

PORCELAIN AND POP



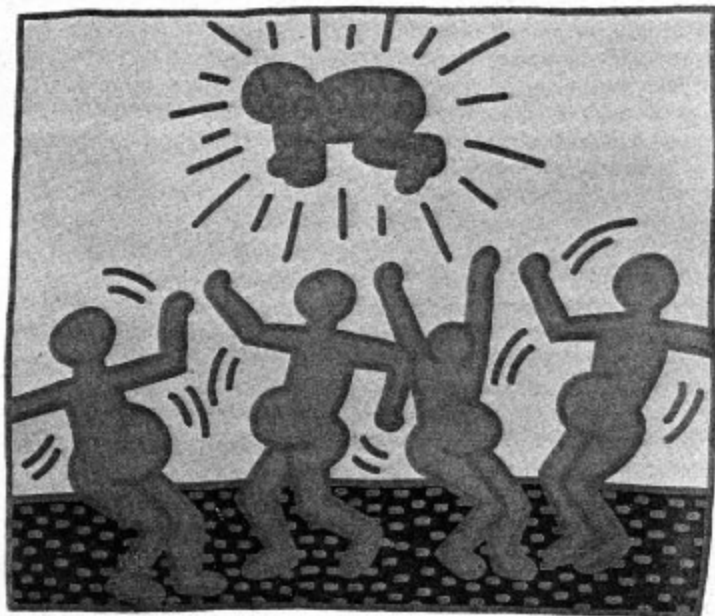
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Adrian Saxe's take-offs on Sèvres porcelain presentation pieces must rate as a premier, perverse episode in ceramic history. Keith Haring seems to have indicated in his work a deft circumvention of Art.

Adrian Saxe, Lidded Vessel. 1982. Porcelain, vessel: 26 1/4 x 11 1/4 x 6 1/4"; pedestal: 3 1/2 x 13 1/4 x 8 1/4". Private Collection. Courtesy Garth Clark Gallery.

Adrian Saxe's take-offs on Sèvres porcelain presentation pieces must rate as a premier, perverse episode in ceramic history, and they arrive when they're desperately needed. His feat of intellectual intuition, comparable, I think, to the Johnsian project in the mid-'50s, has all the characteristics of an epistemological break with established ceramic practice and its recent, traditionalist ideology, and serves to disrupt the prevailing modes of thought that have monopolized the field since its renewed formulation in the late '50s—a lately eroding tradition based on the primacy of the earthiness of the clay vessel, and the attendant, all-consuming content based on the primal substance and “natural” form. By replacing the “mother earth's” material with brittle, hyperconscious stylization; by substituting pastiche for loving recreation and respectful refinement; by redefining function as a mode of presentation and display—without for a moment abandoning the container form itself, without irradiating it or sublimating it into a sculptural project—Saxe has invented a distinctly unnerving, crossbred version of the ceramic object as a network of skewed relations between the abstractly functional and the nonformally aesthetic that offers a conceptual complexity radically at odds with the anti-intellectual, procedural bases represented for decades by two doctrinal alternatives: expressionist mudslinging and “truth to materials” aesthetics based (usually falsely) on Eastern models.

Choosing the most (aesthetically) devalued, debased, and “decadent” style—the Rococo-to-Neoclassicism of 18th-century France—Saxe has rediscovered the ideal vehicle for his cool analysis of contemporary ceramic thought: that style considered to be the most frivolous, the most anti-naturalistic, the most mindlessly attuned to the dictates of a ruling class, the furthest removed from any consid-



Keith Haring, Untitled #1, 1983. Silkscreen, 42 x 50".
Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

eration of the everyday or the down-to-earth. In so choosing, he insinuates his objects into a space where they pose in opposition to established cultural taste *in general*: unacceptable to ceramic schools and to "high art" taste, as decorative objects and stylistic anachronisms. And this space—or dis-place—has been summoned, it seems, not out of contrariness or the desire to be different, but in order to evade the authority (found today in all the visual arts) of a practice grounded in *either* craft or art; this displacement effected by the introduction of an alien, previously unthinkable, process of thought having no ties to either internally generated meaning as a function of natural, given characteristics of material, or meaning generated in the struggle between artist and material. His ceramic object seduces by being the most unnatural thing in the world, by a virtuosity without center, by a succumbing to a totally willed yet self-effacing stylization.

There is something that suggests both invitation and repulsion here; the porcelains are perhaps the sleekest visions of objects of delectation that exist as well as the least tasteful of things—products of an aberrant sensibility seemingly unaware of the proprieties of restraint while exhibiting a bull's-eye attentiveness to measured proportion in their mix of stilled, hypnotic excess with crazed composure. If you get hooked on those little squiggles and jagged cylinders, and stay with them long enough to begin to understand their submersion in the *idea of style*, you probably feel both pleasure and remove. I haven't talked to anyone who is indifferent to them, and even those who continue only to hate them understand their aims to an extent.

No one can quarrel with their technical expertise; and, necessarily, they are done superlatively well or they wouldn't elicit the rush of response that viewers are so meticulously manipulated into feeling. This work is, on one level, about spectacular craft, not in order to condemn it as mere facility (one thing they aren't is facile); not in order to show technique as something easily attained and as easily dispensed with (as so much ceramics—and art—goes out of its way to prove). On the contrary, nothing is offhanded: the skillful performance becomes a content, a most difficult subject, and not a mere means to the end of content.

Saxe became known years ago for his "Antelope Jars," and the major pieces in his show were also called "Antelope Jars." Now, however, the spiky, bony animal takes its place within a more thoroughgoing working premise: this odd "finial," which kept the viewer from (visually or literally) opening the container, underlining the "hands off," distanced presentation of the object and the perversion of usual function, is only one detail expressing the pervasive hermetic attitude, one more exaggeration of the process of preciousness and stylization stressing the object's existence in a space devoted to presentation and display. As presentation pieces, these objects "function" doubly, as witty plays on the meanings of the word "present": as gift, token, present—a noun; and as a function, in the presentation of the present: that is, the present both action and state of being.

My first encounter with these objects occurred in Kansas City, where each object was displayed in a plexiglas case, which is how they ought to be experienced—as presentations. The exhibit in New York was utterly wrong, as it made the work available (even as a possibility) to touch; and yet it didn't really matter, as the context and sense and space could be inferred. The pieces will demand distance even without the extra added attraction of a further, flaunted disdain for the human element or physical touch. Their invitations are strictly visual. They don't require "sculptural" presentation because of their fragility, or to secure some art status, but because the very mode of presentation—on a pedestal (rather than on a "shelf"), encapsulated (rather than tactically exposed)—is, in a sense, part of their content, what they're *about*: this status that is not taken for granted makes a point of their idea of a "use" that has nothing to do with pouring, filling, handling. In the way that, say, Betty Woodman's jugs and vases *shouldn't* be so displayed, because they invite

the viewer—even if only as a fiction—to handle, pour, fill (because as pots and pans they are all the more beautiful for always being in danger of being literally used, because they invite touch, because they should be within reach); so then Saxe's pieces need isolation as exaggerated, delicate, and deadly serious gestures of presentation.

There is a delicious haughtiness in these pieces that comes from near inhuman perfection; after all those years of the perfectly deformed roughness of mainstream ceramics, it is as if the ceramic body has been pulled together, toned, and sent into orbit on its own. The viewer may be put off for, after all, who can measure up to this kind of perfection? There is some fascinating discomfort, as when in the company of someone with impeccable manners: a bewitchment that derives from an ideal of controlled, performed acting rather than simply "being"; a perfection not expected, but worked on and up to; an arranged and engineered artifice that in no way appears natural but that nevertheless is attained without strain, exertion, or labor. To be perfect, to act perfectly, is possible only in the province of the artificial, of the uncanny pastiche and closeness to something completely, sumptuously other free from the trembling hand of accident. And yet this perfection has its deliberate vulgarities, a knowledge of its superrefinement as "too much," a spilling over into unbalanced extreme. There is no purity of means here, or effect, unless it is the singleminded obsession with the impure, the irresistible immoderation of excess, the hyperbolic limit, that can only be sustained by a supreme confidence indifferent to responsible authority.

There is no other such complex tactile surface in all of contemporary ceramics—nor in any current sculpture, for that matter. In the best pieces, Saxe goes to the intelligible limit of that complexity, and the surface and the form break apart, dissociate, the form of the vessel separating from its decorative embellishment in a division of their functions; applied elements lift off and away from the container as if poised to fly, as if responding to their own gravitational forces. A strict, formal decorum rules while being restricted: each crisply articulated surface retains the erotic confection of Rococo's "ordered chaos" erupting as the strategically placed absurdity, as the elegant dissonance of squat pipe feet on stepped pedestals; as the bulging, ill-tempered, truncated torso shorn of arms and legs (one in this series is titled *Parisienne Chain and Saw Massacre*); as diagonal paths of irregular decoration energize the container's perishable symmetry to the extent that the object seems to revolve itself into a frenzy of aesthetic madness even while insisting on its own sublime, ultraformal composure and the sane serenity secured by the tranquilizer of cool porcelain; as the spell of fantasy is interrupted by fake, polished jade, the cheap substitute for some "real," precious material; or by the shock of raw rock and crystal; by the delicate emblem and dandyish in-joke of an applied, fake gold French curve—Stella miniaturized.

