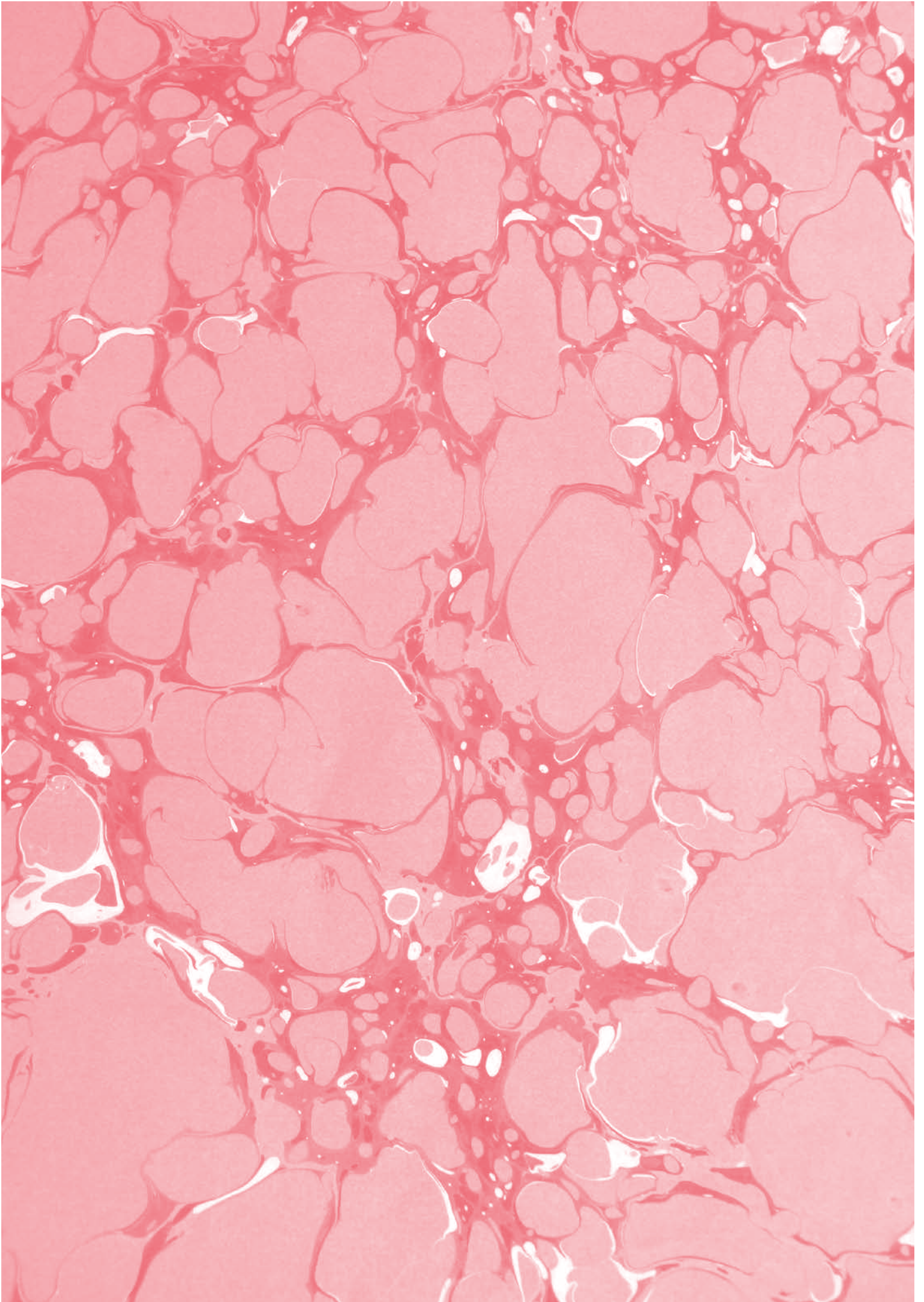


# FEAST



SETTING THE TABLE

**THE  
HOME STUDIES  
COLLECTION**



Between April and July 2016 FEAST editors Laura Mansfield and Elisa Oliver invited a group of academics, artists and writers to undertake a period of research into the Home Studies Collection in order to develop a series of contemporary responses to the historical material.

