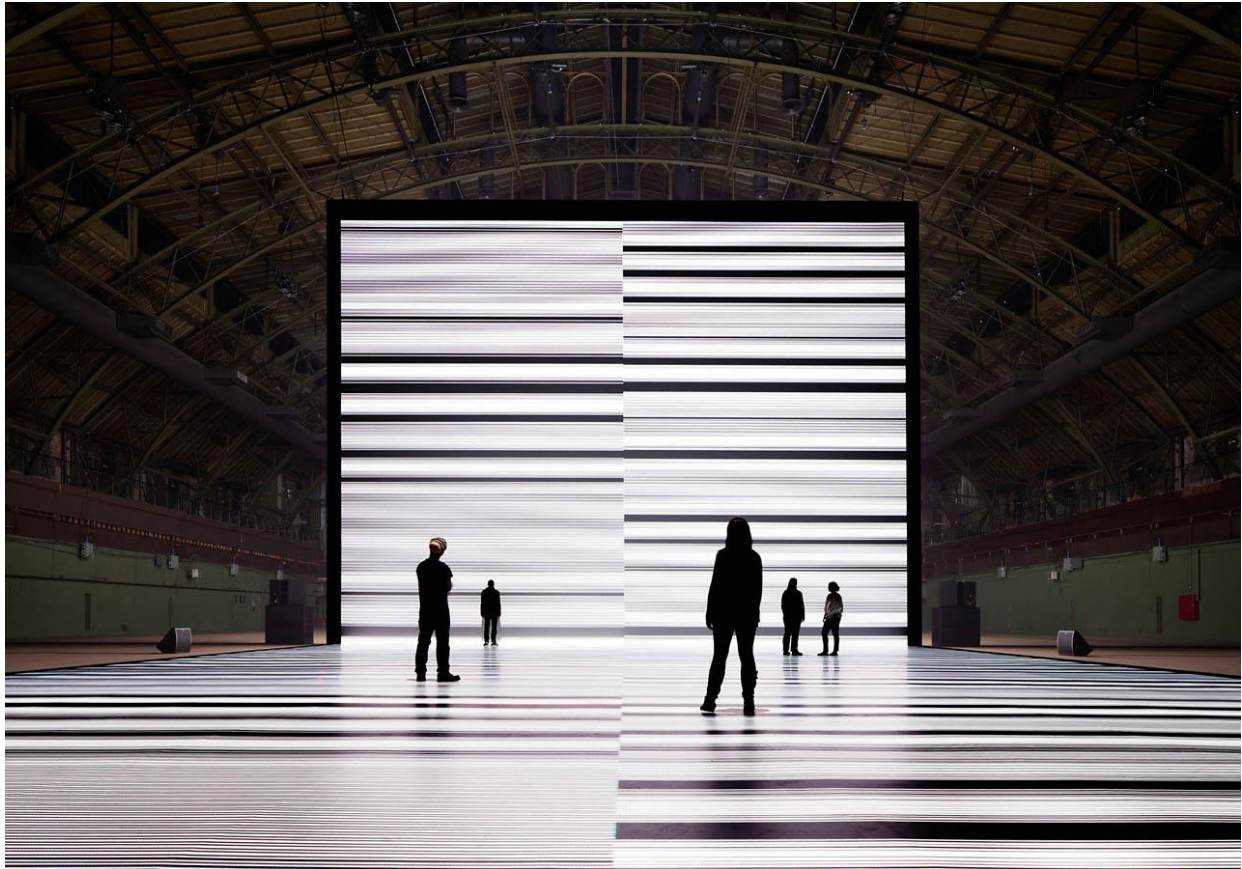


Voyaging Into the Cosmic Minimalism of Ryoji Ikeda

By [Ben Davis](#)

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Ryoji Ikeda's *The Transfinite* (2011) at the Park Avenue Armory

When Conceptualism and Minimalism were at the peak of their relevance, the personal computer was just a glimmer in Steve Jobs's eye. We've come a long way since then, technology-wise, and the kind of rule-based abstract art once made by the likes of Sol LeWitt now seems quaint and human where it once seemed to be an inscrutable avatar of futuristic cool. We have infinitely greater command of information at our fingertips these days, and "The Transfinite," Japanese installation- and sound-artist Ryoji Ikeda's massive installation at the Park Avenue Armory, delivers a kind of maximalist minimalism for a super-charged digital present.

Ikeda, born in 1966, is already well known in Japan and in experimental music circles, and this immersive environment — his first concentrated outing in New York — is likely to be a star-making turn. Dominating the center of the Armory's darkened, theatrical hanger space, "The Transfinite" consists of a looping 10-minute abstract film projected across a giant wall and an equivalent area of floor in front of it. Waves of static-y visual noise wash over the viewer, followed by scrolling bars of alternating black-and-white stripes and passages where blocks explode and disappear almost before you can see them. These geometrical pyrotechnics are meticulously choreographed to a veritable symphony of abstract sound that alternatively suggests the old Internet dial-up sound, alien transmissions, and an ominously circling motorboat.

"The Transfinite" is spectacular and overpowering. As visitors wade out into its landscape of light and sound, with the gargantuan screen towering above them, they look like refugees on some digital shore, staring out into waves of data flying at them from outer space. But the giant installation, with its restricted palette of black and white, also has a formalist severity that makes it work for me in a way that other contemporary videos that embrace scaled-up technological spectacle don't. It is closer in spirit to Hans Richter's pioneering 1923 abstract film "[Rhythm '23](#)" — a pure exploration of shape and alternating black-and-white — than it is to a present-day artist like Marco Brambilla, with his bombastic 3-D "[Civilization](#)," big-budget pop art kitsch.

Ikeda's installation, however, is not so abstract that it is without theme or topic, and the underlying reference point for all this noise is close at hand. Circling to the other side of the wall, one comes upon another massive projection on its reverse side — the second part of the installation. Instead of pure binary alternations of light and darkness, here you have a massive wall of data with blocks of numbers, letters, and computer code, flickering to the rhythm of the same music. The jumpy flood of information — sometimes presented in wheeling ribbons like spinning slot-machine tumblers, sometimes appearing as strobing grids of digits — collages together NASA datasets and info from the Human Genome project, climaxing by spewing out text composed (I am told) of the piece's own "metadata," code relating to the architecture of the project's programming itself. Arrayed in the space in a line perpendicular to the screen, nine low podiums topped with their own screens play animations of star maps, protein sequences, and so on.

The phrase "data visualization" pops up in the material around this show as one of the artist's interests, which makes sense, since Ikeda is building patterns out of scientific information. But usually this Internet-age discipline is all about bringing clarity to masses of

information, whereas Ikeda's point here is not to make this information manageable, but rather to suggest, through sheer volume of imagery coming at you, the uncognizable immensity of all the data that civilization has put at our disposal, transmuting this into some kind of sensuous experience. In his artist statement about the show, Ikeda situates his work at the balance point between the beautiful and the sublime, order and chaos: "To me: beauty is crystal: rationality, precision, simplicity, elegance, delicacy; the sublime is infinity: infinitesimal, immensity, indescribable, ineffable."

Technically speaking, Ikeda is speaking about what Enlightenment guru Immanuel Kant would have called the "mathematical sublime," the aesthetic experience of being overpowered by the inhuman immensity and complexity of the universe. Indeed, contemplating the cosmos was one of Kant's main examples of phenomena that triggered this state of mind. And yet, the curious thing about "The Transfinite" in this regard is that, while the flood of data indeed evokes something overwhelming, the very fact that this is done through the medium of computer models highlights the power of humans over the universe, not their humility in front of it — ultimately, the installation makes one think of just how much has been made knowable, to the point of being able to harness and manipulate vast quantities of information at the snap of one's fingers. "The Transfinite" is, for all its massiveness, a very human-scaled work; for all its wildness, it is hyper-controlled. It is ultimately not about experiencing the bigness of the cosmos, but about how small we have made it, the music of the spheres as state-of-the-art chamber music.

Interventions is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor [Ben Davis](#). He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com