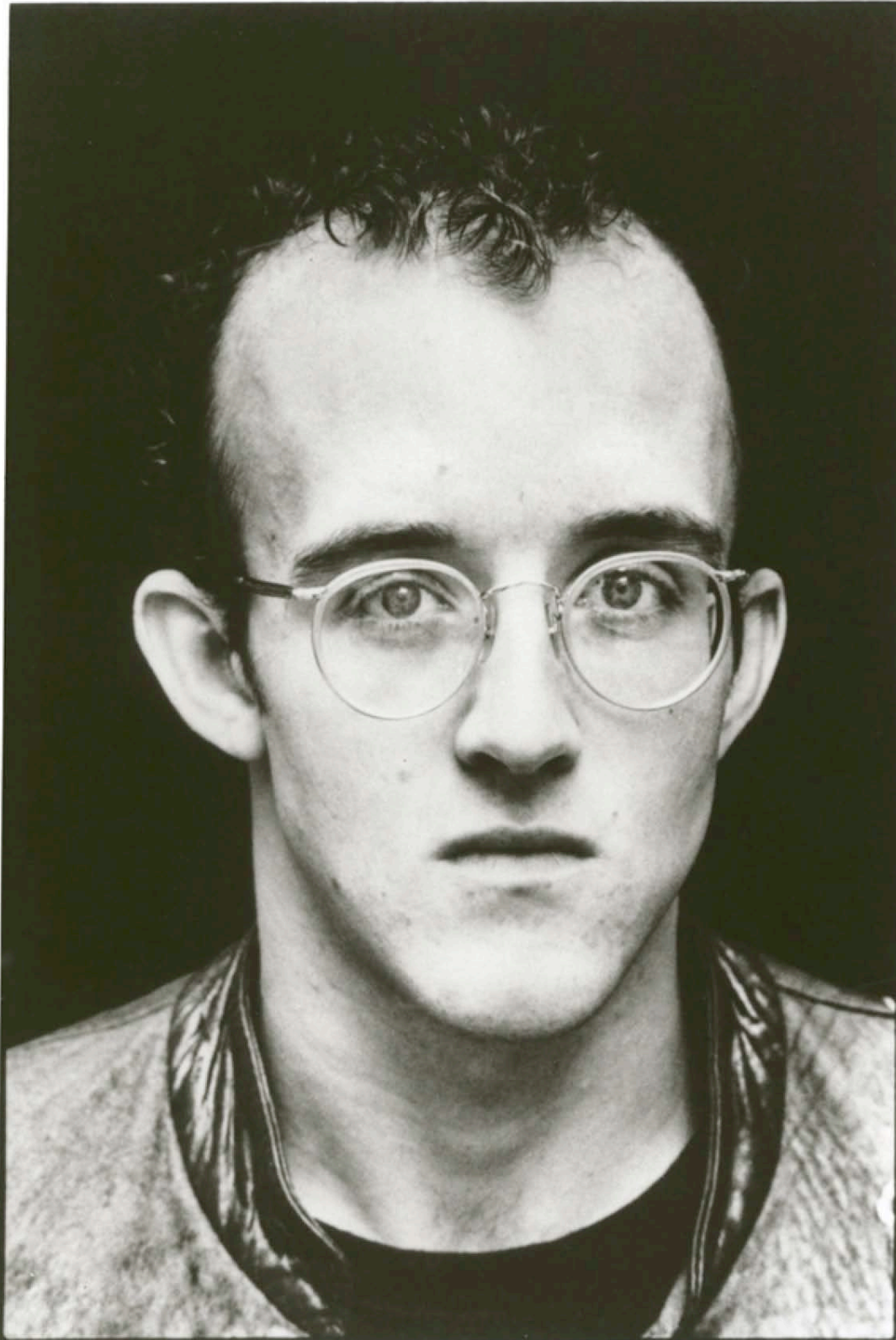


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rubell, Jason. "Keith Haring: The Last Interview", Arts Magazine, Sept. 1990



