

Tony Cokes

CAM x Counterpublic



Tony Cokes, *Let Yourself Be Free*, installation view, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, Liechtenstein, 2025. Courtesy the artist; Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz; Greene Naftali, New York; Hoffman Donahue, Los Angeles and New York; Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna; and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York. Photo: Sandra Maier.

Tony Cokes draws from pop cultural sources—including songs, critical theory texts, news reports, and courtroom documents—and remixes information they contain to question how power is wielded in today's media landscape. His video essays, posters, and billboards typically position text atop monochromatic color fields, often set to music. The animated flows of his videos mimic rhythms typically encountered in advertising spaces: Cokes subverts them in critical reflections.

TT The River Won't Stop (Edit) is a newly commissioned work for Counterpublic 2026: *Coyote Time* that centers the global music superstar Tina Turner. In the 1950s, when Turner moved to St. Louis as a teenager, she attended nearby Sumner High School; today Turner is embraced as a local hero. Cokes's project, built on research that included interviews with St. Louis natives,

venerates Turner and her music. Cokes's video speaks to the appropriation and extraction of Black culture by other communities. In doing so, it celebrates the resilience of The Ville—and neighborhoods like it—where structural racism is faced and overcome despite overwhelming odds.

Cokes's project comprises a video in the sanctuary of the nearby Antioch Baptist Church, a projection on CAM's facade for Street Views, and billboards bridging the two sites. Interviews with members of Antioch's congregation, public documents, and the artist's memories of growing up with a mother who adored Turner's music are the project's foundation. As it moves between celebration and anger, *TT The River Won't Stop (Edit)* resists a singular interpretation. Cokes has remarked, "It is possible to dance and think at the same time."

Since the 1990s, Cokes has produced videos that incorporate animated text even as they avoid photographic imagery. Across these works, the often private action of reading is made public; yet, within the public sphere, reading is typically associated with consumption. Cokes rewrites these assumptions, invoking how legibility in the absence of image can inspire imagination and action.

Cokes's deep interest in and knowledge of music informs the soundtracks he conceives for his videos. The presentation of *TT The River Won't Stop (Edit)* at Antioch Baptist Church includes sound, while its presentation for *Street Views* is silent. In a recent interview published in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Cokes addressed how the combination of music and text produces feeling, noting:

One thing that's reported to me fairly often is the idea that there might be some kind of bodily response to historical or theoretical or journalistic information. The body is one register of potential knowledge, and hopefully, future action. It's not just fun, it's not just being entertained, it's not just diversion. It's also a way of thinking and acting. The body, and its rhythms, are sites of acknowledgment and community. I see a resonance between gospel music, the Black Baptist church, and community, and maybe even art practice and institution-building. I want to model those possibilities, those possible connections.

Through his work, Cokes offers ways to understand the political and social reverberations of words and music. He uses his position to constitute a public, question forms of power that are often invisible (or at least ineffable), and to advocate for advancement and change.

Tony Cokes is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis as a part of Counterpublic 2026: *Coyote Time* by Stefanie Hessler, Counterpublic 2026 co-curator, with assistance from Dean Daderko, Ferring Foundation Chief Curator.

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Portrait of Tony Cokes. © John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Courtesy the artist and the MacArthur Foundation.

Tony Cokes (b. 1956, Richmond, VA) lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island, where he serves as Professor in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. Cokes was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2024 and the Rome Prize in 2022–23. A solo presentation of his work, *Texts, Tracks, Talks (1992–2026)*, will open at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University on September 18, 2026.

Related Programs

Free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. For a complete list of programs, please visit camstl.org

Artist Talk + Walking Tour: Tony Cokes

Saturday, September 12, 10:00 am–12:00 pm

Located at Counterpublic's Hub in The Ville at 4140 Dr. Martin Luther King Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130

Learn More

Visit our website for more information about *Tony Cokes*, including an **audio guide**.



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