Saxe's imitations—pastiche rather than parodies—of Sèvres porcelain have a covert content worth mentioning. Much historical ceramics is valuable because it is rare—having been used, much of it chipped, broke, was disposed of. Much of it is valuable as cultural token, as evidence from everyday life that cannot be retrieved in any other way. Even those ceramic traditions that saw clay objects as special—religiously significant or indexes of status—usually took second place to other "higher" forms of expression that were more valued (usually painting, sculpture, but mostly architecture and metalwork). Sèvres distinguishes itself as being impossibly expensive from the outset, incredibly expensive to produce, so much so that the French government at one time went bankrupt supporting its factories; it is said that Sèvres porcelain itself was one of the three causes of the French Revolution. Of what other enterprise can one say that an entire culture represents its most flighty dreams and total obliviousness to anything but its own pleasure, and does so in what is, at bottom, a set of dishes? That this endeavor is not the folly of a lone eccentric, but the mad escape of an entire ruling class? It is, of course, the crazy magnificence that is part of the meaning of

Saxe's work: the crystallization of culture not in some public display of self-confident heroism or timeless moral good or the triumph of individualism, but in some potpourri container.

Keith Haring is a skilled craftsman and a superb entertainer. Need he be anything more? He seems to enjoy pretending he's untutored (which is probably not all pretense—he attended the School of Visual Arts) but, really, he possesses a graphic flair and an eye/hand confidence that quite simply puts to waste any dishonest philistine criticism based on his being an inept draftsman. If anything, Haring has certain technical efficiencies easily mistaken for those associated with traditional Art—capital A—such as a rigorous style appropriate to subject matter. In the Whitney Biennial, downstairs, he performed what was a miracle of formal mapping, in a color-coded scheme of red and black on a white field: an all-over configuration of interlocking shapes handled with masterful aplomb; a pictographic puzzle of maximum variety all the more admirable for being executed with improvisational freshness and speed. Most any Abstract Expressionist of the 1940s might have been envious. That the mural had exactly zero art content (which is why it would have been perfect for the subway) won't come as news to many people: Haring seems to have indicated in his work a deft circumvention of Art, and his talent for cross-over is as feeble as Peter Max's.

The reason for Haring's not being an artist is the same as the one that has been ascribed to another superior technician and extremely popular entertainer, Steven Spielberg: both identify themselves with innocent wonder and a children's fantasy world, but don't give (mature) authority its due. Because everything's reduced to the comic book level, power—real power—is treated as a straw man, usually faceless, corporate, military, beastly, anonymous. It's a world where Sherman and Mr. Peabody—boy's best friend—save the day every time by the strength of their uncorrupted charm and blissed-out simplicity that is nothing more than just another fiction and strategy. What Haring and Spielberg aren't good at is friction, conflict, real (rather than imaginary) menace—that is, weakness is superior power for them, and authority fails to become reasonably human, and thus manageable, conquerable. Authority—capital A—is always looming, threatening, in this vision, but given the limitation of the conception, it remains benign and, well, ineffectual. So what's to be afraid of?

All this wouldn't be much of a problem if Haring (and Spielberg) could keep their hands out of the cookie jar of BIG IMPORTANT subjects, and just content themselves with being sweethearts—big, dumb kids. The fatal flaw at the heart of Haring's work is that his "radiant child" means nothing because it can mean anything and everything. Unsullied by thought, the child's point-of-view responds only to the immediately satisfying. Is the child radiant because he (passively) accepts radiation (from color TV, video game, atomic bomb) or is radiation an impending peril, something to be avoided? Is there to be no value judgment regarding such a devastatingly serious issue? That is the problem of those who believe virtue the province of only the untouched, thoughtless innocent. All the best popular art forms have essentially the same problem: compare "Drop the Bomb," a favorite rap from this summer, with its nonanalytical "message" that can be read as either "drop"/give up the bomb or "drop"/deploy the bomb—with all the unconscious ambiguity, not to say contradiction, this entails. Similarly, the new "White Lines" is alarmingly confused about its view on the use of cocaine.

