

# Catastrophe in a Bottle: Ellie Ga's Medial Detritus of Drift

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## Abstract

Contemporary media artist Ellie Ga's video-essayistic practice documents her maritime travels, interviews, and encounters with antiquated and, at times, lost artifacts of cultural production. But at certain dramatic turns within her narratives, she is forced to confront the dire realities of the humanitarian crisis emerging just off-screen. This paper considers these shifts in perspectives—from material studies of messages in bottles and the ruins of the Pharos Lighthouse to the bodies of asylum seekers—in order to propose a vein of media studies that superimposes populations under duress with the matter of their transnational, oceanic environments. While this study, following Ga's, partakes in a media archaeological approach by delving into the operations of seemingly obsolescent processes of writing and recording, it draws upon theories of new materialism, namely Karen Barad's writings on "intra-action" and "diffraction," in order to reformulate difference within the assemblage of incommensurate ideas, bodies, theories, and matters. Ultimately, Ga's videos and performances serve to inscribe within media studies and practice an ethics of exclusion which prioritizes uncertainty and intuition.

## Keywords

media, materiality, refugee, border, apparatus, object, archaeology

There is a curious moment midway through Ellie Ga's two-channel video, *Strophe, A Turning* (2017) (henceforth *Strophe*), when the camera suddenly falls to the artist's hip. Dangling precariously from her shoulder, it still records, albeit shakily, her coastal surroundings, where only moments earlier we witnessed Ga carefully combing a rocky beach along the Aegean Sea on the island of Lesbos, searching for messages in bottles washed up at the end of their long and uncertain journey. Heretofore, her video remained clear and composed; a series of interviews and voice-over narrations interjected meditative analyses of found objects and historical texts like a plastic toy ship and Theophrastus's ancient botanical classifications. But now the sturdy ground of her camera's focused engagement gives way to an erratic and haptic visualization akin to the water's turbulent motion: here some shades of cloudy skies; there some stones turning, like the waves crashing over them, within the frame of the film; and still further the hint of an orange life vest washed ashore on the body of an asylum seeker.

Her hands now free of camera equipment, Ga begins assisting refugees come ashore, marking a radical pivot within the course of the film's unfolding action. Her filmic essay henceforth studies the political and ecological forces of the European migrant crisis, which saw more than one million (mostly Syrian) refugees arrive into the European Union in 2015 alone. Yet the move was, from the project's outset, entirely unpremeditated. Like the ocean currents and means of maritime navigation that have determined the artist's career-long study, *chance* and *accident* are often welcome interventions forcing one's travel in new and unexpected directions. Earlier essayistic video performances like *Four Thousand Blocks* (2014) and *The Fortunetellers* (2011), which will prove equally informative in this essay's relaying of Ga's material concerns, anticipate *Strophe*'s sudden change in course. Related scenes in the earlier films, for example, recount her erratic travels aboard a French scientific expedition or her

happenstance dive into the remains of the Pharos Lighthouse, lost to the depths of the sea outside Alexandria, Egypt. In each instance, the impossibility of seeing beyond the horizon provides the artist with an apt metaphor for the production of more epistemological concerns, namely processes of historical remembrance and record effected by variations of new and traditional media objects like overhead projectors or nineteenth-century letterpress cases. Ga's forays, as critic Jennifer Kabat writes, "into memory, myth, language, and history, [advance] in the Montaignian sense of *essayer*—to try, to explore." Yet as *Strophe* makes clear, navigational research methods hardly ever promise smooth sailing. Deviations, diffractions, and the dire realities of global cultural flows frequent the historian's explorations.

