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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
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Keith Haring's Pop Shop:  
A New Space of Artistic Communication

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Denisse Rodriguez

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Bert Winther-Tamaki, Chair  
Professor Roberta Wue  
Professor Scott Volz

2023



## **DEDICATION**

To

my parents and friends

in recognition of their support

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Keith Haring's Pop Shop:  
A New Space of Artistic Communication

by

Denisse Rodriguez

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Bert Winther-Tamaki, Chair

At the height of his career, Keith Haring sought to visualize his philosophy, “art for everyone.” This paper aims to focus on his philosophy and artistic message through the establishment of the iconic Pop Shop. The artist-run store is a testament to his philosophy of democratizing art. Situated at the epicenter of New York City’s vibrant art scene during the 1980s, the Pop Shop established a form of artistic communication between diverse audiences as an art installation and store. Unlike traditional art spaces, it connected individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds and encouraged engagement in the artistic space. Haring’s creative development is surveyed for a contextual understanding of his art and the decision to commercialize it through his formal art training, artist influences, and daily life. It focuses on his specific artistic communication, audience reception, and the creation of his legible aesthetic.



This paper explores the multifaceted nature of the Pop Shop that emphasizes the visualization of Haring's message. The audience engagement and interaction were the focal points that led to unforgettable aesthetic experiences, visual engagement, and substantial art product consumption. The democratization of Haring's art is attributed to his artistic persona and message that aided the success of his career and, subsequently, the Pop Shop. As a visualization of his "art for everyone," the shop's legacy serves as evidence of his life's work. It is a reminder that art lies not only in its creation but also in the dynamic relationships it fosters with its diverse audience, inviting them to explore, engage, and embrace the transformative power of art, unlike before.

## INTRODUCTION

Two nine two Lafayette Street was home to the famed Pop Shop (Figure 1), owned by artist Keith Haring. Located in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City, the Pop Shop welcomed critics, artists, consumers, and anyone who was willing to venture inside. At a glance, the shop doesn't seem to offer much due to its limited color palette and minimal layout on its surface. The store's facade was painted black, with no pattern or design. Two dark forest green columns stand at the center, framing the glass wall and door in the middle. The bright red awning at the top of the store displays its name, Pop Shop, in big bubble letters, including a subtle line of dancing figures at its bottom. Big windows are placed next to the building's columns, each adorned with a big neon sign. The signs were designed to display two of Haring's known icons. The left window displays a white neon sign of the radiant baby against a red backdrop, while the right window displays a red neon barking dog against a dark green background. Despite the simple exterior, the awning's use of the color red contrasts the black exterior of the shop, bringing focus to the name of the shop. The big neon signs composed of his icons hang at the center of the empty windows, bringing focus to the middle of the store and inviting viewers to wander inside.

Encountering the shop as a regular New Yorker would have been difficult if one hadn't been exposed to his billboards. During the 1980s, New York City underwent gentrification. The neighborhoods in and around lower Manhattan began to expand from low-income creative spaces into wealthy upper-class districts; "The high culture of fine art brought capital, visitors, and attention to SoHo. It developed a mix of galleries, art-related shops, and dining options that

gave it a distinct neighborhood culture.”<sup>1</sup> The SoHo neighborhood changed into a space of urban culture developed by artists. Due to economic and social changes in the area, any of those unfamiliar with the area would not be able to navigate the space. Placed within a couple of blocks of Lafayette Street in the SoHo neighborhood, the billboards directed the whereabouts of Haring’s Pop Shop to outsiders. Composed of the artist’s icons, the barking dog, and the heart icon, the signs provided clear and concise directions to the store. Like the shop, the billboards (Figure 2 and Figure 3) displayed were also minimalistic and straight to the point, using the same color palette and simple iconic designs. His uniform use of color and line throughout his artworks composed his noticeable aesthetic, which will later be discussed. Thus, any viewer would be able to recognize the shop through the aesthetics previously established by his many artworks.

Much like the outside, the inside of the Pop Shop is also very simple, contrary to what is being seen. As viewers step inside, they are immediately immersed in the space of artistic design from top to bottom (Figure 4). The surface area inside the Pop Shop is enveloped with a continuous linear design of Haring’s graffiti-inspired art, consisting of a seemingly endless thick black line that runs from floor to ceiling. Each wall features different figures, making the visually repetitive design a unique experience at every turn for the viewers. Despite the space appearing like an immersive art installation in and of itself, the primary purpose of the Pop Shop was to sell the objects designed by Haring. The shirts or prints displayed on the wall were the main products for sale, but the store also sold simple, affordable, and common items (Figure 5). They ranged

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Shkuda, *The Lofts of Soho: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950-1980*, PDF (Chicago (Ill.): The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 00.

from \$5-\$250, including shirts, pins, prints, skateboards, postcards, and books, with the most expensive item being an embroidered satin jacket (Figure 6).<sup>2</sup>

At the peak of his career, Keith Haring developed a visualization for his slogan, “art for everyone,” that encapsulated his personal philosophy on what art should be. At the center of this visualization was the opening of his Pop Shop, creating a new form of artistic communication that allowed for the immersion and interaction between his different audiences. The space promoted the idea of democratic interaction, connecting audiences from different socioeconomic backgrounds. It was a space that required the interaction of the audience in order for his artistic message to be visualized. Not only were these audiences able to immerse themselves within this inclusive space, but the commodities sold were also an extension of that space.

The Pop Shop is a testament to Haring's unique artistic message that art should be accessible to everyone.<sup>3</sup> Unless people explicitly traveled to New York, accessibility of the store remained within socioeconomic audiences like art connoisseurs, middle-class workers, and activist groups in New York City. The space provided his audience with memorable experiences of aesthetics, immersivity, and consumption of goods. The Pop Shop exposed everything it and Haring had to offer, only if one was willing to venture inside.

