

music

Nuclear emissions

A month before the earthquake and tsunami that triggered an atomic crisis in Japan, the ambient electronic music artist Biosphere was busy capturing the beautiful but bewildering nature of the doomed Mihama plant, writes Andy Battaglia

When the artist known as Biosphere set out to make his new album, the story goes, he began to get inspired when he happened upon an old photograph of a picturesque nuclear plant by the sea. He was newly stationed in Kraków, Poland, where he'd moved after spending most of his 49 years cloistered in the upper reaches of Norway. His setting for the winter had changed: a grey city sighing beneath clouds of smoke as opposed to a remote town where the northern lights shine.



N-Plants
Biosphere
Touch

Geir Jenssen, the man known as Biosphere, was thinking internationally, and his pursuit of a theme sent his mind travelling from Europe to the "post-war economic miracle" of Japan. Not exactly the first thing that springs to mind when thinking of subjects to address by way of ambient electronic music, but then, what is?

The photo he chanced upon showed the Mihama nuclear power plant, which sits majestically, like a strange sort of mechanico-futuristic resort, on the coast of Wakasa Bay. He found the plant and others like it beautiful but also bewildering. He couldn't help but wonder: "Are they safe when it comes to earthquakes and tsunamis?"

This was in early February, a little more than a month before Japan was devastated by both. The results of his work, finished before those fateful rumblings on March

11, are gathered now on *N-Plants*, a striking new Biosphere album that pits an unwitting sense of portent against a disquieting air of mystery.

Geir Jenssen has been making ambient electronic music under the name Biosphere for a decade, and most of it has been at least a little bit mysterious. His classic album *Substrata*, held out as a touchstone of the genre since its release in 1997, layered atmospheric sounds with excerpts of speeches from the television series *Twin Peaks*, and his 2004 release, *Autour de la Lune*, was made in mind of 19th-century science-fiction writer Jules Verne and noises from outer space. Samples of the sort abound.

But none could have foretold the mysteries that greet *N-Plants*. Foremost among them is how much, if

at all, the conception of nuclear plants really figures into the album's sound in the end. In brief notes tagged to the release, Jenssen wrote of his new-found fascination with such industrial sites: "I wanted to make a soundtrack to some of them, concentrating on the architecture, design and localisations, but also questioning the potential radiation danger (a cooling system being destroyed by a landslide or earthquake, etc)."

That's certainly intriguing, but it's the only even remotely specific statement that Jenssen offers as to his working process. Did he go visit? Did he stay at home and look at photographs, build models, chart out angles from blueprint plans? Did he consult with shadowy sorts who know more than is generally known about potential radiation danger?

None of that is clear, and so it is hard to divine what is going on in a track like the brooding, burbling album-opener *Sendai-1*. It reveals itself over the course of eight minutes, with a mix of subtly seething environmental noise and what sounds like a simulacrum of a muted horn in mourning. At the root of it is a gently cycling mechanical hum, the kind of sound you can imagine issuing from a big grey machine covered with feeble yellow caution tags. It's eerie but also beautiful, like an elegy.

It's also an enigma, which goes a long way towards separating

such a track – and all the others on *N-Plants* – with corresponding titles like *Genkai-1* and *Monju-2* (though not Fukushima, the name of the plant that has been the source of such troubles in Japan of late) – from what might otherwise be classified as more or less conventional electronic music. Much of that owes to the unique production touch of Jenssen, whose music as Biosphere sounds improbably spacious and weighty. His widescreen vision and wandering sense of patience in tracks that take their time to unfurl tends to pay off, and his robust bass sounds come across more like natural phenomena than

mere musical tones. But some of the exceptionalism owes to a simple question worth asking: is work of the kind even really music? In an article in *The New York Times*, Brian Eno – mastermind of what most of us now know as ambient music – addressed his own recent yearning for a different term of art. His offering to take the place of "music" in such cases was *sonema*, an invented word meant to signal a 21st-century set of priorities given to "sonic immersion and environment". It's less music than some other medium – or at least it can be helpful to think of it that way. Certainly it is when taking in work



The Mihama nuclear power plant in Japan. Issei Kato / Reuters

Meet El General, a 21-year-old rapper who has emerged as the hooded bard of the Arab Spring, since providing the soundtrack to the final days of Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia

'Rapping the revolution'
by Lauren E Bohn,
Foreign Policy

about Biosphere's work is especially abstract.

Indeed, tracks on *N-Plants* like *Ikata-1* and *Oi-1*, with their skittering rhythms and formalistic designs, play like the kind of minimal techno much in fashion in numerous electronic-music realms.

Heard another way, however – with a compelling narrative attached and probing questions asked by way of implication – Biosphere's music is extremely abstract. It's stranger than it sounds at first, and then grows ever stranger as the mystery behind its making begins to suffuse a listener's interaction with it. What are we to make of such work? What are we to make of ambient electronic music in general? Does it have anything in particular to communicate and, if so, what?

The last track on *N-Plants* is the only one to touch down expressly on the album's stated theme. Over some synthesised electronic whirling and a series of severely constricted beats, it features the voice of a Japanese man talking.

To a listener not versed in Japanese, he sounds nervous, reticent, maybe anxious about the potentiality of a menacing event to be delivered in some eerily unidentifiable way. He might be talking about radiation danger or the precariousness of certain nuclear-plant locations or the weird unknowability of technology at large. Then again, he might just be talking about the weather.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Artforum*, *Spin* and *Pitchfork*.

playlist

The national grid: four more power-related albums, from the sublime to the obvious

The Power Station

The Power Station (1985)

Time to get the most literal one out of the way first. The Power Station were an Eighties supergroup mainly composed of two parts Duran Duran and one part Robert Palmer, whose slickly produced debut album turned out a couple of minor hits, including a decent cover of Get It On, the T-Rex classic.



Pink Floyd

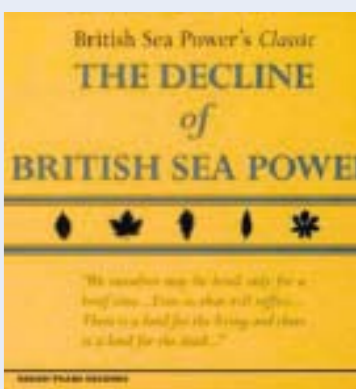
Animals (1977)

Nothing says rock and roll quite like a disused coal-fired power station in London. Temporarily adorned with a large inflatable animal, Battersea Power Station features on the cover of Floyd's 10th studio album, the one after Wish Your Were Here and before The Wall.

British Sea Power

The Decline of British Sea Power (2003)

This indie rock band's debut gathered a small sliver of success upon its 2003 release. It is most notable for Remember Me, a track originally released two years earlier and, fantastically, later reissued as a double A-side with a cover of a Wurzels track.



The Crystal Method

Tweekend (2001)

The second album by DJ duo The Crystal Method is most interesting (within the confines of this playlist), for its cover art. If you are either long in the tooth or eagle-eyed you'll be aware it appears to parody the cooling towers and deckchairs of Supertramp's 70s opus Crisis, What Crisis?