More often than not, the material she collects at one end of the ocean's great divide seems always to mediate, through often distant and dissociated forms of communication, urgent expressions of relief and rescue. Some flotsam she finds in the Pacific Northwest, for example, she traces back to the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami off the coast of Northeastern Japan. But now, filming from the Aegean, she must grapple with the inseparability of detritus and its human actors; artifactual encounters signal the presence of an open and evolving assemblage linking messages in bottles with refugees fleeing political and economic collapse in northern Africa and the Middle East. This linkage, to be clear, is not a false equivalence between refugee and debris, but rather, as will become clear, an approximation between subjects of humanitarian crises and their global forms of communication. In this way, Ga's falling camera embodies the misfortune of her newfound subjects, enlightening her viewers into the video's titular etymological roots: "*catastrophe* was a term used in ancient Greek drama to describe a reversal of what is expected, a turn of events. *Cata* meaning 'downward' and *strophe*, 'a turning'" (Ga 26). No longer does Ga allow herself

to be solely concerned with the seemingly esoteric details of messages in bottles and the invisible circular ocean currents that linked sender to receiver. Now, as the camera swings beside her hip, she uncovers a more pressing message—a “catastrophe,” if you will—in a bottle.

One might be too quick to interpret the camera’s own “downward turn” as Ga’s relegation of recording mechanisms in the face of more pressing emergencies. How often, for example, are the passivity theses of contemporary journalists called into ethical question? Might Ga be but opting instead for a more active end in this opposition? But the fact that the camera continues to record, emphasizing a less focused than frenetic picture of the events around her, points to the sustained belief in the *mediality* of her moment—her being among the bodies as well as the material detritus with which they (directly or indirectly) drift. The contractual nature of the image in the reconstruction of citizenship (Azoulay, *The Civil Contract; Civil Imagination*) proves a fruitful route with which to develop Ga’s work, but I turn my attention to the theories of Karen Barad, who provides a crucial re-reading of Judith Butler’s biopolitics of precarity in order to examine the patterns of diffraction emanating from Ga’s media-material reckoning of a global humanitarian crisis. Implicated within the fall of her camera is a reflexivity latent within much of Ga’s work: a belief in an unstable and contingent world of media objects thought not in representationalist terms but rather through a material-discursive practice of what Barad terms a performative “intra-action” that locates human, nonhuman, and inanimate bodies within (though not reducible to) the currents of their shared phenomenal situation, often turbulent, distressing, *catastrophic* (*Meeting the Universe* 178, 214; “Quantum Entanglements” 244). Our current moment—in which those seeking livable lives find themselves in liminal and unstable spaces void of borders and citizenship—demands

such a reading. As Arjun Appadurai makes clear by drawing on the Andersonian concept of “imagined communities,” the distribution of media assists in the production of elsewhere and otherwise “imaginary worlds” (33-37). But rather than privilege solely the world of the animating agent, I find in Ga’s practice a dynamic world constantly in motion; inanimate detritus drifts in shared indeterminate patterns with precarious human subjects, offering a radical reformulation of the relations between matter and meaning in a wholly mediatized world that daily screens subjects in distress.

### **The Drift**

Let us start our journey not with the falling camera’s diversion but rather along the same route with which Ga begins *Strophe*: a quote from the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) voiced by the artist over a still image of scrolled messages in varying glass and plastic bottles. “To whom does the poet speak?” asked Mandelstam in his 1913 essay, “About an Interlocutor”:

At a critical moment, a seafarer tosses a sealed bottle into the ocean waves, containing his name and a message detailing his fate. Wandering along the dunes many years later, I happen upon it in the sand. I read the message, note the date, the last will and testament of one who has passed on. [...] The message in the bottle was addressed to its finder. I found it. That means, I have become its secret addressee. (58-59)

Equating the writing of a poem to the sending of a message in a bottle, Mandelstam and Ga alike stress the distance and the uncertainty involved in any act of communication. If we are to leave the movement of any message to chance, we must contend with the severe abstraction leveled against our normal conceptions of discourse. As Ga’s camera floats along the surface

of a collector's deep filing boxes, each containing messages at the end of their sea-faring journey, she stresses the faith implicated in the initial cast.

But the navigation inherent to communication is neither a purely conceptual nor even "ideal" process. The route along which each bottle travels depends on the material conditions of the bottle and its environment. In the next scene, a Dutch collector pulls out a map before



Fig 1. Still from Ellie Ga, *Strophe, A Turning*, 2017. Two-channel video and sound, loop, 37 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

Ga's camera in order to justify the large numbers of messages he receives every year from English school children. He traces his index finger along the ocean's shifting current (fig. 1), southbound along the edge of Western England, across the Strait of Dover, past the northern border of the Netherlands, and into the North Sea toward Norway. The forces of this frequent route, most familiar to the debris that floats along its course, move deep below the surface of the ocean. Driven by wind movements as much as the earth's rotation, circular *gyres* operate as invisible currents carrying much of the water's material debris, messages in bottles notwithstanding. But such scientific systems operate in Ga's video not merely for objective reclamation. So too is her poetic metaphorization of the ocean's patterns an assertion of the material conditions of even the most immaterial forms of media communication, like the

performative oration determining her anecdotal approach, emblemized in a work from two years prior, *The Fortunetellers*.

