ALMINE RECH

Ryoji Ikeda
π, e, ø

Nov 29 — Dec 21, 2017 | Paris

Over the past two decades, Ryoji Ikeda has developed a body of work that comprises large-scale audiovisual installations and performances, presented either in public spaces or institutions such as museums or theaters. He has also produced albums – artist's books of sorts – which tend to function as recordings, or analog memories of otherwise dematerialized works. More recently, he has been working on smaller sized works, using durable materials such as paper and celluloid.

Taking its title from one of works on display – ***π,*** *e, ø* – this exhibition reflects upon the notion of infinity and permanence. It unfolds in two "chapters": one that is more immersive, with primarily large projected images and sound, while the other showcases analog works – prints, and celluloid film "drawings".

Found in the back room, both *data.tron (WUXGA version)*, and *data.matrix (n°1-10)* belong to the seminal *datamatics* series, which Ikeda has been unfolding since 2006. Its sounds and images are derived from the endless fluxes of data we are surrounded by, albeit invisible and silent until they are decoded by any of the devices we use as receivers – mobile telephones, tablets, computers, etc. Data in transit consists of electrical impulses traveling at the speed of light from one end of the world to the other, before being transformed into content. Regardless of its nature, information therefore is somewhat dematerialized most of the time. Yet, it is a matter that has profound perceptual and cognitive effects on the way we relate to our realm. With his immersive audiovisual environments, Ikeda materializes the data cloud, and thus creates an awareness of how it reshapes our perception of the world in real time. Map and territory can no longer be dissociated, as our information society fully integrates newsfeeds, social media and other means of instant communication in an evermore seamless fashion. Blending "brick-and-mortar" with information architecture, Ikeda reveals how both have become intertwined to create a new condition sometimes referred to as "augmented reality".

Ryoji Ikeda has often set strong perceptual contrasts by juxtaposing dark spaces to heavily lit ones in the context of the same exhibition. This exhibition is structured in a similar fashion, with an immersive datascape flanked by a room hosting more conventional works of art. Both, however reflect systems of data representation, and raise issues of display and interpretation.
The various film works shown in the "white room" ponder the perceptual shift that occurs when film is no longer used for projection. The physicality of a material that is usually concealed comes as a natural pendant to the digital projections found in the "dark room". The evidence of the data container becomes an object in and of itself, with a new meaning. One thinks of Ikeda's albums, and how they framed time, and materialized otherwise completely ethereal works. Framed as a classical landscape, *4'33"* consists of magnetic film footage for a duration that is similar to John Cage's work of the same name, dating from 1952. In this case, Ikeda chooses to materialize silence, another immaterial yet essential element in human life. Film, which was conceived to be moving is now still, is now framed as a relic, as if to materialize infinity. This is precisely the subject matter of another film work, ***π,*** *e, ø*, which title takes its cue from three irrational numbers that represent different dimensions of the infinite. The 1 x 1 pixel-like prints somehow function in a similar fashion: the sleek surface of the black, white or grey paper holds almost invisible information, which happens to be fragments of those same numbers.

The form data takes in Ikeda's immersive work may at first make the visitor think that it has yet to be processed to become content. Yet, what one sees and hears is much more than the binary code that inconspicuously surrounds us; rather, Ikeda hints at the fact that ones and zeros can be interpreted in multiple ways. His work addresses the notion of synesthesia, and evokes how different interpretations of the same data may result in a cognitive shift. For instance, what would the sound of an image be, or what would sound look like, should the data be processed in another fashion?
Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Ikeda's research is revealed in his analog work. Indeed, while it is obvious that digital content needs playback equipment to be experienced, one may be inclined to think the eye is enough to read and interpret the surface of an inert – analog – object, such as his prints or film work. Although we may not require any mechanical equipment to experience such pieces, the need for a system of interpretation (in this case, culture at large) to decipher content is not precluded. Somehow, these new pieces reflect upon cultural obsolescence or irrelevance, how the passing of time or the change of cultural context affects our understanding. For instance, thinking of celluloid as a mere surface rather than as a container of images that requires a projector leads to a very different understanding of the object and its meaning.

Ryoji Ikeda produces his work in series, many of which have been ongoing for several years. This anchors his research in the rich history of experiments carried out both in the fields of sound and visual art over the course of the past century, and a working process that epitomizes modernity. Whereas the notion of the series already existed in the 19th century – exemplified by Claude Monet's haystacks and cathedral paintings – it was in the 1960s that artists such as Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd or Sol LeWitt conceptualized serialism in the field of visual arts, taking their cue from music theory. Composers started working in series in an effort to shun romanticism and subjectivity in favor of formal simplicity. This led to an aesthetics reduced to the bare essentials, devoid of any kind of ornament, that somewhat echoed the rationalism expressed by modern architecture. Ikeda not only unfolds serial works that are related to each other and united under the same title, but his pursuit of a visual and aural language that tends to be evermore pure and formally simplified results in works that can be qualified as *sublime* – a word also used by the American Minimalists.

Ryoji Ikeda's multimedia work originates in his collaboration with Dumb Type, a pluridisciplinary collective formed in the mid-1980s in Kyoto, whose performative installations mixed references to visual arts, theater, experimental film, and popular culture. Ikeda joined the group in the mid-1990s and quickly became an essential contributor. It is likely that the theatrical quality of his work is grounded in this collaboration that culminated in the late 1990s with OR[1], a seminal work for the stage, wherein one could already detect the emergence of a visual and aural vocabulary that would become key to the artist's oeuvre.
One could however point to other influences in the fields of music and visual art. For instance, Noise Music – and more specifically "Japanoise," is an interesting reference for understanding Ikeda's micromechanical soundscapes. In more general terms, it seems like composers interested in music without instruments, as well as its spatialization have also been a source of inspiration: one may think of John Cage – hence, perhaps the importance of *4'33"* as an homage to the master – but also La Monte Young, who posited the experience of sound in direct relation to the experience of light and space. Such concerns also informed Iannis Xenakis's *Polytope* series who also considered the condition of listening as intrinsically related to the perception of space and light. In these cases, the notion of a time-based experience is somehow questioned, as the spectator is in charge of the duration of her or his experience. There is an immersive quality to these works in which all the components – space, light, image – are meant to challenge and awaken the visitor's senses to new listening conditions.

Fundamental to Ryoji Ikeda's formal vocabulary are the essential components of sound and image: white light and sine wave. With these two building blocks, he has developed a method of working that is increasingly grounded in mathematics, as for him, the research led by mathematicians is the purest form of intellectual activity and the purest form of aesthetics: one that is deemed the closest to absolute rationality and logic. Mathematics is also the linguistic structure that is closest to universality, perhaps even more so than art. Ikeda's work can interpreted as totally open, yet it formally attains a state of extreme precision that implies the opposite. However, the work's strongly evocative elements and the acute perceptual state they induce could point to another reading: a universality that precedes verbal language.

Benjamin Weil

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[1] *OR* is a staged performance that premiered in 1997. It is a meditation on the space between life and death and coincided with the passing of Teiji Furuhashi, one of Dumb Type's key members.