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# 6

## *Movement* – A Conversation with Artist Michaela Melián

*Burcu Dogramaci*

With the installation piece *Movement*, dedicated to the life and work of the violinist Susanne Lachmann, the artist Michaela Melián contributed to the exhibition *The Futureless Memory* (2020) at the Kunsthaus Hamburg. Born in Frankfurt am Main in 1888, Lachmann studied violin in Frankfurt, Leipzig and Vienna. She later moved to Hamburg where she played the second violin in the Bandler Quartet from 1925 and made her debut in 1931 with the Schneider Quartet at the Kleine Musikhalle in Hamburg. At the same time, she taught at the Pädagogische Akademie in neighbouring Altona, among other places. Her daughter was born in 1926. Because she was Jewish, Susanne Lachmann could no longer practice her profession after 1933 and was only allowed to give smaller performances in the context of the Jewish Cultural Association. In 1935, she managed to flee to England with her daughter. Unable to make a living in England, Susanne Lachmann continued to Elgin, Scotland, where she taught music at the Gordonstoun School – initially on a room and board basis – and also founded the school orchestra and choir. She remained connected to the Pädagogische Akademie after the end of the war, but never returned to Hamburg. Susanne Lachmann died in Elgin in 1967.

We sat down with multimedia artist Michaela Melián, who divides her time between Hamburg and Munich, to discuss the concept and form of the installation *Movement*, conceived as a result of artistic research into the life of a forgotten musician and the mapping of her escape route.

Burcu Dogramaci (BD): Michaela, your installation *Movement* was created for the exhibition *The Futureless Memory*, which opened in 2020.<sup>1</sup> Can you tell us about the background and the story of its creation?

Michaela Melián (MM): The starting point for the exhibition was the question of how art can bring the forgotten back into the present. Initially, the director of the Kunsthaus Hamburg, Katja Schroeder, asked me to contribute a piece on the American composer Conlon Nancarrow. However, I really wanted to work on a Hamburg-related topic and dedicate myself to a female biography. I had an urge to explore a female musician who was productive at a time when radio really took off, after the arrival of the gramophone but still in its early days, when only a limited number of musicians were recorded. Also, a lot of the material is not available as it was not released on shellac records and so could not be digitized later on.

BD: How did you find out about Susanne Lachmann?

MM: While working on the research project “Lexikon verfolgter Musiker und Musikerinnen der NS-Zeit” (Encyclopaedia of persecuted musicians of the Nazi era) at the University of Hamburg, we found an entry on the musician Susanne Lachmann (fig. 6.1).<sup>2</sup> Her vita, despite the limited information available, immediately appealed to me because it contains a lot of what *The Futureless Memory* is about. From a global perspective, the



FIGURE 6.1: G.C.M. Gray, *Portrait of Susanne Lachmann*, published in *Gordonstoun Record*, no. 42, 1961, p. 105 (© Gordonstoun School Archives, see *Lexikon verfolgter Musiker und Musikerinnen der NS-Zeit*, University of Hamburg, [www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm\\_lexmmedium00001334](http://www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm_lexmmedium00001334)).

exhibition examines the importance of belonging, also in the context of flight and exile.<sup>3</sup> In the exhibition itself, I wanted to trace Susanne Lachmann's path, which was marked by exile and expulsion and make it physically tangible. I wanted to address the ephemeral nature of her biography. To me, Lachmann is representative of so many others who, in a sense, have escaped from our memory because they were driven into exile.

BD: What was it about Susanne Lachmann's life and work that appealed to you?

MM: First of all, I found it fascinating that, as a woman born in 1888, she had an exceptional career and played in well-known chamber music formations. She always played the second violin, which is quite extraordinary; almost all famous quartets in music history consisted exclusively of male musicians, something that has only changed in recent decades. Since I play a string instrument myself, this immediately stood out to me.

BD: For a long time, classical music was an exclusively male domain

MM: Many younger people aren't aware of this but: when I studied cello, before studying art, the Vienna Philharmonic and the Berlin Philharmonic didn't have a single female member. That's another reason why I was interested in Susanne Lachmann's life. The fact that she studied at famous music academies with important teachers and thus forged her own path – I found this remarkable.

BD: Susanne Lachmann's life was characterized by frequent displacement and is closely linked to big cities: from her birthplace Frankfurt am Main, she moved to Leipzig and Vienna where she pursued her studies, and finally ended up in Hamburg where she lived and worked until she emigrated.

