

Tim Rollins + K.O.S.:  
Fifteen Years of Art and Teaching

Hatton Gallery  
Colorado State University

March 22 - April 30, 1999



### I See the Promised Land

*This was Dr. King's last, and most poignant, sermon. He delivered it, on the eve of his assassination, at the Bishop Scott Memorial Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on 3 April 1968. It was the last sermon of the Church of God in Christ, the largest African American Pentecostal denomination in the United States.*

Thank you very kindly, my friends. As I listened to Ralph Abernathy in his eloquent and generous introduction and then thought about myself, I wondered who he was talking about. It was easy to have your closest friend and associate say something good about you. And Ralph is the best friend that I have in the world.

I'm delighted that each of you here tonight to ignore that storm warning. You've been determined to see on this day something is happening in Memphis, something is happening in our lives.

As you know, I've been thinking at the beginning of my life, with the possibility of a general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take the recent night in Egypt through the desert across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land. And in spite of its magnitude, I wouldn't stop there. I would move on to Greece, and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality.

But I wouldn't stop there. I would go on, even to the great heights of the Roman Empire. And I would see developments, a world, then, through various emperors and leaders. But I wouldn't stop there. I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all that the Renaissance did for the cultural and artistic life of the world. But I wouldn't stop there. I would even go to the man whom I'm certain had his hand on the plow. And I would watch Martin Luther as he tackled his nation's sins at the dawn of the church in America.

But I wouldn't stop there. I would come on up even to 1963, and watch a vacillating president, the man of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.

# The Art of Tim Rollins + K.O.S. Expanding the Circle: Towards a Democratic Art

by Patrick Fahey and Linny Frickman

Tim Rollins and the Kids of Survival, (K.O.S.) are among the most documented of the new community art projects. Now in their second decade, they have become an exemplar of collaborative art practice and over 200 articles about them have appeared in books and journals. In 1981, artist Tim Rollins began teaching art classes in the New York City public schools to students categorized as “learning-disabled,” “dyslexic,” “emotionally handicapped,” and “neurologically brain-impaired.” The limitations presented by working in the school system dictated that Rollins establish a separate program and K.O.S. and the Art and Knowledge Workshop were officially formed. Working with a group of primarily Latino students in the South Bronx, Rollins emphasized literacy. This belief led to a central working premise—that all artwork would derive from a text. Choosing books with themes of struggle and themes that spoke to adolescent students, they developed images to enlarge their understanding and relationship of the text to their own lives. Yet as Tim Rollins + K.O.S. continue their work, the description of their project must now be reconfigured. Tim Rollins + K.O.S. is no longer just a community project centered in the South Bronx, but rather a project of expanded audience and

expanded participants. Through the introduction of Prometheus Bound (the first website by Tim Rollins + K.O.S.) as well as art-making workshops throughout the world, Tim Rollins + K.O.S. is extending the boundaries and scope of their work. This broadening of activities brings Tim Rollins + K.O.S. closer to the goal of art-making as a democratic process.

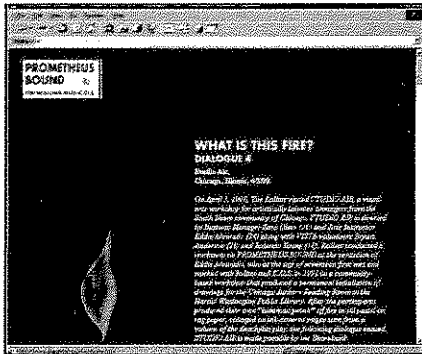


figure 1

Activist, writer and artist Suzanne Lacy proposes a new construct for the relationship between artist and audience in her essay *Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art* (1996). Lacy challenges the traditional model of aesthetics which suggests conversations only emanate from the art work to the viewer. Her concentric model is instead based on dialogic movement back and forth between audience, art work and artist. Tim Rollins + K.O.S.’s work embodies Lacy’s interactive model. Even in the beginning of their project, Rollins involved his students in a process that asked them to originate

and collaborate in the construction of the art work. They called it “jamming”—a process that involved a discussion the text, their individual interpretations, and cooperative placement of images on the text adhered to a canvas. Lacy illustrates a circle with a center of origination and responsibility. The center is occupied by an individual or individuals critical to the success of the work. As the concentric rings emanate out from the center more people are involved as collaborators, participants and audience. While Tim Rollins and his core participants in the South Bronx remain at that critical center, their contemporary activities open outward to include others and strengthen the original democratic aims of the group.

