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Enchanted Objects:
Agency in the Magic Act and
Contemporary Art Practice

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Abstract

Enchanted Objects: Agency in the Magic Act and Contemporary Art Practice

In my research project I examine some of the ways in which the objects, strategies, and concepts of conjuring—or what Simon During has called 'secular' magic—might be seen to converge with those of contemporary art practice.

The theoretical concepts that I employ derive principally from Alfred Gell's (anthropological) theory of art and agency. In Gell's theory, an index/artwork is a mediatory (or secondary) agent, but an agent nonetheless, through which the (primary) agency of a social other can be communicated. Gell's concept of enchantment, but also his interpretation of the status of the artwork as provisional and problematic, rather than aesthetically or semiotically determined, is deployed as a means of creating a productively meaningful relationship between art and magic, both of which can be said to occlude the 'abduction' of agency in distinctive ways. Finally, Gell's concept of agency provides a robust yet fluid set of paradigms for exploring the mobile, tripartite relationship between artist, artwork, and spectator.

This relationship is explored in the studio-based work by reproducing some of the forms and strategies associated with the magic act within the context of a 'gallery' setting, and considering how the effects of the magic illusion might position the viewer in relation to a set of beliefs about the world. In this sense the magic act (and/or object) operates as a kind of fulcrum between the work and the viewer, signposting a particular orientation towards the work, but simultaneously destabilizing any straightforward response in favour of a more complex set of reflections.

In the thesis I explore these themes through four discrete but interrelated chapters, each of which spring from elements of my practice, and can be seen to represent

different aspects of agency: the liminal nature of performance, the 'enchanted' object, the 'magic' of moving image technology, and the concept of the cognitive 'trap'.

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DVD: clips and stills from video works, live performances, and other works (see insert, inside back cover, for listing)

Acknowledgements

Dedicated to the memory of Greg Daville

Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed J. Gilhooly   **Date** 25/5/2010

Introduction

A circular parlour table is suspended in mid-air, apparently kept afloat by a bouquet of large white balloons. However, rather than the predictable visual image conjured by this description—of a table hanging from a bunch of helium-filled balloons—it is the balloons themselves that suspend from, and appear to anchor, the apparently floating, inverted table. The title of the piece, *Gravitation Effect*, reinforces this less obvious reading, openly declaring the earthbound gesture that the assemblage itself reveals.[1] In *SFX-1*, a length of turkey foil is unrolled from the floor up to a wall-mounted shelf. On the floor in front of it, and of equal width, are spread two sheets of A1 paper—partially overlapping each other, and in contrasting tones of blue—upon which sit a rotating desk fan and an orange table lamp. The fan and lamp point towards the foil in such a way that it undulates in the breeze from the fan, throwing out a succession of orange and blue rippling reflections. The susurration of the foil completes the putative illusion of a sunset over sea; but in fact this illusion is barely sustained, and continually threatens to break down through the sheer poverty of its means.[2]

The above two examples encapsulate some of the themes at the heart of my research project in a number of ways. Both pieces take as their foundation, a magical view of the world in which objects appear to act in unpredictable or counter-intuitive fashion. The particular magical worldview that they embody is derived principally from theatrical, or 'secular', magic—the realm of the conjurer. Its concepts, strategies and materials are here reconstituted for the purposes of producing an effect that, though not strictly performative, mirrors the magic act's moment of shock, during which intuitive notions of cause and effect are disrupted. At the same time the disposition of the works is such that the mechanisms by which these effects are produced is, at least partially, revealed. Thus the works develop around a series of key strategies. Firstly the production of a magical illusion that (partially) reveals itself: in the case of *Gravitation Effect*, this is achieved through a process of inversion—the fact that the assemblage seems the

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[1] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Gravitation Effect* (2007), shown at Grey Area, Brighton (see appendix).
[2] Jonathan Gilhooly, *SFX-1* (2006), shown at Phoenix Gallery, Brighton (see appendix).

'wrong way round' (i.e. upside down) immediately suggests that there is a 'right way' against which it can be tested. The title, *Gravitation Effect*, subliminally provides its counterpart, 'Levitation Effect'; the rupturing of spectatorial expectation that results from this inversion, is central to the piece and is a second key component. Third, is the concept of an illusion which, although self-sustaining up to a point, also threatens to break down with the merest shifting of position or perspective. Linked to this is the suspicion that these pieces might have been created for the chief purpose of simultaneously concealing and disclosing the means by which their illusory qualities have been realized.

These key strategies have emerged in my practice through a sustained engagement with the theoretical and strategic framework of the art of conjuring, or what Simon During has called 'secular magic'.[3] Initially this manifested itself through the complementary concepts of concealment and revelation, central to the conjurer's act, but also, it seemed to me, characteristic techniques of the artist. My point of departure in the research has been the work with which I have been engaged as an artist over the past few years. Put simply, this began with an attempt to reproduce some of the forms and strategies associated with the magic act within the context of a gallery setting, as a means of testing a set of hypothesized questions concerning the nature of representation, its mode of reception, and the tricky relationship between the artist, artwork and spectator. At the beginning I wanted to demonstrate what I thought of intuitively as a connection between the role of the artist and that of the conjurer: that somehow what, at the time, I called a 'contract of deception' existed between each of these key figures and his audience, and that magic in some way crystallized a certain kind of questioning of reality that was also a prerequisite for much post-Duchampian art. The studio-based work, rather than being constrained by a particular medium, therefore centres on objects and strategies associated with the magic act, usually, but not exclusively, in terms of theatrical magic or conjuring.

In the thesis I explore this subject through four discrete but interrelated chapters, each of which spring from aspects of my practice: the liminal nature of performance, the 'enchanted' object, the 'magic' of moving image technology, and the concept of the cognitive 'trap'. The theoretical concepts that I employ

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[3] Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*, (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2002). p. 1.

derive principally from Alfred Gell's (anthropological) theory of art and agency; Gell's concept of enchantment, and his interpretation of the status of the artwork as provisional and problematic, rather than aesthetically or semiotically determined, is ideally suited to my intention to bring together a productively meaningful relationship between art and magic. Finally, Gell's theory of agency provides a robust yet fluid set of paradigms for exploring the mobile, tripartite relationship between artist, artwork, and spectator.[4]

Throughout the thesis my choice of artists is determined neither by their propensity to utilize explicit magical tropes and strategies within their work, nor on the basis of obvious theatrical magical affinities (although this has not necessarily excluded them either); rather I have used the work of artists who, it seems to me, adopt a certain position towards their materials and practices, whereby notions of agency are foregrounded in a provocative fashion. These artists, among them Yves Klein, Martin Creed, Ceal Floyer, are often located nominally under the rubric of conceptual art—an already unwieldy category into which many different types of practice are usually lumped together—but might more usefully be thought of as problematizing and illuminating a particular approach to the post-Duchampian art object, as well as opening up a liminal zone of uncertainty between artist, artwork and spectator. There are of course artists whose practices can be seen to reflect a magical sensibility in a more straightforward manner: one such is the German artist Joseph Beuys, whose self-styled shamanic role was notionally presented as a genuine proposition—a means towards transforming society through both the creativity of the individual and the magical power of base materials. However, the shamanic position of an artist such as Beuys was not where I wished to place the emphasis in my thesis, preferring instead to examine the work of artists who demonstrate a more reflexive and ambivalent relationship with their practice. Whereas Beuys' work is *already* concerned with the magical, I want to use magic as a prism through which to explore certain aspects of contemporary art practice.

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[4] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

Fig. 1. Jonathan Gilhooly, *Gravitation Effect* (2007).
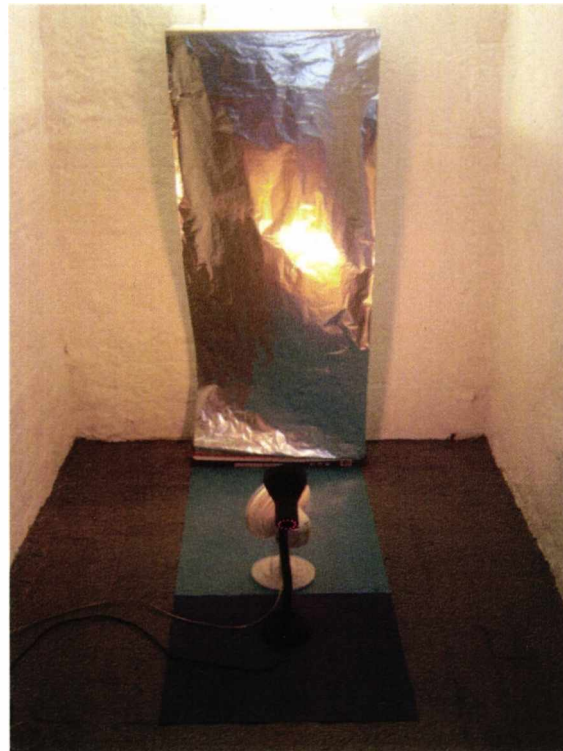
Fig. 2. Jonathan Gilhooly, *SFX-1* (2006).

Chapter One

Art and Magic as Technologies of Enchantment

Introduction

In this chapter I present an account of the potential connections that exist between art and magic, and some of the ways in which these connections might be and have been expressed. The chapter also serves as an explanatory introduction to the analytical and theoretical concepts that I make use of throughout the thesis, and offers a brief survey of the status of theatrical magic within modernity, in order to create a backdrop against which the rest of the thesis can figure. By doing this I hope to clear a path for my own methods of tackling the subject—the particular relationship between art and magic that I feel is both productive in a general sense, and which describes and accounts for, or parallels, my own practice.

Although magic in a broad sense has been a subject of serious investigation since the mid-19th century, particularly in the field of anthropology, surprisingly little has been written about theatrical magic.[5] Ironically, a huge body of magic literature does exist, but it has been either produced specifically for the magic community—and is therefore of a recondite and mostly instructional nature—or is broadly biographical and anecdotal, rather than critical. James W. Cook's *The Arts of Deception*, Simon During's *Modern Enchantments*, and more recently, in the field of performance studies, Michael Mangan's *Performing Dark Arts* are recent exceptions.[6] All three volumes provide insightful introductions and interesting interpretive accounts of the history of conjuring, and I shall refer to them both by way of a general account of the subject of magic and, where appropriate, as a support for more specific thematic concerns that emerge throughout the thesis.

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[5] Anthropologists E.B. Tylor (1832-1917), James Frazer (1854-1941), Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), all considered the subject of magic, in this broader sense.
[6] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2001). During, *Modern Enchantments*, Michael Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring, Theatre and Consciousness*, 1753-3058 (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

Each of these book's authors also, to varying degrees, touches upon the relationship between magic and modernity, and upon theories of enchantment that include modernity rather than seek to set magic in opposition to it. Each presents a view of magic as generally marginalized or excluded during the modern period, not, according to the authors, necessarily due to any rationalist instinct, but because magic has been deemed jaded, clichéd and trivial; or occasionally because it has been judged negatively in association with fraud and with the activities of the con-man (this is Cook's primary perspective in *The Arts of Deception*).[7] Finally, each author, especially During and Mangan, makes a case for the important influence of magic upon the development of modern *culture*, and During explicitly argues for an interpretation of particular categories of modern art and fiction that allows for the influence of some of the conceptual and material strategies of the conjurer. This sense that magic might somehow be central to the unfolding of modernity is also pursued in an essay by Michael Saler, *Modernity and Enchantment*, which begins with the provocative line: 'Specters are once again haunting Europe and America.'[8] Essentially an overview of contemporary criticism around the theme of enchantment, Saler's thesis challenges the orthodox view that modernity is disenchanted through its demystification by science, secularism, and bureaucracy. Saler examines the possible ways of presenting the interrelationship of the (admittedly rather vague) categories of enchantment and modernity, offering three dominant methods of analysis: the binary, the dialectical, and the antinomial. The binary model positions enchantment as rational modernity's 'residual, subordinate "other"', thereby necessarily relegating it from the status of delight to that of delusion'.[9] The dialectical approach sees modernity itself as irrational: 'a mythic construct no less enchanted than the myths it sought to overcome.'[10] Saler cites the writings of Karl Marx, but also Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which charges that modernity's rational self-image is itself a form of enchantment. In a memorable passage its authors compare the self-legitimizing instrumentalism of modernity with the magician's self-inscription for the purposes of incantation:

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[7] Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, pp. 201-203
[8] Michael T. Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review', The American Historical Review 111 (2006), 26. p. 692
[9] Ibid. p. 694
[10] Ibid. p. 697

'[t]he mastery of nature draws the circle in which the critique of pure reason holds thought spellbound.'[11]   Finally, Saler describes the antinomial model, as a container for *necessarily* conflicting tensions and oppositions, a model that is truer to 'lived experience', whereby enchantment 'depends upon its antinomial other, modern disenchantment, and a specifically modern enchantment might be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously: one that delights but does not delude'.[12]   Broadly speaking, I have embraced this latter model, in both theory and practice, as one that seems to me to reflect more accurately the diverse character of the magic assemblage, and which seeks to avoid the potentially reductive characteristics of the binary and dialectical approaches.   Saler's claim that this more complex model is somehow truer to the spirit of modernity, is echoed by During, who asserts magic's 'relationship with the fictional and the emergence of show business'.[13]   He comments on the convergence of the rise of secular magic as part of an industry of entertainment, with that of the genre of the realist novel, and claims that they share a 'cultural logic'.[14]   It is to this fictive nature of magic that I now wish to turn, as a touchstone to a brief account of the cultural status of magic within the modern period.

The Status of Magic in Modern Culture

Simon During's 2002 publication *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*, is an academic study of the history and influence of magic, something which, as During himself acknowledges, has barely been attempted, as nearly all historical surveys of the subject have been written anecdotally, by magicians themselves.[15]   What During refers to as *secular* magic, i.e. conjuring, can be seen both as a sophisticated form of, and in contradistinction to, *real* magic.   The author's definition of real magic is particular, and forms part of a lexicon of denotations employed throughout the book as a means of distinguishing

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[11] Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments. Cultural Memory in the Present*, ([Stanford, Calif.]: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 19, cited in Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment', p. 698.
[12] Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment', p. 699.
[13] Sina Najafi and Simon During, 'Modern Enchantments: An Interview with Simon During', Cabinet, 26 (2007), 88-95. (p. 88).
[14] Ibid. p. 93.
[15] During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 74.

between different magic types.[16] Real magic, for During, is such that the magic itself—its method, as distinct from the effects it produces—pretends, or claims, to be real (regardless of whether or not one believes it), emanating as it purports to, from non-physical, supernatural forces. Real magic, then, is notionally the magic of witches and shamans, and During contrasts this with *secular* magic, which, in spite of its efficacy, always proclaims its falsity, its reliance on methods and technologies—whether sleight of hand or elaborate stage apparatus. Secular magic is therefore the magic of the conjurer and showman. During's nomenclature may not be entirely satisfactory, particularly as it conflicts with that of other writers on the subject; but it is a systematic attempt comprehensively to define the conjurer's art in terms of its distinction from and disparity with the historical practices of witchcraft or sorcery.[17]

During also distinguishes magic from religion, in that the latter can never be secularised—its relationship to the sacred is a *sine qua non* of its identity. This is not true of magic: the complex historical relationship between real (supernatural, in every sense) and secular magic is predicated, from a modern, enlightened point of view, on the ultimately illusory nature of both. In this sense the entertainment sort of magic can be seen as a kind of historical whistle-blower on the supernatural sort, exposing its non-efficacy by revealing its methods.[18] In spite of this, the two sorts of magic have historically retained an uneasy alliance (a confederacy that may be useful to the stage magician who, even while distancing himself from the supernatural, can benefit from any residual suspicion that real sorcery is the cause of the apparent miracles his audience witness).[19] It is worth examining this overlap a little further for, whilst During is clearly attempting to demarcate the boundaries between real and secular magic, there are evidently ways in which the two have remained interdependent, even throughout the modern period. In Performing Dark Arts, Michael Mangan likens the relationship

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[16] In addition to real and secular magic he refers to *natural* magic—that which is a precursor of, or aligned with, science. During, *Modern Enchantments*, pp. 17-21.

[17] Helen and Pier Giorgio Varola, for example, in their introductory essay to the Site Gallery's exhibition, *Con Art*, refer to the art of the conjuror as 'natural' magic. (*Magic/Object/Action* in H. Varola, C. Maund, and P. G. Varola, Con Art (Sheffield: Site Gallery, 2002).)

[18] At least since the end of the 18th century, when magic began to appear as a form of mainstream entertainment (See Cook, The Arts of Deception.)

[19] Many magicians have traded on this supposition (images of demons in early 20th century magic posters testify to this), and some, such as Uri Geller, embrace it completely, thereby committing a cardinal sin in the eyes of the magic fraternity. Geller distances himself from ordinary magicians, claiming real powers. (See Nicholas Humphrys' *Behold The Man*, in Nicholas Humphrey, *The Mind Made Flesh: Essays from the Frontiers of Psychology and Evolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). pp. 206-231).

between conjuring and the occult to a 'braid', an intertwining of the two practices, one with the other.[20] This image is presented in opposition to an orthodox 'linear, chronological model' in which supernatural, or shamanistic, practices give way, over time, to more secular forms of entertainment: Mangan cites the theoretical works of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner (both of whom I refer to in chapter two) as exponents of this interrelated model of ritual and theatre. Ritual 'involves an expectation of results' and is linked to the notion of efficacy, whereas the object of theatre is entertainment and fun; for both Turner and Schechner these notional extremities of a 'continuum of performance' are never entirely separate, but are always to some extent imbricated with one another, thus offering a more complex '*interplay* between efficacy and entertainment'.[21] Throughout his book Mangan echoes this refusal to make easy distinctions between real and secular magic, in favour of a more complex, multi-faceted reading.

In her book 'Artful Science', Barbara Stafford explores this more complicated reading by means of the relationship between science and conjuring in early modernity. Stafford focuses upon the 'exciting ways of doing science by stimulating the eyes', which were common in 18th century Europe, and which utilized aspects of the expanding leisure industry of the period.[22] However, the 'enlightened entertainment' that served to instruct as well as to delight, relied upon the same ocular stimulation employed by conjurors, 'jugglers' and other tricksters, whose covert aim was that of delusion.[23]

> On the one hand, the competitive leisure industry pressured the informing philosophical illusionist to distinguish himself from the deluding conjuror. On the other hand, popular educators relied on the same battery of stunning newfangled devices to attract the consumer's gaze.[24]

Thus a kind of epistemological anxiety emerged out of the tendency for both instructors and conjurors—using similar instruments, but to very different ends—to attempt to make visible a hidden realm. According to Stafford, this became

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[20] Mangan, Performing Dark Arts, p. 16
[21] ibid
[22] Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: enlightenment, entertainment and the eclipse of visual education* (MIT Press, 1994), p. xxi
[23] ibid, p. 73 ('juggler' was a catch-all term, from the middle-English *jogelen*, meaning to entertain with tricks)
[24] ibid, p. 73

further compounded by the uncontrollable acquisition of such devices—lanterns, mirrors, projectors—by a growing consumer society. Furthermore, a decidedly moral dimension grew out of a deep-seated suspicion of certain ostentatious forms of public display, whether instructional or entertaining:

> When the viewer felt irresistibly magnetized by the visible invisible, especially in the presence of unreadable optical effects, then the technologist was condemned as a cheap trickster and his product judged as sophisticated flimflam.[25]

This intersection of science and magic continued into the 19th century with the establishment of the London (later 'Royal') Polytechnic in 1838. The Polytechnic featured public exhibitions and demonstrations of a scientific and technological nature, whereby the visitor might gain a 'general knowledge of the processes by which the wonders of art and manufacture are produced'.[26] The optical effect known as 'Pepper's Ghost' was first demonstrated at the Polytechnic, but in the form of a dramatic interlude—a scene from Charles Dickens' *The Haunted Man*—rather than as part of a scientific lecture; this phenomenon, whereby a ghostly figure could be produced on stage through subtle lighting and the exact positioning of a sheet of glass (invisible to the audience), was quickly seized upon by magicians in both Britain and France during the 1860s. In fact magicians have, throughout the modern period, taken advantage of public disquiet, scepticism and anxiety instigated by unfamiliar scientific discoveries, as a means of framing their performances, thereby further complicating the relationship between scientific truths, supernatural forces, and downright charlatanry.

In a recent paper Karl Bell has also explored the interplay between technological rationality and magical beliefs, critiquing what he sees as the reductive bifurcation of real and secular magic advocated by During (and alluded to earlier in this chapter), in favour of a more complex reading.[27] Bell examines the performances of John Henry Anderson, the self-styled 'Wizard of the North', a magician at the forefront of the promotion of magic as a form of mass entertainment. He demonstrates how Anderson's 'blending of "magic" and

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[25] ibid, p. 79
[26] During, Modern Enchantments, p. 144
[27] Karl Bell, Remaking Magic: The "Wizard of the North" and Contested Magical Mentalities in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Magic Show, Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft, Vol 4, No. 1 (2009), pp. 26-51.

science' can be seen as an extension of earlier forms of 'natural' magic, whereby modern forms of science such as chemistry and astronomy had emerged in part from the experiments of alchemists and astrologers. Anderson's shows were advertised as deriving from the '"sciences of chemistry, dynamics, hydraulics, acoustics, optics, electricity, Galvanism, electro-magnetism"', and, according to Bell, were a way of 'sugaring the pill of useful instruction', his comments converging in spirit with those of Stafford. [28]

Two modern magicians who reflect this notion of hybridity, each from a different end of the performance spectrum, are Uri Geller and Derren Brown. The Israeli born Geller made his name in the 1970s as a 'paranormalist' by performing feats such as spoon bending and telepathy, often on live television shows. Geller became a newsworthy figure when viewers of his shows claimed to have experienced psychic phenomena (bent cutlery, stopped watches) within their own homes. In spite of this Geller has been denounced as a fraud by many within the magic community; the magician and debunker James Randi claims that all of Geller's feats are easily replicable by any decent stage magician. Conversely, the British performer Derren Brown makes no direct claims to the supernatural, but nevertheless employs strategies which evoke or are framed by such phenomena. In 'Séance', first aired on Channel 4 in 2004, Brown brought a group of University students together for a live séance.[29] The event was staged at Elton Hall in East London, and Brown claimed the location had a history of paranormal activity after 12 people killed themselves in a suicide pact in 1974. He then proceeded to demonstrate some of the methods employed by spiritualists— including the use of a ouija board—in contacting the dead, much of the event being filmed in near darkness using night-vision cameras. Brown, much in the manner of John Henry Anderson, was exploiting and problematizing the perceived gap between psychic phenomena and their modern scientific explanation through such concepts as 'ideomotor movement'—unconscious movements we make when we expect motion to occur. Although ostensibly a debunking exercise (one of the supposed suicide victims was introduced to the group at the end of the experiment, and the methods used were apparently explained) what the show demonstrated was the propensity for participants to be

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[28] Ibid, p. 36-37
[29] Derren Brown, Séance (Channel 4, 2004)

caught up in the effects produced, when the context that framed them was a supernatural, rather than a theatrical event. On other occasions Brown has implied the use of forms of subliminal suggestion and ideas derived from neuro-linguistic programming—concepts that have contemporary currency, but of which his audience probably have scant knowledge; despite these cryptic references, much of the time they are themselves forms of misdirection, Brown relying instead upon tried and tested conjuring strategies.

These uneasy overlaps between different magic types are also evident in further distinctions in scholarly preoccupations with the idea of magic within modernity, whereby magic is defined either as the visible strains of already identifiable forms of practice which have become marginalized within an otherwise rational culture (witchcraft and other occult practices), or the kind of approach which views aspects of modernity itself as enchanted. An example of the former is Susan Greenwood's recent book *The Anthropology of Magic*, in which the author attends to an exploration of occult practices from the 'inside', participating in witchcraft rituals and working with shamans.[30] An example of the second approach is Raymond Williams' 1961 essay *Advertising: the Magic System*, in which the author posits, in an extension of Marx's commodity fetishism, advertising as a form of magic whereby ordinary objects are transfigured into enchanted signifiers (so the motor car becomes, for example, a symbol of masculinity).[31] During touches upon the example of Williams and upon other forms of 'Modern Magic' in the early pages of Modern Enchantments: Marx's commodity fetish, Freud and the unconscious, Kenneth Burke's notion of the magical function of naming in language, all are considered here as the residual strains of magical thinking within modern culture. However, During's central claim is set out in the opening pages of *Modern Enchantments*: he suggests that, from the point of their commercialisation and absorption into the mainstream, magic shows have influenced the trajectory and formation of modern culture, and its conception of itself. Beginning in the late 1700s, modern performance magic enjoyed an ambiguous status: rejecting its former association with sorcery and witchcraft, magic became a respectable form of mass entertainment. At the same

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[30] Susan Greenwood, *The Anthropology of Magic* (Berg, Oxford, 2009)
[31] Raymond Williams, *Advertising: the Magic System*, (1965) in During, S (ed) *The Cultural Studies Reader* (Routledge, 1993)

time the modern magician was tacitly engaged in a form of deception that, in a somewhat different incarnation, was coincidentally becoming a newsworthy phenomenon: that of the criminal pickpocket or con-man.[32] It is not my intention here to give a detailed account of the history of magic, but some of During's speculations in the chapter *Enchantment and Loss: Theorizing Secular Magic*, are worth examining. During suggests that, once magic's role as cultural agent is understood, 'our sensitivity to the play of puzzlement, fictiveness, and contingency in modernity will be heightened'.[33] He argues that the history of magic is intertwined with the history of fictionality, 'the category in relation to which fictions are written, circulated, and received as fictions', and he illustrates this with reference to three such fictions which represent magic performances; of these, Walter Benjamin's *Rastelli Erzahlt* is perhaps the most instructive.[34] The story concerns a juggler, The Master, who performs a graceful ball routine, the secret of which is the concealed presence of a dwarf inside the ball, and who controls its movements. According to the story, the juggler was condemned (he faced certain death in the event of failure) to perform in front of an autocratic Eastern ruler. Fortunately the performance is a huge success but, as The Master is leaving the theatre, he receives a letter saying that the dwarf is ill and so cannot perform that night; from this we infer that the performance must have been truly magical! However, there is a twist to the story: the dwarf's letter may have been a ruse, and the Master himself, tricked. For During, Benjamin's story symbolizes the ambiguous epistemic status of secular magic and demonstrates 'an anxiety about the status of history whenever it meets (as it often must) the secret, the unfathomable, and the tricky, for which the history of entertainment magic stands as a type'.[35] During concludes that secular magic can be thought of as a site where history and fiction collide, the one splintering and transmuting into the other.

Once again, the uneasy affiliation between real and entertainment magic is made clear. One possible interpretation is that modern culture nurtures magic as a surrogate for the erosion of the supernatural; this is what During terms the

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[32] The term 'confidence man' was first used in 1849 to describe the New York swindler William Thompson. Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, p. 201.
[33] During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 2.
[34] Ibid.Pp. 58 – 60. The other two stories are: Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Walter Benjamin's *Rastelli Erzahlt* and Kafka's *K* (a fragment of a posthumously published notebook).
[35] Ibid. pp. 59-60

'compensation' theory, and he cites the French Lacanian literary critic Max Milner, whose *La Fantasmagorie* examines the technologies of secular magic in terms of compensation for (or lack of) the supernatural within modern culture, and of an 'other space' in which the boundaries between reality and dream are blurred.[36] During ultimately rejects this position, however, as a plausible way of explaining the cultural power of magic, on the grounds that it does not adequately describe the kinds of pleasures—often trivial and silly, and by no means exclusively desirous of the supernatural—sought by magic audiences. He is equally dismissive of the dialectical approach of Adorno, in which Western modernity itself is seen (negatively) as enchanted and self-justifying—a position which, for During, does not allow for the capability of modernized individuals to be simultaneously enchanted and disenchanted. Ultimately the inherent ambiguity at the heart of Benjamin's story points to this double bind response experienced by the observer of a magic trick: the (rational) knowledge that the effect is a trick, and the simultaneous suspension of disbelief for the purposes of (fictional, or magical) enjoyment. This is a concept frequently alluded to by During throughout his book, in which he posits a paradoxical—a *both/and*, rather than an *either/or*—approach to his subject; it coincides with Michael Saler's succinct description of modern enchantments' propensity to 'delight rather than delude'.[37]

Joshua Landy expands upon this notion of a magical orientation within modernity in a recent book (co-edited with Saler) exploring the cultural significance of magic and enchantment.[38] Landy argues that it was the 19th century French magician Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin who provided his audiences with the potential to 'reinforce an aptitude of detached credulity', thereby contributing to the possibility of a re-enchanted quotidian existence.[39] Robert-Houdin presented himself as an actor playing the part of a magician, and in certain of his illusions, employed a pseudo-scientific form of presentation. In one of these—a levitation trick entitled *Ethereal Suspension*—the magician claimed to have discovered a 'marvellous new property of ether. If one has a living person

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[36] Max Milner, *La Fantasmagorie: Essai Sur L'optique Fantastique*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1982), cited in During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 62.
[37] Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment', p. 699
[38] Joshua Landy and Michael T. Saler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford General, 2009).
[39] Joshua Landy, *Modern Magic: Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin and Stéphane Mallarmé*, in Ibid., p. 110

inhale this liquid when it is at its highest degree of concentration, the body of the patient for a few moments becomes as light as a balloon'.[40] Using his own son as guinea pig, Robert-Houdin would wave a vial of ether under his nose in order to put him into a trance (the bottle was empty, but backstage ether was poured onto a hot iron, filling the theatre with its vapour). After a complex series of manoeuvres, the magician used his little finger to raise his son—now supported only by a thin cane resting on a stool—into a horizontal position, where he remained, apparently levitated by the power of the ether. Landy describes the way in which, here, the public curiosity in science was exploited for magical effect: Robert-Houdin's audience knew about ether, and of its 'marvellous applications', and so might be prepared to grant it 'magical' powers. Furthermore, Landy says, certain sections of the audience were sophisticated enough to respond more ambivalently:

> In the Ethereal Suspension, Robert-Houdin provided his audience with a *model for the construction of a belief system that recognizes itself as illusory*; even science can be a religion, he seems to have been hinting with a sly wink to those in the know, if you lucidly wish to believe in one.[41]

The author here counters the commonly held notion that science has been instrumental in disenchanting the modern world, arguing instead that, paradoxically, it produces new wonders, even in the process of explanation; furthermore, the inherently counter-intuitive nature of scientific explanations of certain phenomena can seem more mystifying than our common sense realism would have them. Landy is also suggesting that Robert-Houdin's ostensibly disenchanting theatrical productions produced or enabled the very *homme d'esprit* of whom the magician spoke so enthusiastically.[42] The urbane and rarefied atmosphere of the little Robert-Houdin theatre permitted and encouraged an equally rarefied and sophisticated response, the kind that was, after all, only one of several possible responses at that time. Landy's interpretation of magic suggests therefore, like During's, a both/and rather than an either/or type of response on the part of the spectator. The assertion made by Landy—that the

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[40] Ibid, p. 107
[41] Ibid, p. 110
[42] Ibid, p. 109

deployment by Robert-Houdin of a scientific approach in the presentation of his illusions produced hybrid and ambivalent forms of response—is a line of argument pursued by both Cook and During in their books. It is also worth remembering that towards the end of the same century a spiritualist revival in America and Britain was parasitic upon the development of another 'scientific', visual form—that of photography—and that it produced similarly ambivalent responses.

It is worthwhile expanding here upon the complex position of the spectator within the modern period. Several recent volumes have attempted to deal with this slippery concept: in *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary discusses the shift in the role and status of the observer during the early part of the 19th century, using the camera obscura as a model of earlier modes of observational *habitus*, and citing other, later optical instruments (such as the stereoscope) as paradigmatic of its transfigured status.[43] In so doing Crary intends to give an account of the history of vision in which the emphasis is placed less upon the notion of a set of evolving representational practices but instead on the 'no less problematic phenomenon of the observer', who constitutes 'the field on which vision in history can be said to materialize, to become itself visible.'[44] Crary's thesis revolves around an assertion that, for a period of over two hundred years, the camera obscura had represented and embodied a set of fixed relations between an observer and the external world; it had effectively functioned as a model (both philosophical and technological) of vision which was essentially passive, as well as operating transparently, and which was predicated upon the 'radical distinction between interior and exterior, between the subjects and objects of perception.'[45] By contrast, 19th century optical 'toys' (the stereoscope, praxinoscope, and others) originated in a 'new empirical knowledge of the physiological status of the observer and of vision' that was far less rooted in any notion of truth status. This new knowledge included clearly subjective phenomena, such as Goethe's discovery of the after-image, that were not susceptible to explanation by the classical model of vision. A highly problematized model of vision therefore

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[43] See also Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity*, and Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (both published in 2009)

[44] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century* (MIT Press, 1990), p. 5

[45] David Phillips, *Modern Vision* (book review) Oxford Art Journal, 16, 1 (1993), pp. 129-138 (p. 130)

emerged during the 19th century, and Crary's modern 'observer' is a more physiologically constructed and embodied individual as distinct from the passive onlooker of the 17th and 18th centuries; this is evidenced by his use of the word 'observer'—with its connotations of assimilation 'within a prescribed set of possibilities'—as opposed to the more detached 'spectator'.[46]

Crary's account performs two important functions: the theoretical displacement of vision itself from discrete entity into a multiplicity of activities and processes, and the situating of the modern observer as the site of a complex nexus of social, aesthetic and technological processes. Crary's model of vision has however come under some critical scrutiny, partly for its overly linear narrative, but also because, as David Phillips has pointed out, it fails to account for the way that 'modernist perception was also premised upon the denial of the embodied observer – a denial which had been so integral to the camera obscura'.[47] Certainly for the first half of the 20th century the notion of a distanced observer acquired a kind of orthodoxy, particularly in the writings of influential art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. The implicit theatricality characteristic of much postmodern art is at odds with the explicit aestheticization at the heart of the modernist project. Fried himself, in an essay from 1967, declared theatricality the enemy of art: remarking on the tendency of minimalist (or as he called them, 'literalist') artists to espouse 'objecthood', Fried called it 'nothing more than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art'. Although he was referring specifically to minimalist art, Fried's objection was to the very activation of the gallery space (and, by extension, the incorporation of the beholder) upon which the work of much contemporary art depends. Referring to the work of Robert Morris he says:

> 'Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art "what is to be had from the work is to be had strictly within [it]," the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation* – one which, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.'[48]

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[46] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 14
[47] Phillips, *Modern Vision*, p. 136
[48] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*. Artforum, (summer 1967), pp. 12-23 (p. 15)

Martin Jay has also alluded to a 'plurality of scopic regimes' during the period of late modernism.[49] In *Downcast Eyes*, Jay discusses Derrida's opposition to notions of aesthetic purity, whereby the French philosopher argued against the idea of the integrity of the artwork on the grounds that 'any purely aesthetic discourse cannot itself avoid intermingling with those it tries to exclude—ethical, cognitive, or whatever.'[50]

These discursive accounts of modern spectatorship point to a complexifying relationship between artwork/event and audience that itself parallels a proliferation of forms, materials and technologies, as well as a dissolving of disciplinary borders that would have been anathema to critics such as Greenberg and Fried. Some of the examples I discuss in chapter two display a further splintering of the hitherto discrete boundaries separating performer and audience, artwork and observer.

