

## Ambient Landscapes from Brian Eno to Tetsu Inoue

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Not listening in the space, but listening to the space.

Music as an art of space, rather than an art of time.

Music as a painting to hang on the wall.

Music as an environment, rather than an event.

But what kind?

Early environmental musics each had their own characteristic spaces: Eric Satie wanted music to go with the knives and forks; John Cage had his Manhattan apartment with windows thrown open to let in sounds from the street below; Morton Feldman's best-known score was designed for the Rothko Chapel. In this article, I focus on two more recent landmarks in the history of space music: Brian Eno's highly influential "ambient" albums in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and one of the high points of ambient music in the 1990s—Tetsu Inoue's *Ambiant Otaku*. By examining both the visual and aural components of these works, considerable shifts in the form and content of environmental music gradually drift into view. This most spatially sensitive of genres registers a wide variety of approaches to public and private landscapes, both real and imagined.

### **Eno On Land**

While Eno's ambient work is perhaps most famous for its goal of creating a music "as ignorable as it is interesting,"<sup>1</sup> closer attention reveals an artist investigating not only novel ways of attending to sounds, but how these sounds can negotiate a "sense of place" with the environment around them—responding directly to new habitation patterns in cities around the globe.

In the liner notes to *Ambient 4: On Land* (1982), Eno describes how ambient music developed out of his experiences as a traveling musician,

when he would use albums to create a familiar “sense of place” even in the most transitory of circumstances:

I realized while I was living this nomadic life, the one thing that was really keeping me in place, or giving me a sense of place, was music. [. . .] We can use recordings to insert a sense of place in the various locations we end up in. They repeat identically each time—they’re reliable portable experiences. (Korner)

The problem Eno addresses here is how to reengineer this “sense of place” in a mobile world where the familiar markers of belonging are fast felt to be slipping away.<sup>2</sup> From the mid 1970s onward, Eno returned repeatedly to the image of an evacuated landscape:

An aspect of this landscape concern is to do with the removal of personality from the picture. You know how different a landscape painting is when there is a figure in it. Even if the figure is small, it automatically becomes the focus—all questions of scale and depth are related to it. When I stopped writing songs, I took the figure out of the landscape. (Tamm 4)

Drawing on his experience with visual art (Eno studied at the Winchester School of Art before embarking on his music career), Eno conceptualizes ambient music here as a particular form of landscape painting.

The landscape has ceased to be a backdrop for something else to happen in front of; instead, everything that happens is a part of the landscape. There is no longer a sharp distinction between foreground and background. (Tamm 4)

This conceptualization of environmental music as an immersive landscape painting stands in stark contrast with another composer-theorist of the period, R. Murray Schafer. Unlike Schafer’s term *soundscape* (Schafer 1977), Eno’s “landscape” maintains a tight synesthetic union between the sound environment and the visible environment through which it moves and mixes. Where Schafer’s World Soundscape Project tended to isolate and privilege sound over the other possible “scapes” (proclaiming the need to promote listening in a supposedly ocularcentric culture, as if the senses were

competing with one another), Eno's background in visual art—following the lead of Satie, Cage, and others—led him to approach music more as an extension of the plastic arts. In the ambient music experiments in the mid-to-late 1970s, he drew extensively on the tradition of graphic scores (referencing this history with the “notation” drawings for the four *Music for Airports* pieces<sup>3</sup>), a methodology well suited to the ever-increasing temporal plasticity offered up by new technologies in the recording studio.

Schafer and his collaborators emphasized the fragility and ephemerality of particular sounds. Their narratives described how culturally significant segments of the “soundscape” are ever being drowned out by noise and lost to history. This led to a salvage approach based on the precise mapping and recording of when and where particular sounds have occurred. In contrast, Eno embraced recorded music as a means to reliably maintain and reproduce novel sound environments. He approached music from the perspective of a curator, or installation artist, focusing on the interaction between the artwork and the space enveloping it (and enveloped by it). Like most painting or sculpture, recorded music retains its aesthetic form for years at a time. The recording can also be moved from place to place, installed in different contexts to both shape and be shaped by its surroundings. With ambience, Eno writes, “the underlying idea was to try to suggest that there were new places to put music, new kinds of niches where music could belong” (Korner).

As Tia DeNora (67) has more recently argued, recorded music provides a set of coordinates in real time that can serve as a map for how listeners might move and feel, how a subject might “fit in” to an environment. Music establishes patterns of tension and resolution, timbre, harmony, melody and rhythm, all of which can serve as an “entrainment device” allowing the body to latch onto the aural-tactile environment around it, both consciously and unconsciously. In this way, music acts as an interface between subject and landscape, establishing resonances between them in particular ways.<sup>4</sup> With ambient music, Eno aimed to inaugurate a genre oriented explicitly toward exploring this interface between listener and environment.

