

“Keith Haring” *Out*, 2002.

It's been said from the moment Keith Haring stepped off the bus in Times Square, at the age of twenty, he knew exactly where he was going and what he'd be doing. Inspired by the then-new rhythms of hip-hop and urban graffiti, this white boy from Pennsylvania Dutch country began to scribble his joyous "radiant" children, barking dogs and flying saucers directly on subway, tenement and gallery walls. Soon an international art star, Haring packed a full career into a single decade before AIDS struck him down in 1990. The long expected Keith Haring retrospective, which opens June 26th at the Whitney Museum of American Art, comes years late; it will also contain the most open celebration of gay sexuality since Mapplethorpe.

KRISTEN HARING: LITTLE SISTER

I've been reluctant to take on the role of the person who was the "Radiant Child." But he did spend a lot of time with me when I was very young. He used to take me in my stroller over to the public library a couple of times a week. We have a huge extended family-my father is one of twelve children-and so there was always a real mob of cousins and their children around. Keith was going through a troubled time as an adolescent. Somehow he was able to make a connection to an infant in a way that was fresh.

DREW STRAUB: ARTIST

Keith and I didn't really know each other in Kutztown, because while I was in school, Keith was taking acid and going to Grateful Dead concerts. We became roommates in New York City in December, 1978. We were young kids from Pennsylvania, very repressed. It's like we

both were not saying we were gay, and then we'd run into each other at the baths, wearing towels. Keith didn't really talk about being gay that much, though. He just included it in what he was doing, like drawing penises with wings that looked like butterflies.

ANN MAGNUSON: CLUB 57 DOYENNE, ACTRESS, PERFORMANCE ARTIST

At the time, I remember, Keith looked very innocent, gangly, probably hungry for sin like anybody just off the bus. Keith used to come down to Club 57 with a bunch of the regulars from the School of Visual Arts, like Kenny Scharf. There was always a Little Rascals on acid quality to the place. The drug of choice was probably more hallucinogenic, whereas at the Mudd Club and that world it was heroin. So we were always a very goofy bunch.

DREW STRAUB

Club 57 was like a suburban kids' clubhouse in the basement of a Polish church. Ann was Mom-she was the Florence Henderson character in the Brady Bunch. She never told people not to do things, though-it was like, do MORE things, please! It was a nutty vibe.

ANN MAGNUSON

What was wonderful about that particular time-I think it was right before Keith got really well-known, and certainly before 1984, when the whole scene became infected with blind ambition and money-was that it was my impression that people were truly living for the moment and very much swept up in the high-the art student high-when you first discover the joy of making art. That might sound naive, but it was true.

FRED BRATHWAITE A.K.A. FAB 5 FREDDY: GRAFFITI ARTIST, MUSIC
PRODUCER, FILM DIRECTOR

We were all becoming underground art stars. We were doing parties and creating our own little scenes, and being written about in the little cool downtown publications. It was all real fly. It was an incredible convergence of forces, the disco, hip hop, the graffiti scene and the art scene.

I taught Keith about the intricacies of street culture. And he was really open and already had a great ear, that was what was cool. Here's this white guy who was already into James Brown and rap music and loving the whole way they played with words. And Keith taught me about William Burroughs and how that whole rap, D.J., scratching thing is kinda like William Burroughs' cut-up theory.

BILL T. JONES

Keith was having a show at the Robert Frazer Gallery in London, and as one of the activities there we did a body painting collaboration. It took about four hours; I was nude and the whole thing was very, very intimate. I remember him looking up at me mischievously and then putting the last three stripes of paint on my dick with a kind of twinkle in his eye. There was something about being covered with these cryptograms, if you will, that seemed to draw power and meaning. It was a very ritualistic thing, very profound.

JOHN GIORNO

I used to go over to Keith's studio to see these giant paintings of hard dicks and it always amazed me. I'm a poet and a gay man and I've always chosen to include gay sexuality in my work, but to me it's been the kiss of death. To be gay that way, I always thought of as heroic,

just in the most traditional way of being a hero-like an enlightened warrior, charging into battle...for sure to be killed.

