

Hope and Typography

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Exploring ways of writing and documenting Bharatnatyam using notations

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Abstract: Practicing and learning Bharatnatyam, a major form of Indian classical dance that originated in Tamil Nadu is considered to be extremely complex. The dance form has many dimensions including head movements, facial expressions, single-hand gestures, double hand gestures, footwork (adavus), eye movements, neck movements, costumes, music, repertoire, and themes of performances. However, it has not been documented in a well-defined manner due to which the dance has started to diminish its authenticity. This has also made it difficult for the modern generations to learn and develop this dance-form into something more.

On the other hand, notation is a way of communication which enables us to record information, replicate, and also helps preserve the content which allows another person to replicate or communicate that information. Therefore in this project, **I have explored notations in relation to experimental typography, semiotics, and communication design to develop a comprehensive language system for writing and documenting Bharatnatyam.**

This has been accomplished with an indefinite design process that has involved experimenting with primary findings and analyzing results to ensure that the findings are precise and clear. A lot of the process involves re-studying the dance from a communication graphics point of view and collecting data by figuring out ways to record minute details of each movement.

Keywords: *Notations, Typography, Experimental Typography, Movement, Documentation, Bharatnatyam, Dance, Culture, Learning*

1. Introduction

Movements in Bharatnatyam are divided into abstract and expressive. The abstract movements show rhythm and provide decoration and beauty to the dance form. On the other hand, Expressive movements convey meaning and show emotion, through a vocabulary of hand gestures, postures, and facial expressions.

I have been practicing Bharatnatyam since childhood. It was the first-ever art form that felt therapeutic and gave me a place to fit in. But the worst part was not have a clear guide that I could follow to memorize the steps and maintain the authenticity of the dance form. On the other hand, letter forms are an essential ingredient for all typographic communications. They go beyond the shapes of letters, are free flowing and can lead to better communication. I thought of how dance and letter forms when integrated could produce a body of work that expands techniques, methodologies, and tools of communication, letter forms and the dance form.

Traditionally in the context of print culture, type has been understood to be static but dance as movement. In order to integrate these two disciplines, I comprehended their differences and similarities. I aimed to test Bharatnatyam through typography by exploring the narratives of dance notations as a way of writing. And using photography as a way of capturing and recording movements.

2. Methodologies

2.1 Primary Research - Data Collection

Primarily, my starting points included researching and exploring ways of recording movement, rhythm, expressions, and notation. I devoted a large section of my time collecting data using primary research and evaluating methods of documentation. Since, all notation is read, and it is a record of knowledge and also a design tool. I designed a table that would enable me to compare and contrast my findings for further development. The aim for this was to analyze what I wanted to highlight in the notation, what I wanted to find out, and how in depth I needed to go into the theory of my field of study in order to develop my ideas.

The table consists of the following columns:

Adavu name (name of the step), Bol + basic notation (what the singer sings during the dance steps + Feet and hand stick figures), RH (right hand gesture), LH (left hand gesture), Legs / feet (legs / feet gestures) and Notes.

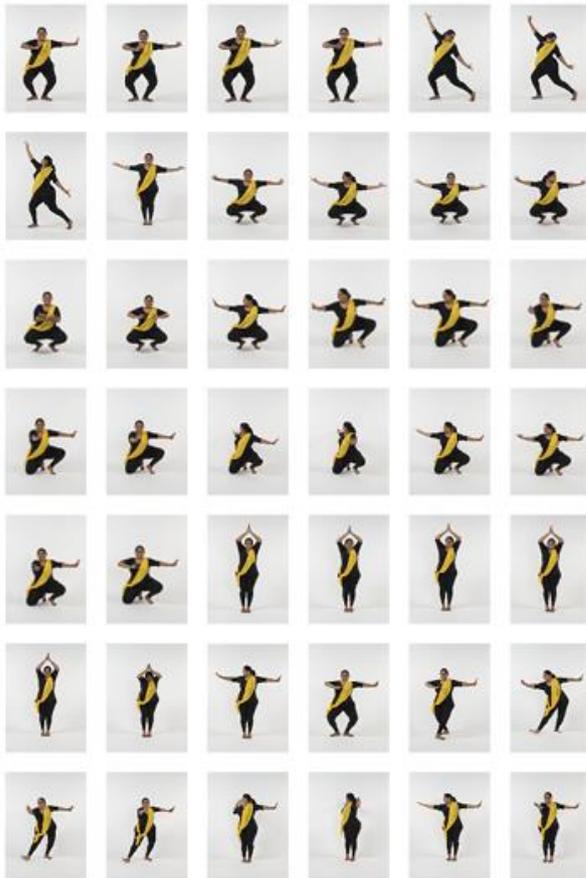
ADAVU NAME	BOL + BASIC NOTATION	RH	LH	LEGS/FEET	NOTES
1. Tat -	Variation 1 1-5 Variation 2 Tam - reverse repeat (1-5) 6 7-12 reverse repeat (1-6) Variation 3				2
2. Tai -					2
3. Tam -					2
4. Dhrit -					2
5. Tai -					2
6.					2
7-12					2
					2
					2
					2
					2

