

### Keith Haring - a Street Artist?

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#### Abstract

*Since about 2000 Street Art is an art movement. Before that only a handful of artists did what we call Street Art in 2016. One of them was Keith Haring. But to what extent is Keith Haring in retrospect a Street Artist? Using the example of Haring's subway chalk drawings (ca. 1980-85) and one of his public murals, called "Crack is Wack" (1986), I discuss concepts such as Street Art, Graffiti and Public Art.*

*Some of Keith Haring's works are Street Art because he carried them out in a performative way, without permission, in public spaces. They might be called Street Art because those works explicitly refer to this public space, they were indeed often tailor-made for their location, and because as a result of their illegality and their union with each location they were ephemeral, not conceived in time permanently. "Crack is Wack," however, became a public art mural. It changed its status from an illegal, Graffiti-inspired, self-authorized work of Street Art to long lasting Public Art.*

**Keywords:** Keith Haring, Street Art, Urban Art, Public Art, Graffiti, Working Definition, Overview, Summary, Terms, John Fekner, Samo, Basquiat, New York.

#### Keith Haring - a Street Artist?

Since about 2000 Street Art is an art movement (Walde, 2006). Before that only a handful of artists did what we call Street Art in 2016. One of them was Keith Haring. But to what extent is Keith Haring in retrospect a Street Artist? Using the example of Haring's subway chalk drawings (ca. 1980-85) and one of his public murals, called "Crack is Wack" (1986), I discuss concepts such as Street Art, Graffiti and public art.

##### 1. Subway Drawings

Keith Haring became famous in 1980 with his Subway Drawings (fig. 1), which were chalk drawings on temporarily blank advertising space in the New York subway. Until their next rental, these billboards were pasted over with black paper or painted over with black paint. From winter 1980 to 1985, Haring put 5 to 10,000 un-commissioned temporary chalk drawings – often produced in several minutes – on these billboards. He published a selection of them – photographically documented by Tseng Kwong Chi – in their book "Art in Transit" in 1984.

Let me briefly retrace Haring's artistic journey concerning these Chalk Drawings. What Haring saw when he came to

New York in 1978 were subway trains often painted from top to bottom. Since the late 1960s, the phenomenon of Style Writing, aka Graffiti, spread from Philadelphia to New York. Teens who wrote their names on trains, as masterpieces on the train and as small tags, e.g. in the wagons, these "rolling canvases" connected all parts, races, classes and income groups in New York. Keith Haring:

"Almost immediately upon my arrival in New York in 1978, I had begun to be interested, intrigued, and fascinated by the graffiti I was seeing in the streets and in the subways. [...] I was starting to see not only the big graffiti on the outside of the subway trains, but incredible calligraphy on the inside of the cars. [...] So the time spent en route to a gallery or to a performance or to a concert was just as interesting and educational as that which I was going to see. Sometimes I wouldn't even get on the first train. I'd sit and wait to see what was on the next train. (Gruen, 1991, p. 44). Haring saw Style Writing Graffiti in the subway and called them an influence on his own subway drawings. *The New York Times* wrote about Haring in 1990 under the headline "Career Began in Subway Graffiti," which was somewhat misleading. Keith's career and his confrontation with Graffiti actually began with

an art exhibition, the now legendary “Times Square Show” in June 1980. In Haring’s words: “It was around this time that a downtown group calling itself [...] COLAB organized a show called The Times Square Show. They had found this sort of abandoned building on Seventh Avenue and Forty-first Street which used to be a massage parlor. They rented it for very little money and invited all these artists to do installations and hang their works there. As it turned out, The Times Square Show was a turning point for the art world at this time. It really made a mark, because it was the first time that every kind of underground art could be seen in one place--and that included graffiti art. It was the first time that the art world acknowledged that the underground existed. [...] I had a piece with lots of pink penises in it, and one of the best graffiti artists, Lee Quinones, hung a piece. Also in the show was Fab Five Fred, who was infamous among graffiti artists for having done a subway train covered from top to bottom with Campbell’s soup cans. It was a reference to Andy, of course. So graffiti was becoming much more sophisticated, with its references to the real art world. As a result, the art world started paying much more attention to the graffiti world. (Gruen, 1991, p. 65).

According to the exhibition plan, Fab5Freddie and other Graffiti writers took part in the Times Square Show, but not Lee, here Haring’s memory might be wrong. Fab5Freddie exhibited under his real name, not as graffiti writer Fab5Freddie but as Fred Brathwaite and he showed “Graffiti [sic] Paintings (2)”.<sup>1</sup> Keith and the always high-art-savvy black sprayer Fab5 Freddy became friends. In Freddie’s words: “Actually, we were a sort of a posse-Keith and me and Jean-Michel and Kenny Scharf-and also this kid, Futura, who was this cool graffiti artist. So we were tight. [...] One night [...] we decided to walk in Alphabet City [...] the real Lower East Side. It was a time when nobody walked over there, because it was drugs and shit [...]. So we [...] were coming down by Houston Street, when all of a sudden I smell spray paint. I say, “Yo! Keith! Somebody is piecing.” See, that’s what graffiti artists do. When they do a piece of art, they go out piecing. So we walk closer [...] and we’re off Avenue D-when we come to this school called P.S. 22. We walk all around it and, right there in this courtyard are

all these local guys doing graffiti-and Keith went crazy! That’s when Keith plugged into this whole graffiti thing, and he wanted to be part of all that. Keith looked at these kids doing their stuff, and he looked up and saw this concrete band running all around the walls of the school courtyard and, right away, he wanted to fill it with his tags and stuff. So next day he came with a ladder and got up there and started painting his stuff. And it was there that Keith met LA II, this kid whose tags Keith went crazy about, and with whom he later collaborated.” (Gruen, 1991, p. 67).

For Keith the style of this 14-year-old LA II was outstanding. It reminded him of calligraphy, but in particular also of his own drawing style, determined by the black line. “The forms I was seeing were very similar to the kinds of drawings I was doing, even though I wasn’t making the voluminous letters and the aggressively fluid lines, which were done directly on the surfaces, and without a preconceived plan. They were really, really strong” (Gruen, 1991, p. 44). With LA II, which stands for Little Angel, as his real name is Angel Ortiz, Haring collaborated several times in the coming years. LA II often filled the gaps between Harings clearly recognizable figures and symbols. His style was similar to Haring’s, only less figural.

Haring is wrong when he states that Graffiti on trains got along without a sketch. Many Graffiti sprayers use preparatory drawings, i.e. in their black books. But his quote shows that Haring is especially interested in the act of drawing, in his words: “There was also this stream-of-consciousness thing-this mind-to-hand flow that I saw in Dubuffet, Mark Tobey, and Alechinsky” (Gruen, 1991, p. 45). Not only in recent art history, in particular painters of the abstract post-war art, which Haring cited here, but also in newer calligraphy especially the procedural aspect is important. The act of writing calligraphy is often impulsive, which makes the single characters difficult to read, but all the more expressive. Font styles such as cursive script make the actual text and its readability deliberately step back behind the calligraphic design. Even educated Chinese often cannot read Chinese Cursive calligraphy script. It is regarded as image, not as a text. All this, the gestural, often deliberately illegible, the pictorial can be applied to Graffiti as well. Haring’s works, before he started to draw figuratively in 1980, are also reminiscent of calligraphy, of illegible, gestural character images that are closer to Jackson Pollock than to Pop Art. Haring recognized his own drawing style in Graffiti writing

1 “Floor Plan and Artists List,” Times Square Show, 1980; drawings by Tom Otterness; notations by John Ahearn. Six-page offset print, front and back, on 3 sheets of colored paper, 8 ½ x 14 inches.

more than he was actually influenced by Graffiti: "And the fluidity of line, and the way they handled scale--doing this work on these huge, huge trains. And always the hard-edged black line that tied the drawings together! It was the line I had been obsessed with since childhood!" (Gruen, 1991, p. 44). LA II met all the criteria that we, then and now, attribute to a "classic" (or stereotypical) New York Graffiti writer around 1980. He was a teenager, he was not from an educated background, rather from the "ghetto," as many of those writers would describe themselves. He was not prefigured artistically. In short, he was everything Keith Haring was not. Today Haring is often lumped together with Graffiti sprayers, even though he hardly ever held a spray can in his hand, although he was already a trained visual artist before he worked illegally.

The reason why Haring is often labeled "Graffiti artist" is that he actually was friends with well-known Graffiti writers; he exhibited or collaborated with them, but also because there are different understandings of the term Graffiti. To write his tag, his pseudonym, with a spray can or marker is very often, from the perspective of the public, the same as any kind of scribbling on toilets, anarchy signs or illegal political messages in public space, i.e. "vandalism" and "daub." But if we speak about the Graffiti writers of New York in the 1970s and 1980s in the narrow sense, we speak of illegal or at least un-authorized practices with their own terminology, rules, hierarchies, legends, myths, standards, visual styles that are rather a subculture than incoherent, spontaneous scrawling.

With his chalk messages Haring decidedly addressed Graffiti writers, too. He speaks of his "tag" (Gruen, 1991, p. 65) when he drew his "barking dog" or his "radiant baby," although a "tag" in the Graffiti language actually is the artful writing of one's own name, at best in a self-developed style. Haring adheres to often quoted Graffiti rules of that time by not going over the tags and pieces of Graffiti writers. He paints his "baby" neatly between Graffiti tags (Haring, Tseng, 1984). He often drew his "radiant baby" just where many Graffiti tags could be found, he shared the space with Graffiti writers (Haring, Tseng, 1984). He posed for a photo in front of a poster that shows one of his subway drawings next to an ad poster with the word "King" on it (Haring, Tseng, 1984). "Kings" were the best writers in the Graffiti language.

However, Haring's work is based on images, not primarily on typography. This difference is often a sufficient one between Street Art and Graffiti. Even if there is Street Art,

which consists only of letters, their goal is usually the same as Haring's goal - readability and thus comprehensibility. Many Graffiti writers tend to address rather other writers, they often do not want to be read and understood by the public, rather by their own peer group.

The performative part in his subway drawings is more important for Haring than the lasting or destructive part. Chalk can be wiped off at any time. Unlike Graffiti he wants deliberately not to be destructive. Only like that he could attach his drawings under the public eye in the daytime. Contrary to Graffiti writers at that time he let himself be photographed and filmed very openly during the creative process. Especially the interaction with passers-by who approach him and with whom he can discuss his work is an integral part of the artwork. Chalk is not only reminiscent of the original and creative in children's drawings but also of education. Here Haring shares similar intentions with the "blackboard"-artist Joseph Beuys: Everyone's an artist. Art is for everyone.

Haring also wanted to communicate through the location of attachment of his works. Graffiti writers often sprayed destructively on and in trains, Haring used chalk on blank billboards. He filled a gap. Also outdoor advertising communicates primarily with all passersby or at least with a very large group, for instance with all Spanish-speaking. Street Art often aims at a general audience. Haring, who studied commercial graphic design, pointed to commercial advertising space vacancy. In 1975 New York narrowly escaped financial collapse; in 1980 Haring tried to reach the billboard consumers in the underground, but at the same time just to criticize consumption, for instance in a drawing where people worship a cross with dollar sign on television (Haring, Tseng, 1984).

