

Things that start slowly

<https://vimeo.com/25080056>



Abstract

This article looks at the relationship of Screendance, time and loss through an analysis of a film triptych, made in 2010, called *Things that start slowly*. With particular reference to Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006), the discussion focuses on the way movement and stillness in Screendance resonate with the temporality of grief.

1. Introduction

Things that start slowly

Things that start slowly is a Screendance that explores the relationship of time and loss. It was made as a response to losing my first baby. The film looks at how we can feel safe again, when events make us aware of, what Mulvey refers to as, 'the intractable nature of time' (2006:31). In this article, through an analysis of the work, I look at how the medium of Screendance invites the viewer to rehearse feelings of fear or safety around loss, because of the particular relationship of the body on film, to time.

The discussion focuses on the way movement and stillness onscreen resonate with the perceived movement or non-movement of time within the experience of grief. The first part looks at movement in the work, the second focuses on its instances of stillness, and in the final section I suggest that *Things that start slowly* offers the possibility of, what could be termed, a *moving stillness*, a state that echoes the process of incorporation, which is the process of recovery.¹

Things that start slowly is a film triptych. The central image is a single low quality shot of a baby feeding from its mother. On either side of this there is footage of two dancers continually re-framing and re-positioning themselves in relation to the camera. On the left screen they are both five months pregnant and on the right screen they are both nine months pregnant. The images of pregnancy are

intercut with a progression of black and white still photographs showing a ship sinking. Over these images the film layers sound of wind and water. At times, the viewer also hears someone talking about fate and the transience of the body. The work lasts about nine minutes and has an intense and meditative quality.

Originally this work was intended to be a live performance, but when I lost the baby I was carrying we stopped the process. When we came to start work on it again both I, and the other dancer in the company, were pregnant again so the decision was made to make a film called *At 5 months*. The main body of this work consisted of an improvisation to camera where the dancers controlled the image that was produced. When we were nine months pregnant, we performed this improvisation live, alongside images from that film. Fourteen months after that I decided to film the last time I breastfed my daughter, at five in the morning, with the camera resting on her toy box.

Exploring death through the medium of Screendance felt very logical, so logical in fact that I wasn't aware that I was doing it, until a long time after I had done it. In 2010 I edited these different places and times together into a triptych form, finishing the work three years after we started. It is a document of my experience of loss.

Loss

Miscarriage leaves a double absence: the loss itself and the consequent loss of any physical presence to mourn. This film was necessary as I was left with no traces or documents to point to. The narratives formed by the images in the film are part real and part desire. It is both an imagined memorial to the baby I lost and an attempt to preserve images of my daughter who lived, in case I lost her as well. As such, the footage is testimony to the grinding process of getting to twelve weeks or five months, or nine months, listening for movement and waiting for elusive feelings of reassurance. It reveals the deep anxieties that underlie all processes of capture or preservation. The film also acts as an attempt to counteract, what felt like, the absurd disruption of the narrative of reproduction I had experienced. To reassert the way things should happen, to reassure.

Screendance and loss: Movement and stillness

'The words "*stillborn*" strikes fear in a parent's breast' (Johnson, 2007:19).

On the most fundamental level, movement is life and stillness is its absence. Life also insists that the body moves through time and death, that the body is no longer in time. Dance invites us to be aware of the inevitable progression of the body towards stillness, for when we watch dance we know that the movement has to, and will, end. In this respect, the relationship between dance and death is an integral one. There is fear and joy in recognising this; indeed Phelan suggests that dance itself 'emerges from the oscillation of our desire to be animated, and our desire to cease to be' (2004:18).

Screendance raises further questions in terms of the connection between movement, stillness and loss, as movement inscribed on film does not have to end, or can at the very least be played again. Without wanting to rehearse the well-mapped 'question of presence' (Brannigan, 2011:8) in Screendance, the complexity, of course, is that filmed movement is irrevocably bound to its moment of inscription; it can only be that 'now' played again in this 'now'. Unlike live dance, where dancer and audience share the same moment of time, with its possibility of movement/change, in Screendance the image's relationship to time remains still and only the viewer's position moves forwards through time, a significant point I return to further on.

My analysis of the relationship between movement, stillness and time in *Things that starts slowly* begins by looking at the movement in the work. Here I focus on the movement of the dancers, exploring a section I described earlier called 'the continuous improvisation' that contains endlessly shifting, un-phrased material. The improvisation is discussed in relation to Brannigan's assertion that continuous movement, which she argues is a distinctive feature of much Screendance, resonates with Bergson's description of the experience of modern time as one of continual flux and unarticulated flow. In her 2011 book, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*, Brannigan articulates Deleuze's connection between Bergson and film, usefully extending this connection to Screendance. Drawing on this, I suggest that there are some interesting connections between the sense of continuous 'now' evoked by the endless movement in *Things that start slowly*, and the unarticulated timelessness of trauma.

Grief's continuous present prevents articulations of time, such as the separation of past and present. Distinctions such as this not only help create a sense of perspective and progression but also, a sense of what might be coming next. I go on to look at the ways that *Things that starts slowly* also acts to counteract a sense of timelessness through using patterns of moment and stillness that 'attempt to defeat transience, by bending it into a pattern' (Connor, 1997:124). Here I focus on returning images in the work, and their contribution to a sense of narrative movement and linear progression, suggesting that these devices can make the spectator feel, on some level, that their existence through time is safer, less transient, and the future more predictable. This section ends with a discussion of the way the use of text, or authorial voice in the work acts both to reinforce and undermine the perception of the body as an unstable, unpredictable phenomenon changing through time.

The second section focuses on stillness. Here I consider the connection between stillness and death in the work with reference to the physical movement of the film itself, particularly its use of still images and still camera shots. In this discussion I refer to Mulvey's seminal text *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006) where she argues that whilst the capture of a still image,

'marks a transition from the animate to the inanimate, from life to death' (2006:15). Drawing on psychoanalytic discourse to connect ideas of stillness, time and mortality, Mulvey argues that the ability of digital film to be stilled at any point foregrounds the integral presence of death within film and, therefore, the mortality of the spectator. As Mulvey writes:

The presence of the past in the cinema is also the presence of the body resurrected and these images can trigger, if only by association, questions that still seem imponderable; the nature of time, the fragility of human life and the boundary between life and death (2006:53)

I consider the way the still images in *Things that start slowly* work to raise the imponderable questions Mulvey describes above, looking particularly at their existence both as individual images and images within a progressive sequence leading, inescapably, towards the inevitable stillness at the end of the film.

The final section looks at the way *Things that start slowly* creates moments of what I term 'moving stillness'. I explore this first in relation to the film's triptych structure where the elements both move through time, and remain present at all times. Following this, through a discussion of my changing relationship with one of the film's central images of unfolding, the idea of moving stillness is considered in terms of how my position as spectator shifts through time, in relation to the film which remains bound to its time of production. At the end I consider the way these moments of moving stillness, where some things (marks) remain as the body moves forwards through time, might articulate a way of perceiving time that eases a sense of loss, particularly the kind of loss that leaves no document.

2. Movement

Movement and trauma

In the footage played on the two side screens we witness the dancers in the process of inscribing themselves onscreen. The dancers film themselves from one angle whilst watching and recording their image from another. The dislocation between the spatial front and the filmed front, plus the possibility of the zoom altering the frame, disorientates the dancers. Their improvised efforts to continually re-orientate themselves, efforts that prevent progression or repetition, create a strong sense of 'now' for the viewer as they watch the dancers' immediate responses to changes through time.

This footage refuses stillness as a point of conclusion or rest and instead presents each moment as a new 'now' rather than a before and after. This generates a sense of tension as the viewer waits for the dancers to arrive or settle. Phelan, in writing about Trisha Brown's dancing, writes that the slight pauses in between her movements 'claim our attention because [they] seem both

to promise and to threaten our restless longing to be still' (2004:18). Here this restless longing for stillness is continually maintained as the dancers keep shifting and adjusting, echoing perhaps both the continual movement of the foetus inside the womb and our equally strong desire to keep living and moving.ⁱⁱ

Brannigan (2011) associates this type of continuous, transitional movement with the genre of Screendance, arguing that one of the things that makes it unique is the way that its ungraspable movement emphasises transience and its own disappearance. This movement quality is achieved through a rejection of traditional dance phrase shapes (echoing a similar rejection of narrative shape which I return to further on) that are created by privileging particular instants in time rather than movement through time. An example of this might be a clear beginning, middle and end established by the use of a repeated still motif. Brannigan connects these choreographic non-structures with Bergson's model of modern time as one of endless flux and immediacy. Without the sense of start and finish and, therefore, 'then' and 'now' created by points of stillness in this section, the overall impression is one of continuous 'now'; the always-moving movement working ultimately to create a sense of stillness.

