



after

Ashley

by Steve Kado

What happens to the work of an artist, whose personality is so central in their own work, when that artist dies? What's left of works that were, one might fear, entirely propped up by the artist's unique body, personality and magnetism? It's a question relevant to the work of Robert Ashley, a recently deceased composer whose work is enduring a revival within contemporary art. Ashley believed that the most beautiful kind of singing was the American spoken voice, the sound of people just talking – and it was his own voice, both unassuming and immediately distinctive, that came to define his recorded works. It is a voice that is almost entirely unique in performance: not exclamatory, not strident, not tired, not bored. He had a dreamy, relaxed way of speaking that lies between soft chanting and conversation, which somehow sounded totally natural while also being stridently artificial. Ashley's work can feel infuriatingly casual: people just talking, someone playing piano, not entirely connected but not entirely apart, a synthesizer sweeps through and then it's back to someone talking. They're telling you something about their day, about what they like to drink, about what happened at the bank, about the aliens, about theosophy, about the Renaissance, about how to play piano, the solar system, stumbling across gay men having sex in a park, about anything. And yet, the work never seems to lose some essential thread, no matter how vague or distant the divagations seem to be. Ashley's work is wonderfully strange, the kind of thing that's almost impossible to imagine people willing into existence; it has an accidental quality that the best moments of real life have, and yet it is so rich in these moments that it can't merely be random.

Ashley's best-known work is his "mature" work, which he started producing when he was in his forties. It was at that stage in his life that he came to believe that he was making operas for television, a feat he managed in earnest only once, with *Perfect Lives* (1980). From that point on, he focused on how people chose to hear music everyday – which is to say we hear it on record or as part of our media landscape rather than in concert halls. As such, Ashley viewed his recorded performances as more or less the final word and tried to insert his work into the flow of daily channel-surfing life. In writings from the '80s, he is vehemently against recitals: "Whatever it is, you are not a part of it. You have been a watcher. The recitalist hopes that you have been entertained." For most of his "mature" phase, live performance seemed to be something that Ashley tolerated – a hangover from a more performative time – rather than something he embraced. He called for an experience between audience and artist that would remind "the people who came" that what they were seeing was only "a surfacing of the continuing musicality of everyday life." It seemed that live performance might be necessary just to let people know that he was still working, but this "surfacing" could happen anywhere.

So it seems like a vexing thing to try and figure out how to perform this music now, when the dominant personality that filled up so much of it has gone and when that personality was himself mostly ambivalent about the idea of you doing it. But, rising interest in Ashley's work makes revivals almost inevitable. There were major performances of Ashley's work after his passing but they were already substantially underway during the composer's lifetime. *Crash* (2014), the last opera he was able to finish, was premiered at the Whitney Biennial one month after Ashley's death along with *Vidas Perfectas*, a Spanish-language reading of *Perfect Lives*, and a remount of *The Trial of Anne Opie Wehrer* and *Unknown Accomplices for Crimes Against Humanity* (1968), all of these organized and directed by Alex Waterman. Yet by now enough time has passed that we have to doubt the extent of Ashley's contributions to new work that appears

under his name. Recently, The Kitchen premiered *Quicksand* (2015), which is maybe Ashley's final work. From late interviews, it appears that Ashley was working on *Quicksand* for at least five years before his passing. There have also been some recent remountings of historical Ashley, notably a revival of Alex Waterman's revival of *The Trial of Anne Opie Wehrer*, performed at 356 S. Mission Road in Los Angeles in March.

Both recent productions have a pedigree behind them: Waterman, in addition to being the driver behind the Spanish renovation of *Perfect Lives*, produced (along with Will Holder) the hefty autobiography of Ashley culled from parts of his own scores, titled *Yes, But is it Edible?* He can take some credit for convincing Ashley to reverse his long-held opinion that his work should not be re-performed. This late-in-life Damascene conversion almost certainly contributed to the increased attention and stature Ashley's work benefitted from right before his passing. *Quicksand* for its part is performed by what might almost be called "The Robert Ashley Band without Robert Ashley" (the electronic "orchestra" is produced by Tom Hamilton who collaborated with Ashley on almost all his later work, the lights are by David Moodey) and also features luminaries who were Ashley's contemporaries (the choreography is by Steve Paxton, who "co-starred" in a series of films Ashley made with George Manupelli in the late '60s, among other connections). The only voice heard throughout *Quicksand* is Ashley's own recorded voice, so in a way he should also be added to the list of venerable collaborators.

