

# An autobiography of hands: on training in sleight of hand magic

Augusto Corrieri<sup>1</sup>

I. With thanks to Lucy Cash, Luca Mattei and Aurelio Paviato, with whom recent conversations greatly informed this text. All the illustrations are by Nelson C. Hahne, taken from Bobo ([1952] 1982).

Written in an autobiographical frame, this text is a first-person account of an intensive process of training in sleight of hand magic, undertaken by the author in his teenage years. Accompanied by a short online video, as well as illustrations from a classic book on coin magic, the text explores the configuration of the conjuror's studio, the relation to the mirror, and the forms of exchange with other sleight of hand magicians. The biographical narrative then considers what happened when this intensive training was later abandoned - its effect and continued resonance - and ends with a brief note on how it is now being resumed.

**Keywords:** sleight of hand, magic training, card magic, body memory

*And maybe theory is biography.* (Xavier Le Roy)

Let's begin with a simplified *curriculum vitae* (from the Latin, 'the course of one's life').

## **Augusto Corrieri**

Born in Milan, Italy, 1980

1994–1999

Trains as a sleight of hand magician. Wins competition prizes and gains entry to Magic Circle.

2000–2014

Abandons magic.

Moves to England to study contemporary theatre (BA and PhD degrees).

Develops body of work in performance and conceptual dance.

2014–present

Resumes magic, presenting a show under the pseudonym Vincent Gambini.

The curriculum reveals a simple pattern: magic, then theatre and performance, then magic again.



**Figure 1**

For 14 years I stopped being a sleight of hand magician: no more daily practising of techniques, no more endless hours of dropping and picking up coins, no more asking people to choose a card, any card.

It was around 2000 that I left my teenage obsession well and truly behind (or so I thought). I got rid of countless decks of cards, props and instruction videos, though I was unable to find a buyer for the extensive library of magic books, which therefore remained packed away in the basement of my parents' flat in Milan. Little did I know at the time that 14 years later I would be eagerly unpacking my magic library.

Set in an autobiographical frame, this text describes the intensive process of training in sleight of hand magic, what happened when this training was subsequently abandoned, and how it is now being resumed. It is a chronological narrative, a straight story, written under the light of choreographer Xavier Le Roy's suggestion: that perhaps biographical narration in itself constitutes a mode of theorising (Le Roy 1999).

The initial impetus for this writing came from a curiosity about hands: the same hands now doing this writing, and the hands that were (and are now again) at the centre of my creative research on sleight of hand magic.

As well as a bio-graphy (literally, 'life-writing'), I wondered if this text might be a manu-graphy, a writing of hands. Could the hands doing the writing – typing on the keyboard, scribbling and drawing on paper – also be the writing's subject? Writing about the hands writing; or else, an autobiography of hands.



Figure 2

### Part I: 1994–1999

It would have been autumn 1994. I am glued to the television screen, watching the Italian live show *Buona Domenica* (Happy Sunday), an obnoxious mix of minor celebrity stunts and barely clad dancers that managed to somehow run for 20 years on one of Berlusconi's commercial channels. Lasting several hours into the afternoon, I am waiting with bated breath to catch the live close-up magic of Aurelio Paviato, ready to press Record on the VCR. I will then spend the rest of the week watching the act, over and over and over again.

Not unlike learning to play a guitar riff by listening to and imitating recordings, my training in magic began, at age 14, by mimicking these recorded performances by Paviato, one of the most talented sleight of hand magicians in Italy.

Pause, rewind and slow motion allowed me break the movements down, to imagine what the hands and fingers might be doing given the subsequent effects, and gradually build a sequence of actions that would produce roughly similar results.

At first this imitative relation resulted in a kind of mini-Paviato: a teenage magician came into being by reproducing the actions, movements and speech rhythms learned from a televised model. As I later began to meet other magicians, attend lectures, and devour an expanding library of books on close-up magic, the primacy of the original model loosened, and it became clear how vast the literature was around this apparently simple pursuit. Through intensive daily study, the techniques I had intuited and guessed at by replaying the videos of Paviato's hands became more precise and nuanced, and more importantly they acquired names and a history: I became fully conversant with terms like the Diagonal Palm Shift, the Cover Pass, the Zarrow Shuffle, the Slip Cut, as well as hundreds of variations, improvements and updates. Whilst some sleights can be learned in a few hours, the vast majority take months and often years of solitary practice.



