



ELLIE GA GYRES

BY TOM MCDONOUGH

It was the Swedish scientist V. Walfrid Ekman who, early in the twentieth century, first systematically studied the dynamics of ocean currents, those great streams of water formed by the conjunction of global wind patterns and forces produced by the Earth's rotation. The circulation patterns of these currents compose what are known as the five major ocean gyres, giant circular surface flows whose name derives from the Greek *gyros*, meaning "ring" or "circle." It would be another half century, however, before the Situationist International poeticized this discovery, shifting Ekman's gyres to the city, which, Guy Debord noted in 1958, was possessed of a kind of "psychogeographic relief [...] with constant currents, fixed points, and eddies that make access to or exit from some areas very difficult." Oceanography provided a powerful metaphor for understanding the hidden logic of the urban landscape—with some neighborhoods as fatal as dead water, others as lively as turbid currents—but just as significant was the sense of setting oneself adrift on its flows, surrendering oneself to its flux as one might to the promptings of the unconscious on the psychoanalytic couch.

In her recent three-part film, *Gyres* (2019), Ellie Ga might be said to return these psychogeographic currents to their watery place of origin, exploring the people and things moved by circulatory patterns in the ocean, in the less predictable waters of the Mediterranean, and, ultimately, in the movements of individual thought and memory. Beachcombers in the Pacific Northwest collect and classify flotsam that washes ashore, while in the Aegean a monastery receives messages in bottles cast into the sea by believers. Some of that flotsam turns out to be debris washed into the ocean by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan's northeastern shoreline, while, in recent years, refugees fleeing political violence and economic collapse in Africa and the Middle East have replaced the bottles that once

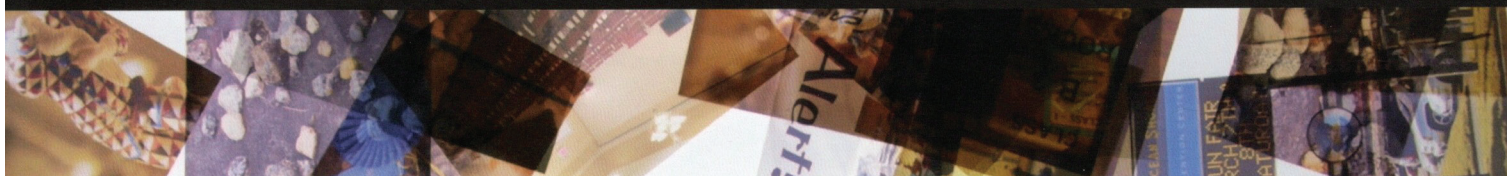
landed on the sands of Lesbos. Oceanography, marine biology, and human geography prove inseparable from contemporary history, from the ecological and political catastrophes of our times. Ga tells these stories, and many more, in *Gyres*, whose drifting, essay-like form allows the artist to follow her streams of (un)conscious associations while always circling back to a set of interlinked themes: the castoff, the votive offering (*tama*, in Greek), the nomad, and, ultimately, death. She is the psychogeographer of the seas and what they carry to our shores.

Ga, who is now in her early forties, has spent the last decade and a half honing this essay form in her films, installations, performances, and publications. Jennifer Kabat put it well when she wrote that Ga's work "delves into memory, myth, language, and history, in the Montaignian sense of *essayer*—to try, to explore." That experimental, provisional approach, in which a subject is seldom addressed directly but is rather considered obliquely from various angles, is characteristic of all her work. More concretely, Ga has distinguished her attitude from that of the journalist or documentarian: "I work in ephemera," she has said, "in discarded pieces of the past. On some level, I think I play the role of archivist." This archival impulse, with its emphatic discursiveness, has been present from her earliest forays in art and publishing, undertaken in the late 1990s in the context of the innovative program of Ugly Duckling Presse, where she was a member of the editorial team. Its mature form emerged, however, after she had completed her MFA, during eighteen months spent in residency at The Explorers Club in 2005-06. Digging through its archives of nineteenth-century exploration, Ga developed a narrative, first

performed in 2006, that came to be known as *Catalogue of the Lost (and other revelations)*. It is "an essay about lost people, places, concepts, and species in the history of polar expeditions," as she once described it. She compared her approach to that of the bookworm, which leaves a trace of its path as it slowly eats its way through moldering volumes, and, in that characterization, we might hear an echo of Manny Farber's termite art—Ga's work shares that lack of pretension, that nibbling away at what might first seem marginal.

