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## **New edge : technology and spirituality in the San Francisco Bay Area**

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## Chapter Three: The Style of New Edge

### Negotiating Technoscience and New Age

I am rather skeptical. (...) Some days I feel like an atheist, or I believe in God, but predominantly I feel like an agnostic or atheist. You can't know, there is no way you can know. (...) I feel very uncomfortable making a choice now, I feel very uncomfortable making one. The choice that I have made is that I am not going to make that decision. (...) I feel as though I am taking the middle ground between two communities. On the one hand I became increasingly interested in the scientific community and [in] looking at the neurological correlates of consciousness (...) Then I have many friends who are die-hard spiritual New Agers, having kind of belief systems (...) This pendulum swings, all the way to one direction, then all the way to the other. (...) Erik Davis (...) and I have pretty similar view points on this matter. Also Ken Goffman, even now I can pick up old issues of *Mondo2000* and can read them and it still is relevant. Ken did a great job with that magazine (Jon Hanna - organizer of *Mindstates*).<sup>176</sup>

I feel myself as a liminal person, I live in between. (...) I feel in between the counterculture and the mutants, the people that have always been on the Internet. (...) I experience that as in-betweenness. A lot of my friends are hackers and code-people and geeks, but I am not one of them. [and] when I am in a hippie environment I choose a different position. (...) [It is] probably a psychological trait of me, I am not a good joiner, I don't tend to feel myself identifying with a particular community. (...) I tend to be always a little on the edge of the space that I am, I am trying to articulate what is crossing over, from one side to the other: I can see there is this notion (...) that there is not ultimately a limitation in the definition of what human beings are, it is a process. (...) New Agers are constantly trying out new ways of thinking about processes, discovering concepts and frameworks, readapting constantly to a shifting set of practices. In a way that process is similar in the hacker zones (Erik Davis - author of *TechGnosis*, presenter at *Mindstates*, *Synergogenesis* and *Burning Man*).<sup>177</sup>

Tech culture...I was always open to the idea... [I was not] a 'back to nature', machine-rejecting hippie. (...) I never was a really good hippie or New Age person. I don't like sleeping in a tent, I eat meat, [I] never [was] very good at being hyper spiritual (...) the whole New Age thing was weird to me. (...) that when you want to

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<sup>176</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Jon Hanna, November 22 2005, using internet conversation program *Skype*.

<sup>177</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Erik Davis, December 2005, San Francisco.

live in this house you have to be vegan and hold hands and chant in the morning and you have to be nice all the time (...) the political correctness thing, by nature I like to stand things on the head. (...) I am pretty skeptical about anything that presents itself as a solution. (...) There were aspects that were cool (...) When it is not based on some rigid, guru thing, a certain openness to possibilities, like day to day, feeling and life, experience, anything is possible, most things are just improbable. There were always some good vibes there, there was always the psychedelic movement within the New Age that I thought was generally a lot more sophisticated. (...) There are those aspects and wings, and I think there is a lot to be said for Buddhism and Taoism, those are really disbeliever philosophies as well, shutting of the chatter of the intellect and about experiencing the now, there is nothing wrong with that. (...) Throughout our publishing history, High Frontiers, Reality Hackers and Mondo 2000, we became a funnel for a lot of things that were expressed also by very New Agey people (...) we wanted to separate ourselves first of all from the New Age thing (...)

(Ken Goffman - co-founder of Mondo 2000, vendor and speaker at Mindstates, reflecting on his experiences with New Age when he arrived in California in the early 1980s)

These are fragments taken from my interviews with Jon Hanna (1976), Erik Davis (1967) and Ken Goffman (1952), in which these interviewees reflected on their cultural environment. Using different and overlapping terms, all three see themselves as brokers, 'middle-men' and 'in-between' people. They stand in-between a cultural sphere they associate with 'New Age', 'hippies', or the 'counterculture' and a cultural sphere they associate with the 'scientific community', 'code-people and geeks', 'tech culture', 'hackers' or 'mutants' - those people who have 'already' 'transmuted' into technical form. In the context of their projects - such as the Mindstates conference and the magazine Mondo 2000 - these 'middle-men' seek to 'broker' both these spheres, while remaining unattached to either cultural sphere nevertheless. As such, these New Edge spokespersons pledge both an affiliation with and a rejection of 'New Age.' Shifting and differing understandings are thereby used of what New Age is and how New Age relates to their own, New Edge 'in-between' position.

When these New Edgers reflect upon the New Age cultural sphere in a negative sense, New Age is imagined as the 'other' of science and of technology. New Age, if we evoke Jon Hanna's characterization, is thereby depicted as a 'system of belief', or, in the words of Goffman, as 'culturally correct' and 'rigid.' When these New Edgers reflect on New Age in positive sense, New Age is imagined to be 'open to possibilities', interested in 'process' and is associated with 'disbeliever philosophies.' In this sense, New Age is seen to be resonant with the sphere of 'technoscience.'

The distinctions thus forged alert us to the fact that the characterization of New Edge as a 'high-tech form of New Age' can only be seen as tentative and

limited. Whereas I used this tentative understanding of New Edge in chapter one, an additional self-understanding of New Edgers now comes into the picture. When rejecting New Age, New Edgers do particularly so because they want to emphasize their own philosophical, spiritual and cultural flexibility - a flexibility that is manifested in the stances taken by Hanna, Davis and Goffman as 'skeptical', as being 'on the edges' and as 'moving from reality tunnel to reality tunnel.'

However, here we are faced with a puzzle: as we saw in the examples above, when New Edgers juxtapose their flexible approach against a 'non-flexible' New Age, they do so by asserting themselves as 'skeptical', as interested in 'science' (Hanna) and as open to 'technology' (Goffman). However, 'skepticism', in the way here used by Hanna as always adopting a questioning attitude and as never settling for one epistemological approach, is simultaneously what New Edgers like Davis *embrace* in New Age, when regarding New Age in a positive light. The same goes for the interest in 'science' and 'technology': while Hanna and Goffman here, on the one hand, reject (tendencies in) New Age that are non-scientific and anti-technological, Davis sees the New Age openness to possibilities as consonant with 'hacker culture.' Also the fact that Hanna and Goffman recognize that New Agers are drawn to their New Edge platforms, shows to them the New Age interest in science and technology.

On the one hand thus, these New Edgers affirm a distinctiveness vis-à-vis New Age through their 'skepticism' and their association with 'science' and 'technology.' At the same time, they also assert that these features can also be recognized in New Age. Indeed, scholars of New Age have generally taken these features to be central to New Age. With respect to technology, the British scholar of New Age Paul Heelas observed that "virtual reality technologies" are used as New Age tools (1996: 20). And with respect to science, the Dutch New Age scholar Wouter Hanegraaff, has coined the term "New Age science" to account for the large interest within New Age for science (1996: 62 -70). In his *Science in the New Age: The Paranormal, Its Defenders and Debunkers, and American Culture*, moreover, the American New Age scholar David Hess writes: "New Agers have a penchant for bringing together the technical and the spiritual, the scientific and the religious" (Hess 1993: 4). Also skepticism, Hess writes, is a hallmark of New Age. Whereas organizations like the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) consider themselves skeptical of the holistic claims made by New Agers, Hess writes:

New Agers see themselves as skeptics in their own right. They are skeptical not only of the demands of religious faith but also of the promises made to them by the corporate world, official science, and the medical establishment. They are skeptical of orthodoxy (Hess 1993: 14; see also Hanegraaff 1996: 2).

This New Age skepticism, of course, also informs to a great extent the epistemological attitude of gnosticism itself, deriving its cultural power from the

notion that true knowledge can never be obtained by slavish adherence to external dogma and doctrine (e.g. Heelas 1996: 18, 19).

Hence the puzzle: New Edge spokespersons imagine their distinction vis-à-vis 'New Age' - at those moments when New Age is discussed in negative terms - in terms of their embrace of science, technology and skepticism. Yet, both scholars and New Edge proponents - when speaking of New Age in positive sense - generally agree that these attitudes are integral to the cultural orientation of New Age also. What then, we may ask, is the ethnographic base through which New Edgers recognize themselves to be different from New Agers nevertheless? I take this as the central question of this chapter, as a way of understanding more about the social manifestations of New Edge.

In the first part I explore the New Edge sense of 'in-betweenness' in more depth, showing how the New Edge discourse is shaped in relation to the cultural spheres of New Age and of technoscience without uniquely and permanently associating with either one sphere. The second section argues that New Edge distinguishes from New Age through a distinctive style. In the third and final part of this chapter I explore the so-called 'backstage' of New Edge. Here I explore how the New Edge ideal of 'in-betweenness' is cross-cut by stereotypes that exist in its cultural surroundings.

### **3.1. Being 'In-Between'**

#### **New Edge rejections of New Age**

In order to understand how New Edgers may reject New Age as 'rigid' or as a 'belief system', I need to evoke two common-sense understandings that scholars have reached in the past few decades about the sociality of New Age. First, it is generally acknowledged that not many spiritual seekers adopt the term 'New Age' as a self-referential label. Ever since the term gained popular currency in the early-1980s, spiritual seekers have generally sought to move away from this labeling (e.g. Hanegraaff 1996: 9; Heelas 1996: 17). This is logical considering the New Age antipathy against institutionalization and considering its celebration of subjectivity and individual authority. In this sense, the New Edge tendency to distance from 'New Age' parallels the tendency among New Agers to distance themselves from the label 'New Age'.

Still, this does not explain why and how then the term 'New Edge' continues to be used as a self-referential label. The term New Edge was coined around the second issue of *Mondo 2000* in 1989, at a time that the term 'New Age' was widely used and when those who adopted the New Age discourse, began shunning this label. Even though more than two decades have past since the coinage of the term 'New Edge', I have seen no evidence of the same having happened to this label. Goffman still employs the word in positive self-referential

sense, at the Rant & Rave evening I have seen others do the same,<sup>178</sup> and some of my interviewees whom I reminded of this label embrace it with great enthusiasm.<sup>179</sup> What happened to the label New Age does not seem to have happened to New Edge, even though the New Edge discourse communicates a message that is similar to that of New Age. In other words, we need to understand why and how the New Edge discourse successfully manifests its penchant to bring together science, technology and spirituality in a 'non-rigid' way.

We saw that New Edgers like Jon Hanna and Goffman reject 'New Age' to the extent that the latter manifests itself as a set of 'belief-systems' and as a dogmatic ideological position that pressurizes people to adopt only one form of behavior (e.g. vegetarianism). However, based on the study of written sources that are influential within New Age and of the types of teachings offered in New Age centers and self-help books, scholars of New Age generally sketch the New Age cultural orientation as eclectic, embracing multiple religious and philosophical traditions and various epistemological techniques simultaneously (e.g. Hammer 2001; Pels 1998; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; York 1995; Hess 1993). This general flexibility of New Age thus seems to argue against the New Edge allegation that it comprises a dogmatic belief-system.

