

In February 1984 New York-based artist Keith Haring made his only visit to Australia. In Melbourne he attracted considerable attention when the gently flowing current on the famous water-window of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) was turned off, providing an enormous

glass surface on which Haring was to paint his first public mural in this country – an event that the gallery's then-director Patrick McCaughey described with cheeky hyperbole as 'the rebirth of contemporary art in Melbourne'.¹

The origins of Haring's Australian visit date back to 1982, the year in which his international reputation suddenly exploded. Late that year, John Buckley, inaugural director of Melbourne's new Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA, later called the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, or ACCA), first encountered the 23-year-old Haring's early subway drawings in New York. After also

seeing Haring's paintings and ceramics at New York's Tony Shafrazi Gallery, Buckley caught up with Haring in London, where the artist was creating a monumental drawing on paper at the ICA Gallery. Watching him at work on this project, Buckley recognised the young artist's dynamic potential.



To see him in action was tremendously exciting, because he had this ability to be able to literally start out at one end and just read the whole thing as he went along – and it always finished up absolutely perfect, with no preparatory drawing, or thinking or anything. Just bang! It was also interesting as a kind of performance thing to watch – because the sheer speed, and the balletic sort of dancing movement over the surface of the paper was quite extraordinary.²

As a result of their meeting, Buckley invited Haring to Melbourne as a guest of the fledgling CCA. With funding provided by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, Haring visited Australia for three weeks, from 18 February to 8 March 1984. It was fortuitous that Haring and Buckley had arranged this in 1982 for, as Melbourne art critic Robert Rooney noted on Haring's arrival: 'A lot can happen in two or three years, including Haring's meteoric rise from subway anonymity to mass-media personality.'³ And indeed, to cite only one instance of this sudden fame in the art world, the covers of the international magazines *Vanity Fair* and *Flash Art* were both dedicated to the artist during the period of his Melbourne visit.

top: Keith Haring painting the 'nativity' mural on the water-window, National Gallery of Victoria, 21–22 February 1984. Photograph Geoffrey Burke. Artwork ©The Estate of Keith Haring. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

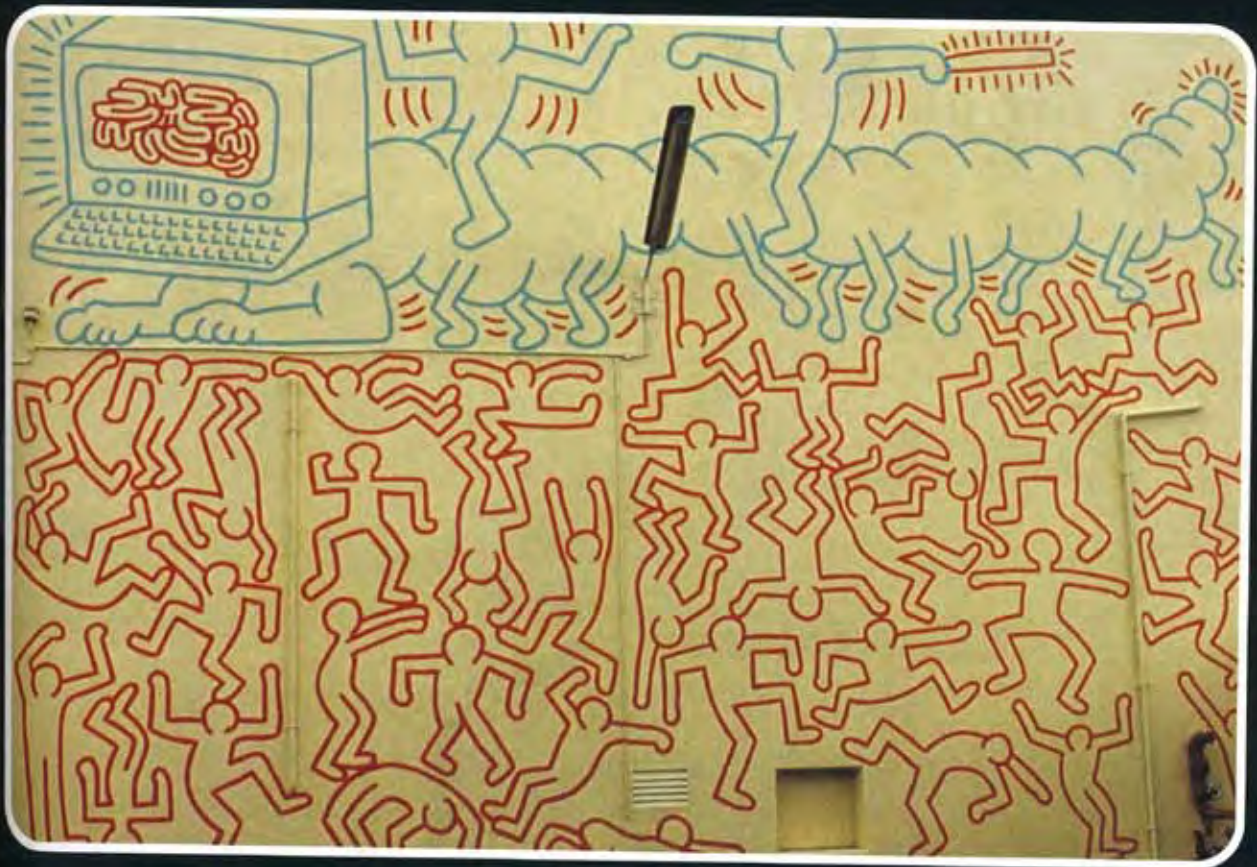
left and opposite page: Keith Haring painting the Collingwood Technical School mural, 6 March 1984; the finished mural. Photographs John Buckley, courtesy ACCA. Artwork ©The Estate of Keith Haring. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



