

FOREWORD: EVER BROCKMAN

SINCE THE 1960s, John Brockman’s pioneering activities have been diverse and multidirectional, marked by a fearlessness and fluidity of thought. He has been a writer, a literary agent, a junction-maker between science and art, a curator, an avant-garde-film programmer, has worked in industry, for the Joint Chiefs of Staff and for the White House. He is also the founder of Edge Foundation and editor of Edge.org, an important platform for the exchange of knowledge between different fields that aims to arrive at the edge of the world’s knowledge.

Stewart Brand has called Brockman an “intellectual enzyme . . . an adroit enabler of otherwise impossible things.” As Brockman himself puts it, “I look to . . . those who through their empirical work are changing the nature of ourselves and reality, whether they are scientists or not . . . people who are using technology and new communications ideologies to radically reboot the whole idea of human communication.” First and foremost, he is driven by the question: “Who . . . will take us to the epistemological crossroads where everything has to be rethought? My entire career has been in pursuit of this vision.”

Central to this approach is Brockman’s fundamental opposition to the separation of art and science. Instead, he sees art *as* science and science *as* art. This way of thinking beyond the boundaries is a guiding theme that defines his activities, which focus on establishing networks “whose authority was derived from their persona and their ideas, not from their institutions.” He “celebrates thinking smart versus the anesthesiology of wisdom,” where experts ask questions not “in front of their peers in their academic discipline or their field, [but] in front of people who are their equals in other areas.” This is why, when I first met him in the summer of 1998 at his rural farm in Connecticut, he became one of my great inspirations, reinforcing my conviction that pooling knowledge across disciplines is the future.

In one of our many conversations over the last fifteen years, Brockman remarked that “Life is the theatre of one chance.” His life and work have been greatly informed by this idea. In 1964, he met the artist and filmmaker Jonas Mekas, who was running the Film-makers’ Cinematheque for underground cinema. Brockman was already working with underground film-makers, and video artists, which was at this time a revolutionary art genre. In 1965 Mekas invited him to take over the Cinematheque and to initiate an Expanded Cinema Festival there. He invited many great New York artists working in all fields, including Nam June Paik, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Whitman, and Claes Oldenburg, to make a work integrating film for a special performance. These activities led to an invitation from leading scientists in biophysics, computation and cybernetics to bring a group of New York artists, filmmakers and musicians to MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for what was probably the first art-science symposium—an event that would have a lasting impact on his thinking and methods.

Out of his experiences in the avant-garde art world of New York, Brockman’s writings were quickly evolving. His first book, *By The Late John Brockman* (1969), was introduced in 1968 as part of a six-evening avant-garde program at the Poetry Center at the 92nd St Y in New York. Preceding and following Brockman on the program, respectively, were evenings by John Cage and Jorge Luis Borges.

This was the era of “The Living Theatre,” of Antonin Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty,” and the management of the Poetry Center had trepidations about Brockman’s event, and rightly so. Brockman’s “reading,” a performance piece orchestrated in collaboration with Ken Dewey’s Theatre X and artist group USCO, was an attack on the values of the Poetry Center itself. The evening turned into a riotous affair—enraged audience members stopped the show five times, closing the curtains, stealing the scripts, harassing the performers, turning off the lights.

By The Late John Brockman, his second book, 37 (1971), and a third book intended as volume three of the trilogy, were published together in a paperback in 1973 under the title *Afterwords*. They were a response to the idea of cybernetics. The first looks at all human theory through the lens of information theory; the second examines Heisenberg’s theory of indeterminacy, and the third investigates the limits of words as tools for understanding.

When Heinz von Foerster, an architect of cybernetics, along with Warren McCulloch, Norbert Wiener, and John von Neumann, reviewed the trilogy in 1973, he commented:

Brockman takes the mystery of language and puts it right back into its own mystery; that is, he ex-plains the mystery of language by taking language out (“ex-” of the plane of its mystery, so as to become visible to all before it slips back into its plane. This in itself is a remarkable achievement that has been denied to almost all linguists, for they stick to the

description of the plane without seeing that it is the plane that holds their descriptions. . . . All who are concerned about the violence committed in the name of language will appreciate the useful uselessness of Brockman's un-book.

Von Foerster's appreciation of Brockman's writing is not a surprise. While Brockman began writing his trilogy in 1966, von Foerster led a movement that began in 1968 to develop "2nd order cybernetics," or "the cybernetics of cybernetics." Von Foerster wrote in 1973:

a brain is required to write a theory of a brain. From this follows that a theory of the brain, that has any aspirations for completeness, has to account for the writing of this theory. And even more fascinating, the writer of this theory has to account for her or himself.

That year Bateson and Mead increasingly talked about patterns and processes, or "the pattern that connects." They called for a new kind of systems ecology in which organisms and the environment in which they live, or which they study, are one in the same. They were henceforth to be considered as a single circuit.

"It was only after *Afterwords* was published in early 1973 that I met Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, and Heinz von Foerster," remarked Brockman.

In April of that year, a group that included von Foerster, Bateson, Zen philosopher Alan Watts, and dolphin researcher John Lilly convened the legendary AUM ("American University of Masters") Conference in Big Sur to study G. Spencer Brown's book *Laws of Form*. The premise of the "American University of Masters" was that it was comprised of those maverick intellectuals whose authority derived from their persona, ideas and work, and not from their institutional affiliations. Brockman, on the strength of his trilogy, was summoned at the last minute to replace the keynote speaker Richard Feynman, who had been hospitalized.

Later, in New York, on a visit to Brockman in New York, Bateson told him, "The cybernetic idea is the most important idea since Jesus Christ. And it's an idea that's foreign to almost every so-called intellectual among mainstream thinkers." However, it was an idea that was pervading the art world at this time. John Cage, for example, was interested in how ideas and patterns move through cultures, while Nam June Paik's videos were, in Brockman's words, "an example of the cybernetic idea in action." "The cybernetic idea was not about 'a' and 'b,'" he recalled. "It was about a process and the process was the reality." Each of his books is made as a process, performance, or experience, recalling the Duchampian idea that the reader/viewer does at least fifty percent of the work. Brockman takes this idea even further in his belief that the reader *owns* the words, which makes his books highly performative in the moment of reading.

In this, his writing anticipated the ideas of Bateson and Mead concerning the necessity of considering the ecological nature of the organism and its environment as a single circuit. Brockman calls it "undifferentiated activity." "The entire work is performance piece that in all parts are the whole, undifferentiated as activity, where you can't tell who the subject is, you can't tell what the subject is." To him, the writing is demanding, physical, and exhausting, requiring constantly keeping in mind the complete work, i.e., the single circuit.

In the first edition of *By The Late John Brockman*, it is not only the content that is highly experimental, but also its format and layout. Each page contains a single paragraph comprised partly of quotes from works by figures from Marshall McLuhan to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Samuel Beckett and E. E. Cummings, that is disconnected from its predecessor. A front-page review in the *San Francisco Review of Books* stated:

In short, sharp strokes of words, he breaks through the very forest of meaning by denying meaning, eschewing traditional forms of activities, thoughts and emotions. It is not what he says that is so valuable; it is his whole manner of negating what can be said. His words backtrack on themselves, stalk their own meanings, and thrash about in the underbrush of our sensibilities. There is a total devastation of language, isolating and withering the very hands our dreams are made of.

Preempting the ebook by many decades—or conversely, recalling ancient scrolls—the first edition was printed on one side of the page only. Brockman had told his editor at Macmillan: "It is obscene to print on both sides of a page."

Although the reception to *Afterwords* in 1973 was decidedly mixed, comments when it was nominated for the long list of ten books for the National Book Award, ranged from "Trashiest specimen of newly proliferating genre of electronic dada" (*Kirkus*), to "The best book since Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*" (Alan Watts); from "Terrifying . . . depressing . . . cerebral . . . icy" (*Vogue*), to "There are certain writers whose thought is so important that it doesn't matter whether you agree

with them or not. A verbal tension so powerful, an ascetic appetite so huge and consuming forces us both to accept the vision as a revelation and to resist it as a dutyâ (San Francisco Review of Books).

The publication of *Afterwords* was followed by a volume of essays entitled *After Brockman: A Symposium*, in which artists, poets, writers, and scientists wrote about the importance of Brockmanâ™s trilogy. Later that year, Brockman, at thirty-two, retired from writing (although he has managed, over the past forty-odd years, to publish forty-five books in his various roles as editor, producer, impresario).

Afterwords is part of a great lineage of experimental volumes that invent new formats, from Laurence Sterneâ™s *Tristram Shandy*, written in the 1750s to 1760sâ”the first example of a book using variations in typography and deliberately blank pagesâ”to Cageâ™s *A Year from Monday*, an aphoristic collection that inspired Brockmanâ™s interest in the book as experience. The artist Richard Hamilton once remarked that we only remember exhibitions that invent new rules of the game. This welcome new edition of Brockmanâ™s *Afterwords* is a thoroughly inspiring reminder of the fact that this observation can also be applied to books.

Hans Ulrich Obrist,

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