JEFFREY DEITCH: ART CRITIC, ART DEALER

I wrote the introduction for Keith's first gallery exhibition catalogue. You rarely see this kind of focus, brilliance, drive; I knew instantly that he was the real thing. Keith's freedom and exuberance always drew people to him.

I think doing openly gay art was actually one of the reasons that Keith has inspired people so much. He really was a completely liberated person and inspired other people to liberate themselves. Instead of being wary to expose his gay sexuality in order to achieve mainstream stardom, he emphasized it as something that other people could relate to and find inspiring.

There is a lot of confusion. People say Keith was a graffiti artist. What Keith was doing was much bigger than graffiti. He was taking on the whole world.

One of his greatest achievements...his embracing his sexual energy, putting it out there, encouraged other people, both gay and straight. I know that Keith also inspired people to come out and become gay - people who were suppressing it. He had tremendous influence on people in that way. I would prefer not to say who, because that's too personal. But I absolutely know that the work and Keith as a person inspired people in that way.

He was a very liberating influence, both in allowing others to embrace their own sexuality, and just in making it possible for people who weren't gay to embrace gay sensibility and enjoy it.

TONY SHAFRAZI, ART DEALER

You have to remember that in the early eighties, there was no life in the gallery world at all. So, Keith's first one-man show in 1982 shocked and surprised everyone. At opening, three to four thousand people poured into the gallery. The whole street was blocked off. It was a phenomenon, because of the kind of people he'd brought, from celebrities to kids from the projects, from the graffiti world to internationally renowned collectors, museum directors and famous artists of every kind. Everyone was amazed at the genius, the energy, the originality of having these drawings and paintings all stacked up, the music, black light, everything. It was an incredible success.

KENNY SCHARF: ARTIST

We were sharing a loft on Times Square when Keith's career started taking off. It was a little rough for me because I was trying the same thing, but nobody cared about what I was doing. People would come up to the loft and walk past my work like it was a white wall. And just gravitate to his work.

FRED BRATHWAITE A.K.A. FAB 5 FREDDY

I remember one night I was with Futura and Crash and a bunch of other guys, and I think I was dancing with Mary Boone. Keith ran up to me and said, "Andy's upstairs, Andy's upstairs. He wants to see you! He doesn't want to come downstairs because his hair will glow." Andy's wig was like fluorescing in the black light, and everyone would know that obviously his hair was really fake! So I went upstairs and Andy was standing by the staircase and Andy was like, "You're such a star! You're such a star! We just saw 'Wild Style'! You're so good! Ooooooh! you are so...."

KRISTEN HARING

As an adolescent, I was still living in this conservative small town with the same parents Keith grew up with, but we're getting calls from New York saying, "You'll never believe who I had dinner with last night!" and it would be Grace Jones, or Madonna.

ANN MAGNUSON

I think when Jean-Michel [Basquiat] would be riding around in limousines, that's when it really started to change.

DREW STRAUB

At a certain point, Keith got totally star struck. If you didn't call yourself by one name, he wasn't interested in you-if it wasn't Brooke, or Michael, or Boy, or Grace, or Madonna, or Andy. He totally went into that vibe. But I don't have problem with anyone wanting to hang out with Brooke Shields, really. He did the best drawings of Brooke Shields with a dick. I'd still get invited to his birthday party at Mr. Chow, or whatever, but I'd end up sitting with his parents, not with Tina Chow.

FRED BRATHWAITE A.K.A. FAB 5 FREDDY

The Paradise Garage was like our church, it was an institution. Coming from Brooklyn, and coming from a real urban ghetto environment, I'll admit I was real homophobic. But everybody knew that some of the best disco, some of the best hip hop flavor, was emanating from these gay clubs. Keith was like, "Unbelievable!" and the Garage was this whole revelation that then led into a whole big part of his life. So, Keith became a regular and me and Jean-Michel [Basquiat] would go together, usually when a hot new record had come out.