There is a connection here between this moving stillness and Freud's description of trauma as a timeless state of continual present where unconscious processes are 'not ordered temporally, or altered by the passage of time' (Gay, 1989:582). When loss, or trauma, happens, words of movement such as, moving on, getting over and moving through are quickly offered. But the difficulty of grief, at its peak, is that it is experienced as a continual nowⁱⁱⁱ. I realised some time afterwards the process of making the film that it allowed me to gather experiences from different times and places and process them into 'an' event that could create a sense of 'then' and 'now' for me to counteract this sense of timelessness.

Connected to this, one of the complexities when a baby dies before it exists separately from the mother, is that it makes it difficult to move on, when there is no distinct object of loss to move on from. You are the only physical connection to the object of your mourning and you cannot leave yourself behind. Without recourse to cuts in the film, allowing them to miraculously appear in a different relationship to the screen, the women are caught between trying to elude and trying to capture their own image. So although the movement may have qualities of continuity and non-arrival that resemble the Screendance examples Brannigan cites, in this film the movement is caused by an inability to find stillness. The women are not celebrating transience and change they are trying unsuccessfully to re-establish certainty and a sense of permanence; a desire I now go on to consider.

Movement patterns and predictions

'...the idea that anything can happen becomes an overwhelming statement, rather than an exciting place of possibility' (Things that start slowly 2010).

One of the effects of this movement without end, and by this I mean a lack of clear phrase shape with a resolve, is that it makes it hard to predict what will come next or recall what the dancers just did. This timelessness, where no discernible patterns of movement and stillness are offered, creates an unsettling feeling that anything might happen^{iv}.

When an event pierces the psyche, we are made aware of the possibility of death, our own and others. This 'trauma' is often accompanied by a profound 'loss of belief in the predictability of the world' (Garland, 2002:11). It leads one to question: will someone that was here today be here tomorrow? If something happens once will it happen again? In order to be able to reassert a sense of what normally happens, you need to a) identify what is normal, to be able to see a pattern, and b) trust that what is normal will remain normal, to see that pattern repeated. If no patterns can be discerned, and here I argue that this echoes with the continuous present experience of trauma, then life would feel like an unpredictable place and it is this that gives rise to the tension between transience, the possibility of change through time, and stability, the belief that some things will remain through time.

'patterns and percentages offer a seductive sense of protection' (Things that start slowly 2010).

In order to be recognised as such, patterns are, by necessity, acts of repetition. Part of the importance in identifying a pattern in an artwork is that, as Gilpin suggests, 'our access to repeated experiences gives us the illusion that we can control the future and perhaps, the past' (Gilpin in Parviainen, 1998:173). A simple example of this might be the reassuring effect of a reoccurring movement pattern that suggests to the viewer that things will return rather than disappear. The process of structuring time in art is, of course, an echo of the way we process time in our lives. As Mulvey writes, '[h]uman consciousness creates ordered time to organise the rhythms of everyday life [...] in recognition of the intractable nature of time itself' (2006:31).

In the footage of the continual improvisation, the same dancers are seen again at five and nine months, doing the same thing, and wearing the same clothes. This same but different image creates a form of classical repetition, repetition with change through time rather than the unchanging relentless repetition of trauma. These repeated but different images of pregnancy, five months on the left and nine months on the right, enclose the central image of the baby. Here, time is given shape using the traditional left to right flow of the images onscreen. This is

accentuated by the side screen footage being slowed down, representing the past, and the image of the baby being screened in real time, as if it were the present. It produces a clear sense of narrative movement arcing from conception to birth. Here, through editing time, the body is made stable and the future predictable as the body moves reliably from five months pregnant, to nine months pregnant, to baby. Mulvey connects the motion of film with narrative and time, stating that

'Linearity, causality and the linking figure of metonymy, all crucial elements in story-telling, find a correspondence in the unfolding, forward-moving direction of film' (2006:69).

This predictable forward motion creates a sense of stability for the viewer; it gives them something they can rely on. What they expect to see is what they do see, which lends the film a sense of solidity and permanence, offsetting the transience of the movement itself.

Movement and the stability of the body

'the taste in my mouth will be gone in...15 seconds' (Things that start slowly 2010)

A sense of stability is also offered by the spoken text in the film, which delivers authoritative truths, about unknowable things using a predictable repetitive structure. The text lists a series of things connected to bodily experience for example; the ground we walk on, the clothes we are wearing or the taste in our mouth. With each one it offers a precise time scale for when this phenomena will disappear. These pronouncements are made in a believable, authoritative, middle-England voice; they make the unknowable knowable and the unstable body stable.

Putting language and the body together always raises issues of time. As Lepecki writes, language can be seen as operating as a kind of "cure" – a mnemonic supplement – for dance's somewhat embarrassing predicament of losing itself at the very moment of emergence' (1999:83). Although film, like language, could be described as an inscribed practice, Mulvey defines it as an indexical sign, as although images form part of the original event, they are irrevocably bound to the time of their production. She contrasts this with symbolic signs, such as the inscribed practice of language, that operate outside of time, beyond individual instances. Her distinction echoes the traditional epistemological separation, within western analytical philosophy, of stable propositional concepts, operating beyond time, and the 'intrinsically indeterminate' status of the body as it is lived and experienced in time (Parviainen, 2002:11).

Things that start slowly blurs these polarised positions by binding the authoritative text to the body that speaks it. The pronouncements are made in the

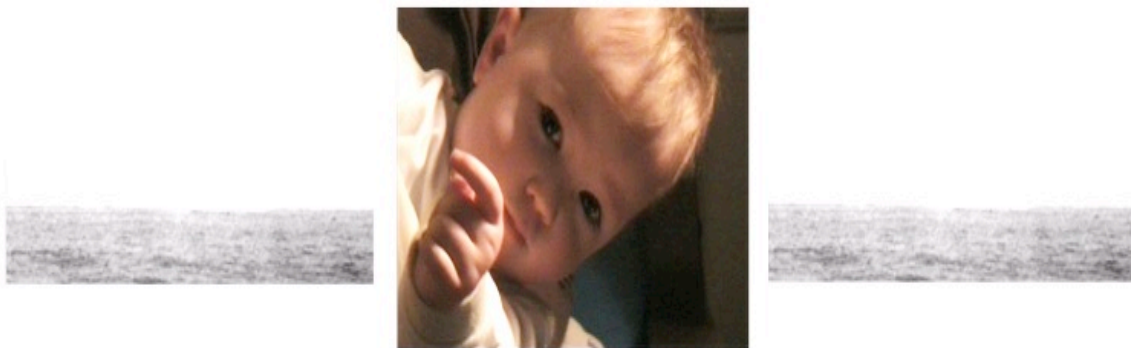
first person, emphasising the subjective nature of the predictions. The claims, whilst plausible at first, become increasingly unfeasible, such as a precise prediction as to when every memory of someone will disappear, or how long a piece of clothing will last. The speaker's pauses suggest that they are guessing, undermining the authority of their claims. Also, the fact that the words are spoken binds them more closely to their moment of utterance, emphasising the point that they will remain only as long as the body that voices them.

3. Stillness

Still camera shots

A constant in the film is the central, unmoving, shot of a baby feeding from its mother. The length of the feed dictated the duration of the film. For the majority of the film you only see the back of the baby's head. The baby's movements are continuous and small which allows the eye, once the image has been registered, to be drawn to the more obviously changing images either side of it. As such the image acts as anchor in the work, it feels reliable and we do not expect it to change.

This unedited shot allows the viewer, and the original event, to share a 'single measure of time' emphasising feelings of immediacy for the viewer (Pennell, 2012:76). In contrast to the footage on the two side screens that are slowed down and clearly edited, it feels more 'live' because it is shown in its entirety, in real time. However the stillness of the static camera shot – whilst emphasising the liveness of the subject, also pulls attention on the impassive mechanism of the camera. Here, unlike the clearly created focus of the continual improvisation shot where the remote control is on view, the liveness of the baby is captured by an inanimate eye. The cameras' gaze is passive and lifeless, it suggests eyes that are open but do not see, adding a difficult edge to the image^v.



Near the end of the film the baby turns, seemingly to look at the camera/viewer, and smiles. This is striking because it feels unexpected and is the only moment of direct eye contact with the viewer. Babies demand immediate interaction and it has been interesting to note that at screenings, many people who watch the film find that they smile back at the baby, as if they were interacting in real time. This is a significant point in the film as it is one of the few moments where both outer

screens show the same still image of the flat sea concealing the capsized boat below it. It is the effect of these images that I go on to consider next.

