The background of the cover is a monochromatic, misty photograph of a forest. A path leads from the bottom center towards the middle ground, flanked by trees and foliage. The mist is thick, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere. The overall color palette is muted, consisting of various shades of grey, blue, and white.

Environmental Ambient Art

J. Berghuis

ENVIRONMENTAL AMBIENT ART

Anyone observing a display of a blurred picture for the first time will, perhaps, have a hard time to 'get the picture behind the picture'. When explaining Ambient art, it is impossible to omit Ambient music. Every style has its history and background. So, back in 1974 (or perhaps earlier) it was due to Brian Eno's sickbed that we nowadays can enjoy Ambient music. Laying on his bed he heard rain falling down and church bells ringing far away, which inspired him. Brian Eno was, and is, a great theoretic in the field of music. Although widely known as the keyboard player of Roxy Music, his reputation of Avant-garde music is big. Even in his childhood, Eno was involved with musical experiments and instruments: His uncle had loads of instruments he played with. Today we consider Brian Eno as the grandfather, inspiratory and inventor of Ambient music.



Defining 'Ambient'

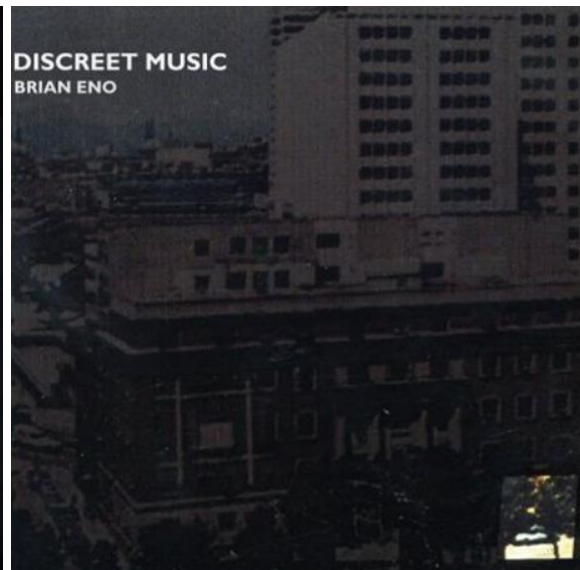
Ambient music is diverse and thus comes in many shapes. Next to modern and classic instruments, the recording studio itself is the main instrument. Most often the sounds are manufactured by reverbs and echoes. It adopts the feelings of surroundings and it comes to you as very calm and atmospheric. As if listening to sounds in the mist and snow, not quite attention grasping. Merely a serving nature. Through decades other forms of Ambient music, like techno-Ambient and dark-Ambient developed. When examining the history of Ambient music, one comes to the conclusion that it is a rather logic string of events.

Before understanding Ambient art, I will have to go through its history first. For instance: During the 17th century, composers were already experimenting with Avant-garde music.

Wildly known in that field is Luigi Russolo. He published a manifest on the noise subject: L'arte dei rumori in 1913. Intona Rumorii **was a** piece written for a special build organ.

Let us jump to the start of the 20th century: The whirlpool of aesthetic movements, which brought us many exciting new forms of art. Artists were seeking new fields to create and express themselves in. The Dada movement would be, in my opinion, the biggest revolt during these times. Andre Breton once explained Dadaism: It's about nothing. He described it as dirt combined with beauty, an expression of fears, a force against common sense and bourgeois and a product of the industrial era. With theory being more important than actual results, the first conceptual art form was born.

Within the Dada movement there is a sound movement called Bruitism, which consists out of noise compositions like sounds of aeroplanes, industry and streets. Bruitism still exists and modern artists like Vivenza, Werkbund, KLF, Astma, Autechre and Zeitkratzer are still active for a small audience. A big commercial breakthrough for Bruitism was Metal Machine Music, made by Lou Reed in 1975. As a revolt to his record company, Lou Reed recorded his music in a loft in New York using electronical sounds, which caused a breakthrough. It was also the time that Brian Eno made his so called 'discrete music' album.



