

ARTFORUM

CULTURES

Colby Chamberlain on the art of Josh Kline

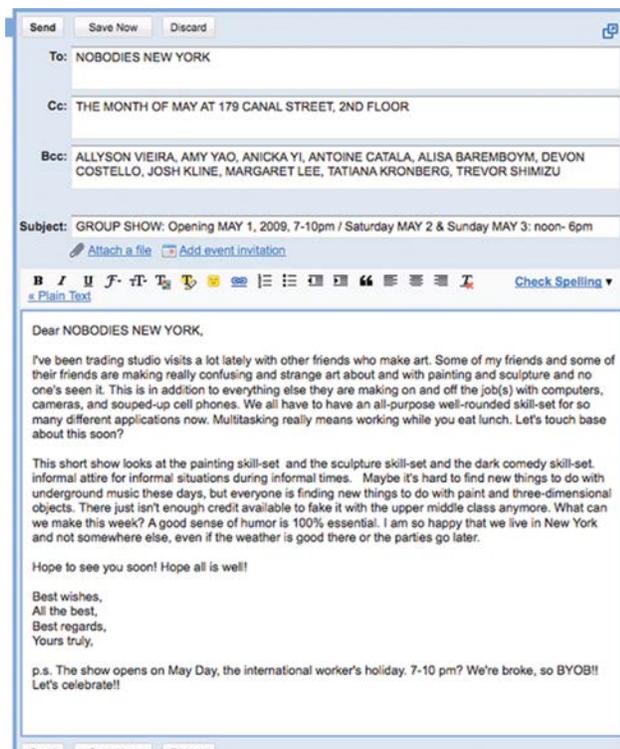


Josh Kline, *Creative Hands*, 2011, pigmented cast silicone, commercial shelving, LEDs, 36 1/2 x 26 3/8 x 15 1/2".

AMERICA LOVES its unconscionable mash-ups. Since the 1990s, a fixture of Thanksgiving Day football coverage has been television anchors' ritual consumption of a "turducken": a chicken stuffed in a duck stuffed in a turkey. Following that logic, what would be the apposite coinage for a manifesto slipped into a press release set inside the screenshot of a Gmail message? A manipressscreenmail, or a Gshotleasefesto? Either way, the announcement for "Nobodies New York," a small group show organized by Josh Kline in 2009, a full one hundred years after the Futurist Manifesto appeared in *Le Figaro*, immediately felt important. Something about its tone, which switched erratically between chatty earnestness and business-casual cliché—"Let's touch base about this soon?"—captured the frantic, perversely buoyant mood of the city following the

2008 financial crash. “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,” wrote Kline. “This in addition to everything else they are making on and off the job(s) with computers, cameras, and souped-up cell phones.” The “nobodies” in question included Alisa Baremboym, Antoine Catala, Trevor Shimizu, and Anicka Yi, at the time all members of the art world’s quasi-anonymous precariat class, the untrustfunded sans-MFAs making work at the ragged edges of their freelance gigs. Kline promised “informal attire for informal situations during informal times,” a combination of “the painting skill-set and the sculpture skill-set and the dark comedy skill-set” with little regard for pedigree. For anyone unsure of the exhibition’s politics, the postscript gave away the game: “p.s. The show opens on May Day, the international worker’s holiday.”

“Nobodies New York” was the debut show at 179 Canal, a linoleum-tiled second-floor space that artist Margaret Lee managed to lease for free when the real-estate market bottomed out. This month, fourteen years, three presidential elections, and one global pandemic later, Kline’s work will be shown in more upscale digs, at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, in a midcareer retrospective curated by Christopher Y. Lew. Though monographic in focus, “Project for a New American Century” is poised to spotlight Kline’s whole peer group, among whom he has frequently played the role of curator and catalyst. Several of the artists in “Nobodies” later joined the roster of 47 Canal, the gallery Lee cofounded with Oliver Newton after 179 Canal’s closure, and Kline has organized several shows since at artist-run spaces, museums, and Electronic Arts Intermix, where he held down a day job for ten years. One might also look to the credit lists on the wall labels for his sculptures, videos, and installations, which map the social relations among a milieu of artists and like-minded “creatives” who are constantly exchanging tips, favors, and expertise in the course of experimenting with new technologies, methods, and materials.



Announcement for the group exhibition “Nobodies New York” at 179 Canal, New York, 2009.

