

# évasion

For *évasion*, Michele Barker and Anna Munster have worked with a professional escape artist, Ben Murphy. They filmed numerous takes of his performance of a variation of Houdini's famous straightjacket escape. These takes were subsequently recomposed to become the focus of their new installation.

The reworked takes of the escape routine are played back on eight screens, arranged in an octagonal configuration. This octagonal shape is reminiscent of pre-cinematic "movement machines" of the nineteenth century. Specifically, it echoes the inner structure of the praxinoscope, in which mirrored surfaces reflect images from the inside of an outer cylinder, animating the stills when the device is set in motion. In such pre-cinematic devices, as in *évasion*, movement is expressed more or less as a dance on the spot. Together with the reference to Houdini's escape stunt, the praxinoscope calls through time and enters the gallery space in a new configuration.

Barker and Munster construct variations of both the classic escape routine and the early movement machines. Their escape artist is neither suspended upside down as is Houdini in his famous stunt, nor does he ever completely escape. Yet the unfolding of the escape attempts across the screens set something extra in motion—a more subtle possibility of escape.

The high resolution of the images enables us to perceive minor details, while a frame rate of 100 frames per second makes the movement appear slower. Sometimes the footage has been slowed down further and the performance appears almost suspended. At other moments the performance is sped up to a quite frenetic tempo. The footage is also played in reverse at times. At one point, there is a moment of alignment across the performances that connects the different screens. All this highlights the variation in the tempo of movement itself.

It is in this that one begins to sense a more subtle kind of escape. The straightjacket itself comes to life. It moves and enables movement as much as it constrains. The surface of the jacket appears to have extra volume due to the variation in the tempo of movement and the play on its surface of shadow and light. The jacket becomes an active agent that refolds with the body of the performer as both move and 'exfoliate' into the surrounding environment.

Philosopher José Gil uses the term ‘exfoliation’ to ‘describe the way in which a body is always already unfolding into the space it occupies’<sup>i</sup>. He writes that ‘the space of the body is made of plates, exfoliations, surfaces and volumes that underpin the perception of things’<sup>ii</sup>. In *évasion* the body’s exfoliation is perceived most obviously when the moisture on the performer’s head exfoliates to intermingle in the air with the particles exfoliating from the sleeves of the straightjacket. Yet the exfoliation is more complex than this, both within and beyond the visual. For one thing, there is an exchange of exfoliations across the registers of the visual, the movement of the viewers, and the sound. There is a hint of escape in this exchange between sensual registers. Barker and Munster tell us that sense perception itself is recomposed. In *évasion* it is experienced as a relational and co-sensual endeavour. This is enhanced by the fact that the sound is responsive to the viewer. It moves and refolds with her as it is affected by her body’s own exfoliations. The viewer in turn moves, looks and listens: attentive to the ‘audio-visual participatory environment’—in what becomes a co-exfoliation.

The heaving soundscape is all around. Much of the sound has a breathy and gasping quality. It is as if the bodily efforts of the escape artist fill the space. The performance thus exfoliates into the sonic register as much as the visual. Other sounds are more machinic, whooshing, or almost animal like. These surround us but also seem slightly out of reach. We may hear footsteps too. We are called forth, back and around.

There is no final escape in the performances. Yet movement itself escapes as it exfoliates with the environment of the gallery space.

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<sup>i</sup> Stephen Muecke in José Gil, *Metamorphosis of the Body* (trans. S. Muecke), University of Minnesota Press: London and Mineapolis, 1998, p. xiii.

<sup>ii</sup> José Gil in *ibid.* p. 129.

