

Agatha Gothe-Snape's *Late Sculpture* places two stark, and at first glance seemingly unrelated, elements in conversation. The first and most physically impressive element is a rectangular steel self-supporting sculpture; hand forged and sealed in a white industrial coating. It is a relic of late and high modernism, recalling the works of Richard Serra, Anthony Caro, Eduardo Chillida, and locally Ron Robertson-Swann. It carries with it these artists' monumentalism, and occasionally dogmatic formalism. Like the works of these artists, Gothe-Snape's formidable object operates by reduction, the reduction to purity, and the minimalism of an essence. It idealises and formalises unity, while fetishising the material products of industrialisation. If not a 'relic', then at very least it is an unmistakable ghost of the recent – though somehow distant – past.

The second element in the exhibition is a text-piece reproduced as a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation (a soon-to-be-artefact of the post-industrial world) – *Heavy Reading* (2013). One function of this work is to narrate the sculptural object. Some background is necessary here. Gothe-Snape was recently recounted a story by an eyewitness to a particularly bitter disagreement between two established Sydney-based sculptors. The disagreement occurred in 1992, at a party, and descended into physical violence. The dispute was ostensibly over the direction of an art school, though incorporated the always fascinating miniature and ideological differences that arise from the formalist schools. This event was transcribed by Gothe-Snape in the moment of its retelling, and is re-presented unabridged and unedited in *Heavy Reading*.

Given this context, the conversation between the two elements becomes clearer. We have a late modern object and a fierce late conversation about the direction and stakes of this and like objects. Or similarly, we have an oral history recorded and documented by the artist, and a representation of the artefact that this history encompasses. Gothe-Snape has staged and directed a dramatic theatrical event, where the text piece functions as a script and the sculpture as both stage set and actor. It is a *Living Sculpture*, animated by conflicts.

But what is the dénouement of this mise en scène? How does Gothe-Snape approach and attempt to resolve this conflict? What side of the argument, what side of history and the object, does Gothe-Snape take? We could see the work as a cynical exercise. It is possibly a form of parody, and likely ironic in humor. After all, who comes to blows over the direction of modernist art in 1992 – some decades after the grand claims of art's modernism have run out of steam, or been refuted and democratised within the lukewarm embrace of postmodern and later contemporary art's pluralism? Sure, it might have made sense for Malevich and Tatlin to have it out over their competing and then highly innovative and revolutionary claims to 'truth' in art; or for the earnest Abstract Expressionists to come to bar room blows over the direction of America's first and only national avant-garde. But artists in Australia, and in the early 90's no less, some 15,000 kilometers away and three decades after the party has ended? The notion appears so anachronistic, so sadly beyond the compass of the historical moment, that Gothe-Snape's restaging of the event is possibly intended to incite laughter.

Thankfully this isn't the case, or at least only one part of it. *Late Sculpture* is not limited to postmodern irony. It is not exclusively

self-referential, or implying that art (or its innovation) is exhausted, and a matter only of continuous, skeptical quotations of itself. It is not indivisible from cynicism, echoing a self-conscious stance that undermines sincerity, feeling and expression, while similarly ruling out the existence of 'truthful' claims about the ontology of art. While these well-worn tropes are evident in *Late Sculpture* another contradictory pull is at work.

