

One Minute Volumes 1–4

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‘There’s nothing worth knowing but facts. Hard facts! Facts alone, Mr Tesman ...’ (Joseph Conrad, *Victory*)
‘Oh, I am done with facts!’ (Joseph Conrad, *Victory*)

The four volumes of the *One Minute* series constitute anthologies of – you guessed it – moving-image pieces of one minute or less in duration, which have been heroically curated, assembled and distributed, without recourse to sponsorship or other funding, by Kerry Baldry, herself a film-maker, between 2007 and the present, for, in general, relatively small-scale (but splendidly wide-ranging) showings. They are not currently available for home viewing on DVD (except to reviewers), although some may be accessed on the Internet. The first three volumes were compiled on an invitation basis. *Volume 4* also had an open call associated with it. I understand *Volume 5* is currently in preparation.

First things first. This is a review. You may get the opportunity to go to a showing of these selections, culled from over twenty years of very short form moving-image-making with a fine disregard for the exact mode of making and the video versus film questions which have detained so many for so much precious time. If so, you should definitely go. The works are entertaining and thought provoking – at a minimum,

little manuals of technique, or funny jokes, or nice patterns, but, at best, something altogether more profound. The compilations are assembled with the eye and brain and heart for balance, surprise and pace of someone who herself wrangles moving images. You’ll be irritated occasionally (many of you, of course, at quite different points) but never bored (partly because of Baldry’s curatorial skills, partly because there’s always something new, never more than 60 seconds around the corner).

Next, a declaration of interest: I have a piece, *Blossom* (Szpakowski 2010), included in *Volume 4*. I will write no more about it except to say that the question of whether it lives up to any prescription or falls under any criticism, stated or implied, arising from my discussion here will be left, as in the advanced mathematics text books, *to the reader as an exercise*.

The question arises, why *one minute*? Whence the implicit valuing of the miniature in and of itself? And why in this context and why now? Of course, it’s nothing new: the lyric poem; fragmentation by dint of circumstance – Sappho; the romantic fetishizing of the broken, lost, distant and weathered. The icon. The sketch. The Persian, Turkish and Mughal miniature. Netsuke. Fabergé eggs. The films of the brothers Lumière. All make their impact within a modest scale. Also the TV advertisement. Size here, of course determined by ability to pay, so that the occasional epic used to launch a particularly ‘important’ new product is very much the exception.

Reviews



Marty St James,
Upside Down World
(2009), digital
video, 4: 32 min.
Music by Julia
Wolfe. Courtesy of
the artist.

Note the ad as the dark side to which the TV art interventions (Meigh-Andrews 2006; Rees 2008) of the 1960s to early 1990s could be seen to be righteously counterposed.

Those TV interventions. A politico-artistic form arising out of a very particular balance of class forces and, because a *concession*, small. On the one hand bearing a seed, a promise; on the other, congealing into a pale and institutional ghost, which even now stutters on nightly after the Channel 4 news as *4thought.tv*.

The music video, though well over a minute, is a miniature in television terms and an important link in the chain as well.

Most importantly – the elephant in the room of present-day artists' film and video in any context – is the Internet, fuelled by ever more powerful, ever cheaper and more widely available digital technology. Infant steps from the mid-1990s on. Gathering pace unsteadily in the first three years of the new century. Tiny windows, savage compression and concomitantly degraded image quality, QuickTime's looping and palindrome loop features, the very fact of QuickTime as the main platform in the face of Microsoft's virulent opposition (RoughlyDrafted 2007) until the recent Flashification of Internet video, and hence the possibility of easy downloading and manipulation, meaning not only a renewed and confirmed aesthetic of the miniature, the fragmented and the fractured, arising directly out of the material circumstances of the Internet, but also a sense of *handleability*. You could not only watch the pieces (in a circumstance of strange intimacy, face right up against the screen, and even learning to love and embrace that tininess) but you could get in there yourself, with no prior skills but with \$15 or so for QuickTime Pro, and *play*.

The Big Bang – YouTube, 2005: it's not just appropriation or remix. The embedding of moving images in huge networks like YouTube, Vimeo and social networks together with tag and search

has rendered indistinct the edges – and the very idea – of a singular identity, of individual works. Pieces converse – similarities of topic or technique can easily be used as criteria for the creation of ad hoc sequences or collections.

