

## TANYA LEIGHTON

PRESS RELEASE

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### JOHN SMITH

*THE MAN GIRL PHONING CHEWING MUM GUM*

25 JANUARY - 22 FEBRUARY 2017

PREVIEW: WEDNESDAY 25 JANUARY, 6-9PM

In celebration of the 40th anniversary of John Smith's film *The Girl Chewing Gum*, Tanya Leighton is pleased to announce an exhibition focusing on this seminal work, widely regarded as one of the most important avant-garde films of the 20th century. The exhibition's title, *The Man Girl Phoning Chewing Mum Gum*, is a conflation of the titles of the two films on view - *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976 and *The Man Phoning Mum*, 2011. The latter repurposes the earlier film wholesale, building on its referent by overlaying video on the original. These two works - both of the same length and sharing the same soundtrack - are presented in synchronized loop.

The original, *The Girl Chewing Gum*, is an interrogation of the conditions of narrative film and the uneasy relationship between images and language. Debuted at the London Filmmakers' Co-op in 1976 - an era where many experimental filmmakers in Europe and North America were eschewing narrative for materialist concerns - the film is in some senses an anomaly. It consists of twelve minutes of voiceover narration describing two shots - one of a bustling street corner in Dalston, London and the other in a field outside the city. The film begins: Smith's directorial voice projects above the sound of car engines and an incessantly ringing alarm bell. 'Slowly move the trailer to the left', he begins, and a scene takes shape with each prop, backdrop and actor obediently following his cues.

Willful suspension of disbelief is eroded over the first few minutes of *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Paradoxically, this is not because of unconvincing performances or the voiceover failing to describe what is represented on screen, but rather the cast being too perfect and the narrator too emphatic, overstepping his role in the creation of meaning. He disregards the fact that the camera is an apparatus capable of panning, zooming and focusing - of potentially making meaning - and in turn reminds the viewer of that easily forgotten truth. The conditions of cinema are exposed by this film's over-reliance on them.

*The Man Phoning Mum* utilizes the footage and soundtrack of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, treating the earlier film as a kind of readymade. Layered on top of the original is video footage shot more than three decades later in the same locations. Perhaps in a concession to the uncontrollable change that occurs with the passage of time, Smith does not direct the 21st century interlopers in Dalston. The old street corner has changed dramatically, as has East London around it. Technological progress has reshaped our world, seen here as the film's new eponymous protagonist chats into a cell phone.

When the video cuts to rural landscape, subtitles confess that Smith couldn't locate the original field. Whether this is due to the drastic changes in the landscape, the artist's forgetfulness or just another lie, we don't know. Humorously, the subtitles mention that the electricity pylons and trees seem to have been rearranged in a different order - as if all this could happen by one director demanding it from off camera.

John Smith's work has been widely shown internationally for four decades. He was the winner of the 2013 Jarman Award for achievement in artists' filmmaking. His solo exhibitions in the past year include LOOK Gallery, Budapest; Kate MacGarry, London; Wolverhampton Art Gallery; Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig; Vita Kuben, Umea. Retrospective programmes of his work were presented recently at international film festivals in Leipzig, Munich, Lussas, Stuttgart and Vilnius.