Maya Deren described *A Study in Choreography for Camera* as "a dance so related to camera and cutting that it cannot be 'performed' as a unit anywhere but in this particular film." Deren's film was a milestone, the first experimental film of dance to be written about in the *New York Times* and in *Dance Magazine*. And its influence on filmmakers is inestimable: Deren is bound to be cited in any history of dance and film. In this three-minute silent film, the camera and the dancer perform a pas de deux in which the movement is continuous through time and space. The camera rotates on a central point, catching dancer Talley Beatty three times as it scans the forest environment. Beatty's twisting body is barely discernible in the dense stand of trees. The film cuts to his leg entering a small living room. He dances around the room, performing phrases in which his body contracts and expands. Cuts move him from room to room. He dances before a mirror, creating a momentary pas de trois between the camera, the dancer, and his own reflection. Another jump cut places him in a large sculpture-filled courtyard (a gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art). In a moving and picturesque phrase, Beatty, his head shown in close-up, spins in front of a four-headed circular Buddha. He
top and bottom: Maya Deren, stills from *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, 1945
top and bottom: Shirley Clarke, stills from Dance in the Sun, 1953
becomes an animated manifestation of the Buddha. A series of suspended leaps, which cohere into one great leap, deposits Beatty outdoors, where he lands, feet planted in second position plié, on the brow of a hill.

Deren recognized the natural alliance of dance and film: “I feel strongly that film is related more closely to dance than to any other form because, like dance, it is conveyed in time. Like dance, it conveys primarily by visual projection and, like dance, it operates on a level of stylization—it is the quality of the movement that renders the meaning."¹⁹ Though Deren was not a trained dancer, she was keenly interested in it. Many of her short films featured dance, from modern in A Study to ballet in The Very Eye of Night (1952) to Chinese martial arts traditions in Meditation on Violence (1948).

In Shirley Clarke's Dance in the Sun (1953), Daniel Nagrin performs his 1950 stage piece of the same name. The dance was filmed both on a beach and on a stage, and the two takes are cut together to maintain the continuity of the dance performance. The film begins with Nagrin greeting his piano accompanist, Sylvia, as he enters a rehearsal hall. He hands her sheet music, then ponders a seashell in his bag, a memory object that immediately injects a mental location shift. Nagrin moves toward the camera, fixed at stage audience level, and there is a jump cut to him running down a dune onto a beach. This cut seems to slip us into Nagrin's unconscious, where he conjures a visual image that generates the choreography. Jump cuts seamlessly move the dance back and forth, emphasizing the rhythm, and the time and space between the two locations. When Nagrin has finished the dance, he picks up his sweater and joins the accompanist, who immediately gives him a cigarette. (It's somehow humorously postcoital, but then dance is often quite emotional and physical.) He lights her cigarette, then his, and they smoke while they review the music, preparing for another run-through.²⁰

Clarke's editing style resonates with Deren's use of jump cuts in A Study (though, it should be noted, Clarke did not see Deren's film until after her own film was complete). But there is a significant difference: Deren's film represents a ritual or dream state, whereas Dance in the Sun examines "the strange phenomenon of 'time' that exists between each cut."²¹ Clarke was a former dancer who made two other dance films, Bullfight (1955) and A Moment in Love (1957). She considered the latter fully achieved as a dance made for camera in that it was not a translated stage work. Clarke did not make another dance film after A Moment in Love, but she viewed all of her films, many of them award-winning documentaries and
features, dance films in their editing rhythm and stylized camera movement. Although Clarke considered *Dance in the Sun* a preliminary attempt at creating dance for the camera, it is nevertheless a stunning marriage of dance and editing. It was selected the best film of 1953 by the New York Dance Film Society. Of her editing style, Clarke once noted: "Just as dance exists not in the positions the dancer takes but in the movement between the positions, so kinetic film is the movement within and between the shots."²²

Kelly Nipper’s *interval* (2000) translates Clarke’s words into a photographic illustration of the movement between positions. The four large photographs comprising *interval* are hung sequentially on a wall. The width between them is equal to the width of the frames, evoking another type of interval. A lot can happen in that space between poses, between photographs: the mind’s-eye continuation of the dancer’s quiet choreography; another still pose; or the movement that repositioned the dancer a step to her left. One count or eight, maybe a breath—whole worlds can exist in the interval. The duration of the work in photographed time and in real time is ultimately unknowable. Eadweard Muybridge’s late-nineteenth-century motion studies, often shot against a background grid that annotated movement, convey the same conventions of time and space. Nipper’s serial motif holds much in common with the moments frozen by Muybridge’s battery of cameras, as does her use of a gridded screen behind which the dancer poses. However, the interval between Nipper’s photographs is so long that we can’t see sequential motion as we can in Muybridge’s images (though Muybridge himself often collaged sequences from different shoots or created sequences for greater clarity of motion). But perhaps our photographically savvy minds can easily fill in, if we so choose, all the movements necessary to get from one pose to the next.

While facing front from behind a wood screen, Nipper’s dancer performs for the fixed camera a sequence of balletic poses. First, she stands with her arms...
overhead, and then with arms at her sides. The climactic moment in the third photograph is created by a shift of her body, now at the center of the photograph and bifurcated by a screen. The final pose repeats the first except the dancer now faces the back wall. Is the dancer in interval performing a series of still poses or the moments of stillness within a dance? The photographs convey the characteristics of notation, a marking of movement. Marking is a term used to describe the way dancers rehearse, where the intended movements are not fully executed. (Marking time is another definition for interval.) Overlapping architectural elements—the back wood-paneled wall and the foreground screen—create something of a staff upon which a female dancer records a notation. Her body is nearly dissolved (pixelated) by the screen and the extreme flattening of the space. The body behind the screen is transformed into an abstraction, an effect heightened by the generic qualities of the setting and the intense stillness of the photographs.

If Nipper's interval is the embodiment of the stilled film, Oliver Herring's works can be seen as video counterparts. His stop-action approach differs little from flip books, in which sequenced still photographs are printed one per page and fanned quickly to set a person or object into filmlike motion. (In Shall We Dance, Fred Astaire's character falls in love with a flip book, or rather, the woman depicted in it: a dancer played by Ginger Rogers. "That's grace, that's rhythm," he swoons over the pictures.) In Herring's videos, people with little to no dance skill (let alone training) move with the staccato rhythm of a dancer in a flip book. Dance here is not fluid movement but rather a series of poses held for a few seconds each. "Think Bob Fosse," Herring may request during filming, and then, paradoxically, "Nobody move," as performers struggle to hold their positions.23

