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John Brockman: A Portrait

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The World Mind That Came In From the Counterculture

10.01.2014 · Be imaginative, exciting, compelling, inspiring: That's what John Brockman expects of himself and others. Arguably, the planet's most important literary agent, Brockman brings its cyber elite together in his Internet salon „Edge.“ We paid a visit to the man from the Third Culture.

Von JORDAN MEJIAS, NEW YORK

Artikel



At the age of three John Brockman announced: „I want to go to New York!“ For decades he has been a leading light behind the scenes in the city's intellectual life. © WOVE

The Internet had yet to be born but the talk still revolved around it. In New York, that was, half a century ago. „Cage,“ as John Brockman recalls, „always spoke about the mind we all share. That wasn't some kind of holistic nonsense. He was talking about profound cybernetic ideas.“ He got to hear about them on one of the occasions when John Cage, the music revolutionary, Zen master and mushroom collector, cooked mushroom dishes for him and a few friends. At some point Cage packed him off home with a book. „That's for you,“ were his parting words. After which he never exchanged another word with Brockman. Something that he couldn't understand for a long time. „John, that's Zen,“ a friend finally explained to him. „You no longer need him.“

Norbert Wiener was the name of the author, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* the name of the book. Page by page Brockman battled his way through the academic text, together with Stewart Brand, his friend, who was about to publish the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the shopping primer and bible of the environmentally-driven counterculture. For both readers, physics and mathematics expanded into an infinite space that no longer distinguished between the natural and human sciences, mind and matter, searching and finding.

Like the idea of the Internet—which was slowly acquiring contours during these rambling 1960s discussions—the idea of **Edge**, the Internet salon around which Brockman's life now revolves, was also taking shape. Edge is the meeting place for the cyber elite, the most illustrious minds who are shaping the emergence of the latest

developments in the natural and social sciences, whether they be digital, genetic, psychological, cosmological or neurological. Digerati from the computer universe of Silicon Valley aren't alone in giving voice to their ideas in Brockman's salon. They are joined in equal measure by other eminent experts, including the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker, the philosopher Daniel Dennett, the cosmologist Martin Rees, the biological anthropologist Helen Fisher, the economist, psychologist and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, the quantum physicist David Deutsch, the computer scientist Marvin Minsky, and the social theorist Anthony Giddens. Ranging from the co-founder of Apple Steve Wozniak to the decoder of genomes Craig Venter, his guest list is almost unparalleled even in the boundless realm of the Internet. Even the actor Alan Alda and writer Ian McEwan can be found in his forum.

The bridge of the third culture

A question is sent out to all salon members at the start of every year. This year it is: „What scientific idea ready to be retired?“ The „editorial marching orders,“ written by Brockman, reveal the heart of Edge: „Go deeper than the news. Tell me something I don't know. You are writing for your fellow Edgies, a sophisticated bunch, and not the general public. Stick to ideas, theories, systems of thought, disciplines, not people. Come up with something new, be exciting, inspiring, compelling. Tell us a great story. Amaze, delight, surprise us!“

Does he really need to spell all that out so clearly? After all, quite a few of the authors number among his clients. He markets them and their works globally, and they know exactly what he expects of them and what they can expect of him. As their literary agent, he never misses a business opportunity. Indeed, he has built a reputation for negotiating mind-boggling prices for individual works that, in contrast to Edge, adopt a more populist approach to the sciences. But above all, it's his concept of The **Third Culture** that glitters, the miraculous formula that Brockman evokes to secure the supremacy of the so called hard sciences, even in the instances when the world and our place in it is surveyed in quasi-philosophical mode. As physicist, politician, and the novelist C. P. Snow lament, there is a chasm separating the twin cultures of the natural and human sciences; and the enterprising Brockman fills this divide with bestsellers from his Third Culture.

Business isn't just blossoming, he says, it has never been better. Anyone harboring any doubts should pay him a visit on Fifth Avenue, where Brockman, Inc. has been spreading its wings of late in premises that are awash with light and where gravity seems to have been suspended. The two glass corner offices are a testament to transparency. The one for the company's founder allows the Empire State Building to peek over his shoulder as he works at his paper-free desk; the other is for his son Max, the company's brand new CEO, who can admire the perpetually breathtaking silhouette of the Flatiron Building through the gigantic windows. Between them Katinka Matson, the co-founder of Edge, President of Brockman Inc., mother of Max, and business and life partner of John—has stylishly set up shop. As the daughter of a literary agent, the profession is in her DNA. In her spare time she now brightens up the office with multi-colored, larger-than-life scans of floral images.

Brockman, who was born in 1941, could comfortably retire and devote himself completely to Edge, his intellectual hobby. But Edge is no mere hobby for him, no pastime pursued at times when the demands of work abate. „I have never thought of money. I have only ever done what interested me, and that always brought in enough to get me by.“ Before opening his Internet salon, he had published a newsletter with the same title and philosophical outlook. This evolved out of the Reality Club. „Trippy stuff“ topped the agenda when a group of people started meeting in New York during the 1980s, a group whose fluctuating composition included the physicist Freeman Dyson, the feminist Betty Friedan, the social revolutionary Abbie Hoffman and the film stars Ellen Burstyn and Dennis Hopper. They were charged with asking each other the questions that they asked themselves. No instant answers were expected. The focus was on asking the questions. In literary New York Brockman had never glimpsed the prospect of this type of exchange of ideas, the adventure that he wanted for himself and to share with others. He preferred the empirical study of our cosmos, on both micro and

macro scales, to the imagined world. Not that this forced him to relinquish story-telling. With the frequently spectacular experiences they describe, the books and authors he represents offer him more suspense and excitement than he can find in any novel. And his own life? As he describes it, that too emerges as a collection of gripping stories that veer off in numerous different directions while always following a clear, very personal line. From Day One he was curious and hungry for knowledge, and had an appetite for excitement and new experiences.

A blueprint for the Internet

Brockman's life-story begins with the proclamation: „I want to go to New York.“ He was three years old at the time, lying in a Boston hospital, seriously ill with cerebrospinal meningitis, and these are said to have been the first words he spoke when he woke up from a six-week coma. He finally made it to New York at the age of 20—enrolling as a graduate student at Columbia University where he completed a degree in business. After this he worked within the financial services industry, not that his life revolved exclusively around money and transactions at the time. The crazy 1960s burst into life and Brockman felt compelled to immerse himself in the vibrant cultural mix. He experienced the New York underground for himself on the stage of the Living Theater. It was culture shock, a call to action, an invitation to engage. But Brockman didn't participate in the avant-garde experiments with his banjo and guitar, but with his gift for organization. Today we would probably call him a cultural impresario.

New York gave him confidence, telling him „You can be free.“ He didn't need to be told twice. With Sam Shepard, who was still working as a waiter, he discussed ideas for „intermedia“ stage performances. In no time he had become an indispensable part of the multimedia theater and film scene. He was entrusted by Jonas Mekas, the great father of experimental film in the U.S., with commissioning films from Nam June Paik and Robert Rauschenberg for an „expanded“ film festival. His organizational skills even got him into the Lincoln Center Film Festival where he presented the work of newcomers like Martin Scorsese when he wasn't escorting European guests—with names like Federico Fellini and Jean-Luc Godard—out to dinners. Even Jackie Kennedy, still not an Onassis, makes an appearance in the background during this period.

While the stars of Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and the Beatniks were slowly fading, and the folk scene around Bob Dylan dawning, Brockman was spending time working with Andy Warhol. But the drug-sodden collective in the Factory wasn't for him. He needed to be his own master. For the same reason, things didn't work out with the countercultural Yippies, after his friend Abbie Hoffman recruited him for the founding meetings of the movement. Brockman had no interest in revolution. However: „The ideas behind it interested me.“ Cage taught him how to perceive the non-linear structure of reality using cybernetics. With hindsight he came to feel this was „like a construction diagram for the Internet.“ He wrote a book with the title *By the Late John Brockman*, an aphoristic volume of his various insights and experiences.

In the circle of elites

And then, at MIT in 1965, he finally came face to face with a computer. There is precisely one example of this type of computer, a humungous contraption, surrounded by busy men in white lab coats, and secured behind a glass screen against which he pressed his nose. „I fell in love on the spot. It was pure magic.“ Brockman had no more doubts whatsoever that everything was interconnected: the arts and the sciences and the psychedelic shows with their flashing strobes, through whose cacophony of sound Marshall McLuhan trumpeted his theory of communications.

At the Esalen Institute, the personal growth laboratory on California's Pacific coast, he listened to talks by scientists and madcap geniuses whose names hardly anyone on the East Coast knew. A treasure trove just waiting to be opened. An awakening. In 1973 this gave rise to his literary agency, albeit circuitously. Once again he found himself promoting something that interested him. Slowly but surely he realized that he had struck gold. Or, as he prefers to say, he discovered an oil well that has never stopped bubbling. Since then Brockman has been keyed to the Third Culture from head to foot.

Famous scientists, researchers, entrepreneurs and sponsors are drawn to him like moths to a light bulb. At his desk in New York he clicks on the invitation to a party he is flying to in San Francisco the following day. The hosts include the co-founder of Google Sergey Brin, the Russian billionaire Yuri Miner, the co-founder of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg, and Art Levinson, Chairman of the Board of Apple Inc. and the former CEO of the biotech company Genentech. It is safe to assume that Brockman also enjoys get-togethers with such distinguished names.

But even more he evidently enjoys the gatherings at his picturesque farm in Connecticut with its numerous nooks and crannies. For one day or weekend every summer, he affords himself the intellectual pleasure of transforming his New England idyll into a swap meet for the latest scientific research and ideas. From Princeton and Yale, Harvard and MIT, Silicon Valley and New York's executive suites, he invites thinkers, movers, shakers and clients—all of them friends—to discuss the hottest topics in their various fields. The most recent edition of these bucolic conferences held beneath ancient maple trees began with an up-to-date tour d'horizon by the economist Sendhil Mullainathan, who mused that the excessive volumes of data might threaten the qualitative character of science. The social scientist Fiery Cushman reported on the failure of algorithms in complex calculations, the experimental philosopher Joshua Knobe on the elusively ephemeral nature of the self, the psychologist June Gruber on the problem of positive emotion and the initial solutions.

Weitere Artikel

Die Edge-Frage 2014: Welche wissenschaftliche Idee ist reif für den Ruhestand?
Der Weltgeist, der aus der Gegenkultur kam

In total 10 scientists gave talks on this perfect summer's day, which now, thanks to Edge, no longer has to end. Since November Brockman has been posting the videos of the contributions on the Web. By February the day's entire program should be accessible. Those online, however, can only guess at the pleasure John Brockman feels as he observes the mind games he has staged. „Edge,“ says its creator, „for me that means ideas, for me that means culture.“

Quelle: F.A.Z.

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Michael Nyman zum Siebzigsten

Wie der Ohrwurm ins Piano kam

Er gilt als Pionier der Minimal Music, als gewiefter Filmkomponist und als einer, der E- und U-Musik miteinander versöhnt. Dem britischen Komponisten Michael Nyman zum siebzigsten Geburtstag. [Mehr](#) Von CHRISTIAN WILDHAGEN



23.03.2014, 00:01 Uhr | Feuilleton

Regierungschef will keinen Union Jack auf seiner Flagge

Das altehrwürdige britische Banner scheint schweren Zeiten entgegen zu gehen. Die Neuseeländer könnten den Union Jack von ihrer Flagge tilgen, und falls Schottland unabhängig wird, steht wohl eine Überarbeitung an. [Mehr](#)



11.03.2014, 03:23 Uhr | Politik

Themen des Tages

Erster Handelstag für „Candy Crush“

Die Aktie des Herstellers des Smartphonespiels „Candy Crush“. King Digital, wird in New York erstmals gehandelt. Das Bundeskabinetts berät über die Finanzreform für die gesetzliche Krankenversicherung. [Mehr](#)



25.03.2014, 17:39 Uhr | Wirtschaft

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