The visual record of “Nobodies” consists of only a few grainy snapshots, which has been the source of some belated consternation and head-scratching, since Lee herself was an accomplished photographer then employed as a studio assistant to Cindy Sherman. The silver lining to the exhibition’s lack of high-res JPEGs is that it underscores how little anyone involved cared about circulating the show online, an inconvenient truth for those who have attempted to situate the 47 Canal scene within the then-emerging discourse of post-internet art. Kline has vocally opposed the post-internet label, suggesting, only half-jokingly, that “post-9/11” or “post-Lehman Brothers” would be more accurate, but involuntary categorization is the price an artist pays for relevance.¹ Zeitgeist-chasing curators have pinned Kline to virtually every buzzword-laden theory that gained traction over the past decade—not just post-internet art, but also “speculative realism” and the microwaved leftovers of Italian *autonomia*. To varying extents, the writings of Vilém Flusser, Reza Negarestani, Franco “Bifo” Berardi touch on topics that Kline also addresses, like labor, class, technology, and climate change, but none really capture the essential strangeness of injecting a painting skill-set and a sculpture skill-set with a dark-comedy skill-set, or account for why Kline’s installations can be so welcoming and discomfiting in equal measure.

Lee’s former employer belonged to a cadre of artists, together engaged in a semiotically inflected critique of mass media, who came to be associated with the exhibition title “Pictures,” a word that Douglas Crimp chose for its polysemy. “[A] picture book might be a book of drawings or photographs, and in common speech a painting, drawing, or print is often called, simply, a picture,” Crimp wrote in the revised version of his catalogue essay. “Equally important for my purposes, picture, in its verb form, can refer to a mental process as well as the production of an aesthetic object.”² To make out the common project that Kline has pursued in concert with his peers, you need an even more multifarious concept: *cultures*.



View of “Nobodies New York,” 2009, 179 Canal, New York. From left: Anicka Yi, *cruisin’ for a bruisin’*, 2009; Amy Yao, *Screwball Dance Club*, 2004; Josh Kline, *Box 4A: Extra Coffee Mugs*, 2008; Josh Kline, *Box #1C: Extra Calculators*, 2008; Josh Kline, *Box #12: Extra Tylenol*, 2009; Josh Kline, *25 Tylenol Paintings*, 2008–2009; Allyson Viera, *2,3,5 I*, 2009; Allyson Viera, *2,3,5 II*, 2009; Allyson Viera, *Marble Relief*, 2008; Allyson Viera, *Torso*, 2009. Photo: Margaret Lee.

Commodities not only surround the body with signifiers but transfigure the body from the inside out, until flesh itself convulses into another sign of exchange.

IN HIS CLASSIC 1976 text *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams identified “culture” as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.”³ Its earliest uses referred to the process of promoting natural growth in agriculture or animal husbandry, which in turn led to the metaphor of culture as tending to one’s mental and physical acumen. By the late eighteenth century, this term of process could also indicate a finished product, at which point culture became a cudgel in struggles for power. Culture, or the state of being cultured, was claimed by the upper classes, and, when used interchangeably with civilization, it served as a pretext for Europe’s forcible extension of its influence. (The Latin root word for culture, *colere*, is also the root of “colony.”) A campaign of liberal-minded critique broke the concept apart, so that one now speaks of multiple cultures spreading across different regions and distinguishes among types of culture, such as folk, middle-class, urban, online, and pop. Still, an ambiguity persisted over whether culture encompassed the full range of everyday behaviors or a narrower set of intellectual and artistic disciplines. Definitions also diverged among academics. Cultural anthropologists, for instance, located culture in a community’s material production. By contrast, Williams, Stuart Hall, and other early proponents of the interdisciplinary field known as “cultural studies” conceived of culture as a signifying or symbolic system.⁴



Josh Kline, *Forever 27*, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 14 minutes 39 seconds.

Culture, in short, is both a process and a product, a means of either asserting or leveling social hierarchies, a rarefied pursuit or a widespread phenomenon, an object of study and a framework for analysis. In Kline’s practice, these competing denotations and connotations come together in

surprising, genre-bending configurations. For the videos *Forever 48* and *Forever 27*, both 2013, Kline appropriated a familiar television format, the prying tell-all interview, and hired a Diane Sawyer look-alike to pitch questions to actors playing, respectively, Whitney Houston and Kurt Cobain, here miraculously still alive. “Whitney,” we learn, survived her 2012 overdose; “Kurt” left Nirvana to deal with his chronic stomach ailments, now ameliorated by reduced stress and probiotics. Using a precursor to present-day deepfake software, Kline unconvincingly grafted Houston’s and Cobain’s faces over the actors’ mouths. The glitches recall the smudges on Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe silk screens, imperfections that mourn and tarnish a dead celebrity at the level of facture. Yet unlike the static image of Monroe, forever the icon who passed away at thirty-six, these digital surrogates struggle to keep up with the times. “Kurt” puffs an e-cigarette, gripes about the diminishing returns on his music royalties, and calls aging a disease; “Whitney” recalls feeling invincible when she was younger. Alongside these fictionalized exchanges, a third video, *Kurts & Whitneys (Extras)*, 2013, takes a more ethnographic approach. Off camera, Kline, who studied visual anthropology as an undergraduate at Temple University, interviews the twentysomething actors themselves: What do you pay in rent? How do you make a living? Have you gone to college? A meditation on the cult of fame rubs up against an appraisal of culture-industry aspiration.



