

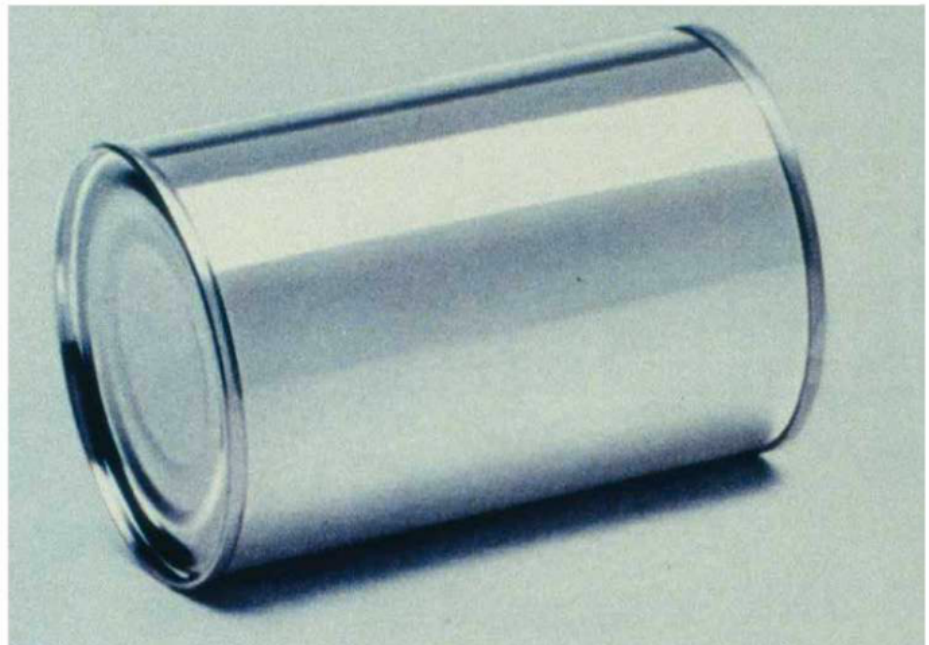
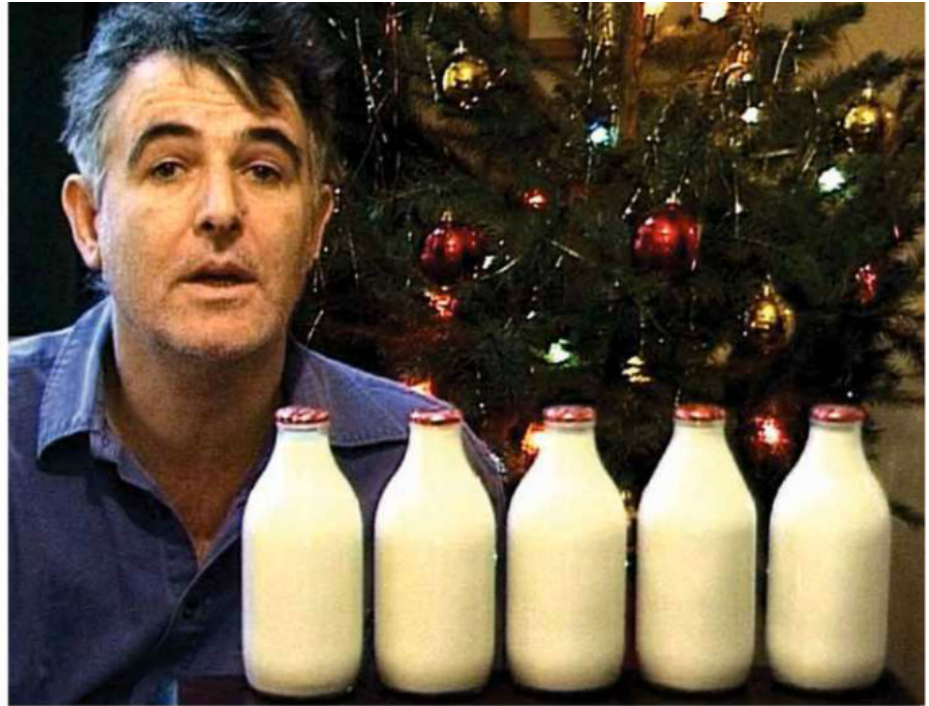
*"The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing."*

—Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting"

**A** member of the "second wave" of British structuralist filmmakers, who benefited from the influence of radical mentors such as Peter Gidal and Guy Sherwin without swallowing their prescriptions wholesale, John Smith followed in his mentors' footsteps by relentlessly revealing the artifice upon which cinematic representation depends. To paraphrase Michael O'Pray, Smith manipulates in order to expose manipulation: he leads us into seemingly familiar territory before blatantly confounding our expectations and forcing us to think twice about how image and sound can be molded to match their maker's aims.

Smith's baring of this device is all the more impressive for the frequent paucity of devices at his disposal. At his most efficient and economical, he requires little more than time-lapsed sunlight lapping the furniture of a modest West London apartment to incite reflection on the geometric construction of filmic space (*Leading Light*, 1975). In *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), Smith channels Truffaut's "Director Ferrand" from *Day for Night* (1973) as he hollers instructions at his "cast" of extras on a bustling Hackney street corner, gradually revealing that these commands are actually an *ex post facto* imposition, a reaction to the autonomous movements of random passers-by. In *The Black Tower* (1987), a jet-black water shed atop a brick tower is photographed from multiple perspectives, the resulting images providing the basis for a mysterious and disorientating narrative relating a man's maddening experience of encountering the obsidian edifice around every London street corner, and even in the sylvan sanctuary of the English countryside. And in *Blight* (1996), which depicts the demolition of the filmmaker's neighbourhood to make room for the incoming M11 motorway, the film's very subject matter puns on the construction (and, in Smith's case, the deconstruction) of the images, sounds, language, and ideologies upon which cinema is based.

While Smith's use of humour is often singled out as the most distinctive trait of his work, even



## **VOICES OFF**

The Films and Videos of John Smith

BY SAMUEL LA FRANCE

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Top: *Regression*

Bottom: *Associations*

more crucial is his employment of his own voice as both interrogator and embodiment of the codes and conventions his practice aims to subvert. In *Associations* (1975), made during his student days at the Royal College of Art, Smith employs an excerpt from Herbert H. Clarke's *Word Associations and Linguistic Theory* as a vehicle for shameless visual punning: as Smith's dry reading of the text progresses, increasingly hilarious word-image associations are drawn from selected keywords (or "stimuli"), such as *categories* (a Persian cat), *idiosyncratic* (a bathroom vanity, a rodent, and a clock), or *Chomsky* (an alpine skier). The purpose of *Associations* is to render a text unintelligible through its gross (in this case deliberate) misinterpretation, abating both the supremacy of the word as a communicative tool and the artist's own competence as a sound-and-image-maker.

In the works that followed, Smith developed this theme of directorial unreliability within larger explorations of filmic language, time, and on- and off-screen space. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, he inverts the temporal structure of the film's production, leading us first to believe that the overheard director occupies an off-screen but nevertheless diegetic space, then revealing that this monologue has been recorded in a field at Letchmore Heath, some 15 miles away from where the street footage was filmed. In the film's final moments, Smith cuts to this same field and executes a slow lateral pan that takes in horses, electrical towers, and the surrounding pastoral landscape, but the artist's voice has now gone silent and the body from which it issues is conspicuously absent. Following on the revelation of his inability to "direct" the urban action previously glimpsed, the filmmaker (an ironic designation in this context) is now literally effaced from the work.

