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NGV

# Keith Haring

# Jean- Michel Basquiat

Crossing Lines

## TRANSCRIPT

The following is an edited transcript of the NGV Multimedia Guide for  
*Keith Haring | Jean-Michel Basquiat: Crossing Lines*, narrated by Patti Astor.

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## STOP 1: WELCOME TO KEITH HARING | JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT: CROSSING LINES

Location: Entry Corridor

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In the late 1970s, cryptic poetry started to emerge on the streets of New York City. Haiku-like poems appeared with lines like 'Pay for soup / Build a fort / Set that on fire'. Such statements were signed 'SAMO©' – spelled using the letters S, A, M and O plus a copyright symbol. Some interpreted this as 'same old, same old', others just as 'same old shit'. Other SAMO slogans included 'SAMO© ... 4 THE SO-CALLED AVANT-GARDE', 'SAMO© ... 4 MASS MEDIA MINDWASH' and 'SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE 2 "PLAYING ART" WITH THE "RADICAL CHIC" SECT ON DADDY'S FUNDS'. You can see other examples in the photographs displayed here, which were taken by a young Swiss art student called Vijya Kern, who was fascinated by these mysterious statements.

Initially, no one knew who authored them. Many became enthralled, including a young Keith Haring. He said:

[T]here were a lot of things in New York that influenced me: graffiti writers, and street artists. People like Jenny Holzer, who took propaganda-like texts onto the streets, which aroused the public curiosity. SAMO, who used the whole of downtown Manhattan as his field of operation, was the first to write a sort of literary graffiti. He added a kind of message to his name which conveyed an impression of poetry: statements criticizing culture, society and people themselves. Since they were so much more than ordinary graffiti, they opened up new vistas to me.

SAMO© was later revealed to be Jean-Michel Basquiat, working with his schoolmate Al Diaz. In 1989, Haring reflected: 'Before I knew who he was, I became obsessed with Jean-Michel Basquiat's work ... From the beginning he was my favorite artist'.

This corridor transports you to New York City in the late 1970s and early eighties. It was here, in New York's streets and subway stations, that Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat started to present their work. Have a look around – you may even find yourself walking alongside the figures of Haring and Basquiat.

Welcome to the NGV. I'm Patti Astor. From 1981 to 1985, I ran a gallery with Bill Stelling in the East Village of New York City called Fun Gallery. Both Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring had early exhibitions there. I'm looking forward to exploring the exhibition *Keith Haring | Jean-Michel Basquiat: Crossing Lines* with you and also sharing some of my recollections.

*Crossing Lines* focuses on the many crossovers in the lives and art of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, two of the most significant artists of the late twentieth century. Each in his own way developed a highly idiosyncratic visual language and practised unusual artistic techniques. Both revitalised contemporary art, creating works of extraordinary vitality that delivered powerful political messages. The two artists were also friends and great admirers of each other's work. They also shared the experience of being young artists rapidly rising to fame in the art world. Although their lives were tragically short, both artists left a huge legacy, not only for art history but also for culture more broadly.

This long, darkened space also reminds me of the New York subway. It was there that Haring created thousands of chalk drawings on the black paper that covered temporarily unused advertising space. Keith said that the paper's soft, matte surface seemed 'dying to be drawn on'. He said:

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 ... 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.

Well, most were 'completely enthralled' – except for one New York cop, as you'll see at the end of this corridor. You'll see three of Haring's subway drawings next door.

See you in the next room.

Vijya Kern  
SAMO© as an end – Rara, taken in New York 1980  
© Vijya Kern / Courtesy of Artstübli Gallery, Basel  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artstar, New York

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## STOP 2: THE NEW YORK CITY STREET SCENE

Location: Early Works

Stop icon at: Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat *Untitled (Symphony No. 1)* c. 1980–83

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This piece of plywood was part of the New York urban landscape in the early eighties. Both Haring and Basquiat contributed to it. Can you see a row of crawling babies and a row of dogs? These are two of Haring's most important motifs. Lower down, you should see a crown, the text 'AARON', and the top half of a cartoon-like car. These marks were by Basquiat. The crown is crucial to Basquiat's work and so are words, often with cryptic meanings. You'll hear more about these symbols later.

Have a look around ...

You are surrounded by the texture and energy of New York City in the late seventies and early 1980s. It was in the city's streets, trains, subway stations and clubs that a whole new art scene emerged, based on revitalised forms of graffiti. In an enormously fertile period, visual artists like Fab 5 Freddy, Lee Quiñones, Rammellzee and Futura 2000 created new graffiti forms, such as complicated letter work called *Wild Style* or more spontaneous forms, such as tagging, a kind of quick artistic signature. In this section, you'll see two panels with tag-style markings by many who created work on the New York streets, including Basquiat, Haring, LA II and Kenny Scharf. Graffiti's significance to New York was encapsulated in 1981 by the poet Rene Ricard, who wrote, 'The graffiti style, so much a part of this town, New York, is in our blood now'.

The new styles of graffiti were accompanied by new musical forms. Musicians such as Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa and dancers Rock Steady Crew contributed to the emergence of rap and hip-hop in the clubs and dance halls of New York. These new sounds inspired dynamic new styles of dancing, such as breakdancing and the electric boogie. Much of this vibrant artistic and musical activity emerged from the Black and Hispanic communities.

Both Haring and Basquiat started out making art in public space. Basquiat created literary graffiti; Haring created lively subway drawings featuring UFOs, babies, robots and dancing figures. While both used the street as their canvas, their work was thematically and stylistically very different from most artists in the NY graffiti scene.

Keith Haring also claimed a space for himself in the competitive New York street scene – something unusual for a white, middle-class kid from Pennsylvania. Basquiat paid homage. He once said: 'I think I have to give the street art crown to Keith Haring'. Haring and Basquiat always admired each other's work – in a competitive art scene, both declared respect for each other.

As well as their street-based works, the early works of Haring and Basquiat were included in exhibitions held in alternative spaces. For instance, both attracted attention in two group shows: the *Times Square Show*, which was held in a former massage parlour in Times Square in 1980, and the *New York/New Wave* exhibition, which was held in 1981 at PS. 1 Contemporary Art Center, now MoMA PS1, in the borough of Queens. As you entered this section, you saw a yellow door that Basquiat painted for the entrance to the *New York/New Wave* show.

As you leave this section, you'll see three of Haring's subway drawings. Between 1980 and 1985, Keith produced more than 5000 such drawings, sometimes making up to forty a day. The subway became, as Keith said, his 'laboratory' – a way for him to experiment with ideas and forms. It was also a way to encounter the public while working – something that would prove important to him as an artist. The writer William Burroughs, who lived in downtown New York during this time, said of Haring's subway drawings:

I think Keith Haring is a prophet in his life, his person, and his work ... Keith will influence other painters – probably profoundly. By association, Keith is part of the whole New York subway system. Just as no one can look at a sunflower without thinking of Van Gogh, so no one can be in the New York subway system without thinking of Keith Haring. And that's the truth.

Keith Haring  
Jean-Michel Basquiat  
Other artists  
*Untitled (Symphony No. 1)* c. 1980–83  
mixed media, spray-paint and paper on plywood  
© Keith Haring Foundation  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licenced by Artestar, New York

### STOP 3: SELF-PORTRAITS THROUGH SYMBOLS & JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT'S EARLY LIFE

Location: Portrait / Self-Portrait, Friends and Objects

Stop icon at: Jean-Michel Basquiat *Self Portrait* 1984



Here is a self-portrait by Jean, made when he was twenty-three years of age. Elsewhere on this wall, there are portraits of Keith Haring – his trademark round glasses make him easily recognisable. This section has conventional portraits of both artists but, perhaps more importantly, it introduces you to the key symbols that each artist chose to represent themselves. Early on in their careers, both artists developed distinct motifs that they frequently used.

For instance, you won't have to look far before you find another of Keith Haring's crawling babies. For Haring, the baby was the perfect manifestation of the human. He said:

The reason that the baby has become my logo or signature is that it is the purest and most positive experience of human existence.

Babies represent the possibilities of the future ... how perfect we could be. There is nothing negative about a baby, ever.

The baby often has lines emanating from it, like it is emitting electricity. This type of radiation is typical of Haring. His figures seem alive with energy.

Have a look around ...

The symbol most closely associated with Jean-Michel Basquiat is the crown – a roughly drawn, three-peaked outline. Basquiat once nominated his subject matter as 'royalty, heroism and the streets'. As you explore this exhibition, you'll see that Basquiat often placed a crown on his black male subjects, especially celebrated African American athletes and musicians. The addition of a crown was not only a gesture of respect but also a strategy to empower historically disenfranchised figures. Basquiat's crown not only conferred status; it also issued a direct challenge to white privilege. And yet, in Basquiat's art, the crown is also a complex symbol: it gives power to the subject while also acknowledging the inherent problems with power, such as the human tendency to form hierarchies or to engage in catastrophic power struggles.

As you look around this section, I will tell you about Jean-Michel Basquiat's early life ...

Jean was born in 1960 to a middle-class family that lived in Brooklyn in a New York brownstone. His father, Gérard, was born in Haiti and his mother, Matilde, was born in New York and was of Puerto Rican descent. The young Jean-Michel grew up speaking Spanish, French and English. At age seven, while playing ball in the street, he was hit by a car and was hospitalised for a month. During his recovery, his mother gave him a copy of the medical text *Gray's Anatomy*, which would prove to be of formidable influence. You will see an interest in anatomy in many of Basquiat's images. Matilde also encouraged her son's early interest in art by taking him to the major art museums in New York City.

In 1968, Basquiat's parents divorced. In 1974, following a job promotion, Basquiat's father moved Jean-Michel and his two younger sisters to Puerto Rico, where they lived for two years. They returned to New York in 1976, when Basquiat was sixteen. He returned to a conventional high school for a few weeks but then attended City-As-School High School, whose focus on art and experiential learning suited Jean-Michel. It was there that he met Al Diaz, his SAMO collaborator. Basquiat left school one year prior to graduating, after an incident in which he emptied shaving cream on the principal's head. By the age of eighteen, he had left home and was couch surfing downtown with new friends like the musician and artist Fred Brathwaite, also known as Fab 5 Freddy.

Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*Self Portrait* 1984  
synthetic polymer paint and oilstick on paper on canvas  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artstar, New York

Jean-Michel Basquiat did not attend art school. He said:

I trained myself you know ... I never went to art school. I failed all the art courses I did take in school. I just looked ... that's where I think I learned about art, by looking at it ... When I was younger I looked at Pop Art ... Dada was the thing I looked most at.

Jean realised early on that he would be an artist. He said: 'I always wanted to do this, you know ... as long as I can remember'.

Many who knew the young Basquiat talk of his enigmatic personality. For instance, the curator Jeffrey Deitch

remembered Basquiat's seemingly preternatural instincts and abilities as a young person. Deitch said:

There did not seem to be any separation between life and art ... By the age of 19 he already understood that he was an artist and projected a charismatic self-confidence. Without going to art school or having a mentor, he had the instinct to position himself at the centre of the most dynamic art community. From the beginning of his art career, he was already the centre of attention.



#### STOP 4: UNCONVENTIONAL MATERIALS & KEITH HARING'S EARLY LIFE

Location: Emerging Stars

Stop icon at: Jean-Michel Basquiat *Versus Medici* 1982



Basquiat's images customarily depict a black and usually male protagonist. In this section, you will see two significant examples of Basquiat's interest in the standing black hero figure – one is *Versus Medici*, here. Basquiat said:

I think there's a lot of people that are neglected in our ... I don't know if for me it's the paintings or what ... but ... black people are never portrayed realistically in ... not even portrayed in modern art enough, and I'm glad that I do that. I use the 'black' as the protagonist because I am black, and that's why I use it as the main character in all the paintings.

Basquiat's artwork explored the complex space of black subjectivity. The black protagonist is certainly celebrated in Basquiat's work – he creates a black nobility by crowning athletes and musicians. However, the black figure can also seem exploited and commodified. The African American writer bell hooks wrote perceptively about this. She said:

The images ... speak of dread, of terror, of being torn apart, ravished. Commodified, appropriated, made to 'serve' the interests of white masters, the black body as Basquiat shows it is incomplete, not fulfilled, never a full image ... Content to be only what the oppressors want, this black image can never be fully self-actualized. It must always be represented as fragmented.

Can you see that *Versus Medici* has been painted onto wooden slats? Basquiat liked to paint on found materials like wood panels or pallets. He said:

I think it looks better, less academic ... I don't know. I enjoy painting on canvas still, sometimes, but I really prefer wood and working with more odd shapes ... In the beginning I worked on wood because that's always free, to work on the doors and windows of the Lower East Side.

Later in this exhibition, you'll see examples of Jean-Michel's 'crossbar' works in which a canvas is roughly lashed over a support made from wooden bars coarsely tied together with twine. Both Haring and Basquiat challenged the traditional art-historical approach to constructing paintings in which canvases are neatly stretched over a concealed frame. Around 1982, Haring started to work on vinyl tarpaulins, part of an interest in, as he said, 'destroying the notion of the canvas surface'. '... I didn't want to work on canvas', he said:

because before you even touch it, it has value. I felt that I would be intimidated by a canvas and that I'd be afraid to be totally free on it ... So, I was in search of surfaces.

Keith also enjoyed painting on metal – like road signs or construction hoardings. You'll see a few here. Both artists' unusual choice of support lends their images a sense of three-dimensionality that blurs the conventional boundary between painting and sculpture.

This section includes early works. Have a look while I tell you about Keith Haring's early life ...

Keith Haring was born in 1958; he was two-and-a-half years older than Basquiat. Haring and his three younger sisters had a middle-class childhood in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, where his father worked as an engineer. In his early teens, Haring joined the Jesus Movement, becoming a self-described 'Jesus Freak'. He later

Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*Versus Medici* 1982  
synthetic polymer paint and oil wax crayon on canvas  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artstar, New York

disavowed organised religion but the cross is a frequent and troubling motif in his art, often connected to the abuse of power. Aged eighteen, following his parents' advice, he enrolled to study commercial art at the Ivy School of Professional Art in Pittsburgh, but he lost interest after two semesters and dropped out. In 1978, he moved to New York and found a home at New York's School of Visual Arts, where his professors included the conceptual artists Joseph Kosuth and Bill Beckley, and the dancer and choreographer Simone Forti. The young Haring experimented with making performances, video and large-scale drawings, and he also became interested in the theory of semiotics. It was at the School of Visual Arts in 1978 that he first bumped into Basquiat. 'I let him into school without knowing who he was', said Haring, 'because he was having trouble getting past the security guard at the front'. By 1979, aged twenty-one, Keith had devoted himself to making public art on

New York's streets and subways. He was also curating and organising events at experimental art spaces and nightclubs. Haring was a charismatic figure who was loved by many. He had a rare ability to move easily across New York's diverse scenes. 'Keith [was known]', said Futura, 'for his wonderful humanity and super generosity'. Haring felt a particular bond with children. 'Children can sense this "thing" in me', he said. 'When I do drawings for or with children, there is a level of sincerity that seems honest and pure.'

