

Press Release

Museum Folkwang

“Art is for everybody”: Major Keith Haring retrospective starting 21 August at Museum Folkwang

Essen, 20 August 2020 – Between 21 August and 29 November 2020, Museum Folkwang will present a comprehensive exhibition of works by US artist Keith Haring (1958–1990). With his unmistakable motifs of dancing figures, barking dogs and flying saucers, his message was comprehensible to all. This exhibition presents Haring not only as an artist, but also as a performer, activist and organiser who never compromised on innovation and relevance in his quest for a fairer society. Some 200 exhibits are on display, including famous paintings, large-format drawings, early video works, sculptures, photographs and archive material.

The exhibition positions Haring’s oeuvre against the backdrop of global interconnectedness and contemporary social change, themes that the artist began to tackle early on in his career and which he promoted through artistic and commercial strategies alike. While his work is inspired by US popular culture — including the influence of underground culture, space travel, robotics and video games — at a very early stage he developed his own artistic strategy, one that made use of traditional visual media such as drawing and painting, but also incorporated photography, video and performance. His iconic style of painting was inspired by the comics of his youth, Expressionist and contemporary art, Chinese calligraphy and the graffiti of the New York streets. Haring’s work incorporates various influences from art history, philosophy and cultural theory, while deliberately employing ambiguity in his visual language. Haring first made a name for himself with thousands of chalk drawings in the New York subway system; though soon enough, he had secured wider recognition through international exhibitions and high-profile artistic collaborations. Unceasingly fascinated with the phenomena of the post-modern metropolis and its diverse social and cultural milieus, Haring radicalised art’s exodus from the museum that had begun in the 1960s, always true to his conviction that “the public has a right to art”.

Broken up into ten ‘chapters’, the exhibition presents a comprehensive overview of Keith Haring’s artistic work and life. Starting with his early works, the exhibition circuit moves through a city-like structure with alternating spatial arrangements that illustrate the diversity of Haring’s interests and artistic strategies. It was at the School of Visual Arts (1978-1980) that Haring first came into contact with performance art, conceptual art and video art. For Haring, this was a time of experimentation, in which he explored his artistic identity, and it was at this time that he developed his *performance paintings*, which combined painting and action. Sketchbooks, video experiments and collages illustrate this early phase in Haring’s art, in which he came to the conclusion that art had to be direct, unprejudiced and accessible to all.

Museum Folkwang

His involvement in the New York art, club and gay scene enabled Haring to establish a large social network, which he repeatedly drew on for collaborations in art and activism. At the legendary Club 57, a hub for artists in the East Village, Haring organised shows and exhibitions, presenting his works together with those of artists such as Lee Quinones, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jenny Holzer. Haring worked with artists such as Andy Warhol and collaborated with music and fashion icons like Madonna, Grace Jones, Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren. In addition to Haring's idiosyncratic designs for the posters and flyers of events at Club 57, the exhibition also includes videos featuring Madonna or the dancer Bill T. Jones, the bonnet of a taxi that Haring painted together with graffiti artist LA II (Angel Ortiz), or garments from the Westwood and McLaren *Witches* Collection, which Haring helped design. The reconstruction of a black-light installation accompanied by hip-hop music, which Haring designed for an exhibition of large-format paintings at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery from 1983-1984, transports visitors back in time and demonstrates Haring's interest in innovative forms of presenting art.

Rare archival material including leaflets, manuscripts, film recordings and photographs, some of which have never been exhibited before, together with Haring's paintings, illustrate his commitment to social and political issues. Haring's catchy visual language conveys his attitude towards issues such as racism, the threat of nuclear war, rampant capitalism, and oppression through the abuse of religion. His political activism involved the creation of posters, which he designed himself, printed at his own expense, and distributed at demonstrations. Together with the artist group ACT UP, he fought to dispel taboos surrounding AIDS, and advocated for sexual education and investment in medical research. His iconic poster *Ignorance = Fear, Silence = Death* (1989) is still used by ACT UP today. Haring, who lived his homosexuality fiercely and openly and often expressed his "gay pride" in cheerful and affirmative homoerotic works, became increasingly aggressive in his visual language following his own HIV infection. In the series *Set of Ten Drawings*, dated 4 April 1988, he depicted the HIV virus as the macabre personification of "devil sperm". That same year, he worked with the legendary beat writer William S. Burroughs on the series *Apocalypse*, which is one of his most interesting works due to its genesis and formal composition. The 20-part series, newly acquired for the Museum Folkwang collection, is being shown for the first time as part of this exhibition.

Keith Haring died at the age of 31 of AIDS-related complications. As a spokesperson for his generation, Haring's works responded time and again to the pressing issues of his time and lent unique expression to universal concepts such as birth, death, love, war and compassion, creating an oeuvre that remains as relevant today as it was at the time of its production.

Museum Folkwang

The exhibition is being presented in collaboration with the Keith Haring Foundation, the Tate Liverpool, and BOZAR, Centre for Fine Arts Brussels.

The major sponsor of the exhibition at Museum Folkwang is E.ON.
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