

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sheff, David. "Keith Haring, An Intimate Conversation", *Rolling Stone*, August 10, 1989.

Interviews

Keith Haring, An Intimate Conversation

Rolling Stone, August 10, 1989
BY DAVID SHEFF

DAVID SHEFF co-wrote "Portrait of a Generation," which appeared in *Rolling Stone* 523 and *Rolling Stone* 525.

JUST SAY KNOW "You use whatever comes along" says artist Keith Haring about the path his career has taken. Now, living with AIDS, he sums up his life and times.

MAYOR Richard M. Daley has declared it Keith Haring Week in Chicago. The artist is here to work with some 300 public-high-school kids on a mural, and Daley has issued an official proclamation with lots of official-sounding whereases. For example: "Whereas Keith Haring is internationally recognized as one of the most important artists of his generation and is acknowledged to have popularized and expanded the audience for the art forms of painting and sculpture." Or this one, Haring's favorite: "Whereas he is respected for committing his life and work to the democratic ideals of social justice, equality and compassion for his fellow man."

A 520-foot ribbon of whitewashed plywood has been constructed in Grant Park across from the city's Cultural Center. Haring and the kids will spend several days painting the wall, which will then be moved to a building construction site near downtown Chicago and eventually broken up into panels that will be placed permanently in the participating schools. Haring encourages and coaches the kids as they add to his dancing figures and abstract creatures and shapes. De la Soul plays from the boom box. One kid paints dancing fairies. Another writes, I WOULD FLY IF I HAD WINGS AND SOMEWHERE TO FLY. Others: NO SEX UNTIL MARRIAGE, and DON'T USE DRUGS.

One day it begins to rain, so the kids are asked to come back to paint the next day. Before they go, they swarm around the artist, asking him to draw on and sign their hats. They walk away in Keith Haring hats and T-shirts. One girl in a cluster of seniors says to him, "I really got to thank you." Another pipes in, "Yeah, not many people pay attention to us." The first girl says, "Most people consider us an eyesore." A tall boy who has been silently watching adds, "Like we don't exist."

In Haring's hotel room, one of the students, a seventeen-year old junior named Joe Asencios, orders a well-done steak from room service. Haring has invited Asencios to see the Cirque du Soleil, a theatrical circus, tonight. "I haven't ever taken art" Asencios says. "I'll take it next year." This experience has transformed him. Asencios, who lives with his father, an exterminator, and hasn't

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seen his mother except twice in nine years, says Haring is the nicest person he has ever met in his life.

His last day in Chicago, Haring paints two walls in Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center. The next morning he will jet off to Iowa to visit an elementary school where he painted a mural five years ago, then he will return to New York to work on a series of etchings and to paint a mural in the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. In June he travels to Antwerp for the opening of an exhibition of his newest paintings. After that, he's off to Paris, where he and Soviet painter Eric Bulatov are painting huge canvases that will fly over Paris on opposite sides of a blimp. From there he travels to Pisa to paint a mural on a historic site within the walled city.

It's an exhausting schedule, but Haring, 31, has rarely set down his paintbrush since he first gained attention in the late 1970s for his drawings in the New York City subways. With white chalk, he made simple, powerful and distinctive figures - crawling babies, dogs, flying saucers and the like - that were cartoonlike, reflecting his earliest influences, which included Walt Disney and his father, an engineer whose hobby was cartooning.

The Harings lived in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, where Keith had an unextraordinary childhood of paper routes and odd jobs. He experienced the Sixties via television; he was ten when Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were shot. In his early teens he was, for a time, a Jesus freak. He later became an ersatz hippie, hitchhiking across the country, selling Grateful Dead and anti-Nixon T-shirts he made and experimenting with drugs. The one constant throughout was his art. He had his first exhibition when he was only nineteen, at what is now the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.

He arrived in New York in 1978, enrolled in the School of Visual Arts and became immersed in the art and social scene of the East Village. It was a vibrantly exciting period from which emerged such artists as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf and a singer named Madonna. Four years after arriving, Haring had his first major exhibition. Andy Warhol, who became his close friend, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg and Sol Le Witt attended.

His work in and out of studios became more and more well known. He made huge sculptures for playgrounds and public spaces and murals for inner-city walls, clubs and children's wards of hospitals. Much of his art contained political messages about AIDS, crack and apartheid. He also began to work with inner-city children all over the country. For the hundredth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, he and 1000 kids made a building-size painting. In 1986 he painted on the Berlin Wall. He had fast become one of the most popular artists in the world, although his ascent was controversial: Some viewed him as a pop, commercial media manipulator, while others took him very seriously, describing his work as an assimilation of some or all of Warhol, Lichtenstein, the minimalists,

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aboriginal art, American Indian art and primitivism. Prices for his paintings soared - one canvas recently sold for \$100,000 - and Haring's images became some of the most familiar of our time, partly because they were circulated on T-shirts, buttons, posters, billboards, watches, walls and even clothes, many of which are now sold at the Pop Shop, his store in New York City.

