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Kenny Scharf reminisces about Keith Haring and making public art in '80s New York: 'We were very anti-elitist'



Keith Haring, left, and Kenny Scharf in New York in 1982. (From Keith Haring Foundation archive)

BY DEBORAH VANKIN | STAFF WRITER

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Artist Kenny Scharf and I are headed to ArtCenter College of Design's Hillside Campus to visit Keith Haring's 1989 mural inside a classroom building. A major exhibition opens at the Broad museum this week, exploring Haring's art and activism, and we wanted an up-close-and-personal look at the mural Haring created on the occasion of the second World AIDS Day. Scharf and Haring were close friends and college roommates at New York's School of Visual Arts in the early '80s, before Haring died in 1990. Scharf promised Haring he would remain an advocate for his work.

We've just visited Scharf's own mural at ArtCenter's South Campus in downtown Pasadena. The colorful piece, featuring his cartoon-like images, covers four sides of a rooftop elevator shaft and can be seen from the 110 Freeway. That sort of accessibility — that art should be enjoyed, for free, by passersby — is part of a more than four-decade-long philosophy Scharf shared with Haring.

As an ArtCenter representative drives us, her 2006 Honda Accord winding its way through the San Rafael Hills with the car windows rolled down and the fragrant spring air rushing inside, Scharf reminisces about his and Haring's early days in New York. This edited oral history traverses their friendship, their art adventures and parties and, as the budding artists found their voices, making marks in public spaces.

The beginning: I moved to New York in 1978 and Keith was one of the first people I met. I was probably 19? He was 19 or 20. We were kids, we were very close.

I don't know if we influenced each other's styles, but we definitely influenced each other's [thinking] — a reason to be, in a way. I took — what I still take from him — is so much of his work ethics. And the philosophy about how art is shared and how art is something that we wanted for everyone.

The '70s and '80s New York art world: The art world, when we arrived in the late '70s, was very much about conceptual art, minimal art. And everything that didn't relate to people in the street. The art of the time that was being celebrated was not interested in the people and the public — it was an elitist thing. And we were very anti-elitist. But if you were an artist that was reaching out to the masses, it wasn't looked at in a positive way; it was looked at as, "Oh, you're just dumbing it down for the masses. You're a sellout." Well, we thought very differently.

Haring's subway drawings: It was about 1981. I was living in Times Square. Keith was living in a sort of halfway house at the time and I got him to take the extra space [in the house]. Literally a week later, he started going down into the subway near where we lived, which was 6th Avenue and 42nd Street. He was doing those chalk drawings on black paper, these amazing drawings. And it just exploded, it made such an impact. So many people were talking about it. It just showed the power of doing art in public places and his imagery — it was like a new kind of language he was developing that was all about inclusiveness.

Life at home: We had parties, so many parties. We lived in this crazy two-story building, an 1840s townhouse. The stairs had no railings, the bathroom toilet was a pull chain. It was like 1840s inside — nothing had changed. It was right near Bryant Park, Times Square in Midtown. It was the two of us and [artist] Samantha McEwen, my girlfriend at the time. Jimmy De Sana, the artist, he was our landlord. He died early on, one of the first people [I knew] to die of AIDS. But it was very dangerous around Bryant Park, a lot of knives and shootings. Very sketchy.

Once, while we were having this party — Basquiat was probably there, we were in the circle together — some guy had been stabbed [in the park] and he ran into the party, bleeding. We didn't know him. He could see the door open and people coming in so he ran inside. People thought it was an art performance, which shows you how crazy the times were. The next thing, there were [what seemed like] 30 cops inside the party and we got kicked out. He didn't die. The ambulance came and got him. That's just the way things were. It was a crazy time.

A lasting influence: In 1978 I was running around with Jean-Michel [Basquiat] and doing public drawings in the street with marker. But Keith inspired me to take bigger chances and risks.

Keith was one of the most important people in my life. Still, very much so.



Deborah Vankin

Deborah Vankin is an arts and culture writer for the Los Angeles Times. In what's never a desk job, she has live-blogged her journey across Los Angeles with the L.A. County Museum of Art's "big rock," scaled downtown mural scaffolding with street artist Shepard Fairey, navigated the 101 freeway tracking the 1984 Olympic mural restorations and ridden Doug Aitken's art train through the Barstow desert. Her award-winning interviews and profiles unearth the trends, issues and personalities in L.A.'s arts scene. Her work as a writer and editor has also appeared in Variety, LA Weekly and the New York Times, among other places. Originally from Philadelphia, she's the author of the graphic novel "Poseurs."