

Keith Haring/New York City Subway Drawings, 1983  
(Photo: Tseng Kwong Chi)



MATRIX is supported in part  
by a grant from the National  
Endowment for the Arts, a  
Federal agency.

"...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 pre-historic times. It brings together man and the world. It lives through magic."

Keith Haring, 1982  
Documenta 7, vol. 2, p.144

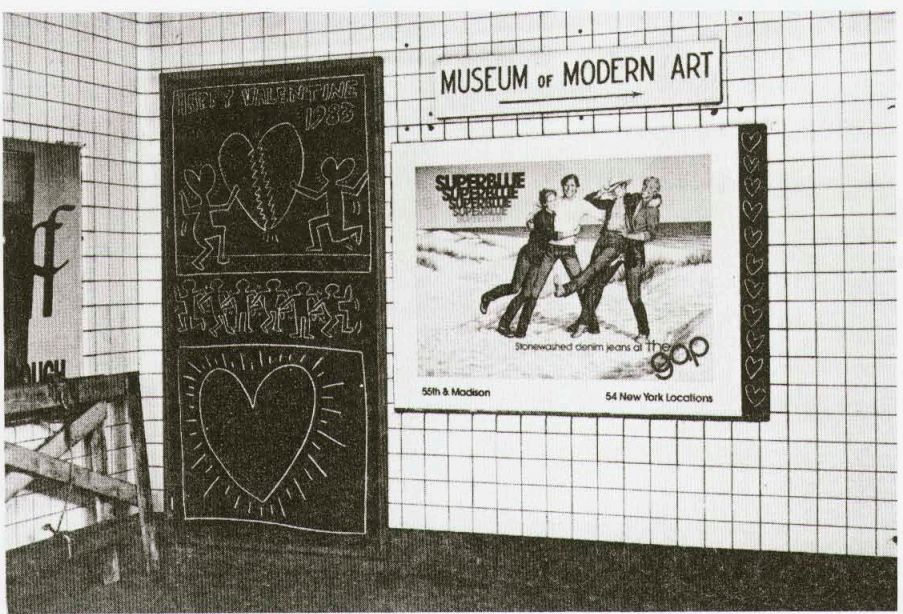
Twenty-five-year-old Keith Haring is one of a number of young artists who, in the past few years, have radically altered the meaning of "art in public places". Bypassing (and ignored by) the prevailing system of commercial galleries, government subsidies and the museum network, Haring initially took his art directly to the people. His New York City subway drawings, begun in January, 1981, soon turned Haring into something of an urban folk hero. Small crowds which gathered to watch the artist work would signal appreciation with applause when a drawing was completed. Ironically, this admiration and attention was swiftly translated into a level of commercial success uncommon for an artist of his age. Haring, who continues to do his lightning-quick drawings in the same subways (often in the stations of the Lexington Avenue line), recycles a portion of this new income into the production of buttons, posters, and stickers which are sold at cost or, even at times, given away.

Though greatly inspired by the most talented of the New York City graffiti writers who, wielding spray cans of paint and broad-tipped felt markers, have decorated (or some would say, defaced) subway cars with their exuberant and aggressive "wild style" writing and emblematic tags, Haring's subway work has, in fact, always reflected a more traditional, middle-class art school background. His very

choice of the clean empty rectangular wall spaces (routinely available whenever the subway authorities use black tar paper to cancel discontinued ads) suggests his inclination to adhere to a conventional format. However, drawing on the run, in the public view and on public walls, is highly unconventional, even subversive. Technically illegal, the drawings are, of necessity, executed with speed. Each is a virtuosic performance, completed within two or three minutes--fast enough to hit-and-run and avoid a confrontation with the police. Admittedly, on a number of occasions the artist has been arrested for criminal mischief.

Haring likes using white chalk. "It's fast, cheap, and temporary", he says. This statement challenges what the public, its expectations based on experience with museums and private collections, generally thinks about art: that it should be labored, costly, and enduring.

Haring's goals, like his methods, are also unconventional. He is anxious to share his work with the general public and is glad to make art that is accessible to a broad multi-lingual, multi-cultural population. In the subways his art has reached many who would never venture into a museum or art gallery. Instead of art for the privileged few, Haring has made art for everyone. His commitment to the democratization of art also represents a reaction against much contemporary art of the past few decades which, despite its obvious intellectual strengths (and its liberal, sometimes even anarchistic political biases), is most readily understood by a small group of highly educated constituents. Furthermore, Haring's work is not "art about art" nor is it cunningly Post-Modern. It is a straightforward expression of the artist's concern about the condition of society today.



Keith Haring/New York City Subway Drawings, 1983  
(Photo: Tseng Kwong Chi)

Though the content of Haring's work is not programmatic and much about it remains intriguingly mysterious, Haring's images often do stand for major issues. Power and conflict, exploitation and subjugation, love and friendship, and the fears attendant on the threat of a nuclear holocaust are all rendered in prototypical images which, through repetition, acquire a ritual significance. They seem to be emblematic warnings of societal distress, better acknowledged than ignored.

The frequent appearance of the television set, the radio, the telephone, the barking dog, etc. are clues to Haring's interest in the complexities of communication. Well-versed in semiotic theories, Haring is alert to how both words and images function in the exchange of information. Some of his earlier work was language-based. His subway drawings, however, embody his current focus on visual signs and symbols. In fact, Haring's use of images is not unlike our customary use of words. While his alphabet of images is limited, the numerous combinations available make possible an extensive realm of meaning.

Haring welcomes the range of possible interpretations, the multiplicity of meanings found in his work. Ambiguity, after all, undermines authoritarianism. Is "the radiant child" a victim of nuclear radiation or is it alive with unfettered polymorphous sexuality? Any given image is apt to change its meaning when scale or context is changed. A small animal might be a pet. The same animal greatly enlarged looms as a predator. The similar sets of short, staccato straight lines (cartoonists call these marks agitrons and blurgits) can indicate almost anything from electricity, light, sound, motion and speed to excitement, pain, recognition, epiphany and love. Often a range of these meanings will coexist in the same drawing. Definition and interpretation depend on context and experience.

Sometimes Haring's iconography comes initially from quite specific incidents or experiences. The man with a hole in his stomach was first drawn in response to John Lennon's assassination. Atomic explosions followed the Three Mile Island accident. The man with six arms was in re-

response to the Falkland Islands crisis (a picture of colonialism?). The cross and the rod appeared on the occasion of Pope John II's first visit to Poland. Mickey Mouse is, not surprisingly, a symbol for the United States. Following his recent trips to Japan and Europe, a world globe began to appear in his subway drawings (along with clocks which seem, in part, a response to his visit to Switzerland). But, importantly, these are only examples of the beginnings of meaning, not in any way a complete definition.

This MATRIX installation features new work which Haring drew spontaneously with sumi ink on paper in the gallery space on Saturday, June 4, 1983. The speed with which Haring draws is a key to understanding his work. Ideas travel swiftly and uncensored from brain to hand. The result is an authentic gesture, revealing perhaps a little of the magic Haring refers to in the introductory quote (above). Haring's technique can be sanctioned by precedents as diverse as the sparse yet content-laden gestures of Chinese calligraphy, the Surrealists' automatic writing and the Abstract Expressionists' existential strategies.

Haring's achievements as a skilled and energetic young draughtsman speak eloquently for themselves. His facility with line is impressive and joyful. His style is recognizable and self-assured. He has created a whole mythology of figures that are infiltrating the public consciousness.

There is, of course, a risk that through increasing familiarity the freshness and impact of his work will be diminished simply through the influence of outside forces. Even Leonardo's Mona Lisa has suffered in the hands of the media from over-exposure. Yet, despite the sometimes playful quality of his work, Haring is serious about

his goals and genuine in his beliefs. Anxious to reach a large audience, it is possible that Haring will be able to use the media itself as an effective tool for still wider dissemination of his images. He may even explore the media as medium.

In addition to being a gifted, inventive artist, Haring has also brought an attitude to his art-making that raises troubling issues about both the role of art and the role of the artist in contemporary American society. Like a number of other artists whose work has been exhibited in MATRIX over the past eight years (e.g. Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Adrian Piper), Haring has questioned the elite nature of art in our society. Must art be seen only inside institutions (museums and galleries) patronized by the economically privileged? Need art be owned and enjoyed only by those with extra disposable income? Should art be understood only by those able to wade through curatorial and critical texts?

Useful inspiration for Haring has come from many sources. Semiotics, Chinese calligraphy and the art of the New York City subway graffiti writers have already been mentioned. Jean Dubuffet's articulate rejection of art that was obscure, over-intellectualized and burdened with layers of language in favor of an art brut which drew its strength from primal instincts was clearly a persuasive model. The major retrospective of work by Pierre Alechinsky at the Carnegie Institute (1977) was a catalytic experience for Haring, giving legitimacy to an art that was expressive, spontaneous and highly-charged with energy (in startling contrast to the prevailing aesthetic of the time). Haring was also influenced by



Robert Henri's text, The Art Spirit, which encouraged artists to embrace enthusiastically the full range of humanity which comprised the metropolitan scene and to paint such subjects with spontaneity and vigor.

Keith Haring was born in Kutztown, Pennsylvania in 1958. He left Kutztown by way of Pittsburgh to travel West. After a brief return to Pittsburgh, he moved to New York City in 1978 to attend the school for Visual Arts where he studied with Joseph Kosuth and Keith Sonnier. He was actively involved in organizing exhibitions at The Mudd Club and Club 57. Haring lives and works in New York City and is represented by Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

Andrea Miller-Keller  
Curator of MATRIX



PLEASE NOTE: Keith Haring will give an informal slide talk on Sunday, June 5, 1983 at 3 p.m., Connecticut Room, Wadsworth Atheneum.

