

Steer, Emily, Tim Rollins and K.O.S,  
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# Tim Rollins

*Tim Rollins and K.O.S. first hit the art scene in 1982 after Maine-born artist and teacher Rollins began working with disadvantaged South Bronx schoolkids on a body of work that would end up in museum collections around the world. Thirty-four years and counting later, the group continue to take inspiration from trailblazing texts and silenced voices.*  
Words: Emily Steer.

# and K.O.S.

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"We knocked on the front door of the art world. We rang the doorbell. Ding-dong! They looked through the peephole, they saw who we were and they pretended they weren't home." Tim Rollins is speaking with distinctive animation on the final day of Art Basel when I meet with him and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) members Angel Abreu, Rick Savinon and Logan Swedick in the group's shared apartment just a street from the fair. "But," he continues, "we're smart. So what we did is just go to the back of the building. The door was open and unlocked so we went on in and sat down. And everyone went: 'Oh, these guys are OK.' It was very Trojan horse."

First formed in the early 80s, when Rollins recruited teenage students of the South Bronx school at which he was a temporary teacher, the collective have certainly won art-world acceptance since. Indeed, when we speak they are basking in the inclusion of their *Darkwater 17* (after W. E. B. Du Bois)—formed using pages of Du Bois's 1920 book *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*—in Basel's prestigious and suitably pioneering Unlimited strand. Their work can be found in over 120 public collections including those of MOMA and the Tate. All the same, the journey to acceptance was seen as a little nuts to begin with.

"I remember vividly," Rollins says of his decision to get the ball rolling, "because I wasn't meant to stay in that school, I was meant to be there for two weeks and this voice told me: 'You must stay. I'm sorry, I'm not schizophrenic! I'm eccentric but I'm not schizophrenic. The voice said: 'You've got to do this, nobody else is going to do this...'. The reason why I started is: I've got to do something, and I'll worry about it later. I always tell the members they've got to get out of the 'what if, what if, what if'. It should be 'why not, why not, why not'. It does take courage."

"I give Tim a lot of courage," says Savinon, who joined K.O.S. in 1985 and has, but for a one-year hiatus, been a constant presence ever since, "because I look back and in the 80s in the South Bronx it was really rough."

"A lot of courage and maybe a little bit of stupidity," Abreu interjects—casual joshing of Rollins is a recurrent theme with these guys, much to his delight. "Maybe a little bit of naivety."

"Insanity!" Rollins one-ups. "It was insane." As he mentions later: "I had to buy toilet paper



Tim Rollins and K.O.S. at the opening reception of *Repossession*, Lehmann Maupin, New York, 2016

for my kids when I was teaching. Pencils. I had to bring my own boombox to play my cassette tapes. But we did it. It was a party every day. In terms of the environment it was hellish, but then you had Afrika Bambaataa, you had Zulu Nation. It was the birth of hip-hop. So there was joy. But it was a means to survive: psychologically, emotionally, physically. For real, you didn't know if you were going to come home that night."

Today, the collective runs workshops with kids, mainly in the Bronx but also in other cities. (Of an event some years ago in London's Hammersmith, Rollins has the following to say: "We did a workshop with a ragtag group of

kids and we made a painting with a young man, which is now in the collection at the Tate. And his name is Steve McQueen. Kiss. My. White. Ass! That's my ammunition.")

The work produced often takes its cue from revolutionary texts, as with *Darkwater 17*. "Du Bois is an extraordinary role model for our young people today because he was not essentialist, he did not believe in categories," Rollins says of the American educator and civil rights activist. Other titles that have served as an inspiration to the group include Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Franz Kafka's *Amerika*, and the group work with rare first editions. The resulting pieces are often

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**“It’s like a great alternative band or something”**

