

Open Secrets and Closed Stacks:

Professional Community Engagement in a Private Library and Archive in New York,

A Collection Assessment and History of the Conjuring Arts Research Center

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The Conjuring Arts Research Center (CARC) is a private, non-profit (501C3), library and archive located in Midtown Manhattan on West 30th Street. The CARC is a library and archive documenting the history of magic performance from the ancient world to the present day. The library operates during business hours (9AM-5PM Monday through Friday) and is open to any magicians, researchers, or others by appointment only. The library is led by a board of directors and its funding comes from a foundation established by William Kalush. William Kalush built the vast majority of the collections at the core of the CARC and he currently serves as chair of the board of directors. The collections of the CARC have two primary functions. The collection serves a large international community of professional magicians seeking technical information about magic performance and technique. The CARC also provides resources and material for researchers investigating the history of magic performance and related subject matter.

The CARC was founded in 2003 by William Kalush, an entrepreneur and magic historian, as well as magicians Steve Cuiffo and David Blaine¹. Kalush, who scrounged and saved to afford often costly and hard to find magic books, wanted to establish a research center that, unlike other prominent private collections, would be open to all curious magicians and scholars. Kalush and Cuiffo established a foundation through which the CARC would be administered, as well as the tax designation as an educational, cultural non-profit institution

¹ Kalush, William. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 3/10/2010.

(501C3). While the CARC requires all visitors to schedule an appointment with one of its librarians in advance, he remains committed to providing access to the 13,000 volumes to all who show an earnest desire to study the history and performance of the art of magic.

The CARC maintains a full-time staff of three professional librarians, an office manager, one subject specialist, and a part-time team of subject consultants and interns. The CARC head librarian, Alexis Lynne Pavenick, PhD, came to CARC in 2009². She has subject knowledge of British and American literature from the 18th to 20th centuries, and she has worked as a rare-book dealer, a university instructor.³ While Dr. Pavenick did not possess prior subject-specific knowledge, she holds an MLS and has an educational background in rare books and archival materials. Dr. Pavenick is responsible for overseeing the cataloging of books at CARC, as well as maintaining the physical space of the CARC and overseeing physical preservation and conservation as well as re-housing of materials. Dr. Pavenick also manages the daily operations of the foundation that operates the CARC.

Librarian Dr. Lori Pieper serves as the CARC's in-house director of research and translation, and Sean Rockoff serves as chief digitization librarian.⁴ Both Dr. Pieper and Mr. Rockoff work closely with Richard Smith, the CARC's acting student in residence and in-house subject specialist. William Kalush and Richard Smith are the only full-time staff members of the CARC who have extensive knowledge of magic history and performance technique. When an item is added to the collection, Dr. Pavenick creates a basic catalog record in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, often with consultation from both Dr. Pieper (much of the older material is not in English) as well as from Mr. Kalush and Mr. Smith, who can provide information about the content and context of the material within the CARC collection. The item is then digitized by

² Pavenick, Alexis Lynne. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 4/20-4/27/2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ CARC Web Site. Available online: www.conjuringarts.org/about/staff Accessed: 2 April 2010-27 April, 2010.

Mr. Rockoff using a high-resolution digital camera, archival safe lights as well as book-supports, and is transferred onto the CARC servers as a loss-less .tiff preservation master copy.

Much of the material at the core of CARC's collection is comprised of magicians' trade secrets dating back centuries. These materials come in the form of professionally published and bound books, self-published works, pamphlets, lecture notes, correspondence, and manuscripts. The vast bulk of the material's content was never intended by its creators to be made available to a general public. These secrets, methods, and techniques were passed among magicians and were often closely guarded. Much of the material was never published by large popular presses, and is comprised of small, independent publishers, such as (L&L and A-1 Media), and for much of the twentieth century to present, is comprised of photocopied, spiral-bound and self-published works sold or distributed at professional conferences and lectures given by the creators. The content of this kind of material is comprised of the technical secrets and methods used to perform magic, and the performance techniques, often called "patter," used to accompany the magic effects themselves.