Figure.1 Example of Data Collection

As the project began, I realized I should give more importance to the research rather than the outcome. This was because I am undertaking an indefinite design process which involves experimentation with authenticity and analyzing results to ensure the findings are of the highest standard. A lot of my process involved data collection, examining, producing sketches. This became a repetitive process and an integral part of my design practice.

2.2 Motion Capture using Photography

The movements of Bharatanatyam are unique. They are often described as geometric, for there is much geometry in the basic postures and movements of which the dance is built, but this makes them sound static, which they aren't. Bharatanatyam is dynamic and energetic; it is also precise and balanced. So getting inspired from Eadweard Muybridge, I took a series of photos and provided a detailed reference to visualize the entire dance sequence.



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Figure 2. Results from Motion Capturing Photography

2.3 Mark-making of dance as a record of action

This exploration has been done using light motion photography which included creating abstract shapes using flashlights. These shapes records movements and distinguishes themselves based on how they are perceived. This type of notation is aimed only for those already proficient in the dance and can effortlessly replicate the movement. The result of these were very beautiful, they captured minimal differences between movements along with the authenticity and grace of the dance form.

These shapes when combined can create their own typeface.



Figure 3. Mark Making

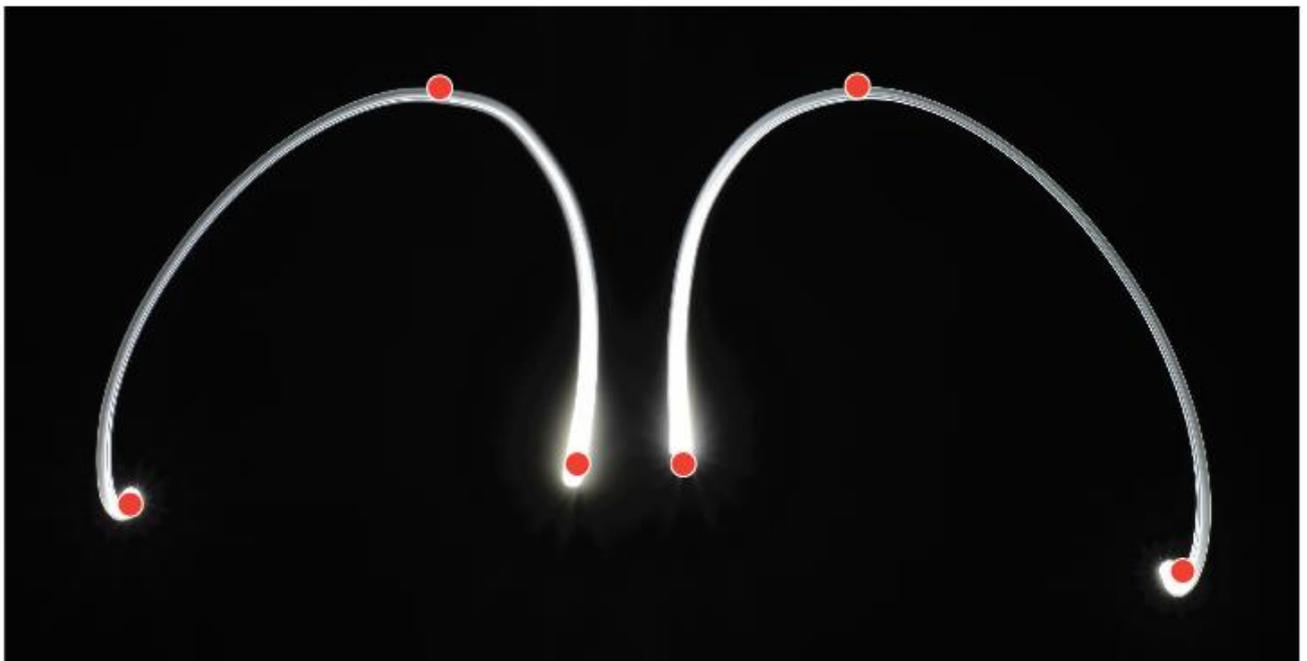


Figure 4. Result from Light motion Photography

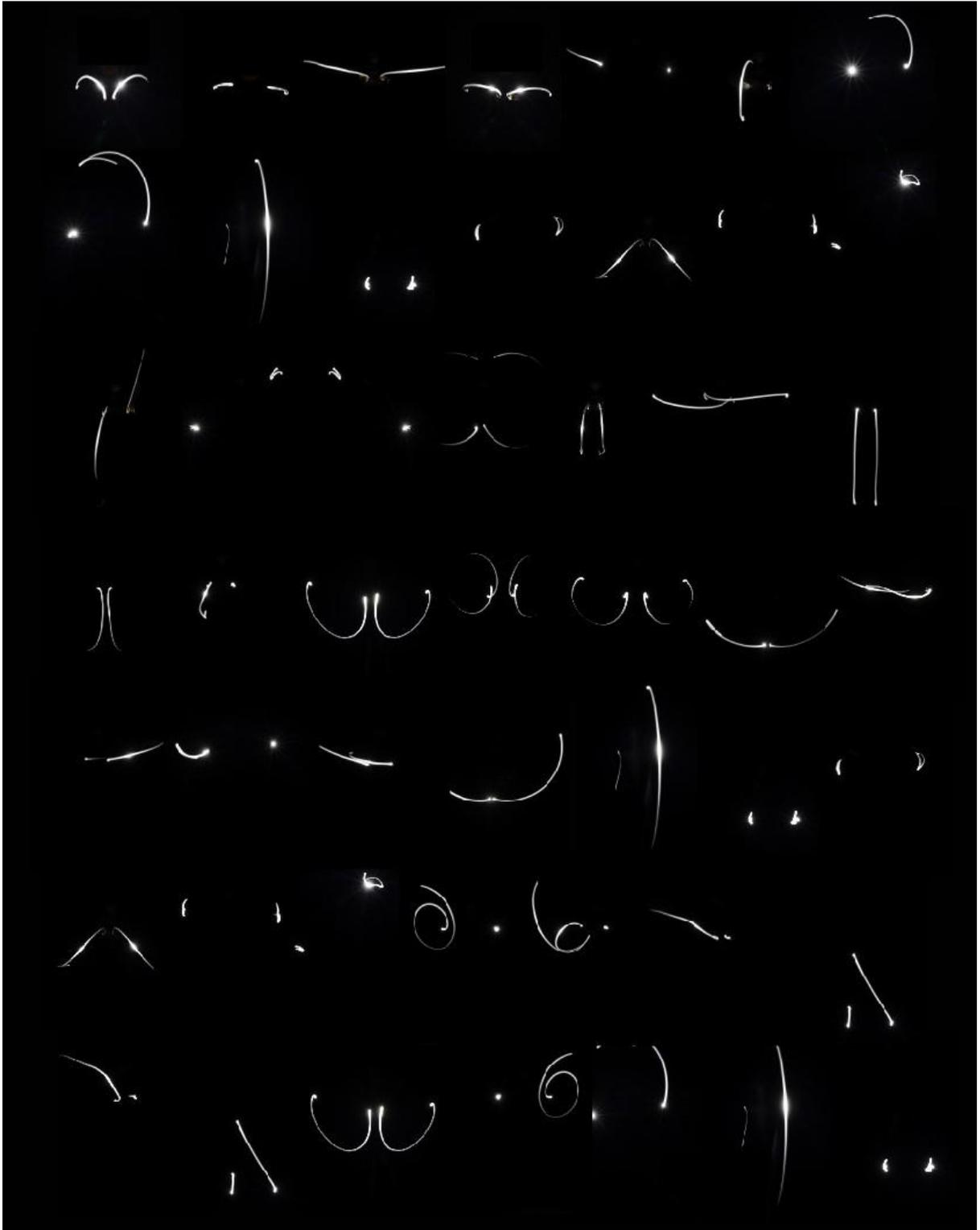


Figure 5. A Typeface - Light motion Photography

2.4 Simplifying movement using Illustrations

In order to form a logical understanding of the series of movement of each recital, I decided to simplify the photos and draw two-dimensional stick figures.

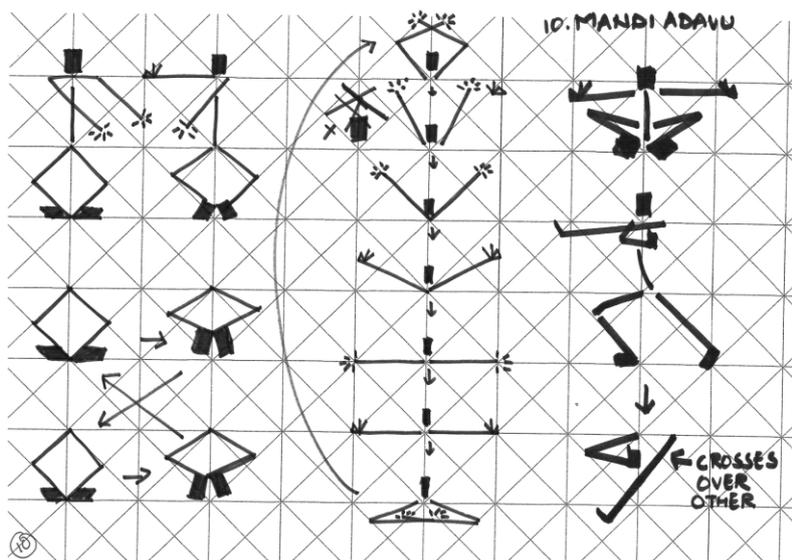


Figure 6. An example of initial stick figure Sketch

After examining these stick figures, I figured that for accurate movement description I must account for the human body both male and female individually. The book titled, 'The measure of man and woman by Henry Dreyfuss'. It aided me in achieving the perfect proportions for the stick figures. Also, the Vitruvian Man by Leonardo Da Vinci assisted me in developing the grid for those stick figures.

