



PERFORMING DECEPTION

LEARNING, SKILL
AND THE ART OF
CONJURING

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2. Self and Other

Who we are as individuals depends in no small part on our relations with others.

The interplay between connection and separation has figured centrally in many attempts to theorize human relations.¹ Along these lines, families can be thought of as constituted through how their members mix interdependence and independence, as well as unity and difference.²

In *Performing Deception*, I approach magic as a kind of method for understanding ourselves and others. Herein, self and other are not discrete, pre-existing objects that can be plucked out of a top hat with a cry of 'Ta-da!' Instead, they form and dissolve as part of ongoing engagements. As the beginning of a much larger story about the relations between magicians and audiences, this chapter concentrates on my initial forays into learning. Through recounting the mixture of experiences, concepts, reflections and experimentation associated with practicing my first trick, I want to characterize some of the conspicuous and subtle types of work associated with magic as a domain of reasoning and skill. In particular, I attend to how notions of self and other are implicated in undertaking magic.

A Self(-Other) Study

But first, some basics. In seeking to understand aspects of the world, social inquiry often takes the form of an immersion into what is, at

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- 1 Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
 - 2 Baxter, Leslie A. and Montgomery, Barbara M. 1996. *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics*. London: Guilford; Arundale, Robert. 2010. 'Constituting Face in Conversation', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42: 2078–2105.

least for the investigator, unfamiliar terrain. In turning toward the learning of embodied skills, the topic under investigation becomes one of how individuals hone ways of seeing, feeling, thinking and acting.³ So-called 'self-studies' of acquiring practical knowledge and embodied skills involve a researcher using their own experiences of becoming a competent salsa dancer, clay sculptor, jiu-jitsu fighter and so on as a way into appreciating what a pursuit entails.

Although hardly unique to self-studies, the question of how to relate one particular pathway to others is highly salient.⁴ The one-many relation, in part, turns on the status accorded to personal experience. Camilla Damkjaer spoke to this point when she contended that: 'What is important is not my subjective experience as such, but the questions and difficulties that I encounter and what they can tell me about the art of circus performance, and the possibilities created by physical reflection for an academic researcher'.⁵ For Damkjaer, first-person accounts were not granted a privileged status, but they were taken as vital for knowing about the lived experiences of what it is like to perform, in her case, on a vertical rope.

In broad terms, *Performing Deception* adopts a similar set of starting premises. However, just as magic will be interpreted as entailing a shifting interplay between ostensibly opposed tendencies (see Chapter 1), so too will the study of it. In this spirit, I treat the issue of how to relate the one to the many as a matter to be revisited throughout this book, rather than as something to be set out at the start.

Also, in *Performing Deception* I orientate to magic as a thoroughly relational undertaking. While playing the piano or juggling balls can be done solo or in the company of others, it makes little sense to speak of performing magic alone. As with teachers and students, as well as joke-tellers and listeners, magicians and audiences realize themselves in relation to one another. It is this interdependency that means learning magic is poorly conceived as a self-study. Instead, it is also a study of the

3 For instance, see Sudnow, D. 1978. *Ways of the Hand*. London: MIT Press; as well as Tolmie, Peter and Mark, Rouncefield. 2013. *Ethnomethodology at Work*. London: Routledge.

4 O'Connor, E. 2005. 'Embodied Knowledge', *Ethnography*, 6: 183–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138105057551> and Atkinson, P. 2013. 'Blowing Hot', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19(5): 397–404. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413479567>.

5 Damkjaer, Camilla. 2016. *Homemade Academic Circus*. Winchester: iff: 39.

possibility of apprehending others. For this reason, I refer to this book as a 'self-other study'.

Perhaps most distinctly, *Performing Deception* adopts a complex orientation to the status of personal experience. As exemplified later in this chapter, one advantage of self-studies of skill acquisition is that they make available for examination an array of embodied sensory experiences through conscious introspection. Such phenomenal experiences would be difficult, if not simply downright impractical, to access in others through techniques such as interviews or surveys. And yet, introspection, to the extent it could even be considered a method, is hardly regarded as unfailing. Beyond the commonplace kinds of doubts that might be voiced about our ability to know and describe our own experiences, this study into learning magic provides additional ones. This is so because witnessing magic—again and again—makes it clear that our senses and ordinary ways of understanding are fallible.

Therefore this 'self-other study' not only tries to unpack a phenomenon but also unpacks how that phenomenon comes into understanding. The attention to what is known and the means of knowing creates both challenges and opportunities. To discuss such points now, though, is perhaps to get ahead of the argument...

Beginnings

How can a self-other study be begun? The question has particular significance for entertainment magic due to the comparative absence of conventional pathways for training. Many other types of performance art are enculturated through professionally sanctioned programs, offered as part of established educational settings such as universities, schools and studios by accredited practitioners. Through processes of immersion, these programs have as their task preparing new entrants into a 'community of practice'.⁶

Such formal training programs, though, are relatively rare in the case of magic. Local clubs and professional societies can provide important collective settings for being with others by exchanging skills, testing competencies and developing a sense of shared identity.⁷ However, their

6 Wenger, E. 1999. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

7 Jones, Graham. 2011. *Trade of the Tricks*. London: University of California Press.

availability and make-up vary widely. Today, in an era of mass online tutorials and forums, magic societies play less of a vital role than they did previously in providing access to coveted techniques. In addition, participation in a club or society is not a requirement for professionally working in the UK or many other countries.

In short, informal pathways for training are typical.⁸ The comparative absence of formal training and accreditation procedures has significant implications for the development of skill, the formation of identity as well as the governance of community norms. These matters will be explored in later chapters. In late 2017 when I began practicing, I did not have a sense of such wider issues. Instead, as a novice, I was faced with a basic question: what now?

Based on a suggestion from the academic-magician Wally Smith, my pathway began with a resource central to many aspirants in the past: instructional books. Against the patchy availability of face-to-face instructions, specialized instructional books have proven a prime means of reconciling the competing desires in conjuring to delimit access to the information about the hidden methods, to enable new entrants into this art by sharing information, as well as to recognize (and reward) the contributions of innovators.

As part of its extensive magic collection, Dover Publications published eleven 'self-working' books by Karl Fulves. First printed in 1976, *Self-Working Card Tricks: 72 Foolproof Card Miracles for the Amateur Magician* initiated this Dover series, and this volume is where I began. While no definition of 'self-working' is given within the book, Fulves describes the tricks set out as 'easy to master' because they require 'no skill'.⁹

My starting orientation differed. It was, instead, informed by the long-running distinction in social research between concrete actions and their description. As one aspect of the overall distinction, scholars across diverse academic disciplines have considered the work needed to move from formalized instructions to situated action.¹⁰ Effort is required

8 Rissanen, O., Pitkänen, P., Juvonen, A., Kuhn, G., and Hakkarainen, K. 2014. 'Professional Expertise in Magic—Reflecting on Professional Expertise in Magic', *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01484>

9 Fulves, K. 1976. *Self-Working Card Tricks*. New York: Dover: v.

10 Suchman, Lucy. 1987. *Plans and Situated Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Garfinkel, Harold. 2002. *Ethnomethodology's Program*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield: Chapter 6.

because instructions are abstractions that cannot anticipate all possible relevant contingencies. They are incomplete. As a result, readers must manage the relevance of instructions, what it means to adhere or deviate from them, what consequences are likely to follow from action, and so on. In this sense, instructions do not function so much as standards that dictate what should be done, but as resources for undertaking situated action whose meaning is settled in undertaking the action. And yet, despite what might be taken as their limitations as abstractions, instructions often serve as adequate resources for satisfactorily accomplishing tasks—assembling a cabinet, preparing a meal or fixing a leaky faucet.

Through engaging in wide-ranging forms of practical reasoning—from how to play checkers, to how to construct origami figures, to how to follow a laboratory chemistry manual—Eric Livingston concluded that: ‘Realizing what [...] instructions describe depends on the work that we do to find their adequacy. The ability to find their adequacy is, to some extent, what “skill” is.’¹¹ Therefore, in learning conjuring, I took the gross and subtle efforts undertaken in enacting instructions as my topic for reflection and observation when I opened *Self-Working Card Tricks* on an already dark winter afternoon in late 2017.

Attending to how practical activities are accomplished is no straightforward task. Among other challenges, doing so requires contending with what Garfinkel called the ‘holy hellish concreteness of things’.¹² This expression points toward the endless volume of detail that can be relevant when experience is taken as the topic of inquiry.

The next section examines instructions for a single card trick with a view to considering how notions of self and other can be implicated in interpreting texts.

As a way into, rather than out of, holy hellish concreteness, I would strongly recommend you put this book down and find a deck of playing cards to practice the instructions for yourself. Whether a new or old hand to card magic, attending to how instructions are fashioned will likely greatly enhance what you take away from your time spent with

11 Livingston, Eric. 2008. *Ethnographies of Reason*. London: Routledge: 100. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315580555>

12 Quoted from Liberman, Kenneth. 2007. *Dialectical Practice in Tibetan Philosophical Culture*. London: Rowman & Littlefield: 37.

this chapter. As conjuring is a bodily undertaking, there is no substitute for a bit of DIY. Expending effort in this way is also highly economical. It will raise for you subtleties that simply cannot be elaborated here—no matter your patience. Or mine.

Enacting the instructions will also aid in appraising the abstracted account of my experiences given below.¹³ This account is not intended as a universal reading of the instructions. Instead, it is offered as a particular instance of sense-making, one that is of interest for how it is both the same and different from other readings. This being so, contrasting your experience based on your own personal knowledge, intentions and so on with my account provides a rare prospect in social analysis. This is a chance for you to encounter the phenomenon being analyzed akin to how the author encountered it. This is an opportunity not to be missed.

Practical Skills and *No-Clue Discovery*

Box 1 provides the instructions for the first entry in *Self-Working Card Tricks*, an entry titled *No-Clue Discovery*. It is an example of card magic that uses a Key Card Principle, a principle whose recorded origins date back to at least the 19th century.¹⁴ Added paragraph numbers are provided for ease of reference. The photographs approximate the original sketches.

Box 1: No-Clue Discovery

1. A spectator chooses a card and returns it to the deck. He then cuts the deck and completes the cut. His card is lost in the pack and no one—not even the magician—knows where the card is.
2. The magician takes the deck and begins dealing cards one at a time into the face-up heap on the table. As the magician

13 For results of an audience experiment that employs the central elements of this trick, see Smith, W. et al. (forthcoming). *Explaining the Unexplainable: People's Response to Magical Technologies*.

14 More specifically, Professor Hoffman. 1876. *Modern Magic*. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books. See <https://www.conjuringarchive.com/list/category/960>.

deals, he instructs the spectator to call out the names of the cards. The spectator is asked to give no clue when his selected card shows up. He is not to pause, hesitate, blink or change his facial expression. Nevertheless, the magician claims, he will be able to detect the faintest change in the spectator's tone of voice at the exact instant the chosen card shows up.

