

Antigua

Corriero

& Vincent

Gambini

Augusto

Corrieri

& Vincent

Gambini

Let me show you something. *[He holds up a playing card, the Ace of Spades, with the face toward the camera]*

Vincent Gambini in *My Cousin Vinny* (1992)

A conjuring act in the form of an interview

Augusto Corrieri, Vincent Gambini and Rhubaba, 24 June 2014

RHUBABA: Hello Vincent, hello Augusto.

VINCENT: Hello.

AUGUSTO: Hi.

RHUBABA: You're both at the gallery and studios throughout the month of August, in different ways. Augusto, you're showing *Diorama* (2013) in the gallery, a video work in which we see an actor and a sheep in reversed settings: the animal on a theatre stage, and the human in a field. The two bodies execute the same actions.

And turning to you Vincent: you're in residence, working on what we could call... a deconstructed magic show?

VINCENT: That's right. I'll be developing the work throughout the month, with a few small showings along the way. There will be a more formal presentation at the end, which I've called *This is not a magic show!*. It won't really be a show, but rather a chance for me to reflect on magic and sleight of hand, through a kind of lecture-performance. It will be like a live essay, with demonstrations of magic, set in a theatre.

AUGUSTO: Sounds very much like a magic show, actually.

VINCENT: Yes, I guess. *[laughs]*

RHUBABA: Part of the reason we were interested in bringing you both together for the month is that you share an interest in the theatre and how the stage frames a set of actions. Maybe you could say something about your relationship to the theatre or the stage.

AUGUSTO: Yes, the theatre is clearly at the centre of our interests, but we work with it in very different ways. Would you agree Vincent?

VINCENT: Yes, there are many differences in the way we work.

AUGUSTO: For me, the theatre is always the starting point, and the point of arrival, it seems. I can never escape it, no matter how much I try. It's probably because I'm using theatrical means to enact my escape... so I always end up where I started: the red curtains, the stage, the wings, the seats, etc.

I see the theatre as a device, a constructed situation, in which one person watches another. The Greek word *theatron* means 'the place of seeing', so theatre really is about being in a place, watching.

And the way we watch is of course structured by conventions, which have to do with space, with architecture, and with time: duration, modes of attention, etc. In the 20th century a lot of effort went into bringing down theatre's walls, both literally and figuratively. And I am totally indebted to the avant-garde, to performance art, to deconstructive approaches, etc. It's all I know, in a sense... But I always work with the assumption that the theatrical situation, and its conventions, somehow returns: it is like a ghost of sorts, haunting the way we watch and make performance.

RHUBABA: We can leave the theatre, but the theatre won't leave us. Even if we attempt to deconstruct the frame by bringing the mechanics on stage, we cannot completely escape framing, because the eye is a framing device. We like the idea that the theatre's architecture is modelled on the biological workings of the eye, the curtains being like heavy eyelids. We stare at the stage and the stage stares back at us.

AUGUSTO: Yes! [laughs] And so, instead of trying to get rid of this artificial machinery, with all its trappings and outmoded functions, why not use it creatively, generatively? The example I often return to is John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), the famous "silent" piece. That work was written for, and premiered in, a concert hall. Of course, you could say, the piece can be executed anytime, anywhere: you just find a spot to sit, and listen to whatever sounds are occurring there, for 4 minutes and 33 seconds. But this wasn't Cage's proposition: the piece, and hence its apparent shock value, took place in an auditorium, which is a place for listening to intentionally produced sounds i.e. to music. It was shocking at the time because Cage was seen to remove that sacrosanct intentionality. It was like stripping the architecture of its intended purpose: what is a theatre, if it is not filled with crafted meanings, with intentional human performances? The main point, for me, is that the piece needed the formal auditorium in order to happen, it was not some kind of reaction against it.

RHUBABA: I guess the word 'auditorium' probably relates to hearing, right? So in fact Cage was using the auditorium precisely for what it was built: to hear, to listen. He adhered to the convention, but radically so.

