

Using Art in Social Studies: The Extraordinary Keith Haring

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When artist Keith Haring died on February 16, 1990, I was a preservice teacher. I had seen Haring’s artwork in magazines and on TV and was captivated by his simple, vibrant, eye-catching style. One of his artworks especially caught my attention: *Ignorance = Fear | Silence = Death*. When he painted it in 1989, the AIDS epidemic was raging, and Haring himself was diagnosed with the disease. I remember admiring the clever and courageous artist who had created such a bold—yet basic—image that roused communities to fight the AIDS crisis. The artwork, featuring three images covering their eyes, ears, and mouth, was followed by a *Fight AIDS Worldwide* piece in 1990 that depicts entangled people on a hunched-over figure. Many art critics assert that Haring’s work brought AIDS to the forefront of social consciousness when government leaders were largely ignoring it.



Ignorance = Fear, 1989. Keith Haring. Lithograph. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

But the Keith Haring piece that had an enduring impact on me was his *Crack is Wack* mural, largely because of the reason he painted it. I was naïve about the cocaine derivative, crack, and its destructive potency, which ruined the lives of many users including that of Haring’s studio assistant. Keith

Haring witnessed the young man transform from an upright, intelligent apprentice to a troubled crack addict. The perilous crack, especially its highly addictive nature, incited Haring to take action through art in his New York City community. He painted an animated mural on a wall composed of energetic figures with the striking message, “Crack is Wack.”



Crack is Wack Park, East Harlem

“When I discovered this wall, it was a handball court that was more or less abandoned and which didn’t have a fence around it. And because the wall looks like a big billboard on the highway, it’s perfect for a painting. As usual, I didn’t ask permission, and I just brought my ladders and paints and, within a day, I had painted this mural,” Haring explained.¹ The mural imparted a dynamic warning to thousands of New Yorkers through symbols and figures that invited contemplation over a communal problem. But for me, a South Texas college student, I learned the power of public artwork to cast light on a critical social concern.

Now, as an experienced teacher and professor of education,

ON THE COVER: Keith Haring mural, East Houston Street, NYC (Stefano Corso via Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

I consider Keith Haring’s artwork—with its playful yet empowering graphic style—to be a valuable resource for use in the middle school social studies classroom. Learning about Haring’s iconic artwork and personal motivations can inspire students to plan and execute their own artwork and raise awareness of issues they consider critical.

The Keith Haring Biography

While many middle school students may be able to identify Keith Haring’s art because of its popularity in the media, fashion, and other artistic creations, they may know nothing about the person. To introduce Haring in social studies instruction, first show some examples of his work. The sidebar at right lists books that feature his art. Teachers might project this on a screen using a document camera. Alternatively, online images are available from the Keith Haring Foundation website (www.haring.com) which also includes a section for kids (<https://haringkids.com>) as well as numerous lesson plans. Select images that suit the unique interests of your students and pose critical thinking questions to cultivate a discussion. This is an ideal time to use a Think-Pair-Share strategy so that all students participate in the discussion by reflecting on questions such as:

- How do you feel about the artwork?
- What do you notice about the colors, shapes, and lines?
- What message is the artwork communicating?
- How does this compare to other art you have seen?
- What does this art mean to you?

Also consider using the Visual Thinking Strategies’ questions, which help students formulate hypotheses about artwork supported with evidence.² The three key questions of this inquiry-based teaching method include: What is going on here? (Students formulate hypotheses); What makes you say that? (Students provide evidence to support their hypotheses); And, what more can we find? (Students further explore the art).³

Then, select a resource from the list at the right so students can learn about Haring before he became a famed artist. (Teachers who are required to document a content discipline standard to support the reading can apply those with phrasing such as: students identify and describe the influence of individuals on contemporary society, the relationship that exists between the arts and the societies in which they are produced, and the ways

in which contemporary issues influence creative expression).⁴

Reading about his childhood and adolescence will help students connect with him as a peer, making it easier to understand how art was both a creative outlet for him *and* a medium to draw attention to causes that were important to him. Haring’s Pennsylvania boyhood was unexpectedly traditional in that he seemed an ordinary, easygoing child, heartened by Dr. Seuss and Walt Disney, and eager to draw and doodle on whatever paper he could find. But as a preteen, he exhibited a social activist propensity when he scribbled anti-Nixon slogans on the buildings of his hometown. By young adulthood, break dancers, hip-hop musicians, and graffiti artists inspired Haring to express himself through lively art.

