Curiosity and Method
Ten Years of Cabinet Magazine

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Curiosity and Method: Ten Years of Cabinet Magazine

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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.
—Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher”

Another error … is the over-early and peremptory reduction of knowledge into arts and methods; from which time commonly sciences receive small or no augmentation. But as young men, when they knit and shape perfectly, do seldom grow to a further stature, so knowledge, while it is in aphorisms and observations, it is in growth; but when it once is comprehended in exact methods, it may, perchance, be further polished, and illustrate and accommodated for use and practice, but it increaseth no more in bulk and substance.
—Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*

Polonius: Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

You have in your hands a copy of *Curiosity and Method: Ten Years of Cabinet Magazine*, a reference book primarily culled from contributions to the first forty issues of our periodical based in Brooklyn, New York.

You may be wondering why two animals have ended up on our cover. As Claude Lévi-Strauss once observed, animals are good to think with, and at *Cabinet* we have found two animals in particular—the fox and the hedgehog, our friends on the cover—especially good for thinking. This is in part because they represent, in one poetic-philosophical tradition, two distinct approaches to the world around us. The curious fox, it is said, knows many small things; the cautious, methodical hedgehog, on the other hand, knows one big thing. Where the former has no appetite for systematizing, the latter is the ultimate systematizer. *Cabinet* has from its very beginning been dedicated to staging an encounter between these two outlooks in the belief that each can disrupt the familiar comforts and presumptions of the other, and that an ethics for how to understand—and therefore possibly change—the world can emerge from the friction between them. For more on how we have pressed these two creatures into service on our coat of arms, please see the entries on "Fox" and "Hedgehog" in the main section of this book.

Any long-term cultural project is only possible through an enormous collective effort, and in *Cabinet*'s case this has consisted of the dedicated work of hundreds of writers, artists, and fellow editors. Without them, where there is something—the book in your hand, issues of the magazine—there would have been nothing. Of course, transforming this work into artifacts also requires financial assistance, and we are indebted to the institutions and individuals who have made both *Cabinet* and this book possible. We are especially grateful to Hesu Coue-Wilson and Edward Wilson for their generous support of this volume, and we also thank Princeton University for additional funding.

Once their checks had cleared, we spent the money making a book that has ended up being over five hundred pages and weighing roughly six pounds. We understand that this heft might seem challenging, daunting—perhaps even uninviting. And so on the following pages you will also find a few words of advice and orientation to guide, and misguide, you in your travels through these pages.

Sina Najafi
Editor-in-chief, *Cabinet*

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I. THIS BOOK IS AN ENCYCLOPEDIA

In 1974, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* delivered itself of a massive fifteenth edition—a thirty-volume effort to get the cosmos onto paper. It had no index. You might argue that an encyclopedia hardly has need of an index. But the fourteenth edition and the sixteenth edition both had them. So this experiment in paratextual amputation was not a success. It had its origins, like many a publishing fiasco, in editorial hubris. The makers of the fifteenth edition believed they could dispense with the index because they had worked up a radical new structure for their work. Instead of a "flat" information architecture—the stuttering parataxis of traditional encyclopedism (i.e., lots of little articles in alphabetical order)—they had developed an epistemic pyramid of some grandeur: a one-volume *Propaedia*, an introductory schema-of-everything, CliffsNotes-style; a twelve-volume *Micropaedia* made up of thousands of detailed, informative, and specific articles; and finally, a seventeen-volume *Macropaedia*, a collection of ranging essays, each of which possessed some synthetic ambition. A two-volume index to all this was prepared separately about a decade later.

The tang-colored epitome in your hands at this instant displays an editorial *Bauplan* not unlike *Britannica*'s fateful fifteenth (a macropedia of new keyword essays at the rear; a broad belly of micropedia entries culled from the first forty issues of *Cabinet*; a front-end propedia in the form of this introduction).

And no index. We propose to issue an index to the present volume on the occasion of the magazine's twentieth anniversary.

