

Carpenter Center

IN
CONVERSATION

TONY
COKES AND

CHRISTOPH
COX

for the Visual Arts

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Tony Cokes and Christoph Cox
April 9, 2020

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,
Harvard University

This conversation took place over Zoom at 7:30pm EST on Thursday, April 9, 2020. This publication is the first in a series of edited transcripts that record the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts's public programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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DAN BYERS : Thank you all for tuning in. These are strange, difficult times, and I hope you are all doing okay and taking care of yourselves. I want to extend a happy Passover to those who celebrate, and to those who may be delaying their seders to join us tonight.

Tony Cokes's exhibition *If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol. 2* opened at the Carpenter Center on January 31. We were forced to close the exhibition early, on Thursday, March 12, just as I was getting used to the bass-heavy club music from Tony's video *Mikrohaus, or the black atlantic?*, which beautifully permeated every crevice of our building.

Volume one of this exhibition debuted in London at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art in the fall, and volume three will be on view at ARGOS centre for audio-visual arts in Brussels in September. I want to thank our friends and collaborators at those two institutions: Sarah McCrory and Natasha Hoare at Goldsmiths, and Niels Van Tomme at ARGOS.

I also want to thank my colleagues Liv Porte and Laura Preston for all of their work organizing this event. Tony



Stills from "In Conversation: Tony Cokes and Christoph Cox," the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 9 April 2020, video, 1:18:39, <https://carpenter.center/programtony-cokes-if-ur-reading-this-it-s-2-late-vol-2>.

and Christoph will speak for an hour, and then at 8:30pm we'll take questions via Zoom's chat function. Please keep yourselves muted for the event.

This is my third Q&A with Tony, and I'm very happy that he will finally get some really good, smart questions, because we're lucky enough to have Christoph Cox running the show tonight. Thank you all for joining us!

CHRISTOPH COX : Some people in the audience know your work well, others don't. So I thought I'd begin by asking you about the general form your work has taken over the past fifteen to twenty years. For the most part, your videos and installations have taken the form of text animations on a monochrome ground with a soundtrack. This represents a radical reduction of the image in favor of text and sound. Can you talk about your motivations for this reduction?

TONY COKES : It was my interest in music—specifically, popular music and its effects in history—that led me away from the image. In 1999, I made a transitional work called *Ad Vice*, which was part of a series called *Pop Manifestos*, and which was probably my first move towards reducing, or deferring, the image. In *Ad Vice*, I used these very short loops from what I thought were generic music videos almost as placeholders—a kind of generic approach to the image. And then I decided it might be interesting to just take the image out.

I was thinking, too, about this idea that maybe videos, rock videos in particular, were like ads or promotional material for musical acts. Were there other ways to critique that subject matter, and maybe allow more space for the imagined viewers? I'd written these short essays about popular music in the late '90s, and I was really interested in things like post-rock and electronica and, of course, techno and house. A lot of those genres didn't really have a heavy image repertoire accompanying them, and they were in some ways just as interesting—if not more interesting—for that. These often electronic, studio, or “bedroom” music forms also deployed pseudonyms and anonymity. They weren't visualized in quite the same way or with the same vocabulary as blatantly marketed pop. And since I was interested in forms like the essay film, it hit me that it might be useful to excise the image and work with the text as a kind of imaginative space rather than trying to fully visualize and narrativize these musical texts.

C C : *Ad Vice*, if I'm not mistaken, was part of a collection of videos you made for a band that you were part of. This makes me wonder whether all your work could be considered, in some sense, a form of music video. Yet, conventionally, the video adds an image to a musical track.

T C : Right. I was intrigued by the idea that a “debased”

form like the music video might be perverted toward a critical cultural function.

C C : In your work, it seems to be the reverse: that the image has been reduced back to music and text.

T C : Yeah. You know, certainly for me, I'm more interested in foregrounding sound and its production activities than I am in foregrounding the visual image. In my imaginary, montage and narrative are already present in the music, so if I empty out the picture plane, you might have a chance to experience those things. Images are already being conjured; you don't really need the doubling down of the image in relation to these things. I am also interested in using the economies of desire and production that are, again, already in the music track. And, of course, I also want to open up a little bit of distance and distraction between the track and the subject of the text to see how they might inform one another in useful and interesting ways.

I think part of my adoption of this methodology comes from a realization I had with the next series of works I got involved in [the *Evil* series]. I thought, do I want to be trafficking in these highly recognizable images that people have already seen? Do I want to be using spectacular images of trauma all the time, which already have a circulation? Or is there a way to talk about these images in their absence? I wondered whether or not it was possible

to approach these images in a different modality, with a different vocabulary. It occurred to me that using the affect modulation of music was a way for that to happen.

