

BOMBLOG

## ART

### JOSH KLINE: NEW YORK, DIGNITY, AND SELF RESPECT

by Jenny Borland Jan 20, 2012

**Energy drinks and LEDs shock the system and set the stage for Josh Kline's curiously energized creative practice.**

Josh Kline's first solo show in New York, *Dignity and Self Respect* at [47 Canal](#), welcomed its viewers to the residual shock of the present, in a culture fueled by energy drinks, reality television, LED lighting, and the virtual Internet world that increasingly infringes upon daily existence. As an artist, curator, and collaborator, Kline's practice often transcends the physical art object to pinpoint the nature of labor and productivity in a climate of posthuman conditions. We discussed his work and exhibition on a rare day off in Brooklyn.

**JENNY BORLAND** After watching the entirety of your video *What Would Molly Do?*, my experience of the exhibition seemed to shift—perhaps creating anxiety as I felt more implicated as relating to these interviewees. I'm curious about the video's role in the show and if you could discuss some of the decisions made while filming?

**JOSH KLINE** The show's focus was creative labor. Lifestyle aspirations encourage young people to make tremendous sacrifices for their careers today. Young creative people cast aside their dignity and in many ways, their humanity, for a chance to get started on the road to self-actualization. A job interview can be seen as a kind of sacrificial altar where you offer yourself up as a commodity, as a product. In the exhibition, I was offering up a suite of human products: the hands and gestures and biological material of creative workers, images of mass-produced celebrities, drug foods, and, in the video, potential interns.

The video played a central role in the show. The monitor was placed in the center of the room, but speakers were placed around the gallery so that the sound permeated the space. When you walked around the installation, the interviews and the discussion with the internship candidates were intended to travel with you, coloring the rest of the work. It's multitasking, performing double duty as a video and an audio piece. The video was shot in a single afternoon in the gallery. Everyone who responded to my post for interns and showed up is included in the video.

**JB** For me, I guess I was relating to it as coming from a place not so far removed from these interns—not just age-wise but also feeling sympathetic for them because I've had many an interview like that in the past, not knowing what to expect and also knowing how to perform in that role. Although each of the applicants occupied different *subcultures* in a way, all of them shared the continuity of being part of this specific age group . . . for instance when you asked them about taking recreational drugs like Molly, or kinds of prescription drugs to stay focused, they treated it as no big deal. Do you feel as though that is something you think has changed between your generation and the youth of today?

**JK** *Molly* is the kind of word that makes a generational divide visible. People in

their 30s don't know what it means. The first time I heard it used, I felt like I was on the wrong side of a drawbridge. Much of what was discussed in the interviews involves trying to map this generational boundary that divides thirtysomethings from the current desirable demographic.

In the interviews I also wanted to explore the role of drugs in the lives of young people. Within our small sample of twentysomethings, it seemed like they were much more open about their prescription drug use than people my age would be. What they told us about their actual usage habits and the usage of their peers was in line with what I remember from my early 20s, though. When I was in high school, a lot of my friends were on drugs like Ritalin, Zoloft, or Paxil. In college people took Ritalin or coke to study or finish projects. In the art industry, I feel like I hear a lot of stories from people my age and older who need to take sleeping aids because they're so keyed up or stressed out. They take Ambien, Tylenol PM, Ny-Quil in order to turn themselves off at night. I'd be curious about the drug habits of people in the financial sector or in medicine . . . In order to work all the time we're going beyond just taking simple drug foods like coffee, and becoming reliant on more complicated substances, altering our brain chemistry in really profound ways so that we can keep up with the demands of communications technology. Human beings have a hard time staying focused at a desk for nine to ten hours straight, five days a week. *Posthumans* have Redbull and Adderall.

**JB** How did you find these subjects—did you post an ad somewhere, like on [New York Foundation for the Arts \(NYFA\)](#) or Craigslist, advertising an internship? Did they know that they were participating in a video for an exhibition?

**JK** I posted to the NYFA website and also to Craigslist seeking interns. The post was for interns to help an artist produce his first solo show. I work full-time, leaving me with very little time and energy for my own work. I thought I needed interns to pull off my plans for the show. At the same time, though, I wanted to address the idea of internships. I wanted to get into the heads of people actively seeking to work for free—people who would work for free and help me shovel



Installation view: *Dignity and Self-Respect*, November 4 – December 18, 2011, 47 Canal, New York. All photos are by Joerg Lohse and courtesy of 47 Canal.

money into my own credit card debt art production bonfire.

