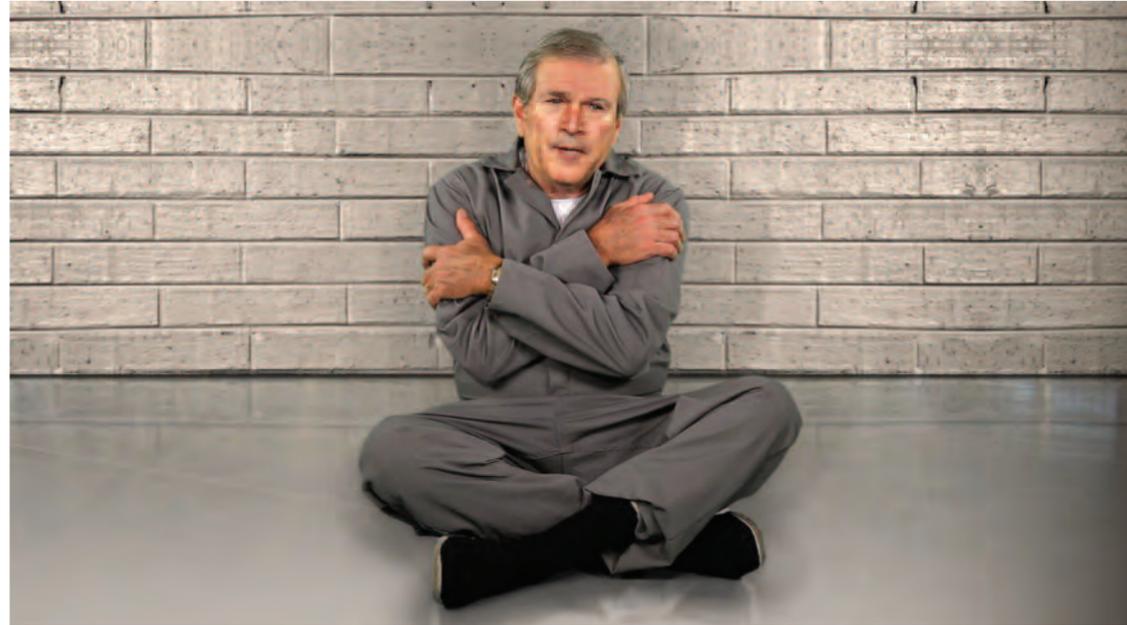


***JOSH  
KLINE***

***BY CIARA MOLONEY***





Crying Games, 2015, video still, HD video, sound, color, light-box display: plexiglas, LEDs and power supply, flat-screen TV, media player, and wood, 264 x 178 x 12,7 cm  
 previous pages: Respect, 2015, LED screen, media player, HD video, altered mannequin, plastic helmet, cotton, leather, nylon, cast resin, paint, steel, foam, and aluminum (detail) Photo: Joerg Lohse (p. 85)  
 Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York

In George Saunders' short story *The Semplica-Girl Diaries*, the beleaguered narrator describes the daily struggle to provide for his family in an American suburb dominated by competitive neighbours.<sup>1</sup> He notes with envy the extravagant houses, gifts and lavish 'SGs' of other families. It soon becomes apparent that the SGs are not your run of the mill status symbol. Named after "doctor + smart cookie" Lawrence Semplica, the Semplica Girls are in fact female migrant workers strung together by a microline at the temple and displayed on the front lawn of people's homes. The narrator aspires desperately to be able to afford his own SGs so that his children can be on a par with their affluent friends. Planting this single grotesque image at the heart of a story of family life, Saunders recasts western capitalist culture as irresponsibly materialistic, immoral and downright damaging.

The power of the absurd is well understood by American artist Josh Kline. In *Freedom* (2015), Kline has created a dystopian installation in which a menacing SWAT team bearing Teletubby faces and tummy-screens guards a darkened room. The "artistic uncoupling from the actual"<sup>2</sup> of Kline's work provides surprising insights into the comfortingly familiar; the formerly cuddly stars of children's television are transformed into dark forces of the state in a work about surveillance in 21st century America.

Born in 1979, Kline is part of an emerging generation of artists working with the materials and technologies of today, from advanced graphics software to 3D photographic printing. However, unlike many of his peers (often referred to as post-internet artists, a label that Kline refutes), he undertakes these methods in the service of a profound investigation into contemporary globalised political and economic conditions, rather than as an end in themselves. Indeed, the artist has described his ambition to create a entire cycle of projects that will speculate on the impact of events such as global warming on our future lives.