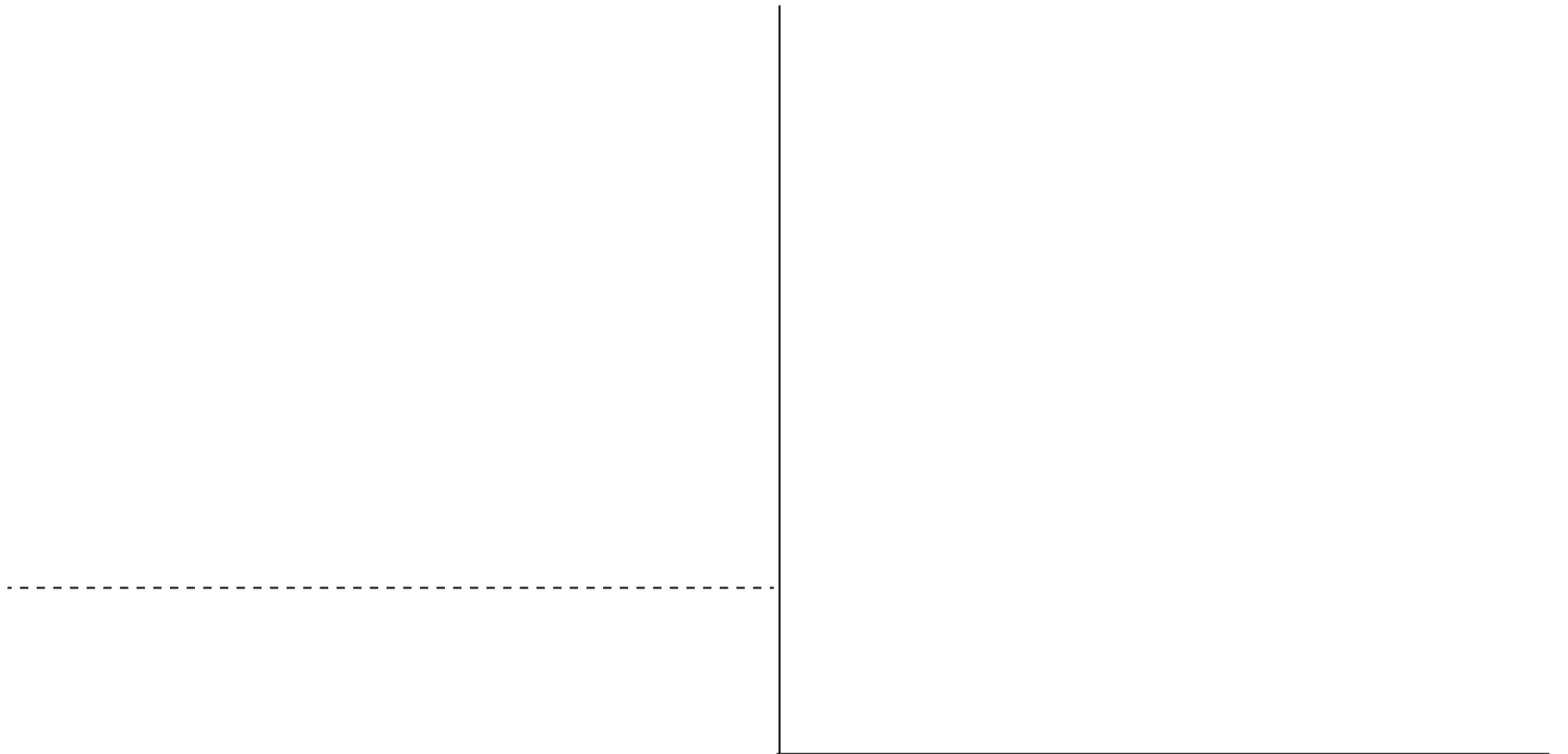
This pull is evident in Gothe-Snape's meticulous restaging of the imaginary sculpture, which lovingly reinstates what Michael Fried would have described – critically – as late modern sculptures 'theatricality' and 'objecthood'. In other words, there is an affection and fidelity here to the materiality of the work, albeit a materiality that is effaced by the addition of flat, monochromatic paint to the surface of the sculpture. And there is a real desire to foster the challenge this period of sculpture threw down to the ways in which the viewer develops a relationship with the object; a challenge that ultimately creates an interactive experience between the viewer and the work. Further, Gothe-Snape's desire to restage this conflict of Australian art history and its competing models of modernism emphasises the importance of local contexts and histories, rather than deriding the event via some re-inscribed and condescending notion of Australia's peripheral relationship to the centre. This strategy recalls Gothe-Snape's *Every Artist Remembered*, which inscribed local, international, past and present art histories across the same the surface. More importantly, there is a kind of awe (possibly nostalgic) in this re-staging of the high-stakes available to the bickering modernists. There is a yearning for the narrative still available to them but lost in our malaise of indifference. What would it actually feel like, Gothe-Snape asks, for it all to mean that much?

These stakes represent a danger Gothe-Snape wants to reproduce, and it is a danger well played out in the materiality of the object – in its weight, its scale, in its potential to maim. This danger, which is also a reality of the production and forging of this type of sculptural work, is performed or imitated in *Heavy Reading*. It echoes through the corrosive sound that frames the text, and in the impressions of a red-hot welding that swell behind the argument. In this sense a conversation proper arises between the elements of *Late Sculpture*, as it is the object that in turn narrates the text, which talks back to the text, reasserting its presence in the argument.

*Late Sculpture* strives to accurately weigh up the argument, presenting a position on both sides simultaneously. Placing a now quixotic event and object of history before the viewer, its final reflection is at once skeptical and admiring, idealistic and cynical. In this sense the installation chooses to explore a Romantic variant of irony, offering equilibrium of opposing attitudes and values, rather than a commitment to a single outlook. The work is therefore reflective, rather than dismissive or nihilistic in the manner of much postmodern irony (which is actually ironic, given the supposed relativism of postmodern irony). As a reflective work, *Late Sculpture* aims to reveal the value of the other side and limits of ones own. It holds to a belief that challenging art escapes attachment and orthodoxy, leaving itself open to the true conflicts of irony, which are also the dynamic conflicts of history.

Shane Haseman, April, 2013.

# LATE SCULPTURE



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