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VIOLENCE,  
LOOTING AND  
VANDALISM, well-  
placed artworld  
types, coteries of  
globetrotting  
curators, fucking  
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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  
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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 coteries 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.  
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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