3. The cards are dealt one at a time off the top of the deck. The spectator calls them out as they are dealt. It does not matter how he calls them out; he can disguise his voice, whisper, shout or name the cards in French; when the chosen card turns up, the magician immediately announces that it is the card selected by the spectator.
4. *Method:* This trick makes use of a principle known as the Key Card. Before performing the trick, secretly glimpse the bottom card of the deck. This can be done as the deck is being removed from the card case. In Figure 1, the Key Card is the 3D*.



Fig. 1

5. Hold the deck face-down in the left hand. Then spread the cards from left to right, inviting the spectator to choose a card from the center, as in Figure 2.



Fig. 2

6. As the spectator removes his card, separate the deck at the point from which the card was taken; see Figure 3. Tell the spectator to look at his card and remember its identity. As he does this, place the packet of cards in your right hand on the table.



Fig. 3 Photos: Brian Rappert (29 March 2018).

7. Tell the spectator to replace his card on top of the packet that lies on the table. Your instructions should be something like this: "Please place your card back in its original position in the deck." As you speak, point with the right hand to the tabled packet. As a matter of fact, the

spectator is *not* returning his card to its original location, but this fact is never questioned.

8. When the spectator has placed his card on top of the tabled packet, place the packet in your left hand on top his card. Tell the spectator to carefully square up the deck. His card is apparently lost in the deck, but really it lies directly below the Key Card, the 3D in our example.
9. Now begin to deal cards off the top of the deck, turning them face-up as you deal. Explain that if the spectator names the cards as they are dealt, you can determine which card is his no matter how he tries to disguise his voice. Encourage him to announce each card in a different manner; he can speak in a dialect or an obscure foreign tongue; he can shout, scream or whisper. The more variety he uses, the more impossible the trick seems.
10. All you need to do is wait until the 3D shows up. Then deal the next card. This will be the spectator's chosen card, and you announce it as such.

* The Three of Diamonds. This standard form of reference, with numeral and initial suit name, will be used in the book from time to time.

Consider, then, one way of making sense of this entry.

A noticeable feature is its two-part organization: Paragraph 1 of *No-Clue Discovery* sets out a performance from a third-person perspective. More than just being a fly on the wall observing what is taking place, readers as aspirant performers are invited into witnessing shared nescience: the pack is such that 'no one—not even the magician—knows where the card is located. The identification of the chosen card in the third paragraph (without any details suggesting how this could be done in the second or third paragraphs) sets the basis for a mystery. Despite being lost to everyone, the magician finds the card nonetheless.

But more than just presenting an effect unfathomable to the audience, the wording in the second and third paragraphs presents a puzzle to

the aspirant reader. The amateur magician is to somehow identify the card based on the tones of utterances of the spectator—even as the instructions in the third paragraph suggest that the details of what is spoken do not matter.

With seemingly no apparent way to make sense of how the card identification was accomplished up until this stage, paragraphs four to ten then give the ‘how to...’ methods, speaking directly to readers. They specify that the methods at play are unrelated to the calling out of cards mentioned in the directions. Instead, a known card marks the position of the chosen card.

A feature of *No-Clue Discovery*, then, is that rather than setting out a single perspective for understanding performance, the wording provides varied ways of relating to what takes place. In this, *No-Clue Discovery* is arguably in line with many other written and face-to-face forms of direction. As Graham Jones argued in *Trade of Tricks*, imagining what spectators are seeing and thinking is a central skill honed during face-to-face conjuring tuition. Hand gestures, verbal patter, bodily movements and other actions need to take spectators toward preferred understandings and discourage others.¹⁵ Ensuring this outcome requires performers to be able to adopt the perspectives of others.

It is hardly surprising, then, that conjurors have developed varied forms of writing designed to attend to spectators’ perceptions. Scripting performances, as happens with TV dramas (for instance) is one way to foreground what conjurors wish their audiences to perceive and to remember.¹⁶ Even the basic vocabulary favored by magicians for describing conjuring speaks to the importance of how the audience perceives what is taking place. While *Self-Working Card Tricks* adopts the commonplace term ‘tricks’ to label the feats set out, ‘effects’ are often portrayed as the prime preoccupation for magicians. *Effects* refers to what the audience perceives through the overall presentation. *Method* refers to the means and techniques whereby the effect is produced.¹⁷

15 Jones, Graham. 2011. *Trade of the Tricks*. London: University of California Press: Chapter 1.

16 McCabe, Pete. 2017. *Scripting Magic*. London: Vanishing Inc.

17 However, by no means is this distinction uniformly accepted or used consistently. For one articulation of it, see Regal, David. 2019. *Interpreting Magic*. Blue Bike Productions: 167; as well as Whaley, Barton. 1982. ‘Toward a General

And, as has been argued, in magic: 'Effect should come first. Method second.'¹⁸

In my initial encounter with *No-Clue Discovery*, it was not just the spectator's perspective that I had to grapple with in making sense of the instructions. After reading the second and third paragraphs, I could not discern the meaning of the prior claim that 'no one—not even the magician—knows where the card' is. Was this meant as a statement of fact or a desired audience impression? In line with the expectation that magic involves extensive pretense, I was inclined toward the latter interpretation. Subsequently, I would read many trick instructions that strive to create such an impression. In this particular case, however, I came to understand the 'no-one' claim as a statement of fact (albeit one making use of a certain dramatic license in playing on the *identity* rather than the *location* of the card in the deck). In this way, I came to recognize that appreciating how to see as the performer can be a matter that needs to be wrestled with in working with directions.

However, to begin recounting my experiences with *No-Clue Discovery* as a process of reckoning with the meaning of the text in this way is already to discount the situated physical actions that accompanied my reading. As I tried out these instructions for the first time, I did not do so by reading the text from beginning to end, reflecting on ambiguous passages, settling on preliminary meanings and then picking up the cards to practice. Instead, my reaction was to physically act out the steps as I read them. When it came to the fourth and fifth paragraphs, for instance, this meant recreating the actions of both the magician and the spectator: removing the cards from the case, spreading them out, picking one of them and so on. What was the case for *No-Clue Discovery* has proven to be so ever since; my reading of instructions has been invariably accomplished through some kind of concurrent physical enactment to make the text intelligible.

Let me now turn to some of the bodily and mental work associated with enacting the instructions.

Theory of Deception' *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 5(1): 178–192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398208437106>.

18 Kaps, Fred. 1973. *Lecture Notes*. London: Ken Brookes' Magic Place: 1.

Correspondence

To use Livingston's terminology, enacting instructions as a lived activity entailed a good deal of effort at 'correspondence'. Because words and two-dimensional figures are not physical undertakings, continual effort is needed to coordinate bodily actions with instructions. In this case, for instance, a significant amount of the corresponding entailed repeatedly visually checking the position of my hands and the cards against Figures 1–3.

Through this inspection, points of divergence became evident. As one example of a difference I noted at the time, Figure 2 (associated with the fifth paragraph) shows a small number of cards laid out with uniform distancing. Yet my first attempt at spreading an old deck on my wooden study desk resulted in a far clumpier arrangement (see Figure 4).



Fig. 4 Photo: Brian Rappert (11 December 2017).

While I noted this divergence, appreciating whether it (and others) mattered was not evident through reading the text up to paragraph six. As a result, I stopped undertaking the steps at this point to scan the instructions ahead and then re-read the description in paragraphs one to three to judge if the differences noted would affect the outcome. Once I grasped how the chosen card was located, I judged that these differences in layout would not (even if the clumpy spreading might well be regarded as, well, clumsy). I then carried on with enacting the instructions.

As a way of developing a sense of the work associated with corresponding, let me offer a contrast. One advantage with instructions that include photos, pictorial illustrations or video imagery is that they can display a complex array of simultaneous bodily movements that would each require lengthy individual descriptions involving specialized terminology if codified into verbal or written language. As Trevor Marchand contended in a study of woodworking training, 'skilled practices and movements regularly comprise numerous actions simultaneously performed by different parts of the body, and in an immeasurable variety of possible combinations'.¹⁹ However, language-processed instructions are:

constrained by time-linear sequencing, making it impossible to capture the complexity of three-dimensional movement with words. Verbal instructions are necessarily impoverished because linguistic propositions can only convey information about one salient action at a time. Other simultaneous and possibly crucial actions to the movement are either eliminated from the instruction altogether or (re)arranged to follow one after the other. Propositional representations flatten three-dimensional practice into the sequential order imposed by language, thereby rendering simultaneity time-linear.²⁰

In contrast, visual imagery enables multi-dimensional forms of representation that can be compressed into a single image, which would instead take many paragraphs to elaborate in a written form.

And yet, for all of the advantages of learning through visually dense instruction material, such as DVDs and online tutorials, in my experience these came with implications for the work of correspondence. I cannot recall a single case of forwarding ahead when watching a DVD or online tutorial to check on the potential relevancy of any difference between my execution and what I interpreted the instructions stipulated at a particular point. Such a fast-forwarding would be impractical. But more than this, whereas textual figures are often characterized by neatness and precision, video displays typically involve a far messier set of affairs. Within DVDs and online tutorials, cards are often not precisely aligned, finger positions move around, other physical movements

19 Marchand, Trevor H.J. 2010. 'Embodied Cognition and Communication', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 16: S112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2010.01612.x>

20 Ibid.

vary in duration and distance, etc. In short, the matters of divergence between what is stipulated and what is shown are often many! Part of the competences I developed in learning through audio-visual material was to judge when such divergences can be set aside and when they call into question the adequacy of the instructions.

In these ways, what has become evident to me is that the kind of correspondence work needed for instructions varies. Part of developing skill in working with instructions is determining, among the many details presented in the instructions, whether and which kind of correspondence is required at each step. For one step, like the spreading of cards in *No-Clue Discovery*, a loose correspondence might well suffice. For the next step in this trick or for the spreading of cards in another effect, however, precise physical correspondence with instructions can be required. For example, a relatively uniform distancing between cards may be necessary for some effects so as not to show too much of their back or front faces. When this is so, hitherto taken for granted or unrecognized qualities of the cards—such as their white bordering—can emerge as vital features.

Rather than characterizing my working with the instructions as a matter of ‘following’, therefore, the language of ‘aligning’ seems more appropriate. Instead of implying adherence, it suggests making ongoing adjustments to achieve an overall line of action supporting a sought-after effect (such as card identification). Over time, as I have gained familiarity with written instructions, I have noticed myself assessing more and more which manipulations, utterances and so on are essential, and which are tangential to the desired outcome.

