

SM: I think the paintings have always used architecture to get to another point. But even with the Midtown series that I did, the paintings weren't—, even if there was a painting called *Revlon Corporation*, I can assure you it looks nothing like my painting. Nevertheless people thought maybe the work is photo-based, or whatever, but there is no reality that matches the work. [Laughs] I mean, the work uses architecture, and tries to use the strategies that architecture uses in order—, for instance, the issues of scale or distraction, or how you might feel empowered walking through a certain space, or—contrary to that—how you might be dwarfed and might feel completely intimidated,—but tries to use those sort-of-psychological strategies in relation to the viewer of art the same way that a person in space might be manipulated. That's not about architecture, though,—that's actually just employing or appropriating architecture to your own end. So there's always some confusion as to 'What does this represent?'

NH: But at the same time it is some kind of comment on the architecture as well or—?

SM: Uh,—yeah,—well,—I'd say it's both, it's all of the above. I clearly use architecture, I use architectural reference, literally and also title-wise. I use it, but I'm trying to go beyond that, so I'd never say the work work is 'about architecture,'—much more clearly it's more about power, it's more about the image and how we relate to that now. That's what I think about a lot more than—. I like being manipulated,—I like being in spaces where you're so easily seduced by that set of circumstances, where you're transformed,—you become—, maybe not 'transformed,'—you're moved to a different psychological space. Part of doing this Los Angeles series of work was about trying to—. A) I wanted to really make a film about film and contemporary filmmaking, and deal with this issue of 'the commercial,' the commercial world. How foreign is it? I mean, really what's going on there,—what are the structures in place that propel that image or that surface outwards? [B) Can you infiltrate that? Can you infiltrate it and can you get what you want out of it? Again, this issue of not using something as an end in itself, but using those things and then they become yours. It's the same, when I mention this Revlon Corporation,—can you take over those structures, and make them your own? It's a pretty strange, sort-of-maniacal thing to do! [Laughs]

NH: But you can only make them your own in the very limited space of creating your artwork.

SM: But that's everything. You can make it so that no one can ever watch the Oscars again in the same way. I believe that art is a lot more powerful than the latest film that Steven Soderbergh's making. I mean, obviously I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing if I didn't think it was extremely important and very influential.

NH: Right. But you can do what you do believing in its—I dunno—veracity, or believing in its purpose, without necessarily believing it's more influential than Steven Soderbergh.

SM: Yeah, but I think I'm more ambitious than that. I don't actually think that—, I don't really see the point of artists being marginal. A) I don't come from that background,—I never went to art school—

NH: You went to Brown, right? What did you study?

SM: Semiotics,—like, Film Theory, Cultural Theory. So,—I don't have all the trappings of coming from a background where I view the artist as a marginal position. That doesn't mean that it's without critique, but I don't view my place as being on the sidelines making things superfluously,—that doesn't interest me. What interests me is somehow becoming part of—, this idea of becoming somehow part of the thing you're talking about, and doing it in a way that you actually get access to all of the infrastructure of that system, whatever it is,—whether it's in Washington and you're able to get into Senate committee meetings, and get into the Cabinet Room, and see how those rooms are

set up, how those meetings take place, and that you're basically there. I don't believe in some sort of level of objective truth where I'm there, and you're not influencing those moments,—you definitely are. That level of the symbolic of those people being open and flexible to somebody being there I think is really politically important. It's the same thing even with those images in Miami of the Coca Cola factory. They didn't just let us go in there and shoot for a couple of hours. They actually helped us do those shots and helped us orchestrate what we needed to orchestrate. Obviously, they didn't know how we were using their product in relation to all these other images, which formally become a sort of montage, or a day in the life of a city,—but they're confident enough that if they make that structure open something interesting will take place.

NH: I wondered when I watched it why it was Coca Cola, and there,—are they based there?

SM: It's one of the main headquarters. Also Coke is like—, drinking a sugared water that costs pennies to make and dollars to buy,—it's quintessentially in the whole tropical-modernism thing that goes on there. I go to a place and try to distil that place as quickly as possible.

NH: There's a kind of creative artificiality about coke,—is what you're saying with the tropical-modernism idea?