The Marvellous and the Miraculous

It was the Surrealists who, during the 1920s and 1930s, pursued the notion of the marvellous as a category of the irrational. André Breton's first *Manifesto of Surrealism* describes the marvellous in terms of a 'sort of general revelation' the fragments of which might include 'the romantic ruin, the modern mannequin, or any other symbol, capable of affecting the human sensibility for a period of time'.[51] Simon During rightly observes that, as a metaphysical notion designed to resist the rational, the Surrealist concept of the marvellous has little in common with the technologies of performance magic. The (Surrealist) marvellous is to be reached through altered states, the unconscious, dreams, or strange encounters; a magical experience, by contrast, is conscious, requires the willing suspension of disbelief, and consists of the witnessing of (apparent) miracles. The distinction is a subtle but important one: in describing Matthew Lewis's 18th century gothic novel *The Monk*, Breton admires the way it 'exercises an exalting effect only

[49] Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality* (New Press, New York, 1988), p. 20
[50] Martin Jay, Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought (University of California Press, 1993), p. 516
[51] André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), quoted in During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 30.

upon that part of the mind which aspires to leave the earth'.[52]   Surrealism's *marvellous* is fantastical; magic's *miraculous* is inexplicable.[53]

For During the 20th century artist whose work comes closest to the condition of secular magic is Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp's works are fragments (in the tone of Breton's manifesto) but not symbols, in that they 'dissolve art and the marvellous in play, teasing mysteries, technique, and fun'.[54]   In the chapter *Magic and Literature*, During discusses the central role of Duchamp in the context of his exposure to the writing and dramatic output of Raymond Roussel. Roussel, the rich son of a successful Paris stockbroker, courted controversy by virtue of the vast sums of money that he lavished on the publication and production of his texts and plays. During sees him as a precursor of the avant-garde, in that he de-humanized art by using a repertoire of mechanistic literary devices (word-play, puns, homophones, rebuses, etc) to generate his bizarre narratives. In May 1912 a second production of his play *Impressions d'Afrique* opened in Paris; a month later, on 10th June, Duchamp attended a performance with a group of friends, describing it as 'the madness of the unexpected'.[55]   At the heart of Roussel's story is a series of disconnected spectacles featuring a succession of primitive machines, whose function is the production of artworks. One of these, a mechanical easel with a variety of complex accoutrements, is described in great detail:

> The [automatic] arm slowly extended towards the palette, while the horizontal, rimless wheel, created on the end of it by the star of brushes, was gradually raised to the top of a vertical axle, wound upwards by a cogged ring which was directly connected to the sphere by a highly elastic driving bolt [...] Immediately
> the brush, impregnated with the delicate shade, automatically drew a narrow, vertical strip of sky down the side of the future picture.[56]

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[52] Andre Robert Breton, Helen R. Lane, and Richard Seaver, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated from the French by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. (Second Printing.), (Ann Arbor Paperback. Aa No. 182.)[Ann Arbor:] University of Michigan Press, 1974). p. 15

[53] Darwin Ortiz distinguishes between the activity of watching something you can't explain, and watching something *inexplicable*; between solving a puzzle, and witnessing a miracle. Darwin Ortiz, *Designing Miracles: Creating the Illusion of Impossibility* (El Dorado Hills: A-1 Magicalmedia, 2006). p. 31

[54] During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 31.

[55] Ibid, p.195.

[56] Raymond Roussel, Lindy Foord, and Rayner Heppenstall, *Impressions of Africa*. Translated by Lindy Foord and Rayner Heppenstall, (French Surrealism.), London: Calder & Boyars, 1969), p. 144-145.

Duchamp later acknowledged that his readymades (as well as his reputed masterpiece, *The Large Glass*) had been directly influenced by Roussel: 'Roussel showed me the way' he proclaimed, and 'it was fundamentally Roussel who was responsible for my [Large] *Glass*'.[57] For Duchamp however, all art objects, including paintings, are readymades: 'Since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and ready-made products we must conclude that all paintings in the world are "readymades aided" and also works of assemblage.'[58] During remarks on Duchamp's tendency, in his post 1912 production, to prioritize a certain apparent lightness, jokiness even, in his work, and to attempt to place it somehow outside of the limiting factors of tradition and taste. He quotes Michel Leiris who, in his essay on Duchamp, describes the artist's constructions as embodying a 'physics (or logic) of fun', and During explicitly ties in this assertion with the practices and sensibilities of the 'magic assemblage'.[59] Duchamp's works are therefore marvels, but marvels that, through their archness, undermine the very tradition and essence of the marvel. Of course Duchamp was also instrumental in testing the distinction between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic; During concludes Modern Enchantments by revisiting *Large Glass*, a work in which he claims the artist attempted to 'aestheticize a form of magic visibility, or rather, to de-aestheticize "art" by miming magic'.[60]

The cultural approach to magic, During's in particular, is an attempt to create a vivid, heterogeneous picture of the history of magic and magicians from the 17th century onwards. Supplementary to this however, is During's suggestion that a 'discourse of disenchantment' paradoxically *produced* new categories of enchantment, this time directed at the imagination.[61] The self-conscious and reflexive illusions of modern magic are but one expression of the centrality of illusions in modern mass culture. While Cook associates such 'artful deceptions' with the growth of a capitalist market economy and middle-class anxieties concerning the status of truth, During places more emphasis on how the discourse of disenchantment itself fostered secular and rational enchantments aimed at the

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[57] Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works*, (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.51.
[58] Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism on Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, Theory and History of Literature; V. 51 (Minneapolis; Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 170
[59] During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 30.
[60] Ibid, p. 286.
[61] This is a view shared by Terry Castle, whose essay concerning *spectral technologies* I discuss in chapter 3.

imagination—and at how the imagination itself has become a central source of modern enchantment.[62] The early romantics turned to the imagination for this purpose, and During utilizes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's notion of experiencing fictional wonders through the 'willing suspension of disbelief'.[63] In a compelling analysis, During contends that a specifically modern enchantment is to be found via the prevalence of fictions in the modern world, and the ways in which these fictions become interiorized within the modern imagination; modern magic is a part of this turn to self-reflexive fictions, but so too are works of avant-garde art, literature, the cinema, and show business in general, all of which receive some analysis in his account. During defines all of these as magical assemblages that delight one's reason and imagination without deluding them. His understanding of the modern efflorescence of representations departs in interesting ways from the more disenchanted views of certain postmodernists. While figures such as Jean Baudrillard maintain that representations and reality have become virtually indistinguishable, rendering modernity almost impervious to critical analysis, During contends that the prevalence of illusions in modern culture has effectively trained its audiences to distinguish the real from the fictional. Modern magic affirms the concept of the real in the process of appealing to the imagination, for 'consumers of modern culture learn to accept one set of propositions in relation to the domain of fiction, and another in relation to the everyday world'.[64]

Ultimately, although useful for an analysis of the cultural significance of magic, the perspectives discussed above are too broad to provide much purchase specifically within the area of artistic practice. Only Simon During makes a purposeful case for certain categories of visual art as having magical (in the strict sense of what he terms the secular magic assemblage) connotations. His designation of the work of Marcel Duchamp as an attempt to 'de-aestheticize "art" by miming magic', provocatively removes Duchamp from the reductive category of conceptual artist, and links him with the much more unofficial and marginalized world of theatrical magic.[65]

[62] Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, p. 201.
[63] During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 45.
[64] Ibid, p. 50.
[65] Ibid, p. 286.

Magic as Science

A very different perspective of magic has emerged from the fields of psychology and cognitive science. In fact I began my research by focusing upon the psychology of magic through the work of, among others, Richard Wiseman, Peter Lamont, and Gustav Kuhn. Ultimately, the drawback with this approach from my perspective is that it focuses (necessarily, from the point of view of the authors) upon the motivations and strategies of the conjurer, at the expense of the broad experience of the spectator or recipient of the magic effect, whose responses are measured in carefully circumscribed, positivist terms. Gustav Kuhn's work in particular successfully adumbrates the magician's art in terms of perceptual and cognitive processes; he uses an eye tracker, a head-mounted device that monitors saccades—rapid eye movements within a limited range—in order to objectively determine where a spectator's gaze is directed whilst viewing a magic trick. By asking participants to view the trick on a TV monitor, the eye tracker simultaneously records their eye movements, and the extent to which they unconsciously respond to 'social cues'. However, this process assumes, as part of its methodology, a positivist ontological framework for the processing of its experimental data. Kuhn ignores, or brackets out, for example, the technological mediation (TV monitor, eye-scanner) through which some of his results are produced, thus excluding the possibility of a 'magical' or 'enchanting', mediatory role that technology itself might bring to bear upon the process. In his essay, jointly written with Ronald A. Rensink and Alym A. Amlani, Kuhn makes a plea for magic to be used by cognitive science as 'an important source of insight into the human mind'.[66] This is undoubtedly a bold and intriguing proposition, and it contains many important insights into the magician's methodology, in particular the ways in which performers might manipulate 'innate' human cognitive tendencies. Yet by focusing on the techniques of magic, and in order to test them scientifically, the study effectively reduces magic to these very techniques at the expense of the broader, framing technologies of the magic act, and the extent to which it might rely upon a conscious suspension of disbelief on the part of a

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[66] Alym A. Amlani and Ronald A. Rensink Gustav Kuhn, 'Towards a Science of Magic', Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 12 (2008), 349-54, (p. 349).

socially complicit audience. From my point of view the eminently scientistic viewpoint (again, *de rigeur* for the authors) seemed limiting: the *experience* of magic is almost a footnote at the end of their essay.[67] In a certain sense then, Kuhn, Rensink and Amlani are using magic as a scientific tool—in fact treating magic *as* scientific—a curious mirror image of Robert-Houdin's use of *science* as a *magical* tool, as described earlier by Joshua Landy.[68]

Similarly, Wiseman and Lamont give a thorough account of the various categories of magical transaction, a kind of taxonomy of the principles of conjuring. They also outline a distinction between the magician and the 'pseudo-psychic', in an attempt to mark off these two categories in relation to each other.[69] Here magic becomes a rational enterprise that declares its hand, in contrast to the irrational pursuit of the pseudo-psychic who feigns access to the supernatural—a pursuit deemed out of bounds by Wiseman and Lamont. Broadly speaking, what each of these accounts does is to describe how magic effects are produced, by focusing on the various methods employed by magicians—misdirection, dissimulation, and so forth—and how they might affect the cognitive functions of the observer: how, for instance, the psychological concept of 'object permanence' can cause us to believe that objects still exist even when they cease to be visible to us.[70] In both accounts (Kuhn, Rensink & Amlani, and Wiseman & Lamont) there is a tacit assumption that magic is a technology for disrupting the perceptual and psychological mechanisms of the viewer, but that this must also be seen against a background of a scientifically rational and sensible version of reality, that magic itself helps to reinforce. In fairness, it is not really within the remit of either of these accounts to engage with the question of what it is that magic does in the world, how it is culturally situated, and how it acquires or creates meaning. Instead, its authors focus on psychological questions—the perceptual expectations of the spectator and the ways in which these can be tactically exploited by the magician. So while the particular strategic and material components of magic are subjected to forensic analysis, these accounts ignore its broader cultural

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[67] 'Care should be taken in using these techniques as a way of investigating the mind without destroying the necessary mysteries and secrets that give us so much joy.' Ibid, (p. 354).
[68] Kuhn is a semi-professional magician, while Robert-Houdin was an amateur scientist.
[69] Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman, *Magic in Theory: An Introduction to the Theoretical and Psychological Elements of Conjuring*, (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999).
[70] Object permanence, the understanding that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, or touched, is a 'skill' learned in infancy, and is instrumental in differentiating the self and the world.

implications: that theatrical, or 'secular' magic can provide an eminently crystalline prototype of a certain kind of image of modernity—one in which a shadowy, contingent and ludic zone of play operates alongside and in relation to the more rationalist and progressive aspects of the modern.

Rather than employ a (reductive) psychological perspective, I want to consider theatrical magic as a component of a much broader conception of magic, one in which the notion of deception is one component among many: that of an assemblage of technologies, from which the rational element of conjuring (*pace* Wiseman and Kuhn) cannot so easily be disentangled. This is not to say that I have rejected a psychological approach completely (particularly in chapter 4, in relation to the concept of the cognitive trap); merely that it is not used as a primary epistemological tool, and where it is used it is within a broader (non-classical) conception of the psychological and cognitive, wherein 'mind' is conceived of as embedded and embodied, distributed and context-dependent. Recently, there have been attempts to forge links between neuroscientifically-driven theories of mind, and more broadly philosophical, social, and arts-based perspectives, as in philosopher Michael Wheeler's *Reconstructing the Cognitive World* (in which the author adopts a Heideggerian framework as a means of re-positioning the philosophical foundations of cognitive science), and Barbara Maria Stafford's *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*.[71] These insights chime with Alfred Gell's own proposition in *Art and Agency*, that 'cognition and sociality are one', and have proved useful in supplementing an analysis of art objects, in so far as they converge with the notions of agency that I employ in a primary theoretical role throughout the thesis, and to which I now turn.[72]

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[71] Michael Wheeler, *Reconstructing the Cognitive World: The Next Step*, (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT, 2005). Barbara Maria Stafford, *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*, (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
[72] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 71.

Alfred Gell: Art, magic, and agency

Primarily, I want to examine the relationship between artistic practice and magic performance in terms of its effect upon the spectator. In order to do this I intend to focus on the ideas of the anthropologist Alfred Gell and, principally, his 1998 (posthumous) publication *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory*.[73] It seemed possible, and indeed productive, to use Gell's notion of agency as a means of exploring the relationship between art and magic that had become central to my recent practice. One of the advantages of Gell's approach is the way in which, as an anthropologist, he studiously avoids adopting a theory of art that begins with, or prioritizes, a consideration of artworks as a class of aesthetically revered objects. Although he is doing this for sound, anthropological reasons, it means that his perspective also offers a challenge to orthodox art historical accounts in which the aesthetic viewpoint is privileged; his position represents a refusal to treat art as a category of mute objects awaiting evaluative appraisal.[74] Instead he considers art objects as persons, possessing agency and able to 'change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it'.[75] Gell views art as essentially a magical system, able to enchant and captivate the viewer, but glossed (in post-enlightenment cultures) as the preserve of 'genius' or as the subject of a distanced, aesthetic appreciation. This is a somewhat counter-intuitive approach that positions enchantment at the foreground of an inherently action-centred art system; art and magic are both intended to *change* things in the world. Now it could be argued that in doing this Gell transforms art into a form of technology (a 'technology of enchantment'), therefore defining it in somewhat positivistic terms. Similarly, although his aim is to formulate a theory of art, one that is serviceable universally, Gell's *art nexus*—essentially a diagrammatic device for organizing sets of relations orbiting the art object—is 'undoubtedly a Western representational apparatus'.[76] However, I am more concerned with the ways in which Gell's theories offer up a functional and productive framework for the analysis of art objects from the point of view of an artist-practitioner already

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[73] Ibid.

[74] 'Evaluative schemes, of whatever kind, are only of anthropological interest in so far as they play a part within social processes, through which they are generated and sustained'. Ibid, p.3.

[75] Ibid, p. 6.

[76] Matthew Rampley, 'Art History and Cultural Difference: Alfred Gell's Anthropology of Art', Art History, v. 28 (2005), p. 524-51. (p. 549).

working within that Western tradition, and, additionally, how those theories generate useful parallels between the 'technology' of art and the 'technology' of magic, as defined within the theory. Besides, Gell's definition of technology is far broader than the one that is commonly ascribed to it, i.e. the production and use of tools: in *Technology and Magic*, he describes the technical as 'a roundabout means of securing some desired result', but broadens the definition to include not only the kinds of knowledge required for the making and use of tools, but also 'the forms of social relationships which make it socially necessary to produce, distribute and consume goods and services using "technical" processes'.[77] Furthermore, and crucially, for Gell technology and magic are not opposed to one another; rather they are mutually constitutive, because technology 'sustains magic, even as magic inspires fresh technical efforts'.[78]

Gell's ideas about the agency of the art object spring partly from two key sources: firstly David Freedberg's defence of a consideration of the artwork as possessing power over the beholder. Freedberg develops this thesis in his book *The Power of Images*, in which he addresses a range of issues including censorship, pornography and iconoclasm, as examples of images that arouse and motivate a response from the viewer.[79] Gell adopts this action-centred stance towards the artwork, partly as a means of collapsing orthodox distinctions between 'religious and aesthetic exaltation'; he goes on to claim that 'art-lovers [...] actually do worship images in the most relevant senses, and explain away their de facto idolatry by rationalizing it as aesthetic awe'.[80] Second, Gell's ideas about the distinctive relationship between social agents and artworks echo those of Pascal Boyer's work in the field of cognitive psychology; Boyer's notion of an intuitive psychology with which the human agent makes inferences about the world, forms the basis of Gell's concept of 'abduction'.[81] The term abduction is used by Gell to designate a particular kind of probabilistic, non-linguistic semiotic inference, brought to bear upon indexical signs and social others alike (he gives the example of a smile connoting friendliness, whether in a painting or from a

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[77] Alfred Gell, 'Technology and Magic', Anthropology Today, 4 (1988), 6-9. (p. 6.).

[78] Ibid. (p. 9).

[79] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[80] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 97.

[81] The reference to Boyer as Gell's closest source is from Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner's introduction to Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner, *Art's Agency and Art History, New Interventions in Art History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 11. (Gell himself cites Pierce (by way of Eco)).

person). The particular type of abduction pertinent to the category of indexes qualified as artworks is the abduction of *agency*, for which the index itself is seen as the outcome.

The definition of 'art object' is also, for Gell, problematic, and he refuses not just an aesthetic categorization but also, more contentiously, a semiotic (or at least narrowly semiotic) one, on the grounds that 'visual art objects are not part of language [...] nor do they constitute an alternative language'.[82] Gell's definition is *theoretical* and grants the art object 'no "intrinsic" nature', other than as a 'function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded'. Ultimately then, for Gell, aesthetic and symbolic considerations are adduced only as part of a system of analysis that prioritizes 'social agency and perceptual cognition, rather than culture and symbolic meaning'.[83] What Gell also does, via his art 'nexus', is to provide a supple and adaptable schematic for the analysis of a set of relationships centred upon the artwork, and emanating from the idea of agency. This framework is flexible because it is not taxonomic or classificatory, but relational: it is contingent upon context. So the position of agent (according to Gell's scheme) can vary from one given instance to another. The four agent 'positions' that Gell supplies are *index*, *artist*, *recipient* and *prototype*; these provide 'the "canonical" nexus of relations in the neighbourhood of art objects'. Although Gell's 'nexus' provides a useful conceptual framework, I have employed it within the main chapters of the thesis strategically rather than as an exhaustively delimiting analytical tool. One brief example will suffice here in order to give a flavour of the rigorous structure of Gell's system, and of its algebraic extrapolation into linear and arboresque structures, or 'Gellograms'.[84] In the chapter *The Involution of the Index*, Gell articulates a number of possible sets of relationships between his four designated agent 'positions'; in addition, he illustrates how each of these can themselves be in the (meta)-position of either agent or patient. In one example—Joshua Reynolds portrait of Samuel Johnson— Gell suggests that it is the eminent and intellectual figure of Dr. Johnson himself (the *prototype*) who has motivated both the *artist's* manner of his portrayal, and, ultimately, our own (the viewer, or *recipient*) abduction of his (Johnson's) agency

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[82] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 6.
[83] Osborne and Tanner, *Art's Agency and Art History*, p. 6.
[84] A term coined by Whitney Davis: Whitney Davis, *Abducting the Agency of Art*, in Ibid.pp. 199-219.

as iconic figure and 'culture hero of the English', *via* the painting (*index*). The resulting diagram nests the artwork/index within a sequence of relationships that unfolds from left to right, with respect to the roles of agent and patient:

[[[Prototype-A] → Artist-A] → Index-A] ⟶ Recipient-P
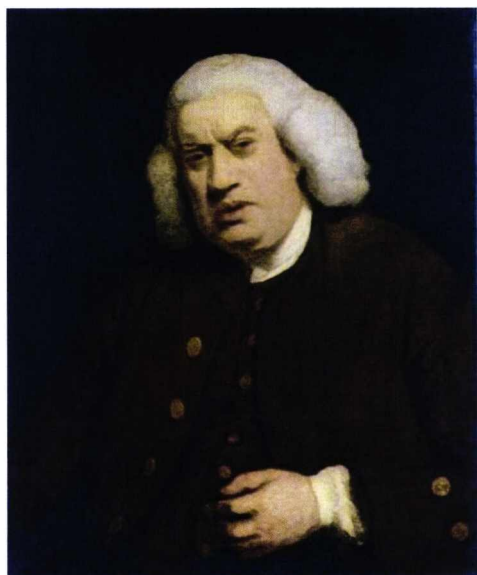
Fig. 3. Samuel Johnson, by Reynolds.
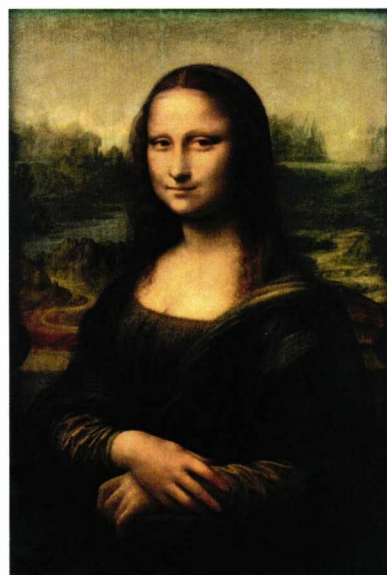
Fig. 4. Leonardo's 'Mona Lisa'.

Gell then proceeds to employ a minor shift to indicate a different relational structure—that represented by Leonardo da Vinci's portrait, the *Mona Lisa*. Here, it is the artist himself who is the primary agent 'seen as responsible for the Mona Lisa's appearance', whose features mediate (again, via the index/artwork) our awareness of Leonardo's 'genius' as painter:

[[[Artist-A] → Prototype-A] → Index-A] ⟶ Recipient-P [85]

Although superficially complex, these formulae provide an original and effective method for tracing the sets of relationships between Gell's four agent positions. Where I do employ them (although not in this formal, diagrammatic format) it is in an attempt to account for situations where agency might be (or might be seen to

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[85] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 52.

be) occluded or subverted in some way—as is often the case in the magic act, as well as in my own art practice.

Gell's conception of enchantment is framed quite specifically in terms of a kind of resistance, on the part of the art object, to being 'grasped' by the viewer, such that the viewer becomes overwhelmed and attributes the basis of the artwork as magical. Artworks are therefore, for Gell, 'cognitive traps' that directly affect or 'captivate' the viewer in ways that might range from a slowing down of perception, through to a sense of awe, desire, or fear. It is worth pointing out that Gell doesn't necessarily limit his definition of 'technical skill' to what we in the West might think of as virtuosic skill, and is prepared to bestow the same descriptor upon works, such as those by Picasso or Duchamp, that display conceptual, rather than artisanal, skills.[86] Nor does he limit 'artworks' to conventional Western-type conceptions of that term (paintings, sculptures, etc); in fact in an essay from 1996 entitled *Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*, he includes actual hunting traps within his notionally expanded definition of art.[87] I am particularly interested in this idea of cognitive traps and employ it as a theoretical device for uncovering and extending some of the more apparently intractable aspects of the magic assemblage (its status as a uniquely constructed technology for the motivation of astonishment), as well as for the apprehension of works of art. It is worth expanding here upon Gell's concept of 'enchantment', a concept that has enjoyed renewed critical attention in recent years: Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, and Landy & Saler's *The Re-enchantment of the World*, are two examples, both of which adopt anti-Weberian positions, and that seek, in their different ways, to offer a (re)interpretation of modernity as *already* enchanted.[88] Although I shall refer to these works where appropriate, it is important to distinguish Gell's notion of enchantment as a more singular and finely tuned concept, one with specific relevance for the apprehension of artworks. For Gell, enchantment is a form of captivation experienced within the vicinity of (art) objects, and caused by a combination of 'technical expertise and imagination of a high order', which

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[86] Alfred Gell, *The Technology of Enchantment and The Enchantment of Technology*, in Alfred Gell and Eric Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology: Essay and Diagrams*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology; V.67 (New Brunswick, N.J. ; London: Athlone Press, 1999) , pp. 159-186 (p. 174).

[87] Alfred Gell, *Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*, in Ibid, pp. 187-214.

[88] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, N.J. ; Chichester: Princeton University Press, 2001). Landy and Saler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*.

exploit the intrinsic mechanisms of visual cognition; thus enchantment here converges with Gell's ideas about the abduction of agency, and situates itself within a framework of cognitive and social relations.[89] Matthew Rampley has offered a useful exposition of Gell's 'technology of enchantment', one that defends its emphasis upon the technical against the possible charge that it is a Kantian aesthetic theory in disguise. Rampley proposes instead, that Gell's category of enchantment can be seen to invoke Althusser's notion of *interpellation*, which might account for Gell's deep interest in 'art-like situations' in which the subject is enmeshed.[90] Additionally, Gell's theory of enchantment is not intended as a description of a specific kind of experience, more as an account of its social function—in particular the creation of asymmetrical power relations. In any case, Gell hardly rejects the aesthetic response out of hand; rather, he refuses its deployment as a primary constitutive factor for an *anthropological* theory of art.

Agency, in this formulation, is also meticulously articulated, and it is important to note that Gell does not seek a definition of agency that is necessarily philosophically tenable. What matters here is that agency is '*attributable* to those persons (and things[...]) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention' (Italics added).[91] This particular (broadly externalist) conception of agency allows for the possibility that material objects—including artworks—can be agents.[92] It also places magic in an interesting position in so far as the theatrical magician may appear to obscure the boundary between agency (as inferred intended action) and 'natural', or physical, (albeit disrupted or subverted) cause and effect occurrences. That is, in response to an illusion which, to all intents and purposes, appears to contravene the laws of cause and effect (an object disappears, reappears somewhere else, floats unaided, etc), the magician may claim agency himself, or may do so on behalf of the object, or even attribute it to hidden 'forces'. In Gell's theory, an index/artwork is a mediatory (or secondary) agent, but an agent

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[89] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 68.
[90] Rampley, 'Art History and Cultural Difference', p. 540. It is worth pointing out that Gell's account lacks the Althusserian dimension of ideology as a mode of analysis for his enquiry.
[91] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 16.
[92] 'externalist' in so far as it constitutes a conception of mind, not as internal and delimited, but as extended and distributed into the social milieu.

nonetheless, from which the (primary) agency of a social other (often, but not always, the artist) can be inferred.

Before completing this brief summary of Alfred Gell's ideas it is worth mentioning a critical observation that has been raised in relation to them. In his appraisal of *Art and Agency*, Matthew Rampley has drawn attention to the level of abstraction at which the theory of the art nexus operates, suggesting that this might present difficulties for an 'analysis of concrete practices'.[93] As an artist researcher, my own solution to this potential drawback has been to employ other theoretical models commensurate with Gell's own, where appropriate, and where they might reinforce or help sustain a reading of a particular work. This trans-disciplinary approach seemed preferable to what might otherwise have produced a rather forced and straitjacketed analysis of works and practice, through an over-reliance on the particularities of Gell's nexus of relations.[94] In general however, Gell's theories have enabled me to adopt a more flexible framework towards the analysis of magic, than the scientifically-oriented ones referred to earlier.

Rather than assume a polarised position in relation to magic (conjuring) in which it could be used as, on the one hand, a tool for the purposes of debunking or demystifying, or, on the other hand, simply the appropriation of a set of tropes that might be employed to create an 'aura' of the magical or mystical, I have instead attempted, in both writing and practice, to examine how the effects of the magic illusion might position the viewer in relation to a set of beliefs about the world. In this sense the magic act (and/or magic object) operates as a kind of fulcrum between the work and the viewer, signposting a particular orientation towards the work, but simultaneously destabilizing any straightforward response in favour of a more complex set of reflections. In this respect, the works I have produced attempt to enact, rather than simply illustrate, the concepts that they adumbrate.

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[93] Rampley, 'Art History and Cultural Difference', p. 548.
[94] In fact, Gell himself draws attention to this apparent deficiency, suggesting that the anthropology of art should 'focus on the social context of art production, circulation, and reception, rather than the evaluation of particular works of art, which, to my mind, is the function of the critic'. Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 3.

Magic and Art: 'Shared imaginations and Strategies of deception'[95]

Some eight or nine years ago I began to examine some of the strategies, concepts and objects of performance magic (conjuring), and the responses that magic elicited from an audience.[96] I became fascinated by the notion that the spectator of a magic show could enjoy the experience of having been fooled, disbelieving the evidence of his own eyes (as, in most cases, the magic performance is predicated upon a contract of deception between performer and spectator), yet simultaneously suspending that disbelief in the interests of enjoying a magical experience. It seemed to me at the time that certain parallels might be drawn between this kind of experience and the experiencing of artworks: the relationship between magic and art from the point of view of a tacit contract between magician and audience/artist and spectator; also notions of illusion and its relation to ideas of spectatorship and perception (connecting to cognitive theories of attention and distraction), which might be seen as central to concepts of the art object, as well as to magic theory. In 2002 I saw an exhibition at the Site Gallery, Sheffield, which helped consolidate these ideas: entitled *Con Art*, and comprising works by artists such as Jonathan Allen, Keith Tyson and Mark Wallinger, its stated aim was to explore 'the convergence of art and magic in contemporary practice', and 'magic and art's shared imaginations and art's conspicuous affinity with strategies of deception'.[97] In her introduction, director and curator Carol Maund proposed the link between art and magic as 'the willing participation of the viewer in an act which they know to be an illusion'.[98] I also wanted to use some of the strategies of magic in my own practice, as a means of modelling the perceptual processes entailed in viewing works of art, at the same time staging or enacting these processes, rather than simply reflecting upon them. At the Site Gallery a work that seemed to encapsulate this paradigm was *Values for a New Age* by Kyprianou and Hollington.[99] In this piece the viewer observes, via a pair of screen monitors, a wine glass moving around unaided, on the surface of a table; close by, the real glass can be viewed through a spy-hole, but now it is stationary. The only proof

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[95] Helen and Pier Giorgio Varola, *Magic/Object/Action*, in Varola, Maund, and Varola, Con Art. p. 8.
[96] The word 'conjure' has its origins in the Latin *conjurare*, meaning 'to conspire' or 'to swear together'.
[97] Helen and Pier Giorgio Varola, *Magic/Object/Action*, in Varola, Maund, and Varola, Con Art. p. 8.
[98] Ibid. p. 5.
[99] Kyprianou and Hollington, *Values for a New Age*, in CON ART, at Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2002.

of the glass's apparent movement is via its relay to the monitors, but whenever the viewer returns to the spy-hole the wine glass is in a different place. Alluding to the spiritualist trappings of the séance, this work also framed technology as magical, simultaneously questioning its status as mediator of truth.
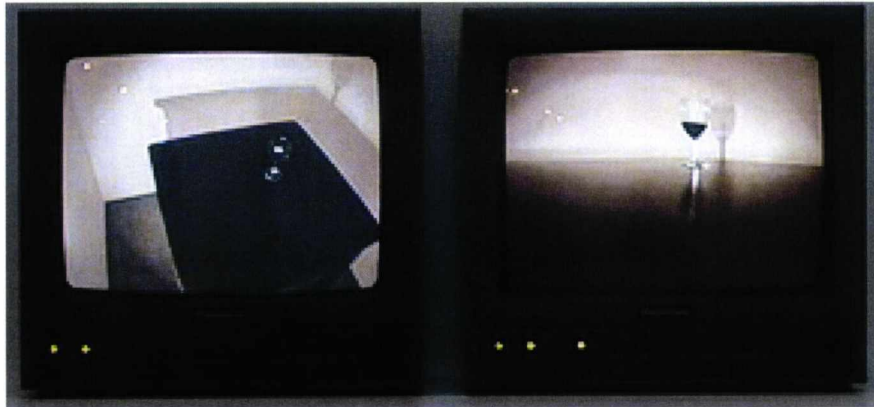
Fig. 5. Kyprianou and Hollington, *Values for a New Age* (2002).

In order to pursue this idea, I want to describe two magic tricks from the world of theatrical magic, and a work of art that, together, seem to encapsulate the spirit of ambivalence central to my research. Both illustrate and embody the creation of a magical experience, and its simultaneous deconstruction through comedy, demonstration or misdirection. Tommy Cooper began his career in the early days of television broadcasting and became a comic-magician when he noticed that audiences preferred his performances when the tricks failed. After his debut in 1948, he soon began starring in his own shows, most notably with Thames Television from 1968 to 1980, and these half-hour programmes—a mixture of zany sketches and apparently ad hoc magic tricks—proved immensely popular to British television audiences. A typical Tommy Cooper routine consists of a series of well-known magic tricks subverted for comic effect: one example, a transportation illusion, will suffice to give a flavour of his act. A small clock is placed in a box, on a table, with a second container positioned nearby, the aim of the trick being magically to cause the clock to travel from one box to the other. After muttering some (completely incoherent) magic words Cooper peers into the second box and, without showing it to his audience, assures us that the clock has indeed been transported. Now—and this of course is the joke—he will magically

send it back again, upon which the first box is opened to reveal the 'reappeared' clock, to the sound of huge applause. This apparently absurd routine retains the essence of a magical experience by playing on the audience's knowledge of how it should, if properly executed, proceed, and by concealing its method of production. In fact by removing the method—the actual business of getting the clock from one place to another—what we are left with is pure effect, albeit in degraded, bathetic form.

The second example is the version by the American duo Penn and Teller of a classic routine, possibly the oldest in magic, the *cups and balls*. The traditional version of this trick (which, though it might be accompanied by a narrative, never varies much in substance) consists of a number of balls being placed under three cups, which are then lifted to reveal that the balls have either disappeared, multiplied, or have mysteriously switched places. Penn and Teller are known for their subversive deconstructions of magic tricks, and in their send-up of the cups and balls they appear to break a cardinal rule, by performing the routine using transparent plastic cups. The ostensible point of this deviation from tradition is to reveal how the trick is done: instead, what happens is that, partly because of the rapidity of their performance, the whole routine is still completely bewildering to the spectator. Magician and writer Eugene Berger describes Penn and Teller's routine in this way:

> I find the transparent cup routine that they do pretty magical, even though the 'outer frame' is about exposing it: all they've exposed is the obvious – except for that small percentage of the population who thought that the balls magically appeared under the cups for some strange reason.[100]

By exposing the method—by making it, literally, transparent—Penn and Teller foreground other elements of the routine: performance skills, dexterity, misdirection, as well as its sheer dazzling complexity.

Both of the above examples encapsulate two of the key elements of magic, method and effect, but it is the aspect of deconstruction that is key for my

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[100] Eugene Berger, *The Mysteries of Magic*, Discovery Channel (2002). Mysteries of Magic, 3 x 1 hour Documentary Series1998 - The Learning Channel, Discovery. Communications USA.

purposes: it is a peculiarly self-conscious and almost postmodern adaptation of the magic trick that does not normally feature in more traditional performances.[101] Its purpose is to simultaneously undo or subvert the illusion even as it is in the process of being constructed, and the result is a more knowing and arch demonstration that seems to acknowledge its own constructedness and falsity. However, even as it apparently reveals these elements, it simultaneously redoubles its illusory nature, ironically covering up its own revelatory tracks.

'An Oak Tree'
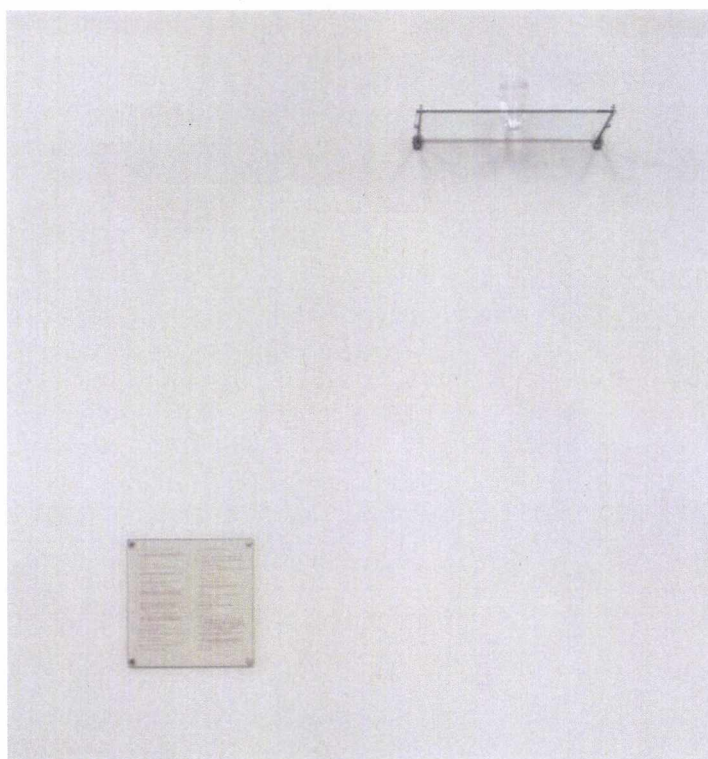
Fig. 6. Michael Craig-Martin, *An Oak Tree* (1974).

In 1974 the British artist Michael Craig-Martin exhibited an artwork called *An Oak Tree* as part of his solo show at the Rowan Gallery, London. Comprising a glass of water set on a glass shelf roughly nine feet from the floor, *An Oak Tree* was accompanied by a leaflet containing an interview in which the artist was interrogated about the origination of his artwork. *An Oak Tree* functions very

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[101] The 'method' is how the trick works; the 'effect' is what the spectator perceives. Lamont and Wiseman, *Magic in Theory: An Introduction to the Theoretical and Psychological Elements of Conjuring*, p. 1.

much like a magic trick, presenting the effect, or outcome, of a transformation; the interview enacts this change, which the viewer is then invited imaginatively to reconstruct. But it is the concept of belief as an ineluctable essence of both magic and art, which underpins this 'performance'. I have employed Craig-Martin's iconic artwork within both my theoretical and practical research as a talisman of a particular *modus operandi* towards the triangular relationship between artist, artwork and viewer, which is at the heart of my project. *An Oak Tree* constitutes a locus within the thesis, a useful point of return, and a means of re-examining this crucial relationship. I believe it is a work whose richness has perhaps not fully been mined—regularly and complacently assigned, as it has been, to the realm of conceptual art—and I intend to use it as a leitmotif around which certain themes can be re-oriented and re-examined. This deployment reflects the ambiguous and equivocal status of the artwork itself, which shifts—a glass of water masquerading as an (fictive) oak tree, or an oak tree camouflaged as a (illusory) glass of water—depending on the viewpoint. The work shares certain characteristics with the two magic routines described above, simultaneously sustaining and undoing its own fictions, and positioning the viewer in a state of uncertainty regarding its ontological status.

