

John Smith, *Blue Bathroom* (1978-9)

Rest assured, it's not just a pseudonym. John Smith is one of England's finest avant-garde filmmakers, and one of its more prolific. In thirty years he's finished about as many films and videos, and shown them in museums, galleries and festivals around the world. Smart, funny, and often astonishingly beautiful, until recently Smith's films were unfortunately rarely shown in the United States. With luck, recent screenings in New York and Chicago and a gallery show in Williamsburg, Brooklyn are but the beginning.

Smith started making films in 1972, at the zenith of English Materialist Filmmaking. The theory-first formalism of standard-bearers like Malcolm LeGrice and Peter Gidal is evident in the rigidly precise structure of Smith's films. And yet, the arid film-by-numbers quality that afflicted the films of so many of Smith's contemporaries is tempered by his mordant wit and weakness for narrative.

Girl Chewing Gum, probably Smith's best known film, is one of the few avant-garde films that still never fails to elicit a good, hearty belly-laugh from audiences. Purporting to be the rushes for an establishing shot from an unspecified feature film, it consists of an off-screen voice "directing" people as they go about their business on a busy London street corner. Everyone from a young mother to an inexperienced stickup man to a flock of pigeons gets their cue.

BRIAN FRYE

His other films are similar, setting up a series of expectations, only to turn them on their head. There's a kind of soft didacticism to Smith's films, which contrasts the brittle hardness that can make the films of his avowedly Materialist peers so hard to watch, and often so unrewarding. Nothing is quite what it seems in a John Smith film, but he always lets you in on the joke. And in the process slyly slips in some tough questions about the business and nature of filmmaking.

Frye: How did you come to start making films?

Smith: Before I even went to art school, when I was about 16, I started doing light-shows for bands. A friend of mine's father had a photographic shop that sold ex-government equipment, and one of the things that he had was a cellar full of American 16mm Ampro projectors. We could get these projectors for almost nothing. The shop also sold old

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scientific films, informational films, industrial films, documentaries, that sort of thing.

Frye: This would be the period when those kinds of films were sold for scrap?

Smith: Yes, exactly. It was about 1968. And so our light-show, in addition to including the more psychedelic things—inks and all that—also incorporated film projection. At that time I had no education in film whatsoever. I got interested in film mainly through discovering that you could make a film without making a splice, by projecting loops of different material either superimposed on or next to each other. And I was immediately struck by how meanings came out of nowhere, and how many coincidences you get when you just put two pieces of film together.

Frye: This was a realization you came to spontaneously, then? On your own?

Smith: Yeah, well, it was at the time when light-shows were emerging with music in Britain and the United States. But it was a fairly new phenomenon at that time. Film wasn't really used very much. It was a fortuitous thing really, of being able to get a hold of all this equipment, like Specto projectors, which run at two frames per second. So that was an interest from the start, but I didn't go off and make films straightaway after that. I was still in school at that time. It was like the end of school, and I wanted to go to art school. I was interested primarily in painting at that time. My parents didn't want me to do a fine art course and, because I was young and I couldn't have got a grant, my parents had to support me when I first went to college. They said, "Well, we're not going to support you to do a fine art course. We'll support you to do a commercial art course." Basically a graphic design course. So I went and did a general art foundation course, and then went and did this graphic design course, which wasn't what I wanted to do, but it was the closest I could get to it. That was a three year course, but when I got to the end of one year I thought, "I'm not really interested in spending my life designing typefaces." Although there were elements of graphic design which interested me, and which I think do inform my later work. Ideas about economy and signification, which are very considered in my work. Anyway, after one year I decided I'd had enough of this. There was a new course opening at another college in another part of London, which was called a com-