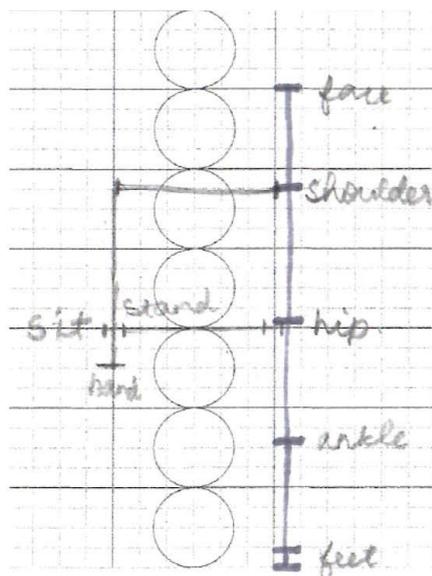


Figure 7. Grid for final stick figures

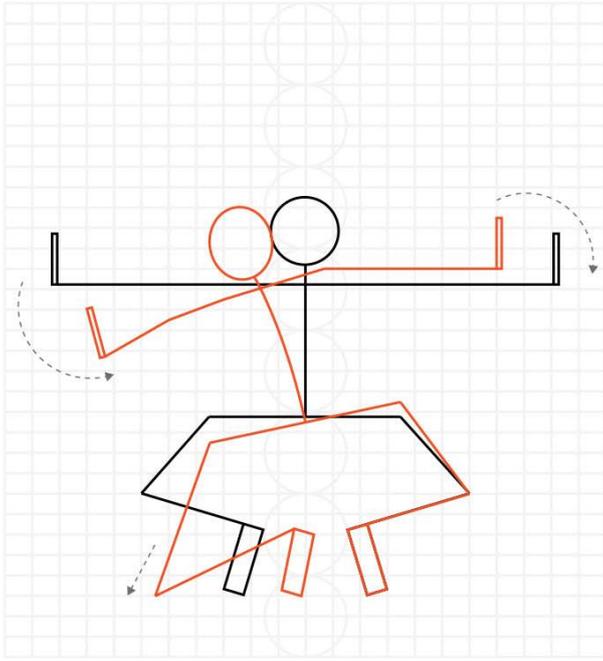


Figure 8. Final Stick Figure. The black line represents the movement the dancer is currently in the position and the orange line is the movement he/she will be performing next.

2.5 Notation Writing

Even though the figures would give an understanding for the dance. I didn't account for every detail necessary to the correct movement of each performance nor did I contain all details necessary for an accurate performance.

As the dance was first documented in Sanskrit script, I designed a notation system inspired from the script to embody the examined concept. The body of Sanskrit literature encompasses a rich tradition of philosophical and religious texts, as well as poetry, music, drama, scientific, technical and other texts. Sanskrit has a number of linguistic features like, phonologically, the introduction of retroflexes, which alternate with dentals, and morphologically, the formation of gerunds. There are about a thousand conjunct consonants, most of which combine two or three consonants. There are also some with four-consonant conjuncts and at least one well-known conjunct with five consonants. This is a selection of commonly-used conjuncts.



Image 9. Example of conjunct consonants.

My explorations were based on how notations would work and how they would look like and resemble the original vedic sanskrit alphabets. I tried to understand how overlapping symbols would work, should the symbols represent a movement or rather a part of the movement and lastly which type of grid for symbol placement would be easily understandable. I decided to use these conjunct consonants and the detailed linguistic features further ahead in the process.

Secondly, this Bharatnatyam notation system has been inspired by Laban notation. Which is the process of recording movements on paper which involves the conversion of the elements of space-time energy and the parts of bodies involved in symbols that can be read and converted into movements.

This learning tool for Bharatnatyam is designed as a writing format for each step in the dance in a clear and structured manner. This type of notation language is perfect for new learners and amateurs. It shows how dance studies can be successfully integrated using notation as both a tool and a unifying factor.

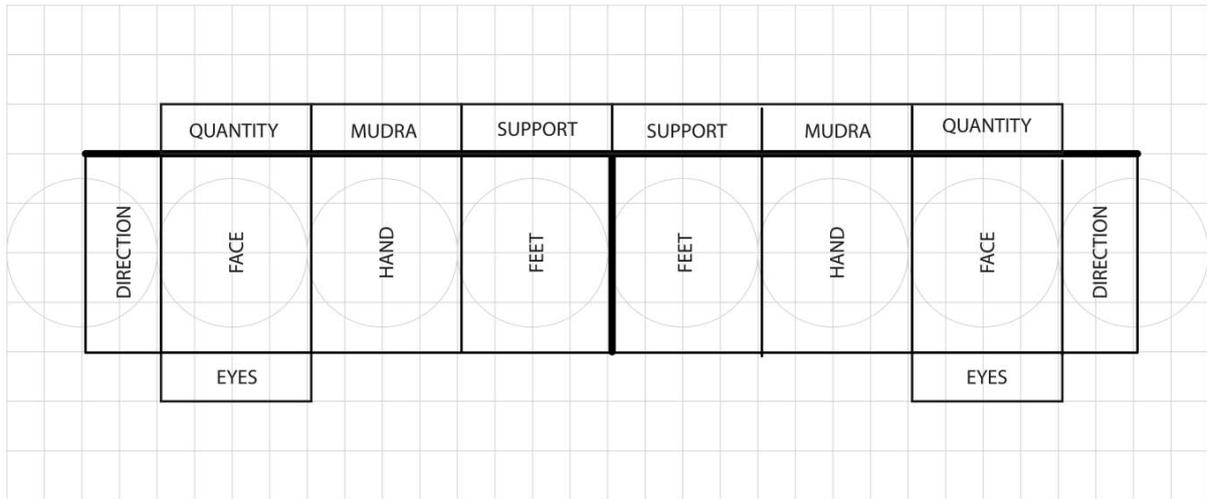
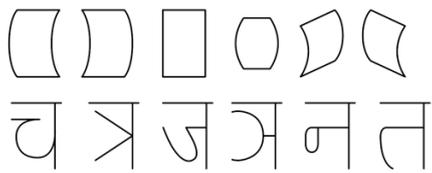
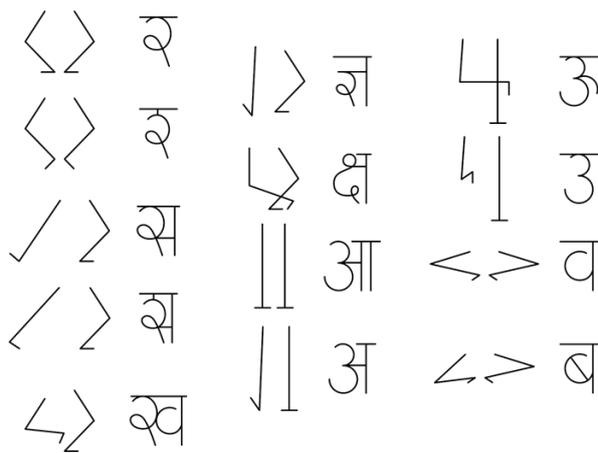


Figure 10. The grid I designed for writing the notation

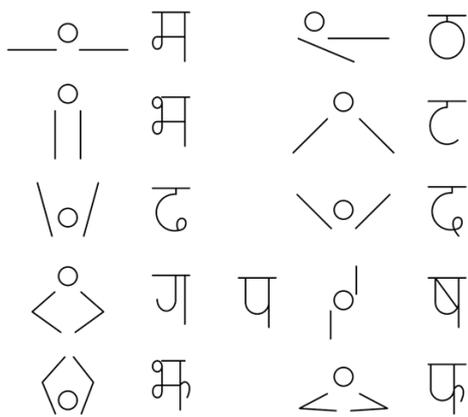
HEAD MOVEMENTS



LEG MOVEMENTS



HAND MOVEMENTS



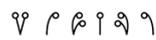
PALM MOVEMENTS



MUDRAS (HAND GESTURES)



NO. OF MOVEMENTS AND ON WHICH SIDE



DIRECTIONAL SYMBOLS

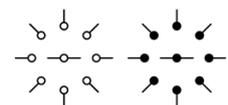
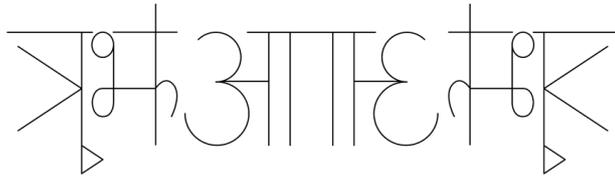


Figure 11. The Key

तक तदन्गि Taka Tading



तात तै ताम Tat Tai Tam

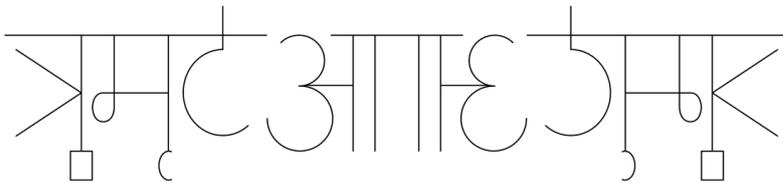


Figure 12. Example of steps written in notation form

2.6 Allaripu - a Learning Guide

The Allaripu is traditionally the first dance piece that Bharatnatyam dancers learn and perform in their recital. It is an invocation piece, symbolizing the offerings of respect to God, Guru (Mentor) and the audience.

I compiled all the results and designed an editorial for Allaripu to show how this project can benefit the audience. This also gives an understanding or an idea in the further development of the project.