In these early films, Smith demonstrates how an image's adherence to the directing "voice"—literal in Smith's case, figurative by extension—is interrupted as a result of that voice's unintelligibility, disengagement, or impotence, exposing the fickleness of cinematic interpretation in an effort to confuse, bemuse, and (no less important) amuse the spectator. Smith made direct use of his body and voice in a number of key works throughout the '80s, culminating in the brilliant, one-minute *Gargantuan* (1992). The film begins with an extreme close-up of a newt, imperiously commanding the screen in all its majestically magnified newty-ness as Smith's voice intones an ode to its apparent enormity. As the camera slowly zooms out, the newt becomes "medium," "average" in the opinion of its unseen balladeer; and as the previously off-screen space invades the frame, revealing Smith's pyjama-clad body and a bedside clock ticking in the foreground, the amphibian is adjudged "little," "scanty," and "diminutive." As Smith finishes his serenade with the refrain "My newt, I love my newt," the word "minute" (minute) appears on screen and the alarm rings to mark the song's end. The (self-)deprecation here is double. Not only does Smith make himself look foolish through his absurd act of amphibian

adoration (and his deliberately dreadful pun), he also arrogates perspectival authority to the camera rather than the artist: lying on his side, Smith describes the newt's changing stature in relation to how the camera, and not he himself, sees it. Yielding his authority to both the tyranny of time and the expanding field of the camera eye, Smith subsumes his positions as seer, speaker, maker, and subject within the inexorability of the film's process, reducing the role of the artist to a lethargic body, a deceived eye, and a saccharine voice.

By the late '90s, when film's economic and material impracticality began to outweigh its aesthetic and conceptual benefits, Smith started using digital as an intermediary before embarking on his first full-fledged video experiment, *Regression* (1998-99). A remake of a 16mm film made two decades earlier, *7P* (1977-78), the video begins with a direct-to-camera address wherein Smith justifies his conversion to digital, first describing the technical issues that plagued his earlier attempt, then suggesting that the new medium will lend a certain contemporaneity to the piece, and finally engaging in comically hyperbolic speculation that, with some rudimentary movie magic, viewers might mistake him for a spritely Young British Artist. As Chris Kennedy has astutely pointed out, Smith's facetiously Fitzgeraldian aspiration is achieved through a rigid adherence to a familiar song's cumulative structure: filming himself singing one line from "The Twelve Days of Christmas" every morning after Christmas day, the artist literally grows younger with the repetition of each of the previous days' verses. The self-derisive tone of Smith's introduction—as well as the earnestness with which his multiple selves fail to hold the carol's tune—helps avoid the potential pitfalls of the aging artist's conversion to what Rosalind Krauss suggested was an inherently narcissistic medium. Where Smith had previously employed his own seeming inadequacy as artist in order to emphasize the primacy of process, his focus in *Regression* on the sagginess of his chin and his desire to appear younger signal a new movement in his work, his interrogations of cinema's illusions and representational limits relocated from the process of filmmaking to a self fit to be fetishized within a newly digital economy.

This revised self-engagement with the voice and body stands in counterpoint to the supposedly transparent lack of process in Smith's approach to videomaking. Not unlike his work on 16mm, Smith's videos are characterized by a restrained practicality laced with hints of misdirection, self-deprecation, or outright boredom. In his seven-part *Hotel Diaries* (2001-2007), Smith imposes a set of more or less rigid formal and practical constraints to which all of the videos comply. Each is comprised of a single shot (with the exception of *Dirty Pictures* [2007], which contains two scenes filmed on each side of the West Bank barrier) recorded with a mini-DV camcorder; each is limited to the space of the respective hotel's rooms and hallways and the view outside; and each contains diegetic narration by Smith assessing the decor, relaying banal observations about the artist's life and work, and offering commentary on key developments in international events, often engendered by the images captured in the camera's purview: an empty bed calls to mind the death of Yasser Arafat; a pyramid brings to mind troubles in the Middle East and the recent election of Hamas in Gaza; a visit





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*Gargantuan*

to the Jewish Museum and Peter Eisenman's Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in the Berlin-shot *Museum Piece* (2004) yields a hallway-wandering monologue about Smith's discomfort in entering the museum due to his objection to Israeli state policy.

