

Derek DelGaudio is, technically speaking, one of the best magicians in the world. But he's spent the last few years putting on a mind-blowing stage show that's equal parts conceptual art and social experiment. Here, with a little help from fan Stephen Colbert, director Frank Oz, and collaborator Glenn Kaino, he explains how the best parts of his work have nothing to do with actual magic.

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## Derek DelGaudio's Genre-Bending Magic Show Will Make You Feel Things

**Derek DelGaudio wanted to meet in New York City's Washington Square Park**, which should have ranked pretty low on any list of anxiety-inducing activities. And yet, when I got there, my heart started pounding. DelGaudio, a magician, had suggested the location, and it didn't seem an unreasonable request. But as I entered the park ahead of our meeting, I started scrutinizing my fellow park-dwellers in a state of adrenalized attention. One woman seemed to point her phone at me. (She was FaceTiming someone). My own phone buzzed with a notification, and I nearly jumped out of my shoes. I'm generally an easygoing guy, but what I'd seen DelGaudio do a month prior in his one-man show, *In & Of Itself*, had put me in a distinctly paranoid mood.

DelGaudio, widely considered one of the most talented magicians on the planet, had displayed such a casual facility for manipulation—for card tricks but also for knottier, weirder illusions that weren't necessarily illusions at all—that I was convinced I was walking into some sort of trap. It had seemed so easy for him to tweak reality onstage, as if it were a product of the guy and not his stage show. I was expecting him to pull one over on me, and probably without my noticing it.

I say this at the risk of sounding hokey. But at a time when “magic” and “magicians” are dorky, nonessential concerns, DelGaudio seems to have found a way to use the medium to do something genuinely novel: to get people of different races, genders, and political orientations

to really see each other. (Also, to do some truly wicked sleight of hand.) That may not be eating glass—and it might not even be magic, strictly speaking. But *In & Of Itself*, which will shut down in August after a run that started in Los Angeles in 2016, was easily the most compelling work of art I'd seen in a while. I wanted to know how it was that a magician, of all people—a fraud! a huckster!—had managed to pierce my cynical heart. Which is how I found myself in Washington Square Park, heart in mouth, until DelGaudio texted his location and then patiently explained that, no, he wouldn't be pulling any card tricks on me.

DelGaudio, 34, was dressed in dark colors, with a three o'clock shadow creeping in. We started off on a lazy



ramble through lower Manhattan. DelGaudio moved slowly, as if to conserve energy. He was performing that night, and the effort of getting through *In & Of Itself* eight times a week, which he's done just about every week since the show opened, has taken a toll on him: "Every day it feels like I took the SATs and attended a funeral."

In *In & Of Itself*, DelGaudio tells the story of the blind men and the elephant. Maybe you've heard it: The one where one man touches the trunk, another puts his hands on the tail, the third feels the legs, and so on, each thinking he's feeling a different animal instead of the same one. Thanks, perhaps, to DelGaudio's predilection for things that are both themselves and metaphors for themselves, the show is a bit of an elephant: six illusions, paired with monologues, that are breathtaking on their own but, until they're considered as a whole, run the risk of obscuring a greater truth.

DelGaudio makes a brick disappear. He does some really stupendous card tricks. He tells stories about family secrets, and his life as a card shark. He fits a ship into a bottle. And then, through some combination of artifice and pure wavelength-reading, a process that leaves him shaking and near tears by the end of the show, he manages to get a handle on the secret ways hundreds of people explain themselves to themselves—on their identities. It is less a magic show than an unholy combination of monologue, one-man show, magic show, conceptual-art piece, and doorway to radical intimacy.

Making the magic happen, DelGaudio explained, is "actually the fun part. That's the challenge. That's the analytical part, where you sit around and you create the impossible." The other part—the thing that separates the show from any other magic extravaganza—is something weightier. "The hard part, aside from the physical challenges of it, and just the actual technical difficulty of it, was existential and emotional," he elaborated.

In other words: The easy part is creating the trunk and tusks, the floppy ears and sturdy legs. The hard part is convincing the audience that they're seeing an elephant—that the magician onstage isn't bullshitting them.

"People have a right to be cynical about what a magician is and what they do," DelGaudio said as we strolled down a sun-warmed street in SoHo. "Because magicians have sullied that good name." Magicians are tricksters, birthday-party performers, vortices of cheese. And the best-known good ones, anyway, do magic only in the loosest sense of the word: David Blaine, a friend of DelGaudio's, has recently taken to eating glass. No illusion, he just...eats wine glasses.

"I don't really even self-identify as a magician," the two-time sleight-of-hand champion told me. "I allow

people to do it. But it's very hard to hear the things that we're actually talking about because of that goddamned label."

The things DelGaudio is actually talking about, the subjects of *In & Of Itself*, are weighty: identity, and choice, and how we square the faces we show to the world with the way we see ourselves. It is to DelGaudio's frustration and the audience's delight that the easiest way to have that conversation is with something that six blind men would convince themselves is a magic show.

