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In Focus Interview with Erika Balsom

Researching John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976

15 September 2015

Tate is publishing a series of In Focus projects about individual artworks in the collection. This project looks at the film [The Girl Chewing Gum](#) 1976 by British artist John Smith.

Project editor Celia White asks the author of the In Focus project Erika Balsom (King's College London) about her research.



John Smith

The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)

Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

Why did you select this work by John Smith for the In Focus project?

The Girl Chewing Gum is a work of central importance in the history of artists' film, which is my field of specialisation. The film has long been a personal favourite of mine, but it also dovetails very nicely with my research interests, which include thinking through the place of the experimental film tradition in the

art world and exploring the intersection of documentary and art, both of which are key issues raised by *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Although the film has been written about over the years, it has never received the kind of in-depth treatment that an In Focus project can provide. I saw this format as allowing an opportunity to explore the rich complexity of this film from multiple historical and theoretical perspectives. *The Girl Chewing Gum* is most often considered to be a humorous critique of the notion of objectivity in documentary filmmaking, which indeed it is. But there are also other very interesting ways of approaching it, whether as a film of place (rooted in Dalston, the filmmaker's neighbourhood), as a way of exploring the changing status of film within art institutions, or as a key moment in the life and work of John Smith, who continues to be one of Britain's preeminent artists today.

What did you discover about the film while carrying out your research?

I had seen the film many times before undertaking this project, but watching it closely and repeatedly in the course of my research led me to a whole new level of appreciation for the sophistication of its orchestration of voice and image. But I was also very keen to look beyond the film itself, to the context of its production and initial reception, and to its more recent incarnation as a gallery installation, as these were areas I felt had not been adequately addressed in existing scholarship. Through conversations with the artist and primary research at the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection at Central St Martins, I was able to provide an account of the film's genesis and early life. In particular, the original programme notes – long out of circulation – were fascinating and revealing. I also became very interested in how John Smith revisited *The Girl Chewing Gum* in his 2011 exhibition *unusual Red cardigan* at PEER in Hoxton, London, in which the 1976 film figured as an absent centre around which the various elements of the exhibition congealed.

Smith's film offers a reflection on the notion of truth in documentary filmmaking. How prevalent were such concerns at the time that the film was made?

One sometimes encounters the claim that documentary constituted a 'bad object' in artists' film in the 1970s, to be refused because of its bogus claim to an authoritative, transparent representation of the world. This both is and is not entirely accurate. For some, this was certainly the case. However, to generalise this position as characteristic of the period as a whole would be to overlook the multifaceted engagements with documentary that occurred in artists' and independent cinema in the UK at this time, including in *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Smith's film takes up a nuanced relationship to documentary, engaging in a critique of its so-called 'voice of God', while in many ways remaining a documentary film. In the 1970s, often in response to the dominance of direct

cinema in the 1960s, we see a flourishing of reflexive documentary practices of this kind, not just in the UK but around the world. Today this international tradition serves as a major inspiration for many contemporary artists who are working in this vein.

In the In Focus you trace the legacy of the film into the present day, as explored by the artist himself in the 2011 remake The Man Phoning Mum. How should contemporary viewers consider the film in relation to the remake and the new ways in which it is now exhibited?

The 2011 video remake asks us to look back at the 1976 film not just as an interrogation of voiceover conventions but as an historical record of place and pastness. In this way, *The Man Phoning Mum* proposes a (re-)reading of *The Girl Chewing Gum* as a documentary, when it has so often been understood as a critique of documentary. This seeming contradiction is in my view where a great deal of the film's interest lies. But it is also important to recall that the 2011 remake was produced for the *unusual Red cardigan* exhibition at PEER, where it was exhibited alongside a number of other works that together explored the life of *The Girl Chewing Gum* beyond its initial moment of creation, outside of its original exhibition context (the cinema) and no longer tied to its original medium (film). This installation is both a part of and a reflection on how the infrastructures for the production, distribution and exhibition of artists' moving image have been utterly transformed in recent years. The factors contributing to this shift are economic, technological and art historical. Examining the contemporary life of *The Girl Chewing Gum* provides a microcosm through which one can glimpse the workings of these larger processes.

What did you most enjoy about studying John Smith and this film at Tate?

This In Focus project gave me the opportunity to study a single work in great depth, which I had never done before but which I found very fulfilling. I very much like the way that the series combines the rigour of academic peer review with the benefits of public access online. It also gave me an opportunity to step slightly outside the format of a traditional scholarly article, both in terms of form and content. The online presentation meant I was able to integrate film clips into the piece, and it was terrific to be able to invite Patrick Wright to have a conversation with John Smith about *The Girl Chewing Gum* as a Dalston film. In a typical academic article, neither one of these things would have been possible, but I think they offer an enriched experience for both researcher and reader.

Erika Balsom is Lecturer in Film Studies and in Liberal Arts at the Film Studies Department, King's College London.

The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 by John Smith

John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

The Girl Chewing Gum is a twelve-minute 16 mm film made by British artist John Smith in 1976, when he was a postgraduate student at the Royal College of Art in London. Shot primarily in Dalston, close to the artist's home, the film is at once a portrait of street life in East London and a wryly funny critique of the myth of documentary neutrality.

This In Focus project explores the production context of *The Girl Chewing Gum* and charts its intersections with debates concerning the political efficacy of avant-garde cinema in Britain in the 1970s. It examines the film's rigorous interrogation of the relationship between image and sound and considers its status as a film of place. It concludes with a discussion of the vibrant contemporary reception of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, including Smith's own return to the film in his 2011 exhibition *unusual Red cardigan*.

Published in September 2015, the project is authored by Dr Erika Balsom (King's College London) and includes an interview with the artist John Smith conducted by Professor Patrick Wright (King's College London).

The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 by John Smith

Fig.1

John Smith

The Girl Chewing Gum

1976

Film, 16 mm, black and white, and sound

12 min

Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* (fig.1) is many things: a twelve-minute 16 mm film consisting of only two shots, a testimony to how complexity can arise out of a sparse economy of means, an allegory of cinema, a critique of documentary naturalism, an interrogation of language-image relations, a record of an East London neighbourhood, a classic avant-garde film, an art world hit some thirty-five years after its debut, and more besides. Yet before discussing these elements, some description is in order.

The film opens with a static long shot of a London street, facing westward across Kingsland Road where it intersects with Tottenham Road and Stamford Road in Dalston. This take lasts approximately ten minutes, as much film as the magazine of a 16 mm camera can hold. On the soundtrack, a burglar alarm rings over ambient street noises. A male voiceover – Smith's own – begins: 'Slowly move the trailer to the left. And I want the little girl to run across – now'. As he delivers these commands, the corresponding actions occur in the frame. Invisible behind the camera, this director-narrator continues to rule over the represented scene. After two minutes of orchestrating the entrances and exits of passers-by, Smith delivers a different and rather curious kind of instruction: 'I want everything to sink slowly down as the five boys come by'. As the camera tilts upward, the world – or rather, the representation of the world produced by the apparatus – sinks. This, of course, happens all the time in the cinema, but is usually apprehended as a product of the camera's mobile gaze rather than the

movement of normally stationary buildings. Paradoxically and rather humorously, Smith foregrounds the mediating presence of the camera not by naming its actions ('Tilt up'), but by acting as if it does not exist – as if the director had a control over the onscreen world so absolute, direct and godlike that buildings sink and elevate according to his whims. If the first two minutes of *The Girl Chewing Gum* had skirted the possibility that the scene was indeed being directed by the off-screen voice, the description of this camera movement in terms of its pictorial effect rather than its cause signals to the viewer that something is awry. What might have appeared as an *assertion* of control becomes legible as a critique of the *fantasy* of control.

The upward tilt rests on a clock, which is then directed 'to move jerkily towards' the filmmaker as the camera zooms in. The voiceover continues, 'I want the long hand to move at a rate of one revolution every hour, and I want the short hand to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours. Now, two pigeons fly across and everything comes up again until the girl chewing gum walks across from the left'. By the time the camera tilts down and the titular girl walks into the frame, *The Girl Chewing Gum* has done away with whatever illusionism it cultivated in its earliest moments and has resituated itself firmly as a reflexive interrogation of cinematic conventions. As the film goes on, Smith's investigation of the manipulability of meaning becomes increasingly elaborate. The voiceover begins to remark upon details of the scene invisible to the camera, such as the title of the magazine carried under the arm of a man in the distance (*Exchange and Mart*). It offers information about the figures onscreen indiscernible from appearance alone, such as the fact that one man is a dentist who is on his way to the bank. Either this voice possesses a complete knowledge of all aspects of the filmic world, or – more likely – he is simply making it up, with the result that what we are told we are seeing and what we actually see do not coincide. The voice had initially seemed to direct the scene, cueing the action according to a desired choreography. But as the film continues, the voice is increasingly overtaken by a drive to fabulation: the viewer is in thrall to an unreliable narrator who weaves stories that, while not incompatible with anything seen onscreen, are not there to be found in the image-track alone. The so-called dentist Smith shot in Dalston that afternoon might in fact be a barrister on his way to the pub.



Fig.2
John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery,
Berlin



Fig.3
John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery,
Berlin

Just past the eight-minute mark, this unreliability is amplified as the viewer learns that the narrator is not present in Dalston at all; rather, he is 'shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath, about fifteen miles from the building you're looking at'. The burglar alarm and street noise disappear as he begins to describe the scene around him in the field, accompanied by continued images of Dalston. The account of Letchmore Heath at first seems to offer the viewer a moment of trustworthy description. One might for a moment think that the narrator has been unmasked and now speaks the truth. But his description of the field turns out to contain absurdist improbabilities that rely on a distortion of scale: he catches sight of blackbird with a nine-foot wingspan and a man carrying a helicopter in his pocket. He begins to speak about Dalston once more, but the soundtrack remains otherwise quiet. He describes a man who has just robbed the local post office and

who is carrying a revolver in a sweaty hand inside his raincoat pocket – none of which, aside from the fact that the man who appears onscreen at that moment is wearing a raincoat and has his hands in his pockets, is verifiable by sight. ‘The burglar alarm is still ringing’, the voiceover says, but it cannot be heard. The voice stays quiet as the camera holds on a cinema queue for around one minute before zooming out to reveal the entire building, the Dalston Odeon (fig.2). (The film on view that day is *The Land That Time Forgot*, a 1975 lost world fantasy based on the American writer Edgar Rice Burrows’s 1918 serialised novel of the same name.) *The Girl Chewing Gum* concludes with a two-minute, 360-degree pan across Letchmore Heath, accompanied by a soundtrack of Dalston street noises, including the alarm (fig.3). The man with the helicopter in his pocket and the giant blackbird are nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they are out of frame, or perhaps they were never there.

The Girl Chewing Gum was made during a rich period of avant-garde practice in which many filmmakers, both in Britain and beyond, sought to dismantle the illusionist transparency of dominant cinema. Most of those invested in this project took up a focus on filmic materiality, refusing the possibility of a ‘window on the world’ in favour of a modernist concern with the cinematic apparatus. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, Smith proceeded somewhat differently: his interest lay above all in interrogating the conventions that structured cinematic signification through a reflexive deployment of those very same conventions, rather than any out-and-out negation of them. *The Girl Chewing Gum* offers a playful yet trenchant exploration of the role that language – and particularly voiceover – plays in the production of filmic meaning and asserts the absolute impossibility of immediacy and neutrality. But despite its anti-illusionist criticality, the film remains deeply engaged with narrative and humour, two terms not often associated with British avant-garde cinema of the 1970s. Indeed, it was Smith’s concern that the film might be taken simply as a joke that led him to conclude the work with several humourless minutes, what he has referred to as ‘thinking time’.¹

The five sections that follow will adopt a series of mutually enriching perspectives on this classic, multi-faceted work in order to situate it historically, explicate its intersections with film and visual theory, and explore the changing conditions of its exhibition and reception since the time of its production. It will begin by providing a context for the emergence of the film before considering its connections with and divergences from structural/materialist filmmaking and its complex interrogation of language-image relationships. Following this, a conversation between John Smith and Patrick Wright will take up *The Girl Chewing Gum* as a local film, one that documents a neighbourhood that has undergone immense changes since 1976 and has been home to the filmmaker for much of his life. The final section will address the contemporary status of the film in the gallery and museum context, where it has been the subject of enthusiastic embrace in recent years, culminating in Tate’s acquisition of the work in 2010.

Erika Balsom

September 2015

Notes

1. John Smith, interview with the author, 20 November 2014.

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Context and Conception

In his landmark book *Expanded Cinema* (1970), film critic and theorist Gene Youngblood described intermedia performances such as projected light shows as a central part of the 'Paleocybernetic Age' that would supersede the age of single-screen cinema and lead to forms of 'cosmic consciousness'.¹ However, for John Smith things would happen in the reverse order: an involvement with light shows would turn out to be a precursor to life as a filmmaker. In 1971 and 1972, while a student at North East London Polytechnic (1971–4; now the University of East London), Smith and his friends were the resident light show group for many



Fig.1
John Smith
Someone Moving 1972 (film still)
Courtesy the artist

of the progressive rock acts that played at the college's student union, including Deep Purple, Hawkwind and Mott the Hoople. The shows employed techniques such as 16 mm loops, psychedelic liquid slides and still projections of superimposed black and white graphic patterns projected through moving colour filters. Smith would project multiple loops of found footage simultaneously, sometimes side by side and sometimes superimposed, playing with the connections and juxtapositions that would emerge between them in real time. This performative practice formed the basis of Smith's first films, *Triangles* 1972 and *Someone Moving* 1972 (fig.1), both of which were made with materials used in these light shows and which showcase his interests in riotous colour, psychedelic abstraction and graphic composition.

