

THROUGH A LOOKING GLASS

On John Smith at Tanya Leighton, Berlin, and Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover

The gaze through glass exemplifies the question concerning the relationship between reality and its semblance. Be it eyeglasses, a window, or a goldfish bowl: the lens is always part of reality while also affecting, by virtue of its material properties or its curvature, what is seen through it – the German term “Objektiv” for a photographer’s lens seems hardly apposite.

In John Smith’s work, glass becomes a media-reflective metaphor for film as such. The documentary picture showing a cramped hotel room or the growth of a lily reveals its structuralist qualities when the cracks in the filmic reality show how our image of it is composed. In another twist on the relationship between reality and its semblance, film here not only lays out how it operates but is also the instrument of this reflection.

We are looking into a forest glade dappled with sunlight. Then it begins to rain, splattering what we take to be the camera’s lens into a streaming blur. Moments later, a wiper sweeps across the view and the semi-transparent surface proves to be that of a car windshield. Meanwhile, the narrator on the soundtrack is telling us that this is not merely a generic patch of countryside, but a forest in Essex, in southeastern England, from which great amounts of wood were culled during the reign of King James I of England (1566–1625), to supply glass manufacturers of the period. Although everything in this passage of film is geared to qualify what we are seeing with what we are seeing it through, what we are seeing – this particular forest – proves to be equally significant in the equation.

I have been describing a sequence from John Smith’s longest 16mm film “Slow Glass” (1991) – the centerpiece of his show at Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin this spring. Smith makes us aware that structuralist and documentary modes of filmmaking – which we might have thought antithetical (the former self-reflexive; the latter

outward-looking) are united in their empiricism. He elicits structuralist metaphors from social observation: the subject, located in primary experience, always appears to come first, and the medium to follow. His films can appear raw and local when they appear – as they increasingly do – within a contemporary art context dedicated to the navel-gazing of cultural referencing; that is, among art that is primarily about other art. The conjunction of structuralist and documentary modes is also a reminder of Smith’s roots in early British Conceptual Art of the late 1960s and early seventies, a movement including such figures as Bruce McLean, Susan Hiller, and Art and Language, which impelled both self-critique and self-erasure, wiping the artistic slate clean of the remnants of late Modernist mannerism and beginning again from first principles. This was a historical juncture at which empiricism (taking art out of the picture frame, and even the frame of the gallery, and back into the unmediated environment through performance, happenings, and an extensive use of found objects) and self-reflexivity (asking artistic media to focus on their own materiality, even to an extent that would render them dysfunctional) collided.

“Slow Glass” is essentially a 40-minute meditation on glass, and the British industry of glassmaking. One of the first pieces of information the narrator imparts to us is that, contrary to appearances, glass is a very slow-moving liquid that hardens as it cools, but never crystallizes into a solid. An apparently stable phenomenon proves to be imperceptibly changing. Appearances are elusive; they may even be illusions. Smith collages footage, gathered over many years, of Leyton in East London, where he was living at the time, to reveal the changing cityscape. He makes it clear



John Smith, "The Kiss", 1999, film still

that observing the city in the present tense cannot be distinguished from perceiving it on a temporal axis. To see is to remember, and to see an object in the present is also to see it become transparent to its own past. Smith manages to make the overt artifice of his editing, with its radical temporal juxtapositions, function as an empirical tool.

The only film shared between the Berlin show and Smith's concurrently running mini-survey show at the Kestnagesellschaft in Hannover (both exhibitions are joined by a further retrospective selection at the Neue Museum Weserberg in Bremen, also concurrent) is the "The Kiss" (1999). We watch a lily, which appears to be blooming in fast-motion, until it fractures a pane of glass through which we had unknowingly been watching its growth. In fact, what appears to be time-lapse photography is five minutes of real-time film and the accelerated growth is an

illusion. Smith held the lily between two panes of glass which he gradually brought together in a vice until the increasing pressure shattered one of the panes and pressed the flower. The illusion of growth is caused by the spread of the petals under the compression of the encroaching panes. Shown on a monitor in Berlin and as a beamer projection in Hannover, the film proves to be remarkably presentation-specific. The broken shards "become" the television screen in the Berlin installation in a way which gives the film's structuralist metaphor an extra dimension. The lily is set up, within the film's extremely restricted viewpoint, as "test-case" reality – the thing being observed by the camera – and its exoticism extends the conceit like a set of inverted commas designating the flower as the "real", but in the alternative form of its artificial image, an artificiality that is enhanced by the illusion of



John Smith, "Bildstörung", Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, 2012, exhibition view

its unnaturally accelerated growth. Smith's basic methodology – exposing the inherent strangeness of the mundane – is rhetorically inverted here. The exotic form of the spreading lily stands for the otherness of the real as it is manifested in the image that film makes of it. The broken glass is a violent emblem of the fracturing of that image's illusion, a moral culmination in which reality overpowers fiction.

The seven-part sequence "Hotel Diaries" (2001–2007), presented on adjacent monitors in Hannover, also associates the exotic with self-reflexivity, as though what is familiar is already so extraordinary that a foreign environment can only be a false lead – a blind – and literally so, in that Smith restricts his view, in each of the parts, to the four walls of a hotel room somewhere around the world. He blinds himself to what lies beyond those boundaries in order to concentrate on himself and his own act of filming. This is filmic self-reflexivity figured in theatrical terms. Only in the sixth part, "Dirty Pictures" (2007), set in Palestine, does Smith wander briefly onto the balcony and allow his camera to rove over the separation wall and take in the dun-colored panorama. The sense of having breached the limits of a cell is significantly qualified when we see

Smith in a different hotel room, inspecting the footage of the cityscape we have just been shown. He claims to be dissatisfied because specks of dust on the camera lens have disrupted the view. We might wonder why he didn't go back and refilm, but that dust – like the rain over Essex, and the windscreen wiper that cleared it – functions as a reminder that we are looking not through our own eyes but through someone else's or at least their camera, their surrogate eyes. And not at the present but at the past, even as our relief at being released from the confinement of the hotel room might allow us to forget it.

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John Smith, "Slow Glass", Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin, February 11–March 3, 2012.

John Smith, "Bildstörung", Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, February 24–April 29, 2012.