II. IT IS FOR REFERENCE

The problem of reference has dominated literary and artistic criticism for more than a century. Theological, metaphysical, and semiotic approaches each afford some traction on the issue, but none can be said to offer perfect satisfaction. Ethics, politics, and aesthetics are pervasively implicated. Predictably, many consider the problem wrongly framed, regardless of the framing. Etymology can help. Some sources suggest that the word *reference* hails from the Latin *res ferrum*, meaning "a small iron object." Does this point to a meteor? It seems likely. Thus it is important to remember that whenever we make use of a reference work—indeed, whenever we *refer*—we are reaching back toward the kind of anomalous, streaking body that burns itself out across a nearly instantaneous, violent transit between worlds. Every referent is therefore properly understood as the cold, hard residue of a shooting star. You are holding a thunderstone.

This points, if somewhat indirectly, to a more general observation: "methodical curiosity" is a pretty good definition of science as we know it; "curious method" résumés much of what some people call art. Applying the canons of methodical curiosity to the productions of those curious methods, or applying curious methods to the productions of methodical curiosity, does not, in fact, precipitate the kind of matter-antimatter dematerialization familiar to

students of science fiction. It is more like the collision of a passenger jet with a flock of geese. Which is to say, usually the effects are negligible. A little pink mist. Perhaps a delayed flight.

But sometimes, for someone on that plane—someone looking out the window—everything changes at once.

III. IT CAN BE USED IN DIFFERENT WAYS

The early twentieth-century Hungarian anarchist Franz Toth reportedly described the book as "a disembodied brick," and commented disparagingly on the "wispy paper wings" of what he called "pasteboard angels." Out of this burly indictment came the dubious tradition of tying books to paving stones as missiles in the street fighting and window-smashing mayhem of the period. While it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to endorse this specific "creative misuse" of textual materials, the episode affords a useful reminder of the broad range of possibilities that greet a reader upon picking up any new volume. Interestingly, Toth was an exact contemporary of the American penny-press hack "Professor" George Conklin, famous for his endlessly reprinted *Argument Settler*, a book that promised to "resolve any dispute." In addition to being packed with useful statistical and geographical information (the sort of facts over which men in local pubs in the period might find themselves at odds), each exemplar of the rare seventh edition of the *Argument Settler* was drilled to fit over the hand like a set of brass knuckles.

IV. SO BE CREATIVE

Creativity is sometimes described as an ability to "pick the problem up from the other end"—suggesting that the power of the imagination lies in avoiding handles, resisting the affordances that the world affords. Call it parkour for the mind's eye. All this works pretty well for stemware and roses, since each of these, grasped at the business end, provides a notable satisfaction to the hand. But the proposition holds less well for straight razors and sea snakes. Even in these problem cases, however, it is possible to imagine scenarios where tactical misapprehension can pay significant dividends.

All of which is to say: don't be afraid. *Curiosity and Method* is your book. Do with it what you will.

V. REACH YOUR GOALS

Gregory Bateson, enamored with cybernetics, once likened cognition to target practice, drawing a broad distinction between thinking with a rifle and thinking with a shotgun. Marksmen wielding the former learn to center the gentle, rhythmic oscillation of the gun sight on the bull's eye, gradually squeezing the trigger while tightening the envelope of the harmonic vibrations that are the vitality of a body. Ideally, these converge, and the gun goes off at the narrowest achievable amplitude of this natural pulsing—on target. Shotgun shooting, by contrast, is all kinesis and choreography. The moving target leaves no time for dampening harmonics. As the pigeon flies, the shooter wheels, swinging the body with the bird, the barrel follows the body, and it is all one motion: pull, swing, bang. Some problems, as Bateson would have it, require rifle-think—a sequenced tightening of focus. Others, he suggests, require the grooved swing-think of the shotgun.

But any shot can *ricochet*. The word has its origins in a form of lyrical ballad common in Old French, where a cognate term signaled the poem's refrain. The derivation seems to have something to do with the idea that refrains "come back at you"—a little like a bullet pinging off a steel pipe.