I was not, however, always able to ‘align’ loosely. For instance, *The Lazy Magician* is another entry in the book *Self-Working Card Tricks*.²¹ In contrast to the two-part organization of *No-Clue Discovery*, a notable feature of this entry is the lack of any overall depiction of the sought effect. Rather than first illustrating the effect and then describing how these results can be achieved, the instructions for *The Lazy Magician* simply provide a step-by-step listing of card manipulations. These largely consist of directives that the magician needs to issue to spectators. Along similar lines, while the revelation of a Key Card method provided a basis

21 Fulves, K. 1976. *Self-working Card Tricks*. New York: Dover: 8–9.

for tracking the movement of the cards in *No-Clue Discovery*, *The Lazy Magician* includes no such tracking marker. It is just a series of directives. Finally, *The Lazy Magician* does not include any figures. As a result of the absence of such reference points for gauging the sought-after line of travel, the work of coordinating my actions with the instructions took on a mechanical quality. I manipulated the cards without having a sense of why or what for. I did so with the expectation that I could make sense of the reasoning for these manipulations at the end of reading the text (which only partially took place to my satisfaction). What impressed me at the time of trying out this entry was the parallel the instructions set up between the magicians' directives for spectators and Fulves' instructions to learners. In both, individuals are meant to carry out certain sequential actions—shuffling, picking, squaring, transferring, counting—but without any pointers as to why or what for. It is perhaps not surprising that while rehearsing *The Lazy Magician*, I repeatedly could not make sense of what I needed to do. Without reasons for acting, it became problematic to coordinate, correspond and undertake other work needed to put instructions into practice.

Aligning physical manipulations with instructions can become overtly question-begging in situations in which instructions include divergent prescriptions for action. In this vein, to return to *No-Clue Discovery*, have you noticed that the instructions post-replacement of the chosen card differ in an important respect? If not, have a re-read of Box 1. I only noticed it during my fourth run-through. Paragraph one asks the spectator to cut the resulting deck, whereas no such directive is given in paragraph eight. Both courses of action are possible, though the former is not without its risks. While cutting the deck further substantiates the belief that 'no one—not even the magician—knows where the card' is located, cutting risks separating the Key Card from the chosen card.²² In the face of such recognized divergences, readers have to decide for themselves what should be done. It is just this need to consider how to go on in the face of absent, contradictory or even inaccurate details

22 My fear initially was that this separation might jeopardize my ability to identify the chosen card. As I realized, a *single* cut in-between the cards would result in the Key Card being located at the bottom of the deck and the chosen card at the top. This did take place once. A spectator called off all of the cards from the deck, and then the Key Card was the last one. I then knew the chosen card was the first one flipped over. By this point, though, the spectator appeared exhausted with this now lengthy display of 'magic'.

that some magicians identify as a vital *advantage* of written texts.²³ Through their blemishes, instructions demand considered reflection and, therefore, enable future innovation.

Overall, then, as part of my development, the starting imperative to seek a close correspondence between instructions and actions gave way to conscious recognition of the scope for variation.

Envisaging

The previous subsection set out some of the work of corresponding. Enacting the instructions involved attempting specified physical actions (spreading cards, cutting a deck, making an utterance) to achieve certain positional arrangements of cards and bodies.

In the practical actions of how to make this-spread, this-cut and this-utterance, more work was taking place than just concerning the position of cards. Instead, senses of self and other were implicated.

As a way into characterizing how this was the case, consider two contrasting orientations to experience. In *Being and Nothingness*, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre set out this concept of 'The Look' through imagining a situation wherein:

...moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole [...] [B]ehind the door, a spectacle is presented as 'to be seen', a conversation as 'to be heard'. The door, the keyhole are at once both instruments and obstacles; they are presented as 'to be handled with care'; the keyhole is given as 'to be looked through close by and a little to one side', *etc.* Hence from this moment 'I do what I have to do'. No transcending view comes to confer upon my acts the character of a *given* on which a judgement can be brought to bear. My consciousness sticks to my acts, it *is* my acts; and my acts are commanded only by the ends to be attained and by the instruments to be employed. My attitude, for example, has no 'outside'; it is a pure process of relating the instrument (the keyhole) to the end to be attained (the spectacle to be seen), a pure mode of losing myself in the world...²⁴

23 Comments made during Earl, Ben. 2020, July 18. *Deep Magic Seminar*.

24 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2003. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. London: Routledge: 347–348.

In referring to his consciousness having ‘no outside’, Sartre evokes a sense of absorption in living an experience without the need to justify one’s actions or even to be self-consciously aware of them.

He then goes on to contrast this scenario with what takes place when ‘all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being...’.²⁵ As Luna Dolezal elaborates, at one level, for Sartre to be affected is to become reflectively self-aware of one’s actions. As she outlines:

once we are captured in the Look of another we suddenly separate ourselves from the activity in which we are engaged and see the activity and ourselves as though through the eyes of the other. Through this ability to ‘see’ oneself, afforded by being seen by another, we gain knowledge about the self, knowledge which is essentially unavailable through introspection.²⁶

Yet, as she contends, this self-awareness need not require the physical presence of others. Through evoking an imagined sense of an absent or abstract Other, it is possible to see and evaluate oneself from the outside.²⁷

My efforts at corresponding in the case of *No-Clue Discovery* did *not* entail the kind of selfless absorption Sartre initially described in looking through a keyhole without care for being observed. Instead, the work of correspondence was frequently undertaken with a self-awareness of my actions. I undertook bodily actions in relation to an anticipated audience, an imagined Other. This Other was scrutinizing and evaluating my efforts. While hardly unique among performing arts, anticipating what audience members see, think and feel is arguably an integral form of reasoning in magic given the importance of deception.

As I fancied at the time anyway (see the concluding section below), for me such imaginations of the Other took the form of something like a visualized video recording filmed from across my table. My card manipulations featured in the center of the frame. Through this envisaging, I anticipated others’ experiences and I came to understand

25 *Ibid.*

26 Dolezal, Luna. 2012. ‘Reconsidering the Look in Sartre’s: Being and Nothingness’, *Sartre Studies International*, 18(1): 18. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ssi.2012.180102>.