Haring is openly gay, and he has used *his* art to benefit gay causes. Since the AIDS epidemic began, he has been an advocate of safe sex, and the disease that has taken the lives of some of his close friends has been an inspiration in his work. Two years ago, Haring himself was tested HIV positive, and he has since developed Kaposi's sarcoma, a form of cancer that often accompanies AIDS. While KS can be fatal his illness hasn't slowed Haring down at all. To the observer, the only noticeable effect is lesions, faint plum-colored splotches behind his ear and on his forehead.

A sticker on the heavy industrial door of Haring's lower-Broadway studio reads, JUST SAY KNOW - TIM LEARY. Through the door, the studio is like the inside of a kaleidoscope. There are Warhol soup cans, Mobil flying horses, a Mona Lisa with colored nails smashed into her face, toys - a talking Pee-wee and Chairry and a Roger Rabbit Super Flexie - and stacks of art books. There are wrapped wall-size canvases, a huge hot-pink phallus, a larger-than-life black-and white sculpture of a headless man and shelves of paints. There are photographs of Brooke Shields and Michael Jackson, a poster of Grace Jones painted like a warrior and a pair of fluorescent bikes.

Haring is wearing paint -splattered jeans, untied Nike Delta Force high tops and one of his SAFE SEX T-shirts two cocks jerking each other off. He is thin and pale, eyes wide behind thick-rimmed gray glasses, sort of like Sherman of Peabody and Sherman.

We begin our interview - the first of a half dozen extensive, late-night sessions in Manhattan and Chicago while Haring paints a new series of canvases. There are several abstractions obviously influenced by his recent trip to Morocco and a two-part black-and-white series painting. The first canvas has a skeleton peeing on a small sunflower. In the second, the flower has blossomed. Keith talks like he paints. It comes out in a line, a spontaneous, smooth line.

What made you want to be an artist?

My father made cartoons. Since I was little, I had been doing cartoons, creating characters and stories. In my mind, though, there was a separation between cartooning and being a quote-unquote artist. When I made the decision to be an artist, I began doing these completely abstract things that were as far away from cartooning as you could go. It was around the time that I was taking hallucinogens - when I was sixteen or so. Psychedelic shapes would come like automatic writing, come out of my

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unconscious. The drawings were abstract, but you'd see things in them.

Were you taking drugs because it was fashionable?

Drugs were a way to rebel against what was there and at the same time to sort of not be there. And I remember that all the antidrug things on television at the time only made me want to do them more. They showed all these things to scare you: a gas burner turning into a beautiful flower. Thought, that's great! You mean I can see like *that*?

Drugs showed me a whole new world. It completely change me. I was a terror when I was a teenager, an embarrassment to the family, really a mess on drugs. I ran away. I came home stoned out of my mind on downs. I got arrested – for stuff like stealing liquor from a firehouse, on my newspaper route, no less. Me and my friends were making and selling angel dust.

If you had conformed to your parents' expectations, what would you have been like?

We were in a little, conservative town. You grew up there, went to high school there, had kids there, and your kids stayed, too. I had been a good little kid. My parents had taken us to church and things like that, but I became this little Jesus freak, and my parents were appalled. I had fallen in the movement out of a lack of any other thing to believe in and out of wanting to be part of something.

When did you decide to go to art school?

I'd been convinced to by my parents and guidance counselor. They said that if I was going to seriously pursue being an artist, I should have some commercial-art background. I went to a commercial-art school, where I quickly realized that I didn't want to be an illustrator or a graphic designer. The people I met who were doing it seemed really unhappy; they said that they were only doing it for a job while they did their own art on the side, but in reality that was never the case – their own art was lost. I quit school. I went to a huge retrospective by Pierre Alechinsky at the Carnegie Museum of Art. It was the first time that I had seen someone older and established doing something that was vaguely similar to my little abstract drawings. It gave me this whole new boost of confidence. It was the time I was trying to figure out if I was an artist, why and what that meant. I was inspired by the writings of Jean Dubuffet, and I remember seeing a lecture by Christo and seeing the film on his work *Running Fence*.

How did these artists inspire you?

The thing I responded to most was their belief that art could reach all kinds of people, as opposed to the traditional view, which has art as this elitist thing. The fact that these influences quote-unquote *happened* to along change the whole course I was on. Then another so-called coincidence happened. I applied at a public-employment place for work and happened to get placed in a job at

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what's now the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. I was painting walls and repairing the roof and things. I started using their facilities to do bigger and bigger paintings. When someone canceled an exhibition and they had an empty space, the director offered me an exhibit in one of the galleries. For Pittsburgh, this was a big thing, especially for me, being nineteen and showing in the best place I could show in Pittsburgh besides the museum. From that time, I knew I wasn't going to be satisfied with Pittsburgh anymore or with the life I was living there. I had started sleeping with men. I wanted to get away from the girl I was living with. She said she was pregnant. I was in the position of having to get married and be a father or making a break. One thing I knew for sure: I didn't want to stay there and be a Pittsburgh artist and married with a family. I decided to make a major break. New York was the only place to go.

