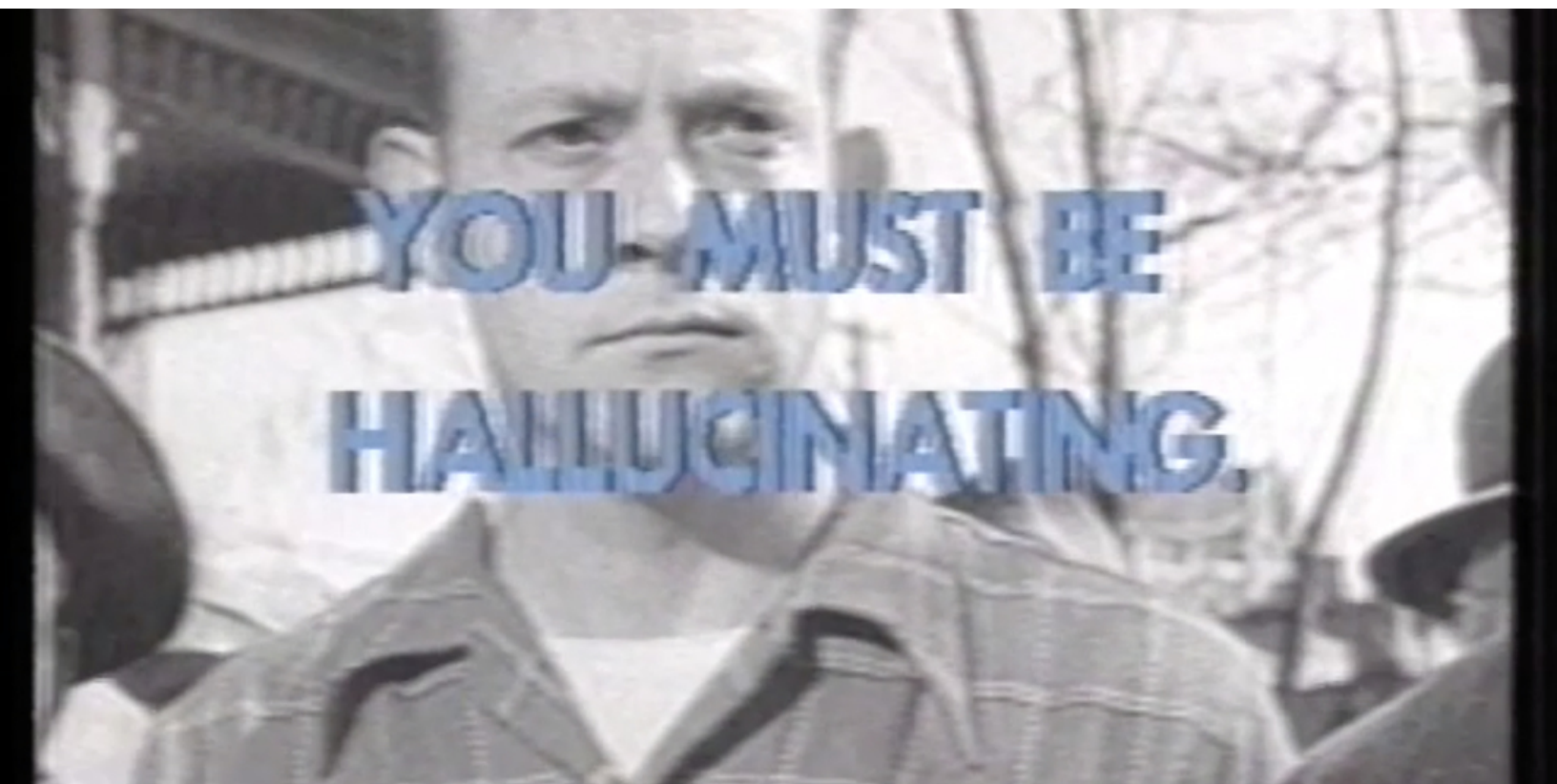


INTERVIEWS

## TONY COKES

Tony Cokes on quotation and legibility

September 30, 2019



Tony Cokes, *FADE TO BLACK*, 1990, video, color, sound, 32 minutes. Courtesy the artist; Greene Naftali, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

*“Capitalism is profoundly illiterate,” observed Deleuze and Guattari in Anti-Oedipus. Since the mid-1980s, Tony Cokes has been composing multimedia installations that collage pop music, archival film footage, and critical theory. While demanding close reading from viewers, his work also suggests the stakes, and even hazards, of legibility. For one of two commissions in his survey at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) at the University of London, Cokes quotes from filmmaker and scholar Kodwo Eshun’s 2018 Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture, which took place at the school around a year after Fisher’s suicide. Both Cokes’ and Fisher’s practices focus*



partly on the relationship between sonic and visual representation, and what it might look like to implement Derrida's notion of ontology as a cultural strategy. "If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol I" is on view at Goldsmiths CCA from September 29, 2019 through January 19, 2020 and will travel to Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts and Brussels's ARGOS centre for audiovisual arts next year.

**I'M NOT TRYING TO BUILD A RATIONAL ARGUMENT** as much as I'm attempting to set up a series of relations when putting together a new work or exhibition. Sometimes it can be really straightforward. For *The Morrissey Problem*, one of the new works in the Goldsmiths CCA show, I'm adapting the entirety of an article by Joshua Surtees, whereas I'm using maybe half of the text from Kodwo Eshun's lecture. Duration often determines what I use. With certain short pieces, I can adapt the whole thing and it makes sense to do that, while from longer texts I usually take a fragment, or I'll compose a work with excerpts from multiple sources. Often I'm acting as an editor; it all depends on what kinds of relations I can find in the material. Some sources just comport themselves best incomplete. The relation of a project's potential histories and futurities, the ways it might manifest and how it might be radically different in its ultimate articulation: That's what I'm interested in.

I'm not adapting one of Fisher's texts—although at some point I do plan to do that—but rather taking up a text about him, one I was drawn to for its form and rhythm. What I find particularly appealing in Eshun's lecture is his attention to the various contexts in which writing and reading might occur. If we're thinking about that in regard to ongoing discourses on identity today? Well, on one hand, people uphold stable conceptions and declarations of identity to represent certain positionalities, certain differences in experience. On the other hand, when people try to regulate these things in an absolute way, by over-stabilizing and over-identifying, it can become a trap for almost everyone concerned. The notion that there is an absolute identity with which one can only speak, or about which others cannot speak, has corners and limitations.

I'm particularly interested in how the will to disavow class divisions in this country has become more pronounced over the past forty to fifty years. In the official pronouncements of America, and in what people say they believe about their daily lives, there seems to be a compulsion toward an imaginary of equality, even as things become more and more unequal. I think it's both psychic and discursive; there's always an element of wishful thinking or fantasy with regard to these ideas. Many people remain convinced it's impossible to have a grounded critique of the life in which you are inscribed; it should be possible, but there are a lot of people who disavow even the possibility of doing that. Fisher wanted to draw attention to those unresolved and disturbing aspects of how we live and how we are represented or accounted for. For me that's crucial. So is

his articulation of how there are always leftovers and possible projects in the things we thought we understood, thought we were done and over with.

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This also relates to the way legibility has become, to many, an ideal in itself. And it's like, well, no. Things are always complex and a little confusing. When something is instantly legible or absorbable, what is that as an aesthetic, as an idea, as an approach to things? Reading is a process; it's not all in the text, and it's not just a question of trying to atomize or understand something in one dimension. If there weren't interferences or complications, we would live in a radically different world. But there are.

— *As told to Hiji Nam*

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