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# Björk at MoMA – the line between art and music is becoming ever more blurred

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Not your typical gig outfit. Yui Mok/PA Archive

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“If I were to say who influenced me most, I would say people like Stockhausen, Kraftwerk, Brian Eno and Mark Bell,” Björk told Mark Pytlik for his biography of the Icelandic musician. An intriguing, if not altogether surprising, group. It not only name-checks some of the most important musical figures of the past 70 years, but also provides a template with which to understand Björk.

I’m not just talking in musical terms. Björk may be a musician but she has a much broader aesthetic than music – to the extent that an exhibition about her is shortly opening at MoMA. At the heart of such a show is the question of where the boundaries between art and music lie.

Her influences tell us a lot about why and how this is the case with her work. German electronic music pioneer Stockhausen was most active in the 1950s and 60s. He certainly inspired Kraftwerk and Eno to redefine the confines of popular music in the 1970s. Bell, a key figure in the development of techno and house music in the UK in the 1990s, essentially fused Eno’s ambient music with Kraftwerk’s melody-driven synthesised beats.

Stockhausen (indirectly) and Bell (directly, as Björk’s producer from



1997 until his death in late 2014) can be regarded as highly influential in cultivating the Björk soundscape.

## Multifaceted

But Kraftwerk and Eno have probably had a more diverse, profound and even dynamic impact. Both have long histories of exploring the connections between music and art. They are equally at home in art spaces and galleries as they are in concert halls and recording studios. Music is only one facet of their oeuvre.

Kraftwerk collaborated with artists, Eno creates photography, installations and digital art. They both work with film and video, and have given live performances as living art. This idea of the living artwork seems to be very much at the heart of the MoMA rationale for the Björk exhibition, which it describes as:

*A retrospective of the multifaceted work of composer, musician, and singer... To chronicle her career through sound, film, visuals, instruments, objects, and costumes.*



Björk, The Face, 1993. Photo by Glen Luchford

This is not the first time MoMA has recognised the margins of culture inhabited by some musicians. In 2012, there was the exhibition Kraftwerk – Retrospective [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#). There were eight live shows, each featuring the music of a different album. Each performed to sell-out audiences. The same format was used by Tate Modern in London for another eight sell-out performances in February 2013.

Of course, there's an argument that Kraftwerk has always defied constructs of what constitutes a popular music act or even a rock band; it has always been more of an arts collective. Its members built their own instruments. They never gave press interviews. They refused to be photographed, and used dummies for photoshoot clones.

Their stage performances were carefully constructed. They

collaborated with artists for album art work (Emil Shult created the iconic cover for Autobahn) and music videos (Rebecca Allen used state-of-the-art facial animation software for the film that accompanied the 1986 single Musique Non-Stop).

The art world finally took notice around the turn of the millennium when Tokyo's Metropolitan



Björk, Volta, 2007. Photography by Nick Knight. Image courtesy of Wellhart Ltd & One Little Indian

Museum of Photography featured an exhibition on the making of Allen's film in late 2002. This was what initiated the art world's exploration of the interface between art and music.

### Kraftwerk - Musique Non Stop 1986 Music Video



### Three artistic poles

Like Kraftwerk, Eno refutes the rock star cliché. The early years with Roxy Music merely established the platform from which he was able to create a variety of work. He can now be considered a composer, sound technician, session musician, musical collaborator, record producer, visual artist, social and cultural commentator.

With Kraftwerk and other electronic musicians such as Tangerine Dream, Vangelis and Jean Michel Jarre, he helped form the musical landscape of the 1980s and beyond. He also began creating photography and art installations in the 1970s and his work has been exhibited widely across the globe.

Roy Ascott has remarked:

*Any attempt to locate Brian Eno's (art) work within an historical framework calls for a triple triangulation, whose trig points in the English tradition would seem to be Turner/Elgar/Blake; in Europe, Matisse/Satie/Bergson, and in the United States, Rothko/La Monte Young/Rorty.*





Brian Eno during the presentation of his project 77 Million Paintings. Javier Cebollada/EPA

This three-pointed allusion embraces artists, musicians and philosophers. At the edge of music you find a border country, as much cultivated by the visual aspect of music making, and the pop star as cultural icon, as it is to the desire to explore multiple creative forms.

From Elvis Presley forward, the performance and marketing of music has always relied on a visual aesthetic. But it is not only the record company or concert promoter, more concerned with the commercial imperative of the product on sale, who has been preoccupied with the packaging of music and musicians. Starting with the Beatles in the mid-1960s, musicians themselves became more interested with image; not just their appearance (on and offstage) but with how their broader persona was presented and what it represented.





David Bowie in 1973. PA/PA Archive

The trend began with album covers as genuine works of art (Peter Blake's 1967 collage for the Sgt Pepper's album) and soon evolved into elaborate stage costumes (Arthur Brown), and ultimately, into exotic alter egos (David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, whose costumes featured among the exhibits at last year's V&A retrospective of Bowie's stage creations).

Some musicians even insisted on fashioning their own album covers, Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell chief among them. Dylan has exhibited his paintings and sculptures in galleries worldwide, including the National Portrait Gallery in London.

Film was also used to cultivate and enhance image: look at the proto-videos for Dylan's 1965 single Subterranean Homesick Blues or, a decade later, Queen's global phenomenon Bohemian Rhapsody. Videos themselves were the main drivers of sales throughout the 1980s, initiating the MTV age, before digital technologies enabled a more holistic multimedia approach, particularly in terms of live performance.

Björk seems to embody all of this. The four musicians she mentioned to Pytlik are surely just one aspect of her inspiration and ambition. As the New York show will no doubt prove, with its showcasing of music as well as album covers, videos and costumes, Björk's work references Bowie's performance art and Eno's extending of aesthetics, just as much as German electronic music. What will happen next in these borderlands, we'll have to see – but it's an extremely exciting prospect.