Moving stills

This photograph of the flat sea is the last in a series that show a ship gradually sinking. These are shown on the two side screens intercutting the moving images of the pregnant dancers. In these pictures, the constant movement of the sea, which should echo the baby's continuous natural movement, is frozen. Their stillness appears ominous against the continual movement they interrupt, the contrast emphasising the fact that they are 'drained of movement, the commonly accepted sign of life' (Mulvey, 2006:22). The photographs are black and white and faded, further emphasizing the immediacy of the baby in contrast with their already 'pastness'. The repetition of the image makes it appear as if the baby is surrounded by empty sea, its 'liveness' contained by utter stillness, by death. The image of lifeless containment echoes and contrasts the images of pregnancy it has replaced. As the viewer smiles back at the baby they are, perhaps, made aware that the baby is already not there.

The photographs appear at regular intervals and in a causal order. Although they contain no movement, unlike all the other types of footage, the still images progress inevitably towards this final image of complete immersion. So now, as Pennell writes

'[t]he still image becomes a world of that which is waiting for something to happen; it adopts aspects of the linear trajectory and future anticipation of the moving image' (2012:74).

This relentless progressive structure of the images is echoed in the text as it lists aspects of the world that will eventually disappear, describing larger and larger parts of the world fading in longer and longer time spells. Just before the baby turns towards the viewer a woman's voice tells us that 'every bit of ground I ever stepped on will be gone in... 2 billion years' inviting the viewer to consider their own disappearance, and the disappearance of any trace of their existence over vast periods of time. Again, like the still images there is narrative movement here but it is a movement towards stillness, a progression towards distinction. The doubled image of the flat sea acting as a culmination of all the losses described in the text.

I was drawn to these images because of the sense of inevitability a sinking ship has, for once it has taken on water, the only way for it to go is down. The progression of the ship's demise is predictable and relentless, echoing, perhaps, what Phelan (2004) describes earlier as our restless desire for stillness^{vi}. The film ends in an abrupt cut. Something was there and now its not. Time is stopped.^{vii} Here again, unlike other sections of the work the viewer is offered something they can rely on, although perhaps not the thing they might want.

4. Moving stillness

In the triptych form of *Things that start slowly*, all the moments in time remain at all times. The women move *from* being five months *to* nine months pregnant but they also remain *at* five months *and* nine months pregnant. The fact that the images remain present, rather than being erased within the successional flow of a single screen, works to emphasise their moment of filming alongside their role in a linear narrative. Contrasting his description of the experience of modern time as an endless flow, described earlier, Bergson identifies archaic time as the process of identifying and preserving 'mental states' within 'the flow of experience' that our lives are made up of (Bergson in Brannigan, 2011:26). Brannigan connects this with the process of privileging particular movements or steps in dance, extracting them from the general flow of movement. The triptych form makes it possible to hold in our minds that a linear sense of time is constructed from a series of instants. It is a reminder that a sense of progression is both seductive and illusory. Like the privileged moments of 'reassurance scans' at six weeks or five months, images can only offer reassurance for that split second, any truth or resonance beyond that moment is constructed.

However, the spatial arrangement of the triptych has a counteractive, reassuring effect. The images of pregnancy enclose the central image of the baby, acting as a kind of spatial and conceptual scaffold for the work. In this triptych the body does not fail to contain the baby, it is firmly held within the two maternal images, images that are comprised of and in their placement echo, the maternal image schemata of containment^{viii}.

Incorporation

The question that started the making of *Things that start slowly* was: how can we find a sense of stability after an experience of loss? There is a particular image in the film that, I would suggest, offers some answer to that question. It is an image of one of the dancers folding forwards so that her back is at a right angle to the ground. At the time the action evoked other instances of folding for me, such as folding in to protect something, the weight of a baby pulling me forwards, the strong line of my back folding over the soft inside of the body, folding over in an attempt to cover absence. As I watch it now, and at other times since, it evokes different folding experiences such as they way my daughter carefully folds paper, doubling over with the pain of contractions, folds in my skin or folds in bags that small things are always getting lost in.

