

William Raban /
John Smith

Made in London

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John Smith studied at North-East London Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art, after which he became an active member of the London Filmmaker's Co-op. In his formative years Smith was primarily inspired by structural film, but he also developed a distinct interest in the power of narrative and spoken language, which he frequently employs in order to subvert the readings of documentary images. Often rooted in everyday life, his meticulously crafted films playfully explore and expose the language of cinema. Since 1972 Smith has made over sixty film, video and installation works that have been shown in independent cinemas, art galleries and on television around the world. He received a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Artists in 2011. In 2013 he was the winner of Film London's Jarman Award. Smith is Emeritus Professor of Fine Art at University of East London.

William Raban studied painting at Saint Martin's School of Art before developing a distinctive experimental film practice through involvement with the LFMC, where he was workshop manager 1972-6, and other artists who came to film from fine art and a diverse range of other backgrounds. His early work often drew on landscape imagery and structural concerns exploring distinctly filmic/mechanical modes of looking. Several works from this period are also focused investigations of expanded cinema and the relationship between the viewer and screen. These strands can be seen throughout Raban's career, but from the 1980s onwards, a more historical and socio-political focus emerged in his work, often addressing the role of London in the context of global economic changes. Raban is Professor Emeritus of Film at London College of Communication.

Both filmmakers continue to live and work in East London, a location which often features in their films. Their conversation here covers significant developments in their careers, their mutual interest in structural film processes and the coincidence of politics and the everyday in their immediate environment.

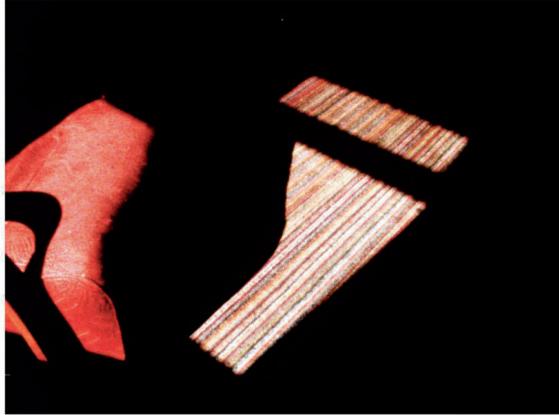
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John Smith — When I was asked which other artist I would like to converse with for this publication you were the first person who came to mind. In addition to being an admirer of your work, which influenced me greatly when I started out, I am aware that there are numerous concerns that we share and that the trajectory of our filmmaking over the past five decades demonstrates a number of parallel shifts. I'm sure that several of these connections will come out over the course of our conversation but I would like to start the ball rolling by talking about the first film of yours that I encountered, the single screen version of *Angles of Incidence* (1973).

I first saw *Angles of Incidence* soon after it was made, when my then tutor Guy Sherwin invited you to visit North-East London Polytechnic. I remember being knocked out by the experience, partly because of the illusions of movement it created and its transformation of spatial perception. But what struck me most was that this spectacular film was recorded in a mundane domestic environment, the only 'prop' being a piece of rope (sash cord I hope) stretched between the middle of a sash window and the camera in order to keep the same distance between camera and window as the tripod was moved to various positions around an arc. Watching *Angles of Incidence* made me realise how the most ordinary of environments could be rendered exotic by filmic means and that a simple and evident formal process could magically transform representation into abstraction. Another fundamental aspect of the work for me was that it was filmed in your own home with a view onto your own street, not in any remote or unfamiliar location. Sitting at my desk now I've been thinking about why this aspect of the work was, and still is, so important to me – like you, I have made many films over the years in and around my home. I have always felt it's important that my own work is rooted in personal experience but I think my predilection for the local might also be about trying to create an intimacy with the audience and undermine the hierarchy of producer / consumer, attempting to level the playing field a bit by inviting the viewer into my film / house. My focus on the everyday is a big part of this, I rarely show dramatic events but prefer to work with mundane environments and occurrences that most of us can identify with.

William Raban — Most of my films start with a proposition. With *Angles of Incidence* I was using film to investigate cubist space – hence the rapid alternation of viewpoints. I did not pre-plan the film but rather plotted the camera movements at the actual time of filming and did the same with

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About Now MMX (2010) which is another work partly based on ideas of cubist space. I think we share this experimental view of film to ask basic questions: what if...? I like the idea of film being a proposition. The idea for *2'45"* (1973) was written in 1972: "the film as 'live' event; a film which IS its showing, different each time, always the sum of its past screenings. The film can only ever be 2' 45" (100 feet) long". The performance was shot over a succession of days. By the end, all preceding iterations were seen as successive negative and positive images receding into the depths of the film screen as a form of *mise en abyme* to build a picture comprised solely of the layers of space and time of the film's coming into being. The screens-within-screens of its current and past performances are the sole picture and sound content and in this respect it demonstrates that form and content are fundamentally inseparable. This was partly a riposte to an annoying and simplistic assumption that structural film was about form over content. I see the idea of film as a proposition in such films of yours as the *Blue Bathroom* series (1978-9) and *Dungeness* (1987). If we knew the results in advance, I guess we would not make those films in the first place.

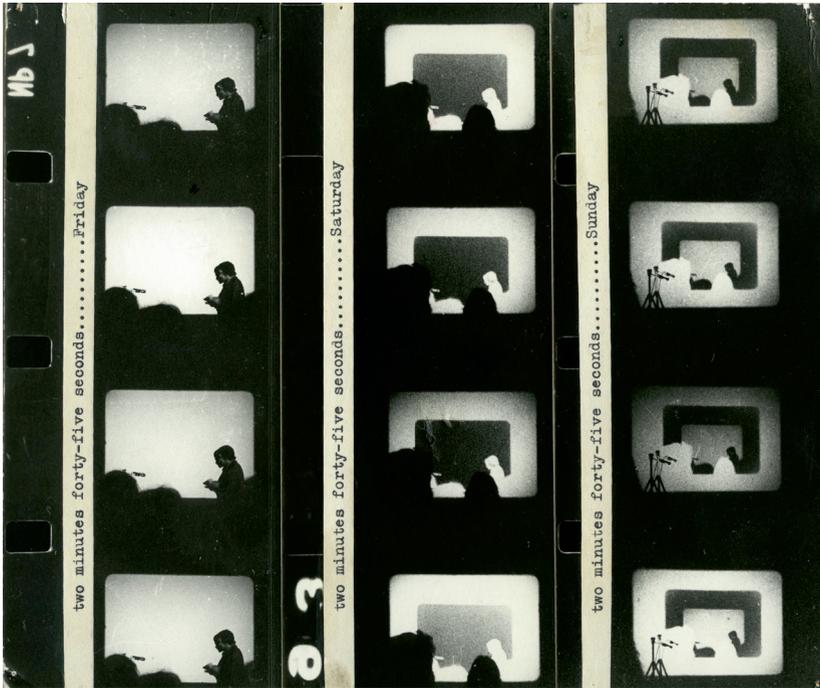
JS — Yes, it was exciting constructing those early films in the camera, waiting on tenterhooks for them to be processed and not really knowing how they would turn out. It must have been the case with your time-lapse films too. It was true of *Blue Bathroom* certainly, but also other edited-in-camera films like *Leading Light* (1975) and *Hackney Marshes – November 4th 1977* (1977), where one had to imagine the rhythm of the film when deciding on the shot length. I think one of the reasons that I stopped making that kind of work was because I was gaining expertise that enabled me to predict the end results more accurately, which ultimately would have made making the work rather pointless – why not just write down the idea and imagine the outcome? But I also got to a point around 1980 when I started to feel that my films needed an extra dimension, that they were in danger of becoming too mechanistic and too focussed upon formal ideas. I began to worry that I was making films in a language that only a small circle of filmmakers and theorists could fully understand. That's when I started work on *Shepherd's Delight* (1980-84), which addresses the subject of humour and was my first film to be partly based on a written script.

WR — Apart from *Black & Silver* (1981) which was fairly tightly scripted and story boarded, I like to keep the direction of the film fairly open right through

the production process. But picking up on location, I made a couple of films where the focus was on the domestic environment such as *At One* (1974) and *After Eight* (1975). Both those films have radio news programmes playing in the background which I saw as a way of bringing world events into the domestic environment. Perhaps this connects with your *Hotel Diaries* series? You are right that my interest is largely about filming public spaces. That is certainly true of the films made since *Thames Film* (1986). It is partly to do with filming observationally in the local neighbourhood and trying to see the place for the first time to understand how it works. That is true of *Sundial* (1992), *A13* (1994), *Island Race* (1996) and *The Houseless Shadow* (2011). It is also to do with wanting to show people things rather than telling people how to interpret what is being shown in a didactic way. I think the sometimes wry humour in so much of your work sets you apart from our generation of filmmakers. This ranges from the reflexivity of *Home Suite* to the *Hotel Diaries* where you combine humour with acute political observation. I suppose we both share an interest in politics of the left though this manifests itself very differently in our respective films. I am particularly drawn to the way you voice your own films.

