

MUNICH



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



Tony Cokes, *Evil.80.Emathy?*, 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.

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.Emathy?* 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