

Visitors' Text

Josephine Meckseper

21st February – 3rd May 2009

Situated somewhere between the trappings of political activism and mass consumerism, the works of Josephine Meckseper (born 1964 in Lilienthal, lives and works in New York) are like sculptural collages that evoke the paradoxes of the current capitalist value system. In Meckseper's first solo exhibition in Switzerland, the migros museum für gegenwartkunst is exhibiting a series of new works investigating the complex interaction between the auto and oil industries and the war in Iraq.

Since the early 1990s, Meckseper's installations, photography and films have reflected upon the reciprocity between a culture of consumption and politics. Shiny consumer products become artifacts of a political activism which, in effect, yield a veritable constellation of confusion. Window display mannequins – exponents of a consumer-happy society – are draped with picket signs, while glamorous accessories and toilet brushes are absurdly confronted by Meckseper's photographs of street protests. The incongruous arrangement of contrary worlds in a seamless display refers point-blank to the flattening out of political and aesthetic principles in the mass media. Meckseper works with symbols, which serve as metaphors for the critique of late capitalist society. Her arrangements of objects and artificial scenarios recall the aesthetics of department store displays, but at the same time re-contextualize the objects presented: the protest slogans are given a new significance – they become "a provocation against the presumed state of paralysis of our world."¹ In this confrontation of normative societal attitudes Meckseper challenges viewers to evaluate their own code of values.

The wars in strategically important countries, legitimized by the USA's national interest, have been taken by Josephine Meckseper as inspiration for her most recent works, which interrogate the value system of American society. The life-size oil rigs *Untitled (Oil Rig No. 1)* (2009) and *Untitled (Oil Rig No. 2)* (2009), isolated from their original context and transferred to the exhibition space, serve as symbols of the USA's economic history. The dependence on oil, upon which a significant part of the USA's economic success story is based, implies an inevitable overabounding decadence. The symbols of industrial power, the advance of the automobile, freedom and independence are confronted by the replication of a World War Two bunker, *Untitled (Bunker)* (2009). This is oriented by a bunker Paul Virilio photographed, described in his book *Bunker Archaeology*. Likewise, in the shop window installation *Fall of the Empire* (2008) the subject matter is dedicated to societal and moral decay. The reference to the fall of the Roman Empire points to the increasing degeneration of Western consumer culture.

Material cut from automobile company TV advertisements and set to music with a sustained piercing industrial noise song by Boyd Rice with the chorus "Do you want – total war?", in the video *0% Down* (2008) deconstructs the suggestive image language of advertising strategies. Cars are escorted into the desert by military jets, their bodywork armored by jet nozzles. Forward thrust, invincibility and military fascination stand for a war-like and strong-willed nation – a war-affirming aesthetic for a nation conducting war. This work synthesizes a series of Meckseper's works in which the artist brings together the link between US interests in the raw material oil, upon which the automobile industry is highly dependent, and the wars in the Middle East. In an interview, fellow artist Liam Gillick praised this work as "the most elegant and cutting corruption of contemporary culture" that he had ever seen.² The collages of desirable car models such as *Dodge Viper*, *Honda NSX GT* and *Ford Mustang* (2008) question advertising's mode of operation. Found posters are stretched across industrial canvas and transparently laminated to suggest a form of serial production. The status symbol

¹ Interview with the artist on <http://www.artnet.de>, 2007.

² Liam Gillick in an interview with Josephine Meckseper, www.interviewmagazine.com/art/josephine-meckseper.

of the car, reduced to six polished chrome trims and displayed on a mirrored pedestal, in **Negative Horizon** (2008) emphasizes the absurd fetish character of the display of goods. The chrome trimmings become symbols of societal surplus and lose their use function. This arrangement conveys an aesthetic sublimation of commodity objects.

President's Day (2007), a canvas composed of black rectangles and white lines, seems like a constructivist painting. The distribution is the result of an investigation into the economic organizational principles of magazine layout, in which advertising columns serve to neutralize the editorial structuring of a newspaper page, as in the *New York Times* articles reporting on victims in Iraq that Meckseper researched, which were placed next to advertisements for luxury goods. Similarly in black and white are the wall works **Untitled (Black and White Wall)** and **Untitled (American Flag)** (both 2009). The artist has adapted elements of the US flag, and thus reflected the simplified perspective on foreign policy for which the government under George W. Bush was responsible.

In **Ten High** (2008) Meckseper has arranged various objects that represent the fall of American neo-liberalism. On a glossy black pedestal in front of a background of the same material are three headless window display mannequins. With her cardboard sign "Going out of business, SALE", the first indicates the moment at which the work was created, and the looming depression. The second mannequin with a tie around her neck patterned with Christian symbols refers to the arch-conservative Bible-belt population of the US Mid-West. Beside that the third figure sports a veteran's t-shirt. The other objects in the arrangement – a walking-frame, the flag, an ash tray and a whisky bottle – comment on the destiny of war veterans, those who returned, who often live in deep poverty while being abused by the American state for alleged nationalist glorification. The work **Thank a Vet** (2008) features an oil canister, a toilet brush, and a bathroom carpet, a dummy stocking leg, and a bust wearing a "Thank a Vet" shirt, a war veteran souvenir shirt.

The display window of the consumer advice centre, the *Verbraucherzentrale*, a German consumer protection institution, was the original exhibition location of the installation **Verbraucherzentrale** (2008). This independent and non-profit organization informs and represents the interests of the consumer as a counterpart to those of the companies. Under this banner the exhibited objects are scrutinized. In contrast to this are photographs of people demonstrating for their rights. The video **March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 04/29/06, New York City**, (2007) was created in response to the political measures taken in Meckseper's city of residence. The photograph of a demonstration for the freedom of opinion is used by the artist to show to how great an extent freedom of opinion was subject to state as well as voluntary censure in the years under George W. Bush and since September 11th 2001. Anti-war demonstrations were often not permitted, and papers such as the *New York Times* offered no criticism of war events in Afghanistan or Iraq. **Mall of America** (2009) was created using as its background the USA's largest shopping mall in Minneapolis, with over 500 shops, fun parks, cinemas, nightclubs, restaurants and numerous hotels. In this gigantic leisure and consumer temple, alongside the boutiques and fun parks, a military recruitment office can also be found. The artist points to the dangerous combination of the consumer world and politics. As a capitalist palace the mall promises a beautiful commodity world. The sequences showing shops and strollers are gently filtered with the colors of the American flag, and are contrasted with unfiltered outtakes of the recruiting office. Through the coloring, the slowing down of the image rate, and the use of electronic sound fragments, the stroll through the mall becomes alien, rather like an unpleasant dream.

Meckseper, a German artist living in New in New York, grew up in a politically engaged environment. After her studies at the Universität der Künste (University of Fine Art) in Berlin she transferred to the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California, where she was confronted with the increase in patriotism at the outbreak of the Gulf War, and the Rodney King riots. Meckseper registered this politically charged mood, and she made it the mainspring of her work. During the following years she participated in significant group exhibitions at renowned establishments such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2006), the Royal Academy of Arts, London (2006), and the Tate Modern, London (2006), and produced solo exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart (2007), MoMA, New York, with

Mikhael Subotzky (2008), and in the Bremer Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst (2008) (The Bremen Society for Contemporary Art).

CATALOGUE: on the occasion of this exhibition JRP|Ringier, in cooperation with the Münster exhibition hall of contemporary art, the Blaffer Gallery, and the Art Museum of the University of Houston, will issue a catalogue in June 2009, featuring text contributions by Heike Munder, Rachel Hooper and Sylvère Lotringer in conversation with Paul Virilio.

PUBLIC GUIDED TOURS: Sunday, 22nd February, 15th March, 5th and 19th April, 3rd May at 3pm as well as Thursday, 5th March and 30th April at 6.30pm.

FAMILY GUIDED TOURS: Sunday 29th March at 1.30pm. The tour is 1.5 hours long and its content is aimed at families. Practical work will take place during the tour.

SCHOOL WORKSHOPS: for the Josephine Meckseper exhibition the museum is offering museum learning workshops for schools in collaboration with the Zürich Education Board of the Kanton of Zürich. Further information and registration forms can be obtained at: www.schuleundkultur.ch

OPENING HOURS: Tues / Wed / Fri Midday–6pm, Thurs Midday–8pm, Sat / Sun 11am–5pm. Entry to the museum is free on Thursdays between 5pm and 8pm.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS: on 1st May the museum is open from 11am to 5pm.

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The migros museum für gegenwartskunst is an institution of the Migros-Kulturprozent.
www.kulturprozent.ch