How might the three examples described above be accounted for in terms of Alfred Gell's theory of agency, and the abduction of agency? In *Art and Agency* Gell, whilst discussing the motivation of abduction of agency from an artefact, notes that the attribution of manufacture of an object may sometimes reside with some sort of divine agency; or that the object may be believed to have made itself in some mysterious way. Furthermore, 'the origins of art objects can be forgotten or concealed, blocking off the abduction leading from the existence of the material index to the agency of the artist.' This concealment, or occlusion, is of particular relevance for the magic act and for magic objects, for magic can be described as a technology of occlusion, in so far as the sum total of its technical apparatus—the lighting, staging, patter, objects, methods and narratives—all conjoin to effect a kind of 'blocking off' of origins.[102] For this reason it seems more appropriate to speak of magic as a technology of occlusion, rather than a technology of deception, because deception is the result, rather than the means, of

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[102] I use the word occlusion deliberately here, to suggest a blockage, something that requires 'unblocking' (by a spectator).

its technological provision. What is exceptional in the above examples is the way that a partial revealing is provided as a counterpart to this occlusion. In the first, Tommy Cooper's agency as a comic 'buffoon' is seen as responsible for the somewhat ludicrous outcome of the trick, the objects mediating this agency in mute fashion. However, another, highly contrasting reading seems equally plausible: that the trick is happening *to* the hapless magician, who is not really in control but who is just as bemused as we (the audience) are by the unfolding events. In this alternative reading, the objects (clock, boxes, table) themselves acquire agency in acting upon the performer, and in appearing to not quite do what he wishes them to do. This may seem initially to be a perversion of Gell's formula, in that it does not feature an artwork (at least in any conventional sense of the term): however, as we have already seen, Gell himself accepts no *a priori* conditions for the status of artwork, and, in some of his examples, even specifically allows for living objects—as part of performative rituals—to function as indexes.

The second example also includes a partial revelation of occluded agency: the plastic cups that Penn and Teller use are (optically) transparent, thus rendering the trick itself conceptually transparent. This time the two performers are completely in control and render the trick impenetrable through the speed of their performance, and with a certain amount of stage misdirection. This mesmerizing act becomes, in Gell's terms, a cognitive trap because here, at last, we (the members of the audience) are given an opportunity to undo (or unblock) the magic's technological means. And yet we are completely unable to do so, not because we cannot 'see' what is happening, but because of the rhythmic intensity of the performance, which, somewhat like a dance, holds us spellbound. In fact it could be argued that, in Gell's terms, all that is actually revealed is the complex hierarchical nature of the cups and balls routine, its composition of parts into a whole, which Gell analyses in relation to apotropaic patterns: 'the deconstruction of this complex of hierarchical relationships endows the decorated object with a certain type of agency, which is the reciprocal of the agency exercised by the recipient in (attempting) to perceive it.'[103]

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[103] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 83.

These occlusions and their partial revelation return us once again to the subject of the spectator and to what might be thought of as a more instrumental reading of the magic act. The position of the spectator in relation to the performing magician might suggest an asymmetrical distribution of power, in so far as the magician is in possession of knowledge of how the trick works, whereas the spectator is not. However, what both Penn and Teller, and Tommy Cooper are acknowledging is that the secret and secrecy of a magic trick are not necessarily its key attributes, and in many cases revelation is never far behind. Instead, the entertaining explication of a magic trick nuances the relationship between magician and observer—a metaphorical knowing wink, or hint of complicity that is the real key to these transactions. Barbara Stafford, in an essay prefiguring the central thesis of her book *Artful Science*, describes a spectator who could learn from deception by being exposed (or partly exposed) to the mechanisms of illusion. She cites in particular Henri Decremps's La Magie Blanche devoilée (1788) for its nomination of magic as a 'force for visual education':

> Momentary concealment and subsequent revelation were not the same as a permanent lie. This fluid and interactive performance medium demonstrated that legerdemain, camouflage, distraction, misdirection, and above all the perspective one had permeated the perception of life and need not be evil. (...) Invited to conceptualize or model generally practiced social strategies of deception, they, too, might eventually learn to avoid self-deception.[104]

Returning finally to Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree*, we are presented with yet another condition of agency, one that is also predicated upon a kind of cognitive 'trap'; here the objects that mediate (the artist's) agency are the glass of water, the discursive argument, and the oak tree. It might initially seem absurd to include the oak tree within this equation, but in fact whether one considers it to be a mental construct, a discursive symbol, or a 'real' object, there is no doubt that it is crucial to the meaning of the work. In fact none of these objects really takes primacy: the work is not mere philosophical speculation (for which the text alone would suffice), nor is it simply the offering up of an

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[104] Barbara Maria Stafford, *Conjuring: How the Virtuoso Romantic learned from the Enlightened Charlatan*, Art Journal, 52, 2 (1993), pp. 22-30 (p. 28)

everyday object presented 'as art'. The essence of the work is a moment of transformation, which the viewer attempts mentally to reconstruct: *An Oak Tree* is an apposite demonstration of the protean nature of Gell's concept of the abduction of agency.

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to sketch out a historical and cultural background of theatrical magic, particularly within the modern period, together with some of the possible theoretical perspectives from which the subject might be approached. I have also begun to tease out some of the inherent magical themes within my work, as well as what I perceive to be broader thematic links between art and magic. Finally I have outlined the theoretical position from which the following chapters will orient themselves, particularly in relation to Gell's notions of the art object, agency, and enchantment.

Originating from an engagement with these theoretical issues, and in tandem with conceptual and material elements of my practice, four identifiable key themes emerge: the performer, the moving image, the object, and the cognitive 'trap'. My practice during the past six years or so has incorporated these modes of working, often in combination. Thus the object/installation works have contained an implicit performative component, in the way either that they themselves 'perform', or that they motivate an interactive response from the viewer. Conversely, performances have operated around a specific object (as in *Zeno's Oak Tree*, where the material object is a recreation of Craig-Martin's artwork discussed above). Similarly, video works have featured magical objects, or video has been incorporated into performance; text pieces have been performed, or have functioned as material objects. In other words, the four key themes do not represent dividing lines in my practice, rather they act as pivotal conceptual and material nodes upon which the work is hinged, and which the theoretical material can be deployed productively to illuminate.

The following chapters, though each having a discrete and identifiable theme, are thus also interlinked; accordingly, certain ideas, works, or subjects will be re-visited and re-interpreted under the rubric of each chapter heading. As

much of the work seems to hinge upon the performative in some form or other, I begin by looking at the liminal aspects of performance, and at the concept of the artist/magician as a kind of 'border prospector'. In chapter three I examine the 'magic' of the moving image in terms of its status as (in Gell's terms) a technology of enchantment, but also as an assemblage of effects and practices originating in the magic shows of the 19th century. Chapter four is concerned with an interpretation of Gell's concept of the cognitive trap, in so far as it relates to my text-based works and, more generally, to an idea of extended cognition; this is an attempt to make a more salient link between Gell's theory and certain recent developments in neuroscience. Finally, chapter five examines the status of the art object in relation to its capacity to motivate the abduction of agency, drawing upon Gell's notion of object agency, but also upon an attention to things whereby meaning is seen as embedded within them, rather than as something separate from them that requires to be decoded.

Do not trust those who analyze magic. They are usually magicians in search of revenge.
Bruno Latour[105]

Chapter Two

The Shuffling Gait of a Fit Man: Performance as wilful ambiguity and deception[106]

Introduction

In *The Prestige*, his novel about two feuding 19th century stage illusionists, author Christopher Priest reveals one of the secrets of the Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo.[107] Foo, Priest writes, performed an illusion in which he produced a large bowl of water out from under an empty cloth; logically, the only place that the magician could conceal the bowl was beneath his cape, and yet at the same time this was clearly impossible for 'it was obvious to everyone that Ching Ling Foo was physically frail, shuffling painfully through his routine'.[108] In fact Foo had adopted the shuffling walk in order to conceal the enigma—that the bowl was indeed concealed beneath his cape, and that the magician himself was a man of great physical strength and fitness. He was therefore condemned always to walk in this fashion, performing or otherwise, solely in order to maintain the deception necessary to execute the trick. In the novel Priest's chief protagonist uses this story as a kind of clue to his own authorial deception, which, even in the writing of his memoir, 'controls what I may write and what I may not.'[109]

In this chapter I examine the concept of the performer as a kind of border prospector, and I suggest that the sort of counter-intuitive inversion of reality represented by Ching Ling Foo's 'shuffling gait' underpins the perverse logics of both magic and art, and is emblematic of the ways in which they often conceal

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[105] Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 212
[106] Christopher Priest, *The Prestige*, St. Martin's Press, 1996). ('The shuffling walk of a fit man.' p. 36.)
[107] Ibid, p. 36.
[108] Ibid, p. 36
[109] Ibid, p. 36.

and reveal meaning. I will employ ideas about play, in particular Alfred Gell's suggestion that play orients the agent towards a 'magic standard', and Victor Turner's conception of the 'liminoid'—a ludic zone or in-between state, which permeates not just art, but everyday life.

Ludicrous instruction: entertaining art and magic.

In *From Ritual to Theatre*, the anthropologist Victor Turner explores the role of play in modern and pre-modern societies.[110] In the book's final chapter (*Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting*) he argues that acting is both 'work and play, solemn and ludic, pretence and earnest', that it is, in short, inherently ambiguous.[111] Turner's thesis draws a distinction between ritual and theatre, in that ritual does not differentiate between audience and performers, whereas (quoting Schechner) theatre 'comes into existence when a *separation* occurs between audience and performers'.[112] However, the performative is a position that enters into everyday life and, according to Turner, produces the 'persona' of pre-industrial societies (ritualistic but nevertheless a part of everyday life) and the 'individual' of modern societies—one who plays and is entertained.[113] In fact entertainment is a key word here: deriving from the French *entretenir*, to 'hold between', it can be interpreted as 'the making of liminality, the betwixt and between state'.[114] This ambiguous state offers the spectator an 'as-if' position from which to respond, simultaneously suspending disbelief and holding on to reality.

Turner's conception of an 'as-if' position for the spectator, provides a useful perspective from which to examine the performance-related component of my practice. *Zeno's Oak Tree (Proposition for a Miracle)* is a work that incorporates installation, video, text and performance, and which takes as its starting point an artwork from 1974 called *An Oak Tree*, by the British artist

[110] Victor Witter Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York: performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).
[111] Ibid, p. 102.
[112] Richard Schechner, *From Ritual to Theatre and back*, in Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory*, 1970-1976. 1st ed. edn (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977).p. 79, cited by Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 112.
[113] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 115.
[114] Ibid, p.121.

Michael Craig-Martin.[115]   As I outlined in the previous chapter *An Oak Tree* comprises a tumbler of water set on a glass shelf and is accompanied by a framed pamphlet containing an interview in which the artist is questioned about the origination of his artwork.   In this exchange, Craig-Martin (who is both interviewer and interviewee) engages in a quasi-philosophical dialogue that touches on, among other things, the intention of the artist, the act of transformation that takes place in the creation of an artwork, and, centrally, the importance of belief: 'both the power of art to construct reality and the question of how this belief comes into being.'[116]   At the same time the two-sidedness of the auto-interview exposes a degree of doubt on the part of the artist: he is both believer and sceptic, whose own ability to effect change is barely comprehended.

> Q: You don't know how you do it?
>
> A: It contradicts what I feel I know about cause and effect.[117]

In the original work Craig-Martin examined the notion of belief as an ineluctable essence of an artwork, articulating it as a kind of hidden component, one that is brought to the work, unwittingly, by the spectator.

> (An Oak Tree) is really [...] an exercise in trying to think about what is the absolute essence of a work of art. So I came to this idea that it had really to do [...] with belief, both the belief on the part of the artist in the genuineness of the activity that they were engaged in, but also [...] the suspension of disbelief which is called upon with a viewer, and everybody understands that in the theatre but of course people have to do that in an art gallery too, so what I tried to do with the Oak Tree was to play on the relationship between the artist, the object and the viewer, and all three of them are engaged then. [...] [T]he text is in [...] the form of an auto interview and [...] there's the half of me that's the artist and there's the other half that's the audience, and there's the part of me that believes it and there's a part of me that's sceptical, and so all of these things are played out [...], and so the work has been surprisingly successful and long lasting, [...]

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[115] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Zeno's Oak Tree (Proposition for a Miracle)*, performed at Grey Area, Brighton, 2008, (see appendix).

[116] Lynne Cooke, *'The Prevarication of Meaning'*, Michael Craig-Martin, *Michael Craig-Martin: A Retrospective: 1968-1989* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1989). pp. 11-36.

[117] Ibid

because people recognise in it something about what it is that happens in all works of art. [118]

My re-creation, *Zeno's Oak Tree,* is in one respect a meditation upon and homage to an iconic artwork by means of a comic-absurd deconstruction; I appraise Craig-Martin's artwork, adapting its title and materials, and adopting its processes and methodology. The presence of a text (which is performed to, rather than read by, the audience), together with its discursive complexion, echoes the original work's accompanying (written) text, which was shown as part of the work itself. This dialogue is performed by means of both parts (interrogator and interrogatee) being played by myself, each under a respective printed sign, 'Q' and 'A', on each side of the stage. The dialogue proceeds—much in the manner of its model—as a philosophical exchange, and unfolds beneath a replica of the original work. However, as it progresses, further complicating reflections upon the work's relationship with its originary source are introduced, resulting in a growing uncertainty and instability.

Q. Could you explain what you mean?

A. Of course. *An Oak Tree* was concerned with an epistemological distinction between appearance and substance: Craig-Martin claimed to have transformed his glass of water into an oak tree – hence the title. I make no such claim.

Q. So your piece is not called *An Oak Tree*?

A. Certainly not – that would be impertinent: my piece is called *Proposition for a Miracle.*

Q. I'm afraid you're losing me: where precisely is the miracle?

A. The Miracle is yet to take place: in *An Oak Tree* the miracle was the transformation from glass of water into an oak tree, without – and I quote – 'changing the accidents – colour, weight, feel, size – of the glass of water in any way'. In my work no such transformation has taken place; nor is there any guarantee that it will.

Here, the dialogue itself becomes a kind of agent of deconstruction and ambiguity, incorporating metaphysical speculation and everyday niceties within

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[118] Michael Craig-Martin, in conversation with John Tusa, BBC Radio 3, 2003.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/craig_transcript.shtml.

its scope. In Bryan Appleyard's introductory essay to an exhibition of Craig-Martin's works at Waddington Galleries in 1992, he draws attention to the tenor of the interview accompanying *An Oak Tree*:

> The interview which accompanied this glass of water on a glass shelf announced his conviction that this was unquestionably an oak tree and that the transformation he had executed was easy—'no effort at all. But it took me years of work before I realized I could do it.' The tone is that of Samuel Beckett in conversation with Georges Duthuit or even that of Oscar Wilde. Whatever else one says about Craig-Martin, it is worth remembering how much he shares with that great tradition of perverse, dandyish Irishmen.[119]

Appleyard might also have included another 'perverse and dandyish Irishman', the writer Flann O'Brien, whose absurdist novel *The Third Policeman* contains similar, apparently philosophically pointless meditations. In their conversation about a tiny manufactured spear, the character MacCruiskeen describes its point to the protagonist of the novel:

> 'And what is this inch that is left' I asked. 'What in heaven's name would you call that?' 'That is the real point,' said MacCruiskeen, '[...] It is so thin that maybe it does not exist at all and you could spend half an hour thinking about it and you could put no thought around it in the end. The beginning part of the inch is thicker than the last part and is nearly there for a fact but I don't think it is if it is my private opinion that you are anxious to enlist.'[120]

O'Brien goes further than Craig-Martin in his exposition of logico/absurdist discourse—in particular his punning on words like 'point' and 'end'—but the 'tone' of which Appleyard speaks is unmistakably shared by Craig-Martin's interlocutors as they discuss the possibility or otherwise of transformation from glass of water to oak tree:

> Q. Haven't you simply called this glass of water an oak tree?
>
> A. Absolutely not. It is not a glass of water anymore. I have changed its actual

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[119] Bryan Appleyard, catalogue essay for *Michael Craig-Martin, Michael Craig-Martin: Paintings* (London: Waddington Galleries, 1992). p. 3.
[120] Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Folio Society, 2006), p. 71.

substance. It would no longer be accurate to call it a glass of water. One could call it anything one wished but that would not alter the fact that it is an oak tree.[121]

During my performance of *Zeno's Oak Tree* I discuss the flaws, as I see them, in Craig-Martin's dialectic, whilst taking seriously its central proposition of material transformation. The climax of this performance occurs with the showing of a video, in which the pouring of water from a glass jug into a tumbler (sited on a glass shelf) has been filmed and subsequently subjected to a gradual slowing-down, using high definition digital technology. The significance of this action stems from a sense of doubt, on the part of the performer, that the moment of transformation has been thoroughly considered by the originator of *An Oak Tree* (Craig-Martin): this uncertainty hinges upon the use, in the original text, of the word 'put' to describe the depositing of the water into the glass. By contrast, the performer (myself) envisages the pouring of the water from one vessel to the other as necessarily constituting a process, thereby throwing into question the instantaneity of the transformation. By first recording this process (I argue) and then gradually slowing it down, this precise instant might be illuminated and pinpointed, through the technological agency of film. I intended to make both the text and its performance represent a convergence of 'modes' of dialogue and delivery, from the didactic (the image of a lecturer—or, more prosaically, a weather forecaster) and discursive, through the comic, to the absurd.[122] In *The Invention of Culture*, Roy Wagner discusses the necessarily playful dimension of what he calls 'interpretive culture': he cites the example of the weather forecaster who not only has to predict the weather but who also precipitates it, thus precipitating his audience.[123] But because his predictions will at some point fail (weather being, by definition, unpredictable) he also has to 'be a funny man, a kind of weather-wit' in order not to be taken too seriously by his audience.[124] Thus, in *Zeno's Oak Tree*, I spell out the argument in stepwise fashion, thereby accentuating its absurdity. At the same time of course, I am mimicking the rhetorical strategy of the original text, in which Michael Craig-Martin's imaginary

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[121] Richard Cork, Michael Craig-Martin, and Enrique Juncosa, *Michael Craig-Martin*, (London: Thames & Hudson, in association with the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2006). p. 15.

[122] The discursive nature of the text and its attempt at resolution also alludes to the conversations between Sherlock Holmes and his confidante Dr. Watson, in their attempts to solve crime through deduction from evidence-based reasoning.

[123] Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*. Rev. & Exp. Ed. edn (Chicago: Chicago U P, 1981), p. 69.

[124] Ibid. p. 69.

and sceptical interlocutor poses questions in a similar manner, as a means of adumbrating his intentions.

> Q. There's one [flaw] in particular that bothers me: in the accompanying text to *An Oak Tree*, the artist's interlocutor asks when precisely did the glass of water became an oak tree: the artist replies, 'when I put the water in the glass.' My issue here is with the use of the word *put*—one cannot really *put* water into a glass, one would have to pour it. It seems to me therefore that the artist has glossed over a crucial dimension of the transformation—that of time. You see, if the artist could effect this transformation immediately (and he assures us that there is no *process* involved) then surely it would take place as soon as the water makes contact with the glass, in which case, why did he elect to fill the glass almost to the top?

> A. I wanted to film the water being poured into the glass, and then to slow it down to discover whether the exact moment of transformation could be determined, and if so, where precisely it takes place.

> Q. And has it worked?

> A. Not yet. You see I have slowed the film down exponentially (if that's not a contradiction in terms), so it's taking longer and longer for the glass to fill up – it may never do so.[125]

The text here therefore embodies a semi-serious deconstruction of Craig-Martin's original artwork in an attempt to understand an aspect of its make up which, originally, was not intended to be taken entirely seriously. Because of the ambiguous nature of this text, the audience is uncertain how to respond: the text's central thesis is surely not to be taken in earnest, particularly as it seems to be peppered with jokes—wordplay, banter, and deliberate mistakes—and yet the central image of the glass slowly being filled with water from the jug, induces a genuine sense of tension that somehow articulates this central message. This video, whose stated (and notionally absurd) claim is to determine the exact moment of transformation, thereby becomes magically imbued with the potential of actual revelation.

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[125] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Zeno's Oak Tree* (see appendix).

However, there is more than the discursive and absurdist aspects of the piece that need to be considered here: importantly, although *Zeno's Oak Tree* is constructed around a text, it is a text that is spoken and performed, and it is the performative element of the piece that, I believe, gives it meaning. In Alfred Gell's 1988 essay *Technology and Magic*, he describes magic as an 'adjunct to technical procedures [that] serves symbolic ends, that is to say, cognitive ones'.[126] He continues:

> Magic consists of a symbolic commentary on technical strategies in production, reproduction, and psychological manipulation. I suggest that magic derives from play. When children play they provide a continuous stream of commentary on their own behaviour. Not only does the basic format of children's play-commentary [...] irresistibly recall the format of spells, but the relation between reality and commentary in play and in magic-making remain essentially akin.[127]

This understanding of magic as deriving from playful commentary, and in particular that of children, needs some elaboration. Perhaps by virtue of the fact that they have aggregated fewer experiences that contradict a sense of magical potential, children are able to hold apparently contradictory states in tandem with one another. Richard Schechner, defines performance itself as 'ritualized behaviour conditioned/permeated by play', and emphasizes the capacity for play to oscillate between different states: 'Playing creates its own multiple realities with porous boundaries. Playing is full of creative world-making as well as lying, illusion, and defeat.'[128] Children's play can be particularly labile, 'laughing one minute, crying the next, angry the next'.[129] Gell's point about magic deriving from a kind of playful running commentary, and serving cognitive ends, is a theme that he later develops in *Art and Agency*. His concept of 'abduction' of agency draws upon the cognitive principle that a 'powerful interest in and capacity for the abduction of agency is built into the human mind'.[130] In *Zeno's Oak Tree*, the element of psychological and rhetorical manipulation (of an audience), and the 'magic' commentary are effectively one and the same. In other

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[126] Gell, 'Technology and Magic', p. 7.
[127] Ibid, p. 8.
[128] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 89 & 92.
[129] Ibid, p.96.
[130] Osborne and Tanner, *Art's Agency and Art History*, pp. 11-12.

words, the cognitive captivation that is the aim of the performance is embedded within and shades into the commentary (the text) that is its formal content. At certain points the commentary itself is recursively commented upon, as when the questioner incorrectly identifies a thematic link with 'Heidegger's [sic] cat', or when attention is drawn to the contrived nature of two actors being played by the same performer:

> Q. Isn't this all a bit didactic though?

> A. Well if it is then it must be auto-didactic, because I doubt if anyone is really falling for this rhetorical device of an interrogative dialogue in which we are currently engaged – particularly here in Grey Area: I mean it might look convincing on the printed page, but in here everyone can see that there is only one person involved.

> Q. Although you could of course be acting the part of two different people – the interrogator and his interrogatee.[131]

Here, the dialogue turns reflexively upon itself, becoming its own running commentary, and exposing a liminal area of uncertainty between performance and reality. The audience therefore become aware of, not just the performance, but of the playing out of this performance in a present within which they too exist. Victor Turner uses the term *liminoid* to describe the spaces for ludic play that are opened up in post-industrial societies.[132] Liminoid connotes a more knowing form of play whose emphasis is on 'individuality and open-ended processes, they [liminoid phenomena] are seen to occur within leisure settings apart from work, are experimental and exploratory, plural and fragmentary, developing along the margins of society, forming social critique and providing the potential for the subversion of the status quo.'[133] The type of art generally referred to as performance art has, since the 1960s, situated itself within this liminoid zone by rejecting both the narrative conventions of theatre and its 'attempted evocation of

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[131] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Zeno's Oak Tree* (see appendix).
[132] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, pp. 32-33.
[133] Graham St. John, *Alternative Cultural Heterotopia: ConFest as Australia's Marginal Centre* (Unpublished Doctoral thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, 2000), p. 38.

another, "absent" reality through mimesis'.[134] Richard Schechner has commented on the ways in which performance and performance theory have been transformed in the postmodern era: 'Recognising, analysing, and theorising the convergence and collapse of clearly demarcated realities, hierarchies, and categories is at the heart of postmodernism.'[135] Describing the work of avant-garde theatre pioneer Richard Foreman, Marvin Carlson describes how he sought to 'call attention to the audience's moment-by-moment existence in the theatre, to seeing what is there, to seeing themselves seeing, and thus aiming to "ground us in what-it-is-to be-living"'.[136] Audiences are 'thereby made acutely aware of their process of reception. The works are about the "making of art"'.[137] We are returned once more to Crary's model of a modernized spectator, able to make nuanced distinctions in response to particular types of performance. In *Dramaturgy of the Spectator* Marco de Marinis considers a typology of performance ranging from 'open' to 'closed', according to which a certain type of spectator might be elicited or anticipated. Open performances (to which category most performance art could be said to belong) are able to address themselves to a recipient who is 'neither too precise, nor too clearly defined in terms of their encyclopaedic, intertextual, or ideological competence.'[138]

The magician as border prospector

In *Performing Dark Arts* Michael Mangan puts forward the case for the magician as someone who is 'constantly engaged in boundary work: [...] he brings us up against the limits of a culture's beliefs and knowledge of its habitual ways of understanding the world'.[139] For Mangan then, the magician is a border prospector *par excellence*, trading on contemporary beliefs or superstitions in order to test or subvert them. In a chapter entitled *On the Boundaries of the*

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[134] Marvin A. Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. edn (New York; London: Routledge, 2004). p. 141.
[135] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p.131.
[136] Carlson, *Performance*, p. 127.
[137] Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis, *Drama/Theatre/Performance*, The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 145.
[138] De Marinis, Marco (trans Dwyer, Paul), Dramaturgy of the Spectator, The Drama Review: TDR, 31, 2 (1987), pp. 100-114 (p. 103)
[139] Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts*, p. 76.

Human, he explores magic's questioning of enlightenment belief in the primacy of man's status as 'rational animal', separate from and superior to the beasts. Many late 18th and early 19th century magicians gleefully used this as an opportunity to undermine the authority of the distinction itself by exhibiting a variety of intelligent animals, one such being William Pinchbeck's 'Pig of Knowledge', which could spell out words by indicating, or moving, cards arranged on the floor. Pinchbeck later wrote an exposé of his own method for training the animal, in the form of a series of correspondences between himself and a fictional inquisitor. These dialogues uncannily recall the interchange at the heart of *An Oak Tree*:

> Wherever I stop on my tour I am sure to hear of the fame of your celebrated Pig, and the many different opinions prevailing relative to the mode of his tuition, makes him a subject of general speculation. Some contend it is witchcraft; and others, like the ancient Pythagoreans, believing in the transmigration of souls conclude that the spirit of the grunting philosopher might once have animated a man.[140]

Mangan examines a different kind of boundary work in a chapter entitled *Acting and not-acting*. He discusses the role of the French 19th century magician and clockmaker, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, who famously transformed the status of the stage magician when he declared: 'A conjuror [...] is an actor playing the part of a magician.'[141] It was Robert-Houdin who was largely responsible for transforming the persona of the magician, moving away from the traditional wizard-like associations of street performers and towards the more urbane image of the high-class gentleman. Mangan extrapolates the position of Robert-Houdin towards a more complex definition of acting; he quotes from the performance theorist Marvin Carlson who argued that, while performing, the performer 'is not herself (because of the operations of illusion), but she is also not not herself (because of the operations of reality). Performer and audience alike operate in a world of double consciousness'.[142] A modern popular performer who best exemplified the colonisation of this hybrid form was the comic/magician Tommy

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[140] Ibid, p. 82.

[141] Ibid, p. 97.

[142] Carlson, *Performance*, p. 52, cited by Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts*, p. 97.

Cooper; uniquely, Tommy Cooper was *both* comic and magician, the two practices eliding uneasily and often anarchically with one another. In his 2004 essay *Last Laughs*, Adrian Heathfield describes the enduring appeal and intrinsic strangeness of Cooper's act:

> His work displayed an unusual formal hybridity, and in the space of this interplay and fusion he found a brand of liminal performance which shares a surprisingly large range of aesthetic tactics with 1980s and 1990s British and American experimental theatre and live art. The correlation is more than formal. His most enduring themes were the frayed edge between appearance and disappearance, the visible and the invisible, illusion and reality, the sensory life of objects and subject-object relations, the play of indeterminacy in meaning, and most significantly the collapse of identity. [143]

For Heathfield, Cooper's act was characterized by a fascination with 'the comic possibilities of temporal disjunction and disorder'.[144] His performances were peppered with disruptions: from unseen off-stage 'producers', by his own meta-commentaries on the success or otherwise of his act, by his mistimed laughter, and by the frequently half-abandoned tricks. He played within 'that complex space between the intended and the unintended mistake'.[145]

This hybrid notion of the actor/performer can be expanded from art and magic, to the role of the lecturer/pedagogue, who simultaneously delivers and withholds information. For the lecturer, the role is, at least in part, a performative one, and is framed as much by what is left out as by what is included. In his introduction to *The Art of Anthropology: essays and diagrams*, Alfred Gell discusses the role of the seminar in University culture, and his attempts to deliver papers that were inherently performative, rather than written: 'scripts to be performed' in which 'the skilled dialecticion [...] exploits the opportunity afforded by hostile questioning to produce additional extemporized displays of wit, turning the questions back on the questioners and making fun of their positions.'[146] So the seminar is inherently social, 'a game, an exchange' full of wit, humour and the 'cut and thrust of debate'; it is in itself a form of witty

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[143] Adrian Heathfield, 'Last Laughs', Performance Research journal, vol. 9 no. 1. (2004), 60-66 (p. 62).
[144] Ibid, p. 62.
[145] Ibid, p. 62.
[146] Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p. 2.

play.[147]   In fact, in an earlier draft introduction to the volume, Gell explicitly declares his attraction to the 'anthropological muse' of comedy, citing Malinowski's 'comic' style as a foil to the faux-seriousness of anthropology as an academic discipline; comedy and humour have the ability to induce an empathetic response on the part of the listener or reader. [148]   Gell asserts, rather provocatively, that the prose style of Bronislaw Malinowski—the 'father' of modern anthropology—is inflected with a comic tone, that we are being asked, as readers, to be amused by his anthropological subjects (the Trobrianders): 'Malinowski's themes are the social comedy of "exchange" and the intellectual comedy of "magic", contained within the broader comic frame of the expatriate polyglot Pole versus the rooted, self-assured, Trobrianders.'[149]

The lecture format is one that has been productively employed by contemporary artists, as a means of re-situating and re-activating the medium of performance. Mark Leckey's Turner prize-winning work, *Cinema-in-the-Round*, consists of video documentation of a quasi-lecture delivered at various institutions (including Tate Britain) between 2006 and 2008, and incorporating speech and movie clips, as well as oblique references to Disney characters and to the work of other artists, including Marcel Duchamp and Philip Guston.[150]   The Disney reference is particularly telling, with Leckey citing the multiplane camera—a device for producing three-dimensional effects from two-dimensional images—as (*pace* Gell) representing a 'technology of enchantment'.[151]   However, it is Leckey's delivery of these 'lectures' that is most disconcerting: he employs a speech style that can only be described as informal oratory, forgoing the more authoritative enunciation of a 'conventional' speaker (the received pronunciation common to most 'voice-overs') in favour of his own, distinctive South Wirral accent. The work leaves the viewer speculating as to the status of the artist's performance: Leckey is a lecturer himself, but his delivery seems almost perversely pedestrian and self-conscious, as if highlighting the inherent fragility of his chosen medium.

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[147] Ibid, pp 1-2.

[148] In similar vein Randall Styers describes the failure of scholarly efforts to 'contain and circumscribe magic'—a failure, in other words, to take into account the enchanting nature of social analytical construction. Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*, Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.216.

[149] Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, xi-xiii n2

[150] Mark Leckey, *Cinema in the Round* (2008), Tate Britain.

[151] Ibid.

The artist Martin Creed has also explored what Carlson calls this 'double consciousness' between performer and audience, but within the conventional setting of the interview.[152] In a discussion with Pablo Helguera, Creed consciously traverses a liminal zone by ostensibly responding to questions by the interviewer and members of the MoMA audience, whilst subtly and almost imperceptibly transforming the event into a kind of performance.[153] This is a reflexive act however, in which the performer is acting out his awareness of his own performativity. Creed's faltering, semi-improvisatory and deadpan delivery—the stumbling utterances of an articulate man—gradually causes the audience to lose their sense of orientation in relation to the event, resulting in some bewildered responses. The outcome is disorientating and occasionally very funny (the segment in which they—Creed and Helguera—debate whether they should stand or sit for the interview verges on (aural) slapstick). Later, when opened to audience questions, one particularly exasperated contributor accuses Creed of a lack of sophistication in his 'literal' thought-processes, asking: 'was there ever a point that you had to de-intellectualize yourself to be like this?' to which Creed replies, 'all you're hearing are my words, not my thoughts.' Creed creates a liminal (or liminoid) space within the conventional framework of the interview, one that projects his own persona (as indecisive, semi-articulate artist) but displays an awareness of that persona, possibly exaggerating it at the same time. In a more recent interview for *Art Monthly*, Creed himself reflected on this process:

> MC: Over the years, as I was doing more and more of these [slide] talks, I realized that the slides were a kind of escape route for me, a way of actually avoiding talking about something, away from a dialogue. So I started doing talks without slides and I decided that the best way of talking about making work was to try and make a work in front of people, using words.

> DT: Like a piece of performance?

[152] Carlson, *Performance*, p. 5

[153] Conversations with Contemporary Artists: Martin Creed. From *Think Modern: Conversations with Contemporary Artists*, recorded at MoMA, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. March 21, 2008. http://www.moma.org/visit_moma/audio/2008/pub_prog/downloadAAPAA_2008.html

MC: Aye, but I was just talking about my work without slides – I was trying to make a work using words. I would improvise, there would be questions and often it would just end up as a bit of a conversation, but it was to try to take away some of the conventions in order to make it more of a direct experience.[154]

Creed's 'act' subverts the conventions of the artist-interview: instead of making analysis the object of the exchange—as a means of arriving at a putatively objective understanding of his artwork—he foregrounds the dialogue itself, thus exposing (through enaction) its innate mechanistic tenuousness. Creed's border prospecting is therefore, between interview and performance, between the passive and the active, and between acting and 'not-acting'.

Michael Mangan also considers the conventions of the interview as platform for performance. He describes the position of Uri Geller who achieved notoriety in the 1970s as a self-styled psychic; Geller was able to use television—a still (relatively) new medium—and the chat show format (a still-accepted form of 'reality' entertainment), as a stage for his displays of 'supernatural' power. The notion that interviews with celebrities simultaneously reinforce and deny the 'falseness of celebrity' through a form of 'contrived intimacy', is now a commonplace in the era of *Big Brother* and other similar reality shows.[155] At the time of Geller's appearances however the lines (between honesty and dissemblance) were less clearly drawn, and he was able to use the format as a re-framing device, 'in effect, an extremely effective form of misdirection in itself.' As Mangan explains: 'Geller was implicitly saying – "This is not showbiz; this is me. I'm really doing this. Look, come closer, bring the camera in as close as you like. This is reality."'[156] Both Geller's and Creed's 'performances' elicit an uneasy and ambivalent response from the viewer/listener, whereby the borders of the interview frame are suddenly made fluid and permeable.

In similar spirit, another of my own performances, *Hat*, begins with a formal introduction during which the audience are informed about the content of the piece.[157] This exposition trails off as I apparently become increasingly distracted by a top hat sitting on a nearby table. Thus, very quickly, the dividing

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[154] David Trigg, 'Time and Motion', Martin Creed interviewed in Art Monthly (November 2008), pp. 1-4, (p. 4).
[155] Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts*, p. 175.
[156] Ibid, p. 175.
[157] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Hat*, performed at Grey Area, Brighton, 2008, (see appendix).

line between formal introduction and actual performance is blurred, the one morphing imperceptibly into the other. *Hat* is a free association of tropes and gestures associated with magic performance, and employed without recourse to narrative, resolution or, for the most part, the pay-off of a conventional magical effect. The intention here is to stall what might be considered orthodox expectations—the bracketing of the act and its resolution in the form of some sort of climax—in favour of an emphasis on 'presence'.

