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On our cover, Kevin Costner trades in tunic and breeches for a suede baseball jacket, $1,870, and a cashmere sweater, $1,210: both by Giorgio Armani. (Grooming: Lucienne Zammit for Cloutier, L.A. Styling: Stephen Earabino for Visages, L.A.) Photographed exclusively for *GQ* by Herb Ritts.

## fashion



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Arnie Greif with one of his FractalVision digitized hallucinations.

# Valley of the Nerds

*The keys to our economic future are in the hands of Silicon Valley's young computer visionaries. And a lot of those visions are triggered by hallucinogens created in labs just yesterday. Welcome to the Second Psychedelic Revolution*

They call themselves MacAddicts. They are hard-core users of the Apple Macintosh personal computer, and they've come to San Francisco by the tens of thousands for their annual tribal gathering, the Macworld Expo. Some have on suits and carry briefcases. Some have on Grateful Dead T-shirts and carry briefcases. More than a few of them look MacStoned.

This is not just another convention; in many ways it's a cybernetic Woodstock, a be-in for the Information Age. Inside the vast Moscone Center, a dizzying sound-and-light show is in progress as corporate exhibitors with names such as Gizmo Technologies, MacroMind and Lifetree push their mind-bending wares, both

*By Walter Kirn*

hard and soft. The conventioneers stand mesmerized before the pulsing VDTs, absorbing each new data rush with giddy nods. A bearded man in an ill-fitting sport coat (he looks as if he wears a serape at home and subsists on organic trail mix) stares at a screen aswarm with 3-D graphics and grins beatifically. The Mac is beautiful, long live the Mac. Even the Japanese in attendance seem caught up in the digital euphoria. There is no doubt about it: The Apple PC, conceived in a garage by Stevens Jobs and Wozniak, has evolved from a kind of homegrown, countercultural calculator into a multibillion-dollar commercial miracle.

But the Macintosh is not the only attraction at the Macworld Expo. On the sidewalk outside the convention hall, a trollish young man with shoulder-length hair and a funky brocade vest is drawing his own adoring audience. Ken Goffman, known to his public by the pen name R.U. Sirius, is the editor of *Mondo 2000,* a rapidly growing desktop-published glossy magazine that documents, among other things, the strange convergence of psychedelic-drug use and avant-garde computer science. Recent articles have included an interview with Timothy Leary on higher computer consciousness (LSD meets the PC), a rundown of the latest intelligence-boosting pharmaceuticals and a talk with medical scientist John Lilly, the inventor of the sensory-deprivation tank and the trippy pioneer of human/dolphin communication.

Today, Goffman has a new issue for sale, and Mac-Addicts, even the suited, Rolexed ones, are lining up to purchase it (at $5.95 a copy) at an astonishing rate. Possibly thinking I'm with *Mondo,* one of the buyers apologizes to me for his Brooks Brothers costume ("My straight clothes") and tells me about a party tonight where he and some of his techie friends plan to drop 25D, a mild designer hallucinogen, and check out musician/computer-head Todd Rundgren's Utopia Grokware products.

I look at the man's Macworld Expo badge and see that he's an employee of a major San Jose software firm. It doesn't surprise me at all. I've been in California for almost two weeks, deep in the psycho-silicon jungle, and I've met enough of its denizens to know that the "enemy" in the war on drugs includes quite a few of our country's best minds and leading scientific innovators. (Jobs, for example, is a self-confessed former acidhead.) If a massive nationwide raid were held today, it would net mathematicians, inventors, technicians and a multitude of free-lance visionaries—the very people we're counting on to beat out the Japanese, renew a stagnant economy and generally lead us into the MacFuture. Indeed, this corps of turned-on nerds has already helped to change our lives, providing much of the high-test zeal that has joysticked us from the age of heavy industry into the point-and-click MacPresent of megabytes and mice, shrinking the modern office to the size of a laptop computer and enlarging the laptop computer, via such things as modems and networks, into a walkie-talkie for the global village.

So before the crackdown goes any farther, perhaps it's time to ask: Can America afford to take the "high" out of high technology?

