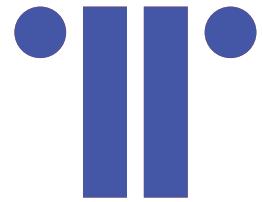


**Talbot Rice Residents**

**Eminie Alcluskey**



Emmie McLuskey's thoughtful practice – including works with titles like *The A-Z of Movement* (2022 - ongoing), *To Avoid Falling Apart with Janice Parker* (2023) and *these were the things that made the step familiar* (2019) – is about embodiment.

If these titles conjure the idea of something that is either simple or back-to-basics, then it is important to call out a misunderstanding from the start. Think of how feminist theorist Karen Barad pushes back against classical physics' idea of a vacuum being "nothing", when really its indeterminacy means that it is infinite in possibility. ("The presumed lack of ability of the finite to hold the infinite ... seems empirically unfounded, and cuts short the infinite agential resources of undesirability/ indeterminacy that are always already at play.") Or, how robotics experts talk about the way so-called complex problems often turn out to already have a solution, when "simple" things (like a robot catching an egg, or going floppy so it doesn't break when it falls) are really difficult. How knowledge defines what is "simple" or "complex" is political because it orientates us in the world: it establishes a value system that effects what you notice and what you ignore because it is, apparently, "nothing."

When, through her careful treatment of movement across the mediums of print, film and sculpture, we become mindful of the arch of a hand, the torsion of an ankle or the incumbency of a torso – in other words, when we feel with and through bodies – we are in a space rich with possibility. If in school or in life our embodied possibilities are curtailed by the "complex" problems of – capitalism, industry, economics, social roles – then we can recognise McLuskey's work as being about a radical re-education through the body. Borrowing a vocabulary from choreography and dance – and in frequent collaboration – McLuskey substantiates a discourse that can trace the connection between our "simple" movements and politics. Whether using working with low frequencies (*Background Noise, Part 1*, 2022) to create listening spaces or the format of children's picture books to provoke action, her work is always about the patience and the bravery it takes to shed preconceived ideas and learned through the broader possibilities afforded by experience.

Talbot Rice Residents

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artist  
intro



*To Avoid Falling Apart with Janice Parker, 2023. Still.*



*The A-Z of Movement*, 2022 - ongoing.

## The A-Z of Movement

James Clegg, 2023

A popular quote from Merce Cunningham (originally from a 2001 interview with Joyce Morgenroth for her book *Speaking of Dance*) runs: "The body tends to be habitual. The use of chance allowed us to find new ways to move and to put movements together that would not otherwise have been available to us. It revealed possibilities that were always there except that my mind hadn't seen them." This helps us to start to place McLuskey's *The A-Z of Movement*. It reminds us that we are all, in a sense, choreographed throughout our lives; that our bodies already know forms of discipline and conformity before we have chance to consciously understand how. For Cunningham – in this interview celebrating his creative relationship with John Cage – chance was a vital tool that could expose or break with patterns so latent in the body that they are normally inconceivable.

What McLuskey's long-term engagement with dance and movement establishes is the idea that with the right groundwork something more stable than chance can be used to raise this subject to consciousness. Her collaborative publication (with Freya Field-Donovan) around the work of dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham and filmmaker Maya Deren, *A Strange American Funeral*, for example, outlined an important factor. That whilst we might often think of dance as being something transient – as fleeting as the sound of ballet slippers upstage – in an expanded sense it actually encompasses the discourse and documentation that prepares

b is for bounce  
b is for bend  
b is for bendy  
b is for backwards  
b is for bounce back  
b is for birl  
b is for balance



c is for crawl  
c is for connect  
c is for connection  
c is for cycle  
c is for climb  
c is for cover  
c is for crumple  
c is for circle



the way for it happen. In other words, movements on the stage are not hermetic events, but are informed by conversations, photographs, videos, experiences and encounters with teachers and books. Interestingly this is close to John Dewey's broader definition of habit as, "an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response [and] a special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions". McLuskey's exploration of how dance can be embodied in print or the (lack of) historicisation of dance, could be seen as a concern with the documentation of something that is close to the intimacy, latency and instinct of habit.