While Eno is often described as one of the first musicians to use the studio as his primary instrument (producing albums rather than performances), he has from the early ambient works onward been focused on public installations of his work as well. These installations are often corporate sponsored, such as the one Eno produced for Toyota's Amlux Auto Salon in Tokyo in the early 1990s. He describes the ideal site for his

music as “a place poised between a club, a gallery, a church, a square, and a park” (Lanza 47). Eno originally conceived *Music for Airports* as music to be played at a Cologne air terminal. He determined that music for this space

has to be interruptible (because there will be announcements), it has to work outside the frequencies at which people speak, and at different speeds from speech patterns (so as not to confuse communication), and it has to be able to accommodate all the noises that airports produce. (Sun 85)

As a further way to develop new “niches” of musical experience, Eno also makes regular forays into new consumer media. Sony Japan commissioned the 61-minute *Thursday Afternoon* from him in 1984 to show off their new long-playing compact disc format, and more recently, he released *Bloom* (2008), an iPhone application in collaboration with Peter Chilvers.

Eno outlines the development of his environmental thinking in the liner notes to *On Land*:

The idea of making music that in some way related to a sense of place—landscape, environment—had occurred to me many times over the years preceding “On Land.” [. . .] My conscious exploration of this way of thinking about music probably began with “Another Green World” (1975). On that record I became aware of setting each place within its own particular landscape and allowing the mood of that landscape to determine the kinds of activity that could occur.

Here, Eno focuses directly on music’s capacity for the entrainment of moods. But unlike the more utilitarian mood regulations De Nora describes, the landscapes Eno fosters are more multivalent and uncertain. They provide calm, as he writes in the essay included with *Music for Airports*, but they are also landscapes of the unfamiliar, the still unexplored.

### Urban Wetlands

Aside from the airport, two particular landscapes are repeatedly invoked in Eno’s ambient music: the cluttered gray Manhattan cityscape of the earlier releases, and the kind of marshy, insect- and bird-populated natural habitat that permeates *On Land*.

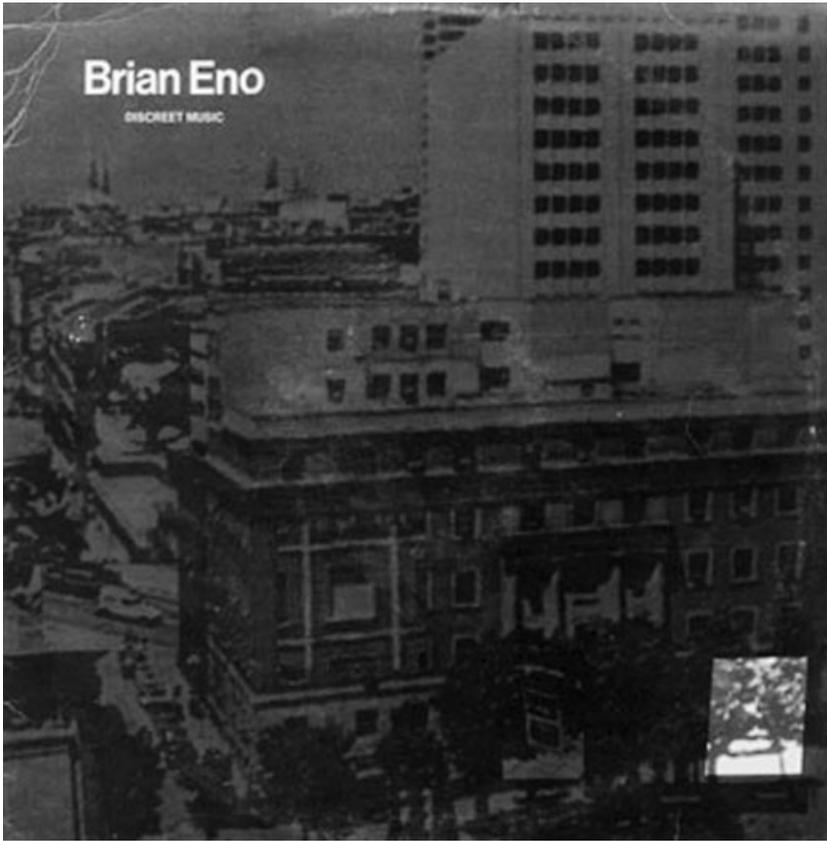


Figure 1: Cover artwork: “Discreet Music,” Brian Eno, 1975 (EMI/Virgin Records). Reproduced with kind permission of Brian Eno.

In 1975, as Eno’s interests shifted away from the glam-rock band Roxy Music and toward more conceptual pursuits, he started the label Obscure Music (1975–1978) as a way to use his popularity to secure the distribution of then-unknown British composers like Gavin Bryars and Michael Nyman, as well as releasing recordings by Cage and his own early ambient experiment, *Discreet Music*. The album artwork used for these releases ties in closely with the style of music they contain.

