

**Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: The Black Spot**  
**Talbot Rice Gallery**

**Transcript - Artists' Talk**  
**August 4 2012**

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Transcript of a public talk held in The Playfair Library Hall, University of Edinburgh on the occasion of the exhibition Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: The Black Spot, 2 August – 20 October 2012.

Associated to the exhibition were a range of events referenced in this transcript including an 'Art and Knowledge Workshop' with young people from across the Lothian region and an 'ArtWorks Seminar' for arts educators. Works created via the workshops with young people were included in the exhibition 'The Black Spot'.

**The talk was introduced by Talbot Rice Gallery's Principal Curator Pat Fisher and featured Tim Rollins and K.O.S. members Angel Abreu, Rick Savinon and Eric Fernandez**

**Pat Fisher:** I think this room, the Playfair Library, embodies many enlightenment ideas and it is on the concept of enlightenment that I am delighted to introduce you to Tim Rollins, Angel Abreu, Eric Fernandez and Rick Savinon representing Kids of Survival, who are going to speak to you in conversation for about 40 minutes, before handing over to the audience for a question and answer session.

There are so many specific and unique comments I'd like to make about this artists work, the integrity of education, their remarkably luminous works of art that they create in collaboration that they are the perfect package, let's say, for a university gallery that embodies two of these points in all of its work I hope. But the one thing I would like to say before I hand over to Tim, is that this work is real and ongoing. The survey exhibition we have in the Talbot Rice, the exhibition that runs until the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, includes work from the 1980s and it includes work that was completed just about three days ago. This work is as relevant today as it was in 1985 when we had our original conversation. So therefore I should say no more, and hand you over to Tim Rollins.

**Tim Rollins:** Good afternoon everybody. You know me – talk back! Don't give me that Scottish reserve. Good afternoon everybody! I am thrilled to see this turn out. Thank you very much for sacrificing this beautiful afternoon. I'm going to get a conversation going. I am incredibly excited to be here and I know Angel, Rick and Eric are thrilled, we had a wonderful, wonderful week in Edinburgh. It is one of the greatest cities in the world and I've been around so I am not just gassing you up! We are thrilled.

It is an amazing experience to finally be working in the Talbot Rice which has been a great dream of ours for years and years. And also the most extraordinary experience of working with young people in Edinburgh to create these pretty extraordinary new works. And so I was asked ... some of you have heard this before. And some of you have asked to talk about the history of K.O.S. but what I would like to do is I am going to tell you how all this happened. And rather than just talking about the past, I want to talk to you about the present and to talk about the future. Because when I was working with these young teenagers, this week, it hit me that when you are working with young folk you need to work in the future tense. Any parents in here? You are making a personality that is going to function and be beautiful and effective in this world in the future tense. That is the holistic aspect of all the things that we have done from the very beginning, when I come from the hillbilly hills of rural Maine, New England, Scots Irish family, five generations. And I decided to take up the sado-masochistic act of moving to New York city in 1975 with five hundred dollars, go to the Hotel Chelsea, to come and study at the school of visual arts with my great mentor Joseph Kosuth who actually surprised me, he showed up at the opening the other day, to my delight! It took me back. It took me back, that first day here. Everyone is quiet, everyone is a little bit scared and we are all a little bit scared, but of course I can't show it. And just to go back and say 'wow, this is how this all began'.

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I went to New York and I studied at the School of Visual Arts where I am now a senior professor. Scared to death. Went to New York University to study political philosophy and education and I took on the sado-masochistic act of becoming a public school teacher. In Intermediate School 52, on Kelly Street, in the South Bronx in 1980. Now, South Bronx in 1980, mmm. It is true. I had a wonderful principal. He said 'Tim, I have seen you in action, teaching and in workshops', I was all of 25 years old, and I thought I was 'all that'. He goes 'it would be great if you could come up and help us start an art programme in our junior high school. We have gone through three teachers in one year.' I go 'what happened?'. He said 'the kids ate them up alive and we think there might be a chance with you'. I said 'ok, I'll be the good, nice new England Yankee and I will come up to the Bronx for two weeks and I would work with "brown" children and brag about it in cocktail parties and dinner parties and gallery openings'. You laugh but some of it is true. You know how some of us are. We have a missionary attitude like we have something to give someone when we have hardly got anything ourselves. Hello! And so, I said 'yes, I'll come up' and he goes 'where do you go' and I goes 'gee, I need a subway stop, from downtown Manhattan. What stop is it?' and he goes 'Prospect Avenue'. And I thought 'Prospect Avenue' that sounds wonderful. Prospect Avenue. Take the 2 train up to and you keep going up, up, up. You go through Harlem and then the train is elevated, after Jackson Avenue, and then it is Prospect Avenue.

I'll be honest with you, on that cold September morning, and I go on up, and I get off the L and here is Prospect Avenue and you cannot believe your eyes. Acres and acres of burnt out shells of building and tenements. I am not just talking about two or three abandoned places. Acres. And you could smell the neighbourhood before you got out the train. The smell of burnt, acrid, whatever. I walked out of the train and I go down the stairs and I am looking around. And you have got crack heads over here and over there. Literally, and Rick and Angel, they are older so they know, literally wild dogs running around the streets in packs, with one alpha dog leading them wherever they are going to go. Sirens, fire people going here and there, because everything was on fire and then you have the single mom, walking her kids like this, looking this way and that way, like Angel's mom, getting them to school.

And I am like 'thank god I just said two weeks' and I get to the school and you could hear the school before you got in there. The pandemonium, the bells, security guards screaming at the kids and cursing at them and they are cursing back and I am going 'wow, two weeks'.

I go into the office, familiar story right, here is George Gallego who is the principal and I walk into the office, the school office, after being patted down by security and you go into the office and everybody goes ... the staff start clapping, the secretary, the people hanging around, George Gallego, the principal says 'ok everybody pay up!' he had wagered, they all wagered that I would not make it the four stops, the four blocks away from the subway stop. And I go 'what is going on here?' and they say 'we are really thrilled you are here. And guess what Tim, we are so excited, we got you a room. And guess what, it has got a sink.' And they were all shouting 'hallelujah' and I was like 'what?', I expected a room, I expected, as an art teacher, to have a sink. And then you walk in the space, and it was a five storey building from 1900, the first two floors were such wrecks that no-one could be up there for insurance reasons, so they are operating ... all these kids, 600 kids, on three floors of the school. They were doing classes in the bathroom, for real. They were doing them in the hallway. The library had three classes going on at the same time. Which is pandemonium in a junior high school, ok. I did get the room. I walked in. There is no windows, all busted out and they were covered with plywood, horrible graffiti on it. They did handmade marking pens, they put india ink in roll on deodorant. Imagine that. And instead of the ball, they stuck in felt stolen from the blackboard erasers. Very

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ingenious, right! I look up at the ceiling and the ceiling is really, really high up. Almost 14, 15, 16 feet and on the ceiling was all this amazing graffiti, tags, done in thick pieces of charcoal. I said 'George, these are thirteen year olds, 11, 12, 13 year olds, how the hell did they get up there?'. Well in the Bronx we don't have air conditioning, so you have these long wooden poles that you would pull down the top window, you know what I am talking about. These kids had taken the charcoal, and with masking tape, taped the big chunk of charcoal on the end of the thing and went like that. It looked like a hip hop Sistine Chapel. Wow! 'How they do this, when they do this?' And he said 'Well, the other teacher didn't have much control over his class' and I said 'that is quite obvious but what is also obvious is that if these kids could be so diabolical and creative in a negative way, maybe there is something I can do here, what do you think?' And he goes 'I sure hope so!' but in my mind I am going 'Two weeks! Two weeks!' And then the bell goes.

So what I had, I was armed with the only things I could get, there was no materials, I just took copy paper, the cheap stuff, 8 and a half by 11, two big reams of it. Number two mongol pencils, 2B pencils. That is it. Luckily there was a boom box there and I had brought all my cool tapes. So there was Afrika Bambaataa and Treacherous Three and ... do you remember all those folk? And Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

The interesting thing is in the South Bronx in 1980/81 it was on fire literally but it was also on fire culturally. It was the advent of the hip hop era and don't tell anyone tell you differently, it did happen in our neighbourhood. It was the graffiti artists that were the heroes, it was the break dancers, it was people in fashion, in spoken word. So in a funny strange way, to be the art teacher you were the big hero of the school. It wasn't the basketball coach or football coach because there was no money for sports. It wasn't the band director. It was the art teacher. So I was in a very interesting position and I didn't realise it until after a few hours with the kids. And I said, here we go and the bell rang and here come 12 of them. Down the hall way ... and they bang on this big metal door and the doors open and in they come. One long row, like we did upstairs. One long table, one long row and they were coming on in. And 'boom' and they were looking at me like 'oh yea, he is young! He is so white he could get a moon burn. Who wants to make him cry first?' And yet I had been through enough experience through the boroughs, I had been to Harlem one day, Dead Star the next day, Lower East Side the next day. So I knew, working with these folk, to put on the death mask face. White death mask. (LONG PAUSE) He is a teacher, he knows. And they go 'he crazy! He might be a serial killer or something!' and I said 'I hear you are ok in art, you like art, here we go. What we are going to do for the next hour, straight.' I took the paper – boom! I'm theatrical man. Boom! Boom! 'Here is the pencils, what I want you to do is today, is this ... I want you to make the best drawing that you have ever made in your life. Now.' They go 'now?'. I go 'my favourite word – now'. They looking at each other 'he crazy' and I put the music on and they draw. And I am like 'next', draw, like we did in our workshop yes. 'oh god, what is he doing? Don't even look.' And I am walking like this. And I am trying to be cool. I am trying to keep the death mask on. I am trying to show no expression whatsoever but the stuff that these kids were coming up with was blowing my mind. My church would call it shouting material. And I am looking at it and going 'oh my god they are good' and I am like 'mm hmm'. In the hour, the music is blasting so loud that the kids can't even talk to each other, which was really cool, because their concentration was great, and the math teacher next door was 'could you lower that a little' and I said 'yes sure, and I'd close the door, didn't do anything. I am going to be there for two weeks, there is nothing she can say. At the end of the hour, 'put your pencils down', it is like a test and we are looking, mind blowing ... and they all look at each other's stuff and 'ooh, you made that. Oh, oh.' And I said 'let me ask you something. Is this the best thing you ever made in your life?' and they are like 'yes, hell yeah. Can we do it again?' I said 'wait a minute, one of the kids, Carlos, little guy, big brown eyes, in the middle, the alpha dog of the class' he said 'Tim, can we ask you something?', 'what?' 'are you going to stay, or are you going to leave like all the rest?'. Ooh, manipulative little so and so. Big eyes ... well 'I told Gallego that I am