John Smith, *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976)

munication design course. It was based in design but it also involved film, photography, video, audio, and writing. It was a kind of media course that is actually quite common now, but at that time it was a very new thing. The emphasis wasn't on commercial design. It wasn't based on commercial ambitions. So I went and did that course, and the person who was teaching film in that course was Guy Sherwin, who was only about three years older than me. As we all know, when you go to college, most of the staff seem very very old, and if there's someone only a couple of years older than you, who hasn't been out of school that long, you generally gravitate towards them. Guy himself hadn't been making films for very long. He was just starting to get involved with the Filmmakers' Co-op in London. A number of us in the course ended up gravitating towards film. It wasn't the kind of hierarchical situation I'd always had a problem with in education. We seemed much more equal. As you know, Guy's not an authoritarian figure, to say the least. But even before that, I had become interested in photography as well, during the graphic design course that I'd done, and continued photographing in the communication design course. My first films came out of still photographs. They were all to do with the animation principle, basically. I made a film which was composed of a lot of still images of people's faces, cutting between similarly framed faces and creating that sense of metamorphosis and animation of facial gestures and things like that.

Frye: Was that a response to Kurt Kren's films?

Smith: No, I hadn't seen those at that time, and I didn't see very much experimental film for quite a long while.

Frye: Would you say that the first experimental films you saw were those coming out of the London Filmmakers' Co-op?

Smith: It was a mixture. I mean, I did see some American stuff. During that time Grahame Weinbren came and showed a program of American work. I don't remember exactly what, but they were largely very visual pieces, quite abstract visual films by the Whitneys and Pat O'Neill. Pat O'Neill's work I really liked when I first saw it: at the time I found it really inspiring. Especially coming out of the film work I was talking about earlier, which used ideas about superimposing images. All of his stuff with mirrored images, high-contrast loops printed backward and forward on top of each other, colored filtration and things—spectacle was something that really attracted me to film to begin with.

Frye: What sort of films do you think inspired the kind of work you ended up making?

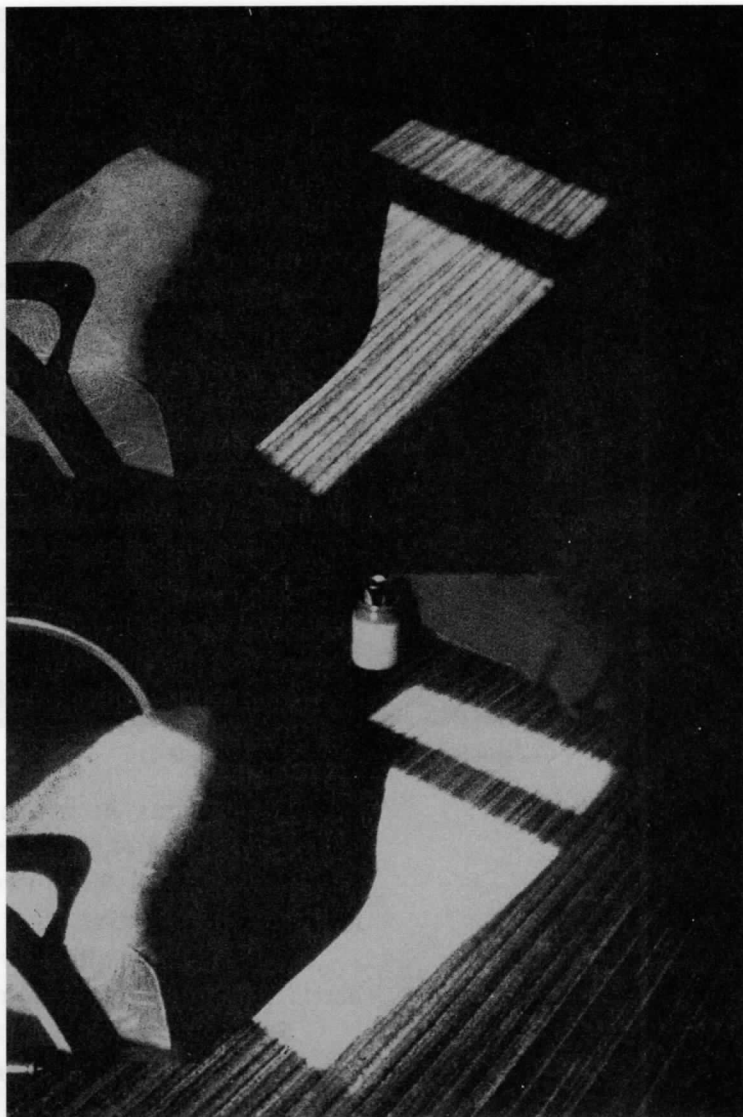
Smith: I think that came a little bit later. I'm quite glad that I didn't see too much stuff when I first started, because I didn't know at that time that everything had been done before! After the communication design course I did a post-graduate course in film at the Royal College of Art, and teaching there was Peter Gidal. And Peter ran a weekly seminar that was really influential on me, because we looked at a lot of work, English work and a lot of American work as well. I think I did see some English landscape work at the time I was at the first college, which was a big influence. William Raban's films, for instance. He and Chris Welsby were two English filmmakers who were dealing with landscape and also ideas to do with form, and I was very interested in things which are determined by nature to some extent and the ways in which one can interact with those formally in film. Take a film of mine like *Leading Light*. It's one example of a number of films I made which had to do with taking a natural cycle—in this case the sunlight traveling around a room—which sets a framework in which to work—and then interacting with that. So that worked as an influence. At the RCA I think I started to get a lot more interested in American and Canadian filmmakers. Michael Snow was a really strong influence on me. I think that before even

