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Tim Rollins and K.O.S

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Tim Rollins Is Always Beginning

BY KYLE CHAYKA | FEB 27, 2014 | 3:02 PM



When the American artist Tim Rollins speaks, he essays forth, the pace increasing and his words rolling over each other as he continues. At times, he inserts interpolations like “yeah” or “all right,” prompting call-and-response shouts from his audience. Though he’s fond of referring to himself as a Baptist, the preacher pose is a little incongruous for a white man born in Pittsfield, Maine—but for Rollins, *art* is inherently spiritual.

At the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) Museum of Art last week, Rollins opened “*RIVERS*,” a minimalist exhibition of less than a dozen works populating a wide-open gallery space. The pieces appropriate texts—not just books, but interviews, music, and poetry—from the African American canon and alters the manuscript pages with paint and collage, turning them into drawings and sculptures. It’s a stirring show, but the most important element of the works isn’t the final product hanging on the gallery wall. It’s how they’re made.

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‘We treat these objects better than we treat each other,’ he said, gesturing around at the gallery.

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Standing in front of a crowd of SCAD students to give a short talk about "RIVERS," Rollins ended his sermon arguing that art's purpose should be humanist, bringing people together rather than dividing them. "We treat these objects better than we treat each other," he said, gesturing around at the gallery. "We keep them warm in the winter, cool in the summer"—unlike so many of the homeless or dispossessed in our country. Rollins' strategy is to use his art not just to prompt social change but to actively create it.

For three decades, Rollins has made work in collaboration with Kids of Survival, a group of predominantly African-American children from the South Bronx, where he opened a communal studio after working as a teacher at Intermediate School 52, developing an art curriculum. Sitting at a table with two of his collaborators, who were young students when he met them and are now grown men, Rollins still seems a little surprised by the path his career has taken.

"It was a pretty rough school in a very treacherous neighborhood, but I fell in love with the kids," Rollins explains. "I couldn't stand the school, so after eight long years of being there every day, we started our own school, called the Art and Knowledge Workshop." The workshop became known as Kids of Survival, which initially welcomed boys and girls to work with Rollins, but now focuses only on boys. "It started out as an after school school, then it became a fraternity, and now it's a family," Rollins says.

Rick Savignon and Angel Abreu are part of that family. The sharply-dressed pair have been in Kids of Survival for 28 years. Savignon met Rollins through a workshop at Legman College, also in the Bronx, where the artist was hosting a workshop to fund his K.O.S. studio. After the workshop ended, Rollins asked Savignon and his best friend to join the group. "He told us it was in the South Bronx, and my immediate reaction was, are you crazy I'm not going out there, he's nuts!" Savignon recalls. "I stepped into the classroom and saw the current members of K.O.S. working, and I just fell into it. They welcomed me with open arms and from then on I've always been in the group."

Abreu joined K.O.S. at the age of 11 in 1985. "As an 11-year-old walking into this situation, I didn't know, it felt really organic, really natural," he says. "It wasn't until years later that I realized how extraordinary the whole thing was. For me it was natural—going after school, going to make some art, and some of the art is going to hang in galleries and museums." Tim Rollins and K.O.S.—both names are usually credited on wall labels—have entered the collections of institutions like the Museum of Modern Art.

Going back to school was an unorthodox step for Rollins, who was firmly embedded in the upper echelons of the 1980s art scene. "All my friends in the art world—I was assistant to Joseph Kosuth, I knew Warhol, Rauschenberg—they went, are you out of your mind?" he says. But he was confident. "I knew deep down in my soul that we were gonna make history. I didn't talk about it too much 'cause that's kind of intimidating for 11, 12, 13-year-olds, right, but I did say—"

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'I said, don't bring me your scholastic art award winners, bring the kids who need this—a boost, some encouragement, something to live for for a little while,' Rollins says.

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Angel interrupts, "You did say though! You did say we're making history every day."

Rollins responds, laughing, "And you're like what? Who is this crazy white man?"

Though he doesn't fall under the category of relational aesthetics—an amorphous contemporary art movement with Tino Sehgal as its star, that focuses on creating interactive situations rather than objects—Rollins makes the most impact by throwing disparate groups of people and ideas together and seeing what happens. With K.O.S., he introduced the cutting edge of conceptual art to inner-city students who had little access to any kind of art, let alone active contemporary artists. And the artist has found that intersection very fruitful.

For many of their exhibitions, Rollins and K.O.S. also work with local children attending schools near the galleries and museums, convening with them in a temporary studio to work on specific projects. For the Savannah exhibition, the group collaborated with students from Garrison Junior High School, a school of visual and performing arts in the city. "I said, don't bring me your scholastic art award winners, bring the kids who need this—a boost, some encouragement, something to live for for a little while," Rollins says. "The selection and diversity were so amazing. The vibe was actually pretty hilarious."

The artist insisted that the team would work in a studio at SCAD, a lushly appointed, rapidly expanding college that serves as one of the centers of arts education in the American south. "I wanted the kids to have an experience of the college environment; now they can see themselves here," Rollins says. It's a form of encouragement that he got from his family early on. "My grandma worked in the commissary of Colby College in Waterville, Maine—I will never forget the day that she wanted me to come visit her, I loved it," Rollins says. "She said, Timmy, I see you in a place like this. I was the first in my whole family to go to college."

The Garrison collaboration became more fruitful than anyone expected. Though the workshops usually only focus on creating one series of work, this time, the team made three in as many days. They are also some of the most heartfelt pieces in the show. A printed page of Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is daubed with a single twisting stroke of watercolor paint, the sinuous arc of the language and the language's object at the same time. Elsewhere, there are pages of music, the notes of Duke Ellington's score for a ballet called "The River." Each page is blackened with a tide of paint, rising up the staves like a flood.

Rollins describes his work as an attempt to help share a culture, helping kids who don't have access to the heritage of African American art. With these textual artifacts comes education and repossession. Though Rollins' objects can be beautiful and are often poetic, this learning experience is his greatest accomplishment. Rollins isn't playing the savior—he is a collaborator through and through—but he feels there's something in the history of African-American oppression in the United States to atone for. "The history of slavery is an American phenomenon, not just in the south," he says. "It's about owning up."

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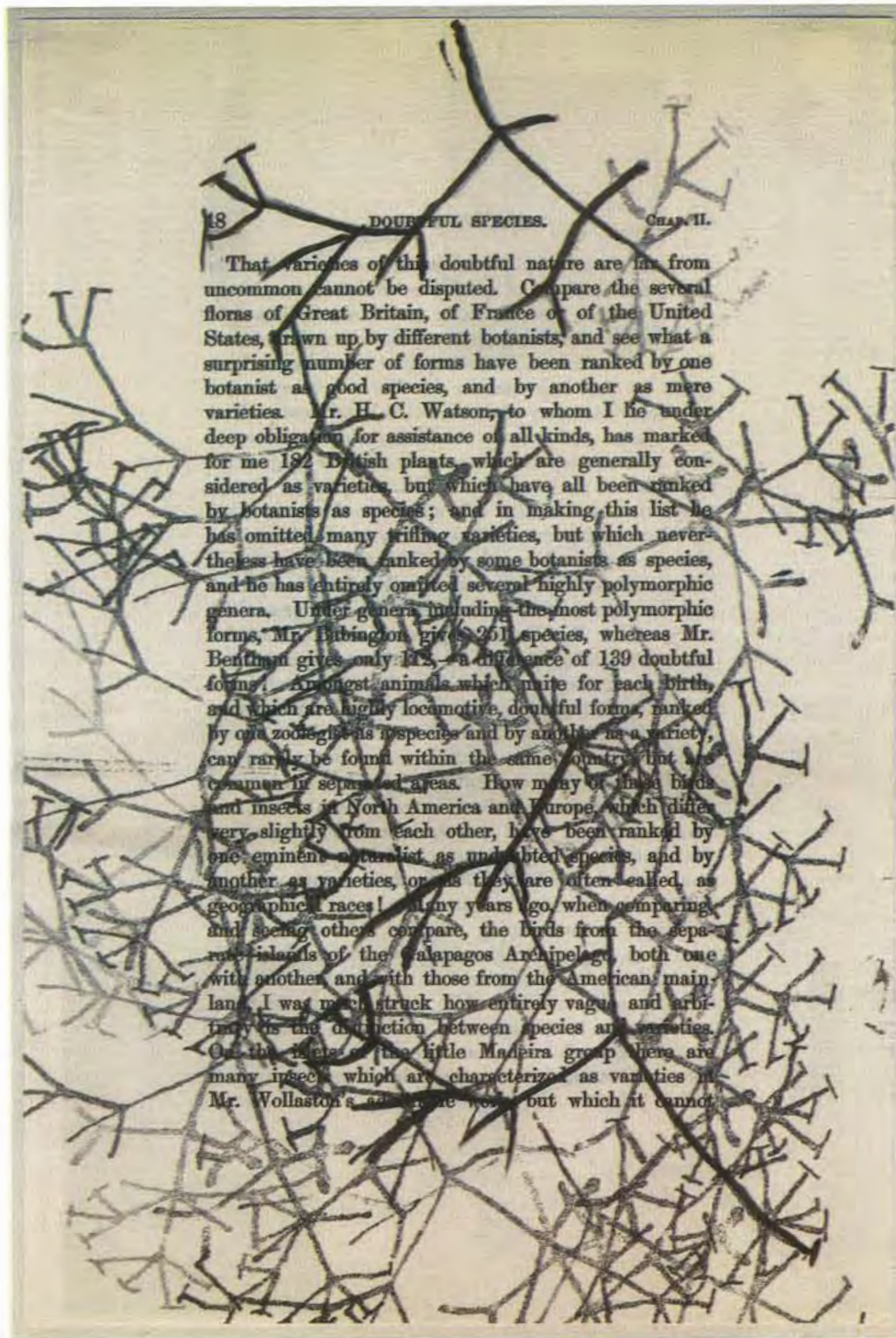
'The joy with young people is that you're making art in the future tense.'

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"You can't ignore it," Savignon says.

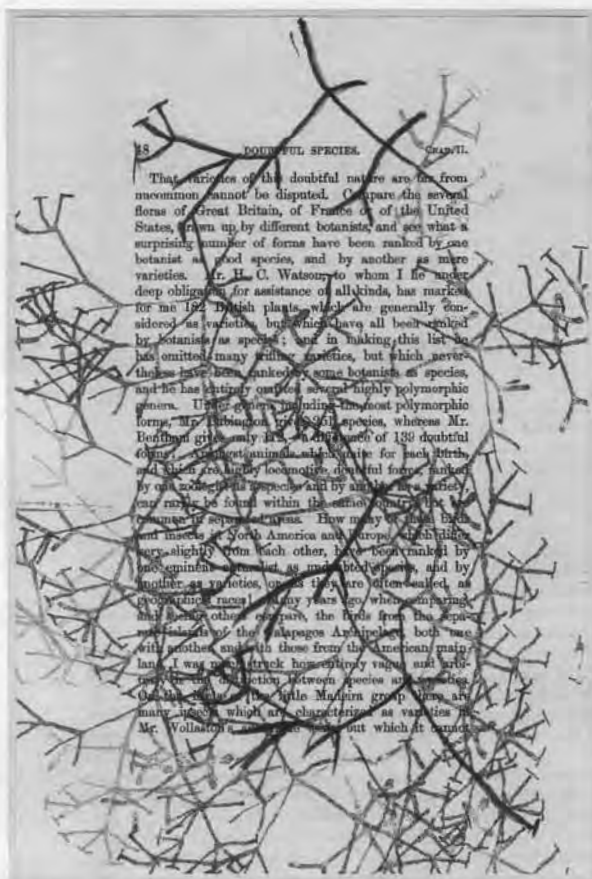
"But you can't steep in it, either," Rollins responds. "The joy with young people is that you're making art in the future tense. I'm not driving my truck looking through the back-view mirror," he riffs. "We're going straight ahead, runaway train—that's why you make art. It's a way to move on." And just like that, Rollins and K.O.S. are always moving, circulating an ever-changing group of compatriots, changing lives, filling galleries. "I feel like we just started," Rollins says. "After 30 years I feel like we've just begun."

Galerie
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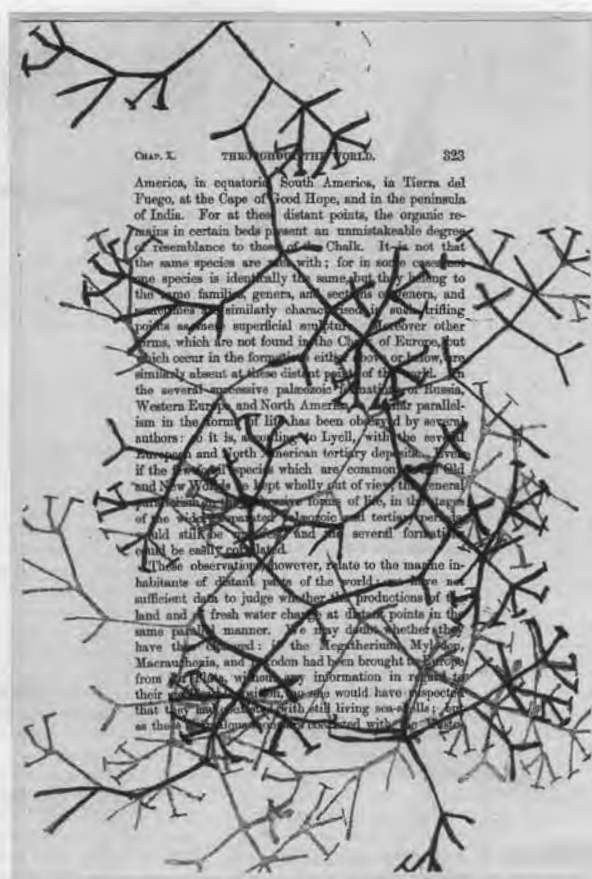


BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE DEC2013/JAN2014

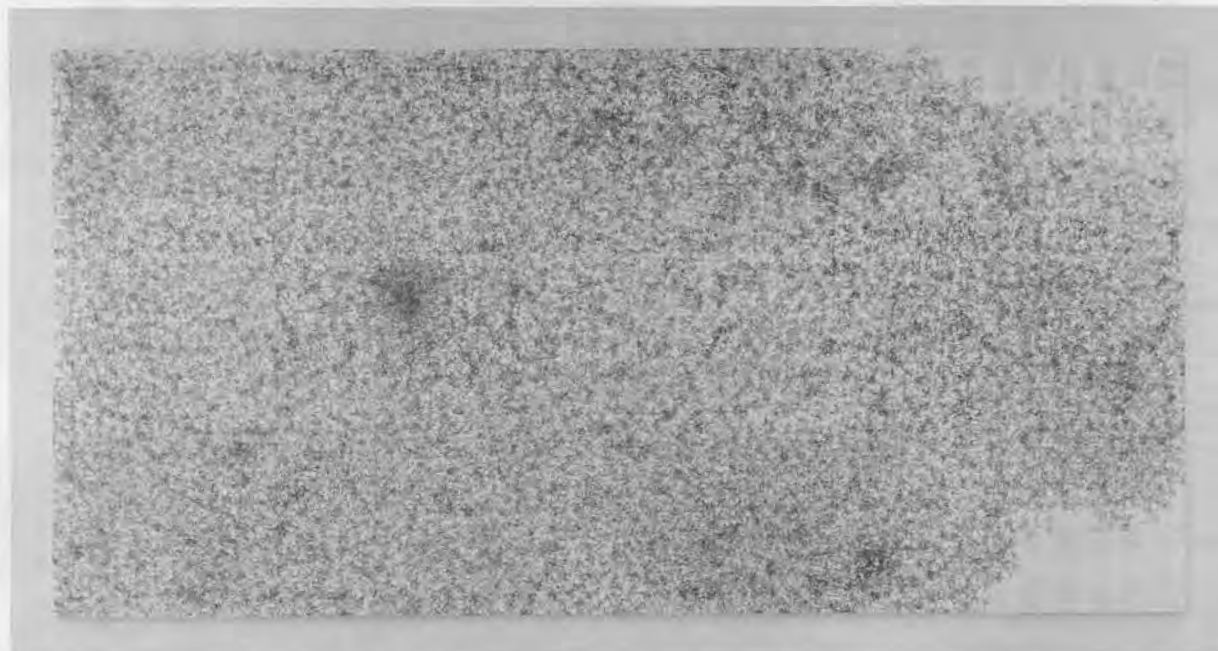
Massimiliano Gioni, Jacob Kassay, T.J. Wilcox, Roni Horn, Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Player of the Year, End of the Line, Big Spring, Vamos a Colombia, Highlights from Doclisboa,
Women of the Year in Music, and Poems for Robert Motherwell.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S Studies for *On the Origin of Species* (after Darwin), 2012. Ink on book page 9×6" (paper) 12.75×9.75" (frame). Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S Studies for *On the Origin of Species* (after Darwin), 2012. Ink on book page 9×6" (paper) 12.75×9.75" (frame). Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S *On the Origin of Species - Variations V* (after Darwin), 2013. Ink and matte acrylic on book pages mounted on canvas, 96×192". Photo by Elisabeth Bernstein. Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

Two Days in the Lives of Art as Social Action:

SHAKESPEARE, DARWIN, AND HANGING OUT WITH TIM ROLLINS AND K.O.S.
by *Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*

The following portrait of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. is in two parts. Part I is an excerpt from a transcript of a workshop Tim Rollins held this summer at the School of Visual Arts.¹ The text we were working with was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the work will be included in a show for the Highline to be mounted sometime in 2014. Part II takes place in the studio of K.O.S. as they worked finishing the canvases for *On the Origin*, based on Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which is currently on display at Lehmann Maupin. (November 7–December 28, 2013)

Part I

The School of Visual Arts: July 2013

PREFACE

Tim Rollins is an artist to hear and experience in action. Performance is his being. Drawn from his own New England Baptist background and the influence of Martin Luther King, Jr. since he was a boy, he is a preacher, a teacher, and an inspiration machine. He comes from a family long rooted in the New England Congregationalist tradition. His mannerisms are cut to the very rhythms and emphatic cadences of the Baptist preacher as his body sways with the motions of devotion whenever he speaks.

Born and bred in rural Maine, Rollins has an accent that to many of us sounds Southern Tennessee Williams but is actually upper Appalachia. His background is working class and the town he comes from had just over one thousand residents. His devotion to "unteachable" children, usually urban, poor, and of color, is for a reason. He is that kid who was broken wide open by what he read. Along with King, he read Thoreau, Emerson, and later, Dewey, but it was an essay that appeared in Gregory Battcock's *Idea Art*, that essentially changed his life: Joseph Kosuth's "Art After Philosophy." Rollins, teacher that he is, is a conceptual artist, one for whom ideas and objects collide and make one another through collective action.

SLAM!

Rollins slams a paperback copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* onto the table. Graduate students from the M.F.A. program in Art Practice are mixed with a group of teenage girls from the Lab School. We are situated in a U-shaped circle of tables where Rollins walks up and down.

SLAM!

Everyone jumps.

"There's no revolution without revolutionary practice. You should listen to Martin Luther King. Jane Addams, or the great John Dewey who said, 'The truth is what works and you can't have revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory.'"

Today we come together to do, to make, but I want to share with you. I come from the hills of rural Maine and even then I was kind of smart. I came here so I could study with Joseph Kosuth. But after S.V.A. I attended a graduate program at N.Y.U. in art education, politics, and philosophy. But I spent most of my time skipping my required classes in art education because I found a wonderful place called La Maison Française. You can go see it now—along that little street off of University Place near N.Y.U. It's like a Hollywood set of Paris and when you enter you feel you're going to see the ghost of Jean Paul Sartre or Simone Beauvoir wandering around. But in truth I stumbled upon Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes. I mean at night I was having dinner with Joseph Kosuth, doing dishes and he says, 'You might want to come along to hear some of these lectures.'

Ah that was a long time ago."

Slam. Slam. Slam.

"Thirty years ago! So I've read a lot and that is still useful but I am interested in what you do with the book. I don't want to look at you and see a bibliography. I want to see your project or to see you write your own thing. So let's get back to my tradition, where I started from, and that would be Thoreau and Emerson. Oh this stuff gets you going hmmm mmmm good.

Thoreau, Emerson, brilliant. W.E.B. Dubois, brilliant. Jane Addams, John Dewey, Charles Sanders Pierce, William James? You catching this? And these folk are in English, real English—New England English.

So hello. Get your padding ready—you say, turn the other cheek, well I've got four." [He slaps his two cheeks on his face followed by the two cheeks of his bum.] "one, two, three, four, cause you're going to get your ass whipped and no theory's going to help you with that. When you get your practice going, that's the ultimate practice. Does this make sense? You see, no more dress rehearsal. You must generate, write something that other people want.

You must generate, write something that other people want. You can be a hero to the world but ultimately you've got to be a doer.

You can be a hero to the world but ultimately you've got to be a doer. Does this make any sense? This is what I am trying to encourage you to do. When we talk one on one later today I want you to show me what you did yesterday and tell me where you want to go.

There should be no fear in this making. One of my favorite quotes by Robert Ryman is 'I know what I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing. Even when I don't know what I'm doing I can't know what I'm doing in order to do it.'

Nonetheless, I smell it. There's an odor in the room. It stinks of trepidation. And I don't know where it comes from. I come all this way and spend all this time and still I smell trepidation. You hear that??? You hear?"

SLAM!

"Yah. We're *here* people. And it's a miracle for some of us. How did a gay kid from the hills of Maine get to New York City? That's how you do it. We're here. We're here. And so I don't understand the trepidation. You're in it. But I don't think it's a fear factor but a spirit of procrastination that stops you. Procrastination always comes from fear. Dr. King called it the paralysis of analysis. That's good, right? It's like you're so afraid of doing the wrong thing that you do—[He waits.]

Nothing!

You are like a beautiful car in idle. You ain't going forward. You ain't going back. Why are you idling? My job is to tell you to take off your brakes. I can tell some of you like driving I-95 with the emergency brake on. Oh smell that burning rubber!

I like to move and that's what the kids taught me. Don't overthink this stuff. Let's get into it. There's a word for this program and it's called practice. That's why you're here. Are you hearing me? I want to see stuff. Then we'll talk about it later. We'll write about it later. Where's the stuff? The stuff.

Any questions about my attitude?"

Part II

The Chelsea Studio of Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

FALL 2013

Enter the K.O.S. studio in Chelsea to find a sunlit space crowded with giant canvases, tables covered with books (Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*), ladders with people reaching out to work at the top of the canvas, computers, music blaring, and several individuals kneeling and standing as they fill in and stamp, with various levels of pressure, hand stamps of tiny branches over a canvas covered in a grid of book pages. It is the fall of 2013 and Rollins and K.O.S. have been making art since the early '80s. They are preparing for the show at Lehmann Maupin, *On the Origin*, inspired by Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

The K.O.S. studio is in the artist-packed 526 building on 26th Street in Chelsea. "We got this studio here in Chelsea in 1994. We were the first artists in the building, then Peter Halley came along, and then wonderful Gary Simmons. We'd been isolated uptown, not to mention the number of times we had hysterical dealers calling in a panic, lost in the South Bronx." The year before, one of Rollins's favorite kids was murdered on Valentine's Day. So the move to Chelsea marked a further iteration of K.O.S. from its origins in a classroom at P.S. 52 in the South Bronx in 1981 to the Art and Knowledge workshop (a space near the school Tim rented in 1984 with a small grant from the N.E.A.), to Chelsea in the '90s. "It's ironic. When I began, I lived in Chelsea and commuted to the South Bronx. Now I commute to Chelsea and live in the South Bronx."

A thin, pale young woman from *Interview Magazine* is visiting the studio as well. Tim is telling her she can find their backstory "in the book" (*Tim Rollins and K.O.S.*, edited by Ian Berry, M.I.T. Press, 2009). He isn't here today to reiterate history but to make it in the present. I almost trip over a camera in the corner that has been set up by long-time member Rick Savinon. "Because people can't figure out how we do what we do," he says to me. Angel Abreu, a tall, athletic, handsome man in his 40s, dressed all in white—the other K.O.S. "lifer," stands near Tim, who is dressed in black, in the middle of the room. They make a team of contrasts: tall brown and dark next to short white and pink. They are surveying the progress of fine rhizomatic patterns that are forming. The Smiths is in the background and mixes with the loud clap of the hand-cut stamps covered with black ink as they hit the white canvas.

TIM ROLLINS: We're taking Darwin's original drawing known as *The Tree of Life* and we're placing it over and over again. It's taken us eight years—that long to get the idea going. We made the first one five years ago. It was a commission for the National Institute of Science, made in collaboration with kids from Washington, D.C. We used to be based in the South Bronx but now we're all over the world. The original works on paper were done in Edinburgh. We worked with 18 kids, ages ranging from 13 to 16. It was amazing. We were 50 feet from Darwin's studio.

THYRZA NICHOLS GOODEVE (RAIL): So he came down and visited with you, didn't he?

ROLLINS: Yes, he did. He came down from on high. I always say, when we get together it's like a séance. Darwin comes down and we commune with the ghosts of the past. Our work is a material-literal way to have a conversation with history.

You know, there is such a thing as a "divine science."

RAIL: Yes, Newton was a big mystic. That's why there are only seven colors in the rainbow instead of eight.

ROLLINS: Tell me. I don't know that.

RAIL: Well, you know he discovered the various wavelengths of visible light by experimenting with prisms. He observed how white light was refracted and broken up into different colored bands. But think of it. Why are there seven? It doesn't make sense: it goes red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. By such logic there should be an analogous color for indigo, but because he was a mystic and the number seven is sacred, he claimed there were only seven colors. Some claim indigo isn't really a color.

ROLLINS: We've done a lot of works in indigo. It has a big influence on African-American history because the most precious crop was indigo. It was found in South Carolina, the Gullah region. See Julie Dash's beautiful film *Daughters of the Dust*. It's about an indigo plantation. That's why Duke Ellington's song is named "Mood Indigo" and why we made works using indigo. It's super hard to find and expensive because it's a color that is not black, not purple, not blue.

ANGEL ABREU: We did lots of research and found the best was Daniel Smith in Seattle. So we had to special order it. We spent a lot of time looking at different brands of indigo. You see, nothing we do is arbitrary.

RAIL: So why did you create these stamps?

ROLLINS: It comes from a drawing he did in his notebooks in 1837. It is his visual representation of the theory of evolution. It's called *The Tree of Life*. It's important to us that the work looks like a drawing. That's why some people are filling in lines here and there. It should have that feeling of hand-touch, of spirit-feel. Even Warhol has touch. You can see it in the silkscreens—that's the reason they are irregular. Silkscreens are like stamps, the pressure is different every time.

RAIL: I see moments where blotches appear. Dripping ink.

ROLLINS: Yeah—the blotches are important, they are the mutations. After all, don't we all have blotches?

RICK SAVINON: They become part of the work. Otherwise it's too regulated and looks like a print.

ABREU: The issue is the guy who made these stamps for us, he's now out of business so we have to find someone else. When we asked him to make 60 stamps he said, "You know that's going to be expensive." We said, "How expensive?" And he said "60 dollars!" That's why he went out of business! Each one is hand-made.

RAIL: The placing of the pages of the book on each canvas—are they different or all the same?

ROLLINS: No, all the same—in order. The whole book is 360 pages but we don't ever want to be literal so it's not all of the pages. They're there to inspire. It's like an opera. The libretto inspires the music. You can watch an opera in a language you don't know, without reading. It's the same with our work. It's about a visual correspondence with the text. The work is not about something. That's why you can't get hung up on interpretation. That's a big issue, especially with so much politically engaged art. We want to create a situation, learning machines, so everyone is learning in the process of making and then hopefully the audience will be inspired too. Maybe they will pick up Darwin or continue with the idea. These are catalysts for action. They are action-based, not, "This will look good in my house,"—that's not bad but, we aim to make a total work of art that communes with the past and then, in the course of the present, it's up to the people to commune with the object, to see what happens in the future, because after these are done, we're moving on to the next thing.

RAIL: And what is that?

ROLLINS: The poems of Pasolini. Okay, you guys, I have to leave. I'll be back in 15 minutes. I have to pick up my suit at the cleaners for church tomorrow.

RAIL: You've been to his church?

ABREU: Yeah, it's intense. People go down and stuff.

RAIL: You mean faint?

RICK SAVINON: One day I was there and Tim, he almost went down.

Tim, who's just about out the door, shouts: "Rick—he found it scary."² We all laugh.

RAIL: Angel, I can tell you're a painter. You're stamping has such a structure to it.

ABREU: Well there is a rhythm to it. We each have our own technique. That's why—

SAVINON:—we jump around all over the canvas so as not to have a style. We lay a foundation and then we step back. That's why I needed to stop for a moment and look, even get up on the ladder, in order to see what areas need adjusting.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bul.

RAIL: Your motions are so repetitive and the canvases are so big. Do you guys ever have dreams of this work, like after a day of skiing?

SAVINON: Dreams! Oh yeah! Sometimes I go home and I dream of working here. I wake up and realize I have to come back and go, Jesus—I haven't even slept.

ABREU: When I used to work in a restaurant I had waitmares. You know, when it's crazy busy and everyone needs something from you. It took a long time for me to have artmares. They usually come around deadlines. All that anxiety. Like when someone spilled something on a painting.

RAIL: Has that happened?

SAVINON: Oh yah. We've had holes in paintings and had to patch them up. One time when we were working on the *Amerika* series based on Kafka—the one with the golden horns, we were finishing one up and a guy spilled a bucket of water on one corner and the whole thing began to just melt! We had to redraw it, wait for it to dry, and redo it. The good thing is no one panicked.

ABREU: Hell yeah. We don't panic.

SAVINON: That's the other thing. We all have our own practices. Angel's a painter. I have jobs outside of this. Clients in Europe and on the West coast, design work, photography. I make furniture, and I use all of those skills here at the studio.

ABREU: Yeah, installers love us.

RAIL: You two are the only ones who've been here since the beginning. Others come and go?

ABREU: Tim was my seventh grade art teacher. When I showed up on the first day I showed up with my Crayola crayons and everybody just burst out laughing at me. I had been avoiding going to P.S. 52 for two years. I wanted to go anywhere but there. At that point it had the reputation of being the worst school. I went to one of the first charter schools in the city before that: Evergreen. It took me two buses to get there. I was nine or 10. But by seventh and eighth grade I was forced to go to P.S. 52.

RAIL: Do you remember your first impression?

ABREU: Of course. In walks Tim. He starts dropping books on the desks in front of us: Bam bam bam. All his mannerisms have not changed. I'm going, what's going on? I was brand new. The other students knew what was going on. It's the first day of school and he slams down a test. I open it up. It's multiple choice. Questions like: "What year was the First Surrealist Manifesto written? Of these four artists, who was an Analytic Cubist?" Stuff like that. We're all moaning, and groaning, and rolling our eyes. This is terrible. So after the test he says, "Maybe some of you did okay but some of you didn't know anything but I guarantee you, this is the exact same test you are going to get as a midterm. I promise you will get an A. If you don't, you can't make art until you do." This was the start of my career. I was 11.

RAIL: You went to boarding school in Deerfield, Massachusetts after P.S. 52. Right?

ABREU: I applied to Deerfield to appease my parents. The guidance counselor at P.S. 52 was friends with the Admissions Director at Deerfield so he came down and interviewed me. I had no idea, but they gave me a full scholarship. I didn't want to go though; I wanted to go to LaGuardia.

RAIL: My brother and my father went to Deerfield. Quite a leap from the South Bronx in the '80s. Were you still connected to K.O.S.?

ABREU: I was involved during vacations. I studied art at Deerfield along with everything else. They had a pretty amazing art facility. But my senior year my art teacher was livid with me because that summer he'd opened up the *Washington Post*, and K.O.S. was on the cover, and there I was with Tim, and I hadn't told him. He was not happy.

RAIL: You didn't tell him?

ABREU: I didn't want to come off like I was a poser. After Deerfield I went to the University of Pennsylvania for crew but I ended up in Seattle studying philosophy at the University of Washington and painting at night. I talked to Tim twice a week the whole time, so it wasn't like I ever left.

SAVINON: I took a year break about 18 years ago. That's when I started in the fashion business doing design work for showrooms. I needed a break. At the time I was going to the School of Visual Arts. It was just too much pressure. I had to abandon everything and then regroup. You know, K.O.S., it's a swinging door. People are in and out of here all the time. Like Nelson Montes who's coming back tonight. We haven't seen him for a decade but he's coming back and it's like nothing ever happened. Also we're able to connect through the Internet now. There was one work where we had called all the members of K.O.S. and they sent all their images, faxed over material, and it became part of the work.

ABREU: They're all in the book. There's a list. People often say to us, well you're not kids anymore.

RAIL: I said that.

SAVINON: No, we're not kids but there are always kids involved. That's the point. To tell us not to continue to use K.O.S., that's like saying to Derek Jeter, "When are you going to open up your own league?"

ABREU: We're constantly reinvented through the workshops and it's always about working with kids. We are just back from Edinburgh, this summer we worked with the Lab School in Chelsea, and recently, The Springfield Renaissance School in Massachusetts.

RAIL: The kids always seem to be around 13 or 14? That's around when you started, Rick. Angel—you were the youngest at 11.

ABREU: We like that age. We do workshops in high schools too but sixth, seventh, and eighth graders are very cool. Especially the sixth graders. They are very funny.

Tim returns with his dry cleaning while Jimi Hendrix is blaring. He stops and stares at everyone. "It looks like Courbet's *Artist's Studio*." Then he looks at the canvases on either side of the room. "This is getting kind of scary." Since he left an hour ago, the stampers and line-fillers have been working away, so the canvases are beginning to fill and vibrate with spontaneous patterns. The whole enterprise is a thriving industry of individuals coming together to form a greater good, larger than any one singularity. Process, art, evolution, and social action are one: in other words, K.O.S. ☺

ENDNOTES

1. This opening selection drawn from Rollins's workshop at SVA originally appeared in a more extended feature written for SVA Art Practice blog. It can be found at: svaartpractice.tumblr.com.
2. The Church Rollins attends, Rivers at Rehoboth is an African American L.G.B.T. Evangelical church, "for those who have been wounded by oppressive religions" located at 263 West 86th Street. The pastors are Rev. Vanessa Brown and Rev. Joseph Tolton.

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Tim Rollins Is Always Beginning

BY KYLE CHAYKA | FEB 27, 2014 | 3:02 PM



When the American artist Tim Rollins speaks, he essays forth, the pace increasing and his words rolling over each other as he continues. At times, he inserts interpolations like “yeah” or “all right,” prompting call-and-response shouts from his audience. Though he’s fond of referring to himself as a Baptist, the preacher pose is a little incongruous for a white man born in Pittsfield, Maine—but for Rollins, *art* is inherently spiritual.

At the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) Museum of Art last week, Rollins opened “*RIVERS*,” a minimalist exhibition of less than a dozen works populating a wide-open gallery space. The pieces appropriate texts—not just books, but interviews, music, and poetry—from the African American canon and alters the manuscript pages with paint and collage, turning them into drawings and sculptures. It’s a stirring show, but the most important element of the works isn’t the final product hanging on the gallery wall. It’s how they’re made.

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‘We treat these objects better than we treat each other,’ he said, gesturing around at the gallery.

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Standing in front of a crowd of SCAD students to give a short talk about "RIVERS," Rollins ended his sermon arguing that art's purpose should be humanist, bringing people together rather than dividing them. "We treat these objects better than we treat each other," he said, gesturing around at the gallery. "We keep them warm in the winter, cool in the summer"—unlike so many of the homeless or dispossessed in our country. Rollins' strategy is to use his art not just to prompt social change but to actively create it.

For three decades, Rollins has made work in collaboration with Kids of Survival, a group of predominantly African-American children from the South Bronx, where he opened a communal studio after working as a teacher at Intermediate School 52, developing an art curriculum. Sitting at a table with two of his collaborators, who were young students when he met them and are now grown men, Rollins still seems a little surprised by the path his career has taken.

"It was a pretty rough school in a very treacherous neighborhood, but I fell in love with the kids," Rollins explains. "I couldn't stand the school, so after eight long years of being there every day, we started our own school, called the Art and Knowledge Workshop." The workshop became known as Kids of Survival, which initially welcomed boys and girls to work with Rollins, but now focuses only on boys. "It started out as an after school school, then it became a fraternity, and now it's a family," Rollins says.

Rick Savignon and Angel Abreu are part of that family. The sharply-dressed pair have been in Kids of Survival for 28 years. Savignon met Rollins through a workshop at Legman College, also in the Bronx, where the artist was hosting a workshop to fund his K.O.S. studio. After the workshop ended, Rollins asked Savignon and his best friend to join the group. "He told us it was in the South Bronx, and my immediate reaction was, are you crazy I'm not going out there, he's nuts!" Savignon recalls. "I stepped into the classroom and saw the current members of K.O.S. working, and I just fell into it. They welcomed me with open arms and from then on I've always been in the group."

Abreu joined K.O.S. at the age of 11 in 1985. "As an 11-year-old walking into this situation, I didn't know, it felt really organic, really natural," he says. "It wasn't until years later that I realized how extraordinary the whole thing was. For me it was natural—going after school, going to make some art, and some of the art is going to hang in galleries and museums." Tim Rollins and K.O.S.—both names are usually credited on wall labels—have entered the collections of institutions like the Museum of Modern Art.

Going back to school was an unorthodox step for Rollins, who was firmly embedded in the upper echelons of the 1980s art scene. "All my friends in the art world—I was assistant to Joseph Kosuth, I knew Warhol, Rauschenberg—they went, are you out of your mind?" he says. But he was confident. "I knew deep down in my soul that we were gonna make history. I didn't talk about it too much 'cause that's kind of intimidating for 11, 12, 13-year-olds, right, but I did say—"

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'I said, don't bring me your scholastic art award winners, bring the kids who need this—a boost, some encouragement, something to live for for a little while,' Rollins says.

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Angel interrupts, "You did say though! You did say we're making history every day."

Rollins responds, laughing, "And you're like what? Who is this crazy white man?"

Though he doesn't fall under the category of relational aesthetics—an amorphous contemporary art movement with Tino Sehgal as its star, that focuses on creating interactive situations rather than objects—Rollins makes the most impact by throwing disparate groups of people and ideas together and seeing what happens. With K.O.S., he introduced the cutting edge of conceptual art to inner-city students who had little access to any kind of art, let alone active contemporary artists. And the artist has found that intersection very fruitful.

For many of their exhibitions, Rollins and K.O.S. also work with local children attending schools near the galleries and museums, convening with them in a temporary studio to work on specific projects. For the Savannah exhibition, the group collaborated with students from Garrison Junior High School, a school of visual and performing arts in the city. "I said, don't bring me your scholastic art award winners, bring the kids who need this—a boost, some encouragement, something to live for for a little while," Rollins says. "The selection and diversity were so amazing. The vibe was actually pretty hilarious."

The artist insisted that the team would work in a studio at SCAD, a lushly appointed, rapidly expanding college that serves as one of the centers of arts education in the American south. "I wanted the kids to have an experience of the college environment; now they can see themselves here," Rollins says. It's a form of encouragement that he got from his family early on. "My grandma worked in the commissary of Colby College in Waterville, Maine—I will never forget the day that she wanted me to come visit her, I loved it," Rollins says. "She said, Timmy, I see you in a place like this. I was the first in my whole family to go to college."

The Garrison collaboration became more fruitful than anyone expected. Though the workshops usually only focus on creating one series of work, this time, the team made three in as many days. They are also some of the most heartfelt pieces in the show. A printed page of Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is daubed with a single twisting stroke of watercolor paint, the sinuous arc of the language and the language's object at the same time. Elsewhere, there are pages of music, the notes of Duke Ellington's score for a ballet called "The River." Each page is blackened with a tide of paint, rising up the staves like a flood.

Rollins describes his work as an attempt to help share a culture, helping kids who don't have access to the heritage of African American art. With these textual artifacts comes education and repossession. Though Rollins' objects can be beautiful and are often poetic, this learning experience is his greatest accomplishment. Rollins isn't playing the savior—he is a collaborator through and through—but he feels there's something in the history of African-American oppression in the United States to atone for. "The history of slavery is an American phenomenon, not just in the south," he says. "It's about owning up."

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'The joy with young people is that you're making art in the future tense.'

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"You can't ignore it," Savignon says.

"But you can't steep in it, either," Rollins responds. "The joy with young people is that you're making art in the future tense. I'm not driving my truck looking through the back-view mirror," he riffs. "We're going straight ahead, runaway train—that's why you make art. It's a way to move on." And just like that, Rollins and K.O.S. are always moving, circulating an ever-changing group of compatriots, changing lives, filling galleries. "I feel like we just started," Rollins says. "After 30 years I feel like we've just begun."



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Artist interview

Tim Rollins and KOS: don't call it a comeback

The art collaboration that rose to fame in the 1980s is holding its first public workshop for youngsters at Frieze New York

What really bothers me," says Tim Rollins, the artist and teacher who gained international fame in the 1980s with his collaboration Kids of Survival, "is when people come up to me and go 'wow, Tim and KOS are back.' I say to them, 'We never left. You're the ones that left us. We've always been here.'"

"We've been getting that a lot lately," says Angel Abreu, now 38 and an active member of KOS since he joined as a seventh-grader in 1985.

The collaboration between Tim Rollins and KOS became one of the hottest stories in the art world in the late 1980s. Rollins, an artist who taught at a Bronx high school, began an arts programme for a group of students often labelled with learning disabilities. The students called themselves Kids of Survival, or KOS. Early on, inspired by one of the student's drawings in a copy of George Orwell's *1984*, the group began pasting the texts of literary classics onto canvases and then superimposing their own interpretive paintings, creating a socially aware body of work.

Rollins and KOS had their first solo exhibition at a Bronx community college in 1985. Before the year ended, their work appeared in the Whitney Biennial. The gallerist Jay Gorney began representing them a year later. In 1989, Rollins and KOS appeared on the cover of *Artforum*. They travelled the world. *The New York Times* called their Kafka-inspired "Amerika" paintings "preocious masterpieces". It was almost too good to believe.

"We were superstars in the late 1980s and early 1990s," Rollins says. "And then everything fell out."

The backlash began in 1991 with an article in *New York* magazine. Based on allegations made by two former KOS members who had been kicked out of the group, it painted Rollins as a vocally and sometimes physically abusive tyrant who



Eric Fernandez (left), the newest member of KOS, and Angel Abreu with Tim Rollins (centre) in the group's studio in Chelsea

misappropriated the collaboration's funds.

