

JOHN SMITH: EVERYDAY DISRUPTIONS

BY MARK PRINCE

VIEWED AGAINST THE background of contemporary art, the work of the British experimental filmmaker John Smith reveals how self-oriented the current context has become. This is a curious paradox given that Smith, born in 1952, emerged as an artist in early 1970s England under the influence of Structuralist filmmaking, which aimed to dismantle the illusionism on which film is based. But Smith's films are also rooted in British Conceptual art of the late 1960s and early '70s, which sought to scrap all the prevailing templates of art-making and begin over again from first principles.

Smith's work reminds us that early Conceptualism involved taking art out of the picture frame, and the frame out of the gallery, to engage the unmediated environment through performance, Happenings and a use of the found object. His recourse to primary experience for his material exposes the reliance of today's artists—both younger and of his own generation—on webs of quotation to reinforce their authority. In contrast, Smith seems liberated from the circular bind of art about art, despite his concern with investigating how film manipulates us.

Considered together, the three recent solo exhibitions of Smith's films in Germany—at the Kestnervesellschaft in Hannover, the Neue Museum Weserburg in Bremen and Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin—provided a 40-year overview of a career in which a painstaking accumulation of footage, complex editing and long periods of creative gestation have produced an average of four or five films per decade. The three exhibitions constituted a salutary argument against the art market's demands for production.

Smith typically begins with the observation of his immediate sur-

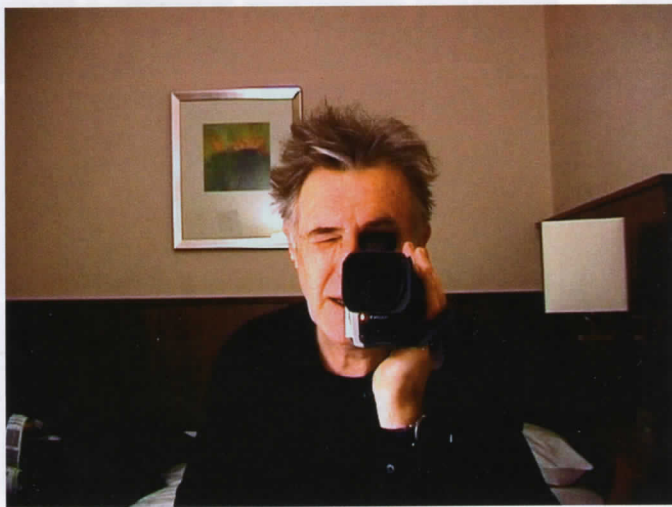
roundings: he walks the streets, or looks out of the window, and films what he sees. Artifice—in the form of radical editing, manipulations of temporal perception and switches between documentary and fictional modes—is then applied in the cutting room. His most celebrated work, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976, 12 minutes), shows the comings and goings on an unexceptional street corner in Dalston, East London. This scene is transformed by Smith's voiceover, which makes it appear that he is directing the passersby, a conceit as comic as it is temporally disorienting. Our habitual suspension of disbelief depends on accepting the film's artifice for the purposes of emotional engagement.

This illusion can only be sustained if we insist on seeing the urban traffic as submissive to Smith's commands. The absurd correlation between voice and action is finally rendered spatial, as the camera's view is exiled to an empty field in the Hertfordshire countryside, from which Smith claims to have been narrating what has preceded.

We are left to choose between interpreting Smith's voiceover as evidence of the narrator's ability to cause events or as the disillusioned words of someone who has already seen the film. It is also, however, a metaphor for artistic solipsism, which makes the film itself a fable about an artist's ability to create a microcosmic world in which all the rules are his.



John Smith: *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, film, 12 minutes. Images this article courtesy Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.



Above, three stills from the seven-part film series "Hotel Diaries," 2001-07. Top to bottom, *Dirty Pictures*, 2007, 14 minutes; *Pyramids/Skunk*, 2006-07, 16 minutes; and *Throwing Stones*, 2004, 11 minutes.

Opposite, five stills from *The Black Tower*, 1985-87, film, 24 minutes.

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STRUCTURALIST FILMMAKING is self-reflexive: the medium coerced into revealing its own materiality. Smith takes this literally, reading self (film) as self (artist). From *The Girl Chewing Gum* onward, his films often feature his own voice as their narrative catalyst and connector. This allows for expediency (his voice being the nearest at hand) as well as transparency (the film brought to reveal its maker).

The seven-part film sequence "Hotel Diaries" (2001-07)—installed in Hannover on seven adjacent monitors—is Smith's most extended meditation on the insularity of filmmaking: his viewpoint is hemmed in by the four walls of various hotel rooms around the world. Only in the sixth section does Smith wander briefly onto his Palestinian balcony and let the camera rove over the dun-colored cityscape.

These seven miniature chamber pieces, each approximately 10 minutes long, are unedited experiments in the free-form improvisation of narrative. Smith places himself in the role of the storyteller/entertainer, weaving a stream of consciousness out of the most frugal materials—the basic act of filming, his own solitary witness of that act and what he happens to discover in the unfamiliar territory of his hotel room. Ironically, he chooses to look for narrative-building material in spaces known for being generic and homogenized. He might focus on the mysteriously frozen image of a politician on a TV screen (*Frozen War*, 2001); cheap Styrofoam ceiling tiles flapping with each gust of wind, as though a poltergeist were playing havoc above (*Dirty Pictures*, 2007); or inscrutable heraldic symbols on the walls of an English bed and breakfast accommodation (*B & B*, 2005). References to the Middle East conflict serve as a global foil, offsetting the principal register of self-containment. Smith explores the dimensions of his mostly silent microcosm, while the big world threatens to boom from the headlines of a newspaper lying folded on the dressing table.

"Hotel Diaries" is one of the few films Smith has made outside the suburban East London area where he lives. His artistic project is to reveal the mundane as extraordinary, and when he strays from his immediate environment he does so rhetorically, as if to intimate the absurdity of exoticism when the familiar is already so strange. He always seems to be asking us what we might be missing through an excess of familiarity with our surroundings. The project of linguistic structuralism was to reveal the construction of meaning in everyday language; to make us aware that signifiers manipulate our perceptions and that naming things—and



the act of picturing is another form of naming—is tendentious. *The Girl Chewing Gum* and “Hotel Diaries” are ironic performances of the act of naming aspects of quotidian reality.

Smith has remarked that *The Black Tower* (1985-87)—the culmination of his Hannover show—is “about the power of language.” The narrator of the 23-minute film—Smith himself—describes observing a mysterious black tower repeatedly appearing over trees and rooftops. The film’s story was suggested by the angles from which a local water tower, peaked by an ominously black house structure, could be seen. A view across hospital grounds evokes illness; a graveyard suggests death; a bank of trees an interlude of rural convalescence. From these beginnings, the film spirals into a surrealist tale of mental illness, as the narrator becomes reluctant to leave his home for fear the tower’s inexplicable reappearance will further threaten his sanity.

Smith’s script builds upon the reflex significations of contingent images, rather as a therapist might probe a patient’s psyche by asking him to engage in free association. We are left ultimately unsure whether it is the city itself, the culture—in the guise of the images it trafficks—or the artist’s fertile imagination that has created the narrative. Structuralist film, which was intended to expose filmic illusion, has had its purpose reversed into projecting a space for fantasy. But if the film’s wayward narrative turns are no more than reflections of what the views of the water tower happen to signify, its themes of agoraphobia and solipsistic hallucination function as metaphors for the sealed-off world of film. Smith’s passive attitude to his material is therefore strategic: he is receptive to not just any results, but the right results. In their openness to fantasy, his films transcend the literalness of their Structuralist roots.

Toward the end of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the voiceover shifts from description to a more internalized mode, but one that serves to raise our awareness of how little we know about reality through images, and how much we automatically compensate for that lack with our imagination. We are told a furtive-looking man, scurrying across the road, has just robbed a bank and is concealing a pistol in his raincoat. Thriller conventions are appropriated in order to make us conscious that such an outlandish notion is finally no more fantastic than anything else we might assume about the passersby from the safe remove of the film footage. It could, of course, just as likely be true. ○

“John Smith: Picture Interference” was on view at Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, Feb. 24-Apr. 29. A catalogue will be published in the fall. “Worst Case Scenario: Films from 1975-2003” appeared at the Neue Museum Weserburg, Bremen, Jan. 20-Mar. 24. “Slow Glass” was at Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin, Feb. 11-Mar. 3.

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