The dispute that here unfolds is more than merely a difference in perspective on New Age, but reveals one basic tension that exists *within* New Age. In his discussion of the New Age "perennial philosophy", Wouter Hanegraaff points out this tension, and shows why and how New Age may manifest exclusivist and sometimes dogmatic tendencies. The "philosophia perennis", summarized by Aupers and Houtman (2006), is the philosophy that "all religious traditions are equally valid, because they all essentially worship the same divine source"<sup>180</sup> (2006: 203). Hanegraaff points out the basic tension that emanates from this philosophy:

The "wholeness" that New Agers consider basic to the tradition of "perennial wisdom" is grounded, according to them, not in dogma or rational speculation but in personal experience. The result is an ambiguity (...) On the one hand, the experience of ultimate wholeness must be *universal*, which suggests that all human beings have access to one and the same fundamental reality; on the other hand, the emphasis on the value of *individuality* combined with the irreducible character of individual experience means that *all* personal experiences must be fully honoured and respected. (...) Logically, the first option implies that only one kind of experience is

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<sup>178</sup> "Rant & Rave: Dance Culture -- Past, Present and Future", an evening of reflection on 'rave culture, organized by Ken Goffman in the Community Center of Mill Valley, September 22 2005.

<sup>179</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Bonnie de Varco, Santa Cruz, California, January 4, 2006.

<sup>180</sup> The *philosophia perennis*, Aupers and Houtman write: "derives from esotericism—especially from Blavatsky's New Theosophy (Hanegraaff, New Age)—and influenced the first generation of New Agers in the 1970s through the work of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki and Aldous Huxley" (2006: 203).

"true" in an ultimate and absolute sense, while the second implies that many different kinds of experience are "true". (...) The problem is, of course, what to do with religions which refuse to fit in this scheme because they do not share its premises. The New Age solution is as predictable as it is sobering: either such religions are "false" (dogmatic, exclusivist, merely exoteric etc.), which means that they only masquerade as "genuine" religion' or they represent "lower" levels in a hierarchy, or stages in a process of evolution towards genuine spiritual insight, which means that they are imperfect. Obviously, it is difficult to see how this should be distinguished from other forms of exclusivism or, in some cases, dogmatism (Hanegraaff 1996: 328).

Hanegraaff's argument is that the eclecticism of New Age forms a very uneasy alliance with the simultaneous universalism of New Age, i.e. the notion that there is one objective higher reality, or one universal process, that implicates everything that exists. It is this insistence on universality, Hanegraaff observes, that may lead to exclusivistic or dogmatic behavior.

In acceptance of Hanegraaff's observation regarding the exclusivism of New Age, in the following I argue that the New Edge orientation is characterized by radical *inclusivism*. I will argue this with respect to the different approaches that characterize the New Age and New Edge social, philosophical and stylistic attitudes regarding the imagined relationship between nature and high-tech. New Age, I maintain, has a tendency to distinguish its celebration of the divinity of nature from a 'singularitarian' faith in the evolutionary potential of technology and science. New Edge, by contrast, is characterized by its simultaneous endorsement of a New Age-like celebration of sacred nature and a 'singularitarian' faith in technoscience. I will illustrate the different philosophical and social imaginaries of New Age and New Edge in the following sections. I do so by tracing the different interpretative frameworks that envelop a *fractal* - a computer generated image - while traveling different social spheres in the San Francisco Bay Area. The particular fractal that I trace traverses social spheres where, respectively, 'techno-optimistic', 'New Edge' and 'New Age' discourses dominate.

## **The Fractal**

In this section I discuss the travels of a 'fractal screensaver', a computer-generated moving and morphing image, as I traced it through three social environments in the Bay Area.

A fractal is a figure that has acquired, in the larger context of the Bay Area, both scientific and spiritual significance. With 'scientific' I mean that a fractal plays a key role in institutionalized scientific spheres in the study of 'complex systems' or 'chaos'. With 'spiritual' I mean that spiritual seekers see chaos theory as proving the ontological order that they also experience while in 'altered-states', when meditating or when dancing. In order to understand how a fractal works as a tool

for the study of chaos, I discuss briefly the recent cultural trajectory of chaos theory.

### ***The Fractal as Science: Chaos, Artificial Life and Computer Visualization***

The study of chaos was pioneered in the 1960s by the American physicist Mitchell Feigenbaum, at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. Chaos theory is popularly associated with the notion of the 'Butterfly Effect' - the idea that "a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York" (Gleick 1987: 8). The study of chaos, in short, is the study of how small, relatively simple initial conditions produce unpredictable quite complex outcomes later. The field emerged in an interdisciplinary effort by, among others, mathematicians, weather forecasters, economists, physiologists and ecologists, to study the irregularities in the systems that each of these specialists were concerned with. In the context of chaos theory, generally, all possible kinds of 'information' that relate to a particular phenomenon (like the weather, economics or evolution) are taken into account, offering an integrative picture of what this phenomenon looks like at the smallest and at the largest level.

In the early 1980s, the study of Artificial Life became one of the 'grounding fields' in which chaos theory developed. In 1984 the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, where Mitchell Feigenbaum had first set to study 'chaos', spawned the Santa Fe Institute for the Sciences of Complexity (with 'complexity' roughly being synonymous with 'chaos') located in California. In this research laboratory, 'chaotic' or 'complex' systems were studied via the creation of 'Artificial Life' (AL). Artificial Life, a field with roots in mathematics and that was pioneered long before computers were used for scientific research (Levy 1992), has in the past few decades developed into a predominantly computer-related field of study. 'Artificial Life' is generated by means of 'iterative computer algorithms': mathematical programs run on a computer, which feed back the result of an equation into the original equation. In the context of AL research, these algorithms are studied as 'life', and 'life' in turn is perceived as a 'chaotic' or 'complex' system: the creation of Artificial Life thus forms one of the avenues for the study of chaos/complexity.

Before the 1980s, computers did not yet have the graphic capacities they would later. The large scale introduction of computer visualization in research laboratories as well as in the homes of computer hobbyists, by the late-1980s, gave an important impulse to the study of Artificial Life, and hence also to the study of chaos. As the British media scholar Richard Wright (1996) details, by 1987 the National Science Foundation of the United States set a goal to "provide every scientist and engineer with their own graphics workstation". This had the immediate effect of "stimulating a new market for specialized computer software and hardware" (1996: 218).



Graphic computer visualization programs played a significant role in the study of Artificial Life/chaos in the sense that graphics could now visualize the otherwise difficult to perceive emergent properties of the computer programs that represent Artificial Life/chaos. A fractal is one of the ways in which Artificial Life came to be visually represented, and hence one of the technologies through which chaos could be studied. A fractal is a 'self-similar', 'self-evolving' 'creature'. A fractal begins with a mathematical equation that is iterative and that is brought visually into view by means of computer visualization software. A fractal has the characteristic of a chaotic system in the sense that it begins with a fairly simple equation and results into highly complex patterns that could not have been anticipated from the initial equation (fig 15).

In Silicon Valley, particularly since the mid-1980s when computers began to appear not only on the desks of Artificial Life labs but also in the homes of computer hobbyists, fractals 'escaped' the laboratory setting and moved into the popular cultural domain, not least into raves. Richard Wright writes about this 'escape' of computer scientific imagery from institutionalized science by the late 1980s:

(...) in scientific journals, TV documentaries and magazine articles, computer-generated imagery seemed to have become an indispensable means of communicating scientific research both within science and out into the non-scientific community. Chaos theory was able, through media, to become an icon (...) (Wright 1996: 218).

Wright describes the emergence of, what he calls, "chaos culture", a cultural moment at which the science of chaos was embraced in popular cultural settings, leading to "conflicts of context, with bizarre results". "When people relied upon these pictures [fractals] to "show" what the science of chaos meant, the results were very unscientific", Wright claims (Ibid.).

### **The Fractal as Spiritual Tool**

In the context of the overlap between rave culture and New Age as it ensued in the Bay Area in the late 1980s, chaos theory turned into a form of 'New Age Science' (Hanegraaff 1996: 63).

New Age science, Hanegraaff writes, is a form of science that "does not primarily aim at keeping the public informed about the current situation of scientific research, or at disseminating knowledge about new scientific discoveries" (1996: 63). Instead, New Age science a priori reads a "unified worldview" into research data. We have seen an instance of New Age science earlier in Timothy Leary's celebration of 'Chaos' as a manifestation of the worldview of the "poetic Hindus", who "thought that the universe was a dreamy dance of illusion (*maya*)" (Leary 1996: xiii). Another example of the way in which chaos theory came to be implicated in a holistic worldview comes from Fraser Clark. Clark is a British rave

advocate who is generally credited with having brought raving to California and with coining the term 'pronoia.' He interpreted chaos theory as a "unification science, interrelation science, whole science. It shows you that there is a connection between everything" (Clark in Wright 1996: 227).

As illustrated by these examples, within the rave environment since the late 1980s, chaos theory has come to fulfill a 'New Age scientific role.' And fractals were the vehicles that made chaos theory and the unified worldview that it allegedly 'proved', visible and palpable within these scenes: fractals came to adorn the dance floors of raves where they blended in with the many other consciousness-raising technologies. They were created on the home computers of 'geeks' like Gary,<sup>181</sup> as an instance of what I referred to earlier in chapter one as 'nerd science.' In the overlapping settings in which fractals emerged and moved around, different interpretative frameworks converged: fractals were instances of Artificial Life, tools of scientific exploration and reminders of cosmic unity and complexity simultaneously. And in the setting of these overlapping interpretative frameworks, the 'worldview' and philosophical attitudes that fractals are taken to manifest is thereby not equivocal and uncontested. In the following, I trace the travels of a screensaver through three different social environments. In each of these environments, the fractal acquires a different significance.

### ***The Travels of a Fractal Screensaver: Accelerating Change***

The first time I met Carl (1968) was in September 2005 at the Accelerating Change 'Tech Night.' This Tech Night was organized in an exhibition space in Palo Alto the Friday evening prior to the start of the Accelerating Change Conference<sup>182</sup> that weekend. On this evening the computer scientists, programmers and entrepreneurs who would attend and/or speak at the conference exhibited their recent technical inventions and ideas. Carl stood in the exhibition space, showing his 'fractal screensaver', a colorful moving and morphing image that was displayed on a large computer screen. The screensaver stood alongside other demos that demonstrated current advances in the two technoscientific fields that the conference was organized around: Intelligence Amplification (IA), the field in which technology and science are geared towards the 'augmentation' of human intelligence, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), the field that seeks to develop technologies that are themselves 'intelligent' and 'alive'.

