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ART AIN'T DEAD, YOU ARE!

An Analysis of how Capitalism has Warped Keith Haring's Artistic Rhetoric

In sophomore year, I remember seeing a boy wearing a white hoodie with Keith Haring's iconic "Figures with Red Heart" piece on it. According to my friends, who were in the boy's grade, he was mildly homophobic. As a joke, my friends got me to go up to him and compliment him on his hoodie, saying, "You know, the person who made that was a gay guy. So, thank you for supporting us." A part of me wondered how a piece of art made by a man whose sexuality was so central to his art ended up on the chest of an alleged homophobe. Years later, the internet was stirred into a frenzy by an X user who posted about Haring's "Unfinished" painting, often interpreted as a self-portrait representing his life being cut short by HIV/AIDS. The user had run the painting through an artificial intelligence program to "complete what he couldn't finish." People across the Internet interpreted this as the X user willfully ignoring Haring's intent with creating "Unfinished" and were outraged and deeply offended on his behalf. Keith Haring, an artist who is best known for his distinctive style and political art, is not alive today to give us a working definition of his artistic rhetoric. In this paper, I analyze both Keith Haring's original rhetoric surrounding his art and the creation of it and the way that the modern world—

specifically, large corporations—has utilized and warped that pre-existing rhetoric into one of its own.

Keith Haring got his start with chalk drawings on empty ad space on the New York City subway. Born in Pennsylvania and having moved to New York for college, he found an underground art community in alleyways and the subway system, and friends in artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol. Throughout the 1980s, he expressed many of his political opinions through his art, including his support of AIDS protesting, anticapitalism, and the anti-apartheid movement. He was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in 1988 and died when he was 31 years old, after only about ten years in the public eye. Even so, his legacy continues to this day, and his work graces shirts, posters, and photographs around the world.

While he is likely best known for the simplistic lines and solid colors that make up his art, Keith Haring made a name for himself in part by creating art for protest groups like ACT UP. ACT UP, or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was an activist group formed in 1987 with the intent to protest the government's treatment of the HIV/AIDS crisis. In his 1987 piece, "Ignorance = Fear," Haring combined the classic "See No Evil/Hear No Evil/Speak No Evil" triad with ACT UP's slogan and logo (Ignorance = Fear). Here, he employed symbolic action as well as epistemic bubbles to highlight the AIDS crisis and ACT UP's contribution to protesting it. Symbolic action is one of the simplest types of rhetoric: a symbol is a design used by a group, whether it be anarchists or IKEA, and the symbolic action is taken when that symbol is used to communicate opinion. The symbol of the pink triangle, formerly used by the Nazis to label queer people during the Holocaust, has since been reclaimed by the queer and trans community, and in particular, was used by ACT UP as their logo. By including the pink triangle in his works, Haring aligned himself with ACT UP and their political beliefs. Epistemic bubbles are defined as

a rhetorical scenario in which certain voices have been excluded from the conversation, sometimes intentionally. By using the pink triangle as well as the slogan “SILENCE = DEATH”, Haring signaled to people involved with ACT UP and AIDS protests, or even those who may have just quietly sympathized, that he was not only a member of the group and of a like mind, but also someone who would willingly exclude the opposing voice to keep their people safe. Aside from working with ACT UP, Haring also created art in support of the anti-apartheid movement in the ‘80s and ‘90s. Apartheid, a system of oppression that was in place in South Africa from 1948 to the early ‘90s, sought to control the majority Black population by putting the minority white population at the top of the socio-political hierarchy, and encouraging infighting between various South African communities. In the ‘80s, protests against the apartheid system were gaining traction across college campuses, groups like ACT UP, and even the Olympics. Haring was no exception to this. In 1984, he created a painting later titled “Free South Africa,” which depicts a small white figure attacking and holding a larger black figure on a leash in the first panel, and the black figure resisting and crushing the white figure in the second (Free South Africa). In this piece, Haring used deliberative rhetoric and audience awareness to appeal to international objections to apartheid South Africa. Deliberative rhetoric refers to the process of advocating for a future as the people employing it wants it. By highlighting a topic of great political discussion, he used deliberative rhetoric.

Similar to the modern-day encouragement to call your representatives when a bill is on the Senate floor, Haring shoved the call to action in front of the eyes of his audience—some of whom may have identified themselves as apolitical or even in support of apartheid. Audience awareness largely does what it says on the tin—the whole idea is that the creator knows what kind of audience they have and is able to adapt their message to get through to that audience. In

that vein, Haring knew that although he had a diverse audience thanks to his fame, the people supporting him at the root were those who shared similar morals as him. The decision to support the anti-apartheid movement came from a place of knowing he himself would be supported.