Haring felt a strong and early compulsion to be an artist. Aged nineteen, he wrote in his diary:

Through all the shit shines the small ray of hope ... The music, dance, theatre, and the visual arts; the forms of expression, the arts of hope. This is where I think I fit in ... Art will never leave me and never should.

## STOP 5: THE DOWNTOWN SCENE: INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND PERFORMANCE

Location: Emerging Stars



Around 1982, the New York nightclub Danceteria had the slogan 'Dress up, have fun!' The spirit of the times was one of creative brio, experimentation and extravagance.

This fantastic headpiece was worn by Grace Jones, one of the New York club scene's most extraordinary performers. It was made by Keith Haring in collaboration with the jeweller David Spada. The headpiece was matched with a wire bustier and a skirt on which were hung the little metal figures you can see nearby. To complete the look, Haring applied body paint in the same black-and-white tribal markings. This is clearly illustrated in the powerful image here of Grace Jones wearing the designs and body paint created by Haring with Spada. Keith loved Grace Jones because she seemed a mix of 'Primitive and Pop', which reflected his own artistic interests. He said: 'I was really interested in painting Grace Jones because to me hers seemed like the ultimate body to paint'.

Have a look around. This section immerses you in the thriving performance scenes of downtown New York. Here, interdisciplinary arts practices blossomed across galleries, streets and clubs. In particular, nightclubs like

Club 57, Paradise Garage, Mudd Club and Danceteria were home to exciting hybrid dance- and performance-based practices. Keith Haring was a regular at all of them; he loved to dance.

From the mid 1970s till the early eighties, New York experienced an anti-golden age. The economy was failing and the real estate market started collapsing – the city was peppered with empty buildings because of unpaid property taxes. Artists flooded in and took advantage of the space, the cheap living and the freedom. A spirit of experimentation and rebellion prevailed – a post-punk energy reinvented as 'no wave'. The artist Ann Magnuson described New York as she said, 'the undisputed centre of the universe'. Here is how she spoke of downtown life:

Blocks of abandoned buildings. Apartments with low rents, the toilet in the hallway and a bathtub in the kitchen. Few distractions, few ambitions, and even fewer bills to pay. Being in a band even if you couldn't play, making art even if you never learned to paint, running a club with no business experience, falling in love over and over and over again. Having just enough to get by and never wanting more. Living for the moment. Doing nothing, trying everything. Hanging out with your artist friends with no timetable, no pressure, and no agendas.

This context led to the emergence of the 'downtown scene', a title synonymous with the East Village of Manhattan. Here was a tight-knit community of a few hundred people who were focused on experimentation. They drew from high art and popular culture, and they mixed artistic disciplines without regard for established boundaries.

The downtown scene was a place of not only brave experimentation but also of competition. George Condo was a young artist in the eighties and a friend of Haring and Basquiat. Here is how he saw it:

The scene was dark and shady. Lots of homeless people, junkies and derelicts. Then there was the artistic side which had an urgency; we all felt a fast-track, impulsive need to be exhibited and seen. All of us were young, in our early twenties, literally just out of our teenage years and we found the whole city to be alive and kicking. Some of it, like Times Square, felt like an old Edward Hopper painting, other parts felt like an underground world of wild punk music, art and revolt.

Keith Haring  
David Spada  
Grace Jones's Hat 1984  
ink on metal  
© Keith Haring Foundation



Jean-Michel Basquiat was also out at the clubs every night, especially at the groundbreaking, punk-oriented Mudd Club, which was set up as an antidote to the disco glitz of Studio 54. He was also obsessed with music. He played clarinet and synthesiser in his experimental noise band, Gray, and owned more than 3000 records. His collection spanned everything from Donna Summer to Bach; however, his favourite music was bebop, the jazz style that emerged in America in the 1940s. Towards the end of this section you will find *Plastic Sax*, a painting by Basquiat that includes portraits of African American bebop legends, such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Basquiat's artistic style has a bebop sensibility: he often improvised like Charlie Parker riffing on a melody on his sax. Basquiat kept his ideas loose,

with an elusive, jazz-like interplay. His love of wordplay is also behind musical forms such as rap and hip-hop that emerged in New York in the eighties. In 1983, Basquiat produced a hip-hop single *Beat Bop* with Rammellzee and K-Rob. You can see his cover artwork for it [here](#). George Condo described Basquiat's approach as 'like a cross between a scientist of random wordplay and a bebop saxophonist'.

Before you leave this space, I encourage you to remove your headphones and experience the audiovisual material on the central bank of screens, which displays archival material of cross-disciplinary projects such as music videos, live performances and fashion shows.

## STOP 6: DEVELOPING A VISUAL LANGUAGE

Location: Drawings and Early Exhibitions, Notebooks



The dog is one of Keith Haring's earliest and most enduring symbols. Sometimes the dog stands up on two legs and dances like a human; sometimes it barks and bites and seems a kind of authoritarian figure; and sometimes it appears to hold a spiritual significance – it reminds me of Anubis, the ancient Egyptian god with the head of a jackal who watches over the dead. The four-legged creatures in this early drawing by Haring look like an early incarnation of his dog motif.

This corridor focuses on early works and exhibitions. As you look around, you'll see the artists developing their signature motifs and techniques. In Haring's images, you'll see his first uses of pictograms like the dog, the UFO and the dolphin. In Basquiat's images, you'll see him reworking key motifs, such as the black protagonist or words like TIN, GOLD, SUGAR, COAL and ASBESTOS, which recall the history of colonisation and slavery. In this section, you can witness the development of each artist's inimitable style.

Both artists made art compulsively. They made their marks on all manner of things: helmets, nursery furniture, wood pallets, tarps ... Writing in 1988, Keith described this artistic compulsion:

I guess I'm just too obsessed with lines and colour  
... I love paintings too much, love colour too much,  
love seeing too much, love feeling too much, love art  
too much, love too much ...

Many works in this section date from the early years of the 1980s. In 1981, when Haring was twenty-three and Basquiat twenty-one, the careers of both artists really took off. In 1982, both were included in the major international exhibition *documenta 7* in Germany, where Basquiat was the youngest participant. Their work was presented alongside that of artists such as Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol. In 1983, both Haring and Basquiat featured in New York's high-profile Whitney Biennial. By the mid eighties, both had achieved global, commercial and critical success. Suzanne Mallouk, Basquiat's girlfriend at the time, remembered the shift:

We went from stealing bread on the way home from the Mudd Club and eating pasta to buying groceries at Dean & DeLuca; the fridge was full of pastries and caviar; we were drinking Cristal champagne. We were 21 years old.

Haring's and Basquiat's success led to considerable public exposure. Both found the role of 'art stars' sometimes enjoyable but also often traumatic. The artist Jenny Holzer summed this up by saying:

At times it seemed the fluff took over. Which was unfortunate, because the important political and cultural content, the societal references that were in both men's work, were neglected in the party and money frenzy. You'd have to be dim to miss the gay pride and liberation message in Keith's work, and that Jean-Michel was a race man, but people didn't always talk about that.

Keith Haring  
Untitled c. 1980  
spray-paint and ink on paper  
© Keith Haring Foundation

## STOP 7: FUN GALLERY

Location: Drawings and Early Exhibitions, Notebooks

Stop icon at: Keith Haring *Untitled* 1983



I moved to the East Village in 1975, when it was really cheap, but very dangerous. All my friends said 'Well, goodbye! We're never coming over there, you're going to get killed ... it's too scary'. I said 'that sounds great! I'm doing it'. I came out of CBGB's and the Mudd Club. By 1980 I was already the Queen of the downtown screen, what we called a downtown celebutant, when Fab 5 Freddy sought me out. What a thrill for me to be right in the middle of it. Our story begins when downtown met uptown, hip-hop met punk rock ... Fab 5 Freddy and Patti Astor, the queen of downtown met the king of uptown and the art world would never be the same. We all came from nothing and were making it up as we went along, New York City was our canvas.

