

# Fade to grey: On the future of Keith Haring's Collingwood mural

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*Art lives through the imaginations of the people who are seeing it. Without that contact, there is no art.<sup>1</sup>*

KEITH HARING MADE HIS ONE AND ONLY VISIT TO AUSTRALIA in February and March 1984. Haring's engagement with the vibrant New York club and street scenes was highly influential and he had been invited to Melbourne by John Buckley, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's founding director, who had seen the artist's signature white crayon work on disused black advertising panels in Manhattan's subway stations. A number of new works were created by Haring while he was in Australia, including a mural on the National Gallery of Victoria's Water Wall, another in Sydney in the Art Gallery of New South Wales's forecourt, and more impromptu works at various sites and events in Melbourne.

Only one of these works was intended to be permanent: an outdoor mural painted at the Collingwood Technical College (now Collingwood TAFE) in inner-city Melbourne. Completed in a single day on 6 March 1984, the mural comprised a solid yellow background behind a lattice of bold red and green lines depicting a series of dancing figures and a giant computer-headed worm. Captured in Haring's typically lively and graphic style – from up close and without preparatory drawings – and realised to his preferred hip-hop beats in front of a student audience, its imagery speculates on the future of humanity in the technological age. Especially symbolic for Haring was the colour red, which he associated with blood: 'it has power with the eye'.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly three decades on, the Collingwood mural now exists as a shadow of its former self, its power diminished by time and neglect. To the naked eye, its colours are drastically faded and its symbolism compromised. Lower sections are mouldy and Haring's lines, with the exception of those captured in green, are chipped and often faded beyond comprehension. Standing at its base, the figuration of the overall graphic image can still be discerned,

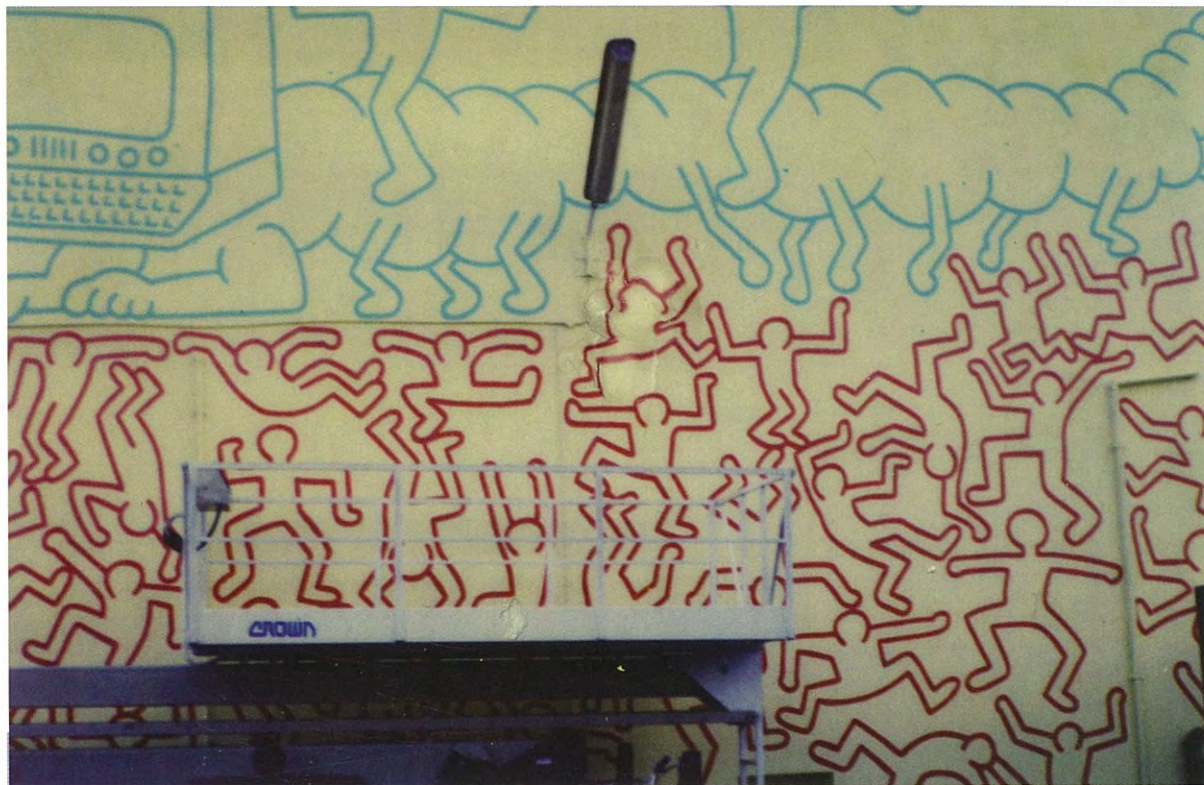
however a bleached pallor has overcome Haring's intended vitality.

