



MOCA JACKSONVILLE
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PROJECT ATRIUM: AMANDA COOGAN

THE LADDER IS ALWAYS THERE

NOVEMBER 26, 2018 - FEBRUARY 24, 2019



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In *The Ladder Is Always There*, internationally renowned Irish performance artist, Amanda Coogan, transforms the Atrium Gallery at MOCA Jacksonville into an immersive site of artistic experimentation and durational performance. Peaks of pale blush fabric are gathered at different heights and suspended from the atrium's ceiling. These sections of fabric, which can be interpreted as mountains, stage curtains, costumes, or sails of a ship, can be moved at several points throughout the atrium by a rope pulley system. The cobalt blue, curvilinear lines on the atrium walls suggest undulating waves, which relate to the maritime poem by Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck*—a significant source of inspiration for the work. The title of the exhibition, which derives from a line of this poem, speaks to a metaphorical journey in which Coogan and, by extension, the other performers, dive into or work to overcome an obstacle. The rope ladder, installed from the ceiling, is always within sight but ultimately unattainable.

Amanda Coogan, one of the most critically acclaimed artists working across media including live art, performance, and video, began her artistic career in painting. After experimentation with Action painting—a style most notably linked to the Abstract Expressionist period—Coogan began to consider her body as a tool for creating art. As a child of Deaf¹ parents, and whose first language was Irish Sign Language (ISL), Coogan's means of communication were rooted in the visual realm—the body and its gestures provided her a primary and natural mode of expression. Beginning in the 1990s Performance art, which typically incorporates the live presence of the artist and the physical actions of his or her body, in a specific space and for a particular amount of time, became Coogan's artistic focus. Many of the themes that long informed the genre, including political engagement, Feminism, Psychology, and its links to Conceptualism, aligned with Coogan's interests in art as a site of intersectionality.



In 1999, Coogan studied under Serbian artist Marina Abramović, who is frequently referred to as the “Grandmother of Performance art.” As Abramović noted, Coogan “worked intensively and developed rapidly to create works that are layered with metaphors and references, and at the same time confrontational and very tough.”² Coogan's recent works exemplify this characterization, and demonstrate how live performances are constantly in flux, and cannot be distilled into a singular meaning. At once playful and challenging, Coogan's performances address a struggle and a psychological resilience. This meaning is imbued through the very nature of durational performance such that Coogan must withstand a physical or mental challenge for a prolonged period. In 2011 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Coogan presented *The Passing*, a live performance in which she continually moved up and down the stairs of the museum for the duration of one day.³



▲▲ ABOVE © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There*, 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Image courtesy of Doug Eng.



Coogan often incorporates stairs and ladders into her work, symbolic of change and progress; both ladders and stairs provide the physical body the opportunity to transport to a different place. Other symbols of movement or mobility include mountains, as seen in the peaks of fabric included in *The Ladder Is Always There* and in earlier works including *You Told Me To Wash And Clean My Ears* (2014), in which Coogan performed in collaboration with the Dublin Theatre of the Deaf—the work honors deaf-mute Eamonn McDevitt who was wrongfully shot and killed following an anti-internment march in August 1971. The performance features Amanda Coogan atop several voluminous peaks and mountains of fabric, while performers from the theater slowly sign and walk around the installation. The slow, dreamlike, and methodical movements employed by Coogan and the Dublin performers subtly invite the audience to join in their protest.

Beyond the references to universal hardship and struggle, Coogan also celebrates the lineage of Performance art by incorporating works from MOCA's collection that honor theater, costume, and dance. The painting on the atrium walls, for example, recalls the gestural marks from the *Firebird* ballet costume painted by early Modernist artist Marc Chagall for the Ballet Russe. The dress, which was gifted to MOCA as part of the Norman Fisher Collection, served

▲▲ ABOVE © AMANDA COOGAN, *You Told Me To Wash And Clean My Ears*, 2014. Performance with Dublin Theatre of the Deaf at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland. Image courtesy of Paddy Cahill.

as one of Coogan's earliest points of inspiration as fabric, material, color, and costume are significant to her process. The adjustments of the peaks of fabric also reference traditional theater as they may be read as drapes or stage curtains. For the duration of the exhibition, visitors are invited to adjust the ropes accessible by nine dock-cleats installed throughout the building and the atrium walls. As the ropes and peaks move throughout the space, so do the women's shoes attached to the ropes. Created by Jacksonville native and celebrated footwear designer Joseph LaRose, the shoes have a unique tie to the history of Jacksonville. They also may remind the viewer of ballet or dance shoes, delicately draped and pointed at the toe as if to suggest surrogates for dancers and performers—a memory of human presence. Symbolically, shoes represent a journey or a next step in progressing forward; in *The Ladder Is Always There*, the women's shoes signify female empowerment.

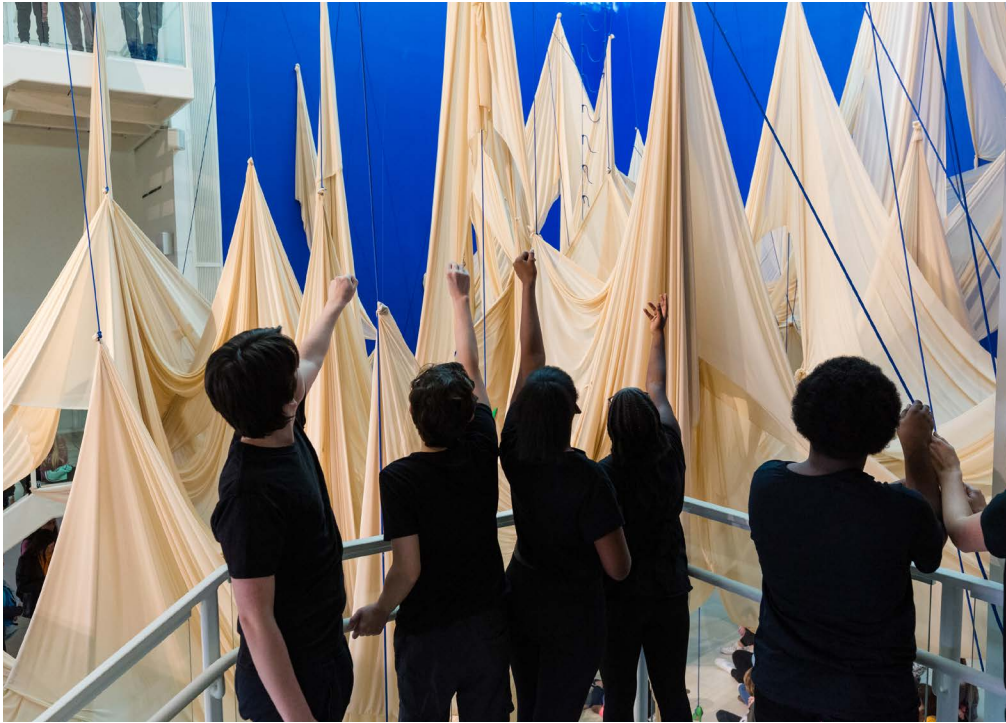
There is also a political subtext in *The Ladder Is Always There*. As Coogan plans and develops her work, she often looks to the region in which she will perform as an opportunity to engage a history or subject matter that resonates with that community. As Coogan began developing her proposal for Project Atrium, the recent shooting in Parkland, Florida, and the activism that followed resonated with her. When Coogan visited Jacksonville and met with Phase Eight Theater Company, she learned of their recent production entitled *Mass* due to premiere at MOCA—a play about a fictional mass shooting at an office party. Coogan felt that the performers from Phase Eight could expand upon this issue as collaborators in her durational performance. While *Mass* provides some context to the work, *The Ladder Is Always There*, like the earlier Coogan works Abramović described, is layered with meaning and metaphors. Coogan ultimately allows the audience to draw their own meaning from the piece.

Viewers, however, may have noticed some repeated gestures across all four performing groups which included middle-school theater students from La Villa School of the Arts, high school dance students from Douglas Anderson School of the Arts, Three-Dimensional Design students from the University of North Florida, and performers from Phase Eight Theater Company. These gestures included raised hands and arms, signs of looking, a closed fist as a symbol of resistance and power, other gestures signifying stopping and surrendering, as well as performers' fingers gently brushing those of the performer behind or in front of them—alluding to secret messages, the passing of information, and human connectedness.



