

# sleek

JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER  
TALKING  
**THE TALK**

EXCHANGING  
GALLERIES  
FOR HARDWARE  
STORES, JOSEPHINE  
MECKSEPER MAKES  
ART THAT SPEAKS  
LOUDER THAN  
THEORY

INTERVIEW — Katy Diamond Hamer  
PORTRAITS — Heji Shin

JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER  
Manhattan Oil Project (Pump Jack, No. 25, 2012)  
Photo: © 2012 Josephine Meckseper. All rights reserved. [www.josephinemeckseper.com](http://www.josephinemeckseper.com)  
Artwork: © 2012 Josephine Meckseper  
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Submission, 2015

Acrylic, painting, mirror polished stainless steel, PVC, fabric, paper, LED lights, linoleum, rotunda, aluminium frame  
125.3 x 125.1 x 4 cm  
Copyright the artist, New York  
Country, Timothy Taylor, London  
Photo: Deutsche Photography, London

# III

In 1916 the German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote a bizarre theological essay called "Language as Such and the Language of Man", in which he claimed that everything in the world speaks a language. Lamps, chairs, foxes, mountains, they all partake in the "magical immediacy" of expression. The only difference, he said, is that human language is verbal, whereas the language of, say, a coffee press, is shown through its transcendental energy that people transform into words.

And although it might sound strange, the work of German-born artist Josephine Meckseper also speaks this silent, mystic idiom. In her recent solo show in London, her works seemed to be talking to visitors as well as to each other. At the centre of the room, the angular sculpture "Empire", made from steel racks, points to a denim canvas with a pair of jeans attached to it, and "Becket", a tribute to the Sixties film about the medieval English prelate made from acrylic, neck ties, LED lights and toilet rug fabric. Dented, stained, scratched and worn, these pieces communicate aspects of the social relations that produced them, and are a thematic continuation of Meckseper's previous work.

For example, her 2009 film "Mall of America", interrogated politics and capitalism through footage of shopping centres, protest demos and military manoeuvres and installations. Another consistent aspect of her practice is her fixation with glass, which functions as both a frame and a symbolic threshold



between the real world and her art. Today, her work operates in a less direct fashion, but it still functions via the juxtaposition of the object and the image in order to question the world in which it exists.

Originally from the bohemian town of Worpswede in Lower Saxony, she has lived in the US since moving to California to attend CalArts in 1992, but currently resides in New York, from where Sleek met her to talk about her background, theories and latest exhibition.

**SLEEK: Your hometown is famous for being a home for artists. Did it influence your practice?**

**JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER:** Yeah, it became an artist colony at the beginning of the twentieth century, and you can see that in its combination of Jugendstil, German Expressionist and Modernist architecture. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a book about it and Werner

Fassbinder shot one of his films there. But also the political climate of the Seventies had a bigger influence on me, especially when the Baader-Meinhof group began revolting against corporate capitalism. One of my first videos shot in the US is a documentation of a 24-hour happening, coinciding with the Rodney King riots on a rooftop in Los Angeles. The idea was to occupy a space, and inhabit it through deliberate action and accumulation of spatial and filmic materials introduced by the group members. It was vaguely based on the concept of the Situationist International, who advocated experimentation with the construction of situations, namely setting up environments as alternatives to capitalist order.

**You often use glass display cases in your work, as in your 2010 film Mall of America. Why?**

For me shop windows and vitrines reflect the role of the artist in our

current consumer society and point to the instability of capitalism. The pairing of oppositional voices, such as advertising language and protest signage, was a crucial factor in the conceptualisation of many of my displays, and the window installations are intended to look like protest 'targets'.

In terms of Mall of America, the idea was to document the iconography of US consumer rituals amid the recession and military expansion. In some scenes, the camera zooms in and out of the mall before focusing on an aviation store or military recruiting station. It also features military footage, which enhances the disillusioned atmosphere of the mall. The paradox presented in the video recalls Karl Marx's prediction that capitalism cannot perpetually sustain the living standards of the population because of its need to compensate for deteriorating profit margins by decreasing wages, cutting social benefits and practising military aggression.

**Compared to previous exhibitions, your current solo show at Timothy Taylor in London seems to have a limited palette. How come?**

This perception hinges on a piece called "Here and Elsewhere" from 2015. It's a shelf featuring liquor bottles with black and white labels, which is meant to be reminiscent of the monochrome palette of early cinema. Elsewhere in the show I also use objects and techniques that, in some instances, are



SCOTT & CO

references to films. These include "Becket" starring Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole, as well as Jean-Luc Godard's short "Film-Tract n° 1968", where he and French artist Gérard Fromanger filmed red paint dripping down a French flag, as an act of solidarity with leftist anti-government movements. There are also nods to the material aspect of analogue cinematography, too. Overall, I have an ambiguous relationship with colour. The problem with art is that it's so contained and specific that only a certain group of people have access to it, and taking the artiness out of art is something that interests me, which is why I'm always drawn to mundane objects.

**One such object in your retrospective is a pair of denim jeans. What is its function?**

The choice of ordinary materials is simply a fascination that I share with artists like Martin Kippenberger, who have used the most banal objects to get away from the exclusivity of art. So in my current show, this is manifested in the form of metal wall vitrines illuminated by fluorescent lights that contain jammed window blinds and toilet seat rugs, business ties, and a grey pair of denim jeans on a denim canvas. These denim objects reflect on social interactions within the art world and employ an object – in this



FILMTRACT NO. 1, 2015

Acrylic staining, acrylic paint, tape, vinyl, blackened, industrial aluminium frame  
241.8 x 122.4 x 94.0 cm  
Copyright the artist, New York  
Courtesy Timothy Taylor, London  
Photo: Debra Fine Photography, London

case pieces of denim stained with semen – to create a narrative rather than an image. Marcel Duchamp did something similar: in 1946 he made a painting called "Passage fauif"

("Faulty landscape"), using a black piece of fabric and his semen. In my work, the denim didn't relate to a particular story – it's more about the act of me as an artist making decisions in a particular moment and specific environment. I chose to use denim because it's a fabric that could have been at someone's home. It's something most men wear, but then again, I could have just as easily chosen a bath towel.

## I'M INTERESTED IN NOTHING AND EVERYTHING. THIS INCLUDES POLITICS, ASTROPHYSICS, OR A TOILET BRUSH.

JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER

**Your work has a thread of humanity running through it.**

I'm interested in nothing and everything. This includes politics, astrophysics, or a toilet brush. Politics do of course play into my work because it shapes our lives. I've always been fascinated by artists and how they've made art in the midst of war. When I was in high school I studied Picasso's "Guernica" and the paintings of mangled veterans by Otto Dix from the 1920s. Indeed, today, the 'explicitness' of the human body in advertising can only be seen as symbolic of universal capitalist rhetoric. These elements are often present in my work but always with a theoretical and coded approach that shifts the focus to something that is slightly different. These references raise questions such as: "Does what we produce culturally have an accumulative aspect, or is it just a process without ultimate consequences?" In some ways, every object is also about the non-existence of that object.

**How do you conceive and produce your art?**

My work is fundamentally conceptual. There is no real formula, but I do work with different people in several parts of the world who help me realise some of them. I usually come up with too many ideas and then there usually isn't much time to produce them. But since I have worked with the same people for many years things can happen quickly. I'm pretty involved with every aspect, it's never something

that I just hand off to someone else. There are almost always new technical challenges that need to be resolved, and I also work with engineers and architects for site-specific works or large scale sculptures like the life size oil pump sculptures on Times Square. This technical interest in the way things are made is probably very German. There are several plumbing stores near my studio, specifically one right around the corner. In their display window, they have pipes, toilet seats and a yellow ad dating back to the 1960s of two women in the shower. I prefer to go to hardware stores than galleries. Any day I get to them is a good day.

JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER AT TIMOTHY TAYLOR RUNS UNTIL DECEMBER 12, 2015



Above  
Mall of America, 2009

Video  
12:32 min  
Copyright the artist  
Courtesy Andrew Ross Gallery, New York  
and Timothy Taylor, London

# Interview

## JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER AND THE BURDEN OF HISTORY



LAUNCH GALLERY »

Josephine Meckseper is adept at critiquing her environment. She questioned the prosperity of the art world by placing an "Out of Business" sign in the window of a gallery in Chelsea (a similarly cheeky "Help Wanted" sign attracted up to 20 applicants a day who had failed to get in on the joke). In 2012 she erected two 25-foot oil rigs in the heart of Times Square to remind unsuspecting tourists about the perils of capitalism and industrialization. Her work critically examines mass media, our consumption-obsessed society, and even our political systems. But for her most recent solo exhibition at Andrea Rosen in Chelsea, Meckseper turned her attention towards something left previously unexamined: her own lineage.

Though Meckseper left Germany for New York on her own accord, she failed to leave behind the burden of guilt felt by many young Germans, even three generations after World War II. The reverberating impact of

Meckseper's German heritage is exemplified by her black-and-white images of Niedersachsenstein, a sculpture in Meckseper's hometown of Worpswede that commemorates the soldiers who perished in World War I. This historic image is juxtaposed against glossy ad images and Meckseper's vitrines—recognizable reconstructions of modern store displays. The uniquely personal nature of the exhibit became clear when we sat down with Meckseper to discuss leaving the sheltered artistic community of Worpswede, living in New York, and the Christmas displays at Macy's.

ALLYSON SHIFFMAN: There's a sense of irony in that the advertising imagery in this exhibit closely resemble the ad pages one would find in an issue of *Interview*. Do you have any misgivings about that?

JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER: That's funny—no one has ever asked me that. Obviously my work speaks to the usage of advertising. The abstractions in my paintings were actually based on how you divide an advertising page—the quarter-page, half-page ads. Since it's so much a part of what I've been doing, it's good to embrace the media rather than try to ignore it.

SHIFFMAN: Worpswede seems to be this sheltered artistic utopia. At what point did you start to become aware of the world beyond this community?

MECKSEPER: I moved to Tuscany right after high school, which was actually not very different in the sense that it was extremely sheltered and very much formed by cultural history. There was little mainstream contemporary consumer culture there, at all. Then I was briefly in Berlin studying at Berlin University of the Arts, but Berlin was so underground at that time. The wall was still up, so it was much more about being in this island inside of East Germany. I was completely in favor of the division of Germany—it's kind of a leftist stance. We all felt it was not justified that it would ever be unified.

So it was really only when I moved to Los Angeles to go to CalArts—that was the big shift for me—to be outside of L.A., in Valencia, where it's all about the mall. That was the beginning of deciphering the language and the vocabulary of the mall and the culture that comes with that.

SHIFFMAN: That's an extreme introduction to consumer culture—especially at a time when the mall was still very relevant. It's evident in your film that explores the Mall of America that mall culture is waning. Does this amplify the quality of relic in your work?

MECKSEPER: It does. The whole idea of the window displays is already becoming something very historicizing. It's more about looking at something that's disappearing in our culture. There was a time that the Christmas decorations on Fifth Avenue were a big event—people would come from the suburbs. Now I can imagine a young kid saying, "There's no way I'm going to go to that." [*laughs*]

SHIFFMAN: [*laughs*] To anyone who isn't from New York, the notion of unveiling the Macy's window displays being an event is so peculiar. Is your studio still in Chinatown?

MECKSEPER: It is. It's near Orchard Street on the Lower East Side, where there are still some of the older Jewish shops. There's this one lingerie store that has extra-large women's underwear. So there's literally these huge underwear displays... nobody now would display something that is that unattractive. It's pretty surreal.

SHIFFMAN: This show encompasses so much more than the consumerism issues—particularly with the images of the Niedersachsenstein monument in Worpswede. What did that monument mean to you growing up?

MECKSEPER: I always liked to make up stories and narratives. I would bring other kids there and tell

them all kinds of stories about what I thought it was.

SHIFFMAN: Can you recall any of these stories?

MECKSEPER: A lot of the fantasies revolved around us having been told that after the war a family had to live in the basement of the monument because there was no place else for them to stay. They had come from the East, fleeing from the Russians. We tried to break in to see how they lived there. This monument was declared degenerate art at the time. They were actually about to tear it down, but we didn't really see it as artwork as much as a place for us to hide. It's tucked inside of a forest and when I grew up people didn't really go there. People would rather try to forget about it—nobody wanted to be reminded of the war at that point. Now it's different.

SHIFFMAN: When I first visited Germany, I was overwhelmed by the burden of guilt felt by young people and all the monuments built to serve as reminders.

MECKSEPER: It is. It's huge.

SHIFFMAN: How do you approach doing a show in New York, in Chelsea, differently? Are the stakes higher given this is essentially the most consumerist of cities?

MECKSEPER: All my previous gallery shows that I've done here were hinting directly at that issue. It's so much a part of my practice to be conscious of the environment. It goes back to being at CalArts and studying with Michael Asher, where it was really about institutional critique, but this show is a lot less about that. Chelsea is so oversaturated, it's not that interesting anymore. So it was an opportunity for me to dig deeper into what it means to be a German artist in New York.

SHIFFMAN: And what does that mean?

MECKSEPER: It's sort of what it means for me having come here without being forced. That whole guilt thing was so heavy on me—when you're really sensitive, you can't live with it. It was actually unbearable to stay [in Germany] and be constantly reminded of it. I'm the third generation after the war, so it feels selfish for me to say that I'm somehow affected by what happened, but it's still so much a part of my life. This is the first time I felt like I'm actually bringing that into the work. Of course there's all the consumerism, but there's also another truth, which is more biographical.

SHIFFMAN: Your work has also touched on issues surrounding the oil trade. I'm curious about what your thoughts are on the emerging art scenes in oil rich countries like Qatar?

MECKSEPER: There are very different aspects to it. When I was in the United Emirates participating in the 2011 Sharjah Biennale, even though they censored some of the works and they fired the director of the museum, it was such a great opportunity to begin opening up that society. I was in this building near the main museum that was next to a mosque. People would go to the mosque and they would stop at the museum afterwards—I don't know if it was because the AC was running [*laughs*], but it seemed very organic. It was actually providing opportunities and jobs in and around the museums, especially for the local females interested in art. So I'm actually for it.

SHIFFMAN: So what else have you been working on?

MECKSEPER: I'm working on proposal for a competition to create an outdoor environment at a prison in Germany. It's in Stammheim, which was the prison for the Baader-Meinhof Group—the German terrorist group from the '70s. My aunt was sort of on the fringes of it.

SHIFFMAN: That's fascinating. How does a competition like that even come to exist?

MECKSEPER: The Green Party is running the state where the prison is, so they have all these innovative ideas. It's a very, very unusual project.

SHIFFMAN: Everything you do has such weight to it. What do you do to relax or escape?

MECKSEPER: I don't really do anything to relax and escape. If I could take a vacation that would be great, but I never do. *[laughs]* I like badminton. I never have time to play, but when I do, it's my favorite thing.

SHIFFMAN: Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

MECKSEPER: I'm sure most people would say I'm a pessimist. *[laughs]*

SHIFFMAN: *[laughs]* Probably.

MECKSEPER: ...But I think of myself as an optimist.

*JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER'S SELF-TITLED SOLO EXHIBITION IS ON DISPLAY AT ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY THROUGH JANUARY 18.*

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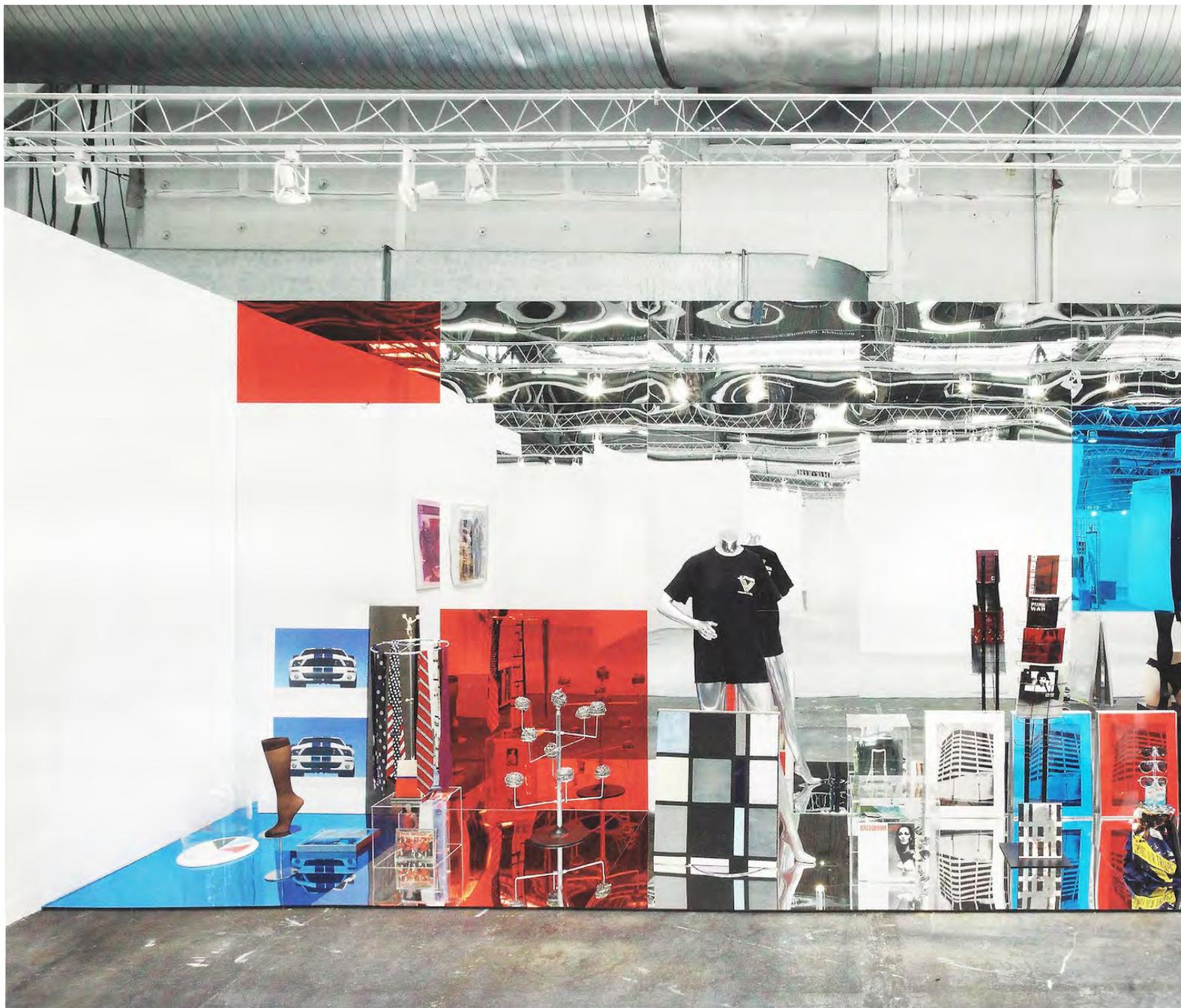
# THE ARCHAEOLOGIST

Josephine Meckseper  
digs into  
capitalism's  
artifacts

BY BRIENNE WALSH







**B**y using such elements as testosterone-laden car logos, lingerie-clad mannequins, and burnt American flags, German-born artist Josephine Meckseper sets herself up to be many things—a commentator on gender, a political activist, a critical outsider, a soothsayer, even an archaeologist. The latter designation is the one she prefers. “My motive is to capture our present in some form that people can relate to as if they’re looking at an archaeological display of what life was like in 2013,” she says.

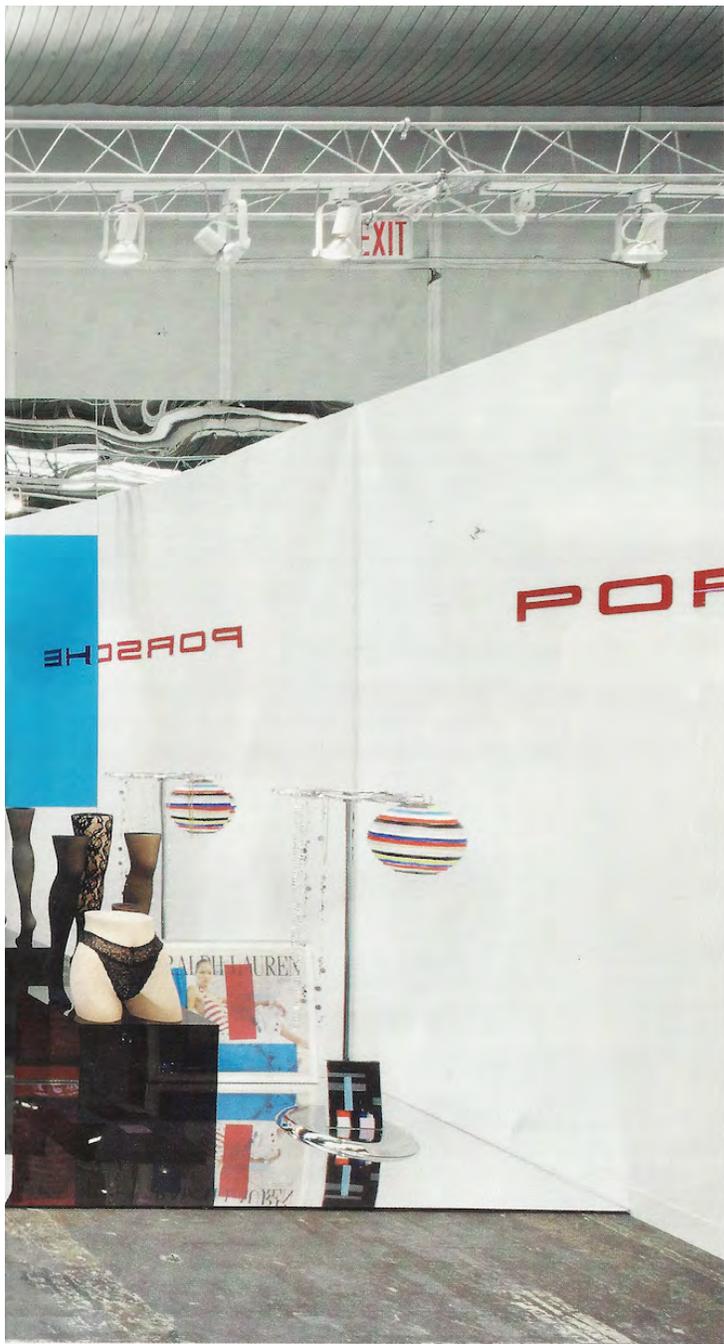
A woman of slender frame with piercing green eyes, Meckseper is laconic when asked to explain her work. Her reticence perhaps explains why so many critics incorrectly read bold political statements into that work. German curator Heike Munder compared her practice to the writing of radical liberal intellectual Noam Chomsky. In a catalogue essay for Meckseper’s solo exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart

in 2007, Okwui Enwezor wrote, “Meckseper’s artist’s projects have stringently focused on addressing the politics of power and violence that undergird the current global imperium.”

When asked if her work is actively political, Meckseper replies, “My work is not really political because there’s no message. There’s political content in it, and I reference politics but the work itself is not political.”

Dissecting what she means takes some effort. To begin, it’s important to understand that Meckseper derives much of her thinking from Michael Asher, who was her professor when she was a graduate student at the California Institute of the Arts in the early 1990s. She describes his oeuvre as archaeological; he clinically examined institutional behavior to understand how galleries and museums fail both artists and viewers. “He was one of the founders of the notion that the exhibition space is not actually a neutral ground, that you have a political responsibility when you show there,” Meckseper says.

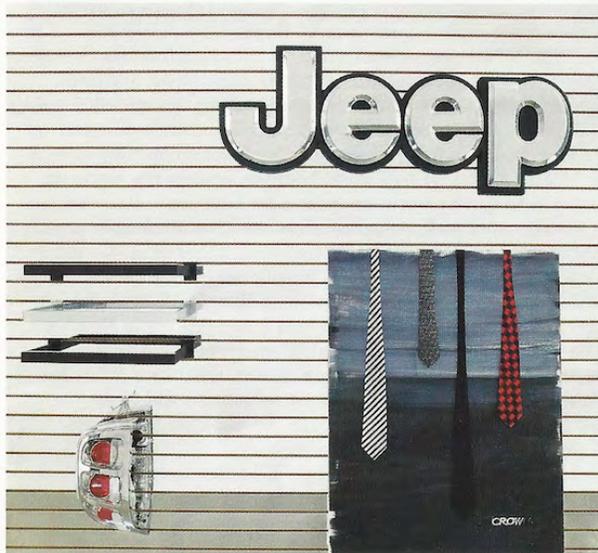
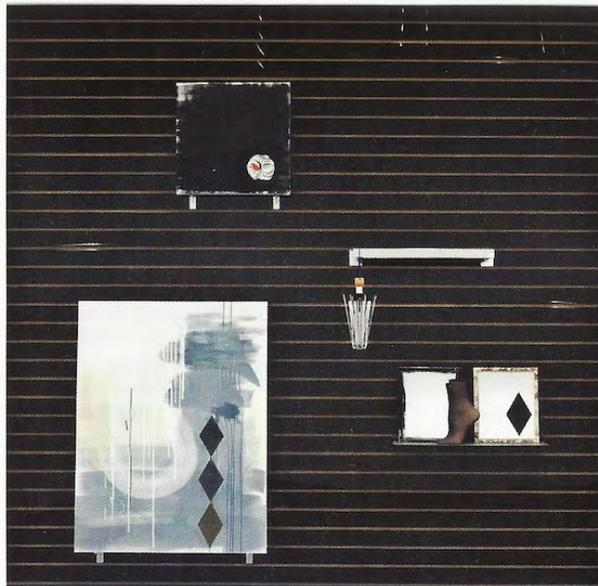
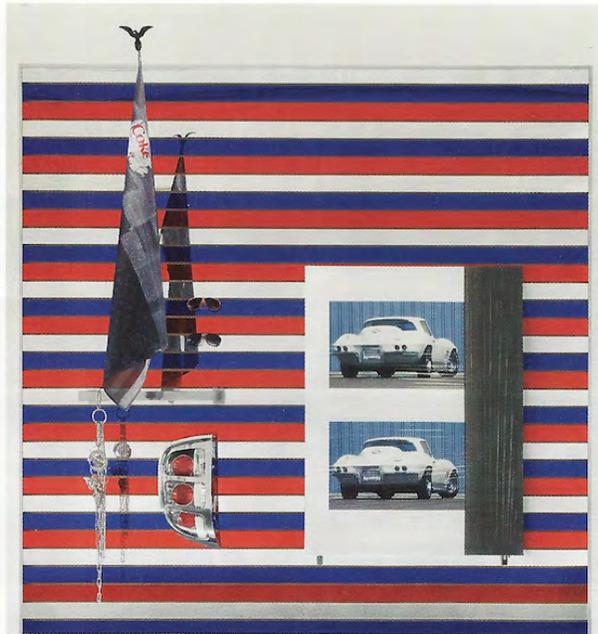
PREVIOUS SPREAD: FROM LEFT, KRISTINE LARSEN, JAMES EWING, JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER, TIMOTHY TAYLOR, GALLERY LONDON, GALERIE REINHARD HAUFF, STUTTGART, AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: GENEVIEVE HANSON, JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER, TIMOTHY TAYLOR GALLERY, GALERIE REINHARD HAUFF, AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

As cool as her approach to her practice is—the role of the archaeologist is, after all, ultimately neutral, disclosing facts but not offering prescriptive solutions—the art Meckseper makes is heavily steeped in a Marxist critique of consumer culture.

