

Forest for the Trees

DIETER ROELSTRAETE ON THE ART OF GOSHK MACUGA

ART AS RESEARCH, RESEARCH AS ART: This is a powerful new force in contemporary culture, its development partly driven by a momentous shift in art education, where scholarly methodologies and knowledge production are increasingly emphasized. London-based artist Goshka Macuga is an oft-cited standard-bearer of this approach. The majority of her projects are the result of long years of reading and research, much of which is conducted in close collaboration with other artists (whose work she often features within her installations) and with specialists from adjoining fields, and much of which is carried out in the archives of the host institutions. Her work has

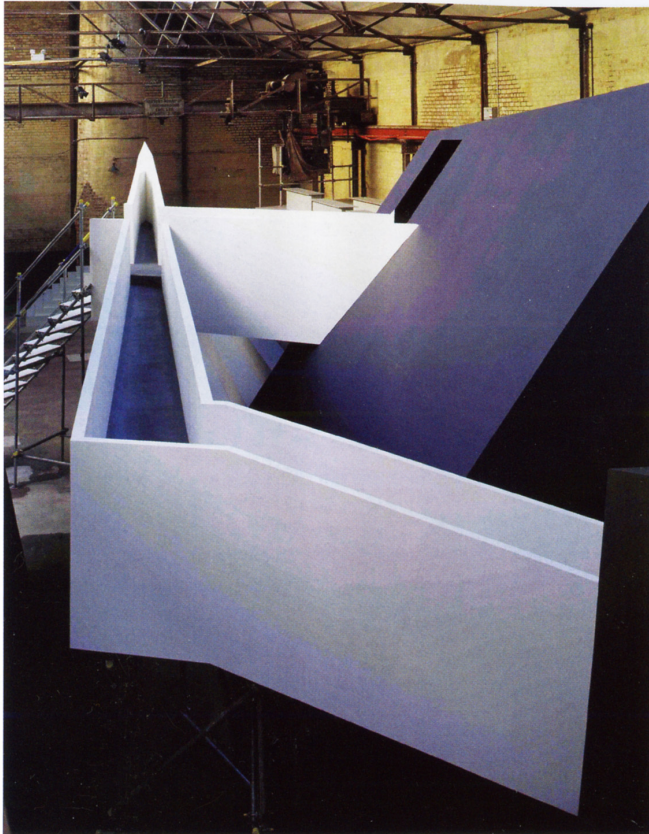
figured in numerous discussions of contemporary art's not entirely unproblematic love affair with archives and archaeologies, history and historiographies, ranging from quaint or obscurantist art-historical minutiae to sweeping vistas of past utopias.

Such archaeological fieldwork often yields a wealth of traces, relics, objets trouvés, and archival materials, whose inclusion in Macuga's actual artwork regularly pushes the boundaries of what we understand appropriation to be. Her work could be viewed in conjunction with a marked intensification of interest on the part of a growing number of artists in curating, in the history of exhibition making, and

in strategies of display. This trend has led not only to a gradual reconfiguration of exhibiting as art production (the exhibition as a work of art, the artist as curator) but also to a shift in the ways we question traditional notions of authorship and authenticity, originality and reconstruction, artistic autonomy and cultural heteronomy. The artist as researcher, the artist as historian, the artist as curator: a trinity that haunts all of Macuga's work.

Haunts is used advisedly here, as an interest in occultism and other forms of spiritual heterodoxy has long been a constitutive factor of Macuga's practice. This, too, could be linked back to her decidedly

Goshka Macuga
Artforum, Issue 50, September 2011
Dieter Roelstraete pp. 322 - 327



Opposite page: Goshka Macuga with Simon Moretti, *Element 7: Magic Star*, 2006, floor painting, logs, artworks by Mai-Thu Perret and an unknown artist. From Goshka Macuga, *Sleep of Ulro*, 2006. Installation view, Greenland Street, Liverpool. From the 4th Liverpool Biennial. Foreground, left: Mai-Thu Perret, *Le Fée Idéologie* (The Fairy Ideology), 2004. Background, right: Artist unknown, *Journeyman*, n.d. Photo: Andy Stagg.

Above: Goshka Macuga, *Element 11: Spike and Walkway* (detail), 2006, mixed media. From *Sleep of Ulro*, 2006. Installation view, Greenland Street, Liverpool. From the 4th Liverpool Biennial. Photo: Andy Stagg.