SM: Yeah. And also try to get to the core of thinking about a place as quickly as possible. Like, if you had to make a skeletal sketch of Los Angeles, how would you do it as *fast* as possible? So, part of the whole speed thing, in relation to the way I work,—it's not like it's the symptom of something that's disorganised and not properly researched. It's more of a thing like,—I want to shoot Los Angeles the week before the Oscars,—we've got to get all of these levels taken care of before that moment or that event happens,—because these things are transformed by the anticipation of that moment. I actually have to get back to you about the title of the film,—I'm thinking about it right at this moment. So,—when I started really thinking about it, over a year ago—, I mean, I've been thinking about it for a long time. One of my favourite films is by Goddard,— it's called *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*),—it's about a movie-star,—Brigitte Bardot's in it, and Jack Palance,—it starts off with a tracking shot of a camera. I wanted to make something that was self-reflexive,—not just about the film-community or the world of entertainment, but self-reflexive in relation to how I make the films and what dynamic is going on there. A year ago in Los Angeles I really had no idea how I was going to orchestrate what I was doing. [Laughs] I remember feeling like—, you know when you go to a place and you feel like 'Actually, this city is huge, it's enormous,' how will you ever—

NH: It occurred to me, going through LA for the first time, that this is a city at the centre of this worldwide industry manufacturing these dreams and images. It would actually be foolish to expect that there's actually anything there – of course not – it's like a void, and it makes sense that it's a void, since what it sells is this artificial reality of film.

SM: I'm interested in the neuroses of that.

NH: Going back to the thing you were talking about,—being powerful as an artist,—surely the distribution, the nature of art and that it's for a smaller audience—

SM: It doesn't matter.

NH: You don't think it matters? Why?

SM: First of all I would debate you about the audience thing,—the number thing.

NH: Compared to Hollywood movies, surely it's incontestable?

SM: Okay,—it's less, but when you think about who's watching, who's looking, how many advertising campaigns it affects—

NH: It's a more elite audience—?

SM: Yeah, but it ends up everywhere. It ends up influencing contemporary writing, contemporary theory, contemporary architecture,—I just told you about this General Dynamics thing. It ends up—, I mean, how do you know what it ends up influencing? It's immeasurable. For me, what was interesting about Los Angeles – my experience there – is everything works in a very pyramidal way. You can't shoot Paramount unless Sherry Lansing says you can shoot Paramount. You basically have to work from the top down. I think that art is something that works in both ways. It works on a populist level, that people begin to understand your work and have a relationship to it, and then it also works at a level where it transforms into other things in the culture,—it becomes larger than what it is. I think the whole debate about 'Is it for an elitist audience?', at this stage in contemporary culture, has moved.

NH: I didn't mean that in an aggressive or reductive sense,—but in terms of power, the power comes from the fact that you're talking to people who'd be referred to as opinion-formers?

SM: I don't know, you tell me. Is Matisse or Picasso less powerful than Steven Spielberg? Depends how you measure power. I'm not talking about bank accounts, I'm talking about how you influence perception and how you influence the way people look at things. So I don't really—, anyway, this is going off on the wrong track! I don't really view art as a marginal activity, and I don't think anybody at this stage in the game could really make a strong argument that it is really marginal, or really truly elitist, because if you look at the museum,—museums and the circulation of things,—you'll find that actually it's a huge element of—say—New York City,—one of the biggest elements of New York City is its art world. So it's a hard argument to go down to say that art isn't powerful, or art doesn't even have the commercial behind it. Hans Hacke made artwork about this in the Seventies. But, anyway, we're going off on the wrong thing.

NH: On the films,—the language you're using is almost like sociological study, but the fact that it's through the medium of film and painting,—you're trying to also communicate it with aesthetic pleasure as well? And if you are how does that relate to the more purely intellectual content that's there as well?

