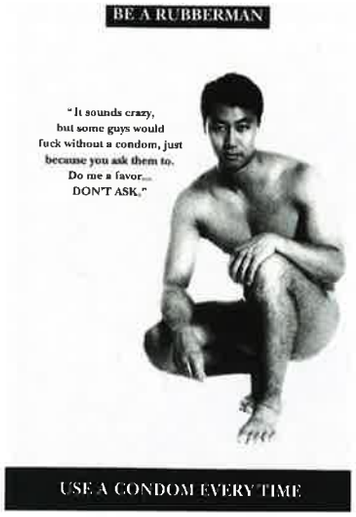
Keith Haring, *Safe Sex*, 1985, acrylic on canvas tarp, 120 × 118".



Far left: ***Be a Rubberman: Use a Condom Every Time*** **postcard, San Francisco AIDS Foundation, ca. 1990.**

Left: **Cover of *Play Fair!* pamphlet** (Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, 1982). Artwork: Ray Bostrom.

Above: ***No Less a Man for Playing Safe*** **poster, PS Atlanta, ca. 1987.**

Right: **Howard Cruse, *Great Sex! Don't Let AIDS Stop It/Great Sex is Healthy Sex!* poster, Safer Sex Committee of New York City, 1984.**

CLOSE-UP

MUTUAL AID

DANIEL MARCUS ON KEITH HARING'S *ONCE UPON A TIME*, 1989

"BY THIS TIME—1985—things have seriously changed in New York, and in my life, because the horror of AIDS had come to light." The words are Keith Haring's, quoted in his biography. For Haring, as for many queer people in the mid-1980s, the moment ushered in an unprecedented experiment in social distancing: "You had to start being selective and much more aware of what you were doing, and who you were doing it with," he writes, noting the need to balance communal safety with a hard-won culture of liberated sexuality. "I didn't stop having sex, but had safe sex or what was considered and understood to be safe sex at that point."

If the biological toll of a pandemic can be easily quantified, the impact on culture is harder to measure. Speaking with biographer John Gruen, Haring is quick to reassure him: "Of course, nothing changed as far as the creation of my work was concerned." But something in his art *did* change in 1985, the year he first broached the subject of AIDS directly. On October 20—five days before the State of New York officially sanctioned the closure of gay bathhouses, bars, and clubs as a prophylactic measure—Haring made a monumental declaration in praise of safe sex. Painted in garish acrylic on a roughly ten-by-ten-foot tarp, *Safe Sex* features two larger-than-life lovers jacking each other off beneath the eponymous slogan, each bobbleheaded figure's face bearing a green X, a symbol that could be construed as a target (e.g., of viral infection, gay bashing, governmental neglect, etc.) or, perhaps, as a marker of straight-edge self-denial. This was not only one of the earliest works of art to engage with the AIDS crisis; it also marked an uncharacteristically direct gesture on the part of an artist best known for the elusive (yet lovable) ambiguity of his subway drawings. Around the same moment, Haring painted a smaller version, also titled *Safe Sex*, which he consigned to a benefit auction in support of the grassroots AIDS organization Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in late November 1985. He spelled out the title in cutesy cursive, punctuating it with a registered trademark symbol: SAFE SEX.®

In a sense, safe sex in 1985 *was* a brand-name product: As early as 1982, gay communities understood that AIDS could be spread through sexual contact and had begun distributing information to raise awareness of this fact. That year, the Bay Area collective Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence authored the first of a slew of guides to safe-sex practices: a brochure titled *Play Fair!*, which focused on a broad array of common STDs, including "Kaposi's sarcoma—the so-called 'gay cancer'" (a telltale symptom of HIV, although the virus had yet to be identified), mordantly illustrated by a cartoon cast of bearded nuns. Less than a year later, the concept of "medically safe sex" emerged in the widely circulated—and extensively researched—pamphlet *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic*, jointly written by New York–based activists Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen in consultation with physician Joseph Sonnabend. Written for a sexually active gay readership and distributed by the authors, the pamphlet offered detailed advice about the risks of specific