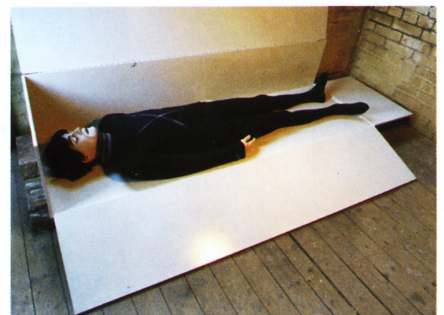


Above: Goshka Macuga, *Element 4: Heaven*, 2006, mixed media. From *Sleep of Ulro*, 2006. Installation view, Greenland Street, Liverpool. From the 4th Liverpool Biennial. On wall: David Thorp, *The Kiff Plant*, 2006. In vitrine: Tony Matelli, *Weed*, 2006; botanical anatomical models by R. Brendel & Co.; various objects from the collection of the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, UK. Photo: Andy Stagg.

Below: Goshka Macuga, *Somnambulist*, 2006, carved wood, fiberglass, hair, clothes. From *Sleep of Ulro*, 2006. Installation view, Greenland Street, Liverpool. From the 4th Liverpool Biennial. Photo: Andy Keate.

left-field conception of (art as) research: Much like art, after all, magic could simply be viewed as an “other” form or model of knowledge production. Take, for example, her monumental multichamber installation *Sleep of Ulro*, unquestionably a highlight of the 2006 Liverpool Biennial. A sprawling, labyrinthine structure, the work’s angular architecture resembled the set of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—an allusion that was hard to miss, given the presence in one room of a life-size effigy of Caligari’s sleepwalking right-hand man, Cesare, lying enshrined in a white coffin. Macuga’s title refers to a luminous slumber that William Blake believed “man must go

through to awaken to eternal life and the divine vision of unity.” Paradoxically, such a divine vision of unity was hard to come by amid the installation’s many disparate elements, ranging from a vaguely satanic-looking floor diagram made in collaboration with Simon Moretti and Mai-Thu Perret to botanical models culled from the collections of the Manchester Museum to a hand-carved effigy of a levitating Madame Blavatsky, renowned cofounder of the Theosophical Society—all spiraling around a body of research into Renaissance cosmologies, mysticism and its conflicted relationship with modernism, and, of course, somnambulism. Like the physical and con-



The artist as researcher, the artist as historian, the artist as curator: a trinity that haunts all of Macuga's work.



Left: Goshka Macuga, *I Am Become Death*, 2009, mixed media. Installation view, Kunsthalle Basel. Photo: Serge Hasenböhler.



Right: Goshka Macuga, *Untitled*, 2008, color photograph from the archive of Tom Pripish. From *I Am Become Death*, 2009.

ceptual structure of *Sleep of Ulro*, the eccentric associative logic that governs Macuga's art in general resists the facile reductions of narrowly disciplinary thinking. It is precisely in the weaving of such unorthodox webs that her practice presents itself as eminently contemporary—the strong whiff of archival research and archaeological excavation notwithstanding.

Indeed, Macuga's greatest intellectual passion may well be the unearthing and invention of connections, the assembly of "objects in relation," to borrow the title of her 2007 exhibition at Tate Britain. But while the unruly, probing curiosity of her mind remains in evidence in Macuga's most recent work, some of the frivolity of yore (as evident in, say, the "realist" wooden sculpture of Madame Blavatsky and others like it) has disappeared. So too, it seems, has the somewhat myopic art-historical anecdotalism that defined suites of works such as *Gottesseggen*, at Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle in Munich in 2008, and the aforementioned "Objects in Relation." (In the Munich show, life-size wooden sculptures modeled after the gallerist and an influential local museum director greeted visitors on their entering the space; at the Tate, one of the relations referred to in the title was a romantic liaison between two key members of the prewar British avant-garde, namely Paul Nash and Eileen Agar.)

For her three most recent major projects, *I Am Become Death* at the Kunsthalle Basel in 2009, *The Nature of the Beast* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2009, and *It Broke from Within* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis last spring, Macuga decided to concentrate her considerable investigative energies on political histories that are intricately interwoven with the institutions in which she works—and that, it so happens, principally concern America. In *I Am Become Death*, curated by Adam

Szymczyk, this concern with the political partly manifested itself in the figure of Tom Pripish, a Vietnam veteran whose wartime photo archive Macuga acquired via eBay. The project's title invoked a nugget of Vedic wisdom Robert Oppenheimer is alleged to have repeated on witnessing the explosion of the first atom bomb in the deserts of the American Southwest, where Pripish now lives—a region traversed in a documentary film Macuga made in collaboration with anthropologist Julian Gastelo, retracing Aby Warburg's 1896 journey from New York to the Hopi settlements of Arizona and providing glimpses of a number of war memorials along the way. (Warburg is the other key reference in this characteristically dense meshwork of historical associations, and the renegade art historian seems an obvious choice as far as guiding spirits or patron saints go. The highly unacademic collage technique of his *Mnemosyne Atlas* could be cited as one historical source of Macuga's own experiments in what has been called three-dimensional collage.)

