

CONTROL & SURRENDER

Eno Remixed: Collaboration and Oblique Strategies

Kingsley Marshall & Rupert Loydell

'Imagine the piece as a set of disconnected events.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

One

'State the problem in words as clearly as possible.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

Oblique Strategies, a set of 100 cards printed with a series of cryptic messages, was first published by Brian Eno and the painter Peter Schmidt in 1975, as a device intended to jog their respective minds in periods of creative impasse. In a radio interview with Charles Amirkhonian, Eno explained that the cards had evolved from 'separate working procedures. It was one of the

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many cases during the friendship that he [Peter Schmidt] and I where we arrived at a working position at almost exactly the same time and almost in exactly the same words. There were times when we hadn't seen each other for a few months at a time sometimes, and upon remeeting or exchanging letters, we would find that we were in the same intellectual position - which was quite different from the one we'd been in prior to that' (1980).

To begin requires me to clearly state the problem, which I think is for us to explore the nature of collaborative practice in the digital age, where appropriation is far from the avante garde and chance encounters are a click away. When talking about synthesiser design, Eno stated in the documentary Imaginary Landscapes, that the emphasis by manufacturers was on increasing the number of options available to musicians, while he suggested that what was more helpful was 'fewer possibilities, that are more interesting' (1989).

In the always-on digital culture (the citation was found through a Google search, leading to a YouTube rip of now hard to find documentary), are we effectively limited in our true creativity, and is there value in returning to limited systems (such as Oblique Strategies) that deny creators opportunities, somehow allowing them to realise something different? Is there a difference between ideas borne of individual memory than those borne from the collective cultural behemoth of the internet?

Two

'Turn it Upside Down.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

In an online CD review Irving Tan Zhi Mian quotes Eno being interviewed for the 2011 Brighton festival: 'Control and surrender have to be kept in balance. That's what surfers do – take control of the situation, then be carried, then take control. In the last few thousand years, we've become incredibly adept technically. We've treasured the controlling part of ourselves and neglected the surrendering part. I want to rethink surrender as an active verb' (2011).

This balance has been of interest to Eno since his days at Ipswich School of Art, where he encountered and was subjected to the ideas of telematic theorist and 'maverick educator' Roy Ascott (Sheppard, 2008, p. 31). Ascott was interested in control and behaviour, believing that a 'behavioural tendency dominates art now in all its aspects. One finds an insistence on polemic, formal ambiguity and instability, uncertainty, and room for change in the images and forms of modern art. And these factors predominate, not for esoteric or obscurantist reasons but to draw the spectator into active participation in the act of creation; to extend him, via the artefact, the opportunity to become involved in creative behaviour on all levels of experience—physical, emotional and conceptual. A feedback loop is

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established, so that the evolution of the artwork/experience is governed by the intimate involvement of the spectator. As the process is open-ended, the spectator now engages in decision-making play' (Ascott, 2007, pp. 110-111).

Eno went further. He wanted not only the audience but the artist to partake in 'decision-making play' and be part of the ongoing feedback loop which Ascott describes as 'creative participation' (ibid, p. 111). Oblique Strategies was one way to make decisions, collaboration was another. Both can be seen as abdications of decision-making, as ways to open up participation, or as a way of putting John Cage's 'Composition as Process' into practice (Cage, 1939).

Three

'Not building a wall; making a brick.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

This 'behavioural tendency' described by Eno was as much about the environments in which he was creating, as it was about any overarching orthodoxy which he felt directed studio-based music production. In a 1977 interview with Ian MacDonald he explained that his feeling of booking a recording studio with a demo already completed effectively limited his own sense of creativity once there, and articulated a fear that he 'might be missing

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all kinds of things because you had a fixed goal in mind. I found that if you went into a studio with demos, you spent all your time trying to re-create the demos - which was not only extremely time-consuming, but always prevented you from seeing what was actually happening' (1977).

