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## Weeds, Flies and Magic

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Steve Baer

## Weeds, Flies and Magic

WE ARE HYPNOTIZED by our tools and other products. Ask an architect, engineer, or craftsman what is the best thing he ever made, and it is unlikely he will mention his children.

Stop for a moment: look at the world around you, seeking elegance, simplicity, beauty. Weeds and flies begin to loom larger than skyscrapers and jet planes. Last month I was talking to Clard Svenson and he pointed out that a person's own self was his greatest achievement, that creations such as ourselves are white magic, whereas airplanes and TV sets are black magic. We are more impressed by the trivial results of our own black magic than by the wonders of white magic—clouds, trees, snakes, birds.

Where does all the merchandise come from? Have you ever seen a refrigerator being manufactured or the machines that produce the copper wire that is strung all over? Is it not possible that other planets are trading with us? Maybe another planet is taking our rats and dumping new Chevys and TV's and blenders. But isn't this silly? We all know that we could track down the machines that draw out copper wire. Yet some link is missing between us and this stuff. It could just as well be coming from outer space.

You walk through a door, hand someone a dollar, and get a metal can filled with paint. You shake the can, then press a button on top of it, and paint sprays out, and the paint is exactly the same color as the top of the can. Now if this seems mysterious, it is of course nothing compared to putting a tiny seed in dark brown earth, watering it, and getting a big, green mass of flexible stems and leaves with perfectly attached tomatoes which turn from green to red and which you can pluck off and pop in your mouth.

It is a world that is too complex and too subtle for most of us. We are ready to chuck the whole beautiful, challenging mess. We surrender our complexities and hard-to-express relationships to a simpler mineral machine pattern. Living is so difficult.

Look at bridge girders. Like us, they are under enormous strain, but you cannot deny that they are better off: better judgment was involved in their construction and placement, and enforced laws

prevent fatal overloads. One becomes envious of an existence in which problems and strains are relieved by the introduction of a lever or a hydraulic jack. For the internal problems of the self, external dexterity is only a distraction. Do you suppose that I could obtain a grant from the government to investigate communication with other galaxies if my theory was that people who live in harmony with themselves and their world must be already in contact with some other civilization?

What do we admire? What do we think is progress? Freeman Dyson, of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, advises astronomers to look for cool stars as signs of advanced civilizations. He says the huge energy requirements of advanced civilizations will require their cocooning themselves in with their sun, with gigantic shrouds which will utilize the radiant energy. If we do it, as he says we can (we can get building materials by disassembling Jupiter), we shall be provided with one hundred thirty trillion times the energy we now consume. What would we do with all that energy? We hypothesize that there are civilizations advancing along these lines, and our scientists are trying to communicate with them.

A bearded man with scabs on his arms makes his way into the control room of the National Radio Astronomy Observatory at Green Bank, West Virginia where there has been a five-year million-dollar effort to communicate with outer space. The personnel have fled days ago. He speaks into a microphone. "Sorry this bunch of nuts here have been bugging you. We just got to 'em in time. Man, these microphones are terrible, uhch. I'm hangin' it up so I can get tuned in with you folks again." This man makes more sense to me than Freeman Dyson and the rest of the energy freaks.

But I wish suddenly to shift to my own work, to the solar heating of buildings. I feel that it would be a nice feature in architecture: to be able to read the latitude by the slant of heat collectors. One might be surprised in the mountains of Mexico to find a village's heat collectors slanted gently, while the pine trees and snow would indicate a much higher latitude. Or again, a favoring of east or west would say something about the climate. Along parts of the West Coast, collectors would be best slanted to the west since the mountains are so often foggy. It would be nice to read the rhythm of cloudiness in the form of a building.

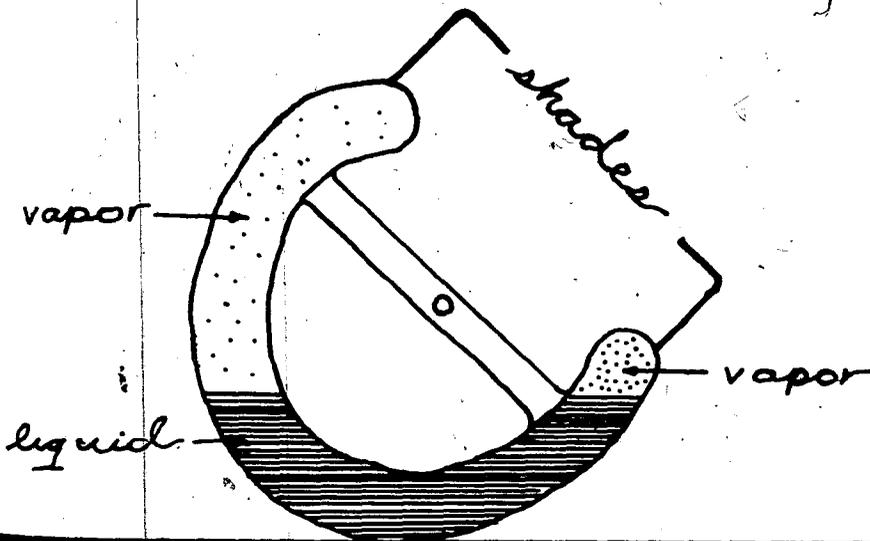
I have been working on a device that can tilt to follow the sun throughout the day, like a sunflower. (I thought I was the inventor, but the patent office informs me that Charles William Geer applied this principle in 1959.) I think this device has the characteris-

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tics we should be looking for in our techniques. It is a tube closed at both ends and bent in an arc of about 240 degrees, partially filled with water or some more volatile liquid, and evacuated except for the liquid and the gas that boils off the liquid. The tube is either clear, so that the sun shines through it, or it is insulated—except for the two ends, which are dark and which heat up when the sun shines on them. These ends are shaded so that the sun may shine on only one at a time, the end farthest from the sun. The liquid inside the tube serves to divide the pockets of gas at either end, just like the trap below a kitchen sink, and it serves as the ballast which, when temperature changes move the liquid from one section of the tube to another, bring the position it occupies in the tube to the low point and therefore turns the whole apparatus. If the device is positioned so that one end is farther from the sun than the other, then the sun shines on that end and it grows warm, liquid evaporates, the gas expands and pushes the liquid towards the other end, which thus rotates the whole device to face the sun. Once in focus, both ends are shaded and it remains at rest until the sun moves enough to shine past one of the shades.

This device is silent, it does not wear out, it is responsive, you would be able to see it get up and move to face the sun at day-break: You could confuse one by shading it with your hand. You could make one move by warming an end with your hand. Think of the difference between this and something driven by a large clock



motor. A power failure would cripple all such trackers, and once the juice went on they would follow something that wasn't there until they were set. On a cloudy day, the liquid heliotrope might or might not find the source of radiation behind the clouds. It would be interesting to watch. A clock driven mechanism would go on regardless of clouds, shadows, or night time.

A duck and an airplane collide.

Our blood transports oxygen with iron ions. When did the iron age begin?

It's harder to learn to walk than to drive.