TED GOTT AND LISA SULLIVAN

KEITH HARING

IN AUSTRALIA



Since ACCA had not physically opened its premises at the time of Haring's arrival, Buckley arranged for the artist to execute public projects in both Melbourne and Sydney that would reflect the institution's new presence on the Australian art scene.⁴ The NGV mural was painted on the interior of the water-window over two days, on 21 and 22 February 1984. At the centre of the window, gracing the gallery's entrance, Haring placed a gigantic allegory of birth in which the torso of a mysteriously energised newborn was shown emerging from a squatting mother figure, whose stomach sported television screens tuned in to nuclear atoms and an atomic explosion. This mother figure was flanked by two of Haring's 'signature' crawling-baby images, significant for Haring because: 'Babies represent the possibility of the future, the understanding of perfection, how perfect we could be. There is nothing negative about a baby, ever.'⁵ Darker forces

appeared in the flanking panels, where snake-headed hybrids gyrated and robots tossed people wildly in the air. This narrative ambiguity was reflected in Haring's comment on the NGV mural: 'It's a series of images about life and things which threaten life. Maybe it's a kind of play on good and evil, but I prefer people to read it however they want to.'⁶

The NGV mural was painted in Keith Haring's characteristically bravura manner. With music constantly blaring from the ghetto blaster that accompanied him everywhere, and working in perfect composition, scale and perspective without preparatory drawings of any kind, Haring painted this vast expanse of glass in a seemingly effortless sweep, using a small paintbrush and tiny pots of red, black and white pigment. This limited palette held a special significance for the artist. As he told Sylvie Couderc in 1985: 'If I were asked to use three colours it would be black, white and red, for they are the three strongest colours, and yellow would be my next choice. Red is one of the strongest colours, it's blood, it has a power with the eye. That's why traffic lights are red I guess, and stop signs as well.'⁷ The public performance aspect of Haring's work, which was to be a feature of all his Australian projects, reflected the manner in which, for Haring, 'the artist becomes a vessel to let the world pour through him ... I find the most interesting situation for me is when there is no turning back ... Whatever marks I make are immediately recorded and immediately on view. There are no "mistakes" because nothing can be erased.'⁸

