

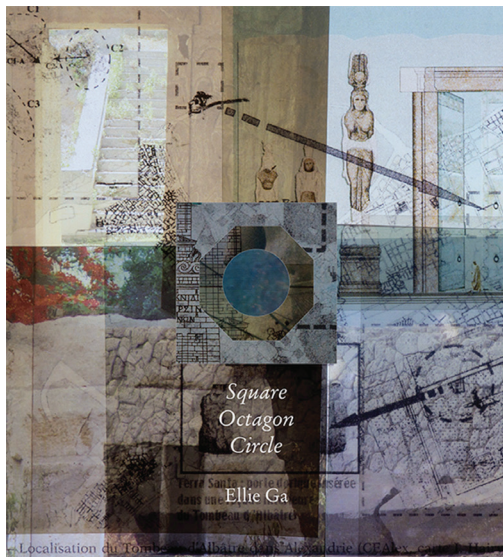
HYPERALLERGIC

BOOKS • WEEKEND

Ellie Ga's Empire of Texts

Like Italo Calvino or Umberto Eco, Ga's theme is a search for a truth that leaves signs everywhere, but remains out of reach.

Max L. Feldman



Ellie Ga, *Square Octagon Circle*

Visual artist Ellie Ga's book *Square Octagon Circle* is deceptively simple in plot. It draws on and completes her 14-piece multimedia project of the same name, which includes performances, videos, prints, drawings, sculptures, and slide projection shows, with one clear aim: to find out what the Lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the long-lost seven wonders of the world, truly looked like. In search of that sight, Ga beats the mean streets of modern day Alexandria and trawls through archival materials.

On the way, she meets Greek kings and Egyptian sultans; Byzantine Jewish legal scholars; 13th-century Christian monks; modern Islamists; archaeologists; scuba divers; and Archimedes himself.

Commissioned around 305 BCE by the Greek King of Egypt, Ptolemy I Soter, the lighthouse was destroyed by a series of earthquakes between the 8th and 14th centuries and replaced in 1477 with the Qaitbay Citadel by the eponymous Mamluk Sultan; this building was, in turn, destroyed by the 1882 British bombardment of Alexandria. The original lighthouse was last seen in 1349 by legendary Moroccan explorer Ibn-Battuta during his journeys across Africa and

Asia. “I passed a second time toward the lighthouse,” reads Battuta’s diary, “and I found its ruin complete.” The remains of the lighthouse lie just under Alexandria’s harbor. Ga finds two competing versions of what it could have looked like.

German archaeologist Hermann Thiersch spent nine years on his comprehensive study of the lighthouse around the turn of the 20th century. Influenced by Medieval Arabic manuscripts, his orientalist fantasy combines legend, incomplete first-hand observations by visitors throughout the ages, and visible Islamic additions after Tulinid Caliph Ahmad installed a Mosque on the site in 868. Contemporary archaeologist Isabelle Hairy, however, offers a sparer picture. She thinks the lighthouse directly incorporated Euclidian mathematics, as a rectangular tower rising into an octagonal shaft capped with a cylindrical beacon. Seen from above, this makes a square, an octagon, and a circle. This investigative narrative seems simple enough, but Ga’s tale is non-linear. There are many detours. It is up to us to straighten it out.

The story begins with the artist’s trip to the Arctic Circle with a French scientific expedition to research her series *The Fortunetellers* (2007). Ga boarded the *Tara*, a vessel specially built to withstand the pressure of Arctic pack ice and drift among the ice floes. None of the crew knew how long they would drift or when they would return home. It was almost always dark and they had little communication with the rest of the world. When finally released from the ice, they saw light for the first time in many months. “At that moment,” Ga writes, “a lighthouse blinking in the distance became a symbol for our anxieties about the future: it marked our return to civilization.” This lighthouse briefly blesses the black wasteland with a single dot of light, like a wink from a benevolent sea god. A symbol of hope, it separates civilization from the unknown.

Ga became fascinated by how her French crewmates called the lighthouse *le phare*, strikingly like *il faro* (Italian) and *el faro* (Spanish). It did not take long to find the lighthouse—or Pharos—of Alexandria. Having left its trace on language, she became obsessed with tracking its physical remains. *Square Octagon Circle*’s theme is this search for a truth that leaves its signs everywhere, but is always out of reach. The book’s tone and structure belong to metatextual detective fiction, like that of Italo Calvino or Umberto Eco, though Ga never questions her own narrative voice. She asks only how the evidence fits together.

