

# Josh Kline

Interview Thor Shannon Artwork Josh Kline

*The pervasive influence of corporations and brands on contemporary society is, of course, nothing new. For decades, companies have sought to reflect and direct the prevailing styles, tastes, and inclinations of their particular era, capitalizing on the hardwired human obsession with originality and self-differentiation. What is new about our own particular era, though, is the extortionate degree to which corporations and brands have come to influence its every aspect, the dizzying speed of current trend turnover, and the complacent acceptance of the individuals in this system of this system. Ours is not a generation to rage against the machine—others tried that not too long ago and failed, remember? Most of us have even come to accept our status as capitalist subjects, embracing brands rather than distrusting them. There are, however, exceptions to every rule, and the artist Josh Kline acts among the chief counterpoints to this one. Though Kline is acutely aware of these generation-defining conditions—indeed, much of his art takes these conditions as its ground—he chooses to exist nonetheless in deliberate opposition to them. Rather than self-consciously stylizing his own personal brand, as most artists feel is by now practically imperative, Kline works to constantly complicate and obfuscate how he is represented. He shirks this attention in order to avoid becoming another passing trend himself, while exposing moreover the disposable approach to both products and people that defines this current trend-obsessed climate. In his stringent critique of contemporary culture—from the precarious economics of creative labor, to the impacts of technology on society, to the particular tastes and aspirations of each class—Kline has become one of the most significant artists we have today rethinking current groupthink, as well as one of our best hopes for the realization of an altogether different, less cynical future.*

**OOO:** *Hi, Josh. Let's start with the basics. Where are you from, where did you go to school, and how/why did you begin making art?*

**JK:** I'm originally from Philly and lived there until I was 22. No art school in my past, unfortunately (or fortunately). I studied film at Temple University and also took a minor in visual anthropology. It's a good program, but mostly churns out experimental documentarians and cameramen for the local news (other notable alumni: Diplo, Tim and Eric, and Bob Sagat). Not a program that usually links into the contemporary art world. While there, I studied with a former student of the Vasulkas and discovered video art. That eventually led into Photoshop and, many years later, into sculptures and installations. I moved to New York in 2002, almost immediately after graduating.

*Interesting. I didn't know your point of entry into art was video, though of course you've continued to make videos since then. Your practice encom-*

*passes so much more than video alone, though. When did you begin to expand into other media? Why?*

Well, I actually took a break from making video for about six or seven years after I graduated. When I got out of school, I was suddenly without all the gear I had become totally dependent on for making moving image work (no Avid, no mini-DV cameras, no lights, etc.), and I was completely broke struggling to find entry-level work. I had already been dabbling in Photoshop, and tried to make that my medium—compositing still images instead of moving images. After moving to New York, I failed pretty miserably at exhibiting the work I was making, all of which involved the Bush wars, and so I gave up on making art for a few years. Around the same time, I became really interested in curation. I had a full-time day job at Electronic Arts Intermix, a non-profit archive of video art, which became a curatorial position, and I was doing some independent curation as well. I tried to focus on that, but eventually realized that I was still interested in making work. Around 2006, I got a studio with my friend and co-worker Trevor Shimizu, where I started experimenting with sculpture and paint. About a year later, in 2007, I started working with Anicka Yi and Jon Santos in a collective called Circular File, whose aim was to do a cable access show. That's how I got back into video.

*Wow, I had no idea. I was going to say that I was surprised you'd been making work for so long, since I hadn't heard of any work of yours from the early 2000s.*

People are always surprised when they find out I'm a 30-something! I never exhibited any of that work. I was making work with computers and software, but it didn't fit into people's expectations of what new media was supposed to look like at the time. There were no webpages, animated gifs, or video games—and it was about the news. Contemporary art people who would come over for studio visits (i.e., visit my apartment) would get really freaked out by the content. No one wanted to touch the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Bush administration people... It was the wrong moment in New York for that work. It was also really hard to get taken seriously at the time without an MFA from an expensive school like Columbia or Yale. I didn't really publicly exhibit work in New York before 2009.

*Much of your recent work—the work I'm familiar with, from 2009 onward—engages and probes aspects of contemporary existence that are less overtly political than what you were working on before. For instance: trends, lifestyle choices and brands, our incessant usage of technology and the corollary effects of that usage... What propelled the shift? What encouraged you to focus*







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*on these current themes and issues over more explicitly political subject matter as you were doing earlier?*

Working (and I don't mean making art) in New York changed me. It had a huge impact. It made me want to talk about the economic role of creativity and the politics of lifestyle. What these things drive us to do with our lives. New York is a place where trends come to spawn. Conditions here forecast the future elsewhere. You can extrapolate forward from New York and understand where large parts of the West are going culturally. It's how our culture, design, and entertainment industries make their money. People here sell New York's today as the rest of the world's tomorrow. Extreme income inequality, for instance. New York was like America's focus group on the topic. Much of my work is site-specific. I'm an installation artist. I make work for a local IRL audience (whatever that means in a global city like New York) and not for the Internet. In the coming months and years as I show more outside of the city, many of my earlier concerns are going to reemerge as I try to find common ground with audiences that I don't understand as intimately. In addition, I feel like art audiences are finally ready to engage with bigger-picture issues again.