Smith had come to North East London Polytechnic after spending a year on a graphic design course at Hornsey College of Art. He had wanted to study fine art but had chosen design in an effort to appease his parents. At North East London Polytechnic he began a course in communication design, which included substantial instruction in what might today be called media studies. It was there that he encountered Guy Sherwin, an experimental filmmaker teaching at the college who was starting to get involved with the London Film-makers' Co-operative ('the Co-op') at the time. It was Sherwin who would be responsible for introducing Smith to the history of avant-garde cinema and for arranging Smith's first public screening, as part of a mixed programme of films by students from the college, held on 25 January 1974 at the Co-op, then located in a former dairy at 13a Prince of Wales Crescent in Kentish Town. In *Time Out*, filmmaker and critic John Du Cane previewed the event, describing it as follows:

Some interesting work by Liz [sic] Rhodes and John Smith with printing, loops and frame by frame letrasetting, a good film by Ian Kerr using rephotography and some good camera-work by Tim Bruce and Andrew Charles, plus a film-performance called the Golden Age of the Silver Screen. Much more watchable film than you'd normally expect from this sort of area.²



Fig.2
John Smith
The Hut 1973 (film still)
Courtesy the artist



Fig.3
John Smith
The Hut 1973 (film still)
Courtesy the artist



Fig.4
John Smith
The Hut 1973 (film still)
Courtesy the artist



Fig.5
John Smith
The Hut 1973 (film still)
Courtesy the artist

Smith often locates the beginning of what one might call his mature period of filmmaking with the production of *Associations* 1975, the first film he made as an MA student at the Royal College of Art's Film and Television School.³ However, while still at North East London Polytechnic, Smith made *The Hut* 1973, a lesser-known yet accomplished film that serves as a bridge between the early abstract works and the interlocking concerns with narrative, humour and cinematic reflexivity that would be central to *The Girl Chewing Gum*. *The Hut* begins with a title card reading 'La hutte', rendered in a cursive font that invokes the French avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s (fig.2).⁴ This title is superimposed over an image of an office for boat rental on a lake in Epping Forest, one that looks as if its best days are long in the past. The film begins with a downward tilt over out-of-focus tree branches, accompanied by a female voiceover saying: 'I was walking through the forest one day, when suddenly I saw it'. The camera comes to rest on the face of a woman in medium close-up, sporting an expression somewhere between startled, frightened and amazed (fig.3). The voice continues, 'The hut'. Two seconds of flickering alternations between still images of the sea-foam green hut are followed by a cut back to a close-up of the woman's wide eyes. The film then enters into a montage of various details of the weathered and rusted hut, its paint chipping away (fig.4). As momentum builds, many shots appear to be no more than a single frame. The film comes to a climax with an extremely fast, almost vibrating flicker that finally rests on a frontal shot of the hut. After barely a second, a medium close-up of a young girl appears and the same voiceover returns, exclaiming: 'I was amazed!' (fig.5). The girl promptly exits the shot, the camera swiftly zooms out to reveal a clearing in the forest, and the film ends – so abruptly and without explanation that it ventures into the domain of absurdist humour.

The Hut may be considered a documentary of place insofar as it engages in a fastidious examination of the architectural details of a small, worn shack. Yet the film makes no attempt to present the hut 'as it is'. Rather, at its core *The Hut* is a film concerned with the transformative possibilities of cinematic vision. The figure of the woman-turned-girl is a spectator who witnesses a sight wondrous enough to

return her to her childhood, a fantastical metamorphosis that might be seen to allegorise the recalibration of seeing that is the mandate of much avant-garde film. Experimental filmmakers of many different stripes have emphasised this potentiality of the medium, formulating its precise character in varying ways.⁵ The framing narrative of *The Hut* casts its long middle section as just such an engagement with visionary experience and metamorphosis. It proposes that by changing the way we see the world – by taking the banal and making it miraculous – the cinema can render back to it something of the enchantment it held when we were children.

The structural/materialist cinema that dominated British avant-garde film practice at the time was deeply committed to a critique of cinematic illusionism.⁶ It was marked by a desire, to borrow the words of film theorist Christian Metz, to 'break open the toy and see into the guts of the machine', thereby disrupting its ideological function.⁷ Despite possessing a formal rigour often associated with this tendency, *The Hut*, with its playfully surrealist sensibility, diverges from structural/materialist film by situating itself firmly on the side of cinematic fascination and the expanded perceptual possibilities the medium offers. It is in this respect closely tied to Smith's earliest quasi-psychedelic works, such as *Triangles* and *Someone Moving*, which participate in the forms of mind-expansion and hallucinatory vision that were at play in countercultural movements of the time. However, as an allegory of cinematic representation and experience, *The Hut* also prefigured to some degree the concerns with mediation and reflexivity that would mark *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Even at this early stage in his practice, Smith proved very suspicious of naturalism and of the impression of reality so dear to dominant cinema. Documentary was present as a concern, but any hint of transparency was vanquished as transfiguration took precedence over testimony. The hut that the woman-turned-girl sees is precisely *not* the mundane hut that existed in Epping Forest; the hut she sees exists in the cinema alone and is endowed with marvel only through Smith's deployment of filmic language. This notion – that cinematic conventions serve to transform the viewer's apprehension of profilmic reality – is, of course, the central preoccupation of *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Although articulated very differently in the two films, both recruit fiction and first-person voiceover as means of interrogating the way in which the spectator's experience is shaped through the manipulation of the image.

It is worth underlining the extent to which the particular character Smith has ascribed to that spectatorial experience changes strikingly between *The Hut* and *The Girl Chewing Gum*. In *The Hut*, one finds an interest in the oneiric, uncanny and wondrous, all of which one might align with a particular form of cinephilia. Three years later with *The Girl Chewing Gum*, this was quite distinctively displaced by a critical project invested in dismantling the cinema's impression of reality, now understood as eminently ideological. This political imperative extended across film theory and practice during the period, often adopting its methodology from the forms of semiotic analysis that took hold in the 1960s and which were very much in the air when Smith began postgraduate study at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in 1974. Although self-avowedly not a 'theory person', Smith had studied the economy of signification in advertising while on his aborted graphic design course.⁸ During his MA, this interest in semiotics was nurtured by RCA tutors including Peter Gidal, a leading proponent of structural/materialist film, and Jorge Dana, a filmmaker and theorist.

While Smith's relation to Gidal and structural/materialist film is perhaps of greater significance,⁹ it is worth noting here the impact of the lesser-known figure of Dana, particularly because his attitude towards narrative was much more moderate than Gidal's and thus closer to the strategies Smith would deploy in *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Dana's interest in the semiotics of the cinema is perhaps best exemplified by a text he co-authored with Noël Burch, who had also been a tutor at the RCA but left before Smith's arrival. Entitled 'Propositions', this essay was published in *Afterimage* in spring 1974 as part of a special issue entitled 'Aesthetics/Ideology/Cinema'. Modelled after Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's 1969 *Cahiers du cinéma* editorial 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', 'Propositions' advanced a taxonomic system for classifying films based on the relationship between ideology and form found within them. The text showed a clear investment in politicised modernist production, but concentrated primarily on an analysis of the codes that functioned within canonical works of narrative film history,

including *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari*) (dir. Robert Weine, 1920), *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941) and *Gertrud* (dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1964). Burch and Dana posited that dominant cinema inherits codes from the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that work to secure the 'guarantee of linearity and illusionist effect'.¹⁰ Making use of a vocabulary heavily informed by French structuralism, and more particularly the importation of Saussurean semiotics into areas beyond the properly linguistic, they advocated modernist filmic practices that disrupted this linearity and illusionism in favour of work on the signifier that would make visible processes of enunciation and effect a defamiliarisation of filmic language. Such films are designated as belonging to 'category D' and are described as follows: 'Films which are informed by a constant designation/deconstruction of the codes which, however ideologically determined at the strictly diegetic level, implicitly question this determination by the way they situate the codes and play upon them'.¹¹ The authors offer *Gertrud* as an example, but one might also see *The Girl Chewing Gum* as falling under this heading due to its appropriation and subversion of commonly employed cinematic codes.

Conventional narrative film constituted a bad object for much avant-garde film production in the early 1970s, as it was seen as a tool of manipulation and mystification used to inculcate viewers with dominant ideology. It was, however, from this domain that Smith first got the idea for *The Girl Chewing Gum*, in particular from François Truffaut's 1973 film *Day for Night* (*La Nuit américaine*).



Fig.6
François Truffaut
Day for Night 1973 (film still)

Truffaut's paean to the labour of filmmaking is rather conservative; indeed, the film is a textbook example of exactly how thoroughly the potentially disruptive force of reflexivity can be recuperated. Yet Smith gleaned from it a crucial insight. *Day for Night* begins with a travelling shot just over a minute long that pans and tracks its way through a bustling city square in France (fig.6). Children play, cars go by and people enter and exit the subway. Two men meet, framed in medium long shot; one delivers a faux slap to the other, breaking the impression of reality that has prevailed this far. There is a cut back to the director, played by Truffaut himself, yelling 'Cut!' In a split second, the scene the viewer had apprehended as the 'real' world of the film is recast as the filming of a street scene on a movie set. A few minutes later, after the assistant director has delivered extensive notes on all that went wrong, another take is filmed. This time, the scene is replayed with Truffaut supplying directions in voiceover: 'The lady with the dog, walk faster please. More action in the subway. Send in the white car', and so on. The sequence was a revelation for Smith:

Believe it or not, I was really surprised to discover that the people in the background were being directed in their actions. Even the dog was instructed to piss up a lamp-post. Until then, I had assumed that extras in street scenes were real passers-by going about their business. I was already a filmmaker and I thought to myself how naïve I had been about the 'realism' of fiction films. *The Girl Chewing Gum* came out of the shock I felt at the power of the illusion of cinema.¹²

The title of Truffaut's film itself gestures to the artificiality of filmic realism; 'day for night' refers to the technique of shooting night sequences during the day using specialised film stock or blue filters, a practice that came to be known in France as 'the American night' due to its frequent employment in the westerns of the classical era. Truffaut thematised this embrace of artifice at the diegetic level in relation to the shooting of the film-within-the-film, but nowhere does *Day for Night* confront or compromise the illusionary coherence of its own diegesis.¹³ This would fall to *The Girl Chewing Gum*, in which Smith would wrest Truffaut's lesson of filmic constructedness out of art cinema and into the avant-garde.

The production process of *The Girl Chewing Gum* was relatively simple. Smith shot the film with an Arriflex 16 mm camera and Nagra tape recorder borrowed from the RCA. Although he owned a Bolex at the time, this camera would not allow him to shoot synchronised sound in the street, something that was key to the conceit of the film. Smith shot no footage beyond that included in the film, with the result that its production costs were very low. Its materials amounted to one 400-foot roll of black and white 16 mm film for the street scene, one 100-foot roll of black and white 16 mm film for the 360-degree pan, the developing costs for each, tape to record the sound, and the cost of producing a final print that included the magnetic soundtrack. Smith has estimated a total expenditure of a 'couple of hundred pounds', which was covered by a £500 gift in support of his work he had received that year from Ken Campbell, one of his ex-tutors from North East London Polytechnic.¹⁴

Smith enlisted Patrick Duval, a friend and fellow student, to help with the sound recording since it would have been physically impossible for one person to carry both the camera and the sound equipment. The pair set off for their chosen location in Dalston, which was around the corner from Smith's flat in Lansdowne Drive. In addition to it being close to where he lived, there were three factors that led to the selection of the precise location that appears in the film: Smith wanted it to be 'an ordinary environment'; he was interested in the presence of the Dalston Odeon since he was making a 'film about cinema'; and lastly he was keen to include the clock as a way of making clear that he was not directing everything – its hands could be relied upon to move regularly without any prompting from Smith.¹⁵ For the 360-degree pan, he sought an outdoor location easily accessible from the RCA with no traffic noise, so that sound recorded there could be convincingly mixed with the location sound from Dalston. Not particularly familiar with West London, he asked a fellow student to recommend a place and was directed to Letchmore Heath – half an hour's ride away on his motorbike.

After the footage had been processed, Smith sat at a Steenbeck editing table with a stopwatch to write the script, balancing what he wanted to say against what he would be able to fit in. The original script is just over two pages long, typewritten, and largely conforms to the voiceover heard in the film.¹⁶ Smith's initial idea was to write a voiceover directing the image-track. In some cases, he already had a clear idea of how this would work while filming; in others, he responded to the contingencies of what he had captured. For instance, the burglar alarm heard prominently on the soundtrack had not been planned, but simply had been ringing on the afternoon Smith and Duval had turned up to make the film. For some time, they waited for it to end, but eventually decided to film while it was going on since time was running out and Smith was afraid he would have to wait weeks to borrow the equipment again. The alarm in turn became a central part of the film's narrative, motivating a crime story of a man who has robbed a post office – something that never would have otherwise been part of the film. The treatment of the clock presents a curious mixture of the planned and unplanned, figuring as what Smith names as one of his favourite moments of the film. As noted above, the opportunity to direct the clock had been part of what had first attracted Smith to the site. But when he got back the developed film he was disappointed with its first appearance due to the jerkiness of the camera, which zooms out for just a moment before zooming in. This was remedied by an improvisation in the writing of the script, which states 'I want the clock to move jerkily towards me', thus recasting what might have been a slight technical error as a perfect execution of the command.

