

# THE ARTS

By Gregory Miller

A few passengers sit idly reading. One or two drift to sleep on a hot New York afternoon. Businessmen stride into the terminal, out of rented sedans, into waiting executive jets. Most passengers ignore the four large, gray pedestals that ring the center of La Guardia Airport's Marine Air Terminal.

Atop each pedestal sits a mute television set. Suddenly one of the monitors comes alive with static. A couple of travelers notice this happening, while the rest sit absorbed in their thoughts. The static gives way to images, one monitor invoking another until all four are active.

The four monitors now begin a gentle visual dance, passing the images across or around the circle, echoing and leading one another. They drift in and out of synch, appearing to have a prearranged meeting, and then wander off again on their own. The screens show views of a building in pastel colors; the pictures fade into darkness, followed thereafter by slightly different images of the same brilliant facade angled at 45 degrees.

The windows of the building capture

shafts of sunlight colored alternately red, green, and blue. Ethereal voices sound through the speakers in each cabinet, forming shifting consonant chords, creating an airy, timeless ambience.

The piece described here is called "2 Fifth Avenue," after the building whose image dominates the screen. It is an installation for airports created by British musician/electronics wizard Brian Eno, who positioned it at La Guardia this summer. The music emanating from the speakers is from Eno's *Music for Airports* album and could be classified as ambient music. The video aspect is one of Eno's first excursions into the phosphorescent medium, and it is also ambient. Eno's plan is to make the audio/video event blend into the environment like a scent.

"When I go into an airport," Eno said one sultry evening in his Manhattan quarters, "I always find myself buying some magazine that I really don't want to read and sitting there getting fed up and feeling nervy and so on. I am put into the position of having to search and scan and dig, trying to occupy myself all the time.

"In an airport you have this captive group of people who don't really have options; so you can create a place where you can introduce some sort of meditative calm for a while. I guess what I want to do with this piece is give you the feeling of being alone again. Most of us spend nearly all our time with others. And we forget we're always tailoring ourselves for others, always adapting and modifying our behavior. It means that parts of us don't surface because there are no social situations that demand time. I guess I'm looking for some feeling of luscious silence, a feeling of solitariness."

"2 Fifth Avenue" activated itself by timers—from 7 to 8 and 9 to 10 A.M. and from 4 to 5 and 6 to 7 P.M.—to coincide with the terminal's peak hours. Short breaks in the hour-long performance allowed the tape to rewind.

Reactions to the installation were mixed, ranging from enraptured enthusiasm to impatience and total nonchalance. Airline and terminal workers were generally not impressed. "It sounds like funeral music," one commented. "It's gotta be some kind of experiment," said another.

But Eno was resolute in his plan to bring "meditative calm" into the terminal. "Soon after the monitors go on, you start to realize that nothing's going to happen," he explained. "It lets you off the hook in a way. You know you can just sit there and look around and drift back to it whenever you want. So your approach to it is quite different from reading a magazine, where you're put in the position of having to search and concentrate all the time."

Since the mid-Seventies, when Brian Eno—synthesizer player and amateur musical technologist—quit the British rock and roll band Roxy Music, he has waged a campaign against the tyranny of narrative or linear form and hierarchy in musical structure. Specifically, he rejects such classical holdovers as the ABA form and leading tone in music.

In the last few years Eno has given a series of lectures on this trend away from hierarchy in fashion, military tactics, sports, and video. He has written several articles, including one on compositional

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Eno on video: The master of programmed randomness brings meditative calm into airports.

structures entitled "Generating and Organizing Variety in the Arts," which argues, among other things, against the convention of violins at the front of the orchestra, playing the melody. Now he has taken up the cause with ambient video.

The structure of "2 Fifth Avenue" reflects the function of the terminal and the entire airport: Tones, images, people, and planes arrive and depart, each group with its own logic in apparently random patterns. The whole is at once an orchestrated unit and a series of disconnected entities. In this abstract sense, then, the work relates to the airport, although it might make similar sense in a train or bus station, a restaurant, or a museum. Indeed, "2 Fifth Avenue" has been installed in hospitals in England and at the Minneapolis and Buffalo airports, and a version of it was briefly set up in New York City's Grand Central Terminal.

In an airport you catch yourself listening to patterns and textures of sound. Conversations and machine noises jump and circle around; climaxes, lulls, and ironic sequences of events draw your attention to abstract features of the environment and away from the details and mechanisms of your situation. You begin to notice architecture, music, light and space, and the dynamics of human interaction.

Because "2 Fifth Avenue" is entirely open-ended, it draws your attention to these aspects of the airport. Take it easy, it seems to say, while the technology and the emotional and physical flux that surround you excite all your faculties. "2 Fifth Avenue" is in this sense an extension of the traditional role of the airport facilities. Architecture, colors, and music are all designed to quiet, but not necessarily to relax—presumably to minimize thought about the possibility of disaster while flying.

The effect is something like a "Muzak for airports"—although the method is opposite. Muzak achieves a specific end—such as relaxation—by way of a rigidly organized progression of volumes, tempos, timbres, and feelings associated with familiar tunes. "2 Fifth Avenue," on the other hand, is a seemingly random permutation of tones with no particular connection. Eno, selected each shot of the building, but the actual order of the images and the overall structure were the result of random editing. "Instead of a picture that pushes you into its center," Eno says, "you create many different foci of attention."

Each observer, then, is invited to reject predetermined organization in favor of spontaneous interaction; to perceive his or her own order in the piece to allow maximum flexibility in the response to the situation. "Art isn't a quality," Eno concludes. "It is a function that exists between someone and something, an interchange, an operation that occurs between observer and event." ∞