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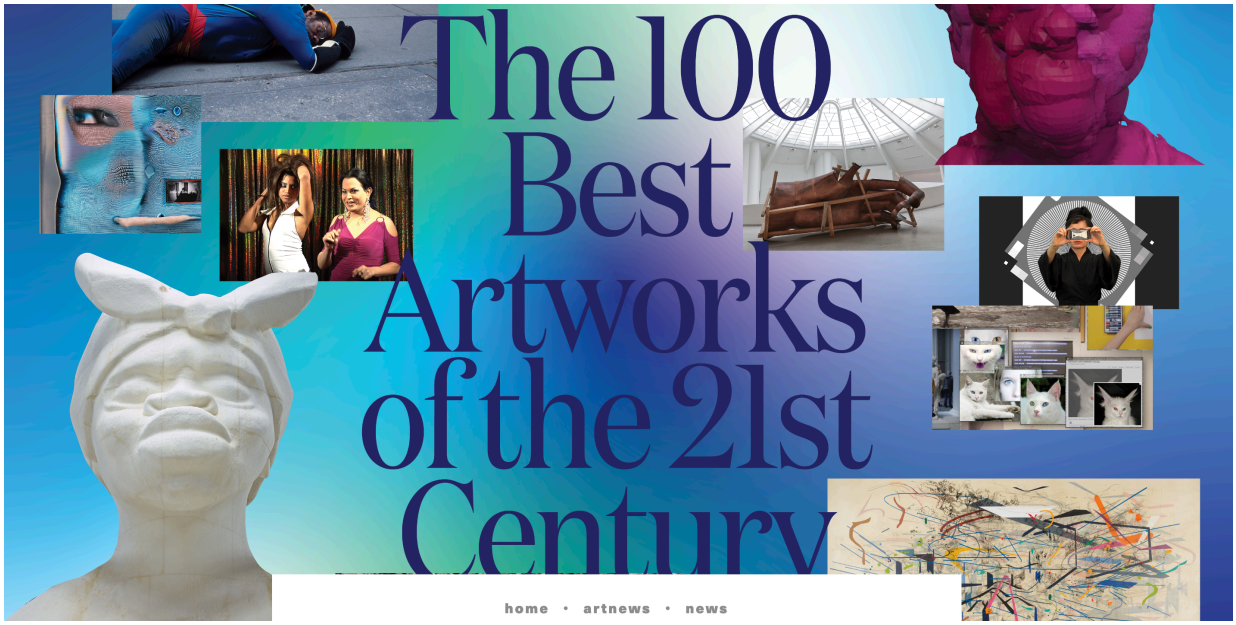


The 100 Best Artworks of the 21st Century

BY The Editors of ARTnews, Art in America March 5, 2025 8:00am

A global recession, a pandemic, 9/11, the Arab Spring, Brexit, the rise of Web 2.0, unrest in the face of economic stability, wars in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere: these were but a few of the many events that have defined the past 25 years, a period characterized by tumult and uncertainty. That all may explain why art appeared to change faster than ever all the while, with artists burning through styles and tendencies with each coming year.

With the 21st century now at the quarter point, we've taken the opportunity to pinpoint the greatest artworks of the past 25 years. Even though we set down some parameters for ourselves (**more on that here**), it was no small task—one made more difficult by the restless creativity of artists during this period.

The joy of an epic list like this one is that it can't encapsulate everything: we know we've left some artworks off, simply because there was no shortage to choose from. We hope you'll discover some amazing pieces here, reflect on some that are much-loved already, and debate the merits of others. And moreover, we hope to learn of new artworks through the conversations we hope our list inspires.

Below, a look back at the greatest 100 artworks of the 21st century so far, as selected by the editors of *ARTnews* and *Art in America*.

This article features contributions from the following writers: Francesca Aton, Andy Battaglia, Daniel Cassady, Anne Doran, Sarah Douglas, Maximilíano Durón, Alex Greenberger, Harrison Jacobs, Tessa Solomon, and Emily Watlington.

42 Josh Kline, *Cost of Living (Aleyda)*, 2014

Josh Kline: *Cost of Living (Aleyda)*, 2014.

Photo : Photo Ronald Amstutz/Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Before 3D printing was widely accepted as an artistic medium, Josh Kline embraced it for this unsettling sculpture of a Manhattan hotel housekeeper named Aleyda, whom Kline interviewed and scanned. Featuring to-scale, 3D-printed versions of several of Aleyda's body parts along with cleaning supplies arrayed on a janitor's cart, the piece comments on how technology has forever altered the workforce. The plastic cart was purchased and will last, but the body parts and tools of her trade are disposable prototypes about which a question looms: What role will the human hand play in the future of our lives and our art? —*A.G.*

LISSON GALLERY

Observer
09 October 2024

OBSERVER

At Lisson Gallery, Josh Kline Presents the Spoils of a Social Media Ransacked World

In his most recent exhibit "Social Media," the artist stages a reckoning of our self-obsessed, social media-mediated world.

Josh Kline, *Mid-Career Artist*, 2024 Courtesy Josh Kline and Lisson Gallery

When Josh Kline premiered his breakthrough exhibit "Dignity and Self-Respect" at downtown gallery 47 Canal in 2011, the world hadn't yet experienced the visual content glut we live with today. Instagram had just graduated from a fledgling company to a photo database steered by a couple of million monthly active users, Snapchat founder Evan Spiegel was still defending his app's short-term content premise and pre-TikTok ByteDance CEO Zhang Yiming was still noodling around with news aggregators.

Kline's most recent exhibition, "Social Media," which opened at Chelsea's Lisson Gallery in New York this September, considers life in the oversaturated world of social media; specifically, the stream of free, generative A.I. content and the continuing algorithm warp. "Social Media" positions the New York-based artist as a sociologist of the visual glut zeitgeist and its most significant genesis: our era's actors' insistence on endlessly vending humans as capital across digital spaces. Kline's 3D models scattered across four rooms are not subtle in their aims.

Silicon hands, one of Kline's earlier artistic fixations, come back here. Like their predecessors, the forms come neatly lined up on sterile, gray cabinets and cling to various objects: a mouse, an 8-ball, mouthwash, a pill bottle. More disembodied body parts in mock art fair booths, like spoils of a social-media-ransacked world, make up much of the rest of the exhibit. On a metal table, a 3D-printed leg—thigh down—wrapped in FedEx labels is positioned next to office implements, a keyboard and mouse wrapped in the Amazon logo. In the same room, a 3D-printed head has been deposited on an Ikea chair, its mouth bound by Amazon wrapping tape. An arm with hand frozen mid-scroll rests near 3D-printed iPhones. A hand wrapped in Visa statements. Body and brand becoming one.

Josh Kline, *Professional Default Swaps*, 2024. Courtesy Josh Kline and Lisson Gallery

For Kline, this is what digital labor looks like writ aesthetically. The internet, particularly social media, insists that you implicate yourself in its project. As long as social currency is king, sharing a steady stream of content, commenting, liking, sending and especially artificial self-marketing are all requisites of usership. Kline is haunted by these cues of our time. In a 2023 New York Times article, the artist noted, "I'm not a person who believes in this myth of timeless art," adding, "I think that's propaganda."

Both the timeliness and literality of “Social Media” are unnerving—it doesn’t get much more literal than FedEx and Amazon labels pasted onto body parts. In “Social Media,” Kline leans far out of the doomsday preparation-esque art that dominated his career, like “Surround Audience” at the New Museum triennial featuring Kline’s riot-geared Teletubbies or the installation “Unemployment” at 47 Canal in which 3D printed automatons have taken over office work or his short film *Adaptation*, in which essential workers steer a boat through a flooded Midtown Manhattan. Instead he turns his attention to the present selfish, scroll-obsessed, and regurgitative world we know to be true.

Josh Kline, *New York Artist*, 2024 Courtesy Josh Kline and Lisson Gallery

There is little aesthetic reappraisal of this world, but literality has always been part of Kline's artistic oeuvre. In a Guernica interview, the artist says, "My audiences shouldn't need a press release to understand what they're looking at, especially if it's in their own country." Kline's rhetoric of literality and resistance to obfuscating the viewer won't explain away the obviousness of "Social Media," but they're not meant to. Kline's "Social Media" is meant to expose, not obscure, the newest algorithmic artifices.

The anemic exhibit comes to a close with the most literal performance of all: a 3D printed photopolymer resin sculpture of a balled-up "mid-career artist" (so the label tells us) wrapped in a polyethylene bag. Said mid-career artist is Josh Kline himself. Kline imagines he has packaged and sold his body to the gods of the algorithm, a sickly, self-obsessed art world, or both. Whatever the beneficiary, the forces that prompt his peddling are all too familiar.

"Josh Kline: Social Media" is on view at Lisson Gallery through October 19.

LISSON GALLERY

Artnet News
5 September 2024

artnet

Here Are 11 Must-See Gallery Shows This Armory Art Week

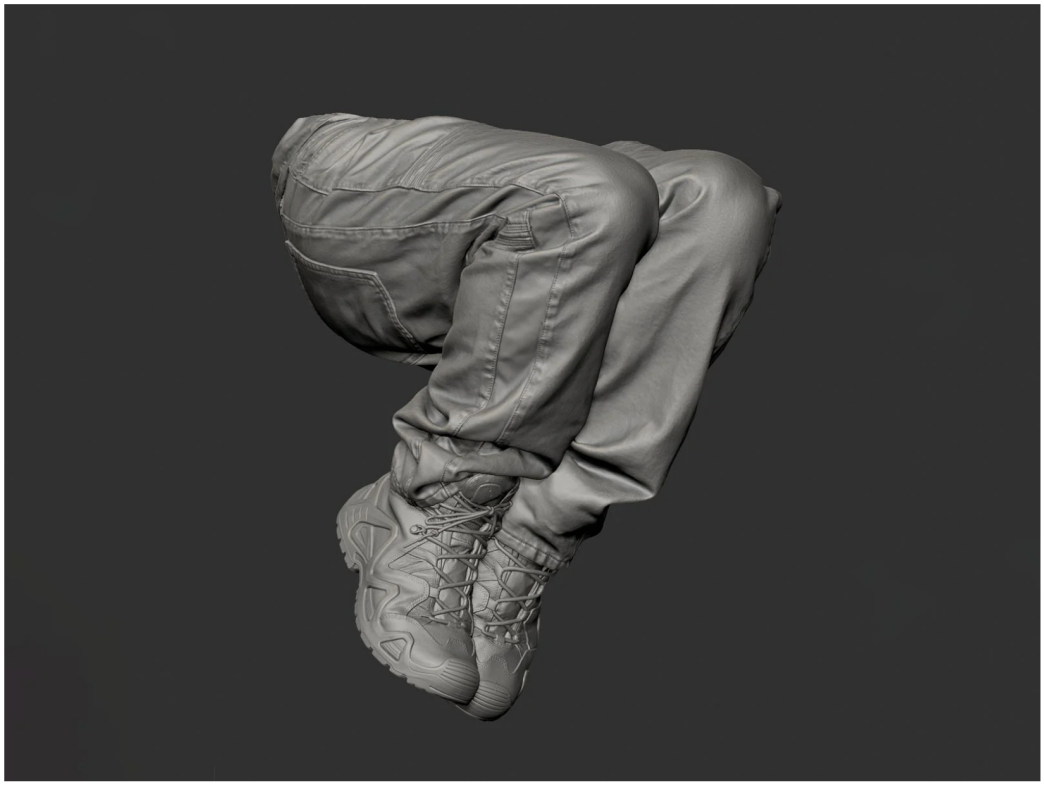
There's more art to see beyond the fairs at Armory Art Week. Here is our pick of must-see gallery shows around Manhattan.

Stephen Thorpe, *We Live Not Only by Day, but Also in Our Dreams* (2024). Courtesy of the artist and Dimin.

The temperature outside is cooling, but in the galleries of New York City, it's heating up with a crop of exciting and timely gallery shows. All across Manhattan, as visitors flock to the slew of art fairs that open this Armory week, commercial galleries are presenting solo and group shows that both harken back to history-making artists of the past, and present up-and-coming artists charting a new course. From super-sized sculptures to a resurgence of fiber art, plus mind-bending paintings and videos, here's our pick of what to see around town.

"Josh Kline: Social Media" at Lisson Gallery

September 5–October 19, 2024



A 3D scan of an artwork by Josh Kline. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Marking his first solo show with Lisson Gallery since his representation by the gallery was announced earlier this year, Josh Kline will show a series of never-before-seen self-portraits in "Social Media." Revisiting themes from earlier bodies of work, Kline explores ideas around employment and the ever-evolving (and often shaky) contemporary workforce. Tapping 3D technology and the selfie, one of the world's most recognizable image formats, Kline turns the idea of a self-portrait on its head to confront the contemporary obsession with individuality and self. The exhibition is concurrent with the artist's solo exhibition "Climate Change" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Lisson is located at 508 West 24th Street, New York, NY

Los Angeles Times
10 September 2024

Los Angeles Times

Protest is everywhere. But climate activists have the monopoly on art — for now

In an image from video, two environmental activists from the collective dubbed "Riposte Alimentaire" (Food Retaliation) hurl soup at Leonardo Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" in January. (DAVID CANTINIAUX / AFPTV/AFP via Getty Images)

Eighteen months later, Anna Holland still can't stomach the smell of tomato soup.

"I can't have a tin of it anymore," said the climate activist, who shocked the art world — and much of the rest of the planet — by throwing Heinz Tomato Soup at Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" in the National Gallery in London in October 2022.

Holland and fellow protester Phoebe Plummer carefully chose the Heinz for its bright orange hue — the same used in Just Stop Oil's international branding — to symbolize "hope for a brighter future" in the Post-Impressionist painting.

"We used soup in particular because it would capture the media's attention," said Holland, a member of Just Stop Oil. "It holds the conversation for longer. It gets people to ask questions like, 'Why soup?'"

The two protesters who threw soup at Vincent Van Gogh's 1888 work "Sunflowers" at the National Gallery in London in October 2022. (Just Stop Oil / Associated Press)

The splashy stunt has held the world's attention like no climate action before, cementing the movement's commitment to artistic vandalism. It's a form of protest first popularized by early 20th century suffragettes — in 1914, Mary Richardson used a meat cleaver to slash Velázquez's "Rokeby Venus" in London's National Gallery — only to fall out of fashion shortly thereafter.

'Hot would be much worse': How a priceless Van Gogh survived a tomato soup shower

Now it's back.

In 2022 alone, protesters threw black goo on a Klimt, mashed potatoes on a Monet, and cake at the Mona Lisa. They glued themselves to an art-history survey course's worth of priceless works, from Picasso to Raphael to Botticelli. Not even Warhol's famous soup cans were spared. Further assaults followed in 2023 and 2024, including a hammer attack on the aforementioned Velázquez and Just Stop Oil's orange dye strike on Stonehenge, the mysterious 5,000-year-old monument in England.

A movement long defined by shaggy hippies encamped in old-growth redwoods and Indigenous protesters chained to construction equipment was remade in the image of two nonbinary university students wielding cans of tomato soup.

A movement long defined by shaggy hippies encamped in old-growth redwoods and Indigenous protesters chained to construction equipment was remade in the image of two nonbinary university students wielding cans of tomato soup.

Equally unexpected, climate activists have managed to maintain their museum monopoly even as combative public protests have spilled into the mainstream.

“We knew it was going to be significant, but we had no idea it was going to be as big as it was,” said Holland. “We sort of claimed that tactic in a way, so [the public] associate it with the climate movement.”

All of which raises the question: What’s the message in the medium?

Just Stop Oil protesters sprayed an orange substance on Stonehenge in Salisbury, England, on June 19. (Just Stop Oil / Associated Press)

“People asked me many times, ‘Why did the activists target a painting? Why didn’t they target the fossil fuel infrastructure?’” said Margaret Klein Salamon, executive director of the Climate Emergency Fund and author of “Facing the Climate Emergency: How to Transform Yourself With Climate Truth.”

“It’s a very frustrating complaint, because Just Stop Oil [protesters] had been arrested hundreds of times blocking fossil fuel sites, and it was barely reported,” she said. “So that’s why they threw soup.” (The Climate Emergency Fund is Just Stop Oil’s primary financial backer.)

In Klein Salamon’s view, and that of many others, the target is irrelevant. Attention is the purpose. Outrage is the goal. If pressed, some argue the indignation over the defacement itself betrays how little our culture values the planet when compared to inanimate works of canvas and pigment.

“You’re taking the risk of potentially going to prison because the government values a painting and a frame over your life and the lives of all of us,” Holland explained. “It shows the government cares more about material things than human lives.”

But that doesn’t mean there’s no role for art to play in the climate crisis — at least, not according to the art world. Grantmakers such as the Frankenthaler Climate Initiative now explicitly fund climate-focused works, while several prominent art museums have made public commitments to showcase them.

“The climate crisis is something that truly terrifies me, and also fascinates me as a subject,” said artist Josh Kline, whose new show, “Josh Kline: Climate Change,” opened in June at the Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown Los Angeles. “There’s very little contemporary art that deals with the climate crisis. That’s one of the reasons why I started making this work.”

Josh Kline’s “Personal Responsibility” is made up of tents and other shelters, with projections of actors playing future climate refugees. (Joerg Lohse)

The work in question is a “suite of science-fiction installations”, spanning roughly five years’ worth of material. It was supported in part by MoCA’s Environmental Council, a first-of-its-kind initiative to transform museum operations and support artists addressing the climate crisis in their work.

“We started to place a higher premium on artists working on issues of climate change,” said curator Rebecca Lowery. “Most viewers will readily recognize the theme of the exhibition and come away thinking about what we can collectively do to avoid this future.”

At the heart of the showcase is an immersive sculpture series called “Personal Responsibility,” made up of tents and other makeshift shelters, whose “inhabitants” — projections of actors playing future climate refugees — narrate their experience of the coming disaster.

“People don’t need me to tell them that the climate crisis is happening — that’s really what scientists are for,” Kline said. “What I as an artist can do … is help make it personal for them.”

On this, Holland agrees.

“Protest is driven by art,” they said. “One of the reasons the climate movement isn’t as big as it could be is because it’s easy to intellectually connect with the climate crisis — what’s not easy is emotionally connecting.”

Climate activists smash glass protecting 17th century painting in London’s National Gallery

“That’s what art does,” Holland continued. “It’s the first step to being able to take action.”

For some, the natural conclusion of this argument is that museums and other cultural centers should be spared, invited into the conversation rather than made the soapbox for it.

“I think protest is a vital form of civic participation, and I want to honor that,” said Devon Bella of Art + Climate Action, a Bay Area-based collective working toward sustainability in the arts. “But in terms of climate activism, there’s also a lot of work that needs to be done in local communities,” work that is often less glamorous and more sustained than a brief, symbolic attack on a beloved painting or sculpture.

Unsurprisingly, the Assn. of Art Museum Directors, an industry group, takes an even more stringent view.

“Attacks on works of art cannot be justified, whether the motivations are political, religious, or cultural,” it announced in response to the soup action. “Such protests are misdirected, and the ends do not justify the means.”

Equally unsurprising, activists say that’s a cop-out.

“No one likes to be shaken awake — it’s very uncomfortable, and people get very angry at the activists,” Klein Salamon said. “But normalcy, which includes things like sports and plays and art, is actually incredibly dangerous at this time.”

Austrian activists of “last generation Austria” have splashed a Gustav Klimt painting with oil in the Leopold museum in Vienna, Austria, Tuesday, Nov.15, 2022 (Letzte Generation Oesterreich / Associated Press)

In this worldview, art about the climate crisis is at best irrelevant, and, at worst, counterproductive to the direct action necessary to stop it.

“I want to distinguish joining the climate protest movement from what most people still think of as climate action,” a.k.a. recycling your Amazon packages and toting a reusable bag to Whole Foods, the activist Klein Salamon went on. “Where we need to go is truly mass protest, hundreds of thousands of people getting in the street, occupying buildings, taking up nonviolent civil disobedience.”

Activists targeting Taylor Swift’s jet vandalize planes with paint. Hers wasn’t there

Josh Kline, the artist, holds a similar view.

“There’s this displacement of responsibility,” he said of the current conversation around climate change. “Instead of saying, ‘We need structural change, we need governmental change, we need change in the political system,’ [we say] ‘It’s *your* responsibility as an individual to spend hours sorting your plastic and recycling.’”

Others argue that the art industry itself shares complicity in the crisis, even as artists and museumgoers are largely aligned in their desire to confront it.

“Art throughout history has been intrinsically connected to wealth and finance,” said L.A.-based artist Sayre Gomez, whose paintings of Los Angeles highlight destruction and decay. “[But] artists and activism overlaps in most cases. It’s artists typically who are aligning with the spirit of protest. So there is a bit of a double-edged sword there.”

Climate activist Greta Thunberg acquitted in disruption of London oil industry conference

Although their methods may be different, both the activists and the artists agree they are locked in an arms race to keep public attention on the emergency unfolding before them.

And that’s where soup may finally be losing steam.

Even Klein Salamon acknowledged that, 18 months after “Sunflowers,” the effect of political vandalism may be wearing off. Nothing shocks in perpetuity — not “The Rite of Spring” or “Piss Christ” or “Pink Flamingos.” Like the art it defaces, protest must evolve to stay relevant.

“Something that works once or twice or three times doesn’t work forever,” Klein Salamon said. “It loses its shock.”

Observer
2 August 2024

OBSERVER

ARTS • ART REVIEWS • ONE FINE SHOW

One Fine Show: Josh Kline's 'Climate Change' at LA MOCA

The exhibition, which runs through January 5, is the first to collect the artist's work dealing with this heavy topic.

By Dan Duray • 08/02/24 1:10pm

Josh Kline, Adaptation (still), (2019-22); 16mm film (color, sound), 10:45 min. Courtesy of the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and Lisson Gallery © Josh Kline

Welcome to One Fine Show, where Observer highlights a recently opened exhibition at a museum outside of New York City—a place we know and love that already receives plenty of attention.

