

Film

John Smith: Being John Smith

What's in a name? Perhaps everything, perhaps nothing. 'That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet', wrote William Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*. What, though, would he have made of the fact that, as we learn in John Smith's most recent film *Being John Smith*, 2023, the artist had a school-mate called William Shakespeare Smith? Some names seem to make a claim on those who possess them. They whisper an inescapable commentary on one's origins, one's character – even on one's very being. Or do they?

Such questions sit at the heart of *Being John Smith*, now on view at Kate MacGarry in London. For anyone immersed in the field of artists' cinema, where the filmmaker's name rings out as the property of an individual who has produced one of the most important bodies of work of the past 50 years (Interview *AM355*), it can be easy to forget that it is shared by some 30,000 others in Britain. Yet this ubiquity seems to have weighed heavily on the John Smith, at least if this new work is anything to go by. Beginning from the curse (or blessing) of his own moniker, he carefully choreographs image, voice and text to spin out an autobiographical reflection on art, individuality and mortality. In this sad and funny film, old photographs, images and sounds of London, and even an anecdote about running into Paul McCartney, come together in an associative account of a life lived with the desire to be different.

In voice-over, Smith ponders whether having a generic name had an influence on his practice. 'Psychoanalysts might suggest', he says, 'that it's the suspicious ordinariness of my name that's led me to make work that questions its own truth and takes everyday life as its subject matter' – qualities that mark classics such as *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1973, and the *Hotel Diaries*, 2001-07. Smith is often associated with the milieu of the London Film-makers' Co-operative, where he got his start in the 1970s. Yet unlike some of his contemporaries, whose formalism has begun to gather dust, his films pursued their inquiry into the workings of the cinematic apparatus in tandem with an interest in broaching political questions in personal ways – something that has made them only more relevant over time.

Being John Smith extends these longstanding preoccupations, traversing the artist's life from his birth in Walthamstow in 1952 through his recent cancer diagnosis and into the darkness of the present. Even though Smith worries via on-screen text that the film lacks 'the idiosyncratic wit and formal inventiveness' of his earlier projects, he need not. The film wears its semiotic sophistication lightly, but it is nevertheless there, as Smith plays with the differences between speech and writing, and probes the abyss that separates words from things. As for his arid wit, here it mingles with the rage and vulnerability Smith feels as he ages, as a genocide continues in Gaza, and as species extinction looms. The film is sincere and moving when it touches on these issues, but it would be a mistake to assume that unrelenting candour is the order of the day; this is John Smith, after all. Every second is as sharp as a diamond, with no trace of the confessional narcissism that is so prevalent elsewhere today. Smith possesses a patient control that sits in compelling tension with the self-deprecation and self-questioning he sprinkles throughout.

John Smith, *Being John Smith*, 2023, video

Near the end of the 27 minutes, Smith films a crowd of more than 40,000 people at a Pulp concert at Finsbury Park in summer 2023. The VIP tower from which he looks down on the spectacle reminds him of his film *The Black Tower*, 1987, but this is not the artist's only personal connection to the event: he was Pulp frontman Jarvis Cocker's teacher at Central Saint Martins. 'I want to live with common people like you': as the music builds and the bobbing masses scream out the refrain, the conviction at the core of *Being John Smith*, and the artist's practice more generally, can be felt in its beauty and bite. In our society, to be common is to be put down, erased, and the demand to perform exceptionalism is integral to the neoliberal commodification of the self. Smith strikes back against all this, creating humble monuments to the glorious ordinary. Here he finds an inexhaustible wealth of stories and faces, worries and dreams – as well as the possibility of redeeming individuality from being just another thing for sale.

Being John Smith is at Kate MacGarry, London until 15 February.

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Jean-Luc Godard: Scénario(s)

From the mid 1970s until his death in 2022, the Franco-Swiss filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard produced a number of image-text collages (made using scissors, glue and a photocopier) and video shorts (composed of miscellaneous still images and film clips) which he referred to as 'scenarios'. For Godard, as Michael Witt argues, there was 'no significant difference ... between research, work in progress, and finished artwork'. While his scenarios take the semi-autonomous form of paratexts (rough drafts, sketches, notes), his individual features – which are cut across by recurrent motifs, critical questions and intertextual citations – repeatedly underscore their provisional status as fragmentary manifestations of an open-ended project that was under continual development. Indeed, as Philippe Dubois observes, what mattered for Godard was 'not to have made a film' but 'being always in the process of making one', of being 'always in the "scenario"'.

It is therefore fitting that Godard's final film, completed the day before his assisted suicide, is titled *Scénarios*, 2024. *Scénarios* began life as *Scénario*, an unrealised film project commissioned by Arte and the Paris Opera. In 2021, Godard presented his idea for this six-chapter feature in the form of an audio-visual brochure, *Exposé du film annonce du film "Scénario"*.