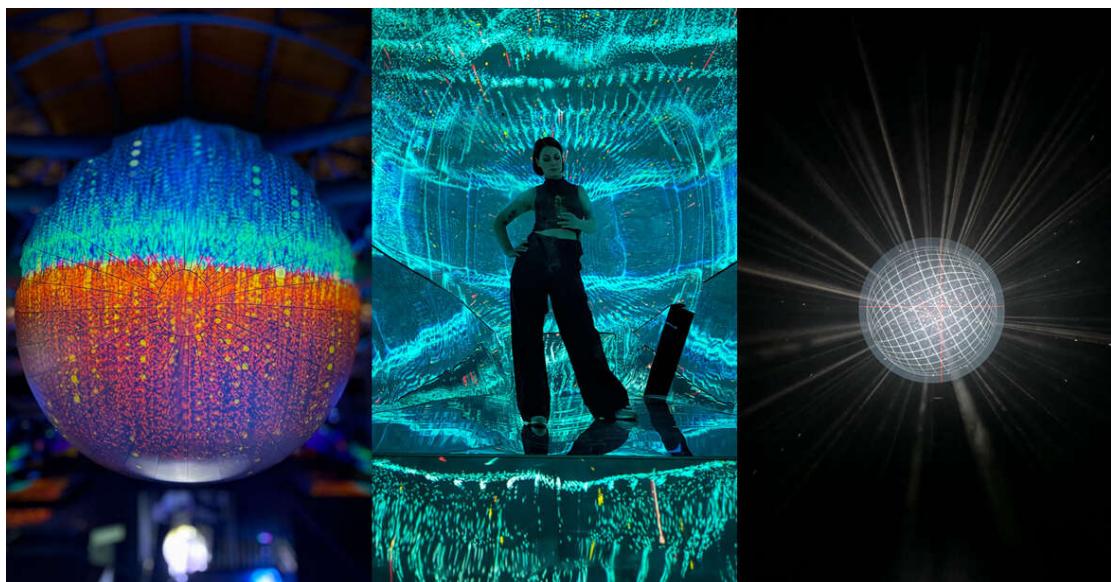


## “THIS IS AN UPLIFTING EXHIBITION” – WE WENT TO SEE THE NEW LAM EXHIBITION

PHANTOM VISION TAKES YOU TO THE DEEPEST REALMS OF YOUR DREAMS AND BRAIN ACTIVITY

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After wandering around the museum for nearly four hours and finally returning to the real world, I realise that “I should have been somewhere else an hour and a half ago”. It had already got dark outside, and I lost my sense of time somewhere around the second exhibit. Who would have thought I was capable of staring at a drop of water for several minutes on end? Or not be able to stop staring at a video installation even though I was repelled by it? But neither of these are surprising after the Light Art Museum’s new exhibition, *Phantom Vision*: a show that’s a perfect interplay between the spectacular and the scientific.

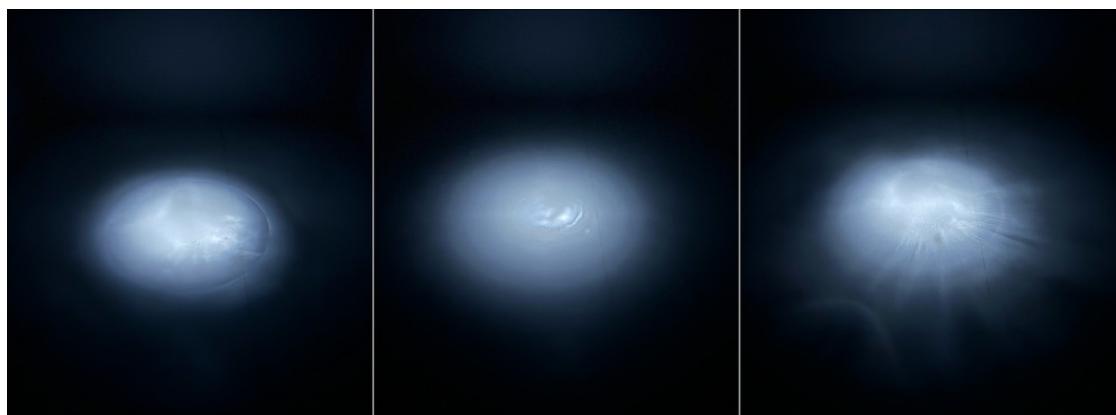
**Adrienn Csepelyi reports.**

“Well?” asks Barnabás Bencsik, the curator of the exhibition.

