Stopgap in Stop Motion

By Stephen Featherstone

Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Stephen Featherstone
Name of Output:	Stopgap in Stop Motion
UCARO link:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/5445/
Output Type:	Q – Digital and Visual Media; artist's film
Year and mode of dissemination:	2017 – 2020, film screenings at 84 international film festivals 2018, television screening (Channel 4, 24th July 2018) 2018 – 2020, internet (https://www.channel4.com/programmes/random-acts/on-demand/66670-002)
Contributors:	Choreographer: Lucy Bennett Dancers: Amy Butler, Laura Jones, Nadenh Poan, Chris Pavia, Hannah Sampson, David Toole, David Willdridge, Tomos Young Costume: Anna Jones (Curious Space) Composer: Dougie Evans Producer for Stopgap Dance Company: Sho Shibata Post Production: Phillip Osborne
Key Words:	Film, animation, narrative, transdisciplinarity, materiality, mimesis, dance, inclusivity
Funding:	Arts Council England - £800

Synopsis

Stopgap in Stop Motion is a research output by Stephen Featherstone consisting of a 4' 30" dance film that combines live action and animation. Featherstone was the sole researcher and the creative lead, but the film was commissioned by, and made in collaboration with, Stopgap Dance Company. It depicts Stopgap's inclusive approach to dance by representing both disabled and non-disabled dancers.

In order to create the film Featherstone researched a number of themes, including inclusivity, dance, multi-dynamic image technique and cut out/replacement animation. This thematic enquiry was then utilised in a creative research process combining stop motion and live action to provide new insights into both content and form.

Stopgap in Stop Motion has been widely disseminated in a range of contexts. Between 2017 and 2020 it was screened at 84 international film festivals, including festivals focusing on film, animation and dance. This has included prestigious events such as a screening at the 2019 opening of the REACH, the Kennedy Center Washington D.C.'s new building. *Stopgap in Stop Motion* has been shortlisted or nominated for 19 awards and won 10. The film was shown on Channel 4 as part of the Random Acts series and it has remained available on Channel 4 online.

This portfolio of contextual information includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It includes images of the production process, and details of the film's extensive dissemination and recognition.

Context

Stopgap in Stop Motion was made in response to a commission by Stopgap Dance Company, who create innovative, inclusive dance productions with disabled and non-disabled artists for national and international touring. Their brief to Featherstone was open and simply requested a film to promote the company and acknowledge the individuality of the dancers.

Development and production were informed by Featherstone's established, ongoing investigation into a transdisciplinary approach to filmmaking. This approach is intended to develop a language and tools to enable solo micro-movie makers to achieve the realisation of visual narratives, and concomitant world building, with greater scope than is usually possible in this sort of small-scale film-making.

Specifically, this research drew on parallel areas of practice, including animation, theatre and the graphic novel. Featherstone had previously experimented with the language and techniques of theatre through adapting stage performances for the screen in collaboration with theatre company Nunkie Productions. This resulted in a series of five live action films, ranging in duration from 30 to 50 minutes, that were disseminated through commercial distribution and which produced insights and methods related to facets of the Stopgap inquiry. For example, the investigation identified ways in which theatrical performance is utilised to visualise place and space. It showed how interaction with suggested—rather than actual—place and space, can be incorporated within a film narrative.

The investigation of transdisciplinarity in the Stopgap project was substantially extended by the introduction of animation techniques and their integration with live action film, that was a requirement of the commission. Films reviewed in relation to this strand of enquiry included work by Virgil Widrich, Osbert Parker and David Anderson. The multi-dynamic image techniques developed by Christopher Chapman, indicating the grammatical and metaphorical potential of frames within a frame in narrative filmmaking, also emerged as a key point of reference.

The use of frames within frames, and the development of this technique through its realisation as 3D cut out animation constructed from live action film, enabled a literal depiction of the dancers in a series of spaces that separate them, both from each other and the containing space, and visualises a metaphor for constraints and boundaries imposed on them. In response to music and each other, the figures 'come alive', dance, and ultimately step out of the enclosing frames to meet in the same space and perform in unison.