After the script was written, Smith recorded the voiceover and edited the soundtrack to fit the picture. A print was made, and *The Girl Chewing Gum* was ready to be seen.

Erika Balsom

September 2015

Notes

1. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, New York 1970.
2. John Du Cane, untitled film listing, *Time Out*, 25–31 January 1974, p.31. The film by Rhodes and Smith

that Du Cane refers to here is *Words* 1973.

3. *Associations* is the earliest film listed in the 'selected works' available on Smith's website (<http://johnsmithfilms.com/selected-works>, accessed 11 June 2015) and is the first discussed in the written component of Smith's PhD thesis, 'Real Fiction', submitted in 1997 at the University of East London.
4. Smith recalls seeing many films from this period while studying with Sherwin at North East London Polytechnic.
5. A key text in this regard is Stan Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), in which the filmmaker describes how the cinema might provide a way of reimagining the prelinguistic vision of the child. This line of thought is also common outside the avant-garde, particularly in classical film theory. Among the most influential formulations are Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'optical unconscious' and André Bazin's statement in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' that 'Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.' See André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, Berkeley 1967, p.15; Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)', trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2002, p.117; Stan Brakhage, 'From *Metaphors on Vision*', in P. Adams Sitney (ed.), *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, New York 1978, pp.120–8.
6. For a discussion of structural/materialist film and the Co-op at this time, see Erika Balsom, 'A "New Face" at the Co-op', September 2015, in Erika Balsom (ed.), *In Focus: 'The Girl Chewing Gum' 1976, by John Smith*, September 2015.
7. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti, Bloomington 1982, p.93.
8. John Smith, interview with the author, 16 June 2014.
9. For an extensive discussion of the film's relationship to structural/materialism, see Erika Balsom, 'A "New Face" at the Co-op', September 2015, in Balsom (ed.) 2015.
10. Noel Burch and Jorge Dana, 'Propositions', *Afterimage*, no.5, Summer 1974, p.43.
11. *Ibid.*, p.48.
12. John Smith, quoted in Catherine Elwes, 'Trespassing Beyond the Frame', in Mark Cosgrove and Josephine Lanyon (eds.), *John Smith: Film and Video Works, 1972–2002*, Bristol 2002, pp.65–6. Although there are two dachshunds and a miniature poodle in the opening sequence, none is in fact directed to urinate; there is, however, a scene later in the film in which the crew runs into difficulty as they attempt to direct a kitten to drink from a saucer of milk.
13. This failure was at the heart of Jean-Luc Godard's criticism of the film, elaborated in a letter that would precipitate the end of his longstanding friendship with Truffaut. See Antoine de Baecque and Serge Toubiana, *Truffaut: A Biography*, trans. by Catherine Temerson, Berkeley 2000, p.300.
14. John Smith, interview with the author, 16 June 2014.
15. *Ibid.*
16. For a full transcription of the original script, see John Smith, 'Original script for the voiceover to *The Girl Chewing Gum*', 1976, in Erika Balsom (ed.), *In Focus: 'The Girl Chewing Gum' 1976, by John Smith*, September 2015. There are a few remarks present in the script that are omitted in the film, most notably the final scripted command, 'Now disappear'. The sole significant alteration is in the location of the field, specified in the script as an 'enormous golf course' in Epping Forest.

How to cite

Erika Balsom, 'Context and Conception', September 2015, in Erika Balsom (ed.), *In Focus: 'The Girl Chewing Gum' 1976 by John Smith*, Tate Research Publication, 2015, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/john-smith-the-girl-chewing-gum/context-and-conception-r1175941>, accessed 14 May 2016.



IN FOCUS

The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 by John Smith

ISBN 978-1-84976-413-1

Original script for the voiceover to *The Girl Chewing Gum*

This is a transcription of the original typescript for the voiceover written by Smith as he edited the film, reproduced courtesy of the artist. Its content differs slightly from the final voiceover used by Smith.

Directions –

Slowly move the trailer to the left....and I want the little girl to run across, now. Hold that trailer there.....Now move the trailer off.

Right – now I want the old man with white hair and glasses to cross the road – come on, quickly.... look this way, now walk off to the left. OK, fine.

Now let's have the man in the peaked cap....put the cigarette in your mouth.....good.....and I want the two girls to come in from the right talking to each other.

Now I want the Jamaican family, father first – look in front of you.....now the mother and the two boys.....and I want the smaller boy to point to the right, and now cast a glance behind him.

Now I want the bus ticket to blow across the pavement.

Fine – now I want the girl with the bag under her arm to walk to the right. Now let's have the man rubbing his eye.....good.

Right. Now I want everything to sink slowly down as the five boys come by.....hold it.....and I want the clock to move jerkily towards me....stop.

Now I want the long hand to move at the rate of one revolution every hour, and the short hand to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours.....fine.

Now two pigeons fly across, and everything comes up again until the girl chewing gum walks across from the left.

OK. Now – the van, the woman, and the boy...the man with the bag of chips, the car roof, the whole car, the old man, the car, the car and the boy, the boy, the motorcyclist and the lorry.

Now when the woman at the window looks in this direction, I want everything to move a bit further away.

Right – let's have the man in the white boiler suit coming in from the right.....stop at the lamp-post and fold your arms....now look around you.....

walk back to the left again, and look left and right as you cross the road.....

Now I want the man reading exchange and mart to come in from the right.

Now a man comes by and bites his nails, two pigeons fly past from right to left and two boys run past from left to right.....the woman at the window looks this way and then goes on talking.

In a second I want four boys to come from the left, and I want one of them to look this way and flap his arms up and down. I'd like the boys to remain in more or less the same position, while everything else moves to the left and goes away a bit at the same time.....Got that?.....OK.....go.

Lift up your arm – now bring it down.

Now I want the man with the turban and briefcase to come in from the right, and now the van marked 'University of London, Senate House, London WC1'.

In the cinema queue, I want to see a boy and his mother. The boy will be about eight years old, and his mother about thirty-two. They will both have collar-length hair, his dark and hers fair – she will be wearing a suedette coat with a white imitation fur collar. They will be talking to each other and looking around them. The boy will look at his watch and yawn, then look at it again and say something to his mother about the time.

Now I want the man coming in from the left in the grey peaked cap to put on his glasses. The three children eating chips, the French woman, the window-cleaner in his van, the greengrocer, the pigeon, the red jaguar, the taxi, the van, the man, the negro with the briefcase and the newspaper, the woman firmly gripping the hands of her two young sons. They stop, and now they cross the road.

The man in the grey peaked cap takes off his glasses again and puts them in his breast pocket. The man with the walking stick is going home. The dentist continues on his way to the bank, and the two naughty boys appear from behind Steele's and cautiously cross the road.

Steele's the plate glass manufacturers is situated in an area with a high immigrant population, predominantly West Indians and Greeks. Outside the building, above its main doors, is a board advertising vacancies at the firm. Until recently, I thought that jobs were advertised on the board in two languages – English and Greek. However, a few weeks ago, I studied the board carefully, and realised that I had been wrong. Each vacancy has its own slat in the board – the words (glass-cutters, bevellers, bench fitters etc.) are cut out of these slats, which are made of perspex. When a vacancy no longer exists, the slat advertising it, which has a central pivot at each end, is swivelled around. The words that I had believed to be Greek were in fact upside-down and back to front English. Steele's also has another interesting feature. Along each wall of the building, there are eight large doors that are kept wide open throughout the year.

I am speaking into a megaphone, which I am pointing at a microphone, on the outskirts of Epping Forest – about ten miles from the building you are looking at. The traffic noise will now fade down. I am standing on the edge of an enormous golf course, and there are trees behind me and to my left. In the distance I can see three golfers. One of them is wearing a blue jumper, and the other two are both wearing red. They are all men. The shortest of the three is standing by a trolley, which is laden with their clubs. The one with the blue jumper, who seems much older than the other two, is looking this way. Now the short one has put a ball on the ground and is taking a club from the trolley. I think he's got a helicopter in his pocket. In a tree about fifteen yards away, I can see a large blackbird with a wingspan of about nine feet.

This young man has just robbed the local post office and is attempting to appear inconspicuous. He is trying to remain calm, but his hand is sweating as he grips the butt of the revolver in his raincoat pocket even harder. He is wondering whether the woman at the window would recognise him if she saw him again. The burglar alarm is still ringing.

Now disappear.

John Smith

1976

How to cite

'Original script for the voiceover to *The Girl Chewing Gum*', in Erika Balsom (ed.), *In Focus: 'The Girl Chewing Gum' 1976 by John Smith*, Tate Research Publication, 2015, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/john-smith-the-girl-chewing-gum/original-script-for-the-voiceover-to-the-girl-chewing-gum-r1176038>, accessed 14 May 2016.

A 'New Face' at the Co-op

The premiere of *The Girl Chewing Gum* took place at the London Film-makers' Co-operative ('the Co-op') on 10 March 1976 at 8.30 pm (fig.1). At this point in time located at 44a Fitzroy Road in Primrose Hill, the Co-op charged a one pound membership fee, which then allowed one to purchase tickets at fifty pence per screening (seventy-five for a double bill). The programme was almost entirely devoted to Smith's work, featuring seven of his films, but began with two films by fellow Royal College of Art (RCA) student Roger Ollerhead, *In The Home* 1976 and *Mis-spent* 1976. The filmmaker and theorist Malcolm Le Grice previewed the screening in *Time Out*:

The major part of this week's show is by a young film-maker who is something of a 'new face'. Though he has shown a film in a group programme at the Co-op before, and one of his films, 'Associations', was recently seen on BBC2's 'First Picture Show', this is the first chance to look at a number of his films in one go. His work is extremely interesting, accomplished, and has a surprising variety. As well as 'Associations' which weaves a complex game of word-image puns with entertaining wit, he will show 'William and the Cows', one of the most surreal films I have ever seen; 'Leading Light', a rather fine short film about sunlight, artificial light, and exposure levels; and 'Subjective Tick-Tocks', about measured time, rhythm, and camera movement. The programme will have the first screening of his newest film, 'The Girl Chewing Gum', which promises to be as good viewing as the rest ... A lively show full of ideas.¹

Smith has no strong recollection of the event, speculating, 'I suspect like most screenings, it was fine but it was an anti-climax'.² It was, however, the occasion of his first meeting with Le Grice, who recommended that the emerging filmmaker change his name due to its plainness and ubiquity. Smith, of course, refused, sticking to a given name that the artist Cornelia Parker has rightly described as 'a perfect fit, a ready made' due to the manner in which it suits the 'ironic embracing of the ultra mundane' one finds in his films.³

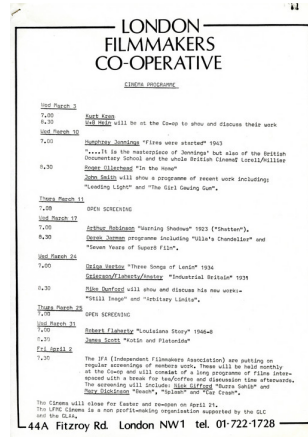


Fig.1 Programme listing for the premiere of John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976 at the London Film-makers' Co-operative on 10 March 1976. Courtesy of British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, Central St Martins

The programme notes that often accompany *The Girl Chewing Gum* today are composed of quotations from critics and academics; for instance, the film scholar Ian Christie's assertion that 'John Smith's improbable treatise on representation has deservedly become a Co-op classic' is frequently invoked.⁴ The text originally used for this purpose was written by Smith himself and has not appeared in connection with any recent presentation of the film (fig.2).⁵ In it, Smith describes the programme's other films in formal terms, but takes up a different strategy for his then-newest work, which appeared last on the bill. Here, one finds the filmmaker's dry humour on full display, alongside what is perhaps a reluctance to give away the film's conceit in advance: 'I am writing this with a black "Tempo" fibre-tip pen. A few months ago, I bought fifteen of these pens for sixty pence. I bought the pens from a market in Kingsland Road in Hackney, about a hundred yards from where the film was shot'.⁶ At first this story of the pens seems to be utterly unremarkable and rather beside the point. After all, what purpose does it serve other than to geographically locate the shooting location of the film? Closer examination, however, reveals that what initially appears to be irrelevant actually provides the attentive reader with a subtle clue as to the film's concerns. The words 'I am writing this with a black "Tempo" fibre-tip pen' are not in fact handwritten, but typed. Smith plays with the slippery relationship that exists between sign and referent, between the deictic shifter 'this' and the thing in the world to which that word might point. The indexical operation of designation is called into question, as the 'this' of the statement (written in fibre-tip pen) and the 'this' presented to the reader (a typewritten text) do not coincide. A gap opens between them, the very same absence at the heart of representation itself that *The Girl Chewing Gum* astutely interrogates.

