

TONY COKES

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HANNAH HOFFMAN

info@hannahhoffman.la
+1.213.263.9681

HANNAH HOFFMAN

TONY COKES

Claire Koron Elat, “Disco isn’t dead. It has gone to war”
032c, May 31, 2023

Disco Isn't Dead. It Has Gone to War

May 31, 2023 | Claire Koron Elat

“I was told right now, in the conservatorship, I’m not able to get married or have a baby,’ S. said.” This is one of the quotes sliding over a monochrome video screen by artist Tony Cokes. Taken from a testimony Britney Spears gave after her 13-year-long conservatorship was annulled, Cokes’ work *Free Britney?* (2022) investigates the political dimensions of pop culture icons to a musical backing.

madness
absolute
madness.

Since the 1980s, Cokes has been working on complicating music and its relationship to dichotomies like catharsis and torture as well as enjoyment and critical thinking. Quotes included in his work come not only from Spears but also from Donald Trump, Ye, or Mark Fisher. His video essays, as he calls them, visually simulate cultural production in the 21st century and allude to their inherent biases and political nature.

Two of Cokes’ works are currently on view in Frankfurt as part of an augmented exhibition titled “DEMO-,” curated by Ben Livne Weitzman, on the political value of publicly accessible spaces. The site-specific virtual works part of the show, which also includes Morehshin Allahyari, Flaka Haliti, and Tamiko Thiel, among others, can be accessed through the [WAVA app](#) across the city. Here, we talked to Cokes about clubbing, the power of sound, and moving backward through time.

went down
in history
as the
“utopia of
modernity” [1].

“I will build
a great wall -

CLAIRE KORON ELAT: An exhibition you had at Greene Naftali in 2022 was entitled “On Clubbing, Mourning, and Critique.” How do these three realms intersect?

TONY COKES: I was drawn to the fact that they wouldn’t normally be connected. But for me, some of those themes revolve around each other. I made a work about two different 90s moments of clubbing, and I’ve also made a couple of pieces that had to do with mourning and the legacy of particular figures, such as Mark Fisher.

CKE: I think that clubbing has the potential of being a form of critique and of mourning.

TC: Especially with Covid-19, where clubbing took on a very different existence. It was more furtive than it normally would be. I couldn’t help but be hyper-aware of the idea that you occupy certain public spaces in certain ways.

CKE: Public spaces certainly became even more important during the pandemic. They were accessible during a time where much other space utilized for acts of critiquing or mourning was shut down. You’re currently part of a show that takes place in public. The work that you are showing there has also been exhibited in institutional contexts – which would also be public, but less public or semi-public – as well as in galleries. Was the process of making the work different because the context of where the work is shown changed?

TC: Ben [Livne Weitzman] and I exchanged views on what might fit. I was particularly interested in getting something into public spaces, because it’s so often fraught and difficult to show there. Sometimes the planning phase and obtaining permissions and logistical hoops that you have to jump through and questions about when or how they will be permitted are often really complex and time-consuming. For this show, it was a matter of choosing the scale. We took a portion of an existing work and were thinking about relative duration that would work in a public situation. The original piece consisted of two channels of 45 minutes each, and we edited it down to two channels with ten minutes.



CKE: In a previous interview, you said that there are certain things only sound can do, and yet your work is a combination of sound, text, and video – it’s not just sound.

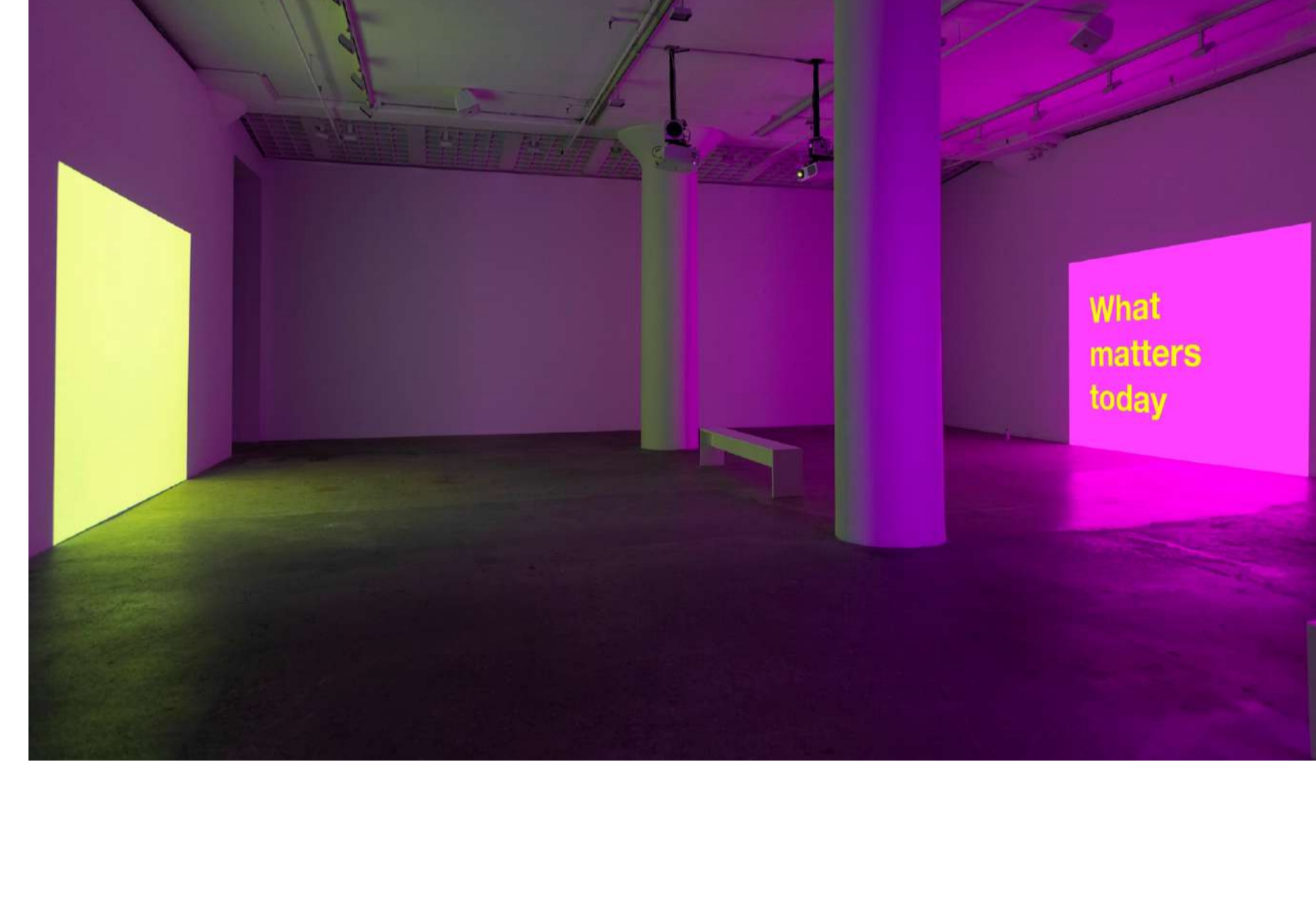
TC: One of the things that sound often does is to allow for an engagement with the body as well as with knowledge, as it’s commonly represented. You can dance and think at the same time, or dance and have a bodily response, and the sonic sensorium can impact, even sharpen, one’s thought. Some people might only think about it as some sort of potential negative or interference, whereas I think about it as a complementary possibility. It can actually change your engagement with the text. At least it does for me, which is why I work with music a lot.