Figure 3

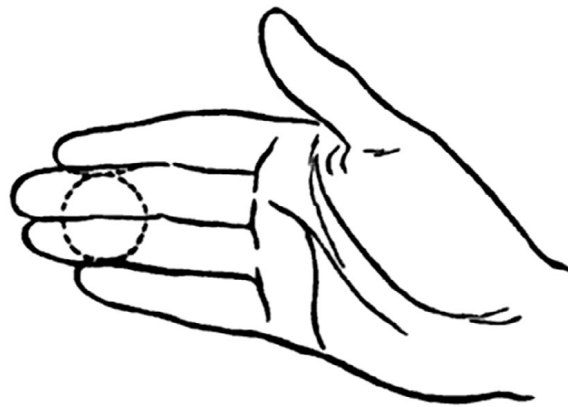


Figure 4

What strikes me now is the extent to which this dedication and obstinacy to cultivating a physical and intellectual craft has remained unmatched in my life since. I am reminded of writer Annie Dillard (2007, p. 91), speaking of the ebullience that accompanies acts of physical mastery at an early age:

But it gets harder... We let our bodies go the way of our fears. A teen-aged boy, king of the world, will spend weeks in front of a mirror perfecting some difficult trick with a lighter, a muscle, a tennis ball, a coin. Why do we lose interest in physical mastery? If I feel like turning cartwheels – and I do – why don't I learn to turn cartwheels, instead of regretting that I never learned as a child?

### ***The mirror***

In learning magic, what one is training (and training for) is a particular disposition: a will to labour on a solitary project that is rewarding in and of itself. Though there is always a goal – a particular 'move' to be learned, a new way of shuffling or 'stacking' the cards to be improved – the hours spent practising sleight of hand constitute a kind of self-sufficient activity, pursued for the pleasure of repetition, the studied nuance, and a kind of endless perfectibility. For roughly five years I sat and stood at a table, intensely practising the movements of hands and cards, poring over books and writing notes, thus



Figure 5

creating a perfectly cocooned study and existence. As Marguerite Duras (2011, p. 4) comments, in relation to the writer's solitary craft: 'One does not find solitude, one creates it'.

My teenage years were ideal for developing sleight of hand: my mother working largely as a homemaker, my father running a successful business in the context of the 1990s booming Italian economy, I could afford to spend all my afternoons and evenings practising magic. After the example of Paviato, I focused from the very beginning on close-up magic (so called because performed at close range), and in particular on sleight of hand using ordinary cards and coins; in this approach, pride and satisfaction lie in achieving magical effects purely through ingenuity and technical mastery, unaided by trick props (also known as 'gimmicks').

My teenage bedroom was configured as a studio. There was a large desk covered in green felt, with a full-height mirror resting on its side against the wall, providing me with visual feedback of the hands' movements on the table. The bookcase held a growing collection of books on magic, hundreds of packs of cards and other props, instruction videos, notebooks, etc. Hanging on the wall was a print depicting Canadian magician Dai Vernon, aka The Professor, who effectively instituted close-up magic as a discipline, mapping out the categories of tricks and sleight of hand techniques still in use today.

The relation to the mirror is fundamental: perhaps similarly to ballet training in a dance studio, every action performed by the budding magician is studied and constructed from the point of view of potential spectators. What the magician actually sees or experiences remains secondary to the actions as perceived by spectators (virtual or actual). To this day, the habit of seeing myself from the point of view of the audience remains ineradicable; for instance in the choreographic works I made in the last decade, even in the simple act of standing on stage I can't help but imagine perceiving this body from the audience's point of view, aware of the particular angle of vision, which surfaces of the body are in view and which are concealed, etc. To train in sleight of hand entails rehearsing this 'out of body' trick; it is a kind of reverse proprioception, achieved by continuously calibrating one's actions in relation to a mirror or imagined perceiving other.



Figure 6

Otherwise put: to control the audience's gaze, the conjuror has to wholly internalise it.