Rollins + K.O.S. moved their work beyond the South Bronx in 1988, involving themselves with community based projects throughout the world. In recent years the frequency and scope of these activities have increased. During this period he has also moved to include literary sources outside western canonical texts

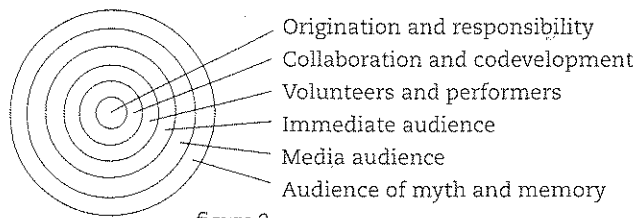


figure 2

figure 1:

Tim Rollins + K.O.S.,  
Prometheus Bound, 09/18/97 ongoing  
Dia Web Site Project  
Dia Center for the Arts, New York

figure 2:

Lacy, S. (1996).  
*Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art*.  
In S. Lacy (Ed.), *Mapping the terrain: New genre public art*  
(p. 178). Seattle: Bay Press.

(*The Invisible Man, I See the Promised Land, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*). In 1997 they directed a workshop with 14 at-risk teenagers from Oklahoma City to create a large scale painting. That same year they traveled to Georgia to work with The Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Atlanta. This past year

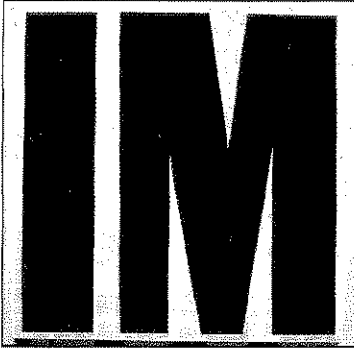


figure 3

Tim Rollins + K.O.S. have travelled to Albany, to Chicago (working with adolescents from the Studio Air), to Pennsylvania State University and to the Bay Area of California (where a collaboration with the Yerba Buena art center continues). In each of these settings Rollins + K.O.S. work with groups of children removed and marginalized from the center and bring them closer to that center. As in Lacy's territorial model, Rollins + K.O.S. share authorship with children who usually have little power or voice in today's contemporary society. Author and educator Nicholas Paley suggests that children and adolescents are often looked at as having little to contribute. Yet they need to have their voices heard and acknowledged. The process that Tim Rollins + K.O.S. champions allows children and adolescents to have their ideas taken seriously through group discussion based on Socratic method. And when works produced in Rollins' outside workshops are recognized as part of the K.O.S. oeuvre and students see their art purchased by museums and art world institutions they gain a sense of self worth and access to the dominant culture.

Tim Rollins + K.O.S. belongs to the explosion of art and political activist projects that first emerged in the mid 1970s. Nina Felshin (1995) notes that many of these practices are collaborative in nature and that even their names (for example Group Material—Rollins was a founding member) can challenge “art world notions of individual authorship, private expression and the cult of the artist” (p.11). Rollins has been criticized for placing his own name prominently as part of the group's moniker. Yet this labeling is key not only to Rollins view of himself as teacher at Lacy's critical center, but to his view of democracy in action. Though what emerges from the K.O.S. studio are collaborative finished pieces, the individual is never negated. “Kids 'own' their images, yet the workshop places them collectively, by talking it out. Like transfigured graffiti, the format makes room for the individual within a group” (Larson, 1989, p. 123). Personalities are encouraged. In both Rollins' + K.O.S.'s travels, and through their travels in cyberspace, participants are identified and acknowledged for their contributions. Rollins' work is teamwork, but teamwork where the players receive their due.

Tim Rollins + K.O.S. recognize they are limited in the number of groups they can work with face to face in any one year and have turned to the internet as a vehicle to create work, disseminating their ideas and inspiring others to create. Their web site, founded in 1997 with the Dia Center for the Arts, is based on Aeschylus' Greek tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. In the myth, Prometheus, the Titan, is chained to a rock by Zeus as punishment for bringing fire to mankind. Daily he is attacked by a vulture who eats his liver. The story provides the basis for discussion on the relationship of the text to the lives of the participants logging onto the site.



figure 4:

figure 3:

Tim Rollins + K.O.S.,  
*Invisible Man* (after Ralph Ellison),  
 1999, acrylic, book pages on linen,  
 72 x 72 inches  
 Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Peter Paul Rubens,  
*Prometheus Bound*, detail  
 oil on canvas,  
 95 7/8 x 82 1/2 inches,  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art:  
 W. P. Wiltach Collection

The site was inspired by Peter Paul Rubens' painting of Prometheus in the Philadelphia Museum of Art which the group discovered in 1981.

What inspired this whole project was the first time I visited the PMA with some of my special ed. Junior high school students in 1981.....This painting was by far the kids' favorite artwork, with Duchamp's *Etant Donnees* coming in a close second. Isn't that wild. So the kid's enthusiasm for *Prometheus Bound* encouraged me to read Aeschylus and research other artworks, literature and music that have been created on this theme. We've been struggling to make our own Prometheus for fifteen years...So now we're going back to revisit as many of the original inspirations as possible. (Rollins, p. 1, 1997)

In the internet dialogue Rollins describes Ruben's Prometheus. He notes, "I find it full of struggle and hope. Prometheus is strong—he still has power and fight. He's suffering, but not extinguished. He's invincible" (Rollins, p.8, 1997). Rollins' description of Prometheus could easily be applied to the K.O.S. members—marginalized by society, but able to overcome their situations.