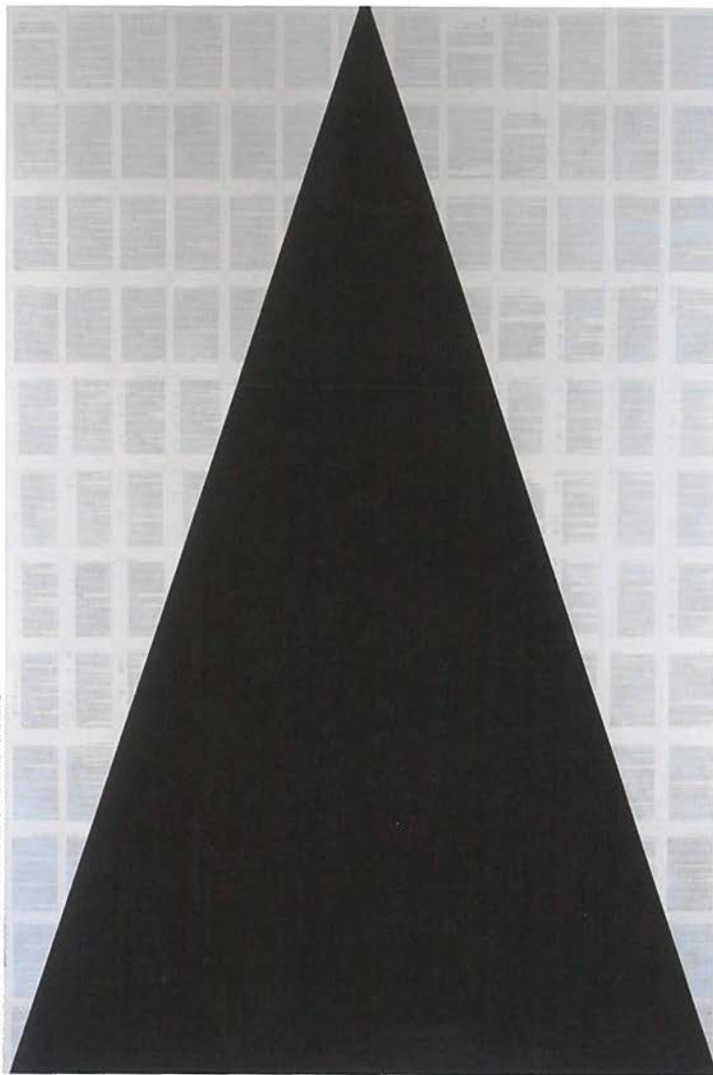


IMAGE COURTESY STUDIO K.O.S., LEHMAN MAUPIN, NEW YORK, AND HONG KONG

weighty and tactile in appearance, dominated by golds, browns and blacks.

“It’s always worked with K.O.S. and our relationship with Tim, but we give respect and we demand respect,” Abreu says of their work with the fifth to eighth graders who created *Darkwater VI*. “The way we give respect is by demanding excellence. We’re basically allowing the participants, the young artists, to step up.”

It’s not merely inclusion in the collective that offers a voice to the often unheard and socially excluded, it’s the work itself too. A common thread running through the pieces is the exploration of black history and related texts, as is the literal covering of words on the page with paint and other marks. “It’s a metaphor for many aspects of culture, particularly for people of colour... they’re not whitewashed, they’re just made invisible,” Rollins tells me. “The refusal of invisibility has always been a major subject of every work we’ve ever made.”

Niclaus of Hagenau and Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512–16) is also a vital inspiration. As Rollins says: “You can’t deconstruct the mystery of the thing. It’s the joy, it’s the drama, it’s the tragedy.” The piece became hugely significant for the group after Rollins stopped a special ed. student, Carlos, from being moved to a class for “educationally mentally retarded children”. Rollins used Carlos’s recreation of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* on a piece of plywood as evidence of his talents and he ended up going to college. Many K.O.S. members have been to visit the piece in Colmar, France, where it is part of the collection of the Unterlinden Museum.

Rollins describes the group as an “amoeba”. While he himself was the original brains behind the operation, and does a fair chunk of the talking, Abreu and Savinon have been fully entrenched since pretty much the beginning, alongside other members including Jorge Abreu, Robert Branch and Ala Ebrekar (twenty-one-year-old Swedick is a recent recruit). All maintain their own practices alongside their work with the collective.

“The workshops serve a dual purpose,”

MAUREEN PALEY.