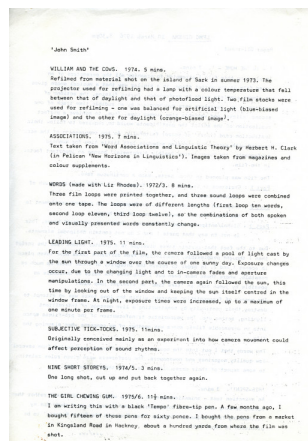


Fig.2
 Programme notes for the premiere of John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976 at the London Film-makers' Co-operative on 10 March 1976
 Courtesy of British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, Central St Martins

In the mid-1970s, the London Film-makers' Co-operative was a space of vibrant dialogue concerning the political efficacy of avant-garde filmmaking. On 10 and 11 February 1976, exactly one month before the first screening of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the Co-op hosted a two-day seminar called 'Theory of Avant-Garde Film Practice'. Based on the November 1975 special issue of *Studio International* devoted to British and European experimental filmmaking, the event saw filmmaker-theorists Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Wollen each present papers, show films and participate in a chaired discussion. The *Studio International* issue up for debate featured two influential texts exemplary of the ethos that prevailed at the Co-op during this period: Gidal's 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film' and Wollen's 'The Two Avant-Gardes'. Taken together, they are immensely helpful in reconstituting something of the original production and reception contexts for *The Girl Chewing Gum*.

Structural/materialist film derived its name from the 'structural film' that had emerged in the United States in the late 1960s, labelled as such by film historian P. Adams Sitney in a text first published in *Film Culture* 47 in the summer of 1969. Structural film, in Sitney's view, 'insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline'.⁷ Exemplary figures of this tendency included Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr and Michael Snow, a diverse group who nevertheless shared an insistence on a reflexive interrogation of the apparatus. In this drive to isolate and investigate the medium-specific qualities of film, structural film constituted the high modernist moment of American experimental cinema, and had nothing to do with the theoretical school of French structuralism. In the British context, the addition of 'materialist' signalled the presence of an overt political investment, appending a commitment to Marxian dialectical materialism to the Americans' anti-illusionist probing of the materiality of the filmic medium. Gidal's piece in *Studio International* programmatically outlined the aims and methods of this tendency, calling for an emptying of content, a demystificatory rejection of

identification, a total repudiation of narrativity, an emphasis on process and a focus on the material relations that exist between film and viewer. Gidal was rather mandarin in his anti-narrative position, rejecting even exercises in 'narrative-deconstruction' for not going far enough in the quest to banish the spectre of storytelling from the cinema.⁸

Wollen's 'The Two Avant-Gardes' offered a rather different position, particularly on the issue of narrative. Wollen divided experimental practice in Europe into two camps: those aligned with the Co-op and pursuing the kinds of strategies Gidal elaborates, and those like Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, who made Brechtian film essays. For Wollen, the filmmakers of the Co-op constituted a painterly avant-garde interested in the expulsion of language and narrative, and invested in a search for cinematic specificity that he saw as 'deceptively purist and reductive'.⁹ Gidal and Wollen both described the contemporaneous field of practice as one in which dominant cinema was the object of an assault to be accomplished by intense work on the signifier. The point of contention between them lay in whether this would be most successful through the evacuation of content proper to structural/materialist film or whether it might be, in Wollen's words, 'possible to work within the space opened up by the disjunction and dislocation of signifier and signified'.¹⁰ This would mean not jettisoning content (the 'signified') entirely, but retaining it while insistently putting into question its relation to form (the 'signifier'). For Wollen, language and narrative were sites of intervention too important to be cast out of the purview of avant-garde filmmaking.

Writing in 1997 of the influence of structural/materialist film on his practice, Smith reflected, 'Although I did not embrace the movement wholeheartedly its propositions were fundamental in the formation of an approach to film-making that I have pursued consistently ever since'.¹¹ Like Gidal – who was, it is worth recalling, not only a major filmmaker-theorist at the Co-op but also Smith's tutor at the RCA – Smith took up the task of making a film that rejected the creation of a seamless diegetic reality in favour of emphasising filmic construction, reflexivity and the shifting dynamics between spectator and text. But in maintaining a keen interest, however critical, in the codes that governed the production of meaning within narrative cinema (be it fiction or documentary), Smith was positioning himself outside the orthodoxy of structural/materialist film. Gidal's notion that film 'must minimise the content in its overpowering, imagistically seductive sense, in an attempt to get through this miasmic area of "experience" and proceed with film as film' is wholly inapplicable to *The Girl Chewing Gum*, which remains purposefully immersed in the 'miasmic area' of a street corner and all of its quotidian activities.¹² *The Girl Chewing Gum* does not advance 'film as film' (i.e. material) but rather investigates the signifying conventions of cinema. Moreover, it does so through two long takes, restricting itself to an element of the cinematographic vocabulary traditionally aligned with a faith in the recording capabilities of the apparatus. The film is, at a very basic level, a documentary – albeit a peculiar one. All of this places it at odds with Gidal's statement that 'An avant-garde film defined by its development towards increased materialism and materialist function does not represent, or document, anything'.¹³

For all these departures from the structural/materialist line, *The Girl Chewing Gum* is not any more at home within Wollen's 'second', essayistic avant-garde. Smith does share with the Godard-Straub axis a strong interest in semiotics and the conviction that, as the literary and cultural theorist Roland Barthes had suggested in 1970, 'The contemporary problem is not to destroy the narrative but to subvert it'.¹⁴ *The Girl Chewing Gum* never rejects the codes of dominant cinema entirely, but rather playfully entertains them so as to render their operations and occlusions visible. Language is tremendously important. However, the film departs sharply from the institutional and economic contexts of the second avant-garde in that it was made within an artisanal mode of production and depended on the Co-op for its distribution and exhibition. Even at the level of the text, it lacks the disjunctive montage employed by many of the filmmakers Wollen discusses, as well as their palimpsestic intertextuality. In its isolation of a single filmic device – in this case, the function of the voiceover – it is in a closer relation with the kind of reductive forms of structural/materialist film.

If anything, *The Girl Chewing Gum* might be seen to have most in common with American films of the

period such as Michael Snow's *Wavelength* 1967 and *A Casing Shelved* 1970, or Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* 1970 and *(nostalgia)* 1971, which engage with narrative and language-image relationships while reflecting on the specificity of cinematic representation. Indeed, looking back on the period surrounding 1975 in his 1997 PhD thesis, the first three filmmakers Smith lists as inspirational to him at this time are Snow, Frampton and the Austrian Peter Kubelka.¹⁵ Although Smith has never seen *A Casing Shelved* and did not see *(nostalgia)* until after making *The Girl Chewing Gum*,¹⁶ both films show an especially close kinship with his work in that they make use of a voiceover delivered by or as the filmmaker to describe the image, only to then emphasise the lack of fit between the two. They present themselves as failed attempts to master the visual field. In *A Casing Shelved*, Snow describes in great detail a 35 mm slide of a shelf in his studio. As he put it, 'I wanted to say everything that could be said about it'.¹⁷ Yet despite this stated desire for a complete account, Snow is incapable of exhausting the photograph or taking inventory of its contents in a stable manner. His description of the slide oscillates between naming the things depicted in it – a wine bottle, a paint can – and naming its forms of graphic representation. An electric cord, for instance, is called 'a black line', while a cardboard box is a 'brown rectangle'. Contaminating these two registers of denomination, Snow shuttles between the virtuality of the represented scene and the material actuality of the photograph. In *(nostalgia)*, Snow reads a text written by Frampton in the first person, describing a series of photographs taken by the latter which appear one at a time onscreen, burning on a hotplate. But instead of creating a tight suture between text and image, the description heard corresponds not to the photograph onscreen but to the photograph that will follow it. A gap opens between what is said and what is seen, just as it does in *The Girl Chewing Gum*.

Beyond the similarities in formal technique and semiotic inquiry, *The Girl Chewing Gum* shares with these two films a quality not often associated with avant-garde cinema: humour. *A Casing Shelved* and *(nostalgia)* showcase the dry wit of their makers, both mobilising Snow's droll Upper Canadian monotone to deliver a cerebral amusement that stops just short of being properly funny. While *The Girl Chewing Gum* is wry as well, it is worth noting its differences in tone and sensibility from its American counterparts. Ian Christie has suggested that Smith's particular brand of humour might best be seen in the lineage of 'English eccentricity', a particularly national tradition that he sees as marked by a quirky preoccupation with the 'unfashionably local', a fascination for 'the mundane' and an interest in techniques of defamiliarisation that would 'show the illogic of the usual'.¹⁸ While such characteristics might also be said to be present in the American films as well, *A Casing Shelved* and *(nostalgia)* are marked by a dry flatness that recalls the affect of conceptual art and minimalism, found nowhere in *The Girl Chewing Gum*. For Christie, Smith is an inheritor of the sensibility of the English writer G.K. Chesterton, like him using 'the everyday topography of London as a foil for the cosmic struggle between anarchy and order, which is supposedly taking place beneath and above its streets'.¹⁹ Both Frampton and Snow include autobiographical elements, but the world of their films is very distinctly the art world rather than the quotidian life of their neighbourhood or city. The voice of *(nostalgia)* is emphatically a reading voice, possessing none of Smith's responsive, exuberant flamboyance and never reaching the levels of absurdism and, by extension, entertainment that one finds in his film.

The Girl Chewing Gum, then, shows certain connections to contemporaneous American tendencies while remaining distinctively English. It is a unique film that is ultimately inassimilable to the categories that were commonly used to describe the prevailing tendencies in avant-garde practice in Britain at the time of its production. In this it is not alone; the paradigms outlined in texts such as 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film' and 'The Two Avant-Gardes' are always more uniform and rigid than the diverse field of activity they seek to chart. Nonetheless, rehearsing the film's points of contact and lack of fit with such categories remains a useful exercise, for it enables one to situate *The Girl Chewing Gum* within the broader field of discourses and practices from which it emerged and in which it was first encountered.

Notes

1. Malcolm Le Grice, untitled film listing, *Time Out*, 5–11 March 1976, p.64. In addition to the five films Le Grice mentions, the programme also featured *Words* 1972–3, made with Lis Rhodes, and *Nine Short Stories* 1975.
2. John Smith, interview with the author, 16 June 2014.
3. Cornelia Parker, 'John Smith's Body', in Mark Cosgrove and Josephine Lanyon (eds.), *John Smith: Film and Video Works, 1972–2002*, Bristol 2002, p.8.
4. See, for example, www.lux.org.uk/collection/works/the-girl-chewing-gum, accessed 11 June 2015, and <http://johnsmithfilms.com/selected-works/the-girl-chewing-gum>, accessed 11 June 2015.
5. A longer version of the original text was included in a 1982 pamphlet entitled 'John Smith Films 1975–82' (available in the John Smith file at the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection), but it does not appear to have been used since.
6. Programme notes of the London Film-makers' Co-operative, 10 March 1976, 1p, courtesy of British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection.
7. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1973–2000*, 3rd edn, New York 2002, p.348.
8. Although Gidal allowed that such exercises 'are not irrelevant as sociological insight into certain filmic operations', he saw them as ultimately reproducing through filmmaking a practice better suited to writing, a fact that he saw as having 'now dawned, perhaps, on the overzealous graduates who wish to make statements about certain usages of narrative'. Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film', *Studio International*, vol.190, no.978, November–December 1975, p.190.
9. Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', in Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson and K.J. Shepherdson (eds.), *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, London 2004, p.135.
10. *Ibid.*, p.132.
11. John Smith, 'Real Fiction', paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Smith's PhD, University of East London, December 1997, pp.3–4. Courtesy of British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection.
12. Gidal 1975, p.189.
13. *Ibid.* Yet it is worth noting that Gidal was a supporter of the film: after it was rejected by the Edinburgh Film Festival, he wrote to Linda Myles, the festival director, to argue for its inclusion on her programme. John Smith, interview with the author, 8 December 2014.
14. Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath, New York 1977, p.64, emphasis in text. Gidal was very clear in his opposition to this position in his 1979 text 'The Anti-Narrative': 'What is not needed is "a different narrative", "at the limit of fictions of unity" (Stephen Heath), "an enigma, contradictory": The notion of "the limit" is both a Barthesian and Metzian notion, one which in fact refuses the necessity of denial'. See Peter Gidal, 'The Anti-Narrative', *Screen*, vol.20, no.2, 1979, p.78.
15. Smith 1997, p.4.
16. Smith recalls that the first films he saw by Snow and Frampton were <---> (known as *Back and Forth*) of 1969 and *Zorns Lemma*, respectively. Although he saw these films around the same time he made *The Girl Chewing Gum*, he does not recall whether it was before or after, but notes that 'both made a big impression on [him]'. John Smith, email correspondence with the author, 3 April 2015.
17. Michael Snow quoted in 'The Camera and the Spectator: Michael Snow in Discussion with John Du Cane', in Michael Snow and Louise Dompierre, *The Michael Snow Project: The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, Waterloo 1994, p.91.
18. Ian Christie, 'English Eccentric', in Tanya Leighton and Kathrin Meyer (eds.), *John Smith*, Milan and Berlin 2013, pp.49–50.
19. *Ibid.*, p.53.

