AIDS and the Primitive Male:
The Collaboration of Bill T. Jones and Keith Haring

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Between 1982-1984, distinguished choreographer and dancer Bill T. Jones collaborated with famed graffiti-style artist and social activist Keith Haring. These collaborations yielded three distinct, yet related pieces of art. The first, Long Distance, was a duet performed at The Kitchen in 1982, with Jones dancing solely to the sounds of brushstrokes as Haring painted the backdrop simultaneously. The second came about in 1983, when photographer Tseng Kwong Chi shot Jones in a series of dancerly poses wherein his naked body served as a canvas for Haring’s iconographic white-line drawings. Finally, in 1984 Secret Pastures, an evening-length, loosely narrative work choreographed by Jones/Zane for which Haring painted the central set piece, premiered at The Brooklyn Academy of Music. Although a great amount has been written about both Jones and Haring, no researcher has extensively explored the collaborations between these two self-identified homosexual artists. By the same token, no one has delved into the significance of the fact that their collaborations took place in the wake of the first scientific and popular reports of AIDS, the disease that would indelibly impact the lives and legacy of both artists within the following years.

In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified the first cases of AIDS, which was then called GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency). While the first few years of the AIDS crisis often did not affect the personal lives of gay men the way in which it did in the following years, a discussion surrounding AIDS, male sexuality, eroticism, disease, and death certainly began to emerge. Fears of the homosexual male body within the larger population similarly emerged, as it began to represent the body of AIDS. While the three works on which Jones and Haring collaborated from 1982-1984 were by no means explicitly about AIDS (the way in which later works of both artists
were) more apparent themes of race, primitivism, and sexuality within the works very much connect them to a larger narrative about AIDS, the gay male body, and the gay urban culture of the 1980s.

Following the collaboration, AIDS entered the lives of both men in a deeply personal way. In 1985, Bill T. Jones was diagnosed as HIV-positive, although he did not divulge this information to the public until 1988 when he unintentionally revealed his status as HIV-positive in an interview for an article in *The Advocate*.¹ On March 30, 1988, he lost his partner in art and life, Arnie Zane, to AIDS-related lymphoma.² In 1988, Keith Haring was diagnosed with HIV, and in 1990 he died of AIDS-related complications.³ AIDS devastated the world of art and dance, stealing the lives of such prominent figures as Rudolf Nureyev, Alvin Ailey, Michael Bennet and countless others. I believe that it is worthwhile to look back on the collaboration of Jones and Haring mindful of this devastating health crisis, which particularly impacted the dance and art community, to begin to ask where art, life, and disease intersect, and how our knowledge of the trajectory of AIDS in the 1980s colors our understanding of this collaboration. The works created in this collaboration tell a different story about AIDS and the gay, urban culture of the 1980s than the works created by both artists following this collaboration, which were much more explicitly about AIDS in their expression of loss, mourning, disease, and death.

In 1989, Jones choreographed *Untitled*, one of his first works created after the loss of his partner, Arnie Zane. According to David Gere, who wrote a book about dance in the AIDS epidemic, the dance’s themes of loss, mourning, eroticism, anger, and death are an undeniable response to AIDS. Similarly, the highly controversial piece *Still/Here* (1994) by Jones is certainly one about AIDS, death, loss, mourning, healing, and life. This evening-length work was based on “Survival Workshops” that Jones conducted with participants suffering from diseases such as AIDS, cancer, leukemia, etc. In these workshops people talked about their experiences of disease through speech and movement. Jones used these workshops as the basis of the choreography. Jones’s AIDS-related works tell a story about the absent, diseased, and mourning gay, male body, an important aspect of the narrative of AIDS. No less important in a story of AIDS, however, is the expression of the sexually powerful, gay, male body seen in the collaboration between Jones and Haring.