seeing Snow's films I was making films of my own which had a narrative element and also a formal element, and the tension between those two things is exactly what comes about in *Wavelength*. That's what I was interested in, so that I identified with him a lot. Hollis Frampton's work, some of the things to do with language, like *Zorns Lemma* for instance, in which images come to represent letters of the alphabet was really important as well.

But at that time there was also a big interest in semiology, and that shaped our seminar group at the RCA. So I was also looking at Godard and Straub, and their films were also influences in a different way. One of the good things about the course I did at the RCA was that it had a real mix of people. There were some people who came from a fine art background, but there were also people who were coming from a much more political perspective, who were great fans of Godard, for example. The group of us formed a very interesting hybrid of ideas.

Frye: What was your role in or relationship to the London Filmmakers' Co-op? There is a strong narrative undercurrent to your films from fairly early on, which seems idiosyncratic in the context of a group that's known primarily for its anti-narrative rhetoric.

Smith: I think I never took that position on. Although there were a lot of things that I drew from it, I always had an interest in narrative. Narrative in a very broad sense. But I have made some much more severe films that I didn't show in New York. Roundabout the late 70s and early 80s I did a



John Smith,
Leading Light (1975)



John Smith, *The Black Tower* (1985-7)

number of films in which there was no way one could ascribe any kind of narrative aspect to them at all. So there have always been those two facets, although I was always interested in narrative.

Frye: It seems there is something of a tension between narrative and its dissolution in your films.

Smith: Absolutely. I think I said it about the *Black Tower* the other night, and it runs through a lot of the other work as well. I have this fascination with the power of language, but on one level it is also the enemy. So I like playing with it, letting it start to take over and then stopping it. A number of the films I've made have very much to do with taking the viewer to the edge of psychological immersion, but then pulling out again, so one is made aware of the construction of the film. The fact that the films reveal their artifice is important to all of them. Coming back to the Co-op, that's an ideology that does come from there. Although I use narrative, the work is anti-illusionist, without a doubt. It deals with it in a different way, though. I guess a lot of purists would say, "Oh no, you can't do that." But interestingly, Gidal has shown my work in programs along with his own. I think maybe the impression on this side of the

Atlantic, not surprisingly, is of the British avant-garde as being much more severe, linear and single-minded than it actually was. In fact, there was a lot of diversity at that time. There were manifestoes, but as you know, some people write manifestoes and other people keep quiet, and the people who keep quiet don't necessarily agree with what's said in its entirety. At the filmmakers' co-op, at the same time as the people you're talking about there were people like David Larcher. His films are incredibly rich and imagistic. They really want to give pleasure.