“It’s a drop of light,” I say as I stand mesmerised.

“It’s a drop of water. But it’s behaving differently again. This is crazy.”

I have no idea how it’s behaving differently and compared to what, but in any case I stare with my mouth open as the drop of water makes a drawing on the ground at given intervals and I try to work out how it gets there when it actually doesn’t. I mean, where does it go at all? The good news is that the curator and Szabolcs Vida, the head of the programme, are just as enthusiastic. They can’t get enough of the exhibitions even though they know the ‘solutions’.



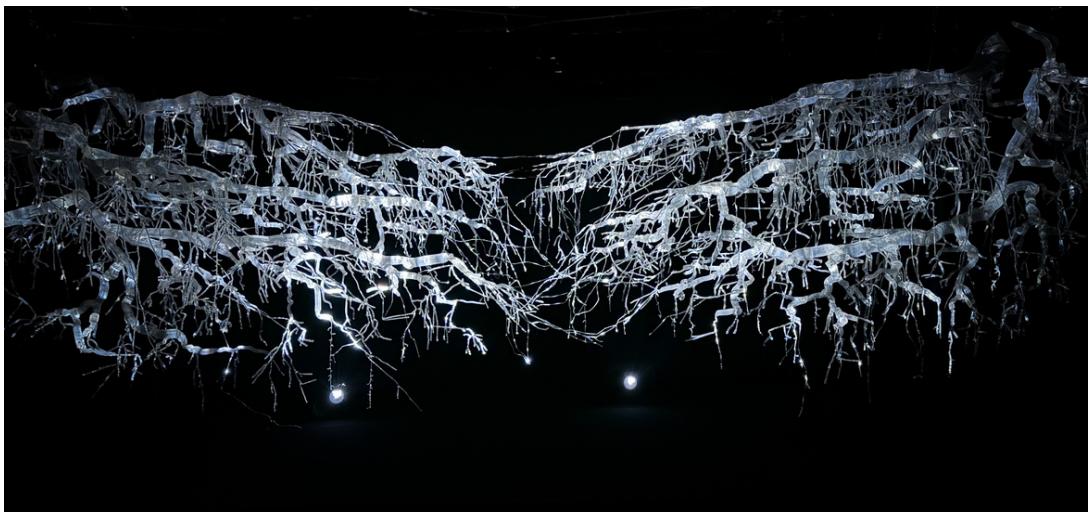
“This is an infusion,” says Barnabás coming to my aid. “The drop of water is illuminated, and it becomes an optic lens in the moment of dropping but by that time it has already dropped. Can you see? What you can see here below is happening up here.”

We’ve been standing in front of Yasuhiro Chida’s exhibition, *0.04* for who knows how long. The Japanese artist doesn’t have to go next door for a bit of Zen Buddhism and, luckily, we only have to go as far as Hold Street. We’ve come to LAM’s third temporary exhibition, *Phantom Vision* and, so far, it’s the most meditative one. For visitors like us, entering the museum space is like a break from reality, a kind of rite. But what does it feel like to work here? “*That’s an interesting question,*” Szabolcs Vida muses. “*I spend a lot of time in the exhibition spaces, and I try to see things through the eyes of a visitor, completely surrendering myself to the experience, as if I was seeing everything for the first time. I also observe what reactions the visitors have and how they move in the space, what captivates them and how they behave.*”

*In the exhibition, Phantom Vision, there really are a lot of works that exude a Zen effect and serenity, or they slow people down, making them more observant of the outside world. This is truly an inspiring exhibition.”*

### **Spending time with the exhibits**

We're standing in front of Dutch artist Thijs Biersteker's installation: a throbbing root system. It's exactly what I saw back in the day under a microscope during my biology lessons, except that it's 'a bit' bigger: it fills an entire room.



