

## JOSH KLINE'S 'UNEMPLOYMENT' AT 47 CANAL: A BRILLIANT, HIGH-CONCEPT THRILLER

By Alex Greenberger

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Installation view of "Josh Kline: Unemployment," at 47 Canal, New York.  
JOERG LOHSE/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND 47 CANAL, NEW YORK

Josh Kline's show "Unemployment" was set around the year 2030, with an election approaching and people losing their jobs to software. The situation it presented was downright ugly—humans appeared only as 3-D-printed sculptures, digital cyphers of their former selves. Subtle, "Unemployment" was not, but it did strike a nerve. Armed with the drama of dystopian movies and the coolness of advertising, Kline revealed that this economy is more hostile to people than are the machines they create.

Although barely over 35, Kline has already created a style that is uniquely his. His work is distinguishable by its uneasy blend of surrealism, new technology, and 3-D-printed janitors, artists, and designers. As the craze for art about technology has escalated, so too has the critical acclaim for Kline, who received widespread attention last year at the New Museum Triennial for his epic Occupy Wall Street allegory, *Freedom*.



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A grand look at the way social media distorted identities during the 2008 recession, *Freedom* is a tough act to follow, but Kline was up to the challenge. This brilliant show unfolded like a high-concept thriller, in a series of intense set pieces.

"Unemployment" began with *On Layaway* (2016), a see-through vinyl chair and ottoman stuffed with shredded tax forms and junk mail. Enter the gallery's main space, and the show intensified. Three granny carts with silicone-cast bottles recalled urbanites who collect bottles to recycle for minimal amounts of money. But, rather than being green or clear, these bottles are the colors of skin, suggesting that people are becoming like tossed-out objects.

Nearby, in a dark room, four spore-like "Contagious Unemployment" sculptures were suspended from the ceiling. Inside these glass objects are boxes that contain sneakers, family photos, and documents—the personal belongings of laid-off employees, or their useless data.

As viewers exited that room, hidden objects appear behind the granny carts: 3-D-printed businesspeople in fetal position, bagged in knotted plastic like materials to be recycled. These life-size humans are dressed either for work or their own funerals; they look alive, but, thanks to new technological modes of production, they are very much dead. At this point “Unemployment” descended into pure horror—beige carpeting gave way to Amazon Prime boxes and hand-me-down clothing; human beings drop out entirely.

And then, all of a sudden, there was a ray of hope. Kline ended the exhibition with *Universal Early Retirement (spots #1 & #2)*, two faux commercials for a universal basic income. Lensed with the sheen of advertising, these short videos depict people living in sync with technology and enjoying life. In the hands of other artists, the *Universal Early Retirement* videos would have been ironic or coy, but Kline is great at genuine, bittersweet finales such as this one, which offers a surprisingly upbeat view of the future. These utopian views of life could be a reality, Kline proposes, if we engineer an economy that prioritizes workers over machines. As one person says in voiceover, “The future is now.”

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## The Future According to Josh Kline

The artist's latest show, 'Unemployment,' is a nightmare vision of working life in the twenty-first century.

BY DANIEL PENNY | June 10th, 2016



*Unemployment*, 2016. Image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal. Joerg Lohse

As Josh Kline sees it, we are living at the twilight of capital. His work as an artist continually returns to the ways people lose their humanity in a brutal and bifurcated economic system—from IV bags filled with a mixture of Redbull, Yerba Mate, Provigil, and gasoline to 3D prints of hotel janitors' appendages fused to cleaning products. With a cheap budget and a black sense of humor, Kline has managed to establish himself as the art-world's conscience, and yet this willingness to speak truth to power has helped launch his career: In the past two years his art has been acquired by the MoMA, Whitney, and exhibited across the globe. *Freedom*, which featured a Teletubby SWAT team with TVs embedded in their chests, was the critical darling of the 2015 New Museum Triennial. While Kline has the art-world's attention, he believes it is his obligation to speak forcefully, and to connect with an audience beyond New York's collectors and cool kids. With his alternately vital and disconcerting sculptures, videos, and installations presented in *Unemployment*, his latest show at 47 Canal, Kline has done just that.



*Freedom*, 2015. Installation view, Modern Art Oxford. Image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal. Ben Westoby

Kline's vision is more sardonic than apocalyptic. His work revels in undermining the aesthetics of brands like CVS, BluePrint juice, or Apple, and in skewering the people who love them. In 2011, Kline's first solo show, *Dignity and Self-Respect*, focused on New York's creative class—their desires, their habits, and their frailties. "Creative Hands" featured shelves of flesh-colored silicone casts made from the hands of Kline's friends and acquaintances: A photographer cradling a digital camera, Kline's gallerist at holding an Advil bottle, a fashion designer's hand encased in a wrist brace. Together, they formed a pointed portrait of what creative labor looks like in the gig-based economy, with all its shortcuts and crutches.

"Skittles," a 2014 installation on the Highline and perhaps his best-known work, is a glowing deli case filled with juices of Kline's own devising, mixtures that represent various New York lifestyles. The juice's otherworldly colors glow in the cold LED light, but the locked case keeps them just out of reach. Each flavor is labeled with a list of ingredients visible through the glass—a purple-white concoction, "Condo," is made of coconut water, HDMI cable, infant formula, tumeric, yoga mat, and glass. The recipe is no joke: "I put yoga mats into the blender and blended them into a chunky powder," he told me. These days, Kline isn't as interested in lampooning the creative class, those adept at "self-branding, self-trafficking, and self-actualizing." Instead he wants to expand his scope, "to look at the people being thrown away after they've been used up at work.





*Creative Hands*, 2011. Image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal. Joerg Lohse



*Skittles*, 2014, detail. Commissioned and produced by Friends of the High Line.



*Unemployment*, 2016. Image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal. Joerg Lohse

***Unemployment*** is set in the near future, sometime around 2030, when, according to the press release “intelligent software has turned out the lights on a hundred million jobs.” A vinyl chair stuffed with shredded tax documents, “On Layaway,” sits at the entrance to the gallery; beige carpeting runs the length of the space, giving way in a corner to Amazon Prime boxes fixed to the floor. Next to the cardboard tiles, a commercial for universal basic income called “Universal Early Retirement” runs on a loop; it hits all the right notes, with the lens flares, diverse cast and upbeat hip-hop soundtrack of a Bernie Sanders ad. Across the space, banker boxes filled with office supplies and family photos hang inside hollow plastic viruses suspended from the ceiling.

The best pieces in the show aren’t representations so much as simulations. Kline’s sculptures of uncanny human forms wrapped in plastic occupy the center of the space. Newly fired or long out of work, their titles are a grim reminder of how capitalism makes even white collar workers disposable: “Productivity Gains,” “By Close of Business,” “Thank you for your years of service,” and “Aspirational Foreclosure.”

Kline hired casting agents to find the models, unemployed workers from the Baltimore area whose old jobs Kline predicts will be made unnecessary by automation. He chose Baltimore because he uses a commercial 3D-scanning company based there to capture his subjects’ every blotch and wrinkle. “It’s a metaphor for how we’re uploading our lives into all these corporate and government databases... you’re literally digitizing the topography and topology of their body,” says the artist. The level of detail, especially in the hands of these sculptures, approaches that of living human, and yet, their hair has the consistency of a Ken doll; the technology is still developing. “You still can’t scan hair,” he says. “It comes out looking like a Chia Pet.”

Across from the abandoned humans sits an orange shopping cart filled with bags of skin-colored silicone called “Desperation Dilation.” “There’s a Home Depot by my apartment in Brooklyn that’s particularly abject,” says Kline. A block away is a bottle recycling center, where people pushing carts filled with the recyclables from across the city converge to scrape out a living. Perhaps out of habit, I had imagined Kline was churning out his sculptures for *Unemployment* in a white studio with floor-to-ceiling windows, maybe located above a pastry shop in an expensive neighborhood. In reality, his studio is more modest. “Right now its in my kitchen, in Bed-Stuy,” he says.

Casual viewers might lump Kline’s work into the nascent category of “post-internet art,” a term used to describe contemporary art concerned with the increasing pervasiveness of technology. Often, post-internet art involves the materialization of the digital—think Richard Prince’s “New Portraits,” large-scale paintings of Instagram photos. Post-internet sculptures tend to be frontal in orientation, as if they were made not to be seen, but to be photographed and shared on social media. Kline hates this term and what it signifies. In his work, he believes “the internet is present—but it’s the tiniest background detail.” His practice is instead animated by the question: “What does today look like?” The internet happens to be a part of it.

