

Dia:



Tony Cokes

June 23, 2023–May 2024

Dia Bridgehampton

The Dan Flavin Art Institute
23 Corwith Avenue
Bridgehampton, New York

Tony Cokes

Since the late 1980s, Tony Cokes has appropriated and remixed text, music, and documentary materials into moving-image installations that investigate the interrelations of politics, popular culture, race, and identity. These pared-down yet highly affecting videos typically include text excerpts—culled from theory, criticism, philosophy, journalism, and social media—that unfold against monochromatic backdrops, all set to soundtracks featuring an array of popular music. Describing himself as a “post-conceptualist,” Cokes builds on histories and methodologies of 1960s and 1970s Conceptual art and institutional critique, as well as those associated with appropriation and critical media analysis. He approaches text, music, and color like a DJ, cutting, editing, and reconstructing these diverse elements to demonstrate how, in his own words, “they can be combined, slowed down, sped up, or manipulated to do a different kind of work and produce new meanings.”¹

Cokes's commission for Dia Bridgehampton, *DFAI.#*, comprises a context-specific audio-visual installation on the first floor. The work responds, in part, to Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures on the floor above, which resonate with Cokes's own conceptual and formal interests in radiant color and light. The two-channel video features colors influenced by Flavin's palette overlaid with texts from Dia's archive and publications charting the history of the site, citing Flavin's own words; scholarship on his work by figures like art historian David Getsy; and reflections from Dia co-founder Heiner Friedrich. The two vivid, floor-to-ceiling projections animate, ventriloquize, and intermingle these voices across opposite corners of the gallery. Coupled with window filters that bathe the space in colored light, the installation conjures the building's past life as a firehouse-turned-First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton, while evoking Flavin's permanent installation *nine sculptures in fluorescent light* (1963–81), a compendium of his spatial and chromatic strategies with commercial fluorescent tubes.

Despite Cokes's engagement with the work of Flavin and with Dia Bridgehampton itself, no singular representation of the site nor of Flavin emerges from *DFAI.#*; instead, the videos present what could be read as abstract portraits composed of text fragments to which our imaginations and desires give shape. This emphasis on context and discourse rather than visual representation cultivates a tension between portraiture and abstraction, identity and plurality, calling to mind another aspect of Flavin's light works: the titles. In a practice begun with his early variations on traditional religious icons, Flavin often titled his works as dedications to individuals in his personal or cultural orbit. As Getsy writes, “The recurring conjunction in Flavin's titles of ‘untitled’ with parenthetical naming is, itself, a manifestation of his desire both to assert the fundamental equivalency of his works and to claim for them particularity and specificity (here through the title's address to a person). Even though his works are not portraits, they evoke persons.”² Similarly, the title of Cokes's installation, an acronym for the Dan Flavin Art Institute, at once describes a specific institutional body while signaling the constellation of personas and sensibilities that have constituted it over time.

DFAI.# includes a richly layered soundtrack that draws on the sonic history of Dia Bridgehampton, engaging the spirits of Black culture and church music that inhabit the space. Cokes samples contemporary tracks that invoke the dynamism of the Black diaspora—fusing soul, blues, electronic music, and other genres—to cultivate, in the artist’s words, a feeling of “Flavin, fire, and gospel.” Cokes further summons this new trinity with ambient light produced by Flavin-inspired color filters coating the windows, alluding to the church’s original stained-glass window dedicated to Reverend W. T. Collins in 1953. In this way, *DFAI.#* collapses time to create a new, hybrid congregation through text, music, and color, invoking the people and ideas that have occupied this location since 1908.

In the context of Flavin, the art historical impact of Cokes’s appropriation of the monochrome comes into clearer focus, as does the politics of color in both artists’ work. Infiltrating Dia Bridgehampton with trappings of the dance club, Cokes rescues Flavin’s monochromatic palette with high-bass beats, effectively “Doing politics with colour . . .,” as several slides in the videos pronounce. This quote is pulled from renowned German graphic designer Otl Aicher, who, in deliberate contrast to colors associated with power, such as black and red, selected bright blue as one of the primary colors for the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, deploying the associative and informational capacity of color, in this case, to communicate democracy, inclusivity, and optimism.³ Perceiving a resonance between Aicher’s design and the ghostly blue glow that emanates from Dia Bridgehampton’s cornice at dark, Cokes repurposes this slide from his previous work, titled *Some Munich Moments 1937–1972* (2022), a recursive gesture that puts him in a nonlinear dialogue with colorists from Aicher to Flavin.

Emphasizing that color is always already political, Cokes’s videos include moments devoid of text, in which solid hues become both form and content. Reckoning with the precariousness of representation in both art history and popular culture, the color frames act as literal and psychological projections, engaging the monochrome through the lens of what the artist refers to as “non-visibility.”⁴ In this context, the monochrome defers the image, destabilizing the hierarchy of visual representation. By imbuing the color field with multivalent politics, Cokes recontextualizes a formal strategy rooted in modernism and key to histories of Minimalism. In doing so, *DFAI.#* recasts color not as a neutral agent but as a vehicle for negotiating the politics of visibility and invisibility.

Flavin, too, deployed colors in a relational and responsive manner: “I’ve made color attacks from time to time. Or I’ve given a color reaction to a situation. *Greens crossing greens (to Piet Mondrian who lacked green)* [1966], for instance, was a color putdown in a sense of Mondrian’s conservative use of red, yellow, and blue, his kind of concentrated conservation of color.”⁵ When he placed works such as *red out of a corner (to Annina)* (1963) on the second floor of Dia Bridgehampton, Flavin again picked up color like a weapon to, in his words, “destroy the corner” with its chromatic vibrations.

