

500 WORDS

## Ellie Ga

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# ARTFORUM



Left: *Ellie Ga, November 1, 83°21'N, 2°28'E, 2008*, black-and-white photograph, 24 x 20". Right: *Ellie Ga, Walk Around Tara, Storm, 2008*, black-and-white photograph, 24 x 20".

After an eighteen-month residency in the archives of the Explorers Club in New York, Ellie Ga became the sole artist-in-residence from 2007 to 2008 aboard *The Tara*—a research vessel lodged in the ice of the Arctic Ocean—and sent occasional reports to *Dispatch*. Here she discusses three of the Arctic Booklets, which were made as the boat was drifting and during the continuous polar night. The booklets are available this month from *Ugly Duckling Presse*; Ga will perform a new work based on the booklets at *PPOW* on April 15.

**WHEN I ARRIVED** on the boat, a handful of people were already there. Two had been there for more than a year, five had been there for six months, and three of us were going on as new crew. Before I left for the expedition, I was told I should prepare to be aboard for at least six months. On arrival, predictions were that we would drift so fast that we would only be out on the ice for little more than a month. It felt like I was getting to the party too late. Everyone already had a memory and a relationship with the ice. So the first thing I decided to do was to become the ship's archivist.

In individual meetings, I asked the crew to draw a map of our "world"; this project eventually became "Ten Till Two (10:10)." They had given these strange names to the locations outside the boat because they needed to agree, through language, how to get to particular destinations, to collect data, to check equipment, and so on. They would say to one another, "We're going to Helsinki today, and you go to Tartu, and you go to Charles de Gaulle Airport." But it was really all just snow and ice. These places had no meaning to me back then.

I recorded my crewmates speaking while they drew their maps. Sometimes they would just describe what they were charting, and in other cases they would make up a narrative. For example, the mechanic was also a diver. He and the chief would dive under the boat to check the propellers. He drew an ice floe in the shape of a mushroom and called it *le champignon*. No one had seen it but him. Another person wrote SILENCE on his map near the area he labeled SOUTH. I often thought of the south as silence, too, because the south was the future and therefore the unknown: Mystery made it silent. One day, though, the captain saw this map and said, "No, that's completely wrong, the south is not silent." He said that the south is a return to chaos, to civilization, and he crossed out the word SILENCE on the area I had labeled SOUTH.

The most poignant parts of this series are the last entries, where it all actually did become chaos. Toward the end of the journey, everything had changed so much that no one knew where we were anymore. At some point, the boat had turned around in the middle of the night and what used to be east was west and vice versa. We lost all our reference points. Helsinki disappeared; Charles de Gaulle Airport broke up and drifted away.

The "Drift Drawings" began as an attempt to document where we were going. We were never able to see our boat moving, but we could chart our movements through the GPS. As you can imagine, in the old days explorers spent most of their energy just figuring out where they were. We knew where we were every moment, so that wasn't our obsession; instead, we were most concerned with where we were going to be next.

This feeling permeated every aspect of life on the boat, because we organized our life based on weather predictions. Having no control over our course, all we could do was react to those predictions. Every morning we would wake up, go down to the office, look at the GPS, and then chart the course of our drift. This was our morning newspaper. I would trace the little drift based on the computer screen, because I wanted to have a record since our path was constantly changing. So in the drawings you can see where we were—here's September 24, October 1, October 22—and you see how we are going up and down and back and forth. We would have a storm that would push us north and then a storm that would push us south again. In a way, the drawings are fractals of meanderings.

The "Log of Limits (Snow Walks)" are based on hikes I took around the boat, since we were essentially lodged in a giant ice block most of the time. But slowly, as we moved more and more south, we began to see small fractures in the ice and then we would have these major breaks and everything would completely change. Some weeks we could walk completely around the boat, other days only a few footsteps, sometimes not at all. Our world expanded and contracted, and like the "Drift Drawings," this expansion and contraction of space over time was not a straight line. The lines are going back and forth, up and down, east and west, like a yo-yo. Even still, we were beginning to see the limits of our little "world."

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler