

# Is evil something you are, or something you do?

"Literature is not innocent," declares George Bataille in *La littérature et le mal* (1958). "It is guilty and should admit itself so." Bataille explores the interconnection between words, flesh, and devil, observing how literature allows us to face the worst in life, the horror, and confront it. Since the mid-1980s

Tony Cokes has deconstructed popular media, observing how issues of race, gender, and identity are represented and perpetuated socially and politically. Cokes's *Evil series* (2001-ongoing), characterized by a unique graphic style and the use of pop and dance music, appropriates widely circulated (mainly

non-literary) texts to offer new and contradictory readings questioning the complexity of our current times. Here Attilia Fattori Franchini speaks to Cokes about the use of language as political and social tool, how power is mediated, and how subversive it can be to invert the relationship between text and image.

TONY COKES AND ATTILIA FATTORI FRANCHINI  
IN CONVERSATION

**ATTILIA FATTORI FRANCHINI**  
What are you working on at the moment?

**TONY COKES** A few things. One is a commission where I'm combining a framing of issues of race in relation to modernist architecture (often coded as male and white) with an R&B soundtrack that takes a black feminist viewpoint. The project will be sited in the residence of a black architect, and also will collapse and tweak ideas of interior and exterior, domesticity and business, public and private space. I plan to use a new color palette that will reflect on desires to integrate natural references into a highly constructed environment. Simultaneously, I'm working on a few installation projects for 2019-2020 where I will continue deploying existing short media works in a variety of scales and technologies. I'm also looking to collaborate on ways to incorporate more performative elements into upcoming media installation works, and exploring potential outdoor sites for media interventions.

**AFF** In addition to being an artist, you are also a teacher at Brown University. Does one role inform the other?

**TC** Absolutely! I learn a lot from teaching and regular exchanges with deeply engaged students and colleagues. It's also a wonderful distraction from my often solitary ideas and preoccupations. Good conversations, even when not directly related to my current projects, tend to improve my acuity and perspective when I return to whatever work I'm doing. Over my years of teaching, a few former students have become close friends or collaborators. Besides, when I was younger, I often felt that my practice might be strangely pedagogical, a way of teaching or demonstrating potential reading methods, not unlike the way I understood a project like Hollis Frampton's films.

**AFF** You've had a very busy few months, with two solo shows, your participation to the Berlin Biennale, and the new works produced as part of *Could you visit me in dreams* recently shown in Vienna. Many of these projects featured works from the *Evil series*, in which you purposely present information deprived of its original visual context to highlight the force of different mediums and their impact when consciously manipulated. Why are these works so relevant now?

**TC** One possibility is that, for better or worse, we live in a period where the production of comfortable feelings and affects, or fearful, hateful responses, has overwhelmed the "truth" of specific events, or their representations. Over the trajectory of my practice I have become interested in how lies, highly contingent statements, or limited, constructed images can obtain the effect of truth through repetition and circulation via media. In the *Evil series* specifically I have been concerned with taking widely circulated material that I believe has been poorly read (or too quickly forgotten) and providing new reading or legibility conditions for those texts. Isolating texts from their original structure and juxtaposing them with sonic elements may allow divergent potential meanings to emerge, or allow the viewer to become aware of instabilities in the forms we think we understand. Often the decontextualized material (where we don't immediately know the source of the text, or who's speaking) permits a reading that simply wouldn't be possible under normal conditions.

**AFF** How has the evolution of technology, and therefore media creation and distribution, impacted your work?

**TC** Perhaps shifts and flexibilities in production technologies have permitted my ideas to migrate across diverse scales and contexts, and enhanced collaborative possibilities—even when often researching and working alone. Yet I retain a deep skepticism about notions of overall social progress as a result of these changes.

Opposite, top - *Evil.66.1*, 2016, *On Non-Visibility* installation view at Greene Naftali, New York, 2018. © Tony Cokes. Courtesy: the artist; Greene Naftali, New York and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York. Photo: Gustavo Murillo  
Opposite, bottom - *Evil 35: Carlin / Owners*, 2012, *On Non-Visibility* installation view at Greene Naftali, New York, 2018. © Tony Cokes. Courtesy: the artist; Greene Naftali, New York and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York. Photo: Gustavo Murillo

"There's nothing  
I love more  
than women,

You and I are not  
in the big club.



