

Keith Haring: Art for the People

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New York as an art world in the 1970s and '80s was a very different place than it is now. On the brink of receivership, with a dangerous transit system overwhelmed by indoor and outdoor graffiti, the city was wilder and more open to experiment, in ways that supported artists on the move. Feminism and gay rebellion were part of the mix, asserting a powerful—and confrontational—critique that would push American, and by extension, indeed international art, in the direction of accessibility, cultural democracy, and change. Whatever one may think of the art produced at the time—an argument can be made that the achievements were essentially social rather than esthetic—the period remained epochal in the sense that a merger had been attempted between social uprising and memorable imagery. Keith Haring, the prolific and talented gay artist who died of AIDS in 1990, was part of this time, lending a hand to the burgeoning gay movement but, just as important, reaching the masses with subway and wall drawings. He represents a particular high point in the popular culture, for he was someone whose sensibility fit perfectly with the spirit of the time; indeed, some might say that he *was* the spirit of the time.

For those reading this article outside of America, it might prove hard to comprehend the sweeping changes of the late 1970s through the 1980s, the period when Haring was most active. Popular culture, presumably the United States' greatest export, became immensely persuasive at this time, which was just coming off the advances in Pop painting in the 1960s, with its emphasis on advertisements and comics. But the artists who made these paintings were seen as belonging to high culture, a far cry from the gritty cartoonlike paintings Haring made in New York. Not a native New Yorker himself—he was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1958, and moved to New York twenty years later—Haring nonetheless soon became the poster child for the city's carefree but also political reading of the dominant culture. Art had to reach the people, an apparently Marxist requirement but actually, in America, a vision of a level cultural democracy. The first work in the Brooklyn Museum's show presents a talented draftsman, some of whose efforts might be placed in the broad boundaries of abstract expressionism. But from the start, in his small drawings and notebook writings, Haring took his art to the streets, where he delighted in the spontaneity and freedom from hierarchy that would become his signature motifs.

In thinking about Haring's work, we come up against a conundrum: does making work extremely accessible always result in dumbing down culture? Sometimes it does, but there are also outstanding exceptions. Today, music perhaps possesses the greatest ability to reach both a high critical level and at the same time speak to people without training in the field. Something similar has happened in art, with perhaps a less successful ending: artists are applying their interest in making work that demands little background in art history, trading on popular culture ever since we saw the rows of Coke bottles and soup cans in the art of Andy Warhol. In a very real way, Haring is the child of Warhol; both wanted to do away with the obstacles separating art from an everyday audience, and both rallied to nearly cult-like prominence with the support of the New York art world. It

seems to me that the impulse of Warhol and Haring is essentially different from that of other Pop artists—for example, James Rosenquist and Roy Lichtenstein. The former were likely much more involved with the New York anarchic underpinnings of the day, but they were also clearly aspiring to become chic apostles of taste at that moment in time. In contrast, the latter were more interested in the successive climb of a traditional career.

As time has passed, more and more the thin line between high and low culture in the New York art world is being erased, to the point where the lives of the artists have become as important to their career as the works they produce. Surely Haring was key in the beginnings of that drive toward a level cultural field, where entertainment and having fun have been key to many artists' success. It is not this writer's job to judge whether the consequences are good or bad, although it is healthy, I think, to be skeptical about the merits of work that pander to the lowest common denominator, with the controversial assumption that the audience cannot understand an evolved esthetic. But Haring and artists like him were developing a demotic style out of choice, even as the sophistication of his work cannot be gainsaid. This merger—of art with an awareness of the modernist history before it along with a style adapted to popular culture—seemed to be successful both as an accessible gesture and as a historically aware endeavor. But there was also considerable integrity involved: Haring has perhaps been underrecognized as someone who lived the life of his beliefs. As one who came from the underground, before his milieu received the attention that it would eventually command, Haring had made the decision to bring art to the people in a quest for community. His art, originating from a cartoon style, and characterized by heavy black outlines, gave and gives a kind of instant satisfaction. Yet the artist is aware of the New York School; his allover patterns and curvilinear strokes fit well within the abstract expressionist tradition.