### Formative Years

From the early years of his childhood to the final years of his life, all Haring was concerned about was art. Born in 1958 in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, Haring wasn't made for the

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Slesin, “An Artist Turns Retailer,” The New York Times, April 18, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/18/style/an-artist-turns-retailer.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Haring quote, “Art for Everyone” LOOK BACK AT THIS

simple white picket, middle-class suburban, peaceful lifestyle his parents had envisioned for him.<sup>4</sup> During his childhood years, the early influences of art came from the inspiration of cartoons and popular culture. Learning how to draw cartoons from his father, it was during this time that Haring began to draw and develop his cartoon-like style.<sup>5</sup> From the widespread influences of Walt Disney and Dr. Seuss, his development and understanding of art eventually led him to want to become a commercial graphic artist. Haring believed that art linked to massive consumption of the population could only transpire through its commercialization in popular culture.<sup>6</sup> Looking to follow commercial art in a similar manner, he attended the Ivy School of Professional Art in Pittsburg. Yet, he realized that becoming a commercial artist did not interest him because he believed his destiny was as a fine artist and not a commercial one. Thus, his time at the Ivy School of Professional Art was short-lived, and his future as a commercial graphic artist came to an end. Looking to expand his perspective on art, he moved on to develop his own personal art style. After a few years of artistic development, he finally established some success through a solo exhibition of his work in 1978. As a result of this success, Haring sought to develop his art further, so he packed his bags, anticipating his new life in New York.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ingrid Sischy, “Kid Haring/ Vanity Fair,” Kid Haring, 1997, [https://www.haring.com/!/selected\\_writing/kid-haring](https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/kid-haring).

<sup>5</sup> “Bio,” Bio | Keith Haring, accessed 2023, <https://www.haring.com/!/about-haring/bio>.

<sup>6</sup> “Bio”. It focuses on his inspiration from Dr. Seuss and Walt Disney since they are commercialized cartoon art.

<sup>7</sup> Ingrid Sischy, “Kid Haring/ Vanity Fair,” Kid Haring, 1997, [https://www.haring.com/!/selected\\_writing/kid-haring](https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/kid-haring).

Upon his arrival in New York, Haring enrolled in The School of Visual Arts (SVA) in Manhattan to become a full-fledged artist. The SVA led to many new developments in his art, from photography to video. Haring was engrossed in finding art with meaning. Despite all his artistic development at the SVA, his time there was also short-lived. Not confined to institutions anymore, he began to create art that reflected how his influences from the SVA changed his philosophy on art.<sup>8</sup> The school's use of different artistic mediums led Haring to question the relationship between art mediums and their communication.<sup>9</sup> Through the academic influences of his formal art training, Haring began to investigate and consider how his art could be easily understood and visualized to a much broader range of audiences. After his time at the VSA, the final features of Haring's developments of self and performative persona crystallized. Moving forward, his synthesis of the multiple influences led to his career's distinctive visual aesthetic and popularity during the 1980s.

He investigated semiotics and the work of Robert Henri, Paul Klee, Pierre Alechinsky, and many other artists. These artists were investigated because of previous lectures at the SVA or exhibits he encountered. He focused on how these artists discovered a sense of self through art. Art as experience plagued his thoughts; it was not only dependent on the art but also many other factors that were rarely taken into consideration. As an artist, he wanted to create an art experience bigger than what was currently being done. Haring felt that the art experience within galleries was too restrictive, "The "art world" is very very small... There is shared interest, but it

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<sup>8</sup> "Bio"

<sup>9</sup> David Sheff, "Keith Haring, An Intimate Conversation /Rolling Stone/ August ," Keith Haring, An Intimate Conversation | Keith Haring, accessed 2023, [https://www.haring.com/!/selected\\_writing/rolling-stone-1989](https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/rolling-stone-1989).

is small...I think art is a much bigger thing than some would like to admit. It is easier to ignore.”<sup>10</sup> These thoughts came directly from the influence of Robert Henri’s belief that “[coming] into contact with a truly wonderful ‘work of art’ causes a tremendous revolution to occur in you.”<sup>11</sup> Henri’s teachings inspired Haring to connect his newly developed art with daily life experiences. He was invested in art as a concept. For that reason, he began to figure out who he was as an artist: “Each of those painters had something I [Haring] was involved with, so I investigated them, trying to find out who they were, so I could figure out who I was and where I was coming from.”<sup>12</sup>

Haring was intrigued by the modern style of abstract painting, which had a significant influence on him. The inspiration of Paul Klee is apparent through Haring’s similar use of line and composition. In his late artworks during the 1930s, Klee’s abstracted figurative qualities of line and color would resonate with Haring. In the earlier artworks by Haring, such as *Untitled*, 1978 (Figure 7), and *Untitled*, 1982 (Figure 8), the use of shape, color, composition, and line bear a resemblance to Klee’s *After the Flood*, 1936 (Figure 9), and *Harbor with Sailing Ships*, 1937 (Figure 10). All of these artworks follow a similar composition of color, with one primary color setting the tone of the art, while other colors are used to create contrast within the image. The lines come together to form figurative and abstracted shapes. Haring’s paintings were usually more clearly figurative than Klee’s, but it is evident that Klee’s use of figuration was explicitly important for Haring.

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<sup>10</sup> Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals/ with an Introduction by Robert Farris Thompson; Foreword by David Hockney*(New York, New York: Viking, 1996), 61.

<sup>11</sup> Haring. *Keith Haring Journals*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Haring. *Keith Haring Journals*, 61.

Pierre Alechinsky was another significant influence beneficial to the evolution of Haring's style. Haring watched videotapes of Alechinsky working and consumed everything he could on the artist. He was fascinated with the artistic persona that Alechinsky embodied. The way Alechinsky performed and expressed himself through paint strokes on a big canvas. The artist exudes certainty in the movement of his strokes, showcasing fluidity and confidence in his line.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Haring further developed his own artistic persona and use of line.

The line was a form of liberation to him, and from that, he gained confidence as an artist. He emphasized the importance of lines in his work, as they transformed the objects' surfaces. His goal was to produce a consistent line.<sup>14</sup> In his later years, he even recognized the importance of line in his work and its social responsibility. His use of lines resulted in the acceptance of his art and had a significant impact on him. He gained a profound insight into the interconnections between humans and their relationship with the world:

The connection to "primitive" (I hate that word) culture [use of line in early cave drawing art] is the key to understanding how and why my art became completely acceptable and quite natural in an age that finds itself technologically and ideologically very far removed from these so-called "primitive" cultures. "Art" after all, is something that is at the very basis of human existence. The need to separate ourselves and connect ourselves to our environment (world) is a primary need of all human beings.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Gruen , "Conversation with Keith Haring," Conversation with Keith Haring | Keith Haring, 2005, [https://www.haring.com/!/selected\\_writing/conversation-with-keith-haring](https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/conversation-with-keith-haring).

<sup>14</sup> Haring. Keith Haring Journals, 86-87.

<sup>15</sup> Haring. Keith Haring Journals, 96.



## Keith Haring's Career

Art shaped and influenced the life of Haring. The first entries of his journal discuss the development of his art, artist influences, and semiotics pertinent to his daily life. In return, he wanted to expose art to the world as much as possible. His artistic career aimed to make art more accessible, pushing art to be a more public endeavor, "Art for everyone."<sup>16</sup> After leaving the VSA, the streets of New York City marked the beginning of his career. His subway drawings drew inspiration from the city. They embodied the artistic message he sought to display. The easy-to-read art style was inspired by graffiti all over the city. Haring experimented with lines similar to the graffiti forms he saw, and the push toward guerrilla art was only natural. He took inspiration from and incorporated the freedom of the graffiti line within the subway drawings. The blank advertisement panels of the subway began to be filled with spontaneous white chalk drawings.

Haring used the advertisements around the blank panels as a source of inspiration, creating readable images that could be marketable to the public. The different abstract drawings he constantly created slowly developed his art and its reception,

This was the first time I [Haring] realized how many people could enjoy art if they were given the chance. These were not the people I saw in the museums or in the galleries but a cross section of humanity that cut across all boundaries. This group of different people living and working together in harmony has always been my prime attraction to New York.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Suzanne Geiss, Julia Gruen, and Jeffrey Deitch, *Keith Haring* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008).\_\_

<sup>17</sup> Keith Haring , "Art in Transit," Art in Transit , accessed 2023, [https://www.haring.com/!/selected\\_writing/haring-art-in-transit](https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/haring-art-in-transit).

Haring's art gained more visibility and recognition through the subway drawings. This helped to showcase and reveal his work to a broader audience.

From local New Yorkers to the worldwide media, Haring's career quickly took off. Haring states, "I became associated with New York and the hip-hop scene, which was all about graffiti, rap music, and break dancing. It [hip-hop] had existed for five years or more, but it hadn't really started to cross over into the general population. It was incredibly interesting to me that it was reaching all kinds of people in different levels from different backgrounds."<sup>18</sup> Two years into his artistic work, his career and artistic vision flourished after his subway paintings gained sudden exposure. With his success as a guerrilla artist, Haring led his first big gallery show in SoHo at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in 1982. This gallery exhibition recognized his talent and helped him gain recognition in the art world. Although Haring had his own biases against the art world, it was through the gallery that he could pursue art full-time.<sup>19</sup>

During the early 1980s, his artwork progressed into more public projects, like billboards, flyers, and murals focused around New York City. Later, he expanded toward worldwide audiences through international survey exhibitions. From paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and murals, the artwork in his career had a variety of mediums that helped Haring get exposure as an artist and help visualize his philosophy. The 1980 to 1989 artworks catered to many different and specific audiences. Haring understood audiences' various appeals and development, as seen in his local guerrilla art, public artworks, gallery art, activist art, and site-specific art. The variety in his audience and art helped aid in the visualization of his career and message. His works arose from the desire to expose art to anyone and everyone as much as possible, not out of

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<sup>18</sup> Sheff.

<sup>19</sup> Sheff.

necessity or demand. Julia Gruen states, “This is what differentiates Keith from the other artists; he incorporated so much of what was going on day to day in his life and in all of our lives.”<sup>20</sup> It is a well-documented fact that Haring lived and breathed art as much as he created it, as revealed through interviews and journal entries. The different outlets of exposure he pushed for are demonstrated within his career. This strategy Haring uses is understood through the framework Alison Pearlman describes as subcultural distinction.<sup>21</sup>

Subcultural distinction uses style “as a marker of social-group distinction.”<sup>22</sup> She forms her framework around Jean-Michel Basquiat and Haring. The artists use the identities of social groups in order to choose what spaces their art was displayed in and the aesthetics they addressed. The cultural mediation made by these artists never identified with the cultural forms they borrowed. They viewed these forms and styles as historically evolving and contextually relative connotations.<sup>23</sup>

Haring’s art was widely accepted and popularized due to his ability to cater to different groups and their interests, falling under the framework of subcultural distinction. Therefore, his career is interpreted as dependent on the frames of reference understood through specific groups of people used in his artwork.<sup>24</sup> The variety in spectatorship is attributed to two main constants in

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<sup>20</sup> Geiss.

<sup>21</sup> Alison Pearlman, “Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and the Art of Subcultural Distinction / 1980s Art and the Usage of Style,” essay, in *Unpacking Art of the 1980s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 69–154, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Pearlman, 96.

<sup>23</sup> Pearlman, 70, 73, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Pearlman, 93-95. These pages explain Pearlman’s specific argument on the distinction between Haring’s art and the audience it is meant to be for. The visual analysis of the artworks in the previous pages convey this specific argument and alludes to the statement.

his works: ideograms and the uniformity of the line. Haring slightly adjusted his art based on specific messages, locations, or audiences.<sup>25</sup> Pearlman's claim of Haring transcending cultural differences from a subcultural distinction standpoint is thus visualized throughout his oeuvre.

