

Art in America

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TERMINAL VELOCITY

by Brian Droitcour



Josh Kline: *Desperation Dilation*, 2016, cast silicone sculptures, shopping cart, polyethylene bags, rubber, plexiglass, LEDs, and power source, 46 by 29 by 40 inches. Photo Joerg Lohse. All images, unless otherwise noted, courtesy 47 Canal, New York.

The forward-looking art of Josh Kline keeps an eye on the people and ideas that get discarded in pursuit of the new.

JOSH KLINE'S ART is social science fiction. He takes issues that he thinks will occupy the people of the future and creates suites of work around them. "Unemployment," his exhibition at New York's 47 Canal gallery last May, was set ten to twenty years from now, when, he speculates, automation will have made many white-collar jobs redundant. Beige shag carpet covered the floor, a sign of middlebrow comfort that was disrupted by the bodies littering the gallery. Kline took 3D scans of the heads and hands of professionals—a lawyer, a loan officer, a small-business owner—and attached them to dummies that hug their knees, in a posture their grandparents might have taken in a bomb drill. Then he stuffed the mannequins in clear plastic bags. There were shopping carts brimming with office equipment ready for recycling—keyboards, coffee cups, briefcases, laptop cases, and more—all silicone casts in flesh tones, from pink to dark brown. The casting molds left scalloped flaps at the seams, like dead skin that needs to be snipped off. A darkened side gallery held analogues to the garbage collected in shopping carts: banker boxes of personal effects, from framed photos to tea bags to sunglasses. These were suspended in transparent casings shaped like viruses, bulbous bubbles studded with rods. As you walked around the sculptures, the contents of the boxes seemed to warp under the curves and spines of the plastic capsid. Flesh was trash in the main gallery, and here the material artifacts of habits and emotional attachments were reduced to airborne contagions.

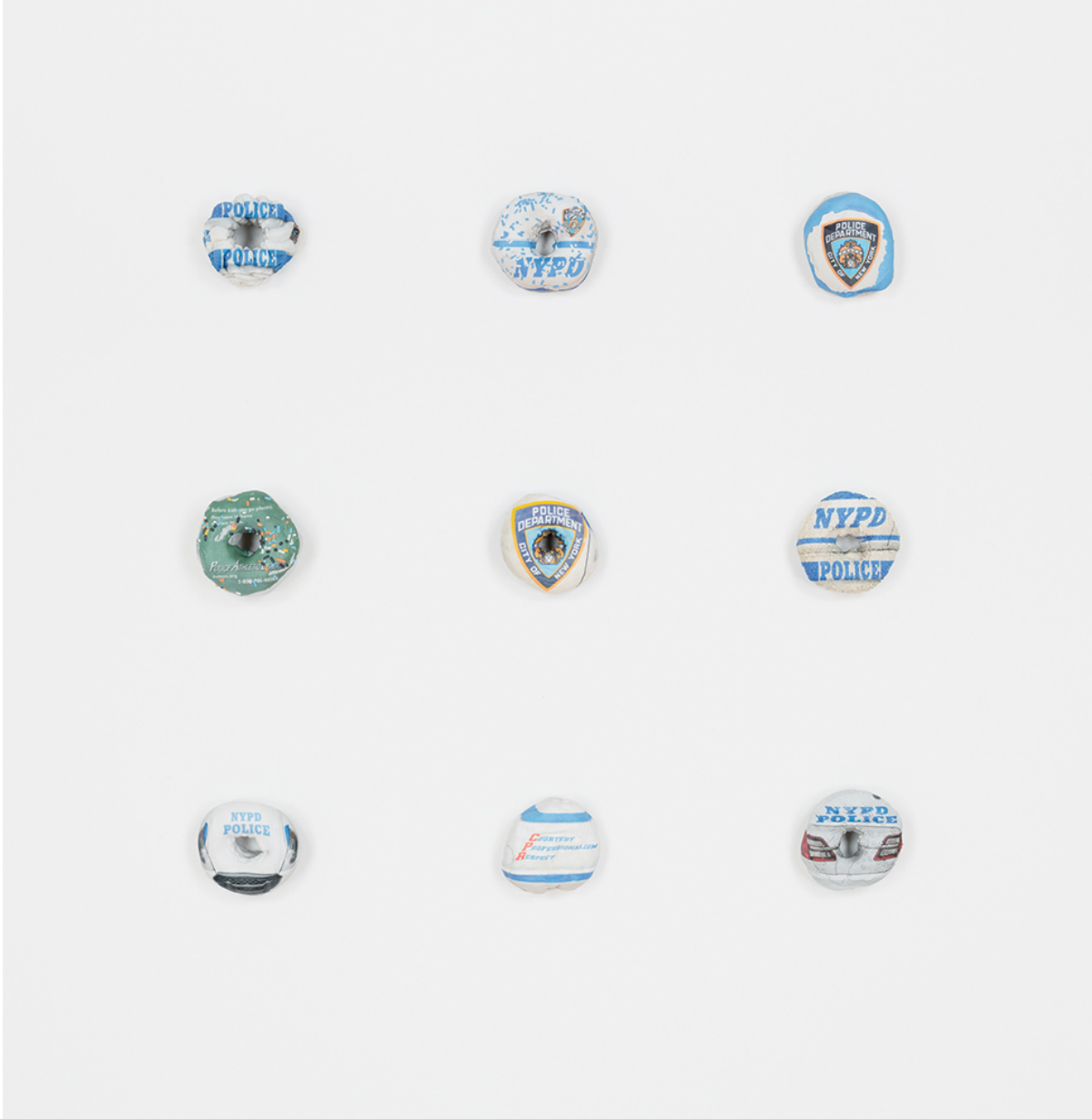
"Unemployment" is the second installment in Kline's ongoing series of projects that chart a trajectory through twenty-first-century history. He began the series with the recent past. "Freedom" (2015–16) elegizes civic life amid pervasive surveillance and policing by stringing together a metonymic chain of cop paraphernalia, recording technologies, and alternately hopeful and fearful visions of political change. The installation now at the Portland Art Museum opens with a dozen grids of nine doughnuts, made from scans of the contents of a box from Dunkin' Donuts. Frosting, jimmies, and jelly-filled bulges detail the surfaces of the sculptures, some of which are resin casts embedded with pennies or handcuffs or dirt,