I tend to think more in prose than I do in visuals, so I draw analogies in my head between artists I like and writers I like. When it comes to Josh Kline, my analog was always the great Ben Lerner, who wrote about Kline in The New Yorker. The two seem

to share a similar attitude about institutions and the difficult aesthetics of the ones that seek to do good, unpacking these with wit and kindness. After seeing his newest works at his survey at the Whitney Museum last year, I decided he's come to remind me also of Kim Stanley Robinson, the sci-fi author with good politics, who seeks to demonstrate the ways humans might survive our various coming environmental crises with a modicum of dignity.

These later works take center stage in "Climate Change," Kline's new show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles—the first to collect his work on the topic, with works dating from 2019 through to the present day. These use mobilizing sculpture, moving images, photography, ephemeral materials and lighting "to completely transform the galleries of MOCA Grand Avenue" into a "charged Gesamtkunstwerk of our contemporary times."

I would have doubted that language from the press release had I not seen the heart of this show in New York, where the Whitney was transformed indeed. The multi-media *Personal Responsibility* (2023-2024) changes the room it fills into a refugee camp from the future. Visitors are invited to explore tents and other temporary homes, inspect the various prepper-adjacent products their inhabitants have purchased from Amazon and pull up a camp chair to listen to stories from the wasteland, told to the camera by actors on flat-screen televisions that live in the tents.

These works can be seen as a merger of his past video pieces, like the ones where he generates deep fake confessions from the Bush Administration or installs monitors into the stomachs of fascist Teletubbies. The survivors in *Personal Responsibility* are varied and intimate, like those of veterans, making you realize that the apocalypse is not something that will happen suddenly but has already begun.
Hope comes in the form of *Adaptation* (2019-2022), a film that offers what Kline calls the "science fiction of ordinary life," as relief workers cruise through skyscrapers in a version of Manhattan that has flooded and become Venice. This feels taken directly from Robinson, whose book *New York 2140* tackles a similar vibe, but Kline makes it his own through warm, beautiful and uncanny 16mm cinematography. The futuristic setting feels like it was shot in the 1970s but is otherwise without irony and, therefore, strangely optimistic. Maybe the world will never end as long as New York is still cool.

Josh Kline's "Climate Change" is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles through January 5, 2025.

Guernica
August 7, 2023
GUERNICA

Josh Kline: "My audience shouldn't need a press release to understand what they're looking at"

The artist discusses labor, capitalism, dystopia and his new show at the Whitney.

By Mengyin Lin and Josh Kline

Josh Kline, In Stock (Walmart Worker's Arms), 2018 (detail). Photograph by Joerg Lohse; image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. © Josh Kline.

In June, I visited Josh Kline's solo exhibition, *Project for a New American Century*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. I found, to my surprise, my own name on one of the wall labels. I worked as a production and editing assistant on one of his video projects in early 2015. Kline was making art and I, though certainly interested in his art, was making money. I couldn't have imagined that my name would end up alongside his

work. Who among us knows the names of the workshop assistants who made dogs out of stainless-steel balloons? Like most of the art world, I accepted my role as invisible labor within a larger hierarchy.

Acknowledging the people behind his art is only one aspect of how Kline investigates the contemporary art world and, by extension, the role of labor in our world at large. The often paradoxical layers of meaning in Josh's work make it difficult to define and fascinating to talk about. He brings blue-collar workers into gallery spaces that traditionally exclude them. He experiments with new technologies while remaining skeptical and critical of their promise. He embraces dark, dystopian visions while believing in the power of rational optimism and utopian imagination.

Project for a New American Century displays videos, sculptural works, and multimedia installations from the past decade of Kline's career. Many of these works incorporate twenty-first-century technologies, such as 3D printing and image manipulation, to explore changes in labor and capital in the U.S. and beyond. I spoke to Kline about how he envisions humanity in these inhuman contexts and what sort of future these inquiries lead him to imagine.

— *Mengyin Lin for* Guernica

Guernica: Can we start by talking a bit about the title of the show? The word "project" has become synonymous with "work," which your art explores. How do you intend this title to be read as the opening sentence of your show?

Josh Kline: "Project for *the* New American Century" was the name of one of the main neoconservative think tanks in the '90s. Many of the architects of the Iraq War came out of there. I made the title a little less definitive and took it as my own. I liked the irony of it: the neoconservative agenda is a failed project, and in a way its failures have paved the way for the potential end of a US-led global order. But this is all still TBD. At the beginning of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, it also seemed like maybe the US was on the brink of collapse, and then it became the most powerful country on earth. The twentieth century has been characterized as the "American Century" because of the outsized global military, political, and cultural reach of the US during that time.

The show considers a second American century and what that would look like. What kind of future is the US building? For better or for worse, we're still living in the world that the US built, in the American empire. The US still has the largest military on earth. The dollar is still the global currency. People still wear blue jeans all over the world. The United States seems to be conjuring up a century of climate disasters and artificial intelligence (AI) catastrophes. Fake news, alternative facts, and emergent authoritarianism are all over the

world because, in some ways, of technologies that come from the US. My work is about the twenty-first century, but it's hard to talk about our time without dealing with the USA.

Guernica: While your work employs technologies such as 3D printing and deepfakes, it is also skeptical of them, especially as they relate to the future of humanity. Can you elaborate on this complicated nature of your work?

Kline: Formally, I see everything as potential material, of course with moral and ethical limits. I am more interested in sampling than in appropriation. Appropriation is basically like, there is this thing in the world and you take it completely out of context and then point at it, whereas sampling is about creating language out of references — a language that moves in nonlinear ways and that has nonlinear relationships, including referring back to and commenting on its sources.

I often work with the technologies I'm interested in unpacking. Their use is a way to bring reality into the gallery. It's similar to working with ready-mades, but in a much more complicated and complex way. Using these technologies allows me to understand how they work, to understand where they're going and what their inherent possibilities are, and also what their flaws and dangers might be. For instance, working with 3D-printing has helped me understand what additive manufacturing could mean when it someday becomes widespread.

Josh Kline, The Sound of Severance*, 2016. Photograph by Joerg Lohse; image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. © Josh Kline.*

Guernica: For your work *Unemployment*, you interviewed unemployed workers about their relationship to labor and compensation. You also used 3D scanning to create 3D-printed portraits of their bodies, paying them to pose for the scans. What purpose did this additional step of 3D scanning technology serve?

Kline: Making work with 3D scanning has been a way to understand the ramifications of digitization, of our personal information and histories, but also of our biometric information. I started to understand that all the information that's being digitized about people — whether it's through biometric acquisition of personal information, or the skimming and vacuuming up of information as they shop online, or when their medical records are sent to the health insurance company they work with, etc. — is a way of cloning those people, of harvesting identities. All the information that's leaking out of you all day long is forming these images of you: information-based clones that can answer questions about you without your consent.

Guernica: And do you feel that art has a way to engage critically with these technologies that is different from the way that corporations use them?

Kline: I do. I haven't seen any corporations using these technologies to critique anything. That's what art can do. Art is a reflection of the society in which it's made.

3D scanning serves as a metaphor in my work. Because of the way it captures the whole body, I think it's also a clearer and more meaningful way to represent these kinds of processes than a two-dimensional photograph would be. It's a closer representation of the real world, which isn't flat. Thinking about how AI and other forms of automation are digitizing and replicating human skills and then displacing people from their jobs — using these technologies doesn't just represent this process in the gallery. The technologies bring it inside and confront the viewer with it.

Guernica: While technology plays a big role in your work, I find that humanity is always at the center of it all. In both *Blue Collars* and *Unemployment*, you displayed 3D-printed portraits of real people in a way that alienates their humanity — severed limbs in a shopping cart, a human body in a tied-up recycling bag on the floor. At the same time, you engage closely with your models, asking them questions and listening to their stories. What is your approach to toggling between humanness and the way in which labor or work strips us of it?

Kline: I am fundamentally a humanist. When I make these works, it's not about representing how I view people. It's about how I see people being treated under capitalism and in our society. The portraits of people in the recycling bags — those works are a way of illustrating how people become a waste product in our economic system. It comes back to this phrase from economics, "human capital."

What does it mean for people to be treated as capital instead of human beings? It means that they can be used up and then discarded. One of those people I scanned was a secretary at a church, and she didn't know how to use social media. So she was fired and replaced with someone who could post on Facebook about church events. Another person was a lawyer, an in-house counsel at a company for more than two decades. When she was fired, she had nowhere to go and burned through her savings without having found a new job. What does that make her? If you wait tables at Applebee's or deliver packages for FedEx, you take on an identity when you wear those uniforms. People treat you like a product instead of a person. I wanted to find a way of portraying this reality viscerally that would stick with the viewer.

Guernica: It's quite confrontational.

Kline: It needs to be. I think we see a lot of images of suffering, of people being exploited on the news, and we don't retain any of it. Those images have lost their ability to affect us, whereas three-dimensional sculptures, I think, still have it. You go into a gallery and there's this reaction you have, which might no longer be possible with most images because we see so many of them.

But at the same time, I want to preserve the stories of those workers. In the video interviews the workers appear intact as people and speak in their own words about their own lives.

Guernica: How does your artwork and the technologies it employs mediate between those stories and the audience in a gallery?

Kline: I think a lot about the audience and how to open up the work without dumbing it down. Someone who doesn't have an education in art history should be able to get most of the meaning. My audience shouldn't need a press release to understand what they're looking at, especially if it's in their own country.

Guernica: I appreciate that openness about your work, because sometimes I feel that certain contemporary art becomes gatekeeping — almost like the artwork intentionally obfuscates the viewer. And I imagine, and maybe this is my wild speculation, that some artists take pride in people not understanding their work.

Kline: Yeah, they revel in it. There's a lot of exclusion, especially class-based exclusion, in the art world. And a lot of this is being perpetrated by people who claim to be Marxists, which is always hilarious. There is one very well-regarded white male artist I know who wrote a whole book about denying the audience. It's a kind of nihilism, but it's also white privilege. Like, if you're denying people entry into your work in this way, keeping out everyone but a very small cadre of elite white intellectuals and rich art collectors, how is this any different from all the other white supremacy and white privilege in our society?

Guernica: At the root, it's the same logic.

Kline: Yeah, it's entirely the same.

Guernica: Do you show your work to people you worked with? Your subjects, so to speak?

Kline: I do. My studio manager and I went through all the records and contact information of people I've worked with, and I invited everyone to come to the Whitney for one of the openings. One of the FedEx delivery workers came to the opening with his daughter. He doesn't work at FedEx anymore and has moved on to a better job. His daughter is in high school studying art. He had seen images of the work, but had never seen the sculpture or his interview in person before. Aleyda, the housekeeper in a downtown hotel who also appears in the show, came to see the work when I first made it. She brought her sister and her son. I interviewed her after that and asked her what she thought. When I was making the work, I told her what I was going to do, asking if she was comfortable with it, so she knew what she was going to see. When she came to the gallery, she and her sister were taking selfies with the sculptures. And she was like, "This is me. This is my life." She understood very well what the work was about and what it meant. This conversation is in the video, too.

Guernica: In a way, the people in your work might not be considered by museums and galleries as a "museum general audience."

Kline: Maybe this is the fault of artists. If art spoke more to working people or to people without an arts education, maybe they would go to see more art. Maybe there would be a larger audience for art if it was about things that were relevant to somebody who has to work in our society. If the work about Marxism actually dealt with working people, maybe they would come to museums.

Guernica: Over the years, your work has investigated a spectrum of labor and work — blue-collar workers in *Blue Collars*, middle-class workers in *Unemployment*, creative workers in *Creative Labor*. How did you become so interested in labor as a subject?

Kline: The earliest body of work shown at the Whitney is my work about creative labor from the early 2010s, about the people I saw around me. As I started showing in larger institutions and also showing outside of the US, I started to question why I was so focused on making work about such a small group of very privileged people in New York, about the creative class. I thought about this a lot when Amazon Prime was blowing up around 2014, as I watched all these FedEx workers delivering Amazon packages. I started to speculate about why there were so few images of contemporary working people in contemporary art. There's a long history of representing labor in art. How can you really think about precarity in the twenty-first century without dealing with these people, these jobs?

Around the same time, I started thinking about the global north's middle classes, who seemed destined to experience the same kind of dislocations due to automation that blue-collar workers had been experiencing. What we know as "the middle class" is an artifact of industrial civilization; an AI-driven, automated civilization is something else. It's not the same thing at all. Then the question is, what comes on the other side of AI? Corporations want to save money by using AI to do everything, but what do we want? What do human beings want?

Guernica: You explore that human desire, the contemporary human experience, with both real and fictional human beings. For example, in the *Contagious Employment* sculptures, the characters are fictional.

Kline: I had this image in my mind of unemployment as a disease, and of these viruses hanging in space. I think I already knew that there would be file boxes. However it happened, once it ended up being file boxes of personal possessions, I had to figure out what those possessions were, who were these fictional people.

Josh Kline, Contagious Unemployment (Best Wishes)*, 2016. Photograph by Paolo Saglia; image courtesy the artist and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin. © Josh Kline.*

Guernica: Do you think technology alters our relationship to both fiction and reality?

Kline: Absolutely. A lot of my work deals with how technology is making it difficult to discern what's real. Even before the Republican Party popularized the terms "fake news" and "alternative facts," I was making work, especially in video, about a world where reality is manipulated through disinformation. Disinformation has been with us for a long time. The proto-deepfake videos that I made with face replacement software are all about the creative rewriting of history. Americans are a deeply irrational and ahistorical people. Sometimes you need to meet your audience where they live.

Guernica: Though much of your work can be described as dystopian, your experiments with utopian visions are quite powerful. How do you see utopian art? Is it doomed to be corny or misinterpreted as satire, or can it guide us to imagine a better (for a lack of better word) future?

Kline: The three-channel film, *Another America is Possible*, is an attempt at depicting a radical utopia. It presents an image of a wholesome and joyous future. The main channel, presented as a large projection, shows diverse people having a summer cookout on the lawn. Then on the other two channels, which appear as smaller projections in the installation, those same smiling people are burying and burning Confederate flags.

The final parts of this big cycle of installations that I'm working on will be utopian. But whether people will recognize it as utopian, I don't know. Creating utopian art is really hard. A lot of people go into art exhibitions assuming that everything is going to be either ironic or critical. If you have something that's neither ironic nor critical, but has a specific political position, and it's presenting an image of the future that is sincere, there are people who refuse to believe that sincerity. For me, the three-channel film is entirely sincere. That's the future that I want to live in. Whether I've succeeded at convincing other people that it would be a beautiful future, I don't know.

Universal Early Retirement is a fictional commercial. I had already interviewed the people who appear in the *Unemployment Bodies* sculptures — those people in the bags. I interviewed them about universal basic income. I asked them what they thought about it. They all hated it. But when I rephrased it as, "What would you do if you won the lottery and all your needs were met?" None of them said, "Oh, I would just stay home and watch TV." They all had goals. "I would volunteer in my community." "I would go back to school." "I would take care of my elderly parents, my children." "I would spend more time with my loved ones." "I would become an artist." "I would work in the garden." "I would do all this stuff that I can't afford to do but that I actually dream about doing." And then that became the script for the commercial. It was about selling universal basic income through these things that people actually want to do with their lives. So coming out of those two rooms of *Unemployment* at the Whitney where you face total dystopia, these commercials are an alternative. What if we took care of people instead?

Guernica: In a way, commercials are inherently utopian.

Kline: Yeah, they're about desire.

Guernica: Dystopia and utopia are opposite to each other, at least on the surface, and you've found your way into both.

Kline: Real societies are always somewhere in between. And utopias can often become dystopias. When we worked together on *Crying Games* in 2015, I would talk about the US as a kind of soft dystopia — and the wider world beyond it as also a soft dystopia. Meaning that for a lot of people, life goes on in a kind of middle-class normality, but nearby there is horror. When you're eating your avocado toast at a restaurant in New York, you're not having a dystopian moment, personally. But the person who's delivering the avocados for Fresh Direct, maybe they're living in a dystopia, you know what I mean? And we all move in and out of it. In 2020, though, we were all living in dystopia. It became a hard dystopia . . .

Guernica: But at the same time, for some people, staying at home had utopian aspects.

Kline: That is where I was going with this. It was a truly dystopian moment in history with millions of people dying everywhere, people losing their jobs. But at the same time, there were so many moments in the summer of 2020 that were astonishing in New York. If you were middle class, you probably didn't have to work. You were just hanging out in parks or marching in the streets. You had all this leisure time. You were wearing a mask and probably afraid of breathing the air, but you also had all this time restored in your life. But for the "essential workers" it was truly brutal. It's a mixed condition. In my short film *Adaptation*, yes, New York is flooded. Yes, it's dystopian. But as long as there are humans to live it, life goes on.

Josh Kline, still from Adaptation*, 2019–22. Image courtesy of Josh Kline and 47 Canal, New York. © Josh Kline.*

ArtReview
June 22, 2023

ArtReview

Josh Kline's Disconcerting Vision of America's Future Feels All Too Real

Owen Duffy Reviews 22 June 2023 ArtReview

The artist levels an ominous critique at middle-class America that feels less science-fictional than rational

More than 40 percent of Americans think that, in the next decade, a civil war is not only possible but likely, according to a 2022 poll. Josh Kline's survey exhibition captures with clarity the inauspicious mood of recent American life. The exhibition's title references a neoconservative, interventionist think tank supported by former vice president, and architect of the Iraq invasion, Dick

Cheney. Assembling over a decade of Kline's work – not-so-easily divided between pseudo-documentary videos, sculptures and new-media installation – the exhibition is literal, bleak and prescient. Historically bracketed by twinned financial crises – 2008's bank failures and 2020's pandemic-induced economic shocks – the show leaves little room for optimism. Yet these genre-eluding installations are not quite dystopian: Kline's work, in a certain sense, comes across as more rational than science-fictional, which is perhaps the exhibition's most disconcerting quality.

With the plush crush of mushroom-coloured carpet underfoot, Kline's sculptural series *Civil War* (2016–17) offers visitors a near-future vision of middle-class America. Presented in one of the first galleries on the Whitney's fifth floor (the exhibition continues on the museum's eighth), it chimes an ominous tone for what's to come. Piles of cast-concrete rubble, arranged like lunar debris, form small mountains of working-class relics. Cairns of commodities, those signifiers through which the working class demonstrates a sense of upward mobility, become the ruined aftermath of this speculative conflict. The piles consist, for example, of disintegrating symbols of commodity comfort: Shop-Vac pull-along vacuum cleaners, lawnmower parts and a sawhorse. Placed on the stage of domesticity, the kind of carpet to which my parents – a car salesman and nurse – aspired to in our suburban Maryland home, these relics hammer on a foreboding sense of future collapse. Kline offers visitors a diagnosis of frayed social fabric: the hollowing out and decay of mid-income stability.

Contagious Unemployment (Talk Soon), 2016, cardboard file box, mixed media, plastic, hardware, cables, LEDs, and power cord, diameter: 66cm. © the artist. Photo: Paolo Saglia. Courtesy the artist and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin

This vision of civil conflict becomes reframed as prescient after walking through *Contagious Unemployment* (2016). Inside clear plastic structures shaped like wriggling virus particles (the kind now etched into our post-COVID psyches) Kline has placed 'bankers boxes', cardboard archive boxes, stuffed with such white-collar office accoutrements as gym shoes, highlighters and family photos. Suspended from the ceiling at torso height, the works glow with the soft light of LEDs. Kline's use of the virus visual is coincidental, sure, originally implemented as an allusion to the coming impact of automation on labour, according to the gallery's wall text. The works have accrued an eerie aura about them in the years since 2020, undoubtedly reminding viewers of the mass layoffs that swept the world during the pandemic's early days. In Kline's future, the middle class is, and will continue to be, squashed, phased out, replaced.

In the context of America's New York City, a gentrified metropolis rife with unequal wealth that has disconnected from the country's heartland, Kline's work emphasises the idea of class in a refreshing yet challenging – and even contradictory – fashion. What does an exhibition of art about workers' plight mean at a privately funded museum, an institution funded by those who emerged the most unscathed (if not also the most enriched) from the financial calamities that historically frame Kline's work? The easy, knee-jerk response could be that the institution swallows the critique whole. The exhibition's central project is at odds with the privilege of the class that supports it. An inconvenient yet beguiling pairing indeed, especially at an institution once funded by a teargas mogul, an institution that only recently came to an agreement with its union, after 16 months of negotiations. On the other hand, might the Whitney Museum's board be the ideal audience for this work, entreating it to seriously consider the future prospects of an increasingly shrinking middle-class and rapidly growing underclass? It seems unlikely that billionaires might yearn for democratic socialism, too.

Productivity Gains (Brandon / Accountant) (detail), 2016, 3D-printed plaster, inkjet ink and cyanoacrylate; CNC-carved urethane foam with shellac-based colour sealer; museum wax; and polyethylene bag, 55 × 69 × 140 cm. Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy the artist

In defiance of Postinternet labels, Kline's new media-infused exhibition emphasises the very material consequences of what supposedly was a dematerialised era of the cloud and Web 2.0. For instance, Kline's militarised Teletubbies are a funny, haunting take on the expansion of police surveillance. *Po-Po* and friends *Courtesy*, *Professionalism* and *Respect* (all 2015) are decked out in riot gear, handguns included. Kline face-swaps these mannequins with the queasy, androgynous facial features of the characters from that bizarre children's television programme. Embedded in their torsos, little monitors play videos of real-life cops (whose faces are digitally swapped with those of activists) reading lines from the 'found' social media feeds of the featured activists, explains the work's wall text. Kline has used face-swapping technology since at least 2013. Around the time of the exhibition's opening, a deep-fake Drake song leaked onto the internet; pointing towards the obsolescence of technology often used in Kline's art, but not the work itself.

