

**Keith Haring**





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## **Keith Haring**

Haring's visual language and his  
ability to communicate his messages  
to a mass audience.

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design  
and Complementary Studies in Candidacy  
for the Degree of BDes of Design in Visual Communications.



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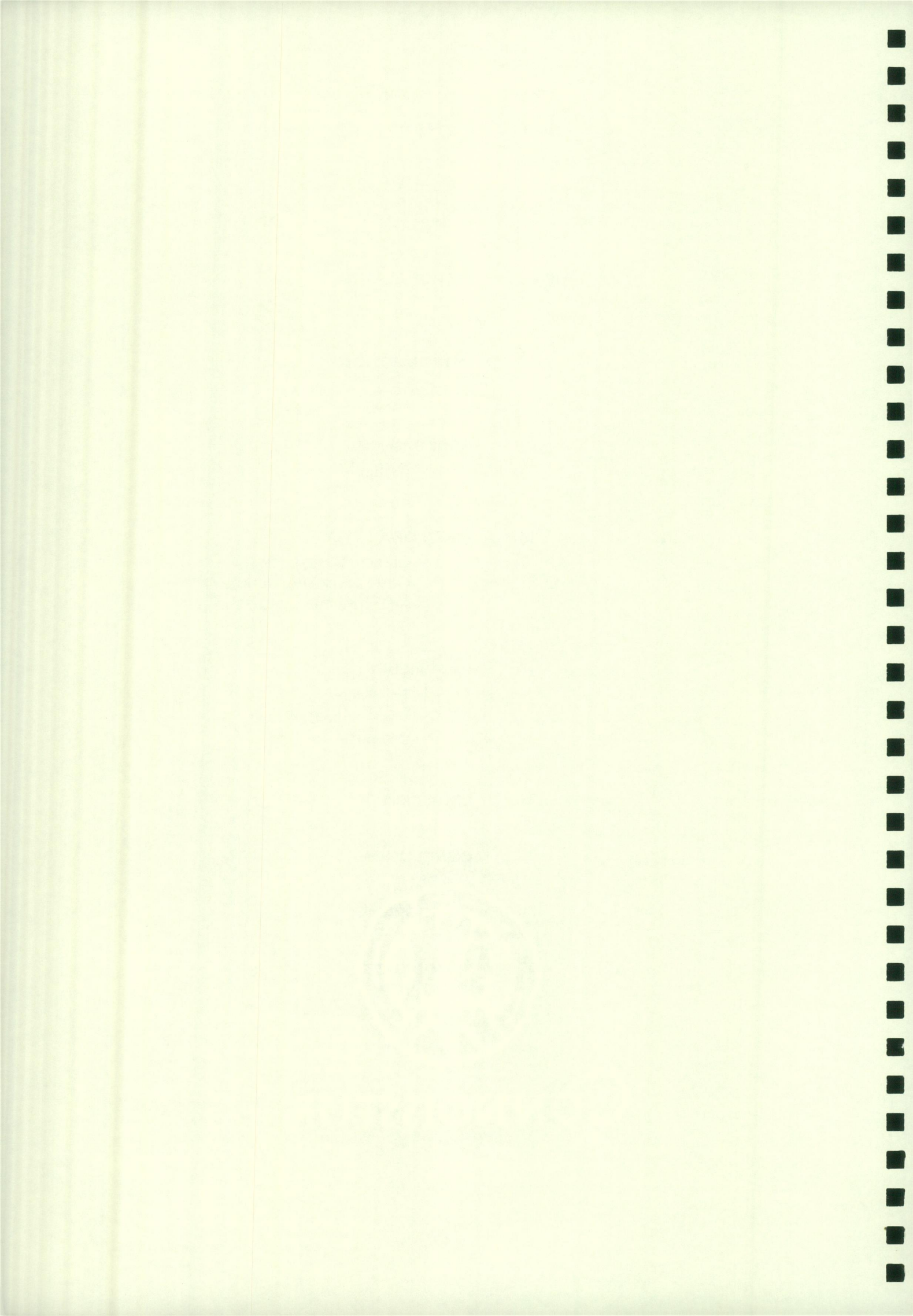
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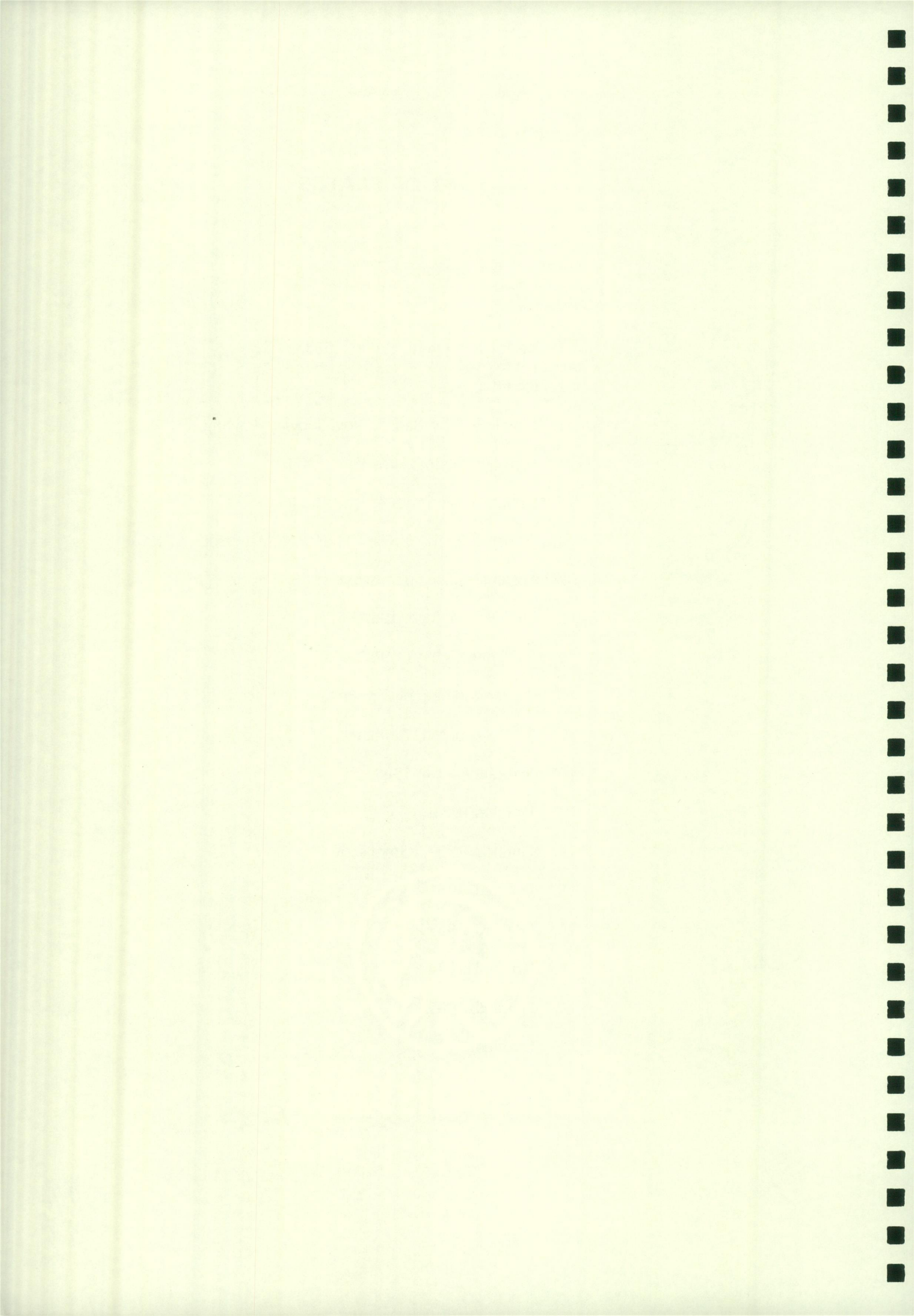


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## INTRODUCTION

Joy, despair, vulnerability, power, birth, death, and fear are some of the themes which are common in Keith Haring's work (Fig. 1). His figures tell the story of what is intrinsically human and reflect popular American culture. Figures clutch each other fearfully, others are playful, throwing their arms in the air for joy as they dance across the picture and others huddle together as if afraid of outer space and power. The figures manage to be constantly provocative, and disturbing.

My first encounter with these anonymous, stick like figures, which remind me of ancient hieroglyphs, was on a T-shirt which I bought in a market in England. I found myself immediately drawn to the simplicity of the figure. This was the start of my journey of discovery of a whole new world; the world of Keith Haring.

In my opinion Keith Haring is both a great painter and graphic artist. He has made an immense contribution to American art, graphic art and American popular culture. His work has been an inspiration for many contemporary graphic artists. Haring was very interested in Semiotics - The science of analyzing signs and symbols and what they represent. Through his studies and his obsession with drawing he created his own visual, pictorial language of signs and symbols. These images helped break down many of the language barriers between popular culture and high art. His visual language is instantly recognizable and comprehensible. Very few people know him by name but nearly all of them recognize his symbols. Although it is three years since he died from AIDS, his images are still imprinted in the minds of the general public.

After researching and examining most of his work I have found his visual language and his ability to communicate with the general public most interesting.

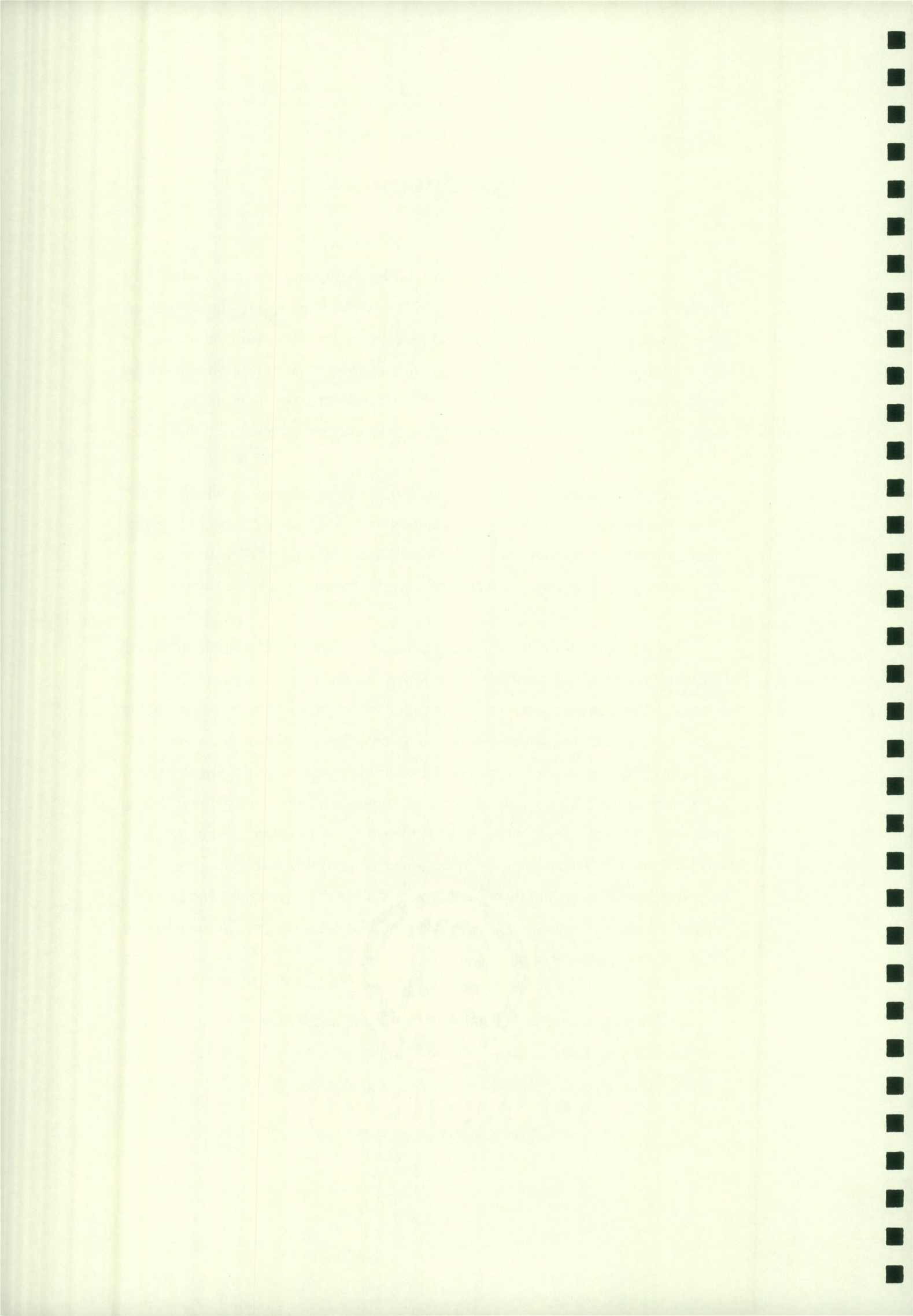
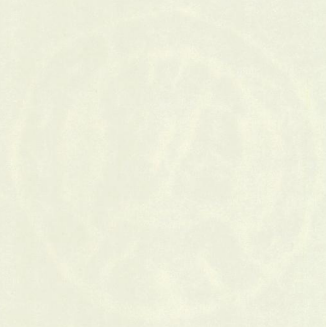
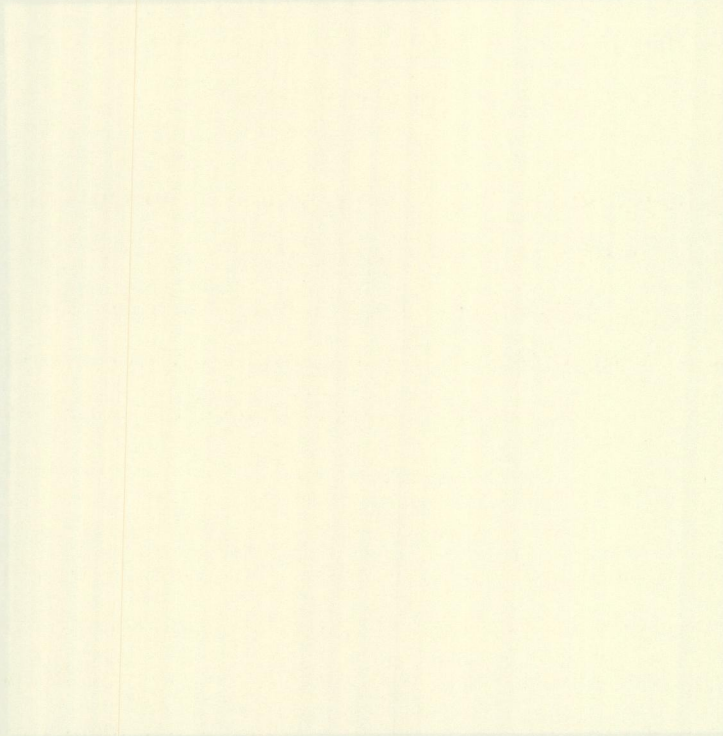
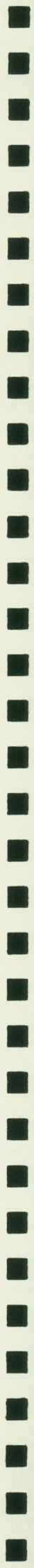




Fig. 1 Keith Haring in his studio, 1983.



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The eighties saw a growing interest in the relationship of the artist to society. In an age of drug abuse, AIDS and the growth of science and technology, Haring felt the need to make social statements. He saw the faults within society, thus many of his images are triggered off by his surroundings.

The eighties also saw the growth of graffiti art in the streets of New York. Unlike other artists Haring didn't go through the same streamline system from art college to the galleries and museums. Instead he found the freedom to express himself in the streets, after being inspired by the graffiti writers. Stephan Westfall in an article in Art Journal states that "Haring was totally Graphic".

The main objective of this thesis is to discuss Haring's work in terms of his graphic imagery and symbols showing their affect on society. The images have become a form of identity, a weapon to criticize and provoke the general public. Haring had a gift for communicating, which was sometimes witty and appealing and at other times cynical, abusive and insensitive.

Chapter One gives a brief outline of Haring's background and what was happening in New York, concentrating on the growth of Graffiti in the street, which had a huge influence on Haring's work. In Chapter Two I propose to discuss the development of his unique style and his ability to visually communicate and also to explore some of this commercial art, such as designing logos, AIDS awareness posters and billboards. Chapter Three deals with Haring's exploitation of the mass media, his obsession with television and computers, which he used to extend his creative abilities and to reach a mass audience, confronting them about their fear of computers and television. In Chapter Four I will discuss the homoerotic imagery in Haring's work. His aim through his erotic drawings is to make society aware of homosexuality, he achieves this aim by bringing homosexuality out into the open in the hope that people will begin to accept it into society.





My examination of Haring's life and work will show that he is indeed a great graphic artist in that he succeeded in dealing with and extending some of the major concerns of the twentieth century to a huge range of people who might otherwise, never become aware of them.



## Chapter One - BACKGROUND

Keith Haring was born in 1958 and lived in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. Encouraged to draw at an early age by his father, Haring developed a growing interest in line drawing. His childhood was taken up with drawing cartoon images, some were images he found in the comic books he collected and others derived from his own imagination, consisting of abstract flowing patterns in pen and ink. He watched a lot of television; Walt Disney cartoons and programmes like "The Addams Family" and "The Munsters". The bulk of his later work is directly linked with these experiences as a child. The drawing technique and experiments he carried out as a child were all used later in his work when he became a professional artist.

As an adolescent he was rebellious, getting involved with the Jesus movement, but as time wore on he began to lose faith in it. Many religious images can be found in his work but "they're used in a more cynical way to show how manipulative those beliefs and images can be". (Gruen, 1991, p. 16.). While he was losing faith in religion he discovered drugs and music. He wanted is freedom and grew quickly apart from his family, feeling suffocated by his home town. After completing school in 1976 he travelled to Pittsburgh to study commercial art because his parents believed it was the only way he would make a living from art, but he grew tired of it quickly, and left to travel around America. Finally he returned to Pittsburgh to work in the Art and Craft Centre; there he used every facility that was available to continue his own art work.

