Anne Bray interviews Tony Cokes

"Tony Cokes (b. 1956, Richmond, VA) is a Professor in Media Production at Brown University. His work has appeared at The Museum of Modern Art & The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium; MACBA, Barcelona; & the Centre Georges Pompidou & La Cinémathèque Française, Paris. He has been included in the 1st Berlin Documentary Forum at the House of World Cultures in Berlin (2010); the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum in New York (2002, 1991); & Documenta X in Kassel, Germany (1997). His work has received support from media-art festivals including Freewaves in Los Angeles; the Rotterdam International Film Festival in Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin/Madrid; the Oberhausen Short Film Festival in Oberhausen, Germany; & the Impakt Festival in Utrecht, The Netherlands. In 2008–09, Cokes was a Resident Scholar/Artist-in-Residence at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles."

(Redcat)

Anne Bray: You’ve shown three times in Freewaves over the years. How do you show your work and how has that changed over the years?

Tony Cokes: From the beginning, the notion of optimum conditions was something I was programmed to question. My work developed in relation to other things. I steered away from a theatrical presentation or TV broadcast. Initially I integrated video in my work as documentation of a performance. Later I questioned the live and the performative elements and the necessity of being there. So the idea of circulating video became appealing because I could spend all my time developing the material in an essayistic way and then the work could circulate mostly without me.

I was interested in what viewers would make of it and the discourses it might inspire without me being there to give official answers to things. I was more interested in what the work could provoke for other people after I was “done” with it, rather than extending it and making sure my intentions were legible. Sometimes “misreadings” of the work were as interesting as my artistic intentions. I’ve always been open to possibilities that I hadn’t necessarily thought of, which is what excited me about putting “Ad Vice” on a billboard for Freewaves.

With “Ad Vice,” I wasn’t sure what would be an appropriate context for the work. A billboard didn’t occur to me, but I realized it was the perfect condition for viewing it. It was even better than screening or projecting in a space.

I’ve almost come full circle in my thinking about presentation. I’m still open to and have ideas about whether work can be shown effectively or intervene in public space. I’m all for it. On the other hand, I think sometimes a traditional gallery space or a room with dedicated sound and imaging is more conducive for the longer form work that I do, so viewers can get closer to what I intend. As opposed to presenting in a public space. Sound has a lot to do with that. I’m still open to a public context, but I’m tending towards the exhibition/installation presentation.

Media work can have multiple lives. I don’t always have access to major resources, for example, multi channel. I appreciate media work because it encourages multiple modes of address and places of address.
The idea of re-versioning things and presenting them in different contexts, it may change the meaning but moving the meaning into different contexts is provocative.

**AB:** Do you have ideas about audience and who gets to see your work? An ideal audience? How big of an audience is important to you?

**TC:** What is the place of cultural practice? I don’t think the size of an audience is necessarily a qualitative factor. I’m suspicious of the idea that reaching large numbers of people guarantees that something is being communicated. But I like the IDEA of it. I don’t imagine that more people seeing it by definition means something. However, I’m not against the work having a wide circulation for the possibility factor. I’m skeptical not cynical, because I know that often in mainstream media the wider the projected audience, the less interesting and rigorous the content will be. This is a function of expectations by (or about) the audience and their habits of reading. Being so widely available makes the work somehow more disposable and less valued. Or maybe it’s that value migrates into whether or not you paid to get access to it or not. The fact that you pay for something gives it value. However, for me, if it speaks to you it doesn’t matter what or if you paid.

**AB:** What would be the problem with TV as a condition for viewing?

**TC:** That it’s a commercial context. Or that it’s juxtaposed with commercial elements. The audience may wonder how this work of art is sponsored too, and whether any critical content is possible (or that the work is either valid or questionable simply because of its commercial sponsorship, rather than for what the work says). I don’t feel my work in its own form is difficult to digest.

**AB:** The art context isn’t so ideal because it’s a limited audience and the TV context is so commercial.

**TC:** Or that there are limited IDEAS about what audiences will accept in either context.

**AB:** Claire Aguilar from KCET gave us insight as to exactly when general audiences would click away from their channel, based on how out-there the content is. They had it all graphed out! 90% of work Freewaves now receives is under 10 minutes.

**TC:** We need spaces where people have time to focus, a more traditional setting AND spaces like the public where people are moving around. That said, the idea that video presented in a traditional context therefore must always already be Art – I find this idea hilarious. It’s no different than the idea that what collectors collect must be Art. You don’t have to like it (and it need not be “Art”) just because someone bought it and someone presented it.

**AB:** Appropriation is a trend that I thought for sure was going to end, and hasn’t. Now everyone does it.

**TC:** Appropriation is a methodology, an appealing one. Its penetration has increased exponentially, so any particular meaning other than its dissemination through society is up in air; you could write a list of things that you’re going to buy, things you want to buy in the future, or critique the buying of things all in the same format. Advertisers regularly appropriate too! Often from high art. I’ve done this to return the favor, in the public and commercial realms, where representations and ideas and ideals have been reproduced and capitalized. I just want to draw attention to that process, through things that already have meanings, but give new ones. I set up different relationships between text and image and sound. Real things have production conditions and assumptions that go with them. I see my mission as supplying a different reading. Anything can be contextualized or re-contextualized.

Someone said that the value of an art work was really its price at auction – that’s ridiculous. Maybe value is in the ideas, the way it looks, the way it relates to other objects, either in expansion or in contradiction to other things. What it sells for isn’t particularly relevant but for many people they’d like to believe there is something measurable. And I think it’s that desire for something measurable that leads to this desire to conflate value with price. It’s like the budget of a movie, or the number of people who went to see it. That’s not really a measure of anything, except the things it claims to measure! The movie could be
great or it could be awful! There’s no quality in quantity. You’d think that there might and should be a logical connection, and one could argue that that is the logic of capital. If you concentrate too closely on price values as measures of legibility or truth value you can easily be mistaken—great things could be made with a lot of money, or stupid things could be made with a lot of money. It could be free AND great. We might not value it as much because it’s free but I’m not sure it’s less valuable than something that costs a lot of money. I think it’s how people reassure themselves about living day to day. That desire to look at price and use it as a measure of something. We’re constantly inundated with information that disallows us to make the distinction between value and price.

I think that part of the value of the museum is the experiences or knowledges we get about society, about people, but that’s NOT what the collector paid for, or that’s not how old it is. It’s not some other measure. It’s more about thinking, or a relationship, or a concept between things. The idea that an art object can be isolated in its price is absurd…Things should be more compelling in a context. We should stay clear about what that context is to understand how meaning is being produced…..The fact that we have a limited sense of criteria for understanding and describing value is a cultural problem.

AB: Identity politics is one of the ideas we as artists have tried to sell people. It hasn’t sold so well. We’re trying to sell ideas to audiences, and we’ve tried hard. How has that changed?

TC: The downside is that identity politics produces the possibility that identity can be atomized and localized the same way that product choices can be atomized. Quantifying. That one’s vociferousness in claiming an identity is somehow linked to a truth value. What if it isn’t? What if identity becomes normative in a kind of market economy where identity is perhaps NOT a choice but where the value of one’s work is linked solely to a single identity attribute, like race? And what if essentialized “identity” becomes the only or primary way of thinking about our practice? It imposes lots of limitations on everyone, that it’s the only way to BE something. Absurd. Exclusive. Reductive. Curiously, it’s starting to sound like branding. As if only certain people can talk about the issue of race or class, or have an interest in changing the beliefs that produce inequality, separate people, and maintain social stratifications. There’s something perverse and undemocratic about it. For instance – African Americans. Only African Americans can talk about issues of race. They speak from a certain position of experience. While that experience is specific, it’s not isolated or exclusive. It’s not as if no one else needs to talk about it, or even as if all Blacks experience the exact same things. It doesn’t acknowledge hybrid conflicted positions within localized communities. There are multiple ways to enact, become and be. Everyone should be able to participate in that kind of conversation. Not that only certain people can talk about it, and only in proscribed ways. This flies in the face of social reality. People DO have beliefs (even mistaken ones) and they act on them on a daily basis.

AB: Do you think that’s what wore out the issue of identity politics?

TC: That limitation is untenable. A world in which we can only speak about our claimed identity and not speak about anything else is absurd. Life, history, identity… are more complicated than that… Identity politics often creates a too-stable and too-limited idea of identity. Like a commodity, you opt in or you’re born in, you represent and that becomes a stable meaning that you alone possess. This falls into a commodity logic. Identity is complex. I don’t just know MY experience. Perhaps we should assume less, and think and discuss more. Instead of perpetuating the notion that only some people have the authority to speak about a given identity. Anything that tends to stabilize or draw rigid boundaries is a potential problem that will eventually spill over.