C C : I definitely want to return to the issue of music and politics. But for a moment, I'd like to continue to think about your use of text. Many conceptual art practices in the '60s considered text to be the degree zero of the image, an effort to reduce image to text. I know you often describe yourself as a "post-conceptualist." Could you talk about your relationship to conceptual art?

T C : Yeah, I can try. It's an interesting history, for me anyway. I'm interested in a reductive approach. I'm also interested in forms like pop and minimalism, but I'm thinking about ways to activate them in a different set of registers. I like the idea that something can have a double, or even triple, discourse—that it's not just about reading the text. It's also about reading the text in the context of other material and maybe having to attend to two or three things at once. That really appeals to me as a complication of the idea of reduction. In my works, a text might be reduced in certain ways, but it also becomes more complex because of the additional elements.

I think one of the reasons why I took up "post-conceptualist" as a self-description was because when you tell people you do video or installation work, they often make assumptions about the kind of work you're doing.

The term "post-conceptual" is a useful shorthand. It says, "Yeah, I'm interested in concepts, relationships, and histories, but not so much narrative, classical argument, or documentary practice." I do have a certain relationship with narrative and argument—the things you might find in a documentary—which are sometimes present in my work in oblique ways.

The term "post-conceptualism" has always intrigued me because it implies dealing with images, but not in a strictly formal way. "Post-conceptual" is almost a way of pointing out the conditions of reading, and the possibility of this practice. So, yeah, it was kind of a useful shorthand. And you know, it kept me from being confused when I would talk about narrative. There are narratives in my videos but not in the traditional character-driven sense. So many people talk about documentary practice as though it should be character-driven, and have all of these narrative attributes. Sometimes I ask myself exactly why that is. Why do you want to set up particular types of identifications and relationships to the image? I'm not sure if that kind of narrative-making is useful in what I want to think about and what I want to provoke in others.

C C : This reminds me of the fact that, for many years, your videos have concluded with the credit "Concept + Form: Tony Cokes."

T C : Yeah, and maybe that's part of the "post." I think

conceptual art has formal attributes and approaches, but they tend to be reduced in a certain way and filtered. So, yeah, it's almost as though I'm happy to take up forms that come out of the history of modernism, including structuralist film. But I want these techniques to resonate against something else. And often that something else is popular music and its forms. There are so many histories of modernism that refuse narrative and refuse direct reference to everyday things. I'm interested in both these formal frameworks and the power dynamics located within.

C C : You've said that with the *Evil* series that began after 9/11, you wanted to reduce the image in order to think about those events (and about terrorism, jingoism, etc.) in a different way—to think about these things intellectually and conceptually without the distraction of those traumatic images. This impulse was also in your earliest works, *Black Celebration* and *Fade to Black*, for example, where the reduction of the image was an important aspect of your thinking about race and its hypervisibility. The other day, I was reading an essay by the artist Chloë Bass about the value of abstraction in conceiving Black lives and Blackness.¹ Bass remarks that “the understanding of subjectivity is inherently abstract,” not something that can be adequately captured in an image. How does the reduction or abstraction of the image relate to your thinking about how to deal with race on-screen?

T C : I think at various times it's been important for me to move away from the image, and the repertoires, associations, and industries attached to the image. After making works like *Black Celebration* and *Fade to Black*, I began to question their strategies. I wanted to think about the images in those works differently, and maybe for me the best way to think about them was at a certain distance.

I'm fascinated by this idea that race is a product of the visible, but unfortunately “visibility” leads to all sorts of mistakes. The visual is highly unreliable. Stereotypes don't really exist. They're always misrecognitions to begin with. And so instead of looking for particular images that are not part of, say, the archive, it seems more interesting to say those images are fungible. If you want to question the validity of stereotypical images, one might do it at a certain remove.

That's not to say abstraction is an escape hatch. It's actually a way to focus when the image might be distracting or unreliable. It's related to the argument in Marlon Riggs's 1991 documentary *Color Adjustment* in which Riggs uses James Baldwin's work to ask a question about what a positive image is. Why do we need positive images, or seem to need them? Why do we wish to have them, possess them, reproduce them, circulate them? You wind up with “positive images,” and you realize that the structures that you may have objected to are still legible at a level that is not at the level of representation.

A CELEBRATION IN
SILENCE,
A CELEBRATION OF
NOISE:

TO CELEBRATE THE FACT
THAT WE'VE SEEN THE
LACK OF ANOTHER BLACK
DAY.



Tony Cokes, *Black Celebration*, 1988 (stills). 17:11 min. Video, black and white, sound. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.



CHAINED? FRAMED?
YOU KNOW WHAT
I MEAN?

