



# FIVE STUDIES

A film by May Zarhy

in collaboration with Tal Kantor and Stephane Leonard

# A MEDITATION ON THE ESSENCE OF MOVEMENT IN DANCE / AVITAL BARAK

A thin line stretched between two hands illustrates the arm span, connecting the extremities to the center. From the line, a body is born, and from the body, a movement is born. Five short visual studies – or sketches – of an encounter between a body, a camera, and a line explore movement: the movement of one body – the body of a dancer moving in space, a skilled and trained body, well versed in the language of dance; the movement of the camera with the cameraman behind it in relation to the dancer's movement; the movement of the line, drawn by hand, frame by frame, in a painstaking technique known as Rotoscoping, gradually transforming the accumulation of illustrated frames into flux. The adjoining of these three types of movements makes up the choreography of *Five Studies*. The process began with an invitation extended by the choreographer May Zarhy to two other artists who explore movement – animation artist Tal Kantor and visual, sound, and video artist Stephane Leonard – to collaborate in an experimental session. This session provided a liminal, multidisciplinary space in which the piece was formed. Unlike choreography based on the dancer-choreographer's creative process, *Five Studies* is a hybrid creation conceived as a synthesis of dance movement, video, editing, and animation. Rather than one medium being used at the service of another, the different media create a common language. Like chapters in a story, each study describes a stage in the collaborative process, and as viewers, we are invited by the artists to learn of and from it. The order of the chapters within the piece is deliberate and significant. The construction of knowledge begins with its foundation: Initially, we encounter the main actors – body, paper, and camera frame. Then, the subject of the collaborative research is presented: the dancer's movement in the studio and the different points of view that perceive this movement throughout the piece. The next chapter focuses on the practice of movement itself, the movement of each medium as well as the movement between them. In a complementary contrast, the fourth chapter is concerned with the halted movement, which is broken down into simple positions and gestures – its fundamental elements. When holding a static position, the human body generates a myriad of micro-reactions, micro-movements, and vibrations that accentuate the clash of contradictory forces affecting the paused body. In video, like in animation, with the increase in frame-rate, the sequence and movement return. The coda of the piece integrates perspectives and movement in space while switching freely between media in a liberating grand finale.

This work takes into account the limited possibility of converting dance – live performance in a space shared by dancer and audience – to a two-dimensional screen. This obstacle is inherent not only to the switching between media and technologies but also to the mere possibility of mediating the dancer's subjective experience of her movement to the viewer, a subject that Zarhy regularly explores in her work. Traditionally, dance seeks to

deliberately eliminate the dancer's experience from the audience's view as part of the effort to create an ethereal, sublime image of the dancer. In her works, Zarhy invites the viewers to empathize with the dancer's experience by exposing the humanity of the dancing body, the pleasure, effort, and grit ingrained in the labor of dance. By establishing such empathy, the viewers may connect to their experience of their own body and their relationship to it. Zarhy's intense preoccupation with voice in works such as *the Voices* (in collaboration with voice artist Michal Oppenheim, 2017) is also motivated by her aim to expose the dancer's perspective and inner sensations. In this work, the voice mediates the dancer's experience of performing, as it echoes the movement's quality and texture within the dancer's body. Considering Zarhy's attempt to present the dancer's point of view and the aforementioned limits of video, what can the encounter between a live medium and a screened one produce? How is the live, present body transmuted into a represented body? How is low technology translated into high technology? In an era where technology can create a world at the push of a button, smart algorithms beget avatars that can perform any spectacular choreography, and AI-based interfaces can predict our every move, the mundane practice of dance is loaded with bodily and spatial constraints, therefore, demanding plenty of patience and faith. Especially during the pandemic, when restricting social gathering hampers and even prevents the live performance from happening, the challenge posed by the medium shift to video is more relevant than ever: how to capture the "live" quality of performance. In this sense, *Five Studies* is the result of research and meditation on the necessity of dance and its role in these times. And here animation steps in, first by representing the subjective experience of the moving dancer and later as an abstraction of the dancer's body and movement. However, not just any animation will do. In the dance discipline, there are no shortcuts. Every day, the dancer goes to the studio to elongate, strengthen, stretch, connect to her breath, move in the space, exercise deep listening and musicality, and practice transforming movement into dance. Dance is low-tech par excellence. Therefore, it demands technology that is also based on training, laborious work, concentration, and devotion. Animation, specifically Rotoscoping, a technique where the animator hand-draws on the video footage, is close in nature to dance. *Five Studies* was created on the assumption that this similarity can conceive a way of converting the live dance into two dimensions while still gracing its origin. Video is also close in spirit to dance. As a medium engaged in movement, connecting and cutting movements and sequences, and the relationship between the camera's dynamics and the movement it captures, it is akin to the dance practice. The evolution of the long and glorious tradition of video dance – a genre entirely dedicated to interlacing the dancer's movement with that of the camera and the editing – is not incidental. Thus, dance, animation, video, and editing culminate in a study of movement from the mover's perspective as well as the viewer's.

