

### Property Project

**DISPLAYER** Imagine **Cabinet** magazine as a private, enclosed room in the sense of a treasure chest, embellished with pictorial and textual artifacts (which convey knowledge), whereas **Cabinetlandia** is more an outdoor platform which displays space itself. Which mission did you follow, and how did the character of space change with the establishment of **Cabinetlandia**? **SINA NAJAFI** Cabinetlandia started with an issue we did on the theme of ‘property,’ for which we ended up doing three property-related projects. One of them was to buy a half-acre piece of desert land in New Mexico, which was bought on Ebay for about \$300. We didn’t know what we were buying because we’d never visited the land—we just bought it sight-unseen and only went there about a year later. Paul Ramirez Jonas, who is an artist who has worked with us on numerous projects, found a Mondrian painting that fit perfectly on the land (the ratio of the sides are the same as our land). Based on this painting, we parceled out the land—which we call Cabinetlandia—into several compartments, such as Readerland, Funderlandia, Nepotismia, etc. Readerland was itself subdivided into micro-parcels of land each the size of an issue of Cabinet (20 cm by 25 cm), and we offered these micro-parcels to our readers for one cent each. Many things have happened there on the land since we bought it in 2003; for instance, three of our readers built a library there, we put up a mailbox up, there is a labyrinth, and we have a guestbook on the land which is quite active ...

The second project came out of our interest in tracking the fourteen strange pieces of land that Gordon Matta-Clark bought in 1973 at a New York City auction for his project later named Reality Properties: Fake Estates. These parcels of land are all very unusual in that their dimensions make them useless for development; for example, one is about

40 centimeters wide and about 100 meters long. We found their locations in Queens and visited them to see what had happened to them. We could see many of them but some of them are inaccessible in that they are completely enclosed by other properties and buildings. It turned out that the city had repossessed all fourteen plots after Matta-Clark’s death in 1978 because the property taxes were in arrears, and so we approached the city to see if we could buy the ten that were still in the city’s possession (four of them had been snapped up by people who had adjoining homes). The city would not sell them to us but they did lease them to us, and we then commissioned three artists to imagine projects on these micro-parcels. This then led to a larger research project and exhibition called Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark’s ‘Fake Estates’, at White Columns and at the Queens Museum of Art in New York in 2005/2006. In the context of this project, we found out that Matta-Clark’s favorite bits of land were the ones you couldn’t access at all, the ones that were even more useless within a group of useless parcels of land because you could only have a purely conceptual relationship with them. That was exactly the relationship that the city had asked us to have when they leased us the plots; our lease contained a phrase that stated that we could only have what the city called a ‘conceptual paper relationship’ to the land!

The third project in the issue on property was to buy a rather large part of Mars from someone who claims on his website to have the authority to do this. This is the most inaccessible of our properties, obviously, and our relationship to it is one premised purely on fantasy. That’s the basic setup!

### Expansion and Failure

Creating an interconnection of space, power and property, **Cabinetlandia** marks space as a fictive architecture of desire. In Luna County, you re-defined desert land—a kind of ‘terrain vague’—into a cultural space as well as a transitional zone between humans and nature. What did you activate to transfer

the display-qualities of a magazine to the blank space of the desert? Did you intend to operate with inaccessible space like Gordon Matta-Clark?

There is obviously a long history of how the desert is imagined in both utopian and dystopian thinking. For instance, look at the American utopian projects from the 60s and 70s; a lot of them took place in Arizona, in the California desert, etc. Part of the reason is that it is unviable land, no one is interested in it, and you’re left alone in some sense; that was an aspect that we were interested in. Projects in the desert are less compromised by external human forces, such as commerce. Things fall apart in the desert too but they seem to do so more in accordance with their own internal logic. Cabinetlandia has also unraveled—the library has been filled with mud, the postbox has fallen down—but most of the breakdown has made us feel the force of nature in a way where it is hard to mark the division between us making things in the desert and nature destroying them. At its best, all the ways in which the project is dismantled by nature also seem to be part of the project. This is not say that culture is absent: someone stole all the books and back issues we had in the library, and the extraordinary rain that came one day and washed mud down into the library was not exactly natural insofar as we’ve modified the environment completely. But on the whole, you feel that entropy is happening at a different scale and at a different rate that would be the case in a project in the middle of Manhattan. That ‘longue durée’ is very conducive to certain kind of thinking, where ‘creation’ and ‘destruction’ are part of one dialectic rather than opposed to each other.