Magic stories: transformations and transitions

The articulation of a liminal zone implies some kind of transition, between one state and another, or between different interpretations of a performance, for which an object can become a mediating agent—as was the case with the glass of water in *Zeno's Oak Tree*. *Prestidigitales* is a short collection of twelve pithy anecdotal tales that I produced specifically for performance; the central premise for each is that an object should take on magical significance in the mind of the listener.[158] Read out to an audience, the provenance and authenticity of these stories is uncertain, particularly as some of them are clearly a pretext for a comic punchline. Furthermore, actual objects—matchbox, magnifying glass, playing card—feature as part of the narrative. The first of these aphoristic tales features the early 20th century magician Max Malini and his legendary ability to predict any card at random, in any situation. The punchline to the story is to give away its secret: that Malini's identification of a playing card found on the street, was due to his having placed it there the previous evening. The effectiveness of this yarn stems in part from its uncertainty, in that it is exactly the sort of anecdote one might expect to hear about a magician in a secular age, and one that has possibly been subject to embellishments or apocrypha. It falls therefore within the realm of the story related at the beginning of this chapter, about Ching Ling Foo and his 'shuffling gait.' One of the purposes of these stories seems to be a disenchanting one: it endows its protagonists not with unnatural powers but with the will and cunning to deceive. These magicians are con-men, or at the very least, they prey

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[158] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Zeno's Oak Tree,* (see appendix).

upon the gullibility of their victims. However, the *performance* of the stories has an enchanting purpose, as it opens up a liminoid space, incorporating real magic effects within the presentation. The stories I include also represent artists such as Marcel Duchamp (whose agency is extended via a maverick trickster, Pinoncelli, who attempts to deface or destroy Duchamp's works), and Piero Manzoni, whose *Socle du Monde* sculpture transforms the entire world into a work of art. Another tale pivots around a magnifying glass belonging to the writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Used in one context to ascertain photographic evidence for the existence of fairies, and in another by his (fictional) character Sherlock Holmes in aiding the deductive solution of crimes, it thus takes on a dual function as both magical lens and scientific instrument. These stories are predicated on a passage in Simon During's *Modern Enchantments*, in which he discusses 'fictive illusions'; During suggests that, once magic's role as cultural agent is understood, 'our sensitivity to the play of puzzlement, fictiveness, and contingency in modernity will be heightened.'[159]

A different kind of transitional space is occupied by the French artist Yves Klein, who also maintained an acute balance between acting and not-acting. His photo-performance work *Leap into the Void* captured the artist apparently in mid-flight, leaping from a second storey window. The photograph provided a kind of evidential document, appearing in a one-day, self-published newspaper—*Dimanche*—and featuring a caption:

> Today the painter of space must, in fact, go into space to paint, but he must go there without trickery or deception, and not in an airplane, nor by parachute, nor in a rocket: he must go there on his own strength, using an autonomous, individual force; in short, he must be capable of levitation.[160]

Klein's stated claim, that his training as a judo expert had taught him how to fall without injuring himself, was a ruse: the photograph was faked, a clever piece of image manipulation. Klein was commenting on the precarious role of the artist—particularly in the uncertain years of the post-war period—but his was no armchair commentary: Klein played the role of artist as mystic/charlatan,

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[159] During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 2.
[160] Aaron Schuster, *The Cosmonaut of the Erotic Future*, Cabinet, Issue 32 Fire (2008/09), pp. 23-31, (p. 27).

operating within a self-publicized 'magic' space—a space that is 'both nowhere and everywhere.' Olivier Berggruen articulates this as a tension within Klein's work, that of the 'contradictory impulse between the preservation of the ritual, which links the artist to a society in which he fulfills a role that is not unlike that of the shaman, and the dissolution of all worldly relations into the void'.[161] Klein's *leap* is therefore a leap into another dimension, which the image both depicts and enacts; it is, in the phrase used by Martin Holbraad, an 'ontological leap' from presence to absence.[162] The liminal status of Klein's performative self—between ego and the void—is articulated within the photographic image, whose epistemic truth-status can, however, only be sustained through contamination. The photograph, as *index* of this transitional act, is 'doctored' so that the 'purity' of the act can be maintained. *Leap into the Void* therefore represents a failure, albeit a failure masquerading as ecstatic triumph. A similar photographic model of failure is represented by Bruce Nauman's photograph *Failing to Levitate in the Studio*, in which the artist is depicted in a double exposure image: one exposure shows him lying horizontal, supported by two chairs, while the other shows his slumped body after one of the chairs has been removed.[163] The work originates from a period when Nauman was examining the mythic and stereotyped image of the artist-in-his-studio, and reinterpreting it as performance. Prospecting and exposing the border between the physical space of the studio, and the mental space of the creative process, Nauman was forced to include the failures, as well as the successes, of his studio-based experiments.

Summary

The examples discussed in this chapter represent attempts to map out an area of performance that is situated between, and that overlaps with, a number of discrete performative disciplines: the lecture, the art performance, the interview, the slide show—all are alluded to by these artists/performers. At the same time the

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[161] Olivier Berggruen, *The Dissolution of the Ritual into the Void*, in *Yves Klein*, ed. Olivier Berggruen, Max Hollein, and Ingrid Pfeiffer (Schirn, Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2005), pp. 109-117 (p. 115).
[162] Martin Holbraad, *The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and motion in the divinatory cosmology of Cuban Ifa (or mana, again)*, in Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, (London: Routledge, 2007), pp189-219, (p. 207).
[163] Bruce Nauman, *Failing to Levitate in the Studio*, (1966).

constructedness and conventional nature of the boundaries that divide them is exposed. Although I have focused on Victor Turner's concept of the liminoid, as a means of examining and interpreting a particular aspect of performance, this analysis can be seen to converge with the ideas of Alfred Gell in *Art and Agency*. First of all Gell prioritizes the performative in a number of ways, not least that the art object can be seen as an index of agency within a network of relations—a highly action-centered approach. More specifically, Gell also views the artwork (or index) as a 'congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other persons can be attained, and via which their agency can be communicated.'[164] The idea of the performer (whether artist or magician) as a border prospector, operating in a liminal zone, can be viewed through the lens of Gell's theory, whereby meaning can be abducted via the performer's transformative act; the spectator is brought up close to this 'betwixt and between' space, also recognizing it as one that exists in everyday life situations.

In my video/performance piece *Never Odd or Even*, a performer interacts with his filmed double in a sequence of tableaux that range from formal spatial organisations of blocks of colour, through illusionistic tricks, to out-and-out slapstick.[165] Several liminal zones are represented in this work: the performance embodies a bringing together of the filmed element with the live in such a way that an audience will believe that some kind of genuine interaction is taking place, whilst being simultaneously aware that this cannot be the case and that the filmed part must have been created and choreographed with the live component in mind. In addition to creating the illusion of a single time zone—a continuous 'present' from a real present and a recorded past—the performance portrays, or appears to portray, a single space, i.e. the screen against which the action unfolds. There is, however, a notional line that dissects the screen vertically, and which marks out the spaces—real and filmic—within which the respective protagonists are confined. Here, the liminal zone is specifically an imaginary space between the filmed and the real, situated in the planar centre of the projected image itself. Here also, the performative converges with the filmic—a normative disposition in the early, pre-picturehouse days of cinema, when the act of showing a film was

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[164] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 68.

[165] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Never Odd or Even* (2005/06) performed as part of *Variety* at the De La Warr Pavilion, and at the Nightingale Theatre as part of Brighton Festival, 2006. (see appendix).

often seen as a kind of performance in its own right. These 'monstrations' were regularly given in the context of a diverse range of popular entertainment forms, including the magic show; it is to the magical aspects of the moving image that I turn in the next chapter.[166]

Fig. 7. Yves Klein, *Leap into the Void* (Early version, 1960).

[166] *Monstration*, the act of 'showing forth', coined by André Gaudreault, in Andre Gaudreault and Timothy Barnard, From *Plato to Lumiere: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

I see what is not and I see this unreal thing exactly (Jean Epstein)[167]

Chapter 3

'An orchid in the land of technology': the magic in and of the moving image[168]

Fig. 8. Jonathan Gilhooly, *Balloon Head* (2006).

Introduction

In my short video *Balloon Head*, a man's head and shoulders are seen, shot against a black background, inflating a white balloon with a face (his own) drawn onto it.[169] As the balloon becomes larger it gradually obscures the figure's head so that the drawn face is now substituted for his own. The balloon continues to

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[167] Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p.84.

[168] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (XI), in Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry ZohnLondon: Fontana, 1973), pp. 211-244, (p. 226).

[169] *Balloon Head (Homage to Meliés)*, shown at Portsmouth Film Festival, 2006, (see appendix).

expand until it fills the frame and finally bursts, leaving (for a split second, before fading to black) a black space where the head should be. Although the original impetus for the piece was an externally imposed time restriction of sixty seconds, the inspiration is Georges Meliés' 1901 film *The Man with the Rubber Head*, in which first Meliés himself, and then his clown accomplice, inflate a duplicate of the filmmaker's own head, until it and the accompanying apparatus explode.[170] In *The Man with the Rubber Head* Meliés superimposed the image of his own head onto the already exposed film and, through a careful combination of masking, and dollying of the camera (to create the illusion of expansion), created the effect of an inflating head. Although comedic in spirit, Meliés film also hints at the violence and mutilation that runs through much early cinema, and which had become a staple of the 19th century magic show.[171] In *Balloon Head* and other of my video works, I wanted to explore ideas around the double, occlusion, and displacement. Unlike Meliés', my film is a single-shot piece, the frame-filling balloon obscuring momentarily the behind-the-scenes business of (with assisted help) covering the head with a black cloth to match the background. The slow build-up represented by the balloon's inflation is contrasted with its sudden bursting, and the quick fade-out of the image; the film is looped to repeat almost immediately, so mirroring the inhaling and exhaling of breath.

In *A Crumpled Ball of Paper Floating on the Breath of the Artist* the viewer is presented with the image of a floating ball of paper (apparently kept aloft via the continuous blowing by a recumbent figure) while being simultaneously invited to discover the means by which the illusion has been produced.[172] This is the pre-condition of much special effects in mainstream cinema, where the spectator views scenes he knows are impossible but which are presented with a seamless degree of photographic and cinematic realism. Dan North opens his book *Performing Illusions* with the example of the closing scene of Peter Jackson's 2005 remake of *King Kong*, in which the computer-generated eponymous anti-hero appears with the 'real' female star at the top of the Empire State building.[173]

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[170] *The Man with the Rubber Head*, dir. Georges Meliés, (Star-Film, 1901).

[171] Culminating in the *Grand Guignol*, a theatre of horror which opened in Paris in 1897.

[172] Jonathan Gilhooly, *A Crumpled Ball of Paper Floating on the Breath of the Artist*, (see chapter 5 and appendix).

[173] Dan North, *Performing Illusions: Cinema, Special Effects and the Virtual Actor*, (London: Wallflower, 2008), pp. 1-2.

Even as the shot asks us to accept that the two figures share the same narrative space, and thus that their spatial proximity can convey an empathetic bond, at another level we are invited to marvel at a complex technical achievement, and challenged to locate discrepancies in the illusion.[174]

In similar spirit, Angela Ndalianis, in her essay *The Frenzy of the Visible*, describes the effect upon the spectator of the fight scenes in *The Matrix*, comparing them with contemporary theme park rides.

The Matrix epitomises contemporary effects cinema's tendency towards enveloping the spectator in pure, unadulterated spectacle. [...] [T]his spectacle of motion finds its closest parallel in the similar sensations to be experienced on funrides that simulate movement and dupe us into momentarily [...] losing ourselves in spaces that present themselves as temptingly lying somewhere beyond our reality. [...] Both examples share a concern for the haptic and kinaesthetic, a concern which has increased recently as media such as film, digital technology and amusement park attractions converge and share common concerns centred around the speed of the image.[175]

These two perspectives on the role of the spectator—one a desire for submersion, the other a curiosity for technical explication—are intertwined with one another, and are fundamental to our experience of the medium of film. They are underpinned by a third component, the tendency for the astonishment at the technologically new to 'fall off' into inurement or habituation. This then begs the question of how these hidden or submerged aspects of the filmic experience might be exposed, at the same time reigniting the sense of 'wonder' that once accompanied them.

In this chapter I approach the subject of the moving image as a category of 'enchanted', or magical technology, by drawing upon Alfred Gell's writings on captivation—what the author describes as a 'primordial kind of artistic agency', one which exerts some kind of power over the spectator by virtue of his (the

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[174] Ibid, p. 2.
[175] Angela Ndalianis, 'The Frenzy of the Visible: Spectacle and Motion in the Era of the Digital', in *Senses of Cinema 3*, (2000), http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/3/matrix.html [accessed 1 April 2009], p. 1.

spectator) 'inability mentally to rehearse' its origination.[176] I also refer to Rachel O. Moore's complementary proposition in *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*, that the 'Hollywood banality that films are magic, or "our magic", [...] stands here as a serious theoretical proposition'.[177] Paralleling Tom Gunning's notion of (early) cinema as an 'aesthetic of astonishment', I intend to explore this primal definition of the phenomenon of moving image technology.[178] As well as examining formal and stylistic particularities of early film (what he has called a 'cinema of attractions'), Gunning has considered the cultural history of technologies from the point of view of their 'move from dazzling appearance to nearly transparent utility, from the spectacular and astonishing to the convenient and unremarkable', and the ways in which this might expose certain myths about modernity.[179] However, the particular interpretation of enchantment that I wish to explore needs to be predicated upon a model that is *antinomial* in nature, allowing for a knowing suspension of disbelief whose origins lie within the tradition of the magic show, in its myriad guises.[180] It also needs to give critical credence to a particular form of response to the cinematic experience: that, as William Paul has commented, 'like play, art may well be an end in itself' and that cinema allows us to 'get lost in play ... (and) ... in the rush of immediate experience'.[181] In similar spirit, when describing the phenomenon of the phantasmagoria, Tom Gunning has suggested: 'it plays with its audience causing sensations that resolve themselves into both fear and laughter.' These assessments alert us to the sensual and spectacular attributes of the cinematic experience, attributes that are often implicitly denigrated or marginalized by modern film theory, but which undeniably constitute a central thread throughout the history of film. They invite a broader interpretative approach to the medium, and incorporate 'elements that involve a more rudimentary sense of play and interaction'.[182] The essence of this

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[176] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p.69, p.71.

[177] Moore, *Savage Theory*, p. 2.

[178] Tom Gunning, *An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator*, in Linda Williams, *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, Rutgers Depth of Field Series (New Brunswick, N.J. ; [Great Britain]: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 114-33.

[179] Tom Gunning, *Re-newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century*, David Ph D. Thorburn, Henry Jenkins, and Brad Seawell, *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, Media in Transition (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 39-59.

[180] Landy and Saler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, p. 3.

[181] William Paul, *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy, Film and Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), cited in Angela Ndalianis *The Frenzy of the Visible*, p. 6.

[182] Angela Ndalianis, *The Frenzy of the Visible*, p. 6.

double bind response on the part of the spectator lies, I suggest, in the gap between our awareness of the technological artifice of film and its overwhelming, enchanting effect.

Enchanted Technologies

During the ten years prior to the publication of *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell wrote two related essays in which he examined the themes of magic and technology. In the first, entitled *Technology and Magic* (1988), Gell sets out his definition of three distinct areas of technology, relating to production, reproduction, and enchantment.[183] It is the third of these, enchantment, that he explicitly defines as constituting a range of psychological strategies (which include the arts) which humans use upon one another, as a means of securing assent or compliance: 'The manipulation of desire, terror, wonder, cupidity, fantasy, vanity, an exhaustible list of human passions, offers an equally inexhaustible field for the expression of technical ingenuity'. Gell goes on to define magic as that which 'formalizes and codifies the structural features of technical activity' and which sets 'an ideal standard, not to be approached in reality, towards which practical action can nonetheless be oriented'.[184] Later, in *The Technology of Enchantment and The Enchantment of Technology*, Gell expands on this notion of a magic standard, as constituting a *zero cost*, the 'baseline against which the concept of work as a cost takes shape'.[185] For Gell, art, as a technology of enchantment is not opposed to technology, but is 'a technology in itself'.[186]

If, as Gell suggests, art can be considered as a 'component of technology', and if the particular technology of which art is a component is a 'technology of enchantment', then cinema can with some justification be regarded as the quintessential technology of enchantment. Cinema produces a singular 'reality-effect' out of a mechanized technological assemblage that, for the most part, remains unseen, and from which it is (seen as) separate. Gell's development in

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[183] Gell, 'Technology and Magic'.
[184] Ibid, p. 7.
[185] Alfred Gell, *The Technology of Enchantment and The Enchantment of Technology*, in Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p. 181.
[186] Gell, 'Technology and Magic', p. 7.

Art and Agency of the concept of enchantment (or 'captivation') is based upon a resistance, presented by artworks, to being cognitively possessed by the viewer: 'the difficulty I have in mentally encompassing their coming-into-being as objects in the world accessible to me by a technical process which, since it transcends my understanding, I am forced to construe as magical.'[187] Within this formula Gell allows other forms of resistance (other than that initiated by technical skill), which, in his terms, could justifiably include the phantasmagoric effect of film as a category of captivation, separated as it is from its agentive source; it is, or it at least appears to be, a technology of zero cost.

The concept of phantasmagoria is one I will return to shortly, but first it is worth drawing attention to the similarity between Gell's concept of magic as a model-technology of zero cost, and Walter Benjamin's notion of technology, specifically in relation to the illusory nature of film. In his seminal 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin describes the paradoxical nature of film—that it emerges, an apparently artifice-free image, from a highly artificial and technologically cluttered environment:

> Its illusionary nature is that of the second degree, the result of cutting. That is to say, in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.[188]

What Benjamin is proposing here is that film simultaneously conceals and reveals reality: it reveals a technologically unencumbered reality-effect, whilst concealing the all-too-real technologically driven means by and through which this appearance of reality is produced. Benjamin already presents these two aspects of film in opposition and contradistinction to one another. In the same essay, Benjamin also opposes film (as a new technology) to painting (as an example of

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[187] Alfred Gell, *The Technology of Enchantment and The Enchantment of Technology*, in Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p. 169.
[188] Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn, *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn, p. 226.

an earlier, 'auratic' art form): for Benjamin, in earlier societies, painting was an 'instrument of magic', and tied to ritual, whereas in the era of film, the cameraman 'penetrates deeply into [the] web' of reality, using a technology that is freed from ritual.[189] Implicit in this account is a dialectical relationship between magic and technology; Benjamin's technology is a technology of reproduction, within which film (as a post-auratic form) might have a utopian purpose—that of educating the masses to recognize the dissembling purpose of technology through its (invisible) embodiment in film. Benjamin contrasts the role of the cameraman with that of the painter, using the analogy of medicine: for Benjamin the painter is closer to the image of the magician who heals through 'the laying on of hands', and the cameraman to that of the surgeon who 'cuts into the patient's body'.[190] However, Benjamin seems deeply ambivalent about the capacity for film to overcome its divided self; in fact there would seem to be sufficient reason for figuring the role of the camera(man) as magical, at least as much as that of the painter, once the surgical analogies have been tested.

In a recent essay, Bruno Latour and Antoine Hennion have argued against Benjamin's account of the mechanical nature of film, as simply mistaken: 'The movie camera adds another mediation to an already long chain but it does not cut it', and '[t]echnique has always been the means of producing art; it is not a modern version of some prior, disembodied creativity'.[191] This last point echoes Viva Paci's injunction, about the importance of distinguishing between film's capacity for original *production*, and its associated, but additional, potential for *reproduction* (or 'multiplication').[192] Furthermore, the nature of the dichotomous forces that permeate Benjamin's essay, presupposes an opposition between painting and film that polarizes the spectator into either the reactionary critic (of modern painting), or the progressive (but still critical) 'enjoyer' of film. This is of course an inherent characteristic of Benjamin's 'sustained, utopian faith in the socially transformative potential of contemporary visual art' but it runs the risk of fatally undermining his own argument, predicated as it is upon a shifting

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[189] Ibid, p. 227.

[190] Ibid, p. 227.

[191] Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour, *How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things at Once—and Become Famous for It*, in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, Writing Science (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 94.

[192] Viva Paci, *The Attraction of the Intelligent Eye: Obsessions with the Vision Machine in Early Film Theories*, in Wanda Strauven, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 121-139, (p. 131).

definition of the 'aura'.[193] Latour and Hennion also question Benjamin's multiply serviceable concept of aura, which is employed as a Janus-faced figure within his essay:

> When Benjamin looks at the modern period, aura becomes a kind of Lost Paradise, a negative foil to what he describes as the new effects of mechanically reproducing works of art, and to the new seduction of the masses that has replaced the former beauty of art. But when he turns to the past, Benjamin sees the nostalgia for the aura as an illusion, a relic or a residue of a cult value.[194]

Warwick Mules has also drawn attention to the ambivalence of Benjamin's concept of aura, by challenging his conception of film as a post-auratic practice:

> [F]ar from being something rendered obsolete by new technologies, aura and auratic experience is accelerating in intensity and scope, as the phantasmagoria of capitalist consumer culture becomes ever more deeply embedded in new technological forms.   Aura has taken on an aspect of the real that now requires renewed efforts on the part of critical theorists and creative artists alike, to unpack its illusory structures and to expose its power to deflect sensory experience into pseudo-presence, or false origin.[195]

Although I do not wish to pursue Mules' analysis of aura specifically in terms of its relation to capitalist consumer culture, his questioning of Benjamin's faith in film based on its identification as a post-auratic practice, is useful. It potentially divests Benjamin's argument of some of its dichotomous components, clearing the way for fresh associations. Benjamin's aspiration for film instrumentally to produce a new kind of response, one in which the viewer might become alerted to the dissembling nature of this new medium, recalls Joshua Landy's description (referred to earlier in chapter 1) of the modern magician, represented by Robert-Houdin, as producing a new kind of spectator by reinforcing an 'aptitude of

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[193] Charles W. Haxthausen, *'Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein'*, October, (2004), 47-74, (p. 48).

[194] Hennion and Latour, *How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things at Once*, in Gumbrecht and Marrinan, *Mapping Benjamin*, p. 92.

[195] Warwick Mules, 'Aura as Productive Loss', *Transformations*, Issue no. 15, 2007. http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_15/article_05.shtml [accessed 12 April 2009]

detached credulity'.[196] When Benjamin describes film as serving to 'train humans in those new apperceptions and reactions conditioned by their interaction with an apparatus whose role in their lives increases daily', his words chime with those of Landy. In fact, both James W. Cook and Simon During point to the possibility of narratives of enchantment and disenchantment that diverge sharply from that of Benjamin, by suggesting that the concept of the reflexively alert spectator might pre-date the latter's arbitrarily designated 'film-moment'. Cook, discussing the artful deceptions of P.T. Barnum and other 19th century American showmen, employs W.J.T. Mitchell's distinction between *illusion* and *illusionism* to explain how popular cultural deceits 'routinely involved a calculating intermixing of the genuine and the fake, enchantment and disenchantment, energetic public exposé and momentary suspension of disbelief'.[197] For Mitchell, illusionism constitutes an aesthetic realm in which illusions themselves are objects of play: 'the self-conscious exploitation of illusion as a cultural practice.'[198] Cook makes it clear however, that the 19th century audiences of these spectacles were fully able to reflect on their own spectatorial behaviour, and in an implicit repudiation of Adorno's dialectical view of modernity and enchantment (and, by extension, of Benjamin's), asserts that 'long before the late twentieth-century insights of critical theory and postmodernism [...] many American consumers thought about, discussed, and resisted the ways that they were manipulated by the culture industry'.[199] In similar spirit Simon During contends that the growth of the fictional within modernity has coaxed 'consumers of modern culture [to] learn to accept one set of propositions in relation to the domain of fiction, and another in relation to the everyday world'.[200] Like Cook, During is critical of Adorno's indictment of Western modernity as a 'globalizing enchantment', wherein modernity is seen as a 'battleground between enchantment and disenchantment, rather than as a field which invites the subtle and supple deployment of belief'.[201] What During is arguing for here is a more flexible critique of early (and, by extension, later) modern film audiences—that far from being passive subjects of a

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[196] Landy, *Modern Magic: Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin and Stéphane Mallarmé*, in Landy and Saler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, p. 110.

[197] Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, p. 17.

[198] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 343.

[199] Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, p. 308, (n. 11).

[200] During, *Modern Enchantments*, p.50.

[201] Ibid, p.65.

hypnotic effect, they were able to contend with and adapt to the fictive demands of the moving image: 'to fall almost simultaneously into enchantment and disenchantment [...] at their own leisure and pleasure, with little subjectivity—or political agency—engaged.'[202]

Conspicuous demonstration

At this point it might be useful to return the discussion to the arena of art practice, in relation to Tom Gunning's notion of a kind of transition from technological astonishment to familiarity (a transition that much experimental artists' film has sought to make visible), by referring to the writings of Martin Heidegger.[203] Like Walter Benjamin, Heidegger was concerned with the effects of technology upon human 'being'; he used the example of the tool (not necessarily a tool in the strictest sense of the word, but any-*thing* that might be 'in use') as a means of describing how it is that things in the world present themselves to us. He used the expression 'ready-to-hand' to say how objects disappear or 'withdraw' into the work that they do, so that when tools 'work' we do not attend to them; it is only when they 'break down' or cease to function in the way that they normally do, that they suddenly become conspicuous—they become 'unready-to-hand'.[204] Now although Heidegger's argument is nuanced towards a question of 'being', and his attitude towards technology (at least in its modern guise) was a generally negative one, there is no reason why his 'tool-being' idea cannot be conceptualized as a means of gaining fresh perspectives on particular technologies, through the disruption of routinized engagement with them.[205]

What this means in effect is that the artist might be conceived as a kind of 'tool-breaker', whose interventions into technology can reveal previously unseen or unforeseen dynamics within the technological systems in use. This interpretation can be conjoined with Mules' gloss on Benjamin as a means of analysing a revealing/concealing paradigm in aspects of contemporary art practice.

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[202] Ibid, p.66.
[203] Gunning, *Re-newing Old Technologies*.
[204] Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphyics of Objects*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), pp.15-23.
[205] Ibid. 'Tool-Being' is Harman's own term for Heidegger's 'readiness-to-hand', or *zuhandenheit*.
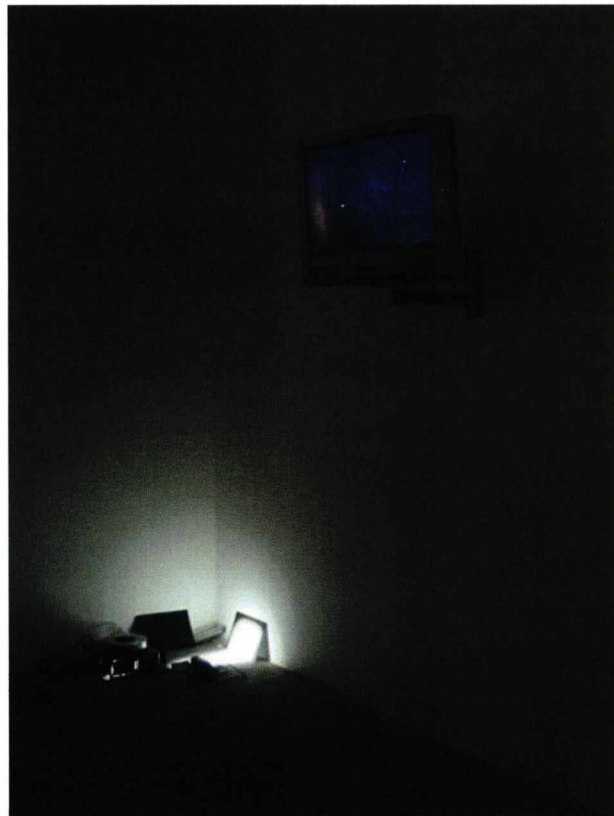
Fig. 9. Damien Roach, *A Small Big Thing* (2003). (Courtesy Sies and Hoke Gallery).

In *A Small Big Thing* by Damien Roach (2003), the artist utilizes an assemblage of slide projector, video camera, monitor and a sheet of black card.[206] The monitor, which is wall-mounted at head height, reveals a nocturnal snowstorm, or perhaps some sort of cosmological vision—points of light slowly spiralling against a dark void. Yet this image is self-evidently a phantasmagorical construction: the camera, positioned on the floor, is pointed towards the sheet of black card, it's perspective interrupted by the perpendicular beam of light from the slide projector. What the camera therefore relays to the monitor is the image of myriad specks of dust, swirling in the projected light. The lo-fi aesthetic employed by Roach exposes a bathetic relation between the disconnected, sublime effect, and its technologically quotidian components. By reconnecting the image with its technological media, Roach demonstrates how the familiar can become unfamiliar, uncanny even, when it irrupts from its equipmental world. This apparently modest work demonstrates and embodies Heidegger's concept of the

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[206] Damien Roach, *A Small Big Thing*, (2003).

tool that emerges, 'unready-to-hand', from its submerged being-in-use. It also recalls Tom Gunning's statement concerning technologies' 'move from dazzling appearance to nearly transparent utility', by alluding to the way in which the experience of early cinema was as much about the monstration of the apparatus as it was about the filmic image.[207] Roach's piece not only makes no attempt to hide the apparatus responsible for the effect, it effectively and actively manifests it almost as a form of demonstration. Ironically, even though the illusion's productive means stands exposed in this piece, the surprising and fantastical nature of the image is not diminished, but is increased: instead of disenchantment, there is re-enchantment. In this way *A Small Big Thing* lays bare a model of enchantment offered in Michael Saler's essay: *Modernity and Enchantment*:

> [M]any modern historians no longer subscribe to the binary and dialectical approaches, finding the antinomial approach more true to the lived experience of their subjects. [...] There are forms of enchantment compatible with, and even dependent upon, those tenets of modernity usually seen as disenchanting the world, such as rationality and self-reflexivity. Modern enchantment often depends upon its antinomial other, modern disenchantment, and a specifically modern enchantment might be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously: one that delights but does not delude.[208]

Saler provides a useful description of the kind of 'disenchanted' enchantment offered up in Roach's piece: the disclosure of the technical means of production, the giving away of the secret, so to speak, only serves to sharpen the sensory immediacy of the viewer's experience. For Saler, without at the very least some residual awareness of the intrinsic artifice of film, delight in its revelation would not be possible.

In moving away then from the dialectical propositions of Benjamin's *Work of Art* essay, perhaps it might be possible to formulate a different model for the speculative appraisal of early film and its audiences, one which places film within a network or chain of technological practices around the 'photographic'. In an essay concerning the 'historical ontology of photographic imagery', Peter

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[207] Gunning, *Re-newing Old Technologies*, pp. 39-59.
[208] Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment', pp. 701-702.

Osborne refuses a single, underlying, medium-specific basis for photography, instead positing a 'relational totality of the variety of different photographic forms coexisting within the present'.[209] For Osborne, the *unity* of these forms (which include photography, film, television, video, digital media, etc) obtains both from a 'material form of the technologies' and from 'their predominant socio-cultural functions and uses'; it is *distributive*, in so far as it spreads beyond the boundaries of individual images or 'works', on account of its inherent reproducibility.[210] Osborne's photographic ontology is reminiscent of Latour's response to Benjamin, in that Latour, through his concept of Actor-Network-Theory, also refuses ontological primacy to either material or concepts, insisting instead upon the unity of these components, through an extended and performative network of relations.[211] This in turn echoes Gell's ideas about the (art) index constituting a nexus of relations, within and throughout which both material (technologies) and concepts (mind) are distributed. But perhaps even Osborne's notion of distributive unity might be unnecessarily delimited by 'technically produced indexical images' together with those (digital) images in which 'such indexical effects are simulated in various ways', and whose 'predominant socio-cultural functions and uses [are predicated upon] epistemically privileged representations of the real'. As Laurent Mannoni usefully points out in his account of film as a multifaceted agglomeration of optical technologies, the graphical method of fixing the 'real' (whether image or movement) was itself subject to a disparate chain of inscribing systems, before resolving in favour of one that possessed inherent stability—that of the ray of light.[212] With this in mind, Osborne's 'chain' of distributive unity can surely be extended to include those earlier technologies such as the phantasmagoria that, although not indexical as such, were certainly perceived as representations of the (spectral) 'real'. This would open up a highly salient sequence of technological practices of the visual, within which the photographic (in Osborne's sense) is but one link, and within which the condition of an enchanted 'subject' is mutually constituted.

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[209] Peter Osborne, *Photography in an Expanding Field: Distributive Unity and Dominant Form*, in *Where Is the Photograph?* Ed. By David Green, (Maidstone: Photoworks, 2003). pp. 63-70, (p. 64, p. 63).
[210] Ibid, p. 65.
[211] Hennion and Latour, *How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things at Once*, in Gumbrecht and Marrinan, *Mapping Benjamin*, pp. 91-98.
[212] Laurent Mannoni, *The Art of Deception*, in Laurent Mannoni et al., *Eyes, Lies and Illusions: The Art of Deception* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004), pp. 47-48.

Culminating in the effect known as *Pepper's Ghost* in the 1860s, optical effects of various kinds had been used as part of magic shows since the late 18th century. Many of these effects, deployed to produce a miscellany of illusions, derive from the technology of the magic lantern; Terry Castle, in an analysis of what she calls the 'spectralization of mental space' focuses on one such effect—the Phantasmagoria. Its chief protagonist, the Belgian inventor and showman Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, used a magic lantern to project images, in darkness, onto a floating gauze screen; another of these inventors, Guyot, actually projected his apparitions onto smoke.[213] Embedded within the technological apparatus of the phantasmagoria is the desire to separate the image from its true agentive source, by eclipsing its material support. Projection onto smoke (emanating from a brazier), resulting in shifting configurations, would have greatly enhanced the autonomous appearance of these ghostly apparitions. An early form of 'dollying', effected by setting the apparatus on rollers, also caused the image to shrink or grow, thus enhancing its existentially ambiguous status for the onlooker. Castle dwells upon this ambiguity, figuring it as a 'profound epistemological confusion':

> Were ghosts themselves real or illusory? Inside the mind or outside it? [...] The subliminal power of the phantasmagoria lay in the fact that it induced in the spectator a kind of maddening, irrational perception: one might believe ghosts to be illusions, present 'in the mind's eye' alone, but one experienced them here as real entities, existing outside the boundary of the psyche.[214]

Castle here highlights a fundamental paradox inherent in the post-enlightenment desire to rationalize ghostly or phantasmagorical phenomena: in subsuming such occurrences to the category of thought, the mind itself became supernaturalized. She argues that it was Freud who, ironically, through an attempt to account for and dispel such illusory forces, ended up reinventing them within his theory of the unconscious. Although I do not intend to deploy Freudian theory here, Castle's essay alludes to the propensity for film to break through or exceed, in a variety of ways, the material limits of its medium, and to its problematic relationship with a 'phantasmagorized' spectator.

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[213] Terry Castle, 'Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie', *Critical Inquiry*, 15 (1988), 26-61.
[214] Ibid, pp. 49-50.

Tom Gunning frames his analysis of the phantasmagoria in slightly different terms, one that discloses it as having a twofold function, as representing a 'conflict between rational belief and sensual experience'.

> From the demystifying point of view, the Phantasmagoria asserted the ultimate truth of the rational and the fallibility of the senses. But, from the point of view of showmanship, audience pleasure, and aesthetics, (particularly if we take the term from its Greek root aisthetikos, 'of or pertaining to things perceptible by the senses,') the novelty of the Phantasmagoria lay in its manipulation of the senses—not to foster credulity—but simply to produce startling effects. Rather than seeing Phantasmagoria exclusively as either an ideological machine sustaining illusions or a process of demystification, it might be worth pursuing it as a new model for the manipulation of the senses. [215]

Gunning elaborates upon this in another essay *Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations*: here he speaks of the historically uncanny obverse of the photographic medium, whereby at the same time that it appeared to valorize a particular, positivist reading of a 'real' objective world of objects, it also conjured a 'parallel world of phantasmatic doubles'.[216] Gunning refers here, not to the Platonic notion of *eidos* for which photography might become a kind of material attestation, but to a subtler notion of the subject as a ceaseless emitter of images, somewhat like sloughed off skin.

