



left: *The Children's Crusade* 2006 (detail) mixed media in display window above: Stills from *March on Washington to End the War on Iraq, 9/24/05* 2006 Super 8 film and video transferred to DVD (black and white/color, silent); 8:50 minutes

**Born in Germany, 1964. Lives and works in New York.**

Josephine Meckseper's artwork evokes the empty simulacra that cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard warned about in his essays on nightmarish capitalism. He saw the "cynical smile" of Pop Art in particular as "one of the obligatory signs of consumption; it no longer indicates a humor, a critical distance."<sup>1</sup> Meckseper wears a cool smile with her slick display cases and shelves, photographs that look like fashion magazine spreads, and silent films of political protests that render the social movements of this generation into clichés of the previous. By using commercial displays to comment on the complicity between protest, performance, and profit, the artist herself embraces both criticism of and collusion with consumerism, an ambiguous and complicated position. But the antiwar street marches that she depicts inherently undermine any dichotomy between cynicism and commercialism, for they reference, albeit distantly, the very real consequences of the Iraq war.

Meckseper studied art in Berlin and in 1990 left her homeland for the United States to complete her MFA at the California Institute of Arts.

There she began making films and soon after, in 1994, started publishing her own magazine, *FAT*, a quirky collage of tabloid news, photos, and essays on art and culture. In 2001, Meckseper started constructing shelves of brightly colored acrylic or plexiglass that display commercially manufactured knick-knacks along with her photographs. As she continued to expand her practice, the shelves became only one element of her gallery installations, which by 2004 also included textiles, wallpaper, vitrines, and shoes.

*The Children's Crusade* (2006) is a window onto a set of carefully arranged objects. Somewhere between department store display case and museum vitrine, the box encases a hodgepodge of items—from a toilet brush in its stand sealed in plastic to a chromogenic print of a 2003 antiwar demonstration in New York's Washington Square Park. Taped to the glass on the front of the vitrine is a sign on which the words "PARENTS PLEASE WATCH YOUR CHILDREN WHILE IN THE STORE" can be made out through the gouache painted on the placard's plastic surface. The posted message refers back to the work's title, which in turn alludes to the medieval legend of a band of Northern European

children who left for the Near East to convert Muslims but were sold into slavery when they reached the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Shown near *The Children's Crusade* in the exhibition *Brave New Worlds* is a film that documents a 2005 protest on the National Mall, *March on Washington to End the War on Iraq, 9/24/05* (2006). The fuzzy focus and scratches on the footage give it a vintage feel, which is echoed in the Cold War-motif wallpaper that is also part of the installation. These artworks mine the gray area in which street protests become catwalks, articles of clothing make political statements, and leftist proclamations operate like advertising slogans. Meckseper's melding of commercial design and leftist symbols presents an ideological paradox of progressive politics and profit-making that hits close to home for many liberal Americans.

**RH**

1. Jean Baudrillard, "Pop—An Art of Consumption," trans. Paul Foss, in Paul Taylor, ed., *Post-Pop Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989), 33–44. Baudrillard predicted a world taken over by the endless commercial reproduction of images that manifest our desires rather than a meaningful connection with the real world.