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Robert Ashley Offers a New Work

By JOHN ROCKWELL

For well over a decade Robert Ashley, the experimental composer, has been involved in amalgams of music, sound, words and theater. The elements shift from year to year, with one or another sometimes fading away almost altogether. But with "Private Parts," an hour-long work in progress that he presented Friday night at the Kitchen, Mr. Ashley has all of them in balance. The result is a work of rare elegance and emotional energy, although perhaps the word "energy" is a bit too overbearing for something so quietly mystical and intensely personal.

The piece in these performances consists of three "songs," as Mr. Ashley calls them, entitled "The Park," "The Supermarket" and "The Backyard." The centerpiece of each was Mr. Ashley, dressed in a grayish jacket, tie and slacks with dark glasses and bathed in ghostly light from a video monitor, on which were projected the words of his text.

He read in a soft incantation, sometimes pitching the syllables and sometimes fading into incomprehensibility. The words were a series of shifting, ideas, scenes and images—the stream of consciousness of a man with a particularly interesting consciousness.

To his far left and right were a California composer who calls himself (Blue) Gene Tyranny, at the piano, and another musician, Peter Gordon, at an electronic keyboard called a PolyMoog. Between the keyboard players and Mr. Ashley were four video monitors, two on each side of the composer, carrying images of Mr. Tyranny's jeweled hands at the piano.

Jill Kroesen was responsible for the

video, and joined Mr. Tyranny for a vocal chorus in the second part. Marc Grafe handled the electronic coordination. The result of all their efforts was that Mr. Ashley's readings were supported by a trance-like tapestry of sight and sound—lovely rippling piano filigrees from Mr. Tyranny, sustained or pulsing chords from Mr. Gordon and a blend of drone notes and electronic chirpings on tape (some of this exists independently as "Settings for Piano and Orchestra" by Mr. Tyranny).

Mr. Ashley has written mystically of this work, saying that "certain images are called up in the sounds, and some people can actually see them," although he adds that he wishes "to avoid the feeling of a seance." This observer "saw" nothing, but he was moved nonetheless. The closest parallel to past work would be some of Mr. Ashley's earlier "operas" and choral pieces and the supermarket monologue of Lucinda Childs to Philip Glass's music in "Einstein on the Beach."

But Mr. Ashley is very much his own man, and his work has a most powerful sense of personality to it. The person that emerges is funny and deeply romantic, full of wonder and a sense of gentle absurdity, angry but in a muted way that seems almost to have been turned by force of will into something consoling.

The last words of the night, spoken with the same semi-sing-song sense of puzzlement and hurried awe as everything else, were "Dear George, what's going on? I'm not the same person any more." Those who let themselves open to Mr. Ashley's art can feel similarly transformed.