Made with volunteers who answered an ad to join Herring in his studio for some spontaneous art-making sessions, the three works in Dance with Camera (and several others made by the artist during the past eight years) transform nondancers, by way of kinetic editing, into dancers. For Herring, dance is something of a leveling strategy or an icebreaker, situating everyone on the same unstable ground. The two participants in Dance 1 (2002) were strangers to each other, an unlikely duo in both physical stature and skill. Joyce is buxom and wears a plain, khaki-colored dress and Birkenstock sandals. Davis is tall and lithe, clad only in maroon gym shorts and basketball sneakers. Their sequences of still poses performed in unison are choreographed by edits. Up-tempo melodic music provides the soundtrack, heightening the comedic effect of the performers' ungainly efforts. Joyce and Davis (2005) was shot a few years later, and during the interim, Herring, Joyce, and Davis had become close friends. Though shot in the same studio (now painted floor to ceiling white) and with the dancers wearing virtually the same clothing, Joyce and Davis varies greatly from the pair's first effort. Repetition comes not from stop-action-style editing, but through repeated attempts at the same movement, as if they are trying to
get it exactly right. Mostly they fail (and flail), and the film slides into slapstick. The
dancers dance with each other, try out different moves, support each other. There
is a new level of intimacy as they perform a series of pas de deux. But it is also a pas
de trois, as Herring, more familiar with this territory and the performers, loosens
up the camera (and the editing) and dances along.
In *Nathan (Hotel Room, CT)* (2007), a young man dressed in casual business attire (jeans, shirt, tie, and sport coat) enters a nondescript hotel room. He initiates a series of improvisatory dance phrases, partnering with chairs, lamps, even the bed. At one point, he masters the timing on a frizzy lightbulb in a floor lamp by tickling it with his extended foot. The camera closely shadows his sweat-soaked efforts to dance in the tiny room. Near the end, as he wrestles with the bed sheets, the music swells. Like the participants in *Dance 1* and *Joyce and Davis*, Nathan was a stranger to Herring—someone who volunteered to collaborate with the artist. And once again, Herring employed dance as a conceit to kill, and fill, time, a mode to make something legible out of a strange situation. The performers are sincere in their intent to execute the choreographies, and though the movements captured on film betray their kooky spontaneity, these charming dances would not exist without the camera—or the editing software deployed when shooting is completed.
Natalie Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament* (2009) appropriates hundreds of YouTube clips of dancers performing for the camera, alone in their bedrooms or living rooms. The clips are knitted together to create a single-channel video installation that appears as an extremely wide lineup of moving bodies—a chorus line. The stage these dancers share is purely metaphorical: dancers separated by physical space and time are brought together by the artist’s skillful searching, selecting, and editing. Bookchin’s Berkeley-esque pattern of dancers moving in unison explores a natural human desire to chronicle our lives—and, pervasive in today’s world, to post it on the Internet. The chronicling is not new, but the sharing through streaming clips is a recent phenomenon made possible by user-generated video-sharing sites. Bookchin searched the sites for clips in which all kinds of people—girls and boys, men and women—film themselves (usually with the computer’s built-in camera) dancing alone at home. They dance for the camera, generating a fixed-view, unedited, haphazardly concocted dance video. They try out moves, they copy, they flub. The clips are classified and united by their similarities—gestures, locations, room décor—and organized into a lineup of sameness. The piece is at once hopeful and dispiriting: the interconnectedness it exposes also highlights our collective blandness. We want to be like most people, even if we’re home alone. So much for the privacy of domesticity. For a certain generation, dancing in front of a mirror is a commonplace
experience. For another (possibly under thirty, or just plain exhibitionist?), filming it and sharing it with millions of strangers is the main thing: “It’s not about the video. It’s about creating a community around the video.”24

Bookchin’s title adopts Siegfried Kracauer’s 1927 theory of the mass ornament, which proposed that synchronized, precision dance troupes such as the Tiller Girls reflected the aesthetics of industrial mechanization, mass group think, and consequently the basis of Fascist power: spectacle. In such specialty entertainment acts, individuality was sacrificed to the whole. Kracauer wrote, “These products of American ‘distraction factories’ are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble female units whose movements are mathematical demonstrations.”25 The Tiller Girls’ kind of dancing can be seen in dance sequences filmed by Busby Berkeley, in which nearly identical dancers become a mass ornament. They don’t so much dance as make patterns and shapes. Bookchin references the influence of Berkeley and the Tiller Girls in her collaged soundtrack, which mixes music from Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi-era propaganda film Triumph of the Will (1935) and Berkeley’s Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933) with the sounds of the YouTube clips themselves: feet on floor, breathy exertions, and ambient noise.

Bookchin’s skillful editing creates its own kind of choreography and rhythmic structure, and we start to pick up on rhyming motifs: similar dance steps and acrobatics, matching props like Christmas trees or mirrors, interior spaces such as hallways or living rooms. One blogger sees Bookchin’s plethora of dancers positively: “By the end of the video, you’re left not only with a sense of elation by the visual dynamism of the projection, but with a realization about contemporary behavior and the contradictory isolation and shared experience of dancing alone together, all these people doing the same dance, performing the same gestures, linked only by cameras, screens and the desire to move.”26 Yes, we like to do the same things, and some of the most popular activities are watching TV and dancing. Or watching dancing on TV: witness the recent popularity of television dance contests. Or YouTube, where one of the most-watched videos (at this writing it has been viewed more than 124 million times, a constantly updating number under the playback box) is called “Evolution of Dance.” In it, “Inspirational Comedian” Judson LaIpply performs a six-minute montage of iconic dance moves, with corresponding dance music mix. LaIpply begins with Elvis’s hips and moves forward in time, through disco, Michael Jackson, break dancing, and on and on, enacting a comedic turn on popular dance. The performance is really a snapshot of rock and pop dancing as interpreted through and by documents of such dance—music videos. Strangely, LaIpply leaves out one of the most important video dancers of all time, Madonna.