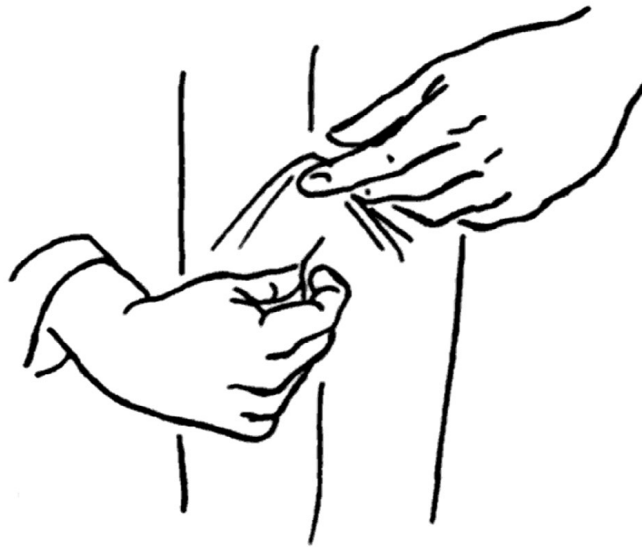
There is something pernicious in this training apparatus: despite its isolated and solipsistic qualities (or perhaps because of these), it encourages a denial of one's own lived perception and experience, wholly in favour of what the other experiences or perceives. A useful analogy is the cliché of the ballet dancer maintaining a smile in the face of extreme physical pain and discomfort: since magic is entirely predicated upon the idealised gaze of the observer, on one level what the conjuror is training for is a particular dissociation between oneself and the activity one is carrying out.

The irony is that, like many teenage magicians, I seldom performed for audiences. As far as I can remember, doing magic tricks for people was largely a nuisance, an interruption of my studious research; besides, performances in the real world were always subject to contingencies such as nerves, unexpected reactions, and the potential for failure or friendly heckles – in short, the whole messy business of social interaction; actual encounters were never as satisfying as the solitary rehearsal. If the training consisted in constructing effective actions from the imagined point of view of another, this ever-present viewer remained largely phantasmal. 'The audience' and 'the spectator', so often invoked in magic literature, were more of a device to get going, a trick of perspective positing a vital, though nonexistent, addressee. I did, however, share my work with the only people who could really appreciate what was at stake in this fantastically specialised labour of hands, i.e. fellow conjurors.

### **Hidden movements**

One of the highest accolades among sleight of hand magicians is the invisibility, or non-perceptibility, of the executed sleights. It is the ability, for example, to simply hold the cards still in one's hand, with seemingly nothing happening, though unseen and unbeknownst to observers a 'move' is being executed.

A move is really a technique, which usually has different applications; for example, a move such as the Pass allows the magician to cut the pack, swapping the top half for the bottom half, without this being perceptible to the



**Figure 7**

audience. What is striking is that, with enough practice, such a move can be performed with the cards and the hands always in full view (this is as much as I can stretch my description before breaking a kind of conjuror's oath).

There is an erotics of card manipulation, highlighted by the way magicians meet to exchange tips and techniques. Walk into a magic club or convention and you will find scores of (usually) male teenagers intently looking down at their own or at someone else's hands: it is not the magic they are so interested in – the art of enchantment, the theatrical framing, the possible relations with the audience, etc. – but the compulsive pleasure of sharing and showing off techniques to one another, the less perceptibly the better. There is a continuous flirting with concealment: the dexterous execution of hidden manoeuvres, micro-performances that are simultaneously offered and withdrawn, indulging the addictive pleasure of 'this is not happening, though it is and you know it'. If you can perform the Pass without any discernible movements of the hands and cards, you will have earned the undying respect of your peers.

This is what we might call the labour of illusion: the cultivated effortlessness (again I think of classical ballet), and the apparent lack of any muscular activity or motion precisely at the moment when the hands are performing movements rehearsed for months or years.

It is the erotics of the invisible sleight – a pleasure which is for other magicians only – or even a homoerotics, given the intensely male-dominated scene, with teenage men spending vast swaths of time alone in their bedrooms in front of a mirror, then delighting in extended 'sessions' where they exchange the fruits of their solipsistic labours with other men. Different from my own teenage days in the 1990s, today YouTube is blurring the separation between the private rehearsal and open sharing: there are thousands of rehearsal videos on the site, male teenage magicians posting comments and video responses from the solitude of their bedrooms.



