

POWERFUL

≡ BABIES ≡

POWERFUL

(( BABIES ))

POWERFUL

≈ BABIES ≈

**POWERFUL BABIES**  
**Keith Haring's**  
**Impact on Artists Today**

**Keith Harings inflytande**  
**på konstnärer idag**

**Alexander Tovborg**  
**Allen Grubestic**  
**J. Morrison**  
**Jaimie Warren**  
**Jeanette Hayes**  
**Joakim Ojanen**  
**John Hanning**  
**Juliana Huxtable**  
**Katherine Bernhardt**  
**Klara Lidén**  
**Kristina Matousch**  
**Lori Ellison**  
**M Lamar**  
**Michael Alan**  
**Misaki Kawai**  
**Przemek Pyszczyk**  
**Raul de Nieves**  
**Scooter LaForge**  
**Steven Evans**  
**Tad Beck**  
**Thedra Cullar-Ledford**  
**Trenton Doyle Hancock**

## **One might very well ask ...**

... why a museum of spirits exhibits art. As its name indicates, Spritmusem (the Museum of Spirits) is a museum of Swedish drinking culture, past and present. An odd subject for a museum, you may think, but if you visit us you will discover that you can reflect a country, its food traditions and celebrations, its humor and anxiety, and its social and political peculiarities through the lens of its drinking habits. Welcome to the vodka belt!

In 2007, the museum became the owner of the Absolut Art Collection – an extensive collection that up until then had belonged to a lucrative brand owned by the Swedish state. This resulted in a move to new premises on lovely Djurgården, opening in May 2012. The Absolut Art Collection, which comprises works by 550 artists, now has a 260-square-meter space of its own where we present related art projects. Every year, we select an artist from the Absolut Art Collection to be the subject of an in-depth show. This year we chose Keith Haring.

We are extremely grateful to very many people for making this exhibition possible. A big thanks goes to Bill Arning and Rick Herron, and all the artists included in the exhibition. We are also indebted to Julia Gruen and her team at the Keith Haring Foundation, as well as everybody who let us borrow and exhibit their artworks. Thanks to Safe TransArt, Bolon, and ABSOLUT. And finally, I would like to extend my immense gratitude to all my fantastic colleagues at Spritmuseum, especially the team that helped create this exhibition. It's all built on cooperation, commitment, creativity, and competence. THANK YOU!

Ingrid Leffler  
*Director Spritmuseum*

## Traces of Haring

One of the best-known works in the Absolut Art Collection is Keith Haring's painting *Absolut Haring* (1986), featuring his famously energetic figures, sketched in red, dancing around a bottle against a fluorescent yellow background. The design suggests the illuminated silhouettes of people in darkness under the pulsing spotlights of a nightclub. Since the Spritmuseum reopened on Djurgården in Stockholm in 2012, this painting and *Absolut Warhol* (1986) have been the only ones we have had on permanent display in the gallery devoted to the collection. Visitors often make it clear that they want to see these works in particular.

The Absolut Art Collection, consisting of some 850 works commissioned by the Absolut Company between 1986 and 2004, was placed in the care of the Museum of Spirits by the Swedish state in 2008. In our efforts to present the collection, we have chosen to take it as a starting point for various projects and sought ways of connecting it to what is going on in the art world today. Seen from this perspective, the possibilities are endless.

Producing an exhibition on Keith Haring has been on our to-do list at the museum ever since we opened. The question was just which perspective to adopt for such an exhibition – and how we could add to the public understanding of Haring. Since the 1980s, many fine selections of Haring's work have been shown around the world. Recently, however, a few significant exhibitions have helped break away from the stereotypical view of Haring as superficial and commercial, a view that has previously hampered deeper analysis of the many dimensions of his oeuvre.

One such exhibition was *Keith Haring 1978–1982*, produced by the Contemporary Art Center of Cincinnati, Ohio, in cooperation with Kunsthalle Wien in 2010/2011. The catalogue included several essays offering fresh perspectives on Haring's work. An essay by Bill Arning, a curator I'd met in New York in the 1990s, particularly captured my interest. Arning wrote that we ought to be listening to music when we look at Haring's works. They were originally created as performance pieces at nightclubs. When we see them today in big, silent museum galleries, we should bear in mind that they, like the African masks that are produced in order to come to life in spiritual ceremonies, have been wrenched from their original context. Arning also mentions the Pop Shop, the artist's own storefront where he sold pins, coffee mugs, and T-shirts printed with Haring symbols in enormous quantities, something many regarded as base and annoyingly commercial. The value of the project as a forward-looking installation and an artistic action escaped the arts establishment of the day.

Bill Arning's essay was inspiring, and thus was born the idea that it could be the starting point for a new exhibition concept. I contacted Bill and explained my idea, but the project quickly took a

different turn. He brought in Rick Herron, a younger artist and independent curator, and together they instead put together an exhibition featuring twenty-three contemporary artists who, more or less consciously, work in what might be called the spirit of Keith Haring. *Powerful Babies: The Impact of Keith Haring on Artists Today* shines a light on Keith Haring's legacy, revealing new pathways that Haring opened up for his contemporaries and later artists.