SM: I'd say that the pleasure of intellect and the pleasure of ideas and conversations are always aestheticised anyway. I definitely think that the best way to have a conversation with an audience is through creating space, and creating a seductive, powerful, influential, impossible-to-avoid space. That is intellectual space and that is also aesthetic space, but you want to—as an artist—create the strongest environment possible for your work to function,—to take over, even if just for a transitory moment in someone's day. I do like this idea of taking over these other spaces that exist in reality,—the space of Hollywood—yeah—or the space of The Revlon Corporation, or the space of Dulles International Airport,—and taking control of the references, taking control of the meaning in your work, and basically giving them new meaning,—taking those spaces that are very inscribed by the function and ideology of those places, and giving them some other meaning that's not so visible or not experienced by the people who are passing through those spaces normally. That's intriguing to me. It probably all comes out of that moment, which probably happened earlier, but for me and my generation happened when we realised at the time of Nixon's resignation in the early Seventies that the idea of truth being objective was a complete fallacy. Several things are interesting to me about that moment,—this sort-of crumbling of a notion of objectivity, and also his documentation of his own conversations leading to the demise of that concept, and the narcissism and vanity of that

leading to his own demise. But if you look at various films from that period of time,—whether it be *The Conversation* or *The Parallax View* or various others,—you will see that it was occurring aesthetically before Watergate, which becomes an interesting thing. Was Watergate just a symptom of this larger thing that was happening in the culture? Yes, it was! Somehow it was going to happen one way or another. There's actually a really great book on Nixon called *The Arrogance of Power*. It's a really fantastic biography of Nixon, and how that level of vanity and neurosis and pill-taking led to that historical moment. How this relates to my work, though, is basically I view the city or moments in time, whether they're aesthetic or historical or intellectual, as a sort of conspiracy,—that there are certain forces that create those moments.

NH: An unwitting conspiracy? An unplanned one?

SM: Well, when you say conspiracy, it's a conspiracy between architectural, aesthetic and people. If you look at all of my films,—and even the paintings, really,—there's something that's slightly,—it's evasive of power, and yet it points to the idea that there is meaning to be discovered, that there's some sort of meaning in these moments, of possible narrative, which the viewer can use in any way they want to figure out the meaning going on,—and there's all these unending narratives. In the paintings I see that as just the sense of,—the paintings slightly evoke propaganda, but to what purpose I have no idea.

NH: They could be seen as purely celebratory. I'm not saying—

SM: I think you'd have to be dumb to think that! [Laughs] No—, but they *do* function—, I mean, the films function like propaganda, and the paintings also slightly function like propaganda. Even this Venn diagram-esque imagery I'm using slightly reminds me—, it's not only evocative of psychiatric chains of interdependencies of people, but it reminds me—, I can't help but think of the 1972 Olympics,—every time I see them I think of the design ethos of that moment in the early Seventies, where—

NH: Manifests in what,—in the logos and graphics stuff that goes with it?

SM: Yeah, but also the aesthetics of the Olympics at that point, and also what happened during the 1972 Olympics. What happened during the 1972 Olympics can't be in any way segregated from the design of the 1972 Olympics. It's all part of the same historical moment. You can't separate those things. That's what I think my work is trying to sort of force the viewer to contemplate,—that constellation of places, people and things,—in such a way that you have a sense of some sort of power larger than yourself that needs to be reckoned with, and needs to be negotiated and flushed out. I try to do that as an artist in the work, but I think the work also sort of does that,—slightly does that autonomously from me. I like saying my work is autonomous. [Laughs] I sort-of feel like that, though,—I do!

NH: Yeah,—the intelligence of the work that's not necessarily your own,—or sometimes emerges from the process and from things—

SM: But it's also part of some sort of systems idea. If you are creating some panorama of a system that is larger than yourself, and you're really effectively doing that, at some point it *is* larger than yourself, in the sense that you've created a system. I clearly have created a system, both in the paintings and the films. I could apply my film approach to any subject matter. You have a feeling of freedom from creating that structure, and that—in a sense—should be able to be somewhat autonomous from your subjectivity.

NH: How didactic, and how politicised, do you think the films are?

