

SONIC DESCRIPTION IN A GARDEN BY BRIAN ENO WRITTEN BY ELIF SHAFAK

Memories are like gardens. We walk into them thinking we know what we'll find inside and yet they always take us by surprise—they are complicated and serpentine. Any time of the day, we push their old, rusted and rickety gate open, tread in without a thought only to be stopped in our tracks, caught by a rose or a thorn.

Gardens create and nurture memories too. Overflowing with life, they provide not only food, shelter for much-needed rest, a haven for insects and birds, but also a chance for us humans to reconnect with the world around us, to feel the earth beneath our feet—a sense of rootedness. Our need for gardens is as existential and old as the stories and myths we tell ourselves to make sense of who we are and where we belong. The garden as a lost Eden. The garden as a wonderland. The garden as an enchanted place or an oasis in the midst of a parched landscape.

Inside Brian Eno's sonic garden we come to realise that everything in nature talks all the time, if we would only care to listen. Grass snakes, honeybees, golden orioles... The murmuring of a mountain stream rushing over rocks. The haunting melody of a winter wind rattling through the boughs. The rhythmic tapping of raindrops falling on leaves. The sudden roll of a thunderclap echoing through the hills. The crackling of pine needles braving the scorching rays of the sun. The hooting of a night owl in the trees. The fluttering of a butterfly's wings, gentle as a lover's touch.

SERPENTINE

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Time slows down. There is no specific beginning here, and therefore, no precise end. Instead, there are circles within circles, wheels of sound turning within greater wheels, telling their story, uncovering layers of history, like the rings of a felled tree. Reminiscent of a mystic's drum, reminiscent of the beating of the human heart, the sonic garden reverberates with the pulse of birth, death and rebirth.

Outside, time is supposed to be linear; the past and the present and the future arranged neatly one after another. But when you retreat into the sonic garden, time becomes cyclical. The past continues to breathe inside the present, and you hear not only the sounds of creatures that are alive in this moment, but also of those that are long forgotten or fading away, you hear the song of a mysterious starling or a vermillion flycatcher gone extinct. Eno's sonic landscape not only honours the myriad sounds of nature, but also confronts the silences and ruptures set in motion by greed and willful ignorance, addressing the accelerating climate crisis. This is a planet that is being destroyed and depleted at a rapid rate. The extinction of species and the obliteration of biodiversity and entire ecosystems.

Strikingly, the sonic garden is not designed as some secluded space, carved out by reason and hemmed in with protective walls, high and artificial. Just the opposite: it is open, welcoming, inviting and inclusive, and in constant interaction with its surroundings,



however incongruous they may at times seem to be. There is an organic connection between Eno’s garden, in this beautiful, beloved public park, and the multicultural megacity of which it is an essential part. Mixed with the sounds of wild life and native birds are the mechanical, monotonous susurrus of urban life—the hum of cars and lorries, the drone of extract fans, the soft whirr of a computer or overhead lights. Eno’s attentiveness to the smallest detail reminds me of what the great Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca wrote with regards to the exquisite panorama and the heavenly courtyards of Andalucía. “Through the waters of Granada only sighs can row.”¹ In the sonic garden, amidst the sounds that shape our lives, you can hear the same sighs, rowing.

This is a garden that refuses to accept borders as permanent and impermeable a quality that is reflective also in its architecture. Both as a public space and creative experience, the sonic garden constantly translates between various forms. Translates and connects. There are sounds here that may be too high or too low for the human ear to pick. We cannot capture it in its entirety but rather experience it in fragments, like the pieces of a giant collage that we must complete in our own minds. Thus we must visit the Serpentine again, and again, and each time it will be a different experience. For a garden is never static. At night, plants shift a little, trees dream and somnambulate, and unlike what many people assume, roots are not fixed, they



migrate in their sleep. A garden is more water than land, more fluid than solid. It flows and churns, taking the shape of the environment containing it. If you come here in the morning, you will witness it differently than in the afternoon or late in the evening. When the rain picks up or the wind begins to howl, once again, it will be a different experience than on a quiet, sunny day.

The sonic garden requires love and attention, it cannot be rushed. It needs to be absorbed, understood, committed to memory. And that is how we might arrive at an inner garden of our own. Whilst sitting in this art space in the midst of Kensington Gardens, we can journey within, reaching a forgotten space inside our own soul, where we might find neglected dreams like tall grass, but also new blooms, new beginnings, multiple belongings. A garden is a meeting-place, where the past encounters the future, the self finds other species, and by the time we leave this place, something in us has already shifted.

¹https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Poem_of_the_Deep_Song_fBuw5MuW12oC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=through+the+waters+of+granada+only+sighs+can+row+lorca&pg=PA3&printsec=frontcover