The complementarity of the show's two curators is reflected in the essays they wrote for the catalogue you are holding in your hand. Bill Arning was born and raised in New York, and is now director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, Texas. As a young man, he moved in the same world as Haring, between the university, galleries, and clubs. Rick Herron is younger. His first encounters with Haring were through magazines, posters, and advertisements. Yet they had much in common. Just like Haring and generations of other young producers of culture, Rick Herron grew up in a smaller city and moved to New York looking for freedom, tolerance, and a community of like-minded people. He is himself part of the young art scene in New York.

During his brief career as an artist, from the time he came to New York as a student in 1978 until he died of AIDS in 1990, Haring became a central figure in the clubs, the art world, and the alternative arts scene that existed outside the galleries and museums. The characteristic feature of his images, his quick, vigorously drawn lines, has antecedents in both graffiti and classical art. His symbols, many of them now universal icons of popular culture, communicate messages of joy and community, but also represent social and political activism. Haring wanted to communicate with his audience on their terms. In particular, he wanted to reach out to children, and often included children and young people in the creation of his public works, frequently executed without compensation.

By not drawing a clean line between life and art, by selling coffee mugs and T-shirts with printed images through the Pop Shop even as his international career as an artist was taking off, Haring effected a paradigm shift in the art world. Radiant bodies, smiling faces, and strong fluorescent colors – Haring's entire visual idiom communicates honesty, joie de vivre, and community – parameters that had rarely been woven into serious art before, but are self-evident strategies for many artists today.

Mia Sundberg  
*Curator Spritmuseum*

## **Art history: Drawing the line from Haring**

Artworks are time travelers destined to outlive their authors and thereby reveal new truths when freed from the constricting circumstances of their period of manufacture. There are few more fascinating examples to practice art history with than Keith Haring, considering the way critics have treated Haring, both during his brief period of making art and in the decades since his premature death from AIDS. Our catalyst here is an artist who was quintessentially of his time, and was fully engaged in its pleasures. That might make him seem a less than ideal test case but I will argue below that his brief shining moment makes him ideal to examine the periods in art that came after his passing.

There are many similar stories of artists whose likability, humor, social engagement, and refusal to obey the rules – written and unwritten – of how to be a “serious artist,” caused art historical and critical erasures. We can diagnose certain prejudices within the art world during Haring’s most active years via the many curators and critics who overlooked and discounted any lasting value for his unique images. People who should have known better found Haring too approachable, too sexual, and too gay – it is likely that for many of his non-supporters the work did not appear as art at all and was therefore not in their own realm to comment on. (It is important to never see any period’s collective judgments as wrong, or our own epoch’s values as correct, because our current assessments are guaranteed to be questioned and to change again.)

Tracing the critical responses to Keith Haring’s work and his reception history requires us to consider what has changed since the time of his first US retrospective at Whitney Museum in 1997, seven years after his death. The change becomes obvious through the two subsequent serious scholarly museum exhibitions. Through their understanding of his work we can see why Haring is relevant to young artists today. Haring’s work and persona grant young artists the freedom to be who they need to be and make what they were born to make, and that seems more apparent every year.

The three periods defined by the three American survey exhibitions could be simplified into “Haring, the irresistible populist,” “Haring, the theoretical philosopher of mass communication,” and finally “Haring, the revolutionary agent.”

As an observer I am far from neutral. In the years Haring became a household name in the art world, the downtown club scene, and to a lesser degree culture at large I had barely entered the art field as assistant director of White Columns and was trying to learn the rules – both spoken and more subtle – to advance my own career. I was studying the strange ways of this tribe. I was a young gay man, a native New Yorker, who had a supportive liberal family that allowed me to come out

relatively painlessly at fifteen in 1975, so by the '80s I was far from closeted. Yet I had no idea how to be myself in my professional life when I decided on a career as a careful, cerebral curator. I knew I would not risk ghettoizing my practice by being too queer; so I studied my elders, saw how they achieved success (or didn't) and where and when they spoke about their own sensibility as being specific to their biographies. Every negative comment I heard about an overly gay or politically engaged artist or curator I took note of and I tried to avoid similar career pitfalls. So I was acutely and anxiously aware of Haring's compromised critical status among certain curatorial experts.

Keith Haring had gone to the School of Visual Arts (SVA), a very savvy, art-worldly school that retains its regular function as an art-world finishing school today. Haring's diaries and accounts of fellow students make clear that he was an inspired student, learning art history and semiotics that he would not have had access to in Pennsylvania, or as a stoned Grateful Dead fan hitching around the country (one of his earlier incarnations as well as the quintessential '70s pre-coming-out move of becoming a "Jesus Freak").

But the School of Visual Arts was located close to "downtown," with its aura of cool. For my generation, the SVA competed with New York University on Washington Square for its combination of a stimulating faculty and proximity to the clubs. Walking distance was important in a late-night city and from the SVA it was very easy to get to all the best dance and rock clubs. New wave in the form of explicitly gay bands like the B-52s and the great era of gay disco at the Firehouse, Crisco Disco, and the Paradise Garage where DJs like Larry Levan were changing the sonic landscape were crucial parts of any worldly artist's indoctrination.