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**"This is, like, one of my favorite things in the whole wide world,"** DelGaudio said. We were looking at the artist Walter De Maria's *The Broken Kilometer*, consisting of five parallel rows of 100 brass rods, pristine and unmoving, located on the ground floor of a building in SoHo. He seemed to have guided us to the work almost accidentally—but of course, that was just an illusion. He'd had the destination in mind all along. "There's a place around here," he'd said, looking on his phone. "Let's see, are we on West Broadway?" I'm convinced now that DelGaudio knew exactly where we were.

But once we got inside, DelGaudio was purely earnest. The trick was ensuring that I'd be surprised, not tricked. "There's absolutely no reason it should exist," he said, almost breathless. For DelGaudio, the work's power came not from its institutional backing—that SoHo space is the property of the Dia Art Foundation—but from its context. "I don't think this matters because it's in an art museum," he said. "The only thing that makes this magical is that it's in between a Banana Republic and Eileen Fisher."

Real magic—the fracturing of the everyday, and the creation of a little bit of room for the impossible to poke through—is the thing DelGaudio's devoted his career to creating. But the tricky thing about real magic is that it's hard to achieve with, you know, magic-magic—with pick-a-card-any-card, or sawing a lady in half, or making someone disappear into a jury-rigged cabinet. That kind of magic has a tough reputation. It's corny.

But that kind of magic is where DelGaudio got his start, and where the bulk of his expertise, to his occasional frustration, resides. He practiced sleight of hand as a kid in Colorado, then moved to Los Angeles, finding work as a bust-out dealer in high-roller poker games, using his deals and shuffles to make sure the house won more than any player. (It's not strictly legal, but neither are private card games where the house takes a cut.) He started performing at the Magic Castle, L.A.'s high



temple to the art. In 2011 and again in 2012, the Academy of Magical Arts dubbed him the Close-Up Magician of the Year. In 2016, DelGaudio was crowned Magician of the Year. Somewhere along the way, he realized he wanted to do something different—weirder, harder, not quite so provincial as card tricks. He consulted on Christopher Nolan's beloved, trippy magician drama *The Prestige* but wanted to keep working with the medium, not go to Hollywood. He'd always enjoyed work like *Pulp Fiction*, or Charlie Kaufman's movies, or Marcel Duchamp's readymades: things that messed with their given medium, that rewrote the rules, and then broke those, too.

One day, DelGaudio saw *Samson*, a piece by the artist Chris Burden, where a turnstile at the gallery's entrance, when passed through, would force two overhead beams spanning the width of the gallery to expand ever so slightly outward. The idea being, DelGaudio

explained, that “if enough people were to go through this thing, it would crush the walls and collapse the whole museum on them. And I thought, ‘Whoa, there’s a piece of art that is both metaphoric and literal.’ And to me, that was so magical. This idea that something can occupy both of those realms of being both the thing and a metaphor for the thing. It was Schrödinger’s cat: The cat is both alive and dead—and I’m looking at it. And that blew my mind.”

We’d moved from *The Broken Kilometer* to *The New York Earth Room*, another De Maria work maintained in SoHo by Dia. “What’s wonderful about both of these places to me is that it’s not about what they are,” DelGaudio explained. “It’s about what else might be. Like how many other places are in this city that are filled with something magical just waiting to be found? And why haven’t I found them yet? That potentiality speaks to me in a way that I think drives a lot of the work I do.”

In 2008, DelGaudio met the artist Glenn Kaino, and the two started working together: trading tips and lessons, and operating a performance-art (and magic) duo. “Derek cares about using his abilities to actually insert meaningful ideas that have caused him consternation and angst,” Kaino said. “He cares about putting those into the world in ways that we can collectively tackle them.”

The big idea DelGaudio was puzzling over as he developed *In & Of Itself* was identity: Why we are the way we are, and how much or little of that we share with the world. In part, that meant working through his own past, growing up as the son of a single mother who came out when he was young; working in the seedy world of underground card games; pursuing a career where every performance is a tightrope—and where the possibility exists of being found out.

“That’s the part that gets scary, just being a fraud,” DelGaudio confessed. *What a funny line of business you got into*, I tell him.

“That’s what makes what I do a little interesting, is like: Here’s a guy who is pretty honest and cares about telling the truth and maybe making things of some value to the world other than entertainment. What does he choose to do?”

*Magic.*

“That’s dumb. That’s not very wise,” he continued. “But...my work happens to live in that space, that paradoxical space of, like, ‘Whoa. That can be both alive and dead. There’s no way a magician can say something meaningful. That’s honest. That should not be the case.’”

He paused. “But I hope to make it so.”

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**Toward the end** of our time together, I asked DelGaudio about folks who might lend useful context to his work, and he offered an interesting name. “Oddly, Stephen Colbert understands this show in a way that I don’t even understand it, that is pretty profound,” he said. “That’s really fucking shocking to me, after only seeing the show once. He kind of got it in a way that was pretty astounding.”

