

Carpenter Center

TONY COKES

If UR Reading This It's 2 Late:
Vol. 2

January 30–April 12, 2020
Levels 1 and 3

If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol. 2 brings together a broad range of videos made by Tony Cokes since the 1990s, and presents the U.S. debut of two newly commissioned works. Cokes's films confront a series of social degradations: the effects of mass media, structural racism, war, and late-stage capitalism, alongside a passionate investment in the ways that music shapes and is shaped by our social conditions. His works combine color theory and music with appropriated texts from a polyphony of voices ranging from Louis Althusser, Malcolm X, and David Bowie, to Public Enemy and President Donald Trump.

Recent works focus on techno music and the appropriation of black music and culture; pop songs used to torture detainees during the so-called war on terror; the Los Angeles architect Paul Williams; and "Queen of Soul" Aretha Franklin. Two new works

making their U.S. debut deal with pop icons: one addresses the political decline of Morrissey, and the other explores Michael Jackson's contested legacy. Cokes's continuous interrogation of the means by which narrative is created through media enacts the all-consuming, almost delirious attempt at sense-making that defines our fraught cultural moment.

for the Visual Arts

LEVEL 1

A. *The Will & The Way . . . Fragment 1*, 2019

HD video, color, stereo

13:39 min.

*On view 5–10 pm outside in the sunken courtyard.

B. *The Will & The Way . . . Fragment 2*, 2019

HD video, color, stereo

15:38 min.

*On view 5–10 pm at the top of the ramp facing Quincy Street.

In *The Will & The Way . . . Fragment 1* and 2, Cokes assembles anecdotes from the renowned Los Angeles architect Paul Williams's biography, also titled *The Will and the Way*, by Karen E. Hudson. Williams's reflections, which convey the discrimination he navigated for the entirety of his career as a black architect, are set against remixes of Radiohead's album *TKOL rmx 1234567*. By omitting the author's name for the majority of the video, Cokes challenges the viewer's comprehension of who is speaking and blurs the relationship between artist and subject. This elision also reinforces the narrative of racial discrimination: despite Williams's acceptance into the American Institute of Architects and completion of 2,500 homes in California, his achievements are still overlooked within American history, no doubt because of the

same biases he navigated during his career. In this way Cokes speaks to the persistent racism that continues to undermines black artists.

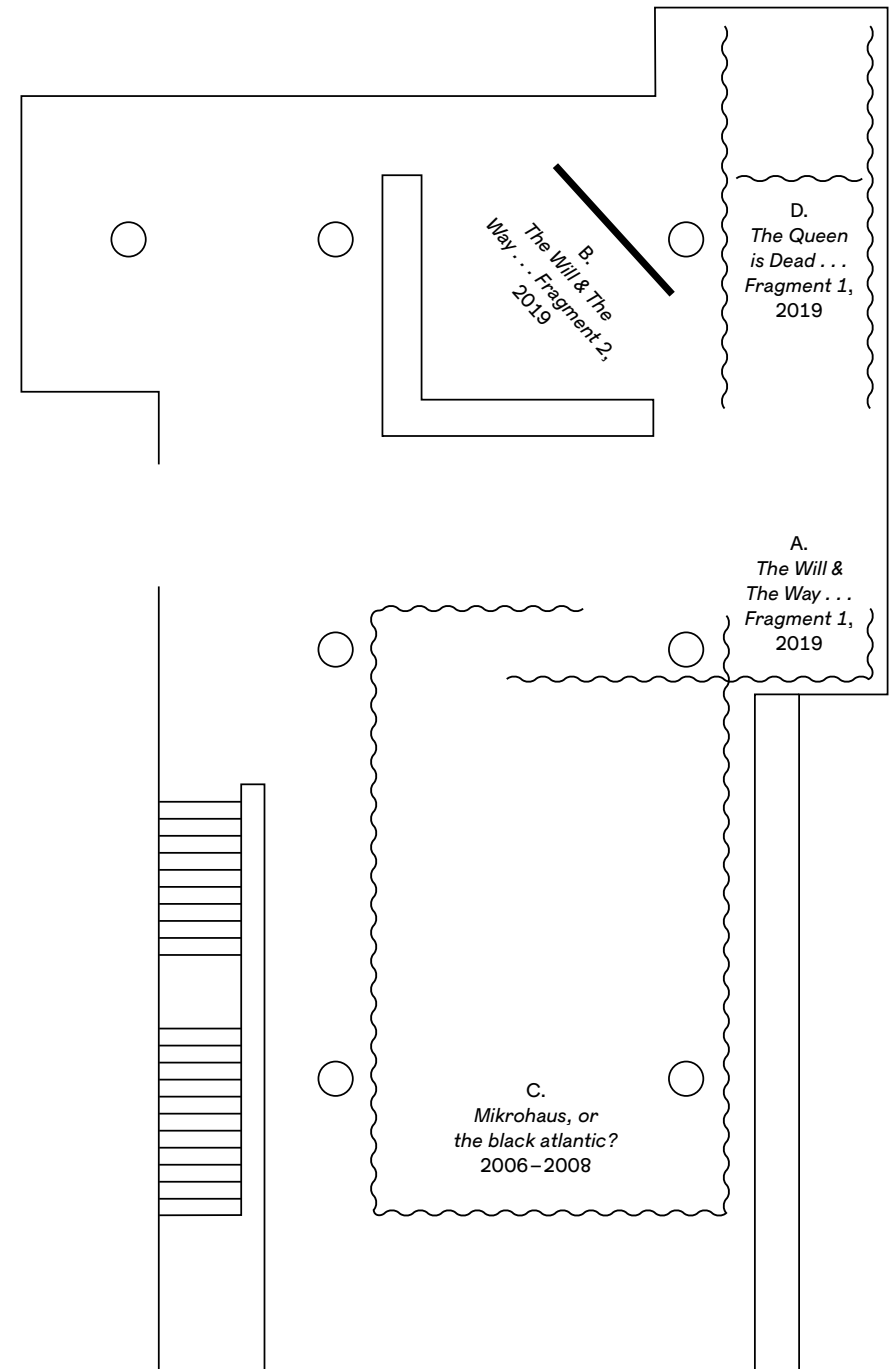
C. *Mikrohaus, or the black atlantic?* 2006–2008