MM: In Hamburg, she devoted herself to her career, performed on the radio and in the Musikhalle, played in quartets and likely played concerts all over Europe. In addition, Susanne Lachmann gave music lessons in reform-oriented socio-educational contexts at the Pädagogische Akademie Altona. She was committed to a certain social participation in the cultural asset of music.

BD: This intense musical life was abruptly curtailed when the Nazi Regime seized power, and Susanne Lachmann ultimately decided to emigrate to England. Unable to make a living there, she finally ended up in the Scottish province.

MM: This part of her life story was very important for my work. Susanne Lachmann hardly had any opportunity to perform in Germany, and in 1935 she fled to England – a single mother with her child – and got a job in the far north, at Gordonstoun School in Elgin, Scotland. There, she came full circle with Germany, since the founder of the school, Kurt Hahn, was a reform pedagogue who had also fled Germany and founded the Schloss Salem boarding school. At Hahn's British Salem School in Elgin, initially intended as a place for children and teachers who had fled from Germany, Susanne Lachmann (fig. 6.2) was offered a position; in the beginning without pay except for room and board. After the war, she stayed on and had to live in precarious conditions in Elgin. Only late in her life did she receive compensation from the city of Hamburg.

BD: In Susanne Lachmann's case, moving to the Scottish countryside can be interpreted as a metaphor for exile. Exile often means being relegated to the margins; including the margins of perception. Many exiles have permanently slipped out of public perception. How did you approach Susanne Lachmann's life, work and her path in exile, and what forms of artistic translation did you choose?

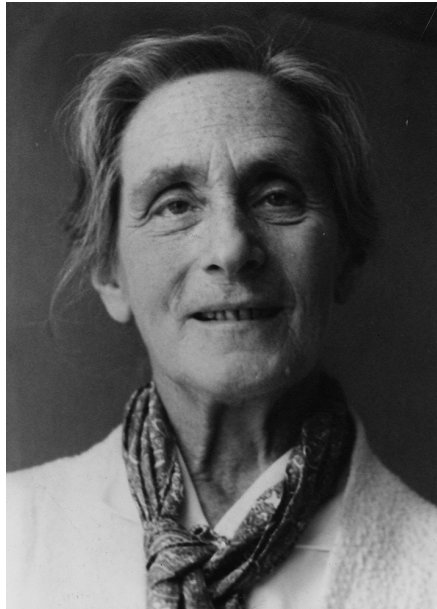


FIGURE 6.2: *Portrait of Susanne Lachmann*, no date and photographer indicated (Gordonstoun School Archives, Elgin, Moray, Scotland).

MM: It was important for me to trace her path from Central Europe, Frankfurt, the upper middle class environment, via Vienna and Berlin to Hamburg and, later, into exile in Scotland. The intention was to make this movement tangible in the exhibition space. However, I didn't want to simply trace the movement, and so I considered including a violin voice and let this sound, which has accompanied Susanne Lachmann her whole life, represent her path. What I did, then, was to transfer her stations in life onto a map in order to develop a notation from these points. This proved somewhat complicated since the movement goes back and forth in space between East and West while it continues through time.

BD: How did you solve the problem of changing directions to create a playable notation?

MM: I drew a simplified map of north-western Europe on a sheet of paper and mirrored it in Vienna, so that I could continue to draw the route from Vienna (fig. 6.3). Vienna then is the intersection and mirror point while Hamburg stands for the note H. Thus, the vertical distance to Hamburg gives the pitch of the other notes = locations. The duration of the notes then

