HANNAH HOFFMAN

Tony Cokes
All About Evil (Selected Works: 2006–2022)
May 17, 2025 – June 28, 2025

   Hannah Hoffman is pleased to present a selection of Tony Cokes' *Evil Series*. These twelve works, displayed across three devices, make no distinction between well exhibited, somewhat notorious works and those that have rarely been shown before. The *Evil Series* is defined by a certain set of rules - thematic, color choice - but due to the subconscious associations induced by both watching and creating these works, sometimes the category is only enforced in retrospect. Cokes is drawn to an affect or resistance to clearly processing as much as the subject, and while watching these works that self defined category becomes both more obvious and more illusive. The works bounce from different screens, like shuffling a deck. On one device each work is shown in a chronological order of creation while on another device shown in a more illusive ordering. This retroactive ordering becomes a recomposition, an excuse to juxtapose concepts and tones that have a relationship and connection from the vantage point of May 2025.

   Recomposition and juxtaposition is really the name of the game for Cokes' work, and it's easy to see this presentation as a continuation of that creative process. His aesthetic rules are so rigid that any deviation from them comes as a surprise, as in *Evil.68: Look @ Whr We R: 2016-2020*, which features footage from an archive of anti-Trump ad campaigns rather than the transcripts of speech Cokes usually favors. At first glance, this piece comes across as a continuation of the political ads themselves, simply encouraging us to sit with some of the difficult realities of living in a country that has elected Trump, now twice. But the work is more about the construction of these ads and the desires of people looking at them. What starts out as a list of concrete abhorrent actions transcends into a sort of philosophical commentary about what it means to regret what you said. When the piece finally is reduced to Cokes' signature direct text, it has become much less literal. The lyrics of the song, which many will cognitively process as background noise, comes to the front as poetry, moving away from "good" and "bad" and more comfortably into a gray area.

The videos are both communal and tyrannical. We are reading in public, but submit to the same reading pace. More so than reading alone, this creates an inherent dynamic and possibility for exchange. The possibilities of reading expand. Time-based work like this can't force viewership, but there is always something for those who want to stay and watch to completion. With the freedom to come and go as you choose, each viewer is able to determine their own dosage. Should I be dancing? Should I be tapping my foot? Certain conditions are more conducive to various conclusions, and Cokes pulls on embodied awareness as a different point of entry. The competing elements of Cokes' will be more or less challenging to each viewer. Like Deleuze quoting Proust, this work should be approached as a pair of glasses - if it doesn't suit you, find another pair.

There are dueling lines of analysis in Cokes' work, it's difficult not to succumb to the temptation of analyzing through music, or poetic sensibility, or visual aesthetic contrast. Like the selection of works, Cokes' soundtrack selection is at times recognizable, other times obscure, sometimes connected through lyrics or emotion, at times used in segments and other times in entirety. There's an impulse to impose resolution of the text while the music swells or intensifies. Cokes abandons his DJ past by eschewing traditional, seamless mixes for a clear cut between tracks - he's not interested in obscuring the difference of his sources. The text is also broken up in different ways, more often than not due to the cadence of the original speaker. Even though the speaker may have paused, removed the auditory component and simply cutting the text on the screen isolates different things than speech and makes certain concepts more legible or illegible than auditory speech. The work is always ultimately more about how something was phrased, how it controls itself differently as a spoken thing even if it is accurately transcribed. There's an attempt to try and capture these unrecognized structures to break open the text into something it wasn't before.

The shadow of something misunderstood or unprocessed can be just as productive as a self-assured sense of understanding. Cokes encourages viewers to suspend the desire to impose a rule or motivation, to forget the lack of attribution at the front of each work. Some viewers assume that it is Cokes himself speaking, manifesting the ultimate unreliable narrator. This process of dissociation considers how rhetoric is served, constructed, staged. In order to answer

these questions, you require a certain type of distance. The content can be completely disagreeable or repugnant, but the mechanics of how it's performed or constructed is always compelling. How is an argument built? How is something complex and contradictory reduced or stated in ways that make it possible to think about it or analyze it in a different way than if you heard someone speak it? There is a both a slowing down and a speeding up.

It's easy to think there is an agenda behind these works, a specific reaction we are supposed to feel. That might be true in certain cases, but more often curiosity is the driving force. More interested in what we don't understand, what we don't know, Cokes is attempting to get to the heart about what determines our sense of understanding. A normative context can create a false familiarity for certain voices or statements. There's an implication of force by placing the work in public in the first place, especially in a context where practically every textual public utterance is about selling things. Cokes' process is one of defamiliarization, seeing the possibilities in the every day for mystery and unstable ground. Propaganda rarely seeks to remind you what you don't know. Cokes questions rather than declares.