His desire to distance himself from any sense of fixity in his production was dramatically realised in Another Green World, his third studio album, released in 1975. The first album on which Oblique Strategies are credited, Eno described it as a project where he entered the studio 'with no written material'. He added, 'Very soon after that, interesting things started to happen. And these things seemed to crop up most frequently when I found myself playing around with a new instrument or new sound.' This led to Discreet Music in the same year, and the later Ambient series, in addition to forming the catalyst for an interest in scoring film. He suggested film music necessarily lacked focus as it did not 'state a central issue, because the central image is the issue on the screen' (MacDonald, 1977).

Unlike his earlier work much of the material on Another Green World was recorded by Eno alone and, where he did make use of guest musicians, he used an emergent collaborative process. Contributor Phil Collins explained that he and bass player Percy Jones would 'run through our dictionary licks and he'd [Eno] record them and make a loop of them' to be used in the later recordings (Thompson, 1995, pp. 117–118).

Four

'Do we need holes?' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

We could regard this advance recording of music for use later, along with procedural processes, tactics and oracle cards a response to what Eno called '[t]he kind of panic situation you get into in the studio'. He states that '[t]he idea of Oblique Strategies was just to dislocate my vision for a while. By means of performing a task that might seem absurd in relation to the picture, one can suddenly come in from a tangent and possibly reassess it' (O'Brien, 1978). Or, in common parlance, one can plug a hole.

We might also consider holes as defined by their edges, as spaces for others to contribute, or as sound holes, i.e. silence. In private papers, quoted by Rick Poynter in one of his commentaries in Eno & Mills' art book More Dark than Shark, Eno states that 'When you work with somebody else, you expose yourself to an interesting risk: the risk of being sidetracked, of being taken where you hadn't intended to go. This is the central issue of collaboration for me. I work with people who I believe are likely to engender a set of conditions that will create this tangent effect, that will take me into new territory' (1986, p. 97).

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So, a hole on the map, a void to be willingly and enthusiastically explored. Or in aural terms, a musical hole to be filled; the silence that is the condition or absence of music before it exists. Eno has stated that he 'use[s] instruments in the way a painter makes a canvas, with a great variety of objects and tools' to facilitate filling the silence (Mallet, 2001).

Eno knew early on that he could leave holes in his music. Commenting on hearing Steve Reich's early voice works for tape he said that 'the economy of them was so stunning. There's so little there. The complexity of the piece appears from nowhere' (Toop, 2004, pp. 184-185). Mallet states that 'Eno has always been fascinated by the idea of a rootless conceptual music' and suggests that 1975's Discreet Music is another kind of hole, 'a kind of black hole capturing the imagination the way Calder mobile catches reflections in the light' (2001).

Interestingly, on the map that is the world wide web, the only seemingly worthwhile Google result for 'Brian Eno + holes' comes up with:

And there's a hole, in a hole
In a hole, in a
Down in a hole, in a hole
I fell right through the hole in you

as part of the lyric to 'There Is Nobody' at the Lyrics Zoo website. Perhaps fittingly, as this track is actually an instrumental and these lyrics do not exist.

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We might read this as a happy accident, or even as a ghost collaboration attempting to unsuccessfully fill an intended hole. Do we need holes? We most certainly do. As 'Wanted for Life', a 2008 Byrne & Eno song says:

Even though it's full of holes

Get cha where ya wanna go.

[...]

My testimonies full of holes

Get me where I wanna go

Get cha where ya wanna go.

And here we are.

Five

'Just carry on.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

Brian Eno had described himself in interviews throughout the 1970s as a non-musician stating (somewhat ironically) in Musician magazine that he felt that there was a 'tacit belief that virtuosity was the sine qua non of music [...] and that seemed to be so transparently false in terms of rock music' (Eno, in

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Bangs, 1979). His place in the Portsmouth Sinfonia delivered on this philosophy, with Eno playing clarinet and producing the Sinfonia's first two albums. The members of the orchestra and the conductor had little experience of their instruments and hacked their way through Tchaikovsky, Strauss, Bach and Bizet.