Josh Kline, *Fedex Delivery Worker Interview #2*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 14 minutes 21 seconds.
From the series “Blue Collars,” 2014–20.

Complementary methods of inquiry also inhere in Kline’s sculptures. For his “Blue Collars” series, 2014–20, he conducted videotaped interviews with individuals working in the service economy as hotel housekeepers, waiters, and delivery persons, asking even-toned questions about their on-the-job responsibilities, family budgets, long-term ambitions, and, on occasion, voting habits. Kline made digital scans of each subject and turned their likenesses into 3D-printed objects that function as allegories for the disaggregation of employees into productivity

metrics and user profiles. *Packing for Peanuts (FedEx Worker's Hand with Scanner)*, 2014, arranges three versions of a man's truncated arm gripping a package scanner across a FedEx box filled with bespoke foam peanuts printed in the shape of miniature hands. Other sculptures reflect cultural-studies insights into how politics plays out through purchasing power and trademarks. Kline's installation *Civil War*, 2016–17, at Stuart Shave/Modern Art in London, shrank the fractured American landscape down into a carpeted living room furnished with bifurcated commodities. In *Make-Believe*, 2017, for instance, one half of a high-end Vitamix blender appears sutured to its discount-brand equivalent, seemingly held together by a thin strip of duct tape while a hidden audio component replicates the sound of a ticking time bomb.



Josh Kline, *Packing for Peanuts (FedEx Worker's Hand with Scanner)* (detail), 2014, 3D-printed sculptures in plaster, ink-jet ink, and cyanoacrylate; cast urethane, vinyl, cardboard, medium-density fiberboard, overall 35 x 36 x 12". From the series "Blue Collars," 2014–20.

The Janus-faced appliances of *Civil War* could be seen as the inheritors of two lineages within Pop art—the parodically inflated fetishism of Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach on one side and the working-class American Gothic of Mike Kelley or Cady Noland on the other. Yet Kline stands apart from both precedents, on two counts. First, he suspends Pop's play of high-and-low in favor of treating the "painting skill-set" and the "sculpture skill-set" as equivalent to every other expertise he and his peers have picked up in order to make a living. For *Creative Hands*, 2011, Kline cast the hands of friends and collaborators clutching office paraphernalia, like Advil bottles, computer mice, or BlackBerries, and titled the resulting pigmented-silicone sculptures according to the subjects' jobs as editors, designers, retouchers, or publicists. By contrast, even Kelley, the most obvious forerunner for Kline's cultural-studies approach, consistently maintained a tension between his interests in fringe popular culture and his training at the kind of

art schools that Kline never attended.⁵ (And who can forget that Noland's grungy ensembles are sanctified by her status as one of the art world's original nepo babies?) Second, Kline breaks through Pop's preoccupation with surface sheen by portraying "consumption" as both symbolic *and* biological. Commodities not only surround the body with signifiers but transfigure the body from the inside out, until flesh itself convulses into another sign of exchange.



Josh Kline, *Share the Health (Assorted Probiotic Hand Gels)*, 2011, assorted cultures in nutrient gel, plastic dispensers. Installation view, Gresham's Ghost, 401 Broadway, New York. Photo: Margaret Lee.

Kline articulated his concept of the cultured body in the press release for "Skin So Soft," a group show he organized in 2011 through Gresham's Ghost, a roving curatorial project run by artist Ajay Kurian. "In Nineteen-Hundred-and-Seventy, the body provided artists with a safe haven from market forces and the production of objects," he wrote. "It was a site for feats of endurance or willpower, a location for confronting the self." A generation steeped in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Herbert Marcuse could believe in the body as a bulwark against commodification, but now such faith was in short supply, along with any stable sense of what constituted the self in the first place. "Twenty-First Century aspiration and desperation are transforming the human body into something that 'used to be human.' What do we put in it? What do we put on it? What comes out of it? How can we use it? Who owns it?" These questions brought together works by Yi, Michele Abeles, A. K. Burns, Brian Clifton, Jesse Greenberg, and the collective Yemenwed that variously riffed on neoliberalism's exhortations to reduce drowsiness, cleanse regularly, stay connected, and eat organic. Kline himself exhibited *Share the Health (Assorted Probiotic Hand Gels)*, 2011, a row of hand-sanitizer dispensers containing bacteria swabbed from specific New York landmarks—a G-train subway car, a Chase Bank ATM—and placed in a nutrient gel, which in bacteriology is known as a "culture."⁶ Here, culture's earliest definition, of tending to natural growth, erupted through the sediment of its subsequently accumulated meanings, like the return of the repressed.



