THE METHOD:
I am an artist who works as a regular schoolteacher in a public junior high school in the South Bronx. In my studio I work with about 70 adolescents who’ve been categorized as learning-disabled or emotionally handicapped. The kids and I have been making art together for about three years now.

In the process of producing art for a large public audience, we are forced to struggle with issues often ignored in school: problems of learning what actually interests and involves us, problems of representing ourselves directly and with honesty, problems of the political and economic factors that determine our lives. While the art objects we make are vital to the learning process that culminates in these objects is far more important. We use art as a means to knowledge of the complex forces that support or undermine our society and our future. In addition, we’re attempting to prove that the power of the arts must exist to recognize the value and importance of things that are excluded yet vast segment of the American people have to have, even if they are not kids or non-artists.

Lately we’ve been painting on books. Our method works something like this: I select a piece of literature that I believe speaks to issues that the kids might relate to and be interested in. I read with the kids, defining unfamiliar vocabulary or paraphrasing while I go along. While I read, many of the kids “jam”–that’s what we call making literally hundreds of small drawings. The drawings do not illustrate what is being read; the object is to relate the content of the book to what we know, feel or sense in our everyday lives. After we’ve made stacks of drawings, we begin to edit, reducing the number of pictures to a small amount of images that seem to mean the most and exciting. Transparenties are made of these small selections. Using an overhead projector on a moving cart, we compose and draft the large piece. Each kid then gets to paint his or her own enlarged drawing on a ground of pages torn from the book that provided the inspiration for the art. In this way the book becomes a literal and metaphorical foundation for our new (our own) form and content and method. The book is transformed from something we’re supposed to consume into an artwork with immediate, relevant and concrete social uses for us today.

ABOUT THE INFERNO

Our newest painting, THE INFERNO, is the culmination of over a year of planning, work, and making. The beginning of this work can be traced back to one of our first collaborative artworks, HYPOCENTER: SOUTH BRONX, first shown at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts’ “The Atomic Salon” exhibition a few years ago. In the center of this piece was a superimposition of two maps: one of the target area of Hiroshima in 1945 and the other of Prospect Ave., the neighborhood in which we live and work today.

It was after HYPOCENTER when the kids and I began working with and on books. I had never read Dante (he being of those authors strictly and automatically assigned in my high school lit. classes) until it was through the films and writings of a man named Pier Paolo Pasolini (a major guide of mine) that a modern appreciation seemed possible.

Several pages into one of the many editions of Inferno I first investigated, I found Scott-Giles’ great diagrams of Dante’s System of Hell. The placement of the nine rings immediately reminded me of those defense department maps of Hiroshima from our work before. I showed both maps, both systems of destruction, to the kids and the work took off.

Guide to THE INFERNO (AFTER DANTE ALIGHIERI), 1983–84
Courtesy of Fashion Moda Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library,
New York University

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To reinterpret a work of the magnitude of Dante's, we needed the help of art history, not to ransack it for quotations, but to find the older struggles that produced the older pictures, gaining encouragement from these great images for the enormous struggles our generations face in the Present. Instead of leaving the painting as an intellectual puzzle for the historians and the art critics, here's a direct, select list of the stuff we looked at: Delacroix's The Bark of Dante, Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece and drawings, Dr. Seuss' Lorax and New Potter Battle Book, Puget's revolutionary poster illustrations from the Spanish Civil War, Frida Kahlo's What the Water Gave Me, stills from Pasolini's Canterbury Tales and Salo, Leonardo's studies of facial expressions for The Battle of Anghiari and his St. Jerome, Jasper Johns' Target with Body Prints, Otto Dix's war etchings, Botticelli's drawings for the Divine Comedy, Dore's Divine Comedy, photos of victims from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Germaine's Part of the Medusa, Munch's The Scream, Jack Kirby's new Captain Victory comic book series, the Blake watercolors of the Comedy, the package are from a big box of Tide laundry detergent and last, but maybe most important, the huge painting on the front of the Hellhole ride at Coney Island.

We want to turn these images into active forms of freedom against those other very active forces who would bring an end to human history and culture as we know it if they are left without our resistance.

Tim Rollins
1984

CIRCLE V: The Wrathful
You have got to be full of burning hate to start a big war. Sometimes you can see it on people's faces. I bit a lot from Leonardo when I made this picture.

- Luis Feliçiano

CITY OF DIL
Intense are the crimes of all. Even in their homes, one can see the flames of crime shoot out, as if to engulf homes with fire. Their buildings are not strong enough to conceal their past.

- Ms Dolores Royal studio co-teacher

CIRCLE VII: Circle of Violence
1. The River of Blood
   Everything will be washed in blood, but nothing will ever get clean.
   - Eric Ramirez
2. The Wood of the Suicides
   There was only one Jesus. I don't want to die for other peoples' sins.
   - Anthony Cruz
3. The Old Man of Crete
   Human civilization could turn from gold to clay in an instant.
   - Adalberto Badillo
4. Geryon
   People with honest faces lots of times have the bodies of scorpions.
   - Armando Perez

VIII: MALABOLGIA ( Fraud Simple )
1. Whip and Excrement
   No matter what, being the victim is humiliating.
   - Anthony Dixon
2. Talking Feet
   The burning feet poke out of the hole of death. They tell us warnings.
   - Nestor Ortiz
3. The Hypocrite
   The hypocrite wears a cloak of gold to cover the heavy lead he hides inside.
   - Felix Cepero
4. Arm with the Head of Saint
   Even the heads of the saints have been blown off. They are still trying to talk to us.
   - Jesus Ruiz

CIRCLE IX: Circle of Traitors and Lucifer
The face of Lucifer isn't a fake monster. It could be the face of a Kid who got burned alive in a place called Hiroshima.

- Roy Roger

BACKGROUND:
If that bomb goes off, the Earth will glow in rings. The universe will never be the same.

- Kevin Smalls
ple, but considering the possibilities and situation of the South Bronx, the Kids of Survival are impressive.

It’s humorous when people argue that Tim ought to be teaching those kids about their own culture. There is some guilt-trip in that argument. It is redundant. Those kids get their “Newyorican” culture every day, the moment they wake up. Culture can not be imported. (And, after all, “Goya” products are available in any m a r q u e t a.) The collaborative process that leads to the creation of the work – for example, the paintings based on Animal Farm – is very significant. It is through those discussions that Tim brings important knowledge to the group, knowledge that contextualizes the place of those kids in history and in the world in general. It is okay to live in the ghetto, but to be in the ghetto is dreadful.

Anyway, I always like writing on the pages of the book when I read. It makes me feel that I have done some real reading. When I first saw one of the K.O.S. paintings, I thought, “Gee! some people can really push an idea and make something meaningful and beautiful out of it.” At the same time it looked fun to make.

I wish I had a teacher like Tim.

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**FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES**
Künstler in New York.

**ANMERKUNGEN**
1) Newyoricanisch: Zusammensetzung aus New und Puerto
2) Spanisch-amerikanische Lebensmittelmarke
3) Kleiner spanischer Laden
4) George Orwell, Animal Farm

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**ADDINh TO ALICE**
“We have a chance to make a statement, and for people our age, this is a big chance. We paint what is, but we also paint what should be.” George Garces, K.O.S.

**LUCY R. LIPPAKD**
New York.
writer and activist.
“I guess art is one of the only ways we can show our point of view, about how we see the world. We don’t own a TV station, but we can get a painting together.” Richie Cruz, K.O.S.

“The Red Alice means both anger and blood to me. This is funny, because red is also the color of love – like valentines. The Red Alice is a young girl who is so angry and in pain that she has had it and might jump out of the painting and fight back. The Red Alice is angry because of all the girls who are raped and hurt and killed because they are girls.” Annette Rosado, K.O.S.

These three statements from Kids of Survival say it loud and clear. They say how Tim Rollins + K.O.S. have learned to see, to criticize, and to act on the realities around them, how they have empowered themselves even though society had already decided to leave them out – as poor people, as black and Hispanic people, as artists. RED ALICE in particular brings a lot of things together for me. When twelve-year-old Annette Rosado began to obsess on the image of Alice, grown too big for her confining space; when the group finally arrived at this image (drawn by Lewis Carroll himself) as the mystery behind their own black paintings inspired by Ad Reinhardt; when they did a red version (red with its positive political meaning, as well as blood and valentines), then a socialist-feminist-high-artwork was born, no matter how many other names it’s called or known by.

Ad Reinhardt is “a K.O.S. favorite,” as he was a conceptual-art favorite, always ahead of his time, always insisting that his art-as-art was timeless, obdurateely eliminating the rest of the world even as he tried to change it as a political person. Having immersed myself in his work when writing a book on him, I’m particularly moved by this unexpected choice. Reinhardt was a “difficult” artist, but he also believed that art teaches us how to see. Ad and Alice. What a match. It wasn’t Alice who crouched behind Ad’s matte monochromes, but some other illumination that had something in common with what Annette Rosado sees there.

Like Alice after her break for freedom, K.O.S. moves in and out of the South Bronx, Venice, Documenta, Northern Ireland, the Museum of Modern Art and the cover of ARTFORUM. This is survival in the highest sense: Living above, as well as in, one’s environment, Living beyond imposed expectations – living. Survival of hope and anger and creativity and action all in the form of art. It doesn’t happen often.

DAZU NOCH ALICE

«Wir haben die Gelegenheit, etwas auszudrücken, und für Leute unseres Alters ist das eine grosse Chance. Wir malen, was ist, wir malen aber auch, was sein sollte.»

George Garces, K.O.S.

«Ich glaube, dass Kunst eines der wenigen Mittel ist, die es uns erlauben, unsere Meinung, die Art, wie wir die Welt sehen, auszudrücken zu können. Unser gehört kein Fernsehsender, doch wir sind fähig, ein Bild hinzukriegen.»

Richie Cruz, K.O.S.

«Die ROTE ALICE bedeutet für mich zugleich Wut und Blut. Irgendwie ist das komisch, denn Rot ist auch die Farbe der Liebe und der Valentinscherzen. Die ROTE ALICE, ein junges Mäd- chen, ist unheimlich wütend und deprimiert, weil sie das Schlimmste durchgemacht hat, und am liebsten würde sie aus dem Bild springen und sich zur Wehr setzen. Die ROTE ALICE
SUSAN CAHAN
THE WONDER YEARS

Three young men in ties and jackets greeted me in the galleries of the Dia Center for the Arts in the fall of 1989.1 They shook my hand, looked me in the eye, and calmly and assertively talked about their work, thirteen paintings from a series inspired by Franz Kafka’s Amerika and a piece based on Franz Schubert’s Winterreise. They seemed a little nervous and looked as if they might have borrowed their jackets from older relatives or their teacher, Tim Rollins. But they struck me as poised and articulate, smart and clear as they led me through the cool white galleries hung with works that The New York Times’s art critic Roberta Smith would refer to as “precocious masterpieces.”

A documentary film made about the group and shot mostly in the K.O.S. studio offers a different view.2 The kids appear equally aware of their self-presentation, but in a way more typical of teenagers. The guys rag on each other and goof in front of the camera. We see their street smarts and sense of humor. We also see their tenuous connection to the education system. Carlos skips school and lies to Tim about it. Tim sees right through him and reminds him that he’s twenty years old and has to graduate before twenty-one or the system will kick him out. The newest member of the group, Victor, is repeating ninth grade for the third time. He’s a wisecracking goofball who rarely shows up for school and, when he does, usually just walks the halls. When I interviewed Tim for this essay, he told me that the guys back then acted like “knuckleheads.”3 Watching the film I see exactly what he means. Despite having sold their art work to museums and collectors all over the world, they blithely disregard institutional authority. Shrewd but uncooperative, they appear to have little faith in the value of schooling.

Even if schoolwork had been their priority, their school did not foster success. The art room where Tim started working with the kids in the early 1980s had few supplies, a sink that barely worked, and windows that didn’t open, covered with plywood, which in turn was covered with graffiti. Located in the poorest congressional district in the country, the school suffered the highest incidence of violence against teachers. And violence was rampant in the students’ lives. According to Rick, “It’s so hard every day just to survive in the Bronx. You know, all the time your friend’s getting shot or you’re with your friend—you’re not even associated with him—and you get shot. And then there’s all these temptations…. I can make two thousand a week just by pressing a little button advising someone upstairs that the cops are coming…”

For Rick, Victor, Carlos, and the others, the American truism that education paves a pathway to success was a banal cliché. Even their most committed teachers saw little hope for their students, except maybe the occasional “breakthrough.” As educational theorist Peter McLaren has written:

We claim to live in a meritocracy where social salvation is supposedly achieved through initiative, regardless of sex, religion or family background. That all sounds fine on the surface, but in reality, it’s simply hollow rhetoric. Research has shown that one of the greatest predictors of academic success is socio-economic status. In other words, while we profess to believe in equal opportunity for rich and poor alike, the fact remains that an individual’s social class and race at birth have a greater influence on social class later in life than do other factors—including intelligence and merit.

How do we reconcile these contradictory images of Tim Rollins and K.O.S., the poised young artists and the doomed “inner city” youths? How did Tim and his students navigate back and forth across the class barriers that separated the South Bronx from the elite echelons of the art world? How did they develop and maintain an authentic voice without being romanticized or patronized as “outsiders”? How did they “win” and actually change the rules of the system of which they became a part?

Tim’s process as an educator was rooted in the critical philosophies of educational theorists Paulo Freire, Robert Coles, and John Dewey. Freire’s work in literacy education in Latin America was particularly relevant, modeling and promoting the idea that all people have the potential to act upon and transform their world in order to move toward new possibilities and fulfillment in their lives. According to Freire, there is no such thing as neutral education. What he calls dehumanizing education is designed to maintain the status quo and help the privileged retain their status; it not only keeps the world as it is, but also trains oppressed groups to accept the world as it is. Liberatory
reading of Jules Verne’s From the Earth to the Moon, the study of astronomy, and an introduction to Charles and Ray Eames’s classic film, Powers of Ten.

Child psychiatrist Robert Coles provided inspiration for using art within a holistic vision of human development. In the 1960s and ‘70s Coles wrote the great series of books Children of Crisis, which chronicled and analyzed children’s political and moral lives in situations of change and stress. A white man from New England, Coles studied the effects of poverty, privilege, and racism on children of all races in the United States, using drawing as a means to help them express the truth about their lives, especially when they could not express it verbally. According to Coles, art is a good medium for those who find it easier to “do” than to “talk.” Coles’s “children of crisis” were Tim’s “kids of survival.”

The later work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. was made with the finest archival materials, but they made their early works using whatever they could find at little or no cost, including the sheet metal that had fallen off the covered windows of vacant buildings. As the group began to jell, Tim noticed that even the kids who couldn’t read could memorize every word and grunt of a hip hop song. Tim began to create homemade books on tape to animate their art projects. He intuitively that literary classics would resonate with his students’ depth of experience, their frequent encounters with danger and death, and their vitality. When Tim made these recordings, he focused on inspirational passages. In class he’d show the students the book, play the tape or read aloud, and ask them to draw whatever came into their minds. Eventually, the kids started looking at the books themselves, taking them home, and soon, reading aloud to each other. Tim put his students into dialogue with the greats, but the group never worked with a book that Tim knew well. This allowed for reciprocity in the student/teacher relationship and kept the creative process open, since Tim deciphered the texts as a member of the group.

The story of the first book-page works presents an object lesson in the pragmatic creativity that marks K.O.S.’s work. Tim had always loved books, and his love only increased when he worked in the libraries at SVA and Kosuth’s studio. One day he brought a first edition of George Orwell’s 1984 to school to share with the students. Oblivious to its value, one of the kids started drawing on its pages. After Tim recovered from his initial fury, the group realized that this transgression was actually a breakthrough. They discovered that painting on book pages offered an ideal methodology for executing their artistic vision, complete with all of its metaphorical associations with knowledge, authority, voice, and cultural consumption as a form of cultural production. Their subsequent paintings would each embody an intertextual relationship between a canonical cultural object and its pragmatic use in understanding and re-envisioning the present.

The earliest pieces almost obliterate the text with paint, using the book pages more as inspiration and canvas than as communicative or signifying element in the composition. In the painting Frankenstein (after Mary Shelley) (1983), one has to look hard to see the text and, even then, it’s difficult to read the words. This technique suggests the possible influence of Jasper Johns’s paintings of flags and targets, made with encaustic on newspaper and similarly hard to read. But there is a lack of precision in the group’s aesthetic choices. For example, the painting includes pages from both Mary Shelley’s classic novel and Bram Stoker’s Dracula (the subject of another work). The potential of the text as canvas is only partially realized. Moreover, the figures in the work are stylized and cartoon-like, qualities typical of the work of talented kids who haven’t had much training.

Later works integrate the book pages as significant visual and conceptual elements, with Winterreise (after Franz Schubert) (1988–89) standing as one of their aesthetic triumphs. In this work the visual relationship between the paint and the text—in this case a musical score—is rendered in exquisite equilibrium. The paintings create an analogue to the song cycle’s narrative, in which a young poet faces rejection by his beloved and finds his sorrow mirrored in the inexorable onset of winter. Winterreise (after Franz Schubert) is a series of twelve canvases covered with sheet music, each corresponding to one of twelve songs. The canvases are painted edge to edge with mixtures of white paint and tiny flakes of mica. The first canvas covers the score with a thin translucent layer that leaves the notes almost perfectly visible. In each subsequent canvas, the paint layer grows more and more opaque, until, in the last two canvases, the dense coating completely

**HYPOCENTER SOUTH BRONX, 1982 (detail)**
Tempera on paper
18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist
education, however, is a transformative process that develops critical consciousness and enables learners to recognize connections between their individual problems and the social contexts in which these problems are produced. For both Freire and Rollins, education has the potential to "provoke recognition of the world, not as a 'given' world, but as a world dynamically in the making."8

The image of the South Bronx of the late 1970s and early '80s is famously etched in popular memory as an inversion of the American dream. Once a middle class enclave, the area had been disrupted by the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway in 1963, which cut through the community and dispersed many of its residents. The nearness of apartment buildings to the expressway led to a drop in real estate values. Rent control laws that limited landlords' revenues provided further disincentives to maintain the buildings. In the 1970s, fires became commonplace, some the accidental result of decaying electrical systems, but many set by landlords scrambling to salvage some of their investment through insurance payments. This, combined with white flight, led to a fifty-seven percent drop in the South Bronx's population from 1970 to 1980.9 The resulting landscape has often been compared to Beirut in the late 1970s or Dresden after World War II, a bombed-out no man's land. The government absurdly attempted to brighten the situation by applying decals of potted flowers to windows sealed up with cinder blocks.10

The work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. grew out of members' own experiences, so it is not surprising that their earliest paintings took inspiration from the gothic horror novels Frankenstein and Dracula, two stories that investigate existence hovering between life and death. The group made its first publicly exhibited sculptures from found bricks, salvaged from the ubiquitous rubble that littered their neighborhood and painted to look like the flaming buildings from which they had come.11 Each brick became a synecdoche of a larger decaying ruin.

Tim himself grew up in the rural community of Pittsfield, Maine, and attended the University of Maine at Augusta for two years before coming to New York. An avid art student and reader, after devouring the essay "Art After Philosophy" by Joseph Kosuth, he tracked down the author and enrolled in the School of Visual Arts to study under him. To earn money, Rollins worked at the SVA visual arts library and was then hired by Kosuth to organize the artist's own library of five thousand volumes. Kosuth would often ask him to stay for dinner and meet the art luminaries who came to visit. Rollins became a participant/observer in Kosuth's circle of elite theoreticians and artists. "That was my education," says Rollins. These experiences account not only for his bond with the printed word, but also, in part, for his belief that anybody can enter the art system.