In her next two major projects, Macuga's preferred method of weaving together apparently disparate investigative strands into one dense fabric of facts and intimations was given a surprisingly literal twist. The centerpieces of both *The Nature of the Beast* (curated by Anthony Spira) and *It Broke from Within* (curated by Peter Eleey and Bartholomew Ryan) were giant tapestries, a textile art also explored by the artist in the 2009 Venice Biennale, when her enormous *Plus Ultra*—depicting the leaders of the G20, a dollar-sign-emblazoned portrait of Charles V, the Pillars of Hercules, and a fishing boat carrying refugees to European terra firma—wrapped its way around the columns of the Arsenale. The tapestry is a literal, physical translation of the artist's intertextual, reticular working method, then, as well as a medium that is eminently equipped to give extra dra-

matic gravitas to the artist's ongoing interrogation of both power structures and the lure of power proper. Through the history of heraldry, tapestry has retained its explicit association with the spectacle of power and with power's love of spectacle (e.g., the tapestries Rubens designed for the court of Louis XIII). The focal point of *The Nature of the Beast*—a project that in many ways revolved around the art world's occasionally troublesome relationship with the powers that be—was a tapestry that had been neither designed nor created at the behest of the artist: It was the life-size woven replica of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller in 1955. On loan to the United Nations since 1985, it hangs at the entrance of the Security Council meeting room and was infamously covered during Colin Powell's 2003 defense of the US government's argument for going to war with Iraq. The tapestry was brought to the Whitechapel, where the original *Guernica* had actually been exhibited in 1938, for Macuga's yearlong exhibition project. There, it was installed in a room at the center of which stood a large, round meeting table. An open invitation was issued, offering the space to any group that wanted to convene there, and documents and visual records of these events were later collated and published. In the corner of the room, a bizarre-looking bust stood atop a pedestal: a cubist portrait of Powell, depicted holding up a vial ostensibly containing traces of anthrax. The elaborate mosaic of sociopolitical connections and ideological alignments invoked here, became, in turn, the subject of a new tapestry, *On the Nature of the Beast*, in which the artist, always aware of the inevitability of "implication," is pictured somewhat sternly turning away from the action at the center of the image, where His Royal Highness Prince William of Wales stands in front of the "original"

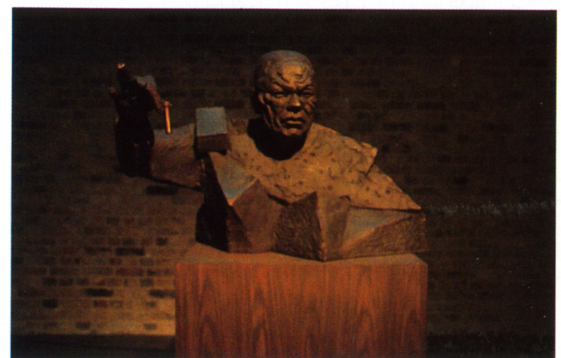
KATE MACGARRY

Goshka Macuga
Artforum, Issue 50, September 2011
Dieter Roelstraete pp. 322 - 327



Above and below: Goshka Macuga, *The Nature of the Beast* (overall and detail), 2009, tapestry, wooden and glass table, leather and metal chairs, bronze sculpture. Installation views, Whitechapel Gallery, London. Photos: Patrick Lears.

Below: Goshka Macuga, *Colin Powell*, 2009, bronze, 21 1/4 x 33 1/4 x 22 1/4". From *The Nature of the Beast*, 2009.



KATE MACGARRY

Goshka Macuga
Artforum, Issue 50, September 2011
Dieter Roelstraete pp. 322 - 327



Macuga's tapestries are a literal, physical translation of the artist's intertextual, reticular working method.

Above: Goshka Macuga, *Lost Forty*, 2011, tapestry, 14' x 48' 4 3/4".

Below: Goshka Macuga, *It Broke from Within* (detail), 2011, objects from the archives and collection of the Walker Art Center, tapestry by Macuga (*Lost Forty*, 2011). Installation view, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo: Gene Pittman.

Right: Goshka Macuga, *Lost Forty* (detail), 2011, tapestry, 14' x 48' 4 3/4".





Goshka Macuga, *It Broke from Within* (detail), 2011, objects from the archives and collection of the Walker Art Center, tapestry by Macuga (*Lost Forty*, 2011). Installation view, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Foreground, left: Joseph Beuys, *Rose für direkte Demokratie* (Rose for Direct Democracy), 1973. On wall: Goshka Macuga, *Lost Forty*, 2011. Photo: Gene Pittman.