Here we see that although the film is preserved in time, I am not. As Walsh writes:

'The index is never a silent memento of the past, but is always being animated by the gaze that looks upon it, a gaze that is open to a temporality not just of the past, but also to the ambiguity of the future' (2006:7)

So as the body moves it 'brings the past to the present' (Klemola, 1991:73), and whilst Screendance might halt that process by recording the body at a particular moment, the act of watching reanimates the image by bringing the spectator's presentness to that, now past, moment. As I watch, I add more experiences to my perception of the image. The action of folding remains the same but each meeting combines that which is long known with that which is immediately experienced. In watching I bring movement to the stillness of the film.

This, perhaps, is why I was drawn to the triptych form for this film, as here, although each moment contributes to a successive linear pattern, each moment in time also remains intact. Here we have stasis and movement combined - an image, which unlike a 'linear concept of time [which] attempts to divest itself of past residues' (Mulvey, 2006:24), has a clear connection with the ability of movement to exist, both in the instant of its execution and in the ability of the body to incorporate its losses.

Being marked

'When we call an event traumatic, we are borrowing a word from the Greek where it refers to a piercing of the skin' (Garland, 2002:9)

I was told by a man in his seventies, that he and his wife lost their first child fifty years ago, and that it left a mark that they feel even now. At the time this scared me because I thought, like the model of linear time outlined above, that recovery was achieved through moving on. The process of being marked, however, is part of the process of incorporation, which in turn is part of the process of recovery. By bringing an experience into the body you can move on without having to leave it behind.^{ix}

It is interesting that Mulvey notes that '...[t]rauma leaves a mark on the unconscious a kind of index of the psyche that parallels the photograph's trace of the original event' (2006:65). The combination of the spectator and the film, the preserved mark and its animation through time, is maybe a useful model for coming to terms with our own mortality, with loss.

Notes

i □ It is difficult to write about one's own work, to be both subject and object. It is important to note though, that this writing represents a retrospective analysis of the film as I see it now, rather than a historical account of the thinking that informed its production, although of course this informs it. Indeed, the changing position of myself as spectator forms a central part of the analysis.

ii '...all human activity can, broadly speaking, be placed into two categories: that which

pushes in the direction of constructiveness, connectedness and life, and that which pulls in the opposite direction towards destructiveness, disintegration and ultimately death' (Garland, 2002: 25)

iii It is interesting that the traditional 'flashback trope' which is used as a way of 'signalling and exploring the return of traumas' (Turim, 2001:207) suggests a linear model of time where images from the past invade the present. Most writing about trauma indicates that trauma is experienced as a continual now, and that a distinction between then and now is the key to recovery.

iv Before I experienced loss I used to feel excited by the thought that anything was possible but I realise now that, by 'anything' I meant 'anything good'.

v See Ryan Bishop's *Method, Techne and Auto-kinesis* (2012) for an interesting discussion of Derrida's notion of techne.

vi 'All pain comes from living' Hannah Segal points out (1993). The wish to avoid that pain, to end the struggle, can become very powerful' (Garland, 2002:25).

vii The films' abrupt ending felt for one viewer like her own grief. Her daughter died and she felt that any sense of future stopped at that point.

viii See Faith's 2004 essay 'Schematizing the Maternal Body: The Cognitive-Linguistic Challenge to Poststructuralist Valorizations of Metonymy' for a detailed study of this image.

ix Here I am offered a chance for the baby to be still with me.

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Biography

Anna Macdonald's work spans site specific performance, installation, and screen-based practice. She brings a choreographic sense of spatial dynamic to visual media, focusing on the way movement patterns convey something of our lived experience in a non-literal way. Her experimental film works have received International recognition including being selected for VideodanzBA, Argentina, Dascamdanse, Belgium and being nominated for the 2011 International Video Dance awards in Barcelona. Recent live works have received the 2012 *Shimmy* Commission and the 2013 *Million Minutes* commission, London.

Alongside her freelance practice, Anna is a senior lecturer in contemporary arts at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Things that start slowly 2010

Performers: Penny Collinson, Anna Macdonald and Molly Macdonald

Editing: Anna Macdonald

Writing: Anna Macdonald and Mark Whitelaw

Original Camera operator: Danny Williams

Production: Sam Heitzman

Screenings

Barcelona International video dance prize 2011 (nominated).

Moves International Video Arts Festival 2011, Liverpool

Roar, Raw, Rare International artists festival, Blue Coat Gallery, Liverpool

Time pieces exhibition, Peter Scott Gallery

DANCAMDANSE, Belgium

VideodanzaBA, Argentina

Axis open space - Women's day exhibition 2010

Dance Cuts platform, 2010.