This is precisely exemplified in *Volume 4* by two pieces originally made by Sam Renseiw. The originals form part of a huge sequence on his own website (Renseiw 2009a and 2009b) and also a large-scale, Internet-based collaborative venture, the 'Lumière' project (Lumière Videos 2011). They were subsequently remixed/recontextualized by Philip Sanderson by the simple act of adding found sound. The hybrid pieces are archived on yet another site in a sequence of one year's such collaborations (Sanderson and Renseiw 2010a and 2010b).

And all this is *fact*, incontestable and irreversible. There's no personal opt-out. Even if you forswear, under *any* circumstance, *any* watching of video on the Internet, it will affect the presentation and reception of work you might see in *any* future context.

Towards a taxonomy of short form video

A natural form emerges directly from the sample/grab/loop. Stuff happens, for a minute. Looping it would be both natural and do it no violence. Of course none of the films on the *One Minute* DVDs is looped – I'm talking here of a characteristic we might call *could-start-anywhere*.

Then there are variants with content which is in some sense representational. *The found loop* – manifesting online in the cult of the GIF and in the Internet surf clubs (Ramocki 2008) – fits here, as does a species of one-liner, an invocation rather than a representation of reality, like Deklan Kilfeather's *Indian Movie in One Minute Volume 1* (2007) (Kilfeather 2007):

A photograph, which may or may not be of somewhere in India, a

plant – some kind of grass? – in the foreground and Indian popular music playing continuously in the background (although there is a slight initial delay for us to absorb the visual before the music fades rapidly in). There is some visual activity – the camera moves nervously about and there are a number of cuts – but none of this constitutes development; it is simply accretion, an emphasizing and revisiting of the basic premise. The music glues it together but it moves towards no resolution – the resolution already lies in every frame.

And so onto a *sort of documentary* – and things are starting to get messy here because this is not simply a form but indissolubly welded also to content, where detail leaks in from the real world or an event happens or is made to happen in that world. And something hinges upon this: the ubiquity of recording devices; the common sense that insists that there is a clear relation between the world and its things and their representation in mechanical/digital images, still or moving; the ever-increasing ease of duplication, indexing, appropriation and sequencing/collecting/comparison of these image-objects; all these privilege reference and connection.

In the best of these pieces there is something I can only call ‘opening-outwards’ – away from the surface of the piece to an intimation of a much larger world. And I want to say that *best* resides in *this* and not in the *well-made* video nor in a process akin to inscribing the Bible on a grain of rice.

Like Barthes’s *studium* and *punctum* (1981), I can’t (can’t, not won’t) give a prescription. I can see the process at work, however, and I can *point to it* for you.

And that larger world may or may not be the one we live in, but if it is not, it nonetheless has points of commonality with it (or with our dreams of it). And there are things in the tiny span of the video that lead us outwards to that world, that map one minute onto a universe.

And although this in itself is not new there’s something about the particular circumstances behind, and current deployment of, the very short form in moving-images that is something we haven’t seen before. The network, the multiple, the lo-fi, the sequence, the glitch, the appropriated, the broken, the *possibility* of intimacy of viewing, make oblique suggestions and triangulation from fragments somehow more natural.

It’s as if the pun, the knowing reference, ambiguity, the speedy and witty response, reborn as e-mail or indeed as a very short moving image, had been re-purposed for wider participation today.

It’s important to reiterate that this process, of finding the key or building the bridge, isn’t rule-governed. It can be



Steven Ball, *Land Gauge 2* (2007), QuickTime movie, 1 min. Courtesy of the artist.

observed and commented upon only after the fact. The most precise methodology that can be suggested is something iterative – keep on remaking until it feels right: try this, try that, try again.

The simplest case is a record of something in the world where the apparent chaos and irrationality of human activity itself makes the content complex and rich (this is not guaranteed though; beware – no recipes!). In Philip Warnell’s short piece in *One Minute Volume 1*, titled *The Electric Hare* (1996), documenting the lure used in greyhound racing, we see weathered and expressive human hands attaching

the object, which resembles a child's cuddly toy, to the apparatus that will whirl it round the track at sixty miles an hour. A camera fixed to the trolley then shows us the lugubrious toy hare looking somehow increasingly vexed as the world falls rapidly away behind it. So much is given to us beyond bare content, arising simply out of the what and how of recording. One can imagine, how almost the same piece – more distant shots, a less battered and expressive hare, younger hands – could have resulted in a much paler work and a less affecting one.