Haring similarly created works explicitly about AIDS. In 1989, Haring painted the iconic work *Silence=Death* featuring white figures covering their eyes, mouths, and ears transposed on a pink triangle, representative of the badge gay men were forced to wear in Nazi concentration camps. Works such as this one became iconic for their message about combating cultural stigmas surrounding AIDS through raising awareness of the disease. Similarly, *STOP AIDS* (1989) by Haring depicts two green human figures forming the shape of scissors cutting a large, red snake-like figure, meant to represent a sperm infected with HIV, and the words “STOP AIDS” along the bottom of the painting. This image became central, like *Silence=Death*, in the effort to combat AIDS and the cultural stigmas surrounding the disease. After their collaboration, both men created
important works about AIDS. Comparing these works with those created in the collaboration reveals a compelling story about the transformation of conceptions about the gay, male body and experience due to AIDS. Furthermore, the three pieces of art created in the collaboration represent an entirely different aspect of the story of AIDS beyond mourning, loss, and contagion, yet are nonetheless important in understanding a narrative of disease and the pathologized gay, male body.


I will first provide background information on both artists in order to set the stage for the collaboration. How did both men begin creating art, and what were their particular goals or tasks? What interested them prior to 1982? Also, some knowledge of the personal lives of both men is important in understanding the stakes of their collaboration as gay men working together during the emergence of AIDS. I will then describe and analyze each of the three works on which Jones and Haring collaborated, paying particular attention to themes of sexuality, eroticism, race, and primitivism. Finally, I will
analyze how the four works described above that were created later and are much more explicitly about AIDS, death, and disease relate to this collaboration by telling a different story about AIDS and the gay, male experience. I suggest that comparing the later works with the works created during the collaboration reveals a dynamic story of the lives of gay men during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. While art about AIDS is most commonly associated with expressions of mourning, loss, and disease, the art from this collaboration depicting the youthful, gay, sexually powerful male body is just as much a part of the story of AIDS. I argue that the progression of these two men’s work tells a compelling story of transformation from the youthful, sexually powerful body, seen in this collaboration, to the body of infection, contagion, and death in their later works. Furthermore, I hope to illuminate how we can consider the intersection of these two artists as an important piece of the artistic narrative of AIDS.

**Background on Bill T. Jones and Keith Haring**

William Tass (“Bill T.”) Jones was born in 1952 in rural Florida to Baptist-Methodist migrant farm workers. The family moved to Wayland, New York when Jones was three years old. The way in which Jones discusses his childhood in interviews and biographies reveals how race and sexuality emerge as important themes early on his development. In an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jones admits that his first sexual encounter was one in which a close family friend “established rules for his sexual
initiation.”

That is to say, this man watched as Jones had his first sexual experience. Voyeurism and the “collision of intimacy and display” (54) become important aspects of Jones’s work, particularly in his collaboration with Haring. In an interview by Leslie Farlow, Jones describes his first homosexual feelings: “Warm feelings. And he was my friend. I remember thinking that, a warmth and a love for him” (17). Jones’s identity as a gay man becomes particularly important in analyzing his collaboration with Haring, which is so deeply rooted in their gay identities during a tumultuous time for homosexual men.

Jones went on to attend State University of New York at Binghamton where he was drawn to dance largely because of his attraction to Arnie Zane, the first man Jones slept with. Their personal as well as artistic relationship developed over many years and in 1982 they formed Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane & Company. The two men created work addressing issues such as race and sexuality, involving partnering between male dancers, and often incorporating spoken word and multimedia elements. Working within the post-modern dance movement, Jones and Zane often explored these themes through contact improvisation, placing them within an avant-garde, experimental sector of dance. This experimental, “high” art Jones was creating is in direct contrast to the pop art Haring was producing.

Keith Haring, born in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1958, became interested in art at a very young age, unlike Jones who was not drawn to dance until college. He went on to study commercial art at the Ivy School of Professional Art in Pittsburgh in 1976.

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5 Jones, Last Night on Earth, 87.
However, having lost interest in commercial art, he dropped out and moved to New York City in 1978 where he enrolled in the School of Visual Arts. In New York City, he encountered a thriving community of artists outside of galleries and museums, creating work in urban, public spaces. Haring was inspired by these graffiti artists who were creating work for everyone to appreciate: “Graffiti were the most beautiful things I ever saw…I felt immediately comfortable with the art. I was aware of it whatever it was.”