Eno acknowledged this when discussing his use of the Electronic Music Studio VCS3, his first synthesiser and perhaps the most crucial instrument in distinguishing Roxy Music's eponymous debut from other albums of the time. 'The VCS3 was quite a difficult instrument to use, though at the time it was a fantastic thing to have for someone like me, who couldn't actually play any conventional instruments. There were no rules for playing synthesizers, so nobody could tell me I couldn't play one. Nobody else could play one either. It was an instrument you made up yourself... its role was waiting to be invented' (Eno, 2011).

Embracing these in-between spaces, between the actual notes or in the chasm between the invention and intention of emerging studio technology, has been a common thread throughout Eno's work. In a lecture delivered at the New Music America Festival in 1979 Eno contrasted the range of electronic instrumentation and possibilities offered by tape with traditional approaches to composition, arguing that the former offered infinite, to the latter's finite, possibilities. 'The composer writes a piece of music in a language that might not be adequate to his ideas,' he argued, 'he has to say this note or this one, when he might mean this one just in between, or nearly

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this one here. He has to specify things in terms of a number of available instruments' (1979).

Instead, other strategies drive his compositions. 'On [David Bowie's] "Heroes" it wasn't as clear cut because we both worked on all the pieces all the time - almost taking turns,' he explained to Interview magazine. 'On one of the pieces - "Sense of Doubt" - we both pulled an Oblique Strategy at the beginning and kept them to ourselves. It was like a game. We took turns working on it; he'd do one overdub and I'd do the next, and he'd do the next. The idea was that each was to observe his Oblique Strategy as closely as he could. And as it turned out they were entirely opposed to one another. Effectively mine said "Try to make everything as similar as possible." which in effect is trying to create a homogeneous line, and his said "Emphasize differences" so whereas I was trying to smooth it out and make it into one continuum he was trying to do the opposite' (Eno, in O'Brien, 1978).

The technique generated many options, though Eno would pick one and determine if it stick, in an attempt to operate outside of the arbitrary constraints of musical form – stepping into the holes of the work.

Six

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'You don't have to be ashamed of using your own ideas.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

'We sometimes tend to think that ideas and feelings arising from our intuitions are intrinsically superior to those achieved by reason and logic' suggests Eno but then goes on to refute this, suggesting that 'intuition is not a quasi-mystical voice from outside speaking through us, but a sort of quick-and-dirty processing of our prior experience' (Eno, 2012).

'The trouble begins with a design philosophy that equates "more options" with "greater freedom"' (Eno, 1999). By focusing on the task at hand, even from an oblique strategy chosen at random, Eno's own ideas are filtered through the oracular. Confusingly, these ideas involve Eno stepping back from using his own ideas or being overtly present as authorial voice: 'If you leave your personality out of the frame, you are inviting the listener to enter it instead' (Eno in Mallett, 2001), although elsewhere he speculates that 'in a sense, you can't escape your own style' (Richardson, 2010).

This is qualified later on in the same answer, when Eno states that he is 'of course, [...] always interested in something when it isn't familiar to me' (*ibid*, 2010). Oblique Strategies is one way to see things anew: 'The idea of Oblique Strategies was just to dislocate my vision for a while' (Eno in O'Brien, 1978). Another Eno strategy is to 'Turn off the options, and turn up the intimacy' (Eno, 1999), to truly get to know an instrument's quirks and potentials rather

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than seek out the black hole of endless possibilities. (The term instrument here would include the recording studio, which Eno has long regarded as an instrument in its own right.)

Discussing this 'Revenge of the Intuitive' Eno comes up with a phrase worthy of inclusion in the Oblique Strategies pack: '[F]amiliarity breeds content' (ibid).

Seven

'Take away the elements in order of apparent non importance.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

This limitation, as opposed to the embrace, of the infinite options available to the producer in the electronic studio was explicitly expressed by Eno, whose liner notes to Discreet Music admitted, 'I have always preferred making plans to executing them, I have gravitated towards situations and systems that, once set into operation, could create music with little or no intervention on my part' (1975).