At the end of this corridor, you'll see a vast installation made by Keith Haring and LA II for Fun Gallery, the gallery I ran with Bill Stelling. Keith Haring said of it:

Fun Gallery had become the graffiti gallery and was pretty much the first gallery in the East Village. It was named by Kenny Scharf. They needed a name and Kenny said, 'Why don't we call it Fun?'

The name was meant to change for each show – but it never did. Both Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat had early shows at Fun Gallery.

I met Jean-Michel for the first time in 1978, on the stairs leading up to the VIP room of the Mudd Club. I knew him from the band Gray, and was flirting with him and teasing him about his weird hairdo, I had no idea he was an artist. I remember sitting on the Lower East Side stoop stairs across from the actual flats fix repair station, when aspiring collector Mary-Ann Monforton gave him \$100 to do his first canvas.

In 1982, Basquiat had a solo at Fun Gallery. After less than ideal results with SoHo galleries, art critic Rene Ricard convinced Jean to have his next show at Fun. He said 'come home Jean, show with Patti'. That show in which we had over thirty canvases is recognised as his best show ever.

I met Keith Haring on Astor Place, in 1979 in front of The Cube. He walked up to me and said, 'Patti Astor, my name is Keith Haring, can I take your picture?' I was strolling across the square in full regalia, 1950s cocktail dress, hat, and gloves. I said, 'of course!', and that was a very lucky day for me, because Keith gave me one of his first baby buttons, and later would become a huge supporter of the Fun Gallery, and one of my best friends.

In February 1983 Keith Haring had a show. By this time limos lined the ghetto streets, the crowd outside was over 1000 people. Keith's boyfriend Juan Dubose was on the wheels of steel, as my partner Bill Stelling said, 'I thought the gallery was either going to rise up into the sky, or crash into the basement'. This party is legendary as the best art opening of all time.

You can see a vibrant display that recalls part of the 1983 exhibition here. Keith and LA II covered the entire gallery with signs and symbols, over which Haring hung paintings executed on leather. The wallpaper here has been reproduced from a series of panels created by Haring and LA II for Keith's first 'Party of Life' birthday celebration at the Paradise Garage in 1984.

Keith Haring described his Fun Gallery opening as 'a very funky East Village scene ... packed with a mix of graffiti artists and other people'. Andy Warhol was there – it was his first Haring opening and it cemented their friendship.

Before you explore the collages and drawings around the corner, make sure you enter the small room that holds some of Basquiat's notebooks and Haring's journals. These materials reflect the important role of language in each artist's work. In Basquiat's notebooks, you'll see him noting down words picked up from around him, often repeating them or crossing them out. Haring's journals present a different approach: you can see him transforming words into a visual language of pictograms.

Keith Haring  
*Untitled* 1983  
synthetic polymer paint on leather  
© Keith Haring Foundation

## STOP 8: THE 'CUT-UP' METHOD AND OTHER ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Location: Copy and Paste

Stop icon at: Keith Haring *Reagan Son \$50G Sex* 1980



These early works by Keith Haring show the artist cutting up newspaper headlines and rearranging them to create humorous messages. You are looking at a selection of Haring's original collages. He made hundreds of photocopies of these and pasted them on the street. Many of these works responded to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Haring said:

We thought there was no way this man could win and it was like a joke. So I had made these headlines, many of which were about Reagan ... They had a sense of humour, but at the same time, they seemed a little bit real, so people were forced to confront them. Some people were infuriated by them and would scratch them or rip them off.

Haring was greatly interested in public art. For this project, he was partly inspired by Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* project. Starting in 1977, Holzer pasted up posters around New York featuring one-line maxims such as 'Abuse of power comes as no surprise'.

Keith was also inspired by William Burroughs's and Brion Gysin's 'cut-up technique', in which a piece of writing is cut up and rearranged to create a new text. Burroughs said of this technique:

Life is a cut-up. As soon as you walk down the street your consciousness is being cut by random factors. The cut-up is closer to the facts of human perception than linear narrative.

Jean and Keith were great admirers of William Burroughs. In 1978, they both attended the Nova convention – a three-day celebration of readings, discussions, film screenings and performances on Burroughs's work. Staged in New York, the Nova convention included contributions from Laurie Anderson, John Giorno, Patti Smith, Philip Glass, Brion Gysin, Frank Zappa, John Cage, Timothy Leary and others. Later, both met the older writer through the downtown scene. In 1981, when asked who his favourite writer was, Basquiat said:

'I was going to say Burroughs, but I thought I'd sound too young. 'Cause everybody [says] Burroughs all the time. But he's my favourite living author, definitely'.

However, the biggest influence on both artists was Andy Warhol. 'I am seriously convinced that he is the greatest artist since Picasso', Keith Haring once enthused. Warhol forged a different path for artists. He flattened boundaries between disciplines, between high art and popular culture, and between art and commerce. Haring later wrote in his diary, 'Andy's life and work made my work possible'. You might have noticed a work by Haring earlier in the show, called 'Andy Mouse' – a conflation of two of Haring's idols. In time, Warhol became both friend and mentor to both artists. In the mid eighties, Basquiat undertook a significant collaborative series with Warhol.

Like Andy Warhol, Haring and Basquiat were members of the 'mass media generation'. As well as high art references, their artwork also contains references to popular music, B movies, advertising, twenty-four-hour television, fast food, comics and superheroes. Haring was very conscious of himself as an artist responding to what he called the 'Information Age'. He said:

In the last hundred years we have seen the invention of telecommunications, radio, automobiles, television, air and space travel, computers, genetic science, satellites, lasers, and on and on. In short, our experience of life has been drastically altered. The role of the image maker cannot be seen as the same as it was a hundred years ago, or even ten years ago. The rate of change is accelerating at an increasingly rapid speed and the artist has to change with it.

Keith Haring  
*Reagan Son \$50G Sex* 1980  
newspaper collage  
© Keith Haring Foundation

In the 1980s, appropriation and sampling became important to contemporary art and hip-hop and rap music. Throughout this exhibition, you'll see both artists borrowing ideas from a vast range of sources. One day, the artist George Condo saw Basquiat's magpie approach in action. He said:

I was at Jean-Michel's studio ... He had a pyramid of books on the floor, everything from medical textbooks to classic novels, about five feet high. He would randomly pick one up and just write out something that was written there. He worked on numerous pieces simultaneously.

This section has a set of forty-two postcards that Basquiat made with artist Jennifer Stein. The postcards feature found materials such as cigarette butts and photo booth images. The collage and layering technique in these early postcards were repeated throughout

Basquiat's career. Here you can see some of their master copies as well as the xeroxed copies that Basquiat and Stein sold on the streets of New York. Stein remembers how they would, as she said:

[walk] around New York City, interacting with people and saying, 'Postcards! Postcards! One dollar! One dollar!' We'd stand there screaming! We went everywhere trying to sell them ... we were really trying to make money to live – it was not like we were rich and doing it to have fun. We needed to have that dollar.

It was through selling such postcards that Basquiat first met Andy Warhol. Warhol was having lunch with Henry Geldzahler, curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Basquiat walked into the restaurant and, after lengthy negotiations, sold two postcards to Warhol, each for one dollar. They are worth quite a bit more now.



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## STOP 9: SYMBOLS AND WORDS

Location: Image-language, Line and Symbol

Stop icon at: Jean-Michel Basquiat *Ishtar* 1983

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'I don't think about art while I work', Basquiat once said. 'I think about life.' This work, *Ishtar*, is representative of Jean-Michel's visual language at its most layered and complex. You can see him brilliantly combining disparate sources into one resolved piece. 'I like to have information', he said, 'rather than just a brushstroke'.