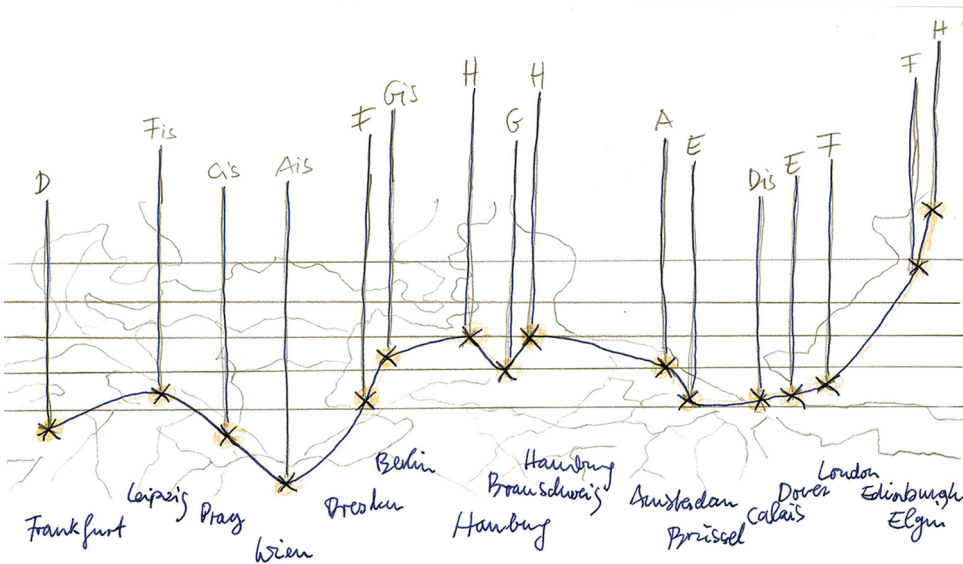


FIGURE 6.3: Michaela Melián, *Movement*, 2020, drawing, pencil, coloured pencil, ink on paper (© Michaela Melián).

depended on how long she lived in each place. The melody, which could be heard at regular intervals in the exhibition, was recorded for me in different versions by the Hamburg violinist Ruth May. The tempo is quite slow, about 80 bpm, which roughly corresponds to an *andante* (*andare* = to go), i.e. just slow or fast enough for the melody to remain playable and recognizable and not break up into individual notes.

BD: In your composition, the slowness and delays are striking. Nonetheless, flight is certainly associated with something abrupt and hurried.

MM: In the composition, all the stages of life formulate themselves selectively. Susanne Lachmann grew up in Frankfurt and continued her musical studies in Leipzig and Vienna. The time she spent in Frankfurt and Scotland, respectively would have taken up relatively long passages in the composition, since she lived there for longer periods of time. However, holding the two notes for too long would have made for a boring musical arc. Frankfurt sets the keynote; from there the melody swings up, first via Leipzig to Vienna, then Hamburg, Braunschweig, Hamburg again and then climbs up to Elgin. She lived in Hamburg, her child was born in Braunschweig. Why Braunschweig? We don't know. Perhaps she had given a concert and had her daughter there and then went back to Hamburg. The flight that followed later set the pace; I have adjusted the other places where Lachmann stayed much longer in proportion. So, here and there, I shortened or contracted the phases of stay so that the sounds combine to form a melody. You see, this should be heard as a fleeting movement that can be traced with the ear.

BD: In the exhibition, the recorded melody was visually linked to a series of light bulbs suspended on long cables at different levels, which then lit up in concert with the sounds.

MM: In addition to the translation of Susanne Lachmann's life path into a melody that can be audibly experienced in the room, the translation of the life journey comes as a fleeting light drawing across the room. For this, I implemented the notation via light bulbs hanging from the ceiling (fig. 6.4). The light bulbs are suspended at a height that corresponds to the respective pitch in front of an invisible tablature. The distance between the light bulbs corresponds to the length of the note value. As long as a certain violin note of the melody reverberates, the corresponding bulb lights up; as soon as it falls silent, the bulb goes out. Every three minutes, the short, one-minute melody was audible and visible via the movement of the light



FIGURE 6.4: Michaela Melián, *Movement*, 2020, installation, 16 light bulbs, sound track, installation view *The Futureless Memory*, Kunsthau Hamburg, 2020 (© Michaela Melián).

bulbs as they rose and fell. The work looked quite simple and minimalist, but behind it was a complex technical apparatus with four media players connected in series that controlled the light and sound. I enjoyed this; translating the complexity of the conceptual and constructively intricate into something simple, something that floats past in space – barely perceptible to the eyes and ears – and then disappears again. Or, in other words, like a short flash of memory. As I was able to observe on site at the Kunsthau Hamburg, it was only after spending a while in the exhibition that visitors consciously perceived the melody and the light bulbs as belonging together as an installation.

BD: In the installation, your notation appears as an artistic mapping of a life. How important are these initial stages of artistic research and the search for traces which ultimately render possible what later becomes visible and audible in your work?

MM: Research is a starting point and thus an important part of my work. I am guided by the feeling that what concerns us today is not only a



problem of the present but also has always accompanied human life, although perhaps in a different shape and appearance. The biography, the flight experience and the oblivion associated with it can be transferred to the present in the same way. In the case of Susanne Lachmann, it was important for me to give this person a new presence since so little material is available on her person. Only two photographs and her curriculum vitae are known to us, and we do not have any audio recordings of her.

BD: In this way, your work can also be understood as a commentary on the conditions of remembering.