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only going to be here for two weeks and this is experience and we are going to get something great for you and people will come in and work with you' and they looked and said 'can we ask you something?' and I go 'what?' and he goes 'we are good ain't we?' and I go 'you are all right'. 'Hell no. We are real good and you know what and you think we are real good too because it is written all over your face. Will you stay?' and I am like 'woah'. Sirens going off, smelling that smoke, pandemonium in the hall ways. I have 12 special ed kids, special needs, basically they are knuckleheads but they are wonderful, the hate school, but they love art. It felt, you could discern it. I said 'let me go talk to Gallego but really, two weeks'. 'Ok, Ok'. Go downstairs. We are on the third floor.

Downstairs, principals office, here is Gallego, he is smiling like this, big rocking chair – 'they are good aren't they?' and I said 'George, damn! I am stunned, I am blown away, I can't believe that they are in special ed. I can't believe they are allowed to be so truant, what is going on here?' and he goes 'let me ask you something?' and I go 'what?' and he goes 'would you stay?' and I said that one word, my life was passing before my eyes, this is it, this is going to be the death of something and the birth of something else. I said that one word that gets us into so much trouble, lovers, parents ... educators especially and the word was 'yes'. Say yes please. Say yes. And I said yes. And that was it.

And I went home and I told my friends and they said 'you are out of your mind. Why are you doing this?' And it was because, I will be honest with you, that is why we are here, 'why are you doing this, why are you flying all over the place, working with strange kids that you might never see again, and you don't know what is going to happen?'. Because there was this hand that pushed me and I felt the hand pressing and there was nothing I could do about it. It is called the calling and all educators, true educators, know what I am talking about. It is really wonderful when you can make your calling your career. That is what I try to instruct all my young folk to do. I was impelled. Number one, I knew I could do it. Number two it would be a pretty amazing adventure, but number three, it was a push that I cannot describe. It was the push. It was the push, and I went the next day, and there they are 'what are we doing next?' and I said 'listen everybody, I have decided to stay'. 'oh dang, you are going to stay. Oof, oof, oof, raise the roof!' All excited. And I go 'relax, I am not doing it because I am a goody, goody white guy, trying to help poor people, you got that all ready?' They go 'we like that', 'I am here because you are great artists', 'we like that' and I said 'I am here because something deep inside my soul, it is like a pressure under my sternum says I know for a fact that we are going to be making art, but something in my bones tells me we are going to be making history. I can't explain it, I had no proof, I had no indication, I might not make it to the subway tonight, for real, but the voice is telling me that. Let's make history!' They are looking at me like 'he is still crazy', 'hell yes, we are going to make history, oof, oof, oof, raise the roof, history, history'.

So what happened was I was supposed to be there for two weeks and I ended up staying seven years in that particular school. Every single day 7.30 in the morning, 3 o'clock at night but what happened was around 1984 we decided to create our own group called K.O.S., Kids of Survival, and what we did in 1987 was we got our own studio space two blocks from the school and that became the art and knowledge workshop. I worked all day as a teacher, tonnes of kids, and then the knucklehead group of which Angel was one, Rick was one, There's Angel there he's only 12 years old, go 'aw'. And there's Rick up there. Do you see him? They look exactly the same, it is ridiculous. We decided to be this band of outsider students and walk two blocks to school and the great irony is that at 3 o'clock when that bell rang, we marched to a space of our own and that is when we really began to learn. No bells, no hostile custodians, no jealous teachers on the floor, because I was real popular with the kids and that wasn't cool for them, because they are supposed to be the enemy and I am hanging with the enemy. And we would work from 3 till 4, to 5, to 6, to 7 to 8, to nine o'clock at night.

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Parents would bring in food. You couldn't kick the kids out of the studio. Homework was done, it was checked, it was not allowed to pass unless you did really well with it. The rules were you must be in school and you must be doing well. I would accept a C grade, but C means average and my folk aren't average. Right Eric? They are excellent. You must be excellent to be with us. We decided that we would communicate with the greats and when we got together it was almost like a séance, we were summoning down the ghosts of people like ... Rick can we do the thing?...

This is a painting we made on book pages by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* glued to canvas and we actually did our own interpretation of the work after reading the work in passages. Next please, we are summoning down ... that is another group shot, next please ...

**Rick Savinon:** What was interesting was that we were so used to hearing in the school system 'you can't do this, you can't, you can't ...' and breaking away from the school system after the bell sounded and just going into the studio and doing what we *could* do and realising that the school system ... was kind of wasn't allowing us to blossom and become what we really wanted to be and what we wanted to do and the studio gave us an opportunity to do that as a group.

**Angel Abreu:** At this point Gallego had passed away and we were getting a lot of resistance within the school, this was a little bit before I joined the group, I joined the group right after we got the studio. We started getting shows nationally and internationally and there is one story actually, I wasn't involved at that point ... where we had a show in Madrid and Tim ... Tim can probably tell the story a lot better than I can. But Tim had asked the current principal if it is ok to be able to take some of the students away for a week. It is not just all fun and games obviously. It was going to be an educational experience for everyone involved and they resisted. They didn't want to let the kids out of school.