(Not) the Voice of God

It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970)¹

On the night of the premiere of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the 7.00 pm slot at the London Film-Makers' Co-operative ('the Co-op') featured a very different film, one that lay far beyond the domain of structural/materialism: Humphrey Jennings's *Fires Were Started* of 1943 (fig.1). Set in the period preceding the formation of the National Fire Service in Britain in August 1941, the film follows a day's work at a fire service substation during the Blitz, culminating in a massive warehouse fire. Even



Fig.1
Humphrey Jennings
Fires Were Started 1943 (film still)

though it consists entirely of scripted re-enactments, the film was at the time of its release referred to as a documentary due to its use of real firemen and firewomen as actors and its research-based claim to historical actuality.² At the Co-op, it was shown as a part of an ongoing series entitled 'History of the Avant-Garde', which included many experimental film classics, but notably also feature films such as Robert Flaherty's 1948 *Louisiana Story* and Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin (Tri pesni o Lenine)* of 1934. Like *Fires Were Started*, these films complicate the premise held by the proponents of direct cinema that documentary might be best defined as the observational recording of unstaged events and best understood in opposition to fiction and manipulation. Although the very notion of documentary was anathema to structural/materialism, the screening of films such as these is evidence of a more complex interrogation of the documentary tradition occurring at the Co-op during this period than is commonly assumed.³ Rather than taking the indexical capture of reality as something to be 'for' or 'against', the conception of documentary resuscitated in the 'History of the Avant-Garde' series was marked by a constitutive impurity and an insistence on exploring the fraught, transformational space that exists between reality and its representation.

It was only through the arbitrariness of scheduling that *The Girl Chewing Gum* came to share the evening with *Fires Were Started*, but in fact this somewhat strange pairing makes a good deal of sense: albeit for very different reasons and to very different ends, both films are characterised by a productive contamination of fiction and non-fiction. Smith has discussed this aspect of his work, stating that 'If I'm forced to put a label on my films, I'm happy to call many of them documentaries, especially if you go back to [John] Grierson's definition of documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality"'.⁴ He elaborated on this position in his 1997 doctoral dissertation, entitled 'Real Fiction': 'I am highly sceptical of the accepted distinction between "fiction" and "documentary"'. Leaving aside philosophical arguments concerning the concept of "fact", all film is fiction in that it is literally "made up" from controlled representations of selected interpretations of phenomena which are ordered selectively to construct meanings.'⁵

This twinned interest in documentary and the non-transparency of representation prevails throughout Smith's practice, but is articulated with particular force in *The Girl Chewing Gum* in its exploration of

the relations between language and image. Smith's expanded definition of documentary and acknowledgement of the inevitability of fictionalisation are now widely held ideas – indeed, they are frequently deemed central to the so-called 'new' forms of documentary that prevail today in contemporary art – but this position was far less common in the 1970s. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, Smith's embrace of hybridity provides a cogent form for a powerful critique of documentary naturalism and, more specifically, one of its favoured techniques, the 'voice of god' – all while remaining grounded in a commitment to actuality.

The voice of god is a usually male voice, unmarked in accent, prevailing on the soundtrack of many traditional documentaries. It assumes total knowledge and mastery of what is seen onscreen by virtue of occupying a space resolutely heterogeneous to that of the image-track. The power of this voice is dependent on the absence of a body; it seems to speak from nowhere, deriving from this placelessness a superhuman omniscience. *The Girl Chewing Gum* does not present a voice of god in the strict sense, since conventionally, to quote the filmmaker and critic Pascal Bonitzer, this voice 'forbids questioning about its enunciator, its place, and its time'.⁶ The opening minutes of *The Girl Chewing Gum* depart from this regime by allowing the spectator to assume that the voice is located in a space coterminous with the image, simply out of frame; in other words, the voice is initially presented as a voice-off rather than a voiceover. The distinction between these two terms is key in illuminating the way in which *The Girl Chewing Gum* subverts filmic conventions. The voice-off in cinema is defined as belonging to a character not visible in the frame and yet clearly present within the filmic universe. The voiceover, meanwhile, is extra-diegetic, occupying a space that is radically other; it derives authority from this transcendental position.⁷ *The Girl Chewing Gum* cannily subverts the habitual employment of these techniques by beginning with a voice-off that possesses all the authority of a voiceover, only to later reveal it as a voiceover lacking any authority whatsoever. Through this unusual deployment of the relationship between the disembodied voice and filmic space, Smith produces a critical reflection on the ways in which the soundtrack's linguistic message regulates the viewer's apprehension of the image.

Bonitzer wrote that the voice of god is 'able to seize the real', transforming it into the 'visual and perceivable support of the commentary – if one likes, its flesh'.⁸ *The Girl Chewing Gum* stages this seizure of the real within a (bogus) scenario of the production of a fiction film – a situation in which a director would, as in *Day for Night*, be able to control all aspects of the filmic world. What the voice says, the real does. All of the contingencies of the world are subordinated to the pure intellect of the commanding voice, even the flight of pigeons. But as this conceit quickly and amusingly unravels, it becomes clear that the film's real interest lies in the seizure of the *image* of the real through language, by means of a process the literary and cultural theorist Roland Barthes term has termed 'anchorage'. In his 1964 essay 'The Rhetoric of the Image', Barthes described how images are marked by an inherent polysemy – that is, they are open to many possible meanings. Linguistic forms such as voiceover serve to fix certain meanings while discarding others, all in an effort 'to counter the terror of uncertain signs'.⁹ By naming and supplying information about particular elements of the scene, the voiceover of *The Girl Chewing Gum* helps one to, in Barthes's words, 'choose *the correct level of perception*', 'to focus not simply [one's] gaze but also [one's] understanding'.¹⁰ In standard voice-of-god commentary, the voice dissimulates its seizure of the real by adopting a form of discourse that masquerades as fact-based and neutral. It purports to say what is simply 'there', to transparently elucidate the real through the provision of a verbal supplement, when in fact what is occurring is an operation of selection and transformation whereby reality is fictionalised. *The Girl Chewing Gum* stages an allegory of this operation, revealing the voice of god's true function and its false pretence to authority.



Fig.2
John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery,
Berlin



Fig.3
John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery,
Berlin

Smith's voice directs not only the scene, but the viewer as well, guiding him or her to focus on certain aspects of the image and to apprehend those aspects in particular ways. When the voiceover says 'Right, let's have the man in the white boiler suit coming in from the right', the viewer scans the image in search of him at the expense of paying attention to other things happening in the frame. His appearance on the far side of the street in the background on the left – *not* the right as directed – detracts notice from two women who pass in the foreground, even though they occupy a position of greater pictorial importance (fig.2). In addition to directing the spectator's gaze, the voiceover plays a central role in determining what sense one makes of what one sees. Put differently, it influences not only identification, but interpretation as well. We see a man with a cane walking down the road (fig.3). He could be going to any number of places for any number of reasons; the image contains within it a vast reserve of potential meanings. When the voiceover volunteers that 'The man with a walking stick is going home', it accomplishes a pruning away of undesired possibilities (the man is a wounded war veteran, the man uses his cane to beat his dog) and anchors one chosen signified to the image. Although this example is quite innocuous, it is easy to see how instrumental the operation of anchorage can be in the ideological functioning of images. As Barthes wrote, 'With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a *repressive* value and we can see that it is at this level that the morality and ideology of a society are above all invested'.¹¹

The danger of the voice of god is that it powerfully exerts this repressive value without acknowledging it as such; instead, the chosen signified anchored by the voiceover is presented as obvious, as the unquestioned truth of the image. *The Girl Chewing Gum* critiques this regime not by offering an alternative, but by endowing the voice with such extreme power so as to strain one's belief in it as master of the universe. As Bonitzer has written, 'If the unity of voice and meaning in the commentary-off defines a regime of mastery or of oppression, it is perhaps starting from its scission that one could begin to define another politics or erotics of the voice-off'.¹² Bonitzer found an example of such tactics



Fig.4
Luis Buñuel
Land Without Bread 1933 (film still)

in the films of Marguerite Duras, which render the voice hesitant, doubtful, unknowing and marked by silences that endow it with a character very other than the pure rationality of the voice of god. Smith, by contrast, deploys a technique not unlike that found in a second example Bonitzer offers, Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (*Las Hurdes: Tierra Sin Pan*) of 1933, a film that tackles the tyranny of the voiceover head on. Buñuel's voiceover adopts a tone incongruous with the image it describes and makes statements that lie beyond the possibilities of its knowledge. It often attempts to anchor a linguistic signified that is at odds with the photographic signifier, declaring, for instance, that a woman onscreen is 'only thirty-two years old', even though she looks perhaps seventy (fig.4). Although Smith

does not stage contradictions as blatant as Buñuel's, he systematically undercuts the reliability of his narrator through similar means, particularly in the second half of the film, in which he flatly reports on incredible sights (the blackbird with the nine-foot wingspan) and makes frequent reference to information indiscernible by vision alone. The revelation of the specific location of the narrator far from Dalston further demolishes the voice's authority, constituting what might be thought of as the avant-garde equivalent of the pulling back of the curtain at the end of *The Wizard of Oz* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939). These gestures induce the kind of scission Bonitzer described, with the result that the voice of god is recast as the voice of an individual with a god-complex. If this voice is clearly engaged in fabulation beyond the limits of its knowledge, it follows that there are no grounds for trusting its statements. A chasm opens between what is said and what is seen. The filmic image slips away from the linguistic message that sought to capture it, recovering its polysemy and casting doubt upon the enunciative position of all voices that pretend to authority and omniscience.



Fig.5
John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin



Fig.6
John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

There are key moments in which Smith plays with the synchronisation of sound and image so as to throw a wrench in the usual functioning of anchorage. Roughly halfway through the film, the camera comes to rest on the exterior of the Dalston Odeon, with a queue waiting in front (fig.5). The voiceover mentions a man in a turban and a van marked 'Senate House, WC1', but neither can be found. He continues, 'In the cinema queue I want to see a boy and his mother. The boy will be about eight years old and his mother about thirty-two. They'll both have collar-length hair, his dark and hers fair. She will be wearing a suedette coat with a



Fig.7
John Smith
The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 (film still)
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

white imitation fur collar. They'll be talking to each other and looking around them'. Scanning the crowd, it is not possible to identify anyone who fits the description Smith has provided. At the mention of the woman's coat, the camera begins to pan left away from the cinema, so that the queue is completely out of frame. The viewer is being directed to look for something that he or she simply would never be able to see. The voiceover has offered a selected signified, but no signifier to match can be found, troubling the production of a stable meaning. After a perfect sound-image synchronisation of a man putting on his glasses, the voiceover speaks once again of mother and child – 'The boy will look at his watch and yawn, then look at it again and say something to his mother about the time' – but the cinema queue remains out of frame. What is visible, however, are the man in the turban and the Senate House van, mentioned roughly one minute before (fig.6). Almost four minutes later, after the geographical location of the voice has been revealed and its narration is about to end, the camera comes once more to the cinema queue, where the mother and boy are clearly visible, clothed exactly as the voiceover had said they were (fig.7). But by now, the notion that the text might

serve to successfully anchor the meaning of the image by identifying figures of interest and supplying interpretive details has been thrown into crisis. How are we to know that the woman is indeed thirty-two, not coincidentally the same age as the woman of Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*? She might easily be twenty-eight, or she could be forty; she is one face among a crowd and too far away to know. And perhaps her fur collar is real rather than imitation? By the end of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the narrator's authority has been so thoroughly undermined as to restore the liberty of the photographic signifieds.

This sequence is of central importance for an additional reason, one that has to do with the same thing the boy in the cinema queue spoke to his mother about: time. From the beginning *The Girl Chewing Gum* establishes a tight synchronisation between the commands issued on the soundtrack and their execution by the image, one that it largely retains throughout. The synchronised sound of the street scene aids in the creation of a reality-effect, and the soundtrack is presumed to be a single unitary whole. But in the case of the mother and son, this synchronisation is disrupted as the voice supplies information prematurely, identifying figures that will only appear onscreen later. This disjunction between sound and image tugs at the tight suture that had existed between them, opening the possibility that the voice may be speaking from a different temporal position than originally assumed. Even before the disclosure of the geographical location of the narrator, this lack of synchronisation gestures to the film's process of construction by suggesting that the voiceover is – if not clairvoyant – occupying a time *after* the image. This destabilising of the temporality of the soundtrack is exacerbated shortly thereafter when another mother, 'firmly gripping the hands of her two young sons', stops to cross the road. The narrator says 'They stop–', at which point the street noises cut out and the soundtrack is quiet. He continues against a silent background, '–and now they cross the road'. As they begin to walk, the street noises return. Smith has here made clear the presence of two soundtracks that had been masquerading as one, cleaving their unity and putting into question the place and time from which the narrator speaks.

The heterogeneity of film's soundtrack and the foregrounding of the belatedness of the voice have two important ramifications for Smith's critique of documentary naturalism. Firstly, it means that the voice speaks not as witness to the street scene but as viewer of the *film* of the street scene, which can be screened repeatedly so as to familiarise oneself with the sequence of events. This attenuates the relation to the profilmic and foregrounds the image-track as representation rather than reality. Secondly, it fractures the temporality of the film, for what had been apprehended as a single unfolding present is now recognised to be a heterogeneous time in which non-simultaneous recordings of sound and image are rendered simultaneous only through the means of filmic construction. Their apparent unity is shown to be the result of post facto assembly. The artifice of post-synchronised sound is, of course, the truth of most films, but this fact is normally disavowed so as to produce an impression of reality. As the composer and film theorist Michel Chion has suggested, 'The talking film is but a jerry-rigged assemblage ... Instead of denying this rigging, it can choose it as its subject matter, taking that route, under the sign of the impossible, to the very heart of the effect of the Real'.¹³ *The Girl Chewing Gum* inhabits this impossibility to reveal it as such, thus adding a critique of the reality-effect of synchronised sound to its analysis of the signifying operations of the voice of god.

