

KEITH HARING

Gay U.S. Social Artist
(1958-1990)



In 1978, Keith Haring moved to New York to attend the School of Visual Arts. Energized by the influences he encountered, he developed a graffiti-inspired style emphasizing the line. Seeking to work outside the conventional art world, and committed to involving the public in his art, Haring began his series of “subway drawings” – recurring images drawn in chalk on expired advertising panels lining subway station walls throughout the city. The subway became a laboratory for Haring to work out his ideas, iconography and narratives. Executed at all times of the day, in full view of commuters, his drawings attracted a growing number fans (whose interaction he cultivated) as well as the police (who arrested him several times for criminal mischief). His style soon became associated with the tribal undercurrents that permeated metropolitan life; and overtones of his homosexuality can be found throughout the works he created in his decade-long career. The subway drawings and his shows in numerous alternative exhibition spaces received much notice, but it was a solo show at a Soho gallery in 1982 which launched his meteoric ascent. Haring was politically involved, designing anti-nuclear posters (1982); posters for an anti-apartheid campaign (1985); and painting a portion of the Berlin Wall (1986). By 1989 his work had also become synonymous with the AIDS activist movement. Commercially, Haring worked for such clients as Swatch and Absolut Vodka. In 1986, in an effort to keep his imagery affordable, he opened a store in Manhattan – the Pop Shop – featuring merchandise bearing his own artwork. Just as Andy Warhol defined the 1960s, Keith Haring defined the 1980s. Haring’s creativity bridged the gap between consumerism, pop culture and fine art. His pioneering vision remains an inspiration to artists today. Haring died of complications due to HIV in 1990. He was 31.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What does it mean for Haring to be called an “activist artist”? Read the biographical information.
2. Group Discussion: How did Haring’s artwork define the 1980s?
3. Choose two paintings and share your impressions with classmates. Review any of the artwork or genre from http://www.haring.com/art_haring/index.html

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Investigate how Haring impacted the art industry through the review <http://www.haring.com/!/about-haring#.UJLpp452D0A>
2. Website Investigation: Examine another artist from the Legacy Project at <http://legacyprojectchicago.org/Artists.html> and compare their artistic style and endeavors.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Examine how his own personal development as an artist and gay man influenced his view about life. Read this transcript of the conversation at <http://www.haring.com/archives/interviews/index.html>
2. How do you think that Haring’s HIV status shaped the art that he created?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Haring has been described as having “pioneering” vision as an artist. How did this advance his unique style and artistic delivery? Which made an impact on others?
2. Part of Haring’s continual influence is to award grants through his foundation. Review how Haring will have lasting influence and impact through the http://www.haring.com/kh_foundation/
3. In what ways will you advance your vision and your outreach to others?