Climate change, surveillance, AI, demographic shift in America: there are many profound threads to follow when discussing Kline's survey. And here's another: like the credits at the end of the film, Kline acknowledges the labour that produced his sculptures, featuring the names of his studio collaborators, mouldmakers and CNC specialists, among others, in the gallery labels. Ultimately a history that needs to and will be written about the role of specialised fabricators: MFAs with the minds of engineers, progenitors of DIY culture, unlikely to be rendered obsolete anytime soon, and who make the work of Kline, and the artists who show alongside him at New York's 47 Canal, possible. They constitute a new working class that serves the gallery-going public. And, in tandem with their labour, Kline's science-fictional art thus can become cinematic in scale, like a movie set that feels increasingly, unnervingly real.

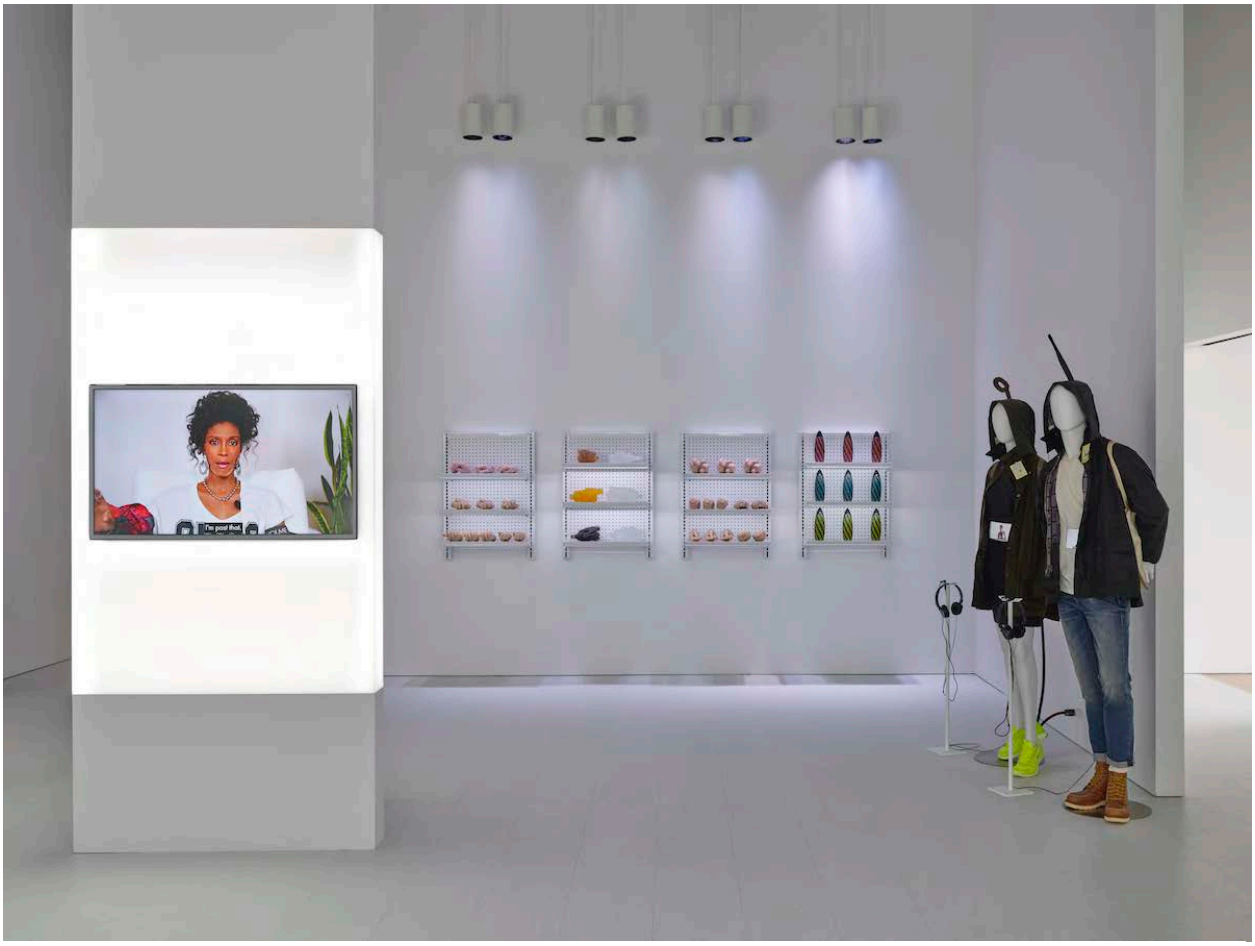
Project for a New American Century ***at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through 23 August***

Owen Duffy Reviews 22 June 2023 ArtReview

ARTnews
May 3, 2023

Josh Kline's Tour-de-Force Whitney Survey Is Further Proof of a Major Talent

BY ALEX GREENBERGER May 3, 2023 8:00am



Installation view of "Josh Kline: Project for a New American Century," 2023, at Whitney Museum, New York.
PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ

A mysterious ticking emanates from a gray-walled, gray-carpeted gallery on the **Whitney Museum**'s fifth floor. The anxiety-inducing beeping portends oncoming disaster—a time bomb about to go off, the Doomsday Clock moving seconds closer to midnight.

Spoiler alert: the source of all this noise is nothing quite so dramatic. Rather than an explosive weapon or an apocalyptic countdown, the ticking comes from a set of jerry-rigged devices that have been cut in two, then reassembled, courtesy of **Josh Kline**, who is currently the subject of his first US museum survey at the Whitney.

One of these works, titled *Alternative Facts* (2017), features a Samsung flip phone and an iPhone attached to each other by red duct tape. Primly shown on a chintzy display, the piece evokes gadgetry repurposed for warfare. The sculpture's title implies that the conflict in question has been necessitated, and possibly even exacerbated, by the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election.

There's a tendency in mainstream media to catastrophize recent events, like that election or the current pandemic, and claim that they signal a grand finale to life as we know it. But the world already ended a long time ago for the many who face climate change, racism, and economic freefall daily. Kline seems to agree with that line of thinking. For him, the apocalypse is now.

His Whitney survey, "Project for a New American Century," attests to his foreboding vision, filled as it is with dismembered limbs and late-capitalist junk. It's dark stuff—you don't exactly leave a Kline exhibition feeling good about the state of things. But oh, how intoxicating it all is. This terrific show is further proof that Kline is one of our great living artists, a true master at spinning nightmarish visions of worlds to come.

Works from Kline's newest body of work, "Personal Responsibility" (2023), feature survivors in a post-apocalyptic landscape narrating their lives.
PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ

Ugly as it may be from a conceptual standpoint, Kline's art is quite beautiful to look at, which is no small part due to the way he installs it. Kline treats art spaces the way film directors approach sets, stylizing every imaginable element so that his fictions feel real and lived-in. Accordingly, there are no white cubes in this exhibition, which is arranged non-chronologically and into environments related to an ongoing saga about where we're headed.

In this exhibition, in lieu of the Whitney's smooth floorboards, there are now flattened Amazon boxes and raw balsa wood. One gallery is lit gleaming white like an Apple Store, while most others are cast in varying degrees of darkness. It's all immersive, creepy, and totally unlike the traditional mid-career survey.

The most notable intervention in the Whitney's architecture is *The look, the feel, of Patagonia Nano Puff®* (2012/23), which covers a pristine wall facing the Hudson River. It's a long stretch of black polyester fabric and insulation that was originally produced by Kline in collaboration with the titular outerwear company. With its rows of black rectangles and its recurring Patagonia logos, the piece offers a curious breed of Minimalism and luxury fetishism.

Josh Kline, *Creative Hands*, 2011.
PHOTO JOERG LOHSE/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK/RUBELL MUSEUM

Familiar logos proliferate in Kline's art. Walking through the show, I amassed a long list of the products invoked: Lays, Jarritos, FedEx, Eastsport, Barbour, Lysol, Walmart, Purina, Levi's, Gold Medal, Rubbermaid, Advil, Amazon Prime, and many more. There's a seductive comfort in discovering each label—and an ambient fear in knowing that the act of brand recognition is now a condition of life as we know it.

The earliest pieces in the show, from the late 2000s and early 2010s, attest to this. A looped animation from 2013, titled *Forever 21*, features digital pills raining down on text spelling out the retail chain's name. The capsules are red, white, and blue: the colors of the American flag. It is presented alongside refrigerated coolers containing pouches of blood doped with drugs like Wellbutrin and IV bags filled with cocktails of Vitamin C, Red Bull, Ritalin, and more—creepy reminders of how we pump ourselves with trademarked substances in order to work harder, better, faster, stronger.

Nearby, there are two videos whose titles, *Forever 27* and *Forever 48* (both 2013), imply a bond with that animation. They depict actors playing the musicians Kurt Cobain and Whitney Houston, respectively, as though they had never died young. These stars' faces are crudely superimposed via open-source AI technology, and periodically, their eyes, mouths, and noses stutter, offering glimpses at the real people beneath the computer-generated masks. Underneath, there are living, breathing beings who are getting squeezed out under the weight of a celebrity's identity—a brand of a different sort.

Josh Kline, *Forever 48* (still), 2013.

When humans do show up in Kline's sculptures, they are made to seem like refuse. Six brutally effective sculptures from 2016 feature people in business casual garb. These office workers look oddly organic as they lie in a permanent slumber, but their 3D-printed plaster forms, with their waxy, pallid coating, betray any signs of life. Curled up in the fetal position, they have been spat out by the capitalistic companies that once employed them and returned to their embryonic state. Now, their amniotic sacs have

employed them and returned to their embryonic state. Now, their amniotic sacs have been replaced with knotted plastic bags, causing them to appear like yesterday's trash.

Or maybe it's more accurate to say like last week's recycling, since Kline's sculpted bodies are often exhibited in parts intended for reuse. Some assembly may be required.

Severed heads, arms, and hands can be found in the janitor's cart enlisted for *Cost of Living (Aleyda),* 2014. They've been 3D-printed based on the likeness of a real housekeeper who worked at a Manhattan hotel; she allowed herself to be scanned by Kline's team. After Aleyda was turned into a data file, she became an object whose pieces now lie alongside plaster renditions of her toilet brushes and spray bottles. She has been literally objectified—she is turned into the tools of her labor, perhaps to represent the perspective of her employer—but Kline does not entirely deprive her of personhood. Nearby, the real-life housekeeper can be seen in a confessional-style video in which she discusses her ambitions and the conditions of her work.

Kline's freakish surrealism is unsubtle in a way that can be jarring. It is unsparing; it cuts through the politesse that typically abounds in conceptual art. It seems directed less at the art-world elite, who may regard its lack of subtlety with a circumspect eye, than it does at the general public, which will find much to gawk at in this show.

Its curator, Christopher Y. Lew, has created an experience that likewise feels accessible. He isn't keen to position Kline with respect to recent art-historical developments, skirting entirely the issue of post-internet art, a movement of the 2010s whose purveyors glibly ported the look of Web 2.0 into galleries, as Kline did in early works that assume the guise of stock photography. And, unless you read the catalogue, you wouldn't know that works like *Cost of Living (Aleyda)* are intentionally paying homage to the tapes of video art collectives like TVTV and Videofreex. Instead, Lew mainly connects Kline's art not to his peers but to ChatGPT, DALL-E, and deepfakes, which he claims Kline foresaw.

These are sloppy comparisons—Kline's art doesn't really have much in common with any of them. It is true, though, that Kline has pointed the way forward for many who came up after him. A case in point: a recent sculpture by Andrew Roberts from 2022's Whitney Biennial that featured a lopped-off silicone arm with the Amazon logo on it. This isn't all that dissimilar to Kline's *15% Service (Applebee's Waitress's Head)*, 2018, in which a server's 3D-printed neck contains, on its hollow inside, the eatery chain's apple icon.

If Kline's art has proven predictive, we probably ought to expect a lot of tech-minded artists to go analog soon. The most recent works in the show, a new group of installations from the series "Personal Responsibility," list 3D-printed elements among their materials, though I must admit I had trouble spotting them. They mainly consist of freestanding cloistered spaces—a vehicle redolent of the #vanlife trend, a bunker-like cell—that each contain a screen. These screens play videos of fictional characters offering testimonials about leaving society and starting anew; they're interspersed with hypnotic shorts showing reversed footage of denim, sugar, and more going up in flames.

The "Personal Responsibility" pieces, which lure in issues related to land rights and systemic racism, are unusually knotty for Kline—perhaps too much so for an artist who is best when diagnosing one symptom of societal collapse at a time. But there is something compelling about how stridently un-digital they are, at least compared to the early works on view not far away.

Works like *Adaptation*, from 2019–22, rely heavily on analog technologies to image the future.

I much preferred the three-channel video installation *Another America Is Possible* (2017), which envisions a July 4 celebration held in 2043, the year that the US is slated to become a minority-majority country. Across the three screens, Black men and women are shown ceremonially burning a Confederate flag as children run freely. Shot on 16mm film, it reclaims the aesthetic of Levi's commercials, peddling leftist politics instead of straight-cut jeans.

Kline's sour worldview and any notion of optimism seem opposed, but this work suggests that the two can be squared. So too does *Adaptation* (2019–22), in which a group of climate-change seafarers navigate waterlogged Manhattan by boat. The Doomsday clock has already struck midnight; disaster arrived a while ago. But the tone is not all so dour. As the actors in it look out at the deluged landscape they traverse, their gazes seem to express something unexpected: hope.

ARTFORUM
April 2023
ARTFORUM

CULTURES

Colby Chamberlain on the art of Josh Kline

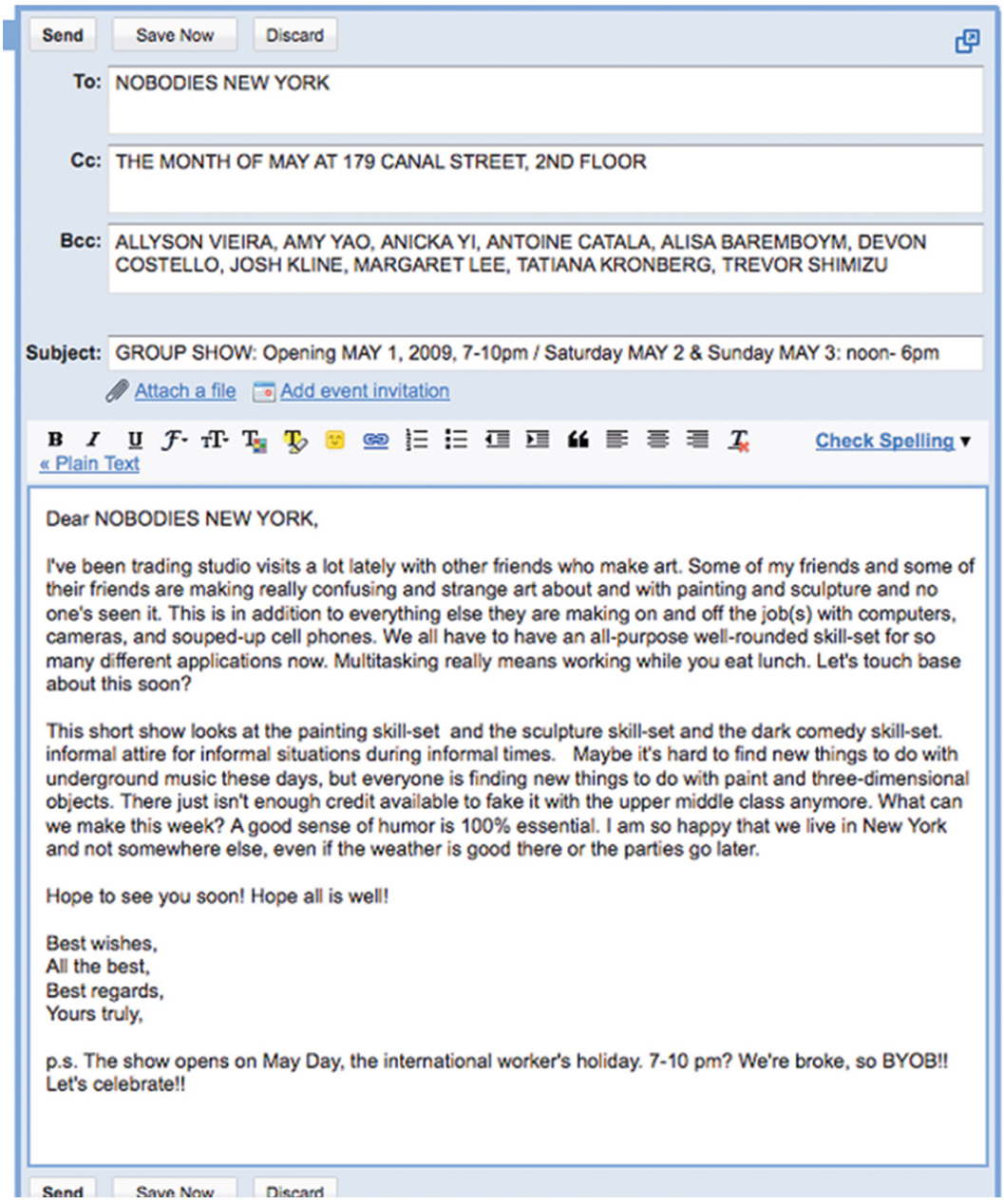
By Colby Chamberlain

Josh Kline, *Creative Hands*, 2011, pigmented castsilicone, commercial shelving, LEDs, 36 1⁄2 × 26 3⁄8 × 15 1⁄2″.

AMERICA LOVES its unconscionable mash-ups. Since the 1990s, a fixture of Thanksgiving Day football coverage has been television anchors' ritual consumption of a "turducken": a chicken stuffed in a duck stuffed in a turkey. Following that logic, what would be the apposite coinage for a manifesto slipped into a press release set inside the screenshot of a Gmail message? A manipresscreenmail, or a Gshotleasefesto? Either way, the announcement for "Nobodies New York," a small group show organized by Josh Kline in 2009, a full one hundred years after the Futurist Manifesto appeared in *Le Figaro*, immediately felt important. Something about its tone, which switched erratically between chatty earnestness and business-casual cliché—"Let's touch base about this soon?"—captured the frantic, perversely buoyant mood of the city following the 2008 financial crash. "Some of my friends and some of their friends are making really confusing and strange art about and with painting and sculpture and no one's seen it," wrote Kline. "This in addition to everything else they are making on and off the job(s) with computers, cameras, and souped-up cell phones." The "nobodies" in question included Alisa Baremboym, Antoine Catala, Trevor Shimizu, and Anicka Yi, at the time all members of the art world's quasi-anonymous precariat class, the untrustfunded sans-MFAs making work at the ragged edges of their freelance gigs. Kline promised "informal attire for informal situations during informal times," a combination of "the painting skill-set and the sculpture skill-set and the dark comedy skill-set" with little regard for pedigree. For anyone unsure of the exhibition's politics, the postscript gave away the game: "p.s. The show opens on May Day, the international worker's holiday."

"Nobodies New York" was the debut show at 179 Canal, a linoleum-tiled second-floor space that artist Margaret Lee managed to lease for free when the real-estate market bottomed out. This month, fourteen years, three presidential elections, and one global pandemic later, Kline's work will be shown in more upscale digs, at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, in a midcareer retrospective curated by Christopher Y. Lew. Though monographic in focus, "Project for a New American Century" is poised to

spotlight Kline's whole peer group, among whom he has frequently played the role of curator and catalyst. Several of the artists in "Nobodies" later joined the roster of 47 Canal, the gallery Lee cofounded with Oliver Newton after 179 Canal's closure, and Kline has organized several shows since at artist-run spaces, museums, and Electronic Arts Intermix, where he held down a day job for ten years. One might also look to the credit lists on the wall labels for his sculptures, videos, and installations, which map the social relations among a milieu of artists and like-minded "creatives" who are constantly exchanging tips, favors, and expertise in the course of experimenting with new technologies, methods, and materials.



Send Save Now Discard

To: NOBODIES NEW YORK

Cc: THE MONTH OF MAY AT 179 CANAL STREET, 2ND FLOOR

Bcc: ALLYSON VIEIRA, AMY YAO, ANICKA YI, ANTOINE CATALA, ALISA BAREMBOYM, DEVON COSTELLO, JOSH KLINE, MARGARET LEE, TATIANA KRONBERG, TREVOR SHIMIZU

Subject: GROUP SHOW: Opening MAY 1, 2009, 7-10pm / Saturday MAY 2 & Sunday MAY 3: noon- 6pm

Attach a file Add event invitation

Check Spelling

« Plain Text

Dear NOBODIES NEW YORK,

I've been trading studio visits a lot lately with other friends who make art. Some of my friends and some of their friends are making really confusing and strange art about and with painting and sculpture and no one's seen it. This is in addition to everything else they are making on and off the job(s) with computers, cameras, and souped-up cell phones. We all have to have an all-purpose well-rounded skill-set for so many different applications now. Multitasking really means working while you eat lunch. Let's touch base about this soon?

This short show looks at the painting skill-set and the sculpture skill-set and the dark comedy skill-set. informal attire for informal situations during informal times. Maybe it's hard to find new things to do with underground music these days, but everyone is finding new things to do with paint and three-dimensional objects. There just isn't enough credit available to fake it with the upper middle class anymore. What can we make this week? A good sense of humor is 100% essential. I am so happy that we live in New York and not somewhere else, even if the weather is good there or the parties go later.

Hope to see you soon! Hope all is well!

Best wishes,
All the best,
Best regards,
Yours truly,

p.s. The show opens on May Day, the international worker's holiday. 7-10 pm? We're broke, so BYOB!! Let's celebrate!!

Send Save Now Discard

Announcement for the group exhibition "Nobodies New York" at 179 Canal, New York, 2009.

The visual record of “Nobodies” consists of only a few grainy snapshots, which has been the source of some belated consternation and head-scratching, since Lee herself was an accomplished photographer then employed as a studio assistant to Cindy Sherman. The silver lining to the exhibition’s lack of high-res JPEGs is that it underscores how little anyone involved cared about circulating the show online, an inconvenient truth for those who have attempted to situate the 47 Canal scene within the then-emerging discourse of post-internet art. Kline has vocally opposed the post-internet label, suggesting, only half-jokingly, that “post-9/11” or “post–Lehman Brothers” would be more accurate, but involuntary categorization is the price an artist pays for relevance.[1] Zeitgeist-chasing curators have pinned Kline to virtually every buzzword-laden theory that gained traction over the past decade—not just post-internet art, but also “speculative realism” and the microwaved leftovers of Italian *autonomia*. To varying extents, the writings of Vilém Flusser, Reza Negarestani, Franco “Bifo” Berardi touch on topics that Kline also addresses, like labor, class, technology, and climate change, but none really capture the essential strangeness of injecting a painting skill-set and a sculpture skill-set with a dark-comedy skill-set, or account for why Kline’s installations can be so welcoming and discomfiting in equal measure.