In 1978 he decided to return to college, enrolling in the School of Visual Art in New York. It was while he was there that he became exposed to the work of Pierre Alechinsky, Jean Dubuffet, Jackson Pollack and the writer William Burroughs. These artists were using cartoon images and worked with great spontaneity. Haring was working in a similar way. His close friend Kenny Scarfe who was making sculptures from found rubbish, mainly television sets



encouraged Haring to use video and performance art in his work. The turning point was when Haring noticed Graffiti art in the streets of New York.

### **Graffiti**

Graffiti was a feature of the streets of New York for many decades, but it wasn't until the seventies that Graffiti Art was taken seriously. Many people saw graffiti in the environment as an act of vandalism which defaced public property. It symbolised 'public disorder, social anarchy, moral breakdown and decay'. (Gablik, 1982, p. 64). People felt intimidated by the messages scratched aggressively onto the walls and subway trains. The messages scrawled on public places were often crude and considered to be a public offense.

At this time also, many middle class New York children were writing their names, or nicknames, with street numbers on the neighbourhood walls. The names became their tags, written in a stylised way which later became their signature. Some writers were proclaiming social and political views, but many of them were simply creating an identity for themselves by constantly writing their tags in many stylised versions on the insides and exteriors (Fig. 2) of subway trains. While the public felt it was getting out of hand, the Transit Authorities were trying to regain social order by organising a military programme to put a stop to the graffiti writing. Guard men with dogs were trained to arrest anyone caught painting or writing in the subway stations at night. Huge amounts of money were spent to buy solvents which were used to clean down the trains that had been hit with graffiti tags. (Gablik, 1982, p.66).

By the mid seventies graffiti was evolving rapidly, writers were covering the whole sides of subway trains using spray can paint and magic markers which could be applied quickly. A new form of artistic expression and a spirit of freedom were emerging from the streets. Images found in comic books were finding their way onto the sides of trains, bringing the trains to life with bright





Fig. 2 Graffiti tags.

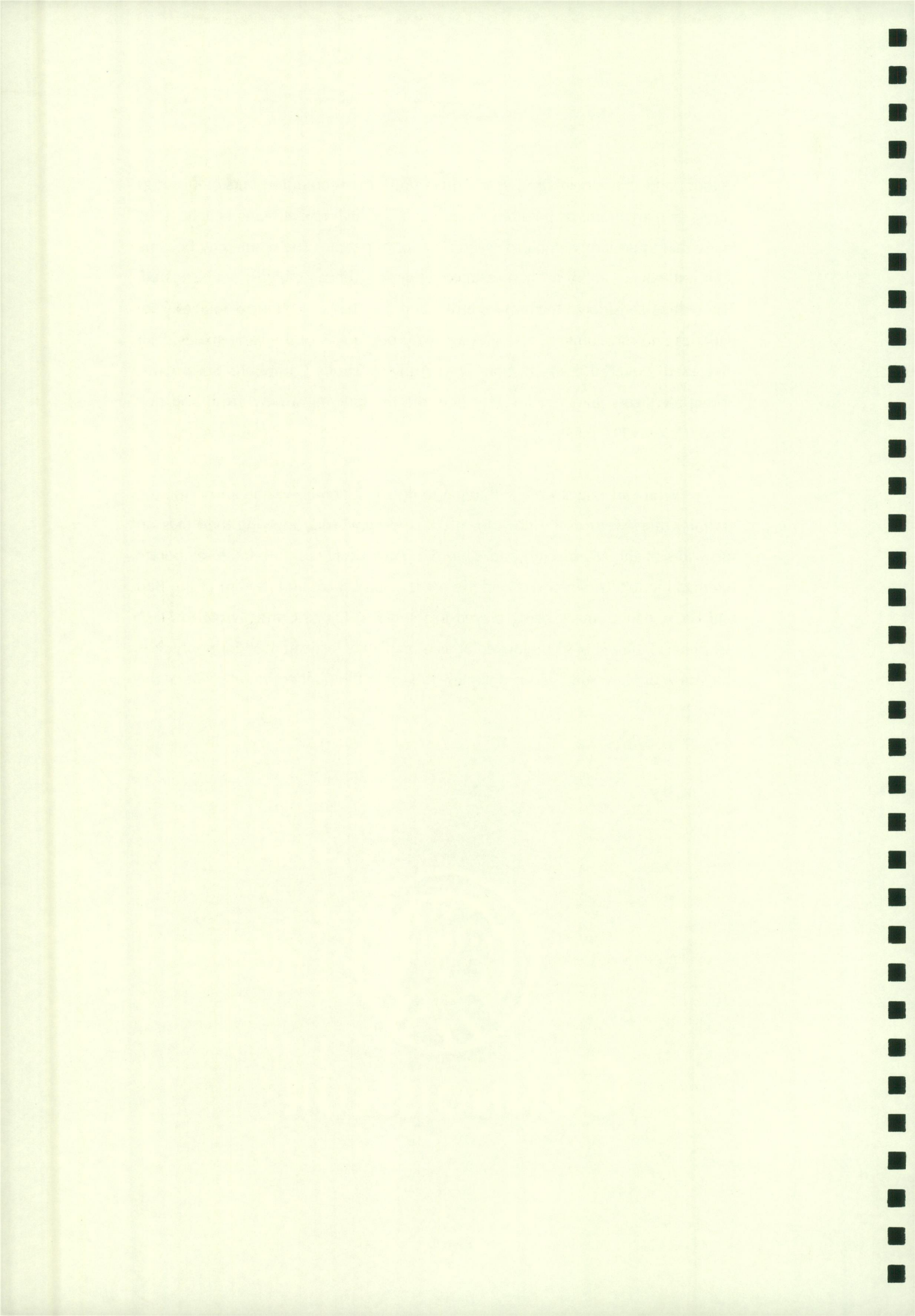
Faint, illegible text on a yellowed page, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side. The text is arranged in several paragraphs and is too light to transcribe accurately.





colours and cartoon images. The writers drew multi-coloured versions of tags across as many trains as possible regardless of the high risk of being caught. They knew that their efforts would be seen by a lot of people. The whole city became their audience. Graffiti art had reached its peak. It became highly sophisticated. The writers considered themselves artists and they began to borrow images from galleries and museums, selecting imagery by pop artists of the early sixties. 'Fab Five Fred' covered a whole train with Andy Warhol's Campbells Soup cans. Young teenagers gave the imagery new life by applying a new, fresh and raw look. (Gruen, 1991, p.65).

While art critics were still trying to decide if graffiti was an art or not, the graffiti writers were in the downtown clubs of New York applying their tags on the walls of the Mudd club and Club 57. They designed ambitious, elaborate interlocking letters, which echoed the energy, spirit, beat and rhythm of the Rap and Break dance music being played in the clubs. Diego Cortes wrote in *Flash Art* that "Graffiti should be looked at as a highly sophisticated art form which is the image of New York, and is definitely the soul of the underground scene at the moment".



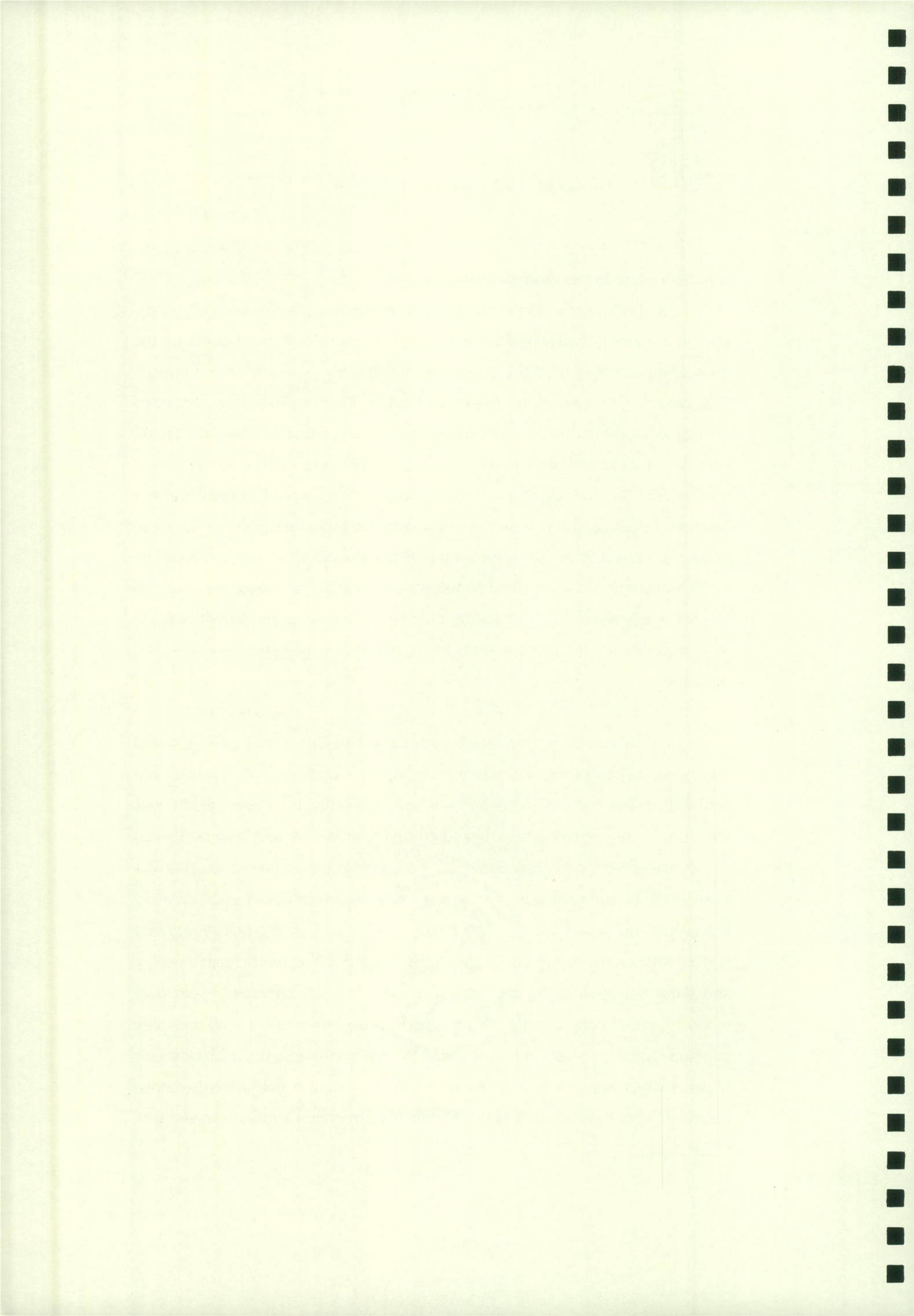


## Chapter Two - BIRTH OF A STYLE

### **Graffiti's place in the commercial art world**

In, 1979 Graffiti began to abandon its offensive reputation and emerge from the underground world as new art. This emergence was helped by the "Times Square Show" in 1980, which was organised by the Collaborative Project. This project had been set up by two artist Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis four years previously to exhibit local artist's work. Art dealers started to notice the graffiti writers and the potential for making a profit. Graffiti writers became sought after. Shops were opened which sold graffiti posters, T-shirts and buttons. Graffiti became a commodity in New York. The graphic spontaneity and vulgarity of graffiti was adopted by the advertising industry. Rock bands were promoted by the use of the graffiti style. Band names were written using spray can paint. This created a rebellious, lively, amusing imagery for fans to enjoy. Graffiti was no longer outside art. It was now firmly integrated into society and the established art world.

While graffiti writers were gaining access up to the galleries and museums, Keith Haring was descending into the underground world of the subways to seek out and create his own unique identity. For Haring graffiti was like "condensed poetry which would stop you in your tracks and make you think" (Gruen, 1991, p.52). Haring wanted his art to have the same effect. This was the start of Haring creating his own visual language, which became accessible to the general public on a daily basis. Haring had been hanging out with graffiti writer in the clubs; through observing, listening and seeing their creative energy and skills, he was inspired and he applied some of their principles to his own work. He didn't copy directly what the street writers were doing with the spray paint on hard metal; instead Haring chose to draw on the soft, blank black sheets of paper which are used in the subways to cover over out of date advertisements. To compliment the soft black paper, Haring used the non-permanent medium of white chalk.

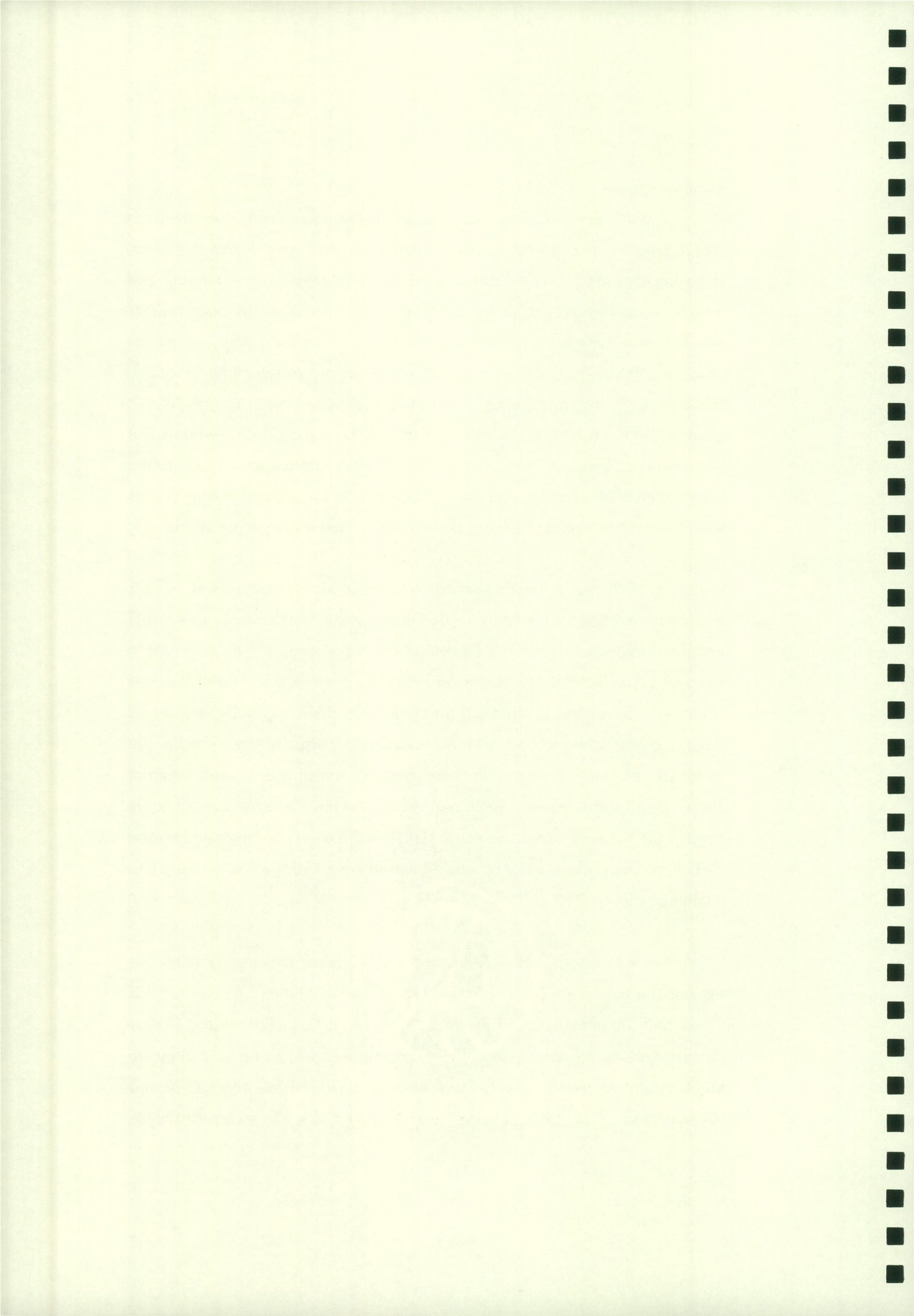


## Graphic Design

Graphic designers aim is to be persuasive or informative. They are given design problems from clients to solve. A design derives from that idea. A graphic designer uses his analytical judgment to produce layouts by arranging and moving visual elements around to produce a pleasing image. He must consider space, colour, typography and image. All these elements should harmonize to produce a good design. He uses devices like enlarging, exaggerating, grouping, isolating, distorting, rearranging or repeating images and type. The rest of this chapter shows how Haring adapted his graphic knowledge to his work. I will draw parallels between the way a graphic designer approaches an idea to the way Haring works. In addition I will discuss many of the graphic design projects that he completed during his life in order to inform and make people aware.

In 1979 Haring briefly studied commercial art in Pittsburgh. It was his foundation training for his future work. He had a good understanding of visual communication and a good eye for design, but at no stage did he really want to become a Graphic designer. He preferred to have the freedom to travel between street art, fine art and commercial art combining elements randomly from all three to create his unique art form. Not everybody is visually literate and aware so he created his own visual non-verbal language which was a combination of simple signs and symbols. Visual communication has the advantage of going beyond the scope of words. His quest was to find a universal language because he believed that "the point of making art was to communicate and contribute to a culture", (Celant, 1992, p. 52).

His visual signs and symbols consisted of outline drawings of stick- like figures. The basic form is one of arms, legs and head. Haring's figures have all come from the same mould. They are impersonal, as he gives no clues to their character or sex; movement and gestures are the only devices he uses. They are faceless and anonymous, reflecting perhaps much of the anonymity and depersonalisation of modern urban life. By bringing his art into society he enable



his audience to become aware of their environment. He understood that his audience would only get a glimpse of the images as they rushed to catch the next train, so he used the simple images, and repeated them over and over again. The images made a direct impact on the commuters. The same symbols express many different ideas by his use of juxtaposition, and they become a common language between Haring and his viewers.

### **Visual Identity**

Haring's images of a crawling baby, a barking dog, and dancing figures became his tag, his signature, (Fig. 3). He didn't sign his drawings but drew a baby instead. People were curious to know who was drawing these images which were constantly in their minds. His images functioned as a logo and trademark because the viewer recognised them, but very few knew that it was Keith Haring who had drawn the symbols. Yet indirectly they became a form of advertisement for the work he was doing in the galleries and museums. He didn't want his art to be seen only by people who visit museums. He wanted to share it with everybody so he brought it to them via the subway. "Art lives through the imagination of people who are seeing it. It has become increasingly clear to me that art is not an elitist activity reserved for the appreciation of a few, but for everyone". (Haring, Keith, *Flash Art*, March 1984, p.21). Haring's subway drawings were beside other advertisements so it appeared that his drawings were advertising something. The advert told the viewer exactly what it meant, but the content of Haring's drawings was sometimes ambiguous and unclear, wide open to interpretation. He was leaving something for the viewer to do, provoking them to look and remember. People had to decide for themselves what the drawing meant, yet the message is so simple it can scarcely be misunderstood. (Rubell, 1990, pp. 45-46.).