Haring is also scheduled to visit The Artists' Collective in Hartford on June 4, 1983 to do an on-site drawing for their Clark Street space.

Works in MATRIX:  
Untitled, 1983, sumi ink on white paper, 6' high, length to be determined by the artist. To be drawn by the artist in the MATRIX space on Saturday June 4, 1983.

Untitled, 1981, marker ink and enamel on fiberglass vase, 40" x 28". Lent by Dan Friedman, New York City.

Untitled, 1982, marker ink on fiberglass vase, 40" x 28". Lent by the artist.

Photographic documentation of Haring in the subways by Tseng Kwong Chi:

Keith Haring/New York City Subway Drawings, 1981-81, twenty Cibachrome photographs, 8' x 10'. Lent by the artist (Tseng Kwong Chi), Courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York City.

Keith Haring/Studio, 1982, Cibachrome photograph, 8" x 10". Lent by the artist (Tseng Kwong Chi), courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York City.



Selected one-man exhibitions:  
Pittsburgh Center for the Arts '78;  
Westbeth Painters' Space, NYC '81;  
Club 57, NYC '81; Rotterdam Arts  
Council, Rotterdam Kunststichting  
'82; Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NYC  
'82; Fun Gallery, NYC '83; Gal-  
lerie Watari, Tokyo '83; Lucio  
Amelio, Naples '83

Selected group exhibitions:  
Club 57, NYC Invitational '80;  
Times Square Show, NYC '80; The  
New Museum, NYC Events: Fashion  
Moda '80; The Mudd Club, NYC  
Drawing Show '81, P.S. 1, Long  
Island City, New York/New Wave  
'81; Hall Walls, Buffalo, NY  
The Agitated Figure '82; Wave  
Hill, Bronx '82; Marlborough  
Gallery, NYC The Pressure to  
Paint '82; Ronald Feldman Fine  
Arts, NYC Atomic Salon '82; Doc-  
umenta 7, Kassel, West Germany  
'82; Queens Museum, The U.F.O.  
Show '82; Institute of Contem-  
porary Art, London Urban Kisses  
'82; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts,  
NYC 1984 '83; Tony Shafrazi  
Gallery, NYC Champions '83; Whit-  
ney Museum of American Art, NYC  
Biennial '83 '83; Monique Knowl-  
ton Gallery, NYC Intoxication '83

Selected bibliography by Haring:  
Documenta 7/Kassel, D + V Paul  
Dierichs (Kassel) '82, vol. 1,  
p. 430 (statement by the artist).  
Documenta 7/Kassel, D + V Paul  
Dierichs (Kassel), '82 vol. 2,  
p. 144 (statement by artist).  
"Keith Haring Above Ground",  
Express, Fall '82, p. 3 (inter-  
view with the artist).

Selected Bibliography about  
Haring:

Marzorati, Gerald. "Signs of the  
Times," The Soho News, May 13, '81,  
p. 36.

Blinderman, Barry. "Keith  
Haring's Subterranean Signatures,"  
Arts Magazine, vol. 56, no. 1  
(September '81), p. 164+.

Ricard, Rene. "The Radiant  
Child," Artforum, vol. 20, no. 4  
(December '81), p. 35+.

Henry, Gerrit. "Keith Haring:  
Subways are for Drawing," Print  
Collectors Newsletter, vol. 13,  
no. 2 (May-June '82), p. 48+

Anderson, Alexandra. "Keith  
Haring: 'I'd Rather Draw',"  
Portfolio, vol. 4 no. 4 (July-  
August '82), p. 8.

Keith Haring, Tony Shafrazi  
Gallery (NYC) '82, with essays  
by Robert Pincus-Witten, Jeffrey  
Deitch, David Shapiro.

Gablík, Suzi. "Report from  
New York/The Graffiti Question,"  
Art in America, vol. 70 no. 9  
(October '82), p. 33+.

Hager, Steven. "Keith Haring/  
Art on the Block," East Village  
Eye, October '82, p. 8+.

Smith Roberta. "Four Formulas  
in Flux," The Village Voice,  
November 9, '82, p. 78.

Moufarrege, Nicholas A. "Light-  
ning Strikes (Not Once But Twice):  
An Interview with Graffiti  
Artists," Arts Magazine, vol. 57  
no. 3 (November '82), p. 87+.

DeSantis, Tullio F. "Haring  
update: Subterranean artist  
rode subway to the stars," Read-  
ing Eagle, November 21, '82,  
p. 16+.

de Ak, Edit and Lisa Liebmann  
"Keith Haring," Artforum, vol.  
21 no. 5 (January '83), p. 7+.

Hapgood, Susan. "Irrationality  
in the Age of Technology." Flash  
Art, no. 110 (January '83), p. 41+.

