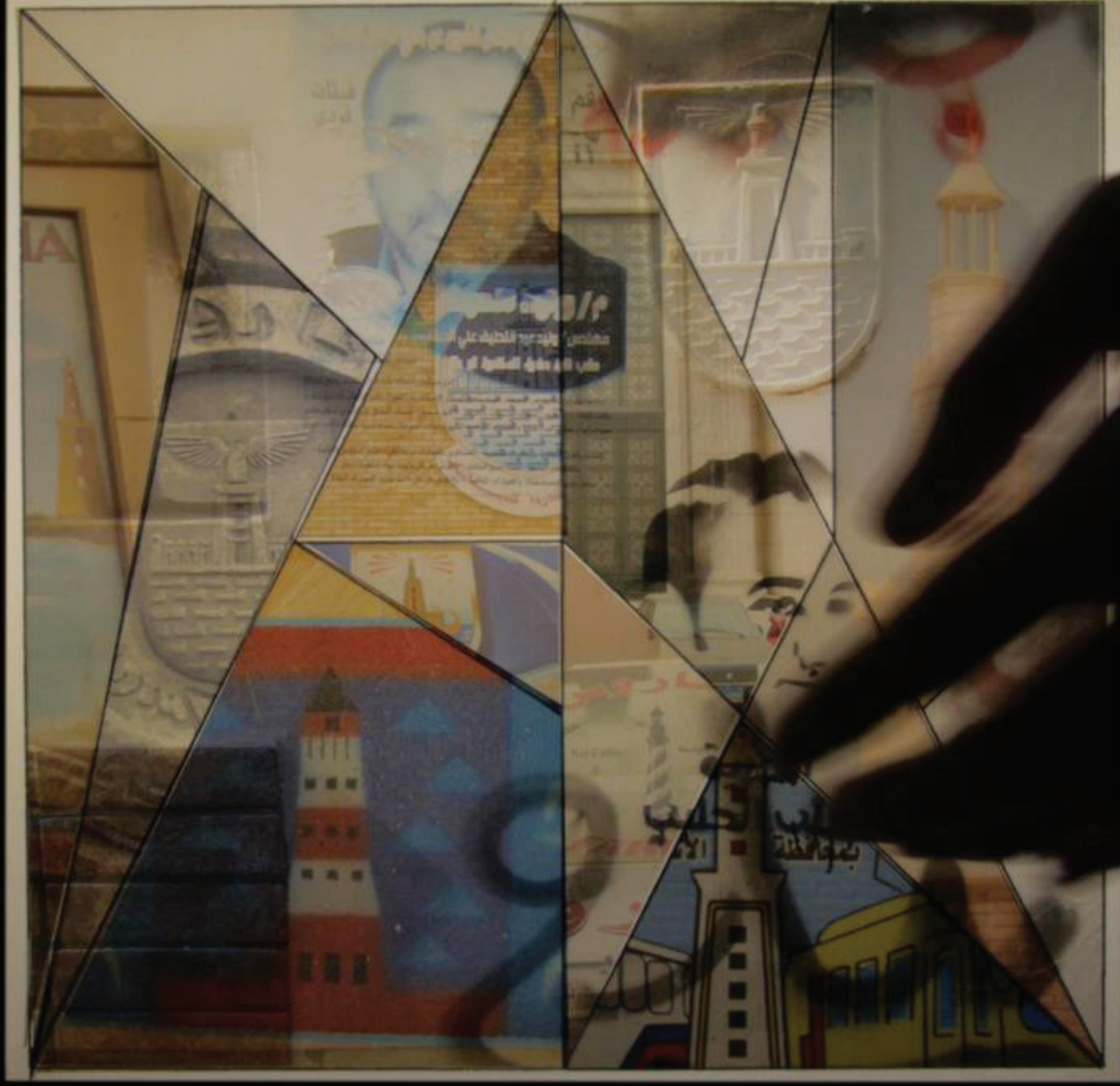


ELLIE GA

SQUARE, OCTAGON, CIRCLE



I.

Sun, clear skies, and a calm sea can be misleading as it is the swell under the surface that affects diving around the Pharos Lighthouse site. The swell is said to have a mind of its own as it lingers long after the winds and the waves have changed direction . . . It's the messenger of what happened before: an aftercast.

