Tim Rollins + K.O.S./MATRIX 109
January 14 - April 22, 1990

Tim Rollins + K.O.S., 1989
Clockwise from center front: Tim Rollins, Christopher Hernandez, Richard Cruz, Annette Rosado, Aracelis Batista, Nelson Sevillano, Nelson Montes, George Garces
Photo: Christina Thomson

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Kids of Survival 1989-90:

Included in the most recent roster of the Kids of Survival are students from ages eleven to twenty: Aracelis Batista, 14; Brenda Carlo, 15; Richard Cruz, 19; George Garces, 16; Christopher Hernandez, 11; Nelson Montes, 17; Jose Parissi, 20; Carlos Rivera, 17; Hector Anthony Rodriguez, 18; Annette Rosado, 16; Nelson Savinon, 17; Miguel A. Valentin, 14.

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This exhibition features highly acclaimed collaborative works by a group known as Tim Rollins + K.O.S. In 1980 artist and educator Tim Rollins began working as a special education teacher for learning and emotionally disabled students at Intermediate School #52 in New York’s South Bronx neighborhood. By 1982 he had founded the Art & Knowledge Workshop, an after-school program a few blocks from the school, to allow interested students to work with him beyond the bureaucratically encumbered and frequently interrupted forty-five-minute classroom periods.

At the Art & Knowledge Workshop, Rollins read aloud works of literature to the students, beginning with such classics as George Orwell’s 1984 and Dante’s Inferno. He encouraged the students to "jam" as he read, that is, to draw images that might, by free association, catch quintessential aspects of the texts. Lively discussions among the students related themes in these texts to their own experiences. Opening up channels of expression for the students is important to Rollins: "I want to explode the predominant culture of silence of the poor and working class. . . . I chose to use great works of literature as the symbol of our survival as a species." The students chose K.O.S., standing for Kids of Survival, for their collective name.

Some of their paintings have taken as long as four years to complete. After considerable debate, key imagery is agreed upon. The students then explore the subject in art history, either in the Workshop’s growing library or through visits to nearby New York museums. It is possible to discern a rich variety of influences in their work, from Uccello, Bosch, William Morris, and Cézanne to Marcel Duchamp, Ad Reinhardt, Joseph Beuys, Sol LeWitt, Marvel Comics, and Dr. Seuss.

Sometimes a single image is collectively
presented, as in *Black Alice/White Alice* (1989),
*The Metamorphosis* (1988-89), and the *Fahrenheit 451*
(1985-89) series. Other times personally expressive,
individual images are elaborately refined and then brought
together as the constituent elements in a single larger
composition. Examples are the golden horns in the
*Amerika* series, the letter "A" in *The Scarlet Letter*
series, and the wounds in *The Red Badge of Courage*
series. In each instance, the actual pages of a text are laid
down with acid-free jade glue in a minimalist-like grid on a
Belgian linen surface. Layered on top of this foundation,
which includes custom-made gesso, poignant visual images
transcribe the meaning of the texts, as filtered through the
poetic perceptions and observations of the students.

One series focused on Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the
Plague Year*, which is about the seventeenth-century
plague in Europe. Rollins + K.O.S. use lamb's blood to
write out the ancient cabala *abracadabra* which Defoe
describes as written on front doors in triangles or pyramids
to ward off misfortune. K.O.S. saw a parallel between the
ignorance described by Defoe and contemporary responses to
AIDS, including the stigmatizing of the victims. The AIDS
crisis has hit the South Bronx community particularly hard,
and members of K.O.S. have lost friends and family to the
epidemic.

The group has often returned to Stephen Crane's *Red
Badge of Courage* in which a young man, Henry
Fleming, returns disillusioned from the Civil War to find that
most of his friends have been killed in combat. For the Kids
of Survival, the parallels to death at an early age in their
own neighborhoods were obvious. They have seen the toll
exacted by the ravages of drugs and crime. K.O.S. began to
study gunshot wounds, using the scars of two members as
firsthand examples. Such wounds speak not only of trauma
and violence but also of survival and triumph. Under Rollins
guidance their contemporary concerns led them to the study
of wounds in Mathias Grünewald's fifteenth-century
*Isernhem Altarpiece* in which the stigmata of Jesus were
realistically portrayed for the first time. K.O.S. is currently
working on a new version of *The Red Badge of
Courage* with actual incisions into the skin of the text,
influenced by *The Metamorphosis*, made earlier last year.

