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A Small Magazine Puts Itself on Trial

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA



Daniella Zalman for The Wall Street Journal

Issues of Cabinet magazine in the quarterly's Gowanus office. Cabinet is 'putting itself on trial' Wednesday at the New York Public Library

Cabinet, the tiny arts and culture magazine based in Brooklyn, is nothing if not resourceful. Take the staircase down toward the grotty basement beneath its office in Gowanus, and in a space too small for more than a few souls, you'll find an elaborate makeshift cocktail bar, with velvet curtains, a gleaming mirror and a pressed-tin ceiling to complete the scale-model speakeasy feel.



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Daniella Zalman for The Wall Street Journal

"It has its own little sound-system, and sometimes we get a bartender dressed in period clothes," said Sina Najafi, Cabinet's founder and editor-in-chief. "We're actually workaholics who are here all the time, so we set this up to give a false impression of who we are."

Over capacity with even four idlers

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Cabinet magazine editors Naomi Mishkin, Sina Najafi, Jeffrey Kastner and D. Graham Burnett in Brooklyn.

created specially by the storied biologist-turned-mixologist Eben Klemm and conceived to teach a history lesson with its use of Applejack from the Laird & Co. distillery in New Jersey, holder of America's oldest legal liquor license.



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Daniella Zalcmán for The Wall Street Journal

The editors gather for a cocktail in the small bar built between the ground floor and basement level of Cabinet's Gowanus office space.

Its spirit is very Cabinet: part lark, part artistic intervention and part show of inspiring enterprise. That same spirit has informed the magazine's 47 issues to date, and it figures into two new excursions. One is a self-inquisition, addressing the question of "how to judge the responsibilities of a periodical today," to be staged Wednesday at the New York Public Library's main branch with the provocative title "Cabinet on Trial: A Magazine of No Qualities?" The other is the publication of a hardcover retrospective book, "Curiosity and Method: Ten Years of Cabinet Magazine," a compilation of highlights from the magazine's first 40 issues filled with encyclopedia-like entries on hedgehogs, olfaction, gravity, music, public relations and cryptogastronomy, among many other topics.



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Daniella Zalcmán for The Wall Street Journal

An encyclopedia of the first 10 years of Cabinet.

"Logistics."

"It started with the question of what an art magazine would be like if it were to pay attention to all the kinds of things that artists are interested in," said Mr. Najafi. "Art magazines are often about criticism and reviews and a certain kind of writing. But what artists read to generate ideas for their work is so much more diverse than that. So we thought about the studio wall of an artist, all the things cut out and put up there."

Contributors, free to digress with intellectual seriousness and a conspicuous sense of play, have included the theorist Slavoj Žižek, fiction-writer Jonathan Ames, poet Anne Carson, artist Marcel Dzama, philosopher Alain Badiou and a collective affiliated with a something called the Institute of Critical Zoologists.

"Cabinet is built around a commitment to curiosity as a stance with respect to the world, to being interested promiscuously," said D. Graham Burnett, an editor and prolific contributor who also serves as director of graduate studies in the history of science at Princeton. "That turns out to be a pretty rich program."

inside, the bar—an art project as much as an actual place to imbibe—serves only one drink: the Cabinet cocktail,

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Mr. Najafi, who is 47, launched Cabinet in 2000 in his Boerum Hill apartment, and has since amassed a small coterie of writers and editors to assemble issues published quarterly and distributed in 11,000-copy runs. Each issue is arranged around a specific theme ranging from fundamental subjects to arcane pursuits: Evil, Friendship, Hair, Bubbles, Fire, Insects. The current issue is devoted to

That constantly cultivated sense of wonder has kept the magazine in line with its mission as it has grown in New York and around the world.

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Daniella Zalcmán for The Wall Street Journal

Some "rustic bling" that was created for a fundraiser.

"It's like a gift for us as artists," said Naomi Mishkin, a glass and mixed-material artist who recently joined Cabinet as an assistant editor. "It feels like it's for us rather than about us."

The retrospective impulse that compelled the magazine's creators to assemble the "Curiosity and Method" anthology also informs Wednesday's free event at the Public Library, a theatrical incursion conceived as an

anarchic mock-trial in the spirit of Dada art.

"A question I hope comes up is what it means to be kind of a para-academic organization that sits next to the academy but doesn't have to answer to some of its rigors, and what it means to mobilize that knowledge outside," Mr. Najafi said. "Is that freedom a useful one, or is it just a way of cherry-picking randomly for pleasure without any kind of responsibility? That's a difficult question."

The event will offer a discussion featuring a cast of 17 friends and foes, as well as verdicts handed down by appointed judges onstage, with repercussions of an as-yet-undisclosed kind. "Part of the learning process of coming into the Cabinet community has been to develop a taste and appreciation for the exquisite pleasures of self-sabotage," Mr. Burnett said, slyly.

Mr. Najafi, in keeping with the spirit of the probing magazine he has expanded mostly by way of grants and donations from loyal readers, concurred. "We're going to present a difficult case against ourselves," he said. "We've stacked the deck."

A version of this article appeared January 30, 2013, on page A15 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: A Magazine Grills Itself.

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