

# Keith Haring: Art Is for Everybody

American artist Keith Haring (1958–1990) broke down barriers and spread joy through his work, all while addressing complex and urgent issues of his time. Decades after his death, Haring’s art continues to gain recognition around the world. He pushed boundaries during the 1980s by creating work outside of traditional art spaces, using materials such as chalk on blank advertising panels in New York City subways.

This exhibition showcases the breadth of Haring’s career and addresses the major themes in his work, from capitalism and political engagement to sexuality and pop culture. Activism was central to his practice: he used his imagery and celebrity to protest apartheid in South Africa, raise awareness of the crack cocaine epidemic and the AIDS pandemic, and support causes from nuclear disarmament to UNICEF. In just over ten years, Haring produced a remarkable volume of work, guided by the belief that art is essential in making a better world—indeed, that art is for everybody.

*“My contribution to the world is my ability to draw. I will draw as much as I can for as many people as I can for as long as I can. Drawing is still basically the same as it has been since prehistoric times. It brings together man and the world. It lives through magic.”*

Born in 1958, Haring grew up in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, where his father, Allen, taught him to draw cartoons from Walt Disney

and Dr. Seuss. He moved to New York City in 1978 to attend the School of Visual Arts. With the emergence of hip-hop, graffiti art, and an active nightclub scene, the city was pulsing with energy. Here he embraced his homosexuality, which informed his worldview and art practice. He met and collaborated with many street artists such as Angel Ortiz (b. 1967), known publicly as LA II. At alternative spaces in Lower Manhattan, such as Club 57, the Mudd Club, and Paradise Garage, Haring developed his visual style alongside the artists Kenny Scharf (b. 1958) and Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988), performers Grace Jones (b. 1948) and Madonna (b. 1958), and many others. In February 1990, Haring died of AIDS-related complications at the age of thirty-one.

## **Finding His Line**

*“The ‘social responsibility’ that I find in my work is found in the LINE itself.”*

In New York City, Haring was immediately intrigued and inspired by the graffiti he saw on the streets and in the subway. He deeply admired the forms and line work achieved by artists with spray paint. He created dynamic works in public—spontaneously and often illegally—such as chalk drawings in New York subway stations. Without a preconceived plan, Haring drew his lines with speed, immersing the viewer in imagery that is both recognizable and accessible.

Haring's work was driven by the vision of reaching a wide audience and affecting change. Anticipating Ronald Reagan's 1981 election and a conservative turn in American politics, he would cut up *New York Post* headlines, rearrange them, and paste them throughout the city.

## **From Street Drawing to the Gallery Walls**

Haring's career took off in 1982 following his first major exhibition, alongside LA II (Angel Ortiz), at Tony Shafrazi Gallery on Mercer Street in Soho. Haring built upon his unique drawing ability and style from New York City subway chalk drawings and street murals to create work using vases, metal panels, and commonplace vinyl tarpaulins.

The exhibition opened a few months after Haring painted an iconic mural at the corner of Houston Street and Bowery, just blocks from the gallery. He included bright pink three-eyed faces, green breakdancers spinning on their heads, and the nuclear symbol—imagery that also appeared in artworks presented at the gallery. Four years after Haring's arrival in New York, the city was saturated with his icons, which he repeated in paintings, subway drawings, public murals, posters, and buttons.

## **Early Video**

In 1978, Haring began experimenting with language informed by his understanding of semiotics—the study of signs—primarily through video and performance. He was inspired by a symposium in honour of beat poet William S. Burroughs, with performances by Philip Glass, Brion Gysin, Allen Ginsberg, Patti Smith, Frank Zappa, Burroughs himself, and others.

Several of Haring's peers from New York's School of Visual Arts appear in his video work from this period. His 1979 video *Painting Myself into a Corner* (1979), is set to Devo's 1978 cult hit "Uncontrollable Urge," and *A Circle Play* (1979), includes a reading of text from Gertrude Stein's *A Circular Play* (1920). The performative and spontaneous nature of Haring's line is also clear in these early works. In these moving portraits of the artist at work, his gestures are rapid and confident, a skill he developed when making work illicitly in public spaces. Dynamic immediacy is a hallmark of his style.