No one was told in advance that there would be a camera. They also didn't know that they would be interviewed by other people—by my collaborators, artists Michele Abeles, Alex Kwartler, and Gloria Maximo. The camera was in plain view in the gallery and everyone was told at the beginning what was going on. They all had to sign release forms on camera. For me, the surprising thing is that no one walked out, and also how comfortable people were with being recorded. Most of them got really into the whole situation and totally opened up to us and to the camera.

**JB** Definitely, like some kind of talk show, it felt like a situation where people could really show off their personalities by being aware that a camera was in the room. When you hear the audio from the piece in context of the exhibition, especially while looking at the celebrity portraits, it suggests a feeling of always being aware of celebrity or reality TV culture and how it permeates through daily existence—could you talk more about your relationship to these concepts and how it affects your work?

**JK** I shot the video before making the portraits, so the images that ended up on the walls of the gallery were informed by the video. Ariel Pink was discussed in one of the interviews and he appears in one of the typecasting portraits. It seemed like a natural extension of the conversation in the video to confuse someone like Ariel Pink, who is a kind of music icon of the late 2000s, with Kurt Cobain who was an icon of my own generation's teenage years. In the video, you have the recently young mining the currently young for information about taste and trends.

Celebrity is part of this. I'm interested in the economic function of celebrities and in their cultural function. Along with drugs and labor, I think celebrities are also a route for understanding where we're going as a species. Celebrities are kind of posthuman in the ease with which they can alter themselves and in the way that they're so integrated with media. What celebrities can afford to do today, everyone will be able to afford to do tomorrow. When you think about the way that social media networks work, we've all kind of taken on a bit of celebrity in our own life. Celebrities are surrogates—that's their economic function. They simulate life for people who don't have time to actually live. If you're working full time, if you have children, a family, you may not have time for friends, so you can watch *Friends* on TV and it's a very low maintenance relationship with people you don't know—you know them, but they don't know you, there's no drama, it's a very one-sided thing. What's new with social media is that we can also now live vicariously through the lives of friends and acquaintances as they post to feeds.

Celebrities are these commodities that fit into standard sizes and are shared by large numbers of people through media. They come back over and over again and fill certain niches. Kurt Cobain wore dresses. Ariel Pink wears dresses. Kurt Cobain had long hair. Ariel Pink has long hair. Their drug use. A certain kind of humor in their lyrics. A celebrity is supposed to be a unique person. They're the .0001% who is lucky enough to make an extravagant living as an actor or a rockstar or whatever, and yet they're chosen because millions of people can easily identify with them, with their faces. When one of them gets too old or worn out they're easily replaced. The MTV version of *Skins* is the masticated and regurgitated end-product of *Kids*. Winona Ryder was a slacker and dated the

lead singer of Soul Asylum. Natalie Portman is an over-achiever and dated Devendra Banhart. Nicki Minaj wears a Harajuku outfit made out of stuffed animals to the VMAs. Bjork wore a swan outfit to the Oscars while she was promoting *Dancer In The Dark*.

**JB** Right, which is why the blending technique that you use in the photographs is so successful—it's uncanny to look at these faces that you recognize every day, but then stepping back to realize that it doesn't even matter who exactly you're looking at, they're all part of the same mold. That leads to another question I had about your exhibition, for me it generated an environment that seems palpable, existing in some kind of space between the virtual and physical world. Moving further from what you've said about technology and the Internet, but also in the sense of commodity—in this particular show I felt as though I was in a Duane Reade, like in the water aisle or the drug aisle, so I'm wondering how that comes into play?

**JK** I'm glad it worked! I was thinking a lot about what I like to call New Century Modern architecture—computer-designed glass buildings with generative architecture, where you have these fractal algorithms determining the arrangement of windows, a kind of computer-driven modernism—and I saw Duane Reade as an expression of this, in addition to goods like Patagonia jackets, Uniqlo, and Aeron Chairs. In the 2000s, the Retro Decade, the Internet came and eliminated the present in a way, especially in places like New York. You had people flawlessly recreating the fashion, music, and style of the past and living in it, completely immersing themselves in it in order to retreat from the present. At a certain point, Duane Reade re-branded itself and it was remarkable because it was so conspicuously contemporary. It's design for people who want to live in the present, or who are even future-oriented. There is a continuing thread of modernism, though, because this hyper-present design is being built with modernist building blocks. New high-tech materials and old retro ideology. I wanted to distill that feeling of being in . . . not future-shock, but maybe I should say present-shock. It's the feeling of walking into a Duane Reade and being like, "What is this?" For me, it really came down to the LED lights that are on the shelves lighting the products. It's the first time in human experience that we are using a light source that doesn't involve something burning—glowing diodes—and it's being used to highlight body wash. In Duane Reade, the LED light is a very cold xenon light—it's the lighting of 2010 through 2012. So I wanted that element in the show, grounding the installation in a certain moment through lighting display design.



