

# Berlin Wall

Between 1949 and 1961 approximately 3.5 million people, or twenty per cent of the population, escaped from East Germany to the West. Most slipped through the border controls in Berlin, then a divided city controlled by four occupying powers (America, Britain, France and Russia). Concerned at the rising numbers of defectors and the effects on the economy and the image of the communist regime, the East German government erected in 1961 first a barbed wire fence and then a concrete wall with watch towers and anti-vehicle trenches. Called by the East German authorities the ‘Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart’ (with the implication that West Germany had not been fully de-Nazified), and described occasionally by the West Berlin city government as the ‘Wall of Shame’ (because of its prevention of movement, and consequent separation, of friends and families), the Berlin Wall became a potent symbol of the Iron Curtain separating East and West Europe. Some East Germans continued to try to escape over the wall but generally failed: between one and two hundred people were killed in the attempt, or used the wall as a place to commit suicide, from 1961 to 1989.

Checkpoint Charlie – or, officially, Checkpoint C – was one of the more visible controlled border crossings between East and West Berlin. Featured in a number of classic spy films and books, it became something of a tourist attraction for visitors to West Berlin. As the years passed, artists and graffitiists painted on the western side of the wall, notwithstanding the dangers of antagonising the East German soldiers guarding it (the wall stood a couple of metres inside the East German border). Such acts of defiance and expression of personal freedom became seen in the west as a sign of West Berlin’s cultural vibrancy as well as an informal protest against the wall and all it symbolised.

Building on this reputation, the Director of the Checkpoint Charlie Museum invited American artist Keith Haring to paint a mural on a section of the wall in 1986. Aware of the historical importance of the wall, Haring, who was visiting Europe at the time, welcomed the opportunity to work on a grand scale. For him, the work was very much a political gesture, an attempt to ‘destroy the wall through painting it’, and amid much publicity he completed his mural, nearly 100 metres long, in a day.

Haring had initially studied graphic design in Pittsburgh but quickly switched to fine art, enrolling at the School of Visual Art, New York, in 1978. He became immersed in the alternative artistic culture developing in the streets and clubs of Manhattan, outside of galleries and museums. Inspired by the energy of the teenage graffitiists, he painted alongside them for a while, developing the distinctive tag of a ‘radiant baby’. He believed art should be direct and engage people of all types and walks of life.

He also took seriously the idea of his social responsibility as an artist. Concerned by the threat of nuclear war and of the risk of nuclear accidents, he designed in 1982 a poster for an anti-nuclear war rally in his trademark black and white linear style, showing the 'radiant baby' in a mushroom cloud surrounded by three angels. As a teenager Haring had encountered members of the Jesus Movement, a grassroots network of Christian groups, which later influenced his imagery (the 'radiant baby' is suggestive of the infant Jesus) and shaped his desire to reach out to a mass audience.

In the early 1980s Haring became well known in New York through making technically illegal chalk drawings on the black paper panels used to cover empty advertising hoardings in the subway. Producing as many as twenty or thirty drawings a day while on the way to and from college, he made the corridors of the subway system his personal gallery. With their stock cartoon-like characters, his drawings became a distinctive feature of the experience of travelers. 'The number of people passing one of these drawings in a week was phenomenal', Haring recollected. 'Even if the drawing remained up for only one day, enough people saw it to make it easily worth my effort'.

Although his work was similar to graffiti in some respects, people recognised that his chalk drawings showed a breadth of vision and an artistry, reflecting both the influence of contemporary figures such as Andy Warhol and a complex mixture of Aboriginal and African art and eastern calligraphy. Haring was arrested no less than five times for his efforts but former curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for New York City, Henry Geldzahler wrote in 1984 celebrating Haring's subway drawings:

*a new presence has been seen and felt in New York City's streets and subways. Radiant Babies, Barking Dogs, and Zapping Spacecraft, drawn simply and with great authority, have entered the minds and memories of thousands of New Yorkers. Our instant familiarity with this new pantheon of characters coincides with our rapid recognition that a sympathetic sensibility is at work in our midst. This call to attention, stronger than that exerted by the colossal glut of advertising or official signage, sets the work of Keith Haring apart from other graffiti writers. The man responsible for this cheer never signs his work. Keith Haring's gift to the public is generous and heartfelt – a celebration of the spirit that is not and cannot be measured in dollars.*

By the mid-1980s Haring was exhibiting in leading galleries in New York and in museums abroad. The prices of his canvases soared and he abandoned his subway drawings, in part because people began to collect them. He opened his own artist's store in Manhattan called Pop Shop, selling affordable T-Shirts and other items imprinted with his familiar designs, and became something of a celebrity himself when he drew on the body of the singer Grace Jones and on the leather jacket of the pop star Madonna. But, though he mixed with celebrities, he still aimed to reach the dispossessed and people not interested in art – and he became famous in part because of his ability to bridge the two worlds. In June 1986 he discovered a wall in a more or less abandoned handball court, which when painted looked from the freeway like a

billboard. He did not ask permission but brought his ladders and paints and within a day created a mural with the simple anti-drugs message ‘Crack is Wack’.

