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How has art contributed to the visibility and political agency of LGBTQ+ communities?

Illustration has always played a fundamental role in shaping the visibility, identity, and political agency of the LGBTQ+ community. It has functioned as not just as a form of self-expression, but also as a tool for activism, resistance and community formation. During key historical movements like the Stonewall Riots, artists used street art, illustration and photography to challenge the dominant heteronormative narratives at the time and assert a queer presence in public and cultural spaces.

Illustration has contributed to LGBTQ+ visibility and political agency in three key ways. Firstly, it has established accessible visible languages that communicate identity. It has also contributed by responding directly to political crises such as the AIDs epidemic and lastly, it has transformed representation into a form of activism. Focusing on practitioners like Keith Haring as well as other queer art movements, this essay demonstrates how art can be both a cultural expression as well as a political intervention.

The Stonewall Riots of 1969 were a turning point in LGBTQ+ history, driving the modern gay rights movement and influencing the rise of queer visual culture. Following Stonewall, art became a way for LGBTQ+ individuals to assert their identity and visibility in a society that frequently marginalised and erased them. Exhibitions such as *Art After Stonewall* (1969-1989) highlight how artists responded to the movement by producing artworks that explored themes of identity, resistance and liberation (Them, 2019). These works often extended beyond just traditional gallery settings by entering public and activist spaces where visibility itself became a political act.

From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns with Michel Foucault's argument that power is deeply intertwined with discourse and representation (Foucault, 1978). Based on this approach, queer art disrupts the dominant narratives by inserting LGBTQ+ identities into cultural visibility, therefore challenging their historical exclusion. Representation becomes a form of resistance that allows marginalised communities to reclaim authorship over their own identities.

One of the most influential figures in LGBTQ+ visual activism is Keith Haring. Haring was part of the New York street art scene since the 1980s and developed a distinctive art style that is recognisable through bold lines, simplified figures, and vibrant colours. His work demonstrates how accessibility in visual communication can enhance political impact.



Figure 1. Keith Haring, Ignorance = Fear, 1989.

A key example is Ignorance = Fear/ Silence = Death (1989). This piece by Keith Haring is a direct response to the AIDS crisis. The composition consists of three stylised figures covering their eyes, ears, and mouth. This symbolises the societal denial and silence surrounding the epidemic. By combining text with simplified imagery, Haring created a piece that is immediately legible and communicates the message across clearly by exceeding linguistic and cultural barriers. Haring's work reflects what Alex Fialho described as 'radical joy' within queer art. It is an approach that combines celebration with political urgency (Fialho, 2019). Haring juxtaposed the brightly coloured and energetic figures with the dark realities of the epidemic. His style turns complex political issues into accessible imagery which allowed broader public engagement.

Furthermore, Haring strategically positioned his work in public spaces like subway stations which rejected the exclusivity of gallery environments. This highlighted his intention to democratise art and make it accessible to a diverse audience while addressing urgent social issues such as AIDs, racism and inequality. (Whitney Museum of American Art, n.d). Haring's work is an example of how art can function as both communication and activism.



Figure 2. Keith Haring, Safe Sex, 1985.

The AIDS epidemic represented a critical moment in LGBTQ+ history. During this movement, art became an essential tool for activism and protest. Due to the governmental inaction and the widespread stigma surrounding the epidemic, artists and activist groups came together to raise awareness, as well as challenge misinformation and demand a political response. Following Haring's diagnosis with AIDS in 1988, he increasingly focused on AIDS related themes, using his work to confront the public silence and fear. (Myers, 2018). His artwork titled Safe Sex (1985) highlights this. Haring used repeated figures and bold compositions to communicate messages of sexual health and prevention. The use of repetition and pop imagery reinforced the urgency of the message while keeping clarity and accessibility. It functions as a public service announcement and an artistic intervention.



Figure 3. Silence = Death poster designed by the Silence=Death Project, formed in 1985.

In addition to this, collectives such as ACT UP have utilised art and poster campaigns to mobilise activism. Their Silence = Death imagery demonstrates how art can unify communities and function as a tool for political resistance. Their use of symbolism can be linked to Judith Butler's concept of performativity, in which identity is constructed through repeated acts (Butler, 1990). Art contributes to this process by continually representing queer identities, as well as reinforcing their presence within public discourse and challenging dominant narratives.



Figure 4. Keith Haring, Once Upon A Time mural for The Centre (1989).

Beyond activism, queer art has a significant role in shaping spaces of belonging and community identity. Haring's mural *Once Upon a Time* (1989), which was created for the Lesbian and Gay community centre in New York, emphasises this relationship between art and space. The mural features explicit but stylised figures that celebrate queer sexuality and liberation which directly challenged the normative representations of the body. Its placement within a community centre is significant as it highlights that the work functioned not only as an art piece but as a cultural statement embedded within lived experience. As Meyer (2017) notes, the mural reflects a celebratory and unapologetic approach to queer identity that is rooted in the broader context of post-Stonewall liberation. By occupying physical space, these works transformed environments into sites of visibility, resistance and affirmation. This shows that art does not merely represent identity but actively constructs it by shaping how communities see themselves and how they are perceived by others.