View of Kline's show "Unemployment," showing *Aspirational Foreclosure (Matthew / Mortgage Loan Officer)*, left, and *Thank you for your years of service (Joann / Lawyer)*, right, both 2016, 3D-printed plaster, ink-jet ink, cyanoacrylate, foam, and polyethylene bags. Photo Joerg Lohse.

while others are 3D prints that map bank logos and NYPD insignia onto the doughnuts. A thirteenth set comprising nine black doughnuts, resting on a plinth with a lightbox on its surface, looks misshapen compared to the uniformity of the others; the ones in this last set aren't prints or casts but actual doughnuts, fried and iced at the museum using a recipe that includes pig's blood. The floor of the main gallery re-creates the pavement of Zuccotti Park, a space for public use controlled by a property developer that was the center of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests, with rubbery stones and the same random distribution of underfoot lights—an example of the algorithmically generated ornament that Kline sees as a hallmark of the architecture of the 2000s.¹ Ghostly trees wrought from the black metal of surveillance cameras have credit cards dangling from their boughs, along with the kind of plastic zip ties used in mass arrests. Both kinds of foliage bind people, willingly or not, to the corporate surveillance state. Teletubbies stand sentinel in riot gear, and the screens in their bellies show police officers reading activists' social media posts aloud, with the faces of those activists grafted onto those of the police as a digital skin.

The same imaging software is used in *Hope and Change*, a video at the end of the gallery, where Barack Obama's digitized face hovers over that of an actor who delivers a doctored version of the 2008 inaugural address that condemns banks for making life harder for working families and promises gun control. In *Crying Games*, a video playing in a gallery beyond the doughnuts, actors wearing prison uniforms sit in cells and tearfully beg for forgiveness, with the faces of Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, and other architects of the Iraq War superimposed on their own. Their features flicker and glitch like Obama's does, as compression artifacts flinch around their mouths.



Police States, 2015, 3D-printed plaster, ink-jet ink, and cyanoacrylate, 9 sculptures, approx. 4½ by 4 by 2 inches each. Photo Joerg Lohse.

