

#SOLO/MULTI

15 July – 20 October 2021

TONY COKES
This isn't Theory.
This is History

Mallah said
the site was
"an unknown place
which they call
'the disco.'"

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Tony Cokes

This isn't Theory. This is History

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This isn't Theory. This is History is Tony Cokes's first solo exhibition in Italy. The show brings together 15 video-based works and one newly commissioned piece covering the American artist's work up until the present day. The artist explores contemporary discourses of structural racism, war, and capitalism, through a process of sampling and subsequently re-framing and re-contextualizing sound, text and image drawn from mass media and pop culture. The result is a unique video-essay language. In combining and re-organizing the familiar into an unfamiliar form, Cokes confronts the viewer with a different way of seeing/reading/listening.

Set in the SOLO/MULTI section of the museum, the exhibition itself is conceived as a work of art, and presents the artist's practice in an entirely new framework: a hybrid between the white cube of the art space and the cinema's black box. Cokes's video-based works move across four large screens, following a score, which comprises the show's choreography. Time and space are the mediums through which the visitor navigates the artist's oeuvre, swept along by the rhythm imposed by the screens.

Cokes's work challenges the established use and hierarchies of the languages of media and art through the reconfiguration of different, and often disparate, cultural fragments– from Aretha Franklin to Morrissey and from Guy Debord to Donald Trump. These fragments are collected by the artist from a variety of sources including newspapers and academic texts or talks. Over the course of his career, the artist has progressively eliminated images from his work, experimenting with colour theory through the use of alternating solid-color slides. Cokes explains: "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".

Starting with Cokes's seminal early film *Black Celebration* (1988), and closing with a new work commissioned for this exhibition, the show spans three decades of work, bringing together his visual language and the evolution of the long-standing themes that have come to characterize the artist's practice through the choreographed sequence of works on display. In addition, the show will expand beyond the walls of the museum, on banners and billboards across the city.

The show's title, *This isn't Theory. This is History* refers to an artistic practice rooted in observing and deciphering the recent past. By placing the marginal at the centre of mainstream mechanisms, Cokes presents us with the echoes of this recent past, as well as the discourses that continue to emerge from it.

A further central theme is non-visibility, which is formally expressed through a unique approach to "sampling". A term usually applied when digitally encoding music becomes, for Cokes, a methodology employed also for the re-contextualization of texts, and in some cases images. The theme of "non-visibility" is more specifically rooted in the history of the Black American experience and in Western culture more broadly, an experience marked simultaneously by hyper-visibility and invisibility. Sound thus becomes a language through which the artist is able to open the work of art beyond the commonly perceived completeness and truth of images.

Tony Cokes (b.1956 Richmond, VA, USA) lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island, where he serves as Professor in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. Since the 1980s, Cokes has developed a precise visual style marked by animated text, found images, and solid-color slides. His works combine cultural fragments, reframing the images and ideas designed to construct our habits and identities. By extracting source texts from their original contexts and layering elements that often clash, Cokes examines media's operations and the ways in which it manifests power. Recent solo exhibitions include CIRCA, London (2021); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona (2020); ARGOS centre for audiovisual arts, Brussels (2020); Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (2020); BAK – basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, Netherlands (2020); Luma Westbau, Zürich (2019); Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London (2019); The Shed, New York (2019); Greene Naftali, New York (2018); Kunsthall Bergen, Bergen, Norway (2018); the 10th Berlin Biennale, Berlin (2018); and REDCAT, Los Angeles (2012). His work has been shown in exhibitions around the world and is in the collections of Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Kunsthallen, Copenhagen; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. His recent publications include *If UR Reading This It's 2 Late: Vol. 1-3* (Goldsmiths, 2019), *The Black Banal* (Greene Naftali, 2019), and *The Vienna Guide* (Saxpublishers, 2018).

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