Working in video, sculpture and installation, Kline has exhibited in leading New York institutions including the Whitney, MoMA PS1 and the New Museum. Previous exhibitions such as *Quality of Life* (2013) focused in particular on the lifestyle economy. In the video *Forever 27* Kline employed face substitution software to create the impression that Kurt Cobain was still alive and well, the dead grunge star having apparently undergone radical life-extension. In this work, Cobain speaks from a strangely sanitized space which resembled the waiting room of a luxury spa or, more likely, an upmarket rehabilitation facility. Kline installed the video within the frame of a glowing lightbox reminiscent of an American ATM kiosk in a knowing appropriation of retail aesthetics. Along with its companion piece *Forever 48*, featuring a Whit-





ney Houston lookalike, this work plays on the popular TV trope of the tell-all interview to examine our contemporary obsession with youth and celebrity.

Kline's work from this time perfectly illustrates 21st century capitalism's manufacture of specious desires as well as its incessant monetisation of our deepest fears. For *Skittles* (2014), he installed a fridge stocked with smoothies made from highly suggestive ingredients on the High Line in New York. Tapping into the health craze in western culture for 'cleansing' and 'detoxing' juices, the smoothies' potent recipes suggested a wide range of lifestyles. Contrast, for instance, the aspirations and relative wealth of *williamsburg* (credit card, american apparel, kale chips, kombucha, microbrew, quinoa, agave) with *minimum wage* (mr. clean, money order, medical scrubs, french fries, toilet paper, phone card, latex gloves, pennies). These small bottles mirror the process of corporate branding, whereby human identity is reduced to a series of labels – labels evoking notions of selfhood that are in turn used to sell products back to consumers.

Of late, Kline's practice has taken a more political turn. This has manifested itself in a series of expanded sculptural portraits for which the artist photographically scanned the bodies of several people who were classified by their profession. These were then 3D printed in various colours and presented alongside the accoutrements of the worker's job. In their first iteration *Tastemaker's Choice* (2012), the hands of creative workers were presented on white shelving redolent of store displays, as if to suggest that one could casually purchase an identity off the peg. Later, Kline began to depict the less conspicuous lives of low-paid labourers, presenting the heads and hands of a cleaner in *Eight to Four* (2015) and a FedEx delivery worker in *Packing for Peanuts* (*Fedex Worker's Head with Knit Cap*) (2014) on janitor carts and packing boxes, respectively. By making an economic underclass visible in contemporary art museums, those temples of high culture subsidised by wealthy private patrons, these works made a radical statement about labour conditions today.

*Freedom*, Kline's exhibition at Modern Art Oxford, marks the artist's first solo presentation outside of America. Addressing authoritarian state power and participatory democracy, the exhibition is Kline's most ambitious project to date. At the centre of the show is a re-staging of *Freedom*, the immense installation which Kline first exhibited at the New Museum Triennale in spring 2015 to widespread critical acclaim. Here, the aforementioned Teletubbies stand in an environment modelled after Zuccotti Park in New York, site of the former Occupy Wall Street Camp. At the heart of the installation is *Hope and Change*, a film in which US

Packing for Peanuts (Fedex Worker's Head with Knit Cap), 2014, 3D-printed sculptures in plaster with inkjet ink and cyanoacrylate, cast urethane foam packing peanuts, vinyl, cardboard, MDF, 89 x 69 x 68.5 cm Photo: Joerg Lohse, previous pages: Rough Rides, 2015 and Who do you think you are, 2015 Photo: Ben Westoby (pp. 88-89) Hope and Change, 2015, HD video, sound, color, 17:10 min, light-box display: plexiglas, LEDs and power supply, flat-screen TV, media player and wood Photo: Joerg Lohse (pp. 90-91) Courtesy: the artist and 47 Canal, New York



president 'Barack Obama' (an actor disguised with face substitution software) delivers a new version of his 2009 inaugural speech. The text was written by Kline and a former speechwriter from Obama's team and, while mimicking the president's rhetorical flourishes, is rather more direct than the pragmatic speech which Obama actually presented.

Monitors in the Teletubbies' stomachs play *Privacy* (2015), the script of which is based on the social media feeds of political activists identified by Kline. The texts were performed by former police and military personnel bearing the scanned faces of the activists to produce a feedback loop of power and control,<sup>3</sup> of information and over-sharing. In *Privacy*, Deleuze's networked society of control is alive and well, with people willingly volunteering information on social media channels that enables them to be tracked and surveilled.

This work was directly inspired by Kline's experiences at Occupy Wall Street, where the police spent hours scanning the crowds with cameras, presumably in order to build up a database of potentially troublesome individuals. It remains to be seen what will happen to all of the information that is being produced, tracked and recorded by individuals and state agencies. There seem to be no controls in place regarding who will ultimately own this data, or how it will be used (or abused) in the future. The work's ironic title nods to the fact that hard-fought civil liberties are being swiftly eroded with little public dissent, thanks to the ease with which the authorities can capture our digital communications.

