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The Infinite

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Ryoji Ikeda's The Transfinite, installed in New York's Park Avenue Armory (photo by James Ewing; image courtesy of Park Avenue Armory)

I AM A PARTISAN for music, completely in agreement with Walter Pater's statement that "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." The practice of making art means working with an accumulation of knowledge, created by the all the works and ideas that came before. Making a new work adds, ideally, to that knowledge, even if incrementally, and while that idea may be but a niche, it's still an addition.

The creative drive in making new art has to face an inevitable choice, which is how to deal with abstraction. Landscape painting, narrative dance and genre storytelling all are fields that have to face this issue; does the new work reflect the knowledge of its tradition, refine it, return a well-crafted example or some slight variation? Or does the new work abandon representation for abstraction?

Music has the inherent advantage of being physically ineffable, existing as the movement of waves through time. What is the image of that wave, the story of that note? Once music leaves words and the meaning of spoken and written languages behind and becomes about how one

chord or note leads to the next, how time is defined by a series of patterned events that briefly illuminate it, then the pieces are fundamentally and entirely abstract. And yet we respond to this art with an emotional complexity and power that have no rivals. It's not an accident that the experience of something so overwhelming that it swamps the boundaries of other forms is usually called "operatic."

We've had less than a century of abstraction in the other arts, but many hundreds of years of it in music. And while the music of 30,000 years ago surely had a narrative component, it just as surely had the component of people making pitch and rhythm together for pure aesthetic and social pleasure. How long it took for culture to move from that experience to one of audiences gathering to listen to musicians play is irrelevant; it is the next logical step and has been going on for millenia.

How long have we had artists working with music? I don't mean the special pleading for what has come to be called "time-based art," a phrase that says nothing informative and denatures the visceral power and great humanity of the involving, dramatic creations of artists like Marina Abramovic. I mean artists who use music as the material for their art - different from composers who create a piece of music as their ends. I've come to think, after seeing the wonderful Whitney Museum show of the work of Christian Marclay, that these are media artists, because they work on a spectrum of materials but seek, ultimately, to create music.

One of the major media artists is Ryoji Ikeda, who has produced a brilliant and enthrallingly beautiful installation in the 55,000 square foot Wade Thompson Drill Hall at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City. This is a work that is music in every way, making things we think of as solid into a fluid, awesome structure. It is a concept manifested in physical form and that conveys itself through the vague materiality of time.

The work is called *The Transfinite*, and it is both microscopic and macroscopic. I've written here previously about music as both the medium and the message, as information and, at the same time, as a means to convey information. Ikeda is doing this in *The Transfinite* with the added layers of having it as his subject and also as his material. He is a composer working with information, a sculptor working with sound, a computer scientist making films.

The Transfinite can be thought of as a representation of a particular, pervasive type of information: data. The work has two visual aspects set up like sides of a coin. Inside the entrance, a perpendicular set of screens shows a flow of black and white lines, that change in width and, synchronized to music, pause at times. On the back of the vertical screen, there is projection of strings of text and numbers, while laid out on the floor is a straight line of television sized screens, facing up, that show details like numbers, and images that look like

star charts, with points of light plotted on a grid, or rotating galaxies, or networks of synapse-like forms, or changing vanishing points defined by moving planes. All the images are resolutely simple, sharply defined representations of the flow of binary, digital data through . . . networks? The world? Our minds?

Ikeda's music is looping, based on digital sounds; chiming, thumping, short, all resonant, all pleasing. The space between the notes and the size of the installation, despite the vertiginous visual quality, is immediately and profoundly restful. The music and the visual display, especially on some of the smaller screens, is beautiful, and the overall effect of the work is so powerful and so transparent that it requires no understanding. It grasps us and completely involves us. It is all, completely, music. The visual aspect has a specific rhythm, pulse and pace, that is easy to see, but it's music because it is about time, and time is its true medium. In *The Transfinite*, data moves from one point to the next, not disappearing but replaced in our attention by something else in the moment, and we feel the impression of it both flowing and accumulating, as the experience mounts in us through time. Just as themes and harmonies and states - all information - build in a Beethoven symphony, so do pieces of information build in *The Transfinite*. And as a symphony exists in a larger stream of time - the music that came before and will come after - so does *The Transfinite* exist in the larger stream of human experience, the ever-growing accumulation of ideas and experiences.

But the ineffable and profound quality of Ikeda's piece is that it hints at something far greater, at the accumulation and flow of information through a universe that has existed far longer than we can comprehend and that will exist even longer past our deaths. It has physical and temporal limits, but at its core it acknowledges the infinite depths and reaches that we might find if we try and reach its center, or find its outer limit. Experiencing this work places us outside of time and makes the apprehension of what might be terrifying quite gentle and humane. And that is the best thing of all about music.