

Blue Collars

Blue Collars (2014–20) is a series of stand-alone sculptural portraits and video interviews of working people in the United States. Kline began the series in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession as a way of exploring what blue-collar labor—the lower-paid, lower-prospect jobs available to those without college degrees—looks like in the twenty-first century. He hired deliverers, restaurant waitstaff, and hotel room cleaners to have 3D scans made of their heads, arms, and legs, from which full-color 3D-printed sculptures were created. In the video interviews, the same workers are asked about their jobs, aspirations, political views, and feelings about the conditions of their lives in general. Together, the interviews and sculptures present an unsettling picture of how precarity dominates the lives of so many workers in service industries.

Kline sees photographic 3D scanning as a way of digitizing the human body, directly connecting the process of producing these works with both the ongoing automation of labor and the monitoring of productivity and biometrics that increasing numbers of people are subject to in their workplaces. The sculptures suggest that not only can one's identity be subsumed by one's job, as demonstrated by the body parts overlaid with corporate logos and branding, but that work turns human bodies and human lives into products.

Personal Responsibility

The core of Kline's project *Climate Change is Personal Responsibility* (2023–), a sculptural installation set in the future, in the aftermath of climate disaster. Borrowing their forms from the temporary shelters used by refugees and migrants in the United States and around the world, the tentlike structures here serve as both home and workplace for different types of “essential workers”—the people who will still have to physically go into work, often at great personal risk, when those in higher-paying jobs can work from home in comfort and safety.

The installation also features two sets of related videos. One, *Capture and Sequestration* (2023), centers four iconic commodities made from materials that powered America's rise as the world's preeminent military, economic, and cultural power: sugar, tobacco, cotton, and oil. Through these materials, it is possible to trace the lineage of human-made global warming and climate change back through America's global empire and the industrial revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the most painful parts of US history—the enslavement of Africans and the theft of Indigenous land. The other videos are fictional interviews with people who are living through catastrophic climate change in a future America. Although set decades from now, these videos are informed by extensive research into the experiences of survivors of climate-related disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, and Harvey and the recent wildfires in California. In visualizing and making relatable the forecasts of climate scientists, Kline raises questions about whether the American people are willing and able to work together to prepare for, and possibly mitigate, what is to come.

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Adaptation

The short film *Adaptation* (2019–22) imagines a future Manhattan transformed by ruinous climate change and follows a team of relief workers at the end of their shift. Described by the artist as a “science fiction of ordinary life,” the film focuses on what tomorrow could be like for the working people who will clean up the inevitable mess resulting from the political and economic decisions of previous generations. Like the real workers interviewed in *Blue Collars*, the fictional workers of *Adaptation* survive by doing the kind of essential but poorly compensated, physically taxing jobs that society takes for granted.

Using primarily analogue special effects—scale models, miniatures, matte shots—and 16mm color film instead of high-definition digital video, Kline creates an expressionistic science fiction that suggests a nostalgia for the present from the perspective of a future transformed by global warming. Although it was filmed in 2019, the work was completed during the pandemic and its poetic voiceover and melancholy soundtrack, both added in 2020, quietly evoke the lockdown and quarantine in New York.

Civil War

Civil War (2016–17), a chapter from Kline's ongoing cycle of installations, imagines the American middle class a decade or two in the future, in the violent aftermath of massive layoffs as white-collar workers are replaced en masse by intelligent software. In this gallery, elements from the chapter's first two parts are brought together. One group of monochrome sculptures resembles a field of concrete rubble—furniture and objects that have been broken apart like the middle-class dreams they represent. The other group, titled *Class Division*, conjoins luxury and generic appliances—a metaphor for an increasingly inequitable America.

