

Artist text: Agatha Gothe-Snape

by Aarna Fitzgerald Hanley

‘When you’re not present what remains?’ (1)

There is a squiggly blob. Lines wiggle within the splattered shape, like neurons. The squiggle is virtual, a repository of text uttered and heard. Standing either side are two doorways, drawn ajar. They appear as portals, one opening onto the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the other to Carriageworks. The drawn lines trace *Every Act of Reading Performs the Work* (2019–21). Agatha Gothe-Snape and collaborator Andrew Burrell are finding words. Sitting in Gothe-Snape’s studio, they outline the final part of a three-part project for *The National: New Australian Art* from 2017–2021. Their words are sticky. (2)

Starting in the middle. In 2019, a digital trailer was released. ‘I am trying to imagine how to begin,’ it opened. We follow the artist’s voice. We pass through an open door. We’re inside an institution, an art gallery. We rollercoaster through a trail of text. The trailer promised entry into a newfound virtual world, but the project would end where it began.

The closing monologue from Australian-born art critic and tv personality Robert Hughes’ canonical *The Shock of the New* was Gothe-Snape’s starting point. In the 1980 series based on the book, also the year of the artist’s birth, Hughes offered an abstruse declaration of the state of art. Gothe-Snape used Hughes’ monologue to frame a film project that was to capture the social context in and around the three iterations of the exhibition. But after the first iteration in 2017, this was redirected by her newly formed collaboration with Burrell and his work with virtual environments.

Virtually, Gothe-Snape’s distinct material practice of collecting words using pen and paper becomes a whole environment; an infinity pool of text and markings, where the only organising principle of, and through, this world of words is the artist’s body. At the beginning of *You and everything that is not you* (2012–17), Gothe-Snape was caught on video trying to remember and Ms-remember Hughes’ monologue (an intentional use of the honorific). In 2021, Gothe-Snape performs her own closing monologue. Like ‘beads on a thread’, text pulled from this world forms a ‘single mutating thought’.

Offering a textual deposit of the entire project, the spoken performance is portal-ed to us in two forms. Once as a *Rogue Monologue (Art Gallery of New South Wales)* (2021) at the titular institution and weekly as an *Apparitional Surge* (2021) at Carriageworks. At the former, Gothe-Snape performs live to an audience while within the virtual world. The artist is present but absent, like a reader lost in her chair. At Carriageworks, performing remotely from her studio, the artist appears in the gallery, unannounced, as a green blob on a roaming LED screen. With the body elsewhere, the roaming LED frame is a ‘living sculpture’. (3) When the artist is not present, mediated or otherwise, a daemon takes hold tracing this archive of conversations, quotes and observations that ‘always exist’ yet are ‘perfectly inaccessible’.

We are left with a facsimile of the artist’s presence over the time and space of the six-year project; an (embodied) experience of *The National*. And at its end, the work performs its own end. Facing Hughes’ proclamation, *Every Act of Reading Performs the Work* finds meaning through a ‘process of not knowing’. The third act closes, in the artist’s own words, literally, with an ‘insistent openness’. (4)

(1) Quotes are from author’s conversation with Gothe-Snape and Burrell, 12 Jan 2021, unless otherwise noted.

(2) Anneke Jaspers and Agatha Gothe-Snape discuss the ‘stickiness’ of Gothe-Snape’s practice in ‘Passing Honey Between Hands’, in Hannah Mathews and Melissa Ratliff (eds), *Agatha Gothe-Snape: The Outcome is Certain*, Monash University Museum of Art & Perimeter Editions, Melbourne, 2020, pp.126–128.

(3) This description is borrowed from the title of *Living Sculpture (White)* (2013), which has a similar sculptural form to *Apparitional Surge* (2021).

(4) Email correspondence between author and Gothe-Snape, 26 Feb 2021.