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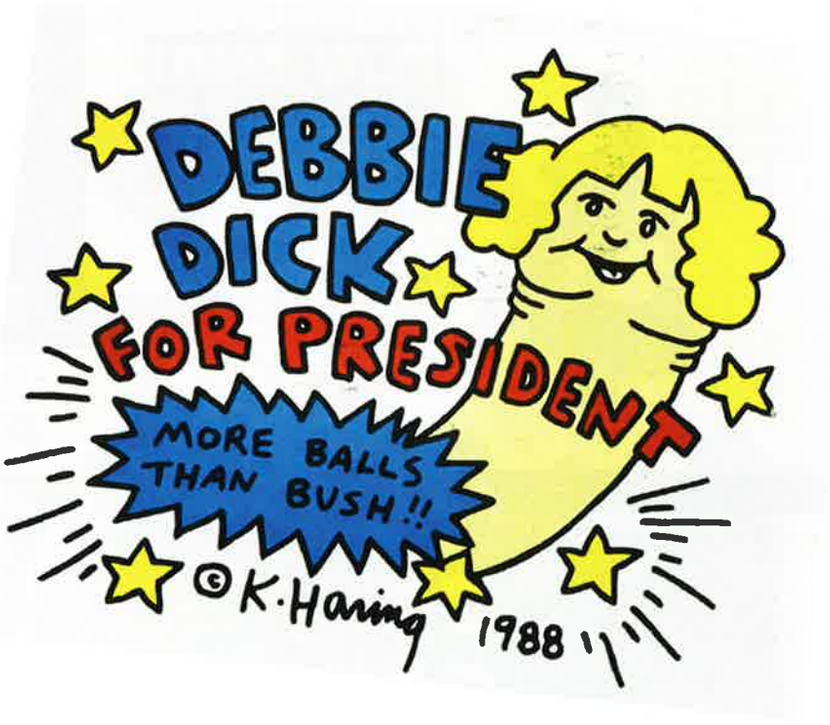


sexual practices, emphasizing safety over celibacy: "Sex doesn't make you sick—diseases do," the pamphlet rightly insisted.

Berkowitz, Callen, and a handful of collaborators soon joined forces to cofound the Safer Sex Committee of New York and, working with GMHC, created an influential (and widely imitated) poster emblazoned with the slogan GREAT SEX IS HEALTHY SEX! and illustrated by a G-rated cartoon of two men flirting in a locker room. Posted in gay bathhouses, backroom clubs, and bars, the flyer opened the door to countless variations as AIDS activists and advocates struggled in the absence of governmental support to promote communal self-defense, combining new ideals of sexual desirability (NO LESS A MAN FOR PLAYING SAFE, read the caption of a muscle-bound Atlanta-based ad campaign) with tough-love admonitions against laxity (BE A RUBBERMAN—USE A CONDOM EVERY TIME).

Haring's *Safe Sex* paintings took shape against this backdrop of desperate invention, importing the newly conceived discourse around sex, risk, and pleasure into the realm of high art. Although difficult to appreciate in retrospect, these works crossed a line in his practice, violating an unwritten rule—one carefully safeguarded in Haring's role as subway-graffiti writer—that language should not gain the upper hand over figuration. Extremely self-conscious about on-brand messaging, Haring had never previously inserted a slogan into his art (his ubiquitous FREE SOUTH AFRICA poster of 1985 followed the two *Safe Sex* paintings); and if the phrase SAFE SEX was not *quite* sloganeering, it nonetheless suggested an instruction to be followed, as illustrated by the two figures. More to the point, the particular message of these works was unlikely to have mass appeal, defying both mainstream homophobia and the culture wars of the Christian Right. Even the auctioneer who secured *Safe Sex* for the GMHC benefit worried over the fact that "it showed two male stick figures stroking each other," expressing concern that "this may appear in the *New York Times*."

The risks Haring ran in painting *Safe Sex* were real, then—and the stakes were high: His celebrity status in the mid-'80s gave him a built-in audience among heterosexuals, for whom the affirmation of generic human community (as opposed to specifically *gay* identity politics) was more or less synonymous with his brand. Exploiting this status to the hilt, Haring took his safe-sex campaign further, collapsing art, consumerism, and public health into a multipronged appeal for peer-to-peer risk mitigation. Under the aegis of Pop Shop, his Lower East Side boutique–*cum*–mail-order catalogue, he sold safe-sex-branded T-shirts, buttons, posters, and even (naturally) condom cases inscribed with prophylactic messaging.

At the center of this campaign, in addition to the "two male stick figures stroking each other," who would continue to adorn Haring's safe-sex swag, was the iconic "Debbie Dick," a feminized erection whose visage acquired a cult following among AIDS activists and educators in the late 1980s. By turns cherubic and obscene, these mascots contrasted with the official materials of AIDS-prevention organizations (and even more so with the trickle of ads issued by governmental agencies), marking their bearer, or wearer, as part of an uproarious libidinal community—one symbolized, in the persona of Debbie Dick, by a male member in blonde drag. No single image better expressed the open-ended fraternal spirit of Haring's propaganda than the original duo of mutual masturbators, whose crossing of arms renders the ideal of queer solidarity at once literal and provocative—a gesture of generous, joyful obscenity.

