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CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK

Keith Haring’s Legacy Is Not Found at the Museum

Three decades after his death, his work is still sold on products and in stores. But his concept of public art is most powerfully preserved on the street.

By Max Lakin

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Toward the end of “Radiant: The Life and Line of Keith Haring,” Brad Gooch’s exhaustive new biography, he quotes from a journal entry Haring made after visiting the Museum of Modern Art in 1988 expressing his “sense of injustice” that contemporaries of his “were represented upstairs in the galleries, while he was confined to the lobby gift shop: ‘They have not even shown one of my pieces yet. In their eyes I don’t exist.’”

Haring’s frustration surely feels surprising for anyone who is familiar with his work, which is mostly everyone. You needn’t be able to name a Keith Haring picture to recognize it; its vibrating line and electric palette announce itself as efficiently as a neon sign. That was true in 1988, by which time Haring had completed more than 50 murals around the world, largely for hospitals and children’s charities, and was designing Swatch watches and ads for Absolut vodka and Run DMC. And it is more so now, 34 years after his death, in 1990 at the age of 31, as his work continues to permeate contemporary art.

In his short but intense career, Haring’s pulsating figures became an inextricable part of New York City life, like ancient hieroglyphics that weren’t as much drawn as unearthed. Remnants of his public works, like his crimson “Crack is Wack” handball court mural in East Harlem from 1986 and the 700-foot wraparound frieze in Woodhull Medical Center done the same year, remain highly visible. At once modern and classical, gnomic yet instantly clear, Haring’s work distilled the Pop Art of the previous decades and Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s, wrapping in uptown graffiti movements into a genderless, raceless utopia — a basic but expansive vision of human equality. And yet the most likely place you’ll encounter it now is still not the museum, but the mall, which was his own doing.

Haring's "Crack Is Wack" mural in the East Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan. Robert Wright for The New York Times

Haring's 700-foot wraparound frieze at the Woodhull Medical Center in Brooklyn. Sara Hylton for The New York Times

Haring's view was that art ought to be available to as many people as possible, and he correctly identified that most people's exposure to it was not in galleries but on the street and in stores.

Today, the breadth of artist-branded merchandise — the tchotchkes and T-shirts that function as an accessible counterpart to the art market's billion-dollar machine — is unremarkable. But the convulsions occasioned by the opening, in 1986, of Haring's Pop Shop, a SoHo storefront that sold inexpensive souvenirs stamped with his energetic vocabulary — pins, stickers, posters with smiling penises encouraging safe sex — were rabid. Critics regarded it as a violation of the sanctity of art. He was called a prostitute and a "disco decorator." The gall of an artist who had appeared in the Whitney's 1983 Biennial selling his own cheap reproductions was radical enough to shock.

And they were cheap. Posters went for a dollar and Radiant Baby buttons — a Haring calling card, previously offered free — moved at a mere 50-cent markup.

Haring's Pop Shop on Lafayette Street in Manhattan in 2005, the year it closed. It sold cheap souvenirs stamped with his energetic vocabulary — pins, stickers, posters with smiling penises encouraging safe sex. James Leynse/Corbis, via Getty Images

Haring was 27 and disaffected by the gallery-industrial complex that sought to commodify him, so he did the commodifying himself. “I wanted it to be a place where, yes, not only collectors could come, but also kids from the Bronx,” he said at the time. “I assumed, after all, that the point of making art was to communicate and contribute to culture.”

A generous reading could cast Haring’s project as institutional critique; a more cynical view would look something like that of the anonymous critic who sprayed “CAPITALIST” across the Pop Shop’s facade a few hours after its doors opened.

Critics and curators still struggle with Haring’s legacy. MoMA, whose Design Store stocks over four dozen styles of Haring merchandise, owns Haring’s untitled, 50-foot-long ink drawing from 1982, but rarely puts it on view. The last comprehensive museum exhibition of Haring’s work in New York was at the Whitney in 1997. Commercialism, apparently, still makes people uncomfortable. “Radiant” makes room for a multiplicity of motivations: Haring was an earnest humanist, alive to the liberating capacity of art; or a keen observer of American television and cartoons whose saturated gloss he mirrored in his art; or an early master of self-promotion.

Haring’s untitled, 50-foot-long ink drawing, from 1982, at the Museum of Modern Art. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

By now, a judgment is beside the point. To be deemed a sellout, as Haring often was called, was once the most wounding slur. Now it is the goal. The modern artist, aside from having to say something true about life, is expected to be an entrepreneur. Seen now against the crush of art licensing and fashion industry mash-ups, the Pop Shop, which closed in 2005, feels quaint. At least you actually had to show up to buy.