Video, black and white, sound
31:07 min.

In *Mikrohaus, or the black atlantic?*, Cokes explores the connections between minimal electronic music and race using text from cultural critic Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy argues that blackness is a transnational diaspora that circulates political and cultural communication through music. Cokes focuses on the "black Atlantic" within this work as "unsettl[ing] any notion of fixed historical origin, or essentialist notion of blackness, and think[ing] instead about how black cultural practices inhabit, shadow, and shift modern cultural forms in unexpected ways and contexts."• The artist animates the work's text and overlays it with studio-produced minimal techno music, a genre with roots in African-American musical traditions such as soul and funk. These samples sonically

- Cokes, Tony. "Filmmaker's Journal: Resonanz.01 (2008–2013) Notes / Fragments on a Case of Sonic Hauntology." *Black Camera* 5, no. 1 (2013): 220–25.

Level 1



A. *The Will & The Way . . . Fragment 1*, 2019
(5 pm – 10 pm) Outside

translate the unsettled affects Gilroy explores in his book.

- D. *The Queen is Dead . . . Fragment 1*, 2019
Video, color, stereo
15:40 min.

Cokes continues his exploration of the music of black America in the two-part work *The Queen is Dead*. In *Fragment 1*, on view here, Cokes reflects on the cultural and political impact of the singer Aretha Franklin following her death in August 2018. Featuring Franklin's most memorable ballads, Cokes choreographs a series of critical texts that discuss her music's ability reflect the political and social landscape of American culture while spurring people to action. Mournful, searching, and polemical, the work poses the question: "What does it mean to bury the Queen of Soul?"

LEVEL 3

- E. *The Morrissey Problem*, 2019
HD video, color, sound
9:25 min.

In *The Morrissey Problem* and *Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)*, two newly commissioned works, Cokes delves into the murky, complicated status of two of pop music's most revered heroes. Morrissey, former frontman of The

Smiths, has a passionate fan base. But *The Morrissey Problem* charts the pop singer's recent bigotry and hostility towards multicultural Britain. Cokes samples passages from journalist Joshua Surtees's writings on Morrissey's far-right leanings, his dismissal of rape survivor accounts, and his anti-immigrant outbursts, which all violently clash with the singer's former advocacy for the marginalized. Cokes uses Morrissey's political evolution as a startling model for the various violences—hate speech, physical attacks, systematic oppression—that can grow from the far-right's paranoia and anxieties.