*“This here is the root system of two trees, a work based on serious scientific research,”* points out Barna Bencsik. *“In recent years, we’ve read and heard lots of different things about how trees communicate with each other using thread-like structures called mycelia. This work models that process. What you see is a 3D print of the 3D-scanned roots of two specific, existing trees, made using PET plastic bottles fished out of the sea. The whole installation has an incredibly powerful ambiance, which draws people in as they start watching these tiny particles move. As the work casts a shadow, it creates the impression that we’re in a forest.*

*This whole thing exudes an atmosphere that generates a kind of introspection, a feeling of calm and a desire to observe ourselves. We start to focus on the installations. And we spend time with them.”*

Barna Bencsik's tone now turns a bit more personal: *“I first saw this work in the size of a postage stamp. Even then, I felt that this was the direction we’d like to go in. And that’s when*

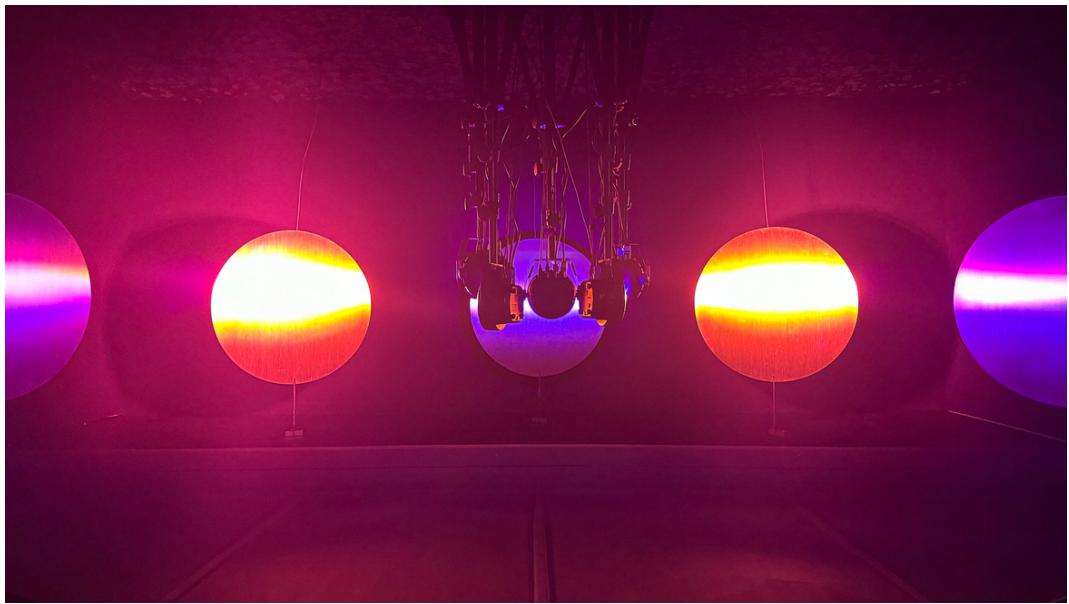
*we began to ‘investigate’: we tried to find out who made this installation, when and under what conditions we can obtain it, and what we need to do to fit it into the available space and to allow it to create the effect exactly as the artist intended. And it feels great when you finally turn a thumbnail into reality.”*

This really is a huge challenge because, there is hardly any documentation about works due to their very nature, and a lot depends on the curator’s power of imagination or, if you like, on his/her intuition. *“We mostly find short Insta Reels and a few small photos with descriptions, but it can virtually never be perceived in advance what happens to a work in its own time, how it works and with what kind of effects or sounds. At most, we can only guess if a chosen work will really be what we need here and whether or not it will reinforce the previously selected other work(s) rather than cancel it (them) out.”*

And there’s still the practical part: *“This one just about fit in here, it all depended on five centimetres. It’s also an indispensable factor that we provide the technology for what the artists envision. For example, these two projectors. I’m not even going to say how much they cost. But they were horrendously expensive,”* says Szabolcs Vida, and judging from the not quite genuine smile on his face, I can just about imagine. *“What else could we have done? The artist insisted on it and wasn’t interested in the alternatives we suggested. In the end, he was right because it only works with this technology. Properly so.”*