*The Metamorphosis*, acquired by the Atheneum last
spring, is a hauntingly beautiful canvas which includes a live
red apple embedded in its surface. It marks the moment in Franz Kafka's story when the dutiful son, Gregor Samsa, now transformed into a large bug, is pelted with fruit by his angry father. An apple lodges in Gregor's back. The pain is excruciating, and he is unable to remove it. The Kids of Survival saw this event as a chilling metaphor for the painful experience of child abuse. In preparing this piece, K.O.S. studied the apple from early Christian iconography to Cézanne and Magritte, as well as in the writings of Meyer Schapiro. The live apple, ironically of the variety Delicious, is allowed to "metamorphose" in the painting, to be replaced once a month.

Explaining K.O.S.'s response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter, Rollins says, "Just as Hester is condemned to a life of poverty and silence, so is the South Bronx and too many of its individuals." The novel raises the issue of a stigma placed by society trying to assign guilt and shame. For members of K.O.S., Hester Prynn's elaborate ornamentation of the letter "A" on her dress was a sign of resistance, turning a stigma into a symbol of pride.

For K.O.S., Ray Bradbury's novel Fahrenheit 451 led to study of censorship in public school libraries. Selecting books that had been banned in local U.S. school systems (such as Diary of Anne Frank, Origin of the Species, and Fahrenheit 451 itself), they became book
burners themselves, scattering the ashes of previously censored texts over Bradbury's cautionary tale.

The accomplishments of Tim Rollins + K.O.S. embody conflicts and contradictions, some of which are difficult to resolve. These artist-students whose own access to books is severely limited by their difficulties with reading have selected written texts as the literal and figurative foundation of their work. Nevertheless, through collective action, students labelled "learning disabled" have made an extensive body of art that is formally accomplished and emotionally and intellectually engaging. They have done this, in part, by wresting meaning on their own cultural terms from texts that are initially alien to them. Rollins has described their sources as "classics from world literature—texts from a canon that was either useless or denied to us." The tension inherent in these ironies is reflected in the way these initiatives, although undeniably elegant, also assault the texts. Sometimes the texts are whitened and blacked out, cut into, burned to ashes or placed behind bars, giving vivid testimony to the uneasy alliance between the artists and their chosen foil. The result is an array of ambiguities born of this charged creative encounter.

Furthermore, the significance of the Latino constituency of K.O.S. as well as the collaborative group process itself have been noted by Rollins: "I think there are many people
who find the work we do threatening. On the simplest level we take the conventional nineteenth- and twentieth-century notion of the white male genius alone in his garret making masterpieces for history and throw it out the window."

Despite the considerable recognition that has come their way in the past two years, Rollins retains his healthy scepticism of the art world and his sense of humor. "We work together like a little tribe. I'm over-educated, the kids are under-educated. I'm making them tighten up, and they're making me loosen up. Together we're a pretty good artist—but individually—who knows?"

Rollins' primary interest steadfastly remains in social change through personal action. When accepting the second annual Joseph Beuys Prize awarded in Switzerland last summer he said,"... our artworks are but material manifestations of a dynamic, living social and learning process. For us, it is a means to a knowledge required for the just transformation of the world. In this respect, our works are as powerful and futile as prayers."

Rollins "started this program in anger at an educational system that threw kids away." He hopes the financial benefits that accompany their recent successes will offer the opportunity to establish The South Bronx Academy of Fine Art, with an accredited high school curriculum that would have the methodology of the Art & Knowledge Workshop at its core. For Rollins, "The art objects we make are vital things, but they are still only trophies—culminations of a learning process and a collective radical will. Art is most important to us as a means to knowledge."

Says Kids of Survival member George Garces, representing the philosophy of his colleagues at the Art & Knowledge Workshop, "Art should make you think."

Andrea Miller-Keller  
*Curator of Contemporary Art*

PLEASE NOTE: Tim Rollins and several of the Kids of Survival will visit the Atheneum on Sunday, January 14, 1989. They will give an informal MATRIX lecture about their work at 2 p.m. in the Hartford Courant Room. A reception in their honor will follow the talk. This event, part of the Contemporary Artists Lecture Series, is free with museum admission.
Works in MATRIX:

*Fahrenheit 451-Diary of a Young Girl I., II. and III.*, 1985-87, ashes, matte acrylic on book pages (*Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*) on linen, triptych, 38" x 28" each.


*From the Animal Farm I*, 1985-88, acrylic and pencil on book pages (*Animal Farm* by George Orwell) on linen, 55" x 80". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. William Mack, New York City.

