



KEVIN KELLY:

- A new plague seizes the world. As fatal as AIDS, but transmitted on a sneeze, and spread by airplane travelers, the virus touches billions within a year.
- Computer power plateaus. The expected doubling of power and halving of chip size slacks off. More computer power can be had, but it costs.
- Computer screens (both CRT and flat screens) are found to be dangerous to the health. Working at a computer is viewed as a toxic job.
- Alcohol is so severely restricted that people need "licenses" to drink it. Tobacco is, of course, prohibited from being sold. You

can grow your own, though, and some do. The underworld moves to North Carolina as cigarettes become contraband.

• American education works. Revived by vouchers, a longer school year, private schools and for-profit schools, the majority of Americans (though not the most disadvantaged) get the best education in the world.

• Japan is eclipsed by the Asian tigers. The success of Japan subverts itself: women rebel, the young drop out, the workers play, and the system declines.

• Catalog direct marketing dies. Inherently private electronic money and stricter privacy laws kill the hopes of bar-code


What follows is a conversation. Knowing its original context may add to its value. Kevin Kelly — editor of this publication from 1984 to 1990 — and Brian Eno — British musician, music producer, and artist — posted these conjectures in a private conference on The WELL run by the Global Business Network (GBN). GBN's

main activity is long-term strategic planning for organizations large enough to plan ten to twenty years into the future, and its main tool is scenario planning. Scenario planning encourages responsibility in organizations by helping them think far ahead, but the process of generating wide-ranging scenarios gains from irresponsible thought. You need "what if" ideas unpolluted by wishful thinking.

"Unthinkable" thoughts have the virtue of bringing to serious consideration wholly repressed ideas,

as evidenced by the laugh that often accompanies them. They frequently express real fears that people have, that are based on real events, but which they are forbidden from speaking for one political or psychological reason or another. They posit the kind of harsh turnabout in public affairs that often happens in reality. And they relieve a serious limitation of standard scenario planning, which is plausibility. This is the crucial difference between fiction and real life: fiction must be plausible; real life has no such constraint.

So inspired, Kevin Kelly created a topic (string of online comments) on "Unthinkable Futures" in GBN's WELL conference. Brian Eno took Kevin's bait and then turned into a monster of perverse creativity. Kevin fought back gamely. Later Brian expanded three of his notions into Unthinkable Stories (p. 9). Can you predict which ones? —SB



dreams and direct marketing in general.

- Nobody wants to be a doctor. It becomes an overwhelming bureaucratic job with low status. Women and minorities become working doctors; men do medical research.

- The human genome project is halted by activists. Placards at demonstrations say: "Our DNA, Our Selves."

- Third World nukes become commonplace. Everybody has one, because everyone has nuclear power plants.

- Mass advertising is restricted. Billboards are categorically banned; advertising in subways, buses, removed. Towns take up "Advertising-Free Zones."

- People begin leaving the US. Many arrivals to the US keep resident status but choose not to adopt citizenship. The world sees more people without allegiance.

- It costs half a day's pay to drive your car into the downtown area of a big city, and a day's wages to park.

- No more employees. Everybody is hired as a consultant, each negotiates a deal with various goodies (benefits, insurance, perks). Even factory workers are treated as "consultants."

- Women retreat en masse from the commercial workforce. They stay with their families, work with nonprofits, or work part-time.

- All voice phones are universal flat rate. Data is still metered.

- American universities go franchise. Ivy League schools launch branches in Tokyo, Berlin, London.

- Revitalized cities squeeze out the urban poor to squatters' suburbs. Inner cities flourish. The poor take over the nearest suburbs, between edge cities and downtowns. With little transportation in the suburbs, the poor are really downtrodden.

- In a series of science papers, biologists prove that humans are weakening their gene stock with such artifices as eyeglasses and medical care, since "biologically inferior" stock now breeds. This sets off religious and scientific eugenics cults and social

weirdness around "healthy" genes.

- Pills make a comeback. Psychedelics, smart pills, power drugs and a host of newly invented non-addictive head pills seep into the young generation, who have no memory of the last drug phase.