Video-sharing sites like YouTube have replaced music television. Now you don’t have to watch what MTV dictates—you can watch whatever you want, whenever you want—without commercials or talking heads or shows about adolescents
boozing in the real world. We watch computer screens more than we watch television
screens. Bands now make videos for the Internet or handheld player devices, and
there is cachet in posting (as opposed to broadcasting) them online. They're cheaper,
they're viral, and kids like to copy them, creating a cottage industry of dance contests.
YouTube-type sites more quickly spread news, culture—everything—for better or
worse. Someone suggested I watch Beyoncé's video “All the Single Ladies.” Three
women perform some high-energy dancing against a brilliant white background that
transforms their black leotard-clad bodies into near silhouettes. The video is good,
the song is catchy, and the directing and choreography is top-notch. But more im-
portant, YouTube's related-videos sidebar (our age's channel surfing) linked me to a
recording of a 1969 television performance by Gwen Verdon and two dancers, chore-
ographed by Bob Fosse—the inspiration for Beyoncé's video, though her version
was super-sized and sexed-up for 2008. Fact: video directors have found a new idea
basket in YouTube. (I like Verdon and Fosse's version better.) Fosse is a gold mine.
Paula Abdul's video for “Cold Hearted” (1989) appropriates pretty much shot for
shot a dance number from Fosse's All That Jazz (1979)—though expurgates Fosse's
erotic ending so it could play on cable. And, of course, Michael Jackson was all
Fosse—the white socks, lowered hat, isolated movements, swivel hip, and turned-out
leg. (Most people, including Jackson himself, compare Jackson's movement to
Astaire's. But Astaire would never grab his crotch. Fosse: Yes.)

The exuberant visual style of music videos is reflected in Frank Moore and
Jim Self's dance video Beehive (1985). Their collaboration generated several live
dance works and one video, which originated when Self invited Moore to work with
him on a film project. It was Moore who proposed the idea of a film dance based on
insects. Self recalls: “Frank had worked with bees when he was younger and talked
all about how they danced to communicate, and built amazing hives which contained
storage areas, birthing cells, and dancing spaces. I liked this idea and thought about
how it could be a ballet. As we continued to discuss bee culture, the project grew and
grew into a giant ballet with Bee television and a cast of dozens in pointe shoes.”
Self catalogued a considerable vocabulary of beelike movements, which he deployed,
along with other “bees,” in a seemingly enormous hive set. Sandwiched between
beginning and end sections of bee dancers flitting around flowers is a kind of bee
sitcom in which the drone (Self) causes one commotion after another. The female
worker bee cracks him over the head with a pan brimming with a singed flower, and
then she gets a pie in the face. The twangy, quirky soundtrack emphasizes the farcical
nature of the video—there are even funny bee voices and canned laughter.

Moore and Self contributed equally to every aspect of Beehive, from the chore-
oography and costuming to sets, lighting, and editing. Moore's surrealist-influenced
narrative painting style shines here in the vertigo-inducing sets, wonderfully elaborate
furry costumes, and quirky visual flourishes. Self's and worker bee Teri Weksler's
top and bottom: Frank Moore and Jim Self, stills from *Beehive*, 1985
balletic interpretations of bee life transport the viewer into the hive. The culminating pas de deux, which climaxes in a rather lascivious mating dance, is at once elegant and utterly comical. Editing plays a critical role. Movement is often accelerated to create a jittery bumble like activity. Animation techniques set the bees in motion over images of floating flowers, and camera angles emulate the directionless world of the hive.

At the time Beehive was made, Moore was an emerging artist and Self had most recently danced with Merce Cunningham (he appears in Roamin’ I, discussed below). Self’s experience dancing for Cunningham’s camera dances informed his approach to Beehive: “[Merce] and Charlie [Atlas] had many insights and tools for making dances for the camera. The most useful ones involved scale and perspective. For instance, on camera the narrowest point is at the front and opens outward as you go deeper in space. At the same time, the figure gets smaller and harder to see, so there has to be a balance to get depth and also capture the body without losing detail. We used a lot of what I learned from Merce in Beehive. Another tip was regarding moving forward in space—moving away from the camera was much less powerful than moving towards it. And finally, something we used quite a lot in Beehive which is unique to camera space—one can enter the film space from all sides, top and bottom.”

Artist and filmmaker Charles Atlas is unquestionably one of the foremost makers of video dance. His pioneering collaborative videos with Merce Cunningham are a genre unto themselves. Cunningham, always a trailblazer throughout his long career, was one of the first choreographers to consider how dance could, and should, be made for the camera lens. A substandard document of one of his performances prompted him to take directorial matters into his own hands, and ever the collaborator, he invited Atlas, his then stage manager (and budding filmmaker), to make videos with him. From 1971 to 1983, at the dawn of video art and production, they made about ten videos, all choreographies conceived for the camera. (Some were then translated for the stage, as opposed to the more conventional order of stage to screen.) Their working method involved precisely choreographed camera movements and edit points.

Fractions I (1977), made in the company’s Westbeth studio in the West Village, is a seldom seen video work that showcases multiple timing cues. Four stationary cameras aimed at the corners of the studio record the dancers. Television monitors—sometimes a single monitor, sometimes two stacked vertically, and sometimes four in a square—display live feeds from the four cameras. Our eyes constantly attempt to piece
top and bottom: Charles Atlas and Merce Cunningham, stills from Fractions I, 1977
together the operation between the image on the foreground monitor and the dancers in the background. The monitors replicate the field effect characteristic of Cunningham’s live stage works—where the dance is happening all over the stage (or even separate stages) with no one focal point—by transmitting images of dancers from other areas of the studio. At times, the monitor displays the very same dancer who is dancing in the background, which creates a double image, a pas de deux made possible only by the camera. Other times, the monitor conveys a detail or a close-up of the dancers in the distance.

Indeed, in contrast to the camera’s somewhat dictatorial eye, Fractions I allows the viewer to determine the viewpoint: on the monitors or on the “real” dancers. Further complicating the shifts between foreground (monitor) and background (dancer) are technical transitions from black-and-white, with those flat grays characteristic of early videotape, to color. The monitors remain monotonously black-and-white. Fractions I’s ending is a brilliant curtain call, video-dance style. The entire ensemble, shot in color, dances in unison. The choreography moves each dancer to the front, at which point his or her name appears on the screen. There is a cut to the credits, followed by an outtake of the dancers on the floor, exhausted.