Eventually, Haring became known for many of his subway works, drawings in white chalk on black paper panels throughout the New York City subway system. Unlike Jones’s performance art that appeared in a “downtown” dance world, Haring’s “public” art appeared across the city, especially in subway stations, thus seeping into the city’s popular consciousness. However, the distinction between “high” and “low” art becomes somewhat irrelevant when AIDS enters the picture. The disease would affect the lives of artists creating in both the avant-garde and popular worlds of art, creating a bridge between the two. Disease does not care what kind of art one is creating.

Although Haring began his work outside of the “high” and mainstream art community, the art world eventually came to him, and he garnered a celebrated status. In terms of the style of his art, strong lines and colors and active figures denoting movement create a vitality and liveliness to his work. In terms of thematic content, Haring was criticized for his overt sexual themes, with some arguing that this homoerotic imagery was pornographic. However in an essay entitled *Haring’s Place in Homoerotic American Art*, Bruce D. Kurtz argues that this dimension of his work “expressed his status as a

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liberated gay man…achieving social and artistic significance.” Yet, it is important to remember that this liberated sexuality became a source of great suffering and fear for many gay men including Haring as AIDS entered the picture and their personal lives.

In biographies and interviews, both Haring and Jones describe their activity in gay bathhouses and bars in the late seventies and early eighties. Both men sought out sex with other men at these bathhouses designed for this purpose. Haring and Jones detail their experiences with anonymous gay sex, a phenomenon both men would soon learn had potentially dire consequences. Jones describes his experience in the following way: “I would advertise my body quietly, discreetly. If someone wanted me, I would choose.”

These associations with Jones’s exceptional, black body as the desired, erotic body become extremely pertinent in interpreting and understanding the work Haring and Jones produce together. Jones often consciously and deliberately eroticizes his own body; aware of the connotations his body carries.

Haring was similarly an active participant in the gay, urban culture of New York City. Haring describes his art as “blossoming” as he becomes more and more involved in the activity of “cruising” for sexual partners in public spaces. Furthermore, he writes about back-room bars where men would partake in anonymous sex, as eventually becoming part of his “nightly routine”. An understanding of both men’s experiences and activity in the gay, urban culture of New York City in the 1970s and 80s is important in interpreting the work they create together, for expressions and representations of this culture and the gay, male bodies that partake in this culture are central to the work. The

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7 Bruce D. Kurtz, “Haring’s Place in Homoerotic American Art,” 5.
10 Ibid., 31.
deliberately exposed and fetishized male body, which I discuss below, is fundamental to this collaboration and the life both men were living at the time.

In addition to their participation in the gay, urban culture of New York City, Haring and Jones shared the unique status as out, gay public figures in the 1980s. Haring began making cartoonlike homoerotic images in the late 1970s, a subject matter few of his contemporaries besides Andy Warhol, Paul Cadmus, and Robert Mapplethorpe had risked exploring, and thereby exposing his own homosexuality. Similarly, homosexuality was central to Jones’s work with his dance and life partner Arnie Zane. Duets choreographed and danced by Jones and Zane such as Blauvelt Mountain (1980) and Monkey Run Road (1979) were recognized for the intimacy and affection displayed between two men. In discussing this element of his dances, Jones writes, “We had understood our homosexuality to be a part of our work…dance was a place where the strategies of our [Jones and Zane’s] relationship and of our art making were delineated even as they conmingled.”12 The presence of homosexuality in both Jones’s and Haring’s work and each man’s public identity as gay are key aspects in linking their collaboration to the AIDS epidemic.

Finally, the two began to collaborate in 1982. In describing the origins of this collaboration, Jones says that on two different occasions someone suggested that he contact Haring, citing certain similarities between his own work and Haring’s. He explains how the “abstract, flattened out cookie-cutter shapes” in his piece Social Intercourse: Pilgrim’s Progress (1981), a piece for four dancers choreographed by Jones

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12 Jones, Last Night on Earth, 149.
and assisted by Zane about the fusion of the traditional and the new wave,\textsuperscript{13} reminded Bill Katz, a friend of Jones’s and an important figure in the art community, of the two-dimensionality and abstraction present in Haring’s work.\textsuperscript{14} Other similarities in their work include an affined sensibility of the body, each exploring the moving, feeling, and expressive body. In addition, urbanity is an important component of each man’s work. Jones was creating within the downtown, contemporary dance scene while Haring worked in the subway systems and popular realm, different yet nonetheless both very urban spaces. In addition, the bathhouse culture both actively participated in connects the two artists to each other and to the urban, gay experience of New York City. Ultimately, because of Katz’s suggestion and another of a similar nature, Jones decided to contact Haring, at which point the collaboration began with Haring creating a poster for \textit{Social Intercourse}. From there three significant works of art emerged: \textit{Long Distance}, a series of photographs, and \textit{Secret Pastures}.