Oblique Strategies co-author Peter Schmidt was also interested in these systems, having served as music adviser for the 'Cybernetic Serendipity'

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exhibition at London's ICA in 1968, curated by Jasia Reichardt, which showcased work by artists including John Cage, Nam June Paik, and Jean Tinguely (Dayal, 2009 and Reichardt, 1968). Eno later described Schmidt as his teacher, having initially hired him to perform at Winchester School of Art whilst he studied there, later becoming friends and ultimately creative collaborators (Eno in Amikhanian, 1980).

Eno described a change in both he and Schmidt's practice around the period of recording Discreet Music. He noted that these changes were widely perceived by others as 'in some sense regressive', an abdication of previous positions. Schmidt had returned to watercolours from acrylics and abstracts, while Eno endured similar comments that he had somehow regressed in his new music; music that did not shock and surprise but was instead 'extremely calm, delicate and kind of invites you in rather than pushes itself upon you' (ibid).

Eno had made use of cyberneticist Stafford Beer's Brain of the Firm in his early approaches to composition through self-generative systems, rather than traditional approaches. 'It wasn't only the sound that was interesting me, but how the music came into being' (Eno in Whittaker, 2009, p. 8).

The advent of the sampler in the late 1970s allowed musicians to use any sound as an instrument and map these to keyboards or other technologies. In My Life In The Bush of Ghosts (1981), a collaborative album with David Byrne, Eno made use of snippets from radio call-in shows, an exorcism and a

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number of pre-existing albums, and has itself since been sampled by artists including Primal Scream and J Dilla. In Brain of the Firm, Stafford Beer offered a regulatory aphorism in his rules of viable systems that suggested that 'it is not necessary to enter the black box to understand the nature of the function it performs' (1979, p. 59), yet the possibilities offered by sampling is as much what is not included – what is left out – than what is left in.

Eight

'Make a sudden, destructive unpredictable action; incorporate.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

'Then Brian was knocked down and seriously injured by a taxi whilst crossing the Harrow Road.' As Eno lay recuperating, New York musician Judy Nylon visited with the gift of an album of harp music that ended up being played on a broken stereo at such a low volume that Eno could hardly hear it once he had returned to his bed. '[B]ut since he was barely able to move, he left it as it was and listened. As he did so, an alternative mode of hearing unfolded' (Toop, 1995, p. 139). Or so this version of the story goes.

'More laughter, this time from Brian Eno' (*ibid.*, p. 121).

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'For almost every musician searching for ways to step outside the boundaries, an interest in invented or expanded sound technology is inevitable' (ibid, p. 138). Broken stereos and low volume may not be what we normally think of as 'expanded sound technology' but it was certainly a way to step outside the boundaries of what was perceived as rock music in the 1970s.

'It happened like this. In the early seventies, more and more people were changing the way they listened to music. [...] people were wanting to make quite particular and sophisticated choices about what they played in their homes and workplaces, what kind of sonic mood they surrounded themselves with' (Eno, 2004b).

'The other day I was lying on my bed listening to Brian Eno's Music for Airports. The album consists of a few simple piano or choral figures put on tape loops which then run with various delays for about ten minutes each [...] Like a lot of Eno's "ambient" stuff, the music has a crystalline sunlight-through-windowpane quality that makes it somewhat mesmerising even as you only half-listen to it' (Bangs, 1979/80).

'Let me think a moment so that I can formulate an intelligent answer' (Eno in Bangs, 1979/80).

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‘When you walk into a recording studio, you see thousands of knobs and controls. Nearly all of these are different ways of doing the same job: they allow you to do things to sounds [...]’ (Eno, 2004b, p. 95).

“Yes,” smiles Eno. “I just need one note” (Bangs, 1979/80).

‘As technology has changed, so the recording studio has become increasingly virtual’ (Toop, 1995, p. 124).

‘More laughter, this time from Brian Eno’ (*ibid*, p. 121).

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‘[T]he tapeless studio became a possibility, though rarely a total reality’ (*ibid*, p. 125).

“His compositional method is entirely dependent upon tape recorders...”
(Bangs, 1979/80).

‘Like a lot of the stuff I was doing at the time, this was regarded by many English music critics as a kind of arty joke and they had a lot of fun with it’
(Eno, 2004b, p. 97).

‘Take the word “Ambient” for example. Today, it is the hippest word in pop, embracing a panoply of styles that rely on atmosphere and repetition. In the

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past, it was the dirtiest word in pop: an automatic put-down for any music that strayed outside the hip conventions of the music press' (Prendergast, 1993).

'More laughter, this time from Brian Eno' (Toop, 1995, p. 121).

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'The virtual studio, then, is our chronotype, the fictional setting where stories take place' (ibid, p. 125).

Once upon a time there was a musician who invented ambient music.

'More laughter, this time from Brian Eno. (ibid, p. 121).

Nine

'Faced with a choice, do both (given by Dieter Rot).' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

'I think it's really fascinating that there are a lot of people who presumably aren't active as composers or artists who are quite interested in the

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philosophical nuts and bolts of being an artist or composer' (Eno in Cain 1990).

As often as the pack offered resolution to creative blockages, the Oblique Strategies cards were as likely to instigate conflict. As Eno explained when working on Bowie's Low (1977a), 'Sometimes we went in opposite directions. David's card said: "Make a sudden, destructive unpredictable action," and mine: "Change nothing and continue with immaculate consistency' [...]. The music was like a place of Hegelian dialectics in which everything was in conflict' (Mallet, 2001).

In an interview as part of a Arena documentary, Eno observed that digital studio technology such as the Pro Tools audio workstation presented a temptation to the producer to 'smooth everything out' to correct imperfections in the performance that ostensibly 'improve' the recording, though observes that homogeneity is the output 'until there is no evidence of human life at all' (2010).

Chris Martin admitted of X&Y (2005), the album recorded prior to Coldplay's work with Eno, 'in terms of playing together as a band, we were relying too much on Pro Tools and using it as more of an examiner instead of as an instrument' (In Dombal, 2011).

Oblique Strategies force the record producer or artist to take themselves out of the work and consider their own position in the process. Eno noted 'not only

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do I have the technologies that I'm used to using, like recording studios and synthesizers, at my fingertips; I also have this big device, - the human brain - which I can also somehow make use of as part of the work [...] Oblique Strategies were really a way of getting past panic by reminding myself that there were broader considerations than the ones I could remember at that moment in the studio' (In Dilberto, 1988).

Ten

'Look closely at the most embarrassing details and amplify them.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

'Muzak is a quiet challenge to the sonic order of a free society' writes Evan Eisenberg in his astonishing book The Recording Angel, which considers how records brought changed the way humans listened to music (1987, p. 67). But he goes on to note that '[m]usic and silence are both supposed to be golden....' and that 'the use of background music finds a noble justification in Plato', although he is slightly more cynical when he states that '[m]usic or silence, either one heard clearly, would ennoble every thing or else explode it. By playing background music we kill both birds with one stone' (*ibid*, p. 168).

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It is not a very big step from Bing Muscio, former president of Muzak Corp. stating that 'his product should be heard but not listened to' (quoted in Eisenberg, 1987, p. 65) to Eno's statement in the original liner notes of Music for Airports that 'Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting' (1978). He was adamant that 'it is possible to produce material that can be used thus without in any way being compromised' (*ibid*).

'William Schumann, however, was maddened by it [muzak] on a Metroliner train. "I couldn't work. I couldn't think ... My whole life is music, and I don't like to see it destroyed by omnipresence"' (quoted in Eisenberg, 1987, p. 65).
Would ignorability have made any difference to him? I suspect not.