What did you do once you got there?

At first I was just working in the same style as I was at home. But then all kinds of things started to happen. Maybe the most important was that I learned about William Burroughs. I learned about him almost by accident - like almost everything else that has happened to me, sort of by accident-chance-coincidence.

Apparently, you believe in fate.

From the time that I was little, things would happen that seemed like chance, but they always meant more, so I came to believe there was no such thing as chance. If you accept that there are no coincidences, you use whatever comes along.

How did Burroughs influence you?

Burroughs's work with Brion Gysin with the cut-up method became the basis for the whole way that I approached making art then. The idea of their book, *The Third Mind*, is that when two separate things are cut up and fused together, completely randomly, the thing that is born of that combination is this completely separate thing, a third mind with its own life. Sometimes the result was not that interesting, but sometimes it was prophetic. The main point was that by relying on so-called chance, they would uncover the essence of things, things below the surface that were more significant than what was visible.

How did you use the concepts?

I used the idea when I cut up headlines from the *New York Post* and put them back together and then put them up on the streets as handbills. That's how I started work on the street. There was a group of people using the streets for art then, like Jenny Holzer, who was putting out these handbills with things she was calling truisms, these absurd comments. I was altering advertisements and making these fake *Post* headlines that were completely absurd: REAGAN SLAIN BY HERO COP or POPE KILLED FOR FREED HOSTAGE. I'd post them all over the place.

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With what intent?

The idea was that people would be stopped in their tracks, not knowing whether it was real or not. They'd stop because it had familiar words like *Reagan* or *pope* and it was in a familiar typeface - so they had to confront it and somehow deal with it.

What was it like living in the East Village at that time?

It was just exploding. All kinds of new things were starting. In music, it was the punk and New Wave scenes. There was a migration of artists from all over America to New York. It was completely wild. And we controlled it ourselves. There was the group of artists called COLAB - Collaborative Projects - doing exhibitions in abandoned buildings. And there was the club scene - the Mudd Club and Club 57, at St. Mark's Place, in the basement of a Polish church, which became our hangout, a clubhouse, where we could do whatever we wanted. We started doing theme parties - beatnik parties that were satires of the Sixties and parties with porno movies and stripteases. We showed early Warhol films. And there was this art out on the streets. Before I knew who he was, I became obsessed with Jean-Michel Basquiat's work.

Was this the period in which Basquiat was doing his early graffiti?

Yeah, but the stuff I saw on the walls was more poetry than graffiti. They were sort of philosophical poems that would use the language the way Burroughs did - in that it seemed like it could mean something other than what it was. On the surface they seemed really simple, but the minute I saw them I knew that they were more than that. From the beginning he was my favorite artist.

And how was your art developing?

I'd gone from the abstract drawings to the word pieces, but I decided that I was going to draw again. But if I was going to draw again, I couldn't go back to the abstract drawings; it had to have some connection to the real world. I organized a show at Club 57 for Frank Holliday and me. I bought a roll of oak-tag paper and cut it up and put it all over the floor and worked on this whole group of drawings. The first few were abstracts, but then these images started coming. They were humans and animals in different combinations. Then flying saucers were zapping the humans. I remember trying to figure out where this stuff came from, but I have no idea. It just grew into this group of drawings. I was thinking about these images as symbols, as a vocabulary of things. In one a dog's being worshiped by these people. In another one the dog is being zapped by a flying saucer. Suddenly it made sense to draw on the street, because I had something to say. I made this person crawling on all fours, which evolved into the quote-unquote baby. And there was an animal being, which now has evolved into the dog. They really were representational of human and animal. In different combinations they were about the difference between human power and the power of animal instinct. It all came back to the ideas I learned from semiotics and the stuff from Burroughs - different juxtapositions would make different meanings. I was becoming more and more involved in the underground art scene,

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doing graffiti, and then I would use people's studios and do paintings. It was one of the first times graffiti was being considered art, and there were shows. In the summer of 1980, COLAB organized an exhibition of a lot of these artists in the Times Square Show. It was the first time the art world really paid attention to graffiti and to these other outsider artists. It was written about in the *Village Voice* and in the art magazines. Jean-Michel and I got singled out of the group then.

How did you begin drawing in the subways?

One day, riding the subway, I saw this empty black panel where an advertisement was supposed to go. I immediately realized that this was the perfect place to draw. I went back above ground to a card shop and bought a box of white chalk, went back down and did a drawing on it. It was perfect - soft black paper; chalk drew on it really easily.

I kept seeing more and more of these black spaces, and I drew on them whenever I saw one. Because they were so fragile, people left them alone and respected them; they didn't rub them out or try to mess them up. It gave them this other power. It was this chalk-white fragile thing in the middle of all this power and tension and violence that the subway was. People were completely enthralled.

Except the police.

Well, I was arrested, but since it was chalk and could easily be erased, it was like a borderline case. The cops never knew how to deal with it. The other part that was great about it was the whole thing was a performance.

When I did it, there were inevitably people watching - all kinds of people. After the first month or two I started making buttons because I was so interested in what was happening with the people I would meet. I wanted to have something to make some other bonding between them and the work. People were walking around with little badges with the crawling baby with glowing rays around it. The buttons started to become a thing now, too; people with them would talk to each other, there was a connection between people in the subway.

The subway pictures became a media thing, and the images started going out into the rest of the world via magazines and television. I became associated with New York and the hip-hop scene, which was all about graffiti and rap music and break dancing. It 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. Then, in 1982, I had my first one-man show in New York at a big gallery, Tony Shafrazi, in SoHo.

What happened to your resolve to study away from the traditional snobbish art scene?

As an art student and being sort of in the underground and having very precise and cynical ideas about the art world, the traditional

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art-dealer gallery represented a lot that I hated about the art world. But people started to see an opportunity to make a lot of money buying my work. I got disillusioned with letting dealers and collectors come to my studio. They would come in and, for prices that were nothing, a couple hundred dollars, go through all the paintings and then not get anything or try to bargain. I didn't want to see those people anymore. I wanted to sell paintings because it would enable me to quit my job, whether as a cook or delivering house plants or whatever else I was doing - and paint full time. But I had to have a gallery just to give me distance.

Was it hard to accept that the paintings were commodities?

Yes, but it's not that way for everyone. People get something from living with a painting. I love living with paintings.

What do you have on the wall in your apartment?

One of my favorite Warhol paintings that I ever got from Andy - a small hand-painted portrait of Christ at the Last Supper. Two George Condo paintings. One Basquiat. A small Lichtenstein drawing. A Picasso etching. A Clemente monoprint and a Kenny Scharf I also have a television painted by Kenny that is incredible. And one piece of mine, a metal mask that I made for an exhibition a few years ago in New York. In the collection, I have a lot of things, from Jean Tinguely to Robert Mapplethorpe photographs to a lot more Warhols and Basquiats.

Had you met Warhol by the time of your first show?

Before I knew him, he had been an image to me. He was totally unapproachable. I met him finally through (photographer) Christopher Makos, who brought me to the Factory. At first Andy was very distant. It was difficult for him to be comfortable with people if he didn't know them. Then he came to another exhibition at the Fun Gallery, which was soon after the show at Shafrazi. He was more friendly. We started talking, going out. We traded a lot of works at that time.

How do you feel about the publication of the Warhol diaries?

He wanted them published. That's *why* he kept them. The weirdest thing to me is to see his insecurity. It was all ridiculous, because he had nothing to be insecure about; this was after he'd already safely carved himself a permanent notch in our history, probably the most important notch since Picasso. It's nice going through the diaries, though, because he tells enough of the story that it takes me back to the exact moment, and I can fill in all the rest.

You were hanging out with Madonna, Michael Jackson, Yoko Ono, Boy George pretty glamorous.

I knew Madonna from before. We were in that scene in the lower East Village at the same time. She was just starting. She used to go out with Jellybean [Benitez, now a record producer], and I'd see her sing at the Fun House, where he was the OJ. But I met the others through Andy. He had a way of sort of making things happen

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around him. I don't go to those parties much anymore; I'm not leading the same glamorous life. I don't miss it a lot, but when it started happening, I was young and naive, and it was really exciting. It was like incredible to go, you know, to meet Michael Jackson backstage with Andy. When he brought me to Yoko's apartment the first time, it was incredible. You can't believe that you're there. The ultimate one was a dinner at Yoko's. I brought Madonna and the artist Martin Burgoyne. Andy was already there. Bob Dylan was there. David Bowie was there. And Iggy Pop. Just sort of in the kitchen. At first you are more in awe of things like that, but you adapt really quickly.

What do you think was the basis of your friendship with Warhol?

Andy always had young people around him at all points of his life. Fresh blood with fresh ideas. It was good for him to be around, and for us it was good because it was giving us this whole seal of approval - the ultimate approval you could get was from Andy. Everyone looked up to him. He was the *only* figure that represented any real forerunner of the attitude about making art in a more public way and dealing with art as part of the real world. Even when we became friends, I was always still sort of in awe of him. But everyone who knew Andy talks about him as if he was the sweetest, most generous, simple, kind person. People have a hard time believing that; they have the media image of him that was totally damaged by the whole Edie Sedgwick thing - Andy as a bloodsucking vampire taking advantage of people and throwing them away. People felt this meanness toward him. When you actually knew Andy, you saw that it was completely unfounded. It stemmed from other people's jealousy at not being his friend, not being part of the whatever, the inner circle, so they would attack it and blame their own misfortune on him because he was a good scapegoat.

What was it like being with him?

He was easy to know, easy to be with. I learned a lot from him. Some of the best things were about generosity and about how to conduct yourself. I always learned from watching quietly and listening or seeing the way that he would deal with things, like someone coming up to him at an art event or seeing a reaction that he would have to something that would be written about him. He was really supportive.

He was a big supporter of the Pop Shop. I was scared. I knew I would be attacked. The art world thrives in its little elitist world. The rest of the world can get access if the art dribbles down, like Mondrian shoes or Warhol whatever or window displays that look like Jackson Pollock. That's acceptable. What happened to me is that it started in the subways, it began in popular culture and was absorbed and accepted by the popular culture before the other art world had time to rake credit for it. They want to say, "We're giving you your culture;" which they usually do. By opening the Pop Shop, it was the ultimate in cutting them out of the picture.

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Some think that the Pop Shop is about crass commercialism. Other artists had been accusing me of selling out since my paintings started selling. I mean, I don't know what they intended me to do: Just stay in the subway the rest of my life? Somehow that would have made me stay pure? By 1984 the subway thing started to backfire, because everyone was stealing the pieces. I'd go down and draw in the subway, and two hours later every piece would be gone. They were turning up for sale.

My work was starting to become more expensive and more popular within the art market. Those prices meant that only people who could afford big art prices could have access to the work. The Pop Shop makes it accessible. To me, the Pop Shop is totally in keeping ideologically with what Andy was doing and what conceptual artists and earth artists were doing: It was all about participation on a big level.

If it was about money, I could have been the most successful commercial designer and illustrator in the world. I've turned down numerous huge things. I've been approached to do Saturday-morning television and breakfast cereals. I didn't do the advertisements for Kraft cheese or Dodge trucks.

But you did a poster for Absolut vodka and the Swatch watch. What's the difference?

There were challenges in each thing I've done, and *they* circulated the work, and the quality was controlled and limited. But the point wasn't to try to get rich. The *money* has been the least interesting and, in some ways, the biggest drawback. You get thrust into this position of attention and wealth that *you* don't *necessarily* know that *you* deserve in terms of payment. To me, the whole thing of payback is an idea, an ideological or emotional thing, or something that I get from making successful work.

And even that isn't the main thing. See, when I paint, it is an experience that, at its best, is transcending reality. When it is working, *you* completely go into another place, *you're* tapping into things that are *totally* universal, of the total consciousness, completely beyond *your* ego and *your* own self *That's* what it's all about. That's *why* it's the biggest insult of all when people talk about me selling out. I've spent *my* entire life trying to avoid that, trying to figure out *why* it happens to people, trying to figure out what it means. How do *you* participate in the world but not lose *your* integrity? It's a constant struggle. Part of growing is trying to teach *yourself* to be empty enough that the thing can come through *you* completely so it's not affected *by your* preconceived ideas of what a work of art should be or what an artist should do. Since there have been people waiting to *buy* things, I've known that if I wanted to make things people would expect or people would want, I could do it *easily*. As soon as *you* let that affect *you*, *you've* lost everything. As soon as *you* get some acclaim, *you* have alienated some people that think that *they* deserved it instead of *you*. So *you* sold out. I never sold out.

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At the Pop Shop, you sell "Free South Africa" posters and a lot of AIDS-related art. Were you always politically conscious?

I learned a certain sensitivity to things at home. My parents weren't in any way politically involved, and, in fact, they were straight Republicans and have voted straight Republican up until now - even I couldn't change their mind about Reagan - but *they* were concerned about things. I guess I reacted to their politics. I remember driving somewhere, like to New Jersey to the shore for vacation, and being in the back seat and seeing hitchhikers and hippies and feeling like I was on the wrong side. I was the *enemy*, my father and me with our crew cuts driving *by*. When Nixon or someone asked Americans to show their support for the war effort *by* driving with their headlights on for this one *day*, we were driving to New Jersey with the headlights on. I was *only* eleven, but I was embarrassed. As soon as I was old enough, I got involved. I remember being really into Earth Day, making collages with peace signs.

Your safe-sex campaign is my explicit - like the recurring character Debbie Dick.

Yet people respond really *strongly*. Teachers everywhere ask me for safe-sex stickers. In the United States people are *shy* to talk about safe sex. In Europe it's completely acceptable. A lot of what we see here is more tame because of some people's preconceived notions of what they think people can handle. In fact when people are treated as if they have some intelligence and are given explicit information, they appreciate it. And it's the only thing that gets through to kids, the people that need it.

Where did Debbie Dick come from?

I wanted to make something that communicated the message with a sense of humor. The whole subject is so morbid and antihumor. People have the hardest time just ralling about it. They can't get used to ralling about condoms, never mind going out and buying condoms.

You did a pretty well-known anticrack painting - 'Crack Is Wack' - on a wall in New York. What's the difference between kids' doing crack now and your doing drugs when you were younger?

Crack is a businessman's drug. It was invented to make someone profit. Smoking pot never made you go poor. And crack is completely different than the mind-expanding drugs like LSD or pot. It's the opposite of mind-expanding; crack makes you subservient. Instead of opening your mind, it shuts it and makes you dependent on whoever's providing you with the drug. I think crack is even worse than heroin. Heroin calms you and makes you feel sort of unaware. Crack makes you totally schizophrenic, aggressive and irrationally obsessed with wanting more. It's much more quickly addicting than heroin or any other drug. What's most repulsive is that I don't think the powers that be really want to stop the crack problem. For them it's the perfect thing. It makes people very easy to control. After all, the government is really the one controlling the source. They're supposedly having a war on drugs now, but the

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whole time Bush was vice-president the amounts of cocaine coming into this country were phenomenal.