**Tim Rollins:** They said it wasn't official school business and who was I to take these young people to Madrid. For Latina folk Madrid is a motherland, fatherland, brotherland, sisterland. We were going to see Velasquez, Goya, we were going to do ... it was a huge international group exhibition and they actually had the audacity to say 'this is not official school business and frankly it is illegal to take children out of public school' and that was when it snapped for me. This was in 1987 and it just snapped. And I thought this is April, I am not going to quit, I am not going to give up on my kids, but we are going on this trip. So ...

**Rick Savinon:** Coincidentally we all developed some kind of stomach virus and we all went on the trip.

**Tim Rollins:** And all the Moms are into it. They wrote excuses. They got doctors on board. It was a giant anti conspiracy. It was a positive conspiracy. And we went and it changed our lives. We showed work from a series, this is on Franz Kafka's *America*, in which each of the kids portrayed themselves and their voice as a golden horn and this is the wonderful painting you see downstairs. It is this wonderful cacophony ... you are not sure if it is the apocalypse on a democratic utopia. A little bit of both, which is what America is. This is on the *Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane, in which the kids portrays themselves individually as self portraits, as wounds. Heavy. Next was the *Scarlett Letter*, after Hawthorne, in which this stigma is turned into a transcendent emblem of pride through the transformative power of art.

**Angel Abreu:** I want to add ... this was before the Demi Moore movie too ...

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**Rick Savinon:** It is an interesting story with this work because one of the ... Richard Cruise one of the members of the group at the time, he came in and said 'I am sick of this book, the assigned me to read this book' and Tim says 'you know this is one of the greatest novels in literature, you should read this' and what happened was that Tim had never read the book. So he wound up taking the book back home and we started working on it and collaborating with each other to develop what you see.

**Angel Abreu:** Tim never told us that though. He told us that years later. He had never read the book. He took it home that night, read it and then came back and we were inspired to start on this series.

**Pat Fisher:** Can you tell us a little bit more about how literature became the driver for the paintings? Was that a collective point or was the teaching the literature part of the school system? Or was that a spontaneous decision you made?

**Tim Rollins:** It wasn't spontaneous because if you are true educator you are deeply inspired by ignorance. I was doing a workshop the other day, back in the states, it was based on a Midsummer Night's Dream by Shakespeare and you would be very surprised ... how many people here know what this play is about? What this comedy is about? And hardly anyone person put their hand up and here is twenty young folk. And I said 'I am thrilled, because now you have given me something to do. To teach it all the way through' was very exciting to me.

The reason that literature came about is because everyone is telling me that my kids couldn't read and yes, some of them were dyslexic and emotionally handicapped. These are the labels. Academically at risk, uneducatable, mentally retarded – I love that one! My favourite, don't get mad at me but I know I am right, in the States especially, it is like an epidemic. It is called ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder. You are rolling your eyes. I don't know if you have that here. Back then everyone was having it. It was a big excuse not to let people fly and you can't do this. Everyone had a disorder. But I come from New England, and I think we share a lot in our culture, but we tend to be an assets based nation. Assets based pedagogy in which you find out what someone, a young person is good at, and you build on that and you make it broader and you teach it deeper and you go higher. And luckily everyone had their wonderful skill and love for the making of things, not the taking of things, not the faking of things, not the consumption of knowledge, but we wanted to produce knowledge and in art you can do that instantaneously and it is a whole different pedagogy. They aren't just sitting and passively becoming this bank that people deposit knowledge at. So it really came from ... Martin Luther King is one of my great heroes growing up and he was assassinated when I was 13 and it was the first real death that I felt and acknowledged in my life, it still impacts me to this day, it keeps me going. His wonderful essay, The Strength to Love, he goes.. there is a thing called righteous anger, which I think we as artists and educators all sort of have, and the Norse route for the word to grieve is anger. Anger means to grieve, not to rage OK? But to grieve. And I grieved for this 11 year old named Angel, this 13 year old named Rick. When I met them way back then their intelligence was discredited, it wasn't acknowledged, their beauty wasn't appreciated and their dreams were deferred, and I said 'I grieve for this' and the best way to express that anger was in the form of these works. And daring to have a dialogue with the greats.

When we were in the workshop upstairs at Talbot Rice and I said 'guess what, two ghosts are going to be hanging out with us today, so get used to it and don't get scared of them. It is the ghost of Robert Louis Stevenson and the ghost of Charles Darwin and they are going to end up being your best friend if you let them. Don't be afraid of them. Have a dialogue with them and talk with them. And that is how the art work comes out.'. Rick, can we show a few more.

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This is Anna Sewell. *Black Beauty*. Do you get it? She wants her freedom, her liberty and these bars are there. They are not there literally but they are psychologically. In this work many people think 'well you put the horse behind the bars' and I say 'no, you are the one behind the bars, approaching the artwork. Get it? You think you are free, but you have no idea. That is why you are so imprisoned. Because you think you are free.' That is the role of artists and great educators. To liberate your imagination. So you can see not only what is and what could be but what is possible. This is on the autobiography of Malcolm X. This is in the show, you see our portrayal of certain American politicians as barnyard animals in George Orwell's wonderful *Animal Farm*. Nothing has changed! This is on Pinocchio in which we take logs and we put ... we had a prosthetic expert copy our eyes and insert them in the logs, those are our eyes, in portraits in wood. Pinocchio wants to be human, Pinocchio wants to have agency but for some reason he or she don't have legs yet and they are just waiting. They have the vision, they are waiting for the legs. It is very poignant. This is on Huck Finn, Jim asleep on the raft. We took the little racist caricatures that Mark Twain commissioned for the book to help it sell, and we own them. We took them back. There is the old Baptist hymn, 'I went to the enemies camp and I took back what they stole from me' and in many of these ways, that is why we are engaging with the literature, because we want to take back what was stolen from us in terms of culture. Shakespeare did not write for comparative lit students at the University of Edinburgh although I am sure he is thrilled they are engaged. He wrote for the kids in the poorest congressional districts in the United States, he wrote for my kids. And we relate more than anybody to the character of Puck.

