

ARTFORUM

John Smith

TANYA LEIGHTON
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In 2010, John Smith's 1976 black-and-white film *The Girl Chewing Gum* was included in the Berlin Biennale as an installation in a storefront space a few steps from the city square of Oranienplatz, endlessly crisscrossed by residents and tourists. Berlin's gentrification was in full swing then, making Smith's film, though cheeky and playful, feel like a destabilizing dream about memory, time, and social control.

The classic film achieves virtual-reality effects through humble means: a few grainy black-and-white shots and a simple voice-over. We see people going about their business on a London street as a charming Englishman narrates. But it soon becomes clear that the narrator is directing these pedestrians, as if a person's interior monologue had assumed an omniscient and manipulative power.

Now, the filmmaker's awry study of perception and the social gaze has reappeared for this exhibition, joined by his 2012 video *The Man Phoning Mum*, in which the earlier work is overlaid with color versions of scenes shot thirty-fives years later, in the same locations, from the same perspectives. The films play in sync, and temporalities are transposed, so that human and architectural ghosts seem to move among the living. Here, past and present are separated by a thin, celluloid barrier. The show's political potential lies in how it returns tangibility to passing time, all while Smith's casually clever methods pull down the viewer's guard, allowing the films to do their subtly startling work.



John Smith, *The Man Phoning Mum*, 2012,
HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes.

— Mitch Speed