

Object Collection: *Automatic Writing*

The Brick, New York, US

Robert Ashley's 1979 work *Automatic Writing* is a deeply intimate and enigmatic work. Somewhere between performance and tape piece, the work is built around the involuntary utterances due to Ashley's self-diagnosed Tourette's syndrome. Those sounds are central to the work, but other elements – Mimi Johnson's French monologue, a Moog wash and a disco bassline – easily overwhelm Ashley's soft stammers. For anyone else to do the piece seems, not an injustice exactly, but nevertheless preposterous.

Ashley's recording is so spatial that it begs to be realised in a room in real time, and so strangely disorienting that it's hard to imagine how it could be. Object Collection have done the unimaginable quite successfully by envisioning the piece as a staged work, conceived with the blessing of the composer. They have

presented the work on a few occasions since their initial realisation in 2014 (the same year Ashley died) and revised it for five performances at The Brick in Brooklyn.

As with much of Ashley's work, it's as difficult to pay attention as it is to be unaffected. The mind drifts, but with the uncanny feeling of it being someone else's mind. It is, either in Ashley's recording or in Object Collection's production, a deeply subversive work – not politically subversive but psychologically subversive. It's psychedelic in a way that The Zombies or Strawberry Alarm Clock could never have imagined.

The transfixing Turkish actor Fulya Peker is at the front of the stage on the final night of the run, taking on Ashley's whispers and sputters. She's seated in a large chair between two screens, hidden behind dark sunglasses and motionless, as if about to interrogate the audience. Three other performers are on stage

facing, like Peker, away from the centre.

It takes several minutes to orientate and determine just who's doing what, even with the activities of the three others being projected in real time onto the screens flanking Peker. Guitarist John Hastings is to the right and director Kara Feely at left, providing the second voice, in German instead of French, occasionally dropping in English phrases, embedding a suggestion that the listener has missed something (did she just quote Aretha Franklin?). The quiet club music comes in almost immediately and is even more convincing as an outside intrusion in the small theatre.

The figure in the rear, Chloë Roe, concocts visual impressions with coloured liquids (as seen on screen), apparently also producing an electronic sound bed below the voices and electric guitar playing slow, clean, single notes with heavy reverb. The

guitar is an odd choice, it grounds the work as being something more musical than Ashley's incidental and seemingly almost accidental score. When the guitar drops out for an extended period around midpoint, the scene becomes unmoored.

The screens change. Coloured lights change. Occasionally, things change. The remote disco music returns at some point (meaning it had left at some point). The screen on the left features a purple haired Chloë Roe painting a green cube with white powder atop a sheet of satiny red fabric. Things change again, though not toward any climax.

After about an hour, the lights shut off with an audible click. It ultimately proves to be more disorienting than the original. In Ashley's recording, you can't picture what's happening in the studio. In Object Collection's staging, you can see what's happening, but you still don't know. Kurt Gottschalk

Object Collection performing Robert Ashley's *Automatic Writing*