A 2015 performance at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, *The Fortunetellers* best captures the processes of oration, organization, and intuitive observation undergirding Ga's work. Sitting before an overhead projector with her back to the audience, she flicks on the project's light and begins narrating her travels aboard a French scientific expedition near the North Pole, which, beginning January 2007, lasted roughly five months. As the crew drifted through endless horizons of ice, meandering along a course without a destination, Ga accumulated a vast collection of photographs, videos, diary entries, and interviews—materials remediated as photographic transparencies which she layers onto the projector's illuminated surface.

Like scenes from *Strophe* and *Four Thousand Blocks*, the overhead projector or the lightbox serve as working desktops, the transparencies akin to stacks of papers and clippings. But when the shadows of her own hands appear on screen, Ga becomes both projectionist and projected, evoking recent expanded cinema techniques by such artists, filmmakers, and theorists as Erik Bullof, who "double" film through an immediate and reflexive recounting of its modes of production. Her research, in other words, follows a direct by-line to her practice, fulfilling the role of both participant and observer key to many an anthropological account (Ingold 4-6), even if the conclusion has yet to be written or the destination yet to be reached.

Exhibiting the evolution of her analyses casts each scene as itself a moment of reflection not yet prefigured by certain discourses or objectives. In *The Fortunetellers*, for example, she foregrounds the navigational desire at the heart of her research by describing a tarot-card game performed with the crew. The instability inherent to her travel forced her to

seek coordination elsewhere: in weather forecasting, oceanographic research, quotidian routines, and ancient forms of fortunetelling. In a card-reading session on January 13, 2011, Ga lists her hand: The Drift, Big Brother, The Cabin, The Plankton, The Fissure, Divination, Universalis, La Poubelle. Soon thereafter, her list becomes the subject of a conversation, and the anonymous shipmate with whom she performs the reading offers further contextualization:

The theme of instability leads us to your next card, The Drift. Here we have the chief of the expedition marking the drift. Now, the drift was a circuitous movement and we had no control over our direction or our exit from the ice. Once a month, on the first of the month, just for the hell of it, the chief would mark our course on the map.

A single mark provided little orientation. But an accumulation of marks sufficed to show the progression of the ship's course. This symbolic map-marking evidenced not only the perceived value of antiquated forms of maritime navigation but also the constant reassurance of the ship's points of both departure and destination. However circuitous the route, the presence of an origin assured the stability of their navigation. Yet, at the end of their session, one card remained: The Cabin, or, as Ga recounts, "the question of origins, of how did I get there?"

Whereas The Drift relinquished control over the ship's destination, The Cabin threw into doubt the site of its origin. Yet if we are to take seriously Ga's continued poetic metaphorization, her retelling insinuates analytic depths a bit deeper than the forgetting of the name of the port from which the ship departed. Rather, she sees an absent origin as a productive disclosure of difference, much in the same vein as theorists like Barad or Donna Haraway, who reverberate cinema studies' feminist forebears Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Theresa de Lauretis, and Jacqueline Rose by articulating a post-critical method of science studies which locates the structure of sexual difference within the perception of data.



But Barad and Haraway are less concerned with “presencing” the absent origin than tracing the effects of the initial, differential disturbance. “A diffraction pattern,” writes Haraway, “does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the effects of differences appear” (300), much like the chief who marks neither the origin nor the destination but rather the patterns of the resulting course, which, with accumulation, starts to resemble the ripples of the ocean’s guiding waves.

Unfixing herself from these set origins and destinations often affords Ga a responsive reappraisal of the direction of her camera, which, as conveyed by the camera’s fall in *Strophe*, may focus on human subjects who must also grapple with the erasure of the site and of the life from which they first embarked. Mandelstam, Ga reminds us, suffered a fate similar to his poems. Even he was not aware, when “launching” his own figurative message in a bottle, of the disaster that would befall him. In May 1938, after the Stalinist-led Soviet Union censored much of his work, they arrested him, forced him into a correction camp in Eastern Russia, and killed him. Years later Mandelstam’s poetry was rediscovered, his innocence asserted, and his identity exonerated. But such suffering, conditioned perhaps by as much distance and uncertainty as the drifting bottle, resists the objective, recursive logic attributed to the operations of technical systems subtending his work. Writing, recording, sending, and receiving are not fixed processes for those under duress. Rather, in the haze of the great expanse between one’s origin and destination, in the blurred motion of Ga’s swinging camera, there begins to emerge the formula for an epistemology of media materiality that opts less for governance, control, and objectivity than indeterminacy, drift, and irreconcilable contradiction. Picturing subjects of humanitarian crises through this lens does not collapse them into fixed,

singular entities but rather opens up spaces for response and redress, recorded through unexpected deviations in the course of composition.

### Irretrievable Artifacts

What might be saved when everything is lost? This is the paradoxical question informing another of Ga's projects, *Four Thousand Blocks*, in which her archival impulse records the remnants of the Pharos Lighthouse, which collapsed sometime between AD 956 and 1323 and has since slowly weathered under the Mediterranean Sea outside of Alexandria, Egypt. Its deterioration has plagued historians like Ga since, for its original architectural form—the specifics of its shape, size, and mechanics—has likewise succumbed to the lapse of historical remembrance. Various attempts have sought to illustrate its image, to give form again to these irretrievable artifacts. But like *Strophe* and *The Fortunetellers*, Ga's approach metaphorizes ruins as the instabilities of historical knowledge. Her own media reflexivity extends these archaeological limits to the materiality of the media with which she works, in particular processes of writing and recording which resist logic and symbolization.

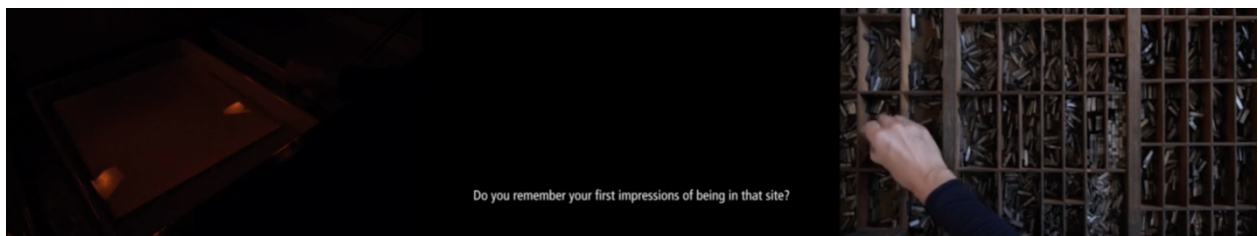


Fig. 2. From Ellie Ga, *Four Thousand Blocks*, 2014. Three-channel video and sound, 23 minutes, 40 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

Toward the end of *Four Thousand Blocks*, Ga blackens the center frame of the three-channel screen as a figuration of the absence of the lighthouse's original form. To the left and right of this absent image play observational recordings of, respectively, a photograph floating in a developer bath and the setting of type in a letterpress composing stick (fig. 2). Atop the

central, black expanse emerges intermittent subtitles, excerpts of a conversation with a pair of Egyptian archaeologists exploring the underwater site. Their encounter with the ruins began thanks to a faulty CD provided by other researchers. On the CD were photographs and other recordings which would have given them some vision, however digitally mediated, of the blocks. But when the computer failed to read the CD, they decided to see the site for themselves. Soon thereafter, they earned their scuba diving certificates, rented a boat, and traveled out into the ocean, where they became the first Egyptian archaeologists to explore the ruins of the Pharos Lighthouse.