Frye: What about the role of humor in your films?

Smith: I'm glad that the films have humor, but the humor doesn't come first. It's a kind of by-product of the things I'm interested in, because I'm interested in the ambiguity of meaning, how things can mean different things when they are presented in different ways, and how one can use the context of a film to change meaning. Naturally, from that kind of exploration humor arises. When I set out to make a film, I don't intend to make a comedy, but the fact that the humor arises is important. I'm interested in making work that lots of people—including people who are completely uninformed about avant-garde cinema—would be interested in seeing. So to me, the accessibility that humor creates is an important part of the work.

Frye: There's a formal element to the joke, as well, that structures many of your films. A long buildup that culminates in a reversal of perception.

Smith: I see it as a lot like a game really, like playing a game, and setting up an expectation. Sometimes it's not even funny, it's just surprising. I love playing with that power; it's kind of megalomaniacal. I like getting people in a dark room, locking the doors, and saying, "Okay, now you're going to follow this journey." And controlling to some extent their journey, hopefully, a journey which leaves some freedom for viewers to create their own space. The films have a lot to do with control and release, and certainly also with anticipating what will be seen and to some extent directing that. It's the kind of thing that I like to do, and I see it a lot in Michael Snow's films, which I often find extremely funny, including *Wavelength*. I think there's a kind of humor there, which is wonderful, isn't it? His film *So Is This* is very much about setting up an expectation through text and then taking an alternative route. There's the question of



John Smith,
Shepherd's Delight
 (1980-4)

time, and how long you stretch time. You take the viewer to the point where they feel like they've had enough, and then let them know that you know they're thinking that, and that's what you wanted them to think. Like in my video piece *Regression*, which is very much to do with getting people to ask, "Who is this guy, why does he keep going on?" It's kind of cruel, I suppose, but most people don't mind the cruelty.

Frye: There's often a sadistic element to humor. The filmmakers who came to mind first for me when watching your films were George Landow and Robert Nelson. I saw a strong parallel between the way they approach film form and the way you do.

Smith: I don't know Robert Nelson's work at all, actually, but in Landow's work, certainly, there is a very similar quality. Fortunately, I was set on a course before I saw Landow's work, otherwise I think I might have felt, "Oh, I'm not going to bother." I love some of his work so much. I did actually make a film, called *Shepherd's Delight*, which was based on an analysis of humor, and it's quite similar in several ways to Landow's *On the Marriage Broker Joke...*, including using Freud as a reference.

Frye: What was the provenance of *Girl Chewing Gum*? Was that material you shot yourself, or something you found?

Smith: I generally film in familiar places. That was a street at the end of the street I lived on at the time. I wanted to film on a busy street corner. The film came out of seeing Truffaut's *Day for Night*, which has to do with a film within a film. It's been a long time since I saw it and I might describe it wrongly, but there's a snow scene in the film, in the street, which sets up a situation between two characters, and you see the street being prepared for the filming, which includes machines going down the street spraying the fake snow everywhere. But also, the passers-by in the street are directed. I shot the *Girl Chewing Gum* in 1975, and I started making films in 1972, so I'd been making films for 3 years. And still, when I saw Truffaut's film it had never occurred to me that the people in the background in Hollywood films were directed. I'd always just thought, "Oh, they're passers-by. The film crew have gone into the street to make the film and they've got access to do things." In *Day for Night* a dog is directed to piss up a lamppost, or something like that. Anyway, it was a complete revelation to me, and it came at a time when I was surrounded by people who were saying, "Narrative is the power of illusionism, it's evil." The structural materialist kind of approach to film. And I thought, "Goddamn it, they're right! I've been had! How can I be making films for three years and not realize that?" Though not narrative films. I'd never had much of a narrative element in my films up to that point. I think *Girl Chewing Gum* is the first film I made in which you see a person, more or less anyway. But anyway, *Day For Night* was what made me want to make that film. I thought, "Okay, I'm going to film on a streetcorner, and I'll use a 400 foot roll of film, and I'll film what happens on the street, and then I'll direct it later." So that was the plan. I went and set up the camera, and there were a couple of things that were planned, like I deliberately set up in a place with a clock because I wanted to direct the hands of the clock. Also, it was great to film by a cinema, because the cinema appearing in the shot becomes a reference to this imaginary space that the audience is occupying. Just by coincidence—it doesn't really figure in the film as you can't see it clearly—the film that's showing in the cinema is *The Land That Time Forgot*, which is great,



