

Goshka Macuga "To the Son of Man who Ate the Scroll" at Fondazione Prada, Milan February 23~2016



There is a startling fragment of a lost fresco by Donato Bramante in the Pinacoteca di Brera (Milan's main public gallery for Old Masters paintings), painted around 1488 for the house of his Milanese patron and friend Gaspare Visconti, a poet.

It depicts a laughing philosopher (Heraclitus), and a crying one (Democritus), side by side, before a series of open books; between them, a perfectly round globe floats in midair, with a precise mapping of the Mediterranean area, Asia Minor, North Africa and the Middle East. The two scholars are believed to represent the ever-changing moods of the human mind, as well as the culture of Federico da Montefeltro's humanistic court in Urbino—Bramante's birthplace, the Ideal City of arts, letters and sciences of the Italian Renaissance and main epicenter for the study of perspective. Federico's famous *studiolo* (cabinet), with trompe-l'oeil decorations in inlaid wood and 28 paintings of famous learned men, dates to 1476.

A clue to Bramante's puzzling iconography can be found in a dialogue by Lucian of Samosata, titled *Philosophers for Sale*, where Democritus explains that he laughs about all human affairs, because there is "nothing serious in them: all much about an atom-dance in the infinite void", while Heraclitus cannot hold back tears because "all mankind, from the least to the greatest, are liable to decay and death. Human life is in my view of it, one continued funeral procession". I couldn't help thinking of Bramante's bipolar duo and the recursive nature of our spiritual dilemmas upon meeting Goshka Macuga, for a preview of her exhibition "To the Son of Man Who Ate the Scroll" at Fondazione Prada, where an original *studiolo* (c. 1480) from Northern Italy features as a star of the permanent collection, as well as an obvious signifier of a distinguished tradition of patronage.

The show's title refers to prophet Ezekiel, who was given a scroll of lamentations to eat by God and found it "as sweet as honey"; he experienced visions about the tree of life and knowledge, and about beings who "had the likeness of a human": a perfect testimonial for an ambitious exhibition where the main role of art is to historicize and visualize the connections between science, philosophy and new technology, in order to explore the fundamental questions of the origin and end. Macuga operates as a researcher, curator, artist and freewheeling impresario. *The end* is a fairly ironic subject for a foundation that opened its pharaonic new premises in May 2015, with a huge tower still under construction, and thus in the initial phases of an innovative development. It is also a timely subject, given the current debates upon the approaching end of humanity as we know it, as a joint result of impending Anthropocene gloom and the fast-forward evolution of artificial intelligence.

Memory is another key theme of Macuga's investigation, which lasted for one and a half years and ranged from the mnemonic techniques of ancient rhetoricians, to the Renaissance art of memory and Aby Warburg's Atlas, to our artificial devices for producing, structuring, saving, and imagining information. Macuga's spectacular famous learned man and contemporary prophet, installed in the Podium, is a "manmade man": a bearded android commissioned from the Japanese A-Lab, who speaks in a captivating voice while turning his handsome head, blinking his eyes, and moving his hands like a perfectly "natural"

creature. It utters a blend of words of wisdom by thinkers, philosophers, writers and artists from the past. “The robot is the rhetoric, a collector of speech. Like ancient orators, his speeches are constructed of many speeches”, says Macuga. Among them is a witty quote from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: “How dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to be greater than his nature will allow.” Like a modern *Frankenstein*, the robot is the superhero of science fiction, “a term which holds within itself the contradiction of being simultaneously both truth and lies”, as Ariane Koek points out in her excellent essay for the volume *Before the Beginning and After the End*, a 350-page atlas of the “Macuga galaxy” documenting the artist’s entire career, from 1993 to the present, published for the occasion.

Dark-haired and skinned, the robot’s both seductive and daunting complexion evokes great Muslim philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes, but also the fearful ghosts of radical Islamist preachers, whose effective use of rhetoric has been recently counteranalyzed by French philosopher Philippe-Joseph Salazar. Macuga consciously focuses on “the breaking down of human nature in Freudian terms of love and hate”, she explains, as well as—cleverly—on the lures of the “uncanny valley”, an emotional response to humanoid robots (firstly theorized in 1970 by roboticist Masahiro Mori), initially met with empathy and smiles, but quickly faced with repulsion and anxiety for what viewers perceive as nearly, but not fully human. The artist also brings up another issue of post-humanity: we identify her android as a “him”, but as in Spike Jonze’s movie *Her*, it is evident that gender is an artificial construction, as well as a matter of language and performativity, to put it in Judith Butler’s terms.

Around the android Macuga has installed a series of artworks by Phyllida Barlow, Robert Breer, James Lee Byars, Ettore Colla, Thomas Heatherwick, Eliseo Mattiacci and herself, to create a cosmogony of cross-references. Upstairs, after an encounter with *La salita della memoria* (1977), a Jacob’s ladder by Claudio Parmiggiani, the exhibition continues with *Before the Beginning and After the End* (2016), an installation carried out in collaboration with Patrick Tresset, the creator of “sketching robots”: it comprises a series of six industrial tables, ten meters long, akin to conveyor belts painted in bright colors. Each table displays a long paper roll covered in machine-made drawings and incorporates a few original artifacts, boxed in individual showcases: significantly, the first one is an ancient Sumerian seal, inscribed with a cosmological myth on the creation of humanity, which has to be unrolled to produce readable imagery. Through the succession of these pictures, objects and alien “pictograms”, Macuga narrates art history and human history at large, up to its expiration. To mark this, on the sixth table, the robotic drawing arms of the “Paul- A” series will keep on sketching with ballpoint pens for the entire duration of the exhibition.

Inside the Cisterna (Tank), Macuga has positioned a series of 73 bronze heads of thinkers (from Foucault, Zizek, and Marx to Pussy Riot and Aaron Swartz), hand-sculpted by herself and linked by long brass bars, materializing in space as if in a diagram the possible dialogues and broken conversations among them. Here, the inspiration came from an epistolary exchange between Freud and Einstein on the future of humankind, collected in the 1933 book *Why War?*, where the father of contemporary physics suggested expanding the

cross-historical boundaries of knowledge and engaging the best minds of his time in a collective discussion over crucial global topics. On weekends, Macuga will also stage a series of readings in Esperanto inside the Studiolo: an ironic, utopic countermeasure to the Tower of Babel of present languages, be they human, scientific or artificial. Time to laugh or to cry?

at Fondazione Prada, Milan

until 19 June 2016

by *Barbara Casavecchia*

Goshka Macuga in collaboration with Patrick Tresset, *Before the Beginning and After the End*, 2016



Goshka Macuga in collaboration with Patrick Tresset, *Before the Beginning and After the End*, 2016

Courtesy: the artist and Fondazione Prada, Milan. Photo: Delfino Sisto Legnani Studio







