

Robert Ashley Gets a New Backdrop

by Catherine Kron 12/12/11

If there's such a thing as an "artist's composer," Robert Ashley is it. The 81-year-old opera composer and performer, who has earned a cult-like following, is credited with revitalizing the opera form for fine art crowds. He is admired for his scores, whose unorthodox formats appeal to musicians, performers and visual artists. But his underground credibility might be blown with *Vidas Perfectas*, a reimagining of his 1983 opera *Perfect Lives*. The new work opens next week at the Irondale Theater in Brooklyn.



SARAH CROWNER'S BACKDROP, COURTESY THE ARTIST

Perfect Lives, a loose story of a bank heist, is best remembered as a highly distorted experimental video. The new live show, produced by the musician/scholar Alex Waterman, involves collaborations between Waterman and commissioned artists. Ashley was not involved, and Waterman made dramatic changes to the original: translating the work, which is sung by four vocalists, from its original English to Spanish; and splitting the original videos into new projects. This is the first installment of the series, and addresses only the first three sections of the original video. Each project will take place in a new location, and employ a different set of contributors.

For this adaptation of the video's first three sections, artist Sarah Crowner created a backdrop and sets. Crowner, who is known for her use of sewn fabrics stretched over canvas to color-blocking effect, had been developing a series of curtains she thought of as backdrops for a play. "Suddenly Alex and I noticed that the white parts on the backdrop could function as screens," Crowner told *A.i.A.* "We started discussing the idea of projecting something on the screen."

The two decided to project the original score from *Perfect Lives* as a direct visual reference for *Vidas Perfectas*. It serves to bring Ashley's scores, normally seen only by the work's performers, to the audience.

In collaboration with Eve Essex, New York artist Anna Craycroft has made text projections derived from the work's original English—Ashley's narrative score is dictated as a list of lyrics with indications for the work's rhythm and key but no staff or clef—and will project her version as a visual reference for the audience, akin to subtitles for the Spanish vocals. These visuals are projected onto the actors and set, both aiding and disrupting the audiovisual experience of the work.

Craycroft says the change from English to Spanish is appropriate for Ashley's operas. "You would think, if you're performing a narrative poem, why eliminate the possibility for maybe half the audience to understand it?" she says. "But in *Perfect Lives*, a lot of the narrative was obscured by how the words are articulated against the piano and drum track. The language becomes phonetically embedded in the overall experience of the music."

The show will next move to Marfa, TX, this spring, where Waterman will invite new artists to interpret another section of the work.

Vidas Perfectas, presented by Issue Project Room, Marfa Ballroom and the Irondale Theater, opens this Thursday at the Irondale in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. The show will run Dec. 15–17.