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Brian Eno's '77 Million Paintings' is an artwork that won't sit still

Sylvie Simmons, Special to The Chronicle

Wednesday, June 27, 2007



"Ah, synesthesia," Brian Eno says by telephone from England. "Vladimir Nabokov had a very severe and interesting form of that -- between characters of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet and color and taste sensations. One particular letter he described as being unquestionably a deep ginger in color with a dark, oily taste. I don't have anything like that."

Perhaps not. But Eno admits there are times when he'll listen to one of his self-generating musical compositions and think, "It needs something cold blue over there or it needs something big, soft and brown." His instrumental music -- as fans of his "Ambient" and "Soundtrack" albums will attest -- paints pictures, and his visual art is musical: slow, rhythmic, ambient.

When Brian Peter George St. John le Baptiste de la Salle Eno left Roxy Music in 1973, he re-emerged as the founding father of ambient music, embarking on a career in which mainstream projects -- like producing U2 -- were outnumbered by experimental, often computer-based ones as likely to reflect his art school training as his time as a rock keyboard player.

This week Eno, 59, presents the U.S. premiere of his "77 Million Paintings," a three-night stand at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum. Eno says he originally created the computer program on which "77 Million Paintings" is based to be used in home computers. (A "77 Million Paintings" DVD/software package is widely available for purchase.)

The increasing number, capability and quality of home computers made it wasteful, he felt, to leave monitors dark or mundanely screen-saved when they could be small home galleries for Eno's slowly changing, self-generating art.

At the Yerba Buena shows, "77 Million Paintings" will be projected onto a 12.5-by-45-foot flat screen. Ambient music, also self-generating, will play along with the images. The installation is part of a world tour, the kind Eno much prefers to those of his rock-star days.

"I can't bear the rock music tradition," he says. "So much of stage work is connected with the

presentation of personality. It's about, 'Oh there he is, that's him,' and I've never been interested."

Six years ago in his London studio, Eno described to me the principles and workings of self-generating art, with the help of two computers, 60 boom boxes playing CDs to and with one another and a diagram drawn on the spot on a Post-it note. But it would require more space and journalistic brainpower than currently available to say more than that he creates audio or visual clusters, gives them a set of rules they must follow, and observes them forming and re-forming their own little artistic communes.

The "paintings" you'll see this weekend, though different from the paintings seen at the installations in Venice, Tokyo or London, thanks to the evolutionary process, all stem from the same original rules. Does it make him feel a bit like God, watching them get on with their lives?

"Yes," he says, laughing. "They are living an independent life, and they keep doing things that still surprise me. I've watched this program now for thousands of hours, because I have it running in my studio, normally, when I'm working there, and occasionally I'll look up and I'll see something really completely unlike anything I've ever seen before and think, 'Bloody hell!' I know all of the elements in the piece, of course, because I made them all, so you would think that I wouldn't be particularly surprised by any of the combinations of them, but I'm very surprised, actually.

"The combinations are much more various and startling than I could have imagined. This is a very good example of a piece that started with quite a simple ambition and without very high hopes and it's so far exceeded, it's paid off in such a big way and I'm very surprised by it and very thrilled by it."

Talking to Eno via cell phone, The Chronicle has caught him in a surprisingly low-tech moment -- sitting in the dark, the victim of a power outage. In the background his daughter can be heard playing classical music on an acoustic piano. The computer programs are safe, he says; they're running on battery.

The most remarkable thing about seeing work originally created for the small screen on 45-foot ones, he says, is actually watching the people watching it.

"A lot of people sitting very quietly, completely lost in this thing -- it's an amazing thing to see. I've really never seen this kind of viewer behavior, where the thing that's going on is terribly slow, there's not much happening, and there are no big surprises or anything. It completely contradicts the common assumption that people's attention spans are getting shorter. I think the opposite is the case, actually. I think people are really ready for very long, still experiences in a way that they haven't ever been before, or for a very long time, anyway."

That's music to the ears of the Long Now Foundation, which is presenting the "77 Million Paintings" show. Among the San Francisco nonprofit's objectives is to provide a counterbalance to

today's short-attention-span, want-it-now mentality. Instead, the foundation promotes long-term thinking. You might have heard of Long Now's 10,000-year clock -- with bell sounds by Eno -- designed to run for that length of time and to adjust itself if there are no humans left to do the job.

Eno is one of Long Now's co-founders and stays in regular contact with his colleagues here.

"I have quite a few friends in San Francisco. I just adore it. I think it's one of the world's five great cities. I like it mostly for its intellectual culture. I think there's a kind of freedom of thought and a generosity of thought and an optimism of thought which I have a regular injection of. 'Things could work out, things could be good, why don't we try it and see what happens?' That type of thing.

"You're English," he says to me, "so you can perhaps appreciate how welcome that is to someone who lives in England and nothing is possible and everything is discouraged in many ways."

He adds, "I lived in San Francisco for a while, in 1980, and I sort of think in a way that's where I still live really, that's where my mind lives, I suppose, even if my body lives somewhere else."

As the lights come back on in England and before my cell phone battery runs out, Eno says, "I left my mind in San Francisco."

77 Million Paintings: Flat-screen installation by Brian Eno. 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday (Sunday show at 7 p.m. is for members of the Long Now Foundation) at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum, 701 Mission St., San Francisco. Tickets \$20-\$25. Call (415) 978-2787 or visit www.longnow.org.

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This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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