"That was such obvious bullshit," Rollins says today, echoing what he and KOS members have said since the article appeared. "If you believed that stuff, you wanted to believe it. We were threatening to the system. We suffered from 'it's too good to be true' syndrome."

Not long after the *New York* article hit news-stands,

can't recall, the story was killed prior to publication.

Interest in the group's work declined. After it held a show including works based on *Pinochio* at the Mary Boone Gallery in 1992, Robert Storr, then a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, said in an interview for a documentary on the collaboration: "It was the most disappointing show of [Rollins and KOS] that I've seen so far."

"Shakespeare's Puck reminds me of [KOS]. They're class clowns. They like changing things for the joy of it. They don't make art to be on the cover of *Artforum*."

Anthony Haden-Guest, who now writes for *The Art Newspaper*, spent time following Rollins and KOS for an article commissioned by *Vanity Fair*. Haden-Guest says that he found none of the "dark shadows" portrayed in *New York* magazine, and that his own article would have been positive. For reasons he

As it grew more difficult for the group to sell their paintings, deeper tragedy struck. After witnessing five murders in the South Bronx, Christopher Hernandez, a 15-year-old KOS member, was killed on Valentine's Day in 1993.

It was the breaking point for Rollins and KOS. "I think we

had collective post-traumatic stress disorder," Rollins says today. He told the *Scotsman* in 2001 that he began drinking himself to sleep. The crew was evicted from its studio. "We retreated," he says. The members hunkered down and focused on their work, largely out of the spotlight. "It got down and out," Rollins says. "We were in pretty rough shape. Nothing was selling."

The downturn, however, led to the work that inspired the group's project at Frieze New York this year.

In 1998, the University Art Museum at the State University of New York in Albany asked Rollins and KOS to put on a Shakespeare-related workshop. "I said, 'That sounds great. What would the fee be?'" Rollins says today, remembering how badly he and KOS needed funding. "They said \$2,000. And I said, 'I'm on it.'" But he couldn't think of what to do.

At a loss, Rollins resorted to a book of Shakespeare quotations for inspiration. He landed on a passage from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

"And as imagination bodies forth/The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen/Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing/A local habitation and a name."

The play was an inspiration. "We went to the university and we ran out of paper on the first day because the kids went nuts," Rollins says. He was especially drawn to the trickster Puck. "Puck reminds me of all of my kids. They're class clowns. Not goody-goodyies. They like changing things just for the sheer joy of it. They don't make art to be on the cover of *Artforum*."

For their project at Frieze New York, Rollins and KOS are due to use the ideas from Albany 14 years ago to stage their first public workshop for youngsters. During the fair, Rollins plans to have a 40-foot-long table in the woods on Randall's Island where kids can help to create a painting inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on top of the musical score of Felix Mendelssohn's 19th-century composition of the

same name. "We're going to be blasting Mendelssohn's overture," Rollins says.

During the gap between being represented by Mary Boone Gallery in the mid-1990s and their current dealer Lehmann Maupin in 2008, Rollins says that they placed around 20 works in museums on their own. "But, boy, it's a rough system," he says. "It's like representing yourself in court without a lawyer. It took a big toll on me. And on my personal life. That's why my hair's grey."

"That was then," he says. "This is now. It's a new day. I don't look back. I don't drive looking through a rearview mirror. We make art in the future tense."

While Rollins and KOS consistently worked throughout the years, the art market didn't really return to them until the mid-2000s. Rollins and KOS showed with Galleria Rauecci/Santamaria in Naples, Italy, in 2006.

"Through that," Rollins says, "we were contacted by Galerie Eva Presenhuber [in Zürich], where they had a show in late 2007. And things started selling again to museums and major, major collectors."

Soon after, in 2008, David Maupin came calling. "I've known David since he was working behind the desk for Mary Boone," Rollins says of Maupin, who was Boone's assistant in 1990.

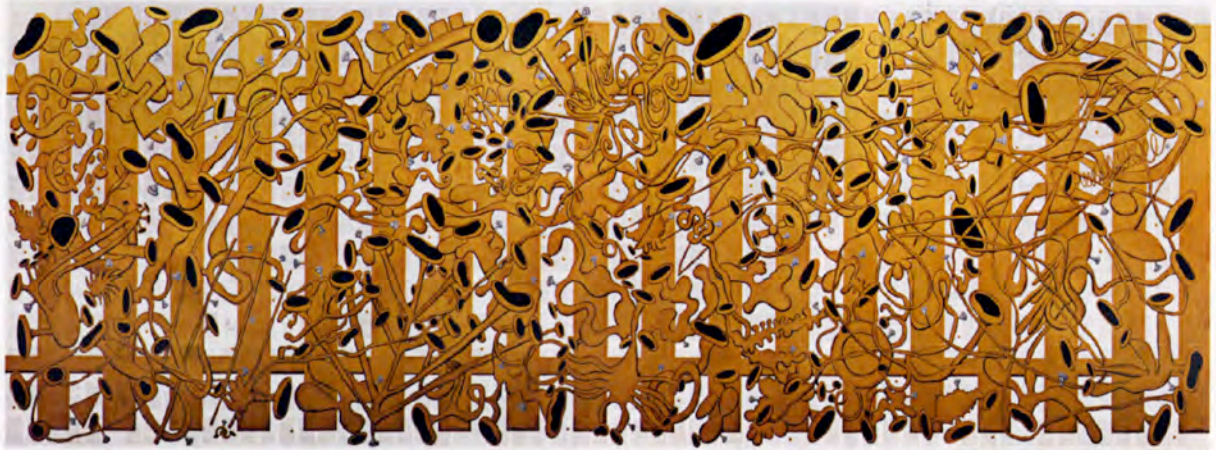
"It was kind of major for us," Maupin says, "that this hero of ours was working with us and joining the gallery."

As Rollins and KOS begin their Frieze project, their goals have not changed greatly in 30 years. "My only goal is to keep going," Rollins says. "Making art is necessary; not for the market, not for self-gratification, but for the culture. I think our goal is to change the culture. And to change everyone's idea about what art is, what art can be, who can make it, and who can love it."

Eric Magnuson

Tim Rollins and KOS's workshop is in Frieze Projects. Their work is available with Lehmann Maupin (C10) at the fair

SWITZERLAND



Tim Rollins + K.O.S. Museum für Gegenwartskunst Basel

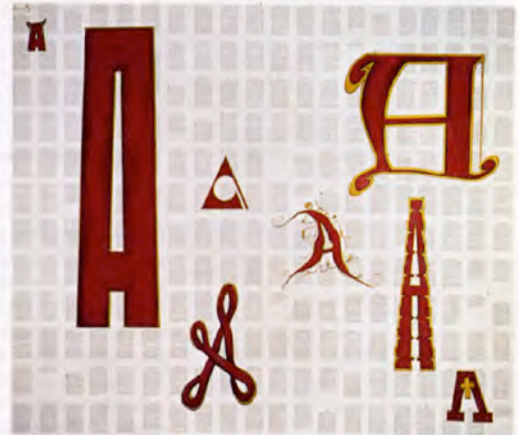
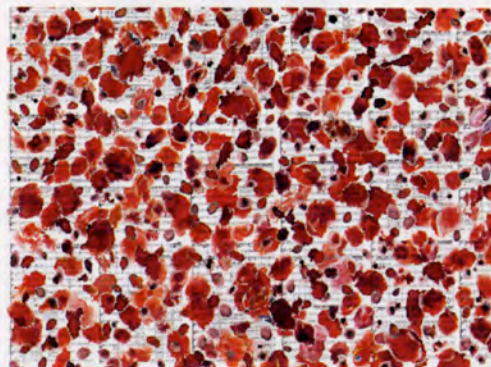
In an interview in the catalogue for 'On Transfiguration', the beautifully realized exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel, Tim Rollins explained his collective practice with K.O.S. (Kids of Survival): 'The studio is a place of séance, where ghosts such as Kafka and Melville, Malcolm X and the X-Men, Anna Sewall and Harriet Jacobs, Richard Strauss and Franz Joseph Haydn all come down to visit, to suggest and hopefully to watch what happens with delight.' In the literature-laden paintings made by Rollins + K.O.S., pages of text become both ground and subject. Theirs is an epistolary practice: the painting overlaid across Kafka, Melville, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mary Shelley is a visual letter in response to the original texts. Together, the paintings amount to a conversation about literature and art, sign and image, the past and the present, the canon and the street and – as Rollins + K.O.S.'s *oeuvre* has become increasingly celebrated – the canon again.

This exhibition elegantly traced the collective's development over the past three decades, beginning in the early 1980s, when Rollins was working as a public school teacher in the (still) severely disenfranchised South Bronx. There, he began the Art and Knowledge Workshop, in which he would read texts to his students while they sketched out drawings in response, later to be repurposed as paintings atop grid-like supports made of the writings that inspired them. Some of his earliest students continue to work with him today, and Rollins continues to hold workshops with kids around the world, often in confluence with exhibitions of K.O.S.'s work. Much has been made and written of the positive pedagogical root and edifying bloom of their practice, yet it is not just their conception and making that is political, but also their chosen form. The fabled whiteness of much of K.O.S.'s source material gleaned from the Western canon – from Homer and Strauss to Abstract-Expressionism and Post-Minimalism – is complicated and subverted by their very (virtuosic) handling of it.

In the identity politics-strewn art world of the 1980s from which Rollins + K.O.S.'s

collective practice emerged, political figuration and representational painting was supposedly the packed pasture of any artist not white, male and straight; abstract painting was, like whiteness, for those whose 'only' task was to deal with art, not struggle. Thus, in their sleek and seamless conflation of high abstract formalism with issues of race and class, and their use of abject materials like paper and blood, Rollins + K.O.S. paved the way for painters like Mark Bradford and Ellen Gallagher, both of whom use potentially political materials to make their gorgeously minimal canvases and collages.

Accordingly, Rollins + K.O.S.'s immense influence, and their still-smarting singularity, was immediately apparent in Basel. The earliest works on view, such as the mural-like *Absalom! Absalom!* (1983), evoke 'outsider' art, naively illustrative of moments from the novel (a noose dangles, a hobo skulks). Quickly though, the paintings discard such pictorial language for a reduced visual vocabulary of decorous or geometric signs. With their appealing lattices of faintly corporeal, horn-like shapes, *Amerika – Infinity* (after Franz Kafka) (1987–88) and its recent reprise, *Amerika – Everyone is Welcome!* (after Franz Kafka) (2002), conjure both William Blake and Sue Williams. At times the textual grounds function like Greek fragments, their omissions and erasures creating a weird poetry. In 'The Temptations of St. Antony (Other Voices)' (1989–90), a series of watercolours on individually framed pages, one page is blacked out but for a sloping figurative form of text left unpainted at its centre, which reads: 'elongated swimmer/olly conceal him/ANTONY/ed the shape of /perhaps I'm dead an/breathe! The s/I No more Sufferi/me the thunder/That blonde patch'. *Me the thunder* is right.



Top:
Tim Rollins + K.O.S.
Amerika – Everyone is Welcome! (after Franz Kafka)
2002
Acrylic on bookpages on canvas
2.4 x 7.3 m

Above:
Tim Rollins + K.O.S.
The Scarlet Letter (after Hawthorne)
1987–8
Acrylic, watercolour and bistre on bookpages on linen
2.7 x 3.6 m

Tim Rollins + K.O.S.
A Midsummer Night's Dream (after Mendelssohn and Shakespeare)
(detail)
2009
Watercolour, acrylic, india ink, collage and offset music score
1 x 1.2 m

Later works make elegant use of musical scores as grounds, evoking Hanne Darboven's elegiac grids. This use of music underlines Rollins's interest in a language of signs, be they textual, musical or purely visual. Nevertheless, a series of paintings from the past few years left such rigid geometry behind and instead offered delicate pools and splotches of bright watercolour peppered across Mendelssohn and Shakespeare, conjuring the most delicate of Pollocks. The exhibition not only emphasized serious beauty but serious humour. I see *the Promised Land* (After the Rev. Dr. M.L. King, Jr.) (2008), with its enormous black triangle painted over pages reading 'Black Power Defined', hung next to *Black Beauty* (1987–89), in which vertical black stripes (conjuring prison, Daniel Buren, and Rainer Maria Rilke's 1902 poem *Panther*) cover a text about the infamous black horse and its 'Strike for Liberty'. Nearby, an enormous, pale-white, near-monochrome, was sourced from Melville's still-potent 'The Whiteness of the Whale' chapter in *Moby-Dick* (1851). Here, as elsewhere, a box of referents was adroitly opened: mid-century painting, race, literature, omission and negation. This plurality of approaches speaks to Rollins + K.O.S.'s practice, which eschews the singular virtuosity of the artists they conjure by the very collectivity of their making. Simultaneously, it affirms that old-time virtuosity and individual agency by the authorship of the canonical works they transform so singularly – and so brilliantly. That their work remains so relevant both artistically and politically underlines the power of the *oeuvre* itself, as well as the continued entrenchment of the bleak socio-political realities that gave rise to it.

Quinn Latimer

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Arts

Spirit of the Bronx

In 1979, the people of the South Bronx worked with Tim Rollins and John Ahearn to create art that would help them survive their struggling neighbourhood. Next week, the first Frieze art fair in New York will pay tribute to their work. By Ariella Budick

Art is like prayer," Tim Rollins intones in a preacher's cadence: "if you don't believe in it, it's not going to do anything for you, but if you believe that this thing you made has some sort of power, then mountains can be moved. I'm talking about the mountains in your life," says Rollins, "the mountains in your community, the mountains in your situation. I have this complete, crazy, romantic fantasy that is vindicated week after week after week."

Rollins has the experience to back up his passionate words: 30 years' worth of watching vulnerable inner-city kids turn into wary collaborators, then acolytes, co-creators and, in some cases, fully-fledged partners in the tenacious enterprise called Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival, or KOS. Theirs is a peaceful kind of urban gang, united by faith in the transformative powers of painting.

Earnestness is making a comeback, or at least enjoying a moment. Rollins belongs to the same idealistic generation of artists as the sculptor John Ahearn. Both fired up their careers in the South Bronx in the early 1980s, when hopefulness was a tool of survival; both will be plying their trades at Frieze, the giant art fair taking place from May 4-7 on Randall's Island, a neglected wedge of land in the East river equidistant from Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens. Frieze New York will shove Rollins and Ahearn back into the glare of the contemporary art scene; and their presence may shake the carnival atmosphere with the more ardent tremors of a revival meeting.

Is there still a place for art without irony? "Hell, yeah!" Ahearn almost yells. "Are you kidding me? I have no irony. My sculptures are the heartfelt expressions of my feelings and my passions."

We meet in Ahearn's large, sunny studio above a tyre shop in one of New York's poorest areas, where he's been working on and off since the late 1970s. The Bronx has improved immensely since its bleakest days but it's still a long way from glamorous. The pristine art galleries of Chelsea belong to a different universe.

Rollins' and Ahearn's zeal seems strangely out of sync with an art world propelled by gargantuan spectacle and soaked in wry self-consciousness. Jeff Koons hires fabricators to produce gleaming steel balloon dogs. Maurizio Cattelan finds eye-catching ways to sneer at the system that crams his pockets with cash. Neo-Duchampians sell shoeboxes as enlightened critique, and slews of young graduates prettify their pitches with brainy allusions to the liminal and the abject, always pledging to "transgress boundaries". Set against that pageantry and cleverness, a belief in art's redeeming powers seems almost embarrassingly naive.

More than three decades ago, Ahearn began making plaster casts of the South Bronx's struggling population. Part-time prostitutes, kids trundling home from school, road sweepers and clients of the methadone clinic down the block (all of them black and Hispanic denizens of crumbling buildings nearby) posed patiently while Ahearn smeared their faces with pink gloop and inserted straws up their nostrils so they could breathe. He and his collaborator Rigoberto Torres took the art into the street, seating their subjects outside their studio and passing plaster and paint through the window. Neighbours gawked; many eagerly participated.

About 40 of those casts starred in the popular 1979 exhibition "South Bronx Hall of Fame" at Fashion Moda, the shopfront gallery that opened in one of the most battered sections of a burning borough. "Crucial to Ahearn's work is its venue and audience," the artist and art critic Walter Robinson wrote in a review for *Art in America* magazine. "By now, we are used to artists and critics railing against the elitist museum/gallery system. It's less common - though Ahearn has shown how easy it is - to find an artist actually seeking out a new audience of a different social background and making art specific to that context." Robinson went on to describe the locals' enthusiasm and their gratification at seeing themselves so heroically depicted.

Cecilia Alemani, curator of Frieze Projects, is re-enacting that landmark show with as many of the original busts (around 26) as she can muster. "I wanted to pay tribute to a non-profit space that no longer exists," she says. "South Bronx Hall of Fame was a community-based, participation-based event. John is great, but he's not really a commer-

cial artist, so it's hard to see his work. [At Frieze] you will encounter it as you would a regular booth, and then you'll realise it's something completely different."

A large chunk of the difference is that Ahearn and Torres will be making new casts at the fair for anyone with the fortitude to bear the gunk-and-straws, and the means and desire to pay \$3,000 for the result. How does Ahearn reconcile his life-

long dedication to the least privileged with his new project of immortalising wealthy insiders? "That's my punk side," he explains. The Frieze organisers asked him if there was some way to recreate the street vibe of the original project but Ahearn hated that idea. "My angry side came through and I insisted that there be no social relevance to this activity. You can quote me on that: Enough social relevance!"

Ahearn may be overstating his cynicism, but he does want to lighten his social com-

'The South Bronx was on fire, literally and culturally. We didn't make art to be cute. We made art to survive'

mitment with realism, and he hopes to gain a few patrons in the process. He has a warehouse full of work and a sense, at 61, of the brevity of life. He also has an appreciation for what the critic Clement Greenberg called "the umbilical cord of gold" that ties creators to the rich. Ahearn cites his hero, Caravaggio, as a champion of ordinary folk but one who depended upon the largesse of the super-elite.

"Isn't my soul being soiled by this experience?" he asks rhetorically, making it clear he thinks the answer is no. "If I'm going to glorify anyone, it'll be tongue-in-cheek." Ah, so he does have a trace of irony in him, after all.

'That's my punk side. My angry side came through and I insisted that there be no social relevance to this activity'

Tim Rollins doesn't share Ahearn's ambivalence about money. Playing an art fair, he says, is just another way "to make history, make hysteria, and affect the culture". Rollins chairs an organisation structured as a for-profit corporation with a not-for-profit arm, so the competing demands of service and business are built into its DNA. We meet at the headquarters of Tim Rollins and KOS (pronounced "chaos"), a small office in Chelsea, strewn with the detritus of recent artistic experiments.

At Frieze, the group will pray for good weather and spread a 40ft table beneath the shoreline canopy of oaks on Randall's Island. Local children, veteran members, KOS alumni and casual drop-ins will conduct a workshop on the theme of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Somehow, the project involves watercolours, a musical score, mulberry paper and fields of colour. To Rollins, Frieze needn't be just a flea market for finished products, but a demonstration of the group's complex, participatory process – a kind of public camp meeting.

"We're not making art about the community," he says, "but using art to create community."

That has been Rollins' credo since 1981, when he arrived in the Bronx for a two-week gig teaching art to at-risk middle schoolers. He stuck around for eight years. "It was an amazing time to be an artist in the South Bronx, when hip-hop exploded," he recalls. "Life was crazy, it was scary, it was dangerous. The South Bronx was on fire in two ways: literally and culturally. That's how KOS was born. We didn't make art to be cute. We didn't make art to be on the cover of *Artforum*, although that was really cool. We made art to survive psychologically, emotionally, spiritually and, eventually, financially.

That "we" is not merely rhetorical. Rollins assembled a band of young followers, and together they forged a collective aesthetic that has endured, even as the individual



KOS's 'Amerika - Everyone is Welcome' (after Kafka 2002) Courtesy of the artists: Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

Spirit of the Bronx

Continued from previous page

participants have grown up and drifted away, or returned as peers. At any given time, 12 to 14 people gather to discuss the writings of F Scott Fitzgerald, Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King, Franz Kafka and many others, and those seminars become the basis for inspirational paintings. The team of artists glues pages of print on to canvas, and then paints or collages over the words. Basically, Rollins runs a permanent floating book club for people who won't be content with doodling in the margins. Just how a dozen different readings of a text become alchemised into a coherent KOS vision remains a mystery, one that Rollins sees as profoundly political.

"I love the metaphor [the feminist and pioneering social worker] Jane Addams used," he says. "She had this notion of a cultural democracy, which she described in terms of the community choir. Everybody gets together, one person can be the soloist, and one person can't sing at all, so you put him at the back. But nothing is more beautiful than when they all raise their voices in unison. That's what gives you goose pimples."

One of those choir members is Angel Abreu, who entered Rollins' orbit as a South Bronx child, was hauled reluctantly to the Museum of Modern Art, and later graduated from the prestigious Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts and the University of Pennsylvania. Now, at 38, he has become Rollins' colleague. "I don't think Frieze knows what's coming," Abreu chuckles.

In the early years, the art world didn't know what to make of a children's collaborative led by a self-appointed guru. After the initial celebrity, Rollins remembers a

backlash of whispers that he was a child molester, that he beat his apprentices, and ran a cult with strange initiation rites. "They said, 'Tim sits in first class sipping champagne while we sit in coach eating stale bread,'" Abreu laughs.

"People couldn't believe that we loved each other," Rollins adds. He compares the group's spirit to that of a baseball team, a jazz ensemble, an orchestra, an architecture firm, or a boys' choir, but none of those analogies quite captures the feeling of shared authorship that KOS fosters.

"Egos are checked at the door," Abreu says. "We feel like we're very talented people but we trust each other enough so that I'm OK with someone else taking one of my drawings and manipulating it. That's how we operate."

That collective vision can be a tough sell in an art market fuelled by individual genius. Gaggles of kids do not fit well in the shiny global gatherings, where, as the critic Jerry Saltz memorably put it, "money and art have sex in public". Rollins, the pied piper of the South Bronx, had a brief heyday in the 1980s, but the market's attention soon wandered away. Even KOS's dedication to making beautiful things by hand became a liability in a scene dominated by identity politics, conceptualism, and neo-Dada.

Rollins didn't care. "We've always aimed to make beautiful things," he says. "I'm like, 'Poop on stuff if you want', but we grew up with a whole lotta ugly, so the most revolutionary thing you could do was to make things of beauty."

While Rollins and Ahearn cleaved to their practice of art as social healing, the world changed around them – and then

backgrounds. And living right around the museum, we have the largest west African population in the US. People are looking for something more from art."

As New York has become a safer, shinier and more prosperous city, inevitably it's been washed in nostalgia for rougher times. It's easy to believe that, back then, everybody had less money and more fun. Ahearn exhibited at the infamous 1980 Times Square Show, a racially integrated, anything-goes bash in a decaying porn theatre. Rollins spent his days teaching in the South Bronx and his nights partying in the East Village. It was just a quick subway ride from lower Manhattan's buoyant inclusiveness to the South Bronx, where shopfronts and abandoned warehouses were turned into impromptu galleries. "It was a downtown scene, relocated uptown," says Holly Block. "You could go anywhere and do a show. Space was open, and people were flexible." Who wouldn't want to revive that?

The curator Cecilia Alemani insists that bringing Ahearn and Rollins to Frieze has nothing to do with nostalgia, but she does seem wistful for a world in which a clear line separated the rebels from the establishment. "The context has changed so much that the notion of an alternative scene doesn't exist any more," she says. "Alternative to what?"

And yet there are flickers of the wild, missionary ambitions that were once the New York scene. An organisation called No Longer Empty has commandeered parts of a creepy, derelict palazzo on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, and turned it over to a battalion of artists, including Rollins and Ahearn. That building, called the Andrew Freedman Home, once housed indigent intellectuals and the fallen rich; now, each room is a vibrant art installation, making a virtue of peeling paint. For a little while, on the Grand Concourse and on Randall's Island, the spirit of the 1970s is back.

Ariella Budick is the New York-based art critic for the Financial Times

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slideshow of

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Tim Rollins

and John Ahearn, go to

www.ft.com/bronx



Tim Rollins, founder of Kids of Survival (KOS); a KOS work 'Frankenstein' (1983)

Dana Lixenberg; art courtesy of the artists and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York



changed again, in ways that may now benefit the pair. Today, the South Bronx is unrecognisable to anyone who knows it only from old news photos of charred cars, or of President Jimmy Carter walking into a rubble-filled lot on Charlotte Street. Vacant buildings have been renovated or razed and rebuilt; crime has waned, and the epicentre of urban blight has moved on through other cities across America.

"The Bronx is an amazing mecca of culture," says Holly Block, executive director of the Bronx Museum. "It's a natural first stop for recent immigrants to America, so the people who live here are from different



ARTFORUM

PHILADELPHIA

Tim Rollins and K.O.S. INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

This modest exhibition of approximately twenty woodcuts, sculptures, and paintings harks back to 1980s New York. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), a collective that emerged at the beginning of the decade from Rollins's pedagogical activities with a group of "at risk" students in a South Bronx public school, have produced a rich oeuvre based on the discussion and analysis of literary works ranging from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to Kafka's *Amerika*, to Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. The group's collaborative practice can be viewed as an urgent response to the political and cultural conservatism of the '80s—in which the art establishment endorsed a fierce return to traditional modes of production and circulation (i.e., neo-expressionist painting displayed in the white cube). Simultaneously, a cadre of collectives emerged (centered largely around the East Village) seeking ways to bridge art and political activism. One of the more significant was Group Material, of which Rollins was a founding member, and K.O.S. might be seen as an offshoot of his activities there.

The exhibition—curated by Ian Berry and traveling from the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs, New York, where it debuted last February—emphasizes mostly the objects produced by this singular collective over the course of nearly two decades, with a particular focus on the years between 1984 and 1998. The rewarding result delivered not only formal diversity but a range of operations befitting what must have been a fascinating process of interaction between the artist and his largely Latino students.

So while the paintings *Dracula* (After Bram Stoker) and *Frankenstein* (After Mary Shelley), both 1983, are notable for their pictorial materiality, rich imagery, and a clear cartoonlike style of thick outlines, crude forms, bold colors, and flat spaces that facilitates narrative, others, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream VI* (After Shakespeare), 2000, tend toward abstraction, all-over compositionality, and delicate shapes. The show's eclecticism was indicative of the collective nature of Rollins's group as well as of its disinterest in such concerns as stylistic consistency. That said, a notion of "progress" creeps in when the works are seen together, as more conceptually minded entries appear to have developed from an initial interest in illustrative imagery. Also based on literary works, the later pieces employ visuality, erasure, and transparency to complicate issues of representation in ways that the early work does not. And many, of course, employ actual book pages as a visible support. So, for example, in *Invisible Man* (After Ralph Ellison), 1999, the artists arranged pages from Ellison's novel in a grid and applied a light coat of white acrylic, upon which they rendered, using black paint, the letters IM. While clearly standing for the title, the letters sound like the words *I am* when spoken out loud—a textual ambiguity that addresses the African-American protagonist's explorations of identity. These later works, which depend on formal and textual associations to generate meaning, are redolent of techniques favored by many artists of the '80s keen on analyzing (self) representation.

That high school students from the South Bronx could so rapidly rise to the highest echelons of the art world—they participated in the Whitney Biennial in 1985 and the Venice Biennale in 1988—is remarkable. A comprehensive catalogue is in the works, but further material documenting their successes—and articulating the fascinating pedagogical process that is the bedrock of this unique collaboration—should have been central to the exhibition.

—Monika Amor



Tim Rollins and K.O.S., *Invisible Man* (After Ralph Ellison), 1999, matte acrylic on bookpages mounted on canvas, 60 x 60".

db artmag

feature

this issue contains

- >> Re-reading the 80s
- >> Tim Rollins and K.O.S.
- >> Barbara Kruger
- >> Interview Rainer Fetting

By the People and for the People: Tim Rollins and his Youth Project K.O.S.

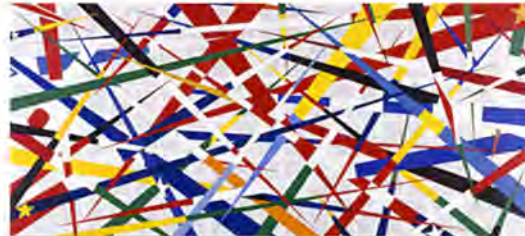
Education programs for children and young people are currently experiencing a boom. The [Deutsche Bank Foundation](#) is sponsoring a [project](#) enabling pupils to encounter art free of charge at the [Wallraf-Richartz-Museum](#) in Cologne, while the [Deutsche Guggenheim](#) has offered educational programs geared to certain age groups from the very beginning. So it's time to take a look back. For more than 25 years Tim Rollins has been working with school kids from New York's South Bronx. In one of America's most extreme sites of social discord, the artist and teacher offers kids alternatives to drugs and crime with his collective "Tim Rollins + K.O.S. (Kids of Survival)." But K.O.S. is more than just an ordinary social project—some of the group's works have made it into the MoMA and the Tate. [Cheryl Kaplan](#) met with Tim Rollins in his studio.

After twenty-six years, Tim Rollins is still riding that line between art, education, and a rescue operation, having started Tim Rollins and K.O.S. in the early 80s as a collaboration with visually talented kids living in poverty and danger in the South Bronx. K.O.S. works as both a core group of 12 members and through a series of collaborative workshops with kids from local schools across America. The projects created by Rollins and K.O.S. usually take years to complete. As Rollins explains, "We first made the painting *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1992 [based on [Stephen Crane's](#) Civil War [novel](#) about a soldier's conflict in fighting], and then, in 2008, we made a new version of this work for the exhibition at [The Warehouse Gallery](#) in Syracuse, NY. Crane had attended the university. We also combined this work with the sermons of [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)"



Tim Rollins
photo courtesy Cheryl Kaplan, Cheryl Kaplan, 2008.
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Sitting in a wooden rocking chair, [Tim Rollins](#) looks like a country preacher from another century. He speaks with an almost Southern drawl, which is surprising because he was born in rural Maine in 1955. In the space of a week he's been to Syracuse, Kentucky, Harvard and back. The floor of his studio looks like hell: papers everywhere, a bulging suitcase with an outfit from last year; a white shirt wrapped in its dry cleaning bag rests on top of the rubble of empty paint bottles, scraps of paper, and wires. The windows and the walls are covered with art or remnants of art. A laptop computer juts out of a plastic bookshelf and a photograph of [K.O.S. \(Kids of Survival\)](#) peers out of another corner. It reveals a younger Rollins with jet black hair and Chris Hernandez, an original K.O.S. member who was shot and killed on Valentine's Day, 1993 in the South Bronx.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S., *The War of the Worlds (after H.G. Wells)*, 2004
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S.
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich.
Galleria Raucci / Santamaria, Naples.
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich.

Rollins and K.O.S. always include a period of discovery as part of their process; the planning stage involves conceptual and technical research. Rollins collaborates with the K.O.S. group through a combination of meetings, emails, Fed-Ex deliveries, phone calls, and sometimes video conferences if they cannot meet in person. Rollins does not have a solo presence or individual voice in the work; he likens himself to a conductor and K.O.S. is his orchestra. When it comes to the workshops, the original members join Rollins to lead "master classes" where they first gather to discuss the texts and then begin working, adhering acid-free archival book pages onto a gessoed canvas using archival jade glue. This visual base forms the physical and contextual foundation for the paintings. Some projects have included music, as in a project and large-scale print series collaboration with students at the [Kalamazoo Institute of Arts](#) in Michigan and [Pyramid Atlantic](#), a non-profit contemporary arts center based in Maryland that specializes in hand papermaking, printmaking, and bookmaking. The project, now on view at [Colgate University](#) in Hamilton, NY, evolved as a response to [Franz Josef Haydn's](#) 1798 oratorio [The Creation](#).



Tim Rollins and K.O.S. studio
photo courtesy Cheryl Kaplan, Cheryl Kaplan, 2008.
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Tim Rollins and K.O.S., *25 Years 2007*
Exhibition view Galerie Eva Presenhuber
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich.
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich.

"By the People and for the People: Tim Rollins and his Youth Project K.O.S.", *Db Artmag*, 2008.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S. in the late eighties
© Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

The paintings have a wide visual range, from pattern paintings and narrative illustrations to a neo-geo look and even abstraction. In 2007, Rollins and K.O.S. had a major 25-year retrospective at [Eva Presenhuber Gallery](#) in Switzerland. The work on view included projects from *Amerika*, based on [Franz Kafka's](#) book; *Shakespeare*; as well as [Lewis Carroll's](#) *Alice in Wonderland* and [Ralph Ellison's](#) *The Invisible Man*. If the work and paintings have an erudite, yet down-to-earth demeanor, that's because Rollins' style of teaching is based on the practice of intervention. He combines the classics with street smarts, getting the kids to identify simple but strong themes in the writing. For *Amerika*, Rollins had the kids focus on the golden trumpets in the book's last chapter; what ends up on canvas is a series of trumpets nearly marching across the painting's surface. The K.O.S. version of Alice finds her in a black-on-black world in a painting titled *Black Alice*. The physical and emotional sense of displacement—or just being out of place—is both the text message and the visual message of the work.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Amerika - Everyone is Welcome ! (after Kafka), 2002
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S.
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, Naples
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich

If the name K.O.S. sounds vaguely like a band, it's probably just a reflection of those times. After hitchhiking from Maine to New York in 1978, Rollins moved to the [Chelsea Hotel](#), home of [Sid and Nancy](#), the [New York Dolls](#), and the [B-52s](#). Rollins was in "Harlem on Sundays and [CBGB's](#) during the week." As for Hotel Chelsea, it wasn't exactly the safest spot to be in, but it was where the action was. Rollins came to New York to study with conceptual artist [Joseph Kosuth](#) at the [School of Visual Arts](#), having used his last quarters for the phone call to school to see if he could study with his soon-to-be mentor. Rollins had read the conceptualist's 1969 essay *Art After Philosophy* and was struck by "the politics and democracy of the work and its openness. People think early conceptual art was elitist and exclusionary, but I saw it the other way around. It allows someone who doesn't have canvas and paint to do something. Art is idea." Rollins' work began as a mix between Arte Povera and Conceptual Art; he could be found drawing the town line between Augusta and Gardiner, Maine with a graphite pencil.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S., from the series
"A Diary of a Young Girl (after Anne Frank)", 2007
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Private collection
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, Naples
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich

Rollins was also walking the line between art and religion. Raised by his [Revivalist](#) great grandmother during the summers, Rollins recalls: "She had no running water, we'd go to Revival Tent meetings and heal in rural Burnham, Maine. Daddy was hard drinking, bowling alley and Mom believed in God. In Maine, the only time you had art was Friday afternoons at Church." Even now, the first place I found the artist was at Harlem's [Baptist Memorial Church](#). When I called the receptionist responded: "Praise be the Lord, can I help you?" In Rollins' case, his interest in art provided a way out of a difficult family life. "Daddy was a hand sewer for the Northeast Shoe Company. When the shop closed, we were on welfare. In Maine, the stigma is unbelievable. Daddy was an alcoholic, he was relatively functional, he never hurt me that bad. He was neglectful, but not violent. A little bit; he was out of it. I've forgiven him."



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
from the series *The Creation (after Haydn)*, 2004
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, Naples
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich

"By the Poepple and for the People: Tim Rollins and his Youth Project K.O.S.", *Db Artmag*, 2008.

In many ways, Rollins and K.O.S. are an amalgam and symbol of all that was happening in the art world in the late '70s and '80s. By 1985, Holly Block, now the Executive Director of the [Bronx Museum](#), had curated their first solo exhibition at Hostos Community College in the Bronx. The Bronx Museum, founded in 1971, has gone through a recent major renovation and is an important part of a long revitalization project that reflects the history of the Bronx from a place in trouble to a place that is attracting major attention for both the local community and the art world. The trajectory of both Rollins' and Block's careers inform and track these developments. Rollins' start in the South Bronx didn't go unnoticed by Block in her early career as curator at Hostos.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Animal Farm '92 (after George Orwell), 1992
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, Naples
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich.



At the Tim Rollins and K.O.S. studio
photo courtesy Cheryl Kaplan, Cheryl Kaplan, 2009.
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"Tim was working in the South Bronx, but he hadn't shown there. The infamous sportscaster Howard Costell had declared that 'The Bronx is burning' during game two of the 1977 World Series at Yankee Stadium, when a helicopter-mounted camera revealed a five-alarm fire in the Bronx. 100,000 people were about to leave the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. Rollins and K.O.S. exhibited paintings on bricks from the rubble of the burnt buildings. Tim was hugely important; he's still dealing with the inequities of the South Bronx. The Teen Council educational project at the Bronx Museum is currently doing a DVD film on him. The K.O.S. *Malcolm X* series is also part of the museum's permanent collection."



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
By Any Means Necessary (after Malcolm X), 2007
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Private collection.
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich.
Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, Naples.
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich.

Rollins and K.O.S. had their first major gallery show at Jay Gorney Modern in 1986. As Gorney observes: "Rollins/K.O.S. was a meeting point of art making, social theory, critical theory, and social action. The work was meaningful then and now." In the '80s, Rollins' work sold well, but, like [Gordon Matta-Clark](#), he was attracted to utopian, socially-based ideals. Rollins remembers him as "an adorable genius. He had a huge influence on me." This makes sense, given Matta Clark's projects like *Food*, a communal restaurant the artist created in SoHo in the late 70s. Rollins' community-based initiative first began at The School of Visual Arts when he formed a political activist group called F383 (the name of the course) that later became *Group Material*. Like many in the '70s/'80s, *Group Material* started its own gallery. As Rollins puts it: "I'm from Maine, and if you want to build a barn, you don't study the theory and practice of building a barn, you don't study essays like *The Barn + The Other*, you build a god-damned barn. *Group Material* started in 1980 in a storefront on 13th Street, where white folk feared to tread. Nothing was for sale, ever."



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
A Midsummer Night's Dream (after Shakespeare and Mendelssohn), 2007
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Private collection.
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich.
Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, Naples
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Frankenstein (after Mary Shelley), 1984
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich.
Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, Naples.
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich.

Soon Rollins was teaching on Stanton Street in a New York City-funded program called *Learning to Read Through the Arts*. Rollins had begun to teach in the South Bronx at Intermediate School 52. These were tough times for New York City, and the South Bronx was especially violent. "I was living with Kate Pierson from the B52s, who told me I was out of my mind. Building a community is like being a choir director, you have to organize people, they don't just sing." Rollins found his calling with the creation of *Tim Rollins and K.O.S.*

“By the Poeples and for the People: Tim Rollins and his Youth Project K.O.S.”, *Db Artmag*, 2008.

K.O.S. filled the gap between performance art, installation, graffiti, and Neo-Expressionism. Rollins was attracted to the idea of an intellectual revolution and learning. Maybe it was his early job as Kosuth's assistant that helped shape the ambitions of K.O.S. or maybe it was because while Rollins was delivered Kosuth's paintings to [Rauschenberg](#) and [Warhol](#) he stumbled into a bigger world. Kosuth warned Rollins not to hang out, but he hung out. "I accepted lots of party invitations, never telling Joseph." Rollins moved at warp speed, hovering in a strange trajectory between Gospel, Andy Warhol, and the B-52s (he later married and divorced Kate Pierson).



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Xmen 68 - Red Raven, Red Raven, 1991/92
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Private collection,
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich,
Galleria Raucio/Santamaria, Naples.
photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich

Rollins combines the idealism of [Henry David Thoreau](#), the educational ambition of [John Dewey](#), and the raw energy of [Gustavo Dudamel](#), the Venezuelan conductor who, at 26, is leading the [L.A. Philharmonic](#). Dudamel comes out of *El Sistema* (the system), a program that has trained over 250,000 kids from poor Venezuelan neighborhoods and teaches them to play musical instruments. Like K.O.S. on a much grander scale, *El Sistema* is a social movement, saving kids from crime, drugs, and death. And like *El Sistema*, K.O.S., though infinitely smaller with its core group of twelve to thirty members, has had success as well, not only in the art market, but in the achievements of its members: one has an MA from Teachers College/[Columbia University](#) and another an MFA from [Bard College](#).



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
The War of the Worlds III (after H.G. Wells), 2007
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Private collection,
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich,
Galleria Raucio/Santamaria, Naples.
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich

After 26 years, Tim Rollins is still full of creative drive. Scheduled for the next few months is a workshop based on Shakespeare's [Midsummer Night's Dream](#) at the [Henry Street Settlement](#) in the Lower East Side of New York City. And the upcoming exhibitions in the renowned [Lehmann Maupin Gallery](#), the [Tang Museum](#) in Saratoga Springs, NY and in Athens, Greece and Naples, Italy will spread the word that good art doesn't have to be elitist.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S.,
Animal Farm '07 (after George Orwell), 2007
©Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Private collection,
Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich,
Galleria Raucio/Santamaria, Naples.
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich

Monopol Nr. 12/2007

Die Kunst des Überlebens

Es ist eine der schönsten Geschichten, die New York zu bieten hat: Anfang der achtziger Jahre gründet Tim Rollins in der South Bronx ein Kunstprojekt für Problemjugendliche. Mit seinen „Kids of Survival“ wird er zur Marktsensation und schafft es bis ins Museum of Modern Art. Nach Jahren in Vergessenheit feiern Rollins und seine Schüler ein grandioses Comeback – wie ihr Stadtteil, der einst in Gewalt und Drogen zu versinken schien.

VON LARS JENSEN

Ein erstes Treffen mit Tim Rollins an einem Augusttag in New York um ein Uhr mittags. Draußen ist es so heiß, dass dem Bus auf der 23rd Street ein Reifen geplatzt ist. Vom Tresen der dunklen Kellerbar, in der wir uns verabredet haben, kann man das Drama gut beobachten – die Klimaanlage kühlt uns und die anderen Gäste ab. Ein abgekämpfter, aber glücklicher Rollins sitzt da. Mit einem verschmitzten Gesicht, dessen Ausdruck stets zwischen Stolz und Zweifel schwankt. Er hat alles gesehen, alles erlebt, was einem Lehrer in der Bronx in einem Vierteljahrhundert zustoßen kann. Respekt: Das Lachen hat er unterwegs nicht verlernt.

Dem Reporter scheint er allerdings nicht zu trauen. Vermutlich traut Rollins niemandem auf Anhieb. Nun soll er sich erst mal einen Drink aussuchen. Der Lehrer wählt: Gin Tonic, das beliebte Mittagsgetränk. Tim Rollins, 52, sieht aus, als habe er noch nie eine Pistole in der Hand gehalten. Oder eine Fliege zerklatscht. Er regiert das Ghetto mit seinen Waffen – mit Pinsel und Leinwand formte er angehende Gewalttäter zu Stars der Kunstwelt. „Doch mein Aussehen täuscht“, sagt Rollins. „Mit liberalen Metho-

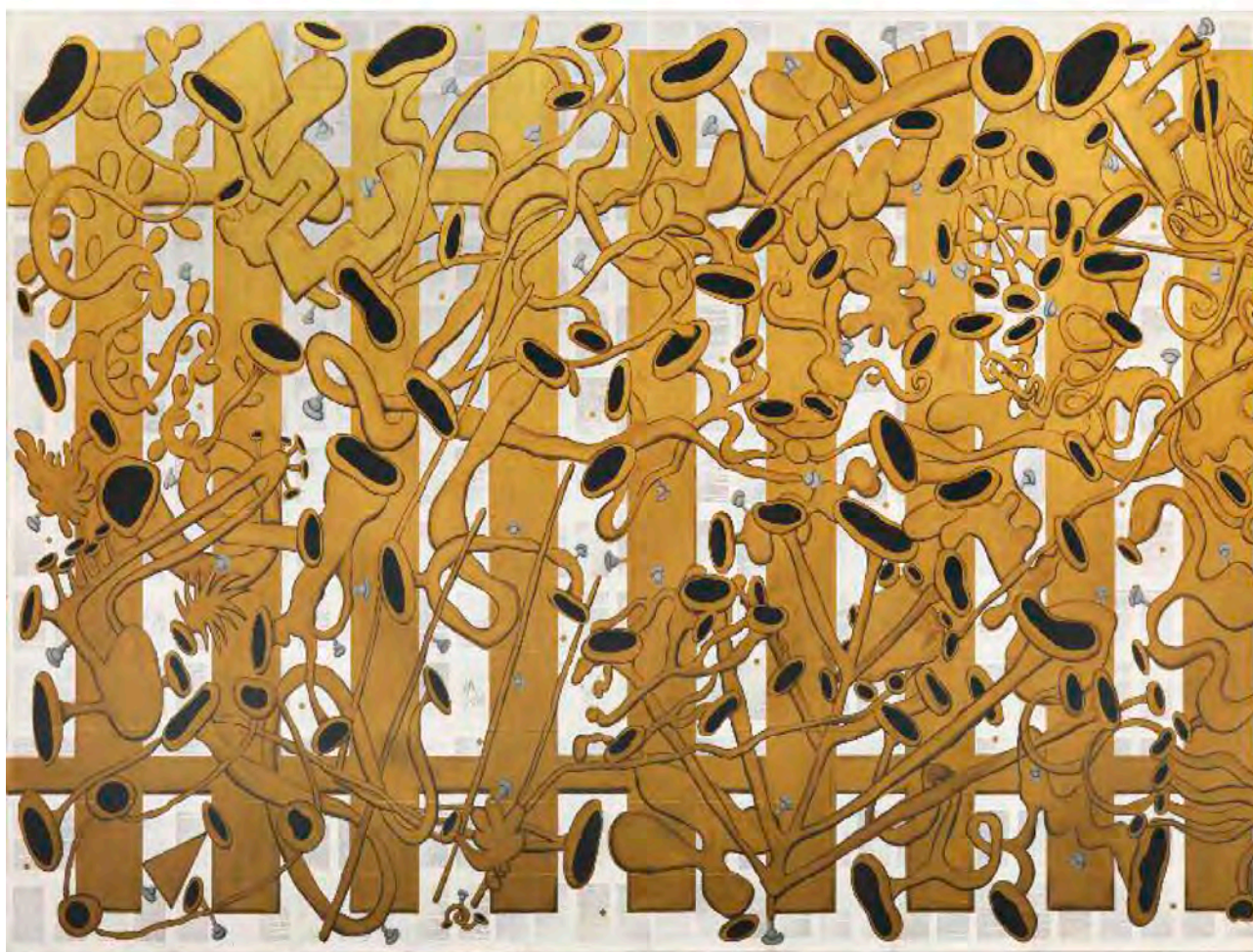


Tim Rollins and K.O.S., „Invisible Man (after Ralph Ellison)“, 2007, Acryl auf Buchseiten auf Leinwand, 183 x 183 x 4 cm

Galerie
Chantal Crousel



The kids are alright: Tim Rollins
and K.O.S. Ende der achtziger Jahre.



Oben: „Amerika – Everyone is Welcome! (after Kafka)“, 2002, Acryl auf Buchseiten auf Leinwand, 245 x 728 cm

den alleine kommst du in der Bronx nicht weiter. Da musst du manchmal brutal und eiskalt entscheiden.“

Zum Beispiel im Fall von Carlos Rivera. Ein junger Kerl ohne Eltern, der unter schwerster Dyslexie leidete, als er Ende der achtziger Jahre bei Rollins auftauchte. Zehn Jahre lang versuchte der Lehrer, Carlos zum Schulabschluss zu treiben. Drei Mal fiel der Junge durch. Doch Carlos war einer der talentiertesten Mitarbeiter in Tim Rollins' Kunstworkshop. Am Tag der allerletzten Prüfung war Carlos wieder spurlos verschwunden – mit seinen Freunden von den Drogengangs. Rollins schmiss Carlos' Kunstwerke auf die Straße. Ein wirksamer Schock: Carlos schaffte später den Abschluss und studierte sogar.

Überall wollen die Leute Rollins' Geschichten hören. Er verbreitet Hoffnung, und wenn er in Fahrt ist, hat er die Qualitäten eines Star-Entertainers. Gerade kommt er von einer Vortragsreise

aus Michigan zurück, wo er über Erziehung und Kunst sprach; übermorgen fliegt er nach Belfast, um mit Schülern an einer Installation im öffentlichen Raum zu arbeiten. Das viel wichtigere und aufwendigere Projekt spielt sich allerdings im Atelier in Chelsea ab. Hier bereitet er mit seinem Team die Werkschau vor, die bis zum 22. Dezember in der Züricher Galerie Eva Presenhuber zu sehen sein wird: „Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: 25 Years“.

Man kann durchaus folgende Behauptung aufstellen: Die Karriere von Rollins, wie er 1982 seinen Job als Lehrer in der South Bronx begann, an der Schule ein Kunstprojekt für Härtefälle gründete, mit den Schülern Ende der achtziger Jahre zur Marktsensation wurde, in Vergessenheit geriet und nun ein internationales Comeback erlebt – das ist die rührendste Geschichte, die die New Yorker Kunstwelt zurzeit zu bieten hat.

Rick Savinon, 36, eines der dienstältesten Mitglieder der „Kids of Survival“, drückt



Teamwork: Bei der Arbeit an „Amerika (after Kafka)“, 1998



***Rick Savinon, 36,
eines der dienst-
ältesten Mitglieder
der „Kids of Survival“,
drückt es so aus:
„Ich habe keine Angst
mehr vor dem Tod.
Wenn ich sterbe,
hängt mein Werk
immer noch im MoMA.
Wir sind unsterblich
geworden durch
unsere Kunst.“***

es so aus: „Ich habe keine Angst mehr vor dem Tod. Wenn ich sterbe, hängt mein Werk immer noch im MoMA. Wir sind unsterblich geworden durch unsere Kunst.“ Um genau zu sein, zeigt die aktuelle Hängung des MoMA sogar drei Gemälde von Tim Rollins and K.O.S. Und viele weitere sind in Dutzenden Häusern wie der Londoner Tate Gallery, dem New Yorker Whitney Museum oder dem Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel zu sehen.

Eigentlich überrascht es nicht, dass Rollins ausgerechnet 2007 für das große Publikum wiederentdeckt wird. Auf der verzweifelten Suche nach Kunst, die mehr bietet als Unterhaltung und Rendite, durchforstet der Betrieb die Lager und die Erinnerungen und stößt auf diese Künstlergruppe, die von Rollins mit einem ganz pragmatischen Ziel gegründet wurde. Er wollte ein paar Kindern helfen zu überleben. Wollte Jugendlichen eine Alternative zeigen zum Leben auf der Straße. Sie sollten begreifen, dass es für die Zukunft hilfreicher ist, ein Buch





Tim Rollins mit drei langjährigen Kids of Survival in seinem Studio in Chelsea, fotografiert von Jessica Antola am 29. September 2007

Die Regeln, die Rollins aufstellte, waren klar und verständlich, aber nicht für jeden einfach einzuhalten.

- 1. Keine kriminellen Aktivitäten***
- 2. Keine Drogen***
- 3. Keine Waffen***
- 4. Wer nicht täglich zur Schule geht, fliegt raus***
- 5. Kein Ärger mit Mädchen***

zu lesen, als an der Straßenecke mit Crack zu dealen. Dass die Bilder von Tim Rollins and K.O.S. im Juni 2007 reißenden Absatz auf der Art Basel finden würden, war damals nicht Teil des Plans gewesen. Aber natürlich wirkt diese Kunst heute wieder irrwitzig trendy. Wahrhaftigkeit ist das heiße Ding in einer Zeit, in der es selbst russischen Oligarchengattinnen zu peinlich ist, den brillantenbesetzten Platinschädel von Damien Hirst zu kaufen.

Dann lieber eines dieser großformatigen Gemälde von Tim Rollins and K.O.S., die so seltsame abstrakte Formen zeigen und in den besten Fällen die Energie des abstrakten Expressionismus mit der Eleganz der Minimal Art verbinden. David Ross, der ehemalige Kurator des MoMA und heutige Leiter der Yale School of Art, sagt: „Die Arbeiten handeln nicht von sozialen Problemen, dem harten Leben im Ghetto und anderen naheliegenden Stereotypen. Sie sind so großartig, weil sie die Fantasie nutzen und durch Metaphern den Horizont erweitern, zum Denken anregen. Außerdem zeugen die Bilder von einem enormen ästhetischen Talent.“

In Maine geboren und aufgewachsen, war Rollins 1978 nach New York gekommen, um Kunst zu studieren und Künstler zu werden. Doch der Durchbruch gelang ihm nicht, und so nahm er den Job als Lehrer in der Bronx an. Ein 26-Jähriger, der im Wald aufgewachsen war, fand sich plötzlich in einem Kriegsgebiet wieder. „Es kann sich heute keiner mehr vorstellen, wie es 1982 in der South Bronx zugeht“, sagt Rollins. „Ich konnte die Geschichten nicht glauben, die ich hörte und erlebte. Zwölfjährige kamen mit Schusswunden zum Unterricht, ständig starben Elternteile, Crack wurde gerade populär. Ein Junge sagte, er konnte nicht kom-

men, weil ihn die Mutter eines Freundes zum Sex zwang. Der Bursche war 13 Jahre alt. Unser Name ‚Kids of Survival‘ war kein Marketinggag, sondern ernst gemeint. Es ging für viele einfach nur ums Überleben.“

In den ersten Jahren war der Arbeitsweg von der U-Bahn-Station Prospect Avenue bis zur Public School 52 – zehn Minuten zu Fuß – ein allmorgendlicher Parcourslauf vorbei an brennenden Autos, brennenden Mülltonnen. Oft hallten Schüsse über die endlosen Brachflächen, manchmal lagen Cracksuchtlinge im Weg. „Doch ich wusste am ersten Tag, dass ich die richtige Entscheidung getroffen hatte. In all dem Chaos war auch eine gewaltige kreative Energie zu spüren. Hip-Hop war gerade geboren, und die Graffiti-Kultur breitete sich aus“, sagt Rollins.

Also gründete er einen nachmittäglichen Workshop mit dem Titel „Art and Knowledge“ in einer leerstehenden Etage des Schulgebäudes. Eingeladen waren alle Jugendlichen ab 13 Jahren, die Schwierigkeiten in der Schule hatten und über künstlerisches Talent verfügten oder einfach Lust hatten mitzumachen. Die Regeln, die Rollins aufstellte, waren klar und verständlich, aber nicht für jeden einfach einzuhalten.

1. Keine kriminellen Aktivitäten außerhalb und innerhalb des Workshops
2. Keine Drogen
3. Keine Waffen
4. Wer nicht täglich zur Schule geht, fliegt raus
5. Kein Ärger mit Mädchen

Dann tauchten Jungs wie Rick Savinon auf. Ein Straßendealer, der immer wieder sitzenblieb, weil er nicht zum Unterricht erschien. „Die Versuchung war groß“, erinnert sich Rick, „denn ich konnte auf der Straße

tausend Dollar pro Woche verdienen, ohne mich anzustrengen. Aber so viele meiner Freunde starben, und jedes Mal, wenn ein Freund erschossen wurde, habe ich gehofft, einen Ausweg zu finden. Der Ausweg war K.O.S." Mit jedem Jahrgang stießen wieder zehn oder zwölf neue Jungs zur Gruppe, und einige andere verließen K.O.S. – meistens, weil sie die Regeln nicht eingehalten hatten und Rollins sie rauswerfen musste.

Oder weil sie nicht überlebten. Wie Chris Hernandez, der zwölf Jahre alt war, als ihn seine Mutter beim Workshop ablieferte. Ihr Mann war bei einem Überfall auf den Pizastand erschossen worden, und sie musste danach arbeiten gehen, hatte keine Zeit mehr für Chris. Der Junge stellte sich als extrem talentiert heraus und fertigte schon bald alleine große Bilder – inspiriert von seinen Träumen und von Jules Vernes „Reise zum Mond“. In dem preisgekrönten Dokumentarfilm „Kids Of Survival: The Art and Life of Tim Rollins + K.O.S.“ (der bis heute regelmäßig auf HBO läuft) ist Chris eine Hauptfigur. Dann kam die Nacht, in

der eine Bande von Dealern ihn in einer Schießerei als Schutzschild benutzte. „Sein Geist ist immer mit uns“, sagt Rick. Und Chris' bestes Bild „From The Earth To The Moon“ hängt an einem Ehrenplatz im Hirshhorn Museum Washington.

An den neuen Arbeiten, die Eva Presenhuber zeigt, wirkten zwölf K.O.S.-Mitglieder mit. Veteranen wie Robert Branch, 30, Adam DeCroix, 34, und Angel Abreu, 34. Aber auch der 1990 in der Bronx geborene Pedro Herrera, ein schwächlicher Junge mit fröhlichem Gesicht. Die ganz harte Zeit im Viertel hat er nicht mehr erlebt. Doch hätte er ohne die Hilfe von K.O.S. einen Schulabschluss geschafft? „Wohl nicht. K.O.S. hat mir die Zukunft gerettet. Und, wie ich hörte, einigen meiner Kollegen hier auch.“

Die Vorgehensweise von Rollins hat sich seit 25 Jahren kaum verändert. Bevor er in die Bronx kam, waren Konzeptkünstler wie Sol LeWitt und Hanne Darboven seine Vorbilder. Deren Strategie der seriellen Arbeit kombinierte er mit sei-

nem Lehrauftrag. „Ich bin Marxist, und ich glaube an die utopische Idee, dass die Kunst die Welt verbessern kann“, sagt Rollins. Jedem Kunstwerk, das die „Kids“ anfertigten, liegt ein Stück klassische Literatur oder Musik zugrunde. Und zwar im Sinne des Wortes: Zunächst lesen alle Mitglieder das Buch oder hören die Musik, dann kleben sie die Textseiten auf eine Leinwand und bemalen sie – mit assoziativen Formen, von Graffiti beeinflusst oder von Vorbildern aus der Kunstgeschichte. „Farm der Tiere“, „Mittsommernachtstraum“, „Die Entstehung der Arten“, Werke von Aristophanes, „Das Tagebuch der Anne Frank“, „Frankenstein“ bearbeiteten die Kids.

Die bekannteste Reihe ist sicher „Amerika“, nach Franz Kafkas Emigrantennovelle. Das Hauptgemälde (175 x 425 cm) hängt heute im MoMA. Als Rollins und K.O.S. die Arbeiten 1986 zeigten, bescherte ihnen das den Durchbruch. Aus seiner Zeit an der New York University war Rollins nicht nur mit vielen Künstlern befreundet, sondern kannte auch einige Galeristen, bei



„The War of the Worlds III (after H. G. Wells)“, 2007, Acryl auf Buchseiten auf Leinwand, 138 x 304 cm. Rechts: „ohne Titel“, aus der Reihe „Animal Farm (after G. Orwell)“, 1989

denen er immer wieder Ausstellungen unterbringen konnte. Über „Amerika“ schrieb die strenge Roberta Smith in der New York Times: „Wie die Kinder mit Rollins' Hilfe die Brücke schlagen zwischen Literatur und Kunst und dabei so effektive Metaphern erzeugen, dürfen Sie auf keinen Fall verpassen.“

Dann erlebte die Gruppe, wie es sich anfühlt, von der Kunstwelt in eine Umlaufbahn gehypt zu werden – erst in der New Yorker Galerienzene, später mit Museumsausstellungen in San Francisco, Havanna, Paris und so ziemlich jeder anderen Stadt. Viel Erfolg erzeugt viel Neid. Irgendwann tauchten Fragen auf über Rollins' Arbeitsmethoden und seine pädagogische Strategie: Benutzt er die Kinder? Beutet er als Weißer die *hispanics* und Afroamerikaner aus? Es kamen auch Gerüchte über den Verbleib der Einnahmen auf. Schließlich gab es Andeutungen über Affären, die die Kinder miteinander und mit Rollins gehabt haben sollen.

Die Sexgeschichten waren schnell ausgeräumt, denn sie stimmten einfach nicht.

Wo das Geld geblieben war, konnte Rollins lückenlos nachweisen. Er zahlte seinen Schülern ein monatliches Taschengeld, damit sie sich Bücher und Stifte kaufen konnten; der Großteil des Geldes floss in die Produktion der Kunst. Und für die Zukunft der Kinder gründete Rollins einen Fonds, aus dem er Collegegebühren zahlen würde. Wie für Rick Savinon, der ohne das Geld nicht hätte studieren können.

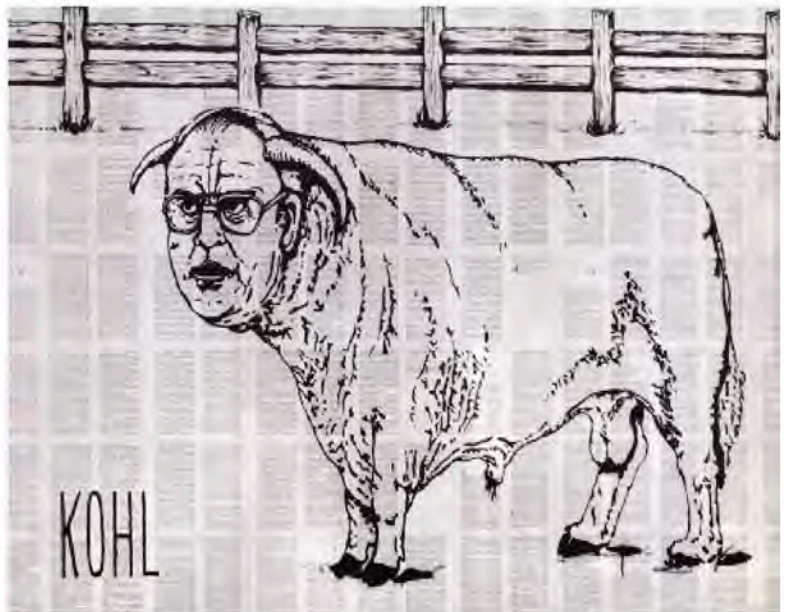
Doch die Gerüchte zeigten Wirkung. Ab Mitte der neunziger Jahre verkauften sich die Arbeiten von Tim Rollins and K.O.S. nur noch schleppend, und es wurde fast unmöglich, die laufenden Kosten zu decken. Das Projekt galt nicht mehr als cool und frisch, und der Markt wandte sich ab. „Wir haben über zehn Jahre lang Kunst ohne Öffentlichkeit gemacht“, sagt Daniel Castillo, 28, der 1996 zu K.O.S. stieß. „Aber wir gaben nicht auf, und jetzt werden wir sogar in Europa wahrgenommen.“ Tim Rollins fügt hinzu, dass es auch ganz angenehm sei, die 30 000 Dollar, die das Projekt im Jahr kostet, solange man es sparsam be-

treibt, nicht mehr aus seiner eigenen Kasse zahlen zu müssen.

Eva Presenhuber, die Tim Rollins and K.O.S. bereits in den achtziger Jahren kennen- und schätzen lernte, ist froh, dem Kollektiv zum 25. Geburtstag eine Ausstellung widmen zu können. „Ich bin ein Fan von Tim und seiner Arbeit, seit ich ihn in den wilden Jahren in New York traf. Wir müssen die Sammler in Europa natürlich noch überzeugen von der Klasse und der Bedeutung seiner Arbeit. Aber ich glaube, das wird nicht so schwierig.“

Heute wie damals, in der wilden Zeit, arbeitet das Kollektiv nach denselben strengen Regeln und mit unerschöpflichem Teamgeist. Der Unterschied: Das Atelier befindet sich nicht mehr in der hellen, riesigen Schule, sondern in einem etwas beengten Raum im neunten Stockwerk eines Lagerhauses in der 25th Street Manhattans. „Wir haben einen wohlwollenden Vermieter“, sagt Rollins. In der Nachbarschaft preisen Hunderte Galerien ihre Ware an, und in

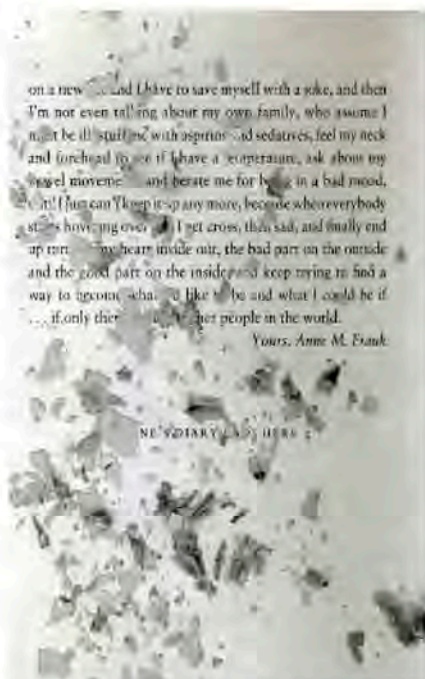
Galerie
Chantal Crousel



David Ross, der ehemalige Kurator des MoMA, sagt: „Die Arbeiten handeln nicht von sozialen Problemen, dem harten Leben im Ghetto und anderen Stereotypen. Sie sind so großartig, weil sie die Fantasie nutzen und durch Metaphern den Horizont erweitern, zum Denken anregen.“



Kansas City 1998: Teilnehmer eines
Workshops bei der Arbeit an
„Invisible Man (after Ralph Ellison)“



Tim Rollins and K.O.S. „A Diary of a Young Girl (after Anne Frank)“, 2007, Asche, Acryl auf Buchseiten, 21 x 13 cm

„Ich bin Marxist“, sagt Rollins. „Ich glaube an die utopische Idee, dass die Kunst die Welt verbessern kann.“

neuen Hochhäusern kosten Wohnungen siebenstellige Summen. Aus Queens, Brooklyn, der Bronx und Philadelphia pendeln die Künstler zur Arbeit.

Im Oktober treffe ich Rollins wieder. Es ist die Woche, in der die Bilder für Zürich fertig werden müssen. Sechs Mitglieder von K.O.S. sitzen zusammen und diskutieren über ein Bild aus der Serie „Krieg der Welten“. Ein Großformat, mit strahlenartigen Farbkombinationen: Soll es verschifft werden zur Ausstellung? Am Ende entscheidet das Team dagegen. Die Arbeit gehört zu den schwächeren. „Der Müllkorb ist unser wichtigstes Werkzeug“, sagt Rick.

Auf dem Rückweg in die Bronx, wo Tim Rollins in einem hübsch renovierten Gründerzeithaus wohnt, muss er nicht mehr befürchten, von einem Querschlä-

ger getroffen zu werden. Die Häuser haben Scheiben in den Fenstern, kleine Geschäfte und Restaurants sind zurückgekehrt, und auf den Flächen zwischen den Gebäuden, wo sich früher Crack-süchtige beschossen, spielen auch nach Anbruch der Dunkelheit noch Kinder.

Man kann sich wieder wohlfühlen in der Gegend rund um die U-Bahn-Station Prospect Avenue. Und die Leute hier behaupten, Rollins habe mit seiner Arbeit viel dazu beigetragen. Passanten winken ihm von der anderen Straßenseite zu. Eine Frau ruft Rollins aus einer Pizzeria hinterher: „Komm her, mein Kunstlehrer, wir essen eine Pizza.“

„Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: 25 years“ ist bis zum 22. Dezember 2007 in der Züricher Galerie Eva Presenhuber zu sehen.

The Artist's Voice

Interview with Tim Rollins



Tim Rollins and "EdGE" students at Opening Reception, March 5, 2005.

Born in Pittsfield, Maine, Tim Rollins is a conceptual artist who co-founded the artists' collective Group Material. He was also a special education teacher in public school 52 in the South Bronx. He established the Art of Knowledge Workshops and K.O.S., which stands for "Kids of Survival," a name the students chose for themselves. Tim worked with middle school students in Maine through a program called EdGE in Cherryfield, as well as Maine College of Art's Creative Community Partnerships Program. The exhibition at CMCA included "THE CREATION (After Haydn)," and a print from "A Company of Girls" in Portland. Also exhibited were photographs from Portland photographer Sean Harris, which documented the collaborations.

CM: Cathy Melio, CMCA Education Director

TR: Artist Tim Rollins

CM: Tim, let's start with the K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) project.

Tell us about it please.

TR: Back in 1981, I was a college graduate fresh from rural Maine. I came to the School of Visual Arts in New York City and then went to New York University for art education. After that I was recruited by a very dynamic Junior High School Principal who had this crazy idea that I might be able to start a structured and disciplined fine arts program for his special education students in a very distressed community at that time, in a very distressed school, in a very distressed emotional, psychological, financial, and spiritual environment. I was foolish enough to say yes and I was going stay for two weeks and ended up staying seven years in that school. I was profoundly influenced by the giftedness and talents of the kids and I thought, hmmm, there is something in

my spirit that says I know we could make art with these kids, but what if the kids could also make history? I could discern that feeling in a very strong way and so it wasn't long before we applied and were successfully awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts with which we started an after school studio program two blocks from our school. We called it the Art of Knowledge Workshop. The kids (there were about 20 at the time) were being labeled, called learning disabled, emotionally handicapped, academically at risk, all these ridiculous, embarrassing, insulting labels. We decided to make art together, collaborating on art inspired by classics of world literature and music, texts that were considered way too difficult and sophisticated for, quote unquote, "these children." So every day at 3:00 the bell would ring, and ironically, getting out of that public school, that was when we really began to learn. We'd work every day from three until six, seven, eight o'clock at night. Homework would be done, homework would be checked, grades were going up, enthusiasm was going up, parents were bringing food on in, and we are now celebrating our 25th anniversary of K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), a name the kids thought up. We're still based in the South Bronx, but also now working with kids in Philadelphia, Memphis, Tennessee, San Francisco, and in this case, rural Maine.

CM: Combining literature and music with visual art brings an intellectual element which seems to empower the kids on another level.

TR: Definitely! We've gone through a terrible time in education, where we've been teaching to the lowest common denominator and I don't know, but maybe it is the New England Yankee in me (I'm from rural Pittsfield, Maine) and growing up in Maine I was always taught to the highest common denominator, to the highest expectation and my experience internationally is that if you raise the bar, and those expectations are sincere and real, the kids will meet those expectations every time. That is certainly what has happened here in Maine in the project we did in Washington County Maine - painting on music inspired by the Creation by Joseph Haydn, not what kids usually hear on radio in Maine.



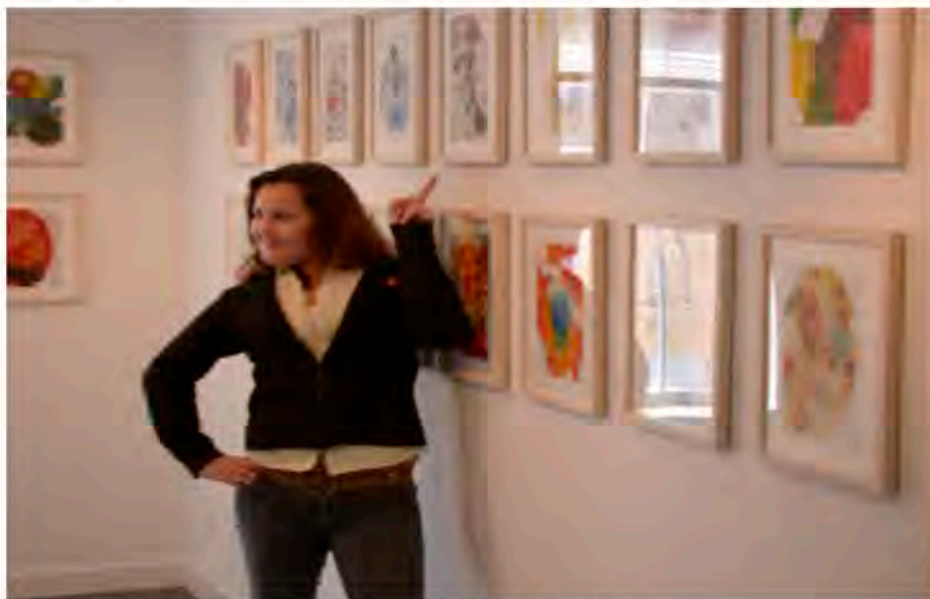
Pre-Opening Reception Gallery Talk with Tim Rollins.

CM: How did you pick that piece of music?

TR: I always say this: It chose me! I got tickets in New York since I'd always heard about the piece and there was something in my intuition drawing me to it. So I was sitting there listening to this music, I knew of it, but did not know it in a very deep way and I just sat there with tears in my eyes and said this is the next project, the creation, the creation of a universe, the creation of a cosmos, wouldn't it be great to go to Washington County, Maine and work with 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders and ask them to play God? Is it possible on the lunchroom tables, listening to this music and using watercolor paper, watercolors, and inks, and listening to this music, could we create our own universe? And that is exactly what the kids did! We listened to the music, we studied images from the Hubble telescope, we talked about some theories, of the Big Bang Theory, about how the cosmos is structured - this was before *The Elegant Universe* by Brian Green came out. We wanted to picture it in our own way, to create that in our own way because also it's a dress rehearsal for life and if you can create a world, a cosmos that is loving, that is total, on a piece of watercolor paper, then maybe that is something that you can create in your own life, for the rest of your life.

CM: What does it mean to them and to you to have the work exhibited in a professional gallery like this?

TR: It is a total act of affirmation. I always love to take the work of my kids to the next level. It is wonderful to have this incredible experience. It's great to have it on the school bulletin board or on your mom's refrigerator but also to have it framed and put up in a professional manner, (and we've always done this) is important. I always thought this is just too good to keep to ourselves! So that complete strangers, not your mother, not your Sunday school teacher, but complete strangers, some of them cynical people, or bitter artists, and they are often blown away, which is so encouraging, not only in the making of art but to continue to make this wonderful life. We've done this over the last 25 years, so the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. is in over 75 museums worldwide (and counting).



"EdGE" student posing for a picture.

CM: What about your own individual work?

TR: That is almost like asking Leonard Bernstein to conduct a symphony without any players. I mean, he might be able to do it because he is real good, but my inspiration is other folk. They're not instruments, they are inspirations, living inspirations. The great Jane Adams who started the settlement house movement always talked about a democratic culture and people asked her what she was talking about. She said something like, and maybe this is not great metaphor, but she used the example of a community choir: maybe you have an elderly person who could hardly hit a note, or maybe you have a diva who could have a recording contract on her own, but to her nothing is more beautiful, more moving, more inspiring, more transformational, than when all these voices of the whole community rise up in unison singing a common song and that is what we are trying to do in the visual arts with K.O.S.

CM: So you don't actually draw or paint on your own?

TR: I fool around. In other words. I do alot of research and development so I can present a set of problems and challenges to the young people. I do a lot of legwork, research what text could inspire the kids. It has got to work and you can't set them on fire if you're not on fire. So what I do when I'm alone is usually I catch on fire and that is by listening to the voices of history and they tell me how I can impart this and inspire the next generation.



Sample from "The Creation (After Haydn)"

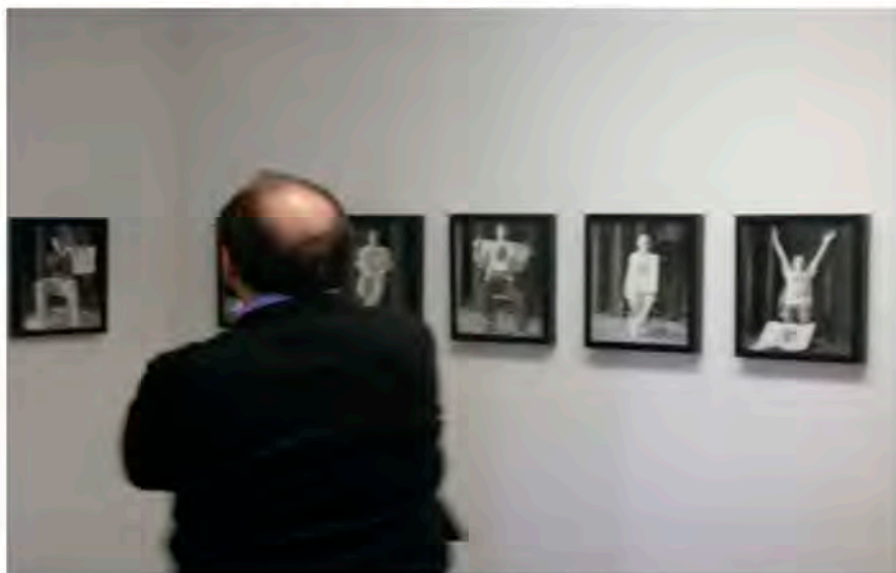
CM: Can you tell us about the impetus for combining text and image back in the early 80's?

TR: Sure. At that time we were paying experts tens of thousands of dollars to diagnose and tell us what our kids could NOT do and kids had all these disorders - everything was a disorder. Now when I was growing up in Maine

we had a thing called an aptitude test with which they found out what you liked to do, what you COULD do well. Now we've got this weird kind of overly clinical analysis situation in which everyone's got a problem, everyone's got a disorder. It's negative based education instead of assets based. They told me that my kids couldn't read, that they were dyslexic, had learning disabilities. My favorite is ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) sometimes they are kids who can play Nintendo for eight hours straight without taking a bathroom break and they supposedly have ADD? I decided no, they had TDD, teacher deficit disorder and I wasn't going to have it. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. says the word anger came from the Norse root "to grieve" and I grieved that these kids were being disposed of, if not physically, then intellectually, at the age of 11, 12, or 13. It's like intellectual genocide and I wasn't having it, so that made us do two things. One, I was reading challenging texts and making my own books on tape because we didn't have a dime, so in between blasting hip hop music we would listen to Kafka's *Amerika* or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, now we're doing *War of the Worlds* after H.G. Wells (very appropriate for now) and the kids would just draw and draw and draw. Then the second act, which many people thought was transgressive was that we took the pages, literally beautiful acid free volumes of these books and archivally adhered them to canvas on a beautiful grid and we painted right on top of these pages. We overlaid our creation over the creation of the past to see if some sort of energy and dynamic could be created. That certainly has been the case for all these the years.

CM: So would you say that in a way the ownership also doesn't matter because the collaboration and the shared experience is such a part of the art?

TR: If you're really serious, the work is owned by history.



Looking at project documentation by photographer Sean Harris.

CM: You mentioned that you get hope from these children, that wherever you go, children are children and that is hopeful. You just alluded to the fact that the planet is in turmoil right now. How do you keep that hope or does the global situation and strife get you down sometimes?

TR: Not really, because the artwork itself is a testament to hope. I always say that art is the enemy of death. Art is the enemy of death and as long as I keep making art, that's fine, you know? I could get hit by a tractor trailer going back to Portland tonight on interstate 95 (you know I know that road!) and I know I'd be alright because first of all I'd be thrilled that the last thing I did was being with all these fantastic kids in Rockport, Maine after doing a wonderful workshop this weekend in Milbridge, Maine. The other important thing is those things hanging on the wall about 40 ft away from us are going to last beyond my life, beyond the kid's lives.

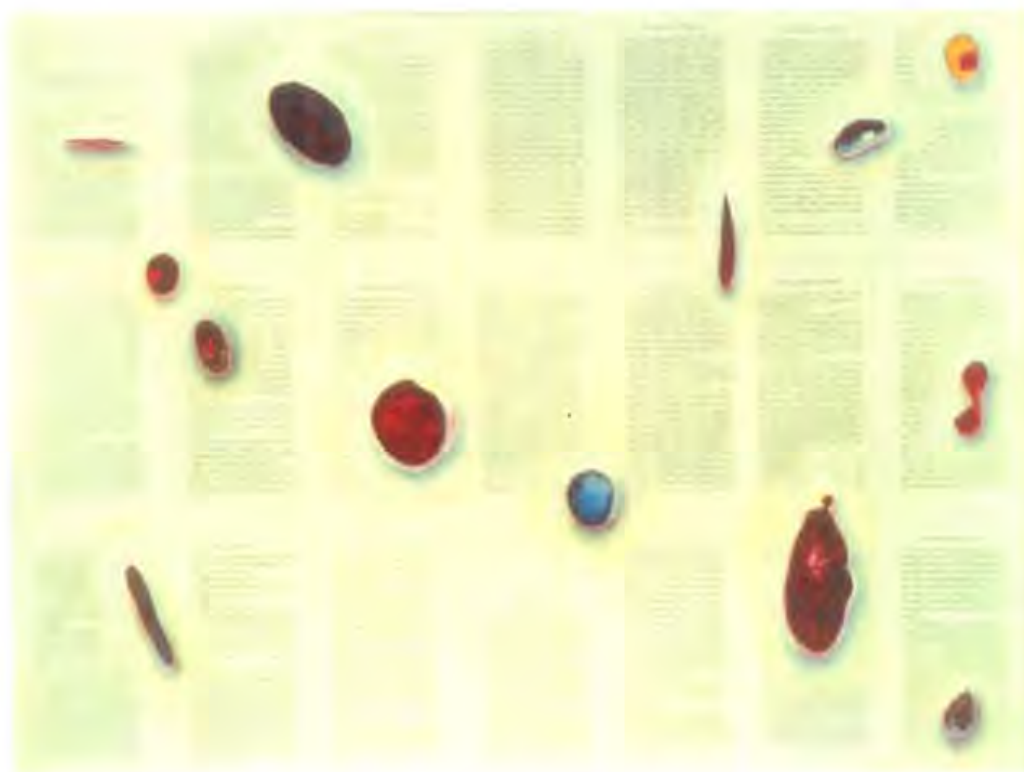
CM: Perfect. Tim Rollins, thank you so much for talking with me. Anything else in closing?

TR: It's nice to be home!

The Artist's Voice is an online series that seeks to serve as a catalyst for increased recognition of Maine artists.

ART • FAITH • MYSTERY Number 45 U.S. \$10 / Canada \$

I M A G E



Tim Rollins, K.O.S., and the Beloved Community

Doris Betts on the Return of Omniscience

Thomas Lynch Goes Home to County Clare

Jeanne Murray Walker Meets the Cast

An Interview with Margaret Avison

Poetry by Linda Hogan

In Review: Marilynne Robinson



A R T • F A I T H • M Y S T E R Y

I M A G E

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J A M E S R O M A I N E

*On a Clear Night,
I Can See the Sun
Tim Rollins and K.O.S.
Test Faith's Possibilities*

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

—William Shakespeare
A Midsummer Night's Dream

FROM *the Earth to the Moon*, a painting in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, is an expanse of blue-black darkness with bits of broken auto glass and mirror dispersed across its surface. The work is subtle and unassuming, not the brazen sort of aesthetic that often characterizes contemporary art. You might walk by it without paying any attention, but, if you stop and look into this painting, it offers an entire new universe of experiences.

The title refers to a Jules Verne novel in which a group of explorers challenge each other to attempt the impossible, a story that intriguingly parallels the story of the painting's creators, the collaborative team of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival). Since 1980, Rollins, an artist, curator, educator, and activist "from the political wing of the conceptual art movement," has worked with African-American and Latino students from the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City.

Despite art-world successes with Group Material, a team of artists committed to social activism that he co-founded 1979, Rollins became dissatisfied with what he perceived as conceptual art's limited potential for realizing meaningful political change. After studying art education and political philosophy at New York University, Rollins put theory into practice by becoming a special-education

IMAGE : ART , FAITH , MYSTERY

teacher in the Bronx and founding the Art and Knowledge Workshop, an after-school program that used art-making as an educational vehicle, out of which K.O.S. was born in 1982.

Rollins and K.O.S. collaboratively create paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints based on their reading of literary texts and musical scores that form the conceptual and physical foundation of their art. Their works are birthed through a three-way collaboration between Rollins, K.O.S., and a text's author. They begin new pieces by reading works of literature such as Franz Kafka's *Amerika* or Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Rollins reads aloud while K.O.S. members sketch. A collective analysis of the text's historic meaning and modern relevance as well as what imagery might best represent their response to the literature is followed by the painting of selected imagery over book pages which have been laid in a grid on canvas in such a way that the imagery both illuminates and disrupts the text.

Although Rollins and K.O.S. have been the subject of several catalogues and hundreds of essays and reviews, it is not widely known that both their concern for social justice and strategy of activism have been profoundly influenced by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Not only was the civil rights movement the main formative influence on Rollins's personal spiritual and political philosophy, but King's strategy of nonviolent direct action has sustained Rollins and K.O.S. throughout their career. King's spirit permeates their art.

Rollins is a charismatic educator and speaker, who animates audiences of all ages with the fervor of Baptist revival preacher and his passion for racial, economic, and social justice. I met him in the Chelsea studio he shares with K.O.S. on Martin Luther King Day, and we spoke about the civil rights leader's impact on their art. Although Pittsfield, Maine, was far removed from any center of civil rights activity, Rollins recalls seeing King on television every day and found in this "magisterial figure" a "paragon of political righteousness." He adds, "What I learned from King and the civil rights movement was that we don't have to accept society, politics, and identity the way they're handed to us, that change is not only possible, but inevitable."

King's impact on Rollins was affected by a shared progressive Baptist background that emphasized putting faith into action. Rollins describes his religious upbringing as "Bapticostal" (part Baptist and part Pentecostal) and himself a "red letter" Christian (a reference to Bible editions in which Christ's words are printed in red): "All of the Bible is important, but the first thing you read are the words in red."

