



ALL IMAGES Tony Cokes, *The Book of Love* (1992). Video stills. Video, color, sound, 59:37 minutes. Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

TONY COKES’S *THE BOOK OF LOVE*

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The Book of Love is a video by Tony Cokes which he completed in 1992. It runs for just under an hour and deploys a fairly limited visual toolkit. White sans-serif text scrolls across a black background. Often (but not always) this text is accompanied by moving images whose aspect ratios are continually shifting, but which never fill the screen completely. The background, therefore, is ever-present as an empty field on which text and image interplay in various ways. The text is heavily postmodern; it hand-wrings about unknowability and refers to traces, margins, power, and itself. The images occasionally depict drab, unpeopled residential environments; mostly, however, they show a black woman in her late middle age sitting at a table in a creamsicle-colored room, talking about life and her approach to living. This woman is Dorothy Cokes, Tony’s mom. *The Book of Love* is a portrait of her.

Cokes’s video struggles with its status as a portrait, with the impossibility which making a portrait — especially a portrait of a person as dull and inscrutable as one’s own mother — necessarily entails. It acts this struggle out by proposing an affinity between the conceptual wiliness of the genre of portraiture and the structural wiliness of any artistic medium, in its own case the medium of video. It is a masterpiece of its medium for its deployment of text in abstract and abstracting ways; for the subtlety with which it works the most plainspoken pictures into elaborate visual mechanisms; for its use of language to undercut and complexify

image, and vice versa; and for how all of this is entwined with its status as a video, with how videos look and what they alone are capable of doing, aesthetically. In a word, *The Book of Love* is great for its “medium specificity,” but not in any caricatured modernist sense. Rather, the work is animated by an enormous sensitivity *both* for its subject (Mrs. Cokes), however elusive she may be, *and* for its object (the medium, video), however unfit it certainly is for conveying even a sliver of the wholeness of a whole human being. There is an intractable conflict between these two things, a portrait’s sitter and the fact of the portrait itself. *The Book of Love* makes this conflict palpable.

Near the middle of the piece, a salient phrase scrolls across the bottom of the screen. “I only have an hour to make my mother intelligible,” it reads. A sort of thesis statement for all the video’s written words, this phrase contrasts sharply with the other half of the video’s “content”: the stream of truisms and banal reflections on the ways of the world that flows from Mrs. Cokes, who possesses an absolute conviction of her hard-won wisdom’s worth. Though only tangential — occasionally parallel — to what she’s saying, the roving text seems ruthlessly to undercut or contradict her, deploying as it does the dispassionate rigor of a nineties academic. Typically, it proceeds objectively and in the third person. But at times (as in the above quote) an author, Tony, pokes through the steely theoretical facade, revealing all the discourse analysis to be less a serious intellectual exercise than a

dressing-up of a son’s attempt to belittle his mother and refuse to hear what she’s telling him. This makes all of the poststructural pabulum artistically legitimate. It isn’t intellectualism, but the wounded lingo of someone who’s had sociability educated out of him trying like hell to relate to a person whom he knows he should love, but can’t.

“I only have an hour to make my mother intelligible.” But how is this to be done given the vanishing nature of subjectivity — of the intelligibility of anything at all — that Cokes’s text makes plain is among his artwork’s structuring principles? The answer lies in the aspects of *The Book of Love* that do the work of conveying, rather than communicating: the aspects of this interview with his mother that are purely visual. In the context of the artwork, these are the foremost mediators of our understanding of Mrs. Cokes, through which any intelligibility of the woman would have to proceed.

The simple consistency of the video’s general appearance — images and scrolling text contending with each other on a black ground — allow minor variations in its visual order to contribute disproportionately to the work’s overall effect. The speed with which phrases flow across the screen frequently changes, for instance. There’s a constant switch from horizontal to vertical scrolling, too. Mostly the text never touches the image, but occasionally it’ll start to creep across the frame that holds Mrs. Cokes. In each case, these permutations interrupt any development of narrative or structural coherence by forcing awareness of the fundamentally non-narrative and unstructured forms that make meaning possible: the “abstract” atomic units of texts and images. The changes don’t come too quickly, and they

don’t overpower. This provides the video with a steady rhythmic armature that undergirds the droning sameness of its more immediate linguistic elements.

This armature is built out by the similar, if more varied and complex, alterations which the video’s representational components undergo. Apart from frequently cutting in from and out to black, the frame that holds Mrs. Cokes’s image proves wily and multifold. It expands and contracts. It can be broken apart into two or more rectangles. It is subject to static and other corruptions of the video format. Its aspect ratio changes, and it’s cropped in many different ways. Its position on the screen is constantly shifting, as though *The Book of Love* is a Hans Hoffman painting, attenuated and in constant motion.

There is no reducing these visual elements to Mrs. Cokes’s monologue or her son’s interpolations of it. Rather, visual structure and conceptual substance approach each other asymptotically, the ineluctable gap between them given apparent shape and heft by forms that rub up against the very thing that causes that gap in the first place: mediation. In *The Book of Love*, only in some instances is the medium that Cokes has made to seem specific the medium of video. More generally, it’s mediation itself, the fact that words and images fly through each other and their referents ceaselessly, but without ever alighting. Cokes’s sense that there is an analogy between the way sons relate to mothers, portraits to subjects, and thoughts to things is the font of his video’s success as an artwork.

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