

Ault, Julie, *Tim Rollins 1955–2017*,
Artforum, March 2018, p.43

TIM ROLLINS 1955–2017

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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 mak-

ing. 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."



Tim Rollins (far right) and K.O.S. in their South Bronx studio, New York, 1992. Photo: Chris Felver/Getty Images.

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.*" □

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