

Performance still of *Eureka, A Lighthouse Play*, 2014, live narration, video, slide and overhead projections, recorded sound, 40 minutes. Photo by Joeri Thiry. Courtesy of the artist and STUK, Belgium.

Ellie Ga speaks about trust: people gift her with their trust, their time. She has traveled to Lesvos, the North Pole, Alexandria, and Athens to record museum directors, scholars, and anthropologists. Much of Ga's work is about beachcombing, which involves artifacts that wash up and the currents that transport them, and in which she is consumed in the process of research while also drifting. Her recent film *Gyres 1–3* (2019), commissioned for the Whitney Biennial, considers water as a site for political exile, religious pilgrimage, and forced migration across the Aegean.

Working between travelogue, diary, and visual essay, Ga's associations take the form of multichannel videos, performances with live narration, and books. We spoke about her work as a collection of chance encounters, what is lost (and accrued) in translating between the spoken word and the written, and major archeological discoveries made at the flick of a cigarette.

—Sophie Kovel

Sophie Kovel

Your video installation *Strophe, A Turning* (2017) begins with a definition of poetry: launching a bottle into the sea. I feel like this is a good place to start.

Ellie Ga

The narrative voice, my recorded voice, reads a quote by Osip Mandelstam at the beginning of the film: “the message in the bottle is addressed to whoever finds it. Being the finder, I am thereby the mysterious addressee.” It’s from his 1913 essay “On the Interlocutor,” which I read in English translation by Philip Nikolayev. I use the quote to set up key themes: paying attention to what drifts ashore, responsibility, care. Communication against all odds, desperation at sea. Objects on the shoreline that speak over distance and about distance.



Still from *Strophe, A Turning*, 2017, two-channel video, loop, 37 minutes.
Courtesy of Bureau, New York.

SK

Objects that find themselves in unforeseen hands.

EG

I can’t help but wonder if Mandelstam had a prescient sense of the fate of his later works from the 1930s—that they would not arrive on readers’ shores until years after his death in a transit forced labor camp, thanks to his wife, Nadezhda, who memorized the later poems and taught them to others.

SK

It seems like you have a lot of chance encounters.

EG

It's the classic thing: you're looking for one thing, but you find something else. I recently spoke with a couple of anthropologists at Stony Brook University who discovered what are now considered the world's oldest stone tools. They literally made a wrong turn. They said that this happens all the time in their field—the accidental discovery, not having a predetermined search image in one's head. Because that's so often how things get discovered.

They also showed me a fossil and explained how it was found in their camp. Someone was smoking outside the tent and flicked his cigarette. His eyes went to the spot where the cigarette landed, and he noticed something sticking out from underneath. There it was.

SK

Returning to Mandelstam and memorization, in your book *Square Octagon Circle* (Siglio, 2018), you describe how alchemists preferred to pass on their knowledge orally and cite the Greco-Egyptian god Hermes Trismegistus: "Speech is the most beautiful kind of theoretical magic." You then say, "If you want to remember something, don't write it down." This comes across as a kind of treatise or strategy for your performances. What is your relationship to storytelling and oral history?

EG

Square Octagon Circle is a reconfiguration of the spoken narratives that make up my series of videos and a performance (of the same name) about the submerged ruins of the ancient Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Pharos Lighthouse. I initially used Trismegistus's text in the narration for *Four Thousand Blocks* (2014). One of the threads I follow in that video explores the various representations and symbolic uses of the Egyptian god Thoth.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Thoth goes to the king of Egypt (aka the sun god) with all these great inventions that he wants to give to humans: the calendar, dice, writing, etc. The king asks Thoth to list the pros and cons of each invention. When Thoth gets to writing, he says to the king, "I can't think of anything bad to say about this invention. It will give people the remedy for forgetting." Jacques Derrida unpacks a double use of the Greek word *pharmakon* (remedy and poison) in his essay "La Pharmacie de Platon." Thoth's gift is both a remedy and a poison.



Installation view of *Four Thousand Blocks*, 2014, three-channel video and sound, 23 minutes, 40 seconds. Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum.

SK

A poison because it also means people will forget?

EG

Yes, and the king says that it's not the recipe for memory but rather an aid to forgetting. In the video installation *Four Thousand Blocks*, my hands travel in and out of a wooden-type case, setting the metal type of that exchange between Thoth and the king. On another screen I'm developing a photograph in a darkroom. After the Greeks conquered Egypt they merged some of their gods with the Egyptian ones. Aspects of Thoth were merged with aspects of Hermes. Hermes Trismegistus became associated with alchemy (a word derived from Arabic, likely folded into Greek, then Latin, via the city of Alexandria). The quote, "If you want to remember something, don't write it down," speaks to the secretive nature of the alchemists' experiments; memorization becomes a way to distribute clandestinely.