John Smith,
Double Hoarding

really fortuitous. So anyway, I just filmed what was happening, and kind of improvised the camera movement, followed people sometimes, and directed things later. I filmed in a quite obstructive place in the street, and I was hoping that the police would come and stop me filming, so I could direct that, and that would be the end of the film, but of course they didn't. Afterwards, I sat down with the film and worked out the instructions that I was going to give, and with a stopwatch worked out what I could fit in. I did go off to a field in the middle of nowhere, and shouted into a microphone a script I had written directing all those things, then came back, cut it on separate magnetic stock and fitted it in. The street

sound that you hear is the sync sound of the street. There's an alarm bell ringing throughout the film, which I found very annoying at the time, but I just had to shoot it then. I was doing the camera, and I had a friend who'd come with me to do the sound recording, and I thought "I've got to do it now." So I had to make it a burglary, with a boy robbing the post office. So I fit all of those accidental things into the scenario, because I'm fascinated by accidents.

Frye: The narration changes as the film goes on. It's plausible at first and becomes less and less so as the film goes on.

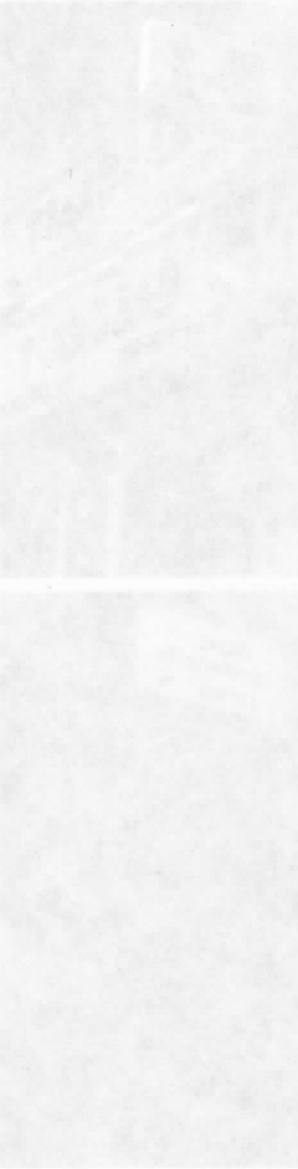
Smith: Basically, it moves from direction to description, and so at the end I'm talking about the dentist going to the bank, and all those sorts of things. It's got to do with labeling, and how we perceive things, how we're told what things are. There's an awful way in which documentaries can completely subvert the real world. It's very hard when you look at a documentary that's got a voiceover, without turning the sound down, to say, "Well, what is this visual information giving me really? Is this evidence for what's being said?" "No, it could be evidence of lots of different things," one might say. But the power of the text is so strong, that the image appears to be what the voice is telling us it is.



Frye: In your films *Slow Glass* and *The Black Tower* you cause the image to shift suddenly between two points in time. How exactly do you accomplish that, and what in particular did you find compelling about it?

