

FT WEEKEND

Spirit of the Bronx at Frieze New York

By Ariella Budick

New York's first Frieze art fair pays tribute to two artists who brought art to South Bronx's struggling neighbourhood.

"Art is like prayer," Tim Rollins intones in a preacher's cadence: "if you don't believe in it, it's not going to do anything for you, but if you believe that this thing you made has some sort of power, then mountains can be moved. I'm talking about the mountains in your life," says Rollins, "the mountains in your community, the mountains in your situation. I have this complete, crazy, romantic fantasy that is vindicated week after week after week."

Rollins has the experience to back up his passionate words: 30 years' worth of watching vulnerable inner-city kidsturn into wary collaborators, then acolytes, co-creators and, in some cases, fully-fledged partners in the tenacious enterprise called Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival, or K.O.S. Theirs is a peaceful kind of urban gang, united by faith in the transformative powers of painting.



John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres' permanent outdoor mural *Back to School*

Earnestness is making a comeback, or at least enjoying a moment. Rollins belongs to the same idealistic generation of artists as the sculptor John Ahearn. Both fired up their careers in the South Bronx in the early 1980s, when hopefulness was a tool of survival; both will be plying their trades at Frieze, the giant art fair taking place from May 4-7 on Randall's Island, a neglected wedge of land in the East River equidistant from Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens. Frieze New York will shove Rollins and Ahearn back into the glare of the contemporary art scene, and their presence may shake the carnival atmosphere with the more ardent tremors of a revival meeting.

Is there still a place for art without irony? "Hell, yeah!" Ahearn almost yells. "Are you kidding me? I have no irony. My sculptures are the heartfelt expressions of my feelings and my passions." We meet in Ahearn's large, sunny studio above a tyre shop in one of New York's poorest areas, where he's been working on and off since the late 1970s. The Bronx has improved immensely since its bleakest days, but it's still a long way from glamorous.



Mario and Norma (1979)

The pristine art galleries of Chelsea belong to a different universe. Rollins' and Ahearn's zeal seems strangely out of sync with an art world propelled by gargantuan spectacle and soaked in wry self-consciousness. Jeff Koons hires fabricators to produce gleaming steel balloon dogs. Maurizio Cattelan finds

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eye-catching ways to sneer at the system that crams his pockets with cash. Neo-Duchampians sell shoeboxes as enlightened critique, and slews of young graduates prettify their pitches with brainy allusions to the liminal and the abject, always pledging to “transgress boundaries”. Set against that pageantry and cleverness, a belief in art’s redeeming powers seems almost embarrassingly naive.

More than three decades ago, Ahearn began making plaster casts of the South Bronx’s struggling population. Part-time prostitutes, kids trundling home from school, road sweepers and clients of the methadone clinic down the block (all of them black and Hispanic denizens of crumbling buildings nearby) posed patiently while Ahearn smeared their faces with pink gloop and inserted straws up their nostrils so they could breathe. He and his collaborator Rigoberto Torres took the art into the street, seating their subjects outside their studio and passing plaster and paint through the window. Neighbours gawked; many eagerly participated.

About 40 of those casts starred in the popular 1979 exhibition “South Bronx Hall of Fame” at Fashion Moda, the shopfront gallery that opened in one of the most battered sections of a

burning borough. “Crucial to Ahearn’s work is its venue and audience,” the artist and art critic Walter Robinson wrote in a review for Art in America magazine. “By now, we are used to artists and critics railing against the elitist museum/gallery system. It’s less common – though Ahearn has shown how easy it is – to find an artist actually seeking out a new audience of a different social background and making art specific to that context.” Robinson went on to describe the locals’ enthusiasm and their gratification at seeing themselves so heroically depicted.

Cecilia Alemani, curator of Frieze Projects, is re-enacting that landmark show with as many of the original busts (around 26) as she can muster. “I wanted to pay tribute to a non-profit space that no longer exists,” she says. “South Bronx Hall of Fame was a community-based, participation-based event. John is great, but he’s not really a commercial artist, so it’s hard to see his work. [At Frieze] you will encounter it as you would a regular booth, and then you’ll realise it’s something completely different.”