After completing his BFA at the School of Visual Arts he entered the graduate program of the School of Education at New York University. At NYU he studied Marxist philosophy with political theorist Bertell Ollman and film historian Jay Leyda. He sat in on classes with art historians Kirk Varnedoe, John Pope Hennessy, and Robert Rosenblum. He listened to lectures by literary theorist Roland Barthes and philosophers Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Julia Kristeva.

In 1981, Rollins came to I.S. 52 in the South Bronx after discovering that he had a gift for working with kids written off by the system as emotionally disabled, intellectually handicapped, or just plain uneducable. During his last year at NYU he student-taught at P.S. 3, an elementary school in the West Village founded in 1971 by parents looking for an educational alternative, dedicated to student-centered teaching methods and open classrooms. Tim's placement with a special education group proved a pivotal experience. He electrified the students and amazed the teachers with his charismatic command of attention in the classroom and a pragmatism that led him to overcome obstacles with creative solutions that defied convention. He had found his milieu.

Rollins never finished his MA, but with his BFA became one of several instructors in a program called Learning to Read Through the Arts. From 1980 to 1982 he traveled to schools throughout New York City, lugging art supplies and slide projectors for short-term stints as a visiting artist/teacher. On the day in 1981 that he arrived at I.S. 52, assigned to a special needs class, he was surprised, entertained, and horrified to find that the students had managed to write graffiti on the ceiling of the art room. They had devised an ingenious method of taping charcoal to the end of the long pole meant for operating the windows, a technique that reminded Tim of the one used by the bedridden Henri Matisse at the end of his life. Yes, it was vandalism, but executed with imagination and skill.

To that first class Tim brought a ream of copier paper and some nice drawing pencils. Deviating from the program's official lesson plan, he put Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa on his boom box, slammed down the stack of paper, and said, "You've got forty-five minutes to make the best damn drawing you've ever made in your life and you're doing it now." The students rose to the challenge.

Rollins's ability to establish order and instill discipline in students deemed beyond reach was quickly recognized by I.S. 52's Crisis Intervention teacher Arthur Albert. He spoke to principal George Gallego, who within days hired Rollins on a permanent basis. He accepted the offer but only with conditions: Art would become a major subject, and Tim would see the kids every day. He would offer a multidisciplinary curriculum that used art as a means to knowledge and included reading, writing, literature, art history, and music. "I felt it was unethical," he says, "to make art when they couldn't even spell the word art." Each project would generate its own curriculum. For instance, one student's desire to make a painting of the universe led to the
whites out the music. The penultimate canvas renders the entire text illegible; the final canvas takes this heaviness even one step further into an impenetrable field of blinding whiteness.¹⁴

One vital aspect of the humanizing educational process that Tim advanced consisted of countering dominant social expectations regarding students like his through the public exhibition of their art. While still working with Learning to Read Through the Arts, Tim had exhibited works that a group of his students made in response to the Atlanta child murders of 1979–1981. The drawings were shown in an exhibition organized by Group Material¹⁵ and cited in a review by critic Lucy Lippard in *The Village Voice*. Group Material’s philosophy of cultural democracy and exhibition practice as a form of public dialogue made possible the acceptance of Rollins’s students’ work as legitimate artistic expression in a public setting, not dismissed or patronized as “children’s art.”

At I.S. 52 Tim continued to release his students’ work into the art system. In 1983 the kids sold their burning bricks for $5 apiece at Colab’s A More Store, a temporary shop that offered artists’ multiples during the Christmas holiday season. Shortly thereafter Rollins received a call from art dealer Ronald Feldman about a show called *The Atomic Salon*, organized with *The Village Voice* and its art critic Carrie Rickey to coincide with a nuclear disarmament demonstration in New York City. Feldman wanted suggestions for young artists to include in the show.¹⁶ Tim surprised the dealer by suggesting his own students, then thirteen and fourteen years old. To Rollins’s own surprise, Feldman agreed. The group submitted *Hypocenter: South Bronx*, premised on the idea that the hypocenter of a nuclear blast would fall at Prospect Avenue, the subway stop nearest their school. The piece consisted of nineteen drawings hung on the wall in the shape of a mushroom cloud, and depicting targets, war planes, burning bodies, and charred flesh. Most of the reviews cited the work as among the most powerful in the show.

Other early pieces, the *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* paintings, shown at Brooke Alexander and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, celebrated abjection. This “expressionist” phase would quickly give way to their first major series to receive widespread acclaim, the *Amerika* paintings. *Amerika I (After Franz Kafka)* appeared in the 1985 group show *Social Studies* at Barbara Gladstone, along with works by Eric Fischl, Jenny Holzer, Mike Glier, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, and others. The painting sold to Chase Manhattan Bank for $5000 and the group went pro.

The alternative arts movement of the 1970s and the proliferation of collaborative exhibition practices in the 1980s created a context for recognizing and showcasing the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. as art. The movement had emerged in the wake of 1960s social activism that demanded more democratic concepts of cultural value. Newly available government arts funding supported the growth of an art sector not beholden to wealthy patrons. Less restrictive art venues, especially artist-run galleries, made space for more diverse and socially-engaged art.¹⁷

Tim’s first contact with the alternative arts movement came just after his arrival in New York in 1975. His mentor Joseph Kosuth had belonged to the conceptual art group Art & Language and when Tim arrived, was the editor of the group’s influential but short-lived publication, *The Fox*. By 1977 Rollins himself had become involved with Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, a group formed to protest an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art celebrating the Bicentennial of the American Revolution. Culled exclusively from the limited collection of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III, the exhibition included no artists of color and only one woman. Rollins participated in the production of an anti-catalogue, a low-budget publication containing critical essays and documents opposing the use of arts institutions to serve the interests of the rich.

By the late 1970s a new generation of artists began establishing a second wave of artist collectives and artist-run organizations. Collaborative Projects (Colab), one of the first, consisted of about forty artists who raised money, shared equipment, and organized exhibitions.¹⁸ The epicenter of activity among young artists moved from SoHo and Tribeca, which had been overtaken by the affluent, to the East Village and the South Bronx. Ideas of community were pursued by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, who cast plaster portraits of South Bronx residents, taking molds of their sitters outdoors on the sidewalk. In 1978 Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis opened Fashion Moda in a South Bronx storefront space. There the downtown and uptown art worlds met, including graffiti writers, hip-hop musicians, break dancers and other artists.¹⁹ Fashion Moda also organized projects in public places such as vacant lots and abandoned buildings. A new style of art show emerged: “non-curated, densely packed shows on oddball themes, including art by children and the anonymous…”²⁰ The scene was celebratory and critical, and it reinvented the idea of the art exhibition, fueled by political ideals, artistic ambition, and communalism undeterred by lack of resources.

In 1979 Tim helped found Group Material, a collaborative group whose artistic medium was exhibition practice, which they viewed not only as a vehicle for the display of objects, but as a means of building community. In a 1983 statement, the group defined itself in ambitious terms:

Group Material was founded as a constructive response to the unsatisfactory ways in which art has been conceived, produced, distributed and taught in American society,... While most art institutions separate art from the world, neutralizing any abrasive forms and contents, Group Material accentuates the cutting edge of art. We want our work and the work of others to take a role in a broader cultural activism,... In our exhibitions Group Material
reveals the multiplicity of meanings that surround any vital social issue. Our project is clear. We invite everyone to question the entire culture we have taken for granted. 21

From 1980 to 1981, Group Material operated a space in the East Village, believing it important to establish a physical presence in order to gain legitimacy and recognition. 22 Group Material’s ideological positioning strategy informed Tim’s work with K.O.S. Like Group Material, Tim wanted K.O.S. to stake a claim in the center, not the periphery. In a prescient statement about their work made in 1983, Tim said, “I think my greatest success is that I’ve pulled kids into the realm of production, where they make real things that other people see… [T]he work I do with my kids is almost always shown in a real art gallery, mainly alternative spaces…so far.” 23

Tim Rollins and K.O.S. were not the only young artists to make it big in the 1980s. The most visible were graffiti artists, among them Lady Pink, who started her career at sixteen while still a student in high school, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who began as a graffiti writer and became an art star by age twenty. 24 But beyond its use of text, the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. had little in common with graffiti art. The group’s works were increasingly influenced by the artists they studied with Tim, including the conceptual art of Hanne Darboven, Sol LeWitt, and Kosuth; the monochromatic paintings of Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman; and the politically engaged work of Joseph Beuys, Margaret Harrison, and Conrad Atkinson.

Of particular influence was Atkinson, a conceptual artist and activist who also showed at Ronald Feldman’s gallery. During the late 1960s and early ’70s many “political” artists turned their backs on dominant cultural values, but Atkinson continued to see the history of high art and the institutional art world as vital sites. He especially identified with the history of socially engaged literary texts and wanted to see them mined on the main stage of art. In a 1985 interview, he expressed the need to employ a broad range of activities to rebuild the torn social fabric, including the kind of intellectual discourse that can happen through cultural institutions. 25 “You have to occupy the ruling hegemonic spaces as well as popular areas. Otherwise you render yourself invisible,” he would later say. 26

The art world’s increasing recognition of “community-based” art aided the acceptance of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. by mainstream institutions. The work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. has often been classified among artistic practices that emerged in the 1980s and proliferated in the 1990s, variously referred to as “service work,” “project work,” or “new genre public art.” These terms describe process-oriented art that involves “community” participation and often limits the authorial role of the artist. 27 Such work uses art as a means to engage groups of people, often those who do not identify themselves as artists, and is sometimes described as disrupting the conventional social relationships in the art system.

The fashion for this type of art paved the way for Tim Rollins and K.O.S.’s acceptance into the art world, even though their work didn’t really fit this category. First and foremost, Tim was not engaged for a short-term project or exhibition to “collaborate” with a “community group” on a temporary basis. The group’s projects did not serve as a metaphor for cultural democracy, but an actual rethinking of definitions of cultural participation. The relationships among the members of the group were sustained and continue to this day. Much “community-based” art is more concerned with process than product and, as Michael Brenson has written, “is intended to lead away from the object into the lives of real people, real neighborhoods.” 28 Not only did Tim Rollins and K.O.S. reject the glorification of poverty and “difference” as signs of social or artistic authenticity; they also embraced the “thing-ness” of art, the joy of making beautiful and lasting things that embody the mind, strength, character, and presence of their makers. Referring to the group’s painting. Tim says, “Call it a commodity if you want, but honey, this is a commodity that has spirit.”

Much “community-based” art aspires to the condition of unalienated collective labor and attempts to critique capitalism either by remaining outside the art market or taking social and economic relations as its subject matter. By contrast, Tim Rollins and K.O.S. jumped into the market enthusiastically. In 1986, after the show at Barbara Gladstone from which Chase Manhattan Bank had purchased Amerika I, dealer Jay Gorney offered an exhibition at his gallery on East 10th Street, then part of the red hot East Village art scene. Gorney paired Amerika II and works based on the The Red Badge of Courage and Alice in Wonderland with photographs from The Ballad of Sexual Dependency by Nan Goldin. Not expecting to sell a thing, Tim was stunned to learn that mega-collector Charles Saatchi had purchased their work.

On occasion, Tim has been vilified for what appears to some as missionary work or exploitation, and the group’s market success has only exacerbated these accusations. But selling their work enabled K.O.S. to fulfill the pragmatic need to make a living. They matched a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to open their Art and Knowledge Workshop with $8000 of the money they earned, set up a college fund, and provided themselves stipends. 29 Whatever scorn one might have for the inequities produced by the capitalist system, earning money is practical and legitimizes the group’s work. Tim says, “It was this bizarre—and I’m sorry but this is the reality—it was this kind of bizarre affirmation of everything that we had been doing.” This is the essential dialectical tension in Tim Rollins and K.O.S.’s work: in order to pursue a Marxist-driven vision of social liberation, the group had to “win” in the capitalist system.

Tim Rollins and K.O.S. were firmly grounded in the art world, but Tim also belonged to a community of New York City
arts educators who shared his critical understanding of education as having the potential either to reproduce existing social relations or intervene in and transform them. The concept of art and art education as instruments of social change informed a subculture of educators in the 1980s, including Artists/Teachers Concerned, with whom Tim Rollins and K.O.S. showed in 1989 at the gallery Minor Injury. Artists/Teachers Concerned comprised thoughtful, good-hearted, politically aware individuals, but their work with their students tended to be predictable and underdeveloped. They promoted art activities in which students depicted social problems, such as homelessness and pollution, or expressed positive messages, as in murals that read, “We can make a difference!”

Several things distinguished Tim Rollins and K.O.S.. They not only penetrated the art market, they developed a high level of artistic sophistication. They took frequent field trips to research their painting projects, to the Museum of Modern Art, for example, where they looked at Rothko and Reinhardt and the Russian Constructivists. They were often dogged by security guards who bristled at their age and skin color; nonetheless MoMA became a second home to them.

When art prices declined in the early 1990s, Tim Rollins and K.O.S.’s market sagged. The infrastructure that supported their artistic development was then further battered by the assault on cultural democracy, whose main target became the National Endowment for the Arts. But the group itself endured. The work had matured. Its process of creation, formal elegance, and poignant content defied categorization and so disrupted both aesthetic and social categories. Tim’s teacher Kosuth, it seems, ended up offering Tim more than simple entrée into a community of art intellectuals. His own art modeled an approach for Rollins, a drive to continually recreate the idea of art as a characteristic of art itself. As Kosuth has described: “…[T]he work of art is essentially a play within the meaning system of art. As that ‘play’ receives its meaning from the system, that system is—potentially—altered by the difference of that particular play.”

Tim Rollins and K.O.S. have integrated process and product into a practice that defied assumptions about who is eligible for recognition as an artist. The members of the group formed bonds and alliances across lines of age, class, and ethnicity. In retrospect, the refusal of Carlos, Victor, Rick, and the others to remain complacent provided a necessary condition for change and for the model they developed, a harbinger of a more democratic, liberal (in its true meaning), and just America.


4. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations by Tim Rollins are from an interview with the author recorded on December 9, 2008.

5. Victor Llamas, quoted in Kids of Survival: The Art and Life of Tim Rollins and K.O.S.


7. Freire called this conscientização.


11. Rollins has stated that these early works reflected his paternalist imposition of his own liberal agenda. See "Tim Rollins Talks to David Detitch," Artforum 40, no. 8 (April 2003): 79.


13. In the course of writing this essay, I asked Tim how well the kids learned to read. He responded with just a handful of their accomplishments. One just completed graduate school at Columbia; another graduated from Stanford and is teaching at Berkeley. A third got a full undergraduate scholarship at Bard College and is getting his masters in art education at Lehman College.

14. The influence of Glenn Ligon's work may be seen in this piece in its play of textual legibility and illegibility.

15. Atlanta, at Group Material's space on East 13th Street, 1981.

16. The Atomic Salon, Ronald Feldman Gallery, June 9–July 2, 1982. The show was mounted in conjunction with a special Village Voice issue on nuclear disarmament, which published images of the art in the exhibition.

17. The Kitchen, founded in 1971, showed video art, a medium ignored by museums at the time. 112 Workshop/112 Greene Street, founded in 1970, provided a place for conceptual works that responded to the physical and social conditions of its site. AIR, founded in 1972, was a women's cooperative gallery. Many other organizations, including El Museo del Barrio, Kenkeleba House, El Taller Boricua, and Basement Workshop showcased works by artists of color who had been shut out or included as tokens in the major museums.

18. Their most celebrated project was The Times Square Show, mounted in June 1980.


22. Following this phase the group continued with a changing roster of members until 1996.


24. Fab Five Freddy and Charlie Ahearn parodied the rapacious hunger for young South Bronx artists among downtown art aficionados in their 1983 film Wildstyle.


27. For discussions of this type of work see the 1994 lecture by Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler, "How to Provide an Artistic Service," in Museums Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) and Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).


29. Artist Jenny Holzer also contributed toward this match.


Amerikan Painting

Suzanne Hudson
Scan the extant writing on Tim Rollins & K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) and a few things become clear. For one, biography predominates—and for good reason, given the group’s unconventional genesis in a severely underfunded public school in New York City’s South Bronx in the early 1980s. This arrant fact of social disadvantage, compounded with the functional illiteracy of many of these students when Rollins first met them, leads to another predictable treatment: one that, in its more generous manifestations, underscores the precocity of the learning disabled, dyslexic, and handicapped artists, and elsewhere admits near caricatural incredulity as to their wherewithal and ability to execute works of aesthetic consequence. In all cases, Rollins & K.O.S.’s rise to prominence within the international art world allows for, even solicits, a Horatio Alger-like narrative of ascent to middle-class respectability in an age of wanton pluralism. Which is also to suggest that these attempts to manage Rollins & K.O.S.’s efforts owe much to the dictates of an identity politics for which they have long been cast as a cipher.

To be sure, the mode of pedagogy enacted by Rollins matters, as does the specificity of the work it generates (and by whom). I would be the last person to argue for a formalism that ignores the particular circumstances of its objects, as what follows should make clear. And yet, my distinction is that knowledge of the extraordinary conditions of Rollins & K.O.S.’s production has tended to occlude the very simple point that they have nearly exclusively made paintings. Big, unapologetic paintings based on a range of seminal texts, which refer not—or not only—to the demands of locality and subjective responses to them, but petition besides an appeal to a common sense rooted in the canon (a Reagan-era, postmodern shibboleth, if there ever were one) from which they were ostensibly excluded as “at risk” minorities in the American ghetto.

The mere adoption of painting here should give pause. A material designation with determined institutional and philosophical ramifications in the decade in which Rollins & K.O.S.’s work got underway, painting was omnipresent but critically disavowed. In a canvas-flooded moment heralding a regressive return to Neo-Expressionist figuration, incisive, radical work was to be made elsewhere, and by other means, whether conceptually dematerialized or forthrightly material (here, photography triumphed alongside agitprop, which took photographic imagery as its basis). Painting was the gold standard, the aspirational mediumistic analogue for the literary masterworks that became Rollins & K.O.S.’s compositions’ very real grounds: pages glued on fabric form the paintings’ supports—which was also the source of its unredeemed conservatism. That Rollins & K.O.S.’s project was painting-based must have seemed an act of cognitive dissonance. Better to pretend it did not exist; better to focus on the group’s agreeable politics.

Yet, the ways in which Rollins & K.O.S. rendered painting a sustained social and collaborative practice through the classroom at I.S. 52, the Art and Knowledge Workshop, and the studios beyond were inextricable from their politics. In privileging painting, they eschewed the most dumbly obvious, expected forms of artistic articulation (e.g., graffiti or community center art) given their respective stations. They instead maintained that painting’s seeming incompatibility with critique—even activism—released a space for its continued viability, and on its own terms. So that their engagement with the medium was, to use the language supplied by the present context, a key transfiguration of it.
This began early on, with Rollins' attempt to redefine cultural participation through his radical pedagogy. Responding to his students' needs, Rollins began the practice of reading aloud as the students drafted sketches conjured by the books. Steeped in the twin virtues of Emersonian self-reliance and Deweyan pragmatism, which advocated for the precedence of action (as the agent of learning and requirement for theorization) and also claimed education as a democratic tool, Rollins set to work. Indeed, he set to work by getting the students set to work in accordance with Dewey's transformative ideas of learning by doing, in which there exists an "organic relation of theory and practice," whereby one learns "not simply [by] doing things, but [by] getting also the idea of what he does; getting from the start some intellectual conception that enters into his practice and enriches it; while every idea finds, directly or indirectly, some application in experience and has some effect upon life."1

Crucial in this experiment was Rollins' position that books imply use—that they are things in the world to be activated by one's interaction with them. Lest this be understood as a solipsistic endeavor, centered on the individual, for Rollins it implied the basis for agonistic dialogue among the members of his group, one that generated a curriculum for art making as a collective enterprise. As Rollins put it early on, in the guide to The Inferno (After Dante Alighieri), 1983–1984, cited here at some length:

The Method: I am an artist who works as a regular schoolteacher in a public junior high school. In my studio I work with about 70 adolescents who've been categorized as learning-disabled or emotionally handicapped. The kids and I have been making art together for about three years now ...