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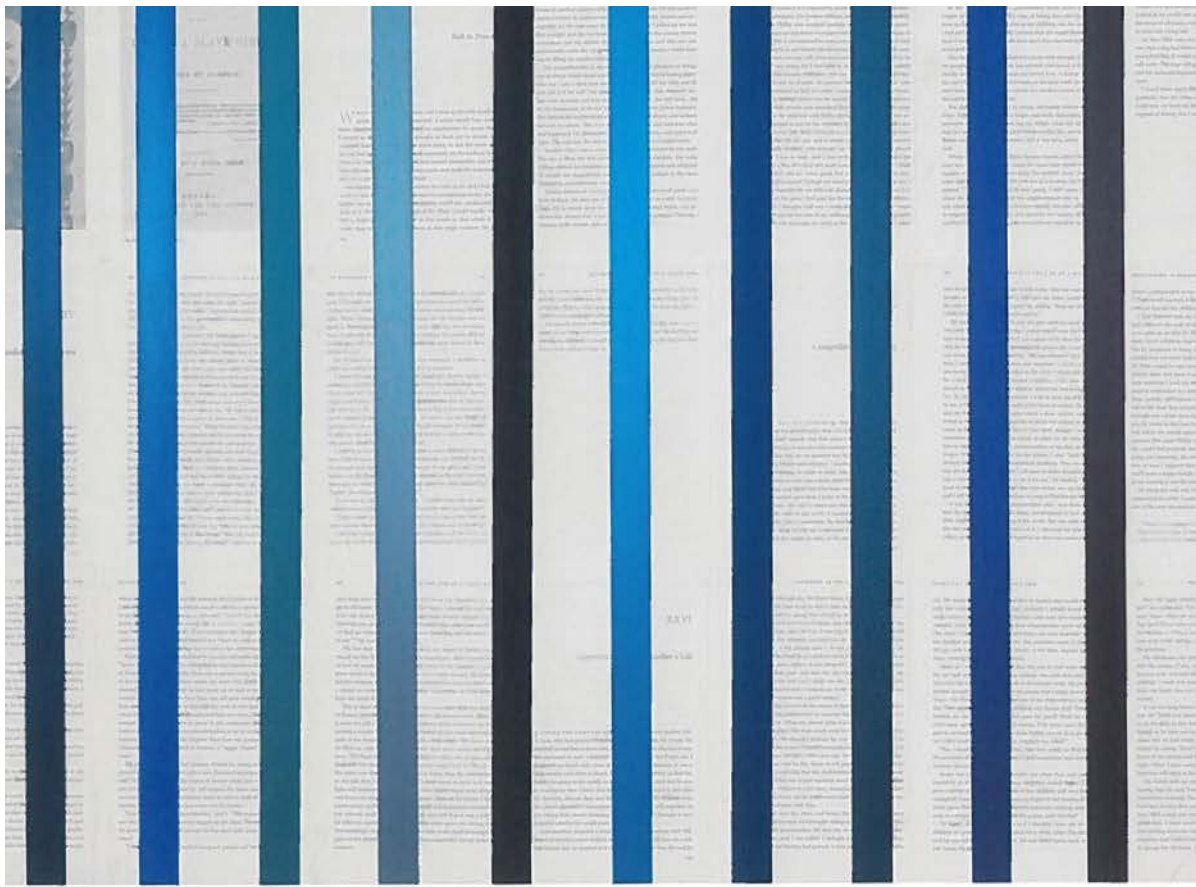


Image: *I See the Promised Land (after the Rev. Dr. M.L. King, Jr.)*, 2008, matte acrylic and book pages on canvas, 274.3 x 182.9cm  
*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (after Harriet Jacobs)*, 2015, silk ribbons, matte acrylic and book pages on wood panel, 61 x 91.4 x 4.4cm, signed, titled and dated on verso

... "It's not only to keep the ethos of going—because people don't quite do it now we're not kids any more—but to do it for us to be able to recruit."

"A terrific story," says Rollins, "and I get a lot of time from stupid people. They go: 'What are you trying to prove? Why are you doing this? Why are you going to these raggedy neighbourhoods? Why are you doing this work, the missionary work...?' It drives me crazy."

"My early days were difficult from every perspective. If you weren't essentially a white male doing painting or sculpture it wasn't considered serious," Rollins mentions. "I came up in Haring, Basquiat and those folk. I wanted to go to Joseph Kosuth. So it was: 'Oh my God, this new hot thing.' And then they were working with young people of color. All of a sudden it devolves from a painting and an after-school project." He mentions his inclusion in Charles Saatchi's *New*

was exciting, and that's when we hooked up with Maureen Paley," he says. "And then we did the Hayward [*Doubletake: Collective Memory and Current Art* in 1992], which was an extraordinary exhibition. We've had wonderful support, particularly in London."

"We've been radically inclusive," confirms Rollins, "and when you're radically inclusive you become exclusive to the folk who don't want to be."

The downright eccentricity of the whole vibe and, yes, the position of Rollins in relation to these odds-beating kids has also given rise to suspicion in some quarters. "It's a family now and people have a hard time, you know... We're an alternative family. Some people, some very boring, closed-minded people, have a hard time thinking of it like that. How can these folk love each other? People are so fractious now. I'm a gay man. Clinically bisexual, but I'm a gay man. So it's a white gay man and Latino..." he trails off.

sional—polite, engaged, thoughtfully and lightly personal and real. There is an unapologetic sense of emotion and it feels "other" to the typical public face of the art world's top tier.

As someone who has come of age with a fair chunk of his adult life as a painter, Savinon perhaps sums it up best: "My childhood I would always take things apart and put them back together. I always thought I was weird. But when I went to meet Tim I realized he was thinking the same way. Then I met K.O.S. and we were all outsiders within our own families, and we made an outfit together."

"We have accepted that we'll all be outsiders," Rollins agrees. "It's like a gay band or something where you have your folk and your fans and that's all you