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John Brockman, New York, 2011.  
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## IN CONVERSATION JOHN BROCKMAN'S EXCHANGE WITH JOHN NAUGHTON

**John Naughton** I see you've been variously described as a "cultural impresario" and an "intellectual enzyme". How would you describe yourself?

**John Brockman** Wallace Stevens wrote in his poem "Man With the Blue Guitar":

*Throw away the lights, the definitions,  
And say of what you see in the dark  
That it is this or that it is that,  
But do not use the rotted names.*

Any attempt to describe myself would end in awkwardness, confusion and contradiction. Also, I like to keep changing the subject, to surprise myself.

**JN** What's your intellectual background? From which of the original "Two Cultures" do you come? ■ an engineer, so this two/three cultures stuff really resonates with me.

**JB** In 1944, at three and a half years old, I was stricken with spinal meningitis and was in a coma for six weeks at Boston's children's hospital. The doctors had given up on me when, unexpectedly, I opened my eyes. I am told the first thing I said was: "I want to go to New York."

I arrived there at age 20 in 1961 for graduate school at Columbia. I was immediately struck by, and impressed with, the argumentative and exciting culture in which conversations were being carried out month after month in the pages of literary magazines such as *Commentary*, *Partisan Review* and the UK's *Encounter*.

For a dollar or two, I was privileged to look over the shoulders of the intelligentsia of the day – Lionel Trilling, Stephen Spender, Hannah Arendt, Alfred Kazin et al – as they went at one another over important issues such as the Eichmann trial and/or more trivial pursuits as to who slept with whom on a particular Bloomsbury weekend or who was still a Stalinist after the purge trials of 1937.

It's interesting to note that while I was ostensibly at Columbia to study economics and finance, my interests and instincts were strictly cultural and I made the most of the resources of a great university and New York City to educate myself in the areas that interested me and also to situate myself in the milieu where the action was taking place.

**JN** How did you get involved in the arts?

**JB** I quickly realised, but did not articulate, something the anthropologist Gregory Bateson told me 10 years later: that of all our human inventions, economic man was by far the dullest. A friend suggested I come downtown at night and help out at Theatre Genesis, an off-Broadway theatre in St Mark's in the Bowery, the avant-garde church that also was home to a bustling poetry centre.

So every night I would show up in my three-piece banker's suit and help set up the theatre. Working with me were the 21-year-old Sam Shepard, a young playwright from the midwest, and his room-mate, Charlie Mingus Jr.

One of the artists I got to know was the poet Gerd Stern, who had, on occasion, collaborated with Marshall McLuhan, incorporating live McLuhan lectures into USCO intermedia performances. Gerd, with his unkempt hair and abundant beard, was an odd counterpoint to the buttoned-down classics professor from Toronto, but they got along famously. Through Gerd and other artists, McLuhan's ideas had begun to permeate the art world, though it would be several more years before they hit the mainstream.

Gerd introduced me to the

anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, McLuhan's collaborator, who in turn invited me to Fordham University in 1967 to meet McLuhan, Father John Culkin and other members of that charmed circle of communications theorists. The discussion centred on the idea that we had gone beyond Freud's invention of the unconscious and, for the first time, had rendered visible the conscious.

**JN** OK, so you're deeply immersed in the avant-garde scene and entranced by McLuhan. But how did you get from there to an involvement with science and technology?

**JB** It was McLuhan who turned me on to *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, the book by Bell Labs scientists Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver that began: "The word 'communication' will be used here in a very broad sense to include all of the procedures by which one mind may affect another. This, of course, involves not only written and oral speech, but also music, the pictorial arts, the theatre, the ballet and in fact all human behaviour."

He also pointed me to Oxford zoologist JZ Young's 1950 BBC Reith lectures entitled "Doubt and Certainty in Science". And I recall his quoting one memorable line that has stuck with me and informed my thinking since that day: "We create tools and mould ourselves through our use of them."

**'Any attempt to describe myself would end in awkwardness, confusion and contradiction'**

John Cage had also picked up on all these ideas. He convened weekly dinners during which he tried them out, as well as his mushroom recipes, on a group of young artists, poets and writers. I was fortunate to have been included at these dinners where we talked about media, communications, art, music, philosophy, the ideas of McLuhan and Norbert Wiener. McLuhan had pointed out that by inventing electric technology, we had externalised our central nervous systems; that is, our minds.

Cage went further to say that we now had to presume that "there's only one mind, the one we all share". He pointed out that we had to go beyond private and personal mindsets and understand how radically things had changed. Mind had become socialised. "We can't change our minds without changing the world," he said. Mind as a manmade extension became our environment, which he characterised as "the collective consciousness", which we could tap into by creating "a global utilities network". In some ways in 1964 and 1965 he was envisioning what would become the internet, long before the tools became available for its implementation.

Inspired also by Buckminster Fuller and others, I began to read avidly in the field of information theory, cybernetics and systems theory. I also seized the opportunity to become the first "McLuhanesque" consultant and producer and soon had a thriving business working with clients that included General Electric, Metromedia, Columbia Pictures, Scott Paper and the White House.

I wrote a synthesis of these ideas in my first book, *By the Late John*

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