The process in which spoken narratives are transcribed, memorized, and re-spoken fascinates me. In the Portuguese theater director Tiago Rodrigues's performance *By Heart* (2013), ten audience members are asked to come on stage and learn Shakespeare's "Sonnet 30." The one that begins: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past." While Rodrigues works with the ten people to learn the poem, he tells the story of his grandmother—a voracious reader who loved to memorize texts: poems, paragraphs, stanzas. When she started to go blind, she asked her grandson to bring her one last text so she could memorize it before she could no longer read.

Around this time, he sees a television program featuring the cultural critic George Steiner who talks about how learning a text by heart can become an act of resistance, of bravery, of distribution—as was the case with Mandelstam's later poetry. Rodrigues writes to Steiner for advice. It's not clear if Steiner ever responds, but Rodrigues makes his selection: he presents his grandmother with a collection of Shakespeare's sonnets. I walked away from the performance thinking that her losing her sight was a coded way of saying she was losing her memory.

Another ongoing work that asks this question is choreographer Mette Edvardsen's *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (2010), in which people and performers memorize a book of their choice. The installation is a library of "living books" who recite their content to visitors. While waiting to meet my book, I browsed the shelf of memorized books in this ongoing project. The books have been performed all over the world, often in translation, in an array of languages such as Arabic, Italian, Norwegian, German, English. In an additional layer to Edvardsen's project, the recitation of the book is transcribed, slightly altered by the cracks in the performer's memorization process. She has begun publishing, codifying if you will, the new version of the texts. One of the books in the edition is Herman Melville's "Bartleby, The Scrivener."

SK

Memorization becomes a kind of translation. I've always loved that the verb *to translate* in German, *übersetzen*, also means to ferry across. This word comes up for me countless times as I watch your films.

EG

Strophe and *Gyres* have their fair share of clips of ferries: the Staten Island Ferry, people in Lesvos waiting to board the ferries to get to the next registration camp,

islands where the only means of public transportation are ferries. I hadn't thought about that link between ferrying and translating.

SK

You make connections across place and time to produce a finely crafted script that becomes live narration or voiceover. What is your writing process?

EG

It begins as a series of spoken, associative, freewheeling texts that I speak into a recorder, then transcribe, edit, and memorize. I condense this until it lodges itself in my body so that I can call upon it even after a few years pass ... like a song.

SK

That makes me think of the epic, epic narratives.

EG

In one of David Antin's "talk poems" he distinguishes between a narrative and a story:

but theres another way in which you could make an artwork that
would be something like the construction of a narrative a narrative
not a story because i distinguish between narratives and stories
this is a distinction of which aristotle and the french critical tradition
as well as the american folkloric tradition are all ignorant because all
theyre interested in is plot and as i see it a story is all about plot a
story is the representation of a series of events and parts of events
that result in a significant transformation its a logical form but a
narrative is a representation of the confrontation of somebody who
wants something with the threat and or promise of a transformation
that he or she struggles to bring about or prevent or both these are

It's an excerpt from the talk poem called "The Noise of Time," which is a reference to a collection of essays by Mandelstam that Antin stumbles upon in a bookstore. I find Antin's process fascinating. The artist Julien Bismuth has researched him extensively and recently restaged his *Sky Poems* in San Diego. Julien explained Antin's method to me in an email:

He'd talk in front of an audience, for as long as he needed to get somewhere, not to a destination he had fixed, but somewhere that was a good place to stop.

He would transcribe the poems first, then remove the needless repetitions and ums and ahhs and "well, I don't know" ...

Then he would formalize it on the page. He did not use punctuation, just spaces, because he was trying to make the writing look like speech....The blank spaces reflect pauses, breaths, the punctuations of thought rather than the punctuations of syntax.

When Julien was at the Getty, he looked through Antin's archive. You can see his transcription evolve into a series of revised drafts. The striking thing is that Antin doesn't edit that much. *"He was a formidable improviser ... and a precise one as well,"* Julien says.