The covers of all ten albums released on the label present the same cropped photograph of a crowded urban landscape (Figure 1). The photograph is shot from a relatively high angle, looking down from a high perch. A wide five- or six-story building occupies much of the foreground, while a large tower rises behind it to the top edge of the photo. Trees and streets line the bottom edges of the buildings, but the image is cropped so as to prevent the street lines from consolidating into any form of perspectival

depth. This flatness is enhanced by the way the entire photograph is darkened and desaturated, with the exception of one or two small parallelogram-shaped frames where the full color and brightness of the original photograph shine through. The location of these parallelograms shifts with each album, as if to imply that each work is shedding light on but one small part of an immersive field. The location of each parallelogram does not appear to be chosen with any special regard for what it will reveal of the photograph, nor does the sum of the bright pieces of all ten albums add up to any recognizable shape (two haphazardly overlap, and one album—number seven—does not have any lit-up area at all).

A later version of the Obscure Music catalog shifts to a new format of black background and pastel vertical landscape photography—again of New York City. Eno drew these stills from his emerging ambient video work, which similarly explored the Manhattan landscape looking down across a contour of buildings and water towers.<sup>5</sup>

The covers of the four albums of the *Ambient* series (1979–1982) continue this focus on flat landscapes that obscure more than they reveal. But here the imagery departs from mimetic photography and moves toward a more cartographic register (Figure 2). While the *Ambient* covers appear to be topographic maps of some sort, it is impossible to discern whether or not they refer to an actual place. The blue lines that curve and fork their way across each cover appear at first to be rivers, occasionally gathering into larger bodies of water. On the latter two covers, however, the shapes become more ambiguous, with elongated ovals resembling microscopically enlarged bacteria or fossilized worms.

Again, the framing feels arbitrary, and the images have no focal center. As with the street photograph, the cropping of the covers implies that the image extends beyond the edges of the frame. A cryptic letter “T” appears in the lower right corner of *Ambient 1*, its message uncertain.

This extension of the landscape over the edge of the frame relates directly to Eno’s interest in an acoustic horizon that extends beyond the limits of perception:

I like to work with all the complex sounds on the way out to the horizon, to pure noise, like the hum of London. If you sit in Hyde Park just far enough away from the traffic so that you don’t perceive any of its specific details, you just hear the average of the whole thing. [. . .] There are foreground events [. . .] there are events that are not so close to the ear, there are ones that become misty

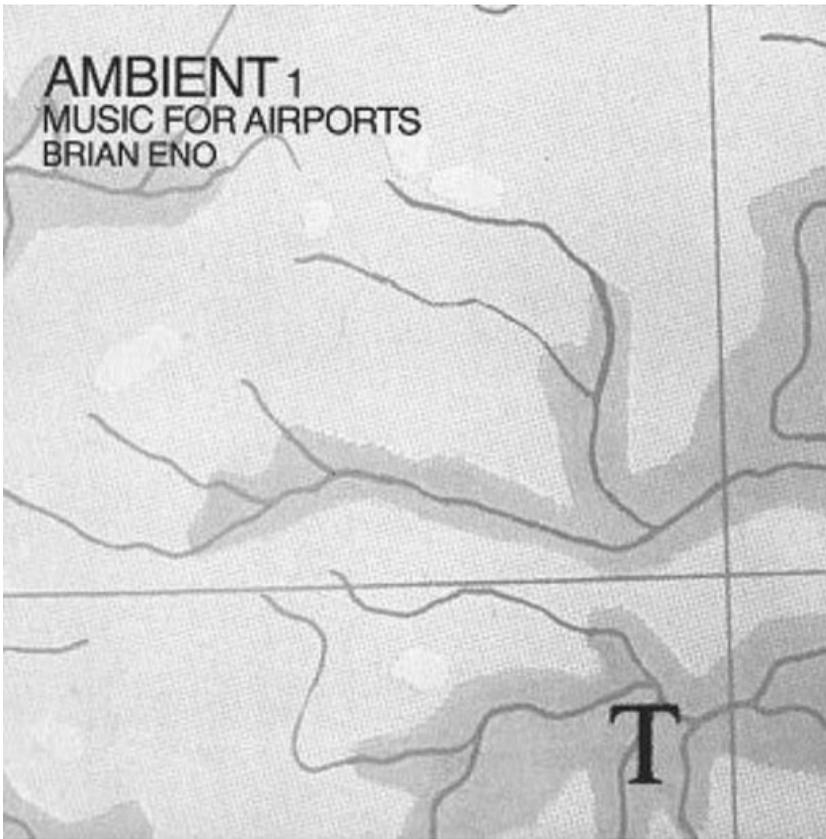


Figure 2: Cover artwork: “Ambient 1: Music for Airports,” Brian Eno, 1978 (EMI/Virgin Records). Reproduced with kind permission of Brian Eno.

and indistinct, and then occasionally comes a hint of something that is practically out of earshot. I like this idea of a field of sound that extends beyond our senses (Korner).

In Eno’s landscapes, vision is immersed from beginning to end in a continuous *mélange* of architecture (in the earlier works) and organic shapes (in the latter). This is how the music works as well.