Does it bother you that many important critics have essentially dismissed your work?

A lot of critics read my work one way a long time ago, when they first saw it, and they will continue to see it the same way no matter what.

It took Warhol a long time before he was taken seriously by the mainstream art establishment.

Andy and people like Roy Lichtenstein have stories about the early criticism that they were getting. When they first came out, they were attacked and laughed at and written off. There's still an attitude about it. Robert Hughes's eulogy to Andy in *Time* was the most horrible, insulting thing, trying to dismiss whatever stature he had earned.

Hughes once compared you to Peter Max - fashion but not art, essentially.

He has written particularly horrible things about me. He hates my work. He's said it many times. The Peter Max thing is a way of saying that it may be commercially interesting and even reflective of the time, but it has no value beyond that. I don't know. . . . The things that have always given me the strength and confidence not to worry about those things are, first of all, support from other artists, artists whom I look up to and respect much more than I respect these critics or curators, and second, things that come from real people, people who don't have any art background, who aren't part of the elitist establishment or of the intellectual community but who respond with complete honesty from deep down inside their hearts or their souls. Unfortunately, these moments sustain you for a certain amount of time, and then your paranoia sets in, and you remember that you're not in this important contemporary American art show, and it's very frustrating. It's frightening how much power critics and curators have. People like that may have enough power to completely write you out of history. I mean, Hughes called Jean-Michel the Eddie Murphy of the art world. It was this completely racist, ridiculous, narrow-minded and silly criticism.

Was it a shock to you when Jean-Michel overdosed on heroin last summer?

The last few years his friends were really scared for him. He was really playing with death, pushing it to the extreme. But there was no point in telling him. He knew what he was doing. He knew what the risks were. He had friends that died. His friends could only hope that it wasn't going to happen. But it was not a surprise to any one when he died.

It must have been particularly difficult after losing Andy the year before.

Jean-Michel was like... icing on the cake. There are artists whose work I appreciate, but there aren't a lot of artists that I have a

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relationship with that I'm totally inspired and intimidated by at the same time. They were born like that.

Why were you intimidated by them?

You think that they are so good that it makes you think that you're not good. Or that you think you're not doing enough, because seeing what they do just making you want to go back and work. So to lose Andy and Jean-Michel.... The weirder thing was that it had happened right after I had lost someone else. When Andy passed away, I had just lost a friend of mine who was sort of like a guardian angel for me, Bobby Breslau. He was like my conscience, my Jiminy Cricket. He was working here until he got so sick that he couldn't even come to work. I think he knew that he was really sick, but it wasn't diagnosed as AIDS for a long time. By the time he went to the hospital, he died within a week. And that... that was almost... that was like pulling the rug out from under me. It was like being a little bird thrown out of a nest. *You've got to do it on your own now. And you've got to do it in a way that's going to live up to what he would have expected.* Within a month, Andy passed away. Losing both of them in a month was hard. This was after losing a lot of other friends, too. I was supposed to go on a vacation. A week before I was to go, my ex-lover, Juan Dubose, who had been sick for a while, died. Within the week, my friend Yves Arman, on his way to come see me in Spain, gets killed in a car accident. He was one of my best friends - probably the best supporter I had in the art world - and a photographer and an art dealer and the son of Arman, the sculptor. I was the godfather of his child, a beautiful one-year-old girl. Four or five people died within a year and a half. The main people. It's like somehow, every time it happens, you get a little bit tougher, a little bit more sensitive somehow but a little bit stronger at the same time. And you have to... You sort of have to go beyond it.

In a way, in a horrible way, somehow it's easier when someone is dying slowly and you know they're dying, because you can get to live it out or work it out while it's happening. It still hurts, but it's somehow easier because it's not a shock. The harder ones are when it's a shock. I'll never get over them. In the face of things like that the only solution is to be really strong. There's no rational way to deal with it

With all the close friends who have died, do you sometimes wonder why?

Unfortunately, death is a fact of life. I don't think it's happened to me any more unfairly than to anyone else. It could always be worse. I've lost a lot of people, but I haven't lost everybody. I didn't lose my parents or my family. But it's been an incredible education, facing death, facing it the way that I've had to face it at this early age. I guess it's similar to what it must have been to go to with and to lose your friends while you're at war. A lot of people don't start to lose their friends until they're fifty or sixty years old. But to start having it happen when you're in your mid-twenties - especially because a lot of the people that I've lost have been lost because of

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AIDS - to have it happen that way, in a way which can many times be very slow and very horrible and very painful, you know, it's been really hard. It's toughened me. It's made me, in a way, more respectful of life and more appreciative of life than I ever, ever could have been.

I ran into someone on the street; we sort of talked a little bit about his situation and my situation and everyone's situation. He said to me he's probably - you know, surprisingly, in the face of this - probably happier than he's ever been in life. And I understand exactly - I mean, somehow appreciating things in a way that you never appreciated before. Every day when I walk out of the house and feel a warm breeze and look up and see the clouds in the sky, it's incredible.

I'm glad to be here, you know? Because I've watched people who were much younger than me and in much better physical shape than me deteriorate to nothing. The first person I know that died of AIDS was the performer Klaus Nomi, in 1983 probably. It wasn't until later that it started to be a lot of people. Since then, the list, it's incredible, amazing, a long list of people. You toughen yourself up. You prepare yourself in this crazy way for it. I don't know how many times I could watch it as close as I did with some people, being there in the last moments, but it has taught me so many things and shown me so many more things about love and about people.

One thing that's amazing is to watch people's parents come to them. They haven't been that close, maybe, because in a lot of cases homosexual men don't have a particularly good relationship with their parents, especially their fathers. Maybe their fathers had totally rejected them. But then they came to them in the end and for the first time really opened up to them and showed them love.

Did your parents know you were gay from the beginning?

My parents have been so amazing about the whole thing, but in their own way - knowing but not saying anything. I never tried to hide it from them, and they never asked me about it. When I lived with Juan, they would come visit the house. By that time, because of the work that I was doing, I had sort of proven myself as a grown-up. They knew that I had turned my life into something good, and that's what they cared about.

But it was never discussed?

No, but they would come to the house and there was only one bed. And Juan came with me to Christmas to a family-reunion thing for the entire family. My Father has ten brothers and sisters. It's a marine-corps family. All my Father's relatives are marines; I know that I could have been a marine. On one side there is this really macho thing, but there is also this thing of pride in yourself and in family and in real simple things. I could have done all that, but it was even more incredible to have their respect even though I was not a marine and even though the whole family knew, by now figuring it out, that I'm gay. Haring is their name, too, and what I've

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done makes them incredibly proud. And though we never talked about it, after coming to New York and visiting me when I was living with Juan, my parents finally accepted him as part of the family, buying him a present at Christmastime. And, by the way, the fact that he was black was an added thing for them to deal with. Although they're a very open-minded family, I heard nigger jokes at the Thanksgiving table growing up. Not in the last years, but when I was a kid. So it's changed incredibly. It happened over time. It happened, I think, because I taught them, and my sisters taught them.

Now it's to the point that they come to New York and they're friends with my friends and they're comfortable being at my parties, where, like, a drag queen can walk up and say hello - like Dean Johnson of Dean and the Weenies, who's very tall, shaved bald, very masculine looking but wearing this incredible little negligee and platforms. They tell their friends about it. On their refrigerator at home they have pictures. There's a picture of them with Yoko Ono at the last opening. And a picture of Bill Cosby posing with them, sitting on the Huxtables' couch, him sitting with his arm around my mother and dad, on either side. They have these Polaroids on their refrigerator beside all of the report cards and pictures of the grandchildren.

Are you emphatic in your belief that people should be open about their homosexuality?

Normal about it. It's not an issue to me. It doesn't have that much to do with the rest of my life. It shouldn't prevent me from being able to work with children. It doesn't mean I'm going to molest them. A lot of people can't even imagine the idea of someone that is gay working with children. They assume they're going to be lecherous. It's very sad. And now, within the last few years, AIDS has changed everything. AIDS has made it even harder for people to accept, because homosexuality has been made to be synonymous with death. It's a justifiable fright with people that are just totally uninformed and therefore ignorant. Now it means that you're a potential harbinger of death. That's why it is so important for people to know what AIDS is and what it isn't. Because there is the potential for far, far worse things to happen, the possibility of more hysteria or more fascist reaction. It's really dangerous. Jews weren't even causing anyone to die, and they became this incredible target of hate. All it will take is some major economic disaster for it to get totally out of hand. That's the biggest fear that I have. I'm cynical enough to be very curious how this whole thing could have even started. We know they're capable of making diseases. They do it. They have laboratories for germ warfare. They *could* have done it. The original targets were just homosexual men and IV drug users. Perfect people to wipe out.

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But it's rampant in Africa and other places.

Which adds a racist thing on top. They experiment with people they don't want around. It's just this perfectly invented disease. It depends on how far you want to take it, on how paranoid you are about conspiracies.

Did you find out because you were getting sick or from a test?

I had been tested before. But even if you're positive, it doesn't really sink in until you get sick.

So you knew you were HIV positive before you got symptoms?

Yeah, and even before, I knew. I've been having safe sex for a very long time, before I ever got tested. I knew it was a possibility. I was here at the peak of the sexual promiscuity in New York. I arrived, fresh from coming out of the closet, at the time and place where everyone was just wild. I was major into experimenting. If I didn't get it, no one would. So I knew. It was just a matter of time.

Now the thing I'm most concerned about is how it's going to affect other people. I have so many friends, kids that are friends. *My* godchildren. I have a lot of kids almost like my own, because I can never have kids but I always wanted kids; other people's kids were like my kids. I just can't imagine. I really, really, really don't want them to see me get the way that I've seen other people get. I don't know which is more noble: to fight to the end, until your last breath, no matter what you turn into, or to cut it off and die with dignity. I don't know which would leave a better impression in their minds. Would it be worse for them to know that *you* took your own life? Or to know, even if it wasn't pretty at the end, that you fought and had a will to fight and tried to survive? Even though at a certain point it's killing everyone around you.

You described how much you learned from the people around you that were dying. Isn't that the answer?

That's the argument that makes me think I have to have the courage to go all the way through it and not be scared what people are going to think. But the little kids. I just can't imagine. That's the worst part.

I think part of the reason grown-ups have such a hard time dealing with illness and death is because we have no experience with it growing up; kids are always kept away from it. I was struck by your reluctance to talk. At first about being sick because you're afraid that people ignorant of the disease will stop you from being able to work with kids; they won't invite you to their schools to paint with kids.

I know they won't invite me. But I think it's not fair for them not to know and to go on and then find out: "He was here, and he had AIDS." I think that what will happen with people knowing will be far more interesting than just going on as if nothing had changed and having them find out later. It will force things to happen. Maybe they won't be good. There will be people who will make a stand and want me to still do the work with kids and a lot who won't.

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By keeping quiet about it, Rock Hudson helped perpetuate the ignorance.

Because he didn't talk about it, the media was able to perpetuate this thing that AIDS was punishment for something he did that was bad.

And made it seem like he was ashamed of being gay.

To me, one of the most important things is that being sick is not going to make me go back on anything in *my* life. I don't regret anything I've ever done. I wouldn't change anything. Everything was natural and out in the open.

I think one of the hardest things AIDS has done is to kids growing up now, trying to figure out their sexuality in an unbiased way. They always will have their sexuality shoved down their throats, but they'll make their own way because it's such a strong thing- it will override everything, no matter how much brainwashing's going on. So imagine how horrible it must be to some young kid who knows he's gay or someone thinking of experimenting. They could have a sentence of death. It's horribly frightening. It gives so much fire to the people who are telling you that it's wrong to be who you are. There are so few people who are good *openly* gay role models or just good people who are respected who are open about their sexuality. Now there *has* to be openness about all these issues. Kids are going to have sex, so help them have safe sex. People still don't do safe sex. I know so many kids that think that if they're screwing girls it doesn't apply to them. They hate wearing condoms. But heterosexual transmissions is one of the leading causes of new cases.

Have you had any symptoms in addition to the lesions?

No. I never get the kind of sick that you don't want to get out of bed. But it's like you know it's out there. You know, it's just being in the wrong place at the wrong rime. In ten years it will be a whole different situation. Inevitably, in the beginning, they're not going to know how to deal with any new disease. And it was just bad timing in getting it, too. We got infected because we didn't even know the thing existed. When people started getting sick, they had no idea where it was coming from, had no idea that it was out there, so you didn't know how to be protective and prevent it. Now people have no excuse. Now you're responsible for what happens to *you* because *you* have the ability to protect yourself. If *you* didn't know about it, you can't be held responsible for it.

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How has having AIDS changed your life?

The hardest thing is just knowing that there's so much more scuff to do. I'm a complete workaholic. I'm so scared that one day I'll wake up and I won't be able to do it.

Do you make time for life outside of work?

You force yourself to. Otherwise I would just work. I spend enough time enjoying, too. I have no complaints at all. Zero. In a way, it's almost a privilege. To know. When I was a little kid, I always felt that I was going to die young, in *my* twenties or something. So in a way, I always lived *my* life as if I expected it. I did everything I wanted to do. I'm still doing whatever I want.

No matter how long *you* work, it's always going to end sometime. And there's always going to be things left undone. And it wouldn't matter if *you* lived until *you* were seventy-five. There would still be new ideas. There would still be things that *you* wished *you* would have accomplished. You could work for several lifetimes. If I could clone myself, there would still be too much work to do - even if there were five of me. And there are no regrets. Part of the reason that I'm not having trouble facing the reality of death is that it's not a limitation, in a way. It could have happened any time, and it is going to happen sometime. If *you* live your life according to that, death is irrelevant. Everything I'm doing right now is exactly what I want to do.

Do you get more impatient with the trivial things in life?

The opposite. Nothing is trivial. I wish I didn't have to sleep. But otherwise, it's all fun. It's all part of the game. [*He is quiet, and then he looks up.*] There's one last thing in *my* head. With the thought of - of summing up. My last show in New York felt like it had to be the best painting that I could do. To show everything I have learned about painting. The thing about all the projects I'm working on now - a wall in a hospital or new paintings - is that there is a certain sense of summing up in them. Everything I do now is a chance to put a - a crown on the whole thing. It adds another kind of intensity to the work that I do now; it's one of the good things to come from being sick.

If you're writing a story, you can sort of ramble on and go in a lot of directions at once, but when you are getting to the end of the story, you have to start pointing all the things toward one thing. That's the point that I'm at now, not knowing where it stops but knowing how important it is to do it now. The whole thing is getting much more articulate. In a way it's really liberating.