

Ambient Lightworks



© Justin Olin

Alongside his celebrated ambient Music for Airports, a neglected chamber in the mansion that is the Eno brain is his eighties' instigated ambient video. Kevin Eden traces its origin, from Brian Eno turning a video monitor on its side in a New York loft, to the realisation of a new form of artwork for public spaces.



Introduction

The seven colours of the rainbow have increasingly been linked to the seven notes of the diatonic scale. The French Jesuit Louis Bertrand Castel describes inventing a 'colour organ' around 1750, and Scriabin, the Russian composer, had what is called synaesthesia; a strong colour association with musical tones, and composed 'Prometheus' (1914) to which an optional part for 'Tastiera per luce', or keyboard of light, was written. In the visual arts various abstract film-makers and animators such as Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye have used the idea of coloured light to accompany a musical soundtrack. However, these experiments all use the medium of film and, in the end, remain cinematic in conception and experience. Only Ludwig Hirschfeld-Macke, in his Bauhaus

experiments of 1922, succeeded, albeit briefly, to use pure light projected onto coloured glass. Only by using acetylene flames along with various rheostat settings, changing light sources, dissolves and fade-outs could he achieve anything purely abstract. With the advent of audio and video technology these two mediums could be thoroughly unified, and at the forefront of this pioneering experimentation is Brian Eno.

Listen to the quiet voice

Brian Eno is among the most influential and admired figures in today's popular music. He's produced many respected solo records and been a guiding influence on some of the best-known recordings of the last twenty-five years, including those of David Bowie, U2 and

Talking Heads. Yet outside of the rock music milieu Eno has forged another, and equally influential path. The source of this other path is often seen to originate from two events.

In 1975 two, not unconnected, events were to shift Eno's perspective of not only his own music making but the role it had to play with the listener. In January of that year Eno was involved in a road accident that left him bed-ridden for some time. A friend, visiting him, brought along a record of 18th-century harp music. After having put the record on Eno realised that the amplifier was set at an extremely low level and that one channel of the stereo had failed. Too weak to alter this situation, and as it was raining at the time, what Eno heard was a new way of listening to music – as part of the ambience of the environment: 'just as the colour of the light and sound of the rain were parts of that ambience.' Since this insight Eno has released six solo 'Ambient' albums. He's stated, 'I believe we are moving towards a position of using music and recorded sound with the variety of options that we presently use with colour – we might simply use it to 'tint' the environment, we might use it 'diagrammatically', we might use it to modify our moods in almost subliminal ways. I predict that the concept of 'muzak', once it has shed its connotations of aural garbage, might enjoy a new and very fruitful lease of life. Muzak, you see, has one great asset: you don't have to pay attention to it. This strikes me as a generous humility with which to imbue a piece of music, though it is also nice to ensure that the music can offer rewards to those who do give it their attention.'

This concept of music as ignorable as it is listenable was to have far wider consequences from when Eno made the above statement. The second event was the publication of *Oblique Strategies* with artist Peter Schmidt. *Oblique Strategies* are a box-set of over 100 cards with a short, cryptic statement or aphorism. They are to be used as a technique to prompt intuition and escape blind alleys in various creative pursuits. As with many of Eno's procedures the idea for the cards had its origins in his experiences with Roxy Music. Working in the recording studio, Eno noticed that interesting ideas and sounds that arose by chance were constantly passed over and lost forever. Sometimes the musicians were so

caught up in the task at hand that these special moments went completely unnoticed. To combat this tendency, Eno began to compile lists of reminders designed to open his eyes to the aleatory occurrences of the recording process. Eno transcribed 64 or so of these messages – some technical, some conceptual, some just plain cryptic – onto a deck of small cards. Whenever he was unable to decide what to do next he would pick one of the cards at random and try to apply it to his problem. Shortly afterwards, Eno discovered that his artist friend, Peter Schmidt, had produced a similar set of observations to aid his own work as a painter. The two decided to combine their cards, produce some new ones that did not arise specifically from their work, and publish the pack as a box-set. With the subtitle: 'Over one hundred worthwhile dilemmas', Eno explained that their function was 'simply to bring the consciousness one has as a listener to one's consciousness as a composer – to deal with things in a much more studied way.' Perhaps the best known of the cards is the first one that Eno formulated: 'Honour thy error as a hidden intention'. Its injunction to keep a watchful eye on the secret workings of chance could stand as an epitaph to Eno's entire career.

Into the impossible

After Foundation Studies at Ipswich, Eno studied at Winchester Art School between 1966-69 for a Diploma in Fine Art. By this time he had read John Cage's *Silence*. Cage had been one of the first composers to signal the shift of emphasis from the purity and repeatability of a work as a predetermined pattern of sounds, to the ideas of or process used to generate it. By concentrating on behaviour rather than results and process rather than product, as proposed by Cage, Eno's period at Winchester was spent delving into the textual processes that could be used to generate music, so that his approach to painting and sculpture became