### **A Clearing**

The track “A Clearing” from *On Land* is indicative of the immersive and continuous mixing of sounds within Eno’s ambient work. As with his earlier pieces like *Discreet Music* and “1–1” from *Music for Airports*, “A Clearing” has a texture characterized by the slow periodic repetition of a

limited number of soft, elongated sinusoidal pitches, appearing in various seemingly random permutations for a seemingly arbitrary amount of time.

As with much of Eno's other ambient work, these permutations in the middle frequency range are grounded by a steady drone in the low register. Here a low F holds steady throughout. While continuous, the tone's different harmonics slowly oscillate up and down in amplitude, giving the sound a softly vibrant, shimmering quality. This drone provides a ground—not only harmonically (for the various D-C-F patterns that play out above it), but also spatially, providing the wide, expansive earth of the “clearing” from which the other tones lift off and return, sometimes seeming to blend back down into the drone itself. The slow-moving harmonic oscillator lends the drone the lushness of a slow and steady breath.

As we noted above, the buildings in the *Obscure Music* covers obscure a clear view of the street. The buildings themselves seem to constitute the surface of the earth, becoming the heavy and heavily contoured ground cover. The spaces of *On Land*—“Dunwich Beach” and “Lantern Marsh,” for example—produce a similar textured weightiness at their ground level. The land here is heavy, grainy, maybe even sticky. It holds the weight of the landscape, providing a sense of gravity that seems to pull down the higher tones that slide across its surface.

In “A Clearing,” these higher tones repeat at relaxed and seemingly random intervals. In shape they resemble a set of three distinct birds. One softly caws like a crow two or three times in a row. Another produces a series of short rising and falling whoops. A third makes a quick series of low watery splutters: wapwapwapwap. Characteristic of Eno's work, these sounds are very difficult to conclusively identify as either synthetic-sounding birds or birdlike synthesizer tones. They appear scattered, much like actual birdsong, across the length of the piece. They appear individually and in various combinations, sometimes longer and sometimes shorter, sometimes louder and sometimes softer. Only once, near the end, do two sound simultaneously—a muted and easily missed crescendo to what is otherwise a steady and temporally static composition.

The fadeout at 4:09 feels quite arbitrary in fact, and as with Eno's generative music, the piece feels like it could continue cycling onward toward infinity. This continuousness is crucial to the “ignorable” quality Eno claims for ambient music. There are no surprises in the texture once the basic patterns are established, and as a result there is no chance of missing anything should the listener's attention wander. There is a calm in knowing all the tones will come back around—no need for salvage here. At the same

time, however, the randomized nature of the music ensures that, were the piece to keep on going, each precise combination of tones might only occur once in a lifetime.<sup>6</sup> And yet this too—the unlikelihood of any meaningful repetition—further contributes to the ignorability of the music.

“A Clearing” provides a remarkably coherent perspective on the landscape implied in the title. The pulsing low drone provides a soft, contoured, tonally rich gravity. A feeling of being on the ground, on the soil. Across this grassy plane, long sustained tones float by at slow intervals, while sun cascades across the clearing from between the adjacent trees. Birds pop up here and there in the branches, flickering near and far, predictably unpredictable in their songs. All of this is bathed in a soft light, worked over through layers and layers of sound processing.

Each of these sounds taken individually might not present such an image, but taken together with the earthy lake-and-fossil topography of the cover art, and the titles *On Land* and “A Clearing,” some landscape along these lines is clearly going to manifest.

### **Drifting Apart: Other Ambiences**

The landscapes developed in ambient music have diversified considerably since the time of *On Land*, responding to developments in electronic music, music recording and distribution technology, and, perhaps most importantly, the continued transformation of the built environments listeners inhabit and move within. Building from a recent special issue on the history of ambient music in Japanese music magazine *Studio Voice* (2008), we can identify several divergent strands in post-Eno environmental music.

One thread extrapolates the darker side of Eno’s ambience out toward a dystopian future. This approach fueled many of the ambient-inflected science-fiction soundtracks of the following decades, including *Blade Runner* (Vangelis, 1982), *Akira* (Geinō Yamashirogumi, 1988), and *Ghost in the Shell* (Kōkaku kidōtai, Kenji Kawai, 1995). Others groups working in this vein, such as The Future Sound of London, merged ambient with elements of industrial music, striving for the most desolate, bleakest modes of ambience available, a genre in some contexts dubbed “isolationist.”<sup>7</sup> This darker side of ambience is implicit in Eno’s work, part of the uncertainty he hoped to include just under the surface of his calm reverberations. Describing the development of *Music for Airports*, for example, he remembers thinking that airport music

has to have something to do with where you are and what you're there for—flying, floating, and, secretly, flirting with death. I thought, “I want to make a kind of music that prepares you for dying—that doesn't get all bright and cheerful and pretend you're not a little apprehensive, but which makes you say to yourself, ‘Actually, it's not that big a deal if I die.’” (Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices* 295; Sun 85).