Figure 8

And so, to demonstrate something of the feeling associated with the erotics of sleight of hand, I have made and uploaded a two-minute video of myself performing ‘Eight hidden movements’ to accompany this publication. In the video it appears I am merely holding the cards face down, slowly passing the deck from one hand to the other, though in fact eight rather complex sleights are being executed; this only becomes apparent when I repeat the sequence with the deck face-up, the uppermost card changing identity eight times. At the end of the video, the eight moves are named (though not explained or made perceptible). If you can access the Internet now, I suggest you watch the video before proceeding to Part 2. It is available at the following address: <http://www.vincentgambini.com/blog/hidden-movements>

## Part 2: 2000–2014

Around 1999 I began to grow dissatisfied with what I perceived to be magic’s outdated and clichéd presentational formats. Newly arrived at Dartington College of Arts in Devon to attend a theatre degree, I wondered if there could be a magic *avant garde*. In true modernist fashion I decided to wipe the slate clean of the last five years of intense sleight of hand training, and to seek alternatives in the worlds of contemporary theatre and dance. This, at least, was the courageous narrative I told myself. The first problem I encountered was precisely my magic training, which unbeknownst to me had been a perfect way of postponing the development of my selfhood. As must be abundantly clear by now, learning sleight of hand conforms to that romanticised idea of what performing arts training looks like: the daily drill, the





**Figure 9**

endless repetition, poring over the smallest of details, year after year; what better way of curtailng teenage angst and internalised family neuroses than by mastering infinitely complex card tricks? The instant I stopped the daily practice, all that angst began to flare up, causing havoc inside this newly fragile, fearful self.

The training apparatus that I had used to keep trouble at bay was suddenly absent. The metaphorical mirror had broken, and I began to deeply resent magic for the way it had so fully absorbed and defined me (or rather I resented myself, for allowing this to happen). Despairing and unable to recognise a personal crisis, preferring to frame it as an 'artistic' one, I rejected all my training. The few cards and props I had carried over to England I placed into a plastic bag, onto which I stuck a large note to self: 'If I open this bag, I will have failed'. No doubt this rather naïve cold-turkey approach to giving up magic was an attempt at rejecting the very unease and confusion that, through the intensive training, I had so successfully moved to the furthest reaches of my awareness.

So much for the late developing teen. A lingering question remained, perhaps not consciously articulated, but rather felt at the level of muscles, nerves and habitual physical patterns: what to do with those five years of deeply ingrained intensive training? What happens to a practice that gets abandoned, and to the body thereafter?

The cards did eventually re-emerge from the forbidden bag, but instead of being treated as an instrument they were demoted to the role of stress-ball, something to be absentmindedly picked up and toyed with. A rather sad end for the 52 pasteboards: years of studious training had resolved into a mindless activity, mostly as a manual accompaniment to the debilitating loops of existential rumination that I began experiencing.



**Figure 10**

This link between sleight of hand training and a depressive dispossession of self would continue for over a decade. I would reach for the cards during daily slumps and difficult moments; instead of, let's say, listening to an old tune or looking nostalgically at photographs, I used sleight of hand muscle memory (or it used me) as something of a comfort blanket: a way of physically inhabiting a familiar stasis, a strategy for curtailing, deferring or avoiding the lived life. I didn't want these empty hours of thoughtless card manipulation, but it seemed I had no choice in the matter. I remember wondering if pianists who abandon their training find themselves rhythmically tapping their fingers on tables for the rest of their lives.

### **Procrastination**

If you cannot write because of dithering about, then write about the dithering about. This is also what this text is: an attempt at focusing on a distracting habit. The dithering in question is the compulsive habit of mindlessly picking up a deck of cards and rehearsing a few moves, when I ought to be writing that email, making that decision, reading that book, phoning that friend, or going to bed.

Even as I write this, in December 2015, the pack of cards slides continuously in and out of my hands, producing an oddly oscillating rhythm: write a few words, pick up the cards, read what I have written whilst executing a few card techniques, put the cards down as I edit a word or two, then pick the cards up again... repeat *ad infinitum*.

More to the point, my ingrained sleight of hand training linked arms with procrastination. Between 2000 and 2014 (and continuing today, though differently) I spent countless hours not training and rehearsing, but rather in a limbo-state in which muscle memory, cards and habit conspired to hold me in a fearful state of indecisive inaction. Compulsively and mindlessly I would find myself performing sleight of hand, fearful and confused as to what to do, think or feel.

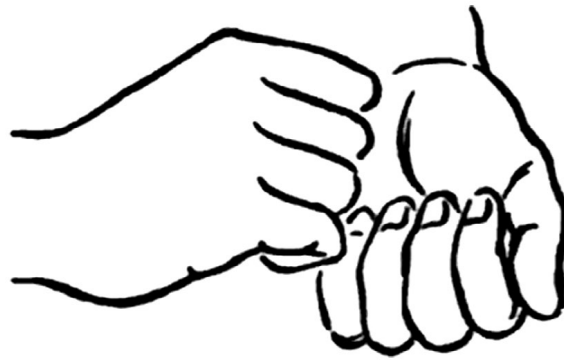


Figure 11

At times I would sink so deeply into these ruminative states that the only way I could rouse myself was by throwing the cards away or putting them on a shelf out of immediate reach. In sum, my abandoned conjuring practice was used to mark out a kind of dumb time, a holding back. Depressive indecision took on material and rhythmic form, in the execution of card techniques that seemed to cascade of their own accord, the hands moving as though on auto-pilot. It was as though, confronted by adult disquiet, the hands reacted by returning to the familiar movements that once held my sense of self together, at home, *chez moi*.

Curiously, the three or four techniques that I (or the hands) executed when procrastinating were mostly the ones I was working on around 1999–2000, just as I was abandoning my practice. And instead of improving or developing in the intervening years, those techniques acquired a litany of bad habits: nuances and details were lost, and the sleights no longer truly worked; they were not imperceptible or ‘angle-proof’, as magicians would say.



Figure 12

In sum, the first five years of training echoed strongly for over a decade, as though strangely paused or stuttering, reminding me of Chaplin's famous scene in *Modern Times*, when he (or his alienated jittering body) continues to perform the required movements to operate the factory's machines, even when no longer working at the assembly line. My hands internalised the requisite movement patterns to such an extent that they continued of their own accord, long after I had any use for such a practice. The hands endlessly repeated what they had learned through endless repetition.

### Epilogue: December 2015

In the last two years I have started actively revisiting magic, this time framed by performance and theatre, and less interested in mastery and technique. In place of resisting or attempting to 'forget' the old training, I have somewhat re-embraced it, structuring a new branch of my theatre practice under the pseudonym Vincent Gambini, an adept at sleight of hand magic. There would be much to say about Gambini, including the way the pseudonym allows for a kind of loose play of identity (it's not 'me', nor a character), as well as being a nod to a long line of US magicians whose real or stage names end in 'ini': Max Malini, Harry Houdini, Cardini, Tony Slydini, Aldo Colombini.<sup>2</sup> For this context I just want to draw attention to a few closing ideas.

2. For a discussion on the Gambini–Corrieri relationship, see Corrieri et al. (2014).

The invitation to revisit magic did not come from me. It *had* to come from someone else, a friend and performance artist colleague in Berlin, Florian Feigl; as far as I was concerned (and despite my hands' protestations) I would never have returned to my odd teen hobby, so linked was it to a kind of escapist solitude. Hesitantly at first, then increasingly enjoying revisiting that world (as well as the feeling of estrangement from it), I have gradually developed a new performance work based on sleight of hand magic.

I had to quite literally blow the dust off my bulky spiral-bound notebook of magic tricks and techniques, only to find largely incomprehensible hand drawings, lists and technical descriptions: hundreds of notes to self that are now effectively undecipherable. A single loose notebook sheet from 1995 mentions the following coin moves: the Deep Palm Tenkai, the Muscle Pass, the Click Pass, the Kaps Subtlety, as well as a card technique: the Hofzinger Top Change using the Gambler's Cop; presently I can only remember what two of those terms actually refer to. Much of the jargon and terminology has lost its meaning, and I will most likely not be able to decode my old studies, or return to the same technical proficiency. The hands, however, do remember (albeit with some imprecision), and in the current performance I shamelessly capitalise on those years of assiduous teenage rehearsal.

To remedy the habit of mindlessly repeating card techniques (as I write this, the cards are still sliding in and out of my hands), I try to pause and rehearse focusedly, slowly, and to ask very concise questions: what are the hands doing now? Why are they doing it this way, and not another way? Do I need to keep rehearsing this, and if not why am I doing it? This careful attention short-circuits the auto-pilot mode, at least temporarily, allowing me to notice and steer away from the bad habits picked up through years of procrastination.

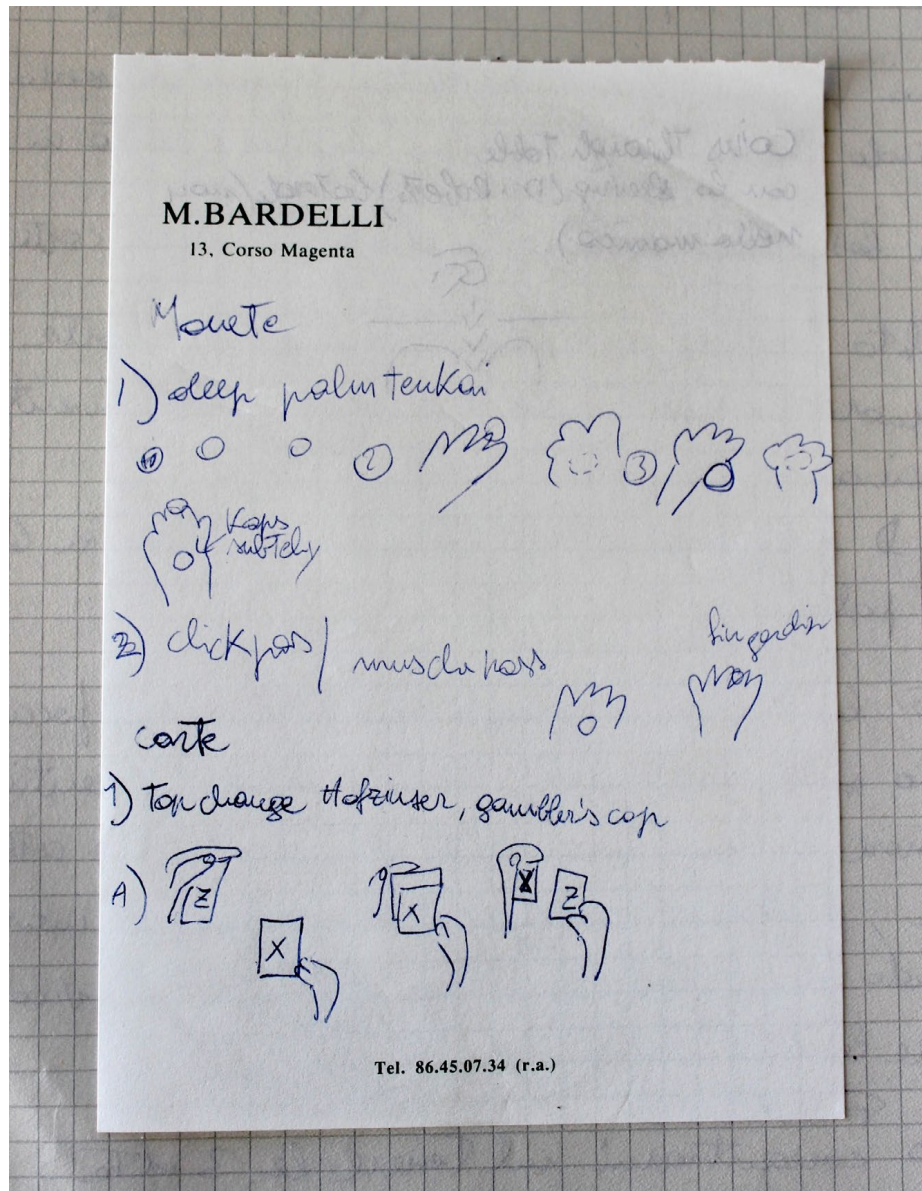


Figure 13

So far in my life's curriculum there have been three extremely different phases of magic training: as intensive teenage mastery, as compulsive accompaniment to mental ill health, and as vital component of a new performance work. I am not currently allowing myself to try and predict what will happen next, though I am amazed by just how much there is to decipher.

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