> these images are constantly cast off, like a sort of detritus. *Photography simply retains some of them.* This process of individual entities constantly broadcasting imperceptible signals which can be received as images exemplifies an extraordinary new mythology of modernity as it confronted technological change. Unlike official allegories which vaunted the forces of commerce and technology with dessicated images from classical mythology, this modern mythology

[215] Tom Gunning, 'Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and its Specters', (2004), p. 14. (Text originally placed on www.MediaArtHistory.org as a PROGRAMMATIC KEY TEXT in preparation for *Refresh! The First International Conference on the Histories of Art, Science and Technology*. This text may have been or will be published and/or presented elsewhere by the author).

[216] Tom Gunning, *Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny*, in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, Theories of Contemporary Culture; V.16, ed. by Patrice Petro, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 42-71, (p. 43).

welcomed the dissolving effects of modernity into the core of its metaphysics.[217] (italics added)

Gunning is arguing here for a recognition of the early reception of photography as uncanny, as marked by its propensity for producing 'doubles'—that this was what conferred uniqueness 'as much as its existential link with its original source'.[218] While this immediately summons up the spirit of Freud's essay of 1919 (in *Unheimlich*, Freud names the double as an apposite theme for his theory), it also recalls Alfred Gell's concept of distributed personhood and agency in *Art and Agency*.[219] Here Gell, citing Yrjo Hirn, proposes a philosophical approach to the concept of 'convergence between images of things and parts of things', that of the Epicurean doctrine of emanations, or *eidola* according to which 'every image of a thing constitutes a concrete part of that thing itself'.[220]

> According to the clear and systematic statement of this doctrine given by the old Epicurean philosophers [...] shadows, reflections in a mirror, visions, and even mental representations of distant objects, are all caused by thin membranes, which constantly detach themselves from the surfaces of all bodies and move onwards in all directions through space.[221]

Gell goes on to quote from Lucretius' epic poem on Epicureanism, *De Rerum Natura*:

> [Many visible objects], ... emit bodies some in a state of loose diffusion, like smoke which logs of oak, heat and fires emit; some of a closer and denser texture, like the gossamer coats which at times cicades doff in the summer [...] since these cases occur, a thin image likewise must be emitted from things off their surface.[222]

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[217] Ibid, p. 43.
[218] Ibid, p. 43.
[219] Sigmund Freud and David McLintock, *The Uncanny*, Penguin Classics, (London: Penguin, 2003).
[220] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 104. (Both Gell and Gunning refer to Balzac's use of the concept of the phantasmatic double to explain the nature of the daguerrotype. In a passage from the novel *Cousin Pons*, Balzac vindicates an apparently absurd belief in the occult by comparing it with the notionally absurd fact of Daguerre's invention: 'that a man or a building is incessantly and continuously represented by a picture in the atmosphere, that all existing objects project into it a kind of *spectre* which can be captured and perceived.').
[221] Ibid, p. 104.
[222] Ibid, p. 105.

This description of images as having substance *in and of themselves*, and particularly in its analogical comparison with the emission of smoke from fire, is inescapably reminiscent of Terry Castle's account, already referred to, of the spectacular phenomenon of 'fantasmagorie' at the end of the 18th century. Castle's penetrating psychological analysis productively links Gunning's moderately Freudian account of the uncanny, photographic double, with Gell's anthropological interpretation of the distributed agent: 'that *images* of something (a prototype) are *parts* of that thing (as a distributed object).'[223] Furthermore, in Castle's formulation, the phantasmagoric model embodies not only a destabilization of the relationship between things and images of things, but also between the inner and outer of 'mind and world, illusion and reality'.[224] This is not the 'either/or' dialectic of Benjamin's *Work of Art* essay, formulated as it was for political expediency, but a more pliant and ambivalent conception in which film can be seen as part of a distributive chain of spectralized optical technologies of enchantment.

Doubles and substitutions: photography

Fig. 10. William Mummler, spirit photograph (c. 1871).

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[223] Ibid, p.223.
[224] Castle, 'Phantasmagoria', p. 50.

Tom Gunning pursues further the concept of images as ghostly apparitions, this time in relation to the still photographic image, in his essay *Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations.* Here he draws attention to the position held by photography in the 19th century as an 'emblem' for a 'new realm of visual certainty', possessing a dual identity as icon and index.[225] But photography also created a parallel world of 'phantasmatic doubles', recording visual reality but at the same time dematerializing it. Clement Cheroux echoes this line of enquiry in his reference to the 19th century correspondent to *Le Progres Photographique*, who described as resembling a 'cage of ghosts' the glass negatives bearing traces of earlier images.[226] The notion of a ghost as a faint, secondary image caused by a fault in an optical system (here, photography, but equally valid in other such systems: faulty TV reception or internal reflection in a mirror) was analogical with more traditional imagery of ghosts as spirit beings or phantoms.[227] This second definition was adopted by followers of Spiritualism, a growing movement from the 1840s onwards in both the United States and Europe. Thus, according to Cheroux, application followed accident (as so often in the history of photography) and a few photographers began intentionally to exploit the perceived similarities between the two effects. William Mummler produced spirit 'portraits' (sitters accompanied by a ghostly figure) in order to convince a public of the plausibility of the spirit world, but at the same time images of ghosts, spirits and fairies were used in conjunction with contemporary optical toys and as part of magic entertainment shows (phantasmagoria). During this period the status of the medium became crucial and, according to Gunning, it was claimed that all the great spirit photographers were mediums and that, once again, an analogy could be drawn between the photographer as medium and the 'medium' of the photo-sensitive plate: it was deemed sufficient for the spirit photographer simply to hold the sensitive plate in order for an image to be formed. Thus the idea of the photographic image as the product of a receptive (photochemical) medium was echoed in the belief in the Medium as similarly 'sensitive' and productive. At the

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[225] Gunning, *Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations*, in Petro, *Fugitive Images*, (p. 42).

[226] Clement Cheroux (2005) *Ghost Dialectics: spirit photography in entertainment and belief*, in Clément Chéroux, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 45-71.

[227] In the Hideo Nakata's 1998 film *Ring*, characters watch a barely perceptible ghostly trace on a rented videotape - allegedly recorded by mistake from a dead TV channel - before falling victim to a malevolent force.

same time there was a belief in the idea that the technological agency of photography itself could capture and reveal something that lay beyond or beneath the threshold of ordinary human perception.

A second sort of spirit photography became known as 'full materializations'—full-bodied figures of spirits revealed during séances. The physicist Sir William Crookes was the first to take photographs of materializations and, in contrast to spirit photographs—which revealed the presence of a spirit that remained invisible to the spectators present—photographs of materializations revealed spirits who could clearly be seen, and even touched, by those present. It was in the phenomenon of the séance that Spiritualism and magic began to overlap: William and Ira Davenport, two brothers from Buffalo, New York, demonstrated complex sittings in which the closed spirit cabinet became a means of removing the medium from the eye of the public.[228] In fact the second part of the Davenport's 'show' would take place in almost complete darkness, members of the audience having been invited to tie up the brothers inside their cabinet.[229]

Although controversial, these shows signalled the arrival of a new type of magic entertainment, this in spite of the fact that the Davenports continued to protest their authenticity as mediums. In fact Spiritualists went to great lengths to dissociate themselves from the 'tricks' used in magic shows: in the case of spirit photography they gave complex 'scientific' explanations of how a form invisible to the spectator could leave a visible trace on a sensitized plate.[230] A further manifestation of spirit photography was the documenting of ectoplasm—a pale substance expelled from the orifices of mediums: in some of the photographs of these manifestations the ectoplasm itself bears images, the Medium herself thereby becoming a sort of camera. It also suggests a fascinating possibility about the role that images play in Spiritualist manifestations: that, as Gunning suggests, they supply 'a sort of pictographic code between the visible world and the realms of the invisible'. Ectoplasm was thought of as proof of spiritual manifestations

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[228] It is significant that these séances took place in darkness thus echoing the very conditions in which the photographic image is produced or constructed; a controlled darkness, or semi-darkness, was also a prerequisite of certain theatrical magic illusions of this period.

[229] During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 154.

[230] John Neville Maskelyne, who attended a Davenport séance at Cheltenham in 1865, discerned their methods and declared his intention to recreate the séance 'without the aid of spirits'.

but could also be conceptualized as a kind of 'ethereal glue', linking the human agent with the technological apparatus.[231]   Overall, these otherworldly images speak of a surfeit or excess, which the camera at once reveals but which it cannot completely contain.   But they also represent a kind of visual documentation of what Daniel M. Wegner has called 'virtual agency', wherein the intentional agency of the medium seems to be transferred or deferred to the spirit or ghost.[232] This could be seen to parallel what happens, more prosaically, in the interaction between human agent and camera, whereby agency is tacitly transferred to the camera, and the photograph seems to 'take itself'.

Doubles and substitutions: film

The double-nature of the photographic image—its role as both guarantor of the real and purveyor of the uncanny—is for Gunning what gave it its 'unique ontology'.[233]   He goes on to discuss the trick films of the French filmmaker Georges Meliés as further engagement with the phenomenon of spiritualism; however, Meliés never claimed supernatural status for his films, instead inviting 'technical amazement at a new trick rather than awe at a mystery.'[234]   Laurent Mannoni has stressed the deceptive aspects of moving image technology, acknowledging a historical variance between still and moving image: whereas spiritualist photographs often elicited a credulous, or at least ambivalent response as to the veracity of their content, the moving image was more clearly associated with trickery and deceit.   Mannoni lists the various devices and techniques in which 'deceptive art' consists, including 'silhouettes; tricks with mirrors; camera obscuras and lucidas; anamorphoses [...] all flow into this current and form an immense body of production in the history of the sciences and arts'.[235]   In an essay subtitled *The Magical Magic of the Magic Image,* André Gaudreault has commented on how Meliés used magician's misdirection even in his editing: the

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[231] I have taken this phrase from Yves Klein's description of the 'essential of painting is that something, that "ethereal glue," that intermediary product which the artist secretes with all his creative being and which he has the power to place, to encrust, to impregnate into the pictorial stuff of the painting'.
[232] Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will,* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2002), p. 269.
[233] Gunning, *Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations*, in Petro, Fugitive Images, (p. 43)
[234] Ibid, p. 63. (Meliés produced a film called *The Spiritualist Photographer* in 1903).
[235] Mannoni, *The Art of Deception*, in Mannoni et al., *Eyes, Lies and Illusions*, p. 43

eyes of the spectator are firmly focused on the lower half of the film, where the (narrative) action is taking place; in the meantime, a different kind of action is occurring in the upper half, and close examination of the film strip reveals the traces of gluing in the upper part of the frame. Thus, as Gaudreault comments, Meliés understood that even as cinematographer he was still first and foremost a magician who 'must draw the viewer's attention towards areas where nothing is happening, but where everything *appears* to be happening in order, as he must, not to reveal his secret'.[236] Here the physical material of the film itself becomes doubly the site of occlusion and concealment, and of deception.

In these trick films of Meliés, the narrative is far less important than the simple spectacular nature of the 'cut', or edit, that facilitates the trick, and the presentational style of the effects themselves: this is what Tom Gunning has called the 'cinema of attractions', a sort of 'now you see it, now you don't' approach to the moving image.[237] The kind of 'simplistic' edit employed by Meliés is notionally invisible, even though, to our (21st century) eyes, it is blatant. Of course, the rigorous theatrical frontality of Meliés' tableaux, which were, after all, produced and shot inside a purpose-built theatre (The Robert-Houdin theatre in Paris, where Meliés had been a stage magician), was instrumental in maintaining the illusion of pictorial continuity, therefore allowing the tricks to look convincing. But what is perhaps more fascinating is the way in which, because of the naturalization of continuity editing, audiences have become inured to basic, 'classical' cinematic techniques even when, as in a simple shot-reverse-shot sequence, they are arguably more disruptive and disjunctive to the pictorial fabric of the film; it is the narrative element in mainstream cinema that 'heals' over these lacerations.[238]

Meliés' fascination with producing effects and manipulating the response of his audience, emerged from his experiences as a stage magician and through his knowledge of a variety of optical effects and scientific phenomena that were frequently staged as lecture-performances during this period.[239] In Gunning's

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[236] André Gaudreault, *'Meliés the Magician: the Magical Magic of the Magic Image'*, Early Popular Visual Culture, 5 (2007), p. 167-174, (p. 167).

[237] Both Gunning and During have drawn attention to the context within which much early film was seen – as part of a 'variety' of forms of popular entertainment.

[238] Ironically, Meliés would not use 'tricks' (such as shooting twice from different viewpoints) which, for him, were not 'motivated'. During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 170.

[239] Although Meliés could not have witnessed the original presentations of Pepper's Ghost at the Royal London Polytechnic, he would certainly have known about it from the writings of Robert-Houdin, whose

essay *'Primitive' Cinema: A Frame Up? Or The Tricks On Us* he discusses the 'stop-motion' techniques employed by Meliés: Gunning suggests that Melies in fact used splicing (the physical cutting and suturing of the film-strip), as opposed to the manual stopping and re-starting of the camera, in order to maintain the illusion of continuity.[240] Meliés the magician immediately grasped the illusionistic potential of this technical 'flaw' and many of his films incorporate adaptations of magic tricks in which the idea of transformation or metamorphosis is explored. Whilst in a staged magic show this would have involved complex stage props and methods of misdirecting the attention of an audience, in the medium of film Meliés was able to employ a temporal disjunction as a means of 're-setting' the tableau with the new figure, object, etc, substituted for the original. The apparent 'real time' trajectory of the now spliced narrative would ensure the anticipated continuity and complete the transition.

Meliés also employed double exposure in order to obtain 'dissolves' between substitutions: in *The Living Playing Cards* a life-size court card transforms into a real woman and back again by virtue of this method.[241] These techniques have since become cinematic clichés, although they are more often used to facilitate temporal or spatial shifts (rather than maintain the illusion of temporal continuity) in order to satisfy, as Gunning and others would have it, the demands of classical cinematic narrative. Mary Ann Doane draws attention to the way in which the 'magic tricks' of cinema underpin or support the conjuring tricks of the magician (in Meliés and in Edison, whose film *The Artist's Dilemma*, she specifically cites). The emerging 'out of blackness' that characterizes Edison's film (as well as some of Meliés') demonstrates for Doane 'that the film seeks to reinscribe the uncanny likeness of the cinematic image as magic, and magic as the underside of science'.[242] The transformations that take place in Meliés' films share with some of the spirit photographs the idea of the double: in

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theatre he inherited. Jim Steinmeyer has argued convincingly that Meliés re-exposure of film for the deployment of special effects derived from the principle employed in Pepper's Ghost. Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible*, (London: Arrow, 2004), p. 179.

[240] Tom Gunning, *'Primitive' Cinema: A Frame-Up? Or the Trick's on Us*, in *Early Cinema: Space-Frame-Narrative*, ed. by Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), pp. 95-103. Meliés himself recounts in his diaries how, whilst filming on the streets of Paris, his camera jammed and it took him a full minute to release and restart the film: when later on the same day he re-played the footage he observed that 'men transformed into women, a carriage became a hearse'. (From 'Melies the Magician' Arte Video DVD, 2001).

[241] Meliés, *The Living Playing Cards*, (Star Film, 1904).

[242] Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency. the Archive*, (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 111.

The Spiritualist Photographer a young woman transforms into her own two-dimensional image and the magician (played by Meliés), after having rolled up the life-size figure, unfurls it in dramatic fashion, producing the restored, now three dimensional figure and leaving the paper blank.[243] According to Tom Gunning, for Meliés, 'spirit photography results less in communication with the dead than an exchange of identities between image and model.'[244] Here Gell's notion of 'distributed personhood' is once again evoked; in some of Meliés films he appears as a double of himself, whereby the protagonist's agency as magician, actor and director is extended through his multiple filmic image.[245]

In another of his essays, *'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions*, Gunning draws a parallel between the early films of Meliés and 'curiosity-arousing devices' of the fairground (and, by extension, of the magic show), describing cinema's concurrent 'fascination with novelty and its foregrounding of the act of display'.[246] This, for Gunning, undermines the assumption of 'narrative primacy', at least in the cinema before 1908. However, even as late as 1924 Buster Keaton, in his film *Sherlock Jr*, was making use of the 'trick splice' pioneered by Meliés: although arguably employing it to the more classical ends of spatial shifting, Keaton's character (a cinema projectionist and amateur sleuth) is transposed into a bewildering succession of hostile settings whilst maintaining the illusion of temporal continuity. The effect was achieved by Keaton standing stock still (his poses were measured laboriously using surveyors' instruments), and then re-positioning himself into the new background sets or locations. It could be argued here that a parallel can be drawn between the temporal dislocation of the spirit photographs and that of film: in the former the accepted notion of the photograph's instantaneity is resisted and challenged, in the latter the 'real time' appearance of the film is disputed. These substitution devices become (at least in Meliés) almost literally invisible and again, arguably, the double-exposure technique of the spirit photographs is similarly invisible, regardless of the plausibility of its content. Gunning challenges the arguments put forward by Mitry, Metz and others, that

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[243] Gunning, *Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations*, in Petro, *Fugitive Images*, (p. 64).

[244] Ibid, p. 64.

[245] Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp. 96-153.

[246] Tom Gunning, *Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions*, in *Silent Film*, ed. by Richard Abel, (London: Athlone, 1996), pp. 71-84, (p. 73).

early cinema represented a struggle between theatricality and narrativity. Instead he introduces the term *cinema of attractions*, which he defines in terms of the special emphasis it places on the spectator. Narrative invokes the spectator's interest by 'posing an enigma' whose resolution is delayed during the unfolding of that narrative. This necessitates a denial of complicity with the spectator, which transforms him into a voyeur, unacknowledged by the world of the film. By contrast the cinema of attractions constitutes an exhibitionist relation to the spectator: it addresses him directly, acknowledging the viewer's presence in order to 'quickly satisfy a curiosity'.[247] Sometimes this encounter could be confrontational as when an oncoming locomotive train threatens to break out of the cinematic space and into the theatre itself.[248] So the cinema of attractions is seen by Gunning as a means of creating a 'temporal disjunction through an excess of astonishment and display' predicated on the notion of presence and absence (the *'Now You See It, Now You Don't'* both of the title and of the *fort/da* game played by little Hans, and observed by his grandfather, Sigmund Freud) that form the basic temporality of this form.[249] Rachel O. Moore echoes this notion of cinematic excess, or plenitude, in her book *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*. Moore also uses the example of Buster Keaton, again in *Sherlock Jr*, in which Keaton passes in and out of a (depicted) film frame, threatening to disrupt the autonomy of the film image. Here Moore again returns us to the concept of the double.

> The film image can be seen as the spirit double of the real thing it shows, always independent of that thing, an exact copy that is thoroughly autonomous and exists as part of the spirit world that is cinema. The magical nature of the spirit double is very evident in films that play tricks with the frame and thereby highlight the delight got by its autonomy.[250]

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[247] Ibid, pp. 74-75.

[248] Buster Keaton poked fun at this convention in his film *The Goat* (1921) when the onrushing train upon whose cowcatcher he sits, stops dead 'in front of' the screen, Keaton himself staring impassively at the audience.

[249] Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, and Angela Richards, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis: 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 'the Ego and the Id', and Other Works*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984). Gunning, *Now You See It, Now You Don't*, p. 80.

[250] Moore, *Savage Theory*, p. 87.

Fig. 11. Buster Keaton, *Sherlock Jr* (1924).

In considering how the readings of these texts might in some way relate to my own practice I want to look at two works, *Light House* and *Never Odd or Even*.[251] In *Light House* one of the principal considerations was the discrepancy between real—i.e. experienced—time, and filmed time. In *Light House* the image of a magician, apparently illuminating a light bulb, is projected onto the wall of a small, specially constructed room. This image ostensibly appears in continuous time but, by virtue of substitution splicing, actually configures a sense of presence or absence (of light) in a variety of ways. For example, the background wall in the projected image alternates randomly between black and white as the (projected) light bulb goes on and off. But the projector itself alternates its function between conveyor of image and simple light source, and to further confound this, a phantom bulb—a double—of the projected bulb, appears to hover in front of the screen. This phantom bulb is produced via the agency of an angled sheet of glass—invisible to the spectator—that divides the viewing area from the screen. The glass reflects the image of the bulb (the real bulb is hidden from view) so that it appears to hover just in front of the screen (this is the effect known as *Pepper's Ghost*, and referred to earlier in the chapter). The audience is involved directly both by their spatial immersion in the piece and by virtue of the

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[251] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Light House*, 2005, shown as part of *Variety* at the De La Warr Pavilion, 2006, (see appendix).

fact that a light source in the actual room, independent of the projected image, is randomly switched on and off. *Light House* chimes with the dynamics of presentation and display discussed in Gunning's essay, '*Now You See It, Now You Don't*', although the effect is less one of surprise than of disorientation.

In *Never Odd or Even* a live performer (again a double) interacts with his on-screen self, initially mimicking and then deviating from the other's actions. All of the action (live and filmed) takes place on or in front of a screen just large enough to contain both the performer and his double, visible from the waist up. The piece begins with the pair acting out a sequence of moves in which sheets of primary coloured paper are systematically moved and repositioned across the screen, resulting in secondary hues where coloured light overlaps material colour. As the action progresses, the substitution tricks employed by Meliés are here applied to exchanges between the two players, in other words between real and depicted space: a jacket is passed from the real to the filmed performer; a red silk is taken by the real actor from his double, made to disappear, and is then returned to him. These actions are, because of the nature of the projected image over (that is, physically on top of) the live performer, at certain times more or less visible to the spectator, at others the result of genuine sleight-of-hand. A tension is thus created between the apparent real-time event, and knowledge of the artifice that underpins it, together with an uncertainty as to the distinction between real-time tricks and those supplied by the camera. There is no linear narrative to the piece, rather a series of tableaux in which a sequence of actions, revelations and exchanges are played out. The final four minutes consists of an extended credit sequence, in mock homage to mainstream cinema, in which the filmed performer gradually shrinks in size in relation to his counterpart. The 'apotheosis' ending of early film is combined with a trope from classical cinema to provide a climax or denouement.

The role of the double here is that of the uncanny doppelganger, but also the unwitting mediator between audience and screen. This is a role that has traditionally been occupied by the dipsomaniac or drunk, as described by Rachel O. Moore in her analysis of ghost images in Norman Z. McLeod's film *Topper*, in which two drunks witness a pair of invisible ghosts move objects including a tyre and a wheel-jack:

> Outcasts from the film's plot, the drunken observers [...] mark the periphery of the film, the line between viewer and film, between reality and make-believe. They don't know it's only a movie; the viewer, on the other hand, knows better. The figure of the drunk is also a sort of wedge, easing open, albeit in a containable way, a porthole for the fantastical and the magical. [...] The drunks' amazement at seeing objects move of their own accord, of magic, weakens the sober viewer's reality resolve. We know the objects can't really move on their own, but we wish, ever so much, to see them do so.[252]

In *Never Odd or Even* the live performer only gradually becomes aware of his (filmed) double's existence, initially mimicking the other's actions in nonchalant fashion. His subsequent awareness and surprise now echoes that of the spectator, for whom he is mediator, but of whose presence he remains blithely unaware. These complex relays—of awareness and unawareness, knowledge and surprise, belief and disbelief—passing between audience, actor, and double, constitute the conceptual edifice of the piece, underpinning both its stylistically formal and theatrically anarchic elements.

Conclusion

The model of the moving image that my work seeks to elicit and perform is one in which its illusory and duplicitous characteristics are foregrounded. Gell's model of agency, in which abduction from an index is posited as elusive and unpredictable, provides a robust theoretical interpretation of cinema. The enchantment, or captivation, of which Gell speaks occurs when there is a resistance exerted by the artwork—what Gell calls a 'halo-effect of technical "difficulty"'—such that it might be construed as having come into the world magically; it is their 'becoming rather than being' that enchants.[253] Film achieves this through various means, but central to its power is the way in which its technical agency is uncoupled from its enchanting effect. Film as an index of agency is often uncertain, ambiguous, not only because of its reality effect, but due to the proliferation of doubles—its uncanny underside—which it produces.

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[252] Moore, *Savage Theory*, pp. 85-86.
[253] Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p. 166.

My video works attempt to bring the viewer up close to the technological mediation situated in the dark background that film adumbrates. They attempt to achieve this through fairly modest, technological means; in other words, by looking towards, and rejuvenating, some of the notionally simple tricks of early cinema in order to produce what I like to think of as 'muted spectacles'. In *Never Odd or Even*, the filmed character appears to have agency in his communications with his live double, even though we 'know' this cannot be the case. This exposure alerts us to the kinds of irrational responses that we constantly suppress, or sublate into a more normative, or commonsensical understanding of the cinematic experience.

> But we might wonder if another alternative is not laid out here, a deeply sensual art, certainly evocative of dreams and illusions, but which does not attempt to found a new religion or support an old mythology. Simultaneously popular in its address and yet often abstract in its forms, it plays with its audience causing sensations that resolve themselves into both fear and laughter. Unlike canonical high modernist art, this art is not overly concerned with objecthood, or even the materiality of the artwork. Rather, it manufactures machines and devices for shaping light and darkness, constantly aware that its true material lays less in its projections than in the sensual experience of its viewer. It seems to me to be a model that still has an uncanny hold on life. [254]

The phenomenon of doubling appears again in my next chapter, this time in the guise of mimicry or imitative behaviour. This forms part of my appraisal of enchantment in the context of what Alfred Gell has called 'cognitve traps', as a means of approaching a further strand of my practice—that of the conceptual conundrum.

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[254] Gunning, *Illusions Past and Future*, p. 16.
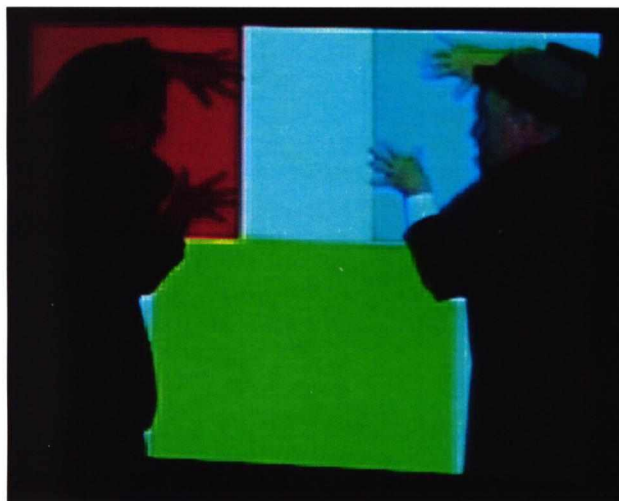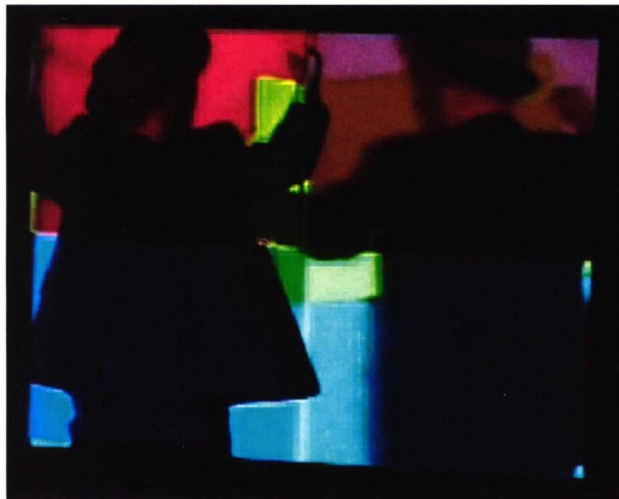
Figs. 12-17. Jonathan Gilhooly, *Never Odd or Even* (see appendix).
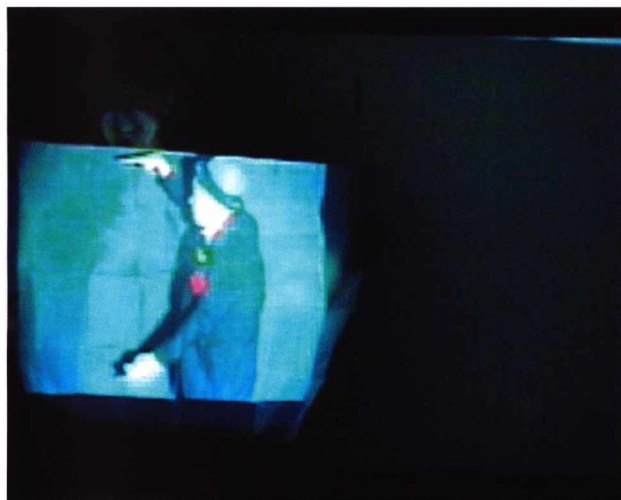
Chapter 4

Tricks and traps: the cognitive dissonance of word games

<u>Introduction</u>

In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell refers to the 'cognitive stickiness' of apotropaic art—patterns that protect against demons or other malevolent spirits. Apotropaic (literally, averting evil) patterns are such that their designs become objects of fascination for a hostile demon, who becomes caught up, hopelessly stuck within the complexity of its arrangement. Gell uses the specific example of Kolam, South Indian threshold designs, drawn freehand by women using lime, rice and other sorts of powder, and yielding complex topological figures whose manufactured trajectory is difficult to follow.

> On first inspection, it seems to consist of a single line, pursuing a complex, sinuous path between the rows and columns of dots. However, this is an illusion in that this *kolam* is actually composed of four continuous loops of asymmetric configuration, superimposed on one another while being rotated in 90-degree steps. This *kolam* is, so to speak, the visual equivalent of a canon in four parts, in which each voice sings the same notes but not in phase.[255]

Here Gell is using analogies of both music and mathematics to explore the structure and configuration of the pattern. It is a strategy echoing that of Douglas Hofstadter in *Godel, Escher and Bach*, in which he identifies the concept of 'strange loops', tangled hierarchies, each level of which may consist of objects or processes, and which is linked to at least one other by some type of relationship.[256] Hofstadter explores this concept throughout his book in an intermittent sequence of tripartite metalogues, within which the concept of the strange loop is materially imbricated. The difference is that while Hofstadter's loops are purely models of cognitive perception, illustrated through the—as he

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[255] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 85.
[256] Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, ([S.l.]: Harvester Press, 1979).

sees it—interrelated themes of mathematics, music and visual images, Gell's analogies are part of a broader endeavour to formulate an 'anthropological theory of visual art'.[257] It should be said that for Gell they also function as a means of indicating how abduction of agency might take place in the context of abstract or non-figurative images/indexes. However, what underpins each author's conceptual analysis is the notion of cognition as primary ontology: as Gell says 'the "technology of enchantment" approach [...] (which is the psychological aspect of the anthropology of art) conjoins a theory of social efficacy with considerations which, if not aesthetic, are definitely cognitive in nature, because *cognition and sociality are one*'.[258] (Italics added). This bringing together of cognition and sociality by Gell is key to the approach I wish to take in this chapter, in which I examine artworks and magic illusions that are inherently *trap-like* in Gell's sense of the term. Once again magical phenomena (this time, tricks-as-traps) are employed as a means of illuminating what I believe to be a salient characteristic of the artworks under appraisal. At times my experience as a spectator of magic has taken the form of a kind of cognitive dissonance, provisionally proposed here as paralleling, in certain respects, the form and function of Gell's cognitively 'sticky' patterns. Gell's extension of a cognitive-social dynamic to include a magical (in a broad sense) aspect is derived from Pascal Boyer's writings on the cognitive origins of religious and supernatural beliefs, and is an extension of Boyer's notion of intuitive ontology. Boyer argues for the idea of *cognitive constraints*, a kind of mental natural selection of certain types of representations 'more likely than others to be acquired and transmitted, thereby constituting those stable sets of representations that anthropologists call "cultures"'.[259] Instead of the tendency for magical or religious thinking to be understood as the product of a false or deluded system, it is construed here as part of a 'normal' inferencing process (or set of processes) of the mind.

In this chapter I employ two apparently distinct, but (I believe) actually related lines of enquiry as a means of tackling the apparently enigmatic or contradictory aspects of the artwork and of the magic act. Firstly, proceeding

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[257] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 1.
[258] Ibid, p. 75.
[259] Pascal Boyer, *Cognitive Constraints on Cultural Representations: Natural Ontologies and Religious Ideas*, in Mapping the Mind, eds. Lawrence Hirschfeld and Susan A. Gelman (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 391-411, (p. 391).

once again from Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, this time from two chapters entitled *The Critique of the Index* (that deals with patterns as traps), and *The Extended Mind*, respectively. Second, by employing an aspect of cognitive neuroscience concerned with accounting for the imitative tendencies of animal (human and non-human) subjects. Two inter-related themes emerge: the notion of the conundrum itself, and the concept of mimicry (as distinct from mimesis), both of which will be played out within this chapter. Returning to Gell's image of a preoccupied demon, I want to explore the possibility that this is an imitative tendency that itself mirrors the unconscious propensity, on the part of the spectator, to mirror (or at least to desire to mirror) the actions of the artist/magician through either the live performance, or the 'congealed' residue of the artwork.[260] This model might be conceptualized within a range of quotidian human activities—for example, the crossword puzzle solver who is re-tracing the intricate steps of the crossword puzzle setter.

Delayed transactions

The notion of cognitive traps, in Gell's terms, is explained as a 'cognitive stickiness'; elsewhere as 'demonic flypaper' (to describe apotropaic traps); he also makes frequent use of words such as 'tackiness', and 'viscosity'. Gell's persistent use of these treacly metaphors is very deliberate and is intended to suggest a sense of retardation or obstruction, but also of adhesion; this concept of stickiness derives in part from a Maussian notion of gifts as adhesive connections between donors and recipients.[261] It is also, however, articulated as a kind of weapon in contact with which an enemy (usually in demonic form) will become hopelessly trapped in its attempt to retrace the steps of the pattern's manufacture. Here the example of the Kolam comes into play, and Gell describes his own frustrated attempts mentally to disentangle the four interlaced drawn lines that make up the intricate patterns.

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[260]Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 68.
[261]Ibid, p. 84.

Here seeing the figure is quite distinct from being able to mentally intend the process of its construction. Yet we 'write in' the fact that it is *possible* to construct the figure, because here it is, it has been made by someone […]. So we end with a series of paradoxes. We want to see this figure as one continuous line, but we know it is four separate loops, which, however, we cannot separately abstract from the overall design. We know too that this design […] was made […] but we cannot retrace fully the process whereby the design came into the world, by the agency of this woman. [262]

Gell extends this interpretation to artworks in general, envisaging them as a special kind of cognitive trap, in which the viewer becomes ensnared.

Partly this comes from the spectator's inability mentally to rehearse the origination of the index from the point of view of the originator, the artist. The 'blockage' in cognition arises at the point when the spectator cannot follow the sequence of steps in the artist's 'performance' (the 'performance' which is objectively congealed in the finished work).[263]

In *Critique of the Index*, Gell expounds a detailed analysis of the index-as-pattern through an appraisal of non-representational decorative designs. He views decorative patterns as being a component of the technology of enchantment, inseparable from an artefact's more obviously functional attributes. Additionally, typologies of pattern variation can be analyzed in terms of their capacity to compel the viewer mentally to translate the notional shift of a motif (around a symmetrical plane), and consequently to induce a sense of animacy, so that 'agency and motion seem to inhere in the motifs themselves'.[264] That this is merely an illusion of movement is however mistaken, as it is not a purely subjective phenomenon: the sense of motion derives ultimately from our own agency, from the movement of our bodies and the saccades of our eyes. Gell goes into great detail in order to adumbrate this idea of complex patterns as somehow inducive of movement in the gaze of the beholder; what underpins his argument however, is the notion of 'complex patterns as unfinished business', the

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[262] Ibid, p. 86.
[263] Ibid, p. 71.
[264] Ibid, p. 78.

inexhaustibility of their potential to entrap and engage, to slow the perception of, the viewer.[265]

The 'cognitive stickiness' that Gell attributes to such patterns as the South Indian *Kolam*, in which the apotropaic motifs are drawn with rice powder trickled from the hand, is immediately reminiscent of the work of certain contemporary Western artists such as Bernard Frize and James Siena.[266] Frize's intricate paintings consist of polychromatic 'ropes' of pigment brushed into the wet resin-coated support and forming looped, recursive or braided patterns, which, through various means, index their own manufacture. One of these methods is employed in *Unimixte* (1999), one of a series of works in which a loaded brush is employed in a single, uninterrupted stroke until the paint is used up. The consequent gradual emaciation of colour clearly indicates both directionality and temporal origin. In spite of this, the longer we look at Frize's painting and attempt to retrace the path taken by the artist's brush, the more we become 'cognitively trapped' and ultimately unable mentally to recreate the process of its construction. The wonky linearity of Frize's patterns betrays their handmade-ness (in contrast to the imagistic quality of mass-produced patterns), thus eliciting the observer's desire to decode the history of their making. In fact *Unimixte* is a trick, the successful perpetration of which is due in part to our tendency to view artworks as the product of a single creative hand. Frize's paintings, conversely, are often the work of several participants or performers, moving in meticulously choreographed sequences, so that the painting emerges as the 'congealed residue' of their joint performance.[267]

> I imagine it's amusing to understand how it's made, and to reach out to the viewer in a game in which they can be involved. That's what I enjoy when I look at a painting anyway: understanding how it works, what was done, what happened, why it was made, etc.[268]

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[265] Ibid, p. 93.