## **Day-Glo**

In 1982, with LA II (Angel Ortiz), Haring transformed the basement of Tony Shafrazi Gallery in Soho with stripes on the walls, ultraviolet light, and art made with Day-Glo paint. Haring had met LA II two years prior, after noticing his tag all over New York City. They began to collaborate, combining their distinctive lines on paintings and sculptures. At the exhibition opening, Haring invited friends to deejay that he had met through his boyfriend, Juan Dubose, and at nightclubs like Paradise Garage. The music playing in this gallery is from Haring's personal

collection of mixtapes, featuring songs by Eric B. & Rakim, the Beastie Boys, Aretha Franklin, and Grace Jones, among others.

## **Pop Shop + Anti-Capitalism**

In 1985, Haring stopped making subway drawings on the matte paper that covered expired advertisements because the panels would quickly be stolen. The following year, he opened a commercial space called the Pop Shop to continue to reach a broad audience with his images. “I tried, as much as I could, to take a new position,” Haring wrote, “a different attitude about selling things, by doing things in public and by doing commercial things that go against the ideas of the ‘commodity hype’ art market.”

Pop Shop articles on view here are paired with works that critique capitalism. Haring made many works that engage with the stereotype of the “capitalist pig,” often used in political cartoons to depict greedy businessmen. Created during the Reagan era of economics that favoured the wealthy, Haring’s pig paintings comment on the ills of capitalism and abuses of power in the name of profit.

All ephemera courtesy of The Keith Haring Foundation.

## **Party of Life**

Community was important to Haring, from his collaborative work with other artists, musicians, dancers, and poets, to connections formed in the New York nightclub scene. The artist held annual “Party of Life” birthday celebrations from 1984 to 1986 at the Paradise Garage and the Palladium. At the first event, the Garage was decorated with huge cotton banners and tarpaulins painted by Haring. Garage deejay Larry Levan and Haring’s boyfriend, Juan Dubose, played the event, and Madonna previewed her song “Like a Virgin” and performed “Dress You Up” while wearing a Haring and LA II–painted pink leather suit.

These clubs were also spaces where Haring experimented with psychedelic drugs. In a letter to the psychologist and psychedelics advocate Timothy Leary, Haring wrote: “I don’t know if you know how important the Paradise Garage is, at least for me and the tribe of people who have shared many a collective spiritual experience there.”

## **Monumental**

*“I try to make images that are universally ‘readable’ and self-explanatory. An artist is a spokesman for a society at any given point in history. His language is determined by his perception of the world we all live in. He is a medium between ‘what is’ and ‘what could be.’”*

Works in these galleries speak to Haring’s criticism of capitalism, consumerism, mass media, nuclear power, and religious oppression. Seeking to work at the same scale as his street

murals, Haring made monumental-sized drawings and paintings as well as large sculptures. The shaped paintings in the next space address the problems of capitalism and corrupt abuses of power for gain.

## **AIDS Activism**

As the AIDS epidemic grew in the late 1980s, Haring used his imagery and celebrity to bring awareness to the issue. As HIV and AIDS were thought to only affect marginalized populations—including intravenous drug users and gay men, among others—early treatment responses were uneven and underfunded.

Many of Haring's artworks of this period address illness and mortality. Haring collaborated with other activists and organizations by circulating information about how HIV spreads, promoting safe sex, and providing support for those affected by the disease. AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was one organization that Haring actively supported, both financially and by designing posters and flyers that reflected ACT UP's messaging.

In 1988, Haring was diagnosed with AIDS. Soon after he created the Keith Haring Foundation to continue his artistic legacy. The Foundation's mandate is to provide funding to AIDS organizations for education, research, and care, in addition to groups that work with children and marginalized communities.