



The counter-cultural *Whole Earth Catalog* laid a paper trail towards the eclectic world of the Internet.

HISTORY

Holistic browsing

D. Graham Burnett muses on an exhibition exploring the legacy of Stewart Brand's eco-handbook.

What was the *Whole Earth Catalog*? It was a paper periodical, published in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, full of information about things you could buy. It was more than just a catalogue. Technology guru and Apple co-founder Steve Jobs suggested in 2005 that this counter-cultural handbook should properly be understood as a forerunner of Google. In its crumbly newsprint pages, which advertised the eclectic accoutrements of tuned-in America in those years — macrobiotic food, macramé patterns, yurt plans — Jobs spied a radical rethinking of the connection between information and community.

Literary critic Hugh Kenner came to a different conclusion. Puzzling in 1971 over this “bizarre shopping-list of glassblower’s torches, Swedish looms, \$50 funerals, wind-driven pumps and books about Polyhedra, Organic Gardening, Beekeeping,” he judged the *Whole Earth Catalog* to be mere “reading

Access to Tools: Publications from *The Whole Earth Catalog*, 1968–1974

The Museum of Modern Art, New York Until 26 July 2011.

So was it Walden or Internet? The best answer may be that it spanned exactly that gamut. If you are wondering how, visit *Access to Tools*, a small but engrossing exhibition currently at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In seven glass cases, together with a homely plywood table scattered with stuff to read, curator David Senior has assembled a bibliographic tribute to the ‘Whole Earth’

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Stewart Brand on whole-Earth monitoring:
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matter” — less a practical tool than “a nubly multifocused many-voiced meditation on what we might be doing with our lives... a kind of space-age Walden.”

phenomenon, and the visionary behind it, Stewart Brand.

The show emphasizes that the *Whole Earth Catalog* was,

for all the eccentric hardware in its pages, a bookish affair. It advertised them, reviewed them and promoted them: handbooks on blasting and childbirth; *The Joy of Sex* and *The Mind of the Dolphin*; compendia of Native American lore and Norbert Wiener’s cybernetics. *Access to Tools* lovingly reassembles this weird world of print. Moving from case to case, one can re-inhabit what was, in its moment, a radical new way of thinking about the planet, the self and the future.

Hard questions are at stake in this material. How did American nature worship and state-fostered conservation concern take such a sharp swerve towards a hacker-culture of nonconforming individualists? And what happened to the heady pluralism of that enterprise, with its do-it-yourself energy? Did Brand’s publication set the course for a new kind of democratic-populist engagement with science and nature? Or does its real legacy lie in lifestyle marketing and pricey organic shops? One wonders.

For instance, there was much talk of the globe in the buzz around the *Whole Earth Catalog*. It famously featured the extraordinary ‘Earthrise’ photos of the blue marble of spaceship Earth as seen from the Moon. And its contents ostensibly highlighted human togetherness and interdependency. But it is hard to say whether the holistic eco-consciousness of the project amounted to anything more than solipsism. Brand’s tagline, after all, was a rip-off from Ayn Rand: “We are as gods, and might as well get used to it.” Try it on the women looking for firewood in Bangladesh.

By constellating the underground magazines, heavyweight theory and quirky publishing universe from which the *Whole Earth Catalog* emerged, Senior gives museum-goers a chance to revisit the extraordinary intellectual, artistic and political ferment of those years, and to weigh, for better or worse, its legacy. It is, in the best sense, a trip.

As a museum exhibition, *Access to Tools* can only whet the appetite, as it is hard to look at a lot of books in glass boxes. They are, after all, meant to be read. It is by no means clear that Brand’s readers were actually doing much of their reading. And that, in the end, may be the whole point. Perhaps the *Whole Earth Catalog* really was the forerunner of the Internet and its tools, in that it represented a transmutation of a whole cosmos of radical ideas, crazy stuff and possible lives, all returned to us as little more than an alluring opportunity to sit down and browse. We’ve been browsing ever since. ■

D. Graham Burnett is professor of history of science at Princeton University, New Jersey 08544, USA, and an editor at *Cabinet* magazine, based in Brooklyn.
e-mail: dburnett@princeton.edu