

art & film

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November 2008 £8



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**spectra (paris) by Ryoji Ikeda,
produced by Forma
Review by Angharad Lewis**

The annual Nuit Blanche festival in Paris sees the city's art scene open up its doors for a whole night of events and spectacles, and, if you have enough staying power (or coffee), you can fill your time until the early hours with one-off performances, public installations and free access to galleries. The main event at this year's Nuit Blanche, however, was visible right across the city, and maybe even from your hotel window after you crawled back for a couple of hours' sleep before breakfast. Ryoji Ikeda's *spectra (paris)*, situated at the base of the locally notorious Tour Montparnasse (the tallest building in France and a piece of early 1970s architecture so reviled by Parisians that they responded to it by passing a law forbidding the construction of any further tower blocks), consisted of 64 super-powerful architectural lamps arranged in an eight-by-eight grid, each pointing directly up into the sky. *spectra (paris)* was switched on at 7pm, just as dusk was falling, and stood strident over Paris, dwarfing the Tour Montparnasse and disappearing into cloud cover five kilometres above the city until it was switched off, bulb by bulb, twelve hours later at 7am.

Ikeda is something of a renegade and he doesn't slot easily into art-world conventions. He sees himself more as a composer and musician than an artist—indeed, his works and performances are often dominated by sound—but he is also obsessed by mathematics. Don't let this put you off, though. While Ikeda is dealing with some hefty mathematical theory in the processes from which his work is born, you certainly don't need to understand the maths to get the work. In fact, maths is something Ikeda resolutely believes should be left to the mathematicians.

I met him a few hours after *spectra*'s switch-off and, despite having had virtually no sleep, he is still exhilarated from the performance. For 'performance' seems the right word for *spectra (paris)*, a positively dynamic installation. The sixty-four narrow beam floodlights that create the visual part of *spectra (paris)* are set on plinths slightly lower than head height. This forms a vertical component—the 'y' coordinate if you like—of a three-dimensional graph, over which is placed a second grid, or 'x' coordinate, in sound. A composition of sine waves (pure sound) on an hour-long loop is emitted from speakers surrounding the grid of lights. As viewers enter and move about, they experience a unique combination of sound and light with each move they make, the position of their bodies in turn affecting the sounds that are experienced by other viewer/listeners. "The sound creates an invisible web and you change the form," Ikeda explains.

I ask him why the grid is so important to him, especially in this particular work. Why not have the light beams arranged in concentric circles, for example? But it's a no-brainer for Ikeda, for whom the grid is something almost instinctive, the "minimum system" and the only aesthetic solution. "A circle is not beautiful to me," he says. The grid is the perfect base component because it has a standard unit (four by four) that can be repeated infinitely. Infinity is central to the mathematical philosophy that powers Ikeda's art. Infinity and randomness; both concepts that our brains are unable to visualise but that mathematicians can express with numbers and equations. Ikeda likens the brain-flipping experience of trying to mentally conceive of infinity as like standing in the middle of a desert with nothing but horizon surrounding you 360 degrees. "You can't process it," he observes.

Review spectra (paris)

01, 02
Ryoji Ikeda, spectra (paris),
produced by Le Troisième Pôle,
co-produced by Forma,
commissioned as part of La Nuit
Blanche 2008 for the City of Paris.
Photography by Marc Damage



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02



01, 02

Ryoji Ikeda, *spectra III / line / a real number / a natural number*. Part of the exhibition *V#L*, commissioned and produced by Le Laboratoire. Photography by Marc Damage

spectra (paris) by Ryoji Ikeda was a Forma production, commissioned for *Nuit Blanche* by The City of Paris

V#L by Ryoji Ikeda is exhibited until 12 January 2009 at Le Laboratoire, 4 rue du Bouloi, Paris.