27 Dolezal, Luna. 2012. ‘Reconsidering the Look in Sartre’s: Being and Nothingness’, *Sartre Studies International*, 18(1): 18–20. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ssi.2012.180102>.

myself through their eyes. In doing so, my own ways of perceiving were taken as the analogic model for how an absent Other would perceive my undertakings.²⁸ In philosophy of the mind, the term ‘simulation’ refers to how we attempt to know the minds of others by emulating and ascribing mental states based on our ways of making sense of the world. Using one’s mind as a model for generating a sense of others’ experiences can entail the conscious forming of a representational depiction, as it did so for me in the form of a running film.

Envisaging through simulation was not only at work concerning my undertaking of this or that step in *Self-Working Card Tricks*, but in relation to further anticipated audiences’ responses to each step. For instance, as part of getting the chosen card under the Key Card, paragraph seven of *No-Clue Discovery* calls on the magician to verbally mislead the spectators about the return position for the chosen card. Fulves also contends that this ruse is never called into doubt. More than just the achievement of some physical action, the instructions hinge on securing an additional outcome: the non-questioning of the card placement by the spectator. In this respect, as with many other trick instructions, *No-Clue Discovery* provides explicit indications of how spectators will and will not respond. These form a kind of working theory of behavior. It is a theory inasmuch as the instructions predict how spectators will interpret situations, posit competencies, ascribe intentionality, establish expectations and foretell reactions. It is a theory presumably distilled from Fulves’ considerable experience—a know-how itself informed by the previous experiences of other conjurers.

And yet, in the case of the placement text above, my envisaging led me to doubt the wisdom of the ‘Place your card back in its original position’ directive. As I got to the end of paragraph seven in my first enactment of the instructions, I saw the card being placed on the packet and felt a jarring between the ‘original position’ verbal designation and the physical positioning. However, this was also accompanied by a recognition that what I had envisaged was based on my acquired knowledge of the methods at play. Accordingly, I tried out variations for how the cards and my hands could be positioned while imagining

28 See Goldman, A.I. 2002. ‘Simulation Theory and Mental Concepts’. In: *Simulation and Knowledge of Action*, Dokic, J. and Proust, J. (Eds). Amsterdam: John Benjamins: 35–71. <https://doi.org/10.1075/aicr.45.02gol>.

how spectators would see these alterations in the absence of knowledge about the methods. Thus, at times, while the instructions provided the basis for forming my mental simulations, my simulations later also provided the terms for assessing the adequacy of the instructions.

Running through the instructions in this manner also made me appreciate how the audience's ongoing actions are *not* included in the instructions.²⁹ As I read through the other entries in *Self-Working Card Tricks*, my speculations about the behavior of spectators would lead to repeated concerns about the relevance and sufficiency of the details given related to the ongoing ways in which audiences would orientate, monitor and react to my doings. For instance, almost none of the tricks in the book speak to the physical positioning of the audience vis-à-vis the magician, though this issue would directly bear on matters such as the likelihood that someone could detect my attempt to see the bottom card of a deck without being noticed. Thus, I could undertake the specified steps to find the chosen card, but how my doings would be responded to at each step was uncertain.

Such realizations, in turn, would lead me to try to sharpen my awareness of what factors were at play in trying to understand the perspectives of others. I did so as part of my development by consulting the academic 'Theory of Mind' literature. Within this writing, the embodied quality of how we know each other is a recurring, though multiply conceived, theme. Philosopher Shaun Gallagher has contended that individuals might exceptionally relate to each other in face-to-face interactions by holding a theory about each other or by trying to access each other's mental states through inner simulations of reasoning. In general, though, lived interactions are often characterized by a rich diversity of ongoing signaling that provides immediately accessible evidence for others' reasoning.³⁰ Eye and other bodily movements, facial expressions, posture, displays of emotions and expressive actions make attempts at 'mindreading' more like 'body reading'. As such, rather than others' minds being hidden, to perceive the actions of others is to already know their meaning and intentions. Body reading in this

29 Whilst I performed variations of *No-Clue Discovery* on many occasions, I have never included this directive.

30 Gallagher, S. 2001. 'The Practice of Mind', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8(5-7): 83-108.

sense is a capacity young children develop well before they can engage in complex hypothetical deliberations about others through explicit theories.

The result of consulting this philosophical literature for me in early 2018 was to draw my attention further to the importance of ongoing embodied signaling and the lack of regard for these matters in *No-Clue Discovery* and elsewhere.

Missing from these instructions, then, is what seems central to the undertaking of tricks: the ongoing, moment-by-moment, lived interactions between individuals. To state this is not just to contend that the instructions are no substitute for hands-on experience. It is also to point out that instructions such as that of *No-Clue Discovery* do not identify or contain all the resources needed for navigating the moment-by-moment undertaking of tricks. While, as a set of instructions, the text of *No-Clue Discovery* might provide a sense of the sought-for result of the physical manipulations, it does not provide guidance about how to make sense of the adequacy of one's action vis-à-vis the audience's expressions, positioning, and a host of other situational and emerging considerations.³¹

As I would later come to appreciate, this was not my individual concern alone. For instance, for magicians that use engagement with spectators as a basis for concealing methods, the difficulty of incorporating moment-to-moment lived interactions in instructional books can render the written medium unsuitable for teaching. [This is so, not least, because written instructions often make effects appear downright implausible unless they are also demonstrated through enacted performances.³²

Further complicating matters, determining the adequacy of instructions depends on what counts as their 'successful' enactment. By envisaging different scenarios for how my undertaking of the placement directive in paragraph seven of *No-Clue Discovery* might be perceived, I concluded that there were a range of possibilities for what could count as success:

31 In missing this information, the instructions implicitly render social interactions into individual deeds.

32 Watch around 81:00 and 1:22:00 of DaOrtiz, Dani. 2017. *Penguin Dani DaOrtiz LIVE ACT*. <https://www.penguinmagic.com/p/11142>.

