Keith Haring/New York City Subway Drawings, 1983
(Photo: Tseng Kwong Chi)
"...My contribution to the world
is my ability to draw. I will
draw as much as I can for as many
people as I can for as long as I
can. Drawing is still basically
the same as it has been since pre-
historic times. It brings
together man and the world. It
lives through magic."

Keith Haring, 1982
Documenta 7, vol. 2, p.144

Twenty-five-year-old Keith
Haring is one of a number of
young artists who, in the past
few years, have radically altered
the meaning of "art in public
places". Bypassing (and ignored
by) the prevailing system of
commercial galleries, government
subsidies and the museum network,
Haring initially took his art
directly to the people. His New
York City subway drawings, begun
in January, 1981, soon turned
Haring into something of an urban
folk hero. Small crowds which
gathered to watch the artist work
would signal appreciation with
applause when a drawing was com-
pleted. Ironically, this admira-
tion and attention was swiftly
translated into a level of com-
mmercial success uncommon for an
artist of his age. Haring, who
continues to do his lightning-
quick drawings in the same subways
(often in the stations of the
Lexington Avenue line), recycles
a portion of this new income into
the production of buttons, posters,
and stickers which are sold at
cost or, even at times, given
away.

Though greatly inspired by the
most talented of the New York
City graffiti writers who, wield-
ing spray cans of paint and
broad-tipped felt markers, have
decorated (or some would say,
defaced) subway cars with their
exuberant and aggressive "wild
style" writing and emblematic
tags, Haring's subway work has,
in fact, always reflected a more
traditional, middle-class art
school background. His very
choice of the clean empty rect-
angular wall spaces (routinely
available whenever the subway
authorities use black tar paper
to cancel discontinued ads)
suggests his inclination to
adhere to a conventional format.
However, drawing on the run,
in the public view and on public
walls, is highly unconventional,
even subversive. Technically
illegal, the drawings are, of
necessity, executed with speed.
Each is a virtuoso performance,
completed within two or three
minutes--fast enough to hit-
and-run and avoid a confronta-
tion with the police. Admittedly,
on a number of occasions the
artist has been arrested for
criminal mischief.

Haring likes using white
chalk. "It's fast, cheap, and
temporary", he says. This
statement challenges what the
public, its expectations based
on experience with museums and
private collections, generally
thinks about art: that it
should be labored, costly, and
enduring.

Haring's goals, like his
methods, are also unconventional.
He is anxious to share his work
with the general public and is
glad to make art that is acces-
sible to a broad multi-lingual,
multi-cultural population. In
the subways his art has reached
many who would never venture
into a museum or art gallery.
Instead of art for the privi-
leged few, Haring has made art
for everyone. His commitment
to the democratization of art
also represents a reaction
against much contemporary art
of the past few decades which,
despite its obvious intellectu-
hal strengths (and its liberal,
sometimes even anarchistic po-
itical biases), is most
readily understood by a small
group of highly educated con-
stituents. Furthermore,
Haring's work is not "art about
art" nor is it cunningly Post-
Modern. It is a straight-
forward expression of the
artist's concern about the
condition of society today.
Though the content of Haring's work is not programmatic and much about it remains intriguingly mysterious, Haring's images often do stand for major issues. Power and conflict, exploitation and subjugation, love and friendship, and the fears attendant on the threat of a nuclear holocaust are all rendered in prototypical images which, through repetition, acquire a ritual significance. They seem to be emblematic warnings of societal distress, better acknowledged than ignored.

The frequent appearance of the television set, the radio, the telephone, the barking dog, etc. are clues to Haring's interest in the complexities of communication. Well-versed in semiotic theories, Haring is alert to how both words and images function in the exchange of information. Some of his earlier work was language-based. His subway drawings, however, embody his current focus on visual signs and symbols. In fact, Haring's use of images is not unlike our customary use of words. While his alphabet of images is limited, the numerous combinations available make possible an extensive realm of meaning.

Haring welcomes the range of possible interpretations, the multiplicity of meanings found in his work. Ambiguity, after all, undermines authoritarianism. Is "the radiant child" a victim of nuclear radiation or is it alive with unfettered polymorphous sexuality? Any given image is apt to change its meaning when scale or context is changed. A small animal might be a pet. The same animal greatly enlarged looms as a predator. The similar sets of short, staccato straight lines (cartoonists call these marks agitrons and blurgits) can indicate almost anything from electricity, light, sound, motion and speed to excitement, pain, recognition, epiphany and love. Often a range of these meanings will coexist in the same drawing. Definition and interpretation depend on context and experience.

Sometimes Haring's iconography comes initially from quite specific incidents or experiences. The man with a hole in his stomach was first drawn in response to John Lennon's assassination. Atomic explosions followed the Three Mile Island accident. The man with six arms was in re-
response to the Falkland Islands crisis (a picture of colonialism?). The cross and the rod appeared on the occasion of Pope John II's first visit to Poland. Mickey Mouse is, not surprisingly, a symbol for the United States. Following his recent trips to Japan and Europe, a world globe began to appear in his subway drawings (along with clocks which seem, in part, a response to his visit to Switzerland). But, importantly, these are only examples of the beginnings of meaning, not in any way a complete definition.

This MATRIX installation features new work which Haring drew spontaneously with sumi ink on paper in the gallery space on Saturday, June 4, 1983. The speed with which Haring draws is a key to understanding his work. Ideas travel swiftly and uncensored from brain to hand. The result is an authentic gesture, revealing perhaps a little of the magic Haring refers to in the introductory quote (above). Haring's technique can be sanctioned by precedents as diverse as the sparse yet content-laden gestures of Chinese calligraphy, the Surrealists' automatic writing and the Abstract Expressionists's existential strategies.

Haring's achievements as a skilled and energetic young draughtsman speak eloquently for themselves. His facility with line is impressive and joyful. His style is recognizable and self-assured. He has created a whole mythology of figures that are infiltrating the public consciousness.

There is, of course, a risk that through increasing familiarity the freshness and impact of his work will be diminished simply through the influence of outside forces. Even Leonardo's Mona Lisa has suffered in the hands of the media from overexposure. Yet, despite the sometimes playful quality of his work, Haring is serious about his goals and genuine in his beliefs. Anxious to reach a large audience, it is possible that Haring will be able to use the media itself as an effective tool for still wider dissemination of his images. He may even explore the media as medium.

In addition to being a gifted, inventive artist, Haring has also brought an attitude to his art-making that raises troubling issues about both the role of art and the role of the artist in contemporary American society. Like a number of other artists whose work has been exhibited in MATRIX over the past eight years (e.g. Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Adrian Piper), Haring has questioned the elite nature of art in our society. Must art be seen only inside institutions (museums and galleries) patronized by the economically privileged? Need art be owned and enjoyed only by those with extra disposable income? Should art be understood only by those able to wade through curatorial and critical texts?

Useful inspiration for Haring has come from many sources. Semiotics, Chinese calligraphy and the art of the New York City subway graffiti writers have already been mentioned. Jean Dubuffet's articulate rejection of art that was obscure, over-intellectualized and burdened with layers of language in favor of an art brut which drew its strength from primal instincts was clearly a persuasive model. The major retrospective of work by Pierre Alechinsky at the Carnegie Institute (1977) was a catalytic experience for Haring, giving legitimacy to an art that was expressive, spontaneous and highly-charged with energy (in startling contrast to the prevailing aesthetic of the time). Haring was also influenced by
Robert Henri's text, The Art Spirit, which encouraged artists to embrace enthusiastically the full range of humanity which comprised the metropolitan scene and to paint such subjects with spontaneity and vigor.

Keith Haring was born in Kutztown, Pennsylvania in 1958. He left Kutztown by way of Pittsburgh to travel West. After a brief return to Pittsburgh, he moved to New York City in 1978 to attend the school for Visual Arts where he studied with Joseph Kosuth and Keith Sonnier. He was actively involved in organizing exhibitions at The Mudd Club and Club 57. Haring lives and works in New York City and is represented by Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

Andrea Miller-Keller Curator of MATRIX

PLEASE NOTE: Keith Haring will give an informal slide talk on Sunday, June 5, 1983 at 3 p.m., Connecticut Room, Wadsworth Atheneum.

Haring is also scheduled to visit The Artists' Collective in Hartford on June 4, 1983 to do an on-site drawing for their Clark Street space.

Works in MATRIX:
Untitled, 1983, sumi ink on white paper, 6' high, length to be determined by the artist. To be drawn by the artist in the MATRIX space on Saturday June 4, 1983.

Untitled, 1981, marker ink and enamel on fiberglass vase, 40" x 28". Lent by Dan Friedman, New York City.

Untitled, 1982, marker ink on fiberglass vase, 40" x 28". Lent by the artist.

Photographic documentation of Haring in the subways by Tseng Kwong Chi:

Keith Haring/New York City Subway Drawings, 1981-81, twenty Cibachrome photographs, 8' x 10'. Lent by the artist (Tseng Kwong Chi), Courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York City.

Keith Haring/Studio, 1982, Cibachrome photograph, 8" x 10". Lent by the artist (Tseng Kwong Chi), courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York City.
Selected one-man exhibitions:
- Pittsburgh Center for the Arts '78;
- Westbeth Painter's Space, NYC '81;
- Club 57, NYC '81; Rotterdam Arts
  Council, Rotterdam Kunststichting
  '82; Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NYC
  '82; Fun Gallery, NYC '83; Gal-
  lerie Watari, Tokyo '83; Lucio
  Amelio, Naples '83

Selected group exhibitions:
- Club 57, NYC Invitational '80;
- Times Square Show, NYC '80; The
  New Museum, NYC Events: Fashion
  Moda '80; The Mudd Club, NYC
  Drawing Show '81, P.S. 1, Long
  Island City, New York/New Wave
  '81; Hall Walls, Buffalo, NY
  The Agitated Figure '82; Wave
  Hill, Bronx '82; Marlborough
  Gallery, NYC The Pressure to
  Paint '82; Ronald Feldman Fine
  Arts, NYC Atomic Salon '82; Docu-
  menta 7, Kassel, West Germany
  '82; Queens Museum, The U.F.O.
  Show '82; Institute of Contem-
  porary Art, London Urban Kisses
  '82; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts,
  NYC 1984 '83; Tony Shafrazi
  Gallery, NYC Champions '83; Whit-
  ney Museum of American Art, NYC
  Biennial '83 '83; Monique Knowl-
  ton Gallery, NYC Intoxication '83

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  Documenta 7/Kassel, D + V Paul
  Dierichs (Kassel), '82 vol. 2,
  p. 144 (statement by artist).
  "Keith Haring Above Ground",
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