

Forbes

Studio K.O.S. Brings The Invisible Man Back To Life In A New Exhibition

Brienne Walsh Contributor

It's easy to feel invisible in America. Even as headlines tout [a strong economic outlook for families in 2021](#), the unemployment rate for [black workers remains almost double that of white workers](#). And despite calls from the new administration for racial equality, [black Americans are 3.7 times more likely to die from COVID-19](#) than white Americans—and Hispanic Americans are 4.1 times more likely. You can talk about what you see on social media, and even take to the streets, but the numbers show that inequality persists, and is relentless.



Studio K.O.S. (left to right) Robert Branch, Rick Savinon, Angel Abreu, and Jorge Abreu standing ... [+]

COURTESY STUDIO K.O.S.

“Kids don’t know how they can be heard,” says Angel Abreu, one of the members of Studio K.O.S., an art collective founded in the South Bronx in the early 1980s. This past summer, Studio K.O.S. which stands for Kids of Survival, ran online workshops with students in Philadelphia and Minneapolis. The workshops consisted of readings of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison over Zoom, during which the students were asked to create artworks that responded to the text. Their artworks, which followed the same format — graphic renditions of the letters “I” and “M” laid over the first two pages of the epilogue of the novel and rendered in different colors and patterns depending on the individual making them — were gathered together to form a video work. The video, along with 15 other works by Studio K.O.S., is currently being shown at “Studio K.O.S.: The Continuing Legacy of Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival (selected works from 1987 - 2020),” [an exhibition open by appointment](#) at Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia through March 20, 2021.



An installation view of "Studio K.O.S.: The Continuing Legacy of Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival ... [+]

IMAGE © JOSH GADDY PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF WEXLER GALLERY.

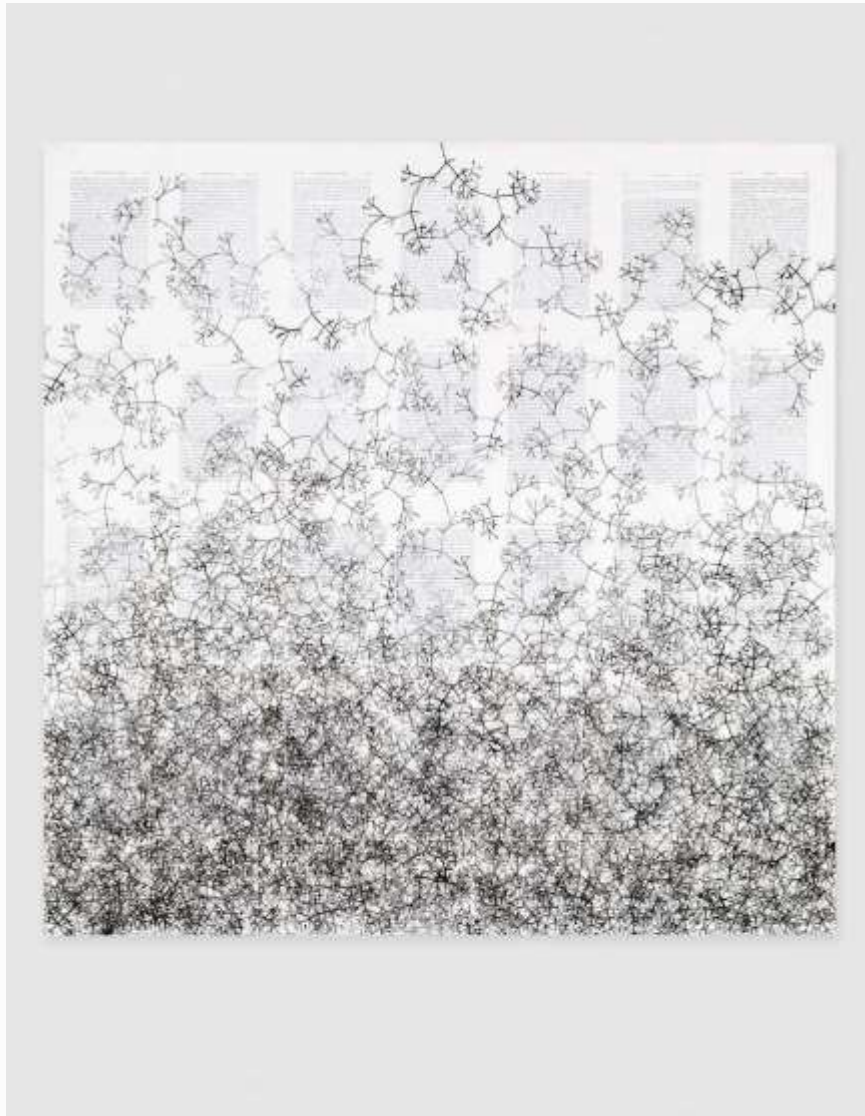
Finding a voice — and gaining power — through the creation of art is something the members of Studio K.O.S. have been experiencing since they were first recruited to the collective by Tim Rollins, a charismatic young teacher at a public school in the South Bronx in the 1980s. Rollins was assigned to teach the special education kids, kids with dyslexia and learning issues who didn't want to be in the classroom. He reached them by reading texts, and playing music, and asking his students to respond to it by making artwork. His work in the classroom led to the "Art and Knowledge Workshop," which led to the formation of the collective. "He was on fire," remembers Nelson Ricardo Savinon, who along with Abreu, and two other members — Jorge Abreu and Robert Branch — make up the core of Studio K.O.S. today. "His teaching mechanics were just out of this world."



Tim Rollins & KOS, Untitled (Study for Amerika Series), 1988, Metallic paint and ink on printed ... [+]

IMAGE BY KENEK PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF WEXLER GALLERY

Under the tutelage of Rollins, Studio K.O.S. was vaulted to the highest reaches of the art world. Their work, which features ecstatic, collaborative drawings and paintings over texts by Franz Kafka, Henry David Thoreau and Charles Darwin, among other authors, and sheet music by Felix Mendelssohn, among other composers, has been featured in two Whitney Biennials, the Venice Biennale and Documenta, and is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Tate Gallery in London.



Tim Rollins & KOS, On the Origin of the Species (after Charles Darwin), Made with young people from ... [+]

IMAGE BY STEFAN ALTENBURGER PHOTOGRAPHY, ZÜRICH

Over the years, the group, which initially consisted of roughly 15 members, has stayed together, gathering to make artwork on nights and weekends as life happened, and they grew into adults with successful professional careers. “The project started inside the classroom, grew to an afterschool program, grew into a studio project and now it’s a family,” says Branch.

In 2017, Rollins passed away at the age of 62, and the collective, faced with the absence of their founding member, decided to recalibrate their mission. They realized they loved to travel around the country, conducting workshops with the types of disadvantaged students they had once been. “Kind of like Johnny Appleseed, spreading the word,” laughs Angel Abreu.

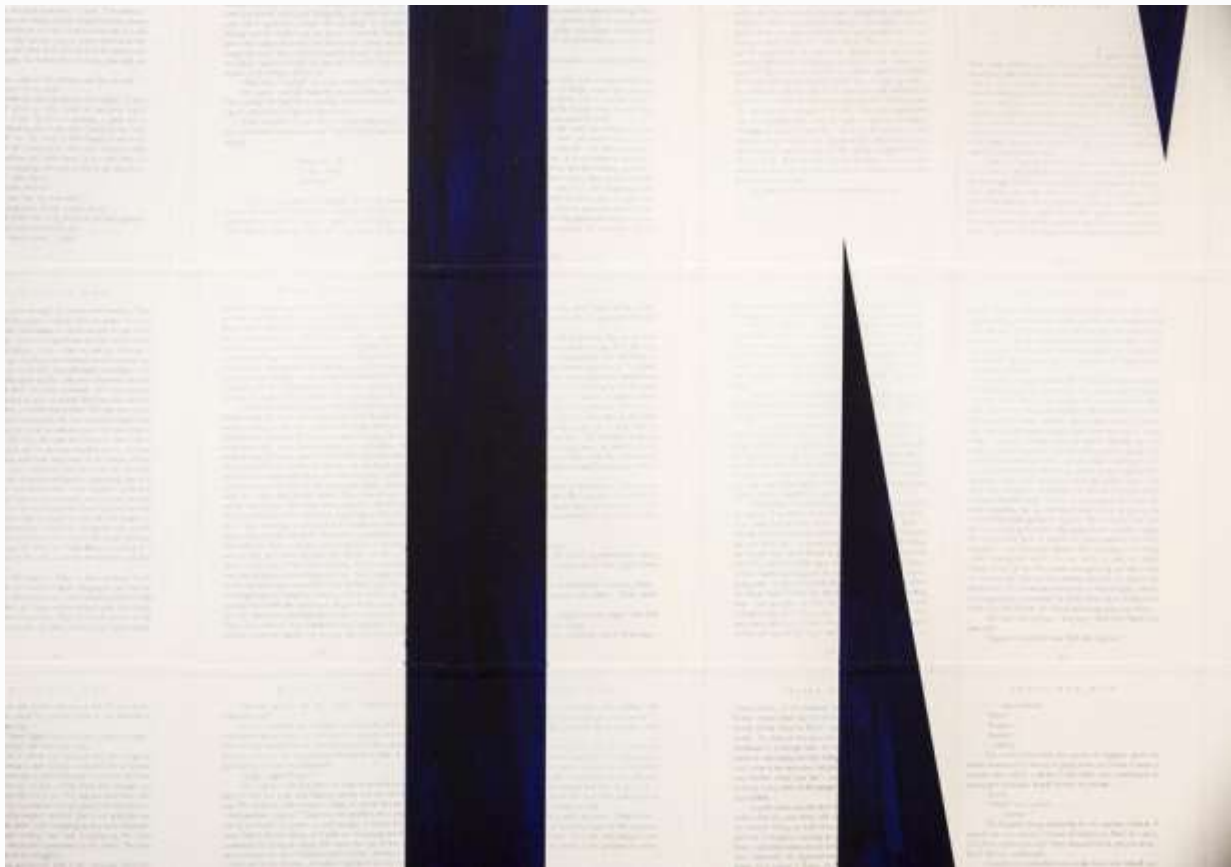
Studio K.O.S ran workshops during a solo exhibition of their work at Lehmann Maupin gallery in 2019. In 2020, they planned to take their project national. Then, COVID-19 hit; in June, protests in support of Black Lives Matter filled the streets. Studio K.O.S saw the crisis as a call to action.