Josh Kline, *Lies (detail)*, 2017, HP laptop, MacBook, hardware, duct tape, wood, contact speaker, audio hardware, sound. Installation view, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London. All from *Civil War*, 2016–17. Photos: Robert Glowacki.

To a striking degree, the preoccupations that informed “Skin So Soft” paralleled concurrent developments in cultural studies. If the cultural studies of the Birmingham School during the 1960s and ’70s consisted of Gramsci, Althusser, semiotics, and sociology, and the Visual and Cultural Studies program at New York’s University of Rochester added a heaping dose of poststructural and psychoanalytic theory to this mixture in the ’90s, then cultural studies in the twenty-first century has been infused with biopolitics. The proposition that power operates on and through life itself—most prominently associated with Michel Foucault, but also apparent in the early work of Donna Haraway, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillers—has become central to how we understand culture today. In recent scholarship, one finds it in Mel Y. Chen’s relating of panics over traces of lead in Chinese-manufactured toys to nineteenth-century “one drop” miscegenation laws; Paul B. Preciado’s frenzied auto-theory on the effects of topical testosterone; Simone Browne’s not-paranoid-if-it’s-true inquiry into the biometric surveillance of

Blackness; and Ari Larissa Heinrich's siting of the medically commodified body within flows of transnational capital.⁷ According to their job titles and the catalogue listings of Duke University Press, these authors are affiliated with an extensive medley of academic concentrations—Asian studies, African American studies, queer theory, trans studies, Asian American studies, Black diaspora studies—even as their arguments repeatedly stress the contingency of any such identity-based designation. Kline has reflected on his own Filipino heritage with comparable nuance. “Filipinos are a mestizo people by definition,” he wrote in a contribution to *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the Arts*. “Like many mixed-race/mixed-culture peoples who have emerged, are emerging, or perhaps yearn to emerge from a colonial legacy, most Filipinos see no contradiction in this racial, ethnic, and cultural mix.”⁸



Josh Kline, *Overtime Drip* (detail), 2013/2020, IV bag, espresso, Adderall, deodorant, Red Bull, Ritalin, printer ink, vitamin C, mouthwash, toothpaste, Plexiglas, LEDs, wood, 17' 6" × 5 3/8" × 8".

Pop art lavished so much attention on the aesthetics of the Coke bottle that it never considered whether its sugar content would spike obesity rates or how strung-out service workers might come to rely on its hit of caffeine. In Kline's work, culture's symbolic meanings and chemical properties are harder to pry apart. Past sculptures have been laced with painkillers, energy boosters, appetite suppressants, and antidepressants formulated to meet the demands of what Jonathan Crary has called “24/7” capitalism.⁹ Necromantic concoctions of such products as Red

Bull, Wellbutrin, Adderall, and Coke Zero have filled the cafetières of *Sleep Is for the Weak*, 2011, the IV solution of *Overtime Drip*, and the chilled blood bag of *ThinkStrong*, both 2013. Kline treats the synthetic hues of brand-name beverages as a reliable source of “local color,” especially so in *Skittles*, 2014, named after a candy so ruthlessly effective in its marketing that I cannot see the word without recalling its accompanying slogan, “Taste the rainbow.” An immaculately illuminated version of a standard-issue bodega refrigerator, *Skittles* was first installed on the High Line in New York directly underneath the Standard hotel. Behind its locked glass doors lay shelves of smoothie-style beverages with offbeat names and curious contents. In the bright orange “williamsburg,” torn-up shreds of plastic credit cards and American Apparel clothing floated in a mixture of kombucha, agave, and quinoa; Windex, the Wall Street Journal, vodka, and Champagne together gave “bottle service” a sickly green complexion. Like August Sander’s epochal “People of the Twentieth Century,” ca. 1922–64, *Skittles* was an exercise in typology, a cross-section of contemporary society rendered as an assortment of distressingly ingestible beverages. The bottles were less representations of lifestyles than evidence of life styled, their saturated hues an index of human bodies awash in stimulants and polymers.



Josh Kline, *Skittles (detail)*, 2014, commercial refrigerator, blended liquids in bottles, Plexiglas, LEDs, wood, 7' 1/8" x 10' 7/2" x 3' 5".