Erika Balsom

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Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [1970], London 1989, p.10.
2. See, for example, 'Fires Were Started', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol.10, no.112, April 1943, p.47. For more on this see Brian Winston, 'Fires Were Started–', London 1999, pp.58–66.
3. For a discussion of structural/materialist film and the Co-op at this time, see Erika Balsom, 'A "New

- Face" at the Co-op', September 2015, in Erika Balsom (ed.), *In Focus: 'The Girl Chewing Gum' 1976, by John Smith*, September 2015.
4. John Smith, quoted in Catherine Elwes, 'Trespassing Beyond the Frame', in Mark Cosgrove and Josephine Lanyon (eds.), *John Smith: Film and Video Works, 1972–2002*, Bristol 2002, p.64.
 5. John Smith, 'Real Fiction', paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Smith's PhD, University of East London, December 1997, p.10. Courtesy of British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection.
 6. Pascal Bonitzer, 'The Silences of the Voice (*A propos of Mai 68* by Gudie Lawaetz)', trans. by Philip Rosen and Marcia Butzel, in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, New York 1986, p.324.
 7. For a further elaboration of this distinction and its implications, see Mary Ann Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space', in Rosen (ed.) 1986, pp.338–41.
 8. Bonitzer in Rosen (ed.) 1986, p.325.
 9. Roland Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath, New York 1977, p.39.
 10. *Ibid.*, emphasis in text.
 11. *Ibid.*, p.40, emphasis in text.
 12. Bonitzer in Rosen (ed.) 1986, p.329.
 13. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman, New York 1999, p.151. It is worth noting that Chion had in mind here films very different than *The Girl Chewing Gum*, namely feature-length narrative films that problematised the embodiment of the voice, such as Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr Mabuse (Das Testament des Dr Mabuse)* of 1933 and Kenji Mizoguchi's 1954 film *Sancho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)*. Nonetheless, his insight remains extremely pertinent to Smith's play with synchronisation.

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Dalston, Then and Now: An Interview with John Smith

While Smith has written that ‘all film is fiction’,¹ one might also add that all film (live-action, at least) is documentary. The ‘controlled representations’ Smith has described consist of traces of people and things that have passed before the camera lens.² At the turn of the twentieth century Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon’s Lancashire-based film company produced hundreds of actualities: short non-fiction films capturing glimpses of daily life, festivals, parades, factories and – importantly – street scenes in Britain (fig.1). In filming a Dalston intersection for an uninterrupted ten minutes, Smith recalls the work of Mitchell and Kenyon, resuscitating a filmic genre that largely died out with the development of narrative filmmaking in the 1910s. *The Girl Chewing Gum* may be a ‘creative treatment of actuality’, but it remains actuality nonetheless.



Fig.1
Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon
*Bootle May Day Demonstration and Crowning of the
May Queen* 1903 (film still)

The film’s images were always images of the past in that they are retrospectively described by a voiceover that is revealed to be situated later in time than the images it accompanies. But this notion of retrospective examination becomes even more important today, as *The Girl Chewing Gum* now appears not only as a reflexive examination of cinematic conventions but also as a document of a neighbourhood that has undergone immense changes since 1976. Smith himself highlighted this aspect of the film in his remake, *The Man Phoning Mum* 2011 (fig.2). Here, Smith paired the soundtrack of the original with an image-track consisting of colour video filmed at the same location in 2011 and superimposed over the 1976 film. From time to time, he varies the balance of the two images, allowing one or the other to fully inhabit the screen. During the 360-degree pan at the film’s end, subtitles appear: Smith was unable to find the exact location he filmed in 1976 and remarks upon the differences between Letchmore Heath then and now (fig.3).



Fig.2

John Smith

The Man Phoning Mum 2011

High definition video, colour, sound

12 min

Courtesy the artist

In the following conversation, John Smith and writer and historian Patrick Wright reflect upon *The Girl Chewing Gum* as a film of place and a document of the past. Among many other books, Wright is the author of *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (1991, revised edition 2009), which turns to the East End, and more particularly to a short stretch of Dalston Lane, to examine the transformations of British life under Thatcherism.

This interview took place on 20 November 2014 at King's College London.



Fig.3

John Smith

The Man Phoning Mum 2011 (film still)

Courtesy the artist

Interview with John Smith

Patrick Wright: *What took you to Dalston?*

John Smith: I lived there, a few hundred yards from the place that you see in the film. Most of my work is made in places I'm familiar with, often near my house. I lived in Lansdowne Drive then. I later moved away for twenty years and moved back to the area in 2003. It's interesting how the location of a film becomes more fascinating and significant over time. When I made the film, I didn't particularly care where the location was. I chose it because it had a cinema and a street clock. I also wasn't thinking about anything to do with time, or that I would record this place and then later look at it in a very different way. I just wanted an image of an ordinary present-day place, and the most convenient ordinary place I could find was this one.

The Girl Chewing Gum is a film that has taken on a new layer of meaning as time has gone by, because it has become an historical document. It's a kind of Mitchell and Kenyon film of Dalston. I like to think that at the time the film was made it probably contained the only ten-minute shot of Dalston

ever recorded. It's an ordinary place captured in a single shot. It is an historical record, which of course I didn't think about at the time at all. I wasn't thinking beyond the day it was made, and as a twenty-three-year-old art student I never imagined that people would still be watching it nearly forty years later. I was trying to make something from the ordinary, the mundane – from something as grey as possible. But looking at the film all these years later, the place has become coloured by the passage of time; it has become exotic and full of character. It's very strange.

Patrick Wright: *The year you were beginning to work on The Girl Chewing Gum, I fled to the west coast of Canada. I came back in 1979 and moved into Clapton, then Stoke Newington, and then Dalston. In those days, you could pick up a house for sums that now seem entirely trivial. Of course, we still struggled to do it, but people without regular work could still buy houses. I wrote about Dalston in my book, which has now strangely become part of the geography of the area. The area at that time had tremendous imaginative possibilities. What struck me was that it was such an impressive place of accumulated historical traces. I loved those arguments that people like [the French philosopher and sociologist] Henri Lefebvre had made about the inner city being remarkable because nobody has managed to codify it or impose a single order of meaning on it. It's full of things that exist in different cultures, different places, and different times. Cut through the familiar poverty scenario and the talk about drabness, and those streets could become the richest places in the world: you only had to walk through them to find yourself incredibly stimulated by places and objects that had defeated, or at least escaped, time and power. Those streets were also lines of intersection between the working class and bohemia, and it was great to discover that earlier observers had known about this. I remember reading Barbara Jones, who praised the funereal culture of the East London undertaker. Where others saw nothing but a drab blackened shopfront, she detected 'a nice, rich, debased Baroque'.³*

John Smith: I should say that I come from a lower middle class background. I grew up in Walthamstow. It wasn't as rough as Hackney, but I felt just as at home with working class people in Hackney as I did with my contemporaries at the Royal College of Art. I thought I was middle class before I went to the Royal College, but then I saw that there were whole upper echelons of society that I never knew about. So my view of things in Dalston wasn't so anthropological. In the early 1970s, the separation that I experienced was mainly between me as a dope-smoking long-haired art student and all the straight people who were around, whatever their class was.

Patrick Wright: *You put the camera there, but people didn't engage with it the way that they might now. You must have been quite visible.*

John Smith: Yes, I was very visible: I had a big Arriflex BL 16 mm camera on a tripod. I've often wondered about why people didn't interfere more, or even ask what I was doing, as they would now. In retrospect I think it has something to do with the class divide and how at that time there was more of a sense that people knew their place. The camera used to have a lot of authority. So even though I was this slightly weird looking bloke, people thought 'There's a professional person going about his business here, we'll let him get on with it'. It was only the kids who reacted; everybody else looked the other way. Of course, it's entirely different now. When I went to the same location and made *The Man Phoning Mum* three years ago, some people looked at me really aggressively. In fact, after walking in front of the camera, one person did an abrupt turn, came back, and said 'Oi mate, are you fucking filming me?' He got really angry. You're never quite sure whether it's because someone expects that they should be given money – that they should be paid for being in a film – or whether it's just that they feel that their privacy is being intruded upon.

Patrick Wright: *So you stood on that street corner in 1976, and then you went back.*

John Smith: Yes, in 2011. It happened partly because I was interested in how much the location had changed, but also because I discovered all these homages to the film on the internet. These were shot in many different places around the world, but in several cases people had traced the actual location of the film and made their own versions in Dalston. I got interested in the fact that it had been remade

already. I thought, 'I know exactly where my camera was, I can go and re-do it myself'. I liked the remote possibility that one of the people in the original film might still live in the area and might walk in front of the camera, so that in the new video they would confront their younger self when the 1976 and 2011 footage was superimposed. What struck me when I turned up – this is one of the reasons that the video is called *The Man Phoning Mum* – is that every second person was carrying a mobile phone. Of course, in 1976 this would have been considered science fiction! You'd think, where are all the wires? Why aren't they tripping over them? The omnipresence of mobile phones is something that we're all very aware of today, but to look through the camera and see how many people were using them was still very striking. Since I know the original film so well, I noticed that people were not looking at the world around them as much as they did in the 1970s. It sounds kind of corny, but I found it disturbing that a lot of people just looked glazed and stared straight ahead. All they cared about was whether they would get knocked over crossing the road, whereas the people without phones seemed like they were taking in the world a bit more.

Patrick Wright: *It's also the case that music is now played through headphones instead of on the street. That used to be a real feature of those streets. I remember once studying the bus queue on Dalston Junction. I was interested in watching the way people milled around in that area. Where the station was and now sort of is again, there used to be a wide pavement where people could gather for buses but also just mill around. It was very interesting to watch this whole way of life at the bus queue. It was always dishevelled but always formal as well. It was not a military queue of people, but there was a code about who did what. The kids were the only ones to break these unwritten rules, but everyone knew that. In central London, the street is for transit: you walk because you're going somewhere. But in that part of Dalston, there were people who actually lived in the bus queue. You'd see that they'd hover around the queue but then back up without ever getting on the bus. At first I couldn't work out what this was about. And then I realised that there was a law that you could be arrested by the police for loitering. This meant that you had to act as if you were doing something or on the way somewhere, but there were people who were in or at the edges of the bus queue for hours because it was the only way of existing. I always thought that this way of operating in the street was fascinating. It was non-purposeful, quite differentiated, and irreconcilable with the planners, who speak of a purposeful thing called 'the pedestrian's line of desire'. These people didn't have a line of desire anywhere near them. I think that your slow shot is also very revealing of that difference, of this other way of inhabiting space.*

John Smith: There are a few people in the film who linger and come back. There's an old man with a peaked cap and a cigarette who walks up and down the street, lurking and lingering behind the kids standing in the cinema queue. There is this sense of a lack of purpose. It's surprising how many people go backwards and forwards across the frame more than once.

Patrick Wright: *What are the other differences you notice between 1976 and today?*

John Smith: This is one that I should look at more closely, but one thing I noticed in the parts of the film where I superimpose one image on the other and have the scale exactly right is that people in the 1970s appear smaller. We hear that through nutrition we've gotten bigger and bigger, but this impression was so strong to me when looking at this footage. Several times I've looked at it and wondered whether a person was further from the camera than another one, but it really looks like they're in the same place but that the figure from the 1970s is smaller.

Patrick Wright: *And of course the cultural mix is different now. In The Girl Chewing Gum, you were filming a working class street. Now you're filming a round-the-world-in-three-hundred-yards street. Everything is there.*

John Smith: When I look at it now, it's amazing. I thought that the community was very multicultural at the time of making *The Girl Chewing Gum*. But in the film, a black person walking down the street really stands out – there are probably no more than ten non-white faces that appear in the whole ten

minutes. What I'm also aware of now when I look at the original film is how everybody looks really poor. It was before the time when people would spend their last penny on getting a good pair of trainers – they would rather eat. So a lot of people are dressed in really worn out clothes.

Patrick Wright: *The street for you is not a local object, is it?*

John Smith: No, but it is important to me that I film in places that I know and that the work comes out of my own experience. I wouldn't dream of going to Northampton and filming a street corner there to make something like *The Girl Chewing Gum*. It was important that it was close to me. I feel more comfortable documenting a place that I'm familiar with, even though I wouldn't want to go as far as to be seen as being any kind of authority on it. Knowing the place probably doesn't affect my judgement on how I film things at all, but I'm very opposed to the kind of documentary tourism that takes place in the world an enormous amount, when people go somewhere to make a film about a subject they are not familiar with. The familiarity of place is important.

Patrick Wright: *Yes, it's a desire not just to be a visiting outsider, not just an eye. It seems to be that television journalism does create a demand for that kind of thing. People who try to make a living in that world end up going to streets they've never seen before and calling them 'Benefits Street'.⁴*

This film is now almost half a century old. All the technology's changed, but what about the aesthetic? What's happened to your eye and the way you think of film now?