Lately we've been painting on books. Our method works something like this: I select a piece of literature that I believe speaks to issues the kids might relate to and be interested in. I read with the kids, defining unfamiliar vocabulary or paraphrasing while I go along. While I read, many of the kids "jam"—that's what we call making literally hundreds of small drawings. The drawings do not illustrate what is being read; the object is to relate the content of the book to what we know, feel or sense in our everyday lives. After we make stacks of drawings, we begin to edit, reducing the number of pictures to a small number of images that seem the most true and exciting ... In this way the book becomes a literal and metaphorical foundation for our new (our own) form and content and method. The book is transformed from something we're supposed to consume into an artwork with immediate, relevant, and concrete social uses for us today.

The first paintings take their cues from comic books, horror films, and cartoons, as well as traditional paintings (often allegorical or historical). Rollins was always forthcoming about the voracious and habitually incompatible range of sources he and K.O.S. assimilate in the finished pieces, as his Dante guide makes clear. (In it, he reveals what the group studied—from Delacroix's The Bark of Dante to Jack Kirby's Captain Victory series—to save the art historian bent on iconographical analysis the task of source-hunting.)

Striking in these initial efforts though is the extent to which Rollins & K.O.S. equated the

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Tim Rollins & K.O.S.
The Frogs—Fairmount III (After Aristophanes), 1998

Tim Rollins & K.O.S.
Amerika VI (After Franz Kafka), 1986–1987
Tim Rollins & K.O.S.
Study for Amerika VII (After Franz Kafka), 1987

Tim Rollins & K.O.S.
Amerika—Everyone is Welcome! (After Franz Kafka), 2002
choice of painting with a didactic representational style. Looking now at *Frankenstein (After Mary Shelley)*, 1983, and *Dracula (After Bram Stoker)*, 1983, the narrative-oriented imagism abetted by clear figure outlines, legible symbols (a clenched fist, a gun, a coffin), and bold, highly-keyed colors read more descriptively than Rollins' above statement advises would have been welcome. However close these tread to the clichéd representations of abjection Rollins & K.O.S. would shortly denounce, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* nevertheless importantly evidence a desire for meaningful, deeply personal communication. In *Frankenstein*, for example, the werewolf is a self-portrait of K.O.S. member Jose Padilla—but a single occurrence of what James Romaine would characterize as "work that visually manifested their self-perception, as well as their recognition of the perception of others, of their own 'monstrosity.'"

Such paintings also permit a fundamental rethinking of the easel-painting form (ever the portable and private bourgeois trophy) as something akin to the revolutionary public mural, replete with explicit municipal objectives born of a communitarian ethos. Even smaller scale works, such as *Angry Father and Mother*, 1982–1984, a page-sized watercolor with two black-rimmed faces crying vertical rivulets of tears, betrays its diminutive dimensions in its call to civic accounting as one of a number of images painted on a sheet of anti-abortion legislation. Subsequent works from the early 1980s transition away from comparable acts of illustration. Even as they forgo deictic pointing to the source and any pictorial consequence of their meaning they still retain a comparably vital sense of sincerity, anger, and empathy—qualities far from disallowed by abstraction, as Rollins & K.O.S. intuited and would exploit in a host of later, strikingly non-figurative efforts: from the slow obscuring of surface by successive layers of white paint in the sequence of acrylics comprising the *Winterreise (Songs XX–XXIV)* (After Franz Schubert), 1988, to *Letter from Birmingham Jail No. 2* (After the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), 2008, where prison bars (evenly spaced, black vertical lines) effect an optical and conceptual moríre.

The *América* paintings (after Franz Kafka's posthumously published novel of the same name) were the first to augur a change of course. A golden copse of tangled instruments fills the vastness of the underlying book-page grid, in what critic Roberta Smith described as images of "radiant grillwork, a golden gate of overlapping, intertwining trumpets, each more eccentric, more wildly mutated and suggestive than its neighbor." Taken from the unfinished manuscript's rousing last chapter, in which the protagonist (buffeted by a series of misfortunes after arriving in the United States, and chastened in due course by his run-ins with various figures of authority) decamps to Oklahoma, to a commune where everyone is welcome and is also an artist. He is there welcomed into a stadium by angels with long horns—the horns that, along with footage of jazz legends and images of noisemaking culled from Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who*, became the inspiration for those in the suite of paintings. Thus did Rollins & K.O.S. arrive at potent icons of eccentric heterogeneity unified in their discrete demands for the acknowledgment of presence.

This agenda notwithstanding, it is worth remarking upon the caesura and reconstitution that happened in the wake of K.O.S. member Christopher Hernandez's murder in 1993, when he was just 15. After the group's eviction from a studio (these were the insolvent years, post-market-crash), Jorge Abreu found Hernandez's notebook, filled

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with drawings inspired by Aristophanes’ comedies: *The Frogs, The Birds,* and *The Clouds.* Rollins & K.O.S. used these musings to create arresting paintings based on the story of Dionysus. (Dionysus attempted to bring the poet Euripides back from the dead, and heard the cries of frogs on his journey.) Far from the only instance of paintings responding to local affairs—David Deitcher, for one, makes a compelling argument for the gravity of many 1980s panels pockmarked with “wounds” in relation to AIDS (including *Amerika VII, 1986–1987,* with its representation of the morphology of HIV taken from a contemporary graphic in *The New York Times Science Times*)—it remains notable for its insights into the valences of meaning supplied by the images and texts appropriated, and at decisive times.

The Aristophanes items foreground not only the literary sources, but also the reasons for their applicability for Rollins & K.O.S.; in short, the choice of text matters, from *Dracula* to *Amerika.* Thought against certain strains of period discourse that professed appropriation as potent insofar as one attended to the structure of its operations above the content of its images, this stance denies the blankness of surfaces or the arbitrariness of decisions in favor of suffusion of affect and motivation of means. For a counterpoint, take Sherrie Levine. For her first solo show at the newly opened Metro Pictures Gallery, New York, in 1981, *Sherrie Levine After Walker Evans,* Levine assumed existing artworks a kind of cultural readymade. Visitors to this show saw photographs that Levine had rephotographed from bookplates in an exhibition catalogue gracing the walls as art. As the moniker describes, the now ubiquitous Farm Security Administration images of Depression-era tenant workers and their habitations are “after” Walker Evans, in the dual respects of temporality and homage. Evans’ 1930s photographs returned, reanimated in Levine’s work, despite Levine’s seeming disinterest in their subject matter, much less their prior status as photographic “masterpieces.”

By continuing to paint, even as appropriation—of texts and images—became the precondition for and ideological subtext of the group’s activity, Rollins & K.O.S. insisted upon the intention of selection; the crucible of process; and the clarity of result in conveying the preceding. More recent paintings have abided by the same approach, although, as mentioned before, they frequently have little morphological affinity to the primary and exceedingly literal transcriptions. In the words of Monica Amor, the later, decisively abstract works—based on Ralph Ellison, Shakespeare, H.G. Wells, and Malcolm X—“employ visuality, erasure, and transparency to complicate issues of representation in ways that the early work does not.”

All this to say: the paintings produced since the 1990s are worthy of sustained attention. And yet, what I wish to do in the remaining space is make a case for a model of so-called Amerikan painting, derived from the eponymous series, instead of systematically traversing the intermediary years.

For the *Amerikan* paintings represent not only a sort of group-directed artistic initiation but a platform for future work, which was immediately understood as such upon the paintings’ exhibition. The criticism that graces the installation of the series at the Dia Art Foundation, New York, in 1989 is nothing short of celebratory, a credit perhaps owed to Rollins & K.O.S.’s seizure upon the possibilities of making art out of the contingencies of life lived through a series of inhospitable—if ultimately redeemed—encounters and sites. Here was art that could reflect upon and ultimately transcend its strictures, whether of economic geography or medium. In *Amerika,* the book and

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5 Monica Amor, “Tim Rollins & K.O.S. at the Institute of Contemporary Art,” *Artspace* (December 2009), p. 239.
paintings alike, one is given a salvation narrative of a particularly American type, where change comes from hardship and a utopian promise extends from the ever-malleable frontier internalized as self-actualizing potential (a conceit shared by thinkers ranging from Benjamin Franklin to countercultural denizens of the New Age). We might say then, that Amerikan painting honors the fantasy of metamorphosis of the subject as the basis for reform that extends well beyond. That this inevitably remains at the level of fantasy much of the time—caught on the shores of selfish invocation, loss of will, or abdication of agency—does not obviate a program that seeks its achievement. Instead, it highlights its ongoing necessity.
AFTER TIM DIED, I incessantly watched videos of him conducting workshops and giving his remarkable preaching-and-teaching talks. Quick to coin a potent phrase, Tim’s audacity was intelligent and strategic. “Do you want to make history?” he’d yell at a group of students. Locking eyes with a possible Kids of Survival—or K.O.S.—recruit, he’d solemnly ask, “Do you believe in love at first sight?” The room came alive when Tim spoke.
Don’t take my word for it. See for yourself. He was on fire his entire life.

Tim was uncannily self-possessed—purposeful from an early age. He delivered his first manifesto at five years old, to his parents: “When I grow up I want to be an artist, a teacher, and a scientist. Don’t get in my way.” Tim came from down-home, working-class stock, a big country family—Pentecostal Baptist. Charlotte, his ever-resourceful mother, taught him, “We aren’t poor. We just don’t have much money.”

“Born and raised in the hills of central rural Maine, American pragmatism is built into my DNA,” he’d say. Tim embodied his roots, but he was also an anomaly, “a city kid born in a country body.” In 1975, he left for New York on a Greyhound bus to study Conceptualism at the School of Visual Arts.

Tim was a lifelong instigator, with sincere faith in personal transformation and communal agency. The philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was his compass. He was in dialogue with history, learning from and building on his activist and literary forebears. Tim’s aspiration to “flow into an organic democracy that would produce works of art and anthologies of social and cultural concerns” dated to 1979, when he cofounded Group Material with a circle of friends and collaborators, including me. But Tim’s life mission found him when he started working with special-education students in 1981 and, soon thereafter, became the art teacher at I.S. 52 in the South Bronx. “I was deeply compelled by the situation, the stress of the neighborhood, and the beauty and intelligence of the kids who were supposedly emotionally handicapped and dyslexic,” he said.

With rigor and enthusiasm, Tim threw himself into forging effective educative methods and contexts—learning by doing. “You’ve got forty-five minutes to make the best damn drawing you’ve ever made in your life, and you’re doing it now,” he said on the first day of school. The kids were smitten. “An act of love is to say, I have the highest expectations for you and I will not patronize you in any form; and the kids respond to this, I think, beautifully.”

Tim’s classroom was “structured chaos,” exploding with music, rap, readings, experiments, doing, and making. Students made countless sketches responding to the books Tim or a student would read aloud, connecting literature to “things they know and
feel and relate to in their everyday lives.”

Once, when K.O.S. member Carlos Rivera spontaneously drew on a first edition of George Orwell’s 1984, Tim was angry, until the light went on and he realized the promise embedded in the transgression. The group started drawing and painting on the pages of the books they read together. Whole books, dissected and attached to canvas in grids, became K.O.S.’s enduring form.

“We make art for the ages, but it has to come from where we’re coming from,” he said. Commitments from Tim, his devoted participants, and the local community took root, giving birth to the Art and Knowledge Workshop and then to K.O.S.

“The making of the work is the pedagogy.”

The independent studio that Tim Rollins and K.O.S. established thirty-five years ago has been deepening and maturing ever since. Tim, Angel Abreu, Jorge Abreu, Robert Branch, and Rick Savinon have composed the steady core of K.O.S. for decades, while preserving its fluid nature for temporary collaborations and taking in new members. “I am the conductor of our choir,” Tim said. “Certain people have certain abilities, some are great and haven’t gotten there yet, some have been there for a while and are soloists, but nothing is more beautiful than when we all get together on the same page with a common song.”

When Tim and I were teenagers in Maine, his mother had quipped, “New York is for mutants.” Tim couldn’t wait! He was an inexplicable and brilliant mutant—transgressive, anointed, a shaker and mover. As much as he was a child of Maine, full of Yankee ingenuity, self-reliance, and barn-raising spirit, he didn’t belong there. Tim’s horizon was here, Tim’s destiny was here: in the individuals and communities that would transform him—and that he would transform—through K.O.S., the love of his life.

I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve watched Tim’s “part lecture, part conversation, and part tent-revival meeting” at Rollins College. You witness his presence and mind, the energy he gives to convey the history of K.O.S. He’s on a mission. He’s speaking to you and me. You feel his warmth, religiosity, and soul as he recites what he considered the “greatest definition of art in the English language,” 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.

“Ohh . . . I can say it two hundred times a year, especially when you tell fifth graders and they are just like, ‘What??! Huhh??? Aahh.’ A local habitation and a name.”

Julie Ault is an artist, curator, writer, and editor.

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“Today we make history.” This was the constant refrain from Tim Rollins, as a group of teenagers filed into the South Bronx studio every afternoon after school. The group had named itself Kids of Survival and the lofty idea of making history became ingrained in the fabric of our collective consciousness. Our aim was to change our lives and become immortal through the creation of art.
epidemic hit our neighborhood especially hard, but there was an energy ignited by music, fashion, and the visual arts. The South Bronx was the epicenter of hip-hop and its effect on the community was palpable. Despite the abject appearance of the abandoned buildings and vacant lots, there was a certain defiance born from genuine pride in the community. If you had some sort of special talent, like drawing for instance, you garnered respect, including respect from drug dealers and other rough entities. They left this nerdy kid alone. In ways both physical and metaphorical, the making of art provided me safety.

In 1986, at the age of twelve, I joined Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival. I first met Tim as a seventh grader at the Intermediate School 52 where he was teaching at the time. Tim had only intended to stay at the school for a few weeks. The students had made charcoal drawings on the ceiling of the classroom, and the walls were covered in graffiti. Tim often described the art room as the “Hip-Hop Sistine Chapel.” He was convinced that there was a profound reason he was there.

Timothy William Rollins was born in 1955 in a small town in central Maine. Similar to the South Bronx, Pittsfield was economically downtrodden and its youth struggled against the pitfalls of low expectations. Tim
Although I.S. 52 had a reputation for being one of the worse schools in the worst district in New York City, this wasn’t always the case. One of its graduates was Colin Powell, who attended I.S. 52 in the late forties. Times had changed, though. This was the eighties, and the film *Fort Apache, The Bronx*, starring Paul Newman, contained more truth than fiction. In order to avoid walking the three city blocks to I.S. 52, I took two buses to attend one of the first charter schools in New York. Alas, in the seventh grade, I no longer had a choice and was forced to attend I.S. 52. That first day of school was as chaotic as I had imagined it would be. The halls were littered with paper and the students ran rampant. But as seventh period came around and I walked in to room 318, there was a collective hush. We were scheduled to attend art class and there Tim was at the head of the classroom wearing a red three-piece suit. As a steadfast Marxist, this was his uniform back then. He insisted that we take our seats quickly because there was a lot of work to be done. Tim introduced himself and proceeded to give us all a handout that looked like a test.
this unorthodox, brilliant protocol that made me realize I was where I belonged.

Several months later, Tim met my parents during a parent-teacher conference. He told us about the Art and Knowledge Workshop, an after-school program that he had developed using education as a medium for making art. The next day I arrived at the studio in a nearby community center, which had been secured through a $8,000 NEA grant in 1984. Not quite grasping the immense scope of the project, I had my precious Crayola watercolor paints in hand. The entire studio erupted with laughter as I wielded the silly set. Although I was embarrassed, I wasn’t discouraged. I had a visceral feeling of being home.

At the time, Tim and K.O.S. were preparing for a major exhibition at PS1 called Out of the Studio: Art with Community. This exhibition included John Ahearn and David Hammons, among others. There were large-scale works in progress. One painting consisted of a cacophonous assembly of golden horns based on Franz Kafka’s Amerika. Another was a constellation of wounds reminiscent of planets or airy cosmos, inspired by Grunewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece, painted over the text of Stephan Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage. This spoke to the daily challenges we faced as young folks growing up in the South Bronx.
All of the works were painted on texts carefully assembled in a grid-like fashion. We discussed the books, and all their significant symbology, under Tim’s guidance. These visual manifestations were much more than illustration. We considered them to be conversations with the authors and composers. We followed Ralph Waldo Emerson’s maxim that books are to be used, not just read.

Although the project was an egalitarian form of a Renaissance studio, there was no room for condescension. The high demand for excellence required that all of us, including Tim, check our egos at the door. I would not realize until later the importance of this social experiment that mixed racial identity with cultural and sociogeographical ones. Despite Tim’s Caucasian skin and rural Maine upbringing, the connection we all had was concrete and kindred. The works became a by-product of the relationships forged in the studio. A photo album of sorts, evidence of significant research and life-changing discovery.

The group went on to see astronomical commercial and critical success. We participated in two Whitney Biennials in 1985 and 1991, as well as the Venice Biennale in 1988, and documenta 8, among others. Tim pressed upon us his belief in the importance of first-hand empirical knowledge. Through sales of the work, we were able to travel to the national and international galleries and museums that were exhibiting us, providing life-changing experiences. We endured tremendous peaks and valleys in the nineties and 2000s. Identity politics in the art world and beyond had put us in a place not quite easily understood or compartmentalized. People began to assume the worst of our unique collaboration. There were whispers of mutual exploitation and attempts, intentional or not, to tarnish the extreme sincerity of our project. We persevered. Members of the group came and went organically. A few key members of the group, such as Rick Savinon, Robert Branch, Jorge Abreu, and myself, remained constant fixtures. With Tim’s encouragement, we attended college. Tim pushed us all to engage in our own individual practices as well, which informed the project in turn. The work matured as we did, both physically and mentality. We became Tim’s colleagues, rather than his students. With this shift, the work grew to be more conceptual, appearing as if it was done by one hand, though this was not the case.
In essence we morphed into a think tank, using literature and philosophy as tools for engaging social justice. We began conducting workshops in conjunction with institutional exhibitions outside of our community. We were grown men now, but we were still a family and we would always be Kids of Survival.

In late 2017, Tim suddenly passed away at the age of sixty-two. It shattered my world. Tim was not only my mentor, but my father figure, best friend, and collaborator. This is true for all of the remaining K.O.S. members. Over the last year and a half, we’ve come together often to talk about how we can continue the legacy of a man who gave so much to everyone he encountered, and especially to us. I picture a twelve-year-old Tim, full of promise and ambition, reading Dr. King’s sermon from 1957. “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.” It is with this in mind that Rick, Robert, Jorge, and I will continue the work and keep Tim’s spirit alive through Studio K.O.S.

The exhibition “Tim Rollins and K.O.S.” will be on view at Lehman Maupin until June 15.

Angel Abreu is an artist, writer, and educator. He is a member of Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival (K.O.S.), and teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.


**Present:** Richard Cruz, 18; Nelson Montes, 17; George Garces, 16; Nelson Savinon, 17; Christopher Hernandez, 11; Aracelis Batista, 16; Annette Rosado, 16; Carlos Rivera, 17; Tim Rollins, 33.