CKE: Is sound even more powerful than images?

TC: They can have a complimentary antagonistic relation. There’s a particular sort of pause or rhythm or contradiction that happens between sound interventions. Sometimes you can charge a text through a juxtaposition that imagines a different pathway or way of relating to reading images or text.

CKE: The design of the short statements on monochrome screens in your works reminds me of “news” accounts on Instagram that post fashion news, gossip, or comments on the current status of culture.

TC: I don’t really follow contemporary design and its uses. My engagements with advertising are more historical and I’m more focused on structural film or minimal visual techniques. Certain relationships in social media and the way things are split up and presented mimic those historical forms in certain ways. I discovered the swipe as an electronic “haptic” surrogate before I had a smartphone. My probably limited view of design is that it’s a way of adding context and legibility to the material that you’re working with. I’d argue that some of those techniques were borrowed from even older, avant-garde traditions. It’s like moving through time, although back then, the content was different and it had a different intent.



CKE: Historical references in advertisement, mass media, and pop culture are interesting when you think of these three realms as inherently political, and keep in mind that pop culture is often deemed as unpolitical or superficial.

TC: I would probably agree that pop culture is inherently political – even if it isn’t intended to be critical. It’s kind of hard to avoid it. Sometimes, there’s this idea that something is devoid of content and context. To my mind, that’s hardly ever the case. There’s always a context and there are always possibilities for meaning. It depends on how certain things are deployed, not so much just on the intent or the so-called meaning of something. My idea is to use codes that we’ve all seen before in ways that get us to read somewhat differently as opposed to just fold into the flow.

CKE: You made a work about the whole discourse around Britney Spears, called *Free Britney*.

TC: It was an interesting situation. I wasn’t a follower or a huge fan. I knew some of the music. I remember hearing this radio report, which was based on the article that I used from *The New Yorker*. Have you ever wondered about relationships with your business and your family that get entangled and put one at the mercy of a punishing, perverse legal and therapeutic regime? It’s hard to imagine that because it’s so visible.