In installations for her 2007 Kunstmuseum Stuttgart show, Meckseper filled glass cabinets that resembled shop windows with images of women in lingerie beside toilet plungers, photographs of riots, and pretty mannequins wearing kaffiyehs, the Arab scarf commonly associated with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Other display cases held bath mats, perfume bottles, treatises by Jean Baudrillard, jeweled pendants, and packed dress shirts. One room featured abstract paintings resembling works by Russian Constructivists like Kazimir Malevich—hung across from photographs of street bombings. In Meckseper's supposedly neutral works, one message becomes clear—all commodities are equal enough in social value to be placed in the same exhibition space, and conversely are all equally worthless.



FROM TOP:  
Corvette, 2011.  
Mixed media  
on acrylic mirrored  
MDF slat wall,  
96 x 96 x 33 in.

*The Bird of the Air*,  
2012. Mixed  
media on  
acrylic mirrored  
MDF slat wall,  
96½ x 96½ x 14½ in.

*Crow*, 2011. Mixed  
media on  
acrylic mirrored  
MDF slat wall,  
96 x 96 x 11½ in.

OPPOSITE:  
Installation view  
of *American Mall*,  
2010.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:  
Installation view  
of *Manhattan Oil  
Project*, 2012.



Her later work seems to be more directed at critiquing the American government and what Meckseper suggests is its insatiable hunger for oil and war. For *0% Down*, 2008, which has been widely shown, Meckseper mashed up clips of American car commercials with “Total War,” a soundtrack by experimental sound artist Boyd Rice, to create a short black-and-white film that reads like a propaganda piece for the air force of the government in *The Minority Report*. For a 2011 exhibition at the Flag Art Foundation, in New York, she assembled an array of objects that summed up the typical American man—or at least the one idealized by hip-hop culture. Gleaming chrome tire rims rested on tables with reflective surfaces. A slat wall—ordinarily used to display merchandise in industrial retail stores—was composed of red, white, and blue mirrors. On it hung, among other objects, a screen print of twin Ford Mustang Shelby GT500s and a rack of silver necklaces with pendants depicting a bald eagle and the Mercedes logo. The look of the exhibition was both sleek and sort of tacky; in another venue, it could have been a shrine to a pizza delivery boy.

The 2012 *Manhattan Oil Project*, for which Meckseper installed two 25-foot-high oil pumps at the corner of 46th Street and Eighth Avenue in New York City, is perhaps her most overtly political work to date. The pumps bobbed up and down as if drawing oil from under the sidewalk; in actuality, they were just sculptures. Her intention was to make a statement about how oil fuels America’s appetites, though perhaps the most powerful statement made was that passersby largely ignored them.

Someone digging up such artifacts 100 years from now would not necessarily get an unbiased view of society—for instance, where is the Internet in all this?—but she would certainly surmise that people today were patriarchal, patriotic, self-destructive, and marked by a fairly disturbing predilection for ugly objects.

Not all of Meckseper’s work, however, ignores the aesthetic. In her studio, we sit in a corner wedged between a desk with an Apple computer and an elegant glass case that Meckseper says references Mies van der Rohe; the great father of modernist architecture plays a central role in both her exhibition that opened in June at the Parrish Art Museum, in Water Mill, Long Island, and her solo show this fall at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. The vitrine pairs the ass of a plaster mannequin with a totem resembling Constantin Brancusi’s vertical sculptures. “Van der Rohe built a lot of structures for art collections,” she says. “So I see these as display sculptures for small art collections.” A characteristically opaque response.

It isn’t until the very end of my visit that Meckseper loosens up. “Your studio is so neat,” I comment, as I wander around the meticulously clean space, lined with large canvases (based on photographs of Bernhard Hoetger’s Expressionist outdoor



sculptures) that will appear in the Andrea Rosen exhibition. “It’s the German in me,” Meckseper says, smiling slightly.

Although Meckseper has called New York her home for the past 18 years—“I always miss it when I’m gone, whether it’s dirty and rainy or sunny and hot,” she says—she was born in Lilienthal, Germany, in 1964. Her parents considered themselves anarchists but were well connected nonetheless; Meckseper’s father was a friend of former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. They hailed from the German intellectual avant-garde—her great-granduncle was Heinrich Vogeler, who founded Worpswede, a Weimar-era utopian artists’ colony, with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, among others. And Worpswede is where Meckseper spent much of her childhood. Rather than watching *Sesame Street*, she watched movies like Alain Resnais’s Holocaust film *Night and Fog*.

At the Parrish, as part of the institution’s new Platform Series, Meckseper’s pieces have the opportunity to interact with the permanent collection; she has created installations that directly engage in conversation with the institution’s new Herzog & de Meuron—designed building, unveiled last fall.

The structure, which resembles two barns stretched horizontally, evokes both the clean, light-filled buildings of Van der Rohe and the pavilion-like car dealerships across from the museum

LEFT: GENEVIE HANSON; JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER; TIMOTHY TAYLOR GALLERY. GALLERY REINHARD HAUFF, AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY



Meckseper in her New York studio, 2013.

OPPOSITE: Stills from *0% Down*, 2008. Video, 6 min. 2 sec.

along Route 27, the clogged single-lane highway that equalizes all who visit the Hamptons, even the wealthiest. Given Meckseper's fixation on automobile culture and the great modernists of the Weimar Republic, the marriage between her and the Parrish seems predestined.

On the exterior of the main entrance lobby, visitors are greeted by a glass vitrine that Meckseper modeled after Van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion at the 1929 World's Fair. Just beyond, in the interior space, lies *Sabotage on Auto Assembly Line to Slow It Down*, 2009, a chrome conveyor belt with three tires placed on a mirrored panel on the floor, in front of a mirrored panel on the wall behind. Next to the conveyor belt sit two television sets, one playing *0% Down* and the other running *Shattered Screen*, 2009, a continuous video of shattered glass. "In the mirror, you see the cars driving by reflected in it, and it looks as if they are driving into the mirror," Meckseper says. "It's not necessarily about seeing the reflected wealth or glamour of the Hamptons, but more about Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* and being stuck in traffic."

In *Weekend*, 1967, a vacuous French bourgeois couple abandon their car in traffic en route to a holiday and find themselves immersed in a surreal kind of civil war. As they traverse the

bucolic landscape, they encounter burned cars, dead bodies, and a gang of cannibals who eat British tourists. Despite the carnage, the duo's main concerns include making sure that their Hermès bags are not destroyed. Meckseper's installation replicates the traffic in the film right before the violence erupts. When viewers turn away from it, they may find themselves in the museum—or immersed, as Godard's couple discovered themselves, in a class struggle they can no longer ignore. (One hopes for the latter, especially if they've spent a Friday afternoon on Route 27.)

Four other works by Meckseper at the Parrish also employ mirrors, as well as images of cars, American flags, and ties. They reflect the art installed alongside them—pieces by John Chamberlain, Willem de Kooning, Keith Sonnier, and Dan Flavin. Like Meckseper's shop window installations, all the objects captured within the piece are effectively equalized: The exorbitantly expensive works of the great Minimalists are humbled alongside overblown Jeep logos. One can read it as a familiar critique of the art world—the auratic object has become just a commodity like any other. Or it can be taken as Meckseper herself might describe it—an archaeological display of what life is like in 2013, albeit for a privileged group of people, of which the artist herself is a member. MP



Through the Looking

GLASS



Josephine Meckseper in her studio

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEFAN RUIZ

RIGHT: IMAGE COURTESY OF TIMOTHY TAYLOR GALLERY, LONDON; GALERIE REINHARD HAUFF, STUTTGART; AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK; PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAMES EWING



INSIDE JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER'S studio, right in the heart of chaotic Chinatown, the streets are bustling with commuters and tourists. Inside her studio, though, the noise is hushed, the walls are white, the floors—pristine. It feels almost more like a laboratory than an artist's studio—until you see the two glass vitrines, each at least 10 feet tall, standing by the window. The vitrines contain abstract wooden sculptures that recall the modern art of the early 1900s but look less like an art exhibit than a display case in a high-end jewelry store.

"They're a window into our time," Meckseper tells me. "With all its contradictions."

A few days after my visit, the vitrines are transported along the Long Island Expressway all the way to Water Mill, where Meckseper is having an exhibition at the Parrish Museum, a stalwart of the area's art scene that's recently reopened in a stark new building. The Parrish plans to invite contemporary artists to produce new installations—and in selecting Meckseper for the inaugural show, has chosen a provocative and challenging artist with a strong connection to the area.

The Parrish Museum has been a fixture of the Hamptons art scene since 1897, with a collection that includes many artists who have lived and worked on the East End, but its original building grew unwieldy for contemporary purposes. This past winter, after a years-long endeavor, the museum unveiled an austere beautiful new home designed by Herzog & de Meuron, the Swiss architectural duo responsible for such icons as Tate Modern in London, the "Bird's Nest" stadium in Beijing and the Prada tower in Tokyo. The new Parrish is a long, low-slung structure nestled among the surrounding grass, which features light-filled galleries composed of pure, unadorned materials: concrete, steel, glass and blonde wood. With its triangular roof and spare detailing, the building pays homage to the barns that still dot this end of Long Island.



Josephine Meckseper, *Manhattan Oil Project*, 2012. The Last Lot project space, New York.

Since the museum opened during the Hamptons' off season, this summer will be the first time that many visitors will see the new Parrish—which Meckseper is taking into account. "It's quite a statement, but it's very subtle," the artist says of the museum's new home. "It could almost be mistaken for an agricultural building. It's definitely very inviting, not overwhelming. The curators were very generous and I could have done anything: films, performances . . . But since the building is so new, and so specifically inspired by the area, I was interested in engaging with the architecture itself. So I've created a narrative thread through the museum with my artworks."

For more than two decades, **Josephine Meckseper's** art has blurred the line between culture and commerce. This summer, she takes her provocative work to the ravishing new Parrish Museum in Water Mill.

by Jason Farago



Josephine Meckseper, *Corvette*, 2011. Metal fixtures, acrylic fixtures, metal chains, metal rings, metal buckles, metal hooks, taillight; digital ink-jet print on canvas with plastic; on acrylic mirrored MDF slatwall with aluminum edging.

IMAGE COURTESY OF TIMOTHY TAYLOR GALLERY, LONDON, GALERIE REINHARD HAUFF, STUTTGART, AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK; PHOTOGRAPHED BY GENEVIEVE HANSON

To that end, Meckseper has created new sculptures that replicate or respond to elements of Herzog & de Meuron's architecture. Visitors will see this effect even outside the front door, in a self-styled "outdoor lobby" that leads into the forecourt. There, Meckseper has produced a number of her signature vitrines, which display out-of-context commercial materials and references to modern art. But she's produced them in the same scale and with the same materials that Herzog & de Meuron used for the building. The result is an uncanny echo effect, which Meckseper describes as "expanding the museum from the inside to the outside."

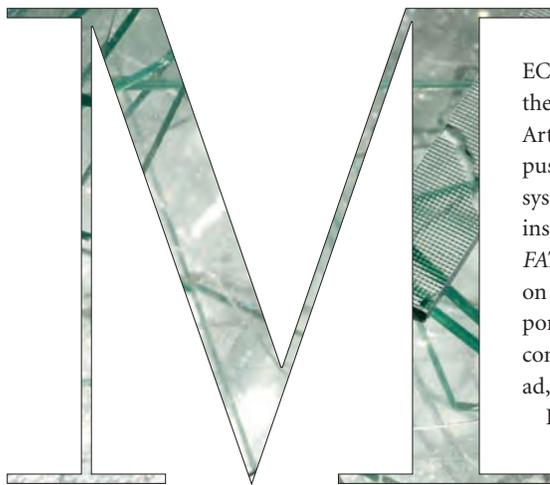
Elsewhere at the Parrish, Meckseper has hung her own work alongside art from the permanent collection, in a productive, at times surprising, conversation. Near a neon sculpture by Dan Flavin, for instance, is a Meckseper painting that incorporates a brassy light source. One of the Parrish's ravishing late paintings by Willem de Kooning has the same red, white and blue color scheme as a Meckseper painting that references America at war. And a crushed car from the sculptor John Chamberlain—who worked on Shelter Island and whom Meckseper has always admired—stands alongside her largest work: an abstracted assembly line of hub caps and other car parts, featuring a pair of televisions broadcasting car commercials against a giant mirrored backdrop.

"I actually made this work in 2008, and it had a lot to do with the crisis in the American car industry," Meckseper tells me. "But in this context I really see it more in juxtaposition with Route 27, which runs right by the museum." The artist has cunningly installed the piece near one of the Parrish's largest picture windows, "so you actually see the cars reflected in the mirror. It'll almost be as if the cars are driving through the installation.

"I didn't really want to comment too much about the economy of the Hamptons, because people already know that it's a wealthy place. I'm more interested in the aspect of getting to and from the Hamptons."

Meckseper explains that she was inspired by *Weekend*, the classic 1967 French film by Jean-Luc Godard, which features a minutes-long tracking shot of an endless traffic jam. "We all know what it's like to be driving that stretch. You turn the corner in Southampton and you feel, 'Oh, I've almost made it,' and then you're still stuck in traffic. And at this point you will see all the cars reflected."

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ECKSEPER WAS BORN and raised in northern Germany and came to the United States in the early 1990s to study at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), one of the country's most progressive art schools, which pushes students to think about producing art outside of the traditional system of galleries and museums. When she graduated, she decided that instead of making art, she wanted to edit a publication. That publication, *FAT Magazine*, lasted for seven years and juxtaposed heavyweight articles on art and philosophy with loud, garish imagery (and sometimes even pornography), all laid out like a trashy Italian tabloid. All sorts of artists contributed: In one issue, a work by Matthew Barney was disguised as an ad, and *FAT* soon garnered a downtown cult following.

It wasn't until the 2000s that she began making artworks in what has become her signature style: assemblages of random consumer goods, sometimes luxurious and sometimes cheap, in glass vitrines against mirrored backdrops. They bring the imagery of shopping into the white cube, but by placing such weird collections of items together—car parts, designer underwear boxes, costume jewelry, a toilet brush—Meckseper calls attention to the strangeness of those objects, and to the larger economy that produced them.

The works are also, she explains, a chance to ask questions of the art world's own tendency to transform culture into commerce. "At first I



The new Parrish Museum in Water Mill

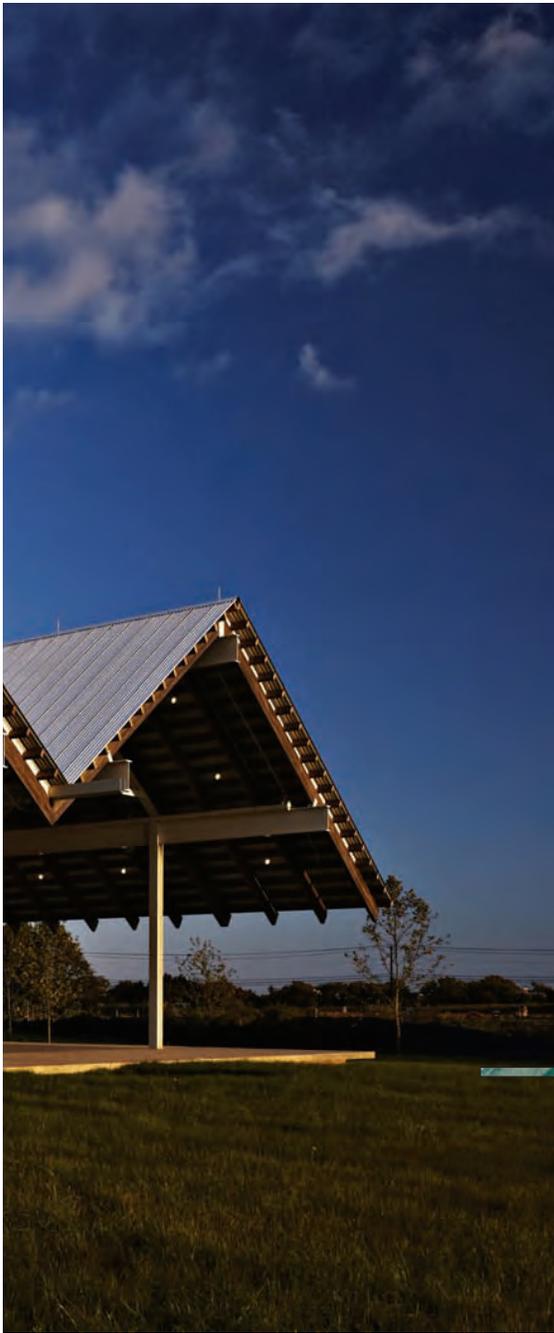
didn't want to take part in the commercial gallery system," she says. "But later I became more interested in taking on the commercialism of the art world itself, and that's when I started making these display forms and shelves." Her vitrines and displays have been exhibited at MoMA, the Guggenheim and the Whitney; this autumn, she'll have her first show at Andrea Rosen Gallery, her new dealer, with help from the Art Production Fund.

Last year, Meckseper completed her largest work ever: a massive public installation, right on 44th Street, of counterfeit oil pumps, which made the site look as if midtown had struck black gold. Oil, and the political and ecological consequences of car culture, have always been a few of the artist's major interests. But *Manhattan Oil Project* was on a scale she'd never before attempted. Even though the pumps didn't actually have any function, they churned up and down all day—and became an unlikely tourist draw.

"That piece in particular was really about creating something extremely accessible," Meckseper explains. "Being near Times Square, it allowed people from all over the world to see something where

they weren't really sure if it was an artwork. When we did surveys, 50 percent of the people really thought that the city was drilling for oil. It was actually very endearing to talk to people about their ideas and what they brought to it. A lot of people from the Midwest told me that they had these things in their backyard. So it was as if a piece of Americana had been brought to New York. But then, 500 feet away in Times Square, there's that army recruiting station . . . It was the most gratifying thing that I've ever done."

Her work requires precise craftsmanship, so most of her pieces are produced not in her studio but with the help of outside manufacturers. Although she often works with specialty art producers, she told me that she actually prefers to work with commercial fabricators. "For the oil pumps I worked with a company in New Jersey that only does industrial machinery and not artworks," Meckseper says. "They were so excited. They came to the opening, and we're still in touch. It would actually be a lot cheaper for me to produce my work overseas, but it's nice to manufacture things in this country. There's a certain amount of pride that goes into doing things locally."



“WHEN WE DID SURVEYS, 50 PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE REALLY THOUGHT THAT THE CITY WAS DRILLING FOR OIL. IT WAS ACTUALLY VERY ENDEARING TO TALK TO PEOPLE ABOUT THEIR IDEAS AND WHAT THEY BROUGHT TO IT.”

M

ECKSEPER'S PARRISH SHOW is something of a homecoming. She spends her summers in Amagansett with her boyfriend, the artist Richard Phillips, and several of the works in this show were inspired by a car dealership in Southampton, where she'd sit outside and gaze at the showrooms. Unlike many of the artists who exhibit in the Parrish's collection, Meckseper has no studio on the East End, at least not yet. "I hope to, at some point," she says. "But I also sometimes prefer not to work there, because it's nice to have a division—to just go out there and not think about work. I'm torn. Because once I have a studio, I know that I'm going to have to work there."

Meckseper's elaborate, sophisticated show in the Hamptons this summer may seem a far cry from the punky magazine of her early days. But the impulse behind her new work remains the same as it's ever been: to surprise us, to expose the hidden sides of our culture and to investigate our assumptions about everything around us. "As an artist you can't really take the exhibition space as a neutral ground," she says. "Maybe the most radical thing would be to show at some glitzy gallery uptown. I think it's more interesting because it gives you more options. If you live on the fringe, you always have the romanticism about never failing. If you don't really jump in, you can't fail." ♦

# REVERSE ENGINEERING

written by Bill Powers

photography by Tim Barber

Il titolo di questo articolo funge anche da nome della mostra collettiva a cui parteciperà Josephine Meckseper ad agosto presso la galleria The Fireplace Project di East Hampton. Josephine apprezzerà questa ulteriore valenza, in quanto è il primo artista a presentare una mostra estiva al recentissimo Parish Art Museum di Southampton.

Adesso ci sarà davvero da divertirsi.

BP Sei d'accordo che tre è sempre meglio di quattro?

JM In realtà opterei per il quattro, perché mi piace la simmetria. Il tre è più che altro un numero cristiano che evoca colpa e paura, mentre il quattro è più indefinito e inclusivo, in linea con ciò che per C.G. Jung rappresentava la ricerca di un'integrazione spirituale e una completezza entro i confini dell'inconscio collettivo.

BP Nelle tue opere preferisci concentrarti sui colori primari?

JM Sono tedesca. Si può dire che sono

contraria a mescolare i colori, lo ritengo un tradimento. Solo ai francesi è concesso, a Matisse ad esempio.

BP Bernini diceva che la scultura è un'arte suprema rispetto alla pittura, in quanto mostra ciò che realmente esiste invece di offrire una mera rappresentazione della sostanza e della profondità.

JM Ma c'è anche una famosa citazione di Ad Reinhardt: «la scultura è qualcosa contro cui vai a sbattere quando indietreggi per osservare un dipinto». Non credo che esista una gerarchia in termini di contrapposizione fra oggetti e rappresentazione. Mi interessa di situazioni come le modalità in cui, negli anni '20, Mies van der Rohe progettava gli edifici adattandoli alle collezioni di opere d'arte.

BP Che relazione c'è fra architettura e scultura?

JM Si potrebbe affermare che l'architettura è scultura: è scultura concepita per creare spazio sociale. Entrambe mirano a lasciare

in eredità un monumento rappresentativo del loro tempo.

BP Raccontaci quando sei andata a trivellare a Times Square per cercare il petrolio.

JM Quando ho dato vita al *Manhattan Oil Project* l'anno scorso, ho riflettuto molto sul monumento di Tatlin alla Terza Internazionale negli anni '20, su Marc Di Suvero, Ronald Bladen, e sul Broken Obelisk di Barnett Newman, e ho anche ripensato al muro di Berlino e al sarcofago del reattore di Cernobyl. La storia del genere umano può essere raccontata in modo molto più incisivo da questi monumenti che da qualsiasi documento scritto. BP Puoi parlarci di come utilizzi la pubblicità della moda della quale ti appropri? Ho sempre avuto il sospetto che tu voglia deridere queste immagini rubate.

JM Sono stanca della parola "appropriazione", la considero un elemento specifico delle opere di altri artisti. Nei miei lavori interpreto questo tipo di processo piuttosto come un riciclo di immagini rappresentative di una determinata prospettiva e che spesso sono l'epitome della produzione culturale americana.

BP La gamba di un manichino di cui hai fatto il calco nel calcestruzzo sembra scostarsi dai tuoi primi lavori per i quali avresti semplicemente utilizzato la massa generata dall'oggetto stesso.

JM Ho già inserito parti di manichini prefabbricati in passato, ma attraverso la creazione di oggetti definibili come faux art e realizzati con materiali diversi, intendo dare ancora maggiore rilievo all'aspetto commerciale.

BP E definiresti i tuoi quadri faux painting? JM Faux – quindi falsi – come qualsiasi altro quadro. È artificiale, per questo lo chiamiamo arte. Trovo interessante – e significativo – che i creativi appartenenti a qualsiasi tipo di industria, sia che si tratti di William Burroughs, David Lynch, Steven Soderbergh o George W. Bush, inizino tutti a dipingere dopo essere andati in pensione. È quasi una precondizione.



*The title above doubles as the name of a group show with Josephine Meckseper at The Fireplace Project in East Hampton this August. Josephine will enjoy the added distinction as the first artist to stage a summer show at the newly built Parrish Art Museum in Southampton. Now that's some serious beach time.*

*BP Would you agree that three is always better than four?*

*JM I would actually make a case for four, because I like symmetry. Three is more of Christian number that evokes guilt and fear. Four is more open ended and inclusive, in line with let's say a C.G. Jung quest for a spiritual integration and wholeness within a collective unconscious. BP You prefer to concentrate on primary colors in your work?*

*JM Look, I'm German. I'm sort of against blending colors. I think that's cheating. Only the French can get away with that, Matisse for example.*

*BP Bernini said that sculpture was supreme over painting because it shows what actually exists rather than merely depicting substance and depth.*

*JM But then there's also that famous quote by Ad Reinhardt, «Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting». I don't believe in a hierarchy in terms of objects versus representation. I'm interested in situations like how Mies van der Rohe in the 1920s was designing buildings around people's art collections.*

*BP What is the relationship between architecture and sculpture?*

*JM You could argue that architecture is sculpture. It's sculpture designed to create social space. Both aim at leaving behind a monument of their time.*

*BP What about when you went drilling for oil in Times Square?*

*JM When I created the "Manhattan Oil Project" last year, I was thinking a lot about Tatlin's Monument to the Third International in the 1920s, Marc Di Suvero, Ronald Bladen, and Barnett Newman's Broken Obelisk, but also the wall in Berlin and the sarcophagus reactor of Tschernobyl. Human history can be*



*told based on these monuments much better than any written document.*

*BP Can we talk about your use of appropriated fashion advertising? I always suspect that you are making fun of these stolen pictures.*

*JM I'm tired of the word "appropriation." I think of it as being very specific to other artist's works. In my work, I see the process more as recycling images that represent a certain perspective; often it's the epitome of American cultural production.*

*BP Looking at this mannequin leg which you've cast in concrete seems a departure from earlier work where you might have simply used*

*the mass produced object itself.*

*JM I have included readymade mannequin parts in the past, but by creating faux art objects in different materials I'm trying to highlight the commercial aspect even more.*

*BP And would you categorize your paintings as faux paintings?*

*JM As faux as any other painting. It's artificial, that's why it's called art. I find it interesting – and telling – that creative people from all different industries whether it's William Burroughs or David Lynch or Steven Soderbergh or George W. Bush all start painting after retiring. It's almost a default.*

# Less Than Zero

*Twin looks behind the smoke and mirrors of Josephine Meckseper's astounding artwork to uncover her politics of dissent.*

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY MARK PECKMEZIAN  
WORDS FRANCESCA GAVIN

It isn't hyperbole to say Josephine Meckseper is one of the most interesting and political contemporary artists working today. Her vitrine installations, wall pieces, videos, public sculptures, magazine projects and window displays have proven that her focus is on ideas, rather than just medium. The German-born, NYC-based artist works in the heart of Chinatown – an interesting location for a woman whose work is a biting examination of capitalism, consumption and the manipulation of desire. She makes artwork that plays with deeply accessible references – the everyday, throwaway, object-driven world around us. Meckseper's intention is to avoid being turned into mere product. Here, pieces may sometimes resemble twisted versions of shop windows, but this is a practise that is all about resistance, rather than sales.

*What are you working on at the moment?*

I'm working on a show at the Worpweder Kunsthalle in Germany, which is taking place in my hometown, a small village between Hamburg and Bremen. It was an artist's colony at the turn of the century and attracted artists and writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke and my great grandfather Heinrich Vogeler, who was a Jugendstil artist and architect, and later became a socialist-realist painter in Russia. He was forced out of Germany by the Nazis in the Thirties and moved to the Ukraine. His life story and artistic career is very symbolic of 20th century German history. Worpwede was one of the few German artist communities that voiced opinions against the Nazi regime – it was, and is, a very unique place.

*What kind of work are you going to show?*

It's a small retrospective of different works. There are installations and mirror sculptures that have communist symbols and logos. Other works incorporate the philosophical rhetoric from the Romanian philosopher, E.M. Cioran. There are wallpapers with imagery of Heinrich Vogeler's early utopian Jugendstil designs. And some works are going to have site-specific references; for example, I'm making three window installations in the façade of the building. The window pieces are

a play on the main street where the Kunsthalle is located and are poking fun at the tourist industry that has developed around this artist colony. It's a somewhat personal exhibition.

*When I think about your work in a wider sense, it is usually much more universal. It doesn't seem to reflect so much your own history.*

My work is quite universal. I think of it as an archaeology of the present. It's a window into our time. It sums up and dissects what our culture is about. I'm using specific examples like the car industry or the oil industry to create an archaeological relic of our present. People in the future will see what we were doing at this time in an artistic language.

*You often use American consumerist references...*

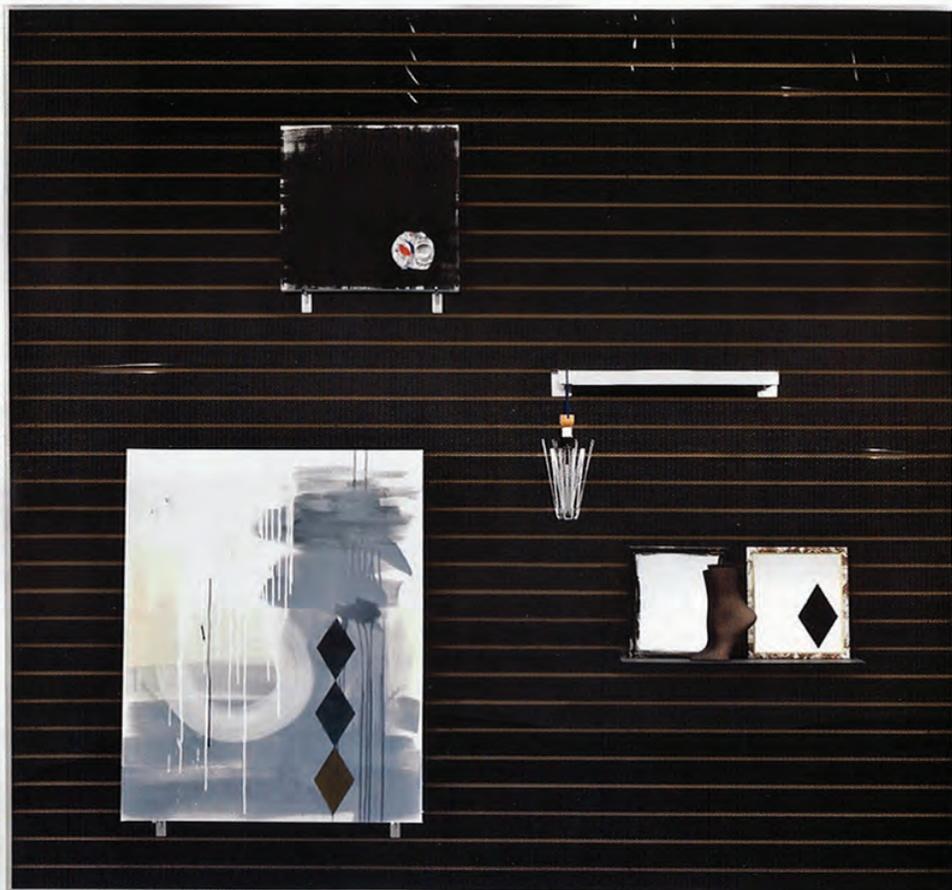
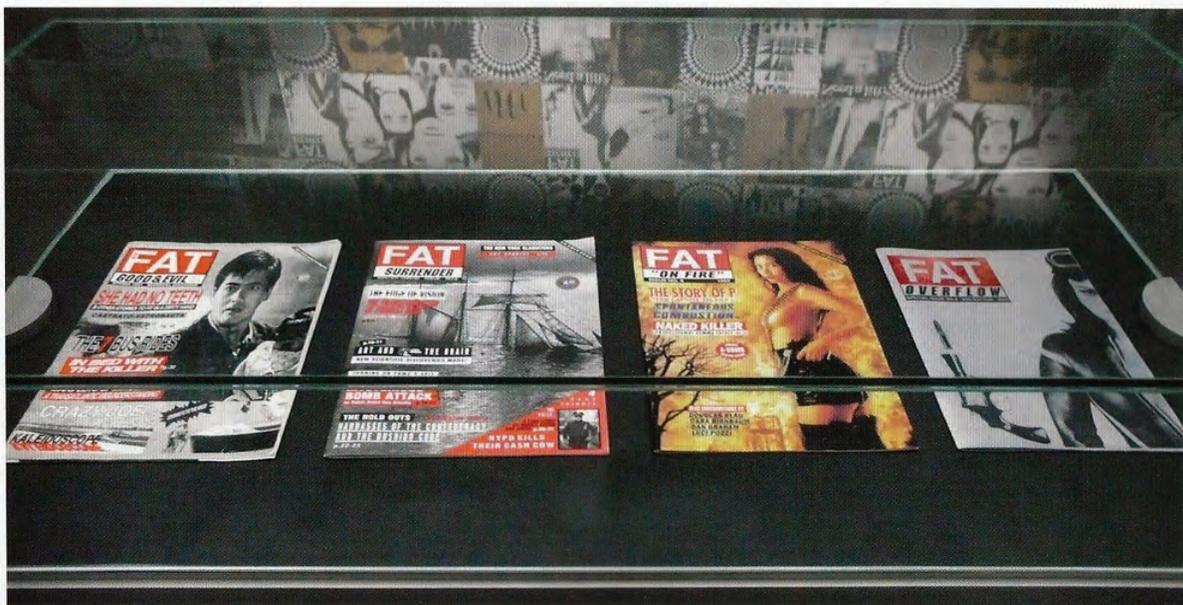
Only in the sense that American culture and politics epitomise what capitalism signifies. It's not really about the politics of the country, but it's more about how it exemplifies capitalism.

*In the past you have described your work as 'a portrait of consumer society.' Is there an emotional aspect here? A revulsion or disgust perhaps about our relationship with our desire for objects?*

It's a portrait of who we are, and what we are, and where we are, but it's not pointing a finger. It's more about a documentation of what is happening. I don't believe in the concept of desire in conjunction with capitalism, it's much more about propaganda and manipulation. There is no actual desire – it's about how you can manipulate the masses to buy. I'm not condemning or judging our consumer society, I'm more looking at a way to use display forms to make references to how cultural signifiers can be captured.

*How did you start working with the vitrines?*

It comes out of the concept of institutional critique and street activism. It's not so much about celebrating or dissecting the make-up of the city. It's more about looking at what it means to show art in



top FAT Magazine No. 1, No. 2, No. 3, No. 4, 2007.  
bottom The Bird of the Air, 2012.



TOP *Tout va Bien*, 2005.  
 BOTTOM *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art*, 2005



*Untitled (Berlin Demonstration, Fire, Cops), 2002*

a museum or taking an exhibition space in a gallery or museum as a neutral ground. Working with the language of display and display culture is, in a way, more about questioning the elite status of what art represents in a museum. In a scientific museum it's about one culture judging another culture. It's essentially very imperialist – the approach of putting relics of another culture into a glass case.

*Do you want to tell me what you find interesting about highlighting the relationship between consumerism and propaganda?*

I think it goes back to the Situationists. Guy Debord realised in the Sixties that the only way to live outside our constant spiral, being manipulated by mass media, is to create situations outside of that, to create experiences that are not part of a capitalist order.

*How does that relate to your own political history?*

All Germans of my generation have, in one way or another, a pretty political history. The generation after the Nazi regime was very much fighting for a new liberated, more politically aware society. Some of my parents' siblings were involved in leftist movements and were close

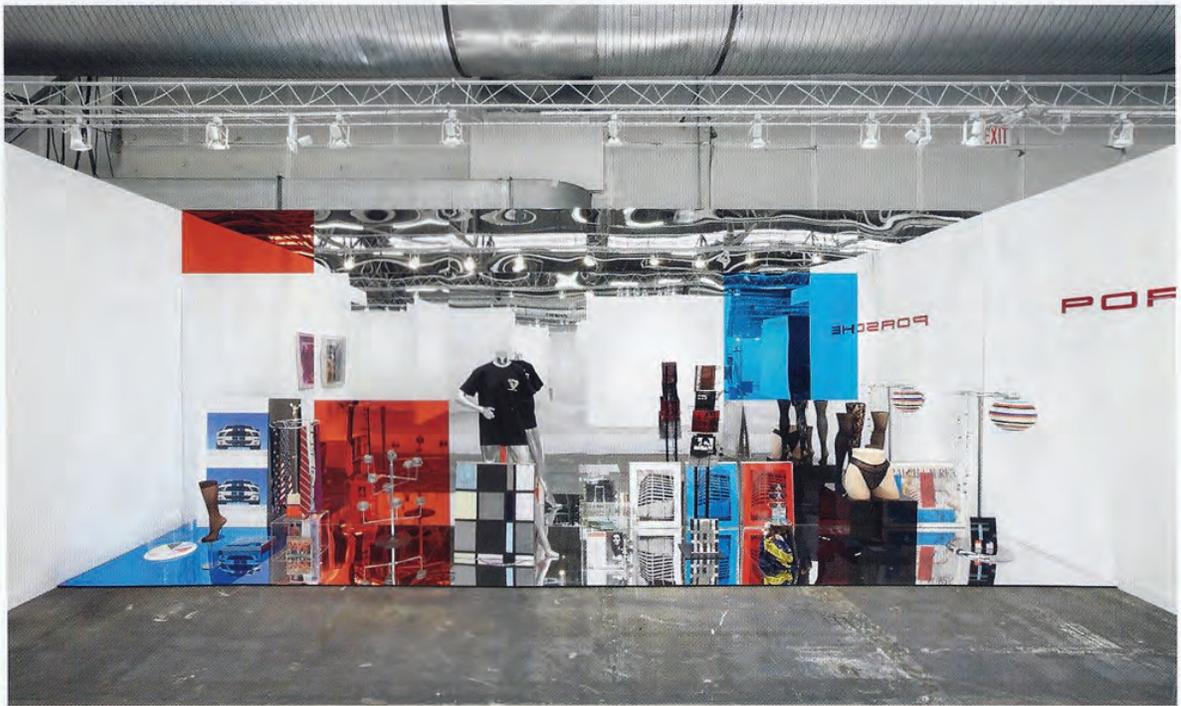
to the Baader-Meinhof group. So, growing up, knowing all that, it's hard to be neutral about politics and it consequently became part of my work.

*Did the desire to make art come out of a similar place?*

No, my parents are actually artists and as a child I knew I wanted to be an artist, it wasn't so much a decision. There was never really a debate that I would do anything else.

*Tell me a bit about your working processes. How you end up putting things together, conceiving shows and objects?*

My work is conceptual. It's usually the idea that stands in the foreground and the material and form aspect is something that follows. That's why it can be very exchangeable and I've worked in very different media. I made a conceptual magazine and I made films that captured protest culture which were often part of my installations of shop displays. The displays really derive from the idea of creating a consumer shrine that was meant to be a focus point of attack – like a shop window of a large demonstration that would be broken in by demonstrators.



*American Mall, 2010.*

*There is a lot of glass and mirrors in the things you make – things that can be smashed...*

Shiny surfaces can be seen as a provocation. The broken mirrors are referencing the moment in which the protestor picks up a stone and smashes in a shop window. At the same time mirrors reflect and simulate consumption and leave very little escape for the viewer who is permanently confronted with his/her reflection. They stand for a capitalist 'smoke and mirror' mentality that is camouflaging all social and political concessions that we have to make to uphold the Western status quo.

*Do you spend a long time making things and putting things together?*

It's not usually a slow, dragging, studied process. I'm interested in how life in its most normal and abnormal forms can be recycled and reclaimed. I'm taking snapshots in my mind of things that I see on the street, then I put them back together in different forms in the studio.

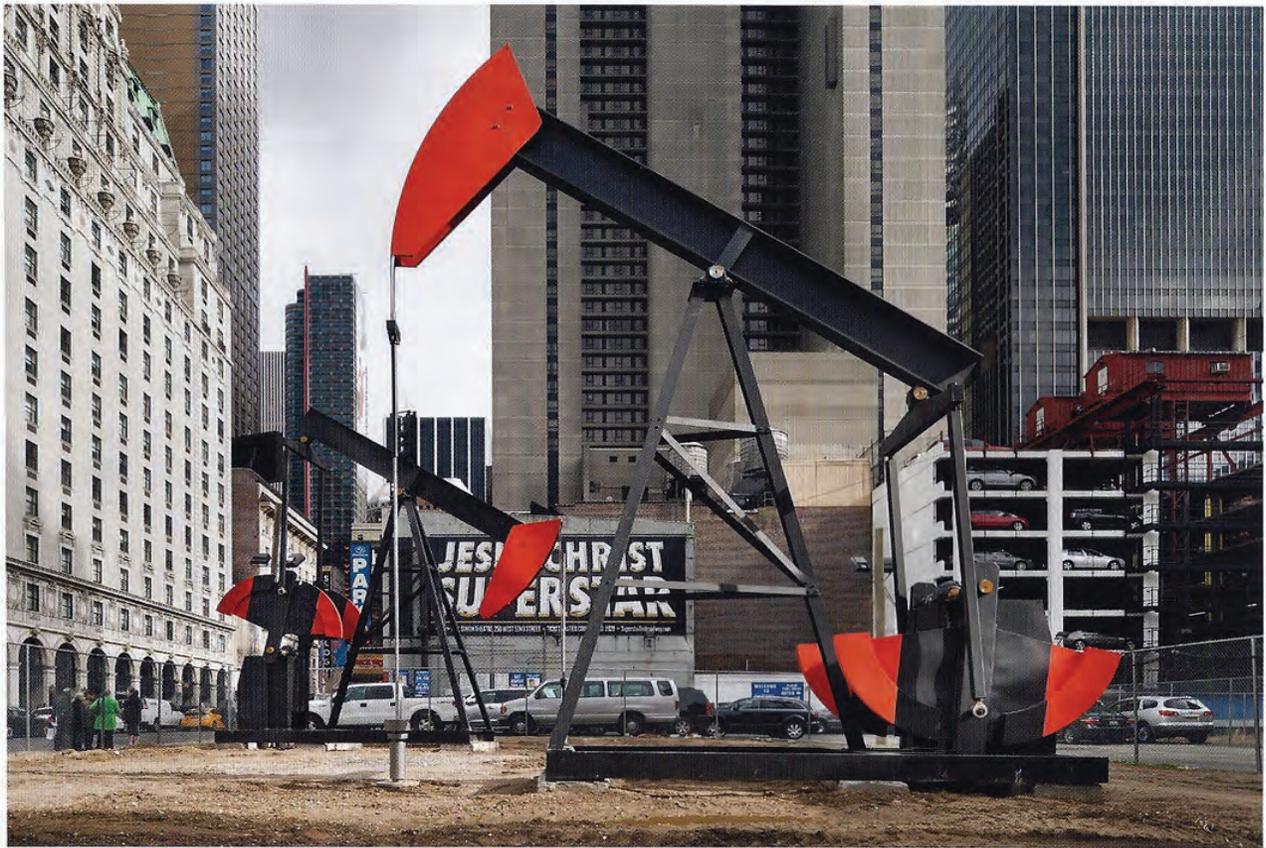
*Your work does look very considered.*

It's taking the semantics of a shop-dresser's language. It's very simple; any shop-window

decorator could do the same thing. But there is no affirmative reassurance in the seemingly benign appropriated objects. My display platforms and arrangements are meant to be ignition points and triggers for destruction. The inescapable reason for their existence is the anticipation of their own destruction.

*Also your purpose is slightly different because you're twisting the concept of selling. There is also a sense of how the art could relate to a fetish object – an object of desire.*

The recycled, reproduced and repurposed image, is now set-up, to float freely, in an absolute market context that is blind to any stability of meaning. The idea is to undermine an elitist art vocabulary that is not accessible to a broader audience. On one side it's a post-Marxist critique on the fetishisation of the object. On the other, I point out how capitalism creates an unequal imbalance of power, down to the very form of commercial products. The collective performative aspect of consumption is frozen inside the vitrine and the flip side of capitalism (like images of exploited factory workers) is literally glued to the back of displayed objects. The concealed power structures that are the core of alienated production are made visible here.



TOP *Manhattan Oil Project*, 2012. Photo: James Ewing.  
BOTTOM Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, 2009



TOP BOTTOM 0% Down, 2008.

*Do you want to tell me about where you find inspiration? Is it something you consider?*

Inspiration is such a romantic term. My work is about creating a window into our society, our lives and reality.

*What do you find interesting about putting work in a public context? For example, the large oil drill sculptures you made for Times Square.*

In a museum or gallery people are preconditioned to look at work differently than outside. I enjoy making work that is accessible to the public. It creates a more open-ended dialogue. It lets me play with cultural icons without having to consider the heavy handedness of the art context. That was true for the oil sculptures as well – to use forms that were already ingrained in people’s consciousness and therefore inherently understandable. I wanted to make a conceptual monument representing what was going on in 2012.

*What about oil in particular interests you?*

It’s really the end point of a capitalist society, needing to feed itself through natural resources and human beings. Times Square has a military recruiting station and I felt there were very strong cultural signifiers. It made me want to do something where people don’t immediately think that it is public art or a sculpture, but something real. When confronted with the oil pump pieces, people were interested in what it meant, if New York actually had oil. What would happen with it? Who would gain from it and who would lose? The Manhattan Oil Project had a similarly populist approach as the magazine project I did in the Nineties – its authorship and intentions always remained obscure, but it was available to everyone at news-stands and in supermarkets.

*Do you want to tell me a bit about that magazine?*

Having studied at CalArts [California Institute of the Arts], which was a very theory heavy and Marxist environment, I was not exactly inclined



to make saleable artworks for a commercial gallery system. Instead I published a conceptual magazine named *FAT*. It was inspired by Jean-Paul Marat's newspaper, *L'Ami du Peuple*, from the French Revolution and the avantgardist tradition of breaking down barriers between art and life. It was a manifesto against a rarefied culture. It looked like a tabloid magazine and was sold to lots of people who did not care about the art world. They would look at images that were artworks but presented as journalistic documentation. It was more of a Surrealist or Dadaist project.

*Because you work so critically with this consumerist capitalist regime, does it make you look at things differently? Are you as persuaded to buy as the rest of us?*

That's hard to say. I've never been very interested in shopping and never really have time for it. When I look a product display, I only look at it as a case study for my work and it's not something I am personally invested in. If I could, I would probably wear a uniform everyday.

*Have you ever come across examples of people trying to co-opt your work into a capitalist context?*

It has to do with a projection of that same audience of how they view their environment. Sometimes people read my work, especially the vitrines and photography, in an affirmative way. I usually incorporate photography as part of an installation, to describe a specific commodity relation. It's meant to be seen as a critical element of something else. So when the viewer distills that my work is about glamour and fashion, it's a complete misreading.

*I suppose in a way the idea of rebellion and protest is easier to absorb if you can commodify it and that removes the power from it, it ends up being nullified.*

The goal is for the work to be very generic, to create a very generic catalogue of images. When I created photographic images, it wasn't about creating an iconic picture. I'm trying to capture our culture as a whole. It's not about making something exceptional – it's really about capturing everything." ❧

## Josephine Meckseper Drills to New York's Dark Center

by *aimee walleston* 03/05/12

This spring, Josephine Meckseper brings the pernicious quest for black gold to New Yorkers' backyard. "Manhattan Oil Project," the artist's first foray into monumental public sculpture, opens Mar. 5 at The Last Lot, a project space at 46th Street and 8th Avenue administered by Art Production Fund. The kinetic sculpture consists of two life-size steel oil pumpjacks, modeled after mid-20th-century rigs the artist found in Texas.

"Last fall, I made a trip to Texas to look at how oil pumpjacks were still being used," Meckseper told *A.i.A.* on the evening before the concrete foundations for the sculptures would be poured. "A lot of the jacks are not being used now, so what I saw in Texas was almost more of a cemetery for oil pumpjacks—like a science fiction monument to the past."

"Manhattan Oil Project" is based in part on an exhibition Meckseper created in 2009 for the Migros Museum in Zurich, which featured two red-and-black pumpjack sculptures (*Oil Rig #1*, *Oil Rig #2*). "The context for those sculptures, as opposed to 'Manhattan Oil Project,' was about where the U.S. had arrived in the last years of the Bush administration," says Meckseper. "The pumpjacks operated as a signifier of that particular period, and the reasons the war was fought in Iraq: for natural resources."

For Meckseper, the rigs stand in for quintessential Americana, referencing the specific economic and cultural history that frames America's oil industry. "Before oil, the idea of wealth in the U.S. wasn't as prominent. Wealth from oil really changed the texture of the culture in America. And of course the same thing happened to the Middle East." The plotlines of major motion pictures from *Giant* to *There Will Be Blood* have proposed that the fall of America begins with a dribble of crude oil (and the evil gleam of avarice in men's eyes). Meckseper's piece falls in line with these parables in some ways, while also aligning the history of America's oil consumption with a larger tale of globalization. Oil—here, in the form of pumpjacks—is used as a physical metaphor for the mystification of global economics. Meckseper's sculptures formalize the concealed initiatives of capitalism, repurposing the physical identity of crude oil—and its conduits—in the service of larger concepts of power and control.

Meckseper counterpoints the myriad billboards that carve a story of commerce into the streets of Times Square. She views her sculptures as critical of capitalism, and as a call to arms in line with the new identity of Mark di Suvero's monumental sculpture *Joie de Vivre* (1998). "In scale and color, they are definitely a nod to di Suvero," says Meckseper. "His sculpture at Zuccotti Park has become an emblem for Occupy Wall Street, and I am interested in public sculpture becoming a symbol for political action. I believe in that potential in art."

Meckseper is known for creating appropriative sculptures that beguile with the shiny, happy charm of the commodity playthings from which they are derived. When she repurposes luxury items, displaying them on mirrored, retail-ready showcases—she does so to challenge their ubiquity. What we are blind to becomes a literal mirror. To this end, Meckseper's pumpjacks promise to be in the spirit of Times Square itself—disconcertingly spectacular and fun. "It's extremely gratifying to make something for people who don't necessarily pay attention to art," she says. Like theatrical set pieces, the sculptures behave as props for the set of Midtown Manhattan, illustrating the machinations of power and force that run the city.

"The key thing is that they operate as a mystery object, something real and yet also fantastical," says Meckseper. "They look extremely real, and technically, they could pump oil. So at first glance people will say 'Wow, now we're drilling for oil in New York City?'"



Photo by James Ewing Photo by James Ewing

500 WORDS

## Josephine Meckseper

03.06.12



**Josephine Meckseper, *Manhattan Oil Project*, 2012**, steel, plastic, hardware, paint, 25 x 23 x 6'.

*For the Manhattan Oil Project, the German-born, New York–based artist Josephine Meckseper has installed two twenty-five-foot-tall sculptures inspired by mid-twentieth-century oil pump jacks in The Last Lot, a project space in Times Square organized by Art Production Fund. The project is on view from March 5 to May 6, 2012.*

**THIS IS** technically my first large-scale public sculpture. In the 1990s I produced a conceptual magazine, FAT, which was kind of like public art because it was distributed at local newsstands. Similar to the magazine, the oil pumps are art disguised as something real. Both projects use recognizable generic forms to subvert an elitist art vocabulary, one typically not accessible to a broad audience.

My main motivation for installing oil pumps in the middle of Manhattan was to use forms that were already ingrained in people's consciousness and therefore inherently understandable. I wanted to make a conceptual monument representing what was going on in 2012, and the pumps signify various current sociopolitical issues—from war to the world economy to the exploitation of natural resources.

The oil pumps are made out of three tons of steel each. The familiar forms appear jarring when juxtaposed with throngs of tourists, harried office workers, and a sea of advertising. In this area of diversion and commercialism, the sculptures become the hard-edged reality of a culture that is defined by its control of supplies of natural resources.

The surrounding theaters provide a distraction and escape from such real-world issues. But the nearby Port Authority, on the other hand, defines the neighborhood more realistically. For many immigrants, this terminal is a launch pad for their hopes and dreams. Picking up on this notion, the pumps can be seen as symbolic of the quintessential American dream, left over from the frontier days: striking it rich.

A New York metal shop called Pabst Enterprises, which typically makes large metal specialty parts for big telecommunications networks, fabricated the sculptures. There are very few plants like this still working on the East Coast, since this type of production is now largely outsourced to China and elsewhere. It was important to me to work with a company that makes industrial products, not art sculptures. Fifty years ago this plant built giant parts for the US Navy. There are still old train tracks on the factory floor there, which reminded me of the giant steam train my father bought in the '70s and installed on nineteenth-century tracks next to the train station in my hometown, Worpswede, Germany. The similarly anachronistic look of the oil pumps echoes the more innocent beginnings of the industrial revolution, now escalated to a tenuous reality defined by our dependency on oil.

— As told to Mara Hoberman

# The New York Times

## A Wildcat Operation in Midtown

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

Published: February 29, 2012

In many parts of the country the pump jack — a kind of equine-pterodactyl metal monstrosity that perpetually extracts oil from a well — is as familiar a feature of the landscape as a tree or a telephone pole.

But to come across a pair towering over a vacant lot in Midtown Manhattan, with a “Jesus Christ Superstar” billboard on one side and a porn store on the other, is a little surreal, like a portrait of John D. Rockefeller by Magritte. The two pumps, 25 feet tall, materialized this week on a lot at 46th Street and Eighth Avenue where a hotel once stood, now the only remaining patch of undeveloped land in the neighborhood. On Monday the pumps will be activated and — at least if their creator, the German-born artist Josephine Meckseper, has her way — they will cause passers-by to think about a lot more than whether there might actually be black gold coursing beneath the urban bedrock.

“I think of them as a kind of fragment, a glimpse, into what our reality is,” said Ms. Meckseper, 47, whose work often operates at the intersection of culture, consumerism and power. “They are about people struggling to have enough money to pay their heating bills. But they are also about those same people’s desire for entertainment and culture, and about the costs of those things too.”

The sculptures were commissioned by the Art Production Fund, a nonprofit public art organization, as part of its Last Lot program, in collaboration with Sotheby’s, the Times Square Alliance and the Shubert Organization, which owns the chain-link-fenced lot and has donated it temporarily for art projects.

Ms. Meckseper based the electric-powered pumps closely on mid-20th-century models used in Electra, a small town in north Texas once famous as the state’s pump jack capital. And while their red accents and arcing forms inevitably evoke Alexander Calder and Ellsworth Kelly, she said it was important that they were pump jacks first and kinetic sculpture only second.

“The fact that they would really function is very important,” she said, standing in a light rain Wednesday morning on the rough ground where the pumps had been installed.

Until May 6 they will lumber into motion twice a day — four hours in the morning and four in the evening on weekdays; continuously for eight hours on weekends — pumping nothing but conceptual crude while appearing to pump the real thing. They will probably not succeed in drowning out the constant stream of roaring, honking traffic headed east on 46th Street, but they will make the authentic, old-fashioned din of American industry.

“The fabricator asked if I wanted to make them noisier, but I said I didn’t want it to happen artificially,” Ms. Meckseper said. “If they were out here for a few years, they would start to make that horrible screeching noise. It’s a sound that I actually kind of love.”

A version of this article appeared in print on March 1, 2012, on page C3 of the New York edition with the headline: A Wildcat Operation in Midtown.

## Josephine Meckseper | The Final Shop

Sarah Lookofsky

A conversation between Josephine Meckseper and Sarah Lookofsky.



Josephine Meckseper, Film still, Mall of America, 2009.

**Sarah Lookofsky** I thought we could begin with a bit of media-specific contemplation. Here we are on a website that addresses, among other things, fashion, a time-bound commodity that your artistic practice has continually explored. I thought it might be interesting to think about this site in contrast with the “sites” you frequently assemble in your work, namely the glass vitrine and display case. The shop window is a curious recreation at this point in time, since people’s desiring (of sex as well as other consumables) and buying have increasingly moved online. To further emphasize this point, the shopping mall, in your piece *Mall of America*, shot at the once-biggest mall in the world, appears like a heavily discounted ghost land with a few disoriented shoppers milling about, almost as if undead. These pieces seem to recognize that the shop window and its surrounding gigantic mall, once the symbol of American affluence, are, if not obsolescent, then at least obsolescing spatial tropes. What are your motivations for adopting these forms of display, and the often out-of-date stuff you put in them, to problematize our digital age?



Josephine Meckseper, Film still, Mall of America, 2009.



**SL** Your practice has maintained a dual preoccupation with consumer capitalism, on the one hand, and protest on the other. Up until recently, these two remained quite disparate in the U.S. context. When large protests happened, as you have recorded, they were mainly against war; they did not imply a broader critique of the economic system “at home.” It seems to me that your work reads quite differently now—differently, say, than it would just 6 months ago. To my mind the Occupy Wall Street Movement is novel in the way it has initiated a systemic critique that attempts to connect the dots between corporate capitalism and politics, both domestic and foreign—hence the proliferation of demands (rather than a lack thereof), from “stop the wars” to “tax the rich”. As far as I can tell, these ideas are starting to make their way into political discourse and the mass media. I wonder how you think about these recent political events, since they seem to relate to the longstanding engagements of your artistic practice in a variety of ways.



Josephine Meckseper, Film still, 04.30.92, 1992.

**JM** Growing up in Western Germany in the ‘70s, a very similar revolt against corporate capitalism and politics was in motion and had a deep impact on my immediate environment. Namely the Red Army Faction, later renamed the Baader-Meinhof Group, declared war against the “system” — consumer society and the wealthy functionaries of the time. They were calling out for a revolution against capitalism. The fact that they were financed by the East German communist government, which came to light only a few years ago, doesn’t change the motivations of the group at the time. The imagery and sentiment of the leftist revolts of the ‘70s, but also the Situationists and the Angry Brigade (a British libertarian communist militant group in the ‘70s), had a large influence on how I started out as an artist. One of my first films is a documentation of a 24-hour happening with five fellow Cal Arts students on a rooftop in Los Angeles. The idea was to occupy a space, and inhabit it through deliberate action and accumulation of spatial and filmic materials introduced by the group members. It was based on the concept of the Situationist International who advocated experimentation with the construction of situations, namely setting up environments as alternatives to capitalist order. The goal is to point out the central roles of mass media and advertising spectacles in advanced capitalist society in simulating a fake reality in order to mask the real capitalist degradation of human life.

The recent events of Occupy Wall Street reconfirm what I have long argued in my work. I’ve set out to make a case against a celebration of the commercial value of art in favor of the flip side, of revealing modes of production that give voice to protest culture. There is a threshold even in the most complacent society.



Josephine Meckseper, *Untitled (Berlin Demonstration, Fire, Cops)*, 2002, C-Print.

**SL** Until the recent upheavals across the Middle East, revolutionary change was often assumed to be a thing of the past. While social media received much credit by the media for sparking the Arab Spring, recent political movements—from Tahrir Square to Wall Street—seem rather to prove that social change, regardless of the prevalence of digital communication, still needs to be carried out in the streets and squares of real cities. That of course contradicts my earlier point, and perhaps certain indications present in your work, that city space is over and done for. This brings me to question a prevalent interpretation of your practice, specifically the claim that your work asserts the total commodification of all spheres of human activity: revolutionary protest has become revolutionary chic. I believe I detect more mixed, and less cynical, signals in your work (the footage of street protests in *March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 04/29/06, New York City, 2007*, for example, strikes me as more ambiguous). Given the still-unfolding political developments worldwide, would a 2012 vitrine similarly include images of protest within them and references to revolutionary chic?



Josephine Meckseper, *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art*, 2005 (detail).

**JM** The misunderstanding that my work should reference an idea of revolutionary chic probably has to do with a projection of that same audience of how they view their environment. Contrary to this belief, I see my work as a call for street activism, in opposition to a rarified elitist art viewership. My aim is to present consumer display systems that have an auto-critique built within. This can take place, for instance, by inserting images of the opposition produced by capitalist society, namely protestors and rioters, or by using pieces of shattered glass. As a starting point I usually work with films of riots and protests and confront them with forms that refer directly to shop windows smashed by demonstrators. The installations of display forms like shelves and vitrines represent the static face of capitalism. The collective performative aspect of consumption is frozen inside the vitrine and the flip side of capitalism (like images of exploited factory workers) is literally glued to the back of displayed objects. The concealed power structures that are the core of alienated production are made visible here. I have been filming protests in different parts of the world, and they represent a solution in form of action. I question the arbitrariness and entertainment character of news coverage. The films show underexposed civil disobedience and protest; the display works show overexposed modes of consumer society. The images and films I've been taking at demonstrations bear witness to the moment when oppositional forces take on a militarized arm of the state, exposing mass media and advertising's central role in advanced capitalist society.

*March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 04/29/06, New York City, 2007*, was filmed at a protest against the war in Iraq. It includes images of federal and court buildings in Foley Square that were recently activated again by the Occupy Wall Street movement. The soundtrack creates a propagandistic brain-washing undertone that evokes the repression of the Bush regime.



Josephine Meckseper Film still, *March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 04/29/06, New York City, 2007*.

**SL** Your most recent artworks have addressed oil production and how the extraction of this natural resource has engendered a close, if largely suppressed, working relationship between governments in the US and the Middle East. Perhaps we can talk about this history as it relates to two of your recent projects? First, your most recent installation, *Manhattan Oil Project*, brings renditions of 20th century oil pumps to a vacant lot adjacent to Times Square. Here, the past mechanical power of U.S. wealth is brought into a present dominated by Post-Fordist spectacular culture. The depiction of oil here, as a natural resource, reminds us of the fact that the world economy is in fact dependent (to devastating ecological effects, of course) on such material commodities—something that is frequently forgotten in the current focus on pulsating mega screens and stock tickers, the immaterial “stuff” that now supposedly constitutes a solid national economy...



Josephine Meckseper, Installation view, Josephine Meckseper, 2009.

**JM** I am interested in making the anachronistic nature of oil and gas exploitation visible by taking the oil pump jacks out of context and confronting them with the epicenter of US American entertainment propaganda that Times Square represents. I'm also interested in the role of the artist mistaken as an infantile entertainer of some sort, completely out of touch with social and political cataclysm; a puppet and tool of a capitalist system that rewards mindless subordination and trivial gestures.

When I first exhibited the oil pump sculptures at the Migros Museum in Zurich, they tied into the overall installation that included a military bunker, films and various sculptures portraying a decaying consumer society. They expose the "endpoints" of the United States capitalistic and militaristic crusades since 2001—totalitarianism in the current era of war, globalization, and domestic crisis.



Josephine Meckseper, Installation view, Josephine Meckseper, 2009.



Josephine Meckseper, Fall of the Empire, 2008.

**SL** The other project I find interesting in this regard is the video included in your *The Fall into Time* (2011) installation at the Sharjah Biennial, which employs footage adopted entirely from the 1980s TV series *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. It includes familiar scenes of cowboy romanticism, luxury goods, New York aerial shots and oil fields, as well as scenes of protest, wherein a screaming crowd (whose members look much more like '70s American hippies than Middle Eastern citizens, by the way) is supposed to portray local uproar against Texan cowboys' meddling in their region's oil resources. Although this '80s footage is quite defamiliarizing to contemporary eyes, it necessarily echoes the most recent Iraq War's war-for-oil charges and the attendant caricatures of Texas cowboys' oil grab in the Middle East.



Josephine Meckseper, Installation view, Sharjah Biennial 10: Plot for a Biennial, 2011.

**JM** The film focuses on the glorified depiction of the American oil industry in the light of the economic policies carried out in the early 1980s like so-called "Reaganomics," which was supporting the wealthy by creating tax benefits and loosening market regulations, while cutting social spending for the poor. The images from the '80s television shows *Dynasty* and *Dallas* are juxtaposed with a Detroit acid house soundtrack from the same decade, creating the context for a renewed debate on offshore oil drilling, the Deepwater Horizon disaster and the recent downfall of the Detroit automobile industry.

At the beginning of the first season of *Dynasty*, the oil tycoon Blake Carrington has to withdraw his oil company from a fictitious Middle Eastern country because of an anti-American uprising. This very little known scene is the basis of the movie that I created. The film as a whole exemplifies the ruthlessness of the Reagan era, but also ties directly into the present politically motivated struggle for natural resources on one side and a growing revolutionary force on the other side in the suppressed Middle Eastern nations. At the biennial in Sharjah, I found myself navigating the difficult terrain of being a Western artist in the context of a monarchic Middle Eastern country, without seeming condescending or ignorant to the local context. The idea was that the footage of the stereotypical American TV shows would invert this problem by pointing the finger back at Western clichés of entertainment and imperialism.



Josephine Meckseper, Film still, DDAYLNLAASSTY, 2010.



Josephine Meckseper, Film still, DDAYLNLAASSTY, 2010.

Sarah Lookofsky is a historian, curator and critic for the arts.  
All images courtesy of Josephine Meckseper.

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VIOLENCE,  
LOOTING AND  
VANDALISM, well-  
placed artworld  
types, coteries of  
globetrotting  
curators, fucking  
shit up, SPECTRUM  
DISORDER,  
Bartlebyesque  
responses, chrome-  
plated aesthetics,  
THE PERFECT  
MARRIAGE OF  
DESTRUCTIVE  
CONSUMPTION

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words JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

portrait MICHELE ABELES



Consider this: 'Around 2000, I began to focus on making shelves and vitrines. I felt motivated by the idea of establishing a link to real shop windows smashed by rioters.' Or this: 'The mirrored sculptures, vitrines, and slatwalls are not meant as affirmations or glorifications of consumerism. On the contrary, their shiny surfaces are meant as provocations for destruction.' Or this: 'Their clean surfaces are a provocation for vandalism and destruction. They represent the moment right before a demonstrator picks up a stone and smashes a window.'

These statements, which Josephine Meckseper made in interviews between 2008 and 2010, must read much differently today after the violence, looting and vandalism of England's August riots, when the 'shoplifters of the world' united under the banner of what we might call 'liberated consumerism'. The word that will inevitably be bandied about during the run of Meckseper's show at London's Timothy Taylor Gallery this month is 'prescient'. Well-placed artworld types, commentators, loyal 'theorists' and devotees will note that Meckseper 'gets it', and that she obviously 'got it' long before the London, Manchester and Birmingham police, or the shocked populace, or the media cynics, or the welfare state, or the neoliberal world order – which, one might add, both the left and the right have diagnosed as the disaffected rioters' spectrum disorder: 'What's wrong with Johnny?' 'Oh, he's neoliberalistic.'

But here's a question: if you were to pick up a stone and hurl it through the crystal pane of one of Meckseper's mirrored vitrines, would you still qualify as a demonstrator? Who and how, exactly, is this work meant to provoke? Does it want from you – the artist, the collector, the casual gallerygoer, the writer/critic/curator, the socialite/dealer, the exhausted art-handler, the art martyr – the same as it wants from the tracksuited hoodies from North London? Is it even possible that you want the same things?



# THE JOBSEEKER WANTS A JOB, NOT A LESSON IN IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE; THE GALLERYGOER WANTS TO AUGMENT HER OWN ENLIGHTENMENT, HER OWN ALREADY-ACHIEVED KNOWINGNESS, NOT A JOB. WHAT DOES THE RIOTER WANT?

facing page: **Emirates Palace**,  
2011, mixed media in glass vitrine,  
203 x 119 x 51 cm

below: **Afrikan Spir**, 2011,  
mixed media in glass vitrine,  
203 x 203 x 51 cm

bottom right: **Crow**, 2011,  
mixed media on mirrored slatwall,  
244 x 244 x 29 cm

all images: Photos: Genevieve  
Hanson. © the artist. Courtesy  
Flag Art Foundation, New York,  
and Timothy Taylor Gallery, London



Let's put these questions on hold for a moment.

Meckseper's work first gained wide attention in 2006, when it was included in a number of big-venue exhibitions, such as *Media Burn* at Tate Modern, that year's Whitney Biennial and the Okwui Enwezor-curated 2<sup>nd</sup> Seville Biennial (where some of Meckseper's photographs of antiwar protests caught the attention of the artworld's most quotable theorist, Jacques Rancière, who took them as a jumping-off point for a talk he gave at the concurrent Moscow Biennial). Meckseper herself is the first to admit that the commercial outlets of the artworld were slow to pick up on her work, that it was the more theoretically adept and politically minded coterie of globetrotting curators who found it well-aligned with their exhibition conceits and catalogue arguments. Commerce never minds coming late to the game, though; it's less risky that way.

The Whitney piece, *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art* (2005) – an academic-monograph-ready title if ever there was one – featured a number of politico-commercial





6, 2011, mixed media in glass  
vitrine, 203 x 119 x 51 cm.  
Photo: Genevieve Hanson.  
© the artist. Courtesy, FLAG Art  
Foundation, New York, and  
Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

juxtapositions: the EU flag hanging over a stuffed rabbit holding a 'Oui/Non' sign, which recalled the French people's famously Bartlebyesque response to the ratification of the EU Constitution in 2005; perfume bottles next to a toilet plunger and brush; newspaper fashion ads, hung upside down; a Koran next to a percent sign next to an argyle-stockings-clad mannequin leg – a purposely uneasy equation.

In the past couple of years, more common American symbols have come in for a drubbing at Meckseper's hands: oil is one of them, as is the militarised car-culture that drinks it up. One of Meckseper's videos, *0% Down* (2008), offers a montage, backed by Boyd Rice's industrial noise track *Total War* (1997), of television commercials that are curiously explicit about the connections between automotive technology and defence departments' expensive toys – as the tagline goes: 'Saab, made from jets'. Ford Mustangs and Hummers figure prominently in prints and photographs too, though not necessarily, or solely, as targets. Meckseper's studied ambivalence is too cagey for that. An overall-clad Carl Andre once said that one had to inhabit one's contradictions. Meckseper makes contradiction a totalising, hermetically sealed, chrome-plated aesthetic. What else would one expect from the author of a 'manifesto of non-affirmation'?

The work, according to Meckseper, is not 'earnest', as for example Thomas Hirschhorn's is, nor is it mere 'decorative formalism', like Carol Bove's, two artists who might be seen to hold down the poles of Meckseper's brand of politico-commercialised conceptualism. But as Meckseper describes it, her work – an 'inventory of the present' – shares more with certain French philosophers than with other contemporary artists. Not Rancière, though, or even Badiou, but Baudrillard, and less the latter's radical statements on terrorism and the nonhappening of 9/11 than his more well-received work from the late 1960s and early 70s, which took aim at the (American) 'system of objects' and the 'consumer society' that had washed up on European shores (and more specifically in Paris) once the reconstruction wave of the Marshall Plan had retreated. Jean-Luc Godard captured this classically in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), when Belmondo and Karina make their way through a cocktail party whose banter is drawn entirely from TV ads. The humour there was sharp and shown brightly. Meckseper's work, true to her German roots, is as humourless as a high-fashion ad.

At New York's Flag Art Foundation this past summer, one could find chrome rims, Jeep and Infinity car-company logos, hood ornaments made into, or cast as, wearable bling, red, white and blue mirrored slatwalls bearing blackened American flags, and a bathmat next to mannequin legs next to motor oil next to designer-underwear packaging next to a toilet brush next to a T-shirt inveigling one to '... thank a vet'. The inanity of advertising and marketing and consumerism and politics is everywhere implicated. It's enough to make one want to pick up a brick and...

So, back to those questions.

What, if not window-smashing, does Meckseper's art want from its audience? In an interview in 2008, Meckseper said, 'I kind of hope for Joe Sixpack types with a sense of humour to walk into my shows.' The

show in question was a solo at Elizabeth Dee in New York, which had the gallery's own signage obscured and a fake Help Wanted sign in the window (art audiences stayed away, but jobseekers showed up). Early in her career, Meckseper produced a 'fake magazine' called *FAT*, which imitated checkout-line tabloids in its form and included tabloid-type pieces alongside art ads, theory, pulp and politics in its content (Sylvère Lotringer, an early supporter, wrote a piece for the first issue). The magazine was distributed to newsstands and supermarkets, where it mingled with 'real' tabloids and presumably found its way into the hands of some 'Joe Sixpack types'.

The 'fake' in these instances is always imagined as a subtle (or not so subtle) form of subversion, by which an audience is misled, but misled, as it were, to the truth, through the classically avant-gardist strategy of estrangement, which, so the subverter believes, will crack open the facade of the misled's false consciousness. The hoped-for narrative is this: 'Where once I was blind, now I can see.'

It's a familiar conversion tale, but one that can be told only from the perspective of the converted: to see as such – the validity of an object's claim to 'art'; the legitimacy of an ideology's claim to 'truth' – one has already to be open to the possibility of believing that claim, which means the conversion, if not yet complete, is already under way. It begins, we might say, when one knowingly – that is, intentionally – steps through the door, be it cathedral, megachurch, museum or gallery. One cannot be misled to it. The jobseeker wants a job, not a lesson in ideology critique; the gallerygoer wants to augment her own enlightenment, her own already-achieved knowingness, not a job. What does the rioter want?

To fuck shit up.

Faced with the rioters' stones, acts of avant-gardist subversion, or hyperbolic mirroring, or arm's-length irony can appear as nothing more than manifestations of impotence. The riots, on the other hand, were 'a demonstration of the material force of ideology', the perfect marriage of destructive consumption, or consumptive destruction.<sup>1</sup> This is not to idealise or fetishise them, the acts or their perpetrators; it's only to note that the art which comes in their wake needs to imagine what a more just world might be like, or to carve out a space where such an imagination might be possible, not to continue to hint at the injustices of the present. •

*New work by Josephine Meckseper is on show at Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, 12 October – 12 November*



**Note**<sup>1</sup>

*Or so wrote Slavoj Žižek in a piece published in response to the riots for the London Review of Books's online edition on 19 August. For Žižek, 'the problem with the riots is not the violence as such, but the fact that the violence is not truly self-assertive. It is impotent rage and despair masked as a display of force; it is envy masked as triumphant carnival'. The question is how does this 'authentic rage... transform itself into a positive programme of sociopolitical change'? The violence, in other words, needs no further provocation; it needs to get organised.*



top: **FAT Magazine No. 1**, 1994, inside spread: 'The Art of Evil'. Two-colour offset printing on paper, 30 x 22

bottom: **FAT Magazine No. 1**, 1994, two-colour offset printing on paper, 30 x 22

both images: © the artist. Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London



**JOSEPHINE  
MECKSEPER**

## INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO BONAMI

**Francesco Bonami:** Are these monuments to a capitalism of a lesser god?

**Josephine Meckseper:** Monuments and un-monuments to an entire culture fueled and defined by consumption. Monumental in a sense that they mirror or simulate consumer madness and un-monumental in how they diagnose a cultural pathology that enables wars fought over oil or irreparable environmental damage.

**FB:** Nothing seems celebratory here; there is always a pathetic aura; pop culture seems to have been replaced by the culture of “poor”—do you agree?

**JM:** Yes, the mirror and chrome sculptures, glass and steel vitrines, and mirror slatwalls are not affirmations or glorifications of consumerism. On the contrary, their shiny surfaces are meant as provocations for destruction. They are designed to be targets, like high-end shop windows being smashed during riots and protests. These works mimic retail aesthetics in order to activate the commercial zone into a political one.

**FB:** Is it then a reflection on how a culture based on luxury turns into “cheapxury” when the economy goes upside down?

**JM:** It’s a rather literal reflection since there is no escape for the viewer because of the many mirrored surfaces in this exhibition. The works also reference the car dealerships in Chelsea that are defined by a specific aesthetic based on chrome and bargain deals and a lack of real values that further eroded during the financial crisis. Chain drugstores like Duane Reade use the same mirrored slatwalls to sell discounted toothpaste or cosmetics.

**FB:** What are the politics within the work?

**JM:** On one side is a (post-)Marxist critique on the fetishization of the object; on the other, a new history of the object that has become a free agent and is now arranging and rearranging reality for us. Similarly, as on television, where news and advertisements blend seamlessly into one other, the artwork, a product with symbolic and commercial value, is held hostage in a vicious cycle.

**FB:** Are these ghosts of Jasper Johns's flags?

**JM:** Johns is in some ways a cultural referent in my work, an American icon or emblem as much as General Motors or the White House.

**FB:** Some of the works look like Joseph Beuys's vitrines. But while Beuys's were shrines to the remains of performance and action, yours seem to be shrines to the remains of the rite of consumption.

**JM:** The three vitrines in the exhibition capture the sense of cultural performance in consumption. Consumption in a larger sense includes the digestion of art and images. One vitrine houses a photograph taken at the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi a few months ago. It shows a Giacometti sculpture in front of a Daniel Buren painting. There is no allusion to where the image was taken; the location and purpose of the image become casualties of global indifference. The consumer performance aspect is further exemplified in the form of a taxidermy black crow holding a piece of jewelry in its beak as if caught shoplifting in midflight; or dishes, Pepsi cans, and scrubbers stuck on metal poles like sinister totems of a mad consumer society.

**FB:** While Cady Noland's work is about some kind of suburban nomadism, your work feels like the nomad subject has been stuck somewhere and has nowhere to go. The frontier is within our shopping mall.

**JM:** Cady Noland is addressing a specific American cultural pathology in her work in a genius way. My subjects are the more global psychopaths who find themselves trapped in a megamall in Dubai, for example, where all the cultural referents are borrowed and mirrored indefinitely until the oil runs out and the next megamall in another country becomes the new frontier.

**FB:** Can one think of the work as an archaeology of a shopping age?

**JM:** These works are, in a sense, time capsules for a near and far future. They represent everything that is wrong with our culture and a possible end phase of an expanding global capitalism that may or may not be sustainable in a few decades. They are dubious souvenirs of our time.

**FB:** The vitrines remind me of Warhol Time Capsules.

**JM:** The cardboard boxes Andy Warhol filled in his time anthologized culture in a literal way. My vitrines similarly function as containers and entrapments. Except that the cultural fragments I am chronicling are more sinister and less digestible because of their focus on the end points of cultural production and their political mechanisms. They are open modern-day sarcophagi with remnants of our civilization on display.

**FB:** Haim Steinbach's work has a bourgeois aspect to it. Some kind of compulsive order. Your work seems to have gone beyond order and compulsion into the dysfunctional realm of the celebration of subluxury.

**JM:** My work borrows its aesthetics more directly from retail environments and is less invested in the "artistic" translation of its stereotypes. It's a more open-ended process in which different forms such as window display, mirror platform, photography, and film resist any real categorization.

**FB:** Is the wheel sculpture a possible "Detroit memorial" for a time when the car was at the center of U.S. economy and culture?

**JM:** It is an example of a specific (male) cultural icon that is now deteriorating in front of our eyes. Ironically, I made the wheel sculpture just a few months before the financial collapse in 2008 and a year before General Motors declared bankruptcy.

**FB:** Could you imagine the shopping mall as some kind of real-time museum of the consumption of culture?

**JM:** The mall has become the ultimate American landscape. It is the modern epicenter of artificial leisure and activity, a new church and museum at once. Everything is on display: commodities, entertainment, military recruiting, and exploitation of the work force.

**FB:** There is nothing biographical in this work, right?

**JM:** My work follows a butterfly-net principle. It catches cultural signifiers and freezes them into immobile objects. A Chinese counterfeit designer, for example, could come up with very similar products and concepts.

**FB:** The shop window is going to disappear in the future; the new window is the Web window. Do you see your work as some kind of nostalgic representation of the physicality of the street window, its capacity to break up the urban flow and structure? The end of Walter Benjamin's Arcades?

**JM:** The manifestation and aesthetics of consumption are in a state of complete transition. The face of capitalism is getting a total makeover. In Europe, you can still find shop window decorations that have remained the same for several decades. There is a timelessness and romanticism in the look of specialty stores that sell items such as orthopedic shoes. In a few decades no one will remember these stores. The new flâneur is an Internet junkie like the characters in the *South Park* episode "Make Love, Not Warcraft," so glued to the screen that they don't even bother to go to the bathroom when they have diarrhea. It's a rather unromantic future.

## Josephine Meckseper

03.28.11

AUTHOR: KATHLEEN MADDEN

*02.23.11-05.26.11 The Flag Art Foundation*

In her latest exhibition, Josephine Meckseper presents sculptures that further the themes raised by her previous shiny and seductive works that are also smart and interrogative of commodity culture. Take, for example, *Thank a Vet*, 2008, which includes objects such as a walker, mannequin legs, an underwear box, a T-shirt (telling us to “Thank a Vet”), and a plastic motor oil container, all of which are precisely assembled on a large mirrored plinth. Installed in front of a window with an expansive view of the city beyond, *Thank a Vet* reflects directly on urban life. Meckseper’s work elicits both anxiety and delight through slick aesthetics that reveal some of the power dynamics underlying the retail-driven icons of our age. The T-shirt has an American flag motif, and the reference to American veterans and the oil container imply a relationship to the gulf wars.

In *Cobra*, 2011, mirrored red, white, and blue bargain store slatwalls are used to erect an American flag that is painted black, complete with a plastic silver eagle at the top of the flagpole. Juxtaposed next to this are three identical pairs of cheap aviator sunglasses, one red, one white, and one blue and an image on stretched canvas of two identical Cobra cars enclosed in stretch wrap and propped up by two brackets. Displayed together, the objects in the show create a biting critique of American consumerism. Perhaps in ways similar to Haim Steinbach, yet with greater ambivalence, Meckseper engages the viewer through tropes of titillation and desire, but a sense of unease ultimately ties her works together.

## Artist of the week 162: Josephine Meckseper

The New York artist sets out a sinister stall where everything – even the mutinous anti-capitalism she espouses – has its price

Skye Sherwin  
guardian.co.uk, Thursday 3 November 2011 12.06 EDT



Unholy alliance of art and commerce ... *Afrikan Spir* (2011) by Josephine Meckseper. Photographs courtesy of the artist and Timothy Taylor gallery.

Shopping and violence are two sides of the same capitalist coin in [Josephine Meckseper's](#) art. She creates cool assemblages of luxury items and pound-store tat. These often strike a feminist note, with objects split down a gender divide. Female identity is boiled down to brillo pads, loo brushes and fussy vintage undies, while men get silvery hubcaps, ties and tees. Displayed on chrome shelves against large squares of shop-wall cladding, or in vitrines resembling swanky department-store cabinets, it's all as shiny, cold and hard as an evil robot.

Meckseper points the finger at a consumer culture in which you are what you buy. At the same time, her arrangements of trinkets (which include anything from dusters to sunglasses) have an interchangeable quality – as if the objects themselves weren't really important, only the spending and selling. There's something simmering beneath these cruel surfaces: a rage against the machine also vented in Meckseper's films and photos of anti-capitalist or anti-war demonstrations. Yet even political resistance isn't beyond being neatly packaged and sold as a lifestyle choice. Hence radical publications and [pictures of Karl Marx](#) have appeared in her retail-like displays. Art is hardly exempt either, as her messy abstract paintings – which you might find propped up next to black stockings or desktop knick-knacks – concede.



Seeing stars and stripes ... Josephine Meckseper's *Designation* (2011)

Born in Germany in 1964 but now New York-based, Meckseper hails from a politically active family: her father is a self-described anarchist, her mother a former Green Party rep, while her aunt was friends with [Ulrike Meinhof](#) and her family holiday home by the North Sea had been a Red Army Faction hideout. Her own concerns are centred on America, where she moved to study at LA's [CalArts](#) in 1990, coming of age in a decade marked by the [Rodney King riots](#) and the Gulf war.

Her latest work is imperiously red, white and blue. The colours of the stars and stripes cover glass vitrines and mock-ups of discount store walls and windows, and the three hues also seep into the items they encase, including a plastic statue of an [American identity](#), [Flag](#), and [Warhol's Brillo Box](#) come to mind. Yet what Meckseper points to is a long way from the complex lives Johns evoked with his [painting](#) built from everyday news-cuttings, or pop art's cheerful embrace of banal consumption. Instead, her shop windows suggest something sinister and controlling. They sum up the moment a demonstrator can't take it any longer, picks up a stone and smashes the glass.

**Why we like her:** For her vitrine [Afrikan Spir](#) (2011), which gives an American gothic twist to capitalism's unholy alliance of art and commerce. Among other things, its dark glass box contains a raven reminiscent of [Edgar Allen Poe's](#) weird tales, a portrait of [Tippi Hedren](#) (star of Hitchcock's allegory of female hysteria [The Birds](#)) and a lacy black stocking.

**Off with a bang:** One of Meckseper's first shows when she moved to LA featured an [installation](#) of a terrorist HQ, replete with fake machine guns and explosives. It prompted a local sheriff to seal off the exhibition space.

**Where can I see her?** At [Timothy Taylor gallery](#), London, until 12 November 2011.

# FlashArt



## Josephine Meckseper

AMERICAN STILL LIFE

Monika Szewczyk

**MONIKA SZEWCZYK:** *You've lived in New York for years, though I think many people still see you as a German artist and seek the sources of your work in German traditions of sculpture and installation. You're also writing a piece about installing the work of Cady Noland at documenta, which may emphasize your German roots, albeit she is an American artist. But I'd like to begin not with Germany or New York, but the West Coast. I'm curious to know about your early years at CalArts—who were the big influences there and what were the ideas about art making and social engagement that you took away from this place?*

**Josephine Meckseper:** In many ways, study-

ing at CalArts, back in the '90s, was the most formative experience for the development of my work. The school was conceptually and theoretically based—more a breeding ground for ideas than for art production in a commercial sense. Michael Asher, Charles Gaines, the filmmaker Thom Andersen and the theoretician Sylvère Lotringer were important influences on my thinking and way of working. I pursued neo avant-garde models, like the Situationists and the Angry Brigade for example, in a 24-hour happening with a group of five CalArts students on a rooftop in Los Angeles. The idea was to occupy a space, and inhabit it through deliberate actions and the accumu-

lation of spatial, filmic and material elements introduced by the group members. It was a very politically-charged time, the performance coincided with the Rodney King riots and the filming of the riots became part of the piece. For my thesis show I brought machine guns and dynamite detonators from a Hollywood prop house into the school's gallery, wrote chemical formulas of explosives on the walls and broke a hole in the ceiling. The centerpiece of the show was a video of a bank robbery that I had staged at the local Wells Fargo, and photographs were scattered across the floor and on a desk. I think one of my Molotov cocktails is still hidden behind the school's drywall.



Opposite: **JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER**, *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art*, 2005. Mixed media in display window, 160 x 250 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York. Above: **JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER**. Installation view at migros museum für gegenwartskunst, Zurich, 2009. Courtesy the artist, Reinhard Hauff, Stuttgart; Elizabeth Dee, New York; Arndt, Berlin. Photo: A. Burger.

**MS:** *You bring up homemade bombs so I'll continue, not with revolutionaries, but with fire and firearms, but also firemen, soldiers, sergeants, vets, construction workers, bikers... and their magazines. One of your first projects out of CalArts was a magazine called FAT. And I've got where a copy of FAT, "On Fire" (No. 3, 1997), which has a truly impressive group of contributors and advisors (a scorching interview with Dan Graham, pages and texts by Dara Birnbaum, Piotr Uklanski, Sally Stein, Lucio Pozzi to name just a few). Still, it's making my writing desk lookless 'Virginia Woolf,' more 'Foxy Virgins'—some special issue of Enquirer meets Hot Rod meets Hustler's Jail Babs. This 'rag' type is really condensing all the semiotic sins of the Valley — I think of porn fed to privates in training a few miles east into the Mojave Desert or those a few miles southwest, at the port, sitting in an aircraft carrier bound for the Gulf. There's a black band with yellow text at the top right corner: "your favorite art magazine." And it just might be for them and for me, if I forget everything I learned in school. I have to admit (and this will*

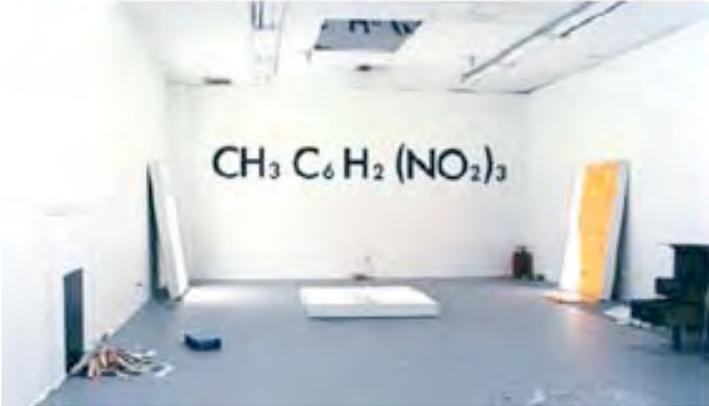
*kill my street cred) that I rarely look at porn, but I'm fascinated with it at a distance, as a phenomenon. And FAT seems to echo a kind of general pornocracy of the image, which I think is systematically tied to war. Still, I'm curious. Was this a rebellion or rather evidence that you were a 'good student,' which is perhaps the ultimate perversion? And then practically, how many did you print and where were they really meant to land?*

**JM:** The first issue, "Good & Evil," came out in the early '90s, a moment of utter political correctness. There was a rebellious undertone in *FAT* magazine's shrill tabloid style that was completely antithetical to the academic and even commercial side of the New York art world. Coming from CalArts, I didn't want to simply make art and show it in galleries. Instead I wanted to create my own context for what art could be at the time. A group of former CalArts students worked with me on the magazine, writing, editing and designing it. Sylvère Lotringer contributed the essay "The Art of Evil," about pre- and post-WWII art and literature in relationship to the Holocaust. *FAT* is a conceptual magazine project, inspired by Jean-Paul Marat's newspaper, *Ami du Peuple*, and the avant-gardist tradition of breaking down barriers between art and life. The idea was to show art works in a nonelitist, easily digestible form. Photographic reproductions and art images are subverted into

a monstrous montage with representations of advertising and propaganda next to fictitious news items. The design is based on the Italian tabloid magazine *Cronaca Vera*. Each issue had a different print run; the first one of 1,500 sold out immediately, so we increased it to 10,000. The goal was to reach a broad non art-specialized audience. The magazine was distributed through Tower Books and other commercial distributors to newsstands nationally and internationally. We got a lot of letters from readers from all over the country; places in the Midwest or Alaska, for example.

**MS:** *You mentioned to me once that your sculptural work is a natural extension of the magazines. I can see this already in terms of the thematic or socioeconomic register of your materials, but maybe you could say something about how you deal with the distribution and display... Are galleries the best places to show or maybe you actually prefer fairs because they're more like malls?*

**JM:** My shop window installations and vitrines especially function in a similar way as *FAT* (and magazines in general) in terms of the economy of form and content. These display work types are made deliberately for a commercial context such as an art fair or gallery, pre-empting any illusions about their instrumentalization and absorption into a free market system. It's a purposely non-affirmative way of using consumer display



From top clockwise: Untitled (Berlin Demonstration, Fire, Cops), 2002. C-Print, 76 x 102 cm. Courtesy the artist; Elizabeth Dee, New York; Reinhard Hauff, Stuttgart. Installation view at The Armory Show, New York, 2010. Courtesy the artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York. Photo: Tom Powel. Mall of America, 2009. Video, color, sound, transferred to DVD, 12.48 mins. Courtesy the artist; Elizabeth Dee, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Installation view at CalArts, Los Angeles, 1992.

forms to turn them into targets and focus points of attack. Their clean surfaces are a provocation for vandalism and destruction. They represent the moment right before a demonstrator picks up a stone and smashes a window. Ironically, I've only had about a handful of gallery shows and very little art fair exposure; my work mostly shows up in institutional contexts where it reads a bit more academic. The windows and vitrines become archaeological time capsules for a near and distant future, much like old magazines tell us a story of another time. On the other side, the larger institutions and museums have themselves become closer to shopping malls, with escalators and souvenir shops, which makes them ideal sites for my display works.

**MS:** I definitely had this sense—this desire to smash some glass—in Hascher Jehle's sleek, transparent cube that forms the Stuttgart Kunstmuseum, where I first encountered a big body of your work in 2007. But a sense of suspension prevailed. You've been good enough to send me a preview of your manifesto on non-affirmation (in progress), where there is again

a call for destruction, but also a profound refusal to proscribe or articulate the stakes of the game: "There is no coherence, we remain vague in terms of authorship and purpose." Is it really true—as you say in another chapter of your manifesto—that you don't like what you do?!! I can't quite believe this. At the end of the day, what I also see is the aesthetic beauty of things rendered profoundly useless, the flip side of the commodity, which only art can affect.

**JM:** There is no affirmative reassurance in the seemingly benign display forms and the appropriated objects that are presented in them. My work functions more like a manifestation of the collective unconsciousness of our time. I'm looking for cultural and sociological end points as a platform to chronicle and subvert reality. I am assembling and juxtaposing opposing elements into artificial simulations of everyday reality. I have no reason to be invested in the aesthetics, because my work is based on things that are readily available. Formal issues are only the means to capture a sense of the present, but they are never the goal. The reading of the work is circumstantial though, as it reflects the respective degree of criticality that the viewer brings to the environment. It succeeds when it brings out rejection and aggression. When I brought life-size oil rigs and military bunkers into the spaces of the Migros Museum last year, it likewise wasn't based on my preference or admiration for their form and shape, but was meant to create a three-dimensional still life of contemporary culture. The

same is true about my film *Mall of America* at the current Whitney Biennial. It captures a sense of capitalist decay mixed with a desperate military recruiting attempt as played out inside the oversized Midwestern shopping mall. I think of these works as relics of the last throes of U.S. hegemony. In a way, my work serves as a garbage can for the history of the present.

*Monika Szcwzyk is a writer and editor based in Berlin and Rotterdam. She is head of publications at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and a tutor at Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam.*

*Josephine Meckseper was born in 1964 in Lilienthal, Germany. She lives and works in New York.*

*Selected solo shows: 2011: FLAG Art Foundation, New York. 2010: Reinhard Hauff, Stuttgart. Elizabeth Dee, New York. 2009: AZKM, Münster (D); Indianapolis Museum of Art; The Art Museum of the University of Houston; Nottingham Contemporary; Migros Museum, Zurich. 2008: MoMA, New York; Arndt & Partner, Berlin; Elizabeth Dee, New York; Colette, Paris; GAK, Bremen (D). 2007: Kunstmuseum Stuttgart (D); Reinhard Hauff, Stuttgart. 2005: White Columns, New York. 2004: Reinhard Hauff, Stuttgart.*

*Selected group shows: 2010: Whitney Biennial, New York. 2009: "Morality: Beautiful from Every Point of View," Witte de With, Rotterdam. 2008: "Walls in the Street," Siemens Arts Program/MSUB, Belgrade. 2007: "Brave New Worlds," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Moscow Biennale. 2006: "Media Burn," Tate Modern, London; BIACS, Seville (ES); "USA Today, Works from the Saatchi Collection", Royal Academy of Arts, London; Whitney Biennial, New York. 2005: Lyon Biennial.*

# The New York Times

ART REVIEW

## Creative Debate Among Sculptors, Not Too Loud

By ROBERTA SMITH

PUBLISHED: JUNE 1, 2010

Artistically speaking, West Chelsea — land of several hundred art galleries — is a tower of Babel spread on the horizontal. On any given day, scores of different visual languages are being spoken at once, often in raised voices. Arguments made by one show for one aesthetic position are immediately, sometimes violently, countered by the show next door. The effect can be cacophonous and confusing, although the other extreme is probably more disconcerting: when too many shows are talking alike.

Perhaps most interesting are those instances when a few shows speak enough, but not too much, of the same language to have an engaging debate. That's happening this week among exhibitions of three younger artists working primarily in three dimensions — shows that focus on sculpture and its ostentation in terms of means of production, use of materials and methods of display.

Their efforts offer pointed commentary on the medium, particularly in its most cash-dependent forms: large-scale public sculpture and pricey portable objects that involve complex techniques, skilled artisans, expensive materials and demanding maintenance regimens. Each artist here takes a do-it-yourself, low-budget approach involving found, inexpensive materials and objects, which they simply but deliberately — and at times ingeniously — work, rework or combine. Wit is a common denominator, and in all cases works on paper amplify the cross talk. Otherwise, these artists go their separate ways.

In his second solo show in New York (and at the Zach Feuer Gallery), Johannes VanDerBeek embraces traditional sculptural subjects in nontraditional ways and in cheap materials, displaying a facility and historical awareness that have never been quite as overt, whimsical or physically inventive. The exhibition, titled “Another Time Man,” has about six distinct bodies of work — it's actually a series of capsule shows — that range across the ages. This is implied by the first large work you'll see, a partition titled “The Big Stone Flatscreen With Static.” It is cobbled together from pieces of cut-out cardboard, painted fuzzy black and white on one side and smeared on the other with a gray material called Celluclay. It's television versus cave painting.

One group of works, displayed within a shimmering but flimsy curved wall painted silver, are fashioned from tin cans that have been sliced open, bent, stacked in various ways, welded together and tinted with spray paint; they flit effortlessly among Cubism, Futurism, Modern architecture, totemic figures, tramp art, Calder and toys. Life-size sculptures made of wire mesh offer ghostly depictions of an American Indian, a frontier woman and a hippie as vanished characters, implying some kind of historical continuum. Darkly colored slabs of textured metal could be remnants of an ancient culture or just Rust Belt castoffs, signs of more recent obsolescence; either way, they are aluminum foil colored with ink and pastel and incised with a ballpoint pen.

Eeriest of all are several found aluminum display boxes on pedestals whose interiors, looped with dead neon tubing, have been gingerly spray-painted and outfitted with arresting masks collaged from magazine images — talking heads, Roman portraits or ancient spirits conjured up around the campfire. Mr. VanDerBeek's vision is darker than you think.

In his physically slightest work, he distracts us with grids of paper towels, stained and splashed with paint: sweet, sophisticated nothings of considerable pictorial power. His next target may be abstract painting.

More exclusively focused on — and dismayed by — the present, Josephine Meckseper continues her meditation on American consumerism in her second solo show at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery. This time she offers a kind of chrome monochrome environment in which the references ricochet among Modernist sculpture, the automobile as the No. 1 object of American male desire and various references to the fairer sex, which might be described as desire No. 2.

Ms. Meckseper's dazzling surfeit of reflective surfaces takes the animal fascination with shiny and runs with it. “Americanmuscle” updates Duchamp's bicycle wheel with a chrome car wheel on a mirrored pedestal. Other ready-mades, hanging from chrome display stands and racks, include a tail light, chains of different sizes, fox tails and rabbits' feet. Gender differences are acknowledged in the display of a nylon stocking and crude approximations of designer handbags made from metal mesh and chain, sometimes with a car logo attached, using a bit of tar- or crude-oil-like substance. “Brillo” consists of a chrome treelike counter display stand, each of whose nine small platforms holds a metal pot-scouring pad, as if it were a precious object, perhaps a feminist hood ornament.

Repeated uses of enlarged watch faces from Cartier ads in wall pieces and papier-mâché forms may be a comment on the work of the key appropriation artist Richard Prince and his extensive use of car culture. Elsewhere, a small photograph of the burning Deepwater Horizon rather heavily-handedly suggests the self-destructive implications of consumerism, as does a small and erratic video of cracked glass — a car windshield or store window.

Haim Steinbach's Neo-Geo sculptures of the mid-1980s, and the more dour, redneck tack taken by Cady Noland in the late 1980s are influences here. But Ms. Meckseper is no stranger to the store display case; here she creates an environmental one in which we are both pliable consumers and available commodities.

If a kind of Americana prevails in those two shows, Siobhan Liddell turns more decisively toward Europe in "Ordinary Magic," her outstanding fourth show at the CRG Gallery. Ms. Liddell has always been interested in making the most of fragile, ephemeral materials, with colored string and thread, wire and especially paper high on the list. Miró would seem to be the dominant influence here, although Richard Tuttle and Alan Shields, the 1970s master of tie-dye and the sewing machine, can't be ruled out.

This show is dominated by a series of exquisitely modest structures, most involving jewel-colored paper, often hand-painted. All rest on tables cobbled together from mismatched pieces of wood that contribute to the works' charm. There is a sexual undertone to the title of "Pierced Pink Pyramids in the Round on the Square," while the honeycombed structure suggests a kind of architectural model on holiday, masquerading as a Mardi Gras float. "Blue and Gold Fold" is simply a small square of shiny gold foil, slightly peaked to reveal the paper's blue underside; it might refer to similar, larger floor pieces by Roni Horn and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The tabletop piece disco ball about to be inundated or perhaps se-ceramic that exudes a freer sense of abandon.

Ms. Liddell works with many of these same elegant Dada results. But the outstanding work on the wall here is a large, untitled piece where expanses of small cut-out paper — white on one side and green on the other — create a raised surface that evokes leaves, fur and scales while resolving itself into a large plant form. O.K., it's not sculpture, but it is consistent with the conviction, palpable in all three shows here, that art is far more a matter of imagination and ingenuity than of materials and money.