**"R.U. Sirius," editor of the influential *Mondo 2000.***

DEBORAH SAMUEL/VISAGES

# Arnie

Greif is the sort of young man who free-market conservatives applaud in principle but tend to ignore, or even to attack, in practice: a committed, free-thinking entrepreneur. Along with his wife, Sherri, he operates a business, FractalVision, out of a modest one-story house in a Los Angeles suburb. He keeps a punishing work schedule. By day, he toils full-time as a systems analyst for a large electronics corporation, then puts in another forty or fifty hours a week at the Sun workstation computer in his den. Fortunately, the long nocturnal hours are paying off. Unlike most small businesses these days, FractalVision is growing and has doubled in income every year since 1987.

Basically, what FractalVision produces is digitized hallucinations. Greif pops a tape into his VCR and plays some of them for me. Immediately, the screen is suffused with flowing fields of vibrant imagery. The images are abstract yet familiar, outrageous yet structured—

DMT is spoken of by users with

the sort of shapes people often see after taking magic mushrooms. An iridescent snowbank melts away in time-lapse motion. Colonies of Martian microbes fuse and mutate and split apart. The effect on the viewer is slightly disconcerting; you feel as if you're peering into your own brain, watching neurons fire by the millions. Greif explains that the forms are not random but are visual translations of certain simple equations fed to his computer. This so-called "fractal geometry"—pioneered by Benoit Mandelbrot, an IBM research scientist—governs the behavior of natural phenomena from waterfalls to clouds to brain waves. This is the new psychedelia, where math and mysticism mix.

"On the Fourth of July, 1979," Greif says, "I stared at a blank white wall. I was doing a lot of hallucinogens at the time, and patterns like these are what I saw. Later, I discovered fractal geometry and learned that these shapes are the building blocks of the universe. Now I am able to reproduce these forms mathematically rather than chemically."

Arnie goes on to detail the applications of his fractal designs. Some have appeared in music videos—in Cher's *Heart of Stone,* for example. Also, psychotherapists have used his tapes as relaxation aids for their patients. And the principles underlying the designs have implications for acoustic science. Currently, he is working with an engineer to improve studio recording techniques.

Eventually, I ask the 30-year-old Greif if he still trips. It seems like an inappropriate question, given the squareness of our surroundings: a living room straight out of the Levitz catalogue, strictly suburban sub-modern.

"No, but that doesn't mean I won't go out there again," he says, toying with a strand of shag rug. "I've got kids now, so it's hard, it's hard to find the time. I don't really side with the war on drugs, however. Psychedelic drugs are like a chef's knife: dangerous in the wrong hands but useful to the professional."

He nods at the video monitor and adds, "I don't think I could have accomplished what I have without them."

Among high-tech entrepreneurs, Arnie Greif is not alone in feeling that chemicals and achievement really can mix, all those stern public-service announcements notwithstanding. Ron Lawrence and Vicki Marshall are the founders of a company called KnoWare, a Los Angeles publishing firm and Macintosh consultancy. "Whatever problem you're having with the Mac," Ron boasts, "we're here to solve it. Day or night." Most recently, KnoWare was summoned to troubleshoot the office system of a West Coast fashion magazine.

Lawrence, a 45-year-old Vietnam veteran who returned from the war depressed and alienated, credits his personal salvation to three forces: the Macintosh computer, the writings of Timothy Leary (which KnoWare publishes) and psychedelic drugs. "Drugs for me were a catalyst," he says. "By taking psychedelics, you clean out the storage banks and have to reprogram yourself. That's what I did. And that's what I do with this baby here." He pats his computer as if it were a pet, as if it were part of himself.

"Just like with the mind," says Lawrence, "nothing appears on that screen that you don't put there. Psychedelics teach you that."

David (not his real name) is a graduate of a top East Coast engineering program. He commutes from his communal house in Berkeley to a computing job at one of America's leading producers of professional video equipment. I interview him in his home office, where he conducts a sideline business designing custom software packages. On the other side of the office door, at the kitchen table, his housemates are using razor blades to strip the tough green skin off a large San Pedro cactus, hoping to get at the mescaline inside.

David's fingers wander lightly over his computer keyboard as he describes the appeal of psychoactive drugs for himself and some of his high-tech peers. His tranquil, cloistered manner reminds me of a friend of mine—an acidhead Ivy League computing major, who, last time I heard from him, was living near Palo Alto doing classified Star Wars research.