Most of the showcases were somewhat in between IA and AI. An example is the 'Personal Awareness Assistant' (PAA) by Dana Le. The PAA is a device that can be placed on a person's shoulder from where it scans and records its environment in 'intelligent' ways. In this way it helps the person remember who she

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<sup>181</sup> I introduced Gary in chapter two as member of the rave collective 'Dance.'

<sup>182</sup> I have also discussed the Accelerating Change Conference in chapter one.

has met, where this happened and how this person looked.<sup>183</sup> Another display demonstrated 'Tactical Iraqi', a three-dimensional interactive game set in Iraq, teaching military personnel spoken Iraqi Arabic. Technologies that were new at the time, like the Virtual World platform Second Life and the browser Google Earth, were also shown alongside new types of 'intuitive interfaces.'

Carl's screensaver was presented as an instance of Artificial Life that uses 'cyberspace' as its 'ecological environment.' As a leaflet of the exhibition explained, this screensaver does not run simply on one computer from a pre-installed program, but is the result of the participation of hundreds of users. On one central server a 'fractal algorithm' continuously 'breeds' life-like creatures, that get distributed to the home-computers of users, on which a version of the screensaver has been installed.<sup>184</sup> On the Accelerating Change website, the screensaver is described:

When these computers "sleep", the screen saver comes on and the computers communicate with each other by the internet to share the work of creating morphing abstract animations known as "sheep".<sup>185</sup> (...) Anyone watching one of these computers may vote for their favorite animations using the keyboard. The more popular sheep live longer and reproduce according to a genetic algorithm with mutation and cross-over. Hence the flock evolves to please its global audience.<sup>186</sup>

Carl's screensaver thus appeared to be a gigantic cooperative Artificial Life creating program.

### ***The Travels of a Fractal Screensaver: Rant and Rave***

The second time I met Carl and his screensaver was a few days later at the 'Rant and Rave evening.' This evening was organized in September 2005 by Mondo 2000 founder Ken Goffman in a community center in Mill Valley, a suburb to the

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<sup>183</sup> On the website of Accelerating Change this device is described as follows: "What catapults the PAA past a simple recording device is its ability to respond to particular contexts and situations. For example, when a user is introduced to someone new, the Assistant recognizes the phrase, "It's nice to meet you", records the name of the person as she introduces herself and takes a low-resolution picture. All this takes place without any specific command from the user. Once the device captures the data, it automatically categorizes the information into a pre-designated domain—in this case a sophisticated address book complete with audio, digital image, date/time stamp and location. Because the data is stored contextually, information retrieval is straightforward. A simple inquiry, such as "Who was that person I met at lunch last Thursday?" brings up the appropriate information. Using Global Positioning System (GPS), the Assistant also can determine where the user is located, such as the office or visiting clients, to further finetune and categorize a response" (<http://www.accelerating.org/ac2005/technight.html>. Retrieved September 2010).

<sup>184</sup> For more information about how the screensaver works, see: <http://electricssheep.wikispaces.com/Electric+Sheep+FAQ>. Retrieved September 2010.

<sup>185</sup> In calling his fractals 'sheep', Carl pays homage to Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) (<http://electricssheep.org/>. Retrieved October 21, 2010)

<sup>186</sup> <http://www.accelerating.org/ac2005/technight.html>. Retrieved September 2010.

north of San Francisco. During this evening, the 'New Edgers' of Mondo 2000 reflected on their own history and future, recalling their 'New Edge' parties in the early 1990s and trying to anticipate the significance of raving in the future. Many attendees were dressed as if they attended a rave instead of a discussion on raves - they wore colorful dresses and glittery trousers - making the hall seem vibrant and lively. At a dinner I was invited to afterwards, I came to know some of these attendees as astrologers and 'healers', some of them as transhumanists and hackers.

During this evening Carl's screensaver played on a computer screen that stood on a table in a corner of the community center hall. On this table stood also a collection of *Life Enhancement Products*: the 'smart drinks' and 'designer drugs' that had, more than a decade earlier, been advertised in Mondo 2000. Next to the computer screen was also a stack of the latest book written by Ken Goffman and Dan Joy: *Counterculture Through the Ages: From Abraham to Acid House* (2004). Right before the panel discussion started I flipped through the book. It contained a chapter on rave culture, which placed the phenomenon of raving in historical perspective by comparing this 'counterculture' to earlier 'countercultures' like those of the Gnostic Sufis and Silicon Valley hackers. I quickly read the foreword, written by the psychedelic 'guru' Timothy Leary<sup>187</sup> right before he died in 1996. Leary writes:

The mark of counterculture is not a particular social form or structure, but rather the evanescence of forms and structures, the dazzling rapidity and flexibility with which they appear, mutate, and morph into one another and disappear (Leary in Goffman and Joy 2004: ix).

As I read this part, Carl's screensaver was morphing and mutating with 'dazzling rapidity' on the screen next to me. The correspondences between Leary's words and the screensaver made it seem as if this fractal, in this setting, represented the New Edge community itself.

### ***The Travels of a Fractal Screensaver: Synergenesis***

My two encounters with Carl, first at Accelerating Change and then at the Rant and Rave evening, were coincidental: it was only when I went to the Rant and Rave evening that I met Carl again and that I realized that I had already seen him and his screensaver at Accelerating Change. Having met the same person and the same technical artifact in two different settings, I was now curious to see where Carl was heading furthermore. After I interviewed Carl about his fractal screensaver and the cultural environment in which he moved, a third occasion I followed him to was

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<sup>187</sup> As described earlier, Timothy Leary was a professor of psychology at Harvard in the early 1960s. He and his colleague Richard Alpert got expelled after they enlisted volunteering students for experimentation with psychedelics. Both became 'gurus' within the ensuing countercultural environment. In chapter one I mentioned Timothy Leary as the person who celebrated the universe as Chaotic.

the closing rave of *Synergenesis*. Synergenesis was a conference on 'consciousness' and 'visionary art' that took place in October 2005 in a community center in San Francisco.

In the closing rave of Synergenesis, Carl's screensaver was projected with a beamer onto a large screen. The screen adorned the dance floor of the San Franciscan community center where the rave was organized. At the Synergenesis rave, Carl's screensaver was yet again part of a different ambiance compared to the previous two settings: in the vicinity of the screensaver was a massage corner with a Buddha statue in it. Furthermore, the movements of the fractal were rhythmically accompanied by stroboscopic lights, dancing bodies and electronic 'trance music' mixed with life-performed songs and acoustic music.

The significance of the screensaver here resonated with the talks that had been given in the day. In the day, the visionary thinker Daniel Pinchbeck had spoken about the Mayan prophecy and the 'awakening of the universe' in the year 2012<sup>188</sup>; the visionary artist Alex Grey<sup>189</sup> had talked about the history of contemporary esotericism<sup>190</sup> and the author of *TechGnosis* (1998) Erik Davis had presented his vision on the Californian counterculture. Furthermore, a woman called Jenny Pell gave a presentation on experiments with "permaculture", a form of "permanent agriculture" that is "sustainable" and "holistic", using technologies and skills in "appropriate ways".<sup>191</sup> In addition, Alex Grey gave a 'visionary art' workshop, and artistic performances and art exhibitions had filled the community center in the day.

The rave at which Carl's screensaver performed was the culmination of this day. In the context of this rave, the morphing and moving images of Carl's screensaver appeared an artistic expression of a 'vibe' that extended beyond the technological context of this screensaver alone. In this setting, the fractal seemed to express the evolution of collective consciousness that so many participants here believed was ensuing.

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<sup>188</sup> In chapter two I mentioned Daniel Pinchbeck in the context of his presentation on the Maya prophecy organized at Burning Man, August - September 2005

<sup>189</sup> As I found out later, the illustrations of Alex Grey had been published in the biofeedback manual *BioMeditation. The Scientific Way to Use the Energy of the Mind*, written by Payne & Reitano (1977), mentioned in chapter one.

<sup>190</sup> Grey hereby discussed the Human Potential Movement at Esalen, the Theosophical Tradition and the Spiritualist movements preceding the Human Potential Movement.

<sup>191</sup> "Appropriate" here meant "as opposed to how they are being used in cities", enabling people to "remember" their roots and ones hidden skills again (*Permaculture Now!* Presentation by Jenny Pell at Synergenesis October 8 2005, San Francisco).

## **New Age and New Edge**

As Carl carried his screensaver software from place to place and from setting to setting, plugging it into computers and beamers standing in different halls and venues of the San Francisco Bay Area, the fractal seemed to accumulate a lot of different meanings in its morphing body. At *Accelerating Change*, the screensaver fitted with the overarching themes of this conference. Here it seemed a manifestation of the technologically-empowered sort of evolution that presenters like Ray Kurzweil spoke about. In the Mill Valley Community Center where Ken Goffman organized his 'Rant and Rave' evening, the fractal appeared an icon of the New Edge 'rave culture.' And at the closing evening of the *Synergenesis* conference, the screensaver was expressive of something even grander. Here, the fractal appeared organic, expressive of a colorful and multidimensional evolutionary process that accounts the universe at large.

Both Carl's fractal and Carl himself seemed to travel seemingly unhindered within and between the three different social spheres. This suggests that these spheres are part of an overarching cultural environment in which boundaries between technology, science and spirituality - just as the boundaries between natural and technological intelligence and natural and technological evolution - have become rather blurry and arbitrary. However, I argue in this section, in terms of social imaginary, these boundaries don't appear to be quite so blurry: as we will see, participants at *Synergenesis* distinguish themselves by means of the New Age discourse from the technological optimism of an environment such as *Accelerating Change*; and participants at the Rant and Rave evening employ the New Edge discourse as a way of distinguishing themselves from the New Age idiom. It is through the social imaginaries employed by participants of the social spheres that I sketched, in other words, that we can recognize how New Edgers manifest their 'techno-spirituality' in a way that is different from New Age and that, in particular, stands in contrast with the exclusivism of New Age.

### ***New Age Exclusivism***

At first sight, the stylistic and discursive environment of *Synergenesis* suggests no intrinsic tension between high-tech and the nature mysticism here evoked. Computer visualizations blended harmoniously with acoustic sound while dancers got ecstatic on the dance floor. And Carl, who came fresh from the *Accelerating Change* conference where he had been surrounded by narratives of technological evolution, seemed supple in his ability to also open himself up to a cultural environment where stage was given to Pinchbeck's prophesies of spiritual evolution. However, during the Question and Answer session that followed Daniel Pinchbeck's discussion of the Mayan prophesy (see also chapter one) participants drew hard boundaries between the social sphere of *Synergenesis*, and social spheres where 'singularitarian' optimism regarding technoscience reigned:

A man in the audience stood up after Pinchbeck finished his talk: "So...", he started slowly, "people have this idea of (...) outliving our bodies and living forever (...) it totally ignores the rest of life and consciousness that is out there". Another audience member stood up as well and chipped in: "Yes! this whole idea has been spun by all these futurists writing about the technological singularity, I think that is completely the wrong direction". The first man became even more agitated after this remark and added passionately: "I am against that too, all of these things seem to be talking about what it is what humans do with their machines, it totally ignores animals and plants and cycles and all of that". Then Pinchbeck re-appropriated the conversation by concluding: "Not controlling nature but managing our relationship with nature, that is what we have to do".

