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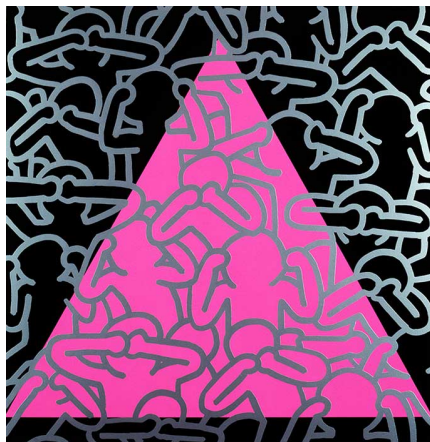
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### Contextual Analysis: Keith Haring

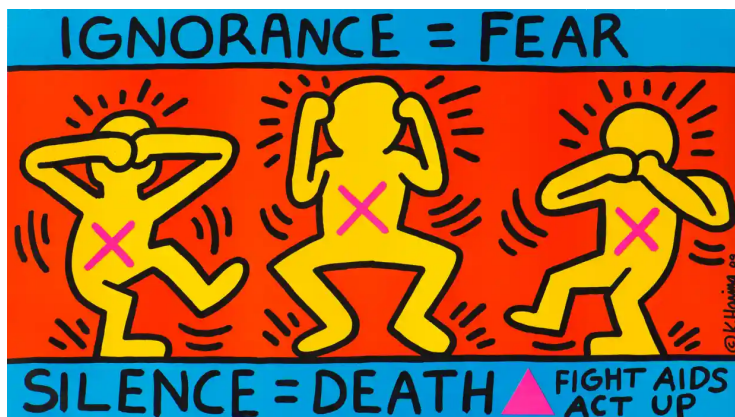
I chose to examine Keith Haring's artwork for my contextual analysis. From the early 1980s until his passing in 1990, New York was the home of pop artist Keith Haring. Haring was renowned for his intensely political artwork, much of which dealt with prejudices against people facing oppression. In his work, one-dimensional figures are typically depicted with a thick black line around them. Haring primarily used his art to express ideas like death, love, and sex. Haring was a proud openly gay man with many of his works reflecting how proud he is to be able to live his life how “god” made him. As Haring was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988 at the height of the pandemic, his artwork from 1988 until his passing two years later frequently mirrored the illness. You can see a shift in how Harings work changes from before and after his diagnosis with how he creates his pieces about being a gay man in a country against gay people.



For the first piece ill be analyzing I chose the 1989 piece made with acrylic on canvas “Silence = Death.” This work shows a pink triangle within a black square, the work also has sliver figures covering the entirety of the work. The story of the pink triangle goes all the way back to world war two. The pink triangle was used to identify gay men in the holocaust

since gay men were targeted for the death penalty by Nazi Germany. The pink triangle was then taken by gay men during the AIDS pandemic as a political statement comparing the treatment of gay people during the pandemic to the treatment of gay men in the Holocaust. Using such a recognizable symbol in this work that already reflects the death of gay people allows people to understand the meaning behind the work with little effort. This piece is meant to bring attention to the pandemic quickly and to bring awareness to it. The Queer community made up the majority of those impacted by the AIDS pandemic, and the governments of the world ignored the deaths of homosexual people during that time. The silver figures painted over the triangle stand in for all of the victims of the AIDS crisis as spectral beings.

“Silence = Death,” the title Haring picked, is a play on the saying “See no evil, Hear no evil, Say no evil.” He took this action in protest against the political leaders of the USA and their failure to address the AIDS pandemic, which was actively killing large portions of the American people. In creating this piece and selecting the title, Haring aimed to draw attention to the government's deliberate inaction in aiding those impacted by the crisis and to the fact that many members of the government viewed members of the Queer community as so invaluable that they wanted them to succumb to the virus.