### **Brand building and education**

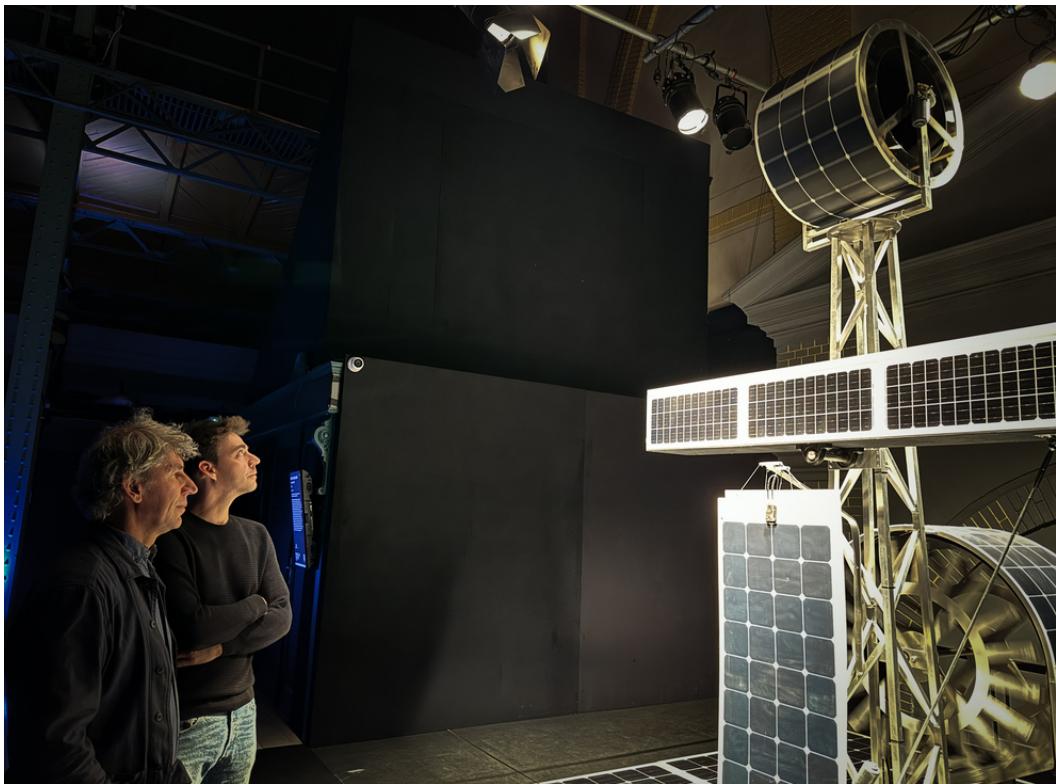
Seventy percent of visitors to LAM are Hungarian, which proves that the Hungarian public are curious about the fine arts and about the world that has come into being through the triad of technology, science and art. *“A great many school groups visit us,”* says Szabolcs Vida. *“Barna and I are running a course at MOME and in the first lesson we had a discussion with the students, and many of them said that the main reason they enrolled was because they knew that they would be »using« the Light Art Museum during the lessons.”*



It's a serious challenge for a new institution to put itself on the map, especially in the incredibly lively and exciting area of immersive exhibitions. What's more, all three of us agree that there's a lot of scepticism about all this. Let's admit it, there is a good reason for this: almost all of us have been to an "immersive" exhibition that had nothing but cheap projections of paintings providing a background for spectacular selfies but not really focusing on transferring values.

***"The immersive experience draws in audiences," says Barna Bencsik, but one must be very careful from a professional perspective and make sure not to go in the direction of empty spectacles dazzling people with light games. The challenge is to strike a balance between the two.***

*There's a great deal of energy as well as huge amounts of money, technology, knowledge and apparatus in the world, thus in Hungary too, enabling us to create ever more wonderful spectacles using more and more professional technology. But since I and my colleague – curator Borbála Szalai, who manages the Trafó Gallery – both come from a contemporary, autonomous art and museum background, it's crucial for us that our exhibitions have meaning and that they're relevant. What visitors encounter here has the same effect as those hyped-up but questionable and superficial shows that act as magnets to huge crowds."*



*“What ultimately counts is the experience people get upon entering here, and the overall impression they leave with,”* says Szabolcs Vida. *“From the feedback, we can tell that visitors make a break with the outside world and get completely immersed in our exhibition: for a while they can exist in an incredibly enjoyable ‘bubble’.”* Neither Bencsik, nor Vida see social media as a necessary evil; in fact, they see it as an opportunity for people to share their experience and show that contemporary art can be a great photo op.