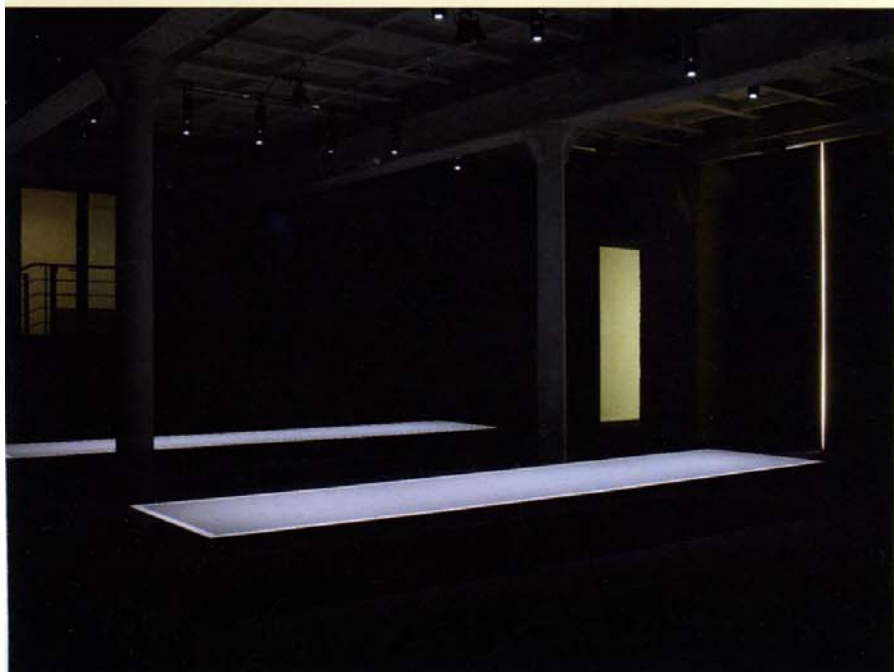
www.ryojiikeda.com
www.forma.org.uk
www.laboratoire.org

I had a similar feeling of awe as a viewer of *spectra (paris)*. Walking into the centre of the installation, sounds that are loud and almost jarring when you are beside the speakers coalesce into sonic serenity. Then you look skywards to see light streaming above you and fusing into a vanishing point. You feel like you are in a vortex or at point zero, your senses being channelled by the installation.

Grids provide a fixed basic structure on which something else can be expressed—they are the visual equivalent of the formula in mathematics, or the scale in music. "Music and mathematics," Ikeda says, "are brother and sister... Music is a variation of mathematics for me." Both maths and music indicate something primitive and emotional for the artist and they come together in his art through the act of composition. During *spectra (paris)* Ikeda had also been putting the finishing touches to an exhibition of his work at Le Laboratoire. The three new works in *V#L* are the result of a year-long conversation between Ikeda and Harvard mathematician Benedict Gross, who together share a sense of the beauty in maths ("When you discover a mathematical truth, everything immediately becomes clear. It's so easy to understand. You don't want to touch it," Gross has said. "The beauty of mathematics is just a pleasure to behold"). Included in *V#L* is a pair of one-by-five-metre photographic prints laid horizontally on stands 45cm from the floor. On one is printed a prime number, and on the other a real number, each consisting of over seven million digits. While the prints at a distance are a meaningless patina of ink, up close (we're talking your nose almost brushing the surface) single digits can be discerned, revealing the detail of the number and its breathtaking polarities of scale. This seems to encapsulate Ikeda's philosophy of beauty. While everything is reduced to its

minimum level—be it a single pixel, a sine wave or pure light—it meets its other extreme, the maximum, or infinite. "The infinite is very, very attractive to me," says Ikeda. "The biggest problem for mathematicians is infinity. Mathematicians believe that if we were to encounter a different civilisation, even though everything about it might be different, they must have the same maths." It is a bit like a space age, twenty-first-century version of the aesthetics of the sublime that inspired the British Romantics of the eighteenth century as they contemplated the awesome beauty of nature atop a mountain. But on a cosmic scale. "This is more than romantic," says Ikeda. "It's scary and exciting."

While I was inside *Spectra (Paris)* I found myself absorbed in people-watching—it was fascinating to see how visitors interacted with the installation. The nighttime crowds seemed compelled to interfere with the beams, putting hands, heads and items of clothing over the lamps to try to make their mark on the light (nothing so much as dented it). I also saw people using handmirrors to refract light, making spots play over the façade of the Tour Montparnasse and the block of flats adjacent. As a fine drizzle of rain began to fall, rainbow clouds appeared suspended a few metres above us. Also, perhaps unsurprisingly, there were an inordinate number of snogging couples (even for Paris). These visceral, spontaneous, human responses to the installation are just what excite Ikeda—they're the unpredictable side of maths that occurs where human randomness opens the story up as we viewers enter the narrative. "I don't like to explain the concept," Ikeda reveals. "The process is quite personal. The result is the end point for me, but for the viewer it is just the start..."



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