Resources on Keith Haring

Children’s Picture Books
Tami Lewis Brown, <i>Art is Life: The Life of Artist Keith Haring</i> (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2020)
Matthew Burgess, <i>Drawing on Walls: A Story of Keith Haring</i> (Enchanted Lion Books, 2020)
Kay A. Haring, <i>Keith Haring: The Boy Who Just Kept Drawing</i> (Dial Books for Young Readers, 2017)
Books with Photos of His Artwork*
Dieter Buchhart, ed., <i>Keith Haring: The Political Line</i> (Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 2014)
Jeffrey Deitch, <i>Keith Haring</i> (Rizzoli, 2014)
John Gruen, <i>Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography</i> (Fireside, 1992)
Keith Haring, <i>Keith Haring Journals</i> (Penguin, 1996)
Alexandra Kolassa, <i>Haring</i> (Taschen, 2016)
Films*
Ben Anthony, <i>Keith Haring: Street Art Boy</i> (American Masters, 2020)
Elisabeth Aubert, <i>Drawing the Line – A Portrait of Keith Haring</i> (Biografilm, 1990)
Christina Clausen, <i>The Universe of Keith Haring</i> (New Video Group, 2008)
Feature length documentaries and video clips can also be found on YouTube

*Preview these resources prior to using them with students. Some may include content that contains sexual, obscene, or mature themes not suitable for students.



(Used by permission. Keith Haring artwork © Keith Haring Foundation/ Wikimedia Commons)

Keith Haring mural, "We Are The Youth," at 22nd and Ellsworth Streets in Philadelphia.

The Keith Haring Foundation also offers a comprehensive biography with photos and Haring's own commentary on significant life moments. Consider using some of the picture books even though at first glance they seem inappropriate for middle schoolers. The stories are simple and provide ample illustrations to demonstrate the progression of his work. Each book includes the author's notes, information about specific art, and other relevant material. For teachers who value timelines, the Buchhart and Kolossa books provide a chronology of his life.⁵

Some questions to ask about the reading include:

- What is your perception of Keith Haring?
- In what ways did you connect with him?
- How is your life similar/different to his?
- What did you find to be the most meaningful aspect of his life?
- How are you influenced or motivated to create art?

Several films are also listed on page 3 for teachers who would like to complement the readings about Haring. Additionally,

students can complete Handout 1 on page 7 as a formative assessment of what they have learned so far. Any of the questions can be used as an Exit Ticket for students to reflect on their learning. Student responses can also be used to open ensuing lessons when they discuss their opinions about Haring's life and artwork through a Think-Pair-Share. After the discussion, students might use a KWL (Know-Want to know-Learned) chart to determine what they would further like to learn about Haring. This elicited feedback can be used to inform and differentiate upcoming lessons.

While biographies on Keith Haring concur on milestones, they differ on how they address his life as an openly gay man in the 1980s. Some exclude discussion of his sexual orientation, his romantic relationships, or that he died of AIDS at 31 years old. Others attend to these aspects lightly. The children's book written by Keith's younger sister, Kay Haring, mentions in the author's notes that Keith was gay and that he contributed to AIDS organizations. Other books like *Drawing on Walls* are more direct and note that Keith Haring fell in love with a man.

This poses an interesting dilemma for teachers: whether to broach these aspects of Haring's life with students. To be candid, the decision lies in the comfort level of the teacher and the

composition of the learning community. Some teachers and students might prefer to skim through these characteristics as a way of normalizing diverse sexual orientations. (Haring himself mentioned that being gay was not an issue for him. He said, “It doesn’t have that much to do with the rest of my life.”⁶) Teachers might choose to refer to Haring’s sexual orientation briefly if they have instructional time constraints and want students to spend more time exploring the artwork. Others might want to overtly discuss that Haring was a gay man because this part of his identity cannot easily be separated from his work.

