

Visibility is Unenchanted but Deception is Magical

I learned how to perform the mind-reading trick demonstrated by Nemo where the spectator selects one out of 15 shapes and is then asked to say if the chosen shape appears on a set of 4 cards. This was an enriching learning process that helped me get in the mindset of a magician and better understand aspects of learning magic that I first read about in the “Trade of the Tricks” by Graham Jones and “Learning to Deceive and Conceal” by Brian Rappert.

I learned how to perform the trick directly from Nemo in the in-class workshop, but as I practiced with a friend, I actually understood the importance of performing gestures meticulously so that the user feels as if they were free to choose. While performing the trick for the first time, I was holding the cards awkwardly and I accidentally peeked at them, which provoked an interesting reaction in my spectator. She asserted that she was unimpressed by the trick because I had asked for too many clues and I could see what was on the cards every time she said that it had the shape, and she further asserted that it was easy for me to know the shape she had chosen initially by just looking at the shapes in some cards that were not present in others. I had broken the rule that Pierre Braham emphasized in the “Trade of the Tricks” of having the user “secretly under control” because my spectator was able to ostensibly see that she was being manipulated by the way I was peeking at the cards. However, when I performed the trick immediately after, but this time calling to my spectator’s attention that I would be able to read her mind without ever looking at any of the cards, my spectator was in absolute surprise. This result emphasized

the idea explored in “Trade of the Tricks” about how important style is in defining the caliber of the magician. The result was striking because my spectator’s original reaction of doubting the magic in the trick was gone; now, she was not able to perceive how she was being controlled. Furthermore, she confessed that she was even more astonished than she might have been had I performed the trick more skillfully the first time. I had left loose ends that left my spectator feeling as if they knew what was going on, but when I outsmarted my spectator’s alert to upcoming deceptions, the trick had an even stronger effect. This was an illuminating moment for me because I learned the importance of breaking the barrier between the real and the imaginary in magic performances by having the audience under control while giving them the illusion of free will. This was a technique employed by the magician Joel Acevedo that augmented the magical effects of his trick by performing illusion after illusion that would further convince the audience that the trick was inexplicable, thus making it more magical. This process is also described in the “Trade of the Tricks” as successful disinformation design, which is the presentation of visual or verbal cues that lead spectators to make the wrong inferences about the situation that is going on.

Another important aspect of my learning to do magic was controlling the expressions that I communicated to my spectator as I fabricated the illusion. When I first tried, I received complaints that my tone was too technical, which took away from the magical effect of the performance. I was inspired by the ideas discussed in the “Trade of the Trick” about the “expression game”, which consists in keeping an internally consistent set of truths and false information to immerse the spectator in the magic of the trick. In order to achieve this, I borrowed some inspiration from “Learning to Deceive and Conceal” about perceiving the magic act as an act of caring rather than a process where the magician holds the power and the audience

is a receptacle. Putting these ideas together, I became most concerned with whether my spectator was attentive or not and whether my techniques to draw her attention were effective, which helped me come up with more creative ways to direct her attention to the impossibilities of my trick such as the fact that I was never looking at the cards. This allowed me to come up with a more compelling performance that engaged my spectators; other times that I performed, since I was aware that my spectator had seen the trick already, I changed the way I made the final prediction of the trick to be more sudden and impactful. Another important concept from the article by Brian Rappert that resonated with me regarding the process of learning and performing magic is how much the performer depends on the attitude of the Audience, where the success of the magical act relies on the assumption that the people in the audience want to see magic. This was also a point that the magician Joel Acevedo made about how a magic performer deals with a spectator who is being obtrusive and tries to ruin the magic trick.

In the process of repeating the trick in front of a critical spectator and receiving feedback on how to perform the trick, I experienced a tiny bit of the way magician communities learn from each other. For example, I had a similar experience to when Graham Jones was learning to perform “Cirque”. The precision of my words was insufficient. As I instructed my spectator to look at a shape, she immediately screamed out the shape. I had not thought of that possibility, so it dawned on me why magicians are so meticulous and always calculate every aspect of the show that could go wrong. This reminded me of the event described by Graham Jones of when Nemo paid scrupulous attention to the menial psychological detail that was changed in the new version of the Star Wars movie where the directors removed the pause between two actions. As I kept practicing my tricks, I as well became more and more obsessed with details.

In my learning journey, I teleported to France and pictured myself using the skills of a scientist/engineer to craft the meticulous aspects of performing magic. I was left with a desire to learn more because I started to see magic as an art, an art that manages to dismantle the veil between reality and fantasy in the audience engaged.

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