JS — I think that your observational filming and the lack of added commentary in much of your work prevents it from becoming dated. *Island Race* for example now seems more pertinent than ever, especially as it is bookended by the Channel Tunnel footage. In my own work, political issues have certainly been addressed more directly in recent times. This hasn't been a conscious decision, it's just that the West's 21st century collapse into chaos has become a bigger and bigger part of the everyday consciousness from which my ideas develop. Although visual aesthetics remain a prime concern in most of my work, I don't think I could make a film like *Leading Light* in 2019. I would find it hard to make a film that celebrated the beauty of sunlight travelling around a room because I'm only too aware of all the people who don't have a room to call their own. I very much share your desire to avoid didacticism and have tried to find ways of expressing political ideas without presenting myself as an authority or expert, which I certainly am not. The *Hotel Diaries* videos, some of my most overtly political works, were recorded as single handheld shots on an amateur camcorder set on automatic, giving them the appearance of raw home movies. Their improvised commentaries, recorded at the same time as the image, deliver seemingly unrehearsed thoughts in an intimate, casual manner. By this

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means I'm attempting to level the playing field between the filmmaker and the viewer, presenting myself as an equal, an 'everyman', with no special knowledge or expertise. I'm trying to create a kind of conversation with the viewer, not saying "This is how it is", but rather "I think it is like this – what do you think?"

WR — It is that quality of improvisation during the continuous take that I love in both *Home Suite* and the *Hotel Diaries* and you are right that we the audience share in the risk of the unpredictable current moment. Back to the question of location again, I do seem to be attracted to filming in hostile or dangerous situations that are hard to control. For example, filming from a small sailing boat on the Thames through day and night and shooting on film there is the anxious wait for the rushes to see what is actually there. More recently, risk is involved in filming the BNP or filming London streets after midnight where I try to render myself invisible to passers-by. It is exciting to work on the edge of control and it helps to create a physical experience for the audience.

JS — We couldn't be more different there, I try to avoid danger at all cost. That's one of the reasons why so much of my work is filmed from windows or in the safety of a domestic space or hotel room. As is evident from my faltering speech at the end of *Home Suite*, I felt quite nervous when I made myself leave my house to record the mass eviction taking place in the next street. Because I prefer to work entirely alone I can feel rather vulnerable if I'm looking through the camera in a public space, with no knowledge of what's going on behind me. I could never have filmed the BNP.

WR — Having the great pleasure of watching your films again for this discussion, one issue seems to emerge. Although we have both made quite formal short films from a singular location, we have also made much more complex work composed of different strategies and ideas into a more complex form. I think for example of your *Hackney Marshes* or *Slow Glass* alongside *Thames Film* and *Island Race* perhaps. My last 3 films have each comprised a single shot and in some ways, I suppose I am working towards trying to make things that seem to be more reductive and simple.

JS — That's a connection that has struck me as well, my recent films are very short too. The average length of the films I've made over the past

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seven years is about four minutes, and several of them are comprised of only one or two shots. I have always aimed to express ideas economically and like to think of these recent works as film haikus, that I'm paring information down to its essence. But on off days I wonder if it's just that I don't have the energy anymore - it's sometimes hard to imagine making a film as complicated and laborious as *Slow Glass* again.

WR — I agree that an economy of means is really important and leads to a minimalist approach. As a general principle, I try to avoid illustration. I like the idea that sound and image can work together in a push-pull relationship so for example, the image can be doing something that doesn't seem necessarily connected to the sound.

JS — Absolutely, that's the main reason why I avoid filming with sync sound, there's very little lip sync in my films and most of what does look like sync is recorded at another time and synchronised with the picture later. Avoiding sync sound gives you the freedom to juxtapose sound and image in any way you like. When I'm editing a film I find that much of its dynamic comes from creating a tension between sound and image, allowing the two to converge and diverge, sometimes working together in a representational way but at other times working on a more abstract or musical level, without any literal sense.

WR — Yes. That dynamic relationship between picture and sound – not necessarily being in sync is important to both of us. If they are recorded one after the other, it means that equal attention can be given to capturing sound and image which is important when working alone.