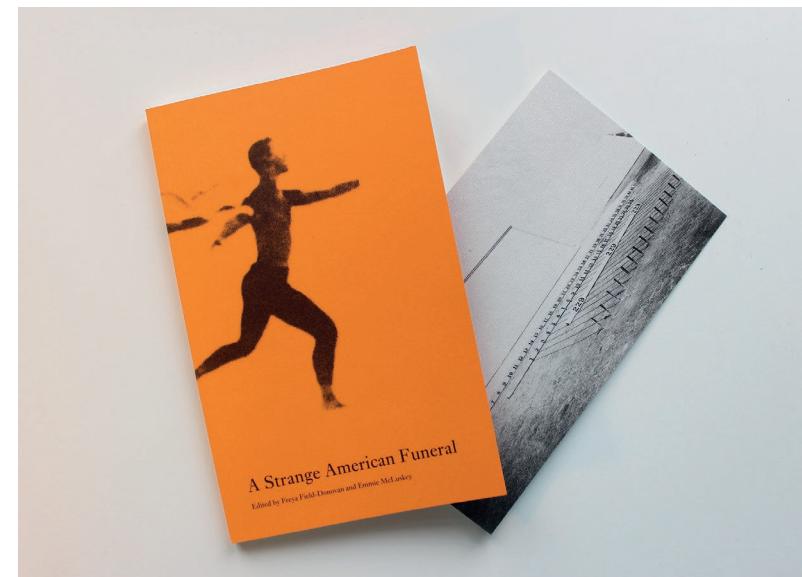
This supports the pedagogic framing of *The A-Z of Movement* and its desire to institute a critical programme for embodiment: a toolkit to foster an alternative knowledge of movement. If power principally acts upon bodies and they are conditioned before we know it, then working out how to equip people with the resources to explore their habits is incredibly interesting from the point of view of social change. In more open terms, this is also about how children (and all people) have many different attributes and forms of intelligence that are not always rewarded or recognised in school, other academic settings or life. And it is worth noting here that the words in *The A-Z of Movement* were collected from people of all ages that McLuskey has worked with. So, it is more subtle than just thinking of bodies being controlled by some external authority from which the artwork may liberate us, and more about exploring how embodiment is framed within society (which is hierarchical and problematic).

The work of dancer, choreographer and movement theoretician Rudolf Laban was instructive for McLuskey's A-Z of movement (and previously *these were the things that made the step familiar*, 2019). Here, his work helps to put us back in touch with the pleasures of embodied freedom. Borrowing Anna Carlisle's summary of his aspirations, this is dance for:

- "a celebration of communal thought"

- "joy in the harmony of movement"
- "sensitivity and spontaneity of expression"
- "experiencing alone and together the increased vigour of the physical, emotional and spiritual forces ..."
- "touching and enhancing one's inner light"
- "care for the human being as opposed to the robot"

Labanotation, Laban's vocabulary of movement, is crucial to McLuskey's work. But vital too are these correlations to the positive powers of movement. Joy, sensitivity and care are the qualities that vitalise the project of (re)learning. This is a reminder too, that in trying to capture what is as the heart of this work, we are speaking about something that will inevitably escape certain forms of thinking. It is more that – as this artist has taught us – this text might help support other encounters in the world of bodies, and encounters with this important artwork.



*A Strange American Funeral*, 2019.

## Emmie McLuskey: Hanging Out

Richard Birkett, 2023

Hosted on the Edinburgh art space Collective's website is a recording of a conversation between artists Cauleen Smith and Emmie McLuskey.<sup>1</sup> The talk was part of *H-E-L-L-O* (2022), a solo exhibition by Smith programmed and organised by McLuskey. The first two minutes of the recording are purely composed of the sound of the audience gathering, greeting friends and settling. The acoustics are unusually crisp and sonorous, the event having taken place in Collective's domed nineteenth-century observatory. With the talk coming hard on the heels of two years of COVID-19-related restrictions, the burble of chatter between people is audibly animated while never resolving into legible conversations. This section of audio is perhaps incidental, a quirk of absent editing. Yet it is also profound in communicating the meaningfulness of social gathering through the material and sonic particularities of voiced bodies in a space.