What these Synergenesis participants loudly asserted here, was that a belief in technological evolution - as espoused by "all these futurists writing about the technological singularity" - is unfit with their own belief in 'natural' spiritual evolution. Moreover, this discussion alerts to a hierarchical relationship that is postulated at Synergenesis between Nature - with a capital 'n', standing for its assumed ultimate significance - and technology. For the Synergenesis participants involved in this discussion, Nature is original and evolution occurs as a function of this Natural order. In line with this understanding, the idea is rejected that man-controlled technology can bring about evolution.

Another instance in which such a hierarchical relationship was postulated occurred at Mindstates 2005, the audience of which consisted of several people who would later also join Synergenesis. In a presentation called *Designer Minds*, the computer scientist Ramez Naam discussed *neuroprosthetics*. Neuroprosthetics, Naam explained, are "electrical systems connected to the brain to augment or manipulate our abilities in certain ways".<sup>192</sup> Naam used both the terms "healing" and "augmentation" to discuss the benefits of neuroprosthetic systems: under the rubric of "healing" Naam discussed the use of neuroprosthetics to heal deaf, blind or paralyzed people. Under the rubric of "augmentation", Naam discussed the use of this technology to "crack the code" of how we "encode memory", and to give people implants that give them *better* than normal memory and that help them communicate better (Ibid.). During the Question and Answer session following Naam's presentation, a woman objected:

(...) [you are talking about] implants (...) they bring us away from each other and from the earth. I find it highly curious that we want to enhance human communication by putting implants in them.

What stands out in the objection of this woman is that she did not challenge Naam's 'healing' rhetoric; i.e. she did not criticize the use of neuroprosthetics as a way of restoring 'original health.' However, she did object to Naam's rhetoric of technological augmentation. While thus implicitly accepting technology as a tool

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<sup>192</sup> Ramez Naam. *Designer Minds*. Presentation for Mindstates, San Francisco, May 28 2005.

that can 'work with' original Nature, she rejected the notion that technology would rule over - i.e. 'improve', 'augment' - it. The woman's remark, which was applauded by the audience, thus served as a way of restoring an original order in which 'Nature' occupies a hierarchically higher position than 'technology.' Such a celebration of original Nature is typical of New Age. This New Age discourse excludes not technology per se, but the particular optimistic ideological framework that often embeds technological talk and practice in the Bay Area. It is in this way that New Age, in the setting of high-tech Bay Area life, works in an exclusivist way - it determines how technology is accepted and distances itself from those social spheres where Technology - with a capital 't' to refer to its assumed ultimate significance - is celebrated as original and nature as secondary.

### ***New Edge Indeterminacy***

It is in this particular sense that New Edge differs from New Age: the New Edge discourse incorporates the 'singularitarian' optimism regarding science and technology, as well as the New Age celebration of 'ultimate', or sacred nature. The Rant and Rave evening was dominated by such a New Edge attitude. Here, people with a strong enthusiasm for 'augmentation' technologies and science paving the way for a world of healthy and immortal bodies, sat together with people who have a strong belief in the sacredness of the cosmological order. More significantly, the discursive sphere was such that none of these frameworks was deemed superior over the other. One way in which this was done was through the ironic style of Goffman. With respect to raving - the theme of the evening - Goffman's irony for instance brokered a strongly secularist and strongly spiritualist understanding of the cultural significance of this practice. These are some of the notes I took that evening:

The evening begins. Will Block, announcing himself as the owner of "Life Enhancement Products" and as the sponsor of this evening, introduces R.U.Sirius as the "Ed Sullivan of subversion". Sirius takes his turn, and after a small mistake in his sentence jokingly refers to 'the third smartdrink' he just took. He then offers an evening that will be "insightful and confusing and inconclusive and filled with social and cosmic significance". "Nevertheless", he adds, "basically we are talking about partying till dawn".

This brief fragment shows how Goffman's irony does not favor either a secularist or a spiritualist interpretation of raves and smartdrinks, he lets them exist side by side: reflecting on raves as both having "social and cosmic significance" and being nothing more than "partying till dawn", advertising smartdrinks as tools of awareness while downplaying this effect by treating them as drugs that merely mix up his mind, Goffman does not offer a final account: while offering 'insight', he also states that confusion and inconclusiveness are acceptable goals of the evening.

Goffman lets different readings of raving sit side by side in one and the same frame, just as the fractal that was present in the community hall features



simultaneously as an instance of technoscientific ingenuity and of cosmological evolution. Whereas the New Age discourse, which dominated at Synergenesis, favors one reading of evolutionary development, the Rant and Rave evening is definitely not a place where the 'singularitarianism' of the Bay Area is rejected.

What I argued by means of a discussion of the fractal, accounts for New Edge in a more general sense: New Edge, I argue in the following sections, derives its distinctiveness vis-à-vis New Age thereby that it negotiates different interpretative frameworks and different modes of being by means of a style that is *indeterminate*. It does so in contrast to the style of New Age that ultimately favors one overarching understanding of reality through a style that I call 'synergistic.' Before I do so, I need to explain what exactly I understand the cultural power of 'style' to be.

### 3.2. New Edge Style

In his book *Expectations of Modernity. Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (1999), the American anthropologist James Ferguson writes about style:

Those participating in common stylistic practices are united in sending similar stylistic messages, but they may at the same time have very diverse motives, values, or views of the world. (...) the relation between styles and the people who cultivate them is more complex than is captured in the idea of style as an "expression" of distinctive identities, values, or orientations. (...) cultural style need not map neatly onto an underlying cultural orientation or even, as Bourdieu would have it, a "habitus" (Ferguson 1999: 96, 97).

'Style', in other words, has the power to generate a sense of cultural unity in a situation where people distinguish themselves from each other in discursive, ideological or in any other sense. However, if we consider the fractal as a stylistic aspect of both the New Age and the New Edge cultural spheres, it becomes clear that style can unite diverging perspectives in quite different ways.

To introduce the way in which I understand the New Age style to unite diverging perspectives, I think it is useful to turn to Wouter Hanegraaff's 'preface' to his book *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996). Here Hanegraaff describes how he first became interested in New Age. Hanegraaff recalls "strolling into a newly-opened shop [located in Zwolle, the Netherlands] one afternoon, curious about the combination of pastel tints, tensionless music, and a smell of incense coming out of the open door". The shop, he would later learn to define, was a "New Age bookshop". There were books of Bhagwan and Meister Eckhart, quantum physics and witchcraft, psychology and astrology, "standing brotherly side by side in a manner which seemed to suggest that they had something in common" (Hanegraaff 1996: vii).

Hanegraaff's double observation that the New Age bookstore casually presents seemingly diverging topics "as if they have something in common"; and his observation of the 'soft' New Age atmosphere, are significant for my purpose of characterizing the style that is typical for New Age: a correlation exists between the New Age holistic and syncretistic treatment of fields of thought and practice that are generally at tension with one another (with 'secular' and 'esoteric' topics 'brotherly' related) and the style in which these topics are brought together by the owner of the bookstore. Soft pastel colors, relaxing music and sweet scents, I interpret, generate an atmosphere in which the very different topics of the books on the shelves are brought together in a 'tensionless' way.

Hanegraaff's stylistic observations can help us make the New Age holistic style at Synergenesis explicit. If we can extrapolate from the title of the Synergenesis conference that the dominant style here, and of New Age in general, is 'synergistic', we may recognize this synergistic style in the way that the fractal is implicated in a larger stylistic environment. The term 'synergy' refers to the construction of a whole that has acquired a significance that is higher than contained by each of its parts separately. In the 1960s, this term was refined by Buckminster Fuller to refer to the "behavior of whole systems, unpredicted by the behavior of their parts taken separately" (Fuller 1975:3). Synergenesis, the title of the conference, may be translated as expressive of the New Age idea that spiritual evolution results from the unification of separate aspects into a larger whole. The New Age synergistic style, in short, may be defined as characterized by the fact that it does not manifest the tensions between the different parts that form the whole, but that it foregrounds their larger unity.

What this unity is has been laid out for the Synergenesis attendees during the presentations and has been shown in the many artworks here displayed. In the presentations and in the art, the unity of nature and the sacred essence of natural, biological life and 'tribal' cultural existence was foregrounded. This 'bio-tribal' unity was also reflected in the style of dress of many of the Synergenesis attendees, which predominantly consisted of soft earth-toned colors. Also the tone of the music, ambient electronic accompanied with drumming and acoustic songs emanated a similar earthy, tribal sphere. In this setting, the fractal, as already mentioned above, appeared organic, and the techno-optimistic framework that enveloped the fractal at Accelerating Change was absent. The fractal was, in other words, part of a stylistic environment that did not manifest all possible readings of a fractal and that, as such, did not show the tensions that exist between these readings.

If this tentative characterization of the style of New Age as 'tensionless' and 'synergistic' is correct, the New Edge style by contrast, as we saw in Goffman's irony, foregrounds tensions and brings technoscientific enthusiasm and spiritual understandings of evolution together in one frame. In the following sections I

discuss *how* the New Edge style does this. I make thereby use of an additional advantage that an analysis in terms of style grants me. "Style", the anthropologist Birgit Meyer writes in her analysis of "Pentacostalite Style" in Ghana's Public Sphere (2004) "enables one to discern overlaps and links between different expressive forms (...)" (2004: 94). Accepting this, a description of New Edge in terms of style thus enables me to consider the relations between the various expressive forms of New Edge. Its style can apply to visual forms - like fractals - as well as to discursive strategies - such as irony - and to ways in which personhood is imagined. What characterizes the style of New Edge foremost, I argue, is its indeterminacy: its explicit discouragement of trying to read one consistent message into its performance and to discern one deeper meaning behind its appearance.

### **Irony**

When Ken Goffman founded *High Frontiers* - which later became the magazine *Mondo 2000* - he adopted the name 'R.U.Sirius.' Sirius is a planet that plays a role in certain New Age accounts as the original home of the human race (e.g. Hanegraaff 1996: 308). By adopting the name "R.U.Sirius" Goffman turned this New Age understanding into ironic self-mockery. A similar sense of irony characterized the magazine at large. While rife with New Age and psychedelic accounts of spiritual evolution and consciousness-transformation, the irony of *Mondo 2000* left indeterminate whether the editors really believed in the transcendental realities proclaimed in these accounts or whether they were merely indulging in fun.