The space – cavernous, dim -  
works against normative  
representations  
of space and time

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IS EVIL SOMETHING YOU ARE, OR SOMETHING YOU DO?  
A. FATTORI FRANCHINI

For example, the last fifty years have also produced greater social inequalities, and we are currently experiencing a period where irrational hatreds and lies are being circulated, repeated, and accelerated. I see my practice as a reworking of visual forms and methods from conceptual art, structuralist film, or minimal, modernist design as a way to present political and critical ideas about contemporary society, particularly to explore its modes and rhetorics of mediation and power. The soundtracks are intended to give the works a visceral, affective resonance. I'm intrigued by the possibility that ideas or concepts can be experienced at a bodily level. I would propose that we can dance, and perhaps think, simultaneously, and socially, not in atomized, mediated isolation. Clubs often function as social models where complex and differential identities can thrive. This is probably why dance musics and club cultures are resources (and sometimes themes) for my works. I accumulate texts on topics that interest or bother me, consider structures for presenting and editing their content, and ideas for sounds that might enhance or interfere with the experience of reading them. I repeat the elements and juxtapositions, and construct "versions," often over a long period, trying to find relationships that potentially shed light on the process of how our subjectivities and experiences are produced via the images and concepts that circulate around and through us historically and daily.

AFF

As part of the 2018 Berlin Biennale, you presented a broad selection of eleven works and organized a series of events—club nights. What did they consist of? I wonder what happens once a bodily experience is added to your practice.

TC

My participation in the Berlin Biennale was in many respects a dream project. Five years ago Gabi Ngcobo had asked me about contexts I imagined for showing my work, and I responded with something like: "In a club, or in a bar." She remembered my idea, and quoted it back to me via email in June 2017 when she had already found a space for the project. Ngcobo's vision, our mutually articulated dream, was both to present a deep array of my media work in an amazingly funky, industrial basement space, and to encourage an expansive context for considering its sources and implications. That's the spirit in which the club nights were developed by the curatorial team with my consultation, and in response to my engagement with club methodologies and cultures. The events featured a group of multi-genre, cross-generational artists like Paul St. Hilaire & Rhauder, Gigsta, Kode 9, Opium Hum, Mark Ernestus, and Sarah Farina. Additionally, the Biennale supported two performative interventions called "Tony Cokes Remixes" developed by choreographer Andros Zins-Browne in collaboration with Will Rawls and Jenn Rosenblit. My initial, rather cryptic mandate to Zins-Browne and Rawls was "No score, no decor," which meant that they were free to take up my video as material to be reworked and transformed through movement and imagination, rather than treated like a given text to be cited in traditional ways, like a musical score or visual background. Of course they contradicted my advice at multiple points!

AFF

Your work is also defined by a sharp disillusioned humor, a smirking attitude, which reminds me of some of Don DeLillo's literary work, questioning the United States and its operative system from within, while highlighting the induced constant sense of panic and possible imminent disaster perpetuated by external forces. Terror and its political definition through color has been a focus of the work *Evil.12* (2009) and much of your work post-9/11. Can you tell me more about it?

TC

I think my work has a dry, skeptical, perversely humorous aspect, but my sources tend not to be literary (though I do admire the bits I've read of DeLillo's work). While my works' topics are rather

serious, I've always felt strongly that a certain playfulness usefully suggests that there are alternative ways of framing and contesting so-called normative history or reality. If meaning is "settled" and can't be reframed or remade, we're really in trouble. Panic, or cynical acceptance in the face of power, its rhetorics, and its representations, has always seemed rather useless to me. Therefore, humor, like anger, provides energy toward critique.

AFF

Your text sources are nevertheless extremely varied, from Barbara Kruger to the Situationist International, Kanye West to Donald Trump, Martin Luther King to the Bible, club descriptions, news, political speeches, stand-up comedy, and much else as well as your own writing. Once selected and reappropriated, these texts become fluid material, anew in their essence. I find it extremely subversive to decouple language from its original visual context, allowing new and imaginative readings of historical, social, and political moments. Do you think media deconstruction can lead to emancipatory politics?

TC

Strangely, acts of copying and recontextualization can be powerful gestures with political implications. Perhaps they can act as models for ways of reframing and acting in the world. I have long been curious about how texts, voices, and points of view are constructed, reproduced, circulated, and manipulated. I study and use simple methods for suggesting how repositioning commonly "understood" tropes and meanings can amount to a form of civil disobedience, and underline a reimagination of the forms, conditions, and possibilities of the social.

AFF

Rewriting factual narratives, or offering new versions and new visual formats for them, can be an act of disobedience?

TC

I think those are fair assessments. The desire of many displaced, alienated subjects to revise and reconstruct "official" discourses and images, and thereby contradict the received ideas they inherited or to which they have been violently subjected, is a common motivation for cultural producers since modernism. I've never had much interest in "originality;" rather, I am engaged in processes that suggest other productive possibilities and imaginative outcomes for existing materials and so-called facts or knowledges.

