

Question 2- Within a given time period, select what could be considered high and low cultural artefacts. Discuss these, taking into consideration the social, political and historical context.

High and Low Cultural Artefacts
Graffiti, Keith Haring and Commercialism

The 1980s was a decade that brought with it a multitude of defining moments, from the murder of John Lennon to the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany. Along with these significant moments in our history, the 1980s also brought along with it a mass of cultural artefacts. With the first commercial cell phone call being made in 1983 and the first Apple Macintosh computer being introduced by Steve Jobs in 1984, the 'Information Age', as the period between 1950s and late 1970s is commonly known, was coming to an end, and the new era of telecommunications was beginning. As well as technological advances, the 1980s also brought with it several significantly historical moments in art history and an abundance of cultural artefacts, both high and low culture. In this essay, I will be discussing some of these artistic cultural artefacts, the work of the original graffiti artist, Cornbread, and Keith Haring in particular, and whether they could be considered of high or low cultural status, taking the social, political and historical climate of the time into consideration. (Author Unknown; 2013; *The 80s Timeline*.)

The act of creating these individual pieces of street art, which could be argued to just be random acts of vandalism by those less in favour of the arts, is an art form that has been forever expanding and changing since 1967 when street artist 'Cornbread' began to tag the walls of Philadelphia to get the attention of a girl. And at the time, it was not considered to be an art form, rather a nuisance. Because of the widespread attraction to this new art form, street artists began to tag their own names, or pseudonyms, on subway cars. Author Tristan Manco, he writes- 'Reclaiming the city space is often seen by graffiti artists as their main mission, either as a reaction against consumerist advertising or a need to make a personal mark on their environment' (Manco, 2004). He notes that the act of tagging names onto public property such as subway cars was done as an act of marking their territory. As more and more subway cars became inundated with the names of street artists and their own imagery, in 1972 the then Mayor Lindsay of New York City called for the decommission of the tagged subway cars with the last one being removed from service in 1989. However, some graffiti can still be seen on some of the subway cars of New York, eroded with acid in attempt to clean away the paint, almost serving as a reminder of the street artists of the past and perhaps even the originators of the graffiti movement. As a cultural artefact, these worn away examples of graffiti are almost certainly to be considered a low cultural artefact as they are reminiscent of a time where graffiti was only then becoming popular within youth culture and was used to mark territory. (Ehrlich, D; Ehrlich, G- 2006)

Figure 1 depicts a young boy running along the tops of what appears to be decommissioned subway trains, specifically in the Bronx borough of New York City. At the time of the photograph being taken, this particular area of New York City was rife with drug users as it became the worst affected area when the use of crack cocaine became very prevalent. Being a fairly deprived area at the time, with whole blocks suffering from a series of arson attacks and the previous president Ronald Reagan withholding funding for New York City, a lot of the graffiti on these subway cars could be seen as a way of reclaiming public spaces through a form of creative aggression. In the book 'Spray it Loud' by Jill Posner, a short sentence without credit in a chapter on the homeless situation in Islington, London, and the graffiti that followed in response, reads- 'Graffiti was a very public way of voicing discontent, along with the petitions and leaflets' (Posner, 1982). She indicates that graffiti is not just simple scrawled writing sprayed on a brick wall, it can carry a message of frustration. In the case of the graffiti on the subway cars, it was more than likely targeted towards the government. Because of the social, historical and political climate of the 1980s, the way the subway graffiti was



Cooper, M (1983) *Boy Running on Top of Train, CC Yard, Bronx* [fig 1]

used to mark their own environment and territory and it's mass appeal within the lower class and youth culture, the graffitied subway cars could be considered a low cultural artefact.

Born on the 4th of May, 1958, in Reading, Pennsylvania, Keith Haring was a pop art and graffiti artist who gained popularity in the 1980s from his spontaneous line drawings, often featuring multiple figures in abstract, dancery poses. These pieces of artwork, which were often drawn very quickly and on the black paper of the blank unused advertising panels in the train stations using white chalk, would cause Haring to have trouble with the local police and subsequently be arrested for vandalism. However, between 1980 and 1989, Haring began to gain popularity and began to gain public recognition, notably from multiple solo and group exhibitions- including his critically acclaimed 1982



Keith Haring in front of Spectacolor Billboard (1982) [fig2]

one-man exhibition at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York City, New York. He would also be commissioned to work on public projects including the Spectacolor billboard in Times Square, New York City, where a short 30 second animation was displayed. [See fig 2] (The Keith Haring Foundation, date unknown)

If Haring's career was to be defined as either a low cultural artefact or high cultural artefact at this stage, it would certainly be considered to be of high cultural status. This is due to his one-man exhibition receiving critical acclaim and in turn society deemed his work to be of exemplary artistic value. Despite not having any form of literal meaning, his use of signs and iconography in work became universally discernible and he bridged the gap between graffiti artists and the art establishment and the enthusiasts in the higher social classes.

