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Communication Design Theory

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Paper #1

The design object that I will be discussing is a street art poster designed by Keith Haring called, “Ignorance=Fear, 1989”. Keith Haring was a prominent artist during the 1980’s, he showcased a variety of neo expressive art. His poster from 1989, “Ignorance=Fear” is an activist poster showing the ignorance that the public had during the AIDS epidemic. Haring’s design responds directly to the theory of semiology and linguistics.



Ignorance=Fear, 1989, Street Art Poster, Keith Haring Foundation.

He uses human figures that can also be known as icons and words and lines to communicate a message about AIDS in this 1989 poster. Particularly, Haring wanted to advocate the issues of AIDS and how many were ignorant about it. Many were fearful about the disease and chose to stay silent and ignorant about it. According to the Sunpride Foundation, “Haring is fascinated by the use of symbols to create his language. He studied semiotics when attending the

School of Visual Arts in New York. He believes there is a basic structure within all forms. The formation of a symbol is made by the minimum number of lines to indicate the entire object. This is common to all languages, all people, all times.” (Sunpride Foundation) In many of Haring’s work, he was consistent in demonstrating semiotics to communicate a message. In this particular poster, he designs human figures where one is covering its mouth, another its eyes and ears. This shows an emphasis of the behavior that the public had towards the AIDS epidemic.

In this poster, instead of having his symbols be interpreted as pictographic symbols. It demonstrates more ideographic symbols. According to “Counting Sheep A Brief History of Written Numbers”, “Such a sign is called an ideograph, because it stands for a concept or "idea" rather than a material object.” (Miller 48) In this case, Haring’s work does show examples of ideographic symbols because he is demonstrating a concept and meaning behind each one. He shows the behavior of the public by using semiotics and language to show the ignorance or lack of awareness about the disease. According to “Course in General Linguistics”, “In fact, every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behavior or—what amounts to the same thing—on convention”. (DE SAUSSURE 68) In other words, Haring’s poster design highlights the behavior of how the public reacted towards the disease, and because of that Haring shows the consequences of that behavior by illustrating the words “Silence=Death”. In addition, the pink triangle that is on the right hand side of the poster. For any ordinary person, it may look like a regular colored triangle. And because of that, it can be perceived as a pictograph, but in this case it is an ideographic symbol because this pink triangle has a context and history behind it and for Haring’s purpose. It symbolizes the LGBTQ+ community and it is a form of self identity for said community.

Haring also uses lines that surround the figures to give their behavior more importance. Those lines are seen in a lot of Haring's work because he wants to be able to highlight the message that needs to be communicated. Additionally, the X's that are placed on the figures may emphasize an error or mistake or a wrong-doing, because in society an X can be recognized as forbidden or just a wrong-doing. He uses the X as a sign to signify the concept that the behavior of being silent, unaware, or not bothering to hear, is a wrong-doing. Especially when it comes to a topic he is heavily advocating and sadly affected by.

He also uses linguistics in his poster by crafting a language that deciphers two words that creates one whole meaning such as "Ignorance=Fear," "Silence = Death". It is a straightforward way of communicating a message. Another example of a straightforward message in this poster is "FIGHT AIDS ACT UP". This is not only awareness for the people who stayed silent or did not want to educate themselves about the disease. It was also advocating towards people who were suffering with the disease and that they shouldn't feel ashamed but empowered to fight it. According to PBS a quote by Haring, "looking at language and picking it apart and deciphering how meaning attached itself to things." (Fields) A lot of Haring's work is heavily influenced by semiotics and linguistics. His symbols do have different meanings. However because of that, it can mean something different in a whole other context that isn't his work. Haring was unique in the sense of creating his own symbolic language that he created for his own art, which nowadays any work of his that is seen is recognizable.

Bibliography

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