The affinity makes a certain amount of sense: Colbert, in a past life, was a sort of master of deception. And when I called him up to talk about DelGaudio, he put his finger on the tightrope walk that DelGaudio does every night—the thing that separates his act from your traditional magic show, that makes it something like art. “You can be intimate on stage in ways that sometimes can be difficult in person,” Colbert explained. “And because the stage lends a distance that is akin to fiction, but it’s not fiction...you’re allowed to confess things that you couldn’t even over drinks.” DelGaudio had found a way to do what Colbert had done for more than a decade: to tell a lie, and in doing so find communion.

Except, very early in *In & Of Itself*, DelGaudio announces to the audience that everything he says for the next hour and change will be the truth. Would you believe a magician when he told you that? Of course not—and that’s the point. “I use knowing that they’re not going to believe me as part of the narrative,” DelGaudio explained. “And I use it to confront them. I use it to have them be confronted by their own prejudices and preconceived notions of what a thing is and what a person is, and kind of turn that around on them at some point where they go, ‘Oh shit, I only got beaten because I walked into this thinking a certain thing.’” (“He plays checkers in 3D,” Frank Oz, who directed the show, told me. “I’m sophisticated and I’m keyed in to him enough to understand and support him, but not enough to be the one who thinks that way.” DelGaudio sums up the core irony of the show like this: “It’s an insane thing to be up there and to actually, to genuinely be honest and vulnerable and authentic while simultaneously hiding a sea of secrets.” But when it works, it works. The show’s climax, when it succeeds, sees DelGaudio and the audience bridge that divide—to find a moment of vulnerability not just amidst but because of that sea of secrets.





With DelGaudio's blessing, I'm going to tell you what happens, but only because I don't think it ruins the effect—which is, simply, DelGaudio telling audience members who they are.

When audience members enter the theater to see *In & Of Itself*, they're confronted with a choice: nearly a thousand cards tacked to a wall, each reading, "I Am \_\_\_\_\_," with options like "a daughter," "a joker," "a ninja," and "a storyteller." They're instructed to choose one. The cards factor into the show in obvious and less obvious ways, and then comes the ending. DelGaudio asks audience members who feel that their card accurately describes them to stand; he spends the next portion telling the up to 150 folks what their card says. I'm not sure how he does it; trying to parse the insane logistical chain that would give him that information is harder than simply accepting that it's magical. It's breathtaking.

"That moment of watching people be and feel really, genuinely seen is the magic of the show," DelGaudio said. "It's all leading up to that single moment of another person looking at another person and just going, 'I see you, man. I see you standing there. I know who you are. I totally get you. In this moment, I see all of you.' And that is like a fuckin' gift that we struggle to receive every single day. And because we're all struggling to receive it, we forget to give it."

That gift? I didn't receive it—I'd quickly picked a card at the outset, not really paying it much mind. I'd been left out of the climax and couldn't quite appreciate it in the same way. Had I put more thought into my selection, I think, I might have been less apprehensive when I walked through the park that day—less intent on seeing in DelGaudio a trickster and better able to understand his magic as being separate from, you know, the magic. I was still focused on the tusk.

I asked Colbert what he made of the finale. "He's asking us to be honest, and he's promising to be honest with us," Colbert said. "And that's the high wire. That's the bullet, you know. The diamond bullet, as Colonel Kurtz would say, of honesty and experience and knowledge. That's a dangerous thing, to expose yourself." But participating requires exactly that.

So I went back to the show, two months later. I lingered at the board of cards. The one I'd thought I would pick wasn't there, and I grew worried that I wouldn't find something that felt honest. The issue, of course, wasn't with the cards—it was about spending more than a cursory moment thinking about the self I'm wary of presenting to the world. I found a card, eventually, and stood at the finale.

DelGaudio had seemed sad throughout this performance, sadder than during the first show; when the time came to look every audience member in the eye,

tears hung in his eyes. He told one showgoer that she was the devil and paused, swallowed, before telling another that he had determined himself a failure. Somewhere in there, he got to me.

I had brought a friend, and we would argue afterward about DelGaudio's method. I was convinced that there was some element of psychology, or mentalism, or pickup artistry, whatever you want to call it, behind the effect—as close as a guy can get to magic without using a wand. My guest had it pegged as a series of cameras and microphones. Much as it bums me out, I'd bet his version is closer to the truth.

But that's not really the point. Because in that moment, as a guy I barely knew looked me in the eye, gave the slightest smile, and affirmed my chosen identity, all of that melted away. I didn't particularly care how it was done, and I'm comfortable acknowledging the fact that magic is fake. "The real magic of that show, and the real magic of Derek's practice, is not about magic," Kaino told me. "All the magicians [who see the show] look for the answers in magic. And it has *nothing to do with magic*." Figuring out how the show works would be about as useful as learning what kind of cat Schrödinger had.

In all likelihood, DelGaudio didn't look me in the eyes and divine the card I'd chosen. He did do something, though. In that moment, the magician forded his sea of secrets, casting his microphones and cameras and memory and mentalism aside. He saw me the way I see myself and allowed the rest of the room to see me that way, too. DelGaudio had once again conjured an elephant, and it was there for anyone who cared to look.

→ <https://www.gq.com/story/derek-delgaudio-magician-profile>

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