

I'm not robot!

Although he is best known to Far Out readers for his minimalist solo work along with efforts with stadium rockers U2 and David Bowie, Brian Eno is an avant-gardist of the highest order. It's not the work that drives him, but the art process has stimulated and interested him all this time. Eno has kept himself busy over the years, whether it's touring as part of Roxy Music, or "Enossifying" a Genesis track at Peter Gabriel's request. He also designed a set of cards that offered as a guide to him through dense times, and was more relaxed. "The Oblique Strategies evolved from me being in a number of working situations when panic, particularly in studios, tended to make me quickly forget that there were others ways of working," said Eno in a 1980 radio interview, "And that there were tangential ways of attacking problems that were in many senses more interesting than the direct head-on approach." Centred on the aphorisms that can solve or destroy a work situation, the cards hold such messages as "honour thy error as a hidden intention", "state the problem in words as clearly as possible", "remember those quiet evenings", "once the search is in progress, something will be found", "work at a different speed" and "look closely at the most embarrassing details and amplify them". Physically, they are presented in a deck of 7-by-9cm printed cards in a black box. And although the game doesn't hold a set of rules per se, the function of the exercise is to encourage artists to continue working down their perilous path. In other words, they act as a friend at a time of great need. Eno has always tailored philosophies to suit the work at play. During the recording of The Joshua Tree, he claims he tried to burn a tape in the hope of getting a more vital performance from the band. He was caught in the act, but at least his intentions were pure. Indeed, he persuaded U2 to abandon their rock image on the excellent Original Soundtracks 1 album, giving Eno and U2 the chance to explore other avenues the rock genre prohibited them from performing. Only once do the band return to the melody-laced flavours of their traditional output, and it's for the spellbinding 'Miss Sarajevo', a chorus-heavy anthem complete with a stunning vocal from Paravotti. Bono must have used the Oblique Strategies cards in his time, considering that the messages are meant to help people find their purpose behind the mania and craziness that lingers in a recording process. Eno likely borrowed a couple of tips from the equally idiosyncratic David Bowie, who believed that the best way to generate great art was to push beyond the point of comfort into the realm of discomfort. Eno and Bowie worked on 'Warszawa', a probing instrumental punched up by a series of chants and scat vocals. Buoyed by the directions Bowie gave him, Eno came up with a riff that was eerie, ominous, even hymn-like, making it one of the undisputed highlights on Low. Written to evoke the energy of Poland, the song could never have come around but for Eno's interest in exploring. Danger leads to great art, but it can also be damaging to the artist, once they start to doubt themselves. These cards help artists recover their sense of control, and gear them to happier terrains. Eno is the first to understand the risk creativity involves: "I often get asked to come and talk at art schools," he revealed, "And I rarely get asked back, because the first thing I always say is, 'I'm here to persuade you not to have a job.'" The best way to be truthful to an artistic endeavour is to commit to it with everything at their disposal. The Stone Roses took that dive in the late 1980s when they collectively decided to give up their day jobs to focus on the music at hand. John Lennon gave Paul McCartney a firm ultimatum, leading the bassist to quit his job for the band, much to the supposed chagrin of his father. This likely explains why he released the Oblique Strategy cards in 1975. The whole purpose of the exercise is to comfort artists, who have taken the ultimate plunge and jumped out of convention into a more abstract world. Coldplay took that dive into the world of art-rock in 2008 to create Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends, an orchestral work that seeped in the importance of the here and now. Naturally, they asked Eno to look over the process. Because that's precisely what art is: it's a process. The product only holds so much value, barring the commercial one, and if the journey to the final point isn't worthwhile, then what's the point? Follow Far Out Magazine across our social channels, on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. {{#.}} {{#articles}} {{#title}} {{/title}} {{/articles}} {{/.}} "Honor thy error as a hidden intention." "Work at a different speed." "Try faking it!" These suggestions will sound familiar to everyone who's ever flipped through the deck of cards known as Oblique Strategies. You can now do that digitally, of course, but Oblique Strategies remains an essentially physical experience, one whose shuffling and drawing reminds the user that they're drawing from the well of chance for a way to break them through a creative impasse or just rethink part of a project. It also began as thoroughly a physical experience, invented by producer-artist-ambient musician Brian Eno and painter Peter Schmidt, who first came up with them in the pre-digital days of 1974. Back then, writes Dangerous Minds' Martin Schneider, the concept for Eno and Schmidt's "set of 115 cards with elliptical imperatives designed to spark in the user creative connections unobtainable through regular modes of work" emerged as a form of "radical intervention with roots in Eastern philosophy." Having first come on the market in the 1970s, Oblique Strategies has gone through several different production runs, usually packaged in handsome boxes with the deck's name emblazoned in gold. The first four editions are out of print and collector's items (and priced to match). The 5th edition is currently available from Eno's website for £30 (about \$50). In 2013 a limited 6th edition of 500 numbered sets were available but quickly sold out. "At this moment, you can find one imported set on Amazon. But it seems that the very first set of Oblique Strategies, featured in Schneider's post, is unavailable at any price. Written in Eno's own hand, sometimes cursive and sometimes block, on cards with a wooden-looking texture and without the rounded corners that characterize the commercial version, these first Oblique Strategies include "Don't be frightened to display your talents." "If a thing can be said, it can be said simply." and "Do we need holes?" Those who have followed Eno's work will surely appreciate in particular the card that says to "use non-musicians," "non-musician" being one of Eno's preferred titles for himself, especially when working in a musical capacity. The total package of Oblique Strategies may have grown more refined over the years, but this handmade first set does have a certain immediacy, and also, in a sense, the imprimatur of history: after all, they worked for Brian Eno. via Dangerous Minds Related Content: Jump Start Your Creative Process with Brian Eno's "Oblique Strategies" Deck of Cards (1975) How Jim Jarmusch Gets Creative Ideas from William S. Burroughs' Cut-Up Method and Brian Eno's Oblique Strategies Marshall McLuhan's 1969 Deck of Cards, Designed For Out-of-the-Box Thinking Brian Eno on Creating Music and Art As Imaginary Landscapes (1989) Based in Seoul, Colin Marshall writes and broadcasts on cities, language, and culture. His projects include the book The Stateless City: a Walk through 21st-Century Los Angeles and the video series The City in Cinema. Follow him on Twitter at @colinmarshall or on Facebook. What are they? The most famous of Brian Eno's dadaist mind games with music production. The original Oblique Strategies (Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas), was a set of cards created by Eno and his painter friend Peter Schmidt, and published as a signed limited edition in 1975. On each card is printed an (often quite abstract) instruction, which is invoked when an artist, producer or band has reached some form of creative impasse and requires external disruptive influence to suggest new ideas. Who uses them? Oblique Strategies is most associated with bands Eno famously produced during his mid to late-70s creative highpoint, including Talking Heads, Berlin trilogy-era Bowie and Devo. More recently, Coldplay used Oblique Strategies when working with Eno on Viva La Vida, and Phoenix – rather than shelling out for Eno himself – bought a deck to use while recording Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix. How do they work? The actual instructions? Try getting your heads around these: "Discard an axiom"; "Honor thy error as a hidden intention"; "Not building a wall, but making a brick"; "What are the sections sections of?"; "Always first steps"; "Idiot glee", or indeed, "Short-circuit principle – a man eating peas in the belief that they will improve virility shovels them straight into his lap." Where do they come from? Eno claims that he and Schmidt devised almost identical Oblique Strategy systems, at the same time and using almost exactly the same words, but completely independently of each other. The power of the synchronicity was enough to convince them to make the messages available to other artists. Despite Schmidt's death in 1980, Eno has continued to revise the Strategies, and the fifth edition of the cards was published this year, along with the inevitable iPhone app. Why are they classic? Depends who you ask. U2 didn't use them, but the Edge applied the cards' rationale of "seeing limitations as some kind of a strength and a governing influence over what you do" to their work with Eno. David Byrne thinks that "Brian's cards are funny and sometimes useful", but the rest of Talking Heads resented Eno's input. What's the best ever Oblique Strategies song? Well, it's not going to be anything by Coldplay (did Eno invent a deck just for them with instructions like "Make everything more pretty" or "Be a bit sad"?). So let's go for Eno's own St Elmo's Fire. Five facts and things The blurb accompanying the 2001 edition says: "These cards evolved from separate observations of the principles underlying what we were doing. Sometimes they were recognised in retrospect (intellect catching up with intuition), sometimes they were identified as they were happening, sometimes they were formulated. They can be used as a pack, or by drawing a single card from the shuffled pack when a dilemma occurs in a working situation. In this case the card is trusted even if its appropriateness is quite unclear. They are not final, as new ideas will present themselves, and others will become self-evident. Don't get Devo started on Oblique Strategies. "Devo being the smartass intellectuals that we were, we thought the Oblique Strategies were pretty wanky," said group leader Gerry Casale. "They were too Zen for us. We thought that precious, pseudo-mystical, elliptical stuff was too groovy. We were into brute, nasty realism and industrial-strength sounds and beats. We didn't want pretty. Brian was trying to add beauty to our music. Oblique Strategies isn't just handy for making Coldplay sound a bit like Queen or whatever, they can also be applied to cringeworthy creative branding and cooking. When working with Coldplay, Eno would give each member of the band a random card and ask them to interpret its instruction musically as the band jammed, without letting the other members know what their card says. "Of course, the chances of you getting a great piece of music are quite remote," Eno acknowledges. "But the chances of you getting a seed for something are quite strong. You hear a voice singing a single note over a drumbeat and you think ... 'Ooh, it's not quite the right drumbeat or quite the right note, but there's something good about it.'" The new iPhone app has made Oblique Strategies available to the masses for the first time. Previously, intrigued Eno-ites would have to watch eBay like a hawk for a deck to become available (the editions were usually released in small presses of 500 to 1000 and no two decks were the same). For a while, a small cult of Eno followers started up their own internet-based Acute Strategies system, where anyone could submit their own strategies, providing they followed lots of geeky rules about avoiding jargon and inside jokes and urging a familiarity with the I Ching and other oracular sources.

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