The irony of *Mondo 2000* was particularly characterized by its hyperbolic language. Consider the first editorial, written by co-founder of *Mondo 2000* Allison Kennedy, a.k.a. 'Queen Mu':

This magazine is about what to do until the millennium comes. We're talking about Total Possibilities. Radical assaults on the limits of biology, gravity and time. The end of Artificial Scarcity. The dawn of a new humanism. High-jacking technology for personal empowerment, fun and games. Flexing those synapses! Stoking those neuropeptides! Making Bliss States our normal waking consciousness. Becoming the Bionic Angel.

But things are going to get weirder before they get better. The Rupture before the Rapture. Social and economic dislocation that will make the Cracked 80's look like summer camp (*Mondo*, Issue '7' [1], Fall 1989: 11).<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> The first issue of *Mondo 2000* was numbered '7' because the editors counted onwards from the previous *High Frontiers* editions. In the characteristically confusing style of the magazine, in later numberings, beginning with *Mondo*'s third issue, the editors retrospectively began counting the first issue of *Mondo* as '1'. This had the consequence that there are two issues '9' (the 3d and the 9th issue of *Mondo*).

While making far-reaching claims about the spiritual nature of human's interaction with digital technology, this hyperbolic self-mockery begged the reader not to take these claims seriously. In general, the magazine played with the blurred distinction between reality and fakery. The 'letters to the editors' were often feigned and reviews of books were possibly (though not certainly) written by the authors themselves.

Also in the choice of topic the Mondo 2000 editors showed interest in blurring distinctions between the 'real' and the 'fake'. For instance, the magazine published articles on plastic surgery and the editors even parodied the fake-musical duo Milli Vanilli. And while the editors presented themselves as leaders and visionaries of technospiritual transformation, they indulged in self-mockery about this pretentious position. In the first editorial (Fall 1989), the magazine was cast as being on the 'leading edge' of the transformation of consciousness that will emerge as a result of human-computer symbiosis. In the second edition (Summer 1990), a (presumably faked) response from a reader read:

Dear R.U.

The 1990s are here, and it's *our* turn to lead now.

We have ten years to whip this place into shape for the Third Millennium.

Accept your role as a key agent of social change.

Get serious. Lay it down. If *you* don't, who will?

Don't worry. People will follow. It's time. Let's go.

Peace & love,

Sirius responded to this letter:

Sorry. You caught me half-astral projecting.

R.U. Sirius

(Mondo, issue '8' [2]: 12)

Serious and passionate stories on the unification of 'East' with 'West' after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and serious discussions on the empowering aspects of computer hacking, were alternated with far-fetched conspiracy theories and self-conscious reflections on the Mondo transformational aspirations. An example is an advertisement that contains a questionnaire that readers were urged to fill in as a way of assisting the editors in telling a "Mondoid [a typical reader of Mondo, DZ] from an Ordinary Human Being" (Mondo, issue 8[2]: 30, 31).

In an article for *Artforum*, the media scholar Vivian Sobchack was highly critical of the irony of Mondo 2000. Sobchack was asked, in 1991, to analyze the first three issues of the magazine that had thus far been published. In the resulting article, Sobchack chooses to consider Mondo's irony as a way of "backing off from commitment" and as a cloak covering Mondo's *real* message. At first, as she wrote, she was almost seduced in considering the magazine utopian: "At first read", she begun the article, "M2 seemed, somehow, important in its utopian plunge into the user-friendly future of better living not only through a chemistry left over from the 1960s, but also through personal computing, bio-and nano-technologies [and]

virtual realities" (Sobchack 2001: 11). Yet, her definite judgment of the magazine is that it is an irresponsible and selfish magazine for the (male) privileged that is dangerous in its commitment to virtual reality instead of real reality:

Hiding under the guise of populism, the liberation politics touted in the pages of *M2* are the stuff of a romantic, swashbuckling, irresponsible individualism that fills the dreams of "mondoids" who, by day, sit at computer consoles working for (and becoming) corporate America (2001: 18).

When I asked Goffman about his opinion of Sobchack's critique he told me that he doesn't even remember what Sobchack had written, and that they simply had a "good laugh with it". Goffman:

We didn't want to represent the world, or a country, or a political organization, any of that. We were just a bunch of people who got together, doing a magazine as an artform. (...) we were having fun and were also trying to mutate the world. Trying to make, have something really different happen to the human species. We were doing both of those things at the same time. We were intrigued by it and modestly hopeful that a change would occur in the human situation.<sup>194</sup>

'Queen Mu', co-founder of Mondo2000, Goffman told me, was mostly responsible for discussing this change in a New Age way, others were more addressing the tech-side of it. The result was a magazine that avoided any intellectualist or ideological interpretation of what it was about. While Goffman's irony seems as such to 'back off' from its commitment to its *real* message, as Sobchack wrote, it should better be understood *as* the real message of the magazine, which is intrinsically eclectic and holistic yet performed in a way different from New Age.

When Goffman and I spoke about the New Age, I mentioned the New Age holistic tendency to fuse things into a larger whole. Goffman: "(...) embracing it all... well, we were kind of doing the same thing. (...) Irony does notice distinctions". Through the irony of the magazine, it could, in other words, embrace multiple interpretational frameworks together and celebrate different roads to transformation without smoothing out the differences between them. Seeing this attitude as central to New Edge, we can say that the New Edge discourse seeks to be holistic by openly allowing different interpretational contexts to be present within the same frame. It even allows for very different kinds of understandings of irony *itself*.

### **Different Interpretations of Irony**

"The ironic imagination", Michael Saler writes, is a "rational way in which enchantment can be reconciled with the rational and secular tenets of modernity" (Saler, 2004: 139). This is one of the ways in which the irony of Mondo 2000 can be interpreted: through the irony of the magazine, people can write about the

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<sup>194</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Ken Goffman, San Francisco, September 23 2008.

evolution of the cosmos while distancing themselves from the spiritual connotation of such an account.

Another interpretation of the meaning of irony is suggested by Erik Davis in his article *Beyond Belief*. Here, Davis writes about "sacred irony" (Davis 2005: 32). More than a cynical negation of its own message, 'sacred irony' shows awareness that form corrupts:

Modernity has bequeathed to many of us a profound disenchantment with both the cultural and institutional forms of religion as well as the beliefs that sustain them. At the same time, many feel the sneaking suspicion that such forms may be necessary as vehicles or containers of the visionary insights and sacred energies many continue to crave. Though these forms may successfully channel the spirit for a time, they inevitably fail: they become consumer idols, or safety blankets, or cheesy parodies of themselves. By affirming an ironic relationship to these forms, we draw attention to their incompleteness, to their inability to satisfy our yearning or sustain the disenchanting movement of spirit (Ibid.).

Davis here describes irony as a strategy to evoke religious experience without dogmatic attachment to religious *forms*. This also appears to be one of the ways in which Goffman understands the significance of irony:

Irony has an element of worldliness to it, it gives you a certain amount of sophistication that doesn't prevent you from also viewing the world in a holistic manner, if that's what you're inclined to do, it doesn't prevent you from being a spiritual person if that's what you're inclined to do, or any of those things, it just prevents you from becoming a humorless ass about it. Actually, if you look at the most interesting forms of the sort of spiritual thinking, quest for enlightenment, Zen, Taoism, Suffism, covered in my counterculture book [*Counterculture Through the Ages*, 2004, DZ], it is all about irony. When you wake up in Zen, it is about a question that is unanswerable, a riddle that is unanswerable, that makes you laugh at the situation of being here.<sup>195</sup>

In this sense, the irony of *Mondo 2000* is not an act of backing away from commitment to its spiritual message but it is itself a manifestation of a spiritual attitude.

Irony, in *Mondo 2000*, serves a secular and an enchanting purpose simultaneously and ultimately negotiates both interpretational frameworks. This understanding of irony is also relevant for understanding the irony of another New Edge publication that is strongly associated with *Mondo 2000*: those produced by the 'parody cult' the *Church of Subgenius*. The Church of Subgenius<sup>196</sup> is a parody religion that was founded in 1979 from Dallas by a certain 'Ivan Stang' and that became highly popular among the New Edge subculture in early 1990s Bay Area. One can become a member of the Church by sending in 30 dollars to the Church.

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<sup>195</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Ken Goffman, San Francisco, September 23 2008.

<sup>196</sup> I mentioned the Church of Subgenius also in chapter one as the parody cult that Homey had joined.

What is received in return is the reward of eternal 'slack.' Slack, a condition also mentioned in chapter two, refers to the 'luck' and good fortune that comes to you without having to work hard for it. The Church of Subgenius postulates the idea of 'Original Slack' - with 'slack' being the original state of reality that manifests itself when you decondition from social expectations. 'Slack' is granted by the church to the 'subgenii', people who are deconditioned from intelligence and thought and who stumble through life in unglorious fashion from accident to accident.<sup>197</sup> The Church of Subgenius, as such, gives popular cultural form to gnostic spirituality. With its notion of 'slack' it parodies the gnostic idea of original divine unity, which is taken from people through social and cultural brainwashing.

In the past decades, the 'Church' has published many books, periodicals and videos. One of the ways in which these publications are ironic is in its ongoing switching between different paradigms and different epistemological approaches towards 'the truth.' In the second edition of *Mondo 2000*, 'Doug St. Clair' reviews the SubGenius publication "Three Fisted Tales of Bob":

For those of you unfamiliar with the Church, you *must* find a copy of *The Book of Subgenius*. A parody of religions, cults, occult systems, all forms of politics, ritual, belief systems...have I left anybody out? ... It's simply the funniest book to come out in the 80's.

SubGenius is not just a genre, it's an active lifestyle, or mindstyle (...) It's a celebration of inexplicability, a rejoicing in what we *still don't know*. It's also a celebration of imperfection. It clings in a very ornery way to the conviction that human beings are hilariously imperfect, that the very idea of striving for perfection (as taught in so many New Age schools) is pure foolishness. "Bob" Dobbs isn't smart, or even *good*. He's just lucky. Slack *is* luck (...) It's also non-political or, rather, above politics. No way is "Bob" going to save the world. His function is rather to make it *worth* saving ("Three Fisted Tales Of "Bob" in *Mondo 2000* issue #2: 155).

The god of the Church, "Bob" is furthermore presented as a figure towards whom the SubGeniuses display a "puzzling attitude combining extreme distrust, forced or at least reluctant worship, and sudden, unexpected spastic spurts of blind, unquestioning faith" (Ibid.) (fig 16).

When I asked Homey why the Church of Subgenius is so ironic, he answered:

"It has to be!"

" Why?" I ask.

After thinking for a while, he says:

"Because the truth is too powerful not to be cautious with it".

A little while later the subject is brought up again.

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<sup>197</sup> See discussions about the meaning of 'slack' at [http://www.subgenius.com/bigfist/answers/faqs/X0038\\_The\\_essence\\_of\\_slack.html](http://www.subgenius.com/bigfist/answers/faqs/X0038_The_essence_of_slack.html). Retrieved May 2010.

"Humor", Homey says, "is needed to break out of the idea that there is something out there that is going to save you. People think the conspiracy is a bunch of men at a table plotting the world, but it is not that. It is the entire set of unconscious assumptions that people make and don't realize it. And so it is up to them to break free from that. Sorry if I sound so serious here".<sup>198</sup>

In one and the same conversation, irony is explained as a protecting mechanism against the power of magic as well as a tool that prevents people from being too seriously attached to a belief in a higher power. Both these explanations interpret irony as a stylistic strategy for relating to the sacred but both types of explanation forge the relationship in a different way. In one sense, irony is here approached as a sacred epistemology in the sense that it protects people from too immediate an experience with the sacred. In another sense, irony is here presented as a secular epistemology, enabling conversation about the transcendental while rejecting the notion that there is 'some higher power out there to save you.' In this latter sense, irony enables people to speak of a sacred reality while retaining individual responsibility over their own lives.

The key characteristic of the role played by irony within New Edge is thus that there is no way of objectively defining what its significance is. It is indeterminate, not only in the sense that it expresses inconclusiveness about the question whether its message needs to be taken seriously or not, but also regarding the question whether this indeterminacy needs to be interpreted as a sacred or secular act. Irony, in other words, enables the simultaneous existence of seeming oppositional epistemological strategies, much in the same way as the devotees of the Church of Subgenius worship their god "Bob".

## **Multiplicity**

Besides 'irony', another feature of the New Edge style is its celebration of 'multiplicity.' 'Multiplicity' was an important concept in the early 1990s within the VR community as represented in magazines like *Mondo 2000*. The term referred to the hopeful idea that VR could help people get back in touch with all the diverse identities people have inside themselves, whereas the mainstream world only accepts one. In an interview with *Mondo 2000* in 1993, media artist Allucquere Roseanne Stone defines 'multiplicity' as a way of "not being sure where people's edges are":

I notice the expression 'multiplicity' being kicked around at one conference or another, so multiplicity is apparently a happening thing all of a sudden. That's nice to see, because the advantage of multiplicity as a political strategy is that it's a way of disrupting the idea that people are single personalities, which is a method of political control (...). Multiplicity is another way of not being sure where people's edges are, because there are a lot of them in the same physical envelope, and you're

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<sup>198</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Homey San Francisco May 2005



never really sure which one you've got. Politically it's a complete no-no -- when you name a person you've named all of them. There's only one identity. All the others are bogus, and that's a specific political strategy. It's a way of nailing people down, and controlling them. The idea of creating the illusion that everybody is singular is a way of producing a particularly manageable, tractable kind of identity. But nobody is really singular.<sup>199</sup>

Virtual Reality developer and theoretician Brenda Laurel, who also featured in *Mondo 2000*, linked the celebration of 'multiplicity' to Virtual Reality. Virtual Reality, Laurel believes, helps 'awaken' the realities that we already contain inside ourselves but which are suppressed in daily life: "Like in theater, when people place themselves in an unfamiliar setting and behave in ways that is different from behavior in ordinary reality", Virtual Reality awakens the many different selves, identities and modes of being that are already present inside someone in an unconscious way. As Laurel is convinced, "when you shine a flashlight into your brain, you can find everything you look for (...) we contain a lot more than what we are conscious about a lot of the time".<sup>200</sup> Virtual Reality then, is an environment that brings out our unconscious selves.

Multiple personhood was performed, as Brenda Laurel told me, at a conference on Virtual Worlds by Allucquere Rosanne Stone. As Laurel told me, and as Bonnie De Varco and Galen Brandt later confirmed, Stone, standing on stage, subtly changed her gender throughout her presentation. She did so by altering her posture and voice timbre, one moment appearing as a full-blown woman, the other moment as an attractive, macho man. Multiple personhood was also performed at the 1997 Mindstates conference by "Zoe7". On the Mindstates website, Zoe7 is described as a "multi-dimensional synergy personality cluster", who inhabits the body and mind of six personalities. Zoe7's theoretical interest reflect a similar 'multiplicit' configuration. He has written books on "parallel universes (...) multiple personalities, and schizophrenia".<sup>201</sup>

## Hyperbolic Performance

Since Ervin Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) social scientists have generally been aware of the significance of the performative aspects of cultural practice. In the context of the style of New Edge, however, performance plays an additional, heightened role. Whereas all cultural practice can be labeled 'performative', the New Edge style can be called 'hyperbolically performative': by drawing attention to itself as a performance, it strengthens its indeterminacy. I will make this argument in this section by focusing on one significant theme in Ervin

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<sup>199</sup> The article is published online: <http://cyber.eserver.org/mondo.txt>. Retrieved November 7, 2010.

<sup>200</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Brenda Laurel, Santa Cruz, California, November 2005.

<sup>201</sup> <http://www.matrixmasters.com/speaking/mindstates/speakerbios/speakerbios.html>. Retrieved October 13 2010

Goffman's work: the distinction between front-, and backstage performance. The New Edge, I argue, is characterized by the fact that its performance cancels out the possibility of making such a distinction.

With his theory of performance, Ervin Goffman advanced an understanding of the manner in which social actors negotiate, in the context of social life, different public roles and different interpretative contexts. Goffman observed the ways in which social actors reach temporary "working consensuses" as a way of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation. During such a working consensus, people agree as to "whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored" (Goffman 1959: 20) and potential conflicting understandings of reality are temporarily concealed. He thereby distinguished between "front stage" performance, as someone's public presentation, and "backstage performance" as someone's mode of being and feeling in a more private setting (1959: 21).

In the New Age setting of Synergenesis, a clear distinction between front-, and backstage performance can be observed. The front-stage performance, I propose, is formed by the synergistic style and the holistic discourse. As illustrated by the swirling fractal at the rave, this frontstage performance suggests ultimate unity between the technoscientific body of the fractal and the 'bio-tribal' stylistic larger atmosphere. This unity however is challenged by the backstage performance, as ensued in the Question & Answer session after Pinchbeck's talk, in which strong distinctions between 'singularitarians' and the Synergenesis attendees were evoked.

By contrast, the New Edge does not establish a 'working consensus' from which someone can deviate in a 'backstage' setting. On the contrary, the performance of the New Edge style draws its power from its ability to present all kinds of possible manifestations of reality openly and explicitly into the same frame. If we consider for instance the difference between 'New Age' and 'scientific' readings of the fractal, in the setting of New Edge the performative quality of the fractal is exactly that it enables the observer to consider all kinds of possible interpretations simultaneously. Likewise, when multiple genders are performed by Sandy Stone, or when multiple personhood is performed by 'Zoe7', it is the intention of the performance to emphasize the possibility of simultaneity of different modes of being. In this sense, the New Edge style falls outside the explanatory scope of Goffman's theory of performance.

One major facet of the difference between New Edge performance and Ervin Goffman's understanding of cultural performance concerns the role of self-reflection. In Goffman's scheme, it takes a social scientist like Goffman to discover cultural acts as performances - which are otherwise habitual and unconsciously performed by social actors who have tacitly been socialized into accepting certain roles. However, the New Edge needs to be situated in a cultural context that is highly reflexive, in the sense that proponents of New Edge are themselves quite

conscious of the power of performance as a way of mediating different cultural meanings. This can be illustrated by looking at the role that is played by dress in the context of New Edge. Clothes, Ervin Goffman observed, are part of a person's repertoire of "sign vehicles" (1964: 34), used to tacitly and subtly assert different kinds of social roles as distinct. In the context of New Edge this cultural fact is consciously embraced in a more explicit and expressive manner as a way of performing indeterminacy regarding one's actual social identity.

Erik Davis for instance uses the performative activity of 'dressing up' as a way of enabling himself to be part of a particular cultural environment without being attached to it. I saw Davis for instance in October 2005 at Synergenesis where many of the attendees wore typical hippie-attire: dreadlocks, tattoos, long dresses. In contrast, the blouse and pants of Davis made him stand out a bit, profiling him not as the typical 'hippie' most attendees appeared to be. This surprised me: a month earlier, when I went to a lecture by Davis at the San Francisco Art Institute, addressed to a somewhat 'straighter' audience, Davis was dressed as a 'hippie' – including sandals and colorful attire. When I asked Davis, in a later interview, about his ongoing change of dress it was then that he told me about his sense of 'liminality' within each of the scenes he was interested in. In each new subcultural scene, Davis adopts a new posture by dressing against the grain of the norm of that scene.

Also Bruce Damer, the NASA engineer who speaks regularly for Mindstates, self-consciously literally *fashions* different identities for himself which make him stand out relative to the different social scenes in which he moves. In October 2005 Damer organized an event for some well-known 'founding fathers' of the personal computer industry at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View.<sup>202</sup> Steve Wozniak, the creator of the first Apple, and Lee Felsenstein, the inventor of the Osborne computer, wore simple, inconspicuous dress. In contrast to them, Bruce really stood out with his 'psychedelic attire', wearing a shiny shirt with bright purple, green and yellow swirly patterns. At Burning Man, where I saw Bruce give a speech, he wore a white long robe and when he spoke at a conference organized by my research group *Cyberspace Salvations* he was dressed in his self-made 'cybergarment' - pants and dress styled in combined 'Renaissance' and 'cyberpunk' style.

The New Edge performances are highly self-consciously staged and often exaggerated: as such, they draw explicit attention to themselves *as* performances, but performances in the context of which a critical observer would not be able to discover a particular 'working consensus' nor to identify a clear distinction between

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<sup>202</sup> The event was the 30th anniversary of the 'Homebrew Computer Club', discussed in more detail in chapter four, a computer hobbyist club that spawned the first personal computer companies, such as IMSAI, PET, and the most famous of all, Apple.

frontstage and backstage. As such the hyperbolic performative aspect of the New Edge style leaves it to each individual onlooker but most significantly to the one employing the style, to decide for herself what the reality is that is being performed.

### **3.3. The Backstage of New Edge**

In the above I have sought to describe the distinctiveness of the New Edge style vis-à-vis that of New Age as a difference between a (New Edge) multiplicit style versus a (New Age) synergistic style.