Tony Cokes, *Fade to Black*, 1990 (stills). 32:51 min. Video, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

C C : Let me stick with formal questions for one more moment. Every viewer of your work is confronted by the fact that text, image, and sound flow at different speeds. Moreover, while text and image tend to shift in discrete chunks, the soundtrack sutures these bits together through a more continuous flow. (I think this is true even in a piece such as *Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)*, which features musical tracks with stuttered or fragmented vocals and beats.) This involves different levels and speeds of attention. Even if one knows the texts you're appropriating, your work provokes an unusual and difficult mode of reading. How do you want readers to approach the text elements in your work? What modes and temporalities of reading are you seeking to engage?

T C : I think I am trying to produce different protocols for reading. Maybe it's a question of placing the text in a different context and under different pressures. How legible is it? How available is it? How much slippage is there? How would you approach it, or claim to understand it? I suppose I do want to produce more gaps and fragmentation. I wish to delay any full mastery of a text that may be difficult to begin with. Maybe it's also about being able to revisit the text and find the difference in each rereading—a complication, if you will. Obviously, if you want to read the texts, you can read them in a book. I don't prohibit that. What I'm interested in is a deferral of absolute understanding.

I'm also interested in the movement from the text to the animation and back again, because recently I've been doing projects in print. But animating a text brings up a question of translation: I'm working with text as a kind of material as opposed to something that could be understood, consumed, analyzed, and moved on from. So maybe it's that desire to think about the text and reassemble it in, perhaps, different ways.

C C : It seems to me that you approach these texts in a musical way. We're no longer in the era when people tended to listen to musical pieces from beginning to end. Instead, we think of music as "tracks" that are often entered in the middle and that can be sampled and remixed to form other tracks. This leads me to another line of thought. All the texts and musical materials in your work are appropriated or borrowed. (That's true even in works that seem deeply personal, as though they're presented in your own voice—*The Morrissey Problem*, for example.) One could think about this by placing your work in the lineage of appropriation in the visual arts (for example, the Pictures Generation). But it's always seemed to me more appropriate (as it were) to think about your work within the model of the DJ. The DJ is an artist, but an artist who appropriates, who takes things. And the DJ's art is in the art of the mix, the art of conjoining different things to generate new thoughts, feelings, and possibilities. Does this model of the DJ seem right to you?

T C : I don't know. In certain senses, I would say it's a much better fit than appropriation per se. The idea of the DJ is that you can combine two things, and maybe get a third and fourth resonance out of that combination or juxtaposition. And all of the elements are fungible in some way. They're not fixed, and they can be combined, slowed down, sped up, or manipulated to do a different kind of work and produce new meanings. That's why, more often than not, the soundtrack comes first.

I often think about the work a soundtrack can do in relation to text. This work can be on a musical level or a structural level, or sometimes on the level of lyrics. But I'm always looking for an extra value in the relationship between the text and sound, and that's why I think about the soundtrack first—I don't just add it afterwards, to provide a context or something. More often than not, I'm looking for juxtapositions that project or reference something different than what the text would say alone. You've probably heard me say this a lot: I don't do period soundtracks. If I'm doing a piece about a historical moment, I'm not going to use music from that same cultural moment, because I'm interested in the resonances, the re-habitualizations, and the echoes of that historical moment in the contemporary. But sometimes I will do the reverse. In *Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)*, I didn't use music I was listening to in 2020. I took music that I was listening to ten years ago when I first had the idea for doing the project. That piece was an instance where it was useful to

deal with the subject matter in a more "historical" context than usual for me. It was more interesting to go back into the late 2000s, when Michael Jackson died, and I was listening to Joy Orbison and a lot of those post-dubstep tracks. I just love that vocal loop in Joy Orbison's "J. Doe."

C C : Yeah, it's fantastic!

T C : And where is this loop going? Even if it's not going anywhere, it seems to be so productive each time. It has this power of the imaginary, this power of displacement. I was like, "Oh, this would be great to juxtapose with Mark Fisher talking about music as a political economy and as a symptom of the society from which it comes." As I'm editing or juxtaposing, it's always been helpful to me to have something that's filling my mind and producing associations on an aural level. I then think about these associations in relation to the visual or textual material.

C C : On the affective level too, right? Because in so many of those dubstep tracks, there's a peculiar combination of joyfulness and foreboding. It seems to me that your work really engages this affective tension, both textually and sonically.

T C : Definitely. Maybe it's because I'm not interested in things that are only in one register—only joyous, for



Installation view, *Tony Cokes: If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol 2*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, on view January 31–April 12, 2020. Pictured: Tony Cokes, *Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)* (video), 2020. Photo: Julia Featheringill / Stewart Clements.

passivity
and agency -

a system of
commodification
so complete

and that meant
being dead
while still
alive,

j was at least
capable of
convincingly
simulating
(en)joy(ment)
at this point.

