

KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS

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ÖZGÜR KAR MACABRE

Özgür Kar in conversation with KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS

KG *MACABRE* consists of a new sound and video installation conceived especially for the space of KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS. You defined the work as a response to our current period defined by physical distance, crisis and political polarization. Can you tell us more about it?

ök I started working on this show during the Covid lockdown of 2020. Just like a lot of people I was devastated, and was trying to make sense of what was happening. It felt like a harsh transition to something new, something darker. As someone with a serious case of hypochondria and fear of death, I was extremely worried. The possibility of death was on every corner. We were all bombarded by not just the threat of death to our own bodies, but the news of death from all over the world. The exhibition came out as my response to all that was happening since the pandemic started. I couldn't think about anything but death. After a while, my intense fear of fatal death turned into a constant feeling of living with death, a sense of decay of our pre-pandemic world, habits, everything we knew and we thought we loved.

I started writing the script of the show with these ideas in my mind. It was somewhat a healing process for me. Contemplating about a subject that caused me extreme anxiety. I think we all faced the fear of death in the last year, much more than we ever did before. I think death is one of those essential things that binds us all together: we are all mortal creatures. Whoever you are, or wherever you live, death will always come and find you, and you will have to deal with it, doesn't matter if you are scared of it or not. The show deals with this dark subject in a very emotional and humorous way. I wanted it to be relatable, confrontational, and maybe somewhat healing. The show invites the viewer to a moment of reflection, on a topic that is very ubiquitous today, and very essential to life in general: death.

KG We are also curious about the exhibition title.

ök Well, it is a very direct title, isn't it? *MACABRE* simply means "things that cause fear of death, or things that are concerned with death". The word has a long history, and has been used a lot during the Middle Ages, usually as "Dance Macabre". We all know those famous manuscript illustrations of skeletons dancing, and playing instruments. They were the initial inspiration for the show, and I thought the title *MACABRE* would be fitting.

It is also a phonetically interesting word. It is hard to pronounce, if you are not French. When I was looking through the resources on "Dance Macabre" this word got stuck in my head for days. I constantly tried to pronounce it right, and it almost became a never-ending mantra in my head. I also like that it is a very theatrical word. It is very dramatic: *MACABRE!* You can't say *macabre*, without adding some drama.

A friend of mine strongly advised me to not use this title for a show that deals with death. He thought it is too "on the nose" and it will be "lame", and perhaps he is right, but I do like things that are direct. There is almost something campy, and dramatic in this type of directness. I felt that our world today is already complicated enough, so I didn't need to complicate things even more with a confusing title.

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KG *MACABRE* introduces a new character in your oeuvre, presenting *Death*, as a self-conscious tragicomic subjectivity somehow archetypal. How has this character originated?

ök I always loved looking at manuscript illustrations. In particular Ottoman, Persian and European manuscripts. During the last year I became obsessed with the depiction of death, personified in the manuscript illustration as skeletons and corpses. They always look like the most annoying characters, dancing, celebrating, laughing at miserable people. I thought they were very dark and humorous at the same time. Since I was interested in making a work directly linked to the current moment, I wanted to bring back the representation of death. It is like a 2020 version of the Medieval "Dance Macabre." This time, instead of dancing in the streets, *Death* is locked inside a screen, and maybe not as happy and powerful, but rather concerned and confused about the state of the world today.

When I look back at my personal experience of the pandemic, I was glued to my phone, reading news about multitudes of people dying. So, compared to the Middle Ages, where people might be encountering corpses on the streets, my impression was that today we are encountering corpses only through technological mediation. I think that the pandemic is closely interlinked with technology, just like everything else in our lives. So, it made sense that the *Death* character of the Middle Ages, would only come alive today through screens.

KG Your work often brings a cognitive shift, questioning who is trapped beyond those screens, us or the characters we are observing. The same happens in the exhibition: is *Death* a tool for personal and collective confrontation?

ök Yes, to me the *Death* character in the show represents that disturbing voice we all have inside our head. Constantly reminding us about the end of our lives, of our hopes. It is that anxious voice. While going through some of the medieval manuscripts that have the depiction of death, I came across this one specific illustration. It is from the *Book of Hours, Life of Saint Margaret* from 1490. The illustration depicts a skeleton holding a mirror towards a human character. This image was so captivating to me. I couldn't get it out of my head. When you think about it, death is the perfect metaphor to show us our own image. In the face of death, we are all powerless. It strips us from every worldly and superficial ambitions we have. It brings us back to the root of what we are as humans, and puts aside all the differences. I wanted the *Death* character in the show to function in this way. Just like this image, it holds a mirror to us.



