

Interview with Sina Najafi and Jeffrey Kastner of *Cabinet*
Printed Project no. 14, November 2010, pp. 52–58

printed project

the conceptual north pole

ISSUE : 14

lytle shaw *curator/editor*

heriberto yepez jeff derksen lisa robertson

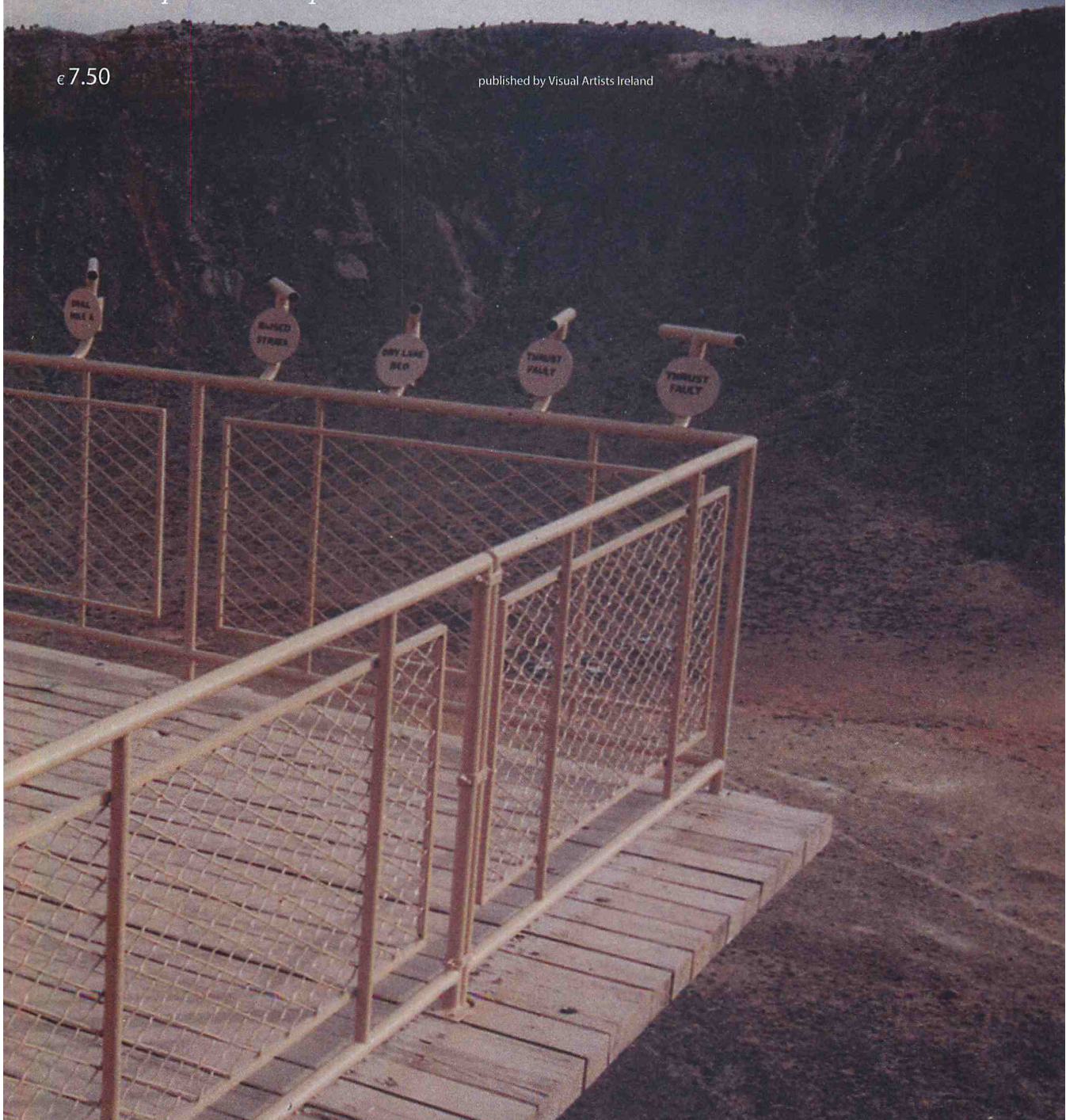
matthew buckingham mónica de la torre emilie clark

gerard byrne matthew coolidge rob fitterman

kenneth goldsmith cabinet (sina najafi & jeffrey kastner)