AUGUSTO: And similarly, theatre is the place of seeing, and so that is what I explore: how we look at, and perceive, bodies, objects, and phenomena. The theatrical frame bathes objects in a particular light; its imperative is: "LOOK AT THIS, this is relevant, significant, it has been placed here for a reason", etc.

So what if we continue employing the theatre as a device for heightening attention, but remove, or somewhat diminish, the actions, drama, and dancing? We might be bored for a while, but perhaps after some time we would adjust to this new situation and begin paying attention to previously marginalised "non-human" entities: sounds, for sure, but also dust, currents of air, or other life forms, such as insects, or plant matter, wood, metals... [pauses]

A significant experience for me occurred on a visit to Vicenza's Teatro Olimpico, an Italian Renaissance theatre, the first purpose-built indoor theatre in the West. I was just sitting there for half an hour, doing nothing, watching other tourists come and go, occasionally taking photographs. Then all of a sudden a black object darted across my field of vision: it was a swallow, which apparently lives undisturbed inside the theatre. So there I was, watching a bird fly elegantly around the space. It seemed significant, or poignant, because it was happening inside a theatre: again, the unintentional occurring within the architectural frame. The swallow did not "break theatre's boundaries", not at all: if anything, the space became more comfortable, welcoming... The theatre framed the bird's appearance, but it was also somewhat modified by it.

Similarly, I've been working with theatre's age-old boundaries to frame small or otherwise unremarkable events: a gust of wind, the perambulations of a sheep, human bodies executing simple actions, or being still, being absent...

RHUBABA: We are interested in *Photographs of a dance rehearsal* (2008), which you made for Camden Arts Centre, London; in this work, a group of performers dance inside the gallery space until a viewer opens the door and the performers then stop still, and remain so until the audience leaves. This work relies on the door and the movement of viewers in and out of the gallery. The physicality of viewing work in a gallery is different from that in a theatre. Does the movement within a gallery, its difference in duration and expectation, affect your thinking about your work?

AUGUSTO: In the case of *Photographs of a dance rehearsal*, the piece examines a particular theatrical dynamic but from within a gallery context. Take a generic theatre show: when the audience arrives at the theatre, the performers walk on stage and begin moving; their activity ends when the spectators leave the space. For *Photographs of a dance rehearsal*, I simply reversed the terms of that logic: so when the audience arrives to see the work, the dancers cease their activity, and when the audience leaves the work, they resume it. This is made possible by the gallery context. It is a formal constraint, and an opportunity for spectators to assume responsibility in

their relation to performers; because occasionally audience members still the dancers in rather uncomfortable positions, and so, by deciding how long to stay in the room, spectators are also deciding how much discomfort to inflict upon the performers. On the other hand, the stillness of the dancers highlights the movements of the spectators: the work of spectating becomes visible and performative, and a little fraught with doubt and uncertainty. The piece can be seen as a study in the effect of bodies watching other bodies, and the ethical bonds implied by that activity. For we tend to see the act of watching as neutral or passive, but it is in fact very intense and complex. So yes, in *Photographs of a dance rehearsal* these theatrical considerations of what it means to watch another were filtered through the specific situation of the gallery.

RHUBABA: Vincent, can we turn to you for a moment. What's your approach to theatre?

VINCENT: Listening to Augusto made me think of just how much the magician's act is indebted to the theatre as a perceptual device. I am thinking in particular of the proscenium arch: the frame in which everything is set.

RHUBABA: Could you tell us what the proscenium arch is?

VINCENT: It's the frame that encases the stage, delimiting what we see and what we don't see. The custom started in the 16th century, apparently Leonardo Da Vinci sketched the very first one. One of the effects of this frame is that, just like in a painting, it produces a front and a back: there is a side that is given to see, and one that isn't. I don't just mean the wings at the sides: I mean that when you stand on stage facing the audience, for example, they can see your front, but they can't see your back. [*stands up to demonstrate*] And if I turn to show you my back... now you can't see my front. And so on.