- Twenty-five years from now, the American public becomes even more conservative at the grass-roots level than it is now, and the Reagan years are viewed as "moderate."

by Kevin Kelly and Brian Eno

BRIAN ENO:

- Everybody becomes so completely cynical about the election process that voter turnout drops to 2 percent (families and relatives of prospective politicians) until finally the "democratic process" is abandoned in favour of a lottery system. Everything immediately improves.


- It turns out that nearly all the conspiracy theories you ever heard were actually true — that the world really is being run by 150

malevolent men with nasty prejudices.

- Smoking is proven to be good exercise for the lungs.

- Genetic research shows that it is possible to create gifted scientists, great artists, sublime linguists and supreme athletes. Everyone starves to death through lack of farmers, cooks and waiters.

- It becomes clear that there are significant racial differences between people — that



the stereotypes were right after all.

- Ordinary people routinely employ publicists.
- Public relations becomes the biggest profession in wealthy countries.
- Sexual roles reverse: men wear makeup and are aggressively pursued and harassed by women in ill-fitting clothes.
- Video phones inspire a new sexual revolution whereby everybody sits at home doing rude things electronically with everyone else. Productivity slumps; video screens get bigger and bigger.
- Suicide becomes not only commonplace but socially acceptable and even encouraged. People choose when to die: living too long is considered selfish and old-fashioned.
- A new profession — cosmetic psychiatry — is

born. People visit “plastic psychiatrists” to get interesting neuroses and obsessions added into their makeup.

- Meanwhile, as the cult of youth fades away, plastic surgeons find a profitable new market in making people look interestingly wrinkled, wisely aged, and experientially weatherbeaten. Also, as Oriental aesthetics sweep the West, the traditional values of physiological symmetry and freedom of blemish are seen as naive and uninteresting. Perfect youngsters from Colorado, after years of fretful mirror-gazing, finally save enough money to get their noses put on wrong, or to have a few teeth blackened.
- Tanned skin is once again seen as the mark of peasantry. Sunblock-wearing becomes routine.

• Mass outbreaks of allergies unexpectedly solve all our transportation problems by confining almost everyone to their sealed residences. Telecommunications stocks soar.

- 2025 AD: A social archaeologist discovers a cowshed built from nineteen old Julian Schnabel paintings.
- Abandoned highrise projects become the residence of choice for the new urban chic, changing hands for ever-increasing sums, until finally only lawyers and stockbrokers (skillfully posing as members of dispossessed minority groups) are able to afford them.
- 2010 AD: California elects the first transsexual governor. All public toilets are redesigned at great expense.
- New drugs to pacify children (modern laudanum) are smilingly

sold by big pharmaceutical companies (wish they'd hurry up!).

- A new kind of holiday becomes popular: you are dropped by helicopter in an unknown place, with two weeks' supply of food and water. You are assured that you will not see anyone else in this time. There is a panic button just in case.
- Seed companies start selling packets of unpredictable mutants produced by random genetic engineering programmes: “JUST PLANT 'EM AND SEE WHAT COMES UP!” Suburbia is covered with exotic new blooms and giant cucumbers.
- A new concept of “global Darwinism” takes root: people argue for the right of the human species to rid itself of weak specimens. Aid to developing coun-




KEVIN KELLY:

- AFRICA AWAKES — Centrally located, Africa becomes the breadbasket of Europe, the Mideast, and the wider markets of North America. It becomes a postindustrial continent, a combination of high- and low-tech agriculture.
- GLOBAL COOLING — After a steady increase in mean temperature, the Earth starts cooling off. Dire warnings are issued; no one pays any attention.

- INFO-TERRORISTS — Hitting where it hurts most, a radical group with access to nukes threatens to destroy the Library of Congress if their demands are not met. No action is taken until the American public realizes that all the great TV shows from the past are stored there.
- GREEK OLYMPICS — To save money, the Olympics are permanently sited in Greece.
- TEPID WAR — America and Europe devise a new

style of dynamic socialism, which they try to export against the wishes of a thoroughly free-market Russia.

- BARBECUES OUTLAWED — Because of high carcinogenic content, nothing barbecued or burnt may be sold, nor barbecue paraphernalia. Private barbecues (cannot be seen from street, etc.) become hip underground.
- TV AMISH — Groups, most of them religious, ban all TV, virtual reality,



tries ceases. Hospitals become "viability assessment centres" and turn away or terminate poor specimens.