Informed by the history of the 1920s and 1930s, when mass unemployment in the wake of the 1929 Wall Street Crash destabilized many democratic nations, as well as by that of the 1990s and 2000s, when a wave of factory automation and offshoring hit the United States, *Civil War* draws connections between those eras and the present. Kline conceived of *Civil War* during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, anticipating the Republican Party's descent into openly authoritarian politics and the violent attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Contagious Unemployment

Unemployment (2016), another chapter of Kline's ongoing cycle, is a stark series of installations set in the 2030s or 2040s—a vision of a near-future in which automation has replaced the majority of administrative office jobs. The first installation, *Contagious Unemployment* (2016), comprises six transparent sculptures in the shape of common viruses; each contains a cardboard box filled with the kind of personal items that white-collar workers keep at their desks and take with them when they are laid off. Together, the family photos, mugs, and other objects within each sculpture serve as a fictional portrait of a middle-class professional who has recently lost their job.

For the artist, the metaphor of unemployment as contagion resonates with the experience of ostracism and shame so many workers feel after losing their jobs. Made four years before the Covid-19 pandemic, the *Contagious Unemployment* works also speak to how in the United States one's health and access to health care are often dependent on employment status, and how illness or disability can be an obstacle to obtaining or retaining work.

Unemployment

While *Contagious Unemployment* portrays mass layoffs as a spreading disease, the works in this gallery, also from the *Unemployment* chapter of Kline's installation cycle, focus on the human consequences. What happens to the people who provide the goods and services that are replaced by automation? If people are products—human capital—does society throw them away like used-up office supplies when they are no longer needed?

For these works, Kline put out a casting call for accountants, lawyers, office administrators, and other desk workers—professionals whose jobs are predicted to be largely eliminated by artificial intelligence (AI) over the next two decades. He sought individuals who were out of work at the time, bringing a sense of urgency and realism to this potential future. The participants were hired to pose for photographic 3D scans and then be rendered as sculpture through a combination of full-color 3D printing and CNC routing—a computer-controlled cutting process. While the unemployed workers were being scanned, the artist engaged them in extensive conversations about the nature of labor and compensation, which informed the video *Universal Early Retirement (spots #1 and #2)* (2016), on view nearby. For these works, Kline intentionally chose advanced fabrication techniques that are analogous to the technologies currently impacting the workplace. Today, this future is no longer speculative. The early stages of a new kind of automation—seemingly poised to threaten a number of labor sectors—are now visible, as recent breakthroughs in AI have brought natural-language chatbots like ChatGPT and text-to-image generators like DALL-E to the public at large.

Another America Is Possible

The three-channel 16mm film *Another America Is Possible* (2017) is the conclusion of Kline's *Civil War* chapter. In contrast with the darker scenarios explored in other parts of that project, this film visualizes a radical utopia. Set in 2043, the year when the United States is predicted to become a majority-minority country, the work depicts a vision of an America at peace that has chosen healing over harm and unity over division. In the film, a diverse group of people is celebrating a summer holiday, but it is not the Fourth of July. Here, the Confederate flag, which served as the "battle flag" of the pro-slavery secessionist states during the American Civil War and continues to be used as a symbol of white supremacy, is buried and burned. With a familiar visual style that draws equally on home movies and advertising, *Another America Is Possible* is an attempt at a different kind of progressive political messaging for the twenty-first century that aims to reach a wide audience. The work proposes that new inclusive traditions can replace America's tainted myths and rally a fractured country toward the dream of a multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic democracy.

Creative Labor

Creative Labor (2009–14), the earliest body of work in the exhibition, looks at how creative workers—visual artists, musicians, and designers—navigate their fields by branding and marketing themselves in pursuit of self-actualization and success. Made at the moment when smartphones and social media became an unavoidable feature of working in these fields, these works are both a time capsule and a critique of creative life in New York—a hub of the global financial system—in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession.

Kline identifies the creative sector as the origin point for the erasure of boundaries between professional life, social life, and home life. For the artist, a world where workers are never off the clock is the inevitable outcome of what he has described as the “posthuman or nonhuman conditions made possible by always-on communication technology.” By incorporating performance-enhancing substances like Adderall and caffeine into some of his works, Kline reflects on the often-false hope that the limits of the human body can be exceeded in pursuit of greater productivity. This installation was inspired by the early twenty-first-century interior design of high-end drugstores and the lobbies of corporate bank branches. It is meant to evoke a world designed by big-city creative workers and fueled by lifestyle aspiration and credit-card debt.