It's a ridiculously simple premise, but I think it structures a lot of magic, deception, and sleight of hand: the instant you show something, something else is hidden. It's a necessary compromise in the theatre, and magicians exploit it to the max.

RHUBABA: There is always something behind what is presented, what is seen. Hidden actions and intentions, multiple layers...It's also about getting the audience to look over there [*points across the room*], whilst secretly carrying out something else, yes?

VINCENT: Only partly, actually. You see, there are certain clichés that always pop up when talking about magic. What you have just referred to, the practice of distracting the audience, is called misdirection. And the cliché of misdirection is that the magician distracts the audience to carry out the tricks. But in fact misdirection has more to do with sculpting the path of the audience's attention, sowing certain thought patterns and expectations. Like a film editor, you are responsible for choosing to highlight certain features and ideas over others: and only some of these choices have to do with outright concealment, many are simply about producing a certain logic, an idea, an atmosphere, or reinforcing a sense of impossibility.

AUGUSTO: What's another cliché relating to magic?

VINCENT: Well, I guess the idea of dissimulation. For example you take out a pack of cards [*reaches into pocket and takes out a pack of cards*] and people generally assume they are trick cards. Enter the magician, or the frame of magic, and audiences assume that objects are somehow corrupted or fake. Whereas many magicians, especially sleight of hand magicians, are akin to old-fashioned folk artists: they are purists, they will never, or only very rarely, use gimmick props. There's a certain pride in doing tricks with a regular deck of cards, or borrowing an object from a spectator.

I'll give you another example. Recently I went for a psychotherapy session. It was my first meeting with this analyst. I told the woman about my teenage obsession with magic, and we also talked about my family situation during those teenage years: my sense of things remaining unspoken, pretending that everything's fine when in fact it's not, keeping up appearances, etc. Anyway,

the analyst made the connection between magic and my family situation: because magic, she suggested, is about fakery, and concealing what is actually happening, etc.

Of course I could see her point, but she was thinking of magic in terms of this cliché, or dualism: appearance and truth, fake and real, etc.

There are other ways of thinking about magic... As a teenager, by practicing magic all day, every day, for several years, I was genuinely creating and inhabiting a world. In order to master complex sequences of sleight of hand you have to enter a state of complete absorption, physically and mentally, where even the smallest movement or action is studied, rehearsed and naturalised. It is a very delicate kind of labour, and you can easily spend days simply rehearsing how to place a card on the table. Talk about an intentional, crafted performance! *[to Augusto]* I imagine John Cage hated magic tricks?

AUGUSTO: I don't know... but if I were a psychotherapist, I would say that you were using magic to ward off the "real" world. You spent years mastering card and coin manipulation as a way to create a sense of order, or predictability... of holding life within a rehearsable parameter...

VINCENT: Absolutely. And it's interesting that magic, unlike performance art and the avant-garde perhaps, is about creating a quasi clockwork world, in which you control a mostly predictable outcome. Take for example a classic card trick, where the magician cuts to the four aces, one by one, from a shuffled pack of cards. Can you shuffle these? *[hands the cards over to Augusto for shuffling]* Now watch... *[cuts to the four aces]*.

RHUBABA: Wow...

AUGUSTO: Jesus...

VINCENT: The point I want to make is that in this trick the cards are really shuffled, there is genuine chaos and disorder, and the task is, within the chaos, to produce a kind of order... that is, the four aces. There is of course a mismatch between what the audience sees, and what is happening behind the wings, let's say. But the fact remains that I genuinely have to create this sense of order from chaos, it's not just a trick with an easy explanation... A visual art metaphor comes to mind: it's like making a mess of shapes and lines on a sheet of paper, then trying to identify and extract a clear pattern underlying it. The mess is real, and the extracted pattern is also real. So in fact there is little dissimulation or fakery going on, at least in this case.

RHUBABA: How long did it take you to learn a trick like this?

