

“After Armageddon; Tactics of Survival in a Post-Nuclear Planet.”

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Wild, dark times are rumbling towards us, and the prophet who wishes to write a new apocalypse will have to invent entirely new beasts, and beasts so terrible that the ancient animal symbols of Saint John will seem like cooing doves and cupids in comparison.

--Heinrich Heine¹

The East Village art scene, in the early eighties, was an anarchic, multifaceted movement of New York artists and musicians whose original impetus came from the working-class punk music scene in London. The East Village artists were suburban, middle-class white kids, for the most part, with degrees from well-established colleges of art, but circumstances had forced them to live in grimy, small decaying tenement hovels east of Third Avenue. There they came in contact with an alien street culture that infected them with an exhilarating sense of impending urban violence and social-technological breakdown. Their heroes were the Puerto Rican and Black street youths—some considered geniuses!—who spray-painted elaborate murals on the sides of subway trains. Their tightly drawn cartoons contained vivid colors, weird slogans and insane typography that seemed to rival and beat anything the art students had come across in a hundred thousand collective hours of art history classes.

Out of this fertile cultural cross pollination soon emerged a cadre of young “graffiti,” “New Wave” or “No Wave” artists (as the art world variously dubbed them) whose work seemed to summarize the apocalyptic visions and vivid anarchic political beliefs of a desperate, dead-end culture. Within a few years, the names of these artists began to resound internationally: the wall-poster polemicists, Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, the graffiti artists, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, among many others in miscellaneous or shifting categories, such as David Wojnarowicz and the performance artist, Ann Magnuson. The East Village artists were obsessed with mutation and decay, but generally seemed to maintain their good humor. As artists, they made no effort at making permanent works, but scribbled on crumbling urban walls, giant sheets of cheap paper and subway poster stock, rather than durable artist’s canvas, because, “Atomic blasts destroy canvas just as fast as paper.”²

But the world that these young artists mourned (or celebrated!) as passing was often not the human world of flesh, family, and relationships, but the pop culture they had grown to know and perhaps love better. A curious substitution had occurred. It was Betty Boop, Popeye, Beaver Cleaver, George Jetson, Mickey Mouse, and Bambi who received the stings of nuclear jelly in the art of the early eighties, rather than the village children of Cambodia (who’d actually received them). The scrim of images thrown at these Baby Boomers from television over the course of the past several decades had proved incredibly durable, perhaps more durable than their own dwindling resources and downsized employment opportunities. It was no wonder that young artists projected their fears and hopes upon the immortal characters of sit-coms and daytime cartoon shows, rather than on their flawed selves or people they barely could say they knew.

Their artwork looked ahead, past the nuclear-techno-enviro-politico-viral conflagration that seemed just ahead, and tried to imagine just what was in store for everyone, and what accommodations could be made. The human species would survive—any other future seemed unimaginable—but in what bizarre forms, and in what chemically-altered, radioactivity-drenched, dinosaur-inhabited, retrovirus-invaded, Big Brother-monitored fox holes would they be forced to make their last stand?

As a twenty-year-old art student from Pittsburgh, Keith Haring, wrote in his journal: he and his friends felt midwife to a holocaust about which they were extremely ambivalent:

The silicon chip has become the new life form. Eventually the only worth of man will be to service and serve the computer....

And what is the role of an artist? Should the situation be resisted or accepted? It appears to me that human beings have reached an end in the evolutionary process. We will, if we continue on the same path, eventually destroy ourselves....

I agree to an extent, that if human beings are incapable of evolving further, we should evolve in the form of creating a new life form that can survive the human condition and transcend it. The question that I have trouble with is: Should the new life form be completely oblivious to the aesthetics of human beings? Is it forced, because of its very nature, to be a new life form with no traits of the human beings? Have we created a life form “in our own image” or is it a completely different form?

This is the question that the artist of our times has to ask, because it is we who will have to lead the fight against a machine aesthetic or prepare people for it... This for me is the question that will decide my position in the arts... How do you help the human race realize its predicament? And if you do not see it as a predicament, how do you help prepare humankind for the reality of a machine-aesthetic world?...