Held within Special Collections, Manchester Metropolitan University, the Home Studies Collection contains more than 700 items relating to the preparation, serving and eating of food from the 1600s to the 1980s. Originally held at the Manchester School of Domestic Economy and used as a teaching resource, the collection includes household manuals, cookery books, national food surveys and educational text books as well as recipe books by Women's Institutes and Social Clubs from across the UK. The collection provides a wealth of information on changing food habits, aspirations and cultures.

Guided by FEAST's overarching theme of Setting the Table, Catherine Bertola, Augusto Corrieri, Bryce Evans, Beryl Patten, Rachel Rich and Susannah Worth worked with the vast array of titles in the collection to develop a response to the material that reflected their own creative or academic practice. The resulting responses were presented in a series of public discussions facilitated by FEAST's editors in the collection. The intimate discussions provided a unique opportunity for those attending to view and handle a selection of the materials that had formed the basis of the invited practitioners research.

The following publication is a document of the individual responses and attests to the collection's ongoing importance in contemporary debates around cultures of eating and the availability, popularity, preparation and production of certain foods.

Edited by

LAURA MANSFIELD

DINING TABLES AND PERFORMANCES,  
OR: THE LABOUR OF ILLUSION



by

AUGUSTO CORRIERI

01.  
THE DISAPPEARING  
KNIFE TRICK

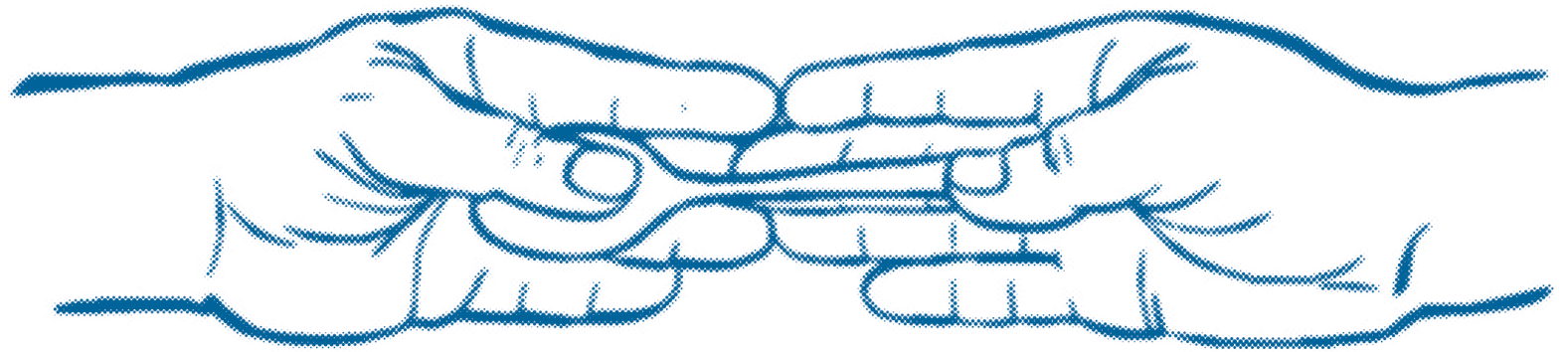


fig.1

**'At first I am rather confused'**

After spending some time perusing various books from the Home Studies Collection, it seems to me there is little connection between my own work — the ideas or practices I habitually engage with — and the theme or setting of the dinner table.

