

A black and white photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored trench coat and a patterned scarf, sitting in a chair in a library. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is filled with bookshelves containing numerous books. The text "Exhibit, A" is overlaid in a white, elegant serif font across the center of the image. A vertical red textured bar is visible on the far left edge.

Exhibit, A

Dieter Roelstraete

Untangling

*Making
Sense
of Goshka
Macuga*

A minor literature doesn't come
from a minor language;
it is rather that which a minority
constructs within a major language.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,
*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*¹

For a number of years now, the arcane medium of tapestry weaving has taken center stage in Goshka Macuga's creative practice. Although the Polish-born, London-based artist quite early on in her career took a vivid interest in textile arts more generally—part of a broader trend, among young women artists in particular, aimed at rescuing various strands of the applied arts tradition from the stigma of house- and handiwork, of being a “minor” art—it is only since 2008 that large-scale tapestries have featured prominently in her work. A monumental tapestry—a life-size woven replica of Pablo Picasso's iconic 1937 painting *Guernica*, to be precise—was at the heart of *The Nature of the Beast* (see pages 12–13), the sprawling, institution-specific installation Macuga developed for the refurbished and expanded Whitechapel Gallery in London, in 2009. *Plus Ultra* (see pages 42–43), another enormous tapestry, wrapped in part around two giant columns inside the Venetian Arsenale, was one of the stand-out pieces of the 53rd Venice Biennale, also in 2009. A third epically proportioned tapestry (see pages 30–31) was one of the undisputed highlights of the artist's first solo show in her native Poland, organized at Warsaw's Zacheta National Gallery of Art, in 2011, while the centerpiece of her first exhibition in an American museum, *It Broke from Within* (at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 2011), was likewise a massive woven mural, various pictorial elements of which were braided together to better chronicle the tortuous path of the museum's eventful (pre)history (see pages 58–59). Finally, Macuga's spectacular contribution to Documenta 13 consisted of a diptych: one tapestry (see pages 78–79) installed inside the Rotunda of Kassel, Germany's Fridericianum—the habitual site of the exhibition's most emblematic artworks—and the other (see pages 86–87), installed inside the Queen's Palace in the Afghan capital, Kabul (Macuga was one of twenty-seven artists invited to participate in Documenta's controversial satellite project in Kabul). The sheer size of these tapestries inevitably evokes memories of this ancient art's regal past, reminding us that, long before the advent of large-scale history painting or equestrian statuary, kings and queens all over Europe adorned the walls of their palaces with the very best the weavers of Flanders and Northern France—the traditional centers of the art form's seventeenth-century flowering—had to offer.

1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What is a Minor Literature?” in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16.

2 This is not as insignificant as it may seem in our era of “post-studio art practice,” as Macuga’s name is likewise often mentioned in the framework of the critical reevaluation of *craft* that has become such an important feature of much contemporary art (see, for instance, the increased interest in traditional art forms such as ceramics, archaic printing technologies, and woodcarving *alongside* the growing popularity of various textile arts among younger artists). Macuga’s interest in artisanal modes of production, however, is less a practical one than a matter of cultural politics—a function of her fascination with anachronism and obsolescence as well as an expression of her passion for revising received (“canonical”) art history. Rather than platforms for the reconsideration of the relationship between art and skill, between artist and artisan, the tapestries operate as arenas for larger art-historical debate, the key questions of which are essentially: Why do certain media fall out of favor? And why is art history written the way it is? Part of the answer to these questions leads us back to the relative predominance of women artists in the recent turn toward a critical reevaluation of applied (or “minor”) arts, i.e., of craft and handiwork. The systematic art-historical denigration of these traditions, so closely linked to the so-called domestic sphere of traditional female labor, is similarly always a matter of power and of the perpetuation of the powers that be, in the cultural realm. This discussion also partly informs Macuga’s *Arkhitectony—After K. Malevich* (2005), in which the muscular language of Russian suprematism is corrupted by the intrusion of a teapot or slightly deflated by the addition of a statuette depicting what looks like a naked, flag-waving pioneer girl.



On the Nature of the Beast (detail), 2009

In other words, given that tapestry is a medium that is intricately bound up with power and whose history is also that of the unquenchable thirst for pomp and circumstance that afflicts those in ritualized positions of authority, it is only fitting that in many of the aforementioned gobelins, *power* regularly returns as the ultimate subject of Macuga’s critical scrutiny (the mural is another instance of craft and tradition operating in the service of public power—one of many reasons why *mural* is a fitting synonym for Macuga’s tapestries). It is certainly no coincidence that in the artist’s first tapestry, *On the Nature of the Beast* (2009; see pages 10–11), made after (and based on) the acclaimed Whitechapel show, the proverbial spotlight is on Britain’s Prince William, addressing a well-heeled crowd of art-world insiders gathered to celebrate the reopening of East London’s foremost contemporary art space, while in *Plus Ultra* the world’s true high and mighty (leaders of the G20 member states) put in an emphatic guest appearance. In the Documenta tapestries as well, the medium’s warp and woof symbolically echo the artist’s ongoing interest in the dense meshwork of power relations that keep both the art world and its “real” counterpart—themselves closely entwined in a messy tangle of mostly economic dependencies—in the saddle. In this sense, Macuga’s adoption of large-scale tapestry, an art form whose historical development is so intricately bound up with the aura of power, as her signature medium of choice in recent years also signals an important shift in her practice toward more explicitly political (or socioeconomic) concerns and away from the preoccupation with art-historical anecdote and “alternative” traditions of knowledge production that were such defining characteristics of her earlier work.

What is it that these tapestries depict, however, and how are they made? The answers to these questions point us in the direction of a larger methodological debate—one in which *collage* is established as the governing principle of all Macuga’s art. Indeed, most of these kaleidoscopic tapestries depict photo collages that were painstakingly put together by the artist herself using mostly original, i.e., purpose-made, photographs (the tapestries themselves are factory-produced²), with the medium’s immersive, landscape-like scale allowing for a dizzying wealth of content and detail that is not



Arkhitectony—After K. Malevich (detail), 2005

so easily achieved in the modest format of traditional photo collage (of which Macuga has likewise been an enthusiastic practitioner for a number of years now). Much of this content often appears impossibly incoherent, fragmented, disparate, occasionally opaque, and also obtuse. The tapestry created for the Walker Art Center, *Lost Forty* (2011; see pages 58–59), is a particularly potent example: a vertiginous stew of current affairs and political history, autobiography and art world anecdote, peppered by the odd incongruity meant to destabilize any straightforward reading of the work as mere reportage.³ Indeed, it is in the tapestries (which can be considered extravagantly blown-up photo collages) that the artist's prodigiously associative research logic and love of oddball juxtapositions acquire their fullest, most formally resolved expression; quite literally, these works enact the weaving together of various seemingly irreconcilable narrative strands and lines of inquiry to produce the dense, tangled fabric of unmoored meanings that is one of the hallmarks of Macuga's practice.

The art of Goshka Macuga could be said to be exemplary of its time for a number of reasons, and its high-profile status in some of the last decade's most important group exhibitions can, in part, be attributed to its fortuitous placement at the intersection of a number of key tropes, trends, movements, and developments in contemporary art—much like the narrative strands woven together in the aforementioned tapestries. Among these shifts, three stand out as structuring principles underlying much of the artist's evolving method and oeuvre. The first relates to the relatively novel conception of art as research and, conversely, of research as art: research not merely as an integral aspect of art practice—arguably, an aspect more crucial now than ever before in the history of art—but possibly also an art form in its own right. For some time now, this tendency toward inquiry and investigation has been an especially powerful force in contemporary art—guided, in part, by the increasing demands for academization and discursive sophistication that are made on art education (which is itself connected to the rise of the knowledge/information economy)—with which Macuga's work in particular has increasingly been identified. Projects such as *I Am Become Death* (Basel, 2009; see pages 100–101); *The Nature of the*