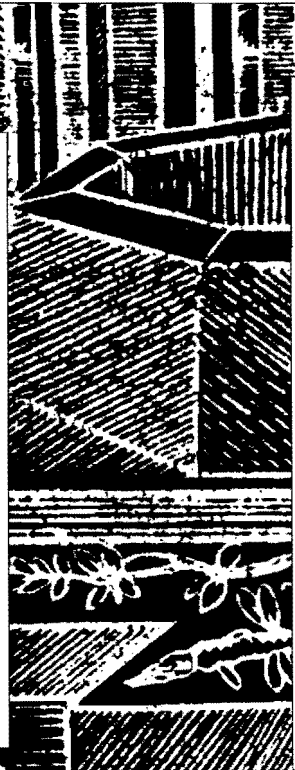
- In reaction, a new definition of viability (based on memes rather than genes) is invoked. People are subjected to exhaustive tests (occupying large amounts of their time) to check the originality and scope of their ideas.
- A new profession, meme-inspector, comes into being.
- Schools abandon the attempt to teach the three Rs, concentrating instead on wacky and controversial "personhood" therapies. Everyone grows up bonkers in some way or another. The whole of the next century is like the late sixties.
- A highly successful new magazine — *Ordinary*

People, edited by the nonagenarian Studs Terkel — focuses only on people who have never done anything in particular to deserve attention.

- A new type of artist arises: someone whose task is to gather together existing but overlooked pieces of amateur art, and, by directing attention onto them, to make them important. (This is part of a much larger theory of mine about the new role of curatorship, the big job of the next century.)
- The first Bio-Olympics, where athletes can have anything added to or subtracted from their bodies, take place in 2004.
- News is understood to be a creation of our attention and interests (rather than "the truth") and news shows are redesigned as "thinktanks," where four interesting minds from

different disciplines are asked the question, "So what do YOU think happened today?"

- Later, four uninteresting minds (chosen from the pages of *Ordinary People* magazine) are asked the same questions.
- Direct-mailing organizations carry increasingly complex and subtle character assessments of their targets. To avoid being deluged by the resulting irresistible offers, people routinely begin buying inconsistent products. This is designed to confuse the profilers.
- Pro-lifers, meanwhile, discover that women are less likely to miscarry if confined to bed and sedated for the first trimester. Congress bows to pressure and legislates rest.



and artificial life in their communities. Immensely productive, educated and sane (and out of step), they begin to assume power.

- **DIRECTED TAXES** — Software gains allow a certain portion of taxes to fall to the discretion of the payer. John Public can assign X amount of his taxes toward one service, to the exclusion of another. It's a second vote that politicians watch closely.

BRIAN ENO:

- The set of *Terminator 9* is wrecked by a pressure group of offended industrial robots.
- Jesus returns to Earth and is discovered in flagrante delicto with a

group of flagellant monks from Opus Dei.* Judas is rehabilitated.

- Famous and talented men routinely auction their sperm for huge sums.
- A microbe engineered to eat oil

* I asked Eno what Opus Dei is. His reply: "Ah ha! Opus Dei is an organization started about forty years ago by a fanatical Jesuit monk whose name I've forgotten—a Spaniard or South American. It is dedicated to flagellation and self-torture of various kinds, is extremely right-wing (therefore very anti-liberation theology), and generally supports everything that you probably wouldn't. Naturally the Vatican has just canonized him and the man is now an official saint. Many people are distressed by this apparently premature honour bestowed on such a man, but then this is the same Vatican which recognized the Haitian military regime that overthrew Father Aristide (having already threatened to excommunicate him for involvement in politics) — the only state to do so." —SB

slicks evolves a taste for rubber.

Transport grinds to a halt on burst tyres. People stay home and have sex more, but condoms crumble routinely. World population doubles in six years.

- As scenario projections become more accurate and convincing, people become increasingly aware of the unwelcome results of their actions. All social action becomes paralysed, or is evaluated in purely negative language: "Is this course of action less harmful than that?"