**Angel Abreu:** What I was also going to say about that was Mark Twain commissioned those drawings from Kimbles Dilman who made them. He actually grew up in the Bronx. We didn't know this. Through our research we found this out.

**Tim Rollins:** And so what we did was we asked the kids to become Puck. Puck is the greatest artist. He is a consummate artist because he or she likes to transform things just for the sheer joy of it. It is not instrumental. It is not about getting an exhibition at the wonderful Talbot Rice Gallery, although hallelujah we are so glad after all these years, it is not about getting on the cover of *Art Forum* or the *Scotsman*, that is really great but really it is just about the sheer joy of not accepting the world that has been handed to you and to transform it. To have the audacity to change it. So what we did was we all became Puck and we created the magic flower that has the power to make you fall in love with the next living thing that you see upon awakening from a dream. And then we started accumulating them into these vast fields of joy and possibility. It is really wonderful because I have done this with fifth graders all the way to graduate students, and everyone becomes level in the process of creating. This one is in the show as well. That is me yelling at fifth graders, my favourite thing to do on earth. Martin Luther King with *Where Do We Go From Here?* Mahagonny, the Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny. This is definitely a self portrait of the United States of America, and probably the whole world at this point. *I See the Promised Land*, after Martin Luther King and the final work, this is on *Invisible Man*, and you see, I think, a very beautiful installation, in this exhibition on the great book written by classic African American novelist Ralph Ellison, who wrote this in the year of my birth, 1955, in Harlem. And it is a pretty fascinating ... we had a real rough time around 1993, when one of our favourite kids Christopher Hernandez, was horribly, brutally murdered by a drug dealer, he was an innocent bystander and he was basically ... it was a massacre in his apartment building. He was the youngest one there. He happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It devastated us. We really could hardly function for two or three years. The art market crashed. We were doing really well, we were really independent, independent of the school system and we were travelling all over the place and everything stopped because we had what I would call ... we have had collective joy but there has been times when we have had collective heartbreak.

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Collective grief. And it is hard to make objects of joy and possibility under those conditions. George Abreu who is Angel's little brother, Chris' best friend, one day we were in the studio, and we were looking at a tabloid newspaper, the New York Post, had a very graphic, pretty raw headline typeface and this was this big article about a murder victim and what George did was ... he said 'we have been trying to do Invisible Man for years'. He cut out the word victim and he cut up the v and then the l and then the c and then the t and it was 'I am' and the first thing we did, we made this 12 feet by 12 feet, in a colour of our making 'I am' not 'I am a victim' but 'I am'. The first line in Ellison's book is 'I am an invisible man'. The great genius of that is that when you state you are invisible what happens, you are no longer invisible. And I thought that is what this art thing is all about. 'I am'. Your brother again, we went to an art opening once, and sometimes people play with us, they think we are not real and they try to challenge my young folk and they go 'well, what does this represent?' and as a true artist, George goes 'well what do *you* represent?'. I just have the experience, I don't represent anything. 'I am.' Not 'I was', not 'I could have been', not 'I should have been' ... not 'I want to be', just 'I am'. I think that is the greatest message of all genuine art. 'I am'. And the work is a witness. 'I am.' The exhibition is a witness. 'I am.' All my young folk in the back, you made that work, and now it is on the wall, yes, you are waving! 'I am.' I am a witness, I know Angel and Eric and Rick here are a witness. The work is a witness and I hope after today, you will be a witness as well. Is that all right? That is all I have got. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

**Tim Rollins:** Before I get off, I have to do this. We have this wonderful piece called 'The Black Spot' After Robert Louis Stevenson in which the pirates will slip a black spot into your hand and it is actually a summons, you are going to have to atone for something that we know you did. And we are finishing up and Becky Preston, who is in the back, I got permission, all right Becky? OK. She slipped this into my pocket and I go 'oh, is this my black spot, did I do something wrong?' and can I read a little bit of this to you ... I did not write this.

'While working with you I felt a closer connection to art, and to my dream of being an artist. And you the other day talking about that push into the wrong or right direction, reminded me of when I felt first that push. The first time I felt it and I understood what it meant. I guess that was my push. But listening to you yesterday made me realise how lost I had become on my path. Probably going the wrong way. Doubting my ability, my self worth and my love for art and ...', I love this part ... 'and now I feel like I am back' moving forward, working for what I want, I am working towards my purpose to create beautiful things with meaning and to help other achieve the same thing. I know it is probably incredibly cheesy and cliché but you have inspired me on a whole new level and I don't think I can ever forget working with you and K.O.S. and I certainly don't want to. I want to say thank you so much and that I am blessed to have met you and by that I mean all the courage and faith that I now have is something owed to you. The very essence of instinct is that it is followed independently of reason. Darwin taught me that.'