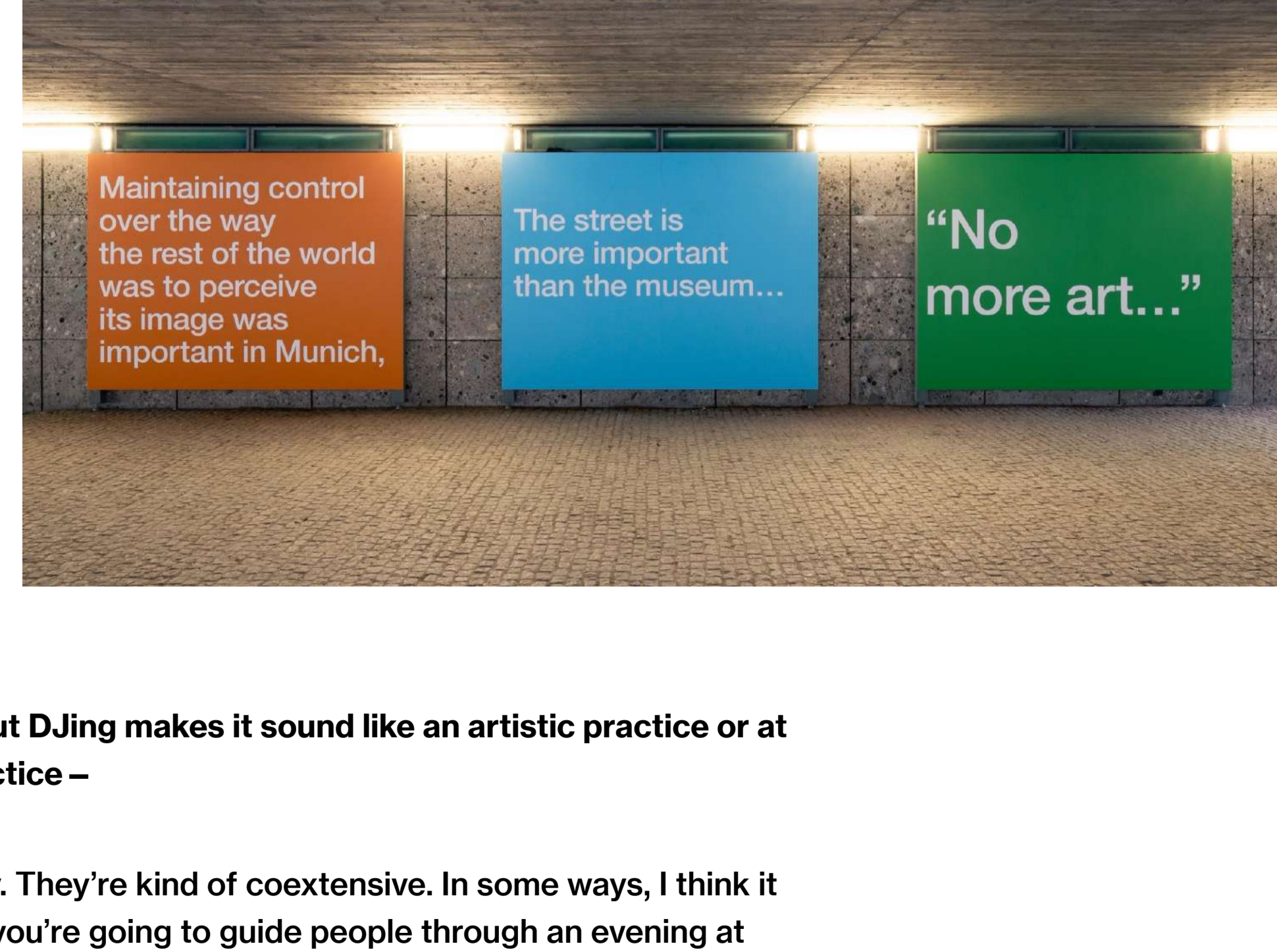
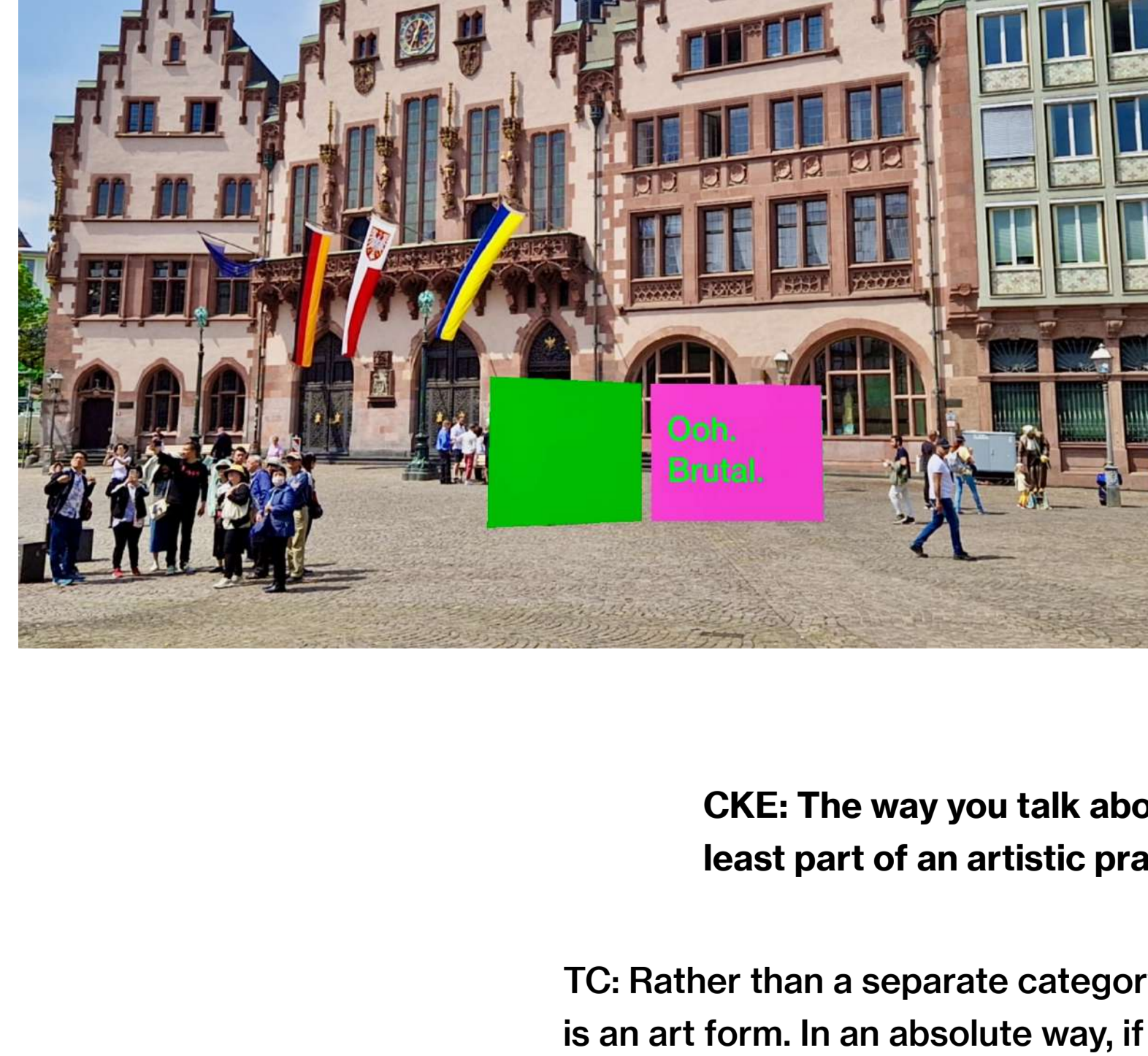
CKE: What’s absurd is that they use Britney’s music to torture inmates in some prisons while she is a kind of prisoner too.

TC: It was a strange anomalous thing. Pop music, when repeated at high volumes can induce stress. Then there are the conditions under which that person is working and making music, which also has problems inscribed inside. I’m attracted to pop material because of the way it goes into the beliefs of culture. What’s acceptable as an activity or what’s pleasurable as a way of being in the world?

CKE: Since music as well as collaging different sounds are such a principal part of your work, I was wondering whether you consider yourself as a DJ.

TC: I often make mixes in order to make video or installation work. I don’t think I’ve ever publicly DJed. I’ve done private parties, lectures with music, things like that. I’d say the first thing that I commit to is the sound. I choose articles that I want to juxtapose as raw material. When I’m trying to edit a piece, I feel like I need to have something to respond to, and something to position the text elements against. I’ll take three tracks, for instance, and just play one after another back-to-back. But other times, for reasons of time or just to have a more varied soundscape to work with, I will actually make an edit for the sound.

“I think that Drake
and Kanye West
are the two most
important artists
in the 21st Century



CKE: The way you talk about DJing makes it sound like an artistic practice or at least part of an artistic practice –

TC: Rather than a separate category. They’re kind of coextensive. In some ways, I think it is an art form. In an absolute way, if you’re going to guide people through an evening at duration and make often, even political, decisions about what goes into a mix, many factors should be considered. That sounds like artmaking to me!

CKE: If you think of DJs who operate in a more mainstream way, it’s probably not really a form of an intellectual practice. But then there are some great DJs who are also simultaneously artists.

