



April 21 - 27, 1999

We Hurt a Lot

A passage of unforgettable transcendence occurs about an hour into Robert Ashley's new "television opera," *Dust*, which had its domestic premiere at the Kitchen last week. A man who has lost his legs in a war converses with God while under the influence of morphine. The languorous synthesizer lines performed by "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and visual director Yukihiro Yoshihara's tie-dyed televisuals are sublime, while the topic (why violence and suffering?) is fragmented, accelerated, and chaotic. God simply speaks too fast to be comprehended.

Then something amazing happens: the "half-man" remembers four dreamy pop songs from his past. Country-and-western plain speech about love combines with down-home electronica to produce a peculiarly American strain of Buddhist grace, clarity, and acceptance. "I want to fall in love just one more time," declares one song. "Don't get your hopes up," answers another. "We hurt a lot," goes one refrain, and ample anecdotal evidence is provided.

Ashley to ashes, *Dust* to dust. Mortality and life's "irreversibilities" are Ashley's themes in a libretto inspired by the free associations of homeless street people. Modeled on the motet form of layered voices (a sort of Middle Ages doo-wop), *Dust*'s set consisted of five vocalists -- Ashley, Sam Ashley, Joan La Barbara, Thomas Buckner, and Jacqueline Humbert -- arranged behind panes of glass that shifted constantly between clarity and opacity. Television monitors above each of them commented on their words, while a wall-sized screen hovered above this mystical multimedia Stonehenge like a supertitled Rothko panel.

No one sings in *Dust*, at least not in the old-fashioned sense, although the performances demanded virtuoso moments of pitch and timing. Ashley himself embodies an urbane intimacy reminiscent of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon improvisations. In their harmonies, speech patterns, constant digressions, and, yes, utter sense of fun, Ashley's operas give the cumulative impression of a single extended work. The epitome of pop-art perfection, it's both ritual and diversion -- television of the future. — Richard Gehr