I would like to move on to consider how we deal with so-called imperfections in the recorded image. I remember that for a long time after Chris Welsby and I had finished *River Yar* (1972) I felt very dissatisfied by some of the imperfections in it. Some worked well such as the reflections of the camera in the window at night or the picking up of radio frequencies on the soundtrack due to the long microphone cable we were using but I was bothered by occasional hairs in the gate, some of the bad exposures and a few focus 'errors'. Now when I look at the film, I accept all those things that used to annoy me and see them as indexical traces intrinsic to the making of the film. To take another example, there is a shot in *A13* where I am filming from a car window when a passer-by throws an apple at me, hitting

the camera. There is a diagonal line across the frame caused by a filter in front of the lens becoming offset but once I had edited the shot into the film alongside the sound, that camera mistake goes unnoticed. In a sense, no matter how controlled the environment, there is still a feeling of being on the edge of control and I like that.

JS — That almost subliminal and unexplained aggressive act against you in *A13* is very powerful and disturbing. I agree with you about some kinds of technical imperfections but I still don't like hairs in the gate and I have to admit that I'm obsessed by sharp focus. I wish that I wasn't, I get annoyed with myself quite often when I find myself discarding footage which has everything going for it apart from being slightly soft. But on more than one occasion I have found that accidents occurring during filming that initially feel like disasters end up being the bits I like the most. When something goes wrong you have to find a way to get around the problem and that's often where things become most inventive. When I first viewed the street footage for *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) I was very disappointed that I had executed a zoom in on a clock very jerkily, initially zooming in the wrong direction. Every time I looked at the rushes it annoyed me more. Eventually I realised that, as I was retrospectively directing everything else that happened in the film in the voice-over, I could direct that event too, so I commanded the clock to "move jerkily towards me". Watching it obediently comply with my request remains one of my favourite moments in the film. It was during the making of *The Girl Chewing Gum* that I became excited by the potential of chance to influence the development of ideas. For example, a burglar alarm that was ringing annoyingly throughout the sync sound filming of the street scene had to be acknowledged in the voice-over, so I described an innocent passer-by as someone who had just robbed the local post office in order to explain its presence on the soundtrack, pushing the credibility of the voice-over to a degree that I had not previously considered. I'm a big believer in the potential of chance and have incorporated a deliberate chance element into numerous works. For example, *Lost Sound* (1998-2001) documents fragments of audio cassette tape found in the street, filmed in the locations where they were found, creating portraits of East London places and events determined not by choice but by where the bits of tape were discovered. The soundtrack incorporates music and voices salvaged from each fragment of tape (the contents of which were unknown at the time of filming) and played to accompany its image, adding another

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chance element which lends a particular atmosphere to each scene.

WR — Yes, I suppose that all our films incorporate chance and intentionality in different ways. With *The Houseless Shadow* (2011) the starting proposition was to see what would happen if the soundtrack voicing the *Night Walks* essay by Charles Dickens played against contemporary images of London at night filmed 150 years later. In the last shot of *The Houseless Shadow* (a dawn time-lapse view of the Thames from Hungerford Bridge) required careful calculation by reference to local tide tables to film the barges swinging 180 degrees on their moorings precisely at the moment of sunrise. A different example is the longest shot in *Island Race* where the cortege during the funeral of Ronnie Kray comes around a corner 150 metres away before passing the camera. As the cortege turned the corner, the sun came out from behind thick cloud, to backlight the whole procession. That was chance but there was also the element of accident in that same shot. I wanted all the 25 limousines to pass but that would have made the shot too long for the film so I decided to film at 18 rather than normal speed 25 frames per second. The speeded-up motion has the effect of making the shot look like early newsreel which I hadn't anticipated at the time of filming so that is an example where accident fortuitously brings something more to the shot than what I had calculated. Perhaps we might talk about where our ideas come from?

JS — Most of my own ideas for new films come about by chance, in that they are triggered by things that I come across in daily life. I don't go looking for ideas, I generally wait for them to come to me. *The Black Tower* (1985-7) for example came out of my interest in a building that I could see from the window of a house I lived in during the 1980s. More recently *Song for Europe* (2017) was triggered by watching the scrolling Jenny Holzer style LED signs that you see through your car windscreen while travelling on the train that goes through the Channel Tunnel. *A State of Grace* (2019), which attributes alternative meanings to Ryanair's safety instructions, was conceived after repeated exposure to the bizarre diagrams on the back of the airline's seats over the course of many journeys.

WR — I agree about ideas being triggered by observations or seeing things in everyday life. I find *The Black Tower* amazingly evocative and even surreal. That elusive black rhomboidal apex switches seamlessly between

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being a monument to humour and horror which is partly to do with the way the voice on the soundtrack alternates from banal descriptive pathos to extreme vulnerability following the narrator's admission to hospital.