€7.50

published by Visual Artists Ireland



Cabinet

Lytle Shaw: Cabinet Makers: Part of the late 1960s conceptualism was a thorough critique of the art object. As generative as this was at the time, it has perhaps become a bit of a piety. I see Cabinet adopting an interestingly different stance: epistemological and social questions come into focus through objects, not beyond or despite them. And, perhaps more importantly, fascination and curiosity drive the process, rather than familiar negations or 'critical' revelations. Could you talk a little bit about how you see the project of Cabinet in relation to the debates of conceptual art of the late 1960s including the critique of the object, the blurring of the priorities between language and art, and the analysis of the institutions of art all really coming into focus then? What has changed since the high moment of conceptualism, and what is Cabinet's, your, position in relation to these changes?

A corollary of this: the category of the literary often intrudes upon those of history, art, documentary, archaeology, history of science *etc* in the pages of Cabinet. Is that fair to say? If so, what else is literariness doing other than rendering these disciplines more playful? In what senses, how is the literary an epistemological tool?

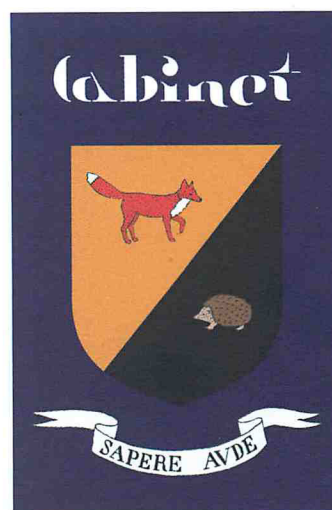
Finally, I've been teaching a Major Texts in Literary Theory class for the last few years and I include a lot of Enlightenment science: Hooke, Diderot, Linnaeus. In teaching Hooke's writings in particular I've been trying to argue that the tendency toward math that we see in Newton wasn't inevitable, wasn't the meaning of 'empiricism', and that there are radical empiricisms that are very much worth recuperating – ones that I wasn't exposed to at all in my own theory education. I've never really talked to you about this, but I've always imagined you as a sympathetic interlocutor here. This seems related to the idea of the cabinet of curiosity. How does the project of Cabinet engage with our received notions of the Enlightenment? And in particular with dominant versions of theory's characterization of the Enlightenment or of empiricism?

Cabinet (Sina Najafi and Jeff Kastner): There's obviously a lot of very rich material to mine in the above. Since we understand this as an invitation to a dialogue in some sense, we hope you won't mind if we answer your questions, at least in this first instance, both with some general introductory observations and also with the occasional question of our own.

First of all, we think we recognise, at least in its broad outlines, the paradigmatic shift you describe in your précis. But on a more granular level of analysis, we do feel like it might be helpful to try to define some terms and general parameters. We understand your reading of this move away from 'antiquated' concepts like 'inspiration' and 'influence' as one that turns from specific objects and the people who make them to larger-scale conceptual concerns around "installation, site, document, procedure and history". Is this telescoping out, as it were, from things and people to ideas and structures, what you mean by "meta chart-making"? And is it right that there has been a 'recent' setting out by new parties for this *terra incognita*, an assay whose character is in some important way distinct from that embarked upon by the pioneers of the 1960s and 1970s? (Or, indeed, the 1980s, 1990s, or 2000s?)

Maybe the best place to start is with a thought or two about the first question that follows from this observation of yours, namely that the “thorough critique of the art object ... has perhaps become a bit of a piety of late.” You say that you understand Cabinet’s approach as different, one that brings “epistemological and social questions ... into focus through objects, not beyond or despite them.” One of the things we found most interesting about this is the way the word ‘art’ drops out of the equation between the first and second sentences, and this seems to us a very important distinction that’s being made, whether or not it was intentional. Because it actually would not be accurate to say that these questions come into focus for Cabinet through art objects: we almost never use artistic objects, at least contemporary ones, as the jumping off point for the discursive material we publish. In fact, one probably could make the argument that the very theoretical developments you describe – the dematerializing strategies of post-war conceptualism; the theatrical turn identified in opposition to the modes of absorption structured solely by the art object – are precisely what has informed Cabinet’s approach, insofar as what we take to be the result of this evolution is the emergence of disciplines around visual culture, critical studies *etc.*, that recognise a far more heterogeneous class of things as fit for both spectatorship and analysis. The 1960s conceptualist critiques of the art object were not, as far as we understand them, a critique of objects in a general sense, but rather of the qualities associated with a *certain class of objects*, namely artworks, and of the idea that these sorts of objects were somehow privileged. Perhaps if Cabinet has engaged on some level with these issues, it is by taking seriously the idea that it is not necessary to designate something as *art* in order to find a kind of beauty – to take pleasure, not in the disinterested Kantian sense, but rather in the mode of Stendhal’s *promesse de bonheur* – in it.

As for the function of the literary ‘intrusions’ into other categories in the pages of Cabinet, it is definitely true that the magazine likes to mix modes of address, and that we’ve been open to experimenting both with unorthodox textual devices and the ways in (and degrees to) which these devices are signaled. We’re assuming you’re not simply referring to a tendency toward belletrism in our approach (something to which we must probably plead guilty), but more to the fact that we employ certain literary – meaning ‘fictional’?—strategies as a way to reinterpret and (hopefully) enhance the often dry, ostensibly fact-based context of history, documentary, archeology *etc.* There’s no doubt that this participates to some degree in what is now understood as the parafictional turn: from the *nouveau roman* to Borges to DeLillo, the ‘literary’ has for a long time been receptive to intrusions from the world of data, and it’s clear that this has also become something of a trope within the same contemporary art world dynamic you mentioned at the beginning of this. (We should also say that the increasing ubiquity of this move, and our utilization of it, is something that we actually have mixed feelings about – we are increasingly aware of our position on a very fine line between a kind of generative ambiguity and what ends up being simple unreliability).



Cabinet's fox and hedgehog shield.



An array of Mexican jumping beans, showing the interior hollows created by developing larvae.

Perhaps part of this is attributable to the fact that just as contemporary artists have, since the 1960s, increasingly deployed objects and rehearsed scenarios that are in some fundamental sense *extra-artistic* – without their own inherent aesthetic surplus – so too does Cabinet, in engaging with artifacts and information that originate outside the world of art, find that the most useful location for the creative gesture lies in the discursive (literary) space that surrounds them. If such moves to some extent act to distort or destabilize the conventional informational landscape one expects to find in material from history, the sciences *etc*, they also have what seems to us enormous potential to capture certain aspects of experience – things that are happening in the texture of everyday life that don't traditionally rise to the level of the official record, and are in fact already the purview of the literary gesture. If these experiments allow for a greater degree of indeterminacy than is usually associated with such ostensibly empirical fields of endeavour, we feel that they also provide a more inviting way into the material: preparing the ground, as it were, for an ethics of curiosity and concern that encourages readers to learn more than on their own.

As for the question of Cabinet's engagement with received notions the Enlightenment tradition, we're not actually sure which set of received notions you're referring to. It is true that Cabinet has borrowed its motto 'sapere aude' (dare to know) from Kant, while also referencing in its name pre-Enlightenment practices of collecting as a way of knowing. And to make matters worse, our insignia also references Isaiah Berlin typology of two fundamentally different modes of understanding the world—which borrows from the Greek poet Archilochus the characters of the fox (who knows many small things and therefore cannot systematize) and the hedgehog (who knows only one big thing and therefore has a systematic framework for approaching the world). What we like about having both of these animals on the shield is that it dismantles the apparent distinction between the Enlightenment obsession with taxonomy and totality and the idea that it is instead through fragments that can never be assembled into a full picture that the nature of the world is actually expressed.