I've been thinking about this passage of res-onant sound both in connection with the insightful exchanges that unfolded between the artists, and for how it offers a motif for McLuskey's broader practice. McLuskey's projects are in the realm of the social, of the things that happen when contexts and people meet and communicate. Vitally, the space that she invokes does not privilege the linguistic. Rather, it sits with the affective: with the impact of sound on a body; with the presence or absence of gesture; with the plurality of motion; and with an understanding of geographies as bearing boundaries and contours of power, which can be actively resisted through how we inhabit them, collectively and individually. The audience soundscape summons a sense of extemporaneous conviviality. In McLuskey's work we experience what theorist Jasbir K.

Puar describes as "the analytic power of conviviality": "As an attribute and function of assembling ... conviviality does not lead to a politics of the universal or inclusive common, nor an ethics of individuatedness, rather the futurity enabled through the open materiality of bodies as a Place to Meet".<sup>2</sup>

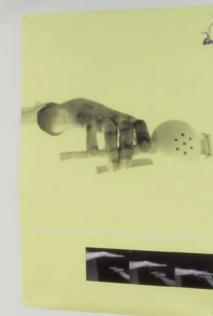
While McLuskey's artistic practice has encompassed roles as a producer, programmer and organiser, asserting the potentiality of these designations in how they centre working with others, it is perhaps pertinent to address McLuskey's work through its constant movement between different scales of research, instantiation and praxis. This is evident in the relations that exist across projects such as her solo exhibition at Collective, *these were the things that made the step familiar* (2019) and her leading of The School of Plural Futures, an alternative school in Skye and Lochalsh (2021). The Collective project explored early twentieth-century developments in dance – particularly the work of choreographers Katherine Dunham, Maya Deren and Rudolf Laban – and its intersections with ethnographic and scientific theories of movement. Laban is known for describing and interpreting human motions, studying the nature of what he termed "effort". In combining different vectors of effort, he identified eight primary annotations for movement – punch, slash, dab, flick, press, wring, glide, float – that have since been widely used in dance and acting training, while also influencing workflow practices in manufacturing contexts. In the exhibition McLuskey installed a series of digital prints each combining a cropped image of hands and arms engaged in motions corresponding to Laban's annotations – for instance shaking maracas, or sticking a fork in a potato – with a reproduction of one of Laban's own diagrammatic images, a photographic description of the action in British Sign Language, and a line of poetry taken from the work of Millicent A. A. Graham.<sup>3</sup> These composites placed Laban's system in relation to secondary layers of interpretation: interactions with objects; poetical associations; and non-vocal, non-alphabetic language.

<sup>1</sup> See [https://soundcloud.com/collectivedinburgh/cauleen-smith-in-conversation-with-emmie-mcluskey?utm\\_source=clipboard&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=social\\_sharing](https://soundcloud.com/collectivedinburgh/cauleen-smith-in-conversation-with-emmie-mcluskey?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing)

<sup>2</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, 'Prognosis time: Towards a geopolitics of affect, debility and capacity', *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, vol.19, issue 2, 2009, p.168.



*The School of Plural Futures, 2021.*



*these were the things that made the step familiar*, 2019. Photo: Tom Nolan

Through unsettling Laban's system, *these were the things* raised the question of what kind of knowledge the system yields and who or what constitutes its subject and object. McLuskey's work suggests less of an analytic frame on the body, than the reclamation of somatic, psychic and linguistic states as they form our relations to the world. These intersections are sites of both habituation and potentially radical transformation.

*these were the things* further developed around the research and choreography of Dunham and Deren. Working with scholar Freya Field-Donovan, McLuskey focused on an unrealised collaboration between Dunham and Deren to create a children's book. In a publication made for the exhibition, Field-Donovan writes of the importance of their work in the 1930s and '40s for how it shifts a perspective away from a "language of naturalism and embodied presence", to "questions about the relationships between bodies, media and pedagogy".<sup>4</sup> *these were the things* added geographic site to this framework and reproduced texts by Deren and Dunham that address dance in the Afro diasporic contexts of the Caribbean and the American South, alongside poems by Graham that speak to her surroundings in Jamaica.

