Thank you all for coming out here on this rainy evening. Tonight, I’m going to talk about three linked topics:

1. The Luminous Nose
2. Cabinet
3. The Critical and the Curious

Let me begin, then, with this very first and rather strange thing: you should be wondering ‘What’s the luminous nose?’ I do not mean Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer. I’m talking about quite a peculiar poem published in the 1870s by Edward Lear. Lear was an obscure and somewhat tragic Victorian poet — a cabined and longing epileptic, the 21st of 22 children born into a morbidly gigantic and impecunious Victorian family.
We publish four times a year. The issues are themed. We’re more than a magazine, we’re also an event and gallery space, and a set of associated projects, undertakings, and capers. All this has been going on now for about ten years. At the heart of the enterprise is my colleague Sina Najafi, our core founder, and Jeff Kastner, the senior editor.

This is our crest. [Fig.2] Some of you will recognize these two animals: the fox and the hedgehog. And this motto, ‘Sapere Aude,’ means ‘Dare to Know’ in Latin, a catch phrase most closely associated with Immanuel Kant’s immortal essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ Our little avatar-animals hail from a great pre-Socratic fragment by Archilochus: ‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.’ This is simply a fragment. We have only a few decontextualized shards of text from Archilochus, and this is probably the best known — not least because it was elaborated into a distinction in intellectual styles by the historian and philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Who had one big organizing concept or preoccupation that motivated the totality of a body of work? Who, by contrast, picked and plucked and moved here and there? Sorting the great thinkers into these categories amounts to a kind of twee parlor game:

- Shakespeare? Fox.
- Plato? Hedgehog.
- Dostoyevsky? Hedgehog (probably).
- Laurence Sterne? Fox. For sure!

It is possible to argue that Cabinet is erected on the ambition to hybridize these species. Or at least to make a commodious home for both creatures. One large eschatological project hoped to get the lion to lie down with the lamb: to get power and gentleness to coexist. We aim to make a peaceful garden for monomaniacs and

Lear, in addition to making many very good ornithological illustrations (his ultimate métier), authored many singsong lyrics — much of it was sort of nonsense. “Nonsense” meaning made-up words. The delirium of sounds. Child-speech. One of these bits of touching jabberwocky is ‘The Dong with a Luminous Nose.’ ‘Dong’ is a strange word in English. It mostly means the sound of a bell. But it also often means something else these days, in that it serves as slang for private bits of the male anatomy. ‘The Dong with a Luminous Nose’ is a nonsense poem of about four pages. It is the story of a boy who loses a girl with whom he’s quite in love. In his pursuit of the girl, he builds for himself a very odd contraption on his nose so that he can go wandering in the darkness looking for her. He puts a lamp — a fire, a lantern — in this prosthetic nose so that he can go wandering in the darkness searching for her all the time. People in the hills see the light coming from his nose as he seeks her:

“And because by night he could not see,
   He gathered the bark of the Twangum Tree
   On the flowery plain that grows.
   And he wove him a wondrous Nose,—
   A Nose as strange as a Nose could be!
   Of vast proportions and painted red,
   And tied with cords to the back of his head.
   –In a hollow rounded space it ended
   With a luminous Lamp within suspended,
   All fenced about
   With a bandage stout
   To prevent the wind from blowing it out;–
   And with holes all round to send the light,
   In gleaming rays on the dismal night.”

I begin here with this strange figure from the nineteenth century. To the dong and his prosthetic we shall return. For now, let us turn to Cabinet magazine, and allow me to introduce this publication to you, and tell you a little bit about what we do and why. What is Cabinet?

This is our current issue. [Fig.1]
magpies alike — as well as for the schizophrenics who yo-yo between the each-and-sundry and the all-in-one.

So, what kinds of things do we do in the magazine? We have issues on death, fame, money, forgetting, bubbles, hair, and so on. Facially eclectic, this roster — stuff drawn from all over. Our name, ‘Cabinet,’ is meant to invoke the tradition of the cabinet of curiosity — a place where all kinds of different materials are gathered together, to edify and entertain, to exemplify and astound.

We often say that the magazine was founded back in the Interwar period. Which is to say, we tell stories about ourselves. Let me tell you one of those stories. Here, look at these. [Fig.3] These are Mexican jumping beans. Have you ever seen a Mexican jumping bean? Mexican jumping beans are small beans that, well, jump. If you put them on the table, they may just sit there for a while, but then eventually they’ll start to move a little bit. It may take them a few minutes to get there, but if you warm them they jump even more. They’ll jump for two or three days. This is a true story, the story I am about to tell you, and we sometimes say that this story represents the founding of Cabinet.