And while one might dismiss the CD in its entirety, consigning it to obsolescence and championing instead the first-person encounter with the ruins, Ga's anecdote privileges both the material encounter and conceptual inquiry at every level of mediation. When one such encounter gives way to error and obstruction, curiosity takes hold, leading the subject to trust his or her memory to external supplements, a pernicious processes Derrida considers in "Plato's Pharmacy" as "a play of appearances which enable [substitution] to pass for truth..." (130). Writing, he argues, is not a gift but a hindrance, a drug. If we entrust our memories to the *pharmakon* of writing, knowledge crumbles and deteriorates, accumulating into a pile of blocks lying still on the bottom of the ocean floor.

But when Ga turns her attention to the setting of type, she focuses not on the final simulacrum of the ruins' discursive description but rather the embodied handiwork of its preparation. As Ga's hand places letters into the composing stick, she narrates a short history of the California Job Case, which finds capital and non-capital letters placed in the same space to reduce hand travel. Given this strategic organization, the cumulative distance traveled by the hand which hovers over and pulls from each compartment is markedly less. But only through

the repetitious movement of the hand, the long and learned setting of the type, will the setter begin to memorize the divisions of the case. The handiwork, in short, becomes habit, until the work of the hand has been translated back into the mind. “A skilled typesetter,” notes Ga, “can read the text set by another typesetter just by watching the pattern of hand movements in and out of the compartments.”

In this movement back and forth between the composing stick and the type case, we find also Ga’s continuous oscillation between absence and assignment, the “intellectual” or the “symbolic” at play with the “material” transformation of writing and recording. When the center screen assumes its blackened shadow, metaphorizing the disappearance and irretrievability of the lighthouse, the viewer assigns to the photograph and the composing stick the objectifying mode of reference seemingly inherent to each. But Ga’s screened typologies destabilize the dichotomous relations between media tools and their operations of grammar—concepts and rhetorical strategies like metaphor ubiquitous throughout her work—in order to perform the very disjunction between what Paul de Man refers to as the “aesthetically responsive” and the “rhetorically aware” (72). Doing so, de Man continues, “undoes the pseudo-synthesis of inside and outside, time and space, container and content, part and whole, motion and stasis, self and understanding, writer and reader, metaphor and metonymy, that the text has constructed” (72). In other words, reanimating the lighthouse through a projection of its mediated ruins unites the mechanics of its operation (i.e. the Kittlerian techno-determinism of, for example, the letterpress) with the logic of its grammar.

Still, the lighthouse, even in the face of the CD, the photograph, and the letterpress, remains formless, *unwritten*, fundamentally resistant to description. Judith Butler, through her own psychoanalytic reading of sexual difference, privileges such resistance in order to describe

a materiality not dependent on signification, therefore prior to (and uninhibited by) discourse, logic, and governance. With reference to Plato's *chora*, she analyzes the presence of a "receptacle," a "permanent, ... shapeless non-thing which cannot be named" (*Bodies that Matter* 53):

In this sense, the receptacle is not simple a figure *for* the excluded, but, taken as a figure, stands for the excluded and thus performs or enacts yet another set of exclusions of all that remains unfigurable under the sign of the feminine.... [T]he feminine is cast outside the form/matter and universal/particular binarisms. She will be neither the one nor the other, but the permanent and unchangeable condition of both, what can be construed as nonthematizable materiality. (*Bodies that Matter* 42)

Butler's shapelessness posits a feminine body regulated by disciplinary ideals and governing norms yet nonetheless never fully attainable by such generalized abstractions. Yet considering Butler's theories of the ontology of matter in the depths of Ga's observational media practice assists in recognizing *how* bodies and objects even begin to matter. Only through an iterative process of approach, through degrees of closeness, do bodies occupy norms, or rather, as Butler notes, "position[s] somewhere between the norm and its failure" (*Undoing Gender* 74).