Johannes VanDerBeek's "Another Time Man" runs through June 12 at Zach Feuer Gallery, 530 West 24th Street, Chelsea; zachfeuer.com. Josephine Meckseper runs through June 26 at Elizabeth Dee, 545 West 20th Street, Chelsea; elizabethdeegallery.com. Siobhan Liddell's "Ordinary Magic" runs through Saturday at CRG Gallery, 535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; crggallery.com.



"Stand With Three Circles,"  
by Josephine Meckseper.

TOM POWELL IMAGES

**Vitamin 3-D**  
**New Perspectives**  
**in Sculpture**  
**and Installation**

PHAIDON

Josephine Meckseper is known internationally for her sculptures and mixed-media installations, photographs and videos exploring the glamour of consumer fashion and advertising from a radical point of view located inside the world that she is displaying. Both art history and the very galleries in which she exhibits have been subjected to the same straight-faced treatment. In the ironically titled *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art* (2005) objects displayed at incestuous proximity (toilet cleaners and perfume, fashion ads alongside a plunger) are reflected in Meckseper's signature mirrored showcases. At once standing to attention (like Jeff Koons' vacuum cleaners) and reversing themselves (reflected in the mirror the 'OUI' sign for the European referendum turns into a 'NON'), they keep alluding to the magic of the commodity brilliantly described in Karl Marx's *Das Capital*. In Meckseper's installations, objects stand for exchangeable human relations, but simultaneously they take on the attributes of fetishes (the furry rabbit and mannequin legs are classics). Similarly, conflicting ideologies and opposing political parties are reduced to empty tags and merely consumed as ideas.

Occasionally the exhibition space itself is turned into a boutique in order to emphasize the continuum of art and commerce. In her mirrored shelves and chromed glass shop-windows, Meckseper subtly (or blatantly) introduces disruptive elements that upset the seductive display surfaces. Her *Talk to Cindy* (2005), for example, not only mirrors consumerist culture with a vengeance, but multiplies the same images ad infinitum. Instead of criticizing the consumer society, Meckseper keeps upping the ante on the principle of equivalence that regulates the capitalist system, sending it spinning into a kind of giddy delirium. In an art world which uses critique as some kind of disclaimer, Meckseper is the first contemporary artist to dare break what could be considered the ultimate taboo: not sex, but politics. Presenting imagery of protest culture and revolutionary myths side by side with art installations, she exposes consumerist and counter-cultural discourses as if they belonged together. In the process, she bewildered many well-meaning social critics, such as Okwui Enwezor and Christian Höller, who were otherwise ready to welcome her into the fold.

As early as 1968, in his *System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard boldly anticipated that, in a consumer society, critique would become complementary and complicit to what it opposes: 'The revolutionary imperative is alive, but unable to realize itself in practice; it is consumed in the idea of Revolution. [...] All ideas, even the most contradictory, can coexist as signs within the idealist logic of consumption.' Like Emil Cioran or Jean Baudrillard, Meckseper doesn't project any ideological critique or advocate any cause but, taking its signs at face value, perversely allows the consumer system to hang itself.

Stylishly redolent of Constructivism and Minimalism, Meckseper's work sits uneasily between the cool irony of Andy Warhol and the interpolative slogans of Barbara Kruger. Her detachment may only be apparent, but what counts is the strategy she uses to register the ambivalent nature of contemporary reality. Instead of dismissing it, her strategy is to strip it bare in order to perform some kind of archaeology of the present. *Quelle International* (2008), a group of pictures reproduced on reflective Mylar culling fashion photographs from a mail-order catalogue popular in Germany in the 1970s, may go even further to suggest that showing contemporary reality for what it is would be enough. Time itself will eventually provide the necessary critical distance, turning her own work into an unsettling document. [Sylvère Lotringer]



01



02

03 Shelf No. 31, 2005  
Shelf with mixed media  
59 x 152 x 35 cm

04. *Untitled (End Democracy)*, 2005  
Inkjet print, Plexiglas,  
plastic mannequin torso, metal  
stand, mirror on wood  
144 x 121 x 121 cm

01,02 *The Complete History of  
Postcontemporary Art*, 2005  
Mixed media in display window  
160 x 250 x 60 cm

05 USA, 2007  
Mixed-media sculpture  
on Plexiglas cube  
74 x 21 x 21 cm



03

195

Josephine Meckseper

04



05





06 *Ten High*, 2008

Plexiglas platform, 3 mannequins,  
collapsible walker, cane, bottle of  
whiskey, Bible, ashtray with cigarettes,  
broken mirror on wooden panel,  
poster mounted to aluminium, mixed media  
on canvas, aluminium sign, T-Shirt,  
tie, fake vomit on Plexiglas  
350 x 350 x 350 cm



48x72

BLICK  
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Josephine Meckseper

# CRASHING

## I

Josephine Meckseper's sculptures and mixed-media installations are especially striking in the spacious site of the migros museum für gegenwartskunst, which is situated in a former beer brewery, an industrial context that reinforces the impact of what is by far the most direct and politically explicit exhibition that Meckseper has ever made. It is not every day that history is knocking at the door, and she may have decided to make a definite statement about an era that is fast disappearing, leaving aside the subtle and unsettling approach to contemporary society that has become her signature. Conceived just a few months before the global financial meltdown and the staggering collapse of the Big Three, the exhibition projects the intensity of the present, when capitalism seems to be unraveling under our very eyes, wrecking havoc across the entire planet, revealing in the process the intricate web of connections between speculative finance, politics, economy and war. In this respect the exhibition anticipates the end of American dominance as it has existed until now, and the resounding demise of the free-market model of capitalism the United States had tried to impose worldwide. The catch phrase of Charles Wilson, head of General Motors under President Dwight D. Eisenhower immediately comes to mind. As he was being confirmed as secretary of defense, Wilson was asked if there was not any conflict of interest, and he famously answered: "As General Motors goes, so goes the nation." This statement has never rung truer than it does today.

The crash of General Motors, a global powerhouse company, and the most symbolic of them all, throws an uncanny light on the Great Car Culture that was part of American power and a major incentive for controlling oil fields worldwide by all means necessary, including the devastating oil war waged in Iraq. Meckseper's exhibition invites us to look back on this still ongoing imperialist saga not just in economic terms, but anthropologically: in times to come, cars, like dinosaurs, like America itself, will be relegated to the National History Museum. This is what the neat canvas posters of cars wrapped up in plastic also tend to suggest. Discarded consumer products, even when glamorized by publicity, are just like body bags. Violence and death are still lurking around, although carefully kept under wraps.

What is being questioned at this point is not just the simulationist aspects of financialized capitalism, but the technology it relies on in order to further its goals. Paul Virilio has reminded us that technology is an enigma that can only be addressed properly by bringing out its *negative* sides, all too often ignored, or considered extrinsic to the invention. Each invention casts a long shadow: car accidents are as much of an invention as the car itself was. Plane crashes are not just a freak occurrence, but a creation in their own right. What is unheard of is not that cars would crash, but that the carmakers themselves would. Accidents reveal the essence of the machine, or of the system. "Integral accidents" that affect the entire planet, such as the one we're experiencing right now, tell us something about the nature of "techno-capitalism."

Virilio helped dispel the humanistic discourse on technology, which usually casts it in instrumental and anthropological terms, as if technology was mere "applied science" manufacturing objects meant to enhance human life, and cars were just made for consumers' convenience and vanity. Heidegger reminded us that the *essence of techne* does not reside in the making itself, rather in the fulfillment of an underlying project or scheme. Technology is not neutral, and its project remains to be spelled out. It is part of a "total war" of which the current wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan are just the most visible pointers.

Joseph Goebbels used the expression "total war" in his famous speech of February 18, 1943, in which he exhorted the German people to fight to the bitter end after the collapse of the Eastern Front. The ominous bunker from Virilio's *Bunker Archeology* is a reminder of the time when the space of war crossed Europe from North to South, from the Siegfried Line to the Maginot Line and the Atlantic Wall. "By the same token," Virilio commented, "you touch on the mythic dimension of a war spreading not only throughout Europe, but all over the world." Bunkers, like anti-aircraft shelters, etc., are "reference points or landmarks to the totalitarian nature of war in space and myth."<sup>[1]</sup>

Total War is not just invoked in extreme situations, it involves the "total mobilization" of populations in time of peace as well as in time of war. Ernst Junger was the first to raise the concept of mobilization in *The Worker (Der Arbeiter, 1938)*, suggesting that a fixed budget would not be enough to cover the costs of waging a total war. In addition to the armies on the battlefields, the "modern armies of commerce and transport, food-stuffs, the manufacture of armaments—the army of labor in general," should be mobilized.<sup>[2]</sup> From then on battles would not be waged on the battlefields, but in the "battle of movement." In the same article, Junger pointed out that total mobilization did not mean enlisting people in the army, or sending them to the battlefields, but rather their "readiness" for mobilization.

Virilio has often referred to this concept in his own elaboration of "pure war," a war that would be waged without an actual war being the necessary outcome. The Cold War was its perfect illustration. Although bloody wars were unleashed in various corners of the world (in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, etc.) the two adversaries kept "detering" each other from triggering the fatal outcome, relying instead on economic and technological escalation to achieve similar results. This fusion of science and war signaled the breakdown of the distinction between the civilian and the military. Unlike Virilio, Junger dwelt

[1]  
Paul Virilio/Sylvère Lotringer.  
*Pure War*, trans. Mark Polizotti,  
Semiotext(e), New York 1983,  
1997, p. 10.

[2]  
Ernst Junger, "Total Mobilization,"  
*The Heidegger Controversy:  
A Critical reader*, Richard Wolin  
(ed.), The MIT Press, Cambridge,  
Mass. 1993, p. 126.

at length upon the sociological implications of this mutation. He defined the "Worker" as a "new reality," even a new human "race" meant to replace both the bourgeois and the proletarian. The army of labor would not be relegated anymore to industrial ghettos, the whole society would become a "total work-space" directly enlisted to the war effort. This new reality, he believed, would be governed by the "Figure" (*gestalt*) of the worker. Junger hailed technology as a demoniacal power bound to destroy all individual differences between classes and nations. But what the Worker lost in individuality, he would gain in precision and objectivity, work becoming the source and destination of every human existence. "The face which looks at the observer under the steel helmet or that of the pilot has also changed [...] It has become more metallic, as if galvanized on the surface, the bone structure jutting out markedly [...]"<sup>[3]</sup>

It was a new *metallic* race that was beginning to develop according to the requirement of a new technological landscape. In Meckseper's exhibit, from the life-size insect-like steel derricks to the chromium plates of cars, and from the abstraction of car rims to the metallic surface of the mannequins' bodies, a new technological race-crossing species is in the making. It encompasses the sleek war-like display of SAAB commercials with jet planes bouncing in the background while the added 1990s industrial music keeps ironically asking: "Do you want total war?"

Junger saw this new humanity as a combat "elite" not defined by its individuality but moved by a "superior legality" to fulfill specific tasks, and even hailed the Kamikaze pilots in Japan in 1934 as a kind of "Nietzschean humanism." The invention of electronic technologies over the last decade has made this elite far less identifiable, actually more of a mass phenomenon. The "extreme coldness" of the metallic features moved inside, but remained no less metallic for all that. Gilles Deleuze called this new race waving cell phones and credit cards as their weapons: "dividuals."

Readily identifiable in dynamic vehicles, the effects of technological violence are no less powerful for remaining unnoticed. In fact, the less explicit the violence, the more far-reaching its impact. Moving from vehicular vectors, outwardly in nature, to more intangible weapons of communication—visual technology like photography, film, television and video, up to the most recent advances in electronic media technologies, all indirect offshoots of military research and "Star Wars" type technological deterrence—this technology is quickly approaching the absolute value of the speed of light, waging another kind of war on the human environment. The "real-time" of telecommunication is abolishing the distinction between the real and pictures we derive from it, substituting for the actual physical proximity a more virtual kind of presence. This "transparence" is the ultimate accident generated by the "vision machines" in which the speed of images has replaced actual physical movement. Instantaneity and ubiquity are now canceling memory and history, triggering a general de-realization of reality. Modern technology has drastically changed our relation to the world, which can only be grasped, in Heidegger's formula, as a "word-picture." The advent of "instant time" on a global scale announces the virtual disappearance of the social. The technology of warfare and the techniques of perception have become one.

[3]  
Ernst Junger, *Der Arbeiter*, p. 149.

## II

### Paul Virilio The Total Accident

An Interview with Sylvère Lotringer

Sylvère Lotringer: *We're running out of time. Everything now is happening in real time, except that time seems to have lost its reality. And this is also true for history.*

Paul Virilio: We no longer participate in the trilogy past-present-future. Today we are experiencing an acceleration not only of History, but also of the instant. The instant isn't present. The instant of the immediacy and of the ubiquitousness doesn't participate in the present. It has acquired its accidental autonomy.

In the past, historians from the Annales School studying archives dealt with two historical categories: the long Braudelian periods—Braudel, March Bloch, Lucien Febvre were concerned with general history (centuries and civilizations) and the history of the events (1914–1918, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution). Now, a new element originating in instantaneity is inscribing itself in history. We still have long durations, we still have the time frame of certain events that participate in the present (the present of the 1789 Revolution, the present of the Russian Revolution, etc.), but we're entering the possibility of an accidental History, of a history that connects neither in the past, nor in the present, nor in the future. History as event has been replaced by an accidental history with no points of reference. In this sense, it is an accident of time.

#### The Unsurpassable Success

*Globalization is turning into a disaster. The planet is shrinking and we are also running out of space. We're on top of each other on both counts. A simple flap of the butterfly's wings and the entire globe goes haywire. Should we de-globalize ourselves and get out of this disastrous situation?*

Hence all these studies on the exo-planet, the exo-biologists, what I would call the exo-science. In other words, we are now re-launching the colonial enterprise into the outer world. Cyberspace is already a colony that replaces the real world. The sixth, virtual continent already is a sort of new colony, a preparation for the immigration to outer space. Through the search for exo-planets, by means of space probes, etc. there is something that takes us, not to the other world—say, the discovery of America—but to the outer world.

*An integral accident on the planetary scale would be capable of incorporating a whole host of incidents and disasters in a chain reaction. Is that also what we can detect in the trajectory of disaster?*

No, the trajectory of disaster is the accident's development. The accident has become inseparable from progress. Hannah Arendt explained this when she said, "The catastrophe and the accident, the two sides of the same coin." The more progress unfolds, the more insurmountable catastrophe is. Now, since the end of the 20th century, we have entered the era of an unsurpassable success: the world is too small for progress.

*It has succeeded all too well.*

It has succeeded too well, and has closed itself off, foreclosed, enclosed onto itself; this explains people's temptation to enclose themselves within gated communities or towers that repeat Babel's myth, which, in a certain way, will develop catastrophe's principle. Catastrophe is a sort of knowledge that one doesn't acknowledge, except in technological crashes. And this is my point: future universities will study the catastrophe of progress. Every area of knowledge is summoned to participate in the barbarity of techno-scientific progress. In the same way that European universities were created in Bologna, at the Sorbonne and later in Salamanca around barbarity—History's barbarity—we have to reinvent, not in the year 1000, but in 2000, a university that opposes catastrophe and the catastrophic success of techno-scientific progress in the areas of atomic knowledge, information technology and genetics, Einstein's three bombs. The atom bomb was made possible by the informational bomb; the informational bomb made the genetic bomb possible—through the mapping of the human genome, the possibility of cloning, even of creating hybrid species, etc. So, in today's universities we have to invent the equivalent of the crash test in an enterprise—I want to remind you that a crash test is part of History.

#### The Financial Accident

*Several years ago we talked in some detail about a financial crisis that would trigger the total accident. It would be, you said, the prime example for the book that you are writing on the accident. This integral accident is now happening before our very eyes.*

We are up to our neck in it. The crash is the model of the total accident. Why? Because, together with war, it is the example of instantaneity. Let me remind you: if time is money, then speed is power, the power of money and not just money. So, the new series of crashes—remember the crash in Japan, the mortgage meltdown that completely destabilized Japan, which used to do so well before that—is happening now in the United States, and it will happen everywhere. And this has nothing to do with the 1929 crash.

*I just talked about it with an old Italian friend, Christian Marazzi, who is a well-known economist in Switzerland. He told me that he has started studying catastrophe theory because he realizes that we have no way of knowing where all this will lead us. According to him, it will take at least two more years before we know exactly the full extent of the crisis. We have never faced a situation of that kind before, in which the entire financial system could collapse.*

Absolutely. In the early 1980s I came up with the idea of a Museum of the Accident, as I called it then. At the time Jack Lang was the [socialist] Minister of Culture in France and François Barré was president of the Centre Pompidou. I was interviewed by *Art Press* on the ruins of the La Villette slaughterhouse and François Barré asked me, "What do you think we should do with these ruins? You are interested in ruins." And I told him, "I would make a Museum of Science and Technology." He told me, "That's exactly what they are planning to do." And I said, "That's perfect." Then he asked, "And what should we

include in the program?" And I told him, "It's clear that each area of knowledge should present its success *and its catastrophe*." There should be no censorship on the nature of the catastrophe arising from the progress in that discipline. Of course, no one asked for my opinion on La Villette—curiously, I was consulted on other occasions, but not on this project. And when did they open the Cité de Science in La Vilette? In 1986. And 1986 was Chernobyl and Challenger. And at that time I made a point of writing another article in *Art Press*: "I remember you interviewed me, and you said once again that the Museum of the Accident is the TV. You, Scientists, proved incapable of facing this question. And since then it has become bigger and bigger; we saw the Space Shuttle Colombia disintegrate, etc."

*We have now moved from the nuclear accident and the space accident to the financial accident.*

Exactly.

*Did you foresee that it was in the offing?*

I always believed that the financial accident, the financial *crash* was the model of the integral accident, because it projected at the greatest speed the consequences of the error or of the hyper-quotation. If there is a place where hyper-accidents happen, it is certainly on Wall Street. Every day one accident can trigger others. This is what the market is about.

*But this one came from the markets' instantaneity.*

In this case too, if time is money, speed is power. This is why we enter a race. What is a race? It means taking hold of power by getting there first. And at the same time we ride on horseback, drive a car, walk on foot. It's very clear that speed = power, and power = speed, and instantaneity, ubiquitousness and immediacy are the prerogatives of the divine.

*It's true for speed, but as for power, it's hard to say where it is located at the present time.*

Usually, speed allows us see, which is the case with television. During online streaming, the speed of transmission allows us to see what is happening somewhere else. So it's clear that speed is the power of vision. And it should also be the power of pre-vision, of predicting. And that's not the case. But I think this is an extraordinary taboo, I mean the fact that, in the world of progress, no one is free to be rational.

*Isn't the world completely irrational at this point?*

Yes, but they swear it is reasonable. And this is the great bluff, the three-card monte. Just a word: what I am opposed to is the progress of techno-science, not the progress of science. I object to the instruments produced by science, whatever they may be. Once we start producing instruments, I'd say that they should be subjected to Popper's rule, they should be tested.

*You predicted the financial crisis; what do you predict now?*

## The Crisis of Politics

The crisis of politics. By this I mean that global governing is no longer possible in the context of the state. Why? Because computers, mathematical programs, superior mathematics have been used in economy, and it's obvious that they are incapable of managing global economics. It became obvious with the Kervielle scandal in France, and it is true for everything that's going on in the United States right now. Now when we see politicians and leaders in power throughout the world, whether Sarkozy, to start with, or George W. Bush or Berlusconi or Putin, the list is endless, there isn't a single politician up to the challenge of globalization, of the finitude. In the past when a man said, "I want to be the master of the world," he was locked up. Now, these men have the power to manage the finitude—our finitude is not the Apocalypse, but the closure—and none of them are up to it, it's beyond their capability. And the question of democracy will shortly be raised.

*Years ago, we discussed the notion of "transpolitics." Is globalization really making the capacity to act politically impossible?*

The capacity to act politically was linked to the past, to historical progress. If democracy exists it's because the Greeks existed. If monarchy existed, etc. So, in some way, political science was linked to the history of government knowledge, whether religious or secular-republican, whether royalist or democratic. But the speeding up of history, which provoked the *blitzkrieg*, that is to say, WWII—don't forget that I am a child of WWII, the lightning-war—has also caused the accident of History. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, "an unforgiving century," as Camus said, is Auschwitz as well as Hiroshima. So, this time, the speeding up of the real, real time, immediacy, instantaneity, is entirely slipping away from the political. No kind of politics lives up to this quasi-divine event. Managing the world's economy and ecology in real time has become impossible, unless we renew the foundations of politics, as the Greeks did at the origin of History. And then we find again... I rediscovered a book that I liked a lot by a man who is a great teacher for me, Vladimir Jankélévitch, *The Austerity of Moral Life*. It is a book no longer in print, [...] a book more relevant for today's world than we can imagine. What is ecology? It's austerity. It's very clear for me, it's not decadence, it's austerity. No one today is capable of reflecting on the very foundation of ecological austerity, on its gravity and difficulty. Everyone, Sarkozy included, says: "We'll manage, it's nothing serious, don't worry."

*Austerity means that less is more.*

So, humility is tomorrow's virtue. I'd like to remind you that the expression "humility is truth" is Teresa of Avila. Well, this expression is about to become tomorrow's political truth, unless we reinvent colonialism and move into space to discover a new empire among the other planets, etc. At a time when colonialism—French, British colonial empire—is criticized so harshly, one feels like saying, "And you are now doing the same thing with the other planets! Congratulations!"

*What can we expect from politics when people now are merely managing catastrophes? In fact, they totally live up to the catastrophe since they contribute to it.*

The catastrophe of progress is the catastrophe of success. It is a paradoxical logic. The problem is not that a nuclear plant might break down; the problem is that we keep building nuclear plants. When a nuclear plant breaks down, even if that involves destruction, it's nothing more than a failure; but to keep building them alleging the exhaustion of natural resources (coal, oil) is another kind of catastrophe. This is not a failure, it is the

success of the proliferation of nuclear plants that is becoming a bigger threat than the depletion of energy resources. And we can very well see that right now nuclear energy is again an idea on the table, in spite of Chernobyl, twenty years after.

*Even nuclear war is back in tactical weapons. It's all creeping again through the back door.*

Nuclear war, proliferation... We are beyond deterrent weapons. I mean, nuclear deterrence is gone. Proliferation cancels deterrence.

*And in catastrophe, what's the place of death, of kamikaze?*

I've talked about the suicidal state in one of the chapters of *The Insecurity of Territory*. The suicidal state was a local figure, a figure of a State, of individuals, of social classes that could participate in suicide. We've seen it in Japan during WWII, we see it today in the integral, fundamentalist Islam. We see how the suicidal state can become a State in the political sense of the word.

#### A Catastrophic State

*It would be a catastrophic state. We've seen that before in Nazi Germany. The totalitarian state was a catastrophic state.*

I'd like to point out that when the emperor of Japan saw that the war was lost, the Japanese military launched the idea of national suicide—the nation was committing suicide. The Japanese had to oppose the military in order to accept defeat.

*And now we are on the verge of an international catastrophe.*

Today we are no longer at a national level; we are experiencing a mobilization of kamikazes. But it's already similar; the number of voluntary kamikazes, the suicide in the name of a religion has become a very worrisome phenomenon, an epidemiological phenomenon. In Japan, it was the emperor's project; in today's Islam it is a project that springs out of the social body. It's not a state that orders national suicide; rather, there is a "generosity" of mass suicide. The problem is no longer that of weapons of mass destruction; it is the masses that are destroying themselves, that are self-destructing. The kamikaze is indeed one of the greatest questions, but it comes from Japan.

*Don't you think that, on the one hand, this is an individual act, but on the other, it is a collective response? The kamikazes are a response to the kamikaze of our own culture.*

Absolutely. The invention of the atomic bomb was a historic and scientific accident. Besides, Oppenheimer said, "Maybe we have sinned"—a scientific sin. He meant that maybe we have gone too far. And, indeed, there was a responsibility of science, which has become mortal. It tied its fate with war and it became mortal.

*In some way, the Islamic kamikazes reveal what we haven't seen: that we are in a suicidal state.*

It's a mirror effect. The suicidal state existed during WWII, it existed in Germany. Hitler couldn't order a national suicide, but when he died, he ordered the poisoning of

all people and the destruction of all military plants, etc. It was a suicidal logic. And the invention of the atomic weapon was suicidal for science—or rather, for techno-science. Hence, the scientist's words, "We may have sinned"—a scientific sin.

*In short, our suicidal tendency comes back to us from the outside. It is revealed to us because it puts us in danger at the same time.*

There is no more exterior. This is what globalization means, we are all foreclosed, enclosed. There is a foreclosure of History which matches the world's reduction to the instant. The world used to be big, endless, immeasurable, that's why it was called "world"—it wasn't called "universe," it was called "world." And this world is about to close itself off because of the acceleration in all areas: acceleration of information, acceleration of transportation and acceleration of consequences. I'd like to remind you of Churchill's words, "We have all entered the era of consequences." Winston Churchill said this in 1939, right after Munich, and today we can say this on a global scale, not only merely on a European or WWII scale. We have entered the era of ecological and eco-logistical consequences. I always use the word "eco-logistics." Ecology is the eco-logistics. It is the acceleration of transportation and transmission—instantaneity, ubiquitousness, immediacy. There is a book by Cioran I discovered, *The Evil Demiurge*, a very interesting book in which he has this sentence, the concluding sentence: "We all are all at the bottom of a hell whose every instant is a miracle." The Evil Demiurge is techno-science, and it is its progress that abolishes us.

# 46.

## Josephine Meckseper

*Anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist visionary with a sharp eye on power and the people*

Josephine Meckseper collapses the visual and aesthetic codes of consumerism and high fashion with the symbols and insignia of the political realm in works that implicitly critique the Western capitalist system. She uses film, video, photography, painting, graphic design, sculpture and installation to ape the seductive power of shop windows, display cases, posters and advertisements. ‘I’m trying to create a new and contemporary vocabulary, one in which politics, equal rights and readiness to change have a place.’