There is a larger question here, one that explores the relations between the Pop art movement and its inheritors and the high-culture stance of the abstract painter. When Haring made his work in the late part of the 1970s, the New York School was for the most part over as a cohesive movement. Cultural politics rushed in to fill the void, and such movements as minimalism, performance art, and conceptualism were key to the art world's disagreements with American society. The gay movement was burgeoning, and Haring played an important role in presenting homosexual imagery, alongside the other well-known gay artist and activist David Wojnarowicz. But the latter was deliberately raw and highly confrontational, while Haring's statement, equal in ambition, took on the social context of the gay artist in a less aggressive manner. And at the same time, Haring never completely left abstraction behind; indeed, many of his cartoonlike works incorporate nonobjective imagery. Actually, one of the better pieces in the show was a series of twenty-five small gouache drawings, which were painted a brownish red on paper. Here the small shapes, a mixture of both geometric and organically abstract forms, hold a dialogue with each other that is much more sophisticated than might seem at first. The images are closely related but different enough for each to stand on their own.

At the same time, Haring could be forcefully queer. One of the earliest works in the show is the group of graphite on paper drawings called *Manhattan Penis Drawings for Ken Hicks* (1978). The sequence, despite its small dimensions (each piece of paper is 8.5 by

5.5 inches), was monumentally phallic in its implications; penises form tall buildings in several cases, rising in the drawings as high as the sketched buildings of several stories. One work repeats the image of an erect phallus and testicles until the drawing looks almost abstract. In another image, the heads of phalluses become shooting stars, while the last image in the group is an amusing representation of the World Trade Center as a pair of twin-tower penises. As a piece of travesty, the body of work is humorous and charming, and not without art interest. But it seems that the real point of the drawings had the goal of familiarizing the (straight) world with imagery whose directness surely would make some people uncomfortable. Gay culture had moved truly into public realms, and with efforts like those of Haring, also into mainstream art circles. In response, Haring cultivated a street-smart persona. Yet he was never extremely far from the center of things in New York—primarily because of the city's embrace of popular culture.

Haring worked often in notebooks, and one of the unsuspected pleasures of the show is its exhibition of tight, complex, and often intricate black and white drawings. One group, taken from untitled notebooks in 1978-79, shows highly patterned designs that are so involved and finished, they can hardly be called sketches. Sometimes looking like Mayan hieroglyphs, sometimes like outsider or naïve art, and sometimes like sophisticated abstraction, the drawings assert a range many viewers likely are not aware of in Haring's art. But that, I think, is part of his pop process—a lightness of touch allowed him to take on almost any subject and render it graphically compelling. The openness and breadth of outlook Haring took to his task resulted in a body of work that remains resonant with the ongoing romanticism of young artists in New York, who like any generation are looking for heroes both to follow and rebel against. Now that pop art and culture has become permanent within the field of contemporary art, founding figures like Warhol and, later, Haring have taken on a nearly mythic importance. But it should also be noted that this kind of work and life is not for everyone, for it suggests that a culture of leisure, celebrity, and the pursuit of pleasure, often of a sexual nature, are the only things worth caring about.

Such a criticism is not expressed to push Haring to the margins. In the first place, he explored contradictions: he was highly industrious—the show's coverage of four years early in his life has filled the large halls of the Brooklyn Museum's main exhibition space. The point is that Haring refused to divorce his life from his art in a culture where celebrity is key. He became a noted nightlife figure, indeed someone who the press could turn to if reporters were interested in sounding the opinion of an openly queer artist. Haring responded by addressing the needs of his culture's demimonde—in works that were immediately successful, even when abstract, because they were based on cartoon forms and composition. One of the largest (170.2 x 238.8 cm) and most interesting pieces in the show is an untitled ink and acrylic work (1979) that incorporates a semi-abstract, semi-figurative drawing on top of a yellow and orange abstract ground. The top drawing is outlined in black and shows off a considerable number of phallic images, stair-like structures, and simple abstract forms. The overall design is fun and impressively artistic, although it can also be said that there is a public distancing in the imagery that makes it impersonal. But on another level, the painting is a tour de force of disciplined postmodern iconography, and shows off the artist's considerable conceptual skills.

It can be said that some of the notebooks and drawings amount to juvenilia, with a limited esthetic or intellectual interest. There is in fact a certain degree of irony that a major venue like the Brooklyn Museum is devoting so scholarly a show to Haring, who lived in the moment and created as many examples of ephemera as he did finished pieces. Did he see both temporary works and established ones as equal in importance? It is hard to tell. But clearly Haring found no contradiction or conflict of interest in making art that was both fun and funny and turned toward a single event. It was not as though Haring deliberately sought approval; he was a true independent willing to pay the price of an assertively demotic language—indeed, his drawing life in the subway was punctuated by several arrests. Nor was he an utter hedonist. Instead, the art was wedded to a lifestyle, so that, in the same way Warhol has become as legendary for his life as from his art, Haring could not be understood without knowing about his downtown existence and unapologetic, nearly ecstatic participation in the gay scene.

Indeed, it may be likely that the artist will be known more as a figure in the aggressive sociology of the time, a period when one needed to assert identity as a way of demonstrating that all groups, sexual minorities included, were alive and well. In that sense, gay desire would no longer be pushed to the margins as something taboo or at least not addressed publicly. Haring played a big role in contextualizing queer identity, no matter what the consequences—sadly, he would die in 1990 of AIDS, the quintessential gay disease. In a journal drawing from 1977, two pages of the notebook are entirely covered with small orange designs—circles within circles, squares within squares, tooth-like structures. But in the lower part of the second page, a single black circle is drawn in outline—it looks as if a virus has attached itself to the glory of the abstract doodling that occurs in the cartoon; and it seems to be a premonition of AIDS. America has a short cultural memory and seems to have forgotten about the disease, now that it has become a chronic illness as opposed to an acute disease. But for people like Haring, the illness was not only savage in that it killed him before his time, it also was a devastating reality to the New York gay community at large.

But Haring was too savvy a personality to play the role of victim; his legacy will hold on as that of a person living according to what he believed. At the same time, his fame belongs to Warhol's famous scenario of fifteen minutes of notoriety, in part because Haring took part in a scene for which only ephemera—small photographs, press releases, and flyers—remain. In this show, the use of words was more than usual, for on some level, Haring was not only concerned with gay perceptions but was also committed to a serious discussion of art. The extent to which one can relate Haring's texts and graphic works to his more ambitious imagery can be debated, but we must remember that he was celebrating a way of life, as well as putting forth a body of work deliberately made in the moment for the moment. The raw design and crude drawing emphasize Haring's connection with an improvised world of entertainment, one that still exists today in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side. His love of the extemporaneous added to the legend being drawn up around him, and around 1980, he began to draw the simple figures surrounded by short strokes intensifying the action or serving as evidence of a penumbra, as the case may be.

The cartoon element in Haring's work cannot be overemphasized. Figures are reduced to black outlines with very little or no detail, while the single images often look like illustrations to a narrative, albeit one whose outcome we are unable to know. Such imagery turns some of the work vulgar, as happens with the pig's face turned upwards, but this is part of the demand of being accessible. In contemporary art, the audience is all important, to the point where the work is directed toward people who have no actual understanding of modernism's abstraction and intellectualism. One can argue, then, that Haring's work consciously embraces viewers who for the most part don't look at more sophisticated artists. A question is inevitably brought up: Has Haring failed his mission by *excessively* simplifying his imagery, or has he fulfilled it by speaking directly to everyday people? There is a point when art ceases to be fun and begins to be demanding of higher standards, although America is now in the throes of democratizing culture and attacking artworks that are difficult to understand. Haring's art is part of this movement; in fact, he can be considered a major practitioner. The viewer educated in art may be alienated from work that fulfills its requirements so simply. Simple pictures of dogs or people squatting or crawling may have mass appeal, but they do not lead the viewer along a path of higher education.