*Those phenomena I brought up earlier, which your work engages, are intimately tied to political ideas and questions—how we exist as humans, how we're governed, how we interrelate, how we self-identify, how we're pacified. How would you characterize your own oblique approach to these political ideas about labor and the lifestyle economy?*

Much of my work for the last few years has dealt with taste, creative labor, aspiration, and class, and along the way taken in the impact of technology on the human condition. Creative workers (designers, art workers, artists, musicians, advertising people, etc.) are at the forefront of a certain technology-fueled approach to precarious labor. Today's precarious freelance lifestyle originates with artists and has spread to people who want to or are forced to live like artists—usually without a reliable income, without a steady job, without a safety net. These are people who have to hustle constantly (at least the ones without well-off

parents). In the process the boundaries between their personal and professional lives dissolve. Life becomes a constant never-ending job interview where you're judged not just on your work, but on how fun you are at parties, and on your taste. Your resume or CV becomes a kind of tally for likes... An indicator of how charming you can be. As more and more of the economy goes in this direction, these conditions are spreading far and wide.

*The "intern economy."*

Exactly. Middle-class and working-class people competing with the children of the wealthy, who can afford to work for free. This is a big problem in the art industry. Entry-level wages in the art world are impossible to live on in New York... so the entry-level jobs often go to people who can afford not to work, or to people willing to take on impossible amounts of debt in pursuit of their aspirational goals.

*Why, in your mind, might it even be worth entering this precarious labor force, given the bleak or at least uncertain forecast for anyone working within it? You're critical of the role artists have played in creating (if only unconsciously) this precarious labor economy, and yet you're still an artist. How might an artist with a pulpit like yours redirect the system as it currently exists? Because, for me, it seems as though things are becoming increasingly untenable for anyone without family money, at least in New York.*

No one clued me in to how crazy pursuing a career as an artist was when I started out. The whole system was promoting a fake-it-till-you-make-it credit card approach in the early 2000s. Ryan McGinley was running around in the magazines encouraging kids to make cold-calls with homemade artist books. If I'd known what I know now when I was in school, I would have tried harder to become a video editor or would have pursued science. I went through a delusional period when I was 19 where I thought I could become a nanotechnologist and started taking hardcore physics classes. There's a parallel probability universe out there where that delusion became the rest of my life... When I speak to younger artists, particularly when I visit schools, I'm pretty upfront



about how difficult it really is to become an exhibiting artist and also about how long typical careers last. I advise them to develop lucrative design or technical skills—for instance: 3D modeling, retouching, or motion graphics. Most people aren't going to make enough money to put food on the table or go to the doctor working in art. Beyond speaking out about these issues, the problems in our field are pretty daunting. It's a Mount Everest. Where do you start chipping away at that? There's no oxygen up there. I was involved with a group trying to start an art workers union in 2012, but it didn't really go anywhere. We couldn't figure out where to start. With the schools that put young artists into crushing debt? With the teaching artists making a living on the statistically unlikely dreams of aspiring young artists? With non-profits that don't pay artists and pay their employees wages from the 1990s? With studios and galleries asking young people to work for free while they make bank brokering speculation in abstract painting? Maybe the first step is creating a public culture of shame around these practices.

*How, then, do you specifically address these issues and questions—none of which, of course, have clear solutions—in your work? Can you speak about some of the recent exhibitions you were either in or curated, and provide some examples as to how you may have negotiated the problems you've been discussing?*

My work isn't specifically focused on the art industry. In the videos and sculptures I make, I'm looking at the implications of creative labor in general. I don't know if I'm offering any solutions. At this point, I'm just trying to help further outline the problems. In the semi-fictional video interviews with Kurt Cobain and Whitney Houston that I exhibited at 47 Canal in September, and in the earlier Photoshop composite portraits that came before them, I wanted to talk about the trend-cycle in all star-driven creative fields (including art), and what happens on the other side of that. About the disposability and interchangeability of people in this kind of system. In the videos I've made out of intern interviews, prospective and current interns end up speaking about the conditions pushing them to work for free. We talk about what this all means in their lives. The *Flattery Bath* video is about the dissolution of the boundaries between life and work, turning the spa into a site for self-promotion and for job interviews. All the sculptures of 3D-scanned body parts are portraits of people who have made themselves into brands—of people who traffic in their selves. The solution to internships is to pay the people who work in your business or office. But handing someone a paycheck doesn't necessarily have the same impact as an artwork as hearing an unpaid intern speak on video about how hopeless they feel. Art's role is still mostly about provoking people to think or to act. It isn't a solution.