The audience and reception of Haring's artwork are at the center of Pearlman's claim, yet how are they identified? Confined into five audience groups, Pearlman asserts that these specific groups are commonly addressed in his oeuvre.<sup>26</sup> The groups that define and differentiate his artwork are members of the leading art world, alternative subcultures, specific neighborhoods, the urban population, and (most notably) children. Haring's "art for everyone" philosophy and artistic message are focused on by the different audiences of Pearlman's subcultural distinction framework. She claims that Haring can reach such audiences due to the specificity of each audience within his art. However, his work is only seen as audience-specific. Pearlman alludes that Haring's art as subcultural only works within specific audiences, with no overlap between spectatorship. While attributing the works produced in this framework as specific to each group can be true, Haring's work is not intended to be recognized explicitly by its intended audience. The murals he painted inside nightclubs were intended to target and appeal to the alternative subcultures His sculpture art in parks and courtyards was made to appeal to children. The public murals around New York City were meant to appeal to the youth and address social issues in the city like his "Crack is Wack" (1986) mural. Since each work was created for a specific audience, the visual similarities in his art began to establish Haring's aesthetic. He created legible icons,

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<sup>25</sup> Pearlman, 88.

<sup>26</sup> Pearlman, 88.

such as the heart, the baby, radiating lines, and dancing figures, as part of his aesthetic. The dialogue he had with the different audiences was made possible through the art produced.

It is a fact that all of the artworks in Haring's oeuvre are inspired by and catered to specific audiences, yet these audiences are supposed to be inclusive of one another.<sup>27</sup> As suggested by Pearlman, "Haring's neighborhood-specific works, by contrast, took advantage of the frames of reference common to the people of that area."<sup>28</sup> While she argues that Haring's work only caters to specific audiences, it also contains a universal appeal. I would suggest that the aesthetic he established is what made his work enjoyable to everyone, not a specific audience.

Haring's design simplification comes from his philosophy to broaden his artwork and his desire to form an easily recognizable aesthetic among all his audiences. Interaction and fluidity of his aesthetic between different spectators is what he hoped to achieve.<sup>29</sup> Haring comes to the conclusion that:

Art experience as opposed to daily life -if artists expand these boundaries- these ways of seeing (and they are) to include daily life if artists see life-experience life as art--if the qualities called art become the same qualities of a special experience of daily life--are people who experience this special thing- are they having an art experience? Is it essential

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<sup>27</sup> Not specifically stated by Keith Haring, but conclusions for this claim are made through the literature on Haring, most prominently in his Journals. The early entries of his journal explain his thought process for creating artwork that is visually receptive among all people who viewed his audiences.

<sup>28</sup> Pearlman, 95.

<sup>29</sup> Haring. Keith Haring Journals, 98.

that they think of it in an "art context"?...Is television making us all more aware of aesthetic seeing can we all see special things and are we all-artists?<sup>30</sup>

Haring's popularity is not only associated with subcultural distinction but also with the art aesthetic itself. His philosophy and artistic statement that art could be for everybody became a staple in his work, which he constantly tried to define and visualize. Although his artistic message is better understood through his oeuvre, his individual artworks lack a clear visualization of that message. Out of the many artworks Haring has created, there is only one that visualizes and embodies his personal philosophy and artistic message.

### The Pop Shop

The Pop Shop's opening commercialized Haring's art and established a new type of artistic space distinct from his oeuvre. The artist-run store had been in the works for three years before its opening, as people were already creating their own t-shirts featuring his icons. Haring was hesitant to open up a shop because he didn't want to be entirely shut out of the art world.<sup>31</sup> Although Haring was already gaining attention and revenue through his gallery work, he did not intend to sell out as many critics had speculated.<sup>32</sup> The commodification of his artwork developed from his dislike of exclusive art, which later influenced his interest in creating a public space where people could view his work, like in his subway drawings. Haring comments

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<sup>30</sup> Haring. Keith Haring Journals, 62.

<sup>31</sup> KH on the Pop Shop. 383 In the second paragraph he explains that he wanted to retain the respect of the art world, specifically artist and writers. He still wanted his artworks to have an effect in the art world.

<sup>32</sup> Amy Raffel, Art and Merchandise in Keith Haring's Pop Shop, PDF (S.l.: Routledge, 2023). 38.

that the shop was an experiment where “[he] would not have thought twice about closing it.”<sup>33</sup> He attained partial success through this experimentation by creating art products that catered to specific audiences.

As a shop that sold art products, different audiences were able to purchase the art goods of Haring’s artwork. Having the audience become a part of his artwork through their purchase as commodities symbolizes personal and public interaction with his art. While Haring viewed the commodification of his art products as an extension of his artwork, to critics, it was seen as selling out.<sup>34</sup> Haring understood his audience, so the commodities sold were strategically chosen to appeal to its specific audience. The products displayed on the postcard showcase t-shirts, buttons, pins, and stickers, appealing to a younger audience. He acknowledged that “half of [his] clientele was going to be young people and that temptation [of their consumption] would certainly be too much.”<sup>35</sup>

Most of the commodities sold were simple items that displayed Haring’s icons. The interaction between his art and the products sold allowed the viewers to create personalized interactions as an extension of his artwork. Through the purchase of a commodity, buyers extend the meaning of the artist's icons across different audience groups. These art goods help visualize the representations of specific audiences through the commodities they associate with. Depending on the icons displayed on the objects, the audiences have different interpretations of each of his icons. For example, someone who purchased a radiant baby icon t-shirt could’ve been

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<sup>33</sup> Geiss, 383.

<sup>34</sup> Geiss, 384.

<sup>35</sup> Geiss, 383.

part of an audience associated with groups focused on children as the world's future. Toward the end of Haring's life, the radiant baby was associated with life and energy. The icon symbolizes youth and strength.<sup>36</sup> The radiant baby t-shirt, pin, or tote bag can embody and be related to different audiences and community meanings as they become extensions of Haring's art. The artistic capacity of his products led to the creation of these extensions, which aided the Pop Shop's success.