SM: I don't think they're didactic at all, in the sense that there is really no clear meaning in them, frankly. Because there is no dialogue, because there is no clear narrative, they're really an open structure. If you look at this idea that somebody like Umberto Eco conceptualised, that you have open texts and you have closed texts,—I don't even know if I believe that there are open texts and closed texts,—I think everything is open. Even very fixed meaning can be completely perverted and changed in different contexts. I completely believe in context. What I try to do with the films is make this open set of associations—or open narrative structure—by using a set of images to create this sort of open structure. So,—to me, that would be the opposite of being didactic. On the other hand, there's a very specific way of looking, in terms of cinematography,—the way I'm looking at things, and cropping things, and isolating things, is probably very specific, and is very aestheticised. Maybe that is a level of being didactic,—I don't know.

NH: Probably the word 'didactic' was too strong, but I'm interested in how politicised you conceive the films to be. Say *Capital*,—I was reading an article that Joe Klein wrote,—a good article—

SM: You know who Joe Klein is, right? Joe Klein's the biggest political theorist in America. He wrote *Primary Colors*. He's amazing. He covered Clinton for years, and he wrote that book—under a pseudonym—and we asked him to write because he knows everything about not only the whole political structure, but he knows everything about Clinton,—he knows how he operates. Clinton also was the master of this sort of openness. Clinton, even if he was in meetings with enemies,—in fact, the cabinet meeting that I filmed was with Trent Lott, which is an absolute opponent,—he would always say 'Yes, but.' It was never 'No,' it was 'Yes, but.' That's very Clintonian. In a way, I would try to emulate that way of thinking and that way of working,—never to outright negate something, but try and be inclusive of it, and try to reveal its dynamic through that inclusion.

NH: But that's an intelligent strategy, rather than defining the motivational thought behind it or the agenda behind it. You can have—like Clinton can have his—agenda and be argumentative about it, but be much less successful.

SM: I don't know if it's my duty as an artist to reveal my agenda, y'know?

NH: Sure. This is a conversation,—you're free to do what you like.

SM: The idea of having a clear agenda—. I know what my desires are in terms of creating certain images, and creating a certain set of aesthetics, or a certain intellectual space I want to create, but I would never say that I have a clear agenda. In fact my agenda might be quite contradictory.

NH: Also, I wouldn't want you to set out an agenda like a political manifesto. You've done Washington, Miami, Vegas, LA, New York, right? The choices make sense, and they're about the urban environment, which is itself a highly politicised thing, and the power of American rampant capitalism that creates these architectural and cultural environments. Obviously they're highly important and by their very nature politicised structures that have been created like that. I think it's impossible to point out those things—and then to edit things down particularly when your movies are quite short—without intimating a—not fixed—but a range of possible meanings,—to close it down to some meaning. For example, in the Joe Klein thing, he was talking about the inhumanity of Washington—'a horrible void of a place'—, which is kind of the sensation you get. It doesn't look like an advertising movie for 'Come to Washington!' Obviously there is an element that you're communicating, I think very clearly,—an atmospheric thing, and an emotional response that you're trying to engender. There are some boundaries that it's operating within, some emotional responses which would be very very strange to get from that movie. I'm not trying to pin you down too much, but a little bit!