Sketchbook work
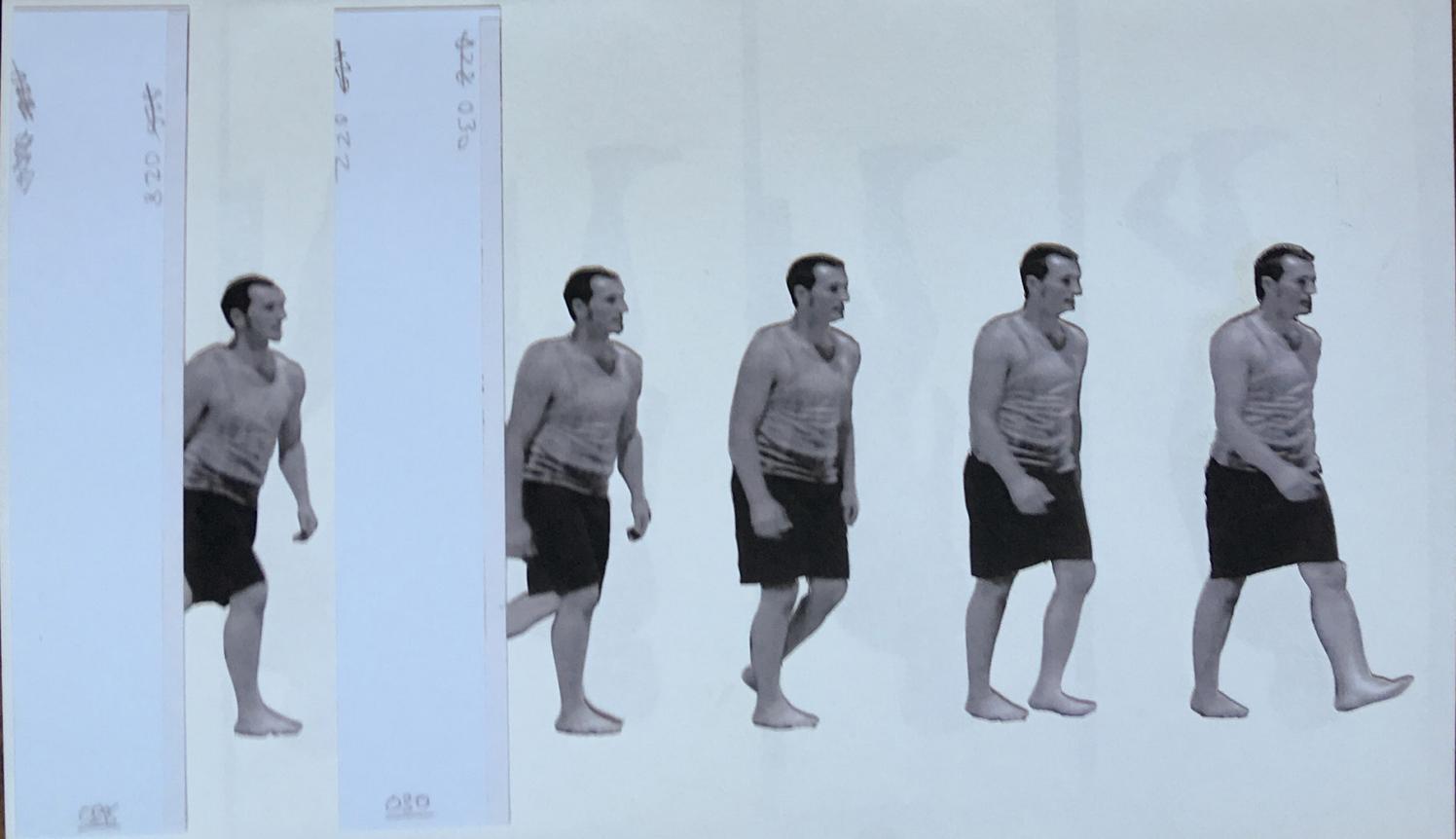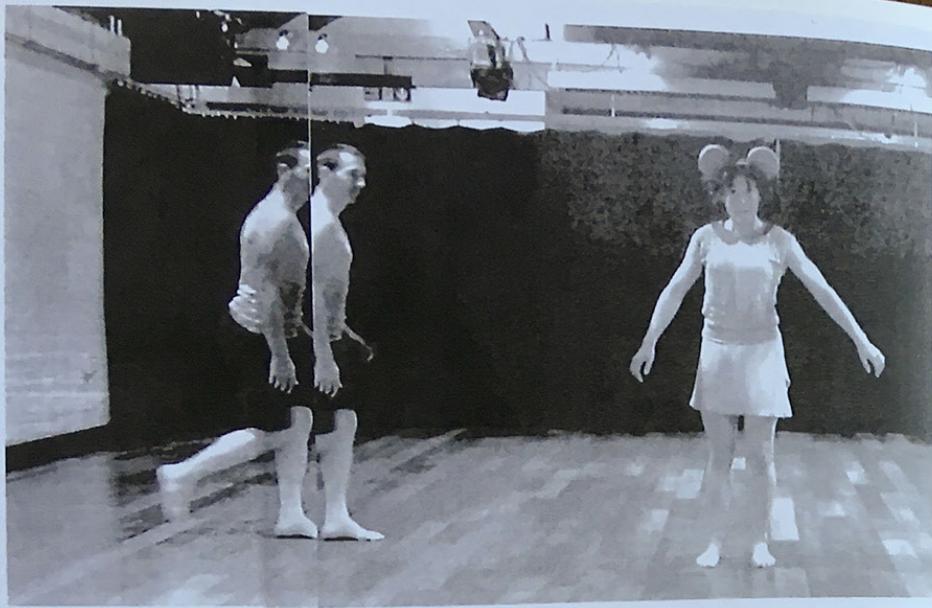
Storyboard.   First draft of storyboard = framing as necessitated by
                                    the constraints of the process
        second draft of storyboard = directing the camera etc.

* The opening shots of the stills could include images that
   have not yet been trimmed from their frames.
** Could reprint the stills/sequence of Shi + Laura so that
   these are not yet trimmed from frames

2.5cm approx

105%.

