

“What about the Bible? And the Koran? It doesn’t matter: We have *Perfect Lives*.” – John Cage

“These are songs about the Corn Belt and some of the people in it, or on it.” – Robert Ashley,
Perfect Lives

In the back gallery, JOAN presents Robert Ashley’s *Perfect Lives*, an opera produced for television and originally broadcast on BBC Channel Four in 1983. Shown here on video, *Perfect Lives* is an avant-garde opera and a key work of experimental television that has been described as, “the most influential music/theater/literary work of the 1980s.” It is also a poetic story of life in the midwest, told in a distinctly American vernacular.

Upon its release, *Perfect Lives* was lauded as a truly modern opera, uniquely American in structure and form as it was destined for the television screen instead of the theater. Since 1983, the work has been represented and reinterpreted live and on video. It was in television though, that Ashley saw the possibility of a new landscape in geography and sound. The work exists without a traditional score, instead it is a seven-part libretto with intricate notational markings to relay rhythm and cadence. A key characteristic of the work is Ashley’s signature vocal style. Deeply influenced by regional accents, dialects, and turns of phrase, he narrates the story in a melodic sing-song lull.

The story goes, (in Ashley’s soft, hypnotizing rhythm) that two friends, Raoul, the singer, and Buddy, “the world’s greatest piano player,” are in town to perform at The Perfect Lives Lounge, a dive in an anonymous midwestern town. The musicians strike up an unlikely friendship with two locals and begin to plan what they describe as the perfect crime, a grand gesture—a bank robbery that lasts for one day. The four characters decide to steal from the bank for one day and return it the next, after letting the whole world know it was missing. The narrative unfolds slowly, in a winding fashion, a series of digressions and tangents on life in America. Driven primarily by sound, the visuals are a complex series of Ashley monologues, title sequences, garish sherbet hues, close-ups of musicians playing, outlandish costuming, neon signage, and most iconically, extended shots of the long, low cornfields and endless highways of middle America—the landscape becoming a character in its own right.

Alongside the looping videos, JOAN presents copies of the opera’s seven-part libretto. As a continually adapting piece of music which is different each time it is performed, *Perfect Lives* does not have a traditional score. The libretto on view shows the highly intricate diacritic notation which indicates the rhythm and intonation for its performance. Also on view is material from the 2010-2014 Spanish language re-staging and new television version of *Perfect Lives*: VIDAS

PERFECTAS, directed by Alex Waterman, produced by Marfa Ballroom, the Whitney Museum, and El Paso Opera.”

Robert Ashley (1930-2014) has achieved an international reputation for his work in new forms of opera and multi-disciplinary projects. His recorded works, *Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon*, *She Was A Visitor*, and *Automatic Writing*, are acknowledged classics of the use of language in a musical setting. He is a pioneer in opera-for-television. 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 David Behrman, Alvin Lucier and Mumma as the Sonic Arts Union. In the early 1980s the Kitchen commissioned Ashley's *Perfect Lives*, the opera for television that is widely considered the precursor of “music-television.” Stage versions of *Perfect Lives*, as well as his following operas, *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. In 1999 Kanagawa Arts Foundation (Japan) commissioned *Dust*, which was quickly followed by *Celestial Excursions* and *The Old Man Lives in Concrete*. His last opera, *Crash*, was completed in December 2013. A large part of his recorded work is available from Lovely Music.

JOAN would like to thank Performing Artservices, Inc. for their assistance in this exhibition. Additional production notes and information on other Robert Ashley works can be found at : <http://www.robertashley.org/>

Perfect Lives Cast & Collaborators

ROBERT ASHLEY as “R” (The Narrator)

“BLUE” GENE TYRANNY as Buddy (The World's Greatest Piano Player)

JILL KROESEN as Isolde

DAVID VAN TIEGHEM as “D” (The Captain of The Football Team)

Produced in collaboration with CARLOTA SCHOOLMAN for THE KITCHEN (New York City) in association with CHANNEL FOUR (Great Britain).

Television Director — JOHN SANBORN

Instrumental music beds composed in collaboration with “BLUE” GENE TYRANNY and PETER GORDON

Music produced in collaboration with PAUL SHORR

Video image processing — DEAN WINKLER and JOHN SANBORN

Associate director — MARY PERILLO

Videotape editor — DEAN WINKLER

Piano solos and electronic keyboard parts composed by “BLUE” GENE TYRANNY

Piano solos based on harmonic progressions by “BLUE” GENE TYRANNY

Pre-recorded chorus voices: JILL KROESEN and DAVID VAN TIEGHEM and REBECCA ARMSTRONG (The Supermarket)

Costumes and make-up by JACQUELINE HUMBERT

Piano landscape-mirrors and color design by MARY ASHLEY

Synchronous sound recorded by PAUL SHORR

Audio engineer: JOSHUA HARRIS

Rhythm templates derived from the “Palace” organ, courtesy of Gulbransen Organ Co. (CBS Musical Instruments)

Special thanks to PIERRE AUDI and THE ALMEIDA THEATER (London)

PERFECT LIVES was commissioned for television by THE KITCHEN — MARY MACARTHUR GRIFFIN, Director; CARLOTA SCHOOLMAN, Television Producer

Written and created for television by ROBERT ASHLEY

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