TC: It’s a question of your desires, your context, the scale of things, and how you use them. I probably wouldn’t argue that all DJs are artists – that would be an interesting claim. That’s kind of almost like Joseph Beuys, “Every DJ is an Artist.” I would say they definitely have that potential, and I wouldn’t be exclusive about it. I wouldn’t say, “Oh, you’re a DJ, that’s not possible.” Because I know very well that some of my favorite artists are DJs – or designers, for that matter. But, of course, some people who are artists and have art careers put limitations on what practices to include.

“Tony Cokes’ works *SM BNGRZ 02.01 (2021)* and *SM BNGRZ 01.04 (2021)* are on view in front of *Paulskirche* and *Frankfurter Römer*, respectively, in Frankfurt. The exhibition can be accessed through the [WAVA app](#) until April 30, 2024.

Credits

Text [CLAIRE KORON ELAT](#)

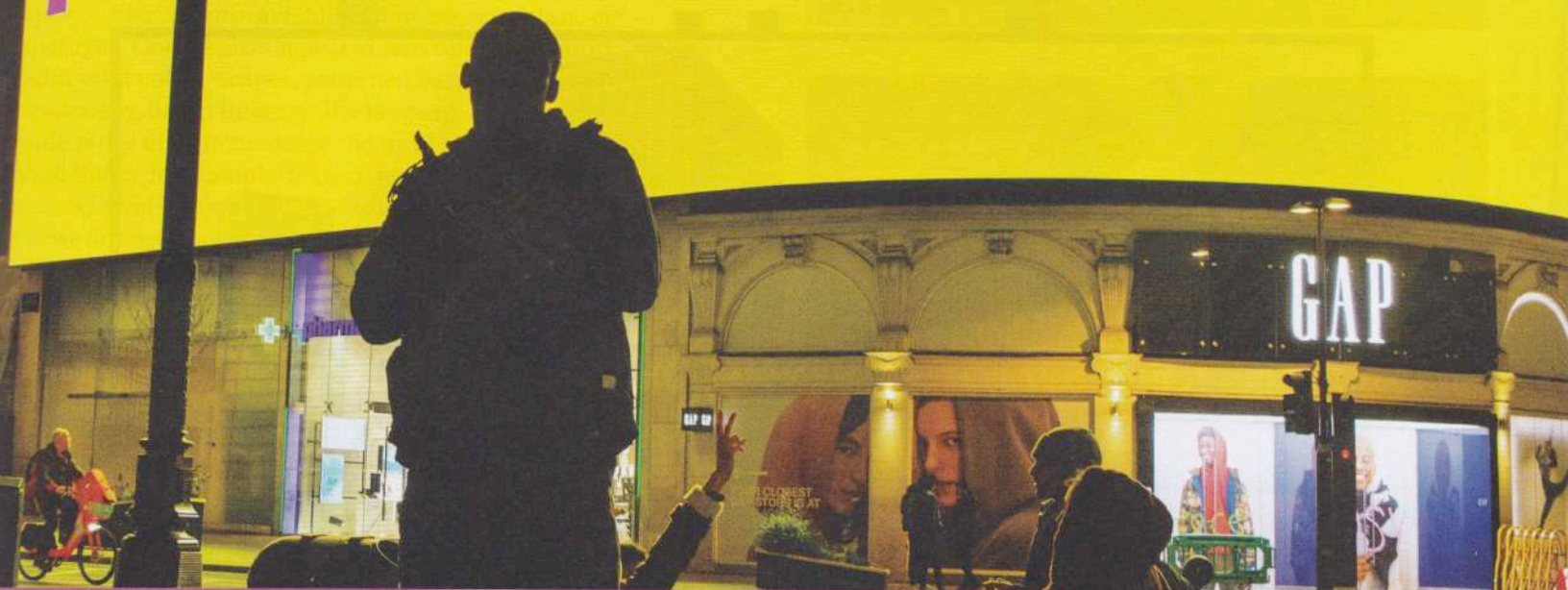
TONY COKES

Shiv Kotecha, "Profile: Tony Cokes's: A poetics of music and hardship" Frieze, No. 228, June - August, 2022

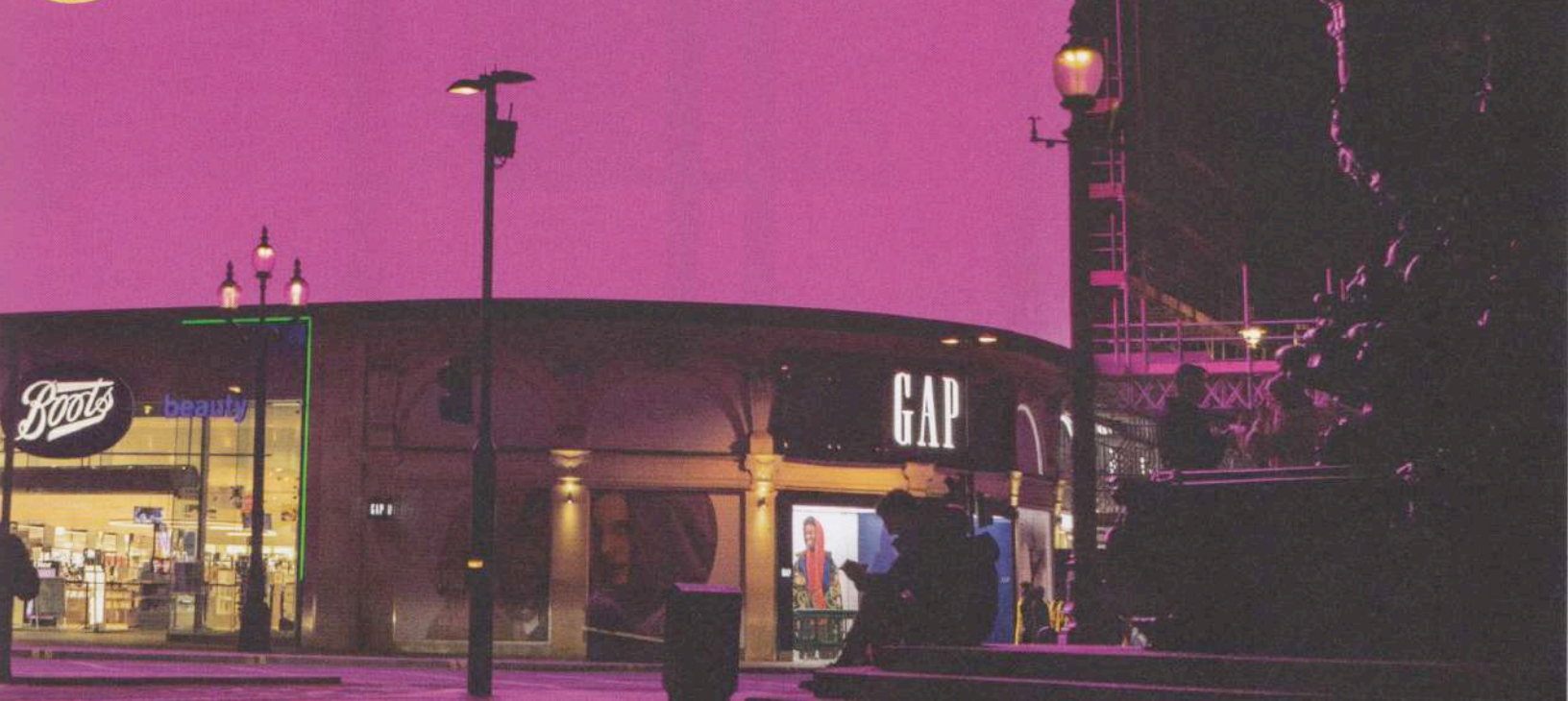
Profile: TONY COKES uses music and theory to challenge contemporary anti-Blackness and the legacies of US imperialism. *Shiv Kotecha* asks: Can you still dance to it?

Tony Cokes

I CAN'T BREATHE



SO SRRRY



And the collective goes on sleeping.



When I met the artist and DJ Tony Cokes last month, he showed me a way to watch his videos I had not considered before: by dancing to them. We were in the lobby of the Maritime Hotel in New York after Cokes had finished installing a suite of new and reworked videos as part of the 2022 Whitney Biennial, titled 'Quiet as it's Kept'. When I asked Cokes about 'SM BNGRS' (2022), a series of videos about club culture and nightlife, he recalled their conception: focused reading, conversations with friends and social-media footage of children cutting a rug to one of his own videos. 'She can't read', wrote one proud parent, 'but she can respond.'

For nearly 40 years, Cokes has been making videos and installations that appear deceptively simple in their display – like an informal slideshow presentation, or a Spotify ad. Cokes's texts appear in sans serif font against bright, solid colour-scapes, patterned backgrounds and, occasionally, found imagery. The language derives from a wide range of sources: dense theory (Alain Badiou and Judith Butler, for example) to interviews with other artists (such as David Hammons and Martha Rosler), to snippets of news articles, transcriptions of civil-rights oratory and so on. Words flicker, strobe, slide across Cokes's screens, accompanied by music, much of which would be familiar to most Western ears (Christina Aguilera, Morrissey, Bruce Springsteen), though he sometimes includes eclectic deep cuts (2000s-era German math-rockers The Notwist, to name one) or some one-off dubstep track discovered on Bandcamp. His wall-sized projections and LED screens take up little space, so that his audience has plenty of room to read, listen and, when possible, reflect.

Take, for instance, *HS LST WRDS* (2021), a video that plays in a street-facing window of the restaurant at the Whitney as part of the Biennial, where visitors typically see admission prices and adverts highlighting the perks of museum membership. This video displays the last words spoken by Elijah McClain, the 23-year-old massage therapist whom Colorado state police murdered in 2019, after restraining him in a chokehold and then dosing him with enough ketamine to induce a coma. First, the music: the Welsh indie-rock outfit Manic Street Preachers' 'Between the Clock and the Bed' (2014), which trots out its white subject's complaint with stereo clarity: 'Shapes move inside my head / Colliding with shared desperation'. The singing is full throated, trailed by a slight echo. McClain spoke to the police in short sentences and, as in 'SM BNGRS', Cokes drops the vowels in each of the words. They blink one at a time, unspooling a knot of pleas and explanations: 'I JST CN'T BRTH CRRCTLY', 'I WZ JST GNG HM', 'TRY 2 4GV ME', 'LL I WZ TRYNG 2 DO WZ BCM BTTR.'

'There's nothing rocket-sciencey about [my work],' remarked Cokes, who was in New York from Providence, Rhode Island, where he teaches in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. We shared a tacit understanding of the absurdity of our contemporary moment and the hideous cliches and limitations of a city like New York – also, our love of it. Police brutality, anti-Blackness, American war crimes: these are some of the violences that Cokes's videos explicitly address – and that make dancing, for viewers like me, a difficult thing to imagine doing.



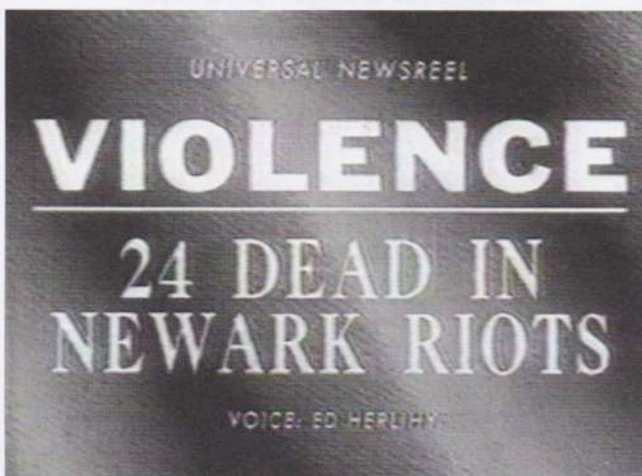
Cokes's works are never moralistic. They invite viewers to think critically alongside and through them.

Opening spread
4 Voices / 4 Weeks, 2021, installation views, CIRCA, London. All images courtesy: the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles, Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York; photograph: Melanie Issaka

This spread
Shrink! 1.1-4, 2001, installation view, 'Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept', Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photographs: Zeshan Ahmed

This page
Black Celebration,
1988, video stills

Opposite page
Evil.16 (Torture.Musik),
2009–11, video stills



I am reminded of Yvonne Rainer's evening-long performance, *The Mind Is a Muscle* (1968), in which she observes: 'My body remains enduring reality. This statement is not an apology. It is a reflection of a state of mind that reacts with horror and disbelief upon seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on television – not at the sight of death, however, but at the fact that the television can be shut off afterwards as after a bad Western.' Like Rainer, with whom Cokes would later study while completing his MFA in sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University, the artist is sceptical of narrative storytelling, especially the tales spun by the media and the state. His works are never moralistic. Instead, they invite viewers to think critically alongside and through them, in real-time.