It wasn't until the late eighteenth century that gunners figured out a systematic and productive way to harness the phenomenon. The first experiments were naval: rather than trying to lob a cannon shot at a distant vessel, why not skip the ball across the surface of the water like a flat stone? Under the right circumstances, this dramatically improves hit ratios (many fewer overshoots, for instance, since the ball stays close to the waterline). By the 1790s, artillery officers were expected to have mastered *ricochet* techniques on land, which could be used to deliver low-angle raking fire over the period's stout stone fortifications. Together, these forms of skip-gunnery demonstrate clearly that, properly deployed, all indirection amounts to a teleological suspension of teleology.

Upshot? To hit the target often requires aiming elsewhere.

VI. KEEP YOUR MIND AND EYES OPEN

Gordon Holmes, arguably the greatest British neurologist of the twentieth century, achieved his extraordinary intimacy with the brain under the testing conditions of trench warfare during World War I, which exposed the headmatter of thousands upon thousands of young men to the naked eye. Stoical, precise, and possessed of fearsome skill, Holmes became an alchemist in the world's largest laboratory of pain: daily he labored to convert a mudslide of human destruction into positive knowledge.

British soldiers tended to wear their flat little helmets high on the head, with the result that one-quarter of all penetrating wounds sustained in the conflict by British combatants were cerebral. The first thirty years of the twentieth century were, moreover, a peculiar sweet spot for the trauma surgeon with an interest in the cortex. The technologies of war had advanced to the point where bullets and other harmful bits of metal could be propelled fast enough to cut through the skull reliably, but the achieved velocities were not yet such as to produce the terrible (and almost invariably fatal) cavitation effects that would be seen by mid-century. The result? Large numbers of relatively clean, small, piercing holes through parts of the brain.

Holmes skillfully removed the foreign bodies, often with an electromagnet (an innovative procedure in the day), and then he followed up. In one patient, for instance, Holmes found that the injury had left the young man permanently blinded—exclusively in a crescent-like region at the leftmost periphery of his visual field. It was a crucial data point in what would become Holmes's greatest legacy, the "Holmes Map": a precise correlation of the anatomy of our visual cortex with the topology of that bowl-like picture our eyes make of the world. Poke a hole *here* in the occipital, get a blind spot over *there* in one's view of the world. Poke a hole over *there*, and suddenly there is darkness over *here*.

Holmes had little patience for allegory, but that should not detain us, since his story is less an episode in the history of cortical mapping than a bit of monitory folklore concerning the way knowledge works: Knowledge does not come as a pallet of bricks for our up-building. Nor do we dig for foundations upon which to stand. Rather, the world wings at us, hard shards like buckshot. We peek above the parapet, and are struck by a barrage of facts. Pop! Pop! Pop! Each of them that hits home opens a little blind spot in our view of things. Usually (for a while anyway) we heal. Indeed, because the brain tends to interpolate across such aporias, we seldom become aware of what has been knocked out of what we can see. Nevertheless, summed, correlated, and delivered all at once, the totality of facts—Blam!—would afford *both* a general map of what obtains *and* a condition of total blindness.

Hence, the trouble with encyclopedias, which are, thank heavens, unreadable.

VII. PREPARE YOURSELF TO BE SURPRISED

On 17 June 1924, Elmer Cline, the vice-president of merchandising for the Taggart Baking Company in Indianapolis, received a trademark registration for the phrase "Wonder begins in philosophy," which was intended to serve as the centerpiece of a campaign to promote the health benefits of the company's "Wonder" brand loaf, launched in the summer of 1921. Taggart was shortly thereafter acquired by Continental Baking, whose executives scuttled the "philosophy" campaign, replacing it with the more familiar "It's Slo-Baked," a catch-phrase incorporated into the logo of multicolored balloons. Discarded art by the commercial illustrator Drew Miller included a depiction of Plato and other epigones gathered around Socrates, who holds a piece of white bread aloft in a position reminiscent of David's *Death of Socrates*.

