

# Tony Cokes

## Music, text, politics

Exhibition until 7 February 2022



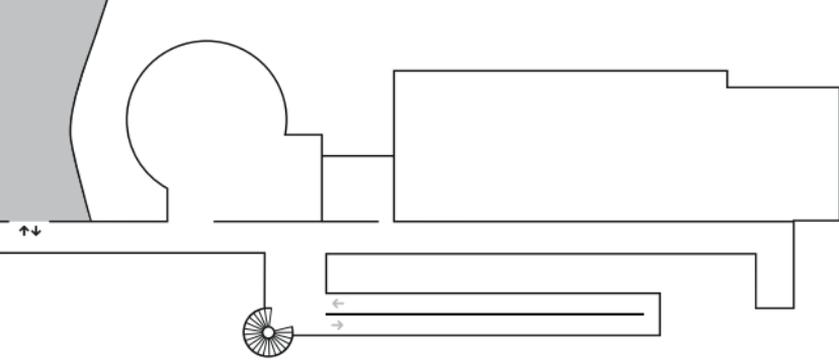
*Black Celebration*, 1988. Video, b/w, stereo, 17:11 min. Courtesy of Greene Naftali, New York; Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles; and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

‘Electronica and Black cultures both critique Western ideas of material progress and temporal development through ruptures, accidents, and repetitions.’

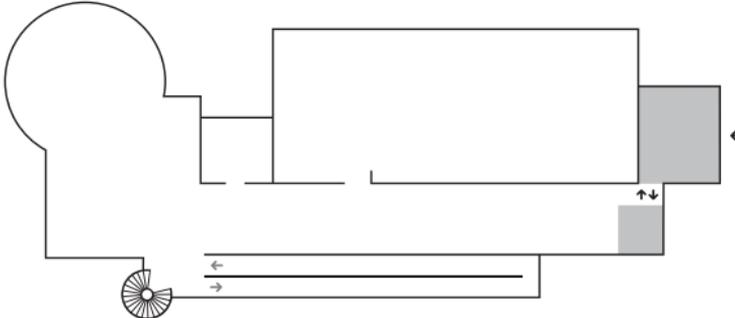
**Recommended itinerary**

Meier Building

**Level 2**



**Level 0**



IN OUR PRESENT multi-screen and hyper-informed (or uninformed) context, this exhibition invites us to change the way we process information through reading text, seeing and responding to images, listening to music, and absorbing the political and advertising slogans that assail us at every step.

Since the late 1980s, the American artist Tony Cokes (b. 1956) has developed a precise, pared-down and powerful visual style, characterised by his use of text often superimposed on vibrantly monochromatic backgrounds, to create digitised, discursive slide shows, light boxes, and printed matter. These works confront social and political hierarchies and prejudice. Through them, he challenges the ideological abuse of music and, oftentimes, pre-existing text and image.

Identifying himself as a post-conceptualist, Cokes acknowledges the influence of conceptual artists such as Art & Language, Adrian Piper, Lawrence Weiner, and Jenny Holzer on his work. While studying photography, video, and sculpture, he encountered a number of artists working in moving images, particularly video, who often placed this medium at the service of political discourse, including Dara Birnbaum and Yvonne Rainer. He became interested in editing and the idea of the version or 'mix', and in how these strategies could provoke a different way of reading images.

Through his videos, Cokes thus explores and subverts cultural and political discourses embedded in pop music, electronics, television, film, and art itself. He draws from popular and theoretical texts and quotes from a wide range of figures such as Paul Gilroy, Louis Althusser, Malcolm X, David Bowie, Aretha Franklin, Mark Fisher, Public Enemy, Morrissey, and Donald Trump, combining them with the intention of making a political and social critique of capitalism.

## The seen and the unseen

That critique of capitalism is evident in *Black Celebration* (1988), in which Cokes also focuses on issues such as racial representation, and the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility that characterises black subjectivity, a theme drawn in part from W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness and Ralph Ellison's seminal novel *Invisible Man* (1952). In this early work, the artist combines images of the 1960s riots in the black neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, Watts, Boston, Newark, and Detroit with popular music in the place of the customary news or documentary commentary. Instead he adds text comments taken from sources as diverse as Barbara Kruger, Morrissey, Depeche Mode's Martin L Gore, and the Situationist International, through which he creates a scathing counter-reading with the aim of re-examining the motivation for the riots and looting, and questioning their characterisation in the media as criminal. Looting is thus portrayed as a means to overcome the power of racialised capitalism and a rebellion against commodification.

This exhibition also features *Mikrohaus, or the black atlantic?* (2006–08), a work that examines the links between 'minimal' techno music and race. *Mikrohaus* explores the transatlantic origins of minimal techno in a story that connects Berlin, Cologne, and London with Chicago and Detroit, among others, while at the same time examining post-colonial histories. Though the exhibition combines a variety of textual sources in a way that has become characteristic within Cokes's work, it draws most heavily from the music critic Philip Sherburne's writings on techno and house music, and also includes key excerpts from Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). The film thus mixes reflections on a number of interrelated musical genres, minimal aesthetics, and socio-political power relations. In the context of MACBA and the museum's broader agenda, the film links and furthers the investigation of a rigorously minimal abstraction that nevertheless has a powerful political content and the deeper examination of the connections between art, politics, and popular culture.

## ***Disco isn't dead. It has gone to war.***

Two works shown in the atrium on the museum's ground floor reflect on the ways in which music has been used ideologically, during war, and as a form of torture. They introduce one of Cokes's most well-known bodies of work, the *Evil* series (ongoing), with another work included elsewhere in the exhibition. *Evil.12 (edit.b) (fear, spectra & fake emotions)* (2009) denounces the Bush administration's terrorist alert coding system as a method of modulating people's behaviour and emotions. Meanwhile, *Evil.16 (Torture.Musik)* (2009–11) draws from an essay titled 'Disco Inferno' by the writer Moustafa Bayoumi, first published in *The Nation* in 2005, that examined the military use of music and sound as a weapon, with particular reference to US operations and torture programmes during the war in Iraq. Cokes's investigation into the use of music and sound as a weapon by the military, security services, and police as a source of psychological manipulation and even torture can be seen as a parallel to the investigation into the abuses of power made by Forensic Architecture and other groups denouncing human rights violations.

## **Façades**

In the windows overlooking Carrer de Montalegre, the exhibition presents the light boxes featuring, the texts that also comprise the video *Face Value* (2015) in still format. Together they comprise a project that was started in 2006 which employed the credits of the film *Manderlay* by the controversial director Lars von Trier, and later combined with statements the director made in Cannes in 2011. *Manderlay* was the second part of von Trier's idea for a trilogy titled *USA-Land of Opportunities*, imagining a plantation in rural Alabama in 1933 where slavery had not been abolished. The film is replete with racist terminology. Cokes' work also includes charged historical quotations and three songs by David Bowie including *Young Americans* (the soundtrack to von Trier's credits) and the words of similarly controversial singer Kanye West, known for his provocative public statements. Megalomania, declarations of love for fascism, racist remarks, and other statements become even more shocking when extracted and magnified.

The exhibition continues on the second floor of the Museum in a space that further amplifies Cokes's concerns while opening up other avenues for reflection.

## «Ideas you can dance to»

A third work from Cokes' extended *Evil* series is shown here. *Evil.27. Selma* (2011) features one of the artist's most minimalist formulations: a grey background with excerpts from the essay *Notes from Selma: On Non-Visibility* by the Alabama-based artistic collective Our Literal Speed. The text is a media-based analysis of the evolution of the civil rights movement in the United States that highlights the contrast between the culture of sound and imagination associated with radio and the transition to spectacle with the coming of television. According to OLS, in our current political context the non-visibility of radio is the most revolutionary form of visibility. Fragments of Morrissey's songs punctuate the video, creating contrast and a new layer of possible meanings to decipher. The title refers to the Alabama town of Selma, the starting point of three protest marches in 1965 that were landmark events of the American Civil Rights movement and the struggle for voting rights.

Further into the same gallery is Cokes's homage to the soul and gospel singer, musician, and activist Aretha Franklin (1942- 2018). *The Queen is Dead... Fragment 1* (2019) is one of two works that explore Franklin's political involvement and symbolism. These works employ a title taken from an album by The Smiths, but which also refers to Franklin's status as the Queen of Soul, and brings together various sources that explore the political resonance of Franklin's work and legacy, to the soundtrack of her own music and unparalleled voice. The soundtrack of *Fragment 2* also features a techno track, alongside Franklin's music, by DJs Floorplan and Robert Hood. In both cases, the videos serve as a reminder not only of Franklin's enormous talent, but also of her support for the civil rights movement, and especially for women as symbols of hope, (political) power, strength and beauty.

## **Beyond black over white**

*The Vienna Guide* (2018) is a collection of travel notes edited by Tony Cokes in which he describes an imagined Vienna by appropriating and mixing historical figures, tourist clichés, club culture, and comments on technology. Cokes's proposal is a discursive platform about future possibilities and identities, and it features three stickers of images from his video *Could You Visit Me in Dreams?* (2018).

Cokes edits and organises the text of his portfolio *The Black Banal* (2019) around excerpts taken from an artist's diary, a newspaper article, a faxed joke, and an essay from a catalogue modified to look like an artist's statement. The end result is a series of screenprints in the form of a veritable graphic explosion.

## **Pop Manifestos, collective works**

The *Pop Manifestos*, most of which are exhibited here, demonstrate the role Cokes sets for himself in his artistic production process. The credits of the pieces are packed with names, references, and indications of sources and collaborators. He also tells us that all the unattributed texts have been taken from Morrissey's lyrics, one of his biggest influences, yet also voices his disappointment in a figure who has been associated with far right ideologies through his recent statements.