[266] This notion of a traceable facture might easily be extended to incorporate artists who produce action-centered, or overtly gestural paintings, such as Jackson Pollock.

[267] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 68.

[268] Bernard Frize, interviewed by Irmeline Lebeer, in *Bernard Frize, Aplat*, Musée D'art Moderne De La Ville De Paris, 06.06-28.09.2003 (Paris: Paris musées, 2003), p. 92.

Frize's colours indicate purely relational distinction between hues, rather than being used in an overtly spatial or aesthetically 'balanced' manner. He is fastidious in his attempts to reduce the tonal or chromatic dominance of any single hue, thus assigning to colour the function of differentiating the various linear trajectories, later to be teased out by the viewer. The American artist James Siena creates drawings and paintings in which the unique configurations of complex figure/ground relationships possess a similarly idiosyncratic facture to those of Frize. In *Critique of the Index*, Gell analyses the phenomenon of figure/ground patterns in terms of their intractability, that we cannot quite grasp the relationship between the 'figure' and the 'ground': 'We experience this as a kind of pleasurable frustration; we are drawn into the pattern and held inside it, impaled as it were on its bristling hooks and spines. The pattern is a mind-trap.'[269] Siena's drawings evince this very complexity: they are glitched, algorithmic patterns whose amalgam of order and error entices us back to their surfaces, slowing down our perception as we attempt mentally to possess them fully.
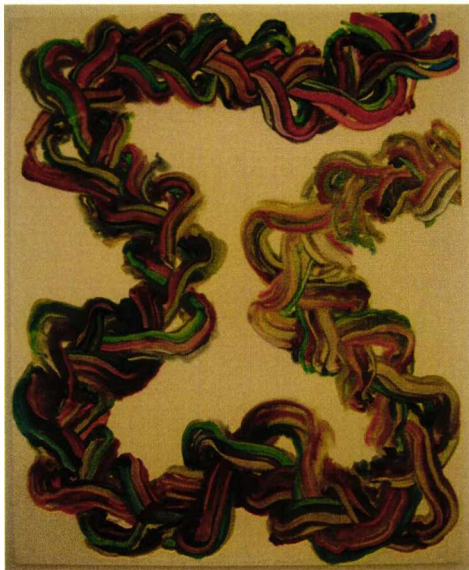

Fig. 18. Bernard Frize, Unimixte (1999).

Fig. 19. James Siena, Untitled (1999).

The *Critique of the Index* that Gell pursues in *Art and Agency* is effectively a kind of supplement to *Vogel's Net*, an earlier essay in which Gell

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[269] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 80.

deals directly with traps of a distinctly more recognizable sort. He discusses the ways in which animal traps are at once models of their creator (the hunter, *in absentia*), and the victim, in so far as they mimic aspects of the animal's behaviour in order to trap it. Gell explains: 'Traps are lethal parodies of the animal's *Umwelt* [self-centered world]. Thus the rat that likes to poke around in narrow spaces has just such an attractive cavity prepared for its last, fateful foray into the dark.'[270] The cleverer the animal, the more imaginative and laterally conceived must be the trap that ensnares it; so a chimpanzee—who will display curiosity, rather than running away like a 'dumb' animal—must have its intelligence engaged in a more functional way, in order to trap it. As well as describing actual animal traps Gell makes explicit reference to works of contemporary Western art: he discusses artworks by the British artist Damien Hirst—specifically his acclaimed 'shark in formaldehyde' (*The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*) from 1991, and *A Thousand Years* (1990) in which a decaying cow's head hatches maggots/flies, which are then zapped by a high-voltage flytrap.[271] These works are considered in relation to the (aforementioned) African hunting traps, which Gell describes as carriers of ideas and meanings, but also as 'transformed representations' of their makers and victims. Within the context of an imaginary exhibition of traps (the conceit within which Gell frames his essay), works by Western artists such as Hirst would both illuminate and become illuminated by their inclusion and proximity, occupying as they do, the same 'semiological territory'.[272] However, Gell also makes clear that *A Thousand Years* is, to all intents and purposes, a trap in the sense that he has already established—that it plays out a kind of fatalistic tragic-drama in which the victim's demise is inevitable:

> A trap within a trap, victims within a victim; as anthropologists we should be the first to recognize redundancy within the mythological code as a means of underlining the dialectical message, which in this case is to induce the spectator to identify him- or herself with the victims in this assemblage (the dead animal,

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[270] Alfred Gell, *Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps*, in Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, pp. 187-214, (p. 201).
[271] Gell incorrectly refers to it as a sheep's head.
[272] Gell, *Vogel's Net*, in Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p. 203.

the maggots, the flies) and at the same time with the vicious God who has set this rigmarole of a world in motion, the makers of traps, Hirst, you, me...[273]

It is in this essay that Gell mentions, in passing, a work by Marcel Duchamp that I think has particular significance: *Trébuchet*, a readymade from 1917, is an ordinary coat-rack that has been nailed to the floor. In 1953, Duchamp described this readymade in the following manner to Harriet Janis:

> A real coat hanger that I wanted at some time to put on the wall and hang my things on but I never did come to that – so it was on the floor and I would kick it every minute, every time I went out – I got crazy with it and I said the hell with it, if it wants to stay there and bore me I'll nail it down, and then the association with the Readymade came and it was that.[274]
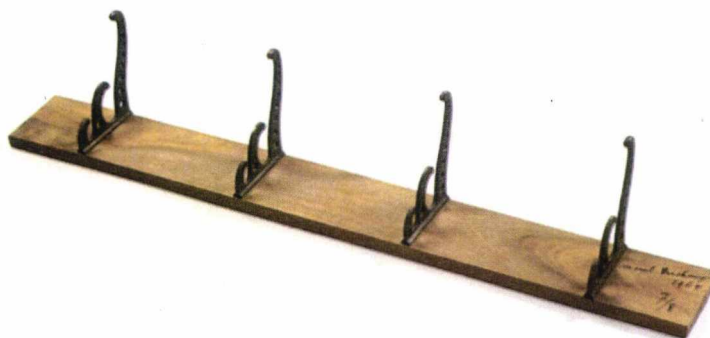
Fig. 20. Marcel Duchamp, *Trébuchet* (1917).

Trébuchet, is loosely translated as 'trap', but 'trebuchér', the verb, means to trip or stumble. There are three further possible meanings: a double-trayed scale for weighing gold and other metals, a bird trap, and a chess player's ruse for 'tripping

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[273] Ibid, p. 205.
[274] Interview with Sidney Janis, 1953, quoted in Anne and M. A. C. Shine D'Harnoncourt, *Marcel Duchamp*, and Kynaston Macshine, *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. by Anne D'harnoncourt and Kynaston McshineLondon: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 283.

up' his opponent.[275] Thierry de Duve describes it as three-dimensional word-play (recalling the work of Raymond Roussel, whose writing influenced Duchamp), but also makes oblique reference to the Zeuxis and Parrhasios fable: 'The birds caught in the trap are the viewers [...] who take this coat rack nailed to the floor for a real object when it is merely, thanks to its title, something placed on the aesthetic scale [...] for their attention.'[276] According to Gell's notion of the expanded connectedness of artworks and artefacts, *Trébuchet* functions as a 'thought-trap', set within a context (the gallery) which is itself, a place of fleeting captivity: 'and what is any art gallery but a place of capture, set with what Boyer calls "thought-traps", which hold their victims for a time, in suspension?'[277] Implicit in Duchamp's own description of this errant object is the idea of repetition ('I would kick it every minute, every time I went out'), immediately suggesting a certain comic tone reminiscent of slapstick comedy. A great part of the humour of slapstick (particularly in the early films of Laurel and Hardy, and Buster Keaton) lies in its repetitious inevitability: the knowledge that if something is there to trip over, then someone will trip over it—often over and over again. There is much of Duchamp's work, including *Trebuchet* and *Door: 11, Rue Larrey* (1927)—a door angled between two adjacent doorways—that implicates the viewer in an actual or mentally projected farcical engagement.

Might it be possible here to extrapolate Gell's notion of artworks as traps to the arcane arena of theatrical magic? It may be objected that the comparison of static, two or three-dimensional artworks, with magic routines that are inherently performative, is tenuous, in that they represent distinct areas of practice. However, as Gell points out, the act of drawing can usefully be considered as performative—analogous to dancing—the resulting artefact representing a 'kind of frozen residue of this manual ballet'.[278] This parallel becomes especially apposite for Frize's paintings (discussed earlier), where the choreographic nature of employing multiple executants is often a pre-requisite for their outcome. Even Duchamp's work can be thought of as performative: 'ontological transformations

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[275] Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 1996), p. 409. (Duchamp was a keen chess player).
[276] Ibid, p. 409. The story is that Zeuxis and Parrhasios, two 5th century (BC) Greek artists, held a contest to determine which was the greater artist: when Zeuxis unveiled his painting of grapes, they appeared so life-like and inviting that birds flew down from the sky to peck at them.
[277] Gell, *Vogel's Net*, in Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p. 213.
[278] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 95.

[...] forged through language, the performance itself a show of rhetorical tropes'.[279] A candidate for consideration here is what is thought possibly to be the oldest routine in magic, the 'cups and balls', in which a complex and perplexing sequence of moves is executed by the magician, during which the viewer is continually 'tripped-up' and led into a number of 'traps', or false assumptions. The apparent function of these moves is to dazzle or mesmerize the viewer, who then becomes caught up in, or captivated by them; in reality this pattern of manoeuvres conceals the real business of the routine, which is to get the balls (and often various other objects) under, and out from under the cups, without the audience seeing them. Even then the hapless spectator is not released from this particular trap, for the appearance, disappearance and displacement of balls was itself a ruse, a false ending: the real climax (the 'prestige') of the cups and balls, is one of scale. When we think the trick is over, the magician tips over the cups one final time, to reveal objects twice or three times the size of the original balls—limes, lemons, eggs, even live chicks, suddenly appear from underneath objects surely too small to have contained them in the first place. In each of the above examples the notion of a trap is not material—in that no one is 'physically' being trapped (apart from the chicks)—but cognitive.

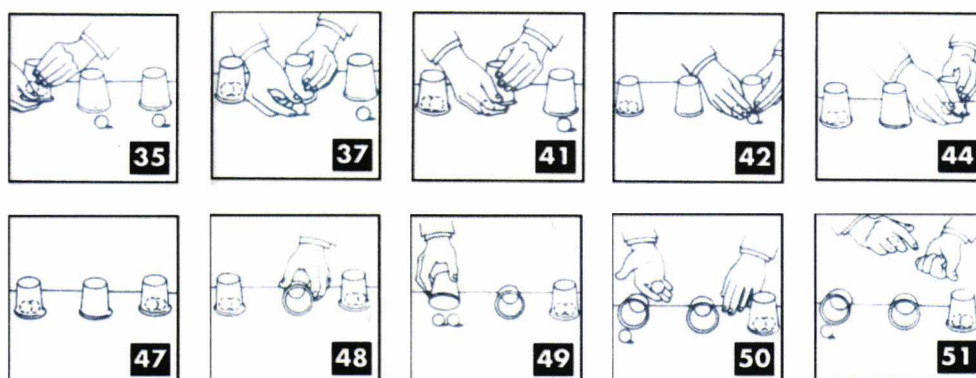Fig. 21. Cups and Balls magic routine, instructional illustration.

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[279] Gunnar Olsson, *Washed in a Washing Machine*, in Claudio Minca, *Postmodern Geography: Theory and Praxis*, (Oxford; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 255-281, (p. 261).

Word games and performatives

The sequence of pieces that I produced under the generic heading of *Incantations* were intended to function as an exploration of this notion of cognitive traps, but in this case as works which introduce language as a means of triggering certain kinds of dissonant responses in the viewer. There is a rich tradition of language being exploited for its ambiguity (puns, nonsense verse, word games, logical paradoxes), which, although sometimes regarded as trivial, seemed to me to be constitutive of the territory I had already been exploring.[280] Additionally, many artists associated with the tendency in art from the 1960s and 70s identified broadly under the rubric of 'Conceptual Art' (Joseph Kosuth, Mel Bochner, John Baldessari, Ian Burn and others), used language as a means of testing the relationship between art and ideas, between the percept and the concept. Ian Burn's 1970 work entitled *Looking Through a Piece of Glass* embodies this idea: it consists of a rectangular box-frame with glass panels at the front and sides, the back painted panel having the words LOOKING THROUGH A PIECE OF GLASS painted in white lettering. This of course is exactly what you are doing when you read the words, immediately conjoining the act of looking with the material qualities of the artwork. As Adrian Piper points out: 'you get this conflict between looking at the surface, looking through the surface, looking at yourself in the surface, and reading the text behind the surface, which refers you back to what's beyond the surface and which you can't possibly look at while you're reading the text.'[281] Furthermore, the work enacts an example of 'performative' linguistic phenomena; in Green and Lowry's essay *From Presence to Performative*, the authors draw upon J.L. Austin's 'Speech Act Theory', in which the philosopher of language distinguished between denotative statements, called constatives—'sentences which seemed to describe an event or matter of fact'—and performatives, which 'could best be described as actions rather than being decoded as meanings.'[282] Burn's piece certainly has a performative aspect, in so far as the viewer is acting out its message.

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[280] In the English language, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll and even James Joyce are examples of writers who indulged in wordplay.

[281] Adrian Piper, *Ian Burn's Conceptualism*, in Michael Corris, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 342-357 (p. 348).

[282] David Green and Joanna Lowry, *From Presence to the Performative:* in Green, PhotoWorks., and PhotoForum Inc., *Where Is the Photograph?* (pp. 47-60), p. 52.

The works that constitute *Incantations* took as their starting point the phrase VIEW FROM OTHER SIDE, this in turn originating in the many years spent giving lectures in which the visual component was provided via slide transparencies and projectors (these words often appear on the lower framing edge of one side of a slide transparency, as an indicator for positioning within the carousel). This ubiquitous instruction, familiar to anyone who has ever given a slide lecture, seemed to me to bring together language and vision in a dissonantly productive fashion. Possibly due to my own stumbling at these points of acute decision-making (I usually failed to remember which way round the slides should be positioned in the carousel), but also suspecting that here was a moment of cognitive irruption that might be 'universally' recognizable, I began to think about the possible connotations and implications of this experience. Subsequently I made a large-scale installation drawing, in response to the difficulties of negotiating a shop-door whose sign read 'push' on one side, and 'pull' on the other; this straightforward directive was complicated by the simple fact that the door itself was made of glass, thereby creating a momentary disjunction in what would otherwise have been an 'invisible', cognitive operation. Once again I am able to invoke Heidegger's equipment or tool model here, for this simple negotiation of a door is one that he specifically mentions: 'When we enter here through the door, we do not apprehend the seats, and the same holds for the doorknob.'[283] Michael Wheeler, in his proposal for a Heideggerian model of cognitive science, refers to this example of 'smooth coping' that becomes disrupted, for example, when the door is stuck and the doorknob suddenly irrupts into 'conspicuousness'; it ceases to be phenomenologically invisible.[284] The work that I produced in response to this experience of negotiating the door (*Untitled*, 2003), consisted of an 8' x 8' free-standing gallery display board with the word 'PUSH' drawn, in reverse, across the width of its upper half.[285] In order to further complicate the reading, the letters themselves were outlined, as a negative, by their own implied, thrown shadow, thereby treating them as if they were physical objects. The three-dimensional display board itself also had to be negotiated by

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[283] Wheeler, *Reconstructing the Cognitive World*, p. 131.
[284] Ibid, p. 138.
[285] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Untitled*, (2003), shown in *Hung, Drawn and Quartered*, an exhibition of drawing at Phoenix Gallery, Brighton, (see appendix).

the visitor to the gallery, as it partially blocked access to the main space, resulting in a kind of re-enactment of my original experience with the door.

The recent pieces *View from other side*, take a similar approach to text/language as provisional and pliable. Specifically the word 'view' acts as both verb and noun, transforming the phrase from command to statement (or vice versa). When originally shown the pieces were hung in doorways, thus alluding to the original function of apotropaic traps as threshold devices. Like the 'Push' drawing, they display lettering as negative and (literally) 'cut out'; the letters themselves are reversed, although the phrase is not, meaning that, in spite of an inkling that it might be readable from the 'other side', it is actually illegible from both. Another piece in this group of works situated the phrase, as a cut-out negative, in front of a letter-box shaped mirror; the normal expectation that the words would be reversed is confounded by their appearance as an echo, thereby implying infinite regression and the impossibility of ever fulfilling the implicit instruction.[286] Another work, *Double Bind*, extends this idea through a combination of mirrors and glass tumblers.[287] Recalling the formal arrangement of the 'Cups and Balls' routine, *Double Bind* positions three groups of two glass tumblers in such away that each pair supports a rectangular mirror or sheet of glass at a forty-five degree angle. [288] The tumblers contain objects such as red balls or limes, but as the viewer moves around the piece some of these objects disappear and reappear owing to the confusing nature of the symmetrical reflections. Once again, as in *View from other side*, the agency of the spectator is elicited in producing the meaning of the work itself.

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[286] Jonathan Gilhooly, *View from other side*, (2008).

[287] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Double Bind* (2007), shown at Grey Area, Brighton.

[288] Gregory Bateson formulated the concept of double-binding in conjunction with an investigation of mental disorders such as schizophrenia. However, he also acknowledged that it could occur in 'normal' circumstances, especially in 'play, humor, poetry, ritual and fiction'. The clearest illustration of the double bind occurs in humour or comedy: in his book *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler expounds a theoretical basis for comedy based on the notion of the double bind, although he terms it *bisociation*. Koestler's notion of bisociation focuses on a structural dissection of this particular phenomenon, whereas Bateson's concept of double bind concentrates on what happens within an existential engagement with cognitive dissonance.
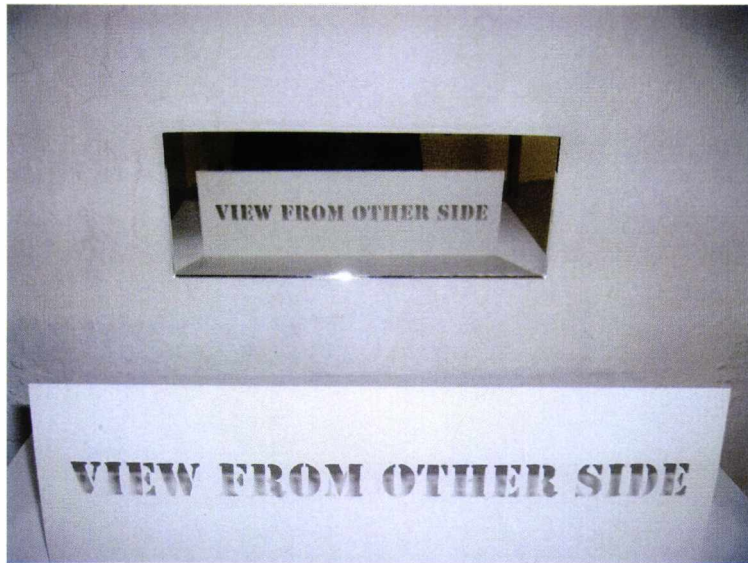
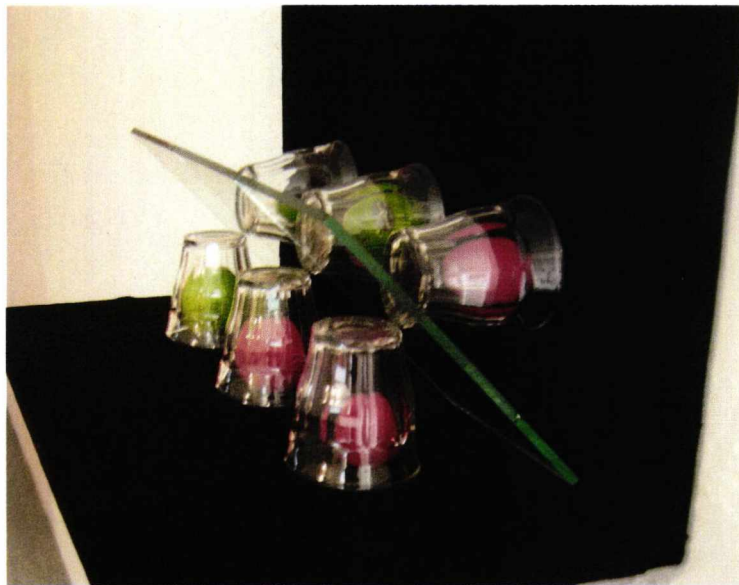Fig. 22. Jonathan Gilhooly, *View from other side* (2008).

Fig. 23. Jonathan Gilhooly, *Double Bind* (2007).

The aim of these drawings was to activate the viewer in such a way that he would be impelled to move around the work in order to see the 'other side'; finding himself in an effective double bind, he would be unable to extricate himself, or to

find a 'solution' to the apparent conundrum. Furthermore the phrase itself is intended to conjure up associations of witchcraft and the supernatural: 'the other side' is the side of the spirit world, and therefore alludes to a late 19th century preoccupation with visuality as being somehow consonant with the hidden world, with the world of spirits.[289] The 'other side' is therefore both symbolic and geographical in so far as the viewer might imagine another (metaphorical) side at the same time as physically moving to an opposite viewing position. As with the Ian Burn piece, the spectator is here acting out in the manner of his response, the tacit instruction at the heart of the work. This returns us to Gell's 'apotropaic' patterns, and to a component of his argument not yet fully addressed: that the viewer (whether demon or human spectator) can be conceived of as a mimic of previously articulated actions. This concept of mimicry, or mirroring, is not only consonant with Gell's concept of agency, it also articulates a central tenet of modern neuroscientific research, wherein a possible cognitive basis for the social tendency for mimicry or imitative behaviour has been identified.

Mirrors and Mimicry

In his book, *Making Up The Mind*, neuropsychologist Chris Frith talks about what he sees as the very real phenomenon of mind over matter, in so far as it manifests itself in our own everyday experience of lifting our fingers, hand, or arm in order to carry out an action.[290] We respond, he asserts, to the agency of others in the same way that we respond to our own agency; this is a view of agency that has emerged from a relatively new hybrid discipline, that of social neuroscience. Frith argues that our knowledge of the world of other minds is created in the same way for each of us as our knowledge of the world 'out there'. We acquire this knowledge by observing how others act (are agents) within and upon the world.

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[289] This is similar to the description in the previous chapter, of the employment of photography (in the 19th century) as a means of securing belief in the spirit world; i.e. as a scientific affirmation of that which previously had been unverifiable.

[290] Christopher D. Frith, *Making up the Mind: How the Brain Creates Our Mental World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p.152. Frith quotes a literary passage: 'She raised her hand and flexed its fingers and wondered, as she had sometimes before, how this thing, this machine for gripping, this fleshy spider on the end of her arm, came to be hers, entirely at her command.' (From Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.)

According to Boyer's notion of intuitive ontological categories, we intuitively infer different types of movement (a leaf blown by the wind, a human hand gesture) in terms of intentional agency, cause and effect.[291]   Although simple recognition (that a particular object is a cat, rather than a tree) 'does not give us access to the mental world of beliefs and intentions', observing the intentional movement of a cat (or a person) *can* tell us something about those worlds.[292]   In *Echo Objects* Barbara Maria Stafford compares recent experiments in functional brain imaging (fMRI) with the Romantic insight that 'individuals, things, and scenes constitute a resonating system'; in other words, that 'mind' can become diffused or extended into its environment.[293]   In the chapter *Mimesis again!* Stafford invokes the phenomenon of mirror neurons as a basis for the discussion of mimetic behaviour.   Mirror neurons were experimentally postulated by the Italian neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti, whilst observing brain activity in Macaque monkeys; particular neurons became activated not only when the monkeys made certain kinds of movements (eg, grasping an object), but also when they observed other monkeys, or even humans, making the same kind of gesture.   For Stafford, the concept of mirror neurons helps to return mimesis 'to its rightful esthetic significance after a long poststructuralist hiatus', in that it challenges certain assumptions that have emerged through a prioritizing of language as the 'royal road to the knowledge of other minds'.[294]

The evidence for mirror neurons is by no means overwhelming, and opposing experimental data has also been produced.[295]   More importantly perhaps, as Chris Frith has argued, 'people and their brains are rarely found in isolation.   Isolation is bad for them.   The human brain is exquisitely tuned for interaction with other people.'[296]   This qualification by Frith helps to curb what might otherwise have constituted a fairly reductive, positivist interpretation of mirror neurons (that they are purely 'brain-centered' phenomena), and instead positions them within a more socially oriented model of mind as extended and

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[291] Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts That Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors,* (London: Heinemann, 2001), (pp. 69 & 132).
[292] Frith, *Making up the Mind,* p141.
[293] Stafford, *Echo Objects,* p. 90.
[294] Daniel Clement Dennett, *Kinds of Minds: Towards an Understanding of Consciousness,* Science Masters (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), p. 13, cited in Stafford, Echo Objects, 75-76.
[295] Ilan Dinstein et al., *'Executed and Observed Movements Have Different Distributed Representations in Human aIPS',* J. Neurosci., 28 (2008), 11231-39.
[296] Frith, *Making up the Mind,* p.187.

distributed. I recognize however that I will need to tread carefully here: the adoption of neurological evidence (for the existence of mirror neurons) into the sphere of philosophy (*pace* Wheeler and others) is itself complex and diverse, yielding subtly nuanced and contending variations on the theme of extended mind. However, what I intend in deploying these ideas is that they can be seen provisionally to underpin the more anthropologically oriented definitions of 'mind' in a generically plausible manner; it is therefore not necessary for me to get involved in the minutiae of internal arguments concerning mirror neurons, in order to justify their inclusion. Having said that, the ideas of Andy Clark and Michael Wheeler do seem to be those that most closely converge with Gell's. Clark, whose radical hypothesis of extended cognition favours a 'coupled system[…] comprising neural, bodily and worldly elements', uses the example of what he calls 'thoughtful gestures', bodily movements that accompany verbal communication, suggesting that, rather than being merely expressive, these might play 'some kind of active causal role in thinking'. [297] Like Stafford, Clark also invokes the example of mirror neurons, citing David McNeil's suggestion that our own gestures activate 'the part of the brain that responds to intentional actions, including gestures, by someone else, and thus treats one's own gestures as a social stimulus'.[298] For Wheeler, cognitive processes can incorporate extra-somatic components (such as notebooks and computers), with which the subject extends his cognition into the world 'out there'. These ideas, it seems to me, clearly converge with Alfred Gell's notion of mind as something extended and distributed. Gell's concept of the extended mind is itself an extension of the idea of distributed personhood to which I referred in the previous chapter; Gell sees an '*isomorphy of structure* between the cognitive processes we know (from the inside) as "consciousness" and the spatio-temporal structures of distributed objects in the artefactual realm', and correspondingly that our 'inner personhood seems to consist of replications of what we are externally'. With these ideas in mind, it might now be possible to conceptualize some of the text works referred to earlier, such as *view from other side*, as eliciting a unified, coupled response, incorporating mind, vision, language, body and world.

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[297] Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 113, & p.123.
[298] Ibid, p.128.

In similar vein art historian David Freedberg has commented on the capacity for viewers of paintings mentally to reconstruct bodily gestures from their visible traces as painted marks:

> even the artist's gestures in producing the art work induce the empathetic engagement of the observer, by activating simulation of the motor program that corresponds to the gesture implied by the trace. The marks on the painting or sculpture are the visible traces of goal-directed movements.[299]

Freedberg's description (above) might well be seen to support a Gellian analysis of the kind I made earlier in relation to the paintings of Bernard Frize; arguably it is less convincing for more overtly figurative works in which evidence of the 'trace' might be muted or less significant. However, from the point of view of my argument this kind of mimetic or empathetic activity has a more straightforward 'you do as I do' significance: in magic the magician fakes symmetrical responses (nods of the head, eye movements) in order to dissimulate his intentions. In other words the viewer can be fooled into a false sense of empathy with the magician. A good example of this is the tense-relax strategy employed to great effect by Tony Slydini; the Italian magician exploited the way that an audience will tend to mirror or echo the body language of the performer, thereby enabling him to predict when attention will be at its most acute, and when it will be less critical.[300] In the realm of visual art, Barbara Stafford has commented on the series of 'Museum' photographs by German artist Thomas Struth, in which viewers are depicted as unconsciously mimicking the compositional orientation of the paintings in front of which they stand.

> His Gallery series illuminates how socially diverse and entropically scattered modern viewers, standing in the world's great museums, unconsciously align themselves with schemata implicit in the painting on the wall that they are beholding. A telling case is the group of tourists diagonally fanning out in front of Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, mimicking and so internalizing the compact

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[299] David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, *Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience*, in Trends in Cognitive Sciences, (Volume 11, Issue 5, May 2007), pp. 197-203, (p. 202).
[300] Slydini would 'carry out the method while relaxing in a chair, with the effects created while leaning forward'. Gustav Kuhn, *'Towards a Science of Magic'*, (p. 350).

triangular structure of this natural and human disaster until it gets lodged in the bone.[301]

The fact that this feature may be a by-product of Struth's intentions does not undermine the saliency of Stafford's analysis; the observations she makes are undeniably features of the photographs' compositional structure.

It seems worth commenting briefly on the use of the word 'mirror' to describe these neurologically-driven theories: mirrors lie at the heart of magical illusionism, in fact Barbara Stafford herself describes the mirror as 'that absolute (optical) device [...] from which all the others in one way or another subtend'.[302] The presence of actual mirrors in artworks immediately suggests and embodies a problematized relation with reality—we see ourselves, seeing. For the observer however, this can present the possibility of a rejuvenated engagement with original material. In Mark Wallinger's video work, *Regard a Mere Mad Rager* (1993), we see a clip of British comedian Tommy Cooper performing a quick-change routine, which sees him putting on and taking off a series of hats.[303] The title of the piece is, in fact, a palindrome, and the video-tape itself is played backwards—the video monitor visible only as a reflection in a large mirror. This displacement of the material has the effect of defamiliarizing it, in spite of the image of Cooper himself being utterly familiar to a British audience. In viewing the work we find ourselves attempting to regain familiarity by endeavouring to reconstitute the backward-running commentary, or at least our memory of it. In an impromptu recent work in response to Anish Kapoor's *Sky Mirror*, I mimicked the form of the original sculpture (a three metre-diameter, tilted concave mirror) by producing a miniaturized replica.[304] The site of Kapoor's piece (a public gardens) was thought to necessitate the use of both a protective cordon and a security guard, consequently making both the work and its normally public location oddly inaccessible. It seemed to me that the senses of touch and sight had been unwittingly and provocatively brought together by this prohibitive act, the strictures of 'do not touch' becoming all but synonymous with 'do not look'. This, and *Sky Mirror's* circular form, immediately recalled the polished shield

[301] Stafford, *Echo Objects*, p.38.
[302] Ibid, p.126.
[303] Mark Wallinger, *Regard a Mere Mad Rager*, shown in CON ART, at Site Gallery, Sheffield (2002).
[304] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Empyrean Speculum*, installation as part of 2009's Brighton Festival.

worn by Perseus as an aid to killing the Gorgon, Medusa; as gazing directly at the Medusa would have resulted in instant death, Perseus used his shield as a reflective device to enable him to look upon, and so defeat her. My own piece, *Empyrean Speculum*, was sited close to the Kapoor work, complete with its own tiny fence and faux-security guard. In spite of the larger mirror's intended purpose to reflect the sky, it was evident that the majority of people wanted to get up close in order to see their own reflections, which they were more easily able to do with the miniature version.[305] *Empyrean Speculum* functioned as a reflection, literally and metaphorically, of *Sky Mirror*, by mimicking its form, and thereby exposing some of the (partially concealed) circumstances of its installation.

That developments in neuroscience have led to the articulation of ideas around agency that seem uncannily close to those theorized by anthropologists such as Gell, is interesting for a number of reasons, not least because some of the technological paraphernalia used by scientists are similar to those used by magicians. Chief amongst these are, appropriately enough, mirrors. The neurologist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran has investigated the phenomenon of 'phantom limbs', in patients who have lost a limb through amputation. Most patients with phantom arms feel that they can move their phantoms, but in many the phantom is fixed or paralyzed, often in a cramped position that is excruciatingly painful. In order to overcome what he postulated as a 'learned' paralysis, Ramachandran created the mirror box in which a mirror is placed vertically in front of the patient, who then looks at the mirror reflection of the normal arm so that the reflection is optically superimposed on the felt location of the phantom (thus creating the visual illusion that the phantom has been resurrected). Remarkably if the patient now moved his normal hand while looking at the reflection, he not only saw the phantom move (as expected) but felt it to move as well. In some patients this seemed to abolish the pain in the phantom; In others the phantom disappeared entirely—along with the pain—for the first time in years.[306] In *I Am Anagram*, the artist Aura Satz uses the exact

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[305] Viewers were mimicking the manner of their desired interaction with the larger, less accessible work.
[306] Ramachandran, VS, *'A Journey to the Centre of Your Mind'*, in *TED: ideas worth spreading*, ed. by TED, (USA, 2007).

Fig. 24. V.S. Ramachandran, 'phantom hand', mirror experiment.

same set up to explore the connection between a tradition of violence and dismemberment in aspects of the magic act, and the use of magic props (mirrors, etc) within the discipline of neuroscience—this time to opposite effect, that is, to recreate integrity where there is loss. The work constitutes an 'interactive performative sculptural installation, a complex kaleidoscopic mirror box of sorts, which audience members are guided through and into, one by one'.[307]

> *I Am Anagram* explores the concept of the Exquisite Corpse both literally and metaphorically. The new anatomy that results from illusion is conjured through the joint authorship of interior phenomenological experience of body-image and exteriorized spectatorship, a sense of being at once within and without one's self. This is extreme close-up magic; inner, interiorized, incarnate magic, which can be, to the actual sufferer, a terrifying pandemonium. Throughout the show, the cabinet will become an accumulative repository full of the phantom limbs of its participants.[308]

Satz work also explores the concept of 'displaced agency', when the binding together of the cause and effect of an action is undone in some way. This is

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[307] Explanatory text from Aura Satz, *I am anagram*, (2005). Interestingly, Ramachandran has also used phantom limbs to explore the perceptual correlates of the mirror neuron system in humans.
[308] Ibid.

precisely what is happening to Ramachandran's patients, who feel the effect of pain in missing limbs, without the concomitant cause.

I am now able to re-position my video/performance work *Never Odd or Even*, (referred to in the previous chapter) in the context of these ideas around extended agency. In the video a live performer appears to mirror the actions of his filmed double; this doubling function gradually disintegrates as the protagonist becomes aware of his own unique agency, as separate from that of his co-conspirator. Much of the meaning of the work derives from the way in which the viewer becomes inured to distinctions between flesh and blood actor and his two-dimensional doppelganger, the two of them interacting in ways that are clearly staged, but seem fluid and natural. What I am proposing here is that the ability for the live performer in this piece to respond naturally to his filmed double, goes beyond the limits of rigorous rehearsal (timing, coordination of movements, etc); rather there is an element of 'thoughtful gesturing', and empathetic response to gestures, that occurs between the performer and his double. The video documentation of the performance reveals a great deal of unconscious mimicry (head movements, eye contact, hand gestures) that seems to go beyond the structural mirroring already built into the format of the piece. Moreover, the audience is able to respond knowingly to these exchanges—aware of the work's constructedness, but simultaneously caught up in the complex symmetrical 'dance' that these two agents perform in front of them.

Summary

How do the theoretical concepts I have employed in this chapter—Gell's cognitive traps, Heidegger's 'unreadiness-to-hand', and the neuroscientific concept of mirror neurons—come together to form a productive appraisal of my chosen material? I believe that it is possible to regard the scientific concept of mirror neurons in such a way that it helps to throw light upon and reinforce Gell's 'extended mind' theory. This in turn aids a particular interpretation of artworks that positions them as part of a network within which the viewer is (cognitively) trapped. The *kolam*, or threshold designs described by Gell are created with the specific intention of *fooling* the malevolent demon; the implicit suggestion here is

that, in many parts of the world demons, although powerful, are also (deemed to be) stupid.[309] The demon has certain human characteristics attributed to it (sight, movement, agency), but not others (intelligence, humour). Human agents on the other hand, are able to *enjoy* the experience of becoming cognitively ensnared— can find it challenging, frustrating, even funny. They can also (unlike the demon) have a kind of meta-awareness of their own trapped state, whether via a malfunctioning doorknob, a complex abstract pattern, or a bewildering magic routine, thus being momentarily ousted from their normative 'smooth-coping' condition. Furthermore, the points raised in relation to pieces such as *View from other side* reveal a response to artworks which is not simply about looking at them, but about engaging with them visually and bodily, even (unconsciously) mimicking the vestigial intimations of their agency. In the final chapter I look more closely at the 'materiality' of the artwork itself, and as a category of enchanted object.