To further my point, I will look at the 1989 poster “Ignorance = Fear.” We can't identify the three figures in this piece based on their race, gender, or sexual orientation. All of these people had previously been infected

with the AIDS virus. The term “Ignorance = Fear” is supposed to show people that it's not just

gay men to contract the virus since the majority of the stigma of AIDS was projected onto gay men. The x's on the figures' middles indicate that they will die soon from the infection, and Haring's goal with this poster is to alert and educate the public that AIDS may affect everyone, not just queer men. People would suffer unfavourable effects from both the virus and the stigma associated with it if people were to continue to be in this state of ignorance about the infection. Because of inadequate information about the AIDS pandemic, many people thought you could get the virus by simply touching an AIDS-positive person's arm.

On this poster, we once again see the phrase “Silence = Death” referencing the gay rights project created by Avram Finkelstein and the art piece “Silence = Death” created by Keith Haring. The other phrase on the poster says “Fight Aids Act Up” which is another organization that focused on combating the AIDS virus. We can see that Haring is stating that ignorance is fear and then goes on to provide people with references to work on their education about the AIDS virus such as the “Silence = Death” and the Act up organizations.

Before Haring's diagnosis, the work he did stray away from the queer community and majorly looked at people of colour. He made many pieces with the purpose of combating racial inequalities rather than looking at inequalities throughout other communities. We can see this is the majority of the early work he did on the walls of subway stations. It's implied that the characters in his early work are people of colour because the walls he would put the graffiti on were black therefore making the characters black. The figures in his graffiti were often either in moments where they are depicted as heroes or someone who is just doing good deeds. This is showing the same level of commitment to helping the black community as we see with his dedication to the queer community.



The next piece I will be analyzing is the work he did painting the singer Grace Jones for her performance at Paradise Garage, a nightclub in New York in 1984. In order to challenge western notions that claim being a person of colour or sensuality are wrong, Haring and Jones set out to hypersexualize a person of colour in this piece. With the artwork they painted on her body, they hoped to demonstrate that individuals of colour and all sexual orientations can be attractive. They recreated this piece many times

each time showing that people of colour and that sexuality are indeed beautiful.

The purpose of Haring's artwork is to demonstrate to viewers that all facets of existence, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or race, are beautiful. With the portrait he creates of Grace Jones, we can clearly see this in action. Her body is painted with bold white lines, and he embellishes her with unusual materials like wires and string beads. Also, he adheres paper cutouts of his distinctive designs to the wires, creating the illusion of dress fringe. His work with Grace Jones was his first time using a human as a canvas. Her vision was to have Haring paint her in a way that would mirror the body painting that many African cultures used. Several of those cultures painted their bodies with thick white lines. By having Haring do the body painting they were able to use traditional African body painting and modernise it with Haring's art style in a successful attempt to combat the colonial views on people of colour.

Whether it was defending people of colour or challenging the stigma surrounding the AIDS pandemic, Keith Haring's work has always had a strong political message. Haring has never shied away from standing up for what is right, even when the political atmosphere was hostile to individuals who held those beliefs. Before discovering his illness, he would produce pieces that honoured marginalised communities who were dealing with social inequalities like racism. In comparison to his works from after his diagnosis, Haring's tone changed within his pieces. Several of his political works appear to be driven by anger rather than joy, as they did before 1988. We can tell because many of his more political works don't include text until his works about the AIDS virus. It would be because Haring was then directly affected by what he was fighting for and that he then realized how it really felt to be an outcast and to be judged for uncontrollable factors of who he is. After his diagnosis, his works became more personal, more pointed, and more educational.

Haring was an incredible artist who never back down from fighting for what he thought was right. He reflected his beliefs through his art by uplifting so many people. His collaboration with artists such as Grace Jones were major events in art history, and his activism in fighting against the stigma of the illness that would ultimately end his life was heroic. Keith Haring is the blueprint for using your platform for good. His usage of the pink triangle a symbol used in the holocaust to identify a gay man and compare it to the AIDS crisis was a powerful piece translating the anger he felt towards the government condemning AIDS-positive people to death is a powerful message that is still felt today. Haring's work will never not be looked at fondly because of the incredible work he did fighting for peoples rights and lives.

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