From *Catalogue of the Lost*, to her time spent with the scientific crew of the research schooner *Tara* during its extended drift in the Arctic pack ice in 2007-08, to her fascination with the ancient Lighthouse of Alexandria, whose ruins now lay scattered on the sea floor of the city's harbor, she has continued to nurture her interest in archiving the overlooked, in excavating the detritus of human existence. When delivered as performative essays, these excavations—one critic has likened Ga to a "conceptual archaeologist"—share a set of formal strategies, a conjoining of photographic transparencies laid out on a lightbox and cast onto a screen by an overhead projector, short video clips, and her live narrative, sometimes accompanied by recordings made in the course of her research. The results, as in *The Fortunetellers* (first performed 2008), which recounts her time on the *Tara*, are spellbinding. These are stories conjured out of the transient conjunction of images, visual aides-mémoires that spur the flow of words on which Ga sets her audience adrift. Part memoir, part travelogue, one could compare them to filmmaker Patrick Keiller's associative narratives of the British landscape, or, more recently, to

Gyres 1-3 (detail Gyre 1 [Porcelain]), 2019



artist Amie Siegel's archival explorations, but Ga's idiosyncratic anthropology of the unnoticed, the disregarded, and the discarded has a personal, even philosophical, sensibility unique to her.

That sensibility is most evident in *Gyres*, whose narrative is composed almost entirely around transparencies, which she makes use of like cards from a deck that can be shuffled and reshuffled. The film screen is split between a long "reserve" of images that stretches across its bottom and a central square to which they can be pulled in varying combinations as her story progresses. This is, of course, a kind of filmic equivalent to her live performances, but it is also a continual reminder of the contingency of her narrative—that this particular montage could be rearranged, through the subtraction or addition of transparencies from the always visible reserve, and hence its meaning, too, in true Derridean fashion, can never be definitively fixed. Ga deals out her photographs, pulling some from the pack, laying them upon the lightbox, and reading out their enigmatic meanings—these images are subject to a kind of cartomancy, like the tarot. Divination has haunted her work since at least her time aboard the Arctic research ship, with both *The Fortunetellers* and *Reading the Deck of Tara* (first performed 2011) making explicit reference to its techniques. Tara, tarot, tama are all signifiers that slide along a paradigmatic plane of homophonic relation, a set of unconscious associative links that Ga has followed over the years.

Gyres, we could say, is ruled by the thirteenth major arcana card in the tarot deck, that is, by death—whose element is, after all, water. Death pervades the film, in the form of objects lost or discarded upon

the seas, of people Ga has lost—*Gyres* is marked by mourning for her mother and a brother—and even of a kind of hope-against-hope embodied in the *tama*, the votive offering cast upon the waters or left before the icon, as a cry for divine intervention when all other possibilities have been exhausted. Trash, humans, and memories are each alike set adrift on the oceans; some will find their way ashore, to be saved—by the obsessive beachcombers, by the humanitarian activists, or by the artist who collects images of them all. For the photograph, too, is a kind of flotsam, which is carried upon the tide of memory before washing up on Ga's lightbox. We are reminded of André Bazin's comparison of the photograph to the mummy, to an embalming process that might preserve the husk of living appearance. The final image of *Gyres* is of a survival suit, meant to protect its wearer from hypothermia, hanging empty from the ceiling of a collection of ocean detritus in the Pacific Northwest—a mere curiosity, if perhaps a bit uncanny in appearance, until we realize that it once held the body of a fisherman who had been thrown overboard in a storm. It becomes a tragic icon, a figure of death, but one that might be redeemed by the artist's narrative, indemnified into memory and, at least for a moment, rescued from its drifting along time's tides.

Gyres 1–3 (detail *Gyre 1 [Porcelain]*), 2019

