



Ellie Ga

*The Lighthouse Card*, (from the *Deck of Tara*), 2011

52 cartes de jeu uniques / 52 unique playing cards

Courtesy Ellie Ga; Bureau New York



# Ellie Ga

By Patrice Joly

Ellie Ga's praxis borrows from different cognitive and narrative structures, such as the essay, the scientific documentary and storytelling, which the artist presents in filmic installations backed up by many by-products: photographs, slide shows, videos, and the like. Her work is invariably the outcome of a major personal engagement entailing lengthy periods of immersion in significant contexts from which the matter required for her output emerges. The decision to produce work issues from things unforeseen which the artist manages to grasp and go along with, beyond the mere fact of their unexpected appearance, calling to mind the manner of the Surrealists. For *Pharos*, it is the extraordinarily rich context of studies of Alexandria and the construction of the great lighthouse which becomes the base of a half-scientific, half-biographical investigation with, in the background, the myth of the god Thoth, inventor of writing and symbol of the "modern" organization of knowledge; the project is developed at the M-Museum in Leuven in the form of the video installation *Four Thousand Blocks*, around which subsidiary pieces function like so many "further investigations". The performance *Eureka, a Lighthouse Play*, programmed at the same time in the Festival Playground, acts like an echo of this powerful reflection on the circulation of images.

*Mehr Licht*<sup>1</sup>, we are tempted to think as we peer at the itinerary that prompts Ellie Ga's interest in the island of Pharos, after making a northerly journey during which she was starved of sunlight

during those endless months of Arctic darkness. Be it a real scientific pull or a need to draw closer to what she interpreted as a sign of destiny, the fact remains that on emerging from her long northern night and seeing the first glimmer of the inhabited world in the form of a beam of light coming from a lighthouse, the young artist decided to devote herself fulltime to studying Pharos, the site which lent its name to the famous edifice whose flashing light could be seen up to more than 100 miles from the shores of present-day Egypt, which is why it became one of the seven wonders of the world. *Pharos* is part and parcel of this symbolically and biographically very marked context as an "integral" project which, in the wake of a long scientific expedition in the Arctic on board a research vessel, involved nothing less than an immersion in both a city and a civilization, Alexandria and Egypt, hitherto totally unknown quantities for the artist. Rather than downplaying the unusual nature of this signal rising up from the darkness, Ellie Ga decided to turn it into something almost like an omen, and make it her road map for the months not to say years to come. As such it comes close in attitude to the Surrealists when these latter realized that they wanted to decipher the existence of a hidden itinerary in the forest of signs: the desire to let themselves be guided by chance and the unexpected, and not repress those things but, quite to the contrary, turn them into nothing less than a vade mecum-like handbook, a fully consenting connection with the world. Ellie Ga's work is in fact steeped in this attraction to the unforeseen which guides her throughout her Egyptian quest—and in her earlier works, too—which leads her nowhere else than to encounters with remarkable people, quick and dead alike: as such, Egyptology together with its researchers, its historical characters, its deities, both major and minor, and its methods is an extraordinary ballpark, a tremendous mine of narratives, some part and parcel of the very principle of archaeological studies, while others, in the making, combine with the former and form an impressive magma which the artist moves about in all directions, not without a certain pleasure.

The history of Pharos is above all else an extraordinary history of words, caught in a no less extraordinary movement involving one civilization being absorbed by another, and one language by another. For those highly skilled navigators who regularly dropped anchor in that great Mediterranean port, the association between territory and sovereign was something quite usual because Pharaoh also meant the land of Egypt... When the Greeks settled on the island, they gave it the slightly altered name of Pharos, from Pharaoh, and, when the lighthouse was completed, it kept this metonymic name which refers more to its location than to its function. The name Pharos subsequently passed unobstructed through the Greek tongue, ending up, after making its way through Latin, with the derivatives which we all know: *le phare*, *il faro* and *o farol*. This first occurrence of an etymological shift has its significance, it gives structure to the artist's project as she tries to show how—if we were not already sufficiently aware of as much—language and words undergo many different alterations, uncertain translations and re-appropriations, as well as misuses and even misinterpretations. Ellie Ga thus sheds light on the importance of power structures in the formation of language, which even, in an intrusive manner, find their way into its meaning. This is not that surprising, after all, in relation to the Egyptian civilization, whose ultra-“pyramidal” organization invented the order of scribes to underpin and develop the pharaoh's power by way of the set of his representations. On the face of it, the artist's idea is not to get into applied linguistics, yet we do feel that she takes a certain pleasure in following this original deviance which cascades its way towards its final destination. The example of the god Thoth is extremely revealing: his name lies at the root of an extraordinary linguistic shift which proceeds from the reference to the figure 8—Khemenu for the Egyptians, then taken up by the Arabs to become *el chimia*, then alchemy, the science of esoteric transformations—right down to our modern chemistry. This ibis-headed deity, mythical founder of writing and language, is also the god of chance, the inventor of dice, becoming Hermes Trismegistus for the Greeks, who added an extra string to his divine bow, that of the voyage. His figure permeates the exhibition from one end to the other: *Four Thousand Blocks* retraces his legend in the form of a video triptych. In the middle we find the “principal” narrative whose meandering plot intermingles overlaid and clashing tales; on the left, we can make out the artist's hands in the process of handling a photograph in a developing tray, a photo which turns out to be of two huge stone blocks at the entrance to the port of Alexandria, on which are painted two and five dots, like two outsized dice (*Projection Harbor*, 2013); on the right, two hands, once again, which are selecting letters in order to compose a text evoking the myth of the god, which we find further on in the exhibition in the form of a typographical print (*Pharmakon*, 2012), a print without ink which emphasizes the ghostly character of the writing. Between the image in the making and the word fading, the central narrative has trouble blazing a trail for itself, the allegory of the illusory nature of knowledge being incarnated in the figure of Thoth, god of writing and knowledge, but also of chance...

