

The City & The City: An Interview With John Smith

Nicholas Burman , March 13th, 2021 10:09

John Smith, the artist and film-maker whose landmark short *The Girl Chewing Gum* is amongst the jewels of the British avant-garde, has spent lockdown filming out of his bedroom window and downloading clips from YouTube. He talks to Nicholas Burman about his new films *Citadel* and *Covid Messages*



Citadel by John Smith, courtesy MUBI

Artistic and philosophical responses to lockdown appeared almost as quickly as lockdown itself did. Stuck inside, everyone was left with a sense of: what's this? And what's next? With a playful and ironic approach to deconstructing the narrative conventions of documentary cinema, the work of British art film maker John Smith has been pondering the "what's happening?" question for a few decades now. In recent years, Smith's also developed a special interest in identity, both national and internationalist. No doubt informed by his experiences teaching international students, and his relationship with the European arts scene, he's become increasingly preoccupied with Brexit and its implications, as well as the effect of the austerity narrative upon the nation.

Typically a mindful and steady worker, the pandemic and the subsequent bombardment of political propaganda spurred Smith into action and make *Covid Messages*, a series of remixes of the government's Downing Street briefings. He's also combined samples of various pronouncements by Boris Johnson from throughout 2020 with footage of the City of London that he'd been filming from his bedroom window. The result, *Citadel*, recently available to stream via MUBI, plays with Johnson's and the Tory government's proximity to disaster capital, and also showcases Smith's interest in the aesthetics of urban architecture.

Art critic Boris Groys writes that "under the conditions of our contemporary product-oriented civilization, time does indeed have problems when it is perceived as being unproductive, wasted, meaningless. Such unproductive time is excluded from historical narratives, endangered by the prospect of complete erasure. This is precisely the moment when time-based art can help time, to collaborate, become a comrade of time." Surely there's no better recent example of "unproductive, wasted, meaningless" time (in the sense that many common methods of production have been paused) than during the ongoing lockdown. In this context, we can view Smith's *Citadel* as a comrade of our time, a film that provides a meditative look at an overexposed view and voice, and a cinematic rendition of the question: "what's happening?"

2020 was a productive year for you. Was that because being stuck inside your house meant you were very encouraged to keep busy, or was it something about the politics of that moment which you felt had to be captured?

It wasn't anything to do with being stuck inside the house. I feel a bit guilty about this, but COVID has made very little impact on my working practice as I generally always work alone and from home. I made two new films during lockdown, *Citadel*, which was filmed from my bedroom window and *Covid Messages*, which was made from footage that I found online, so neither required any outside resources. But there was certainly an impetus that came from the government's awful handling of COVID, both films were cathartic in terms of expressing the rage that I feel towards this Tory government. It's a rage that goes back many years of course, but the last 12 months have been the worst.

Another incentive was that *Citadel* was a commission for Steirischer Herbst, an arts festival in Austria. Strangely, I'd actually started filming it before they approached me and asked if I could make a piece of work relating to COVID-19. If it hadn't turned into a commission I'd probably still be working on it now, because I very often tend to work on things over several years. Fortunately the commission prompted me to work more quickly than I otherwise would have done, as the festival took place last September.

Twice, the first episode of *Covid Messages*, where I'm washing my hands and singing 'Happy Birthday' to the tune of the 'Death March', was initially a stand-alone film. It was shown in last year's Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, up until the time when the second lockdown started. So for a while its soundtrack dominated a room full of paintings, which must have annoyed the hell out of some visitors.

After watching quite a few of Boris Johnson's COVID press conferences I became engrossed by the details of the ritual, which started to feel more and more bizarre. When Johnson fluffed his lines and started talking about 'contract

tasting' when he meant 'contact tracing' I knew I had to make a second part. One thing led to another and I ended up making a six-part series.

There was a strange transformation of the Prime Minister into this quasi-presidential figure. Those press conferences became so omnipresent, and we became inundated with these political speeches and big moments. I wondered if you had any thoughts on re-contextualising these television and YouTube events into this – as you describe it – quite slowly made video art. Was there anything you wanted to achieve with that process?