**Tim:** We could begin by making stains on the ground of book pages: stains with watercolor that are full of accident, full of chance and anxiety.

**Richard:** But I don’t want the stains to be it; we shouldn’t let the making of the stains take over.

**Tim:** It’s a problem. How do you organize stains?

**Carlos:** Just let it go! Let the stains paint themselves.

**Tim:** Look at the tradition of the subject of St. Anthony’s temptation: Callot, Bosch, Cranach, Bruegel, Schoengauer, Grünewald, Ensor, Redon, Daumier, Ernst. In many ways, the most contemporary and interesting of the group is Ensor’s painting that we studied at the Museum of Modern Art. In this version, even St. Anthony is a monster. You get this strong sense that Ensor is depicting a world in which something has gone very, very wrong. You feel that these aren’t hallucinations, but that they are real. You feel that the elements, the genetic makeup of the world are becoming sick and mutating.

**Chris:** Our temptation reminds me of a car crash.

**Richard:** Let’s talk about The Metamorphosis.

**Tim:** Someone was asking me, what is the meaning of the apple?
CARLOS: I know it means something, because it makes me think of things. But, to be honest, I can't really say.

TIM: Well, it has to do with what fathers often do to their sons, how fathers are threatened by their sons, while, at the same time, the sons always have to pay for the sins and mistakes of their fathers. It's an old theme throughout history.

CARLOS: It's like when your father does something bad to you. It's just like the apple that sticks in the back of Gregor. It doesn't fall out, it stays stuck in your back and soon becomes part of you, like it's stuck in there forever.

ANNETTE: Well, after trying all those different kinds of apples, all those different sizes, then trying all those different places to stick the apple in the text, I'd say we found the perfect apple, the perfect size, the perfect place.

That little apple looks creepy.

I'm glad we didn't use that big, shiny apple that looked like the one the evil queen offered to Snow White in the movie. It's wild to think about all the things that apples mean.

When the apple starts to rot, it starts looking like a heart.

TIM: Or some kind of deep, inner organ.

ANNETTE: The apple could be the father's love, but it became like a weapon.

GEORGE: When I walked in today I didn't know you guys had finished the piece yesterday and when I first saw the piece I couldn't see it was an apple stuck in the text. I knew it was something, but it was weird.

TIM: The way the apple is pressed into the text is good. It's neither inside nor outside of the text. It's in between.

GEORGE: The apple is slowly... going... in...

The position of the apple has meaning, I know. But I can't tell you what it means.

ANNETTE: It's really scary because of the mystery of the position.

TIM: When Arthur Danto was visiting the studio last week, he told me that one of the great riddles of Kafka's story is exactly what size Gregor became when he awoke as an insect? He's not so big that people freak out when they see him, but he's big enough that you know he's not an insect that came out of the garden. He's a profoundly disturbing size. I think he is as big as the text we layed out on canvas.

CARLOS: Like a worm turns into a butterfly and Gregor turns into a roach, and like the book turns into art, and the apple turns into... you know, on and on.

GEORGE: When you look at our metamorphosis since the apple is rotting slowly, as part of the piece you never look at the same painting twice.

RICHARD: What do we do when the apple in the painting rots?

GEORGE: Change it.

TIM: You just replace it with a new one.

GEORGE: Or just leave it in?

TIM: I don't think that works, because the apple will dry and just become a static part of the artwork.

NELSON M.: Why don't we write on the back instructions for the work? The apple could be changed every month. When we did the experiments, the apple rotted in about a month.

TIM: Every month is the cycle of human reproduction.

ANNETTE: Do you think people will think our Black Beauty is a painting of black stripes or will they see it as a book that we put in prison?

GEORGE: I remember when you were painting horses first, then the saddles and straps and whips and stuff that people use to control horses, but all that got boiled down to just black bars.

TIM: I think the real meaning of the book Black Beauty isn't the story about the horse, but the story of how the horse is broken in, how the horse exchanges his freedom for a useful role in society, which means serving the master gladly.

ANNETTE: Those old studies for Black Beauty looked like they came from Texas!

TIM: There's a tradition here, too: Gene Davis, Buren, some of the work of Ross Bleckner and Sherrie Levine; but this is different. It was amazing to finish the idea for our Black Beauty, and then find a few weeks later...

ANNETTE: Oh, yeah... Step... Step...
TIM ROLLINS & K.O.S., METAMORPHOSIS, 1988-89,
APPLE, BOOKPAGES ON LINEN / APFEL, BUCHSEITEN AUF LEINWAND, 36 x 64" / 91,4 x 162,6 cm. (PHOTO: KEN SCHLES)

TIM: Stepanova. She made this great stage set for a play called THE DEATH OF TARELGIN, around 1922 in Russia.

ANNETTE: Yeah, it was this thing called the “meat grinder,” but it really was a prison...

TIM: The painting also suggests that modernism, while intending to celebrate intellectual freedom, is actually a prison, a prison many artists have been taught to love. Do you get this at all?

RICHARD: Yeah.

CARLOS: No.

RICHARD: I was thinking that when you first look at the BLACK BEAUTY, it looks like the text is in jail. But it could be that you’re not outside looking in, but you’re inside looking out. You are the one in jail.

GEORGE: This is the first condensed painting we’ve ever done.

TIM: I’ve been thinking that art is like a student, a student for which most people have the lowest expectations.

CARLOS: I know what you’re saying...

TIM: Let’s pretend that Carlos’ name is Art. What if we assume because of who Art is and where Art comes from and because of what Art has done in the past, that Art is this and that and only capable of certain limited things. That’s like taking this great potential, this possibility, locking it in prison and throwing away the key. I love what we do with our project. We drive people crazy because they can’t figure out what it is. Is it social work? Is it a school? Is it an art project? Is it a fraud? Is it socialism? Is it rehabilitation for juvenile delinquents?

RICHARD: All and none of the above!

TIM: Oh, guess what? We found the X-MEN # 17 issues!
GEORGE: Great!
TIM: So now we can proceed with the works of pages from old X-men comics mounted on linen.
RICHARD: Do you think people will get them?
GEORGE: Not everybody knows that the X-men were a bunch of mutant teenagers that made their own school.
TIM: The X-men didn’t exactly fit in with the program of the public schools.
GEORGE: Right. And they started their own school led by another mutant called Professor X.
RICHARD: Sounds like Malcolm X…
GEORGE: … and Professor X is kind of like Tim because he can read minds and can tell when you’re lying and stuff… (Laughter) The X-men are rejects because they’re different; they each have special powers that society can’t understand how to use.
TIM: I was addicted to X-men comics when I was your age, around 1966 to 1969. I learned how to draw through these books. Those comics were my literature, my life. Do you know what was happening in the country at the time of these early X-men comics?
The Vietnam War.
RICHARD: Here’s another question: true or false? The old X-men comics are better than the new ones coming out today.
EVERYONE: True!
TIM: I agree. It was like a holocaust in every issue, with a world beginning and ending within fifteen pages of pictures and text.
GEORGE: Yeah, the battles were great! Maybe it’s because a lot was happening out on the streets in the sixties. Now, the stories go on forever, like the comic book companies just want you to keep on buying the series.
TIM: Do you consider those early comics great literature?
RICHARD: Yes. The art wasn’t so innovative as now, but the stories were a lot better.
TIM: I don’t know if I have the nerve to go through with our plan.
GEORGE: Just do it!
TIM: Well, the idea of just presenting the pages from these old comic books as art, as finished, complete works, was intriguing. But when we actually laid out the pages, the way the ensemble looked, and all those old emotions welling up – I can’t trust myself. I’m too sentimental about the X-men.
NELSON M.: No, when we laid out those pages together on the floor, they looked good. Real good.
TIM: And now they are our art.
RICHARD: The X-men comics always were art, it’s just that people don’t recognize them as such.
TIM: I’ve been thinking how our X-men works compare with Pop Art, with Roy Lichtenstein’s practice of using comic-book motifs but representing them in the conventions of fine art: enlarged, on canvas, made in paint, generalized.
RICHARD: I think people like Warhol and Lichtenstein didn’t have to make comic images in canvas and paint to make them art, because the comics are art already.
TIM: The X-MEN # 17 isn’t a painting; it isn’t a drawing or a print; it really isn’t even a readymade, because it is something that was found, but also something that was already art. Our X-MEN is an artwork that has changed its social and economic class.
CARLOS: From low to high…
RICHARD: A lot of our new work seem to be about social rejection – like the WINTERREISE guy who gets rejected by his girl and so he decides to just wander out of the town through the snow and the cold. As he walks, the snow falls around him, and he wanders through his memories and he feels worse and worse and worse.
CARLOS: The girl dumped the guy for another guy with money and she made the Winterreise guy feel like he was nothing.
TIM: Did you ever wonder what the guy does for a living?
GEORGE: Artist…
TIM: Yeah, a poet, artist – one of those creative, sensitive guys who can’t make money and always get dumped by girls.
GEORGE: And he walks towards his death, a white death.
RICHARD: The WINTERREISE is a cycle. There are always moments in life when things seem hopeless.
Then you see someone like the hurdy-gurdy man “Der Leiermann,” and you can relate to someone who can survive the worst.

**Tim:** Why did Schubert write this song cycle?

**Nelson M.:** I think it was because he went through a similar situation with his girl. I think it was real personal.

**Annette:** I think it was something bigger. I think Schubert is saying that everybody must travel to that point in their life where they fell in love, to find real love once again.

**Tim:** A lot of people think that the *Winterreise* is about the “winter’s journey” that is the fate of every artist. But I think it isn’t just about artists, it’s about everybody.

**Richard:** It’s about everybody.

**Tim:** Do you believe that the artist is this tortured, suffering soul who inevitably walks towards a bitter death or... I mean, look at Schubert’s condition when he wrote the *Winterreise*. The guy was sick with syphilis, he was dirt poor, not recognized when he wrote this song cycle. Then look at the way we make work today!

**George:** Sure it’s different, but in a lot of ways it’s the same. We may be known, but we’re really known only to people who know about art. Art is alienated nowadays. The artist is still alienated, even though he might be rich.

**Tim:** Do you all feel like a Schubert, an outsider?

**Carlos:** Yup!

**Richard:** Yes.

**Carlos:** We’re like a band of outsiders.

**Tim:** Maybe all together we make a somewhat normal person.

**Richard:** I like the way in our *Winterreise* we make the audience take a winter journey of its own.

**Nelson M.:** The painting makes you follow the steps of the character.

**Richard:** The painting gets whiter and whiter and whiter...

**Nelson S.:** ... because the dying is starting until you reach the final panel which is completely white.

**Carlos:** The music vanishes.

**Tim:** Do you think Schubert’s music is dead? Be honest.

**Carlos:** Well yes.

**Richard:** Yes. Really, you have to know someone to get to hear this music. I mean, in the Bronx, not too many people listen to Schubert.

**Tim:** Look, in Manhattan, in the U.S., in the world, I don’t think that many people listen to Schubert.

**Nelson M.:** When we first heard it, remember? — it was so boring. We all made fun of it. Knowing the words in English helped a little.

**Tim:** I had never heard this music before this project began last year. Actually, I had read a newspaper review of a new recording of the *Winterreise* and it was through that description of the theme that I thought, “Hmmm... it sounds like something we could all relate to.” It sounded like a perfect representation of the troubles of adolescence. I was immediately reminded of those long, lonely walks I would take through the snowdrifts in my home town in Maine.

**Annette:** We spend a lot of our time bringing the dead to life: dead books, dead music, dead art.

**Nelson M.:** “Muth” (Courage) is my favorite song of the *Winterreise*. It’s like I need courage for myself in my life, courage to stand up for my rights. I want more courage.

**Annette:** I like “The Crow.” It’s just like real life in the city, where even if you’re walking alone, it’s like there is this thing following you.

**Tim:** Yeah, that crow was following him... why?

**Annette:** Following him to his death. Just waiting.

**Richard:** Death is always following you, but this is just a symbol for something you can survive. I like Wassermilch (Winter Flood). It’s talking about the feeling of flooding in the past, in problems, in your tears, with the possibility of drowning.

**Nelson S.:** I like “Der Leiermann” because, well, it’s a little like “Courage.” Here is this guy at the end of his rope and he meets the hurdy-gurdy dude, this weirdo playing his hurdy-gurdy over and over with no one around who wants to listen. He’s standing in the snow barefoot with this empty tin cup, but still, he’s living. His existence offers hope. He doesn’t care what other people think about him.
GEORGE: Like those borrachos (winos) on the corner who seem to live forever!

CARLOS: Yeah, it’s true! They hardly eat, they live on the street all bummed up, but they last longer than you do! For years!

RICHARD: I also like the Leiermann song because it doesn’t finish the Winterreise. It’s not like a period to the story. It makes you think about what could happen.

TIM: I love the “Nebensonnen,” where he’s close to death and sees three suns in the sky. You have no idea what the meaning of this apparition is.

NELSON S.: Maybe one of the suns is his girlfriend, and another is his life.

NELSON M.: And the other one is Hope.

TIM: Schubert put that song in just to make people crazy.

NELSON M.: “Hmnnmm, let me stick three suns in here…” (Laughter)

RICHARD: I’m glad we’re making the colossal painting of Botha on the pages of the book Animal Farm repeating over and over.

NELSON M.: Botha as a guard dog.

TIM: As we speak, Botha’s on his last legs. His own party has been trying to kick him out, but he has been refusing to resign. This week he finally gave up.

GEORGE: This is a big one: twelve by eighteen feet.

NELSON S.: I’ve noticed that some artists seem to think that the bigger the painting the better…

CARLOS: And they will make much money for it.

TIM: Painting-by-the-pound!

CARLOS: Our Botha needs to be big, because he’s over as a leader maybe, but the system behind him is still big like a monster, and he is still like a great, big dog, you know?

RICHARD: It’s refreshing to make a painting that we know will probably not sell. It’s a great freedom.

TIM: Ironically, we can do paintings like this because we can afford it. Due to the income we’ve made from the less difficult works.

CARLOS: It’s shocking to see Botha this big.

TIM: It’s a giant goodbye party for him!! (Laughter)

CARLOS: The painting’s like a newspaper. It reports what’s going on with South Africa now, but I think it will still have meaning for the future.

TIM: Is there any unity in our work?

GEORGE: I think all the pieces look different.

TIM: But what about a meaning or mood that connects all this new work?

RICHARD: Well, I know it’s not a happy mood!

GEORGE: When we started, it was real important to make beautiful things like the golden horns in the Amerika paintings, the Scarlet Letter works, but these new things don’t get lost in beauty.

RICHARD: We’re not making the paintings that people want us to.

NELSON M.: We can’t be making those golden horns forever!

TIM: We could be millionaires! (Laughter)

NELSON M.: The way I see it, the older work was more about freedom. The new work is about being trapped.

NELSON S.: Sometimes I feel this about the neighborhood, with all the crack, and senseless violence and stuff.

RICHARD: It’s not unbearable, but everything is always tense.

TIM: Ever watch the evening news?

NELSON S.: It gives you nightmares.

TIM: Almost every report is about corruption, or children found dead in garbage cans.

CHRIS: And acid, oil, burning ships, and cancer fruits.

RICHARD: God, he’s only eleven and he pays more attention to this shit than I do!

GEORGE: It’s like America is becoming one big preview for Nightmare on Elm Street.

TIM: And here we are making art. Why don’t we just give up?

NELSON M.: Because we can’t.
Scan the extant writing on Tim Rollins & K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) and a few things become clear. For one, biography predominates—and for good reason, given the group’s unconventional genesis in a severely underfunded public school in New York City’s South Bronx in the early 1980s. Thisarrant fact of social disadvantage, compounded with the functional illiteracy of many of these students when Rollins first met them, leads to another predictable treatment: one that, in its more generous manifestations, underscores the precocity of the learning disabled, dyslexic, and handicapped artists, and elsewhere admits near caricatural incredulity as to their wherewithal and ability to execute works of aesthetic consequence. In all cases, Rollins & K.O.S.’s rise to prominence within the international art world allows for, even solicits, a Horatio Alger-like narrative of ascent to middle-class respectability in an age of wanton pluralism. Which is also to suggest that these attempts to manage Rollins & K.O.S.’s efforts owe much to the dictates of an identity politics for which they have long been cast as a cipher.

To be sure, the mode of pedagogy enacted by Rollins matters, as does the specificity of the work it generates (and by whom). I would be the last person to argue for a formalism that ignores the particular circumstances of its objects, as what follows should make clear. And yet, my distinction is that knowledge of the extraordinary conditions of Rollins & K.O.S.’s production has tended to occlude the very simple point that they have nearly exclusively made paintings. Big, unapologetic paintings based on a range of seminal texts, which refer not—or not only—to the demands of locality and subjective responses to them, but petition besides an appeal to a common sense rooted in the canon (a Reagan-era, postmodern shibboleth, if there ever were one) from which they were ostensibly excluded as “at risk” minorities in the American ghetto.

The mere adoption of painting here should give pause. A material designation with determined institutional and philosophical ramifications in the decade in which Rollins & K.O.S.’s work got underway, painting was omnipresent but critically disavowed. In a canvass-flooded moment heralding a regressive return to Neo-Expressionist figuration, incisive, radical work was to be made elsewhere, and by other means, whether conceptually dematerialized or forthrightly material (here, photography triumphed alongside agitprop, which took photographic imagery as its basis). Painting was the gold standard, the aspirational mediumistic analogue for the literary masterworks that became Rollins & K.O.S.’s compositions’ very real grounds: pages glued on fabric form the paintings’ supports—which was also the source of its unredeemed conservatism. That Rollins & K.O.S.’s project was painting-based must have seemed an act of cognitive dissonance. Better to pretend it did not exist; better to focus on the group’s agreeable politics.

Yet, the ways in which Rollins & K.O.S. rendered painting a sustained social and collaborative practice through the classroom at I.S. 52, the Art and Knowledge Workshop, and the studios beyond were inextricable from their politics. In privileging painting, they eschewed the most dumbly obvious, expected forms of artistic articulation (e.g., graffiti or community center art) given their respective stations. They instead maintained that painting’s seeming incompatibility with critique—even activism—released a space for its continued viability, and on its own terms. So that their engagement with the medium was, to use the language supplied by the present context, a key transfiguration of it.
Amerikan Painting

Suzanne Hudson
This began early on, with Rollins’ attempt to redefine cultural participation through his radical pedagogy. Responding to his students’ needs, Rollins began the practice of reading aloud as the students drafted sketches conjured by the books. Steeped in the twin virtues of Emersonian self-reliance and Deweyan pragmatism, which advocated for the precedence of action (as the agent of learning and requirement for theorization) and also claimed education as a democratic tool, Rollins set to work. Indeed, he set to work by getting the students set to work in accordance with Dewey’s transformative ideas of learning by doing, in which there exists an “organic relation of theory and practice,” whereby one learns “not simply [by] doing things, but [by] getting also the idea of what he does; getting from the start some intellectual conception that enters into his practice and enriches it; while every idea finds, directly or indirectly, some application in experience and has some effect upon life.”

Crucial in this experiment was Rollins’ position that books imply use—that they are things in the world to be activated by one’s interaction with them. Lest this be understood as a solipsistic endeavor, centered on the individual, for Rollins it implied the basis for agonistic dialogue among the members of his group, one that generated a curriculum for art making as a collective enterprise. As Rollins put it early on, in the guide to The Inferno (After Dante Alighieri), 1983-1984, cited here at some length:

The Method: I am an artist who works as a regular schoolteacher in a public junior high school. In my studio I work with about 70 adolescents who’ve been categorized as learning-disabled or emotionally handicapped. The kids and I have been making art together for about three years now ...

Lately we’ve been painting on books. Our method works something like this: I select a piece of literature that I believe speaks to issues the kids might relate to and be interested in. I read with the kids, defining unfamiliar vocabulary or paraphrasing while I go along. While I read, many of the kids “jam”—that’s what we call making literally hundreds of small drawings. The drawings do not illustrate what is being read; the object is to relate the content of the book to what we know, feel or sense in our everyday lives. After we make stacks of drawings, we begin to edit, reducing the number of pictures to a small number of images that seem the most true and exciting... In this way the book becomes a literal and metaphorical foundation for our new (our own) form and content and method. The book is transformed from something we’re supposed to consume into an artwork with immediate, relevant, and concrete social uses for us today.

The first paintings take their cues from comic books, horror films, and cartoons, as well as traditional paintings (often allegorical or historical). Rollins was always forthcoming about the voracious and habitually incompatible range of sources he and K.O.S. assimilate in the finished pieces, as his Dante guide makes clear. (In it, he reveals what the group studied—from Delacroix’s The Bank of Dante to Jack Kirby’s Captain Victory series—to save the art historian bent on iconographical analysis the task of source-hunting.)

Striking in these initial efforts though is the extent to which Rollins & K.O.S. equated the

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Tim Rollins & K.O.S.
The Frogs—Fairmount III (After Aristophanes), 1998

Tim Rollins & K.O.S.
Amerika VI (After Franz Kafka), 1986–1987
Tim Rollins & K.O.S.
Study for Amerika VII (After Franz Kafka), 1987

Tim Rollins & K.O.S.
Amerika—Everyone is Welcome! (After Franz Kafka), 2002
choice of painting with a didactic representational style. Looking now at Frankenstein (After Mary Shelley), 1983, and Dracula (After Bram Stoker), 1983, the narrative-oriented imagism abetted by clear figure outlines, legible symbols (a clenched fist, a gun, a coffin), and bold, highly-keyed colors read more descriptively than Rollins’ above statement advises would have been welcome. However close these tread to the clichéd representations of abjection Rollins & K.O.S. would shortly denounce, Frankenstein and Dracula nevertheless importantly evidence a desire for meaningful, deeply personal communication. In Frankenstein, for example, the werewolf is a self-portrait of K.O.S. member Jose Padilla—but a single occurrence of what James Romaine would characterize as "work that visually manifested their self-perception, as well as their recognition of the perception of others, of their own ‘monstrosity.’"2

Such paintings also permit a fundamental rethinking of the easel-painting form (ever the portable and private bourgeois trophy) as something akin to the revolutionary public mural, replete with explicit municipal objectives born of a communitarian ethos. Even smaller scale works, such as Angry Father and Mother, 1982–1984, a page-sized watercolor with two black-rimmed faces crying vertical rivulets of tears, betrays its diminutive dimensions in its call to civic accounting as one of a number of images painted on a sheet of anti-abortion legislation. Subsequent works from the early 1980s transition away from comparable acts of illustration. Even as they forgo didactic pointing to the source and any pictorial consequence of their meaning they still retain a comparably vital sense of sincerity, anger, and empathy—qualities far from disallowed by abstraction, as Rollins & K.O.S. intuited and would exploit in a host of later, strikingly non-figurative efforts: from the slow obscuring of surface by successive layers of white paint in the sequence of acrylics comprising the Winterreise (Songs XX–XXIV) (After Franz Schubert), 1988, to Letter from Birmingham Jail No. 2 (After the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), 2008, where prison bars (evenly spaced, black vertical lines) effect an optical and conceptual moiré.

The Amerika paintings (after Franz Kafka’s posthumously published novel of the same name) were the first to augur a change of course. A golden copse of tangled instruments fills the vastness of the underlying book-page grid, in what critic Roberta Smith described as images of “radiant grillwork, a golden gate of overlapping, intertwining trumpets, each more eccentric, more wildly mutated and suggestive than its neighbor.”3 Taken from the unfinished manuscript’s rousing last chapter, in which the protagonist (buffeted by a series of misfortunes after arriving in the United States, and chastened in due course by his run-ins with various figures of authority) decamps to Oklahoma, to a commune where everyone is welcome and is also an artist. He is there welcomed into a stadium by angels with long horns—the horns that, along with footage of jazz legends and images of noisemaking culled from Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who, became the inspiration for those in the suite of paintings. Thus did Rollins & K.O.S. arrive at potent icons of eccentric heterogeneity unified in their discrete demands for the acknowledgment of presence.

This agenda notwithstanding, it is worth remarking upon the caesura and reconstitution that happened in the wake of K.O.S. member Christopher Hernandez’s murder in 1993, when he was just 15. After the group’s eviction from a studio (these were the insolvent years, post-market-crash), Jorge Abreu found Hernandez’s notebook, filled

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with drawings inspired by Aristophanes’ comedies: 
The Frogs, The Birds, and The Clouds. Rollins & K.O.S. used these musings to create arresting paintings based on the story of Dionysus. (Dionysus attempted to bring the poet Euripides back from the dead, and heard the cries of frogs on his journey.) Far from the only instance of paintings responding to local affairs—David Deitcher, for one, makes a compelling argument for the gravity of many 1980s panels pockmarked with “wounds” in relation to AIDS (including Amerika VII, 1986–1987, with its representation of the morphology of HIV taken from a contemporary graphic in The New York Times Science Times)—it remains notable for its insights into the valences of meaning supplied by the images and texts appropriated, and at decisive times.

The Aristophanes items foreground not only the literary sources, but also the reasons for their applicability for Rollins & K.O.S.; in short, the choice of text matters, from Dracula to Amerika. Thought against certain strains of period discourse that professed appropriation as potent insofar as one attended to the structure of its operations above the content of its images, this stance denies the blankness of surfaces or the arbitrariness of decisions in favor of suffusion of affect and motivation of means. For a counterpoint, take Sherrie Levine. For her first solo show at the newly opened Metro Pictures Gallery, New York, in 1981, Sherrie Levine After Walker Evans, Levine assumed existing artworks a kind of cultural ready-made. Visitors to this show saw photographs that Levine had rephotographed from bookplates in an exhibition catalogue gracing the walls as art. As the moniker describes, the now ubiquitous Farm Security Administration images of Depression-era tenant workers and their habitations are “after” Walker Evans, in the dual respects of temporality and homage. Evans’ 1930s photographs returned, reanimated in Levine’s work, despite Levine’s seeming disinterest in their subject matter, much less their prior status as photographic “masterpieces.”

By continuing to paint, even as appropriation of texts and images—became the precondition for and ideological subtext of the group’s activity, Rollins & K.O.S. insisted upon the intention of selection; the crucible of process; and the clarity of result in conveying the preceding. More recent paintings have abided by the same approach, although, as mentioned before, they frequently have little morphological affinity to the primary and exceedingly literal transcriptions. In the words of Monica Amor, the later, decisively abstract works—based on Ralph Ellison, Shakespeare, H.G. Wells, and Malcolm X—employ visibility, erasure, and transparency to complicate issues of representation in ways that the early work does not. All this to say: the paintings produced since the 1990s are worthy of sustained attention. And yet, what I wish to do in the remaining space is make a case for a model of so-called Amerikan painting, derived from the eponymous series, instead of systematically traversing the intermediary years. For the Amerikan paintings represent not only a sort of group-directed artistic initiation but a platform for future work, which was immediately understood as such upon the paintings’ exhibition. The criticism that graces the installation of the series at the Dia Art Foundation, New York, in 1989 is nothing short of celebratory, a credit perhaps owed to Rollins & K.O.S.’s seizure upon the possibilities of making art out of the contingencies of life lived through a series of inhospitable—if ultimately redeemed—encounters and sites. Here was art that could reflect upon and ultimately transcend its strictures, whether of economic geography or medium. In Amerika, the book and

5 Monica Amor, "Tim Rollins & K.O.S. at the Institute of Contemporary Art," Artforum (December 2009), p. 239.
paintings alike, one is given a salvation narrative of a particularly American type, where change comes from hardship and a utopian promise extends from the ever-malleable frontier internalized as self-actualizing potential (a conceit shared by thinkers ranging from Benjamin Franklin to countercultural denizens of the New Age). We might say then, that Amerikan painting honors the fantasy of metamorphosis of the subject as the basis for reform that extends well beyond. That this inevitably remains at the level of fantasy much of the time—caught on the shores of selfish involution, loss of will, or abdication of agency—does not obviate a program that seeks its achievement. Instead, it highlights its ongoing necessity.
THE WONDER YEARS

Three young men in ties and jackets greeted me in the galleries of the Dia Center for the Arts in the fall of 1989. They shook my hand, looked me in the eye, and calmly and assertively talked about their work, thirteen paintings from a series inspired by Franz Kafka’s *Amerika* and a piece based on Franz Schubert’s *Winterreise*. They seemed a little nervous and looked as if they might have borrowed their jackets from older relatives or their teacher, Tim Rollins. But they struck me as poised and articulate, smart and clear as they led me through the cool white galleries hung with works that *The New York Times*’s art critic Roberta Smith would refer to as “precocious masterpieces.”²

A documentary film made about the group and shot mostly in the K.O.S. studio offers a different view.¹ The kids appear equally aware of their self-presentation, but in a way more typical of teenagers. The guys rag on each other and goof in front of the camera. We see their street smarts and sense of humor. We also see their tenuous connection to the education system. Carlos skips school and lies to Tim about it. Tim sees right through him and reminds him that he’s twenty years old and has to graduate before twenty-one or the system will kick him out. The newest member of the group, Victor, is repeating ninth grade for the third time. He’s a wisecracking goofball who rarely shows up for school and, when he does, usually just walks the halls. When I interviewed Tim for this essay, he told me that the guys back then acted like “knuckleheads.” In the film I see exactly what he means. Despite having sold their art work to museums and collectors all over the world, they blithely disregard institutional authority. Shrewd but uncooperative, they appear to have little faith in the value of schooling.

Even if schoolwork had been their priority, their school did not foster success. The art room where Tim started working with the kids in the early 1980s had few supplies, a sink that barely worked, and windows that didn’t open, covered with plywood, which in turn was covered with graffiti. Located in the poorest congressional district in the country, the school suffered the highest incidence of violence against teachers. And violence was rampant in the students’ lives. According to Rick, “It’s so hard every day just to survive in the Bronx. You know, all the time your friend’s getting shot or you’re with your friend—you’re not even associated with him—and you get shot. And then there’s all these temptations…. I can make two thousand a week just by pressing a little button advising someone upstairs that the cops are coming.”³

For Rick, Victor, Carlos, and the others, the American truism that education paves a pathway to success was a banal cliché. Even their most committed teachers saw little hope for their students, except maybe the occasional “breakthrough.” As educational theorist Peter McLaren has written:

We claim to live in a meritocracy where social salvation is supposedly achieved through initiative, regardless of sex, religion or family background. That all sounds fine on the surface, but in reality, it’s simply hollow rhetoric. Research has shown that one of the greatest predictors of academic success is socio-economic status. In other words, while we profess to believe in equal opportunity for rich and poor alike, the fact remains that an individual’s social class and race at birth have a greater influence on social class later in life than do any other factors—including intelligence and merit.⁶

How do we reconcile these contradictory images of Tim Rollins and K.O.S., the poised young artists and the doomed “inner city” youths? How did Tim and his students navigate back and forth across the class barriers that separated the South Bronx from the elite echelons of the art world? How did they develop and maintain an authentic voice without being romanticized or patronized as “outsiders”? How did they “win” and actually change the rules of the system of which they became a part?

Tim’s process as an educator was rooted in the critical philosophies of educational theorists Paulo Freire, Robert Coles, and John Dewey. Freire’s work in literacy education in Latin America was particularly relevant, modeling and promoting the idea that all people have the potential to act upon and transform their world in order to move toward new possibilities and fulfillment in their lives. According to Freire, there is no such thing as neutral education. What he calls dehumanizing education is designed to maintain the status quo and help the privileged retain their status; it not only keeps the world as it is, but also trains oppressed groups to accept the world as it is. Liberator
education, however, is a transformative process that develops critical consciousness and enables learners to recognize connections between their individual problems and the social contexts in which these problems are produced. For both Freire and Rollins, education has the potential to provoke recognition of the world, not as a 'given' world, but as a world dynamically in the making.28

The image of the South Bronx of the late 1970s and early 1980s is infamously etched in popular memory as an inversion of the American dream. Once a middle-class enclave, the area had been disrupted by the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway in 1963, which cut through the community and dispersed many of its residents. The nearness of apartment buildings to the expressway led to a drop in real estate values. Rent control laws that limited landlords' revenues provided further disincentives to maintain the buildings. In the 1970s, fires became commonplace, some the accidental result of decaying electrical systems, but many set by landlords scrambling to salvage some of their investment through insurance payments. This, combined with white flight, led to a fifty-seven percent drop in the South Bronx's population from 1970 to 1980.29 The resulting landscape has often been compared to Beirut in the late 1970s or Dresden after World War II, a bomb-out no man's land. The government absurdly attempted to brighten the situation by applying decals of potted flowers to windows sealed up with cinder blocks.30

The work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. grew out of members' own experiences, so it is not surprising that their earliest paintings took inspiration from the gothic horror novels Frankenstein and Dracula, two stories that investigate existence hovering between life and death. The group made its first publicly exhibited sculptures from found bricks, salvaged from the ubiquitous rubble that littered their neighborhood and painted to look like the flaming buildings from which they had come.31 Each brick became a synecdoche of a larger decaying ruin.

Tim himself grew up in the rural community of Pittsfield, Maine, and attended the University of Maine at Augusta for two years before coming to New York. An avid art student and reader, after devouring the essay "Art After Philosophy" by Joseph Kosuth, he tracked down the author and enrolled in the School of Visual Arts to study under him. To earn money, Rollins worked at the SVA visual arts library and was then hired by Kosuth to organize the artist's own library of five thousand volumes. Kosuth would often ask him to stay for dinner and meet the art luminaries who came to visit. Rollins became a participant/observer in Kosuth's circle of elite theoreticians and artists. "That was my education," says Rollins. These experiences account not only for his bond with the printed word, but also, in part, for his belief that anybody can enter the art system.

After completing his BFA at the School of Visual Arts he entered the graduate program of the School of Education at New York University. At NYU he studied Marxist philosophy with political theorist Bertell Ollman and film historian Jay Leyda. He sat in on classes with art historians Kirk Varnedoe, John Pope Hennessy, and Robert Rosenblum. He listened to lectures by literary theorist Roland Barthes and philosophers Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Julia Kristeva.

In 1981, Rollins came to I.S. 52 in the South Bronx after discovering that he had a gift for working with kids written off by the system as emotionally disabled, intellectually handicapped, or just plain uneducable. During his last year at NYU he student-taught at P.S. 3, an elementary school in the West Village founded in 1971 by parents looking for an educational alternative, dedicated to student-centered teaching methods and open classrooms. Tim's placement with a special education group proved a pivotal experience. He electrified the students and amazed the teachers with his charismatic command of attention in the classroom and a pragmatism that led him to overcome obstacles with creative solutions that defied convention. He had found his milieu.

Rollins never finished his MA, but with his BFA became one of several instructors in a program called Learning to Read Through the Arts. From 1980 to 1982 he traveled to schools throughout New York City, lugging art supplies and slide projectors for short-term stints as a visiting artist/teacher. On the day in 1981 that he arrived at I.S. 52, assigned to a special needs class, he was surprised, entertained, and horrified to find that the students had managed to write graffiti on the ceiling of the art room. They had devised an ingenious method of taping charcoal to the end of the long pole meant for operating the windows, a technique that reminded Tim of the one used by the bedridden Henri Matisse at the end of his life. Yes, it was vandalism, but executed with imagination and skill.

To that first class Tim brought a ream of copier paper and some nice drawing pencils. Deviating from the program's official lesson plan, he put Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa on his boom box, slammed down the stack of paper, and said, "You've got forty-five minutes to make the best damn drawing you've ever made in your life and you're doing it now." The students rose to the challenge.

Rollins's ability to establish order and instill discipline in students deemed beyond reach was quickly recognized by I.S. 52's Crisis Intervention teacher Arthur Albert. He spoke to principal George Gallego, who within days hired Rollins on a permanent basis. He accepted the offer but only with conditions: Art would become a major subject, and Tim would see the kids every day. He would offer a multidisciplinary curriculum that used art as a means to knowledge and included reading, writing, literature, art history, and music. "I felt it was unethical," he says, "to make art when they couldn't even spell the word art." Each project would generate its own curriculum. For instance, one student's desire to make a painting of the universe led to the
reading of Jules Verne’s From the Earth to the Moon, the study of astronomy, and an introduction to Charles and Ray Eames’s classic film, Powers of Ten.

Child psychiatrist Robert Coles provided inspiration for using art within a holistic vision of human development. In the 1960s and 70s Coles wrote the great series of books Children of Crisis, which chronicled and analyzed children’s political and moral lives in situations of change and stress. A white man from New England, Coles studied the effects of poverty, privilege, and racism on children of all races in the United States, using drawing as a means to help them express the truth about their lives, especially when they could not express it verbally. According to Coles, art is a good medium for those who find it easier to “do” than to “talk.”12 Coles’s “children of crisis” were Tim’s “kids of survival.”

The later work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. was made with the finest archival materials, but they made their early works using whatever they could find at little or no cost, including the sheet metal that had fallen off the covered windows of vacant buildings. As the group began to jell, Tim noticed that even the kids who couldn’t read could memorize every word and grunt of a hip hop song. Tim began to create homemade books on tape to animate their art projects. He intuitively that literary classics would resonate with his students’ depth of experience, their frequent encounters with danger and death, and their vitality. When Tim made these recordings, he focused on inspirational passages. In class he’d show the students the book, play the tape or read aloud, and ask them to draw whatever came into their minds. Eventually, the kids started looking at the books themselves, taking them home, and soon, reading aloud to each other.13 Tim put his students into dialogue with the greats, but the group never worked with a book that Tim knew well. This allowed for reciprocity in the student/teacher relationship and kept the creative process open, since Tim deciphered the texts as a member of the group.

The story of the first book-page works presents an object lesson in the pragmatic creativity that marks K.O.S.’s work. Tim had always loved books, and his love only increased when he worked in the libraries at SVA and Kosuth’s studio. One day he brought a first edition of George Orwell’s 1984 to school to share with the students. Oblivious to its value, one of the kids started drawing on its pages. After Tim recovered from his initial fury, the group realized that this transgression was actually a breakthrough. They discovered that painting on book pages offered an ideal methodology for executing their artistic vision, complete with all of its metaphorical associations with knowledge, authority, voice, and cultural consumption as a form of cultural production. Their subsequent paintings would each embody an intertextual relationship between a canonical cultural object and its pragmatic use in understanding and re-envisioning the present.

The earliest pieces almost obliterate the text with paint, using the book pages more as inspiration and canvas than as communicative or signifying element in the composition. In the painting Frankenstein (after Mary Shelley) (1983), one has to look hard to see the text and, even then, it’s difficult to read the words. This technique suggests the possible influence of Jasper Johns’s paintings of flags and targets, made with encaustic on newspaper and similarly hard to read. But there is a lack of precision in the group’s aesthetic choices. For example, the painting includes pages from both Mary Shelley’s classic novel and Bram Stoker’s Dracula (the subject of another work). The potential of the text as canvas is only partially realized. Moreover, the figures in the work are stylized and cartoon-like, qualities typical of the work of talented kids who haven’t had much training.