The materials Ga collects throughout her films, however falsified, anecdotal, *immaterial*, constitute layers of historical record and remembrance which, when brought to cohere in the durational performance of her projects, start to form the foundation for a site approximate to, yet never exactly like, the lighthouse. The same might be said of the camera's downward turn in *Strophe*, which aims to approach and approximate through its retreat a different traumatic upheaval: that of the asylum seeker. The swing from signification into the pre-symbolic, non-representational world of Butler's receptacle takes form as filmic blur,

nodding not just to the haptic visualities of contemporaries like Steve McQueen but the structural-materialist filmmakers of yesteryear, in particular Stan Brakhage's idealized "untutored eye." Such processes push back against a correlationist account of materiality that takes objects to be passive mediums for human inscription. Rather, Ga opens up a reconsideration of media archaeological approaches more aligned with new materialist theorists like Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, Manuel DeLanda, and Barad, who assert matter's lively, "vibrant," and agentic character. Approaching Ga's medial detritus through this lens reformulates traditional conceptions of difference inherent to media and their mediations, even when such an approach lacks the necessary signification with which to thematize images and individuals.

### **Projection and Diffraction**

Turns, falls, and crossings: throughout Ga's films and performances these tropes reappear frequently, unsettling any viewer's sense of stable spatial or temporal emplotment. *The Fortunetellers* exhibits the most extreme of such cases when the artist sweeps the transparencies off the projector into a pile on the table before her and places, in their stead, a plastic yo-yo, through which the projector's bulb struggles to pass (fig. 3). For those aboard the scientific expedition, the uses of this yo-yo were many: a toy, a name for the scientific tool sent through a hole in the ice to measure the solidity and temperature of the ocean, and a metaphor for the movement of the researcher across and even through boundaries of disciplinary histories. Ga:

[T]he massive ice cube we are attached to is sitting on top of two layers of water: the warmer, saltier, Atlantic layer; and below that the cooler, fresher Arctic layer. The yo-yo goes down to the arctic layer to take a sample of solidity and temperature, and then

up to the Atlantic layer. [...] [T]he yo-yo is *cheating time*, because it takes at least three thousand years for one water molecule to travel on the oceanic conveyor belt, past the equator, down to Antarctica, and back up again to the Arctic. So, the yo-yo is a moment, taking a sample of the different centuries as it passes through the water sources. [...] [This] would be a huge transition. Some would say it would be like entering a whole other world.

The yo-yo, resting atop the surface of the projector, serves for Ga as a machine capable of moving between these worlds. Its up-cast and its down-cast have such little regard for the separation of these bodies of its water, yet the environments it encounters on either side (an



Fig. 3. From Ellie Ga, *The Fortunetellers*, 2011. Performance, running time: 1 hour. Live narration, video, slide and overhead projections, recorded sound. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

inside and an outside void of direction or hierarchy) remain radically different. It follows a routine oscillation “re-turning” within the ocean’s depths, by which I mean, following Barad’s feminist physics, that it moves “not by returning as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again – iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities, [...] new diffraction patterns” (Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction” 168).

A small white circle amidst an ocean of black then appears on the screen before Ga (fig. 4). Its edges are clearly demarcated, but from its sides, into the black expanse, radiates a gradient of its illumination. And while the source of its light remains unclear, it stands at once as an illustration for the hole within the ice, the lighthouse’s broadcasting beam, and the diffraction patterns of which Barad, drawing on the work of Donna Haraway (“Promises of Monsters”) and Trinh T. Minh-Ha, writes. For only when we conceive of difference at every