SM: I think I would go back to what I said about notions of conspiracy, in terms of how things are designed, or what they mean to us, and how we interpret that meaning, and how that makes us feel as we operate in those types of spaces. I guess the contradiction really resides in the fact of what I was talking about before, this idea of,—once you've created a system, where then it takes on an autonomy of its own that's larger than you as an artist, and how that operates. I don't think there is any fixed meaning in relation to the work. I know what you're saying about the levels of reference are probably determined by my interests and the time I grew up in, and how we think about the world. Without being more cliché, obviously there's a certain set of reference in which I think and analyse things. But what I think is more interesting for me as an artist is—, I don't really have any clear agenda, except for to somehow use those dynamics of creating images that somehow do take on—mimic—elements of the mainstream. I think for me as an artist what I think about a lot—definitely something I thought about a lot in Los Angeles—is how internalised can you go within that system? Either before they try to control the meaning that you're producing, which in this case is very difficult, because I'm not funded in any way by anybody out there, and I have no alliances with anybody really, other than myself. But, nevertheless, how you can infiltrate a system in a world that is so paranoid. You've heard me talk about various film studios, agencies, movie stars, and the similar thing that they all have in common is that although it's a world that clearly is advertising itself all the time, and although it's a world that's completely about photography in a general sense, it is extremely reticent about its own image unless they're in control. So, one of the things I was thinking about a lot when I was out there was how exactly—, at certain moments it felt like a very extreme thing to be playing around with, because of that level of how paranoid they are. In Washington it was like, yes, it is a big deal to get inside the Cabinet room during an active meeting. I wouldn't go so far as to say that was unprecedented, because Cartier-Bresson documented Kennedy and whatnot, but it's still an unusual thing,—but not that unusual for a president that claimed he was very open and accessible. It was more about proving, in creating almost a provocation, anybody who thinks art is marginal, look where you can get, look at what you can be involved with, look at the images that you can influence. But one thing I was thinking of when I was doing this film is—, well, you just get—, there's a certain toxic feeling that you—, you must've—! [Laughs] The film industry, yeah. There's some amazing characters out there, as well as some very uninteresting characters, like anywhere, but there was a certain feeling that—, it's like anywhere where you feel like you sense people's desperation. You sense a desperateness and also that commercial thrust. Did I tell you the story of talking to a PR executive from a particular film studio, and she was telling me I could film a premiere as long as it didn't look like a premiere, and as long as there were no identifiable movie-stars on camera? I said '*why* would I do that? And what would it be to your interests to have me do something that was so unrecognisable in relation to your company?' and she said to me 'You are not in my interest. Your film is not in my interest, and you are not going to help me sell any units,' is what she said! I thought that's so brilliant,—she's so direct! If only everybody else in Los Angeles was this direct!

NH: [Laughs] Was that the end of the conversation? Did you say thank you,—or fair enough?

SM: I actually held the phone away and I said 'If that's the way you feel,' and then I hung up on her. I was really amazed that she didn't actually cancel our entire shoot.

NH: And you did it?

SM: We didn't film that premiere. We actually ended up filming a premiere we went to with Lawrence Bender—the producer for Tarantino's films—where he had no objection to the concept of premiere and what that means. She wanted me to film it, without it being clearly—. That's insane, yeah!

NH: That's insane. I mean, a premiere's a public event anyway!

SM: But that level of neurosis, knowing full well what I want out of the situation but being resistant to it,—that's a very crass version of it. The extensive Warren Beatty interview thing is a more intelligent version of it, where it's like, 'Listen, I've made my few films, and I don't want to be just an image, so can we talk more about this and figure out a way that I can be part of this without being just an image.' That might be neurotic too, but it's a level of neurosis I'm prepared to be engaged with—

NH: It's idiosyncratic, as opposed to systemic neurosis, right?

SM: Well, the other type is more about crass commercialism! I'm much more sympathetic to that idea of not wanting to be represented, and not wanting to be that identified with that place. Maybe it doesn't matter if you've lived somewhere for forty or fifty years. Maybe you still don't feel like you're a citizen of that place. I know when we shot Dennis Hopper he was like 'I really want to live in New York.' We had a really funny conversation about it. It's interesting how people view their self-identity in relation to place. Maybe it was because we were all a bit hungover when we went to Bob Evans' house that morning, but just the level of 'This is what a veteran is, of this place. This is what it looks like. This is what your bedroom will look like.' I ran into Bob Evans and his girlfriend Tatiana at the Vanity Fair party, and he's got so much energy. He said 'I found it really interesting what you told me about Paramount yesterday.' They had lunch, apparently, with Sherry Lansing and some people from Paramount right after we saw them, and he was just commenting to me about what the studio was like then and what it's like now. It *is* quite different in terms of how guarded, and how they view themselves at large. It's interesting because before I went out to Los Angeles I was reading this book that John Gregory Dunne wrote called *The Studio*, where he had access to 20th Century Fox for a year,—being involved in meetings that were going on there and whatever,—and it's an interesting book, not particularly riveting, but the idea of letting the outsider in is increasingly rare. All these companies are owned by other companies that are not entertainment companies,—Sony, yeah, or Viacom. Then, the other thing is that there are some very interesting people in Los Angeles, who are the opposite of what we're talking about—, not the opposite, they're just like variations. One of the people who helped me a lot was this man named Sid Ganis, who is a producer at Sony,—he was also producer of *Bonnie and Clyde*, and he's high up in the Academy,—and he vouched for me and got me clearance to what I needed to get. All these people who were helping me, or were at least on the phone with me chatting away—had their pivotal, seminal moments back in the Seventies,—the time we were talking about. Sid,—and this is just a bit-part but nevertheless I think it's informative,—he worked on *All the President's Men*. He played one of the *Washington Post* editors, which I think is an interesting full circle. He's the person who got me access to the Oscars, and he represented, in a movie, one of the editors of the *Washington Post*. We were laughing about it on the phone! What's interesting to me is you can see—, how could I have gotten into the Oscars? You would have to have somebody of Sid's generation who would make that happen,—you see? He's a really interesting character and he's a really beloved producer out there. He basically introduced me to people, and advised me on how to handle a lot of situations. Anyway,—so the story sort-of comes full-circle with this sort of moment where,—I was probably three, those people were playing roles in films that actually shaped our interpretation of 'Is there anything that is objective?' Or do we even believe in any sort of concept of objectivity or the truth? Those people were crucial in that. Douglas Copeland wrote a text for the book that we're putting together at the moment, and I was looking at it, and one thing that Douglas talked about and I slightly disagreed with him on,—or not disagreed, we haven't actually talked about it, it was more like his choice of vocabulary,—I don't really believe that there is anybody that is not somehow complicit on some level. I think there was a time where people didn't quite view it like that. But I guess what I'm trying to say is there are some very interesting, fascinating characters out there, and they are definitely some of the people who helped me orchestrate what I was doing. I think it's

important to mention that as well as the toxic side of the equation. Not just to be balanced, because I don't want everything to be balanced,—but it's true.

NH: You said you could do this anywhere, but obviously the films have been in major American cities. That was part of the question about being politicised,—for example, would you go and do this in a rural village in England,—the power structures there? Not that you just go around looking at power structures, but would you be as interested in doing that? Or is there something about the environments,—whether it's physical or conceptual or power environments,—which are created in places like America, which is just so extreme? Las Vegas, New York and LA are three different types of extremity, specific to America.

SM: Well, I think that psychology is definitely exported, transported elsewhere.

NH: Sure, but the places that you film are the epicentres of three different things—New York, LA and Washington. Are you particularly fascinated because it's America,—a continuation of the American—

SM: I didn't say I could do it anywhere, what I said is I could use my approach on anything. But you're right that the subject matter has specific meaning,—it's not without meaning. You wouldn't do a film about sea-shells. Or maybe you would, I don't know, you might, and no doubt it would be very interesting.

NH: Were you interested in the intensity and the concentration of power in these American cities?

SM: Yeah. I like the idea of trying to create—, to try to get that sense of intensity, or condensation, that occurs in those places.

NH: I personally find it very difficult to view or be in touch with those kinds of intensities without having a very strong sense this is a good or bad thing,—in a quite simplistic way. As something separate from your films, do you experience the intensity of the cities in that way?

SM: I don't really view things as good or bad,—I really don't,—I don't! I'm way too complicit to be viewing things as good or bad.

NH: Irrespective of what is in the films? As I said, I'm not trying to say you're making a film where you go 'Oh look, it's bad!'

SM: But to even be able to pull off what I'm pulling off, I would have to have skills that would be parallel to what I'm talking about.

NH: But you're not a disembodied eye either, right?

SM: No, and there's no way you could ever be.

NH: And a moral response of some kind is inherent to that, isn't it?

SM: Yeah, but you see what I'm saying,—to be able to navigate your way through a labyrinthine that is—say--Los Angeles, or that is Washington, or New York, you would necessarily have to have some sort of skills of the subject matter you were talking about. Yeah,—you have to be able to operate in that environment.

NH: Which you're saying implies a level of complicity?

SM: Yeah.

NH: But you can be complicit and still have political or moral opinions about the environment you're in?

SM: If you're asking me am I Democrat,—yes I am. I don't know,—I really don't view things as an either-or situation. Is that annoying?