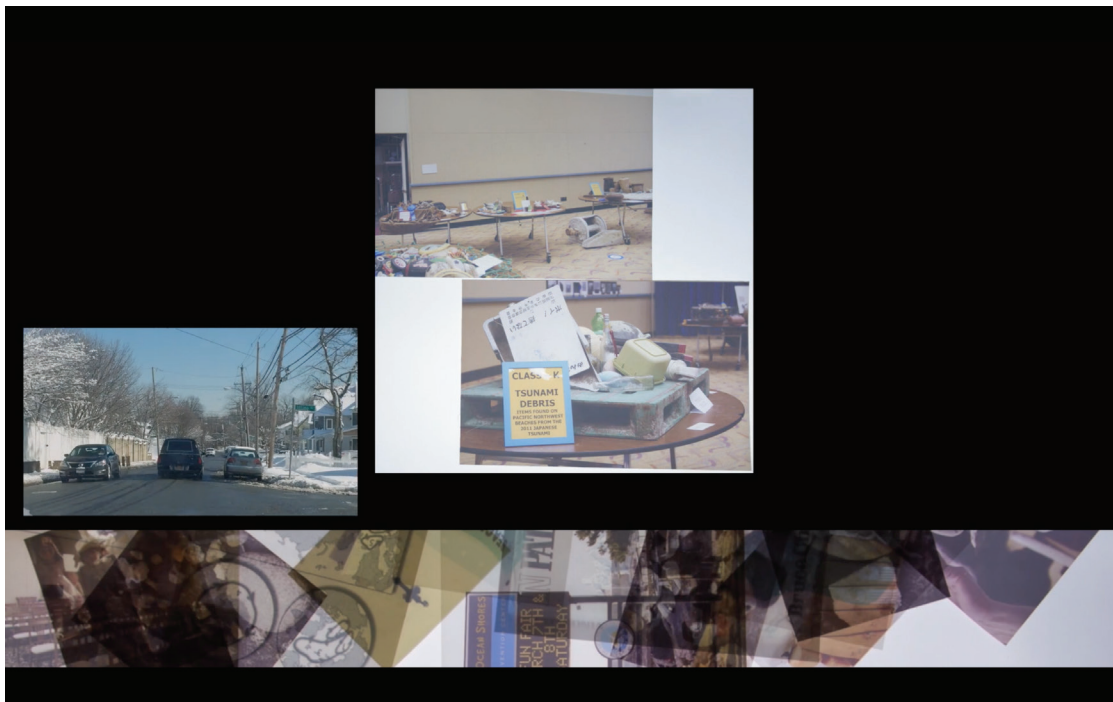
SK

In thinking about writing that approximates speech, Allan Sekula defines the photograph as an "incomplete utterance." I couldn't help but associate this with Ibn-Battuta's description of the Pharos Lighthouse as a complete ruin at the beginning of *Square Octagon Circle*, one that is no longer decipherable.

EG

That's really nice. Ibn-Battuta's quote is something like, "I passed by the lighthouse again and I found its ruin complete." There are four thousand blocks on the seabed, and archaeologists in Alexandria are still doing tedious but essential work, turning over every stone to check each side for inscriptions.

In terms of Sekula's definition of photography, I think about how you can come back to an image years later and it can have a different association. In *Gyres*, images reappear over the course of the forty-minute narrative. Each time they are retrieved from the screen—which I call the beach—they come back with a slightly different significance, so hopefully the viewer begins to have a layered experience with the images. It's sort of like the ruins on the seabed: all these fragments, all the spaces between things. The absence has to be measured as well.



Installation view of *Gyres 1–3*, 2019, Whitney Museum, single-channel video, sound, 39 minutes, Courtesy of Bureau, New York.

SK

You have a strong sense of rhythm in *Gyres* in your voiceover and the way you move images with your hands methodically or in a sudden swoop, and even the way you turn the light table off and on.

EG

Gyres plays with pauses, with the incomplete utterance, with speaking in ellipsis. Can the pause allow the viewer to fill in the blank, to complete the sentence? This was something I was aiming for in *Gyres*—to be as economical with the spoken word as possible, to allow for pauses. Those pauses are sometimes filled with images, sometimes just left alone.

SK

How did you construct the narrative of *Gyres*?

EG

I had been turning over a large portion of the material for several years, an accumulation of life lived while grasping at connective tissues: beachcombing, volunteering on the beaches in Lesvos, having a small child, institutions letting people down.

I've worked on iterations of those experiences in essay form (such as "Bird Flight, Stone Flight [A Thousand Described Routes]" (2017)—the title taken from a Paul

Celan poem)—and in the video work *Strophe, A Turning* as well as in informal presentations in friends' living rooms. Sometimes the material petrifies, goes stale, and the links and connections seem too expected. Then I put the material away for a while.

So when I started working on *Gyres* I had stored in my mind, in my being, these turns of phrases, sentences, images in first, second, third attempts.

When I sit in front of my audio recorder, I try to harness that history of living with material. I try to empty my mind of expectation as to where I want or should end up in the narrative. Once in a while, I'll make an unexpected turn, and two experiences, geographies, or time periods will collide. For example, in *Gyre 1 (Porcelain)*, the narrative winds up in the southeast of England, walking alongside an archeologist, looking for prehistoric stone tools. I ask her why people leave stones and pebbles on tombstones. She says it might have something to do with the crossroads, how putting one stone on top of another has long been a way of marking where we've been. Time becomes a sifter for the material. After several years of walking with the archeologist, filming, recording conversations, and taking photos, three sentences and four images get ferried across the screen.

Ellie Ga will perform Eureka, A Lighthouse Play at Anthology Film Archives on December 2 as part of 2019 Fall Flaherty NYC.

Sophie Kovel is an artist, writer, and editorial assistant at BOMB Magazine.