Atlas’s Roamin’ I (1979–80) is a short documentary-style video of the making of Locale, another Cunningham and Atlas video dance. Locale (1979–80) was the first video dance to employ the then new Steadicam, a camera rig worn on the body of the camera operator, and the first work by the collaborators in which the camera moved with the dancers, emphasizing the kinetic punch of the movement. Atlas, wearing the camera, essentially danced alongside the performers. Made at the Westbeth studio, the video alternates between color shots of Locale and black-and-white behind-the-scenes footage of the making of Locale. It exposes the painstaking work of making video dance: the planning, the dancers rehearsing and resting and waiting, the yards of video cable that have to be managed. You hear shouts of “Cue red, cue blue,” which correspond to the dancers’ leotards. Roamin’ I also shows us how the camera interacts with the dancers: a cut-in of Locale shows a dancer exit near the camera; Roamin’ I shows us the same dancer slip by the side of the cameraman, duck under cables, then reenter to prepare for another shot. It is quite comical at times, sort of a zany backstage exposé, while at the same time a work of art in itself. Roamin’ I also provides a wonderful metanarrative of Dance with Camera: here is the camera, making the dance, and the camera is dancing.
Cunningham’s dance works were defined by collaborations. Often in his works, the elements of music, costume, lighting, and scenography would come together with the dancing at the moment of first performance. Dancer Flora Wiegmann’s video *Adaptive Lines* (2007) proposes a different type of collaboration. The title is borrowed from artist Vito Aconci’s 1971 text outlining modes of performance: “Adaptive Lines of action. A performance can consist of performing (adhering to the terms of) a particular element (a rule, a space, a previous performance, another person). . . . The performer can work as a producer; the performance pattern can be linear—a series of additions of material and energy.”32 *Adaptive Lines* was created by such additions of material and energy, or more specifically, a series of collaborative, structured progressions. Wiegmann choreographed a solo dance for an outdoor location. She invited artist Walead Beshty to choose a site for this dance, and he selected a freeway median, a 360-degree no-man’s-land circumscribed by on-ramps and off-ramps. Wiegmann adapted the dance to the site and videotaped her performance. She then sent the document of this performance to artist Alix Lambert, who was invited to create a soundtrack. Lambert, with Joshua Myers, composed a percussive track derived from the recorded sounds of a boxing gym (rhythm bags being punched and bells). The finished soundtrack was three minutes, so Wiegmann shortened her dance to conform to this time frame. Inspired by the sound, she also changed some of the movements: at one point she feigns a punch. Artist Andrea Zittel served as costume designer and created a khaki-colored smock with a huge black X on the front. Wiegmann adapted the dance to the costume, a garment that allowed total freedom of movement.

All of these elements were combined to create the final performance: Wiegmann danced in costume, with soundtrack, and on location for filmmaker Margo Victor. The video (transferred from film) begins with an establishing shot: foreground trees give way to rushing freeway traffic. Wiegmann follows the lead of Deren and Clarke by taking dance out of doors, but here the setting is not a bucolic forest or sunny beach, but the anxious fringes of a Los Angeles freeway. Victor’s editing refracts the kineticism of a highway, transposing the body in space against the machine. She transforms Wiegmann’s dance, much slower and more complex in its original form, into a hyperkinetic series of shapes and lines and balances. Victor’s deft editing creates a dance possible only on film: movement is speeded up and slowed down, and elements are repeated in quick succession. When the camera spins rapidly around Wiegmann, the ensuing disorientation captures the character
of the physical site. The adaptations Wiegmann invited resulted in a uniquely collaborative dance film.

*Inside Eyes* (1987) by video artist James Byrne and choreographer Victoria Marks investigates the relationship between the body and the camera. When Byrne and Marks decided to collaborate on an experimental dance video work, their premise was to just go into the studio with dancers and a camera and see what might result. Working with a handheld video camera, Byrne developed a distinctive
way of inserting himself into the dance. Other filmmakers “danced” with their dancer subjects, but Byrne goes a step further. The camera is not just close to the dancer, it is a dancer, transforming the notion of a pas de deux between dancer and camera into a very literal manifestation. How does a body move when it holds a camera, or when it pays close attention to the fact of its being filmed, to its mediated form?

In her choreography, Marks considered the camera’s movement as well, specifically the camera’s ability to switch perspective and to come close. In fact, the video begins and ends with an extreme close-up of an eye (hence the title), and the rest of the movement is equally close. Marks choreographed a visual barrage. The dance has no front, sides, or back. The effect of the camera work is to place the viewer into something like the eye of the hurricane. Bodies are seemingly everywhere, layering into shapes and forms, even crashing into the camera. Quick edits augment the hyperkinetic movement. All the while, the dancers talk aloud about the movements they’re doing, explaining what they will do next and what the camera will do. The dancers execute partnering work that mimics the partnering of camera and dancer: at one point, a dancer in the background even mimes holding a camera.33

James Byrne and Victoria Marks, still from Inside Eyes, 1987