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Monday, Nov. 27, 2006

Light Years Into The Future

By MICHAEL BRUNTON

For an artist with a reputation for lofty concepts, ethereal soundscapes and evanescent light shows, Brian Eno's west London studio is a place of reassuring solids. Boxes neatly marked "screws," "measuring tools," "transistors" and "plaster" jostle for wall space with meter upon meter[an error occurred while processing this directive] of books, CDs and DVDs. Above a row of **keyboards** and computers, five boom boxes hang neatly in line. Suspended from the ceiling is a jerry-built lightbox of perspex and wood. Here and there lie bits of dead projects and pieces of experiments still in gestation.

Amid all this stuff sits the artist, drinking tea and dolefully declaring, "You think I'm happy, but I'm not. I'm totally miserable." But Eno, art-rocker turned producer turned ambient-music pioneer and all-round creative **omnipresence** in contemporary culture, is fibbing. At times, he wears the look of a visionary grown weary of waiting for the world to catch up with the future he has so long been inhabiting. Truth is, most of the time Eno can't stop smiling at the thought that that moment may finally be upon us.

Behind him on a giant wall-mounted plasma screen is his latest reason to be cheerful. Layers of gorgeous, intensely colored abstract images appear, morph and dissolve into one another then fade away into something entirely new. Entitled *77 Million Paintings*, this is the state of Eno's "generative art," the term he coined 14 years ago to describe what happens when you hand over artistic control to a random process. Though it is based on 300 images that were painted, etched or otherwise touched by the hand of Eno, it's the **logarithms** in the computer software that are running the show. On its fastest setting, it will take about 9,000 years to display every possible combination of images; at its slowest ... well, the final reviews won't be in for a few million years. "Part of what I wanted is that it should produce results that I don't know about, that surprise me," Eno says, craning behind him to sneak another look at the screen. "For example I've never seen that combination before and � Oh, that's lovely!" He leaps up and dashes to the computer to make a screen grab of the image, " ... and may never see it again."

Here's an odd thing about Eno: as much as he relishes the ideas of transience and randomness that come with generative art, as much as he challenges accepted notions of artistic ownership (every image on *77 Million Paintings* is copyright free), Eno is a ravenous collector. As well as **recapturing** screen snapshots of the very art he's set free, he keeps an archive of his own recorded interviews, clips newspapers, and hoards rusting canisters of slides and colored gels from his earliest works. But rather than keeping them for posterity's sake, he harvests them for the seeds of ideas they contain. Thus, spanking new though the idea of *77 Million Paintings* may be, some of the images it is mixing are 35 years old.

The theme of time, foreshortened or elongated, is a defining feature of Eno's musical and visual adventures.

But it takes a long lens, pointing back, to bring into focus the ways in which his influence has seeped into the mainstream. Born in Suffolk, England, in 1948, Eno graduated from art school in 1966 and by 1972, with no musical training, he found himself swept into the world of glam-rock fame as a member of Roxy Music. Back then it was the feather boas, leopard-skin jacket and makeup that caught the eye, but what's lasted longer are Eno's abnormal squawks of **processed** sax and early synthesizer that punctuate the magnificent romp of tracks like *Do the Strand*. Many British fans never forgave Eno when he split from Roxy Music after just two albums and headed off into musical outer space. But in New York City they came to adore him — eno is god read the graffiti in the late '70s — as he set about reinventing the studio as an instrument for making music rather than a place for capturing it. That, for better and worse, is how much of today's music gets made. Then, with a series of albums such as *Music for Airports*, Eno quietly introduced a whole new genre of music to the record racks. It was ambient — music created to fill a given space, music you could immerse yourself in or just as easily ignore. Along the way, of course, he's also been a superstar collaborator and producer, helping create career-high albums for the likes of David Bowie, Talking Heads and U2 right through to the high-gloss finish he applied to Paul Simon's angsty *Surprise* this year.

But here and now Eno doesn't want to talk about music — he visibly slumps at the mention. "It's just not the art around which culture is centered right now," he says. Is there one? "Well, it's still in the process of developing, but I think I know what it will be: short films." Pointing to the **popularity** of do-it-yourself websites like YouTube and the affordability of video-editing software like Final Cut, Eno sees a parallel with the revolutionary effect the 45 r.p.m. single had on popular culture in the '60s. "It suddenly liberated music because people only had to have one good idea," he says. "And it only had to to last 2 1/2 minutes."

Thoughts like this seem to flush Eno with fresh enthusiasm and optimism that the world is catching on to his ideas. The randomness, uncertainty and unknowability he explores in his art are, he says, demonstrated daily in life by the failure of political planners and **strategists** to predict, let alone solve, the world's problems or to avoid wars they cannot win. "People comprehend this at gut level," says Eno, "and it makes them want different kinds of experiences in their art."

And, perhaps, it makes them want some art in their daily experiences. Witness Nokia, which for its latest range of upmarket phones commissioned from Eno a suite of 20 subtle ring tones based on the soughing of Saharan winds. Like **ambient** music, that will strike many as so much noodling for a niche market. But we live in an age that takes noodling seriously and that contains a marketful of niches with a global reach.

Eno is hoping to fill one such niche with *77 Million Paintings*. Throughout the summer it has been exhibited as an art installation in Japan and Europe, including this year's Venice Biennale. But last month it came out on dvd-rom, in a version designed to look good on the kind of giant flat-screen monitors that are fast becoming the **centerpiece** of the digital-age living room. "I would walk past places round here and there would be a posh dinner party going on and on the wall is this big black hole," says Eno. "They weren't going to be watching *Eastenders* over dinner, so what else do you put on a big screen like that?"

Well, when it's released on dvd, you could also try *The Boss of It All*, the brand-new film by groundbreaking Danish director Lars von Trier. Instead of employing a cameraman, Von Trier came up with Automavision, a system in which control of the camera's movements is handled by a **randomizing** computer. "I've been predicting for a long time that generative is the future, and now it's happening," Eno says. But vindication of his foresight comes second to his driving desire to be the first in making it come true. "That's the thing I care about most, actually," says Eno, somewhat ruefully, of the computer-driven future now arriving thick and fast.

The artist perks up again. Computers are the dumb end of generative art, he explains. They only obey the rules they're given. "I want results that I like, so I will change the rules until I get them," he says. "It isn't quite as **automatic** as it seems." The next releases he plans will let users change the rules to their taste. "You won't ever get pop songs out of it," he says. Pause. "Though I do have some ideas on how you might."

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