

PILLS, POT, PLACEBOS, POISONS, & OTHER INTOXICANTS



Cabinet #8

ON DRUGS

BY ANNIE NOCENTI

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED IF A GOAT ON ACID CAN walk a straight line? What drug inspires the most murder and mayhem? What's in the pill cocktail used to get horny at a circle jerk? Why it is that when a witch straddles a broomstick she can, ahem, "fly"? What absinthe has in common with that other convulsant, bug spray? What inspired blotter acid? And just what was it the FDA discovered when they injected an elephant with a massive dose of LSD?



Smart art mag *Cabinet* #8 offers up some delectable answers for drug aficionados in its special "Pharmacopia" selection. *Cabinet's* been around for three years, each issue exploring a new topic, and last year the editorial team chose drugs. As senior editor Jeffrey Kastner explains, "We wanted a constellation of articles that would resuscitate questions about drugs that everyone thinks are settled." From scientific articles on pharmaceuticals to obscure drug facts to art curiosities and narcotic tales from the vault, the selection does just that, and serves to elevate the argument on just what drugs are and how we view them.

"Pharmacology is used to produce socially 'acceptable' behavior," says Kastner, "whereas other drugs produce socially 'unacceptable' behavior. Where's the pivot point in that? Is it the drug or is it the social conventions? Is it the drug or is it the way we think about drugs?"

The madness of where the lines have been drawn between legal and illegal drugs is fueled by these socially acceptable/unacceptable judgments. Visionary drugs, drugs that make one question things, are illegal. A bag of a so-called "unacceptable" weed will get you a stretch in the bighouse, yet there is a cornucopia of legal drugs to choose from that elicit "acceptable" behavior. Doctors pump kids full of Ritalin so they'll sit still in school, destroy dreamlife with Ambien and other sleep draughts, flatline the emotions of an entire generation with Prozac, Zoloft, Valium, Xanax, et al. A flat-lined population can't think, let alone revolt. *Cabinet* #8, with a complex range of articles, raises the level of discussion on drugs by exploring how history, society and artists have

viewed them. A rarefied quarterly that explores niche obsession with irreverent reverence, *Cabinet* is designed and printed with the discerning and exquisite restraint of a perfectly-chilled martini.

The first half of the mag primes your mental palette for the drug revels to come with stories that celebrate obsession, fetish and the pleasure principle, but these tales are often followed by admonishing articles that have the sting of penance.

Like a drunk that stumbles home to a berating spouse, pieces honoring indulgence are intermittently punctuated by articles that serve as the requisite hangover.

For instance, an article describing a wild 3rd Century Roman hoo-down, where eating the brains of all manner of animal seemed to be typical for a party of the day,