Although these videos seem improvisational and disengaged from specific aesthetic goals, they are in fact carefully constructed and rehearsed performances whose heavy subject matter is offset by Smith's meandering narration on the quotidian details of each room and his handheld, seemingly haphazard videography, which frequently gravitates towards mirrors, windows, picture frames, and other reflective surfaces. With the apparatus' view now practically indistinguishable from the artist's own eye, these videos suggest that the switch to a less process-based form of filmmaking has empowered Smith to look for (and at) himself. His identity and presence as a filmmaker—manifested in an eye, a body, and a voice that now collude in order to create—is now the primary engine and signifying system of the work's creation, and as such must be broken down in its turn. By de-emphasizing the process of image-making through the deceptive casualness of his visual strategies, Smith now gleefully deconstructs himself. He films a tooth that has fallen out of his mouth; admits to “losing it a bit” as he exhaustedly rambles on; pokes fun at a biographical description of him in the Rotterdam film festival program guide as “one of the most famous experimental filmmakers in the world”; and, at the conclusion of *Museum Piece*, he undercuts his political pontifications about Israel and the Holocaust by paying off a seemingly random comment from the beginning of the video—that he is sometimes told he has a lisp, one that he himself cannot hear—with a pan up to the manufacturer's label on an elevator and a patently awful Smithian pun: “I was in *Schindler's Lift*.”

The admission (or performance) of revelatory self-criticism and the functions (and malfunctions) of Smith's own mouth and body become central illusions of his practice that carry the potential to reveal introverted bouts of self-doubt. *Soft Work* (2012), a sort of “making-of” documentation of Smith's creation of the installation *Horizon—Five Pounds a Belgian* (2012), is filled with such moments. As Smith films the horizon of a shoreline in the south of England, he offers a loquacious rumination on his work, his willingness to be bored and to subject his audiences to boredom, and the occasional second-guessing that he experiences as an established filmmaker: “The only thing I'm a bit worried about is that people might find it a bit egotistic, or narcissistic. Do people really want to hear me waffling on about things that are important to me but pretty dull to everybody else?” Another project documented on video that evolved into a gallery show, *unusual Red cardigan* (2011), begins with Smith defining himself as “one of those people” who indulges in egosurfing (a.k.a. self-Googleing) to keep up to date with his online presence. This confession leads him to eBay, where a seller is auctioning a VHS compilation of Smith's films for the “rather steep” sum of £100. As Smith relates his sleuthing by retracing his web browsing, he reveals that he has ordered at other times from the seller's very limited stock—mostly comprising women's clothing and accessories—in hopes of learning more about the seller's identity. Though he admits that his methods are rather “creepy,” the artist acknowledges that the transparency of his investigation may have brought him to the vendor's attention. His curiosity is ultimately revealed to be self-serving, driven by his desire, if not for genuine connection, then at least for attention (“I bet she wondered about me, as I've been wondering about her”).

In a way, *Dad's Stick* (2012) closes a loop started nearly 40 years earlier with *Associations*. The video is a brief remembrance of Smith's late father, describing his precision as a hobbyist painter, his benevolence, and work ethic, as well as three objects that his father used throughout his lifetime, each with a function lost or reshaped over time: a standard-issue ruler repurposed as a truncheon; a stick for stirring wall-paints transformed into a record of the family's domestic history; and a teacup used to catch drops of touch-up paint, now hardly suitable for sipping Earl Grey. Forgoing handheld videography for precise, static documentation of the objects and opting to use captions instead of voiceover narration, Smith here uses his voice only sparingly, imitating his father's habit of humming and singing pop songs with mixed-up or invented lyrics. It's no doubt telling that Smith, after years of placing his demeaned self at or near the centre of his work, here largely absents himself when dealing with such intensely personal material. Yet this work about the distortion of mnemonic associations is revealing in a way wholly unlike Smith's self-mocking self-interrogations: it locates his career-long fascination with the malleability of language and the scrambling of significations in both his familial roots and the habits of everyday life. After years of tricks and deliberate befuddlement, there is here no deception at work: though his body is absent and his voice never rises above a gentle hum, the artist is more sincerely present than ever before.