

Ryoji Ikeda

The aesthetics of data flow

Daniel Palmer

Ryoji Ikeda

micro | macro

Concept and composition: Ryoji Ikeda.
Programming and computer graphics:
Norimichi Hirakawa, Tomonaga
Tokuyama, Yoshito Onishi and Satoshi
Hama. Commissioned and produced
in cooperation with ZKM|Center for Art
and Media, Karlsruhe. Installation view,
Carriageworks, Sydney.
Photo: Zan Wimberley, 2018

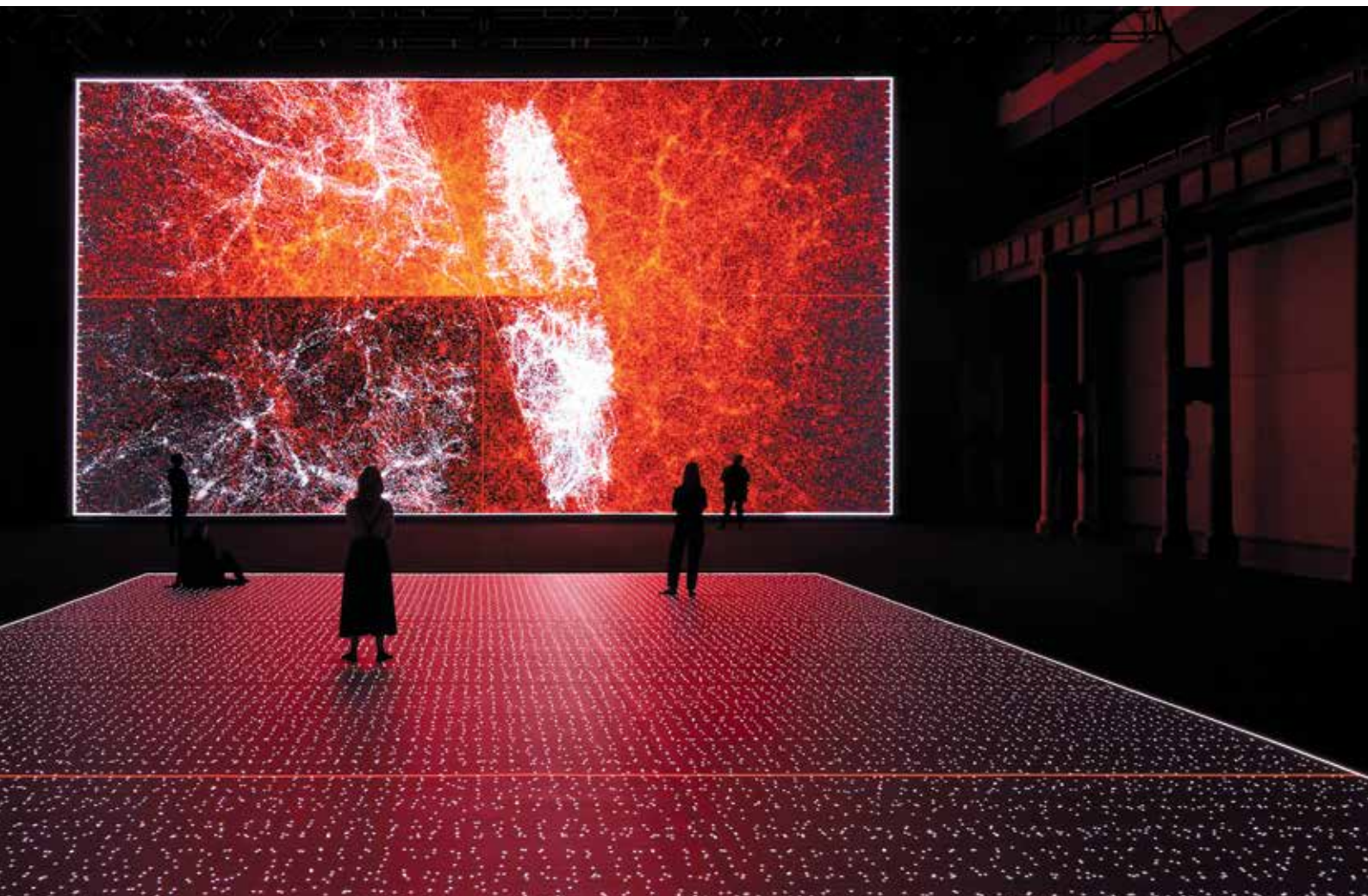
Opposite:

Ryoji Ikeda

spectra, 2018

8.2 ch sound system and
49 Xenon searchlights.