**Early AIDS Background**

The convergence of these two gay male artists occurred at an extraordinarily significant and difficult period of time to be a gay man. The first official recognition of AIDS (then called GRID) was in the June 5, 1981 edition of the “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report” issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concerning “five young men, all active homosexuals.” On July 3, 1981 the \textit{New York Times}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 163.
published its first article about AIDS buried deep within the paper entitled “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.”\textsuperscript{15} Even in this very first article, one can sense the homophobic and sensationalist rhetoric that would come to saturate public discourse about gay men, and their lives and behaviors. The article quotes: “According to Dr. Friedman-Kien [one of the investigators of the outbreak], the reporting doctors said that most cases had involved homosexual men who have had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners, as many as 10 sexual encounters each night up to four times a week.”\textsuperscript{16}

By 1983, self-identified gay men had already begun to experience the consequences of rumor, misinformation, hysteria, and fear surrounding AIDS, which was becoming the disease of the gay, male body. Self-identified gay men had been banned from donating blood, experienced residential evictions, denials of visitation, challenges to confidentiality, as well as many other discriminatory practices and laws. On May 24, 1983, Patrick Buchanan, a conservative political commentator and senior advisor to Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan, published an article in the \textit{New York Post} entitled “AIDS Disease: It’s Nature Striking Back” in which he wrote, “The poor homosexuals – they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} This article was the first instance many gay men in Manhattan would first learn about what would become known as AIDS. It is identified as a significant publication in the writing of AIDS in such books as \textit{The Gay Metropolis: The Landmark History of Gay Life in America} by Charles Kaiser, \textit{Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America} by Larry Gross, as well as other sources.


14 months after the initial *New York Times* article identifying the first cases of AIDS, Bill T. Jones and Keith Haring performed *Long Distance*. This work and the other two works created in this collaboration were by no means definitively about AIDS. Yet the themes expressed in these works and our foreknowledge of what becomes of these two men after this collaboration makes it nearly impossible to deny that these pieces of art speak to a much larger narrative about AIDS, the gay, male body and the gay, urban experience of the 1980s.

*Long Distance*

![Long Distance](image)


*Long Distance* premiered on September 30, 1982 at The Kitchen in New York City. It is a duet in which Jones dances to the sounds of Haring’s brushstroke as Haring

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18 *Long Distance: Keith Haring and Bill T. Jones*, 2011 (accessed October 20, 2013); available from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw2hADJQrm0&feature=youtube_gdata_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw2hADJQrm0&feature=youtube_gdata_player).
simultaneously paints the backdrop. Jones is dressed in a black tank top, black pants, and black shoes. Haring, on the other hand, is dressed in a white tank top, white pants, and white shoes. Immediately, the race of the two men becomes an important feature of this piece. Jones has a single white stripe of paint down the center of his face. Haring paints thick black brushstrokes along a large white backdrop. This is a piece lacking color, utilizing only black and white. The black body is the one on display, as well as the one with paint on it, while the white body paints. The brush held by Haring’s white body has presumably painted Jones’s black body. The theme of race and the black body emerges as an important part of this collaboration.

In his article about Jones in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes about representations of the black body in Western culture as simultaneously “ogreish, coarse, and highly, menacingly sexualized” and “darkly alluring—still highly, menacingly sexualized, but in a good way” (61). In both cases, the black body is viewed as exceedingly erotic, as an object, either of fear or desire. Jones acknowledges and often takes advantage of these associations of the black body with the erotic.