Sketchbook work

Production process
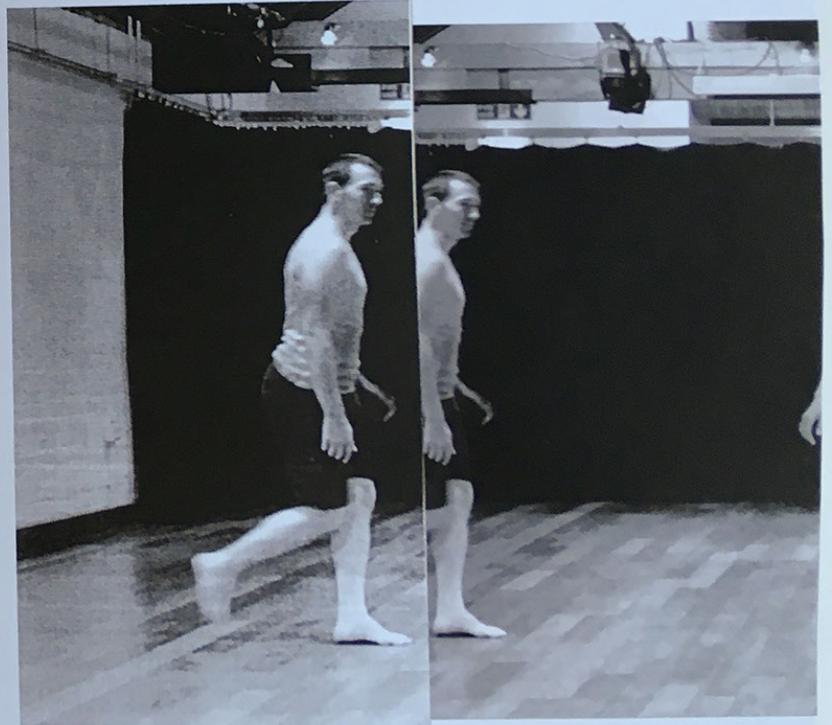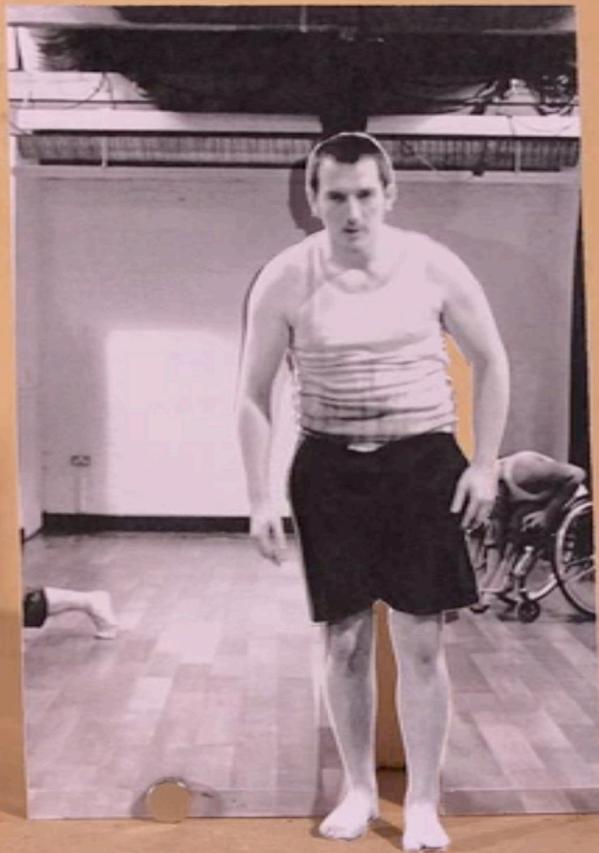
Aims and Questions

Research aims:	To investigate transdisciplinarity, in the form of cut out, replacement and stop-motion animation techniques applied to live action film
	To adapt and expand multi-dynamic imagery into a material, three-dimensional form, as a means for providing language and tools for the solo micro movie maker
Research questions:	How could this form of multi-dynamic imagery enable the solo micro movie maker to extend scope in visual narratives and concomitant world building?
	How can cut out, replacement and stop motion animation techniques be applied to live action film in order to explore the themes of inclusivity in dance, and the potential for dance to enable performers to cross physical and social boundaries?

Research Methods

A central concept for the film, and narrative device, was established very early in the development process: photographs would come to life and cut-out figures would step out of or into them. The potential metaphorical and grammatical uses inherent in this device and the imagery it created was immediately apparent and informed an important element of the investigation that followed.

A detailed interrogation of key, relevant films was carried out in order to: establish context and verify distinctiveness in the ideas and methods proposed for the intended investigation; identify variations developed from similar central concepts explored by previous filmmakers; define the visual language of each film in relationship to, or as extension of, the conventions of film grammar; evaluate practical processes utilised, and any divergence from orthodox production techniques.

Solutions to the practical and technical problems that arose when translating the storyboard to the screen were reached through methodical experimentation with, and testing of, materials, digital tools, animation techniques and frame rates. In particular, the transformation of film frames to cut outs, and the adaptation of cut out, replacement and stop motion techniques, required bespoke inventions; albeit those founded on conversance with animation theory and common practical experience. As methods and techniques were devised and learnt, a making process gradually evolved so that, by the end of the shoot, understanding could be applied to new problems and solutions reached more quickly.

Research Process and Insights

Character animation using traditional techniques is typically a meticulously pre-planned business, particularly in a budget-constrained industrial context where the animation captured is intended to closely replicate a storyboard and/or the use of key frames stymies improvisation. The practical realisation of this film, like most films, went through a series of distinct making processes, but a significant discovery was the extent to which revision and further development of ideas was possible, or necessary, at each stage, and that, since much of the film was made by an individual rather than a crew, as new areas of inquiry emerged, investigation could be extended.

This gave rise to numerous technical inventions and, at times, breaks with the conventions of animation practice, in order to realise aims and address research questions. For example, in some instances different frame rates were used within the same shot. A central idea for the film was that each time a character exited or entered a photograph the effect would be achieved with a different device. Solutions to the problems this posed were reached through systematic tests based on the reworking of cut out, replacement and stop motion animation techniques.

Despite this period of testing, an unexpected aesthetic discovery at the time of capturing the animation was a boiling effect created through the imprecision in the replacement process and the use of low-resolution prints to replicate photographs. This resulted in a quality to the movement, texture and lighting, in these sections of the screen, that was akin to silent film footage, and helped to delineate the temporal and spatial differences between the frames and the panes (as the cropped images, or sub-frames, were designated by Christopher Chapman).