Growing up in a leftist artistic family and community, Meckseper excoriates both her native Germany as well as her adopted home in the US. In *CDU-CSU* (2001), she creates a fashion-shoot allegory of contemporary Germany under Angela Merkel, raising issues of nationalism, feminism and consumerism: perfect Aryan blondes, sporting CDU-CSU necklaces (after Germany’s two conservative sister parties), lounge in conspicuous luxury, while a working-class maid stands in the background. Meanwhile, *USA* (2007) satirizes the contemporary US predicament: a tottering tower of display furniture presents the cheap tools of oblivion – martini glass, disco ball and necklace mounted above a newspaper reporting the bloody after-effects of the Iraq War.

The way in which genuine political protest has been co-opted by fashion, advertising and the culture industry in order to convey youth, energy and authenticity is another issue raised by Meckseper in numerous photographs, videos and installations. *Untitled Berlin Demonstration* (2002) reveals the theatricality of demonstrations: the staging, the orchestration, and the costume and dress codes of police and protesters alike. In a similar vein, *Pyromaniac 2* (2003) cheekily styles the pouting poster girl for radical political action and revolt. In *March for Peace and Justice* (2007), Meckseper’s over-riding aesthetic treatment of the subject suggests the manipulation and control of people power, and its reduction to merely decorative and lifestyle elements.

In *Blow Up (Tamara)* (2006), Meckseper uses her glittering, reflective vitrine of discordant objects and images to expose the contradictions and absurdities of consumerism. Beautiful women model frumpy GDR-style underwear, signifying a utilitarian dead-end for fashion; nearby pan scourers and orthopaedic supports are treated with the reverence normally reserved for handbags or jewels. Meckseper uses the Situationist technique of *détournement* to achieve her ends, adopting and then twisting the aesthetic tools and codes of unbridled consumerism to undermine its power.

Meckseper suggests her methodology demonstrates Martha Rosler’s observation that consumer society objectifies the person and personifies the object. Recently, her targets have included the car industry and petrochemicals lobby, exposing once again how codes of power are used by advertising to sell the dream. Meckseper regularly uses large mirrored plinths – the minimalist aesthetic updated to reveal the effect of an endless commodity surplus, created by any reflective surface.

Since the end of the Bush era, and the arrival of global financial turmoil, Meckseper’s work appears not just relevant but prescient. Her naked dummies, empty signs, cheap goods and utilitarian clothing worked as satires on rampant consumerism, but they now suggest the flip-side: a future of enforced thrift, self-sufficiency, commodity shortages and food riots. Indeed, they depict the very fragility of our entire economic and political system.

*USA*, 2007  
Mixed media sculpture on Plexiglas cube,  
74.6 x 21.8 x 21.6 cm (29 x 8 x 8½ in.)



Meckseper uses her *discordant* objects and images to expose the *contradictions* and *absurdities* of consumerism



Top left  
*Untitled (Berlin Demonstration, Fire, Cops)*, 2002  
C-print, 76.2 x 101.6 cm (30 x 40 in.)

Top right  
*CDU-CSU*, 2001  
C-print, 106.6 x 165.5 cm (42 x 65 in.)

Above  
*Untitled (Berlin Demonstration, Smoke)*, 2002  
C-print, 76.2 x 101.6 cm (30 x 40 in.)

Right  
*Pyromaniac 2*, 2003  
C-print, 101.6 x 76.2 cm (40 x 30 in.)

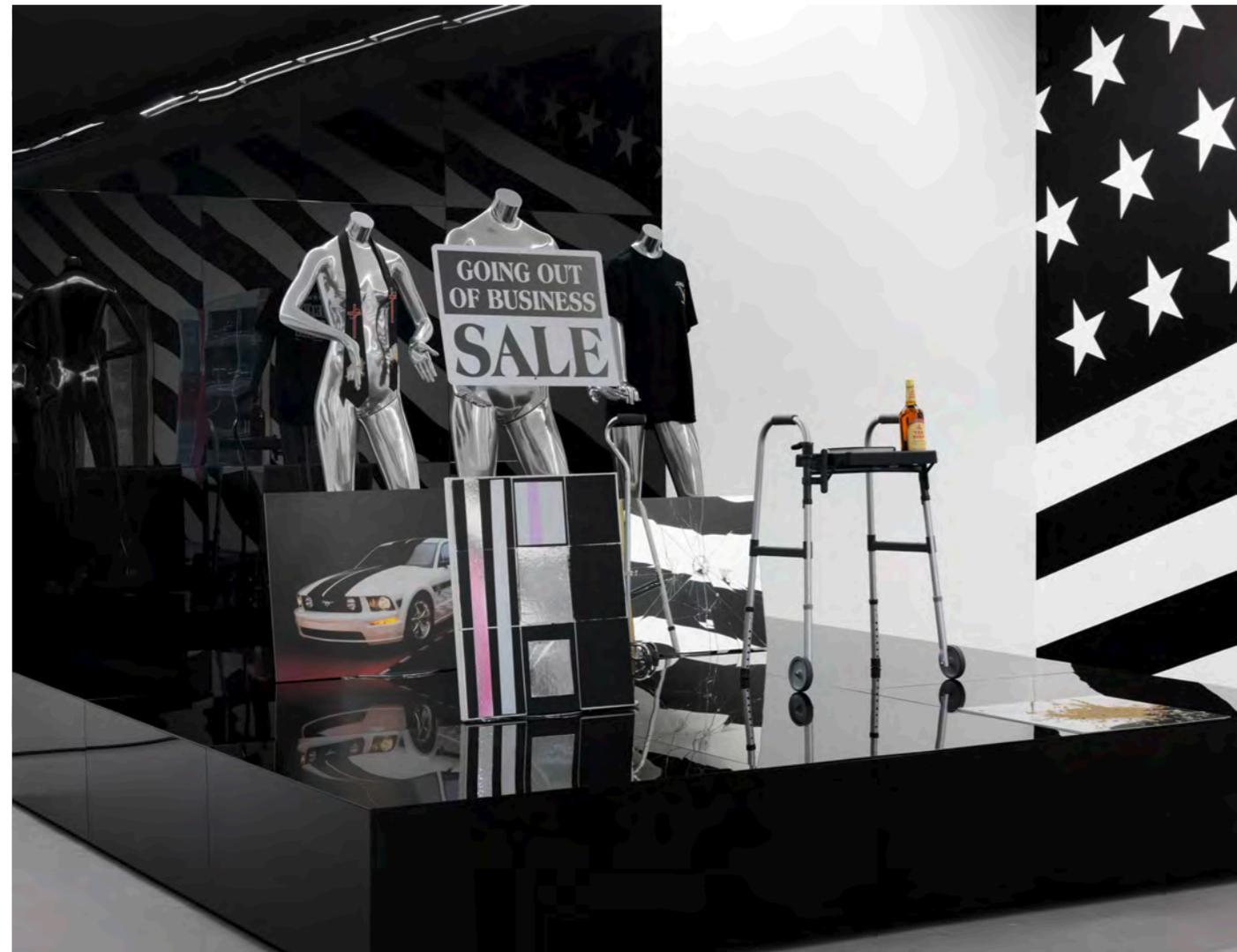
*Blow Up (Tamara)*, 2006  
Mixed media in vitrine (installation view),  
208.3 x 243.8 x 68.6 cm (82 x 96 x 27 in.)

Right

Installation view, Arndt & Partner, Berlin, 2008

Far right and below

Installation view, Migros Museum für  
Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, 2009



Above

*Untitled (Hammer and Sickle)*, 2005  
Chrome-painted tools, mirror on wood,  
78.7 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm (31 x 48 x 48 in.)

Above

*March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 04/29/06,*  
*New York City*, 2006  
Black-and-white and colour 16mm film transferred  
to DVD, sound 7:20 min.

# Interview

48/ART

## Josephine MECKSEPER

By LIAM GILLICK Portrait GRANT DELIN

MAYBE IT WAS THE GREEN-PARTY MOM, THE ANARCHIST DAD, OR CHILDHOOD VACATIONS WITH COMMIE GUERRILLAS, BUT THE WORK OF THIS ARTIST IS A POLITICAL TOUR DE FORCE CONNECTING BIG CARS, BIG OIL, THE RIGHT WING, MILITARY JETS, AND SLEAZY LINGERIE

HOODIE: UNITED COLORS OF BENETTON. DRESS: DONNA KARAN COLLECTION. COSMETICS: SHU UEMURA. HAIR PRODUCTS: AVEEDA. STYLING: ANDREAS KOKKINO. HAIR: SELJI/THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP: KATEY DENNO/THE WALL GROUP. SPECIAL THANKS: SHOOT DIGITAL. FASHION DETAILS PAGE 138.

At her solo exhibition in New York City last spring, 44-year-old artist Josephine Meckseper showed a six-minute film titled *0% Down*, a hot and incendiary black-and-white remix of car commercials set to a merciless industrial-noise song called "Total War." The propulsive images of cars and SUVs speeding across deserts and morphing into fighter jets looked as if the Pentagon had recently opened an advertising agency. Meckseper, a native of Germany who has lived in the United States since 1990, has never shied away from the darker, violent truths of capitalist culture. Her videos, demonstration photographs, shop-window installations, collages, and even her own restaging of beauty ads, employ the frank emptiness of materialism as well as a political aggression that lies just beneath the surface. Meckseper is something of a political dissident, just when you thought there was no way an artist could be one anymore. This winter she is showing her shop vitrines and '50s lingerie ads at MoMA, bringing an anti-Iraq War film to the first-ever New Orleans biennial, and creating a series of damning prints made of found imagery dealing with the U.S. presidential election. She chatted via e-mail with fellow artist Liam Gillick, a person who also knows what a maze the surface of things can be.

LIAM GILLICK: Your last solo exhibition in New York had a great film playing in the back room. It was cars and sound and power—surface and lies. It was one of the most elegant and cutting corruptions of contemporary culture I have seen. Yet it seemed extremely simple—one of those moments when someone identifies an aesthetic in the culture and nails it. Tell me more about that.

JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER: The concept for this film was fairly straightforward. If it had a script the only line would be: "Illustrate the obvious ties between the car industry and wars fought

“ I MADE AN INSTALLATION THAT LOOKED LIKE THE HEADQUARTERS OF A TERRORIST GROUP GETTING READY TO KNOCK OFF A BANK. A SHERIFF SEALED OFF THE EXHIBITION SPACE BECAUSE HE COULDN'T TELL WHETHER ALL THE FAKE MACHINE GUNS AND EXPLOSIVE DEVICES WERE REAL OR NOT. ”

over oil.” In essence, Dick Cheney could have easily come up with this idea in his retirement years. LG: How did you put it together?

JM: I contacted a group of car companies and asked them to send me their current TV commercials. Saab, which is part of General Motors, had been running a campaign called “Born from Jets,” where they used the connection between the way they make cars and their involvement in building military jets. Other carmakers show oil rigs or insert indirect references to 9/11 in their ads. It’s devastatingly overt. Once I had enough commercials, I contacted the industrial-noise musician Boyd Rice in Colorado and talked to him about using his song “Total War” as the soundtrack. The edited film is called *0% Down* and consists entirely of black-and-white edits of the car commercials I collected. The overlay of Boyd’s menacing, base-heavy soundtrack leaves very little room for imagination.

LG: This is not an appropriation in a pure sense but a complete reframing of propaganda. You invert the message. In a lot of your work you reveal the way power finds form. Has this always been the case?

JM: The roots of my work can be traced to my childhood. My father always claimed that he was an anarchist and declared all politicians to be criminals, but at the same time he was friends with Gerhard Schröder [the chancellor of Germany from 1998 to 2005]. My mother had a brief stint as the Green Party representative in my hometown. Our vacation place on the North Sea was sometimes used as a hideout for Red Army Faction associates, because my aunt hung out with one of the leaders, Ulrike Meinhof. When I moved to Los Angeles in 1990 to study at CalArts, I started experimenting with explosives and made an installation that looked like the headquarters of a terrorist group getting ready to knock off a bank. A sheriff sealed off the exhibition space because he couldn’t tell whether all the fake machine guns and explosive devices were real or not.

LG: What was the political climate like then?

JM: It was right at the time of the first Gulf War. Everything erupted! I was pretty shocked when the school was suddenly invaded by right-wing local residents swinging American flags at the pacifist Marxist students. And on the freeway, cars rushed by with KILL SADDAM stickers. It was a mess. So I got interested in situationist strategies and collaborated on actions with other students that revolved around all techniques of turning things on their heads and adding fuel to the fire. The last happening accidentally merged with the Rodney King riots. That forced us to shift from a detached critical position and interact with reality, filming the raging fires around us.

LG: Does an art context provide something that other radical positions can’t? It seems like you want to escape the limitations of radical aesthetics and get to the more complex, seductive sides of power.

JM: As a political activist you run the risk of having to settle for one compromise or another in order to achieve your goals. Artists face the obvious accusation of elitism. The fundamental principle of my work is that it critiques capitalism in very specific ways. I am not interested in generalized political

rhetoric. Instead of “aestheticizing” political issues, I try to challenge ingrained perspectives. Leaf through a newspaper and you’ll find horror stories from Iraq appearing side by side with underwear adverts. My work exaggerates this. I want to bring out the paradoxes inherent in manic consumption.

LG: Can you give an example?

JM: The vitrines and shelves that I make, the objects displayed can be easily exchanged. This is a key to the work—the objects are mere signs of capitalism. The reason for their existence is in anticipation of their own destruction. They are meant to trigger a resemblance to the way store windows appear just before they are smashed by demonstrators. They represent targets for potential violence.

LG: What about your films?

JM: I’m interested in dissecting the manipulative qualities that always come when you combine sound with images. We have seen this exploited to various degrees of shamelessness in recent history, and the way this works needs to be exposed.

LG: Would you say you are an American artist? So many of your reference points are connected to European modernism.

JM: Despite what I said about my childhood, art for me has always been less a mode of autobiographical expression than a way of engaging with the world. The United States of America are more of a concept than a historically evolved geographical conclusion, compared to European countries. I find this extremely interesting. Europe seems objectively more progressive and more civilized at a time when the U.S. is entering a regressive, oppressive, totalitarian era. You’ve got racial issues, the endurance of Puritanism, other seriously anachronistic religious fanaticisms, and it’s all linked to conservatism. Despite all the unresolved deep-seated problems, the U.S. is still a country where it’s less important where you come from than what you do. But after 18 years of living here, I still have a German passport, a soft spot for the avant-garde and constructivists, and a heavy accent.

LG: There is a strong element of documentary in contemporary critical practice. What brings you back to the lure of the art context?

JM: I’m not cut out to be a purely rational pragmatist or a full-blown documentary maker. I like the boundaryless potential you get when you make work for a context that is open to interpretation. Thinking about an art context is too claustrophobic, though. I always hope that at least half my audience is not directly related to the art world. I use art as a balancing act. It’s a good way of avoiding everyday chores and social obligations.

LG: How do you avoid showing a dominant culture what it already knows?

JM: The least-challenging way to make art for me would be to reinforce decorative formalism or find a way to extend entertainment values. Humor can sometimes be the only way out of this intolerable dilemma. And if that doesn’t work, arson.

LIAM GILLICK IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK CITY AND LONDON. HE WILL BE THE ARTIST AT THE GERMAN PAVILION DURING THE 2009 VENICE BIENNALE. LEFT: VIDEO STILLS FROM JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER'S *0% DOWN*, 2008. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



CATALOGUE  
2012

# THE JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER



# CLEARANCE SIGNS

## SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER

**ONLY APPEARANCES REMAIN: WHY NOT  
RAISE THEM TO THE LEVEL OF A *STYLE*?**

—E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*

**THIS IS HOW THE MAFIA WORKS, FIRST  
SHAKING DOWN THE CUSTOMER, THEN  
PUSHING THEIR PROTECTION. CONSUMER  
SOCIETY GOES ABOUT ITS BUSINESS OF  
FILLING A VOID THAT IT HAS ITSELF CREATED.  
EXCHANGEABILITY CRYSTALLIZES INTO  
FETISHES. IT WOULDN'T TAKE MUCH FOR  
THE FRAGILE CONSTRUCTION TO COLLAPSE  
ALTOGETHER AND DELIRIUM TO SET IN.**

Illustration from the *J.S.* No. 8, Paris, 1963, with the following picture caption: "Preparatory program of the Situationist movement. This slogan on a wall in the Rue de Seine (Paris) dates from the first months of the year 1953.



Do you know E. M. Cioran? Probably not. This Romanian-born French expatriate is too dark and uncompromising a writer to succeed in the United States. What he says out loud we would rather not admit, preferring a more optimistic view of what life is supposed to be about. Yet, deep down, few would disagree with his clear-eyed diagnosis of the human race. All the more reason to deny its validity. It may come as a surprise then that Josephine Meckseper would have sought inspiration in the writings of a twentieth-century thinker who subjected contemporary culture and politics to a scathing skepticism unmatched in our own time. Cioran claims his philosophy is grounded in Marcus Aurelius, but his bitter experience of European history may have had a lot more to do with it. Behind her outward flippancy and impeccable craftsmanship, something else is also at work that makes Meckseper's art quite different from those, like the Bernadette Corporation, whose various projects would seem to be closest to hers. It isn't only an ocean that separates them, but also the heavy burden of a past that doesn't let itself be forgotten.

Cioran had no illusions about the future of humanity; he refuted them in great style. "Without illusion," he wrote, "there is nothing. Strange that one would find the secret of reality in unreality." Cioran questioned everything that passes as self-evident. An incurable doubter, he embraced objectivity and skepticism. Skeptics, he wrote, "don't propose anything because – real benefactors of humanity – they destroy its prejudices and analyze its delirium."<sup>1</sup> But can anyone live without any certainty? "I am not unhappy living without a goal," he recognized. "People have to get used to living without one and it isn't as easy as one would think."<sup>2</sup>

Cioran actually did fairly well, doubting everything voluptuously. His skepticism was the only religion he would have claimed had he been capable of believing in one. Like Swift, he suffered from "chronic lucidity," but he was more adept at irony (and self-irony) than satire. He used irony as self-therapy, to keep his anguish and obsessions at bay. Actually his absolute negation was always bracing, like the *idea* of suicide he entertained throughout his life. Unlike pessimism, his skepticism was sharp and polemical. It involved a certain aggressivity, even cruelty. "I only have," he said, "a sense of responsibility in daily life – I have a human attitude towards human beings – but not in my writing....I don't care about the consequences a sentence or an aphorism may have."<sup>3</sup> Going to extremes was a simulated delirium that relieved Cioran of his sanity. "My secret was very simple," he admitted later in life: "I didn't have any sense of restraint. At bottom, it is at the source of every vitality."<sup>4</sup>

### 1 Cioran's triumphant doubt

is a hard act to follow, but Josephine Meckseper does it in her own way, alternatively exhibiting condensed, crisp assemblages and over-the-top extrapolations. Like Cioran's, Meckseper's objectivity tends towards extremity. Her work seeks to liberate us from the "truth" by creating a certain state of defascination. This was already perceptible in the four issues of *FAT* magazine that she has produced since 1994, cleverly using provocative collage to inhabit tabloid culture with a vengeance. Her present artworks are bent on pushing the limit in numerous directions, leaving us with a sharp question mark in the guise of an answer. Can one understand anything about contemporary culture if one doesn't take it to the bitter end?

What is most striking about Josephine Meckseper's installations is that they hardly are different from anything else, only much more so. Her mock shelves, storefronts, and windows are less separate from the world than continuous with it. And there is a reason for that: they are not just a way of exhibiting her art, they *are* her art. It is consumeristic displays that

she is displaying, not just specific objects. This is made clear by the logo she posted on the storefront of Elizabeth Dee Gallery suggesting that a conglomerate named Duane Reade/Gagosian/UBS would be taking over the gallery soon. At bottom, there is no difference between any of them. A display is a display as a rose is a rose. "Never see in things more than there is to see," warned Cioran. "See them as they are. Don't identify with them." This is what he called *objectivity*.<sup>5</sup> Everything being exchangeable within a consumerist society, galleries can easily be turned into boutiques. Which, of course, has already happened. Is it vastly more incongruous to display a framed photograph of Marx and a roll of toilet paper side by side, as Meckseper does? (Freud equated feces with money.) If society is a spectacle, why not make it a freak show?

Meckseper's vitrines draw attention in a very strange way, and it is often difficult to account for this phenomenon. The "mixed media in display windows" exhibited at the Whitney Biennial 2006 are a case in point.

In the one bombastically called: *The Complete History of Post-contemporary Art* (2005), the objects aligned are brightly reflected in the back wall of the vitrine, but these reflections dissolve in some kind of a fog. How could they be so startlingly luminous and spooky? Standing at the left corner, a white rabbit can also be seen reflected doubly from a slight angle, which adds to the magic. The second window, *Tout va bien*, plays this in reverse. This time, the back and sides of the vitrine elicit fuzzy effects, while the bottom of the window (made of a regular mirror glass) almost sends the objects floating in space. Her

ingenious use of gray and black Plexiglas reflected on regular mirrors accounts for this disquieting effect. But the effect also suggests one often used within the realm of theory: it's as if Meckseper (who has dabbled in Marxism) managed to sardonically stage the magic of a bourgeois economy, the "mist" through which the products of labor "appear to us to be an objective character of the products themselves," as Marx noted brilliantly in volume one of *Das Kapital*.

Consumerism and the capitalist system are Meckseper's prime focus, and she pursues them with biting humor and flights of craziness. Images from a mass anti-Iraq War protest in Washington are displayed on the Elizabeth Dee storefront as if they were part of the urban flow – which they truly are. Information is consumed like everything else. Demonstrators meet as a tribe and celebrate their own past with codified clothes and rituals, chanting, dancing, waving signs for the most diverse causes, and leaving behind piles of garbage like any high school reunion. Largely ignored by the media,

they feel free to indulge their enforced irresponsibility and confront “the Man” as if there were still one. Politics, even radical politics, has become news. Nothing is exempt from the iron law of capitalism. It is this process, in which objects (or people) are “disappeared” before our very eyes, that Meckseper explores in her windows. Actual commodities are summoned, then vanish through a series of ghostly mirrors. As consumers, we are supposedly defined by what we select. But it is signs that count, what objects *mean*, not what they are. Human relations are no different. They are merely “personalized” within a system of signs. What is signified is not a singular experience, only the idea of a relationship. Is art that different when you think of it, particularly conceptual art as Meckseper herself practices it? Her art is congruent with its content because it deals with ideas abstracted from objects and signs. Except that it plays with signs for themselves, for no other purpose than her own.

*The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art* presents a series of objects lined up before us in a spare display: the white-furred rabbit, an old book, a checked stocking on a mannequin’s leg, a blue flag, a framed picture, a plunger, two upside-down posters, three bottles of perfume, a toilet bowl brush, etc. Odds and ends, high and low, disconnected from one another, are derisively assembled. They stand at attention like the wolves in Freud’s famous case. Perched on a tree, the Wolf Man’s wolves were intently observing an “obscene” parental scene through an open window. We observe Meckseper’s objects similarly. Straight-faced and self-contained, the objects stand there (they also *stand for* human relationships) eager to deliver their message. The arrangement suggests the existence of a secret grammar: many of the same items – plungers, stockings, underwear ads, fashion pictures, or bare asses (“We’re Open,” a sign says), etc. – can be found in other installations. If *Das Kapital* could lie on a couch, this would be its dream-work and worst nightmare.

An aesthetic reading of this installation would note Meckseper’s impeccable sense of space. Two diagonal lines cross on the mannequin’s white knee, balancing the two white masses on both sides. Poster ads and flags hanging upside down from the top create a kind of a dome effect. Meckseper’s work is highly aestheticized, and she often assimilates avant-garde aesthetics, especially Russian constructivism, with consumerist packaging. A thin geometric strip on a poster repeated on the stocking reminds us of it. Meckseper is not referencing her work to art history, she is simply suggesting that art (including her own) is never isolated from commerce.

But a purely aesthetic reading of her work would bypass the obvious: the objects’ insistent signage. Each item carries a sign: the white rabbit holds a OUI vote (it turns into a NON in the mirror, an allusion to the recent constitutional referendum in Europe, reinforced here by the Euro flag and an ironic “Euroslut” porn poster); perfume bottles have NE TRAVAILLEZ JAMAIS

[Don’t ever work] labels; the toilet bowl brush has a \$3.95 price tag, etc. A small sign announces %, a real steal. Reality itself is for sale. Everything is a sign, and every sign has its price, whether advertised or not. The piece’s title written in script on an old Koran sums it all up: *The Complete History of Postcontemporary Art*. Art is no different than anything else, and art history exists simply to plug the product. Our current glut of “posts,” from post-modernism to posthumanism, clearly describes the absence of any new content. “Art” now surpasses its traditional definition. As Jean Baudrillard claims, our entire society has been *trans*-aestheticized. While critics debate the “death of art,” we are actually experiencing the exact opposite. Never has art been more present at every single level of society, from advertising/fashion/media to politics. The reverse is also true: activities once seen as not artistic (ecology, biology, medicine, etc.) are now present in art. Boundaries between the various domains have become porous: another psychotic syndrome unleashed by the flows of capitalism.

## IF SOCIETY IS A SPECTACLE, WHY NOT MAKE IT A FREAK SHOW?

Exchangeability knows no bounds, and the best one can hope for is to note its system of pretenses and illusions. Meckseper’s work creates an active awareness of the *systemic cynicism* that permeates contemporary society. In % (2005), Meckseper sculpts the well-known silhouette of an Abu Ghraib torture victim out of a halter top, as if it were part of a fashion show. War, like obscenity, is not the exception, but the rule. “Just because we’re not behind bars doesn’t mean we’re not behind bars,” a character says in one of Chris Kraus’s early videos (*Fullproof Illusions*, 1986).

