

Keith 2000

Keith and I came from neighboring towns in Pennsylvania, he from Kutztown and me from Hamburg--twenty miles or so apart--but I first met him in New York where he took my semiotics class at SVA. We were reading *A Lover's Discourse* by Roland Barthes. Semiotics is the study of signs which are cultural agreements, and Keith had an intuitive knack for the subject. From the start his work communicated effortlessly. His crescent eyebrows lifted in astonishment as if life were a perpetual surprise.

Our home towns are in the heart of the Pennsylvania Dutch country where the Amish dress in black and ride around in buggies. Drinking, dancing, art, and other forms of sex are shunned, so I felt a kinship with Keith in that we both found it necessary to escape to New York at different times for basically the same reason.

At the time I met Keith in the late seventies I was hanging out at the Mudd Club with Tony Shafrazi, a friend who was making a transition from artist to art dealer. (Tony had already received notoriety for spray painting *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art.) He opened his first gallery in his tiny studio apartment on Lexington and twenty-seventh street. His openings bustled with starlets, musicians, and transvestites like Max's Kansas City had in the sixties, and the party always flowed into the hall.

I thought Tony needed an assistant, maybe even an artist, so I introduced him to Keith. They hit it off right away. Both were genuinely hooked into popular culture the way Andy was, and soon Keith was showing with Tony. I mentioned Keith to Hans Mayer, my German dealer who lives in a huge castle on the fringe of Düsseldorf. Hans was working with Andy at the time. Since Keith was so young it took Hans a little longer than Tony to come around. In the end Hans commissioned the monumental outdoor sculptures that Keith made in the last years of his life.

As a student be careful not to think you have to make it right after school the way Keith did. Once after Keith became famous, a junior at SVA asked me to his studio. He was doing OK, but was agonized that he hadn't had a show in a real gallery, and that none of his work had sold. His anxiety got in the way of his art. Eventually he became a drug dealer--he had to sell something. Artists like Barnett Newman and Louise Bourgeois

emerged late in life. Actually, Louise once told me the secret to success is the ability to be able to store your work for twenty years and wait for the right moment. (But, of course, that doesn't always work either.) Besides his obvious talent, I attribute Keith's success to expansiveness, generosity of spirit, and a sensibility that was exactly in tune with the time.

I drove back to Pennsylvania for his funeral, to a church outside of Bowers, a tiny town with a couple of houses and an old hotel. After the service I stopped at the inn for a drink. Even out there in the sticks the dirty-blond barmaid knew who Keith was, and was sorry that he had died. It was the first time I spoke of him in the past tense, though I still think of him in the present. Outside the window of the hotel a dark stream flowed through a grove of trees. Its ripples reflected the yellows, oranges, and violets of the sky. And the sun so near the horizon had all those funny lines, animating it like a baby or a hallo.

Bill Beckley, January 12, 2000