Szabolcs Vida regards the expansion of general knowledge as an outstandingly important aim: *“We provide thorough, in-depth descriptions for every installation and even more information on our web page. We provide a huge amount of supplementary material, ranging from the exhibition catalogue to the videos made by the artists and the curators, so there’s a wide range of resources available to those visitors who would like to immerse themselves even more in this world. And we also have educational programmes: we devote a great deal of energy to organising events, conferences and lessons for people of all ages, and from school children to university students and even professionals.”*

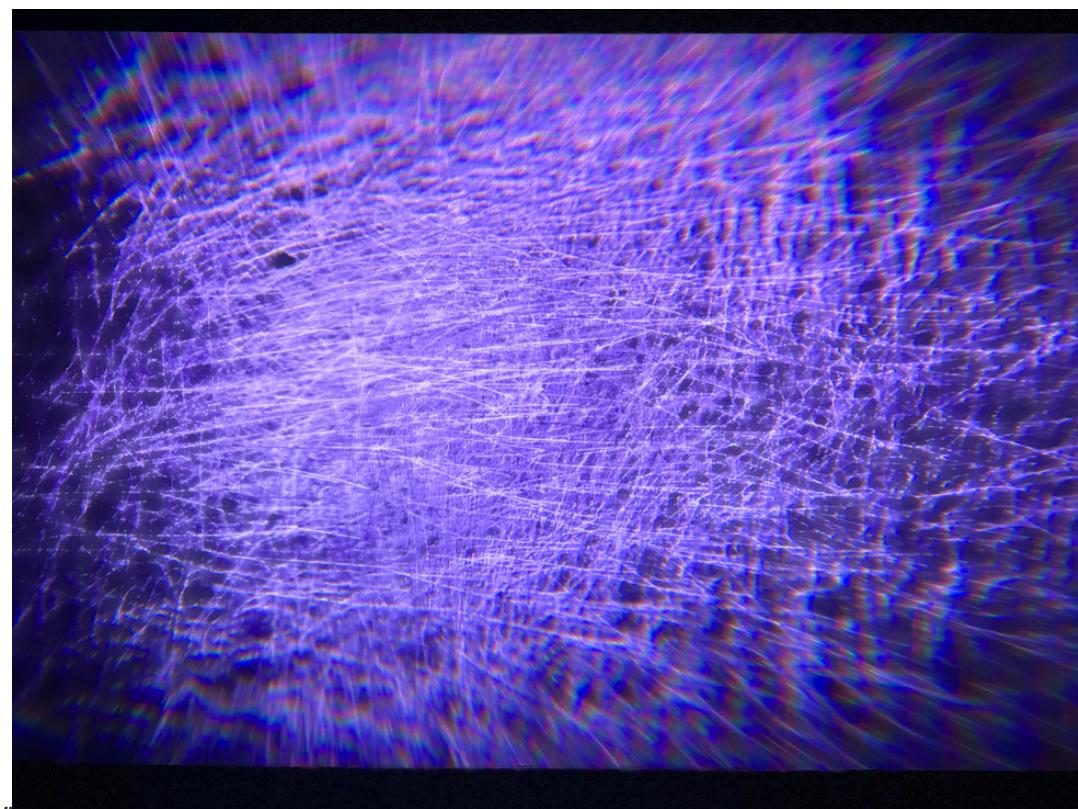
*I hope that our exhibition will also appeal to the sort of visitor who might normally be a bit hesitant about visiting a contemporary museum of fine arts but will very soon find out that art is not an inaccessible ivory tower but something that everybody can enjoy."*

### **Artists from two worlds**

LAM accommodates a symbiosis of two completely different 'ecosystems': the contemporary art scene with museums, galleries and private collectors, and the applied arts creating the visual world and background for large-scale productions of the creative industry. Two completely different modi operandi, but this type of museum is a blessing for both:

**the artists receive a platform and a stable income, while the players of the creative industry become part of an institutionalised canonisation process, which is what most of them in this sector dream about.**

"Well, harmonising these is a serious managerial task," says Szabolcs Vida smiling, "and it means attracting big names from both worlds and all the incidental expenses, not to mention transport and insurance."