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[309] Boyer, *Religion Explained*, p. 9.

Chapter 5

Enchanted Objects, Objects of Enchantment

Introduction

In *Mirror Ball* (2008), the spectator enters an apparently empty white gallery space. On closer inspection there is a small aperture in the centre of the far wall, situated at roughly head height, and approximately one centimetre in diameter.[310] The view through this aperture reveals a small room that can be glimpsed behind the gallery wall; close to the back of this space stands a white plinth on top of which sits a mirrored cube that is open on three sides. Floating inside this cube— moving erratically up and down and from side to side—without any visible means of support, is a crumpled ball of white paper. The ostensible lack of support for the ball of paper is reinforced by its complete visibility, via the agency of the mirrored cube, which enables the spectator to see it from all sides. At the same time at least part of the space in which this installation stands is also visible: the top half of the plinth (assuming that the floor is on the same level as the one on which the spectator stands), the back wall situated just behind the plinth, and what appears to be the front wall thrown back in the complex configuration of reflections from the mirrors themselves. Something else also appears in these reflections: a small shelf of some sort (the brackets are clearly visible) that appears to support a flat rectangular object and narrow horizontal bar, the exact position of which are difficult to ascertain, but which seem to constitute a contraption that is somehow central to the performance of the whole effect.

In a companion piece, *A Crumpled Ball of Paper Floating on the Breath of the Artist* (2008), a life-size video projection is positioned low on the gallery wall.[311] The film depicts the head and chest of a recumbent figure blowing gently at a crumpled ball of paper, which floats just above his face, apparently rising and falling in rhythm to the exhalations of his breath. For the 90 second duration of

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[310] Jonathan Gilhooly, *Mirror Ball*, (2008). See appendix.
[311] Jonathan Gilhooly, *A Crumpled Ball of Paper Floating on the Breath of the Artist*, (2008). See appendix.

the video the camera remains static, and there are objects visible at the periphery of the image: at the lower left corner is a single plug socket, with plug inserted and a lead trailing out of the lower edge of the picture; at the top right corner of the screen the portion of a laminated sign of some sort can be clearly seen, its lower left-hand corner tacked to the wall with a single, white drawing pin.

In both of these works the viewer is presented with a limited but significant amount of visual information—information that simultaneously conceals and reveals. The visual cues presented appear to reinforce a particular kind of reading, one that emphasizes the normative relationship between the viewing position of the spectator and the structural orientation of the work itself. At the same time, there is not enough visual data to substantially explain or justify the phenomenon apparently taking place in each piece of work—that of a ball of paper, floating impossibly in mid-air. In fact each work produces its phenomenological effect in a roughly similar way, firstly by rotating the image seen through 90 degrees. In the video work this was achieved at the filming stage, by tilting the camera on its side so that the (actual) seated, upright figure appears
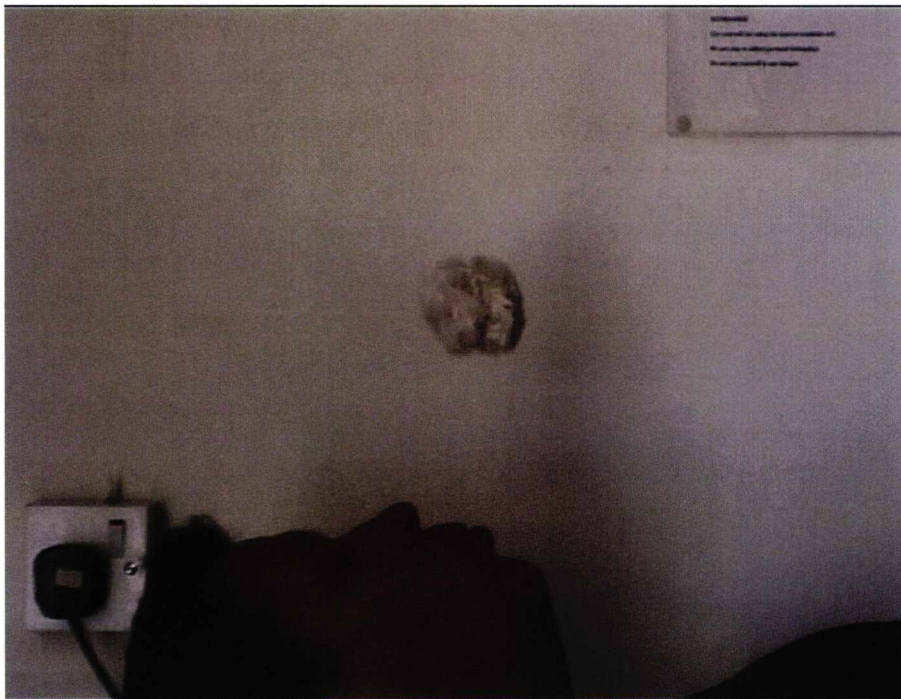

Fig. 25. Jonathan Gilhooly, *Crumpled Ball of Paper floating on the Breath of the Artist* (2008).

to be lying on his back. The plug socket at the lower left of the image has been fixed at a 90-degree, clockwise angle from its normal position so that, when viewed through the tilted camera, it appears the right way up and in the correct position and orientation for a plug socket. This still does not account for the ability of the ball of paper to float: this was achieved with the use of *invisible thread*, an extremely fine, single filament nylon fibre used by magicians, and which, under the proper lighting conditions, is virtually impossible to see. Acute and sustained scrutiny might actually discover this thread, but, because of the 90-degree tilt, it is no longer attached to the ball of paper from the point at which the viewer would expect to find it (i.e. suspended vertically), but horizontally from the side, so that its invisibility is, so to speak, doubly assured. *Mirror Ball* works according to similar principles: a sheet of mirrored glass directly behind the viewing aperture is angled at 45 degrees, making the plinth and mirrored cube—which are actually lying horizontally on the floor—appear as if standing vertically at the back of the space. Again, invisible thread is used to suspend the ball of paper, whose bobbing movement is caused by a small fan, just outside the spectator's line of sight. Because the angle of the thread is perpendicular to the spectator's sight line, once again its invisibility is reinforced. In this piece, even though the apparatus for realizing the illusion is notionally visible in the mirrored cube (the shelf, brackets and bar referred to above), its presence is not enough to counter the strength of an intuitively normative reading of the visual information being offered. In other words, the illusion of a 'normal' reading is absolute even when the spectator *knows* (or is able to deduce) how it has been achieved. Both of these pieces present a recognizable object—the ball of paper—as simultaneously banal and magical.[312]

In this chapter I want to examine the role and status of the art object and the magic object from two related positions: firstly Alfred Gell's notion of art as a 'technology of enchantment', in which he positions the artwork as a specific category of object the nature of which is unpredictable, and that can exercise, or be treated as exercising, social agency. As a supplementary argument I propose that the orthodox notion of artistic 'influence' might be re-calibrated, in terms of

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[312] Another work, *Spinning Playing Card* (2008), uses the same strategy by appearing to show a card spinning close to the ceiling via the agency of a small fan. Once again, the entire apparatus has been filmed upside-down. (See appendix).

Gell's theory, as the abduction of agency through a causal chain of sympathy and contagion. Thus the connections between works of other artists (often consciously adopted) and my own can be accounted for in a manner consonant with the theoretical framework; this will also enable me to set out a speculative interpretation of the way in which art objects acquire positions (culturally and historically) within a (putatively taxonomic) network of relations. Second, by way of a material culture analysis (derived principally from Henare, Holbraad and Wastell's *Thinking through Things*), I will introduce the idea that objects (or things) might be considered synonymous with their significatory power: this second approach treats things *as if* they embodied their representational concepts, rather than seeking to explain them through (western) orthodox, *analytical* means.[313] These two approaches form a mutually constitutive analysis of the art object and of the magic object, in so far as these can be viewed first of all as possessing agency (as opposed to a more normative 'neutral' status of awaiting the impact of some external agency), and secondly as *embodying* concepts (as opposed to representing or symbolizing them). The object that provides the nexus of these theoretical approaches within this chapter, is the magic object or 'prop'; I intend to deploy the magic 'prop', as an ontologically problematic and indeterminate object, in order to illuminate certain characteristics of the postmodern art object.

Object agency and enchantment

In Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of art, *Art and Agency*, art objects are conceptualized, not as objects of an aesthetic gaze, but as material indexes of agencies that are able to trigger *abduction* in viewers. Gell's notion of abduction is not a theory of causal inference, but of inferred intentionality, itself drawn from what he sees as an innate tendency to attribute social agency whenever we encounter effect. The important—and somewhat counter-intuitive—issue here is the power that Gell ascribes to objects which, though non-biological, might be

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[313] Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, (London: Routledge, 2007).

construed as *animate* within particular social contexts. In other words, things can have agency imputed to them, whether this be the little girl's doll who becomes an effective family member, or the car that is chastised by its owner for having the temerity to break down at an inconvenient moment (both are examples given by Gell).[314] Gell deals with the potential objections to this account of agency (that non-biological 'things' cannot have intentions) by appealing to the fact that human agency is always exercised within an already causally active material world: 'unless there is some kind of physical mediation which always does exploit the manifold causal properties of the ambient physical world [...] agent and patient will not interact.'[315]

Gell also defines captivation or enchantment, as a process in which the spectator becomes trapped (cognitively) within the index (artwork) because, as he says 'the index embodies agency which is essentially indecipherable'.[316] Gell seems mainly to attribute this indecipherability to the disparity of powers between artist and spectator (which we—that is 'we' within the Western tradition—might attribute to inspiration, or artistic genius), in so far as the spectator is unable to trace the path of technical processes by which the transformation from raw material to finished product has been effected.[317] He uses the example of Vermeer, whose technical virtuosity frustrates the attempts of the spectator to trace the origins of his paintings, in spite of perhaps understanding, on some level, how a painting is made. The origination of the artwork is therefore blocked or occluded, and the spectator is left, as Gell himself explains, 'suspended between two worlds; the world in which I ordinarily live, in which objects have rational explanations and knowable origins, and the world adumbrated in the picture and which defeats explanation.'[318] Gell equates western notions of inspiration or genius with the magical efficacy of so-called primitive societies, and although he stresses the idea of technical virtuosity (as in the Vermeer painting), he is willing to extend this category beyond its purely mimetic function to include modern artists such as Duchamp, in whose work little or no skill (in the conventional

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[314] Gell, *Art and Agency*.
[315] Ibid, p. 20
[316] Ibid, p. 71
[317] Gell also makes clear that the technology of enchantment is a technology of persuasion: 'the art-system contributes to securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed'. Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p.163.
[318] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 69.

sense) is evident, and whose transformation of materials may be conceptually and contextually defined rather than technically, but the effect of which is still beyond the intellectual grasp of the viewer. (This could be described as the paradigm of much late modern and postmodern art, which has become self-reflexive, and which provides, at least in part, a critique of its own 'grounding'.) Gell had previously identified 'magical technology' as a model for the efficacy of works of art in his essay *The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology*; he describes enchantment and technology, broadly speaking, as being mutually constitutive: 'The power of art objects stems from the technical processes they objectively embody: the *technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*. The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form.'[319] He continues:

> What really characterizes art objects is the way in which they tend to transcend the technical schemas of the spectator, his normal sense of self-possession, then we can see that there is a convergence between the characteristics of objects produced through the enchanted technology of art and objects produced through the enchanted technology of magic, and that, in fact, these categories tend to coincide. [320]

Gell also describes magic as an ideal technology, a standard against which 'all productive activities are measured': it is when something appears effortless that it most closely converges towards this magic touchstone.

How might the notion of inferred intentionality be applied to magic objects? Theatrical magic, with its somewhat degraded cultural status, is arguably tolerated only in its representation as entertainment, within the technological framework of what Simon During calls the 'magic assemblage'.[321] Yet its central project is concerned with the severing of normal cause and effect events—objects

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[319] Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p. 163. This definition of enchantment is a more specific one than that supplied by Jane Bennett in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, as a state of wonder, a 'moment of pure presence'. Bennett's description of the experience of enchantment is closer to a Freudian definition, an '*unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition'. She also alludes to the etymological roots of the words 'wonder' and 'enchantment' as, respectively 'smile' and 'sing' (chant). (Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*).
[320] Ibid, p. 181.
[321] During, *'Modern Enchantments: An Interview with Simon During'*, p. 69.

appear, vanish, levitate, are transformed, etc—and these inherently transgressive acts push at the edges of the theatrical frame, threatening to disrupt its stabilizing presence. The historical propensity for (faked) violence in the magic act is well documented: from P.T. Selbit's ambulances and buckets of blood, serving as gory pre-performance side-shows outside the theatre, to Penn and Teller's extreme 'body-mutilation' acts.[322] These allude to magic's desire to present its effects as real—as more real than real—in spite of the resistance of the theatrical frame. Perhaps because of this dichotomous character—on the one hand transgressive and transcendent, and on the other trivial and shoddy—magic has provided contemporary art with an alluring paradigm for exploration.[323] But it is the objects of magic that occupy the nexus of magical effects; in Gell's terms, the magic object is the index whose abducted agency is continually deferred and occluded. The behaviour of the particular objects in the above examples—playing card, ball of paper, etc—frustrates attempts, on the part of the spectator, to abduct agency from them, even when a possible inference is offered: would the blowing of a stream of air be sufficient to maintain the levitation of the crumpled ball of paper; or the action of a small fan be enough to cause the playing card to spin in mid-air? The artist here takes on the role of magician in possessing the power to perform this feat apparently effortlessly. I want to explore further this special position occupied by magic objects, through the theory of 'embodied concepts', but first of all I need to return to the artworks with which I began this chapter, in order to discover the nexus of relations within which their featured objects are situated.

Mirror Ball and *A Crumpled Ball of Paper Floating on the Breath of the Artist* rely on a particular lack of knowledge on the part of the spectator by including prosaic bits of visual information ostensibly for the purposes of orientation: these objects—shelves, plug-sockets, coving—'disappear' into the background of the main action even though their overt and somewhat weighted presence might be questioned. Another 'double bind' situation is contrived here:

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[322] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible*, p. 81. Selbit would tell the queuing audiences that it was 'just a rehearsal'.
[323] *Con Art* at the Site Gallery, Sheffield (2002), comprising works by artists such as Jonathan Allen, Keith Tyson and Mark Wallinger, surveyed this neglected territory. It's stated aim was to explore 'the convergence of art and magic in contemporary practice' and 'magic and art's shared imaginations and art's conspicuous affinity with strategies of deception. Helen and Pier Giorgio Varola, *Magic/Object/Action* in Varola, Maund, and Varola, Con Art.

these objects are there purely for the purposes of reinforcing a particular, normative reading of the image; however, because of the phenomenological intensity of the main event—to which the viewer gives his full attention—they are rendered insignificant. It is only when shown in their *correct* (i.e. inverted) state, that they suddenly become 'visible'. It might be useful to return briefly to Heidegger's 'tool analysis', first introduced in chapter 3, in order to analyse this phenomenon. Graham Harman, in his account of Heidegger's tool, or 'equipment', analysis, describes what he calls an 'invisible realm' wherein the entities or aspects of the world that we rely upon, or take for granted, tend to recede from our awareness: 'Instead of encountering "pane of glass," we tend to make use of this item indirectly, in the form of "well-lit room."'[324] As a rule these entities 'work their magic upon reality without entering our awareness'— what Heidegger called 'ready-to-hand'—it is only when they 'fail' that they become visible. In this sense, the floating, crumpled ball of paper has 'failed' in that it has ceased to be part of a 'general equipmental effect'. As an object it is no more or less quotidian than the plug, until it begins to float and thereby irrupts into visibility.[325] This is an interesting interpretation of the magic object: an object that—in the Heideggerian sense—has failed (to operate 'normally'). At no point does Gell make explicit reference to Heidegger in this respect, but Gell's conception of magic as a technology of zero cost, could be seen to elide with Heidegger's notion of the 'unready-to-hand', or the broken tool; magic is 'the negative contour of work', just as the smoothly functioning tool and broken equipment constitute mutually exclusive figure and ground to one another.[326]

Sympathy and contagion

The title of one of the works described above alludes to two other artworks in which some sort of alchemical transformation has notionally taken place: Martin Creed's *Work No. 88: A sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball*, in which a sheet of A4 paper has been crumpled into a ball, and Piero Manzoni's *Fiato d'Artista*,

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[324] Harman, Tool-Being, p. 18.
[325] Ibid, p. 18.
[326] Gell and Hirsch, *The Art of Anthropology*, p. 181.

or *The Artist's Breath*, in which a red balloon is inflated by the artist and displayed on a wooden base.[327] Partly via the title of my work I not only allude to these two artworks, but also endeavour to abduct their (iconic) agency into the service of my own. This idea of a tacit appropriation of the magical properties of the work of others draws from the concept of contagious and sympathetic magic, the notion that objects of similarity or contact can maintain or extend their influence even when removed from each other in space or time. In *Art and Agency*, Gell returns to Frazer's ideas about magic in order to explore notions of causality and intention. Frazer had distinguished two types of magical action; sympathetic magic, which depends on shared properties of objects, and contagious magic, or magic through contact, in which influence passes from one object to another. This second law is conceived of as a chain of sympathy, along which various characteristics can be transmitted. Frazer describes it as follows: 'that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed'.[328] This concept of a 'causal chain', temporally dispersed, might be seen to function as a quasi-magical alternative to the orthodox western art historical notion of 'stylistic' *influence*. The original sense of this word—influx, flowing matter—and its instantiation within scholastic Latin as 'imperceptible or indirect action exerted to cause changes', is highlighted here, from the point of view of origination of agency, mediated through or by (art) objects.

This is closer to Gell's notion of agency mediated through objects and in fact echoes specifically his discussion of the oeuvre of Marcel Duchamp, in the concluding chapter of *Art and Agency*. Through a complex replaying of Husserl's model of time-consciousness, Gell outlines the works of Duchamp in terms of a sequence of retentions (from earlier works) and protentions (towards later works), which result in a 'single temporal entity'. To be more specific, Gell describes the artist's oeuvre as a chronologically arranged set of works 'each of which is partly a recapitulation of previous works and partly an anticipation of works as yet uncommenced', and amounts to 'artistic consciousness (personhood in the cognitive, temporal sense) writ large and rendered public and accessible'.[329] Gell

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[327] The balloon itself has long since deflated and perished, but the crimson residue staining the plinth, represents a trace of the artist's agency.
[328] Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp 99-106.
[329] Ibid. p. 236.

articulates this notion of a body of work as temporal 'object', through a discussion of a single work by Duchamp, *The Network of Stoppages*, a preliminary study for *Large Glass*. It is clear from even a cursory inspection of this work that Duchamp painted it over a pre-existing image—in fact two images, palimpsests ghosting through the reused canvas. The first is a faint preliminary sketch for the layout of *Large Glass*, and beneath it, the trace of a painting from Duchamp's 'symbolist' phase of 1911, entitled *Young Man and Girl in Spring*. By re-framing the work's title as both an expression of Duchamp's fascination with the fourth dimension *and* Durkheim's meditations upon time in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Gell makes salient a connection between the subject matter of Duchamp's painting and its mode of presentation.[330]

> *The Network* is a protention towards the *Large Glass*, which is a retention, first, of the original abstract layout for that work […] and secondly a retention, from this retention, of Duchamp's Symbolist beginnings, the thirst for transcendence […] which set him on the path he subsequently followed.[331]

In a similar way then *A Crumpled Ball of Paper Floating on the Breath of the Artist* can be seen as a *retention* of the work of two other artists (Creed and Manzoni) and as a *protention* of *Mirror-ball*, through a process of sympathetic or imitative attraction. The question remains however, as to why these two particular works (by Creed and Manzoni) have been brought to bear upon the service of a third—namely my own. In order to answer this it is worth staying with Creed's artwork, *Work No. 88: A sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball*, for a little while longer. What might seem at first glance to be an intensely banal work is in fact performing a number of transformative functions almost by virtue of that very banality. First of all it seems to me that Creed's crumpled ball of paper can be described as being in a state of transition: for what is the crumpled ball of (A4) paper if not the archetypal object of despair for every artist—writer, draughtsman, poet, composer? It is the final state of the rejected work shortly before it is artlessly ejected from the world via the receptacle of the waste-paper

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[330] It could be argued that this model of Gell's relies somewhat heavily upon the institutional categories for art, which earlier in the book he seems to reject: Duchamp's 'durée, as Gell puts it, can only be instantiated through a particular institutional interpretation of the artist's 'oeuvre'.
[331] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 246.

basket. At the same time it is the quotidian flotsam chucked casually from the workstation by the office worker at the end of the day: Dale McFarland has described Creed's artwork as 'the office tantrum […] turned into something akin to an alchemical transformation'.[332] However, Creed has added to this particular crumpled ball in that he has fashioned it approximately into a sphere, thus providing it with nominal sculptural form. What we have here therefore is a kind of double trajectory of opposites, one descending towards bathos, and the other leading upward to poiesis. Part of the rationale of Creed's work is to put objects into the world that all but disappear into it, and it is this that accounts partly for its diffidence and inscrutability—for its obdurate presence. Manzoni's *Fiato d'Artista* configures the artist's breath as magical agent, carrying forward his distributed personhood (at least until its/his expiration). Here the concept of inspiration (literally, 'breathe into') is brought together with contagious magic (the artist's breath as physically detached fragment) in the form of the index.

Fig. 26. Martin Creed, *Work no. 88: a sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball* (1994).

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[332] Dale McFarland, 'Don't Worry: the art of Martin Creed', *Frieze, 52*, (2000), pp. 66-69.

The 'things' themselves, and the properties of 'props'

Gell's concept of object agency can, I think, be supplemented by a different, but complementary approach to objects, or things, one that places greater emphasis on the things themselves.[333] Notable in Gell's formulation of object agency is the specification that agency is abducted *from* objects; this consolidates Gell's qualification of objects as *secondary* agents and could be said to draw attention away from the objects themselves. This is a view put forward by Leach, who argues that in Gell, the (art) object is treated 'as an index of something else', rather than as something that has agency in and of itself; in this latter sense the (art) object 'has a life of its own for which the producer(s) can claim at best partial credit or responsibility'.[334] This is the methodological stance sketched out by Henare, Holbraad and Wastell in the introduction to their book *Thinking Through Things*, and it expresses the notion that '*things might be treated as* sui generis *meanings*'; in other words to treat thing and meaning as identical, rather than meaning being treated as something distinct from material things, or as something to be imposed upon it. In *Thinking Through Things*, the writers articulate a manner of conceiving material objects not interpretively, but such that 'wonderment' can be held in a 'state of suspension so as to resist the urge to explain it away'.[335]

> With purposeful naïveté, the aim of this method is to take 'things' encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately presuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else. Adopting an approach that might be called 'radically essentialist' […](this) can be seen as exploring a more open, heuristic approach to analysis that allows 'things', as and when they arise, to offer theoretical possibilities[…].[336]

This form of 'radical essentialism' can be seen as different in degree, rather than in essence, from that of Gell's object agency. In spite of Leach's

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[333] In *Thinking Through Things*, the authors privilege the word *thing* over *object*, *artefact*, or *materiality*, in that it carries 'minimal theoretical baggage'. Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, *Introduction: Thinking through things*, in *Thinking through Things*, ed. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, (pp. 1-31).
[334] James Leach, *Differentiation and Encompassment: A critique of Alfred Gell's abduction of creativity*, in Ibid, p. 184.
[335] Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, *Introduction: Thinking through things*, in Ibid, p. 1.
[336] Ibid, p. 2-3.

comments, Gell does at least grant (the manifestation of) agency to objects as well as to humans, and makes it clear that the general argument in *Art and Agency* depends upon this position. Also (as Pederson points out in his contribution to *Thinking Through Things*) Gell argues that art objects which are part of certain forms of collective transactions (such as the Trobriand Kula exchange system) do not simply 'serve to represent a corresponding body of social and cultural knowledge; rather the very materiality of these objects is itself a vehicle of such knowledge.'[337] Importantly, Gell's approach towards the art object is, as stated in my opening chapter, emphatically opposed to its determination in symbolic terms ('I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it').[338] Furthermore, *Art and Agency* is self-avowedly a *theory* whereas it should be emphasized that the authors of *Thinking Through Things* view their project as predominantly methodological, as a means of identifying things within diverse contexts in such a way that they might then yield theoretical positions (rather than imposing pre-existing theoretical frameworks *upon* them). Having said this, I find that the central idea expressed in the introduction of *Thinking Through Things*—of a collapsing of the distinction between concepts and things—to be instrumentally useful (as an adjunct to Gell's 'object agency') in scrutinizing the curious ontological status of magic objects. It is useful not only in and of itself, but also as a means of countering some of the more orthodox (and frankly rather jaded) interpretations of magic objects, particularly those of an overtly symbolic nature, which I refer to later on in this chapter. Magic objects (or 'props') *are*, it seems to me, rather odd things that deserve close examination in relation to the various contexts in which they might function. Martin Holbraad's thesis in *The Power of Powder*—an enquiry into the ontological status of *Aché*, a powder used in Cuban divination rituals—provides a useful case study against which this methodological approach can be tested.[339] The practitioner of these rituals (called a *babalawo*) 'draws' into the layer of powder that is spread onto a divining board, as a means of revealing certain divinatory configurations, which are themselves related to particular myths.

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[337] Morten Axel Pederson, *Talismans of Thought: Shamanist ontologies and extended cognition in Northern Mongolia*, in Ibid, p. 141.

[338] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 6.

[339] Martin Holbraad, *The Power of Powder: multiplicity and motion in the divinatory cosmology of Cuban Ifa (or mana, again)*, in *Thinking through Things*, ed. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, (pp. 189-225).

Holbraad emphasizes however, that for the babalawos, this powder does not merely represent power, it is somehow synonymous with it: 'neither thing nor concept, but rather a bit of both'.[340] He goes on:

> (aché's) abstract meaning as power is internally related to its concrete nature as powder. So the meaning of aché (the 'concept') is literally constituted by the things to which it would otherwise be assumed simply to 'apply'. Its intension is modified by its extension (...) by what one might call a relation of 'hyper-metonymy' (*imagine a crown that didn't just signify royalty, but actually made it—a 'magical crown, then*).[341] (Italics added).

This, it seems to me, is an elegant, if counter-intuitive, way of describing magical objects—in other words, objects that, within a set of specially circumscribed conditions (for example, a theatrical magic performance), can be conceived of as embodying their 'symbolic' role. There are certain objects within the magic act that are traditionally associated with effecting particular kinds of change: the magic wand, for example, is the magical agent of change *par excellence*. However, the wand is not exempt from transformation itself—for example it might suddenly become soft, or metamorphose into a bunch of flowers, or float in mid-air. This apparently maverick capacity for the wand to restyle itself from tool to magical object, or to be *both at the same time*, is of course part of the anarchic apparatus of the magic act. It illustrates Henare, Holbraad and Wastell's proposition that 'the "things" themselves may dictate a plurality of ontologies'.[342] So the wand's 'meaning' (which might conventionally be thought of as metonymic symbol of the magician's power), is embedded within its very thing-ness, with what it does or is seen to do. This prioritizing of the agency of objects goes beyond what Gell sees as the 'secondary agency' of objects in relation to their (human) primary agents. Within a highly specialized and (stylized) setting, the theatrical magic act retains a conception of objects as intrinsically meaningful, agentive and fluid. This, however, is not the usual view of magicians themselves: ironically, magicians often seem to play down the role

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[340] Ibid, p. 206.
[341] Ibid, p. 206.
[342] Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, *Introduction: Thinking through things*, in *Thinking through Things*, ed. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, pp. 1-31, (p. 7).

of magic objects (the word 'props' being used in pejorative fashion) in favour of more overtly symbolic meanings which are, as it were, attached to the magic performance. In *Beyond the Props*, an article for *Magic Magazine*, writer and magician Larry Hass puts forward the idea that 'magic is about *life*, not the props'.[343] Hass is critical of the 'fluffy' approach magicians often take towards their performances, an approach which, according to him, focuses too much on the props being used:

> To feel the force of the problem here consider the following: no other art form takes for its thematic focus the materials out of which it is made. That is, there are no notable films about cameras, [...] no paintings about canvas and brushes.[344]

This statement deserves close examination, for it goes to the heart of some of the assumptions being made about, not just the performance of magic, but of its ontological status. Contrary to what Hass says, clearly there are in fact numerous examples of (late modern and postmodern) artworks that do indeed take as their subject, their own materiality—at least in a reflective, or reflexive, way. Artists and avant-garde, or experimental, filmmakers in particular have used the material status of film as subject (from Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, through much of the structuralist film of the 1960s) and such approaches have also filtered through into mainstream cinema. Modern and contemporary painting too has often reflected on its means of production, from Pollock's action-centred abstract works to present day artists such as Bernard Frize (whose work I analyzed in the previous chapter), and Callum Innes' process-oriented 'exposed' paintings.

Another writer and magician Eugene Burger argues along similar lines to Hass: 'To get unstuck as a magician I need to take my performances beyond the props and move them into the realm of *meanings*'. Burger's default position seems to be that magic is about mystery and about healing:

> In this view, the magical effects of the earliest conjurors functioned symbolically, pointing beyond themselves to a deeper healing mystery. The result has been a

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[343] Lawrence Hass, 'Beyond the Props', *Magic Magazine* (2007), p. 25.
[344] Ibid. p. 25.

movement away from seeing the origin of conjuring within a framework of human selfishness and greed, and putting it instead into a framework intended to produce group cohesiveness and individual healings.[345]

But there is no particular reason why this should be so just because Burger prefers that magic be something that 'uplifted the spirits of early men and women'.[346] The problem with the argument against props is that, it in its place it often privileges an extremely vague notion of 'storytelling' as being centrally important for the magician's act. What Burger and Hass seem to prefer is that magic performance should be 'about life', that it should direct itself thematically (that is, through a form of narrative) and symbolically, to the everyday interests of the spectator—matters of life, death, love and loss. But by drawing attention to these themes magicians often trivialize them, and overlook the fact that, in many cases, these themes are already embedded into the props and pre-existing rituals of the magic act. So for example, playing cards are already understood as being 'about' fate and chance, because a random element is, as it were, built into them; similarly, a knotted rope is already (at some level) 'symbolic' of entanglement or binding, precisely because it is an entangled object.

Magic acts that employ a narrative which derives from and elaborates upon these embedded meanings are arguably indulging in performative truisms, rituals that add nothing to the efficacy of their routines. By way of contrast, Fred Kaps' performance of the 'five card' routine requires only that his audience understand the distinction (conceptual and perceptual) between cards of a high and low value.[347] Beyond this the trick plays itself out by being 'about' the disappearance, fluctuation, and transformation of the cards *as material objects*. Because of this, and in spite of the relative small scale of playing cards (especially in the hands of Kaps, a physically large man), attention is intensely focused on them as the objects of great dramatic potential. Kaps' (fairly banal) patter simply relates what he is doing in parallel to the playing out of the trick itself—the very kind of incantatory commentary that Gell suggests derives from play.[348]

What I am arguing for here is that magic objects (and, by extension, art

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[345] Eugene Burger and Robert E. Neale, *Magic and Meaning*, (Seattle: Hermetic Press, Inc. 1995), p. 81.
[346] Ibid, p. 68.
[347] Fred Kaps was a Dutch magician, active between 1950-1980.
[348] Gell, *'Technology and Magic'*. p. 8.

objects), disclose their meaning through what they are (conceptually), and via what they do (performatively). Furthermore, it is possible to regard magic objects, or 'props', as possessing an excess or surplus in relation to their function. An example of this is the copper cup that is used to 'disappear' a crochet ball (in the cups and balls routine): this cup already causes the ball to disappear in a certain obvious sense, in that *it covers the ball*—once covered, we can no longer see the ball (although our—rational—sense of object permanence tells us it is still there).[349] When the cup is lifted and the ball is no longer there, the cup has effectively collapsed the distinction between an object that disappears from our sensory awareness (is 'hidden'), and one that disappears in that it 'ceases to be'.[350] This idea of a magic prop or object having its magical capacity somehow already embedded within it echoes Tim Dant's assertion, in *Materiality and Society*, that human interaction with objects exceeds its symbolic meaning: 'as the social human being interacts with an object, she or he must take account of what the object is doing or is about to do and must fit their line of activity to the intentions embedded in the object.'[351] The cup (which already has a 'disappearing intention' embedded in it) therefore becomes a kind of super-charged agent-for-disappearing-things.

Fig. 27. Jonathan Gilhooly, *Cup and Ball* (2003).

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[349] Jonathan Gilhooly, Cup and Ball, (2003). See fig. 27, and appendix.
[350] This is the usual diegesis, although occasionally magicians will say the object is 'invisible'.
[351] Tim Dant, *Materiality and Society*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), p. 111.

There are many such disappearing-agents in magic but—whether curtains, cloaks, screens or boxes—they are normally already the kinds of objects that vanish other objects in this more normative sense of 'hiding them from view', and of having a concealing intention embedded within them, with which the magician interacts.[352] At other times magic objects deploy their material specificity as a means of simultaneously denying it, as with the linking 'Chinese' rings illusion. This consists of a number (usually between three and eight) of large solid metal rings, which are made mysteriously to link and unlink in a sequence of highly choreographed moves. In appearance, the linking rings illusion is not unlike the cups and balls, but this time it is the solid materiality of the rings that is thrown into doubt; this is achieved, in large part, by the performer repeatedly drawing attention to the solidity of the rings by, for example, audibly clanking them together, in such a way that the resulting metallic sound becomes metonymic of their rigidity, imperviousness, and strength.

So the notion of 'different worlds' put forward by Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, might clearly be conceptualized within the magic act, for here the concept of, for example, invisibility and the vanished object become *one and the same thing*. The authors posit an (multiply) ontological approach to the material world, such that might allow us to 'treat meaning and thing as an identity'.[353] This proposition is, however, conceptual rather than perceptual, conception as a 'mode of disclosure'.[354]

> The very notion of perception simply reiterates the distinction that 'different worlds' collapses. The point about different worlds is that they cannot be 'seen' in a visualist sense. They are, as it were, *a-visible*. In other words, collapsing the distinction between concepts and things (appearance and reality) forces us to conceive of a different mode of disclosure altogether.[355] (italics added)

Art objects can clearly be thought of as problematic and resistant to interpretation in a similar sense. The postmodern art object is (since Duchamp) often an object

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[352] Sometimes these objects are 'gimmicked', at other times sleight of hand is used. The magician's working environment and ultimate success as a performer also relies upon a different kind of concealment, that of secrecy, not just from his audience but also from his fellow magicians.

[353] Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, *Introduction: Thinking through things*, in *Thinking through Things*, ed. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, (pp. 1-31), p. 3.

[354] Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, *Introduction: Thinking through things*, in Ibid, p. 15.

[355] Ibid, p. 14.

reconfigured conceptually, whereby its *visual* similarity to something recognizable may not aid disclosure of 'meaning'.[356] Returning to *Mirror Ball*, the ball of paper in the piece might be construed, for example, as 'hovering' between different states (that of rejuvenated art object and banal detritus), in that it might be perceived as having these meanings, as it were, attached to it. However, it must also be conceived of as an object that actually hovers, albeit inexplicably, in and of itself. In other words, if this object is to be understood through what is, effectively, a process of de-familiarization, then it must first be accounted for as 'ball of paper that floats', in so far as that is the function it performs within an apparatus (the mirrored cube) that has been constructed specifically in order to reveal this. In another piece, this idea was made explicit in the title of the work, which changed from *Table to be Levitated* to *Levitated Table*, after the table in question was caused to levitate during a performance. This was presented, not as a magic illusion, but as a ritualized event, the purpose of which was to enact the transformative potential of objects; my role—as artist/facilitator—was to oversee the event. At the opening of an exhibition of my work at Grey Area, Brighton, six volunteers were self-selected (by handing out randomly-marked envelopes), and then positioned themselves around the table with their hands on its surface; after a brief pause, it slowly rose off the ground. *Levitated Table* embodies the argument at the heart of Martin Holbraad's essay that 'concepts and things can [...] be each other'.[357] For even if we might 'know' that, rationally, the table cannot float unaided, it is possible to configure and to conceive of it as 'table that floats' within a particular, circumscribed setting.[358]

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to incorporate two approaches to an analysis of the magic object and the art object. I do not think, however, that these two methods have to be thought of as being mutually exclusive or even contradictory.