By defining the distinctiveness of New Edge in this way, it becomes clear that there is a strong ideological dimension to the New Edge style: as part of its style, the New Edge forges an idealtypical way of being, that is intellectually, physically and psychically flexible and capable of moving within and out of different epistemological and ontological contexts. Ultimately, the idealtypical way of being that is constructed as part of the New Edge style, is capable of celebrating technoscientific rationality and New Age spirituality within the same frame. However, we may ask, does the New Edge really not have a 'backstage' performance? Does it really allow for a simultaneous existence of all possible interpretive frameworks and modes of being, or does it work so as to favor one mode of being more than another?

This question, with which I conclude this chapter, leads us to a consideration of some discourses and forms of stereotyping in the surroundings of New Edge that constrain the latter's performance. First, I will show, the New Edge attempt to overcome distinctions between 'spirituality'/religion' and 'technoscience' is challenged by the ongoing tendency in its cultural proximity to consider these part of distinct spheres. A second, related challenge vis-à-vis New Edge multiplicity are gender stereotypes that distinguish between a male, rationalist, autonomous, 'flexible' gender and a religious, intuitive, and constrained feminine gender.

#### **Challenging the Religion-Science Dichotomy**

In the start of this chapter, we saw how Mindstates founder Jon Hanna brought together, in his self-reflections, different epistemological forms within the same frame: reflecting on himself as a 'believer' the one moment and as an 'atheist' the other, Hanna celebrates the epistemological attitude that is typically related to 'religion' along with that of 'science.' At the same time, in the reflections of all the New Edge spokespersons, we saw that when New Age was reflected upon in a negative sense, it was referred to as a 'belief-system' (Hanna) and as 'rigid' and 'dogmatic' (Goffman). In contrast to New Age 'belief' and 'dogmatism', the New Edge spokespersons presented themselves as 'skeptical.' Whereas thus on the one

hand epistemological eclecticism is manifested whereby 'religious' and 'scientific' attitudes are combined, New Edge rhetoric at the same time challenges this eclecticism by distinguishing between the epistemological attitudes tied to 'religion' and 'science' - here polarized as 'belief' versus 'skepticism.' This perseverance of dichotomous thought forms one of the 'backstages' of New Edge. This 'backstage' is not merely an intrinsic part of the New Edge discourse - challenging its own eclecticism from 'within' - but defines also the limits of the New Edge performance in the larger cultural environment of the San Francisco Bay Area. This can be illustrated once again by looking at Carl and his fractal screensaver.

We may see the fractal screensaver as fully expressive of the New Edge epistemological ideal: as it travels through the different social scenes of the San Francisco Bay Area - some of which manifest as 'scientific', others as 'spiritual', yet others as 'New Edge' - it condenses various meanings in its moving, morphing body. In an interview that I had with Carl prior to Synergenesis, it seemed to me as if Carl himself was moving from setting to setting with a similar ease as his screensaver, adjusting himself to different interpretative frameworks along the way. Talking about the computer code of the screensaver in the scientific terminology of 'genotype' - whereby he referred to the actual appearance of the fractal as the 'phenotype' - Carl presented himself as an Artificial Life scientist who is studying evolution through the creation of life. At the same time Carl employed the mystical narrative of experiencing 'oneness' so common in a cultural environment like Synergenesis. Carl celebrated the screensaver as "highly cooperative:" by participating in the creation of this screensaver, Carl claimed, "you become part of this one living creature".<sup>203</sup>

Carl also told me how his understanding of computer science helped him arrive at a transcendental understanding of reality. As an undergraduate in computer science at Brown University in the late 1980s, and later as a graduate at Carnegie-Mellon in the 1990s, Carl engaged in psychedelics-use and meditative practices as a way of doing a lot of soul-searching. "I was reading Teilhard de Chardin<sup>204</sup> and this whole Gaia thing<sup>205</sup> (...) I thought that we are on this path...to more meaning, more information, higher complexity, which is undefined (...) I believe something is happening. Technology is part of it". And by means of the creation of technology, Carl also feels to be part of 'it'.<sup>206</sup>

Whereas Carl blurred distinctions between science, technology and spirituality in his self-understanding and in his 'soul searching' practices, in our

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<sup>203</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with 'Carl', San Francisco, October 6 2005.

<sup>204</sup> Teilhard de Chardin was a French 'priest-biologist' who described, among others in his book *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959 [1957]) an evolutionary and universal ascent of spirit.

<sup>205</sup> The term 'Gaia' was coined in this way by the biochemist James Lovelock in the 1960s as the idea that the earth is a self-organizing system in which all living matter functions as a single organism.

<sup>206</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with 'Carl', San Francisco, October 6 2005

interview Carl also showed me something of the tensions that he experienced between the scientific and spiritual narratives present in the rave environment in which he moves. Carl told me this 'off the record', and asked me, if I chose to write about it, to do so in a way that would not reveal the identity of the rave community he spoke about. The example given by Carl was a discussion that took place on the mailing list of the rave community in which he participates - a community that overlaps in membership with the people who were present at Mindstates, Synergenesis and at the Rant and Rave evening. The discussion was about a certain self-ascribed healer who claimed that cancer can be cured through the application of consciousness. Certain ravers on the list were supportive of this healer, but Carl was highly disturbed by this mode of thought because he considers it dangerous and irresponsible. In a similar sense, Carl told me, he strongly rejects the comparison made by some ravers between the 'energies' of their bodies and the energies described by physics: "When they talk about the energies of the body and nature, a lot of people think that this 'energy' they talk about is the same as 'magnetic energy.' Of course it is not (...)"<sup>207</sup> Another sign of Carl's disapproval of the 'lack of scientificity' of the people in his cultural environment came when we were listening to Daniel Pinchbeck's presentation at Synergenesis. Sitting on a bench next to Carl, I noticed that Carl felt the need to disassociate himself from Pinchbeck's prophecies: quietly, Carl whispered to me that he thought Pinchbeck a "nutcase", "there is no science in this", he told me. Referring to such 'naive' uses of science, Carl referred to the participants of his rave community as "wishy-washy New Agers".

The fact that Carl whispered his disapproval of Pinchbeck to me quietly instead of challenging him as a 'nutcase' in public; and the fact that he told me his disapproval of the healer 'off the record', show that Carl distinguishes between his 'real identity' (a scientist) and the New Age discourse in his cultural surroundings. Even though it may seem as if Carl's own conceptual framework blurs 'science', 'technology' and 'spirituality', at Synergenesis Carl structures his experiences in such a way that he becomes a 'scientist in disguise', who is secretly present in an environment that is religious and non-scientific. What appears a dominant framework for Carl here is not the eclecticism of New Edge. Instead, he feels pressed to make distinctions.

Nik, whom I introduce in greater detail in chapter four, employs a similar type of self-reflective narrative. I met Nik at Accelerating Change and followed him through different social scenes, among which Burning Man and certain rave collectives. Nik is a self-educated physicist, chemist, computer animator and a participant of the same rave collective as Carl. Like Carl, Nik's reflections on high-tech and science verge on the mystical: he compares physics to Zen Buddhism, and

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

his practice as a computer animator make him ponder the existence of a 'fourth dimension' in consciousness.<sup>208</sup> In the context of Burning Man he uses technology to project the star constellation Pleiades, which, Nik explains, has much value in New Age mythology but which *he* finds "scientifically" interesting.

Even though his scientific and technological interests overlap with the 'spiritual' interests in his cultural environment, Nik nevertheless distinguishes between these other 'New Agers' and himself as a scientist:

New Age is very annoying and delusional and arbitrary. And when I hear two people talk to each other, I think, neither of them is really understanding the other, but they are both sort of agreeing because of the ambiguity of their story telling, and I feel sometimes annoyed about being in this world. But I learn more about being chameleon like and invisible rather than my telling them what I think.

In our interview, Nik thus presented himself to me as a 'scientist in disguise' - someone who can blend in, like a chameleon, with a surrounding New Age culture while knowing, deep inside, that his true identity is that of a scientist. While earlier in the interview he had spoken about the mystical experiences evoked by technology and science, later he felt pressed to draw clear distinctions between 'New Age' spirituality and technoscientific rationality.

Whereas in these examples Carl and Nik act as scientists in disguise, reverse examples, of people operating as esoterics in disguise, can also be found. The Virtual Worlds developer Bonnie De Varco is a case in point. In chapter two we saw how De Varco thinks of Virtual Worlds as consciousness enlarging and as educational; fostering spiritual growth and having a function in the academic curriculum simultaneously. Virtual Worlds show to De Varco that science, spirituality and technology, religion and mysticism, education and consciousness-growth can all be combined and be generative of a higher perspective that become intuitively available when one is immersed in these online worlds.<sup>209</sup> However, despite her own New Edge-like understanding that Virtual Worlds condense and fuse the meanings of science and spirituality, she is careful, she tells me, not to mention in the setting of the "educational environment" she works in, that she understands these Virtual Worlds as gateways to a "fourth dimension":

I think that in the teaching/learning environment, you just have to be (...) careful. I can't tell the teachers that *that* is what we are doing. (...) they don't know what we are doing, that it changes your mode of operating in the world, your way of being, your perception and perspective (...) I have to stay very careful and mainstream.<sup>210</sup>

While De Varco's Virtual Worlds designs themselves seem to move freely within and between different nodes of a network, Bonnie's cautious approach illustrates that she does not feel the same freedom herself.

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<sup>208</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with 'Nik', Santa Cruz, January 19 2006.

<sup>209</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Bonnie de Varco, Santa Cruz, California, January 4, 2006.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

Another such example comes from Rob Tow, the husband of the Virtual Worlds artist and scholar Brenda Laurel. Tow is a hardware and software engineer and technology consultant. He harbors a simultaneous interest in magic. For Tow, his interest in magic is highly compatible and not at all in conflict with science and technology. Yet, he knows that in the corporate/scientific environment in which he works, he runs the risk of being scorned for this, just as it happened to Tow and Laurel's mutual late friend Terrence McKenna<sup>211</sup> when they brought him to speak at a Silicon Valley corporation. Tow and Laurel told me how McKenna lectured in front of an audience of computer scientists about his theory on the "novelty curve", a theory about time progressing as "harmonic waves", enabling at predictable intervals unique opportunities for transformation and "novelty". When McKenna gave this talk, Laurel and Tow told me, "all the mathematicians chewed him up and spat him out". Afterwards, when they went for dinner, they asked McKenna how it had been. In his characteristic nasal voice, he told them: "next time, let's do a root canal".<sup>212</sup>

Even though to Tow the laws of magic are quite compatible with the laws of computer science and technology, he feels the necessity to disguise the seriousness of his interest in magic in the scientific setting of work. Tow illustrates how he does this by telling me about a recent interface design that Tow thinks of as magical - a component of this magic is that the interface involves the use of hand gestures like magical rituals do. "Isn't it great", he says,

I have official permission from a Silicon Valley corporation to make magic real. At the corporation they use the word 'magic' too, to describe the device. Only, they don't know there is a 'k' at the end.