While I was in the quiet Art History rooms at NYU's Washington Square East building with its monk-like slide libraries rather than the raucous studios at the SVA, the conversation was as often about what clubs we would hit that night as it was on the nature of Joseph Beuys's art. When Haring is described playing the first B-52s album on repeat, the shock of recognition is intense for me. When I came to teach at both the SVA and New York University in the '90s, I saw, cherished, celebrated, and encouraged countless young art students who had just arrived in New York, as Haring had from Pennsylvania, and who went from terror at negotiating a new world to ecstasy and overwhelming joy at finding their future families and way of life there.

Yet, when Haring was emerging, there was something a little too easy about what appeared to be a commercially inspired slide from nightclub to gallery. In that period, graffiti was everywhere in the city and every subway ride was an intoxicatingly visual experience. The art form first moved

into the gallery world with Fab Five Freddie and Lee Quinones's 1980 exhibition at White Columns' alternative space but soon scores of street artists were harvested to provide commodities for what was then a declining commercial sphere. Not enough has been written about how the mainstream art world used graffiti to enliven its sphere and then promptly moved on to other forms. Most writers on Haring at some point make the point that he did not pretend to be a bona fide graffiti writer, but since most visually observant New Yorkers first saw Haring's art on the subway platforms while waiting for the authentic expression of the rolling museums that were the subway cars, the confusion in the public consciousness is understandable.

The other key point of Haring's appearing was the *Times Square Show* in June of 1980, in which Haring shared a room with SVA fellow artist Kenny Scharf – who today stands as the sole survivor of the group – invited from there to have his first gallery show with Tony Shafrazi's high-profile space. The *Times Square Show* came out of the edgy artist-run spaces like Fashion Moda and AB No Rio that were committed to art, populism, radical politics, and resisting the forces of gentrification. This epochal show's punk rock, multicultural ethos has since been replicated by hundreds of artist collectives all around the world but it stands as a marker in cultural history of a more innocent, idealistic time.

In 1981 and 1982 Haring took chalk into the subways and made quickly executed line drawings on the empty black advertising panels that the subway system used to cover an existing ad in cases when its time was up but no new poster was ready to take its place. His subway drawings were absolutely everywhere in 1981 and '82 and they were perfect works of in situ art. If the job of the artist is to create images that absolutely embody the period the artist is living in, Haring's subway drawings do just that.

The East Village galleries also appeared in the early '80s and showed scores of artists who in some way resembled both Haring and the black and Latin graffiti artists. The scene was Fun with a capital F, as was the name of one of the quintessential galleries FUN gallery along with Gracie Mansion, Sensory Evolution, Piezo Electric, Art City, Civilian Warfare, New Math, International With Monument, Nature Morte, CASH Newhouse, cheek to cheek with bars like 8BC and Little 57. (Note the edgy poetry of those unlikely gallery names.)

Art patrons started at openings, scavenged dinner, and wound up at the clubs and the entire process was seamless, boozy, and hysterically fun. I bought my first painting at Sensory Evolution for 100 dollars and felt so proud. But still, I knew somehow that while I would have fun, get drunk,

and flirt at these events, this was not where I should plant my flag if I wanted to get into academia or the museum world.

Among the many hidden inhibitions in art world discourse at the time there was a self-censoring around the gay male realities that appears slightly pathetic now. To say that the art world was de facto liberal, progressive, and inclusive is not entirely true. While gay men have apparently always had major positions in the realm of art-making from the Renaissance and onwards, they have done so at the cost of not speaking about sexuality – the very factor that constitutes queer culture – openly. (Lesbian invisibility is beyond the scope of this essay because it includes as part of its rubric the silencing of women in general so it is harder to parse out, but should in every instance be brought to light. I am of course aware that I am atavistically reiterating female silence here, but I honestly do not see another strategy beyond this simple acknowledgement of the condition, and the admitting that ignoring women's concerns in general, as well as issues of race and class inequality, was endemic to gay male culture pre-HIV, and is still way too prevalent.)

As part of Haring's generation I can say we looked at the trio of Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg as queer role models but received a conflicted message. Johns and Rauschenberg were widely known to have been a romantic couple for several years, but never spoke about it in the press or acknowledged the place of sexuality in their practice, leading art historians to risk their wrath when finding obvious queer messaging in Rauschenberg's *Bed or Canyon* and John's *Target with Plaster Casts*. They maintained a strict historically justified code of silence and were rewarded with the highest accolades an artist could get. While appearing personally asexual, Warhol, who in the '80s was a huge, swishy, and lively presence, made cock drawings and piss paintings. In the early '80s he was still treated by many authorities on art like a trivial annoyance that would soon pass. Today Warhol is "the master" whose practice in every aspect is the primer given to young artists in school, but when Haring and I were students, adopting Warholian stratagems was to risk much in terms of museum culture.

I came to seriously consider Haring's work for the first time as a journalist writing for *Out Magazine*. I had been a curator for twelve years and must admit that I never thought about Haring's work as a suitable subject in my curatorial endeavors. Indeed, I might not have at that juncture either if I wasn't trying to make a living writing, teaching, and occasionally curating on contract. As it turns out, non-art-world publications pay better and while *Out* was still low paying, I earned three times what I was getting at *Art in America*, and they assigned cultural stories of general gay interest

to me. I started writing for general reading audience publications and needed to speak to audiences that were not art experts for the first time in my professional life. I suddenly found many things about Keith Haring that were admirable and interesting to write about. Perhaps it was because I was not writing for a specifically gay publication and at a time when the rapid pace of deaths from AIDS rendered almost every other critical discourse moot that I suddenly saw what Haring's subversions had really meant.