If choosing to discuss Haring’s sexuality with the class, help students understand the context of the 1980s. When Haring catapulted to fame, prejudice against gay men was uncompromising. Gay men could not serve openly in the military, nor could they marry other men; very few anti-gay discrimination protection clauses existed (e.g., at work, for adopting children, and securing housing); AIDS was rampant in the gay men’s community; and President Ronald Reagan and his executive advisors were not addressing the AIDS epidemic even though 100,000 people had lost their lives to disease. It is in this context that Haring set out to use his artistic talents to raise awareness about AIDS. Some art experts emphasize:

Haring, through his artwork, also called out the public’s indifference and disdain towards the AIDS movement. *Silence = Death* shows a group of figures covering their ears, mouths, and eyes, highlighting the fact that most people were forced to suffer in absolute silence, rejected by their own communities. A pink triangle is shown in the background, an emblem that had once been a symbol used to signify homosexual individuals during the Holocaust. Haring’s use of the pink triangle in his works helped gay and HIV/AIDS rights activists re-appropriate the symbol as a pro-gay, HIV rights icon throughout the 1980s.⁷

To wrap up this segment of the lesson, point out that since Haring’s passing in 1990, American culture has evolved from acceptance and normalization of the LGBTQ community to celebration and pride, even as some people continue to harbor intolerant attitudes. Underscore the importance of treating others with respect and dignity by using inclusive language, and answer students’ questions with concrete concepts (e.g.,

Haring had romantic relationships with men; he was openly gay; he depicted gay themes in his art; he died of AIDS). Follow by noting other LGBTQ artists who—like Haring—have produced an array of highly acclaimed artwork (Frida Kahlo, Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe), but that, of course, not all artists are gay.

Keith Haring’s Artwork as a Tool for Raising Social Awareness

After reading about Keith Haring, underscore for students that much of his artwork was in public spaces because he wanted to share his whimsical style with the world. His spirited union of lines, shapes, and faceless figures adorned city walls, billboards, lampposts, and sidewalks. According to some estimates, Haring created as many as 10,000 drawings on subway stations alone.⁸ “I think public art (unless there is a specific political or ideological message) should make people feel comfortable, and brighten their environments,” he said.⁹ Together, he could attract people to his art and herald a wake-up call about conditions in the community.



Keith Haring at work in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. (March 14, 1986)

To highlight for students how artwork can be used to heighten social awareness, focus instruction on two essential concepts with regard to Keith Haring’s work:

- **Symbolic messages.** Haring used a variety of signs and nonverbal symbols as a language.¹⁰ His most famous include a crawling baby (which represented purity, innocence, and optimism), a barking dog (depicts

protector and a warning), a flying saucer (considered a source of mystery energy), and wavy lines (action and movement).¹¹ He melded these together with bold black lines, a few colors, and basic shapes to unveil an energetic drawing.

Show the students a variety of symbols, such as in Figure 1 below, and how they are used in American identity, politics, geography, and throughout history. Also explain that lines and shapes can be manipulated in ways to express emotions such as in the examples below. Show some of Haring's work again and have students describe how he used lines, shapes, symbols, speck patterns, etc. and interpret what he was communicating. To encourage a discussion, ask questions such as:

- What lines, shapes, and symbols do you see in the art piece?
- Why do you suppose Keith Haring arranged the lines, shapes, and symbols this way?
- What meanings do the lines, shapes, and symbols have?
- Why do you suppose Keith Haring chose these colors?
- How do the lines, shapes, symbols, and colors contribute to a message?

For teachers who wish to extend the lesson into a writing

assignment, provide students a colored photocopy of one of Haring's artworks and instruct them to complete Handout 2 on page 7. Again, Exit Tickets, Think-Pair-Share, and KWL instructional strategies can elicit responses to gauge student learning and plan for future lessons.

