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Magicians and the mind: People may be wired to fall for the sleight of hand

By George Johnson

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LAS VEGAS: The reason he had picked me from the audience, Apollo Robbins insisted, was that I'd seemed so engaged, nodding my head and making eye contact as he and the other magicians explained the tricks of the trade. I believed him when he told me afterward, over dinner at the Venetian, that he hadn't noticed the name tag identifying me as a science writer. But then everyone believes Apollo - as he expertly removes your wallet and car keys and unbuckles your watch.

It was a Sunday night on the Las Vegas Strip, where earlier this summer the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness was holding its annual meeting at the Imperial Palace Hotel. The organization's last gathering had been in the staid environs of Oxford, but Las Vegas - the city of illusions, where the Statue of Liberty stares past Camelot at the Sphinx - turned out to be the perfect locale. After two days of presentations by scientists and philosophers speculating on how the mind construes, and misconstrues, reality, we were hearing from the pros: James (The Amazing) Randi, Johnny Thompson (The Great Tomsoni), Mac King and Teller - magicians who had intuitively mastered some of the lessons being learned in the laboratory about the limits of cognition and attention.

Apollo, with the pull of his eyes and the arc of his hand, swung around my attention like a gooseneck lamp, so that it always pointed in the wrong direction. When he appeared to be reaching for my left pocket he was swiping something from the right. At the end of the act the audience applauded as he handed me my pen, some crumpled receipts and dollar bills, and my digital audio recorder, which had been running all the while. I hadn't noticed that my watch was gone until he unstrapped it from his own wrist.

"He's uncanny," Teller said to me afterward as he rushed off for his nightly show with Penn at the Rio.

A recurring theme in experimental psychology is the narrowness of perception: how very little of the sensory clamor makes its way into awareness. Earlier in the day, a neuroscientist had demonstrated a phenomenon called inattention blindness with a video made at the Visual Cognition Laboratory at the University of Illinois.

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Jane Kalinowsky for The New York Times
The magician Teller demonstrating a coin trick.

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walking on from stage left. (The video is online at viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/grafs/demos/15.html.)

Secretive as they are about specifics, the magicians were as eager as the scientists when it came to discussing the cognitive illusions that masquerade as magic: disguising one action as another, implying data that isn't there, taking advantage of how the brain fills in gaps - making assumptions, as The Amazing Randi put it, and mistaking them for facts.

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