TIM ROLLINS AND K.O.S.
ANIMAL FARM
SEPTEMBER 17 - DECEMBER 6, 1992
During five days in July, the collaborative artist group Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) conducted a workshop for eleven local high-school students at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D.C. Artist and teacher Rollins selected the students through a competitive District-wide portfolio review, choosing those who displayed talent for caricature and portraiture. The goal of the intensive workshop sessions was collectively to create a large-scale painting, based on George Orwell's cautionary fable Animal Farm (1945), depicting approximately one hundred world leaders as barnyard animals. The painting is the centerpiece of the Hirshhorn's exhibition "Directions—Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: Animal Farm," which also includes related studies by individual students and earlier paintings on the same theme by Rollins and K.O.S.

From their home base in the South Bronx section of New York City, Tim Rollins and K.O.S. have been making art collaboratively for ten years. In 1980 Rollins was a cofounder of Group Material, a group of artists who worked together to create exhibitions around particular social themes. A year later, he was recruited to teach special education classes at a public school in the South Bronx. Most of his students were truant, classified as learning disabled, or had behavioral problems but also exhibited artistic talent. K.O.S. evolved from the afterschool workshops for these students that Rollins conducted on his own. By 1984 he had established the Art and Knowledge Workshop, Inc., in a local community center.

A group of workshop regulars, 11-16 years old, became the self-named K.O.S. Over the years, the membership has changed but the requirement that members be in either secondary school or college remains. The present core includes long-time members Angel Abreu, Carlos Rivera, and Nelson Savinon, with newcomers Jorge Abreu, Christopher Hernandez, and Victor Llanos. In 1987 Rollins left the public school system to devote himself full-time to the Art and Knowledge Workshop, where he and K.O.S. gather to study and produce art.

In order to instill K.O.S. with pride in their production, Rollins, from the beginning, ran a professional studio. As soon as they could afford it, the group bought the best art supplies and eventually moved the Workshop into a spacious warehouse loft. Although initially their works seemed aligned to the graffiti tradition of impoverished urban areas, Rollins and K.O.S. soon found their voices in a sophisticated merging of art historical and mass culture influences. None of the ghetto stereotypes would apply.

The nature of their collaboration is complex but organized. Rollins likens it to a choir, where he is the conductor but, as in all good choruses, the individual voices must be developed and encouraged to sing. Because they work on several projects at once, each K.O.S. member performs the jobs at which he or she is particularly adept. Some are proficient draftsmen, and others are better abstract painters. The older, more experienced members help the younger ones.

Rollins relies on books as teaching tools. He begins each project by selecting a classic of Western literature. After K.O.S. approves his choice, the group reads and analyzes the book, relating elements in its story line to contemporary issues and generating ideas for images of which they make studies. Rollins urges the group not to get "lost" in books but use them for inspiration. Usually, the group prepares a canvas by gluing the actual pages of the book onto it, creating a grid-like pattern and painting on this field of text.

The centrality of ideas through language and text is of primary importance to Rollins and K.O.S.'s efforts. The actual textual background of works like Animal Farm '92 is also the conceptual background. The group's painting on books, whether actual or metaphorical, is their updated interpretation in their own visual language or, as Rollins asserts, they "re-write the book" in this manner.
URING FIVE DAYS IN JULY, THE collaborative artist group Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) conducted a workshop for eleven local high-school students at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D.C. Artist and teacher Rollins selected the students through a competitive District-wide portfolio review, choosing those who displayed talent for caricature and portraiture. The goal of the intensive workshop sessions was collectively to create a large-scale painting, based on George Orwell’s cautionary fable Animal Farm (1945), depicting approximately one hundred world leaders as barnyard animals. The painting is the centerpiece of the Hirshhorn’s exhibition “Directions—Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: Animal Farm,” which also includes related studies by individual students and earlier paintings on the same theme by Rollins and K.O.S.

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The theories of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire are an inspiration to Rollins. Freire advocates an active and empowering learning process in which students become "subject-readers" who critically analyze a text. Citing his experiences teaching in rural areas of Brazil, Freire grounds his instruction in language related to a student's experience. He believes in a literacy that heightens self-awareness and thus inevitably liberates the learner from the societal constraints of ignorance and poverty.¹

Similarly, Rollins views education as a liberating force. His goals range from motivating K.O.S. members and workshop participants to stay in school and encouraging them to attend college to transforming them into confident and productive people who "make history." He pushes K.O.S. to transform any perceived limitations into strengths, accepting no excuses for anything less than their best.

Producing ongoing series of works, Rollins and K.O.S. have created art inspired by a variety of books, including Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll, Amerika by Franz Kafka, The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Temptation of St. Anthony by Gustave Flaubert, and The Autobiography of Malcolm X. More recently, they have painted their version of From the Earth to the Moon by Jules Verne and created sculptures from Collodi's The Adventures of Pinocchio.