Of course, it can be countered that such criticisms should not apply to popular art forms, and in a sense that's true, although not to the degree often thought. The confusions and contradictions have less to do with analytic laziness than with awareness of the audience: listeners to popular music and viewers of graffiti have limited attention span, and every message is less a meaning than part of a pattern, pulse, beat, or rhythm that is set up and propelled forward. (Graffiti "writing" is intentionally empty, "meant" to be seen rather than read, not a [verbal] language.) There is no contradiction between glorification and condemnation of nuclear war (or drugs) if they temporarily succeed one another; one attitude is forgotten when the other is introduced, and, finally, both are forgotten. There is little conviction in this world of the immediately ingested, only a belief in what will have the most visual or aural impact—what will give the

most direct satisfaction or impel movement.

Haring shares this problem, but it becomes a serious impediment when he makes static objects, where repeated viewing generates increased skepticism. When he works *in situ*, the impermanence says: "This isn't worth too much effort; the message is not sustained, worked through, or capable of standing up to scrutiny over an extended period of time—like art must." His ephemeral drawings, in the subway, occur in the same "space" as records on the hit chart: they are released, stay around for a while, and then drop out of sight; one doesn't want or need them around any longer. The origin of the style, on traveling cars, says the same thing: once seen, the "message"—purely visual and territorial—is forgotten, or eradicated, until that time when it pops up again, somewhere else; only its presence in a shifting situation gives it any freshness it might possess. So then, precisely, it is the appearance of graffiti on permanent canvas in the Janis "Post-graffiti" show that gives the banal its edge. Of course, we've seen "popular art" in galleries before, but the difference is that the art/gallery context *limits* rather than expands this medium's possibilities: the limits of the pictorial. Here, painting is neither a discipline nor a necessity, but an expediency.

Now, before this is read as a racist reaction (the expanding is economic, the expediency one of the marketplace), let me add that I'm not holding back the Art "tag" in order to keep these kids on the streets, or to withhold even the symbolic rewards of the art system (which I'm in no position to award in any event). Let them have all the money in the world; it will have as little to do with art as several million dollars has to do with a Cézanne. Many of these trained hands display a finesse and sophistication lacking in most gallery art—to the degree that I grudgingly agree with Dolores Newman, quoted in the *Voice*, that they "know how to work with space," although her ascription of some supposed content—"the dehumanization of man"—sends me to the nearest toilet bowl to throw up.

If I take the general point of view, if I search through the record to find out what has been assigned significance, it appears obvious that if artists like Adolph Gottlieb are given hallowed status—in color in the history books—then there is no reason whatsoever to exempt the graffiti artists, the post-graffiti artists, or Keith Haring from being given the same treatment. In Haring's case, the comparison is not idle: Gottlieb began his career with identical sorts of childlike, cartoony imagery arranged in similar all-over patterns, and graduated to those damn "blast" paintings, while Haring accomplishes both at the same time, and with what I think is infinitely more success. His condensed scribble plus overt nuclear explosion—the mural form married to symbology—is frighteningly easy to like, and completely ingratiating and superficial—arty but not art. Its accessibility is just a fact, and has no bearing on its relevance to painting.

The same can be said of any of the other "post-graffitists," because knowingly or not, their gallery work takes place in reference to visual culture and history as a whole, and that includes the inevitable, more-or-less random matchings to past art. (For instance, Surrealist procedures abound; some stuff looks like most bad color-field painting; Haring often looks vaguely Klee-ish; other things are maddeningly like baked-car enamel L.A. art of the Sixties.) However that history is abused by commentators, the fact will remain that graffiti has more to do with popular manifestations like rap and breaking, with urban chants, nimble nursery rhymes and social prowess in performance, than with painting. These popular forms have more limitations than painting has had; and, because graffiti artists are indebted to them, and not to painting, one cannot imagine a developing or maturing graffiti artist: popular artists don't mature, they just get older. (This is no less than another lesson learned from Warhol; the 14-year-old post-graffiti artist who has provisionally crossed over to High Culture may not know exactly what he or she has gotten him or herself into, for whatever he or she knows about visual graphics and punchy delivery, whatever street smarts are employed to justify making a *painting at all*, the overwhelming tension in the air comes from the feeling that it will last only fifteen minutes. Even highly touted "real" artists have lately discovered this, and many find themselves in the agonizing throes of self-doubt where two years ago there was nothing but majestic sainthood. Will passé 15-year-olds come to this same baffling conclusion, or will their very lack of investment in the myth of painting soften the blow?)