This questioning dynamic between bodies, media, pedagogy and site provided the ground for McLuskey's guidance of The School of Plural Futures, working with a group of young people living in Skye and Lochalsh. Meeting throughout 2021 in village halls and outdoor spaces, the group shared film screenings, met with activists, researchers and artists, conducted exercises in mapping and movement and produced prints, objects and a publication. Underpinning these activities was a sense of reckoning with spatial and environmental crisis in the context of the Hebridean island: the spectre of tourism-led gentrification pricing inhabitants out of home rental or ownership; the shifting understandings of land-use necessitated by climate change; and the loss of

<sup>3</sup> Millicent A. A. Graham, *The Damp in Things and The Way Home*, Peepal Tree Press, 2009 and 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Freya Field-Donovan and Emmie McLuskey (eds.), *A Strange American Funeral*, Collective, 2019.

biodiversity. As an exercising of in-situ everyday collective practice and attentive gathering, The School of Plural Futures was motivated by the dialectic between pluralistic somatic movement through a common geography and the distanciation felt when experiencing the representations and privatisations of this site.

In the conversation between McLuskey and Cauleen Smith, Smith spoke of particular imaginings of the space created between people, which for her modelled actualised forms of utopia: the improvisatory collective of Sun Ra's Arkestra; the Shaker movement; Simon Rodia's Watts Towers and their deep resonance for the community of South Central Los Angeles. McLuskey is similarly invested in what is at work in such a modelling, as an everyday process of thinking and communicating through bodies in motion and of transgressing the dominant worlds of sense.<sup>5</sup>

Richard Birkett is a curator and writer.

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this phrase and the text's title from Maria Lugones, particularly her essay 'Tactical Strategies of the Streetwalker', in Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppression*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003. 'Hanging Out' was also the title of the Artist Moving Image Festival 2019 programmed by McLuskey, Ima-Abasi Okon and Kimberly O'Neill.

## Biography

Emmie McLuskey is an artist based in Glasgow. She works with other artists to produce collaborative work; this has previously taken the form of exhibitions, publications, events, objects, conversations and writing.

Emmie graduated from Goldsmiths College, London in 2010. Throughout 2023 she has been working towards the creation of a new children's book titled *The A-Z of Movement* with choreographer Janice Parker. Recent exhibitions and presentations include *To Avoid Falling Apart*, The Travelling Gallery; *A is for Angle*, Freelands Foundation; *these were the things that made the step familiar*, Collective; *Private Lives*, Siss Club Marseille; *Organs*, Dogo Residenx für Neue Kunst, Switzerland and *Notes on the Floor* at KW, Berlin.

Since 2021 she has led The School of Plural Futures, an alternative education project with ATLAS Arts. In 2022 she was the Associate Artist for Edinburgh Art Festival and curated Cauleen Smith's solo presentation at Collective, Edinburgh. Recently she has been in residence at Cove Park, Hospitalfield Arts and ARCUS, Japan. Since 2019 she has edited multiple artist publications including *Too Brittle Too Rigid Too Fixed* by Janice Parker, *A Strange American Funeral* with Freya Field-Donovan and *A Person Is Not An Individual* with The School of Plural Futures. McLuskey regularly writes about and produces other artists' work, recent commissions include FVU, London, National Galleries of Scotland, Counterflows Experimental Music Festival.

## Talbot Rice Residents

Talbot Rice Residents is a two-year programme within the unique context of Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh College of Art and the University of Edinburgh.

A part of the Freelands Artist Programme, Talbot Rice Residents provides time and support for emerging, or re-emerging artists based anywhere in Scotland. It is supported by Edinburgh College of Art, where the Residents have a studio and access to facilities. Residents also receive year-round curatorial and technical support from the Talbot Rice team, as well as access to workshops, libraries and collections, and contact with the vast academic community within the University of Edinburgh. In addition to an annual artist fee, Residents receive an individual budget for production and travel, and meet at key points in the programme for masterclasses and workshops delivered by invited guests. The programme also includes national and international research trips, new commissioned writing and culminates with exhibitions in Edinburgh and London.

## Freelands Artist Programme

The Freelands Artist Programme is a landmark initiative to support emerging artists across the UK launched in 2018 by Freelands Foundation. The programme nurtures emerging artists' practices by fostering long-term relationships and collaborations with arts organisations and bolstering regional arts ecosystems.

In its first five-year phase, 80 artists have undertaken the programme across four partner organisations – g39, Cardiff, PS<sup>2</sup>, Belfast, Site Gallery, Sheffield and Talbot Rice Gallery.

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