Like so many artists of the ’80s, Haring idolized Warhol, “everyone’s cultural parent,” as Rene Ricard wrote in 1981. Where Warhol coolly observed the country’s turn toward mass culture, Haring devoured it. His father, an amateur cartoonist, had him drawing Mickey Mouse before he was 6. Warhol was especially impressed with Haring’s buttons; when he referred to Haring as “an advertising agency unto himself,” it was the biggest endorsement he could think of.

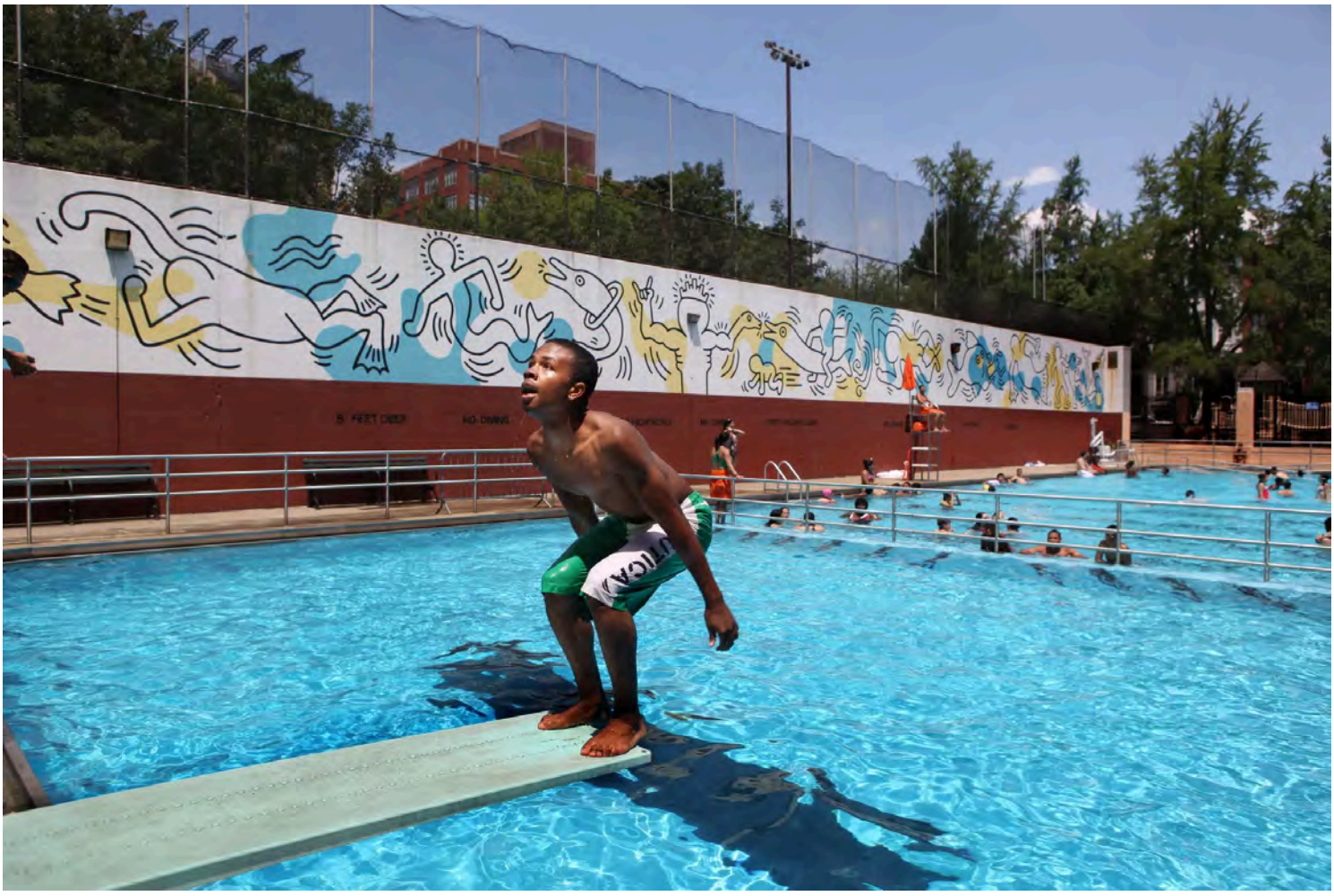
Haring isn’t responsible for art’s hypercapitalist mode; likely it was already headed there, accelerated by the money-flush market of the ’80s and the conflation of an art work’s market with its cultural value. But his career did offer another blueprint, for street art. In ’70s and early ’80s New York, subway writers and graffitists largely functioned in the city’s periphery, outside the gallery system’s gravitational center, until eventually that gravity pulled them in too.