LS: True to form, Cabinet is the one interview that begins with queries! And this is why every piece of writing I've ever given the magazine has been improved by it in the editorial process. What I was alluding to obliquely by meta-chart making was that, while the initial language of conceptualism constantly referred to maps, we now need a better map not just of this moment in art history, but of how the problems it opened up were, and are, problems between disciplines, problems that involve disciplinary mapping too.

The paragraph on the conceptual North Pole was more of a provocation than a history – so of course I'm happy to elaborate on it too. What I meant to suggest was antiquated was a relation among the disciplines of art and writing that could be defined merely in terms of influence or inspiration – as if the structures and procedures of the other discipline were insignificant: literate artists reading poems or novels and being moved by them – referring to them obliquely in their paintings. Or poets referencing 'Pollock' or 'Picasso' in discrete poems. This seems to me old-fashioned. I'm interested in, and think I see around me, a more intense mutual involvement in which poets turn to strategies of site-specificity and institution critique – actually operating in an area that's really between the disciplines, involving procedures that each discipline can appropriate. Or artists restaging works of literature under very specific installation conditions or turning famous minimalist artists into dramatists, as Gerard Byrne does. I see this as a productive development of the disciplinary crisis that got opened up in the late 1960s when, with conceptualism, it became unclear whether art was becoming linguistic or whether writing was entering into the domain of art – strategies of seriality, performance documentation, experiments in the breakdown of any hierarchy between word and image, among other things.

So, no, I didn't see that as a pure telescoping out but rather an oscillation between scales where the macro (the historical moment, some concept of social totality, for example) and the micro (an object, a collection, a specific way of making or thinking) come into contact; the object is necessary for the 'granular' more immediate level of the micro to come into focus, and thereby to give us more specific and interesting versions of the macro. The idea of a pure telescoping out, independent of the micro scale, is, I think, bound up with a dream that art could become merely informational, that its object status would effectively disappear, either through a 'non-aesthetic' medium (as if that's what photography turned out to be!) or through objects that

were only important until they catapulted you into the larger, more significant domain of a discourse (natural history, race-relations, border politics) and then self-destructed, as in the dominant reading of Mark Dion, for instance. Also, this older view of conceptualism was often coincident with a Horkheimer and Adorno view of enlightenment in which inquiries into concrete things were dismissed as empiricism, and empiricism understood, in blanket fashion, as a form of instrumentalization.

For me, making a distinction about whether an object is an art object or a daily life object has more to do with a reading strategy, a mode of interpretation, than it does with a bedrock ontology. It's possible to interpret anything as *art*, just as one can decide to read any piece of writing as a poem. So I'm more interested in mobile frames than in claimed essences. Still, I see the question as important inasmuch as art is constantly mobilising or nominating objects that just a second ago were part of daily life, or part of some other discipline. But I think that has been established in art history – as the history of the avant-garde.

What seems less discussed, what I'm struggling to suggest that Cabinet has been an important agent in, is a larger movement demonstrating that there are several empiricisms, not all of them symptomatic. And, as much as Cabinet is a magazine for historians, philosophers, anthropologists, it's also part of a shift in artists' understanding of the object, artistic or otherwise, helping to clear the air a bit of that categorical dismissal that had happened in the late 1960s with the roughly simultaneous dematerialization of the art object and the emergence of Frankfurt School critical theory. Experimental empiricism becomes sexy, and uncoupled from positivism. I'm not talking about reconciling ourselves with the inevitability of the market, rediscovering 'beauty' – I'm still committed to most of the social / intellectual project of the critical theory moment: I'm just welcoming more complex and generous senses of the Enlightenment, inquiry, empiricism – or, as Sina, I think, puts it, curiosity.

