

'A fantastic field of visual ecstasy' – the art of Tim Rollins and KOS

As part of the alternative art college at London's Hayward Gallery, Wide Open School, the artist Tim Rollins and his team KOS will be creating artwork based on a musical score for A Midsummer Night's Dream. Here, he explains how they first came to work together

Tim Rollins
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Tim Rollins and KOS. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

In 1981 I was recruited by a really rough public junior high school on Kelly Street in the South Bronx to teach art classes for students with special needs. It wasn't long after I started this work that a band of the most dedicated and enthusiastic kids would hang out in the art classroom after school to make things. Soon, it became obvious that we needed a space of our own outside of the school system. We found a large space in a nearby abandoned public school that had been converted into a neighborhood community centre. We called the space The Art and Knowledge Workshop and we called our team "KOS" (for "Kids of Survival"). We met almost every day after school and on weekends to create collaborative paintings inspired by classic works of literature and music that many outsiders assumed would be beyond our ability to comprehend or appreciate.

Thirty-one years later, our paintings are in the permanent collections of over 95 museums worldwide including the Tate Modern in London.

KOS and I continue to conduct art making workshops with young people throughout the world. Several of the team's original members still work with the group.



Artwork by Tim Rollins and KOS. A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2011.
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

Our participation in Wide Open School will engage with Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. We always paint on a grid of book or music score pages that are carefully glued in a grid on canvas. This time, we will be painting on the music score for the incidental music for A Midsummer Night's Dream, written by Felix Mendelssohn (who began composing the work in 1826 when he was a teenager).

For us, the central character of Shakespeare's comedy is Puck. Puck is a creature who loves to create transformations just for the sheer, mischievous joy of it. Puck is our role model – the ultimate artist. In our workshops at Wide Open School we'll ask the participants to invent magic flowers in pencil and watercolor – hundreds of them. These bizarre but beautiful blossoms should look like they possess a juice, a nectar that when squeezed on the eyelids of someone sleeping causes that person to fall madly in love with the first living creature they see upon awakening. All the flower elements will then be collaged onto pages from Mendelssohn's score for A Midsummer Night's Dream, conjuring a quick, bright, confusing and fantastic field of visual ecstasy.