In an interview conducted with *Crowd Magazine* during his Melbourne visit, Haring noted that the NGV mural was 'my biggest wall up to date'.⁹ In expanding the scale of his performance painting in this manner, he made use in Australia of a cherry-picker machine – a novelty at the time that was to become an indispensable tool in his later murals worldwide. While it was intended in any case for only a three-month span on the water-window, the NGV mural was irreparably damaged by vandalism in March 1984, barely two weeks after its creation.¹⁰

In the wake of the NGV 'nativity', the spontaneous creation of Keith Haring's second Australian mural, painted in the forecourt of the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) between 28 February and 1 March 1984, attracted television cameras and gawking crowds, as well as the admiration of then Sydney art critic Terence Maloon: 'Haring was observed on an hydraulic platform, working away from left to right, without any preparatory drawing. He never came down to ground or stepped back to appraise the work in progress ... He has evidently developed a sixth sense, through long practice as a graffitiist, and has an instinctive understanding of scale, spacing and variation.'¹¹



above and opposite page Keith Haring painting the 'nativity' mural on the water-window, National Gallery of Victoria, 21 – 22 February 1984. Photographs Geoffrey Burke. Artwork ©The Estate of Keith Haring. Used by permission. All rights reserved.





left Keith Haring painting the Guardian Angel at Glamorgan preparatory school, Melbourne. Photograph John Buckley, courtesy ACCA. Artwork ©The Estate of Keith Haring. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

opposite page left Keith Haring painting the foyer of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 28 February – 1 March 1984. Photograph AGNSW. Artwork ©The Estate of Keith Haring. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Like its Melbourne predecessor, the AGNSW mural also featured classic symbols and narrative elements that Haring had developed during the preceding three years in New York, 'his vocabulary of human, zoomorphic or technology-derived images – including extraterrestrials, spaceships, TV sets, cameras, and the inevitable (neo-expressionist) pointed-ear dogs.'²² While on an even greater scale than the NGV water-window composition, Haring's AGNSW mural had an equally brief existence. It was to be painted over one month after its completion, in preparation for the incoming Biennale exhibition of 1984.

Wrapped around these highly visible public murals were a surprising number of other projects undertaken by Keith Haring during his brief time in Australia. Most of these were organised in Melbourne, such as the paintings made for the Hardware Club in echo of the large sumi ink drawings with which he had decorated New York's Paradise Garage disco

in 1982; and a vibrant human body painting made for the Fashion Design Council of Australia's *X-Hibitionists* fashion parade.²³ John Buckley recalled that 'there were also numerous chalkboard drawings done secretly at night – in much the same spirit as he still makes the chalk drawings in the subways of New York', as well as nocturnal zapping of 'some of the pylons under the river and under Richmond railway station' done with local artists to whom Haring had been introduced by Buckley.²⁴

Haring also made thirteen large exhibition-quality ink drawings and four acrylic paintings during his time in Melbourne, making use of Australian motifs such as the kangaroo. These were left in Buckley's care, and later used for the 'Keith Haring' exhibition that was finally staged at ACCA's finished premises in September 1985.²⁵

Haring's love of working with and for children was well known to Buckley, and it was fortuitous that the latter was then resident house master at Melbourne's Glamorgan preparatory school (part of Geelong Grammar), where Haring was first billeted during his Australian stay. Together, Haring and Buckley staged a magical event for Glamorgan's students:

There was a building there that had been recently converted into a new kindergarten area for children. I thought it would be nice if Keith painted a Guardian Angel on it for the prep kids. But this was also the unlocking of a secret – because prior to that, Keith had been actually staying at Glamorgan, which he quite enjoyed. Every night I unlocked one classroom and he did a drawing on the chalkboard, of his bouncing figures. Then I locked the classroom door, and nothing was said. For two weeks the kids were in a state of absolute excitement because no-one knew. "How did they get in?" or "Who was doing the drawings?" It was a big mystery. Until finally, I got Keith to paint his Guardian Angel on the wall outside and everybody suddenly realised that they had had an artist in their midst all this time.²⁶