The material manifestation of the images in the film demonstrates a degree of innovation in comparison to the optical printed imagery generated by the original multi-dynamic technique, or later variations which have employed digital compositing technology. Whereas those methods could suggest spatial relationships through juxtapositions of scale and placement in the frame, the multi-dynamic imagery in this case is constructed from physical prints of exported film frames positioned within three-dimensional sets. This creates the potential to make meaning through the treatment of and intervention with the printed panes, and allows *mise en scène* techniques to be utilised in the interaction between the panes and other three-dimensional elements.

Further insights were gained through subsequent evaluation of the ways in which the multi-dynamic imagery is utilised in the film. Although use of multi-dynamic imagery was constrained by the central narrative concept, sequences and shots that depict multiple panes within a frame, either in the form of still or moving images, enabled some degree of exploration of multidimensionality and multiple perspectives. More often, shots are created from an image within an image, with the shot forming the frame, and the sub-frame or pane, depicting two independent spaces and times; their separateness highlighted further by the differing scales, contrast between colour and monochrome, and variation in texture.

The capacity of filmic images with this particular form of correlation to be used as grammatical units was clearly indicated by Chapman's work. However, the more innovative device (in this context) of pictorial elements leaving one space and time (a frame or a pane) and entering another, substantially extends the range and complexity of potential relationships between the components of the montage, or assemblage. In this example, as well as suggesting an apparent coexistence between the two independent zones that are depicted, the device enables use of metaphor to add a layer of meaning to the narrative: as dancers exit photographs and move into sets, the characters free themselves from constraints.
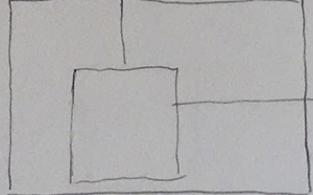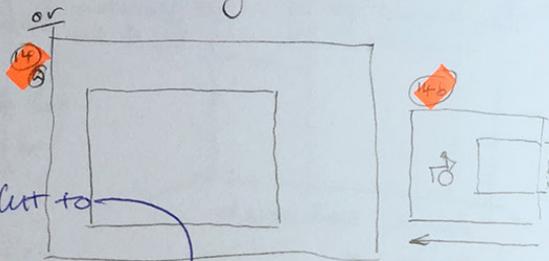
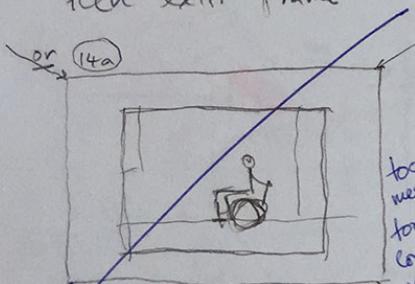Wider shot of Hannah
continuing to dance
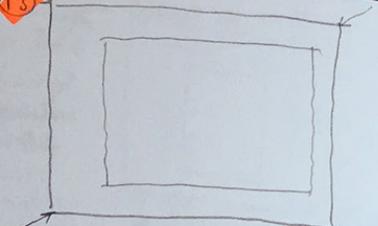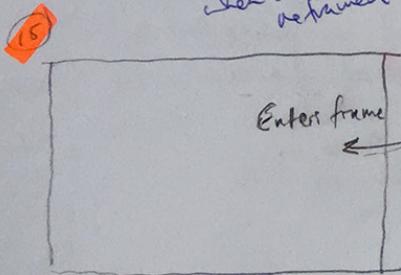
Slow track in to
3 boys

or

Wide shot of desk + cut to
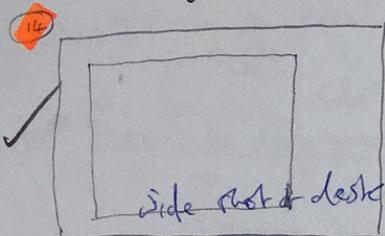
Cut to Laura dances
then exits frame

(14a) tracks slowly in
then...

too messy, too time
consuming, not to
right, too many things
can go wrong

don't like
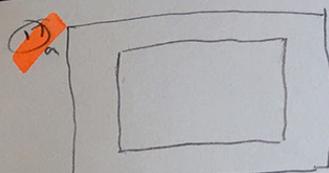the composition
when the shot is
reframed

(14b) Tracks R to L following
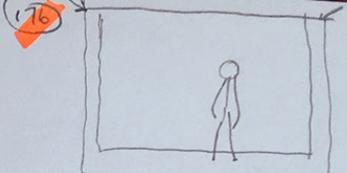Laura as she exits
the photo.

Enter frame

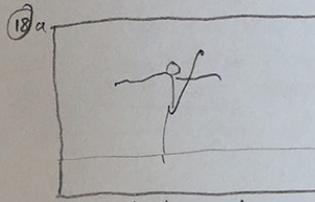Cut to BCU of Laura
whipping head around
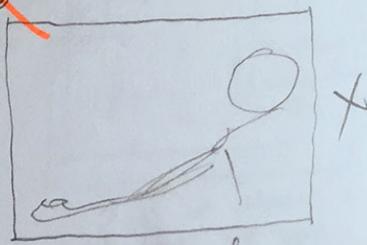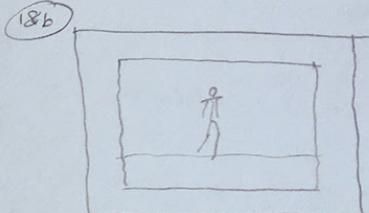
Cut to CU of
Laura's arm movement.
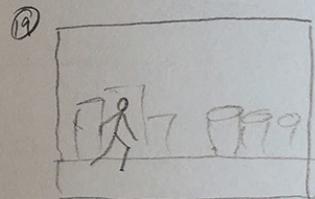
return to framing
of (13) to 3 boys
dancing

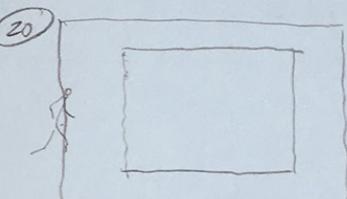Short, quick track
in as David exits

(18a) CU of Amy dancing

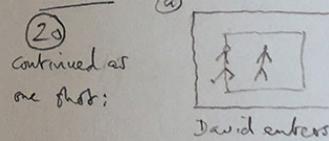(18b) track back to reveal
photo in context

(19) cut out figure
of David walks
L to R through
tea area

(20) David walks into shot

either
(20) continued as
one shot:

David enters

or
break into
several shots (20)

track in to
closer shot of
the two dancing

Track wider
to allow Amy
to exit top
of frame

Could frame this
close and track
with the action

Could tilt up to
allow Amy room

CU as David
enters

wider as
they dance together

Could cut
wider to allow
room for the
spring then
tilt up

Stay wide to
allow room
for 2 to exit.

track R for exit
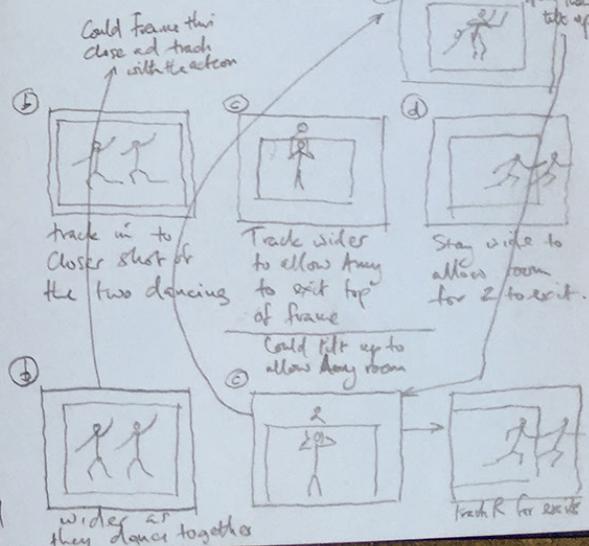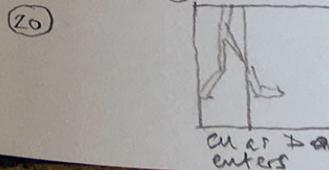
- difficulty of achieving camera movement may decide this
- it is a long sequence so perhaps needs to be broken down into shots
- the editing pattern has become more fragmented and guided by this. Stage by one long shot sequence (even allowing for the dances) could be problematic

Sketchbook work

Sketchbook work

Research Dissemination and Recognition

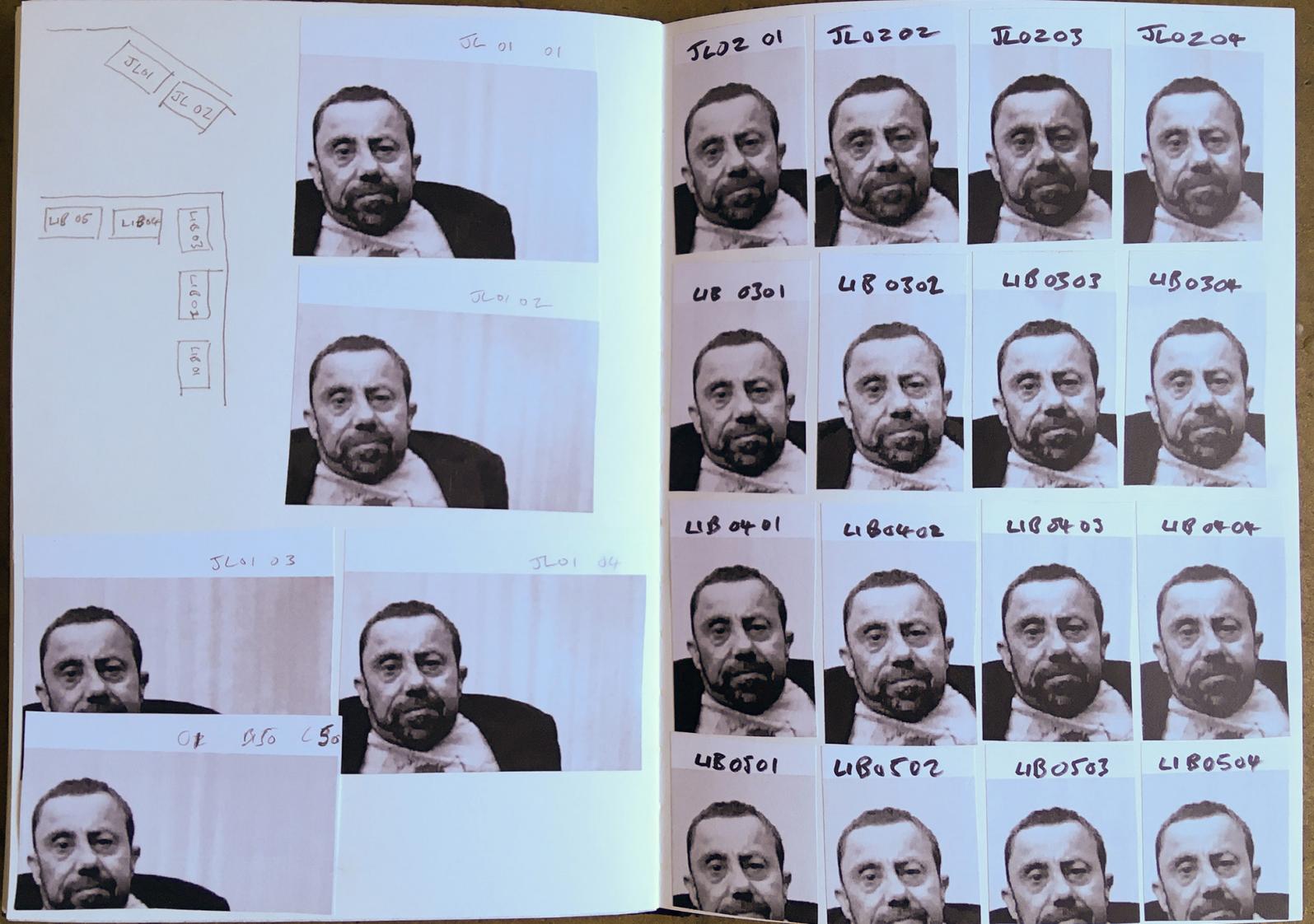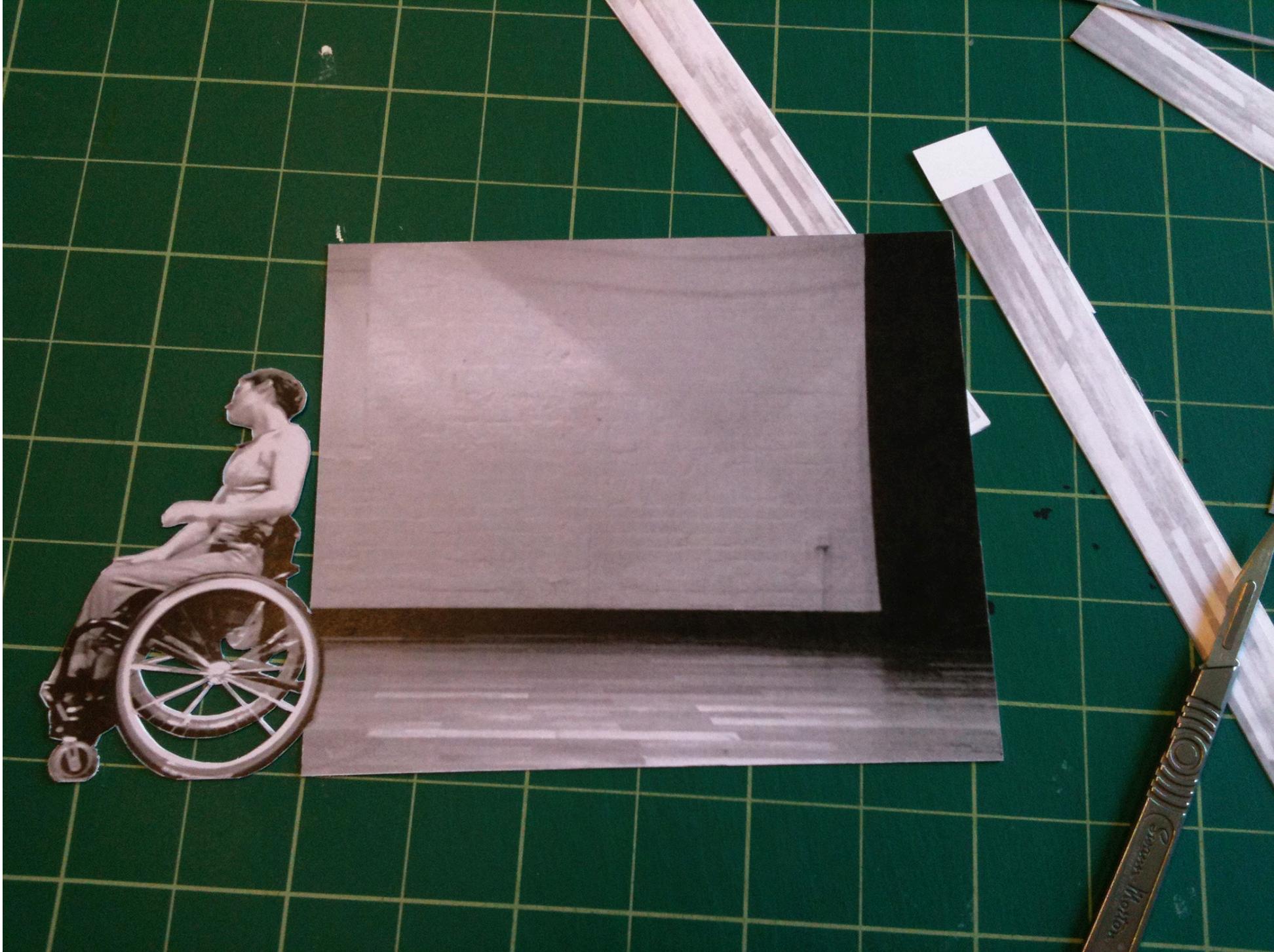|	
Dissemination:	SCREENINGS *Stopgap in Stop Motion* was selected for the following competitive festivals: 2017 Migrations Dance Film; Bluenose-Ability Film Festival, Halifax, Canada; Golden Knight Malta International Short Film Festival, B'Kara, Malta; Mirror Mountain Film Festival, Ottawa, Canada; Locomocion / Experimental Animation Festival, Mexico City, Mexico; Thess International Short Film Festival, Thessaloniki, Greece; Greensboro Dance Film Festival, Greensboro, NC, US; Cucalorus Film Festival, Wilmington, NC, US; 40 NORTH Dance Film Festival, San Diego, CA, US; Moving Body Dance Screen, Varna, Bulgaria; Northwest Screendance Exposition, Eugene, OR, US; Divulge Dancers' Film Festival, Los Angeles, CA, US; Mexico City Videodance Festival, Mexico City, Mexico; San Francisco Dance Film Festival, San Francisco, CA, US; Sans Souci Festival of Dance Cinema, Boulder, CO, US; Flatlands Dance Film Festival, Urbana, IL, US; Portland Dance Film Fest, Portland, OR, US; New Renaissance Film Festival, London, UK; Festival International VideoDanzaBA, Buenos Aires, Argentina; CAPITOL Dance & Cinema Festival, Washington, D.C., US; Paris Play Film Festival, Paris, France; Los Angeles Dance Shorts Film Festival, Los Angeles, CA, US; Perth Dance Festival - Screendance Awards, Perth, Australia; Iowa International ScreenDance Festival, Iowa City, IA, US; International Music Video Underground, Los Angeles, CA, US; 2nd Braga International Video Dance Festival, Braga, Portugal. 2018 Toronto FEEDBACK Film Festival, Toronto, Canada; InShadow - Lisbon Screendance Festival, Lisbon, Portugal; Reel East Texas Film Festival, Kilgore, TX, US; DeSales University Screendance Festival, Centre Valley, PA, US; Aesthetica Short Film Festival, York, UK; The Animattikon Project, Paphos, Cyprus; Superfest International Disability Film Festival, San Francisco, CA, US; TDP'18 International Dance Festival's Screendance Selection, Tipperary, Ireland; GUIAR International Screendance Festival, Recife, Brazil; Cinemaway, Zhovkva; ViDEOSKIN, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada; EX|ART Film Festival, Pavia, Italy; Progeny Short Film Festival, Blacksburg, VA, US; ARTS TRIANGLE - Dance Film Festival, Dallas, TX, US.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination:

2018 (continued)
Festival of Recorded Movement (F-O-R-M), Vancouver, Canada; Experimental, Dance & Music Film Festival, Toronto, Canada; DanceBARN ScreenDANCE Festival, Battle Lake, MN, US; Best Film, Reading Fringe Film Festival, Reading, UK; Dance on Camera Festival, New York, US; Open Call For Screendance: [POSITIONING], Valetta, Malta; ADF's Movies By Movers, Boone, NC, US; Door Kinetic Arts Festival, Baileys Harbour, WI, US; On Art, Warsaw, Poland; Global Short Film Awards, Cannes, France; "inHabit" - A Festival of Dance on Film, Grover Beach, CA, US; [C]Screen Screendance Spring, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain; ScreenDance Festival, Stockholm, Sweden; Speechless Film Festival, Mankato, Minnesota; Tiny Dance Film Festival, San Francisco, California; Twin Cities Film Fest Dance Flicks, Minneapolis, MN, US; LA Dance Film Festival, Los Angeles, CA, US; Midwest RAD Fest, Kalamazoo, MI, US.

2019
The International Film with Alternative Media Festival, Mexico City, Mexico; Animation Marathon, Athens, Greece; IMARP, São Paulo, Brazil; Raksa Dance Film Festival, Paris, France; Oska Bright Film Festival, Brighton, UK; London International Screen Dance Festival, London, UK; Santiago International Film Festival, Santiago, Chile; Muestra Movimiento Audiovisual, Guadalajara, Mexico; Kadoma International Film Festival, Kadoma, Japan; Dumbo Film Festival, New York, US; Winter Gardens Film Festival, Blackpool, UK; Oklahoma Dance Film Festival, Tulsa, OK, US; Dance@30FPS, Columbus, OH, US; Dunedin International Film Festival, Dunedin, FL, US.

2020
RoDi Festival, Thessalonika, Greece; Moving Images International Videodance Festival, Nicosia, Cyprus; Airdrie Film Festival, Airdrie, Alberta, Canada; Festival de Cine-Arte en la Frontera, San Cristóbal, Venezuela and Cúcuta, Colombia; Athens International Digital Film Festival, Athens, Greece; Look&Roll, Basel, Switzerland; Vesuvius International Monthly Film Festival' Campania, Italy; Frame Rush Festival, London, UK; South London Screendance, London, UK; No Words International Short Film Festival, Ptolemaida, Greece; Auroville Film Festival Auroville, Tamilnadu, India.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination:	**TELEVISION AND ONLINE** As a result of these international festival screenings, broadcasting rights were also bought by Little Dot Productions for airing on Channel 4 as part of their "Random Acts" strand. The broadcast date was 24th July 2018 and the film was subsequently disseminated by Random Acts via online sharing services (https://www.channel4.com/programmes/random-acts/on-demand/66670-002).
Follow-on activity:	**REPRESENTATION OF INCLUSIVITY** As *Stopgap in Stop Motion* presents an innovative representation of inclusive dance, it has been requested for the following screenings: **2018** Screened by [C]Screen Festival for the "International Day of People with Disability" at Museu d'Art de Cerdanyola in Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain; in programme of screendance with an inclusivity theme at the State Theatre, Freiburg, Germany **2019** From November 2019 *Stopgap in Stop Motion* has been playing on a continuous loop, with other Superfest Disability Film Festival films, in the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, USA and at showcases at The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA; The Children's Day School, San Francisco, USA; at The Exploratorium Museum of Arts & Science, San Francisco, USA and at Stanford University, California, USA Screened as part of the opening festival for The REACH, an expansion of the Kennedy Center, in Washington (https://youtu.be/qE4m1KwQOZI) **2020** Superfest Disability Film Festival Kids Showcase (screening online due to COVID-19)

