THE HERETICAL JACOBIN

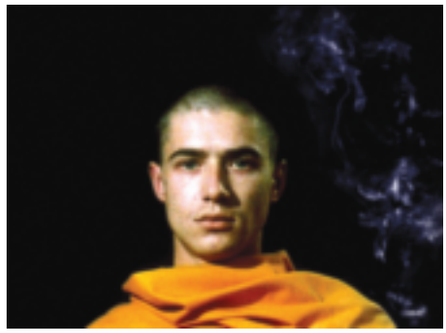
Frozen War (Hotel Diaries 1), video still, 2001
Courtesy: the artist

Developed in the 1960s in the context of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative, the film practice of English artist JOHN SMITH is aimed at deconstructing narration by means of sincere engagement and sophisticated humor.

words by SIMONE MENEGOI

Scene: a crowded street. Still frame. They are shooting a film. A voice-over gives instructions to the passers-by, like an old man crossing the street, a couple of girls moving by the camera and a Jamaican family turning the corner. The trailer of a truck pauses in the left corner of the frame, then at the command of the voice-over, it is pushed outside. Yet the instructions given by the invisible director gradually become unlikely or even absurd. The voice dictates the moment when a couple of pigeons have to enter flying through the frame, and the pigeons fulfill the order with a timing too perfect to be true. Even a public clock is "directed": the minute hand, as the voice says, must make a complete rotation in one hour, while the hour hand must make its rotation in twelve hours. The viewer grasps the trick: the voice's directives don't affect the image, but vice versa. The scene was shot first and has an independent development; the voice-over was added afterwards, adapting to what happens in the frame. Since the voice is in slight advance of the events, it seems that it induces them. The "film" we are watching is simply a fragment of urban life.

For more than one reason, *The Girl Chewing Gum*, a 16mm film realized in 1976, can be considered the manifesto of its author, the London film-and-video-maker John Smith. It contains all the elements of his work: an indie filmmaker's craft approach, all ideas and no budget; humor; the strong bond with London's East End, where Smith lives (the film was shot in Hackney); and, above all, the critical approach to the audiovisual language. "Something that is fundamental to me in any film I make," Smith told Cate Elwes in 2001, "is that the information it presents should be made suspect and its construction should be made evident. […] I'm interested in work that invites us to question what we are told. It's to do with engagement rather than consumption"[1]. Throughout almost forty years of work, Smith has remained loyal to this principle, which took shape in the London underground film scene between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. In that period, Smith was closely involved with the London Film-Makers' Co-operative, an association founded in 1967, which aimed to provide production structures and distribution to underground filmmakers. Those were the years of "structural cinema," a form of filmmaking focused on its own language, rather than the representation of the world through that language. London Co-op artists elaborated a more radical version, influenced by Marxism, of this general trend, called "structural/materialist film." In 1976 (the same year as *The Girl…*), Peter Gidal, one of Co-op theoreticians, wrote an essay-manifesto defining the group's positions. Among those there were the refusal of narration; the refusal of the aesthetic and psychological mechanism on which narration is based (that is, the viewer's identification with what is happening on the screen, considered the terminal product of capitalist alienation); the support of a radically anti-illusionist cinema, which "does not represent, or document, anything."[2]



Above:
Om, film still, 1986

Below:
Associations, film still, 1975

All images courtesy: the artist

ARTIST'S BIO

JOHN SMITH was born in London in 1952 and studied film at the Royal College of Art. Recent solo exhibitions include Royal College of Art, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham in 2006, Kunstmuseum Magdeburg in 2005 and Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool in 2003. Smith lives and works in London, where he is also a Professor of Fine Art at the University of East London. He is represented by Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

Smith's 1970s works are clearly influenced by this artistic background. *Associations* (1975), for instance, explores the bonds between image, phonic signifier and signified. It is composed of a voice-over reading a scientific text on the linguistic and psychological mechanisms of verbal associations, and rapid sequences of still images taken from newspapers and magazines, which are self-reflexively connected to the words of the text by phonic assonance. *Leading Light* (1975) and *Blue Bathroom* (1978–79) are studies of places and objects in altering conditions of lightning, with extreme editing effects (in some parts of *Blue Bathroom*, the very rapid alternation of identical frames, but with reversed compositions of light and shadow, causes a stroboscopic effect). Beyond the influence of the aesthetic atmosphere of the London underground, *Leading Light* and *Blue Bathroom* are influenced by two great American experimental filmmakers: Hollis Frampton, whose *Zorns Lemma* (1970), structured according to mathematical criteria, is mostly made of frames of alphabetical letters taken from Manhattan's signs, and Michael Snow, whose *Wavelength* (1967) is an endless odyssey of a forward zoom through a room, continuously changing from daytime to nighttime, from light to shadow.

If the Co-op was Smith's natural context, his work nevertheless remained heterodox, even heretical, compared to a certain sectarian spirit characterizing the association.

(To get an idea of the aesthetic Jacobinism of those years, it suffices to say that Gidal, in his 1976 manifesto, contemptuously wrote off "Antonioni and the much less talented Bertolucci, Pasolini, Losey," saying that they were conservatives disguised as progressives, worse than the professed reactionaries). Instead of refusing narration altogether, Smith preferred clear-headed play with its seductive power, as in *The Girl…*— in other words, using narration to deconstruct narration. Although he kept a strictly anti-illusionistic approach to film language, he increasingly dedicated himself to *description*, and even to the despicable *documentation*, of places. Above all, he introduced an unexpected ingredient into the austere universe of British experimental film: humor.

Of course, the word must be considered cautiously. Smith's approach to humor, like

the spirit of his work taken generally, is intellectually sophisticated. In a 2003 interview, he explains to Brian Frye that what he is interested in is the joke's structure, the creation—sometimes sadistically slow and very detailed—of expectations which are then, suddenly, belied or overturned: a structure common to both jokes and avant-garde work. Yet the intellectual approach does not exclude pleasure. Smith's films are often actually *funny*, with few equals in experimental cinema. The author is fully aware of that, asserting that humor is an element of openness in his work, allowing him to get closer to a different—and wider—audience than the one of contemporary art.

There is a democratic spirit to this openness, which suits his left-wing political beliefs. This spirit comes through the constant attention of the director to the surrounding context, that is, London's East End, with its populist social and urban fabric in the process of continuous transformation. Despite his refusal of the documentary clichés, many of his films from the 1980s and videos from the 1990s are *also* precious documents of a daily, proletarian, anti-heroic London of which the director considered himself a part.

The Black Tower (16mm, 1985–87), widely considered to be Smith's masterpiece, uses all the intuitions and techniques that the filmmakers had been developing at that moment. It takes its cue from the director's discovery of a newly-built construction in the vicinity of his house: the waterworks of a hospital, which were painted an unusual matte black. Observing it from different points of view, the filmmaker realized that he could create the illusion that the construction rose in different contexts. From one point of view, the waterworks seemed clearly connected to the hospital, but from another, it seemed close to a meadow, while from a third, it seemed to tower over a cemetery, and so forth. Considering this condition, which was not unusual for a building in an urban context, Smith invented a story, dark and ominous, about a man obsessed with a black tower, a sort of architectural *unheimlich* that appears before the man's eyes in many places until it drives him mad. In the film, the story is told by the usual voice-over, while the protagonist's hallucinations are simply different views of the construction, alternated with abstract shots. A perfect, elegant game of linguistic construction, Raymond Roussel-style—but the gothic fascination of the story, as it happens in Roussel, shifts the attention from the form to the content, leaving the audience uncertain about the nature of what they are watching. Since it is Smith who voices the voice-over, some have gone so far as to say that it was an autobiographical story. "The scales tip a bit further in the narrative direction than I expected," ironically commented the director.

In the aforementioned interview with Cate Elwes, Smith explained his artistic devotion to the places where he lives: "I am very wary of making films on themes that are outside of my experience. That is a big reason for rooting things at home. […] But there is also a very practical consideration involved here. I nearly always work on my own. I don't like filming on my own in a place that is unfamiliar."

But the "unfamiliar" places are nevertheless present in Smith's life: they are the places he "meets" during his travels, particularly trips throughout the world to present his films. Between those places, there are some sites that are unfamiliar *par excellence*: hotels, supposedly anonymous and interchangeable, supposedly the same from a city to another. Challenging his own habits, Smith took these places, the most neutral places one can imagine, as a point of departure, directing a series of works freed from his usual geographical and existential coordinates. The result was the seven videos of the "Hotel Diaries" series (2001–07, his most recent works to date). The formula is simple and direct, far from the sophisticated editing exercises of the previous films. With a camera in his hand, Smith "explores" his hotel room, commenting out loud and in real time on what he sees. He looks for particular marks, something that distin-

The Black Tower, film still, 1985-1987
Courtesy: the artist

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

John Smith is among the participating artists in the 6th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Trespassing beyond the frame" in Josephine Lanyon (ed.), *John Smith. Film and Video Works 1972-2002* (Picture This Moving Image/Watershed Media Centre 2002).

2. "Theory and Definition of Structural/ Materialist Film" in Peter Gidal (ed.), *Structural Film Anthology* (London, British Film institute, 1976).

Above:
Blight, film still, 1996

Below:
The Girl Chewing Gum,
film still, 1976

All images courtesy: the artist

Shepherd's Delight, film still, 1980-1984
Courtesy: the artist

guishes that specific room or hotel from the others he has visited, taking his cue from what he sees to wander through personal associations. The recurring topic in his monologue is the international political situation. The series, started in October 2001, a few weeks after the fatal attacks on the Twin Towers, reports, through Smith's commentaries, on the developments of the Middle East conflict, the punitive wars took up by Bush's America, and Islamic terrorism. In 2007, Smith finally arrived in a country widely evoked in the videos: Palestine. We don't see the razor wire of check-points and images of war; instead, Smith once again limits his shots to an anonymous room in a hotel in East Jerusalem. But the damaged roof of the room—a souvenir of the recent occupation of the hotel by the Israeli army—is enough to materialize history and its tragedies. Although different from his formally sophisticated works, the "Hotel Diaries" maintain a recurring characteristic of his work, the voice-over, and confirm his idea of a "committed" however non-pedantic cinema, through which he manages to handle important issues while remaining grounded in particular and daily matters. In the last months, the world of contemporary art has taken a particular interest in Smith's work. Royal College, where the artist was a student in the 1970s, dedicated a retrospective to him; his films have been included in collective exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Basel and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and he has been invited to the 6. Berlin Biennial. It is a due reward, and hardly an unexpected one. Looking at Smith's work, the most astonishing thing is its abundance. Abundance, not only in a quantitative sense—although he has always worked alone, Smith has accumulated about fifty works, comprised of both short and full-length films—but also an abundance of ideas, approaches, levels of readings and *enjoyment*. Starting from an analytical approach to the film medium and, particularly, to the relationship between image and word, Smith has not refused the challenge of narration. Formalist by nature and study, he managed to use the language of his early works to evoke the surrounding urban and social reality. Inclined to a typically English intellectual humor (Lewis Carroll would probably have loved *Associations*'s puns), he has nevertheless proved capable of feeling a subtle form of *pietas* for what is consumed by time: urban landscapes, houses and ourselves. In brief, his art is one we need these days—an art of complexity.

Gargantuan, film still, 1992
Courtesy: the artist

AUTHOR

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Slow Glass,
film still, 1988-1991
Courtesy: the artist