'I kept ending up in odd places,' Cokes told me, describing the circuitous route he took to becoming an artist. He attended several professional schools and liberal arts institutions, where he would experiment with still photography and performance, mining his own family history for material. He used recordings of his mother singing, for instance, and choreographed simple gestures to reflect his father's working-class background. 'He was a janitor, so I made a mess with coal and then cleaned it up,' recalled Cokes. It wasn't until the mid-1980s that video became Cokes's primary medium, as it allowed him to 'gather evidence' to contextualize the live aspects of his practice. In *Black Celebration* (1988) and *The Book of Love* (1992), Cokes's technical background in analogue videography and documentary photography, his scepticism of either's claim to truth, is conspicuous. *The Book of Love* is a portrait of his mother – in the form of an interview and a song – perforated by questions, insinuations and doubts that scroll by in lengthy ribbons of text. Long, abrupt silences puncture her narrative to create an uncertain sense of who his mother is. She is perceived in fragments and magnifications, exceeding the frame of the video.

Perhaps Cokes's best-known work is his 'Evil' series (2003–ongoing), which he began in response to the depraved rhetoric used by the George W. Bush administration to justify its 'War on Terror'. *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)* (2009–11) continues to haunt me. It was shown again recently at MoMA PS1, New York, as part of 'Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011', an exhibition which closed in March 2020, right before COVID-19 shut down the world. The video projection spanned the entire back wall of one gallery, so that the strobing blue and red backgrounds splashed across the floor and out the door. (If it were not for the soundtrack, which played at maximum volume, a passerby could easily mistake the lightshow for a work by Dan Flavin.) The text on screen reworks journalist Moustafa Bayoumi's article 'Disco Inferno' – first published in *The Nation* in 2005 – about 'advanced' torture techniques deployed by US troops in Abu Ghraib, Afghanistan, Guantánamo Bay and lesser-known places on the Syrian border, such as Al-Qaim. Here, in a room they reportedly called 'The Disco', US soldiers blasted deafening music into the ears of Muslim detainees for hours, sometimes for days on end. Cokes remixed the songs Bayoumi referenced, including Barney the Dinosaur's 'I Love You' – a staple of American children's television since the early 1990s

This is when
the mind begins
its rebellion
against the body.

And he was left
in a room
soldiers blithely
called
The Disco,

Disco isn't dead.

It has gone
to war.

They charged
that "deafening music"
was played directly
into their ears
while soldiers ordered
them to dance.

**Police brutality, anti-Blackness,
American war crimes: these are some of the violences
that Cokes's videos explicitly address.**

Dear Morrissey,

I can't stop loving
your music.

It is never free,

distribution,
and repetition.

your life
will improve by
a minimum
of 47%.

reading
Rosalind
Krauss

It's a joke.

Whoosh!

and the first of many voices chosen by US torturers to destroy the sanity of their prisoners. Barney's voice is crudely spliced with Britney Spears's '...Baby One More Time' (1998), followed by a jarring cut to Metallica's 'Enter Sandman' (1991), then Limp Bizkit and back to Metallica.

Over the past several years, Cokes – whose studio consists only of a desk and a laptop – has worked on a series of videos that prod at contemporary artists' skewed relationships to labour and urban space, and at how their studios have an afterlife in real-estate development, ultimately contributing to the pricing out of working-class people from major metropolises, such as New York and Los Angeles. A video from 2011, *studio, time, isolation: reconstructions of soul and the sublime*, which Cokes dedicated to Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, plays three reggaeton tracks by Cornel Campbell over long citations from the art historian and critic Tom Holert's essay 'Studio Time' (2006). Cokes redacts the chief example Holert uses to make his argument – Mathias Poledna's *Western Recording* (2003) – to build a comparative through-line of studio-based practices in music, cinema and televisual industries, as well as the effects these traditions have on their immediate surroundings. 'I'm not obsessed with representations of studio practice per se, but I'm interested in their migration and circulation in society,' Cokes told me. 'Why, for instance, did the artist's loft become a default lifestyle? Why does everything have to turn into a creative enterprise? Why is it that artists have to say all these crazy things to gain visibility in a highly mediated context?'

At the Whitney Biennial, in addition to 'HS LST WRDS', a triptych of videos from Cokes's 'Shrink' series (2001–02) plays on a loop in a sixth-floor window overlooking the Hudson River. Taking its name from The Notwist's 1998 album (and no doubt also riffing on the informal term for a psychoanalyst), the 'Shrink' videos depict text overlaid on found footage of a pre-9/11, Rudolph Giuliani-era New York skyline. The same four songs – 'Chemicals', 'No Encore', 'Shrink' and 'Your Signs' – score a panoply of texts ranging from Susan Buck-Morss's tome on Walter Benjamin, *Dialectics of Seeing* (1989), to a 1988 interview between art historian Kellie Jones and Hammons, whose blunt rejection of white cultural imperialism plays against The Notwist's strummy guitars and rattling electronic beats. This sensory overload of music and text illustrates Cokes's own media politics and his ideas about labour and creativity. 'Don't you know', reads one of Hammons's responses, scrolling a bit too fast, 'chasing these stories is what it is?'

One video in the 'Shrink' series features a 2002 article by Jill Nelson from *The Village Voice* about the decision by the New York State Court of Appeals to overturn the conviction of three of the four NYPD officers involved in the torture and rape of Abner Louima in 1997. In this video, the sentences run slower than in Cokes's other works, decelerating the rate of reading. Set to The Notwist's Markus Archer crooning 'Say: face me, embrace me / Take all these friends away from me', Nelson's text flashes in two- to three-word fragments and advances with a minor lag – eerily, reading and waiting become simultaneous activities. The anachronistic pairing only

'I'm not obsessed with representations of studio practice per se, but I'm interested in their migration and circulation in society.'

Tony Cokes

emphasizes how directly Nelson's article still speaks to today's New York, stifled by the unsparing policies and garbled platitudes about 'public safety' and 'civic discipline' spat out by the city's current mayor, Eric Adams. In the last year, Adams – who served as an officer for the New York City Transit Police and the NYPD for over two decades – has reinstated a maximum police presence in all five of the city's boroughs as a means of harassing and unfairly incarcerating Black and Brown people, and to effectively disappear the city's poor and homeless population. Nelson, as broken apart by Cokes:

'Whether or not / we choose / to recognize it, / we live / in a cityscape / that has for decades / been littered / with the dead bodies / of citizens / killed by the police / under questionable / circumstances.'