The fields I am currently engaged in can be named as: magic and conjuring, theatre as a framing device, avantgarde performance practices, and lastly, and somewhat differently, animals, non-humans and ecology. Visiting an archive of nineteenth and early twentieth century books around cooking, dining and the domestic, therefore, seems at once too familiar, and too distant. Too familiar because eating and dining are activities that, despite the attention I might dedicate to them, remain in the background of my direct interests: eating is an activity I do when I am not 'at work'. And distant because, again upon first impression, this collection arguably relates to bygone eras, when the places assigned to women, men, children, animals, food and objects were fixed according to values that have since been radically called into question, if not superseded.

However, as I continue my research in the collection, certain correspondences begin to emerge, particularly between magic and the dining table. Correspondences that are perhaps phantasmal, imaginary, superficial even... and therefore worth pursuing. I realize, for instance, that the first magic trick I ever saw and learned as a child, as far as I can remember, was at a dinner table. I would have been maybe 7 or 8 years old. I was sitting opposite a family friend — a man in his 40s I think — at the family table. The man picked up a knife, covered it with his hands, and brought his hands up to his mouth: in one swift

motion he then moved his mouth over his hands, miming as though 'eating' the knife, which to my great surprise had vanished without a trace. I can remember a strange mixed feeling, a kind of 'thinking wonder': it seemed to me that the knife really had been eaten up, though I also knew that *couldn't* be happening, lest everything I'd learned so far about the body, and matter in general, suddenly be wrong or radically incomplete. Back then I don't think I quite had a sense of 'something else' taking place: of backstage work, trickery, something secret or hidden. After all, I was at home, in my own kitchen, at the table where I sat every day for my meals. This man simply took one of the knives from the table, and appeared to gobble it up.

Little did I know at the time that the very dining table, the cutlery, and the fact of being sat together facing one another — all *that* constitutes the apparatus of the magic feat, and that's why it remains invisible: because it is simply the same apparatus structuring the meal. When we step into a theatre, with the lights, the stage and the curtains, we know to be on alert: we know to be suspicious of a theatre, because it is obviously meant to deceive, it is an apparatus that hides and reveals. Surely the domestic space is not a theatrical apparatus? Surely 'home' is not rigged with trapdoors and pulleys for magical illusions?

Simplifying to the extreme, on the one hand we have 'the theatre', clearly announced as a place for spectacle and deception. On the other hand, the 'home', which passes itself as real, private, or not-theatre. With this dual model in the back of my mind, I delve back into the Home Studies Collection and chance upon *The Gentleman's Table Guide*, by E. Ricket, (1873). In a striking passage the author describes emperor Nero's spectacular dining apparatus, configured to represent a mutating cosmos: *In Nero's palace, called the 'Golden House', the whole building being covered with gold, enriched with pearls and precious stones, he caused the roof of one of the banqueting rooms to resemble the firmament, both in figure and motion, turning incessantly about night and day, exhibiting new appearances as the different courses in the feast were removed... the attendants could at pleasure make it rain down a variety of sweet waters or liquid perfumes.*<sup>1</sup>

Nero's impressive sensory display partakes in a rather usual understanding of theatre — as visible apparatus, as spectacular occasion, as entertainment. In contrast to this, we find Roman politician Lucullus' more subtle theatrics:

<sup>1</sup> E. Ricket, *The gentleman's table guide*. (London: Frederick Warne 1873), 76. Home Studies Collection, Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 77

Among the luxuries of Lucullus are mentioned his various banqueting rooms, each named after the gods... To each apartment was assigned its peculiar feast, so that he had only to say to his servants that he would dine in a certain room, and they understood perfectly what they were to prepare for the entertainment. Cicero and Pompey attempted on one occasion to surprise him [to see how Lucullus dined normally] and were astonished at the feast which had been prepared at the simple remark of Lucullus to his servant, the he would sup in the hall of 'Apollo'.<sup>2</sup>

