

THE AUTHOR AS SELECTOR: TONY COKES' ICONOCLASM



CHRISTOPH COX

*No matter what the people say
These sounds lead the way
It's the order of the day
From your boss deejay
King Stitt, 'Fire Corner' (1969)*

Overall, I see myself more as a reader, or editor, than as a traditional author with all that implies. I enjoy being able to alter and reconstruct existing works to produce differential readings and effects.

Tony Cokes (2015)¹

Over the past several decades, Tony Cokes' artistic practice has offered a sustained critique and reconfiguration of the primary modalities of media and art: image, text, and sound. Challenging the established employments and hierarchies of these registers (the primacy of the image; the supplementing caption or critical text; the supporting soundtrack), Cokes has built a visual arts practice centered around text and sound, conceiving the role of the artist on the model of the editor, critic, theorist, and DJ. In Cokes' work, these three registers meet on the same platform but remain distinct tracks, resisting their fusion into an immersive totality.

1. Jenelle Troxell, "Torture, Terror, Digitality: A Conversation with Tony Cokes," *Afterimage* 43, no. 3 (November/December 2015), 24.

Each appropriates found or readymade material of heterogeneous origin, employs a disparate regime of signification and affect, and flows at a different speed. Cokes' videos thus make considerable demands on the audience.

FROM IMAGE TO TEXT

In his earliest works, *Black Celebration* (1988) and *Fade to Black* (1990), Cokes presented video essays in the tradition of Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, and Harun Farocki. Yet by the early 2000s (with the *Evil* and *Pop Manifestos* series), he had largely reduced the image track to highly-saturated monochromes (more recently, to morphing gelatinous backgrounds) over which animated texts scrolled, appeared as blocks, or flashed word-by-word. A practice that began with the production of video essays was distilled into the presentation of *essays on video*.

A self-described 'post-conceptualist', Cokes acknowledges his debt to conceptual artists such as Art & Language, Adrian Piper, Lawrence Wiener, Jenny Holzer, and Glenn Ligon who construed text as a zero degree of the visual: a visuality that points beyond the image, not to the thing itself, but to the domain of discourse and conceptuality. Yet Cokes' reduction of the image is also driven by other considerations central to his practice.

NON-VISIBILITY

Where earlier works such as *Fade to Black* focused on representations of African Americans in Hollywood film and TV journalism, since 2000 Cokes' work registers the limits of documentary evidence and the peculiar combination of hyper-visibility and

invisibility that marks black subjectivity.² Cokes' solution to this scopic dilemma has been to pursue what he calls 'non-visibility', an effort 'to differ/defer the image or even refuse the image in order to talk about it in a different manner or context.'³ This strategy is made explicit in the 2011 video *Evil.27.Selma*, among Cokes' most visually minimal works. A solid gray background and animated blocks of white text in Helvetica font deliver 'Notes from Selma: On Non-Visibility', an essay by the Alabama-based art/theory collective Our Literal Speed. The text offers a media analysis of political events, considering the transition, during the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, from the culture of sound and imagination fostered by radio to the culture of image and evidence propagated by television. Challenging the received wisdom about media effects, Our Literal Speed argues that the dominance of visuality is politically stultifying while the 'non-visibility' of sound and radio spurs a political imagination that is creative and enduring. The text concludes that, in our current political context, 'most likely, non-visibility will produce the most revolutionary visibilities of all, and we will never see it coming.'⁴

Evil.27.Selma's presentation of this text on politics and civil rights is incongruently framed by quotations from lyrics by the English pop singer Morrissey, three of whose songs constitute the video's soundtrack. However disparate the pairing, Morrissey's songs impart to the text both an infectious buoyancy and a haunting insistence, generating unexpected sound/text conjunctions, such as when the singer croons 'I am now a central part of your mind's landscape' while the text on screen considers the 'complex mental horizon' generated in the listener by radio broadcast, or when Morrissey repeatedly intones 'the closer I get' and 'ah, let me in' as the text reads 'What if we could ride the buses as equals?'

2. As Ralph Ellison remarked in his 1982 introduction to *Invisible Man*: 'Despite the bland assertions of sociologists, "high visibility" actually rendered one *un-visible*.' *The Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 482.

3. Cokes, conversation with Tine Semb in *Polar Green (Mikrohaus++)* (Oslo: Karmaklubb* and ICTWLI, 2019), 47.

4. See <http://ourliteralspeed.com/about>.

[...] What if we could live as equals?’