AFF

I am interested in your color palette choices. Do they have political or psychological implications?



No video,  
no photography,  
no recording, no  
clocks,

Anyone you might want  
to be here with you, but  
is not here now, will have  
to hear your mistaken  
memories, your rumors,  
your lies, your silences

Don't forget  
to go home  
(If you have a home)

I won't reveal any names

Anyone who knows me  
can probably guess  
where I am from reading  
the text

Right - *Evil.12*. (edit.b): *Fear, Spectra & Fake Emotions*, 2009, *On Non-Visibility* installation view at Greene Naftali, New York, 2018. © Tony Cokes. Courtesy: the artist; Greene Naftali, New York and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York. Photo: Gustavo Murillo  
Opposite - *The Vienna Guide*, 2018. Published by saxpublishers, Vienna; Could you visit me in dreams? (stills), 2018. © Tony Cokes. Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

If you need souvenirs,  
it might be better to  
order them over the  
weekend internet – from  
your brightly lit home –

There is nothing  
to exchange, to distract  
from this minimal,  
grandiose, real-time,  
gorgeous, social illusion!

Many here are  
strangers,  
like me

this will create is a great  
business opportunity  
because it will lead to  
more weapon sales,

Disco isn't dead.

It has gone  
to war.

**TC** I like to use preexisting reference systems whenever possible. Simple structures often help me think, and perhaps produce the effect that my choices are meaningful. Red, white, and blue used in the majority of *Evil series* works obviously relate to the colors of the American flag, but in some cases may also reference the British flag (say in *Evil.16: Torture Musik* [2009–2011]). Overall this color palette can be seen as a parody of the US flag's emergence as a ubiquitous and disturbing patriotic symbol post-9/11. In *Evil.12*, I coordinated the color and sequence of backgrounds with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (now retired) terror alert system, registered predominantly in yellow and orange. I also code some works in a gray, black, and white monochrome color set probably to enhance their generic, "modern," or minimal qualities.

**AFF** Your recent show at Greene Naftali (2018) was titled *On Non-Visibility*. The show took its title from the work *Evil 27, Selma* (2011), which appropriates a text written by the Alabama-based collective Our Literal Speed unfolding the relationship between image circulation and political effect and affect. Can you say more about it?



**TC** I was lucky enough to cross paths with Our Literal Speed as a participant in some of their early large-scale "events series" and then more informally over the last decade. I continue to find inspiration and useful perspectives in their diverse, often rather acidic works. I particularly appreciate that they are at pains to confuse or dissolve boundaries often considered clear and firm, like those between art history and critical theory versus so-called artistic practices. Their insistent view, for example, that art historical scholarship has performative dimensions, and that artistic practices can be scholarly, makes sense to me given my own hybrid approach. Specifically, the text "On Non-Visibility" developed a very astute, counterintuitive reading of the civil rights movement from the perspective of shifting media forms (tracing a parallel movement from radio to television), and then boldly questions the primacy and effects of visual representation in social change. As I am deeply invested in the potentials of sound as a form of political (yet imaginative) representation and as an affective mode of social historiography, reading the article provoked me to consider how to translate this short text into a different, legible-audible form. I am now developing an adaptation of a recent OLS text that excavates critical possibilities via reconsidering historical modernisms through the skewed frame of contemporary works juxtaposed with a techno-rock soundscape.

**AFF** By employing collaboration as an active tool toward emerging new critical perspectives, your practice opens to unexpected outcomes and possibilities. Do you have parts of it where you are less willing to dialogue?

**TC** This is a difficult question to answer, if I understand you. I appreciate contaminations and imagine that I would be open to almost any divergence that emerges from the process of encoding and reading. Yet I'm aware that sometimes a viewer will find readings or associations based on their knowledge or desire that I didn't, or even couldn't, intend or control. I am usually intrigued by what I think of as productive differences, and those divergences certainly animate my work, even if I can't predict them in any precise way. I would definitely say that what I bring to the components I redeploys is perhaps at a certain distance from, or has contradictory relation to, the intent of the materials that I rework. I like to believe that desiring, critical, interested readings are the most productive, but I am aware that others may find this possibility uncomfortable.

**AFF** We met through the exhibition *Could you visit me in dreams?* (2018), for which you wrote an inspiring alternative guide to Vienna. Encompassing historical facts, club descriptions, Franz Kafka and Sigmund Freud anecdotes, current news, and your own writings, it offers a diverse if not unique view of the city as a site of encounter and confrontation. The text was presented as a three-channel video installation and published as a book under the title *The Vienna Guide*. I wonder if, by returning to a textual form, your work might take a new, more intimate affectual dimension?

