

(1996) ROBERT ASHLEY ON *AUTOMATIC WRITING*,
PURPOSEFUL LADY SLOW AFTERNOON AND *SHE WAS A VISITOR*.
(From <https://www.dramonline.org/albums/robert-ashley-automatic-writing/notes>)

“Automatic Writing,” “Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon,” and “She Was a Visitor” were all composed before the days of extended liner notes, so these remarks, without recourse to help in the form of reminders, should be understood as purely anecdotal. I try not to retain an analytical attitude toward (or analytical understanding of) works finished.

“Automatic Writing” was composed in the recorded form over a period of five years, during which time I was fascinated with “involuntary speech.” I had come to recognize that I might have a mild form of Tourette’s syndrome (characterized in my case only by purely involuntary speech) and I wondered, naturally, because the syndrome has to do with sound-making and because the manifestation of the syndrome seemed so much like a primitive form of composing—an urgency connected to the sound-making and the unavoidable feeling that I was trying to “get something right,”—whether the syndrome was connected in some way to my obvious tendencies as a composer.

I have not kept up with the literature on Tourette’s syndrome, but I have the notion, gathered from conversations with friends who are psychologists, that Tourette’s syndrome has evolved into a kind of catch-all for many kinds of involuntary behavior. The psychologists are probably right, but for my purposes such a general definition is not useful. My understanding is that Tourette simply had the problem of wanting to leave the party for a few minutes to go into the other room and curse. That was what was happening with me, and I noticed (as a composer) that I always said the same thing; I always uttered the same phrases.

Morton Feldman said that any composer who went around with a tune in his head should be locked up. He didn’t mean it in the practical sense, of course, because nobody should be locked up, considering what locked up means, but he was talking about me as I understood it, so naturally I was interested. These utterances, released in a sought privacy, were the tune that Feldman was talking about. This speech was illegal. That it was also connected to music seemed obvious. The problem of the connection is that music is mostly a deliberately “conscious” activity, especially for a musician, and in the most extreme case, “performed”—that is, doubly deliberate.

John Cage said in one of his books how fond he was of a composer friend who hummed unconsciously while they were walking together. Pierre Boulez said that he hated people who whistle, which I would understand to mean, “-while they work.” Boulez is famous for hating people, so if you whistle there is nothing to worry about career-wise (he would probably hate you for other reasons), but we are getting at the crux of it.

A few years after all of this searching, I discovered in a book by Julian Jaynes, “The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind,” that Jaynes had come to something of the same conclusion about the connection between music and “involuntary” behavior, but it was too late by that time for me to put aside my muttering as aboriginal and not up to the standards of the classics and something to be covered up by a few doses of whatever, and besides the record of “Automatic Writing” was out and was making quite a stir in avant-garde circles. (I should say in my own defense that Jaynes’s idea involves the origin of consciousness and the language of consciousness in hallucinations and commanding voices from the outside, as in schizophrenia. I didn’t have any of those. Jaynes doesn’t say much about Tourette’s problem, but he makes some perceptive remarks about the relationship between the urge to speak and the urge to make music, which is the case I was working on.)

During the time of composing “Automatic Writing” I was in a deep depression, because, among other things to be depressed about, the world was not interested in the kind of music that I was interested in. I was out of work, so I decided to “perform” involuntary speech. The performances were more or less failures because the difference between involuntary speech and any other kind of allowed behavior is too big to be overcome willfully, so the performances were largely imitations of involuntary speech, with only a few moments here and there of “loss of control.” These moments, triumphs for me, are documented elsewhere, in rumors and in legal briefs against my behavior on stage. Commonly, for instance, people think that involuntary speech is a symptom of drunkenness. (Watching people on the subway who are engaged in involuntary speech behavior and who obviously can’t afford to get drunk should be enough to teach that drunkenness and involuntary speech are different, but we can’t see that logic.) This is dangerous territory for a performer. It is against the “law” of our society to engage in involuntary speech. That’s why we are embarrassed to talk to ourselves. That’s why Tourette had to leave the room. That’s why we are embarrassed by poetry. (T.S. Eliot said that in composing poetry one is either talking to one’s self or to God. Jaynes says that we are talking to God. Tourette had lost God.)