He does not disavow the gaze of white fascination: he works within it, plays with it, uses it…To him there’s an important difference between exploiting yourself and being exploited by another. So it’s not that Jones doesn’t want to be objectified; it’s just that he wants to be the one to do it. (62)

In the dance, Jones repeats a sequence of gestures, including one in which he seems to be playing with these two contrasting parts of black eroticism elucidated by Gates: the exotic and the fear-inducing. For example, he lightly touches his tongue with his index finger. Another gesture that repeats itself is the smooth roll of a shoulder that
transmits itself further down the body to a roll in the hips. These smoother, more suggestive and erotic gestures are in direct contrast to more dynamic, aggressive ones such as a harsh stomp on the floor or a tight squatting position with fisted hands.

Haring’s backdrop further emphasizes the eroticism explored in Jones’s body. The backdrop consists of Haring’s iconic, graffiti-like images with many figures strongly resembling his work about AIDS. One animal-like body starts out with very few details aside from two ovals near the waist, clearly depicting male genitalia, and a snake-like image emerging from the same area of this figure meant to represent a phallus. This phallic imagery is quite similar to that seen in Haring’s pieces aimed towards social activism surrounding the AIDS pandemic. The snake-like phallus recalls the deadly sperm seen in STOP AIDS. The lines are drawn in black on a white backdrop. The erotic is encompassed in this piece by the black brushstroke, the black body, and the black phallus.

It is interesting to consider that while Jones often deliberately exploits the associations of his race with the erotic, Haring reached the “black ghetto” much more successfully than Jones, according to Jones himself. In an edition of Ballet News from 1985, Barry Laine writes, “Artist Keith Haring, although white, also offered a ‘bridge to black and Hispanic culture’ through his urban street style.” Haring was inspired by graffiti artists creating work for a large and diverse audience to appreciate. Jones was largely creating work within the avant-garde dance community. Therefore for Jones, collaborating with Haring represented, in part, a point of entry for different audiences: “Arnie Zane and I were also very interested in getting out of the avant-garde ghetto.

Haring had found a way by going into another ghetto, which was the Spanish and black ghetto.” However, while Jones and Haring operated in different “ghettos,” they both explored ideas of bridging these ghettos and the intersection of high and low art. Where did the popular and the avant-garde coincide? Ultimately, AIDS served as one point of convergence, as the disease does not distinguish between the artist creating “high” art or the artist creating “low” art.

These ideas of bridging high and low, race, and eroticism all connect this work to a larger narrative surrounding AIDS and disease. Jones’s fear-inducing, eroticized black body is the exact same fear-inducing, sexualized gay, male body that becomes the body of AIDS a few years following this work. Also, AIDS forces a bridge between high and low, infecting those that come in contact with the virus regardless of the “ghetto” to which one belongs. Finally, AIDS, just like any terminal disease, drives a person to a more primal state of being in which survival is at stake and constantly on one’s mind, bringing me to my final point of discussion of this dance.

The primitive is worth noting in relation to this dance and becomes even more significant when discussing the photographs and *Secret Pastures*. While race and sexuality emerge as important themes to this piece, connecting it to both men’s later works about AIDS as well as an emerging conversation about fears of the gay, male body and disease, there is also the sense that this piece is connected to a more primal state of humanity; what is being shown is unadorned and unfiltered humanness. This is a deliberate and conscious choice made by Jones and Haring to display the male body in this primitive way, perhaps thereby allowing them to express sexuality and humanity in

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20 Ibid., 2.
the most fulfilling way for them. This theme of primitivism expressed through the use of non-western and prehistoric visual forms is an important idea within this collaboration to be discussed further in connection with the photographs and *Secret Pastures*.

The only sounds produced are Haring’s brushstrokes and Jones’s stomping feet - unadorned, unfiltered, unrefined sounds. Also, the single white stroke of paint down Jones’s face connects him to some primal state of being. Like in the photographs, in which Jones’s body is covered with hieroglyphic-like paintings by Haring, the paint removes Jones from refined society. Body painting is not a high, civilized art, but an art associated with the primal and the unrefined, again a connotation deliberately intended by Jones and Haring who were aware of the power of this primal imagery.

*Long Distance* displays potent visual images, both painted and danced, of the sexually powerful and primitive male body, reminding us today how AIDS transformed this conception of the gay, male body to the diseased, pathologized body of AIDS. Jones and Haring further explore these themes and ideas of the primal and sexual male body in the photographs by Tseng Kwong Chi.

