

How to draw a spleen:

Georgia Sagri: *IASI, Stage of Recovery* at de Appel

Georgia Sagri asked us to spend the next 30 minutes drawing a spleen or several spleens.<sup>1</sup> The results were indelible: one student used thick graphite to show a spleen in revolt, mimicking the rhythmic diaphragmatic halt of a body trying to vomit. Another student shaded a light shadow under theirs—the spleen as a floating object. Some of us had prior knowledge of spleens. Mine remained unknowable. When it came to Sagri, she held up her first drawing—chalk pastel fingers that made a rapid swoosh down the page—that showed the movement of the spleen. The second was more punctuated, showing the spleen’s rhythm. The last was a powdery tangerine, its temperature. We, a few participants of this year’s de Appel Curatorial Programme, were invited to a Zoom seminar with performance students from the Athens School of Fine Arts, where Sagri recently accepted a tenured position to organise and lead the Academy’s first Performance Studio. This was her inaugural course, called *Fantastic Anatomies*. Concurrently at de Appel in Amsterdam, a solo exhibition of Sagri was being held by curator and director Monika Szewczyk called *Georgia Sagri: IASI, Stage of Recovery* that began on October 23 and ran until January 18 of 2021.

In her words: “In Greek, IASI refers to the time and the process in which the body changes through illness. There is no such thing as recuperation and a healthy normal state.”<sup>2</sup> The research Sagri conducts is about the body, the state, and illness. It must be noted that her formulation of this trifecta is perfunctory, as the research is really about freedom or what is yet to come. When asked this year if I am feeling sick, it is difficult to distinguish whether I am physically afflicted or am just sick of it all. There is no meaningful distinction between knowing and feeling. On October 24, the sun dipped into the horizon at 6:25pm in Amsterdam. As the bright hands of day folded into night and the glass-clad Aula of de Appel became windows to the great unknown, Sagri began to breathe. In plain dark clothes, Sagri inhaled sharply, then softly. She blew air, amplified by the two microphones set up on the floor. Moving her body, she expanded her arms, drew them in again, pushed out her breath and beckoned with an outstretched arm to take breath in. *Breathing (7-1-7) with embryac position / Windface* held its place in the Aula, the auditorium of the former Pascal College built in 1969 by functionalism architect Ben Ingwersen, and what is now the Broedplaats Lely, a collective studio building or—if translated directly from Dutch—a ‘breeding ground’ for artists.

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<sup>1</sup> The word spleen seeks its inheritance from Ancient Greek, idiomatically equal to heart in English. In the tradition of the four bodily humors, where a balance of these liquids was said to dictate mood, the English of the 18th century characterised the spleen as hysterical, a hypochondriac. The French consider it melancholic. In German, quirky or eccentric. The Talmud calls it the organ of laughter. Traditional Chinese medicine sees it as the Yin in partnership with the Yang that is the stomach.

<sup>2</sup> Georgia Sagri in conversation with directors of three institutions supporting IASI: Daria Khan of Mimosa House, London; Olga Hatzidaki and Maria Thalia Carras of Tavros, Athens; and Monika Szewczyk of de Appel, Amsterdam held online on 23 October 2020.

For around 45 minutes, Sagri gesticulated and made guttural sounds. A kind of throat singing from the future, I fought against my urge to read this new lexicon and rested, out of my depth. I lost the rhythm of my heart in hers, turned into a gas—definitely not a whisper!—entranced by the demand of her feet on the speckled maroon vinyl floor. Each movement was made with great effort, precision, and conviction. As the performance drew to a close, Sagri walked past us and toward the back of the auditorium. No gaze left the site where she was. No applause. As if we could hold our breath in order to hold that space forever. The disciplined and revolutionary freedom wrought by her body and propelled by her core to give and take constituted that eternal moment. My eyes drifted up to the ceiling, where a colourful seminar of chalk and charcoal drawings hung. These were the findings of her research. Like drawing her spleen, these were made with hands coated in pigment—remnants and body notes like gesture drawing exercises. Their shapes face ours. Behind, on the auditorium stage sat another stage. Square, the height of a typical bed, with a light wooden frame, and a crimson mattress. The stage of recovery, and where she held one-to-one sessions with participants from which her research drawings were derived. Transparently flanking the room were selected archival images from de Appel's avant-garde history of performance art including documentation by Ulay and Marina Abramović, Laurie Anderson, Tiong Ang, Janine Antoni, Ben d'Armagnac, Christine Borland, Huang Yong Ping, among others.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the three exhibition periods of *IASI*, which took place at Mimosa House in London, and will take place at Tavros in Athens, Sagri held and will hold one-to-one sessions. In these sessions, she teaches techniques to help people build routines to learn from their particular physical condition, to learn through their own systems, to begin recuperation. Voicing becomes a kind of tuning, where shifting the register of your voice begins to vibrate your insides differently. One-to-one is a clarification of how political processes happen. The difference between a rally and a protest is that a rally is organised to beg the question, whereas a protest posits one. Namely, a protest is where people—one-to-one—try to work out how a group of people can be a group of people together. Thus, it can have no name and only pragmatic use of the words that structure demands. In conversation with Sagri, Silvia Federici notes: “The important thing is organizing structures that make what is implicit in the work more visible, and this has to be done collectively. You also need to ensure that this other vision that you want to bring out is not normalized. Because it is placed in a context where it is neutralized.”<sup>4</sup>