—Ellie Ga, Dispatch 4, "Notes from Alex"¹

Much of Ellie Ga's work unfolds like the "aftercast" she describes above: it mobilizes, and is mobilized by, the past—history, myth, and memory—and amasses a palimpsest of traces, like an ancient city's architecture. Consider, for example, one of the points of departure for her latest body of work: a card from a bespoke set of fifty-two that Ga animates—electrifies, even—in her performance *Reading the Deck of Tara*, a focus of her 2011 solo exhibition in New York. The deck was inspired in part by her five-month journey in 2007 as an artist in residence on the French climate-change research vessel *Tara*, which was exploring the uppermost reaches of the Arctic. As the *Tara* drifted in the ice, Ga became a "poet of the quotidian"; she could often be found recording the crew's activities and researching through the long, dark polar night. From this formidable experience, she has produced books, videos, and slideshows, though she is perhaps best known for her performance-lectures.²

¹ Website accessed July 16, 2013: <http://notesfromalexandria.wordpress.com>.

² In the performance-lecture *The Fortunetellers*, for example, Ga superimposes photographs, drawings, and maps on an overhead projector while recounting detailed narratives about the excursion and simultaneously unpacking a vast constellation of subjects—from word etymologies and Greek myths to modern day explorers and chronobiologists.

Ga's short performances for *Reading the Deck of Tara* take an intimate form: a one-on-one reading at a small table. If you were sitting with her, and if she set down the lighthouse card (our point of departure, showing two passengers on the *Tara* waving at a faraway light), you would hear that already in 2008 she was contemplating a trip to Alexandria:

This card is the lighthouse and it represents origins and destinations. By the time the ice released us we hadn't seen the sun in many months. The first light we would see would not be the sun, but the light of this lighthouse. I thought to myself that for all of our speculation about the future—maybe the future is a light you can see in the distance. So I jump off the boat, diving deeper and deeper until I hit the origin of the word "le phare" as it lies on the bottom of the sea, in the harbor of Alexandria.³

For Ga, the future is a distant light and a constant envisioning of what comes next; gesturing like a beam from a lighthouse towards something or someone across time and space, alluding to the unknown. In this case, Ga foresaw dives she would make just a few years later, sinking "deeper and deeper" into her new fixation—the Pharos Lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—but also physically into the Mediterranean Sea, with her camera.⁴ Simultaneously, she was also considering how she could make a new body of work that would be able to live without her.

³ A sample of Ga's text for *Reading the Deck of Tara*, accessed July 16, 2013: <http://www.elliaga.info/index.php?/egypt/square-octagon-circle/>

⁴ From January to May of 2012, Ga studied at Alexandria University's marine archaeology department.

Ellie Ga, Lighthouse Card from *The Deck of Tara*, 2011, 52 unique playing cards.



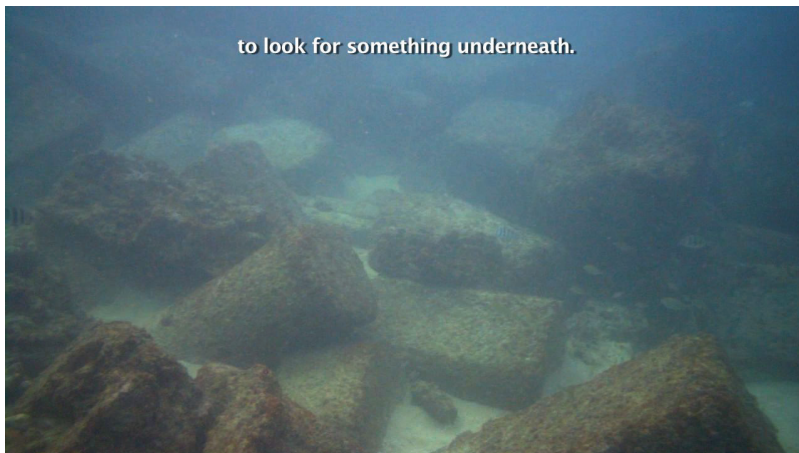
II.

The Ancient Greek *Φάρος*, or “pharos,” provides the etymological origin of “phare” in French—“lighthouse” in English. The Pharos Lighthouse was built between 280 and 247 BC on a coastal island off Alexandria, near the western edge of the Nile’s delta. According to the *Odyssey*, Pharos was the home of Proteus, the Greek aquatic deity Homer dubbed “The Old Man of the Sea,” who can foretell the future but will shape-shift to resist doing so (hence the adjective “protean,” or mutable). In Ga’s *Reading the Deck of Tara*, the Proteus card shows a large dog, one of the *Tara*’s crewmembers, digging in the ice and perhaps trying to summon Proteus so as to pin him down and discover when the *Tara* would travel home.⁵

After Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, the Greek King Ptolemy I Soter initiated construction on the granite lighthouse with a Doric design—a rectangular base, octagonal pillar, and cylindered beacon at the top. It has been said that the beacon encased a burning mirror, which was used to guide or sometimes set enemy ships on fire, as Ga describes in the two-channel video *Measuring the Circle*, 2013.⁶ The three shapes are standard throughout portrayals in various historical sources, and, “from a bird’s-eye view they would have been seen as square, octagon, circle,” Ga maintains. This view of history, and what encompasses history, speaks to the expansive qualities of her work—how these shapes were meant to “reach the cosmos”—as well as to specificity, to three basic geometries.⁷ The dual slideshow installation

5 From the short video *Map of the World #6*, accessed July 16, 2013: <http://elliega.info/index.php/projects/proteus-video>. The common myth structure of Proteus is that he must be “held down” in order to stop shape shifting and prophesize.

6 After rising some 430 feet above the harbor, the Pharos Lighthouse collapsed in the fourteenth century after a series of earthquakes. It had been a beacon for numerous sailors and was also considered one of the tallest man-made structures for nearly fifteen centuries. Drawings of the three-tier formation by an early twentieth-century scholar named Hermann Thiersch are the most well-known depictions of the lighthouse. Ga presents a replica of these drawings for this project. In a segment of *Measuring the Circle*, Ga discusses a large silver lighthouse replica, which an Alexandrian shopkeeper had made for the former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak as a gift, and which is based on the Thiersch drawings as well.



Ellie Ga, *SAYED*, 2013, video still.



Ellie Ga, *Four Thousand Blocks*, 2013, video still.

It Was Restored Again, 2013, offers 160 disparate depictions of the lighthouse (drawings from the Middle Ages to Internet-sourced images) as well as texts (stories by Arab travelers in the Middle Ages to recent archaeological statements about the lighthouse). Slowly, we begin to see the monument as an aggregate of fact, myth, and replication—an elusive “wonder,” indeed.

Sayed, a local diving guide, accompanied Ga on her excursions in the breakwater just north of the Citadel of Qaitbay in Alexandria’s harbor—his “home,” and the site of an in-progress archeological dig by a team of French researchers.⁸ In order to communicate underwater, Ga and Sayed engaged in a series of hand gestures, which she reviews in the three-channel video *Four Thousand Blocks*, 2013, superimposing black-and-white photos of Sayed on a lightbox: one fist across the chest means Roman stone; two fists down on the thighs implies a sphinx, and so on.⁹ Hand gestures and their import as language (the first?) are important to Ga: In addition to the emphasis she places on Sayed’s set of gestures, she discusses the gesticulations of the *Tara*’s crewmembers in *The Fortunetellers*; her own gestures play a large role in *Reading the Deck of Tara*; and moreover, in several videos and performances Ga uses her hands to repeatedly add, layer, superimpose, and wipe images off a light box. Notably, Walter Benjamin argued that gestures themselves are not as potent as the moment directly before or after they occur—a pause makes them “quotable,” more memorable, and gives the viewer space to reflect.¹⁰ For Ga this reflection is key—gestures are a way to consider and remember, and also they activate a different method of writing and accessing

7 Ga states, “These three shapes: square, octagon, circle are assembled to reach the cosmos. Geometry for the Ancient Greeks was a divine ideal—a philosophy that is seen in Islamic art as well. This cross-pollination between civilizations in Egypt is mirrored by the history of the Pharos Lighthouse: designed by the Ancient Greeks using Ancient Egyptian materials and building techniques, then repaired and converted into a minaret during the Middle Ages.” E-mail to the author, July 8, 2013.

8 The massive medieval Citadel of Qaitbay that was built in the 1470s incorporated many of the original stones used in the lighthouse. Here, a team of French researchers—headed by Jean-Yves Empereur, whom Ga calls “The Emperor” in her new work—is exploring the giant fallen blocks from lighthouse.

9 Website accessed July 16, 2013: <http://notesfromalexandria.wordpress.com>.

10 Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theater?” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1977): 147–151.

history. Yet what can be gleaned from pieces of a drowned beacon?