Lucullus was able to communicate, at a moment's notice, exactly what kind of feast should be prepared, simply by informing his servant of the room. In this apparent absence of preparedness lay the trick that fooled Cicero and Pompey. Whereas Nero's theatrics were in full view, Lucullus' were ingeniously disguised: the deceptive feat was made possible by the tacit knowledge shared between himself and his servant. It was the apparent absence of any preparation that fooled his guests; and as any magician knows, it is precisely where there appears to be no trickery, or even no possibility of trickery, that trickery is taking place. This, at least, is what I have learned from magic: it is in the apparent absence of any wrongdoing, often at the very moment of honest display (the moment the hands are 'shown empty') that the subterfuge is carried out.

The word subterfuge literally means '*flee beneath*'. It helps in fact to explain the knife trick that first enchanted me. After carefully covering the knife with both hands, all you do is gently drop it onto your lap: the knife's fall is covered by the hands, and by the edge of the table. The rest is theatrics.

#### fig 1 & 2

*The basic mechanics of the trick, here seen using a spoon.* George Schindler, *Magic with Everyday Objects*. (New York: Stein & Day 1976), drawings by Ed Tricomi.



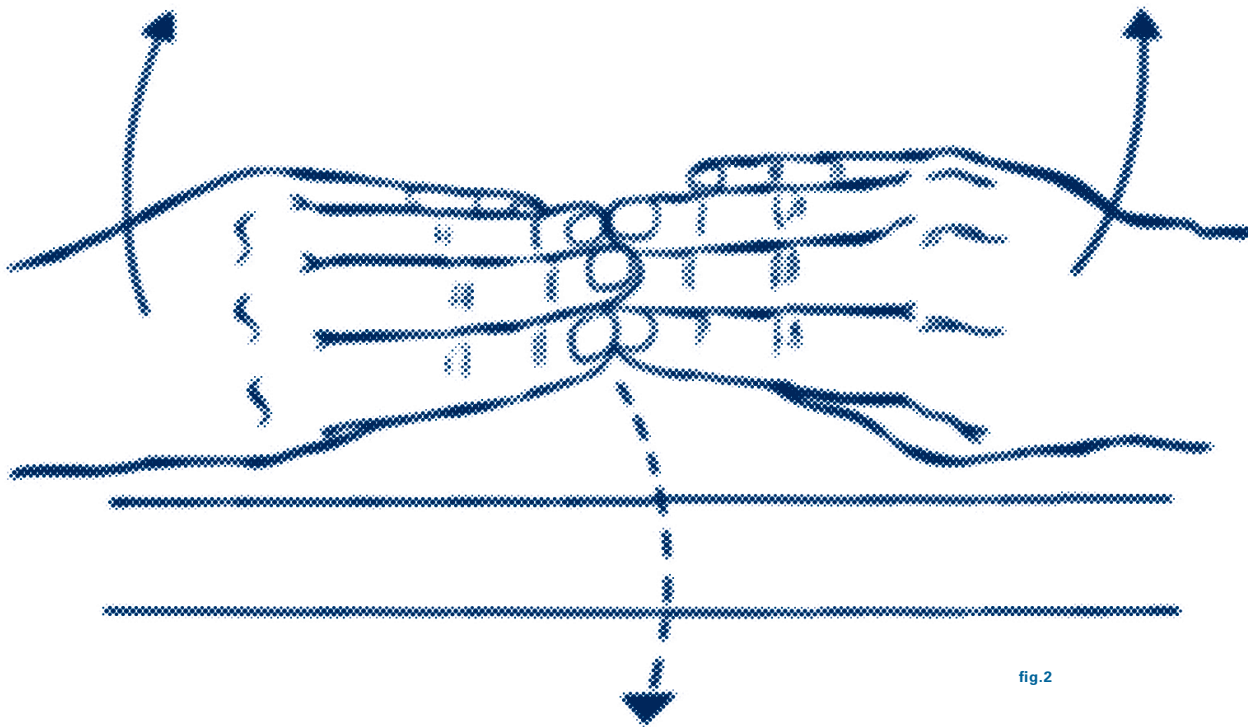


fig.2



fig.3

02.  
THE VANISHING LADY

The dining table, much like a magic theatre, might be a site of subterfuge, of timed appearances and disappearances. The display of food upon the table, the serving of dishes by trained staff in contemporary restaurants or the servants of historical empires, might create a sense that the dinner is effortlessly made — there is no artifice, no investment, and no preparation. The (often female) labour remains hidden, and the feast unfolds as though of its own accord: by ‘magic’.