More than two decades earlier, Cokes’ *Black Celebration* had quoted Morrissey in panels of text montaged with newsreel footage of black riots during the 1960s. The return of this lyrical content in another video on the civil rights movement prompts us to view *Evil.27.Selma* as a revision of the earlier video which underscores a shift in his conception of the potentialities of the image.⁵

FROM THE VISUAL TO THE SONIC

This rethinking of the audio-visual sensorium recalls a central theme in the work of cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (a key source for Cokes), who in his book *Against Race* (2000) argues that the 1990s witnessed the culmination of a ‘displacement of sound from the epicenter of black cultural production’ and ‘the growing dominance of specularly over aurality.’⁶ This ‘rampant iconization’, Gilroy argues, ‘tips the balance from sound and even from print to create new forms of minstrelsy and new remote audiences hungry for the pleasures they display and orchestrate. Music and dance, so long the core of the alternative public world in which dis-sidence was worked into a counterculture, reluctantly yield their traditional places of authority to pseudo-performances and video-based simulations.’⁷

For Gilroy, as for *Our Literal Speed*, sound enables political possibilities that iconization forecloses. Citing the French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas, Gilroy contends that the image generates a ‘self complete world’ that comprehends and encapsulates the real, condensing it into a self-sufficient icon or representation. By contrast, sound (and audio recording) disrupts this sense of completeness, certainty and evidence. It transcends

5. ‘I used to actually work on very specific repertoires of images to construct a kind of counter memory or counter argument looking at the gaps and insufficiencies of the available imagery in say an archival setting,’ Cokes told an interviewer. ‘Then I realized that *not* having the images present has a kind of useful function especially in a cultural and political period where we seem to be inundated by imagery of various kinds.’ Cokes, *Polar Green*, 47.

6. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 191.

7. Gilroy, *Ibid.*, 214. See also 273 and 342.

the given and thus opens futural potentialities.⁸ The music of the Black Atlantic – ‘the slaves’ aural bequest to the future’ – Gilroy writes, was able to exceed the bounds of the commodity form in which it was issued. ‘Dissident, transcendent music was produced and dispatched radically unfinished’, ‘its openness anticipat[ing] the involvement of remote audiences.’⁹

MUSIC/VIDEO

The object of Gilroy’s critique is, in part, MTV and the culture of music videos that emerged in the 1980s and ’90s, a culture that sutured songs to an authorized set of images and thus constrained the aural imagination. More broadly, Gilroy’s critique is directed at the connection between visualization and commodification, the ways that black culture is made to lend ‘its special exotic allure to the marketing of an extraordinary range of commodities and services.’¹⁰ This account helps us to situate and clarify Cokes’ practice, central to which is a deconstruction of the short visual formats emblematic of consumer capitalism: the advertisement, the music video, and the trailer.

A critique of the music video format was key to Cokes’ rethinking of the relationships between image, text, and sound in his work. An initial effort in this direction, *Ad Vice* (1999), retained the visual language of the pop music video (rapidly cut, effects-laden images of a band performing on a sound stage), while inserting solid-colour frames overlaid with text (advertising slogans, critical reflections on consumerism, and quotations from the militant post-punk band Gang of Four’s song ‘Why Theory?’). Cokes quickly undertook a further reduction of the image. The *Pop Manifestos* series (2000–2004) – a set of ‘promotional videos’ for his erstwhile

8. Gilroy, *Ibid*, 191.

9. Gilroy, *Ibid*, 273.

10. Gilroy, *Ibid*, 214.

band Swipe – experimented with a variety of visual strategies, eliminating the last vestiges of music video iconography in favour of pure text animation.

Cokes has also made alternative versions of existing music videos. *killer.mike.karaoke* (2017), for example, takes political rapper Killer Mike's song 'Ric Flair', deletes the image track of the official music video (a dull production in which the rapper lip-syncs and gesticulates to the camera in various locations around Los Angeles after dark), and replaces it simply with text animation of the song's lyrics. Where the official video invites a reading of the song as a generic hip hop celebration of success through musical or athletic genius and bravado, Cokes' version allows us to hear the track as exposing the lure of hip hop or basketball stardom to be a mechanism that interpellates black subjects into consumer capitalism.

SOUND AND AFFECT

Cokes' critique of the representational image operates not only by means of text but also, fundamentally, through music and sound.¹¹ If text addresses the subject at the conceptual or super-representational level, sound and music address it sub-representationally, at the level of affect and disposition.¹² Cokes' soundtracks engage the viewer-auditor viscerally, activating the body's kinesthetic and proprioceptive capacities. The songs that compose these soundtracks ground the attention of viewer-auditors, supplying them with a continuous flow across abrupt visual edits, and conferring a sensual pleasure on often difficult textual material. Cokes' videos draw on all sorts of pop musical genres: rock, r&b, hip hop, industrial music, EDM, post-punk, reggae, house, techno, etc. Yet – as evidenced in projects such as *I!* (2004), *Mikrohaus*, or *the black*

12. Gilroy speaks of a 'politics that exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth.' *The Black Atlantic*:

Modernity and Double Consciousness (London: Verso, 1993), 37. This theme has been developed by other black scholars, for example, Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetic of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 171–231, and Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

atlantic? (2007) and *1!+ (a dubstep primer)* (2014) – he is deeply drawn to studio musics such as dub reggae, minimal techno, and dubstep that summon a particular set of affects – fear, dread, and alienation – and capture what he describes as ‘the dark space of post-industrial capital, tracing its paranoia and decay through sonic fragments, stuttered, displaced, sutured.’¹³

Two works from the 2000s foreground this affective dimension. Incorporating an essay by Brian Massumi that considers the Bush administration’s colour-coded terror alert system, *Evil.12. (edit.b) (fear, spectra & fake emotions)* (2009) reflects on Cokes’ own use of colour as a form of affect modulation and on the political deployment of fear as a quasi-cause through which an indeterminate future threat casts a shadow over the present. Massumi’s text is set to a dub track by the German electronica duo Modeselektor featuring West Indian vocalist Paul St. Hilaire, a key figure in Berlin’s dub techno scene. A jittery organ loop and a stochastic percussion sample are laid over a syncopated, down-tempo hip hop beat, as St. Hilaire delivers ominous vocal fragments soaked in reverb and echo. Produced during the first few years of the Iraq War, the track amplifies the sense of dread and dislocation in Massumi’s text. A later installment in the series, *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)* (2011–2019) reflects more directly on sound, rolling out a playlist of songs used as weapons of torture by the U.S. military during the Iraq war. The text and accompanying soundtrack underscore the capacity of sound as a tool of psychological disorientation, physical pain, and unbearable intensity that coerces without leaving visible marks on the body.

The contrast between these two soundtracks is revealing. Cokes suggests that the rock and metal songs used to amp up American soldiers and to torture infidels are easily conscripted into the logic

13. Cokes, ‘*resonanz.01* (2008–2013) notes/fragments on a case of sonic hauntology’, *Black Camera* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013), 222.

of domination, while dub and dubstep foreground the dread and alienation of our condition and, at the same time, work to exorcise it. Taken together, *Evil.12* and *Evil.16* confirm theorist and dubstep producer Steve Goodman's claim that 'sound systems (consisting of bodies, technologies, and acoustic vibrations, all in rhythmic sympathy)' are 'deployed in a war of mood, sensation, and information' and are able, at once, to unleash violence and to 'transduce, even temporarily, pervasive fear [...] into momentary joy through the ritualization of aggression in collective dance.'¹⁴

GHOSTS AND DUBS

To dub is to double, to form a *doppelgänger*, a *duppy* (Jamaican patois for 'ghost'). All audio recordings are ghosts or revenants in a basic sense: traces of past that refuse to remain there, constantly returning to haunt the present and the future. But dub (and the dub continuum that includes trip hop, jungle, minimal techno, and dubstep) revels in this aural spectrality, employing reverb, delay, echo, fragmentation, and erasure to generate aural traces, audible absences, and other uncanny effects. For Cokes, the dub continuum powerfully manifests a sonic 'hauntology', philosopher Jacques Derrida's term for *the being of the ghostly* (at once dead and alive, virtual and actual, past and future – but never truly present).¹⁵

At stake in hauntological musics, for Cokes, is not simply the soundscape of contemporary capitalism but specifically the spectre of blackness that haunts it. While reggae is filled with tales of wrenching displacement through the Atlantic slave trade and the desire for a return to Zion, dub's hauntology calls into question both origin and end, *ousia* and *parousia*. As Cokes conceives it, the music of the Black Atlantic 'unsettl[es] any no-

14. Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 6, 173.

