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Composer (and Others) Rethinking His Works
By STEVE SMITH | September 16, 2011

THROUGHOUT a lengthy, influential career the composer and vocalist Robert Ashley has designed his groundbreaking series of operas — dizzying confluences of spoken and sung words, electronic music, video elements, mystery and charm — to be performed by himself and a tightly knit group of regular collaborators.



The composer Robert Ashley in a performance of his opera “Dust” at La Mama E.T.C. in 2009.

That hasn’t changed entirely. Mr. Ashley and his ensemble presented his three most recent operas — “Dust,” “Celestial Excursions” and “Concrete” — in repertory at La MaMa E.T.C. in 2009. A new opera, “Quicksand,” is being created. And Mr. Ashley continues to rethink his older works: an expanded version of “Concrete” (2006) will have its premiere during an engagement by Mr. Ashley’s ensemble at Roulette in Brooklyn, from April 25 to 28, as part of the Interpretations series.

But this season will also bring a number of other artists pursuing their own paths into Mr. Ashley’s seemingly inimitable body of works. It is a welcome development that should help to establish these works more firmly within a broader new-music canon while also infusing them with fresh energy and new perspectives.

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Then on Nov. 6 the experimental-music ensemble thingNY revisits a feat it first undertook in Brooklyn in June, mounting a site-specific guerilla performance of Mr. Ashley’s seminal seven-part television opera “Perfect Lives” in locations around the Lower East Side. The sites for this bold, thoughtful undertaking have yet to be announced, but details are to appear on the ensemble’s blog.

“That Morning Thing,” a 1967 opera, will receive a long-overdue new production at the Kitchen as part of the Performa 11 series, with shows scheduled from Nov. 19 to 21. And “Perfect Lives” returns in another guise in December, as “Vidas Perfectas,” a new Spanish-language video adaptation jointly produced by the Issue Project Room and the Irondale Center in Brooklyn and Ballroom Marfa, a contemporary-art space in Marfa, Tex.

Initial episodes of this elaborate undertaking, directed by Alex Waterman and produced by Peter Gordon, are scheduled for screening at the Irondale Center in December.