The use of colour is important in Haring's drawings. The background is black. Black traditionally is associated with death, depression, mystery, fear and magic. Haring rebelled against these conventional ideas by drawing on the black





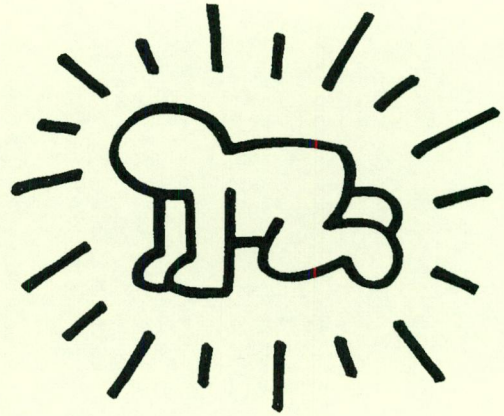


Fig. 3 Crawling baby, 1983.



Fig. 3 Barking dog, 1983.



panels. Since black's companion colour is white he used white chalk. White traditionally represents happiness, light and life. Haring creates a tension between black and white by the opposing large areas of black to small sharp areas of the white lines. The surrounding large black spaces help to separate the drawing from the bombarding advertisements, which have become its competitors. In a multicoloured world these neutral black and white drawings are a freshness to the eye of the commuter.

Haring used devices commonly used by graphic designers to produce a good design. Haring repeated, enlarged and rearranged his symbols. He drew the symbols in different arrangements on as many black panels as he could find. A graphic designer will do a number of different layouts, moving elements around the page until he finds a suitable layout that harmonises all contrasting elements. The designer will spend a lot of time analysing the layout and then he will show them to his client. The client will pick the one that solves the given problem. It could be said that Haring also produces a number of different layouts of the same idea, but he spends little time analysing the design to find mistakes. The commuters become his client. Many viewers would stop Haring while he worked and start to discuss the meaning of the drawing with him. This was how he got the majority of feed back from the general public. (Rand, 1985, p.56).

Another image of communication in Haring's drawings is the telephone. *Untitled Subway drawing*, 1981, shows a telephone which has its receiver left off the hook, (Fig. 4). Telephones are a means of communication to anybody anywhere in the world. Haring could be implying that people are not listening properly to the problems that are in their society and in the world. People tend to ignore problems in the hope that they will go away and so people do nothing. Haring was constantly making statements, criticising culture, probing society, asking questions and looking at human life. The drawings were a day to day commentary on happenings in New York, a city, where because of its vast size, sheer numbers of people and speed, real listening and active communication become virtually impossible.



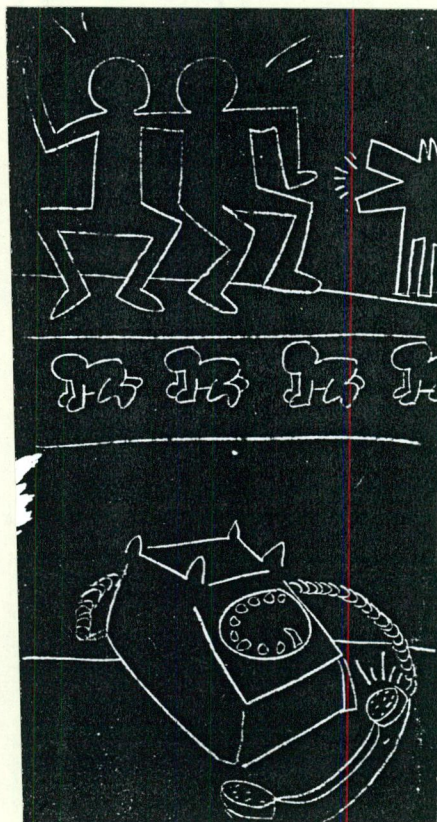
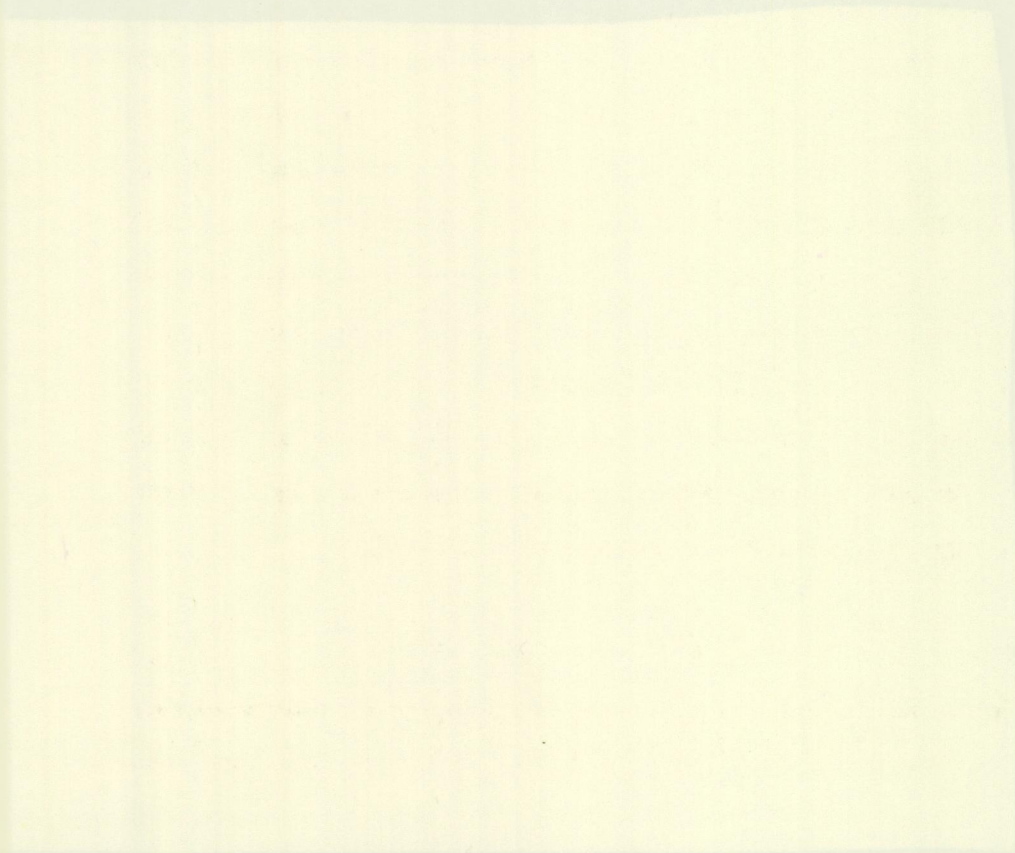
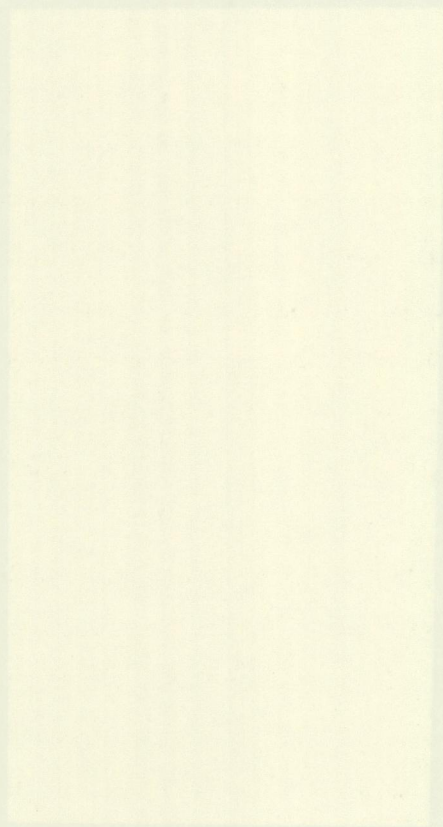


Fig. 4 Subway drawing, New York, 1983.



Fig. 5 Untitled (Free South Africa), 1984.

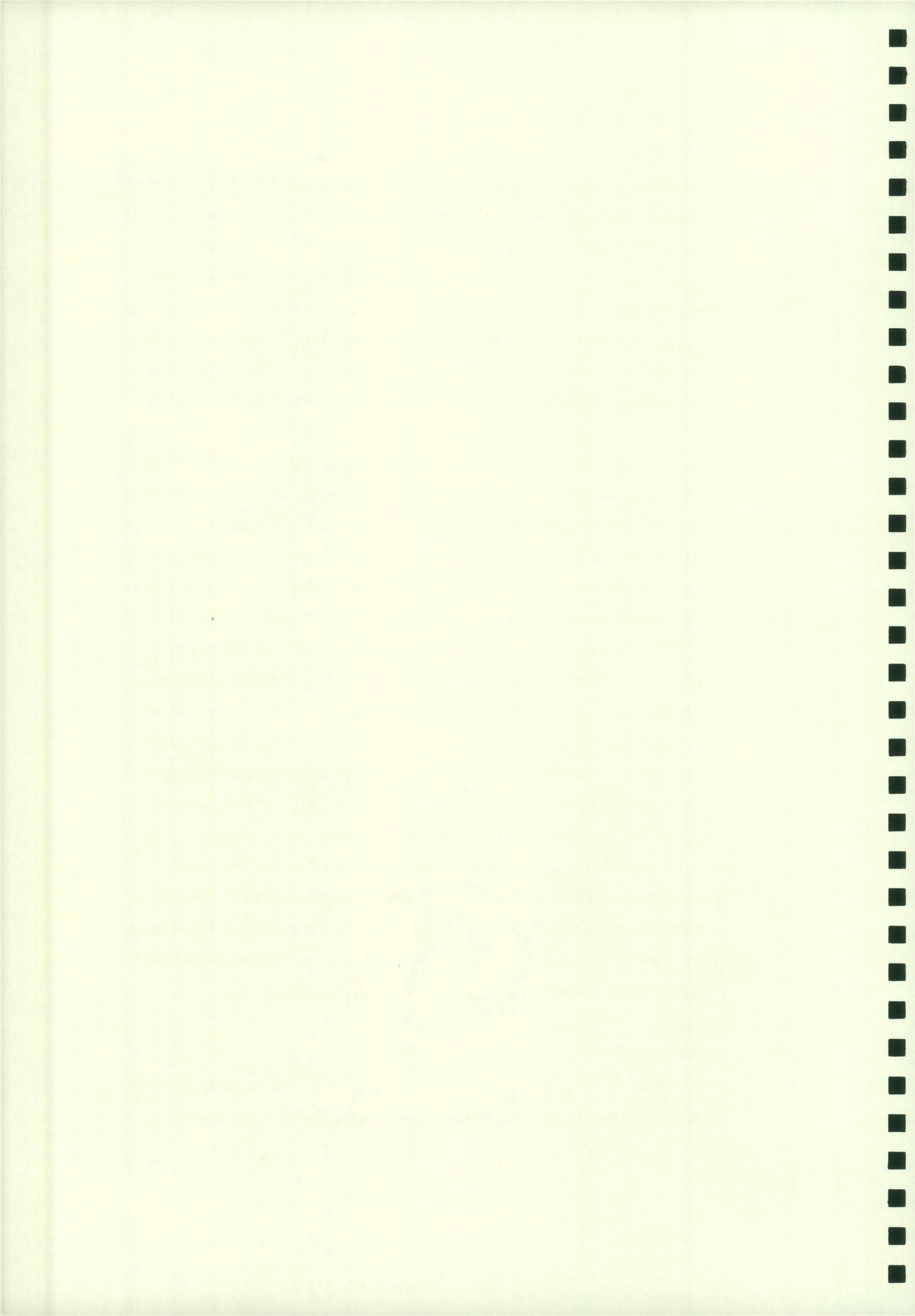


Haring involved himself with social issues and causes. The fear of nuclear war, apartheid, drug abuse and the spread of the AIDS virus, were high on his list. He used his graphic ability to make his views known to the general public. A little white figure holds a rope which is tied around the neck of a black person who is many times bigger than the white person, (Fig. 5). Haring is simply saying that white men treat black people like dogs but black people refuse to be treated in this way and will assert themselves. His images surrounding the stage at Wembley Stadium for the Mandela concert in 1988 emphasise further this theme.

In 1985, he designed a billboard poster to advertise an exhibition in the Phoenix Museum. The design consisted of figures dancing with great energy and excitement over the page and hand written lettering to say where and when the exhibition was being held. Instead of using traditional typeface, the hand drawn type is in harmony with the figures. Each element is integrally related and is in harmony with the whole idea, expressing the mood and spirit of the exhibition. Similar treatment is given to his billboard design for the Boward Country Human Society, Florida in 1987, (Fig. 6). The figures are replaced by cats and dogs but still drawn in his comic style. They play together, have fun and they appeal to all generations. Haring is conveying the idea that cats and dogs are lovable creatures that should not be mistreated by humans. The society's name and logo are printed in white to contrast with the purple background and the strong black outline of the cats and dogs. The white colour links up with the colour of their eyes which are full of joy yet pleading for respect. The typeface chosen is a sans serif condensed typeface, which is friendly and free flowing, totally in keeping with the mood and tone of the overall billboard, yet it is contrasted to the hand drawn animals, showing his creative thinking. The images are simple and direct so that the message can be read from a distance, even at speed.

### **Absolut Vodka**

Absolut Vodka started a new advertising campaign for their vodka to boost sales. The clear glass allowed the 'cool, clear vodka' to be noticed and they





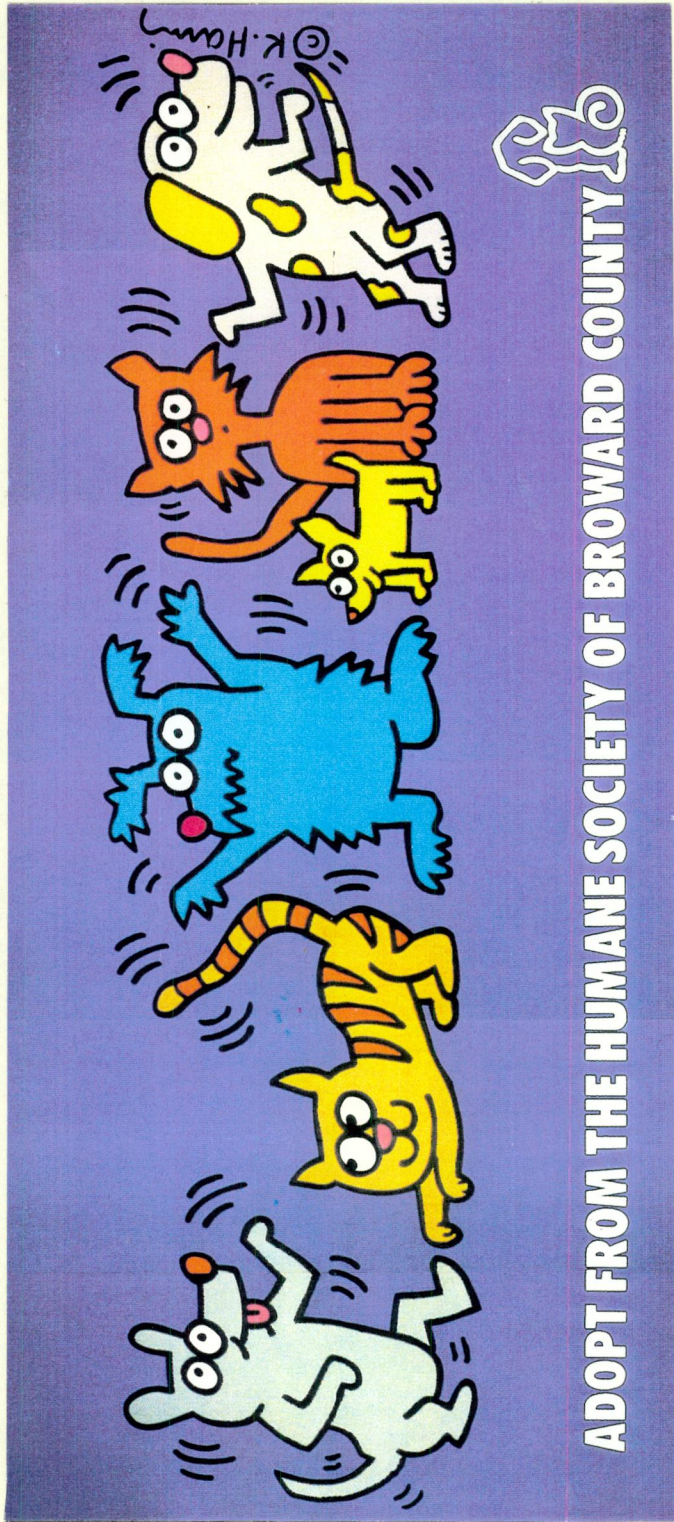


Fig. 6 Billboard for the Boward County Human Society, 1987.