In 1934, a set of six jumping beans found their way to Paris and to the salon around André Breton. Breton and his buddies played with them. They all agreed that the little things were super interesting, and the young mathematician and writer Roger Caillois proposed that they should cut one open to see what’s inside that made them jump. Breton is said to have replied along the lines of, “This is the scientific spirit! The dreaded empiricism that murders to dissect! It is grotesque to have that violent desire for rational unveiling! No, you will not touch a single bean!” There is a kind of spat, and Caillois gets angry and storms out — a rift among the surrealists. This is the letter he writes to Breton the next day:

“For instance, modern atomic theory is at present an adventure into the dark [...] Here we have a form of the Marvellous that does not fear knowledge but, on the contrary, thrives on it [...] When I compare this great game with Gerard 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...”

I’m not with you, says Caillois. I don’t want to protect mystery under a cloak of blindness. I’m with those who believe that it’s mystery all the way down — as we go deeper, the mystery multiplies.

This is Caillois’s theory, if you like — his creed. We say this is the moment Cabinet magazine was founded. Many of the magazines are themselves “objects” of a sort — things that do or express.

This is a fig leaf, the thing that covers the genitals in Adam and Eve story. [Fig.4] Here the leaf was a scratch off so that you could scratch off the fig leaf on the cover of the magazine.

The Enemy was, if I am not mistaken, our least successful issue. We sold so few that we later turned the issue into an artistic project. [Fig.5] We sent stacks of the magazine to a shooting range and had them shot through with .50 caliber bullets and sold the perforated copies to help raise money. We are a non-profit magazine.

Let me take a few moments to talk thematically about the project of the magazine, in an effort to give you a sense of its spirit.

The Meander. To meander, in English, means to take a path that is not straight, to wander, as in the French notion of the flâneur. In this example of the spirit of the Meander, I will point to Daniel Rosenberg’s great essay and visual project — a timeline of timelines. This is a history of representations of time on a linear scale, going all the way back to the Greeks.

This is a wonderful piece by Aaron Schuster [Fig.6] — a kind of skew history of the graphic representation of the path of the notorious donkey in Tristram Shandy, that most meandering of English novels.
The Collection. Because we care about cabinets of curiosity, I would say that we often engage problems of collation, taxonomy, and the organization of objects. For instance, we’ve done a project on invented stamps from non-existing countries. Here is an image from Geoff Cox’s wonderful essay on all the covers of *The Communist Manifesto*, a piece that lets you trace a parallel history of the book’s “imaginary” in different nations and times. [Fig.7]

These are coffee lids [Fig.8] — the cheap plastic tops from disposable hot beverage cups. And this represents a small sample from an enormous collection of different designs, a body of materials gathered by Louise Harpman and Scott Specht.

Here is Leland de la Durantaye’s thoughtful piece on all the different versions of Duchamp’s “Fountain”. [Fig.9]

The Marginal. We have a strong interest in resisting the unthinking resort to “importance” or “centrality” as a criterion. Again and again, we are inclined to examine the edges of things, or to take up peripheral perspectives.

For instance, take our publication of David Greenberg’s wonderful project built out of the presidential archives in the United States: a culling of the doodles done by American presidents in meetings during their tenures at the helm of governance. [Fig.10] This project subsequently became a book-length study.

Failure. Here I need to make a personal aside. *Cabinet* is, in a way, “committed” to failure — perverse as that may sound — in a way that has significantly changed and developed my own thinking. I feel I have learned so much in this regard from my years working with the magazine. Please recall, that I’m just serving here as a kind of “ambassador” for a whole bunch of people who really make the magazine work. Above all, Sina and Jeff.

When I first joined the magazine, I suppose I really hated failure. Even the *idea* of failure. Even a *whiff* of the *idea* of failure! Working at *Cabinet*, I feel as if I have learned a new and deep respect for, and even a kind of infatuation with, failure. Not least because we fail, sometimes. Beautifully. In our semi-famous “Failure” issue, we ran Jeff Kastner’s touching piece on collections of letters from crashed airplanes: lost mail, collections of letters that never reached their destination because of the wrecks of the airplanes carrying them to their recipients. Or this very intense and strange artistic project made by the great Matt Freedman (under the pseudonym Kris Lee): a conjured account of the nonce development of a fourth-place medal for the Canadian Olympics in 1964. The idea was that instead of having just three, the Canadians wanted there to be a fourth-place medal as well. This created a huge controversy and was ultimately suppressed. Though as Kris Lee tells the story, an artist was commissioned to make the medal. A couple of copies of the medal survive. It is, I think, an invented story but was presented as true in the magazine. Truth is, I am not even sure. And I like that feeling in this domain.

