

Interview

Georgia Sagri

“It’s almost like we try again and again
to assume that we are all on the same planet.
No, we are not all on the same planet”

by Ross Simonini



Attempt. Come., 2016, performance, duration 20h,
Documenta 14, Athens. Photo: Stathis Mamalakis.
Courtesy the artist



Georgia Sagri's multifarious work for Documenta 14 involved dozens of sculptures, a short film, a manifestolike text and a variety of performances in multiple countries. All of these activities, collectively titled *Dynamis* (2017), revolve around an approach to the body she has been developing for years, and which, for the first time, she here attempted to "transmit" in a series of workshops over eight months to 200 people. In action, this training manifests as something like a Dada event, a dance rehearsal and an acting class, with a group of participants she refers to as a chorus (as in Greek theatre). Pairs of people walk, run, hum, count, crouch, dance, yell and chant, and at the centre is Sagri, a demanding, fastidious conductor who speaks in half-direct, half-ambiguous commands: "Concentrate on the breathing," she says. "Not on what you are supposed to be while you are doing this!"

At one point the workshop was open to the public, and audience members could engage in dialogue with Sagri. Her work has often encouraged viewer participation, such as *Art Strike* (2013), performed at the Lyon Biennale, in which audience members were brought, one by one, to stand onstage until all the seats were empty.

Most of Sagri's work orbits around performance, and yet she dislikes the term and usually attempts to twist its parameters, especially those related to space and time. Many of her works take place over long, unbroken periods. *Dynamis* occurred 'simultaneously and in continuum' in both Athens and Kassel for six days this last June, with performers moving slowly, deliberately and in strikingly unusual ways among Documenta's attendees. The performance also spilled out of the galleries

and museums and onto the street, a gesture of social and political engagement that has been present since Sagri's early works, some of which were a part of the Occupy Wall Street movement. In *Polytechnic* (1999) she stood in a glass cage, wrapped in bandages to commemorate studio protests in Athens, and in *The New Kind* (2003), a video for the Athens Biennial, she crawled through city streets with bound hands and feet. Born, raised and still partly living in Athens, she has said of the city that 'every time you go out for a walk there is a protest. It's impossible to not be politically involved.'

"When these two groups of people met, they started crying, because they realised they were doing almost the same movements – without me directing anyone, without me trying to impose any choreography"

Her sculptures, too, are performative. For her work *Unethical Nests* (2011) she strapped plastic dog transporters under the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway in New York. For *Dynamis*, she created blown-glass 'scores' of the breathing and counting practices in her workshops.

Whatever her chosen media, Sagri's work offers an intense and sometimes humorous exploration of the human body, especially

Dynamis, Breathing score I'n (detail), 2017, handblown glass, steel, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

its place in contemporary capitalist culture. She often pushes her own body to its limits, usually through exhaustive, repeated movements – twitching, jarring facial expressions, screaming, crying – and to do so she has drawn upon the manners of a used-car salesman, Bruce Lee, ancient drumming rituals and iPod commercials.

For the following interview, I Skyped with Sagri, who was in Athens for the final days of Documenta 14.

ROSS SIMONINI *What have you been teaching in your workshops?*

GEORGIA SAGRI The point of the workshops was to share my practice, which is primarily based on physical and mental exercises that I've been developing and practising by myself in solitude for ten years now. It was not an easy process, as it was the first time that I was actually sharing this very personal practice with others. I had to find ways to transmit, and at the same time to observe how it affects other bodies and help those bodies to adjust to the training, as well as to find individuals willing to participate in a six-day nonstop performance with me. At the opening of Documenta 14 in Athens the workshop was open to the public, and a group of 20 stayed to be part of the performance in June – during the opening of Documenta in Kassel.

RS *Who took part in the workshops?*

GS Many different people – artists, dancers, actors, sociologists, anthropologists, writers, musicians, singers and students of the schools of the arts from Kassel and Athens. Most of them were very enthusiastic and curious about performance art, and some wanted to go through the workshop to learn more about performance



Soma in orgasm; as leg, as hand, as brain, as car, as heart, as breast, as sex, 2017
(installation view, Documenta 14, Athens). Photo: Angelos Giotopoulos.
Courtesy the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London



but also its relation and connection to their field of interest. For example, the dancers were very much interested in breathing exercises, and many of them benefited from the training to realise basic mechanics of the skeleton, the posture and diaphragm. But it wasn't only for me to teach someone a fixed method, but to be able to continue developing it myself.

RS *This sort of self-training, do you apply it to every one of your performances?*

GS Exactly, because it is a training, it has no endpoint. It can be a preparation for any performance but also it can stay as training.

RS *And the workshop is a training for anybody interested in movement.*

GS In understanding their bodies, basically. Understanding their physical capacities, and the individual and unique characteristics they carry. Because each person has very specific and unique capacities and conditions, the way we experience the world is very different.

It's almost like we try again and again to assume that we are all on the same planet. No, we are not all on the same planet. This planet holds many different planets, many different organisms that are really totally different from each other and experiencing this place in a totally different way. So I have to be okay with that.

Most of the time, we're trying to adapt to something that we see, and we try to mimic, and the better we do this, the more we form our bodies and qualities. But each person has their own conditions and their own capacities to exist and experience everything, so I understand training as a way to abandon this idea of mastery – mimicking someone – in order

to acquire and understand the unique qualities that each of us carry; that is, in my opinion, taking care of the self. Which for me at least is also the base, the foundation, for the medium of performance. Or any kind of medium of using the body as primal material.

