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THE WISE GUY

Since the mid-60s, whether promoting pop culture happenings, Dada revolutionaries or the leading science writers of the day, JOHN BROCKMAN has been in the vanguard of intellectual fashion. Here he looks back over a life restlessly lived

TEXT JACQUELINE MARCUS

Perhaps no one has so completely embodied Marshall McLuhan's 1964 proclamation that "the medium is the message" as renegade cultural impresario John Brockman. A gonzo epistemologist and marketing genius, Brockman's a hustler, a behind-the-scenes wheeler-dealer calling the shots amongst America's cultural and scientific vanguard. He was the only regular in Warhol's Factory scene with an Ivy League business degree, and in the late 60s would flit between management consultant gigs at the White House and Pentagon and long afternoons kicking it with Black Panther leader Huey Newton in California.

A Borsalino hat-wearing maverick, he reinvents himself once a decade, his career ranging from roles as pop publicist for the likes of the Monkees and Andy Warhol to literary agent specialising in top science writers. Along the way he's become a tech software goliath and founded cybersalon Edge.org. Supporting the greatest super-brains of his time – from the fringes of counter-culture to radical scientists – Brockman has been a consistent crusader for great ideas. At 70 years old, the jowly pitbull is still pissing off New York's genteel elite by going for the jugular to close book deals.

Brockman was born on February 16, 1941 to immigrants of Polish-Jewish descent in a poor Irish Catholic enclave of Boston, Massachusetts. A rough neighborhood made tougher for him by being told he "killed Christ", Brockman developed a thick skin and fighting spirit. Though a substandard student, he learned crucial lessons about markets,

money and clients through his father, a wholesale florist. "Basically, he was the Carnation King. He would set the price for carnations at 5am and yell, 'eight cents', and that meant retailers paid 16 cents, and you paid 32 cents." This early education was seminal in forming his future take-no-prisoners approach as a book agent. "One day I was on the phone in a negotiation and I realised that it was my father's voice coming through my head... This was not an effete, literary world, this was a marketplace of men at 4am, a pretty gritty world. It was a good way to grow up."

Leaving Boston the first chance he got, Brockman got an MBA from Columbia University when he was 22 years old. After a brief stint in the army, he hotfooted it back to New York for good in 1964. "I went to St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, which is this famous Mecca of avant-garde on 10th St, and they had a programme called Theatre Genesis." An anarchist Off-Off-Broadway group in the heart of the East Village, Brockman worked here setting up performances, stacking chairs in a three-piece suit with Charles Mingus Jr. and future Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and actor Sam Shepard. He headed the theatre's new film programme, and at a watershed moment in cinema when underground movies were just starting to take off Brockman positioned himself as the smart and sober business mind directing an arts scene fueled by a post-Beat cocktail of drugs and bravado.

That year, following a chance encounter with avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas in Central Park, Brockman landed a gig managing performances at Mekas's Cinematheque, connecting him with art giants including Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg. Brockman threw inter-media kinetic events that were spectacles in every sense of the word – berserk outpourings that ran the gambit from lysergic displays of strobe light techno-wizardry to lo-fi absurdist performances that would last for hours on end. Expanding the definition of what could be considered art, he explains that "after a while, you would figure out that you are the instrument... You become the art, you move your head, the sound changes, you walk through the space. Some of these evenings were just breathtaking."

Brockman first met his longtime consciousness-exploding friend, *Whole Earth Catalog* publisher Stewart Brand, in 1965 after booking USCO, an anonymous media art collective that set up a "Psychedelic Tabernacle" in an abandoned airplane hangar outside of Manhattan. Susan Sontag saw one of their first multimedia performances – produced by Brockman – and ran outside to tell her friends to rush down and catch the second show. "As a result, this thing just took off like an oil gusher. Globally in the press it became known as the Expanded Cinema Festival, it was just crazy," says Brockman. He started having weekly mushroom dinners with John Cage, who gave him a copy of Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics*, a book that forever informed his intellectual sensibilities.

Turning his hand to promoting, Brockman devised a notorious advertising campaign for the Monkees' cult flop *Head* that saw images of his face and the word "Head" plastered all over New York

City. While the sparse campaign may have contributed to the movie's commercial failure, it was entirely in keeping with its myth-deconstructing oddball psychedelia. He also put together distribution deals for Warhol's films. "It was obligatory to go by the Factory and see what was cooking," Brockman recalls. He was there the time Bob Dylan dropped in, and mingled amongst the motley crew of heroin addicts, drag queens, and "a vividly beautiful [but] so spaced out" Edie Sedgwick. He was instrumental in getting Warhol's films seen, convincing the sleazeballs on 42nd street to buy esoteric art flicks. "In the old days there were theatres showing exploitation movies and porn, and the owners were these guys all smoking big cigars, and I was showing them *Empire*." He was a master at serving up New York bohemia in a palatable way for investors and businessmen. "I was more like the producer. There was all this money that people wanted to throw at the arts, but they couldn't throw it at this crowd because they were too far out."

As anti-Vietnam sentiments and civil rights agitation took over the counter-culture in the late 60s, Brockman dabbled in the political. He was present at the founding meeting of the Yippies (Youth International Party), a group of subversive leftist shit-stirrers. "It was revolution for the hell of it, there were six of us [at the first meeting]. It was theatre, throwing money off the balcony of the



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[background image]
LIFE MAGAZINE cover
story, May 27, 1966
[this page]
JOHN BROCKMAN
(photo courtesy of
TOBIAS EVERKE)



THE SHOOTING OF 'THE PROMISED LAND' WITH JOHN BROCKMAN AND DAVID MAYS

Op art, mad rags and a dazzle of changing color



So What Happens After Happenings?

By ELENORE LESTER
His "The Underneath" is the first of a series of films that Brockman has made. It is a...
Brockman's first film, "The Underneath," is a...
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John Brockman, director of "The Underneath" (left) and "The Promised Land" (right). He is shown in a scene from "The Promised Land" with a woman.

[clockwise from top left] BROCKMAN, WARHOL, DYLAN (photo courtesy of NAT FINKELSTEIN); LA VANGUARDIA cover story "THE NEW HUMANISTS"; THE NATION, December 1965; LIFE MAGAZINE cover story, May 27, 1966; SO WHAT HAPPENS AFTER HAPPENINGS? by ELENORE LESTER September 4, 1966; LIFE, Cheetah, Le Bison, 1966 [opposite page] LIFE, Cheetah, 1966



MS Howard Junker

THE UNDERGROUND RENAISSANCE

The advent of discotheques and superstars, with the hyper-pub- lic of Camp, the glamour of Un- der Cinema, at least for the rich girls and their maga- zines and even for most film people...
The avant-garde is always a how to hoe: how long could it be fun to trek around down- town following the film makers in their search for the Promised Land? How many ill-conceived, half-baked, technically incompetent, fag- goty, poetic films can anyone see before announcing, "I've made that scene. And never mind about the art form of the age."
The Underground, which can be dated from the founding of Film Cal-

derground classics last month. How- ever, the tone of the museum's ses- sion on the Underground matched Miss Kael's for pious disapproval of the dimly perceived. Judith Crist and Susan Sontag scratched at each other and alternately faint-praised and belittled the Underground. Robert Osborn, cartoonist, said he had seen more exciting stuff in Paris decades ago.
Osborn's comment is almost per- ceptive. Independent films have changed so little in the past forty years because film makers are, literally, still working in the silent era. Sound equipment rents for \$100 a day, a moviola costs \$12 a day. Plus lighting, processing, sound transfer, mixing, and so on. A rule of thumb for industrial film pro- duction is a budget at \$1,000 per

shot. So that even in grants of as much as \$100,000 from the Ford Founda- tion, each of twelve film makers can make only one or two films a year—sound is barely possible, the most ground work is done in the home by frame, no crew, no budget. Live-action film makers in the Under- ground and photography, Emshwiller, are not using points. At one stage, he had developed the peo- ple in the Under- ground di- er moving his camera. —that is, Warhol made the most primitive condi- tion as possible. erground film makers are a virtue of technical who can blame them? re with a pencil," says



stock market and watching these millionaires diving and fighting for dollar bills. Trying to levitate the Pentagon." He was attracted to their Dada-esque tactics to overthrow established authority, but felt the political posturing was "beneath what artists should be doing." He parted ways with the Yippies but stayed connected to the radical left, regularly visiting his friend Huey Newton, chairman of the Black Panther Party, in Oakland, California. "I first met Huey through a Hollywood connection who was backing him and wanted me to meet him. He was absolutely brilliant." They'd discuss "strategy and politics," but Brockman distanced himself from Newton once it came out he had murdered people, and was liable to go ballistic and shoot someone just for uttering the word "baby".

The wild trip of the 60s turned ugly as President Nixon was sworn into office. Brockman got married to Katinka Matson, and became interested in serious writing. Katinka's father was one of the top literary agents in New York; "within four days I had a contract to write a book." His first effort, *By the Late John Brockman* (1969), was influenced by John Cage, Marshall McLuhan and cybernetics, and panned in the *Kirkus Review* as "electronic dada" and in *Vogue* as "a terrifying book... devoid of either wit or simple clarity". Though despised by the traditional literary community, the book impressed philosopher Alan Watts and LSD expert John Lilly. They invited him to the American University of Masters conference, where Brockman stumbled into becoming a book agent. "Everyone there was an author — four or five of them had No.1 bestsellers — but nobody had an agent. They were all getting screwed. Several of them said, 'You know how to do business, why don't you take care of our books?'" He did just that, and sold Lilly's book idea, officially launching his literary agency Brockman, Inc. in 1973.

Always one step ahead of the game, in the early 80s Brockman declared himself the first software agent, shrewdly anticipating the future gold rush when the software market was still a lawless frontier. "I went around and said, 'There's this new thing, it's called software; it's bigger than dog food and it'll be bigger than luggage.' They had no idea why I was coming to see

"I'm in my 70s going on 24. I don't have any personal goals, I don't think that way. I don't know what is important"

them. They thought it was about secretarial software." He went to the Computer Dealers Exposition, found his first client, a word processing program, and sold it for \$1 million.

"I managed a corner of the computer book market in New York — this goes back to what my father did. He cornered the carnation market." Armed with his old man's aggressive style, in 1983 he sold Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Software Catalog* for \$1.3 million, making global news. With a roguish grin that's seen it all, he recalls daft reporters on the über-rich beat asking him to, "Stand next to your Mercedes please for the picture." Brockman didn't always play nice, and caught the ire of Bill Gates for poaching his authors. "Bill Gates is not a fan of mine," he shrugs, "but that was the beginning of the personal computer revolution and I've been at the centre of it ever since."

Engaging and straight-up avuncular in person, it's easy to see why he's maintained his place at the centre of the tech microcosm. He began throwing an annual Millionaires' Dinner for titans in the business, attracting Google triumvirate Sergey Brin, Larry Page and Eric Schmidt, AOL chairman Steve Case, Bill Gates, and, later, Mark Zuckerberg. "In the beginning it was very consequential; there was heavy stuff going down, alliances coming and going about browsers...

Once people had their jets parked outside, it got upgraded to the Billionaires' Dinner."

Though a tech-world bigwig, he kept his close personal ties to the hellions of the art world. When Brockman's son Max was a baby, Hunter S. Thompson, Dennis Hopper and USCO's Gerd Stern performed a special dance in his honour. "It was just a dinner and they were all there. Max was not yet one, and he was in his crib room. Hunter S. Thompson was in the kitchen; within an hour he had imbibed six different illicit substances. Nothing seemed to change or phase his demeanour. And then Dennis Hopper — have you seen *Blue Velvet*? That was him at various stages. They said, 'Let's do this show, this blessing for this child.' And they danced around his crib for an hour. Crazy. Manic."

Due for another great idea, in 1995 Brockman released a treatise called *The Third Culture*, calling for scientists to use empirical evidence to find deeper meaning into the human condition. He subsequently founded the Reality Club with physicist Heinz Pagels, calling it "an attempt to create an inter-disciplinary group of peers and people at the top of their game. You would get a chance to present your new ideas and be challenged in a constructive way." Pagels died, and in 1996 the Reality Club morphed into online salon Edge.org, a place where, he explains, "science and scientific methods are being brought into areas where no one ever thought it was possible, like morality, psychology, into decision making, into any aspect of your physical life." Like Brockman himself, Edge is wholly unpretentious: "There's

no talking down to people, there's no baby talk, if somebody talks for an hour-and-a-half I print it. If you don't like it then fuck you, I don't care, don't read it." He's always been dismissed as an annoyance amongst America's literary elite — a gaffly and bully who plays publishing houses against one another for more money in blithe disregard of established norms. But it's this ballsiness that makes him the best in the business, as satirist and former Yippee Paul Krassner can attest: "Brockman represented my autobiography, and he fought for my literary rights as he does with all his authors. He has particularly nurtured the scientific and philosophical communities around the globe. He remains the personification of an agent of change." Now publications like *The New York Times* are taking him seriously as a catalyst of mind-expanding discussion, reporting on his annual Christmas tradition of posing a big question to the Edge community. 2010's question — "How is the Internet changing the way you think?" — spurred raucous debate about the future of human memory in the age of Google and Wikipedia.

Brockman's MO isn't to tell people what to think but just to get their brains percolating. The indefatigable former hippie-ringleader made his own success by simply gravitating towards what he finds interesting. A great communicator, Brockman packages ideas from an inscrutable intelligentsia into an easy-to-understand format for the masses. He's responsible for redefining the framework of how we see our world, and shows no signs of slowing down: "I'm in my 70s going on 24. I don't have any personal goals, I don't think that way. I don't know what's important. Inevitably, something catches my imagination and I go with it, but don't tell me what thing that's going to be until it happens."