**Tim Rollins:** Thank you Becky. Becky get on up, stand up. Give her a hand everybody. She has got it big time!

**Pat Fisher:** Everyone, I am sure like me you have been inspired by everything you have heard but you know, this is a university there is still conversations to be had and everyone on the stage is very open to your questions, I think there are a couple of roving mikes, I think we have about ten, fifteen minutes, so please, if there is anything you would like to ask Tim, Angel, Eric, Rick or indeed if there is anything that you would like to ask about the perspective of the gallery then please go ahead.

**Pat Fisher:** Can I begin then? One thing that I would collectively like to ask you is about the extrapolation of the image? I am imagining, and of course I have also seen some of the video film footage of the many documentaries you have made over your career, about the reading of these classic texts. It is indeed inspirational how you have described Tim, reaching for the sky, not starting with something second best but going to the best classic literature. From those readings, how does the image, for example, the golden trumpets of proclamation, they are very, very sophisticated images, how long does that take and how does the visual icon get developed?

**Rick Savinon:** It is a long process. What usually happens is that it is very intuitive so Tim will usually pick out the literature and then what happens is he says he has some ideas and then it is almost like the ball is handed over to Angel and he will add something to it and I will add something else to it, since we all have different skill sets. But it usually happens when one of us has this 'aha' moment. It could be a passage, one phrase or a passage in the book or a paragraph that usually gets our attention immediately and we just focus on that until finally visually we get something that all of us can agree on and start from there. We make a lot of junk, but you have got to make the junk to weed out ...

**Angel Abreu:** I am sure some of you artists out there can attest is the greatest tool that an artist can have is a garbage can. That is true. Pat, it is mining. We really go through and it takes us years a lot of times. Darwin, we have been working on this for 8, 10 years.

**Tim Rollins:** And Eric nailed it. He is new.

**Angel Abreu:** Eric is a newcomer, he was the missing key to Darwin. And also the students we worked with.

**Eric Fernandez:** It is the evolution of the group.

**Tim Rollins:** It is just like a football game, and you kick and you kick and you get and then that one day 'goal'.

**Rick Savinon:** And what is great about us being a group is that each of us have our different jobs, so if I am not in the studio working, then where I have left off, Angel can pick it up. Wherever Angel left off, Eric can come on it. But when it gets down to the nitty gritty, when we are really finalising what the image looks like, we are all in there. What is great is we have email access now, we all just email each other with our smartphones and we are right into the mix.

**Pat Fisher:** So there is a real democracy almost? Are there clashes sometimes?

**Angel Abreu:** All the time.

**Rick Savinon:** The Midsummer Night's Dream pieces, they are not my favourite pieces but there was one that we made that was a horizontal, for me, I got that 'aha' moment, ok I get it now, I understand where this is going, but a lot of the pieces, we were working on a piece, Jules Verne, From the Earth to the Moon, and we were placing glass fragments on the painting, with no old book pages, and every now and then I would cut out a spaceship and pretend like I was flying to space and make fun of the works but eventually I get to realise that it is important. But we do sit down and sometimes we clash but we don't argue. It is not an argument we are just vocalising what may or may not work.

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**Tim Rollins:** The only real controversy is fighting over what music to play in the studio while we are working. That is the only time we really get heated.

**Rick Savinon:** I always say there are no egos in the studio, that is dropped the minute you walk into the door. Collectively we have to be that way to agree on what you see before you.

**Tim Rollins:** The only ego present in the studio is the personality of the artwork that we are making. That is the key. It is not about us. We are just instruments for this strange thing that is going on when we all get together in the same room.

**Rick Savinon:** It is the work, once we finish the work, it is the work that decides that it is done. Not us.

**Pat Fisher:** That point of recognition.

**Angel Abreu:** It happens, and we all know.

**Pat Fisher:** And again, the artists in the audience would be very sensitive to that knowledge because a work of art can be ruined if you impose yourself on it and don't allow it to have some life.

How about questions from the audience. A microphone here at the front ...

**Audience question:** Thank you. I just wanted to ask, this work seems so vital and fresh because it is prepared to talk about faith and belief in the face of a lot of apathy. The art world is very good at finding good excuses for being apathetic, it is ironic, there is the kind of aloofness that artists have. Maybe generally a lot of people associated with the art world feel quite spoilt and even worse, maybe a bit middle class and they don't have that sense of grief to go out and change the world. What would your advice to those people be? Should they go out and look for trouble? Go and find some burnt cars?