The destruction of this planet, this solar system, by human beings would not be an end to life. It would go on without us. We have a choice, whether we wish to continue evolution on this planet or not. I vote “yes.” 3

Haring’s most arresting image, and one he drew, over and over, thousands of times, on dusty car windows and empty subway posters, was of an irradiated baby with cartoon ray-lines coming out of its torso. Born in a mushroom cloud, it was a figure of both innocence and ambivalent sexuality, as it was often depicted on its hands and knees, being mounted by another “baby.” “These poor little characters wiggling out from the radioactive communications they are bombarded with are superslick icons of turmoil and confusion,” wrote Rene Ricard in a defining 1982 *Art Forum* article. “They are without will, without protection from impulses of mysterious source. We can laugh at their involuntary couplings and tiny horrified runnings around because, we see them as we cannot see, as the fish cannot see the water, ourselves.” 4

Locked together in proto-cubist edges, Haring's glowing angels, his humanoids mutated so that their extended parts could easily penetrate one another, his barking dogs and porpoises gathered to receive blessings from hovering spacecraft—all existed in a mutant world that was, essentially, happy to be changed: by computers, by atomic blast, by contact with extraterrestrial aliens. Later, as the HIV virus took command of his own body (the artist died of AIDS in 1989), Haring often depicted the human figure—his irradiated baby, grown up—crucified upside-down. In one of his last canvasses, he portrayed the virus that was killing him as a thousand miniature human figures dripping from an open wound, while, ironically, a set of immense artist brushes impaled and mortally wounded our bright blue planet.

Haring's art school friend, Kenny Scharf, also put the best face on the coming annihilation. His was the hedonist approach to the end—if we're all to be grilled on a nuclear fire, then we might as well bring marshmallows! With sardonic humor, the graffiti painter invented the faux philosophy of Jetsonism—that things will be much more fun after the bomb, when we will all be allowed to fuse genetically with our favorite television characters. His quickly sketched, Day-Glo, tenement-wall murals contained a veritable pantheon of mutant Hannah Barbara television characters--Fred and Wilma Flintstone, George Jetson and so on—whose devolved limbs and caterpillar like torsos were shown wriggling against 50s-deco backdrops of spinning vortexes and giggling ghost heads.

A gray and ghostly presence, Andy Warhol had left his fingerprints all over the downtown art arena; his influence—grown benign and godmotherly in those latter years—was obvious in the way the New Wave artists talked (incoherent, deferential, deflective), in the discarded pop-culture imagery they used (warmed-over Warhol, some critics said), in their fascination with black leather and even in the kinds of cheap, street-level drugs they ingested.

But the true patron saint of the East Village art scene was the old Beat writer and prophesier of doom, William S. Burroughs, who in his late sixties was showing no signs of slowing down. He was still writing novels, still addicted to heroin off-and-on, and still hovering over the stinking streets of Alphabetville like some ancient, stalled meteor. Burroughs' novel, *Naked Lunch*, published in 1959 by a French pornographic book publisher, Olympia Press, had set the stage for the East Village party. There was almost nothing in the East Village program that you couldn't find in the novel, the artistic experimentation, the paranoia, the obsessions with aliens, the viruses, the fear of government control and addiction, the homosexuality, the gleeful dancing on the bones of the old, doomed superstructure of the American success story. In further novels, Burroughs had methodically gone about destroying the very DNA of the English language with "cut-up" writings in which sentences were torn into strips and scraps and recombined at random. The "cut-ups" could be seen anew in the antic collages of the East Village graffiti artists, who took such disjunction as a metaphor for the breakdown of the social order they saw all around them. Burroughs was honored by a week-long "Nova Convention" in 1978 in an East Village church. He was then living in Kansas and writing pastoral novels in which outlaws rode through apocalyptic Western landscapes, shooting, riding, and mating with one another. In interviews he was advocating space travel and rapid biological transformation as a way to escape an evolutionary dead end: "Only way to go is up. We've got no place else, having burned down this planet."⁵

Burroughs met Haring and pronounced him the “real thing,” commending him for his “weird mutations, weird figures...just jumping with vitality and life.”⁶ For his part, Haring admitted, “The major influence, although it is not the sole influence, has been the work of William S. Burroughs.”⁷

Burroughs also met with Jean-Michel Basquiat in 1986. Basquiat was one of the few Black artists to come out of the East Village scene, though his incendiary success burned out quickly—like Haring, he did not survive the eighties, but died of a drug overdose at the age of 27, in 1988. Basquiat and Burroughs shared an addiction to heroin and an obsession with the power of language. Perhaps emulating Burroughs’ ominous novels, Basquiat filled his faux-naive canvasses with a ferocious, almost incomprehensible machine-gun staccato of words, phrases, advertising slogans, Christian and voodoo icons, street scenes, death heads and diseased pictures from a culture whose very cell walls seem to be dissolving before one’s eyes.

