

## 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 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

