

HARING WAS HERE



Keith Haring at work in the Stedelijk
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THE DUTCH ADVENTURES OF KEITH HARING, 1982 AND 1986

*You feel the deal is real
You're a New York City boy
So young, so run
into New York City/
New York City boy
you'll never have a bored day
'cause you're a New York City boy*

*(Chris Lowe/David Morales/Neil Tennant: 'New York City Boy,'
Pet Shop Boys, 1999)*

When he comes to Amsterdam for his first museum solo in the spring of 1986, the American artist Keith Haring (27) doesn't spend all his time at the Stedelijk – he goes out, to into the city.

Haring, a former art school student, began by making chalk drawings on empty advertising signs in the New York subway. His drawings were seen and appreciated, and even collected.

Teenagers adore him. Haring's vibrant bouncy figures are a perfect match with hip-hop street culture.

So, when Wim Beeren (58), appointed director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1985, stages a major show of Haring's work, it turns out to be a good move.

After his European debut in Rotterdam (1982), Haring becomes an overnight sensation following an exhibition at Tony Shafrazi in New York, later that year.

By showing Haring's work, Beeren brings youth street culture into the Stedelijk. Things were very different under the directorate of his predecessor, Edy de Wilde. Haring achieves his

much-coveted museum status, but loses none of his street credibility.

He won't compromise – for anyone or anything.

In front of – and inside – the Stedelijk, Haring spray-paints a velum, a woven canopy that filters daylight, and creates an equally monumental wall painting using paintbrush and ink. With the help of a hydraulic platform, he energetically paints a mural on the exterior of the Stedelijk's storage depot near the Markthallen.

Keith's a social being who lives to share his work with everyone. During the Kunstrijken at the Stedelijk, he makes a large wall drawing in the museum with a class of 12-year-old kids from Amsterdam. Relaxed, open, no airs and graces.

But in the mid-eighties, a global economic crisis strikes, and causes a rift between the established and alternative art scene.

Up to then, artists who sell poorly, or are just starting to develop their career, have been entitled to social benefits. But now, the Dutch government brings the scheme to an end. And people are angry.

In this climate of austerity, Dutch art critics have little sympathy for the Haring exhibition. They accuse him of superficial opportunism. Unlike the masses of visitors who flock to the show, they don't think much of the radical, fresh visual language Haring uses to address gay culture, AIDS, Apartheid and environmental issues.

The alternative art circuit, from which Haring emerged in New York, think that he's betrayed his roots by associating with art capitalism.

The theft of a homo-erotic drawing during the opening, followed by a blackmail note from artists in the squatters' scene, put Beeren and Haring in a tight spot.

Who could have anticipated that taking art off the streets and bringing it into the museum would precipitate such outrage?