"If you think about it," says David, "the computer is an alien presence. It takes a lot of courage to relate to such an amazing machine. Drugs help me to overcome my fear of the computer—especially the new drugs. For example, there was the time I used U4ia [a long-acting form of amphetamine] to solve a knotty programming problem. I'd been stuck on this problem for ages, and the drug helped to free up my mind enough so I could see it in a whole new way."

The new drugs David is referring to come in an almost limitless variety. Because the drugs' molecular structures are somewhat malleable and can be changed around faster than the DEA can identify them, some of the newest have yet to be made illegal. A number of the substances are designed and manufactured by respectable degree-holding chemists, one of whom is a full professor at a prestigious California university. There is MDMA, or ecstasy, which is said to evoke Aquarian feelings of love and brotherhood. There is ketamine, a potent operating-room anesthetic that I came across maybe a half-dozen times in my Silicon Valley travels. Ketamine, says David, "takes you on a submarine ride to the bottom of the universe." Then there is DMT, the *Tyrannosaurus rex* of psychedelics. Usually spoken of by users with a certain wide-eyed, trembling awe, DMT has the power, in the words of one programmer I met, "to completely annihilate your ego in about a minute. Your body falls off like a peeled banana skin, and you rocket away in a ray of white light to the edge of known existence."

Egoless, bodiless white-light astral travel sounds like pretty scary stuff, and those who have tried DMT readily admit its perils. One mathematics professor I interviewed put it this way: "You use the drug three times, and the words 'brain damage' literally appear before your eyes." Indeed,

a certain wide-eyed, trembling awe.

# These trippers' goal is intel

such sober warnings were common among the turned-on techies I encountered. For them, drug use is serious business, requiring meticulous preflight preparations. Prior to takeoff, a typical user fortifies his system with plenty of fruit juice and vitamins, then loads the CD player with congenial music—Bach, perhaps, for the austerely intellectual; the Red Hot Chili Peppers for the more adventurous. He may even consult an instruction manual, such as the closely typed four-page leaflet that sometimes is provided by hyper-responsible dealers with doses of MDMA ("After an MDMA session, great care must be taken in swallowing solid food, since there is a minimum amount of anesthesia present. . ."). In the one DMT "experiment" I witnessed, the subject was carefully watched and attended to by a note-taking, water-drinking friend—the psychedelic equivalent of a designated driver.

In this world of oddly stringent trippers, where so many genius IQs are on the line, there is little patience for sloppy procedure. The goal is intellectual adventure, not intoxication. Alcohol is widely dismissed as insufficiently insight-inducing. Cigarettes are scarce. Cocaine is charged with promoting aggression and stupidity. The drug-taking is discreet, almost monklike, and, consequently, busts are rare. None of my sources showed any interest in winning converts to higher chemical consciousness, let alone in making money off of drug sales. (Concerned parents will want to note that it doesn't seem likely DMT and ketamine will soon appear on your local playground, despite their popularity at your local high-tech research park.)

Readers may logically wonder at this point just how people like David hold on to their job, considering the amount of time they spend riding cosmic submarines. What's more, in this age of widespread drug testing, how did they get their job in the first place? The answers to these questions lie in the nonconformist, fairly hallucinogenic nature of the computer industry itself. In a business that seeks to shrink the human mind and put it in a box for easy access, access to one's own mind is not a guilty pleasure but something approaching a duty.

R.U. Sirius, whose journalistic rounds put him in constant contact with Siliconites of all descriptions, says, "In my experience, the most creative people in computers experiment with drugs. It's a very bizarre culture, where the freaks are the elite. At a company like Autodesk [a cutting-edge developer of virtual-reality technology], the R&D department includes a little room full of people in sandals, with hair down to their ass. At Apple, they buy group tickets to the Grateful Dead show at the end of the year."

But what about bad trips? What about those terrifying times when the submarine fails to surface? R.U.'s answer brims with common sense: "People in those fields, if they know what they're doing, seldom freak out. Say that a computer person takes some acid now, in 1991, and everything he sees and hears and feels is speeding by and changing shape. What's the difference between that and his everyday reality?"