Tony Cokes, *Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)*, 2020 (stills). 40:47 min. HD video, color, stereo. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

instance. It seems more interesting to have a level of complexity, where you're feeling multiple things at the same time. It's like being embodied on one level, but also still being capable of thought and complexity. It's a relation that appeals to me, maybe because I see so many counterexamples where people only want affect to run one way. Where they're not open to complication and ambivalence.

C C : This ambivalence runs through Black music from the very beginning, doesn't it? Blues, jazz, reggae, dubstep—that whole continuum thrives on the nexus of joy and sorrow. But I want to come back to some of the political issues that show up powerfully in the “m.j.” piece and in other recent pieces, such as *B4 & After the Studio, Pt. 1*. This latter piece is largely about the role of art in the shift, during the 1970s, from Fordism to post-Fordism, or from industrial to post-industrial production. This idea returns in the text of the “m.j.” piece, where Mark Fisher reads Michael Jackson's career as moving from the industrial production paradigm of Motown to the very different pop landscape of the '80s. Can you talk a bit about your fascination with this historical shift and about the political economy of post-studio art?

T C : Well, I'm interested in the reaction that my desire to take up these topics is a bit arcane. I haven't heard that reaction so much recently. I'm just curious what cultural

production has to do with phenomena like the discovery of a creative class, and the desire to make every possible activity “creative.” I've been struck by the imperative that everything must be seen as creative, yet the major outcome is not necessarily creative in the way that I look at it. Even architecture and lifestyle are no longer about productivity, and for me, this mimics the movement from the industrial to the post-industrial. You could even make an argument that the so-called artist's lifestyle—working “independently” without a permanent job, requiring large amounts of so-called free time—somehow morphed into these 24/7 post-Fordist economies. It's almost like artists are a signal figure for that transformation.

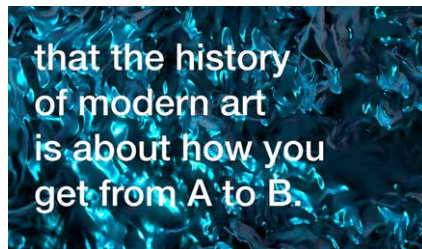
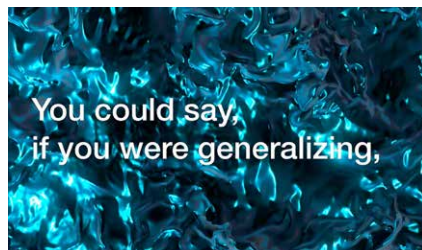
As the activities and relationships of the artist's studio migrate into broader society, you get this weird phenomenon where an industrial workspace becomes a lifestyle ideal for people who haven't needed to use the space in that historically productive way. It's as if attitudes towards production and institutions become something other than their historical origins. This feeds back into strange loops of inequality and precarity. It's like, “Oh yeah, you have these ‘options and freedoms,’ but your existence is also potentially problematized, threatened by all your alleged free-market ‘options and freedoms.’” My interest in this historical moment is not nostalgia; it's an interest in the movement from one way of organizing life to another that's quite different.

C C : One of the texts you draw on in *B4 & After the Studio, Pt. 1* is sociologist Sharon Zukin's book *Loft Living*, which describes SoHo as a formerly industrial space that, in the 1970s, became a magnet for artists and galleries. In the late twentieth century, the factory became the artist's studio. But now the artist's studio is something different. I remember you saying to me once that when someone requests a studio visit, you have to point out that your studio is essentially your laptop. There's no physical workspace.

T C : Or maybe it would be better if we actually looked at the work and had a conversation, because there's kind of nothing to see in the spaces where I work. It's like, *this* is my studio.

C C : Yeah, it's just a technological device, a virtual space.

T C : Or, it's like, here's my couch, or a hotel room. It's not quite a studio in that way. It's interesting that we have these holdovers of things that may or may not be relevant anymore. It's a weird pantomime I feel almost obligated to reproduce. The physical studio isn't really the way I work, but at the same time I know other people do. We're in an odd transitional moment. So I began to wonder: What does a studio represent? Why do people want to go there? I think people are maybe a little disappointed that the theatrical environment of the studio



Tony Cokes, *B4 & After the Studio Pt. 1*, 2019 (stills). 11:02 min. HD video, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

is not where I make my work. But that doesn't mean my work's not a productive activity; it's just a different kind of productivity.

C C : The laptop is the quintessential post-Fordist 24/7 space—the space where you do your work, watch Netflix, shop, communicate with your boss and your friends, and so on. It erases the distinction between day and night, work and leisure. Now that Zoom has taken over our lives, this is totally evident to all of us.

We have a few more minutes left, and I want to ask a big question, one that folks might want to continue in the Q&A. We've been talking a bit about "MJ," Michael Jackson. He's one of a bunch of figures who appear and reappear in your work. The figure that's the most persistent, it seems to me, is Morrissey. This goes all the way back to *Black Celebration*, or is it *Fade to Black*?

T C : Yeah, it's *Black Celebration*, actually.

C C : That video drew heavily on The Smiths lyrics. And, since then, Morrissey and The Smiths have shown up in a number of works, all the way up to *The Morrissey Problem*, a piece you produced last year for the Goldsmiths show [*If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol. 1*]. Can you talk about the sustained and complex relationship you have to Morrissey, and how that relationship has changed over the course of, what, thirty years or so?

It was a delicious,
rebellious
pleasure,

As an adult,
I'm furious
at your betrayal

a refuge
through difficult
teenage years.

and your rejection
of modern,
diverse Britain.

Tony Cokes, *The Morrissey Problem*, 2019 (stills). 9:25 min. HD video, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

T C : Yeah, something like that.

C C : And do all of that in thirty seconds, Tony!

T C : Well, I can tell you a short origin story of *The Morrissey Problem*. I gave a talk at the Tate Modern in London, of all places.² A friend in the audience asked a question: "You've had a lot of references to Morrissey over the years in your work. What do you think about his recent utterances?" I knew I had another exhibition in London coming up, and I thought, "Well, I'd really like to think about that, and I'd like to think about it now." And even better, that same person posted the article I ended up using on social media. It was like that mythical Warhol thing where other people are kind of working for you. They're producing connections and all you have to do is fill in the dots. It's almost as if there is a zone, or relation, that one might imagine is particular to oneself, but then you read an article in which someone else is rehearsing the same thing. And I liked that relation and those sets of questions.

My relationship with indie music is a complex one. I listen to a lot of different music, and always have. I often wonder, does this music position me in a particular way, or is my relationship to it ambivalent or antagonistic? Could this song or genre be for me and about me? In certain ways yes, and in certain ways no. But it's more interesting to think about my ambivalence to the music

instead of saying, "I shouldn't be listening to this," or, "This isn't speaking to me." Music is one of those zones where you can complicate your identifications in strange ways. And those ambivalent attitudes surface for me in Morrissey's music, like when he says, "Burn down the disco and hang the blessed DJ."

C C : Yeah, exactly. When you said, "I shouldn't be listening to this," it made me think of other forms of music you've connected with over the years: hip-hop early on, and later house, techno, dubstep.

T C : Every once in a while, I can imagine going back to a particular past genre, and in fact I have. But sometimes I can't deal with the too-close relation between specific pop music genres to global and post-industrial capital. I'll go into other music, or I'll try to listen to most new hip-hop now, and it's like, I just can't.

C C : Your musical choices often defy expectations. I mean, one doesn't usually think of a politicized Black subject as one who listens to The Smiths or McCarthy or other bands like that.

T C : Yeah, but a politicized subject or a class-aware subject could listen to that music.

C C : Your work certainly gives those songs a political

charge that wasn't evident from the start. I'm thinking, for example, of The Smiths and Morrissey songs that form the soundtrack for *Evil.27: Selma*. And this goes back to something you said earlier about resisting the desire to use "period music." The Selma piece features a text about the civil rights movement, which you combine with these jangly Smiths/Morrissey songs that then take on a whole new set of meanings. It's a really engaging juxtaposition, but not at all an obvious one.

T C : Yeah, I know.

C C : So, it's about 8:30 pm. Of course, I'm happy to talk to Tony forever. But should we see if people have questions for Tony?

D B : Sure. Here is one from Robert Levine: "In the introduction to the catalogue *If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol. 1-3*, the curators describe the experience of your work as 'something akin to being simultaneously blindsided and illuminated.' Can you speak to this characterization of your work?"

T C : I think there is illuminative potential in the unexpected. I hope there is, let's put it that way. You know, a major thread of my thinking is questioning what we claim to know. That's another way of saying "blindsided and illuminated." People sometimes ask—"Are you

nostalgic?"—because I sometimes work with antique representations, technologies, or historical things. And it's like, "No." I think these problems are still with us. They're not back there somewhere, in some imaginary connection with something that's been torn apart now. I think things have always been kind of torn apart. I think that nostalgic reading of my work comes from a desire to give the past a simpler, less complex gloss than the dire complexities that we face today, but I'm not convinced that the past was better, or simpler. Maybe the magnitude and alleged obviousness of the problems today have a different valence and register.

LAURA PRESTON [MODERATOR] : Here's a question from Cindy Hwang: "Tony, what informs your color choices?"

T C : I like generics. Again, things we claim to understand and have under our control, as far as reading is concerned. I don't like to make things up, and most people seriously run with red, white, and blue, or primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. It becomes complicated, because you think red, white, and blue is all about America, but actually Britain is in there, or France is in there.

I also like to make rules and then cast them aside. Right now, I'm into these acidic color relationships, which I think are a movement away from the old red, white, and blue. Sometimes I take colors from very specific objects or commonplace things. I did a piece called *shrinking*.

"Women have one
of the great acts
of all time.

but inside
they are
real killers.

The smart ones
act very feminine
and needy,

The person who
came up with
the expression
'the weaker sex'

Tony Cokes, *Evil.66.1*, 2016 (stills). 7:44 min. HD video, color, stereo. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

Brand names
are not unlike
artists' identities,

Tony Cokes, *shrinking.criticism*, 2009 (still). 16:30 min. HD video, color, stereo. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

criticism that's about the disappearance of criticism from the arts. The text I used for that work came from a book, Julian Stallabrass's *High art lite: British art in the 1990s*, whose jacket was really compelling. It had an acidic pink ground and white text, and I said, "OK, I can work with this." So, it depends. Sometimes I try to think "historically" or "symbolically" in a broader sense. I think one of the reasons that red, white, and blue is so prominent in the *Evil* series is because 9/11 triggered the appearance of the American flag more often and in more contexts than I had ever seen before. And I was trying to think about what that was really about. But, yeah, sometimes I want to use colors that do have associations. Like black and white in conceptualism or minimalism.

M : Here's another question from the audience, about permissions and appropriation: "Do you get permission to use the texts and music? And, when possible, do you ever reach out to creators to use their work?"

T C : Sometimes I do if I think there's a good possibility of actually talking with someone directly. If I'm referred to lawyers or agents, I'm more likely to just go ahead and do it. I have worked with some artists on a regular or semi-regular basis, which I enjoy. But sometimes, I don't know, I guess I'm a little bit old-school. Stuff appears in front of me and informs my life and activity. In some ways, attention to it and what I can do with it might stand up in

a fair use case. That's the kind of attitude I take towards it. I know a lot of people say it's like stealing or robbing from people. In my opinion, it's complicated, because it seems to me that arrangements in the music industry as they are also rob artists all the time. So I don't know whether there's a clear path out. It's kind of a thicket, a tricky relationship. But that's just me.

D B : Here is a question from Hadi Fallahpisheh: "I would love to know about your installation decisions. Do you make sketches? Do you keep an archive of unrealized installations? Or does the installation come into play after you've seen the exhibition space?"

T C : That's a hard question to answer. I don't usually make sketches. I do spend a good amount of time in spaces, and I do talk to the people who know the spaces best. That's crucial for me. Maybe it's an effect of my practice. When I have the opportunity to work and share information with people, I try to use it to its greatest advantage.

I can't imagine going into a space that I don't know very well with an idea that may not work in that space. I'd much rather have a conversation about things that have worked in the past, or about known difficulties with the space, so that I have a working context. And for me, learning about the space is an opportunity to rethink the scale and the relationships between the works. That's

what I like about installation, but I also have an ambivalent attitude towards it. Maybe because of my long history. I've seen many ways of doing things, and I try to be somewhat ambitious and adventurous.

Whenever I've had specific ideas about how I want the work to look, the actual spaces tend to contradict that. I can't go in with an airtight plan because, more often than not, the real specific conditions mess it up, and you have to rethink things. So I try to go in with as much openness as I can. Even with shows that have related works, I'm always open to moving things and shifting the relationships because my way of looking at the work is part of my work. Exhibitions are a chance to rethink things.

M : This question is about a work you made for Hannah Hoffman Gallery last year, which was staged in the house of the architect Paul Revere Williams. Could you talk about this show, and what it was like to work on a site-specific project with a historical background involved?

T C : It was a definite learning process. When I began the project, I knew almost nothing about Williams other than recognizing a few of his buildings. I think that informed my decisions in regard to the text I used. I don't think I'd ever actually worked on something quite that site-specific and site-directed, so in that sense it was a challenge and an adventure. I was really intrigued by the space and its specific history, but it also made me think about some

generic things and some potential limitations of focusing too much on Williams. That's one of the reasons I made the choice to tell not only Williams's story. When I was doing the site visit, Aretha Franklin died, and I had a very strong and specific reaction. In the commentary around her death, the political implications of her career and its trajectory came to the fore. So I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to take up this architectural monument and work with it in terms of visibility, racial representation, and issues of gender via simple, taut juxtapositions. It's quite possible I would not have taken that direction if my experience of the space, Franklin's passing, and my production process had not aligned in that particular way. It might have been too easy to make something that was about the house, the man who built it, and about the site—when there might have been other issues to attend to.

M : Here's a question from Chrissie Iles: "How do you think the present [COVID-19] crisis is going to impact the issues around cultural production and the power structures that your work addresses?"

T C : On one level, it's incredibly hard to say. On another level, I hope the present crisis has some impact, because there are a lot of problems that have been misperceived for a long time that have now become obvious. Healthcare, income inequalities, and a lot of other issues, to be quite frank. In my lifetime, I've never seen something



Tony Cokes, *The Will & The Way...Fragment 1*, 2019 (stills). 13:39 min. HD video, color, stereo. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.



