Profile
John Brockman

The son of a Boston wholesale flower seller, he adapted his father's business methods in his work as a pop publicist and management consultant. He went on to become a successful literary agent, specialising in top science writers and — with an online ‘intellectual salon’ — building a reputation as a tireless promoter of influential ideas. Interview by Andrew Brown

The hustler

In 1968 John Brockman was promoting a film called Head, starring the Monkees. His idea of publicity was simply to have the whole town covered in posters showing a head, with no caption. Naturally, the chosen head was his. Grotesquely solarised, with blue-grey lips and and scarlet spectacles, fashionable, suggestive of intellectual power, impossible to decipher, there he stood against a thousand walls, looking down on the city of New York.

The posters have long since faded, but Brockman’s position remains the same, gazing inscrutably on anything interesting in Manhattan. Now he is one of the most successful literary agents in the world, but to his friends and clients he is much more: an impresario and promoter of scientific ideas who is changing the way that all educated people think about the world. Richard Dawkins, his friend and client, says, “his Edge web site has been well described as an online salon, for scientists and for other intellectuals who care about science. John Brockman may have the most enviable address book in the English-speaking world, and he uses it to promote science and scientific literature in a way that nobody else does.”

Anyone today who thinks that scientists are the unacknowledged legislators of the world has been influenced by Brockman’s taste. As well as Dawkins, he represents Daniel Dennett, Jared Diamond, and Sir Martin Rees, as well as three Nobel prize winners and almost all the other famous popular scientists. His old friend Stewart Brand, the publisher of the Whole Earth Catalog and later the promoter of the Clock of the Long Now, which is intended to run for 10,000 years, says: “It’s so easy to think the guy’s just a high-class pimp that it’s quite easy to ignore the impact on the intellectual culture of the west that John has enabled by getting his artist and scientist friends out to the world. There is a whole cohort of intellectuals who are interacting with each other and would not [be able to] without John.”

Brockman himself says, “Confusion is good. Then try awkwardness. Then you fall back on contradiction. These are my three friends.” Fortunately, they are not his only friends. When asked for photographs of himself as a young man, he sends one where he is standing with Bob Dylan and Andy Warhol on the day Dylan visited Warhol’s Factory. In the course of a couple of hours’ conversation, he brings up encounters with (amongst others) John Cage; Robert Rauschenberg; Sam Sheppard; Larry Page and Sergei Brin, the founders of Google, with whom he had just had lunch along with his client Craig Venter, the genome researcher; Rupert Murdoch; Stewart Brand, Elana Pagis, accidental historian of religion; Hunter S Thompson; Richard Dawkins; Daniel Dennett; Nicholas Humphrys, the psychologist, Murray Gell-Mann, the Nobel-winning physicist; the actor Dennis Hopper; and Steve Case of AOL. He even mentions Huey P Newton, the Black Panther. “Sometimes around 1967 or 68, I got a call from Huey, who was a close friend of mine, who I was trying to avoid, because it had been revealed that he was actually gratuitously murdering people . . . you know, shooting them. He was slip- ping out. He wasn’t talking about revolu- tion or anything. Newton’s message was: ‘Me and my buddy Bob Trivers — we’re going to write a book on deceit and self-deception.’ Robert Trivers was one of the most important evolutionary biologists of the past 50 years, and came up with the hugely influential idea of ‘reciprocal altru- ism’ as a graduate student at Harvard in the early 70s before his career was inter- rupted by psychological problems and he went off to live in the Jamaican jungle for some years. (He is now back at Harvard, in a chair funded by a friend of Brock- man’s. Brockman says: “I hope that he [Newton] had a very nasty death just a crummy sidewalk dope deal. This was away for a real revolution . . . a couple of years ago.”

Photo by Eamonn McCabe
This is how the young Brockman learned from his father, a broker in the wholesale flower market in Boston, to become a lawyer. His mother was born in Austria — and grew up in a family of Boston and he remains extremely sensitive to the height of the pop science boom, he wrote: "The emergence of the Third Culture as an intellectual seedbed for Europe and Asia. It all reinforces his idea that reality is not a finished object but a process. He has a Christmas tradition that interested them. They didn't realise that they don't look down on him. But you look behind that, and you see that they're objects of curiosity to him. They either find him to be a little eccentric, or they admire him as a third-generation agent, and who was blessed in his crib by a drunken dance around it by Hunter S. Thompson. It's an argument that I have with all my scientist friends, and I lose it every time. "It's an argument that I have with all my scientist friends, and I lose it every time. Brockman has a characteristically thought-provoking: "I think that humans construct a conjuring trick, designed to fool us into thinking we are in the presence of an inexplicable mystery — so as to increase the value we place on such evidence." He always thought of his work as an editor or curator of thought. The magic circle has gone by different names and uses different degrees of inclusiveness. The term, which was used in the popular culture, is a fine example of Brockman's later books have mostly been on the scientists' dinner — whatever worked for him. When this seemed unimpressive, he realised that the book's focus was on the process of empirical work, not on the scientist himself. He has been at the leading edge of the one in 20 or 100 or so significant intellectual accomplishments that interested them. They didn't realise that they don't look down on him. But you look behind that, and you see that they're objects of curiosity to him. 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