

## Focus Interview: Josh Kline

FOCUS

Posthumanism, sci-fi novels and technology



*Architect's Head with Ergonomic Design (Dominic Leong) on Freshburst Listerine Pedestal (detail), 2012–13, sculpture: 3D-printed acrylic photopolymer, and synthetic rubber; pedestal: Perspex, Freshburst Listerine mouthwash, MDF and acrylic paint, 117 × 36 × 36 cm. All images courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York*

*Domenick Ammirati* Let's get this out of the way: posthumanism?

*Josh Kline* For me, it's about technology changing what it means to be human. There's a self-actualization aspect to it that's potentially positive, but I mostly associate it with the relentless push to squeeze more productivity out of workers – turning people into reliable, always-on, office appliances.

I'm probably not the right person to throw down about posthumanist theory. I go with the simple definition from sci-fi novels: people who are no longer human. I read Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles a long time ago, but I'm uncertain how much has stuck with me. I'm not sure I see them as a starting point for the art I'm making or interested in, which is reacting to real-world events, not theory.

*DA* I feel like what's being identified as 'posthuman' in contemporary art comes precisely from that kind of relation to the general culture. But, if so, you could argue that the 'posthumanist' art of the moment is just the latest extension of the lineage of Pop – a relatively direct re-presentation of the present.

*JK* It's more complicated than that. Many of my peers are turning to communications strategies from mass media and advertising as a way to escape the self-referential conversation of the art system. In much of this work, advertising's syntax is a useful formal strategy or a device. It's also a vernacular.

*DA* Is it important to you to contextualize your art or the art in 'ProBio' – the group show that you have curated at MoMA PS1 – with regard to art history?

*JK* I think most – but definitely not all – of the artists in 'ProBio' feel pretty strongly about getting away from a focus on art history. It's partially a reaction to the 2000s and the MFA system, where older artists make younger artists justify their work against the art-historical record and via theory.

*DA* Don't you worry you could get painted as anti-intellectual?

**JK** Not really. You can use art to have serious conversations about a whole universe of topics that has nothing to do with the art industry.

**DA** It's funny, part of me doesn't care about the rest of the world at all.

**JK** Meaning you side with the hermetic art conversation?

**DA** Not 'side with' exactly; I just enjoy it.

**JK** I think that's why it's rare for this kind of work to be tackled on its own terms. It's one of the reasons it's important for artists to be writing and curating at the moment, so we can put the work in a 21st-century context.

I sympathize with artists who wanted to get out into the larger media world. Kathryn Bigelow and Michael Shamberg are great role models. I'm also an admirer of artists like Alex Bag, Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, and Michael Smith – artists who tried to cross over on their own terms.



*Ready to Wear*, 2012, six sculptures of shoe designers wearing their own designs, 3D-printed in plaster, vinyl polymer and carbohydrate on commercial shelving with LED lights, 93 × 66 × 39 cm

**DA** But what's wrong with a critic or an art historian having their crack at it? Take a label like 'neo-Surrealist', for example. I've seen it applied to you and to other young artists. It seems sensible on the face of it.

**JK** There's nothing wrong with it if they've done their homework. None of my friends or peers who have been misplaced in that category talk about Surrealism at all. That's all coming from two or three art historians. Surrealism is something that pop culture absorbed 75 years ago. It's part of how we communicate. Advertising is a system of communication based on desire and the irrational. So is comedy. We're entering the augmented-reality era. I think the work in 'ProBio' anticipates that, rather than looking back to the 1920s.

**DA** There's something about the recombinatory aspect of the times that makes sure-footed critical judgements difficult. You could just as well argue that you're, say, 'neopostminimalist'; I'm thinking of your 'Share the Health' series (2011–ongoing) – little plastic Donald Judds teeming with bacteria.

**JK** How about Land art or neo-geo? Every art movement has been absorbed and digested. The gestures are like Photoshop filters – click and apply. When I made the anti-hand-sanitizer dispensers, I was thinking about the Duane Reade pharmacy

chain's 2009 rebrand as an ultra-contemporary lifestyle/hygiene centre. Sometimes the dispensers are landscapes, growing microbes sampled from places like an ATM machine or a clothing store; sometimes they're portraits, with bacteria from the mouths of graphic designers or 'undesirable' immigrants.

**DA** Reproducibility is a consistent motif in your work. The bacteria take care of it themselves, of course, but a lot of your recent sculptures are made using 3D printing.

**JK** The recent heads, hands and feet come from 3D scans of people. You can print the finished file over and over again. They're like solid videos. The installations and the more ephemeral sculptures are things that can only be experienced in person, though. They're like performances. You have to be there. They don't really translate in photographs.

**DA** There are aspects of your work – the scanning of the human body, the cheek swabs – that invoke medicine and medical instrumentation. To me it seems that, despite the current wealth of work dealing with technology, there's a lack of critique of the way it's used to repress the sheer fact of mortality.

**JK** The medical industry's not-so-secret long-term goal is repressing mortality altogether. They want to understand the human genome in order to prolong youth and eliminate all the diseases that cause death. But for most of humanity, life is still suffering and hardship, especially outside the world's upper-class zones. As an artist who's thinking about the consequences of technological innovation, I think there's an obligation to raise questions about who benefits. Since Google isn't doing it, someone needs to think ahead and ask who gets radical life-extension and who gets to work as a greeter at Walmart with no health insurance.

*Josh Kline is an artist and curator based in New York, USA. He recently curated the group show 'ProBio' at MoMA PS1, New York, and this month his work is the subject of a solo show at 47 Canal, New York.*

**Domenick Ammirati**

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