Rollins reliance on a Greek classic for the first website is appropriate. His adherence to democratic principles first advanced in ancient Greece and to dialectical Socratic methods are employed in his use of the internet. The visual layout itself emphasizes the dialogue and reads like a script. Rollins also postulates that the Greek philosophers would have loved the internet. "What's exciting about it is you have the simultaneous audience...a thousand people looking at it at the same time...You know if Plato had a website, he'd love the web site; he'd love the Internet...Socrates would really love the Web" (personal communication, May 28, 1997).

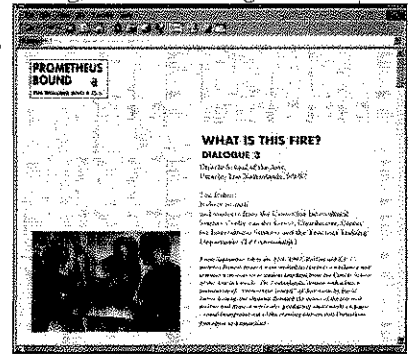


figure 5

To date the website is comprised of four discussions based on Prometheus which also can be described in terms of Lacy's territorial model of concentric circles. In each discussion the number of participants broadens. In dialogue one Tim and three students (Daniel Castillo, Emanuel Carvajal and Robert Branch) discuss Prometheus' fire in their Chelsea Studio. Dialogue two takes place in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and includes an additional K.O.S. member Jorge Abreu and curators from the museum. Dialogue three is a discussion with students from the Center for Intercultural Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands. In this conversation, K.O.S. student Robert Branch moves into the center and takes on a leadership role in guiding the discussion. The fourth dialogue involves eleven students in the Chicago "Studio Air Project" whose instructor (Eddie Alvarado) worked with Tim Rollins + K.O.S. in a community based workshop at the age of seventeen.

Alvarado's move from student to leader of "Studio Air" is proof of Tim Rollins' + K.O.S.'s success, as well as the notion of art making as a democratic process where participants are given the opportunity to move to the center and to originate new works and projects that reach out to others. This democratic ideal is maintained and strengthened in the art making process because of the existence of shared narratives—introduced by Tim Rollins + K.O.S..

figure 5:

Tim Rollins + K.O.S.,  
Prometheus Bound, 09/18/97 ongoing  
Dia Web Site Project  
Dia Center for the Arts, New York

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cover image:

Tim Rollins + K.O.S.,  
*I See the Promised Land*

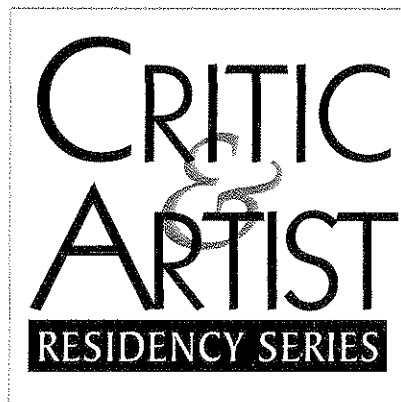
**HATTON  
GALLERY**

#### **About the Program:**

The Critic and Artist Residency Series was founded in 1997 to bring prominent artists and critics to the Colorado State University campus. The series was created from an anonymous endowment (entitled the FUNd) given to the Department of Art. The program puts students, faculty and the community in touch with important figures in the contemporary art world through public lectures, open forums, classroom interactions and critiques. The artist residency also includes a major exhibition of the artist's work in the department's Hatton Gallery. The program began in the fall of 1997. Since that time critics Peter Plagens of *Newsweek*, Terry Barrett of Ohio State University, and Christopher Knight of the *Los Angeles Times* and artist Byron Kim have been in residence.

#### **About the Artists:**

Tim Rollins is an artist currently living and working in the South Bronx. Rollins attended the University of Maine, Augusta, Maine; the School of the Visual Arts and New York University, New York City, New York. He co-founded Group Material in 1979. In 1982 he founded K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) and the Art and Knowledge Workshop. Current members of the artist group Tim Rollins + K.O.S. include Angel Abreu, Nelson Savinon, Jorge Abreu, Robert Branch, Emanuel Carvajal, Daniel Castillo, Roberto Roman, Cedric Constant, Alan Johnson, Luis Santiago Pagan, Jr., Quincy Bass, and Michael Adetutu. Their work has been featured in numerous solo shows including exhibitions at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C..



#### **Acknowledgements:**

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