The philosophical status of wonder remains fundamentally contested. The notion that surprise, or even a kind of stunned stupefaction, might constitute nothing less than a philosophical annunciation did not survive the Enlightenment's enormous appetite for equanimity. Better a phlegmatic on a walk (with a cane, say, and a pocket full of snuff) than some wild-eyed enthusiast on your settee, staring into space in blank astonishment over who-knew-what. Such individuals were not to be trusted with the project of critical rationality, which, at its most critical, demanded a very cool head. And so, somewhere across the eighteenth century "reasonable" and "implacable" became functionally synonymous. Philosophy since Kant has therefore not begun in wonder, but has rather circumambulated its terrain, claiming the lightly guarded adjacent zones, poaching on the margins. Needed: double agents, interlopers, a hill kingdom in between.

VIII. UNDERSTAND HOW YOU LEARN

The phenomenon of "averted vision" is well attested. The human retina is made up of two types of light-receptors—rods and cones. Grossly speaking, the former are extremely sensitive; the latter provide better information on color. So rods are dominant in low-light conditions, cones in ordinary vision. The region at the center of the retina, the fovea, is dominated by cones, so we get the richest views of the world in the middle of our field of vision. But if you would like to see a very faint star in the night sky, you would do best to follow Aristotle's instruction for observing a nearly invisible stellar phenomenon in Sirius: "To those who concentrated their gaze straight at it, the light would become dim, but to those who moved their vision slightly to the side, the light would grow stronger." Edgar Allan Poe invoked the same phenomenon in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* ("it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct"), in what amounts to an apothegmatic formulation of Lacanian ideas about obliquity of view. One suspects Lewis Carroll was casting a similarly sidelong view at his Oxford astronomer friends when he has Alice stumble into a shop "that seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded full as they could hold." Everyone from Charles Baudelaire to Alfred North Whitehead to Henry James has found in all this the suggestion that we do well to look askance, and avoid excessive focus on the things upon which we hope to attend mostly closely. It is peculiar to attend in one place in the visual field in order to become aware of what is going on elsewhere. Such a state of attentive dissociation would seem to have some metaphysical and/or epistemological import.

But bracket that. Focus (but not too hard) on the evolutionary history of the problem. Good peripheral vision evolves in prey. They need to see what is coming at them from the side. Good foveal vision evolves in predators, which like a straight shot at their lunch. The fox and the hedgehog really do see things differently.

And what about us? We are composite creatures. This is inscribed in our eyes. As one becomes aware of a faint star at the edge of one's view, and then, turning to look at it, finds it disappear, one is, in a way, compressing the whole evolution of the species into the narrowest shaving of a glance.

It is up to you whether to read this volume dead-on, or sidelong.

IX. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS, EXAMPLES, GETTING STARTED

Is eclecticism functionally equivalent to dialectical schizophrenia? Do you all have a position on this? I am sick of the bullshit.

These are empirical questions. It is pointless to be programmatic. You'll find what you need under "Goalkeeping."

I have to write a report on the French Revolution. It's due Wednesday. I found a copy of your magazine at my mom's house. Can you help?

Yes! Just look under "D" for "Dentistry!"

Which is better, curiosity or method?

A key question! Turn to "P" and read the essay on "Plastic Surgery."

I am a very committed vegetarian but am on the fence about whether to go completely vegan. How can I inform myself on the issues?

This is a huge topic, but to get started, take a look at the helpful article "Tarot (Quotidian)," which will get you oriented. Then consider the advantages of moving to a liquid diet (see "Sandal"). Because nuts can be a crucial way to get sufficient protein, you may want to spend some time with the entry on "Synesthesia," which is mostly about pistachios.

I have a strong interest in the historical evolution of the avant-garde, which seems to me like an amazing place to go to find out-of-the-box thinking. I am an out-of-the-box thinker, and like company. Will I be able to find new leads in your volume?

Read around! You may find that the entry on "Cat" is a good jumping-off place.

The Latin comedian Terence famously wrote "Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto," which is usually translated, "I am human, and consider nothing human alien to me." This is such a beautiful thought. But I recently learned that Terence was a Berber. Is this true?

You need to dig in. Start at A, for "Addiction," and read on through Z, "Zoosemiotics."