The Mediterranean, cradle of civilizations if ever there was, was dominated by the Egyptians until the arrival of Greek culture, one of whose major representatives, Ptolemy, Alexander's general, would launch the construction of the lighthouse, three centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. The lighthouse is a construction whose size and elevation may be compared with the tallest of our skyscrapers, it was the symbol of the civilization which saw the opening of Alexandria University at the same time as it ushered in an age of intense cultural influence. More than 20 centuries later, a scientific expedition led by the French archaeologist Jean-Yves Empereur made a discovery of paramount importance: a collection of thousands of blocks

lying on the sea bed, evidently coming from the old lighthouse, and thus bringing fully to light the story of the seventh wonder of the world which the countless ins and outs of history, combined with catastrophic seismic activity, had erased from the radar screens of current scientific knowledge.

So it is within this very dense context that we see the development of *Pharos* which, like all the artist's earlier projects, has an almost scientific dimension likening it to the form of the essay. For her project, the artist enrolled at Alexandria University and there, for several months, embarked upon undersea archaeological studies. The leading experts in the field—Jean-Yves Empereur, director of the Centre of Alexandrian Studies, and Kamal Sadou el Saadat, director of antiquities—became the leading figures in a narrative told by several voices and taking many different paths, to whom we must add the various major figures of Egyptian mythology, as well as the great early 20th century German historian, Hermann Thiersch, responsible for renewed interest in the lighthouse. This abundance of players with their different backgrounds partly explains the loose form of a work whose ultimate aim remains unknown to us. The excess of information swiftly becomes a handicap for constructing any kind of certainty whatsoever, with the artist using a whirlwind of images and documents of every kind, which end up making us dizzy. She herself seems lost when the conclusions of the researcher, Jean-Yves Empereur, are called into question by evidence produced by his close female associate, or when, wishing to subject the official narrative to the test of reality by carrying out his own dives and talking in English to the guide swimming with him to the seabed, the answer comes in Arabic (*Sayed*)... Ellie Ga knows only too well how to play with this feeling of disorientation, again emphasized in the performance *Eureka, a Lighthouse Play*, stemming from the same Egyptian experience. In a shrewdly orchestrated way she juggles with the transparencies on the overhead projector, compounded by the scansion of archival documents and her own diving films by way of a video projector. The authenticity of the remains is also called into question: slap bang in the middle of the performance, we learn that the famous blocks which monopolize all the attention of the team of archaeologists—and of the artist herself—are removed from the water in order to be cleaned before being dropped back into the sea and then re-photographed to meet the needs of tourist brochures, thus adding to the confusion, by pinpointing the duality/duplicity of the images and the at once symbolic and prosaic struggle to ensure control of them. Should we understand this work as a way of thinking about the relativity of knowledge? The myth of Thoth, which is much referred to in the various works in the exhibition, may offer an embryonic answer: the sovereign's answer to this deity, who thought that by offering writing to the king of the Egyptians, he would make the people wiser and offer it more memory, was that it was not the gift of memory that he was offering them, but rather the drug of remembrance. In the mouth of the director of antiquities of Alexandria, talking with the artist in *Four Thousand Blocks*, the myth is used to explain the predominance of the oral tradition in Arab civilization; the argument which he puts forward to underpin his thesis is that of the impossibility of remembering his wife's telephone number, entered in his smartphone, proof, if need there were, that writing is the enemy of memory. The myth is henceforth rewritten using the words: “Writing has not given us the gift of remembering but the poison of forgetting...”.

1. *Mehr Licht!* [*More light!*] are the words allegedly uttered by Goethe on his death bed, variously interpreted by different commentators as that great mind's regret that he had not been able to amass enough knowledge during his lifetime, while others go along with the more prosaic dimension of asking someone to open the window for him so that he might have a last look at the daylight.