Because of their location, Haring's makeshift or stopgap drawings appear even more ephemeral than Graffiti and Street Art are anyway, due to their endangered attachment in a public space. Everyone could wipe them out or add something; they might be pasted over by a billboard advert the next day. His drawings were highly vulnerable, often lasted only one day, but may nevertheless have been seen by more people than some works in a museum in a year.

Because Graffiti aerosol is more aggressive and destructive, it makes Graffiti less ephemeral and gives it a much longer expiration date. Many Street Art, which you see on the streets today, consists of posters, stickers etc., and shares its short lifespan rather with Haring's drawings than with

Graffiti. Ephemerality is another hallmark of Street Art. Of course, Keith was not the inventor of chalk drawings in public spaces. In Allan Schwartzman's book "Street Art" from 1985 we see, for example, chalk drawings of children from Brooklyn, New York in 1948 (Schwartzman, 1985, p. 13). Haring's first New York housemate and fellow artist from his hometown, Drew Staub, and Haring's friend Kermit Oswald both worked with chalk drawings in public space as a means of artistic expression before Haring did (see quotes of Oswald, p. 27 and Staub, p 30 in Gruen, 1991). But Haring himself reports the beginning of his chalk drawing as an "eureka" moment, when he suddenly saw an empty billboard at Times Square station, he ran out of the subway and bought chalk (Gruen, 1991, p. 68). But Keith also saw, also at Times Square (not in the subway station but in the show of the same name) those not photographically documented chalk drawings of his friend and fellow artist Jean-Michel Basquiat aka Samo.<sup>2</sup> Keith and Basquiat got to know each other in 1979, some time after Haring saw Basquiat's literary Samo "graffiti" (Gruen, 1991, p. 52), as Haring called them, everywhere in Manhattan. There is a piece of wood removed from a New York street that shows Haring's "baby" and his "barking dog" combined with Basquiat's crown, the words Aaron and a car showing on a wall in the streets of New York.<sup>3</sup> On the floor plan of the Times Square Show it is stated that Samo exhibited chalk Graffiti there. However, Samo was not the only one who worked with chalk Graffiti in the "Times Square Show," as we can see on a documentation photography (Schwartzman, 1985, p. 82) of collective chalk drawings from the 4th floor of the exhibition.

Haring took the concept of self-authorized, i.e., unsolicited public art for everyone, illegal public art, from Graffiti writing, but also from other New York artists around 1980, especially from Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, with whom he also collaborated. Haring's first attempts at working on the street were pretty reminiscent of the text-heavy poster and poetry art of these two conceptual artists, "word artists," who were very close to the Graffiti scene in New York and who both -

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2 - "Floor Plan and Artists List," Times Square Show, 1980; drawings by Tom Otterness; notations by John Ahearn. Six-page offset print, front and back, on 3 sheets of colored paper, 8 ½ x 14 inches.

3 - Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, untitled circa 1980-85, spray paint and paper on plywood, collection Larry Warsh.

like Haring - are often called Street Art pioneers today.<sup>4</sup>

There is a much-published photo<sup>5</sup> of the famous female Graffiti Writer Lady Pink in a T-shirt with a truism of Jenny Holzer, "Abuse of Power comes as no Surprise." Lady Pink played, along with Keith Haring's Graffiti writer friends Fab5 Freddie and Lee, in a famous movie about Graffiti, called "Wild Style." This shows how small and clearly intertwined the New York art scene was in the early 1980s, but also how linked with the Graffiti scene it was, the same can be said about the music scene and the poets of New York. Keith Haring was performing and reading poetry at that time<sup>6</sup> and he was also active musically. This walking between scenes and art genres he has in common with Basquiat, Patti Smith, Kenny Scharf or Jim Jarmusch.

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Haring incorporated his affinity for puns, poetry, performance, word-heavy poster art, Graffiti writing, (here is the written word at the center as well) in his Subway Drawings, which stand as drawings charged with visual symbols and pictographs between writing and painting, they are visual pun-like.

Haring was not the first and only one who used unused advertising space artistically. Especially Graffiti writers did that as well. Around 1980 also New York artist and Street Art pioneer John Fekner stenciled messages such as "My Ad is no Ad" on billboards and walls.

As a next step towards his Subway Drawing Haring once used a "Clones Go Home"<sup>7</sup> stencil that is reminiscent of famous political Graffiti slogans like "Ami go home." Haring did this as a political action. He specifically sprayed this stencil as a gay activist on the street, one of the few times that he took a spray can in his hand. His clear readable stencil font is

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4 - See for instance Lewinson, 2008, p. 89, 93. See also Seno 2010, p. 98-100.

6 - For a photo of Haring performing see for instance Buchhart, 2015, p. 33.

7 - Keith Haring, *Clones go home*, 1980, powdered pigment and graphite on paper, stencil, 51x66cm, New York, The estate of Keith Haring. See Kolossa, 2004, p. 15.

reminiscent of the visual artist Fekner who sprayed about at the same time “Post No Dreams” over “Post No Bills,” and other promotional critical messages.

What Keith Haring had in common with Fekner’s stencils, Graffiti tagging or Holzer’s paste up posters, is the “breathlessness” of their attachment. Haring’s high speed drawing style of making a work in a single operation within minutes, is dictated by the self-authorized element in his actions, since he could be arrested at any time or at least subject to a monetary penalty.

In his “My Ad is no Ad” with its mounting location on a billboard Fekner thought about its viewers and readers, who wonder, like with Haring’s drawings, for which product this strange kind of advertising was meant to be. Often Haring responded to the ads next to his drawings, took over details, atmosphere and content and interacted with it. A hot dog from a billposter advertising emerged in Haring’s drawings repeatedly. In addition to a movie poster, dealing with a documentary about the Ugandan dictator and mass murderer Idi Amin Haring draws a big man on a pile of small human corpses. The reference and interaction with advertising is now often a hallmark of Street Art. Many Street Artists are coming from advertising or were inspired by advertising works.

This becomes clear in another founding myth, in which Haring made his first steps with self-authorized public art. Around 1980 on the way through New York City he saw an advertisement for Chardon jeans. According to Keith someone had playfully painted over the letter “C” in it” (Gruen, 1991, p. 66-67), which changed Chardon to a salacious Hard-On, which you can also word playfully be found in the slogan of the brand himself: “I beg your Chardon” which sounds like “I beg Your Pardon”. From then on Keith changed any Chardon jeans ad into a hard-on-jeans (Gruen, 1991, p.67) and soon saw in other billboards space for his own artistic achievements:

“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” (Gruen, 1991, p.68). Here you will find again the spontaneous, the gestural, the performative, the process-focused element, which Haring would like to see in Graffiti and that reminds him of the afore-mentioned post-war artists.

Reacting to advertising, to commercial messages in public spaces, whether writing or image, hard-on or snowscape, was not Haring’s invention. Although he had an eye for advertising and understood its mechanisms, he had also studied Commercial Design before studying art in New York and later he did advertising as an artist, for instance for Absolut Vodka or Lucky Strike. Especially social political minorities such as gays - or women’s rights activists took advantage of this existing platform, outdoor advertising, bill posters, to demonstrate a counter-public sphere, as in that infamous Fiat car commercial from London: “If it [the car]would be a lady, it would get its bottom pinched” (Posener, 1982, p.13). Underneath someone added with spray paint: “If this lady was a car, she would run you down.” Haring’s confrontation with the advertising posters was taken to an extreme, when next to his illicit chalk drawing there was a poster advertising for a Keith Haring exhibition (Haring, Tseng, 1984). Hence Haring was often inspired by surrounding billboards for his subway drawings or he told stories over several billboards. Many works we can only guess now. This serial storytelling beyond individual works partly over long distances and periods of time is also found often in Street Art, for example, in Banksy’s rat stencils, that were like a net in a particular urban district.

Also Haring’s photographer-friend Tseng Kwong Chi did not always see all hints. One of his photos shows a Haring chalk drawing with two flanking, articulated billboards (Haring, Tseng, 1984). On a different photo (Schwartzman, 1985, p.52), not by Tseng Kwong Chi, we can see more of the blue advertising next to the drawing. In the midst of it an inverted heart pictogram is located, as well as in Haring’s drawing. Why is this insignificant translucent detail important?

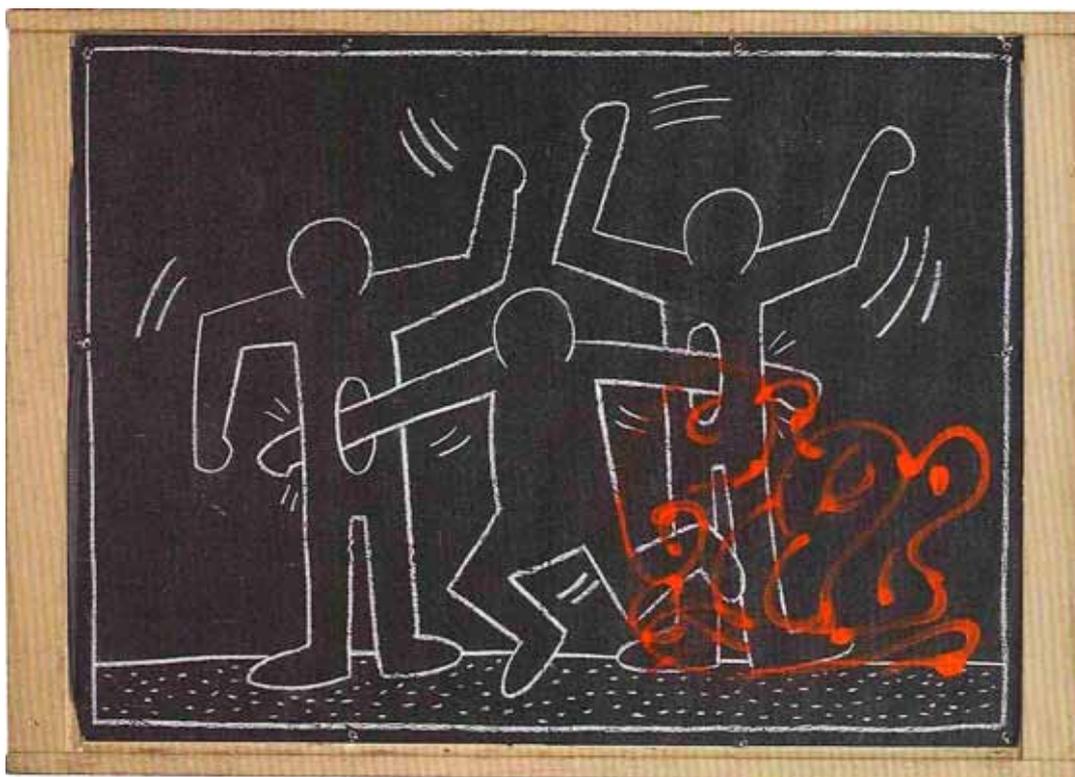


Fig. 1 Haring Subway Drawing, from exhibition catalogue Keith Haring - Gegen Den Strich, 2015, p. 114

At this point we are close to Graffiti and to what would be called Street Art later - and relatively far away from gallery art, close to “an art for all” and an art that is not commercially utilizable because it was part of the public space. In the gallery, this art needs to be connected to a “respiratory protection apparatus,” that is behind glass, in the spotlight. If you see an art exhibition with one of Haring’s Subway Drawings, we have to remember that we see stolen art there, which at least did neither occur there with permission by Haring, nor had it been removed from the subway with (the artist’s) permission. With growing fame, more and more of Haring’s drawings, deliberately made for the public, were stolen. This art, this Street Art was robbed of part of its context, the subway and often the accompanying billboards. In a gallery conservators seem to have a hard time with these “zombie” art works as these chalk drawings were not made for eternity, which are kept on life support against Haring’s will and their own logic.

It is also interesting that subsequently added Graffiti tags on top of Haring’s chalk are often hushed up during the presentation in a museum or gallery space today, although they were often the inspiration for Haring to make Subway Drawings. A larger Graffiti tag (fig. 1), which was apparently

sprayed on top of Haring’s chalk drawing with red paint, is not mentioned in the explanatory sign under the piece, it is seen as a debris.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 “Crack is Wack”, July 1986

A mural is a large-scale painting on a “mur,” i.e., a wall. It can be self-authorized but it does not have to be. As we will see, the anti-drug mural “Crack is Wack” (fig. 2 & 3) is both and it is not just any arbitrarily chosen work of Haring. In the short biography section of the Keith Haring Foundation is the first single work, which they mention with title and only one of four they mention at all.<sup>9</sup> “Crack is Wack” is arguably Keith Haring’s best-known work” (Israel, 2014). “Wack” is not just a Graffiti-term frequently mentioned in New York Graffiti illustrated books since 1984. In different notations, this Afro American slang expression means incorrect, sub-standard, stupid, unoriginal, bad and ugly.<sup>10</sup>

8 - See for instance fig. 72 (plus caption) in Buchhart, 2015, p. 114.

9 - Haring.com, *bio*, <http://www.haring.com/!/about-haring/bio#VriTilKN2ro> [Accessed: 20/01/2016].

10 - For an overview on the meaning of „wack” see Jacob Kimvall’s “Glossary of Glossaries” of Graffiti terms in Kimvall, 2014, p. 212.



Fig. 2 Haring -Crack is Wack, July 1986 photo by Tseng Kwong Chi

Haring “finished the entire mural in one day” (Israel, 2014), July 27, 1986. Since his creative process is documented photographically (again by Tseng Kwong Chi<sup>11</sup>), I move along these photos in my brief description. Haring started with the inscription “Crack is Wack,” which he illustrated afterwards. After the slogan he painted a rather cubist-eyed monster that is about to eat a suspended upside down person (Israel, 2014). Then Haring added a crack pipe, from which the mentioned slogan appears from a puff of smoke or like in a cartoon speech bubble. Haring surrounds all that finally with partly winged skulls and a burning dollar sign. The expression “to have money to burn” comes to mind. Also the eyes of a then added horse were called “cubistic” (Gruen, 1991, p. 84), a horse that has just bitten off a figure’s arm. The horrors of war in Picasso’s painting *Guernica*, which contains a

similar horse (Gruen, 1991, p. 58, 84-85), are compared with the horrors of the crack epidemic. From 1984 onwards, the cocaine-based drug crack was very much in vogue in the United States and claimed many victims, especially young people in the suburbs of large cities (US Department of Justice, 1991). This information is important because it explains why Haring might have painted his “Crack is Wack” mural just on this wall, namely a free-standing wall on a sports ground between East Harlem and Central Harlem, two quarters traditionally associated with poor immigrant inhabitants - Latin Americans in East Harlem, i.e., “Spanish” Harlem, or African Americans in Central Harlem. Both were then disadvantaged neighborhoods where also “classic” Graffiti writer kids came from, who often had Latin American or Afro-American roots.<sup>12</sup> Teenage boys were exactly the same group that was identified as the most crack users and typical Graffiti writers.

11 - The photos about the genesis of Haring’s first (illegal) Crack is Wack mural on the website of the Haring Foundation are mixed with the second (legal) version of mural. <http://www.haring.com!/archives/murals-map#crack-is-wack> [Accessed: 20/01/2016].

12 - For a detailed description of Haring’s site-specific thoughts see Kimvall, 2014, p. 70.



Fig. 3 Haring -Crack is Wack, October 1986 (front) photo by globalstreetart.com

This information is important because they provide an indicator for Street Art, namely, the location reference. Graffiti could be rather anywhere, when a Graffiti writer minds the location it is rather in a formal way. Street Art works are often tailor-made for a specific location, with a message in mind. For Graffiti and also advertising it is often important that it is on a clearly visible spot. Haring uses this principle as well: “Around this time, Haring often drove past a handball court located in a small park near the Harlem River Drive. The court was clearly visible from the highway but abandoned. Nothing fenced in the court and no one played on it (because if you did, the ball would just go onto the highway). According to Haring, the location seemed a perfect spot to paint. It was almost identical to a highway billboard” (Israel, 2014). Like for his Subway Drawings Keith chose a location that looked like an advertising space, but (temporarily) was not utilized like one. Billboard-like locations are always clearly visible locations.