In 1987 they traveled to Charlotte, North Carolina, to conduct their first off-campus workshop and produced Amerika VI. They have also collaborated with students in Minneapolis, Boston, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Derry in Northern Ireland, and London. Their interest in conducting a workshop in Washington around the theme "Animal Farm" was prompted by the political atmosphere of the nation's capital.

Orwell's Animal Farm relates the evils of a totalitarian state. Loosely based on the events of the Russian Revolution, the story occurs on an English farm. The animals seize the farm and oust its exploitative human owners. Initially, the revolution creates an egalitarian and beneficent society, embodied in seven commandments that proclaim that anything on two legs is an enemy; forbid animals to kill each other, wear clothes, or otherwise act human; and declare the equality of all animals. By the book's conclusion, however, the leaders have emulated the evil human characteristics they originally renounced, and the seven commandments have been reduced to a single, more efficient canon: "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others."

The book presents a lesson in power and its effect on those who lead, and Rollins asked the group to think not only about who was in the barnyard but also who built it. He had used Animal Farm earlier as a way of motivating K.O.S. members to learn about politics and geography. Dismayed by their lack of knowledge of these subjects, Rollins organized them to get information about political figures using newspapers, magazines, and books. The artists produced portraits of the leaders and, armed with new knowledge about them, began matching their heads to animal bodies. The group created From the Animal Farm I, 1985–88, which included Ronald Reagan (United States) as a turtle, Mikhail Gorbachev (former Soviet Union) as a bull, P.W. Botha (South Africa) as a dog, Margaret Thatcher (United Kingdom) as a goose, and Yitzhak Shamir (Israel) as a goat. They also produced several single-figure paintings such as From the Animal Farm: Waldheim, 1984–87, which depicts Austria's former head of state.

Aside from the opportunity to examine international politics, the "Animal Farm" works provided K.O.S. with a chance to demonstrate their drawing skills. Many of them had begun their artistic activities by drawing comic-book figures and other hybrid human-beast forms. To these pop culture influences, Rollins added the study of art historical sources.

Rollins and K.O.S. looked with particular interest to nineteenth-century French political caricature. Daumier, Grandville, and Travies had contributed caricatures to La Caricature and Le Charivari, short-lived but very influential French journals published by the artist Charles Philipon from 1830–35 during the brief suspension of censorship under the reign of Louis-Philippe. Grandville's work is particularly relevant to the "Animal Farm" works because of his series of people portrayed with animal heads.² The group also studied the anti-fascist photomontages of the German artist John Heartfield produced during the 1930s. His technique of combining different photographs into one composition would apply to the group's method of composing the "Animal Farm" personalities.

For the Washington workshop, Rollins and K.O.S. brought numerous art books from which the District students were expected to draw. On the first day, they copied reproductions of works by the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, self-taught African-American artist Bill Traylor, as well as Daumier, Grandville, Travies, and Heartfield. In addition to these art historical figures, Rollins also discussed certain terms that the students were expected to learn: zoomorphic caricature, photo-
Victor Llanos, and Nelson Savinon—worked as technical assistants, teaching the students how to mix paint, make transparencies, and make a scale drawing of the entire barnyard scene. The entire team determined the placement of the figures. George Bush as a fox was to be at the center of the barnyard and so was painted in first. By the end of the workshop, the students had added eight other images, including Vaclav Havel (former Czechoslovakia) as a butterfly, Fidel Castro (Cuba) as an old dog, and Helmut Kohl (Germany) as an eagle. Rollins and K.O.S. brought the unfinished canvases back to the Art and Knowledge Workshop for completion.

This exhibition was an opportunity for Tim Rollins and K.O.S. to share their group artmaking experience with Washington, D.C., students. The participating District students were Trevor Cain, Julia Davis, Nekisha Durette, Taiwo Heard, Kirby Kok, Micah Lee, Henry Meléndez, Anthony Melvin, Anthony Mincey, Sylvester Mobley, and Diana Zumas.

Our gratitude goes to Martis Davis, Principal, and Mel Davis, Chairman of the Visual Arts Department, of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts for so generously providing us with the studio space for the workshop. Teresia Bush, an educator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, played a crucial part in this project. Special thanks also to Jamie Kim Cohen for her invaluable assistance, as well as to Michael Lerner from the Art and Knowledge Workshop.

Amada Cruz
Assistant Curator


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BIOGRAPHY


SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1985  Art Gallery, Hostos Community College, Bronx, New York.
1987  Lawrence Olivier Gallery, Philadelphia.
1988  Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Riverside Studios, London, and tour; Barbara Krakow Gallery, Boston.
1989  Dia Art Foundation, New York.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY