John Smith: The Man Girl Phoning Chewing Mum Gum

John Smith interviewed by Pia Bolognesi

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Last year marked an important anniversary for *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), a film that made history in the structural/materialist movement, but John Smith's films, videos, and installations are hard to classify. The British artist studied in the 1970s at the Royal College of Art, after which he became involved in the activities of the London Filmmakers Co-op. Inspired in his formative years by Conceptual art and structural film, but also fascinated by the immersive power of narrative and the spoken word, he has developed an extensive body of work that subverts the perceived boundaries between documentary and fiction, representation and abstraction. Often rooted in everyday life, Smith's meticulously crafted films and videos rework and transform reality, playfully exploring and exposing the language of cinema.

PIA BOLOGNESI: *The Girl Chewing Gum* has turned forty—forty-one to be precise. Has anything changed in the way you perceive this work today?

JOHN SMITH: When I made the film as a twenty-three-year-old art student, it never occurred to me that people might still be watching it forty years later. At the time it was important to me that the film should impose its ideas upon a scene of everyday London life, so I deliberately chose a very ordinary location for the shoot. The only prerequisite was that the location should contain a street clock (so that I could "direct" the hands of the clock to move) and a cinema (because the film was conceived as a critique of mainstream illusionistic film). I essentially wanted the location to appear familiar and mundane. The passage of time has of course added a completely new dimension to the reading of the work. A film that documents the banalities of everyday life in 1976 now looks like an exotic record of a strange and long-lost era, where ordinary people in the street have been transformed by the passage of time into costumed character actors. *The Girl Chewing Gum* is regularly shown in schools and colleges, and in recent years I have been amused to discover several online blogs written by students. One of these stated that the film was made before color film was invented, while another asserted that it was made before filmmakers learned how to edit properly, explaining why it consists of only two shots.
Reading these interpretations made me realize how long ago 1976 must seem to a fifteen-year-old—almost as long ago as 1895, when the Lumière brothers first presented their films. Regularly being present at screenings of *The Girl Chewing Gum* and my other older works makes me very aware of the passage of time in relation to my own life, especially as my own presence features in many of the works. I was recently slightly horrified to realize that I am now more than half as old as cinema itself!

PB: In 2011 you shot *The Man Phoning Mum*, a sort of remake of *The Girl Chewing Gum*,

thirty-five years later. You came back to the same location, a street corner in Dalston, and filmed again, superimposing this new footage upon the original from 1976. This process is interesting for so many reasons: the changes in the landscape as it relates to the gentrification of London's East End; the coexistence of these two different moments that comes alive in the body of the image; the discrepancy in media formats, just to mention a few aspects. And here again, as in most of your films and videos, there's a pragmatic structural precision that expresses itself through the images. This time the superimposition is perfect in its discordance between 16mm and HD.

JS: The overlaying of the two distinct media (black-and-white 16mm film and color HD video) is an important aspect of *The Man Phoning Mum*, as it operates on several levels: formal, aesthetic, literal, lyrical. For me it is as if the materiality of film is attempting to break through the smooth surface of the digital video. I really like the way in which the grainy gray people from 1976 accidentally cross paths with their crisp and colourful HD counterparts from 2011, each treading on the paving stones that have remained the same for thirty-five years while the architecture has changed around them. I have a fantasy that maybe there is one person who happened to walk in front of my camera who appears in both the 1976 and 2011 recordings, oblivious in *The Man Phoning Mum* to their chance on-screen meeting with their younger self.

PB: I've often thought about *The Girl Chewing Gum* as dialectically connected with *Projection Instructions* by Morgan Fisher, from the same year. Do you think they're somehow related?

JS: Certainly, a primary function of both films is to draw direct attention to the cinematic apparatus, albeit by very different means. Although they expand in various directions, they are both based on developments of a single, simple concept. I certainly feel empathy with Fisher's film, perhaps because both works in different ways combine cold formal ideas with a warmer inclusion of a human presence. In general I feel rather more affinity with the American experimental filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s than with the British of the same period, as the Americans' works contain elements of fragmented narrative and humor that were largely missing from the artists' films produced on this side of the Atlantic.

PB: The tension between documentary and fiction is clear in your works. You also deal with how the formal structure exceeds pure structuralism to open itself to the narrative element, to the perceptive graft, which is sometimes ironic and playful, and at other times leans toward temporal and spatial abstraction, creating a sense of linguistic disorientation. You compound the visual level with the addition of words. How do you create this multiplicity of levels despite the fact that you adhere to such a precise and conclusive form?

JS: It is very important to me that the films contain the range of elements that you have mentioned. The kind of film work that engages me the most contains a degree of disorientation, where the viewer is not always

sure what it is that he or she is watching. So I aim to make work that is hard to classify within a particular genre, combining diverse and unexpected approaches and visual and auditory languages within a single film. It is often the combination of images and sounds used for both representational and abstract purposes within a single work that gives that work its dynamic. Shifting the emphasis of a film between narrative/representational and formal/abstract concerns encourages the viewer to actively engage rather than passively consume. But my films aren't generally conceived with this degree of complexity. They usually start out as quite simple ideas that expand and develop organically over time, particularly during editing, where ideas are frequently triggered by chance events and accidents that occurred during filming. The street scene in *The Girl Chewing Gum* was of course largely shaped by chance, as I had no idea what would happen in front of my camera when I started filming the single ten-minute shot. It was during the making of this film that I truly came to appreciate the potential of chance, and how accidents that might at first seem annoying can stimulate new directions for a work. For example, the boy who we are told has robbed the post office only exists because there was an alarm bell ringing in the street for the whole duration of the filming and I needed to justify its presence on the soundtrack. When I got the film back from the laboratory and got ready to plan the spoken directions that would later be added, I was very irritated to discover that I had zoomed in on the clock face in a very jerky and unprofessional manner. It was of course something that I would have to live with, but as I am a bit of a technical perfectionist I found it extremely annoying. Eventually I realized that there was an obvious way out of the problem—I was the director of the film and could therefore be in complete control of my material. So before the shot zoomed in on the clock I added the verbal command "I want the clock to move jerkily toward me" to the soundtrack. To my great relief the clock responded to my request obediently and did exactly what I asked.

John Smith, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (stills), 1976