Ga's interviews with Sayed in a second, shorter video, *SAYED*, 2013, highlight the limits of visibility—of what can be seen and not heard, heard and not seen. Underwater photography is illegal at the diving site (Egypt considers it a museum), and given the swell and pollution, it is nearly impossible to capture images of the ruins, which reside twenty feet beneath the surface. Even Ga's attempts to film her small brass sculpture of the lighthouse in *Measuring the Circle* prove mostly futile. Still, while Sayed says he has never seen a map of the ruins, he remarks that based on his experience he knows where the stones are: "It's in my head," he says, adding, "Whenever we see these remains, we can have a mental picture of the lighthouse."

III.

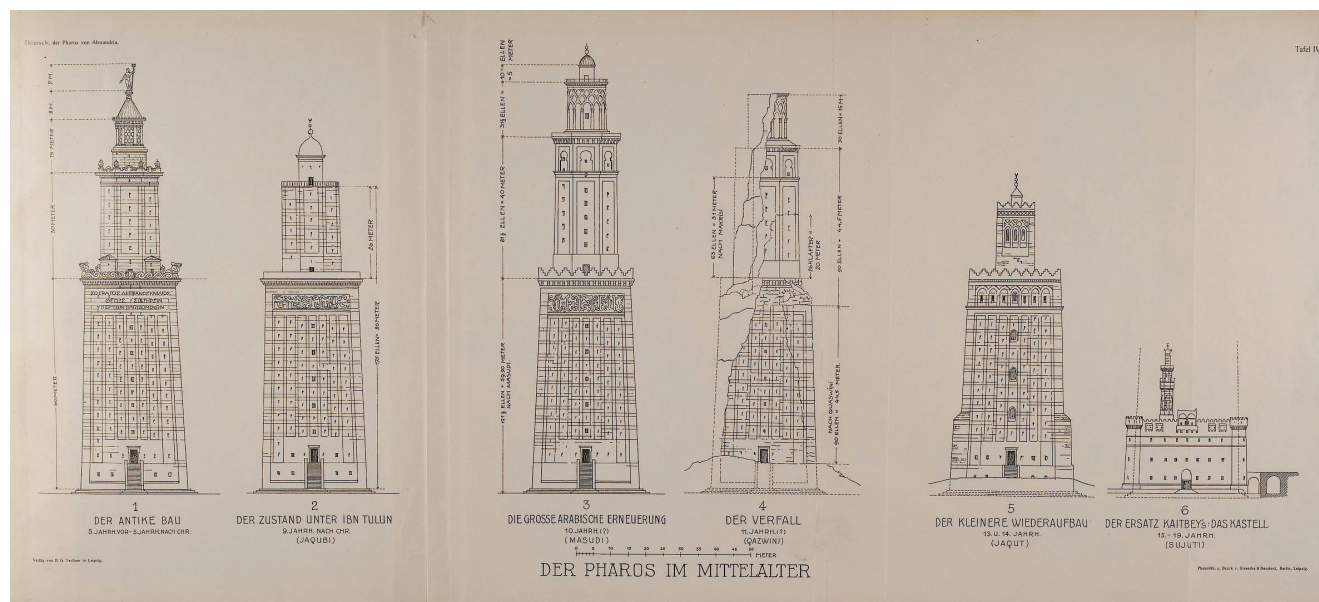
In her latest body of work, Ga examines the lighthouse under different lenses cut from a similar kind of glass, allowing viewers to form their own "picture" of the monument in their mind's eye and fill in any blind spots in the narrative—developing personal insights on illicit viewing and limited visibility, for instance. Additionally, Ga's audience will observe that her lyrical essays—her voiceovers and written texts—are as equally concerned with humans as they are with the lives, histories, and migrations of objects, particularly the lost meaning of symbols. For Ga, the search for such mislaid significances must include everyday, personal encounters with a

wide cast of people, as these interactions form the core of her work, constituting "a method of research (if destiny can be considered a method) that is swayed by chance meetings, diversions, and roadblocks."¹¹ With these vital interactions, Ga searches for a throughline of connections, a constructed world to sustain and store her thoughts, research, and lived experiences.

This "world" is not stable, however. It lacks origins and destinations, as symbolized by Ga's lighthouse card. If part of what drives Ga to make her work is a search to fathom the unknown, the future, or, more metaphorically, a distant flickering of light, in her recent work one could say that this light gestures from the bottom of the sea. It emits from a source on a continuum, fluctuating in a perpetual swell of restyling, replicas, and repetitions.

Lauren O'Neill-Butler
New York
July 27, 2013

¹¹ E-mail to the author, July 8, 2013.



Hermann Thiersch, Author's drawing from the text *Pharos: Antike, Islam und Occident*, 1909.

Cover: Ellie Ga, *Measuring the Circle*, 2013, video still.