

art-science: the cerebral & the sensory

ella mudie: hokuspokus and the body is a big place, performance space



THE MAGIC SHOWS THAT CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF GEORGES MÉLIÈS WHEN HE ARRIVED IN ENGLAND IN THE 1880s LATER INSPIRED HIS PIONEERING INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE SLIPPAGES BETWEEN REALITY AND ILLUSION POSSIBLE WITH FILM. OVER A CENTURY LATER, MAGIC IS NOW ATTRACTING INTEREST FROM ANOTHER LEFT FIELD SOURCE: NEUROSCIENTISTS ARE DISCOVERING IN THE WAY MAGIC WORKS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN PERCEPTION WHICH IS OPENING UP A PANDORA'S BOX FOR COGNITIVE SCIENCE.

This collision between the art of deception and the science of perception has also intrigued artists Michele Barker and Anna Munster, who bring this fledgling area of enquiry into the media art realm with HokusPokus. Comprising one half of the visual arts program in Performance Space's 2011 Exchange season, this collaborative work employed an interactive cinematic magic show to explore the corporeal aspects of seeing. The artists' playful and experimental journey into neuroscience was paired with a stunning immersive installation in the main space informed by the biological sciences, Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor's *The Body is a Big Place*, with sound by Gail Priest, which engaged the organ transplantation process to challenge the disconnect we have with our own bodies and to create greater empathy for this remarkable yet often misunderstood medical procedure.

Installed in the smaller, darkened viewing room at the rear of Bay 19, HokusPokus created a responsive environment that was triggered by a swipe of the hand over an upturned top hat which conjured the appearance of a magician across three screens. A master of illusion and very charming in his dapper black and white tuxedo, the magician launched into a repertoire of visual tricks, deftly manipulating silver thimbles, coins and rings, making balls vanish beneath cups and speedily shuffling and dealing cards. Yet despite his commanding demeanour and gaze, the magician's control over his act was made unstable by the influence of the viewer on his performance. Having networked the space to make the magician flit between the screens in response to movement, the artists undermined the viewer's attempts to unravel the secrets of his tricks through distractions and interruptions to their focus.

Sleight-of-hand magic relies upon exploiting a lapse between what the eye sees and the brain's relative slowness in comprehending, a cognitive glitch. In HokusPokus, Munster and Barker's three screens were arranged to stimulate the viewer's peripheral vision, invoking the phenomenon of change blindness. For the artists this phenomenon signals more than simply a novel optical effect. By creatively engaging an aspect of human vision often neglected by new media art, HokusPokus provocatively challenged what Barker has previously identified as the primacy of frontal projection. It also suggests implications for a branch of cognitive science called enactive perception, which understands seeing as a form of sensimotor knowledge gained through the body. However rigorous the conceptual underpinnings though, it was the shadowy sensory realm of the visual trickster that drew me in. A smattering of antiquarian props on screen riffed against the installation's futurism leaving me feeling curiously outside time while the thrill of having the change blindness eventually 'wear off' so that I could spot the fraud shuffles and blank decks resulted in a surprisingly embodied viewing experience.

The Body is a Big Place offered entry into a sensorial landscape of a more submerged variety akin to stepping inside the confines of a swimming pool. A multi-faceted art and science installation comprising six video channels, an undulating aqueous soundscape, a bio-sculptural pulmonary system and two live pig heart perfusion performances, like HokusPokus the work had a long gestation period. When visual artists Pynor and Clancy began discussing a possible collaboration as far back as 2007 "overlapping interests eventually led us to consider organ transplantation as a process in which the 'personal' nature of internal organs, and the body as a 'porous membrane' are deeply apparent," the artists explain in an online conversation.