Haring’s “Crack is Wack” is not just Street Art because it is more figurative and readable for the public than Graffiti, because it is so ephemeral and temporary, because it has spatial reference, but also because it was created illegally. It was made without request by the owner of the location. Here the Keith Haring Foundation is wrong with their description

on the website. It says in the last sentence, that “The mural was immediately put under the protection and jurisdiction of the City Department of Parks and still exists” (haring.com, 1986). In fact, the work we see on the photo was created self-authorized. Haring had to pay a small fine of \$25USD. Soon after the mural was vandalized into a pro-Crack-Mural: “Crack is it” (Howe, 1986a). But before that “[t]he mural was shown on television, praised by the Crack Foundation and, apparently, won the approval of the neighborhood. It has remained free of graffiti.” (Howe, 1986b). The unauthorized attachment is a major indicator of Street Art. Although created without authorization the (Street Art) mural was on the way to be legalized, i.e., on the way to become Public Art through custom and practice. “And then, according to Haring, to deal with this, some ‘busy bee in the Parks Department’ took it upon themselves to paint over the entire mural in gray without consulting his supervisors” (Israel, 2014).

Artists who act with permission on the street, are never fully free of the implicit allegation of artistic compromises. However, the urban park administration from New York liked the mural or the positive attention it got and offered Haring, who was already an international art star at that time, eight venues in New York, where he could alternatively

paint a new “Crack is Wack” mural, at the expense of the

“is wack” with loosely connected illustrations and symbols

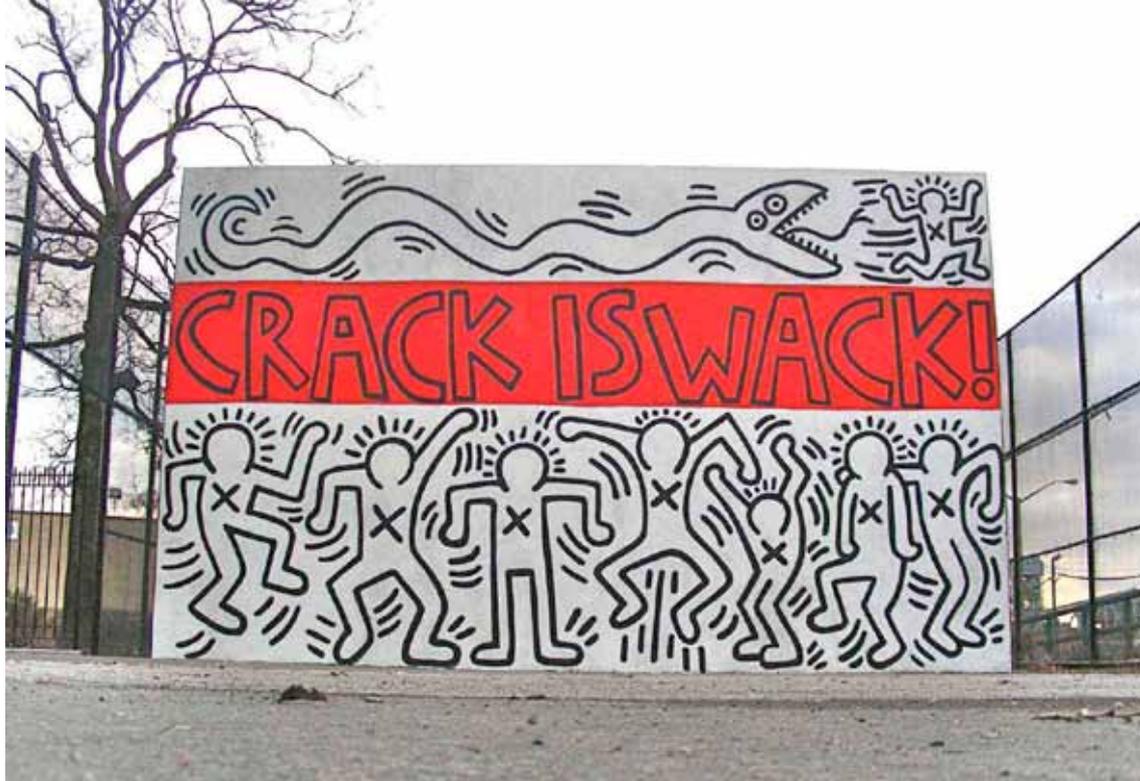


Fig. 4 Haring -Crack is Wack, October 1986 (back)

city administration. But Haring wanted stubbornly nothing but this same location, allegedly because of the spatial references explained above.

## 2.2 “Crack is Wack”, October 1986

Haring painted the second mural (fig. 3), this time legally and commissioned, in early October 1986 (Howe, 1986a). Here again Haring started with the words and then refers to language, the spoken and written word, which is so close to his character-like icons and visual symbols. With this new mural we get a sense of the difference between Street Art and Public Art. The latter has often a distinct geographical reference, but is always made with permission, in consultation with authorities, usually for a fee.

This time the “Crack is Wack” lettering - again filled with unhealthy pustules in a cartoon-like cloud bubble of smoke - is rather a headline, with “CRACK WACK” next to each other and the “IS” on top of the “WACK.” “Crack Wack,” with the drifting “IS” sounds and reads more “wack” or disturbed like a drug trip than the rather ordered “Crack” on top of

grouped around the slogan. In the second version Haring painted a giant skeleton with “X”-out eyes and screaming open mouth. A wild dancing crowd of people carries the big carcass, like a pop star who died stage diving, on top of their heads. In its bone hands the skeleton holds a burning dollar note and a crack pipe, both symbols from the first version. The second one is more clear and energetic than the first version as Haring did not just group symbols loosely around a slogan but connected all elements closer and more consistent. Both murals mention the location and the date “NYC [19]86.” The Mural has the same “fluorescent” (Israel, 2014) “toxic” orange color recalling the toxic drug crack. Like the skulls and the “X” in the skulls’ eyes, Haring uses as well the colors of (chemical) warning signs on commercial products.