Installation view, *Della's House*, Hannah Hoffman, on view February 12–March 22, 2019. Pictured: Tony Cokes, *The Will & The Way...Fragment 1*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.



Installation view, *Tony Cokes: If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol 2*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, on view January 31–April 12, 2020. Pictured: Tony Cokes, *The Will & The Way...Fragment 1* (video), 2019. Photo: Julia Featheringill / Stewart Clements.



Installation view, *Tony Cokes: If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol 2*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, on view January 31–April 12, 2020. Pictured: Tony Cokes, *The Will & The Way...Fragment 2* (video), 2019. Photo: Julia Featheringill / Stewart Clements.

so telling about lots of institutions that no one understands. One hopes it will have a tremendous impact, but exactly how that will be expressed is difficult to tell. I actually have a project on the books that I've made a soundtrack for. The title of the soundtrack is *Of Lies and Liars*.³ It's basically a set of pop songs circulating around scenes of deceit. I feel like that's what we've been living through in the past three years, if not much longer. But, yeah, I'm not a good predictor of futures.

M : Here's another question from the audience that I'll read in its entirety: "You referenced structural film earlier in the talk. Do you have thoughts on structural film after the digital? Additionally, do you have any specific thoughts on 'lyric videos' and the culture around them on YouTube? Do lyric videos have a relation to your work formally?"

T C : That's interesting. Of course, I see connections. In fact, I'm slowly and furtively working on a series of works that are kind of lyric videos, because I think it's an interesting form. There's always the question of how accurate the transcription of the lyrics is, and how much of the transcriber's desire gets into it, but that's one issue. At some point, I'd like to do a series of short pieces that are just lyric videos. There's got to be some way to torque or complicate them, maybe to have an additional track of a different text that's not attempting to word-for-word

transcribe the lyrics of the song. Could you remind me the head of the question? Because I'm answering the tail end of it.

M : "Do you have any thoughts on structural film after the digital?"

T C : Yeah, that's also complicated. You could make the argument that some of the effects of structural film are "easier to produce" in the digital. I had an interest in that kind of fold. What does it mean for something to have a history that gets technologically recoded, and what are the advantages, disadvantages, and problems of such a recoding? It still interests me, because the work I've done that's digital is in dialogue with those earlier tropes. And of course, I'm in a very different space of desire and implication than those historical works. I'd say I still believe some version of this: I'm all for the formal and the analytic, and I have great admiration for a lot of those works and makers. But I'm engaging in these older forms because, at a certain historical and cultural distance, I'm also adding layers to them. I used to say that I was interested in two kinds of "materialism": one that looks critically at the means of representation and one that looks at the culture that's being represented. I want to try to do both of those things in a single work. When I was a student, people would say "you can't" or "you shouldn't" do that. People didn't see any logic to wanting to do those

two things simultaneously—but it made me double down and want to do it more.

D B : A question from Jordan Carter: “You mentioned how you align yourself more with the notion of the DJ than with appropriation. Given that affinity, I’m curious to hear more about your relationship to performance and the live. Do you see your textual choreography as a sort of screen-based performance? And have you considered composing those pieces—layering the text, color, and music—in real-time for an audience?”

T C : Yes, I’ve considered it, and no, I don’t think I’m good enough to do it. But the performative in general is something that interests me, and I think it’s one of the reasons why I’ve aligned certain parts of my practice with people like Our Literal Speed,⁴ because they work around the performative aspects of scholarship. You could argue that there are links between scholarship and various forms of creative practice. I’ve made works that began as talks. There’s one specific work that I’m thinking of called *1!+ (One Bang Plus)*. It’s basically a rework of something that was initially a series of talks I gave. I began the talk by juxtaposing an audio clip and a video clip. For about five minutes, I slowed the video clip down to half speed, and I played this dubstep half-time audio track against it. I think the video was an orchestra performing classical music—Tchaikovsky or Prokofiev—and I beat-matched

them. It just sort of happened that way, and that was the introduction. Then I did this talk about dubstep and its historical and cultural contexts.

Later, a colleague said something to the effect of, “You should make a work about this, because this is a subject I know nothing about.” I gave the talk a few more times, and then I realized that, yeah, I guess that’s sort of my relationship with performance. I’m drawn to doing things in temporal ways, but at a certain point I want to stop doing that and circulate it and not have to be there to enact it.