VINCENT: Hard to say. But probably it would take two years, starting from scratch, to do this trick in the way I just showed you. And this is only possible through a kind of obsessive approach, a desire for surgical precision. You simply have to lock yourself in a room, in enforced isolation, create your own asylum of voluntary rehearsals and *répétitions* (the French word for rehearsal). In that slightly removed world you patiently learn how to locate the four aces from a shuffled pack of cards, a gambler's dream.

AUGUSTO: I know you've said there's chaos, but I get an impression of unfailing precision and order. It makes me think of a little toy theatre... a mini stage, where things come and go, cards can appear and disappear, according to precise modalities and timings.

VINCENT: There is a contradiction at play here. On the one hand the magician is in control of what happens; for example he clicks his fingers, and a coin suddenly appears, seemingly out of nowhere. This is the conjuror as wizard, able to bend the laws of matter to his will, etc. On the other hand, mastery and control are very limited perspectives of the magician's craft; in fact, when I'm practicing sleight of hand with cards, I often have the impression that I'm simply doing what the cards allow, or invite, the hands to do. It is the cards, their shape and size, grain and texture, that dictate what can happen. I am entirely dependent on the particular properties of the objects. And these properties have to be discovered through trial and error, you can't dream them

up in advance, independently of the objects. So to me, sleight of hand has little to do with mastery, in the sense of domination or control; it's more a case of entering into relation with inanimate things, and discovering their properties, which do not match my plans and ambitions.

This way of thinking isn't so common. The overwhelming majority of magicians enjoy the impression of mastery, which, though it can be very appealing, seems very short-sighted to me. Why this obsession with mastery? It is probably not a coincidence that, historically, the figure of the modern magician – the white, male, bourgeois entertainer dressed elegantly in a top hat and tails – appears at the height of industrial capitalism, affirming the rational mastery of the elements. The dream that capitalism could allow for endless growth and production was perfectly mirrored by the stage magician, endlessly producing objects out of thin air...

RHUBABA: It's interesting to hear you talk about the training process as being engaged with ideas of the body; thinking about where the person ends and the world begins. Augusto... you've worked in dance contexts, can you relate to this kind of experience?

AUGUSTO: Well, yes. But I never trained much as a dancer. In fact, my only real training was when I practiced magic throughout my teenage years, just like Vincent.

RHUBABA: Oh yes. We haven't talked about this. You're the magician here. Tell us about Vincent Gambini then. He is, really, just a fictional character?

AUGUSTO: The name Vincent Gambini comes from a Hollywood film, *My Cousin Vinny* (1992), with Joe Pesci in the role of Gambini. In the movie, which I watched a lot in my early teens, we see Gambini perform a simple but impressive card trick, ironically enough during a scene in which he's trying to win someone's trust.

Anyway, when you invited me to work on a magic performance here at Rhubaba I realised that I didn't want to use my own name. I will perform as myself, I won't be in character or anything, I will merely be using a pseudonym.

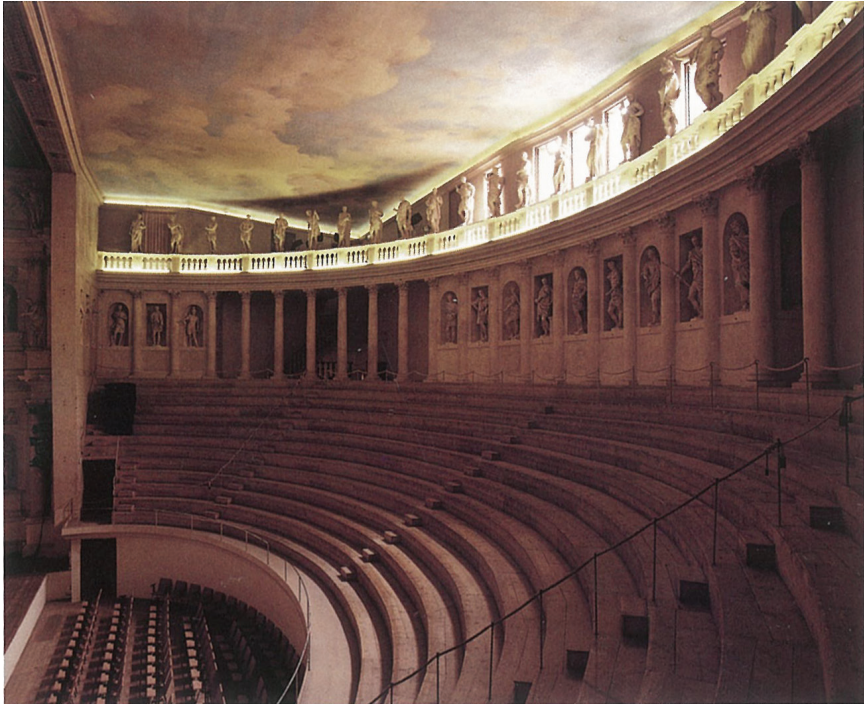
RHUBABA: Why do you not want to use your real name?