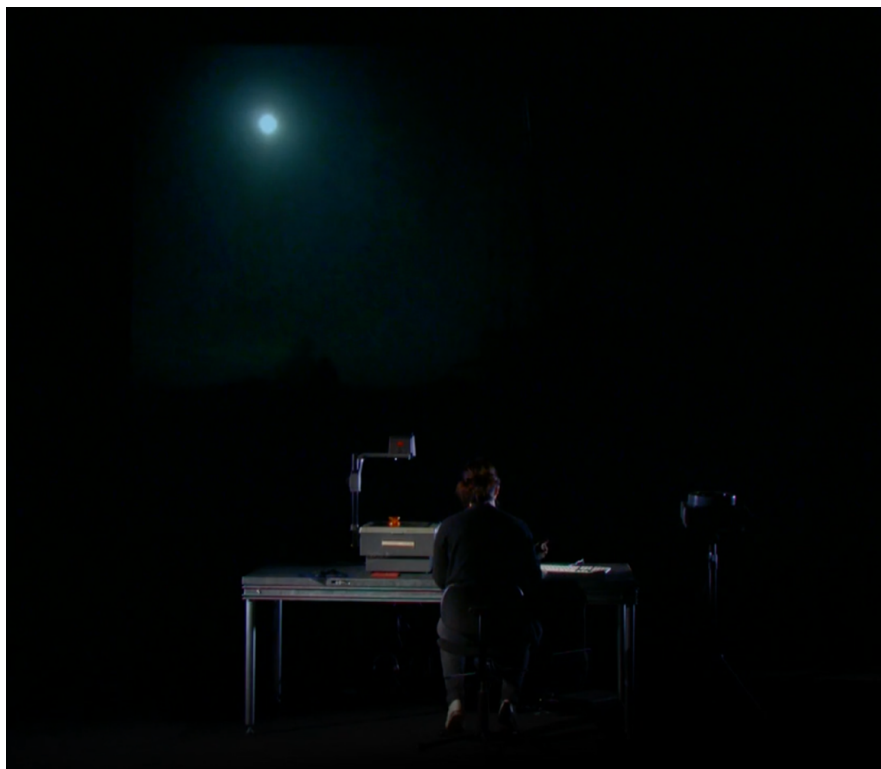


Fig. 4. From Ellie Ga, *The Fortunetellers*, 2011. Performance, running time: 1 hour. Live narration, video, slide and overhead projections, recorded sound. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.



scale of the dispersive gradient might we begin to complicate the light/dark binarisms with which one might simplify this image, or, more broadly, map the epistemologies that have thus far sufficed to fix matter and its meanings: inside/outside, past/present, objectivity/subjectivity, materiality/discursivity, self/Other. Butler has already assisted in recognizing spaces of *unfiguration* as resistance to discursive binarisms, but in her formula, matter remains always implicitly subjugated to discourse (*Bodies that Matter* 9; *Undoing Gender* 217). As Barad asserts, “[l]anguage has been granted too much power” (“Posthuman Performativity” 801). Instead, how might bodies’ and objects’ matter remain inseparable from their materialization and how might these relationalities have ethical effects across the many scales of Ga’s practice?

If we re-turn to the yo-yo’s journey through the layers of water and history, we might start to draw a line towards Barad’s ontological unification of matter, meaning, and practice. For the yo-yo is a measuring device, an apparatus, which takes as its objective, referential sample a water molecule at each layer. But the result of the experiment is not the inherent qualities of the molecule measured; the results include also the entirety of the material arrangement, an approximation between the apparatus and the object taken as an indivisible phenomenon. Thus, Barad closes down the gap between matter and discourse, bodies and their norms, by mediating through practice. Even if any given phenomenon lists its constitutive parts, each action or element is a contingent separation, an *intra-action within* the phenomenon that redefines difference not as something absolute or fixed but rather a dynamic effect of analysis. “Agential cuts,” writes Barad, “never sit still.... Inside/outside is undone. [...] An uncanny topology: no smooth surfaces, willies everywhere. Differences percolate through every ‘thing,’ reworking and being reworked through reiterative reconfigurings of

spacetimematterings [...] each being (re)threaded through the other. Differences are always shifting within” (“Diffracting Diffraction” 178-179). The yo-yo turns over again within the waters, measuring certain qualities into an arrangement though never effecting a unification of beings. Irreconcilable contradictions, inherent differences, are held within.

*Diffraction* encompasses this appearance of patterns of difference coming together to form new arrangements of inclusion and exclusion. Contrary to traditional epistemological models of reflection and reflexivity, which uphold ideals of sameness and separateness, a constant keeping of “the world at a distance” (Barad, *Meeting the Universe* 87), diffraction provides a much clearer picture for analyzing the functions of the very apparatus that produces the pattern. For rather than viewing the same from afar, diffraction serves another metaphor of optics and geometry which maps interferences, disruptions, and the *effects* of difference. The very effects of these effects are crucial: no longer does it force media objects and mediatized subjects into competing taxonomies. Now, as if superimposed on the surface of Ga’s overhead projector, suspended by a string between two bodies of water, and passing through a small hole in the ice, diffraction offers a space of entanglement, a phenomenal map of disjointed and indeterminate dynamics.