Ga works like a conceptual archaeologist, looking at how this structure has marked our collective imagination. She finds that she is not just choosing between two representations of the lighthouse, but uncovering the ancient Greek concept

of beauty. Not merely a scholar, nor like a fictional detective of the “hard-boiled” American school, but a true postmodern detective.

Square Octagon Circle has a structure similar to Calvino’s *If On A Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1979), a hyper-novel narrated in the second person: Calvino, as the author, narrates how you, the reader, reads the book *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino. You are, however, never able to begin reading it because all the pages are out of order and belong to other books. When you go to the bookstore to buy a new copy of the book — only to be confronted by the same problem every time — you meet the beautiful Ludmilla, who shares your dilemma.

In *Square Octagon Circle*, Ga plays the roles of author and protagonist at the same time. She sets up a story and lives it herself. Though she never finds what she is looking for, she gives us a compelling narrative that weaves the drama of historical change into a personal struggle to make sense of all the different clues. Such quests for meaning are typical of the modern novel, in which a protagonist tries to reconcile themselves with a world that does not make sense. For this quest, however, Ga hunts through libraries and footnotes, feeling the ashes of crumbled empires through her ink-stained fingers. She is an emissary to the empire of texts.

She discovers that, unlike her Arctic lighthouse shimmering in the distance, the story of Pharos is not as simple as the brief appearance of light on the horizon. Throughout *Square Octagon Circle* she plays with two complex concepts: the palimpsest — a page from a manuscript from which the text has been removed so it can be used for another document — and intertextuality.

These concepts are built into *Square Octagon Circle*. The lighthouse is built, destroyed, added to, and altered. One empire conquers another, replacing the old gods with its own and building new structures on ancient foundations. You can see this at work on the front cover, which reiterates the title and story. The dust jacket is a collage of photographs of texts, maps, and architectural diagrams. It contains square, octagonal, and circular holes. The book’s front cover uses Isabelle Hairy’s Euclidean structure, in which the lighthouse looks like a square, octagon, and circle when seen from above, as the outline for an invisible structure. As such, we cannot know if we are looking at it top-down or bottom-up. These games continue in the book itself.

The pages of *Square Octagon Circle* represent multiple criss-crossing photographs, superimposed with the script in a clean, white typeface. We see photographs of the harbor at Alexandria, the remains of the lighthouse under the sea, and

numerous pictures of ancient documents, modern books, and pictures of people she encounters, all competing with each other for space. At times, we see Ga's hand, as if the page is part of a slide projection. At other times, we see her holding photographs on top of the page's main photograph. For example, she holds up pictures of her dog, Zagrey, digging through the arctic ice on one page, her crew mates aboard the *Tara* waving gleefully at the sight of the lighthouse, on another. When she describes her scuba training and the work that has already been done about the lighthouse, we see re-sized pages from legendary marine archaeologist Jean-Yves Empereur's book *Alexandria Rediscovered*, complete with post-it notes sticking out of the sides. The truth about the lighthouse is always in front of us, but only as a trace, like something written in pencil and hastily erased.

"There was no plot," complains monk-detective William of Baskerville, the protagonist of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1981), at the end of his investigation, "and I discovered it by mistake." In *Square Octagon Circle*, by contrast, there *is* a plot. We know the historical events that led us here. Yet there is no complete lighthouse to look at firsthand. In *Square Octagon Circle*, we start off with the thing we want to discover, but we can't get to it because every detail is shaped by layers of interpretations about different cultures, religions, and worldviews, including our own assumptions about the mysterious final object of investigation. What we discover "by mistake" is the intertextual debris from the multiplicity of times and meanings. The pleasure of reading derives not from any neat conclusion, but from the search itself.

Square Octagon Circle does not lament the loss of a final, decisive message or fantasize about the old world, which makes itself felt beneath the new. The ancient and modern, the east and the west, are utterly permeable. Likewise, words, texts, and pictures form a territory we share with others, living and dead, and the layering of words, photographs, and plot casts the reader and author as co-conspirators in the mystery.

Square Octagon Circle (2018) by Ellie Ga is published by [Siglio Press](#) and is available from [Amazon](#) and other online booksellers.