- F. *Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)*, 2020
HD video, color, stereo
40:47 min.

Untitled (m.j.: the symptom) explores the contested legacy of Michael Jackson, and collages texts by Joshua Clover, Jeremy Gilbert, and Charles Holland from a book on the pop star edited by Mark Fisher. In a dizzying, damning, and woozy narrative, Cokes draws out the ways in which Jackson and his music are symptomatic of American cultural sickness, and reflect rapid shifts in contemporary society, from accelerated consumer capitalism to transformations in labor, spectacle, racial politics, and counter-culture. The texts in this work are set against acid colors and a soundtrack that samples and remixes alluring

fragments of Jackson's music. The result is an uncanny sonic landscape evoking past, present, and future. About the work, Cokes has written: "*Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)* began with helicopters hovering over the West Side of Los Angeles on a beautiful afternoon just over a decade ago. That day some believed marked the end of a peculiar pop era. That first image will not survive into the final work. Then it morphed as many works do: into an audio playlist—this one hovering largely around the post-dub-step styles of Joy Orbison. The sound works were chosen in part because in my imaginary they address the text's subject obliquely: from a haunting perspective that amplifies defects and differences. It's electronic music from just before and after the subject's death, but with genre seemingly pitched precisely toward R & B derivatives."

- G. *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)*,
2009–2011
HD video, color, stereo
16:27 min.

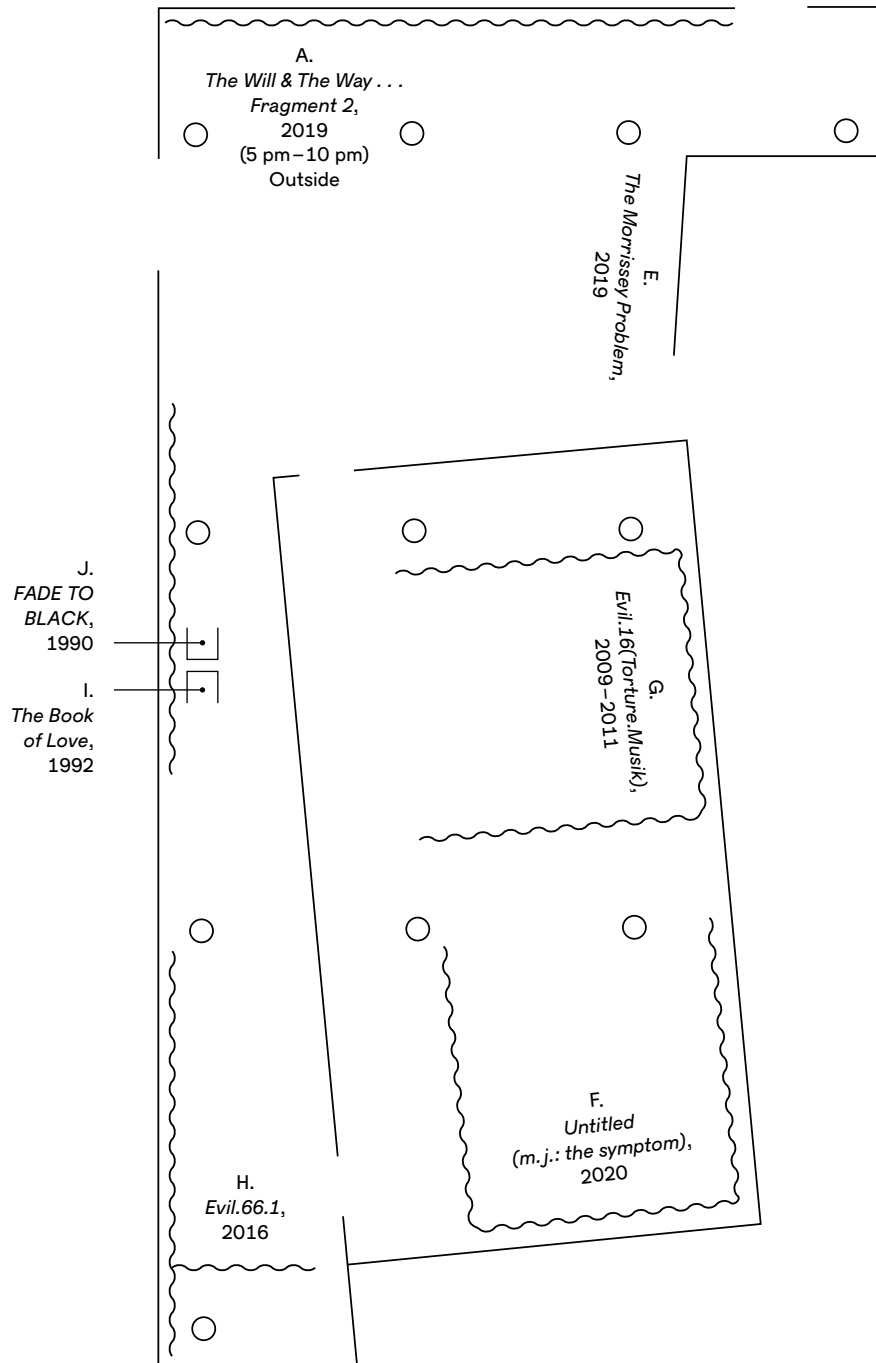
The two remaining videos are chosen from Cokes's *Evil* series. In 2003, the artist began an interrogation of the contradictory notions of "evil" that pollinated popular discourse following the events of 9/11. In *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)*, Cokes reproduces writer Moustafa Bayoumi's article "Disco Inferno" (*The Nation*, 2005) on an alternating blue and red background.