Basquiat’s “Riding with Death,” painted just before his death, was an apocalyptic scene that seemed to fuse the religious and chemical in one simple arresting image of a black man riding upon a white skeleton of a horse-man. The “horse” is certainly a reference to heroin, the drug with whose fascination both Burroughs and Basquiat shared, but it points more openly to the disturbing rider of *Revelation* that appears just before the world’s end: “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.”⁸ Conceivably, Basquiat, whose ears were exquisitely tuned to America’s airwaves, may have intended to exploit White racist fears of a Black uprising (or “race war”) that was supposed to come as a signal just before Armageddon.

The 1980s was a famously lustrous time for the New York art world. The stars of that flush decade, the enormously successful painters, David Salle, Eric Fischl, Robert Longo, and above all, Julian Schnabel, were given so much lucre and achieved so much national media attention, that in no time at all, it seemed, they had been elevated to the status normally allotted to movie actors, rock-and-roll musicians and junk bond salesmen. Their paintings, which displayed nude hedonists disporting on the beaches of Saint Tropez, or (alternately) nude women on hands and knees, derrieres displayed out towards the viewer, or suit-clad yuppie couples in twisted, Bonnie-and-Clyde poses (Longo famously threw tennis balls at his models to get them to contort) or room-sized mock-heroic abstractions of cracked dinner plates, did their best to shock and awe, but hardly offended or challenged the ascendancy of the baby-boomer stockbrokers who ultimately funded them. The artwork of this magically successful quadrumvirate and others like them who were based in the Soho gallery scene, was calculated to enhance the image that their patrons most wanted to cultivate of themselves, that of a flawed, but dynamic and sexually charged race that was destined not only to take control of the universe, but to make uncounted billions.

The East Village artists, in violent antithesis, could be characterized as iconoclasts and innovators; their purpose was to succeed outside of normal art channels, indeed, to remain as outsiders. They made a play at avoiding contact with the money machine that their contemporaries chased so assiduously. Despite the early success of some, notably Basquiat and

Haring, East Village artists remained resolutely counter-culture, though they laughed and scoffed at any comparisons to the counter-culture movement of the sixties and seventies.

After the early eighties, the apocalyptic fears of the New York art world turned more and more to AIDS. The monolithic, incurable disease had taken its first baby steps in the process of wiping out much of the New York art community; now it threatened to destroy the entire human component of the planet. The art world's major preoccupations were thus transmuted, from the macrocosmic to the microscopic: from the instant conflagration of the nuclear blast to the slow, sub-cellular depredations of the tiny HIV organism. One result was a new, almost obsessive focus on the human body, its mounded, vulnerable, fleshy permutations, its distillations and liquids, its wasting forms.

Artists were aware that the Christian Right had characterized AIDS as a scourge to rid the planet of homosexuals and hedonists, and they reacted ironically and forcibly with the tools they had at hand. Andres Serrano photographed a crucifix in a jar of human urine; the resulting "Piss Christ" earned gales of satisfying condemnation from the Christians and their political proxies, such as Jesse Helms. Deliberately, Serrano has chosen to align himself with the dark side and set about to provoke a fight with those who consider themselves in the "light," i.e. the Christian right wing.