*I agree with you. People today, especially those in star-driven industries like you mentioned, are constantly building and stylizing their own brands in order to manage and manipulate the perceptions of others. As a result, people buy into each other based on whatever their personal brands are perceived to represent (“cerebral,” “chill,” “downtown cool,” etc.). Of course some of these brands and labels are trendier than others, which leads to a kind of disposability, as you said—one minute you're in, the next you're out. To me, this has something to do with the question of posthumanism that you've addressed in your work, like in the show you curated last summer at MoMA PS1: ProBio. We're only seeing the beginnings of people accessorizing and gadgetizing themselves, expressing themselves exclusively through mediated channels, merging with the ubiquitous technologies of everyday life, becoming just as trendy and disposable and updatable as the iPhones we all have and love and cling to...*

We've become a culture obsessed with the idea of upgrading, but this disposable approach to culture is built into industrial capitalism. It's been with us since the early 20th century. Since we learned to replace our clothes when their style wears out instead of when the holes appear. We've likewise been upgrading our movie stars, designers, and artists for

years as well. When actors get old, often their careers are over. Likewise for many artists who rise to prominence when they're in their early 20s.

*And then are immediately co-opted by the market and the whole gallery/museum circuit as a result of their status as the “hot new thing.”*

Sure, and then—after their moment passes—the gallerists and museum curators stop answering their e-mails. This disposability is often linked to aesthetic trends. People always rejoice when an exhausted trend goes away, but they don't think too much about what happens to the people who go away with it.

*Exactly. Their careers are often left totally stunted because they're used to receiving attention for a particular kind of thing and aren't always capable of doing or creating anything else subsequently.*

I'm not sure how much blame I place on the artists. I don't think that's why their careers stall or stagnate. It's really hard to survive these changes as an artist. It's really difficult to make work that can speak to different eras. After the 1970s, all that performance work that people now look to as canonical was “hopelessly dated” for a couple of decades. Look at an artist like Charlemagne Palestine, who's suddenly being allowed back in the building. In some cases, though, there are some lucky artists who have steady multi-decade careers performing a single-gesture over and over again (On Kawara, for instance). I think a lot of it comes down to luck.

*Right. I'm curious, then, about the position you've staked out for yourself, given your interest in the disposability and ephemerality of trends. How do you keep the ball rolling in your own practice, so that you can address these issues relating to branding and lifestyle and fads and so on, without becoming another trend yourself? How can one make work that's incisive and critical and highly considerate of the present moment—as I would say your art is—without letting it feel dated moving forward? Maybe these questions aren't even answerable, or worth answering, but I'm curious to hear if you do actively think about these things in the production of your work, and whether you've developed any personal strategies of your own for negotiating them.*

I think about these things all the time. These concerns are built into the art. I try to root my work in specific times and places. It's site- and time-specific. Recently, this has meant the present or the near-future, but before 2011, I was looking at the recent past. The work is already deliberately dated. They're images of specific moments. I don't worry too much about whether individual works will still speak to people when they fall into that “dated” blind-spot. I think it's unavoidable. The problem is speaking to the present in its own language—communicating with the natives. As your career ages and as you age, this becomes a translation problem. A time-travel puzzle. Not everyone can make work that's “timeless.” My first priority is communicating with the present, but ultimately every artist's other audience is the future. That's what posterity really means. The future is a huge landscape that stretches from the moment a work is completed into the months, decades, and deep time that lies beyond. In that sense, all artworks are a kind of time capsule, with the potential of revealing things about the past and present to people in the future. What will their concerns be, and how does our moment relate to them? In my solo show in the fall, I used radical life-extension and last season's youth cultures as interchangeable metaphors for each other. Life extension has one meaning now (Google billionaires who want to cheat death or a sixtysomething Kim Gordon dressing like a twentysomething Brooklynite). It will have a different meaning in a society where physical life extension is a possibility or reality. As artists, we can try to make our work address the time we're living in, which is always changing. We can also try to make work that will speak to people in other times, which is the more difficult challenge. Bits and pieces of the future are embedded in the present. The future doesn't come out of nowhere. It's already growing out of things that are here now. o