With the exception of Jesus Christ, Rollins, says, King has been and remains the most influential figure in his life. For Rollins, King represents everything that a Christian should be. King addressed critical questions concerning faith's function in a modern society and how the ethos of the Sermon on the Mount might be realized in America today.

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Like King, Rollins is critical of what the civil rights leader called the “paralysis of analysis.” Rollins sees this immobilization in many political artists whose work remains in a perpetual state of critique, mistaking critique for direct action. Rollins acknowledges that critique is a form of action, but counters that it is a “pretty low-impact” form of action and rarely makes effective change. “Change requires a higher level of commitment. It means putting yourself on the line.” Rollins calls King his most admired performance artist because he made faith real through social action. “King made faith real; he used symbols but he didn’t only operate in the realm of the symbolic. He made faith proactive and applied it pragmatically in direct and life-effective ways.” Contrasting King with the German performance artist and activist Joseph Beuys [see Plate 2], Rollins said, “I revere Beuys, but he was only able to operate in the realm of the symbolic. It was great that he founded a political party for animals. It’s great that he put fat on a chair, and that made a statement, but he could never cross the border into direct action.” For a different model of what art should be, Rollins, who is ministry leader for praise and worship at Memorial Baptist Church in Harlem, looks to his choir experience: “Gospel music is not *about* Jesus,” he says; “it *is* the direct visceral expression, demonstration, and manifestation of Jesus.” Turning back to the visual arts, he adds, “Pollock wasn’t painting *about* anything. He was creating the thing, the experience itself.” Of his collaboration with K.O.S., Rollins says, “We are the ultimate process art, but the process allows change. Futures are altered; expectations are transformed. We took performance art into the social arena, into a context where lives are changed.”

King defined love using the Greek words: *eros*, what has come to be understood as romantic love; *philia*, a reciprocal love; and *agape*, which King described as an abundant love that seeks nothing in return. Rollins maintains that art is *agape* made manifest. “It is the love that I have for my kids and that they have for me that makes the project go. If that didn’t happen, no one would be in the studio.”

Agape manifested itself through King’s philosophy of nonviolent resistance, a philosophy of action that used collective demonstration and resistance, motivated by love, to effect social change without violence. This method was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, who was influenced in turn, Rollins points out, by Henry David Thoreau’s “Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience.” Rollins shares Thoreau’s transcendentalist mix of optimism and pragmatism. One of the best *Amerika* paintings, a picture of trumpets that sound to celebrate the commencement of a new era of joy and freedom, is dedicated to Thoreau [see Plate 5].

But it was King who provided Rollins with a historical precedent and moral compass. Without the influence of King, Rollins might not have gone to the Bronx, and he probably would not have had the strategy to survive there. In *Strength to Love*, King argued that love has to be demonstrated in some concrete form or action; for Rollins, that meant giving up a potentially lucrative place in

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the art world for a Bronx classroom. Although in retrospect this was a turning point in Rollins's life and work, it was not, at the time, a career move; in fact, it was both career and life risking:

I didn't just take the 6 train to Longwood Avenue and start introducing myself, saying, "Hi. I've come to help you people." At first, my intention was just to be there for two weeks, but when I saw the situation, I couldn't do anything else but stay.... I think the voice of King was somewhere in the back of my consciousness, saying, "If you leave this place, if you walk away from this, don't even talk to me, don't talk about me, and don't say that I'm your hero."

Rollins did stay, and, motivated by the spirit of Christ and the method of King, he developed a studio that makes more than art, a workshop that has become a community.

King wrote:

Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore community.... The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history. He who works against community is working against the whole of creation.

Says Rollins:

We've been using the power of the Holy Spirit to restore community in the South Bronx, in Memphis, in San Francisco, in Philadelphia. Art is a way to bind people who would not have made any connection previously.... Some people are afraid of the Spirit because they think that it is metaphysical, but nothing could be more concrete. Look at the example of my life, at my kids' lives, at our art.

Rollins believes that making art is a faith proposition. In one of the group's works, this faith component is represented by a single mustard seed archivally placed among vibrant watercolor flowers, flowers that spread across a series of works based on William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [see Plates 6 and 7]. The reference is to the red-letter text of Mathew 13: "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard.... It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it is grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree so that all the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." Rollins and K.O.S. approach art-making the same way: they take small things, like broken auto glass, and make works of art that hang in museums for the world to see.

Rollins and K.O.S.'s collaboration provides a pioneering and stimulating model of the interconnection of art and social action at a historical moment when artists

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have become increasingly conscious of their societal responsibilities. Rollins and K.O.S.'s art is not just *about* racial reconciliation and social justice; it *is* racial reconciliation and social justice in action.

Their attitude toward their materials and imagery is no less unique. In *The Temptation of Saint Antony: The Trinity*, based on Gustave Flaubert's drama about the struggle between faith and reason, they used alcohol and animal blood to create monstrously beautiful forms that hover between abstraction and nitty-gritty representation, between figments of the mind and cells of the body [see Plate 4]. The imagery depicts struggle and metamorphosis, forcing material and form against each other like wrestlers in an arena. As spirit and matter push toward equilibrium, imagery seems to struggle out of the void, and the work becomes a visual manifestation of speaking in tongues.

Rollins's philosophy is, simply put, that art materializes the immaterial. Every work of art achieves something that, until the moment before, had not existed, something perhaps literally inconceivable, until conceived through the struggle of the creative process. Once the work has survived this process, it has power and presence. Then it *is*. Says Rollins:

Art is exactly like prayer. It is as powerful or as futile as prayer. If you don't believe in prayer, prayer won't do you any good. But if you do believe in it, prayer can move mountains. Art to me has always been a form of prayer. The silliest thing a person can do is to take a stick with hairs on it, dip it in a colored liquid, then run it across a surface and hang it on the wall. But something in this process is connected with something fundamental to being human.

The message of every work of art is *I am*, says Rollins. "The work of art is about visualizing abstract truth. It is truth that requires expression. We don't make art because it is fun; we make art because we feel compelled to." This urge to communicate is evident in a work like *Invisible Man* [see Plate 8]. The opening line of Ralph Ellison's novel, "I am an invisible man," speaks to our compulsion to communicate, our desire to be recognized, as if being seen by others allows our personality to be realized. Says Rollins, "In saying, 'I am an invisible man,' you are no longer invisible. Art makes you visible." He means that the work of art becomes a physical manifestation of the mature personality, of the selfhood, self-knowledge, memory, purpose, freedom, responsibility, imagination, moral value, will, and action of its creator.

The motif of Rollins and K.O.S.'s *Invisible Man*, the capital letters IM, is at once text and image. It evokes Moses's encounter with God, the supreme personality, the only truly complete personality, who expressed himself in the creation of the universe.

In doing research for *I See the Promised Land*, Rollins and K.O.S. came

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across Ernest Withers's photographs of Memphis sanitation workers marching with signs that read I AM A MAN. They also found a newspaper headline with the word VICTIM and borrowed the shape of the letters IM, transforming an identity defined by a reactive helplessness and misfortune to "I am," a statement of full and free personality. Freedom is not a concept that Rollins and K.O.S. allow to remain in the realm of the abstract. To them, being free means refusing to be limited by internal or external disadvantages such as economic class or learning disability. They choose freedom over bowing to fate. "Art is the fundamental demonstration of freedom," says Rollins. It's a "constant analysis, reconstruction and redevelopment of what it means to be free."

Rollins has described the entirety of his artistic project with K.O.S. as an attempt to realize what King called the beloved community, an environment in which self-realization and mutual advancement were not only possible but encouraged. It was, King said, the ultimate objective of nonviolent resistance. King's dream of the beloved community was rooted in the Hebraic prophetic tradition, in which God's prophets addressed both spiritual and social ills. In *The Trumpet of Conscience*, King wove together references to no less than seven different Hebrew prophecies:

I still have a dream today that one day justice will roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream [Amos 5:24]. I still have a dream today that in all of our state houses and city halls men will be elected to go there who will do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with their God [Micah 6:8]. I still have a dream today that one day war will come to an end, that men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, that nations will no longer rise against nations, neither will they stud war any more [Isaiah 2:4]. I still have a dream today that one day the lamb and lion will lie down together [Isaiah 11:6], and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid [Micah 4:4]. I still have a dream today that one day every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill be made low, the rough places will be made smooth and the crooked places straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together [Isaiah 40:3-5].... It will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the sons of God will shout for joy [Job 38:7].

Harvey Cox, in *God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility*, connects King's dream to the Hebrew word *shalom*. Often translated as "peace," *shalom* means something broader and more positive than the absence of hostility, Cox writes. *Shalom* is a condition of existence in which righteousness, joy, and love flourish in society. Cox argues that *shalom* includes three elements: reconciliation to ourselves, others, and God; freedom from bondage that leads to maturity, responsibility, and service; and hope oriented toward the potential of this world for *shalom* within history. Rollins and K.O.S. have actively realized reconciliation

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freedom, and hope through their art and community. At a time when many artists, even Beuys to a certain extent, have used the prophetic role of the artist as an excuse for self-indulgence, Rollins and K.O.S. are true prophets of *shalom*, a peace that is realized in love and kinship.

The beloved community is only possible when individuals sacrifice out of love for one another. Rollins and K.O.S. practice this in their collaboration. Every member of the group participates in all aspects of the creative process. They encourage and challenge each other along the way, testing the limits of their conceptual and technical abilities. King argued that all life in the universe is interrelated and involved in a single process, a single history, and moves toward a single destiny. Art, Rollins says, naturally celebrates and facilitates human connectedness. Most art, if it brings people together at all, unites them *after* it is created. With K.O.S., Rollins developed a strategy to make the social aspect of art part of its very creation. He says:

Our works look like maps of the beloved community. What does the beloved community look like? It looks like the *Amerika* paintings, like the *Red Badge of Courage* paintings, like the *Creation* paintings. We are not projecting here; this is not a fantasy. We really created a beloved community.

Rollins and K.O.S.'s attempt to realize King's beloved community in their studio raises a question that has preoccupied them for more than two decades: is there a King aesthetic? The 2002 Smithsonian exhibition *In the Spirit of Martin: The Living Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*, with 118 artists participating, demonstrated the breadth of artistic response to King's life and work. Some artists paid visual tribute to King as an icon, social leader, preacher, or just as a man. Other artists made works that comment on civil rights issues. For some artists, King is a personal role model and hero while for others, like Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, he is just one of many American social phenomena. Some of these artists work in the vernacular of folk art while others carry on the visual legacy of modernism. The diversity of artistic responses to King complicates any possible definition of a King aesthetic.

Rollins and K.O.S. contributed *I See the Promised Land*. Inspired by King's last sermon, delivered the night before he was assassinated, theirs was one of the exhibition's few abstract works [see Plate 11]. The painting's dominant form is a brilliant red triangle, its apex extending to the top edge of the painting. The triangle, which Rollins sees as a central motif in King's writings, evokes his essay "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life" (King's three dimensions are loving yourself, loving others, and realizing the love of God) but could be read as a reference to the Trinity. It also relates directly to a passage at the beginning of the sermon in which King describes taking a mental flight across history: from Egypt and its pyramids, he would go to Mount Olympus to converse with great

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philosophers of ancient Greece, then on to the Roman Empire, known for its roads, and to the Renaissance, where artists learned to represent space in a picture through lines of recession, and finally to the present day, where the promised land came within sight. The triangle in *I See the Promised Land*, whether it is read as a pyramid, a mountain, or a road receding into the distance, is at once a stable and highly dynamic composition. It visually captures King's belief that history is not stagnant but moves toward a goal ordained by God; that though progress may appear to be slow, the outcome is certain. It is this faith that God is on the side of justice that has given Rollins and K.O.S. the perseverance to see their project through.

I See the Promised Land is literally a red passage. A visual and mental flight that crosses over the text, it evokes the Red Sea journey out of Egypt toward the Promised Land. For the Jewish people, as for King, the Exodus is a moment when God intervened in history, leading the people of Israel out of slavery. King used the Exodus as a metaphor for the civil rights movement's fight against segregation, and Rollins has applied it to the psychological and spiritual slavery that, even today, is far too prevalent in neighborhoods like the South Bronx.

Rollins and K.O.S. don't often directly reference King, but they make art by the same principles of love and faith that characterized his message. They have applied King's principle of *agape* practiced through nonviolent resistance in their socially concerned art through their emphasis on beauty, hope and joy—qualities that differentiate their work from a majority of activist art, even art concerned with the same issues as King but not possessing his spirit, art often characterized by enraged laments.

Of the difference between rage and anger, Rollins says:

There is a righteous anger that is the fuel in my gas tank. I'm angry that our schools are in the condition that they are. I'm angry that my kids are so nihilistic. I'm angry that their parents are so neglectful. Anger fuels our work, but it's a loving anger. It is an anger that gives you the energy to say, I'm not going to take things as they have been given to me; I'm going to change things. Rage is a whole other thing. Rage doesn't get you anywhere. Unfortunately, we live in a culture of rage. Rage doesn't do anything except carry within it the seeds of its own destruction. Rage is irrational; it has no strategy or methodology for change. You can never create beauty out of rage.

Works like *Amerika* and the recent *Creation* series were made from a belief that joy and beauty are more powerfully persuasive forces for social change than rage. Rather than lamenting problems, these works propose alternative solutions. In *The Creation*, a series inspired by Haydn's oratorio, Rollins and K.O.S. return to the Genesis narrative and apply their own imagination to the creation of the cosmos [see Plates 9 and 10]. These works' reenactment of creation affirms that beauty can emerge from chaos and that individuals, working collaboratively,

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can create a universe of their own imagination and reshape the world according to their vision. While these works might seem utopian, we should remember that Rollins has realized his vision both in material works of art and the living community of K.O.S. They demonstrate that creating a universe of joy and beauty need not only remain in the realm of the symbolic but can also be an effective political strategy. Says Rollins:

It's about being able to connect with people on a one-to-one level and thereby being able to imagine a more collective action. That's the relationship I have with the kids. I think our art is like that. Works like *Amerika* and *The Temptation of Saint Antony* might be a little weird, but they are still accessible; anyone can see what they are about. They don't alienate the viewer. Everyone is welcome. It's too easy to make something obtuse and obfuscating. Beauty is much more complex and, after all, only beauty can save the world. What is beautiful? Any experience that you have that makes you glad to be alive.

There is nothing abject about his and K.O.S.' work, Rollins insists. Even though the abject and the grotesque are trendy at the present, he and his team have shunned this strategy:

The abject was what was expected of us. We were either supposed to represent African-American and Latino clichés or we were supposed to be doing paintings about our constant and irredeemable suffering. Both are tired, boring, superficial, simplistic. What was not expected of us was beauty. Beauty is important to us, and craft is important to us, because we are not just making art, we are making history.

Rollins isn't boasting about their place in the history of art, though they will certainly find a place there. For K.O.S., making history means not having to accept identity and society as you found them. The power to make history means that it's possible to take the script written for you—a script that reads "learning disabled," that dictates that you will have inadequate education and have trouble finding a meaningful job, that you will be psychologically and spiritually oppressed, that you will be robbed of self-respect, that you cannot imagine a world different from the one you find yourself in—and paint the beautiful picture of your hope all over it.

Says Rollins:

I work with kids who have been told that they can't do things, who have been categorized as "learning disabled," and together we've formed an arena in which excellence and achievement are not only possible but expected and required. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, we take the wound and we turn it into a universe. Art is the only way that you can take a trauma, something awful, and transform it into something that is not only beautiful and

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transcendent but inspiring to others. You have to go through this struggle for your work to have authority. Otherwise it's just décor.

Rollins has been encouraged by King's refusal to believe that anything was impossible for God. King's God was not a lofty and aloof old man in the sky; God was an active presence in the blood, sweat, and tears of his people, revealing himself throughout his creation. He wrote:

God has the light that can shine through the darkness. We have experiences when the light of day vanishes, leaving us in some dark and desolate midnight—moments when our highest hopes turn to shambles of despair or when we are victims of some tragic injustice and some terrible exploitation. During such moments our spirits are almost overcome by gloom and despair, and we feel that there is no light anywhere. But ever and again, we look toward the east and discover that there is another light which shines even in the darkness, and “the spear of frustration” is transformed “into a shaft of light.”

Rollins and K.O.S. manifest this change in works like *This Little Light of Mine* [see back cover]. This piece turns a civil rights freedom song, and the first song that Rollins ever learned in Sunday school, into a spiritual and artistic manifesto. It declares that, although too many people hide their light under the bushel of self-doubt, art can and must be a light in the darkness of a broken world.

The theme of light and darkness brings us back to *From the Earth to the Moon*. This work was first created in a dream by Christopher Hernandez, the youngest, and one of the brightest, of the K.O.S. members. Christopher had observed that the streets of their neighborhood were littered with broken auto glass and mirror fragments, the residue of vandalism and theft. No one cleaned this glass up or paid any attention to it, but Christopher saw its potential. He brought the bits of glass and mirror to the studio and cataloged them by size and color. Then he carefully placed them on the canvas (*From the Earth to the Moon* is one of the few works by Rollins and K.O.S. not made on book pages) using a chart of imagined constellations projected onto the canvas by an overhead projector.

Jules Verne's early science fiction novel *From the Earth to the Moon* described a fantastic journey at a time when space travel was still an impossible dream. The book proposes that even the impossible can be achieved, or at least must be attempted.

Nevertheless, sometimes heartbreaking disappointments arise in the attempt. In *From the Earth to the Moon*, the main characters fail to reach the moon. Caught in orbit around it, their space capsule takes on the appearance, from earth, of a star. Rollins and K.O.S. have faced difficulties and even death threats, but Rollins is philosophical: “I always saw each situation as difficult and terrifying, but I saw them not as problems but tests of faith.” Of critics who

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spread unsubstantiated gossip about his relationships with his students, Rollins says, "You want to hate the person saying these ugly things, but you have to love them and keep doing what you are doing to prove them wrong by perseverance."

The darkest night in the history of K.O.S. was Valentine's Day of 1993, when drug dealers used Christopher as a decoy to gain entrance to a neighbor's apartment, then executed the young artist. Christopher was fifteen years old.

Of the afterlife of artists, Vincent van Gogh wrote:

Painters...being dead and buried, speak to the next generation or to several succeeding generations through their work.... In a painter's life death is not perhaps the hardest thing there is.... Looking at the stars always makes me dream, as simply as I dream over the black dots representing towns and villages on a map. Why, I ask myself, shouldn't the shining dots of the sky be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? Just as we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star. One thing undoubtedly true in this reasoning is that we cannot get to a star while we are alive, any more than we can take the train when we are dead. So it seems possible to me that cholera, gravel, tuberculosis, and cancer are the celestial means of locomotion, just as steamboats, buses, and railways are terrestrial means. To die quietly of old age would be to go there on foot.

This vision of life after death became the basis for the famous painting *Starry Night*. In that sky, one can see a form, a spirit, rising up from the earth and being joined to another form coming down from above. Together these forms become a new star.

Discussing *From the Earth to the Moon*, the normally exuberant Rollins becomes more reflective:

After twenty years I can finally see the connections in our works. In almost every single case it is a story of a protagonist who goes through a crisis, survives the crisis, is redeemed, and celebrates the complicated beauty of survival. And this parallels our experience in the Bronx. I discovered this in the tragedy of Christopher's murder. I thought that I had lost him forever, but then I saw the work he created at the Hirshhorn and he was there resplendent. He is there, but you have to have eyes to see it. You have to be operating on a level that accepts the phenomenology of spirit.

The art of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. teaches us to see. We see through their work that beauty can be wrested from torment and temptation, that joy can be stolen back from suffering, that a little light of love can overcome the deepest darkness and shine like the sun at midnight. If bits of broken auto glass from the street can become stars, if new universes can be created out of the discarded things of this world, history can be made, because then nothing is impossible.



PLATE 3. Group Material (Douglas Ashford, Julie Ault, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins). *Americana*, 1985. Mixed-media installation at the 1985 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Dimensions variable. Photo by Geoffrey Clements.



PLATE 4. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. *The Temptation of Saint Antony: The Trinity (after Flaubert)*, 1990. Blood and book pages on linen. 68 x 191 inches. Private collection, Zurich.

PLATE 5. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. *Amerika: For Thoreau* (after Franz Kafka), 1987-88. Watercolor, acrylic, and pencil on book pages. 60 ¼ x 175 ½ inches.
Private collection, New York City.





PLATE 6. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (after William Shakespeare), 2000. Watercolor, tempera ink, paper, collage, mustard seed, and book pages on canvas. 42 x 48 inches. Private collection, New York City.



PLATE 7. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (detail). Mustard seed.