Perhaps our biggest gesture in “Failure” was the Failure issue itself, [Fig.11] which we carefully arranged to have mis-cut at our printer in Belgium. The bottom was meticulously misaligned, so that when all the issues of *Cabinet* are aligned up on the shelf the “Failure” issue cants out slightly and doesn’t sit square and proper with the others. Beautiful, no?

Well, then we ran into the disconcerting fact that lots and lots of these issues were returned to us or scrapped because attentive booksellers noticed that it wouldn’t sit on the shelf right — they assumed it was an accident and threw them out. This is now a collector’s item, or we like to think of it that way, since many fewer of them survived. Needless to say, the magazine lost a small fortune in revenue. Indeed, you could say that we almost put the magazine under in the name of Failure. That’s commitment.

Testing and experimentation. In keeping with that Caillois’ spirit of critical inquiry, we are not afraid...
of submitting things to the test. This is possibly my personal favorite *Cabinet* project of all times. Right about the time of 9/11, there was enormous shift around security in the U.S., and banking security above all. The new department of “Homeland Security” focused on tracking money movements in new ways. In this tense environment, *Cabinet* set out to test how successfully these new identity measures were being applied. So we set to work with an artist and a friend of the magazine with a rather unusual name, Rachel Gugelberger, and we wrote a set of checks to her under various different permutations of her name which she then went and tried to cash. So the idea was she would send the check to the bank and the question would be, would the bank give her the money? As you know if your name is spelled a bit wrong, a bank will usually cash it. As the name gets more wrong, the odds increase that the bank will return the check and decline to cash it. We wanted to feel for that inflection point, and so we wrote several dozen checks. Here are some of them. [Fig.12]

Yes, these were cashed.

Few years ago, we sent a call out to our readers to come into the *Cabinet* space, and take a test. They were invited, but they didn’t know for what they were coming for. When they got there, they met Sina Najafi. [Fig.13] This is he in a schoolmaster’s tie, and behaving very severely. He made them all sit down. Matt Freedman and Sina then subjected all 26 people who’d come to a test on the contents of the last ten issues of the magazine. It took about an hour, and then they were graded and the results were published in the magazine — with their pictures and an assessment of how each person had performed. Many performed very badly, as it was an extremely difficult test.

This is an essay I did on a very strange and utterly real experiment that went on at Princeton University across the 1960s — a test to determine whether the mind could influence matter. This was conducted through funding from military-avionics-linked individuals who were at that time hoping to use telekinesis and remote visualization and perhaps some other far out paranormal, parapsychological powers as part of military contracting. For about six years in this laboratory in Princeton, researchers stared at these steel balls falling through pegs into a normal curve distribution — and as they stared, they thought “go right!” [Fig.14] This gentleman is sitting there thinking ‘Go right’. For six years people sat there and thought ‘Go right’ and then they counted up the balls to see whether in fact thinking ‘Go right’ had any effect on the balls. For the answer, you have to read the piece.

The poetics of science. The story of the mind-science experiment offers a good transition to another important *Cabinet* theme, one very close to my own heart: what we might want to call the “poetics of science.” We are here back in the domain of the Caillois story about the jumping beans. Take this, for instance: Margaret and Christine Wertheim’s remarkable project of organizing collective crocheting of hyperbolic forms, which eventually gave rise to an elaborate undertaking to crochet models of coral reef systems.

Or take this: Sasha Archibald’s amazing piece on Alfred L. Yarbus’ early eye tracking experiments. We can use lasers, now, to see where a person is looking. These technologies are deployed to test advertising, for instance — to see where your eye goes in an image field, and to create hot maps of where your eyes are lingering. This kind of work is also interesting for examining people’s responses to works of art, you can follow where the eyes tend to go, and also track the trajectory of the eye as an individual encounters a given image. This is now done with quite fancy hardware and software (though some of it is now pretty inexpensive). But in the mid 20th century, the Russian scientist Alfred Yarbus began to experiment with this sort of investigation *manually* — by actually sticking a needle with a little mirror on it (which was attached to a suction cup) right *onto the eyeball* of
And here is another piece of mine in this same vein — on spectroscopy. When you burn things and look at the resulting light through a spectroscope, you see characteristic spectral bands, and these bands give you information about the material being burned. This is a piece about fire and knowledge-production, combustion and epistemology. In it, I juxtapose spectroscopy and the “trial by ordeal” such as was used with those suspected of witchcraft. In each case burning is meant to reveal the truth.

