

## THE VITALITY OF SPACES: SASAKI

Lines just one centimeter high stretch from one corner of a building to another. Each is drawn in deep red color as it follows the rhythm of different people's heartbeats. While the heartbeat works I have addressed so far are based on individuals, Sasaki focuses on multitudes. Born in Akita, in 1964, the Japanese artist has made heartbeat drawings his life's activity. He began this "life work" drawn by his fascination with the behavior of vast crowds as he realized that it was literally the heart and heartbeats that make cities alive:

I was inspired to start drawing heartbeats after traveling to Shanghai in 1995. I saw the old China. Thousands of people were walking on the streets and rushing from one place to another. While I was in the middle of all these people, I could feel their energy and also their heartbeats. I could feel how humans are eager to be alive. Everything starts from the heartbeat. In fact, when we are in our mother's wombs, our hearts are the first organs to form, even before the brain. The heartbeat is the most radical source of humans. This is my perception.<sup>14</sup>

Since then, Sasaki has been painstakingly and obsessively recording his own heartbeats and those of hundreds of other people, marking each one in small wavy lines in an ink of a color he has called "heartbeat red." The artist chose the carmine tone not only for its association with blood but also for its vibrant and striking energy: "Some say it looks scary while others say it is powerful."<sup>15</sup>

Using similar optical effects to Heinz Mack, Sasaki applies his red paint on canvases or in installations guided by his perceptions of sonic vibrations. On some occasions he uses pulse sensors but on others he simply concentrates on feeling his own heart beating. For his durational action paintings, just as Mack did decades before, he wears a silver suit because of its ability to reflect everything around him: "Silver isn't a color, it's just a reflection. If I draw a heartbeat, my mind is almost like a zero, because I have to concentrate on the sound."<sup>16</sup>

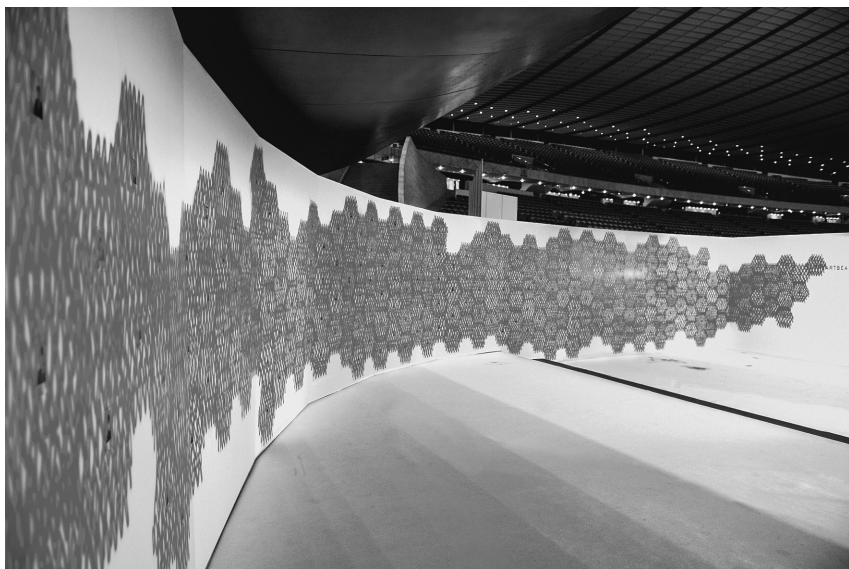
The introspective character of heartbeats has inspired many Japanese artists. Take Seiko Mikami as an example.<sup>17</sup> Her various heartbeat works include her renowned interactive installation *World, Membrane and the*

*Dismembered Body* (1998) in which she amplified the sound of the heart and other bodily rhythms in an anechoic chamber. Another artist is Yoko Ono, whose heartbeat works will be addressed in chapter 7, and Chiharu Shiota, who has included heartbeats in her videos and immersive installations of vein-like webs. What distinguishes Sasaki's portrayals, however, is the twenty years he has spent in the exclusive, repetitive, and persistent use of the vital sign as a drawing subject. The artist documents all the heartbeats that he has drawn; according to the most recent count on his website, this amounts to over twenty-six million heartbeats.<sup>18</sup> His work has an obsessive and serial component reminiscent of On Kawara as it moves from a portrait to an account (as, literally, an accounting). For Sasaki the repetitive and continuous act of drawing heartbeats leads to a meditative state:

It is like meditation for me too. There are some moments when I am not thinking about anything. There is a sense of openness or joy. Drawing heartbeats is really similar to our lives. There's not much time when I can feel good. Most of the time I feel tired or uncomfortable. But I have a purpose to draw and some physical or mental pain is expected. I draw everyday so my body is used to it just like a marathon runner can run for a long distance.<sup>19</sup>

Sasaki uses the repetitive rhythm of the heartbeat, which he associates with minimalist music, as a meditative act. He believes that it helps him reflect not only on his own life but also on the lives of the many others that surround him. "The meditative state of mind can be the state of nothingness," Sasaki said. "I feel that this state creates 'a pure relationship between the inner and outer world,' and I think that is very meaningful."<sup>20</sup>

As curator Mami Kataoka has noted, although Sasaki's drawings of the heartbeats of thousands of people can sound simplistic, this is far from the case.<sup>21</sup> Within the context of today's society in which wars, pandemics, climate change, and the neoliberal socioeconomic system and its weak health systems in many parts of the world, constantly remind us that simply to "continue living" is a challenge, life itself has become a concern that needs to be recognized, valued, and confronted. Through his art, Sasaki reminds us that the continuous line drawn by our hearts is what sustains our individual and collective existence.



