

OCULA

OCULA CONVERSATION

A conversation with Agatha Gothe-Snape

Artist, Australia

Rachel Fuller | Sydney | 19 Oct 2015



Agatha Gothe-Snape. Photo: Aimee Crouch. Image courtesy the artist and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney

Sydney-based artist, Agatha Gothe-Snape is one of six Australian artists to be invited to participate in Performa 15, the New York City biennial dedicated to provoking new directions for live performance.

The arm of Performa dedicated to presenting the work of a particular country is called 'Pavilion Without Walls' and in 2015 it focused on Australia. Together with Gothe-Snape, artists commissioned to create new work for the biennial in November include Brian Fuata, Justene

Williams, Richard Bell, Zheng Mahler and Wrong Solo (a collaborative group comprising Brian Fuata, Agatha Gothe-Snape and Shane Haseman). A public program will accompany Pavilion Without Walls and will be organised by theorist and art historian, Terry Smith.

With an art practice based in text and performance Gothe-Snape will be presenting *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)* (2015), a choral performance which seeks to investigate the gravity of the orbit of the seminal, New York-based conceptual artist, Lawrence Weiner.



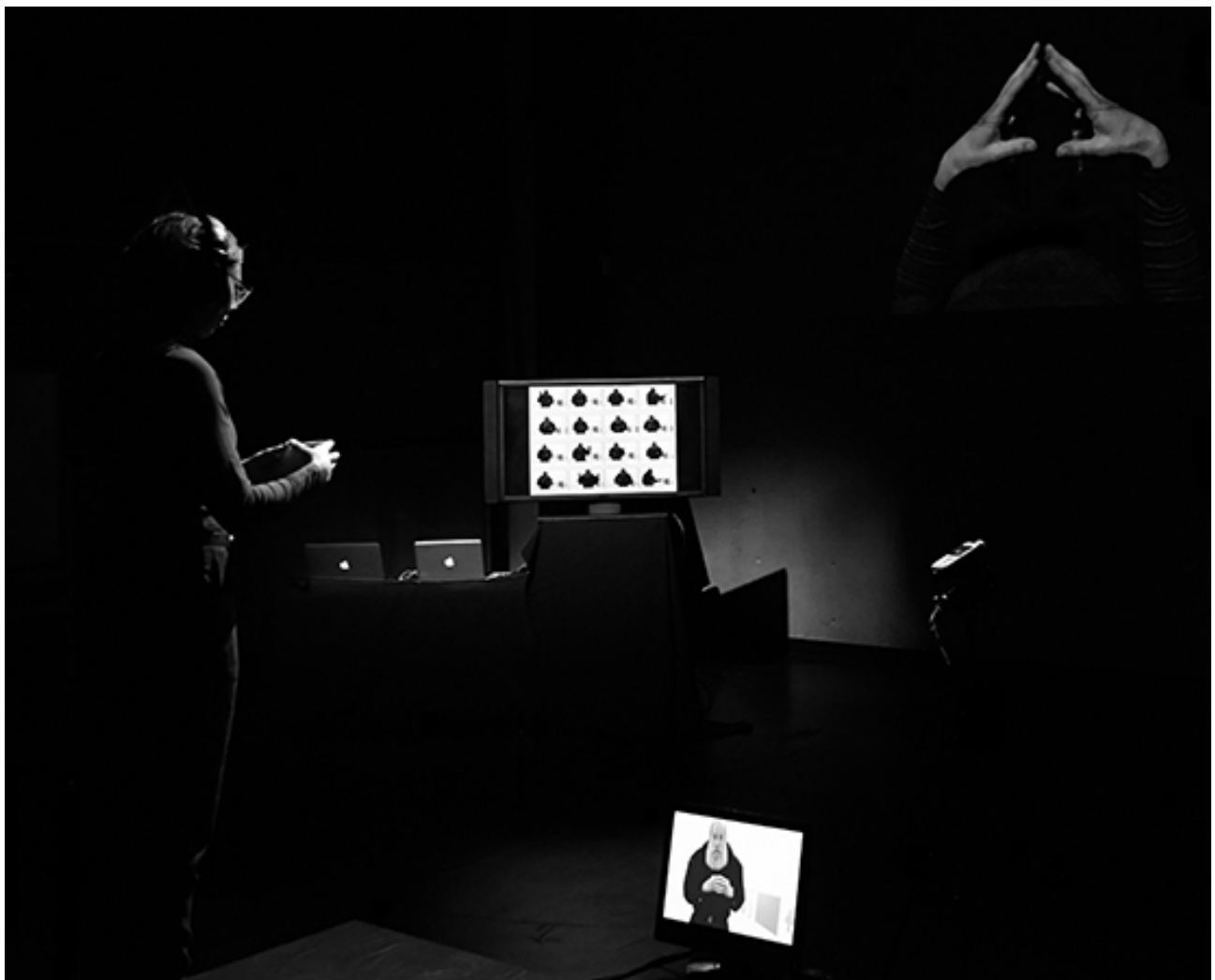
Agatha Gothe-Snape, Documentation of workshop for *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)*, 2015 at Carriageworks, Sydney Musical collaborator: Megan Clune. Choir: Sydney Antiphony. Photo credit: Yanni Kronenberg. Image courtesy Agatha Gothe-Snape and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney. *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)* was commissioned by Performa, Performance Space and the Keir Foundation for the Performa Biennial, 1-22 November 2015

‘I wanted to unpack his legacy and investigate why his work has resonated so much for me. And I wanted to question what it is about his use of text that is so influential,’ says Gothe-Snape. Rather than solely focus on the particular language of Weiner’s text works, Gothe-Snape has spent many hours scouring the internet for video footage of Weiner’s hands.

‘I had always known that I wanted to make some sort of score with Lawrence’s hand gestures. So much of his work is about the distance between his hands and the objects he makes, the dislocation between the output and the hand of the artist. And yet when I watch his hands I feel like they are actually the most potent part about him. They are huge and incredibly spindly and expressive, they carve through space as if he is sculpting. I find the paradox between that and the indifference of his works quite interesting,’ Gothe-Snape explains.

Gothe-Snape has catalogued Weiner's various gestures in order to create a musical score based on cheironomia, the way in which Byzantine choral performances were conducted without written musical instruction. A conductor leads the choir via a language of specific hand gestures that the choir is capable of understanding and interpreting vocally.

'I have imagined that Lawrence is always conducting a choir without knowing it. So it's almost like he has an inadvertent sound track. I wanted to ask myself, what is the sound of his charisma? And taking it further, what is the sound of the 20th century male artist's charisma that is so compelling? What is the sound of that gravity that keeps people returning to those figures at the gate of the canon?' says Gothe-Snape.



Agatha Gothe-Snape, Documentation of workshop for *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)*, 2015 at Carriageworks, Sydney Musical collaborator: Megan Clune. Choir: Sydney Antiphony. Photo credit: Yanni Kronenberg. Image courtesy Agatha Gothe-Snape and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney. *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)* was commissioned by Performa, Performance Space and the Keir Foundation for the Performa Biennial, 1-22 November 2015

One of the great challenges of the Performa commission, Gothe-Snape feels, has been to create a work for an audience. 'I believe all of my work is based in processes of performance and performance methodology and is ultimately performative regardless of whether I have an

audience or not at any specific moment.' Although in the initial stages of the commission RoseLee Goldberg, curator and founder of Performa, was very deliberate in her instructions to Gothe-Snape. 'RoseLee told me, 'This is an opportunity for you to work with a seated audience for a particular amount of time, to build an arc over time. To work with lighting, staging, casting...' So it has been a totally different way for me to work and it has been a huge challenge,' says Gothe-Snape.

Ultimately, *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)* (2015) will be a one-hour performance held in the concert hall of The New York Society for Ethical Culture. Located on the Upper West Side, it is a distinctive art nouveau building with hand-carved oak paneling and stained glass windows. Built in 1910, it continues to house the society and members of its humanist community.

Gothe-Snape had initially thought of the performance as situated within a more contemporary site for rhetorical delivery, such as a corporate lecture theatre. 'I said that I wanted a space of secular worship. Also because I am using Microsoft PowerPoint I was thinking a lot about TEDTalks and how this type of non-religious, secular rhetorical delivery functions now in contemporary life,' says Gothe-Snape.



Agatha Gothe-Snape, Documentation of workshop for *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)*, 2015 at Carriageworks, Sydney Musical collaborator: Megan Clune. Choir: Sydney Antiphony. Photo credit: Yanni Kronenberg. Image courtesy Agatha Gothe-Snape and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney. *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)* was commissioned by Performa, Performance Space and the Keir Foundation for the Performa Biennial, 1-22 November 2015

Although, as Gothe-Snape explains, she is more than happy with the site that has eventuated.

‘The Society for Ethical Culture is a secular religion, people who believe in humanist principles of enlightening yourself through thought and study and conversation. This is the site for the sermons of that religion, for the rhetorical delivery of that religion and I found that very interesting thinking about Lawrence’s rhetorical delivery and then this context of having this organisation in its twilight years. The site is a kind of emblem of 20th century utopianism.’

On stage, the choir will perform under the helm of the highly acclaimed New York-based experimental vocalist, Joan La Barbara. La Barbara will act as the ‘Transmitter’, conducting the choir via instruction from the videos of Weiner’s gestures compiled by Gothe-Snape. ‘The role of the Transmitter is essential because it is almost like they are the ones who, firstly mimic Weiner and then embody him and then come to transcend the weight of that legacy and that history. They come to realise that it is actually in their hands, the choir is following their hands and not the score,’ says Gothe-Snape.

Visually, the work will involve a small fold-back screen that will display the PowerPoint footage of Weiner’s hands. The hands of the transmitter, La Barbara will be projected large scale behind the choir. Produced by New York print collective, Print All Over Me, the choir will be dressed in neoprene costumes that will again display the graphic images of Weiner’s hands. ‘I chose neoprene because I wanted something that was not flowing and that had some PowerPoint aesthetic to it. It has a plasticity to it and something of the hardness of the screen,’ says Gothe-Snape.



Agatha Gothe-Snape, *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)_workshop*, 2015 AGS.ppsx, 2015. Microsoft PowerPoint (slide). Image courtesy Agatha Gothe-Snape and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney. *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)* was commissioned by Performa, Performance Space and the Keir Foundation for the Performa Biennial, 1-22 November 2015

With the bold and graphic repetition of both Weiner and La Barbara's hand gestures set against the backdrop of the decorative timber concert hall stage, it is not hard to imagine the visual strength of *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)* (2015). It is a multi-layered and generous work and it would appear that the aural elements of the performance will only further focus the piece on the meditative visions of the gestures.

'I hope it gives you the space to begin to understand what that gravity is, the language of gesture,' says Gothe-Snape. 'And whether these [Weiner's gestures] are a part of his monumentalisation in history. I think all of my work is in some way about how we deal with the shadows of the canon. And how we can transcend them but also allow them to be present.'

Gothe-Snape's *Rhetorical Chorus (LW)* for Performa 15 has been co-commissioned by Performance Space, Sydney and the Keir Foundation. She is represented by The Commercial Gallery, Sydney.—[O]