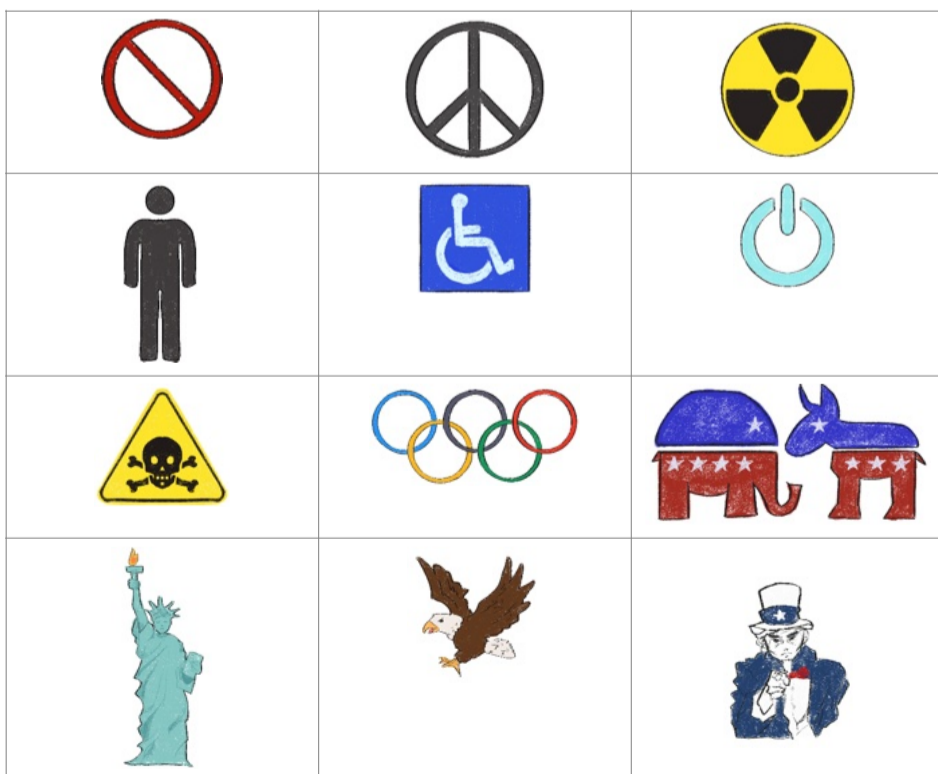
- **Raising social awareness.** Because Haring was dedicated to sharing his art with the world, public venues became the very platform for social causes that were important to him.¹² In addition to AIDS and the crack drug problem of the 1980s, he painted how he felt about apartheid in South Africa, the Cold War, and machines and computers.¹³

Explain to students how art can be sources of information about current social issues, such as the climate crisis, hunger and poverty, immigration, and healthcare availability. Emphasize that messages in artwork raise social awareness when they are viewed in community spaces, and that students can also use their own art to advocate for causes. To encourage students to reflect on social issues that concern them the most, ask:

- What social issues affect our community?
- What social issues concern you?
- How can you use art to support a cause?
- How can you use lines, shapes, and symbols in

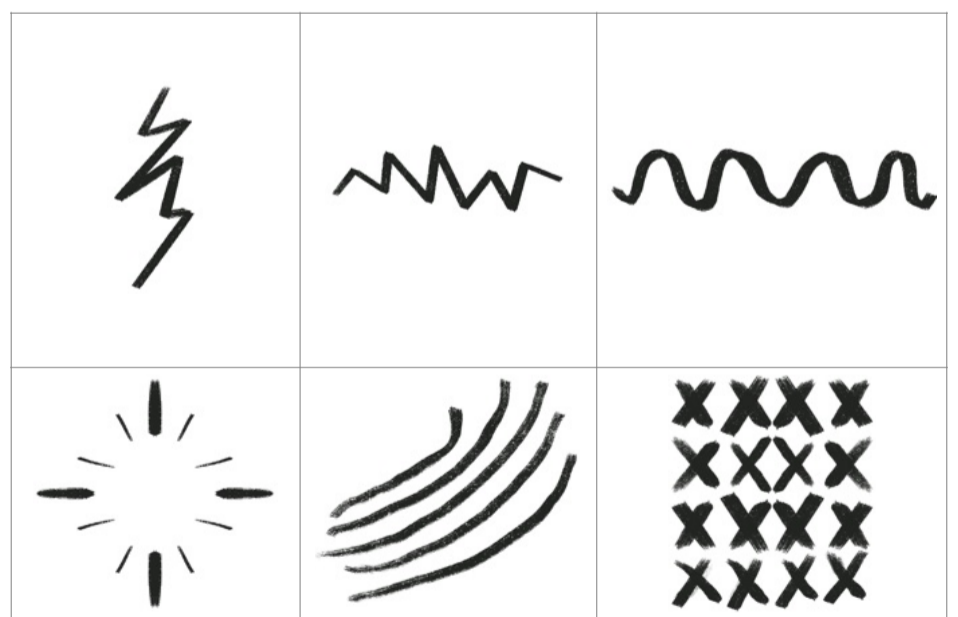
continued on page 8

Figure 1. **Some Common Signs and Symbols**



Credit: Produced by Camrynn Cardenas (2023). Printed with Permission.

