JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER

TALKING

THE TALK

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

INTERVIEW — Katy Diamond Howard
PORTRAITS — Reji Shin
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, mountains, they all partake in the 'magical immanence' 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 center of the room, the angular sculpture "Empire", made from steel rods, points to a denim canvas with a pair of jeans attached to it, and "Decker", a tribute to the Swiss film about the medieval English people made from acrylic, neck ties, LED lights and toilet seat fabric. Dented, stained, scratched and worn, these pieces communicate aspects of the social relations that produced them, and are a thematically continuous 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 Sweeney 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 Fasbinder 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 space and inhabit it through deliberate action and accumulation of spatial and fabric 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 appealing set environments as alternatives to capitalist order.

You often use glass display cases in your work, as in your 2016 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 conceptualization 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 is 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 practicing military aggression.

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

This perception hinges on a piece called "Here and Elsewhere" from 2015. It's a shelf featuring liqueur 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...
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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 not play into my work, because it shapes our lives. I’ve always been fascinated by artists and now they’ve made art in the midst of war. When I was in high school I studied Picabia’s “Guernica” and the paintings of wounded 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 capitalism. 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 nonexistence of that object.

How do you conceive and produce your art?