

ARTFORUM

Ellie Ga

BUREAU



Ellie Ga, *Strophe, a Turning*, 2017, two-channel video projection, color, sound, 37 minutes 33 seconds.

In the opening lines of narration in Ellie Ga's two-channel video installation *Strophe, a Turning*, 2017, the artist discusses Russian poet Osip Mandelstam's comparison, in a 1912 essay, between writing a poem and lobbing a bottled message into the sea. Both acts, Ga suggests, level distance between the self and some unknown receiver—but to what end? Ga's discussion of Mandelstam, who was persecuted by the Communists for his nonconformity, exiled, and later left to die in a Soviet work camp, is characteristically dexterous. It economically introduces the work's ostensible subject—the fate of missives and other personal effects once cast, or lost, to the ocean—while framing this inquiry in crisis, a valence of the work that only slowly reveals itself.

Ga is known for her memoir-documentary performance lectures and video essays, which often present their material as anachronic accumulations of research. By contrast, the narrative of *Strophe, a Turning* is more linear (though an accompanying pamphlet is still a welcome aid to legibility). The work began as an extension of "The Fortunetellers," 2008–13, a project based on Ga's experience on an Arctic expedition. The associated research led Ga to consider the political and historical aspects of what drifts in our waters and the ethics of beachcombers, and eventually brought her to the Greek islands of Symi and Lesbos, where Theophrastus purportedly first cast a letter in a bottle to better understand the sea's movement. But in 2015, the Aegean Sea carried more urgent messages to its shores; Ga decided to commit herself instead to volunteering with a team that helped Syrian refugees to safety, and this work followed suit.

Strophe, from Greek, means "to turn." It also connotes a poetic structure, a gesture employed by a Greek chorus, and it likewise served a structural role here. Installed as it was at Bureau, the work consisted of two channels that played, intermittently, on screens that faced each other across a room, such that the viewer had to turn physically to watch each. The logic of the cuts corresponded with the pivots in Ga's research. Catastrophe, the video reminded us, is a turn downward and a reversal of what is expected. Of course, Ga's installation required the viewer to constantly turn her back on what was being screened—bluntly, first to art, and then to refugees.

One might consider the installation as an embodiment of the artist's struggle with art's compatibility with social change or politics—suggestive, even, of their mutual exclusivity. Indeed, cynicism regarding art's exploitation of crisis foams at the mouth these days. But Ga doesn't get precious about representing trauma, nor does she present an either/or scenario for art and activism. She shrewdly refrains from gratuitous documentation—the refugees are largely represented in the video by orange life vests populating serene coastlines. In a single harrowing shot, we imagine that Ga is assisting a boat landing. The camera shakes, haphazardly points toward the sky. We hear babies crying, but some are laughing; a woman yells, "Yalla, yalla!" This work is striking for noting, pragmatically, art's inseparability from life, and for its acceptance of the ways in which life so often gets in the way of art, compelling us to renegotiate our priorities along the way. Ga's message about the efficacy and responsibility of art and artists is in some ways obvious but so easy to gloss over: Her screens are refractive, and in effect, we see one in light of the other.

—Annie Godfrey Larmon