

John Smith  
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Within documentary practices the relationship between fact and fiction is constantly renegotiated. The films and videos by John Smith address this relationship in a special way, disarrange it, and in doing so, reveal the conditions of producing filmic truth. We invited John Smith to show his films and comment on them in this regard. Here we present audio recordings of his statements and short descriptions of the films he referred to. In the following text, film scholar Volker Pantenburg points out the importance of John Smith's voice in his films, it creates a reflexive level. In a similar way, the audio files create a commentary level for the films in this article. Additional drawings by the Berlin based artist Maxim Bauer illustrate the conversational character of the evening.

John Smith on his Films *The Black Tower*, *Throwing Stones*, and *Dad's Stick*, and on the relation of fact and fiction

Introduction to his films and to *The Black Tower* (1985-1987, 24 Minuten, 16mm, Farbe, Ton)

<https://wissenderkuenste.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Smith01EinfuehrungAnkuendigungBlackTower.mp3>

John Smith's *The Black Tower* is a silent film, structured by cut-to-blacks. Eventually, an off-camera narrator starts to recount how he first saw the black tower, which since then keeps haunting him. It appears and disappears in the most unlikely places: the tower behind a row of houses, the tower behind a prison wall, the tower in an industrial area, the tower behind a church roof - places miles away from each other. However, nobody but the narrator seems to have seen it at all. <sup>1</sup>

<https://wissenderkuenste.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Smith02ErlaeuterungenBlackTower.mp3>

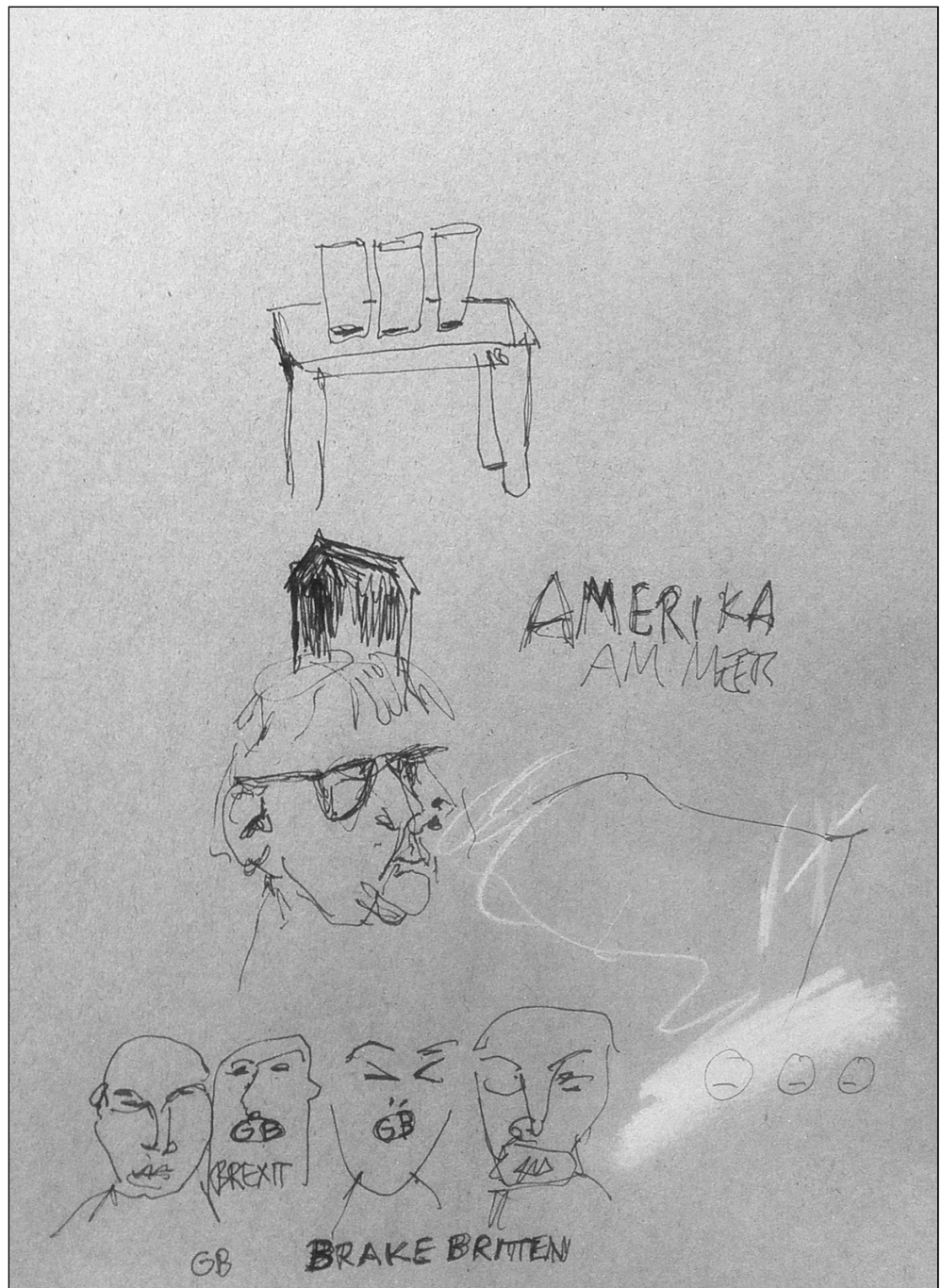


Fig. 1  
Maxim Bauer: zeichnerische Dokumentation (drawn documentation), 2017.  
Pencil on paper.  
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*Throwing Stones* (Hotel Diaries 3, 2004, 11 Minuten, Video, Farbe, Ton)

In *Throwing Stones* John Smith reflects on the geopolitical situation in November 2004, linking it to everyday occurrences during his stay in a hotel in Winterthur, Switzerland. The film presents itself as an unedited diary entry, meandering through associations. The camera slides across the hotel room, and objects seem to come into focus rather by chance. Eventually, it settles down on a poster showing the corner of a Chicago building. Through the reflection in its window a tower is duplicated. The voice comments: „In this pic Chicago has its own twin towers.“<sup>2</sup>

<https://wissenderkuenste.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Smith03ErlaeuterungenThrowingStones.mp3>