तत् Tat²⁹



तै Tai³⁰



Figure 13. Example of the notation and stick figure together

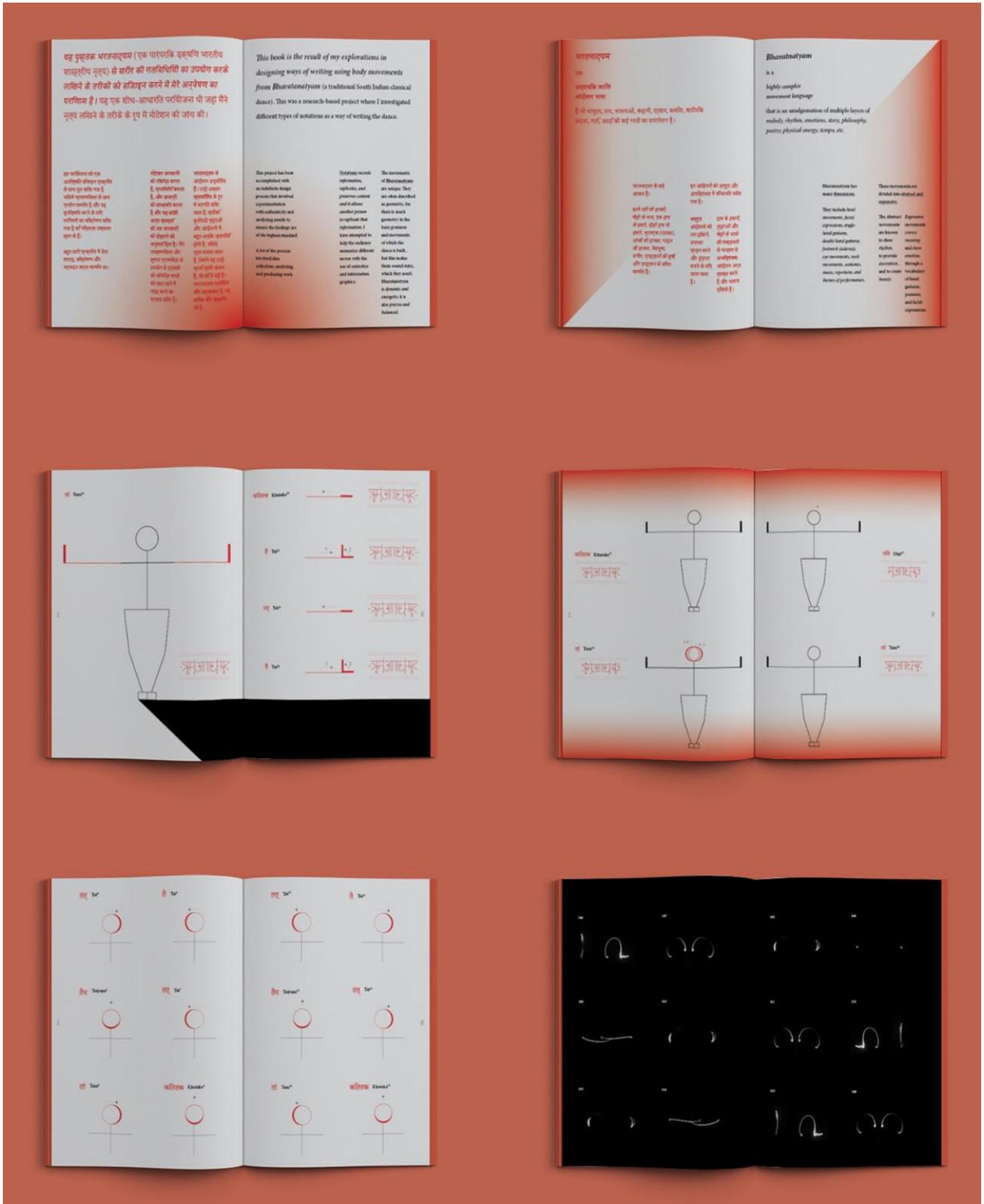


Figure 14. Pages from the Editorial

3. Further Development

Firstly, I want to work more on the written notation language system by introducing conjunct consonants and taking benefit of the linguistic features of the Sanskrit Script. Secondly, I would work on the mathematical accuracy in the figures showing the exact angle a body part moves in. This will be an important step towards developing more detailed notation.

4. Conclusion

The Primary Research helped a lot in this process of finding a way of interdisciplinary form of communication. Structuring the explorations and roughly planning out how I would approach to the challenge aided me in making better comparison between outcomes. And the resulting outcome came as an all rounded approach to writing dance.

Acknowledgement

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