In that article I admitted that if I looked at his works "as paintings" they fell flat for me, but if I looked at them as part of their times, and the parties that were instantiated around them, they were suddenly resoundingly powerful. I did not know at the time that Robert Ferris Thompson, a scholar of African art primarily, had been making the same point about Haring much better than I could. He argued famously that the static presentation of African sculpture on a brightly lit plinth obscured its true nature, and if the works were to be experienced they should be danced in more theatrically lit spaces. As a friend of Haring he knew his work was inseparable from the dance clubs Haring lived for, like Paradise Garage. I merely said that Haring's paintings looked best on the bodies of singer Grace Jones and standing twenty feet tall and wiggling in her giant Keith Haring painted dress in the video for "I am not perfect, but I'm perfect for you."

Haring embraced celebrity, and while his diaries reveal a constant awareness of the museums, galleries, and collectors that were NOT taking him serious – probably because he embraced celebrity and celebrated pleasure – he devoted far more of his life force to saying yes to any project that allowed him to reach the public directly. His willingness to do public works in almost any situation that might reach people in need and children established him as a cultural hero to many.

Still, the first American museum survey exhibition that I covered for *Out Magazine* was perhaps too soon after his passing for a proper critical distance. Curator Elizabeth Sussman is a legendary figure in her own right for the current generation of young curators. Most famously she curated the 1993 Whitney Biennial that was riotously attacked in the press at the time for being too "hectoring," for her focusing on the directly political art – largely inspired by AIDS – that dominated the early '90s. If Haring was attacked and ignored for his direct politics, the curator had faced a similar knee-jerk reaction. She showed Haring more as an irrepressible force of nature than a mature artist thinking through his work. He is described as a populist and given kudos for accessibility, which are not prized attributes in the visual arts.

Yet in the catalogue Haring is depicted surrounded by his friends from the East Village Little 57

club days (actress Ann Magnuson, graffiti writer Fab Five Freddy, rock singer Fred Schneider from the B-52s, and DJ Junior Vasquez). The catalogue does a great job of conjuring a period in which downtown NYC exploded, in which Magnusson describes the largely true vision of kids arriving on buses from the Midwest ready to find each other, fall in love, open spaces, and create together. The Paradise Garage is described as their ritual center. These voices feel very real and authentic but don't add a more distanced perspective. When the curator and Julia Gruen, head of the Haring Foundation that cares for his legacy, together interview Schneider he posits at first that no one was planning on a career – they were just entertaining themselves. They promptly correct him, insisting that Haring was always dead serious about his career.

When Haring emerged, there had been a number of challenges to this regime of refined taste: Julian Schnabel had emerged from the wilds of Houston to form an American response to the Neue Wilde in Germany, such as Immendorf, Fetting, Baselitz, and Elvira Bach. The bars and nightclubs fed on the energy that gave the world the Ramones and Talking Heads in New York and the Clash, Sex Pistols, and Siouxsie and the Banshees in the UK. But by 1984, the forces of serious, tasteful Neo-Conceptualism had reclaimed their turf and galleries like International With Monument showing Peter Halley and Jeff Koons once again banished the preeminence of personal expression as a value.

Such strictures did not affect Haring. Haring took his substantial base of support and did exactly what he wanted to do, often in very public situations, globally, and continued until his life ended. Haring was busily designing record covers, T-shirts, and doing commissions for Absolut Vodka and Swatch watches. In his diaries he expresses amusement at seeing Haring product knock-offs all around the world. In 1986 he opened a store in New York called the Pop Shop to sell t-shirts, posters, and badges directly, to make himself ubiquitous. Haters thought of this as another crass attempt at commercialism but savvy thinkers realized this was a complete conceptual strategy to create a new global reality that would be inclusive and joyous.

By the mid-80s there were signs that some great thinkers were starting to comprehend what he was really up to. In 2010/2011, Rapheala Platow organized *Keith Haring 1978-1982* for the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati and Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna. The show travelled to the Brooklyn Museum, which today is the museum that has accomplished the most when it comes to using innovative technologies and curatorial strategies to get diverse and young audiences through the door. The show attempted to look at the period in which Haring created himself. Haring, as the

catalogue's scholarship makes clear, was indeed analyzing and deconstructing his own responses and transformations, while still having a lot of sex and taking a lot of drugs, but most crucially making vast quantities of work.

When I saw the show at the Brooklyn Museum, I noted my fellow viewers were young, mainly of color, and taking notes on what Haring accomplished at the tender age of twenty to twenty-four. The exhibition's focus was on the young artist self-creating himself through a rigorous study of how meaning is created. It conjured a vision of an artist both precocious and deadly serious, even as he created situations in which the audience was supposed to have fun, to better learn to be and fully express themselves.

By the time this exhibition opened, two more categories had become dominant in art historical thinking. One is "relational aesthetics" in which all the social relations made visible by an artwork are considered as intrinsic parts of the work, not an after-effect. That understanding allowed a new generation to see the kids skateboarding in front of a Haring billboard as activators of the potential of the work. Haring, who was long dead before the term was coined, was claimed as an intuitive founder of a movement that later became institutionalized in museum culture. The Pop Shop was relational aesthetics in practice, as it could be considered as a social sculpture rather than a mere commercial enterprise.

