

caa.reviews

July 26, 2017

Josh Kline: Freedom

2016.

Exhibition schedule: Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR, July 23–November 13, 2016

Kris Cohen



Josh Kline. *Freedom*. Portland Art Museum. Image courtesy of the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and Portland Art Museum. Photo: Paul Foster.

Josh Kline: Freedom, curated by Sara Krajewski for the Portland Art Museum, is the title of the first work in a projected five-work cycle by the artist. Each will imagine a future that extends out from the present's particular techno-economic landscapes. Less a single work than an evolving cluster of works, *Freedom* has been previously exhibited at the New Museum (2015) and Modern Art Oxford (2015). The Portland Art Museum show marks its completion (public conversation between Krajewski and Kline, Portland Art Museum, July 22, 2016). Many reviews of *Freedom* have covered some of the work's most apparent interests: [political disappointment](#), [collective fantasy](#), [technological extensions of the body](#), and [post-internet art](#). And just about all of them reference dystopia, 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermaths, and the Occupy movement. Kline often makes these same associations in interviews (e.g., Lauren Cornell and Ryan Trecartin, "Josh Kline in Conversation with Ryan Trecartin," in *Surround Audience: New Museum Triennial 2015*, New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2015, 16–19). We might say, then, that Kline is an artist who takes the technologies and labor economies of neoliberalism not just as the context for his work but as his medium. But I think we should also wonder if it is a failure of criticism, or somehow a symptom of the present tense examined by *Freedom*, that the

critical discourse around Kline's work is barely distinguishable from his own language for it?

There are twenty-eight works in *Freedom*: fourteen are three-by-three grids of fabricated donuts that feel like a single work; three are standalone videos (*Crying Games*, 2015; *Hope and Change*, 2015; and *Patriot Acts*, 2015); four are roughly life-size riot police with Teletubbies faces; one is a video that plays on the screens embedded in the abdomens of those riot police (*Privacy*, 2015); six are arboreal cell towers bearing the fruits of the American dream turned sour (nylon zip-tie riot handcuffs, plastic grocery bags, and credit cards); one is a standalone sculpture of a dog in the form of a video camera (*Faithful Companion*, 2016); and the final two (which also feel like a single work) both present 3D-printed forearms reposing on industrial shelving and palming video cameras that are indistinguishable from the flesh of the hand.

The materials that constitute and connect all of these discrete works look as though they could have been ordered from a high-end catalogue for either a corporate lobby or a minimum-security prison. If these are made things, the traces of their making have been erased, as though the entire show was 3D printed. This contributes to the widely shared view that *Freedom* depicts a kind of dystopia, despite the fact that two of the videos present scenes from a Liberal fantasy: in *Crying Games*, the architects of the Iraq War—Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Tony Blair—each wearing something like prison overalls, are tearfully remorse, keening the deracinated phrase “all those people.” In *Hope and Change*, a fiercely optimistic Barack Obama (played by actor Reggie Brown) revivifies his 2009 inauguration address.

It is difficult to distinguish between the critical discourse that now surrounds the show, Kline's own language for the work, and what would result if one listed the work's obvious historical references. The exhibition seems to relieve people of the need to care too much about the work's form. The artist himself has said that he wants the show to be “self-sufficient and direct” (“Josh Kline in Conversation with Ryan Trecartin,” 16). The three-by-three grids of donuts, for instance, are imprinted with various references to the New York City Police Department—the joke makes itself. Again and again, we are made to feel as though we get it, as though we are a we. My point is not to wish for a more rigorous formalism on the part of Kline or viewers, but to point to this feeling of knowing, of being the right kind of insider, because that feeling is in fact the concomitant of having no real access to or control over the set of technologies, economies, and politics that lend the exhibition its self-sufficiency. Political comedies like *The Daily Show* revel in such powerlessness, making it their genre. Like other works in that genre, *Freedom* seems far more interested in the present tense's exhausting inevitability than in that feeling's infrastructure. This places *Freedom* in a

long line of sentimental works where the alignment of feeling is the political aim of the work and insidership its mode of address.

But there is one exception to what I have said so far and that is the face-substitution software in three of the show's four video works. Here, the source and even the visual specificity of the conjured effect are not immediately evident. Far from self-sufficient, face-substitution software is a sub-species of two larger areas of research: machine vision and machine learning. In effect, face-substitution software first learns to model a face in order to later produce a match, grafting a still image onto a live video. As the software struggles to maintain the match against the liveness of the face, it is as if the outward face becomes animated. Against the pleasure and levity of the illusion, Kline situates this technology in an overall context that seems mainly concerned with surveillance (one of the technology's major growth industries—e.g., recognizing criminals as they pass through international airports or protesters as they march). But it is also used in applications that do not lurk in the shadows: in photo-management software like Apple's iPhoto and Google Photo (to identify, label, and categorize), in mobile phones (as a lock mechanism), in job sites (as a way of confirming that people punch in and out at the times they claim), and in the treatment of prosopagnosia (inability to recall faces).

Face substitution shows up as a kind of central actor in *Crying Games*, *Hope and Change*, and in the video that plays on the Teletubbies' tummies (*Privacy*) where it allows Kline to replace the faces of off-duty and plainclothes police officers with the faces of activists while those police officers read from scripts culled from the social media feeds of the pictured activists. It has also appeared in Kline's previous work, his semi-fictional Kurt Cobain and Whitney Houston interview videos (*Forever 27* and *Forever 28*, both 2013). The effect here as well as in *Crying Games* and *Hope and Change* is of a face that is oversaturated with familiarity but at the same time is muscularly and affectively out of sync with itself. In *Crying Games*, the actors sob and plead, faces contorted in exaggerated contrition; but this we only sense behind, or through, the all-too-familiar faces. Because the software performs the matching in real-time, the effect is more seamless, more illusionistic when the live face is still, affectless. In the presence of strong emotion, there are more glitches (this makes political emotion political in new ways, e.g., as a counter-surveillance tactic). Bush's face, which we are used to seeing in repose, blank more than calm even in the face of global crisis, produces the best illusion: the software hardly needs to work at all. Underscoring the artifice, the replacement faces in *Crying Games* and *Privacy* sometimes disappear for an instant, long enough for viewers to get an unobstructed view of the face of the actor, who will be unfamiliar to most. Whatever its technical specifications, this too has its sentimental aspect: forcing people to walk a mile in someone else's face; forcing the

Left's favorite villains to finally feel the right way about their prosecution of the Iraq War; making Obama feel hopeful again.

The end result is not a representation; it is an identification. That difference matters a great deal for how we conceptualize individuality and collectivity in the context of Kline's work and in the historical present. In a database like the one Kline's face-substitution software uses, the individual is never just the thing aggregated, the part in a part-whole relation, but the thing managed, identified, appealed to—in short and in a very practical sense, it is the thing produced. This might be a useful lesson to take away from *Freedom*. But whatever the pedagogical ambitions of the show's technological imaginary, they are in tension with its sentimentality. In a sentimental address, the sensitive individual coheres as the very site of politics and the locus of fantasies of belonging. So *Freedom* manifests a belief in the individual while confronting her or him with the force of that figure's disorganization and redistribution. *Freedom* thus locates its visitors in two present tenses: one in which the fantasies and technologies of stable individualism abound; the other in which technologies like face-substitution software fundamentally rewire the person-form as a new kind of collectivity, one in which particularity and singularized address is the means of scaling up and not its impediment. Given the show's atmospheric immersion of viewers in the former tense, and the world's slow but steady immersion in the latter, *Freedom* is far more esoteric than Kline admits.