[LAUGHTER]

**Tim Rollins:** We do this because we can and because we must. Frankly I have done a significant amount of education training in my career as a professor, and frankly there are some people that you would not want within ten feet of a child because they just don't have that... Again, they come in with a missionary attitude and they want to help people. But you see from their body posture and the way that they dress and the way their social skills, or lack of, that is what they have to work on first before they have the arrogance or the hubris to think they are going to give something to somebody before they have developed it for themselves. So this sort of work isn't really great unless more people start doing it but you have to make sure you really got to do it. It has been thirty years, there is not one week, and my folk will testify, where I will say 'this is it, I am done, stick a fork in me because I am done' and then something happens, and I get a workshop like this and I meet you, and I meet Becky and I see the parents come in and the opening was amazing because there were many people who had never been here before, or even a gallery or museum. That is what I call the break through. That is a crossover. But again, I keep saying it, in America we have this thing on November 25<sup>th</sup> called Thanksgiving and, you know, the art is the turkey. This is the dinner at the big long table, everyone is coming together, and in a funny way the food is an excuse to have a communion. To get together and meet folk you have never met before, people you should be walking like, talking like. Martin Luther King talks about three

kinds of love. And this is really important when you are working with young folk. The first kind of love from the Greek is Eros, we all know what that is, and unfortunately some of our young people think that is what love is. Getting down. Culture is about that, their music is about that, their dress is about that. Then there is Philia, it's fellowship, where we are all together because we have a particular interest, probably in art and education, and its impact on the world. But the best form of love, he says, the deepest one is from the Greek Agape. Agape is a kind of love that makes you love your enemy. Makes you love someone who doesn't look like you, walk like you, talk like you, eat like you, love like you. In a funny way, art in a funny way is a form of love and this is the kind of love that will go to any lengths necessary to create the beloved community and I don't know about you but I am feeling a beloved community here today. And it is through the power of art, the attraction of art, but also what we want to do, is just by example, hopefully be an inspiration for folk that might want to do this sort of work in their own communities, according to their own personalities, according to their own situation and that is what is really important.

**Pat Fisher:** We maybe have time for one or two more questions. But if there are none, we won't force them. Two more ...

**Audience question:** Hello, can I ask Tim, I am visually impaired, have you done much work in your work with K.O.S. with kids who have major sight problems, in how they approach the visual arts or how the visual arts approach them? I wonder what the experience that you have had in your world travels has been? Have you come across many visually impaired groups in your workshops?

**Tim Rollins:** Yes, actually I was visiting professor in Drexel University in Philadelphia for two years and they wanted me to make a connect between the university and community but no-one really wanted that connect to happen, to be honest. So what I decided to do was say 'guess what, I don't really want to work on your campus anymore, why don't you appoint me to be visiting professor of art, literature and music at Martha Washington Elementary school', one of the worst neighbourhoods in Philadelphia, everyone is like from 7-10, it was in that context that I did start working with visually impaired kids. It was a challenge. I like a challenge. I worked with those kids. I worked with autistic kids for the first time. Totally changed my life. I don't know if this is your experience, but just in terms of if you use the right materials and what not, the kids actually felt and assumed what they were doing, and the joy. 'I am allowed to do this? Someone is giving me permission to do this?', I said 'don't worry about what it looks like, worry about what it feels like' and to be honest, that is no way different than the things you see in this gallery today. Don't worry about what it looks like, what does it feel like. And that is when the teacher got taught by these beautiful, beautiful kids. And that was my experience.

**Audience question:** I was just wondering about the group dynamic. Earlier on you were talking about the community and the fellowship of all making art together. Do any of you make art on your own outside of the studio? And also how is that affected whenever new people come into the group and how does it feel being a new person in the group?

**Rick Savinon:** We actually use the studio as our own working studio. There is a little section that I have. I am a photographer, graphics artist, sculptor and painter and I have my own little section where I can go in and when there are times that we are not working on a show I am able to use the facility for my own. I have my little section. Eric has taken over the back here. He is the newbie but he has taken over the back which is fine. It is great. But we kind of ... it is kind of like a family. We open our arms to new members. I remember when I was a new member, 27 years ago, I was afraid to go into the studio because I thought I was maybe not going to be accepted. I was reluctant. But as soon as I walked into those doors it was an open invitation.

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There was no fear. I was accepted as who I was with no questions asked. And the bond was just there. I felt an acceptance. I have always felt that I was the odd man out, especially in my own community because people thought I was different, I am the artist, I am the rebel, I am the trouble maker but in this group it was as though I came in with a clean slate. And it was great. It was fantastic.

**Eric Fernandez:** And for me as a new member, coming fresh out of my undergrad at the school of visual arts, I really cherished that bond that goes on in the studio when there are several artists working together simultaneously and the energy is just bouncing across the room. And to walk into the K.O.S. studio and be able to do my own work and also the collaborative work was really important to me to have this network, this brotherhood. And it inspires me every day when I wake up. I am excited that I don't have to be alone and do this. There's other people that are like me. I felt the same way. I am not alone anymore and I don't have to leave school and be alone.

**Rick Savinon:** Also we influence each other. What Eric is doing I am like 'wow, that is really cool', he influences me. It is great to have someone with fresh new eyes in the studio. I have been there for 27 years..

**Angel Abreu:** You're old!

**Rick Savinon:** Yes, so when Eric comes in with his fresh new eyes and he is very enthusiastic and he has all this energy. It is wow. It touches me and I get something out of it.

**Angel Abreu:** Yes, we encourage each other a lot to work on our own things. Including Tim. Me personally, I actually have my own little studio in the attic of my house, and I can tell you I don't have as much fun working by myself as I do working with the other guys. My work is completely different from what we do collectively. But it works.

**Tim Rollins:** That is a condition of being a member of the group is you must have your own practice.

**Audience member:** So it becomes a real education. Everyone is bringing something in as well.

**Tim Rollins:** This is not a boy band. You must have your own practice and I am very, very excited when folk have their own exhibitions and they are doing their own work. I am not a stage dad but to be honest I am even more excited about how Eric got into the group. When these young folk decide to follow me into education. That makes me amazingly proud because the ripple effect is absolutely enormous.