Of the two recent productions, *The Trial of Anne Opie Wehrer* fares the best, due in part to the mystery that shrouds early Ashley works. Ashley's music only made it onto commercially available recordings when he was in his mid-forties, so it can seem almost as if he hatched out of an egg directly into his mature phase sometime around 1977. Other than a dense boxed set of recordings from the ONCE Festival, there are few recorded examples of how Ashley spent his twenties and thirties. So despite seeing mention of numerous early works in books and seeing their sometimes indecipherable scores, there are almost no opportunities for interested people to directly encounter the stuff. This makes sense in a way: Ashley's earliest work appears almost exclusively within the confines of the ONCE Festival, an experimental music/theatre/performance festival held in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from 1961 to 1966. His works from that time tend to fall into two categories: those that were technically complex to produce, involving complex surround-sound set-ups, designed to produce effects that are hard to harness in mere stereo recording; and aleatoric, Fluxus-style happenings, social set-ups and gatherings of specific people doing specific, not necessarily musical, things that were likely difficult to capture on tape. *The Trial of Anne Opie Wehrer* definitely falls into the latter category. The set-up is simple: a tape recording of Ashley's voice asks 100 questions of Anne Opie Wehrer, who is sitting in a chair with her back to the audience, facing a television screen and answering based on her own personal experiences and opinions. Two additional inquisitors cross-examine her and are in turn answered by two surrogates for Anne Wehrer. The questions range from the banal ("Do you smoke, drink or habitually use any narcotic?") to the provocative ("Please describe the most distasteful thing you have ever done for money"). In the original ONCE production, of which only a grainy black-and-white video remains, Anne Wehrer was a scintillating conversationalist, and the main thrust of the work was to basically goad her into sharing this skill with an audience. Anne Wehrer died in 2007, so to replace this larger-than-life conversationalist, who is specifically named in the title, Waterman has brought in a rotating group of Annes. For the present-

ation at Mission Road, the burden of being interrogated fell to Wayne Koestenbaum on the first night and Mary Farley on the second. Farley bristled at questions that were clearly aimed specifically at Anne Wehrer and launched into long entertaining rants in response to other questions. The voices of the additional interrogators and respondents bunched and wove around the main questioning; there were uncomfortable silences as a terse answer left nothing more to be discussed until the next question rolled off the tape. Or was it a tape? Waterman, sitting behind the mixing desk can do a remarkably good Ashley impression so maybe he was taking the place of the tape recording?

Ashley frequently mentioned this piece as a watershed moment for him, and you can see how the piece shaped the work he would subsequently make, focusing on the personalities and speaking styles of a very specific group of people, relying more on talking than on any other technology and also using the form of interrogation, which he brings back in later operas like *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)* (1985) and *el. Aficionado* (1987). The one time I met Ashley, at a revival of another early ONCE Festival work, *That Morning Thing* (1967) in 2011, his comment on the performance was that “it’s definitely a product of its time.” This same critique can be aimed at *The Trial of Anne Opie Wehrer*, although its sparseness and single-mindedness keep it from devolving entirely into a historical exercise, it still had the crackling energy of an antique manifesto, a faded signpost pointing towards the amazing things that were to come. In contrast, *That Morning Thing* – at least in its 2011 incarnation – felt almost as if war re-enactors were acting out the 1960s mid-western avant-garde instead of the battle of Gettysburg, with no actual territory at stake.

In his biographical monograph about Ashley, Kyle Gann² tells us that *Quicksand*, then under construction, would be Ashley’s most ambitious, and his longest opera. Given that Ashley is prone to making long operas (*Now Eleanor’s Idea* can run over five hours if played in its entirety), this is saying a mouthful. So when *Quicksand* was finally produced earlier this year, its two-plus-hour running time seemed positively brisk. A recording of Ashley reading a narrative about an elderly composer who works as a spy on behalf of “The Company” – he’s in Asia accompanying his wife and her friends on a yoga trip and doing a little spy work on the side – plays out over a largely empty stage, one large sheet to the back changes shape a few times, the lights and smoke move around and two dancers occasionally appear, enacting Steve Paxton’s trademarked blend of everyday and not-everyday motion. Borrowing from thrillers is not unprecedented in Ashley’s work: *eL/Aficionado* and *Foreign Experiences* are both detective stories of a sort, and a bank robbery is something like the central event in *Perfect Lives*. Yet *Quicksand* is a frustratingly direct text for Ashley. Normally, discussions of the plot elements of Ashley’s operas have to be full of qualifications – things are “kind of” happening, the bank “sort of gets robbed” – but in this case, it’s all plot. Essentially, Ashley reads you a story from start to finish: a geriatric composer assists a group of good “freedom fighters,” our hero hastens regime change in some Asian country aided by some hyper-violent contractors sent by “The Company” and makes an impression on a beautiful young woman – all before returning home to New York to pick up the rest of his life writing operas and thinking about how it will all end. The interaction between the linearity and the fantasy in the script is unsettling, or embarrassing, cutting this piece off from the casual, everyday feeling that normally gives Ashley’s work its basic power.

The temptation is always to cover for the deceased artist, to say that had he lived, he would have made changes. As it stands, the work has multiple different endings – may-

be he would have picked one, maybe he would have muddled the order of events? Of course, Ashley had already recorded himself reading the text in full, so that in itself it must constitute some kind of commitment to the material as it stands. I found myself sitting in the audience wondering when it was going to get weirder, when it was going to transform into something more than an adventure story.

At one point, David Moodey lights the stage full of smoke in a way that is unbelievably affecting. More than anything, that luminous hazy void made me feel Ashley’s absence. Hearing his voice playing out onto a stage that was empty except for smoke had the uncanny feeling of attending a séance. Paxton’s choreography, on the other hand, by remaining grounded in the everyday world, reminded me how good Ashley was at focusing his attention on the world outside his New York window, or in his past experiences in the midwest and California – and established a painful contrast to the work that was at hand. (Do we really need to hear what a white, American octogenarian has to say about Asia? There are, after all, plenty of people in Asia who could maybe do that job for us.) At its best moments, the text provides some moving reflections on the author’s mortality – signing off, as it were, catching his flight without luggage. The challenge, though, is to view these sections as if this were not his last opera. If this is just an opera by Robert Ashley, would I feel as worked up? Would I feel just as sad? Am I being manipulated? Are those moments really that different from any of the other meditations on aging and death in his other operas? More than anything else, the “surfacing” Ashley was searching for in the ’80s – where viewer and work seem to encounter each other at random, in the street – precludes the kind of catharsis that the conclusion to *Quicksand*’s trades in so heavily. Did Ashley wait until the final moment to get all maudlin on us?

I have the feeling that, in vaults somewhere in New York, there are hours and hours of recordings of Ashley’s talking. Which means there could well be productions and revivals of his works, featuring his own unique sing-song talking voice, for years to come. If I’m wrong, if after *Quicksand*, the vault is now empty, Waterman has groomed his own oral instrument into a very reasonable facsimile. In this scenario, it seems fitting that of any other American vocal performers who might rival Ashley, Elvis comes closest, because of how his work posthumously relies on impersonators. Other than as a scholarly exercise or to promote awareness of his oeuvre, I find myself siding with the old Robert Ashley – the recordings are enough – Ashley without Ashley really lacks, well, Ashley.

In grad school, I attempted to cover *Perfect Lives*. By the time I got clear of the haze of Ashley’s influence on my own enunciation and phrasing, when I was speaking as much like myself as the material would allow, I can’t say I improved or even re-interpreted the work – the score was curved too closely around the way he talked. The best that I could say is that some people saw the work who had not seen it before and that I had affected an odd kind of evangelism. So maybe another aspect of Elvis — the artist as religious figure — is appearing on the horizon for the work of Robert Ashley as well. And like fans of Elvis who make pilgrimages to Graceland, I will likely see every single performance of Ashley’s work that I can in the years to come, despite my reservations about re-performance. The material itself is too good to let any shadow of it slip by.

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Endnotes

1 Will Holder and Alex Waterman, *But is it Edible?* (New Documents, Vancouver: 2014).

2 Kyle Gann, *Robert Ashley* (Champaign, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2012).