Bayoumi's report details the U.S. military's use of pop music as a form of "torture lite" that leaves extensive psychological trauma but does not leave physical marks. Cokes quotes former detainees recalling their experiences. One describes how US soldiers gathered prisoners into a shipping crate filled with flashing lights and ordered them to dance. The video's narrative further asserts the U.S. military's cultural imperialism with a playlist of songs used by the military during these interrogations.

- H. *Evil.66.1*, 2016
Digital video, color, stereo
7:44 min.

Videos in the *Evil* series are named similarly to an MP3 file, presenting the works as "tracks" within a collection of commentary. This naming convention reinforces the relationship between the works as movements in a larger meditation on the hyper-nationalist response to 9/11. In *Evil.66.1*, Cokes presents a range of misogynistic statements made by President Donald Trump before his inauguration in January 2017. Here, the artist removes obvious signifiers of the president, gesturing at the culture-wide prevalence of such attitudes.

Level 3



I. *The Book of Love*, 1992
Video, color, sound
59:37 min.

J. *FADE TO BLACK*, 1990
Video, color, sound
32:51 min.

Cokes's earliest films in the exhibition, *The Book of Love* and *FADE TO BLACK*, exemplify questions and concerns that would occupy his practice for decades. Among his concerns is the way media, such as sound, film, and text, can shape aspects of personal and cultural identity. In *The Book of Love*, Cokes interviews his mother about her life to explore the potential of a documentary that "frame[s] its own devices." Cokes was "interested in how a woman, specifically a black woman, would speak in a television context."• Cokes's mother recounts her life experiences with an honesty and humor that provokes Cokes to reconsider his own experience within a broader narrative framework.

In *FADE TO BLACK*, Cokes compiles a chronology of stereotyped representations of African Americans in 20th century cinema. Cokes overlays these images with statements interrogating the perception of black subjects from figures like Malcolm X and Louis Althusser. He further animates the work's themes with a voice-over conversation between two black men discussing repressed racism. Cokes misaligns text and image to refuse the power of the original representation.

All works courtesy of Tony Cokes; Greene Naftali, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

• "The Book of Love, Tony Cokes," Electronic Arts Intermix, <https://www.eai.org>.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Tony Cokes was born in 1956 in Richmond, Virginia. He received a BA from Goddard College in Vermont, participated in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, and gained an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. He has received grants and fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Getty Research Institute. Cokes's video and multimedia installation works have been included in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art; Whitney Museum of American Art; Guggenheim Museum SoHo; New Museum of Contemporary Art; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; documenta X, Kassel, Germany; and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Recent solo exhibitions and screenings have taken place at REDCAT, Los Angeles; the Gene Siskel Film Center at the University of Chicago; and Greene Naftali, New York. Cokes lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and is Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University.

If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol. 1–3 is co-organized by Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University; Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London; and ARGOS centre for audiovisual arts, Brussels.

for the Visual Arts