Lee’s former employer belonged to a cadre of artists, together engaged in a semiotically inflected critique of mass media, who came to be associated with the exhibition title “Pictures,” a word that Douglas Crimp chose for its polysemy. “[A] picture book might be a book of drawings or photographs, and in common speech a painting, drawing, or print is often called, simply, a picture,” Crimp wrote in the revised version of his catalogue essay. “Equally important for my purposes, picture, in its verb form, can refer to a mental process as well as the production of an aesthetic object.”[2] To make out the common project that Kline has pursued in concert with his peers, you need an even more multifarious concept: *cultures*.

View of "Nobodies New York," 2009, 179 Canal, New York. From left: Anicka Yi, *cruisin' for a bruisin'*, 2009; Amy Yao, *Screwball Dance Club*, 2004; Josh Kline, *Box 4A: Extra Coffee Mug*s, 2008; Josh Kline, *Box #1C: Extra Calculator*s, 2008; Josh Kline, *Box #12: Extra Tylenol*, 2009; Josh Kline, *25 Tylenol Painting*s, 2008–2009; Allyson Viera, *2,3,5 I*, 2009; Allyson Viera, *2,3,5 II*, 2009; Allyson Viera, *Marble Relief*, 2008; Allyson Viera, *Torso*, 2009. Photo: Margaret Lee.

> **"Commodities not only surround the body with signifiers but transfigure the body from the inside out, until flesh itself convulses into another sign of exchange.**

IN HIS CLASSIC 1976 text *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams identified "culture" as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language."[3] Its earliest uses referred to the process of promoting natural growth in agriculture or animal husbandry, which in turn led to the metaphor of culture as tending to one's mental and physical acumen. By the late eighteenth century, this term of process could also indicate a finished product, at which point culture became a cudgel in struggles for power. Culture, or the state of being cultured, was claimed by the upper classes, and, when used interchangeably with *civilization*, it served as a pretext for Europe's forcible extension of its influence. (The Latin root word for culture, *colere*, is also the root of "colony.") A campaign of liberal-minded critique broke the concept apart, so that one now speaks of multiple cultures spreading across different regions

and distinguishes among types of culture, such as folk, middle-class, urban, online, and pop. Still, an ambiguity persisted over whether culture encompassed the full range of everyday behaviors or a narrower set of intellectual and artistic disciplines. Definitions also diverged among academics. Cultural anthropologists, for instance, located culture in a community's material production. By contrast, Williams, Stuart Hall, and other early proponents of the interdisciplinary field known as "cultural studies" conceived of culture as a signifying or symbolic system.[4]

Josh Kline, *Forever 27*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 14 minutes 39 seconds.

Culture, in short, is both a process and a product, a means of either asserting or leveling social hierarchies, a rarefied pursuit or a widespread phenomenon, an object of study and a framework for analysis. In Kline's practice, these competing denotations and connotations come together in surprising, genre-bending configurations. For the videos *Forever 48* and *Forever 27*, both 2013, Kline appropriated a familiar television format, the prying tell-all interview, and hired a Diane Sawyer look-alike to pitch questions to actors playing, respectively, Whitney Houston and Kurt Cobain, here miraculously still alive. "Whitney," we learn, survived her 2012 overdose; "Kurt" left Nirvana to deal with his chronic stomach ailments, now ameliorated by reduced stress and probiotics. Using a precursor to present-day deepfake software, Kline unconvincingly grafted Houston's and Cobain's

faces over the actors' mouths. The glitches recall the smudges on Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe silk screens, imperfections that mourn and tarnish a dead celebrity at the level of facture. Yet unlike the static image of Monroe, forever the icon who passed away at thirty-six, these digital surrogates struggle to keep up with the times. "Kurt" puffs an e-cigarette, gripes about the diminishing returns on his music royalties, and calls aging a disease; "Whitney" recalls feeling invincible when she was younger. Alongside these fictionalized exchanges, a third video, *Kurts & Whitneys (Extras)*, 2013, takes a more ethnographic approach. Off camera, Kline, who studied visual anthropology as an undergraduate at Temple University, interviews the twentysomething actors themselves: What do you pay in rent? How do you make a living? Have you gone to college? A meditation on the cult of fame rubs up against an appraisal of culture-industry aspiration.

Josh Kline, *Fedex Delivery Worker Interview #2*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 14 minutes 21 seconds. From the series "Blue Collars," 2014–20.

Complementary methods of inquiry also inhere in Kline's sculptures. For his "Blue Collars" series, 2014–20, he conducted videotaped interviews with individuals working in the service economy as hotel housekeepers, waiters, and delivery persons, asking even-toned questions about their on-the-job responsibilities, family budgets, long-term ambitions, and, on occasion, voting habits. Kline made digital scans of each subject and turned their

likenesses into 3D-printed objects that function as allegories for the disaggregation of employees into productivity metrics and user profiles. *Packing for Peanuts (FedEx Worker's Hand with Scanner)*, 2014, arranges three versions of a man's truncated arm gripping a package scanner across a FedEx box filled with bespoke foam peanuts printed in the shape of miniature hands. Other sculptures reflect cultural-studies insights into how politics plays out through purchasing power and trademarks. Kline's installation *Civil War*, 2016–17, at Stuart Shave/Modern Art in London, shrank the fractured American landscape down into a carpeted living room furnished with bifurcated commodities. In *Make-Believe*, 2017, for instance, one half of a high-end Vitamix blender appears sutured to its discount-brand equivalent, seemingly held together by a thin strip of duct tape while a hidden audio component replicates the sound of a ticking time bomb.

Josh Kline, *Packing for Peanuts (FedEx Worker's Hand with Scanner)* (detail), 2014, 3D-printed sculptures in plaster, ink-jet ink, and cyanoacrylate; cast urethane, vinyl, cardboard, medium-density fiberboard, overall 35 × 36 × 12″. From the series "Blue Collars," 2014–20.

The Janus-faced appliances of *Civil War* could be seen as the inheritors of two lineages within Pop art—the parodically inflated fetishism of Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach on one side and the working-class American Gothic of Mike Kelley or Cady Noland on the other. Yet Kline stands apart from both precedents, on two counts. First, he suspends Pop's play of high-and-low in

favor of treating the "painting skill-set" and the "sculpture skill-set" as equivalent to every other expertise he and his peers have picked up in order to make a living. For *Creative Hands*, 2011, Kline cast the hands of friends and collaborators clutching office paraphernalia, like Advil bottles, computer mouses, or BlackBerries, and titled the resulting pigmented-silicone sculptures according to the subjects' jobs as editors, designers, retouchers, or publicists. By contrast, even Kelley, the most obvious forerunner for Kline's cultural-studies approach, consistently maintained a tension between his interests in fringe popular culture and his training at the kind of art schools that Kline never attended.[5] (And who can forget that Noland's grungy ensembles are sanctified by her status as one of the art world's original nepo babies?) Second, Kline breaks through Pop's preoccupation with surface sheen by portraying "consumption" as both symbolic *and* biological. Commodities not only surround the body with signifiers but transfigure the body from the inside out, until flesh itself convulses into another sign of exchange.

Josh Kline, *Share the Health (Assorted Probiotic Hand Gels)*, 2011, assorted cultures in nutrient gel, plastic dispensers. Installation view, Gresham's Ghost, 401 Broadway, New York. Photo: Margaret Lee.

Kline articulated his concept of the cultured body in the press release for "Skin So Soft," a group show he organized in 2011 through Gresham's Ghost, a roving curatorial project run by artist Ajay Kurian. "In Nineteen-Hundred-

and-Seventy, the body provided artists with a safe haven from market forces and the production of objects," he wrote. "It was a site for feats of endurance or willpower, a location for confronting the self." A generation steeped in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Herbert Marcuse could believe in the body as a bulwark against commodification, but now such faith was in short supply, along with any stable sense of what constituted the self in the first place. "Twenty-First Century aspiration and desperation are transforming the human body into something that 'used to be human.' What do we put in it? What do we put on it? What comes out of it? How can we use it? Who owns it?" These questions brought together works by Yi, Michele Abeles, A. K. Burns, Brian Clifton, Jesse Greenberg, and the collective Yemenwed that variously riffed on neoliberalism's exhortations to reduce drowsiness, cleanse regularly, stay connected, and eat organic. Kline himself exhibited *Share the Health (Assorted Probiotic Hand Gels)*, 2011, a row of hand-sanitizer dispensers containing bacteria swabbed from specific New York landmarks—a G-train subway car, a Chase Bank ATM—and placed in a nutrient gel, which in bacteriology is known as a "culture."[6] Here, culture's earliest definition, of tending to natural growth, erupted through the sediment of its subsequently accumulated meanings, like the return of the repressed.

Josh Kline, *Denial*, 2017, Amana washing machine, Samsung washing machine, hardware, duct tape. Installation view, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London.

To a striking degree, the preoccupations that informed "Skin So Soft" paralleled concurrent developments in cultural studies. If the cultural studies of the Birmingham School during the 1960s and '70s consisted of Gramsci, Althusser, semiotics, and sociology, and the Visual and Cultural Studies program at New York's University of Rochester added a heaping dose of poststructural and psychoanalytic theory to this mixture in the '90s, then cultural studies in the twenty-first century has been infused with biopolitics. The proposition that power operates on and through life itself—most prominently associated with Michel Foucault, but also apparent in the early work of Donna Haraway, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillers—has become central to how we understand culture today. In recent scholarship, one finds it in Mel Y. Chen's relating of panics over traces of lead in Chinese-manufactured toys to nineteenth-century "one drop" miscegenation laws; Paul B. Preciado's frenzied auto-theory on the effects of topical testosterone; Simone Browne's not-paranoid-if-it's-true inquiry into the biometric surveillance of Blackness; and Ari Larissa Heinrich's siting of the medically commodified body within flows of transnational capital.[7] According to their job titles and the catalogue listings of Duke University Press, these authors are affiliated with an extensive medley of academic concentrations—Asian studies, African American studies, queer theory, trans studies, Asian American studies, Black diaspora studies—even as their arguments repeatedly stress the contingency of any such identity-based designation. Kline has reflected on his own Filipino heritage with comparable nuance. "Filipinos are a mestizo people by definition," he wrote in a contribution to *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the Arts*. "Like many mixed-race/mixed-culture peoples who have emerged, are emerging, or perhaps yearn to emerge from a colonial legacy, most Filipinos see no contradiction in this racial, ethnic, and cultural mix."[8]

Josh Kline, *Overtime Drip* (detail), 2013/2020, IV bag, espresso, Adderall, deodorant, Red Bull, Ritalin, printer ink, vitamin C, mouthwash, toothpaste, Plexiglas, LEDs, wood, 17′ 6″ × 5 3⁄8″ × 8″.

Pop art lavished so much attention on the aesthetics of the Coke bottle that it never considered whether its sugar content would spike obesity rates or how strung-out service workers might come to rely on its hit of caffeine. In Kline's work, culture's symbolic meanings and chemical properties are harder to pry apart. Past sculptures have been laced with painkillers, energy boosters, appetite suppressants, and antidepressants formulated to meet the demands of what Jonathan Crary has called "24/7" capitalism.[9] Necromantic concoctions of such products as Red Bull, Wellbutrin, Adderall, and Coke Zero have filled the cafetières of *Sleep Is for the Weak*, 2011, the IV solution of *Overtime Drip*, and the chilled blood bag of *ThinkStrong*, both 2013. Kline treats the synthetic hues of brand-name beverages as a reliable source of "local color," especially so in *Skittles*, 2014, named after a candy so ruthlessly effective in its marketing that I cannot see the word without recalling its accompanying slogan, "Taste the rainbow." An immaculately illuminated version of a standard-issue bodega refrigerator, *Skittles* was first installed on the High Line in New York directly underneath the Standard hotel. Behind its locked glass doors lay shelves of smoothie-style beverages

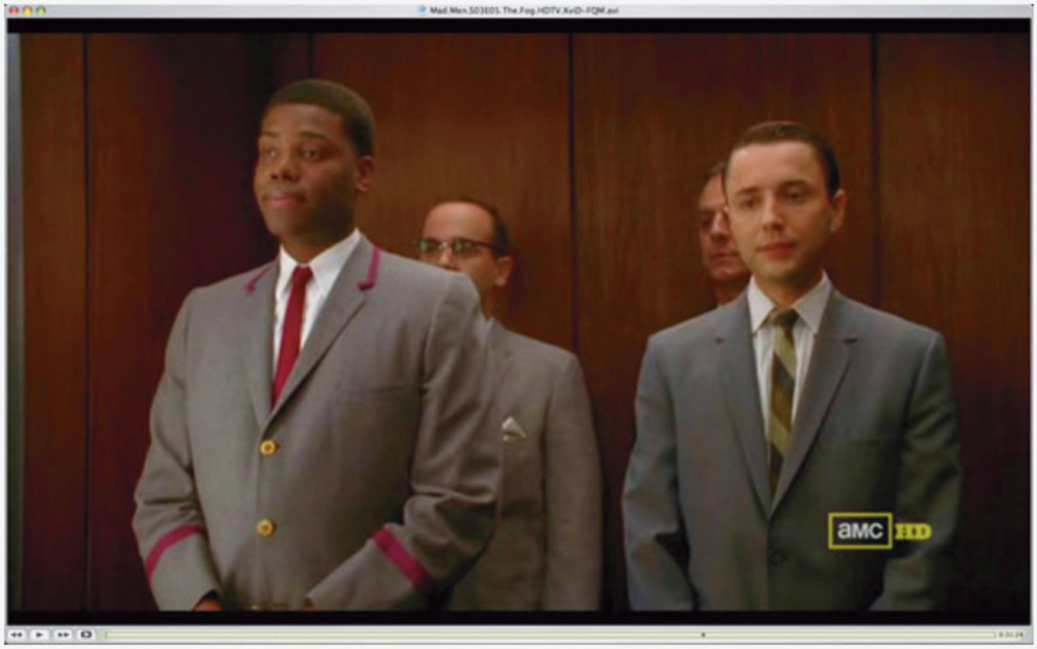
with offbeat names and curious contents. In the bright orange "williamsburg," torn-up shreds of plastic credit cards and American Apparel clothing floated in a mixture of kombucha, agave, and quinoa; Windex, the *Wall Street Journal*, vodka, and Champagne together gave "bottle service" a sickly green complexion. Like August Sander's epochal "People of the Twentieth Century," ca. 1922–64, *Skittles* was an exercise in typology, a cross-section of contemporary society rendered as an assortment of distressingly ingestible beverages. The bottles were less representations of lifestyles than evidence of life *styled*, their saturated hues an index of human bodies awash in stimulants and polymers.

Passersby on the High Line could discern the different ingredients in *Skittles* because they were printed on the bottles themselves, in the lowercase sans serif lettering currently prevalent in the design aesthetic of health-conscious consumerism. The kind of information that gallery-goers usually find in an exhibition checklist was thus transferred onto the work through the appropriation of a commercial vernacular. Kline's use of plainly legible communication formats is part of what made *Skittles* a remarkable instance of "public" art, yet, ironically enough, this very directness has often puzzled an art world accustomed to ambiguity and hermeticism. In a catalogue essay for Kline's exhibition "Antibodies" at Oslo's Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in 2020, Domenick Ammirati openly wondered whether a critic had any meaningful role in presenting a body of work with so few messages to decode or art-historical references to unpack.[10] (If at times Kline's sculptures recall Minimalism, the resemblance derives more from his engagement with commercial-display strategies than from any sustained dialogue with Donald Judd.) This inscrutable lucidity has intensified since the launch, in 2014, of an ambitious cycle of installations that, in the spirit of science fiction, are set somewhere between our projected future and a period of time that Kline has called an "exacerbated present."[11]

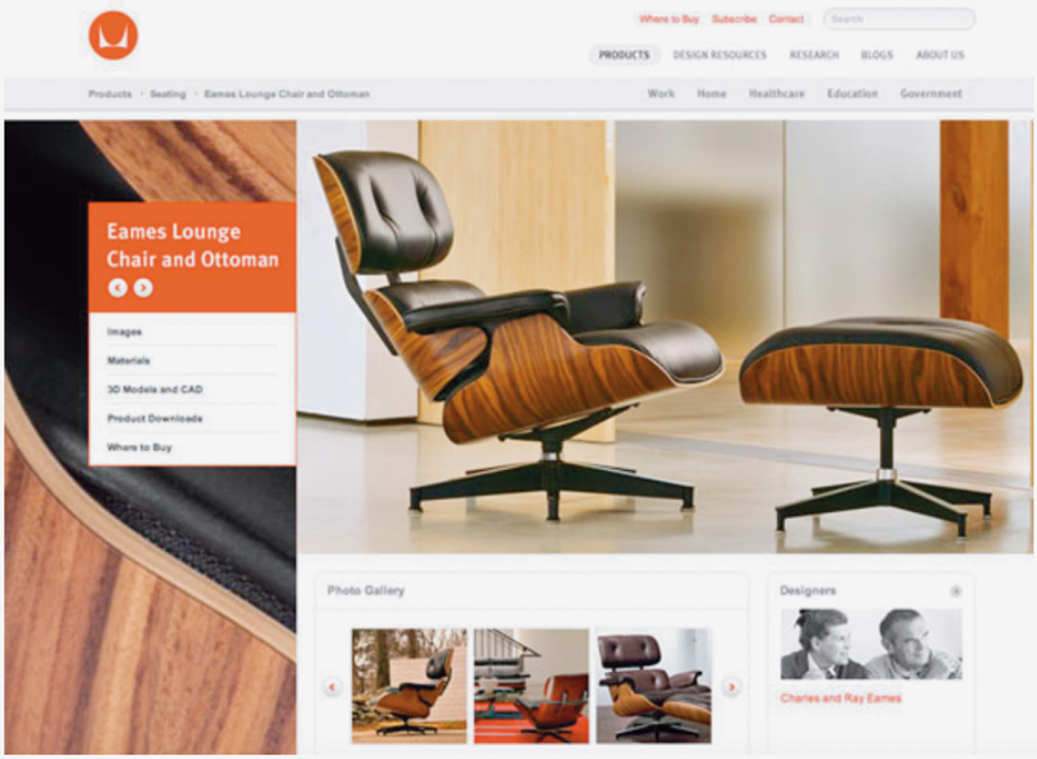
Josh Kline, *Skittles* (detail), 2014, commercial refrigerator, blended liquids in bottles, Plexiglas, LEDs, wood, 7′ 1⁄8″ × 10′ 71⁄2″ × 3′ 5″.

IN OCTOBER 2010, Kline published "New Century Modern Surface Magazine" on ArtFCity, part of the blog's "IMG MGMT" series of image-based artist essays. Accompanied by website screenshots, architectural renderings, and Photoshop collages, the two-thousand-word text looked back on the preceding decade through an incongruous array of off-kilter references. In one particularly dizzying sequence, Kline put forward the *Star Trek* franchise as a cipher for fifty years' worth of interior decor. "The original *Star Trek* (1966–69) presents a mid-century modern fantasy in space—with avocado walls on alien planets and blue-gray talking computers," and its follow-up, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, "takes the beige computer and beige hospital from the late '80s and flies around the galaxy in it, visiting planets full of lavender vases, mauve corporate carpets, and static electricity orbs from Spencer's circa 1986." By contrast, the 2009 film directed by J. J. Abrams offered "a vision of interstellar exploration charted from the bridge of the Apple Store."[12] The latter style, an ostentatiously sleek throwback to midcentury modernism, is what Kline

called “New Century Modern.” The essay’s assembled images located the tendency in the offerings of Design Within Reach and West Elm, in recently renovated airports like JetBlue’s Terminal 5 at JFK, and, most extensively, in New York’s bumper crop of new luxury condominiums. These aughts-era structures, designed by starchitects such as Richard Meier and Jean Nouvel, were first and foremost a testament to the plutocrat-friendly policies of the Bloomberg mayoralty, but Kline detected in their sweeping curves the same psychic forces that made the retro sound of the Strokes so inescapable in the fall of 2001. In much the same way that Takashi Murakami has framed Japanese anime culture as a collective neurosis rooted in the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kline saw New Century Modern as a protracted response to the trauma of 9/11 and the Bush administration’s war on terror.[13] All those gleaming high-rises, with their unnerving capacity to appear as digital simulations even when completed in concrete and steel, were symptoms of a repetition compulsion—one of the sources, according to Freud, of that peculiar category of human experience known as the uncanny.[14]



Where, though, does Dr. Who's TARDIS take America's caring, cultured, progressive liberal Democrats? Even with Obama in office, America's center-left-leaning intellectuals can't get enough of "Mad Men". Is it just the attention to period detail and the brilliant writing or is it the thrill of watching pregnant women drink cocktails and smoke cigarettes while the Black housekeeper does the dishes? The New York Times wants to know. The 2000s and the stunning traumas of Bush Cheney & Co. ushered in an era of extreme escapism. Sitcoms specializing in social surrogacy like Friends have been replaced in our hearts and on our screens by period dramas like "Mad Men", "Rome", and "Battlestar Galactica"and by laptop DVD cultural safaris in the wilds of "Big Love"and "The Wire".



Screenshot from Josh Kline's ArtFCity essay "New Century Modern Surface Magazine," October 21, 2010.