Enough, then, with thematics. I want to point to some of the other things we do. Since Cabinet is more than the magazine. It is a community. And a set of collaborative and pedagogical undertakings too. We do a lot of events and lectures in our space. We have had, for some time, a semi-regular thing called the “Poetry Laboratory” where we “work with” poems — generally by doing stuff with them that goes well beyond (and may even actually obviate) “reading” them. For our notorious “bunk bed conversations” we invite distinguished philosophers and critics and scholars to have an unscripted discussion in their pajamas in a bunk bed, one up and one down. Those take place mostly in the dark, and feature a projection on the wall (next to the discussants) which is controlled by a third, invisible, person who can put up images or text or quotes anything he or she wants. This becomes a kind of dream space upon which the speakers can comment or which can comment upon their ongoing conversation in real time. These events can be very funny and beautiful, but also, sometimes, kind of unsettling and bizarre. See “failure” up above!

What else? Exhibitions. Sometimes. Another editor, Chris Turner and I curated an exhibition at the Architectural Association two years ago called “The Slice: Cutting to See” — a show about the visual convention of the cross section in anatomy and architecture. We worked to hold these two modes of cross sectional visualization together.

an experimental subject whose eyes were held wide open. By shining a light sideways at the eye as the person examined an image, and tracing the reflected beam of light, it became possible to track the location of foveation — you could create a map of the eye’s regard on the surface of a given image. He used this setup to examine notions of class and social dynamics in the visual behavior of his subjects as they looked at paintings in the context of questions about the scenes and the personae depicted.

The rubric of the “poetics of science” also serves to let me introduce several more of my own pieces and projects, since this is, in many ways, a very apt description of the mood and character of my work. So, for instance, take this piece I developed with a programmer friend of mine. This is a piece of software that uses a primitive stylometric analyzer to “translate” literature into chess. [Fig.15] You are all aware that computational analysis can be used to determine authorship. We use software that does that kind of textual analysis, but then we have it “express” that textual analysis as a “style of play” in chess. You can choose two novels, and they can play each other in a chess match — with the software literally “reading” the novel as a kind of encoded chess game. Then, you can, if you are so inclined, slightly rewrite the novel in order to have different outcomes in the chess matches. I then wrote a number of essays about the novels that were also essays about the chess matches — in effect, the software served as an engine for producing a new kind of writing, i.e., a slow, essayistic train wreck between a chess column and work of literary criticism.

This is a piece on the very small bones inside the ear of fish. [Fig.16] Every fish has the unique sculptural form of bone in its ear. These can now be “read,” in a way, as records of the fish’s day-to-day life and surrounding oceanic conditions — because they are composed of hyper-thin layers of mineral deposition. A real fish biologist can identify a given fish to species level simply from one of these earbones, known as ottoliths.
Finally I couldn’t resist putting this in because it is so germane. A few years back we did a rather elaborate and, say, fatuous, project with a strong Turkish connection. I hope you will find it amusing. It turns out that the town of Beşiktaş is the “sister city” of Brooklyn, Cabinet’s home. You may not know that, but we discovered it and, because we are great lovers of football, we put a postcard in all the copies of the magazine — a pre-addressed postcard to be sent to the captain of the Beşiktaş football team (BJK), challenging their club to a friendly match. [Fig.19]

Many hundreds of our readers — inspired, we like to think, by the spirit of dada sportsmanship and the need for more insurgent (if ambiguous) gestures of trans-national comity — signed, stamped, and sent this card here to Istanbul.

Eventually we did get a call from the superb footballers of BJK, saying something along the lines of “Who the hell are you?”

But by the time it was too late, we had announced and promoted the match in the United States and actually ourselves took the field on the appointed day in uniform, waited for the Beşiktaş team to show up, and when they didn’t, we declared ourselves winners by default.

At the heart of everything you’ve heard here this evening, I would argue, is something like a commitment to the curious — and to curiosity itself. Some of you will recognize the great Michel Foucault essay “The Masked Philosopher” which includes this affecting passage about something like the rehabilitation of curiosity in all its political, ethical, and aesthetic valences.

“Curiosity is a new vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity, futility. The word, however, pleases me. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes concern; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist, a readiness
to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.”