MM: There are fundamental questions associated with such a project: Which musicians were recorded and which were not? Who was archived and who was not? Memory also has an element of deception to it. Archives reveal a certain perspective on history, others remain obscured. To what extent can art draw out what has been forgotten, and make it audible and visible?

BD: Nevertheless, knowledge gaps and empty spaces remain, and escape stories leave many questions unanswered. How do you deal with this missing information?

MM: Susanne Lachmann's frequent change of place is very unusual for a female existence at that time, even before the flight. For example, nothing is available about her concert activities, nor about her flight and departure, the route and means of travel or the departure from Germany and her arrival in England. I reconstructed the route from Hamburg via England to Elgin in Scotland by looking at several life stories of other exiles and using their route as a model. I figured if others took these routes into exile, then she may likely have done the same.

BD: Your artistic research and translation methods can be related to scientific methods of source work. As an artist, you can detach yourself from the objective and the factual position and shape your findings in a different way and make them your own. This is the case, for example, in your mappings or notations where a map of Europe is rotated so that a melody can emerge.

MM: Yes, that's right. I was a little helpless at first when I realized that Susanne Lachmann's life path is a back-and-forth, running first to the East and then to the West. How do I bring that into the room? It should be a continuous movement and not look like she is going backwards. And since

the map and the globe are only aids to our spatial imagination anyway, I can also find other representations which correspond to my concept.

BD: In your work, the audible often meets the visual and vice versa. Are these simply two sides of the same coin, do they complement each other or do hearing and seeing require a life of their own?

MM: The note reaches visitors intuitively; the sound embraces them. In *Movement*, there is no defined position for the listener; one can stand in the middle of it or follow the sound. The eye, on the other hand, works quite differently, it focuses on what is inside the field of vision. You can approach the installation from all sides and walk around it, or, if you don't like it, you can turn around and walk away. The sound however is inescapable, as it can be heard throughout the exhibition space. And so, in the end, the sound of *Movement* flows around the viewers in the exhibition, leading them to the installation, even if they haven't seen my work yet.

BD: In doing so, you also challenge conventional perceptions of art.

MM: As exhibition visitors, we are trained to rely on sight as our main sense, and this sense is closely related to cognition. We want to immediately understand what we see, we want to read it, comprehend it and contextualize it. Listening, on the other hand, is very much about the physical experience, the body intuitively remembers sounds and melodies.

BD: How did you become interested in historical events, or rather: lesser-known history(ies)?

MM: During my studies, I was interested in marginalized female positions in the visual arts of the 20th century. At the time, I searched in vain for role models at the academy, because there were hardly any female professors at art colleges then. At the same time, I was always interested in old art and read a lot of art historical analyses of works of art. When I go to museums, I learn a lot about the respective work – about production conditions, and about historical and social contexts of earlier eras when recordings on film or photographs were not a possibility. Thus, in works of art, moments of history are condensed in specific contexts and from specific perspectives. In this way, the omissions of the official representations are marked again and again, often involuntarily, and raise doubt.

BD: And it is precisely this moment of doubt which intrigued you?

MM: Yes, I always found that interesting. Translating and updating the historical into the present with the use of today's media. This is, in the broadest sense, seizing histories or taking them as an opportunity. If you look closely, there are always different layers, narrative strands, shifts in meaning and perspectives. Naturally, it plays an important role which type of media I use and whether I work with sound, light or drawing, like in the work on Susanne Lachmann: Drawing as a means of cartography, sound or light as fleeting sensory stimuli. *Movement* thus, can be perceived as a contemporary composition or installation, as well as the recollection of a historical musician, of her life and work and her escape from Nazi Germany.

## NOTES

1. Michaela Melián's installation *Movement* can be seen and heard in the film accompanying the exhibition *The Futureless Memory* (Kunsthau Hamburg, 19 September–22 November 2020). [www.kunsthauhamburg.de/film-zur-ausstellung-the-futureless-memory/](http://www.kunsthauhamburg.de/film-zur-ausstellung-the-futureless-memory/). Accessed 10 June 2022.
2. Fetthauer, Sophie. "Susanne Lachmann." *Lexikon verfolgter Musiker und Musikerinnen der NS-Zeit*, edited by Claudia Maurer Zenck and Peter Petersen, University of Hamburg, 2010 (updated 15 January 2018), [www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm\\_lexmper-son\\_00004243](http://www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm_lexmper-son_00004243). Accessed 28 May 2022.
3. [www.kunsthauhamburg.de/en/the-futureless-memory/](http://www.kunsthauhamburg.de/en/the-futureless-memory/). Accessed 28 May 2022.