Figure 2. **Examples of Lines**



Credit: Produced by Camrynn Cardenas (2023). Printed with Permission.

HANDOUT 1

1. If Keith Haring were alive, what three questions would you ask him?

2. If you could own one of Keith Haring's artworks, which one would it be? Why?

3. Keith Haring was motivated to draw. What are you motivated to pursue?

4. What inspires you to be creative?

5. After watching a YouTube clip of Keith Haring, draw a picture in his artistic style that honors his life work (to the best of your ability).

HANDOUT 2

1. What lines, shapes, and symbols do you see in the art piece?

2. Why do you suppose Keith Haring arranged the lines, shapes, and symbols this way?

3. What meanings do the lines, shapes, and symbols have?

4. Why do you suppose Keith Haring chose these colors?

5. How do the lines, shapes, symbols, and colors contribute to a message?

HARING from page 6

your artwork to make a public statement?

- Where would you put your art?



(lorello via Flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Take a moment for students to define public art (i.e., art that is outside museums and galleries and is either: accessible or visible to the public for free; concerns or affects the community or individuals; is maintained for or used by the community or individuals; or is paid for by the public¹⁴) and contrast it with art intended for private viewing (i.e., art that is bought, sold, and displayed in museums and private collections¹⁵). Encourage students to search the internet for works of other public artists, such as Christo (who Haring said inspired him), Diego Rivera, and Ai Weiwei, to contrast with Haring's public artwork. As students explore the different art, they can expand their definitions to include the extent of art permanency, the work as a response to its location, the degree of the artist's intent to influence public opinion, and so forth. The students can also look at the sub-genre of public art—street or graffiti art—for further contemplation. Afterwards, invite them to ponder the effect Haring had when he plastered his artwork throughout New York (free of charge), and mass-produced and sold his drawings on posters, magnets, T-shirts, etc., unlike other artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Jeff Koons, whose works are largely in museums and private collections.

Using the Keith Haring Style to Demonstrate Knowledge and Skills

Now that students know more about Keith Haring and the essence of his artwork, they can use his art style in class activities and social studies assignments. At the end of a lesson or unit exploring social problems, their characteristics and causes, and the associated challenges and opportunities, have students take action by displaying their Haring-inspired artwork publicly.

They might:

1. Select or make symbols associated with a local, regional, or global problem
2. Connect the symbols to a vibrant and positive image
3. Draw the image to convey a message, and
4. Place the artwork around the school community (with school leadership team approval)

See the sidebar on page 9 for examples of how students can demonstrate their knowledge and skills through artwork with symbolic messages.

When students advance to step four (displaying artwork), discuss an implicit conflict: asking for permission, which Haring never did, to display artwork in public. The reality is, there are laws that prohibit altering or damaging public property with ink, paint, writing, or drawings without legal consent. The defacing of public property induces penalties that range from fines, restitution, arrest, and jail time. As his biography notes, Haring was arrested and fined many times, and he willingly endured these penalties. However, students are minors who are expected to follow rules designed to keep the school in a condition that benefits the learning community. Ask students to deliberate the prospect of everyone altering their community with artwork as Haring did (without permission) and the merits of laws that prohibit such crimes.

As might be expected, using art in lessons will motivate students to engage in the content and use their imagination to express their ideas. But an added benefit is that they get to share their point of view when they discuss their artwork with their classmates. To cultivate a discussion with total student participation, consider using some of these interactive instructional strategies before students post their work around the school:

- **Gallery walk.** Instruct students to place their drawings around the classroom. Generate some questions for them to answer about the artwork, such as *Which*

art did you most connect with? Why? What does the artwork mean? Which piece showed you a perspective you hadn't considered? Allow the students time to see all the art and answer the questions. Afterwards, allow for a discussion using the questions as prompts.

