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Resurrecting the Apple

Keith Haring, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
June 25-September 21, 1997. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,
October 17, 1997 - January 18, 1998

Steven Kaplan

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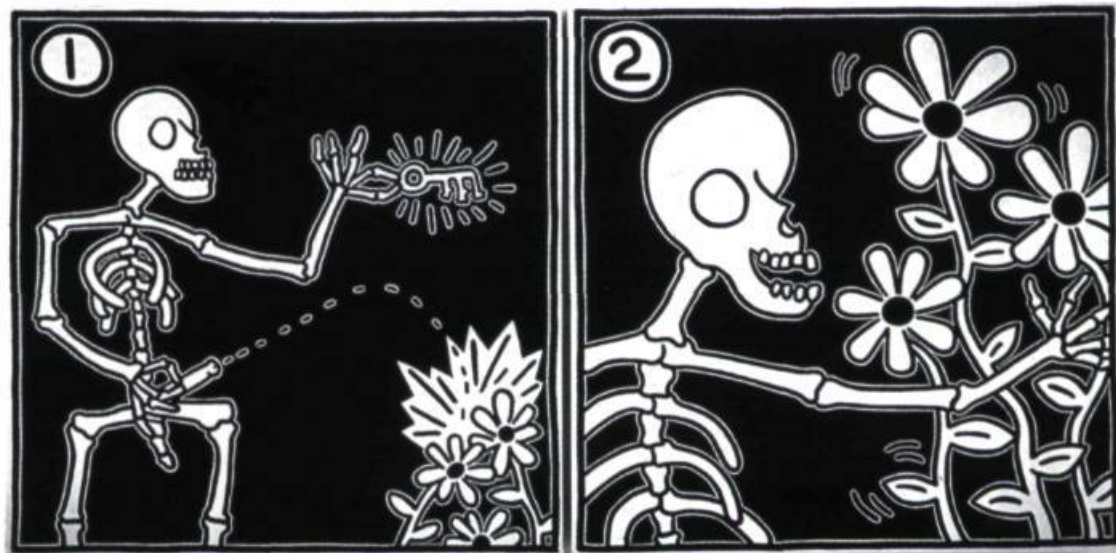
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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

NEW YORK

RESURRECTING THE APPLE

Keith Haring, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. June 25 - September 21, 1997.
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, October 17, 1997 - January 18, 1998



Keith Haring, *Untitled (For James Ensor)*, 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 2 panels; 36" X 72". Coll. Diane Von Furstenberg.

When Keith Haring died of AIDS in 1990 at the age of 31, it was also the end of the era of the 80's; a decade much maligned and still not properly defined (although many have tried), a decade of excess and easy money and (neo)expression, a decade that saw Haring rise from aspiring art student from Kutztown, Pennsylvania to the heights of art world success and international celebrity.

Like Andy Warhol, Haring hailed from the Pennsylvania hinterlands, but he made it in New York and became totally identified with the energy of the 'Big Apple'. His chalk drawings started to appear in the New York subways in 1981. They were mini-narratives of birth, death, love, war, and mutation, featuring radiant children, barking dogs, acrobatic homunculi, pyramids, activated porpoises, TV sets, and zapping flying saucers. They endowed Haring with an instant wild-boy 'street' cachet that easily conflated with the burgeoning inner city proliferations of rap, hip hop, graffiti, DJs, and break dancing. That Haring was concerned with popular imagery immediately accessible to the masses; that he seemed to become an overnight media star hobnobbing with the rock and movie 'A-list'; that he was gay and embraced New York's Afro-Hispanic urban culture in more ways than one (most of his boyfriends were Latino); that he understood the commercial opportunities for his art and was able to market it in

non-elitist, populist forms (as with the Pop Shop) demonstrates many comparisons to Warhol.

But this article is not about the parallels between Warhol, a producer of 50's commercial illustration, 60's Pop, and the Interview Magazine fetish of fabulousness and (super)starfucking, and Haring, perhaps the quintessential 80's artist-activist-celebrity. Certainly, since his death seven years ago, a lot has changed in the art world, where a new generation of artists and aesthetic priorities seems to emerge every season, to the point where Haring's work and his persona, if not forgotten, has certainly been deemed unfashionable in its combination of naive expressionism, its reductive strategy of the horror vacui (in that regard, whatever happened to A. R. Penck, the German artist of aboriginal hieroglyphs whose ur-canvases were sometimes compared to Haring?), and in its go-getter commercialism.

During his lifetime, Haring never seemed to lack for opportunity. He would create his own viewing situations. At the beginning, with shows he curated at Club 57 and the Mudd, both bastions of post-punk/New Wave 'kultur', he had artistic co-conspirators such as painter Kenny Scharf and actress Ann Magnuson. With his New York Post headline cutups (such as "Reagan Slain by Hero Cop") that he pasted on East Village lampposts, he was influenced by the textual theories of Beat writer William S.



PHOTO: TSENG KWONG CHI.

Keith Haring, Houston Street Mural, New York, 1982. © 1997, Estate of Tseng Kwong Chi and Estate of Keith Haring.

Burroughs and Brion Gysin. Most famous was his appropriation of vacant subway advertising space (obligingly covered with black paper by the Transit Authority) for the chalk drawings that attracted arrest by the NYC Transit Police, the bemused attention of millions of straphangers, and the interest of the art elite.

As his career progressed, so did his painted surfaces, from tarps and canvasses, to terracotta urns, to Lower East Side schoolyards and handball courts, to the gyrating torsos of break dancers, to the walls of clubs like Paradise Garage and Palladium, to the hieratic vestments of chanteuse and gay diva Miss Grace Jones, to the naked, dancing body of Bill T. Jones, and to the proliferating consumerism of Pop Shop buttons, T-shirts, magnets, bags and bumper stickers. Like the logo of Sherwin Williams paint, the images of Keith Haring promised to cover the earth.

But despite continued sales of Pop Shop merchandise and the moral presence of the Keith Haring Foundation at auctions to raise money for AIDS research, the artist's work had all but disappeared, in recent times, from high art precincts. (Perhaps part of an 80's backlash now in the process of being re-examined, as the music, art and fashion of that decade get resurrected). This absence has cer-

Well known for its mid-career retros of American artists (and, were he still alive, Haring would certainly be in mid-career), the Whitney does him right with a show that is comprehensive, respectful, perhaps a bit over produced, but indicative of the artist's energy, vision, social commitment and heroism. It would be all too easy to capitalize on the tragic image of the young genius cut short by disease or misfortune. To its credit, the Whitney does not stray too heavily into these maudlin conceits. The installation, created by Tibor Kalman (of the design firm M&Co), is historically accurate, starting with a dark room of subway drawings (including an ABC TV news rags-to-riches featurette on Haring), early street work and alternative space installations, advancing in the next room to the first color work, and so on, including rooms of day-glo paintings and sculpture that Haring made for performance and club contexts, accompanied by a soundtrack mixed by legendary club DJ Junior Vasquez.

Throughout the rooms is a collection of biographical artifacts, such as photos, letters, journal entries, souvenirs and non art objects, displayed in vitrines, which give a running account of the interplay between the artist's life and his art. The exhibition's final room is a tribute to Haring's courage and creative spirit, full of large canvases, tarps and videos executed after 1987, subsequent to his discovery that he had AIDS. When he received this painful diagnosis, rather than retreating from the world, he just got busier, and his concern with social issues — whether AIDS awareness, racism, South Africa, drugs or education — always important to Haring, seems to be accentuated in these later years. Also in this final room are large, kaleidoscopic canvasses that recall the apocalyptic visions of Bosch and Ensor, and several paintings which Haring purposefully left unfinished, the drips of paint against an unadorned ground testimony to his sense of a career where much would be left undone.

The Whitney has produced a large, thick, squarish catalogue (which complements, in shape and color, the famous 1982 spiral bound book from the first Shafrazi show) that is full of visual documentation of Haring's work. Included, of course, are the pieces from the exhibition, but also a large amount of work that was not actually displayed in the museum, as well as essays by critics, curators and friends of the artist. In a sense, the catalogue represents an independent project tied to the show, but destined to extend Haring's legacy beyond the exhibition dates, and certainly beyond the mortal coil.

STEVEN KAPLAN



PHOTO: TSENG KWONG CHI.

Keith Haring, subway drawing, New York, 1983. © 1997, Estate of Tseng Kwong Chi and Estate of Keith Haring.

tainly been redressed this summer by four different projects in New York, a posthumous red carpet seemingly rolled out to Haring by his adopted hometown. There have been two gallery shows; one uptown at Andre Emmerich, and one downtown at Tony Shafrazi, the dealer who first exhibited Haring and represented the whole graffiti aesthetic of the 80's. There are thirteen large scale painted metal cutout sculptures, fabricated by Haring from 1985 to 1989, which are placed along the Park Avenue median by the Public Art Fund. Most important is Haring's first American retrospective, curated by Elisabeth Sussman at the Whitney Museum.