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New York Scene

Tim Rollins + K.O.S., Amerika, Dia Art Foundation, October 13, 1989 - June 17, 1990

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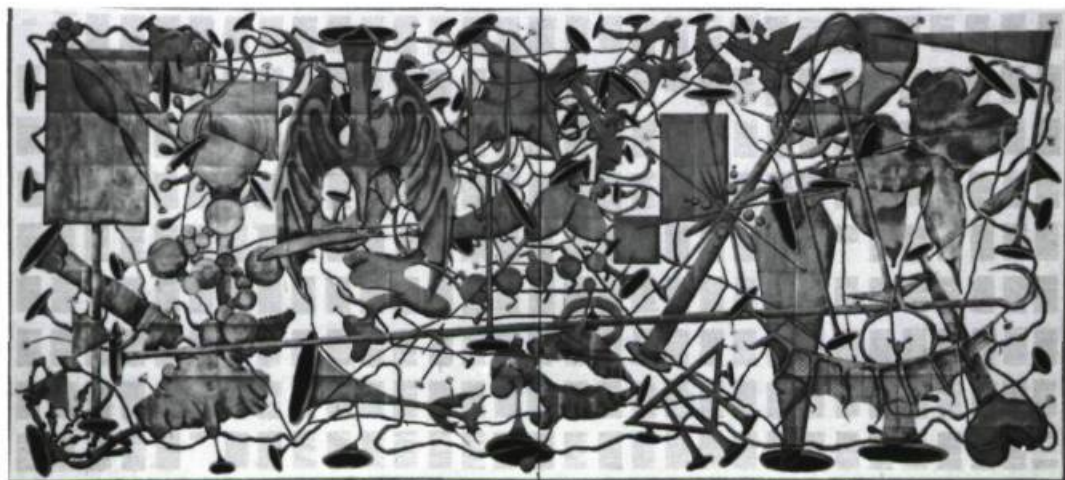
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Tim Rollins + K.O.S., *Amerika IV*, 1986. Lacquer with metallic powder, oil paintstick, and pencil on bookpages on linen; 72 x 130 in. Collection of Virginia Wright, New York & Clay Rolader, Atlanta. Photo : Bill Jacobson Studio

**Tim Rollins + K.O.S.,
Amerika, Dia Art Foundation,
October 13, 1989 - June 17, 1990 -**

The 1980s represented a watershed of sorts in the history of artistic collaboration. And the 90s will most likely continue this essential trend. While the myth of the solitary artist is still potent, conjuring visions of long, brooding hours in splendid, tortured isolation, the current model of creation has acquired a more upbeat, freeze-dried, just-add-water status. This is possibly due to the large volume of work that appropriates from the ready-made global wash of media culture, simulates the late capitalist consumer object, or hyper-realizes diagrams of communication flow and information retrieval, the sources of power in our contemporary microchip world. With more art adapting a strategy of looking like everyday objects or their media projections (in order to more effectively critique our contemporary cultural moment), the traditional notion of a rarefied, precious art object has been compromised, to the point that we are as inured to seeing a stack of clock radios or a pile of industrial hardware in a gallery as we are to a show of paintings.

Perhaps more to the point is the increasing visibility of the entire mechanism of the art world. It's as if the sources of art production, acquisition and aesthetic legislation were a jeep, covered by a Sahara sand dune that the winds have gradually but inexorably blown away to reveal wheels, engine and transmission. Robert Motherwell once said that, when he was first

coming up as a painter, he would never have considered directly approaching a curator at the Whitney, at least partly because he didn't know who these people were or what they looked like. This statement is naïvely touching in our present climate. Now, anyone who wants to know about the infrastructure of the art world can pick up a couple of magazines and read about the auctions, the corporate collections, government endowments, art institutions both public and private, multinational fairs, group theme parks, bi-annual invitational exhibitions, curated shows in museums and foundations, and so on. Many of the galleries themselves have acquired a new corporate patina, with not one but several proprietors' names listed at the top of the masthead, or with an allusion to their silent backers who, by that very allusion, are not so silent anymore. Galleries are starting to project the same polished corporate image as the law firms, banks and ad agencies that constitute their influential clientele. Here is the spectacle of wheels within wheels, of an art world where the group corporate effort becomes the model for production and power.

