

# The man who runs the



Since the mid-1960s, John Brockman has been at the cutting edge of ideas. Here, John Naughton introduces a passionate advocate of both science and the arts, whose website, Edge, is a salon for the world's finest minds. On the facing page they discuss Marshall McLuhan, elitism and the future of the internet

To say that John Brockman is a literary agent is like saying that David Hockney is a photographer. For while it's true that Hockney has indeed made astonishingly creative use of photography, and Brockman is indeed a successful literary agent who represents an enviable stable of high-profile scientists and communicators, in both cases the description rather understates the reality. More accurate ways of describing Brockman would be to say that he is a "cultural impresario" or, as his friend Stewart Brand puts it, an "intellectual enzyme".

The first thing you notice about Brockman, though, is the interesting way he bridges CP Snow's "Two Cultures" – the parallel universes of the arts and the sciences. When profilers ask him for pictures, one he often sends shows him with Andy Warhol and Bob Dylan, no less. But he's also one of the few people around who can phone Nobel laureates in science with a good chance that they will take the call.

Cynics might say that this has something to do with the fact that Brockman has a reputation as an agent who can extract massive advances from publishers. And he is indeed a hustler who spotted early on that there was a massive audience for writing about science, but there's more to it than that. Brockman is genuinely passionate about big ideas. He is fascinated, he told *Wired* magazine, "by people who can take the materials of the culture in the arts, literature and science and put them together in their own way. We live in a mass-produced culture where many people, even many established cultural arbiters, limit themselves to secondhand ideas. Show me people who create their own reality, who don't accept an ersatz, appropriated reality. Show me the empiricists – and not just in the sciences – who are out there doing it, rather than talking about and analysing the people who are doing it."

Brockman's immersion in both sides of the Two Cultures runs deep. He did an MBA at Columbia in the early 1960s and started his own financial leasing company on Park Avenue. But a friend introduced him to avant-garde theatre, thereby launching him on the primrose path into the arts.

He then got involved in the city's underground movie scene, becoming manager of the Film-Makers' Cinematheque, the home of underground cinema, in 1965, where his mandate was to produce a festival that expanded the form of cinema. He commissioned 30 performance pieces by world-class artists, dancers, poets, dramatists and musicians. The resulting festival made a big splash. "Intermedia", the term Brockman coined and used as his logo, was suddenly hot. A number of notable art-world figures were immersed in the genre, among them Les Levine, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, several kinetic and "happenings" artists, avant-garde film-makers and dramatists, the Velvet Underground, and composer John Cage.

This immersion in New York's arts scene also led to deep interest in science and technology. Many of the pieces at the festival were informed by artists' interest in cybernetics. They were reading and discussing books by scientists. Rauschenberg suggested

to Brockman that he read George Gamow's *One, Two, Three... Infinity* and *The Mysterious Universe*. Gerd Stern, co-founder of media collective USCO, who performed in conjunction with talks by Marshall McLuhan, introduced Brockman to several scientists and eventually arranged for him to meet McLuhan and his colleagues.

In cyberspace, Brockman is best known for Edge.org, a site he founded as a continuation of what he describes as "a failed art experiment" by his late friend, performance artist James Lee Byars. Byars believed, Brockman recalls, "that to arrive at a satisfactory plateau of knowledge it was pure folly to go to Widener Library at Harvard and read six million books. Instead, he planned to gather the 100 most brilliant minds in the world in a room, lock them in and have them ask one another the questions they'd been asking themselves. The expected result – in theory – was to be a synthesis of all thought." But it didn't work out that way. Byars did identify his 100 most brilliant minds and phoned each of them. The result: 70 hung up on him!

Byars died in 1997, but Brockman persisted with his idea, or at any rate with the notion that it might be possible to do something analogous using the internet. And so Edge.org was born as a kind of high-octane online salon with Brockman as its editor and host. He describes it as "a conversation. We look for people whose creative work has expanded our notion of who and what we are. We encourage work on the cutting edge of the culture and

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the investigation of ideas that have not been generally exposed."

As of now, the roll call of current and deceased members of the Edge salon runs to 660. They include many of the usual suspects (Richard Dawkins, Craig Venter and Stewart Brand, for example). It's a predominately male crowd, with women accounting for only 16.5% of the members – which is probably a reflection of the fact that science is still largely a male-dominated business. There are a lot of what one might call the "digerati" – the Clay Shirky, Douglas Couplands and Howard Rheingolds of this world. Two generations of the Dyson clan are represented – the great physicist Freeman and his two kids, Esther and George. Edge seems biased towards the Anglo-Saxon world; at any rate, there are surprisingly few continental Europeans or Asians. Brits, on the other hand, figure prominently: names that stand out include those of Brian Cox, Charlie Leadbeater, Colin Blakemore, Karl Sabbagh, Martin Rees, Mark Pagel, Lewis Wolpert, Patrick Bateson, Simon Baron-Cohen, Ross Anderson, Tim Berners-Lee and Helena Cronin.

Asked how he had assembled this intriguing posse of thinkers, Brockman replied: "It's all based on word of mouth and reputation. Edge, contrary

to how it may appear, is not exclusive. Elitist, yes, but in the good sense of an open elite, based on meritocracy. The way someone is added to the Edge list is when I receive a word from a Steven Pinker, a Brian Eno, a Martin Rees or a Richard Dawkins, telling me to do so. It's as simple as that and I don't recall ever saying no in such circumstances."

Ever since it appeared online, Edge.org has consistently been one of the most thought-provoking and interesting sites on the web. As I write, the front-page lead is an extraordinary piece by the evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel in which he argues that humans' capacity for social learning has made us less intelligent than we like to think we are. "If I'm living in a population of people," he writes, "and I can observe those people, and see what they're doing, seeing what innovations they're coming up with, I can choose among the best of those ideas, without having to go through the process of innovation myself. So, for example, if I'm trying to make a better spear, I really have no idea how to make that better spear. But if I notice that somebody else in my society has made a very good spear, I can simply copy him without having to understand why."

"What this means is that social learning may have set up a situation in humans where... we have been selected to be very, very good at copying other people, rather than innovating on our own. We like to think we're a highly inventive, innovative species. But social learning means that most of us can make use of what other people do and not have to invest the time and energy in innovation ourselves."

This essay is a perfect illustration of Brockman's idea of what Edge.org should do: to serve as a forum for big, intriguing and/or disturbing ideas advanced by intellectuals who have a track record of major achievements in their fields. He doesn't seem to have much time for the scholar who crawls along the frontiers of knowledge with a magnifying glass.

This philosophy is also what drives one of his annual rituals. Every year, on the anniversary of the launch of the site, he poses a question and invites Edge participants to answer it.

What kinds of question? "Questions that inspire answers we can't possibly predict. My goal is to provoke people into thinking thoughts they normally might not have." In previous years, the questions have included:

*What do you believe even though you cannot prove it? (2005)*  
*What is your dangerous idea? (2006)*  
*What are you optimistic about? (2007)*  
*What will change everything? (2009)*

In 2010, Brockman's question was: "How is the internet changing the way you think?" He received 172 replies in the form of mini-essays of varying length. These were published on the Edge site in the usual way, but 150 of them have now been collected between hard covers under Brockman's editorship. The result: a whopping hardback, *How is the Internet Changing the Way You Think? The Net's Impact on Our Minds and Future*, published last week by Atlantic Books.

Reading it over Christmas, I was intrigued by the book and emailed John Brockman to discuss some of the thoughts it evoked. What follows is an edited transcript of our exchanges.