Proof of concept film still

Film still

Film poster

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Follow-on activities:

INVITED SCREENINGS
Following dissemination through competitive film festivals, *Stopgap in Stop Motion* has also been requested, based on its reputation and subject matter, to be shown in exhibition spaces, conferences and non-competitive, themed festivals for a number of additional screenings:

2018
Sans Souci Festival of Dance Cinema, screening of international dance cinema for the Footprint Dance Festival, Michaelis Theatre, University of Roehampton, for their "Lafayette 2018" programme, Lafayette, Colorado, USA and as part of their 15th Anniversary Season in Firehouse Art Center, Longmont, CO
PERFORMANCE ROOM for MOVING BODY screenings in Veliko Tarnova. Bulgaria

2019
Sans Souci Festival of Dance as a part of the Ursinus College Fringe Festival, Collegeville, PA
Locomoción Festival de Animación in the Non-Fiction Program at the 6th edition of the International Documentary Film Festival Doqumenta, in the Museum of the City of Querétaro, Querétaro, Mexico
Random Acts at Green Man Festival, Brecon Beacons, South Wales; Latitude Festival in Henham Park, Suffolk

2020
"Retrograde", Tiny Dance Film Festival (San Francisco, California) an online retrospective chosen from work screened by them in the last 8 years
[C]Screen Spring Screendance Festival (Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain) for an online retrospective gallery
Muestra Movimiento Audiovisual (Guadalajara, Mexico) for "Mírame y baila. El baile y la danza en pantalla", a celebration of International Dance Day 2020, accessed online due to COVID-19
Sans Souci Festival of Dance in the Colorado Dance Educators Organization Annual Conference at The Colorado State University School of Music, Theater, and Dance, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Influence of research:

AWARDS
Stopgap in Stop Motion was nominated for, or won, awards in the following festivals:

2017
Winner, Best Dance Film, International Music Video Underground, Los Angeles, CA, US
Audience Choice Award, Sans Souci Festival of Dance Cinema, Boulder, CO, US
Jury Selection, Greensboro Dance Film Festival, Greensboro, NC, US
Honourable Mention, New Renaissance Film Festival, London, UK
Finalist, Divulge Dancers' Film Festival, Los Angeles, CA, US
Nomination, Best Dance Film, Paris Play Film Festival, Paris, France
Semi-Finalist, Thess International Short Film Festival, Thessalonika, Greece
Nomination, Best Performance Award, Mirror Mountain Film Festival, Ottawa, Canada

2018
Best Film, Reading Fringe Film Festival, Reading, UK
Top 10 Dance Film of 2018, Experimental, Dance & Music Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
Finalist, EX|ART Film Festival, Pavia, Italy
Nomination, Best Dance Film; Reel East Texas Film Festival; Kilgore, TX, US

2019
Audience Choice Award, Winter Gardens Film Festival, Blackpool, UK
Best Director in Dance, Kadoma International Film Festival, Kadoma, Japan
Honourable Mention, International Videodance, Muestra Movimiento Audiovisual, Guadalajara, Mexico
Nomination, Stand Out Dance Film, Oska Bright Film Festival, Brighton, UK

2020
Mención Especial Video-Danza, Festival de Cine-Arte en la Frontera, San Cristóbal, Venezuela and Cúcuta, Colombia
Nomination, Best Animation Film, Globe International Silent Film Festival (Live screening postponed due to COVID-19)
Finalist - Video Dance, Athens International Digital Film Festival, Athens Greece

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Influence of research:

REVIEWS
Brandon Judell writes in a review of the Dance on Camera Festival that 'Stephen Featherstone's 5-minute short, "Stopgap in Stop Motion," highlights how a company that "employs both disabled and non-disabled artists [can] find innovative ways to collaborate." Not unlike what The Apothetae brilliantly demonstrates with the current production of Teenage Dick at the Public Theater, the British Stopgap Dance Company accomplishes the same on both film and no doubt live.'
https://medium.com/@brandonjudell/no-two-left-feet-here-dance-on-camera-46-6840d90256c6

Danielle Anderson writes in a review of Greensboro Dance Film Festival that 'Some of the most notable dances pushed the boundaries of tradition and style, featuring revolutionary technique and memorable, socially conscious themes. One in particular, "Stopgap in Stop Motion" directed by Stephen Featherstone, highlighted the experiences of disabled dancers as part of a promotional film for Stopgap Dance Company. The film brought still photos of each dancer to life, producing a stop motion video emphasizing the fluidity of movement and perseverance despite obstacles.'
https://carolinianuncg.com/2017/10/25/greensboro-dance-film-festival-celebrates-diversity/

The director of Flatlands Dance Film Festival, Rebecca Ferrell, commented that "I was really excited to see a stop-motion entry this year. We have received them in the past but not up to this production level. I thoroughly enjoyed the quirkiness of the film and its inclusion of disabled and nondisabled dancers".
https://news.illinois.edu/view/6367/549189

In a preview of Northwest Screendance Exposition, Gary Ferrington highlights 'Stopgap in Stop Motion' and refers to it as an 'innovative film'.
https://www.orartswatch.org/northwest-screendance-exposition-preview-moving-shadows-on-the-wall/

University for the Creative Arts
Research Portfolios

Graphic Design: Studio Mothership

COVER IMAGES
Film stills