Let's take a focused look ...

*Ishtar* was the ancient Mesopotamian goddess of not only love, beauty and fertility but also rage and war. What a woman! This may be her portrait in the central panel. This work riffs on ancient myths and figures. The prominent words 'KHNUM' and 'SEBEK' are the names of ancient Egyptian gods, while the text '2. KINGS VII 21, 22' is a biblical reference to the story of Samson breaking the pillars of the temple, while the text 'SIDE VIEW OF AN OXEN'S JAW' refers to Samson's use of an ass's jawbone to slay thousands of Philistines. The female figure titled 'COLUMBIA' that you can see at the bottom right recalls pre-Columbian American terracotta fertility figures. Words like 'DYNASTIES', 'TEMPLE', 'REVELATION' and even 'ALTER EGO' compound the sense of Basquiat thinking about epic and ancient myths, histories and battles. A contemporary incarnation of such heroic themes is the superhero tradition – here I can see Captain America and the Flash. Basquiat loved superhero comics and cartoons. Other modern references are here, too: PETROL, POLICE, MOTOR. This pile-up of associations, words and symbols to create an elusive meaning is characteristic of Basquiat. As Jenny Holzer said, 'His work is encyclopedic but in a mysterious way'.

Basquiat started making monumental triptychs like this in 1982, the year before *Ishtar* was created. *Ishtar* shows Basquiat's collage technique at its most extended. Can you see that underneath the vivid painted sections, Basquiat has pasted photocopies of his drawings to create a kind of exploded and fragmented collage?

*Ishtar* also employs Basquiat's artistic strategy of erasure. 'I scratch out and erase', said Jean, 'but never so much that they don't know what was there'. Basquiat can be described as contributing to a lineage of 'creative destruction'. As a child, he had become interested in the anti-art tactics of the Dada artists; as a young artist, he gravitated towards post-punk/no wave communities who celebrated an anarchic and rebellious approach to creativity.

Crossed-out words are a particular hallmark of Basquiat's technique. He said: 'I cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them'. This approach aligns him with experimental literary figures like William Burroughs and Patti Smith. It also recalls the conceptual artist's interrogation of language. Basquiat was obsessed with language and codes. He was much influenced by the 'hobo's code' of symbols – chalk marks left by tramps to provide information or warnings to their fellow vagrants. The code is detailed in Henry Dreyfuss's 1972 *Symbol Sourcebook*, one of Basquiat's favourite books, which he frequently consulted when making his art.

Basquiat's works, with their pile-up of symbols and words, some of which are half scratched-out, are intentionally hard to interpret. Jean said, 'I want it to be sort of more cryptic, the work, in some way you know'. The writer bell hooks wrote perceptively about Basquiat's desire for inscrutability:

Like a secret chamber that can only be opened and entered by those who can decipher hidden codes, Jean-Michel Basquiat's paintings challenged folks who think that by merely looking they can 'see'.

Jean-Michel Basquiat

*Ishtar* 1983

synthetic polymer paint, wax crayon and photocopy collage on canvas and wood  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artstar, New York

## STOP 10: SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Location: Image-language, Line and Symbol

Stop icon at: Keith Haring *Untitled* 1982



This scene featuring a mushroom cloud with crawling baby and angels also appears in a poster Keith Haring made for an anti-nuclear rally in 1982. Using his own money, Haring produced 20,000 posters to give away. You can see that the image is a cautionary tale about the catastrophic effects of a nuclear blast. We must be careful, Keith seems to be saying, otherwise we will all be marked for annihilation, just like the figures marked with red crosses here. When Keith Haring places a cross on a figure, it usually means trouble.

Haring was obsessed by notions of the sign and the symbol. 'I am intrigued', he said, 'with the shapes people choose as their symbols to create language'. The need for symbols, he believed, was 'common to all languages, all people, all times'. Haring developed a highly personal language of signs and symbols, which was also – somewhat paradoxically – universally accessible. The historian Robert Farris Thompson said:

[Haring] knew that he had invented an extraordinary pictorial language that spoke to the city, spoke to the '80s, spoke to the whole damn world. Inventively he drew the terrors and the pleasures of our times – the threat of nuclear annihilation, religious bigotry, the fusion of cultures in the dance, the brotherhood of the boom box – all by cartoon-like ellipses.

Keith Haring's father drew cartoons as a hobby; as a child, Keith loved cartoons like Mickey Mouse. As an artist, he ingeniously drew from the visual economy of cartoon language to transmit complex ideas in a simplified visual language. He said:

I am trying to state things as simply as possible ... So much information can be conveyed with just one line, and the slightest change in that line can create a totally different meaning.

Haring's interest in signs and symbols was further informed by his experiences at the School of Visual Arts in the late 1970s. In a class on semiotics taught by conceptual artist Bill Beckley, Keith found interest in, in his words, 'how meaning attached itself to things. How meaning and signs signified, gained meaning, and changed.'

Haring aimed to keep the meaning of his symbols open; there is no definitive meaning to his dolphin, baby or dog symbols. He said, 'I was thinking about these images ... as a vocabulary of things ... different juxtapositions would make different meanings'. He continued:

I think the greatest feature of a lot of these images is that they're not completely explainable and they can have different meanings for different people. That's something that man seems to have less and less patience for, but in earlier civilizations symbols were much more versatile.

Have you seen Keith Haring's mural on a wall of the former Collingwood Technical School, here in Melbourne? He created it during his one and only visit to Australia in 1984, when he also painted the NGV's Waterwall. The Collingwood mural features similar iconography to that seen on the white tarp nearby. Both images feature a computer-headed caterpillar, indiscriminately rampaging over people with horrific effect. Keith cautioned against the dangers of machines and computers; he thought the powerful could use them as a means of control. 'The human imagination cannot be programmed by a computer', he said. 'Our imagination is our greatest hope for survival.'

Keith Haring  
*Untitled* 1982  
synthetic polymer paint on vinyl tarpaulin  
© Keith Haring Foundation

## STOP 11: THE LINE

Location: Image-language, Line and Symbol

Stop icon at: Keith Haring *Untitled* 1985



Jean-Michel Basquiat once described his drawing style as 'heart to hand'. The description could equally apply to Keith Haring. Both worked instinctively, using a direct and expressive style. This stop focuses on 'the line'. Each artist, in his own way, was obsessed with the line; each developed a highly personal and unusual drawing style. Have a look in this gallery and into the next room while I talk more about this ...

Keith Haring regarded his linework style as crucial to his art. He said:

I think the work I am doing, and the direction my life and career have taken, was completely determined by my graphic sensibility (my drawing style) ... The line determines the work.

Haring preferred red, black and white paint. His painting style was sometimes neat and sometimes drippy. He wanted his imagery to evidence a human hand, so idiosyncrasies or drips were appropriate. Haring thought his black outlines were particularly crucial. He said:

There [were] areas of colour but there was always an outline. The hard-edged black line was the unifying thing that tied the whole thing together. This was the line that I had been obsessed with since childhood.

Keith never made preparatory drawings, even for large-scale public murals. He was, he said, 'interested in ... the role of chance in situations – letting things happen by themselves'. He tried to let instinct rule, saying: 'I've come to the realization that I can draw anything I want to – never believing in mistakes.'

Haring was preoccupied by notions of artistic gesture. He said, 'I believe the very essence of my work rests in this concept of the "gesture" and the "spirit of the line" to express individuality'. This led to him privileging the act of creation; the artwork, for him, became the outcome of a kind of ritual or performance. Keith always worked to music; he played DJ mixtapes on a boom box painted by his good friend, the artist Kenny Scharf. Haring's artworks were a kind of trace of these sounds coupled with his individual gestures.

