

PAOLO PARISI

# KEITH HARING

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# Keith Haring

THE STORY OF HIS LIFE



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## PREFACE

Keith Haring died on February 16, 1990, in his apartment in Greenwich Village, in New York City, at the age of only 31. Haring is the expression of an art that is for everyone, not elitist but shared, that breaks down differences and boundaries, community-oriented and accessible. Anyone can feel in tune with any of his public art pieces, with any of his enormous canvases that are exhibited in museums around the world. The work of Keith Haring electrified the panorama of contemporary art in the early 1980s like a bolt of lightning in a clear sky, with an expressive force that has remained unchanged to this day.

Despite his HIV-positive status during his last years, Haring maintained a fast pace of prolific creativity, in constant motion, from one end of the globe to the other: murals, canvases of all sizes, sculptures, gadgets, design objects, clothing, theater performances, scenography. Haring's gaze had a 360-degree sweep, leaping with agility from one language to another, from stage to gallery, from museum to nightclub.

Activism and provocation are two of the main keys that help us fully understand the scope of his artistic career and life: as an advocate for the rights of the LGBTQ community and for people living with HIV and AIDS, for equality and social justice, and against Christian/Catholic dogmatism, the nuclear industry, apartheid, racism, the use of firearms, and police violence.

Talking about Keith Haring thus means revisiting certain political viewpoints that are even more valid and topical today. If he were still alive, Haring would be there on the front lines, giving his energy and putting his genius at the service of civil and democratic struggles to foster profound social and cultural change (issues such as globalization and climate change, sexual freedom and identity, gender equality, racism and nationalism).

In his *Journals* we read, "I am interested in making art to be experienced and explored by as many individuals as possible... The viewer creates the reality, the meaning, the conception of the piece. I am merely a middleman trying to bring ideas together."

I can only agree. In a certain sense, with the obvious differences and in a very scaled-down way, for me creating graphic novels has gradually taken on a similar significance of immediacy and dialogue with an increasingly broad and heterogeneous audience. There is no point in making graphic novels for a small circle of people or an elite audience. The work takes on strength with the multiplicity of meanings and values attributed to it by the readers themselves. It therefore remains incomplete until it is defined by an external vision, by a plurality that coincides with the community in which the work is created and with which it interacts. There is therefore a close link between the context and the work, a "community-building" function of art that cannot be overlooked.

The work belongs to everyone, it must be public, it is not exclusive to private collectors or closed circles. The work is reproduced in society, for society. Art lives a sort of eternity once it is shared, repurposed, saved, reproduced, becoming the product of different generations and social classes.

Thus this volume is part of my personal path of deepening the biographies of iconic figures that have left an indelible mark on the cultural panorama of the last century: John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and now Keith Haring. These are incommensurable artists who created their own paradigms with powerful and groundbreaking communicative impact, linked together by mutual esteem, universal objectives, ethical values, and an awareness of the revolutionary significance of their work.

This book would not have been possible without consulting several other works, the reading of which I highly recommend: the already quoted and legendary *Journals*, which Haring kept from 1978 until the year of his death, and which from an early age showed themselves to be a valuable instrument for his lucid reflections on art, society, life in general, and, especially, his everyday activities and personal condition (health, sentimental relationships, family ties, work), always with his meticulous touch and steadfast determination.

Another essential title is his authorized biography, authored by John Gruen, an infinite source of narrative inspirations and real-life episodes.

The documentation is objectively quite vast, with respect to not only Haring but also, and perhaps even more so, the artistic/cultural context within which he moved: a multifaceted, unpredictable, and constantly evolving panorama.

Out of this was born a wish to pay tribute to a completely unique period of underground culture between the late 1970s and early 1980s. In some of these pages there appear references to protagonists (photographers, artists, gallerists, performers, and video makers) who were at the epicenter of that explosive magma of creativity commonly known as New York New Wave: Robert Carrithers, Joseph Szkodzinski, Tseng Kwong Chi (a friend of Haring's who photographed him drawing in the subway; see page 69), Stanley Strychacki (founder of Club 57 and designer of the logo), Ira Abramowitz, Andreas Sterzing (who documented the alternative soul of part of the Lower East Side). Alex Razbash (a photographer from whom I quoted the image on pages 62–63) is the creator of a series of stupendous panoramic shots of Manhattan.

For deeper exploration I recommend the catalogue of the exhibition *Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978–1983*, curated by Ron Magliozzi and Sophie Cavoulacos, in collaboration with Ann Magnuson, held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 2017, which features the work of numerous collaborators of the legendary scene of St. Mark's Place: Gerard Little, Tom Murrin, Vicki Schrott, Jean Caffeine, Peter Kwaloff, Christina Yuin, Harvey Wang, Blair Rainey, Anthony Scibelli, April Palmieri, Katherine Dumas, Raken Leaves (see pages 44, 45, 48, and 49). Another excellent source is the website [club57stmarksplacearchive.com](http://club57stmarksplacearchive.com).

Protagonists like Bill Bernstein, Tina Paul, Diane Alexander White, Frankie Knuckles, and Reggie Corner, on the other hand, focused their attention on the transgressive nightlife of the Paradise Garage and other trendy clubs like the Mudd Club and Studio 54 (on pages 44 and 58).

Final notes: on page 65, in the first vignette, we see Harvey Milk, incognito among the people interviewed in the subway. Milk was one of the fathers of the struggle for the gay rights, and was brutally assassinated in 1978.

In the third chapter it is the American writer William Burroughs who talks amiably with Keith Haring about the cut-up technique; it is a dialogue inspired by Burroughs's historic 1965 interview with Conrad Knickerbocker of *The Paris Review* for the series "The Art of Fiction."

And, on the last page, the brief quotation from the sharp and sophisticated American intellectual Susan Sontag was taken from her 1989 publication *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. In this essay Sontag elaborates a number of reflections by analyzing the communication and the language used to represent the AIDS epidemic, showing how the disease has never been presented for what it really is but only through other cultural constructs. When she speaks of a "military metaphor" to describe the "battle" of the public health system and of civil society against an epidemic/pandemic, our thoughts cannot help but return to the arguable rhetoric with which a certain political class and certain currents of journalism have illustrated the dizzying expansion of Covid-19 in Italy and in other countries throughout the world.

In Sontag's words, "The body is not a battlefield.... About that metaphor, the military one, I would say ... Give it back to the warmakers."

And so, bon voyage, on this journey in the company of Keith Haring and into his world.





**1958-1977**

KUTZTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA, 1970

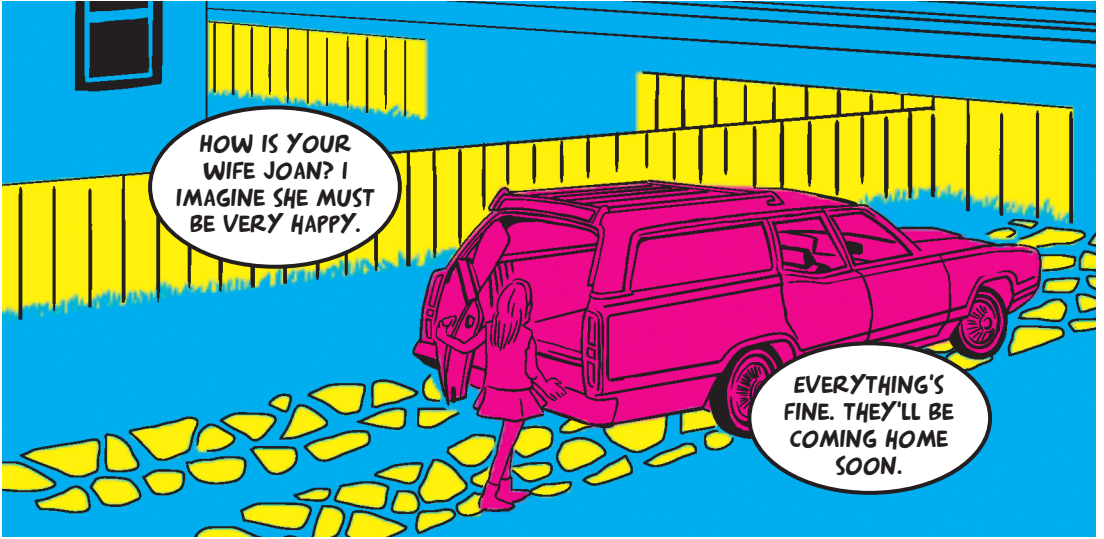
HEY, ALLEN.  
ARE YOU COMING  
TO THE COUNTY  
FAIR THIS YEAR?

I'LL THINK  
ABOUT IT, DAN...  
THERE'S SOME  
NEWS...



I HEARD  
THE HAPPY  
NEWS!

YES, THE  
FAMILY HAS  
GROWN...



HOW IS YOUR WIFE JOAN? I IMAGINE SHE MUST BE VERY HAPPY.

EVERYTHING'S FINE. THEY'LL BE COMING HOME SOON.

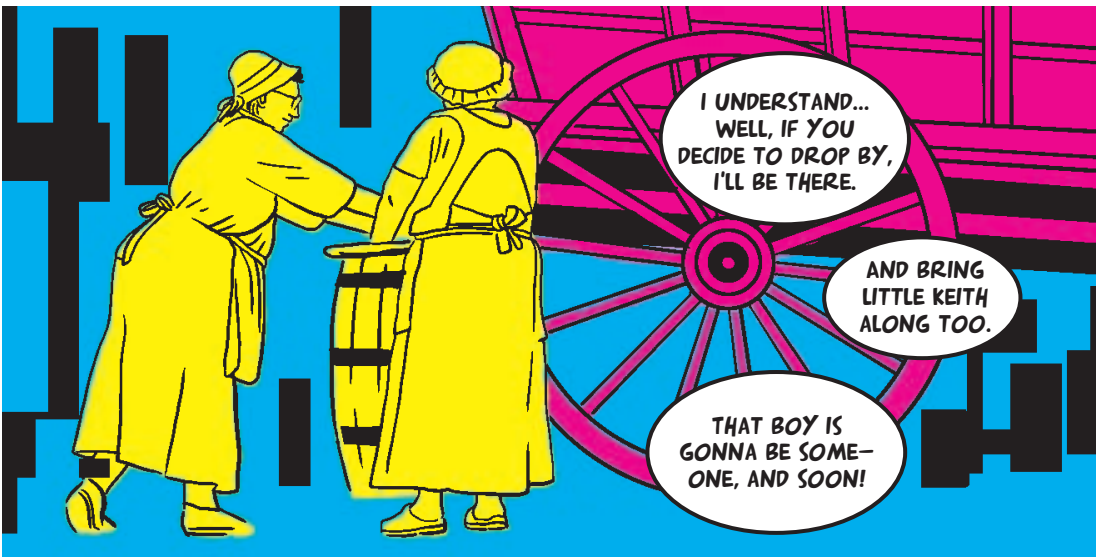


YOU'LL HAVE A LOT ON YOUR HANDS.



IT ALWAYS FEELS LIKE THE FIRST TIME.

EVEN THOUGH SHE'S OUR FOURTH...



I UNDERSTAND... WELL, IF YOU DECIDE TO DROP BY, I'LL BE THERE.

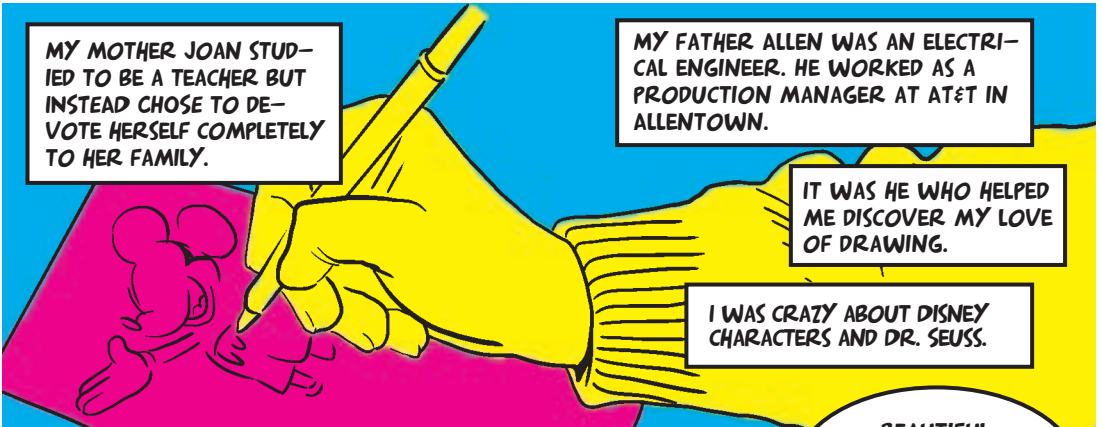
AND BRING LITTLE KEITH ALONG TOO.

THAT BOY IS GONNA BE SOME-ONE, AND SOON!



MY NAME IS KEITH HARING.

I WAS BORN ON MAY 4, 1958, IN KUTZTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA. OR RATHER, IN NEARBY READING, SINCE THERE WERE NO HOSPITALS IN KUTZTOWN AT THE TIME.

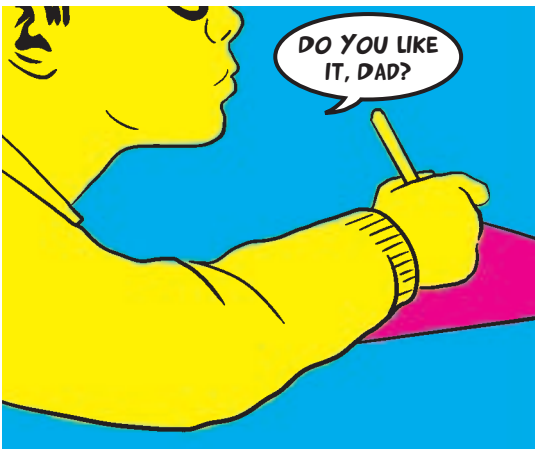


MY MOTHER JOAN STUDIED TO BE A TEACHER BUT INSTEAD CHOSE TO DEVOTE HERSELF COMPLETELY TO HER FAMILY.

MY FATHER ALLEN WAS AN ELECTRICAL ENGINEER. HE WORKED AS A PRODUCTION MANAGER AT AT&T IN ALLENTOWN.

IT WAS HE WHO HELPED ME DISCOVER MY LOVE OF DRAWING.

I WAS CRAZY ABOUT DISNEY CHARACTERS AND DR. SEUSS.



DO YOU LIKE IT, DAD?



BEAUTIFUL, KEITH. LATER I'LL READ YOU A STORY, WHAT DO YOU SAY?

WOW!