Chip Krauskopf is the manager of the Human Interface Program at Intel Corporation, the nation's top maker of microprocessors and also a Defense contractor. He corroborates R.U.'s impressions. That Krauskopf is willing—even eager—to speak for attribution underlines Silicon Valley's no-sweat attitude toward chemical recreation.

"Some of the people here are very, very, *very* bright," says Krauskopf. "They were bored in school, and, as a result, they hung out, took drugs and got into computers. A lot of people I know took exactly that path. And remember, this is an industry that grew up in the Sixties, so there was never any stigma against so-called 'hippies.' People at Intel get judged strictly by how good they are. If their skills and arguments are strong, nobody cares if they wear tie-dye and sandals."

But what about the urine tests often required by the federal government for suppliers such as Intel? Don't they weed out the heads? Well, no. For one thing, urinalysis does not detect most hallucinogens—a fact that led cyber-essayist Robert Anton Wilson to predict, in *Mondo 2000*, "The corporate structure of the short-term future will therefore thin out the ranks of pot smokers and coke freaks while the acid heads climb merrily upward in the hierarchy." Furthermore, the tests can pick up only relatively high concentrations of drugs, and Intel's executives virtually see to it that potential employees have an opportunity to clean up their act, at least temporarily, before their pee is screened.

"We tell candidates when they first come in for an interview that eventually they will be tested," says Krauskopf. "The levels that are tested at, you see, are such that you have to have taken drugs in the past forty-eight hours. Unless you're a total idiot and do drugs every day, you're going to test clean."

If this comes as disturbing news to the straitlaced—the idea that inside the high-tech core of everything from your office PC to the guidance system of the Patriot missile lurks a psychedelic genie—just consider the alternative. If drug testing *were* effective and if it had begun, say, twenty-five years ago, chances are that some of our country's most vital industries might not exist today. Software magnate Mitch Kapor, founder of Lotus Development, whose 1-2-3 spreadsheet forever changed accounting, has publicly credited "recreational chemicals" with helping him form his business outlook. David Bunnell, who started *PC Magazine* and helped create the Altair, one of the first personal computers, remembers his co-pioneers as looking as if "they were just coming down off a ten-year acid trip." (One of Bunnell's hippie colleagues, Microsoft's Bill Gates, is now one of the country's richest individuals, worth more than $4 billion.)

It's time to face facts, America. With our buttoned-down financiers in prison, our uptight bankers in bankruptcy and our automotive titans in retreat, perhaps our freaks are our

# lectual adventure, not intoxication.

last, best hope. And it's not that they've been co-opted by the system—they've co-opted *it*. Yesterday's dropouts, in many cases, are today's insiders, and some of today's head honchos are heads.

But what about tomorrow?

If you're looking for a prophet of the scientific future, you could do worse than mathematician Ralph Abraham, a shaggy middle-aged professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who can use the word "grok" in casual conversation and get away with it. Abraham's revolutionary specialty, in which he is an acknowledged leader, has come to be known as "chaos math" or "dynamical systems theory." What people such as Abraham try to do is graph and predict, with the help of computers, seemingly unpredictable events: global climatic change, the rise and fall of financial markets, even the social origins of war. What makes this math revolutionary, of course, is that no one has really mastered it yet, although aficionados believe it *can* be mastered and that the attempt is eminently worth making.

**Prof Ralph Abraham believes in mixing math and acid.**

The driving idea behind chaos math—that there is order in randomness and randomness in order—sounds like one of those drug-induced epiphanies you scrawl on a napkin at 3 A.M. and then throw away the next day. Well, in a rather literal sense, it *is* a drug-inspired notion, except that Ralph Abraham kept the napkin and has been doodling on it ever since.

"In the 1960s," he says, "a lot of people on the frontiers of math experimented with psychedelic substances. There was a brief and extremely creative kiss between the community of hippies and top mathematicians. I know this because I was a purveyor of psychedelics to the mathematical community."

Math and acid—not, one would think, a natural combination. It's like hearing a champion marathon runner credit his success to chain-smoking Camels. I'm confused. The image of a frying egg ("This is your brain on drugs") flashes in my mind's eye.

Abraham explains, "To be creative in mathematics, you have to start from a point of total oblivion. Basically, math is revealed in a totally unconscious process in which one is completely ignorant of the social climate. And mathematical advance has always been the motor behind the advancement of consciousness. What's going on now with dynamical systems theory is at least as big a thing as the invention of the wheel."