What identity politics historically did is make a claim for categories of experience that historically had no discourses or proper places. Of course once those are proto-institutionalized…. These things aren’t resolved… they strangely reproduce the limits that sought to exclude people in the first place. Single factors don’t explain everything. Ideas about race in this city turn into ideas about class, a discourse we can’t have. Or we talk about class as an evasion for what we can’t quite talk about: race. For me, race, class, and citizenship mutually construct and implicate each other – from genocide, slavery, and the “founding fathers” until the present. There are weird ‘identity-based’ anomalies: people who believe, ‘what we need, the solution to all black people’s problems, is more black people with money.’ I’m not sure if the systemic problems of capital will be displaced by this solution. It’s more complex than that. (As though slavery was not a foundational moment in modern exploitation and wealth production, but rather a
historical “error” in an otherwise rational, positive and “natural” capitalist system.) There’s been a rise of some black people into the upper and middle classes, but other blacks are more marginalized now. Some racial divides have allegedly been ameliorated and allowed certain classes to exist and thrive, but then why is it that some economic inequalities and cultural divisions are exacerbated? There should still be places and spaces to talk about this.

**AB:** I’ve thought that TV could have ended racism in this country, but instead it seems to have done the reverse.

**TC:** Seeing is different than reading about something: TV brought civil rights struggles into people’s living rooms. But that seems to be less stable than before, that kind of visual (AB: like the Iranian woman). Cycle and repetition very quickly dampen or shift that effect. Tom Keenan has written on human rights and visual representations. He talks about the phenomenon that at one time to show unjust, horrible things being done was useful, a call to consciousness. But in certain situations today, people know they’re going to see evil things, and now the perpetrators feel as though that is their message: ‘I can do it because I’m here right now and you’re at a distance somewhere else and you can feel what you want but I can do this now.’ This is a perverse kind of power, having to do with mediation and the short media cycle. Keenan cites Kosovo. ‘We know the cameras are here but we’re going to do this anyway.’ Showing these events doesn’t stop anything from happening, it just means the images travel. ‘I’m not ashamed, you can’t stop me.’ Terror events can’t be recalled (or undone) but they will be mediated and ideas about them will be produced. And the social implications of the global circulation of images need not be progressive.

Once something is represented it’s changed. The desire to represent may have positive intentions but it doesn’t mean progressive representations can’t also reproduce a stereotype, or a binary logic about identity. Images only contain potential for change.

**AB:** Do you feel that different images that the art world was able to present, or represent in the last 20 years had an effect on racism?

**TC:** It produced some interesting debates on ideas of stereotypes, but questions of where or how or for whom are interesting ones. I think that some positive possibilities were produced where images do represent something that’s more complicated. How people process them – that’s difficult to say. For example, consider the PBS presentation of Marlon Riggs’ “Tongues Untied” and the problems / strange bedfellows this work produced for both white conservatives and black homophobes.

**AB:** You see art everywhere in Europe and then you come back here and wonder why it’s been so contained in this culture.

**TC:** There are different ideas here about who art is for.

**AB:** Maybe it’s the young age of our country.

**TC:** Maybe we’re back to the question of what we value. That what’s valuable here is what costs the most money or produces the most money. An attitude of ‘I don’t understand all that crazy experimental art stuff, but if they can get someone to pay for it, well then I guess they’re up to something.’ Pop forms of music, like hip-hop, for example, it’s a sub-cultural phenomenon but it’s trafficking in representations often of violence, luxury goods and gender stereotypes. There are certain truth claims made about these representations, and there’s a secondary guarantee: people from “underclass” backgrounds are making money from it. Those two things, social location and money being made are the guarantees. If tales of the ‘hood aren’t real enough for you, then the money they generate should seal the deal, give it validity. This is an entertaining fiction.

**AB:** Our idea of a free country is one that generates money.

**TC:** For a lot of young people coming into the field, they believe in Warhol’s whole thing of success is a job in New York and a gallery. Market values, because those are things people “understand.” Everyone
understands money. It’s not to my taste but there’s someone interested and willing to pay for it, so it’s allowed. But aren’t there values that contest both - the representations we like and capital? I think this is the biggest challenge to the state of funding for the arts. An artist can have these ideas (it’s a free country) but someone’s got to pay for it. The idea of culture as inheritance or a kind of circulation of value doesn’t seem to have much traction here. Our core value is money. Something has to be a business or it has no value. This idea that all culture must be market driven reiterates it-- our core value is money.

_AB_: If we want to get across an anti-racist message, we have to do it in way that sells. _How can we make feminism sell?! How to make sexism sexy?_

_TC_: Or “relatable” – what does that mean? Friendly, non-threatening, appealing. Not something that’s going to change the world. We have to be able to show it’s like a normative reality. Do you have to be comfortable? Art is not about comfort, not about selling. It’s about ideas, about knowledge, but those ideas and knowledges may not make you comfortable or happy.