Little wonder, then, that the perceptive artist is more likely to forsake his splendid isolation and pool his efforts with other like-minded creators, to produce and sign work with a collective, collaborative identity. As Saatchi & Saatchi might state it in an ad campaign, "Acquire an ampersand & conquer the world". Although several of the following had their origins in the 1960s and 70s, they were all part of the collaborative epidemic of the 80s: Gilbert & George, McDermott & McGough, General Idea, TODT, Ginzel & Jones, Wallace & Donohue, the Grey Organization, Clegg &



Tim Rollins + K.O.S., *America IX*, 1987. Watercolor, charcoal, acrylic and pencil on book pages on linen; 64 x 168 in.
Photo : Bill Jacobson Studio

Guttman, Komar & Melamid, Group Material, Ericson & Ziegler, Fischli & Weiss, IFP, Fortuyn O'Brien, the Bechers, the Boyle Family, the Starn Twins, CoLab, and various teams of graffiti writers.

And, of course, Tim Rollins + K.O.S. (which stands for Kids of Survival). Rollins, a co-founder of the Group Material collective and alternative space for socially committed art, has been teaching art at an intermediate school in the South Bronx for the last eight years. His K.O.S. are a rotating roster of black and Puerto Rican students who the New York City Board of Education has classified as "learning disabled" or "emotionally handicapped". Their collaborative canvases and mixed media work originated as a political act, a double-edged project of remedial education: to inform the kids about the world outside, and to reform the outside world regarding the South Bronx, a tough, derelict part of the city that has been subjected to much media frenzy and uninformed hyperbole in recent years. In this sense, if no other, the Rollins+K.O.S. collaboration differs from those listed above. It is not the self-conscious venture of art school graduates entering into a corporate identity, but rather the dialectic between an educated white male liberal with pedagogic and political aspirations and a class of semi-literate homeboys and homegirls that the power structure had basically given up on.

Rollins' mission, in his own words, was to use art as "a means to knowledge of the world", to acquaint his students with the canons of modernist Western art praxis, through museum visits, examinations of relevant texts, discussion, and hands-on art making. The most celebrated product of this teaching machine — the thirteen large-scale paintings of the *Amerika* se-

ries, based on the unfinished novel by Franz Kafka, and currently on exhibition at the DIA space on 22nd Street — was initiated through an act of defacement, when a student drew on one of Rollins' books. The resultant conflation of image and text intrigued Rollins, because, like many members of K.O.S., the student was dyslexic (a condition that makes reading difficult), yet his overdrawing expressed an uncanny understanding of the very book that he could not read. So an act of vandalism, which could be simply dismissed as belligerence or defiance, could also be construed as a gesture of enfranchisement, a direct, instructive way of relating to the forms of the dominant culture that would otherwise remain inaccessible. (A parallel could be drawn between this enfranchisement through vandalism and rap music or Latin hip hop in which the grooves of a record are selectively "scratched" or sampled for their musical content in the creation of a new song. But this is the subject of another essay.)

From this incident grew a strategy in which the pages of a text (Rollins+K.O.S. have also employed *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*) were pasted on canvas or linen and used as a ground and an inspiration for images that the group would arrive at through drawing jam sessions over an extended period of time. In the particular case of *Amerika*, the 300 pages of the unfinished novel follow the misadventures and reversals of Kafka's protagonist Karl, "a poor boy of sixteen who had been packed off to America by his parents". Almost at the point of leaving America after being cheated, lied to and robbed, in the last 25 pages of the book Karl comes under the benign influence of "The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma", where he is told that anyone can be an

artist and that everyone is welcome. He encounters the visionary sight and aural cacophony of "hundreds of women dressed as angels in white robes with great wings on their shoulders ... blowing on long trumpets that glittered like gold"².