Installation view: Dignity and Self-Respect, November 4 – December 18, 2011, 47 Canal, New York.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the purpose of installations in our culture, on what use they have. I've come to see them as a very primitive forerunner or testing ground for virtual reality. Video games are one kind of virtual reality, but I think installations are another step on the way to the immersive augmented reality and virtual reality that's probably coming around 2020 or 2030. Like where you could put on a pair of cheap sunglasses and actually walk around in a seamless photographically-realistic virtual space. The Internet right now is in its "radio days," and television is coming right around the corner!

I think installation is a great way of exploring what it will be like to walk around in virtual space, in a three dimensional simulation. I don't think this is necessarily what most installation artists are thinking about, per se, but I think it's actually what's going on with the medium. With my installations I want to communicate through mood and through visceral reaction. So like with what I said about the Duane Reade lighting—if you've spent time in these stores, regardless of how much you thought about it, the memory of that kind of lighting is in you somewhere. I'm interested in communicating through these unconscious symbols and the cultural baggage that we accumulate as we go through life.

**JB** Could you talk a bit more about the water bottle sculptures, not only in this show, but also in the context of other places where they've appeared in the past . . . is there a specificity for each exhibition? What is their function in the larger idea of your work, a commentary on plastic?

**JK** It's a joke about plastic water bottles. A few years ago my collaborators Jon Santos and Anicka Yi were both obsessed with this idea of water bottles leaching plastic while sitting in hot trucks in the sun. They thought we all needed to get glass or metal water bottles and start drinking tap water because bottled water was full of toxic plastic molecules. So I thought, why not just put the plastic in the water at the get-go? I boil the water bottles in their own water and then refill them with the plastic-infused water. The first boiled water bottles I made were Poland Spring bottles. After that I got really obsessed with these Duane Reade branded three-liter bottles—that were unfortunately discontinued—that look like computer architecture. It's like drinking out of the Frank Gehry building in Chelsea. Their branding was pretty intense—a barcode Statue of Liberty on the label and the copy on the front which became the work's title: "It's clean, it's

natural, we promise.” On the back: “. . . bottled in New York State for New Yorkers.”



Josh Kline, it's clean, it's natural, we promise. (Acquired Tastes installation shot), 2011.

**JB** These are so specifically New York bottles—if the works were to be shown in say, Europe or Los Angeles, would you “tap into” the water industry as it appears out there?

**JK** Actually, the Duane Reade bottles have already been abroad. They were in a group show that Dispatch (Howie Chen and Tim Saltarelli) organized in Copenhagen over the summer, although not on shelves, just on the floor in a kind of prop-styled product display arrangement. So they’ve already been shown in Europe. They take the New York brand and style along with them. Europe is full of generative glass architecture. The Poland Spring bottles are different. They wouldn’t make as much sense in Europe. The European equivalent of Poland Spring is probably Volvic or Evian. That’s what you drink in a conference room in Germany. If I show bottles in Los Angeles, I would probably make them with Arrowhead water bottles. It’s the same company as Poland Spring, Nestle, but branded for California with different mountains and some red on the label.

**JB** I also want to discuss the hand sculptures. They instantly reminded me of those wax totemic objects, used in churches in Portugal and Spain as a way of healing if you have an ailment, physical or otherwise, you can find an object or body part signifying that, and throw it into a flame. I’m curious what these hands in the exhibition symbolized for you, or if it could have anything to do with this kind of process?

**JK** I actually hadn’t known about the wax objects, but it makes total sense, like Catholic ritual magic. With the *Creative Hands* I wanted to appropriate and mass-produce people. They’re kind of a companion piece to the intern video. Whereas in the video I’m making a medium or subject out of interns, here I wanted to use creative workers—consultants, graphic designers, DJs, curators, studio managers, retouchers, etc. The show was about taking human beings and turning them into products and lifestyle as a form of advertising. With the sculptures I wanted to appropriate the hands of people who are actually shaping

our culture. They're cast silicone, skin-colored silicone rubber – which is already kind of a stand-in for flesh. I also wanted to break down the boundary between the person's hand and their lifestyle technology objects, so it would just become one fleshy thing on the shelf for sale...at Duane Reade, in this LED xenon lighting.



