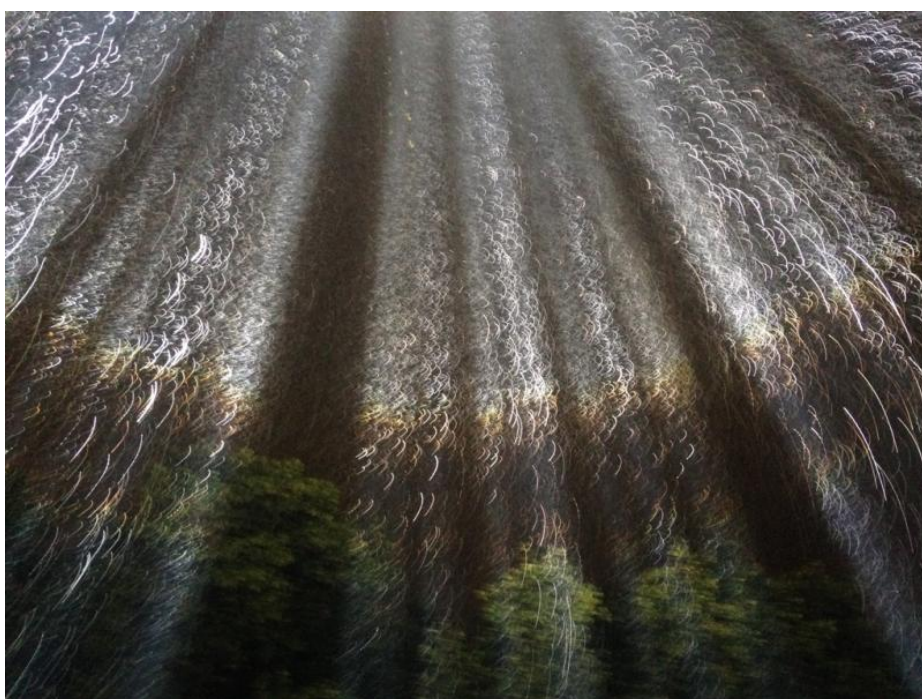


## Ryoji Ikeda: spectra, Victoria Tower Gardens

It's not a UFO – it's the most extraordinary artwork in London

by [Peter Culshaw](#) | Saturday, 09 August 2014

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Beams of light in the summer rain

*Peter Culshaw*

The extraordinary beams of light shooting miles into the air from Victoria Tower Gardens may be the most viewed piece of conceptual art ever. *Spectra*, visible from high points miles away like Primrose Hill, is the extraordinary work of Paris-based artist and composer Ryoji Ikeda, and is produced by art facilitators Artangel.

For 20 years or so, Artangel have been doing – what? Struggling to describe what they do in a few words the best I can say is that they are “purveyors of magic.” They create unusual, often poetic experiences that lift us from the mundane, from Rachel Whiteread’s inside-out house and Roger Hiorn’s crystalline blue flat, to [Michael Landy](#) destroying his possessions and [Heiner Goebbels](#)’ strange music and evocative installation. Funded by the National Lottery and the Heritage Lottery Fund and commissioned by the Mayor of London and 14-18 NOW (First World War Centenary Art Commissions) *Spectra* is one of their most ambitious and evocative productions.

Ikeda’s piece has already been seen in other countries, but the resonance of [switching it on as the lights went out](#) to commemorate the start of World War I gave the piece added gravitas a century after British foreign secretary Edward Grey famously remarked, “The lamps are going out all over Europe – we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”

From afar, it could be mistaken for a UFO. Even up close there is a sense of *Close Encounters* wonder. If you go to Victoria Park Gardens (which I urge you to do in the next couple of nights) the monumental nature of the piece dissolves into an organic, living light sculpture and you can walk among the 49 beams that create the piece and listen to the electronic pulses of Ikeda’s minimal music accompanied by the low hum of the lights; the repeating patterns of the music and subtly changing lights induce a meditative effect. Some visitors have spent hours watching the piece, even bringing picnics. I was reminded of Kubrick’s 2001 which was far removed from Paris in a small cinema, with many of the

“The beams made the raindrops white as though snow was falling in the middle of summer”

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2007, which ran for several years in Paris in a small cinema, with many of the audience on hallucinogens.

The piece changes with the weather. On Tuesday you could see thousands of insects illuminated in the beams like flickering silver, evocative of the lost souls of the Great War. Last night I went again in the pouring rain and it was extraordinary as the beams made the raindrops white, as though snow was falling in the middle of summer and the light induced a spectacular rainbow. Scores of people with umbrellas wondered among the beams.

The power of the piece is partly due to the convergence of the 49 beams. The number 49 has a resonance in many spiritual traditions – in Tibetan Buddhism, the soul is supposed to spend 49 days in the *bardo* state between existences; the Virgin Mary was by legend 49 years old when her son ascended to heaven; and for mystics like Boehme the number 49 represented, as the square of 7, the number of Paradise.

In one of the most depressing weeks for news in years – ISIS, Ukraine, Gaza, Ebola, a real clusterfuck of awfulness - *Spectra* reminds us there are other realities and even utopian possibilities and dreams of unity, if only for a few fleeting hours.

- [Spectra continues until 11 August](#)

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