The series begins with *Ad Vice* (1999), a compendium of appropriated commercials and rock lyrics with video-clip aesthetics, where Cokes addresses the audience directly with questions and suggestions in order to subtly critique this language and the relationship between desire and commerce in capitalist culture. Cokes signs the piece as a member of the artistic collective X-PRZ, while the music is by his conceptual band SWIPE. Most of the other works in the series take the form of promotional videos for his group and provide an ironic analysis of the music industry and its subgenres. *2@* (2000), dedicated to Dan Graham, takes as its starting point the pioneering video artist's *Rock My Religion* and reviews the history of rock from the sixties onwards. *3# Manifesto A Track #1* (2001) is inspired by a song by the artist Seth Price and which is a reconstructed version of 'The Model,' a track by Kraftwerk. *5% Manifesto E* (2001) continues to combine a strict graphic presentation with texts referring to pop music as a cultural form to the soundtrack of a song by SWIPE. *6^* (2001) features a large amount of text on a blue background, while a song by the band Appendix poses similar questions but in the familiar language of rock lyrics.

*Pause* (2004) unites two of Cokes's many interests: cultural identity and pop music, contrasting the formats of contemporary electronic music with those of the African cultural diaspora. The soundtrack uses the mash-up technique. According to the artist, 'electronica and Black cultures both critique Western ideas of material progress and temporal development through ruptures, accidents, and repetitions.' In *Headphones* (2004) Cokes explores the social value of music for channelling violence beyond the economic profit it generates. The text used is by the economist Jacques Attali, author of *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977), and Cokes argues that piracy, for example, is not an aberration but the logical consequence of the marketing of music reproduction technologies. Originating in a lecture, *1!* (2004) is constructed as a revisiting of Cokes's record collection, featuring over a hundred albums he purchased between 1997 and 2002. This annotated discography is accompanied by excerpts from the critic Christoph Cox's essay on the forms and ideology of rock as well as images from an old military documentary explaining how to project a film. In this way, Cokes identifies the figure of the projectionist with that of today's DJ, VJ or music producer, roles that displace the usual conception of the artist or musician.

Separate but closely related to the series of manifestos, *killer.mike.karaoke* (2017) mixes the lyrics of two songs by rapper Killer Mike with the music of one of them, *Ric Flair*. The decision to dispense with the aesthetic cliché of rap music videos causes the lyrics to be received in a completely different way.

This first solo exhibition by Tony Cokes in Spain aims to be a gateway to the exploration of what the artist calls the 'representational regimes of image and sound'. Cokes proposes a radical new way of understanding images and experiencing sound, and invites us to consider the political implications of everything we read, see and hear.

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Exhibition organised by  
MACBA Museu d'Art  
Contemporani de Barcelona.  
(MACBA)

**Curated by**  
Anna Cerdà i Callís

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### **Publication**

*Quaderns portàtils, 38.*

This digital publication dedicated to Tony Cokes (which can be downloaded for free) includes a selection of his works and a text by the philosopher and critic Christoph Cox. Cokes uses, mixes and samples animated text, images and monochrome slides in his unique visual style, tackling topics such as minimal techno, pop culture, the use of music as a form of torture, the diaspora and the black cultural legacy.

A proposal to re-think the flow of information that reaches us in the era of fake news and “alternative facts.”

### **MACBA App**

Enjoy the explanatory texts and audio-descriptions of a selection of works from the exhibition with the MACBA app.

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### **Visits**

Check out the complete schedule of visits at [macba.cat](http://macba.cat).

### **Accessibility visits**

Visits for the hearing or visually impaired, and accessibility supports for ‘Let’s talk about...’ are available by prior request to [educacio@macba.cat](mailto:educacio@macba.cat).

### **Let’s talk about...**

Updated schedule and more information at [macba.cat](http://macba.cat).

### **Opening talk**

The talk features Tony Cokes and Beatriz Leal Riesco, critic and curator specialising in African cinema and art and in the black diaspora. Based on the works in the exhibition, they will reflect on issues of visibility, appropriation, and the recoding of representational regimes, aspects that have marked Cokes’s practice for three decades.

More information at [macba.cat](http://macba.cat).

### **Friends of MACBA**

Check out the exclusive visits for the Friends of MACBA at [macba.cat](http://macba.cat).

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### **Opening times**

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 11 am to 7:30 pm  
Tuesday closed  
(except for public holidays)  
Saturday, 10 am to 8 pm  
Sunday and public holidays,  
10 am to 3 pm

Every Saturday, from 4 to 8 pm, entrance to the Museum is free.

The Museum entry ticket is valid for a month.  
Activate it at the ticket desk and visit us as often as you like.

### **MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona**

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