

Vanishing Points

An excerpt

By Claudine Isé

This text is an excerpt from Claudine Isé's essay, "Vanishing Points," in the Vanishing Point exhibition catalogue (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 2005). The catalogue is available at the Wexner Center Galleries at The Belmont Building and from the Wexner Center Bookshop's online store.

In 1978 rock musician and record producer Brian Eno released a groundbreaking musical composition called *Music for Airports*. A minimalist orchestration of piano, synthesizers, tape loops, wordless human vocalizations, and extended moments of silence, the record was inspired by an experience Eno had while waiting for a plane in Cologne. That day the airport was nearly empty, which drew his focus to the terminal's interior. He began to think about a kind of music that would be particularly well suited to this "placeless" type of environment, which was part waiting area, part transit zone. The music would have to be easy to interrupt, allowing for periodic announcements; it would need to differentiate itself from human speech so that it wouldn't be confused with the sound of people talking; and it would need to accommodate, rather than compete with, the existing acoustic atmosphere. But Eno also thought the music should reflect something essential about the experiences people have in airports. It should be ethereal and elusive, and highlight what was extraordinary about an otherwise mundane environment by somehow evoking "where you are and what you are there for—flying, floating, and, secretly, flirting with death."¹

With its techniques of temporal distortion, looped repetition, and extended pauses, the four-part composition that resulted from Eno's musings was radical for its time in part because it left out almost everything that made "popular music" popular in the first place. There was no beat to dance to, no hook, no vocal refrain. Eno called this ambient music: music designed to fill a space by accommodating itself to a particular environment rather than simply blending into it. It was music that was centerless and nonlinear, blurring distinctions between foreground and background by making everything that could take place within the airport part of the overall musical score. The music also put the listener's subjective experience at its center, because it was meant to be perceived as part of the background of what was already taking place.

Unlike "canned" music or Muzak, which simply blankets a space with familiar tunes, *Music for Airports* took into account the fleeting perceptions and momentary encounters of travelers as they hurried across concourses, waited in line, gazed out at passing jets, and boarded flights to places near and far. Eno

continued to experiment with similar musical structures in his 1976–78 project *Music for Films*. “I found I liked film soundtrack music,” Eno said of this work, “because film music is really music with its centre missing, because the film is actually the centre of the music, so if you just listen to the music alone, without seeing the film, you have something that has a tremendous amount of open space in it—and that space is important, because it’s the space that invites you as the listener into the music.”² As in *Music for Airports*, the insertion of roomy pauses—empty spaces, in effect—enabled the sounds of the outside world to penetrate the composition. The music was subtle enough to fade into the background of the listener’s environment, but at times it also had the power to subsume that very environment by subtly coloring it with its own tonal palette. “Immersion was really the point: we were making music to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside,” Eno recalled.³

Eno’s music asserted the importance of background and atmosphere in defining a sense of place, or, as in the case of the airport and other transit zones, a sense of placelessness. In a manner not unlike his, a number of artists today are making paintings, photographs, video installations, and sculptures that use emptiness and an often overpowering sense of atmosphere to portray our increasingly homogenized urban environment, and, even more importantly, to describe the human’s place within it. Much of the art in *Vanishing Point* is characterized not only by an absence of the figure, but also by an excess of background. In these works commonplace aspects of public environments that typically go unnoticed—banal corporate décor and the presence of elevators, escalators, fluorescent lighting, and HVAC systems, along with the dings, rings, buzzes, and bleeps emitted by computers, alarms, air conditioners, and automated teller machines—are brought to the fore, while other forms of descriptive information are suppressed. The artists’ use of disembodied vantage points evokes the groundless, everywhere-and-nowhere liquidity of contemporary urban experience. With a few notable exceptions, most of these depictions are devoid of human presence. Yet they convey a range of emotional and perceptual experiences—both positive and negative—that the built environment inspires in people today.

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Why are there no people in any of these images? The work of French anthropologist Marc Augé offers insight into the cultural context that this representational absence reflects. Augé argues that societies across the globe are currently in the midst of an emerging paradigm that is dramatically altering our sense of place, on both a local and a global scale. Increased mobility, the advent of worldwide telecommunications, and the ability to compress various forms of media digitally and in seconds send them virtually anywhere in the world—all contribute

to the changing notions of what “public,” “space,” and indeed, “public space” mean today. These trends and technologies also affect our experiences within everyday built spaces like minimalls, megamalls, corporate plazas, and high-rise developments. Augé tells us the established anthropological meaning of “place” signifies an area that acquires meaning from human activities and interaction, but today new types of spaces are emerging that are more accurately described as “nonplaces,” areas that are mostly devoid of such socially inscribed significance.

Typically, “place” has been inscribed by history and human activity. Often the presence of monuments generates opportunities for social interaction and reflection. Spontaneous and organized group activities and exchanges occur in traditional kinds of places (think of sports stadiums, public plazas, and parks), whereas in nonplaces “the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle.”⁴ People are inconsequential to the environment, and in turn the environment bears no permanent traces of human presence. In nonplaces, people relate to one another in an abstract, short-lived, and distracted manner. Nonplaces tend to discourage human engagement other than that dictated by commerce. At the extreme, there is no human exchange at all, just a silent, salutatory text on a computer screen instructing users to insert their card and have a nice day.

For Augé, the traveler’s movement through space—experienced as rootless and fluid, with perceptions by necessity distracted and fleeting—creates the archetypal experience of nonplace. Just as global travelers move through generic environments in which “neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense,” the freeway drivers or patrons of today’s big-box chain stores and shopping malls find themselves in “spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality.”⁵ Although nonplaces might be filled with people, within them the individual’s primary experience is one of isolation. Without the texture and friction provided by human agents inscribing a place with meaning, the nonplace becomes all background with no significant foreground action, like a stage set filled with extras. With this in mind, the disappearance of people from the public places depicted in the exhibition—the absence of passengers in Birgfeld’s airport triptychs, of guests in Joy Episalla’s photograph of a hotel hallway, of cars and people in Daniel Mirer’s photographs of parking lots and hotels, and of workers in Won Ju Lim’s cityscapes—can be seen as symptomatic of the diminishing relevance of the human to built space today. With this in mind, the sensation of “flying, floating, and (secretly) flirting with death” that Eno described may have as much to do with the traveler’s passive engagement with the environment and feelings of irrelevance as it does with fears of an aviation disaster.

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1. Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," in *A Year with Swollen Appendices: Brian Eno's Diary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 294.
 2. Brian Eno, interview by Paul Merton, Fabulous 1 FM (Radio 1, BBC), January 1, 1995, quoted on *Enoweb*, http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/interviews/ambe2.html.
 3. Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," p. 294.
 4. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995), p. 86.
 5. Augé, *Non-places*, 87.