Nothing is what it is because everything is in everything else. Packaging is the only fixed content. Politics, art, commerce – everything must *signify* in order to become exchangeable. “Pardon Our Appearance,” proclaims a sign, slyly suggesting that appearances indeed *are* everything. Another sign, “Clearance Sale,” tells us that yes, everything – art, the contemporary world, humanity – must go. Will consumerist society also vanish among its own reflections one day, completing the cycle?

Most store window displays are organized by category so the eye can move smoothly across the tableau until the item we seek is identified. In Meckseper’s work, objects remain discontinuous, just like unrelated news media items, which are held together only by their instant replacement. Her windows act like a screen on which objects have been slowed to a halt, revealing the arbitrariness of their placement. The stillness of these objects feels catatonic. They are not so much perceived as hallucinated. Standing out against the black background, intensely lit and delineated, they challenge our gaze. There’s something retentive, even fascistic, about them. (The plunger and toilet bowl brush, Duchamp’s choice materials, are ready for action, to say nothing of the perfume bottles). Something is about to happen, as in a de Chirico painting. Something is *imminent*. Similarly, behind



every airbrushed consumerist display looms the prospect of complete mayhem and disorder. Danger lurks everywhere, and more objects are mobilized to remove the threat. Just as Hitler presented himself as the savior of Germany, the job of consumerism is to fill a void it itself has created. Exchangeability crystallizes into fetishes: can total delirium be far behind?

In %, Meckseper throws Soviet iconography into the mix of media referents. The hammer and sickle, once permanent symbols of the Worker's State, appear as decorative designs on a wallpaper. The Red Star is alternately patterned with the (upside-down) Washington Monument. The effect is dizzying and hilarious. A sign in front of the wallpaper reminds viewers of the hollowness of both systems: "End Democracy, that festival of mediocrity. Vote Communist 2008." A wooden hammer and sickle are displayed on a big mirrored cube in front of the wallpaper like a work of art or a product. Reflected in the mirror, the political fetish is allowed to float in the air, freed of all ideological reference: a deluxe object inviting contemplation. Meanwhile, the hammer and sickle bask in their own reflections. Yet in this sublimated state, they are simultaneously deflated and distorted. The sickle in the mirror looks a bit sickly and impaired as if, despite its two handles, it is in fact missing one.

The fine line between neurosis and psychosis, fetishism and delirium, even democracy and totalitarianism, is easily blurred. Seen from a certain angle, the wallpaper's mottled reflections bounce on the mirrored cube, messing up the neat hammer-and-sickle image. Meckseper creates the same mayhem that all these signs are meant to exorcize. But one may also read, in this forest of signs and disorderly patterns,

the ghostly return of the masses who'd been recruited to communism's sublime ideals, only to be left high and dry. "When we refuse to recognize the interchangeable character of ideas," Cioran wrote, "blood is shed."<sup>6</sup>

**2** In 1936, a time of huge Nazi rallies and induced political mysticism, Walter Benjamin analyzed new technologies that were being used to mobilize the masses. Benjamin argued that fascism gave people a chance to express themselves by changing their mode of participation, introducing aesthetics into political life. In this sense, contemporary society has been entirely fascisized. Except that now it is not only the masses (if that concept still exists) who are allowed to express themselves, it is everyone. Now everyone is "personally" required to express themselves, and not just about sex, as Michel Foucault intimated in his *History of Sexuality* – but about *everything*. The masses reborn as consumers are exhorted to express themselves endlessly (through voting, polling, media, etc.) because none of it matters or leaves any mark. The masses no longer have anything to say that has not been pre-

empted by the pollution of real-time communication. In capitalist societies, the more individualized the response, the more massified.

In the early 1960s, the Situationists drifted through the city, eager to reclaim lived experience from the "alienating" effect of the society of the spectacle. Any compromise with commerce would prove fatal to art, they insisted. And in that respect they were prescient, although wrong about everything else. There was no way of regaining any individual authenticity because there was none to start with. Individuation was already mass-produced. There is no escape from the spectacle. Since revolution is no longer possible, revolt is no longer an option. In his *System of Objects*, written in 1968, Jean Baudrillard boldly anticipated this process: "The revolutionary imperative is alive, but impossible to implement in practice; it consumes itself in the idea of revolution...." With the invasion of the media, indistinction became the main feature of the system.

Succeeding decades have amply confirmed this analysis. It is not simply the accumulation of images, but the speed of transmission that makes individuation impossible. With instant feedback, emission and reception have become indistinguishable. The more communication, the less meaning. Signs themselves have become mere signals, individuals "dividuals." Reality itself is being morphed live, its representations reassembled before our very eyes.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanized Reproduction," Benjamin remarked that technological developments had already altered aesthetic experience. Unlike static visual art, which encourages concentra-

tion from viewers, film elicits a kind of distraction that absorbs viewers laterally. The object is perceived in an incidental fashion. No longer are viewers absorbed in the art – it is the art that absorbs them in a state of distraction. This perceptual change caused by film impedes the spectator's intelligent associations. "No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested." Film relies on constant interruption and sudden change. This new form of appropriation – *appropriation of the viewer by the art*, by the speed and fragmentation of the medium, the indirection of the attention – seemed bound to "make the cult value recede in the background." And yet, Benjamin admitted, the opposite happened. The new "habit" generated among the masses – mechanical apperception – was in turn reappropriated *and violated* by fascism. The Führer used it to build his own cult and exert covert control over the masses. Fascism pressed film "into the production of ritual values" (dramaturgy, sacrifice) necessarily leading to war. Monumentalizing the new perceptions instilled by film, Hitler succeeded in turning his rallies into full-fledged spectacles, a bar-

barous celebration of violence and power exalting the supremacy of the German nation. And Benjamin rightly predicted that in time mankind would "experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."

Cioran was in Germany between 1933 and 1935, as the Nazis were sweeping the country. Until then the gifted young Romanian writer had been uninterested in politics, though he was known in his own country for his intellectual outrageousness. There is a fine line, though, between being willfully irresponsible, as he wanted to be then (striking an exasperated pose for lack of conviction), and joining a cause that made irresponsibility a state policy. It didn't take long for Cioran to cross that line, with catastrophic consequences. Moved by the adulation of the German crowds, he became an ardent admirer of Hitler's messianism. He condoned the slaughter of SA (Storm Troopers) leaders, declaring flatly that "Humanitarianism is nothing but self-delusion....What did mankind have to lose with the death of a few idiots?"<sup>7</sup> He also suggested the creation of a concentration camp for Romanian politicians and dreamed of installing a dictatorship in his own country. Back home, he eventually joined Romania's mystical fascist Iron Guard as they ascended to power and a bloody fate.

It took Cioran a number of years of exile in Paris to sober up and draw the bitter conclusions expressed in his book *A Short History of Decay* (1949). This work was the first in Europe to denounce political fanaticism and ideological delusions: "In itself," he wrote, "every idea is neutral, or should be; but people animate it, projecting upon it their flames and insanity....This is the way ideologies, doctrines, and bloody farces are born." Intolerance, ideological intransigence, or proselytism all reveal "the bestial roots of enthusiasm." They turn people into "virtual assassins."<sup>8</sup> In order to resist political temptation, he warned in *History and Utopia* (1960), "one has to control oneself at every moment."<sup>9</sup> Only by cultivating the *power of indifference* could one ever resist the need to believe which has "infested the mind forever."

Cioran's extreme skepticism was the lighter side of his delirious fanaticism, not the result of any philosophical wisdom. And he well knew it. All his life, he remained silent about his irresponsible infatuation with fascism. It was only after his death in 1995 (by then he was widely celebrated in France as the greatest classical writer of the century) that his "youthful folly," as he called it, was disclosed. A violent controversy still rages in France about his alleged anti-Semitism, although he was far less anti-Semitic than most Romanians and mixed nationalist prejudice with admiration and rivalry. Cioran's work became popular in Germany after the rash of ideological terrorism (the RAF of Baader-Meinhof in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy) that shook Europe in the late 1970s and 1980s, when radical revolutionar-

ies, disenfranchised from institutional parties, took political struggle into their own hands. They hoped to address the "deluded" masses directly through spectacular terrorist actions. They didn't realize that their message could never reach the silent masses, never mind mobilize them. They only played into the hands of the media and the State. This was the last outburst of ideological resistance against consumerism's intractability. From then on politics moved from the street to the screen and imploded in pixels. People in Europe call it "the death of ideologies." The state of distraction that Benjamin denounced as the bedrock of fascism is now the main feature of contemporary society. We all are the victims of aesthetic expression and electronic apperception. Meckseper's store windows strangely recall Benjamin's movie screen. Nothing can stop the "soft fascism" of consumerism.

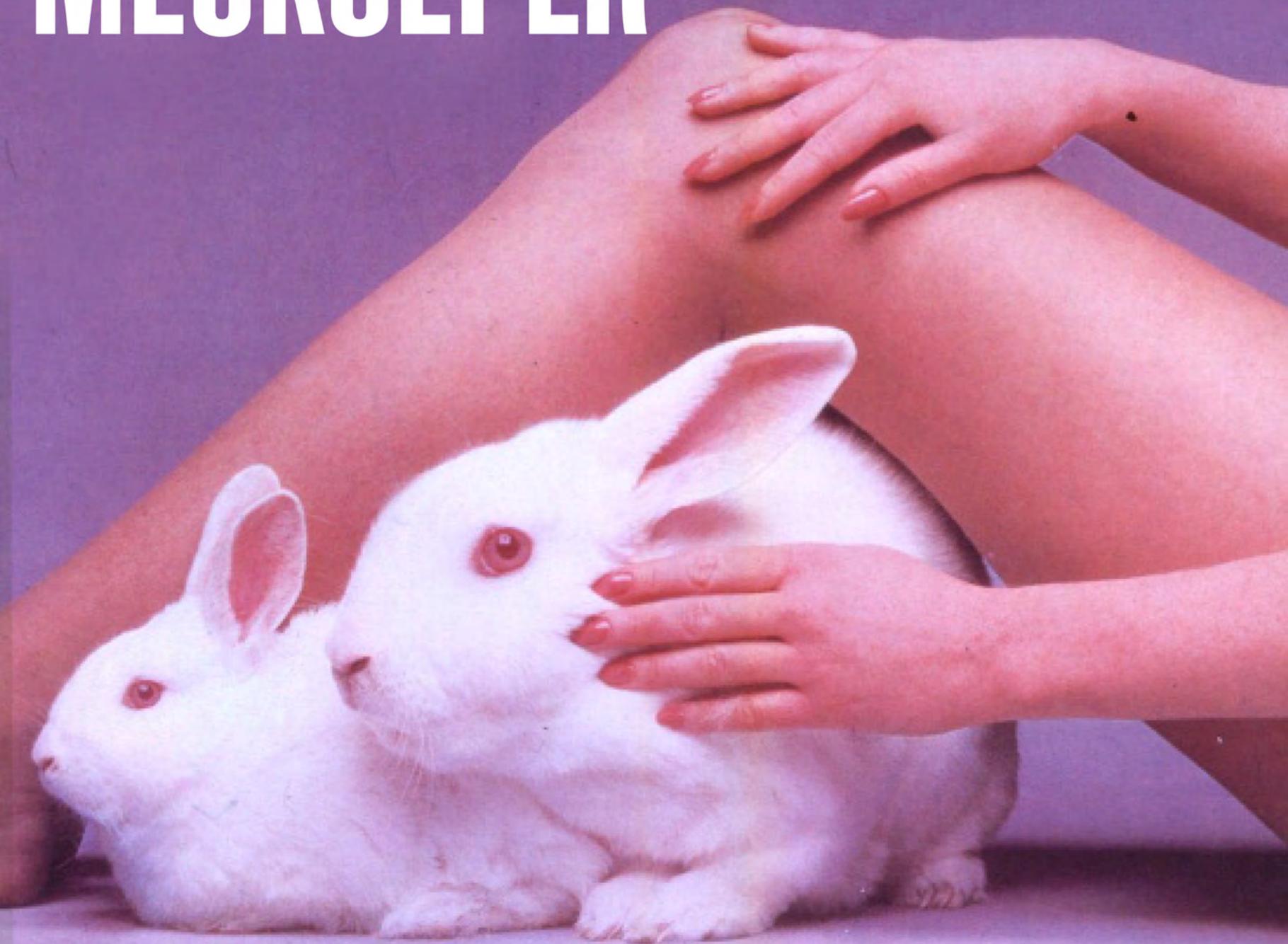
Gilles Deleuze used to say of Meckseper's generation that it would be the last to have an idea of what history was about. Meckseper's grandfather, an architect, joined the SS. Her aunt was a close friend of Ulrike Meinhof. Her mother represented the Green Party. It was her father, an artist, who gave her Cioran to read. She was eleven, and only understood what he meant much later, when she became aware, as she says, of "the oppressiveness of the country's past." It is no surprise that she would make the kind of art that she does. Or that she chooses to do it, like Cioran, *in style*.

*Special thanks to  
Chris Kraus for editing this text.*

## NOTES

- 1) E. M. Cioran, *Précis de décomposition* [*A Short History of Decay*] (1949) in E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1995), p. 582.
- 2) E. M. Cioran, *Entretiens* [*Dialogues*] (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 34.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 4) E. M. Cioran, *Solitude et destin* [*Solitude and Destiny*] (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 7 (July 16, 1990).
- 5) E. M. Cioran, *Breviaire des vaincus* [*Bravuary of the Defeated*], in Cioran, *Œuvres*, p. 566.
- 6) Cioran, *Précis de décomposition*, in Cioran, *Œuvres*, p. 582.
- 7) E. M. Cioran, "Revolt of the Giottons," *Wemea*, August 5, 1934. Quoted in Marta Potra, *An Infamous Past* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), p. 11.
- 8) Cioran, *Précis de décomposition*, in Cioran, *Œuvres*, p. 581.
- 9) Cioran, *Histoire et utopie* [*History and Utopia*], in Cioran, *Œuvres*, p. 1014.

CATALOGUE **THE JOSEPHINE  
MECKSEPER**



# OUR BODIES, OUR SHELVES JOHN KELSEY

**THE PEASANT WOMAN WEARS HER SHOES IN THE FIELD. ONLY HERE ARE THEY WHAT THEY ARE.** —Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*

**HIPPIE WORN USED BIRKENSTOCK LEATHER SANDALS SIZE 38 (WOMENS 8, MENS 6) WORN IN, BUT STILL HAVE PLENTY OF MILES LEFT IN THEM! THEY ARE ALL WORN IN, READY FOR YOU! THESE BROWN LEATHER HIPPIE STYLE SANDALS ARE PERFECT FOR SPRING AND SUMMER WEAR. ITEM LOCATION: SOUTHERN OREGON, USA. SHIPPING IS \$6.95 (OVERSEAS MORE). I ACCEPT PAYPAL, MONEY ORDERS AND CHECKS.**

—Ebay listing, April 2004

In his study of Pissarro's late peasant paintings, T. J. Clark shows how the pastoral mode, and in particular the figure of the farmer toiling in her field, served as a sort of screen onto which modernism projected and tested its emerging technical and expressive inventions.<sup>1</sup> The peasant was one of the last great "subjects" of nineteenth-century painting, an image that had become petrified and sentimentalized in the brooding, crepuscular works of Jean-François Millet and other Salon favorites. In such pictures, the stooped, plodding peasant was viewed in terms of the arrival of the railroad, industrial farming methods, and the insurance policy: as a life-form on the verge of extinction. It seemed the nineteenth century had nowhere to go beyond Millet's *Man with a Hoe*, 1860–62, and it was no accident that a cult of the peasant reached its peak of popularity in a time of both agricultural and aesthetic crisis. How to transform this obstacle into something productive for bourgeois culture's version of progress? By idealizing and erasing it at the same time. So the rural proletariat was converted into a popular image, a cliché put into the service of an encroaching capitalist philosophy of life. This also explains the attraction of such a figure (as worn out by painterly conven-



MAN WITH A HOE, 1860–62  
Jean-François Millet  
Oil on canvas, 80 x 99.1 cm  
Courtesy of the  
Getty Center, Los Angeles

tion as she was by her fieldwork) to anarchists and modernists such as Pissarro and van Gogh. At the risk of romance and prettiness, they reactivated the peasant as a sort of limit-subject, sensing an opportunity to work out problems both aesthetic and political, real differences of opinion about ideas and materials in art, and about art's relation to bourgeois society. The impulse was to de-erase the pastoral in order to retrieve the shock of the material world and, at the same time, to make this material shock meaningful and public. To devise an aesthetic in line with the anarchist rejection of a version of modernity where depopulation of the countryside, and the recruiting of rural bodies for factory and military work, seamlessly coincided with the bland reproduction of idealized pastoral scenes.

Cut to: a pair of used Birkenstock sandals, purchased on Ebay and presented as a readymade sculpture in 2004—a distant echo of the peasant shoes in van Gogh's now famous painting. Like the crude and sturdy peasant shoes, it's impossible for the Birkenstocks not to track in a kind of ideological mud. The tell-tale footprint embedded in their stinky leather is a kind of fossil proving the former existence of an extinct life-form: the "real hippie" who once wore them (and who has now become one more symbol manager toiling in the fun fields of the information economy). Used Birkenstocks stand for a worn-out notion of being-in-freedom, of a lost human bond with the Earth she once walked on, a once-upon-a-time slowness, a keeping it real, a doing your own thing in your own time and a "perfect fit" in a here-and-now, etc. The shoes say all this with their grimy materiality and sell themselves this way too. They are anti-glamour amplifiers (Made in Germany) of a truly alternative lifestyle (all worn in, ready for you!), of an earthy, comfortable fit in freedom.

The hippie, like Millet's stooped, heroic peasant, is a kind of limit-subject the contemporary moment must put to work in order to move beyond. Recruiting her as both cliché and as integrated cyber-citizen, we are able to put an end to a certain, problematic kind of belongingness. And doesn't the current state of the art world seem to mask a process not unlike the depopulation of nineteenth-century farmlands: a progressive reorganization of bodies in the world? Our loss of belief in bodily action and collectivity coincides with a growing resemblance of art galleries to boutiques that will exhibit anything, no matter how countercultural in style or content, as long as the product can be moved and shown with ease. The retro appeal of everything hand-crafted, for example, is more than just the look of the moment; it is our way of neutralizing antagonistic potentials by converting them back into productive signs, converting slowness back into speed, problems into solutions. Here, the Real keeps wanting to return as something available, something that circulates freely, that we can browse and paypal for (overseas shipping extra). Now, use value is cashed in for a nostalgic used-value. Used, hippie-

worn shoes are fresh fossils of our former radicalism. We rub up against these objects in order to measure our new distance from them.

The return of the hippie in recent protest culture, as a folkloric figure made available to young people who want to express their rejection of the global economy and its new wars, will never produce any difference if it remains frozen in the neutrality of a "lifestyle choice." Politics and aesthetics morph seamlessly in a world where politics confuses itself with representation, where all attention is swallowed in the communication of a message rather than in the intensity of an event. Expressing a political position by reproducing, in a street full of cameras and cops, an image like hippie or protester, the body and its potentials are willingly captured in an image that is only seen and counted. The anti-summit sometimes explodes, but mostly takes place as an armed and peaceful fashion show: There is a Trotskyite style, a Pink Bloc and a Black Bloc style, a Green style, as well as a Tute Bianche and an Attac style. Images such as rainbow flags and Che t-shirts, face paint and dreadlocked jugglers, are allowed to share space as long as they remain images we merely recognize and decode—as we do when watching a bad movie.<sup>2</sup> As long as nothing happens, no real life-form is elaborated here. As long as the hippie orgy does not make some kind of violent return, as a contagious event or the experience of civil war. And as long as nothing and nobody really drops out of the picture.

## USED, HIPPIE-WORN SHOES ARE FRESH FOSSILS OF OUR FORMER RADICALISM.

For the original, now extinct, Birkenstock-wearing human, the rug was hand-sewn from recycled scraps, a folksy floor to make your world happen on. It could be rolled up and thrown into the van, unfurled in the pad where the orgy always spontaneously happened. It was a kind of flying carpet to get high and freak out on, a free zone, and a tactile-optical ground on which experimental behaviors were freely unleashed. The orgy rug recalls the Byzantine mosaic: It doesn't represent things or figures, it opens up a space where living bodies and events can take place. The picture conjures depth by putting the viewer at a certain distance, but the flat, glittering Byzantine surface was a two-dimensional machine for closing the distance between Earth and Heaven, and for making the world and its bodies float (as opposed to organizing them with perspective). Hippies had a similar way of producing heaven on earth. The patchwork orgy rug was a kind of shelf that displayed the freakers' free nakedness as they lost and found themselves right there in a bond as intimate as the peasant's to her field. It was a launch pad for smoky visions of druggy, decadent Babylon. The hippie rug was a live-in image, Byzantine in design, and seemed to function as some kind of transportation device. Here, in the gallery installation, facing East, is it a Westernized prayer rug, a way of fast-forwarding to paradise now and here? This floor is unmoored once more in its double-reference to Islam and to the countercultural '60s. It is a shelf with nothing on it. A bodiless projector.

The heels raise the girl up at the same time as they attract our gaze downward, to her feet. There is nothing “down to earth” about a pair of Manolos, but strapping them on I suddenly want to get down on all fours again, all by myself now, and get fucked by your eyes. There’s a peasant hiding somewhere in that fashion model. Something base and low rising there. Birkenstocks and high heels are two kinds of shelves that produce and display two kinds of bodies. One is a hippie who lives on Earth, the other is a fashion model who is basically at war with it. Both the hippie and the model seem worlds away from the idea of work embodied by the peasant. But, in fact, the fashion model or any *jeune fille* (male or female) works just as hard as the peasant by collaborating as intensely as she does in the production of this, her world. She is the perfect combination of biopolitics and spectacle, a walking, talking commodity who puts herself to work every time she looks in the mirror, signs up for a yoga class, medicates herself, flips through a magazine, or catches her own reflection in the shop window. She is both shelf and product. She sometimes stoops to adjust her glittering sandal straps. . . and then she probably feels, like the hippie, free to do whatever she wants (with her hair, with her style).

In Meckseper’s gallery installation, where fashion images share space with protest documentation, where an idea of relational space rubs shoulders with an idea of lifestyle or boutique design, where an idea of the social morphs into an idea of the commodity relation, many of the elements on display also double as mechanisms of display: shelves, rugs, windows, magazine covers, and wallpaper are the products here. Here, display displays itself. Covers and wrappings conceal nothing, they only reveal themselves. And, reappropriating the very mechanisms of commodity transmission in this way, and in particular by conflating politicized symbols with such functions (Party logo and gold pendant, for example), by relocating non-art in art and vice versa, by this orgiastic displacement, this diabolical Feng Shui of signifying forms and materials, the artist also goes to work (like the peasant in her field, the posing model) in the production of her anti-world. The installation unleashes its Byzantine effects across every surface of the white cube. It causes an idea of the contemporary human to float there, between protest and runway, here and nowhere, without providing any solid ground to land on.

Here, as in Pissarro’s peasant paintings, the protester and the fashion model function as screens upon which the artist projects and tests her own virtuosity, her renewed capacity to appropriate language, image, and communicativity. What the protester (who smashes the window), the fashion model (who is a human window), and the artist (who displaces windows) all share is a heightened sense of exposure and a dwelling in communication. As symbol managers, they live a dubious, post-Fordist relation to labor: “They are no longer instruments of production so much as transmission belts. They are, at

## IT WAS A LAUNCH PAD FOR SMOKY VISIONS OF DRUGGY, DECADENT BABYLON.

best, lubrication—pure Vaseline.”<sup>3</sup> As the artist works, she may sometimes catch her own reflection too, stooping in the golden light of some sentimental notion of “artist.” But she finds ways of erasing herself too.

Glittering, flattening, lighting, wrapping, etc., are so many special effects put into the service of a décor that clearly does not pretend to ground a happening but wants to test its own distance from the hippie orgy. Bodies are vanished from this space drained of all placeness. All that remains is the pose. All kinds of posings happen here: com-posings, ex-posings, dis-posings, etc. In photographs, in shoes, on shelves, and in windows. A virtuosity of the pose, of the body’s ability to abstract and freeze itself as image, is infinitely played out.

The installation is a *wunderkammer* where all of these body-images, word-images, and shelf-like objects participate in a larger, crystalline structure, producing an “artificial paradise” where exposure is exposed as such. Ideas and utopias are reduced to surfaces, and surfaces are in turn revealed as the only remaining sites and vehicles of a possible politics. By taking back the surface, we reappropriate what spectacular democracy has long since expropriated from us: our very being-in-communication, and with it the possibility itself of putting our virtuosities in common. But the question of how to use the spectacle against itself will not be answered by its managers. The stinky, leathery materiality of the Birkenstocks is not so appetizing, but there is something intriguing in the way they seem to

kick against this aesthetic no-place. They are a grease stain in paradise, a living-dead body that refuses to be managed.

### NOTES

- 1) T. J. Clark, “We Field-Women,” in *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 55–138.
- 2) “This is a cinema where there is no communication, because everything is communicated. . . a series of orphan images, images which must, one by one, be seen, recognized and, so to speak, *ticked off* by the spectator-consumer. . . Henceforth, images are to be ‘scanned’ twice, once by the post-film-maker who signs them and once by the post-public who endorses them”: Serge Daney, “Falling Out of Love,” reprinted in *Sight and Sound* (London), Summer 1992, p. 16.
- 3) Paolo Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).



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