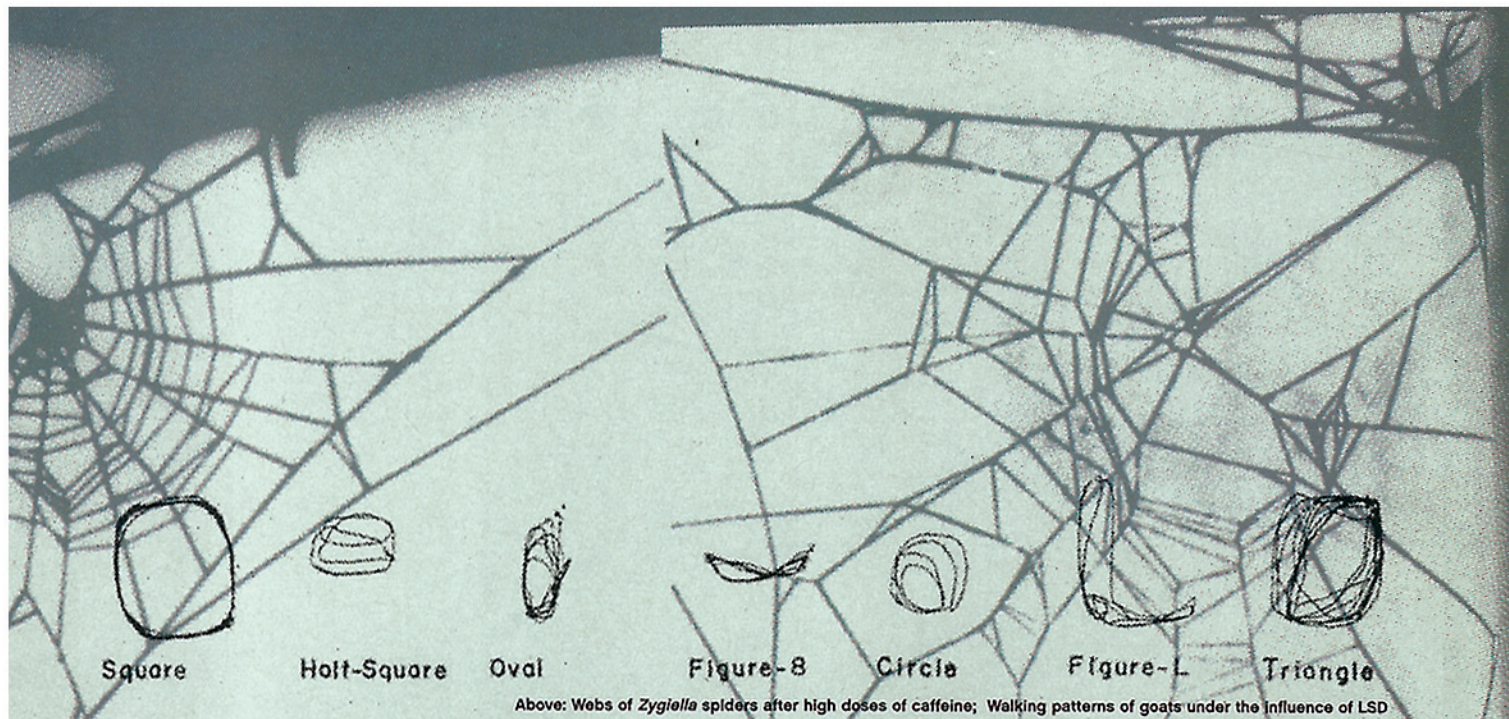


Blotter art by Mark McCloud

is followed by a cluck of the tongue in a column describing the Rules of Conveyance of Corpses circa 1937. This sort of rapacious high empire Bacchanal followed by an allusion to the body's ruin reminds one that abundance eventually leads to the fall of both man and empire, a notion applicable to the globally-toxic shenanigans of today's oil-and-cash gluttonous royal elite.

The rhythm of the magazine mimics the escalation and the crash of fetishistic drug use. One reads a bawdy description of 18th Century London molly-houses, the first gay coffeehouses, then flips through the photos of a shutterbug who gets off on chasing down and photographing the ass-ends of trucks, only to find, a few pages later, an article on the DSM, the "bible" of madness which catalogues a thousand types of dysfunction, in which the characters from all the previous articles could have their own special entries.

And speaking of madness, what of those totally legal, highly addictive, slow-death drugs like alcohol, nicotine, and the seemingly benign caffeine? A shot of java mainlines to the



Above: Webs of *Zygiella* spiders after high doses of caffeine; Walking patterns of goats under the influence of LSD

FROM SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES ON PHARMACEUTICALS TO ART CURIOSITIES AND NARCOTIC TALES FROM THE VAULT, CABINET #8 SERVES TO ELEVATE THE ARGUMENT ON JUST WHAT DRUGS ARE AND HOW WE VIEW THEM.



"Psychedelic" album covers

brain, jarring one awake as it hits the gut like liquid Brillo and depletes the body of all vitamins and antioxidants, and slowly replaces energy you'd wake up with normally if you'd never sipped the infernal stuff. And yet there it is, an ocean of poison doled out on every corner of the uni-

verse in hot little cups of delusional comfort. Markman Ellis takes a look at coffee in his article "The Devil's Ordinary." It seems that when coffee was first introduced in the 17th Century people thought it was a hoax. One snarky critic wrote that coffee tasted like nothing more than "Old Crusts, and Shreds of Leather burnt and beaten." Such is the tough love of vice: at once delicious and nasty. A good drug is a transcendental two-punch, a jolt to the brain that curdles as it enlightens. Ellis ends his ode to coffee with this heady thought: "...the semiotics of coffee, redolent of conspiracy and conversation, is usurped by the infantilizing comfort of the semiotics of milk." Wow. Don't know what that means but I agree.