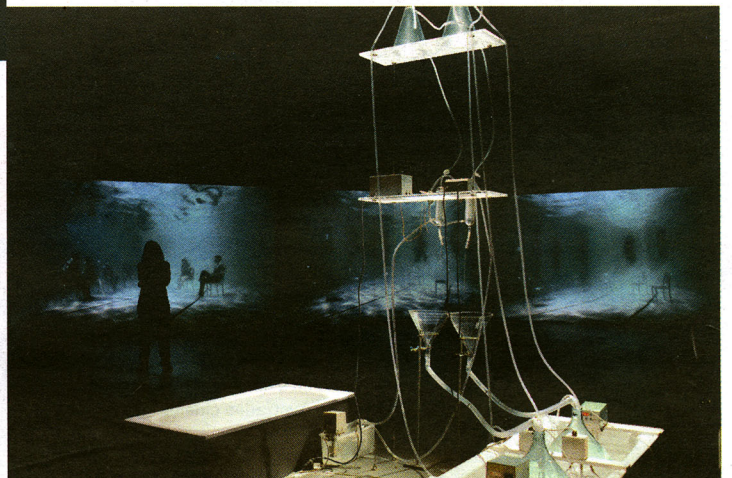
The 'personal' and the 'porous' nature of organ transplantation is explored in the work on two levels. Firstly, through the artists' engagement with the transplant procedure itself, specifically heart perfusion, where over an extended period of research Pynor and Clancy developed a tender affection and respect for the resilient physiology of the heart, emphasised during the procedure when it beats independently of the body, and sought a way to bring that appreciation into the gallery. After witnessing a Langendorff heart perfusion, the artists thought it might be possible to replicate this technique, a feat that was eventually achieved through the

use of fresh pig hearts, sourced as waste product from animals already slaughtered for food in an abattoir south of Sydney.

It was for this live reanimation of the pigs' hearts in the gallery that the bio-sculptural apparatus was created, although within the context of the installation it exuded its own peculiar aesthetic charm. A gurgling vertical bucket chemistry lab created from plastic tubing and an assortment of funnels and bulbous spherical vessels, clamps, dials and monitors, it was faithful to the body in its warming of the water to body temperature and the scaling of the apparatus to replicate human blood pressure, necessary to successfully reanimate the hearts. On an adjacent wall a video showed a scientist performing the perfusion, the raw muscles of

In lesser hands, this could easily have become a gory or sensationalist work. But just as HokusPokus achieved a balance between the cerebral and the sensory, Clancy and Pynor's sophisticated engagement with organ transplantation revealed the maturing of art-science practices, reflecting their conviction that "our interest in heart perfusion has not been to shock or to transgress, but to highlight these astonishing characteristics of life itself."

Performance Space, Exchange: HokusPokus by Michele Barker and Anna Munster; The Body is a Big Place by Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor, sound Gail Priest; curator Bec Dean, Performance Space, Carriageworks, Sydney Nov 3-26, 2011



the pig hearts mesmerising in their almost hyperreal pulsing. This juxtaposition with the apparatus, pumping actively but incomplete until the arrival of two suitable organs (wondrously fulfilled during the two perfusion performances), tapped into the anticipation, longing and uncertainty that underwrites the waiting experience of potential recipients.

The second level of engagement flowed from the artists' interviews and meetings with organ transplant communities. Put in touch with a group of organ recipient swimmers, Clancy and Pynor seized a unique opportunity to film them in a series of loosely choreographed underwater sequences at the Melbourne Baths. Edited and screened across five channels within the gallery, the effect was to create an underwater environment as a metaphor for the interior of the body where Gail Priest's score of deep and reverberating sounds created an intimate, enveloping atmosphere. As the fully-dressed swimmers plunged vertically into the water, their clothes, pregnant with air, billowed wildly about them. Their bodies appeared amoeba like, expansive and fluid, alluding to the dissolution of boundaries that occurs in an organ transfer. At the bottom of the pool they anchored briefly on silver chairs until the need for air plucked each swimmer back to the surface, evoking relief and a sense of liberation.

Images: left - Michele Barker and Anna Munster, HokusPokus (2011), HD multichannel installation, photo courtesy Performance Space; right - Peta Clancy and Helen Pynor, *The Body is a Big Place*, (2011), installation view, 5-channel video projection, heart perfusion device; below - *The Body is a Big Place* (video still); photos courtesy the artists