I tend to work quite intuitively, and don't necessarily ask myself those questions very much, though I've always been interested in exploring ambiguity and ascribing new meanings to documentary images through the addition of words, something that goes right back to *The Girl Chewing Gum* from 1976. But both of the recent films are certainly largely driven by my contempt for the Prime Minister and his government – I wanted to create works that highlighted their incompetence and corruption.



Covid Messages by John Smith

With *Covid Messages* I was also interested in exploring the weirdness of the situation. It's a serious film but it's also playful. At the beginning of the pandemic, when we were told to wash our hands for as long as it took to sing 'Happy Birthday' twice, it seemed like such a bizarre instruction. It's treating people as children, but also, if you're going to choose a song for this purpose, why don't you pick one that's the right length, so you only have to sing it once. And maybe not something as jolly as 'Happy Birthday'! That juxtaposition was very strange. Mind you, Jacob Rees-Mogg suggested that we should sing the National Anthem instead. Given that choice, I think I'd prefer to stick with 'Happy Birthday'.

That was the starting point for *Covid Messages*, and then after watching these press conferences so often, because we'd become so familiar with this environment, with these three lecterns arranged like the Holy Trinity, the over-exposure to that scenario made it feel more and more unreal. The Downing Street conference room started to look more and more like a shoddily constructed film set, with those badly designed cardboard slogans stuck onto the lecterns. The politicians were clearly actors, and the interpersonal relations between the government and the health experts were

obviously very strained at times. So I was interested in exploring the fantasy of it, but metaphorically, allowing reality to shape the fantasy, and the fantasy to comment on the reality.

All of the press conference footage in *Covid Messages* is downloaded from the internet. In several of the recordings that are on YouTube the first minutes consist of a static wide shot of the empty conference room, while the media wait for the protagonists to appear. One recording of the conference on October 31st begins with about twenty minutes of the empty space, occasionally punctuated by the fleeting presence of film technicians and press assistants going about their business. The last time I looked it was still online – I've no idea why it's still there. I suppose there's a lot of sloppiness at the moment because people have other priorities. It's very Brechtian anyway.

It's like Adam Curtis is in charge of directing the 24 hour news channels, keeping the camera rolling while people just do their jobs on either side of big news events happening.

For *Covid Messages*, I'd decided early on that there was going to be an element to do with magic and spells and spirits. Fortunately a number of possibilities to expand on the theme of the supernatural emerged, not least because one of the press conferences took place on Halloween, so the introduction of the spirit world to the narrative could be rooted in reality. I liked the idea of the spirits of all those whose deaths the government was responsible for coming back to haunt them. For the subsequent episode Johnson was self-isolating, so he appeared on a TV screen in the conference room instead of being present. That enabled me to say that he was self-isolating because he'd become possessed by spirits at the previous conference.

A lot of my work has to do with limitations, so I really liked having to work within the context of what happened in a press conference, thinking about how to develop a narrative thread that connected each new conference with what had happened before.

With Citadel, did that start with you wanting to do something with those press conferences or were you already filming the City?

The images came first, the press conferences and speeches came in much later. I had actually wanted to film that view for seventeen years, ever since I moved into this house – the whole film was shot from my bedroom window. When I first moved here, in 2003, the only tall building that was prominent on the horizon was the Gherkin, which had just been completed. But over the time I've been living here, more and more skyscrapers have popped up, largely due to the relaxation of London's planning regulations, and what started out as being quite beautiful has turned into a bit of a mess. I wanted to film it initially because of my fascination with the light changing on the reflective surfaces of the buildings. But I postponed it for quite a long while, as I couldn't really bring myself to film the scene without making some sort of critique of what the architecture represented.

When I first started out in the 1970s and early 80s I made quite a few films which were primarily concerned with observation and formal manipulation. I find I can't really do that anymore, I have to make some sort of acknowledgment as to the real world 'meaning' of what I'm looking at, I can't just appreciate these images on a visual level. In a world where neoliberalism rules, it seemed necessary to create some kind of critique of what the business

centre of the City of London represents. So I eventually decided to film just after the last general election, when Johnson's new administration seemed to be even more in thrall to business interests than the one before.

I started filming in early February, with the vague idea of suggesting that Britain's centre of power was located in the City rather than Parliament. I wasn't thinking about COVID so much to begin with, the threat of which was barely acknowledged in Britain at that time. But when I belatedly heard the bizarre speech that Johnson had made to business leaders in Greenwich on February 3rd, where he portrayed foreign concerns over coronavirus as exaggerated, and a great trading opportunity for Britain, I thought, OK, the pieces are coming together, this is something I can really get my teeth into.

You were born in London, right? In Walthamstow, which I guess at the time was considered a different town. Seeing as you're from the city, how have you experienced the way in which London has changed over that time?

Yes, Walthamstow was still part of Essex when I was a child. But I've lived in Hackney for most of my adult life, with a long period in Leytonstone in the middle. When I lived in Hackney in the 70s and early 80s it was a real dump, but it had a great atmosphere, with a lot of energy, both cultural and political. I'm quite nostalgic for the time during Thatcher's premiership when Hackney Town Hall had a big, regularly updated sign on its façade displaying the number of unemployed people in the borough. Given what has happened with the property industry, it's strange to remember that there were still undeveloped bomb sites in Hackney at that time that were big enough to accommodate 100 unaffordable studio flats today.

The relentless building programme in the city mostly seems to be about outdoing other phallic structures. I was quite lucky that the building in the centre of the frame in *Citadel*, 22 Bishopsgate, looks really enormous and dominates the composition, although it's actually a few feet shorter than the Shard. They were finishing the building work as I was filming. That's how I got the footage with all the lights coming on, I discovered it was the electricians testing the lights in the building, which is why all the lights were switched on at the same time, why everything came on in this wave. It was like some kind of ominous beacon, with the light pollution from all of those windows illuminating all of the surrounding area. It immediately made me think of a digital audio meter. As I already wanted to suggest that Johnson's voice was coming from the City, having the opportunity to modulate the light in synch with his words was a nice accident that really helped cement that relationship.

At points you film your neighbours through their windows, and close up these terraced houses seem a lot better and friendlier, because I know that close up those big City buildings are very uninteresting to walk around, and they're not even really built for people to walk around. Those big buildings can only look good when they're far away as a picture, as soon as you interact with them they lose their charm.



Citadel

That's right, I completely agree. I really like the Gherkin from a distance but I was quite shocked to discover that it's pretty ugly close up. And some of the other buildings are much worse. I see the whole mass of architecture as a single composition, as this composite thing, you know, "The City", over there, floating in the clouds. I was thinking of the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*, and other people have said the exact same thing to me. I was quite interested in that, especially in the City being a sort of fantasy place that doesn't exist, what it represents in the capitalist imagination. Especially now, with the additional fantasy of Brexit, it's going to be interesting to see what happens with all that development when the banks start moving out.

But one of the most important things for me was to create a really strong contrast with the domestic environments in which people live. I wanted the City to appear visually dramatic but cold and alienating. This faceless mass – I wanted to contrast that against the intimacy of people living their lives beneath this looming mirage.

I am slightly disappointed now by a missed opportunity – I had to cut down a tall tree in my garden last summer because it had died, and now I can see a lot more windows! My bedroom now looks out onto a wide range of different flats and houses. Although I could see a bit of action in some distant council flats when I was filming, the best and closest views were into the expensive-looking kitchens of nearby houses, whose owners were probably furloughed and didn't have to risk their lives during lockdown.

