



## Haring, Keith (1958-1990)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

During the 1980s, curious anthropomorphic figures--men, dogs, babies, televisions, hearts, and a wide variety of creatures and objects--characterized by a lack of individual detail, bold outlines drawn in black or primary colors, and halo-like rays that emanate from them, became seemingly ubiquitous icons of pop culture.

These simple yet sophisticated designs were the creations of Keith Haring, a young gay artist influenced by the "public art" of New York City graffitiists. In his all-too-brief lifetime, Haring produced these images at a prodigious rate and reached a worldwide audience that transcended differences of race, nationality, gender, age, and sexual orientation.

Keith Allen Haring was born May 4, 1958, in Reading, Pennsylvania, and was raised in Kutztown, a small Pennsylvania Dutch farm community. From early childhood, he drew avidly, beginning with cartoons and gradually progressing to more complex designs.

In his teens, he saw a display of Andy Warhol's work and was impressed by that artist's flat lines, his use of pop icons and mundane objects, and his concept of mass-produced art. Warhol's exaltation of the commonplace would later be a key factor in Haring's art as well.

After graduating from high school, Haring moved to Pittsburgh, where he studied art intermittently at various institutions. His two years in Pittsburgh were crucial in his development, not only as an artist but as a gay man as well; indeed, the realization of both his art and sexuality seem to have been interconnected. Accordingly, he moved to New York City in 1980, in order to be in the center of both the art world and the gay community.

Once in the metropolis, Haring studied at the School of Visual Arts, where he met other young artists such as Kenny Scharf and Jean-Michel Basquiat. From the beginning, his style was unique and "eccentric" in comparison to the work of his peers, but it evolved into its now-famous form as a result of Haring's appreciation of the city's ubiquitous graffiti.

Indeed, he began to create his own "graffiti," drawings of ambiguous-looking animals and a human figure on all fours, in the city's subways.

By 1982, Haring was employed as an assistant to gallery owner Tony Shafrazi, who gave him his first major exhibition. This show enabled Haring to demonstrate his work on a grand scale, and it featured his "dancing men" in various pop cultural attitudes and sexual juxtapositions.

Over the next three years, Haring's work was displayed and reproduced around the world; and, despite its often unmistakably homoerotic content, its humanist elements allowed it to communicate on virtually universal terms. As a result, Haring's designs were used for many public and social awareness campaigns, including AIDS prevention, literacy, UNICEF children's causes, and the fight against South African apartheid.

During the mid-1980s, Haring's work brought him wealth and celebrity. His fans included Yoko Ono, Dennis Hopper, and even Andy Warhol himself. Another devotee, Madonna, explains that his art had such a vast appeal because "there was a lot of innocence and a joy that was coupled with a brutal awareness of the world."

Haring's popularity was such that in 1986, he opened the Pop Shop in the SoHo district of New York City as a retail outlet for products bearing his iconography. The result, predictably, was the critical accusation that Haring had "sold out" through such a commercial venture.

Haring's response to this accusation was to point out that "high art" itself is an incredibly expensive commodity that is priced beyond the reach of ordinary individuals, and to contend that the Pop Shop enabled such people to obtain art objects at reasonable prices. The Pop Shop has continued to prosper and has since expanded its operations to the internet.

Haring was among the generation of gay men lost in the first wave of the AIDS epidemic. He was diagnosed with Kaposi's sarcoma in late 1988, but continued his art until, in his last months, he could no longer hold a pencil or brush.

Although his art had always reflected his social consciousness, in Haring's last years many of his works--from the relatively explicit "Safe Sex" poster to the familiar symbolic image of a snake cut in two by a pair of anthropomorphic scissors--was devoted to creating cultural awareness about the disease and other gay rights issues.

He was thirty-one years old when he died, on February 16, 1990, in New York City.

### **Bibliography**

Celant, Germand, ed. *Keith Haring*. Munich: Prestel, 1992.

Gruen, John. *Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1991.

Haring, Keith. *Keith Haring, 1988: A One-Man Exhibition in Los Angeles of Paintings, Drawings, and Prints*. Los Angeles: M. Kohn Gallery, 1988.

Kurtz, Bruce D., ed. *Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, and Walt Disney*. Munich: Prestel, 1992.

Sussman, Elisabeth. *Keith Haring*. New York: Bulfinch Press, 1997.

### **About the Author**

**Patricia Juliana Smith** is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com).