- Traveling as a process enjoys a revival. People abandon the idea of "getting from A to B" and begin to develop (or re-discover) a culture of traveling: semi-nomadism. Lots of people acquire super new faxed-and-modemed versions of the mobile home. It becomes distinctly "lower-class" to live in a fixed location. Fast forms of transport come to be viewed like fast food is viewed now — tacky, undesirable, fake.

- Manufacturers of underwear finally realize that men have different-sized balls.

- Prince Charles converts to Catholicism, thus avoiding becoming king (the monarch is head of the Church of England) without actually abdicating. (This is my wife's theory.)

- Big changes in education: A combination of monetarism and liberalism creates a new paradigm wherein schools are expected to be profitable manufacturing and research enterprises. This leads to:

- The infant think-tank, where the innocent genius of children is routinely tapped by captains of industry for large sums of money . . .

- Various highly original manufacturing industries: hand-painted wallpaper and postcards, naive sculpture and pottery, clothing design and manufacture . . .

- Teachers chosen (by the kids, of course) on

the basis of their performance record and likely profitability. They are subjected to gruelling and penetrating interviews by kids . . .

- The old concept of education "in the abstract" (i.e., unrelated to real tasks) is only practiced in the most benighted outposts of the civilized world (England, USA etc.) . . .

- Successful children are traded between schools for huge transfer fees . . .

- Schools completely abandon divisions based on age. People of all ages turn up and sort themselves into effective and profitable groups . . .

- People with lots of money give their children small companies as birthday and Christmas gifts.

- Television producers, impressed by the phenomenal success of the Clarence Thomas hearings, routinely stage semi-surrogate "hearings" where

emotional issues are vented. These take the place of staged wrestling matches and roller derby for the thinking classes. Nobody is ever sure if it's all fixed, or partly fixed, or actually for real.

- The commonly held notion that it is correct to surround children with love, security and affection suffers a serious decline in credibility when it becomes apparent that kids reared thus are entirely unequipped for a world that is cruel, dangerous and insecure. Enlightened parents begin experimenting with new forms of toys: teddies with sharp teeth, building bricks with abrasive surfaces, mildly toxic crayons, unsafe play areas.

- Disabled people finally come into their own as remote operators of telerobots. They are the only ones prepared to commit the immense amount of time necessary to learn the finesse of working inside another body.

KEVIN KELLY:

Over the next fifteen years, climatologists and system dynamicists conclusively show that the Earth's climate shift is not due to human activity: it has its origins in the ongoing shifts normal to the Earth. (This is somewhat Lovelock's current position.) Most surprisingly, scientists see that slow, accumulative carbon dioxide buildup is the only thing that will halt the upcoming hot- or ice-age. And it has a narrow window. So they recommend burning as much fossil fuel as possible to avert global climate shock. After twenty years of constant sermons on the evils of carbon dioxide, this is a political disaster. The environmentalists' cheer: "Let's sink with dignity and purity."

BRIAN ENO:

I just had a kidney stone removed last week. I had this idea that, given the devaluation of diamonds, rich people in the future might actually turn to kidney stones (produced by exotic Third World ladies fed on stone-producing diets) as their new precious gems. I kept mine — though it's not very big. Today I'm getting scanned to see if there are any more. I feel like a potential oyster. ♡

Unthinkable Stories

BY BRIAN ENO

COSMETIC PSYCHIATRY

THE SURGERY WAS DELIGHTFUL:

airy and plant-filled, and with a tinted window through which amber sunlight burst. Shirley was so happy she'd finally come.

It was her friend Sylvia who'd told her about it. She'd known Sylvia since college, and, out of inertia more than anything else, they'd occasionally meet for coffee and send each other Christmas cards, exchanging not-too-intimate details about their affairs, then their husbands, their children, and now, again, their affairs. It was an acquaintance marked by a reliable dullness, the steady drip-filtering of normal-life titbits.

Until, that is, Sylvia took the plunge into cosmetic psychiatry and emerged sparkingly neurotic, full of psychic texture, a fountain of bubbling idiosyncracies. Now she was the life and soul of the kaffee-klatsch — so much to talk about! It was hard, actually, to ever catch her at home these

Art on previous pages: Lorenz Stoer, fantastic architecture from *Geometria et perspectiva*, 1555.