

# The Kitchen

THE KITCHEN PRESENTS THE WORLD PREMIERE OF *QUICKSAND*,  
AN OPERA-NOVEL BY ROBERT ASHLEY WITH CHOREOGRAPHY  
BY STEVE PAXTON

January 28, 29, 30 and February 4, 5, 6, 2016 at 7 p.m.

*“When the 21st century glances back to see where the future of opera came from, Ashley, like Monteverdi before him, is going to look like a radical new beginning.”* — Kyle Gann

Music and Libretto by **Robert Ashley**  
Orchestra composed by **Tom Hamilton**  
Choreographed by **Steve Paxton**  
Light Design by **David Moodey**  
Performed by **Maura Gahan** and **Jurij Konjar**  
Sound design and live mix by **Tom Hamilton**

**The Kitchen** (512 West 19th Street, NYC)

**Tickets:** \$20 (\$16 students, seniors)

thekitchen.org; 212.255.5793 x11

**The Kitchen** is pleased to present the world premiere of *Quicksand*, an opera-novel for music, dance, and light, composed from a novel of the same name by the late Robert Ashley. *Quicksand* features a narrative entirely sung by Ashley, movement by legendary choreographer Steve Paxton, a light environment by David Moodey, and an electronic orchestra by Tom Hamilton. Performers include Steve Paxton, Maura Gahan, and Jurij Konjar.

“I thought that I would try to make an opera libretto from a mystery story, told verbatim,” wrote Ashley, a devotee of mystery novels. In 2012, he asked Steve Paxton to set *Quicksand* (released by Burning Books in 2011) to movement. Since meeting in the 60s, Ashley and Paxton have worked together on several projects (George Manupelli’s films, *Dr. Chicago*, *Pa Rt* and more recently *Night Stand* with Lisa Nelson). However, *Quicksand* is their first major collaboration. It is also the first time Paxton has created work starting from a long narrative. The recording and editing of Ashley reading the opera-novel was completed in the summer of 2013, with the help of longtime collaborator Tom Hamilton.

*Quicksand* furthers Ashley’s distinct and innovative investigation of the American language in a musical setting. Using his signature blend of speech and song, it tells the story of a composer who has been coerced by a U.S. Government Agency (“the Company”) to serve as a low-level “courier” (or spy). Traveling with his wife to an unnamed South Asian country run by a military dictatorship, he becomes involved with plans to overthrow the government through his close friendship with two tour guides. With the assistance of four American mercenaries sent by the “Company,” the composer participates in the capture and imprisonment of the country’s leaders, and the destruction of the torture operation by which the dictatorship has maintained its power.

*Quicksand* is divided into three acts, each containing 16 scenes accompanied by a unique set of specific harmonies that Hamilton used to create the electronic orchestra. Ashley asked Paxton and Moodey to compose

16 visual scenes each, based on any image evoked by the opera. The 16 scenes in choreography and 16 in lighting were to be separate and “moveable,” meaning that any of them could be used or repeated in combination with any of the 48 musical scenes. Ashley’s purpose in suggesting this technique was to unify the opera structurally without the separate elements of music, dance and lighting being forced to illustrate the linear succession of events in the story. The order in which the scenes have been arranged for the final production will not change during the run.

*Quicksand* is curated by Tim Griffin with Katy Dammers as part of “From Minimalism into Algorithm.” This yearlong series sets contemporary and historical painting, sculpture, performance, and musical composition in counterpoint, proposing a new through-line for art-making during the past half century. Taking on the legacy of Minimalist art and composition during the 1960s and 1970s—whose seriality was understood by artists and critics to correlate with the era’s industrial production and increased weight placed on the presence of the individual—as a precedent for reconsidering work by a younger generation, the program considers how serial repetition (and the privileging of experience) might now correspond more directly with digital technology and the reconfiguring of our encounters with physical space through networked communication.

**Robert Ashley** (1930-2014) is particularly known for his work in new forms of opera. In Ann Arbor in the 1960s, Ashley organized the ONCE Festival and directed the legendary ONCE Group, with whom he developed his first operas. Throughout the 1970s, he directed the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College and toured with the Sonic Arts Union. He produced and directed *Music with Roots in the Aether*, a 14-hour television opera/documentary about the work and ideas of seven American composers. His opera for television, *Perfect Lives*, is widely considered the precursor of “music-television.” Stage versions of *Perfect Lives*, *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)*, *Foreign Experiences*, *eL/Aficionado* and *Now Eleanor’s Idea* toured throughout the US and Canada, Europe and Asia during the 1980s and 90s. *Dust*, followed by *Celestial Excursions* and *The Old Man Lives in Concrete* toured from 1999-2012. His last opera, *Crash*, was completed in December 2013. [www.robertashley.org](http://www.robertashley.org)

**Steve Paxton** (b. 1939) began his movement studies in gymnastics and then trained in martial arts, ballet, and modern dance. Paxton was a member of the Jose Limon Company in 1959 and a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company from 1961 to 1964. He was a founding member of the seminal dance collectives Judson Dance Theater (1962-64) and Grand Union (1970-76). It was during his time with Grand Union that he first formulated Contact Improvisation, a dynamic, partner-based dance that is now practiced worldwide. From Contact Improvisation, he developed the movement practice Material for the Spine in 1986, which examines movement outward from the core of the body. Most recently, Dia Art Foundation presented *Night Stand* (2004), a work by Paxton and Lisa Nelson, at Dia:Chelsea in New York City, and in 2014, *Flat* (1964), *Smiling* (1967), *Bound* (1982) and *The Beast* (2010) at Dia:Beacon. In 2014 the Dance Biennale, Venice awarded Paxton the “Golden Lion” for Lifetime Achievement, and, most recently, in 2015, a New York Dance and Performance Award (or “Bessie”) for Lifetime Achievement in Dance. He lives in Vermont.

### **About The Kitchen**

The Kitchen is one of New York City’s most forward-looking nonprofit spaces, showing innovative work by emerging and established artists across disciplines. Our programs range from dance, music, performance, and theater to video, film, and art, in addition to literary events, artists’ talks, and lecture series. Since its inception in 1971, The Kitchen has been a powerful force in shaping the cultural landscape of this country, and has helped launch the careers of many artists who have gone on to worldwide prominence.

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