JUAN RIVERA: CARPENTER

I was about 28 when I met Keith at the Paradise Garage. I worked with him a little bit at the studio, but I mostly kept house. He would give me \$100 a day and I would buy food from Balducci's and cook for him mostly every night. He was a very cool person. But we kind of had problems. I study a little astrology, and we were never really meant to be. When a relationship doesn't go well with the horoscope, it can only last three to four years-and ours lasted for three.

KENNY SCHARF

Every time I'd go to his studio, there would be ten kids there . . . cute little Puerto Rican boys. It was a symbiotic thing, but it was too much. He was getting into the hip-hop culture.

RENE RICARD: POET, ART CRITIC

You know what the shocking thing about Keith Haring is? The most beautiful work he did was the subway work. Keith drew a pretty sharp distinction between the public work and the private work. He didn't want to shock those Puerto Rican boys' sensibilities. He didn't want them to realize what was really up, until they got into his shower. He was out there for boys. He didn't have too much morals. He was sort of like Allen Ginsberg . . . anything goes when the whistle blows. If it destroys the boy, then well it's the boy's problem. There was no ancient Greek style pederasty here, it was straight, New York style wham, bam, thank-you, ma'am.

BILL T. JONES

It was hard to engage Keith around political ideas. He was a very, very bright man and I think a very caring man, but I don't think that he had examined certain aspects of his personality and his likes and dislikes [vis-a-vis Black and Hispanic lovers]. I think that he truly loved being with those young guys, but I don't know if he could understand what his presence in that world meant. Oftentimes he would have the credit card. I'm not saying that Keith was an exploitive person, but I don't think he quite understood that it wasn't just playing, that there was a serious cultural divide there.

DREW STRAUB

Keith went to the Paradise Garage every Saturday night for four or five years. Then he fell in love with Gil Vazquez. He was a beautiful guy, a sweet, sweet guy. Just happens he was straight.

GIL VAZQUEZ: D.J., MIX MASTER

I was 18 years old in 1988. Keith was really into sex and I was typical Keith Haring prey. I looked exactly like what he was after. So, it was weird . . . it was there, but that's not where he was taking it. I'm straight and he knew that. It was the timing when we met, the kind of person he wanted to talk to. There were certain things he couldn't bounce off his lover at the time, Juan Rivera. I hung out every day with Keith. I loved him. I was there when he died.

KEITH HARING: ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW, AUGUST 19, 1989

No matter how long you work, it's always going to end sometime....And there are no regrets. Part of the reason I'm not having trouble facing the reality of death is that it's not a

limitation, in a way. It could have happened any time, and it is going to happen sometime. If you live your life according to that, death is irrelevant.

KENNY SCHARF

Some of Keith's friends in the Warhol crowd really dumped him when the Rolling Stone article came out. I remember that Keith was totally into Grace Jones. And as soon as that article came out, she just disappeared...never called anymore. Never visited when he was really sick. Never called the family after he died. It was really obvious and hurtful. He stopped getting invited to all of the fabulous parties.

GIL VAZQUEZ

There was a time when he was really sick and he didn't recognize anyone for a while. Then there was one day that he just was cool. He was back. He was able for maybe a couple of hours he was coherent and able to talk to everyone. It was like he had come back from a dream. He got to give love to the family, his mom. The immediate people that were there.

KENNY SCHARF

He was sitting up in bed, so happy, and saying how much he loved everybody. I haven't thought about this in a long time. It was really very, very touching. He was so lucid. He was so up and so beautiful. It was a last surge of energy. Then the next day he was out of it again.

GIL VAZQUEZ

It was something you could feel. I believe Mike Tyson lost the fight a few nights before in Tokyo. Everything seemed to turn, the whole world seemed to just about face at that point.

He died on February 16th, 1990. You knew something was going to happen, something was in the air.