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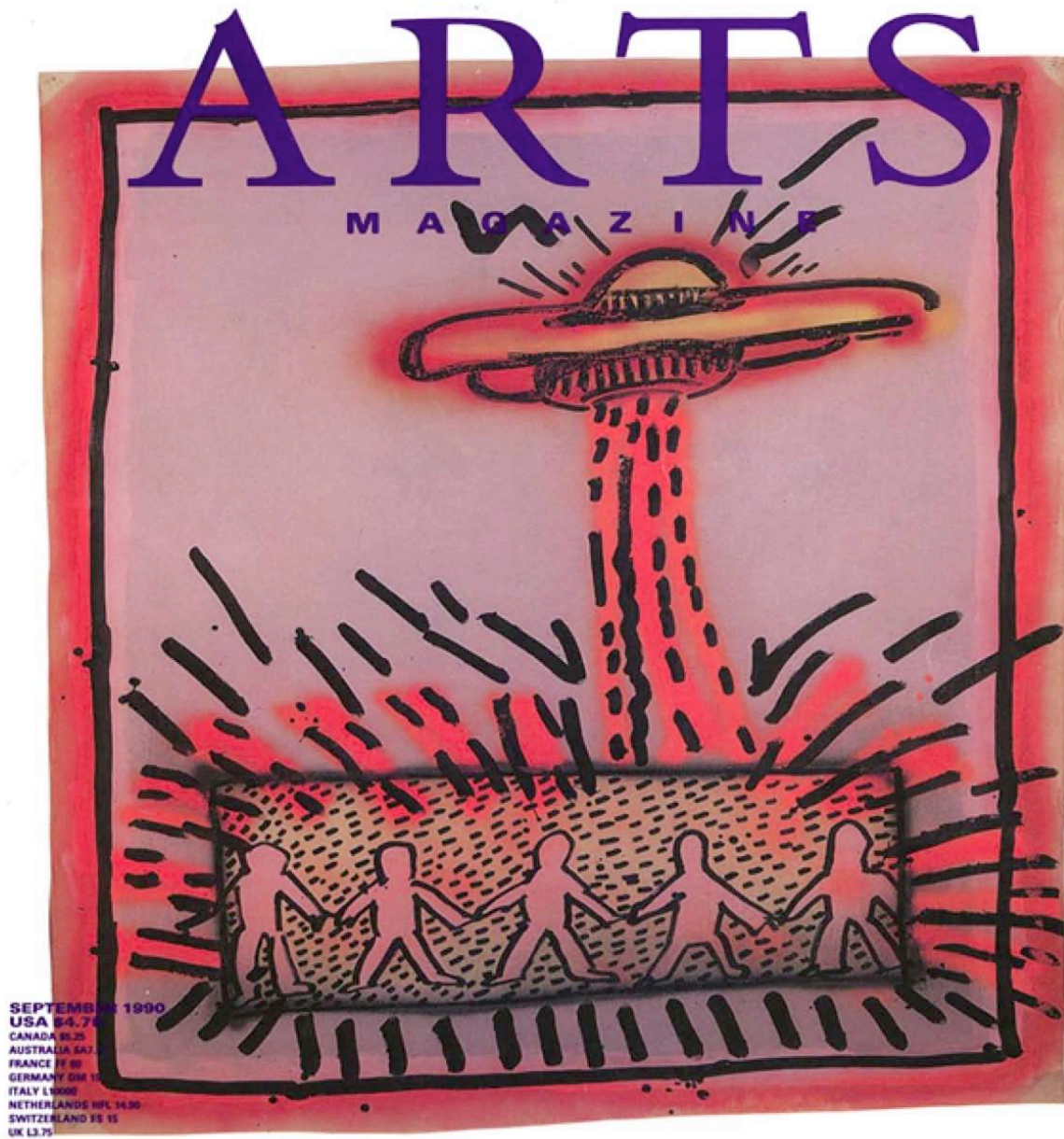
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"Keith Haring: The Last Interview"

Jason Rubell

*Arts Magazine*

September 1990



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## Keith Haring: The Last Interview



Keith Haring, Untitled subway drawing, 1983. Copyright © the Estates of Keith Haring and Tseng Kwong Chi.

**Jason Rubell**

**Photographs by Tseng Kwong Chi**

I first met Keith Haring at the Drawing Show at the Mudd Club in New York in 1981 when I was 12 years old. Acting as the guard/director of the event, Keith sat on a swing that had been constructed in the space. We introduced ourselves (I was with my parents, Don and Mera, and my sister, Jennifer) and proceeded to almost invite ourselves to his studio. We had to know what was behind this quirky, rather comical figure.

My parents ended up purchasing a number of works out of the hundreds that seemed to explode across the floor and walls of the studio. Until this my sister and I had thought our parents were nuts for collecting all these "strange" works of art, but now we had found an artist we could like too. The following year, for my 13th birthday, Keith designed the party invitation. As a present, he gave me a small work on masonite that began my own interest in collecting art.

From that time on, I followed Keith's development and continued to admire and collect his work. Because the emphasis was on friendship and not business, we were always able to talk with a great degree of frankness. Realizing that this relationship was special, I wanted to interview Keith while he was fighting AIDS. Under the guidance of Kristine Stiles, a professor of contemporary art at Duke University, I devised a set of questions for the interview that would form part of the research for a thesis on Keith's ambitious plans for a children's playground, a project which, in my view, encompasses all of Keith's vitality and spirit.

Before Keith died on February 16, 1990, I did in fact have the opportunity to have this discussion with him in his studio. The conversation took place on the evening of January 27. This was the last interview Keith gave before his death. I had been talking with him for some time about coming to see him, but he was constantly consumed with new works. Finally, late that Saturday afternoon, I called Keith and told him that I was in the area and would like to see him. He told me that if I came to the studio at six he would do the interview.

**Jason Rubell:** The main reason I want to do this interview is because, as a person from my generation, and as an art lover, I feel you're one of the key figures for my generation, one of the artists that we relate to . . .

**Keith Haring:** Hopefully the '90s, too.

Exactly. What role do you feel spontaneity plays in the creative process?

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Keith Haring, Untitled subway drawings, 1982. Copyright © the Estates of Keith Haring and Tsong Kwong Chi.

It is almost the essence of everything that I do, the secret of doing something that is almost a gesture turned into a thing. So spontaneity is an essential part of making everything I make, even when the thing, in final form, is turned into something in which the materials aren't restrictive, say in a steel sculpture or something. The first sculpture models are made just with scissors and cardboard and glue and really sitting down and "playing" with the materials and coming up with something. Very rarely is any of the work planned out ahead of time or done in a sort of rational or systematic way to reach a particular goal. It's almost always a sort of outburst of energy more equivalent to a gesture than planned out, strategic action.

*When you talk about the essence, is it something that is in your head before you create it? Is it during? After?*

No, I think art, again I'm only speaking for me, is a prod-

uct of a moment and a state of mind at that moment and a record of a state of being or a moment of living, a point in time in which all your energies and all your forces and the environment is coming together in that one action of making, of creating, of . . . usually in my case, a drawing. Even when I'm painting I'm usually, I'm drawing when I'm painting, really . . . When you're drawing, it's completely separate because drawing is making a mark and cutting into space and just finding something that didn't exist before. It's pure creation in its simplest form. . .

*Do you feel that the immediacy that was evident in the works of '80-'81 has been lost because of your widely held public acceptance?*

The thing that changed very noticeably is the drawing technique itself. When I started doing the figurative drawings in 1980 they were really rough and really almost more about getting the

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Keith Haring, *Untitled subway drawing, 1982*. Copyright © the Estates of Keith Haring and Tseng Kwong Chi.



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idea out than the technique of drawing. In some ways, I have a kind of nostalgia for these old drawings, but you can't go backwards. The drawings in the subway became almost a training course for drawing. The drawings became much smoother and much tighter, the physical anatomy of things changed. They became more skilled. You can't fake naïve drawing. You can't go backwards. And the more I draw, I feel like I learned something, so the drawings were naturally changing and evolving. My sort of mastery of space and composition and design of things has gotten more sophisticated and more skilled over the past ten years, and that really is the biggest change. It wasn't affected by the fact that people were seeing the drawings or were buying the drawings or that the drawings were becoming popular. That was

really something that was coming from my own experience of drawing, my own abilities, whatever. The only thing that I can really say was affected by the fact that the drawings became public was that it changed my materials, it changed some of the ways that I drew, most of the materials and the techniques which I was given access to because of these other things.

*Was this monetary, you were able to afford more, or...*

Partly that. Having money for materials changed the fact that you didn't draw on things you found in the street but you could afford to buy, like when I did the vinyl tarps, and I could afford to have vinyl tarps made and then after that eventually going to canvas and doing things on canvas and doing sculptures and doing paintings on different surfaces that I wouldn't have had access to before, like painting on Grace Jones's body, painting on the Berlin Wall, things that I would not have had access to at the earlier point. But I didn't feel as corrupted by the attention.

*It didn't change the essence or the meaning of the work at all?*

No, I think it depends on the person. My philosophy was always that you can use it as long as you use it for the right reasons and use it sincerely for the sake of the work and not for greed or for money. Then there can't be anything wrong with doing bigger and better things, and more expensive things.

*I always feel that the meaning is what's really important even though the aesthetic issues enter in and your work is pleasurable to look at.*

Talking about the formal things and materials isn't really important, but of course one of the most important things is how my work has entered into the culture and affects culture in terms of its content. The most effective work of art has a balance between the form and the content, they both come into play. If you have only content then you have propaganda and it's not art. And vice versa. Well, vice versa is not exactly true because there are a lot of people who only deal with formal things and have no content but they usually generate dialogue, a sort of intellectual jargon around the subject to create the content. But for me, a good work that's really going to communicate to a person and to the culture has to operate on these two levels... In all my work there is some degree of content that is more obvious, communicating a specific or a general idea that people will get. But a lot of times the content of the work is ambiguous enough that it can be interpreted by whoever. That was one of the essential things that made the subway drawings powerful. They weren't exactly telling you what they meant. They were aside and in the arena of advertisements which were all directly

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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telling you exactly what they meant, what they were trying to sell. The subway drawings looked like signs and symbols. Everyone I'd encounter when I was in the subway, drawing, would ask, "What does it mean?" I was provoking people to look at it and to have to figure it out for themselves, which is what most of the work has really been about. So in making poetic information, instead of obviously communicating information, people have to fill in the blanks and find their own associations and meanings within the work.

*With the subway drawings, you're actually appealing to the mass worker. As long as I've known you, you've always been involved with the public. Why is it such an important thing for you?*

I don't know. Maybe it's sort of a romantic idea of the artist as an artist of the people, as a communicator of the people, and as a part of the general population and culture. A lot of artists have strived for that and not that many people have really succeeded at it. The subway drawings opened my eyes to this whole other understanding of art as something that really could have an effect on and communicate to larger numbers of people that were increasingly becoming the harbors of the art. Art was the symbol of the bourgeois and the people that could afford it and "understand" it. And it was used as a way of separating the general population from the upper class and used in a lot of ways as a tool against the rest of the population, even though over time art went through an over-intellectualization process. People assumed that if they didn't understand it then they didn't like it then they were not part of it. I think those barriers started being broken down by Madison Avenue, advertising, television, and Andy Warhol, but there's still a really long way to go. In the beginning of the '80s I was not the only artist who was addressing this issue of making available and acknowledging the bigger population for art; Jenny Holzer and John Ahearn were working through the Colab (Collaborative Projects), Fashion Moda, and the graffiti artists.

*How do you view yourself in terms of your relationship to Andy Warhol?*

Comparison to Andy is really a hard thing because we have things in common but we also are completely different. I think these comparisons made some sort of bold step in attempting to break down further the definition of what art is or isn't and breaking down the barriers between areas of work. Andy was not accepted by the established art world very easily in the upper echelons and by the art "market." The art market has become a separate entity unto itself and has very little to do with the aesthetic values of art or with the meaning of what art is sup-

posed to be. And within the art market Andy was punished for not following the rules and for doing movies and doing prints and doing *Interview Magazine* and doing commercials in that his prices alongside those of his peers, like Jasper Johns or Roy Lichtenstein, whatever, were one-tenth of the price. Now with his death it's changing a little bit but it still was sort of a result of the fact that Andy was not playing by their rules. I have very, very much the same sort of relationship with the official art world and not only with the art market but with the critics. Actually for me lately the market is turning around which has more to do with economics and the fact that people speculated and invested knowing that they're going to turn the thing over in a couple of years and make twice as much money. But the museum world and the critics have sort of treated me the same way, not really criticizing the work but just ignoring me. I'm not really taken seriously because of the other things that I do like the Pop Shop and graphics and . . .

*Does it bother you that maybe you haven't had the . . .*

In a way I think it's the best thing that could happen. Because the other thing could kill it, really.

*It allows you to just go out and work . . .*

Yeah.

*You're already in the history books, I mean you are an established artist. Is this accurate?*

Well, in some ways yes, but again, there are people that are trying to write me out of history also. Even things like the *Image World* show at the Whitney. I have one little appearance on a video tape or something.

*Is there animosity or is there just a little bewilderment?*

I don't care anymore because I know what I did. As long as the works exist and are judged later on in their own right, I'm not scared of that at all. I think that I can stand up beside Lichtenstein or Warhol, or Stuart Davis for that matter. So I think time is the best judgment of what really happened. I think a lot of things that are considered important now are just going to disappear.

*Do you feel like the non-acceptance or the reluctance to include you in these exhibitions has been an American or a European trend?*

It's more American. This is a weird phenomenon that's existed for a long time. You can see better American paintings from the '50s and '60s in any museum in Germany than you can find anywhere in New York.

*Has your popularity maybe hurt you in the sense that American museums don't want to help you because you're too well known?*

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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beside Lichtenstein or  
Warhol, or Stuart Davis.  
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Yeah, it's a fact in a way. It's hard for me to say these things because I really, I don't like to sound pretentious, but I think that in a way some people are insulted because I didn't need them. Even from the subway drawings I didn't go through any of the "proper channels" and succeeded in going directly to the public and finding my own audience. And so in a way I bypassed them and found my public without them. They didn't have the chance to take credit for what I did. They think that they have the role of finding the artist or filtering it out and then teaching the public. Saying okay, this is what is. But with me, I went directly to the public so they lost their whole role of being the great hander-down of culture, the great distributor of culture. I sort of stepped on some toes.

*The death of Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who were close friends, must have obviously had some impact on you. How do you feel about this? Has your work changed? Has your life changed?*

I don't know how much my life changed because of it. I miss talking to Andy and spending time with Andy, and things like that. Andy was the only person from that generation that I was having a dialogue with and supported what I was doing. Jean-Michel, even though I didn't really go see him regularly or anything, he was really my favorite painter. At that point they weren't the only people that I was losing and there were a lot of people that were close to me that had died or were dying. It was a certain point of growing up and realizing that you've just got to do it. In a certain way you were alone but, in knowing and remembering what you had done and had learned from the time you had spent with them, you go forward. You keep working. The one weird pressure that it put on me was the attention to the work. It meant that for me there weren't a lot of people left that were important to me in terms of other artists. I had a certain kind of freedom in that they weren't making work anymore and it was just me, but it was also a kind of responsibility to keep working and to do good work.

*What surprised you most about your meteoric rise in the art world?*

The phenomenon that the work, which as early as 1982 which was before I had any exhibitions, way before I had ever designed a T-shirt or anything like that, had already, via television, via the subway drawings, spread throughout the world. They had already been picked up by people in a lot of different cultures on every continent. They copied and changed the images into their own thing. People saw it as something that wasn't really by one artist but was a vocabulary open to anyone. T-shirts appeared in Japan and sneakers in Brazil and dresses in Aus-

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rubell, Jason. "Keith Haring: The Last Interview", Arts Magazine, Sept. 1990



Keith Haring, *Litified subway drawings*, 1983. Copyright © the Estates of Keith Haring and Tsong Kwong Chi.

tralia, way before I ever made any commercial object like that. And it's incredible, it still goes on, I mean it's 1990 now. In Thailand, there are stores called Pop Shops, all redrawn but with my "style." It's instantly recognizable as mine but it's redrawn by someone else. It wasn't like it was just in big industrial countries, it was in Brazil in the jungles, and in Thailand and all over, it was incredible. That to me was something that is one of the hardest things to explain, but a most important part of the work; it became generic in a way, someone else could do the drawing. It was recognizable as mine but it wasn't mine. The hand, which is the important part of my drawing, the particularness of the way that I draw, the line, the sensitivity to the line, and to space, is what makes it instantly recognizable as mine. All the people who are trying to fake them, do copies of them, and try to sell them, you can tell the difference because of the subtlety of the difference of the line. That's the whole Japanese and Zen thing of writing the sign and writing the calligraphy so that the whole

essence of individuality is in the way you make the mark. It's the way you pick up the brush at the end, the amount of pressure you bear down, things like that. That's what's lost in all these fakes. All that they have is the symbol and the idea of the line but they don't have the subtlety which is my line. They redraw, they added characters, they changed colors, they imposed one point into another, sometimes they're really great.

*Did you object to this? I find it amazing.*

I think it's great. I think it's a phenomenon. . . . Pollock in a way was treated the same way or Mondrian maybe. People make stuff out of that on window displays, shoes and all these things but not to the extent that this happened. And for those guys it happened after they were dead. But for me it was happening before I even had been accepted by the art world or the real world. So it, like, preceded me.

*This could be one of your main contributions. Art taken to a different level of ownership and making.*



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Keith Haring, *Untitled subway drawings*, 1984. Copyright © the Estates of Keith Haring and Tseng Kwong Chi.

To a different concept of what it is. When you do that it questions the value of it, or it questions the means. What's the difference between the one that's really by me and the one that's not by me. It breaks open a lot of things. I think a lot of what I do is hopefully like the emperor's clothes, it sort of unveils things. I loved when I had the painting inside the Whitney during the Biennial in '83 and at the same time I had the exact same images on drawings in the subway, it makes all these contradictions like what is value, what is the difference between a museum and a subway. I drew in the subway until '85 and by that time my works were selling a lot, the drawings the size I was doing in the subway were worth a few thousand dollars. So what was the difference between the one that was in the gallery for sale and the one that was there in chalk in the subway? It exposed and questioned all these things.

*In terms of your work being a commodity, these days at least it really is a commodity. Does this bother you?*

I detest it. It's the one thing that has been, from the beginning, the unappealing part of being in the art world at all. About being an artist. It took a long time to readjust my thoughts about why I was an artist and what an artist was, to be able to live with myself. In the beginning I wasn't selling much and it wasn't big money, but I was seeing it happen all around me, seeing things going for big money and seeing it as commodity and it was always something I thought I had to work against. Again, the subway drawings were sort of my grand gesture, to say fuck you to the art market, and to say you can make these things while obviously not making money. There is nothing you can criticize about it because I was doing it purely for the love of doing it and for the love of drawing it and for the love of the people that were seeing it. You were suffering for it and at the same time you were doing something that was purely for the sake of doing it. I don't think that since then I've ever done anything as pure as that. Maybe the outdoor murals which can't be removed. I've done murals all over the world which can't be removed and have

**"I can't imagine someone being a young artist now and looking at the way the art world is and being able to go on."**

no monetary value. It's been a constant struggle against it. And now I'm totally inside of it, I've watched it happen and it's economics and it's greed and it's a market just like a stock market or real estate or anything else. And the only way you can keep working is to block that out somehow.

*Are you doing anything different now? Are you changing your economic tactics? Are you selling less or are you trying to hold on to work? How are you handling it?*

I always tried to hold on to work. That was one thing that Andy always said, just take things and put them away. At this point it almost doesn't mean anything because anything I make I can sell right away so it's more a matter of trying to ignore it than it is to think about it. I'm making work at my own pace and for my own reasons. It's really hard to maintain that, I can't imagine someone being a young artist now and looking at the way the art world is and the way things are and being able to go on. You really have to work, consciously work at it all the time. I think of blocking it out and knowing for yourself why you really do it. I don't go to art openings, I don't hang out with collectors. I don't play in that area at all. I actively try to stay out of it so that I know why I make things and I know why I do what I do. That's the only thing that counts.

*Are the subway drawings your most important body of work? Maybe not in terms of the images, in terms of what you're trying to portray?*

I think it's the most important thing I ever did. Yeah, it's five years of work, thousands and thousands of drawings and when I look back I can't believe that I did it for so long because I did it way past the time when I would have had to. I think in terms of what it represents and its pure philosophical statement, it is definitely the most important thing I have done.

*The only way we'll actually be able to relive those is through photographs. Through Kwong-Chi. That's it. That's the ultimate defiance of the 1980s art market!!*

We have thousands of photographs. Hopefully someday someone will make a book, a real documentation of the subway drawings would be amazing. Like 5,000 photographs, on thin paper, but a serious book. It would be amazing.

*How many photographs are there? Would you say of every drawing you made in the subway?*

I think maybe if we're lucky maybe a third. We have maybe 4,000, 3,000.

*How many drawings do you think you did? Maybe 10,000?*

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rubell, Jason. "Keith Haring: The Last Interview", Arts Magazine, Sept. 1990

No, probably more like 5,000. Which doesn't sound like that many but it is.

*That's an incredible number.*

What really bothers me the most about all this was the sort of flack that I got for "selling out." So much of it was about avoiding that, about trying to retain some kind of integrity—public integrity. It's easy to retain integrity and sincerity by staying in your studio and working, but to stick your neck out on the line and be public and still do it in a way that has some kind of integrity, holds on to this initial notion of why you're making art in the first place. What is art supposed to be and what's it supposed to do and some kind of purity of that experience. In the studio you can keep that purity just by being in isolation but being public seems to be much more difficult. Once you step over that line you can't go back. Once I made the first move and did the subway drawings and started television interviews and things like that, it was impossible to go back, you had to keep doing it. And by that point I was hanging out with Andy and learning about things, from being associated with Andy, being even more public and a sort of performer, more of a figure, becoming an image of yourself which is one of the amazing things about Andy. Andy was the first artist to really take it to the extent where his image was his art. That was one of the things that I inherited from him or followed through with him because the same thing happened to me, almost without me trying.

*I did not realize that you thought of the subway drawings so highly. Have you ever thought of going back?*

Yeah, I did some drawings about two months ago.

*How did it go?*

I had chalk in my bag for a while. I still do drawings on advertisements or in bathrooms. But, if I see something that's irresistible, I'll do it. I carried chalk for a couple of weeks about two months ago and did a bunch of drawings.

*How was the experience? Was it like it was?*

It wasn't the same. The funniest thing was that people, several people, accused me of copying Keith Haring!!! They said things like, "Looks just like Keith Haring," or "Like you think you're Keith Haring?" "But I am!" It was fun, the whole avoiding the cops thing.

*The subway drawings had an incredible mood and spirit. Do you feel that your studio works possess that same kind of emotion? Do you see this as a separation and can you identify it?*

The context of where you do something is always going to have an effect. The subway drawings were, as much as they were drawings, performances. It was where I learned how to draw in public. You draw in front of people. For me it was a whole sort of philosophical and sociological experiment. When I drew, I drew in the daytime which meant there were always people watching. There were always confrontations, whether it was with people that were interested in looking at it, or people that wanted to tell you you shouldn't be drawing there. I was learning, watching people's reactions and interactions with the drawings and with me and looking at it as a phenomenon. Having this incredible feedback from people, which is one of the main things that kept me going so long, was the participation of the people that were watching me and the kinds of comments and questions and observations that were coming from every range of person you could imagine, from little kids to old ladies to art historians. The subways in New York are filled with all kinds of people. I had discussions about Mayan carvings with a man who related them to my drawings. I had discussions with bums that were slobbering and drunk. I had discussions with school kids. Because of the situation you were drawing in, even the materials, the subtle materials of drawing with chalk on this soft black paper was like nothing else I had ever drawn on. It was a continuous line, you didn't have to stop and dip it in anything. It was a constant line, it was a really graphically strong line and you had a time limit. You had to do these things as fast as you could. And you couldn't erase. So it was like there were no mistakes. You had to be careful to not get caught. And dealing with drawing in places that might be freezing cold or where you were standing over a puddle of piss or vomit, being in all these weird positions to draw, there were all kinds of factors that made it interesting.

*If you could change one thing in your career up until now, what would it be? What would be the one thing you wished you had done?*

The playground and the land drawings. Drawings like in the desert. Like the ones in the Andes. I could do it so well.

*What's the children's playground?*

That's more feasible than the land drawings. I am starting a foundation which will have more than enough money to build it. I want to do it as a gift to New York. □

*Jason Rubell is a student at Duke University.*