Cabinet makes for thrilling reading, and yet the sense of discovery is coupled with occasional flashes that you've been had, a feeling one gets sometimes when getting suckered into three-card monte or when reading that magazine publication sub-species known as the "Smart Art Mag." (The forensics of synthetic shoe soles? Jesus declined a shot of absinthe? Cats on LSD lose their fear of dogs? Really?)

And just when you thought you'd heard every twist on



European "Aspirin Truck," 1920s-30s

drug marketing, writer Paul Collins offers up a fascinating drug-dealing confidence game, "Viavi Hygiene," brought to the San Francisco populace in 1899 by the snake-oil style Law brothers. Viavi, a highly successful array of tonics, was a cure-all cult, a placebo in a bottle that promised to "cure" you (i.e. let you die) from a range of ailments. Their ad campaign would be the envy of today's PR men: they suggested that "everyone is ill," therefore everyone needs a cure. Their products were disseminated in secrecy by saleswomen who didn't even know what they were selling, but sold it with evangelical zeal. When exposed as imposters, Viavi's business boomed. One of the Law brothers' products did seem to work, the "Viavi Royal" douche for women, which promised to "limit offspring" and may have contained the hinted-at "pennyroyal" which might have done the trick. Such treatments were illegal at the time, but the ironically-named Law brothers found a way to distribute their drugs by recruiting and training women to sell to other women, a kind of "Avon-calling" style door-to-door abortion racket.

In "The Placebo Effect," Tom Vanderbilt explores the current popularity of "wellness" products. These days people spend fortunes on herbs and homeopathies that, in the end, might just make for very expensive piss. But there is a long history of experimental "health" cures, CONTINUED ON PG 74

Webs of *Zygiella* spiders after high doses of caffeine

from “surprise” bathing to cure insanity (throw the unsuspecting nutter in the sea) to pissing in a hollow carrot as a cure for impotence, and perhaps what they all have in common is ritual and power of suggestion. Vanderbilt wonders if the herbal and homeopathic wellness obsession of today perhaps has its origins in “the pagan and carnivalesque strands of American culture rearing up against the white-smocked visage of scientific rationalism.” The role of the placebo in medicine is explained through the double-blind roots of the

THERE ARE DRUGS THAT WAKE YOU UP, PUT YOU TO SLEEP, MAKE YOU HORNY, GIVE YOU VISIONS, STUPEFY YOU INTO NOT CARING ABOUT ANYTHING. HOW DID SOME END UP LEGAL AND OTHERS ILLEGAL?

word; placebo, from its Latin root, *placere*, means “to please,” meaning that if you give a sick man a sugar pill he’s happy and “cured.”

David Levi Strauss and Peter Lamborn Wilson interview poet and psychoactive plant adept Dale Pendell, who writes books illuminating “the poetics of altered states,” complete with “recipes.” His plant alchemy work involves extracting medicine from poisons, what is called “the Poison Path.” In one droll, cloaked exchange Pendell is asked if he “tested” the substances and how they affected “his style.” Pendell answers that “the methodology was immersion.” Wilson comes back with “so there’s nothing that hasn’t been bio-assayed?” The fact that they don’t just say: “Did you eat the drug and write about it?” is part of the diverting enchantment of this interview. Conversation ranges from the difference between a sacred and a profane intoxicant (one makes you feel better in the morning, the other makes you feel like shit)

to the beauty of a vomit bowl (the post-ingestion sacred purge) to an exchange on wormwood. Apparently, absinthe and camphor both share a wormwood ingredient, thujone, which serves to excite the brain. Pendell explains that’s why camphor works as an insect repellent, as thujone over-stimulates the bug’s nervous system. Man drinks it; bugs flee it.

Pendell talks of love as “the last socially acceptable form of divine madness,” something we all suspect as we stumble blindly towards some love object we won’t even remember a few months hence. Or, as country singer George Jones put it in a song about the lessons of love, “Darlin’, you taught me how to stand on my own two knees.” Pendell writes that the “first poisons were philtres, potions to ensnare the heart,” and declares that love is the drug that “inspires more murder and mayhem than any other.” As Pendell illuminates further: “Pain is the first teacher we deny.” He ends with a request that people wear “The Green Ribbon,” his rally cry to free “the green prisoners,” outlawed plants and those imprisoned for taking them.

Drug use in Mexico in the 1920s-30s is illuminated through the Casasola photography archive, when it was still defined by social class: the holy men had their herbs, cacti and mushrooms, the upper-middle class their over-the-counter “pills and powders, typically cocaine or morphine derivatives,” and the lower class had Mary Jane. The Casasola archive, with its alleyway snorters and chaise lounge shooters, depicts the casual bohemian drug experimentation of the rich. The films of the time also reveal the class distinctions of drug use. Here’s a potentially fascinating double-bill: *The Fist of Iron (El Puño de hierro; 1937)*, a story of an upper class kid’s frolicking affair with heroin, followed by *Marijuana the Green Monster (Marijuana: el monstrito verde; 1936)*, a kind of precursor to *Reefer Madness*. Apparently back then weed was considered a “proletarian vice associated with prisons and the lumpen’s *vasilada*.”

The magazine also has articles on aphrodisiacs, designer drugs, and the FDA and CIA’s experiments with drugs on animals and people. Also of note is Walter Benjamin’s brilliant “rausch” writing on hashish from 1927-35, writing prior to the Nazis’ own “War on Drugs,” and a story by Benjamin contemporary Hans Fallada, who went mad as Hitler rose to power. This story is translated by Scott Thompson and is part of an upcoming collection titled: *Nazis on Speed: Drugs in the Third Reich*. And finally, Andrew Hultkrans attempts to get to the roots of psychedelic music—taking it back to 1950s kitsch Polynesian party music, defining it with sitars, Eastern influences, found sound, theremins, techno wizardry, distortion (colorful notes your eyeballs can follow)—but basically admits that the best definition of psychedelic music might have come from The Grateful Dead’s Phil Lesh: “Any music listened to while tripping.”

The issue is illustrated with photos of the screwball spiderwebs made by spiders on caffeine, amusing finds such as a 1924 US opium dispensing tax stamp of a one Dr. Fred Lovejoy, aphrodisiac ads such as “His & Hers Spanish Fly,” and exquisite blotter acid art (apparently blotter was first developed as a result of mandatory minimum sentencing



Photo from the Casasola Archives, Mexico City

being linked to weight; hence, dealers cast off those weighty sugar cubes and dropped the stuff on paper instead).

What *Cabinet #8*'s alchemical array of articles provides is a rich and complex look at drugs. There are drugs that wake you up, put you to sleep, make you horny, give you visions, stupefy you into not caring about anything. How did some end up legal and others illegal? At some point, the question as to whether or not a particular drug is legal or illegal has to be cast off, transcended, and taken to a higher level of argument: human beings yearn for altered states, for ecstasy, for something other than the sometimes cold, cruel, flat reality around us. That yearning has always existed, and always will. Only an acceptance of this idea will open up a rational and humane discussion of drugs, and expose the hypocrisy of a world that allows a drug like liquor that kills scores to remain legal, while persecuting and locking up relatively harmless potheads. To put it another way: a very drunk person can be scary, even dangerous. A very stoned person? Chances are they'll either eat too much or fall asleep.

A curious mix of factoids, intoxications and wonderments, if *Cabinet #8* was shot into space in one of those "greetings aliens, this is what we humans are like" capsules, would the aliens slam pedal to floor and warp speed to Earth? As editor Kastner says: "*Cabinet* wants to be ahead of the curve or way behind it—we just don't want to be right on it."

All in all, a heady brew, even for aliens. Get your copy, imbibe with caution. **HT**

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