Kline’s oeuvre may be future-oriented, but his values are the opposite of so many young artists working today, who have turned to celebrating the surfaces and tropes of digital technology and communication. The art collectives Dis, K-Hole, and The Jogging come to mind, each engaged in the mining, reproduction, and monetization of internet culture—Dis as fashion and lifestyle, K-Hole as corporate branding, The Jogging as all-consuming archive. Kline’s work engages in similar material, but always with the aim of peeling back the shiny facades of digital technologies rather than polishing them further. Instead of embracing the plugged in life, much of Kline’s work shows “creative labor’s role in creating a new kind of economy,” one that diminishes humanity for productivity.

Kline’s first two solo shows, *Dignity and Self-Respect* and *Quality of Life*, explored the lifestyle and lifecycle of celebrities from Kurt Cobain to Nicki Minaj, and Kline didn’t like what he found: He doesn’t have active Twitter or Facebook accounts and the text of his website is written in Latin. Whether Kline’s reticence is politically motivated given his interest in corporate and government surveillance, or just a kind of lifestyle choice, a digital colonic—it’s hard to tell. Sitting in the back room at 47 Canal, he seemed like he would rather use one of the saws hanging from the wall to hack off a limb than answer questions about his personal life. “I’m an artist, not an actor,” he says. Kline believes his life is boring, and would like to keep those boring details to himself. “What does it matter what color sweatshirt I’m wearing?” It was blue.

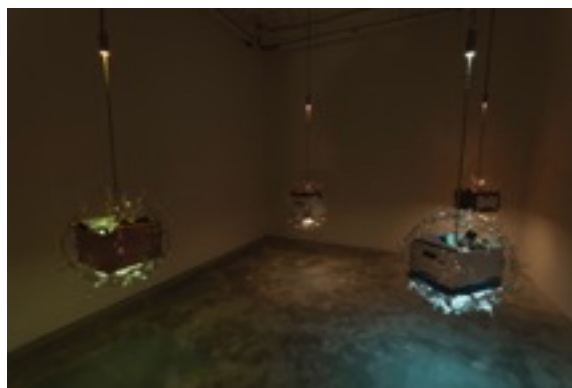
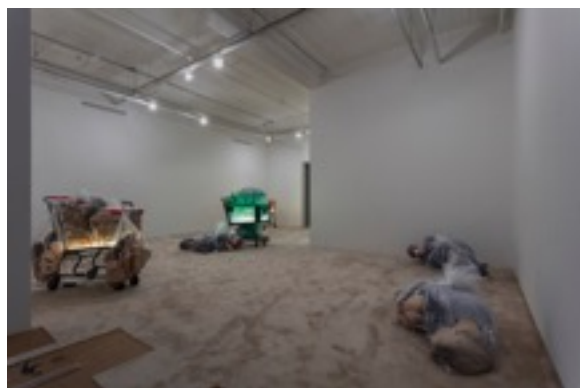
Daniel Penny is an essayist, journalist, poet, and instructor at Columbia University.

## JOSH KLINE AT 47 CANAL, NEW YORK



Josh Kline's *Unemployment*, on view at 47 Canal, New York, is presented as a chapter of a science-fiction novel, fast forward ten or twenty years from our present – half a generation, in 2031 precisely. As incredible as realistic. There will be other priorities, and other policies as well.

And what about the job? The artist supposes that the majority of careers have been starved to near-death or such that unemployment potentially regards everyone. Consequently, the human value could be questioned and every single doubt and fear could involve ourselves. The exhibition offers different sceneries. Will you Airbnb your body out to strangers in order to make rent? Josh Kline gives us a sort of scenic representation, that recalls Archizoom's "12 Ideal Cities". Your mind has left the real economy, but your body still needs to eat food and spend its days somewhere. Not only the press release, but also the whole exhibition, could be read as a crucial manifesto. Your brain is no longer required here. Capitalism doesn't care about you. Economic systems don't have feelings. In a society designed around planned obsolescence, the inevitable fate of goods and services and the people who provide them is to become waste. The same economic alchemy that transmutes a human being into a product—into "human capital"—also turns them into sentient garbage. The other side of consumption's cheap coin is disposal. Desired, acquired, used, used up, discarded, forgotten—this is the lifecycle of expendable labor inside a runaway free market. The first step towards a cure is diagnosing the disease. You are not your job. You are not your career. You are a human being.



*Unemployment*, 47 Canal, New York  
 Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York  
 Photo credit: Joerg Lohse



# ARTFORUM

**Josh Kline, 47 CANAL**  
by Laura Atallah  
May 2016



*View of "Josh Kline," 2016.*

The scene is set in what looks like a futuristic cemetery, only it's today—we encounter 3-D-printed and CNC-carved bodies, based on real people, in see-through plastic bags. Of the four on display, one's a bookkeeper; another, a humble entrepreneur (Productivity Gains [Brandon/Accountant]; By Close of Business [Maura/Small-Business Owner], all works 2016).