AUGUSTO: Well... It's to give the project its own space, and to protect it from myself somewhat. You see, in the performance and writing I've been developing over the last decade, I have consciously been using strategies that are, let's say ideologically, totally opposed to magic and illusion. For a long time, magic has been the no go area, the temptation to avoid, the "bad" performing art I need to emancipate myself from... So the Vincent Gambini pseudonym helps to create a separation: if Augusto cannot do magic so easily, then perhaps Vincent can.

As you can see, I have an awkward relation to magic. On one level I think it's childish: it has echoes of a teenage boy's bedroom, of lowly entertainers, and, in recent years, of beefed-up guys dressed in black, walking all messiah-like towards the camera in ultraslow motion [*demonstrates the slow motion walk*]. By returning to magic, I'm working through a sense of unease and embarrassment in revisiting all this material... perhaps I'm also grappling with the social division between high and low art, and I'm finding it difficult to justify returning to an area that is, in terms of cultural capital, rather poor. I was 18 or 19 years old when I turned my back on magic and moved to theatre and performance art. That was 14 years ago! The challenge for me is to revisit, without regressing. I still really appreciate magic and deception, but almost as a guilty pleasure...

RHUBABA: You feel you ought to always work within "serious" or culturally sanctioned art forms?

AUGUSTO: I wonder... Perhaps it's because magic's basic premise is a little absurd: from the start you are attempting to do something that the audience will not understand. Talk about an unemancipated spectator! Who knows, there might be ways round it. Perhaps Vincent Gambini will find a way... And eventually, I won't need his name to give myself permission to perform magic. Gambini might disappear... as he did just now, in this interview.



Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza, Italy



Still from *My Cousin Vinny* (1992)



Diorama (2013), Still from two-channel video. Duration: 7 minutes. Concept and choreography: Augusto Corrêa



ieri and Little Sheep. Editing: Lucy Cash. Commissioned by Dance Umbrella and straybird. Courtesy the artist.



René Lavand, still from *El Gran Simulador* (2013)

It can't be done any slower: on slow magic

by Vincent Gambini

Magic is fast.

When we think of a magician, particularly the sleight of hand magician, we think in terms of speed: the speed of execution, of concealment, of the swindle.

In a magic show things happen quickly and out of sight, the magician talking at a hurried pace, distracting the audience, and making that speed his subject material, for example through patter lines such as “the hand is quicker than the eye”, “now you see it now you don't”, “hey presto”.

In music notation, the word ‘presto’ denotes a quick tempo. The word ‘presti-digitation’ literally means “quick fingers”. We could think of the quick tempo of magic as being analogue to that of the entertainment industries, of bite-sized attention spans, and the hurried production and consumption of images in what theorist Jonathan Crary has called terminal capitalism.

How to find another pace, another rhythm?

When a sequence of film or video images is slowed down, it becomes possible to see not only more, but differently. What was previously invisible becomes visible; in the right conditions, we realise it is not just the images that have been slowed down, but ourselves too.

