

Interview

Sina Najafi

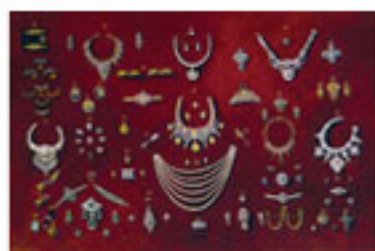
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Lotte Reininger

Paul Laster interviews [Sina Najafi](#), editor-in-chief of [Cabinet](#), about the magazine and its books, artists' editions, curated shows, events, and multidimensional website.

AK: Can you tell us about *Cabinet's* history and format?



Astley D.M.
Cooper

SN: The nonprofit that publishes *Cabinet* was founded in 1999 by artist [Brian Conley](#) and myself, and the first issue appeared in December 2000. The magazine has remained pretty much consistent since. Some of our regular columns have changed, but we've more or less had a similar mix of interviews, artist projects, and essays by artists, writers, and academics. There's a catchall section, a set of columns, the occasional audio CD, and a themed section. Past themes have ranged from the concrete, such as "Animals" or "Horticulture," to abstract notions with a long lineage in philosophy, such as "Evil" or "Chance," to topics that ought to have a sociology but don't — for example, "the Enemy," where there is no such thing as Enemy



Joana Hadjithomas
& Khali Joreige



Arthur Mole &
John Thomas

Studies and no one great book that examines how we've thought about the enemy historically.

AK: What is *Cabinet's* mission?

SN: *Cabinet* was founded around three distinct missions, which we hope resonate productively against each other. First, we wanted to have a magazine that reflected how artists thought about the world around them and

had the same diverse subjects that you might find on the bookshelves of artists today. That's why a history of urban warfare is as likely to appear in our pages as a history of the doughnut; we call ourselves an "art and culture" magazine, but we try to operate with as expansive a definition of those words as possible. The exuberance that artists bring to their work is something we wanted to have in the magazine, and we're not afraid of having the serious next to the humorous or even the absurd, even though some people imagine this means that the serious is not being taken seriously — we obviously disagree! Another characteristic of this approach is that it is less concerned with judging what is good or bad or with policing the boundary between in or out; rather, it's about trying to better understand the ambient culture. Our gambit is that this better understanding is always "critical" in that it helps reveal the contingencies behind the world as it exists today and that knowing things *could have been different* is crucial for believing that things can be changed for the better.

Our second desire was to provide a venue for academia and journalism to meet. This is something that happens in a lot of European daily newspapers and weekly magazines. As a result of their role as public intellectuals, European academics are perceived as

having something important and relevant to say, but they also learn to calibrate their language so that a general audience can read it. In the US, however, the number of nonspecialized venues where academic research is available to a larger public is quite small; [The New York Review of Books](#) is one. But think of the *New York Times*, for example, and of the shameful obituaries they commissioned for [Jacques Derrida](#) and [Edward Said](#), and you'll see how large the divide is in this country. Because of this divide, the public imagines academics have nothing fascinating or important to say about the real world, and academics imagine that the larger audience cannot and does not want to listen to what they are working on. This is just not true, or at least it does not have to be true, and we hope to be part of a larger effort to break down this divide.

The third cornerstone of the magazine is a Baroque sensibility where the idea of an omnivorous curiosity toward the world is crucial. This approach does not try to parcel the world into sections. Rather, it is a quest for understanding everything as interconnected. The cabinet of curiosity, the precursor to the specialized museum of today, is obviously a reference point for us in all this and the source of our name. This quest is an impossible one, but the desire for it needs to be encouraged because it implies an ethics, namely to care for what the world is, to care to find out how it became this way, and to care to find out how we can change it. [Michel Foucault](#) once discussed the vilification of the notion of curiosity and how we need to reintegrate it into our practices. He points out that curiosity ignores all the hierarchies of high and low, and that it also leads to an "estrangement" of the familiar world around us. We agree with this and feel that this immersive notion of endless curiosity is very much against the way "expertise" ends up policing boundaries of disciplines, knowledge, etc.

AK: How does *Cabinet* differ from mainstream art

magazines like *Artforum* and *Frieze* ?

SN: We're such a different beast that it's hard to know where to begin. I could perhaps even say that we're not an art magazine as such. Many art magazines have a few critical essays about specific artists, reviews of artists and art shows, and round-ups of the art scene here and there. This is great and useful, but *Cabinet* is built around very different goals. For example, we have artists writing about whatever they are interested in, so that [Joseph Grigely](#) contributes an essay on how the flies made for trout fishing might make us rethink our theories of verisimilitude and representation; we invite artists to do art projects conceived for the printed page (no documentation, video stills, etc.) so that the reader is offered the full experience of the artwork right there on the page; and we have articles about phenomena that we imagine artists will find interesting, which can as easily be the architecture of West Bank settlements as the unpublished "failed" machines of [Rube Goldberg](#).

AK: What are your favorite issues of the magazine and why?

SN: This is somewhat arbitrary, but let's say our "Failure" issue (no. 7). This was a programmatic issue for us because the notion of the failed is very important to us. The successful is the world around us, which appears so coherent and inevitable that it's like a safe box, both materially and ideologically. The failed (aka the forgotten, the jettisoned, the shunned) are all crowbars with which you can crack that safe box. This is especially crucial today because the idea of "success" is itself the dominant ideology. We live in a world where "loser" is the ultimate insult.

AK: What role do the creative inserts that you place in the magazine and the artists' editions that you publish play in the conceptual concerns of the magazine?

SN: With conceptual art, the idea of the printed page as an appropriate venue for an artist project really took root. There used to be many such magazine interventions in the '70s, and we would like to encourage their return. Our hope is that the art projects we publish rub the other contributions against the grain, and vice versa.

AK: *Cabinet* co-organized the highly inventive traveling exhibition *The Paper Sculpture Show* in 2003. How did the show originate? What has been the response to it? Has it motivated you to organize other art exhibitions?

SN: *The Paper Sculpture Show* started with New York-based artist [Matt Freedman](#) approaching us with the idea of inviting several artists to devise paper sculptures that readers of the magazine could cut out and make at home. We liked the idea, and Matt invited five artists — [Paul Ramirez Jonas](#), [Sarah Sze](#), [Eve Sussman](#), [Pablo Vargas-Lugo](#), and [Allan Wexler](#) — to make DIY sculptures in Issue 4. We then decided that a whole show of DIY sculptures like this might be interesting; there'd be nothing in the museum to begin with until the visitors made the sculptures, gradually filling the space, walls, etc. Matt and I approached Mary Ceruti at the [Sculpture Center](#) and she was interested in having the show there. The three of us curated the show, which Independent Curators International agreed to travel to various venues. Each venue just received boxes of paper that had printed on them the projects of the 29 artists invited to participate in the show. The venues also got instructions for making wooden tables and cubicles for visitors to sit in to do their projects (those tables and cubicles were in fact Allan Wexler's project for the show). It was a very cheap show to acquire, and though it hopefully raised some interesting questions about art-making and authorship, it was also a very fun show; it ended up going to 20 museums across the country.

We've done a second show as well, called [Odd Lots](#):

Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates (curated by Jeffrey Kastner, Frances Richard, and myself). That show developed out of a project we did for our issue on "Property," where we decided to buy up as much useless land as we could afford. As part of this, we ended up trying to find out what happened to the strange slivers of land that Gordon Matta-Clark had bought at a 1973 city auction for his *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* projects. These were absurd plots of land, mostly in Queens; one, for example, was 2.33 feet wide and 355 feet long, and another was basically the land under a bush (1.11 feet by 1.83 feet). It turned out that when Matta-Clark died in 1978, the plots — there were 15 of them in all — had reverted back to the city for nonpayment of taxes. We went back and catalogued the fate of these bits of land and then found out that ten of them were still owned by the city, and so we licensed them. We then decided to do a whole show around this very enigmatic project of Matta-Clark's. We commissioned a number of artists to respond to the original, and their works were displayed at White Columns. But we also wanted to understand how the history of Queens produced these strange, useless plots in the first place. All this historical material formed the basis of the second part of the show at the [Queens Museum of Art](#).

AK: *Cabinet* also produces some quirky books, including *If and Petrov's American Road Trip* and *Presidential Doodles*, which was recently featured on the news program *CBS Sunday Morning*. Do the books grow out of the editorial content, or are they unique projects?

SN: The books could be independent — and we are working on a series of books that are going to be fully independent — but so far all the book ideas have developed out of articles that we've originally featured in the magazine.

AK: *Cabinet* events such as [Crocheting the Hyperbolic Plane](#) at [the Kitchen](#) in New York and [Iron Artist](#) at [P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center](#) in Long Island City have garnered a lot of media attention. What position do these events have in the overall concept of *Cabinet*?

SN: Some of our events, such as [Crocheting the Hyperbolic Plane](#), which was a talk by two Cornell math professors who have solved some of the riddles of very complex non-Euclidean spaces by crocheting them, come out of something originally featured in the magazine. Other events, such as a large-scale conference we co-organized on [nostalgia](#) in Mexico City in 2004 or the [Iron Artist](#) event at P.S.1 were one-off events that were not in the magazine. In both cases, we imagine our nonprofit as being a very flexible platform for all kinds of activities and projects, as long as we think they are interesting.

AK: The *Cabinet* website is sophisticated and multidimensional. How do you regard your online presence in relation to the print publication?

SN: We're a very small magazine, with about 10,000 readers. Some people, of course, know what we do and read us, but our content is so varied that all kinds of other people who are not our "natural" readers can find a few things that we've done to be relevant to their work. Our website has a lot of the articles from our sold-out issues and is therefore available to all kinds of people who don't know the magazine at all. We get around a million hits a month, and I bet many of the visitors have never heard of us; they are just Googling "Pluviculture" or "Cybernetics + Enemy" and ending up on our site. They may or may not wonder who we are and why the next article is about something very different; that's fine, as long as they find something interesting up there.