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Keith Haring

Melbourne's Centre of Contemporary Art has managed to initiate its career with quite a coup. John Buckley, the Centre's director, brought New York graffiti artist Keith Haring to Australia. Haring has become one of the art stars of the eighties and has moved from scrawling drawings in cold subways to mixing with the NY Glitterati ... Warhol and Jagger. Ashley Crawford spoke to Haring at the Centre. ●



PHOTO BY POLLY BORDEN

BABIES STAND FOR AN INNOCENCE THAT SEEMS far distant in the chaos of New York City. Flying saucers symbolise an awe of technology. Men with glowing clubs become images of violence and mythology.

Haring is a star. He dines regularly with 'Andy' in NYC and features on the covers of magazines in a not dissimilar style to Mick Jagger – another personality whose company he frequents. From the subway to the stars, this is the fairy-tale story of Graffiti and Keith Haring.

We first met at Melbourne's Hardware Club where, dressed in a Haring silk screen T-shirt, Keith was being filmed as he danced frantically amidst the crowd. The night after he attended the opening of an art exhibition where once again he wore a Haring silk screen T-shirt while he eyed the

local offerings of Jenny Watson, Gunther Christmann, Geoff Lowe and Dick Watson with an experienced eye. During the interview, the film crew is present and the lights reflect from those permanently askew spectacles. Once again he wears a Haring T-shirt.

Do you believe in self promotion Keith?

Well I suppose it is a big part of what I am doing, sometimes you can look at the whole thing from that angle and people have used that as a criticism to reduce the whole thing to nothing more than an advertisement. Because it is operating in the same arena as that which the advertisements use, using the same vehicle. In the respect that a lot of people see it and become aware of it. The difference is that

up until this point there hasn't been an actual product to sell, so it's not so much selling ...

And is it going to become a product?

Well, more and more, there have been things now, like the T-shirts and the clothes I did with Vivienne Westwood. I have gone into it very slowly, because I am very wary about jumping into the commercial world too quick, because of things in the past like Peter Max and also with the way things become consumed – they become fashion and then are easily dismissed and forgotten. I think there's more to what I'm doing than that. On the other hand, because the work is accessible and became known to the public, who would like to possess it in one form or another, distributing it is to work commercially because there's no way that you can produce individual works of art that can have a value that makes it attainable by large numbers of people. Individual works of art, because of supply and demand, things like that, they've got to cost money, so it makes it impossible for people to sort of just put in their house or wear. Whereas with the direction I'm moving – graphics – for instance in New York, I produce posters which I give away for free at shows. Actually the first time I produced a poster for free, was at the anti-nuclear rally, June 12, 1982. I produced 20,000 posters and gave them away in Central Park during the rally. And it was a way of getting the poster out all over the world and people could have it in their house, and it turned up in all these places which made it accessible to a lot of people.

The communicative aspect of the work seems very important. It's almost like an educational thing, isn't it?

Yeah, well all the works have some amount of information in them, whether that information is specific or more alternating and ambiguous, it's still a loaded image in that, even in a subway, the first reaction from any person – no matter what sort of orientation they have to art – is just approaching it as an image. People just assume that it means something else besides what it is, as opposed to the advertisements that it's sitting inside of which are sort of flatly telling you what they want to say, they don't really provoke you to think it means something. Everyone that confronts the drawings is provoked to search for some other meaning, some significance beyond the symbols themselves. It puts people in, I think, a good area of using their imagination with things and trying to figure them out. A lot of people say 'I don't understand that, I don't know what it means' but at least they've had to grapple with it, try and understand it.

There are other people that have got incredible things out of it. One of the reasons why I don't like to talk about the meaning of specific images, is that often I get much more interesting answers or explanations from other people.

So do you see your role as inspiring people to think beyond what they're used to consuming – for instance in the context of advertising?

Yes, with information now and especially with things like television, advertisements and things are jamming ideas down our throats and not really allowing a lot of room to think or use your imagination in between. 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.

Self-portrait from Dornus magazine.

Another area is a religious related to pa ...?

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'Self-portrait' from *Dornus* magazine.