So far, I have not mentioned the backside of the mural (fig. 4), which Keith created as part of the second, legal version. I inferred that from Haring’s clothes in photos of the second, October 1986, version of the “Crack is Wack” mural, which he also wore on a photo in front of the backside (dancers) part of the mural. Haring created each mural within a day

and there are no photos of the backside with the topless Haring on it from the first session.

On the backside, Haring pictured a group of stylized dancing drug consumers, contaminated, poisoned inside, visualized by the “X” on their chest. Their heads seem to be glowing from the drug, as the dancing moves visualized by radiant-like little dashes. Haring painted only the recurring slogan “Crack is Wack” from the front side in orange, this time appearing in a strip-like band sprawling the whole length of the wall. Contrary to both versions of the front side and contrary to the “P.S. 97 version” Haring painted the figural part on a white background. Maybe he ran out of that fluorescent orange warning color. On top of the slogan, the drug is a snake with dangerous open mouth trying to catch an “x” intoxicated drug user who tries to run away. Like the figure hanging upside down, Haring might have thought of his crack-addicted assistant Benny: “Inspired by Benny [who was eventually cured], and appalled by what was happening in the country, but especially New York, and seeing the slow reaction (as usual) of the government to respond, I decided I had to do an anti-crack painting.”(Haring in Israel, 2014).

The location is, as mentioned, a freestanding concrete wall, as they are often in playgrounds in New York. To use such walls as large screens for a wall painting is the merit of the already mentioned Graffiti writer Lee. In 1979, he created the first of its kind, entitled Howard the Duck (Chalfant, 1987, p. 14). With the increasingly rigorous prosecution of subway Graffiti in New York, Graffiti jumped over on walls around 1980. In a small inscription in “Howard the Duck” we already see the new self-image of the Graffiti movement that sees itself as art, “Graffiti is art.”<sup>2.3</sup> “Life is Fresh, Crack is Wack” (1986)

The mentioned “Crack is Wack” mural was not the only anti-crack-mural at that time in New York and also not the only “Crack is Wack” mural Haring created. Temporarily there was at least one more (fig. 5) from Haring, also in New York. It also contained the rhyming slogan title “Crack is Wack” and was painted in 1986.

The second New York “Crack is Wack” mural Haring painted on the sports field of a school called Bard High School in 2016, a wall Haring hit three times with different subjects. The “Crack is Wack” one appears for instance in the catalog

of the Haring exhibition in Munich (Buchhart, 2015, p. 22-23) in the background of a photo, but mislabeled. There was no “gallery” P.S. 97. This misnomer led to the true location of these murals. “P.S. 97” stands for “Public School 97,” which occupied the building until 2001. For this school, the “contract worker” Haring chose no explicit gloomy horror visuals like skulls, monsters and crack pipes, but harmless dancing animal representations and in big letters, again in a cartoon speech bubble: “Life is Fresh, Crack is Wack.” In some photos of the “Crack is Wack” mural at P.S. 97, we see that Haring paid respect to Graffiti writers: he added “LES-CBS-MMC RESPECT” to his signature “KH86 NYC.” Obviously, Keith had to erase their small tags to paint the mural and did not want to offend them. By paying his respect to these writers, they and others might not go over his mural too soon as well. We also see a little Haring self-portrait. His self-portrait might function like a figural writer’s tag as well.

In the self-portrait, Haring painted himself wearing Nike sneakers. To wear impressive sneakers was very important at that time in a Hip-Hop context. In the same year as Haring’s Mural the famous rap group RUN DMC issued the record “My Adidas,” a hymn to the sports shoes, which led to later Adidas sponsoring of the band. Haring might have chosen Nike, as the Nike “swoosh” is easier to recognize than, for instance, the “Reebok” logo. However, later Haring exclusively designed “Crack is Wack” sneakers for Reebok. The color scheme, the burning bill, the crack pipe from the first two versions, as well as the slogan in the cloud reappear in the sneakers. He merchandized his illegal, political, anti-drug mural as design for consumer goods. Thereby Keith wanted to be available for “everyone,” not just for rich collectors who can afford an alleged art for art’s sake attitude.

“Life is Fresh, Crack is Wack” is also the title of a song from a relatively unknown New York Hip Hop Album from 1986, where Haring apparently took the title from, and possibly the toxic Black-Orange color scheme as well. Two former crack addicts rap on that song as band “Turning Point” against this drug.<sup>13</sup> In 1987 Haring designed a “Life is Fresh Crack is Wack” record cover as well, this time with a cubist-eyed monster with a crack pipe and a burning dollar bill, just

13 - Turning Point, *Life Is Fresh/Crack Is Wack*, 5:10min., 12” vinyl single record, © © 1986 Life Is Fresh Inc., Copyright © 1986 James Polles, <http://www.discogs.com/Turning-Point-Life-Is-FreshCrack-Is-Wack/release/2564639> [Accessed: 20/01/2016].



Fig. 5 Haring - Life is Fresh, Crack is Wack (1986) P.S. 97 mural from haring.com

one out“X”ed dancing drug consumer and his often used breakdancing couple. The record cover is a combination of motives from the July and the October version of the Mural. It was recorded by Haring’s assistant and collaborator Bipo aka Jim Klein,<sup>14</sup> who might have covered Turning Point’s title. On the back cover Bipo poses in front of Haring’s other, already damaged “Crack is Wack” mural at P.S. 97, obviously because this shorter-lived, bigger mural contained the whole song title of the record inclusive “Life is fresh” and not just the negative “Crack is wack.” Michael Jackson fans know

the term “wack” as a term of abuse, “Wacko Jacko,” for the singer in the yellow press. “Wack” is a hip-hop term used as a song title for another rap group called Manhattan Plaza, who even rhymed it with Crack as well: “Crack is the Whack,” published September 17, 1986, right between Haring’s July and October murals.<sup>15</sup> Also from 1986 is BDPs well-known rap-single “South Bronx” that rhymes “wack” with “crack” as well. To rhyme “Crack” with “wack” in graffiti and rap was quite common in New York around 1987, but Haring seemed to be the only white, non-hip-hop artist to do so.

14 - Bipo, *Crack Is Wack*, 4:10min., 12” vinyl single record, U.S. Jump Street Records, 1987. <http://gallery.98bowery.com/bipo-life-is-fresh-crack-is-whack-12-vinyl-single/> [Accessed: 20/01/2016].

15 - Manhattan Plaza, *Crack is the Whack*, 4:05min., music video, September 17, 1986. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvDO1mpPRYc> [Accessed: 20/01/2016].

## 2.4 Why is the July/October 1986 “Crack is wack” mural the best-known anti-crack-mural in NYC?

Haring was not the only one who artistically dealt at that time with crack. Bio, Mack and Nicer painted a “classic” Style Writing Graffiti mural in the Bronx. It dates from the same year as Haring’s “Crack is Wack” (1986), but contains its anti-crack message only small as an inscription “Stop Crack” between the big wild style letters of “Bio, Mack and Tony [Nicer]” and in a poem (Kimvall, 2014, p. 71). They included a crack pipe (like Haring) and a tube of crack, as replacement for letters.

A later one, not by Haring, but also in Spanish Harlem, dates from 1988 and rhymes “crack” with “wack” as well: “ALL DRUGS ARE WACK, ESPECIALLY CRACK.” The painting does not use Graffiti writing style; it reminds rather of community murals, as it addressed a general public through clear readability, western cartoon illustrations and street sign symbols with crossed-out “crack.” It was rather painted than sprayed. Someone called “Chico” painted a third anti-crack mural entitled “Crack Kills” in 1987 (according to the signature), in the Lower East Side. Like Haring’s it contained skulls and other anti-drug symbols like chains. The painting style is between community mural style and style writing. Chico’s mural is quite clear and as easy to understand as Haring’s.

So there were more New York anti crack murals that did not reach such a wide impact, as Haring’s “Crack is Wack” – but why? For Kimvall (2014, p.69-72) racism was the reason why the Mural by Bio, Mack and Nicer did not become famous. This might be one reason. Another reason might be ephemerality. It takes time to become a landmark. On the back cover of Bipo’s record Haring’s second mural was already damaged one year later. We do not know if the other anti-crack murals stayed longer, but they might not have been legal as well, so they might have been short-lived. Another reason for the popularity especially of Haring’s July mural might be it was considered legal, id est public art, by the media before it became public art.<sup>16</sup> Just two colors,

16 - This becomes obvious when you read between the lines: “In the next days and weeks, the mural was quickly picked up by the news media, not because of Haring’s arrest -- no one knew he had been arrested -- but because of the newsworthiness of crack cocaine and Reagan’s “War on Drugs” then in the United States. Haring explained: “Every time the news did a story on crack, they would flash to the [mural as a visual]. NBC [even] did a public service announce-

a readable message, clear, big bright symbols, all these characteristics differentiate Haring’s July (and October) mural from the other anti-crack ones, not only the obvious graffiti one by Bio, Mack and Nicer, but also the ones in community mural style and – Haring’s own one at P.S. 97 as well. The main reason, in combination with the mentioned ones might be the billboard-like location. The anti-crack message of Bio, Mack and Nicer and the others was not as highly visible, in your face and readable from the street, neither on location nor as on photo or on TV. In a word, Bio, Mack and Nicer were rather Graffiti than Street Art, Haring the opposite.

## 3. Short conclusion

At the beginning, I asked the question: is Keith Haring a Street Artist? To answer it one has to define Street Art. As different terms exist, it does not make sense to use Street Art, Public Art, Graffiti or Urban Art analogue to each other. In short, Graffiti is rather word-based, it addresses graffiti writers, Public Art is sanctioned art for the public, Street Art is for the public as well, but it is illicit, unsanctioned, self-authorized and rather image-based. Urban Art is an umbrella term for the other three.

Some of Keith Haring’s works are Street Art because he carried them out in a performative way, without permission, in public spaces. They might be called Street Art because those works explicitly refer to this public space, they were indeed often tailor-made for their location, and because as a result of their illegality or illicitness and their union with each location they were ephemeral, not conceived in time permanently.

Although the term Street Art did exist in Haring’s time, people, like today, used it for different things and sometimes construed it extensively.

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ment using it as a background.” Close to the court date, the New York Post contacted Haring and asked if they could take a picture of him in front of the mural. In the process of taking it, they learned about Haring’s arrest and were shocked. They had no idea he was going to soon be in court and had been arrested for making the mural. The next day the Post ran an article about Haring and the mural with the information that he could go to jail for a year. People immediately came to Haring’s defense. The topic even made the evening news, which prompted Mayor Edward Koch -- who was both anti-crack and anti-graffiti -- to have to consider the issue. Koch commented that “we have to find somewhere else for Haring to paint.” Quoted from Israel, 2014.

Haring's "Crack is Wack," became a public art mural. It changed its status from an illegal, Graffiti-inspired, self-authorized work of Street Art to long lasting, afterwards sanctioned Public Art. So if illegality or illicitness is the core of Street Art, it cannot be Public Art at the same time. But each work of art can change its status within its history.

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