There is, or there might be, an alternative current of magic, never formalised as such, which we might describe as slow magic. The initiator of slow magic would be the Argentinian René Lavand, who is widely regarded by magicians worldwide as one of the best practitioners of sleight of hand card magic. Lavand, who as a child lost his right hand in a car accident, performs masterful card sequences with his left hand only, whilst narrating carefully crafted stories, poems and anecdotes about life and art. Sat behind a table, he moves gracefully, with a deliberately slackened motion, occasionally pinpointed by small dramatic bursts.

The fact that he performs magic tricks with one hand of course raises the stakes, but what is truly remarkable is that he doesn't attempt to “normalise” his performance, for example by showing that he can do with one hand what other magicians need two hands to accomplish. Lavand wears his wound visibly, his right arm at his side, hand tucked in his trouser pocket. Instead of trying to compete with the speed and skill set of two-handed magicians, he has chosen to sculpt a different approach altogether: that is, to go slower.

It is Lavand who, in one of his most celebrated tricks, makes up the term *lentidigitation* (literally, “slow fingers”). The sequence involves him slowly and visibly mixing red and black cards, then showing how, like oil and water, they have inexplicably separated. He repeats this a number of times. The sense of wonder and impossibility grow steadily: each time he repeats the sequence, he moves slower, more clearly, as if to show how the trick is done and how simple it is. And each time he spreads the cards and reveals that the colours have separated, he declares, as if in a refrain:

No se puede hacer mas lento
(It can't be done any slower)

Taking a cue from Lavand, then, slow magic is the kind of magic that emphasises slower rhythms, that is not in a hurry, or that even appears to disclose its own processes (but never its actual working methods: that is the one conservative limit of this performing art). Slow magic's exhortation to audience members is: “LOOK AT THIS”. Spectators become detectives, forensic specialists, patient visitors at an art gallery.

I wonder, more generally, about the possible relations between slowness and enchantment, between doing things at a reduced tempo and a sense of marvel.

I think of the writer Vladimir Nabokov as young boy in Russia, recounting the hours he spent watching the snow fall outside the window, whilst waiting for his piano teacher to arrive (he was always late). He writes:

There was nothing to watch save the dark, muffled street and its receding line of loftily suspended lamps, around which the snowflakes passed and repassed with a graceful, almost deliberately slackened motion, as if to show how the trick was done and how simple it was.

The motion of falling snow becomes an event in its own right, unfolding over and over again before the young Nabokov, ‘as if to show how the trick was done and how simple it was’.

No se puede hacer mas lento...

Slow magic might have to do with the micro performances of everyday things: of snow, of leaves, of plastic bags (as demonstrated, if overdone, in the film *American Beauty* (1999)). It is about the myriad manifestations of matter, of things becoming, transforming, passing: as if to show how the trick was done and how simple it was.



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Augusto Corrieri

London-based Corrieri works in performance, writing and video. Since completing a degree in Theatre at Dartington College of Arts in 2002 he has presented several works nationally and internationally. Previous commissions and residencies include: La Casa Encendida, Madrid; TanzQuartier, Vienna; Camden Arts Centre, London, and the Whitstable Biennale.

Vincent Gambini

London-based Gambini is a sleight of hand magician who has performed magic internationally and on Italian Television. He won first prize at the Italian Close-up Magic Competition and second prize at London's International Close-up Magic Competition. In 2000 he gained entry to the Magic Circle by writing a study entitled *Deconstructing Magic*.

RHUBABA
GALLERY
& STUDIOS



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This publication was produced to accompany:

AN EXHIBITION

Augusto Corrieri & Vincent Gambini

2-31 August, Rhubaba

AN IN CONVERSATION

Enchanting Things

with Prof. Carl Lavery, Saturday 9 August, 3pm, Rhubaba

A RESIDENCY

Vincent Gambini

at Rhubaba throughout August, with appearances in the Fringe

A PERFORMANCE

This is not a magic show!

Saturday 30 August, 7pm, Pilrig Hall