Sasaki's linear durational drawings represent the stream of life that never ceases, flowing from one body to another. With simply a continuous trace of peaks and valleys and the sound of a pen as evidence, Sasaki's paintings depict an unending flow of blood that represents life and time passing. By drawing on the systolic and diastolic movements of the heart, his work is irretrievably related to the temporal, to the organ that gives our lives meaning. All of Sasaki's durational drawings have titles and use processes that engage units of time. For his *In a Day* (2011) series, the artist drew lines throughout one entire day and then partially erased them at midnight. By the gesture of erasing, Sasaki refers to the fact that we are continuously forgetting, not only moments of the day but entire days

#### 4.5

Sasaki, *Connect—Heartbeat Tokyo*, 2011. Performance and installation. Acrylic ink on wall, Polaroid films, sound system, and speaker. Yoyogi National Stadium, Tokyo. © SASAKI, courtesy of the artist.



#### 4.6

Sasaki, *Heartbeat Venice*, 2011.  
Collective drawing and performance.  
Exhibited in *Personal Structures*, 54th  
Venice Biennale, 2011. © SASAKI,  
courtesy of the artist.



#### 4.7

Participant touching a heartbeat sensor in Sasaki's *Heartbeat Venice* performance, 2011. © SASAKI, courtesy of the artist.

disappear from our memory, as if they never existed. His drawings, on one hand, attempt to capture time; and on the other, are a test of time.

Created during one week each month for three months, *7 Days, August–October 2000* (2000), consisted of a performance and a large wall drawing. For the drawing the artist traced the beating of his heart in consecutive rows of small looping red marks, all within a line of forty-two centimeters wide and four thousand centimeters long that stretched along the walls of the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery. The stripe was evocative of blood circulation and, like Etienne-Jules Marey's nineteenth-century graphs and experiments on the visualization of blood pressure in space and time, it was a deterritorialization of the interior, a symbolic projection of the circulatory system in a drawing conveyed from the artist's heart to all the exhibition space. Sasaki's hand can be seen as a machine, a stylus extension that translates the rhythm of his heart into graphs. The line here conveys a double meaning referring to volume and to border. The graph is an active volumetric reminder of the incessant movement of a muscle that beats 100,000 times and produces a volume of blood flow of about 2000 gallons per day throughout the body.

In the same way, *15 Days, Heartbeat Drawing* (2006) traced the throbbing of the artist's heart in a circular drawing accompanied by a heart sound recording. This installation, located in the room's center, operates like a heart with its circular shape referencing blood circulation.<sup>22</sup> The time-based aspect of this piece is amplified here by the heart sound recording that is as constant as the ticktock of a clock.

After drawing only his own heartbeat for more than a decade, Sasaki expanded from individual portraiture to social portraiture in 2007. He began drawing other people's heart rates for his series *Heartbeat Portrait* (2007–), which he considers a social art project that aims to make people aware of the heartbeat—that is, the value of life. In 2011, for *Connect–Heartbeat Tokyo* (2011; figure 4.5), he drew hundreds of people's heartbeats as curving red lines that spread across the walls of an exhibition space in Tokyo, resulting in a collaborative artwork. In 2011, at the Palazzo Bembo, for *Heartbeat Venice* (2011), which was part of the Venice biennial exhibition *Personal Structures*, he recorded on separate canvases the beats of 299 visitors to the show, as a way of “communicating one on one.” The artist installed a station with a heart rate sensor that reproduced the cardiac signal through a pair of speakers (figures 4.6 and 4.7). The thump-thump

of each heartbeat permeated the entire room, while Sasaki marked each one in his distinctive red. At the end of the process, he made the personal portraits into a collective statement by superimposing the images and asking each person to sign the back of their own canvas. “I placed the drawing on top of the others so that person whose heartbeat I drew was the only one who could see his or her own heartbeat,” Sasaki said.<sup>23</sup> By suffusing a space with heartbeats, Sasaki makes it apparent that the energy of galleries, museums, and all the other resources of cities are dependent on the invisible movements of the hearts that make sites alive.

Sasaki’s drawing practice has been limited in recent years because of problems with his hands, and he has turned to using digital pen tablets.<sup>24</sup> *100,000-beats / 24 hours* (2019) is a monochromatic digital drawing in which a white sphere, made of small and conglomerated lines, floats on a black background. “They are light drawings that can be expanded, contracted, and overlapped, and are flexible,” Sasaki says. “Heartbeats have an inherent character in each person and are a commonality that everyone has. I think even the *Heartbeat Drawings*, which are drawn by my heartbeats can be shared with people all over the world.”<sup>25</sup> It is not by coincidence that his drawing evokes a planet woven by crossed heartbeats. It is an interconnected environment that reflects the structure of this world. Sasaki uses minimal means for maximum effect. His heartbeats durational drawings are a system of portraits but also a recognition of life. Through these lines, the Japanese artist reminds us that time and blood flow together, always in unison.