For a parallel we might think of classical ballet, the trained bodies of (often) female dancers, those ‘docile bodies’<sup>3</sup> gracefully leaping about the stage, in a display of effortless and spontaneous movement. And we might think of those female assistants, who from the nineteenth century began to accompany male stage magicians, and who unbeknownst to the theatre audience were the ones often carrying out most of the labour to make the illusion happen — activating pulleys, executing difficult bodily feats and manoeuvres, preparing and disposing of props and objects — all the time having to appear as pleasant human décor, or else as subjects who are being hypnotised, etherised, made to sleep, levitate and vanish, if not sawn in half or skewered, yet through the (male) magician’s powers eventually return to their usual bodily selves.

**fig. 3**

Poster for stage magician Kellar (artist unknown).

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘docile bodies’ comes from Michel Foucault. See for example Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*. (New York: Random House 1995)

In an echo of the relations between workers and capitalist factory owners, the female assistants carried out the labour of illusion, whilst the male conjuror reaped the benefits and took all the credit. The female assistants were quite literally objectified by the male magician’s act. [On April 5, 1789, a poster for the Haymarket theatre, London, promised that that Monsieur Comus, ‘lately arrived from Paris, will, by sleight of hand, convey his wife, who is 5 feet 8 inches high, under a cup, in the same manner as he would balls’.](#)<sup>4</sup>

It might not be a coincidence that most of the books in the Home Studies Collection were published during the so-called Golden Age of magic, the second half the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whereas earlier magicians would perform in a variety of settings, and were generally considered rather lowly entertainers, in the mid nineteenth century they begin to don tailcoats and perform in theatres. Magic transforms into [a legitimate form of theatrical performance, one that would, by the 1880s, become an indisputable staple of the Victorian cultural diet.](#)<sup>5</sup> And THE illusion that propelled magicians to a kind of stardom is, low and behold, the Vanishing Lady.

**fig. 4**

A. Albert Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects, and Trick Photography*. (New York: Munn 1898).

<sup>4</sup> Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, Feminism*. (Durham and London: Duke University press 2003), 46

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 41

Before describing the trick, there are two historical contexts that need to be thought about, and which theorist Karen Beckman has written about superbly in her 2003 book *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*. The first is that in 1851 'the national census made the British public aware of a burgeoning female population, that left men in the minority'.<sup>6</sup> What ensued was a growing male anxiety about managing an increasing population of women, who were increasingly unmarried, in work and able to educate themselves. They were not disappearing into the household, to set the table. Public discussions centred on the perceived question of female surplus, a surplus that would need to be somehow curbed: actual suggestions included shipping women to the colonies, such as New Zealand.

The second historical context to bring to bear on a discussion of the Vanishing Lady illusion highlighted by Beckman is the Indian rebellion at Cawnpore of 1857, resulting in the violent killing of British civilians by the Indian army, and an excruciating retaliation from the British forces. Beckman suggests that this colonial uncertainty abroad, and the beginnings of what would turn into universal suffrage at home, were worked through at a more or less subconscious level, and that such subconscious workings can be seen to appear in the stage conjuror's acts of the time. For one, magicians began having assistants, who were invariably either women or Indian men: *From the 1870s on, British magicians began to blow women out of canons, a trick that could not but recall the punishment of Indian soldiers at Cawnpore, whose bodies were decimated precisely in this way.*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 19