“Unemployment” had a video, too: a commercial for universal basic income, in which people talk about how they can pursue fulfilling work—writing novels, curing diseases—thanks to an economic policy that has freed them from worries about making ends meet. The video has the softly eager music, jump cuts, and racial and generational diversity of an upbeat political ad. It offers a way out of the nightmare of obsolete knowledge workers that was on display in the adjacent galleries, much as the videos in “Freedom” offer a hope of just, transparent governance, even as the rest of the work shows relentless oppression with pulpy vulgarity. Most artists working in video installation try to create continuity between the physical environment and the onscreen action, but Kline juxtaposes contrasting emotional timbres to flesh out a world. Utopia and anti-utopia bear each other’s seeds, and imagining the future means imagining the everyday experience of people who live in another time with its own awesome potential for both.



25 *Tylenol Paintings*, 2008–09. Cray-Pas, crayons, and house paint on paper, 18 by 24 inches each; in “Nobodies New York,” at 179 Canal. Photo Margaret Lee.

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Kline’s art in “Nobodies New York,” a group show he organized at the artist-run space 179 Canal in May 2009. Kline included his own 25 *Tylenol Paintings* (2008–09), works on paper hung in a grid, with the drug’s logo clumsily hand-drawn in crayon on each page and red and beige house paint dripped and splashed sloppily over the delicate, rumpled surfaces like blood and snot. Next to it, Allyson Vieira showed slabs of plaster, imprinted by palms and fingers, leaning against the wall on narrow shelves. Below, on the floor, her broken cast of a plastic bucket balanced on the bucket itself. Tatiana Kronberg offered beeswax casts of Chanel handbags. Antoine Catala’s installation took up most of the back. A plastic hand on a crude mechanism kept poking a projector on a swing, so that its blue placeholder screen did a jerky dance on the wall. Amy Yao showed slender painted sticks, some with horsehair hanging from them, arranged in a suggestion of a semaphore. I’d seen Yao’s works before, perhaps at an art fair. Her elegant sculptures seemed somewhat out of place among works that had the urgency of an unfinished search, like the side effects of working through ideas in the studio.



View of Kline and Anicka Yi’s show “Loveless Marriages,” 2010, at 179 Canal, New York. Photo Margaret Lee.



View of the installation *Freedom*, 2015, LED screens, media players, videos, altered mannequins, and mixed mediums, at the Portland Art Museum. Photo Paul Foster.

The gallery premises had housed a jewelry store before the building was damaged by fire. Artist Margaret Lee made a deal with the landlord: she rented out the building's studios for him and got free run of the second floor, where she organized performances, parties, and exhibitions. "Nobodies New York" was the first show there. The space was no white cube. It was floored with fake-jade linoleum tiles. Along the east wall the ceiling slanted awkwardly under the stairs. Meager strings of crystal turned the light fixtures into shabby chandeliers. Bends in the mirrored bathroom doors made a fun house in the rear of the room. Every few feet a pair of electrical outlets pockmarked the drywall. The windows overlooking the Chinatown bustle seemed permanently dusty. (I got to know the space's charms and flaws well when I organized a group show there in December 2009.)

"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," Kline wrote in the show's e-mail announcement. "This is in addition to everything else they are making on and off the job(s) with computers, cameras, and souped-up cell phones." Kline worked at Electronic Arts Intermix, the New York nonprofit that preserves video art and licenses it for screenings and exhibitions. The friends and friends-of-friends he included were artists' assistants, stylists, and administrators, using credit cards to stretch their salaries and freelance payments to fund their studio practices. Only a couple held MFAs, and none worked with the leisurely dedication of trust-funders. The socioeconomic context, the weirdness of 179 Canal's interior, and the rough quality of the work all made "Nobodies New York" feel like life then—the brightness of everything onscreen and the dinginess of the hardware, the distances of asphalt and dim subway tunnels we had to traverse to get to the places that beckoned us with instant pings to our flip-phones, the way Chase's blue signage crowded bodegas as it colonized branches of failed banks, the worry about what the next gig would be that harried us when we had one and paralyzed us when we didn't.

Kline told me that he had welcomed the recession.² He hoped the economy would never recover, and the decline would make living in New York cheaper and easier—a return of the downtown scene of the 1970s, when artists claimed lofts and built communities around ideas and ephemeral works. He dreamed of an

escape from the art market's decades-long domination of the New York art world, particularly its garish mutation of the early 2000s, a time of burgeoning fairs and art-school debts.