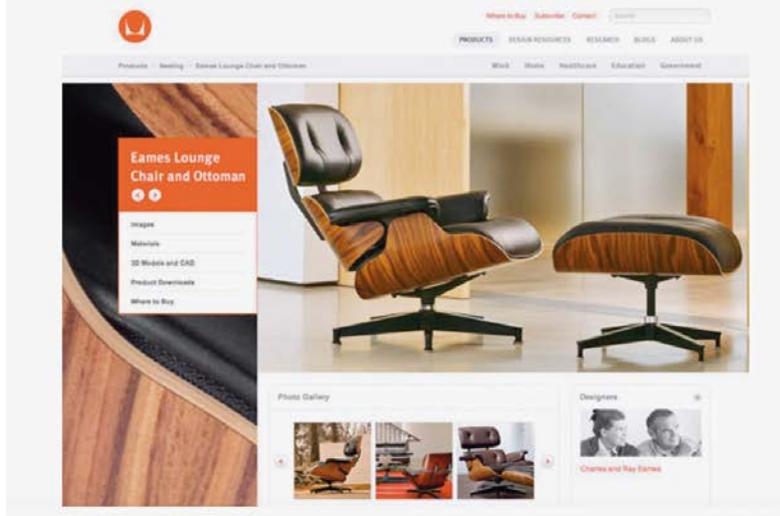
Passersby on the High Line could discern the different ingredients in *Skittles* because they were printed on the bottles themselves, in the lowercase sans serif lettering currently prevalent in the design aesthetic of health-conscious consumerism. The kind of information that gallery-goers usually find in an exhibition checklist was thus transferred onto the work through the appropriation of a commercial vernacular. Kline’s use of plainly legible communication formats

is part of what made Skittles a remarkable instance of “public” art, yet, ironically enough, this very directness has often puzzled an art world accustomed to ambiguity and hermeticism. In a catalogue essay for Kline’s exhibition “Antibodies” at Oslo’s Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in 2020, Domenick Ammirati openly wondered whether a critic had any meaningful role in presenting a body of work with so few messages to decode or art-historical references to unpack.¹⁰ (If at times Kline’s sculptures recall Minimalism, the resemblance derives more from his engagement with commercial-display strategies than from any sustained dialogue with Donald Judd.) This inscrutable lucidity has intensified since the launch, in 2014, of an ambitious cycle of installations that, in the spirit of science fiction, are set somewhere between our projected future and a period of time that Kline has called an “exacerbated present.”¹¹

IN OCTOBER 2010, Kline published “New Century Modern Surface Magazine” on ArtFCity, part of the blog’s “IMG MGMT” series of image-based artist essays. Accompanied by website screenshots, architectural renderings, and Photoshop collages, the two-thousand-word text looked back on the preceding decade through an incongruous array of off-kilter references. In one particularly dizzying sequence, Kline put forward the Star Trek franchise as a cipher for fifty years’ worth of interior decor. “The original Star Trek (1966–69) presents a mid-century modern fantasy in space—with avocado walls on alien planets and blue-gray talking computers,” and its follow-up, Star Trek: The Next Generation, “takes the beige computer and beige hospital from the late ’80s and flies around the galaxy in it, visiting planets full of lavender vases, mauve corporate carpets, and static electricity orbs from Spencer’s circa 1986.” By contrast, the 2009 film directed by J. J. Abrams offered “a vision of interstellar exploration charted from the bridge of the Apple Store.”¹² The latter style, an ostentatiously sleek throwback to midcentury modernism, is what Kline called “New Century Modern.” The essay’s assembled images located the tendency in the offerings of Design Within Reach and West Elm, in recently renovated airports like JetBlue’s Terminal 5 at JFK, and, most extensively, in New York’s bumper crop of new luxury condominiums. These aughts-era structures, designed by starchitects such as Richard Meier and Jean Nouvel, were first and foremost a testament to the plutocrat-friendly policies of the Bloomberg mayoralty, but Kline detected in their sweeping curves the same psychic forces that made the retro sound of the Strokes so inescapable in the fall of 2001. In much the same way that Takashi Murakami has framed Japanese anime culture as a collective neurosis rooted in the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kline saw New Century Modern as a protracted response to the trauma of 9/11 and the Bush administration’s war on terror.¹³ All those gleaming high-rises, with their unnerving capacity to appear as digital simulations even when completed in concrete and steel, were symptoms of a repetition compulsion—one of the sources, according to Freud, of that peculiar category of human experience known as the uncanny.¹⁴



Where, though, does Dr. Who's TARDIS take America's caring, cultured, progressive liberal Democrats? Even with Obama in office, America's center-left-leaning intellectuals can't get enough of "Mad Men". Is it just the attention to period detail and the brilliant writing or is it the thrill of watching pregnant women drink cocktails and smoke cigarettes while the Black housekeeper does the dishes? The New York Times wants to know. The 2000s and the stunning traumas of Bush Cheney & Co. ushered in an era of extreme escapism. Sitcoms specializing in social surrogacy like Friends have been replaced in our hearts and on our screens by period dramas like "Mad Men", "Rome", and "Battlestar Galactica" and by laptop DVD cultural safaris in the wilds of "Big Love" and "The Wire".



Screenshot from Josh Kline's ArtFCity essay "New Century Modern Surface Magazine," October 21, 2010.

Alongside Star Trek, the other television touchstone for "New Century Modern" was Mad Men (2007–15), a prestige drama set amid the Saarinen chairs and three-martini lunches of the '60s advertising industry. Wrote Kline, "Mad Men cunningly portrays America's transition from socially conservative monolithic culture with legislated discrimination to the dysfunctional, fragmented, lifestyle-oriented consumer culture that we enjoy today."¹⁵ This gloss on the show's thematic arc drew uncited inspiration from another of Kline's interests, filmmaker Adam Curtis's Century of the Self (2002). (Kline organized a group-watch of the four-part documentary at the Brooklyn gallery Cleopatra's in December 2008.) Through his signature mixture of archival

footage, probing interviews, and charmingly conspiratorial narration, Curtis explains how psychoanalysis was deployed to manipulate the masses through “public relations,” a field founded by Freud’s nephew Edward Bernays. Various plot elements in *Mad Men* sync perfectly with Curtis’s argument: German-accented academics linking smoking habits to the death drive; psychologists running market-research focus groups; a series finale set at a gestalt-therapy workshop modeled after the Esalen Institute in California. In Curtis’s telling, Esalen kicked off the Me Generation lifestyle politics that powered the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the late ’70s and the left’s surrender to neoliberalism under Bill Clinton and Tony Blair during the ’90s—effectively setting the stage for the accumulated crises that have shaped twenty-first-century life. The popular appeal of *Mad Men* was initially attributed to nostalgia, but, as its later seasons wore on, the show’s exacting re-creations of period style appeared more and more, like New Century Modern high-rises, as an uncanny compulsion to repeat.

Architecture and television were the primary reference points for “New Century Modern,” but to the same degree that Dan Graham’s analysis of suburban housing in *Homes for America, 1966–67*, sneakily commented on Minimalist sculpture, Kline’s essay could also be read as a diagnosis of the art world’s incessant returns to modernism throughout the aughts. In the same summer that *Mad Men* premiered, the 2007 edition of Documenta adopted as its leitmotif the left-wing melancholy of T. J. Clark’s question from *Farewell to an Idea* (1999), “Is modernity our antiquity?” A mere coincidence, perhaps, but both these backward glances could be plausibly interpreted as neurotic symptoms stemming from the same set of historical traumas. Kline has sought to break with this pattern of compulsive repetition by taking up the public-relations techniques highlighted by *Century of the Self* and marshaling them against the neoliberal order that they were so instrumental in bringing about. The installments of his cycle have drawn on the expertise of professionals in political stagecraft, advertising, and commercial film to mount protests against policing, precarity, and climate change. According to various critics, this combination of ubiquitous communication strategies and overt leftist politics can come off as “literal,” “blunt,” or “propagandistically clear.” It also, however, induces an unmistakably uncanny effect, distinct from the one elicited by New Century Modern architecture or even by the Surrealist objects of Méret Oppenheim and Man Ray. According to Freud, the uncanny arises from the reemergence of something once repressed. The uncanny engendered by Kline’s installations comes closer to a recurring trope in *Star Trek* where characters find themselves in a “mirror universe.” Instead of tapping into past memories, Kline’s uncanny pierces through the present and triggers a vague, persistent sense of being stuck in the wrong reality.

Jokes about living in a “cursed timeline” started peppering my Twitter feed during the pandemic, and “multiverses” are right now everywhere in pop culture. I first experienced the mirror-universe uncanny back in 2015, while watching Kline’s video *Hope and Change*, which debuted at New York’s New Museum for that year’s triennial. Kline hired an actor to deliver an alternate version of Barack Obama’s first inaugural address—not the shockingly forgettable speech he delivered in January 2009, but the full-throated call for climate, racial, and economic justice that many who voted for him had wanted, and even expected, to hear. Thanks to the same deepfake