SEX CROPS UP FREQUENTLY in Haring's journals of the era, and as best we can tell, he was willing to take his own advice, keeping to a strict prophylactic regime. At the same time, Haring's diary entries always distinguish the experience of unqualified *sex* from safe sex, the latter representing a sort of postlapsarian compromise: "There really can't be any more anonymous sex or street 'cruising' in the 'original' sense of the word," he muses in an entry from Germany dated June 10, 1987. "Everything has changed quite dramatically. We [Haring and his partner Juan Rivera] haven't had sex with anyone on this entire trip. I'm kind of proud of that in a funny way. Not even the safest sex. I only miss it sometimes."

If cruising was out of the question, and if anonymous sex couldn't be had anymore, then how much of sex was left? How difficult would it be to introduce safety into the actual practice (as opposed to the visual culture) of sex, and to what degree might it interfere with the balance of desire and satisfaction? These issues informed one of Haring's final, most unapologetically obscene public works, a mural titled *Once Upon a Time*, created on the occasion of "The Center Show," a group

FREE SOUTH AFRICA

Opposite page: **Keith Haring, *Debbie Dick* sticker, 1988.**

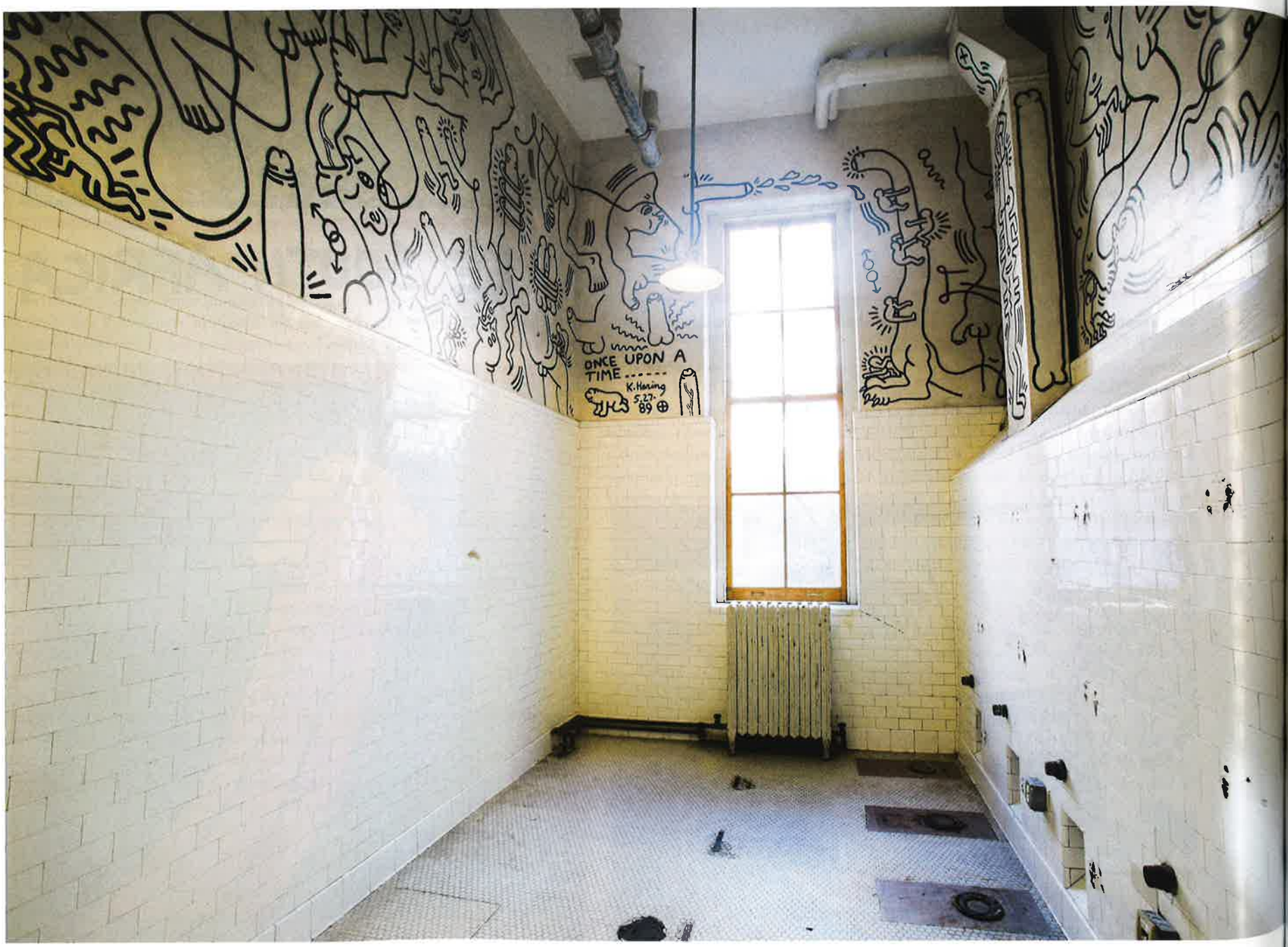
Above: **Keith Haring, *Safe Sex*, 1985,** acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60".