Through Pearlman's framework, we understand the audience his works associate with and how each work is made for a specific group. While the main audiences discussed earlier are at the center of focus when looking at Haring's career, the audience is more specific when looking at the Pop Shop. The shop's target audience is specific to the different socioeconomic groups in New York City during the 1980s. This location-specific group of audiences can envision an art for everyone that Haring intended. In the different socioeconomic groups, the children, the art world insiders, the urban population, and the alternative subcultures are still addressed, except these groups are confined to even more specific groups encompassed by this specific region. Haring's career in New York City was intentional because he believed it "...to be the center of the world. My contribution to the world is my ability to draw. I will draw as much as I can for as many people as I can for as long as I can."<sup>37</sup> The everyone Haring sought to

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<sup>36</sup> Andrea Codrington, "Keith's Kids," Keith's Kids | Sphere Magazine, 1997, [https://www.haring.com/!/selected\\_writing/keiths-kids](https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/keiths-kids).

<sup>37</sup> Haring. Keith Haring Journals, 76.



advocate for was on a worldwide scale. Therefore, he chose New York City as the representative of the world, since his philosophy could not be visualized within a generalized audience.<sup>38</sup>

The success of the Pop Shop led to the opening of another store in Japan, the Pop Shop Tokyo. Haring attempted to further expand his art worldwide to gain more exposure. While he had the ability to cater to different groups, the success of his art through the subcultural framework specific to Japan should have also had the same success in audience reception as the New York shop. It made sense for Haring to open a new shop in a new environment that focused on visualizing his artistic message. Thus, when Haring was thinking about audiences and their reception of art, Tokyo was the central location in which he pushed to open a commercial space. He loved the energy of creating art in Tokyo and felt a deep connection to the place and its culture.<sup>39</sup> Amy Raffel states that the reception of art in Tokyo was far more accepted than in any other place in the world, “[The Pop Shop] was a logical place for a shop because of its specific cultural connections between art and consumerism, informed in part by its long and complicated relationship with the West.”<sup>40</sup> The conditions for Haring’s new shop were more than perfect in terms of audience and location; it should have been successful.

The Pop Shop in Tokyo opened in January 1988 and had around a year of success until it closed in September 1988.<sup>41</sup> Haring’s journals never mention a specific reason for its closure; it is implied by Haring that it was because of counterfeit goods, “there are just too many Haring

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<sup>38</sup> Haring. Keith Haring Journals, 97-99. Haring’s philosophy of everyone pushed for an idealized version of his philosophy that would reach everyone.

<sup>39</sup> Haring. Keith Haring Journals, 92-194.

<sup>40</sup> Raffel, 101.

<sup>41</sup> “Bio.”

fakes available all over Tokyo and, this time, they're really well done."<sup>42</sup> According to a newspaper in Japan, Haring's statement about counterfeit goods is emphasized. On November twenty-second, 1988, the Yomiuri Newspaper printed a press release by the Police Department. This press release states the involvement of the president of a company involved in the movement of counterfeit goods. The forty-six-year-old male, Mori Fuji Hei Hachiro, was caught producing and selling over 15,000 counterfeit goods of a famous artist from February to November of 1988. Mori Fuji sold fake t-shirts and goods in his store, Indio Ginza Shop, and in stores all over Japan, which made him an excessive profit of over three million yen.<sup>43</sup> It is speculated that the counterfeit products were of Haring's art due to the production of these goods immediately after the opening of his Pop Shop Tokyo. Due to the lack of sales within the shop and counterfeit goods, the reception and visualization of his art lacked audience interaction.

Looking back at the reception of the space in the Pop Shop of New York, the counterfeit goods prevented the Japanese audience from making the same connection. The failure of Pop Shop Tokyo was due to the lack of audience interaction and circulation of counterfeit goods that didn't create the same site-specific importance that the store in New York created. Due to Haring's popularity in Japan, consumerist culture in Japanese markets led to unauthorized and unlicensed merchandise of his art. The massive consumption of fake merchandise led to a low attendance at the Pop Shop Tokyo, losing most of its business. Even though audiences in Tokyo widely accepted Western culture and art, especially from the East Village art scene, the artistic

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<sup>42</sup> "Pop Shop Tokyo | New-York Historical Society," New-York Historical Society Museum & Library, 2013, <https://www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/pop-shop-tokyo>.

<sup>43</sup> "Metropolitan Police Department Exposes Contractor Who Made Huge Profit of 3 Million Yen by Illegally Reproducing Popular Illustrations on T-Shirts and Other Items," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, November 22, 1988.

consumption was too commercially oriented for Haring's intended message to take place.<sup>44</sup> The popularity of Haring's art in Japan during this time was insufficient to fully convey his artistic message.

### Pop Art: Commercialization & Commodification

Since the emergence of pop art, artists have utilized new methods to communicate their work, causing a shift in art reception. During the 1960s, the emergence of democratization within art began through artists like Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg and their understanding of the art multiple.<sup>45</sup> Through pop art, these artists aimed to reproduce artwork multiples that cited and participated in mass production and consumption. As observed by Cécile Whiting, “a general cultural leveling” was created when artworks met commodities.<sup>46</sup> This marked the beginning of commercialization and the commodification of art. Displays of pop art and the communication it produced sparked critics' rejection and artistic interest. The democratization of art was driven by artists' capacity to propose works that went beyond the established art world.

As a precursor to the Pop Shop, Oldenburg opened up an artist-run store, The Store, in Manhattan's Lower East Side neighborhood in December 1961.<sup>47</sup> The birth of the store came from the personal idea of breaking away from the institution because, according to Oldenburg,

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<sup>44</sup> Raffel. 104-106. A brief overview of the reception of art in Japan during the 1980s is given.

<sup>45</sup> Raffel, 4-5.

<sup>46</sup> 1. Claes Oldenburg and Cécile Whiting, “Selected Writings on The Store and the Ray Gun Theater (1961-1969) / Oldenburg's Store (1997),” essay, in *Claes Oldenburg*, ed. Nadja Rottner, vol. 13, October Files (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 85–117. 109.

<sup>47</sup> Oldenburg, 87.

“art is doomed to be bourgeois.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, it led him to believe that the only way art could be created without entering the inevitable narrative was through the creation of art objects and their display in a store. Oldenburg utilized daily life analysis and synthesis as a primary influence in his artwork and developments surrounding the store. The art produced in his store were objects based on consumer products he perceived and imitated.<sup>49</sup> They were designed to imitate a variety of low-cost consumer products such as food or clothing, differing only in size, color, and price. Unlike Haring’s Pop Shop, the production of these objects led to the development of the store and not the other way around. Therefore, the consumer-like art objects he produced caused his shop to imitate the discount stores in the surrounding neighborhood.<sup>50</sup> The store not only functioned as intended, but it also was an art studio where he created and supplied the art objects sold in the store. Oldenburg used the duality of the shop as the center of his artistic activities. To Oldenburg, the store is described as “a season-long exhibit, with changing & new material.”<sup>51</sup> Oldenburg’s store demonstrated the potential of artist-run spaces.

Whether intentional or unintentional, the production of his art and its display correlated with the ideas of democratization through his exhibition of art beyond the established institutions. The Store was a realization of Oldenburg’s imagination, a reconstruction of his vision and fantasy projected in his artwork. Oldenburg asserts that “the artworks produced within the store were meant to be ambiguous, where meaning would be dependent on the person

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<sup>48</sup> Oldenburg, 86.

<sup>49</sup> Whiting, 91.

<sup>50</sup> Whiting, 108.

<sup>51</sup> Oldenburg, 87.

viewing it, thus by extension the ability to hold multiple perceived possibilities.”<sup>52</sup> Similar to the surrounding shops of The Store, Oldenburg’s shop welcomed anyone willing to enter and interact with his art, meaning both the public and art critics or connoisseurs were able to interact within the space.

In a way, the conception of Haring’s Pop Shop parallels Oldenburg’s Store. These artistic spaces both emerged from the lack of acceptance of institutions. It is a fact that while Haring sought publicity from a general audience, Oldenburg didn’t. However, it is undeniable that both artists drew inspiration from local spaces. Compared to The Store, the Pop Shop further developed the democratization of art through the use of audience and space. Haring prioritized the communication of art outside of the art world. As a result, the Pop Shop displayed a new form of artistic communication.

#### A New Artistic Communication: Audience Reception & Participation

Haring deliberately chose to locate the Pop Shop in Lower Manhattan, aiming to address diverse audiences across the city’s various socio-economic groups through his artwork. The geographically specific nature of his work, produced in response to different audiences, enabled the Pop Shop to be translated as this new form of artistic communication. The exposure that Haring's artwork received was specifically concentrated among New Yorkers who encountered his subway drawings during their daily commute, critics who visited his galleries in SoHo, and the general public who encountered the public art in surrounding neighborhoods of New York City.<sup>53</sup> The diversity of Haring's audience gave his shop its significant and unique quality.

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<sup>52</sup> Oldenburg, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Geiss

Therefore, the visualization of his personal philosophy and artistic message could only be realized in New York City.

Viewing the Pop Shop as an artwork installation is the new form of artistic communication that Haring envisioned. With the help of an architectural firm, Moore & Pennoyer, Haring transformed the store's interior, optimizing the use of space. It took him more than 20 hours to paint the figurative lines onto the store's surface. People were awed by the interior of the space, Kenny Scharf comments, "Beautiful, and I especially like the drips." Bobby Breslau, the store manager, comments, "Standing in the shop is like being inside his head."<sup>54</sup> Haring designed a space that could function as both a creative merchandise space and an art exhibition, adding significant depth to its purpose. Further emphasizing his artistic vision through the audience's experience and participation in the space. Visitors had the opportunity to immerse themselves in Haring's unique artistic point of view due to the shop's specific design. As an installation, his audiences could interact with the visually immersive artwork that covered the surface area inside. As an unofficial art exhibit, the visitors could enjoy the space without the pressures of the art world.

Artistic freedom and resistance against commercialization thrived through installation artwork in the 1980s. Julian Stallabrass suggests that the artwork in the eighties was commercially driven due to the buying and selling of art.<sup>55</sup> The expanding market for art is due

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<sup>54</sup> Slesin.

<sup>55</sup> Julian Stallabrass, "A Zone of Freedom?," essay, in *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6–29. 24.

to the new development of art itself.<sup>56</sup> The shift towards a new form of consumption and marketing in the art world is what drove this economic shift. Art installations broke away from the mainstream due to the autonomy and ephemerality they provide. Generally found in artist-run, alternative spaces, the re-emergence of art installations would no doubt influence Haring's shop. As indicated by Stallabrass, "Installation allows a space to be inhabited rather than merely presenting a work of art to be looked at. In this battle over spectacular display, artists and museums have avidly seized on new technology."<sup>57</sup> The prevalence of capitalism changed 'the character of the art world' during the eighties. If installations were being used as a spectacle during this time and if "installations are linked to the globalization of the art world," then based on these observations installations embodied communication. Installations served as a spectacle during this time and were directly linked to the globalization of the art world. Therefore, it can be confidently stated that installations embodied communication through Stallabrass's point of view.

At first glance, the intentional duality of the Pop Shop's function as both a space and an installation may seem contradictory to the previous statement. Even so, Haring's artistic nature thrived on contradiction and unexpected connections within the production of his art.<sup>58</sup> By demonstrating contradiction as a central theme in Haring's work, viewing the Pop Shop through Stallabrass's definition of installation as a spatial art helps enhance the comprehension of audience reception and participation.

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<sup>56</sup> Cathleen Mcguigan, "New Art, New Money," The New York Times, February 10, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/10/magazine/new-art-new-money.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Stallabrass, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Geiss, 16.

The presence of different audiences within the shop gives a multi-layered understanding of the space within the Pop Shop. Visitors enter the artistic vision and world of Haring through the display of art products, music, and distinct black line. Spectator immersion, involvement, and participation subtly navigate the audience to explore the space. If Oldenburg's shop welcomed specific reception and participation from its audience, Haring's shop further expanded audience experience and involvement. Even if Oldenburg emulated the small discount shops, the space would only be understood by the art connoisseurs instead of welcoming a different class viewer. Haring effectively engaged multiple audiences through the use of his aesthetics in the shop without limiting himself to a specific target audience. Much like Oldenburg, Haring understood that different viewers led to a different reception of art. As seen in *The Store*, a local shopper would understand the displays as a real-world representation of commercialism. In contrast, a critic or connoisseur would realize the aesthetics of commerce and art.<sup>59</sup> Spectatorship informed the artist of how the audience treated the spaces they entered and their ability to understand aesthetic visual representations. Due to Oldenburg's inability to connect with a specific audience through the art he displayed, his store failed to target a broader and more public audience that democratic art called for, unlike the Pop Shop, which effectively reached a wider audience.

Immersion within the aesthetics emphasized by Haring's line was a generator of meaning, feeling, and communication. The interaction of his different audiences within the shop is what realized the artistic message he constantly advocated for. It demanded movement and participation through the space until nothing was left to explore. Although no physical interaction was required, his aesthetic visually engaged the audience throughout the store.

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<sup>59</sup> Whiting, 113.



Understanding audience participation and installation interactivity is defined and analyzed through the framework provided by Adair Rounthwaite. The audience diversity investigated in this framework parallels Haring's as they both focused on diverse audiences and are situated in the 1980s, despite the specific focus of Rounthwaite's archived audience engagement. In this framework, an audience member or participant is implied to be an activated viewer where they both “contribute to the art and learn from involvement in it.”<sup>60</sup> If an activated viewer is able to emerge from spectatorship, then a specific meaning of the artwork is formed, and a certain affect is formed. Through this understanding, the interaction between the activated viewers and the affects produced becomes a central element of the work since, according to Rounthwaite, “participatory art constitutes art as a sphere of activity where people can best all be thought as participants with different kinds of investment, and agency depending on their specific Position.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the Pop Shop's meaning is formed by the various affects that are generated through active participation within its artistic space. Rounthwaite asserts that “[if] audience involvement can embody arts social impact,” the ability to democratize a space is only possible through audience interaction with the spatial artwork.<sup>62</sup>

The affects produced by the audience within the Pop Shop allow for each individual to create a personalized experience while also contributing to a general effect due to their combined presence. Communication between audience, installation, and art shape Haring's unique artistic

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<sup>60</sup> Adair Rounthwaite, “Introduction Recoving Audience / The Politics of Participation ,” essay, in *Asking the Audience: Participatory Art in 1980s New York* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 1–73. 12.

<sup>61</sup> Rounthwaite, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Rounthwaite, 73.

communication. As explained by Haring, “I am invested in making art to be experienced and explored by as many individuals as possible with as many different individual ideas about the given piece with no final meaning attached. The viewer creates the reality, the meaning, the conception of the piece.”<sup>63</sup> It is important to note that viewers were free to experience the artistic space without feeling obligated to purchase any art goods from the shop.

### Keith Haring Today

Today, the consumption of Haring’s art is still very prevalent, especially on t-shirts. Due to the constant commercialization and recognition of his art, Keith Haring's philosophy and artistic message continue to be visualized. In a recent article in *The New York Times* on the upcoming special exhibition, “Keith Haring: Art Is for Everybody,” at the Broad Museum in Los Angeles, author Robin Pogrebin states at the beginning of the article that since the icons of Haring are embedded in our popular culture, “we forget that they were initially groundbreaking.”<sup>64</sup> The article aims to emphasize the importance and complexity of Haring’s career, as displayed by its title, *Taking Keith Haring Seriously*. The curator of the exhibition, Sarah Loyer, declares in the interview with Pogrebin that,

“Haring is a big name...But for a general audience who might know the artist through the commercial work — through the images they see on clothing or out there in the world — we’re trying to give a much deeper dive into the artist’s career. I think it will be exciting and surprising for people to understand that context.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Geiss, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “Taking Keith Haring Seriously,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/25/arts/design/keith-haring-broad-museum.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Pogrebin,

After thirty years, Haring's iconic art has become widely known through consumerism, but Loyer argues that it has become diluted. Although her statement is partially true, I am very skeptical of calling the public consumption of Haring's artwork diluted.

Last year, I hosted a close friend of mine for a weekend getaway. Upon her arrival, I noticed a black bag featuring Haring's iconic heart. The icon was a radiating heart held up by two figures, contrasting with the dark bag. As I examined the bag more closely, I couldn't help but notice the familiar visual elements characteristic of Keith Haring's aesthetic. However, I only had limited knowledge of Haring's art. Despite this, I found myself intrigued by the bag's design and by my friend's possession of this bag. I then asked her, "Hey, I like your bag; I've never seen you wear it before. Did you recently buy it?" My friend was never interested in art and didn't wear graphic designs without knowing what they meant. She then responded, "Oh, this bag? It's from an artist named Keith Haring. I just discovered his art, but I loved this bag. I get a sense of happiness when I see it. When I wear it makes me feel like living life." It was clear from her expression that she was delighted to have the bag. After hearing her response, I felt happy because my friend had unintentionally formed a personal connection with the art, creating her own meaning and becoming part of it.

During the eighties, many New Yorkers could have also come to the same conclusion my friend made, even more so since his exposure was even more prevalent. After almost forty years of the commodification of his art, people can still resonate with Keith Haring's icons, as seen through my friend's experience. In the article, Loyer argues that the public is unable to understand the context of Haring's work, thus one of the reasons for the whole exhibition. Despite being a member of the general public, my friend's understanding of his work is certainly

not diluted. As someone who has no knowledge of the art, especially Haring's art, my friend was able to attach her own meaning from what she visualized on the bag. She came to her own understanding of what Haring was trying to communicate and then used the bag as a part of her everyday life. At that time, I was only concerned with my friend being interested in art, yet only now, as I am writing this, am I able to truly understand why my friend made such a connection.

Haring's artwork was made for the purpose of easy consumption by the general public. He created legible icons for anyone to be able to understand his artwork. His heart icon was designed to display optimism and love, with a wider understanding of community, collectivity, and compassion.<sup>66</sup> The communication of his heart icon is effective in my friend's case, as she is able to come to her own understanding of his artistic communication. While it is true that the public may not understand the context behind the icons, their associations with the icons should not be overlooked.

In the past, there existed a valuable opportunity to experience the Pop Shop and the vibrant New York art scene. However, that time has now passed, and Haring's artistic message has become irrevocably entwined with consumerism. Haring's Pop Shop changed the way people understood his artwork and artistic philosophy. Despite the fact that the reception of his work is attributed to the development of his artistic career during the 1980s. A contemporary understanding of his work is still possible. As chief curator and founding director of the Broad, Joanne Heyler, states, "When I look at what popular culture is today, it's so shaped by the '80s and to a large degree by what was happening in New York that's still palpable today."<sup>67</sup> Although

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<sup>66</sup> Codrington

<sup>67</sup> Pogrebin

accessibility to the shop was limited, the Pop Shop embodied everything Haring had envisioned in his artistic philosophy. The new forms of communication it provided were emphasized by its audience and the commodities produced. Today the shop's influence and concept live on through the creation of business art and licensing.<sup>68</sup> While shops like Haring's no longer provide the same artistic imaginary, his influence lives on through art commodities.

The Pop Shop was an artwork installation that displayed Haring's philosophy. The dual function of the store gives the shop a multi-layered meaning. He addressed a variety of audiences from different experiences giving meaning to his artistic message. While his career was based on communication with certain audiences, he made sure to create art legible to everyone. Being an artist was his life-long mission, and he wanted to create an impact on the world as an artist. In his philosophy, Haring's artistic message of "art for everyone" demanded a deep understanding of what he considered art to be. His Pop Shop embodied the essence of his artistic message, functioning both as a store that sold goods and as an art installation that was accessible to New Yorkers. The center of Haring's world was New York City, so it made sense that the shop thrived for 20 years until its closure.

The Pop Shop not only changed the way his art was received and communicated, but it also inspired a new generation of artists in the following years. The 1990s accelerated consumer culture along with new forms of artistic median and exposure. Art merchandising was able to reach new audiences and intensified heights. The commercial projects inspired by Haring managed to thrive because of the capital conditions and influence.<sup>28</sup> Artist Takashi Murakami could have been influenced by Haring's work, as their careers run parallel. Murakami's art

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<sup>68</sup> Geiss, 18-19.

focuses more on reaching specific audiences of postmodern Japanese society.<sup>69</sup> His Business Art focuses on the aesthetics of consumption and communication, much like the Pop Shop, but on a more complex and bigger scale.<sup>70</sup> From museum projects to fashion collaborations, Murakami was able to successfully blend his art into the mainstream, “ he saw overt commercialism as an opportunity to inform contemporary Japanese art and identity.”<sup>71</sup> He used Japanese subcultures as the center of his inclusive art paradigm in order to reinvent Japanese identity. Without the context of Haring’s career, artists like Murakami were unable to break into market-based art.

Haring’s aesthetic continues to live on today. Commodities with his legible figures are still very popular today.<sup>72</sup> Brands continue to find Haring’s art relevant, and artists continue to expand market-based art into new projects. Like Murakami, many artists have used commercialism to stay relevant in mainstream society. Many of the art figurines, prints, and objects you see today can all be traced back its the influence of Haring’s Pop Shop. It is difficult to imagine a world without highly visualized art. Next time you see an ad for a Vincent Van Gogh Lego art set or an exclusive Kusama Yayoi-designed Louis Vuitton bag, you can thank Keith Haring, his Pop Shop, and his “art is for everyone” philosophy.

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<sup>69</sup> Jack Bankowsky et al., *Pop Life: Art in a Material World* (London: Tate Pub., 2009).79-81

<sup>70</sup> Raffel, 199.

<sup>71</sup> Raffel, 201.

<sup>72</sup> This statement is made from personal observation of advertisements of brands having collaborated with Keith Haring art, like Pandora, Casetify, Aerie, H&M, etc...

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## APPENDIX A: Figures

Figure 1: Pop Shop Exterior on Lafayette Street, 1986. Website <https://www.kidsofdada.com/blogs/magazine/18384649-80s-icon-keith-haring-s-pop-shop>.

Figure 2: Tseng Kwong Chi, New York, 1986. Website [https://www.haring.com/!/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KwongChi\\_POP1.jpg](https://www.haring.com/!/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KwongChi_POP1.jpg)

Figure 3: Tseng Kwong Chi, New York, 1986. Website [https://www.haring.com/!/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KC\\_Popbillboard.jpg](https://www.haring.com/!/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KC_Popbillboard.jpg)

Figure 4: Tseng Kwong Chi, Keith Haring Inside Pop Shop, New York, 1986. Website [https://www.haring.com/!/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KwongChi\\_POP3.jpg](https://www.haring.com/!/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/KwongChi_POP3.jpg)

Figure 5: Keith Haring inside his Manhattan Pop Shop, 1986. Website <https://www.minniemuse.com/articles/art-of/pop-shop>.

Figure 6: Pop Shop Merchandise. Website <https://www.minniemuse.com/articles/art-of/pop-shop>.

Figure 7: Keith Haring, *Untitled*, Painting, Felt-tip Pen and Watercolor on Paper, 7 1/8 x 9 7/8 inches, 18.1 x 25.1 cm. Website <https://www.haring.com/!/art-work/382>.



Figure 8: Keith Haring, *Untitled*, [Painting, Acrylic And Dayglo On Wood](https://www.haring.com/!/art-work/442), 23 x 23 inches 58.42 x 58.42 cm. Website <https://www.haring.com/!/art-work/442>.

Figure 9: Paul Klee, *After the floods*, 1936, 47.9 x 62.6 cm. Website <https://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-lee/after-the-floods-1936>

Figure 10: Paul Klee, Harbour with sailing ships, 1937, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm [https://  
www.wikiart.org/en/paul-klee/harbour-with-sailing-ships-1937](https://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-klee/harbour-with-sailing-ships-1937).

