

## Paladino/Eno at Ara Pacis

by James Putnam

Although bringing together the two very diverse talents of Mimmo Paladino and Brian Eno to create a project for Ara Pacis might seem an unusual idea, these artists are not worlds apart. Apart from being born in the same year (1948) and studying fine art during the 1960s, by the end of the 1970s they were both experimenting with works made up from a combination of repeated elements or motifs. Most significantly they can both see a relationship between visual art and the art of sounds. Eno has compared his music to sculpture, as something tangible in space that can be shaped with a repeatable temporal dimension. And Paladino believes that the creation of music from the harmony of tones is parallel to the creation of art from the harmony of forms. He also compares the arrangement of his compositional forms in painting to counterpoints, notes, intervals, rhythms and harmonies in music. In 1999 they collaborated on the critically acclaimed installation, *I Dormienti* for the Undercroft of the Roundhouse, London.

Although the Ara Pacis project has its genesis in *I Dormienti*, it is very different in feeling and site. In the dark brick-clad subterranean Roundhouse space, Paladino's sculpture with Eno's generative music, was distributed around a circular central area and in the network of tunnels radiating from this nucleus. In sharp contrast the ethereal white travertine basement area of the Ara Pacis building presents a more challenging site to make an immersive and evocative installation.

Along the entire length and breadth of one wall Paladino has created an installation of hundreds of old wooden shoe lasts with small bronze birds attached to them. The visitor is led along this corridor-like space until they reach his complex sculptural installation, *Treno*, an *assemblage* of terracotta elements on steel racking placed diagonally across the width of the space. Its title suggests comparison with a long line of railway carriages traveling from one side of the space to the other. But the modular metal racking units have a formal and functional role rather than any representational significance. *Treno* was constructed specially for Ara Pacis, in a big open space at Paladino's Paduli studio, then transported to the ceramic works in Faenza. Here the various sculptural elements on their separate modular metal units were placed together directly in the kiln. After firing the clay became fused with the metal and allowed for a convenient method of transportation and arrangement on site at Ara Pacis. Its modular and geometric appearance with different configurations of the rectangular form is also central to Paladino's sculptural concept. These steel racks and their grid supports, suggestive of Dexion shelving units, have been adapted to create an arrangement of parallelograms and voids. This bold rather Constructivist looking device is also a practical method of arranging individual elements into perpendicular lines to create a compositional dialogue between vertical and horizontal.

They appear to be both casually aligned and carefully stacked shapes, suggesting the provisional, just as if the artist might at any time add, remove, or change something in the spirit of an abstract painter. Paladino works intuitively, his process involves a sequence of actions and reactions, carefully weighed and examined, confirmed or rejected, until he arrives at a result. Perceived from different viewpoints, the sculpture morphs into multiple geometric compositions and interweaves a new blend of shadows.

The striking ethereal quality of the light reflected from the porous travertine walls and polished floor acts as a perfect backdrop to cast shadows from this complex combination of sculptural

elements and steel racking. The idea of the shadow is particularly significant to Ara Pacis as the altar was once orientated according to an ancient tradition of linking a holy place with the celestial. In its original location on Campo Marzio (Campus Martius), a giant Egyptian obelisk was precisely sited to project its shadow from the sun towards the altar in homage to Augustus who had created the peace. This acted like a vast sundial or shadow-clock and the tip of that shadow miraculously aligned exactly with a specific part of the altar only once a year on the occasion of the Emperor's birthday. Rather than being an accidental byproduct of *Treno*, its shadow is a significant part of the work and changes the context of the installation so it appears simultaneously as both actual and virtual. As a flat representation of the three-dimensional sculpture projected on the floor, this shadow is integral to the work, neither totally dependent on nor independent of the original sculpture that gives it form. The shadow indicates something other than itself – a dialogue between presence and absence. It moves the borders of our perception, containing not only the reflection of *Treno's* image and its essential nature but also a trace of the light source.

The individual elements of *Treno* are made from terracotta, a medium Paladino frequently uses since it appeals to him for its elemental and transformative properties. Traditionally it has been accorded less value in the hierarchy of sculptural materials, subordinate to the so-called 'nobler' mediums of stone, bronze or wood. But clay is basic, primal matter coming directly out of the land, an intensive manifestation of energy and life in its most elemental form, the combination of earth, water, air and fire. Of all the arts pottery is the most intimately connected with life and in some ancient creation myths, a god-like figure models human beings from the earth itself. The red pigment in terracotta also relates to the iron in our blood. Since the dawn of human history it is the material most widely used to make the vessels that convey nourishment to our bodies and to construct houses that shelter them until at the end of life when they are returned again to the earth. So it is as if Paladino is conscious of clay's bodily connection when he juxtaposes domestic utensils and roof tiles, with human figures curled up in the foetal position.

At first glance the typological presentation of *Treno's* fragmented objects resembles a museum reserve storage system for archaeological artifacts. A characteristic feature of Paladino's work is that he relates some of these ordinary forms to the traditional mediums of art by molding and casting them in ceramic and bronze.