This potent allegory of adolescent immigration, adaptation and survival, and of America as a country of many voices, where everyone can blow what they want and when they want to, seems to have struck a particularly resonant chord for Rollins and his collaborators, many of whom are first generation Americans. Using Kafka's suggested colour scheme of white and gold, they have fashioned a series of wildly improvisational, vividly energetic and totally compelling abstract paintings. The golden horns in the *Amerika* series are rendered in all sorts of forms, from long tendrils to hollow bladders and squat tubas (even tubers). They often take on biomorphic connotations and elements of the gothic imagination or the grotesque, and are periodically augmented by other shapes, such as rectangles, urns, candles, baseball bats, clubs, guns, scythes, letters and glyphs. The gold-filled shapes are given volumetric proportion by black shadings or outlines of acrylic and charcoal. In a postmodernist strategy of appropriating motifs from the history of art, the collective has assembled influences from Miro, Klee, Goya, Georgia O'Keefe, Uccello, Picasso (particularly *Guernica*), Guston, Rodchenko, Ensor and William Morris (to cite but a few), as well as material from comic books, magazines, anatomy textbooks, Dr. Seuss, movies, Mayan tapestries, African sculpture and cartoons.

The dense, extravagant overlay of images in the *Amerika* series suggests the heady, charged atmosphere of a late-night jazz session, even to the iconography of the horns, which seem to brazenly announce themselves in the visual cacophony of a multivoiced, multithroated hymn to improvisation. But just as the wildest jams of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman or Sun Ra are rooted in basic scales and chord progressions, so the eclectic borrowings of Rollins + K.O.S. achieve a surprisingly formal elegance against their background of the regular, repeated pattern of book pages.

This grid of text invokes several formal concerns that are at the heart of contemporary avant-garde art theory: the relation of figure to ground, and of image to text; the question of authorship; the nature of geometric painting. These four issues are admittedly not explored to any particular depth or fruition in the paintings of Rollins + K.O.S., and one can, without much trouble, select four artists who treat these respective issues with greater clarity and resolve (to wit: Tom Nozkowski, Victor Burgin, Philippe Thomas and Peter Halley). But it is exactly this sort of comparative critique that misses the boat, that fails to read between the lines. What is particularly exciting in the art of Rollins + K.O.S. is not the espousal of the postmodernist canon, although the strategies of appropriation and

image saturation that we have already traced would point to a definite postmodern bent in the work. Rather, we are witnessing the reinvention of painting, a multicultural collaboration in which the history of visual expression, from both high and low art sources, is compressed into a series of separate but equal references, in which Batman and Picasso carry the same weight. Of course, this was the strategy of pop art, but in the context of remedial education, does this represent a more democratic, streetwise practice of art, a reversal of the traditional mainstream notion of the academy? By encouraging his students of colour to engage in cultural production that was heretofore reserved to the white, art-schooled hierarchy, but also by remaining open to the pervasive influence of the K.O.S. on his own art practice, Rollins seems to be allowing transformations to occur in both directions. This is a typical liberal strategy, to celebrate and learn from heterogeneity, and Rollins cannot be faulted for the sincerity of his intentions. If there is any irony or disingenuousness to be found in the situation of Tim Rollins + K.O.S., it possibly resides in the intentions of their collectors and sponsors. As the work becomes more marketable, there is a real danger that the banks, museums and other powerful collecting institutions will use the very fact of collecting the work of street kids as an apologia, an easy way to symbolically do their part and avoid any further responsibility for the fate of areas like the South Bronx.

Steven Kaplan

NOTES

1. Franz Kafka, *America*, Schocken Books, New York, 1976, p. 3
2. Ibid. p. 274