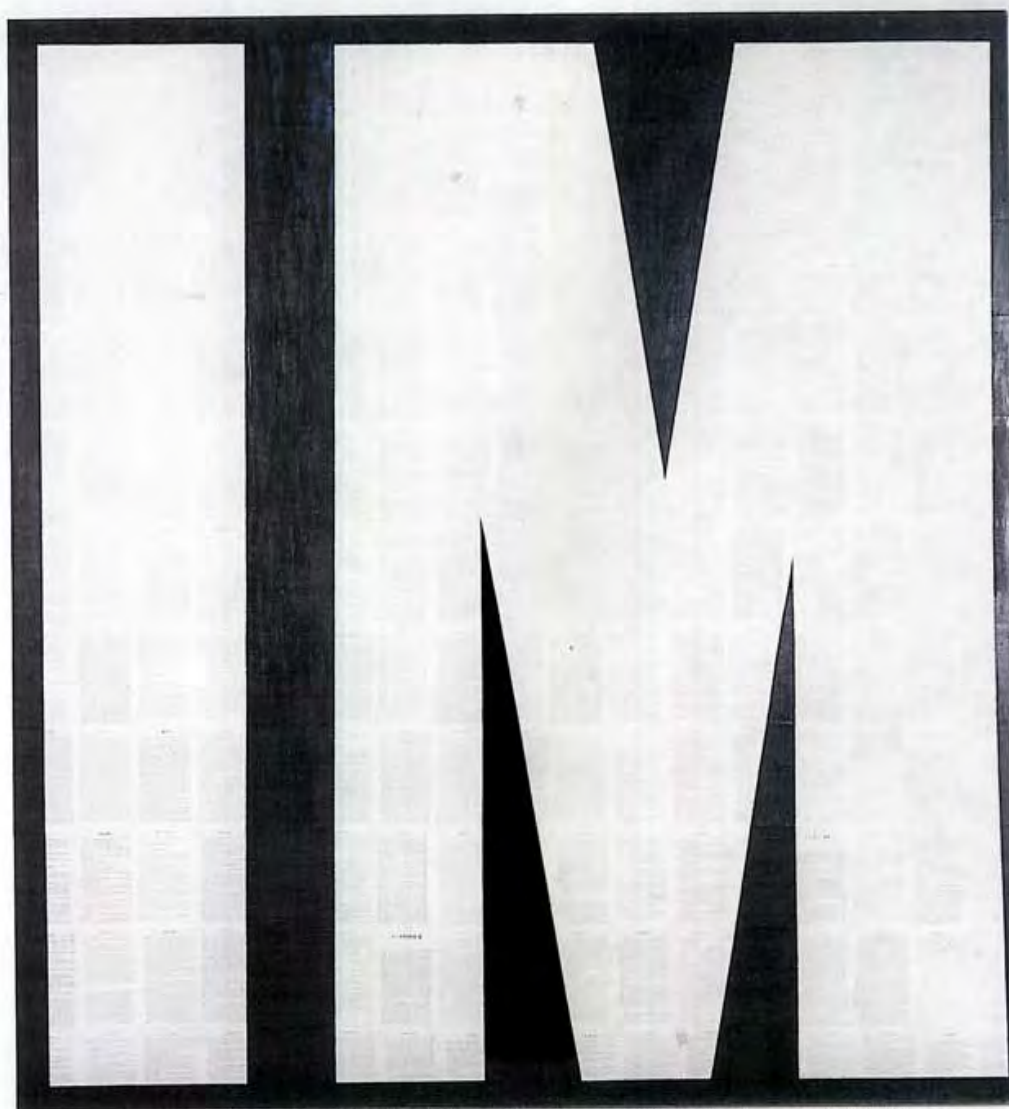


PLATE 8. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. **Invisible Man (after Ralph Ellison)**, 2001-03. Matte acrylic and book pages on canvas. 72 x 72 inches. Collection of the Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis. Gift of the Deupree Family Foundation and the Turley Foundation.

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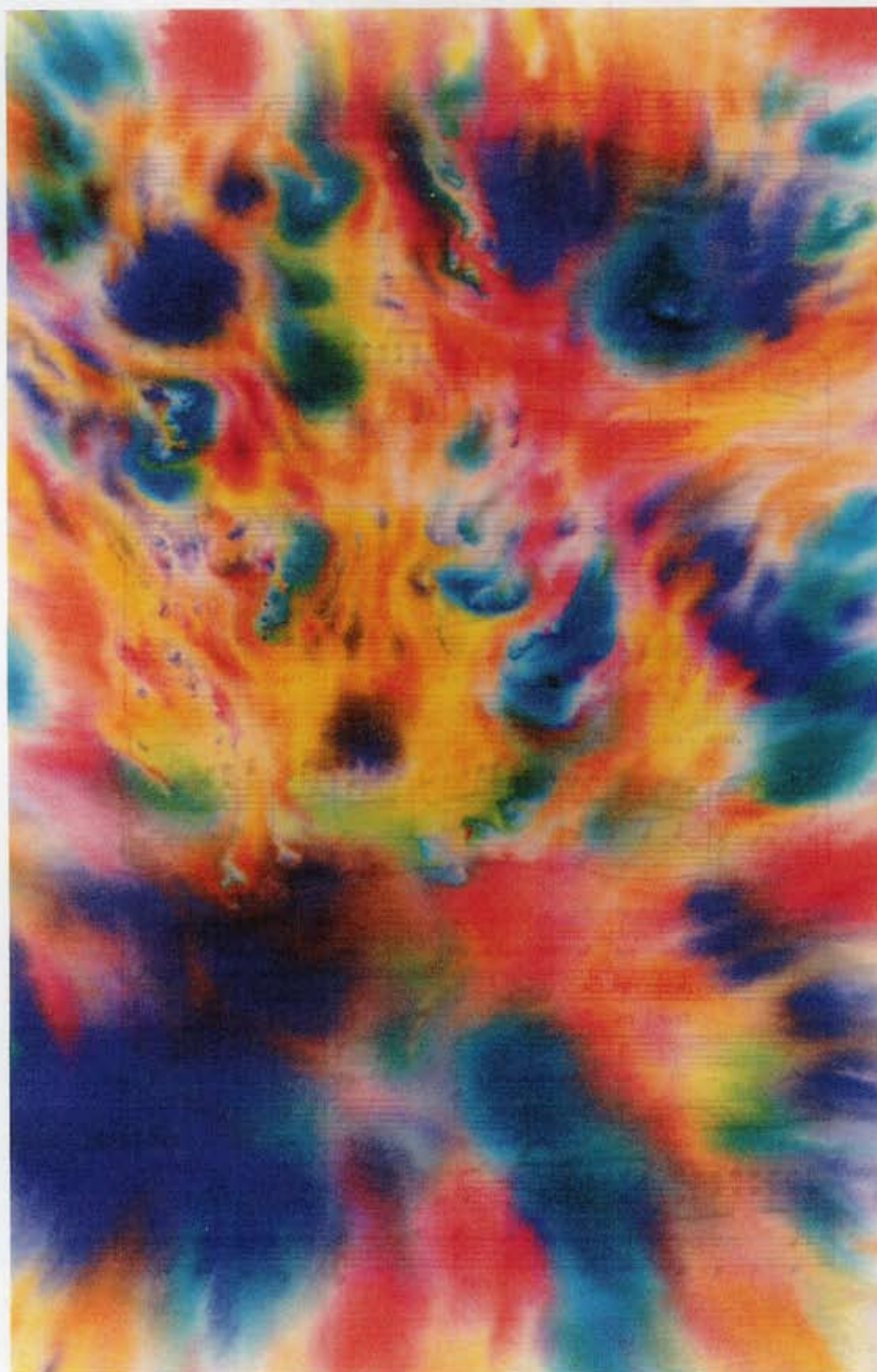


PLATE 9. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. *The Creation (after Haydn)*, 2004. Watercolor, ink, paper, collage, chine collé on book page. 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Collection of the Maine Contemporary Art Center, Rockland.



PLATE 10. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. **The Creation: Representation of Chaos** (after Haydn), 2004.
Watercolor, ink, paper, collage, and chine collé on book page. 10 ¾ x 7 ¼ inches. Collection of the artist.

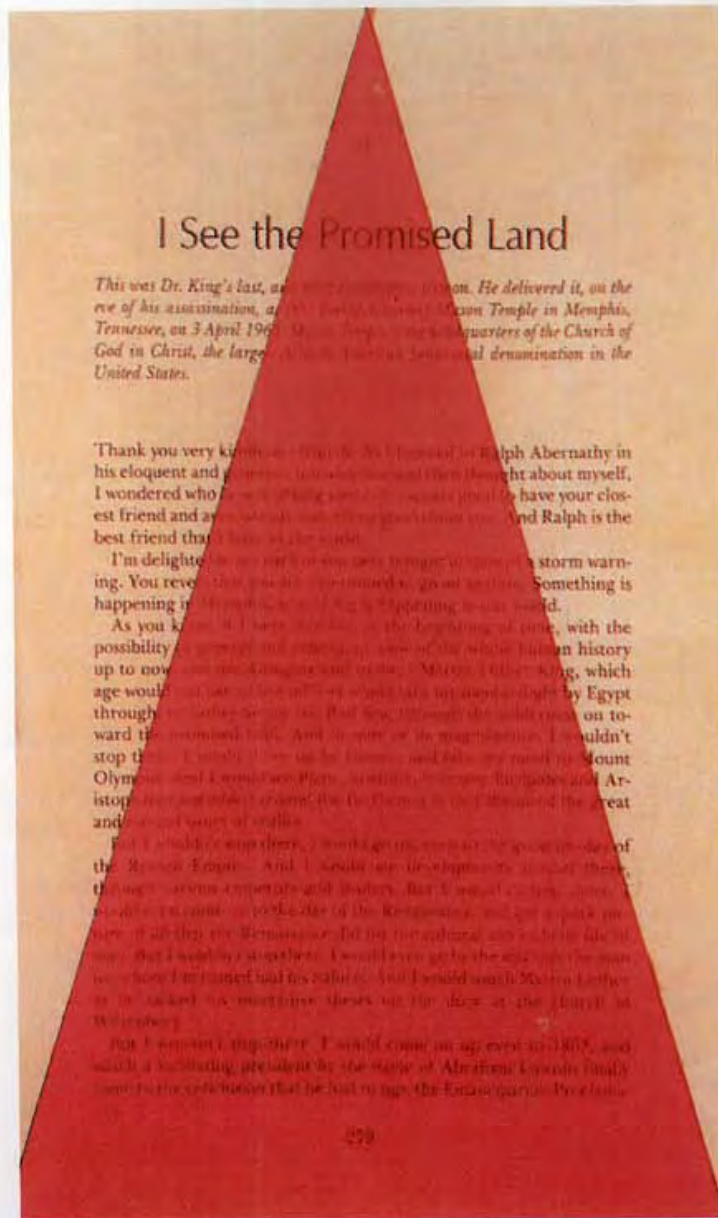


PLATE 11. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. *I See the Promised Land* (after the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.), 1998. 9 x 6 inches. Acrylic and pencil on book page. Private collection, Memphis.



Tim Rollins and K.O.S. **This Little Light of Mine (traditional)**, 2005. *India ink, paper, watercolor, collage, and xerography on rag paper. 11 x 8 inches. Private collection, New York City.*

ARTFORUM

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'80s THEN

TIM ROLLINS talks to DAVID DEITCHER



DAVID DEITCHER: We met at the slide library at the School of Visual Arts in 1980. I remember you as an energetic, engaging young man with an idiosyncratic fashion sense. You wore only red and black, right?

TIM ROLLINS: [Laughs.] That's right, for two reasons. First, economy. Second, I was infatuated with the Russian Constructivists and how they developed forms to serve revolutionary politics—abstract designs that projected enthusiasm, progress, affirmation, even joy, as opposed to the abject imagery of, say, the German Expressionists. The Russian avant-garde explored what a militant beauty might look like. I had red Dickies overalls similar to what my dad used to wear to work every day at the Ethan Allen factory in rural central Maine. So it was a way of keeping to my roots, but styling at the same time.

DD: What marked the beginning of the '80s for you?

TR: The explosion of alternative practices, beginning with Colab and "The Times Square Show," and even Patti Astor's Fun Gallery. Group Material was founded in 1980. It came out of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, a group that included Lucy Lippard, Carl Andre, Jerry Kearns, Rudolph Baranik, May Stevens, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Joseph Kosuth, and many others who met during the mid-'70s to protest the Whitney Museum's plan to celebrate the bicentennial with a survey of American art from the collection of John D. Rockefeller III, which included no work by nonwhites and only one work by a woman. We

worked on this big project called *The Anti-Catalog*—a hefty ad hoc social history of American art. We were the youngest members of that group.

DD: "We" being?

TR: The founding members of Group Material, many of whom were in Kosuth's seminar class at SVA. We were a group of about twenty friends who decided to not sit around smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and complaining about how awful the commercial art world was. We pooled our money instead: Everyone put in fifty dollars a month—about all we had—to rent a space on a block on East Thirteenth Street, between Second and Third Avenues, that many people were afraid to walk down then. It cut into my disco

money, big time. We painted the gallery red and called it Group Material Headquarters, and we organized exhibitions that weren't about works of individual artists or groups, but addressed social themes and subjects like alienation, consumerism, fashion, music, and gender. One of my favorites was "The People's Choice (*Arroz con Mango*)," in 1981, for which we asked everybody on the block to bring in an object that had special value to them. That's when I realized: *This is how you do it. This is what democracy might look like.* It was full of fantasy and surprise and joy and humor and wit—all the things so often lacking in "political art."

DD: What was your day job at that time?

TR: I was teaching in a citywide program called "Learning to Read Through the Arts." In 1981, for the first time, I exhibited a work made in collaboration with my students in "Atlanta," a show at Group Material's gallery. Lucy Lippard made special mention of the work in a review for the *Village Voice*, which was a great honor.

DD: Did you consider Group Material's lively social aesthetics a critique of more conventional kinds of artmaking, display, and cultural judgment?

TR: We did. But there's negative critique and positive critique. Positive critique is when you don't like what someone's doing and you respond by doing something you think should be done instead. It's a can-do ethos that sustains our work to this day.

DD: Listening to you speak about Group Material projects in terms of "fantasy," "surprise," "joy," and "wit," I'm struck by my own more conflicted sense of the early '80s. At the time I was a graduate student, and what I remember is, on the one hand, being excited by new ways of thinking about art and representation and, on the other, being linked by sweeping declarations about what artists shouldn't do—can't do, because such-and-such a cultural practice is "historically impossible." It was a weird mix, and it left a good deal of anguish and creative paralysis in its wake.

TR: Martin Luther King Jr. called that the "paralysis of analysis." [Laughs.] It's progressive-reactionary, mostly affecting people who want to do the right thing but are

so afraid of doing maybe even slightly the wrong thing that they do *no* thing. The best thing is to just take a deep breath and make a move. As a community in the Bronx in the early '80s, we had nothing to lose and everything to gain. People talk about that decade in terms of its incredible economic excess. But in 1981 I found myself in the poorest congressional district in the United States, where people struggled daily to survive physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically.

DD: How did you get from Thirteenth Street and Group Material to the South Bronx, the Art and Knowledge Workshop, and K.O.S.?

TR: In the summer of 1982, I was recruited to work as a full-time art teacher for special-needs students at Intermediate School No. 52 in the South Bronx. I soon started my own after-school studio program—

'80s AGAIN MATTHEW RITCHIE

It took me until '93 to really realize just how thoroughly American artists of the '80s had disconnected themselves from the entire structure and burden of art history. They embraced and as quickly rejected anything that took their fancy, from French philosophy to hedonistic capitalism and pseudo-revolution. But the ambition and greed of this scorched-earth approach ended up being totally liberating. When the smoke cleared, anything was possible, and with that freedom came the redefinitions of context, responsibility, and practice that defines much of '90s art: the kind of nominally coherent but totally individualized internal narratives and ecologies that link practices as diverse as those of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Matthew Barney, Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman, David Hammons, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. ■

—AS TOLD TO TIM GRIFFIN

Opposite page: Tim Rollins and K.O.S. at the Longwood Community Center, Bronx, New York, 1986. This page, right: Tim Rollins and K.O.S., *The Red Badge of Courage IV*, 1986, oil and collage on linen, 21 x 36". Bottom: Tim Rollins and K.O.S., *Amerika I*, 1984-85, oil stick, acrylic, and marker on paper, 6' 5" x 14' 8".

the "Art and Knowledge Workshop"—based first in the school and, after 1983, at a local community center, where Fred Wilson and the Longwood Art Gallery were our next-door neighbors. Out of this studio Kids of Survival was created.

DD: How did you and K.O.S. come to paint on book pages?

TR: While teaching at I.S. 52, I was stunned at the discrepancy between my kids' artistic gifts and their abysmal reading abilities. They were totally excluded from the world of literature, while public schools paid thousands to so-called experts to tell us what our kids could not do. I was told that I was endangering the fragile self-esteem of my students by insisting that they read authors like Orwell, Kafka, Anne Frank, and Malcolm X. It was assumed that they could not read—or would not read, because of their background. This made no sense. If one of my "learning-disabled" students could memorize a Tupac CD, then surely that student could absorb a few lines from writers like Shakespeare and Ellison. My decision to prepare a ground from a grid of book pages adhered to stretched canvas was influenced by the work of artists like Kosuth and Hanne Darboven. But the impetus to paint images of our own making—to vandalize and commemorate these texts at once—came from the students' delight in transgression.

The first time we exhibited a major work painted on book pages was at "The 1984 Show" (actually in 1983), organized by Carrie Rickey and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. The reaction, especially from artists I



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respected, was exciting, although no one thought of the work as commercially viable or especially enduring. Another painting was included in a 1984 group exhibition at Artists Space called "New Art of the Decade." John Ahearn bought that one. By 1985, K.O.S. and I had our first solo exhibition, curated by Holly Block at the Hostos Community College Art Gallery in the Bronx. Soon after, Richard Flood asked us to participate in "Social Studies," a show of politically charged work at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in SoHo. We decided to contribute a painting we had completed just days before, *Amerika I*. A couple of my kids and I

brought this fifteen-foot painting down to the gallery in a roll on the no. 6 train—during rush hour.

DD: Group Material's project "The People's Choice" questioned conventional cultural hierarchies by inviting neighbors to submit objects they really cared about for exhibition. But something different happens when you work with K.O.S. on book pages. That conceptual and physical grid transforms whatever the kids are doing into the most elegant, modernist art.

TR: It was a strategy we adopted. The work had to be beautiful because we were living in a whole lot of ugly. . . . One critic said something like, "I love the 'Amerika' paintings, but the early works—the burning brick pieces, *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Inferno*—were better because that was really the kids." But the opposite is true. "That" was me, with my liberal, Yankee, paternalist, German Expressionist political agenda.

DD: I wonder if your philosophy of teaching was combined with a certain impatience with "Wild Style" aesthetics. Did you decide to impart different cultural standards and expressive tools to the kids? I remember you were super-impatient with graffiti.

TR: [Laughs.] And I still am. The notion that graffiti was the only language that was available or authentic seemed bogus and limiting. The whole point of art is to be transgressive, to have experiences you wouldn't otherwise have. Academics sometimes engage me in arguments about the selection of

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DEITCHER/ROLLINS *continued from page 79*

the literature we paint on, W.E.B. DuBois said it best: "I sit beside Shakespeare and he winces not..."

DD: When did things really turn around for you and K.O.S.?

TR: Nineteen eighty-seven was a watershed year. K.O.S. and I made our first major work with kids outside our South Bronx neighborhood and displayed it in a solo exhibition at the Knight Gallery in Charlotte, North Carolina. The success of that project opened up a whole new world of community-based artmaking. We also took part in two important group shows: "Out of the Studio: Art with Community" at P.S. 1 in New York, curated by Tom Finkelpearl and Glenn Weiss, and Dan Cameron's "Art and Its Double" which was up in both Barcelona and Madrid. That was our first European show—a life-changing experience, especially for the kids, who were all around fourteen at the time.

In 1988, several K.O.S. members came with me to do a solo show at Riverside Studios in the Hammersmith district of London, where we made a painting based on Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* with about eighteen local teenagers. One of them was a terrific young artist, Steve McQueen, then eighteen years old. The exhibition next traveled to the Orchard Gallery in Derry, Northern Ireland, under the leadership of Declan McGonagle. We made another *Red Badge* work there with youth from Creggan in the middle of a tense and violent political situation. The culmination of the '80s was the show Gary Garrels organized of our "Amerika" paintings and our version of Schubert's *Winterreise* at the Dia Center for the Arts in fall 1989.

DD: Nineteen eighty-nine was a difficult year, with the escalating AIDS crisis and the so-called culture wars. Any thoughts on the Serrano and Mapplethorpe flaps?

TR: Democracy is not always a big happy party. One of the consequences when you do open up culture is that you have to start listening to other voices. I'm not threatened by those voices. I think they need to be heard.

DD: Granted, most Americans didn't even notice contemporary art before Reverend Wildmon and his allies in Congress made a fuss about Serrano and Mapplethorpe, and debate is essential in a democracy, but it was hard to think in such distanced terms in the context of the AIDS crisis and violence against gay people. There was so much more than federal arts funding at stake.

TR: We're often stronger than we realize. I believe in looking at issues from as many different perspectives as possible and not fearing the contradictions that are bound to arise. Art is instrumental in creating this dialectic. The great thing that happened with Serrano and Mapplethorpe is that they prompted a dialogue.

Actually, a more interesting moment for me occurred when Robert Gober wallpapered a room at the Hirshhorn Museum in DC with images of a white man sleeping and a lynched black man [*Hanging Man/Sleeping Man*, 1989]. The African-American guards protested that this was the only image of a black person to be found in the entire museum. They had just *had it*. Bob isn't a racist, but his work generated turmoil at first, and then an important discussion took place that brought many buried issues to light.

DD: Any thoughts on the legacy of the '80s?

TR: We saw this very small, relatively homogeneous, and elite art world totally invaded by youth, openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, and people who are not white.

DD: So, again, that's the opening up of culture.

TR: I don't think of it as an "opening up." No one did us a favor. We just broke in. Not everyone banged on the palace doors; many went through the back door. We walked in, pretended we were servants, and decided to stay for a while. □

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