At the core of *Freedom* is a nostalgia for the galvanising effect of Obama's campaign in 2008 and the Occupy movement in 2011, a time when everyday citizens sensed that they could change the way in which the country was run. There is no doubt that social media was an effective tool in gathering together large groups of young people and previously disengaged voters. Yet Kline's work underlines Adam Curtis's assertion that these new channels of communication serve as more of an echo chamber than a viable tool for generating and implementing new democratic policies.<sup>4</sup> In Kline's menacing 'public' park, social media operates as a spectacle of discourse instead of truly activating individual political agency. Indeed, as Jonathan Crary has pointed out, how can citizens of the perpetually-distracted attention economy nurture the streams of counter-thought required to challenge dominant political regimes?<sup>5</sup> *Freedom* contrasts the feeling of hope engendered by Obama and Occupy with today's era of partisan politics, political gridlock, increasing inequality and the entrenchment of power among elites, asking what next for America?

A rebranding of 'America' is required if *Patriot Acts* (2015) is anything to go by. In this animation the logo of the National Security Administration – an eagle with keys in its claws – is rendered in various graphic styles from the Obama '08 colours to the fiery opening credits of *The Hunger Games*. The NSA, whose mass surveillance operations in America were so recently exposed by Edward Snowden, stands as a symbol of the dark state of the state. In *Crying Games* (2015), Kline shifts his focus from governmental agencies to individuals like George Bush and Dick Cheney. Wearing prison-style jumpsuits, these politicians apologise profusely for some unspoken transgression. The viewer is left to speculate on the misdemeanours in question. This imaginary mea culpa suggests that in reality US leaders are excused from taking personal responsibility – the engine of the so-called American dream.

Kline's use of face substitution in this work and in his other videos produces the startling sensation that reality itself is contingent; the person on screen appears recognisably Obama or Cobain-like, speaking in a similar voice, wearing identical clothing and yet their face flickers between that of the actor and that of the impersonated. As the fake and the actual switch back and forth real and imaginary become ever more confused and obtuse. Often directly imitative of real objects and people, Kline's photographic 3D scanned and printed sculptures encapsulate what Jean Baudrillard termed the hyper-real; the "reduplication of the real, preferably through another medium."<sup>6</sup> In today's information-saturated climate, reality itself can be easily manipulated by the media, rendering the public more vulnerable to the stories told by those in power. Working in an era of accelerated technological change, Kline employs more sophisticated technologies than were imaginable in 1976, when Baudrillard's text focused on the medium of photography.

However Kline's version of the hyper-real does allow cracks to show, suggesting that the false meta-narratives enabled by hyper-reality are on the verge of breaking down. In the show at Oxford he has created a series of cast and 3D printed sculptures based on photographic scans of real doughnuts from the American chain Dunkin Donuts. With titles such as *Police States* and the use of the NYPD logo (not to mention a batch of real doughnuts iced with a sickly pig's blood mix) Kline's target is explicit. However, instead of simulating the appearance of real doughnuts, the sculptures incorporate inedible materials like bullets, razor blades and coins, disturbing the hyper-real effect. These works were made in response to recent reports of the deaths of numerous African-Americans while in police custody. The resultant outcry has led to certain assumptions around race and class





Forever 27, 2013, video still, HD video, color, sound, 14:39 min (above) Courtesy the artist Forever 48, 2013, video still, HD video, color, sound, 16:06 min (bottom) Courtesy the artist previous pages: Skittles, 2014, commercial fridge, light box and blended liquids in bottles, 219.7 x 324 x 104 cm (detail), commissioned and produced by Friends of the High Line Photo: Yuko Torihara Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York (pp. 96-97)

in America<sup>7</sup> being publicly questioned. In a similar move, Kline's doughnuts lay bare the brutal underpinning of this seemingly harmless snack. Paired with the interrogation of social media in *Freedom*, Kline's exhibition questions whether movements like Black Lives Matter can lead to real systemic change or whether they will flutter away like so many other political hashtags into the ether of the Twittersphere.

There is a chink of hope in the Saunders story – eventually the Semplica Girls do escape. The beleaguered narrator worries about what they will make of their new freedom – without money or papers, how will they survive? It seems less likely that such liberty will be achieved in Kline's next cycle of work. In a few short years, the artist has generated a remarkable body of work synthesising contemporary technologies, incisive analysis and formal innovation to interrogate many of the political, economic and philosophical assumptions underpinning contemporary American society. As he turns his focus toward the future, we must wait and see whether more apocalyptic visions lie ahead.

1. George Saunders, *Tenth of December* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
2. *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, in *Networks* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), p. 147.
4. "Jon Ronson in conversation with Adam Curtis," *vice.com*, 15 January 2015.
5. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 75.
6. Jean Baudrillard, *The Hyper-realism of Simulation*, in *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 1049.
7. Such as the assertion that America is a post-racial society and that individuals are to blame for their poor education, low incomes, high incarceration rates or simple lack of achievement, rather than centuries-old racial discrimination by the political, economic and legal institutions of the nation.