Enigmatic Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda (http://www.ryojiikeda.com) is one of the most popular artists of the moment, but he is also one of the most difficult artists to contextualise. His cross-disciplinary practice inhabits an ambiguous territory that traverses the mediums of film, sound, installation, and performance. He does refer to himself as a “composer,” but the more one delves in the mysterious depths of his practice the more one realises that the definition of “composer,” in the context of Ikeda’s practice, is not clear cut. A case in point is Ikeda’s epic sound and light installation “Test Pattern [No 5]” (http://www.carriageworks.com.au/?page=Event&event=Ryoji-Ikeda-test-pattern-No-5-installation), currently on show at Sydney’s Carriageworks (http://www.carriageworks.com.au/?page=Event&event=Ryoji-Ikeda-test-pattern-No-5-installation) until July 1. The “Test Pattern [No 5]” experience features a 30 by 10 metre illuminated platform screening data-driven animations in synchronisation with an all-encompassing soundtrack.

The composition of the “Test Pattern [No 5]” installation would suggest that Ikeda is a multimedia artist; that is until one takes into consideration the fact that the “Test Pattern” soundtrack is available for purchase as an audio cd (http://www.ryojiikeda.com/archive/recordings/). So that makes him a musician and a composer who incorporates visual elements into his work, right? Well, not quite. You see his music is not exactly what you would call mainstream – it’s actually not music at all, not in the traditional sense at least. Ryoji describes his sound compositions as “source code transformed into an audible medium” and “high-frequency raw data.” And that is precisely what his sound compositions are, a rhythmic and pulsating arrangement of different tones.
The fact that the sound component of his practice can exist independently of the other components of his practice is evidence that he is primarily interested in the creation sound. And if “Test Pattern [No 5]” was the only piece by Riyoji that one had experienced, this would be a logical conclusion to reach. But then what about the visual elements of his work? Are they a crucial component of his practice? The answer is yes, they are, but to varying degrees. With “Test Pattern [No 5]” the visual and audio components complement each other, but the audio component is more dominant. The opposite is the case with the artist’s “data.matrix [n°1-10]” (http://www.ryojiikeda.com/project/datamatics/), which is currently on show at Tasmania’s Museum of Old and New Art (http://www.darkmofo.net.au/program/beam-in-thine-own-eye/ryoji-ikeda/) (MONA) as part of the group exhibition “The Red Queen. (http://www.darkmofo.net.au/program/beam-in-thine-own-eye/ryoji-ikeda/)” With “data.matrix [n°1-10]” the visual element is much more pronounced with the imagery featured in the installation shown on vertical screens movie-theatre style.

What differentiates “data.matrix [n°1-10]” from “Test Pattern [No 5]” is the content of the visual component of each work. Whereas the visual element of “Test Pattern [No 5]” consists purely of flickering black and white bands, the visual component of “data.matrix [n°1-10]” also features recognisable imagery in the form of numbers, words, shapes, and patterns, which are more engaging and distracting than pulses of black and white. The sound is still a significant element of “data.matrix [n°1-10],” but the sound is more of a backing track rather than the primary element of the installation, unlike “Test Pattern [No 5].”

The contextualisation of Ikeda’s practice is complicated even further when his work “Spectra” (http://www.ryojiikeda.com/project/spectra/) is brought into the conversation. A version of “Spectra” was developed by Ikeda especially for MONA museum in Tasmania as part of “Beam In Thine Own Eye.” Described by Ikeda as an installation that employs “intense white light as a sculptural material,” the MONA version of “Spectra” featured 49 search lights beaming a 15km tower of light into the sky. But what most people didn’t realise, until they experienced “Spectra” for themselves, is that there is a sound component to the work which can only be experienced at the source of the light, the “ground zero” if you like. This presumably means that the sound component is insignificant, right? Well, actually, when the work is experienced in its entirety, the sound component actually challenges the status of the visual component to the point that the experience of the beam of light as a separate entity away from the “ground zero” becomes far less effectual after experiencing the sound and visual elements as a complete entity.

This is an important concept when it comes to understanding Ikeda’s practice because it hints at a situation where each work of art that he produces is in fact able to be experienced and understood in various different ways, none of which is necessarily “right” or “correct.” In a sense his work adapts to the context in which it is experienced.

Ikeda himself is as much of a mystery as his work. He is an enigmatic figure who rarely grants interviews and refuses to be filmed or photographed. But when he does speak about his work he reveals himself to be an incredibly intuitive and eloquent individual, as well as an amazingly inventive artist. As previously mentioned, Ikeda describes himself primarily as a composer. “The key is the composition,” he says. “I am a composer.” But he is not a composer in the traditional musical sense. “I compose visual elements, sounds, colours, intensities, and data,” he explains. “I love to compose; I love to orchestrate all these things into one single art form – sometimes as a concert, sometimes as an installation, sometimes as public art, sometimes as film.” Further adding to the clarification of his creative role is his likening of his practice to playing and cooking. “I’m just playing, cooking with many different materials,” he says when asked to describe his creative process.

The identification of Ikeda as a multidisciplinary composer is perhaps the easy part of contextualising his practice. Things become a bit more difficult when it comes to categorising his individual projects. Ikeda does, however, inject a significant level of clarity into the situation when he describes his relationship with the mathematical and the physical. As well as describing himself as being obsessed with pure mathematics and revealing that he dialogues with many different kinds of scientists and mathematicians, Ikeda also explains that when he makes something, it is based on the mathematical principles. “I always start from that point,” he says. The real revelation, however, comes when Ikeda states that “when you make music, in the extreme sense, you don’t need sound, because it is a mathematical structure.” Further expounding on this concept, Ikeda explains that: “when you listen to the music of Mozart, the composition is the relationship between the notes – and of course it will have a score, but you don’t need the sound. Sound is a property of the physical world, the vibration of air, and you have to know the characteristic of that sound itself. So physics is that part, and mathematics is very much the composition.”

Ikeda’s explanation of the way he conceptualises the physical and the mathematical goes a long way towards defining the product of his practice – but not far enough to allow a concrete conclusion to be reached. However, this state of flux is, in essence, the definition of the product of his practice; the status of the product of his artistic practice can be explained by this state of flux. It is perhaps for this reason that Ikeda is able to present slightly different versions of the same project so successfully – but that is another article in itself. At the risk of over-analysing Ikeda’s work it is perhaps best to stop here and end with a quote from the artist: “When you go to a concert you never ask ‘what is the meaning of this melody,’ you just enjoy it – then you can think afterwards.”
“Test Pattern [No 5]” is at Carriageworks in Sydney until July 1. For more information visit the Carriageworks website here (http://www.carriageworks.com.au/?page=Event&event=Ryoji-Ikeda-test-pattern-5-installation). “data.matrix [nº1-10]” is at MONA until April 21, 2014. For more information visit the MONA website here (http://www.mona.net.au/what%27s-on/exhibitions/).