Alongside *Star Trek*, the other television touchstone for "New Century Modern" was *Mad Men* (2007–15), a prestige drama set amid the Saarinen chairs and three-martini lunches of the '60s advertising industry. Wrote Kline, "*Mad Men* cunningly portrays America's transition from socially conservative monolithic culture with legislated discrimination to the dysfunctional, fragmented, lifestyle-oriented consumer culture that we enjoy today."[15] This gloss on the show's thematic arc drew uncited inspiration from another of Kline's interests, filmmaker Adam Curtis's *Century of the Self* (2002). (Kline organized a group-watch of the four-part documentary at the Brooklyn gallery Cleopatra's in December 2008.) Through his signature mixture of archival footage, probing interviews, and charmingly conspiratorial narration, Curtis explains how psychoanalysis was deployed to manipulate the masses through "public relations," a field founded by Freud's nephew Edward Bernays. Various plot elements in *Mad Men* sync perfectly with Curtis's argument: German-accented academics linking smoking habits to the death drive; psychologists running market-research focus groups; a series finale set at a gestalt-therapy workshop modeled after the Esalen Institute in California. In Curtis's telling, Esalen kicked off the Me Generation lifestyle politics that powered the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the late '70s and the left's surrender to neoliberalism under Bill Clinton and Tony Blair during the '90s—effectively setting the stage for the accumulated crises that have shaped twenty-first-century life. The popular appeal of *Mad Men* was initially attributed to nostalgia, but, as its later seasons wore on, the show's exacting re-creations of period style appeared more and more, like New Century Modern high-rises, as an uncanny compulsion to repeat.

Architecture and television were the primary reference points for "New Century Modern," but to the same degree that Dan Graham's analysis of suburban housing in *Homes for America*, 1966–67, sneakily commented on Minimalist sculpture, Kline's essay could also be read as a diagnosis of the art world's incessant returns to modernism throughout the aughts. In the same summer that *Mad Men* premiered, the 2007 edition of Documenta adopted as its leitmotif the left-wing melancholy of T. J. Clark's question from *Farewell to an Idea* (1999), "Is modernity our antiquity?" A mere

coincidence, perhaps, but both these backward glances could be plausibly interpreted as neurotic symptoms stemming from the same set of historical traumas. Kline has sought to break with this pattern of compulsive repetition by taking up the public-relations techniques highlighted by *Century of the Self* and marshaling them against the neoliberal order that they were so instrumental in bringing about. The installments of his cycle have drawn on the expertise of professionals in political stagecraft, advertising, and commercial film to mount protests against policing, precarity, and climate change. According to various critics, this combination of ubiquitous communication strategies and overt leftist politics can come off as "literal," "blunt," or "propagandistically clear." It also, however, induces an unmistakably uncanny effect, distinct from the one elicited by New Century Modern architecture or even by the Surrealist objects of Méret Oppenheim and Man Ray. According to Freud, the uncanny arises from the reemergence of something once repressed. The uncanny engendered by Kline's installations comes closer to a recurring trope in *Star Trek* where characters find themselves in a "mirror universe." Instead of tapping into past memories, Kline's uncanny pierces through the present and triggers a vague, persistent sense of being stuck in the wrong reality.

Josh Kline, *Hope and Change*, 2015, HD video, color, sound, 17 minutes 10 seconds. From *Freedom*, 2014–16.

Jokes about living in a "cursed timeline" started peppering my Twitter feed during the pandemic, and "multiverses" are right now everywhere in pop culture. I first experienced the mirror-universe uncanny back in 2015, while watching Kline's video *Hope and Change*, which debuted at New York's New Museum for that year's triennial. Kline hired an actor to deliver an alternate version of Barack Obama's first inaugural address—not the shockingly forgettable speech he delivered in January 2009, but the full-throated call for climate, racial, and economic justice that many who voted for him had wanted, and even expected, to hear. Thanks to the same deepfake software that previously resuscitated "Kurt" and "Whitney," the words seemed to emanate from a patchy approximation of the former president's familiar face. Most would point to this avatar's trembling presence as the source of the video's uncanny charge, since it sporadically dipped into the "uncanny valley" of insufficiently lifelike digital animation. However, the mirror-universe uncanny of *Hope and Change* hinged more on Kline's collaboration with a professional speechwriter well versed in the art of public relations. The eeriness came from hearing such a transformative set of political promises in the precise cadences that typically offer only platitudes and empty-calorie uplift.[16] *Hope and Change* appeared as part of a larger installation, called *Freedom*, 2014–16, that reproduced the distinctive pavement of Zuccotti Park, the site of the 2011 encampment by the Occupy Wall Street movement, which had coalesced in part out of widespread disappointment in Obama's failure to hold responsible either investment banks for the financial crash or the Bush administration for the Iraq War. The space was patrolled by four life-size mannequins sporting SWAT-team tactical gear and bearing the smooth plastic visages of Teletubbies, the multicolored anthropomorphic creatures of the eponymous British children's show (1997–2001). Kline regards the program's plastic pastoral environs as a perfect soft dystopia; unseen authorities issue orders from a network of horns that spring out from the Astroturf, and the screens on the Teletubbies' stomachs periodically play surveillance footage of people going about their days. The police-officer Teletubbies of *Freedom*, variously named *Po-Po*, *Professionalism*, *Courtesy*, and *Respect*, thus embodied a

state apparatus dedicated to both placating and monitoring its population. Against this backdrop, *Hope and Change* sketched the outline of another world that, for a few euphoric days following the 2008 election, had once seemed possible.

Josh Kline, *Respect* (detail), 2015, modified mannequin, plastic helmet, cotton, leather, nylon, cast resin, paint, steel, foam, aluminum, LED screen, media player, video. Installation view, New Museum, New York. From *Freedom*, 2014–16. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

After *Freedom*, the second installment in Kline's cycle was *Unemployment* in 2016, nominally set in the 2030s or '40s, at a time when automation will have replaced most of the middle-class workforce (a scenario that the recent proliferation of AI applications has made increasingly plausible). Repeating the approach of "Blue Collars," Kline both video-interviewed and digitally scanned individuals who had recently lost their jobs as accountants or administrative assistants. Their 3D-printed likenesses lay curled in the fetal

administrative assistants. Their 3D-printed likenesses lay curled in the fetal position on the carpeted floor of 47 Canal, wrapped in clear plastic bags. The intimation of living persons subjected to asphyxiation and disposability was deeply unsettling, but, much as Freud regarded the automaton doll Olimpia as secondary to the uncanny effect of E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman" (1817), I might point instead to the exhibition's accompanying video, *Universal Early Retirement (spots #1 & #2)*, 2016.[17] Drawing in part on the responses his interview subjects gave to questions about what they would do if their living costs were covered, Kline produced two slickly folksy advertisements promoting universal basic income (UBI) as a means of alleviating precarity and giving people more time to pursue interests and help others. The two ninety-second spots seamlessly replicate the soft-focus, picket-fence sheen of advertisements that affectively bind us to what Lauren Berlant called "cruel optimism": the stubborn, ultimately deleterious fidelity to a vision of "the good life" that neoliberalism has made increasingly unattainable.[18] Here, however, those finely calibrated aesthetics promote an alternate American dream that, uncannily enough, privileges mutual care over individual advancement.

Josh Kline, *Unemployment*, 2016, mixed media. Installation view, 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

The latest installment of the cycle, called *Climate Change*, comprises a presentation at 47 Canal in 2019; a video installation debuting this month at the Whitney; and *Adaptation*, 2019–22, a 16-mm film that first screened at

LAXART in 2022. Through miniature models and other practical effects, the film portrays a small tugboat navigating the half-submerged skyscrapers of midtown Manhattan in a future where rising seas have flooded the city. Crew members climb out from the water in scuba gear and plop down on the deck, unwrapping burritos just as the golden hour hits. Watching this multiracial crew of "essential workers" take a well-deserved break, I found myself thinking of José Esteban Muñoz's interpretation of Frank O'Hara's "Having a Coke with You" as a glimpse of the utopian within the quotidian, as well as Tina Campt's call for living in "the future real conditional or *that which will have had to happen*."[19] In *Adaptation*, the society on the other side of environmental catastrophe approximates what Kline has described as "the kind of utopian majority-minority future America I've fantasized about living in for decades."[20] Maybe it would be nicer to slip into the mirror universe where Al Gore won the 2000 presidential election and established strong climate protections twenty years ago, but at least this cursed timeline of ours may still have its moments.

> **Instead of tapping into past memories, Kline's uncanny pierces through the present and triggers a vague, persistent sense of being stuck in the wrong reality.**

Josh Kline, *Adaptation*, 2019–22, 16 mm, color, sound, 10 minutes 45 seconds. From *Climate Change*, 2019–.

FOR A CERTAIN SEGMENT of readers, my attempt here to strike up a dialogue between Kline's work and cultural studies will inevitably recall the academic debates of the '90s, when art history entered a turf war with an offshoot of cultural studies known as "visual culture." In 1996, the editors of *October* published a notoriously hostile questionnaire contending that, since visual culture drew variously from anthropology, psychoanalysis, and media discourses, the field had abandoned the task of history, untethering images from the specific mediums that had anchored them to the past.[21] This disciplinary schism was long ago resolved, or perhaps just repressed, but it is worth acknowledging that the art of Josh Kline fulfills all of that questionnaire's worst fears. Here is an artist who studied visual anthropology, dabbles in pop psychology, and pays far more attention to the synchronic sprawl of contemporary culture than to his place in some artistic lineage. (When I emailed Kline to ask whether he viewed Graham, Kelley, or Dara Birnbaum as influences, he wrote back with a list of film directors and science-fiction authors.) For many who confront Kline's blood bags and Teletubbies at the Whitney, "Project for a New American Century" will doubtlessly augur nothing less than the wholesale liquidation of art's history.

Josh Kline, *Freedom*, 2014–16, mixed media. Installation view, New Museum, New York, 2015. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

Against such conclusions, one could offer a counterargument that might go like this: For the past fifty-odd years—a period of time roughly coincident with the social experiment known as neoliberalism—the art of museums and galleries has mostly been working through the same limited set of forms. Minimalism, Pop, Conceptualism, the abstraction-versus-figuration push-and-pull of painting: These strategies have been endlessly revised or retooled, invested with new contents or applied to different contexts. From a certain distance, though, all these variations resemble the finicky adjustments one sees across several centuries' worth of European painting, when the Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical, and Romantic movements made only minor tweaks to the fundaments of Renaissance naturalism. The first true rupture came from Gustave Courbet, who combined a commitment to capturing the realities of labor and class with a capacity for infusing academicism with the traits of popular culture, like the flat graphic quality of the épinal prints enjoyed by his rural family.[22] Perhaps it follows, then, that the cultural field that Kline has been mapping out since "Nobodies New York" constitutes a comparable assault on our current status quo. Institutionally accredited critics like me will try to associate Kline's work with this or that historical reference, and others will continue to call it literal or blunt, but from the vantage point of some future majority-minority country where UBI and responsible climate policy are palpable realities, perhaps all these assessments will be seen, like the broadsides against *A Burial at Ornans* back in 1851, as the befuddled sputtering of an atrophied regime.[23]

But there I go again, mixing up notions that don't belong together, when really that should be left to the likes of Josh Kline.

"Josh Kline: Project for a New American Century" will be on view April 19 through August 13, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

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ART

Artist Josh Kline Brings Ivermectin, Fratagonias, and Late Capitalist Body Horror to the Whitney

"Project for a New American Century," the New York-based artist's first U.S. museum survey, opened to the public this week. The exhibition is a searing look at the political platitudes, ubiquitous commodification, and sensory sanitization of contemporary society.

Josh Kline, *In Stock (Walmart Worker's Arms)* (Detail Shot), 2018. Photography by Joerg Lohse. Image courtesy of the artist, 47 Canal, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

At the Whitney Museum of American Art's opening of "Josh Kline: Project for a New American Century," a friend introduced me to a guy about my age. We got to talking, and he told me that he was an artist (no surprise) but that he was also an art handler. His most recent job had been installing Kline's exhibition. The guy gestured down toward the floor we were standing on, which was plastered with T-shirts and denim, suggesting that he'd had a hand in placing them there.

For a minute I considered asking him whether he was actually *part* of the exhibition, which showcases over a decade of Josh Kline's sculptures, videos, and installations, all rife with references to labor and class. Across two floors of the Whitney, viewers will find 11 exhibition spaces with names like "Blue Collars" and "Unemployment." Kline, who's been living in New York for most of the 21st century, has long deployed, combined, and mutated the aesthetics of the fashion show and the FEMA tent, the cop car and the corporate uniform, the iPhone and the surveillance drone—showing the ways in which cultural and political forces intertwine to produce the class conditions of daily life.

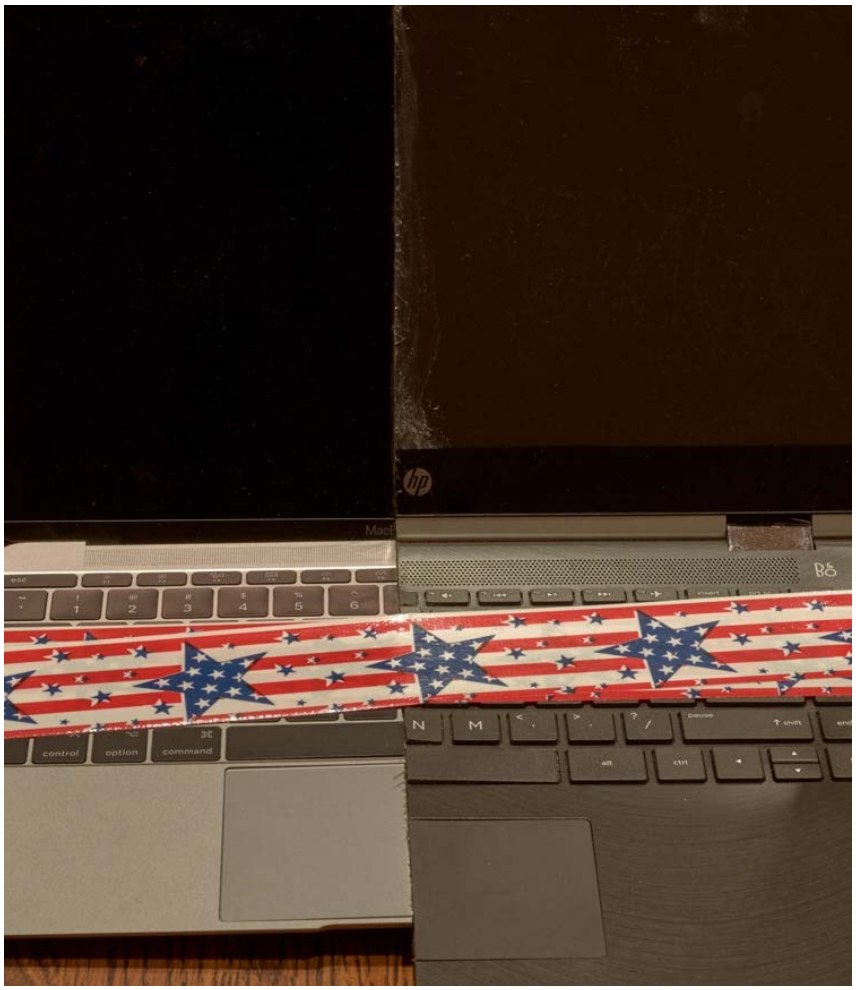
Josh Kline, *Designer's Head in Eckhaus Latta (Zoe)*, 2013. Photography by Joerg Lohse. Image courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

The piece beneath our feet was called *Making Ends Meet*, 2016, and the label listed its materials as: "generic middle-class clothing, fabric, and thread." Looking around the room, I saw people wearing the usual art world Vitamix blend of various collars: generic middle-class clothing, Prada, and Eckhaus Latta. We walked into another room, where a wall was padded with Patagonia puffers, like a mental institution for outdoorsy FiDi types. Another space hosted 3D-prints of Mike Eckhaus and Zoe Latta's heads covered in images of their own designs. In every corner of the show, real or implied bodies were at work.

I called Kline to talk about this wildly smart, darkly funny, visceral, and vast exhibition. It's a retrospective of sorts, but it's also an arrow toward the heart of the future, directing our gaze where it needs to go, which might be toward the floor underneath us.

Elvia Wilk: I'm thinking about the idea of "newness" in your work. The Whitney show is called "Project for a New American Century," which implies that we're on the verge of something. There's something funny and clever about referencing the "new" in a mid-career retrospective. Is there such a thing as newness?

Josh Kline: I am very critical of newness for the sake of newness. I think everyone understands at this point that it has an integral function within capitalism. But in another sense, I think newness is very important. When you live in a society that has a deeply problematic history like the United States, it keeps us from being trapped in a toxic culture from the past.



Josh Kline, *Lies* (Detail shot), 2017. Photography by Robert Glowacki. Image courtesy of the artist, Modern Art, and the Whitney.

Wilk: I think it cuts both ways. Newness implies that real change is possible—that we could do something different—but it's also a marketing tactic to sell the same thing again and again in new packaging. This reminds me of your [Barack] Obama piece from 2015, *Hope and Change*. You hired an actor to recreate Obama's inaugural speech, but he gives us a vision of radical change instead of the platitudes he delivered in reality.

Kline: That piece was about the possibility that Obama represented, and that so many of us believed in in 2008. He offered America a vision of a radically transformed country, but after he was elected, it seemed like he didn't really believe in it.

Wilk: Just yesterday I was talking about the "Yes We Can" slogan and how cringy and painful it is to think back to that time. Who was that "we" supposed to be? Was there a problem in that false collectivity?

Kline: The "we" could have been powerful. Obama's potential was that he offered a narrative that really different groups in America could subscribe to. I think the issue is like, *Yes we can do what?* A lot of people thought, *Yes we can reinvent America. We can create a new America that's more just or that fulfills more people's needs.* And for him, it was, *Yes we can elect Barack Obama.*

Josh Kline, *Desperation Dilation*, 2016. Photography by Joerg Lohse. Image courtesy of the artist, 47 Canal, and the Whitney.

Wilk: Thinking about who “we” are, I found an unexpected element of body horror in your show when I saw all the works together. With the body bags—life-sized replicas of workers who are tied up in transparent plastic bags, like *Wrapping Things Up (Tom/Administrator)*, 2016—you give us the name and occupation of the person it’s based on. There are also the shopping carts with pieces of cut-up bodies in them, like *Unavoidable Victims*, 2016. It’s like bloodless body horror. It’s not splatter, it’s not gross, but it’s even scarier that way.

Kline: I was thinking about it in terms of the objectification of human beings and the transformation of people into products. The blood and suffering is all hidden; you're presented with somebody in a uniform delivering you a package, but you don't know what they're going through. I love David Cronenberg, but I would say the horror of working for FedEx—or the horror of losing your job in a country like America with no social safety net—is far scarier than a chest-bursting sci-fi fantasy. It's really more about capitalism turning people into disposable products.

Wilk: It’s not Cronenberg; it’s an Amazon warehouse where you're not allowed to have a body, to have a bathroom break. That intense denial of the bloody viscera does produce in me a sense of contemporary body horror.

Kline: There will be even more body horror while the show is up. There are bacteria dispensers in the room with the Patagonia wall. If you come back in a month even, those will be squeamishly upsetting. Also the melting wax sculptures (*Consumer Fragility Meltdown,* 2019)... And there's literally blood in the show, it’s just hidden inside plastic coolers (*Internal Disinformation*, 2013/2020). There are IV bags inside them, literally pig’s blood doped with bleach and Ivermectin. You would need one of the guards to open them up to see it.

Josh Kline, *Overtime Drip*, 2013/2023. Photography by Christian Øen. Image courtesy of the artist, 47 Canal, Astrup Fearnley Museet, and the Whitney.

Wilk: A lot of the works are super contained and sanitized, in bags or boxes or coolers, but there's something grotesque happening beyond the surface. I'm calling you from a conference room in a Brooklyn coworking space, and I'm always like, *What kind of horror is happening in the Zoom rooms that I can't see?* Whenever I come here I end up drinking one of those corporate MCT-oil Ashwagandha shakes for breakfast. There's a certain kind of stressful work day where I buy that product, which makes me think of your IV bags filled with Adderall, Red Bull, and deodorant (like *Overtime Drip*, 2013/2020). Everyone here would probably use an IV bag full of stimulants for lunch if they could.

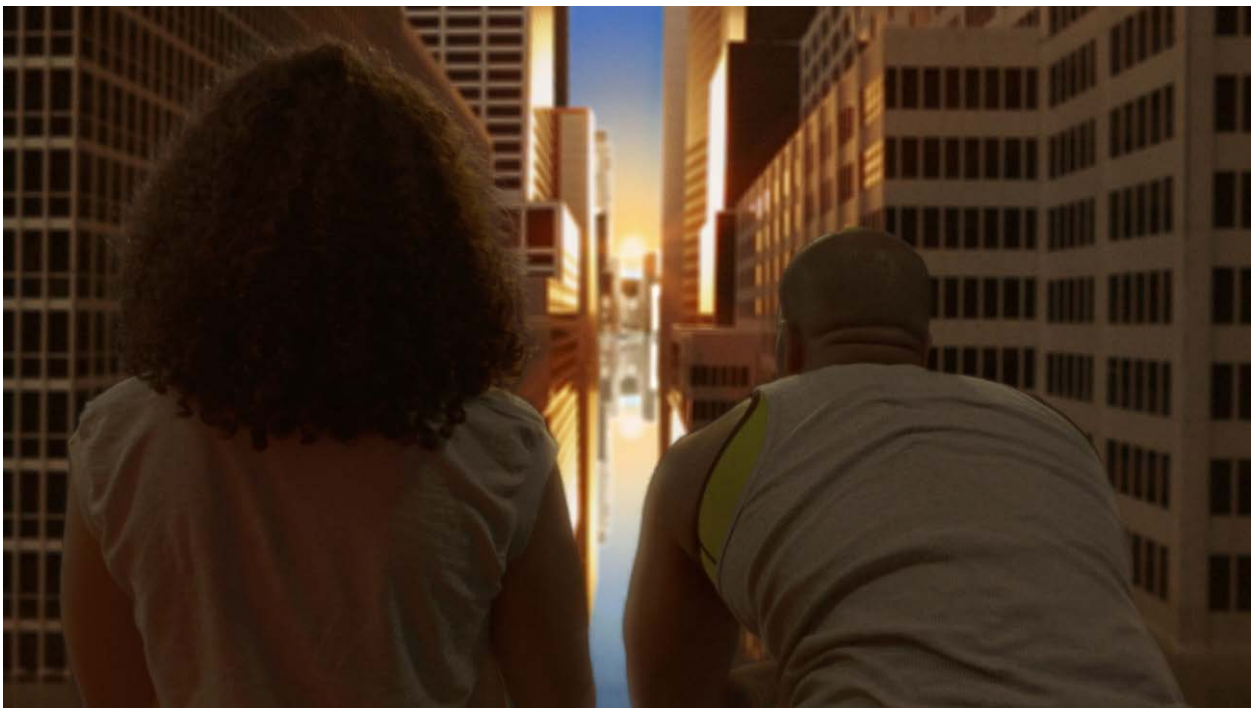
Kline: You're in that zone from your book *Oval.* You think a lot about the optimization of the body and mind in your world too.

