FANTOM
SPRING 2012

Dress Jeans, 2011

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When Josh Kline started making composites of celebrity headshots in 2009, he was an amateur at using Photoshop, which was appropriate for an artist whose work takes on questions of labor and leisure. This body of work has evolved along with the vernaculars it mined.

Critique of authenticity is at the heart of all of Kline's images. With Citizen Dick/Hurl Jam/ Guess Jeans (2010), Kline shaves contours and pushes together the flesh of Matt Dillon and James Franco, two hunky brunette actors who came to fame playing disaffected tough guys. The resulting generically handsome mutant has flushed cheeks, a ratty goatee, and cowlicks atop a prominent forehead. By virtue of the resemblance to both actors, the image cleaves, creating a kind of compare-and-contrast. Kline condenses the men's roles in movies and in 'reality,' suspending them in a professional, real-life situation (one with pathetic depths)—in front of a Guess Jeans step-and-repeat.

Kline's images are awash in the Nineties, a decade currently popularly packaged as retro-authentic, in spite of now four decades of post-modern critique. With Haunted Deodorant (2011), Ariel Pink, an indie musician with a

rambling expressionistic streak, is mashed up with Kurt Cobain, the iconic troubled youth and martyr to commercial demands. Kline channels generational reservations about the former, voiced by Carles of the blog Hipsterrunoff: "I used to actually think he was 'insane'/eccentric. Now it seems like they are trying to package him as a zany ass bro, like any other boring ass eccentric indie front man."

The artist unpacks the Gen-X slacker cliché in Dress Jeans (2011), when he revisits Franco's face and splices it with Johnny Depp's. Though Depp is very famous and has a long public history, he shares with Franco an emphasis on masculine seriousness. Depp, like his allegorical and star-making turn in the television series 21 Jump Street, the young man too darn pretty to be taken seriously, supplements his aura of authenticity by intermittently disputing fame. For Franco, seriousness equates with ceaseless cultural production, embodied somewhat interestingly in his admiration for the role of the artist.

When Kline's collage manipulation is evident, it evokes détournement, what Debord and Gil Wilmon called "the language of contradiction," unmasking popular branded headshots as scripted performances.
Yet Kline's images, featuring sedate, even complicit subjects, don't invoke contradiction in order to provoke anger from a supposedly duped viewer. As Debord wrote in the Situationist International: "far from aiming at arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original." Rather, Kline deploys these contradictions to extrapolate on the singularity we anticipate in the faces of celebrities, as they endlessly step-and-repeat.

Increasingly, Kline's images don't appear as collages, but as an entirely new person. His combination of Winona Ryder (the girl too smart to be a Heather) and Natalie Portman (the Harvard grad who nearly gave up acting) surprisingly resembles Gossip Girl second fiddle Leighton Meister. The new creation invokes post-human anxiety of plastic surgery or cloning, while referencing the way collage has, as Charlie White describes, "normaliz[ed] as an everyday experience."

The subtle shift in Kline's technique over the last year, from crafting Frankensteins to new, fully synthesized human beings, coincides with a change on many web sites, including Facebook. In the new 'timeline' platform, a user-created profile is synchronized fluidly with feedback from other users. Collage and détourné are foundational to this poly-vocal logic, which creates multiple simultaneous and potentially conflicting histories —identities based in declaration, description, inscription and hearsay. The result is a subject who's truly a composite.