The other new category was "street art," which went beyond the simple identification of all street art with graffiti, that was for better or worse tied to its origins in disadvantaged neighborhoods inhabited by people of color with the biographical authority to write graffiti. While Haring as a white kid from Pennsylvania could not claim to be a graffiti artist his street art achievements were manifold.

Not all the changes in art world discourse have been complementary to Haring's reputation. The art world is not nearly as white as it was in 1980, and there are many more curators of color working in the major cultural institutions. The fact that Haring's reputation looms so large while his collaborators of color tend to be left out of the official record except for their relationship with Haring is troubling. While most of the critics do not doubt the sincerity or love Haring felt for his lovers, romantic friendships, and collaboration partners, the type of multiculturalism practiced during the first wave of graffiti in galleries smacks of Elvis Presley's appropriation of black music's tropes. While Haring paid constant attention to the horrible systemic realities of racism – from the murder of graffiti artist Michael Stewart on a subway platform by police to the horrors of apartheid – so

much of what still needs changing is unaffected by all the works of this sympathetic artist figure. The fact that the upper echelons of the art world were more open to the art of Haring than to Rammellzee during the period when they shared platforms continues to be problematic.

Finally, in the recent exhibition *Political Line*, its curator Dieter Buchhart intertwined Haring's two deepest commitments – to the drawn line and political activism – and made a convincing case that the two are intrinsically connected. He also looked at the panoply of Haring's causes, from the environment, racism, drug addiction, health care, and sexual repression and interpreted them as linked in his worldview. The catalogue starts with a quote by William Burroughs on the huge influence of Haring on younger artists and proceeds to show all the reasons why the irresistible energy and production Haring manifested to the end was his greatest strength in making young artists find in him a grantor of license for their own sexual and political energies.

In my first year teaching at NYU I mounted my first syllabus of what this room of studio majors, with a few art history students mixed in, needed to know. Haring was not included, until one of my students, a shy new arrival to New York, asked me to cover his work so he could write his paper on him. Here is his account of how that happened:

Growing up in a place called "Normal" felt like anything but what my definition of a "normal" setting would be. During my exploration of art and design culture in the '80s as an adolescent kid I became infatuated with MTV, Swatch, skateboarding and Prince. My specific interest in collecting Swatch watches, combined with being mesmerized by watching MTV opened up so many windows into the world outside of Normal. When I first saw the Keith Haring Swatches at the mall's department store in Normal, I felt an immediate radiance from the bold graphics. I began exploring whatever information I could find on who this "K. Haring" signature belonged to and what else I might find. Simultaneously, MTV was vividly saturating my creativity with its colorful '80s graphics, Andy Warhol TV, and music videos.

It was the mid '90s and I had 1 semester left of college, so I decided to enroll in a summer class at NYU, Survey of Contemporary Art in New York, and spend the summer getting to know my future city called home. When I arrived in the East Village, it all felt so synergetic. I was able to tour around the city, trying to connect of all the images in *Interview* this cosmopolitan backdrop I was now experiencing. The survey class was a breath of fresh air, we toured from gallery to gallery, from neighborhood to neighborhood dissecting different dichotomies between them, and what was relevant in the art world from a New York point of view. Although it was the mid '90s and people like Haring and Warhol were no longer physically around, their impact was living on and I felt I could begin to understand the work from a new perspective. In this

class, I wrote my final paper on Keith Haring and his impact on the present day New York art scene and downtown club culture. I also became familiar with so many new artists' work, and local nightspots, I began to construe how someone like myself may create my own platform for creativity in the downtown scene.

A year later, after finishing my college degree, I was living in New York, or Williamsburg, Brooklyn more specifically. As much as I felt like a kid in a candy store, with so many options for what my life could look like, I kept my mind focused on the legacy of art stars like Keith Haring, and what my contribution to New York's downtown culture could be.

What I remember was the transformation that occurred when this shy student emerged on New York's downtown scene in the early 2000s as Spencer Product, a singer, DJ, and larger than life personality. When I saw a photo of him, mostly naked and glammed up, I took pride in that this transformation was an effect of taking my seminar – but it was in fact the Haring effect. As my co-curator Rick Herron and I started looking for his effects today, we quickly realized that almost everyone practicing art today was in some meaningful way given a more exciting field in which to work because Keith Haring had practiced there first. That is an amazing gift that Haring continues to give us all.

Bill Arning

*Bill Arning is the director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where he has organized solo exhibitions of the work of Marc Swanson, Melanie Smith, Matthew Day Jackson, and the late Stan Vanderbeek. The last two exhibitions were jointly organized with the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, where Arning was Exhibitions Curator from 2000 to 2009. Arning, with co-curator Elissa Auther, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver also curated a career survey of the painter Marilyn Minter, that will be on view nationally in through late 2016. Arning has written on art for journals such as Artforum, Art in America, Out, and Parkett and contributed to multitudes of international museum publications. His essay "No (Art) Business as Usual," on the art market and AIDS, appears in the catalogue accompanying the traveling exhibition Art AIDS America, organized by the Tacoma Art Museum (University of Washington Press, 2015).*

## How "Powerful Babies" are born

New York 1980

*"Because I was riding the subways every day to go to work and also to look at graffiti, I started noticing all the Christmas ads in the stations. One of them was a Johnny Walker scotch ad – and it showed a peaceful, snowy landscape. There wasn't anything I wanted to alter in the ad, but I saw all that great white space where the snow was. It was a perfect place to draw my row of babies – the ones I had been drawing on the streets above ground. There was also room – up in the corner – to do one of my flying saucers, which would be zapping down into the snow to hit the babies. And that was how the baby with the rays originated. When the flying saucer zapped the babies, I put rays all around the babies, because they had now been endowed with all this power. Later on, this image became misinterpreted. People wrote that the baby has radioactive energy. That wasn't so. The rays from the flying saucer gave this glowing power."*

Keith Haring, *The Authorized Biography*

I first saw the work of Keith Haring at the mall when I was a kid, on a calendar at Spencer Gifts. Or it could have been on the cover of the *A Very Special Christmas* tape at my grandma's house. It could even have been the *Absolut Haring* ad that I first came across in one of my dad's car magazines. What I know for sure is that I saw the barking dogs, dancing men, and powerful babies that populate the world of Keith Haring in reproductions for years before I ever saw one of his original paintings. As a confused gay teen in rural Missouri in the 1990s I really didn't like Haring. I didn't get it. Sitting on a revolving store rack with Anne Geddes's sleeping babies dressed up as peapods on one side and shirtless firemen on the other, Haring's paintings of pulsating men holding giant red hearts aloft seemed kitschy, and I imagined myself to be quite punk. The truth, of course, is that Haring wasn't kitsch, I certainly wasn't punk, and a favorite new author I'd just come across, William Burroughs, had collaborated with Haring years before my idol Kurt Cobain had. The book they made together was called *Apocalypse*, no less! But since there was no MTV in my town and only certain extravagant families had dial-up Internet, I depended on music magazines like *Spin* and *Raygun*, and the gospel that came screaming off the stage at the third-wave ska concerts in Kansas City that I'd go to in my dad's ugly minivan, to help me understand what cool was. When I started getting into art, I saw exhibitions of Minimalism and Andrew Wyeth at the Nelson-Atkins Museum and Georgia O'Keeffe and Louise Bourgeois at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. Great artists all of them, but my first direct experiences were still rather sober affairs. Then, probably

because Courtney Love has a cameo in it, I saw Julian Schnabel's 1996 movie *Basquiat* the night it came out. In just two hours, art had suddenly become radical, immediate, and relevant to me in a way it never had been before. At any moment portrayed in the film, which follows Jean-Michel Basquiat across downtown New York in the 1980s, Keith Haring could be just around the corner, hanging just out of frame. The two artists were often compared. They both showed early on in the historic 1980 *Times Square Show* that brought together artists from all over the city, ignoring ideas about high and low, and it is Keith Haring's iconic baby tag that lends Rene Ricard's 1981 landmark essay about Basquiat its name: "Radiant Child."

When I got to college in Detroit, I saw Haring tattooed around the biceps of the hot guy in one of my art history classes. I saw him on the hoodies of ravers at Motor. After scoring the giant red catalog to Haring's 1997 Whitney retrospective at a sale, it was a constant in my dorm room. Here was St. Sebastian, shot through with airplanes, crying in agony, with a full erection all at the same time. Here was a ghastly Cruella de Vil burning innocent puppies with her cigarette. Here was graffiti artist Michael Stewart being strangled by hands reaching down from the sky, the Earth gushing tides of blood from its core. Haring was unabashedly queer, hilarious, and concerned. He cared. The more I saw, the more complicated Haring became, and the more entranced I was. By 1998, when I rode a bus for 12 hours on a school trip to visit New York for the first time, I was a huge Haring fan. The only things I remember about that trip are being cold and walking a lot, seeing the Jackson Pollock retrospective at MoMA, and the fact that it was very important to me to make a pilgrimage to Haring's Pop Shop on Lafayette Street. Those who made it to the shop were rewarded by being able to step right inside a Haring masterwork. The white floors, walls, columns, and ceiling of the shop were completely covered with Haring's signature thick black lines, interlocking to form an all-over labyrinthine riot of abstracted shapes. Similar abstract compositions began to appear in Haring's works on paper during his student days at the School of Visual Arts in 1978, establishing a quality of line and compositional strategy that he continued to develop right through to one of the last paintings from 1989, called *Brazil*. Although parts of the Pop Shop have been preserved and subsequently exhibited, the DJ dog T-shirt I got on my first trip to New York – which I still proudly/embarrassingly wear constantly – has outlasted the shop itself, which closed in 2005.