Later that year Haring was on a trip to Europe when he was approached by the Director of the Checkpoint Charlie Museum, then run by a human rights organisation, to paint a mural on the wall. Haring quickly planned to use the colours of the East and West German flags (black, red and yellow), symbolising the bringing together of the two peoples, and asked the museum staff to cover the wall with layers of white and then yellow paint prior to his arrival. The staff worked through the night before he was scheduled to arrive (if they had started earlier the blank space would have attracted graffitists) but, contrary to what Haring had asked, they only used one coat of yellow. This meant that the underlying painting showed through in places. To his chagrin, the team painted over a recent work by the French artists Thierry Noir and Christophe Bouchet showing repeated images of the Statue of Liberty. When the artists protested, Haring could only apologise.

Haring worked without sketches or assistants, inventing the positions of the interlinked figures over the length of the hundred metres as he painted. Only when the East German guards were satisfied that he was not defaming East Germany was he relatively safe to continue working, despite having technically crossed into East Germany without authorisation and undertaking a forbidden act. Interviewed later, Haring recalled:

*I went to Berlin for about 3 days when I went to do the wall, and unfortunately, as is often the case, it was very cold and almost rainy most of the time I was there. The rain sort of let up around 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning so I started painting. When I started to paint, the East Germans were peering over the wall all the time. At first they were curious because they saw all the people, sort of milling around on the western side and the press and things, so they didn't know exactly what I was going to do. But eventually after they came out a few times and realised that what I was painting was not really derogatory or insulting them in any way, they just decided to let me alone and stayed behind the wall the rest of the time.*

With his portable radio blaring rock music, Haring completed the mural in somewhere between four and six hours (accounts vary).

The Checkpoint Charlie Museum staff worked hard to publicise the mural, ensuring that Haring's painting of the wall was not just a national but also an international news event across Europe (including East Germany) and America. Haring played a key role in promoting the work, giving interviews and holding a press conference during the day in which he explained the politics of his seemingly apolitical painting: ‘In some ways, although it's a political act, it has to transcend politics and be a message to people. It's about unity, no matter in the face of whatever struggle or oppression, there still has to be a power of the people.’ Knowing from the outset that it would not be permanent, Haring always felt that the mural was going to be both an artistic expression and ‘a media gesture’. ‘For me the Berlin Wall was probably was one of the most successful media events that I ever did. The whole reason almost for doing the wall was more for the idea of doing it and almost as a gesture more than it was to actually paint a wall.’

Like all graffiti and street art, Haring's mural was vulnerable to erasure. That night or early the next day someone painted large sections of the mural gray, perhaps in political protest against the upbeat message of the American's work. Quickly, other artists and graffitiists painted on the hundred metre section that Haring had used, and within months there was very little left to see. Paradoxically, it was not censorship by the East German authorities that Haring needed to have feared but other artists. (Disappointed at the swift effacement of the American's work, the Director of the Checkpoint Charlie Museum said, 'I think Haring was so successful that other artists could not forgive him'.)

Three years later, on 9 November 1989 the East German government succumbed to mounting public pressure and announced that East Berliners would be able to travel freely to the West. That evening people on both sides of the wall picked up sledgehammers and started to bring the wall down in what was a momentous step that led to the re-unification of Germany.

Nothing now remains of Haring's mural beyond people's memories and photographs. But the artist was not distressed by the impermanence of this and other works. He was reassured, not so much by the thought that it was the idea that counted, but by the belief that photographs provided adequate records. In 1987 he wrote in his diary:

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

In the case of the graffiti works of Thierry Noir, however, not all were lost. Some surviving sections of the Berlin Wall with his signed paintings were sold, nominally for charity, at an auction in 1990 (Noir fought a ten-year court case to secure some payment for the sale of his work); and today a small fragment of another of his paintings is incorporated into the pavement around a new building complex in Berlin, a token reminder of one artist's response to the sadness and desperation that had been symbolised by the wall for nearly three decades.

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**Text—**  
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