Similarly, Cokes's corner projections both highlight and blur the edges of the architecture, staging a boundless text-music-color experience in a manner reflecting Flavin's spatial observations:

Now the entire interior spatial container and its parts—wall, floor and ceiling, could support this strip of light but would not restrict its act of light except to enfold it. Regard the light and you are fascinated—inhibited from grasping its limits at each end. . . . Realizing this, I knew that the actual space of a room could be broken down and played with by planting illusions of real light (electric light) at crucial junctures in the room's composition. For example, if you press an eight foot fluorescent lamp into the vertical climb of a corner, you can destroy that corner by glare and doubled shadow.⁶

Exaggerating this doubling effect, segments from *DFAI.#*—while conceptually tethered to Dia Bridgehampton—populate the two 61-foot-tall Shinnecock Monument electronic billboards, located along the nearby Sunrise Highway. Interrupting regularly scheduled programming, this intervention critically mirrors the commercial logic and stylized language of billboard advertisements. Through this dislocated extension of *DFAI.#*, Cokes further pushes the boundaries of how we relate and ascribe meaning to words and images within specific contexts, bridging the legacies of Conceptual art and the diffuse mechanisms of popular media.

—Jordan Carter with Emily Markert

notes

1. Dan Byers and Laura Preston, eds., *In Conversation: Tony Cokes and Christoph Cox* (Cambridge, MA: Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 2020), p. 9.
2. David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 253.
3. For more on Otl Aicher and his "cheerful" design for the Olympics, see Mark Holt, *Munich '72: The Visual Output of Otl Aicher's Dept. XI* (London: Mark Holt Design, 2020).
4. As Christoph Cox writes, Cokes's tactic of "non-visibility" can be defined as "an effort 'to differ/defer the image or even refuse the image in order to talk about it in a different manner or context.'" Christoph Cox, "The Author as Selector: Tony Cokes' Iconoclasm," in *Tony Cokes: If UR Reading This It's 2 Late; Vol. 1–3*, ed. Natasha Hoare (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019), pp. 39–40.
5. Dan Flavin, interview by Phyllis Tuchman, 1972, reprinted in *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective*, ed. Michael Govan and Tiffany Bell (New York: Dia Art Foundation; Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven, 2004).
6. Dan Flavin, "‘. . . in daylight or cool white.’ An Autobiographical Sketch," *Artforum* 4, no. 4 (December 1965), p. 24.

further reading

- Byers, Dan, and Laura Preston, eds. *In Conversation: Tony Cokes and Christoph Cox*. Cambridge, MA: Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 2020.
- Cokes, Tony. *Fragments, or just Moments*. Munich: Haus der Kunst and Kunstverein München, 2022.
- Flavin, Dan. "'... in daylight or cool white.' An Autobiographical Sketch," *Artforum* 4, no. 4 (December 1965).
- Getsy, David J. "Dan Flavin's Dedications," in *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*, pp. 209–65. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.
- Govan, Michael, and Tiffany Bell, eds. *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective*. New York: Dia Art Foundation; Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven, 2004.
- Govan, Michael, and Tiffany Bell, eds. *Dan Flavin: The Complete Lights, 1961–1996*. New York: Dia Art Foundation in association with Yale University Press, New Haven, 2004.
- Hoare, Natasha, ed. *Tony Cokes: If UR Reading This It's 2 Late; Vol. 1–3*. London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019.
- Holt, Mark. *Munich '72: The Visual Output of Otl Aicher's Dept. XI*. London: Mark Holt Design, 2020.

about the artist

Tony Cokes was born in 1956 in Richmond, Virginia. He received a BA from Goddard College, Vermont, and an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond. Cokes participated in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. In 2022, he was the subject of a major survey jointly organized by the Haus der Kunst and Kunstverein, both in Munich. Other recent solo exhibitions took place at De Balie, Amsterdam (2022–23); Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, New York (2021–22); and MACRO — Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma, Rome (2021). Recent group exhibitions include *Signals: How Video Transformed the World* (2023) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the 58th Carnegie International: *Is it morning for you yet?* (2022–23) at Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. His work is in the collections of, among others, the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He is also the recipient of the 2023 Rome Prize. He is a professor in the Department of Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, and lives in Providence.

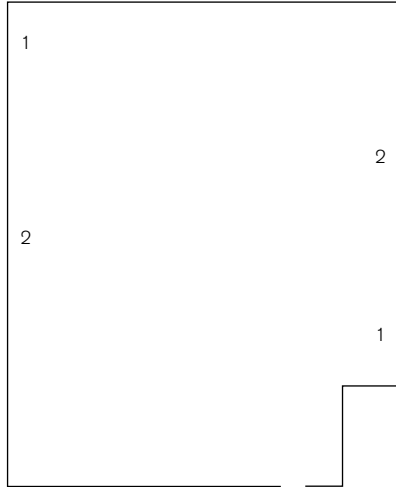
checklist

1. **DFAI.01-05**, 2023
Two-channel HD video, color, sound, 23:31 min.

2. **DFAI.06**, 2023
Colored window gels

Offsite
DFAI.07, 2023
Digital images
Displayed on Shinnecock Monument electronic billboards, located along Sunrise Highway (also known as New York State Route 27) in Hampton Bays, June 23–July 30, 2023, and April 29–May 27, 2024

All works courtesy the artist; Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna; Greene Naftali, New York; and Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles



Tony Cokes is organized by Jordan Carter, curator, with Emily Markert, curatorial assistant, and Randy Gibson, manager of exhibition technology.

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