This alliance of ambience with death stems from a fascination with the dissolution of the self, the removal of the figure from the landscape. It offers a kind of calm confrontation with disaster, a means of dealing with the risk and uncertainty lying just underneath the seemingly ordered spaces listeners move through each day.

A second thread merges Eno's ambient style with two rapidly growing areas of music marketing in the 1980s and 1990s: the “world music” and “healing” or “relaxation” genres. Well versed in exotica after collaborations with Van Dyke Parks and others in the late 1970s, Haruomi Hosono was perhaps the first to explicitly make the connection between ambience and global relaxation tourism. Soon after Yellow Magic Orchestra disbanded in 1984, Hosono launched a series of recordings and books under the twinned names “Non-Standard” and “Monad” (both sub-labels of Teichiku records). Echoing Eno, Hosono released a series of four ambient works: *Mercuric Dance*, *Paradise View*, *The Endless Talking*, and *Coincidental Music* (all Teichiku/Monad, 1985).<sup>8</sup> In a book released to announce the new works, *Globule* (1984), Hosono announces his labels' aspirations to “dialogue with the earth”: “Non-standard also develops the ambient music started by Brian Eno to a global level and to converse with and respond to a dispatch from the earth [sic]” (Hosono, *Globule* 175–76, original in English; Thaemlitz 97).

This image of the “earth” emerges here in the mid-1980s as a marker of global holism absent in Eno's up-close landscapes of the last decade. The music mixes ambient styles with smatterings of “world” music elements from various Asian classical and folk music forms. To promote the virtual tourism on offer here, Hosono introduces the new term *sightseeing music* [*kankō ongaku*] to describe his ambient works, a pun on the Japanese term for Eno's *environmental music* [*kankyō ongaku*] (*Studio Voice* 2004: 40).

While the albums often maintain a playful sense of humor about these global fantasies,<sup>9</sup> Hosono's work nonetheless participates explicitly in

shifting the earlier urban anonymity of Eno's ambient landscapes onto more explicitly exoticized tourist destinations worldwide. Consider, for example, the mishmash of tourist landscapes invoked in the track titles to Hosono's 1995 ambient album *Naga (Music for Monsoon)* (FOA, 1995): "Hindustan," "Taj Mahal," "Himalaya," "Sherpa," "Chaitya," and "Angkor Vat."

In this respect, Hosono's "sightseeing music" stands as an early precursor to the more straightforward cultural appropriations of the major-label "ambient world music" releases of the 1990s, projects like *Enigma* and *Deep Forest*.<sup>10</sup> In a sense, this music returns the figure to Eno's landscapes—an exotic figure made soft and consumable to soothe the global tourist.

The third major development in ambient music is closely interwoven with developments in club culture and electronic music in the 1980s and 1990s. Through the 1980s, ambient DJs gradually emerged within the thriving techno clubs in major cities, often playing in "chill out" rooms to provide rest and respite from the pummeling rhythms of the main dance floor. But by the early 1990s, as home recording became more affordable, this strand of ambience gradually absconded from the club scene to become something more private and small-scale. This shift was part of a larger turn toward home listening, led by artists like Autechre and The Black Dog, who sought more focused listeners for their rhythmically and texturally experimental forms of electronic music.<sup>11</sup> Many ambient artists followed this movement away from the dance floor and toward more concentrated forms of listening.

Tetsu Inoue, working as an ambient DJ in New York after moving from Tokyo in the mid 1980s, recalls gradually becoming frustrated with the drugged-out audiences at clubs, and seeking a more focused and meaningful relationship with listeners. The ideal listening environment became, in Inoue's terms, a quiet domestic space, with lights off and headphones on (Cooper). Nevertheless, this type of bedroom ambience was still thoroughly informed by the psychedelic experience. Inoue recalls his attraction to the music of Pink Floyd and Isao Tomita as a teenager: "Why I liked these groups was that they put you in a very different state of mind; turn off the lights, listen to it. [. . .] Because there weren't really drugs in Japan that you could take for that, so music would [play that role]" (Cooper).

Rather than bask in the apocalypse or seek out salvation through the exotic, this psychedelic strand of ambience responded to the changing urban environment through a double movement in and away from the world outside, first to the communal refuge offered by the DJ, and then further inward to the new flights of mind offered by home listening.

### The “Ambient Otaku”

The use of recorded media as a direct substitute for mood-altering drugs reflects not only a more explicitly pharmaceutical use of ambient music, but also a shift away from the physicality of existing environments, in favor of more private, more thoroughly imaginary mental spaces. While Inoue also speaks of landscapes (on the motivation behind his 1996 album *World Receiver*, he says “I [had] a landscape in my mind that I had to express” [Cooper]), the “land” here is of a much more evanescent and malleable nature than anything encountered in Eno’s terrain.