So did Eno just hijack muzak and give it a new intellectual lick of paint? Did he take Satie's idea of furniture music too far? Recycle Reich? And should we blame him for the outbreak of new age music in the 1970s and the rise of chill-out rooms and trip-hop? John Schaefer suggests that Eno's ambient records 'had a significant impact on composers of electronic music, especially those working in the New Age field. Like Eno, some have succeeded in creating music that is atmospheric but challenging. Other have tried and failed. Many have not even made the attempt, settling instead for pieces that produce a calm, numbing effect that's hard to distinguish from boredom' (1990, p. 13).

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The Nerve Net Sampler CD (1992) had a sticker on with this brief conversation printed on it:

DETAILS:

Do you accept partial blame for new-age music?

BRIAN ENO:

Yes. But I don't accept any blame whatsoever for new-age philosophy.

Eleven

'Disciplined self-indulgence.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

Early reviews of Another Green World (1975) suggested that the album foreshadowed an Eno 'trafficking in precious self-indulgent inertia' (Wolcott, 1976), while Lester Bangs observed in a piece for Village Voice that the 'little pools of sound on the outskirts of silence seemed [...] the logical consequence of letting the processes and technology share your conceptual burden' (In Tamm, 1995, p. 105).

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Eno has argued throughout quite the opposite, that the producer or artist should challenge new studio technologies. 'The thing I've most disliked about a lot of recent music, particularly music done on sequencers, is that it's totally locked [...]. For a listener, this is very uninteresting [...] instead of going for a walk in a fantastic forest, it's like being on a railway line' (In Engelbrecht, 1996).

The critique of his methods is not an uncommon response, the line between art school absurdity and originality and creativity broached in the artwork of Eno's albums, his titles and lyrics or the conceptual approaches to music such as Original Soundtracks 1 (1995). Recorded with U2 under the pseudonym Passengers, this album was initially intended to accompany Peter Greenaway's The Pillow Book (1996), though its final iteration contained tracks intended for existing, unreleased and imaginary film. An accompanying booklet was loaded with hidden messages and allusions to cultural production proving, in the words of Boston music critic Brett Milano, 'that self-indulgence can actually lead somewhere' (1995).

Twelve

'Ask people to work against their better judgement.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

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Eno does not only challenge studio technologies, he challenges those he works with, through the use of Oblique Strategies, but also by other means; Eric Tamm reports that 'Eno's actual role in the making of albums like Here Come the Warm Jets was [...] not that of the traditional composer [...] Eno's role was somewhat paradoxical: although he retained complete artistic control over the final product, he was at pains to suppress the spontaneous creativity of his musicians' (1995, p. 100).

'What did Eno actually tell or ask his musicians to play? Apparently he gave them verbal suggestions, often with the help of visual images or body language' (*ibid*). Again, one has to ask if this is abdication of responsibility, or an example of collective music making &/or improvisation that is then reined in at the mixing and production stage?

Eno is, however, remarkably consistent in the way he approaches music making even when present as a collaborator or producer. 'Brian Eno brought his own innovative way of working to this album' [Lodger (1979)], writes Nick Stevenson in his book on David Bowie (2006, p. 88). 'For instance some of the distorted guitar sound is produced by Adrian Belew. On arriving in the studio he was simply instructed to "play accidentally" without being allowed to hear any of the music' (*ibid*).

Similarly, 'the recording of Low is remembered by many of the musicians who worked on the album for Eno's Oblique Strategies cards. The idea was quite

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simple, if challenging for musicians who were not used to working in this way' Stevenson comments, adding that '[s]ome of the cards were quite baffling [...] and that 'the aim was to disrupt the recording process productively, introducing spaces for the unexpected, accidents and mistakes' (*ibid*, p. 138).

At other times, such as when recording Another Green World (1975), Eno was shooting from the conceptual hip in other ways: 'I tried all kinds of experiments, like seeing how few instructions you could give to the people in order to get something to happen,' although Eno admitted that this was originally the result of a 'kind of desperation' after three or four days of not getting anything done (Sheppard, 2008, pp. 198-199).

'No doubt encouraged by his recent reading of behaviourist philosopher Morse Peckham, whose central assertion maintained that the defining attribute of artistis experience is in its exposure to perceptual disorder, Eno continued to "wing it" with increasingly satisfactory results.' Others were also required to wing it, although the Oblique Strategies were always there to 'act as a conceptual hand-rail' for Eno when he needed it, along with a recognition that '[t]he improvisatory approach [...] was mostly a matter of being prepared to spot an opportunity' (*ibid*, p. 199).

Eno readily admitted that and the work of both John Cage and artist and lecturer Tom Phillips were an influence on Oblique Strategies, along with the Ching (others have mentioned George Brecht's Water Yam (1963), another set of instructional cards), yet somehow Oblique Strategies found a cult

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audience, to the extent that composer Gavin Bryars recalls that 'at the time people were calling it the next best thing after the Tarot' (Sheppard 2008, p. 179).

Thirteen

'Discard an axiom.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

'What's interesting about music is not the music, actually. I don't care what it's like, I don't care about the sounds, I don't really care about how they're made. What I care about is where this fits in the conversation with culture' (Eno, in Young 1996).

This determination of music defined by relative, rather than absolute, values are critical to much of Eno's solo work. A great deal of his back catalogue can be considered a conversation with what is around it, defined by its relationship with architecture, fine art, the moon, film or technology; most literally in his ambient works which, like John Cage's 4'33", are reliant on their environment to complete them.

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In the liner notes to Discreet Music, Eno explained the gestation of this idea, seeded in an album of harp music given to him by Judy Nylon after he had suffered an accident. 'I put on the record. Having laid down, I realized that the amplifier was set at an extremely low level, and that one channel of the stereo had failed completely. Since I hadn't the energy to get up and improve matters, the record played on almost inaudibly. This presented what was for me a new way of hearing music - as part of the ambience of the environment just as the colour of the light and the sound of the rain were parts of that ambience' (1975).

'Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting' (Eno, 1978).

'I was trying to make a piece that could be listened to and yet could be ignored... perhaps in the spirit of Satie who wanted to make music that could "mingle with the sound of the knives and forks at dinner"' (Eno, 1975).

Fourteen

'Disconnect from desire.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

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'[...] many artists want their work to have some kind of staying power that veers toward cultural immortality while at the same time imagining that their work indicates the creative immediacy of the contemporary movement' (Amerika, 2011, p. 9)

Eno seems to not be concerned with 'cultural immortality', trusting instead to 'systems, creative problem solving and thinking pan-culturally across the arts and sciences. Hence Eno's career-long interest in music as laboratories for the testing of ideas' (Bracewell, 2007, p. 206). This idea of allowing or causing things to happen, underpins the Oblique Strategies pack, with cards such as 'Honor thy mistake as a hidden intention' refusing to acknowledge, let alone erase, errors, whilst 'The tape is now the music' is perhaps one of the most radical cards with its declaration that the track being worked on is now finished (Eno & Schmidt, 1979). Tamm states that 'one of the most delightful aspects of Eno's creative personality is his inclination to take the idea of this oracle seriously' (Tamm, 1995, p. 49).

Throughout his career Eno has listened to, encouraged, and networked with other musicians. He has also 'use[d] his ears to scan the environment, putting himself into a music-listening mode even in the absence of music' (ibid, p.42).

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This attention to what is happening around him, whether traditionally perceived as music or not, is evidenced in the Obscure series of LPs he curated and produced for Island Records. These included albums by then obscure [sic] classical composers such as Gavin Bryars (The Sinking of the Titanic (1975)) and Michael Nyman (Decay Music (1976)); a version of Tom Phillips' opera Irma (1978), whose score was derived from Phillips' treated book project, A Humument (1980); Eno's own Discreet Music (1975), and David Toop & Max Eastley's New & Rediscovered Musical Instruments (1975). Bracewell suggests that "[i]n a nod to Anthony Stafford Beer's theories on business organization and process, he [Eno] proposed that they [Island Records] "launch a few things out of the mainstream and watch their progress very closely" (2007, p. 208).