Josh Kline, *Creative Hands*, 13 pigmented silicone hands on commercial shelving with LED lights. From top to bottom, left to right: Photographer's Hand with Digital Camera (Marcelo Gomes), Studio Manager's Hand with Advil Bottle (Margaret Lee), Retoucher's Hand with Mouse (Jasmine Pasquill), DJ/Designer's Hand with iPhone (Jon Santos), Curator's Hand with Purell (Josh Kline). Overall: 36 1/2 x 26 1/8 x 15 1/2 inches. 2011.

In a kind of roundabout way they might be connected to those wax effigies. I'm a big fan of Paul Thek's meat pieces—which were made of wax. I'm sure Thek was aware of the ritual use of those wax objects and that history. For me, I see the meat pieces as objects that have outlived their own original meaning and that have taken on a whole new set of significances. I think they're going to resonate very differently for people in the future. They made me think much more about the human ear that scientists grew on the back of a mouse a few years ago than about Catholicism or mortality or any kind of critique of minimalism. When I saw them at the Whitney last year I remember thinking, it's like a Bruce Sterling novel, this is *posthuman* work.

**JB** Yes, it's fascinating to see them repeat themselves for future generations, because he was making them in the 1960s, at the same time as Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*; it's incredible to realize how old they are, and what function they may have had then could be vastly different now. Going back to the hand pieces—since so many of the subjects you use are collaborators, or friends of yours, I'd like to know how this notion of collaborating and participation with other artists has come into your work and informed your practice, whether in projects you've curated or in your own art-making?

**JK** I guess it really depends on the situation. For this project I wanted to use people I knew as subjects, including myself—one of my hands is in it as a curator's hand, as well as friends like Margaret Lee. Margaret is both my gallerist and an artist—in fact she's a past collaborator (and uses collaboration as her medium)—but I cast her hand with her day job as a studio manager in mind. In terms of collaboration, I feel like the production for this show in particular has really confirmed for me that I don't want to be in this Northern European solitary studio practice tradition. I'm more interested in production models that come out of filmmaking or music. I've been thinking a lot about hip-hop albums and the way that certain producers and rappers approach making an album, like Kanye West just loading tracks with his friends. Why can't you do that with a show as well, and bring in all these people that you're already having a dialogue with into your work, and make all those influences visible? Why can't you put the credits out in front?



Josh Kline, *Retoucher's Hand with Mouse* (Jasmine Pasquill), pigmented silicone, 2 3/4×4 1/4×6 3/4



inches, 2011.

**JB** I think that also speaks to your practice as a curator as well. Were you originally curating before making work as an artist?

**JK** Yes and no . . . I went to film school and moved to New York with the goal of being an artist in 2002. I ended up interning and freelancing for quite a while—which is probably the beginning of all this—then working as an arts administrator and a curator, and subsequently gave up making art for two or three years. I got a studio in 2006 and then in 2007 I formed a collective with Anicka Yi and Jon Santos called Circular File, and started seriously getting back into making work. When I started working as an artist again, I was trading studio visits a lot with peers and seeing a lot of work that wasn't really being shown in New York. I wanted to see it come together in physical space, and re-engaged with curation from the perspective of an artist, organizing exhibitions focused on objects and images. When I curate video screenings and exhibitions, which I do for my job, I try to keep it very separate from my concerns and interests as an artist. With the shows that I curate involving objects, like Skin So Soft, the group show that I organized for Gresham's Ghost this summer, I'm operating as an artist. It's a way for me to think about my own work in relation to the work of my peers and about the relationships between their work. With Skin So Soft I had been seeing work that made me think a lot about a new posthuman approach to the body, made by people who weren't really aware of each other's work, and I wanted to put them all in a room together.

**JB** It makes more sense hearing you say that it's an extension of your art practice, such as in the Gresham's Ghost show, the environment was cohesive in a way that a standard group show might not be—you could notice that there was a deeper understanding or collaboration between these people rather than just throwing them all together based on a theme or thesis.

**JK** Exactly. The Nobodies New York show, which was the first show at 179 Canal, was like that too. I felt like I had these three separate groups of friends—artists who I was in a dialogue with—and I wanted to see all their work together in a space. I'd see one of them here or there in random group shows, but I never saw their work in a group exhibition context that made sense to me. I would walk through these shows feeling like I was looking at a bunch of severed limbs. Together in an exhibition space, though, all their weird, messed-up solo jokes suddenly made much more sense. You could see all the other people cracking up.

**Josh Kline's *Dignity and Self-Respect* was up from November 4 through December 18 at 47 Canal. You missed it!**

**Jenny Borland is an independent curator and writer based in New York.**