This is a bit like a mantra for us, this next sentence — this is something close to the spirit that motivated Sina, that birthed the magazine, and that stays with all of us who are committed to the project:

“I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist…”

I think we think of ourselves as carrying a kind of small flag for that project.

But it is a project that has its perils. There are good reasons for curiosity being stigmatized as futile, as bourgeois, as self-satisfying, as culpably un-critical. Curiosity meanders, it is not in the avant-garde. It stops to smell the flowers, it does go to the barricades. I think, in this respect, there has been now for a number of years something of a kind of tension between Cabinet and its project and this slightly older tradition in American art-writing and small-magazine-making. I think here of journals like October and serious art writers of a leftist, Marxist tradition. Or even of newer publications self-consciously working in the tradition of Dissent and Commentary and the Partisan Review. Say, N+1 or Jacobin.

We are not going to resolve that tension here this evening. I am not going to try. But I think you should know that we are not unselfconscious about our position in relation to those traditions. Indeed, for our tenth anniversary, we put ourselves publicly on trial for our failures, and we had ourselves convicted of “political irrelevance” and “aesthetic corruption.”

But all puckish gestures aside, I want now to return to the poem and image from which I began, the image from which my title tonight derives: “The Dong with the Luminous Nose.”

Since it seems to me that Lear’s tale can in fact be read as a kind of allegory of the perils of criticality. Because, of course, the luminous nose is a tragedy. A very particular kind of tragedy. In theory, the Dong wants to use his nose-light like a searchlight — use it to look for that which he has lost and longs to recover.

But, as we discern in Edward Gorey’s remarkable illustrations, the Dong cannot but be blinded by the light in front of his own face. Which is to say, the Dong’s own instrument for looking is structured to prevent him from seeing that for which he searches. And if this is one very powerful parabolic warning about the dangers of a certain kind of determined discerning, I think the story hides another irony no less significant: the same luminous nose that is stopping the Dong from seeing what he is looking for is amazingly suitable for drawing attention to the Dong himself in his searching! Indeed, the luminous nose makes a veritable spectacle of the Dong’s quest — it is the semaphore by which he continuously announces himself in his wanderings.

I do not want to try to tie off the tale in some moral or apothegm, but I feel strongly that in both these registers — the self-blinding effect of certain species of laser-like focus; the self-dramatization implicit in certain species of slashing inquiry — we are invited to consider limits and contradictions attendant on a slavish devotion to “criticality”: the danger is always that an extravagant and incautious ambition to probe, see through, and see beyond leads inexorably to performative solipsism and/or autolytic narcissism.

It is with that thought — that concern — that I will leave you tonight.

Thank you.

[RESİMLER]
D. Graham Burnett
Parlayan Burun
Problemi: Yansımalar ve Sapmalar

D. Graham Burnett
The Problem of The Luminous Nose:
Reflections And Deflections

[1]
Sonbahar 2013 kapağı
Cover of Fall 2013

[2]
Cabinet logosu – tilki ve kirpi ile
Cabinet logo –with fox and hedgehog

[3]
Meksika sıçrayan fasulyeleri
Mexican jumping beans

[4]
Issue 31, “Shame”, Fall 2008

Aaron Schuster

Geoff Cox

[9] Leland de la Durantaye
Doodles by American presidents

[Dwight D. Eisenhower]

[Lyndon B. Johnson]

[John F. Kennedy]

[Ronald Reagan]

[10]

Amerikan başkanlarının karalamaları
Doodles by American presidents
Cover of the “Failure” issue

[12]  Rachel Gugelberger adına yazılmış kimi çekler
Some of the checks written for Rachel Gugelberger
[13]
Sina Najafi okurları test ediyor
Sina Najafi testing readers

[14]
Beyefendi oturmuş “sağa git!” diye düşünürken görülüyor
This gentleman is sitting there thinking ‘Go right’

[15]
Satranç-roman yazılımı
Chess-novel software

[16]
Balıkların kulaklarının içindeki çok küçük kemikler
The piece on earbones of some fish
Cabinet Milli Kütüphanesi
Cabinet National Library

Hafriyat çalışmaları yapan ve kütüphaneyi kurmak için çingiraklı yılanlara göğüs 거의 kara ekip
The intrepid team that braved the rattlesnakes to install the library and to build an earthwork to support it

Beşiktaş takımının kaptanına gönderilmek üzere hazırlanmış, dostluk maçı oynamaya davet eden kartpostal
Postcard to be sent to the captain of the Beşiktaş team, challenging their club to a friendly match