John Smith: When I was making *The Man Phoning Mum*, it was very interesting to me to combine the grainy, black and white 16 mm people from 1976 with the colourful, high definition video people from 2011, drawing attention to the aesthetic differences between the two media. My ideas are often shaped and facilitated by developments in technology. The formal construction of a lot of my work comes out of what's available technologically. For example, *The Girl Chewing Gum* was shot on one 400-foot roll of 16 mm film and one 100-foot roll. There was just one take of each shot. Conceptually, I wanted it to be that way, to rely on chance and allow the length of the roll of film to limit the duration of the shot; I wanted whatever happened to be what I directed. But that being said, if I'd wanted to do more than one shot I couldn't have afforded it. As a student, I could only afford one roll of film and that was it. Whereas thirty-five years later I could shoot as much digital footage as I liked at no material cost. I replicated the camera movements by putting the original film on my iPhone and strapping it to the LCD viewfinder of my digital video camera so that I could attempt to follow the movements of the original film. This would have been utterly impossible only five years ago, working independently anyway. With a big crew, you could set up monitors and things, but I prefer to work on my own.

Patrick Wright: *Near the end of The Man Phoning Mum, you move out to what looks like open country, but the sense of having returned to the same place you filmed in the earlier work is hardly sustained in the closing scenes. Letchmore Heath is scarcely recognisable as you remembered it.*

John Smith: Well, it's because I couldn't find it! I only went to Letchmore Heath twice: once to record the voiceover and once to film the second shot. So thirty-five years later I had to find this place. All I knew was that the place was called Letchmore Heath and that there were pylons and trees there. So I spent a very bizarre day traipsing around trying to find the precise location and camera position. It was so frustrating. I thought that maybe I would get there, but in the end I gave up and had to settle for a similar view. Afterwards I was glad that I hadn't found it because it allowed me an opportunity to introduce the voice of the present, in the form of captions. The Dalston shot was very easy. I could put the camera in exactly the same place. But I did get very confused when filming it. Although Steele's – the glass merchant – had turned into a scooter shop and the clock had gone, architecturally the building looked exactly the same. I really liked this idea of tilting up to the top of the building so that in one image you'd have the clock and in the other you'd have sky. But somehow I couldn't manage to get the camera movement fast enough and I couldn't work out why. I was following the speed of the movement of the original film, but I couldn't get to the roof in time. Suddenly I realised that probably

thirty years ago they built another storey on the building in the same style. It's very well done, so it's blended in. With age, you can't see any trace of it.

Patrick Wright: *Did you have a political investment in making The Girl Chewing Gum? Was your impatience with documentary connected to an impatience with certain political assumptions?*

John Smith: Absolutely. It was largely concerned with the way in which voiceovers in documentaries can be used to determine the way that we see images and thus tell us how we should see the world. Also, the film was made at the time when there was a lot of controversy around the 'sus' law. This law was introduced in the early nineteenth century as part of the Vagrancy Act, but was increasingly enforced in the 1970s. I imagine that the law about loitering that you mentioned earlier must have been part of the same act. The 'sus' law allowed the police to stop and search any person in a public place whom they suspected might be intending to commit an offence. My voiceover indirectly refers to the 'sus' law through telling the viewer that a young man in a raincoat who passes in front of the camera has just robbed the local post-office. If we find it funny, it's because we can so easily imagine that he has done something dodgy because he looks a little shifty. I go to the extreme by saying that he has a gun in his pocket. Within the context of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, you know of course that you are being lied to. But if you actually took that little piece of footage out, presented it as surveillance footage, and a very confident policeman said 'Yes, this is the suspect walking away from the crime scene, as you see here', you can imagine how people might be led to believe that he had done something wrong. One reason that the 'sus' law was so controversial was that a very high percentage of the people who were stopped by the police were black; to the racists within our police force being black was suspicious in itself. In the later part of *The Girl Chewing Gum* I ascribe imaginary identities to the people that appear and call them things like 'the dentist', 'the window-cleaner' and 'the two naughty boys'. But when a black man crosses the frame I refer to him as 'the negro with the briefcase and the newspaper'. By deliberately denying him a character and describing only his outward appearance I was attempting to draw attention to the inherent racism of dominant perception that existed when the film was made.

Erika Balsom, John Smith and Patrick Wright

September 2015

Notes

1. John Smith, 'Real Fiction', paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Smith's PhD, University of East London, December 1997, p.10. Courtesy of British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection.
2. Ibid.
3. See Barbara Jones, *The Unsophisticated Arts* [1951], Dorchester 2014.
4. *Benefits Street* is a controversial documentary series that aired in the UK on Channel 4 in January 2015. Over five episodes, it followed the lives of the residents of James Turner Street in Birmingham, where reportedly ninety per cent of inhabitants claim state benefits.

How to cite

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A Film in the Age of Video

As *The Man Phoning Mum* makes clear, the cinema that appears in *The Girl Chewing Gum* is no longer there. After forty years in operation, the Dalston Odeon closed down on 31 March 1979. The building remained empty until 1984, when it was demolished to make way for the block of flats that currently occupies the site. One might find nothing particularly remarkable about the Odeon's demise; after all, the same fate has befallen dozens of former London cinemas. However, there is a certain curiosity to the way in which its destiny both diverges from and points to the life *The Girl Chewing Gum* has led in the age of video. On the one hand, the Odeon and Smith's film are nothing alike: the cinema is gone and forgotten, while the film has in recent years reached new heights of popularity and acclaim. But on the other hand, the disappearance of the Odeon indexes a notable feature of the contemporary existence of *The Girl Chewing Gum*: today, it is often found far from the movie theatre in the spaces of contemporary art, where it has entered new frameworks of distribution and exhibition.

In 1984, the same year the Odeon was razed, Smith made an initial foray into gallery exhibition when *Shepherd's Delight* 1980–4 was selected for that year's British Art Show, which toured to museums in Birmingham, Edinburgh, Sheffield and Southampton and was the first to include the moving image (fig.1). The thirty-five-minute long 16 mm film had been made for theatrical presentation and relies heavily on the start-to-finish trajectory and spectatorial attentiveness such a situation enables. As such, it did not fare very well when transferred to video, looped and shown on a small monitor with no seating provided. In the 1990s, however, the circumstances under which the moving image might be exhibited in art spaces began to change dramatically, principally due to the availability of data projectors and video formats of increasing quality. The decade witnessed an explosion of moving images in galleries and museums, one that occurred very much under the sign of cinema. Film historical references, engagements with illusionistic narrative, new documentary practices and a pictorialism never before seen in video predominated – all of which contributed to a situation in which 'video art' largely shed its ties to television and gave way to what would increasingly be called 'artists' cinema' or 'artists' moving image'.¹ Such a climate fostered new interest in the history of avant-garde film, introducing canonical works like *The Girl Chewing Gum* to different audiences. Historically situated at arm's length from the art world, avant-garde film now appeared as a vast and rich archive that might be integrated into the gallery alongside newly emerging practices.



Fig.1
John Smith
Shepherd's Delight 1980–4 (film still)
Courtesy the artist

The first appearance of *The Girl Chewing Gum* in a gallery context was in a group exhibition entitled *Traffic*, held at Curtain Road Arts in London's Shoreditch from 11 April to 21 May 1997. A mixed programme of shorts was projected onto the main front window of the gallery at night, with the result that the films were visible from the street. Other artists featured in the show included Anna Best, Nicholas Bolton, Keith Coventry, Dan Graham, Graham Gussin, Ritsuko Hidaka, Hilary Lloyd, Sean Roe, Emma Smith and Michael Stubbs. The film was installed as a looped video projection for the first time at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in 2003.



Fig.2
Installation view of John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976 at the sixth Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, June–August 2010
Courtesy the artist

These events inaugurated a new chapter in the film's reception history, one in which it would show frequently in Europe and North America as a video installation, thus shifting its material substrate and its larger *dispositif* at once. A year of especially high visibility for *The Girl Chewing Gum* in the art context was 2010, when it was shown at the Armory Show in New York, the Kunsthall Oslo, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London, where Smith was the subject of an exhibition entitled *John Smith: Solo Show* curated by the students of the MA Curating Contemporary Art course. That year, the curator Jens Hoffman wrote in *Frieze* that the film was the 'surprise hit' of the sixth Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, while *Artforum* illustrated its review of the Biennale with an installation shot of the film, which had been accorded a space of its own in a vacant shop at Dresdener Strasse 19 (fig.2).²

On the occasion of the RCA exhibition, the critic Martin Herbert wrote that 'John Smith's films and videos have been criminally under-shown in his home city'.³ Certainly the increased attention from the art world has helped to remedy this, with the RCA's *Solo Show* in particular bringing together twenty-two of Smith's works. How might one account for this flurry of interest? One might see it simply as *The Girl Chewing Gum* belatedly getting the respect it has always deserved. But it is worth noting that the film also fulfils a desire that shaped much curatorial activity in the early twenty-first century. When the art critic and historian Hal Foster wrote of the 'archival impulse' in contemporary art, he was describing artistic practices that delved into and reactivated forgotten histories.⁴ But a related form of archive fever also struck curators during this period, as it became common for exhibitions devoted to contemporary art to include older works. Many curators rummaged through marginalised histories in search of major figures who might be presented to the mainstream art context as new discoveries. Although Smith counts as a firmly canonised figure in the history of avant-garde cinema, until recently he had been relatively absent on the gallery circuit – much like Anthony McCall, Paul Sharits and Morgan Fisher, figures of the same generation who received similar treatment during this period.

While there has been an overall reappraisal of Smith's work in recent years, *The Girl Chewing Gum* has received by far the most attention. Its engagement with narrativity and documentary render it a particularly apposite precursor to the many contemporary works that seek to interrogate those very issues. The first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by a proliferation of moving image practices that actively interrogated cinematic conventions. Documentary in particular was taken up as a discursive field to be questioned, reimagined and pushed forward. If at the time of its production *The Girl Chewing Gum* had been somehow out of step with the party line of structural/materialist film by taking as the object of its reflexivity cinematic conventions rather than filmic materiality, some thirty years later this gesture resonated as absolutely contemporary.⁵

Whatever the reason may be, it is clear that the exhibition of *The Girl Chewing Gum* in the gallery space comes with both disadvantages and advantages (fig.3). Many debates around the importation of historical avant-garde cinema into the gallery have revolved around the material transposition from film to video that is in the majority of cases a prerequisite due to the cost and fragility of exhibiting celluloid. Particularly in the case of filmmakers who engage reflexively with the material substrate, such format shifting can result in a betrayal of the medium-specific concerns of the film. For example, the meaning and integrity of a



Fig.3
Installation view of John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976 at Tate Britain, London
Tate
© John Smith

work such as Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* 1960 – a black and white flicker film that extensively interrogates the single-frame articulation – would be severely injured were it to be shown on video. It is following this logic that Smith has declined to exhibit *Leading Light* 1975 and the silent version of *Hackney Marshes – November 4th 1977* 1977 digitally: both films are edited in camera and make use of flash frames that directly index the technological process of shooting photochemical film.⁶ *The Girl Chewing Gum*, however, does not run up against this difficulty, for it interrogates not the materiality of film but the conventions of cinema, which are relatively unaffected by medium change. This means that while the shift to video may impact the viewer's phenomenological experience of the work, its meaning will not be compromised. Indeed, Smith has expressed that he now prefers to exhibit the film on video because it provides a more consistent, higher quality form of presentation due to how quickly film prints wear out and how easily projectors can slip out of focus. He is also keen to avoid the fetishisation of photochemical film that has been a major feature of artists' moving image in the early twenty-first century, wherein the obsolete technology can become more fascinating to viewers than the film on display.⁷

What is potentially undermined when it is exhibited in the gallery is the film's investment in a start-to-finish structure. Viewers can walk in and out of the space at any point in the loop, resulting in the strong likelihood that they will miss its passage from direction to fabulation or find out too soon that the narrator is positioned some fifteen miles away on Letchmore Heath. Smith has tried to mitigate this possibility by looping the film to commence every fifteen minutes, thus encouraging the viewer to encounter it from beginning to end. Morgan Fisher, a figure who has worked in both the cinema and in art contexts, has made a distinction between what he calls 'teleological film', which relies on a particular linear progression to create meaning, and works that may be encountered at any point and are thus amenable to display on loop.⁸ Fisher's distinction does not rely on authorial intentionality – on whether or not the filmmaker originally intended the work to be shown in a gallery, cinema, or both – but rather on how the internal textual organisation of the work interacts with its screening context. There is no doubt that *The Girl Chewing Gum* is a teleological film in Fisher's understanding of the term and thus would better be seen under conditions that would facilitate start-to-finish viewing. However, agreeing to exhibit it in the gallery means that it will be seen by a significantly larger number of people, thus perhaps making the migration into the art context worth the sacrifice.