Below: **Keith Haring's 1987 condom case and Pop Shop catalogue.**

Above, right: **Keith Haring, *Free South Africa* poster, 1985.**

Right: **Keith Haring, *Debbie Dick*, 1984,** acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60".

Once Upon a Time offered a dark hallucination of gay promiscuity, spanning the full menu of no-longer-safe sex acts.



This page and opposite:
Keith Haring, *Once Upon a Time*, 1989, enamel on bathroom walls. Installation views, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, New York.

exhibition held in June 1989 at the Lesbian & Gay Community Services Center (now the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center), a building that served, among other functions, as the meeting place of ACT UP. Haring's mural decorated the stark white walls of the center's second-floor men's bathroom, paying homage to the memory of liberated gay sexuality with a fever-dream of cocks, assholes, darting tongues, and glutinous sperm. Belying the work's storybook title, and contrasting sharply with other depictions of queer intimacy in the show, *Once Upon a Time* offered a dark hallucination of gay promiscuity, spanning the full menu of no-longer-safe sex acts, from barebacking to rimming and beyond. In a brain-scrambling allegory worthy of Haring's queer heroes William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, the quest for satisfaction turns the human figure into a living erection: Crawling on all fours beside the artist's signature, even Haring's iconic baby becomes a nubile penis.

Conceived as a site-specific intervention, *Once Upon a Time* harks back not just to the function of public restrooms as sites of gay cruising but also to the politics of the so-called bathhouse battles of the early '80s, in which the value of promiscuity was precisely at issue. At the time, arguments for and against closing bathhouses and other alleged hot spots of viral transmission raged in the pages of the *New York Native*, the *Body Politic*, and other gay periodicals; the subject was forced by state authorities, but split the gay community as well. The issue raised the hackles of Larry Kramer, the playwright and cofounder of GMHC, who broke ranks with the group partly over the question of promiscuity. Blasting the sex-positive side in the *Native*, Kramer railed against the gay community for what he regarded as its fatal devotion to sex: "I am sick of guys who moan that giving up careless sex until this thing blows over is worse than death. How can they value life so little and cocks and asses so much? Come with me, guys, while I visit a few of our friends in intensive Care [*sic*] at NYU. Notice the look in their eyes, guys. They'd give up sex forever if you could promise them life."

Kramer's plea for abstinence prompted numerous rebuttals, including one from art historian Douglas Crimp, whose essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," published in *October* in 1987, turned the argument on its head: "Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures. It is that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviors—something that brutal 'behavioral therapies' tried unsuccessfully for over a century to force us to do—very quickly and dramatically. It is for this reason that [Randy] Shilts's and Kramer's attitudes about the formulation of gay politics on the basis of our sexuality is so perversely distorted, why they insist that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact *it is our promiscuity that will save us*."

For Haring, too, the practice of sex held a key to salvation. Look again at *Once Upon a Time*: The mural's depiction of erotic mania is absurd, overwrought, and obsessive—a base confession bar none. But it is nevertheless a shared confession, which, in the context of ACT UP, acknowledges the role of *un*safe sex in preparing the groundwork for queer revolt—and queer comradeship—during the "plague years" of the late 1980s and early 1990s. What the mural confesses is the *communal* power of sex: the power to warp the social fabric, deforming the "normal" image of the human body, while at the same time weaving together communities based on generosity, risk, trust, and pleasure. Haring takes neither side lightly in *Once Upon a Time*: Sex consumes subject and object alike, rendering the human into denominations of engorged flesh, while at the same time endowing the fact of our common embodiment (and, not coincidentally, the source of our mortality) with the ultimate value. Haring wants us to revel in this contradiction, refusing to let go. It is a wild ride—and a seduction, in every sense, to life. □

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