Tim Rollins & KOS, Invisible Man (after Ralph Ellison), 2015 Matte acrylic on book pages on panel 36 ... [+]

IMAGE BY KENEK PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF WEXLER GALLERY

The collective has engaged with *Invisible Man* for many years. The text, which opens with the phrase, “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me,” spoke to them as first youths of color, and then men of color, living in America. In 1993, Christopher Hernandez, a 15-year-old member of the collective, was killed in his apartment building in the South Bronx after witnessing a murder. Jorge Abreu, one of his close friends, saw a headline in *The New York Daily News* about the murder, and was drawn to the “IM” in victim. He made the connection with *Invisible Man*, which Studio K.O.S. had been reading. “I thought, “This could be it,”” Jorge Abreu remembers. “It took on a life of its own after that.”



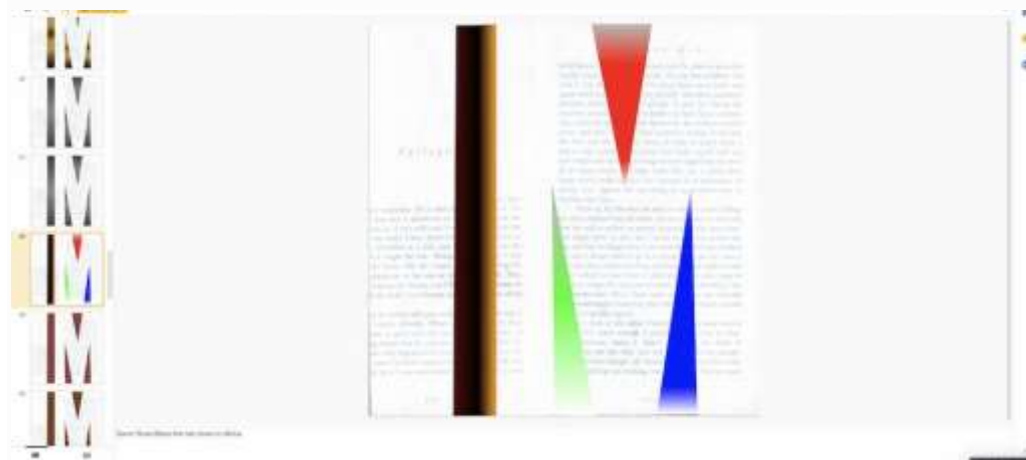
Tim Rollins & KOS, detail of *Invisible Man* (after Ralph Ellison), 2014, Matte acrylic and pencil on ... [+]

IMAGE BY KENEK PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF WEXLER GALLERY

The original “IM” from the *Daily News* headline in the same one that students engaged with in the workshops in 2020. The resulting artwork, which runs just over 23 minutes

long, and plays on repeat in the gallery, features Jorge Abreu reading selections of the text, as iterations of the graphic “IM,” created by participants in the workshop, fade in and out across the screen. Sometimes, the background text is white, and the lettering is black, glowing with hints of red. Sometimes, the lettering is soft, outlined in pastels, and other times, it is hard, dark, fierce, angry. Watching the screen, it’s easy to feel a sense of despair and rage; it’s also easy to feel the influence of superhero narratives, and comic book aesthetics, as well as a Rothko-esque experience of mood through color. Some of the slides seem amateur, with simple color matches, and others shows a sophisticated mastery of graphic space. Shown together, the video is meditative. It forces you to concentrate on Ellison’s words, which were written 69 years ago, but still remain so contemporary. “What did I do to be so black and blue?” Abreu asks, in the voice of the Invisible Man.

Intrusions into the artwork, which arrive in the form of buzzing notifications from a smartphone — text messages and emails and news alerts — make clear how distracted we’ve become from the business of contemplation. Immersed in the video, one wishes to join the Invisible Man in his invisible lair, where he descends into the depths of John Coltrane, and can see the layers of history embedded in each act of culture without having to check his DMs.



An image of the video being made on Google Slides.

COURTESY STUDIO K.O.S.

Studio K.O.S was impressed how informed the students they collaborated with were about politics and social movements. Even with all of the information they had, they still felt helpless to change the status quo. “We empowered them, and showed them, you can have a voice, you can make a difference,” says Angel Abreu. “It’s that light bulb that you literally see, over the students’ heads, that keeps me coming back.”

Studio K.O.S. will continue their mission of creating what Branch calls “beautiful allegories that can be experienced on an artistic level” with workshops at the Museum of Modern Art in February, and consortiums at the National Academy of Science later this year.

The collective knows that the power of their work lies in the communal aspect of their practice. “When you come together as a community, to make something to share, it just has so much more meaning,” says Angel Abreu.