Later works integrate the book pages as significant visual and conceptual elements, with Winterreise (after Franz Schubert) (1988–89) standing as one of their aesthetic triumphs. In this work the visual relationship between the paint and the text—in this case a musical score—is rendered in exquisite equilibrium. The paintings create an analogue to the song cycle’s narrative, in which a young poet faces rejection by his beloved and finds his sorrow mirrored in the inexorable onset of winter. Winterreise (after Franz Schubert) is a series of twelve canvases covered with sheet music, each corresponding to one of twelve songs. The canvases are painted edge to edge with mixtures of white paint and tiny flakes of mica. The first canvas covers the score with a thin translucent layer that leaves the notes almost perfectly visible. In each subsequent canvas, the paint layer grows more and more opaque, until, in the last two canvases, the dense coating completely

HYPOCENTER SOUTH BRONX, 1982 (detail)
Tempera on paper
18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist
whites out the music. The penultimate canvas renders the entire text illegible; the final canvas takes this heaviness even one step further into an impenetrable field of blinding whiteness.\footnote{14}

One vital aspect of the humanizing educational process that Tim advanced consisted of countering dominant social expectations regarding students like his through the public exhibition of their art. While still working with Learning to Read Through the Arts, Tim had exhibited works that a group of his students made in response to the Atlanta child murders of 1979–1981. The drawings were shown in an exhibition organized by Group Material\footnote{15} and cited in a review by critic Lucy Lippard in _The Village Voice_. Group Material’s philosophy of cultural democracy and exhibition practice as a form of public dialogue made possible the acceptance of Rollins’s students’ work as legitimate artistic expression in a public setting, not dismissed or patronized as “children’s art.”

At J.S. 52 Tim continued to release his students’ work into the art system. In 1983 the kids sold their burning bricks for $5 apiece at Colab’s A More Store, a temporary shop that offered artists’ multiples during the Christmas holiday season. Shortly thereafter Rollins received a call from art dealer Ronald Feldman about a show called _The Atomic Salon_, organized with _The Village Voice_ and its art critic Carrie Rickey to coincide with a nuclear disarmament demonstration in New York City. Feldman wanted suggestions for young artists to include in the show.\footnote{16} Tim surprised the dealer by suggesting his own students, then thirteen and fourteen years old. To Rollins’s own surprise, Feldman agreed. The group submitted _Hypocenter: South Bronx_, premised on the idea that the hypocenter of a nuclear blast would fall at Prospect Avenue, the subway stop nearest their school. The piece consisted of nineteen drawings hung on the wall in the shape of a mushroom cloud, and depicting targets, war planes, burning bodies, and charred flesh. Most of the reviews cited the work as among the most powerful in the show.

Other early pieces, the Frankenstein and Dracula paintings, shown at Brooke Alexander and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, celebrated abjection. This “expressionist” phase would quickly give way to their first major series to receive widespread acclaim, the _Amerika_ paintings. _Amerika I (After Franz Kafka)_ appeared in the 1985 group show _Social Studies_ at Barbara Gladstone, along with works by Eric Fischl, Jenny Holzer, Mike Glier, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, and others. The painting sold to Chase Manhattan Bank for $5000 and the group went pro.

The alternative arts movement of the 1970s and the proliferation of collaborative exhibition practices in the 1980s created a context for recognizing and showcasing the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. as art. The movement had emerged in the wake of 1960s social activism that demanded more democratic concepts of cultural value. Newly available government arts funding supported the growth of an art sector not beholden to wealthy patrons. Less restrictive art venues, especially artist-run galleries, made space for more diverse and socially-engaged art.\footnote{17}

Tim’s first contact with the alternative arts movement came just after his arrival in New York in 1975. His mentor Joseph Kosuth had belonged to the conceptual art group _Art & Language_ and when Tim arrived, was the editor of the group’s influential but short-lived publication, _The Fox_. By 1977 Rollins himself had become involved with _Artists Meeting for Cultural Change_, a group formed to protest an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art celebrating the Bicentennial of the American Revolution. Culled exclusively from the limited collection of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III, the exhibition included no artists of color and only one woman. Rollins participated in the production of _an anti-catalogue_, a low-budget publication containing critical essays and documents opposing the use of arts institutions to serve the interests of the rich.

By the late 1970s a new generation of artists began establishing a second wave of artist collectives and artist-run organizations, Collaborative Projects (Colab), one of the first, consisted of about forty artists who raised money, shared equipment, and organized exhibitions.\footnote{18} The epicenters of activity among young artists moved from SoHo and Tribeca, which had been overtaken by the affluent, to the East Village and the South Bronx. Ideas of community were pursued by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, who cast plaster portraits of South Bronx residents, taking molds of their sitters outdoors on the sidewalk. In 1978 Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis opened Fashion Moda in a South Bronx storefront. There the downtown and uptown art worlds met, including graffiti writers, hip-hop musicians, break dancers and other artists.\footnote{19} Fashion Moda also organized projects in public places such as vacant lots and abandoned buildings. A new style of art show emerged: “non-curated, densely packed shows on oddball themes, including art by children and the anonymous….”\footnote{20} The scene was celebratory and critical, and it reinvented the idea of the art exhibition, fueled by political ideals, artistic ambition, and communalism undeterred by lack of resources.

In 1979 Tim helped found Group Material, a collaborative group whose artistic medium was exhibition practice, which they viewed not only as a vehicle for the display of objects, but as a means of building community. In a 1983 statement, the group defined itself in ambitious terms:

Group Material was founded as a constructive response to the unsatisfactory ways in which art has been conceived, produced, distributed and taught in American society…. While most art institutions separate art from the world, neutralizing any abrasive forms and contents, Group Material accentuates the cutting edge of art. We want our work and the work of others to take a role in a broader cultural activism…. In our exhibitions Group Material
reveals the multiplicity of meanings that surround any vital social issue. Our project is clear. We invite everyone to question the entire culture we have taken for granted. 

From 1980 to 1981, Group Material operated a space in the East Village, believing it important to establish a physical presence in order to gain legitimacy and recognition. Group Material's ideological positioning strategy informed Tim's work with K.O.S. Like Group Material, Tim wanted K.O.S. to stake a claim in the center, not the periphery. In a prescient statement about their work made in 1983, Tim said, "I think my greatest success is that I've pulled kids into the realm of production, where they make real things that other people see.... [T]he work I do with my kids is almost always shown in a real art gallery, mainly alternative spaces...so far." 

Tim Rollins and K.O.S. were not the only young artists to make it big in the 1980s. The most visible were graffiti artists, among them Lady Pink, who started her career at sixteen while still a student in high school, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who began as a graffiti writer and became an art star by age twenty-four. But beyond its use of text, the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. had little in common with graffiti art. The group's works were increasingly influenced by the artists they studied with Tim, including the conceptual art of Hanne Darboven and Sol LeWitt, and Kosuth; the monochromatic paintings of Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman; and the politically engaged work of Joseph Beuys, Margaret Harrison, and Conrad Atkinson.

Of particular influence was Atkinson, a conceptual artist and activist who also showed at Ronald Feldman's gallery. During the late 1960s and early '70s many "political" artists turned their backs on dominant cultural values, but Atkinson continued to see the history of high art and the institutional art world as vital sites. He especially identified with the history of socially engaged literary texts and wanted to see them mined on the main stage of art. In a 1985 interview, he expressed the need to employ a broad range of activities to rebuild the torn social fabric, including the kind of intellectual discourse that can happen through cultural institutions. "You have to occupy the ruling hegemonic spaces as well as popular areas. Otherwise you render yourself invisible." he would later say.

The art world's increasing recognition of "community-based" art aided the acceptance of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. by mainstream institutions. The work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. has often been classified among artistic practices that emerged in the 1980s and proliferated in the 1990s, variously referred to as "service work," "project work," or "new genre public art." These terms describe process-oriented art that involves "community" participation and often limits the authorial role of the artist. Such work uses art as a means to engage groups of people, often those who do not identify themselves as artists, and is sometimes described as disrupting the conventional social relationships in the art system.

The fashion for this type of art paved the way for Tim Rollins and K.O.S.'s acceptance into the art world, even though their work didn't really fit this category. First and foremost, Tim was not engaged for a short-term project or exhibition to "collaborate" with a "community group" on a temporary basis. The group's projects did not serve as a metaphor for cultural democracy, but an actual rethinking of definitions of cultural participation. The relationships among the members of the group were sustained and continued to this day. Much "community-based" art is more concerned with process than product and, as Michael Brenson has written, "is intended to lead away from the object into the lives of real people, real neighborhoods." Not only did Tim Rollins and K.O.S. reject the glorification of poverty and "difference" as signs of social or artistic authenticity; they also embraced the "thing-ness" of art, the joy of making beautiful and lasting things that embody the mind, strength, character, and presence of their makers. Referring to the group's painting, Tim says, "Call it a commodity if you want, but honey, this is a commodity that has spirit."

Much "community-based" art aspires to the condition of unalienated collective labor and attempts to critique capitalism either by remaining outside the art market or taking social and economic relations as its subject matter. By contrast, Tim Rollins and K.O.S. jumped into the market enthusiastically. In 1986, after the show at Barbara Gladstone from which Chase Manhattan Bank had purchased Amerika I, dealer Jay Gorney offered an exhibition at his gallery on East 10th Street, then part of the red hot East Village art scene. Gorney paired Amerika II and works based on The Red Badge of Courage and Alice in Wonderland with photographs from The Ballad of Sexual Dependency by Nan Goldin. Not expecting to sell a thing, Tim was stunned to learn that mega-collector Charles Saatchi had purchased their work.

On occasion, Tim has been vilified for what appears to some as missionary work or exploitation, and the group's market success has only exacerbated these accusations. But selling their work enabled K.O.S. to fulfill the pragmatic need to make a living. They matched a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to open their Art and Knowledge Workshop with $8000 of the money they earned, set up a college fund, and provided themselves stipends. Whatever scorn one might have for the inequities produced by the capitalist system, earning money is practical and legitimized the group's work. Tim says, "It was this bizarre—and I'm sorry but this is the reality—it was this kind of bizarre affirmation of everything that we had been doing." This is the essential dialectical tension in Tim Rollins and K.O.S.'s work: in order to pursue a Marxist-driven vision of social liberation, the group had to "win" in the capitalist system.

Tim Rollins and K.O.S. were firmly grounded in the art world, but Tim also belonged to a community of New York City
arts educators who shared his critical understanding of education as having the potential either to reproduce existing social relations or intervene in and transform them. The concept of art and art education as instruments of social change informed a subculture of educators in the 1980s, including Artists/Teachers Concerned, with whom Tim Rollins and K.O.S. showed in 1989 at the gallery Minor Injury. Art/Teachers Concerned comprised thoughtful, good-hearted, politically aware individuals, but their work with their students tended to be predictable and underdeveloped. They promoted art activities in which students depicted social problems, such as homelessness and pollution, or expressed positive messages, as in murals that read, “We can make a difference!”

Several things distinguished Tim Rollins and K.O.S. They not only penetrated the art market, they developed a high level of artistic sophistication. They took frequent field trips to research their painting projects, to the Museum of Modern Art, for example, where they looked at Rothko and Reinhardt and the Russian Constructivists. They were often dogged by security guards who bristled at their age and skin color; nonetheless MoMA became a second home to them.

When art prices declined in the early 1990s, Tim Rollins and K.O.S.’s market sagged. The infrastructure that supported their artistic development was then further battered by the assault on cultural democracy, whose main target became the National Endowment for the Arts. But the group itself endured. The work had matured. Its process of creation, formal elegance, and poignant content defied categorization and so disrupted both aesthetic and social categories. Tim’s teacher Kosuth, it seems, ended up offering Tim more than simple entrée into a community of art intellectuals. His own art modeled an approach for Rollins, a drive to continually recreate the idea of art as a characteristic of art itself. As Kosuth has described: “...[T]he work of art is essentially a play within the meaning system of art. As that ‘play’ receives its meaning from the system, that system is—potentially—altered by the difference of that particular play.”

Tim Rollins and K.O.S. have integrated process and product into a practice that defied assumptions about who is eligible for recognition as an artist. The members of the group formed bonds and alliances across lines of age, class, and ethnicity. In retrospect, the refusal of Carlos, Victor, Rick, and the others to remain complacent provided a necessary condition for change and for the model they developed, a harbinger of a more democratic, liberal (in its true meaning), and just America.


4. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations by Tim Rollins are from an interview with the author recorded on December 9, 2008.

5. Victor Llanos, quoted in Kids of Survival: The Art and Life of Tim Rollins and K.O.S.


7. Freire called this conscientização.


11. Rollins has stated that these early works reflected his paternalist imposition of his own liberal agenda. See "Tim Rollins Talks to David Deitcher," Artforum 40, no. 8 (April 2001): 79.


13. In the course of writing this essay, I asked Tim how well the kids learned to read. He responded with just a handful of their accomplishments. One just completed graduate school at Columbia; another graduated from Stanford and is teaching at Berkeley. A third got a full undergraduate scholarship at Bard College and is getting his masters in art education at Lehman College.

14. The influence of Glenn Ligon's work may be seen in this piece in its play of textual legibility and illegibility.


16. The Atomic Salon, Ronald Feldman Gallery, June 9–July 2, 1982. The show was mounted in conjunction with a special Village Voice issue on nuclear disarmament, which published images of the art in the exhibition.

17. The Kitchen, founded in 1971, showed video art, a medium ignored by museums at the time. 112 Workshop/112 Greene Street, founded in 1970, provided a place for conceptual works that responded to the physical and social conditions of its site. AIR, founded in 1972, was a women's cooperative gallery. Many other organizations, including El Museo del Barrio, Kerekeleba House, El Taller Boricua, and Basement Workshop showcased works by artists of color who had been shut out or included as tokens in the major museums.

18. Their most celebrated project was The Times Square Show, mounted in June 1980.


22. Following this phase the group continued with a changing roster of members until 1996.


24. Fab Five Freddy and Charlie Ahearn parodied the rapacious hunger for young South Bronx artists among downtown art aficionados in their 1983 film Wildstyle.


27. For discussions of this type of work see the 1994 lecture by Andrea Fraser and Helmut Drexler, "How to Provide an Artistic Service," in Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) and Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).


29. Artist Jenny Holzer also contributed toward this match.


To reinterpret a work of the magnitude of Dante's, we needed the help of art history, not to ransack it for quotations, but to find the older struggles that produced the older pictures, gaining encouragement from these great images for the enormous struggles our generations face in the present. Instead of leaving the painting as an intellectual puzzle for the historians and the art critics, here's a direct, selective list of the stuff we looked at: Delacroix's The Bark of Dante; Grosz's The Leningrad Altarpiece and drawings, St. George's letter to the Russian writer; Guyot's revolutionary poster illustrations from the Spanish Civil War; Frida Kahlo's What the Water Gave Me; etchings from Passetti's Canterbury Tales and Goya, Leonardo's studies of facial expressions for The Battle of Angiari and St. Jerome; Jasper Johns' Target with Bullets, Ohio Civil War etchings, Botticelli's drawings for the Divine Comedy; Gore's Divine Comedy, photos of victims from Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Gerbert's Left of the Medusa, Munch's The Scream, Jack Kirby's new Captain Victory comic book series, Blake's watercolors of the Comedy, the package art from a big box of Tide laundry detergent and last, but most important, the huge painting on the front of the Modello ride at Coney Island.

We want to turn these images into active forms of freedom against those other very active forces who would bring an end to human history and culture as we know it if they are left without our resistance.

Tim Hollins
1984

CIRCLE V: The Wrathful
You have got to be full of burning hate to start a big war. Sometimes you can see it on people's faces. I bit a lot from Leonardo when I made this picture.

- Luiz Feliciano

CITY OF DIS
Intense are the crimes of all. Even in their homes, one can see the flames of crime abutt out, as if to engulf homes with fire. Their buildings are not strong enough to conceal their past.

- Dolores Royal studio co-teacher

CIRCLE VII:圈 of Violence
1. The River of Blood
   Everything will be washed in blood, but nothing will ever get clean.
   - Erich Ramirez

2. The Wood of the Suicides
   There was only one Jesus. I don't want to die for other people's sins.
   - Anthony Cruz

3. The Old Man of Crete
   Human civilization could turn from gold to clay in an instant.
   - Adalberto Badillo

4. Guyton
   People with honest faces lots of times have the bones of scorpions.
   - Armando Perez

VIII: MALABOLGA (Fraud Simple):
1. Whip and Excrement
   No matter what, being the victim is humiliating.
   - Anthony Dixon

2. Talking Feet
   The burning feet poke out of the hole of death. They tell us warnings.
   - Nestor Ortiz

3. The Hypocrite
   The Hypocrite wears a cloak of gold to cover the heavy load he hides inside.
   - Felix Capero

4. Arm with the Head of Saint
   Even the heads of the saints have been blown off. They are still trying to talk to us.
   - Jesus Ruiz

CIRCLE IX: Circle of Traitors and Lucifer
The face of Lucifer isn't a fake monster. It could be the face of a kid who got burned alive in a place called Hiroshia.

- Roy Roger

BACKGROUND:
If that bomb goes off, the Earth will glow in rings. The universe will never be the same.

- Kevin Small
THE METHOD:

I am an artist who works as a regular schoolteacher in a public junior high school in the South Bronx. In my studio I work with about 75 adolescents who've been categorized as learning-disabled or emotionally handicapped. The kids and I have been making art together for about three years now.

In the process of producing art for a large public audience, we are forced to struggle with issues often ignored in school: problems of learning what actually interests and involves us, problems of representing ourselves directly and with honesty, problems of the political and economic factors that determine our lives. While the art objects we make are vital to the learning process that culminates in these objects is far more important. We use art as a means to knowledge of the complex forces that support and undermine our society and our future. In addition, we're attempting to prove that the ghosts of the art world must be repressed. We're attempting to prove that the ghosts of the art world must be repressed.

Lately we've been painting on books. Our method works something like this: I select a piece of literature that the kids relate to and are interested in. I read the kids, defining unfamiliar vocabulary or paraphrasing while I go along. While I read, many of the kids "jump"—that's what we call making literally hundreds of small drawings. The drawings do not illustrate what is being read; the object is to relate the content of the book to what we know, feel, or sense in our everyday lives. After we've made stacks of drawings, we begin to edit, reducing the number of pictures to a small amount of images that seem the most true and exciting. Transparencies are made of these small selections. Using an overhead projector on a moving cart, we compose and draft the large piece. Each kid then gets to paint his or her own enlarged drawing on a ground of paper torn from the book that provided the inspiration for the art. In this way the book becomes a literal and metaphorical foundation for our new (our own) form and content and method. The book is transformed into something we're supposed to consume into an artwork with immediate, relevant and concrete social uses for us today.

ABOUT THE INFERNO:

Our newest painting, THE INFERNO, is the culmination of over a year of study, planning, and making. The beginnings of this work can be traced back to one of our first collaborative artworks, HYPOCRITE: SOUTH BRONX, first shown at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts' "The Atomic Salon" exhibition a few years ago. In the center of this piece was a superimposition of two maps: one of the target area of Hiroshima in 1945 and the other of Prospect Ave., the neighborhood in which we live and work today.

It was after Hypocrite when the kids and I began working with and on books. I had never read Dante, but being of those authors strictly and automatically assigned in my high school lit. classes, I was through the films and writings of a man named Pier Paolo Pasolini. A near guide of mine that a modern appreciation seemed possible.

Several pages into one of the many editions of The Inferno I first investigated, I found Scott-Gill's great diagrams of Dante's System of Hell. The placement of the nine rings immediately reminded me of those defense department maps of Hiroshima from our work before. I showed both maps, both systems of destruction, to the kids and the work took off.