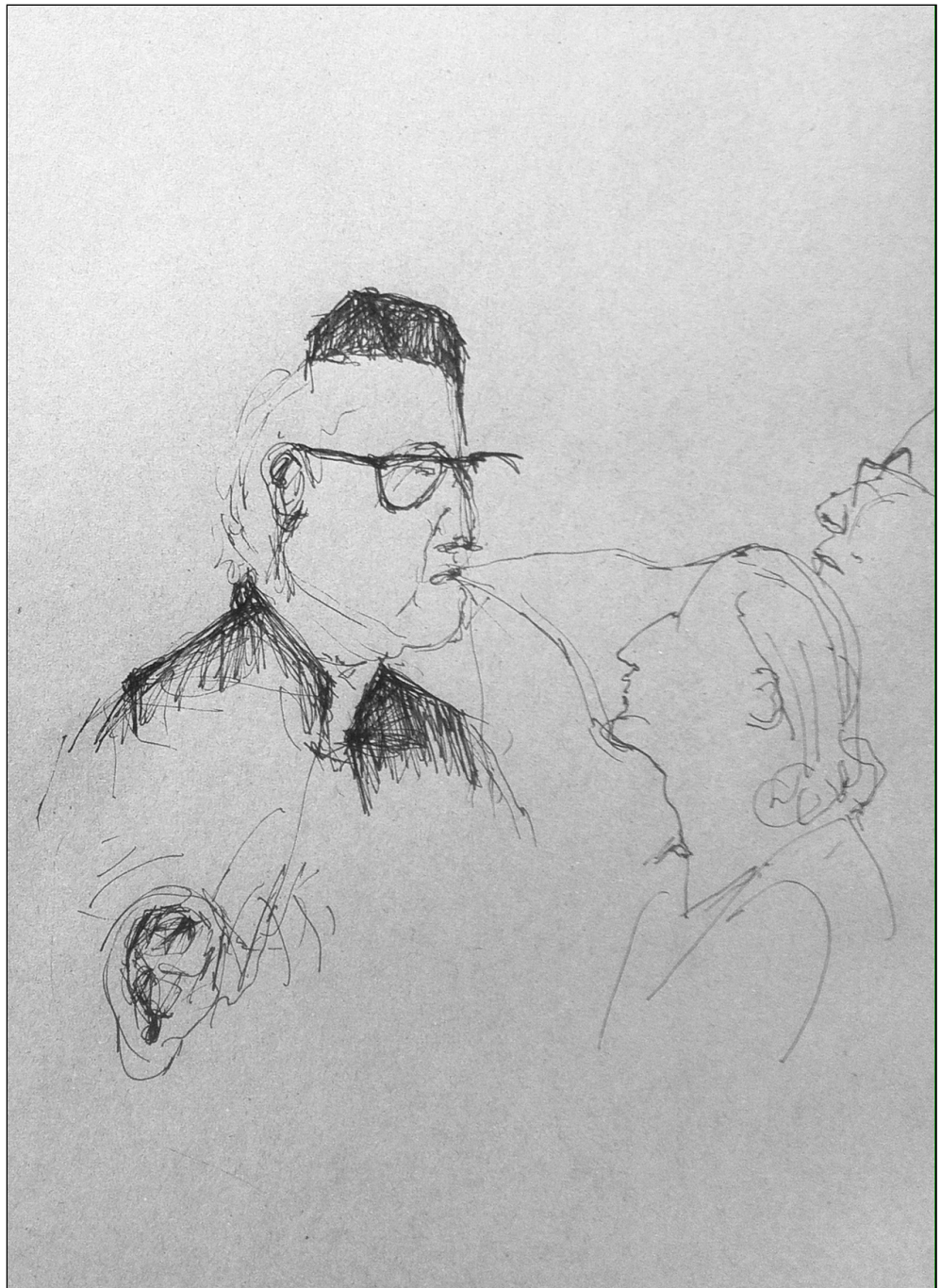


Fig. 2  
Maxim Bauer: zeichnerische Dokumentation (drawn documentation), 2017.  
Pencil on paper.  
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*Dad's Stick* (2012, 5 Minuten, HD Video, Farbe, Ton)

John Smith's *Dad's Stick* consists of a successive sequence of photographs, tied together through sound as an organic whole. From time to time, the movement of the sound connects to the changing of images. We see objects that belonged to Smith's late father, an artist. The cup in which he mixed his colours, the ruler which he stole from his employer when he was fired. By capturing objects and anecdotes like these on film, Smith brings his father to life. <sup>3</sup>

<https://wissenderkuenste.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Smith04ErlaeuterungenDadsStick.mp3>



Fig. 3  
Maxim Bauer: zeichnerische Dokumentation (drawn documentation), 2017.  
Pencil on paper.  
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Volker Pantenburg: Language/Record

#### Brief Remarks Concerning John Smith's Films

Common sense (as well as the curricula of Film Studies departments) traditionally tends to distinguish three major realms of filmmaking: fiction film, documentary, and experimental film. This is, as we all know, an entirely insufficient and schematic set of distinctions, but implicitly or explicitly, it still prevails as an underlying structure in film festivals, academia, film funding etc. *Experimental film* - the poorest of the three sisters in this family, is in itself quite an unfortunate term, sometimes competing with old fashioned words like *avant-garde*. John Smith's films advocate a different way to see things: What if we thought of experimental film making not as a field apart, a somewhat

messy drawer next to the other two drawers? Instead, his films strongly advise us, we could (and maybe should) regard experimental film making as precisely that mode of practice which continuously troubles and subverts the categories of documentary and fiction, tries out combinations, deals with their inextricable connections. Watching John Smith's films, we either realize or get the confirmation that experimental film is neither a genre nor a set of modes and aesthetic practices, but a means of investigating the conditions and properties of film, or moving image art in general.

When he started to make films in the mid-1970s, John Smith was firmly linked to the activities of the London Film-Maker's Coop. His all-time-classic *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) has been called an "improbable treatise on representation." (Ian Christie) It is one of those films that make you wonder: How strange that no one had had this idea before... I don't want to spoil the experience by explaining the concept, but I assure the reader that the film is based on a relatively simple idea - the kind of simplicity that, once and for all, changes your perception of the medium.