It was not until I moved to New York City in 2006 that I saw Haring's original drawings, paintings, and sculptures. When I began working at the New Museum in 2007, I felt proud that the education department director's job title is named for Keith Haring, a nod of recognition to the support

that the foundation he started in 1989 provides to educational art programs around the country. In 2008, just up the block from the New Museum at Bowery and Houston, one of Haring's most beloved murals, from 1982 – full of dayglo break dancers and three-eyed smileys – was repainted to celebrate what would have been his fiftieth birthday. By that time, I had a long-standing relationship to Haring's work that had evolved as I grew up. Part of the experience of being a fan of Haring's work is to feel like had you met, you'd surely have been friends. This is, of course, what it's like to love a pop musician. When you find the right one, you feel like they've snuck inside your head and sung aloud your every feeling, and somehow, they all rhyme. For me, standing for the first time in front of Haring's massive stretched tarpaulins that were covered in electric-colored inks was just as loud and shocking as the first time I saw Kim Gordon on stage in 1995. The color from a big Haring painting can be so intense that it actually changes the way you perceive other colors temporarily. The surface undulates; figures don't just implicitly pulse from the rays painted around them, they actually seem to move before your eyes. At this scale, with a line so sure, so fast, and so impossibly flat, with a visual language that reaches back to ancient Egypt and far into the future, Haring's place among the great artists who influenced him, like Jean Dubuffet and Andy Warhol, seems indisputable.

In his journal from April 30, 1987 Haring wrote: "Picasso seems endless. Amazing how many things one can produce if you live long enough. I mean, I've barely created ten years of serious work. Imagine 50 years. The progress and evolution is remarkable. I would love to live to be 50 years old. Imagine ... hardly seems possible." Keith Haring died in 1990 of AIDS-related illnesses at the age of 31. My parents were born a few years apart from Haring, but it has always felt like he'd be my age. The last few years of his life were a fiery sprint to make as much work and connect with as many people as he could before he was too sick to continue. In just ten short years, Haring made large-scale works for nightclubs, hospitals, casinos, churches, schools, museums, stores, brands, a carnival, and even a blimp. Here, I've mapped out some of the ways Haring shaped my understanding of New York City, art, and life itself. My anecdotes, however, are just a few of the millions around the world that could be shared. With *The Political Line* – a major retrospective that focuses on Haring's most socially engaged works – traveling the world, and with a new line of clothing from MoMA and Uniqlo, Keith Haring has never been more popular. In 2015, there were three Keith Haring solo gallery shows in New York City alone.

Twenty-five years after Haring's death, my co-curator Bill Arning and I have organized *Powerful*

*Babies: Keith Haring's Impact on Art Today.* By always being one hundred percent himself, Haring significantly influenced the way many contemporary artists conceive of what is possible to achieve in their own careers. Now that a full generation has passed since Haring passed away, we begin to see how the rays sparking off Haring's crawling babies reverberate throughout the contemporary art landscape in strange and unexpected ways. The first generation of Haring's powerful babies is all grown up. Including recent works, live performances, and several commissions, the exhibition brings together a diverse group of some of the most exciting contemporary artists making work across the United States and Northern Europe. During our research, we identified five distinct ways in which Haring worked, and we selected artists whose practices exemplify the innovation and veracity Haring is known for. The works we've chosen for the show are not always those that might look the most like Haring's; rather, they give shape to brand-new ways of making art that became possible after Haring's intrepid trailblazing.

Our first area of focus is on fun. One of Keith's favorite projects was a mural he painted for the New York nightclub Palladium. Even if he was in Europe or Japan, Keith would come back to New York in time to dance on Saturday night. When he first moved to New York, his social network developed not just at his college, SVA, but also at Club 57, a church basement turned underground experimental performance-art bar on St. Mark's Place. Haring's open embrace of humor, play, dance, and nightlife set him apart from his artistic peers. Today, museums recognize the importance of documenting and contextualizing social practice that includes nightlife. The artists in *Powerful Babies* play in bands, self-publish zines, DJ at parties, sell Moroccan rugs out of their studios, design T-shirts, direct music videos, and compose minimalist folk operas. Like Haring, these artists recognize the boundless potential of remaining open to life and the power of saying yes.

There are several formal conventions that Haring challenged, ignored, or reinvented. Our next area of focus is a look at the ways Haring's hand can still be felt on the page and the canvas in contemporary art. Space is flat, colors are bright, drips are human but controlled. Haring got his start making white chalk drawings on the black paper covering ads in the subway. Klara Lidén wheat-pastes fresh white paper over concert bills in every major city in a defiant act of erasure/addition. Katherine Bernhardt takes a quick photograph of some litter on the sidewalk and later uses it as inspiration to make a twelve-foot painting of cigarette butts and pretzels. Michael Alan's fine line flitters around a page like an endless, nervous ribbon. The men in Scooter LaForge's paintings don't just have erections; they can fellate themselves. Haring painted directly on the bodies of Bill T.

Jones and Grace Jones, bringing painting to life. Tad Beck asks choreographers to dance right on top of photos of themselves dancing, making their gestures acts of creation and destruction simultaneously.

Next, we were very inspired by Haring's commitment to transparency and honesty about issues related to health and wellness. Well before he was diagnosed with HIV, Haring, in his personal life and his art alike, was a vocal advocate for people living with HIV/AIDS. He made posters, paintings, and T-shirts about safer sex practices and the dangers of drug use. In his 1989 *Rolling Stone* interview, Haring spoke openly about living with AIDS at a time when stigma about HIV/AIDS was at its worst. In our exhibition, artists use social media, performances, exhibitions, and artist-made books to deal with health issues like clinical depression, anxiety, cancer, nerve and spinal damage, and deep vein thrombosis in a way that is cathartic, honest, and healing. By remaining authentic to themselves, these artists use art to connect with others who've experienced chronic illness and personal health setbacks in a way that is personal, yet universally understood.

In addition to making paintings and posters for ACT UP, National Gay Rights Advocates, the AIDS Hotline, the Gay and Lesbian Center, and many more, Haring was on the streets marching in protests himself. Erasing the distinction between art and activism was one of Haring's most important contributions to art discourse. Three of the six works by Haring in the Whitney Museum's permanent collection are specifically about safer sex and HIV/AIDS. In his paintings, his collaborative partnerships and his high-profile presence in the media, Haring also advocated on behalf of environmental issues, campaigns against nuclear proliferation, the anti-apartheid movement, victims of police brutality, world peace efforts and, very frequently, children. Unfortunately, most of those issues are still as critical to society today as they were when Haring was making work about them. The artists in our exhibition also make art about issues like the crisis of violence towards trans people and people of color, the needs of long-term survivors of AIDS, gender as a construction, and legislation and social violence against women's bodies. Whether their activism is delivered in the form of a goth rave in Mexico, a poetry reading, a downloadable mixtape, or a breast-shaped piñata, the artists in our exhibition understand that didacticism doesn't necessarily have to be divorced from dancing.

Finally, children were one of Haring's greatest sources of motivation and happiness. We easily recognize Haring's sincerity, sense of innocence, and uninhibited imagination as being childlike. He frequently collaborated with hundreds of kids at a time to paint murals all over the world. Some of

his greatest artistic satisfaction came from visiting sick kids, and some of his best-known public works were done for children's hospitals. The artists in *Powerful Babies* are examples of how the art of Haring's generation instructed and inspired emerging art today. In turn, many of them make projects for, with, and about kids as well. Jaimie Warren's ongoing project *Whoop Dee Doo* is an intensive weeks-long workshop with teens to develop free, kid-friendly theater programs. Thedra Cullar-Ledford runs an art camp for kids out of her own house. Recently, Joakim Ojanen painted a scene that had struck him during a months-long motorcycle journey through Central and East Asia: A little boy in a head-to-toe Spider-Man costume rides his training wheels across the grassy Mongolian plateau straight towards the viewer. There isn't a flying saucer in sight, but there's no mistaking: this is a powerful baby indeed.

Rick Herron

*Rick Herron is a curator, artist, writer, and museum worker from Plattsburg, MO. He has curated projects and exhibitions for the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, the New Museum, the LGBT Center of New York, VisualAIDS, Chashama, the Cindy Rucker Gallery and others. He has participated in projects with Elmgreen & Dragset, Carsten Höller, Dis, The Kitchen, palissimo, flux-concert, Our Hit Parade, and many others. In 2013/2014, he was the Curatorial Fellow in the Queer! Art/Mentorship program, working with independent curator Pati Hertling and film writer/director Ira Sachs. Rick lives in New York City, where he is the Assistant Manager of Visitor Services at the New Museum.*

## Tad Beck

Tad Beck är en fotograf och videokonstnär i vars praktik samarbetet är centralt. Becks intresse för språk och kroppar i rörelse, dansares och performancekonstnärers domän, går tillbaka till hans tidiga utforskningar av den unika analytiska förmågan i den fotografiska mekanismen. Han fotograferade män som hoppade i vattenmassor och fick dem att återskapa omöjliga poser i luften som han fångade i linsen genom att bygga en speciell bländare i sin ateljé. Detta detaljerade sätt att återskapa en bild ledde till *Double Document*, en serie bilder där han lät dansare och koreografer utföra improviserade eller koreograferade rörelser som var typiska för deras praktiker. Han printade ett urval av bilderna i 106 X 106 cm, lade dem på golvet där varje fotograferat subjekt sedan återuppförde originalrörelsen, så att bilden blev skrynklig och gick sönder. De skrynkliga och sönderrivna bilderna fotograferades med bakljus, så att vi på samma gång får se både bilden och resultatet av rörelsen. Precis som Haring's teckningar dansade när de målades på dansaren/koreografen Bill T. Jones eller på sångerskan Grace Jones kroppar, gör Becks bilder den flyktigaste konstformen påtaglig på ett sätt som en avbildning aldrig kan göra.

Tad Beck is a photographer and video artist who has made collaboration central to his practice. Beck's interest in the language of moving bodies that is the turf of dancers and performance artists goes back to his early investigations in the unique analytic ability of the photographic mechanism. He would photograph men jumping into bodies of water. He would then have them recreate the impossible midair positions he froze in the lens by building apertures in his studio. This elaborate method of remaking an image has led to the *Double Document* series in which he took photographs of dancers, choreographers, and performers executing either improvised or choreographed movements that were "typical" of their approaches.

A selection of images was printed at 42 x 42 inches and placed on the floor, where each photographic subject re-executed the original movements, distressing and tearing the print. These distressed and torn prints were photographed with backlighting, so we simultaneously see the image and the results of the motion. As Haring's drawings were danced when painted on the dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones or on the singer Grace Jones, Beck's images make the most ephemeral of art forms palpable through representation in a way a straight image can never be.

*Double Document-Neil Greenberg 1, 2012, ultrachrome print, 106.68 x 106.68 cm, 1/3*







ISBN 978-91-88031-21-1



9 789188 031211 >



Art and Theory  
Publishing

---

**SPRITMUSEUM**  
& ABSOLUT ART COLLECTION