Third Angel: Digital Shorts
Video Art or Performance
Documentation?

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Third Angel (England)

1. Broken Kit

It starts with some broken kit.

1998. The borrowed Hi-8 deck (thanks, Sheffield Independent Film) won't talk to the support-in-kind Avid Suite (thanks, Site Gallery), or something, so the erratically shot hand-held video footage (thanks to me) of our 30 hour durational performance, *Senseless*, can't be used until someone comes to fix it (thanks Daren).

So the editor, Chris, (working no doubt for nowt, so, y'know, thanks Chris) says, *well, I'll just do something with the digital stills….* He's referring to the photos taken (thanks, Helen) throughout the three days of performance at Arnolfini to be uploaded on to our brand new website (thanks DED Associates).

The images themselves go into the computer quickly; they're on floppy disc. That might bear repeating. They're on *floppy disc*. So Chris is able to drag them into a folder and make rushes out of them almost instantly, leaving him plenty of time to work precisely: worrying about the specific number of frames that each image appears for, or dissolves over. Chris rearranges these stills into an aesthetic, rather than chronological, order, cutting them together to a section of soundtrack (thanks, John) from the performance.

Senseless 02:47:16 stills by Helen Sharma.

Chris suggests the title *Senseless 02:47:16* for this piece. The numbers refer to the duration and time code for the video – minutes, seconds, frames. His feeling was that as the long duration of the live performance was part of its theme, the brief duration of this work inspired by it was significant, too, and should be acknowledged in its title.

The next day the Hi-8 player is working again and Chris is able to cut together some of the video rushes to make a 5 minute documentation piece. We do go on to use both pieces, particularly when teaching or lecturing about our work. But it is the first piece that goes on to have a life of its own, being screened at festivals and on the internet at Reelscreen.com.

Chris remembers that at the time we were all attracted to the idea that the 'film' was created entirely in the digital realm – from camera to floppies to edit suite to internet. It didn't exist physically until transferred to tape for screening.

2. Film Making

I say that it started with a broken Hi-8 deck, but actually, that's not true, is it?

We were already film makers. As Third Angel we had already made our first short film, *With The Light On* (1996), that had been successful at film festivals, and made film and video work to be viewed as part of the live performances *Testcard* (1995), *The Killing Show* (1996), *Shallow Water* and *Experiment Zero* (both 1997).

Our collaboration already included making stand-alone video work, and already assumed a connection – an, integration – between live performance and moving image. It is not surprising, in retrospect, that it felt natural to look to the documentation of one to inspire the other.

We had also previously documented both *The Killing Show* and *Shallow Water* with 'half length' video pieces, performed for camera, without an audience, but which attempted to replicate the audience's

point of view – up close; intimate. These were only partially successful, and although the production values were relatively high, they were neither satisfying as video works, nor fully informative documents of live work.

3. Things I Like, Things I Hate

Probably my favourite short film ever is Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Things I Like, Things I Hate*. A simple, witty, beautifully shot list of things the central character (and film maker?) likes and hates. It is both documentary and drama – and at the same time, neither of those genres. But it is a great short film.

I am drawn to making, and seeing, work that could only exist in the medium in which it is presented. Performance that engages directly with an audience, that responds to them, that recognises that the performers are there, in that room, with that audience, those people, at that moment; performance that makes eye contact. Feature films in which the camera moves through buildings, travels through different rooms, different landscapes. Close ups. TV dramas that unfold narrative arcs and character development over the 16 or so hours of a series. If I go to see a favourite band play live, I want to hear new material, or familiar songs played in new arrangements; I don't want to hear the recordings played live.

And with short film what I'm interested in are works that are hard to define by genre, that are not necessarily drama or documentary, that are best described, simply and accurately, as *short films*.

4. Some Problems with Documentation

From the outset, an ongoing company debate about the documentation of live performance. We need to produce full length videos of our performances for promoters, archives and educational establishments. We also need 5 - 10 minute samplers to show when giving lectures about our work. We require them, practically, but these video documents don't satisfy us creatively. They're constrained by having to represent the performance, but are some distance from the experience of seeing the work live.