A large chunk of the difference is that Ahearn and Torres will be making new casts at the fair for anyone with the fortitude to bear the gunk-and-straws, and the means and desire to pay \$3,000 for the result. How does Ahearn reconcile his lifelong dedication to the least privileged Americans with his new project of immortalising wealthy insiders? “That’s my punk side,” he explains, a little defensively. The Frieze organisers asked him if there was some way to recreate the street vibe of the original project, but Ahearn hated that idea. “My angry side came through and I insisted that there be no social relevance to this activity. You can quote me on that: Enough social relevance!”



Ahearn and Torres casting for their 1979 show at Fashion Moda



John Ahearn

Ahearn may be overstating his cynicism, but he does want to leaven his social commitment with realism, and he hopes to gain a few patrons in the process. He has a warehouse full of work and a sense, at 61, of the brevity of life. He also has an appreciation for what the critic

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Tim Rollins

Clement Greenberg called “the umbilical cord of gold” that ties creators to the rich. Ahearn cites his hero, Caravaggio, as a champion of ordinary folk, but one who depended upon the largesse of the super-elite.

“Isn’t my soul being soiled by this experience?” he asks rhetorically, making it clear he thinks the answer is no. “If I’m going to glorify anyone, it’ll be tongue-in-cheek.” Ah, so he does have a trace of irony in him, after all. Tim Rollins doesn’t share Ahearn’s ambivalence about money. Playing an art fair, he says, is just another way “to make history, make hysteria, and affect the culture”. Rollins chairs an organisation structured as a for-profit corporation with a not-for-profit arm, so the competing demands of service and business are built into its DNA. We meet at the headquarters of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (pronounced “chaos”), a small office in Chelsea, strewn with the detritus of recent artistic experiments.

At Frieze, the group will pray for good weather and spread a 40ft table beneath Randall Island’s shoreline canopy of oaks. Local children, veteran members, K.O.S. alumni and casual drop-ins will conduct a workshop on the theme of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Somehow, the project involves watercolours, a musical score, mulberry paper and fields of colour. To Rollins, Frieze needn’t be just a flea market for finished products,

but a demonstration of the group’s complex, participatory process – a kind of public camp meeting.

“We’re not making art about the community,” he says, “but using art to create community.”

That has been Rollins’ credo since 1981, when he arrived in the Bronx for a two-week gig teaching art to at-risk middle schoolers. He stuck around for eight years. “It was an amazing time to be an artist in the South Bronx, when hip-hop exploded,” he recalls. “Life was crazy, it was scary, it was dangerous. The South Bronx was on fire in two ways: literally and culturally. That’s how K.O.S. was born. We didn’t make art to be cute. We didn’t make art to be on the cover of *Artforum*, although that was really cool. We made art to survive psychologically, emotionally, spiritually and, eventually, financially.

That “we” is not merely rhetorical. Rollins assembled a band of young followers, and together they forged a collective aesthetic that has endured, even as the individual participants have grown up and drifted away, or returned as peers. At any given time, 12 to 14 people gather to discuss the writings of F Scott Fitzgerald, Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King, Franz Kafka and many others, and those seminars become the basis for inspirational paintings. The team of artists glues pages of print on to canvas, and then paints or collages over the words. Basically, Rollins runs a permanent floating book club for people who won’t be content with doodling in the margins. Just how a dozen different readings of a text become alchemised into a coherent K.O.S. vision remains a mystery, one that Rollins sees as profoundly political.

“I love the metaphor [the feminist and pioneering social worker] Jane Addams used,” he says. “She had this notion of a cultural democracy, which she described in terms of the community choir. Everybody gets together, one person can be the soloist, and one person can’t sing at all, so you put him at the back. But nothing is more beautiful than when they all raise their voices in unison. That’s what gives you goose pimples.”



Frankenstein (1983) by Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival

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Tim Rollins with Kids of Survival in 1988

One of those choir members is Angel Abreu, who entered Rollins' orbit as a South Bronx child, was hauled reluctantly to the Museum of Modern Art, and later graduated from the prestigious Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts and the University of Pennsylvania. Now, at 38, he has become Rollins' colleague. "I don't think Frieze knows what's coming," Abreu chuckles.