I spent years tinkering with my consciousness trying to reconcile the performer-legal and highly paid-with the person you cross the street to avoid. The best I could do was a recording, done in secret, but still a performance. The recording documented forty-eight minutes of involuntary speech. It turned out to be, in the lexicon of musical analysis, basically as structured as most music I have studied. This fact, the surfacing of structure in an undeliberated action, is too big to take on here, but it was enough to convince me that the structuralists—the advocates of planning music before you hear or care what the plan gives you—were right: do not rely on unplanned music; it comes out as though it were planned, but planned by someone you cross the street to avoid.

Since I was the person you would cross the street to avoid, I adopted that person as a character who deserved sympathy, and so “Automatic Writing” became a kind of opera in my imagination and I began looking for the other characters in the opera. The “fourness” that was a characteristic of the text of the recorded involuntary speech (which I transcribed faithfully after I got over the shock of hearing it in my own voice) and that dominated the musical form also came to dominate the choice and number of characters. I knew there should be four, and I knew that I would know them when they appeared. I will end this long story by saying that the other three characters (the Moog synthesizer articulations, the voice of the French translation, and the background organ harmonies) were, to my surprise, as unplanned, even “uncontrolled,” in their various ways as was the text of the involuntary speech. And that is how I knew who they were and why they had come to the party.

“Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon, and “She Was a Visitor” are excerpts from an opera entitled “that morning thing” that was composed in 1966-67. The writing of the opera was “caused by” the suicides—in short sequence—of three friends, all women. (The women did not know each other. One lived in a different city. It seemed to me to be nothing but a dark coincidence.) I did not know anything about suicide then, and I still don’t, but I found myself having to give it a lot of thought, and I felt a need to express something, without trying to “say something” about suicide. It would have been preposterous to write an opera in which the heroine takes her life. So the early program notes on these compositions have nothing of this information in them. But, after all these years I can say that the opera is in memoriam of the three women who took their lives. They were good friends. I hope I got it right.

There is a tendency to think of suicide as an act of “teaching”—which appropriates the act to the benefit of the living and robs it of its individuality and courage. I imagined that the act might be thought

of as an escape from an “intellectual” problem that could not be solved and that, above all, the notion of the “escape” gave the act the dignity of being totally personal. Maybe this is wrong as an idea—I don’t know what persons who have attempted suicide have said about their motives—but it gave a structure to the opera and allowed me to express my feelings without having to resort to drama.

I tried to construct an “intellectual” problem that would not be solved. It came to be, finally, the dichotomy between the “rational”—whatever can be explained in words—and its opposite—which is not “irrational” or “a-rational,” but which cannot be explained in words. The true opposite of the “rational” can be said in words, can be described, but the words are not an explanation.

The opera, “that morning thing,” takes the form of an alternation of scenes of “rationalizations” (or explanations) and scenes of “descriptions.” (I hope that the meaning of the opera is evident in the struggle between these two modes of understanding things and evident in the fact that the two modes cannot be reconciled.)

Writing explanations is relatively simple. We live in a time when the interview (a gentle interrogation in civilized society, a not so gentle interrogation in other places) is the main form of self-knowledge. If you haven’t been interviewed, you don’t know what you think. To use a word coined by Jaynes, we “narratize” our existence by answering questions in order to explain, to make sense of our lives. Some people have made an art form out of the interview.

Writing descriptions turned out to be difficult. I wanted, first of all, scenes outside of my imagination. I felt that my life had probably been too sheltered to speak for an act of such gravity. I knew that in every person there are things that can’t be told. So I asked many people who had reason to trust me to record for me anonymously (that is, their voices and their names would not be used in the opera) descriptions of scenes from their life—or descriptions of scenes they had imagined for their life—that they had chosen to keep secret. My instructions were simple: just describe a sequence of events, without any moral or psychological interpretation of those events, but include your sensory perceptual role in the events. The results were very bad. I heard amazing stories, but nobody could describe without explaining, even with me acting like a prosecuting attorney in the case of very close friends who normally would go along with such behavior.

