Since the Bush administration first began arguing for an invasion of Iraq, Josephine Meckseper has been recording the massive demonstrations that sprang up in protest. She positioned herself as an observer of street activism with her 2002 photographic series *Berlin Demonstration* and subsequent films, such as *Rest in Peace* (2004) and *March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 04/29/06, New York City* (2007), shot mostly on 16mm and Super 8 film. Recalling archival footage of the far more publicized anti-Vietnam War protests, these films question “the arbitrariness and entertainment character of news coverage.”[1]
Josephine Meckseper's subversive critique of how politics play out in the public sphere has evolved over time from a documentary approach with a certain analytical distance into a much more direct examination of commercial interests in the war in Iraq. Her video 0% Down (2008) is a montage of various car advertisements that saturated the US airwaves in early 2008, set to the song "Total War" written by industrial musician Boyd Rice and recorded under his alias NON in 1997. In what Liam Gillick calls "inverted propaganda," the work reveals the violence latent in the appropriated, otherwise appealing television spots. [2]

Meckseper's work is informed by a Marxist analysis of how capitalism dictates an inequitable imbalance of power down to the very form of commercial products. The artist says: "The basic foundation of my work is a critique of capitalism. [...] My works] embody a form of commodity presentation." [3] This echoes Jean Baudrillard, who argued: "Art [...] confronted in modern times with the challenge of the commodity, does not, nor should it, look for its rescue in a critical denial [...] but rather in outbidding the very formal and fetishized abstraction of commodities [...] becoming more commodity than commodity." [4]

In the case of 0% Down, Meckseper has gone one step further. The video not only embodies commodity presentation, but also unpacks the commodity form. In his 1867 essay "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret," Marx observed that a commercial product is not only a useful thing, but "a thing possessing value," and that this value "transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic, [...] for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language." [5] One of the goals of advertising can be framed in Marxist language as to encode products with implied meanings and associations that then seem mysteriously to emanate from them as commodities. Concealment of anything other than the values and powers associated with a commodity is at the heart of commodity fetishism. The very design of a product is a mirror reflecting its meanings and desires but concealing the power structure implicit in its fabrication. [6] Through the car commercials, Meckseper turns the fetishization of the car in on itself. [7] At first drawing the viewer in with its slick appeal, the montage slowly dissolves any pleasant and coherent illusions linked to the values these car commercials espouse.

When 0% Down debuted, the commercials were still playing on television, and to see something familiar so radically unmasked was quite shocking. The original advertisements encouraged us not only to buy cars and trucks, but also to embrace what they had come to stand for: speed, power, luxury, and aggressive exploration. Simply removing the color and sound from these commercials made their images dramatically stark. What they show is control in the face of danger—cars navigating challenging landscapes as their drivers operate them with ease while jets gracefully whisk through the air.

The video opens with a low syncopated banging. The beat is soon joined by the looped, high-pitched drone of a siren that sounds like an engine revving. Fade in on a harshly lit, barren landscape. [8] An SUV speeds toward us, barely outrunning a huge dark cloud that looms over the horizon. A quick series of jump cuts orbit the car, revealing that the SUV is a Nissan Murano, and as the hovering mass overhead gets closer, we realize it is composed of floating homes that swoop down under the automobile's wheels to form a perfect suburban neighborhood as the baritone voice kicks in: "Do you want total war? Throw out Christ and bring back Thor? Do you want total war? Unleash the beast in man once more? Do you want total war? Dance and do the lion's roar? Do you want total war? Do you want total war? Yes, you want total war! Yes, you want total war." [9]

While the industrial anthem plays, the monochromatic montage of car commercials continues. Fighter jets zoom by and morph into Saabs. Giant I-beams swing like pendulums and narrowly miss pickup trucks underneath. Sports cars mutate into splashes of oil and zoom through blurs of stripes. Trucks and SUVs race through mountains, alongside water, and over salt flats. Dispatches flash by detailing their features, price, and slogans. A Nissan Rogue maneuvers through a maze of city streets, narrowly evading holes as if

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[7] Meckseper's work United States of America (2008) shows early ideas for 0% Down. A row of pictures of football games, hamburgers, sex, and cars is surrounded with aggressive and linguistic imagery, evidence that the artist was studying American icons in general before deciding on the automobile specifically.
[8] Meckseper chose this scene because it looks like a piece of urban America transplanted into the Iraqi desert.
in a giant, tilting, labyrinth. Finally, a Hyundai drifts through a dark landscape. Fade to black. Then the logo and tag line—"Think about it."

The adrenaline rush of the fast-paced video with its exhilarating soundtrack amplifies the messages of empowerment and conquest being promoted in the commercials. With their color removed, the advertisements are no longer fantasies, but more like newscasts broadcasting terms of the military's hegemony. The artist says of 0% Down: "If it had a script, the only line would be: 'Illustrate the obvious ties between the car industry and wars fought over oil.'" The ties between the US Department of Defense and the automotive industry are even more literal than its ties to disputed oil. Of the parent companies of the cars that appear in 0% Down—Toyota, General Motors (Cadillac, Chevrolet, and Saab), Ford, Nissan, Hyundai, Daimler AG (Mercedes-Benz), Mazda, and Tata (Jaguar)—all but Tata had manufacturing contracts with the US Defense Department between 2002 and 2007. Meckseper could have simply shown copies of these contracts if she wanted to make a concrete argument for how automobile manufacturers are part of the military-industrial complex. Or she could have pointed to how the car industry subscribes to a militaristic image by appropriating the forms of military vehicles such as the Jeep and Humvee to create SUVs.

But these approaches would lack the feeling of catharsis that comes at the end of the video, the sense of a repressed illogical violence suddenly rising to consciousness and being released. Essential to this catharsis is the song "Total War," which directly addresses the ads' subliminal brutality. The term total war was coined by the German World War I General, Erich Friedrich Wilhelm von Ludendorff, to describe his ambition for an omnipotent military force. It was once again associated with German warfare during World War II, particularly the way in which under Adolf Hitler "military means were fatally detached from the political ends they served." Total war is thus defined as a war "in which the whole population and all the resources of the combatants are committed to complete victory and thus become legitimate military targets." The term was most famously employed by that master of propaganda Joseph Goebbels, who on 18 February 1943, worked a large audience into a frenzy, asking: "Do you want total war? If necessary, do you want a war more total and radical than anything that we can even imagine today?"

Total war defines what Giorgio Agamben calls the "state of exception," in which executive legislation overrides constitutional rights, and the Geneva Conventions are not applicable to a population whose members are treated more like detainees than citizens. Recent events have shown us that the practice of total war is prevailing. George W. Bush said in his 2002 State of the Union Address that we should pursue terrorists with total disregard for boundaries: "These enemies view the entire world as a battlefield, and we must pursue them wherever they are." It is no surprise, then, that the US military has been accused of mounting indiscriminate attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch and others have criticized US strategy in Afghanistan, in particular, for failing to take the necessary precautions to avoid harming civilians.

But beyond intimating criticism of the reckless use of military power, 0% Down takes direct aim at the mutual interests of US car manufacturers and the US occupation forces in Iraq to keep the oil flowing. In 0% Down, what we hear emphasizes what we only unconsciously see—that these car commercials are asking us not only to buy into the security and luxury associated with car ownership, but also into the militaristic aggression that supports that stability. We require automobiles to sustain our lifestyle, and cars require oil, so oil is a commodity that must be aggressively pursued. Perpetual war for perpetual peace.

The assumption that peace is contingent on dominance harks back to the age-old conflict between violence and social integrity that Sigmund Freud examined in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In his treatise, Freud outlined the conflict between our ego and our need to form a community. Aggression, although inherent in the human condition, dis-
turbs our relationships with others, and therefore must be repressed by society if communities are to survive. Karl Marx recognized that this repression impacts the way society, and particularly material culture, functions. As Marx in Das Kapital famously said of exchange relations, “They do not know it, but they do it.”

This is the very conflict in which Meckseper is embroiled. Her sculptural displays exaggerate the effect of idly leafing through a magazine where “you’ll find horror stories from Iraq appearing side by side with underwear adverts.” In 0% Down, she has gone beyond those casual juxtapositions to reflect the conflict hidden within the commercials themselves, between the slick veneer of advertising and the violence of the surrounding culture of consumerism.

This tension is relevant even now, as the world has changed substantially since 0% Down debuted. Government policies on the Iraq War and the US economy are in flux after the election of President Barack Obama, and automakers became even more entangled in US politics as the outgoing Bush administration gave the “big three”—Ford, GM, and Chrysler—access to the $700 billion in financial rescue funds overseen by the US Treasury. As a result of this bailout, US car companies can no longer afford to run as many commercials, and when they do, the advertisements often tout the cars’ efficient gas mileage or smaller, less expensive models.

Yet, the video continues to hold us accountable, for it reflects more than a singular historical/political situation. The tension between aggression and civilization that manifests itself in the video springs from a conflict hardwired into our nature. At this moment, Meckseper’s video is directed at our complicity in the Iraq War. But it speaks to the larger destructive forces we are endorsing through our insatiable consumerism and the values it promotes.

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