

ART REVIEW

Media is a weapon, mirror for artist Tony Cokes

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 6, 2020, 7:57 p.m.



A frame from Tony Cokes's "Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)." JULIA FEATHERINGILL/STEWART CLEMENTS

We are subsumed by media. Television can feel inescapable. Music and videos are constantly available. And it all seems to be speeding up in its delivery. Forget Marshall McLuhan's caution that the medium is the message. A marketplace-driven media has

taken us over and shaped us in its own frenetic, propulsive image, even pitting us against one another. We are its pathetic playthings.

Tony Cokes's canny, unnerving videos look at how media is used, and how it uses us. "Tony Cokes: If UR Reading This, It's 2 Late: Vol. 2" on view in an elegant installation at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, traces 30 years of his thoughtful critiques. The show, which was organized with the Carpenter Center alongside Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art in London and ARGOS centre for audiovisual arts in Brussels, is not for the faint of heart.

Like Jenny Holzer and Martha Rosler, who made memes before memes existed, Cokes crafts text-based videos. His sources include cultural criticism, stand-up comedy, and Donald Trump (I'm guessing these are not tweets, although Cokes is the perfect artist to try a scathing critique of that platform).

Mostly, his videos consist of text flashing across brilliantly colored backgrounds over a soundtrack. He samples both words and music, often leaning into propulsive electronic beats.

Music grabs us and makes us move. Words, more generally, make us think. Cokes, who is based in Providence and teaches at Brown, creates painfully disjunctive moments, insisting that we think even as we feel like dancing.

WHY MUST I ALWAYS TESTIFY



From Tony Cokes "The Book of Love," 1992. COURTESY OF TONY COKES; GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK; HANNAH HOFFMAN, LOS ANGELES; AND ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX, NEW YORK

He used to jam images into the mix. The disjuncture is there, in “FADE TO BLACK,” from 1990, as film clips resonant with racial stereotyping from “Gone with the Wind” to “Mississippi Burning” play against a largely hip-hop soundtrack from Public Enemy, N.W.A., and more. The piece slyly layers text, sound, and image to crack open racism, but the triple-punch is overwhelming.

In the digital age, we are drunk with images. We respond to them like lapdogs, cozying down and accepting what we’re offered. Cokes’s later works, drained of imagery, are potent in their astringency. They leave the image-making to us. And it’s pretty scary.

His “Evil” series dismantles our society’s transgressions — racism, sexism, and capitalism on steroids among them. Trump shows up in “Evil.66.1,” making remarks about women. Pet Shop Boys’ “The Sodom and Gomorrah Show” pounds beneath.

The Access Hollywood tape is not included. Indeed, some of the text can be read as innocuous, and Trump is not identified until the credits. Cokes pulls us in with comments

such as, “I’ve hired a lot of women for top jobs.” But, ugh: “The smart ones act very feminine and needy, but inside they are real killers.”

At just under eight minutes, “Evil.66.1” is short, and despite the occasional ambiguity of the text, a fairly simple takedown. “Evil.16 (Torture.Musik),” twice as long, is utterly devastating as its affecting music tugs against its text describing moral corruption. Cokes takes his words from Moustafa Bayoumi’s [2005 piece in The Nation](#) about the American military using American music to torture prisoners in Afghanistan, at Guantanamo Bay, and at Abu Ghraib.

Before I put headphones on, I watched three young women viewing this video installation. One bopped enthusiastically. Text described the torture of Yasir al-Qutaji, an Iraqi lawyer. Hooded, stripped, beaten, and doused with cold water, “he was left in a room soldiers blithely called The Disco, a place where Western music rang out so loud that his interrogators were, in Qutaji’s words, forced to ‘talk to me via a loudspeaker that was placed next to my ears.’ ”

Cokes uses the military’s soundtrack. Bruce Springsteen, Britney Spears, Nancy Sinatra, Nine Inch Nails, and the “Sesame Street” and “Barney” theme songs are among the selections. Reading as I listened, I found myself pushing the music away from me in my head, not wanting to associate it with what Bayoumi reported. Not wanting to accidentally dance.



A view of the exhibition "Tony Cokes: If UR Reading This, It's 2 Late: Vol 2." JULIA FEATHERINGILL / STEWART CLEMENTS/COURTESY OF THE CARPENTER CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

Music is a product and a tool of society. It mirrors the ugliness as well as the beauty. Cokes's newest piece, "Untitled (m.j.: the symptom)" finished just before the Carpenter Center show opened, draws text from "The Resistible Demise of Michael Jackson," a book edited by Mark Fisher, published in 2009 after Jackson's death.

There is much to chew on about who Jackson was and why it's hard to listen to his brilliant music now, and Cokes doesn't even touch on the allegations of pedophilia that returned to the news with last year's release of the documentary "Leaving Neverland."

What he does examine is Jackson as a hollowed-out shell, a black man of colossal talent eroded into a commodity, a pathetic symptom of a voracious, spectacle-drunk marketplace. The soundtrack mostly features music sampling Jackson, not his own

songs, including one wild electronic track full of his sighs, breaths, and squeaks. Of course Jackson is not here; he's used by others.

Cokes's subtext is that the same marketplace has hollowed us all out. His videos, spare and chromatically blaring, step back and take a wide view. He's trying to show us who we are. It is not a pretty picture.

TONY COKES: IF UR READING THIS IT'S 2 LATE: VOL. 2

At Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 24 Quincy St., through April 12. 617-496-5387, carpenter.center

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