Nor do I see the Enlightenment as the great unfinished project for rational subjects. Habermas won't even try to make the distinction between 'generative ambiguity' and 'simple unreliability'; ambiguities and fictionalizations all point toward the latter and must be banished from the public. So, as hard as making those distinctions is, and as irresponsible as some of your contributors are, I applaud you. Now that I have hopefully made a bit clearer what I'm trying to credit you with, perhaps you could tell me whether you agree, and simply how you might explain, in your own way, the magazine's relation to the history I'm trying to sketch here.

Cabinet: The model you've proposed seems a very useful one for the purposes of this discussion and for thinking about Cabinet's project. This oscillation between scales it describes points, it seems to us, toward fundamental questions about the relationship of matter and meaning, and invites a consideration of just what it is that *things might have to say* without, as Lorraine Daston puts it in the introduction to the 2008 collection of essays *Things That Talk*, "resorting to ventriloquism or projection." "Imagine a world without things," Daston writes:

It would not be so much an empty world as a blurry, frictionless one: no sharp outlines would separate one part of the uniform plenum from another; there would be no resistance against which to stub a toe or test a theory or struggle stalwartly. Nor would there be anything to describe, or to explain, remark on, interpret, or complain about – just a kind of porridgy oneness. Without things we would stop talking. We would become as mute as things are alleged to be.



Detail from door overhead by Jacques de Lajoüe. A painter of fantastic architectures, Lajoüe made four such overheads for the Cabinet Bonnier in 1734, this one being above the right-hand door of the room housing the Second Cabinet of Natural History.

Just as they do for a historian like Daston, things give Cabinet and its contributors something to talk about, but the different modes of this discourse (describing, explaining, remarking, interpreting, complaining and more) aren't intended to replace – or perhaps better put, to exhaust – the object. There is always something that remains and the degree to which this remainder or surplus is preserved and made legible is precisely a function of the way the oscillations between the micro and the macro are handled. (Perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that the model of oscillation or, as you so nicely put it, of 'mobile frames', can also be usefully deployed when thinking about the relation of the magazine's programme to the sort of inter-disciplinarity – *adisciplinarity*? – that is the contemporary legacy of 1960s conceptualism). Cabinet is not wedded to one particular speed or frequency of oscillation. In fact, the central goal of the project is to experiment with the different results – the multiple empiricisms, if you will – that can be generated by different emphases along the spectrum from pure matter to pure meaning, both within individual texts and within the larger discursive landscape of a given issue. The spectrum is not, strictly speaking, symmetrical: at one end, the object is understood as utterly symptomatic – only to be used as a catapult to something else outside it – but at the other end the object can't become pure matter, it's necessarily matter and meaning together. Cabinet would certainly be situated closer to this end of the spectrum, but our ambition is to make the magazine a laboratory for experiments that produce heterogeneous answers to the question of how exactly one might go about (to borrow your metaphor) mapping it.

What all aspects of the project share is a desire to dismantle certain long-held oppositions, particularly those that propose an unbridgeable gulf between the poetic and the scientific. There's a wonderful letter written in 1934 by the French social theorist Roger Caillois to André Breton in which the former announces his break from Surrealism over this very issue, and specifically the lack of what Caillois calls an 'equilibrium' in the movement between the spheres of *research* and *poetry*. Discussing the marvels of 'modern atomic theory' in this context, Caillois observes that "here we have a form of the Marvellous that does not fear knowledge but, on the contrary, thrives on it." Caillois continues:

When I compare this great game with Gérard de Nerval's attitude, who refused to enter Palmyra so as not to spoil his preconceptions, or with your own, refusing to slice open a jumping bean that sometimes jolts about because you did not want to find an insect or a worm inside (that would have destroyed the mystery, you said) my mind is made up. Actually, it always was. As a child, I could never really have fun with toys; I was constantly ripping them open or dismantling them to find out "what they were like inside, how they worked.

In some important sense, the debate being staged in this passage – and in the pages of Cabinet – is about whether wonder is located in the mind (Breton) or in the world (Caillois and us). Breton is worried that the world will be exhausted once he knows about it, but if one believes, as Cabinet does, that the world is inexhaustible, then knowledge – empirical or otherwise – poses no threat to *jouissance*, but instead becomes its crucial ally.