The criticism of turning to the vernacular may in fact be unfair to Haring, who after all did what he set out to do. *Spaceship with Ray* (1980) consists of a circular spaceship sending a death ray down to the tallest of several buildings; the ubiquitous halo in Haring's art surrounds the skyscraper, which has no visual appeal, being a simple outline with an angled roof. Still, it is a compelling image, even if it is one whose staying power is distinctly limited. Another work, *Gloryhole* (1980), consists of a headless, nude man sticking an erect penis through a partition into an open space, where many men raise their hands in clear salute to the sexuality of the image. The cartoon quality is dominant in both images mentioned, to the point where Haring seems almost to have backed himself into a corner through overdevelopment of his theme. In the first work, the building is surrounded by Haring's familiar aura of short strokes of black in a red mist, a context found too in the encircling of the penis in the latter image. For this writer, sometimes the effect is crude rather than inspired. But we must remember the spirit of the time, in which ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities were putting up a spirited fight to gain common human rights for their groups.

In the later works, a billboard mentality begins to assert itself. Not wanting to incur distortions of imagery, Haring kept the overall gestalt of his compositions simple and easily available. There is some interest in aliens and spaceships, with the latter capturing blank figures in rays that look like they are beaming up the person drawn under them. Dogs, a favorite image, become sexual objects, alongside figures engaged in multiple activities, some of them sexual. In one engaging, large (eight by ten feet) work on paper (1981), Haring uses sumi ink and acrylic to draw the outlines of two standing animals, presumably humanoid dogs, that seem to be talking and dancing together. Outlined in red, the creatures contrast with the green figures painted helter skelter across the large canvas. Like the gay poet Allen Ginsberg, Haring is at times reductively simple yet never loses his interest, in part because he emphasizes figures in the midst of activities his

audience can relate. Haring is not without a humorous, self-deprecating side: in one untitled work from 1982, Haring shows a simple figure outlined in black covering his eyes and running away from a poster of people dancing frantically in a composition completely given in black outlines. Sometimes, it seems, even Haring himself can grow tired of the simplicity of his esthetic, and is large enough as a person to make fun of his own art.

In another work on paper, done in June 1982, Haring shows two angels with outsize wings copulating with dogs; above them are three more angels, all with red x's where their features should be, flying about in wav-like air currents. It is a scene of comic pandemonium, but Haring also appears to be equating the breadth of sexual desire as he saw it with a kind of social and spiritual anarchy, in which actions that feel good are to be accepted for their own sake. In another sexual image, three men outlined in black sport enormous erections; a big red heart separates one figure from the other two. The canvas's large dimensions, 72 X 112 ½ inches, serve to bring the image into awareness uncompromisingly. Made with sum ink and Day-glo paint on paper, the work is filled with the hyperactive black strokes Haring is famous for. The heart, with its several drips of paint, cannot be seen as originating from sentiment; instead, it celebrates the freedom of sexuality gay people were enjoying at that moment in time. The simplicity of the brush strokes has the effect of emphasizing whatever recognizable imagery there may be, with the idea that the figures lose their initial anonymity and serve as poster boys for a world dominated by eroticism.

But, sadly, that sexualized moment would be tainted by the presence of AIDS, which decimated gay ranks in New York and other places. Suddenly Haring's movement propounding an art for everyone became something else, a field of death brought about by sexual intimacy. Like the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, Haring stood for a moment of freedom in gay history, asserting rights even as the imagery bespoke an anarchic eroticism. Haring was the movement's foremost observer/participant, bringing a joyful humor no matter what the consequences, which were in fact equally dark and light. He was genuinely successful as an artist determined to bring art to people unfamiliar with the fairly unknown and closeted world he belonged to. In fact, Haring brought about a perfect merger of art and politics, in which simple fun played a major role. The times are more serious now, and the lightness of certain movements is gone. In the future, we can only hope for more artists like Haring, who saw no boundaries between the life that he lived and the art that he made. His visionary stance is equal to a radical democracy, which serves as a reminder that protest and politics can be part of a large art scene. In this sense, Haring not only had a considerable amount to tell us, he also genuinely led the way.

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