Cokes, a 2022 recipient of the prestigious Rome Prize, is currently planning a dual exhibition of works in Munich at the city's Kunstverein and Haus der Kunst. 'It will be series of snapshots', he told me, about the things that happened in Munich between 1937 – the year Paul Ludwig Troost, Hitler's favourite architect, inaugurated the Haus der Kunst, home to the Nazi party's inventory of 'racially pure' art – and 1972, the year 11 athletes were brutally murdered in Munich's Olympic village days before the city hosted the Summer Games. The playlist he's making, however, seems like it may veer far from Bavaria's sordid past. 'Giorgio Moroder is an obvious pick, but it might be more interesting to find music that isn't recognizable fully, as such, like international disco produced in Munich in the 1970s, or techno from Berlin and Dusseldorf in the 1990s.' When I ask Cokes whether he would consider making work for public spaces, such as a bar or club, he tells me that he finds those venues useful: 'It's not just fun that you have,' he says, speaking about clubs, 'it's a model of how you might be in the world that becomes thinkable.' 'What happens to my thinking when I'm compelled to dance?' I ask. 'People say you can't do both at the same time,' he replies. 'But I think you can.' ●

Opposite page
'This Isn't Theory. This Is History', 2021, exhibition views, MACRO – Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma. Photograph: Simon d'Exéa

Shiv Kotecha is a contributing editor of *frieze*.

info@hannahhoffman.la
+1.213.263.9681

HANNAH HOFFMAN

TONY COKES
Adam Kleinman, "Tony Cokes"
Artforum, October 2022

ARTFORUM

MUNICH

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It's about
"I bear
responsibility for this."

Tony Cokes, *Evil.80.Empathy?*, 2020, HD video, color, sound, 2 minutes 43 seconds.

Tony Cokes

HAUS DER KUNST
KUNSTVEREIN MÜNCHEN

Nearly concurrent with the scandal over anti-Semitic imagery at Documenta 15, a two-venue survey of the work of American artist Tony Cokes opened quietly in Munich. Housed, in part, in a former air-raid shelter beneath the Haus der Kunst—a museum originally built in 1937 to promote Nazi culture as the Haus der Deutschen Kunst (House of German Art)—the exhibition “Fragments, or just Moments” attempts to sit with inherited symbols of prejudice to ponder how they can be used for progressive mobilization

as well as injury. Featuring the newly commissioned two-part film *Some Munich Moments 1937–1972, 2022*, the show affords viewers an opportunity to assess the ways in which Germany and the United States, too, remain haunted by the specters of their own respective histories.

Some Munich Moments binds the founding of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst to the 1972 Munich Olympics, where Israeli athletes were kidnapped by members of the Palestinian Black September Organization. The film intercuts multiple narratives with excerpts from archival clips, including those of a 1937 parade that took place during *Der Tag der Deutschen Kunst* (The Day of German Art), a Nazi arts festival in Munich. Cokes sutures these interludes together with slideshow-like presentations set mostly to pop music roughly contemporaneous to the '72 games. Featuring white-lettered intertitles on clashing blue, yellow, orange, and green backgrounds, the texts delineate the confluence of competing agendas around the games, which became a stage on which avant-garde German designers presented a reformed state, rebranded as forward-thinking and committed to cosmopolitan values. Cokes sets the infamous kidnapping against the lesser-known story of how several African nations threatened a boycott unless segregationist Rhodesia was forbidden to participate; the Olympics' chief organizer viewed the Africans as hostile to his idealist worldview. Cokes utilizes his intertitles to layer in the story of Wayne Collett and Vincent Matthews, African American runners who, at the same games, protested while the national anthem played during their medal ceremony and were consequently banned from the Olympics for life.

Some Munich Moments is presented alongside earlier works, many on view in both institutions. Among these is *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)*, 2009–11, a text-based montage with sound that takes as its subject the use of American music as a CIA device to torture political prisoners. Cokes samples from the agency's playlist, mixing together disco, soul, punk, and techno, just as in some of his other works, including *Evil.80.Empathy?*, 2020, a slideshow video that lays a soundtrack by DJ Caspa over the transcript of a conversation about the George Floyd protests.

Reading these flashing texts while listening to seductive pop synced to Cokes's hypnotically paced screen wipes, one experiences a startling disjunction between purpose and spectacle

akin to the realization that art, just like sport, can foster both joy and pain. Doubling down on this ambivalence, the show's use of the Haus der Kunst's bunker lends the exhibition the atmosphere of a basement nightclub and in so doing compels visitors to face difficult questions: Are we celebrating in the wounds of others? How should one participate in the discourse around trauma?

As the question mark in its title suggests, *Evil.80.Empathy?* likewise hinges on a query: Why were the George Floyd protests so huge? Disavowing empathy as the primary motivating factor, the video's transcribed discussions between John Akomfrah, Tina Campt, Ekow Eshun, and Saidiya Hartman include such remarks as "Right I think it's complicity / I think that is what's motivating a lot of folks. . . . / It's that suddenly, / it's not about empathy / It's about 'I bear responsibility for this.' / . . . And if I do not do something, / I am complicit with it." While Cokes pursues a well-established critique of sensationalism by withholding widely known images—such as graphic depictions of police violence or the notorious photographs from Abu Ghraib—the work's most urgent demand concerns how visitors, like artists, are implicated in the construction of socially acceptable standards. Cokes doesn't provide closure to this debate for his audience in Germany; rather, he articulates the fact that culture, like history and language itself, can be taken apart and reconstituted, but never disentangled from politics.