[See Fig 3] One example of Haring's work that has become a cultural artefact in its own right is his mural on the Berlin Wall. Beginning construction in 1961 under the order of the German Democratic Republic, the Berlin Wall cut West Berlin from East Germany, where a communist system had been established- causing 2.6 million Germans to escape to West Germany, where life was said to be easier. Until its partial demolition under the direction of the government in 1989, an estimated 5000 escapees attempted to climb over the wall, with a total of 239 of these attempts resulting in death. In 1986, Haring was invited to Berlin by Rainer Hildebrandt, the Berlin Wall Museum directors part of a competition titled 'Overcoming the Wall by Painting Over the Wall'. Over the course of 6 hours, Haring painted the large mural spanning a colossal 350 foot of the Berlin Wall with his iconic figures in the red, black and yellow- in keeping of the colour scheme of the German flag. The mural itself features his human figures interlocked with their hands and feet, resembling peace, community and the that East Berliners and the West would merge once again. Overwhelmed by public pressure, parts of the Berlin Wall were torn down under the order of the government in 1989 and the occupants of East Berlin were free to travel to the rest of Germany once more. Unfortunately, in the process of the destruction of parts of the wall, Haring's mural was also destroyed. With no trace of Haring's thought-provoking mural left, only photographs of this example of graffiti survive. However, the permanence of the mural was apparently not of the most importance to Haring. Writing in his diary in 1987, of his mural on the Berlin Wall and of his previous work, Haring wrote:

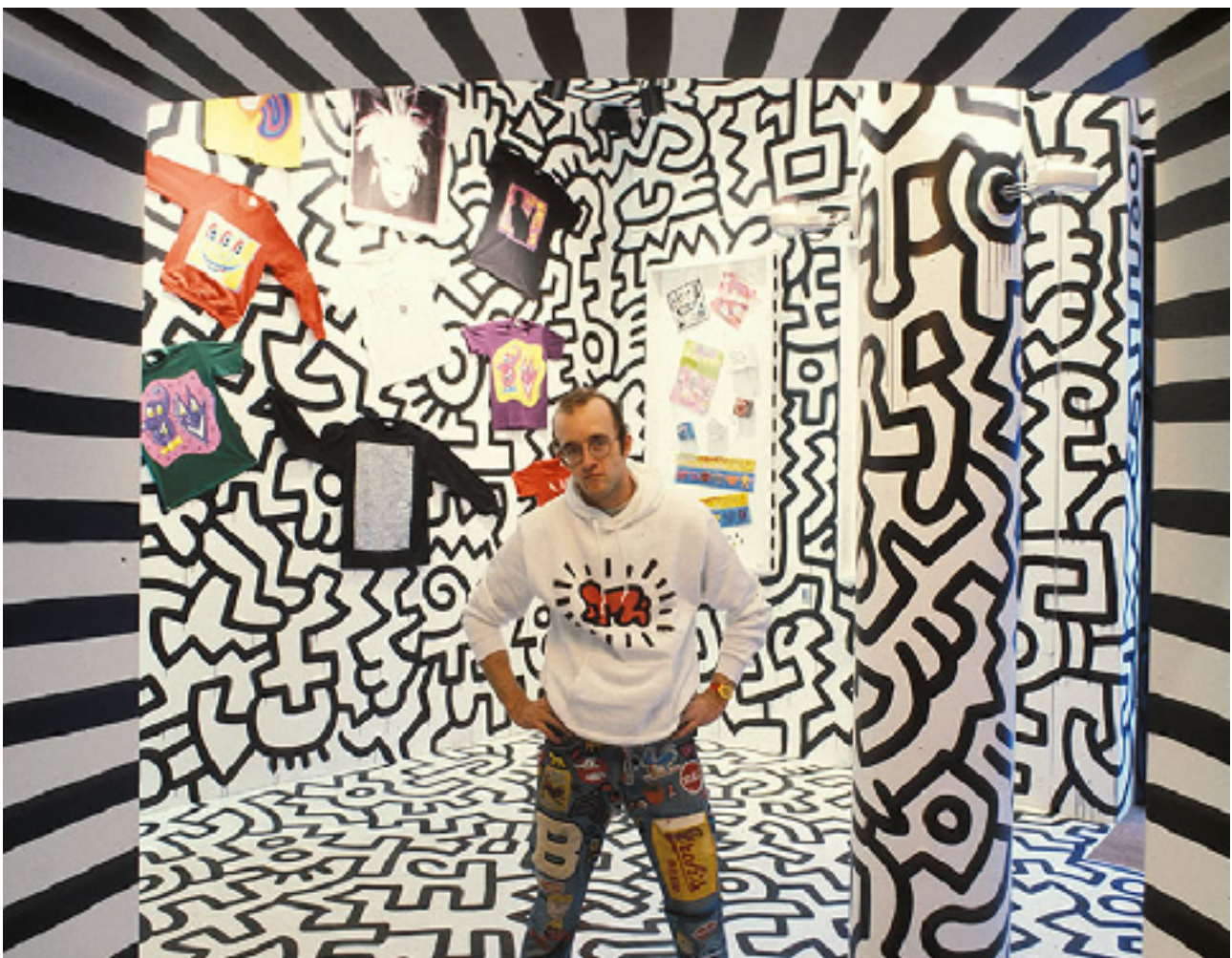


Heinz J. Kuzdas (1986) Section of Haring's mural, Berlin Wall [fig 3]

'If it is not regarded as 'sacred' and 'valuable', then I can paint without inhibition, and experience the interaction of lines and shapes. I can paint spontaneously without worrying if it looks 'good'; and I can let my movement and my instant reaction/response control the piece, control my energy (if there is any control at all) ... It is temporary and its permanency is unimportant. Its existence is already established. It can be made permanent by the camera.' (*Graffiti and the Critical Power of Urban Space*, Pugh, 2015)

In this diary entry, Haring explains the thought process of his work- that there is no thought. By painting spontaneously and allowing himself to paint without any form of suppression or worry of permanency, he was able to create a piece of street art. Though the line, if there is any, between graffiti and street art is blurred, the message of unification as well as the amount of recognition it received as an example of exemplary art would definitely qualify Haring's mural to be classed as high cultural artefact. Also, whereas the original street and graffiti had the intent of claiming space and fighting the established government, Haring's mural on the Berlin Wall carries a message of unity and peace so carries a different intent. However, taking the social and political context into consideration, the message of peace has an underlying level of defiance, due to the amount of bravery it would have taken to paint directly onto such an intimidating structure, carrying the attitude of the original graffiti artists such as Cornbread into the mural.

In April of 1986, Haring opened a small store in Soho, New York called the 'Pop Shop', [fig 4] where t-shirts, buttons, posters and badges featuring his work. With the support from his mentors, including iconic Pop Artist Andy Warhol, Haring treated Pop Shop as a sort of continuation of his work, providing various products at a low cost allowing people from all backgrounds to have accessibility to his work. Inside Pop Shop, the walls and ceilings were covered entirely in Haring's famous linework, almost making the shop itself a functioning shop combined with an installation



Tsng Kwong Chi, (1986), *Keith Haring inside his NYC 'Pop Shop'* [fig 4].

art piece. Despite being a success, it could be argued that by creating a shop in which the mass public can purchase mass produced t-shirts and trinkets goes against the very idea of graffiti and its original message against capitalism.

Writing in The New York Times, now editor-in-chief of Avenue Magazine, Michael Gross wrote:

‘Mr. Haring used to offer his art free on subway walls. Now he sells it for five-figure sums. Mr. Haring also used to give away his pins, jigsaw puzzles and comic books, which are now for sale at the shop.’ (Dellinger, date unknown)

Though making money was not Haring’s goal before he had opened Pop Shop, the fact that he was selling pieces of work for large amounts of money that he would have previously created in public spaces for passers-by to enjoy and engage with has an air of hypocrisy when considering his artistic roots in the graffiti and street art movement. While he was successful in engaging with the public, the mass appeal of the Pop Shop and the mass production of his merchandise would lead to the conclusion that Pop Shop could be classed as a low cultural artefact.

To conclude, it is clear that the graffiti movement which started in 1967 in Philadelphia with Cornbread has held its status, as it is still being written and discussed about today, and whether Haring’s impact was of low cultural impact or a high cultural product in the grand scheme of his career is unimportant, as his presence is still felt in the thousands of street art and graffiti of inspired artists worldwide.

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[fig 2] *Keith Haring in front of Spectacolor Billboard* (1982)

Courtesy of the estate of Keith Haring

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[fig 3] Heinz J. Kuzdas (1986) *Section of Haring's mural, Berlin Wall* [fig 3]

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