Many Ambient records are based on Drone music, which consists out of only one continuous tone that goes on throughout the entire composition. Drone music can also be found as a different structure, just like Metal Machine Music. Instead of one continuous tone, thousands of different short tones form a unity. Matthias Grassow, Eno, Northaunt, Sleep Research Facility, Kammarheit, Xivalv and Trist are examples of modern drone artists, who all cover dark-Ambient music. Bruitism might be harsh to listen to, but it will open up your mind. Even the Australian didgeridoo, the Scottish bagpipe and the monks from Tibet cover drone music. Drone music has got special side effects. It tends to hypnotize and stimulate meditations: Babies, children and grown-ups easily fall in a sleep mode and it fixates your mind (which in turn helps you concentrate). A drone symbolizes simplicity, peace and rest. All becomes 'one'.



Let us return to Bruitism and Dada in that revolutionary, industrial era of 1905. Another exiting music form erupts from the earlier American blues: Jazz music. Within the jazz-music industry anything was possible. All standard harmonies were thrown aboard (Lou Reed called Metal Machine Music initially a jazz experiment). It was a big inspiration for visual artists as well. Mondriaan, for instance, painted jazz. Music compositions were transformed into visual arts. After Mondriaan others developed this inspiration (music of Stockhausen took the idea a step further into atonality).

During the roaring 60's (1960 – 1970), another important era, the conceptual arts came back together with new experiments. As much as some artists tried to paint a feeling, an emotion, some artists considered painting 'nothing' as their biggest aim. There were Avant-Gardists; like LaMonte Young in the sound-field. Later on Underground music emerged and it all added up to evolve into the 1980's: Through Punk music, post-Punk (remember Joy Divisions "Eternal") to Gothic (4AD, Deadcan Dance, Cocteau Twins, Harold Budd). Even the music of Beethoven, Bach and Pachabel carried loads of ingredients of Ambient Music. It's as difficult to describe Ambient as it is to describe jazz. It has the same foundation as Bruitism. Although newest Ambient artists like Trist



are very dark – even horror like -but it's nature is not aggressive. The Russian movie "The Stalker" is an example of epic doom ambient. A lurid atmosphere with a small story.

How does Ambient music relate to visual arts?

Rather simple. Just observe the design of Ambient albums and you'll find the answer. The sound artists follow their heart and express their music visually as well. There is a significant thread between different designs. For example: We often see forests during wintertime in the fog or the breaking of dawn in a blurred landscape. The mist symbolizes the reverbs and echoes in the music. We talk about environmental soundscapes. Having said this, it appears there's not much difference when comparing it to Bruitism. The classical compositions and forced music laws have disappeared. There are just blankets of sounds, a combination of light and dark, all build up and faded away, slowly. The Ambient soundscapes flow rather logically. The spherical pictures are representing the music. Most often there is one



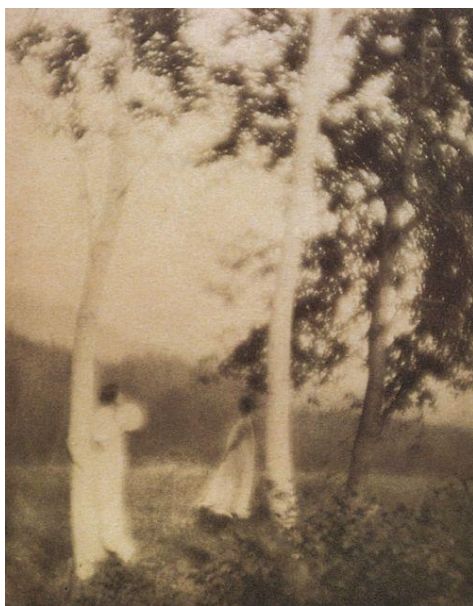
Bart Slangen

simple focus point, like an extraction of a daydream: Almost nihilistic. There's no message, perhaps only a slight meaning hidden in the picture. It's a wandering, fixation and total acceptance of a given vision. It feels as if you just woke up and need to shake off a dream. It's feels like that moment when you're not completely conscious of where you are. But, just like the diversity of Ambient music, there are many different expressions of Ambient art.



Stieglitz

The turn of the 19th century brought new visions to the arts. Photography became more important. Was it the work of changing art or a technical trick? We don't know, but movements in America like '291 Gallery' and 'Camera Work' can be seen as pioneers. Their so called 'leader' was Alfred Stieglitz. As for Ambient art, it might as well be the real jump into that field. Their photographs archived paint-like effects. The result: Soft edged pictures of abandoned surroundings. Free photography with an impressionistic feel to it. Eduard J. Steichen was one of the members who became very famous. The camera and dark room became his palette, just like nowadays the recording studio is a musical instrument to Ambient music. It came to a moment where the Camera Work group were almost competing with painters. This all happened around the same time impressionist painters were flirting with distorted reality.



291 camera works



Nikolai Makarov

Nowadays we are all able to use Photoshop programs on our computers. Take a picture of anything and simply add a gallery effect, such as a (Gaussian) blur and enhance the lightning and colour. Is that art? Well, we can use the camera, the recording studio and the computer as an instrument to express 'new' creativity in order to bring out **any** emotion from the spectator. But these appliances are seldom random or aleatoric. An artist must obtain skills and craftsmanship. Just like painters with brushes in their hands and colours on their canvasses they have to rely on the quality of the given materials – new or worn out. A painted picture is the result of the hand and person. Some call this 'the charm' of human abilities. Created *to the eye*.

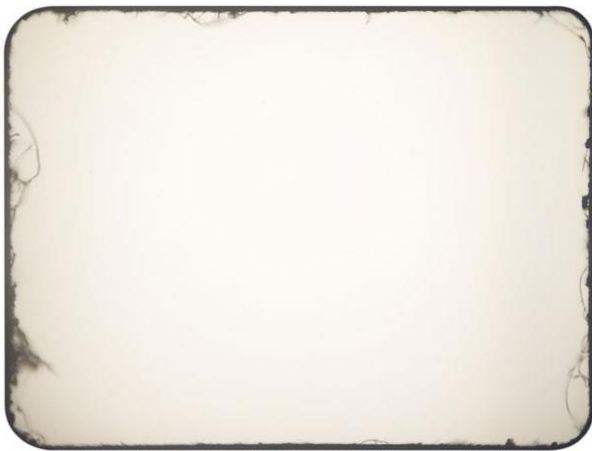


Makarov

291 Gallery was typical for the eclectic era. Their influence still lingers on in contemporary art. A contemporary painter artist from Russia, Nikolai Makarov, gives us similar views like 291 Gallery. Although he is mesmerized by the 17th century clair-obscure light effects, his objects and persons are in vague presence. As if one looks through a dampened glass. Very intriguing dark-Ambient art, similar to the way 291 Gallery Makarov's paintings display some sort of fixation on time.



Musical wise, this could be compared to dark-Ambient. Matthew Florianz is foremost the



Kadervuil by Klopper Loermans & Spruit

musician that accompanies Makarov's paintings the best. His albums of environmental ambient music are a mysterious trip. Very floating and well chosen atmospheres. Mysterious parts solve in to bright light moments. Very comparable to the paintings of Slangen, Hoppzak and Makarov. There is emptiness,

loneliness and solitude, but it floats into another more comforting state. Well made compositions with soundscapes. The

designs of dark-Ambient albums most often consist out of landscapes during wintertime, covered in fog or rain. Vague and blurred pictures are typical for Ambient art. Portraits are aged and patined as if time degenerated the moment itself before ages went by.

In 2006 Marsel Loermans (Klopper Loermans & Spruit) , a Dutch photographer, did a noteworthy project. Originally it began with a fascination for a single ball of fur. Later on filmprojectors with dust and dirt became a point of interest. 'Kadervuil' (translated 'Borderdirt') is an Ambient approach about, in fact, nothing. It might become boring to look at this 'nothing' or 'one thing'. And it is when you compare it to 17th and 18th century paintings. In the classic style from Louis XIV, Louis XV, Louis XVI (the Renaissance), the empire and eclectism from 1900 we find a recognizable scheme concept. A law and rule such as the Golden Rule. With the Golden Rule a natural standard for balanced beauty and

order was secured. It meant composing a painting using 1,618 as a dividing number. I must give credits to Genius of Rembrandt, who also displayed Ambient elements in his portraits and landscapes, especially showing light in darkness. In these classical genres one can easily find rhythm and harmony. Even in the 19th century fashions of eclecticism and Art Nouveau there are strong elements of synchronisms and harmonies. I think the word harmony is a bourgeois approach to art: As if people want to reflect their confidence and believes through a painting. But Ambient art is a child of the 20th and 21st century. It not only breaks with the laws of the Salon-painters, common sense in painting, but the Golden Rule as well.

Ambient art is a development in the 21st century and has obvious links to impressionism, as well as the nul/nihil movement in the 60's and 70's. That experiment still goes on, and will not stop. Impressionism freed painters from classic rules and laws. It was about painting itself again, not so much representation of reality. Instead the inner feelings of the soul came to surface. Surely composition and rhythm played an (important) role, but painters such as Monet, Mancini and van Gogh were more interested in the emotions of the moment. Therefore Allaprima / in-one-go painting was serving the final goal much more. Rough pencil-strokes and thick oil paint gave the display more swiftness and speed. With that, an apparent vagueness entered the art world. For decades, impressionism proved to be a commercial style. The impressionistic way of painting is a recognizable display for people to see new things again and again, all in the same picture. From William Turner to Antonio Mancini up to Bernard de Wolff there are surely developments. The latter being a contemporary Dutch impressionist. His paintings consist out of thick paint clods in which one can vaguely witness a figure. These distorted images are closely related to Ambient art.



← *Antonio
Mancini
Bernard de Wolff*

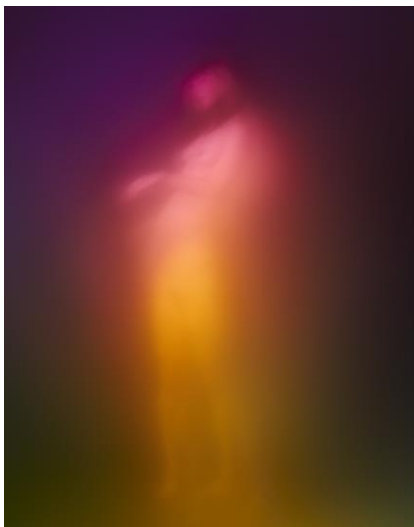


The Pointilists use a comparable approach. Images are distorted and a question comes to the surface: Are certain expressions of a style typical for a certain era? Roughly said, The Mona Lisa and Girl with the Pearl Earring might look different, but initially it is the same girl. We're merely speaking of a different approach. And through centuries of art making, the art world nowadays landed in the land of photography. One can simply use Photoshop and choose the right filter for the right image. I do know a computer could never match a painting, but it surely can be a big help. Therefore photography can not be labelled as art. Art as a revolution can awake you or give a different approach to common sense. It will never stop! It's an evolving philosophy.



William Turner, Sunset

Let us return to 291 Gallery and the Camera Work group: In an early stage, these photographers were experimenting with filters and different print methods. Nowadays this can be achieved through just some clicks on the computer, using Photoshop. Photography can be a creative expression when using the camera and computer as a tool, but the artist's hands are not required to possess the skills to manipulate the image. Discipline, craft and materials on the other hand are far more superior and personal. So many crafted artists with merely a pen or charcoal are able to bluntly copy photographs (fine-art painters and airbrush artists in particular). A great example would be the high-reality artist Dru Blair. He has got a very crafty style, but not in the sense of creating human emotion or an original point of view. A technical replica of photography, like trompe l'oeuil. Technical devices such as the photocamera and the computer have learned us many things: Things painters are rarely



thankful for. The enlargement of a digital photograph, however, brings big pixel compositions of colour combinations and enables a learning resource for painters. I'm convinced that, through working with actual paint, a greater art can be accomplished than photographs. Photography is a very technical product. It probably serves modern art directions like Dadaism and other conceptual art forms. The more we get involved with theoretical art, the less the importance of paint, on its own, becomes.

Drawing and painting are technical human skills that can help express human feelings and emotions, especially Expressionism and Impressionism.



Andre Hoppzak



Bart Slangen

Expressionism is linked to abstract art (Pollock and de Kooning, for example). But how does this relate to Ambient art? Many painters are using Ambient art as a vehicle, so to say. Ambient art is *not* an expression of feelings, experiences and conditions of how the artist feels about situations and surroundings. That belongs to different Abstract Expressionism movements like the Cobra movement (Karel Appel). Abstract art (and partly conceptual art) is non-figurative and hasn't got recognizable displays. It moves away from a visible reality, which is the opposite of Concrete art. Abstract art hasn't got a goal or concept. In a way Ambient art has also no meaning. But Abstract Art is an expression of one's inner self. Not a reflection of a view we see with our eyes.

Impressionism has got a better foundation to serve as the mother of Ambient art. Impressionism makes the artist experience. Surely thousands of paint- and drawing techniques have been developed to express impressions. Paintclods, Pointilism and many other most often vague, swift and blurred visions of reality are typical for Impressionism.

Another 20th century art form is the Conceptual Art. The high-end in art actually. The machine makes the art"". There is no use anymore for realized art- object, it doesn't even have to be ugly or beautiful. This means total freedom from traditional boundaries. Yoko Ono, as a performance artist, is such a conceptual artist. Conceptual art can be seen as a nephew of Ambient art. Then there's the Zero movement (which is *not* about nihilism). It happened just before 1970: No idealism about beauty and no plan at all! Totally Anti-Painting. Repetition of industrial forms and materials. This movement is, in some way, related to newer Underground music. Except The Velvet Underground, Stockhausen and

Phillip Glass were composing in a 'dice throwing' way. This is what they call aleatoric: Spontaneous compositions and accepting faults as a part of the composition. Now, this smells like Bruitism and Dadaism. The only thing connecting these sounds to the Zero-group would perhaps be the fact that there isn't always a plan. A lot of (painted) repetition serials display a monogrammed uniformity. Vivenza is an example of such a Bruitist sound artist: A recording composer from around 1980 who used repetition of machine sounds. He did that formerly and mostly in a futuristic way, but it corresponds a lot to the beliefs of the Zero-movement. The Zero-movement is the 'son in law-grandpa' of Ambient. More interesting towards Ambient Art is the mediative "Colorfield" Art. Mark Rothko is such an artist and declared something rather ambientlike: "I want to make a simple display of complex thoughts". Colorfields were square and rectangular paintings of smeared paint.



Jan Hendrikse (Zero)



Mark Rothko (Colorfield)



Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch

If we consider Monet and Antonio Macini as vague and rough-textured painters from the start of the 20th century, then we are able to follow a distinct line straight into the 21st century. Guys like Nikolai Marakov are the impressionists of today. The blur and vagueness are more extreme nowadays.. In the eclectic era the Stieglitz and 291 Gallery photographers used all these photographic techniques for creating their impression of another reality. In a straight line to this 21st century I call again upon this Ambient painters Andre Hopzak and the Belgium artist Bart Slangen. The blurred and vague 'paintings' are similar to the 291 Gallery group. There is nothing new there. Gaussian vagueness created by Photoshop is what it is. Without a computer they had to use dark room tricks or, like a contemporary painter like Marakov, they will have to use mechanical spray techniques.



Makarov

Makarov is an Ambient Artist. Coming straight from dark-Ambient (music) and Gothic music. Looking at Makarov's paintings we can easily see a lot of Stieglitz 291 in his work. (If anything, Makarov can be compared with Ambient groups like Stars of the Lid, Matthias Grassow, Kammerheit and Trist). The nudes of Makarov are displayed in shadows. It almost seems like details from a Caravaggio have fallen out and were painted by Makarov, in a vague blur. It feels like being looked at from the dark in a sinister way. His Venice paintings leave you mesmerized. Marakov effects his viewers with a still fixation of the moment, a display of a time-image.



Stieglitz in Katwijk, Holland

Most often he uses just one central point of focus. And this is just *exactly* what the 'The Hague School', from the eclectic period of 1900, did too. This group of Dutch painters did exactly the same with grey and dark toned colours. They displayed simplified object and situations. In my opinion, the 'The Hague School' is the mother of ambient art. His landscapes are desolate compared to 291 Camera Works. A dirty and faded look with only one focus point. There are landscapes and sea sides from several The Hague impressionists that involve the same subjects as Ambient art painters. Despite the fact that they used more colours, the vague displays present a desolate emotion. Both art directions have got many things in common: A stare in stillness, a display with a central point of focus. The simple truth. Rather quintessential. The tone has preference above colour. We can recognize this in the work of The Hague impressionists, 291 Camera Works and Ambient art painters. There's a mutual desire. Funny fact: In 1894, Stieglitz visited Holland and made photographs at the beach of Katwijk of fishing boats on the shore. These were totally in the style of paintings of Mesdag, Witsen and Weissenbruch. So there's a big link



Stieglitz in Katwijk, Holland

between the 291 Group and the The Hague School. The photograph processing and editing in a dark room was a serious attempt to make Impressionistic photo art. Stieglitz even wrote a manual on how to treat photographs in order to create different effects.