Being a marginal, abandoned space, the desert is also somewhat like peripheral magazines or cultural projects like ours, so we are in a sense staging our marginality in the desert. For a while, we had this idea that it would be wonderful to encourage other small magazines to buy some land next to ours and we would have this whole desert of strange little libraries showcasing independent

publications; and somebody in 100 or 1,000 years’ time would come across these weird structures and wonder what happened at this place, with all these strange libraries all over this area of New Mexico ... but unfortunately all our neighboring land has been bought up.

Did you intend to convert desert land into a cultural and re-defined space?

No, it was more the other way round, about how to rethink a cultural project under the sign of the desert, and about how to accentuate conditions under which the ultimate sense of failure around any project like Cabinet can be staged fruitfully. I think it’s useful to keep in mind a sense that all this work that we do is just paper, that it will rot one day. There is a kind of Beckettian drama around the whole thing—I can’t go on, I must go on—all our work happens under the sign of decay, entropy, and perhaps even futility. I think that’s part of what Cabinetlandia is about: it is not about bringing culture to the desert land, it is about bringing entropy into the heart of Cabinet. It’s a little piece of the real that is now embedded in the magazine and is a counterweight to Cabinet.

### Legal/Fake Estate: Marks of Culture

With all these property projects **Cabinet** takes a wide view over time—present and historical—or assembles aspects of history and converts them—within the magazine but also within the spaces itself. In relation particularly to Matta-Clark’s **Fake Estates**: did you purpose to revise space as a historical site, or to transfer historical space as a fiction?

The relationship of time and history is very different for the three kinds of land that we’ve acquired. Acquiring land on Mars is a fiction obviously, but on the other hand it allows us to think of a very long future insofar as that land changes at a geological rate. The Matta-Clark plots of land are right in the middle of Queens between peoples’ gardens and houses, and so the relationship to time and change is very different there. This was a distinctly historical project for us, because we were

interested in why these bits of land were created to begin with (there are thousands of bits of lands like this all over the city). When we first asked officials at the city of New York about the genesis of these parcels of land, they said that they were the result of surveyors' errors and these were the remainders of those mis-measurements. This seemed plausible, but as we did our research, it turned out that these weird bits of land were all created either in the 1930s or in the 1960s, and they had nothing to do with surveyors' errors. Queens is one of the last parts of New York City to get a geometric grid imposed on it, and when this Cartesian grid was placed on farmland, the edges were cut off to make some of these bits of land. And the second part of this history came later when Robert Moses reconfigured New York City's highways, tunnels, and other transportation infrastructure, and he ended up breaking up some of the gridded parts of Queens in ways that resulted in more of these strange parcels of land. For us, revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's project was one of precise history. The temporal relationship is very different here than in the desert—where the landscape invites you to collapse past and future and to engage in a certain kind of fantasy, though that fantasy, which seems to nudge history aside, is itself historically determined, of course.

### Acquisition and Ownership

Along with the ownership of disparate parcels in Luna County, **Cabinetlandia** was also launched as 'real estate,' but with fictional features. This piece of land that you purchased through an auction on Ebay is divided into several so-called 'ranchettes,' marked by a particular owner's name, like the allotment **Readerlandia**, which was available in **Cabinet** magazine-sized compartments for a low price.

Would you regard such a 'marking of virgin soil' as a post-colonial gesture, an act of cultural imperialism? In which way is ownership important for you in the context of the desert land you acquired?

When we spoke to Jane Crawford, Gordon Matta-Clark's widow, she said that, despite all his interest in the radical an-architectural dimensions of buying useless bits of urban land, Matta-Clark still had an old-fashioned, bourgeois fantasy of being landed gentry; he still had the thrill of owning land. I think this fantasy of being landed gentry is also at play in our relationship to the lands that we own. But 'ownership' is too easy a word in regard to all this. It covers part of the relationship, but I think a better way to express it would be 'guest' and 'host.' In some sense, we are the hosts of this land—we can never be full owners of it—and we welcome guests who visit. But in another sense, we are only custodians or perhaps even guests on our 'own' land in the desert and the unusable land that we supposedly control on Mars and in Queens. Derrida speaks about how he's learned so much from his cat, because his cat is in his apartment, and as it comes and goes, the question of whose apartment this is, and who is guest and who is host is constantly being renegotiated. When I go to Cabinetlandia and I see a rattlesnake that has a nest there, the notion of 'ownership' is a pathetic one compared to the intensity of the relationship in that moment. All of these adjectives, verbs and adverbs that come with ownership are bracketed when you own land that is far far away, that is more or less unusable, or has no marked borders.

### Staging Space

By purchasing those parcels of land which Gordon Matta-Clark located and assembled for his artwork **Reality Properties: Fake Estates** in 1973, you appropriated not only these lots in Queens County, but also the act Matta-Clark performed within this operation: the marking of space which is defined even more by non-existing architecture—which is finally exhibited. In this regard, would you agree that this desert space works like a kind of stage?

**I think staging is a good way to think about it. When we watch a play at the theater, we know it's fiction but we take it to be both true and non-true. We**

generally think owning property is not a fiction; the English term 'real estate' even points to this, and Matta-Clark was of course very interested in this question and punned on it in his title **Reality Properties: Fake Estates**. This is one way to 'stage' things, through making someone aware of how truth and fiction are interrelated. I think desert land though has a different way of staging the same relationships; any project in the desert that requires us to be there is backbreaking work which needs total commitment, but on the other hand, none of it feels real because it seems absurd and unnecessary. It's a huge effort but it's not clear any of it is justified. In that sense, it's less like theater, and more like a strange dream where you feel like you might wake up at any time. And owning land on Mars is more like a thought experiment. Having said that, fictions, dreams, and thought experiments are not to be cast off as useless or without effect. They are as real in their effects as anything else.

In which way do these different kinds of spaces—unsettled urban, suburban as well as extraterrestrial spaces—refer to and influence the content of **Cabinet** magazine?

**It affects the magazine in surprising ways. Having land in the desert, for example, embodies a kind of failure; everything we do there will eventually fall into oblivion. And it underlines a sense of Sysiphean futility that is also part of how we go about running the magazine. But we don't mind these things; in fact, we get nourishment from this. I think of Beckett**

again: his universe is a very funny one. People try and fail, but they keep going, and in some sense that's part of what goes on within the property projects that we did. When you have something rotting in the desert, you get a very different sense of how to calibrate what you do, which is very different than getting feedback from readers, getting an award, and so on. Having staged decay in the desert, we can then carry on, albeit differently than before.

Which future projects are planned to cultivate, extend and make **Cabinetlandia** more substantial?

**We're going back next year with some readers to build an underground bunker and conference room. I think this underground bunker also fits into the strange utopian/dystopian fantasy of underground survival, which runs deep in the Cold War American psyche. From my point of view, the desert is a kind of privileged site for exploring the strains of utopian and dystopian thought in America.**

The interview took place in Brooklyn, New York at the Cabinet Office on January 25, 2009.

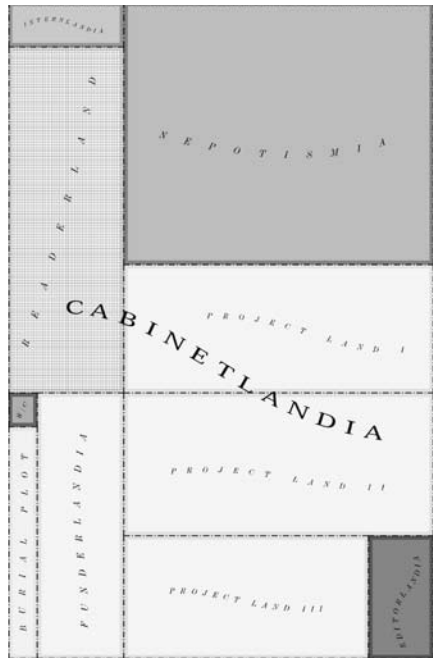
Reyner Banham: *Scenes in America Deserta*, Layton/Utah 1982.

Jorge Luis Borges: *The Library of Babel*, first published in English in U.S.A. 1962.

*Cabinet* Magazine: Issue 10, *Property*, New York Spring 2003.

*Cabinet* Magazine: Issue 18, *Fictional States*, New York Summer 2005.