Guide to the Inferno (After Dante Alighieri). 1983-84
Courtesy of Fashion Moda Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University
To reinterpret a work of the magnitude of Dante's, we needed the help of art history, not to rearrange it for questions, but to find the older struggles that produced the older pictures, gaining encouragement from these great images for the enormous struggles our generations face in the Present. Instead of leaving the painting as an intellectual puzzle for the historians and the art critics, here's a direct, select list of the stuff we looked at: Cellerino's The Bark of Dantis, Bruegel's Farmyard Allegory, and drawings, Dr. Seuss' «Cats» and the Enter Battle Road, Poussin's revolutionary poster illustrations from the Spanish Civil War, Frida Kahlo's «What the Water Gave Me», stills from Pasolini's «Contemporary Tales and Sat», Leonardo's studies of facial expressions for The Battle of Anghiari and his St. Jerome, Jasper Johns' Digest with Body Parts, OLCO UN's war exchanges, Botticelli's drawings for the Divine Comedy, Dora's Divine Comedy, photos of victims from Auschwitz and Sappho, Gericault's «Rats of the Masts», Rembrandt's The Scream, Jack Kirby's new Captain Victory comic book series, the Blake watercolors of the Comedy, the Package Art from a big box of Tide laundry detergent and last, but maybe most important, the huge painting on the front of a Helldive ride at Coney Island.

We want to turn these images into active forms of freedom against those other very active forces who would bring an end to human history and culture as we know it if they are left without our resistance.

Tim Rollins 1984

CIRCLE V: The Wrathful
You have got to be full of burning hate to start a big war.
Sometimes you can see it on people’s faces. I hit a lot from Leonardo when I made this picture.

Luis Feliúzana

CITY OF DIS
Intense are the crimes of all. Even in their homes. One can see the crimes of crime shoot out, as if to engulf homes with fire. Their buildings are not strong enough to conceal their past.

Delores Royal

studio co-teacher

CIRCLE VII: Circle of Violence
1. The River of Blood
   Everything will be washed in blood, but nothing will ever get clean.
   - Eric Ramirez

2. The Wood of the Suicides
   There was only one Jesus. I don’t want to die for other people’s sins.
   - Anthony Cruz

3. The Old Man of Creta
   Human civilization could turn from gold to clay in an instant.
   - Adalberto Badillo

4. Geyser
   People with honest faces lots of times have the bodies of scorpions.
   - Armando Perez

CIRCLE VIII: MALIGNOLIA ( Fraud simple )
1. Whip and Excrement
   No matter what, being the victim is humiliating.
   - Anthony Díez

2. Talking Feet
   The burning feet poke out of the hole of death. They tell us warnings.
   - Hector Ortíz

3. The Hypocrisy
   The Hypocrisy wears a cloak of gold to cover the heavy lead he hides inside.
   - Felix Cepero

4. Arm with the Head of Saint
   Even the heads of the saints have been blown off. They are still trying to talk to us.
   - Jesus Ruiz

CIRCLE IX: Circle of Traitors and Lucifer
   The face of Lucifer isn’t a fake monster. It could be the face of a kid who got burned alive in a place called Hiroshima.
   - Roy Roger

BACKGROUND:
If that bomb goes off, the Earth will glow in rings. The universe will never be the same.
- Kevin Smalls
To reinterpret a work of the magnitude of Dante's, we needed the g of art history, not to ramshackle it for quotations, but to find older struggles that produced the older pictures, gaining our perception from these great images for the enormous struggles our eras face in the present. Instead of leaving the painting as an intellectual puzzle for the historians and the art critics, here's direct, select list of the stuff we looked at: Delacroix's The Bark Dante; Grosz's The Frenzy of the Holy Hand Grenade ofination; and drawings, Dr. Seuss's Green Eggs and Ham, etc. For more revolutionary posters, see Floyd's Revolution.No Suffer Bootstrap R.Camp. Posters are the most beautiful things today for saving a planet. Cricket is New because it is New. From these, the poster art is a big box of Tide detergent in a can, but maybe most important, the huge painting on the front of the millions ride at Coney Island.

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Tina Rollins
1994

TENSIONS (REFERENCES TO IMAGES STARTING FROM MULTI-ARMED GHOST MOVING COUNTERCLOCKWISE)

CIRCLE I: The Undecided
This is for the people who don't want to see or hear or say the going on. They just sit and worry and do nothing. - Adalberto Badillo

CIRCLE II: The Liar
Aristotle must be having a nervous breakdown now. - Harvey Moore

CIRCLE III: The Gnostic
It seems like most of the world's leaders don't want to serve. Just want to eat. - Jose Carlos

CIRCLE IV: The Boarders and the Speedbumps
The machines have power and they take the people's money and blood, yet they pay ammunition with it. Then they figure out a way to get the fire they made poor to fight their battles for them. - Steven Hernandez

CIRCLE V: The Wrathful
Sometimes you can see it on people's faces. I bit a lot from Leonardo when I made this picture. - Luis Feliciano

CITY OF DISHEAR
These are the crimes of all. Even in their homes, one can see the flames of crime shoot out, as if to engulf homes with fire. Their lines are not strong enough to conceal their past. - Ma Dolores Royale studio co-teacher

CIRCLE VII: Circle of Violence
1. The River of Blood
Everything will be washed in blood, but nothing will ever get clean. - Aric Ramirez

2. The Wood of the Suicides
There was only one Jesus. I don't want to die for other peoples' sins. - Anthony Cruz

3. The Old Man of Crete
Human civilization could turn from gold to clay in an instant. - Adalberto Badillo

4. Geryon
People with honest faces lots of times have the bodies of scorpions. - Armando Perez

CIRCLE VIII: MALABOGIA (Fraud Simple):
1. Whip and Excrement
No matter what, being the victim is humiliating. - Anthony Dixon

2. Talking Feet
The burning feet poke out of the hole of death. They tell us warnings. - Nestor Ortiz

3. The Hypocrite
The Hypocrite wears a cloak of gold to cover the heavy lead he hides inside. - Felix Caparo

4. Arm with the Head of Saint
Even the heads of the saints have been blown off. They are still trying to talk to us. - Jesus Ruiz

CIRCLE IX: Circle of Tracers and Lucifer
The face of Lucifer isn't a fake monster. It could be the face of a kid who got burned alive in a place called Hiroshima. - Roy Roger

BACKGROUND:
If that bomb goes off, the Earth will glow in rings. The universe will never be the same. - Kevin Smalls
To reinterpret a work of the magnitude of Dante's, we needed the help of art history, not to reenact for quotations, but to find the older struggles that produced the older pictures, gaining the older struggles for the monstrous struggles our generation faces in the present. Instead of leaving the painting as an intellectual puzzle for the historians and the art critics, here's an intellectual puzzle for the historians and the art critics, here's 

[Text continues]
To reinterpret a work of the magnitude of Sante's, we needed the
of art history, not to transact it for quotations, but to find
other stories that produced the older pictures, gaining
assessment from these great images for the enormous struggles our
countries face in the present. Instead of leaving the painting as
intellectual puzzle for the historians and the art critics, here's
next, select list of the stuff we looked at: Dalìs's The Bar
date, Grosz's The Stolen Light, Miró's La Sansa, and, also,
the Spanish Civil War, Frida Kahlo's What the Water Gave Me, stills
von Steins's Sertorius, Hodler's Bellerophon, and the Mexican's
Eclipse; The Battle of Antibes and his Bijou; Jasper Johns' the
at with Body Parts; Otto Dix's War Editions, Bellini's drawings
the Divine Comedy, Dore's Divine Comedy, photos of victims from
shiva and Nagasaki, Geraciño's Part of the Morning, Munch's the Scream,
Kirby's new Captain Victory comic book series, the Blake watercolors
of the Comedy, the package art from a box of tide laundry detergent,
last but maybe most important, the huge painting on the front of
Malibu ride at Conroy Island.

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other very active forces who would bring an end to human history
as we know it if they are left without our resistance.

Tim Hollins
1984

CIRCLE V : The Wrathful
You have got to be full of burning hate to start a big war.
Sometimes you can see it on people's faces. I hit a lot from
Leonardo when I made this scene.

Luis Feliciano

CITY OF DIS
Intense are the crimes of all. Even in their homes, one can see the
smokes of crime shoot out, as if to engulf homes with fire. Their
buildings are not strong enough to conceal their past.

Ma Dolores Royal

CIRCLE VII : Circle of Violence
1. The River of Blood
Everywhere will be washed in blood, but nothing will ever get clean.

Eric Ramirez
2. The Hole of the Suicides
There was only one Jesse. I don't want to die for other people's sins.

Anthony Cruz
3. The Old Man of Crete
Human civilization could turn from gold to clay in an instant.

Adalberto Badillo
4. Grisly: People with honest faces lots of times have the bodies of scorpions.

Armando Perez

VIII : MALABOLIGIA ( Fraud Simple )
1. The Whip and Excrement
No matter what, being the victim is humiliating.

Anthony Dixon
2. Talking Feet
The burning feet poke out of the hole of death. They tell us
warnings.

Nestor Ortiz
3. The Hypocrite
The hypocrite wears a cloak of gold to cover the heavy lead he
hides inside.

Felix Capero
4. Arm with the Head of Saint
Even the heads of the saints have been blown off. They are still
trying to talk to us.

Jesus Ruiz

CIRCLE IX : Circle of Traitors and Lucifer
The face of Lucifer isn't a fake monster. It could be the face
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Roy Rogers

BACKGROUND
If that bomb goes off, the Earth will glow in rings. The universe
will never be the same.

Kevin Smalls
THE INFERNO

TIM ROLLINS with the K.O.S. CREW

SOUTH BRONX
1983 - 1984

THE METHOD:

I am an artist who works as a regular schoolteacher in a public junior high school in the South Bronx. In my studio I work with about 70 adolescents who’ve been categorized as learning-disabled or emotionally handicapped. The kids and I have been making art together for about three years now.

In the process of producing art for a large public audience, we are forced to grapple with issues often ignored in school; problems of learning, what actively interests and involves us, problems of representing ourselves directly and with honesty, problems of the political and economic factors that determine our lives. While the art objects we make are vital, the learning process that culminates in these objects is far more important. We use art as a means to knowledge of the complex forces that support or undermine our society and our future. In addition, we’re attempting to prove that the history of the art world must begin to recognize the value and importance of things that aren’t included yet vast segment of the American people have to say, even if they are just kids or non-artists.

Lately we’ve been painting on books. Our method works something like this: I select a piece of literature that I believe speaks to issues that the kids might relate to and be interested in. I read with the kids, defining unfamiliar vocabulary or paraphrasing while I go along. While I read, many of the kids “read” – that’s what we call making literally hundreds of small drawings. The drawings do not illustrate what is being read; the object is to relate the content of the book to what we know, feel, or sense in our everyday lives. After we’ve made stacks of drawings, we begin to edit, reducing the number of pictures to a small amount of images that seem the most true and exciting. Transparencies are made of these small selections. Using an overhead projector on a moving cart, we compose and draft the large piece. Each kid then gets to paint his or her own enlarged drawing on a grid of paper torn from the book that provided the inspiration for the art. In this way the book becomes a literal and metaphorical foundation for our new (our own) form and content and method. The book is transformed from something we’re supposed to consume into an artwork with immediate, relevant and concrete social uses for us today.

ABOUT THE INFERNO:

Our newest painting, THE INFERNO, is the culmination of over a year of study, planning and making. The beginnings of this work can be traced back to one year ago when a first collaborative project emerged in our neighborhood. As an initial exercise we began to look at maps – in two cases; one of the target areas of the Spanish-American War and the other of Prospect Ave., the neighborhood in which we live and work today.

It was after Hypocenter when the kids and I began working with and on books. I had never read Dante (or being of those authors strictly and automatically assigned in my high school lit. classes). It was through the films and writings of a man named Pier Paolo Pasolini (a major guide of mine) that a modern appreciation seemed possible.

Several pages into one of the many editions of The Inferno I first investigated, I found Scott-Giles’s great diagrams of Dante’s system of Hell. The placement of the nine rings immediately reminded me of those defense department maps of Hiroshima from our war before. I showed both maps, both systems of destruction, to the kids and the work took off.

Guide to the Inferno (after Dante Alighieri), 1983–84

Courtesy of Fashion Moda Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University
DIALOGUE 5
APRIL 19, 1989 5:00 P.M.
THE ART & KNOWLEDGE WORKSHOP STUDIO,
965 LONGWOOD AVENUE,
SOUTH BRONX

PRESENT: RICHARD CRUZ, 18; NELSON MONTES, 17; GEORGE GARCES, 16; NELSON SAVINON, 17; CHRISTOPHER HERNANDEZ, 11; ARACELIS BATISTA, 16; ANNETTE ROSADO, 16; CARLOS RIVERA, 17; TIM ROLLINS, 33.

TOM: We could begin by making stains on the ground of book pages: stains with watercolor that are full of accident, full of chance and anxiety.

RICHARD: But I don’t want the stains to be it; we shouldn’t let the making of the stains take over.

TOM: It’s a problem. How do you organize stains?

CARLOS: Just let it go! Let the stains paint themselves.

TOM: Look at the tradition of the subject of St. Anthony’s temptation: Callot, Bosch, Cranach, Bruegel, Schoengauer, Grünewald, Ensor, Redon, Daumier, Ernst. In many ways, the most contemporary and interesting of the group is Ensor’s painting that we studied at the Museum of Modern Art. In this version, even St. Anthony is a monster. You get this strong sense that Ensor is depicting a world in which something has gone very, very wrong. You feel that these aren’t hallucinations, but that they are real. You feel that the elements, the genetic makeup of the world are becoming sick and mutating.

CHRIS: Our TEMPTATION reminds me of a car crash.

RICHARD: Let’s talk about the METAMORPHOSIS.

TOM: Someone was asking me, what is the meaning of the apple?
CARLOS: I know it means something, because it makes me think of things. But, to be honest, I can’t really say.

TIM: Well, it has to do with what fathers often do to their sons, how fathers are threatened by their sons, while, at the same time, the sons always have to pay for the sins and mistakes of their fathers. It’s an old theme throughout history.

CARLOS: It’s like when your father does something bad to you. It’s just like the apple that sticks in the back of Gregor. It doesn’t fall out, it stays stuck in your back and soon becomes part of you, like it’s stuck in there forever.

ANNETTE: Well, after trying all those different kinds of apples, all those different sizes, then trying all those different places to stick the apple in the text, I’d say we found the perfect apple, the perfect size, the perfect place.


TIM: I’m glad we didn’t use that big, shiny apple that looked like the one the evil queen offered to Snow White in the movie. It’s wild to think about all the things that apples mean.

ANNETTE: When the apple starts to rot, it starts looking like a heart.

TIM: Or some kind of deep, inner organ.

ANNETTE: The apple could be the father’s love, but it became like a weapon.

GEORGE: When I walked in today I didn’t know you guys had finished the piece yesterday and when I first saw the piece I couldn’t see it was an apple stuck in the text. I knew it was something, but it was weird.

TIM: The way the apple is pressed into the text is good. It’s neither inside nor outside of the text. It’s in between.

GEORGE: The apple is slowly going... in...

Nelson S.: The position of the apple has meaning, I know.

TIM: When Arthur Danto was visiting the studio last week, he told me that one of the great riddles of Kafka’s story is exactly what size Gregor became when he awoke as an insect? He’s not so big that people freak out when they see him, but he’s big enough that you know he’s not an insect that came out of the garden. He’s a profoundly disturbing size. I think he is as big as the text we layed out on canvas.

CARLOS: Like a worm turns into a butterfly and Gregor turns into a roach, and like the book turns into art, and the apple turns into... you know, on and on.

GEORGE: When you look at our metamorphosis since the apple is rotting slowly, as part of the piece you never look at the same painting twice.

RICHARD: What do we do when the apple in the painting rots?

GEORGE: Change it.

TIM: You just replace it with a new one.

GEORGE: Or just leave it in?

TIM: I don’t think that works, because the apple will dry and just become a static part of the artwork.

Nelson M.: Why don’t we write on the back instructions for the work? The apple could be changed every month. When we did the experiments, the apple rotted in about a month.

TIM: Every month is the cycle of human reproduction.

ANNETTE: Do you think people will think our Black Beauty is a painting of black stripes or will they see it as a book that we put in prison?

GEORGE: I remember when you were painting horses first, then the saddles and straps and whips and stuff that people use to control horses, but all that got boiled down to just black bars.

TIM: I think the real meaning of the book Black Beauty isn’t the story about the horse, but the story of how the horse is broken in, how the horse exchanges his freedom for a useful role in society, which means serving the master Gladly.

ANNETTE: Those old studies for Black Beauty looked like they came from Texas!

TIM: There’s a tradition here, too: Gene Davis, Buren, some of the work of Ross Bleckner and Sherrie Levine; but this is different. It was amazing to finish the idea for our Black Beauty, and then find a few weeks later...

ANNETTE: Oh, yeah... Step... Step...
TIM: Stepanova. She made this great stage set for a play called THE DEATH OF TARELKIN, around 1922 in Russia.

ANNETTE: Yeah, it was this thing called the “meat grinder,” but it really was a prison...

TIM: The painting also suggests that modernism, while intending to celebrate intellectual freedom, is actually a prison, a prison many artists have been taught to love. Do you get this at all?

RICHARD: Yeah.

CARLOS: No.

RICHARD: I was thinking that when you first look at the BLACK BEAUTY, it looks like the text is in jail. But it could be that you’re not outside looking in, but you’re inside looking out. You are the one in jail.

GEORGE: This is the first condensed painting we’ve ever done.

TIM: I've been thinking that art is like a student, a student for which most people have the lowest of expectations.

CARLOS: I know what you’re saying...

TIM: Let's pretend that Carlos' name is Art. What if we assume because of who Art is and where Art comes from and because of what Art has done in the past, that Art is this and that Art is only capable of certain limited things. That's like taking this great potential, this possibility, locking it in prison and throwing away the key. I love what we do with our project. We drive people crazy because they can't figure out what it is. Is it social work? Is it a school? Is it an art project? Is it a fraud? Is it socialism? Is it rehabilitation for juvenile delinquents?

RICHARD: All and none of the above!

TIM: Oh, guess what? We found the X-MEN #27 issues!
Great!

So now we can proceed with the works of pages from old X-men comics mounted on linen.

Do you think people will get them?

Not everybody knows that the X-men were a bunch of mutant teenagers that made their own school.

The X-men didn’t exactly fit in with the program of the public schools.

Right. And they started their own school led by another mutant called Professor X.

Sounds like Malcolm X... and Professor X is kind of like Tim because he can read minds and can tell when you’re lying and stuff... [Laughter] The X-men are rejects because they’re different; they each have special powers that society can’t understand how to use.

I was addicted to X-men comics when I was your age, around 1966 to 1969. I learned how to draw through these books. Those comics were my literature, my life. Do you know what was happening in the country at the time of these early X-men comics?

The Vietnam War.

Here’s another question: true or false? The old X-men comics are better than the new ones coming out today.

True!

I agree. It was like a holocaust in every issue, with a world beginning and ending within fifteen pages of pictures and text.

Yeah, the battles were great! Maybe it’s because a lot was happening out on the streets in the sixties. Now, the stories go on forever, like the comic book companies just want you to keep on buying the series.

Do you consider those early comics great literature?

Yes. The art wasn’t so innovative as now, but the stories were a lot better.

I don’t know if I have the nerve to go through with our plan.

Just do it!

Well, the idea of just presenting the pages from these old comic books as art, as finished, complete works, was intriguing. But when we actually laid out the pages, the way the ensemble looked, and all those old emotions welling up—I can’t trust myself. I’m too sentimental about the X-men.