I could imagine doing a live DJ set. One of these days, I think I will. I have a good friend who always tells me that he can teach me how to be a bad DJ in an afternoon. I’m curious to take that up, but on the other hand, DJing is kind of inherent in the way I go about doing things. The first thing I do is put together a playlist. For instance, the piece I’m thinking of making, *Of Lies and Liars*, involves cutting some compilation of audio material. It would be like a DJ set, but I’m probably not going to perform it live. But I’ll probably have to do it live to record it, because I don’t have the time to actually learn to program something like that. So I’ll do it live once to record it, or perhaps a few times until I’m satisfied with what it sounds like. It’s something I’ve done before. Like in the piece *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)*, I made some simple decisions about the length of a track and gradually expanded them to a point where there were whole songs, and then



08.07.01

021. Gas (Mike Ink) - Pop

house and techno (disco's heirs), hip hop, and dub

Tony Cokes, *1!+ (One Bang Plus)*, 2004 (still). 22:51 min. Video, black and white, stereo. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

Disco Inferno

And back in Mosul, Haitham al-Mallah described being hooded, handcuffed and delivered to a location where soldiers boomed "extremely loud (and dirty) music" at him.

Disco isn't dead.

It has gone
to war.

In Guantánamo Bay, Eminem, Britney Spears, Limp Bizkit, Rage Against the Machine, Metallica (again) and Bruce Springsteen ("Born in the USA")

Tony Cokes, *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)*, 2009–2011 (stills). 16:27 min. HD video, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.

I started with clips again. So, DJing is in my methodology. It's almost like the performative.

As an undergrad, I started in a traditional film and TV program but dropped out and began making photographs. This led to incorporating texts. However, in grad school, my route back to the moving image actually came through performance. But at a certain point, I realized that performance has limitations for me, and video was a way to work with text, image, sound, and social contexts. And in performance, then, people made certain assumptions about autobiography that I wasn't personally or practically interested in. It was the thing that eventually led me to some of the ways I make work. But I can't imagine being a performer like a DJ. Perhaps in this way, I might still be considered a "post-studio" artist.

M : I think we'll close with this final question, a good one to end on: "In the same way that you said the post-Fordist studio or workspace could exist as a laptop, do you think that the gallery can also transcend physical space? Especially considering digital works, such as your own, and considering how art in our current moment is moving online."

T C : Conceptually, I don't see why not. But it's funny, one of the things that interests me about media and mediation is the multiple spaces it can occupy. I think I have a little bit of trouble with the idea that all you

need is a laptop. Maybe it's because I've been lucky to be able to present my work in a variety of contexts and scales. Perhaps it's a generational thing to think about the computer as the ultimate zone of presentation and distribution. I feel like, historically, there have been too many idealisms attached to any specific form or forum. One of the things I like about the digital is that it implies that works can take up a multiplicity of forms, and not just be displayed on the computer screen or in a networked environment. The laptop (or the cell phone) is one way things might exist, but I'm not sure whether that's the only way things should exist. I guess my attitude is kind of cross-media and cross-device. These days, I'm thinking about showing work in a variety of formats: still prints, the physicality of large architectural scale, or the effects of displaying work in non-gallery public spaces. Those possibilities are also inherent in the digital, and I think I'm more interested in those shifts than only in networks, only in portable screens. But then again, I'm interested in the desires and assumptions driving the question.

D B : Alright, I think we're going to end at 9pm on the dot, although I feel like this conversation could keep going. Maybe we'll need Part 2 some other time. I'm grateful to both Christoph and Tony for such a generous exchange. It's incredibly heartening to see so many names and faces I know flash across my screen tonight. It's great to see you on any platform where we can gather these

days. Thank you all for joining us, and thank you again, Christoph and Tony. We'll see you on a screen, and hopefully in real space, soon.

C C : My pleasure, thank you very much. So nice to talk to you, Tony.

T C : Always a pleasure.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Chloë Bass, "Can Abstraction Help Us Understand the Value of Black Lives?," *Hyperallergic* (July 28, 2016), <https://hyperallergic.com/314166/can-abstraction-help-us-understand-the-value-of-black-lives>.
- 2 June 2, 2019.
- 3 See https://carpenter.center/program/tony-cokes-if-ur-reading-this-it-s-2-late-vol-2#of_lies_and_liars.
- 4 See <http://ourliteralspeed.com>.

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received a B.A. from Goddard College, an M.F.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University, and participated in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. He has received grants and fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council for the Arts, the 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; the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; the New Museum of Contemporary Art; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; documenta X, Kassel; and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Recent solo exhibitions and screenings have taken place at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University; Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London; REDCAT, Los Angeles; the Gene Siskel Film Center at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and Greene Naftali Gallery, New York. Cokes lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and is Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University.

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Tony Cokes and Christoph Cox

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Still from "Artist Talk: Tony Cokes and
Christoph Cox," Carpenter Center for
the Visual Arts, 9 April 2020, video,
1:18:39, <https://carpenter.center/program/tony-cokes-if-ur-reading-this-it-s-2-late-vol-2>.

