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Magic Research

Yesterday's *Science Times* described research published recently in *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* in which "a team of brain scientists and prominent magicians described how magic tricks, both simple and spectacular, take advantage of glitches in how the brain constructs a model of the outside world from moment to moment, or what we think of as objective reality."

See performances of one the magicians, Apollo Robbins:
(you can also check out his web site, IStealStuff.com)

The *Times* article talks about the relationship between magic and perception, suggesting that the work of magicians can help neuroscientists understand the limits of perception. My non-scientific take on this is that magicians are exploiting known phenomena like the blind spot we have in our vision. The *Times* article highlights several magic tricks that rely on these "biological limitations" to trick humans into thinking that magic is being performed, while it comments on how the brain is misled:

The brain focuses conscious attention on one thing at a time, at the expense of others, regardless of where the eyes are pointing. In imaging studies, neuroscientists have found evidence that the brain suppresses activity in surrounding visual areas when concentrating on a specific task. Thus preoccupied, the brain may not consciously register actions witnessed by the eyes.

There are interviews with a few magicians, as well as a description of Apollo Robbins' performance at last summer's Magic of Consciousness Symposium.

For More Information

- Carey, Benedict. [While a Magician Works, the Mind Does the Tricks](#). *New York Times*, August 12, 2008.
- Doctorow, Cory. [Magic teaches us about human cognition](#). Boing Boing, August 5, 2008. There are some interesting comments about the Boston Globe coverage of the same Nature Neuroscience article.
- Stephen L. Macknik, Mac King, James Randi, Apollo Robbins, Teller, John Thompson and Susana Martínez-Conde. [Attention and Awareness in Stage Magic: Turning Tricks into Research](#). *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, advance online publication, 30 July 2008.
- [Magic of Consciousness Symposium](#). June 24, 2007. See [some video clips](#), including a video of [Teller speaking](#), Apollo Robbins picking the pocket of a *New York Times* reporter, and Dan Dennett being fooled by the Amazing Randi.)

Posted by CogSci Librarian @ 8:34 AM Labels: [brain](#), [consciousness](#), [magic](#)