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[356] In this interpretation Duchamp's *Fountain*, for example, 'looks like' a urinal.
[357] Holbraad, *The Power of Powder*, in *Thinking through Things*, ed. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, (pp. 189-225), p.219.
[358] Interestingly, everyone who watched the filmed footage of the event, asked how it was done; at the event itself, no one asked this question.

On the contrary, it seems to me that Gell's notion of enchanted objects, from which agency can be abducted, but which resist this abduction, can usefully be aligned with the 'thinking through things' approach of Henare, Holbraad, Wastell and Pedersen. In a way, Gell sidesteps the issue of the specificity of the art object in *Art and Agency*, by dealing with artworks as *collectivities*, or at least as members of familial groups, embedded in networks of social relations.[359] He goes on to equate these collectivities of artworks with a far more conventional mode of critical analysis, the concept of *style*. Although perfectly serviceable, this method arguably avoids a head-on engagement with the material and conceptual specificities of art objects, in favour of a 'horizontal' dispersal of stylistic principles, as a means of identifying artworks collectively. What Leach is arguing for, and what Henare, Holbraad, Wastell (in their introduction), and Pedersen demonstrate, is that in order to address the particularities of objects (art objects or otherwise), a somewhat different register is required—one that allows objects their own agency, distinct from (but not necessarily exclusive of) their role as indexes of (human) agency; it is this notion of inherent agency (and thereby inherent meaning) that the magic object implicitly illuminates.

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[359] Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp. 155-220.

Conclusion

In Ceal Floyer's slide installation *Double Act*, the image of a red curtain is projected onto the end wall of the gallery space; the circularly masked slide mimics the function of a theatre spotlight, and is split between wall and floor by the angling of its projection. The light both illuminates and embodies the image—part of its 'doubling' function—its ambience illuminating the remainder of the wall, thus affirming the curtain's duplicity. Nothing is concealed in this work, both image and apparatus are on display, and in this sense it embodies the disclosure of method and effect previously discussed in relation to the magic act, a characteristic alluded to in the title itself. If *Double Act* is a trick then we are being shown how it is done, yet this does not seem to diminish its effect. In his essay on Floyer, Jeremy Millar draws a parallel between the mechanisms within her work and those of Raymond Roussel, whose book *How I Wrote Certain of my Books* functions as a kind of meta-text, simultaneously supplying a narrative whilst revealing its own methods.

> 'The greater the accumulation of precise minutiae, of details of form and dimension, the more the object loses its depth. So this is an opacity without mystery, just as there is nothing behind the surfaces of a backcloth, no inside, no secret, no ulterior motive.'[360]

Floyer's work is replete with puns both visual and verbal, and *Double Act* refers both to the enactment of apparatus (projector) and image (projection), as well as conveying theatrical connotations—the double act of the straight man / funny man. By referencing theatrical (and cinematic) tropes, *Double Act* also activates the space in which it is situated: the closed, spotlit curtain creates a sense of anticipation (although the image is pure surface—there is nothing behind the depicted curtain), whilst its 'closed' state suggests the possibility of motion. Instead of simply being a projected image on a gallery wall, the room itself is

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[360] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *'Énigmes et transparence chez Raymond Roussel'*, (1963), trans. Barbara Wright as *'Riddles and Transparencies in Raymond Roussel'*, in Atlas Anthology 4: *Raymond Roussel Life, Death and Works*, (London: Atlas Press, 1987), p. 101.

transformed and activated into a theatre or auditorium—within which the spectator is engaged as potential actor—but a theatre whose purpose is its own self-revelation.

This enactment, of Floyer's raw material—apparatus and image—is not symbolic or passive, but active and present. We have seen that in *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell deliberately avoids a symbolic approach to artworks, favouring instead one that is 'action'-centred, privileging the 'practical, mediatory role of art objects in the social process'.[361] In another sense, *Double Act* could be said to represent a kind of synopsis of the various sections of my thesis: it stages a space for an imaginary (or actual) performer; it represents both a conundrum and a form of mimicry (a beam of light that is both the source of the image and the image itself); and it embodies the phantasmatic doubling at the heart of cinematic technology.[362] In Gell's terms, *Double Act* is cognitively 'sticky', it holds the viewer in a theatrically captivating space whose commencement (or conclusion) is constantly deferred.
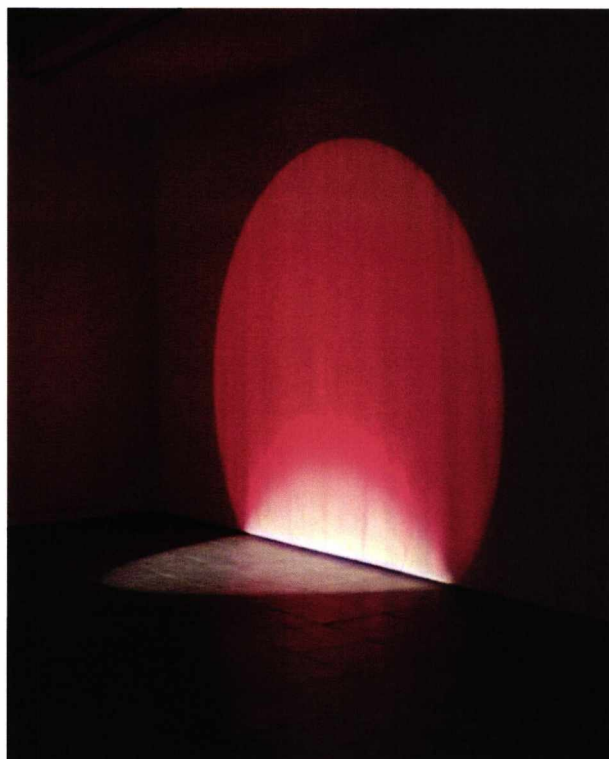

Fig. 10. Ceal Floyer, *Double Act* (2006).

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[361] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 6.
[362] Whilst viewing *Double Act* at Tate Britain in 2007, I found that my mental and bodily disposition became 'theatricalized'—there was a strong inclination to perform within the space.

Gell's concept of agency therefore provides a way of resituating the art object within contemporary art practice, but it has also provided a nexus about which my thesis could develop. The chief significance of Gell's theory lies in its positioning of the artwork within a network of relations, a conception of art as labile, and whose status and identity is insecure. Gell's nexus configures the artwork as productive of meaning according to this shifting network: that different agents or types of agencies will become visible within different contexts. Using this concept I have been able to adapt it in order to examine different, interrelated strands of my practice, and to reflect on a body of (mainly 20th century and contemporary) artworks that seemed to occupy similar territory to my own. Although my thesis takes a distinct theme as a starting point for each of the four main chapters, there is a thread that links them and that runs through the body of the work. This can be characterized as a sense of uncertainty and instability, whether that be the liminal zone in which the performer operates, the phantasmatic nature of the cinematic image, or the contradictory and intractable character of the art object/cognitive trap; I have attempted to use the magic act as a means of isolating and crystallizing this sense of fickleness and unpredictability

This notion of the artwork as uncertain and changeable removes it from the more orthodox critical arena whereby it might be treated as either a 'sign-vehicle'—a generator of meaning—or as an object made for the purposes of provoking 'a culturally endorsed aesthetic response'.[363] Instead, the artwork is repositioned as something that motivates a response within a particular network of social (or cultural) relations—it is the object around which these responses materialize, circulate and evolve. This effectively constitutes a shift away from the purely visual towards a more complex agentive formulation, one that elides usefully with the plural forms of contemporary art practice. What is offered therefore is a fresh and recalibrated model of contemporary art—one that relocates attention away from spectatorship (in its narrow visual sense) towards a dynamic and shifting set of relationships.

Gell's ideas have facilitated this shift, but it goes beyond Gell in alerting us to ways in which artworks might be addressed in an increasingly non-white cube context. More broadly then, I have attempted to show the ways in which

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[363] Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 5.

certain forms of modern and postmodern art have positioned themselves at the boundaries of practice, straddling disciplinary borders. I have argued that magic offers a model for examining these practices from the point of view of both a critical engagement with what I have shown are parallel concerns, and from the position of practitioner, whereby the role of the magician chimes with that of the artist as someone who revels in adopting an essentially ludic, sceptical and transgressive perspective upon the world. Artists and magicians operate as 'border prospectors' who make the most of our willingness to suspend disbelief, as well as 'holding a mirror up to a world that is fractured and ambiguous, where meaning is conditional and up for debate.'[364] These overlapping concerns are encapsulated in my piece *Levitated Table*, where the work functions ambiguously as both art and magic performance, drawing attention to the shared space of both practices as well as to the power and lability of objects. Throughout my research project I have not sought to use magic simply as a means of illustrating or expounding particular ideas, preferring instead to adopt and inhabit aspects of the magician's role as playful and transgressive presence.

Conventionally, Western art has resisted notions of theatricality, preferring instead a more distanced model in which the spectator is cast as a neutral or passive onlooker of an artwork that is paradigmatically self-sufficient. Recent art forms and practices, at least during the last fifty years or so, have continually reinstated the theatrical (in the widest sense of the word), partly in an attempt to incorporate and include the observer, but also as a means of removing art from a limiting and reductive 'white cube' context. They have achieved this often through a blending and cross-pollination of disciplines and practices previously considered inviolably distinct—practices and strategies taken from theatre, film and television, advertising, language, the natural and social sciences—as a means of bringing into sharper focus the relationship of art with areas of daily life. Rather than obeying the inherent ordering principles of these disciplines however, artists deploy disruptive strategies in order to divest them of authority and expose the structures that render them 'natural'. In a catalogue essay for a recent touring exhibition, *Magic Show*, Sally O'Reilly draws attention to the strategic

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[364] Sally O'Reilly, *Bewildering Logic*, catalogue essay for *Magic Show*, A Hayward Touring Exhibition, curated by Jonathan Allen and Sally O'Reilly (2009-2010), p. 13

deployment of non-rational impulses on the part of contemporary artists, equating it with that of the magician:

> If we think of the Enlightenment as the advancement of knowledge by rational means and an attempt to purge the world of chaotic elements, both art and stage magic can be thought of as performing a counter-Enlightenment stance.[365]

Rather than suggesting some didactic or crudely instrumental function for art (or magic) what O'Reilly is alluding to here is the propensity for artists to take a broadly sceptical view towards our rationally ordered environment, for generally disruptive purposes, or, as she suggests, 'to take delight in confusion and disarray.'[366] It requires only a cursory glance at our daily newspapers to discover how, everywhere, irrationality provides an ever-present corollary to the rational: an outright dismissal of the potential efficaciousness of homeopathic remedies, might, for example, coexist with the expression of scepticism towards an issue such as global warming; but it is just as easy to imagine these positions being reversed. Guardian columnist and campaigner George Monbiot has in the past expressed frustration and bewilderment at the inability of some of his readers to accept the scientific evidence for climate change. Yet, as he himself recently conceded, there is an inherent contradiction to scientific certainty:

> 'The detail of modern science is incomprehensible to almost everyone, which means that we have to take what scientists say on trust. Yet science tells us to trust nothing, to believe only what can be demonstrated.' [367]

Referencing Arthur C. Clarke's dictum that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic', Monbiot's reflections echo implicitly the sceptical thinking of Bruno Latour who, in *We Have Never Been Modern*, identified a 'proliferation of hybrids' that results from an attempt to purify the human and the natural, one from the other. [368] Latour specifically cites a variety of examples from newspaper articles that attest to the virtual impossibility of

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[365] Ibid, p.11
[366] George Monbiot, *The trouble with trusting complex science*, (The Guardian, 8th March, 2010)
[367] O'Reilly, *Bewildering Logic*, p. 11
[368] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 1

distinguishing 'supposed hard facts from supposed social constructions or projections of value'.[369] In a similar, somewhat banal example from the world of magic itself, there were cries of foul play from internet bloggers at the revelation that magician David Blaine had used simple editing techniques in order to realize a levitation trick on TV; yet comparable, technologically driven illusions are regularly passed off as real in a plethora of television 'reality' shows.[370] The relevance of magic today passes far beyond the confines of the theatre or the art gallery, for, as the examples above show, the modern world is far from disenchanted.

The range of methods and theoretical concepts utilized throughout the thesis emerged organically from the multifarious practices of magic itself. Traditionally, four main areas of enquiry underpin the magician's art: the mutable potential of matter (causing objects to transform, vanish, become permeable); the psychology of perception, representation, memory, and attention; the illusionistic possibilities of optical and other technologies; the charismatic and indeterminate nature of performance. Each of these four categories enabled, in the first instance, a particular strand of my practice to reflect and embody the concepts, materials, and strategies of the magician, as well as providing foundations from which theoretical investigations could proceed. So the role of the magician as performer suggested an exploration through theories of performance, and in particular the concept of liminal zones of engagement. Likewise, the magician's workaday familiarity with, and manipulation of, psychological aspects of perception evinced a deployment of (through Gell's concept of 'cognitive stickiness') recent theories in the field of cognitive neuroscience. The figure of the magician was instrumental as an experimental pioneer of early cinema, and a recent body of film theory has drawn upon notions of enchantment, forging connections with ludic and phantasmatic dimensions of moving image technology. Lastly, the position within the magic act of a miscellaneous collective of arcane and disreputable objects elicited the concept, based on theories of material culture, of the magic 'prop' as ontologically problematic and indeterminate object. These distinct but overlapping concerns have provided a foundation for future practice, especially where, as in *Zeno's Oak Tree*, they coalesce within a single work—a work which

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[369] Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (re.Press, 2009), p. 62
[370] 'David Blaine, *Street Magic*' (ABC TV network, 1997)

by no means demands a strict gallery setting, functioning ambiguously, as it does, as illustrated lecture, performance, conundrum, and magic act.

As a final coda, a theme that has been repeatedly returned to throughout the thesis is the potential conflict between concealment and revelation that much of the work elicits. Gell's theory positions the observer (or recipient) not as one who infers agency, but as one who infers what he *believes* to be agency; this is an important distinction, and means that the theory must allow for mistaken or misguided inferences (Gell talks about inferences of, for example, supernatural agents). These are, of course, the very inferences upon which magic thrives. The notion of abduction of agency (in Gell's terms) as a kind of inference that is probabilistic and unstable rather than fixed and certain, can be brought to bear upon the magic act, which seeks to manipulate and exploit intuitive inferential 'systems'; in a sense then, magic *abducts the abduction* of agency itself. If, as Gell says, artworks represent a particular category of psychologically salient objects, from which agency can be inferred, then the magic act seeks to exploit, disrupt and contaminate that saliency. What I suggest throughout the thesis is that the magician does not set out solely to deceive, but that deception is part of a technology of enchantment—that the spectator only becomes captivated if a particularly fine balance between deception and enchantment is achieved. To this end, the work I have produced as part of my research can be seen as situated along a spectrum, running from 'open' to 'closed'. In other words, some works rely upon a transparency of means: in *SFX-1*, all of the various components—foil, lamp, fan—are visible and nothing remains 'hidden'; in other pieces, such as *Mirror Ball*, it is possible for the viewer to deduce the means by which the illusion has been achieved. However, there is another category of works that represent the 'hidden' end of the spectrum, whereby revelation of the method would lead to a complete breakdown of the effect produced. This is singularly the case with *Levitated Table*, where the entire presentation is set up in order to preclude the possibility of such a revelation. Even the writing of the thesis has necessitated the revealing of the covert aspects of some of the works, and this has exposed an uneasy yet compelling potential breach between the theoretical and practical aspects of my research: the notion that part of the analysis and explication of aspects of my practice might lead to a kind of surrendering of some

of the very components that make it effective. With this in mind it therefore seemed significant—productive even—to hold back and preserve the secret of *Levitated Table*, if only as a means of activating or at least acknowledging the necessity of this lacuna.

Fig. 29. Jonathan Gilhooly, *Levitating table* (2007).

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Appendix – **Methodology and list of works**

Methodology

My research question emerged initially from an engagement with some of the tropes and strategies of theatrical magic, or conjuring. Some elementary general research of the subject preceded the commencement of my PhD: I had attended magic workshops, theatrical shows, and had done some background reading in the form of magician's biographies and instruction books. What fascinated me initially about this as an artist was the possibility of transposing some of these ideas into an art arena, in such a way that they might illuminate and conjoin different areas of interest that already existed within my practice. Thus my point of departure was (broadly) the establishment of a question concerning the relationship between the magician and his audience, who I conceptualized as having entered into a (tacit) mutual contract—a contract of deception. The first six to eight months of the research therefore focused upon an enquiry into different potential theoretical perspectives, from which the subject could be scrutinized, as well as the construction of a practical framework within which studio-based work could proceed.

During this initial period the emphasis of my research shifted from a broadly psychological perspective, to one in which the notion of agency began to be foregrounded. Discovering the writings of Alfred Gell enabled me to reconceptualize the magic object (and thereby, the art object) as, in Gell's terms, an index that motivated the abduction of agency. Gell's concept of 'enchantment' clearly chimed with the nomenclature of magic, and from this point I was able to formulate a theoretical framework that emphasized the tenuous and mutable status of the artwork, within a network of relations that incorporated the artist and the spectator. Meanwhile the studio-based work commenced with a focus upon ordinary objects that could be manipulated in some way in order to extract a 'magical' potential. I became interested in creating what I later referred to as 'muted spectacles'—scenarios or 'happenings' whereby any action was motivated solely by the objects themselves, and in which these objects might somehow

transcend their prosaic qualities. The best single example of this is *SFX-1* (see appendix), referred to in my introduction, and in which a collection of ordinary objects—coloured paper, foil, fan and lamp—were integrated in such a way that a putative sunset effect might be discerned by the viewer. Paralleling this, works such as *Gravitation Effect* presented a more straightforward illusion and challenged the viewer to uncover its method. Together, these approaches produced a sense of illusions barely sustained, so that, whilst captivating the viewer they did not overwhelm.

In tandem with these works I began to produce a series of pieces in which similarly banal objects were the subject, but this time mediated through the agency of film. It began to become clear to me that these video pieces, usually brief and often looped to play continuously, represented a different facet of my practice, but one that was able to complement the (three-dimensional) 'object' works. The use of film/video was such that it was not intended to be merely a transparent vehicle of these effects, but that the technology itself could somehow be—or could be seen as—complicit in their construction. I became increasingly interested in early cinema, in particular the films of Meliés and R.W. Paul, and in the writings of film theorists such as Tom Gunning, who focused on this early period of film history. Rather than exploiting modern, digital software, I became more interested in revisiting some of the more prosaic parameters of the medium, such as the frame, the position and angle of the camera, the relation between filmic and real time. *Balloon Head*, for example, is an attempt to represent the concealing nature of that which lies within the frame (in that we are unable to see what happens 'off-screen'), and thereby emphasizes the magical or enchanting dimension of film. The intention therefore was to suppress overtly narrative elements in favour of short, sensational and inexplicable episodes, for which the viewer might infer some form of technological agency.

Previously I had produced works that were performative in nature and I wanted to pursue this further, again partly as a means of interrogating a particular object or objects. I was also interested in the role of the magician as performer, and had actually made works that had been performed by a magician. The incorporation of video into some of these works led me to think about ways that I might combine performance with video, objects, and text. The culmination of this approach was *Zeno's Oak Tree*, in which I took a pre-existing (art) object

(Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree*) and made it the starting point for a new work.

Finally, I had also been making drawings that centred around magic phrases or incantations. These developed out of a fascination with the contradictory nature of the magic act, the way in which it seemed to revolve around a series of opposing concepts (such as appear/vanish); this led to the production of a group of text pieces which in turn caused me to revisit the theoretical ideas of Alfred Gell, in particular in relation to the concept of the cognitive 'trap'. Thus the work I produced during this eighteen month period fell into one of these four discrete, overlapping areas of practice. I was then able to locate fresh theoretical bodies of work that helped support these four interlinked areas of research, and which simultaneously reinforced and complemented Gell's ideas of agency.

The following list of works are therefore divided into these four categories, which also parallel the sequence of the thematic material in my thesis. Beginning with the performance pieces, then moving image works, text drawings (cognitive traps) and finally the (enchanted) object/installation works.

> *Never Odd or Even*
> Performance with video projection
> 2006
> Performed at De La Warr Pavilion,
  Bexhill, and Nightingale Theatre, Brighton,
  2006
> Duration: 23 mins
> With music composed and performed by
  Glen Capra

In *Never Odd or Even* the performer interacts
with his own filmed double in front of an audi-
ence. The performance begins with a
sequence of formal moves in which sheets of
primary coloured paper are repositioned by
each actor, so that the resulting overlaps create
a geometric grid of primary and secondary
hues. Eventually the two 'performers'
acknowledge one another's existence resulting
in a sequence of exchanges incorporating real
objects, slapstick comedy and sleight of hand
magic. The climax of the piece sees one of the
actors dramatically shrink in size in relation to
his twin. *Never Odd or Even* creates a zone of
uncertainty for the viewer, who begins to lose
track of the distinction between the filmic and
the real. The piece features magician and
circus performer Fred Delius in both roles.

> *Prestidigitales*
> Performance reading
> 2008
> Performed at Grey Area, Brighton

Prestidigitales is a short collection of twelve
pithy anecdotal tales produced specifically
for performance; the central premise for each
is that an object takes on magical signifi-
cance in the mind of the listener, and pro-
vides the fulcrum around which the story is
hinged. Read out to an audience, the prove-
nance and authenticity of these stories is
uncertain, and actual objects—matchbox,
magnifying glass, playing card—feature as
part of the narrative.

> *Zeno's Oak Tree (Proposition for a Miracle)*
> performance with installation, video and text
> 2008
> Performed at Grey Area, Brighton
> Duration: 18 mins

Taking as its starting point an artwork from 1974 called *An Oak Tree*, by Michael Craig-Martin, *Zeno's Oak Tree* develops the metaphysical dialogue at the heart of the original work, in an attempt to locate the exact point at which a glass of water is transformed into an oak tree. This notionally absurd proposition is played out via the agency of a slowed-down video recording of the water being poured into the glass.
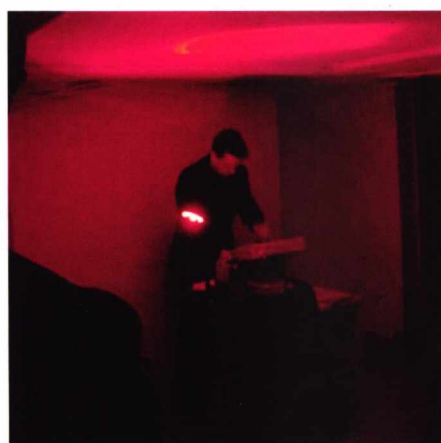
> *Phantasmagoria*
> performance
> 2007
> Performed at Grey Area, Brighton
> Duration: 12 mins

A silent performance in which various 'powers' - gravity, fire, magnetism, mind control - are tested out using a variety of commonplace objects. A soft-boiled egg is sucked into the neck of a bottle, water remains in an upturned glass, and a severed hand suddenly and gruesomely comes to life.

> *Hat*
> Performance
> 2008
> Performed at Grey Area, Brighton
> Duration: 15 mins

Hat is a free association of tropes and gestures associated with magic performance; it centres around the story of Mary Tofts, an 18th century woman who claimed to have given birth to rabbits, apparently giving rise to the rabbit-out-of-a-hat cliché of modern magic. The performance is executed without recourse to narrative, resolution or, for the most part, the payoff of a conventional magical effect.
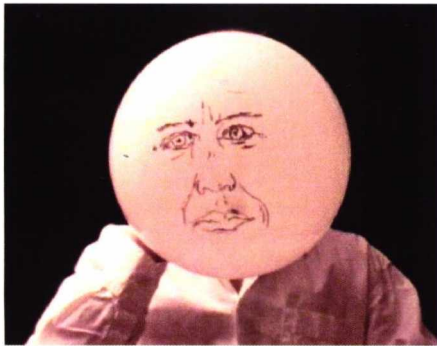
> *Balloon Head (Homage to Meliés)*
> video projection
> 2007
> Shown at Portsmouth Film Festival, 2007, and *Visual Deflections*, London, 2009
> Duration: 59 secs

In *Balloon Head* a balloon with a face drawn on it is inflated until it obscures the protagonist's head, and fills the screen. Extreme tension is built up until the balloon inevitably bursts and, briefly, a black space is left where the real head used to be. The balloon itself has obscured the covering of the head with black material that matches the background.

> *Spinning Playing Card*
> video projection
> 2008
> shown at
> Duration: 2 mins (looped)

A card appears to spin in mid-air via the agency of a small fan sitting on a shelf. In fact the video has been inverted and all the components (including the ceiling coving) are positioned on or close to the floor, the card therefore hangs from a thread, hovering just above the ground.


> *Crumpled Ball of Paper floating on the Breath of the Artist*
> video projection
> 2008
> Shown at
> Duration: 2 mins (looped)

As with *Spinning Playing Card*, this piece exploits an assumption (that the figure is lying on the floor) on the part of the viewer. In fact the figure is seated (the camera having been rotated 90 degrees, and the ball of paper hangs in front of his face. Other objects (including the plug), have been positioned specifically in order to reinforce this reading.
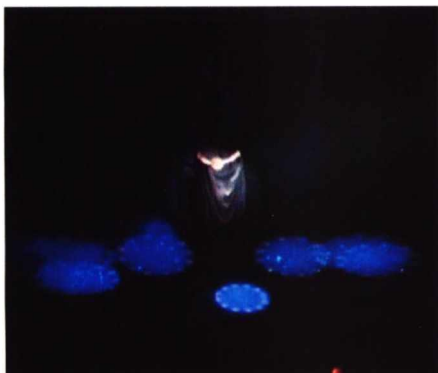
> Metamorphosis
> video projection
> 2008
> Shown at Cinecity 2009, Phoenix Gallery, Brighton
> Duration: 6 mins (looped)

A video piece focusing on the brief instant at which the transformation effect of a stage illusion takes place: this is both a substitution of one performer for another and, effectively, a gender transmutation. The clip is itself subjected to various transformations, including slowing down and speeding up, mirroring and doubling, as a means of locating and illuminating the exact moment of transfiguration.
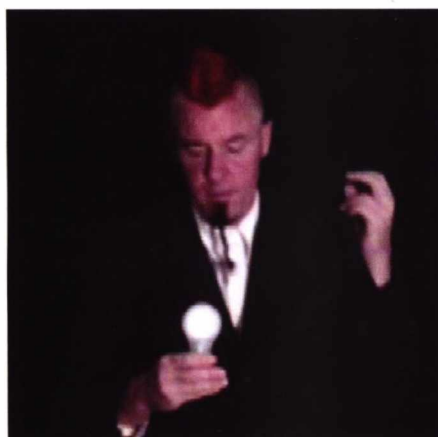
> *Light House*
> video installation
> 2005
> Performed at Grey Area, Brighton
> Duration: continuous loop

A small room contains the projected image of a magician holding a light bulb which he magically turns on and off. But the light in the room itself also goes on and off at random, and, finally, a mysterious phantom bulb occasionally hangs in mid-air in front of the magician, apparently occupying a space between the filmic and the real.

> *Spoon-Jar/Jar-Spoon*
> video
> 2007
> Shown at Grey Area, Brighton
> Duration: 30 mins (looped)

A pair of TV monitors face each at head-height, inviting the viewer to stand in between them. Each displays the image of a glass jar (one against a white, and one a black background) containing a teaspoon, which, periodically becomes animate and rises, falls, or rattles in its container, in an apparent attempt to escape. Only the sound alerts the viewer to the unfolding of this futile exchange.
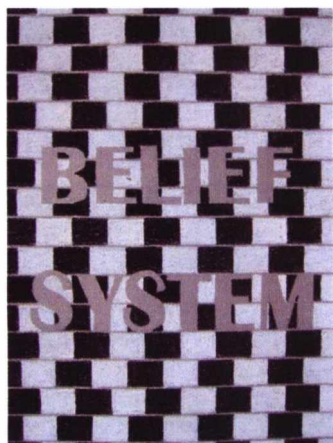
> *Belief System*
> pastel on paper
> 2008

The words 'belief' and 'system' each have particular connotations that might be thought of as mutually opposed. 'System', and the background grid pattern, are also intended to recall the systems artists of the 1970s; however this particular grid is taken from a well-known optical illusion called 'café wall', in which rows of black and white tiles are arranged in such a way that they no longer seem parallel, but wedge-shaped.


> *now you don't*
> strobe light with text
> 2007
> shown at Grey Area Brighton, 2007

A strobe light is set to flash every 5 seconds, revealing the phrase 'now you don't'. The flash leaves an impression of the phrase on the viewer's retina, reinforcing the idea of absence, and simultaneously evoking the first part of the rubric: 'now you see it; now you don't'.
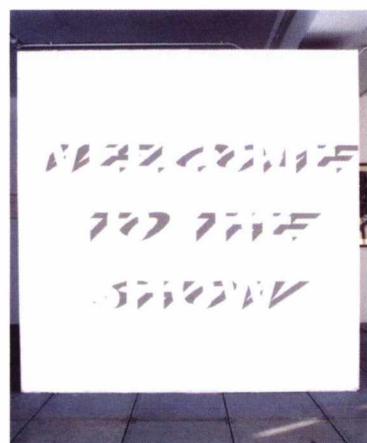
> *Disclaimer*
> text (mock-up)
> 2008

Disclaimer functions as a threshold device, informing the visitor to an exhibition of the mutable and unreliable status of the objects contained therein. In this sense it mimics the introduction to a magic performance - 'welcome to the show' - which itself creates a conceptual frame within which miracles might be experienced. The original drawing was in the form of a poster; the mock-up is for a large wall-drawing.
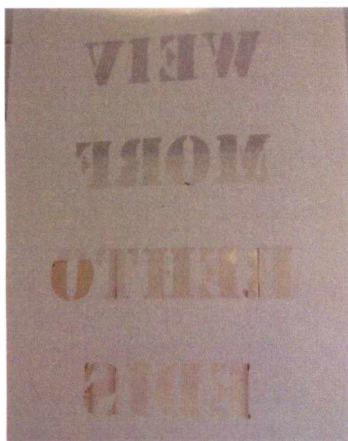
> *View from other side*
> tracing paper, cut-out text
> 2008

A large sheet of transluscent draughting paper, has the words 'view from other side' cut out in stencil form. However the letters making up the phrase are reversed, suggesting the need to move round to the other side in order to view it correctly. But although the letters are reversed, the phrase is not, making it strictly illegible from either side, and frustrating the viewers attempts at a solution.

> *View from other side*
> paper, cut-out text, mirror
> 2008

Again the phrase 'view from other side' is presented in cut-out, stencil form. This time the small strip of card is sited infront of a mirror and, contrary to expectations, the phrase is not reversed but persists in being legible via its reflected image.

> *Here/Gone*
> pastel on paper
> 2008

One of series of works in which, like 'Belief System', words are implicitly set in opposition to each other. This time the word 'gone' appears in the negative space left by the cut-out word 'here' - a sculptural contradiction of the words' semantic definitions. The piece echoes the strategy of the strobe work, 'now you don't'.

> *Gravitation Effect*
> parlour table, balloons, ribbon, metal rod
> 2007
> shown at Grey Area, Brighton, 2007

An inverted table is supported by a central metal pole; the pole itself is concealed by the cluster of balloons and the white ribbons from which they hang, giving the appearance that the table is floating. The counter-intuitive aspect of the piece is that the concept of a floating object - supported aloft by a bunch of balloons - is itself inverted. The magical concept of a levitation effect produces its opposite: *Gravitation Effect.*
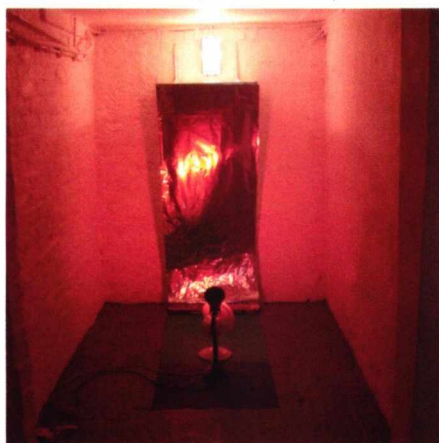
> *SFX-1*
> foil, shelf, paper, lamp, fan
> 2006
> shown at Grey Area, Brighton, 2007

A desk fan and table lamp (with orange bulb) point towards a sheet of foil suspended from a shelf. The noise of the foil being blown by the fan, together with the colours reflected on its surface (created through a combination of the orange light and two sheets of blue paper on the floor), create the tentative impression of a sunset over the sea.
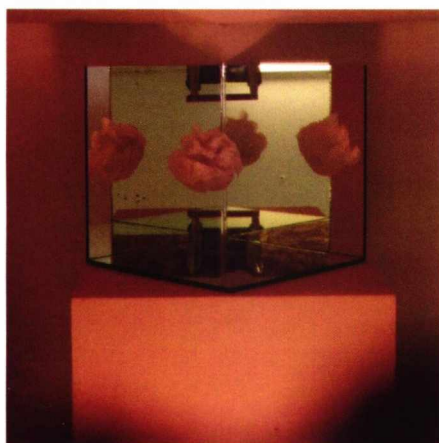
> *Mirror Ball*
> installation with mirrors, ball of paper and plinth
> 2008

Mirror Ball is viewed through a small hole in the wall of the gallery. What appears to be a plinth supporting an open, mirrored cube, reveals a crumpled ball of white paper floating apparently unaided. In fact the viewer is, unwittingly, looking at an inverted mirror image - the plinth and cube are actually lying on the floor. This piece echoes the strategy, and is a companion piece to, the video work, *Crumpled Ball of Paper Floating on the Breath of the Artist.*

> *Double Bind*
> glass tumblers, balls, limes, shelf, black velvet, glass and mirrors
> 2007
> shown at Grey Area, Brighton, 2007

Based on the Cups and Balls illusion, *Double Bind* positions three pairs of glass tumblers on a shelf, in such a way that they are physically supported by three sheets of either mirrored, or ordinary, glass. The glasses themselves contain objects which, because of the 45 degree angle of the mirrors, seem to disappear and reappear according to the spectator's viewing position.

> *Levitating Table/Levitated Table*
> Round dining table, tin box, volunteers
> 2007
> shown at Grey Area, Brighton, 2007

The *Levitating Table* was demonstrated once only at the opening of my exhibition *Now You Don't*, at Grey Area Gallery, Brighton, on Friday 29th June, 2007. The table itself had already been installed as part of the exhibition, and as visitors arrived they were each given a plain white envelope. At a predetermined time during the evening the envelopes were opened: six of these contained a slip of paper with the image of a table printed on it. These six individuals became the volunteers and, by extension, agents in realizing the levitation of the table. A round metal box (which produced a humming noise from within) was placed in the centre of the table, and the volunteers spaced themselves around its perimeter. After one failed attempt, the table was clearly levitated so that it completely left the ground for a period of approximately six seconds. For the remaining period of the exhibition the table was displayed with the label '*Levitated Table*'. Although various explanations for the effect have been offered, none has been confirmed or denied.

Appendix - other referenced works.

> *Empyrean Speculum*
> Outdoor installation/performance.
> 2009.
> Pavilion Gardens, Brighton Festival, 2009.
> (Photograph by Stig Evans).

An impromptu response to the outdoor instal-
lation of a work by Anish Kapoor, *Sky Mirror*.
The miniature replica was sited close to the
original, and included its own security fence
and guard, thereby mimicking the conditions
and circumstances of *Sky Mirror's* installation.

> *Cup and Ball*
> Wooden shelf, black velvet, copper 'chop'
cup, (ball?).
> 2003.
> Shown at the Gardner Arts Centre,
University of Sussex, 2004.

Cup and Ball features a copper cup atop a
shelf. The viewer infers that the ball is under-
neath the cup, but can only confirm this suspi-
cion by lifting the cup, thereby breaking a car-
dinal rule about touching artworks.
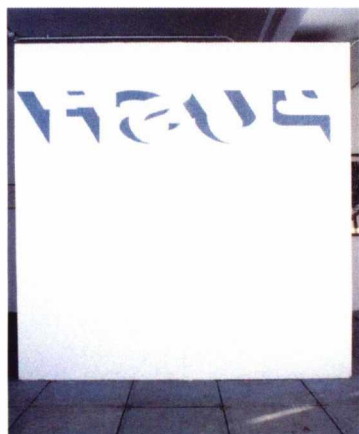
> *Untitled*
> Pastel drawing on large, free-standing
white display board.
> 2003
> shown at Phoenix Gallery, Brighton.

A response to the difficulties of negotiating a
glass door with the words 'push' and 'pull'
printed on each side. The work itself revers-
es the word 'push' and cast it as a negative
of its own shadow. The spectator has to
negotiate the work itself, which partially
blocks their access to the space.