Jeffrey Kastner, Sina Najafi, Frances Richard (Eds.): *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates*, New York, 2005/06.



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02

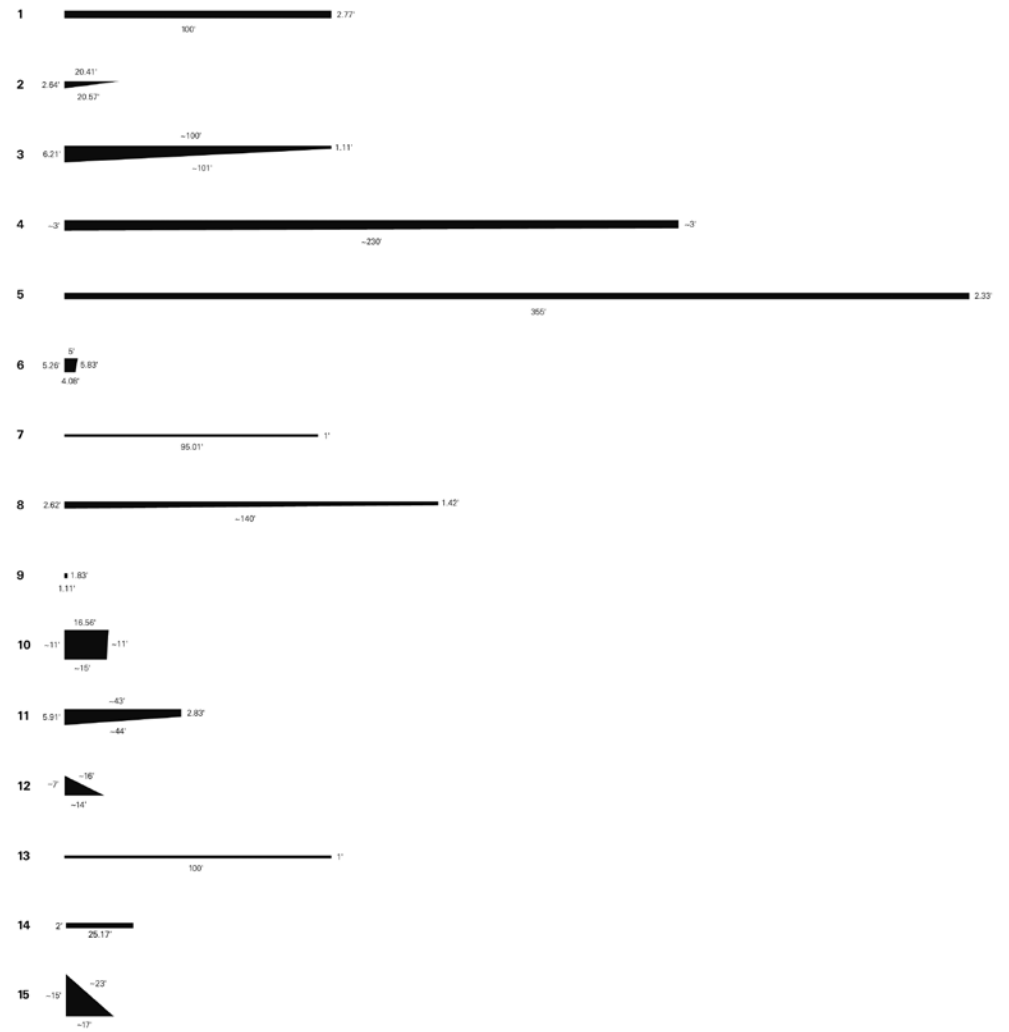


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01 Map of Cabinetlandia, which is divided into a number of zones, including Nepotismia, Readerland, and Funderlandia. The map was produced by Paul Ramirez Jonas and Cabinet by placing a Mondrian painting on Cabinetlandia and following the painting's divisions to create the various zones.

02 Aerial image of desert outside Deming, New Mexico. Cabinetlandia, marked by a black rectangle, lies between the railway line to the north and the highway to the south.

03 Mailbox in front of the Cabinet National Library on Cabinetlandia



Schematic drawings of lots acquired by Matta-Clark at auctions in 1973.

04

04 Schematic drawings of lots acquired by Gordon Matta-Clark at auctions in 1973, adapted and expanded from an original design by Brian McMullen (for Cabinet No. 10).