TOP © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There* (detail), 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Performed by University of North Florida students. Image courtesy of Laura Evans.

BOTTOM © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There* (detail), 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Performed by Phase Eight Theater Company. Image courtesy of Laura Evans.



TOP © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There* (detail), 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Performed by LaVilla School of the Arts students. Image courtesy of Laura Evans.

BOTTOM © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There*, 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Image courtesy of Laura Evans.



In addition to the performative and structural components in *The Ladder Is Always There*, Coogan's use of sound provides an added layer of meaning to the work. The soundtrack overlays excerpts of the *Firebird Suite* soundtrack with that of Coogan's voice slowly reading lines from *Diving Into the Wreck* by Adrienne Rich. Coogan and the more than seventy performers with whom she collaborated remain silent throughout, allowing the drama of the soundtrack to heighten the experience for viewers. At points throughout the piece when the performers adjust the rope, the pulleys emit a jarring sound, subtly reinforcing the themes of resistance and resilience.

At the core of *The Ladder Is Always There* is a meditation on Performance art as a lived experience. Although the process and sources of inspiration are significant to the artist, the meaning of the work is ultimately decided by each viewer. As a result, each visitor's encounter with the piece, the performance, and other audience members inform the meaning of the work. We, as viewers, are reminded that we are necessary collaborators and that of course, *The Ladder is Always There*.

¹ The letter D in the word, Deaf is capitalized to honor the Deaf community and is in line with the practice of the Dublin Theatre of the Deaf, the Irish Deaf Society, The Irish Deaf Youth Association, and the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College, The University of Dublin, Ireland.

² Dunne, Aidan. "A high-risk performance from Amanda Coogan." *Irish Times*, September 2015. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/visual-art/a-high-risk-performance-from-amanda-coogan-visual-art-1.2339165>

³ *The Passing* occurred at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from 7pm on September 17, 2011, to 7 pm on September 18, 2011.

AA ABOVE © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There* (detail), 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Performed by Douglas Anderson School of the Arts students. Image courtesy of Laura Evans.





BIOGRAPHY

Critically acclaimed Irish artist, Amanda Coogan, works across media including live art, performance, photography, and video. Many of her performances incorporate sculptural elements such as brightly colored, altered, or painted fabric, drawing on her degree in sculpture from the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. Coogan also studied under acclaimed performance

artist, Marina Abramović, from 1999-2001. Her oeuvre, including her durational performances, engage a cross-disciplinary approach, incorporating drama, theater, fashion, and the body. She has performed and exhibited her work at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, the Neimeyer Centre, Spain, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, The National Gallery of Ireland, and the Van Gogh Museum, among others.

^^ ABOVE Image courtesy of the artist.

<< FROM LEFT TO RIGHT © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There* (detail), 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Image courtesy of Laura Evans. © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There* (detail), 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Performed by LaVilla School of the Arts students. Image courtesy of Laura Evans.

ABOUT PROJECT ATRIUM

The series features site-specific and site-sensitive installations by emerging and mid-career artists. The unique placement, dimensions, and scale of MOCA Jacksonville's Atrium Gallery provide a compelling challenge to the chosen artist—a call to reinvention and active collaboration with the architecture of the Museum on a monumental scale.



▲▲ **CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT** SARAH EMERSON, *Black Sea of Trees*, 2012. Photography courtesy of Doug Eng. ANGELA GLAJCAR, *Terforation*, 2015. Photography courtesy of Thomas Hager. JOELLE DIETRICK, *Cargomobilities*, 2015. Photography courtesy of Doug Eng. Installations at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, FL.

<< **PREVIOUS PAGE** © AMANDA COOGAN, *The Ladder Is Always There* (detail), 2018. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville. Image courtesy of Laura Evans.

Curator: Caitlin Doherty
Text by Caitlin Swindell
Designed by Stephanie Cruz

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