Every single item added to the CARC collection is processed using the library's catalog. While the CARC is not able to use the AACR2 (the CARC's director William Kalush expressed a concern for speed and efficiency in schema use), head librarian Alexis Pavenick uses a schema closest to Resource Description and Access or RDA. For subject headings used in the CARC collection, LC headings are not useful, (magic instructional works are covered under just the categorical word "tricks") or Dewey Decimal System, Dr. Pavenick uses a set of subject headings created with consultation from magician Richard Smith, who works as the CARC in-house subject specialist.⁵ An example of a subject that appears in the CARC subject headings

⁵ Pavenick, Alexis and Richard Smith. Interview. Conducted by David S. Benjamin, conducted, revised: April 20-27, 2010.

and is specific to magic would be one of the world's oldest documented effects: the cups and balls⁶. While there are various kinds of magic effects that can be done with cups or balls, cups and balls is a specific category of effect, and has generated its own history and professional literature. The digitized and cataloged material is then available in a data mine-able format (.tiff's as preservation masters stored on the CARC servers, and in use copies as downloadable .pdf's) for in-house use by researchers and by members of the CARC's foundation, who pay different annual fees for different levels of access to the CARC's materials.

Intellectual property concerns and considerations present a complex set of problems for the CARC. While illusions or effects cannot be trademarked or copyrighted as such, methods for achieving those effects are often protected under copyright⁷. Written works explaining performance styles and techniques are also covered under more traditional copyright laws for printed materials.⁸ While the CARC digitizes all items added to its collection, materials under copyright are not distributed via the internet and may only be accessed at the CARC's physical location. Magician Richard Smith once performed an effect detailed in a book from the CARC collection, and was attacked in online forums by other magicians who claimed that he had stolen the effect from the magician who wrote the book and invented the performance technique.⁹ Magicians have a centuries-old reputation for proprietary and secretive attitudes about techniques and performance materials, even when such material has been self-published and distributed among the community of other magicians.

The format of the material in the CARC collection can present a host of preservation and conservation problems for librarians. Many magic books throughout history were printed in

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kalush, William. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin, 4/7/2010.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Smith, Richard. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin, 4/2/2010.

small format, often intended for easy concealment, or were carried in the coat pocket of a working magician¹⁰. These physical volumes were not generally well cared for, and can be nearly destroyed when they surface on the antiquarian book market.¹¹ Another problem common to technical materials in the CARC collection is the often poor quality of both paper and bindings used in publication. Thousands of the titles in the CARC collection were printed privately by commercial copy services, distributed and sold at magic conventions and lectures, with little or no regard for the permanence of the materials used. Acidic paper, off-gassing, corrosive binding materials, and discoloration of images and fading text are common to such materials.

Many of the non-print items within the CARC collection present the most complex preservation and cataloging challenges for librarians. Many of the items in the collection are working magicians' props used in performance. These include a substantial collection of items used to cheat casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City during the 1970's (a recent donation to the CARC from Steve Forte, a gambling security consultant, sleight of hand artist, and magician, as well as former professional card cheat). These items include altered playing cards, dice, clothing, and an array of electronic apparatus used to make calculations and transmit information as well as to record events on a gaming floor. The items were cataloged, photographed, wrapped in acid-free tissue paper, and stored in acid-free archival boxes¹². Also in the CARC collection is a dental device, metal cup, and a bullet used by David Blaine during his bullet-catch performance on an ABC television special in 2008. CARC director William Kalush fired the gun for the bullet catch during the television program. Many of these items contain adhesives and materials that will regardless of temperature, humidity controls and stable housing, degrade over time.

¹⁰ Kalush, William. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 3/24/2010.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Pavenick, Alexis Lynne. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 4/22/2010.

The CARC also maintains an archive of prominent magicians' papers as well as professional journals within the magic field. CARC does not possess individual finding aids for the personal papers collection and archive, and has recently begun only box-level shelf listing of these materials. The CARC maintains the papers of magicians David Blaine, Ricky Jay, as well as gambling cheat and sleight of hand artist Steve Forte, among others. All journal titles maintained in the CARC collection have been cataloged on the CARC website, which lists 198 discrete titles for journal series.¹³ Most of the titles within the journals collection are trade publications featuring performance techniques and profiles as well and interviews with prominent magicians.

The CARC does not maintain a large collection of moving image material. Moving image material in the CARC is comprised primarily of DVD's produced by magic publishers and distributors and sold through magic supply companies. These DVD's, of which the CARC has approximately 600, are primarily instructional, demonstrating, teaching, and explaining magic effects. The CARC does not reformat these, or any of its approximately 200 VHS cassettes, which are composed primarily of instructional content as well. The CARC does maintain a small collection of DVD and VHS captures of television performances of magic, primarily network television specials featuring magicians such as David Copperfield, Ricky Jay, and David Blaine. On its web site (www.conjuringarts.org) the CARC embeds a significant amount of moving image material, hosted by youtube. This material is not preserved or stored on the CARC servers, nor are preservation copies made of the content, which is comprised of performances of magic and related arts, such as juggling, acrobatics, and feats of strength.

¹³ CARC Web site. Available online: http://www.conjuringlibrary.net/magcat/Magazine_Datalist.asp Accessed: 4/8/2010-4/27-2010.

The web-presence of the CARC is extensive. The CARC web-site includes a custom-designed catalog/search engine (AskAlexander) which can be accessed through a user name and password assigned to library members. While the CARC does charge money for its services, the money is then used to maintain the servers and web site, as well as to purchase new materials and to pay staff salaries. The CARC web site details the levels for membership and access, which are named for famous magicians from the past¹⁴ (Charlier, Hofzinsler, Erdnase). While the CARC purports to charge members for access, patrons visiting the physical location are welcome to examine any of the CARC's digitized holdings providing they demonstrate some prior knowledge or interest in a specific item or subject.¹⁵ Part of the restrictions on access to materials either in digital or physical form at the CARC stems from the bulk of the collection's content which examines trade secrets of working magicians past and present.

The CARC because of its executive board and executive director, is more oriented toward access to the materials within its collection than it is toward permanent preservation. Groups of magicians and consultants meet regularly in the archive room of the CARC, where they design magic effects and plan performances as well as television programs. David Blaine's television specials for both ABC and the Travel Channel are often designed, written, and created at the CARC¹⁶. Magicians such as Doug McKenzie, Dan and Dave Buck, Steve Cuiffo, and Richard Smith work as consultants and engineers for both the effects themselves and the performance techniques used in the performances. When seeking out material, consultants often brainstorm ideas employing both new technology as well as centuries-old hidden effects and techniques. Two examples of effects created by consultants working at the CARC are a card effect

¹⁴ Conjuring Arts Research Center Web Site. Levels & Benefits. Available online: <http://conjuringarts.org/memberships/levels-benefits/> Accessed 4/10/2010.

¹⁵ Smith, Richard. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 3/20/2010.

¹⁶ Smith, Richard. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 3/20/2010.

performed by David Blaine using an iPhone and as well as Blaine's bringing a dead fly back to life, which appears in a sixteenth century magic text in the CARC collection.

In March of 2010, the CARC was featured in *the New York Times*, when magician Steve Cohen stopped by to work through the performance of a new effect for his parlor magic show at the Waldorf Astoria¹⁷. According to Dr. Pavenick, approximately twice a month, working magicians schedule appointments with the CARC staff to discuss visiting the library and using its collection for performance techniques and related materials.¹⁸ Handling rare materials and working professionals can present its own unique preservation concerns for Dr. Pavenick. "Most of our members have never been to a special collection,¹⁹" she explains, noting that the strict rule enforced in many university and academic libraries have no place at the CARC. Director William Kalush sets the tone for the access oriented values of the CARC and stresses the importance of providing rare and often arcane materials to working professionals and scholars in the field of magic history and performance.

