their grief, rage, and optimism, which, at the time, was not so easy to do at home. They could find validation for their observations and experiences in the community of artists that the show brought together. For the visitor to this exhibition, the most surprising aspect of “One Day” might be how low-key it feels. The atmosphere is charged, but quietly so, and is marked by a foreboding sense of anticipation. There are no banners, no armbands, and no shouting crowds.

In the U.S., we have been shown images of the Tehran uprising, and told that the people are poised to take back the streets. Iranians know better the tragic history of political upheaval in their country. Be it 1953, when the American-backed Shah dismissed a democratically elected leader, or 1979, when leftist students aided the Islamists in revolution and then found themselves the enemy, this past summer was not the first time that a euphoric, youth-driven people's movement descended into tragedy. If the summer’s events did not bring the sea change that was hoped for, they were a necessary step nonetheless.

Art that is timely must walk a fine line between addressing relevant issues and becoming mired in specific events and experiences. When responding to current events, art must remain open-ended in its conclusions or risk being reduced to propaganda. “One Day” resists telling us what to think about the events in Iran or its future. The images, often firm in their muteness, defy easy reading. They are but fleeting impressions of a city that is keeping itself alive, one day at a time.

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In my urban education class at the University of Pennsylvania, my students and I have been reading about the merits and challenges of collaborative learning. Once a week, we work with Parkway Northwest High School seniors who are researching and writing a year-long thesis project. Our goal is to forge a true collaborative partnership. We often question the feasibility of such a project, given the socio-economic, educational, and cultural disparity between urban high school and college students. These ideas were foremost in my mind while viewing the Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) retrospective exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia.

Since the early 1980s, Rollins has worked with underprivileged youth creating collaborative artworks, including large-scale paintings, prints, and sculptures. He began teaching special education in the South Bronx and later opened a studio with an after-school program.

Known for his revolutionary educational tactics of using art as a means to teach history and literature, Rollins began exhibiting the collaborative artworks in the mid-1980s. Featured in many national and international exhibitions, including two Whitney Biennials (1985 and 1991), Documenta (1987), and the Venice Biennale (1988), Rollins and his work have garnered both accolades and criticism.

Referred to as “the pied piper of down-and-out urban young people,” as well as an “on-call good guy, who teaches the classical
canon to kids who many jaded educators figure are beyond reach," Rollins has also been accused of exploiting the collective as a vehicle for self-promotion. One critic writes, “These students do not seem to be becoming artists but respond solely to Mr. Rollins as he pulls the strings, creating political images that have sold well in the marketplace.” Rollins proves his critics wrong, however, through the longevity and expansion of the collective, which currently features members in Philadelphia, Memphis, San Francisco, Seattle, and New York City. Rollins concedes, “We [the collective] are met with a lot of cynicism. Actually, I’m even skeptical. But when you have been making art with young folks and now adults for thirty years, you have to believe it’s real.”

The ICA exhibition features the K.O.S. collective’s works from 1984 through 2000. Rollins and the students create art as a means to engage with literature, politics, religion, and the world. Although many of the works employ the actual literary texts, the art does not serve an illustrative function. In early paintings such as Dracula (after Bram Stoker) (1983) and Frankenstein (after Mary Shelley) (1983), the obvious symbolism is delivered in an edgy, graphic style. The large-scale, cartoon-inspired visuals obscure the texts. In later works such as By Any Means Necessary: Nightmare (after Malcolm X) (1986) and White Alice (after Lewis Carroll) (1984–88), the text and images metaphorically intertwine to reveal a polished elegance and visual sophistication.

Rollins does not shy away from tough texts or subject matter. The diptych Angry Father and Mother (1982–88), for example, addresses anti-abortion legislation. Resisting a polarizing stance, the watercolor shows two faces—both crying. The simple composition speaks to human suffering rather than focusing on the politics surrounding the issue. In Invisible Man (after Ralph Ellison) (1999), the collective explores racial injustice and identity. Using the book’s pages and matte acrylic to frame out the letters “IM,” the message is one of truncation: Do the letters refer to the book’s title or do they invoke the beginning of Ellison’s famous quote, “I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone. . . . and I might even be said to possess a mind”? The sculpture Holy Bible (1987) features a nearly 10-foot totem of stacked Bibles. When first exhibited in 1987, the gallery director could not find anyone to drill through the Bibles until a preparator from the ICA finally agreed to do it.8 While some may find it sacrilegious to alter the text, the imposing tower was built to withstand a lot of abuse. Its steel inner core makes it resilient—quite a powerful and positive epistle.