Senseless 02:47:16 opened a door for us. We realised that we could carry on exploring the ideas and themes of a live project, even as we are fixing it in the process of documenting it.

The process of making these shorts has much in common with our process of making our live work. The core of Third Angel is the two Artistic Directors – Rachael Walton and I. For each project we draw

together a group of collaborators – performers, sound recordists, composers – some familiar and regular; some new. Christopher Hall, now Associate Artist, has been working with us since we set up in 1995.

In devising the work we map out a territory, an area of interest. We ask our collaborators to explore that territory with us, respond to what we've got, and bring in new ideas. We generate far more material and ideas than we can use in the final piece. Many of these ideas will not be used because they don't work, aren't interesting enough, aren't good enough. However, some of them are interesting, but don't fit into the work through time or formal constraints; some are the beginnings of something else.

So even when a project is ready to start meeting an audience, there are still loose ends to be used, or new ideas nagging at us. Even as we tie a live performance to video in making the documentation we need, we are able to continue devising, trying out ideas in relation to the themes we are exploring, through making a digital short inspired by it.

We go in to the edit suite with rushes, much in the way we go into rehearsal with a bit of text or an idea for a section of the show. Rachael and I have already set a territory by making the live work; Chris begins his exploration within that territory, sometimes responding to seeing the work live, sometimes responding to making the documentation of it. He sets out to find something that interests him within the territory we have laid out.

5. Digital Shorts

These are works created, authored, in the edit suite. Works that pay little heed to the formal construction of the originating performance work, but which focus on a single moment, or idea, or *feeling* from that live work and respond to it, amplify it or kick against it.

Hang Up 02:39:02

In 1999, we made a touring theatre piece called *Hang Up*. Four performers confined to replica K6 telephone boxes for the duration of the show, picking up different characters, putting on disguises, breaking into choreographed movement and task based performance. Two miniature infrared cameras in each phone box linked via a projector to a screen above each booth. The performers manipulate these cameras to produce their live-link documentation of their own action, giving us, the audience, a different angle, a different frame, to that of our live view of the stage.

In order to document the show we have to record these live link feeds from each of the eight cameras. Although we shoot the show on DV cam, finances dictate that the easiest way of recording the live camera feeds is on to VHS tape on a stack of borrowed home player/recorders (thanks everyone).

Hang Up 02:39:02 screen grabs.

In the edit suite, it is these hours of silent black and white footage that attract us, that feel worthy of further exploration. This footage emphasises the loneliness at the heart of the live work; emphasises, somehow, the struggle to communicate.

We pull moments from all four performers from across the 70 minutes of the original show. Chris has to lift sound from the 'proper' documentation rushes, and also shoots some new colour footage inside the phone boxes to cut in with it. To match the black and white footage, he shoots this new material on a second hand VHS-C camera in very low light and then 'whacks the gain up' in the Avid.

Hang Up 02:39:02 is full of interference and visual drop out; full of eye contact, camera awareness and attempted communication. The dialogue is made up of lines that can exist on their own and still have resonance, and find meaning in connection with the images.

Pills 03:20:00

Pills 03:20:00, the last digital short to recognise its own duration in its title. *Where From Here*, a touring theatre piece made in 2000. A Man and a Woman in a plain white room. A table, two chairs, two doors. A cupboard full of weapons. They take it in turns to draw (eyes closed) the floor plan of a room onto the wall. The rule of the show is that the white room then becomes the room they have drawn, until another room is described by themselves or the other performer. They tell a story about something that happened in each room, and they begin to inhabit

these stories that they tell. There are asides, digressions; they imagine murdering each other, rehearse it, even. Gradually we piece together the story of their relationship, and draw our own conclusions about this room that they seem to be trapped in.

After cutting together the full length documentation of this piece, Chris knew what he wanted to explore. The show had already produced a spin-off installation, *Pills For Modern Living*. Chris took images generated for that work, and, ignoring all of the memories, story telling and room drawing, he extracted the single monologue in which the Man explains to us how he is dependent on a range of fantastical and metaphorical pharmaceuticals, such as the Easy Conscience Pill and the Fall In Love With Someone Who's In Love With You Pill.


