



Rhetorical Chorus, Agatha Gothe-Snape, Liveworks 2017, photos by Document Photography

## Agathe Gothe-Snape, Rhetorical Chorus

We enter the vast Carriageworks Space 17 via the stairs to find ourselves suspended high above a deep stage and before a huge screen, either side of which are monitors, small at this distance, on which appear in particular the gesturing hands of American artist Lawrence Weiner, often called a conceptualist and who himself creates works of scale and believes art to be a language. Clearly, from Gothe-Snape's program note, Weiner has been influential for her own practice. Onscreen, he speaks (unheard) and gestures (mostly in close-up). Onstage, two dancers 'become' his hands, left (Lizzie Thompson) and right (Brooke Stamp). In solo forays and bursts of synchronicity, the arms of each arc and shaped hands touch – the choreography's most interesting moments residing in the upper body as much as the lower.

Renowned American singer Joan La Barbara (The Transmitter) sits to one side while The Rhetorical Chorus of six populate the floor in various permutations and vocalise with La Barbara to composer Megan Alice Clune's gradually intensifying and increasingly layered score in Benjamin Carey's wraparound sound design. On the screen large regular slabs of colour – a reddish orange and blue – persistently glide, rearrange themselves and ultimately fuse, in part, into a vivid purple. This geometric abstraction, reminiscent of Elsworth Kelly's Colour Field paintings, seemed an apt pairing with Weiner's conceptualism.

That's the picture, but chronologically the work opens grandly, like a movie, with projected credits identifying the participating artists with letters that slip and fall, signifying the instability of language and the difficulty of linguistic representation that we associate with conceptual art (this is writ large in a video sequence within the body of the work with words falling from and returning to columns with fluid ease). We are suddenly lit and performance artist Brian Fuata (The Prologue) appears among us delivering Weiner utterances collated by Gothe-Snape. Fuata speaks the enigmatic text eloquently, but it's his intensifying dance of arms and hands that makes "gesture become language," of a kind. In the work's final passage, La Barbara will sing the same words, "transmitting" them to another aesthetic plane, rendering them quite beautiful. The music reaches a new level of intensity and the hard edge of conceptualism is softened. Or, as Gothe-Snape puts it in her program note, the work's trajectory "fragments the singular, rhetorical voice, dissolving it into a spectacle of transmission."

Her purpose, inspired by Weiner when she met him briefly in an airport, is essentially to humanise the artist, to separate him from his artwork, or a standard view of it, by "transforming his rhetorical delivery into new forms." She writes, "The sense of hierarchy that I had inherited and so willingly accepted – centre/periphery, old/young, male/female – dissolved. This was replaced by the reality of physical, temporal and visceral proximity: hair, bones, skin, sweat, aeroplane smell." This hierarchy is not necessarily, however, dissolved by The Rhetorical Chorus, a work of such scale that its stage performers remained distant figures and a new form hard to discern. While the dancing was engaging from time to time, the choreography and the deployment of the chorus lacked palpable overall shaping or a sense of collective being – heard in the singing but not otherwise experienced. The middle of the work felt increasingly amorphous, improvisational and distended. I've been told that in subsequent performances, the work's sequence durations, which are directly controlled by Gothe-Snape, were shortened, but this would address little of the work's spatial and focal problems; a work of this theatrical scale demands a stronger directorial and choreographic vision.

As to its standing in a festival of exploratory art, Rhetorical Chorus is, in terms of its staging and theatricality, in the lineage of what was once American experimental performance, from Cage and Cunningham to Glass and Wilson and Robert Ashley – with whom Joan La Barbara worked – and the image-makers of American contemporary performance, like Mabou Mines. Consequently, Rhetorical Chorus felt familiar. Though the work failed to surprise, I was intrigued by its subject, Weiner, sadly minus the promised "bones, skin, sweat," and what little I could grasp of him; by the alchemical transformation of rhetoric into song; and by an enduring, confounding, uncommunicative distrust of language. Weiner is still alive, but the ghost of his cool project is no less present, however warmed up by Gothe-Snape. That said, I admire the artist's ambition – works of scale in contemporary performance are, sadly, rare these days. I thought her staging striking, although overblown (including glossy cinematic framing). I relished the superb singing from La Barbara (why wasn't her presence trumpeted about Sydney?) and the Chorus and in particular the magnificent mutation of Brian Fuata's prologue into La Barbara's finale. Something of Rhetorical Chorus has stayed with me, like a dream memory, a keeping and compacting of the best bits into a memorable if fragile whole, while feeling haunted by a sense of a vision that looks further back than forward.

In her "transmission" experiment, Gothe-Snape has asked if she can 'dissolve' the influence of a dominant artworld figure on herself, and presumably her generation, and see him as a fellow skin and bone human. In the work's own terms, she achieves some of that, but without breaking from the constraints of a conceptualist vision (she well might not want to) and without rigorously addressing an inherited postmodern form.