This bulletin is cut from Brian Eno's 1995 diary *A Year with Swollen Appendices* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996)

Cover image: Eno photographed by Marcia Resnick, c. 1979–80

An axis is a name for a continuum of possibilities between two extreme positions: so the axis between black and white is a scale of greys.

I can illustrate this idea by applying it to the description of haircuts. Rather than only being able to say of someone's haircut that it is, for example, masculine or feminine, we're as likely to want to say that it's quite masculine, or quite feminine, or unisexual — somewhere in the middle.
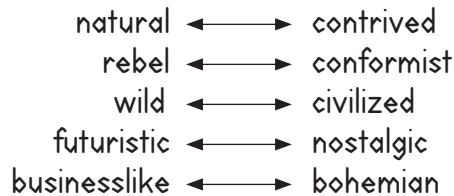

When we do this, we acknowledge that the sexual possibilities of haircuts don't just fall squarely at one or another of the polar positions — masculine or feminine — but somewhere on the wide range of hybrids between them. In fact we would feel constrained if we couldn't make descriptions in these fuzzy, hybrid terms.

If you were trying to describe a particular haircut, however, you'd probably want to say more than "It's quite feminine," or some other comment about its gender connotations. You might also want to locate its position along other axes — for instance along the axis neat ◄———► shaggy — "It's slightly shaggy" or "It's very neat." If that then gave you enough descriptive language to say everything you could imagine ever wanting to say about haircuts, you could locate every example you ever met somewhere on a two-dimensional space — like this sheet of paper. So you could make a kind of graph — masculine ◄———► feminine on one axis, neat ◄———► shaggy on the other. On this graph, which is a simple cross in 2D space, any point represents a particular position in relation to the four polar possibilities:

masculine ◄———► feminine   neat ◄———► shaggy

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I call each of these points a cultural address. I could equally well call it a stylistic address. It is the identification of a particular point in stylistic space, a "possible haircut."

Those four terms still constitute an impoverished language in which to describe most haircuts, and to describe a wide range of possible haircuts we would need several others:

$$\text{natural} \longleftrightarrow \text{contrived}$$
$$\text{rebel} \longleftrightarrow \text{conformist}$$
$$\text{wild} \longleftrightarrow \text{civilized}$$
$$\text{futuristic} \longleftrightarrow \text{nostalgic}$$
$$\text{businesslike} \longleftrightarrow \text{bohemian}$$

Each of these polar pairs defines another axis along which any particular haircut could be located. And each of these exists as a "dimension" in the haircut space, which now becomes multidimensional and no longer easily drawable on a sheet of paper.

We shouldn't forget that each of these poles has no absolute and for-all-time meaning but is also in its own slow motion, stretching the axis of which it defines an end-point this way and that. A really natural haircut, for example, is no haircut. But when we use the term "natural cut" we don't think of someone with shaggy locks hanging over their eyes, but of someone who went to the hairdresser and said something like "Can you make it look sort of natural—a bit windswept?," as opposed to someone else who said, "Can you do me a nine-inch beehive?"

And there is another complication: the resonances are quite local culturally. A man with very short hair in East London in 1985 would be assumed potentially dangerous and "hard." The same man in San Francisco would be thought gay.

And if we look more closely we see that many of the things that we would consider single qualities of hair are actually themselves multi-axial spaces. To describe hair color, for example, needs much more detail than $\text{dark} \longleftrightarrow \text{light}$. It needs an axis of redness, an axis of greyness, an axis of color homogeneity, an axis of shine.

What strikes you as interesting when you begin thinking about stylistic decisions (or moral or political decisions) as being locatable in a multi-axial space of this kind is the recognition that some axes don't yet exist. For example, with hairstyles, as far as I know, there is not a **dirty ◄——► clean** axis. That's to say, your hairdresser isn't likely to ask you, "How dirty would you like it?" It's still assumed that there is no discussion about it: the axis has not been opened up. We would all want it "as clean as possible."

Peter Schmidt used to talk about "the things that nobody ever thought of not doing." A version of this happened in clothing fashion. There was recently a style—variously described as non-fit, un-fit and anti-fit (the name didn't stabilize)—which was to do with people wearing clothes that exist at the never-before-desirable end of newly discovered axis **well-fitted ◄——► badly fitted**. These clothes were deliberately chosen to look completely wrong. This was beyond baggy, which was a first timid step along that axis. Baggy implies the message "These are my clothes, but I like to wear them loose." Non-fit says, "These are someone else's clothes" or "I am insane" or "I cannot locate myself" or "I don't fit."

With punk, a brand-new axis opened up: **professionally cut ◄——► hacked about by a brainless cretin**. As often happens, this appeared (and was intended) to be an anti-style style, and was shocking because we had never previously considered the possibility that the concept "style" and the concept "hacked about by a brainless cretin" could overlap one another. But, as usual, the effect was not to overthrow and eliminate the idea of style but to give it new places in which to extend itself. "Hacked about by a brainless cretin" became not the death of hair-styling but the furthest outpost of a new continuum of possible choices about how hair could look. This is a transition from polar thinking—the kind of thinking that says, "It's either this or it's that," or "Everything that isn't clearly this must be that"—to axial thinking. Axial thinking doesn't deny that it could be this or that, but suggests that it's more likely to be somewhere between the two. As soon as that suggestion is in the air, it triggers an imaginative process, an attempt to locate and conceptualize the newly acknowledged greyscale positions.

I am interested in these transitions—these moments when a stable duality

dissolves into a proliferating and unstable sea of hybrids. What happens at such times is that all sorts of things become possible: there is a tremendous energy release, a great burst of experimentation. Not only do the emerging possible positions on this new-born axis have to be discovered and experienced and articulated; they have to be placed in context with other existing axes to see what new resonances appear.

A good—and undigested—example of this process is the (apparently temporary) demise of state communism in Eastern Europe. It's extraordinary that when the Berlin Wall came down everyone assumed that the whole world was about to become one big market economy running on the same set of rules. What happened instead was that the old dualism communism ◄——► capitalism was revealed to conceal a host of possible hybrids. Now only the most ideological governments (England, Cuba) still retain their fundamentalist commitment to one end of the continuum: most governments are experimenting vigorously with complicated customized blendings of market forces and state intervention.

An example of such a complicated blending is defense spending, which allows a government nominally committed to "market forces" to have at its center a completely intact command economy within which it can direct the flow of social resources.

The period of transition is marked by excitement, experimentation —and resistance. Whenever a duality starts to dissolve, those who felt trapped at one end of it suddenly feel enormous freedom—they can now redescribe themselves. But, by the same token, those who defined their identity by their allegiance to one pole of the duality (and rejection of the other) feel exposed. The walls have been taken away, and the separation between inside and outside is suddenly gone. This can create wide-scale social panic: vigorous affirmations of the essential rightness of the "old ways," moral condemnation of the experimentalists, "back to basics" campaigns, all the familiar signs of fundamentalism.

Essentially, cultures wish to be able to control, or at least channel, such excitements and panics, turning what could be chaotic uncertainty into a power either for revolution or for consolidation. This is normally mishandled. Hostile propaganda campaigns are good examples of

fundamentalism at work: they are designed to push the concepts of friend and enemy to extreme and unambiguous positions, and to cement a complete and unvarying identification between two different axes: us ←——→ them; friend ←——→ enemy.

Zones of Pragmatic Deceit are the social and mental inventions that exist to lubricate the fiction between what we claim to stand for (i.e. simple polar pictures) and what we actually have to do to make things work (i.e. navigate over networks of axes). These two are often quite different, as situations change much faster than the moral constructions that are supposed to describe them.

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