- **I like. I wonder. A question I have.** Have students post their artwork around the classroom. Give each student three sticky notes. Instruct them to write *I like...* on one sticky note; *I wonder...* on another; and *A question I have...* on the third. Allow time for stu-

dents to visit all the art pieces and place either of the sticky notes on three pieces with a written response (e.g., *"I like...your drawing because of the colorful symbols you used"*). Remind students not to place a sticky note on artwork that already has three. Follow with a class discussion using the questions above as prompts.

- **Four corners.** For grouped activities, ask students to place their artwork in four areas of the classroom. Then write questions on chart paper near their artwork that other groups respond to, such as *What do you think is the meaning of this art piece? What do the symbols and lines convey? How would you alter your own group artwork after seeing this one? What did you learn from this group's artwork?* After the students respond to the questions, have them visit another group's artwork in a clock or counterclockwise fashion. After the students have responded to all four pieces of art, gather the students for a discussion.

Examples of How Social Studies Teachers Can Use Keith Haring Style of Art with Students*

Students Can Create Keith Haring Style Art to Show:	
History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How historical events influence contemporary events • The social, political, economic, and cultural contributions of individuals and groups of various societies, past and present
Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of the physical environment and climate on groups of people • The repercussions of modified physical environments (e.g., mining, irrigation, and transportation infrastructure)
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human rights abuses (e.g., the oppression of religious, ethnic, and political groups) by limited or unlimited governments
Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The roles and responsibilities of citizens in the US
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The experiences and contributions of diverse groups of people in a multicultural society • The significance of religious holidays and observances
Science, Technology, and Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The influence of science and technology on contemporary societies • Predictions about the impact of future scientific discoveries
Social Studies Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different points of view about an issue or current topic • Communicating in a visual format

*Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship," in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (New York: Routledge, 1994), 279–286.

Conclusion

As Haring's sister Kay noted, "Keith's energy and ideals live on in his works of art all over the world and in the ripples of inspiration he started that have echoed around the globe."¹⁶ Perhaps, once middle schoolers learn more about him, they will be inspired to use their own artwork to promote messages about causes that are important to them. ■

Notes

1. John Gruen, *Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography* (Fireside, 1992), 149.
2. Philip Yenawine, *Visual Thinking Strategies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013).
3. Yenawine, *Visual Thinking Strategies*.
4. TEA, *Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies: Subchapter B. Middle School* (Texas Education Agency, August 2010), <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/ch113b.pdf>.
5. Dieter Buchhart, ed., *Keith Haring: The Political Line* (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2014); Alexandra Kolassa, *Haring* (Taschen, 2016).
6. David Sheff, "Keith Haring, An Intimate Conversation," *Rolling Stone* (Aug. 10, 1989).
7. Steven J. Hoffman, Annemarie Hou, Annie Jones, and Julia Woo, "Learning from the Role of Art in Political Advocacy on HIV/AIDS," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 11, no. 2 (2023): 233–258.
8. Richard Lacayo, "Keith Haring's Cartoons of Calamity," *Time* (Nov. 13, 2014).
9. Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals* (Penguin Classics, 2010), 127.
10. Kolassa, *Haring*, 20.

11. Thomas Calvocoressi, “Keith Haring’s Urgent Optimism,” *The New Statesman* (July 3, 2019).
12. Martina Vasil, “Hip-Hop and Haring: Pop Culture and Interdisciplinary Learning for the General Music Classroom,” *Journal of General Music Education* 34, no. 1 (2020): 6-13.
13. Buchhart, *Keith Haring: The Political Line*.
14. Cameron Cartiere and Martin Zebracki, “Introduction,” in *The Everyday Practice of Public Art: Art, Space and Social Inclusion*, ed. Cameron Cartiere and Martin Zebracki, 1-10 (New York: Routledge, 2016).
15. Carol Duncan, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship,” in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (New York: Routledge, 1994), 279–286.
16. Kay Haring, *Keith Haring: The Boy Who Just Kept Drawing* (Dial Books for Young Readers, 2017), 33.
17. TEA, *Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies*.

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