1. No one noticing that the placement was not in the original position;
2. Some people not noticing this;
3. No one explicitly pointing it out;
4. Whether or not anyone noticed or pointed it out, the audience enjoying the trick.

Yet, as a novice, I did not have any basis for assessing which of these was appropriate. Outcome 1 might seem most in line with the instructional text, and self-evidently preferable. And yet, in later years, I would come to regard all of these as potentially suitable outcomes depending on the situation at hand. In any case, at the time of first attempting this trick, the perceived absence of a standard for judging adequacy was a significant source of befuddlement. The overall sought effect hinges on the placement of the chosen card in the desired position. Indeed, the physical manipulation instructions up to that step can be interpreted as driving toward this one specific move. And yet, even while I learned to undertake the physical directions, the adequacy of my actions came into doubt because I did not have a defined sense of how to judge my undertakings.

Double Vision

While, in the past, instructional books served as an essential resource for aspiring magicians, today a vast range of audiovisual resources are available through DVDs and online platforms such as YouTube. My engagement with audiovisual instructions began in the late spring of 2018 as part of learning ‘sleight of hand’ manipulations through the video edition of the classic instructional book titled *The Royal Road to Card Magic*.³³ Subsequently, this self-training was complemented by watching video instructions of the sleights and tricks given in *The Royal Road to Card Magic* produced by others on YouTube. Still later, I would go on to watch instructional videos for a wide range of other sleights and routines.

33 Hugard, Jean and Braué, Frederick. 2015. *The Royal Road to Card Magic* (Video Edition). London: Foulsham.

As elaborated previously, in practicing written instructions, I used my imagination about what I would experience as a model for gauging others' views, feelings, apprehensions, etc. Practicing with instructional videos offers a contrasting footing. For instance, it is commonplace that tutorials start with a model performance of an effect, and then proceed to offer step-by-step instructions.³⁴ During the model section, learner-viewers are positioned as an audience. Whereas reading a text requires the learner to imagine what viewers will experience, videos enable learners to visually perceive and affectively react. The position of the learner changes with the viewing. With the acquired knowledge of the methods at play, learners take on the perspective of an insider who knows what to look for in scrutinizing the production of the effects.

And yet, the situation is often far more complicated than this too. Videos might relieve some need for imagination by displaying a scene, but the question of what is displayed still needs to be reckoned with. What a training video provides is not a demonstration that component sleights or culminating effects can be done in general, but a demonstration that they have been executed in a specific situation. The flipside of this specificity is that witnessing one enactment is no guarantee it can be executed elsewhere. The camera angle is the most obvious consideration bearing on whether the effect one experiences as a learner-viewer can be achieved in a different environment. Counterfactual envisioning is one way of trying to resolve what is shown.

Questions about what the video demonstrates become especially acute given the commonplace practice in online tutorials that instructors solely perform for a single camera. This point was driven home to me in practicing the trick 'Topsy-Turvy Cards'; the first entry in *The Royal Road to Card Magic*. Despite watching video after video, I just could not undertake the critical card overturn without prominently displaying ('flashing') a card when I was practicing in front of a mirror. Only after several days did I realize the issue was that I was closer to my mirror than all the online instructors were to their cameras. I took another step away from the mirror to change the angle of viewing and the overturn seemed undetectable.

Moreover, especially as many online tutorials are filmed by instructors themselves, they do not tend to involve other participants. As such,

34 In line with the opening paragraphs of *No-Clue Discovery*.

there are no additional witnesses that can validate the likely effects for other viewers. Even if online tutorials did include an audience, grounds exist for doubting the trustworthiness of others. Today, recorded magic performances are regularly subject to lingering qualms about the authenticity and genuineness of what is shown, even while conjuring itself is widely regarded as a packaged pretense.³⁵ Not only can visual effects be achieved through editing, audience reactions can be coached pre-performance or exaggerated through crafty video splicing.³⁶ The growth of video performances on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook has been accompanied by repeatedly voiced concerns by professionals that cameras and confederates are responsible for more of the magic onscreen than magicians.³⁷

Additional complications arise in making sense of what is shown in instructional videos through reference to what is *not* shown. For instance, multiple filming takes can be required to achieve a displayed effect, but instructions rarely acknowledge what remains off-screen. As a result, what an instructor can demonstrate through a video is not necessarily easy for anyone else (including the instructor) to duplicate consistently. Indeed, learning through watching and replicating others made me more sensitive to the many and varied potential deficiencies of real-life performances. As a result, the observable *perfection* of any single tutorial stood as grounds for doubting that I could consistently replicate what was demonstrated.

These reasons for doubts expressed in the previous paragraph are echoed and magnified within general cultural beliefs. Viewing visual

35 See, for instance, 'More fake reaction videos.... *Theory 11 Forum*. <https://www.theory11.com/forums/threads/more-fake-reaction-videos.48889/>. In the case of Zoom-based performances that have become commonplace since the outbreak of Covid-19, the lack of widespread public understanding that live Zoom video feeds can be subject to real-time manipulation has provided the basis for novel forms showing what is false. See Houstoun, W. and Thompson, S. 2021. *Video Chat Magic*. Sacramento, CA: Vanishing.