Coalescent without being redundant, the exhibition features the diversity of Rollins and the collective’s work over the years. The overall professionalism and attention to technical precision and craft, combined with the conceptual framework, allows the works to stand on their own merits. Rollins’s influence is not limited to K.O.S., but also makes an impact on other pedagogical models across the nation. However, what distinguishes Rollins’s collective from other art education programs is the high caliber of the work. Acknowledging socio-economic, cultural, and educational differences, is equality the only basis for a successful collaboration? Rollins and his K.O.S. students prove that social differences need not hinder
the synergy of the group dynamic. Rollins considers himself a conductor—one who facilitates but doesn’t dictate. Ultimately, he gives kids the opportunity to have a voice and make art as a means to affirm that voice.

COLETTE COPELAND is a multimedia artist who teaches critical writing and visual studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

NOTES


SOLDIERS SPEAK

“. . . OUT OF HERE: The Veterans Project”
by Krzysztof Wodiczko
Institute of Contemporary Art
Boston
November 4, 2009–March 28, 2010

How public intervention functions as art and how art functions as public intervention has been a primary concern of Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. In the 1980s he became known for his large-scale outdoor works in which composites images were projected onto public buildings. The projections fused with the architecture to create stark juxtapositions. These works questioned authority and often included images challenging power and war. At the same time, he was creating works that illuminated buildings in popular urban areas. For example, Wodiczko entered into discussions with the homeless population of cities he visited or lived in, including New York. These discussions led to his “Vehicles for the Homeless” (1988), a group of functional sculptures that reimage the shopping cart. Wodiczko’s “Vehicles” aimed to provide easy mobility and more storage, as well as security and protection to aid the homeless in the collection and transportation of their possessions. Interaction with the public, at times including the homeless or recent immigrants, brings a human dimension to Wodiczko’s technological works.

The Iraq War is the subject of his installation “. . . OUT OF HERE: The Veterans Project” at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston. Similar to his discussions with the homeless and immigrants, Wodiczko engaged with different veteran and refugee groups, listening to their stories about their experiences during and after their time in Iraq. Commissioned by and first presented at the 2008 Democratic Convention in Denver, the “Veteran Vehicle Project” was a public intervention in which a reengineered military Humvee became a mobile projection machine. Rather than projecting bullets, this vehicle illuminated city walls with fragments of text—keywords from the stories—simultaneously broadcast from loud speakers attached to the Humvee. The ICA documentation from Wodiczko’s “Veteran Vehicle Project” is presented alongside a clip from War Veteran Vehicle, a companion work staged in England in 2009. A third monitor shows an excerpt from his Veterans’ Flame (2009). In these projects, Wodiczko collaborated with veterans and refugees, working with them to create emotional and chilling stories that became the spoken texts used in the final works. Veterans’ Flame is subtle and quiet as it pictures a single flame that flutters with the cadence of the text, while the vehicle projects are more bombastic interventions broadcasting out rather than asking one to reflect within. What gives these pieces their power is the precision of the choreography and the translation of the original texts into gestures, like the flickering of a candle’s flame, that resonate beyond spoken language.

Wodiczko’s first projections are silent. Oftentimes, a large image suddenly appears on a building to be viewed against the noise of the city. In his more recent gallery works, Wodiczko desaturates his bold visuals, creating what appear to be moving shadows behind glass walls. In “If You See Something . . .,” presented at Galerie Lelong in New York in 2005, unidentifiable silhouette-like figures with varying opacities were projected onto the walls of the darkened gallery space, as if seen through milky glass. The accompanying soundtrack described the struggles of immigrants during the governments “see something, say something” policy, while viewers watched people going about everyday business—a window washer or two people deep in conversation, their voices passionately relaying the depth of their struggles. In Guests, created for the Polish Pavilion in the 2009 Venice Biennal, Wodiczko expanded the inside/ outside metaphor as he continued to explore the plight of the immigrant using spoken texts and wall and ceiling projections of shadowy figures engaged in menial tasks. Although human beings are vocally present in these installations, they are never fully apparent.

In “. . . OUT OF HERE,” individuals are similarly heard but never seen. The gallery is a dark and cavernous space and this setting puts the viewer inside while the action occurs outside. Projections of windowpanes create a clerestory along the upper perimeter of the walls. The location is not specified, but it is evident that the scene occurs in a place of conflict, in a momentary lull before impending chaos. The seven-minute loop reflects the horror, confusion, and uncertainty of war. The narrative is a compilation, with bits and pieces taken from different stories told to Wodiczko in numerous workshops he has had with veterans and refugees who volunteered to talk about their combat and wartime experiences.