

Mark Lyken's *1300 SHOTS*

Mark Lyken took part LUX Scotland's ONE ARTIST | ONE WORK event in June 2021, presenting and discussing his work *1300 SHOTS*.

We commissioned writer Tina Fiske to respond to the work and are delighted to publish Tina's response below.

A momentary shuffling and taking of seats in the dark - the sound of the screen extending - a low expansive soundtrack commences. Mark Lyken's *1300 SHOTS* begins with no particular scene setting, nor any establishing shots. Instead an exhale and a brief whisper prime us that this is a cinema, that a film has begun. A man and a woman flicker into view – seated side by side in green fabric chairs, facing the camera, which sits between them and the screen they are watching. Their eyes cast upwards, tracking the film action, which in turn throws illumination onto them.

The film itself tells us no more than this, aside, briefly, from the film's title. Those who know their film history might be led to correctly identify the film playing on screen as Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), comprised as it is of 1300 shots each lasting between three and four seconds. By contrast, in a single continuous fixed shot lasting a further 73 minutes we watch Mike Kane and Laura Walker as they watch Eisenstein's film. They begin attentively, their eyes scanning the action. Six and seven minutes in, the briefest of interactions, a smile as Kane looks left and then right, as one might in a busy cinema, before he retrieves a beer can from a bag. Walker smiles to acknowledge him as he opens the can, and it is a further three minutes before she in turn drinks from her water bottle and self-consciously peels an orange. Complicit glances, brief exchanges and occasional reactions play out between them in parallel with the film's Shostakovich score and the drama unfolding on the screen before them. At one stage, Walker becomes visibly emotional, her eyes filling briefly with tears. Our attention is held by them, as theirs is by the film; their absorption in the act of watching, their sense of duration curiously mirrored in our own.

Only when *Battleship Potemkin* concludes and the theatre lights lift do we glean more. The wider auditorium comes into view. Walker and Kane stand up and leave, and the deep familiarity in their distant conversation with Lyken leads us to question what we have just watched or observed: a fiction, a piece of observational cinema, a re-enactment, a double portrait? The film itself does not yield wider facts aside from a few scant credits, but they are these: Lyken filmed *1300 SHOTS* in The Steps Theatre, Dundee, formerly an arthouse cinema that he patronised in the late 1980s and early 1990s as did Kane and Walker.

Closed in its then form in the late 1990s, the cinema remains intact despite major regeneration in Dundee in the intervening time. The film's pretext hinges on The Steps as a place of personal significance, of time spent for the three of them. Old friends Kane and Walker are filmed sitting in the seats that they would habitually

occupy when attending film screenings there, and in which Lyken first spotted them decades ago. These aspects are only implied in the end credits of the film, and yet they are present within the film in an unspoken way, imbuing it with an informality and intimacy that would have been hard to achieve otherwise given the film's overall economy of means. Lyken chose not to interview either Walker or Kane on camera, or include any direct reference to the cinema's history or to archival material. As such, the resulting film is a fascinating hybrid that is rooted in memory and place, whilst simultaneously refusing to disclose those things in any straightforward way.

Lyken has spoken about *1300 SHOTS* as forming something of a bridge between previous experimental documentary work such as *Taifeng and the Motorway Saint* (2018) and newer work such as *Waiting for The Buff to Rub Me Out* (2021), which Lyken again shot in Dundee featuring local graffiti writer Allana James. Although superficially two very distinct films, *Taifeng* and *1300 SHOTS* (2020) both explore place and people, though from apparently contrasting positions. Lyken filmed *Taifeng* whilst on a month-long residency in Taiwan, travelling between three different cities – Taipei, Kaohsiung and Tainan - over that time. Beautifully shot, Lyken filmed places and people unknown to him, allowing his camera to record incidental moments and stories: a woman watching something on her phone in a window as she sells tickets, a couple perching on a branch at a scenic viewpoint, steam rising at a hot spring, a typhoon descending. The film shifts effortlessly between the elemental and the everyday, building a picture of contemporary Taiwanese life that, whilst visually rich, allowed for no especial agency on the part of those filmed.

Perhaps to address issues around the agency of the subject, a local audience was assembled via an open call to watch and spontaneously reflect on the footage together. Their resulting commentary punctuates the film much like a side chorus; unlike Walker and Kane who watch a film we do not see, we watch in parallel with this unseen audience. Their insights serve to remind of the limits of what observational footage by itself can disclose.

As Philippa Lovatt has said: '*Through the voice-over, we come to understand that the spaces that Lyken chooses to pause on are significant for the Taiwanese audience in terms of how they represent in different ways, how the Taiwanese see themselves and their place in the rapidly changing world.*'¹ In arguably the most memorable sequence in the film, we see one of the commentators, a young artist, filmed in close-up performing a series of loud animalistic howls, intercut with shots of the typhoon reaching its peak outside. It is an extraordinary passage and a powerful reminder that language too has its limits.

With both *Taifeng* and *1300 SHOTS*, Lyken made choices that reduced his own directorial control, either accepting or introducing apparently limiting factors – whether filmic, personal or contextual - to provide agency to their subjects and structure the films. With *Taifeng*, the short duration of Lyken's residency (as well

as his lack of spoken Mandarin) form a set of limits, much as the running time of *Battleship Potemkin* does in *1300 SHOTS*. Lyken has said that he selected *Battleship Potemkin* to screen at The Steps primarily because that it was a silent, scored film. Moreover, the particular print watched by Walker and Kane is in the public domain and so free to use. The use of strategies such as these would seem to owe much to filmmakers such as Andy Warhol or James Benning, whose films Lyken has acknowledged as references for *1300 SHOTS*.² Numerous films by Warhol and Benning use external givens, such as the length of a single film roll, or train schedules, or the duration of a particular act (smoking a cigarette, eating a banana, reading a book) to determine the running times or structures of their films.

Compositionally, the framing of Kane and Walker in *1300 SHOTS* owes much to Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-66), which were shot indoors against an ambiguous backdrop. Over a two-year period, Warhol shot 472 individual screen tests using a stationary tripod-mounted Bolex 16mm film camera to record his subjects using a single 100ft roll. Instructing each sitter - most of whom were friends and acquaintances - to look straight at the camera lens and not to move or blink, Warhol would start the camera and walk away. Interestingly, James Benning has confessed to a similar strategy in the making of *Twenty Cigarettes* (2011), one of his few films focusing on people as subjects: '*I am most uncomfortable dealing with people. I'm nervous like they are in front of the camera. That's why when I shot 20 Cigarettes I got out of there so I wouldn't spread this nervousness. And they were my friends, so it was easy.*'³

In the case of Warhol's screen tests, the resulting portraits each comprised a single shot of their subject that lasted the duration of the film roll moving through the camera, and captured their response to the presence of the camera and the duration. Warhol shot the tests at standard sound speed (24fps), yet he specified that they should be projected at slower silent speed (or 16fps). The impact is striking as three minutes are drawn out to four, and the subjects' personas and behaviours become exaggerated – each involuntary tremor or flutter of an eyelid revealed.

Benning has said that he used cigarettes as '*an excuse to film people.*'⁴ Remarking on Warhol's screen tests and the residual sense that each of the subjects in some way sustain a persona or performance over the three minutes, Benning said he wanted to film people in neutral backgrounds in their own environments to see how they would respond when in front of a camera. Certainly, Benning's conferral of agency onto his subjects, who are his friends and acquaintances, informs Lyken's approach in *1300 SHOTS*. However, in the parallels or points of identification that the latter builds between subjects on screen and us, the film's audience, *1300 SHOTS* is perhaps more closely related to Benning's more recent *READERS*, a long-form film composed of just four shots (each 27 minutes long) in which Clara McHale-Ribot, Rachel Kushner, Richard Hebdige, and Simone Forti read quietly to themselves. In Lyken's film,

Walker and Kane's absorption in the task of watching, which varies by degrees over the course of the film, recalls the unfolding process of reading engaged in by Benning's four subjects. Of watching Benning's *READERS*, Madison Brookshire has referred to a particular '*quality of attention*' that it elicits from the viewer, '*drifting to and from something as a way of being with it.*' *1300 SHOTS* operates in much a similar fashion, as we watch Walker and Kane and watch *with* them. At moments, it is as if they are both subject and companion in the act of watching. As Brookshire aptly concludes of *READERS*: '*The point is not whatever conclusions we arrive at, but rather what we learn in the process: we learn what it is like to watch a movie, to sit together in stillness and quiet, our bodies at rest and in action, observing.*'⁵

Notes

1. Philippa Lovatt, 'Mark Lyken's Taifeng and the Motorway Saint,' in *Mark Lyken, New Town, New Wave*, CAMPLE LINE 2018
2. Mark Lyken, One Artist | One Work, 24 June 2021, LUX Scotland
3. James Benning interview with Nick Bradshaw, *Sound & Sound*, 20 June 2018: <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/sight-sound-interview-james-benning>
4. Interview with James Benning at 2011 Toronto International Film Festival, Wavelengths programme: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJDHbPmPse0>,
5. Madison Brookshire, Watching *READERS*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2017: <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/10/film/Watching-READERS>

Tina Fiske lives in Penpont, Dumfries and Galloway. Until April 2016, she was a Lecturer in Contemporary Art and Curating in the History of Art department at the University of Glasgow. Prior to leaving, she oversaw the development of the new MLitt in Curatorial Practice (Contemporary Art), offered jointly by the University and the Glasgow School of Art. Between 2007 and 2015 Tina was funded by Creative Scotland as Research Associate for the National Collecting Scheme Scotland. Since 2016, she has worked as part of the team at CAMPLE LINE, an independent visual arts organisation and public gallery based at Cample Mill outside Thornhill, Dumfries and Galloway.