Even if unintended Paladino's recumbent figures seem sepulchral as if surrounded by their burial goods in this crypt like space. A parallel could perhaps be drawn with the pre-Roman terracotta tomb sculpture of the Etruscans. They were preoccupied with ensuring that their deceased, represented on terracotta coffin lids, had a comfortable afterlife so their tombs were decorated with depictions of household objects that they might need. Despite its true Modernist roots, the perception of Paladino's work is inevitably linked to the aesthetic of the archaic fragment.

Some fragmentary objects have poignancy because of their disruption from their context: their fragility speaks of loss. Others possess an inherent quality through the sculptural configuration of their breakage and have additional power concentrated in them because of their fragmentary state. The aesthetic appeal of the fragment represents a paradox because our human psyche needs to perceive something that is whole rather than incomplete but at the same time we also have a fondness for that which is missing or ruined.

Paladino's rather emblematic device of the disembodied hands, mask-like heads, broken torsos, and corroded metal fittings evoke distant antiquity and buried archaeological fragments.

*Treno* incorporates found everyday objects like domestic utensils, terracotta roof tiles and rusty old metal window fittings into the sculpture.

He has a predilection for using modest everyday objects that he feels express the dignity of simple humanity. A further series of sculptural fragments has been installed along the entire length of the other long basement wall. Apart from the larger standing elements these bodily fragments are mounted at different heights directly on the wall, facing away from the spectator as if trying to escape from the confined corridor-like space. These have been cast in black patinated aluminum

that appears almost burnt and charred as if a remnant of a mysterious ancient civilization on which some catastrophe has befallen.

Paladino often combines and repeats some of his sculptural elements and intentionally creates forms that have this flexibility and adaptability to be reused in different combinations. Moulds allow for the production of multiples that he then individualizes, sometimes breaking the figures into fragments and reassembling them differently. The brokenness of these sculptural elements certainly gives them an apt rapport with the ancient altar that was itself reconstructed from numerous fragments retrieved by the archaeologists from waterlogged soil. After installing them on the wall, Paladino has interspersed these sculptural fragments with a series of delicately rendered line drawings. He considered it important to improvise these spontaneously on site, cutting them directly into the wall plaster and then accentuating them with charcoal.

Paladino's art blurs the boundaries between figuration and abstraction, while having recognizable forms it is neither narrative nor symbolic. It is therefore erroneous to try and interpret or find hidden meanings in his enigmatic imagery, covert motifs and cryptic signs. He creates his own characteristic and personal archetypes, a repertoire of generic, idealized forms and shapes that he can re-use in different configurations in his paintings, sculptures and installations. These are not representative of the real world but are prototypical entities in themselves that conform to his Modernist philosophy. They are after all universal shapes, fundamental to our human sensibility and we are subconsciously conditioned to respond to the nuances of their form, gesture and space. Although their origins are both geometric and natural they can be read on a purely abstract level. This leads to a complex visual relationship between representational and abstract imagery when they are juxtaposed with or merge into one another. In some of his works he composes his own kind of script made of gesture and line and although they appear like mysterious runes or hieroglyphs they are more akin to an abstract painter's brushstrokes on canvas.

These cryptic signs are inscribed on the many facets of the large aluminum ring sculpture upstairs behind the ancient altar.

Within the first room of the enclosed central area Paladino has painted a series of large geometric shapes directly over the surfaces of the interior walls.

These red and white compositions have a precedent in some of his earlier paintings and sculptural installations that relate to his fondness for the Suprematist works of Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), the pioneer of geometric abstract art. Red is basically a sensual colour evoking many images and is associated with profound urges, impulses and emotions, suggesting feelings of excitement, energy, speed, strength, danger, passion, and aggression. But it is perhaps most universally felt that red, the color of blood and fire, represents life and vitality since it also signifies the color and energy of the sun that radiates its life-force to humanity. Red and white is arguably the most visually powerful colour combination used in signs, flags, advertising slogans and corporate logos.

Paladino's wall paintings therefore create an intense, highly charged atmosphere within this enclosed, almost labyrinthine space that surrounds a tiny room or niche just like a burial chamber.

In this final 'inner sanctum', Paladino has installed a bronze anthropoid sculpture with a tree branch projecting from its torso as if expressing growth and life force. He suggests this bough could also relate to the practice of dowsing where a "Y" shaped willow or hazel branch is used to locate underground springs or hidden objects. A related bronze sculpture that includes this forked bough surmounted by a top hat, emerges from the wall of the central enclosure into the main space, as if to establish a dialectic between interior and exterior.

Brian Eno's music for Ara Pacis is not merely a soundtrack to accompany or enhance Paladino's installation, but a complimentary interconnected part of the entire work. His objective has been to create a piece of music that animates Paladino's sculpture, releasing something buried deep within it and evoking an aura of endless continuity and coherence throughout the installation.

Eno's unique approach to making and composing music is regarded by many as a genre of contemporary art in its own right.

Unlike traditional compositions where all the instrumental sounds are organized in a pre-established scheme, Eno works with layers of music that move in space independently of one other to create a richly textured soundscape. Often referred to as "ambient" or "generative" music, the various layers float freely, joining together in continually different unpredictable and unrepeatable combinations.

Although he created Generative Music software in 1996, his interest in its underlying concept has its roots back in his formative years when, inspired by avant-garde musicians, he first experimented with tape loops and phase shifting techniques. Despite the ever-widening sonic possibilities offered by advances in sound-recording and play-back technology, Eno's distinctive music is based on the fundamental principle that it is possible to build up a beautifully complex web of sound from a very simple starting point.

Like a kind of alchemy of sound the manipulation of sonorous elements create progressively astonishing complexity through initial simplicity.

Eno uses treated piano and sometimes overlays sudden sounds and spoken fragments that are looped, fading in and out, sped up and slowed down, amplified or fading down to whispers. The layers of music existing both in isolation and combinations are mixed in tracks of differing lengths with periods of silence also inserted. The continuous slow arpeggios and the rhythm they create build up momentum yet never reach a climax. This produces sounds that repeat in random cycles, as they are unlikely to come back into sync again as the piece of music moves along in time. His layering of sounds is a process of assimilation and combination that produces a new ever-evolving entity. It comprises a unique relationship between its known pre-programming and its unknown random element, which creates multi-layered intricate and unpredictable configurations. It is a way of composing that involves activating a set of rules or a system to produce music that is 'organic' in that it is constantly changing and renewing itself. One of its most intriguing and appealing aspects is that you don't know what it's going to be and it will be different every time you hear it. Unlike conventional music compositions that have a predetermined beginning or ending, generative music can be of infinite length, with layers of sound that are constantly reconfiguring in different ways. Eno's artistic practice involves a collaboration between himself and the technological mechanisms he uses to create his music. But here it also involves a collaboration between his music and its environment, Palladino's sculpture and paintings combined with the architectural space of Ara Pacis. The presentation and dissemination of music is always a carefully considered factor in Eno's installations and the choice and placing of individual sound sources is of major importance.

At Ara Pacis these are interwoven with Paladino's installation, distributed from over twenty portable CD players and various speaker units. A different disk is produced for each player that represents a unique layer of sound composed of a mix of several tracks. Using the control facility on each CD player called 'auto repeat' and 'random-shuffle', the separate tracks are activated in unpredictable order to achieve infinite permutations of sound in space. The individual speakers installed at Ara Pacis range from carefully concealed boxes, to more visible 'grid' units and Eno's characteristic speaker flowers. Like sculptural objects these consist of tiny chassis speakers attached to tall metal stands that sway in response to the sound they emit. The various layers of music, separated and distributed among the CD players and speakers, combine in constantly differing ways and because the sound emanates from so many sources it seems to almost suggest a living and breathing entity of itself.

As humans we have a natural instinct to look for patterns in music and to listen for the intervals and individual notes. But the amazing multiplicity of elements in Eno's music enable the listener to appreciate and evaluate sound on its own terms irrespective of its independent instrumental components or cultural influences. The music is just there as a kind of idealized atmospheric state that demands from the listener no conscious attention, effort or concentration. The soft tones have a floating, mellow quality, gradually building up and receding back again. The reverberation also gives the piece an ethereal haunted quality that slowly shifts over time as the patterns overlay, interweave, merge and repeat against one another.

This omnipresent music pervading the exhibition space allows listeners to become totally immersed and temporarily give themselves over to it, so they can 'float off' into the ethereal space of the installation. Although they hear varied clustering and combinations of the same basic elements, their experience of the music is unique to each specific moment in time as the piece progresses. This overall configuration of sound at Ara Pacis provides a spatial dimension beyond stereo so that the musical composition assumes the form of a 'sound sculpture'.

Eno and Paladino take the idea of transforming the structure of their works using repeated fragments, to embody inter-relationships in new dimensions of time and space. In expanding and building up the individual sounds or visual motifs, these fragments are reunited to become a consistent and harmonious totality. They establish complex and multifaceted connections that can be read formally as well as emotionally, physically and psychologically. This interplay of various elements in a rhythmic pattern with the spaces or intervals between them, links the orchestrated with the random. Paladino feels that this reliance on chance also possesses an element of artistic destiny and unity rather than sheer randomness. Combined with Eno's music his installation is imbued with a coherent sense of ebb and flow, between the polarities of transience and continuity, creating a provisional state of emergence, the counterpoint between the formless and the formed. In experiencing the Ara Pacis installation the viewer, also the listener, is not simply in the work as a part of it but still in the role of seeing and hearing it by being inside of it. They are neither excluded nor totally included in the work, which acts like a map allowing them to explore imaginary places in their psyche outside ordinary experience.