The overhead projector, like much of Ga’s work, forces the artist into unexpected encounters, through which she uncovers a new ethics of care built upon the diffraction of her media objects and subjects. Her relationality among the materialities of her practice goes beyond traditional conceptions of media hybridity, which suggest that relations shape pre-existing entities (Haraway, “Promises of Monsters”; Latour). Yet she builds on these encounters, especially those non-human relations espoused by Haraway, in order to redistribute agency in an ethically significant manner toward those under significant duress. Perhaps most

surprising then, is not so much the yo-yo's ability to maneuver through time by passing through layers of water, but the ghostly reemergence of the yo-yo's dislocation, again and again. Derrida reminds us of this alterity always in anticipation when he asks:

Does [justice] come simply to repair injustice or more precisely to rearticulate *as must be* the disjointure of the present time? [...] Does not justice as relation to the other suppose [...] the irreducible excess of a disjointure or an anachrony, [...] some 'out of joint' dislocation in Being and in time itself [...]? (*Specters of Marx* 32).

That which is included sustains always the haunting of that which is excluded. In other words, the message in the bottle sustains the haunting of the catastrophe just off-screen.

Like the materials assembled on the surface of the projector, Ga's falling camera forces us to reckon with irreducible relations between self and Other. In every mediated encounter, the metaphorical message in the bottle compels not just the reading of its surfaced inscription but also the historical effects of its seafaring. To find it is to confront these bewildering spatial and temporal conditions and to offer something in return. But rather than a reconstruction, Ga implores a response, for the relationality to the precarious Other is one already materially entangled with the self. Therefore, one cannot "wait" for a "catastrophe in a bottle"; it has already been found. The Other as its sender is irreducibly and materially bound to the self as its receiver. "Ethicality," Barad asserts, "entails noncoincidence with oneself" ("Quantum Entanglements" 265).

## Conclusion

In a 2003 conference organized by *Critical Inquiry*, Peter Galison described the difficulties of a recurring trend of theory within which media studies at times still finds itself circulating. "Specific theory," he claimed, finds itself working "between the zero distance allowed by the

dream of an extreme empiricism and the infinite scale of a magical universalism” (382). To theorize about media means at once to place oneself in an Archimedean point outside of the world and to base one’s empirical claims on the specifics of the material, archival, embodied objects of study. To some degree, this is the method with which I have observed Ga’s own observational practice. But throughout I have sought inspiration from her study of the horizon, by which I mean her analysis of the alterity of lost objects—drifting onto the Aegean coast, submerged outside of Alexandria, layered beneath water and ice—and her recording through an imperfect, approximate, *approach*. Her form of cultural production, then, privileges the space of “specific theory’s” contradiction, joining both poles while holding their respective irregularities in constant limbo on the distant edge of her “horizon of criticism” (Galison 382).

The metaphor of the horizon, then, becomes not a way to suggest a beyond, not an attempt to unearth the invisible levels of structural causality within the grain of the object, but rather a legible set of points one can use to navigate through an expanse of media studies. We might here adopt the epistemological frames Ga shares with maritime modeling—information, navigation, and intuition—in order to locate the value of the object not in its recovery but in the research. As Margaret Cohen writes, maritime fiction might offer a mode of reading which allows for the construction of an archive of things long lost to history:

The narratologist in the archive of literature shares with the mariner and the reader the craving, “to see, to see.” This “worker in prose,” too, relies on precise techniques coupled with the pragmatic imagination and the tact hones through practice and experience in her efforts to make the unknown intelligible through piecing together partial information. The remarkable ability of navigators to thread a path across the oceans of the globe for almost three hundred years [...] lacking complete information

about their position on the earth speaks eloquently to the fact that knowledge can be usefully pursued, even amid uncertainty (73).

The navigational work of the researcher draws out a map on which no particular destination is marked. But a glimpse of one's coordinates might be found through the rote regularity of mark-making, much like the captain steering Ga's arctic expedition within *The Fortunetellers*. The hand that pens the mark deliberately projects information in one direction, one bombastic beam of light, causing all of his followers to work toward a similar destination. This is, after all, the intervention of the historian, especially in times of emergency: to find some orientation in a weather of uncertainty, to point to a light in the middle of the night (whatever the cost in the wider scene of one's research) to settle some sense of direction.

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