Haring recognised this type of approach in the ancient Japanese and Chinese traditions of calligraphy and *sumi*, or black ink painting, in which the artwork is an energetic trace of the artist. During art school, he started, as he said, 'thinking about the act of doing as a state of exhilarated experience or as a sacred moment'. He consciously disavowed the classical Western tradition, saying:

The drawings which I do have very little in common with drawings in the classical sense as they developed during the Renaissance ... My drawings do not try to imitate life, they try to create life, to invent life.

And what about Jean-Michel Basquiat's drawing style? It was very deliberately loose – a kind of compulsive 'scribbling'. He said:

I was trying to make paintings different from the paintings that I saw a lot of at the time, which were mostly minimal and they were highbrow and alienating, and I wanted to make very direct paintings that most people would feel the emotion behind when they saw them.

Keith Haring  
*Untitled* 1985  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
© Keith Haring Foundation

Not having gone to art school, Basquiat was freed from classical drawing techniques, instead developing his own unorthodox method. Fab 5 Freddy described it this way:

He would stick [the pencil] through the fourth finger ... so that when he drew, the pencil would just kind of slip out of his hand. He'd let it go that way, then grab it and bring it down, then let it drift. It was amazing, this whole dance he did with the pencil.

Such a technique recalls that of the expressionist painter Cy Twombly, whose style gave the deliberate appearance of the artist using his left hand. He thought that this invested his work with a sense of immediacy. Basquiat's technique also recalls the Surrealist interest in 'automatic drawing', that is, trying to create directly from the subconscious, letting forms emerge without logically controlling them.

Basquiat aimed to keep his style loose and open. His images hover between figuration and abstraction, and also between presence and absence – his words and images are strongly present while simultaneously disassembling. Keith Haring said of Basquiat's artworks:

They were constructed easily out of really flowing, moving, and scratching paint. They included the haphazard look, but not really haphazardly. In a way, that was done sort of intentionally and also by accident. Or like, haphazardly, and sort of delicately. They appeared to be just thrown together, but at the same time they also made sense and they always worked.

## STOP 12: ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY

Location: Image-language, Line and Symbol

Stop icon at: Jean-Michel Basquiat *Untitled* 1984



'Painting is nothing new', Keith Haring once wrote. He continued:

People have been drawing since the Stone Age. In every culture people have attempted to depict their world as they see it and feel it. Images have been drawn, scratched, sprayed, carved, baked or painted in whatever materials were available to that culture at that particular time. Man-made images have always been important and necessary in this ritual we call 'life'.

Haring and Basquiat both regarded art as an ancient and unending tradition. The cluster of works here evidences their interest in the imagery of the ancient world.

For instance, the kneeling figure in Basquiat's image, here, finds its source in African culture. The figure directly references the silhouette of a queen depicted in a rock painting found near Rusape in modern day Zimbabwe.

Basquiat probably saw a reproduction of the painting while flipping through the pages of Burchard Brentjes's 1970 book, *African Rock Art*. African traditions are crucial to Basquiat's art and, in particular, those aspects of African culture that became so pivotal in the development of modern art, such as the tribal masks so beloved by European artists and collectors.

Nearby, you can see that Ancient Egypt is a direct reference for Haring's sarcophagus, while Haring's vase is a new take on an old form from Classical Antiquity – however, rather than citizens of Ancient Greece, Haring's Grecian urn features a wild mix of imagery such as pyramids, telephones, TVs and an authoritarian dog. He enjoyed the contrast of old and new. Keith said:

The confrontation between the history of vase painting and the contemporary approach of drawing with marker and the mixture of contemporary and ancient symbols produces an ironic mix of opposites.

Both Jean and Keith owned books and reference materials on the art of different cultures and also frequented museums like The Met, which in 1969 had acquired Nelson Rockefeller's collection of art from Africa, Oceania and the Americas – one of the world's largest. Both artists disdained the Western custom of describing the art of non-Western ancient cultures as 'primitive'.

Haring's and Basquiat's exploration of disparate artistic traditions confirmed their belief that art was crucial to life. 'Art', Haring believed, 'becomes the way we define our existence as human beings'. Basquiat described art as a way to make connections across millennia. He said:

If I see a painting from the Middle Ages, I can see the life, I can see how people were ... like seeing a sculpture from Africa, I can see the tribe, I can see the life around it.

Jean-Michel Basquiat

*Untitled* 1984

synthetic polymer paint, oilstick and xerox collage on wood

© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



### STOP 13: ELECTRIC BOOGIE

Location: Black Light

Stop icon at: Keith Haring *Untitled* 1983



In this image, a breakdancer is about to spin on their head. Have you seen this move? It's a pretty incredible athletic feat.

When this picture was made, Keith was watching a lot of breakdancing. '1982 to 1984', he said, 'was the peak of rap music and breakdancing'. 'A lot of my inspiration was coming out of watching breakdancers, so [the figures of] my drawings started spinning on their heads and twisting and turning all around.' Some of the pictures in this room depict all manner of bendy and agile moves. One of Haring's favourites was the 'electric boogie', in which one dancer seems to transmit an electric pulse across their body into another's. Haring's robot motif also related to the breakdancing scene. He said, 'Because of the choppiness of breakdancing and the electric boogie, there was this play on the idea of robots and mechanics and so I started drawing robots'.

This darkened room simulates two exhibitions that Haring held at Tony Shafrazi Gallery in 1982 and 1983–84, in which he transformed the building's basement into a black-light installation. Look how completely wild the day-glo paint looks under the ultraviolet light!

The breakdancing images seen here are examples of what Haring called his 'wood drawings'. Haring's childhood friend Kermit Oswald was also an artist who ran a framing business and he taught Haring how to use a carpentry tool called a router. Keith used it to cut grooves in wood that he then filled with day-glo paint. At Tony Shafrazi Gallery, he hung a selection of his wood drawings on walls painted with lurid stripes of fluorescent paint. The overall effect, Haring said, was an 'incredibly active floor-to-ceiling totality'. These exhibitions also included replicas of antique statues – like the bust seen here – which Haring and his friend

the street artist LA II covered in vivid day-glo paint and black marker graffiti. 'I only wish Michelangelo could see them', Haring said.

Have a look around ...

With a bit of imagination, this darkened room might also transport you to Keith Haring's favourite club, the Paradise Garage. He discovered it in 1984. 'I was never the same since entering that club for the first time', he said. He loved the club's incredible sound and light systems and Larry Levan's amazing DJ'ing. The Paradise Garage, Haring said:

was one of the biggest influences on my entire life ... especially my spiritual level. Dancing there was more than dancing. It was really dancing in a way to reach another state of mind, to transcend being here and getting communally to another place.

Keith used to organise his work and flight schedules so he could be back in New York for Saturday nights at the Paradise Garage. The club, he said, 'was packed with 70 percent black kids, 20 percent Spanish and maybe 10 percent Asian and white'. This community was important to Keith, having shown early support for his work. It was a community also important to his friend, Madonna. She said:

I watched Keith come up from that street base, which is where I came up from, and he managed to take something from what I call Street Art, which was an underground counterculture, and raise it to a Pop culture for mass consumption. And I did that too... I don't know what drew us to these exotic clubs – like the Fun House or Paradise Garage. Obviously, it was the sexuality and the animal-like magnetism of those people getting up and dancing with such abandon! They were all so beautiful! ... these were the people who bought my records in the first place ... Keith keyed into that too.

Haring stayed good friends with Madonna. When invited to her wedding to Sean Penn, Keith took Andy Warhol as his plus one. Incidentally, Madonna and Jean-Michel Basquiat dated in 1982.