Photo: Mona/Jacob Collings.
Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and
New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia



Ominous, disorienting and relentless, incorporating strobe effects and sonic frequencies on the edge of human hearing, the experience of Ryoji Ikeda's art is often described as a kind of data sublime. Evoking a posthuman, post-nature universe, the technical virtuosity, spectacular scale and intensity of his installations draws crowds wherever they are shown. Ikeda's appeal to institutions competing for attention in the experience economy is obvious. As a typical promotion reads: "Ikeda's work overwhelms the viewer—don't miss this chance to see it in person."¹ In other words, even as prolific documentation inevitably accompanies his work, Instagram cannot replace the physical encounter of being exposed to it, because the "immersive" scale and soundscape are so integral to the encounter. Tellingly, Ikeda started out as a DJ in Tokyo, and he continues to orchestrate singular experiences for visitors en masse on a global circuit, where works can be re-versioned to suit the venue.

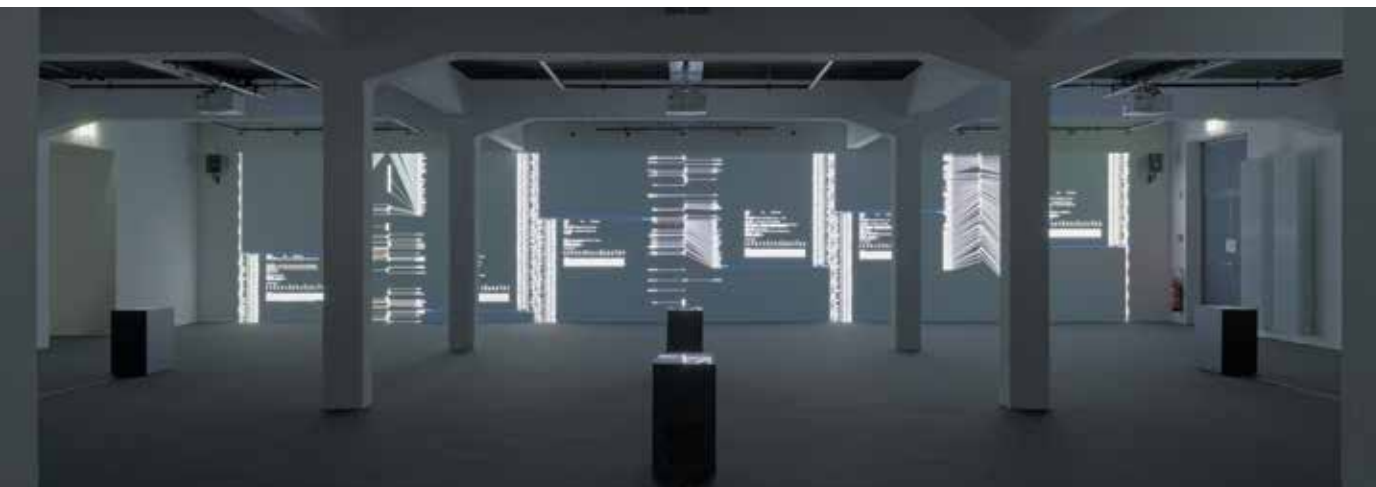
Australian institutions have been great supporters of Ikeda. Curator Mike Stubbs commissioned *data.spectra* as a central part of the exhibition *White Noise* at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in 2005, featuring a horizon line running the entire length of a darkened room made up of a black-and-white data stream, alternating between a floating sea of rows of tiny digits and barcode-like blocks of grey. David Walsh in Hobart is an ardent fan. For *spectra* (2013) at Dark Mofo, Ikeda assembled a bed of forty-nine searchlights to project an enormous vertical beam of white light fifteen kilometres into the night sky above Hobart. When this temporary light sculpture, installation was recently acquired by the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) local residents were offered "art survival kits" in the form of an eye mask. *supersymmetry* (2014), which features frantically scrolling screens of data and light, is also a permanent feature at MONA, and attempts to transform the complexity of quantum theory into an aesthetic experience. That is, as an article in *Wired* suggests, it tries to put you inside a particle accelerator.²

Carriageworks in Sydney have shown Ikeda's work three times, starting with the barcode like flows of *test pattern [No 5]* (2013), a highlight of ISEA2013. Also inspired by quantum theory, *superposition* (2012) was experienced by more than 50,000 visitors in 2015.



In July this year, Carriageworks presented *micro / macro* (2015), developed during the artist's residency at CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research in Switzerland in 2014–15. The work explores the Planck scale (which measures atoms) to contrast our human scale to the microscopic and unobservable. The mammoth floor projection of data represents the smallest matter in the universe while a ten-metre wall projection apparently depicts the largest matter in the universe. The abstract projections on the floor recede rapidly beneath the viewer towards the towering vertical screen in front. This focus field periodically breaks into images that resemble a fusion between neural maps and the big bang, with the uncharacteristic use of red and orange, overlaid first with grids, then circular swirls and insect-like swarms, reaching a crescendo in a solar vortex of flaming oranges and pinks, before returning once again to monochromatic data grids. As the media images circulated and the YouTube video documentation highlights, the viewer is indeed overwhelmed, browbeaten even by the vast scale of incendiary electronics. Not a work for the spectrum-sensitive.

data.tron [3k version] (2014) showing next in Adelaide as part of 12th OzAsia Festival in October, reverts to the perhaps more familiar aesthetic flow of Ikeda's output. An earlier version of the work, *data.tron [3 SXGA+ version]*, was shown as part of *The Red Queen* exhibition at MONA in 2013. Dark, disruptive and abstract, *data.tron*



consists of walls of numbers, impossible to read let alone comprehend. As visual white noise it evokes that wonderful wall of green code in *The Matrix* (1999) or perhaps the Unix kernel of a computer's operating system undone by performance-enhancing drugs. According to the artist, each pixel is "strictly calculated" and "composed from a combination of pure mathematics and the vast sea of data present in the world."³ Belonging to a series that Ikeda calls datamatics, which he has been developing since 2006, it grasps "the potential to perceive the invisible multi-substance of data," "to materialise pure data." Of course, data is never immaterial, but supported by infrastructure like computers, projectors, and cables, not to mention electricity. As if proving this point, Adelaide viewers will not experience the "enhanced" version of the work, *data.tron (8k version)*—in which "visitors are literally immersed in the work, as data is seamlessly projected onto the gallery wall and floor from eight sources"—but will instead, make do with a more discrete three-screen work, projected in an adjoining row along one wall. It remains an impressive work.

As Boris Groys argues, the traditional role of art in the museum has been to resist the flow of time, but today the museum is engaged in "staging the flow" through temporary events.⁴ In Ikeda's work, the public is integrated into the installation space to become part of this spectacular flow of data visualisation. But while inter-subjective encounters and coming together as transitory communities is often a celebrated feature of participatory work, in the prolific

documentation of Ikeda's projections viewers inevitably appear isolated and passive. The unnerving relentlessness of his data experiments seem to echo the atomised and individualistic currents of 24/7 global capitalism. Like the Internet, and the algorithms that govern the traffic of digital finance, we are viewing the world at a vastly different speed and resolution, the obscure logic of which is re-packaged by Ikeda for our entertainment. Like the permanent installation of *data.scape*, an extraordinary 96-metre long screen, four metres high, on the outside of the International Convention Centre's building in Sydney's Darling Harbour (launched in December 2016), Ikeda's aestheticisation of data has become the expo art for our times, a ceaseless flow of electronic hums, pulses and glitches.

¹ "Ryoji Ikeda's micro | macro at Carriageworks," *Broadsheet*, 2018: https://www.broadsheet.com.au/sydney/event/ryoji-ikedas-micro-macro-carriageworks__2 Daniel Culpan, "'Supersymmetry' art show puts you inside a particle accelerator", *Wired*, 23 April 2015: https://www.wired.co.uk/article/supersymmetry-exhibition__3 http://www.ryojiikeda.com/project/datamatics__4 Boris Groys, 'Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk', *eFlux Journal* #50, December 2013.

Ryoji Ikeda: data.tron [3K version] is on exhibition at Art Space, Adelaide Festival Centre, 24 October — 11 November 2018, as part of OzAsia 2018.

Daniel Palmer is Professor and Associate Dean, Research and Innovation, RMIT University School of Art.

Below and opposite:

Ryoji Ikeda

data.tron [3K version], 2014

3 DLP projectors, computers, speakers.

Concept and composition: Ryoji Ikeda.

Programming and computer graphics:

Shohei Matsukawa and Tomonga Tokuyama.

Photo: Jana Cheillino, courtesy House of
Electronic Arts, Basel. © Ryoji Ikeda