In the early years, the art world didn't know what to make of a children's collaborative led by a self-appointed guru. After the initial celebrity, Rollins remembers a backlash of whispers that he was a child molester, that he beat his apprentices, and ran a cult with strange initiation rites. "They said, 'Tim sits in first class sipping champagne while we sit in coach eating stale bread,'" Abreu laughs.

"People couldn't believe that we loved each other," Rollins adds. He compares the group's spirit to that of a baseball team, a jazz ensemble, an orchestra, an architecture firm, or a boys' choir, but none of those analogies quite captures the feeling of shared authorship that K.O.S. fosters.

"Egos are checked at the door," Abreu says. "We feel like we're very talented people, but we trust each other enough so that I'm OK with someone else taking one of my drawings and manipulating it. That's how we operate."

That collective vision can be a tough sell in an art market fuelled by individual genius. Gaggles of kids do not fit well in the shiny global gatherings, where, as the critic Jerry Saltz memorably put it, "money and art have sex in public". Rollins, the pied piper of the South Bronx, had a brief heyday in the 1980s, but the market's attention soon wandered away. Even K.O.S.'s dedication to making beautiful things by hand became a liability in a scene dominated by identity politics, conceptualism, and neo-Dada.

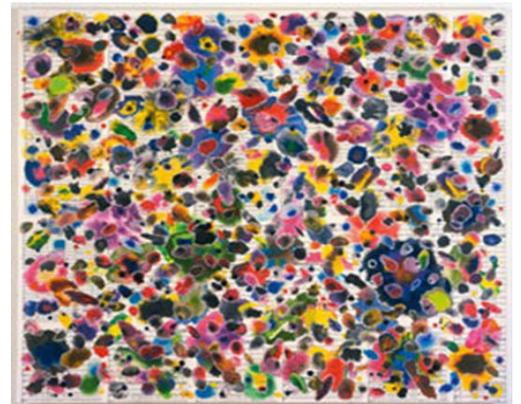
Rollins didn't care. "We've always aimed to make beautiful things," he says. "I'm like, 'Poop on stuff if you want', but we grew up with a whole lotta ugly, so the most revolutionary thing you could do was to make things of beauty."

While Rollins and Ahearn cleaved to their practice of art as social healing, the world changed around them – and then changed again, in ways that may now benefit the pair. Today, the South Bronx is unrecognisable to anyone who knows it only from old news photos of charred cars, or of President Jimmy Carter walking into a rubble-filled lot on Charlotte Street. Vacant buildings have been renovated or razed and rebuilt; crime has waned, and the epicentre of urban blight has moved on through other cities across America.

"The Bronx is an amazing mecca of culture," says Holly Block, executive director of the Bronx Museum. "It's a natural first stop for recent immigrants to America, so the people who live here are from different backgrounds.

And living right around the museum, we have the largest west African population in the US. People are looking for something more from art."

As New York has become a safer, shinier and more prosperous city, inevitably it's been washed in nostalgia for rougher times. It's easy to believe that, back then, everybody had less money and more fun. Ahearn exhibited at the infamous 1980 Times Square Show, a racially integrated, anything-goes bash in a decaying porn theatre. Rollins spent his days teaching in the South Bronx and his nights partying in the East Village. It was just a quick subway ride from lower Manhattan's buoyant inclusiveness to the South Bronx, where shopfronts and abandoned warehouses were turned into impromptu



A Midsummer Night's Dream (2009)

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galleries. "It was a downtown scene, relocated uptown," says Holly Block. "You could go anywhere and do a show. Space was open, and people were flexible." Who wouldn't want to revive that?

The curator Cecilia Alemani insists that bringing Ahearn and Rollins to Frieze has nothing to do with nostalgia, but she does seem wistful for a world in which a clear line separated the rebels from the establishment. "The context has changed so much that the notion of an alternative scene doesn't exist any more," she says. "Alternative to what?"

And yet there are flickers of the wild, missionary ambitions that were once the New York scene. An organisation called No Longer Empty has commandeered parts of a creepy, derelict palazzo on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, and turned it over to a battalion of artists, including Rollins and Ahearn. That building, called the Andrew Freedman Home, once housed indigent intellectuals and the fallen rich; now, each room is a vibrant art installation, making a virtue of peeling paint. For a little while, on the Grand Concourse and on Randall's Island, the spirit of the Seventies is back.

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