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 45

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 52

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 53

The trick that gathered the most attention was Buatier De Kolta's Vanishing Lady. The original title was *L'escamotage d'une dame*, the word *escamotage* from *escamote*, the conjuror's cork ball used in the famous cups and balls routine. Here again a literal upscaling of 'object', from cork ball to female body. The essence of the trick again is a literal act of subterfuge, or fleeing beneath. Presented on the Victorian stage by Charles Bertram, the act was performed in a set that represented the Victorian drawing room, which as Beckman notes is 'already a place of disappearance or 'withdrawal' from public view'.<sup>8</sup> The magician is asking us to imagine a domestic space, in which the female subject is made to literally disappear. After having the female assistant sit on a chair, Bertram would cover her with a large cloth, which was then whisked away with a flourish to reveal an empty seat, the woman nowhere in sight. In fact the assistant would slip through a trap door below (as pictured), her escape perfectly concealed by the cloth, and most importantly by a metallic structure built around the chair, which replicated the essential features of a human body shape.

Interestingly, in the original performance of the trick by De Kolta, the magician also made the cloth vanish, meaning that the secret apparatus that kept the body shape was also gotten rid of. Beckman gives importance to this cloth and its disappearance, reading a kind of anxiety about colonial unrest: *De Kolta's vanishing of the silk, renders invisible the mechanism of vanishing along with the body in question... This piece of silk is remarkable as the only remaining visible trace of the exotic Orient that this very British, very domestic conjuring scene works hard to repress.*<sup>9</sup>

Before the massacre at Cawnpore, in fact, Western magicians often wore Oriental robes and silks, referencing fakirs and mystics from the East. After the rebellion, silks were largely abandoned, magicians now presenting themselves as capitalists, in top hats and tails, establishing a clear and legible corporeal difference.

A detail, that made the trick particularly startling, was De Kolta's spreading of a newspaper on the floor, beneath the chair. How could the lady vanish, without making noise or a tear in the sheet? The secret was that the newspaper placed beneath the chair was actually made from Indian rubber, with a flap for escape. So again it is an Indian product, made of the same rubber serving to erase pencil marks, that is itself made invisible.

Despite the evident analogy between the disappearance of the female assistant and Victorian anxieties around surplus women, Beckam is wary of wanting to read the act as an exclusively straightforward representation of a desire to get rid of women. She acknowledges for instance that a certain disappearance of 'woman' might be desirable, if strategized as a mode of resistance; just as she points out the fact that the female body, in the Vanishing Lady trick, has to return, it insists on coming back, it cannot be vanished without reappearing. And importantly, in London the feat was performed by Mademoiselle Patrice, herself an accomplished magician, which was very rare at the time (and still is). She was summoned by the royal family to perform at Sandringham Palace, like Charles Bertram, the magician who presented the Vanishing Lady.

