

The Locksmithing Institute of University of California, Santa Barbara
College of Creative Studies
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Lesson #1: *Picking Locks: Pressure VS Manipulation*

Much of my early thinking regarding my work as a professional locksmith was directly related to the words and language used by my mentors as they attempted to teach me the practice. Although picking locks was something that I would be hired to do, in actuality it represented a small portion of my daily activities. The area of expertise that the companies that I worked for specialized in was making keys to cars and motorcycles. This process is called “first key generation” and refers to making a key to a vehicle when all the keys have been lost. The process of first key generation for cars and motorcycles is complicated and specialized. In fact, most locksmiths don’t work on cars or motorcycles because the equipment, materials, and tools are too extensive to make it cost effective unless the locksmith has a high volume of jobs to justify the material investment. The two companies that I worked for had significant 24-hour emergency service contracts with AAA, city car-impounds, repo-men, car auctions, and tow-yards. The consistency of these contracts subsidized the less consistent single customers that hired us directly to replace their lost car keys.

Despite the fact that I spent most of my time making keys to cars, a few times a week I would still get hired to unlock the doors to peoples residences. These are called “lock outs” and they are not typically lucrative because a customer is charged a flat rate. The rate is usually pretty low because there is a lot of competition amongst all the different locksmithing companies to land jobs. If a customer is being charged \$75 to open their apartment door, I need to work very quickly because I earn the same amount of money if I get the job done in fifteen minutes or two hours. Because of this, while doing lockouts, I would only make brief attempts to pick locks. If I failed in the first few minutes, I would quickly drill the lock open and then repair it with some spare parts I had in my van. This was usually the most cost and time effective way for me to get through my work days. Subsequently, I never became great at picking locks. It was more important for me to be constantly practicing and researching how to make keys to cars. I could monetize making obscure car keys, I could not monetize picking complicated padlocks.

Despite the fact that I didn’t pick that many residential door locks, I still became really fascinated with ideas and language that surrounded the process. I found my mentors using words like, *tension*, *rotational-force*, or *dead-latch* to describe the tools, materials, and actions associated with the process. But of all these terms, the two that stuck with me the most were, *pressure* and *manipulation*. To pick a lock open, a person needs to apply rotational *pressure* to the key cylinder and then use a lock pick to

manipulate the pins into the correct position. When these have been coerced into alignment, the lock will be forced open. The words *pressure* and *manipulation* kept rattling around in my head while I was doing my daily jobs. I kept a sketchbook in my van and took notes about strange experiences and weird observations that I had while working. When I was on call and if there weren't any jobs to do, I would go to the library and do research, read, or nap. My favorite thing to read was the Oxford English Dictionary. This massive twenty volume reference guide traces the history and origin of almost every word in the English language. I would start with one word and read its history. This would then lead me to look up another word that was related to the first word. This process would go on and on until I got called to do another job, fell asleep, or the library closed. What follows are some of my earliest notes about locksmithing dating back to about 2004. They draw a lot of inspiration from the Oxford English Dictionary, my personal life experiences, and my subjective observations of the customers that I was being paid to help. I share them with you now not because they should be taken literally, but to show you how I personally took the themes and skills related to locksmithing and began to shape them into an art practice on my own terms. We will expand on these ideas over the duration of this course.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest English derivation of the word "pressure" dates to 1382 and was originally defined as: "The action of pressing painfully upon the sensations or feelings; the condition of being painfully pressed in body or mind; the weight or burden of pain, grief, trouble, poverty, etc.; affliction, oppression."

In 1801, the Oxford English Dictionary defined "manipulation" as: "The action or an act of manipulating something; handling; dexterity. Also (occas.): the making of hand motions." And then in 1828 "manipulation" came to be defined as: "The action or an act of managing or directing a person, etc., esp. in a skillful manner; the exercise of subtle, underhand, or devious influence or control over a person, organization, etc.; interference, tampering."

Over the past year I have come to believe that it is not a coincidence that words "pressure" and "manipulation" are used in conjunction with the lock picking process. If I examine the historic derivations of those words and use them in a literal sense to describe the contemporary action picking locks, I can create a different vantage point from which to observe the experience. Drawing directly from those early definitions, it is possible to image a lock as a shielded device which is being forced open by someone who is "pressed by pain" and who lacks the ability to influence that which surrounds them by the content of their character. Such a person must coerce their surroundings into submission through manipulation in a literal sense with their "hands" and in

conceptual sense with their “intentions.” This scenario still places a lock into its most commonly viewed position as a device that deflects energy. However, I don’t think that a lock actually inhibits the path of an incorrect key nor a person’s attempt to pick it. Instead, it I think it takes that persons “manipulative” energy, absorbs it, spreads it out, and renders it impotent. It is possible to view locks as simply passive vessels for the absorption of energy.

Despite the sponge like metaphor that I am using to make a comparison, I don’t think that something akin to locks exists in nature. The natural world might create an impasse through chance and time, but it would never impede an organism’s movement out of premeditated manipulation, fear, or greed. In this sense, locks seem to be solely the creation of people and not reflected in the natural world. However, I have noticed that in general, people are clever but not usually original. By this I mean that we have evolved, survived, and conquered by observing that which surrounds us and adapting those disparate materials and ideas together to serve purposes. If this assertion is true, then it begs the question: What was it that people observed and then adapted to create the first lock? The only clear answer to that question that I have been able to deduce over the past year is: “ourselves.” Through pressure and manipulation we attempt to force ourselves into an understanding of the world that surrounds us. Like attempting to pick a lock, we try to figure-it-out through “pressure” and “manipulation.” What I have found during these first two years of working as a locksmith is that locks do not confine us to certain sections of space nor deny our access to others. It would seem that only our perception is capable of achieving this incredible feat of shackling. I think the point is –and I am certainly not the first to assert this– that we are only captive if we choose to perceive ourselves as captive. Considering this, one might ask if there is an alternative way to pick a lock if not through “pressure” and “manipulation?” The best answer I have at this point is that if one decides to view a lock as a mirror of themselves as opposed to as a “gatekeeper,” then the desire to pick the lock will dissipate and whatever it was that was inhibiting a person’s progress will no longer seem relevant. However, it must be noted that this certainly will not help a person who is being detained against their will. I will have to keep thinking about this one. The comedian Steve Bhaerman once mused: “The bad news is that there is no key to unlock the door to the universe. The good news is that the door was never locked.” I suspect there might be more truth to this thought than he jokingly intended.

Those were my first thoughts regarding the intersection of locks/keys, pressure/manipulation, and access/denial. Take them for what they are. Some of it will probably seem like nonsense to you. Other parts might resonate with you. When I wrote them in 2004, it was important for me to start examining locksmithing on my own terms

and use it as research to inform my art practice. In the same way, what is important right now is for you to examine how the process of picking locks is affecting you. Ask yourself:

- How has the experience of lock picking felt in my body in a literal sense?
- How does the experience resonate or come into conflict with my core values, and the beliefs of my family and community?
- What kinds of things have I been day-dreaming and sleep-dreaming about?
- What are some historical references that I remembered or discovered in new research while learning to pick locks?
- How does this relate to my personal identity?
- How does this relate to my art practice?
- How does this relate to my other course work?

Remember, our goal is to take the skills, ideas, and materials related to locksmithing and use them to inspire new research, writing, thinking, and projects.

There is no wrong way to do this, however this will require a lot of effort and bravery on your part to personally examine this powerful intersection of theory and practice on your own terms.

Don't hesitate to reach out to me to set up in-person or ZOOM office hours to get help or brainstorm ideas. lucasmurgida@ucsb.edu