The weightless sounds and images scaffolding Inoue’s internal spaces make a marked contrast with the gravity of the Eno landscapes we encountered above. As a representative example, consider the title track to his first solo album for Pete Namlook’s FAX +49-69/450464 label, *Ambiant Otaku* (1994).<sup>12</sup>

“Ambiant Otaku” is based not on a drone but on three loops: a short descending four-note pattern in a middle register that repeats roughly every two seconds, a higher three-note pattern that intersects it on a similar rhythm, and a lower note that pulses twice, morse-code like, also roughly once every two seconds. There is a slight difference in duration between the first two and the last of these three patterns, however, so that they offset each other differently as the loops reiterate. The amplitude of their reverberations slowly grows as they cycle onward for the first few minutes of the piece.

Around the one-minute mark another element appears: a synth tone sliding up and down playfully through the lower-mid frequencies. The contour of the slides recalls the shape of a whale song, swimming up and down in a smooth arc through the reverberant ocean. This singing continues throughout almost the entirety of the piece. In contrast to the tightly structured loops, this voice has a gestural and improvisational quality, a freedom that plays across the pulsations of the more rhythmic layers.

About a minute and a half into the music, an even higher pitched cluster of wavy tones enters, shimmering and bright as they slide slippery over one another and then, around the three-minute mark, something resembling a rhythm—an occasional thump, something like a drum. These thumpings, together with the offset rhythms of the ongoing loops, often appear to be on the verge of coalescing into a steady beat. Instead, they continue to shift around, sliding across one another without ever falling into sync.

At nearly five minutes, a contrasting three-note loop comes in louder in a lower register, responding to the opening patterns. This complex

assemblage of sliding loops and shimmery layers continues until near the end of the piece, almost eleven minutes after it began. Different voices continue to emerge and drop out as the music progresses. The original two loops gradually disappear about halfway through, only to reappear in the final two minutes to take the piece to its concluding fade-out.

As is likely evident from this description, Inoue's mode of ambience has absorbed a great deal from techno (and the minimalist music before it<sup>13</sup>): the emphasis on interlocking looped patterns and the building up and breaking down of textures layer by layer across the length of a piece. Unlike Eno's more continuously present sound elements (where pieces feel like they could begin and end at any moment without losing the overall structure), Inoue's compositions have discreet sections, and a definite beginning and end, even if their open structures could easily be spun out longer with additional voices. This periodic introduction and elimination of elements draws a listener's attention with each modification. In this respect, Inoue's work is not nearly as "ignorable" as Eno's more homogeneously contoured works.

In terms of frequency spectrum, "Ambiant Otaku" is nearly the inversion of Eno's "A Clearing." Whereas Eno's layers are rooted in a low, weighty drone, Inoue's music not only has no drone at its base, but keeps the entire low end very sparsely populated. The emphasis is on high-frequency, sparkling, shimmering textures. Along with the whale song and the expansive reverb, my impression as a listener is very much one of being under the ocean, looking up at the light flickering off the surface of the water as various sizable sea creatures swim weightlessly by [I am perhaps influenced by the image of a large stingray floating across the sea floor in the booklet to Inoue's following album, *Slow and Low* (1995)].

### **Inoue Undersea**

The deep seas often come to mind listening to Inoue's resonant textures. Or if not the sea, then at least the depths of space. Unlike Eno's more cluttered topographies, Inoue's landscapes are smooth, spacious, and pulsing with regular patterns. The spaces they refer to are oriented more toward floating than walking, standing, or sitting; more zero-gravity than earth-bound.

This leap from potentially inhabitable landscapes into more abstracted spaces is evident in the artwork accompanying the albums as well. Inoue's FAX +49-69/450464 label releases all feature highly symmetrical

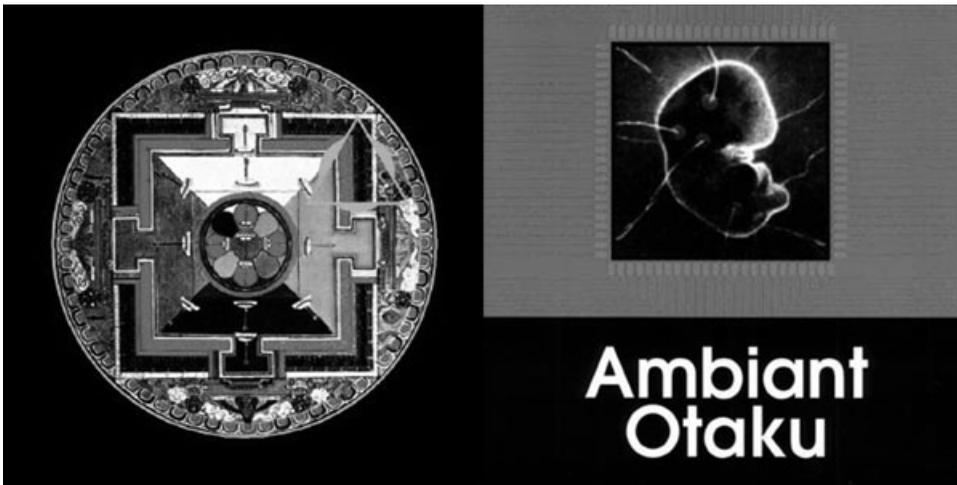


Figure 3: Cover artwork (l) and inside sleeve (r): Tetsu Inoue, “Ambient Otaku” (FAX +49-69/450464, 1994). Reproduced with kind permission of Peter Kuhlmann.

covers, with circular images organized in empty black fields. The mandala on the cover of *Ambient Otaku* (Figure 3) is characteristic of the music’s conceptual organization: a highly detailed geography, but one without reference to any human-scale landscape. Rather, the mandala offers a simultaneous guide through the mind and the universe as a whole.

