



Ladies and Gentlemen by way of introduction this is a [story] about trickery and fraud, about lies. Tell it by the fireside, or in a marketplace, or in a movie. Almost any story is almost certainly some kind of lie, but not this time, no this is a promise that [...] everything you'll hear from me is really true and based on solid facts.¹



On the evening of April 8th 1983, American illusionist David Copperfield performed what would become one of his most known tricks to an in-person and televised audience, live from New York City. Situated in front of a perfectly framed view of the Statue of Liberty, Copperfield's pledge to an audience of 20 transfixed tourists was that he would do the unthinkable by making the Green Goddess disappear from atop her pedestal. As he raised the curtain to block the Statue of Liberty from view, chatter of doubt buzzed through the audience. A few seconds later the curtain dropped, revealing the absence of an American icon.

"I have never seen a statue of liberty disappear" one audience member said, enchanted with disbelief.²

The veritable void of the night sky hung like a heavy velvet curtain in front of the audience, punctuated by shafts of light. In these initial moments of the turn, the illusion at hand may have seemed to be how Copperfield was able to move a 225 ton (450,000 pound) statue. However, Copperfield's interest in disappearing Lady Liberty was not in its material constitution as an object but rather the cultural significance it carried to the American psyche. As over 1 million households tuned in to the live broadcast of "The Magic of David Copperfield V: The Statue of Liberty Disappears," Copperfield suggests that, for a moment, he had disappeared not only the statue but the concepts of liberty and freedom themselves.

¹ Wells, Orson, director. *F for Fake*. Planfilm Specialty Films, 1973. 1 hr., 28 min.
<https://youtu.be/4C2nt72h0cQ?si=U39N6KCDHICHkdI9&t=161>.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=823GNH4Rczg>



Art historian Erwin Panofsky would term Copperfield's gesture as revealing the iconology of the Statue of Liberty rather than its iconography. If we take the Statue of Liberty's iconography to be an analysis of the object that deals with subject matter, form, or meaning; Panofsky instead describes that iconology investigates the intrinsic meaning of an object, constituting the world of symbolic values that tries to reveal the underlying principles that form the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion.³

Of course, to make this illusion permanent—or even a moment too long—would be to hold the Freudian mirror up long enough that the audience notices that it is not the Statue of Liberty that is lost, it is themselves. The prestige came when Copperfield raised the curtain once again and in a matter of seconds, made the Statue of Liberty reappear, and with it, all that it represents. The scale of this illusion is not an indication of its complexity, in fact, lighting, props, timing, and a shift in scale and perspective was all that was necessary to interrogate the idea of the American imaginary.



Fourteen years after Copperfield's disappearing Statue of Liberty, the New York-New York Hotel and Casino opened on the Las Vegas strip. The exterior of the building featured various scaled down versions of New York City landmarks such as the Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, New Yorker Hotel, Manhattan Municipal Building, Grand Central Terminal, Ellis Island Immigration Building, and none other than a 150-foot-tall replica of the Statue of Liberty designed by sculptor Robert F. Davidson.

Davidson's Statue of Liberty is unique to its referent not only due to its diminutive size but by subtle differences in the statues face. These differences would become the basis for a lawsuit when the United States Postal Service mistakenly used an image of Davidson's Statue of

³ Erwin Panofsky, [Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance](#). Oxford 1939. Page 7.



Liberty on one of their stamps rather than the original. Davidson’s testimony stated that “his mother-in-law’s face inspired the Las Vegas sculpture’s design” and that his version was “sexier” and more “sultry” than the original statue.⁴ Freud’s ears are burning once again. Eventually the court ruled against USPS awarding Davidson \$3.5 million for the violation of his artistic copyright.

Copperfield and Davidson’s engagement with iconology highlights the tension between the inherent absurdity and sincere significance of cultural artifacts be it works of art or tchotchkes. History, politics, pop culture, entertainment, and fantasy are inextricably linked through the accumulation of our material possessions and ultimately tell the story of our society better than we do. On August 1, 2024 Proximity Capital—a Las Vegas-based liquidation firm—was hired to coordinate the sale of the furniture and furnishings from The Mirage Hotel and Casino following its closure on July 17, 2024.⁵ The sale was marketed as an opportunity to own a piece of The Mirage’s history before it disappeared, a perfect bookend to The Mirage’s original slogan for its opening: [fantasy becomes reality when the Mirage appears](#).

On the occasion of *Proximity Capital*—Megan Mi-Ai Lee’s first solo exhibition in Canada— notions of theatricality, showmanship, mistaken identity, props, fakes, and fake-fakes are on full display. As a New York-based artist with roots in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Lee’s practice is perfectly triangulated to play within the mirage of where illusion and imagination are rendered into a commodity. The works on display act as comedic foils for the too good to be true, but true, stories that underpin the exhibition.

-Parker Kay, January 2025

⁴ Amanda Svachula, “Statue of Liberty Stamp Mistake to Cost Postal Service \$3.5 Million,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/arts/statue-of-liberty-stamp-copyright-las-vegas.html>.

⁵ Incidentally, I stayed at The Mirage from February 5-10, 2024 during my first visit to Las Vegas. Megan provided recommendations on weird and wild things to see.