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# Robert Ashley's "Crash," Restaged at Roulette in Brooklyn

BY CRAIG HUBERT | APRIL 17, 2015



A scene from Robert Ashley's "Crash."

(Photo by Paula Court, 2015)

“Popular music, when it works, reminds us of something we already know, or it reminds us of something we’ve already experienced,” Robert Ashley [told an interviewer](#) from *The Wire* in 2003. “Opera doesn’t do that. Opera is supposed to present you with characters in the same way that a great novel presents you with characters.”

Ashley's operas do not resemble anything that happens on stage at La Scala. The composer and artist, who died in March 2014 at the age of 83, was the most prominent of a post-John Cage group of experimental artists (Alvin Lucier, David Behrman, among others) who incorporated interlocking voices, sound, and projections to present unique sonic-narratives on stage. Later in his career, Ashley also embraced synthesized sound and television as a medium for his work, most notably in "Perfect Lives" (1983).



"Crash," Ashley's final work, which premiered at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, has been restaged in a production at Roulette in Brooklyn (through April 18). Composed for six voices, each performed by a member of the music collective Varispeed, the opera is self-consciously autobiographical, recounting a man's life from birth to the age of 84. The six performers are spread across the front of the stage in a row, sitting at desks

minimally decorated with a radio, lamp, microphone, and script. Above them hang three screens, each projecting a revolving series of banal American landscapes, the kind offered as screensavers on computers. They are images we see in our daily lives, the kind of images we ignore, but faced with them in "Crash" they become meditative spaces, a blank slate where we project our own images of the character at the center of the work.

The six performers are split into groups of three, each taking turns speaking in a different voice of the main character — one more personal recollections and grievances, the other two philosophical ramblings on the nature of being and our society. As three voices speak, the other three perform the music of the piece, soft and repetitive chanting and bursts of singing, which ebbs and flows, sometimes almost unnoticeable and other times punctuating the narrative with dramatic weight. The entire piece is performed in six 15-minute acts that breathlessly move through the main character's life.

What makes Ashley's work underappreciated has little to do with its content, and gets at a larger problem that faces experimental art. In fact, "Crash" is widely accessible, funny, and moving in equal measure. Ashley's work has not found mainstream popularity because it's uncompromising. It refuses to be labeled or defined. There is a mystery in its lack of solid meaning, and that mystery is essential to its power.



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