In the *Fantastic Anatomies* session I took part in, Sagri begins by outlining the origin of our understanding of performance today, tracing its lineage to the Industrial Revolution and the performance of the machine, the product, and performance reviews of workers. The evaluation of

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<sup>3</sup> Others include: Waldo Bien & Velimir Abramović, Gerrit Dekker, Pepe Espaliú, Pedro Cabrita Reis, Willie Doherty, Simone Forti, Dan Graham, Andreas Gursky, Julia Heyward, Toine Horvers, Jana Haimsohn, Pieter Laurens Mol, James Lee Byars, Otto Muehl, Gina Pane, Sef Peeters, Allen Ruppersburg, Carolee Schneemann, Doris Salcedo, Thomas Schutte, Sarah Cameron Sunde, and Albert van der Weide. Assembled by the research of de Appel intern and scenographer Ariadne Sergouloupoulou.

<sup>4</sup> *Georgia Sagri*, a sort of reader and not quite monograph published on the occasions of the exhibitions *Georgia Sagri* at Kunstverein Braunschweig from 2 December 2017 to 11 February 2018, and *Georgia Sagri and I* at Portikus from 21 April to 17 June 2018 by said art spaces.

these performances are structured by the factory which in turn is structured by its engagement with capitalism. An art space can function to enframe as well, delineating the guidelines for which performance art can be evaluated, determining its course. What else gets in the way of imagining our futures? In the wake of revolution, what right do we have to recovery? How to not be guilty—both in alleged legally-binded charges and in learning how to let go. How to leave a place behind while carrying it with you, a weight that pulls you into the undercurrents crashing against your insides. Your organs engage in hand-to-hand combat, escalating to internal warfare, and your outsides begin to grow ashen. If the hyper-capitalist era has doomed us all to physiological ills and pathologies, then Sagri's research can show us possible ways to heal. She indicates that to think of one's right to recovery is to assume your body is sovereign. I may not have the right to apologise but I can decide to let go.

For documenta 14 in 2017, Sagri began to establish voice routines with over 200 public participants across Kassel and Athens. *Dynamis* is a part of her decade-long body of research into recovery, which can be considered part of her work *IASI*. She continues to make grammar. To parse, wellness cannot be defined since the notion of being well means being entangled with continuous change. Thereby, recovery becomes an innermost commitment to ourselves and others to change. Perhaps this is what Bruce Lee meant when he advised: "Be water, my friend,"<sup>5</sup> or at the very least, this is how it was practiced in Hong Kong last year. *IASI* is against psychoanalysis. *IASI* is psychosomatic practice. *IASI* cannot be put into words. Sagri is not interested in language, but in voice. Sagri is interested in sound, not what is being said. The words she does impart are incendiary. The curatorial text posits: "How well do we breathe? How to inhale as fully as we exhale? How to give as much as we take?"

Famously, Sagri is known for being one of the main organisers of Occupy Wall Street of New York in the summer of 2011. One of her actions was to occupy Artists Space calling on people to "Take that which is already yours." To occupy a non-profit art space without demands for the space does not make an event nor does it garner a debate on the role of arts in politics or the autonomy of art. The address is made *to the people* to enact their citizenship. Art is not special per se, and it is definitely part of the political process whether it likes it or not. Sagri trained as a cellist before moving into the performance beyond performance she does now. She has studied Noh theater and Kabuki to learn how to be still, and Gamelan music to learn how to think with musicality. Everyday, she moves and breathes to build her language which does not yet exist for people who already do. I think of Audre Lorde, who was known to say: "I am doing my work. Are you doing yours?"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In full, he had said: "Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless—like water. You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend."

<sup>6</sup> This came up in a close reading session called *heart forever* on 1 November 2020. *Dream of Europe: Reading Audre Lorde* organised by de Appel in celebration of the publishing of *Dream of Europe: selected seminars and interviews 1984-1992* (2020) edited by Mayra A. Rodriguez Castro with a preface by Dagmar Schultz, Lorde's longtime friend and collaborator in Berlin.

Witness Report by Hera Chan, who was present on:

24 October 2020, Sunset (18:25- CET)

Performance called *Breathing (7-1-7) with embryac position / Windface*

24 November 2020 (14:00-17:00 CET)

Stage of Recovery Workshop

27 November 2020 (15:00-17:00 CET)

Joint Meeting with Athens School of Fine Arts

30 November 2020, Sunrise (8:27 CET- )

Performance in memorial for Ulay