Wilk: That book was about a fictional drug, but the actual pharma on the market is wild. I'm fascinated by what the U.S. thinks should be medicated. Did you know you can be diagnosed with shift work disorder? Anybody would be sick working 12-hour shifts at night, so to put that in the DSM and prescribe people a stimulant drug for it...

Kline: Yeah, these metaphors that our society has been promoting since the industrial revolution are a real problem. They're like, *The brain is a steam engine. The brain is a computer. The brain is a television.* The brain is not a machine! The human body is not a machine! It's a bunch of wet muscle, fat, and sinew. We have more in common with cats than we do with smartphones, and yet it's a crime to get sleepy after you eat lunch.

Wilk: Health and wellness is either about ridding yourself of your filth or reintroducing natural pathogens. Hand sanitizer and probiotics are flip-sides of the same coin.

Kline: Whereas the real problem is the fact that we're filling our bodies with plastic.



Josh Kline, *Adaptation* (Film Still), 2019–22. Image courtesy of the artist, 47 Canal, and the Whitney.

Wilk: I was really glad to see your drowned New York video *Adaptation,* 2019-2022, again. There's a Ballardian vibe to it, but watching it in the context of your show, with the new installation of tents that look like homes for climate refugees, it's definitely a piece for the extinction era. Has the resonance of that movie changed for you over the last couple of years?

Kline: It was never just about the beauty of a drowned world. It was about the fact that this is something that we're gonna live through, a kind of nostalgia for our present through the eyes of the future. I shot it right before the pandemic, and the piece changed when I edited it during lockdown. I've really come to see the pandemic as a dry run for what we're going to go through with the climate crisis.

Wilk: I thought the Whitney show told a really nicely choreographed story. There were two narrative strands for me: the lives of these worker characters in the body bags and in some of the videos, and this meta-narrative of the U.S. and the politician characters who have occupied the political landscape over the past decade and a half.

Kline: It's kind of a portrait of present society and a potential future society. On the eighth floor, you've got the Bush administration apologizing with *Crying Games*, 2015—this political fantasy of remorse—and then you have these people who will continue to be shaped by their policies. I think a lot about what might have happened if [George] Bush hadn't become president, and the repercussions will affect this country for a very long time.

Josh Kline, *Politics is like the weather*, 2017. Photography by Robert Glowacki. Image courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London.

Wilk: I spent most of my 20s in Berlin, which is where I saw your work first and read it in that context. But now, living in New York, the resonance of the work has changed for me a little bit. It's so *about* this place. Can you parse the New York-ness of your work?

Kline: I've lived in New York for almost 21 years now. It's hard for this work not to be insanely rooted in this place, but I also lean into it because New York is a major node in the global financial system. It's an interesting vantage point from which to examine our time, especially given how fucked up America is after these four decades of neoliberal policy. New York is a place of extreme income inequality; there's no real social safety net here. But it's also this place that's romanticized because of the artists, musicians, designers, and thinkers that live here, who are, in many ways, sucking at the teat of the financial system whether they want to acknowledge it or not.

I've been thinking about what it would be like if I lived somewhere else. There was a moment in the pandemic where I thought I should move to Berlin because America is becoming a scary fascist country. And I was wondering what that would do. Would it disconnect me too much from *this*—the forces shaping our world?

"Josh Kline: Project for a New American Century" is on view through August 13, 2023 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

LISSON GALLERY

Interview Magazine
April 11, 2023
Interview

ART

Enter Josh Kline's Dystopian World

By Galcher Lustwerk
Photographed by Dan McMahon

April 11, 2023

Since 2011, Josh Kline has been shocking the art world with dystopian works that tackle the chaos of our technologically charged and environmentally catastrophic era. While preparing for a survey of his sculptures, installations, and videos at the Whitney Museum of American Art this spring, the artist called up his friend and occasional collaborator, musician Galcher Lustwerk, to discuss net-art–era trend forecasting, writing, and why having too much access to the past is inhibiting us from imagining a better future.

GALCHER LUSTWERK: Can I start, Josh?

JOSH KLINE: Yeah, go for it.

LUSTWERK: Congratulations on your Whitney show, and thank you for letting me do the soundtrack for the *Adaptation* film portion. It was really cool to work on. I was wondering: You had a really specific production schedule and style for the film. You used 16-millimeter. What kind of effects were you going for?

KLINE: I think I OD'ed on HD video and CGI animation in the 2010s, and I needed to take a break from it. Film felt like the right direction, because it was so different from that HD video I was working in, that felt so locked into this 2012 moment in video art. Also, film has this inherent nostalgia that comes with it. I wanted to create a vision of the future that wasn't just our present, in the future, but something else. In a way, I wanted the characters in the film to be looking back at our present from the perspective of their future. So the film is about a kind of nostalgia, and film made sense for that.

LUSTWERK: Cool. I think I tapped into that vibe when I was trying to include the saxophone as a representation of New York jazz, and how distant that is culturally, and yet it still permeates the public's idea of music and the city.

KLINE: I like the sax. I also had this kind of *Blade Runner* Vangelis feeling, while at the same time being something totally different. But it brings in a bunch of interesting nostalgia.

LUSTWERK: Is *Adaptation* the only film you have in the show?

KLINE: The only one shot in 16-millimeter. Everything else is video.

LUSTWERK: It's a cool contrast. Digital is cleaner and more clinical, whereas 16-millimeter is more expressive and poetic.

Energy Drip, 2013.

KLINE: That's where I wanted to go. Although with the new sculptures that I'm making, I'm trying to find a new poetic language within digital media. I mean, there's actual poetry going onto the sculptures, poetry writing, which is interesting to talk to you about, considering your music. When did you start writing lyrics?

LUSTWERK: It was a combination of moving to New York and working in branding and doing PDFs and pitches, where you're coming up with weird names and logos. At the same time, I was exposed to what all my art-world friends were doing. And with electronic music, it seemed like there was much more weirdness that could happen. There wasn't as much of a club scene in the early 2010s, so I didn't have any template to work off. I took inspiration from advertising and branding and stuff that I was working on at my day job.

KLINE: So your rap lyrics were coming directly from your advertising work?

LUSTWERK: No, but it honed my ability to pare down a message. In middle school all the way to college, I was being indie or real backpack-rappy, or very emo and expressionistic, with lyrics. But with electronic music you want a more pared-down message and a more palatable, loopable lexicon to work with.

KLINE: There's power in repetition.

LUSTWERK: So the poems you're working on for these sculptures, how are they meant to be read?

KLINE: It's similar to what you were saying. I had been writing the press releases for all my shows for years. They're like artworks in their own right. Also, they were the longest things that I could write at the time because I had a full-time job and writing's always been hard for me. We shot *Adaptation* in 2019. For those who haven't seen it, it's this film set in a future flooded Manhattan where this crew of relief workers emerges out of the sea, basically around a flooded Rockefeller Center. They board this boat in the construction-worker equivalent of wet suits, and they take advantage of being in this boat in Manhattan in high summer, and watch the sun set between the buildings. I was working on editing it and doing post-production, all the visual and special effects, during lockdown and quarantine, which is when we started talking. The more I worked on the film, the more I realized it was about lockdown.

LUSTWERK: I can see that.

KLINE: The experience that we were having in 2020 and 2021 was a dry run or a taste of what's going to happen with the climate crisis this century, and all the disruption and upheaval and cancellation of what we think of as normal life. So I decided to re-record the audio, and just on a whim, I was like, "Maybe I'll write some text, and have these actors record it." Non-narrative text, basically more like the press releases that I was writing. But then it became poetry, and that ended up becoming the voiceover for the film read by the different actors. When I started working on these new sculptures for the show, which are essentially tents about migration and refugees and climate refugees and dislocation, I decided I'm going to put the poetry onto the sculptures. It's literally printed on the fabric of these tents.

Tastemakers, 2012.

LUSTWERK: I like that because I feel like at the moment, text-based art is out of style. Or maybe it's just that graphic tees with words on them are out of style. I'm ready for a comeback on that.

KLINE: I'm really into it. During the pandemic a lot of artists figured out how to make paintings. I wish I had done that, because it's very lucrative. And my video work takes a lot. But, I went deep into a writing zone, both screenplays and, I developed a poetry practice, which wasn't what I thought was going to happen. No regrets.

LUSTWERK: Instead of getting into AI or machine learning, you're getting down and dirty with actual words that are coming out of your brain.

KLINE: Absolutely. It's also something no one can take away. I had this moment during the pandemic where nothing was happening. There were barely any shows. Nobody was going to see anything. If there are no shows, no fundraising, and no budgets, you can still write. If you can't afford paint or 3D printing, or film and camera, you can still write.

LUSTWERK: What are your ambitions for a future feature-length film?

KLINE: I've written a legit sci-fi story and I want to make it into a proper movie. It's not an art film.

LUSTWERK: You want to distribute it the way most films get distributed versus being at a gallery?

KLINE: Yeah. Originally, it was going to be an art project, but the more I worked on the screenplay, the more I realized, "This is not nonlinear. It's actually a linear narrative. I want to see it go into the world." It's *The Matrix* meets a World War II refugee story meets *Kids* meets *Dancer in the Dark*. It's not anything that anybody's seen before.

LUSTWERK: Very cool.

KLINE: I have to tell you, when we were talking back in the day, I didn't realize that you were part of K-Hole. I figured it out after we finished the soundtrack and it blew my mind. I was into your music, but I was also a fan and admirer of what K-Hole was doing. There's a lot of work I've done that involves advertising that's in this Whitney show, and K-Hole as a collective was all about advertising. What are your feelings about advertising?

LUSTWERK: I haven't really talked about this, because for a long time, I kept K-Hole and my music stuff completely separate. But around the time we released our report on normcore, there was a lot of misunderstanding and miscommunication where I felt like the early effects of this information overload and ideas and images were becoming almost incomprehensible, or just magically associated with everything. So K-Hole was my way of feeling like I had some sense of control over images and text. I didn't really do any of the writing, but I did all the copy editing to make sure it wasn't too bookish. All the other members of K-Hole are incredible writers and well-read. I don't have patience for that kind of stuff. So it was a cool exercise in editing an idea down and distilling it. Looking back, it was a cool multimedia exercise.

KLINE: Why was advertising so interesting in that moment? It seems less prominent as a subject in art right now.

LUSTWERK: Part of it has to do with the fact that the cycles are just getting quicker. And disillusionment is happening at a faster rate. I graduated college, went straight to a design agency, and was really drinking that Kool-Aid for a while. After a few years and a few projects with some evil corporations, you get disillusioned and realize, this is all really taking advantage of artistry. The advertising and branding sector just looks to art and counterculture for their ideas, and it feels more like a game than ever when all you have to do is figure out the algorithm.

KLINE: I do wonder if, because of AI and algorithms and other factors, we are living in a society where it's impossible for human beings to have an overview. A society has been created that is only maybe comprehensible by machines. It's something new and disturbing.

LUSTWERK: But you're bucking that trend with wanting to do a feature film. People's attention spans are just different now. I feel that way with music—I'm making my tracks shorter.

KLINE: Do you think a lot about nostalgia in the music that you make?

LUSTWERK: I think about it, but not in a theoretical way. If I feel nostalgic, I'll literally be like, "Oh man, that reminds me of the first time I listened to Goldie in high school." It's more of an autobiographical thing for me. Or it's a vibe. But with music, I'm trying to create a new feeling. If that feeling is augmented by feelings of nostalgia, I want that to still feel authentic and not just referential. Not just throwing a breakbeat on there because I want it to sound '90s. That's not really how I work.

KLINE: I've been thinking a lot about newness. I'm questioning when newness is an important objective, and what is actually possible now. We're in a time where it would make a lot of sense for there to be new aesthetics, because so many of the forms in media that we make our art in are rooted in this really fucked-up past. You think about contemporary art and a lot of the forms that people cling to, they're basically all invented by white men and women. Even in the '60s and '70s, all the artists people prayed to were white. That's the canon. Maybe we need new aesthetics to go with a new society if America is not going to just be a white society.

LUSTWERK: I often think that TikTok is offering a new aesthetic, simply because it's made by people who have a different sense of time. This is what I'm worried about with music. Kids will grow up with TikTok never having listened to full songs. Their appetite for music will be completely different, almost to a point where they just wouldn't listen to a song in the first place. So what changes in music? It could eventually evolve into musique concrète, but grindcore musique concrète where it's 20-second songs.

Desperation Dilation, 2016.

KLINE: This is the peril of AI and algorithms. But maybe the reaction against it will create space for newness. I think about the ’90s when you had no idea what was going on in a city two hours away, and the kind of freedom that created. Just thinking you knew, and then reacting, and not having access to the complete archive of all human culture in the last hundred years. There’s freedom in that.

LUSTWERK: I feel like music is getting more niche. Or maybe I’m just getting older. Who knows? Maybe, going forward, it comes down to making sure everyone has the tools, but can understand how to use them to the best of their ability.

KLINE: Yeah, responsible use of the tools. That’s a good point for us to end on.

LUSTWERK: Great talking to you.

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ARTS AND LETTERS

An Artist for the End of the World

What's so funny about our dystopian future? Just ask Josh Kline.

By Zoë Lescaze
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WHEN "SURROUND AUDIENCE," the New Museum's third triennial of contemporary art, opened in downtown New York in 2015, one piece quickly emerged as the standout. The mixed-media artist Josh Kline had created a full-room installation that deftly captured the daily indignities and collective angst of life in a sputtering democracy. The piece's actual title is "Freedom," but most viewers referred to it by another name: the Teletubbies.

For those unfamiliar with the British children's television show from the late 1990s (and those fortunate enough to have forgotten it), the Teletubbies were plush, crayon-colored creatures who babbled in baby talk while watching videos of human children on screens embedded in their stomachs. For "Freedom," Kline drew on his experiences as a protester during the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations of 2011 to reimagine them as adult-size paramilitary storm troopers whose bellies played videos of real police officers impassively reading social media posts on police violence, privacy and torture. Using primitive facial-mapping software, Kline grafted the faces of the activists who'd written the posts onto those of the officers reading them, as though the resistance had been digested by the very systems it had hoped to topple. An allegory of state surveillance, the piece was dark … but also tragicomic, and Kline, then 35, went from being a presence on the nascent Manhattan Chinatown gallery scene to booking solo museum shows. Since then, he has delivered similarly mordant visions of corporate piracy, class inequality and civil war. In April, his midcareer survey, "Project for a New American Century," will open at

New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. "I feel like you can't just give people gloom," he said this past fall, sitting in the sunny Chinatown office where he works with a small team of collaborators. "The viewer needs a little relief."

"Respect," from Kline's 2015 installation, "Freedom," which debuted at the New Museum in New York. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Kline, now 43, belongs to a broad, multigenerational group of artists addressing the transformative effects of technology on human society. What they create doesn't fit neatly under a single label: None of the provisional terms, like "post-internet art," have found widespread acceptance. Some work in digital media, some shoot videos, some make sculptures, some do all of these and more. Their subjects are equally eclectic, ranging from the mutability of online selves to the dissolution of

authorship in the digital age. Kline is simultaneously more earnest and more playful than many of his peers. Much like the art-fashion collective DIS (who often include Kline in their curatorial projects, and whom he includes in his), he hijacks the aesthetics of retail displays, logos, ads and corporate branding in his work. But unlike DIS — who do so without discernible politics and tend to glamorize a sense of existential resignation — Kline is stridently and sincerely polemical. His closest peers might be Jon Kessler, Trevor Paglen and Hito Steyerl, artists who have delivered similarly pointed critiques of the military-industrial complex, surveillance and state secrecy, but Kline's sense of humor sets him apart, as does his focus on labor and class.

HE OWES HIS populist worldview partly to his upbringing. Kline's father, a biochemist at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, was laid off around the age of 50, when Kline, an only child, was in high school. His mother, who died when he was in college, was from the Philippines and originally a pharmaceutical chemist. After Kline was born, she catered Filipino food, sold insurance and processed tax returns to support the family. His work, he said, has a lot to do with "seeing their American dreams fizzle out."

After an early interest in physics and nanotechnology that ended when he flunked calculus, Kline earned a film degree from Philadelphia's Temple University, where he began making video art as well as installations and staging public interventions, though he didn't call them that. His interest in rampant commercialism found early expression in a series of photocopied posters of manicured hands holding PalmPilots that Kline pasted up around the city. On another occasion, he "foraged," as he put it, a herd of shopping carts, spray-painted them gold and filled them with ads for fake products and papier-mâché pills.

In 2002, three months after he graduated, he moved into the rent-controlled apartment in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood that he still calls home. After scraping by with freelance web design jobs, he eventually landed a curatorial position at Electronic Arts Intermix, a nonprofit archive of video and media art. There, Kline worked directly with the materials of artists he admired, including Dara Birnbaum, Mike Smith and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto — pioneers who skewered clichés of movies, soap operas and other mainstream entertainment. (Birnbaum, for instance, is best known for deconstructing female archetypes in shows like "Wonder Woman.")

A still from Kline's film "Adaptation" (2019-22), which depicts a dystopian vision of a future Manhattan.
Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Kline and his circle — a group of artists working across various media that includes Margaret Lee, Jon Santos and Anicka Yi — struggled to find art world traction. While artist-run galleries had once commanded the respect of the establishment, the few alternative spaces that existed in the early 2000s were widely ignored by industry gatekeepers. But the subprime mortgage crisis that began in 2007 briefly changed that, allowing scruffier experimental ventures to gain a foothold. In 2009, Lee secured a lease on a defunct jewelry showroom in Chinatown that became the exhibition space 179 Canal.

Around this time, Kline began making work in which bodies, brands and products blur together. For "Dignity and Self Respect," his breakout 2011 solo exhibition at 47 Canal (the gallery Lee co-founded after closing 179), he exhibited his sculptures on bright white shelves and glowing plinths reminiscent of an Apple store. One piece, "Sleep Is for the Weak," consists of three French press coffee makers filled with absurd blends of the various stimulants — DayQuil, Vivarin, Coke Zero — his peers employed to stay awake long enough to work. Kline's commentary on the ways in which people use products to both engineer and broadcast their identities found its sharpest expression a few years later with "Skittles," a sculpture that debuted on the High Line in 2014. Inside an industrial refrigerator, rows of smoothies represent lifestyles in liquid form. "Condo" is a creamy white concoction of coconut water, HDMI cable, infant formula, turmeric and hunks of purple yoga mat. "Williamsburg" contains kombucha, quinoa, American Apparel underwear and blended credit cards, among other

ingredients. The Museum of Modern Art acquired the work two years later but, in 2019, when “Skittles” was included in a group show, some ingredients had already become difficult to source. (The conservation team realized the museum needed to stockpile materials like Google Glass if it was going to reinstall the piece 50 or 150 years from now.) Beyond remarking on class and technology, “Skittles” underscores capitalism’s dependence on cycles of obsolescence. While some artists make site-specific art, Kline instead set out to make work that was time-specific: projects that preserve the desires, ethics and frailties of the era in which they were made. “I’m not a person who believes in this myth of a timeless art,” he told me. “I think that’s propaganda.”

A detail from Kline’s 2014 installation “Skittles,” an attempt to capture lifestyles in liquid form. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York

If Kline’s early works held a dark mirror to the present, his subsequent projects have focused on the future. With “Unemployment,” an immersive installation from 2016, he imagined a world in which automation and artificial intelligence have eliminated most office jobs, plunging the middle class into poverty. Its most haunting components are six unnervingly lifelike human figures dressed in office attire, balled up inside garbage bags like corporate flotsam. And in “Adaptation,” a short film he began shooting in 2019, Kline portrays a team of essential workers piloting a boat through the ruins of Midtown Manhattan, a maze of flooded avenues and half-submerged skyscrapers in a city swallowed by rising seas. “It’s not a total inversion of our world. It’s just that much off from what we’re living in,” says the curator Lumi Tan, a friend of the artist’s. “And we can all understand this is what’s coming next if we continue in our mistreatment of the world.”

Still, not all of Kline's visions are quite so dystopian. In 2016, he created the videos "Universal Early Retirement (spots #1 & #2)," advertisements for a world without involuntary work, after interviewing the models for the "Unemployment" sculptures, professionals who had recently lost their jobs. When he asked them what they thought about universal basic income, nearly all of them said it would make people "lazy," but when Kline inquired instead what they would do if their basic needs were met, "none of them," he said, "answered that they were just going to sit on the couch and watch TV." Instead, they described active lives caring for the elderly, fixing up their homes, pursuing new degrees and making art. The resulting videos co-opt the tropes of political campaign ads (sunbursts, rousing slogans, working people looking hopeful and resolved) to depict a diverse cast of adults living their best post-9-to-5 lives. The works could be mistaken for parodies, but Kline intended them as earnest suggestions of how activists might rebrand polarizing agendas. "It's a proposition for how you could convince people of these radical political policies like U.B.I.," he said.

As Kline freely admits, works like these verge on agitprop. But, points out Christopher Y. Lew, who is curating the Whitney show, desperate times call for art that explicitly aims to jolt viewers out of their complacency. Kline, he believes, is making the argument that "it's not just Big Tech and corporations that are going to determine what our futures are like but that individuals can do this and, in a sense, ought to do it." The work, he argues, is a reminder of our own agency.

