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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."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."

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."

"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

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

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.”)

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, 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.

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

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."