Guernica tapestry addressing the throngs of VIPs who have gathered in the art gallery for its festive April 2009 postrenovation reopening. . . . It's a vertiginous spiral of *mise en abymes* that makes the labyrinthine structure of *Sleep of Ulro* appear almost one-dimensional in comparison.

In *It Broke from Within* at the Walker, Macuga's first major exhibition in the US, a photo-tapestry again functioned as a kind of Gordian knot that tied together a riot of apparently disconnected narratives related to recent art history, institutional and capital-P politics, and the economic conditions that occasionally enable their fortuitous convergence. The giant swath of black-and-white fabric hung at the far end of a gallery inside which the artist had installed a futuristic-looking conversation pit inspired by an unrealized design for a lounge, initially proposed as part of the museum's 2005 Herzog & de Meuron expansion. Adorning the surrounding walls were works and assorted materials from the Walker's archives and collection. In one particularly pointed juxtaposition, a Berenice Abbott photo of a woman working at a lumber mill hung next to a Sherrie Levine painted-knot plywood piece, both facing stacks of the redwood blocks that, when arranged in rows, comprise Carl Andre's 1981 sculpture *Aisle*. The tapestry itself, *Lost Forty*, depicts a dense forest—it was, after all, shown in a museum that owes its existence to lumber, which proved a most profitable commodity for founder T. B. Walker. Through this tableau roams a motley crew of strangers, some of whom have appeared in the artist's work before. A full accounting of *Lost Forty*'s exuberantly anachronistic menagerie (which includes but is not limited to Mr. Walker, miscellaneous museum directors, architect

Jacques Herzog, American Indian children, the aforementioned Pripish and Warburg, and the original artist-curator, Marcel Duchamp) is, alas, beyond the scope of this essay, but a few specifics should be noted. Just behind Walker on the tapestry's left side are two banners emblazoned with indignant Tea Party motifs: a don't-tread-on-me snake and a Minnesota state flag desecrated by a hammer and sickle. A treelike structure is being felled—on closer examination, this turns out to be Minneapolis's Foshay Tower, an Art Deco landmark that in 1970 was at the center of a public art controversy when William Wegman produced a billboard depicting the tower lying on its side; the work was titled *What Goes Up Must Come Down*. Today, Wegman's work would be extremely difficult to realize because of its apparent flirtation with terrorist imagery, and this difficulty could be considered an aftereffect of the very culture of fear that has helped to bring such social movements as the Tea Party into existence. Another figure, seen to the left of Joseph Beuys (whose arboreal intervention *7000 Oaks* was re-created in Minnesota, through the auspices of the Walker, in 1997), seems relevant here. Holding aloft a sign saying WE DON'T WANT SOCIALISM, YOU ARROGANT KENYAN!, he is, clearly, the everyman of the Tea Party.

The unnerving fact of that movement's emergence is perhaps the real subject of Macuga's monumental tapestry, obscured as it may initially appear to be by a thicker of sophisticated art-world arcana, like the forest obscured by the trees. Macuga experienced the Tea Party's momentum firsthand on a number of occasions, during site visits to Washington, DC, and Saint Paul. Photographs made at a rally in the latter city were incorporated into the Walker show (once

again, the artist has inserted herself into the tapestry, this time photographed making photographs). Having grown up in Communist Poland in the 1970s and '80s, Macuga has of course long been aware of socialism's tragically stunted history, and her interest in the use of the very word *socialism*—a serious slur in much of present-day America, and one that the Walker Art Center staff has frequently heard cast in its direction—is matched by her awareness of the messy tangle of misunderstandings spun around the discourse of freedom (artistic freedom, freedom of expression) at a time when *that* word has become so strongly associated with a reactionary culture of popular resentment. In the words of Colonel Mu'ammarr al-Gadhafi—who knew they would ever come in handy?—"freedom of expression is the right of every natural person, even if a person chooses to behave irrationally to express his or her insanity," and it is in part this freedom that is documented, however fragmentarily, in *Lost Forty*.

Macuga is currently preparing an exhibition at the Zacheta National Gallery of Art in her native Warsaw, which will once again involve an in-depth investigation of an institution's history—a past that, unsurprisingly, is marked by censorship. Interestingly, however, her research at Zacheta is set to focus on post-1989 history, zooming in on an era traditionally associated with the return of "freedom of speech" to post-Communist Eastern Europe. Whether a tapestry will feature in this exhibition remains to be seen, but it is more than likely that the warp and woof of recent political history will once again provide the project's defining texture. □

DIETER ROELSTRAETE IS CURATOR AT THE MUSEUM VAN HEDENDAAGSE KUNST ANTWERPEN (MUHKA) IN BELGIUM.