Smith: It came about originally by accident. I discovered this technique—which I should patent really, because it's pretty good—when I was making *The Black Tower*. There's one scene in *The Black Tower* of the tower block being demolished, which is made in the same way as most of the shots in *Slow Glass*. When I filmed that shot for the *Black Tower*, basically the demolition went wrong. What

John Smith,
Thang Long Green and
Thang Long Pink



should have happened was that the block of flats should have collapsed completely, rather than stopping and leaning at an angle. In the foreground there's a row of trees. I had thought the building was going to disappear behind the line of trees. I had planned to do this alternation of there and not-there. So I thought all I need to do is film before it happens, when it happens, and then wait until the dust settles, and with the camera still there on the tripod in the same position I can film it and it won't be there any more. The rubble will be hidden behind the trees. But as it happened, it didn't disappear, so I thought "Fuck, what am I going to do?" Nearly all my films are shot on a Bolex, unless they're sync sound. For the Bolex you can get a thing called a gate focuser, a little prism that you put in the gate, and that's how it's done. Basically, I shot the first piece of film, had it processed, then took a little clip from the negative and put it in the gate of the camera, and then viewed the scene through the negative, and just lined them up. It's still difficult because you have to really precisely plot the position of the camera, but as long as you write down the camera height and position it's ok. For *Slow Glass* I put a nail in the street between two pieces of paving stone, so I could come back later and know that's where the camera was. You just have to know the focal length of the zoom lens and have a really good tripod so you don't line it up and lock it on and have it slip, because once you line it up you then have to load the camera, which is kind of fiddly, and there's a high failure rate. But it works amazingly well. Of course now, with a computer, it's no big deal. It's a shame really, because people found *Slow Glass* kind of astounding when they first saw it. "How did you have all these cameras set up all over London," you know? Put there for years, months...

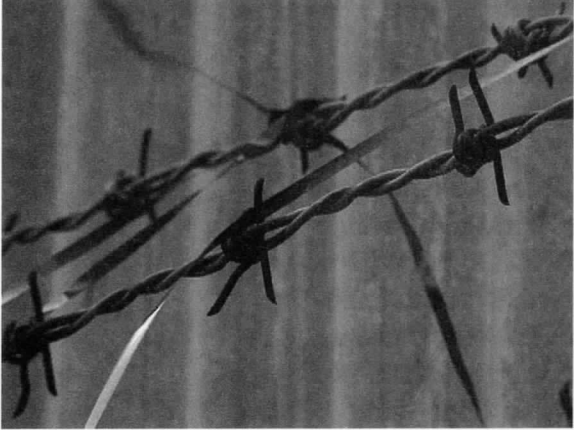
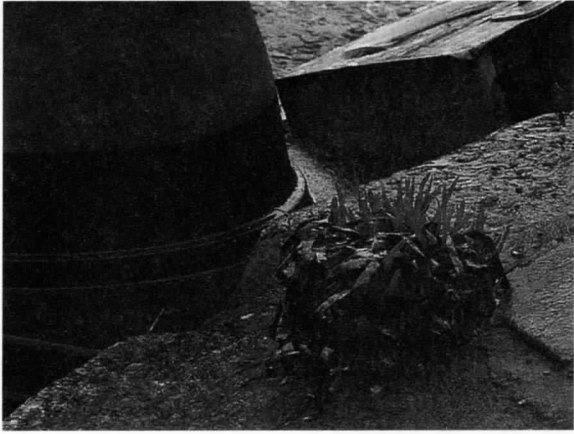
Frye: You've worked for television on several occasions. Did you have to adapt your working methods or change the films at all for TV?

Smith: Well, I've never looked at it as working for television. I've worked in a situation where the films have been funded partly by television and partly by the arts council, and they've generally been commissions for artists. So nobody's said, "This is a bit obscure, you've got to make it more accessible." Although there were no demands placed whatsoever, I think the only one slightly different in context was *Blight*—the collaboration with the composer—in that

the context for that was a little bit more mainstream. They commissioned six programs in a series, and out of the six directors, only two were artists. Some of them were very straight film directors. The emphasis of those films was very often more on the composer than on the filmmaker. But that being said, there were no demands. I've never, ever had anybody turn around and say, "Do it this way, do it that way." The closest I ever came to that was when I made a promotional film for an English rock band called Echo and the Bunnymen, back in 1980. That was commissioned by Warner Brothers, and they were very unhappy with the result, but I never did anything about it. They didn't like having a film of a band where you don't see the musicians' faces! It was a bit of a problem for them.

