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Keith Haring: Silence = Death

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Keith Haring: Silence = Death

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Abstract:

The American aids crisis was one of the most important epidemics of the contemporary world, yet many Americans do not know the severity of the crisis or the true lasting effects on recent society. In my project I will go over personal accounts of individuals directly affected by the illness, like famed artist Keith Haring, to give it a more human perspective. I will also reflect on the art that was created at the time, and how that was reflective on the people affected. Aids is an immunodeficiency virus that has been proven difficult to

diagnose in the early on years. It had a lacking in public interest because it was regarded as a "gay disease", which resulted in the death of about 700,000 individuals in the U.S. at the time. The disease took the lives of many famed individuals such as Freddie Mercury, EazyE, and Keith Haring. I will focus on the accounts of Keith Haring because he documented his life and fear of the illness in many diaries and in many of his works. He produced many works that highlighted his views on how conservative America viewed the aids crisis, as well as creating the Keith Haring Foundation.



Keith Haring



Keith Haring *Ignorance = fear, silence = death* (1989)

The Beginnings of Crisis

In one of the more conservative eras of American politics came the aids crisis. President Reagan was heavily criticized because he did not take it seriously. The overarching issue of the lack of support given by the government was all amounted to the aggressive homophobia the congress held. Eventually AIDs research obtained more funding, but for a lot of people it was too late. The art world became more involved in 1989 when artist Keith Haring decided to create works to educate the masses on the illness.

Keith Haring's Rise to Stardom

Keith Haring was born in Reading, PA in May 4th 1958, and was educated at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He found his footing in the art world by starting off with graffiti design on the streets of New York, with the tag of a baby or a dog. He engaged in the NYC nightlife scene and eventually started seeing his friends become afflicted with AIDS when the illness became more known. He began his activism work for AIDS and created visuals such as *Silence = Death* and *Talk to Us About HIV (AIDS)* in 1989 to help educate people on the illness. When he was diagnosed in 1989, he created the Keith Haring Foundation help with funding AIDS related research.

Keith Haring perspective

Keith Haring's anxieties over the illness were reflected in his works in the *Apocalypse* series, in collaboration with William S. Burroughs. At one point he believed that the government created the illness as a way to test out germ warfare and he thought that they planted it on the gay community and IV users because they "were the perfect people to wipe out". He also did a lot of humanitarian work, such as paint murals for AIDS Awareness Day and the Princess Grace Hospital.



Mural in LGBT Center, NYC
Once Upon a Time (1989)

"Art is nothing if you don't reach every segment of the people."

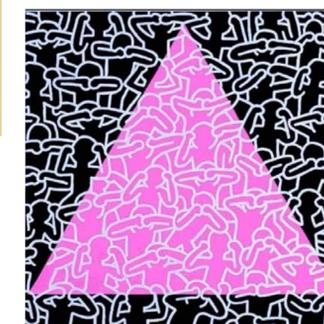
- Keith Haring

Pain in Art

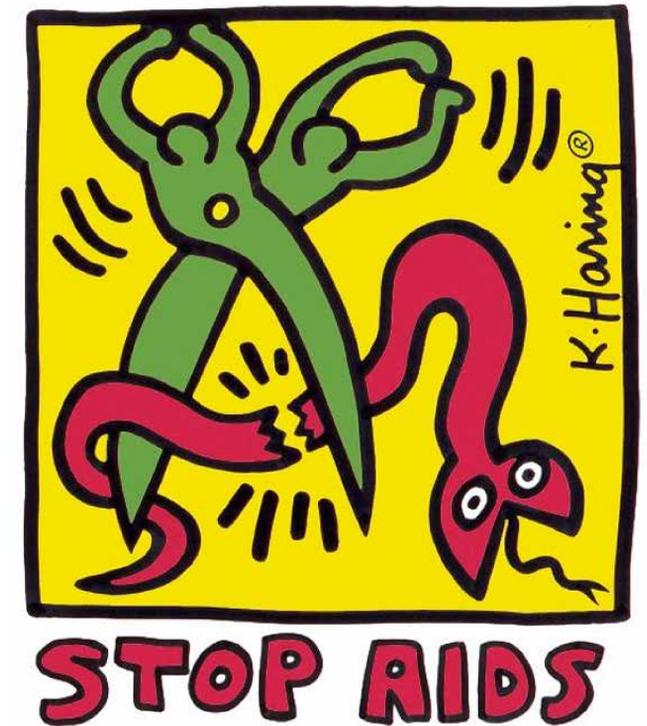
Haring's opinions on the crisis took center-stage in his works such as *Silence=Death*, where he has his iconic people doodle with all of the covering their ears and eyes with a pink triangle on top. The people seem to not want to listen or learn about what is going on, as if it makes the uncomfortable. The pink triangle was used in Nazi Germany to single out gay people. By using this symbolism, Keith Haring creates a comparison between the treatment of LGBT people in WWII Germany vs America in the 1980s. He feels the pain of being othered and not helped in a time of severe need, as if America left behind a huge demographic because of its homophobic tendencies.

Haring's legacy

Keith Haring has influenced a plethora of artists, like Shepard Fairey. His contribution to the art world is still seen in a large number of collaborations his foundation runs, to keep his legacy alive. His involvement in AIDS activism has been praised by the masses. He will always be remembered as the artist whose fun figures were also able to tell an important story. After he passed, AIDS research improved the slightest bit; it is something that still does not have a cure however there are more preventative measures widely available.



Silence= Death (1989)



Stop AIDS, 1989 Keith Haring
Silence= Death