

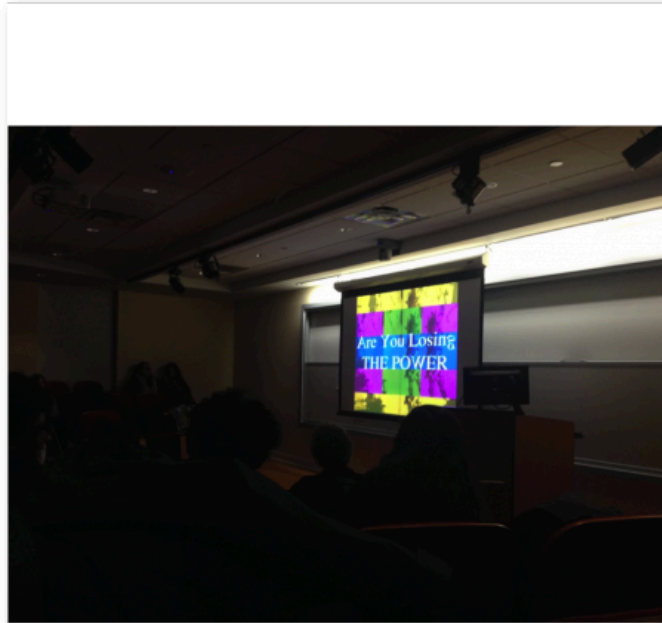
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Tony Cokes, artist, discusses 'Distracted Wreading' exhibit

By Carina Sorrentino in News | February 26, 2015 | Views: 11

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The Karp Hall multi-media classroom before the presentation. - Carina Sorrentino | Concordiensis

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This week Karp Hall, Union's newest academic building was transformed into a platform for the multimedia exhibit, entitled "Distracted Wreading [From Structural Film to Digital Poetics]." The event featured "media viewing stations presenting word films by avant-gardists, structural filmmakers and contemporary video artists." Contributing artists in the series included Peggy Ahwesh, Hollis Frampton, Mona Hatoum, Tan Lin, D. A. Pennebaker, Paul Sharits, Brian Kim Steffans, Michael Snow and Tony Cokes. Cokes, an artist and professor of modern culture and media at Brown University, was the evening's speaker.

Before Cokes' lecture, students and professors were able to venture through Karp Hall to see the contributing artists' work. Scattered through each room of the building were combinations of audio and visual media. Montages of powerful words and images played in video reels, allowing viewers to experience multiple artists' commentaries on pop culture and social issues.

The main presentation room featured Cokes' work, entitled "6^", part of his series of "pop 'manifestos,'" employing colorful images and music by the band Appendix. This multimedia installation sought to explore "questions of originality and authenticity." The video was halted, and Cokes began his lecture by giving the audience some insight to his motives. He said, "I tend to make work about things that bother me or subjects that I want to think about for long periods of time. Many times, I often work to figure out what I think of the subject matter." Cokes is a "post-conceptualist" artist, not a traditional video maker. Using familiar and popular forms of media, Cokes works to offer powerful social critiques. Putting it simply, he stated, "I want to explore how sound works with imagery."

The first of Cokes' films viewed was a piece entitled "Black Celebration (A Rebellion Against the Commodity)."

Before showing the piece, Cokes remarked, "When I made this, it was meant to address the time in which it was made. I wanted to inspire a way of thinking about those events you are about to see." "Black Celebration," a black-and-white film, featured clips of riots in Los Angeles, Boston, Newark and Detroit in the 1960s.

Scenes of police marching, military tanks rolling down city streets and buildings burning were accompanied by music, instead of the newsreel narration, added to text commentary. The next piece Cokes presented was from his "pop manifestos," which he spent working on between 1991 and 2000. Cokes stated, "I was drawing upon the legacies of a wide range of critics. I felt there was a blurring between the boundaries of media and art, so I re-examined the experience of rock music and its history, looking at how the music was less about emotional content and more about life under the industry. There was a realization that certain ideologies could be sold for profit."

The video utilized colorful images, and was accompanied by a reworking of an electronic pop song by Seth Price. Text flashed statements such as "Sing your life. Any fool can think up words that rhyme," and "It is never free, pure personal, or abstract ...". The third video was part of Cokes' "Evil Series" which he began in 2001 after the events of Sept. 11. Responding to the aftermath, his video engaged a political critique of the use of American music as a weapon or form of psychological torture. Cokes was inspired after reading an article by Moustafa Bayoumi on the subject, and decided to read the piece in a different context.

Cokes' film began with the Barney theme song, prompting laughs from the audience, until text began to recount the torture of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay.

Songs such as "Hit Me Baby One More Time," by Britney Spears, and "I Wanna Rock," by Twisted Sister, were played for extended periods of time, torturing the detainees who did not understand the language or culture of the songs. Paired with sleep deprivation and other forms of physical discomfort, Cokes identified this practice as an assault on human rights. Cokes moved onto his final piece commenting on the direction of his work in recent years. He said, "I have been working on small looping exhibits in the last decade. Recently, it has superseded images, and text has become the dominant component of my work. I use a number of different approaches, sometimes a sentence or a word at a time, while still trying to keep the videos densely layered."

His final film shown to the audience was a commentary on quotes from David Bowie and film director Lars Von Trier. Bowie's music played with quotes from both men on Hitler and Judaism. Called "Face Value," the way the provocative quotes appear on screen juxtaposed with the music is intended to make the viewer think about whether we can actually take the statements — or should take them — at face value.

This selection will appear in an April special issue of the journal "theory&event," called "Breaking the Rules: Gender, Power, and Politics in the Films of Lars von Trier," co-edited by Lori Marso and Bonnie Honig.

Marso, a professor of political science at Union, stated, "It was such a great opportunity for students to see the work of media artist Tony Cokes with its several intersecting commentaries on race, celebrity, evil and scandal. The way his work is presented shocks us into new thinking not only about all these issues, but also about our own role in perpetuating some of the worst of their ill effects."

The Karp Hall multi-media classroom was packed with students and faculty across the departments eager to experience Cokes' work. Adam Stolz '15 commented on the presentation, "I liked his unique style and how provocative his presentation was at times." He continued, "Our world is becoming more and more concerned with political correctness and Mr. Cokes seemed to bypass that notion without care, and present the way he viewed modern topics like pop music and human rights in a very direct, opinionated manner."

Cokes' work spanned decades of sociopolitical issues, as well as the ins and outs of modern media. He found a common ground between words, video, music, art and provoking thoughts.