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ELLIE GA: *Strophe, A Turning*

by Kaitlyn A. Kramer

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Theophrastus is thought to be the first person to send a message in a bottle out to sea. In 310 BCE, in an attempt to prove the water in the Mediterranean Sea flowed from the Atlantic Ocean, the Greek philosopher sealed a message in a bottle that asked its recipient to send word from wherever it was found. There are no known records stating Theophrastus's message was ever discovered. I like to think that the bottle is still floating out there, forever adrift, or perhaps a child came upon it on an island's shore in the Aegean Sea and just didn't know how to read. Ellie Ga recounts this history in her two-channel video installation *Strophe, A Turning* (2017), seeing this impulse as an obvious action for someone born on an island like Lesbos: "Throw a bottle into the ocean and see where it goes."



Ellie Ga, still from *Strophe, A Turning*, 2017. Two-channel video, sound. 37:30. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York.

Messages in bottles were the starting point for Ga, whose artistic practice can be described as one that drifts. Fascinated by the use of drifting objects meant to chart the movement of the sea, and the often unintended discoveries that arise from their movement, she follows these objects patiently and welcomes chance. As the artist-in-residence of the sailboat named Tara, designed to be lodged in ice and carried through the Transatlantic Polar Drift, Ga joined a crew of scientists who collected and analyzed data as they drifted toward the North Pole. Like Theophrastus's sealed bottle, they hoped to chart the unknown movement of the sea. Just before the ice released them from their nearly two-year drift, the crew sent out their own bottled message to drift in the Tara's place.

Drifting informs the structure of *Strophe, A Turning*, as the film navigates between distinct narrative strophes. In Greek drama, the strophe acts as a stanza and is recited by the chorus as they turn toward a different part of the stage. The two screens of Ga's *Strophe* face one another on opposite sides of the gallery, where a row of stools is positioned between them. On one screen, a diptych is projected: on the left, the camera looks through an open doorframe toward a quaint lighthouse; on the right, crowds of people walk down a boardwalk toward an island's seafront monastery. A hymn is sung in baritone over these images, which harmonizes the two scenes, providing a balanced calm. We learn through Ga's narration that we are watching the Greek island of Symi, that the monastery is devoted to the Archangel Michael of Panormitis, the island's patron saint, who is a kind of guardian of messages in bottles. It is believed that if a sailor sends a mention to the saint, it will show up on Symi's shoreline.

Images of Symi's port are replaced on the same screen by closeups of flotsam and meticulously organized messages in bottles, as an archivist discusses the types of messages kept at the monastery's museum. He chooses a message written by an elderly woman who describes her ailing condition, which reads as a plea. The archivist speaks to the camera as he comments that once a person has tested the limits of human nature, she resorts to the desperate and irrational act of throwing messages into the unknown. "When you are sick and have lost hope, you stop looking at the horizon and turn your gaze up to the sky to ask for help." This is when the unimaginable occurs, when your message finds its home.

When one screen fades black, the other awakens, requiring the viewer to turn. There is comedy in performing this clunky strophe with a group of strangers, as our knees bonk together and bags tangle between legs while we shift into a mirrored seating arrangement. Settling into the spoken text and images is sobering, as we turn to encounter a still shot of a parked car's hazard lights flashing like the beacon of a lighthouse that faces

out toward the sea. A woman speaks of traveling by boat from Syria to Lesbos to seek refuge, losing all of her belongings in the first few hours of the journey. When the narrative drifts to Lesbos, Ga's camera focuses on the sea. She shows us life vests and fluorescent jackets abandoned in mounds on the silent beach, offering no commentary but the sound of a stream running between them. Over a black screen, the artist speaks of the nearly one million Greeks who became refugees in 1922, by the end of the Greek genocide and Greco-Turkish War, which is known in Greece as the Asia Minor Catastrophe—another turning. Many of these refugees fled to Lesbos, where they settled, becoming an island of refugees. In 2015, Ga volunteered on Lesbos, which had again become an asylum for Syrians escaping the al-Assad regime. She writes how she abandoned her questions concerning messages in bottles and drift during this time, as the need to help was too urgent. When she returned from Lesbos, she understood these bottled messages differently, seeing them as "a call to act."

The screens continue to alternate their narratives, each performing a new strophe as its viewers follow a beat behind. It is easy to drift through the narratives and stare off past the shore again when the film loops. Ga quotes the poet Osip Mandelstam, who writes that the message in a bottle is addressed to the finder, and by finding the letter, one becomes the "mysterious addressee." At its core, the message in a bottle aims to convey presence and asks its finder, "Are you here, too?"



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