



Ellie Ga, *Reading the Deck of Tara*, 2011. Performance View.

Ellie Ga

BUREAU

For the past three years, Ellie Ga has grappled with the materials—the documents and memories—from her experiences traveling to the North Pole in 2007. Acting as a “poet of the quotidian,” she was an artist in residence aboard the French climate-change research vessel the *Tara* and spent five months drifting in the ice of the Arctic Ocean, recording the crew’s activities during the long polar night. Having produced books, videos, and slide shows based on the journey, Ga is perhaps best known for *The Fortunetellers*, 2008–, her captivating performance-lectures. In these, she alludes to various aspects of her trip (such as timekeeping or daily rituals) by superimposing photographs, drawings, and maps on an overhead projector, playing sound recordings, and—best of all—telling scripted and improvised stories about the journey.

The centerpiece of “This Was Later On,” Ga’s first solo show at Bureau, was *Reading the Deck of Tara*, 2011. Like an intimate version of her lecture, it took the form of intense, ten- to twenty-minute one-on-one tarot card-like readings with visitors. Arched over a small table, Ga began by laying down eight cards from a custom set of fifty-two and speaking about the imagery on their faces (the lighthouse symbolized “origins and destinations”; the aurora stood for “exposure”). After dealing a few more cards, she took a moment to “consider the reading,” and, in the remaining minutes, provided more detailed narratives and facts from the

expedition, referring to a vast array of erudite subjects, such as Greek mythology and word etymologies.

In the work, diviners come in many forms: from fissures in the Arctic ice and plankton in a Nansen bottle, to the French speleologist Michel Siffre, who is known for his studies in the field of human chronobiology and explorations of what happens when the organic patterns of life move *Beyond Time* (to cite the title of his first book, first published in 1963 as *Hors du temps*). Roaming from the banal to the sublime, Ga's stories referred to the past, and usually touched on the difficulty of being lodged in the ice and the crew's constant desire to pinpoint their location, always drawing connections between the endlessly changing aspects of life (such as the weather and, by extension, weather predictions) and that which is immutable (uncertainty, desire, failure). It was rare to hear overlapping tales in a single day.

Still, repetition was a pronounced theme of the show, one conveyed most directly by the objects on view. In addition to the performances, Ga presented a slide show of found wristwatch advertisements from magazines in which the clock faces all eerily show 10:10, and a brass cast of a part of the ship's doorjamb that bears the marks of the door being closed again and again. A fuzzy black-and-white picture of five shovels lodged in the ice suggested that reiteration was a fundamental aspect of the most insignificant tasks endured during her time aboard and provided daily life with a sense of purpose. And in fact, the crew of the *Tara* countered the effects of the persistent darkness by imposing a schedule that corresponded to a twenty-four-hour-day. (She described this in one of her readings I observed, also touching on the isolation experiments conducted by Siffre, in which he lived alone in an unlit cave and discovered remarkable changes in his sleep patterns.)

Ga's organization of her memory through reiteration and permutation created meaning from the wonderfully trivial. And her performance proved to be an effective path toward resisting the ways in which memory can become summarized or, at worst, calcified. "We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget," writes Joan Didion. Through her voluminous, extensive reservoir of narratives, Ellie Ga began to reinstate some of the magic of her trip.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler