

Georgia Sagri: Stage of Recovery

When Georgia Sagri arrived in New York from Athens to study at Columbia University on a Fullbright scholarship in 2006, she noted that New Yorkers rarely left the house without the purpose of consuming something. This obsessive need to shop and fill ourselves in an attempt to feel better or mask pain became even more evident during the lockdowns over the past year and a half. How might we exist in public and not consume, Sagri asks. Without a focus on consumption, might we be better able to listen to one another, truly hear – even heal?

Sagri is an artist, activist, anarchist and a founding member of Occupy Wall Street, the people's resistance movement initiated in 2011 to protest against economic inequality. Reflecting on her time growing up in Greece, Sagri comments on how Athens is still considered the birthplace of democracy, yet she is sceptical of this political narrative because the foundation of Greek society was organised by the aristocracy for its own interests, excluding women and those counted as slaves, including household servants. It is not that these groups were not represented, but that they did not exist in this political formation. How does this play out now?

Stage of Recovery is the first publication of Sagri's writing; it is a collection of essays, reports about care work, political missives pertaining to the internal negotiations of Occupy and poetry written over the past decade. The book charts her time as an activist in New York, her thoughts on being a performance artist, her pushback against forms of representation and delegation, the power of 'breath work' in recovery, and her experiences working with art institutions across Europe and the US. The texts are direct and compelling, embodying her drives: pain and anger, but hope too. Uniting them are questions of what it means to be an artist today and what Sagri calls 'spiritual anarchy', an awakening that might see us crack the deathly constraints of capitalism or, at the very least, the problems with our arts institutions.

In her short, insightful essay 'Death', Sagri examines the violence within that underpins our actions and inaction, how it keeps us in a place of stasis from which we cannot recover: 'consumer addiction is now what brings us together; an addiction to amnesia, supplements, distraction, an addiction to not taking responsibility. Accept we are part of the violence that is being created.' Sagri questions why we can't work through

collective responsibility or suppressed pain without an institution and, indeed, why pain has become just a topic addressed within institutions. She calls this white privilege. Either we have each other or we have institutions.

In order to truly change, Sagri stipulates, we need to step into the pain and accept our individual and collective responsibility; 'it's not about finding out who did the violence, but knowing that it was us'. A continued internalisation and inaction will turn our brains and bodies against us, she says; this is the body under capitalism and this is the territory of spiritual anarchy, 'in anarchy, meaning that it cannot fulfil any pre-existing agenda but it does fulfil ethics: the ethics of freedom to come'.

In self-organising, Sagri believes anyone can make change. In the essay 'What is Occupy?', she writes: 'to assemble in public, neither to consume, nor to work, nor to entertain yourself, but to be critical, to meet with others and to bring issues (political, social, everyday issues) into the public sphere and to talk about them openly without fear – is a threat.' There are further texts and correspondences throughout *Stage of Recovery* that continue this line of thought. Sagri talks at length about the General Assembly, a form set up for gathering and listening, alongside Occupy. It was intended as an unauthored, inclusive space in which people could talk freely in their neighbourhoods and start to peel away their social roles, whether as artists, invigilators, directors, curators, visitors or activists for example. When there was a feeling expressed or discussed, you stepped into it and felt it.

Throughout the book, Sagri reminds us to take responsibility as a right not bestowed upon you by a board of trustees or the market or anyone else. 'What does it mean to pretend to be a citizen like this', Sagri asks, before affirming that responsibility 'must be taken affectively in the body, because people are suffering without reason'.

I know the problems, as many reading this book will too: the unspoken hierarchies and contradictions in our arts institutions. In my role as a curator I am part of these problems, I am them and this book is, too. So why don't I revolt – is it because it is an action that cannot be delegated to others? Sagri affirms 'my only imperative as an artist, which is transmitted through my actions, is that no one should lose faith in their own momentum, their power, their personal capabilities'. *Stage of Recovery* is about all of us. It asks us to crack open our pain, acknowledge it and then find an action forward. This is where we can start. Her words are not intended as something for us to hold onto or to quote, they are for us to hear.

Georgia Sagri, *Stage of Recovery*, 2021, Divided, 160pp, pb, £10.99, 978 1 916425 07 1.

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Georgia Sagri, *Breathing (5-1-5)*, 2020, performance, 5 March 2020, Mimosa House, London