Working with Ambient

We've returned to the 21st century, where the computer and Photoshop provide us many more possibilities. But nothing can replace the hand of a painter. Skill and craftsmanship combined with vision. It is easy to link this to decorative painting: For centuries, decorative painters have been involved with creating atmospheres in interiors. Murals displaying panoramic views were around way before the Romans and Egyptians. These murals are intended to create a dream atmosphere, an *ambience*.

These are like towels over a damped body, so to say. A very serving and practical way of decorating. I must note: Decorating is a craft, with clients. Art has a public. But when one observes, for instance, the clouded ceilings (just clouds, no figures) or decorative painters in general then the connection to Ambient art becomes very clear. The soft coloured clouds, vaguely drifting away, are very Ambient like. Decorative painting is about environmental pleasure. Never meant to be an upfront attraction, because it is a play with the theatre of an interior.

So Ambient and decorative art share a mutual goal here. It is almost as if Ambient art drifts away from any real art with a personal or philosophical load. Ambient art does have a meaning and baggage, but it is small, simple and withdrawn. These thoughts correspond with those from Impressionism and the The Hague School: Focussed on one thing, very relaxed and calm. The muted and the muffled.



Willem Witsen



Opposed to all other art-directions which are meant to bring up communication or conflict and emotions. Most often as a reaction to an already existing art-concept. Ambient art is not a happening or a life-concept, but rather a feeling and an impression. In that sense one may call it soft-art or non-aggressive-art. Recognizable but yet still figurative. One may call it Introvert-art, therefore the link to Impressionism is clear obvious.

Although we speak about Ambient art as 'Ambience' – environmental – it is not just a decorative movement. Decorative painting provides environmental pleasure and adapts the personality of an interior or their inhabitants (the clients). If there *is* any meaning or philosophy behind a decorative scheme then it's small and not relevant. Decorative paintings are to support at all times. Ambient art could easily be used within decorative schemes on walls, as well as on furniture. I've had clients who never wished for heavy decorative patterns or figures (like ornaments or structures). At first I wanted to succeed in these restrictions. And when one has to think within restrictions you become inventive and it is just that that will trigger off creativity. In that sort situations, when the assignment is a low profile decorative scheme *and* it may not cost too much *and* there is not much work, then you have to use all your wits. I once experienced a situation where I had to decorate the walls of a staircase. I ended up with twelve sample boards.



That's when I started using a new concept that would later become a new insight. I presented the client a vague ball of light on a wall. Very well softened. One can almost only see the reflection of light.

Another Ambient project I had to do was situated in a classic castle. There I had already painted many decorative rooms, but as time developed and the relation with a client grows, trust in the project is an important matter. For a bathroom decoration we were looking for something new and spectacular. I suggested to paint a ball of light in a misty grey surrounding. The little lane around the castle, where green lampposts lit the ground, served as a source of inspiration. I used photographs of the little lane, which were shot during the night. On the left and right of the entrance door I painted three lights. They were just floating, in nothing. Compare it to the misty and dense fog that emerged when you take a shower. Very ambient, but very sexy as well.



So, the dividing line between decorative painting and Ambient art is also thin. One could even say that painting landscapes and ceilings with clouded skies are an initial form of environmental Ambient art. The definition of the word 'art' here might not be adequate,

since these landscapes are a serving mood. Decorative painting in that sense is always decorative with repetitive techniques and disciplines for compositions and structures. However, an Ambient view of a landscape in a toned-down colour on the walls of a room could be very successful as a decorative scheme. There is even Ambient wallpaper these days, with merely a vague transition of colours.



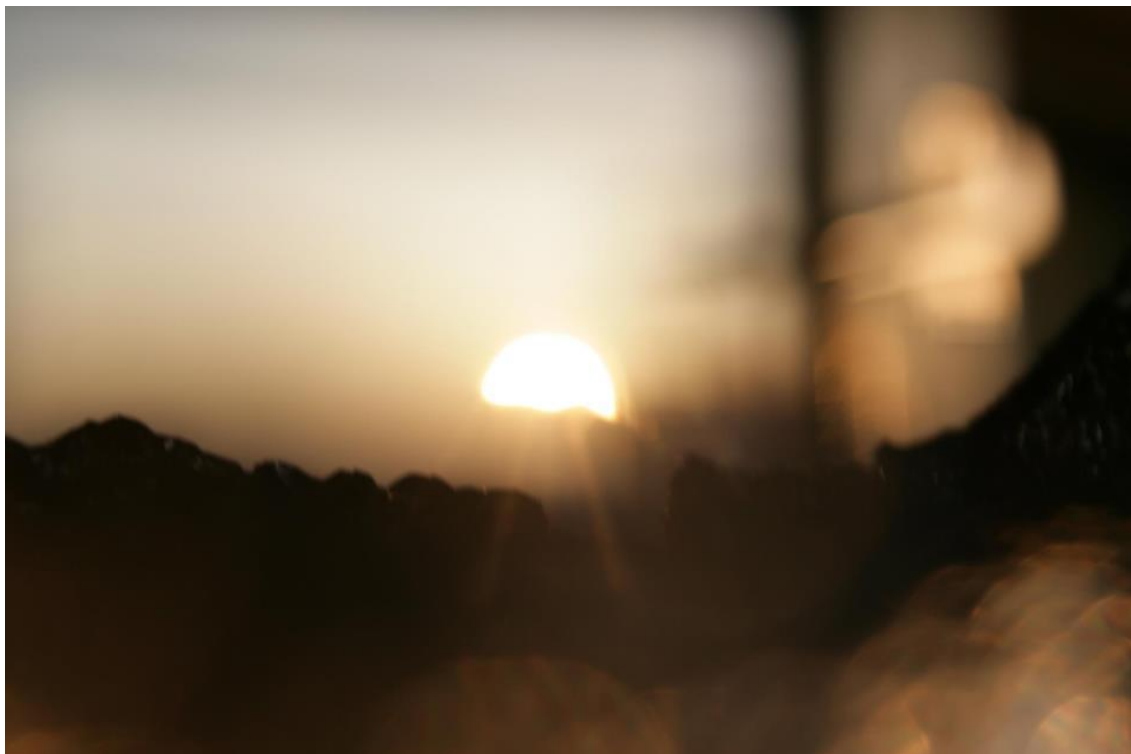
Ambient wallpaper

Through the past decades there has been quite a change in decorative painting that has been influenced by Ambient art. In the 1980's the fantasy structures for walls and furniture patines came to surface. This was due to new paints such as acrylics. Of acrylic-pastes the possibilities were more or less numerous. The economy was good and interior decorating was popular. Through the 1990's comfort and well living became central. In 2000 we saw industrial designs and Zen-interiors, more or less back to basics . Back to humble simplicity: The use of raw materials so to say. Around the year 2010, Interiors and wall decorations simply became less important. This was due to the global financial crisis. But yet, still, there is a transition towards Ambient art. Soft and hazy vague interior murals. We can expect a new revival of richness in interiors around the year 2020.

Understanding Ambient art

The inspiration for Ambient art is, obviously, Ambient music. Ambient art is mostly realism. Like impressionism it expresses the feeling of reality as the artist experiences: The simple truth. An quintessential inspiration from reality to only recall a mood. Some sort of fixation of a moment, with a central point of interest. Like Ambient soundscapes, which lack composition or structure. Freed from doctrines and complexity. Like what the art around 1900 (Turn of the Century) wanted to establish – freedom from the old school. L’art pour l’art. Just serving to suit the environment. Ambient soundscapes aim for sound colours without musical structures. And that is what Ambient art is about as well. I will never deny that the classical way of painting is relevant. Every artist should start with that. To understand the Golden Rule, compositions, the very craft of designing and sketching are the essentials.

Remember the fisherman’s ships from Katwijk in Holland Stieglitz photographed in 1894: It is a form of soundscape.



Matthew Florianz

How can we explain this concept? There is no explanation possible. Because it is about nothing. It is no form except one. It is no structure except one. It has no colour but one. A rather hazy and diffuse statement I must say, but that is exactly what it is. It is the ultimate decorative thing. To be prepared to paint less than nothing, because it *is* environmental Ambience. Fixation of a moment in a stare. Mist, dust, faded lights and humid surroundings. It could be a landscape, a sea, a forest or a blurred sight of a human being. It accepts any content as long as it contains one point of focus, or even none at all. Remember the light: With that it is in fact nothing different from Caravaggio, Vermeer or Rembrandt. Environmental Ambient art is almost an autistic embellishment in sleep modus.

I didn't paint it to be understood but simply "to show what such a scene was like".

J.M.W. Turner

Edited by L.Berghuis