— Adam Kleinman

info@hannahhoffman.la
+1.213.263.9681

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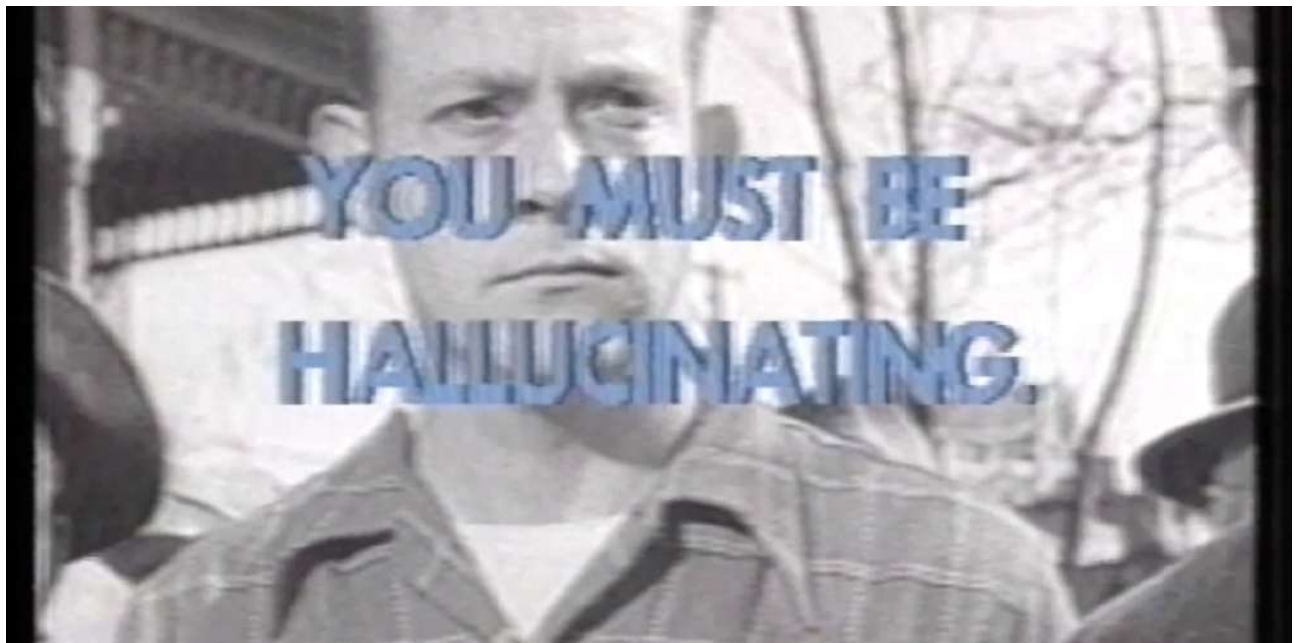
TONY COKES
Hiji Nam, “Tony Cokes”
Artforum, Septembre 2019

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

TONY COKES

September 30, 2019 • Tony Cokes on quotation and legibility



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.

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*

<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/tony-cokes-80912>

info@hannahhoffman.la
+1.213.263.9681

HANNAH HOFFMAN

TONY COKES

Sohrab Mohebbi review of Retro (Pop, Terror, Critique) at Redcat,
Los Angeles Frieze Magazine, Issue 52, Jan - Feb 2013

Tony Cokes

BY SOHRAB MOHEBI

Tony Cokes 3#, 2001, DVD still



**1.0 Pop Music
is a social praxis.**

Tony Cokes's 'Retro (Pop, Terror, Critique)' featured 45 videos and text animations from 1997 to the present. By breaking the show down to eight week-long programmes, the exhibition offered an inventive solution to the all-too-familiar curatorial problem of a video art retrospective. REDCAT's main gallery was turned into a large black cube where each week's looped programme was simultaneously projected onto two walls (one in front of the entrance and the other in the back with a seating area), and played on a group of three smaller flat-screens and a single larger one, offering a variety of display options. The space had the feel of a night-club-cum-videotheque, where the installation created an immersive spectacle of critique as scrolling and/or flashing bars of texts – culled from a variety of academic and journalistic sources and sometimes his own writings – ran on the screens and twinkled to the beat of minimal pop soundtracks and house mixes. In the lobby, three monitors on pedestals showed a selection of videos from each of the exhibition's three categories of 'Pop Manifestos' (1997–ongoing), 'The Evil Series' (2001–ongoing) and 'Art Critique Series' (2008–ongoing). Moreover, all the works on the checklist were available on the gallery's website for the duration of the exhibition, saving Angelenos from the prowl for Downtown parking.

In *leeds.talk* (2008), from the 'Art Critique Series', Cokes traces Rosalind Krauss's oeuvre, recounting her disillusionment with *Artforum's* promotional scholarship – where texts only provided what Boris Groys has recently called 'textual bikinis' in service of the art market – that prompted her and Annette Michelson to found *October* in 1976. Cokes notes (or rather quotes) that this shift instead emphasized the aesthetics of the scholarly text itself, giving rise to critical and academic performances of contemporary art theory and history. Taking cues from this piece, Cokes's works explore the aesthetics of criticism and academic writing (Cokes himself is a professor of Modern Culture & Media at Brown University), and examine video as a venue for scholarship where the text becomes image and adopts the conditions of viewership.

Cokes's videos highlight the economy of circulation in discourse, from art criticism to contemporary politics, and how, across disciplines, dispersion defines content. In the 'Evil Series', ploughing through documents and reports on the War on Terror, Cokes is not preoccupied with making the invisible visible or in revealing the unknown, as in exhausted representational strategies of much so-called political art. Rather, he shows the monstrosity of what is already visible and known, but conveniently de-circulated. For Cokes, this impasse is not limited to politics: 'There is nothing to critique, we only need to marvel at the things we already know,' a text bar reads in *leeds.talk.trailer* (2008).

In the works on view at REDCAT, music functioned on at least two levels. It was posed analogous to academic discourse as both media follow traditions, referential palettes and methodologies that govern their respective forms. Moreover Cokes uses the 'remix' in contemporary music akin to 'quotation' in academic writing. As such, he shows that discursive interiority is not exclusive to academia and is shared across disciplines including popular culture and music. For Cokes, neither pop music nor critique is safe from commodification. He uses the reach of the former as a vehicle for the distribution of the latter, and applies critical theory to pop music to *détourne* it into something more than mere prop for product placement. Here the collective nature of music comes together with the individuality of the critical position, providing a common soundscape for an otherwise idiosyncratic practice. Further, by turning the gallery space into a kind of dance floor ('a mobile assemblage of bodies' according to the crawler in Cokes's *1!*, 2004) the artist appears as an absent DJ and the viewers as club-goers.

While examining the potential of bringing together the idiosyncrasy of critical practice with the collectivity of music, Cokes is under no delusion about the contemporary critical cul-de-sac, the market value of critique and its recuperation by the culture industry. Yet he does not make his scepticism instantly consumable, giving the savvy audience a pat on the back by gift-wrapping critique with irony. His strategy is more akin to the post-rock music of his soundtracks in its refusal to deliver the ecstatic climax of the chorus refrain.