

# IKON

## Exhibition Guide

### **John Smith *Selected Films and Videos***

**13 July – 20 August 2006**

**Ikon Eastside**

John Smith was born in 1952 and studied film at the North East London Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art. He produced his first films in the mid-seventies whilst still a student. Smith's work is associated with 'structural film', an experimental and analytical approach to film-making that was then at its peak. This approach focused on the illusionary nature of film, specifically looking at its 'material' qualities such as the projected light, the film strip itself and the projection apparatus. The films shown here span three decades and demonstrate how Smith expands on the concerns of structuralist practice through new means, including the use of narrative structure, the relationship between sound and image, humour and a close engagement with popular culture.

*Associations* (1975) sees Smith's earliest use of the voiceover, a device he frequently uses to explore the 'seamless' relationship of soundtrack and image. An authoritative male voice reads a passage from *Word Associations and Linguistic Theory* by Herbert H. Clark. As the commentary progresses, images torn from magazines begin to flash rapidly onto the screen, each one depicting something seemingly unrelated to the voiceover. Gradually a relationship becomes apparent, yet as the work develops, the integrity of this relationship begins to fall apart. At the same time the work becomes increasingly comic, with the rapid fire of unexpected and often hilarious visual and verbal puns that undermine the academic text and suggest a slippery relationship between word and image.

In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, a film director, apparently seated behind the camera, issues commands to the characters that animate a street scene in East London. His authority stretches not only to individuals and vehicles but to pigeons in flight, the hands of a clock and ultimately the earth itself. Smith has said that the work "came out of the shock I felt at the power of the illusion of cinema. I made it for myself – just to make sure I understood that all these things were being controlled." His

decision to shoot this film locally, in the area of London in which he has lived for many years, is just one example of the personal nature of his films.

*Gargantuan* is an excellent example of Smith's comic precision in the use of visual and verbal puns. A gigantic reptile fills the frame as Smith begins to sing. As he does this, the camera gradually zooms out to reveal more of the room and Smith himself, revealing the 'gigantic' reptile to be, in fact, a small newt. The manipulative power of script and framing in film and video is sharply yet playfully highlighted in a single shot.

In *The Black Tower*, Smith takes his interest in narrative structure to an extreme, testing our willingness to suspend disbelief by using an unseen narrator to tell a tale that becomes increasingly implausible as it progresses. The initially persuasive narrative is conducted visually through a series of short shots interspersed with darkness and moments of extreme abstraction. Smith has commented "I wanted the film to play with the edge between immersion in a psychological narrative and seeing the film for what it is – a material construction, an assemblage of assorted parts."

*Lost Sound* was produced with the sound artist Graeme Miller. Together they walked the streets of East London filming and salvaging discarded audio tape. The fragments of music and speech that accompany each shot are actually extracted from the sections of tape themselves. A lyrical and poignant response to the urban environment, *Lost Sound* depicts the city as a disparate and fragmented series of personal histories. A sense of migration, loss and displacement seeps through upbeat soundtracks from sunnier climes.

*Hotel Diaries* comprises a trilogy of works, each one outlining Smith's personal response to international political situations from the isolation of hotel rooms in foreign countries. As in *Lost Sound*, Smith's strong social interest in the conditions of his immediate environment is evident in these works.