In 2008, after a visit to the Collingwood site, I became deeply concerned at the mural's visual condition deteriorating without apparent care or comment. The following year Wendy Bignami, an American living in Melbourne, and I began lobbying for an official course of action to be undertaken to ensure the mural's future care. We gathered information from those with an interest in the mural, from local to state bodies, including the Yarra City Council, the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (the owners of the Johnston Street site) and John Buckley, who coordinated the mural's 1984 execution. A public discussion was held in April 2010 with various presentations given, including a review of the mural's history and significance by the National Gallery of Victoria's Ted Gott.

With a desire to make art as highly visible and widely accessible as possible, Haring accepted and enjoyed the mass-reproduction of his imagery on items such as watches, T-shirts and badges sold through his Pop Shops in SoHo and Tokyo. He also painted over fifty indoor and outdoor murals during his lifetime. A significant number of these have been lost to the elements and building development. Others have undergone rejuvenation through repainting, a process advocated by New York's Keith Haring Foundation, which was established by the artist just prior to his 1990 death to perpetuate his legacy and provide grants to charities including AIDS research and child healthcare.

The repainting of murals in such instances is in line with recent shifts in international conservation practices surrounding contemporary art. At a recent lecture at the University of Melbourne, American specialist Jane Norman spoke of a changing emphasis from preserving the material of an artwork towards preserving the artist's meaning or context. She cited the position of highly regarded conservators Laura Davies and Jackie Heuman: 'Respect for the artist's intent and the integrity of the work imposes







the need for certain interventions which would not normally be considered accepted practice when treating a work of art.<sup>3</sup>

In October 2010 it was announced that the former Collingwood Technical College site was to become the new home for Circus Oz, an important cultural organisation within Australia's performing arts landscape. With the site's redevelopment now overseen by the state government's Arts Victoria, a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) was commissioned from Melbourne firm RBA Architects to document the site, including the mural's 2004 heritage listing, and to devise a plan for the future.

While its final recommendations remain unknown at the time of writing, a draft report was made available to a small working party (myself included) coordinated by the Yarra City Council following the 2010 public discussion. Already there are several matters of concern for those advocating the mural's repainting in accordance with the wishes of the Haring Foundation. Throughout this draft report Haring is referred to as a 'graffiti' artist, a superficial reading which disregards both his fine art training in Pittsburgh and New York, extensive exhibition career and inclusion in some of the most highly regarded contemporary art collections. The report also overlooks Haring's motivations and intentions for the Collingwood mural, and his overall collaborative methodology, including an acknowledgment of the central role that reproduction, serialisation and dissemination played within his practice. Of equal concern in the draft report was the absence of the Haring Foundation's voice and expertise. The foundation has clearly advocated the rejuvenation of Haring's murals through repainting, believing this position represents the artist's wishes for his imagery to continue communicating into the future.

While some local conservators have voiced their concern that the repainting of the mural will mean the loss of the artist's hand, sophisticated digital technology exists which enables the documentation, in minute detail, of every evidence of the artist's

original image. With the expertise of conservation specialists, a thorough digital archive of the mural can be compiled to document the unique contemporary state of the mural, making this information accessible to a worldwide community.

Those advocating this latter approach (myself included) have spoken of the importance of close consultation with the foundation to ensure access to photographic documentation and other resources that will assist in the repainting process; consultation with conservation specialists on the best materials and colour matches; and the appointment of the most skilled technicians to undertake the process. A long-term maintenance plan for the mural and its surrounding site are equally important, ensuring that the work is made visible and accessible to the public and remains free of obstruction, damage or other forms of deterioration.

The significance of the Haring mural, and its place in local and international art histories, has been confirmed in a series of written submissions to Arts Victoria from Australia's leading contemporary art figures such as Juliana Engberg, Christopher McAuliffe and Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, all of whom have stressed the importance of respecting the artist's wishes and intentions in any plans made about the mural's future. In the meantime, the official CMP's contents and recommendations for the future care of the Collingwood mural will not be made available until an application is formally submitted by Arts Victoria to the Heritage Council of Victoria for a permit to undertake work on the mural. One hopes this will not be too little too late, both for the artist and the community for which the work was intended.



- 1 Keith Haring, 'Interview', *Flash Art*, vol. 116, March 1984, p. 24.
- 2 Ted Gott and Lisa Sullivan, 'Keith Haring in Australia, 1984', *Art & Australia*, vol. 39, no. 4, June 2002, pp. 560-7.
- 3 Laura Davies and Jackie Heuman, 'Meaning matters: Collaborating with contemporary artists', published paper, 'Modern Art, New Museums' conference, International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, Bilbao, 13-17 September 2004.