

10 Years of One Minutes – *pars minuta prima*

I

The International Bureau of Weights and Measures (BIPM: Bureau International des Poids et Mesures) in Sèvres, near Paris, is the home of ‘the metre’. It takes the form of a metal bar – an alloy of 90% platinum and 10% iridium – with two notches exactly a metre apart. The length of this ‘International Prototype Metre’ was set at the General Conference on Weights and Measures of 1875 and has remained unchanged ever since. It is the standard for measurement apparatus all over the world.

This is a fascinating idea: a piece of metal that embodies a set of agreements and that, kept under the right conditions, has represented a rule for so long. I would like to see it sometime and hold it in my hand, although I know it wouldn’t change anything if I did. It’s an abstraction: a metre only really means anything when it’s translated into something concrete – a metre of motorway, a stretch of carpet, the height of a child, a piece of wool, a brick wall or the distance between you and me.

In the same building, they also keep time: a universal time standard based on the average of two hundred atomic clocks spread around the world. In your mind you can hear them ticking and imagine the rhythm gradually building up and resolving itself into seconds and minutes.

I think there should be another cupboard, there at the International Bureau of Weights and Measures: a special One Minutes cupboard where all the One Minutes in the world can be constantly archived and preserved. Already today, there are over 12,000 minute-long films in existence and new ones are being made every week. That number must represent some new implicit principle or standard – one that does not embody a set of agreements, but can be changed at any moment by anyone, anywhere in the world, who can hold a video camera.

II

The first broadcast of Dutch One Minutes ('De Eénminuten') went out on Amsterdam cable television at midnight on 1 October 1999. It was a new monthly programme of little minute-long films made by artists. (1)

The idea was launched by the Sandberg Institute postgraduate art programme in Amsterdam. The opportunity of making and showing one minute videos would become yet another way that the institute offered its students to display their work. It gave them a quick way of gaining experience, trying out ideas and immediately showing them to the public: it was a crystal-clear result of the educational philosophy of the Sandberg Institute's initiator and director, Jos Houweling.

It was a fairly modest initiative, given that a monthly item shown at midnight on local television was unlikely to attract much public attention, and it wasn't even entirely original: there were already small festivals for one minute films in Brazil and Italy. (2) Nevertheless, the organisation proclaimed it 'A historic moment!' (3), secure in the knowledge that what passes unnoticed is unlikely to be challenged.

That small, easily missed initiative did contain a wonderful, shining, cast-iron idea: the minute. The word comes from the Latin expression *Pars minuta prima* ('the first small part' of an hour). Lasting sixty seconds (the 'second' being the next division), it is an extremely ancient measure of time: a sixtieth of a twenty-fourth of a natural day.

However, a more important fact than the long history of the minute is its current use all over the world. Languages, currencies, measures of length and volume, even calendars vary, but clock faces all over the world are marked out in minutes. Consequently, we can all guess the length of one fairly accurately without even looking at a clock. Minutes are hardwired into our brains. Got a

minute? Then you can brush your teeth. Boil a kettle. Feed the hens. Park your car, grab your bag and rush off. Skim through the headlines. Season the soup. Finally give birth to that baby. Wait for the lift. Scan a menu. Put off a difficult phone call. Put on a sari. Read and answer an SMS. Awake from a coma or breathe your last gasp. We live our lives from minute to minute to minute.

The power of a good idea is that its essence remains unchanged whatever the circumstances. It can adapt, expand, move with the times, gain new significance, or even get forgotten and then remembered again. But if it's really a good idea, it will always find a new place for itself, without needing to change its basic shape.

The 'one minute' proved to be a golden opportunity for The One Minutes organisation (4). Not just that, but they used it well. Like inspired travelling salesmen, they hawked their Minutes around the world.

The Minute proved to be a good format for artists – and soon for other people too – to try out ideas, experiment with form, make statements or challenge viewers. It was an ideal module for use in TV broadcasts, celebrations and exhibitions. And it proved to be a saleable concept worldwide. The idea of making minute-long videos is easy to explain anywhere and that's just what the One Minutes organisation did – especially after Sophie Leferink took the initiative of collaborating with UNICEF and setting up a 'youth wing' (the One Minutes Junior).

No matter how great the language barrier, everyone understands what a minute is and that makes it easy to take the idea on board. In Morocco, kids laughed so hard they practically fell off their seats when the workshop leader said they were going to make a film lasting just one minute. In Iceland, a minute was a short enough time not to get frostbite during shoots. In Amsterdam, ten-year-old Tamatea took the train with his mother to go to the 'Last Minute Desk' in het Netherlands Media Art Institute in 2002. He wanted to make a one minute

film featuring George Bush, Saddam Hussein and James Bond.

