

Ellie Ga

BUREAU

What to call it? A preface? A primer? An afterimage? In the corridor leading into, or out of, Ellie Ga's three-channel video installation *Four Thousand Blocks*, 2013–14, hung a single white sheet bearing the impress of a text, faintly legible in raking light. It told the story of Thoth, the ibis-headed god who offers an Egyptian king the technology of writing, which, he promises, "will make humans wiser and improve their memories." The king quickly corrects him. "What you have discovered is not the recipe for memory, but the drug of reminding," he pronounces. "With your invention, they will be taught, but they will not be wise." Familiar to philosophy undergrads from Plato's *Phaedrus*, and to comp-lit grads from Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy," this myth underpins much of today's grumbling over Wikipedia and Siri. If we entrust our memories to external supplements, the king laments, knowledge hollows out, becomes a semblance of itself, deteriorates.

If you know Ellie Ga's work, you know her voice: low, mellifluous, wreathed with irony, an intelligent murmur. This voice figures heavily in Ga's signature format, performative lectures she calls essays—twisty, digression-kinked tales she relates while arranging transparencies on an overhead projector. Between 2008 and 2013, Ga presented "The Fortunetellers," a series of such essays drawn from her experience as artist-in-residence on a French scientific expedition to the Arctic. Frequent allusions to tarot cards and palm reading nodded to her ship-mates' Gallic penchant for after-dinner augury, yet they also flagged the decidedly French flavor of her narrative technique. Like André Breton in *Nadja*, Ga conjures a world dense with coincidence and half-hidden signs. When she likens cracks in the glacial ice to the lines stretched across a palm, Ga exemplified the Surrealist condition Rosalind Krauss once described as "nature convulsed into a kind of writing."

Four Thousand Blocks marked the New York debut of Ga's most recent body of work, for which she learned to scuba dive, joined a marine archaeology program in Egypt, and explored the underwater ruins of the lighthouse at Alexandria. (What did you do in the winter of 2012?) The video retains the aesthetic of her lectures for "The Fortunetellers." On the center screen, Ga's hands shuffle transparencies over a light box as her voice pours out from surround-sound speakers. The narrative moves quickly: Ga passes through a coast guard checkpoint, rehearses the gestures of scuba sign language, jabbars in broken French to excavation director Jean-Yves Empereur, notices the mnemonic-device clip art on Egyptian election posters. The video closes with an audio recording of Ga recalling the Thoth myth to an Egyptian archaeologist. Oddly enough, she flubs the punch line and describes writing as the gift of forgetting, not reminding.

Video would seem a logical extension of Ga's live performance, yet by alluding to Plato and Derrida, Ga acknowledges the hazards of entrusting her voice to a supplement: Writing is a drug (*pharmakon*), harmful even when helpful, because it is artificial, a site of untruth. Held to a script and recorded to a file, Ga's voice is doubly displaced.



View of
"Ellie Ga," 2014.

Yet in *Four Thousand Blocks*, memory seems to reside elsewhere. To revise a prior statement, if you know Ellie Ga's work, you know her voice *and her hands*, the dark silhouettes manipulating her transparencies. On the video's left and right screens, these same hands develop a photograph in a darkroom and set the (metal) type for the Thoth myth—analog processes that require skill, touch, dexterity. Against the oblivion of the digital, Ga flexes knowledge inscribed within digits.

—Colby Chamberlain