RS *Because you feel that, ultimately, mastery is just imitation?*

GS Because mastery has been the foundation of what we call the 'nation-state'. The performing arts were created to support the idea of representation through reproduction.

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The performer is representing the citizen onstage, and the characters that support existing hierarchies, and this in my opinion has already happened a lot. We have mastered performing. We have mastered reproducing figures, but we haven't acquired the tools and analyses and training of beings. Because when you have representation, you have also particular roles. So for example, in the theatre, you

Dynamis (detail), 2017, 28 sculptures, ten breathing scores, and performances for Documenta 14, Kassel.
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have – still – the representation of the master, servant, woman, man, the representation of the difference between animal and man.

What I'm trying to do with my work is to establish a field that doesn't have fixed roles. I'm starting from very basic things, from understanding the mechanics of the body, appreciating the variety of organisms. On the other hand, because I'm working with this body, with my body, I need to analyse and understand it socially, physically and mentally. And in order to do that I create tools, tricks, training for myself to go along with an activity that exposes specific parameters of time and space. With performance, we assume there is already a form that is presented. No, that's performing arts. What I'm trying to say is that with performance, we acquire the capacity to be ready to perform.

RS *How is that capacity achieved?*

GS For Documenta 14 there was a particular trajectory that this piece was trying to grasp. That is, how to create a sociality. And this action happened at the same time in both cities, Athens and Kassel. *Dynamis* was a priori taking place in the same field – even if it was happening in two different cities, the piece was constructed as happening in one place, in one field, in one space. It was a very difficult task because – and that's the reason why this training was necessary – the people that participated in the performance had to actually do these actions for six days nonstop, they had to not only physically prepare but they also had to admit to themselves that they can do something that they don't necessarily believe logically. It doesn't work for them logically. But then it works for them emotionally. And when these two groups of people met in Kassel on the last day of the work,



Polytechnic, 1999, performance in the streets of Athens.
Photo: Dimitris Diakoumopoulos. Courtesy the artist



they started crying, because they realised they were doing almost the same movements – without me directing anyone, without me trying to impose any choreography. And they were doing them because they were coexisting in the same field of sociality, of space and time.

RS *You have said that this work orbits around the concept of orgasm. Is this the central idea?*

GS Dynamis was the central character: Dynamis is orgasmic force, not exactly strength, and not exactly power. The force that makes people transform, change their lives – personally but also socially. So, it's not the orgasm of sexual intercourse, it's the orgasmic force, which makes people come together and change the course of their lives. The orgasmic force is the space and time we can give to each other to understand our differences, where we actually understand what needs to be transformed. It's also the political or social moments that we understand as revolutions.

RS *This work was performed in the street. For you, does this make the work a form of social activism, where you're trying to engender some kind of social engagement?*

GS I will say that it is a training of emotional capacity that can be shared. And that capacity can create a field of understanding and imagining another way, another space, another time. A common time. The participants, the performers and myself, we tried to touch that moment.

RS *Are you breathing in prescribed ways for the work?*

GS When I'm using the performance as a medium, I don't assume, "Okay, I'm breathing". It's a privilege. It's better to be a little bit more

careful in this – understanding our heartbeats, our breathing, our walking, our gestures.

RS *You began as a musician.*

GS I was trained as a musician from the age of five.

RS *Do you think of your work as rooted in music?*

GS My work is rooted in understanding the score's function during the performance of a piece. That's how I got more interested in visual arts.

RS *What kind of music were you trained in?*

GS Classical cello.

RS *The term 'score' suggests music.*

GS For me, it was the opposite of musical scoring. I was observing the breathing, and I was giving it a reality in blown glass. The breathing was scoring me.

RS *A documentation.*

GS But this documentation, all of it is in the field of art. You know, we don't just make tools that actually work. Some tools are also there to not work. [Laughs] Which is very good! Because we don't have someone to tell us, "Oh, it's not working".

RS *You think of your training as something that doesn't have to work, as well?*

GS Of course! Yeah, of course.

RS *It's just something that you present, and then after that there's no intention with it?*

Dear all, 2013, performance at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon. Photo: Blaise Adilon.
© the artist. Courtesy the artist and Biennale de Lyon

GS I don't present the training. I'm training. The training is to be trained. That's it. Like in music: to be able to make a note sound, you need to work and train for many years. For some people at some point, they have a sound. Others don't. That doesn't mean that they haven't trained. They have been trained. And that's the beautiful part – that you train to make the sound, but it doesn't mean that it's going to sound. But the whole training, the whole calibration of the listening, the position, the everyday need to work on the sound to make it sound – that's the whole point, not to make the sound. The way that I'm working doesn't have an end, it doesn't have a Beethoven.

RS *You seem to resist hierarchy in general.*

GS Yes. I'm really not very comfortable with hierarchies.

RS *But you embrace structure.*

GS Structure is not hierarchy. Structure is part of the creative force, the chaos, which is surrounding us. We try to make sense of it. We try to create a trajectory of our own path and our own understanding of what this chaos is. That's not hierarchy. This is the base for creation. If I was assuming everything around me was fine, I wouldn't have any need to make sense of it, to make something out of it. I'm interested in the moment when the chaos takes form and materialises.

Ross Simonini is an artist, writer, musician and documentarian based in New York and California