On the reverse sleeve, meanwhile, is a striking image of a fetus wired into a microchip. Here Inoue hints at the kind of psychedelic mood regulation producing these abstract patterns and oceanic sensations. Are we under the sea, or hiding inside the electronic womb? The title of the album similarly riffs playfully on the image of the Japanese *otaku*, devotees of various subcultures (most famously manga and anime) who strive for expertise in their chosen field, even if it leaves them rather out of touch with the wider world. While it has shifted somewhat since, the stereotype of the *otaku* in the mid 1990s imagined them withdrawn at home, surrounded by and in some sense surviving off of electronic media: a state not unlike the electronic fetus pictured here.

While Eno sought “reliable, portable” music for those in transit, this ambient *otaku* might never desire to leave the house at all. This increasing interest in more private, listener-controlled atmospheres becomes clearer when looking at the production context for Inoue’s work. While Eno was known for his studio-based productions, we have noted how Inoue’s work is part of a larger shift toward the control and independence offered by home-based recording. Inoue’s series of ambient collaborations with Pete

Namlook, *2350 Broadway*, was in fact named after the New York hotel that housed his bedroom studio.

Further, Namlook's FAX +49-69/450464 might be deemed the premier *otaku*-style ambient music label. Started in Germany in 1993, the label soon became known for its highly systematic packaging (where different icons and colors denoted minutely differentiated sub-genres); highly limited editions (usually from 500 to 2,000 copies per release—*Ambiant Otaku* was first released in an edition of 500), and prolific output (at its height in the mid-to-late 1990s, the label was releasing one album every two weeks). FAX was successful in developing a small, dedicated audience of devoted ambient listeners, some even taking out a subscription to the label to ensure they did not miss a single release.

The equipment used in the production context of Inoue's work reflects a similar shift toward a greater amount of control over the sounds produced. Several of Eno's early ambient works were built from tape loops of other artist's improvisations, and his interest in "generative" music led him often to take a hands-off approach to creating sounds, focusing instead on developing programs that could produce their own musical sequences. He often describes this approach as planting "seeds" that go on to sprout and grow in their own unexpected directions.<sup>14</sup> In recent software-based work like *Bloom*, the compositional process consists of putting together open-ended algorithms for the production of tones, a process the listener can also indirectly participate in by tapping the iPhone screen. In many ways, this is the logical extension of the continual permeations of "A Clearing." Like the earlier piece, *Bloom* produces ignorably interesting iterations, although this time the listener is able to choose how long they will persist.

In contrast, Inoue has moved from his early analog ambience to working with mainly digital sound synthesis, an approach that allows a far greater degree of precision in sound editing. In the process, his work has moved closer to the microscopic sound manipulations of artists like Taylor Deupree, Carsten Nicolai, and Ryoji Ikeda: new shapes, new sculptures, new spaces entirely.

What to make of these differences, then? While both artists continue to explore musical spaces where the listener is effectively dissolved into the landscape, Eno's work remains more "grounded," in the perceptual sense of often having a low drone and earth-bound imagery, but also through his interest in music for those moving through existing physical spaces: in airports, through public installations, or via portable music technologies like the iPhone. Inoue, in contrast, continues to produce a more private music,

largely untethered to any recognizable site of human habitation. His work travels across a much narrower network of listeners, albeit with points of contact scattered across the planet.

These differences, of course, are in part related to Eno's greater access to funding and his aspirations to reach a wide audience. Inoue's *otaku* orientation aims rather for a focused, intensive engagement with a more circumscribed number of dedicated listeners. But this difference in scale and communicative intensity is interwoven with differences in their respective aesthetics, in the spaces their ambient musics both imagine and produce. Even with recent projects like *Bloom*, Eno continues to explore new public landscapes for his "ignorable" music, still holding on to perfumed cybernetic dreams of global nomads "tinting" their given environments as they glide through unfamiliar spaces.<sup>15</sup> Inoue's music—and I believe Inoue is much closer to the orientation of most of the ambient music produced today—registers the transformation of ambient music from a social experiment in semi-attentive listening into a musical subculture catering to its own audience and internal aesthetic criteria. In the process, the "landscapes" produced by ambient music have come to reside more exclusively within the albums themselves—and between the ears of those who float within them.

This is not to say that those making or listening to this kind of music are necessarily isolated or any less social. Collaboration between musicians (often across great distances, via post office or Internet) is a regular feature of both Eno's and Inoue's discographies.<sup>16</sup> Inoue describes the value of collaborative work precisely in terms of his interactions with other musicians: "Collaboration is more like vibration and feedback. . . I get bored sometimes working by myself, because there's no feedback" (Cooper).