Like other magicians,<sup>213</sup> Tow writes magick with a 'k' as a way of distinguishing 'real', supernatural magickal forces from mere magical 'trickery' performed on stage. This difference in writing does not show in speech. Hence, Tow is able to talk with his managers about his technology in terms of magic, whereby only Tow knows how serious this term actually is.

These four examples illustrate the difference between the ideal performance of New Edge and ideological limitations to it. All four technology developers don't necessarily recognize significant distinctions between technoscientific and esoteric practices - whether thought of in terms of religion, spirituality or magick. Yet, whereas their artifacts embody this epistemological

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<sup>211</sup> I mentioned Terrence McKenna in chapter two as the one declaring the transformation of consciousness to be simultaneous with the transformation of technical culture (McKenna 1991: 32).

<sup>212</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Brenda Laurel and Rob Tow, Santa Cruz, California, November 2005.

<sup>213</sup> In *The Virtual Pagan*, the neopagan Lisa McSherry writes: "I spell "magick" with a *k* to distinguish it from the magic of today's modern illusionists with their entertaining sleight-of-hand tricks" (2002: 6, 7).



eclecticism, as persons they don't feel the liberty to manifest this eclecticism themselves in all social settings that they traverse. They either operate as scientists in disguise or as esoterics in disguise and thereby affirm hegemonic distinctions between the secular and the religious.

## Gender

At Synergenesis, Carl did not merely distinguish between himself as a 'scientist' and the cultural environment around him as 'New Age', but also showed that gender is a significant aspect that marks this distinction. When I asked Carl what exactly he meant with 'wishy-washy New Agers', when speaking of the rave collective of which he was a part, Carl answered:

there are guys who are into massage and women who are into computers, but men and women also form two ends of the poles. On the one end are the female wishy-washy New Agers and on the other end are the male rationalist scientists. They are two poles of an opposite.<sup>214</sup>

In such ways, Carl thus casually equates rationalism and science with the male gender and non-scientific naiveté with the female gender. Carl also told me that in his rave environment, he feels often quite alone as a "male rationalist scientist". The distinction thus forged also offers Carl an easy excuse for his presence in a 'non-scientific' environment like Synergenesis: when I asked why Carl was part of this rave scene then, he answered: "there are plenty of good-looking women here, and they know how to make a party".<sup>215</sup>

Carl is not the only one who endorses such ideal-typical gendered distinctions between 'male rationalist scientists' and 'non-scientific' women. Inadvertently, Galen Brandt projects a similar gendered understanding onto herself. Brandt has studied at Harvard and is currently conducting a PhD project on sensorial environments. Nevertheless, Galen thinks of herself as non-scientific. This understanding of non-scientificity is grounded in two self-reflective observations made by her: in the first place, she says that she is unable to make distinctions between the animate and the inanimate and between nature and technology and that she differs, in this respect, from the scientists in Silicon Valley. Secondly, Galen thinks of her approach towards Virtual Worlds as typically female in the sense that she is open to intuitions, to embodiment and to "irrational", "precognitive" experiences whereas many of the 'geeks' she knows, including her own husband Damer when they first met, are predominantly "in their heads".<sup>216</sup> As we saw in chapter two, also Bruce Damer blurs distinctions between

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<sup>214</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with 'Carl', San Francisco, October 6 2005.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Galen after a group interview with Bruce Damer, Galen Brandt, Jim Funaro and Bonnie de Varco, Boulder Creek, January 2006.

the animate and the inanimate, between nature and technology. Yet, this does not stop him from thinking of himself as a scientist. In contrast, Galen is more inclined to interpret this blurring as resulting from her 'feminine', 'non-scientific naiveté.'

There are various ways in which such stereotypes are perpetuated within the larger technospiritual environment of the Bay Area, some of them subtle, some unconscious, some explicit and some in spite of overt and active attempts to counteract social stereotyping. One line along which gendered understandings are affirmed is along the 'science-non-science' line. This line intersects with another mode of distinction; between 'embodied' women and 'disembodied' men, which in turn, imbues men with a greater capacity of being 'flexible', and of performing New Edge detachment and mobility better.

The sense that women are more 'in tune' with their bodies and that this is the distinction that differentiates male and female approaches to cyberspace is pervasive in this cultural environment and is often made explicit. Along with Galen Brandt, the Virtual Worlds artists and theoreticians Bonnie De Varco, Brenda Laurel and Roseanne Allucquere Stone agreed for instance that there is a distinction in how men and women engage with cyberspace. At a conference on Virtual Worlds, they reached the conclusion that "men go to cyberspace to leave their bodies behind whereas women go to cyberspace to find their bodies".<sup>217</sup> This is also a distinction made by Bruce Damer. Before Damer met Galen, he told me, he lived 'in his head' and 'didn't think about [his] body much.' Now, thanks to feminine influence, he calls himself a "whole body nerd, who comes to realize that the body and emotions are important".<sup>218</sup>

Another example of such gendered distinctions can be found in the writings of the Mindstates presenter and Bay Area writer Douglas Rushkoff on Bay Area rave culture. In his book *Cyberia* (1994), Rushkoff writes about 'Earth Girl', whom I also mentioned in chapters one and two as an organizing member of the Toontown raves in the early 1990s in San Francisco and who was one of the speakers at the Rant & Rave evening organized by R.U.Sirius in 2005. In *Cyberia* Earth Girl - who then still called herself by her given name "Neysa" - is portrayed as a mindless, unthinking woman who 'babbles on' to the press. Her male partner Mark Heley considers the way Earth Girl speaks about smart drinks to the press, unscientific and dangerous to the larger 'project' of consciousness transformation. Heley, like Earth Girl has a lot of 'theories' on virtual reality, smart drugs and raving but feels that he expresses them in a more 'factual' and analytical manner

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<sup>217</sup> Group interview with Bruce Damer, Galen Brandt, Jim Funaro and Bonnie de Varco, Boulder Creek, January 2006; Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Brenda Laurel, Santa Cruz, California, November 2005.

<sup>218</sup> Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Bruce Damer, Santa Cruz, September 2005

compared to Neysa. These are the oppositional portraits sketched by Ruskhoff of Neysa and Mark:

In many ways, Heley and Neysa are opposites. He's an intellectual who grounds every psychedelic revelation into a plan. He's all business, and even his most far-reaching DMT experiences mean nothing to him if he can't process them into concrete realizations about the nature of reality. If those realizations are to be worth anything, he must also quickly determine how to communicate them to others through articles, chemicals, club events, or cultural viruses. Heley is a mind. So much so, that his body, often neglected through aggressive chemical use and lack of sleep, revolts in the form of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which incapacitates him completely for weeks or even months at a time.

Neysa lives through her body almost exclusively. She can feel what she calls spiritual "weather", evaluate people at a glance, and predict events in the weeks ahead entirely through her body. She is incapable of articulating her experience through words, but has developed her own "language of heart", which takes the form of a smile, a touch, an embrace, or even sex. (...)

Where Heley valued smart drugs for their mental effects, Earth Girl saw them as a physical preparation for the coming age (1994: 96, 97).

In creating this portrait it seems as if Ruskhoff takes for granted how Neysa and Mark reflect on themselves, as the latter being all about 'mind' and the former all about 'body.' It is probable that also Mark Heley smiles occasionally and has sex, but this is not considered the 'language' in which he speaks. Also Neysa reflects and has theories but this is not what she is 'about.' And just as much as Mark, was 'Earth Girl' analytically and organizationally involved in raving. Nevertheless, according to Ruskhoff, she reflected on herself in the stereotyped feminine terms of embodiment and intuition.

Another example of the way in which stereotypical notions of gender are perpetuated in the New Edge cultural environment is given by the following workshop announcement of Burning Man:

Do you spend more time thinking, planning and doing than you do loving, nurturing, flowing and being? Come let your divine feminine flow (*What Where When* Guide, Burning Man 2005: 19).

Whereas to be 'thinking, planning and doing' is as such contrasted to the feminine essence and whereas non-rationality is even considered one of the elements of feminine *divinity*, to be 'embodied' is considered an anomalous state of being to the male hackers who participate in raves: this latter understanding is illustrated by the commentary given by the hacker Gary on his own involvement in a particular rave. One day, Gary came home from a rave and told me that he had been carrying speakers around, changing the locations of lights, and taken some drugs. "Yes", Gary said, "I like to be a little more on the outside of such events, I like to be organizationally involved". Another hacker, Damien, told me that he used to participate in raving as a DJ. He called his involvement in this scene 'analytical.'

Both Gary and Damien are physically and mentally engaged in the act of raving but reflect on themselves in the masculine terms of 'analysis' and 'organization.'

As such examples show, men seem to identify more intuitively and casually than women with the New Edge values of cultural detachment, flexibility and skepticism. Whereas the New Edge does offer ways to imagine embodiment in relation to flexible transformation (see also chapter two), and subjective intuition in relation to rationalist autonomy, the New Edge performative competence is conditioned by existing gendered cultural frameworks. This means that whereas the New Edge style may be inclusive, this style may also be overruled by other, gendered styles of performance in its wider cultural environment. Besides the prevailing tendencies to distinguish between 'science' and esotericism, the longstanding cultural tendency in Western societies to associate women with bodies, with intuition and with beliefs therefore form another component of the backstage of New Edge.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I explored the way that New Edge proponents define their 'in-betweenness' by means of a particular style. This style is shape-shifting in a similar sense as the morphing and moving body of a fractal. It enables New Edge representatives to traverse the 'technoscientific' and 'spiritual' scenes of the Bay Area without having to adhere uniquely to the epistemological positions here dominant. Whereas New Age is just as eclectic as New Edge in its ideas, the New Edge style manifests this eclecticism in a different way. In contrast to the 'synergistic' style of New Age, the style of New Edge allows different and conflicting readings of reality to coexist in the same 'frame.' Irony, changeability of dress, and other signs of cultural detachment give the New Edge as such an extremely flexible and eclectic appearance.

This chapter also aimed to offer a critical perspective on this supposed flexibility of New Edge. Although New Edge supports an epistemological holism and embraces in its performance different systems of thought as well as genders, this chapter argued that in the social setting of the Bay Area, the scope of New Edge is limited. This is in the first place due to the fact that distinctions between rationality and forms of enchantment continue to be made, also by New Edge proponents. A second limitation is formed by gender stereotypes that distinguish a non-scientific and non-flexible feminine gender from a scientific and flexible male gender. Because of the interference of these ideological structures with the New Edge discourse, the New Edge ideals of flexibility and skepticism are easier to implement and more obviously available to men than to women.