Another area that you seem to be touching upon is a religious one, a lot of the images seem to be related to pagan or primitive images in that respect ...?

Well, not only pagan but a lot of Christian images too, actually one of the things I've heard is that on the subway, there have been incredible readings that have interpreted all the work as some sort of religious fanaticism. Sometimes they're surprised when they actually meet me, because they have visions of some sort of religious fanatic or cult trying to explain this sort of religion to them. So that's one way in which it can be read.

Part of the reason for it for me is that I had a lot of that sort of information in my background, in the early seventies when I was about fifteen or sixteen, and was sort of blundering around through that post-sixties ... the seventies being called the 'me' generation all that sort of thing, weird people floating around like the Jesus Movement, things like that. For a while, I was young and naive and I fell into that. For about a year I got totally absorbed in the so-called Jesus Movement and consumed a lot of information about the end-of-the-world which dominates that train of thought really. Revelations and things taken directly from the bible about the apocalypse and things that were coming to pass. My involvement in that only lasted for a year or so, at which time I discovered marijuana and got into a whole other train of thought, got involved with drugs and the Grateful Dead and turned into a little hippy for a while until about 1976-77 when I discovered Devo and another direction. So anyway a lot of those images are back there in my consciousness.

Now there is a lot of potential for that to happen, we possess the potential for the end of the world to happen anytime, with shows like *The Day After*. There's not a day of the week that you can't turn on the television and hear some discussion of nuclear attack, of coming to our own demise.

So it's really in the air right now. For a while my work was becoming almost too apocalyptic and I was distressed by the fact that everyone was reading them as apocalyptic. Actually I consciously made an effort to move out of that area, I try to be more general and deal with other things because I don't think it's really going to happen that quickly. It's going to take generations until it actually happens. There's a lot of worse things that will happen before as well as at the actual end of the world.

Isn't that a rather pessimistic approach that you take?

Not pessimistic, just being a realist, looking at history, it's only, you know, how many years since Hitler was here. There's a lot of potential, with the way that the economy of the world is generally going, it's just falling apart and wars all over the world and people generally not having anything to cling onto, there is a lot of potential atmosphere for that sort of thing to happen. Another strong man to come from somewhere and push people in one direction.

Reagan?

Well, I don't think Reagan, I think Reagan is just perfect evidence of how you can just bring one into society. I mean when Reagan was running for President, we thought it was a joke, he would say things and we would think, "Oh, people will be able to see right through that," and he got in by a landslide and now he's going to win again. He's definitely going to win because if you know how to control the media that's how you win and the President of the country is an actor! I mean he's Hollywood, he's become the complete epitome of everything he represents from it.



⊕ SELF PORTRAIT IN MILAN - OCT. 83 - K. Han

So do you think your work is basically against that whole concept of America as a commercial entity and as a Hollywood entity?

I hope it at least delves into that in some way, it's hard to be really specific.

The reason I've opted for not using words and not using real political propaganda is that it always seems to be a limitation to reaching a lot of people and I think there's a lot more subtle ways of getting messages to people. Hopefully, I think people will have to start to think more and look at the kind of control that they're living under. It's sort of hard to break through that because there is always such a vast system of control that is set up. I mean the people that own the news are multinational corporations and things. You very rarely get real news and so I think the only way things are going to change are on a much more individual basis. I think the sixties proved that idealistic hopes of changing the world by amassing groups of people very rarely attain anything. No matter how many Americans were in the street, Nixon still invaded Cambodia at the height of the Vietnam protests. You're still in some ways powerless against that. It doesn't matter how many nuclear protests there are in Europe, they're still going to put the missiles there.

Do you think plugging your images into a fairly commercial area, T-shirts and badges and advertising spaces, that's a way of sort of going underneath the system?

Well I think to affect the system, you have to be inside of it first, to affect any sort of change you have to do it from within, from without you don't really have much power.

It's a dangerous area also because at the same time that you are penetrating, you also get co-opted by the system like the way people are eager to jump on a band wagon and accept my things. Also on a higher level, that of institutions, if corporations were to try and support me, try and soften their image by promoting art and things, in a lot of ways, corporations use art to make them seem more humanistic and sort of co-opt the art.