The CARC contributes to new scholarship in the field of magic performance through the publication of its biannual and peer-reviewed journal *Gibeciere*. Printed on Yu Long wood and acid-free paper and bound with double-fan acetate adhesive, each copy has its own 8 digit ISSN²⁰. The CARC maintains a complete run of the journal, which was founded in 2006, and is currently in its fifth volume²¹. The journal is reviewed by a panel of magicians and includes translations and digital reproductions of items from the CARC collection, as well as articles about the history of magic performance. The Summer, 2009 issue of *Gibeciere*, for example,

¹⁷ Kleinfeld, N.R. "No Rabbit in a Hat, but Steve Cohen Has Magic Up His Sleeve." *The New York Times*. 3 March, 2010. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/nyregion/07magician.html> Accessed 5 March, 2010.

¹⁸ Pavenick, Alexis Lynne. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 4/22/2010.

¹⁹ Pavenick, Alexis Lynn. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 4/26/2010.

²⁰ Kalush, William. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 3/25/2010.

²¹ Ibid.

was devoted to a translation and digital reproduction of Pablo Minguet's 1733 *Enganos a ojos vistas (Deceptions in Plain Sight)*, "Spain's first book devoted to teaching conjuring secrets."²²

The issue includes commentary on the work from renowned Spanish magician Juan Tamariz.²³

CARC also contributes its resources to broader popular culture when contacted for technical consulting on television programs and general audience books. One recent example, the Taschen book, *MAGIC*²⁴, incorporates images of several items from the CARC collections, and director William Kalush consulted for much of the text for the book. After founding the CARC, Kalush acquired a vast collection of monographs, broadsides, letters, and other materials which he incorporated into his 2006 book, *The Secret Life of Houdini: America's First Superhero*²⁵. Kalush acquired much material arguing never-before published aspects of Houdini's life. For Kalush, the kinds of information he sought out and acquired for the library were essential in order to give new life and insight to a topic the public thinks it has already seen and understood²⁶. *The Secret Life of Houdini* was released on October 31, 2006, timed to coincide with the date of Houdini's death (in 1926)²⁷. The book sold well, and in 2009, options were sold on its movie rights, which brought significant attention to the CARC.²⁸ *The Secret Life of Houdini* was also published in an edition including all of its footnotes on historical and archival primary sources, which was released in 2007²⁹.

²² Minch, Stepehn. "Pocket Notes." *Gibeciere*. Vol. 4 No. 2: Summer 2009. The Conjuring Arts Research Center, New York: 2009. P,7.

²³ *Gibeciere*. Vol. 4 No. 2: Summer 2009. The Conjuring Arts Research Center, New York: 2009.

²⁴ *MAGIC, 1400's-1950's*. Taschen Press, New York: 2009.

²⁵ Kalush, William and Larry Sloman. *The Secret Life of Houdini: America's First Superhero*. Atria Books, New York: 2006.

²⁶ Kalush, William. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 3/25/2010.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kalush, William and Larry Sloman. *The Secret Life of Houdini Laid Bare*. Mike Caveney Ed. Conjuring Arts Research Center & Magic Words, New York: 2007.

The CARC posts internships on the listserv's of several library schools in the New York, New Jersey area (Long Island University's Palmer School, Rutgers University, the Pratt Institute, and Queens College). Prospective interns meet with Dr. Pavenick for extensive sessions before formal offers are made.³⁰ Strong emphasis is placed on both the uniqueness of the CARC collections and on the educational value of the internship for the interns.³¹ While the CARC does not pay any of its interns, staff members are conscious of monotonous task assignments, and encourage interns to take part in various functions of the library. Interns are taught cataloging particularities of the CARC, as well as basic rare book conservation treatments used as well as some basic subject information about magic. The CARC manages its student interns professionally, with value placed on the interns' learning experience above simply task completion. While the economic downturn has led many cultural institutions to rely more on huge numbers of interns for processing and other large, tedious tasks, the CARC takes an extremely small pool of interns (typically one or two per semester), in order to maintain a high level of supervision and instruction from full-time staff members.

The CARC does not use a collection development plan to build its holdings, but rather, relies on the research interests of its board of directors and senior donors³². The majority of items are acquired by Mr. Kalush, though a smaller number are received through donations from the magic community as well as the non-profit foundations' members. The lack of an explicit collection development plan or policy has resulted in a library rich with rare and extremely old materials, lacking a solidly complete core of more common items and materials. While older materials represent rare and unique items, plans and methods for systematically covering subject matter are not addressed by the CARC. Library director William Kalush has many personal

³⁰ Pavenick, Alexis Lynne. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 4/27/2010.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Pavenick, Alexis Lynne. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 4/22/2010.

relationships with book dealers throughout the world, but does not rely on book vendors to cover subject areas in depth with recently published output. Collection development at the CARC stems from the habits and values of a private collector, as explored in Pearce (1998),³³ rather than the kind of systematic plans explored in Johnson's (2004)³⁴ work on academic and research libraries. High values are placed by the library director on extremely rare, high cache, items, while the CARC does not have a plan in place for either collection development or materials acquisition.

Another significant problem presented by the more private collector oriented values in operation at the CARC is the library's uneven coverage and definition of subject parameters. Within its collection, the CARC maintains small quantities of material on related subjects, such as magic and the occult, spiritualism, telekinetics, mind reading, freak-shows and sideshows, vaudeville performance, juggling, circuses, fiction, performance art, performance theory, recreational mathematics, card-playing, gambling, con-artistry, religion, the history of the ancient world, and military history.³⁵ CARC does not claim to maintain any kind of documentary or extensive holdings in any of these subjects, but rather collects as its members and executive board, consultants, and director become aware of their connections to the history of the performance of magic. While the subject of magic performance invites a broad range of subject offshoots, the CARC's holdings in these sub-fields are extremely uneven, and have not been developed through any systematic approach. For example, while many contemporary and historical fictional works have included magic and magicians as subjects (among them Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Magician of Lublin* (1961), Paul Auster's *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), and Ann

³³ Pearce, Susan M. *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*. Sage Publications, London: 1998.

³⁴ Johnson, Peggy. *Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management*. The American Library Association, Chicago: 2004.

³⁵ Kalush, William. Interview. Conducted by David Benjamin. 3/25/2010.

Patchett's *The Magician's Assistant* (1998)). CARC has just the Auster title in its collection, and has fewer than 100 fiction titles within its 13,000 volumes. Even mainstream and readily available first edition fictional and related works are unevenly collected by the CARC.

Despite its uneven collection and lack of a development and acquisition plan, the CARC engages in community involvement on a larger scale than do many libraries or archives its size. Operated by the CARC's non-profit foundation, the Hocus Pocus Project sends professional magicians into hospitals, schools, and veterans' centers to teach children magic performance as a means of improving physical coordination, social skills, and confidence.³⁶ All of the employees of the CARC see the Hocus Pocus Project as central to the organization's mission. CARC also digitizes and maintains vast collections of materials not held by other academic or research libraries, as they were originally intended for an audience of professional magicians rather than scholars. While its physical location does not meet the preservation and conservation standards in use in large academic or research libraries, the CARC does create digital copies of material never before reformatted on a daily basis. Although it does not follow the protocols and policies employed in collection development, preservation and conservation of large research collections, the CARC functions as a vast private collection open to the public through both the structure of its organization as a non-profit foundation, as well as the generosity of its president, in contributing the majority of the funding for materials acquisitions, staff salaries, physical space, and equipment. The CARC is able to participate in community outreach on a level surprising for a library of its size and staff because of the financial contributions of its president as well as several successful magicians who donate their time and resources because of personal connections forged within the community of working magicians. The CARC is a private library

³⁶ Conjuring Arts Research Center, Hocus Pocus Project Web Site. Available online: <http://conjuringarts.org/hocus-pocus/> Accessed 4/10/2010.

that functions as a small and concentrated research library, serving a small and devoted community of magicians and scholars of the history of the art of magic.