

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. Grottesquely 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."

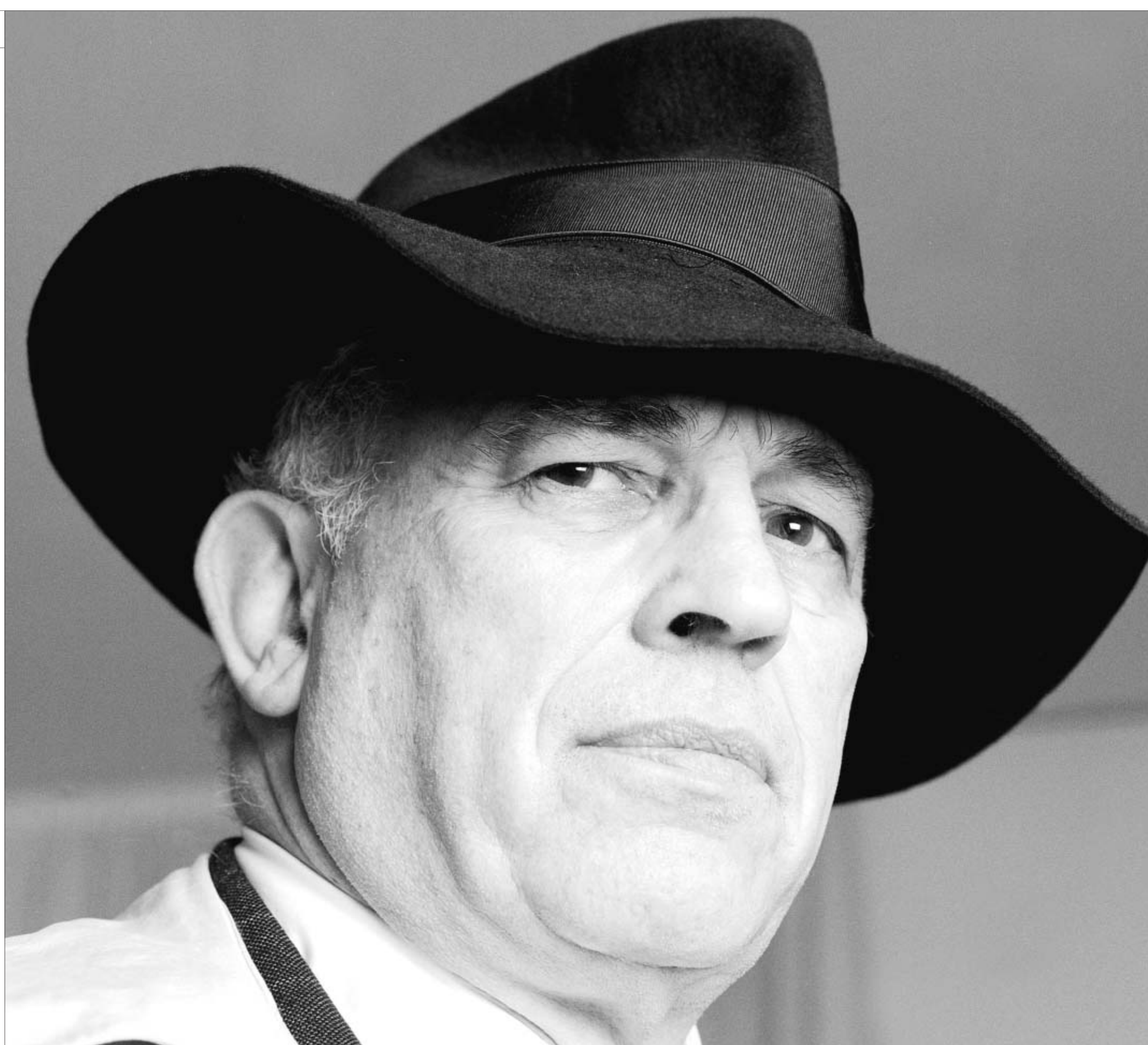
Brockman himself says, "Confusion is good. Then try awkwardness. Then you fall back on contradiction. Those are my three friends." Fortunately, they are not his only friends. When asked for photographs of himself as a young man, he sends one where he is standing with Bob Dylan and Andy Warhol on the 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; Elaine Pagels, an influential historian of religion; Hunter S Thompson; Richard Dawkins; Daniel Dennett; Nicholas Humphrey, 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. "Sometime around 1987 or '88, I get 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 flipping out. He wasn't talking about revolution or anything. Newton's message said: '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 altruism" as a graduate student at Harvard in the early 70s before his career was interrupted 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 Brockman's.) Brockman continues: "Soon after that, he [Newton] died a very nasty death: just a crummy sidewalk dope deal. This was no way for a real revolutionary . . .

"A couple of years ago, I **page 22** ▶

Portrait by Eamonn McCabe



The hustler

“I was a little bit of a hustler, but not much from the publishers as he could have done.”

This is how the young Brockman learned from his father, a broker in the wholesale flower market in Boston, to hustle sales. “He dominated the carnation industry. He would go to the Boston flower market, which was owned by the growers, who formed a cooperative. All these Swedes and Norwegians would be growing gladiolas and carnations and they’d bring them in at three in the morning and leave them like a long aisle. There’d be thousands of flowers, and you had to sell them, or they died. He said to me ‘you gotta move them, they’re going to die’. And one day, 40 years later, I’m on the phone, and I had a chilling feeling as I felt my father’s voice coming through me, like, ‘they’re going to die’. So, why am I always so fixated on closing the deal, getting the next book in? It comes from that experience. That was a pure market situation. So, that’s the way I run my business. It’s not literary. It’s not publishing. It’s business. I have got properties to sell, on behalf of my clients.

“My job is to do the best I can for them and I do it by making a market. The market decides. But knowing how to make a market involves . . . some capacities.” The capacities are at the heart of his business, but it’s hard to describe them. He has a keen sense for interesting ideas, but also for the ways in which they fit into society. For instance, he would never call himself an atheist, he says, in America: “I mean I don’t believe: I’m sure there’s no God. I’m sure there’s no afterlife. But don’t call me an atheist. It’s like a losers’ club. When I hear the word atheist, I think of some crummy motel where they’re having a function and these people have nowhere else to go. That’s what it means in America. In the UK it’s very different.”

The Brockmans were the children of immigrants — John’s father’s family had come from Austria — and grew up in a largely poor and Catholic neighbourhood of Boston and he remains extremely sensitive to anti-Semitism. “There were no books in our house. My father could barely read. He was a brilliant man but he was on the streets working at eight years old. My mother read a little bit, but, you know, it was a little encyclopedia.

“My parents were poor. My father started a business the day I was born which became a successful business. But we grew up in a tough neighbourhood called Dorchester, which was an Irish-Catholic bastion, where this radical right-wing priest went up and down the streets telling people to kill Jews. So that’s how my

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brother and I grew up.” He has one brother, a retired physicist, who is three years older. “We quickly found out, going to school, that . . . we were personally responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. We had a lot of fighting to do, and most of it on the losing end, because there were always 30 of them to two of us. My brother got the worse of it. My mother was a tough cookie. She would kick him out of the house if he didn’t fight hard enough. Luckily in those days you didn’t get killed; you just got a bloody nose. But it was tough.”

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Life at a glance



Charmed circle . . . left, with Bob Dylan, right, and Andy Warhol

John Brockman

Born: February 16 1941 Boston, Massachusetts.

Educated: Babson Institute of Business Administration; Columbia University, New York.

Employment: 1965-69 Multimedia artist; '74-present, literary agent; founder Brockman, Inc; chairman Content.com.

Married: Katinka Matson (one son, Max, 1981).

Some books: 1969 *By the Late John Brockman*; '88 *Doing Science: The Reality Club*; '95 *The Third Culture*; '96 *Digerati: Encounters with the Cyber Elite*; '03 *The Next Fifty Years: Science in the First Half of the Twenty-First Century*; '04 *Science at the Edge*.

PHOTOGRAPH FAR RIGHT, TOBIAS EVERKE

This mixture of pugnacity and sensitivity about ethnicity can still surface. When he was upset by a profile in the Sunday Times magazine, which he thought played to an anti-Semitic stereotype, he complained straight to Rupert Murdoch (using Murdoch’s banker, another of his contacts, as an intermediary).

Brockman was a poor student in high school and was turned down for 17 colleges before studying business, finishing up with an MBA from Columbia University in New York. He worked selling tax shelters for a while, but in the evenings he was hanging out with all the artists he could find. He stacked chairs in the theatre with the young Sam Sheppard; he went to dinner parties with John Cage; he started to put on film festivals and then multi-media extravaganzas at about the same time as Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters in San Francisco and Andy Warhol in New York. This early attraction to the art world seems to have set his style. The art that he was involved with qualified as art simply because everyone involved decided it was.

In 1967 Brockman discovered how to sell flower power while it was still fresh. A business school friend who had gone to work for a paper company asked Brockman to help motivate the sales force for their line of sanitary towels. This was at a time when the New York Times was solemnly explaining that “Total environment” discothèques, such as Cheetah and The Electric Circus in New York, were turning on their patrons with high-decibel rock’n’roll combined with pulsing lights, flashing slide images, and electronic “colour mists”. Brockman asked — and got — a fee of \$15,000 despite having no consulting experience. He put on a multimedia show for the salesmen: they lay on the floor of a shiny vinyl wigwam while four sound systems played them Beatles songs, bird calls, company advertising slogans with an executive shouting about market statistics and competitive products, and a film showed a young woman wearing a dress made of the company’s paper which she ripped down to her

that was the cutting edge of performance pop art. He was an impresario, who could help organise events and people and media and be essential to the process, but unlike a lot of people he was actually alert to what the art was about, just as later, as an agent, he was alert to what the books were about. So far as I was concerned he was another artist in the group of artists I was running with.”

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New York cool . . . with wife Katinka Matson in the agency’s New York office

PHOTOGRAPH FAR LEFT, TOBIAS EVERKE

navel. In the 60s it was cutting-edge art, an “intermedia kinetic experience”, and the salesmen exposed to it reportedly sold an additional 17% of feminine hygiene products in the next quarter. Brockman took the show around nine cities for the company, energising its sales force nationwide, and was established as a consultant who could sell his services to anyone.

But it was not enough. His book *By the Late John Brockman* was unfavourably reviewed, but he was not discouraged and continued to write and edit books — 18 at last count. One, *Einstein, Gertrude Stein, Wittgenstein and Frankenstein*, had to be hurriedly withdrawn after portions were found to have been plagiarised from an article by James Gleick, the author of *Chaos*, one of the first big pop science hits and not a Brockman client. Brockman blamed one of his assistants.

Brockman’s later books have mostly been collections of interviews with friends and clients, salted and sometimes vinegared as well with their opinions of each other. He has a made a Christmas tradition of asking questions of 100 or so people and circulating their responses. “What do you believe to be true, but cannot prove?” was the most recent one, in 2004, and is a fine example of Brockman’s method as an editor or curator of thought. The question was supplied by Nicholas Humphrey, but it was Brockman who spotted its potential, and then knew 120

interesting people who were prepared to answer it. Humphrey’s own answer is characteristically thought-provoking: “I believe that human consciousness is 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 each place on our own and others’ lives.” Philip Anderson, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, believes that string theory is a waste of time. Randolph Nesse, an evolutionary biologist, believes, but cannot prove, that believing things without proof is evolutionary advantageous; Ian McEwan that no part of his consciousness will survive death.

Brockman has constantly reinvented himself. He has been at the leading edge of intellectual fashion for the past 30 years. In the late 90s, just before the dot.com bubble popped, he told an interviewer from Wired magazine that he wanted to be “post-interesting”. Looking back on all the ideas he has enthused about you glimpse a mind that rushes around like a border collie — tirelessly and gracefully pursuing anything that moves, but absolutely uninterested in things that stay still, and liable, if shut up in a car, to get bored and eat all the upholstery. Like a lot of successful salesmen, part of his secret is that he is interested in people for their own sake as well as for what they can do for him, and can study them with extraordinary concentration, solemnly

placing out, beside the journalist’s machine, two tape recorders of his own at the beginning of an interview. To be under his attentive, almost affectionate gaze, is to know how a sheep feels in front of a collie.

Twice in the course of a couple of hours’ chat he says “you ought to write a book about that”. He became a book agent by accident. He was talking about God to the scientist John Lilly, a friend of Brand’s, whose research into dolphins and LSD was one of the first tendrils of a scientific study of consciousness, and he realised Lilly had a book there. He sold the proposal and found a new business where his talents and his interests coincided.

He has been in the vanguard of the trend towards larger advances at the expense of royalties, and a model of rewards in which a few superstars make gigantic sums and almost everyone else makes next to nothing. His first enormous commercial success came in the early 80s, as personal computers started

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to appear. He understood that software manuals would need publishing just as normal books do. In the end, the idea of software publishers didn’t work out, but not before Brockman had made a fortune from the idea. He started an annual dinner for the other players in the business, called the millionaires’ dinner. Later, when this seemed unimpressive, he renamed it the billionaires’ dinner; then the scientists’ dinner — whatever worked to bring lively people round him.

He works with and is married to Katinka Matson, the daughter of a New York literary agent who was AD Peters’s partner in 50s. “She actually makes the wheels turn in the office,” says Tom Standage. The Brockmans have one son, Max, who works in the family business as a third-generation agent, and who was blessed in his crib by a drunken dance performed round it by Hunter S Thompson, Dennis Hopper and Gerd Stern, a multi-media artist from the avant-garde scene.

After the first boom in personal computers and their software blew out, Brockman was perfectly placed for the next boom, in writing about the people who made it. The house magazine of that boom was Wired, which sold itself to Conde Nast as “The magazine which branded the digital age”; it is almost an obligation on the editor of Wired to be a Brockman client. He set out his manifesto in the early 90s for what he called the Third Culture: “Traditional American intellectuals are, in a sense, increasingly reactionary, and quite often proudly (and perversely) ignorant of many of the truly significant intellectual accomplishments of our time. Their culture, which dismisses science, is often non-empirical. By contrast, the Third Culture consists of those scientists and other thinkers in the empirical world who, through their work and expository writing, are taking the place of the traditional intellectual in rendering visible the deeper meanings of our lives, redefining who and what we are.”

Everything was speeding up, too. Brockman had always been quick to close a deal. Now he demanded pinball-fast reactions from the editors he sold to. One trick was to watch the front page of the New York Times and get a quick book proposal out of every science story that appeared there. This mean that if you were a Brockman client on the staff of the New York Times a front page splash was not just professionally gratifying, but also a potential route to a large cheque. There was a danger that this constituted a temptation to hype. When one New York Times journalist, Gina Kolata, followed a “cure for cancer” splash with a book contract the next day, there was an outcry and the book was eventually cancelled.

For Brockman, America now is the intellectual seedbed for Europe and Asia. He wrote: “The emergence of the Third Culture introduces new modes of intellectual discourse and reaffirms the pre-eminence of America in the realm of important ideas. Throughout history, intellectual life has been marked by the fact that only a small number of people have done the serious thinking for everybody else. What we are witnessing is a passing of the torch from one group of thinkers, the traditional literary intellectuals, to a new group, the intellectuals of the emerging Third Culture. Intellectuals are not just people who know things but people who shape the thoughts of their generation. An intellectual is a synthesiser, a publicist, a communicator.” Brockman, it hardly needs saying, is the true intellectual’s agent.

Of course, this was angrily resented by those outside the magic circle, especially if they were themselves intellectuals in every respect save being represented by him. But any anger or ridicule stays off the record. Who knows when they will need to deal with him? Who knows when he could bless them with a million dollars, and whisk them into the magic circle?

Yet it is a tribute to Brockman’s personality that people who have known him a long time like him a great deal. Stewart Brand says: “The salon-keeper has an interesting balancing act between highlighting the people they’re attracted to and also having a strong enough personality so that they are taken seriously as a peer. People do not feel threatened by him or competitive with him. They either admire him or profess to be amused by him. But you look behind that, and you realise that they don’t look down on him at all.”

The magic circle has gone by different names and using different degrees of formality. In the 90s it was a manifested in a physical gathering, run with Heinz Pagels, called the Reality Club. The elite would come together and talk about the work that interested them. They didn’t have to be his clients, and many of them weren’t. But all invested their time in ideas he was promoting. Pagels died in an accident and Brockman says he didn’t have the heart to go on by himself. Instead, he set up his Edge website, where he puts up new interviews every month, which can be read as transcripts or watched as videos, with commentaries.

It all reinforces his idea that reality is essentially social. Even the name, the Reality Club, goes right back to his earliest big idea: that reality is what the smart people, who should be friends of John Brockman, decide to make of the world: “It’s an argument that I have with all my scientist friends, and I lose it every time. They don’t buy it at all. It’s very primitivistic, I’m told, or even solipsism, but it works for me.”