36 LeClerc, Eric. 2019. *Insider 30 September*. <https://www.vanishingincmagic.com/insider-magic-podcast/>.

37 And yet, in line with the duplicity which characterizes so many aspects of magic, the recording of magic performances is also held by professionals as enabling novel forms of audience scrutiny (for instance, through playback). These, in turn, demand magicians refrain from coarse means of manipulating what is seen (for instance, simply cutting out delicate moments of handling props) in favor of other, more subtle forms of obscuring which audiences are more likely to regard as enabling candid scrutiny (for instance, panning back the camera during delicate moments). See Jay, Joshua. 2020. January 9. *Presentation at The Session*. London.

imagery—such as photographs and videos—is often regarded as a fickle form of witnessing. Such imagery can be held up high as faithful and dismissed as contrived. The common expression ‘seeing is believing’ signals the cultural stock placed in observation. And yet, as records, visual images are also recognized as not the same as the events they seek to capture. By giving a particular line of sight or by foregrounding some objects, a photograph can mislead. Also, what is included within the image frame marks the boundaries of what has been left out—be that what has been intentionally cropped out or simply not captured at all.³⁸ Although purposeful manipulation of visual images has long been recognized as a possibility,³⁹ today, digital forms of data processing offer an array of prospects for manipulation and, thereby, generate thorny debates about the status of imagery.⁴⁰

In response to the emergence of these kinds of considerations, for me, DVD and online instructional videos have taken on a kind of haunted quality: their efforts to display are invariably bound up with the production of what is absent.

Self-Other

To know what our spectators are thinking during a magic effect, we must train ourselves to think like our spectators. At the highest level, this means anticipating a spectator’s thoughts, words, and actions before they even occur to the spectator! — Joshua Jay, co-founder of Vanishing Inc.⁴¹

As subsequent chapters will explore in greater detail, the imperative issued by Joshua Jay to know spectators is a frequent refrain of seasoned conjurers. To engender feelings of awe, surprise and disbelief, magicians need to know their audiences.⁴²

38 See, e.g., Mitchell, William J. 1994. *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press; as well as Morris, Errol. 2014. *Believing Is Seeing*. New York: Penguin.

39 *Ibid.*: Chapter 4.

40 See, for instance, Kuntsman, Adi and Stein, Rebecca. 2015. *Digital Militarism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473936676> .

41 Jay, Joshua (Ed). 2013. *Magic in Mind: Essential Essays for Magicians*. Sacramento: Vanishing Inc: 104.

42 See, as well, Burger, Eugene [n.d.]. *Audience Involvement...A Lecture*. Asheville, NC: Excelsior!! Productions.

This chapter has considered some of the embodied forms of work—such as correspondence and envisioning—associated with learning from instructions. While my initial forays into entertainment magic were done alone in the sense of not being in physical proximity to anyone else, in many respects others were continuously made present. Herein, the process of trying to experience what spectators experience was integral to the basic demands of making sense of instructions.

As I have contended, the experiences of others can be positioned in multiple ways. As in the case of *No-Clue Discovery*, instructions can vary between inviting aspirant performers into a shared understanding with the audience or differentiating their perspectives from that of the audience. One of the demands of interpreting instructions is to discern what sort of relation to spectators is being called for by texts at different points. In a parallel fashion, instructions can vary in the kinds of readjustments they facilitate through the extent and nature of the information provided. An aspirant can be invited to achieve an intended effect, or can be led along a tightly prescribed course. The demands on the novice in enacting instructions can be considerable because of the need to appreciate what aspects of directions matter, as well as the need to employ standards beyond the instructions for assessing what might work. Yet it is just these kinds of appreciations that are out of reach for novices because of their lack of experience. In other words, working through *No-Clue Discovery* led to developing an awareness of what I further needed to make sense of the instructions. Thus, if the ability to find the adequacy of instructions is, to some extent, what skill is, then my encounters with *No-Clue Discovery* suggested that even the simplest magic instructions can make it clear to beginners that they possess the skills of, well, beginners.

In general terms, a magic performance is an activity undertaken between a designated performer and an audience, in which the former strives to influence the experiences of the latter. It is also predicated on the possibility that there are fundamentally different experiences existing between the two. As such, relations of unity and variance intertwine. In this chapter I recounted how I employed analogic simulation to establish how others would make sense of what is taking place. This was done, though, by also recognizing others were distinct individuals and thus able to have dissimilar affective states and perceptions. Both aspects

were critical to the process of envisioning others. The relevance of both indicates the complex inter-relations of notions of self and other.

The previous two paragraphs spoke to the main concerns of this chapter; namely (i) the tensions of knowing others, (ii) experienced through enacting instructions, (iii) that entail deception.

For now, I want to close by suggesting how learning magic can entail becoming unfamiliar with one's self. During my initial working through *Self-Working Card Tricks* and other self-working books in late 2017, I was convinced that my simulations of others' experiences amounted to a rolling video with all parts in focus. Months later, when I tried to reconstruct what I had been imagining after undertaking some live performances, what was summoned up was a recollection of hazy, fragmented and darting imagery. Some things came into view—part of my shirt, the side of my hand and so on—but there was nothing like a 'picture frame' image in my mind. Even if I try simply to imagine what I look like from across my desk while typing these words, if I closely attend to what is summoned I notice that I cannot generate anything like a typical perceptual experience of watching the television. Try it yourself.

In this way, in being prompted to reflect on my initial 'simulations', I could not 'see' what I thought I had imagined while practicing with *Self-Working Card Tricks*. Not only did I come to question whether my experiences could serve as an analogic model for others, I also came to question whether my experiences were how I had previously understood them. Like a well-executed illusion, the blurring of perception and imagination was both befuddling and exhilarating.