A second case is an intentional, artist-created, multidimensionality. Things happen along a series of independent axes. Steven Ball's *Land Gauge 2* (Ball 2007), in *One Minute Volume 2* (2008),



Kerry Baldry, *Punch* (2004), originally shot on 16mm film, stop frame, 3 min., re-edited for *One Minute*. Courtesy of the artist.

juxtaposes aerial footage (captured via a balloon?) of a trip over an area of sunlit parkland in Madrid in 2007 with a somewhat formalist (lots of counting) sound work made in 1981, to stirringly *sticky* effect – the way it lodges itself in the mind and won't be dislodged. Three axes: image and sound, sure, but text too, for the record of this juxtaposition becomes part of the piece by virtue of its inclusion in the closing titles.

The third case, maybe paradoxically, is an *inward* intensity, where apparent simplicity obscures a much more complex story – Kerry Baldry's pieces

have this. *Punch* (Baldry 1994) in *One Minute Volume 1* consists of images of colour-filtered fists accompanied by a percussive soundtrack. The rapid transition from image to image, together with the soundtrack, suggests the act of punching is what is being filmed. Not so – each shot contains a fist, constrained in a kind of trembling stasis, shot either front- or side-on and at varying distances, from an extreme close-up, which fills the frame vertically to a medium shot.

Although one needs a DVD copy and a pause button to begin to locate precisely what is going on, such close examination indicates why, although this piece could be looped continuously, it would be an error so to do (or at least without a short pause signalling 'end'). It has a clear direction. We start in one place and finish in another. We know something different by the end.

The audio is interesting too – it masquerades as a diegetic soundtrack and is convincing as such. In fact it is a loop (I viewed the soundtrack as a waveform to confirm this), offset by a number of seconds against the film as a whole and looping three times in all. Here it's that simultaneous richness and looseness of microstructure allied to the materiality and gorgeous smeariness of the filtered images that sets our other senses firing sympathetically and conjures up something beyond.

Marty St James's *Upside Down World* (2009) employs an apparently simple and naïve estrangement device, announced in the title prior to the start of the piece. It is simple, maybe, but powerful. Immediately we are transported back in time to memories of hanging upside down from the railings, or similar, a literal *bouleversement*. The structure is straightforward – binary – with the transition between the two sections underlined by the frenetic music by Julia Wolfe, which accompanies the first section, shot apparently from a moving vehicle. The image content of this first section is by no means simple. It consists of four shots.

The first, very short shot, gives us a view along a road, seen from the front window of a car and then inverted (or shot upside down, I don't know). The second shot is much longer, and again appears to be taken from a moving vehicle, but is 'upside down' only by virtue of the camera pointing vertically upwards into the sky. The third is an artfully composed static shot where a solitary inverted tree, dominating the top left quadrant and surrounded by thin pillars, insubstantial wires and sky, is buffeted by a vigorous breeze. In the final shot of this section we are on the move again through a rather French avenue of trees, but here either the camera is slightly askew or there is a considerable camber to the road, for the inverted image is a few degrees away from vertical. All the shots are linked by cross-fades and it is a cross-fade that moves us into the second section. The music, which had become increasing frenetic, suddenly stops.

Part 2 consists of two shots only. In the first, over half of the top of the frame is occupied by grass. Beneath, amongst a few trees and the sky, a lone inverted figure walks away. The inversion of the gait of a human being causes a frisson the first time one sees it. Although, as an adult, one can be entranced in general by upside-downness, we are capable-enough signal manipulators to mentally set things right. We're bemused, perhaps, but not shocked. I defy anyone who is not a physiologist not to be taken aback by upside-down walking, altogether a laboured, ungainly affair. One initially believes that re-inverting it would evince the same awkwardness in the 'original', but no. The figure slowly recedes in what might or might not be an intentional homage to the last part of *Zorns Lemma* (Frampton 1970).

I can't quite tell whether the final shot, an old chestnut, but one which works beautifully here, of inverted reflections in water (you have to look twice, *you do*, no matter how many times you've seen it, then you feel

stupid because it's so obvious once it comes into 'focus') is a still or a very uneventful bit of moving image. As with all the ambiguities of this piece, the uncertainty enriches it, makes us look more closely and beckons us into its strange parallel world.

This complex of decisions, of suggested meanings, of reference, could easily be a dog's dinner. Some might find it so. For me it is a concrete exemplar of 'looking outwards'. The piece is a tiny visual lyric poem/ticking bomb. Subsequent to writing this I discovered that the *One Minute* version of this piece is an extract from a longer (4 minutes 31 seconds) piece. Of course this alters my argument not a jot.

Roll on *Volume 5*.

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All the works included in the *One Minute* series are listed at <http://kerrybaldry.com>.

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