Kline's 2016 sculpture "Poverty Dilation." Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York

KLINE, WHO IS single and lives alone, does most of his work at his kitchen table. He develops ideas for installations and videos in the way a novelist or filmmaker might: drafting outlines, adding details, cutting sections and creating exhaustive written plans. He works until about 3 a.m. without the assistance of coffee, which, along with alcohol, he stopped drinking in his early 30s because of autoimmune disorders he ascribes to a childhood diet of "toxic" candy and genetically modified food.

He has little patience for the art world's insularity, especially conceptual provocations that only make sense to those with an aesthetic theory decoder ring. "You shouldn't need four years of study of Lacan and Deleuze and Adorno and whoever to understand art," Kline told me. "I want to create an art that's accessible to the FedEx delivery worker or a doctor who doesn't have that specific education but is interested in the society they live in." He's currently working on a feature film and, while the characters and plot are still under wraps, visitors to the Whitney exhibition will get a sense of the project's themes in a new series of sculptures with the working title "Personal Responsibility." Inside tents made to resemble shipping containers and emergency vehicles, video interviews with fictional climate refugees and relief workers will be shown. The scripts, written in collaboration with the filmmaker Thymaya Payne, draw from the experiences of real people affected by Hurricane Katrina, the California wildfires and the winter storms that caused devastating power outages across Texas in 2021, among other disasters.

These new pieces are the latest installments of what Kline conceives as a single overarching series that began with "Freedom," and one he expects will be his life's work. When I asked him how he, as someone who reflects on cycles of cultural relevance and obsolescence, feels about aging and mortality, he paused. Being in his 40s, he said, was actually a relief. "I feel like I've been young for a long time," he said. "Now I want to go deeper into my work."

The New York Times
March 3, 2023
The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Josh Kline: Living in the Ruined World

At LAXART in Los Angeles, the artist imagines an unmoored but romantic life in the post-climate change future.

By Travis Diehl

Published March 3, 2022 Updated March 8, 2022

LOS ANGELES — When Josh Kline debuted his "Climate Change" series at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, the slick sci-fi work looked a

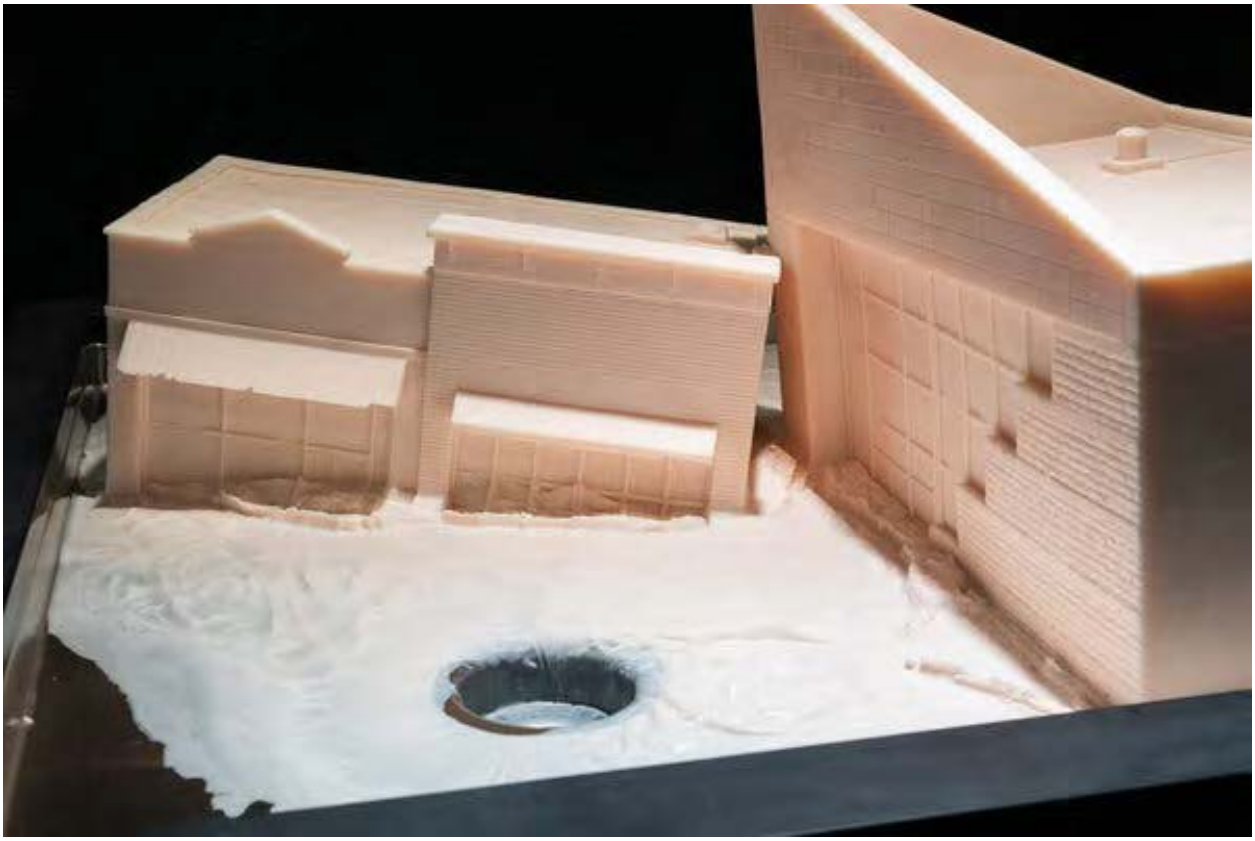
little smug. The New York-based artist, who at 42 has pieces in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art, is known as a political fantasist with a dyspeptic view of life under capitalism. A recent series of dirty, resin-soaked American flags shaped into televisions, for example, is meant to critique Fox News.

Even so, Kline's apocalyptic vision of warming seas for the biennial had outdone itself for corporate-chic confidence: a series of eight tinted photos of emblems of U.S. power — San Francisco skyscrapers, the front desk of Twitter's headquarters, a statue of Ronald Reagan — partly submerged in water in plexiglass cases and lit with medicinal ambers and greens. Pumps recirculated the water over the prints, erasing them slowly, like the washer in a darkroom or a hotel water feature or, maybe, liberal tears. The message was propagandistically clear: climate change is real; the water is rising; turn back the tide while you still can.

Now, three of these flooded works appear at LAXART, a nonprofit project space in Los Angeles, as part of Kline's new exhibition, "Adaptation." In this setting, they seem less declarative, more hunkered down. The relentless combination of time and trickling water soaks the photographs with an aura of romantic decline. A Silicon Valley McMansion's peaked roof peers through a curtain of cloudy fluid in "Luxury Home, Los Altos Hills." A white patch of blight creeps up from the bottom of "Deck, Rosewood Sand Hill Hotel, Menlo Park." In "432 Park Avenue, Manhattan," which depicts a supertall residential tower that may be more an investment storehouse than an actual home, a little scummy foam jiggles on the water's surface.

Josh Kline, "Deck, Rosewood Sand Hill Hotel, Menlo Park," 2019, from a series warning about the blunt effects of climate change. Ruben Diaz

Kline's "432 Park Avenue, Manhattan," 2019. The relentless combination of time and trickling water soaks the photographs with an aura of romantic decline. Ruben Diaz



Kline's earnest warnings about the effects of climate change are still blunt — the immediate greed of energy and tech and lifestyle companies will still doom our civilization, if not the world, to a

watery end. (In fact, the artist doubles down: the back room also features “Consumer Fragility Meltdown,” 2019, a soy wax model of two commercial buildings slumping and sweating on a heated steel table.) But as each image breaks apart, Kline’s message also erodes. Ambivalence creeps through the gaps. Then, when the emulsion has been rinsed away, the print is replaced and the cycle begins again.

This unsure mood pervades the show’s main event, the short film “Adaptation,” making its U.S. debut in the gallery’s darkened, tarp-lined main room. The film opens on a view of the tops of clean-cut skyscrapers clustered around a clear blue sky. Then the image wavers and ripples; a small boat enters the frame. The sky turns out to be a reflection on the glassy water that covers the pediments, streets, parks, and entrances of an entire metropolis. Evidently the major industrial nations weren’t able to stave off global warming, and the ocean inundated New York — and, judging from the waterline, likely every other coastal city.

There is not much plot to speak of, only the real-time present of the characters, six rescue workers surveying the scene. We’re privy only to the poetry of their inner monologues, unfolded in a lyrical voice-over. “Soaking in the tainted brine,” one begins. Two scuba divers climb the boat’s ladder and hose down their contaminated suits. The light on the buildings is slow and orange. Whatever their mission, the divers also seem to be searching for some of their old joys. “What is home,” asks another. “Is this home?” It was, and maybe it could be again.

More waters are "rushing in," they say, although the sea appears deathly calm. We hear that "human aspirations, dreams, and plans" have sunk along with all the "temporary rented homes for temporary rented lives," and "all the drowned drugstores." These references, delivered as dreamy asides, echo Kline's indictment of the American dream, venture consumerism, housing inequality, and big pharma in the "Climate Change" series. But here, the previous work's bitterness feels abstract, at odds with the film's placid drift. The real sadness of the film resides in the sense that — whatever happened, whoever is to blame, and whoever is left — all that matters is pressing on with the species-wide business of survival.

Kline's film is drenched in dystopian, "Blade Runner"-esque sentiment. Indeed, its soundtrack, an entwining dirge of synthesizer and sax arranged by the beatmaker Galcher Lustwerk, pays tribute to the strains Vangelis composed for Ridley Scott's film. Here, too, the more or less hellish world of the near future is mostly the backdrop for the existential questions of its human tenants. These dramas, of course, are quite short, even shortsighted, compared to the wide pageants of the planet itself.

As the divers pass around energy bars and bottles of what could be beer, the sun settling between the buildings and lying gold above the flooded avenues, the voice-over softens and grows indistinct, cross-chattering, as if overlapping scraps of the characters' thoughts. One speaks of "human tears in the water," a line that recalls the dying words of the android at the end of "Blade Runner": "All these memories will be lost in time, like tears in rain."

Even as Kline makes science fiction, his form embraces nostalgia. “Adaptation” was shot on 16 millimeter color film — the projector clatters away in the gallery on a derrick-like stand — using scale models and other practical effects. The choice to use film, rather than the digital rendering and seamless HD video that have become increasingly affordable for contemporary artists, is more than a rejection of that trend. This is the way movies used to be made — and perhaps, he suggests, if the computers fail, or if the entertainment industry collapses, they’ll be made this way again. But the filmstrip, too, looping and looping for the show’s duration, will also degrade …

This is the seductiveness of Kline’s work on climate change: whether or not countries meet their greenhouse gas reduction targets, whether global warming can be held below the threshold, some degree of *change* is inevitable. Cities like Miami and New York will face — already face — rising waters and unprecedented storm surges. Yet Kline’s message in “Adaptation” isn’t one of doom, necessarily — nor of hope. We will simply keep living in the ruined world.

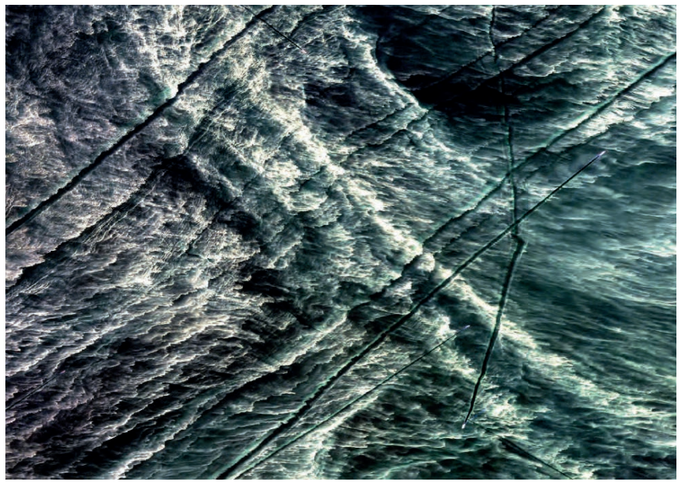
Essay: Art and climate share one crucial trait: rapid change. Might the oceans presage the shape of art to come?

by Carson Chan

New Wave

Josh Kline, *Domestic Fragility Meltdown* (detail), 2019, powder-coated steel frame, epoxy resin, stainless steel, heating panels, soy wax, pigment, plastic bucket, liner, 97 × 100 × 100 cm. Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York; photograph: Joerg Lohse

To survive our rising oceans – of information, of dread – we must learn to read water.



Territorial Agency, *Oceans in Transformation*, 2019, ESA Sentinel-2 data.
Courtesy: © Territorial Agency and TBA21–Academy

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), philosopher Zygmunt Bauman characterized the 21st century as marked by the dissolution of the ideological superstructures that long organized and dominated the Western world. 'Fluids', he wrote, 'neither fix space nor bind time. Fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it.' To dwell in change means to shed fixed axioms, a phenomenon we see readily in the way categories like gender, sexuality and race have become more self-defined, and structures of domination – white supremacy, patriarchy and speciesism – are actively being dismantled.

It is hard not to see the anthropogenic environmental crisis as the theoretical object at the centre of a liquid modernity. The mass migration of climate refugees, vast shifts in climatic zones and rising ocean levels redrawing coastlines force us to relinquish habits, reconsider assumptions and respond to an environment that is increasingly hostile to human survival. For Bauman, 'change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. A hundred years ago, "to be modern" meant to chase "the final state of perfection" – now it means an infinity of improvement, with no "final state" in sight and none desired.'[1]

Bauman's idea of liquid modernity gets to the core of once-routine acts, which now seem to evade our grasp: history, description, even storytelling itself. Objects dissolve into what Timothy Morton calls 'hyperobjects' – things like the climate or ocean plastic, so expansive and dispersed in time and space as to elude easy imaging.[2] How, for instance, do you tell the story of an iPhone or a hurricane named Sandy? Where do you start? Where do you stop? Beneath every object's surface is an interlace of networks shifting against the forces of our values, transactions, correspondences, standards, laws and so on. Our digital abundance has produced visual epistemologies of new oceanic depths. Objects have become clickholes of unfolding information, an unending chain of references that make the object at once more defined and less bounded. Looking at something, even intently, no longer tells you much about it. For architect Keller Easterling, the hyperconnected condition of the contemporary world is not one that can be described effectively or efficiently through conventional narratives. As she argues in her book *Extrastatecraft* (2014), it can only be apprehended as if 'looking at the surface of water'. Like seasoned sailors, we can only understand the hidden temperament of the

Peter Fend, *Plateforme Pétrolière Offshore / Offshore Oil Rig*, 1993, installation view, Manifesta 13, Marseille, 2020. Courtesy: the artist, Collection FRAC Poitou-Charentes, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, Essex Street, New York, and Cabinet Gallery, London; photograph: © Jean-Christophe Lett/Manifesta 13, Marseille

ocean by reading its surface for its disposition. To survive our rising oceans – of information, of dread – we must learn to read water.

Water's disposition for depth, complexity and boundless fluidity, as well as its proximity to questions of mortality, has made it a potent motif in contemporary art. I think of Pamela Rosenkranz's 2015 Swiss pavilion at the Venice Biennale, *Our Product*, which was partly filled with an opaque pink liquid, meant to evoke the colour of northern-European flesh tones; John Akomfrah's three-channel video *Vertigo Sea* (2015) with its fever-dream panoramic scenes of breaching whales, enslaved people thrown overboard on the Middle Passage and swirls of crimson blood mixing into the sea; and Pope.L's *Flint Water Project* (2017), for which the artist bottled, signed and editioned the Michigan city's contaminated drinking water, enjoining an environmental and racial-justice issue with artistic discourse. Consider Olga Balema's amorphous, clear plastic bags bulging with brown-tinged liquid on the brink of bursting and pouring out across the floor into the cracks (*Threat to Civilization*, 2015). Or Julius von Bismarck's corroded high-sea buoy bobbing and swaying from the ceiling, reproducing its motion in the Atlantic with the help of motors and transforming the exhibition space into an underwater realm (*Die Mimik der Tethys*, The Expressions of Tethys, 2019). Water enables artists to fill spaces completely, to exceed conditions of comfort, to inhabit positions that flow from one to another. Water compels a theory of apprehending the world that is fluid and boundless, where everything solid is at risk of dissolving into tiny floating particles. A substance that humans cannot live without, water is also something we cannot survive in (without technological aid) for more than the length of a breath.

The present leaks into the future in Peter Fend's *La Mer et Marseille / The Sea and Marseille* (2020). Conceived for Manifesta 13 in Marseille, Fend's multi-part work analyzes the coastal saltwater systems connected to the city and proposes less ecologically disruptive alternatives. Fend imagines the accumulated nutrients in the Étang de Berre lagoon feeding biomass generators and algae biofilters cleaning up the sewage discharged into Cortiou cove. A liquid, nonlinear discourse, art, for Fend, erodes the bureaucratic barriers to ecological improvements.

What if art institutions became liquid? What if they were conduits to a perpetual flow of matter? Places that

Olga Balema, *Threat to Civilization 6* and *Threat to Civilization 2*, 2015, installation view, Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photograph: Joachim Schulz

could not easily hold their shape? Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21) is a multi-nodal organization founded by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza in 2002. Initially a funding body to support artists and architects while amassing a private collection, the foundation has now become a globally dispersed ocean conservancy that deploys artistic discourse as a means to create new knowledge about the water world. Having left its exhibition space in Vienna's Augarten in 2017, TBA21 opened Ocean Space, a 'new planetary centre for catalyzing ocean literacy, research and advocacy through the arts', in Venice in 2019. Since 2011, TBA21 has been organizing maritime expeditions across the globe. Curators, artists, musicians, educators, writers, marine scientists and Thyssen-Bornemisza herself have set sail on various vessels, engaging in transdisciplinary discussion along the way. A group including art collective Superflex journeyed to Fiji in the late autumn of 2014; curator Ute Meta Bauer led groups to Papua New Guinea in 2015 and French Polynesia the year after. The social and ecological health of the ocean, according to TBA21's website, was a common theme on these voyages. Curator Chus Martínez, one of the expedition leaders, also heads the Art Institute at the FHNW Academy of Arts and Design in Basel. There, inspired by her work with TBA21, she has initiated a series of seminars and conferences called 'Art Is the Ocean', 'which examines the role of artists in the conception of a new experience of nature'.

Martínez, TBA21 director Markus Reymann and e-flux editor Julieta Aranda recently co-edited an issue of *e-flux journal* (October 2020) that takes the ocean as a conceptual figure to address 'the possibility of a new world, of a political philosophy capable of reopening a debate on justice, freedom and public space'. In her own essay in the issue, 'Gathering Sea I Am!', Martínez argues that the ocean, and nature at large, is not merely an allegory for a new way of perceiving (per Easterling), nor a metaphor for the dissolving axioms of the past century (per Bauman), but a set of 'new conditions of space, politics, action, gender, race and interspecies relations'. For Martínez, the rising interest in nature amongst artists and art professionals is not about nature itself. Describing art museums and private collections as participants in a history dependent on oppressive social structures and ideas of citizenship that are currently undergoing radical change, Martínez suggests that nature offers the 'very

Water enables artists to fill spaces completely, to inhabit positions that flow from one to another.

Josh Kline, *Representative Government* (detail), 2019, Potomac River mud, epoxy, silicone epoxy, Plexiglas tank, powder-coated steel frame, vacuformed plastic, digital prints on vinyl, reservoir tank, pump, fan, ocean water, silicone moulds, freezer, 127×33×153 cm. Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York; photograph: Joerg Lohse

possibility of a rebirth outside the frame of history'. She continues: 'We might be so radical as to posit that to say "ocean" is, today, to say "art" – art without the burden of institutional life, without the ideological twists of cultural politics, art as a practice that belongs to artists, art facing the urgency of socializing with all who care about life.'

Here, the aquatic world is understood as being outside the historical reach of a corrupt, polluting and unjust humanity. Equated with art, the ocean is viewed by Martínez as a means to 'reprogramme our senses' and as a source of 'potential for transforming the future of architecture, of communications, of gender entanglement, of economy, of art'. Indeed, the image of the ocean Martínez relies on – the boundless, sublime abyss that exists beyond the reach of history – is itself a product of human imagination. In other words, the narrative of the watery, non-human world is still firmly within humanity's historical continuum. The sea, like art, is also burdened with the 'ideological twists of cultural politics'. Though much of the planet's ocean remains unexplored and unmapped, it is not a mythical place – it has not escaped humanity's manipulation. Submarine communication cables enmesh the ocean floor; military sonars sweep across the seas. A 2019 exploration found single-use plastic trash littered across the bottom of the Mariana Trench, the deepest place in the ocean, some 10,994 metres below the surface. Candy wrappers, plastic utensils and, potentially, a new species of deep-sea creature counted among the finds of this submersible expedition to the abyss. The ocean is as much a deep repository for nonhuman imagination as it is a receptacle for the plastic memorials of human output. If the 'ocean' is 'art', then so are the 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic drifting amidst the plankton, choking the whales, starving the fish by filling up their stomachs. In the same issue of *e-flux journal*, Aranda and anthropologist Eben Kirksey gave voice to a plastic bag in their lexicon entry for 'Circulation'. It's the sea-voyaging antihero of Ramin Bahrani's 2009 film, *Plastic Bag*. Aranda and Kirksey recall a scene where the bag is sitting on a beach. Voiced by Werner Herzog, the bag sighs: 'No one needs me here anymore, not even my maker.' Like TBA21's seafaring travellers, the bag sought communion; like Martínez, it wanted to be reborn. After a treacherous odyssey, the bag 'sings' as it reaches its home in the Great Pacific garbage patch: 'And I was born again / I learned to use the currents of the water / I made it to the vortex. I was with my own

What if art institutions
became liquid?

Lena Maria Thüring, *Gardien de la paix (GPX)* (Peacekeeper, GPX), 2011, video still. Courtesy: the artist and TBA21–Academy

kind. We covered an area the size of a small continent. We were free and happy. I loved going in circles. In circles. In circles.'