Pills 03:20:00 screen grab.

Chris re-shot the original rushes off a TV monitor, re-cut the text of the monologue, and layered the sound over itself and in reverse. Layers of visual and aural experimentation create something that works on a screen that connects, but not too obviously, with the content of the speech. We become more aware of the media we are watching; the Man becomes more of a salesman, perhaps; it's like those old live 'a word from the sponsors' TV ads.

Project Zero

Experiment Zero, a theatre and film piece from 1997. Three characters invent a movie-inspired world to live in, bored with their lives in the real one. We see many noir-inspired scenes from their fantasy lives projected on stage, caught on the sides of white suitcases.
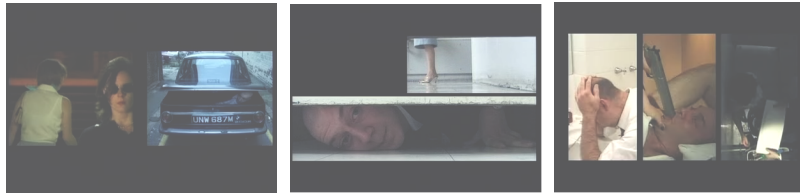
Project Zero screen grabs.

2002. Chris, enjoying the split screen capabilities of his new Avid suite, finally cuts this footage together into *Project Zero*, which could be a trailer for the movie that the *Experiment Zero* characters think they are living in.

Alone Together

In 2005 we produced the 50 performer installation, *Standing Alone, Standing Together* for the Avenue of the Millennium Galleries, Sheffield, as part of the exhibition Tate Sculpture.

A slow, often static, performance intervention that ran on a deceptively simple 1-hour cycle, performed three times one Saturday afternoon, amidst the un/suspecting audience visiting the gallery, or just cutting through to or from the city centre.

An excessively well documented piece, sometimes it felt like there were almost as many photographers there as performers; photographers enjoying the presence of so many static models. A beautiful moment in the second cycle when, in one of the few moments of rapid synchronised movement, all of the performers move suddenly to the walls of the Avenue, leaving six or seven photographers poised, taking photos only of each other.

Alone Together screen grab.

Alone Together is the digital short that is most clearly born of documentation that most clearly replicates the view and experience of the viewer. However, what is different from straight documentation is the way it deals with time. It plays with the stillness of the performance and the availability of the still image. As the arc of the 60 minute performance is condensed into 5 minutes, we are not always sure if we are watching a photograph, video of a still moment, or a still from the start of a video sequence.

6. Something a Student in Scarborough Said.

After watching *Alone Together* recently, a student asked me: "At what point does a video stop being a piece of documentation and become a piece of art in its own right?" My slightly flippant answer at the time was 'a point on the other side of the piece you've just seen.' And these digital shorts are a deliberate attempt on our part to continue the creative process into the documenting of the work. But I can also see the influence of these shorts on our wider practice. The lines between the live performance and the documentation of it have become more blurred for us in recent years.

An Acquired Taste (2003)

Not actually a Third Angel project; strictly speaking a Christopher Hall and Alexander Kelly film, but shot by Robert Hardy and recorded by David Mitchell, both also regular Third Angel collaborators.

An Acquired Taste is a documentary about the performance of a unique task and at the same time documentation of a unique live performance. Unique, because it can only be performed once, as it is being performed for the first time. In it, in split screen real time, I tell a story about my early drinking habits and, in response to a teenage discussion with my Dad, I attempt to acquire a taste for Guinness by drinking three pints as quickly as I can. Which takes me; it turns out, about 8 minutes.

An Acquired Taste screen grab.

Is this live art documentation? An experimental documentary? Video art? It has been exhibited as all three. But most often it is exhibited simply as a short film.

Realtime

In 2004 we spent a lot of the year exploring our relationship with time as part of our R&D project, *Karoshi* and working with three psychologists – Dr David Sheffield, Christine Sprigg and Dr Peter Totterdell. This project has proved to have an enduring influence on our practice, surfacing in *Standing Alone, Standing Together* as well as our current touring pieces *Presumption* and *9 Billion Miles From Home*.