Young man and death, from: *Book of Hours/Life of St Margaret* (Paris, Bibl. Mazarine, ms. 0507, f.113), c. 1490

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KG In *MACABRE*, the sound element is pervasive and almost physical, affecting the mood of the exhibition. Performed by a young boy playing the clarinet, the profound notes, a dark variation of the forbidden *Devil's interval*, completes, extends and defines Death's speech. How this element originated and formed?

ök My work always had a performative element to it. I always treated these animated characters as my performers and with this exhibition I wanted to explore more the performative aspect of my work. I always been interested in operas, or operatic plays, choir pieces, and wanted to move my work towards this direction too. *MACABRE* is the first step towards something more "musical" in my work.

Recently I have been listening to a lot of flute, and clarinet-based music and I think there is something eerie, and sublime about the sound of a flute, or clarinet. There is also so much symbolism tied to flutes, from the *Papageno* to *Pied Piper*. The human character in the show is called *Snake Charmer*, with his clarinet, he summons the *Death* character. He is entertaining the idea of death, and while it is fearful and dangerous, just like a snake, he is somewhat in control of it. If you spend enough time in the exhibition, you will start to realise that the human character is controlling the speech of *Death*. With his clarinet *Snake Charmer* stops *Death's* speech, unexpectedly, whenever he wants.

So, that's where the *Snake Charmer* character came from. I wanted the show to feel a bit mystical, as if there is something magical about the whole scene.

KG It is interesting to see how you employ language as a poetic, concrete and playful tool setting the rhythm of the work. This invites you to read the work in a certain way, surprised and disjointed.

ök I think my scripts sometimes come across as disjointed, but actually the system I'm using to create the rhythm of the spoken-word element is very simple. I see all my exhibitions as "scenes," one theatrical scene that is written to be endlessly looping. I want the visitor to feel like the characters are just in the exhibition space 24/7, endlessly talking to each other, or themselves, or the visitors. In order to achieve that, I write the script in a "contemplative" way. Characters are just stuck in the exhibition space, and from time to time a thought comes to their mind, and they spill it out. The duration of the videos is usually around 20–30 minutes, they are made to be seamlessly looping, and some parts repeat a few times irregularly. This is meant to confuse the viewer, and makes it harder to figure out when the videos end and when the loop starts. Unless you stay in the exhibition for 2–3 hours with full focus, it will be very hard for you to tell when the videos start or end.

To me all my exhibitions are experiments on storytelling. I am trying to find new ways to create non-linear narratives. I used to do this by making film essays, and was obsessed with fragmented and non-linear narrative experiments in films. But a video file is a linear medium, it can never be truly non-linear. The architectural space of the exhibition is a perfect place to experiment on this. There is no set beginning or an end to an exhibition space. You, as the viewer, decide on where the show starts and ends, and how long the duration of the show should be.

KG Your work is becoming more and more theatrical transposing the viewer at the centre of your installations. We spoke about Samuel Beckett and experimental theatre being an influence on your work, is there any specific reference that informed *MACABRE*?

ök I go back and watch Samuel Beckett's plays on YouTube quite frequently. They definitely have a big influence on me, especially the play "Not I." I think this play is just so overwhelmingly captivating. The simplicity of just a mouth on a stage, and the text that at first feels nonsensical, but the more you listen to it becomes so deep and dark. I love

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how he is dealing with a heavy topic like death. Another favourite of mine is Rockaby. It is again an amazing play in its simplicity. It is about holding on to the last moments of one's life. It is so claustrophobic, anxiety-inducing and serene at the same time. Beckett is a big influence, not just for this show, but for my work in general.

Another reference for this show was *Beavis and Butthead*. I always loved *Beavis and Butthead* since I was a kid, and I binged all the episodes last year during the first lockdown. I wanted the *Death* character in the show to resemble *Beavis and Butthead*. They are so annoying, dumb, cynical, and funny. *Death* makes a lot of stupid jokes, and sometimes makes fun of the human character. I wanted this show to be somewhere between Samuel Beckett and *Beavis and Butthead*: funny and existential. I think that is a good mix!