Keith Haring  
*Untitled* 1983  
day-glo paint on routed wood panel  
© Keith Haring Foundation

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#### STOP 14: POLAROID'S BY MARIPOL

Location: The Downtown Scene

Stop icon at: Polaroid taken by Maripol in the early 1980s in New York City, Patti Astor

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This gallery features reproductions of SX-70 Polaroid images taken by the artist Maripol. They depict many of Basquiat's and Haring's friends and collaborators, such as Diego Cortez, Kenny Scharf, Madonna, Andy Warhol, Fab 5 Freddy, Grace Jones ... I also appear a few times

The Polaroids were back in the day the first Instagram. In addition, they were used on professional shoots as a makeup and lighting test. This particular shot of me taken by Maripol, was on the set of Edo Bertoglio's photoshoot for German magazine *Cult*. I am posing on the Staten Island Ferry with the now sadly missed Twin Towers of the World Trade Center behind me. With this cover, I was officially anointed as a new wave superstar.

See you in the next room.

Polaroid taken by Maripol in the early 1980s in New York City, Patti Astor  
© Maripol

## STOP 15: KEITH HARING: ART AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Location: Political Thoughts

Stop icon at: Keith Haring *Malcolm X* 1988



This section explores both artists' strong interest in the social and political issues of their time. The artist George Condo said, 'They were both fighters but for different causes'. In their own ways, he said, 'they were fighting for human rights. That will always be their strength'.

This work by Keith Haring explores the legacy of racial discrimination through the figure of Malcolm X, the African American civil rights leader who was assassinated in 1965. Notice the work's layered composition, which seems to take its lead from Basquiat's approach to image creation. Throughout his career, Haring continued to experiment with new techniques; here, he explores collage. You can see he has integrated a newspaper article about Malcolm X's shooting into this work and also very pointedly defaced the image of the Mona Lisa with an African mask-style symbol.

Keith Haring was committed to social justice. He used his art to pursue social equality. His images depict humanity at its most loving and its most hateful. Figures not only dance together, embrace and bring new life into the world but also beat, ostracise or oppress one another.

Haring very consciously adopted the role of 'activist artist'. He commented on major events of his time, such as South African apartheid, the AIDS epidemic, the Chernobyl disaster

and the Cold War. His activism led him to create high-profile public works with strong messages of social justice. Perhaps his most famous public work is the *Crack is Wack* wall mural on a handball court in East Harlem, New York. Haring created it in 1986 in response to the crack cocaine crisis and President Reagan's ineffectual 'war on drugs' approach.

Keith developed an innate distrust of powerful figures like politicians, priests and businessmen. He loathed hypocrisy, writing in 1987:

The most evil people are the people who pretend to have the answers ... all dogmatic 'control religions,' are evil. The original ideas are good. But they are so convoluted and changed that only a skeleton of good intentions is left. Most of the evil in the world is done in the name of good (religion, false prophets, bullshit artists, politicians, *businessmen*). The whole concept of 'business' is evil ... Business is only another name for control. Control of mind, body and spirit. Control is evil. All stories of white men's 'expansion' and 'colonization' and 'domination' are filled with horrific details of the abuse of power and the misuse of people[.]

Haring's demand for equality also extended to art. 'The public has a right to art', he said. 'Art is for everybody.' His desire to make art accessible led him to draw in the subway, to create public art and to open Pop Shops in New York and Tokyo. He hated the idea that his art was primarily for rich collectors and the art industry elite. 'I sometimes get really sick of the selling part', he said. 'The only time I am happy is when I am working. If I work I produce "things". But I don't want to watch these "things" treated like stocks and bonds'.

Keith used art to liberate and empower. He said that art should be something that 'celebrates humanity instead of manipulating it'. He saw in art a kind of talismanic power, writing in 1984:

Money is the opposite of magic. Art is magic. The worlds of art and money are constantly intermingling. To survive this mixture the magic in art has to be applied in new ways. Magic must always triumph.

Keith Haring  
*Malcolm X* 1988  
synthetic polymer paint, enamel and collage on canvas  
© Keith Haring Foundation

## STOP 16: JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT: EXPLORATIONS OF RACISM

Location: Political Thoughts

Stop icon at: Jean-Michel Basquiat 363 B of Iron 1984



Many of Jean-Michel Basquiat's works address the politics of race and his experience as a black man in a largely white art world. Basquiat once described his work as 'about 80 percent anger'. In particular, he articulated the violent impact of structural racism, an outcome that he traced from complex legacies of colonisation and histories of segregation and slavery. His father, Gérard, once said: 'Jean-Michel was very bright, very social and very politically oriented. He didn't have to politicize through a microphone. The works possess messages and speak for themselves'.

*363 B of Iron* brings together images from disparate sources. One of Jean-Michel's characteristically mask-like heads floats against a ground roughly daubed with purple, black and white paint, and covered with liberal scribbles and doodles as well as silkscreened images and text. This text includes the phrase 'KANGAROO WOMAN THAT MAKES THE RAIN' and 'MANY MYTHOLOGIES TELL OF A VOYAGE TO A LAND OF THE DEAD IN THE WEST'. These lines appear in a number of canvases Basquiat made in 1984.

There is also a cartoon-like depiction of a nomadic herdsman and other figures drawn from African rock art. These snatches of text and image suggest Basquiat was reading a variety of anthropological and historical texts – perhaps skimming them, looking for different origin myths and enjoying stories from various cultures about the creation and end of the world. These references make a kind of surface cultural sampler that don't come together to tell a simple narrative. They do make us think, though, about the artistic traditions of different cultures, and imagine how Basquiat felt making his way in an art world which had a highly problematic relationship with black art history.

Jean-Michel sought to position himself within a history of twentieth-century art alongside 'greats' like Picasso and Warhol. But this particular art history – which brought European and American artists to fame and fortune in the twentieth century – had a complex relationship with black culture, largely predicated on ignorance and suppression. It relied on the concept of 'primitivism', whereby artists like Picasso appropriated ritual materials from Africa and Oceania and seemingly 'renewed' European art with his interest in these 'unknown' visual traditions. Like Duke Ellington, the African American jazz legend, said, 'The Europeans who went to Africa came back with "modern" art. What is more African than a Picasso?'

Basquiat's art, as well as his life as an artist, was rife with racial complexities. His friend, the African American graffiti artist and rapper Fab 5 Freddy, said:

A young black man making art? It took a while for people to get it. Very few in the art world had any sense of what was really going on. Keith never claimed to be a graffiti artist, nor did Jean, nor did I. But the press made that what we were – wild savages spray-painting everything. That was the general tone. There was no understanding of us in the context of art history, outside of our inner circle. Keith [Haring] would often speak up to defend us, because he had an inherent understanding of the ways racism works.

Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*363 B of Iron* 1984  
synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on canvas  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licenced by Artstar, New York

As a young black man, Basquiat experienced everyday racism – taxis would not stop for him and he was refused entry to restaurants. He was also often positioned as a kind of 'wild primitive painter' by the art industry, which was an overly white and privileged community. An example of this was a cover feature that *The New York Times Magazine* ran on Basquiat in 1985. The cover photograph depicted Jean-Michel in his studio with bare feet and wearing an expensive and paint-splattered Armani suit, arranged beneath the dubious title 'Madison Avenue Primitive'. 'They're just racist most of these people', Basquiat said. 'They have this image of me: wild man running – you know, wild monkey man.' His girlfriend at the time, Suzanne Mallouk, recalled:

I remember one night when Jean went on a rant about the way white people in the art world regarded him as their black mascot. It caused him anguish. He did not want to be tokenized for his blackness.

