

KUNSTHALLE BASEL

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Press release: **Goshka Macuga**
I Am Become Death

Press preview: **Wednesday, January 14, 2009, 11am**
Opening: **Thursday, January 15, 2009, 7pm**
Duration: **January 16 - March 8, 2009**
Opening hours: **TUE/WED/FRI 11am-6pm, THU 11am-8.30pm, SAT/SUN 11am-5pm**

Goshka Macuga (b. 1967), a Polish-born artist based in London, tests and transcends the boundaries of sculpture, installation, exhibition design and photography. She ventures into a variety of disciplines, including art making, curating, art history, ethnology, psychology and esoteric science. Macuga's many exhibition projects and publications converge in a multi-faceted oeuvre that cannot be squeezed into such pigeonholes as "politically committed" or "formalist." In short, her work is rigorous in form and anarchistic in content.

The artist's practice has always been marked by an interest in collaboration with other artists and cultural producers. Macuga also makes extensive use of existing cultural material: original arts and crafts; documents related to historical figures, such as artists, their patrons and their opponents; forms of exhibition display devised and applied in diverse political contexts; and references to vernacular culture. Her work predates the often insufficiently reflected inspiration that many contemporary artists draw from the history of (mostly Western European and U.S.) modernism. Her oeuvre has developed as a study extending in time, through which she addresses and modifies prevalent modes of perceiving and interpreting cultural production, in order to give new meaning to familiar forms and artifacts. For Macuga, art is a tool for understanding and a blueprint for social change. Her discursive scenarios involve deconstruction of our society's cultural conditioning and defy the currently dominant mode of artistic practice as a market-driven activity that is detached from a broader social practice of making and marginalized as a plaything of the art world. Her work addresses the actual phenomenon of making art, the manual and intellectual labors of an artist. This residue of free action, often embedded in traditions and codes that transcend the particularities of generations and national cultures, can be a testing ground for new formulations and also the point of departure for a lesson in subversion – either as a direct act of resistance or by way of persiflage and humor.

Goshka Macuga's first institutional solo exhibition in continental Europe, at the Kunsthalle Basel, comprises an ensemble of photographic works incorporating documents and images selected by the artist from the archives of the Tate Gallery in London, The Warburg Institute at University of London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Kunsthalle Basel. The exhibition's title, *I Am Become Death*, invokes a scene from the sacred Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita* (The Song of God). This line from the epos ('Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.') was quoted by J.

Robert Oppenheimer, director of the Manhattan Project during World War II, on seeing the scale of destruction after the Trinity nuclear test at White Sands Missile Range near Alamogordo in New Mexico, on July 16, 1945.

In her new group of works, Goshka Macuga also reflects on the history of exhibition display. *Road to Victory*, an exhibition of 1942 mounted by the MoMA in New York, while the Manhattan Project was well under way, sought to promote America's military strength and helped to consolidate the rationale of a nation embarking on a major war. The show was conceived as 'a procession of photographs of the nation at war' by Edward Steichen in a setting designed by Herbert Bayer and with texts written by the American poet and author Carl Sandburg. Later in 1955, Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* exhibition at the MoMA aimed to illustrate the many facets of mankind—love, work and leisure—in the universal quest for peace and happiness. The show ignored and leveled out the inevitable political contradictions entailed in such an agenda and instead promoted an idealized vision of abstract “humanity.” Supposedly best embodied in the American notion of democracy, it was represented in a selection of photographs, showing human beings as if seen by a naturalist. This largest photographic exhibition of the Cold War era toured worldwide as an American cultural export. One of the European venues was Kunsthalle Basel (1958), where many substantial exhibitions of American art subsequently took place, and most notably the first presentation of Abstract Expressionism in Europe entitled *New American Painting*, and a solo show of Jackson Pollock's paintings, both in 1958, conceived by the International Council of MoMA.

For the exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, Goshka Macuga transposes Herbert Bayer's display concept for *Road to Victory*, presenting a series of collages made of images coming from several different sources, including Aby Warburg's photographs taken during his exploration of Hopi culture in 1896, Macuga's own photographs from her journey in the USA in 2008, as well as installation shots from the American artist Robert Morris' show at the Tate Gallery in London in 1971. Private photographs from a Vietnam War veteran's collection are also included, which, in contrast to *Road to Victory's* well-defined ideological content, deal with daily, un-heroic, funny or just boring aspects of a soldier's life at a military base in Vietnam.

The show also includes replicas of some of the sculptures Robert Morris made for his exhibition at the Tate. Simple constructions made of wood, steel and ropes, they encouraged viewers' physical interaction, but since the museum could not guarantee the visitors' security, the show closed after the first weekend due to the fact that some visitors had injured themselves while using sculptures in a performative way. In the context of the Vietnam War, the possibility of participating in this exhibition at one's own risk can read as a political statement on the nature of the freedom and limitations imposed by the state and (art) institution.

Macuga will also present a new documentary film made in collaboration with the visual anthropologist Julian Gastelo. It is based on the video documentation of their recent journey through the United States, from New York to the Arizona desert, following the route taken by the German art historian Aby Warburg in 1896, when he went to Arizona to study the rituals and iconography of Hopi Indian art. Warburg recalled his travels in a lecture on the serpent ritual, delivered 27 years later at the

psychiatric clinic at Kreuzlingen. His presentation of Hopi mythology and the origins of symbols in general successfully proved to his doctors that he was fit to leave the clinic. Macuga's filmed exploration of (art-) historical America is seen through the filter of contemporary impressions of the country and includes a personal encounter with a Vietnam war veteran. Hence, the artist has abandoned the neutral stance of the detached observer, instead positioning herself as a participating agent within society in an age when nations are again engaged in wars that bring suffering and destruction to entire communities, and when individuals must again face choices that—not so very long ago—were held to be obsolete.

I Am Become Death investigates the aesthetic form as a weapon deployed in conflicts between political powers and the impact of official ideologies on the production of art that still aspires to autonomy. At the same time, the exhibition puts forward the possibility that aesthetic potential can be used to opposite ends, as a means of taking a critical look at the present day.

The exhibition is supported by:

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Solo exhibitions (selection): 2008: *Goshka Macuga*, Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich / **2007:** *Objects in Relation, Art Now*, Tate Britain, London; *What's In a Name*, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York / **2006:** *Mula sem Cabeça* (Headless Mule), *How to Live Together*, 27th São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo; *Sleep of Ulro*, The Furnace Commission, A Foundation, Liverpool / **2005:** *Goshka Macuga*, Kate MacGarry, London.

Group exhibitions (selection): 2008: *Turner Prize exhibition*, Tate Britain, London; *The Great Transformation - Kunst und taktische Magie*, Frankfurter Kunstverein; *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art*, Barbican Art Gallery, London; *When Things Cast No Shadow - 5th berlin biennial*, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin / **2007:** *Les Palais Des Etoiles: These Are Also Wings* (performance with DADADANDY), Selfridges, London / **2006:** *We've Lost Our Heart and Mind*, Event Gallery, London; *Moving in Architecture*, (selected by Cyril Lepetit), Camden Arts Centre, London and Curzon Cinema Soho, London.