The institutional relocation of *The Girl Chewing Gum* also brought changes to the distribution models it inhabits. In 2008 Smith took on commercial representation with Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin, at which time the gallery retroactively issued many of his earlier films, including *The Girl Chewing Gum*, as limited editions of five. A concept imported from printmaking, the limited edition reins in the reproducibility of the moving image through contractual means, artificially creating the kind of scarcity that will make it viable on the art market, which privileges uniqueness and rarity. This is, of course, a form of distribution very different than the rental model of the London Film-makers' Co-operative and its successor organisation, LUX, which constituted the primary means of circulation for Smith's films

prior to 2008.⁹ In the rental model, the filmmaker deposits a print with a distributor, which then hires the work for a pre-set fee, returning a designated percentage to the artist. Any print sales that would occur under this model would be for the life of that print only. Smith agreed to edition his body of work on the condition that it would continue to remain available for hire and that he would retain the ability to publish it on mass market DVDs.¹⁰ This might initially seem to compromise the artificial rarity of the limited edition; indeed, some filmmakers have viewed the situation in this way and withdrawn their work from distribution agencies such as LUX or Canyon Cinema following the decision to edition it. However, Smith's embrace of multiple, cooperating forms of distribution recognises that different formats serve different markets and different purposes. What is at stake in the editioning model is less the sale of a rare object and more a set of rights and permissions governing the present and future of the work. When Tate acquired *The Girl Chewing Gum* from the Tanya Leighton Gallery in 2010, the institution was making a long-term investment in the stewardship and preservation of the film – one that has very little to do with a widely circulating DVD copy, which is not an archival format and does not come with public exhibition rights.¹¹

The Girl Chewing Gum continues to have a life not only within the broader context of contemporary art, but also within Smith's own practice. In 2011 he engaged in a multi-part revisiting of the film that took the form of an installation called *unusual Red cardigan*, on view at PEER Gallery in Hoxton, east London, from 5 October to 10 December. The exhibition interrogated the space between the 'then' of filming *The Girl Chewing Gum* and the ever-shifting 'now' of its reception over time. It proposed that the temporal frame of the film must not be understood as limited to those moments in 1976 when it was first made or first shown, but must be expanded to encompass its subsequent circulation and reception. In line with the autobiographical thrust of much of Smith's recent work, the exhibition explored the place that *The Girl Chewing Gum* has occupied in the life of its maker over the course of the thirty-five years since its production.

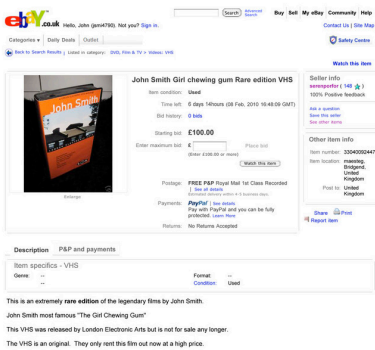


Fig.4
eBay listing posted by serenporfor showing 'John Smith Girl chewing gum Rare edition VHS', February 2010

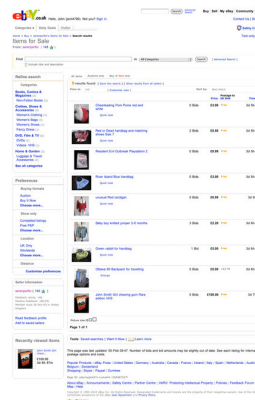


Fig.5
eBay listings posted by serenporfor including 'John Smith Girl chewing gum Rare edition VHS', February 2010

The germ of the installation came from a peculiar experience Smith had while Googling himself: he found a VHS compilation of his films, including *The Girl Chewing Gum*, for sale on the auction and shopping website eBay with a reserve price of £100 – quite an amount for an uneditioned tape, but perhaps justified by the fact that no other compilation of his films was available at the time and the VHS in question was out of print (figs.4 and 5). Smith became fascinated by the seller, a user named serenporfor who was located in Maesteg, a small town in Wales. Browsing through the other items serenporfor had for sale, Smith found that his VHS tape was quite anomalous; most of what was on offer were items of clothing, including a green rabbit fur handbag and an ‘unusual Red cardigan’. Smith attempted to buy all of the items that were up for auction, except for the final listing, ‘John Smith Girl chewing gum Rare edition VHS’. He succeeded in purchasing four of them: a backpack, the rabbit fur handbag, a baby’s knitted cardigan and – of course – the unusual red cardigan. At PEER, Smith installed his acquisitions within the space of the gallery, contextualising them with large prints of screen grabs from eBay and a text detailing the episode (fig.6).¹²



Fig.6
Installation view of the objects purchased from eBay by John Smith in the exhibition *unusual Red cardigan* at PEER Gallery, London, October–December 2010
PEER Gallery
Courtesy the artist and Chris Dorley-Brown

Although serenporfor’s VHS tape contained a handful of Smith’s other films, *The Girl Chewing Gum* was the only title mentioned in the eBay listing. The film’s canonical status provokes some ambivalence in its creator: as Smith revealed in a wall text, ‘When I meet people who associate me with a work that I made 35 years ago and ask me “Do you still make films?” the popularity of *The Girl Chewing Gum* feels like a mixed blessing’.¹³ However, despite giving rise to such conflicted feelings, in *unusual Red cardigan* the extended life of the film became a memory trigger that opened a space for personal retrospection. Near the wall text was an extreme enlargement of a portion of one frame from the film: the titular girl’s face, grainy from magnification (fig.7). When Smith embalmed the contingencies of a Dalston afternoon in 1976, this woman unwittingly played a starring role. Does the girl who walked down Kingsland Road that day have any idea that she is the girl chewing gum in the film? In the same text Smith mused,



Fig.7
Photographic enlargement of the face of the girl from John Smith’s *The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976, as shown in the exhibition *unusual Red cardigan* at PEER Gallery, London, October–December 2010
PEER Gallery
Courtesy the artist

The people who happened to pass through my camera’s field of view one grey afternoon in Dalston 35 years ago have become very familiar to me now and feel like old friends. The Girl Chewing Gum herself must be at least 50 years old, probably a grandmother. I wonder what clothes she wears now, whether she still chews gum and whether she, like myself, still lives nearby. Maybe we pass each other in the street.

I wonder what her name is.¹⁴

The girl and serenporfor converged for Smith as two anonymous figures known only by their aliases. Incidental yet essential, they remain enigmas beyond their appearances in Smith’s work, perhaps unaware of the roles they play. They became the twin protagonists of *unusual Red cardigan*, serving to enlarge the temporal frame of *The Girl Chewing Gum* to include both the unknown futures of all who

appear within it and the many unknown viewers who have encountered it over the years in its various release formats.

The second and third components of the exhibition furthered this interest by making recourse to one of the great preoccupations of recent artists' moving image: the remake. The remake is a form marked by an internal schism in that it both invokes the original and asserts a distance from it. It invariably gestures to the past, creating a temporal space that extends from the present moment of remaking back to the original's date of production, encompassing all that lies between. Next to the frame enlargement of the girl chewing gum in the show was a cluster of nine monitors showing numerous homages to *The Girl Chewing Gum* that have appeared online (fig.7). Each had headphones attached, but it was not immediately clear which set of headphones



Fig.7
Installation view of monitors showing remakes of John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976 in the exhibition *unusual Red cardigan* at PEER Gallery, London, October–December 2010
PEER Gallery
Courtesy the artist and Chris Dorley-Brown

matched with which monitor, thus compromising the autonomy of any particular video and creating a set of relations between the multiple screens. With titles like *The Guy in the Fluorescent Jacket*, these remakes replay the conceit of Smith's film for a number of different purposes: a university assignment to copy an artist's work, a test of a 7D digital camera, or just for fun. Some are relatively straightforward, while others attempt a more clever play on the original, such as Emma Bartrop's *Chewing the Girl's Gum* 2011, in which the artist projects Smith's film on a wall and writes over the image with a crayon in an effort to name everything that appears onscreen. Lurking amid these homages was a copy of the original film found online, albeit one that was both subtitled and rather poor quality, as it had been rephotographed off a television screen when it was broadcast in France. Like the story of serenporfor's VHS tape, this section of the exhibition engaged with the distribution of *The Girl Chewing Gum* by means of secondary formats primarily intended for home viewing. If the new presence within the art space has been the most conspicuous of the film's contemporary travels, Smith's assembly of remakes points to another facet of its circulation, one that did not exist at the time of its production but which has played a significant role in the reception history of *The Girl Chewing Gum*: the networks of digital dissemination.

The final element in this constellation was Smith's own remake, *The Man Phoning Mum*. Smith is far from the only avant-garde filmmaker of his generation to return to his best known film to produce a digital remake: in 2003 Michael Snow remade *Wavelength* 1967 as *WVLNT (Wavelength For Those Who Don't Have the Time)*, while in 2010 Anthony McCall remade *Line Describing A Cone* 1973 as *Line Describing A Cone 2.0*. But in these latter two cases, the concern lies primarily in the medium-specific differences between film and video (although questions of temporality and attention are also important for Snow). Quite differently, in *The Man Phoning Mum* – as in the rest of *unusual Red cardigan* – what is at stake is not only the analogue/digital divide but also autobiography and historicity. *The Man Phoning Mum* telescopes the Dalston of 1976 and the very different Dalston of 2011, recasting the original as an historical document.¹⁵ If the group of remakes found online and shown in the installation points to the place of *The Girl Chewing Gum* in film history, *The Man Phoning Mum* builds upon this to examine the 1976 film as history *tout court*.

The *unusual Red cardigan* installation charts the migration of *The Girl Chewing Gum* across media (16 mm film, VHS, television, digital video), across spaces (cinema, gallery, the internet) and also – crucially – across the bulk of Smith's life, from age twenty-three to age fifty-nine. Art historian David Joselit has recently emphasised the 'need to write *histories* of image circulation'.¹⁶ The exhibition might be understood as taking up this call, as Smith returns to his own film to trace out the multiple and sometimes unlikely pathways it has taken since its creation. He understands *The Girl Chewing*

Gum not just as an immaterial representation that exists on a plane separate from reality, to be considered only within the restricted framework of the aesthetic, but also as a thing with a life in the world. This thing is part not only of the histories of art and cinema, but material and personal histories as well. *unusual Red cardigan* is a strange kind of retrospective in that it contains none of the artist's earlier works (at least not in their original form) and yet functions as an idiosyncratic reflection on a life, a career, and on the film that marked both most deeply. Almost forty years after its making, *The Girl Chewing Gum* continues to resonate for its maker and its variegated audiences in new and unforeseen ways, proving that avant-garde film can be funny, critical, autobiographical, and historical – all at once.

Erika Balsom

September 2015

Notes

1. As curator Chrissie Iles wrote in 2003, 'In form and content, video is now mimicking the qualities that had always pertained exclusively to film. The use of the word video as a defining term for a particular area of contemporary art no longer appears to be either necessary or relevant'. Chrissie Iles, 'Issues in the New Cinematic Aesthetic in Video', in Tanya Leighton and Pavel Büchler (eds.), *Saving the Image: Art after Film*, Glasgow and Manchester 2003, p.140.
2. Jens Hoffmann, '6th Berlin Biennale', *Frieze*, no.133, September 2010, <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/6th-berlin-biennale>, accessed 15 June 2015; Alexander Scrimgeour, '6th Berlin Biennale', *Artforum*, September 2010, <http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201007&id=26169>, accessed 15 June 2015.
3. Martin Herbert, 'John Smith', *Frieze*, no.132, July/August 2010, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/john_smith, accessed 15 June 2015.
4. Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, no.110, Autumn 2004, pp.3–22.
5. For an extensive discussion of the film's relationship to structural/materialism, see Erika Balsom, 'A "New Face" at the Co-op', September 2015, in Erika Balsom (ed.), *In Focus: 'The Girl Chewing Gum' 1976, by John Smith*, September 2015.
6. Notably, this has resulted in both of these films being exhibited far less frequently than those Smith has agreed to transfer to video.
7. Smith adds, 'Because you have to go to another country now to get film prints made, it feels a bit decadent. The puritan part of me feels like it's decadent to be destroying a film print willfully by showing it continuously in a room with no one in it. These machines are going round, scratching up a thing that took so much money and effort to produce'. John Smith, interview with the author, 16 June 2014.
8. Morgan Fisher, 'Experimental Film in a Museum Context: Material', panel discussion held on 4 May 2010 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.
9. Smith's work has also been distributed by Light Cone (Paris), Video Data Bank (Chicago) and Canyon Cinema (San Francisco).
10. In 2006 *The Girl Chewing Gum* was included on the compilation DVD *Cinema 16: British Short Films*. In 2011 LUX released a three-DVD box set of Smith's work.
11. The negative and the master sound material are now housed at the BFI National Archive, but Tate acquired an interpositive and two internegatives, as well as an optical sound negative.
12. There is also a thirteen-minute video version of *unusual Red cardigan*, which was not shown at PEER. In the video, shot in Smith's home, the artist recounts his experience with the online auction and unwraps his purchases, showing each object to the camera.
13. This text is reproduced in Tanya Leighton and Kathrin Meyer (eds.), *John Smith*, Milan and Berlin 2013, p.163.
14. Ibid.
15. For a discussion of these differences as shown in *The Man Phoning Mum*, see Erika Balsom, Patrick

Wright and John Smith, 'Dalston, Then and Now: An Interview with John Smith', September 2015, in Balsom (ed.) 2015.

16. David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton 2013, p.112, emphasis in text.

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IN FOCUS

The Girl Chewing Gum 1976 by John Smith

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Authors

Dr Erika Balsom, King's College London

Professor Patrick Wright, King's College London

Series editor: Jennifer Mundy, Head of Collection Research, Tate

Project editor: Celia White, Collection Research Editor, Tate

Digital editor: Alex Cary, Digital Editor (Research), Tate

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