Ryoji Ikeda - Reflection #1 Junes Dreyfus

Ryoji Ikeda is a visual, sound and new media artist, concerned with our physical experience and perception of the data flows that surround us. Through sound and installation, his approach focuses on the transformation of data — from raw numbers and algorithms — into immersive audio-visual experiences, inviting the audience to experience sound and light in ways that challenge traditional sensory boundaries. Big screens of pulsating light, strings of text moving faster than the eye can read, unreadable UIs of mysterious modelisation. His work might seem cold and distant from a glance, or only concerned with aesthetics. However, it is one that is burdened by political and sensorial questions about the state of modern age, our relationship to technology and the unquantifiable amount of data going through the earth at any given moment. Ikeda himself was part of the Dumb Type collective, which often took a more brazen approach to politics, through humorous and cynical digital installations.   The aesthetic of his work is seemingly clean, unmoved, and minimalistic. For instance, "data.scan" (from the datamatics series) and "test pattern" both involve sequences of flashing lights and rapidly shifting sound frequencies that evoke the digital underpinnings of the world we inhabit. These works push the audience to confront the unseen patterns and flows of data that are omnipresent in modern life. In the performance space, Ikeda's work combines live manipulation of sound and light with carefully programmed visual components.   His work is very much impacted by the maximalist approach we have of data. Never ending supplies of images and sound, stored in ever expanding data centers, asking increasingly high amounts of energy to sustain. Rather than opposing this constant flow, or adding onto it, Ikeda seems more interested in channeling it, offering visual, sonic and corporeal compositions to render those hidden systems visible and tangible again.

His audio work is a good illustration of those concerns, because of how easily sound and modern listening tools lend themselves to intimacy. A case can be made on how the blues and white of his giant LED panels also communicate a sense of domesticity, given how our houses are all linked and full of blinking, flickering luminous objects. But listening to Ultratronics (2022) through my earbuds while making the research for this paper, I felt the warmth behind his work. The data, no matter how distorted, was layered and constructed by human hands. Sound is never cut off from the physical reactions it creates through the body. It is input, materializing the beats synchronically, through movements, or breathing or dancing.   There would be no point denying Ikeda's work has some very strong academic merits. Even as a music-agnostic it's easy to see an assumed logic to his music production, a rhythm, like clockwork. I however don't feel the same "academic" distance I felt with his other installations, perhaps because there I was only facing documentation.
          The album is playful, going through different phases of his music. He reconnects with a past interest, synthetic voice, cold, disincarnate. At the time of its release, these voices are remnants of obsolete technology, the voices we make now are way better at fooling the human ear, so they're used as textures. They're a guiding thread, rather than an authoritative presence, lightening up the listener as they go through this panorama of noise-y, sometimes grunge-y, industriale-y synthetic sounds. I believe Ikeda's work to be mainly retrospective. He reuses, repurposes found material, no matter how distorted. I think Ultratronics' strength resides in the fact that it is comfortable being simultaneously understood intellectually, or as texture, like a child would, mindlessly letting the waves of data flow through you as you nod your head in rhythm.