In 1983, both Haring and Basquiat were greatly affected by the death of the young African American artist Michael Stewart. Stewart had been riding the subway when some transit police accused him of writing graffiti – an illegal act. The incident escalated and Stewart was killed by the police. The event sent shockwaves through the graffiti scene and sparked discussion in the wider community about police brutality. Jean-Michel was shaken by the incident: 'It could have been me', he said. In this section, you will find Basquiat's *Irony of a Negro Policeman*. This work predates Stewart's death; however, it connects to themes of racism and police brutality.



## STOP 17: JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT: LAST WORKS

Location: Last Works

Stop icon at: Jean-Michel Basquiat *Item* 1987



*Item*, seen here, is a broad expanse of yellow punctuated by two black word-and-image arrangements, both of which are mysterious and haunting. Here, Basquiat has exchanged his frenetic, encyclopaedic style for a visual language that tends to sparseness. Basquiat's late works are often marked by voids and a sense of emptiness. His late works also often meditate on existential themes. Elsewhere here you will see *Exu*, a work depicting an alarming devil-spirit from the North African Yoruba religion associated with trickery, misfortune, chaos and death.

Have a look around ...

Back in the late seventies, one of SAMO's literary graffiti phrases was 'MOST YOUNG KINGS GET THEIR HEAD CUT OFF'. With hindsight, as you will see, this reads as a kind of terrible prediction.

By the mid eighties, Basquiat's phenomenally successful art career had turned his life into a kind of crazed show business. In an interview from 1985, he said:

Well, I'm not really sure if the stories of the artists in the studio quietly working are really true anymore. There's always photographers coming into the studio ... It's a life that is documented and put out there, you know? You go to a restaurant and they write about it in *The Post* on page six ... I try to be a little reclusive, and not to be out there and be brought up and brought down, like they do with

most of them ... Yes, they always do [turn on you]. I can't think of one big celebrity-type person they haven't done that to ... People expect you to not really change, they want you to be the same as you were when you were 19[.]

The unexpected death of Andy Warhol in 1987 after a gall bladder operation hit both Haring and Basquiat hard. Andy was an important mentor to both artists and, for Basquiat, he'd become a positive, stabilising influence. Despite his grief and his personal battle with drugs, Basquiat kept working: 'The last works ... were incredible!' said Keith Haring. 'They were some of the best things he had ever done.'

Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring last saw each other in New York, where they bumped into each other on the street. Haring, who had been commissioned by *Spin* magazine to do a photographic report on street fashion, asked to take a picture of Basquiat. He posed lying on a subway grille. He said: 'The last pictures I have of Jean-Michel are of him with his eyes closed, looking completely peaceful lying on the sidewalk. It was a month before he died, so it was totally bizarre'. Keith remembered that Jean asked him how he was feeling because he had heard about Haring's HIV diagnosis.

On Friday 12 August 1988, Jean-Michel Basquiat died at his New York loft. He was twenty-seven.

In November 1988, *Vogue* magazine published a heartfelt tribute written by Haring titled 'Remembering Basquiat: Keith Haring on a fellow artist – and a friend'. You'll see Haring's handwritten draft at the end of this gallery. He wrote:

The intensity and directness of [Jean-Michel's] vision was intimidating. He was uncompromising, disobedient ... He revealed things. He removed the Emperor's clothes ... His expertise at the assembling and disassembling of language has revealed new meanings to old words. He used words like paint. He cut them, combined them, erased them, and rebuilt them. Every invention a new revelation.

Jean-Michel Basquiat dedicated his life to art. He constantly and compulsively created art. For him, it was an activity of the deepest significance. He said:

I think art is very important ... The greatest treasures of the world are art, pretty much ... they are the most lasting, they are still here after people[.]

Jean-Michel Basquiat

*Item* 1987

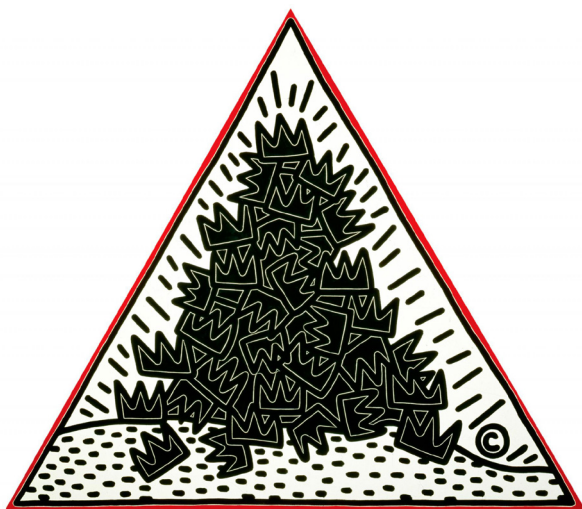
synthetic polymer paint and oilstick on canvas

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## STOP 18: KEITH HARING: LAST WORKS

Location: Last Works

Stop icon at: Keith Haring *A Pile of Crowns for Jean-Michel Basquiat* 1988



Here is Keith Haring's artistic homage to Jean-Michel Basquiat. In a fitting tribute, Haring has made a black pile of crowns, Basquiat's best-known motif. Haring had the utmost admiration for Basquiat, who, he said, 'left a mark on history and on our time'.

At the opening at which this work premiered, something spooky happened. Haring was standing with a group of Basquiat's friends, including the artists Yoko Ono and Francesco Clemente. All of a sudden, *A Pile of Crowns* ... came off the wall. It dropped softly and came to rest on its bottom edge on the floor. '[I]mmediately we knew that Jean-Michel was there', said Keith. 'For me, that was the crowning moment of the whole show.'

Have a look around this section. Around 1986, the iconography in Keith Haring's work became increasingly apocalyptic. *Walking in the Rain* is a good example of this. It is painted using a dramatically different style. Here, Haring has filled the surface of the work with great detail. White squiggles cover the blue background, while the foreground is occupied by a strange creature who seems to be roaming the ruins of a lost civilisation. The changes in Haring's style and themes were partly in response to watching friends die of AIDS-related complications. The artist George Condo said:

With AIDS, Keith moved into imagery that was definitely more gruesome, more Bosch-like, where you had these horrible scenes from hell. Goya-esque imagery, such as Saturn devouring his children; a heaven-and-hell thing ... a kind of paradise lost.

In 1988, Keith Haring was forced to confront his own mortality after being diagnosed with HIV. He had long suspected he would become ill. In 1987, he wrote:

George [Condo] said art is more important [than life] because it is immortal. This struck a very deep note inside me. For I am quite aware of the chance that I have or will have AIDS ... This is why my activities and projects are so important now. *To do as much as possible as quickly as possible ... Work is all I have and art is more important than life ...* I live every day as if it were the last. I love life ... I'm sure that when I die, I won't really die, because I live in so many people. Spirits travel without limits.

Keith Haring died on 16 February 1990, aged thirty-one. Graffiti art in his honour appeared throughout New York's streets. Prior to his death, he set up the Keith Haring Foundation to continue the educational work for children he had started.

I will finish this stop and this tour here. Thank you for joining me today. As you leave the exhibition, you will see images of these two friends, each such an incredible artist in his own right. Both made such significant contributions to our world, in ways that makes the brevity of their lives and careers seem all the more extraordinary. I miss them but have enjoyed this opportunity to celebrate their lives and art with you today.

I think these two incredible masters whose work we have just explored, shared the true mission of art, which is to leave to world a better place ... or as Fab 5 Freddy says in *Wild Style*, 'making things look all beautiful'. All of the Fun Gallery crew would agree with my mission for Fun Gallery, I wanted everyone who walked through that door to feel 'Yes, I can make a difference here'.

Thank you for visiting NGV, and taking that first step. This is Patti Astor, Patt A, signing off from Fun Gallery ... the original and still the best.

Keith Haring  
*A Pile of Crowns for Jean-Michel Basquiat* 1988  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
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