“LAM operates in the listed building of the former market hall on Hold Street, which the management believes is a lucky situation but also one with constraints since no demolition is allowed. Moreover, light art installations need to be properly separated from one another, since works emanating light can interfere with each other. The box-like stalls of the former market hall are perfect for this.

There are many site-specific installations, but Szabolcs Vida says that it is a peculiarity of this genre that works sometimes have to be adapted to a given situation and a given place. *“New artworks are very often made for LAM, and the Light Art Museum usually supports this with production support. If you like, we vitalise the Hungarian fine arts sphere and help to create new works which, in the end, either remain in the ownership of the artist or find their way to our collection, which we are continually building. I think it’s quite something that two hundred thousand people visited our first two exhibitions. An artist who wants to say something is happy to have an audience.”*

### **For 18+ only**

At the entrance, I am given a little yellow card stating that I am over 18. A code on the card allows visitors to view John Rafman’s video installation in a room with a soft carpet and chairs designed by the artist and resembling BDSM culture. Within a few minutes, I begin to realise that what I am experiencing here is M, which stands for masochism, since I can’t stop watching. At least, now I also know the scientific explanation for it:

*“This work is called Dream Journal,” explains Barnabás Bencsik, and I notice in the corner of my eye how both of them are observing me, curious to discover how I’ll react to what I see. “Rafman worked on his project for several years. After waking up, he didn’t write notes in a diary, but instead immediately got down to making games about things in his dreams using algorithms. He created an epic which had the same dramaturgy as dreams, while addressing all of the topical problems people are preoccupied with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He used the same mythology, logic and dopamine release regulation algorithm that video games are based on.*

***It is one of his big revelations - and a warning from him - that gamers who spend so much time in a virtual world that it becomes just as real for them as physical reality***

***are in effect addicted to algorithms since these games are optimised to raise dopamine levels, and all of this is created by software engineers.”***

*Dream Journal* shows us all our nightmares presented through the visual language of the 2010s: suppressed, deeply-seated violence in our souls, psychotropic substances, cyborgs, human-animal hybrids, natural catastrophes... Something is always happening, something weird is always cropping up, each scene carries you on. In just a few minutes, I fully understand why there is an 18+ restriction.

### **Dreams before the days of the Internet**

For a bit of respite, my hosts guide me into another dream world: Fuse studio had an immersive installation in LAM’s previous exhibition, *Superluminal*. “They always use an extensive database and a very scientific apparatus. A dream research centre has been working for decades in Bologna and Santa Cruz in close collaboration with the universities there, gathering data in a clinical environment. This work by Fuse is based on their research during which the REM, i.e. the deep phase of sleep is studied. It is known about every single catalogued dream how long it lasted, how much time after waking the subject related their dream, when it was recorded and if the subject was a man or a woman. This substantial database was fed into the AI software called Stable Diffusion, which transforms the texts into images.”

***It took months to produce this visual world. If you think about it, this is extremely interesting because if you want to describe your dreams to somebody, you have to verbalise them and the person listening transforms your words into images. So they don't see your images but their own. In this case, however, AI relates people's dreams using everybody's images.***

*If you spend half an hour here you can easily start dreaming like artificial intelligence. This work is especially exciting in comparison with Rafman's since the dreams are from pre-Internet days with the last one dating from the mid- to late 1990s.*

### **Top notch analogue technology**

“So can you see what this is all about?” asks Barna Bencsik after we sit down by Yasuhiro Chida’s other installation, *Analemma*, which is a dense web of thread.



“I’m trying to work it out. Something is moving but then it seems like it isn’t.”

“Well, something is moving,” laughs the curator but he waits for me to work this one out for myself. (I’m not going to tell you: you should go and see for yourselves).

“But what are these, synapses?” I ask.

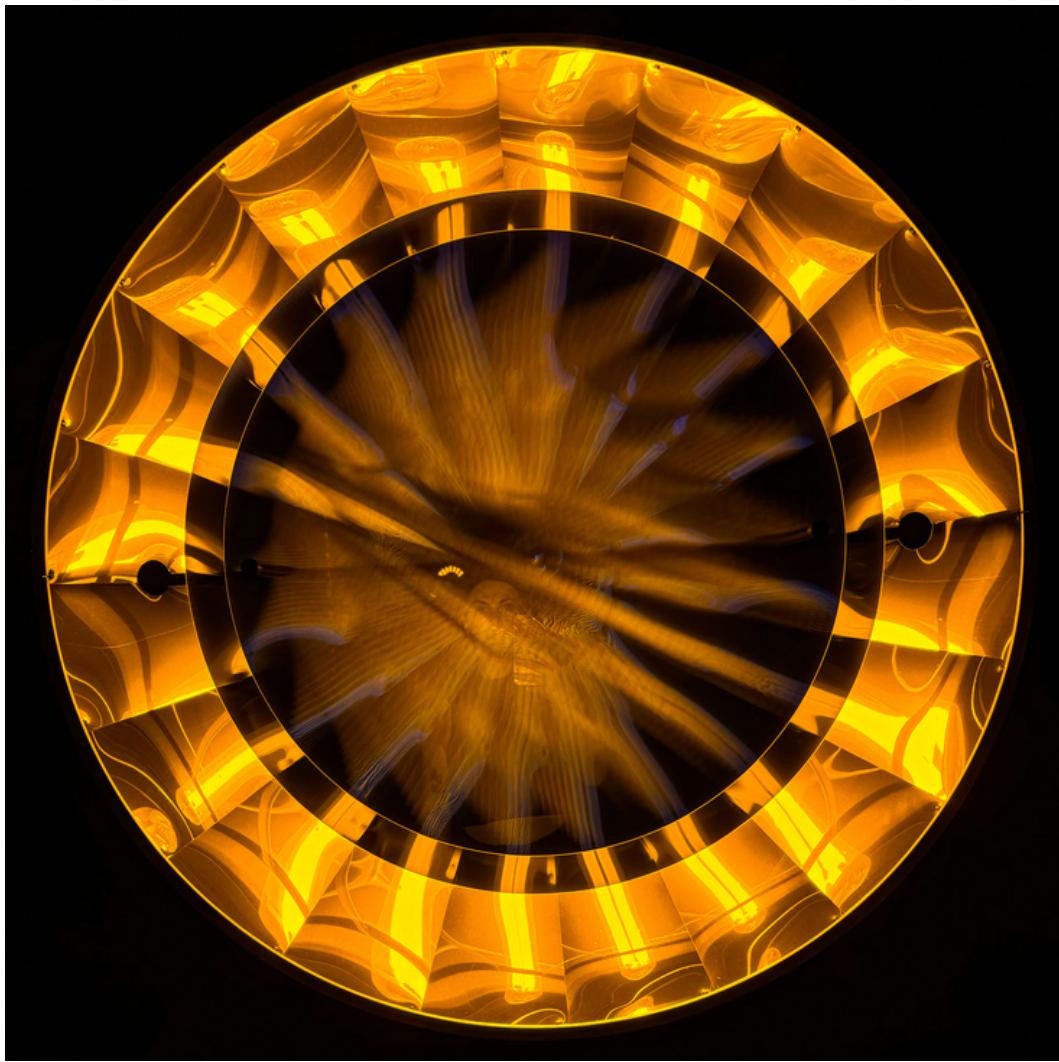
“Well, they could be just that, yes. Your neural pathways.”

“Err, I think mine are a bit more chaotic,” I say as I burst out laughing.

**“More than this? Just think of this: the wiring you see here took the artist and his two assistants a week to build. And they worked according to the time in Japan so that the time difference wouldn’t disturb their biorhythm.”**

This installation might not be affecting my biorhythm, but it is certainly confusing my sense of reality: I go back three times to spend time in the installation and I just can’t get bored of it.

Barna Bencsik feels the same about the artist’s other work – “the droplets” – which contain the entire ocean. In other words, the entire essence of the exhibition.



On making my farewells, I find myself standing by the greatest sensation of the exhibition, Ólafur Elíasson's *Eye See You*, the inclusion of which in this exhibition is an enormous international achievement since the Danish-Icelandic artist is presently one of the biggest names.

**I virtually feel compelled to take a photograph of myself in Eliasson's eye: it's all but magical that I can see myself in a giant iris because of the special combination of lights and materials.**

The golden yellow colour of the photo I took almost warms me up. I can still see it in my mind's eye on the trolley bus on the way home and I am trying to return to reality. But then I realise: why would I? Tonight, I'll dream about something peculiar and colourful.

**Adrienn Csepelyi**

*The images are owned by the writer.*