Frye: What is your experience of working with video after so many years of working with film?

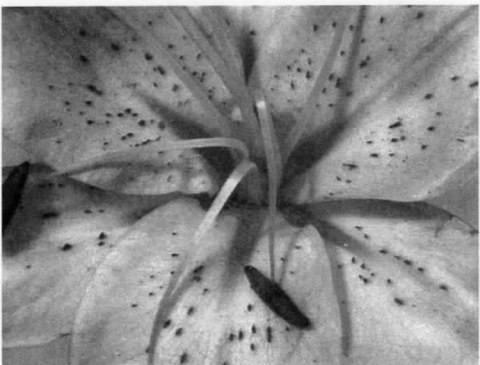
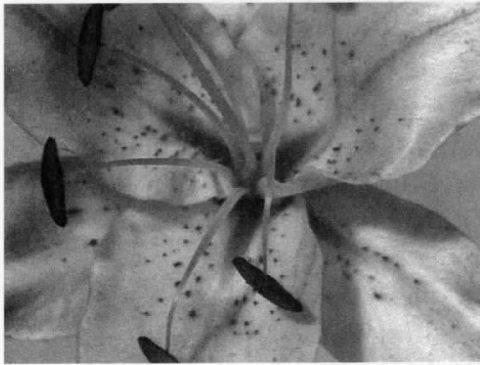
Smith: I'm starting to feel a lot more positive about video than I did a couple of years ago. I did make one video piece before I started having problems with film, which capitalized on the advantages of video. It's a 96 minute video tape, composed of 3 half-hour shots shot with a hand-held camera, while I moved around a house. Very close-up shots, travelling shots basically, with me talking while I'm filming. It's something that would have been impossible to do on film. I did it on Hi-8 video and it cost me \$50 to make a feature! I don't think the situation is as bad in America yet, but 16mm is basically dying out in the commercial world in Britain, so there is a real problem with 16mm and the labs now. Almost all 16mm is shot for television, and there's even less and less of that now. Gradually digi-beta is taking over for TV drama. What 16mm the laboratories process is generally just negative to video. I think there are two people left in the country making optical soundtracks. Most of the labs don't make their own, they send them out to these two people, who are getting older, and their machinery is getting older, and you're very lucky if you get a good optical soundtrack. All the good graders—color timers—tend to work with 35mm now and telecine. It's really only artists that are working with 16mm film for projection prints. It's started to get very grim. *Blight*, for example, was shot on film, and I have film prints of it, but I actually prefer to show it on video. It was a bit of a shock for that to happen, but it's got a stereo soundtrack which is very densely layered with sound, and



John Smith, *Lost Sound*
(2001)

also I was never very happy with the grading of the film. On the telecine I was able to boost the color of the film and correct things which weren't right on the film print. I went through ten prints and still it wasn't right. So I had a couple of years of feeling very negative, like I was working on video only because there's a problem with working on film. More recently I have made some pieces which capitalize on the advantages of video, of which I think there are many. I made a piece called *The Waste Land*, which is shot in a London pub after hours, filming the people who sat in this bar. I could not have got away with taking a film camera in there and doing that, because I would have needed lights, and even if I hadn't needed lights, the film camera would have been too intimidating. So I just used a little mini-DV camera that I put in the corner, and everybody thought I was just a weird guy in the corner. There's a hand-held sync shot where I travel into the toilet of the pub, and I'm talking, reciting this poem while I'm in the toilet. It's something I couldn't have done on film. The recent piece, *Lost Sound*,

which is showing here in Brooklyn, which is images of recording tape in the street, also needed to be shot on video. It has a lot to do with hanging around and waiting for things to happen with the camera running, filming what happens and selecting later. For that we shot 17 hours of tape. Also, conceptually, its tape-to-tape, which justifies its being video for me. At the moment I'm exploring hybrid ways of working. Also, I've always worked on my own at home with my own technology. Films have been edited on a Steenbeck at home. I work incredibly slowly, over long periods of time, and I usually move backwards and forwards between editing and filming. I film something and start to edit it, then ideas come for what I might film next out of what I've edited. One of the big problems for me of working with video was depending on an Avid edit suite. Even if I worked faster, I couldn't afford to hire that sort of facility. I would find it so restrictive, because most of my films I make in the editing. The ideas come about in the editing, so I need that time to just sit in front of the screen. But recently the Apple Corporation brought out the new Final Cut Pro editing software, which is fantastic. If I'm working on DV, I can produce work on my computer at home, and the whole thing cost me a few thousand pounds and that's it. Until the equipment breaks, it costs me almost nothing to make video. But at the same time its film that I love, really, so I'm trying to find different ways of doing things. For the piece I'm working on at the moment I shot 35mm stills on a Nikon with a motor drive. I basically used a still camera as a movie camera. The film is going to end up as stills that occasionally come to life very slightly. So maybe I'll use two frames of the same scene shot a fraction of a second apart. Maybe you'll see a still and somebody will blink, or their bag will swing very slightly. So anyway, I've taken that 35mm still film and I've gone to a telecine suite and I've gone to video. Now that's on my computer, so I can hold those still frames for as long as I want. The plan is to go back eventually to 35mm film, because I don't want to have the nightmare of 16mm film again at the moment. It's depressing, but realistically I'm thinking, "I still want to work on film, 16mm is dying out, is there a way that it's economical to work on 35mm?" But also, is it inhibiting in terms of exhibition spaces, some of which can't show 35mm film? The other option is moving to another country, or forming a relation-



John Smith, *The Kiss* (1999)

ship with a laboratory somewhere where things are a bit more healthy. But I get the feeling that it's only a matter of time, realistically, for 16mm.

Frye: What about the gallery show you're doing here in Brooklyn? Have you done this sort of thing before?

Smith: Once or twice, yeah. This is a little bit of an experiment with this piece, because it's a durational piece that develops over time. I think it's possible to come in at any time and get something from it, but this screening is a bit of an experiment and I'll be interested to see how it works. It's happening because somebody said, we'd like to show this piece in a gallery show, and I thought, let's try it. That's not the way in which it's intended to be shown, but I think it'll be ok. I don't know about here, but in England opportunities in film and video for artists have shifted toward the gallery in terms of exhibition. I think there are advantages and disadvantages. I think there's one very strong advantage, which makes me want to find a way of being able to show things in that context: things show continuously for a period of time. So there's time for people to hear about work from other people who have seen it, or from reviews, and it's still there, you can still go and see it. The problem with artists' films is that you hear that there was a really good screening the other night, but the person's gone back to wherever it was they came from, and you'll never ever see their work. So I'm trying to find a way around that. There's one piece of mine, *The Kiss*, made in collaboration with Ian Bourn, which involves a lily being crushed between two pieces of glass, that was actually devised as an installation piece. That's the best way to show that piece, because it's a loop cycle. At the end it fades out and a new flower comes on and

goes through the same process. The repetition enables you to look at it in more depth, without just asking, "Hey, how was that done? I thought it was time-lapse." It enables you to look at it as more than a technical trick, I hope, because it has to do with this shift between ideas, something which appears to be organic growth, but is in fact a mechanical process. But I'm trying to work in both ways really. I don't think I would be working in a gallery situation if an opportunity hadn't arisen which makes it seem like it would be mad to avoid it. But there is that problem of audience concentration. For me, the conventional black box of the cinema is still the ideal way to show work.