**Pat Fisher:** Anymore, one more...?

**Audience member:** You just said that you are not a boy band, are there women there, have women been involved with the group?

**Tim Rollins:** I get this all the time! It is quite all right. I am used to this. The issue was when everyone was very young, when we started, when Angel was 11, 13 and we came out of the public school system, that was pretty good, we had the structure and we had this situation. Then this strange thing called puberty happens. And people change. And it is almost like saying 'how come there are not girls on an all male football team?' and hopefully soon, when we get to a level of genuine gender equality that might be possible. We keep looking at that, we are watching the Olympics all week and we are going 'how come everyone is separate if

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they have equal skills?'. What is that? It really is about the particular dynamic. For example we had this conversation with educators on Wednesday and I got some people pretty critical about the fact that there are currently no girls in KOS although we work with girls. But then we had 24 students and we had 22 girls and we were working with girls all week. Who mainly made those works you see upstairs. So it isn't like we are deliberately discriminating but in a self selecting group you have to let people self select.

**Angel Abreu:** In terms of practicality, back in the mid eighties the neighbourhood was really, really dangerous and parents weren't too thrilled having their 12, 13, 14 year old girls walking home at 8, 9 o'clock in the evening. And also coming into a studio where the majority of us were boys.

**Tim Rollins:** With ages ranges from 13 to 40 at this point.

**Angel Abreu:** So we did have girls back then but ... it wasn't that we were unwelcoming towards them, that wasn't the case but especially in a Latino community, girls are expected to be at home. I fought about this with my mom, with my youngest sister, the three of us, I have two brothers and one sister, and she was always expected to be at home. We were all able to go off to boarding school and my sister, who was accepted and got a full scholarship to a boarding school wasn't allowed to go.

**Tim Rollins:** So what we have to do, you can't be academic about this, it isn't about what we would like it to be, it isn't even what it could be. We have to deal with real politic if we are working with real kids in real communities and real cultures, and real geographical regions. We have to deal with what is and build from there. And hopefully then ... I work with a company of girls in Portland Maine, an amazing all girl company, that works really, really well. I think we had a good time this week. Am I right everybody? We had a good time. I am not a mean old macho dude. And so, we will see what develops. We are going to go back this year, I am excited, take a little break and then we are going back to IS52, that school, that crazy school that we started this whole project in but now it is stabilized, the neighbourhood is stabilized. I live there now. I live two blocks from Prospect Avenue and Prospect Avenue has regained and reclaimed the original value and potential of its name. And what would be quite exciting and I am thinking about it now, but if within that context, and this will work, it kind of hit me, that is what I got from everybody here. If we had an all girls team and an all boys team, and let them compete. Who could come up with the coolest thing. And that is something that at the age of 13 I can see happening. Thirteen, 14, 15 year olds and see how that can develop and put another generation through college. Does that sound good to you?

**Audience member:** That is OK. It is just I have got three daughters who are all artists and I just wanted to stand up for women!

**Tim Rollins:** That is no problem. It is part of the conversation. This is not a perfect ... there is no failure in this. There are disappointments. I will tell you something right now, we have had some folk, and I went through craziness and they have disappointed me and they have made the wrong choices, and they dropped out of school and they did this and that and you leave the group and, it is funny, eight years later you get his email. 'I am back to school'. 'I got out of jail'. 'I got it together. I want to thank you so much for everything you did. Can I go buy you lunch?'. 'Could you recommend me for this programme?' or that. So you never know. Some of the best teachers, educators know. You hold on you have no idea of the impact that you are really having. That is why it is wonderful when someone like Becky writes a letter like that. This is going to be framed girl!

**Pat Fisher:** I think we have probably run out of time for questions. Tim and the guys have been working tirelessly for exactly one week. They flew in from New York last Saturday and we have worked tirelessly, particularly they have. But just the concluding remarks I would make. As we have gone through this session this afternoon, I couldn't help remember the mission statement of the University of Edinburgh and high-minded as this might sound, it's mission is the curation and dissemination of knowledge and I feel very strongly that this work, fits that mission perfectly. And that is knowledge in its broadest sense. So could I ask you once again to thank Tim Rollins, Angel, Rick and Eric very warmly for their generosity and everything that we have shared here this afternoon. Thank you very much.

**Tim Rollins:** Thank you very much. Thank you.

This is a transcript of a talk given by artist, activist, and teacher Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival).

K.O.S. are a group of artists originally made up of Rollins's students from Intermediate School 52 in the South Bronx. Rollins and his students are known for their large, minimalist works of art created on the pages of classic books cut out and laid in a grid on canvas. Together, they've developed a collaborative strategy that combines lessons in reading and writing with the production of works of art.

More information about the exhibition 'The Black Spot' can be found on the website of Talbot Rice Gallery along with an archived video of this talk; a suite of discursive films documenting Tim Rollins and K.O.S. in Edinburgh can be found on a dedicated blog associated to an ArtWorks Scotland Seminar featuring Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

[www.ed.ac.uk/about/museums-galleries/talbot-rice](http://www.ed.ac.uk/about/museums-galleries/talbot-rice)

<http://artworksscotland.wordpress.com/media-films-and-interviews/>

## Talbot Rice Gallery



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