3 As for the charged subject of autobiography, Macuga frequently includes her own portrait in these photo works, but not necessarily for self-aggrandizing reasons: her cameo appearances are in fact meant to dramatize the stark facts of implication and insinuation, i.e., of being implicated in (“inside”) the art world's celebration of power and endorsement of the status quo. That said, Macuga's use of autoportraiture is also fed by her interest in the semantics of the artist's persona, in masquerade and role play; in the portrait of the artist that graces the cover of this publication, for instance, the role in question is very much that of the artist as *researcher* (or certainly as intellectual), captured in front of a bookcase instead of inside a more conventional studio environment.

Grant Watson

Tapestry

*Pictures
of the
Modern
World*

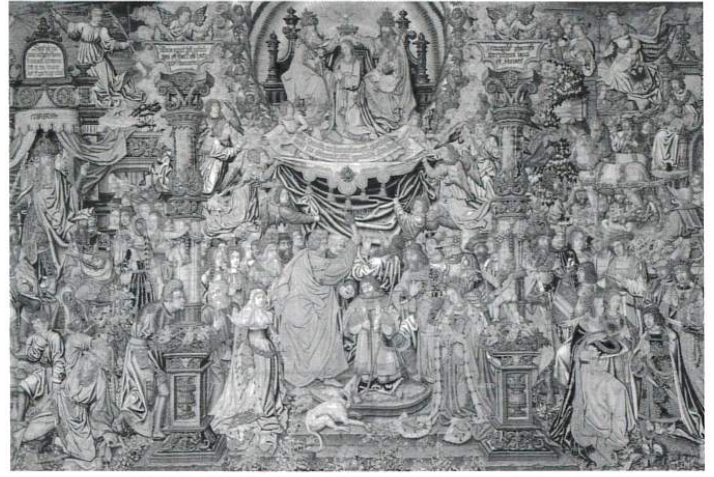
Goshka Macuga often works on a large scale, responding to commissions with an intense archaeology of a given situation and developing a display in response to its particularities. This leads to unorthodox forms of curating, with the artist designing structures used to present diverse materials in ways that break from exhibition conventions to reveal paradoxical and at times enchanting affiliations between histories and things. In recent years tapestry has become an important medium for the artist. Macuga is interested in exploring issues related to history and site and in linking collections and archives to broader social questions, and tapestry has allowed her to elaborate on her concerns using a pictorial language that is not necessarily available to her in other media, and to address audiences with a polemic.

A series of significant commissions—for the Venice Biennale (2009), for the Walker Art Center (2011), and most recently for Documenta 13 (2012)—has seen Macuga moving into the area of monumental tapestry, where the complexity of her previous curatorial installations is reduced and everything is brought together onto one surface so that the artist is able to directly configure and manipulate a set of references. The character of tapestry as a large-scale public mural made from thread, lightweight and portable, has been used historically by artists and artisans, royal patrons and architects, from the Renaissance to Joan Miró's *World Trade Center Tapestry* of 1974 and continues to be explored by contemporary artists. In keeping with her attention to the genealogy of things, Macuga works with the medium's particular function of representing institutions (from royalty to trade unions) as well as its ability to modify architectural space. Holding a mirror to the institutions in which they are housed, Macuga's tapestries peel back something of the exterior surface to reveal the diverse elements that go into the making of the complex organism that is a biennial or a museum, including its history, its rhetoric, its sources of funding, its good intentions, its personalities, its contradictions, and its mistakes—all of which are monumentalized and given a public airing.

It would be interesting in a different context to consider the relationship of Macuga's work to institutional critique. In some of her more curatorial projects, there is a connection to Marcel

Broodthaers, who often played with museum conventions in his work, and also to Andrea Fraser and Annika Eriksson, who might include museum staff or reveal social relations within an institution as part of the making of their work. However, Macuga's practice is never dry, overly theoretical, or exclusive to an art-world audience. The look and materiality of it is important—qualities that make it accessible to an audience beyond the art world—and there is something about tapestry in particular, its combination of scale and tactility, an association with craft and, more distantly, domestic space, that feels unpretentious and arouses people's curiosity. In recent installations Macuga also helps the viewer to decode her works by including textual material, often written by the artist herself, that makes her intentions and thought processes transparent.

Macuga's *Plus Ultra* (see pages 42–43), commissioned for the 2009 Venice Biennale, is a tapestry that was installed in the Arsenale, the building used for thematic group exhibitions by the biennale curator. Shown as part of Daniel Birnbaum's exhibition *Fare Mondi//Making Worlds*, Macuga's piece gives conceptual shape to the implications of this title in a tableau of images that describe the "state of the world," or what George H. W. Bush would call "the new world order." Historically, the Arsenale is the site where the Venetian Republic orchestrated its economic and military power—it was essentially a factory (the largest in the Western world, prior to the industrial revolution) for producing the ships and armaments that would give the republic, at the height of its power, the lion's share of Mediterranean trade. With this history in mind, as well as the biennial's beginnings in 1895 during the age of great exhibitions and world fairs, such as the French Industrial Exhibition (1844) and the Crystal Palace Exhibition (1851), Macuga elaborates on an account of shifting economic and military prowess, from the Holy Roman Empire of Charles V to the hegemonic power of the United States and the current preeminence of the dollar as the world's reserve currency. She establishes a narrative in the tapestry by drawing from a commonly held hypothesis that suggests the dollar sign originated from the motto "Plus Ultra," meaning "further beyond"—designated as a place by the Pillars of Hercules at the Strait of Gibraltar (which in ancient times was considered the edge of the

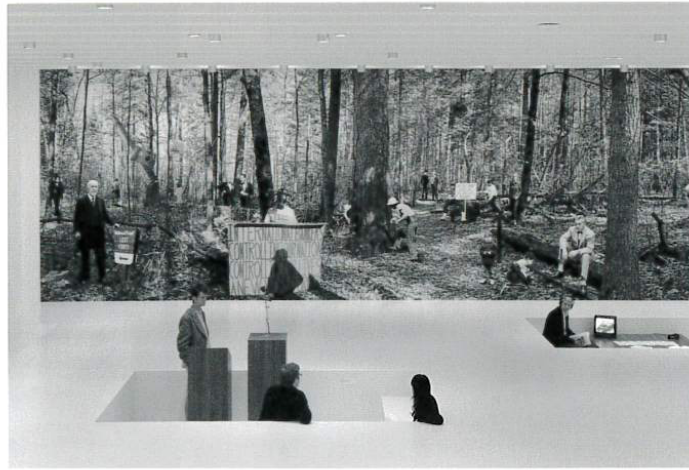


world) and as a symbol by two pillars snaked about by a ribbon bearing this motto. In the Arsenale, Macuga's tapestry was itself wrapped like a giant ribbon around two pillars at the junction between two spaces within the complex. Charles V, whose face appears on the tapestry obscured by a dollar sign, adopted "Plus Ultra" as his personal motto and bequeathed it to Ghent, the city where he was born, which was, at the time, one of the centers of the Flemish tapestry industry patronized by the king and which produced works of beauty and technical complexity. According to the artist, *Plus Ultra* uses compositional elements taken from late Renaissance tapestry—and it was indeed made in Flanders, in a place not far from Ghent, where a sophisticated level of tapestry production continues to exist today. The composition of the tapestry includes a pairing of the Pillars of Hercules with New York's twin towers, shown at the time of their destruction and haloed in light as they might appear on a jihadi website. It also features the leaders of the G20 nations smiling down benignly at a group of refugees floundering in the Mediterranean Sea, presumably while they discuss the international monetary system at a conference in the sky.