**TC** I must admit that I'm attracted to producing more folds within my practice and process right now. The idea of redoubling aspects of my work with text and reading protocols across diverse forms has become pleasurable over the last few years. In producing *Could you visit me in dreams?* with you, I was struck by the fact that while the form and technique are obviously similar to my ordinary process, the orientation toward a printed text format implied a more intimate scale and mode of address than normal for my work, and I find that multiplicity within sameness across media a really exciting space to inhabit and contemplate. While content remains related, it travels through space and time and contaminates viewers/readers at different speeds, scales, or intensities. Perhaps it's just strange to think about the passage of texts and concepts from a website, to an electronic file, to a video animation, into a book or print, with scale shifts, editorial decisions, and different associations and temporalities recorded in each migratory stage.

**AFF** You define your work as pedagogical—in fact it gives its viewers the possibility of learning and unlearning what is known to allow unexpected and contradictory readings of the complexity that defines our current times. Would you call yourself an activist?

**TC** Often because I seek to make the political stakes and potentials for form, history, rhetoric, context, or modes of representation explicit in my work, I've been asked if I'm comfortable being seen as an activist or propagandist. I will simply state that I don't mind having my work viewed in relation to politics, and that I find that politics has a variety of practical forms that we encounter as circulated via media daily. However, I wouldn't claim that my works are the same as social rebellions or street actions. I happen to believe that our lives and the cultures we produce and reproduce are never neutral. I think it's helpful to try to remain aware that many common phenomena are deeply political. Their ubiquity may often distract us from their ideological meanings and resonant psychosocial effects.

Previous spread - *Evil 16, Torture Musik* (still), 2011. © Tony Cokes. Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York  
Above - *Evil.27.Selma*, 2011, *On Non-Visibility* installation view at Greene Naftali, New York, 2018. © Tony Cokes. Courtesy: the artist; Greene Naftali, New York and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York. Photo: Gustavo Murillo  
Opposite, left - *Could you visit me in dreams?* installation views at Galerie Nathalie Halgand, Vienna, 2018. Curated by Attilia Fattori Franchini. © Tony Cokes. Courtesy: the artist and Green Naftali, New York  
Opposite, right - *Could you visit me in dreams?*, 2018, *Could you visit me in dreams?* installation views at Galerie Nathalie Halgand, Vienna, 2018. Curated by Attilia Fattori Franchini. © Tony Cokes. Courtesy: the artist and Green Naftali, New York



**Attilia Fattori Franchini** is an independent curator and writer based in London and Milan. She is cofounder of the nonprofit platforms bubblebyte.org and Opening Times and contributes essays and reviews to international publications such as *Mousse*, and *Flash Art International*. She is the curator of BMW Open Work by Frieze; Curva Blu, a residency project in Favignana, Sicily; the Emergent section of miart, Milan; and the latest edition of the Termoli Art Prize, Italy. Recent projects include *Could you visit me in dreams?* as part of curated\_by 2018, Vienna; *Red Lake* at Point Centre for Contemporary Art, Nicosia (2018); and ARS17+ at Kiasma, Museum, Helsinki (2017). Past projects include *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Roman Road, London (2017); *Céu Torto*, Boatos Fine Arts, São Paulo (2017); *Dawning*, Capitán Gallo, Mexico City (2017); *Morning über, evening oscillators*, Seventeen, London (2016); *Lonesome Wife*, Seventeen, London (2016); *Europa and the Bull* at LambdaLambdaLambda, Pristina, Kosovo (2016); *O44s, Temra and David* in 4 parts, Sorbus, Helsinki (2016); Yves Scherer, *Snow White* and *The Huntsman*, Mexico City (2016); *Kuvan Kevät*, Kuvat Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki (2015); *Bold Tendencies*, London (2015); and *HAND*, Barbican Centre, London (2013).

**Tony Cokes** makes video, installation, print, sound, and other works that reframe appropriated texts to reflect on capitalism, subjectivity, knowledge, and pleasure. He deploys sound as a crucial, intertextual element, complicating minimal visuals. He has shown works internationally at such venues as Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2002, 1993, 1991); the 1<sup>st</sup> Berlin Documentary Forum, House of World Cultures (2010); *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art (1994); documenta X, Kassel, Germany (1997); *Our Literal Speed*, University of Chicago (2009); and the 10<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale (2018). Cokes resides in Providence, Rhode Island, where he is a professor and director of undergraduate studies in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. His work is represented by Greene Naftali, New York.