I want to return to where ideas might come from and how films take shape. When I was trying to cut *Thames Film*, I had a crisis where I needed another new element for the film but had no idea what it was. In February 1985, I had a film show in Madrid and used this as an opportunity to visit the Prado where I was greatly impressed by Bruegel's painting *The Triumph of Death*. Back at the hotel that night, I had a dream where close-up details from that painting were accompanied by a chorale from Bach's Saint Matthew Passion. It was just the soprano singing without instrumental accompaniment and her voice was slowed right down. This dream provided the key to solving the editing problem. So, there are four times in *Thames Film* where details from *The Triumph of Death* appears as I had remembered it in the dream. That example seems to fit with your term 'the trigger' but more generally, I find that ideas tend to evolve more slowly. It can take ages for me to find the ways to make a film.

JS — Yes, maybe my use of the word 'trigger' is a bit misleading as I rarely have flashes of inspiration. My ideas usually develop over long periods of time and the films often end up being very different from what I initially imagined. *The Black Tower* for example weaves together several ideas that were originally conceived as separate films. Although a few of my shorter films have been planned entirely in advance of filming I can't imagine making a long film that was completely scripted. I often start editing when I have only filmed a bit of footage as I find that the editing process tends to generate new ideas as to the direction the work might take. Editing and filming can often be a back and forth process that goes on for a very long time - quite a few of my films have been made over the course of three or four years. A long editing process and intermittent gathering of material can help you to find and build upon connections between different elements of the work. To give an example, I started filming *Blight* (1994-96) when I came home one evening to discover that the house next door to me had been partially demolished, revealing a mural copied from the poster for the film *The Exorcist* on an upstairs bedroom wall. I found this eerie spectacle very powerful, not least because the silhouetted figure with a trilby hat and briefcase that the mural depicted made me think of the faceless official from the Department of Transport who was responsible for the planned

demolition of many houses in the local area, including my own. Having filmed this scene I decided that I would film the act of demolition over the coming days, initially framing details of this action in such a way that no human presence was visible, so that it seemed as if houses were destroying themselves, possessed by poltergeists. While filming the demolition I noticed that one of the workers had a tattoo of a spider's web on his elbow, which seemed to fit in with the sinister theme that was developing. More importantly, the tattoo reminded me of the road network around London, with lines radiating from the centre encircled by the M25 and the A406, so I captured this detail on film with the suspicion that it would end up as an important element. A few months later I started interviewing local residents as I planned (together with my collaborator, the composer Jocelyn Pook) to use fragments of speech concerning memories of past dwellings in the film's soundtrack. One of the first people I interviewed was a woman who spoke about her fear of visiting the toilet when she was a child, because it was in the back yard of her house and infested with spiders. She kept talking about killing the spiders so, having already decided that spiders would have a metaphorical presence in the film, I couldn't believe my luck. Through this serendipitous chain of events the spider became the central motif of the final film, something I could never have anticipated when work on it began.

Coming back to *Thames Film*, it was interesting to find out that the insertion of the Bruegel painting came about because of a dream. The grim fantastical imagery complements the darker aspects of the film very well but it has always seemed like a rather unlikely juxtaposition to me as everything else in the film relates to Britain, and to actuality. I don't think any of my films have been influenced by dreams but several of the early ones were conceived or advanced whilst under the influence of cannabis. On a general level I think that taking cannabis and LSD may have had a beneficial effect on my development as an artist, making it clear to me at an early age that there are many ways in which one can interpret the world. I think that my continuing obsession with exploring the ambiguities of life and language may well be partially rooted in my early experiences of mind-altering drugs.

WR — Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* is a glorious allegorical painting about the futility of fearing mortality but there is a link (for me) between the Bruegel painting and the Thames referring to a time when Britain was part of mainland Europe. Thousands of years ago, the Thames was part of one great river that flowed through the Scheldt and on to the Rhine. In all

probability the landscape in the painting is invented, but topographically it bears a resemblance to the mouth of the Scheldt seen from Flushing. I like this one reference in the film to a deep pre-historic time.

Thames Film is partly based on a manuscript by Thomas Pennant, *A Voyage from London to Dover*, in 1787. I am not sure why, but since early childhood I have remained fascinated by the end of the eighteenth century. Perhaps it is the memory of childhood family camping holidays deciphering the inscriptions on tombstones in the west country whilst my father tried to piece together the family tree. My latest film, *Laki Haze* (2020) also opens with that decade, using accounts of the devastation caused by the eruption of the Lakikagar volcano, Iceland in 1783. The ensuing environmental catastrophe was prolonged by the Laki haze extending across Europe, killing many thousands of people. The 1780s, seemed like a pertinent emblematic moment to start the film because it marks the start of the industrial revolution that can be seen as a root cause of the current crisis of climate change. The film extends this ecological theme into the present day political crisis in Europe and America: Brexit, Trump, the rise of right-wing nationalism and denial of imminent global climate change. Before working out the voice elements of the film, the proposition was to see whether a single shot could sustain the film's 18 minute duration and I spent nearly 2 years and 40 attempts, failing and eventually succeeding to capture a sunrise over the sea. The picture opens in almost total darkness. It is a tightly framed shot of waves breaking toward the camera whilst the sun slowly rises (out of frame) above the picture. After 18 minutes as the film ends, the image has reached slight over-exposure. The image is both menacing and beautiful at the same time: "Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it." (Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*). It is too soon to say whether the film works or not.

About Now MMX was my last film shot on 35mm in 2010. Because I had developed a clear understanding of how film emulsion responds to light and exposure changes, it would have been easier to have made *Laki Haze* on film except that it would have been too long to film as a single take. I have only been working with digital for eight years and am learning all the time about how to use it. I guess that the day I stop learning will be the time to stop making films.

JS — The changing light in *Laki Haze* is amazing, especially the rising intensity of the sun's reflection in the sea. I'm not at all surprised that it took

a lot of attempts. I agree about the learning curve with digital, if you tried to keep up with all the technical developments it would be a full-time job. In some respects I feel like a complete novice. I've been working digitally for roughly 20 years, during which time I've gone through seven different video cameras (eight if you include the iPhone) and goodness knows how many tape and file formats. I've moved from 4:3 ratio standard definition to 16:9 HD and seen digital editing software come and go. By contrast, in the 25 or more years that I worked on 16mm, the technology remained more or less the same. Working primarily with the Bolex camera throughout this period I got to know its every detail and explored all of its capabilities, lovingly manipulating the controls of its cast aluminium, black leathercloth covered body. Although I haven't got it out of its case for several years I can clearly remember everything about this tactile machine, the mechanical resistance of the lever that engages and disengages the spring motor, the sound of the motor changing pitch as it reaches the end of its 28 second maximum shot length and the click of the gelatin filter mount sliding into position. I can't imagine getting to know any video camera so intimately, or finding out about even half of what it might do for me.

Having said this, I've found that digital technology has thrown up numerous creative possibilities that would have been inconceivable just a few years ago. If possible I like to do everything on a film myself, so the capabilities of the equipment I have at my disposal play a big part in shaping my work. Just as the Bolex offered possibilities like rewinding and superimposing the film in the camera or alternating between live action and single-frame filming, digital technology has offered other opportunities, like filming in very low light conditions, cache recording, and creating complex mattes during editing. Some of my ideas have been rooted in the technology itself - in *Steve Hates Fish* (2015), I deliberately confused a language translator app for mobile phones by pointing my phone's camera at the signage in a London shopping street and asking the app to translate what it saw from French into English. Two recent works, *Song for Europe* (2017) and *Jour de Fête* (2017) were also shot on a smartphone's camera, recording incidents that I would have missed if I hadn't had the phone in my pocket. Advances in technology sometimes make me wonder if the world is a figment of my imagination – it beggars belief that a tiny 5mm wide lens in a phone's camera can now approach the quality of a camera lens that one might have paid thousands of pounds for a few years ago. It's taken me quite a while to get used to, and I still sometimes experience those "wish I

had a camera with me” moments, only to realise too late that I had one in my pocket. I’m still regretting a missed opportunity of this kind that occurred during the demonstration against Brexit that took place a few weeks ago, just after Boris Johnson became Prime Minister. Marching along Piccadilly I noticed that someone standing in the doorway of an exclusive club next to a uniformed doorman was attracting a lot of attention from the marchers in front. Getting closer, I realised that the man was Boris Johnson’s father, grinning broadly at the demonstrators and brandishing his own anti-Brexit placard. Not thinking quickly enough, I walked past this extraordinary spectacle without pausing to record it. For several days I woke up in the middle of the night imagining that I had retraced my steps and filmed a few seconds of the man who had spawned Boris Johnson but wanted to abort Brexit. I started to construct a whole film about the complexities and contradictions of this image in my mind. I’m still kicking myself as I think it could have been rather good.