Inoue's comments hint that perhaps one impulse for an *otaku*-style turn toward more private forms of music is a dissatisfaction with the modes of interaction available in contemporary urban environments, and a desire for the more significant person-to-person exchanges available within subculture groups formed around particular hobbies and interests. This dissatisfaction with the public landscape is reflected in the texts accompanying Inoue's FAX projects. The liner notes to the Namlook/Inoue collaborative series *2350 Broadway* describe it as "Music for a city that is unlivable."

While rejecting the public landscape, the FAX label demonstrates a renewed interest in fostering personal accessibility and direct communication. Namlook's actual fax number was included in the label name for

easy reference, and 2350 Broadway was the address of Inoue's apartment in New York. The (sometimes controversially) limited print runs of FAX releases also allowed Namlook to grant artists more control over their releases, and facilitated contact between a small community of artists and listeners. Inoue's recognition of the facile "sociality" of public listening in the club environment, paradoxically, entailed a return to private space, capable of sustaining potentially more satisfying interpersonal and artistic interactions. Finding the given landscapes uncommunicative, ambient artists from the 1990s onward have increasingly decided to invent their own.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>As stated in the liner notes to *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978). While the style developed through albums like *Discreet Music* (1975) and *Music for Films* (1978), *Music for Airports* was where Eno first introduced the term "ambient music" itself.

<sup>2</sup>Alongside Eno, a wide range of other artist-theorists of the time focused their energies on how to make sense of the increasingly faceless, anonymously industrialized landscapes surrounding them. Guy Debord's investigations of "psychogeography," elaborated in his "Theory of the *Dérive*," advocates letting go of usual motives for movement and action, and letting the forces of the environment determine the direction of travel. Matsuda Masao's "landscape theory" (*fūkei-ron*) of the early 1970s advocated the mapping of the homogenous urban landscape as a way to discern the immanent yet spatially dispersed impact of state power on the new post-industrial subject. Each of these projects sought novel ways of making sense of the dispersal of the individual into the landscape, as depicted so forcefully in Oshima Nagisa's *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (*Tokyo sensō sengo hiwa*, 1970). See Debord and Matsuda. See Furuhashi for an excellent analysis of Matsuda and "landscape theory."

<sup>3</sup>Though as Sun (2004: 87–88) notes, these graphics only loosely match up with the recorded music.

<sup>4</sup>See also Kassabian and Le Guin.

<sup>5</sup>The stills are from the video installation *Mistaken Memories of Mediaeval Manhattan* (1980–1981), later released on DVD as part of *14 Video Paintings* (All Saints/Rykodisc, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Eno explores this generative unrepeatability in a visual register in *70 Million Paintings* (All Saints, 2006).

<sup>7</sup>The term came into use after the compilation *Ambient 4: Isolationism* (Virgin Records, 1994).

<sup>8</sup>*Mercuric Dance* included a video by Tadayoshi Arai; *Paradise View* is the soundtrack to the film by Go Takamine, part of the “new Okinawan cinema”; *The Endless Talking* was an installation at the Parco Del Museo Chiossone Comune Di Genova, Italy, in 1985; and *Coincidental Music* contains collected scores for various commercial films.

<sup>9</sup>As Hosono explains in the recent essay collection *Ambient Driver*, “ambience is less a particular style of music, and more a word designating a certain mental state” (18, my translation).

<sup>10</sup>The *Studio Voice* editors name this genre “snob ambient,” marking the brief moment where—thanks to the commercial exploitation of Gregorian monks and Solomon Islanders—ambient music suddenly became fashionable for the mainstream (Itaru 80).

<sup>11</sup>See for example the seminal “electronic listening music” compilation *Artificial Intelligence* (Warp Records, 1992).

<sup>12</sup>Inoue uses the French spelling *ambiant*, perhaps as one way to assert his work’s departure from the ambience that preceded it.

<sup>13</sup>On the influence of American pulse-pattern minimalist music on techno, see Fink.

<sup>14</sup>Eno quite appropriately describes the concept of “ambient music” itself as one of those seeds (*A Year with Swollen Appendices* 293).

<sup>15</sup>The *Bloom* software allows the “mood” of the generated tones to be chosen (or randomized) from a list of scent-derived names familiar from Eno’s other work: Neroli, Vetiver, Labdanum, Ambrette, etc.

<sup>16</sup>To give just a few examples: Eno’s collaborations with Harold Budd; Andy Partridge and Harold Budd’s work on *Through the Hill* (Gyroscope, 1994); David Sylvian’s collaborations with Holger Czukay; Inoue’s numerous collaborations with Pete Namlook, Uwe Schmidt (Atom Heart), and Haruomi Hosono; and, more

recently, Ryūichi Sakamoto's collaborations with Alva Noto, Christian Fennesz, and others.

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