

# Tim Rollins + KOS @ the ICA

Back in the 80's, deeply entangled within the thriving Lower East side art community Tim Rollins co-founded the overtly political collaborative team Group Material. This coalition of artists counted within its ranks notable individuals such as Felix Gonzales-Torres and Julie Ault. Reflecting upon the group Rollins states that 'we organized exhibitions that weren't about works of individual artists or groups, but addressed social themes and subjects like alienation, consumerism, fashion, music, and gender.' Within the ferment of this moment Rollins established the Art and Knowledge Workshop in '83 at a local community center. Out of this workshop the collaborative project "Kids of Survival" was created.

The "Kids of Survival" program took a two-pronged approach toward reaching educationally-challenged and at-risk students. Rollins simultaneously encouraged his students to read and gave them a much-needed means of personal expression by assigning them projects in which they created paintings based on narratives of authors such as Franz Kafka's *Amerika* and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Rollins was associated with Group Material in a ruggedly fairytale-like time when critical theory and philosophy were seen as complimentary, or even crucial for the reception and production of visual art. Having participated in many critical and altruistic projects within that moment of history, Rollins' work and motives appear to be sacrosanct. To criticize these situated artistic procedures from the perspective of our current market driven and celebrity dazzled art world seems out of line. Tim, we're on the same team right?

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Skulking through the opening of the Tim Rollins + KOS historical survey exhibition at the ICA, I felt the pressure to speak only with a hushed voice and scan the room with downcast eyes. The galleries had the sad and mournful tone of an unintentional wake. It seemed like a wake for an undead author.

Collaboration within the field of visual art has the potential to explode an artist's centralized sign-identity that's been formed and reinforced through a notion of singular authorship. The thing that has always bothered me about Tim Rollins + KOS is how Rollins may force the identities of his students to collapse by renaming them of the Kids of Survival, while Rollins retains his own name recognition and singularity. Have KOS not earned the right to claim full partnership in their collaborative projects? Do the students only win back their names after graduating from art school?

What kind of collaborative model is Rollins deploying with his choice of nomenclature? Roberta Smith states that 'their approach upsets the myth of the isolated artistic genius prevalent since the Renaissance.' This claim makes sense when considering Rollins' work with Group Material where the name of the collaborative team blended the authorship roles of the participating artists. Their reasons for this blending of identities was that they 'were put off by the competitive art system in which an individual usually had to develop a signature voice' and that they 'were not so interested in promoting individual members or naming [themselves] very precisely.' The participants of Group Material performed authorial seppuku.

The idea and act of killing the author drains the cultural text of any biographical inflections and insights into those who initially compose the work of art. The author's deeds and misdeeds become irrelevant. The

text is cut from the moorings of the 'isolated artistic genius,' and sent out into the indeterminate sea of free-floating signifiers and textual equivalence. This stripping of the work from its biographical crutch is anti-patriarchal, as well as slowing the wheels of an art market that attributes value based on the signature style of an 'isolated artist.'

Group Material changed course due to what I'm assuming was the result of the pressure from a field that quietly insists on individualist careerism. Julie Ault states that:

In 1985 with, again, *Americana* at the Whitney, we established that the Group was not necessarily made up of everyone who came in for a project or participated in an exhibition. We identified the core collaborative that conceived and organized the projects: me, Doug, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins. Thereafter, we listed who composed.

By listing the names of those who composed, they surrendered their assault on the 'myth of the isolated artistic genius,' thus admitting that they were merely a coalition of re-animated authors.

Within the projects that Rollins works on with KOS, Rollins takes the position of a living author with all of the advantages to be gained from the competitive art system that rewards the conventional 'signature voice'. Curiously, Rollins kills the authorship of his students by blending their identities and representing them only as a group of unnamed and decentered subjects.

When the author is dead, the original writing of the text becomes secondary. The notion of active reading becomes fore-grounded. Active reading occurs when the life experiences and knowledge bases of the readers shape the messages that are received from a text. The textual strategies that Rollins deploys with KOS can be seen as the active reading of dead authors.

Their process of active reading is what they call 'jammin.' Jammin occurs when 'Rollins or one of the students reads aloud from the selected text while the other members draw and relate the stories to their own experiences.' These drawings are assembled and adhered in a grid formation onto canvases, and then delivered to an art gallery for collectors to collect.

Readings like this are highly idiosyncratic and far removed from rigorous explication, or historically contextualized interpretation. It is a classroom feasting on the carcass of a dead writer. By reading and devouring, KOS produce works that are excessive and sovereign. This activity is where the group finds its nourishment and strength. Rollins states that 'the impetus to paint images of our own making--to vandalize and commemorate these texts at once--came from the students' delight in transgression.' By reading outside of the confines of literary analysis, and asserting their own subjectivity onto the texts, they confront the viewer of the work with a practice that attempts to slip their throats out from under the boot of the means and ends ethos of contemporary life.

Even though these lessons that Rollins provides for his students and art audience are important, the questions remain as to when and if the students will regain their birth names and reanimate their singular authorship? Roberta Smith asks, 'will some of the members go on to become artists in their own right? (Money from the sales of their paintings is already putting a few of the older Kids through college and art school.)' I am wondering if the students that do integrate themselves into the art world (a field that is still contaminated by hidden divisions of race, class and gender), will they retain a fidelity to the radical practice of working from a position of destabilized authorship and subjectivity, or will they mimic the steps of their teacher and re-assert their claim to signature singularity and the myth of the isolated artistic genius.

- Holly Martins