In Azerbaijan, Xiamen, Cairo, Athens, Addis Ababa, Hanoi and Calcutta...the anecdotes fly thick and fast when workshop leaders talk about their work around the world, but the stories all have one thing in common: anyone can do it and they are all enthusiastic. Even where the barrier seems insuperable (as with Chinese art students who had never done anything other than painting regulation nudes), the concept of ‘the Minute’ proves to be accessible.

So the organisation that sprang from that small seed grew at lightning speed and was soon active all over the world. Sister organisations emerged (5), television channels, art fairs and film festivals adopted aspects of the idea and interpreted it in their own way.

The organisation has a core of just four people (6) but multiplied like Al Qaeda by spawning a structure of many separate cells. Everyone who had anything to do with The One Minutes was quickly given a great deal of responsibility and the freedom to organise events, workshops or exhibitions as they thought best.

This meant that cultural differences were not ironed out, but incorporated. If it was the custom in Xiamen (the city where The One Minutes quickly gained a foothold in China) to give performances of classical dance and song during award ceremonies, then that’s what happened there. The combination of those performances with the new and sometimes off-beat Minutes produced an almost surreal ‘happening’.

It’s not only in the way things are organised and spread that the history of The One Minutes displays these evolutionary features. Darwin would be delighted with the way in which the basic module of ‘the minute’ was treated. Initially, attempts were made to change it. There were Three Minute films and later Ten Second films, for mobile phones. Eventually, however, the organisation

decided to draw a line under this approach. But then the basic one minute module was used for new kinds of projects: ‘open camera’ Minutes where the public could make their own films, portraits of cities to which a number of artists each contributed one Minute, minute-long versions of books, ‘split screen’ Minutes using re-cut archive film footage, minute-long versions of literary stories and poems, and one minute sequences shot from moving trains. What was successful survived; failures went to the wall.

III

Right from the start, One Minutes were used as a peg on which to hang all sorts of current ‘state-of-the-art’ ideas. These changed a great deal over the decade. It was a period that saw the decisive, large-scale switch from analogue to digital and from cable to wireless. At first, this technological revolution meant that the hardware piled up around us like driven snow.

Our homes contained computers *and* fax machines, cassette recorders *and* CD players, tabletop telephones with spiral cables *and* hefty mobile phones (with antennae) to carry around with us. We’d never heard of downloading but we already knew about burning CDs. Ordinary folk started cautiously buying digital still or video cameras. Maybe even a webcam. The first iPods were sold in the Netherlands in 2001, when they cost almost a thousand guilders each (399 Euros in today’s money). But the impact of the technological revolution was the most important thing.

It changed our lives: within a few years, we had to get used to being contactable everywhere, to multitasking, and to the public exposure that we could all achieve. Anyone could start a ‘blog’. Anyone could be famous (7). And everyone could be seen. The world became an ever-open eye.

There were political consequences too: one reason why the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers had such a psychological impact was that there were countless

cameras to record the disaster and that the images could be sent almost instantly around the world from so many different standpoints. Democracy became a broader concept and dictatorships could no longer maintain hermetic borders. The stream of digital wireless information seeped through every barrier. Last year, Twitter disseminated two million tweets about the irregularities in the Iranian elections. When the country's government blocked twitter.com, thousands of people all over the world rushed to defeat the blockade by offering the population a digital 'escape route' via their own computers.

The One Minutes changed constantly as this revolution progressed. They began, says founder Jos Houweling, as 'a response to visual culture, advertising, the work of VJs and the Internet' (8). Not that anybody then knew exactly what impact the Internet was going to have, but the notion that there was a connection was already around.

In a more reflective mode, The One Minutes were seen as part of (or indeed as an alternative to) the tradition of video art. Art critics were relieved to see the emergence of a short, tightly edited form of video to challenge the endless and often deadly boring video art of the turn of the century. (9). Was the one minute video a new embodiment of the adage 'less is more'? Or had it become, with the spread of in-built video cameras in every mobile phone, as accessible a form of artistic expression as drawing? (10, 11)

The One Minutes also ignored traditional ways of showing videos. Remembering the way video cassettes travelled via unofficial channels all over the world, critic Tineke Reijnders saw them as foreshadowing the global spread of One Minutes. (12)

At the start of the 21st century, both the media and the visual arts were obsessed by the idea of 'interactivity'. Might not One Minutes actually serve to counterbalance that trend? Or, as media curator Bart Rutten asked himself, 'can we accept the idea of *not* being in control, even for just one minute?' (13)

And now that Hyves, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are all common

currency, there is a tendency to see a role for The One Minutes in just that area. ‘The new generation lives and breathes sound and image’, says Jan Vaneessen, film critic and presenter of the Flemish One Minute Awards (14). Just sum up your day, let your friends know, report on the progress of a project or pour out your heart: you can do it all in a minute, *à la minute* and it takes only a minute to watch. The One Minute does the same as all these new media: it conveys and disseminates a message in a quick, snappy way which is simple and accessible to all.

It’s all true and at the same time it’s complete nonsense. In ten or twenty years’ time, virtually all the ideas and interpretations in this essay will be out-dated – all except one. The minute will remain, because the idea of ‘the minute’ will always be understandable, even if art or the world at large passes our understanding; you can cling to it like a drowning man clinging to a piece of driftwood.

Because the idea of ‘the minute’ is as sound as the Golden Section, the contrast between black and white or the Lego brick, the basis of The One Minutes is indestructible. In itself, it is neither good nor bad. It is just a form that ideas can inhabit. So the criticism (repeatedly heard, both inside and outside the organisation) that One Minutes lack quality just doesn’t stand up.

That criticism tends to come from the art world, the cradle of The One Minutes. But the way they are disseminated and the huge accessibility of ‘the minute’ means that The One Minutes have long ceased to be the sole preserve of the artistic establishment. A One Minute may be art, but it may also be a sociological experiment, a cry from the heart or a means of emancipation. One Minutes are not subject to the conventions of the art world and that in itself is illuminating.

I have personal experience of the shock they can be to the system of the average art critic. I felt it in 2008, when I walked into Beijing’s Today Art

Museum, where The One Minutes organisation was holding a major exhibition in the context of the Olympic Games. There were almost 800 Minutes on show from 90 different countries. Like the other visitors, I sank onto the mats slung in front of the screens and found myself whisked away on a world tour. The One Minutes I saw were like surgical incisions into the body of different countries: tiny, private, sometimes to the point of incomprehensibility, but always intense. As a Western-trained art critic, I had no way of responding because the images had no need to conform to my framework of reference and mental toolkit. African storytelling, Scandinavian colours, Asian humour, Russian violence and much, much more rubbed shoulders in a confused and highly condensed miscellany before my very eyes and, by the time I left the hall, I was no longer an art critic, but a – slightly dizzy and bewildered – citizen of the world.

IV

The only way to conclude is with one of my own favourites. So here it is: my favourite Minute. An old lady wants to cross the road in Paris. All around her, pedestrians and cars race past while she just stands and waits. She's not just very old, but also very bent. Her upper body leans forward at an angle of sixty degrees. Her beige beret is level with the door handles of the cars whizzing past. The light goes green. She's off! At a rapid pace, she shuffles over the zebra crossing. For a moment, the situation is reversed. Now everything else stands still while the solitary small figure shuffles across, head down, as if traversing a tunnel in time. She makes it across and the thunder of the traffic resumes.

So many Minutes I could mention; and so many Minutes I'll never get to see. But some Minutes linger in the mind never to be forgotten, like this *Avenue de Clichy* (15). And those ones will always be with me, little pearls in the oyster of my mind.

Now it's up to you to find yours.

- (1) An hour-long broadcast made up of Dutch One Minutes had already been produced for local television in 1998, but 1-10-1999 is the date that marks the birth of The One Minutes as an organisation.
- (2) The Do Minuto festival in Brazil, in existence since 1991, claims to be the oldest one minute film festival.
- (3) Jos Houweling, *De Verenigde Sandbergen* no. 9, 1999.
- (4) The One Minutes organisation (originally known by the Dutch name 'De Eénminuten') became a charitable foundation and adopted its English name in 2002.
- (5) See www.theoneminutes.org.
- (6) Directors Jos Houweling and Sophie Leferink, programmer Ineke Bakker and Bienenke Bennekers, and Anja Masling.
- (7) Singer Esmée Denters was the first 'YouTube star'. She was offered a record contract in 2007, after using YouTube to disseminate daily films of herself singing in front of her webcam.
- (8) Jos Houweling in *De Verenigde Sandbergen* no. 9, 1999.
- (9) 'Ziende blind', Lucette ter Borg and Sacha Bronwasser, *De Volkskrant* newspaper, 18 October 2001.
- (10) Sacha Bronwasser, *De Verenigde Sandbergen* no. 27, 2004.
- (11) 'Eenminutenmoehheid', Marina de Vries, *De Volkskrant* newspaper, 5 June 2008.
- (12) Article by Tineke Reijnders in *Parkett* no. 70, summer 2004.
- (13) Bart Rutten, *De Verenigde Sandbergen* no. 27, 2004.
- (14) *De Verenigde Sandbergen* no. 49, Special Edition Future, February 2006.
- (15) *Avenue de Clichy, Spijker and Splinter*, 2002.

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