He glances at his desk, at the ubiquitous Macintosh sitting there, with its blind gray screen. "Without this machine, of course," says Abraham, "what we're doing now would not be possible. The computer extends our intellect, which helps us create the future. It offers a door to perceiving complex space-time realities."

"The doors of perception"—the words ring a bell. The title of Aldous Huxley's book on mescaline, taken from William Blake's epigram—"If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite." But what, according to Abraham, will all this infinite portal-cleansing bring? Nothing less, he predicts, than global peace.

"Social science, up until now, has not been very scientific. Now, with computers and the new mathematics, we may be able to change that. Soon we may be able to map and manipulate a certain set of parameters—social, cultural, economic, geographical—that will help us to anticipate and mediate international conflict. Loving on the largest possible scale will be enhanced by the intellectual capability to understand the complexity of the systems in which we live."

Spoken like a true Macflower child.

They are sitting in a darkened Berkeley living room, talking about virtual reality and smoking the milder, powdered form of ketamine. I'm with them but not *with* them, if you catch my drift. The ketamine *(continued on page 165)*

(*continued from page 101*) is a bit way-out for me, and the conversation too. Because I don't wish these folks legal hassles, I won't say who they are, just that they know a lot about computers (one man runs a thriving electronics research firm) and more than a thing or two about drugs.

Their speech, in case you're wondering, is perfectly coherent. Alarmingly coherent, when you consider its content.

"You know that telephone-company saying," someone pipes up from the couch, " 'Reach out and touch someone'? Well, soon, with the help of virtual reality, you will be able to do that, literally. You'll wear a kind of bodysuit with hundreds of little sensors and vibrators. You'll plug it into your computer, your partner across the country will plug in too, and you'll be able to feel each other up by moving around in the suits. There's a term for it already, 'teledildonics.' The phenomenon of long-distance sex."

The beautiful young woman sitting beside him—she's a computer musician, and we have just finished listening to her tape—takes a hit of ketamine, then says, "Perfect. No diseases. No unwanted pregnancies."

"Here's something else," says another young man. "It's very, very possible that someday we will be able to transfer the contents of our brains straight onto a microchip."

"Why?" I ask. "Why would we want to do something like that?"

"Come on," he says, "we do it already. We do it all the time, whenever we type our ideas into a computer. In the future, we'll just do it faster, more directly."

I concede that, yes, it's a thought. They're all thoughts. Teledildonics, that's a thought too.

And as the room fills up with thoughts—Utopian, strange, inspiring, ridiculous—it strikes me that this is precisely what Americans are supposed to do: think freely, then try to apply those thoughts, skeptics and solid citizens be damned. Ford did it, Edison did it, Jobs and Wozniak did it, Ralph Abraham is doing it now. It's what we're good at and, coincidentally, what some of our international competitors—with their ancient social rule books and close-order corporate calisthenic sessions—aren't so good at. In his recent book, *More Like Us*, Japan expert James Fallows argued convincingly that instead of trying to ape Japan's regimented industrial economy, the United States would do better to unleash its individualistic potential. This may be another way of saying that weirdness can be an export commodity.

Timothy Leary, who has welcomed the computer revolution with his characteristic cosmic enthusiasm, agrees. While Leary may be a prophet without honor in his own country, the Japanese think otherwise, and he is much in demand there as a lecturer and cultural consultant. "Japan is a tightly structured hive society, and they know it," says Leary. "So just as they go to the Middle East for oil and Australia for wood, they come to California for creativity. They realize that creativity is a raw resource and that we have an abundance of it here."

Part of the recipe for that abundance, like it or not, is chemical. When encountering some bizarre high-tech marvel, we often remark "Whoever made that must have been on drugs." My reporting indicates that, more often than we suspect, we're right. And how should we react to this? I say: as tolerantly and calmly as possible. A little brain damage, in the end, may be a small price to pay for major brainstorms. And it's not as if we could stop these people even if we wanted to. As ever, the pioneers will continue to pioneer, assuming whatever risks they deem necessary. Judge them not by the trips they take but by the gifts they carry back. •

*Walter Kirn has written about Spike Lee and John Updike for* GQ. *He's working in Montana on a new short-story collection.*