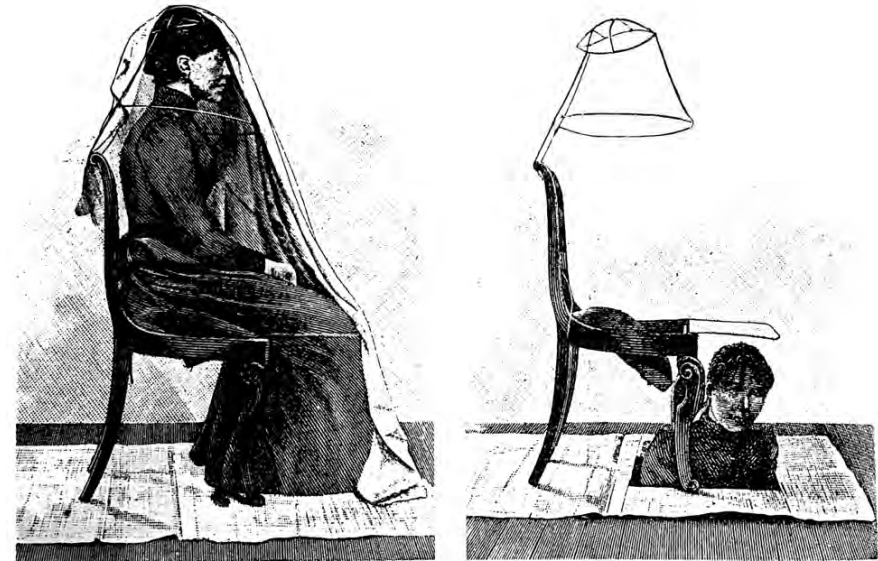


fig. 4

03.  
RETURNING TO  
THE TABLE

The Vanishing Lady trick brings us back to the vanishing knife, since in both cases it is not just an 'object' that mysteriously disappears, but more significantly the very apparatus that makes the trick possible: in the Victorian illusion, the cloth and the metallic contraption, in the table trick, it is the dining table itself that remains unperceived. The seeming absence of artifice or preparation requires very specific labour. The empty space (in theatre), the blank canvas (in art), the white page (in literature): each is already constructed, discursively, materially, and politically. In a similar vein, the empty table or the table set for dinner is a richly inscribed surface, as demonstrated by the following passage, taken from chapter 5, 'Laying the Dinner Table', of Mrs M. J. Loftie's 1878 book *The Dining Room*:

First, place on the table a thick white cotton blanket, such as we find on beds in Germany; this will save the wood from hot dishes and enhance the beauty of the damask. Before all things it is necessary, in order that a dinner-table may look nice, that the cloth be perfectly clean. It may be unbleached, to show the pattern, if this is the fancy of the lady of the house; it may be of plain linen, such as is often met with abroad; it may be of the coarse diaper with coloured borders to be found in the south of France: it may be of the finest double damask, but it must be spotless. Unless this luxury can be afforded, it is needless to talk about ornament.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Mrs M. J. Loftie, *The Dining Room*. (London: Macmillan 1878), 79. Home Studies Collection, Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections

T H E R E





FOLLOW



PAGES

OF

ADVICE



...procuring and fitting napkins, before moving on to consider cutlery, glass and china. In contrast to the illusion of the dinner table, what is productive about magic is the way it implies its hidden activity. It is always winking at spectators, 'I know that you know that I know', and in that winking does a lot of work around the seams of artifice and illusion. As Beckman notes: [magic provokes critical spectatorship through its self-acknowledged performance of undisclosed activity](#).<sup>11</sup>

And of course magic partakes in other cultural norms, anxieties and myths. If silks and ladies seen in half might refer to Victorian political debates, I wonder about that first trick I saw, the knife disappearing under the guise of being eaten. Perhaps that simple subterfuge has to do with the ways the dining table is associated with a certain kind of propriety: it is a civilising apparatus, where manners are learned, a certain conduct upheld, it is the terrain of 'docile bodies'. I certainly didn't grow up by eating with my hands, then graduating to fork and knife, though I am glad to see this happening with children nowadays. In fact, in one of the books from the collection, *The Gentleman's Table Guide*, I find this riposte, by people who prefer to use their hands to eat: 'Fingers were made before forks'.<sup>12</sup> And, taking it one step further, in the 1854 book *Table traits, with something on them*, I find that the word adoration refers to the act of putting the hand to the mouth.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the eating of a knife short-circuits that sense of propriety and docile conduct. This bit of harmless fun could be read as a form of revenge against that training; the distance that cutlery establishes between hands and food is suddenly collapsed, as cutlery itself becomes food. The medium becomes the feast.

<sup>11</sup> Beckman, 190

<sup>12</sup> Ricket, 5

<sup>13</sup> J. Doran, *Table traits, with something on them*. (London: Richard Bentley 1854), 67. Home Studies Collection, Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections