



John Smith (dir.),  
*Covid Messages*,  
UK, 2020. Courtesy  
of the artist.

## INTERVIEW

# John Smith's *Covid Messages*

Since May 2020, John Smith has been at work on an episodic series called *Covid Messages*, made from repurposed footage of press conferences in which Prime Minister Boris Johnson briefs the public on the status of the pandemic. Through six darkly funny instalments, the artist plays with the press conference as a site of 'coded messages', assailing the vacancy of political speech and the grotesque manoeuvres of the Conservative government with his characteristic wit. In the first episode, 'Twice', Smith stands in front of a mirror singing 'Happy Birthday' in a minor key twice through as he washes his hands. The act seems absurd – but then a cut to Johnson reveals that the government has advised the public to do just this. In subsequent episodes, Smith's physical presence disappears, giving way to a more extensive use of text and a clever deployment of repetition and reverse motion. A satirical narrative also takes shape: Smith transforms state rhetoric ('hands, face, space') and prime-ministerial performance into a story of failed sorcery. With scientific advice cast aside, surely some hocus-pocus will save us. The chief medical officer becomes the 'chief magical officer'; Johnson tries out an array of incantations to ward off the virus, but to no avail. At the end of each brief episode – the six together amount to only 22 minutes – Smith punctures the delusion of bogus spells with the hard reality of facts, offering statistics concerning the effects of Covid-19 on the population of the United Kingdom, foremost among them a mounting death toll. *Covid Messages* is hilarious – or, rather, it would be if it weren't also a diary of catastrophe.

The following conversation took place online on 17 December 2020.

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Erika Balsom: How did the *Covid Messages* series begin?

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John Smith: It's something that grew very organically. I often find myself thinking that the world is such a strange place and find it hard to believe what is happening. I was quite bemused when Boris Johnson started telling us to wash our

hands whilst singing 'Happy Birthday' twice. I just found it so bizarre. To begin with, why don't you think of a song that is the right length that you sing only once? And maybe make it something a little bit more appropriate, you know, a little gloomier. I found myself walking around singing 'Happy Birthday' to the tune of Chopin's funeral march whenever I would wash my hands and I thought, maybe I will make a little film about this.

I made 'Twice' as a one-off, but then I was commissioned by a festival in Austria called Steirischer Herbst to make a piece of work related to Covid. They were setting up a bogus TV channel called Paranoia TV to run for the length of the festival and wanted artists to make things that were episodic. They had seen my *Hotel Diaries* series (2001–07) and asked me if I could make something with a similar format. I said, 'Oh, yeah, maybe I could do that', but then nothing like that came to mind. I ended up making a single film, *Citadel*, for the commission, so by way of compensation I sent them 'Twice' and told them that they could show that too. The festival director was very enthusiastic about 'Twice' and asked if it might be possible to make some kind of follow-up, to fit in with the festival's planned programming structure. After watching Boris Johnson fluff his lines so badly at one of his press conferences I came up with an idea for the second part, 'Magic'.

Prior to that I wasn't thinking of making a second part, as 'Twice' works well as a standalone piece. But when I made 'Magic', other themes started to emerge and the series took off from there. It was a bit like the *Hotel Diaries*: once I had made a second piece, I thought, well, just two pieces doesn't feel right, it's not a proper set, I've got to make a third. I liked the idea of there being some kind of supernatural element and it ended up running through the whole series. Washing your hands while singing 'Happy Birthday' is like an incantation. It's a spell, but the spell is too simple, it doesn't work. I really liked the idea of the chief medical officer becoming the chief magical officer, coming up with more elaborate and sophisticated magic than Johnson could manage on his own. Things just started developing from that. I got obsessed with the bizarre film set, the briefing room at Downing Street where they do these press conferences. It looks like it's all made of cardboard, or like it's an early computer game or something. And there are all these ridiculous signs that they put on the lecterns. Everything looks so shoddy. No wonder they can't deal with the pandemic, they don't even know how to design a set! That gothic conference room is so oppressive. It's a sign of so many things for me. Just think about what the House of Commons looks like compared to other European parliaments, with their airy spaces, ergonomic seating and non-adversarial layouts. Compare that to fucking Boris Johnson at his crappy lectern, coming up with nonsense in his wood-panelled room with his fucking flags behind him.

I got interested in Johnson fluffing his lines, when he said 'contract tasting' where he should have said 'contact tracing'. Okay, I thought, that fits in really well with what was going on with him awarding tasty contracts to his mates. I started using captions and it turned into something that was contextualized mainly through text. But the shape of the work was led by what happened in the



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conference room. In the episode called 'Halloween', you see the film crew setting up. What's amazing is that the unedited footage is on YouTube. They have like twenty minutes of just waiting for the press conference to begin.

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EB: I wanted to ask about where you found the footage.

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JS: I just searched the internet for footage of Johnson's press conferences on certain days. The Halloween conference is the only one I came across where you see a film crew, but a lot of them start with quite a few minutes of the empty room before Johnson and his associates appear. The frame becomes this mad proscenium arch, this theatrical space, and they're just waiting. Why on earth would they not just edit the front bit of it? It's bizarre, really bizarre. In the Halloween footage the wait goes on for like twenty minutes. A guy comes out and tests the microphone and a press officer appears and changes the scripts on the lecterns. That particular press conference was really done in a hurry and it shows. This was the one the government had to bring forward because their information had been leaked, and very fortunately for me, they brought it forward to Halloween, extending the supernatural theme. I'm a great believer in chance and synchronicity. As has happened many times, everything kind of fell into place. Once you tune into looking at things in a certain way, there's nearly always that possibility to make more connections. Since it was Halloween, I created a scenario where the spirits of the dead get their revenge on Johnson by messing with his script, changing 'test and trace' to 'trick or treat'. In the next press conference that I watched, he had been in contact with someone with the virus and was self-isolating, so he appeared on a monitor instead of in the actual room. So I could say he was in isolation because he'd been in close contact with the spirits – it was just too good to be true.

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EB: There is a recognizable genre of satire that repurposes news images in a particular way; I'm thinking of something like the remixes of politicians' speeches that Cassetteboy makes. We might expect *Covid Messages* to be in this vein, but in fact the whole magic storyline takes it in an entirely different direction. On the one hand, it is extremely playful. Yet on the other, it is deadly serious in that it speaks to a profound sense of unreality. It feels as if there is a growing chasm between the facts on the ground – which you represent in the videos in the form of a growing death toll, presented in text at the end of each episode – and the world of political discourse and spin, which seems to operate with only the loosest relationship to the realities of the pandemic.

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JS: Absolutely. It's terrifying. It just keeps happening again and again, doesn't it? I find it incredible. We all know what will happen if they relax the rules for Christmas. But Boris Johnson can't be the person who cancels Christmas! That's not his persona. He's much more 'ho, ho, ho!' or 'gung ho, ho, ho!'.

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EB:	Speaking of Boris Johnson's persona, <i>Covid Messages</i> is also a character study of the prime minister.
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JS:	Definitely. That's why I was interested in the hand gestures in the third part. I find it really interesting to turn the sound off and see what he's doing. He wants to appear authoritative. But although his gestures look expressive, they have little apparent meaning.
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EB:	When he gives that strange smile in the final episode, it's deeply chilling.
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JS:	Yes, it felt like an appropriate ending. In that part, the motion of the video is briefly reversed – that's why the smile looks so sinister. There are quite a few places where I go backwards and forwards. That's how I get those protracted shots of Chris Whitty, the chief magical officer. He didn't really stay there quite that long, looking so uncomfortable. Although he certainly looks uncomfortable most of the time. I don't want to ridicule him; the extended shots are meant to emphasize the palpable tension that exists between him and Johnson. I hope he doesn't look too ridiculous on camera. I think he's tried more than most to get realistic messages across, despite the government's propaganda.
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EB:	Throughout <i>Covid Messages</i> we have a sense of Boris Johnson as someone who is attempting to work magic that fails. But I also wondered whether this work functions as a kind of spell or incantation on your part, relative to the activities of the government. It seems as if you are commanding them to take responsibility or to apologize. Apology is a strong theme throughout.
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JS:	Yeah, it's a cathartic fantasy. I would really like to see Johnson be more honest and say, 'The National Health Service isn't going to survive and I am very, very sorry about that.' It really happened that he mumbled 'forgive me', so I used that in the second episode. I subtitle it because you can barely hear him say it. I thought it was really interesting that he's saying, 'forgive me', but under his breath. So that was the origin of the focus on apologies, but then it grows. I want to manipulate reality to make it better. We all do! I certainly feel completely malevolent towards the prime minister, so the more I can ridicule him the better. It's scary that, even now, so many people see him as this lovable buffoon, as a bloke you could have a laugh with down at the pub. I absolutely hate that reading of this monstrous person. Whenever I'm talking to somebody about him and they call him Boris, I say, 'Oh, come on, it's Johnson.'
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EB:	I was going to bring that up with you! I was going to note that neither one of us in this conversation thus far has called him Boris. <i>Covid Messages</i> is a work about language and political uses of language. The convention of calling him 'Boris' as if he's your pal or something is a powerful weapon within political discourse.
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JS: Definitely. In my film, I don't even give him a name. I just say the prime minister. He is somebody who happens to have that role but, you know, whoever he is, it's the bloody prime minister. I want to strip him of all individuality as much as possible in terms of how I talk about him because I want him to be a cipher. People say now that Johnson might resign because he's had enough, but if we get rid of him, we're still going to be in an appalling position because we've got a whole load of right-wing ghouls running the country. It's not going to make things any better. It could even make them worse because the one possible saving grace to Johnson is that he wants to be liked, whereas some of the rest of them would love to be hated. I don't think Michael Gove or Priti Patel are going to be too upset if people don't like them.

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EB: There is an urgency to respond to the present as it happens, but there's also a difficulty in responding to the present as it happens, exactly because it's still happening. I wonder what you think about this problem. The episodic structure of *Covid Messages* is almost diaristic. Even though you only appear in the first one, there is the sense that the series is a quotidian activity for you, an ongoing daily practice. Yet it's also a history of the present. Each episode concludes with a title card that states the date and some fact concerning where we are in the pandemic.

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JS: I've been interested in that since I made the *Hotel Diaries*. They were very much about the present when I made them, but when I look at them later, even if it is only a few years after making them, very often I look at something and think, 'Well, I had forgotten about that. So Blair did that phone call with George Bush?' I think that kind of recording of the details of the present is really important because memory is so short, and seemingly inconsequential things can turn out to be important. But for me, it's also vital to present information in an artificial context so that you're aware that it is a selection and a subjective impression of something. That being said, I think it's perfectly feasible that that Johnson's 'contract tasting' mistake was a genuine Freudian slip. But the episodes of *Covid Messages* are not as immediate as the *Hotel Diaries* were. For instance, I actually went back to the 'Magic' episode, as it says in the captions at the end. I went back to it and added a 'correction' after they changed the rules for making people dead. (Originally, they counted everyone who died after testing positive for the virus, but they later changed this to counting only those who died within 28 days of testing positive, which reduced the number of fatalities.) Generally, though, I might ponder each episode for a couple of weeks. They're not an absolutely immediate response; they come out of thinking a little bit about how to contextualize the material. The only one that came about really immediately was when Johnson was in quarantine, the last one. As soon as I saw it, I knew straight away what to do with it. I grabbed the footage and started working with it.

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EB: The *Hotel Diaries* make such an interesting counterpoint for *Covid Messages* because they are about travel, which we can't do anymore, but they are also about confinement in an interior space, which is something we are experiencing a whole lot of at the moment. I think it's important that in 'Twice', we see you with your iPhone. It becomes a lens through which to understand the series: the artist is stuck at home like so many of us. It foregrounds that you are the one who is intervening in these images – underlining your subjectivity and your presence – but the appearance of the iPhone also speaks to the mode of production. There's been a lot of discussion during the pandemic amongst arts funders and arts organizations about how the production of artists' moving image will have to change in response to Covid. One of the things that people have said is that big budgets are now less viable, that it might be necessary to think on a smaller, more intimate scale. But this is business as usual for you! In a sense, you've always made Covid-friendly movies.

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JS: That's true. I did an online talk with Mania Akbari recently and she asked me about this. She said that she knew lots of artists who were really fucked up by being isolated and not being able to have contact with other people. And I thought, 'Oh really! Because, you know, I just sit on my own going mad at home anyway, so, it's no different' (laughs). Limitation is a really important thing for me. I really like having a framework with rules to work to. For the *Hotel Diaries*, there was the rule that it had to be a single unedited shot in a hotel room, with synchronously recorded sound. For *Covid Messages*, each episode had to be based on found footage from the government's press conferences. *Citadel*, the other film that I have made during lockdown, was all shot from my bedroom window. I find that a really useful way to work. And it's a way to actually make me work. I've made very little over the last couple of years. This is my most productive year, certainly in duration, for quite a long time. I've made three-quarters of an hour of film, which for me is an enormous amount. Very often I make one five-minute film in a whole year. One of the reasons for that is that there are so many possibilities of what you might make a film about, so it's hard to decide what to focus on. But this year, the combination of having a specific limitation and also being commissioned to make *Citadel* was really useful in getting me to be more productive than I've been for a while.

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EB: Your way of working is a good reminder that bigger budgets don't necessarily mean better films. I think that this a lesson from the history of artists' film that is perhaps in danger of being forgotten over the last ten years or so, with the embrace of a different kind of mode of production, using much larger crews. Maybe Covid will be a reality check on that front.

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JS: I hope so. I've always said that I think that the quality of a work is very often in inverse proportion to how long the credits are. That's

a bit cruel, of course – it's not always true. But I do sometimes look at unremarkable big budget artists' films and think about how many interesting and less costly ones could have been made if the same amount of funding had been shared out.

**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

E-mail: [erika.balsom@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:erika.balsom@kcl.ac.uk)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7807-2010>