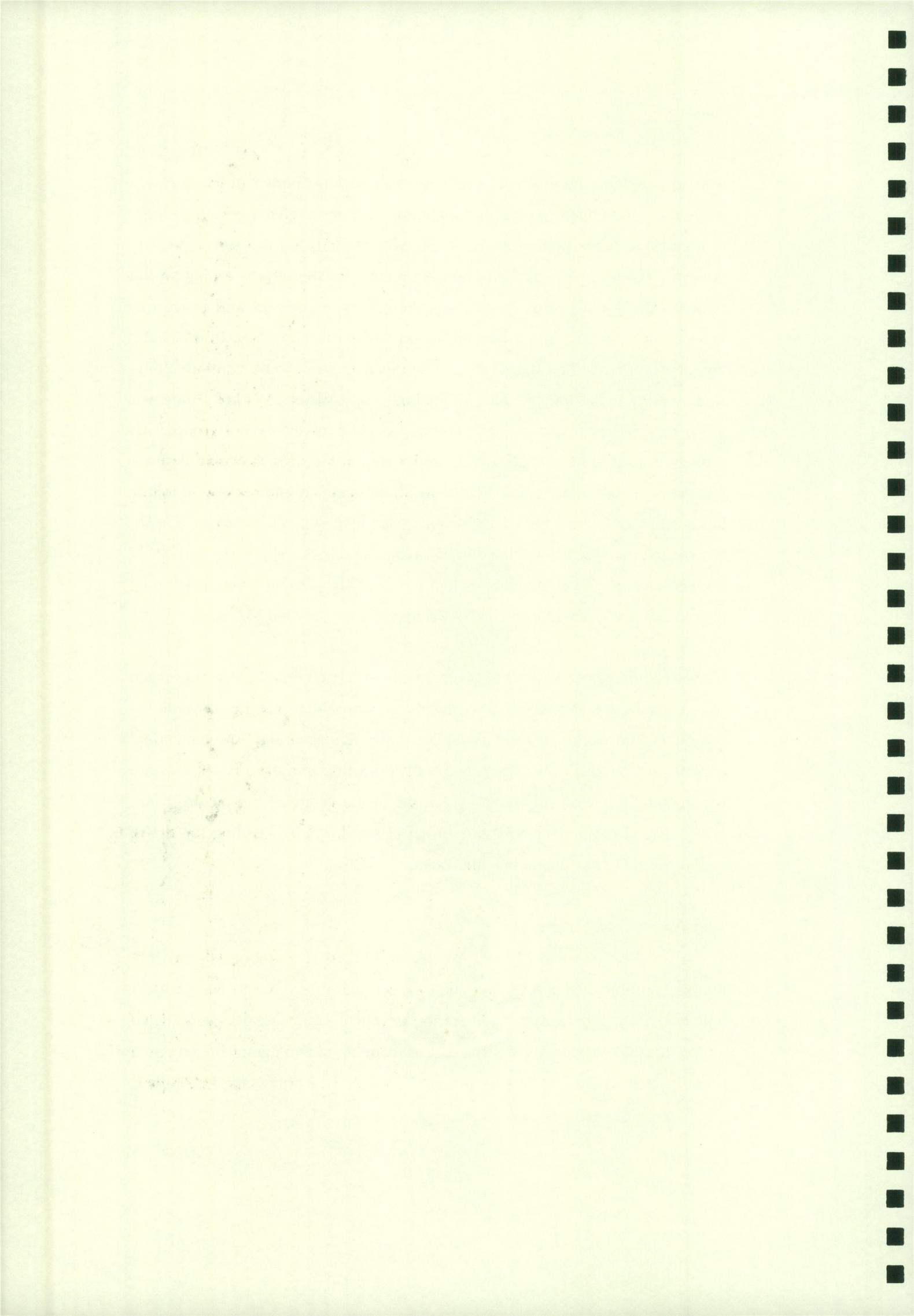


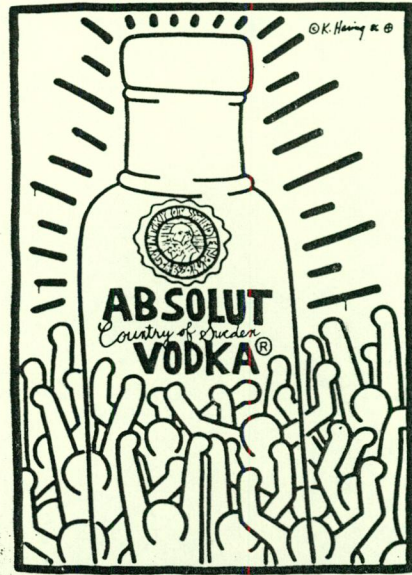
wanted people to know that it was a Swedish vodka. Country of Sweden was written in handwritten typestyle on the bottle in order to give a personal touch. In contrast to it the name Absolut Vodka was printed in a sans serif type. The company used punchy headlines and body copy for the advert - a play on the name - Absolut Generosity. The ads were very successful and powerful, increasing sales and securing market share for the company. In 1989 the company took another approach, a new creative, fresh look, commissioning Andy Warhol to illustrate the ad with the body copy 'Absolut Warhol'. Andy was given total freedom with no interference from the advertisement group. This strategy proved to be a huge success and a step in the right direction. Again it integrated fine art into the commercial world, bringing art into society. To follow this most successful ad, the company asked Haring to do the next advert, (Fig. 7). "The Absolut Haring art is painted in his favourite colours, yellow, red and black: Danger! Alarm!, Stop! sign colours. It is a style of high impact imagery that only the most dramatic poster aspire to". (*Graphis*, No. 249. Vol 43. p.74.).

Haring has done a lot of graphic work and each time he executes piece with a freshness, without compromising his work or style to suit the conventional commercial art world. He used his outline drawn figures in the 'Absolut Haring' commission. Several of his figures wave their arms up into the air as if they are worshipping the bottle of vodka, which sits in the centre of the picture plain, giving it total dominance over the crowd of small figures, creating the desire within people to go out and buy the vodka.

### **Aids Awareness Posters**

In 1987, many of Keith's friends had got AIDS - among whom were Kwong Chi and Keith's last lover Juan Rivera. Haring started to design AIDS murals to make people aware of the seriousness of this new disease. He designed a logo for AIDS benefit (Fig. 8). The logo is made up of two figures holding up a pocket watch. The time is five to twelve. The slogan is '24 hours for life'. Time is





**ABSOLUT HARING.**

PHOTOGRAPHER STEVE BRONSTEIN COPYWRITER EVERT CILLERS ART DIRECTOR GEOFF HAYES

Fig. 7 Absolut Vodka Commission. 1986.

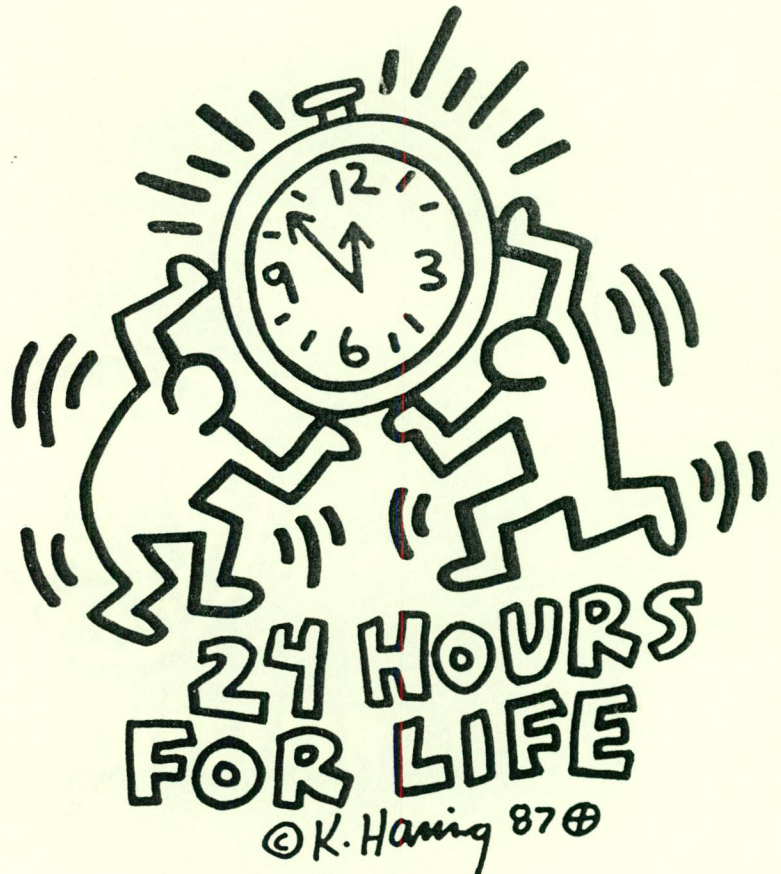
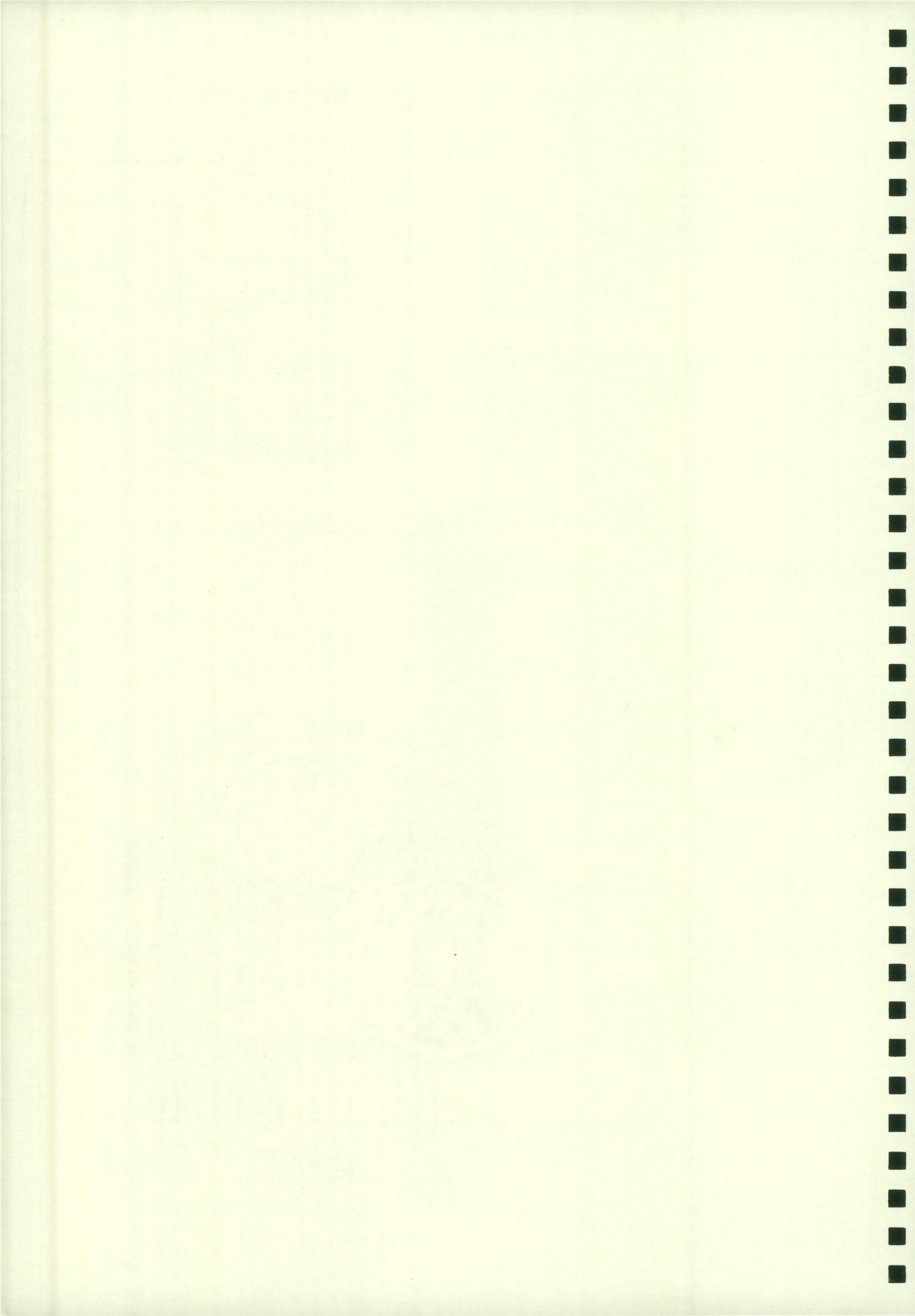


Fig. 8 AIDS Benefit logo, 1987.





**STOP AIDS**

Fig. 9 AIDS Benefit logo, 1987.





running out for all people who are suffering from this mysterious disease. The aim is to try and raise money for research to find a suitable cure. Haring has dramatically and effectively got this urgent message across. (Fig. 9), is another logo that he designed for an AIDS benefit and is equally effective. The image is of two figures who have transformed into a scissor which chops a red snake in half. The snake represents the AIDS virus. In bold red hand written type is the message 'STOP AIDS' plainly stated. Haring has chosen strong, vibrant colours of red, yellow, green and black, adding to the strength of the image and statement. In 1989, this logo was later adopted for an AIDS poster in Vienna and during this same year Haring himself tested HIV positive.

Numerous poster campaigns highlighting AIDS were brought out worldwide. England went for a humorous approach. One image was of a man drawn in a cartoon style, who smiles sheepishly with a condom hovering over his head and the slogan 'BE GOOD IN BED' in a bold, forceful type. Yet it didn't clearly state how a condom could help to stop the spread of AIDS and seemed to trivialise the use of condoms. (Fig. 10). It is unclear as to whether the condom is something he must remember or if it is a halo. Germany went for a mechanical, non-personal approach. The imagery for safe sex was represented by a plastic plug and socket. (Fig. 11). Viewers found it difficult to identify with this imagery; the message was not clear enough.

Haring's ACT Up poster (Fig.12), proved to be the most effective," it conveys a crucial message through a compassionate image". (*Eye*, No.6, Vol.2, 1992, p.37.). The slogan is Ignorance=Fear, Silence=Death. Haring has taken a simple idea of no see, no hear, no speak. Three figures carry out these actions with gestures of their hands over their eyes, ears and mouth respectively. Haring pays considerable attention to the sensitivity of the line and space, making the figure tremble with fear due to the lack of support from others. People don't understand what the disease does to a human person because of their lack of



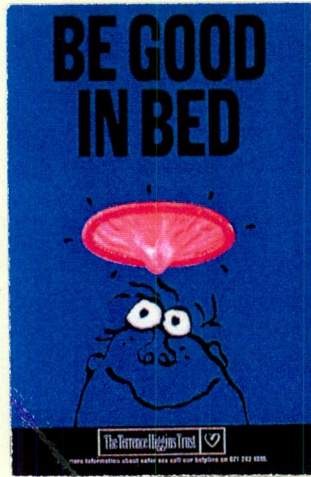


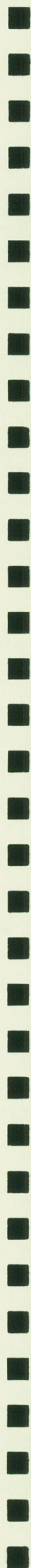
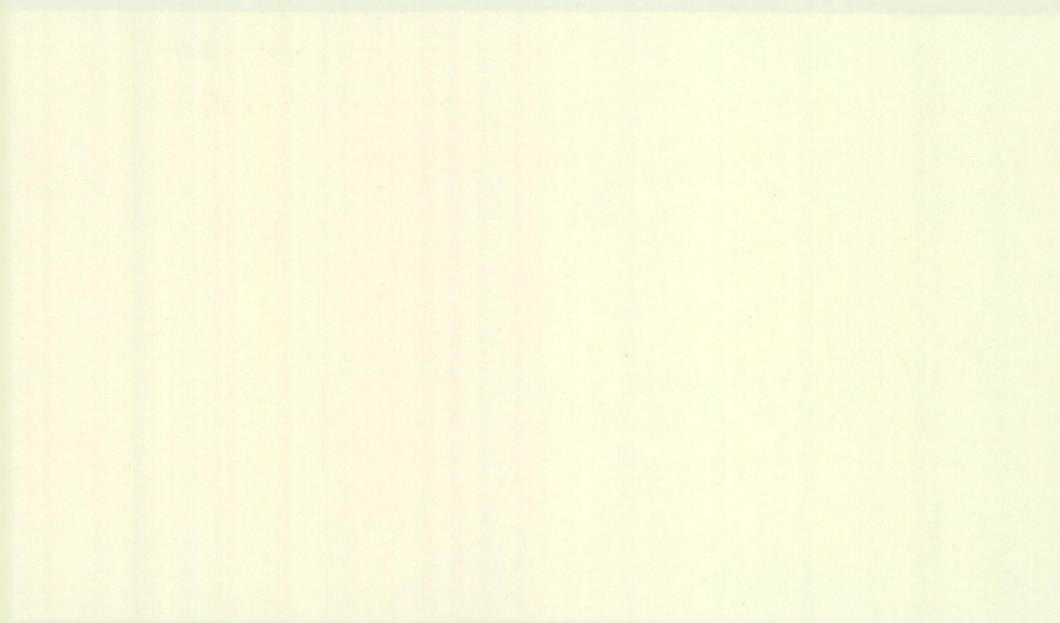
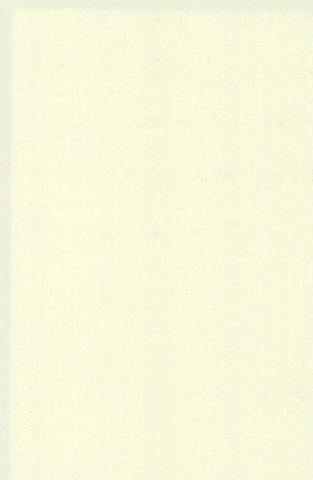
Fig. 10 Be Good in Bed  
by The British Terrance  
Higgins Trust.



Fig. 11 Safe-Sex poster, Germany.



Fig. 12 Ignorance=Fear, 1989.



education on the subject. "Threatened by the premature end of spirit of so much that is ripe. AIDS has brought to bear a frankness that is unbearabl". (Starr, 1991 pp. 22-23). Haring's figures are honest; the message is clear, with no ambiguous information, directly to the point. People are urged to "combat the ignorance and prejudice which continues to surround AIDS". (*Eye*, No.6, 1992, p.44). Haring had first hand experience which enabled him to produce a "socially sensitive graphic" poster which shows no distinctions between peoples' sexual needs.

### **Summary**

It is clear that graffiti artists have made a huge impact on the streets of New York and have given the commercial art and advertising world many new and fresh dimensions. They have also contributed in no small way to the success of Keith Haring, who in his unique way found an identity in the streets as did the young graffiti writers. The subway drawings were a training field for him, he learned the "mastery of space and composition and design of things" (*Arts Magazine*, Sept., 1990, p.34.). His used his Graphic knowledge to constantly develop and improve his graphic technique, enabling him to make "poetic information", which the general public understood because they identified with the message, idea and emotion he expressed. Haring's quest was to communicate to people, using his graphic technique to make people aware and to warn them about the ever present problems of the twentieth century - Racialism, pending atomic war and the spread of the AIDS virus.



## Chapter Three - MASS MEDIA

The sixties saw the explosion of art based on the mass media. The general public was shocked and amused by the pop art work. Many of the themes and subjects were borrowed directly from the mass media. For example, Andy Warhol took images of Marilyn Monroe from newspapers and photographs from magazines to use in his silk screens. The public was disturbed and confused by these images. People didn't know if it was art because these art pieces were only images taken directly from society. (Pelfrey,1985, p.2.).

Pop art helped to break down barriers between fine art and mass media popular art. The traditional distinctions between the two art forms diminished. American artists started to steer away from European culture and returned to look at their own native present culture, reflecting the life of contemporary Urban America. Popular images in American society were brought into museums and galleries. People recognised the images and slowly began to accept them as works of art, making the images icons within popular culture. Pop art broke away from traditional art forms, escaping from the restrictions of the past, constantly looking directly at the present to shape a new, fresh future. Helping to paved the way for the young rising artist of America.

In this chapter I will examine how Haring adopted the mass media into his work, using images of telephones, televisions, and computers in his drawings. Many of these have hidden undertones and are full of wit and paradox. He both uses and experiments with the mass media and with video and computers to reach a mass audience.

### Television

Images of television began to appear first in Haring subway drawings. His human figures seem to be afraid of the television, yet they are totally drawn to it,

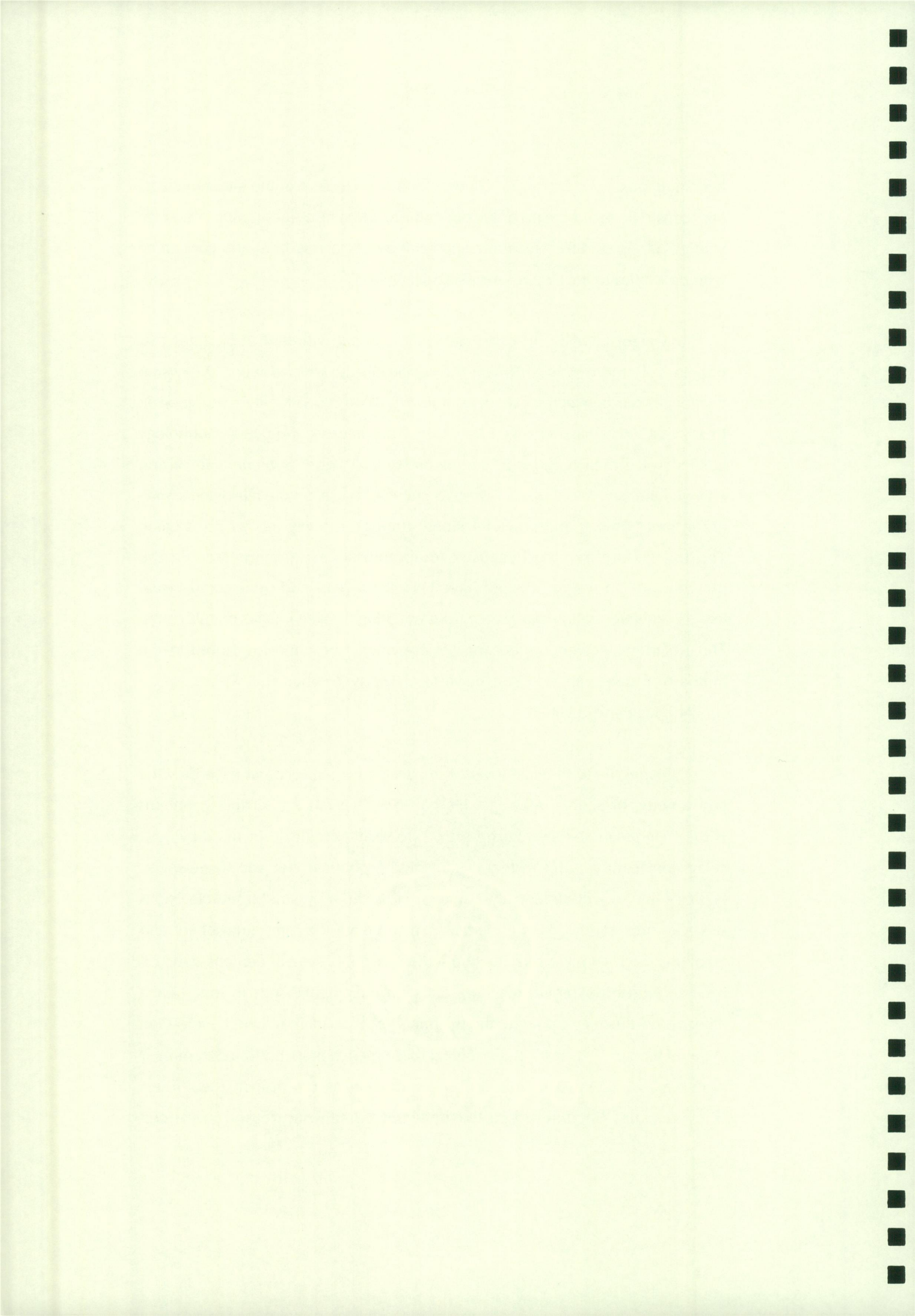




becoming possessed by the TV consumption and emblem of the electronic age. His icons reflect and create American culture, while also questioning American values. Haring uses the electronic approach by borrowing from and combining with past styles to develop his new singular style.

Margot Lovejoy in an article in *Art Journal*, vol.49, 1990, states that people "rely more now on image flow than on the printed word. Television challenges our concepts of space, simultaneity and individuality". She goes on to say that artists have changed how they work because the use of technology has extended their abilities to communicate to a wider audience. Television changed the perceptual base of western culture. Images on the television screen are instant, moving and powerful icons. Haring's subway images are similar. The images are moving because the commuters are moving, seeing the drawings for an instant. People have learned to read and understand visual images and information at a glance from watching flowing images on television. Thus, Harings viewers understand his drawings. They became stored in the minds of the viewers and can be instantly relayed when the viewer sees a similar image elsewhere.

Haring drew to make a visual impact on his viewers and each drawing had a witty, or serious message. He had observed all the terrible problems within American society and he set out to reshape culture in his drawings. Television features a lot in them, transmitting political and social messages. Haring's figures work frantically as they try to build a pyramid from televisions sets. Gestures here play an important part to create the right atmosphere and emotions. Each set has a red X on the screen. Two monsters or demons stand on each side of the pyramid, reaching out with their right hands to touch each other above the centre point of the pyramid, just like Adam reached out to God to gain God's power. Haring is implying that Americans spend too much of their time watching TV. It has become as important as religion in their lives. Television has become a conflict between human nature and advanced



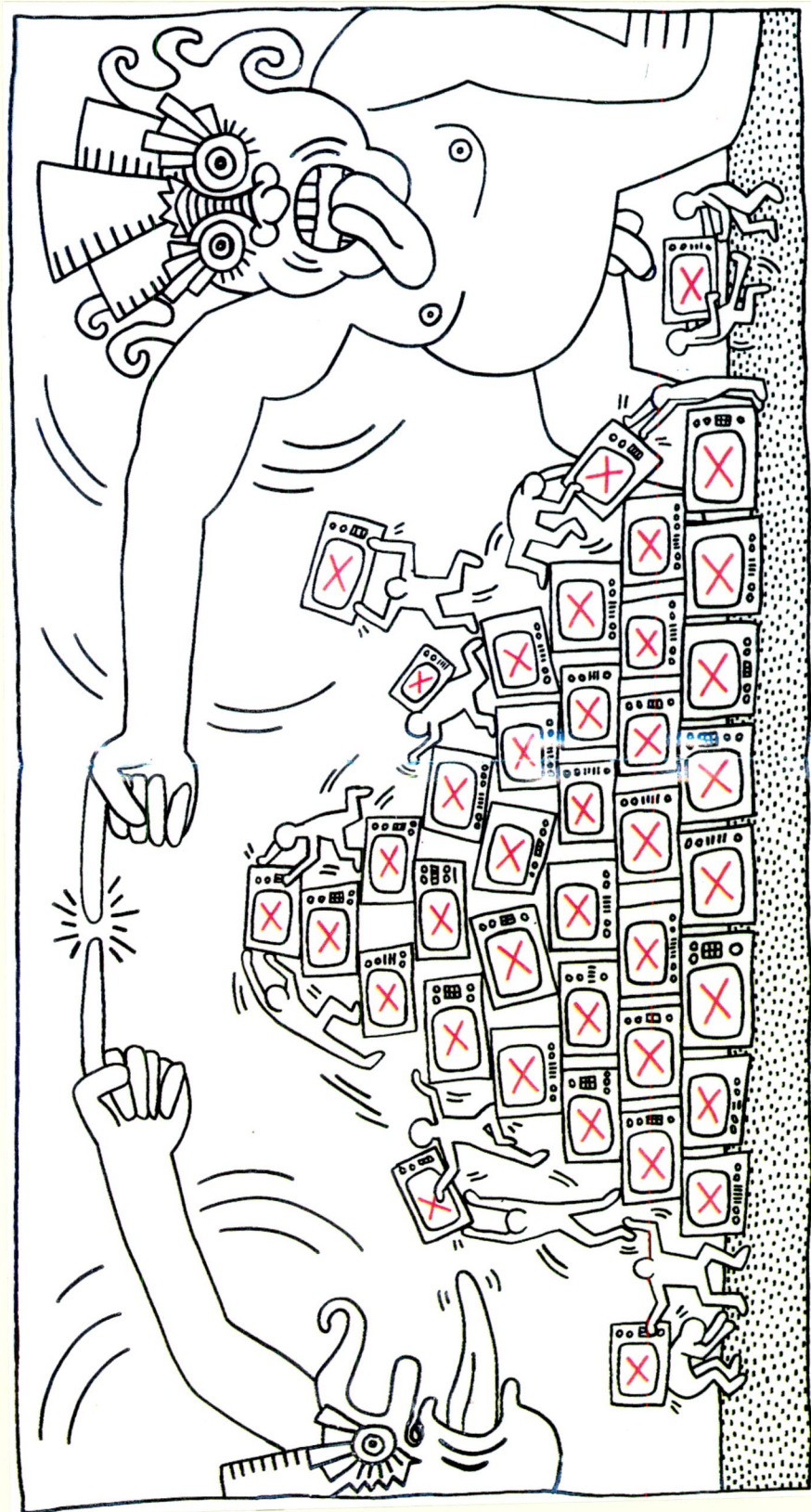


Fig. 13 Untitled, 1983.



technology. People's minds are being controlled by the images they watch every day. If people continue to allow the imagery on TV to be their way of gathering passive information they will end up looking like crude, brain dead monsters. (Fig. 13). Television mimics what is going on in the world but doesn't portray reality. Haring's images take on the same role, many turn into something else, originating from a fantasy world.

### **Mass Media Coverage**

Some artists couldn't accept the invasion of mass media. Clifford Still stopped painting because he couldn't control the media and he let it affect his work. Haring, unlike Still quickly over came his initial fear of computers and technology. He took advantage of them, adapting them to his needs. Technology became an extension of his body and mind. None of the estimated 5,000 subway drawings would exist today, only for the fact that Haring's good friend Tseng Kwong Chi photographed every possible drawing Haring had done before they were ripped of the walls by fans or a new advertisement was posted over them. Most of his work was documented by the use of the mass media. In 1986, he painted 350 feet of the Berlin Wall. "It became a phenomenal media event". Every magazine and newspaper was represented there, recording the spectacular performance. Haring painted the whole area bright yellow and then drew an interlocking chain of figures in red and black. The two colours represented the two sides and the division. Collectively the three colours represented the colours of the German flag. Uniting the figures implied that when people are joined together they are stronger than any wall. The wall divided a race of people but Haring successfully united them together. Later a group of German artists started to paint over it because they felt that it shouldn't be a celebration and that the wall should remain grey to symbolise the division of the country. The greyness of the wall represented something negative but I think that Haring's bright colours indicated optimism. (Gruen, 1991, p. 153.).



## Computers

Computers started to filter into the art world in the late sixties and early seventies. In the beginning, artists were weary of them but they were excited about this new magical medium, which could output astonishing results. The Quantel Paintbox was a revolutionary new program, a computer animation system. The artist could use a light pen to draw on a digitizing board and watch the computer draw it on the screen. Menus were available with ranges of brush sizes and a wide selection of colour: flat, duotones and the pantone range. The computer became a new tool in many artists' studios, becoming an extension of the artist's work, allowing him to reach beyond his imagination with the speed of pushing a key. " Upon completion on the screen, the image was output to 35mm film as a slide, projected onto canvas, taped and spray-painted one colour at a time" (Goodman, 1987, p.75.).

Andy Warhol started to use computers to enhance the photographic images he had taken directly from society, filling in areas with bright colours, using different colour combinations which could be selected from the menus. He would paint in the colours, creating flamboyant and evocative images. Some of the imagery that he created on the computer would be printed out and a silkscreen would be made. Warhol was a close friend of Haring and encouraged him to use computers.

Margot Lovejoy in her article also stated that Haring is afraid that technology and computers were taking over society, rendering humans redundant. Haring was only responding to the fears expressed by society towards the computer. Haring realised that video, television and computers could enable him to achieve his main goal of reaching a wider audience.

I am continually amazed at the number of artists who continue working as if the camera were never invented, as if Andy Warhol never existed, as if airplanes and computers and videotapes were never heard of.

Keith Haring

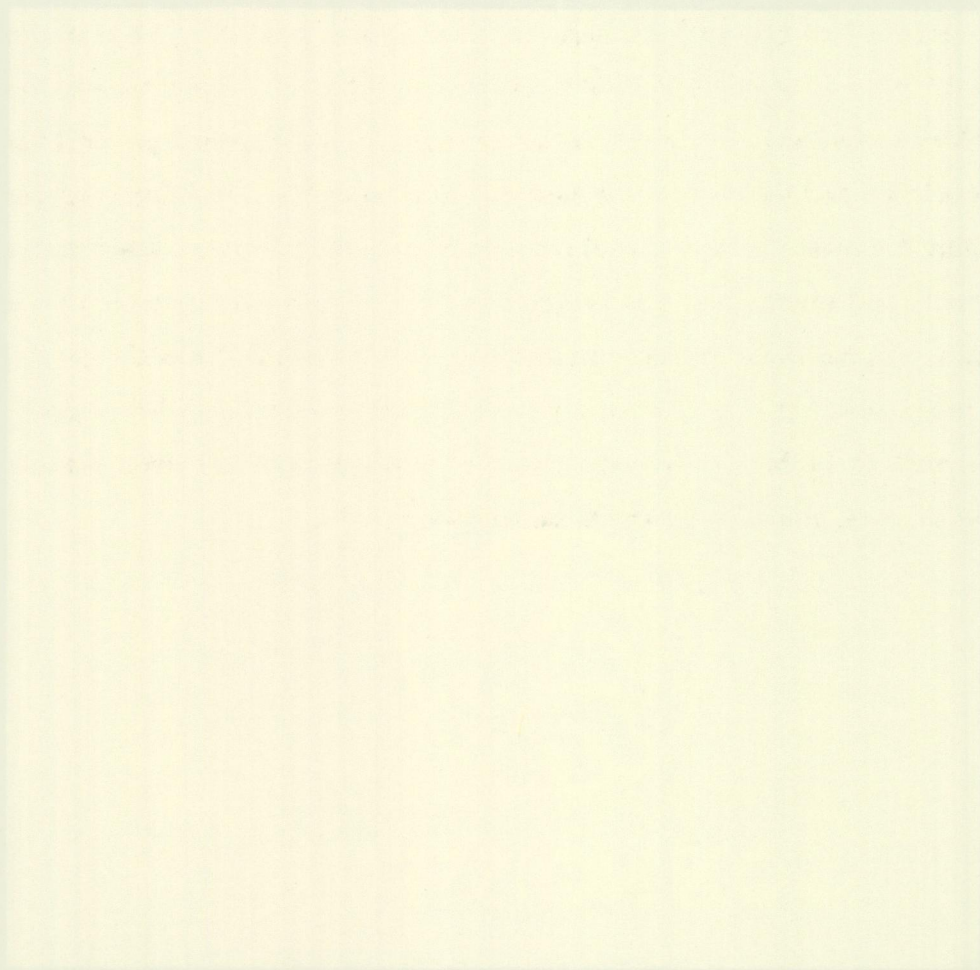




In 1983 Haring was in Tokyo experimenting with computers; he did a series of "paint - system" images. One of these images is of a computerised non-human figure who has two elongated figures rising from the top of its head; a snake attacks a small figure below who waves a stick in the air to defend itself, other figures run around the top. (Fig. 14). All these images can be found in his ink and magic marker drawings, but his use of colour is more varied in the computer image. Haring only uses the computer as a new tool, thus his style remains the same. He merely translates his icons into digits, with full control over the movement of the imagery, as he would have if he were painting it directly onto paper. He learned to draw on the computer using the same speed and ease as he had drawn on the black panels in the subways, on the walls in New York and in galleries. Hence, he doesn't lose any of the spontaneous energy that exists in his hand drawn paintings.



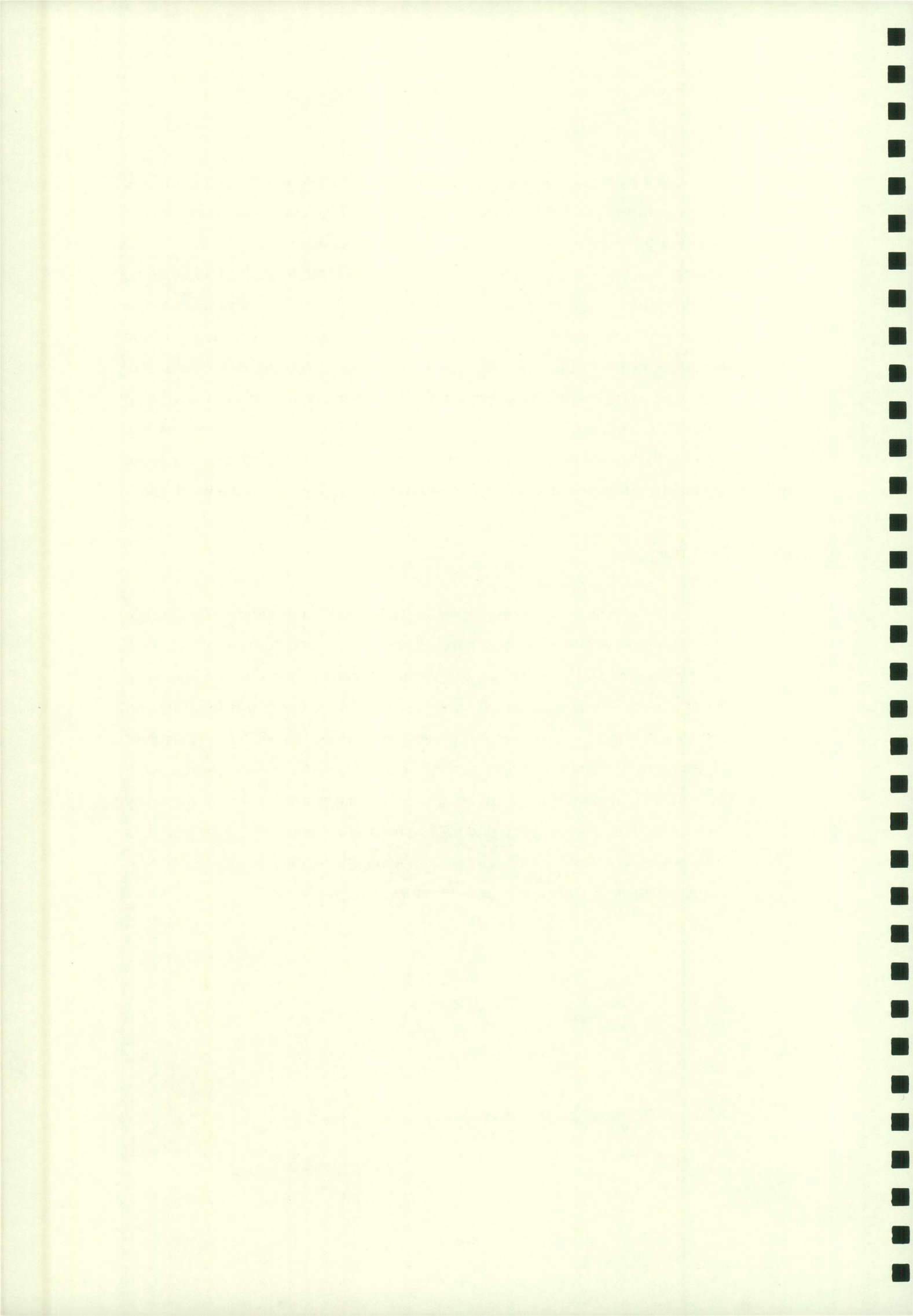
Fig. 14. Untitled, 1983, 35mm slide.



As I have already stated he did some graphic design for billboards and other advertising campaigns. With the age of technology upon him, he broadened his use of the mass media and designed a thirty-second animated drawing for the Spectacolour Billboard in Times Square. The image of the Radiant Child could be seen for miles as the digitized image was repeated every twenty minutes. The Public Art Fund chose Haring and a few other artists to participate in the "Messages to the Public". The Spectacolour Billboard is a combination of red, green, and white light bulbs, giving a limited range of colour and a low resolution of the image, making it look bip-mapped. Haring's imagery was simple and flat, allowing the system to lend itself to Haring's symbols. The outline drawing could be lit up by the coloured light bulbs, thus sending messages across the whole city.

### **Summary**

Haring had courage and belief in what he was producing. His courage allowed him to achieve his main aim, which was not only to have his art work seen by museum and gallery goers, but also to be seen by the general public. In an age of science and technology, the best way to achieve this aim is by using and exploiting the mass media. He uses photography, video, television, spectacolour billboards and computers. His projects became media events, which were photographed, reviewed in glossy art and design magazines and found their way onto television. He exploits people's fear of computers and also people's enslavement to TV but yet he successfully manipulates both to extend his own creative abilities, and to contribute to his ultimate success.





## Chapter Four - EROTICISM

...it is often taken for granted that art-making is directly related to sexuality - as a form of expression, repression, obsession or compensation.

Lucy Lippard, 1980.

Haring's homosexual life blossomed slowly when he was still in Pittsburgh because he had a steady girlfriend, but when he arrived in New York, a whole new way of night life emerged."It was like landing in a candy store or better still a gay Disneyland". (Gruen, 1991, p.35.). Haring spent his time in gay bars cruising for men. While still at the school of Visual Arts he started to draw penises, combining what he was doing in college with what he was doing at night. Moreover, many of his drawings were intricate patterns, evolving unmistakably into phallic images. He was completely open towards his sexuality. Instead of hiding his homosexuality he projects it for all to see. "I consciously flaunted the fact that I was interested in dicks". (Gruen,1991, p.39.). Like his art and his views on religion he treats sex with the same frankness and allows it to become the subject of his work.

This chapter will discuss how his interest in sex led him to become the chief organiser for exhibitions and performances in the New York down town Club 57. I plan to explore some of his drawings which heighten the use of his homoerotic images. In addition, I will discuss one main untitled work in depth, which he painted in 1986. This is a very complex drawing which sums up Haring's obsession with erotic sex and in some ways this drawing reveals many of Haring's desires and gives an insight into the kind of world he lived in.

Haring was hanging out in many Gay Bath houses and in Club 57, engaging in a promiscuous gay sex life. Club 57 was located in the basement of a Polish church. There was dancing, drinking, drugs, and anonymous sex. It

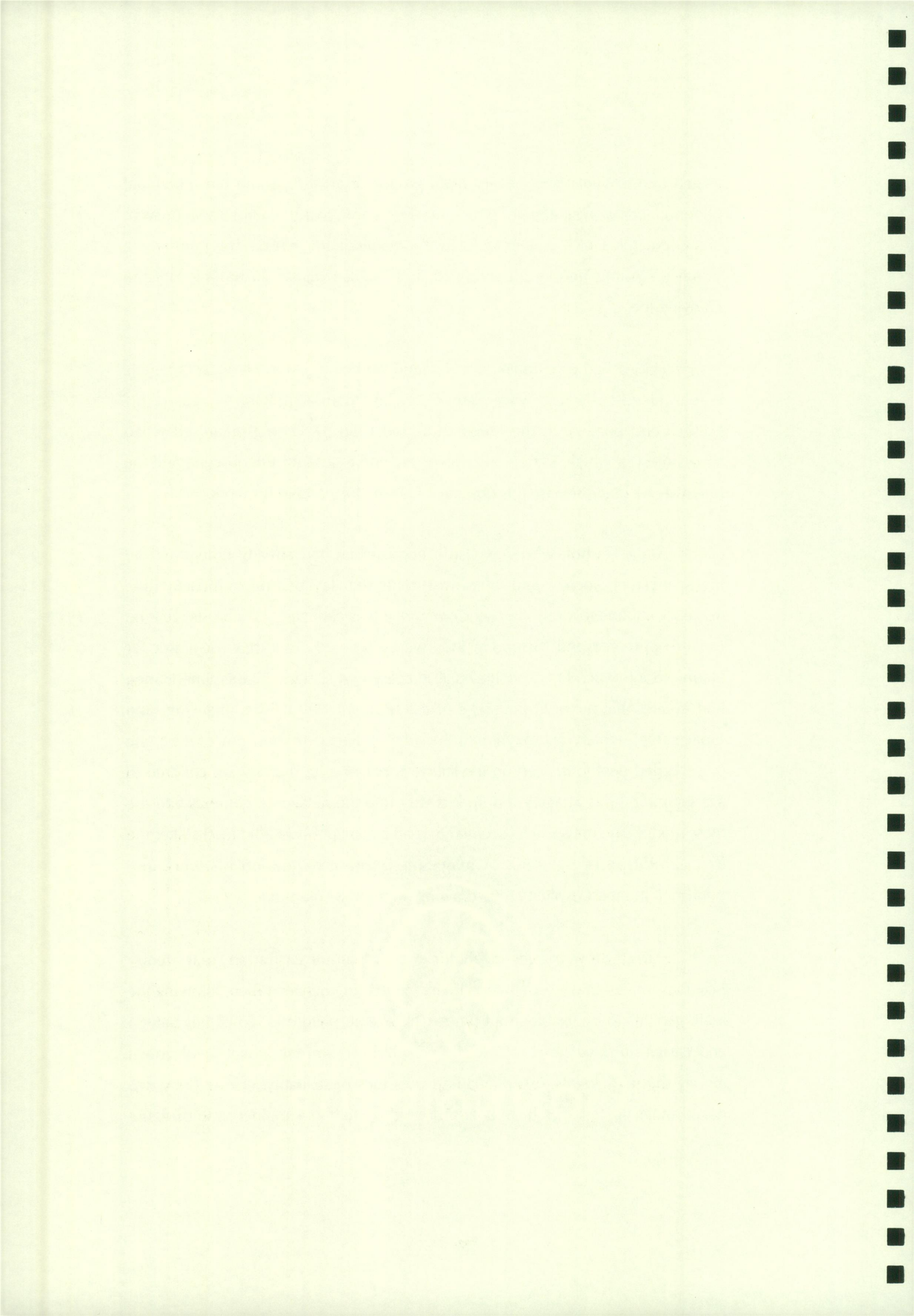


turned into a wild place - every night groups of artistic people did individual performances with set themes. Erotic art shows and poetry reading sessions were organised. Most of it was completely spontaneous and crazy. The club was a frenzy of young people all trying to find themselves while having fun and enjoying life.

Haring had experimented with video while in college. He videotaped his whole naked body from very obscure angles, mainly showing images of his buttock and phallus. In the Mudd Club and Club 57 Haring organised video shows most of which were erotic shows. He had a taste for the obscene and the only way he could release this obsession was in clubs and in his work.

Andy Warhol, who was also a homosexual had already unleashed the myth, mystery, secrets and embarrassments that lay behind homosexuality. Society's attitude towards the Gay Community was changing. Gay artists were no longer oppressed and frustrated, they were liberated. This made it easier for Haring to introduce his explicit sexual imagery into society. By this time Haring had created his pictorial language of the "Radiant Child", "Barking Dog" and "Space Ship", which he brought into the subway. He never drew any of his erotic or perverted phallic imagery in the subways because he didn't want children to see them. Still this imagery did find its way into the museums, galleries and the mass media. The mass media seemed to readily accept his phallic motifs after the first exhibition of his work. A magazine wrote a review on his work and published the most explicit erotic drawing from the whole show.

Haring drew images of phallic motifs: painful castration, rear - entry positions, male intimacy, depicting loving and caring between men, allowing the male genitals to be visible at all times. The overall picture is sometimes natural and casual, at other times it is lustful with little sign of emotional involvement among the participants, just dramatic expressions of sexuality. Haring drew two naked male figures, one has his arm around the others shoulder, a third figure



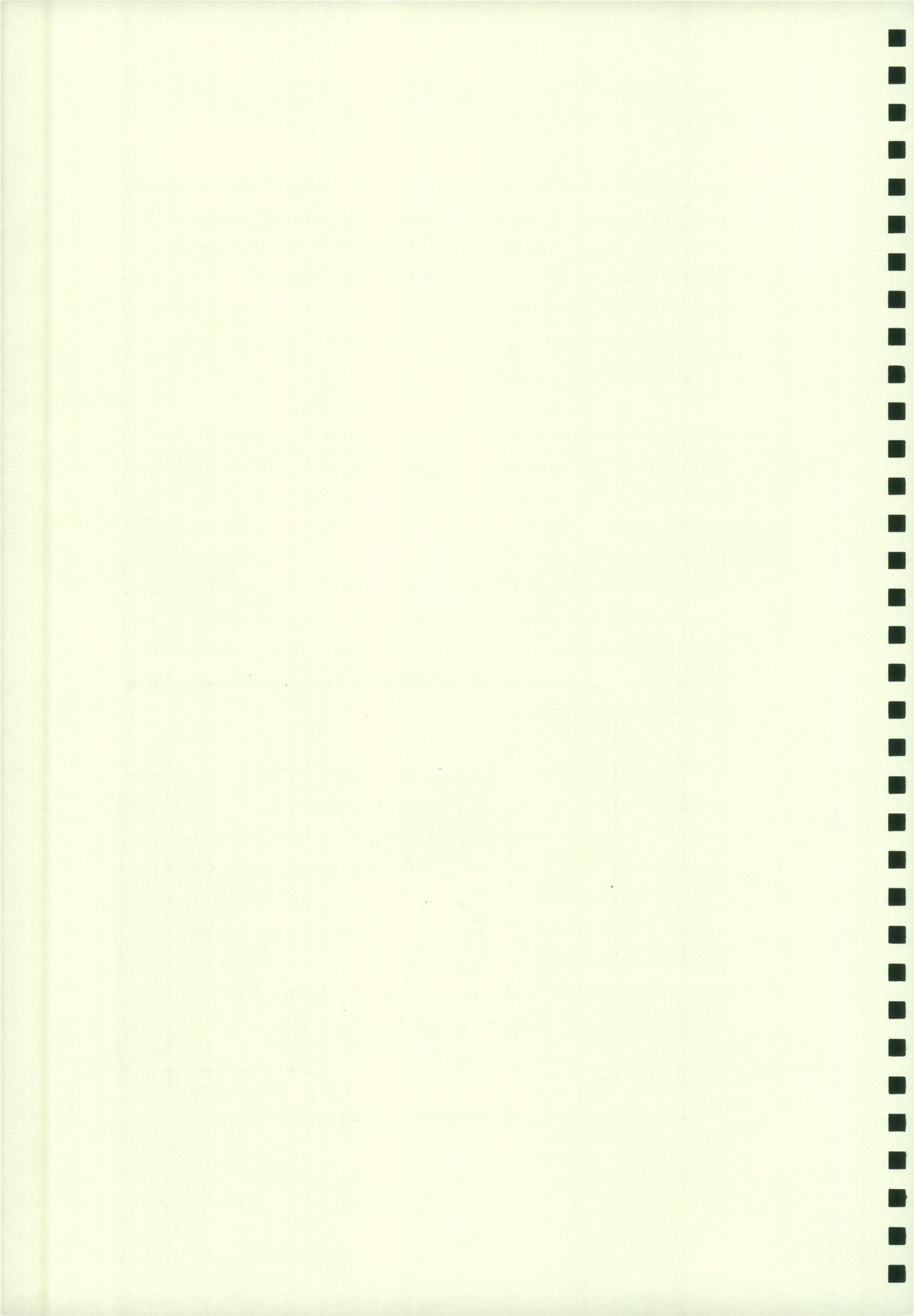


runs towards them. A huge red love heart separates them. All three are sexually excited and have erections. It is distinctly homoerotic. The entire picture is covered with black random strokes which form a pattern (Fig. 15). He portrays the love that two males express for each other without being crude and explicit. He explores the confusion and chaos that some homosexual males feel, as they try to come to terms with their own sexual needs and yet live in a society which doesn't accept homosexuality.

Haring did not confine the homosexual act to just humans. He also imposed it on animals and robots. His boundless energy and humour, allowed him to explore all of society's fears. His bold strong, flowing line created images of mechanical robots with phallus, who are embracing and having sex (Fig. 16). He is indicating that society is dominated by sex, television, consumerism and religion. "Haring uses sex as the ultimate metaphor of a flow or transmission between demon and human, beauty and ugliness, nature and artifice". (Celant, 1992, p.13.). People aren't shocked by this contemporary imagery. The element of humour helps them to deal with the sexual imagery so they don't feel offended by the images.

Untitled, 1984, (Fig. 17), features a grotesque pig which has two eyes on one side, it is reminiscent of Picasso's idea of seeing both sides of the face at once on a two-dimensional plain. This pig is made up of a very large head, two small legs which are kicking up into the air and the torso is made up of only the udder. The pig's mouth is wide open, expelling consumer items and material things which dominate society: cars, telephones, televisions, computer, light bulbs, cameras, guns and many more items. Tiny naked males whose genitals are visible crawl out of the pile fighting to reach the mother pig first in order to feed off her. Haring has painted it in green, a symbol of society's greed.

Black people fascinated Haring, most of his lovers were of ethnic origin. He fought to change people's attitude towards the coloured race. In *Untitled*,



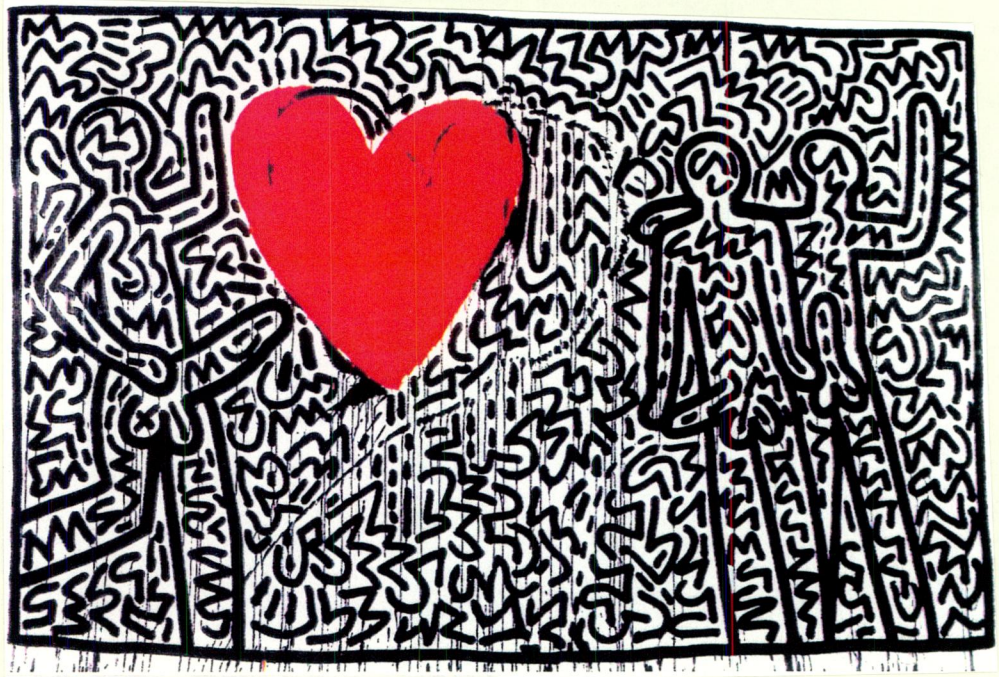


Fig. 15 Untitled, 1982.