Plus Ultra was Macuga's first tapestry, but the introduction of this medium into one of her installations came earlier that year in an exhibition called *The Nature of the Beast* (see pages 12–13), at Whitechapel Gallery, London. For this installation, Macuga borrowed a woven version of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which was created in collaboration with the artist himself and is normally housed at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The impetus for this gesture was to commemorate the original *Guernica* having been shown at Whitechapel for three weeks in 1937. But it was also a comment on the controversial covering of the tapestry during an address to the UN by then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq—presumably because of its graphic antiwar sentiment. Consequently, the elements in Macuga's installation included the Picasso tapestry; a Cubistic bust of Powell; and a circular archive table containing documents pertaining to the 1937 exhibition of *Guernica*, the impact it had on audiences, and the way it was used to generate support for the struggle against fascism and the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. The table had a double

Plus Ultra (detail), 2009

Nobility (detail),
sixteenth-century
tapestry based on cartoon
by Bernaert van Orley,
manufacture of Brussels,
from the series *Honors*



Installation view of *Lost Forty* (2011), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

function, as it also provided an assembly point, a meeting space that was available to the public throughout the course of the exhibition, which ran for a year. This public participation was an important element for Macuga, who hoped to reflect in some way the activities that had taken place in 1937 as well as to animate her project for its yearlong duration. Relinquishing control of these events to the institution and the general public, she soon found that her invitation was being taken up in ways antithetical to the project's ethos, including a meeting of "high net worth individuals," some of whom the artist believed to have links to the arms trade, and a speech by Prince William—events at which the pacifist and republican symbolism of Picasso's *Guernica* were presumably overlooked. As a result of this neutralizing of *Guernica* and her part in it, Macuga produced a corollary in the form of a tapestry called *On the Nature of the Beast* (2009; see pages 10–11), which was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (MuHKA) in the 2009 exhibition *Textiles: Art and the Social Fabric*. The first of Macuga's photographic tapestries, it was produced using press photographs, taken during the Whitechapel show and its associated events, that were edited and digitally collaged into a single image, then translated into a woven tapestry using a Jacquard loom. The work depicts the prince giving a speech in front of the *Guernica* tapestry, cheered on by an appreciative crowd that includes the gallery director, corporate funders, prominent individuals in the London art world, and the artist herself.

The idea of translating photographic material into tapestry form was developed in a larger and more complex work made for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, in 2011, where it was the centerpiece for Macuga's first solo show in the United States. For this exhibition, Macuga created a large-scale tapestry designed specifically to reflect the intended ethos of the Walker's new wing (designed by Herzog and de Meuron) as a place for public gatherings. The tapestry was installed along one wall in the space, which was engineered by the artist to include platforms and sunken seating areas, as well as works from the museum's collection (including those by Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, and Sherrie Levine), archival documents, and an information leaflet.

The title of the exhibition, *It Broke from Within*, was taken from a fundraising brochure, produced by the museum in 1940, in which the museum's director warned against the kind of social breakdown that was happening in Europe at that time and emphasized the art institution's role in augmenting social cohesion by fostering common values. Using this quote as a point of departure, the artist explored the museum's social ethos as well as its stated intention of giving the new wing the character of a town square, through the different elements of the installation. The scene depicted in the tapestry is set in a nearby forest, in which various individuals representing disparate aspects of the museum's history, including previous directors and artists such as Duchamp whose work was exhibited at the museum, can be seen standing among the trees. Through this imagery Macuga comments on the seeming contradictions between the American myth of freedom, connected to nature at a symbolic level and here encapsulated by the forest setting, and the equally American profit motive, which treats natural resources as commodities and fiercely resists environmental protections. This narrative is played out through the Walker's origins; it was established using the profits from an aggressive lumber industry that razed the forests of Minnesota to the ground, apart from the small stretch of woods

Left to right

Marcel Duchamp

Selection depicting one of the artist's readymades, a bottle rack, from *de ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Sélavy (Boîte) (From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy [Box])*, 1941/66

Goshka Macuga

Three Time Loser, 2011

Joseph Beuys

Rettet den Wald (Save the Woods), 1972