No, when we laid out those pages together on the floor, they looked good. Real good.

And now they are our art.

The X-men comics always were art, it’s just that people don’t recognize them as such.

I’ve been thinking how our X-men work compare with Pop Art, with Roy Lichtenstein’s practice of using comic-book motifs but representing them in the conventions of fine art: enlarged, on canvas, made in paint, generalized.

I think people like Warhol and Lichtenstein didn’t have to make comic images in canvas and paint to make them art, because the comics are art already.

The X-men #17 isn’t a painting; it isn’t a drawing or a print; it really isn’t even a readymade, because it is something that was found, but also something that was already art. Our X-men is an artwork that has changed its social and economic class.

From low to high...

A lot of our new work seem to be about social rejection - like the Winterreise guy who gets rejected by his girl and so he decides to just wander out of the town through the snow and the cold. As he walks, the snow falls around him, and he wanders through his memories and he feels worse and worse and worse.

The girl dumped the guy for another guy with money and she made the Winterreise guy feel like he was nothing.

Did you ever wonder what the guy does for a living?

Artist...

Yeah, a poet, artist - one of those creative, sensitive guys who can’t make money and always get dumped by girls.

And he walks towards his death, a white death.

The Winterreise is a cycle. There are always moments in life when things seem hopeless.
Then you see someone like the hurdy-gurdy man “Der Leiermann,” and you can relate to someone who can survive the worst.

**Tim:** Why did Schubert write this song cycle?

**Nelson M.:** I think it was because he went through a similar situation with his girl. I think it was real personal.

**Annette:** I think it was something bigger. I think Schubert is saying that everybody must travel to that point in their life where they fell in love, to find real love once again.

**Tim:** A lot of people think that the WINTERREISE is about the “winter’s journey” that is the fate of every artist. But I think it isn’t just about artists, it’s about everybody.

**Richard:** It’s about everybody.

**Tim:** Do you believe that the artist is this tortured, suffering soul who inevitably walks towards a bitter death or... I mean, look at Schubert’s condition when he wrote the WINTERREISE! The guy was sick with syphilis, he was dirt poor, not recognized when he wrote this song cycle. Then look at the way we make work today!

**George:** Sure it’s different, but in a lot of ways it’s the same. We may be known, but we’re really known only to people who know about art. Art is alienated nowadays. The artist is still alienated, even though he might be rich.

**Tim:** Do you all feel like a Schubert, an outsider?

**Carlos:** Yup!

**Richard:** Yes.

**Carlos:** We’re like a band of outsiders.

**Tim:** Maybe we make the audience take a winter journey of its own.

**Richard:** I like the way in our WINTERREISE we make the audience take a winter journey of its own.

**Nelson M.:** The painting makes you follow the steps of the character.

**Richard:** The painting gets whiter and whiter and whiter...  

**Nelson S.:**... because the dying is starting until you reach the final panel which is completely white.

**Carlos:** The music vanishes.

**Tim:** Do you think Schubert’s music is dead? Be honest.

**Carlos:** Well yes.

**Richard:** Yes. Really, you have to know someone to get to hear this music. I mean, in the Bronx, not too many people listen to Schubert.

**Tim:** Look, in Manhattan, in the U.S., in the world, I don’t think that many people listen to Schubert.

**Nelson M.:** When we first heard it, remember? – it was so boring. We all made fun of it. Knowing the words in English helped a little.

**Tim:** I had never heard this music before this project began last year. Actually, I had read a newspaper review of a new recording of the WINTERREISE and it was through that description of the theme that I thought, “Hmmm, it sounds like something we could all relate to.” It sounded like a perfect representation of the troubles of adolescence. I was immediately reminded of those long, lonely walks I would take through the snowdrifts in my home town in Maine.

**Annette:** We spend a lot of our time bringing the dead to life: dead books, dead music, dead art.

**Nelson M.:** “Muth” (Courage) is my favorite song of the WINTERREISE. It’s like I need courage for myself in my life, courage to stand up for my rights. I want more courage.

**Annette:** I like “The Crow.” It’s just like real life in the city, where even if you’re walking alone, it’s like there is this thing following you.

**Tim:** Yeah, that crow was following him... why?

**Annette:** Following him to his death. Just waiting.

**Richard:** Death is always following you, but this is just a symbol for something you can survive. I like WASSERFLUT (Winter Flood). It’s talking about the feeling of flooding in the past, in problems, in your tears, with the possibility of drowning.

**Nelson S.:** I like “Der Leiermann” because, well, it’s a little like “Courage.” Here is this guy at the end of his rope and he meets the hurdy-gurdy dude, this weirdo playing his hurdy-gurdy over and over with no one around who wants to listen. He’s standing in the snow barefoot with this empty tin cup, but still, he’s living. His existence offers hope. He doesn’t care what other people think about him.
GEORGE: Like those borrachos (winos) on the corner who seem to live forever!

CARLOS: Yeah, it's true! They hardly eat, they live on the street all bummed up, but they last longer than you do! For years!

RICHARD: I also like the Leiermann song because it doesn't finish the WINTERREISE. It's not like a period to the story. It makes you think about what could happen.

TIM: I love the “Nebensonnen,” where he's close to death and sees three suns in the sky. You have no idea what the meaning of this apparition is.

NELSON S.: Maybe one of the suns is his girlfriend, and another is his life.

NELSON M.: And the other one is Hope.

TIM: Schubert put that song in just to make people crazy.

NELSON M.: “Hmmm, let me stick three suns in here…” (Laugh)

RICHARD: I'm glad we're making the colossal painting of Botha on the pages of the book Animal Farm repeating over and over.

NELSON M.: Botha as a guard dog.

TIM: As we speak, Botha's on his last legs. His own party has been trying to kick him out, but he has been refusing to resign. This week he finally gave up.

GEORGE: This is a big one: twelve by eighteen feet.

NELSON S.: I've noticed that some artists seem to think that the bigger the painting the better...

CARLOS: And they will make much money for it.

TIM: Painting by-the-pound!

CARLOS: Our Botha needs to be big, because he's over as a leader maybe, but the system behind him is still big like a monster, and he is still like a great big dog, you know?

RICHARD: It's refreshing to make a painting that we know will probably not sell. It's a great freedom.

TIM: Ironically, we can do paintings like this because we can afford it. Due to the income we've made from the less difficult works.

CARLOS: It's shocking to see Botha this big.

TIM: It's a giant goodbye party for him!

(Laughter)

CARLOS: The painting's like a newspaper. It reports what's going on with South Africa now, but I think it will still have meaning for the future.

TIM: Is there any unity in our work?

GEORGE: I think all the pieces look different.

TIM: But what about a meaning or mood that connects all this new work?

RICHARD: Well, I know it's not a happy mood!

GEORGE: When we started, it was real important to make beautiful things like the golden horns in the AMERIKA paintings, the SCARLET LETTER works, but these new things don't get lost in beauty.

RICHARD: We're not making the paintings that people want us to.

NELSON M.: We can't be making those golden horns forever!

TIM: We could be millionaires! (Laugh)

NELSON M.: The way I see it, the older work was more about freedom. The new work is about being trapped.

NELSON S.: Sometimes I feel this about the neighborhood, with all the crack, and senseless violence and stuff.

RICHARD: It's not unbearable, but everything is always so tense.

TIM: Ever watch the evening news?

NELSON S.: It gives you nightmares.

TIM: Almost every report is about corruption, or children found dead in garbage cans.

CHRIS: And acid, oil, burning ships, and cancer fruits.

RICHARD: God, he's only eleven and he pays more attention to this shit than I do!

GEORGE: It's like America is becoming one big preview for NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET.

TIM: And here we are making art. Why don't we just give up?

NELSON M.: Because we can't.
ADD TO ALICE

"We have a chance to make a statement, and for people our age, this is a big chance. We paint what is, but we also paint what should be." George Garces, K.O.S.

LUCY R. LIPPA

New York,

writer and activist.
Dazu noch Alice

Wir haben die Gelegenheit, etwas auszudrücken, und für Leute unseres Alters ist das eine große Chance. Wir malen, was ist, wir malen aber auch, was sein sollte.«

George Garees, K.O.S.

«Ich glaube, dass Kunst eines der wenigen Mittel ist, die es uns erlauben, unsere Meinung, die Art, wie wir die Welt sehen, ausdrücken zu können. Uns gehört kein Fernsehsender, doch wir sind fähig, ein Bild hinzukriegen.»

Richie Cruz, K.O.S.

«Die Rote Alice bedeutet für mich zugleich Tat und Blut. Irgendwie ist das komisch, denn Rot ist auch die Farbe der Liebe und der Valentinskerzen. Die Rote Alice, ein junges Mädchen, ist unheimlich wütend und deprimiert, weil sie das Schlimmste durchgemacht hat, und am liebsten würde sie aus dem Bild springen und sich zur Wehr setzen. Die Rote Alice
Recently, the New York-based artist Tim Rollins came to Minneapolis to work with a group of students from Franklin Junior High School. In an intensive one-week workshop held in Walker Art Center’s Art Lab they collaborated on the creation of a large-scale painting based on Franz Kafka’s novel Amerika. This unusual project evolved both out of Rollins’s experience—and dissatisfaction—with the Conceptual Art movement as well as his work teaching art to learning disabled students in the South Bronx. From his Conceptualist background, he retained a commitment to making works that challenge the conventional forms and functions of art in our society; however, he rejected what he regards as the hermetic, self-referential quality of much Conceptualist work.

Seeking to combine his art-making with community activism, Rollins became an instructor in the Learning to Read Through the Arts Program and spent two years teaching in some of New York City’s poorest areas. In 1980 he became a full-time art instructor at I.S. 52, a South Bronx junior high school. There he developed a unique curriculum involving classic and contemporary literature, regular visits to museums and galleries and the creation of collaborative artworks that relate such “high” culture influences to the students’ own feelings and experiences. Before long, this process had produced such interesting results that he decided to establish an independent after-school program in which he would continue to work with his most enthusiastic students. Called The Art and Knowledge Workshop, this unprecedented program is now entering its sixth year and involves a group of some twenty students between the ages of thirteen and nineteen who call themselves K.O.S., or Kids of Survival.

While the artwork emanating from their collaborative project has been shown internationally and is represented in several major American museum collections, Rollins maintains this recognition is only a means towards establishing a school program that will offer a wide curriculum of interdisciplinary studies focusing on the fine arts. He anticipates this approach might eventually provide a new model for other schools, and towards this end has begun to test his ideas with students in communities throughout the country. The recent Minneapolis workshop is the second of these experiments, and follows a similar project held in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1987. Though neither of these short-term efforts approximate the depth and scope of the South Bronx workshop, they do offer valuable means for evaluating the potential of Rollins’s methods for teachers and students of varying backgrounds.

The paintings by Rollins + K.O.S. have their sources in well-known literary works. Typically, as Rollins reads aloud from novels such as Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland or Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, frequently paraphrasing difficult or obscure passages, the students rapidly sketch the images that come to their minds. This method, which the South Bronx students call “jamming,” is reminiscent of “automatic writing,” the early twentieth-century Surrealist technique for capturing imagery from the subconscious mind. Such spontaneity, however, is only the beginning of a learning and image-making process that in some cases has taken as long as four years to accomplish. During this time, Rollins + K.O.S. discuss the themes of the text, revise and elaborate the students’ initial designs, study relevant art historical precedents, hold collective critiques and, finally, collaborate on the production of a painting.

One of the most distinctive features of Rollins + K.O.S.’s work is that books, literally and metaphorically, are the bases for their painting. The canvases upon which they paint are covered with book pages, either a chapter or the entire text of a work they have read. Formally, this technique
serves to establish an all-over, shadowy background that upon close observation can be read in a narrative fashion. To some extent, however, the printed matter in every work is partially hidden and made illegible by imagery painted over it. By creating such palimpsest, in which one message both obscures and builds on another, Rollins + K.O.S. are essentially practicing what the French literary theorist Roland Barthes has called “writerly” reading. By de-emphasizing the central importance of the author, Barthes conceived of reading as a creative act through which the reader’s own perspective colors his or her impression of the text. “We relate the themes of the novels to the history we are making today,” Rollins has said, “to our everyday situation in the South Bronx, the United States, the world. In this way, the book is transformed from an object of cultural consumption into a tool, a foundation on which we are building new forms and contents of our own.”

Rollins + K.O.S. have essentially two approaches to iconography. In some paintings, such as Through the Looking Glass or The Whiteness of the Whale: Monstrous Pictures of Whales, a single image is generated collectively. Their painting, Through the Looking Glass, based on Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland stories, was developed almost entirely by the women in the group—Anel Hernandez, Annette Rosado, Yesenia Velez and Emily Pagan—who responded particularly to the passage which describes Alice growing so large that she fills an entire room. To these young women, her predicament symbolized the social constrictions facing adolescent women in their community. The idea to paint Alice black-on-black came from Rosado who had perceived a potent spirituality in Ad Reinhardt’s untitled painting, which she saw during a visit to The Museum of Modern Art, and in which a barely discernable cruciform grid is suspended in a darkly luminous monochromatic field.

For another work, The Whiteness of the Whale: Monstrous Pictures of Whales, based on Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, the entire South Bronx group agreed upon, and collaboratively painted a single image. Covering Melville’s text like a mystical veil is an all-over field of white in which the subtle play between opaque and transparent passages suggests an evasive yet omnipresent power. Commenting on this work, Richard Cruz of K.O.S. said, “When you see white you think of heaven or something good. But we wanted to make a fierce white because Moby Dick was a killer. And he was white.”

In another approach to iconography, applied in such paintings as The Red Badge of Courage XII and Amerika XI, each student in the group has developed and painted a variation on a collectively agreed upon symbol. Rather than illustrate a scene from Stephen Crane’s Civil War novel The Red Badge of Courage, Rollins + K.O.S. selected the image of a wound, which captured the central idea of the story and allowed for a variety of formal and expressionistic interpretations. In the South Bronx, a community where violence and death are part of daily life, the symbol of a wound can suggest not only vulnerability but also survival. Once again, the lessons of art history offered inspiration: on the one hand, the tortured spirituality of Matthias Grünewald’s sixteenth-century Isenheim Altar piece and, on the other, Peter Magubane’s recent photographs of South African blacks in their struggle against apartheid. The composition of the painting is based on NASA photographs of galaxies whose timeless grandeur evoke the idea of transcendence while echoing the cosmological aspect of Crane’s novel.

The painting, Amerika XI, produced by Rollins + K.O.S. in collaboration with students from Franklin Junior High School in Minneapolis is based on Franz Kafka’s novel Amerika. The image of the golden horn derives from the novel’s final chapter, “The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma,” in which the hero, Karl, encounters a placard soliciting new company members for the Oklahoma Theatre: “The great Theatre of Oklahoma calls you! Today only and never again! If you miss your chance now you miss it forever! If you think of your future you are one of us! Everyone is welcome! If you want to be an artist, join our company!” Karl travels to a racetrack where the recruiting is to occur. There he encounters an extraordinary sight: dressed in angel costumes, hundreds of women blow long golden horns in blaring cacophony. Taking this symbol to be the essence of the novel’s allegorical description of American democracy, Rollins asked each student to invent a horn that would, “represent their individual voice and freedom.” The students’ horn images, each highly unique, were then combined into a skin-like, multi-nucleic composition evocative of Jackson Pollock’s frenetic “drip” paintings. The all-over design and consistent use of gold paint imparts a unity to the painting’s multifarious elements, echoing the novel’s populist theme. Now, having completed eleven golden-horned Amerika paintings—nine in the South Bronx, one in Charlotte, and this most recent version in Minneapolis—Rollins might be said to have hit on a successful formula. However, despite...
their similarities, each of these works has a distinctive character deriving from varying compositional solutions and the continuing inventiveness of the horn designs.

_F-451: Fahrenheit 451_ and the two small watercolors from the series Four Paintings About Abortion are somewhat eccentric examples of Rollins + K.O.S.'s work. _F-451: Fahrenheit 451_ is one of a series in which the ashes of censored books, or those threatened with censorship, from school libraries are scattered across the pages of Ray Bradbury's sardonic futuristic novel _Fahrenheit 451_. In this version, Rollins + K.O.S. ironically incorporated burnt pages from Bradbury's own text. The two paintings from the series Four Paintings About Abortion are unique in that they are collaborations between Rollins and one student, Lissette Vargas, and are painted on a Congressional bill, the Hatch anti-abortion amendment, rather than on a work of literature.

The ambitious work of Tim Rollins + K.O.S. must be judged ultimately both for its esthetic as well as its pedagogical success. Their paintings combine remarkable formal invention with the expression of profound human values. As "teaching machines" these paintings have given to the young artists of K.O.S. a broader knowledge and deeper understanding of the world around them. However, it is too early to say whether such methods can be replicated by other teachers and developed into a standard curriculum. One cannot help but wonder what will become of the members of K.O.S. as they grow older. Already a number of them have rejoined the group as staff members, four are enrolled in specialized art high schools and, next fall, Jose Parisi, who joined the group at the age of twelve expects to enroll in one of the country's best art colleges—his tuition fully paid by The Art and Knowledge Workshop.

Lawrence Rinder
For approximately four years, Tim Rollins has been conducting a unique art program called K.O.S., or Kids of Survival, at a public Junior High School in the South Bronx. Jean Fisher has described their process:

"K.O.S. begins with a book. Container of knowledge and guarantor of 'civilized' culture, the book also represses those who are not its subjects, especially those who are educated in a history and ideology that effaces their own experience and traditions. K.O.S., therefore, investigates classics of world literature, examining primary themes or instances in these texts that can be reinvested with K.O.S.'s knowledge and feelings, both of local experiences in the South Bronx as well as of broader world issues. The book is thus reclaimed. No longer merely an object of consumption, its pages form the ground upon which another image is constructed."

The students spend up to several months developing imagery based on the text as read through their own experience. These images are then applied to a surface which is literally made from the deconstructed pages of the book mounted on canvas. Among the books which Rollins and K.O.S. have explored are: Moby Dick, Alice in Wonderland (involving only those male students whose fathers had
been murdered), Animal Farm, and The Autobiography of Malcolm X.

This exhibition will consist of four or five major works by Tim Rollins and K.O.S., including the students individual studies. For this exhibition, Rollins would be willing to produce a unique work in collaboration with approximately ten Minneapolis youngsters, ages 13-18. He prefers that these collaborators represent a cross-section of races and classes.

The work produced will be based on the novel Amerika by Franz Kafka. Rollins has already assisted in producing a number of highly successful versions of this piece, one of which was recently purchased by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Another is being created by Boston School children for an upcoming Rollins/K.O.S. exhibition at the I.C.A.

Using a method he has developed in working with a number of institutions, Rollins would come here in late September to meet with members of the Walker Education Department and/or local teachers who will be involved, to introduce them to the project and help initiate activity.

The young people who are selected to participate will develop their imagery by working, in part, through the mail with Rollins and others in the K.O.S. workshop in the South Bronx. This aspect of the project will last through January.
One week prior to the opening of the exhibition, Rollins and two or three "Kids of Survival" will come to Minneapolis to conduct a workshop in the Walker Art Lab during which a finished work, 24 x 36" will be created, incorporating the participants designs. This work will be displayed alongside other works completed in the Bronx workshop.

### EXPENSES

**Fee:** $7,500, or $2,500 plus $5,000 purchase of Minneapolis-produced painting

**Other costs:**

- **Airfare:**
  - Rollins, 2nd trip: $500
  - K.O.S., 3rd trip: $750

- **Lodging:**
  - Rollins, September: $100
  - Rollins, February: $350
  - K.O.S., February: $350

- **Workshop: Materials:** $450

$2,500 Total