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John Smith
Interviewed by Mark Prince

On Drawing
Christopher Townsend

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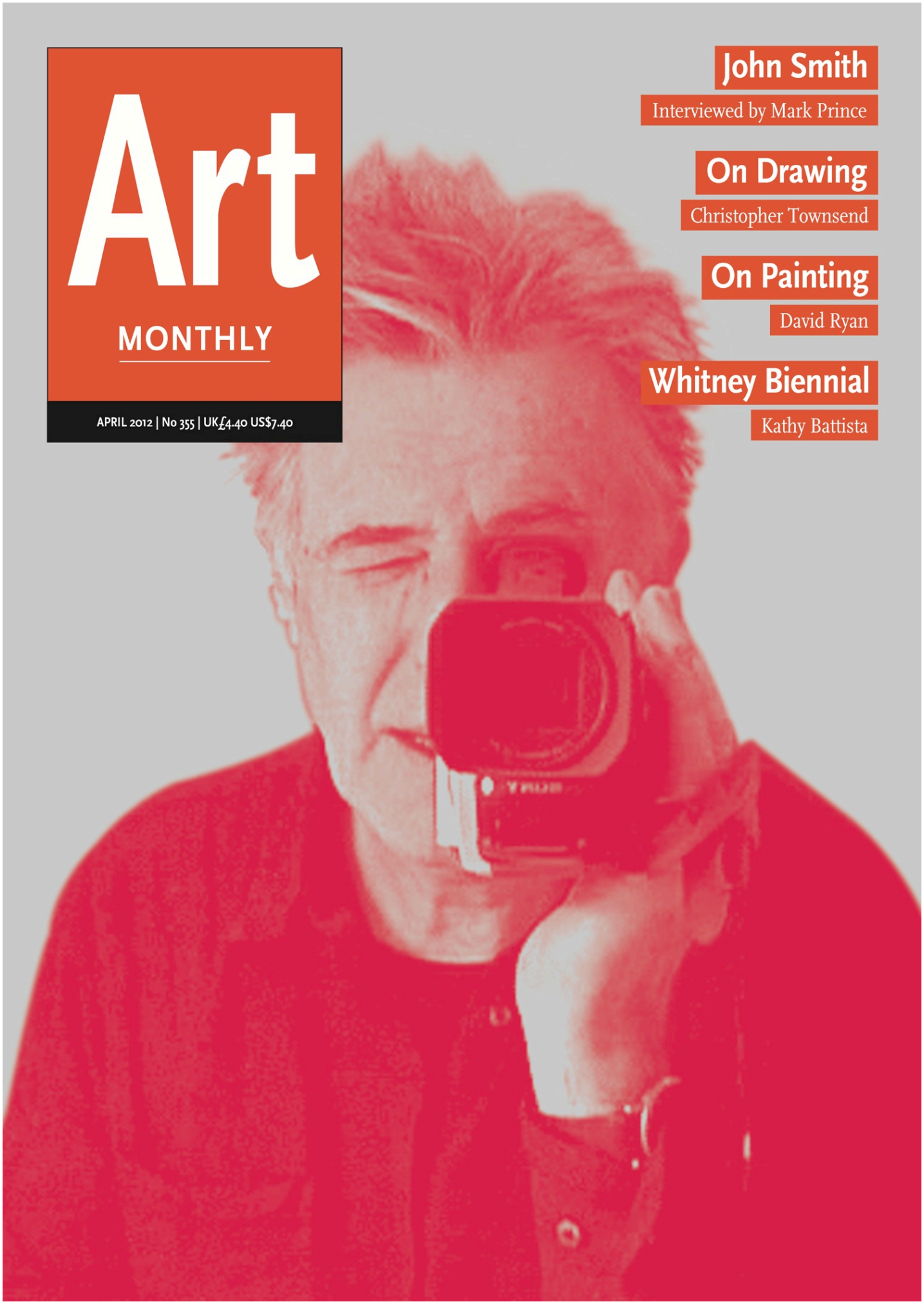

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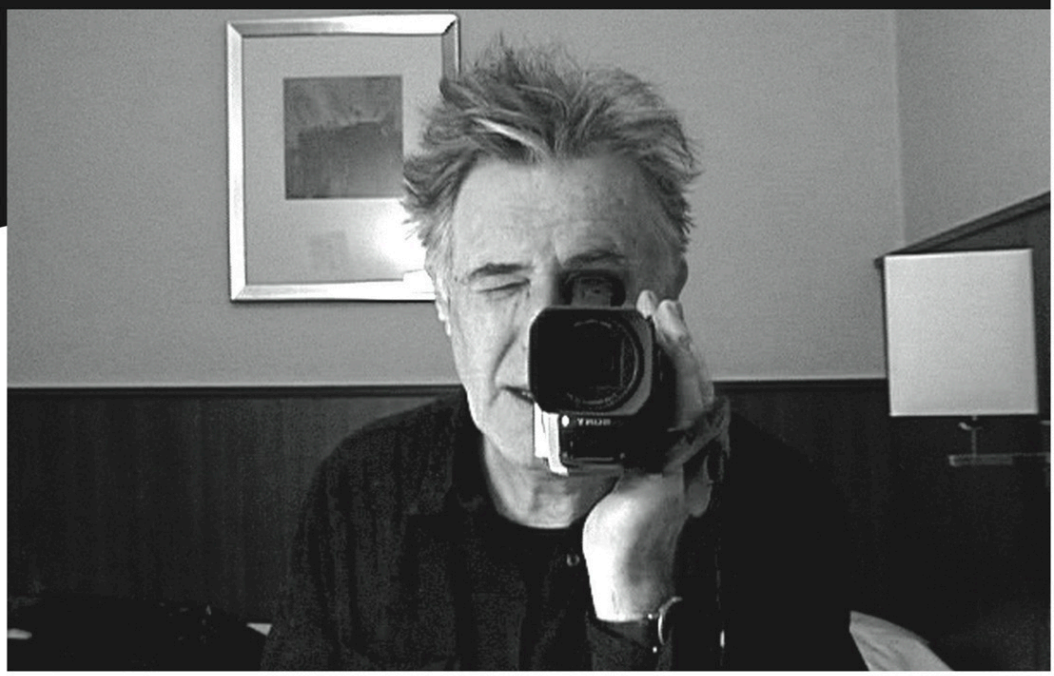
John Smith interviewed by Mark Prince

Waitinggame



John Smith
'Hotel Diaries'
Pyramids/Skunk
2006-07
video

Mark Prince: *One of the things that makes your films currently so distinctive is that you return to primary experience for your material. You walk the streets or look out the window and film what you see. You are not looking through a filter of received references that backs you up. I associate this return to first principles with the spirit of early British conceptual art. Would you say that was your original context?*

John Smith: It was. Conceptual Art was formative but also, when I began making work, it was within the world of structuralist, materialist filmmaking, and also the world of semiology, looking at the construction of meaning. But I'm glad you mentioned that there aren't many references in the films.

Which is unusual now, at least in films made within an art context.

Absolutely. Most of my friends at the time weren't at art school. I wanted to make work that you didn't need to have a background in art or experimental filmmaking to appreciate. That has remained important to me. I'd be as interested in showing my work at a library film society to a group of old-age pensioners as I would to an informed art audience.

Although many of your methods seem structuralist, you tend to work in the opposite direction: to begin by seeing film as hampered by its literalness and then to go on to create a space for fantasy within it. A new potential for illusion is opened up from a position of disillusionment.

I am trying to work backwards and forwards between an involvement in the illusion and making you aware that what you are looking at is a construction. Unlike many of my contemporaries in the 1970s, I have a love/hate relationship with illusionism rather than just a hatred of it. I am wary of the power that mainstream cinema has but I'm also fascinated by storytelling and the psychological involvement it asks of you. I like work in which you have that experience of identification while being regularly reminded of its artifice.

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'Hotel Diaries' *Dirty Pictures* 2007 video

'Hotel Diaries' *Dirty Pictures* 2007 video

Blight 1994-96 video

Entertainment is a great resource.
It seems such a shame to throw that away.

Now that the digital modification of films can be done on an iPhone, we are generally more aware of how artificial images can be. Do you think that invalidates Structuralism or makes its project more urgent?
I think it is still very relevant. Despite the fact that we know images can be constructed we still look at them as if they were evidence. We can't help it. In the same way, when we're given verbal information that we know to be nonsense, we still half believe it. That is really what *The Girl Chewing Gum* of 1976, and *The Black Tower* from 1985-87 are about. You are given these obviously false narratives but the power of the word is such that it is all too easy to imagine them. You are told there is a man in a long raincoat with a gun in his pocket who has just robbed the local post office. If that is funny, it's because it so so easy to imagine that it is actually the case, although you know it isn't.

We need to imagine a film is happening before our eyes for it to remain engaging. In The Girl Chewing Gum, *your voiceover makes it difficult to maintain that illusion. Your films seem to express frustration with the limitations of the medium by manipulating our sense of time in this way or by extreme cutting – radical juxtapositions between documentary and fictional modes, and between still and moving images. Do you find the limitations of film frustrating?*
Not at all. Sometimes I think there are too many possibilities. I often deliberately set up limitations. For example, a film has to be a single shot, or it is going to be exactly one minute long, or the camera is not going to move. I like limitations and I am interested in suggesting what might be going on outside the imposed structure that I'm putting around the work.

But do you see the solipsistic narratives of The Girl Chewing Gum *and* The Black Tower *as metaphors for the insularity of a film's world?*
I find it interesting when people see *The Black Tower* and ask if I have suffered from mental illness. Well, not as far as I know. For me, it is a playful engagement with constructing these worlds.

How did The Black Tower *come about?*
Like most of my work, it was made over quite a long period, over two and half years. It could have been four different films. The sequence in which monochrome colour fields turn into representational images was originally an idea in itself. The part in which the seasons change on the street and the cars appear and disappear from behind a tree was also planned as a single film. I am interested in making hybrid work which goes off in unexpected directions. To me, one of the exciting things about filmmaking – and particularly about editing – is how you can bring disparate elements together and create a seamless flow from one kind of engagement to another. But essentially *The Black Tower* came about because I moved into a house in Leytonstone in East London in the early 1980s. From the bedroom window was the view that you see at the end of the film of the black tower from across the graveyard.

There was actually a black tower?
Yes. You are looking at completely undoctored images of the same building from different angles. It was a water tower in the grounds of the hospital.

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I assumed it was a little model you had made in the studio and somehow superimposed onto the 16mm film.

Someone else said that to me recently. That's the last thing I would have expected people to think when I made the film, especially because things like that were so much harder to achieve convincingly then. I guess it relates to your point about our contemporary awareness of the constructedness of photographic images. Coming back to *The Girl Chewing Gum* and how the voice can determine how we see images, it was a formal proposition for me to make a film in which you are told that this building is in different places and then to make that convincing simply through careful framing. The narrative came out of the places the water tower was visible from: across the graveyard, so I knew it was going to have death in it; the grounds of a hospital, so there was going to be sickness in it; behind high walls, so there would be a prison; over some trees, so I could place it in the countryside. I wrote down what the locations suggested. The film was about the power of language. I was quite shocked when people started saying they found the story scary. I simply wanted to write a pastiche of a mystery horror story, the sort of thing I used to enjoy reading as a teenager.

Many of your films are based around East London, where you live, and determined, like The Black Tower, *by the features of the area. Perhaps there is a connection to London-based painters, such as Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, who have worked in the city over the past half century and treated it as a field for empirical artistic research, even though their work can be almost abstract. Would you agree with Auerbach that the greater the familiarity with the subject, the greater the freedom to invent from it?*

Absolutely. You can draw whatever meaning you want out of something if you dwell on it for long enough. You become aware of detail. With *The Black Tower*, I became fascinated, in an aesthetic sense, with what the tower looked like in various lighting conditions. On a sunny day, it was like a hole cut out of the sky, an absence of image on a plinth. The film is about encompassing polarities – there is illusionism, narrative, conventional cinema and, at the other extreme, something completely abstract. The black frame could be no image at all, or could be the wall of the black tower, or a night sky.

When your films stray from London, they do so rhetorically, as though to point out the absurdity of the exotic when the familiar is so strange. There is the exile to the field in Hertfordshire at the end of The Girl Chewing Gum, *or the last imageless frames of* Lost Sound *which tell us we are in Palermo, when the rest of the film has taken place in a few square miles around Shoreditch. In the 'Hotel Diaries', 2001-07, you are in a series of foreign cities but always confined to the four walls of the hotel room. Vienna, in* Worst Case Scenario *of 2001-03 – mostly shot in black-and-white stills from another hotel room – seems an alien territory. Does being elsewhere dictate a different method?*

It is important for me that the work is rooted in the mundane. So even in the section of the 'Hotel Diaries' set in Palestine, when I look out of the window and over the Separation Wall, I deliberately don't show the dramatic events I am talking about. Although I shot a lot of video footage when I was there which could be seen as reportage, I am more interested in showing ordinary things and investing them with something which makes them extraordinary. So much of cinema is about spectacle that you become immune to it. I find it hard to look at a sunset in reality because it makes me think of shampoo adverts. Our pleasure in the natural world can become a cliché because of our overexposure to it through media.

Your longest 16mm film, Slow Glass *of 1988-91, taps into an archive of footage of the same London sites filmed over several years. It gives us the impression of watching the city altering before our eyes, which produces a sense of nostalgia and loss. A shopfront switches its sign several times within seconds. Does deconstruction, which is usually thought of as a dispassionate process, have an emotional meaning for you?*

I think it's both. I'm a bit of a sucker for the optical effect – for example, switching between an image of something by day and night. I find that very seductive. Sometimes I get a bit annoyed with myself if it begins to feel gratuitous. I first got involved with making films through doing light shows for rock bands so I was really interested in the optical effects of imagery.

In your 2011 show at PEER in London you began looking back to previous work. You were qualifying not just the representation of the Dalston site in The Girl Chewing Gum, *but the film itself as an established cultural artefact. Was there a sense of trepidation in tampering with a film which has become a classic of British experimental filmmaking? Or did you feel it was yours to tamper with?*

I felt I had every right to do it. But a few people were a bit shocked. I thought I would treat the film with the irreverence it deserves. I show these older works all the time. They are so familiar to me that I don't have the distance of someone seeing them for the first time. But it did really shock me when I superimposed the new onto the old images.

What seemed staged in The Girl Chewing Gum *takes on a documentary status. The new colour images push you and the 1970s passers-by back into a black-and-white world which is definitively past. It has become an emotive autobiographical document.*

I think that is something that runs through a lot of my recent work. Maybe because I am still showing those early films. It is a constant reminder of how long ago things were and how much things have changed. Not least because I am actually in a lot of the work. I am seeing images of myself or hearing my voice and, of course, I am getting older.

In the series 'Hotel Diaries', it is a looped process of watching yourself filming yourself watching yourself filming etc. The political theme seems to arise serendipitously in the first film, Frozen War. *Did you then seek it out in the subsequent parts?*

Frozen War was made in 2001. The second film, *Museum Piece*, was set in Berlin in 2004 and ends with me talking about 'Schindler's Lift'. The film had a serious political motivation but I was a bit concerned that people would think it was all a cheap trick, leading up to that pun. So I wanted to make another one just to qualify that. The third part, *Throwing Stones*, I made only a month after *Museum Piece*.

That is the one in which you mention the possibility of a trilogy.

Yes, but the reason for making that one was that Yassar Arafat had died the previous day. That is how it has been with the remaining parts. They have always been triggered by events relating to the conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan that have occurred while I have been travelling.

How much foresight do you have? Are they scripted at all?

They are not scripted, but I know what I am going to talk about and in what order. It is important what the camera is looking at while I am saying something. I have to get myself into a certain frame of mind because it is quite difficult to film and talk at the same time,

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The Man Phoning Mum 2011 video

and I don't allow myself to edit. Occasionally I have done two or three retakes until I get it right.