I'm intrigued by Martínez's suggestion that the ocean can offer a new, yet-to-be-determined condition for apprehending the world – the 'substance of life' – but unconvinced that humans can, or should, adopt a position outside of history and from a 'nonhuman-centred perspective'. Do we have the right? Besides, aren't humans, as biological beings, part of nature? Or, at the very least, part of the nature of our design? Instead, I'd like to think about Aranda and Kirksey's speaking, singing, seafaring, circulating plastic bag as a model for thinking that is self-conscious of humanity's role in constructing and giving voice to the very world we construct and observe – including nature. We are all Herzog, and the singing bag is everything under our gaze.

In 2019, I went to see Josh Kline's exhibition, 'Climate Change: Part One', at 47 Canal in New York. In many ways, it was a show about containment, about holding back the stuff that threatens to spill over and leak out. Melting wax models of buildings sat in a number of drainage tables, like the ones used by butchers or hydroponic gardeners; doors made from an unlikely composite of sand, kelp and nylon flags segregated one part of the exhibition from another; doll-house tableaux of domestic settings and office scenes – arranged within glass beakers and submerged in a clear medium – were displayed inside a fume hood as if to protect viewers from the poison of banality. The exhibition featured three aquariums, each containing a scale model of a city connected in some way to water. In one, titled *Representative Government* (2019), landmarks and monuments of state power from around the world – the United Nations complex in New York, the Reichstag building in Berlin, the White House in Washington, D.C., St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow – made from Potomac River mud, sat atop a satellite image of Washington. The tank contained a cross section of the capitol, just south of the National Mall, around the Jefferson Memorial island. Looming next to the buildings were miniature icebergs, their slow yet inevitable liquification threatening the entire project of international power. It's a caricature of Bauman's liquid modernity and the dissolution of superstructures seen through the peril of rising seas. In Kline's rendering, water will dissolve our seats of power, returning them to the flowing river as tiny particles of dirt.

Julius von Bismarck, *Die Mimik der Tethys* (The Expressions of Tethys), 2019, installation view, Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Courtesy: the artist, alexander levy, Berlin, and Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

Viewed from the side, the island in *Representative Government* comprised the tip of an underwater mountain. Where the Jefferson Memorial would have been, Kline located the United Nations complex. On that same site, President John F. Kennedy's administration had planned what would have been the biggest public aquarium in the world. Designed by the Eames Office, together with Roche-Dinkeloo architects, the National Fisheries Center and Aquarium would have housed aquatic ecosystems from across the planet, drawing millions of visitors a year to marvel at America's ability to contain the world's oceans in a building. The rhetorical claim is clear: at the geographic centre of the country's capital would be a monument to American imperial ambition, as far-reaching and inescapable as the ocean itself. The drawings were completed, the exhibits were designed, the budget was secured; curators, marine biologists and administrative staff were all-but-hired before President Richard Nixon scrapped the entire project in the final years of his presidency.

If water compels a theory of apprehending the boundless world, Kline's aquarium – and the unbuilt aquarium at its centre – suggest that our aim for limitlessness itself, particularly amidst a climate crisis, also has its bounds. The rising water that is already submerging cities around the world is floodwater of humanity's own making. Returning to Martínez's claim that 'to say "ocean" is to say "art"', it is not 'art without the burden of institutional life' that is evoked in this semantic switch but, like Kline's works, it is art that is conscious of how humanity built institutions in service of their own dissolution. Like morning fog, it is art that dwells in the beauty and tragedy of its own vanishing **END**

1 Zygmunt Bauman, 'Foreword to the 2012 Edition', *Liquid Modernity*, 2012, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden, p. viii

2 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, 2013, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

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Flash Art
October 30, 2020
Flash Art

• CONVERSATIONS

30 October 2020, 9:00 am CET

Radical Futures: A Conversation with Josh Kline

by Eli Diner

This conversation took place in May 2020. The text was originally published in *Flash Art* no 349 Estate 2020 – Italian edition.

Another America is Possible, 2017. Film still. 16mm film, 3 channels, sound, color. 4'26". Courtesy the artist; Modern Art, London and 47 Canal, New York.

Eli Diner: Thinking about the rapid changes of the current moment, I want to begin by asking about the role of time — specifically historical time — in your work. On the one hand, it is very much engaged with the present, scrutinizing the commerce, material culture, technologies, taste, class, ideology, and politics of today. There is also, of course, a futurological dimension, the sci-fi aspect. But then, at the same time, there is another thread that looks to the recent past (e.g. *Crying Games*). All of which in my mind amounts to a project of historicizing the present.

Josh Kline: As consumers, capitalism grooms us to live in the present. Contemporary electoral politics — especially as practiced in the United States — and contemporary twenty-four-hour news media also try and trap our imagination in the present. The past and future, history and long-term imagination, are all obliterated or obscured — crushed by short-term thinking. William Gibson has begun calling the combined onslaught of catastrophes — ecological, pathogenic, military, economic, etc. — that will come raining down in the twenty-first century "The Jackpot" — a slot-machine future that comes up all skulls. Once you see the growing world crisis gathering momentum around us, it's hard to avoid asking where today's conditions lead. Boomers may only have a few years left among us, but the generation entering adulthood now will see most of the century. For people who have a strong chance of being here mid-century, this is personal. As an artist, I'm equally as interested in describing and depicting our own era as I am in speculating about where it might lead. I'm not fixated on realism. My work is firmly situated across the border in the world of fiction. Grappling with how people in the future will view our present when it becomes their past is a very useful exercise — especially for Americans. The present moment will end and become something else.

Desperation Dilation, 2016. Silicone sculptures, cartwheel, polyethylene sacks, rubber, plexiglas, LEDs and feeder. 116.84 × 73.66 × 101.60 cm. Photography by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

ED: Your show “Unemployment” comes to mind — actually it has come to mind quite a bit recently, as we plunge into depression and see growing mass unemployment. There you had 3-D-printed hyperreal sculptures of laid-off workers, dealing retrospectively with the impact of the Great Recession. The show also included these ads for UBI that were almost relics of the future. This offers a glimmer of optimism, I suppose, though there is more commonly, I think, a dystopian strain in your work — certainly a show like “Climate Change.”

JK: “Unemployment” is the second chapter in my larger cycle of installations about the twenty-first century — which at this point will probably be called “Extinction Story” — my “Cremaster.” Originally the larger cycle was meant to be half in hope and half in shadow. The first two chapters, “Freedom” and “Unemployment,” would be dystopias, the final two chapters would be utopias, and in the middle would be a project about climate change that would be the inflection point between the two sets of possibilities. As the world’s politics, economics, and ecology tip over into chaos I’ve become increasingly pessimistic and so has the cycle. At the cycle’s end, though, there will still be two chapters that imagine radical utopias. So, some optimism still remains, even in the middle of this.

“Unemployment” was the first part of the cycle that was explicit science fiction, and not set in the present or the past. Those sculptures of unemployed workers I made in 2016 are portraits made from photographic 3D-scans. I chose the subjects I wanted to work with based on middle-class professions that automation and AI were predicted to wash out to sea in the next couple decades — lawyers, accountants, administrators, secretaries, bankers, certain kinds of journalists, etc. Looking at what had happened up until 2016, the historical parallels with the early twentieth century are impossible to miss — a hegemonic power living beyond its means, large-scale income inequality, the decimation of safety nets, a global financial system collapsing, an irresponsible and greedy imperial ruling class, etc. After every recession in the twenty-first century more and more jobs have been automated away. When I was sketching out the larger cycle in 2014, I imagined that it would be the combination of automation, neoliberal capitalism, and a lack of safety nets for the gutted middle class in the industrialized world that would bring on our version of the 1930s and 1940s. Silicon Valley “experts” were predicting that fifty percent of middle-class jobs would disappear across two decades — the ’20s and ’30s. “Unemployment” is loosely set in the 2030s. When I made those “Contagious Unemployment” sculptures, which are actually based on images of more familiar coronaviruses like the common cold — they were a metaphor. Now they’ve become disturbingly literal.

“Unemployment”, 2016. Installation view at Fondazione Sandretto ReRebaudengo, Turin, 2016. Photography by Paolo Saglia. Courtesy the artist; Modern Art, London; 47 Canal, New York; and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin.

ED: Are you an advocate of Universal Basic Income (UBI)? I take those videos to be unironic, but I guess they could be read otherwise. UBI is a policy that appeals to a wildly diverse ideological spectrum, including tech bro libertarians as well as people on the left.
JK: Europeans often insist that *Universal Early Retirement* (2016), my video about UBI, must be ironic. Part of it is that the video is based on real American political commercials for Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton — and that European commercials are nothing like what you see in the States. This kind of political advertising is alien to Europeans. The other part is the casting. The video is set in 2032, during an American presidential election year — which at the time, I thought might be the earliest point that UBI could become a real political issue in America. 2032 is around a decade before America is predicted to finally become a majority minority country, and I cast the video accordingly. When I showed it in Turin, I was amazed how many people told me the video must be ironic because of how much it reminded them of a multicultural Ikea ad.
I believe in UBI. Our society is rich beyond imagining, but those resources are unequally and unjustly distributed, both within countries and on a global scale. With the advent of advanced automation, there's no real reason for most people to do jobs they despise. A real living wage UBI is a both a safety net for people displaced by automation and a set of training wheels for a true post-work future. I believe in the inherent indignity of most forms of labor in capitalism. Using a human being to scan and bag groceries, dig coal, or file paperwork eight hours a day, five days a week, forty-three to fifty-two weeks a year is an obscenity. People are not machines. It sounds silly when you say the words "fully automated luxury communism," but it's actually a very serious human-rights project.

Freedom, 2015. Installation view at 44 Modern Art Oxford, Oxford. Photography by Ben Westoby. Courtesy the artist; Modern Art Oxford; 47 Canal, New York.

ED: Your work has generally taken as its subject matter that historical present I was talking about — you have often addressed, sometimes rather quickly and very directly, current events. Therefore, this pandemic and economic catastrophe affects you not just on a practical level or as an engaged citizen, as it would if you were, say, an abstract painter, but also on a thematic or conceptual level. So, how do you respond to this crisis as an artist?
JK: At the height of the fad for European "post-internet" art in the early 2010s, when people were trying to pin that label on artists in New York, I used to joke that people should call me a post-9/11 artist or a post-Lehman Brothers artist. In the first week or two under lockdown I realized that my entire adult life in America has been lived in a time of escalating concatenated crises, beginning with George W. Bush's election (I turned twenty-one in August 2000) and followed by 9/11, Bush's ill-fated war on terror, his invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the financial crisis and ensuing "Great Recession," Trump's election and presidency, and now COVID-19 and its awesome repercussions. With increasingly frequent localized ecological calamities erupting in the background (or foreground depending on where you live). My art is about this larger crisis you see when you zoom out — about what Gibson calls "The Jackpot."

My work right now is about the future, but it's also directly influenced by and about current events. This has been true of everything I've done since film school. The third chapter in my cycle, "Civil War," is about the potential violent end of the American middle class, but it was also about Trump's Republican Party. I'm at work on the second and third parts of "Climate Change," the fourth chapter in my cycle. The first part was about American nationalism and white supremacy causing the American global order to melt down. Since the summer I've been in production on *Part Three*, a short 16mm film called *Adaptation* set in a flooded mid-twenty-first-century New York. I shot it in August and December, before the outbreak. It's become a lot moodier and melancholy since then, as I edit it and work on the color and special effects during the pandemic. I feel an urgency around finishing all this work. I don't think it'll be possible to make the kind of art I do in a decade or two. The pandemic feels like a dry run for what's ahead in the coming decades because of climate change. Trapped in my apartment for months, I'm not expecting to make any sculpture — or any media work in 2020 beyond this film that's already in progress.

2.5oC (Xenophobic Albedo), 2019. Photography by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

ED: At the same time, while the specifics of what's happening are frighteningly novel, the conditions are very familiar, and many are precisely the themes that you've been examining in your work — inequality, precarity, contamination, etc.
JK: I totally agree. The impact of certain technologies — like social media, AI, and other kinds of automation — are novel, but the results of mass unemployment, extreme income inequality, and xenophobic nationalism are well known. They were studied for half a century after World War II. The whole Western postwar global economic order was designed to prevent another Great Depression and hopefully another world war. The neoliberals, Reagan, Gingrich, the Bushes, the Clintons, turned their backs on all of that knowledge.

ED: And then there's the nationalism thing. I think that theme became really pronounced in your work in "Civil War," and specifically in the film *Another America is Possible* (2017) with its optimistic vision of the future. That show opened in the shadow of the election of Trump; meanwhile the nationalist response to coronavirus has been vicious and predictable.
JK: Over the last two or three decades, the West has seen the return of the kind of nationalism that burns countries down. Before Trump was elected, I thought the US had a couple more decades left before real civil conflict could break out. Now I think we're frighteningly close to the edge. With both *Another America is Possible* — which features a happy diverse family cookout in 2043 that ends with Confederate flags going into a bonfire — and the UBI video, I wanted to present the other option. You can have dystopia or you can work for a society where everyone has a real chance at happiness and well-being.
America's problem is the same one it's had since the beginning. There's a sizable part of the White population that loses its mind over real racial equality. It's only recently that I've understood what the contemporary American Republican Party is. The political descendants of the pre-civil rights Southern Democratic party — the heirs of the Dixiecrats — have taken over the Republican Party. Before civil rights, the American South was a one-party authoritarian state within a state. It's long been known that the Democrats lost all these people when LBJ pushed through civil rights, but what has been poorly understood is the Dixiecrat response. They took over the Republican Party and now control the larger country. They want to remake the entire country in the image of the 1950s South. They want a one-party country with minority rule. All the major Republican figures in congress are from the South: Mitch McConnell, Lindsey Graham, Jeff Sessions, Ted Cruz, etc. The Republican Party isn't a regular political party; they're a revolutionary party. Even now, with COVID-19 ravaging America, all these people care about is their fucked-up agenda.

"Alternative Facts". Installation view at Various Small Fires, Seoul, 2020. Courtesy the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles / Seoul.

ED: You had a show, “Alternative Facts,” at Various Small Fires in Seoul, which consists of all these American flags, smooshed and wrinkled and folded and smeared with dirt and sealed in a kind of resin and affixed to the wall with flat-screen TV wall mounts. I did a virtual walkthrough of the show right as the US was shutting down and South Korea was reopening. It was a very strange experience. Obviously, the flag is a capacious symbol — sinister, to be sure, but multivalent — one reason, no doubt, that it has been incorporated into so many works of art. I have to say that seeing all those flag works on Zoom felt like the specific tenor had just shifted. What was it like for you opening that show under these conditions?

JK: It’s been a strange experience. It’s the first solo show I’ve ever made that I couldn’t install in person. I installed over Zoom in my second week in lockdown and got really depressed for a week afterwards. Somin, the director of the gallery in Seoul, took me for a walk via Zoom during install when she went to get a coffee. Seoul was opening up right as our lives were slamming shut in New York for who knows how long. They had the pandemic under control. Meanwhile, in the US, Trump is still trying to spin and propagandize his way out of a vast disaster. As a result, something like fifteen hundred people are dying a day here and hundreds of millions of people are either forced to stay home or to risk their lives going into work while our national government does nothing. The TV sculptures I’ve made are in many ways about Fox News, which enables and sustains this malignancy. I wake up every day and wish we could change the channel. I really hope Joe Biden or whomever the Democrats end up putting on the ballot in the presidential election can get their shit together and find the remote control.

TimeOut
May 14, 2019
TimeOut

The five must-see artworks at this year's Whitney Biennial

Written by Howard Halle Tuesday May 14 2019

Photograph: Hollis Johnson

Josh Kline, *Skyline, San Francisco*, 2019

Kline's photo sculptures literally weep for the social media–besotted state of America today, in which politics have become broken and income disparity begets economic despair. Recirculating water pumps sealed inside light boxes shoot jets of water across images like this one of San Francisco's Salesforce Tower, which doubles as a warning about rising sea-levels.

ARTFORUM
May 2016
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CRITICS' PICKS NEW YORK

Josh Kline

47 Canal

47 Canal
291 Grand Street 2nd Floor
May 3, 2016 - June 12, 2016

By Lara Atallah

View of "Josh Kline," 2016.

The scene is set in what looks like a futuristic cemetery, only it's today—we encounter 3-D-printed and CNC-carved bodies, based on real people, in see-through plastic bags. Of the four on display, one's a bookkeeper; another, a humble entrepreneur (*Productivity Gains [Brandon/Accountant]*; *By Close of Business [Maura/Small-Business Owner]*, all works 2016). They lie on the floor, shriveled in fetal positions. Expressions of loss—or is it peace?—appear on their synthetic faces, and their attire's tidy and wrinkle free. In Josh Kline's world, obsolescence is the law of the land, and humans are a passé fad . . . or just literal garbage. It's an entirely sinister and familiar display, and one that doesn't require much reading between the lines. Its grave humor is explicit—it's the death of the middle class, a wide swath of the country, rendered as expendable creatures ready for the discard pile.

Nearby is *Universal Early Retirement*, a fictional three-minute commercial for a federally subsidized income. Its spirit seems to ricochet off the many political campaign ads that have been assaulting our retinas of late. The tone is jovial, the music uplifting, and the American flag is blowing in the wind. People from different ethnic backgrounds laud a new kind of New Deal that would give them enough free time to pursue their true passions. This promise of a utopian kind of social reform is, alas, vaguely believable.

Since consumerism is the cornerstone of any capitalist economy, naturally, elimination is necessary for keeping such a system alive. The future belongs to those who can monetize expendability. And if you think otherwise, Kline's dark poetry suggests, the heap still awaits.

The Brooklyn Rail
March 2015
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Critics Page

Josh Kline

MAR 2015

What new or old tools are you attached to in your art practice?

When choosing tools, I sometimes evaluate their usefulness based on their relationship to the time I'm describing in the work. Sometimes a tool's "newness" or level of novelty becomes essential in depicting where certain subjects and phenomena are in the present, have been in the recent past, and are going in the future. The "newer" or more surprising something feels, the more likely that it's a marker of the moment in time we inhabit or are about to inhabit. A still-breathing period piece.

For instance, outside of industrial design and architecture offices, 3D printing is a much hyped, but currently useless, technology. 2015's home 3D printer is good for making knickknacks and simple plastic toys and not much else. That said, using the more advanced full-color or multi-material rapid prototyping machines to create what are essentially solid images points towards probable futures: the eventual supersession of gray-ink, sprocket-hole, dot-matrix printers by machines that can print family photos on cheap supermarket ice-cream cakes; digital C-prints. More powerful industrial technology is waiting in the wings.

Josh Kline, "Tastemaker's Choice" (2012). 6 3-D printed sculptures in acrylic-based photopolymer, various liquids, commercial shelving with LED lights. Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

I'm interested in any kind of tool that can be used for sampling, and also in tools that can alter, composite, and export sampled content and subjects. Sometimes sampling means a cotton swab and a ziplock bag, other times it means a camera. Over the last couple of years, I've become obsessed with devices that can produce biometric 3D scans—including laser scanners, digital cameras, and associated software. In 2014, I started doing 3D scans with DSLR cameras, which opens up a whole new world of solid photography. Primitive daguerreotype holograms. The way they're created—by compositing together scores of photos

of a subject taken from different perspectives—becomes a metaphor for how information about us is collected by companies and government agencies. Fractured aspects of our lives accumulating in different databases, creating subtly different portraits. Cameras can now be used to take actual physical measurements of subjects. Along with light and shadow, they now capture a person's height and the three-dimensional topography of their various physical features.

Whether I'm working with 3D models, video, images, or text, the computer is the real tool. At this point, this is true for most artists—even the painters. The computer has become the true studio. Inside hacked and pirated commercial design software, sampled material is combined in new and more complex forms of irrational language. The results are then exported as videos, images, objects, and other kinds of experiences. This mirrors the way that most people in the world's networked societies now communicate—using smartphones to sample their environment and then speaking to their friends/audiences in bursts of images and video.

What tools have you rejected?

When people ask me what media I work in, my long-running joke is that I work in every medium except paint. And even with paint—I don't rule out returning to it in the years ahead if it helps me communicate more effectively at that specific point in time. Different media are more appropriate in different eras. For instance, the early 2000s was a time defined by cartoon-inspired drawing, graffiti-inspired skater art, and point-and-shoot lifestyle/street photography. Today, in spite of the high visibility of speculative abstract painting, we're probably in a sculpture moment.

The art world keeps most painters in an art-history holding cell. It's extremely difficult for paintings to escape from a self-reflexive post-AbEx conversation about formal/historical issues—a circular conversation about brush strokes, mark-making, and the structuring of abstraction. "Indexicality." With a few very notable (and very brilliant) exceptions, contemporary painting is also not very good at speaking with people outside of art. As a general rule, the artists who embrace it generally have the least interest in engaging with non-art audiences through their work. In the West, we process and understand the world through digital images, brands, and products. Why paint a picture of them, when you can just use the real thing?

Josh Kline, "Untitled" (2014). Husk, New York, June 26th - August 1, 2014. Courtesy of 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Ali Blumenthal.

What have the tools done to your art?

I've come to see photography, image compositing,
video, 3D animation, sculpture, etc., as aspects of a single amorphous medium. Formally, much of my work has become about exploring what it means for all of these media to become aspects of or moments in a non-linear production process. "Digitization" sounds boring, but it's a large percentage of human activity in the "developed" world now. Typing text, scanning documents, recording someone on video—it's all information being digitized. Shopping on Amazon.com with a credit card, filling out forms at the doctor's office, buying groceries, applying for a job: human lives being digitized. In the work I've made since 2013, I've consciously tried to approach these processes as a medium. Information or actual material is sampled from various living and non-living subjects, augmented or composited with other sampled materials and then exported as video, sculpture, images, or working material for other art. Much of my work deals with labor and the human condition—how these phenomena are being affected by technology. This way of working—approaching work from all conceivable directions—also mirrors the way we are expected to perform in the workplace (which has in turn expanded to become every waking moment of our entire life).