In wrapping himself in the cape of the diabolical, however, Serrano was just following in the footsteps of the master, Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe had sprung from the East Village art scene and then risen far above its crumbling sidewalks. His lushly-textured, classically-composed black-and-white photographs perversely combined Roman Catholic and black magic symbolism with graphic homosexual eros, that included sadism, female body builders, nude black men and their sexually-excited genitalia, cross-dressers, body excrescences, death's heads, weaponry and torture instruments of all kinds. Zeroing in on all levels of society, Mapplethorpe also photographed a series of cool, cold portraits of the rich, the deranged, and the celebrated from the American Babylon, including the requisite portrait of William Burroughs sighting along the barrel of a rifle. Such displays seemed deliberately calculated to bring down God's fiery wrath, and of course, it eventually did—Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in 1989, a result of what one might euphemistically call a "risky" lifestyle (as his essayist Arthur C. Danto daintily put it, Mapplethorpe "frequented the wilder precincts of sexual expression").⁹ But not before provoking a national firestorm of debate on artistic freedom and censorship, with the religious right leading the way to have of Mapplethorpe's retrospective show in Washington, D.C. shut down. Senator Helms is said to have remarked that, knowing his wife had looked through a catalogue of Mapplethorpe's work, he was for a long time afterward ashamed to gaze upon her face.

Mapplethorpe had placed himself in the Devil's corner. The guiltless universe of pain-turned-to-pleasure and ugly-truth-turned-to-classical-beauty depicted in the photographs was so hermetically sealed off from "normal" middle-class values and pleasures that it offered little opening for understanding or compromise. Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights did not more surely and completely exclude ordinary notions of decorum from its realm. This had a calculated effect: in the richly detailed anti-planet that the artist had created through

his photography, the normal, decent folk of America would certainly lose their way and perish, but the elect, those who already had become inured to a Bohemian existence, would learn to thrive. It was a curious reversal of the Christian theme of an elect of righteous ones who would outlast God's final wrath. By thoroughly excluding from his photographs everything he did not wish to persist, Mapplethorpe had created his own cleansing Armageddon.

The 1987 Wall Street crash and the subsequent self-implosion of the New York art market burst the late 20th-century fin-de-siecle bubble a little before its time. The capitalist system had allowed greed to get the upper hand, and it had let down the art world, which had hoped to develop a relationship with Wall Street's princes somewhat like that of the artists of the Renaissance with their Medici patrons. In the sedate early 1990s, the art world continued to limp along. An artist no longer carried a license to debauch, and obsessions with sex, death and oblivion seemed to lessen somewhat.

Appearances could be deceiving, though. The "machine age" agonized about by Haring in his journal had overtaken us, in fact, and many of the artists operating in mid-decade were cyber-centaurs, cantering around on digital hooves.

The hot-button issues of the eighties had been absorbed effortlessly into the culture of a new digitally-aware generation: gender-blending, genetic manipulation, body-alteration, designer drugs, and thorough viral penetration were the norm. The universal discos of Alphabet City throbbed until dawn with the sound of computerized mutant dance music, created without the aid of instruments or musicians. One might say that in the last decade of the twentieth century the direst visions of William Burroughs had arrived as fully-modeled realities, and in many cases, they had proven to be startlingly beautiful. Although an apocalypse is just one of several alternative universes that appeared plausible in the post-Cold War era, the collective image of a scorched planet beset by radiological mutations and fought over by roving bands of high-tech (or sometimes primitive) thugs was one that simply wouldn't go away.

Endnotes

¹ Lutetia; or, Paris [1842]. From the Augsburg Gazette, 12, VII. Quoted in Bartlett, John Bartlett's Familiar Quotations; 16th Edition; Justin Kaplan, General Editor (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1992), p. 420.

² Haring, Keith, *The Keith Haring Journals* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), p. 16.

³ Ibid. pp. 17-19. So rigid and persistent are the New York art world taboos against verbalizing content that only a few pages of the artist's journal, written at the very beginning of his career, contain any discussion of the apocalyptic underpinnings of his work.

⁴ Ricard, Rene, "The Radiant Child," *Artforum* (December 1981).

⁵ von Ziegesar, Peter, "Mapping the Cosmic Currents; An Interview with William Burroughs,"

(Kansas City: New Letters, Fall, 1986, Volume 53, Number 1) p. 61. ⁶ Ibid. p. 65

⁷ Haring, Keith. Ibid, p. 31.

⁸ Revelation 6:8, Authorized (King James) Version.

⁹ Danto, Arthur C. "Playing with the Edge," an essay included in Mapplethorpe (New York: Random House, 1992) p. 311.