However, the first works it produced were a video piece, *Realtime*, and a performance lecture, *Hurrysickness*. *Realtime* was originally produced as an installation, running on a loop with the audience listening on headphones, sitting in a space similar to the waiting room in which the film is set.

Realtime screen grab.

We have since discovered that it works much better as a discrete 8 minute short. The protagonist is clearly camera and audience aware, and plays with ability of video to speed up and slow down 'time'. He invites the audience to join in an experiment to measure a minute. In some ways his relationship with the audience is similar to the relationship Rachael or I would have with the audience when performing *Hurrysickness* (produced later the same year). But *Realtime* plays with time and the audiences' perception of what is going on in ways that would be impossible in live performance. It manipulates time, fast forward, rewind, replay, in ways you can only do with film.

7. Some Thoughts on Authorship

Assembly is our most recent digital short. It is far removed from its source live performance, *Parts For Machines That Do Things*, in that it doesn't even utilise documentation of the live shows. Instead it uses video footage of an experiment early on in the devising process: an overhead shot of a table on which I was finding out how long it would take to make an Airfix-style model of a passenger aircraft from scratch, having not made one since I was a child.
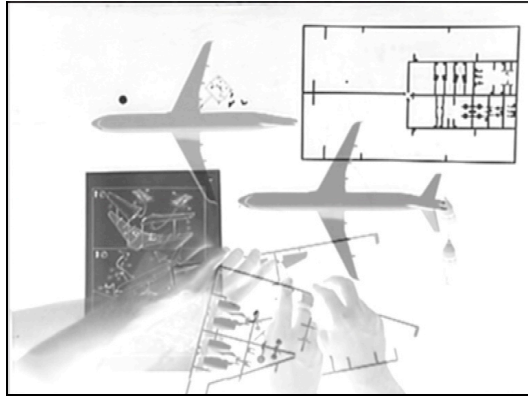
Assembly screen grab.

The accelerated time, layering of images, high contrast black and white and negative treatment of the original single shot, combine to ensure that the film focuses in on the obsession of the live performance that spawned it. It articulates, for me at least, something about the themes of cause and effect, about the intricacy of complex construction that we were exploring in the show.

I sometimes ask myself, what are these works? Who are the authors? Who should they be credited to? They are just as much collaborative pieces as the original devised performances. I shot the footage for *Assembly*, with another collaborator, Chris Thorpe, in the room – writing text for the show. I wouldn't have been doing it if he hadn't been writing. I knew I wanted to try out Airfix models (the show explores cause and effect through the territory of Aircrash Investigation), and I needed something to do whilst Chris (Thorpe) was writing. That video convinced us to use Airfix model construction in the show, and, for then, it had served its purpose. At some point later Chris (Hall) was on one of his occasional forages for footage to use, to be inspired by. I told him about the overhead model making footage and he was immediately interested in experimenting with it.

It occurs to me now that the author of these works is the company, or more precisely, the collaboration. This is recognised, implicitly, by the fact that Chris instinctively left any credits off these shorts, in favour of the company website address. We wouldn't let anyone else take rehearsal footage away to experiment with. We know Chris, we trust him. He knows us – he has found out over the years what Rachael and I like, what we respond to, and when it is worth challenging us or trying

something new. We all understand that one process can create more than one work, can seed other offshoot processes. Understand, in fact, that it is one long, multi-stranded process.

These works: born out of live performances, and the processes that made those performances. We have shown them, usually under the banner 'Third Angel: Digital Shorts', at film festivals, in Artists' Film and Video programmes, in galleries, at performance and live art events and on the internet.

But my preferred way of screening them is 'live', with an audience; taking them back to their roots, a compared screening of a variety of our film and video work, where we can introduce them and give them a context. Not because they *need* an introduction – they have frequently been screened without – but because I think the audience can get more out of them if they know a little more about the process behind the work; like getting live programme notes. And we get more out of it if we are there to experience their reaction – like we get at a live performance.