software that previously resuscitated “Kurt” and “Whitney,” the words seemed to emanate from a patchy approximation of the former president’s familiar face. Most would point to this avatar’s trembling presence as the source of the video’s uncanny charge, since it sporadically dipped into the “uncanny valley” of insufficiently lifelike digital animation. However, the mirror-universe uncanny of Hope and Change hinged more on Kline’s collaboration with a professional speechwriter well versed in the art of public relations. The eeriness came from hearing such a transformative set of political promises in the precise cadences that typically offer only platitudes and empty-calorie uplift.¹⁶ Hope and Change appeared as part of a larger installation, called Freedom, 2014–16, that reproduced the distinctive pavement of Zuccotti Park, the site of the 2011 encampment by the Occupy Wall Street movement, which had coalesced in part out of widespread disappointment in Obama’s failure to hold responsible either investment banks for the financial crash or the Bush administration for the Iraq War. The space was patrolled by four life-size mannequins sporting SWAT-team tactical gear and bearing the smooth plastic visages of Teletubbies, the multicolored anthropomorphic creatures of the eponymous British children’s show (1997–2001). Kline regards the program’s plastic pastoral environs as a perfect soft dystopia; unseen authorities issue orders from a network of horns that spring out from the Astroturf, and the screens on the Teletubbies’ stomachs periodically play surveillance footage of people going about their days. The police-officer Teletubbies of Freedom, variously named Po-Po, Professionalism, Courtesy, and Respect, thus embodied a state apparatus dedicated to both placating and monitoring its population. Against this backdrop, Hope and Change sketched the outline of another world that, for a few euphoric days following the 2008 election, had once seemed possible.



Josh Kline, *Hope and Change*, 2015, HD video, color, sound, 17 minutes 10 seconds. From *Freedom*, 2014–16.



Josh Kline, *Respect* (detail), 2015, modified mannequin, plastic helmet, cotton, leather, nylon, cast resin, paint, steel, foam, aluminum, LED screen, media player, video. Installation view, New Museum, New York. From *Freedom*, 2014–16. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

After *Freedom*, the second installment in Kline's cycle was *Unemployment* in 2016, nominally set in the 2030s or '40s, at a time when automation will have replaced most of the middle-class workforce (a scenario that the recent proliferation of AI applications has made increasingly plausible). Repeating the approach of "Blue Collars," Kline both video-interviewed and digitally scanned individuals who had recently lost their jobs as accountants or administrative assistants. Their 3D-printed likenesses lay curled in the fetal position on the carpeted floor of 47 Canal, wrapped in clear plastic bags. The intimation of living persons subjected to asphyxiation and disposability was deeply unsettling, but, much as Freud regarded the automaton doll Olympia as secondary to the uncanny effect of E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman" (1817), I might point instead to the exhibition's accompanying video, *Universal Early Retirement* (spots #1 & #2), 2016.¹⁷ Drawing in part on the responses his interview subjects gave to questions about what they would do if their living costs were covered, Kline produced two slickly folksy advertisements promoting universal basic income (UBI) as a means of alleviating precarity and

giving people more time to pursue interests and help others. The two ninety-second spots seamlessly replicate the soft-focus, picket-fence sheen of advertisements that affectively bind us to what Lauren Berlant called “cruel optimism”: the stubborn, ultimately deleterious fidelity to a vision of “the good life” that neoliberalism has made increasingly unattainable.¹⁸ Here, however, those finely calibrated aesthetics promote an alternate American dream that, uncannily enough, privileges mutual care over individual advancement.



Josh Kline, *Unemployment*, 2016, mixed media. Installation view, 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

The latest installment of the cycle, called *Climate Change*, comprises a presentation at 47 Canal in 2019; a video installation debuting this month at the Whitney; and *Adaptation*, 2019–22, a 16-mm film that first screened at LAXART in 2022. Through miniature models and other practical effects, the film portrays a small tugboat navigating the half-submerged skyscrapers of midtown Manhattan in a future where rising seas have flooded the city. Crew members climb out from the water in scuba gear and plop down on the deck, unwrapping burritos just as the golden hour hits. Watching this multiracial crew of “essential workers” take a well-deserved break, I found myself thinking of José Esteban Muñoz’s interpretation of Frank O’Hara’s “Having a Coke with You” as a glimpse of the utopian within the quotidian, as well as Tina Campt’s call for living in “the future real conditional or that which will have had to happen.”¹⁹ In *Adaptation*, the society on the other side of environmental catastrophe approximates what Kline has described as “the kind of utopian majority-minority future America I’ve fantasized about living in for decades.”²⁰ Maybe it would be nicer to slip into the mirror universe where Al Gore won the 2000 presidential election and established strong climate protections twenty years ago, but at least this cursed timeline of ours may still have its moments.

Instead of tapping into past memories, Kline’s uncanny pierces through the present and triggers a vague, persistent sense of being stuck in the wrong reality.



Josh Kline, *Adaptation*, 2019–22, 16 mm, color, sound, 10 minutes 45 seconds. From *Climate Change*, 2019–.