*The Journal of the Plague Year* (abracadabra), 1988, lamb's blood and pencil on book pages (*The Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe) on linen, 74" x 70". Lent by Alvin and Barbara Krakow, Brookline, Massachusetts.

Study for the mural *Amerika - For the People of Bathgate*, 1988-89, watercolor, pencil and acrylic on book pages (*Amerika* by Franz Kafka) on linen, 60" x 30". Lent by Jay Gorney, New York City.

Studies for *Amerika: For the People of Bathgate*, 1988-89, watercolor and pencil on book pages, twelve drawings, 7" x 5" each. Lent by Jay Gorney, New York City.

Documentary photograph by Peter Bellamy of outdoor mural, *Amerika: For the People of Bathgate*, 1988-89, color photograph mounted on museum box, 40" x 30". Commissioned by the Public Art Fund, New York City.


Studies for *Metamorphosis*, 1988-89, collage with apple juice, watercolor, pencil and xerograph on paper, five drawings, 10" x 7" each.

*Winterreise - Gute Nacht*, 1988-89, acrylic, mica on music pages (*Winterreise* by Franz Schubert) on linen over wooden panel, two parts, 12" x 9" each.


The Scarlett Letter - Another View of Hester, 1987-89, acrylic, oil and xerograph (The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne) on linen, 36" x 40".

White Alice/Black Alice, 1989, letterpress, handpainted acrylic silkscreen on rag paper (The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland/Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll) two prints, 33" x 52" each.

The Temptation of St. Anthony I-XIV., 1989, aquatint, chine collé and xerograph (The Temptation of St. Anthony by Gustave Flaubert) on rag paper, trial proofs I-XIV., 22 1/4" x 14 13/16" each. Published by Crown Point Press, San Francisco.

All works are from the collection of the Art & Knowledge Workshop, courtesy of Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York City, unless otherwise noted.

Selected Individual Exhibitions:

Bronx Museum of the Arts, Hostos Community College Gallery, NY '85; Jay Gorney Modern Art, NYC '86, '88, '89; Fashion Moda, South Bronx, NY '86; S.U.N.Y., Old Westbury, NY '86; Jay Gorney Modern Art, NYC '86, '88, '89; Lawrence Oliver Gallery, Philadelphia '87; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago '87; Knight Gallery, Charlotte, NC '87; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN '88; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, '88; Riverside Studios, London, England '88; Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England '88; Orchard Gallery, Derry, Northern Ireland '88; Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston, '88; Dia Art Foundation, NYC '89.
Selected Group Exhibitions:

Group Material, NYC Atlanta '82; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NYC Atomic Salon '82; Brooke Alexander, NYC Artists' Call '83; State University at Stonybrook, NY The War Show '83; S.P.A.R.C., Los Angeles Act/React '83; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NYC/1984-A Preview '83; Alternative Museum, NYC Disinformation '85; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC Americana, curated by Group Material for the Biennial '85; Fundacion Caja de Pensiones, Barcelona and Madrid Art and Its Double, A New York Perspective '86; Holly Solomon, NYC Text & Image '86; Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, Cuba, Por encima Del Bloqueo '86; Longwood Art Gallery, South Bronx, NY '87; Städtisches Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf, Germany Similia/Dissimilia '87(travelled); P.S. 1, Long Island City, NY Art out of the Studio, Community Settings '87; Kassel, West Germany Documenta 8 "The Castle", installation by Group Material '87; The Saatchi Collection, London New York Art Now '87; Museum of Modern Art, NYC Committed to Print '88; ROSC, Dublin, Ireland ROSC '88 '88; Venice Biennale Aperto '88 '88; Institute of Contemporary Art and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Binaional: American Art of the Late '80s '88 (travelled); Dia Art Foundation, NYC Amerika/Tim Rollins + K.O.S. '89.

Selected Bibliography about Tim Rollins + K.O.S.:

Sola, Michele. "'Just Take It Step by Step': an interview with Tim Rollins and the Kids of Survival crew," Radical Teacher Magazine no. 33 (September '87), p. 8+.
DiMattia, Joseph. "Tim Rollins' Survival Course," Artipaper vol. 7 no. 6 (February '88), p. 11.
Fairbrother, Trevor. "Tim Rollins + K.O.S." (interview), The Binational/American Art of the Late 80's, Institute of Contemporary Art and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, 1988, p. 175+.


Nilson, Lisbet. "From dead end to avant-garde," Art News vol. 87 no. 10 (December '88), p. 132+.