Things didn't go as Kline hoped, of course. There wasn't an economic recovery so much as an exacerbation of extant inequalities. 179 Canal didn't survive. At the end of a rent-free year, the landlord asked Lee to pay. She tried to raise funds by selling the work she'd shown there, but it was hard to find support for a young nonprofit when the established ones already had a full schedule of benefits and silent auctions. In spring 2011, Lee launched a for-profit gallery, 47 Canal, which represents a stable of artists that includes Kline and several others from "Nobodies," and enjoys critical and commercial success. Startup galleries run by artists that have appeared in New York since then—such as 247365 and American Medium—have been commercial from the start, accommodating to the system as it is rather than how they wish it were.

The history of 179 Canal reflects Kline's nearly simultaneous experience of utopian potential and dystopian failure. He saw how artists, himself included, work at the bleeding edge of self-exploitation and precarious labor, accruing debt, drug prescriptions, unpaid jobs, and other unhealthy habits in pursuit of self-actualization, even knowing that the blessings of fame are notoriously fickle and temporary. These ideas congealed in "Dignity and Self-Respect," Kline's first solo show at 47 Canal in November 2011.

The show used convenience-store shelving and lighting to display some unappealing products: bottles of Duane Reade-brand water deformed by boiling in Duane Reade-brand water, French press coffee makers filled with cocktails of stimulants and painkillers (Red Bull and Vivarin, DayQuil and Dentyne Ice, Coke Zero and ibuprofen). But the strangest, most striking products on view were "Creative Hands" (2011), fleshy casts of hands holding implements, many of them identical, labeled with names and professions: *DJ / Designer's Hand with iPhone (Jon Santos)*, *Studio Manager's Hand with Advil Bottle (Margaret Lee)*, *Retoucher's Hand with Mouse (Jasmine Pasquill)*. Kline had wanted to show 3D prints of whole bodies, to allude to the job market's objectification of workers. But the technology was prohibitively expensive, even to print hands in the quantity he needed, so instead he cast them in silicone, which gave them an uncanny fleshy quality under the wan fluorescents. (For "Quality of Life," his 2013 show at 47 Canal that expanded on the themes of "Dignity and Self-Respect," Kline 3D-printed heads of fashion designers covered with fabric patterns that they used—a total fusion of body and career.)

In the work Kline had made from 2007 to 2009 in collaboration with Anicka Yi as part of the Circular File collective, the job interview frequently appeared in videos and participatory environments as a scenario where people offer themselves up as products to be consumed by potential employers. In "Dignity and Self-Respect," Kline showed *What Would Molly Do?* (2011), an hour-long video compiled from interviews with eight young people who responded to a Craigslist ad for interns to help an artist prepare his first solo show. Upon arrival the candidates learn that being filmed answering questions is the extent of the assistance they are expected to give. They are seated in front of a green screen, flanked by Michelle Abeles and Gloria Maximo, two artists who had rented studios at 179 Canal. Abeles and Maximo do most of the talking; Kline, unseen behind the camera, occasionally chimes in. The would-be interns are asked about their goals and dreams, the usual aspirational stuff of interviews, but they're also goaded into talking about the tougher parts of their present routines: the source of their income, the prescription drugs and illegal drugs they take to survive the pressures of work, study, and social life (the "Molly" of the title is slang for crystal MDMA, a drug also known as ecstasy). It's an amateur anthropology, treating people as data points.

The scene of the interview is completed by a table stocked with cans of Red Bull in various sizes, sugar-free and regular. Abeles sips some, and offers it to the candidates. ("That's a lot of Red Bull," one says, eyeing the table. "I get tired," Abeles breezily replies.) Kline's camera pays nearly as much attention to the Red Bull as to the people. Several shots look almost like commercials. Indeed, *What Would Molly Do?*, paralleling the structure of "Dignity and Self-Respect" as a whole, operates in the way commercials do, using proximity to forge associative links between products and lifestyles. But Kline's anti-ads lack a positive appeal to a consumer who is given the illusion of choice. It doesn't matter if the applicants drink the Red Bull, or want to; the camera treats them both as products.