So, it's hard, you have to maintain your own self-image and your own image of where you are, controlling and making are part of the same thing. It's difficult because it's hard to actually see where you are when you're inside of it. For instance, you read negative things about Malcolm (McLaren) about how he has ripped people off, but one good thing about him is that he does stand for that thorn in the side and even though he has sort of used the commercial world and sort of abused many

people along the way, he still does get a chance to speak and present other possibilities and alternatives.

Do you think what Malcolm is doing is valid by and large?

I sort of go back and forth on that, I think what is incredible about Malcolm is his distribution network - all over the world - and he sort of pools things together like hillbillies and African music and breakers in the South Bronx. In some ways, he manipulates those people in his use of them, but in a broader sense he has gotten that out to the world, made that sort of impact in places where it may be wouldn't have been made as quickly.

With MacLaren's work and yours, the sudden success of it has been quite overwhelming worldwide, do you think it has lessened their impact - for instance with MacLaren's work in the charts do you think it has sort of quelled their effect because of the commercialism and packaging by say, record companies?

No, well I think it's only the tip of an iceberg. I think the one thing that it does do is it opens up doors for all these other people and I think that's what's the most important part, sort of breaking the ground because whether or not the record is doing well on the charts, that particular record is doing well as a sort of opening, so that other records and other people are going to work through those channels. That's why although the label of 'graffiti artist' is in some ways limiting to me, it is really annoying to be just written off as a graffiti artist when in fact that is only one aspect of what I'm doing. But on the other hand I never totally try to eliminate that because it is opening doors for other people and there are a lot of things about the graffiti movement in New York that I grew out of and I still have an enormous respect for it. Although I wasn't as much of a graffiti artist as a lot of those other people ...

What's the situation in the subways now, are those other artists still working or have most of them got to the galleries now?

No, there's thousands of graffiti writers in New York and it's not really a cult but a phenomenon that has been growing and going on for ten years, or more than ten years now. What they've done effectively has been to chase most of the really great artists off the trains.

In '78-79 when I first got to New York the trains in New York were incredible, every car was painted from top to bottom. People would spend eight to ten hours in a train-yard at night just doing one car. And there were incredible works of art, the best art that I saw in New York, the most real and vivid and vibrant and what the MTA did was to pump millions of dollars into their anti-graffiti campaign, partly through an advertising campaign but more with their buffing machines which are these machines which destroy, don't clean the car, or make it look clean but destroy the artwork enough for it to be really disheartening for someone who had spent eight hours doing it. They also spent money putting up really high barbed wire fences with dogs and things trying to discourage people as much as possible, actually sending people to Rykers Island which is like a heavy prison. So it has discouraged a lot of the real artists that were working on the trains, who do not want to take those risks or invest that much time in working on a train, which has made them move into other areas. Which is funny because at the same time as the MTA was pushing them off, the art world was opening up their doors and saying, do it here and you can make money.

But really the best thing that's come out of it, a

lot of stores and businesses and things have started using graffiti writers to paint their storefronts and their buildings and that way they get some money for it and it's still in a public place. Because graffiti in New York is really a style more than a phenomena. There's a whole other generation of graffiti artists growing up in New York now, that don't even need to paint on trains necessarily. I mean people are making incredible drawings and paintings and are involved with it on the level of making exciting things and making beautiful things and so on. There are also a whole group of people who are still just attacking trains and they're never going to end that.

To what extent do you have Tony Shafrazi to thank for your inclusion in the art world?

It's interesting because I had worked for Tony before Tony started working for me. I went to the School of Visual Arts in 1978 and started working for Tony in his garret. He had a little tiny space, actually it was his apartment but he'd pretend it wasn't his apartment and we'd have to - when he had openings - hide his cat and his television and make it look like he didn't live there. I started work as a gallery assistant, painting the walls and xeroxing his mailing list, things like that and at that time I was involved in Club 57 pretty much and nightclubs organising group shows. I used to do things like make double xerox's of his mailing list and use his mailing list to get people to come to my shows at the same time.

But because I worked for Tony for about five or six months I knew Tony from the inside, how he handled art and what he thought about art, although he wasn't really making money at all he was totally committed to it, would lay his life on the line for it really and was involved in trying to support the artists and help. During that time I had started working in the subways and exhibiting in more alternative spaces things like your Times Square show, Tony always knew sort of what I was doing but I never talked about it or showed him so he started hearing about it from other places. He was only one of a group of dealers who at the start of 1980 began to want to exhibit my works and at that point I was pretty much feeling that I didn't want to be with one gallery. Through seeing the way the gallery system operated in New York and knowing a lot of artists who had been professional artists and involved with galleries and

sort of being really wary of the gallery situation I, up to that point, had been committed to being my own businessman and staying outside of the gallery system so that I was calling the shots. Because at that point my work in the subways had sort of taken off and I had proved that I didn't have to go through the regular gallery system and at that point the galleries started coming to me and asking me to be in shows. At first I only agreed to be in group shows, sort of feeling out the different galleries. I was in about eight different shows in different galleries and my work had started to sell and it began to be a weird situation, all wanting to get works from me because they realised I wanted as little contact with those people as possible. All these people in fur coats coming to your studio and have you pull out all these works, go through piles of drawing and then buy nothing or try and get package deals ... I really didn't want to spend my time being with them ... Tony was really the only choice.

When I came to him I was in a position where I was calling the shots and it's always remained that way. We don't have a contract and he doesn't push me into things but follows what I'm doing and adds his own ideas. For instance with the last show I had in New York last month we put thousands and thousands of extra dollars into it that no-one would have ever done, getting extra space around the corner and a discotheque in the basement with huge paintings on the wall upstairs, so it was commercially unviable but it sort of adds to the whole excitement what my art is really about, and Tony is 100 per cent behind it. We produced a book after my first year of showing with him and went into debt \$40,000 but it didn't matter because it was important ... And through Tony people like Jean-Michael Basquiat, who go about it in a totally different way, have just as much control. When people try to put one over on him he just lashes back at them, says I don't need you and dumps them and moves on to the next one. I mean Anita Webber had some of his things in the gallery that she was trying not to give back to him. They were paintings that he had made almost under pressure and wasn't that happy about them and they weren't really finished works and he didn't want her to have them anymore so he just went in and slashed the paintings up, didn't think twice about cutting them up.

Jean-Michael has this really great approach to the whole thing, he just bulldozes through the art world.

The younger artists don't seem to have the same respect for the art world, which is probably very constructive?

Yes, one of my very favourite early early Jean-Michael works was when it was way before he was in a gallery but Fiorucci's wanted to do something with him and he went to them with this painting that was still really wet and had a lot of paint on it and he got paint all over their carpet and their leather couch, he took everybody totally by storm. When in early '79-80 I was still organising shows, group shows with like 100 artists in a nightclub, Jean-Michael would bring the drawings or the paintings in, crumpled up under his arm, like, *here's my piece* and he'd pull it out and it would be a beautiful drawing, it might have footprints all over it but they would be incredible paintings.

How is the art world in New York at the moment, is there much happening out side of the younger graffiti artists?

Well, the great thing about New York is that there's always as lot of things happening, always things going on at all these different levels, the older generations haven't stopped, they still continue producing things, and there's always new people coming up. There's a whole other scene now in the East Village of small galleries that have sort of blossomed and taken over the lower east side basically which really was started by people like Patti Astor with Fun Gallery which is still, I think, the only gallery in the East Village really worth going to. And people like me that in 1978-79 were doing shows in Club 57, the Mudd Club, Danceteria things like that.

At the same time the old masters are still doing shows like Jasper Johns has a show on which I think is the best show in New York, definitely. Roy Lichtenstein just did a huge mural at Castelli on Green St which opened the same day that my show opened. He actually came to my show and was talking to me about painting, he came to my show a few times, those guys are all still around. Bob Rauschenberg was at my show and Andy's doing some collaborative things and Andy comes to my shows and hangs out at them all the time.

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