While early queer art movements focused on visibility and survival, contemporary LGBTQ+ visual culture expanded on these themes through digital media and online platforms. Today, artists continue to explore identity, intersectionality and representation. They often reach audiences through social media and online spaces. Contemporary illustrators build upon the foundations established by earlier practitioners such as Haring and maintain accessible visual languages while still addressing evolving social and political issues which include gender fluidity and the now more diverse queer identities. Online platforms have allowed queer voices to express themselves and raise awareness as well as build community internationally. As a result, art continues to function as a critical tool for both visibility and activism in modern times.

After they play lotto. It is Saturday evening after all, and on Saturdays Jenny is always allowed to stay up late. If they are not going out, she is also allowed to decide what they all do.

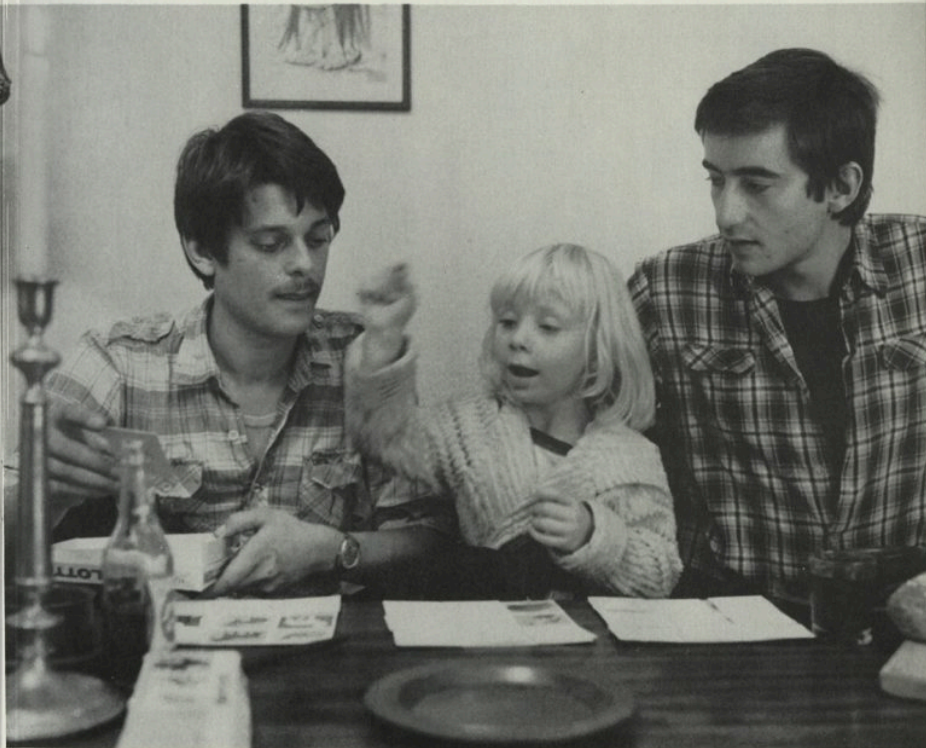
"My turn first," says Jenny.

"No, I am going first," says Eric, "then you."

"Okay," says Jenny. "Then it is Martin's turn after mine."

After a long time playing, Eric says it is time to stop. Then he reads a book instead.

Jenny is so sleepy she can hardly keep her eyes open until the end of the book. And she thinks it is nice being carried to bed and tucked up with her doll, Anne.



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Figure 5. Page 29 Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin Gay Men's Press, 1983.

While queer art has functioned as a tool for empowerment, it has also been challenged and suppressed. This is most evident within conservative political movements from the 1980s. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, 'family values' campaigns were created to paint LGBTQ+ representation as a threat to children and social stability. An example of this is the children's book 'Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin', which was one of the first illustrated texts that depicted a child living with a same sex couple. The book's portrayal of domestic queer life was relatively neutral, and yet it was condemned by conservative groups and labelled as propaganda, especially during the debates surrounding Section 28 in the UK, which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality in schools (Weeks, 2007). This shows that art which was

non-explicit, unlike Harings, was still perceived as politically dangerous when made visible and accessible.

The book's soft, illustrative style photographs and focus on normal domestic scenes directly challenged the notion that queer identities were inherently radical or disruptive. It was exactly this normalisation that was perceived as a threat to conservative groups who viewed such imagery as being capable of influencing young audiences and being a danger to them. Jeffrey Weeks argued that these moral panics were rooted in fears over shifting social norms and the destabilisation of traditional family structures (Weeks, 2007). This highlights that visual representation itself can be perceived as a form of political agency and reinforces the argument that queer art contributed to the visibility of LGBTQ+ communities and aided in the gay rights movement.

Overall, illustration has played a fundamental role in the visibility and political agency of LGBTQ+ communities. From the aftermath of the Stonewall Riots to the AIDS crisis and to today's digital spaces, artists have used illustration and visual language to challenge marginalisation as well as communicate political messages and construct collective identity by utilising accessible imagery, public engagement and activism. Practitioners such as Keith Haring have demonstrated how art can operate as a form of resistance and be used to raise awareness about political and social issues. Their work emphasises how important and impactful visibility is, not just for the purpose of representation but also as a means of asserting existence and influencing societal discourse. Ultimately, queer art is both a reflection of lived experiences and a catalyst for social change. It continues to shape the ways that LGBTQ+ identities are understood and represented.

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