Eno's watching and listening carefully meant that early on he seemed aware that John Cage was an important musical and theoretical presence in the arts (several Cage compositions comprised one side of the Obscure LP Voices and Instruments (1976)), and sensed that both Nyman and Bryars were on their way to public acceptance and a kind of fame.

He certainly remained open to new musical forms and ideas, often choosing to get involved, either as collaborator or producer, with artists as different and wide-ranging as rock guitarist Robert Fripp, of progressive rock band King Crimson, with whom he produced several albums of looping drone music, such as (No Pussyfooting) (1973) and The Equatorial Stars (2004) (Fripp also contributed guitar to the trilogy of Bowie albums which Eno was involved in);

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trumpeter Jon Hassell, whose two 'Fourth World' LPs Possible Musics (1980) and Dream Theory in Malaya (1981) Eno would play on and produce or co-produce; and new wave art-rockers Talking Heads, whom he would co-produce (More Songs About Buildings & Food (1978), Fear of Music (1979)) and then help re-invent as a funk-rock band for the astonishing Remain in Light (1980), which also included contributions from the aforementioned Hassell. Then, of course, there was the re-invention (or resurrection) of U2, around the time of their The Unforgettable Fire album (1984), a collaboration which has continued to the present day through Eno's production, interventions and contributions to the band's albums and live shows.

In fact creating ideas seemed to be what Eno was and is best at doing, as nicknames such as 'The Professor of Pop' (Sturges, 2005) suggest.

Fifteen

'Retrace your steps.' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

Gregory Taylor's helpful Obliquely Stratigraphic (2007) details that, with occasional minor alterations for language, over 60 of the Oblique Strategies that have appeared in all of the packs. What is perhaps more interesting however are the vestiges, those traces of ideas that have become

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functionless as the packs have evolved. Many of the physical strategies – ‘Put in earplugs’, ‘Do the washing up’ and ‘Tape Your Mouth’ - didn’t make it past Editions 1 & 2 (1975, 1978). The supremely oblique ‘From nothing to more than nothing’ appeared just once, in Edition 3 (1979).

Eno commented that ‘[c]ards come and go’ (1996), yet some of these gaps demonstrate an ironic self-awareness. ‘Do we need holes’ and ‘Make a blank valuable by putting it in an exquisite frame’ both appeared in all of the packs other than Edition 4 (1996), a decision no doubt drawing a wry smile from Eno. Perhaps unsurprisingly considering the beautiful design of the cards themselves, which in later editions came cushioned in a black box emblazoned in gold, embossed text, ‘Be extravagant’ appeared from Edition 2 (1978). The latest pack, Edition 5, added ‘Gardening, not architecture’ an acknowledgement of the desire of the strategies to humanise and for creative output to grow and to flourish rather than simply construct an edifice. ‘Make something implied more definite (reinforce, duplicate)’ also appeared, again a tacit acknowledgment of the impact of the cards themselves – as the two men stated in the original title card, ‘intellect catching up with intuition’ (1975).

Writing in the Opal Information fanzine on the death of Peter Schmidt, Eno commented that ‘I know that the “neglected genius” is a mythical character. It’s very unusual for real talent to be completely ignored. [...] He was always alert to those little byways of thought that might open out onto whole new vistas, and he followed them with a quiet kind of courage and with the very

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minimum. He wrote to me once, "In a roomful of shouting people, the one who whispers becomes interesting" (1987).

In a roomful of shouting people, the quiet advice of the Oblique Strategies – whether physical or virtual – have whispered worthwhile dilemmas into the ears of those involved in creative practice for over 40 years.

Sixteen

'Is it finished?' (Eno & Schmidt, 1979)

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