15. See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). The term 'hauntology' came into musical discourse in 2006 via blog posts by cultural theorist Mark Fisher (k-punk) and music critic Simon Reynolds (blissblog).

tion of fixed historical origin, or essentialist notion of blackness, and think[s] instead about how black cultural practices inhabit, shadow, and shift modern cultural forms in unexpected ways and contexts.¹⁶ Adopting this anti-essentialist stance and contesting discourses of cultural appropriation and authenticity, Cokes hears the dub continuum, for example, in the music of the post-punk band Joy Division, the subject of his work-in-progress *resonanz.01*. Dub's hauntology enables Joy Division to detourn 'white rock' and its obsessions with rawness, liveness, spontaneity, and authenticity in favour of a studio music that affirms the spectral character of recording and explores the dark spaces of modernity. Moreover, for Cokes, the visual reduction characteristic of Joy Division's records enables a focus on *sound*, allowing the band's music to serve as a hauntological vector for what many have called the 'dub virus'.¹⁷

SAMPLES AND VERSIONS

Cokes adopts dub not only as sound and theme but as *method* – the method of 'versioning'. In late 1960s Jamaican musical culture, 'versions' were initially simply reggae songs stripped of their vocal tracks and released as instrumental B-sides for 'selectors' (DJs) to play as backing tracks for 'deejays' (MCs) to 'toast' or 'talk over' at live, outdoor sound system parties. Soon after, producers such as King Tubby and Lee 'Scratch' Perry began to think of the 'version' as a thing of its own rather than a supplement to the original, a 'dub' mix that foregrounded the drum and bass and saturated the track with studio effects. Eventually, the meanings of 'version' and 'dub' converged, signifying more or less radical remixes. 'Versioning' also came to be connected with the etymo-

16. Cokes, 'resonanz.01', 221. See also Cokes, *Polar Green*, 50–57.

17. For an overview of this literature, see Steve Goodman, '1985: Dub Virology', in *Sonic Warfare*, 155–62.

logically related expression ‘versus’ (both from *vertere*, to turn), a remix staged as a ‘soundclash’ between two rival producers or DJs.¹⁸

Insofar as he borrows his content almost entirely from existing sources, Cokes can be thought of as working within the lineage of ‘appropriation art’ associated with visual artists of the ‘Pictures’ generation such as Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler and Richard Prince. Yet Cokes’ practice is more fully aligned with appropriation strategies in music – with the sampling, versioning, dubbing, and remixing characteristic of DJ culture. DJ culture dispenses with the idea of ‘songs’ ‘created’ by ‘original’ artists and instead conceives the musical domain in terms of ‘tracks’, portions of a more or less anonymous sonic flow available for sampling and mixing in affectionate or critical ways. The provisional or open status of Cokes’ work is evident in his frequent use of the terms ‘edit’, ‘version’, ‘mix’, ‘demo’, ‘part’, and ‘fragment’ in video titles, and in titles that often read like file names or ID3 tags.¹⁹ The serial nature of Cokes’ practice also contributes to the sense that his videos are not ‘works’ but ‘tracks’.²⁰ Individual pieces in a series function visually and conceptually like cumulative variations, responses to current conditions and elements in an open whole. Affirming both ‘the cut’ and ‘the mix’, the DJ, producer, or remixer wants the audience to recognize the sample and its source, and also to appreciate its insertion into a different sonic flow. Likewise, Cokes’ textual quotations often retain the framing mechanisms of their sources, including chapter titles, section headings, page numbers, footnotes, and even, in a recent video, the list of Powerpoint slides from an appropriated lecture.²¹

This process of ‘cut’ and ‘mix’ enables us to make sense of a peculiar feature of Cokes’ videos: that they are at once polemical and dispassionate, didactic and deadpan. They feature highly-charged

18. For example, Scientist vs. Prince Jammy or Massive Attack vs. Mad Professor.

19. Such as *leeds.talk.04*; *c.my.skull.2*; *Evil.66.2*:[DT Trilogy 2], etc.

20. For example, the *Evil* series, in which there are currently more than seventy installments.

21. See *Before and After the Studio*, Pt. 2 (*Everythingism TM*) (2019).

texts/sounds and carry a powerful left-political critique; yet these materials are presented as found objects and delivered as provisional tracks. This is precisely the role of the DJ or ‘selector’: to serve as the filter for a cultural flow, to survey the fraught political and cultural landscape and select a collection of items for the audience’s attention.²² Operating in the mediascape of ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’, Cokes acknowledges that every selection will be a version. Yet the withdrawal of the image deflates the power of the dominant versions, enabling Cokes to amplify their ‘sinister resonances’ and to create discordant remixes that force us to re-hear, re-see, and re-think the flows of information that stream across the screens, pages, and spaces of our lives.²³

22. See producer Kevin Martin, quoted in Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (Boston: Little Brown, 1998), 280, and Kevin Kelly, ‘Gossip Is Philosophy (Interview with Brian Eno)’ *Wired* (May 1995) accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/1995/05/eno-2/>.

23. See Cokes, *Polar Green*, 48. On Joseph Conrad’s phrase ‘sinister resonance’, see David Toop, *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* (New York: Continuum, 2010), and Julie Beth Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).