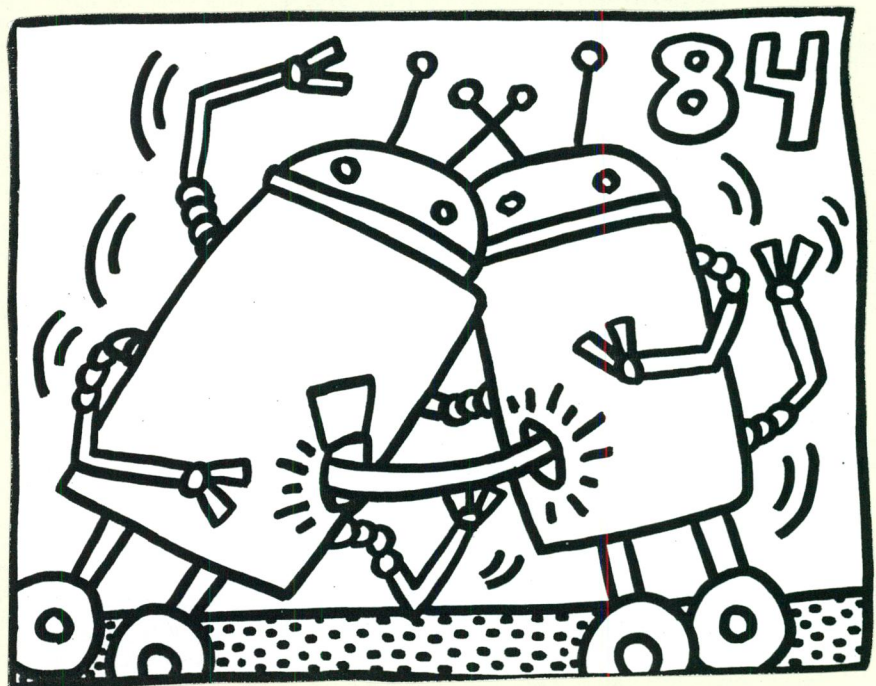


Fig. 16 Untitled, 1983.

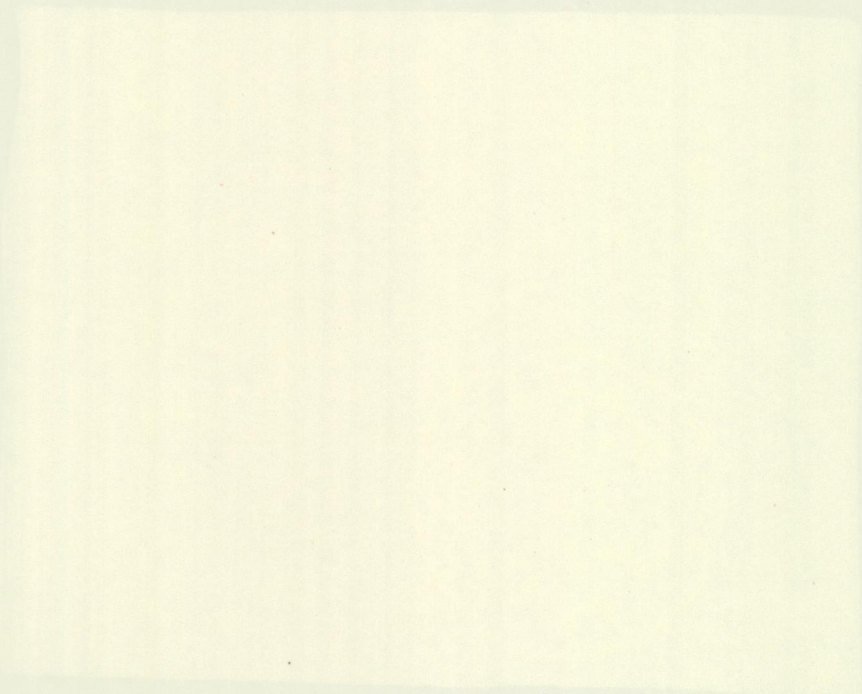
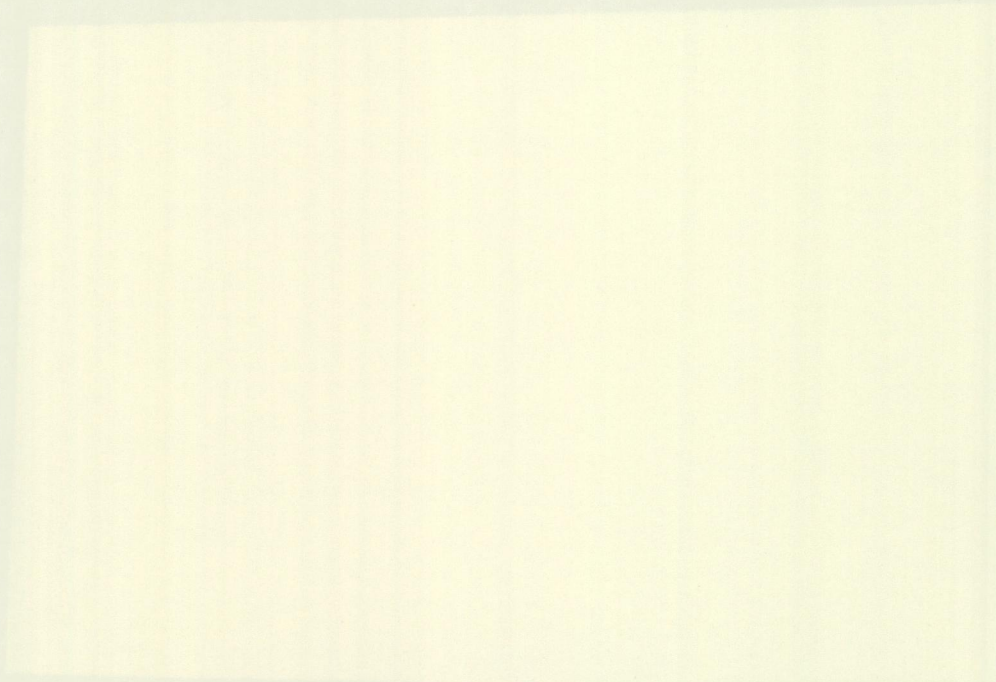
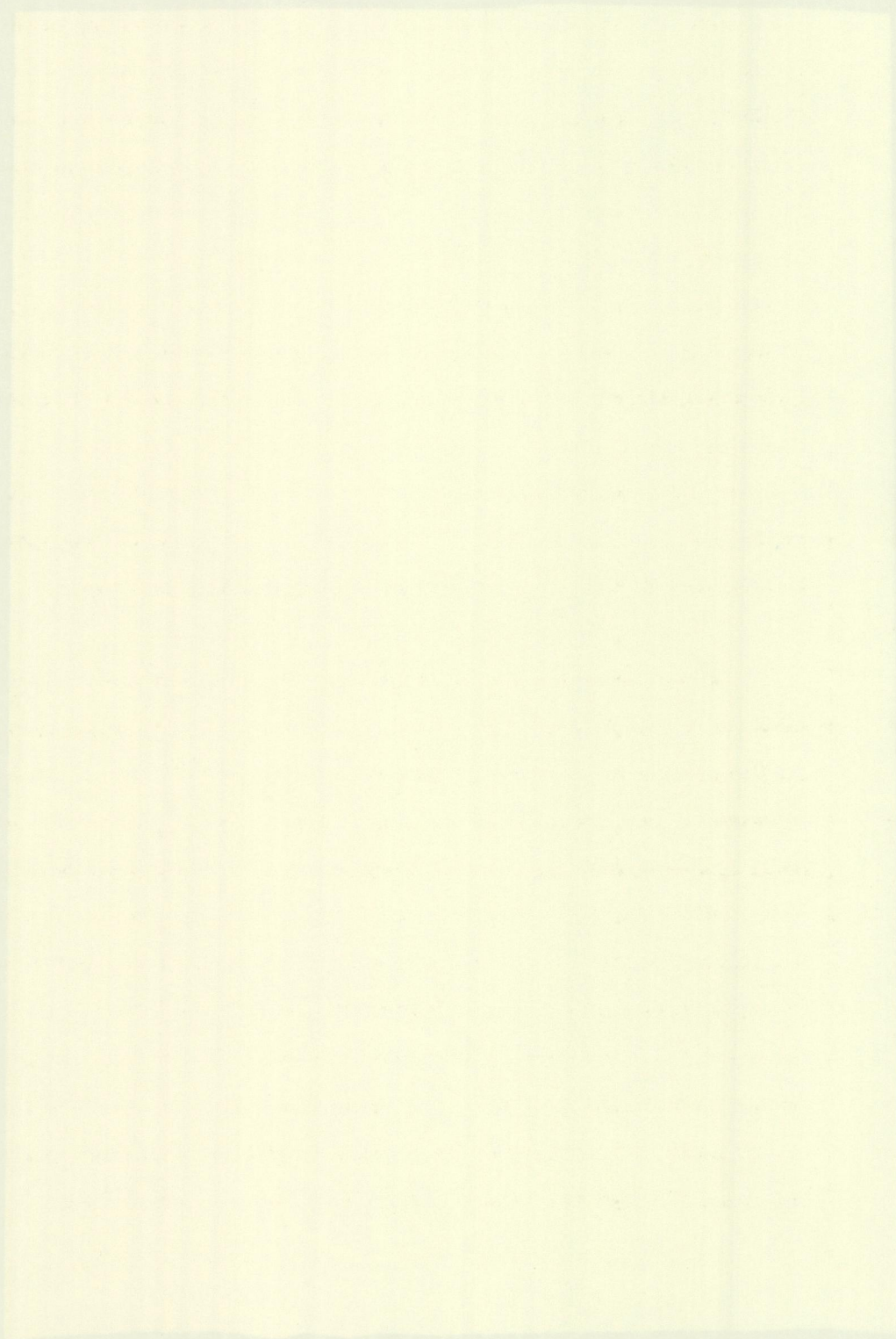


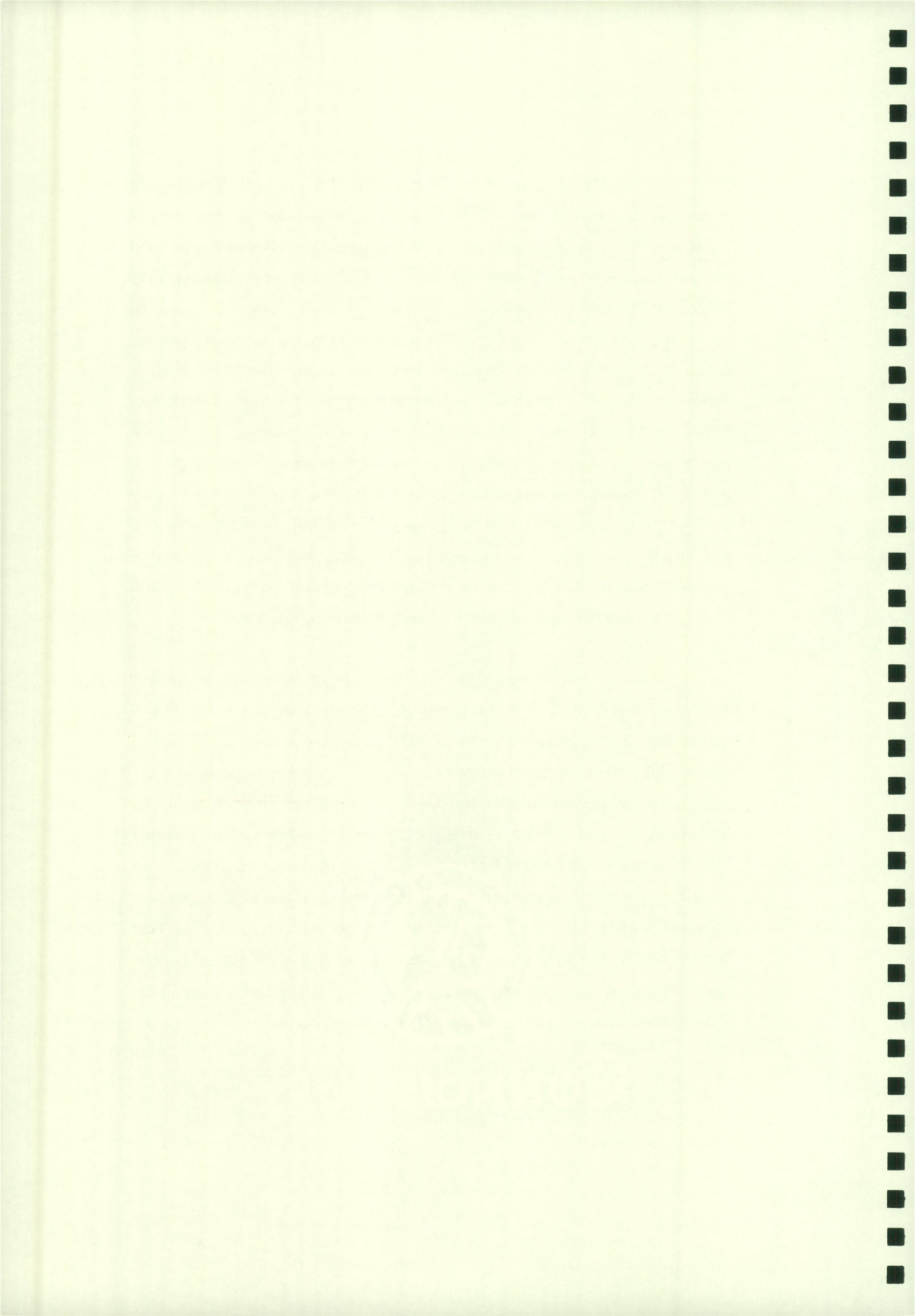


Fig. 17 Untitled, 1984.



1985, (Fig. 18). Haring drew the bottom half of a black male's body, giving the person two penises, indicating that he himself was bisexual and so were many of his friends. The vertical curved lines of the legs gives the feeling of strength and upward movement, which takes over the entire left hand side of the painting. Behind the black figure is an intricate, interlocking pattern of white lines, painted on a very strong blood red. At first glance it appears to be just an abstract pattern, but on looking into it further one starts to notice more of his phallic symbols appearing. His lines act as an illusion because every time one looks at it one sees something different. The strong red colour seems to be a warning, repelling the viewer eye from the picture and yet it excites the eye enough to encourage it to look again. Haring is playing optical tricks within the pattern. It appears totally confusing and complex. Images of figures with web feet, monsters with long dangling tongues, bones, evil eyed horned monsters, male and female sexual organs are all present to make up the violent imagery of copulating, caressing and kissing. They are all linked together in an exaggerated erotic scene.

In another untitled work, 1986 (Fig. 19), there is a scene which features mass copulation between figures and creatures. Women, men and children stand on the tongue of a monster, some of the figures dive into a pool of liquid representing oral sex or blood and semen which are life giving but now with the AIDS epidemic they are also life threatening. The monster melts away slowly, while being attacked by a snake. Male genitals are given wings which fly around like bad angels, others have whips, lashing out at the monsters and some take on the appearance of a bee which is ready to sting his lover. Figures become deformed, arms and legs are amputated, others are bound and handcuffed. Half human animals, like pigs, birds, and snakes take part in this violent sexual orgy. Haring united all creatures in the sexual act, which is both crude and repulsive, and created violent exaggerated imagery of masochism and sadism.





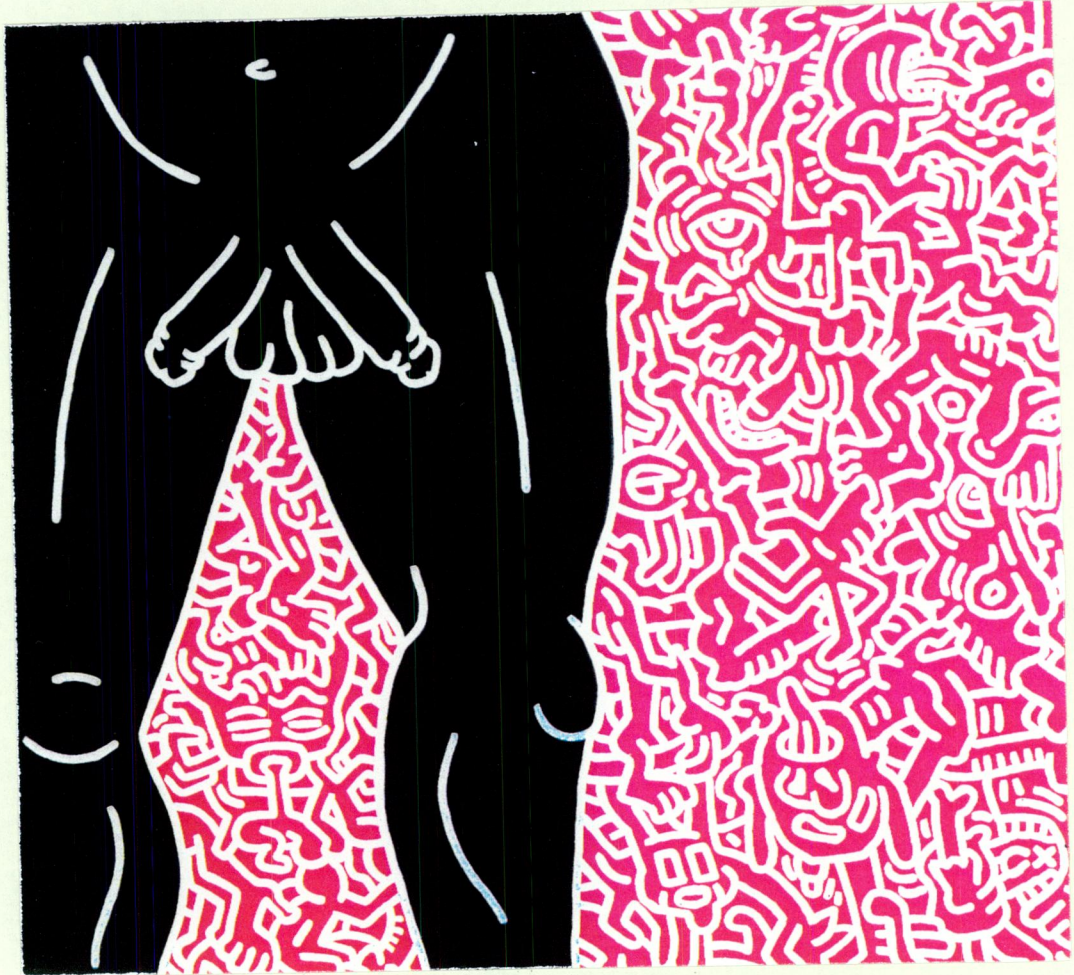


Fig. 18 Untitled, 1986.

Faint, illegible text on a yellowed rectangular piece of paper, possibly a document or photograph, centered on the page.



Faint, illegible text or markings located below the circular stamp.

An orifice represents the eye of a pig who is drooling and transforms into a tree whose branches are budding penises. In my opinion Haring portrays sexually transmitted diseases by using worms, hairy grubs and insects, which are eating away at the sexually active tree. The two monsters in the top of the painting have heads which are connected to their bodies by a network of wires and mechanical hinges, indicating the use of mechanical sex toys. A figure emerges out of the monster's head holding up a circular ring, which may represent the use of condoms for AIDS prevention.



Fig.19. Untitled 1986.

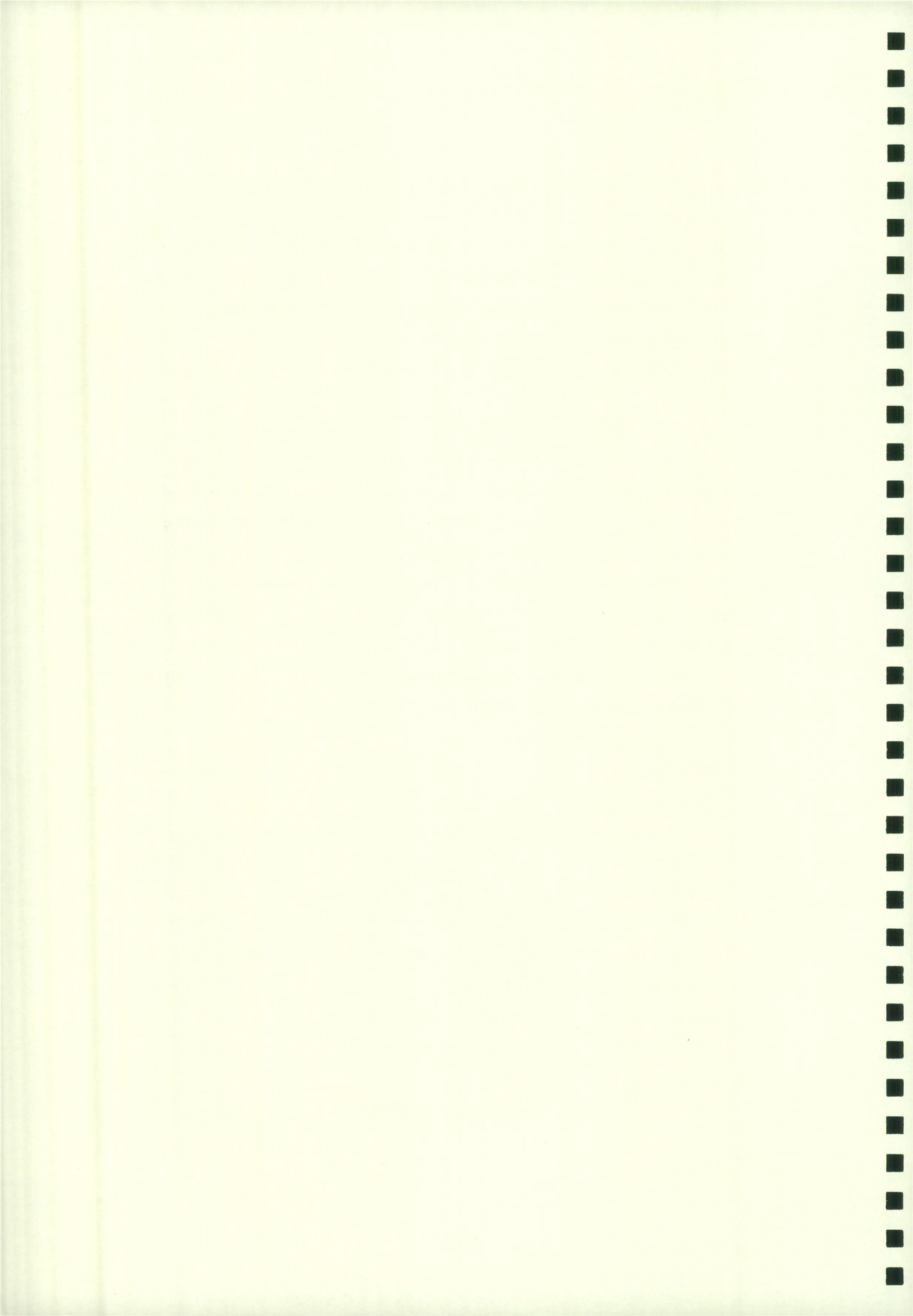
Faint, illegible text on a yellowed page, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side. The text is arranged in several paragraphs and is too light to transcribe accurately.

I find this painting fascinating. The freedom in the lines allow images to flow into tones of tension, stress and confusion. I think this drawing is very complex, it is extremely active, every inch has a new idea or act. I felt compelled to look at it and to return the gaze again and again. Each time I read more into the drawing in the hope of trying to decode the messages. Haring doesn't censor, because if he did he would be going against every thing he believed in and he would not be making people visually aware.

By 1986 Haring was fully aware of the existence of the AIDS epidemic in New York, which was spreading rapidly. Love, blood and sperm were now associated with death instead of being about life and renewal. The Bath houses became vacant and anonymous sex was rare. One had to be more selective and huge campaigns were designed to encourage people to have safe sex. AIDS hit the artistic community with dreadful force, wiping out brilliant artists. Haring's paintings took on the theme of AIDS. He explains that " some are quite grotesque looking because I wanted to show the despair and hopelessness of the situation". He conveyed a gloomy vision. He wanted to educate his audience about AIDS by heightening safer sex awareness.

### **Summary**

The clubs were an outlet to release Haring's fantasies. There he was exposed to music and drugs and he took part in a promiscuous gay sex life. These subjects he brought into his drawings. He developed his abstract patterns into homoerotic phallic and perverted imagery. He created many violent scenes of sadism to unlease his hidden desires and fantasies. Haring rebelled against a society which is dominated by consumerism, television and religion and a society which doesn't accept homosexuality. He draws these images in order to make society aware of homosexuality and to accept it.

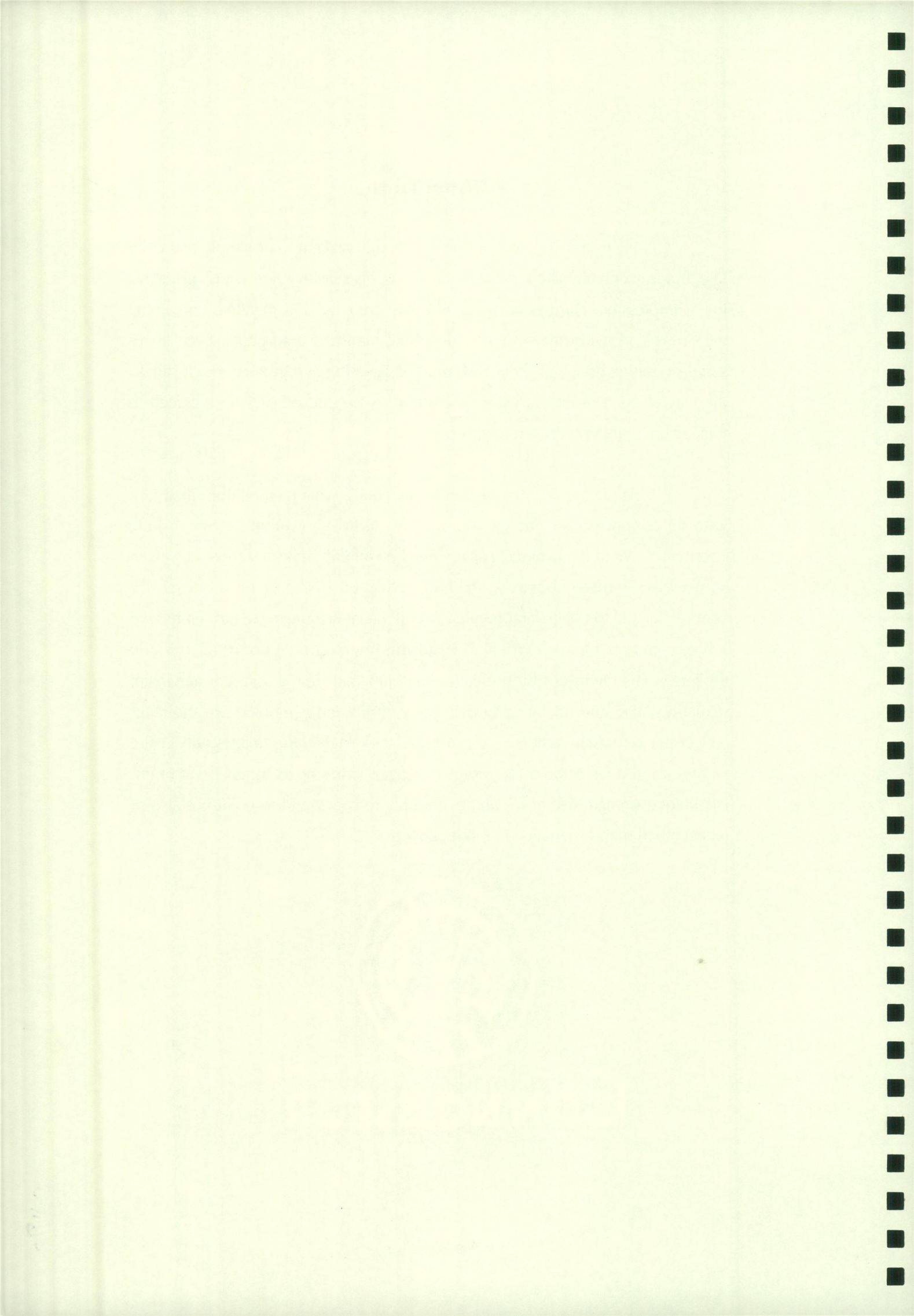


## Conclusion

On first examining Haring's work one could take it to be simple and child like, but it is only the sheer masterly quality of his sensitive line which gives this initial impression. Harings drawings are very complex and detailed, containing wit, irony and his obsession with unleashing his ideas onto paper. Even in his simplest outline drawings there is so much expression and gesture which shocks the viewer. As a result the viewer's curiosity is heightened and he is forced to look again, to interpret and remember.

Haring always felt that he would die young. This premonition filled him with an abundance of energy and spirit to fulfill every moment by working constantly. When the fatal day came when he couldn't draw any more he was in some ways content because he had achieved his goal of successfully communicating to the general public with his visual language. He has left behind a huge amount of work which is inspiring many contemporary artists and designers. His themes of birth, death, environmental destruction, consumerism, sexuality, AIDS and nuclear power are among the most important of the latter half of the twentieth century. His powerful, stark frightening images will insure that we cannot fail to be aware of his message, confusing as it may be at times. His unique strength lies in his ability not only to shock and to uplift but also to reflect much of the alienation of modern living.







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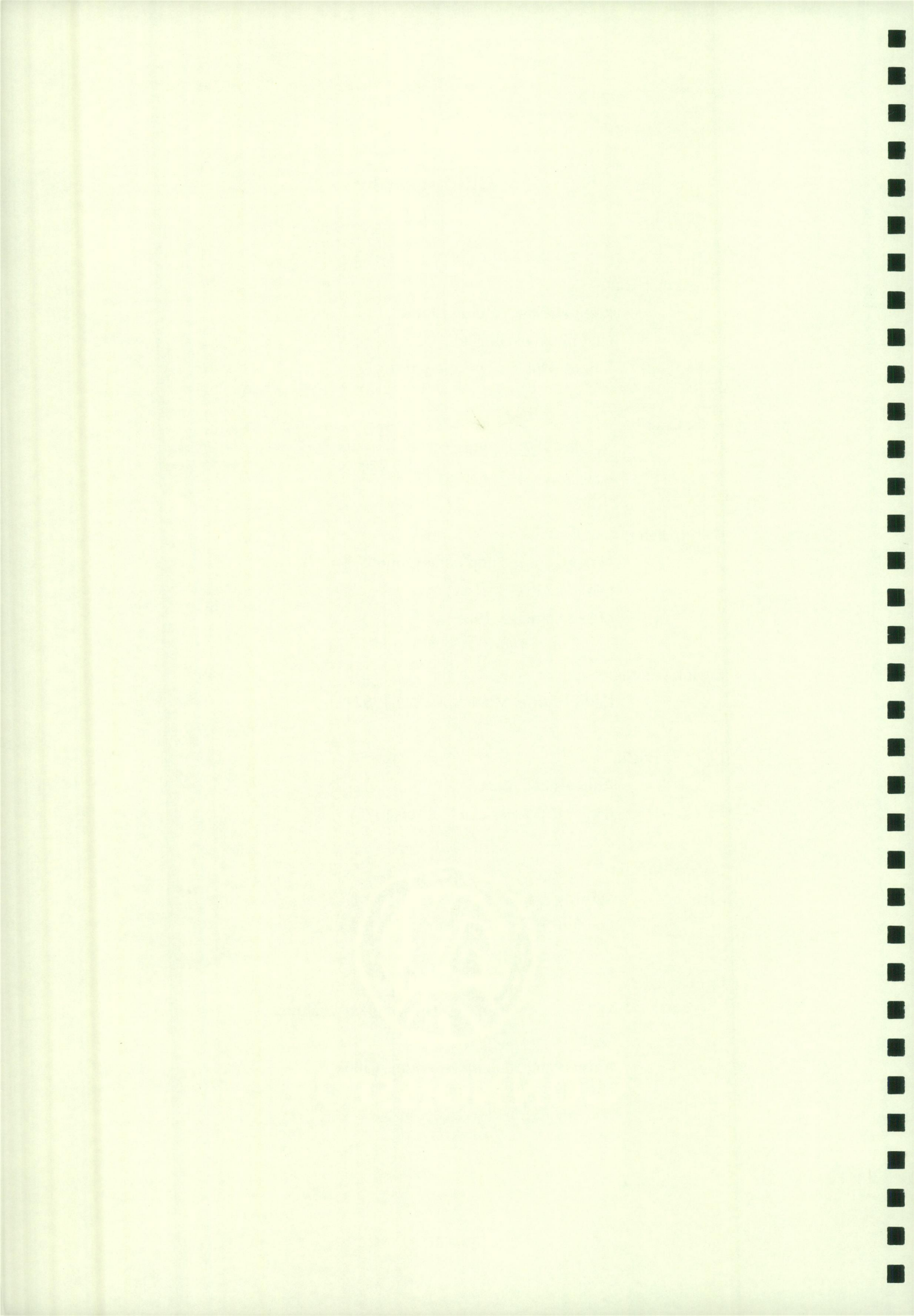
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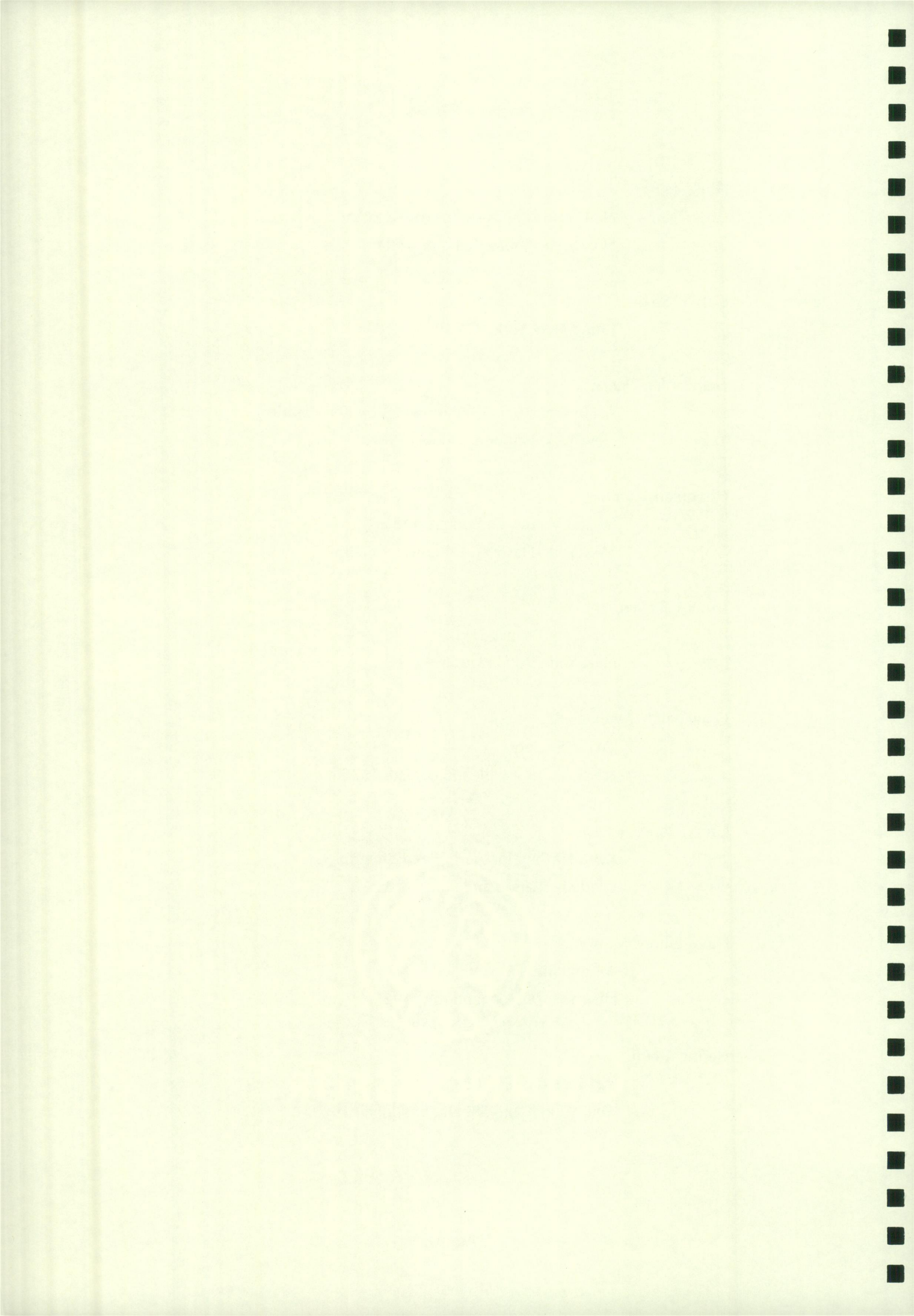
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