

Abreu, Angel, *Tim Rollins 1955–2017*,
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TIM ROLLINS 1955-2017

'I'm not a missionary, but I'm on a mission.'

This was a constant refrain from Tim Rollins. As a member of the Kids of Survival (KOS) for the past 31 years, I had the privilege of witnessing Tim's efforts in achieving his mission and, in the process, witnessing a life well lived.

At 12 years old, the first time I met Tim I had a visceral feeling of instant familiarity. I remember being struck by a lightning bolt with the uncanny thought that I would spend an extraordinary amount of time with this person. As it turned out, I spent more than half of Tim's life with him, and much more of mine. Tim had this effect on people which makes his sudden loss so profound to me, the rest of his KOS family and the multitude of others whose lives he touched.

Tim and I often joked about the similarities of our upbringings despite the seemingly jarring disparities. We constantly shared anecdotal nuances that reverberated, multiplied through daily interaction and became woven in the fabric

of our strong connection. Our own personal *Scarlet Letters*.

Tim was born in 1955 in rural Maine. I met him in the South Bronx where I grew up 19 years his junior. At the time, in 1986, he was teaching at Intermediate School 52 where KOS was born and where Tim was developing his visionary pedagogical instruments of inclusivity that would shape the ethos of KOS – an ethos built on the backs of philosophical giants such as WEB Dubois, John Dewey, Martin Luther King Jr and Paulo Freire, amongst others. Tim made us believe that the driving force of our work belonged to us just as much as anyone else. The books that we chose to work with, canonical or otherwise, were not meant to languish in Ivy League libraries; they are not just to be read and dissected by graduate comparative literature students. These books do not discriminate based on skin colour, socio-economic circumstances or sexual preference. Shakespeare wrote for us as much as he wrote for anyone else. Tim often repeated Dubois's phrase: 'I sit with

Shakespeare, and he winces not.' I wouldn't realise until later how much the message of this quote would be stamped on my consciousness.

During those Intermediate School 52 days, Tim was already a celebrated and established artist and had previously worked with his mentor Joseph Kosuth, who he met at the School of Visual Arts as an undergraduate. Having previous experience of collaboration with Group Material (alongside Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torrez and Doug Ashford to name a few), his generosity with his time and advice, and his sincerity, were remarkable. When my father tragically passed away a few years into my KOS tenure, Tim made the heartfelt pledge that he would always be there for me. He kept that promise through his continual concern, checking in letting me know when he disagreed with any of my decisions, letting me be when it was warranted. All through a caring and watchful eye, Tim made an exceptional case for why real family does not necessarily derive from biology. ■

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