*Extend your hand in front of your chest. Move it in a soft, circular motion. Observe it. How does it look? What image and sensation does this movement evoke?*

While dancing, the dancer doesn't see herself; she has no complete picture of her body. She sees her body's extremities, the arms stretching, the legs extending forward, bouncing upward, folding under her. This is part of the human experience: we cannot really see our own body from the outside except via reflection. Our visual image of ourselves is utterly partial and often immensely inaccurate. Alongside the body extremities and their lines, which are visible to the dancer, she relies on the sensation of her own body, established through learning and practice. Beyond that, she uses imagination to continue the movement, commit to its quality and rhythm, and pass through the sequence of shapes her body creates in motion without actually seeing them. For her, visual knowledge is far less significant than embodied knowledge, which is synchronized with her rhythm and breath. However, this is precisely where the dancing body, the dancer's sensations, and the external gaze on her movement come together. The hand-drawn animated line begins as a representation of the dancer's view of her own body, acquires the quality of her movement and transforms into the viewer's gaze on her. In her work *untitled* (with musician Elad Bardes, 2019), Zarhy challenges the boundaries between the dancer's body and the audience's presence by manipulating the lighting in the shared space. This work was performed in absolute darkness, creating similar conditions for the dancer and audience. The sense of disorientation brought about by the darkness invokes the audience to strongly identify with the dancer. During the performance, she holds the only light source – a fluorescent lamp. Once lit in a specific manner, the lamp creates a two-dimensional silhouette of the dancer's moving body. The two-dimensional image stimulates the audience's abstract thought, thus imposing a sense of alienation, while the darkness generates closeness and empathy. The two positions are concurrent; the tension between them is at the heart of the piece and its motivation.

The concepts 'gaze' and 'point of view' have multiple meanings and roles in society. The gaze is a disciplinary and regulatory power. As the representative and agent of sovereign and ideology, it signifies hierarchies and the power structure in the world. Sometimes it is apparent and obvious; other times – invisible and covert. The gaze is omnipresent; even in solitude, we feel its existence, whether we adhere to it or resist and undermine it. In contrast, a point of view is always partial; more than expressing something, it defines what is beyond its spectrum. It brings the personal, the singular, the particular into the discourse. Contrary to the omnipotence of the gaze, the specific perspective is humble; it has no pretension. It may not present the whole picture, but it does hold a little truth. In *Five Studies*, the point of view plays a significant and central role. Between the camera and animation, we alternate perspectives:

one simulates the viewer's perspective watching the dancing body, and the other simulates the moving body's perspective observing itself. This alteration of perspectives is also the alteration of positions in the world, from the outside inward and back. We are invited to change our perspective while watching the piece. The encounter of the two perspectives expands the significance of movement and adds volume to the screened representation.

A few key concepts emerged through the work process, generating different meanings and interpretations in each artist. One such concept is 'space'. For the dancer and the choreographer, this concept signifies the dancer's awareness of the space outside her body, which she strives to reach through movement. For the animator in this work, the engagement with space is specific to the contact points of the figure with the floor. Whereas for the viewer, the animation actually eliminates the space or context in which the figure exists, creating in its stead a white limbo where only the line representing the dancer and her perspective exists. For the cameraman/video artist, the frame, which defines the recorded world, dictates the space. Thus, the concept of space is transformed into a liminal space where the elements, forces, and interpretations comprising this piece come together. The gaze governs the relationship between the elements, but this hierarchy is unstable. The alternations between different media, perspectives, and spaces maintain an open-ended creative process. Like the dance movement in the studio, which changes and evolves continuously throughout practice, the five studies leave us with a comma, not a full stop. The sentence was never completed. The thought was never fully formed; the meditation on movement continues.

Translated from Hebrew by Noa Shuval.

## FIVE STUDIES

a film by May Zarhy

in collaboration with Tal Kantor and Stephane Leonard

2022, 15:14 min.

Concept, choreography, editing, performance: May Zarhy  
Camera, editing, sound & music: Stephane Leonard  
Animation, concept-art: Tal Kantor  
Movement creation, performance: Susanne Grau  
Chroma keying: Jonatan Schwenk  
Lights: Dennis Dieter Kopp  
Graphic design: Henryk Spiess  
Supported by the NATIONAL PERFORMANCE NETWORK - STEPPING OUT, funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media within the framework of the initiative NEUSTART KULTUR. Assistance Program for Dance.