Predictably, I guess, most of the stories turned out to be about sexual experiences. I learned that I did not know people who were secretly poker geniuses or secretly in touch with angels or secretly in on huge financial scams or robbing banks. (Of course, maybe they simply couldn’t imagine such things or they simply didn’t trust me.) I heard about a lot of sexual experiences, but they were always masked in rationalization. I did not get a single, pure “description.” And so in order to compose the opera I had to compose a description, as best I could. (The plan for this short scene in the opera was that four descriptions would be heard in counterpoint.) I successfully completed one description—a sort of composite of some of the stories I had heard. I had ideas for descriptions of other kinds of experiences, but they were never realized. The deadline for the production of the opera came. I didn’t have the opportunity or the time afterwards to develop the scene fully. The opera was performed quite a few times (even including a performance in Tokyo, from which I have tapes of four descriptions—in Japanese—which I have never understood and which I have been reluctant to have translated, hoping that there is some magic there that I will need someday.) The opera has not been recorded.

The recording of this particular “description” got a lot of attention. Curiously, compared to some of the stories I heard, it has always seemed rather tame to me. (I got a great one about a high-ranking prelate on a rainy night in Rome, his apartment, a young woman in wet clothes, etc., but it was so buried in psychology that I couldn’t redeem it, even as fiction.) It is the description that disturbs.

“She Was a Visitor” is the Epilogue to “that morning thing.” It is obviously another form of description. It is intended to be understood as a form of rumor. The chorus is divided into groups, each headed by a leader. A lone speaker repeats the title sentence throughout the entire performance. The separate phonemes of this sentence are picked up freely by the group leaders and are relayed to the group members, who sustain them softly and for the duration of one natural breath. The time lag between the group leaders’ phoneme choices and those phonemes being picked up by members of the group produces a staggered, chant-like effect, with the sounds moving outward from the nearest performer to the farthest. It is possible that in a concert performance, the audience also could, with minimal instruction, participate.

-Robert Ashley, February 1996

“AUTOMATIC WRITING” (1979)

Voices: Robert Ashley and Mimi Johnson.

Electronics and Polymoog: Robert Ashley.

Words by Robert Ashley.

French translation by Monsa Norberg.

The switching circuit was designed and built by Paul DeMarinis.

Produced, recorded and mixed at The Center for Contemporary Music, Mills College (Oakland, California), The American Cultural Center (Paris, France) and Mastertone Recording Studios (New York City) by Robert Ashley.

Mixing assistance at Mastertone Recording Studios by Rich LePage.

A mix of the monologue and electronics was used in the video tape composition, “Title Withdrawn,” (from “Music with Roots in the Aether, video portraits of composers and their music”) by Robert Ashley.

“PURPOSEFUL LADY SLOW AFTERNOON” (1968)

Speaker: Cynthia Liddell

Singers: Mary Ashley, Barbara Lloyd, Mary Lucier

Cynthia Liddell was recorded by Robert Ashley, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Singers and bells were recorded at Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University.

Originally released on “Sonic Arts Union, Electric Sound,” Mainstream.

The text and recording of Cynthia Liddell’s voice were excerpted from the opera, “That Morning Thing” and reorchestrated as “Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon” to become the opening number of “The Wolfman Motorcity Revue,” a theater work for amplified voices and tape, which has as its subject matter the melodrama and song structures of the nightclub entertainment world.

SHE WAS A VISITOR (1967)

The Brandeis University Chamber Chorus

Alvin Lucier, Director

Originally released on “Extended Voices”, Music of Our Time, CBS Odyssey.

Art Direction and Design: By Design

Design: Patrick Vitacco and Ken Cornet

Silhouette by William Farley

Digital mastering by Nicholas Prout and Allan Tucker, Foothill Digital Productions

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