In many Coop films of the time in Great Britain - I oversimplify - the vector of investigation tended to be directed inwards, towards the apparatus in all its facets: The material of the film strip, the sprocket holes, the camera and its lenses, the projector and the cinematic event. It appears as if, first and foremost, the preconditions of filming had to be thoroughly studied. Although there is, we could say, a strong documentary impulse, the subject of documentation is not primarily the external world, but the apparatus itself.

In Smith's work, this is different. Not that his films take the apparatus for granted or don't worry about the intricacies of the recording process - far from it. However, their vector is rather directed towards the outside, into the world before the camera, and, as I would like to emphasize: the world before the microphone, since the acoustic - be it in the guise of Smith's very pleasant voice, be it in the guise of a very sophisticated sound scape - is a crucial element of their strategies of transforming what's there before the camera lens.

This voice is an integral element of confusing and playing with the ideas of "the real," "the authentic," "representation," etc. In the *Hotel Diary* series, but also in *Dad's stick* and *The Black Tower*, the voice delineates a recognizable subject, it marks the vantage point from which the images are impregnated and infused with meaning and signification. To think about these films as witnesses of some kind of reality (political, psychological, autobiographical), we need to trust in, or at least follow the words that accompany the images you make. In *Hotel Diary #3*, for instance, the authenticity, the factuality of what Smith is saying about Yassir Arafat, George W. Bush, or 9/11, depends on our confidence in this particular voice, a very pleasant voice at that. The film could have been shot in a hotel anywhere, the story of Smith's 9/11 experience in Chicago on 9/11 could be completely made up, but I don't think the film gives us any reason for this kind of mistrust.



Fig. 4  
Maxim Bauer: zeichnerische Dokumentation (drawn documentation), 2017.  
Pencil on paper.  
© Maxim Bauer

On a more general level, this brings up the question of responsibility and ethics. A word that keeps crossing my mind when thinking about the films, is “faith.” This is not a very scholarly term, and I have not yet come to a conclusion what my mind wants to tell me with this association. In fact, it makes me feel more comfortable to rephrase it slightly and speak of “trust.” It seems to me that John Smith’s films rely on a contract that implies a basic assumption: We do take the images of *The Black Tower* as actual images of actual locations in London at an actual point in time in the 1980s. If we had reasons to question the image on this level and to think of it as fabricated, non-representational, “fictional,” the film would be quite pointless.

The British editor and theoretician Dai Vaughan whose collection of essays *For Documentary* I keep returning to, offers a simple opposition. In each and every film, he claims, we deal with the dichotomy of “film-as-record” on the one hand and “film-as-language” on the other. What Vaughan refers to as “the twin aspects of the medium” – the capacities of

registering and of signifying - always appear hand in hand, albeit in different mixes: "If documentary were merely record, then editors would not be needed to order it," he says, "since to grant significance to the order in which records are presented is to impute to it a linguistic nature; yet if documentary were language pure and simple, editors would not be needed to manipulate it, since there would be no meanings generated other than those commonly available - to film crew and viewers alike."<sup>4</sup>

Only if we acknowledge the recorded image of *The Black Tower*, as a somewhat reliable visual testimony of a certain reality in London, its signification (via montage, voice, sound) can take off to turn into the increasingly psychotic, unreliable first person narration. In other words: A strong sense of "film-as-record" is the presupposition that "film-as-language" with all the sophisticated methods Smith employs can work.

Our special thanks go to Johannes Plank (filmmaker and musician, Berlin) for editing the audio recordings.

- 1 Julian Bauer describes all three films in his article  
*Weiterdenken: An/zu den Filmen von John Smith* (in German).
- 2 Julian Bauer describes all three films in his article  
*Weiterdenken: An/zu den Filmen von John Smith* (in German).
- 3 Julian Bauer describes all three films in his article  
*Weiterdenken: An/zu den Filmen von John Smith* (in German).
- 4 Vaughan, Dai: "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity," in: Vaughan, Dai:  
*For Documentary. Twelve Essays*, Berkeley 1999, p. 79.