Like Warhol’s soup cans, Haring’s designs can be seen on all sorts of consumer products, including skateboards. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Haring's style — the boogieing stick-figures and fluorescent palette — is alternatively described as Pop and graffiti. And while his sinuous line evokes some of the graphic, bulbous train art with which Haring became enamored, much of the graffiti label applies because he mixed with artists like Futura, Lee Quiñones, and Haze. But aside from being produced guerrilla style on public property, the simple, early line drawings that Haring plastered on lamp posts and on subway platforms share little with graffiti writers' propulsive alphabetic inventions.

What Haring took most from graffiti was the goal of maximum exposure, which he recognized as social engagement. (Gooch quotes Tony Shafrazi, Haring's dealer, who recalled Haring's habit of giving small drawings away as "a natural part of the way he worked.") In an essay for Documenta 7, in 1982, in which his work appeared alongside that of contemporaries like Donald Judd, Richard Serra, and Cy Twombly, Haring writes: "My contribution to the world is my ability to draw. I will draw as much as I can for as many people for as long as I can. "

Haring's rhythmic humanoids and three-eyed smilers were as recognizable then as they are now. But his genius was to saturate his nervous line in the public consciousness such that artists who may not think about him at all are rendered late-style imitators. (New Yorkers who have witnessed the Sanitation Department collection trucks sheathed in thick black lines might be surprised to learn these are not a Haring license, but the work of Timothy Goodman.)



The Tony Dapolito Recreation Center in Greenwich Village in Manhattan features a mural by Haring. To the artist, art should be available to as many people as possible. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Haring's most visible heir is Brian Donnelly, who, as KAWS, creates highly finished paintings and sculptures featuring a stable of morose characters, as far removed from Haring's gestural, upbeat pitch as can be imagined. Yet Donnelly, a former tagger, has clearly thought about Haring very much. "Untitled (Haring)," from 1997, a black-and-white photograph of Haring drawing on a subway ad, overpainted with a neon amoeba peering over his shoulder, as if taking notes, functions like a manifesto. There are some stylistic overlaps: Donnelly's figures, derived from famous cartoons, are similarly, instantly recognizable. But it's in the wide-view, in which his fine art production is supplemented with constant releases of collectible toys and luxury fashion collaborations, that Donnelly's practice can be seen as Haring's adjusted for inflation.

In terms of market crossover, Donnelly is the most successful post-graffiti artist, though others come close. Futura, for example, has collaborated with Comme des Garçons, Dr. Martens and both the Yankees and the Mets. In his afterlife, Haring repaid his debt to the style writers, having, as he noted, "replaced the network of information in the subways with an international network of distribution." In their eyes at least, he's achieved sainthood: a slightly confusing mural by the street artist Kobra installs Haring, along with Warhol and Basquiat into a Mount Rushmore peering over the Chelsea galleries.

KAWS, "Untitled (Haring)," from 1997, a photograph of Haring drawing on a subway ad, overpainted with a neon amoeba peering over his shoulder. via KAWS and Brooklyn Museum

Haring's art was reflective of the period's turbulence — the threat of nuclear war and Reagan-era conservatism translated into anxious lines and people irradiated by flying saucers — but also the era's sexual liberation, indulgences and club-scene ebullience, transmitted via boomboxes and swelling hearts.

Toward the end of his life, as he contended with AIDS, his free-floating glyphs turned toward activism: political posters advocating nuclear disarmament and anti-apartheid and humanizing the AIDS epidemic through education and appeals on behalf of ACT UP, all rendered in the same unflagging positivity. For most viewers, those signifiers have fallen away. What persists is a simple universality. Like religious art or cave paintings, they dealt in elemental ideas: birth, life, fear, death, sex. Haring's art could be understood because it spoke in the big, broad strokes of human life.

More than anything else, it's the licensing that extends Haring's concept of public art. Gooch quotes David Stark, the founder of Artestar, the agency responsible for the mountain of consumer products licensed with Haring's work, along with Basquiat's and other artists of the period. Stark worked for Shafrazi and then for the Haring estate, and views his purpose with missionary clarity. "I based it on Keith's model," he says flatly. "Keith Haring feels to be on the right side of history." That of course is the one with the gift shop.

The art world's relationship with its commercial realities can be a funnily uneasy one, eager to muffle the sound of business humming softly in the background (what is a gallery if not a store?). Haring's absence in museums suggests that the commercial bent to his populist vision makes that vision less profound. In fact its total triumph bears out the opposite. It's impossible to know if Haring saw the modern expression of the art market coming, but he understood the appeal of an alternative, and the desire to be able to hold onto a piece of art, however small.