FOR A CERTAIN SEGMENT of readers, my attempt here to strike up a dialogue between Kline’s work and cultural studies will inevitably recall the academic debates of the ’90s, when art history entered a turf war with an offshoot of cultural studies known as “visual culture.” In 1996, the editors of *October* published a notoriously hostile questionnaire contending that, since visual culture drew variously from anthropology, psychoanalysis, and media discourses, the field had abandoned the task of history, untethering images from the specific mediums that had anchored them to the past.²¹ This disciplinary schism was long ago resolved, or perhaps just repressed, but it is worth acknowledging that the art of Josh Kline fulfills all of that questionnaire’s worst fears. Here is an artist who studied visual anthropology, dabbles in pop psychology, and pays far more attention to the synchronic sprawl of contemporary culture than to his place in some artistic lineage. (When I emailed Kline to ask whether he viewed Graham, Kelley, or Dara Birnbaum as influences, he wrote back with a list of film directors and science-fiction authors.) For many who confront Kline’s blood bags and Teletubbies at the Whitney, “Project for a New American Century” will doubtlessly augur nothing less than the wholesale liquidation of art’s history.

Against such conclusions, one could offer a counterargument that might go like this: For the past fifty-odd years—a period of time roughly coincident with the social experiment known as neoliberalism—the art of museums and galleries has mostly been working through the same limited set of forms. Minimalism, Pop, Conceptualism, the abstraction-versus-figuration push-and-pull of painting: These strategies have been endlessly revised or retooled, invested with new



Josh Kline, *Freedom*, 2014–16, mixed media. Installation view, New Museum, New York, 2015. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

contents or applied to different contexts. From a certain distance, though, all these variations resemble the finicky adjustments one sees across several centuries' worth of European painting, when the Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical, and Romantic movements made only minor tweaks to the fundamentals of Renaissance naturalism. The first true rupture came from Gustave Courbet, who combined a commitment to capturing the realities of labor and class with a capacity for infusing academicism with the traits of popular culture, like the flat graphic quality of the *épinal* prints enjoyed by his rural family.²² Perhaps it follows, then, that the cultural field that Kline has been mapping out since “Nobodies New York” constitutes a comparable assault on our current status quo. Institutionally accredited critics like me will try to associate Kline’s work with this or that historical reference, and others will continue to call it literal or blunt, but from the vantage point of some future majority-minority country where UBI and responsible climate policy are palpable realities, perhaps all these assessments will be seen, like the broadsides against *A Burial at Ornans* back in 1851, as the befuddled sputtering of an atrophied regime.²³

But there I go again, mixing up notions that don’t belong together, when really that should be left to the likes of Josh Kline.

“Josh Kline: Project for a New American Century” will be on view April 19 through August 13, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Colby Chamberlain teaches art and theory at the Cleveland Institute of Art. His book *Fluxus Administration* is forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press.

NOTES

1. Eli Diner, "Radical Futures: A Conversation with Josh Kline," *Flash Art*, October no. 30, 2020, [flash—art.com/2020/10/conversation-with-josh-kline/](https://flash-art.com/2020/10/conversation-with-josh-kline/).
2. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* no. 8 (Spring 1979): 75.
3. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87.
4. Williams, 87–93.
5. Howard Singerman, "The Educational Complex: Mike Kelley's Cultural Studies," *October* no. 126 (Fall 2008): 44–68.
6. Williams, 90.
7. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Ari Larissa Heinrich, *Chinese Surplus: Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Medically Commodified Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
8. Josh Kline, "What Are You?," in *Best! Letters from Asian Americans in the Arts*, ed. Christopher K. Ho and Daisy Nam (Brooklyn: Paper Monument, 2021), 66.
9. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013).
10. Domenick Ammirati, "The Communicating Object," in *Josh Kline: Antibodies*, ed. Therese Möllenhoff (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museet, 2020), 27–30. Prior to writing on Kline's work for "Antibodies," Ammirati collaborated with Kline on the scripts for *Forever 27* and *Forever 48*, both 2013.
11. Josh Kline, "Josh Kline in Conversation with Ryan Trecartin," in *Surround Audience: New Museum Triennial 2015*, ed. Lauren Cornell and Helga Christoffersen (New York: New Museum, 2015), 17.

12. Josh Kline, "New Century Modern Surface Magazine," ArtFCity, October no. 21, 2010, artfcity.com/2010/10/21/img-mgmt-new-century-modern-surface-magazine/.
13. Takashi Murakami, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).
14. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 145.
15. Kline, "New Century Modern Surface Magazine."
16. The techniques of political theater have also been explored by the artist Liz Magic Laser, whose videos Kline included in a 2013 screening he curated at Electronic Arts Intermix called "Uncanny Valleys."
17. Freud, 135–41.
18. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
19. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 5–7; Tina M. Campt, "Quiet Soundings: The Grammar of Black Futurity," in *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 17.
20. Kline, "What Are You?"
21. "Visual Culture Questionnaire," October no. 77 (Summer 1996): 25.
22. Meyer Schapiro, "Courbet and Popular Imagery" (1941), in *Selected Papers*, vol. 2, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Brazillier, 1978), 47–85.
23. T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 121–54.