When you look out over the city in Palestine, there are specks of dirt on the camera lens. At the beginning of the next film you comment on how you found this regrettable. But you didn't go back and reshoot it, you chose instead to incorporate the mistake into the narrative of the next film.
And that also enabled me to give the film the title *Dirty Pictures*.

What are you working on at the moment?
A commission that is going to be filmed in Margate. I am simply going to film the sea.

There are those lines from The Wasteland*: 'On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing.' In your film* The Waste Land*, TS Eliot reads part of the poem, but I think not those lines.*
That's funny, because the film is going to be very much about nothingness. I am interested in looking out at the vista from the window, and all you see is sea and sky. It should look like a completely naturalistic image but I'll use the same device as in *Worst Case Scenario* where it gradually becomes apparent that you're looking at the same place at different times of day within a single image.

How long would you give yourself to make such a film?
In this case it is dependent on the limited periods I am able to use the office from which I am planning to film. Usually it is flexible. There is a lot of sitting around waiting.

Like waiting for the ceiling tiles in the hotel room in Palestine to start flapping around again?
Or waiting for the unexpected. The waiting around usually pays off in the end. Making *Lost Sound*, for example, Graeme Miller and I would find a strip of tape to film and I would set up an interesting shot, but then be left waiting for things to happen in the background.

It seems amazing that coherent sound could be retrieved from those bits of chewed-up tape found on the street.
You are hearing the content of the tape that you're looking at. It might have had almost all the magnetic coating washed off, but we are so familiar with music that when you play it, your mind fills in the gaps. The type of music is very quickly identifiable. But we also wanted to draw attention to the musical qualities of natural sound – sometimes you are not sure whether what you're hearing is on the tape or ambient sound. So the stop/start of the eroded material creates its own rhythm, or the ambient sound fills in the gaps.

It is a speculative process.
And a solitary one. Waiting for sound as much as for pictures. The clock nearby is going to chime on the hour, or there are some workers on a building site putting up scaffolding, they stop, and you are waiting for them to start up again.

Blight *was filmed at a building site along the route of the M11 Link Road in East London. As in* Lost Sound*, there is a musical component. The voices on the soundtrack seem to derive from found recordings but they are looped and set to music, so they seem like incantations. How did those different elements come together?*
It was a collaboration with the composer Jocelyn Pook, who also lived in that part of Leytonstone. Both our houses were being demolished – the house you see being knocked down was next door to my house. I recorded interviews with people who lived in the area, exploring memory and loss – recurring themes in my work. I asked them, for example, what they remembered about the houses they had lived in. Fragments of the interviews were chopped up quite ruthlessly, given that those people had often been baring their souls to me. Jocelyn noticed the musical qualities of some voices, which played a big part in what we selected. You are looking at discarded objects in a wasteland, an old vacuum cleaner or record player, as you hear the words 'Blue' or 'Grey with a little pink'. Or you see the rings of a tree trunk while hearing numbers, which could be someone's age, the number of the house they lived in or how many brothers and sisters they have. The question is what a number or colour can convey without being given a specific context in which its meaning declares itself.

There are various lateral associations between word and image, or image and image, such as between the map of the motorway network and the spider's web tattoo on the arm of a builder.
I came home one night and the house next door had been partly demolished. A wall was exposed revealing a poster for *The Exorcist*. So I decided to construct the beginning of the film in such a way that you wouldn't see the people involved in the demolition, so it looked as though there was a poltergeist in the house. Some unseen force. And then I started filming the workers, and one of them had the spider's web tattoo on his elbow, which looked like the motorway network around London. Then in one of the first interviews, I asked a woman what she remembered about the house she had lived in as a child. They had an outside toilet which she hated because it contained lots of spiders, and she would have her father go in first and kill them. So the theme of the spider emerged from these separate sources, completely by chance, and became a motif in both the image and the soundtrack. All of a sudden something like that happens which you realise you can build on. That is also why I tend to work over long periods. I'm afraid that things will not come through unless you give them time. You have to wait to find out what you need. Things radiate outwards from that serendipity. ▮

John Smith is at Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover to 29 April and Turner Contemporary, Margate from 1 to 17 June.

MARK PRINCE is an artist based in Berlin.

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