They lie on the floor, shriveled in fetal positions. Expressions of loss—or is it peace?—appear on their synthetic faces, and their attire's tidy and wrinkle free. In Josh Kline's world, obsolescence is the law of the land, and humans are a passé fad . . . or just literal garbage. It's an entirely sinister and familiar display, and one that doesn't require much reading between the lines. Its grave humor is explicit—it's the death of the middle class, a wide swath of the country, rendered as expendable creatures ready for the discard pile.

Nearby is Universal Early Retirement, a fictional three-minute commercial for a federally subsidized income. Its spirit seems to ricochet off the many political campaign ads that have been assaulting our retinas of late. The tone is jovial, the music uplifting, and the American flag is blowing in the wind. People from different ethnic backgrounds laud a new kind of New Deal that would give them enough free time to pursue their true passions. This promise of a utopian kind of social reform is, alas, vaguely believable.

Since consumerism is the cornerstone of any capitalist economy, naturally, elimination is necessary for keeping such a system alive. The future belongs to those who can monetize expendability. And if you think otherwise, Kline's dark poetry suggests, the heap still awaits.

**An Art Show That Addresses the Economic Collapse Head-On**

Kevin McGarry  
May 6, 2016



*Josh Kline's "Productivity Gains (Brandon, Accountant)," a 3-D print of a laid-off professional, is among the works in Kline's new show "Unemployment" that address the effects of the mortgage crisis and recession on real people. Credit: Joerg Lohse*

As an artist who matured during the rise of the so-called "attention economy" — which has rewarded practices that combine a miscellany of ingredients into sometimes tenuous works of art — Josh Kline's anticipated new solo show at 47 Canal gallery demonstrates how a little editing and restraint can elevate unnerving sculptures to an indelible *mise-en-scène*. Titled "Unemployment," Kline's exhibition begins in the gallery foyer, where the stuffing of an easy chair upholstered in clear vinyl is in plain view: shredded financial data, credit card offers and mortgage contracts formerly belonging to the artist — and to the unemployed persons represented in his show. In the main exhibition space, amid illuminated shopping carts replete with empty plastic bottles custom-molded in the shape of human hands and discarded computer keyboards silicone-cast in a full spectrum of skin tones, life-size individuals in business attire lay on the polyester sandstone carpet. They are curled in the fetal position and bagged in plastic like yesterday's recycling — because, in a sense, they have been recycled.

The figures are 3-D prints of laid-off professionals Kline found and fabricated in Baltimore. "She was the president of a small company that developed educational curricula for Wall Street," he explains, stepping past a woman in a skirt suit. "He was an accountant." There is something altogether mortuary about the scene, which the artist describes as a period piece set in the near future, possibly the 2030s. These types of jobs aren't extinct yet, but processes of automation have already begun.

A third room contains sporelike glass bubbles blown around moving boxes full of personal effects: running shoes, stilettos, mugs full of highlighters and family photos, all the office errata a soon-to-be disgruntled

discharge would pile up and take with them on the day they receive their pink slip. “I call these ‘unemployment viruses,’ because when you’re unemployed, it feels like you’re sick with something, the way that people avoid you,” Kline says. “These are different stereotypes of different sorts of people.”

Kline made a splash last year with his installation included in the New Museum’s Triennial “Surround Audience,” the memorable protagonists of which were soldier mannequins in gray-blue fatigues whose faces were occluded by Teletubby masks like infantilized Storm Troopers. Both bodies of work refer to key issues he feels will come to define 21st-century politics. “The project at the New Museum was about democracy and political speech in the corporate commons under mass surveillance by government security,” he says. “This new one is about the middle class as it loses its jobs to software over the next quarter century — the lawyers, the journalists, the accountants, all the office workers, and what to do with this huge swath of the population.”

A cheery proposition waits around the corner, where the suburban carpet yields to a subflooring made of Amazon Prime boxes, complete with their disconcerting smiles. A patchwork blanket made of middle-class brands and fabrics — the Gap, quilted down, etc. — is spread before a projection of a new video by Kline. Done up with the saccharine rhetoric of a campaign spot, it’s a jazzy propaganda for universal basic income hinging on the trope of creating more time for living. “For me, the video is completely sincere — it’s what I believe in,” Kline says. “But I wanted to couch it in the language of political advertising. It’s like an ad from the future.”