Aware that both the NGV and AGNSW murals were intentionally impermanent, John Buckley had conceived the notion of a more enduring project that would also involve Haring working collaboratively with Australian youth. He approached Collingwood Technical School prior to Haring's arrival in Australia, and organised the Collingwood mural project as a permanent marker of the artist's Australian stay. As Haring himself later recalled: 'While I was in Melbourne, somebody called from the Collingwood Technical School, which is an all-boys elementary to junior high school. This person said that they had no funds, but that there was a great wall just outside the school, and would I be interested in painting it? I went to look at it, and agreed to do it – and it's become a permanent site!'¹⁷ Keith Haring's final and only surviving Australian mural was subsequently painted in one day, on Tuesday 6 March 1984.

Haring was happy to undertake the Collingwood project *pro bono*, as such community projects accorded with his pleasure in defying the commercial imperatives of the art market. In this fashion, he felt that his outdoor murals belonged to the same category of free public art as the chalk drawings he had drawn throughout New York's subway system at the beginning of his career. In the final interview Haring gave to Jason Rubell, two weeks before his early death in 1990, he made this point explicitly: 'There is nothing you can criticize about [my subway drawings] because I was doing it purely for the love of doing it and for the love of drawing it and for the love of the people who were seeing it ... I don't think that since then I've ever done anything as pure as that. Maybe the outdoor murals which can't be removed.'¹⁸

Labour on the Collingwood mural was divided into two distinct halves. The lower half of the design, depicting a multi-tiered frieze of dancing figures, was painted first – both on foot, and using a tall double step-ladder. The upper half of the Collingwood mural was painted using a cherry-picker. This machine was placed directly against the wall of the school, at the artist's eye-level, throughout the painting process – meaning that he was not



able to see what he was doing from any distance. The Collingwood students were thus witness to the type of extraordinary Keith Haring performance-work described succinctly by Jeffrey Deitch in 1986: 'Like a jazz musician on a long solo, Haring can lay down line after line without missing a beat ... He seldom works without music, and not only Haring, but the figures he's painting seem to rock to the beat.'¹⁹

Although Haring painted the Collingwood mural entirely alone, with no actual 'painting' help from the pupils, he did share rap-dancing sessions with them at various points throughout the day, in front of the mural-in-progress. This dancing activity mirrored the subject matter taking shape before the students' eyes in the lower half of the mural, in an act of perfect symbiosis.



Keith Haring dress-rehearsing human body painting for the Fashion Design Council of Australia's *X-Files* fashion parade, 3 March 1984. Photograph John Buckley, courtesy ACCA. Artwork ©The Estate of Keith Haring. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

While the lower section of the Collingwood mural was devoted to Haring's passion for the various forms of dancing that were then assuming enormous significance in the New York club and street worlds, the upper half of the design considered his fear of technology. This was manifested in the form of Haring's hybrid man/computer monster, his vision of a future dehumanising evolution, which was ridden by two human figures – one of them waving a glowing stick, a 'negative authority' signifier: 'Sticks held by people symbolize physical and political power.'¹⁰ This aspect of the artist's thinking was stressed while Haring was in Melbourne, as evidenced in an interview for *Tension* magazine:

I deal with technology and television and the influence of television on people's thinking and nuclear power and things like that, that not enough people are thinking about and being aware of, just being consumed by society and overloaded by information and sedately entertained without asking questions. I think there's a lot of questions that need to be asked.¹¹

In retrospect, Keith Haring's Australian murals can be viewed as important testing grounds for his subsequent more famous works on equivalent or larger scales around the globe. The Australian works are among his earliest outdoor murals (Haring's bravura performance projects had hitherto been mainly executed on large spreads of paper), and the first public murals undertaken by him outside the United States. Today the Collingwood Technical School mural assumes special significance for being the only large-scale and publicly accessible work of art to survive from the time of Haring's influential Australian sojourn.

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- 1 Quoted in Rosilyn Beely, 'Graffiti moves out of the subway and becomes art', *Age*, Thursday 23 February 1984, p. 1.
- 2 Interview with John Buckley, former director, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Thursday 9 August 2001.
- 3 Robert Rooney, 'A "space-age baby" makes his statement', *Weekend Australian*, 3–4 March 1984.
- 4 Keith Haring's visit was advertised in the Australian art press as the new Centre for Contemporary Art's 'inaugural event'; see *Art & Text*, nos 12–13, 1984, p. 143.
- 5 Keith Haring, interviewed 14 August 1985, quoted in Robert Farris Thompson, 'Requiem for the Pegas of the B-Boys', *Argoform*, vol. 28, no. 9, May 1990, p. 140.
- 6 Quoted in Beely, *op. cit.*
- 7 Keith Haring, interview with Sylvie Claudet, *Bordeaux*, 18 December 1985; published only on the official Haring website at http://www.haring.com/art/temcommand/interviuo_rauch.html as at 22 November 2001.
- 8 Keith Haring, 'Keith Haring', *Flash Art*, no. 116, March 1984, p. 77.
- 9 Ziggy Oh, 'Keith Haring', *Crossed Magazine*, edn 3, March 1984, p. 61.
- 10 See 'Vandal!', *Herald*, Saturday 16 March 1984, p. 1; 'Vandalism smashes gallery paint', *Age*, Monday 13 March 1984, p. 3. See also note 15 below.
- 11 Terence Maloon, 'Even Matisse lost his touch at times', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 4 March 1984.
- 12 Linda Van Nunen, 'US artist paints a gigantic mural', *Wentworth Courier*, Wednesday 7 March 1984, p. 19.
- 13 This fashion event, staffed by members of the new Fashion Design Council, was held in a large circus tent in Flinders Park on Saturday 9 March 1984, in conjunction with Melbourne's Moomba Festival. See 'Moomba parade of local styles', *Age*, Wednesday 29 February 1984, p. 21. Haring had painted the body of dancer Bill T. Jones in London in 1981; he was to return to this idea in 1985, body-painting Grace Jones for a special performance at the Paradise Garage.
- 14 John Buckley, 'Keith Haring in Australia', in *Keith Haring* exhibition pamphlet, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 10 October–17 November 1985, p. 2; and interview with John Buckley, Thursday 9 August 2001.
- 15 In the autobiographical interview sessions taped with John Gruen shortly before Haring's death in February 1990, the artist expressed anger and confusion concerning his Australian visit, claiming that his exhibition never took place in Melbourne, and that his drawings and paintings were improperly retained by ACCA. See John Gruen, *Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography*, Prentice-Hall, New York, 1991, p. 113. In fact, the exhibition 'Keith Haring' was held at ACCA in October 1985; John Buckley later returned the artist's works to him. The full story of this confusion, and other aspects of Haring's Australian visit (such as his belief that the NGV water window was attacked as a protest against the mistaken belief that he had appropriated Aboriginal motifs in its composition) lies beyond the scope of this introductory essay.
- 16 Interview with John Buckley, Thursday 9 August 2001.
- 17 Haring, quoted in Gruen, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
- 18 Haring, quoted in Jason Rubell, 'Keith Haring: The last interview', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 65, no. 1, September 1991, p. 58.
- 19 Jeffrey Deitch, 'The radioactive child', in *Keith Haring: Schilderijen, tekeningen en een selectie*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 11 March–12 May 1986, p. 11.
- 20 Haring, quoted in Paul Doekker Doyoux, 'Gesprek met Keith Haring', *Museumjournaal*, Amsterdam, no. 3, 1982, reprinted as 'Every station is my gallery', in Deitch, *Keith Haring*, 1986, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- 21 Ashley Crawford, 'Keith Haring', *Timeline* 4, July/August 1984, p. 10.

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Keith Haring painting the Collingwood Technical School mural, 6 March 1984. Photographs John Buckley, courtesy ACCA. Artwork ©The Estate of Keith Haring. Used by permission. All rights reserved

