

Madison Paige Drum

Instructor Ansley Adams

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Keith Haring: Activism in Art

*“Art should be something that liberates your soul, provokes the imagination and encourages people to go further.”*

*-Keith Haring*

In the year 1980, chalk artwork of figures and animals had flooded the walls of the subways of New York City. This was because of one man aspiring to change the world. His name was Keith Haring. The artwork he would create in public spaces was his way of bringing awareness to sociopolitical causes through peaceful activism. While many other people were just ignoring the issue, he did not. Keith Haring lived through many hard times such as the Cold War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Crack Epidemic. He used his artwork to spread messages to the public during these times of crisis. He has left an influence and impact on others that continue his legacy to bring awareness to sociopolitical causes through peaceful activism, as he once did. Inspired by the artwork and peaceful activism of Keith Haring, I decided to create my own painting inspired by Haring. I decided to spread my peaceful activism to the wall of social media to reach others. Keith Haring is important because he brought awareness to controversial social and political causes through peaceful activism.

One day while Keith Haring, a college dropout, was riding on the NYC subway he gained inspiration from seeing an empty black panel. Inspired, he bought a box of white chalk and began drawing on the black panels anytime he came across them. Keith Haring has stated while

making his subway art, “I was always totally amazed that the people I would meet while I was doing them were really, really concerned with what they meant. The first thing anyone asked me, no matter how old, no matter who they were, was what does it mean?” (Haring) Haring specifically made his subway chalk art during the daytime in order to capture the attention of the people passing by in the busy subway. This act of openly “defacing” the walls led to him often being arrested for vandalism. However, getting arrested never stopped him and this was only the beginning to the powerful impact Keith Haring would leave on America.

Times of crisis often bring out the worst in us, but this was not the case for Keith Haring. The eighties served to be a time for inspiration as Keith Haring returned to drawing with a new purpose. He stated “If I was going to draw, there had to be a reason. That reason, I decided, was for people. The only way art lives is through the experience of the observer. The reality of art begins in the eyes of the beholder and gains power through imagination, invention, and confrontation.” (Haring) During the mid to late-1980s the Crack Epidemic was taking over the United States and a lot of lives were lost due to this epidemic. In 1986, moved by these losses, Keith Haring graffitied on a handball court in New York City. The artwork was directly inspired by the crack epidemic and the effect it had on New York City. This artwork was “created as a warning and was initially executed independently, without city permission. The mural was immediately put under the protection and jurisdiction of the City Department of Parks and still exists.” (Haring) This demonstrates the significance of Haring’s peaceful activism, and how he had garnered the attention of the City Department of Parks, so much so that they kept the artwork under their protection because they felt it was an important message during this time of crisis.

On October 23<sup>rd</sup> of 1986 Haring did something remarkable. He painted on the Berlin Wall in order to bring awareness to the corruption of the Cold War. According to Keith Haring

he “decided on a subject, which is a continuous interlocking chain of human figures, who are connected at their hands and their feet—the chain obviously representing the unity of people as against the idea of the wall. I paint this in the colors of the German flag—black, red and yellow.” Haring called the provocation a “humanistic gesture” as well as “a political and subversive act—an attempt to psychologically destroy the wall by painting it.” (“The Story of Keith Haring's Courageous Berlin Wall Mural (Which Is Now Lost to History)”) By painting on the Berlin Wall, Keith Haring was able to bring much needed attention to the issues of the Cold War. The Berlin Wall was later knocked down November the 9<sup>th</sup> of 1989.

During the start of new decade there were many issues that arose during the nineteen eighties. The HIV/AIDS Epidemic was one of the biggest issues during this time, and was a controversial topic that nobody was really talking about. Yet Keith Haring made sure to bring awareness to this subject, as this was an important issue for gay men, as well as many others. This was a time when “the general public was misinformed about the HIV/AIDS epidemic, pop artist Keith Haring publicized his artwork in a marketable and straightforward fashion with the goal of encouraging a discussion about HIV/AIDS and combatting fear and ignorance.” (Choi, June Li) Notably, Keith Haring worked with ACT UP and Gran Fury during these times to bring awareness to HIV/AIDS as they made artwork that went along with the theme of “Acting Up to Fight AIDS.” The phrase “Silence= Death” is significant in Keith Haring’s HIV/AIDS works as this was his way of communicating that this was an issue that he couldn’t continue to be silent about. He couldn’t be silent because many gay men were dying, and no one was helping find a cure to this issue. Keith Haring has also stated his desire to bring awareness to this issue, he said “AIDS has made it even harder for people to accept, because homosexuality has been made to be synonymous with death . . . That’s why it is so important for people to know what AIDS is and

what it isn't." (Choi, June Li) In 1988, Keith Haring was diagnosed with AIDS but that didn't stop him wanting to bring awareness to this issue, so in 1989 he opened the Keith Haring Foundation. The Keith Haring Foundation "mandate being to provide funding and imagery to AIDS organizations and children's programs, and to expand the audience for Haring's work through exhibitions, publications and the licensing of his images. Haring enlisted his imagery during the last years of his life to speak about his own illness and generate activism and awareness about AIDS." (Haring) What is important is that even though Keith Haring had this disease, he did not let it define or stop his needs for justice to this epidemic. Keith Haring was able to capture the attention of many Americans through his artwork, and bring importance to this issue.

Keith Haring was important because of the way he displayed his artwork and meaning behind the pieces. He was able to bring awareness to political and social issues in a way that displayed peaceful activism. Inspired by the way he addressed these issues that nobody else was talking about, I decided to make my own piece in the style of Keith Haring's artwork. As a woman, I personally feel like gender equality is a big issue that does not receive the proper awareness nor justice. Gender equality is vital for human rights, it is important that both men and women are given the same equal opportunities. Inspired by Keith Haring, I decided to paint with acrylic on a canvas. In my piece I painted a male figure and a female figure with an equal sign in between the two to symbolize gender equality. Then after I painted this work, I decided to photograph my piece, and take it into photoshop. I decided to duplicated the image several times and changed the colors on each different piece, then put my multiple copies together as one. Keith Haring was known for his ability to quickly make his pieces as well as duplicate them, so I wanted to incorporate this element into my piece. This piece is kept simple but meaningful just

like Keith Haring's artwork. Additionally, as I wanted to spread my peaceful activism just like Keith Haring did when he painted his works in public locations. I decided to do the same except in a modern way. Instead I will be uploading my artwork on social media to spread peaceful activism and bring awareness to gender equality.

Keith Haring was an activism hero as he was able to bring awareness to things in a peaceful manner. He brought awareness to the Crack Epidemic, the HIV/AIDS Epidemic, the Cold War and was able to leave a positive changing impact on the world. The way in which Haring went about peacefully leaving his impact, not being afraid to voice his opinions, and needs for change is what made him great. What is most inspiring is that while Keith Haring was living through all of these traumatic events, he was also fighting the AIDS disease himself, yet still went out and made artwork for social and political justice. Keith Haring lived a life that inspired many others, like myself, to continue using peaceful activism through artwork in order to raise awareness about important issues and to not be afraid to voice your opinion. Truly, Keith Haring was a special artist leaving his mark and changing the world for the better.

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