The first work by Kline I saw that haunted me was *Graphic Design Office 2000* (2010), an installation in "Loveless Marriages" a two-person show with Yi at 179 Canal in March 2010 that announced the end of their collaboration. There were two iMacs on kidney-shaped tables. Kline had smeared the back of the



Designer's Head in Eckhaus Latta (Mike), 2013, 3D-printed plaster, ink-jet ink, cyanoacrylate, Starphire glass, hextal, Herradura, and MDF, 40½ by 14 by 14 inches. Photo Joerg Lohse.

slim, rectangular computers with Crest toothpaste, and the messy patch of turquoise evoked the computers that Apple sold around the turn of the century, with bright-colored, bulbous plastic casings hugging the hardware behind the screen. Toothpaste, spit out as part of daily routine, functioned here as the getup of a computer in the drag of the recent past. The crust of minty freshness signaled stale product design. Kline continued to work with brands and products with an eye to the cycles of design updates, knowing that the work in “Dignity and Self-Respect” would look dated in the near future. Red Bull may look the same as it did in 2011, but Duane Reade has already changed its water branding. Brands get old and get replaced in the process of rebranding. Kline’s attention to these minor histories reflects an interest in brands and products for their potential to decay and become obsolete—qualities that make them like people.

WHEN KLINE moved to New York after earning a degree in film and media art from Temple University in 2002, he made work with Photoshop on big themes: the Iraq War, Wall Street exploitation, media misinformation. He collaged the faces of network-news talking heads on portraits from the eighteenth-century Age of Reason—Tim Russert’s face on one of JacquesLouis David’s sitters, for instance—in order to posit our era as one of

unreason, marked by the failure of Enlightenment values. Using the cheap flip book you find at dollar stores, he made a tourist’s album of The Hague, filled with doctored shots of former Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic’s trial for war crimes. The work he made from 2009 to 2013, created with and for his own community, had a narrower scope: it was about New York City and the politics of lifestyle. In his new cycle of projects about the history of the twenty-first century, Kline has returned to bigger themes.

But the formal and technical vocabulary Kline used from 2009 to 2013 carries over, even as its deployment changes. Take, for instance, the lightbox. Kline often lines video screens and monitors with lightboxes, mimicking the display architecture in the nondescript junkspace of bank lobbies and upscale

grocery stores without reproducing them exactly. In “Unemployment,” lightboxes rest on the floor, in a position of resigned repose, suggesting the collapse of familiar environments. The deadly doughnuts of “Freedom” convey the same disgust at consumption as the gross pseudo-medicinal cocktails in “Dignity and Self-Respect,” but the revulsion is transferred to broader social control. The shifts in tone are perhaps more striking than the thematic ones. The cruel comedy of the intern interview is like a hazing ritual: if you can’t laugh darkly at the utter bleakness of your situation, then you probably lack the resilience and the heart to make it as an artist. The laughter gets darker still in “Freedom,”



Creative Hands, 2011, silicone, commercial shelving, and LED lights, 36½ by 26¾ by 15½ inches. Photo Joerg Lohse.

as it confronts the dumb threat of Teletubbies clad in the gear of militarized police and wielding the tools of surveillance, then it fades altogether in “Unemployment,” replaced by muted melancholy. It’s hard to laugh when you’re stung by the piteous spectacle of adults in the fetal position, the pathos of middle-class banality gone sour.

The installments in Kline’s twenty-first-century cycle are blunter and more literal than the earlier projects, too. In all his exhibitions Kline prefers the associative chain of metonyms to the airy transport of metaphor; he’s at home in the world-building mode of the science-fiction author. In “Dignity and Self-Respect” the references to the environments of commercial real estate in the lighting and shelving are mere whispers of a consumer’s disposition, and the other combinations of elements—from internships to self-medication to 3D printing—are so outlandish that you get dizzy tracing the vertiginous connections. But in the more recent work it’s easier to see the privately owned public space in “Freedom” and poverty’s incursion into the suburban home in “Unemployment.” The metonyms that align policing with corporate surveillance, or recycling with unsalaried income, are more pedestrian, more familiar. When the metaphors do appear—the Teletubbies in riot gear, the virus-shaped casings on the banker boxes of junk and

souvenirs—they are chillingly precise. They are reminders of fantasy and paranoia’s extraordinary presence in the texture of ordinary life.

Kline likes to say that his art is “about the human condition.”³ It’s a quaint phrase that smacks of cliché, and it’s surprisingly sentimental, given how cold and grim his work often looks. He uses the technologies of today and tomorrow to express indignation, even horror, at their encroachment on twentieth-century ideas of human value. Kline’s position is conservative. But that’s why his work matters. As he maps what lies ahead, he never loses touch with what gets left behind.

“Josh Kline: Freedom,” at the Portland Art Museum, Ore., through Nov. 13.