One of your films that I managed to rewatch recently is your *Hackney Marshes* film, the long version made for TV with interviews that is up on the BFI Player. There's similarities between that and *Citadel*, especially in the way that you're making buildings speak through the people that reside in them, but the differences between them are also quite stark. *Hackney Marshes* feels like a film that could only have been made in the 70s, while *Citadel* feels very much suited to this moment. The gap between the content of those two films seems like a

good demonstration of the changes that London has undergone in the same period. Have you ever felt that your work is about capturing London through time? And do you ever reflect on your older work?

Yes, all the time. While I'm making things I'm usually thinking about the present, but of course things always look different after time has passed, when we look at them in a different context. Hackney Marshes was one of the few commissions I've had for mainstream television. Shortly after I graduated from the Royal College of Art I was asked if I'd like to make a half-hour documentary for Thames TV, to be broadcast at six in the evening. I appreciated the opportunity but I thought 'I don't want to make a documentary'. I'd already made *The Girl Chewing Gum* at the RCA as a critique of documentary, particularly of the manipulative power of voice over. So I conceived *Hackney Marshes* as a kind of anti-documentary too, although it used a completely different strategy.

The film revolved around a series of interviews I did with the inhabitants of a high-rise council estate. Like most of us, many of these people had mixed feelings about the place where they lived, some positive and some negative. I included both positive and negative statements by the same residents, which in simplistic conventional documentary terms could have been perceived as contradictory. I wanted to make a film where the viewers wouldn't take what they were told at face value, to make it clear that I could have made a film which created an entirely negative or entirely positive picture of high-rise living depending on which material I had selected in editing.

One of the reasons for choosing high-rise housing as the theme of my 'anti-documentary' was that at that time, in the late 70s, without wanting to dismiss their importance, the problems that social housing tenants were facing in tower blocks were very prominent in the news and had become almost a cliché as a documentary subject. In contrast to the 1960s utopian vision about what high-rise living was going to be like, the reality was already kicking in and many people, especially families with young children, were having awful experiences living up on the twentieth floor. In the 80s these particular problems disappeared from media attention for several decades, largely because so many tower blocks were demolished or turned into luxurious concierge serviced apartments for private buyers. What you've just reminded me of is how the problems of high-rise public housing have once again been exposed as an important socio-political issue that never went away. If I looked at *Hackney Marshes* today I would certainly be watching it through the lens of the Grenfell fire.

Parts of east London have changed beyond recognition since I started documenting them. *The Girl Chewing Gum*, for example, shows a street scene in Hackney that was absolutely ordinary and everyday. Although now, especially if you're young, if you look at that footage from 1976 it seems completely exotic. It's another world, and it's like the people in the film are actors in period costume. Especially in relation to gentrification, in that film it's really striking how poor everybody looks, and there's no mobile phones.

I made a remake of *The Girl Chewing Gum* in 2011 called *The Man Phoning Mum*. I shot it in the original location with my camera in the exact same place and attempted to replicate the camera movements of the original film. In post-production I superimposed the high-definition digital colour footage over the original grainy black and white 16mm footage, so we have these transparent ghosts passing each other in the street, separated by thirty-five years. I had a

fantasy when I made the later work that one of the people in the original film would walk through the shot again and bump into their younger self. Maybe they did, I doubt whether I would have recognised them.

At the time you were making contemporary art about contemporary society, really not at all about history, but as time passes it becomes this historical document both about the time it was made and also about contemporary art in that moment. It gets turned into something it was never intended to be.

That's true. Watching *The Girl Chewing Gum* with no sound turns it into a 1970s version of those films by Mitchell and Kenyon that documented everyday life in city streets at the beginning of the 20th century. When I present my films in public I often show a mixture of old and new work in the same programme, so I'm constantly revisiting my older films, several of which I made more than forty years ago. Many of them include my own voice, and sometimes my own image, so I can hear and see myself getting younger and older. And of course I associate different films with different times in my life, especially as most of them were shot in my own domestic or local environment. It can be quite an intense experience for me when I show a mixed programme, reminding me of events in my past – where I was living, who I was in a relationship with, what was happening in the wider world, lots of things. I'm not sure if I like it or not.

Citadel by John Smith is currently screening on MUBI