In 1986, Haring painted a mural titled “Crack is Wack” on a handball court in New York City. The original mural had the titular words in all caps at the center of the wall, surrounded by skulls, a dollar bill, and a human being fed to a monster, among other things. It was created without city permission, so it did not remain long. The city ordered Haring to take it down, but immediately after, the New York City Parks Department asked him to create a new mural with the same theme, which still exists today. In a 1989 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Haring commented on his motivation behind creating “Crack is Wack”:

Crack is a businessman’s drug. It was invented to make someone profit...It’s the opposite of mind-expanding; crack makes you subservient...What’s most repulsive is that I don’t think the powers that be really want to stop the crack problem. For them it’s the perfect thing. It makes people very easy to control. After all, the government is really the one controlling the source...They’re supposedly having a war on drugs now, but the whole time Bush was vice-president the amounts of cocaine coming into this country were phenomenal. (Sheff)

With the creation of “Crack is Wack” and the later interview, Haring used forensic rhetoric and criticized the government’s use of *topoi*. Forensic rhetoric is identified as a type of argument that analyzes something that happened—it is used most often in the court system, for example. Haring employed it here when talking about the timeline of the crack epidemic and specifically its impact on New York City. In creating “Crack is Wack,” he took the history of the crack epidemic and turned it into a piece of art that attacked it. *Topoi* refers to the stories communities

perpetuate about themselves—for example, the supposed “origin story of America” beginning with Christopher Columbus “discovering an empty land”. In this case, the story the government was trying to perpetuate was that of the War on Drugs, a term which was popularized in 1971 after then-President Nixon termed drug abuse “public enemy number one.” The reality, of course, was that they utilized the fear of drugs to disproportionately attack and arrest members of the Black community, and people are still unfairly locked up for that to this day. Haring criticized this use of *topoi*, arguing that the crack epidemic was exactly what the government wanted to happen in the first place.

Although he got his start doing chalk drawings for free, Haring’s goal was to become a full-time artist, which meant he had to find a way to make money. In 1986, Haring opened the Pop Shop, what he called “a place where, yes, not only collectors could come, but also kids from the Bronx” (Journals). It existed as both an art installation and a sort of gift shop, where people could come and not only view his art, but also buy it on pins, patches, and sweatshirts. Haring, however, didn’t think this compromised his morals at all. In an interview with *The New York Times*, he commented on his own personal need for the Pop Shop: “there were so many copies of my stuff around that I felt I had to do something myself so people would at least know what the real ones look like” (Slesin). In a period of time when Keith Haring’s work was so popular that retailers would sell poor copies of it, he knew he had to save his own artistic ship from sinking. In a way, he employed the rhetoric of conformity, or a response to an argument which accepts or resigns to it. Even before his death, corporations saw the commercial value in his work and wanted to steal it for their own. He knew that opening the Pop Shop would combat, if not stop, those efforts.

In the later interview with *Rolling Stone*, he spoke about the backlash he received from other people in the art world.

Other artists had been accusing me of selling out since my paintings started selling. I mean, I don't know what they intended me to do: Just stay in the subway the rest of my life? Somehow that would have made me stay pure? By 1984 the subway thing started to backfire, because everyone was stealing the pieces. I'd go down and draw in the subway, and two hours later every piece would be gone. They were turning up for sale (Sheff). The art world at the time, and in part today, was thick with the perpetuation of the "starving artist" as an ideal. If you were an artist and you were prosperous, you must have somehow sold your soul. It created an expectation of suffering as the price of creation, which for Haring and others, was not sustainable.

As well as being motivated—like many artists—by the need to make ends meet, Keith Haring was a subscriber to the belief that art should be accessible to everyone. For most people, this means that the *creation* of art should be accessible to everyone. For Haring, however, it was about *having* art in the first place that made it accessible. At the height of his career, Haring was facing down art dealers and corporations that wanted to profit off of his art. In a biography, he expressed his vitriol toward sticky-fingered prospective buyers: "I can tell [art dealers] want to get the work so they can resell it for more money—and they're trying to rip me off" (82). In the *Rolling Stone* interview, he spoke again about art dealers: "...[P]eople started to see an opportunity to make a lot of money buying my work. I got disillusioned with letting dealers and collectors come to my studio. They would come in and, for prices that were nothing, a couple hundred dollars, go through all the paintings and then not get anything or try to bargain. I didn't want to see those people anymore. I wanted to sell paintings because it would enable me to quit

my job, whether as a cook or delivering house plants or whatever else I was doing—and paint full time" (Sheff). When he opened the Pop Shop, he discovered, as many other successful artists do, a way to commodify his work *by himself*, rather than allowing other companies or corporations to buy and resell it.

The Pop Shop closed in 2005 thanks to the pressures of rising rent and lower sales. However, Keith Haring's art did not in any way fade from the public eye. At present, the Keith Haring Foundation has partnered with corporations like Uniqlo, H&M, and Abercrombie & Fitch to continue with Haring's "spirit of accessibility," as it were. These partnerships, however, have raised more than a few eyebrows in both the art community and others. Is it *truly* in keeping with Haring's motivation to sell to corporations that have no need for his politics and only seek to profit from his fame? Although the current selling price of the clothes distributed by these corporations keeps the prices from the Pop Shop about the same, and sometimes makes them cheaper, there is still cause for concern. Notably, the clothing that is produced by these larger corporations always use Haring's "tamer" art; "Figures With Red Heart" is an example of this. All it shows is the outline of two people holding up a red heart. There's not anything inherently political about that at first glance. By refusing to acknowledge Haring's protest art and choosing instead to profit off of his simpler pieces, corporations engage with the rhetorical practice of "desecration," which refers to taking a symbol of the opposition or argument and destroying it. In a world where personal research is uncommon and people are often exposed to art simply by coming across it, this is intentional. The political movements Keith Haring engaged with and created for are seen as radical and dangerous through the modern lens, and by refusing to showcase this art, corporations participate in intentional loss of public memory.

In 2023, a unique set of Harings were discovered—the first and only digital art pieces he ever produced. Rather than being released to the public, however, they were converted into NFTs, or “non-fungible tokens.” NFTs are critical to interaction with cryptocurrency, which many believe is a feeble venture. Similar to the case of using AI art to “complete” Haring’s final piece, the use of his art as NFTs completely separates it from his motivation to create it. It, even more so than the actions taken by corporations, engages with desecrative rhetoric. Haring himself wrote, “Money doesn’t mean anything. Money breeds guilt (if you have any conscience at all). And if you don’t have any conscience, then money breeds evil” (Journals). To literally take a piece of his art and only use it for the purpose of buying and selling fake currency is to covet the profit and spit on the intent. The argument can and has been made that the Keith Haring Foundation’s decision to partner with corporations to mass-produce his work is still technically in keeping with his spirit of “art for everybody” as it continues to allow people access to his art, whether it be the explicitly political or not. The decision to turn his work into an NFT, however, is an action which goes directly against Haring’s entire belief system and rhetorical reasoning for creating art in the first place.

It’s a topic of little discussion that to create art is an inherently political—and anti-capitalist—action. In the world of today, art is seen as something that takes away from labor, and every moment of your life is expected to be devoted to labor. Advances in the field of artificial intelligence have largely been made to allow A.I. to create, usually by plagiarizing pre-existing art. When people take the time to create, whether it be painting, songwriting, or sewing, they take action that is in direct opposition to capitalist expectations. Even then, marketing anything at a large scale sometimes means “selling your soul.” The punk band Green Day, for example, recently partnered with 7/11 to create a limited-edition collection of Green Day-7/11 merch to

celebrate 30 years of the album *Dookie*. Anyone versed in punk ideology may feel a sort of aversion to this decision—isn’t the spirit of punk about disengaging from large corporations and creating with yourself and the people around you? As the musician MC Lars wrote in his song “Hot Topic is Not Punk Rock,” “That \$8 you paid for the Mudvayne poster/Would be better spent used for seeing your brother’s/Friend’s band” (Lars).

That said, it’s nearly impossible to make a living as an artist in the modern world unless you receive outside funding or become ridiculously famous. People don’t want to buy an intricately crocheted dress if it’s more than a hundred dollars – even if that’s exactly what it’s worth. Artists today and throughout history must fight tooth and nail to preserve their spirit while interacting with late-stage capitalism. For some, this means working two or three jobs to feed and clothe themselves. For others, it means selling your work for corporations to put on their clothes. In the case of Keith Haring, he held out as long as he could, but eventually even he had to turn a profit.

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