**Photographs by Tseng Kwong Chi**

In 1983, in a London photo studio, Keith Haring, Bill T. Jones, and photographer Tseng Kwong Chi collaborated on a series of photographs. In these photographs, Jones poses in various angular positions allowing maximal display of the line-drawings painted by Haring that cover his entire body. Every inch of Jones’s nude body is painted with white acrylic paint. According to Jones, Kwong Chi acted as both photographer and art
director, instructing Jones to make very flattened positions to display the paintings.\textsuperscript{21}

Kwong Chi was a significant figure in documenting the 1980s urban, gay club and art scene of New York City, photographing Haring’s work on countless occasions. He, like Jones and Haring, died due to complications from AIDS at the age of 39. Hence, within a few years AIDS would indelibly impact the lives of all three men working on these photographs. However, at the moment in time of these photographs they were all focused on capturing the beauty of Haring’s art and Jones’s body.

As mentioned briefly above, the nude, painted body is a very sexual and primal concept. Primitive sexuality in these photographs reveals itself in the very unfiltered, unadorned, and somewhat uncivilized nature of the presentation of the body. In addition, as discussed in relation to \textit{Long Distance}, this primitiveness reflects many of the widespread fears of the early AIDS epidemic. Primitivism, while in many ways deconstructed, also thrives in these photographs as well as the other two works, and this connection to a core, human essence of sexuality serves as a central theme.

Haring’s paintings on Jones’s body convey the primitive. They appear like hieroglyphics from a distant past. The paint is white acrylic and it emanates from Jones’s contrastingly black body. The variety of shape, line, and figure makes the painting itself feel extraordinarily dynamic as one’s eye is drawn from place to place on the body. Haring seems to be asking the viewer to look at and appreciate both his own work and the beauty of the canvas it resides on. The radiating lines from the figure on the chest, characteristic of Haring’s work, give a vitality to the figure much like the vitality of the body on which the figure resides. Haring’s style of painting, inspired from graffiti art,

\textsuperscript{21} Martinez, “Full Frontal Art: A Q&A With Choreographer Bill T. Jones About Working With Keith Haring,” 2.
generally has a sense of accessibility to it; this is art for everyone and anyone to understand and appreciate. This is work that is still characteristically Haring’s, but feels slightly more elevated placed on a body. For this reason there seems to be a push and pull between the reverence/elevation of the male body in the intricacies of the painted glyphs and designs, and the accessibility of that same body in its nudity and proximity to the viewer and artist. In fact, this may have been the way Haring and Jones viewed the male figure as gay men, elevated yet necessarily accessible and primal.

Jones’s body and poses similarly call upon associations of primitivism and sexuality. It is difficult to discuss primitive male sexuality in dance in the twentieth century without bearing in mind the work of the infamous ballet superstar Vaslav Nijinsky, and, in fact, each of the three works emerging from this collaboration very distinctly recalls, in its own particular way, Vaslav Nijinsky. Nijinsky was a key figure in early twentieth century ballet for he was central in reintroducing the male presence to the ballet stage. His work as a dancer and choreographer was crucial in reinvigorating male dance and reconsidering the role of the male dancer. Ideas of sexuality and masculinity were key aspects of his works, including two of the most important, *L’Après-midi D’un Faune* (1912) and *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913). Each ballet displayed different versions of masculinity and male sexuality.

In addition, Nijinsky was the lover of Serge Diaghilev, the founder and artistic director of the Ballets Russes. Only a very limited group of people were aware of this relationship: “Diaghilev disapproved of effeminate behavior in men, and while he appeared in public with his lovers, they were not identified as such, and all acted in a
‘discreet’ way.” While not public knowledge, this relationship shaped many of the roles Diaghilev created for Nijinsky. He often played androgynous characters that drew upon his sexual nature, quite different from the heteronormative roles of the Romantic and Petipa ballets. These roles, such as those in *Faune* (1912), *Scheherazade* (1910), *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911), and *Jeux* (1913), generally displayed Nijinsky as an exotic and pleasure-seeking creature, appealing to and even shocking audience members in his libidinal excessiveness.

Nijinsky’s choreography and dancing in *Faune* was met with significant criticism for its explicit sexual imagery, particularly the final pose in which Nijinsky as the Faun thrust his pelvis into the ground in apparent erotic pleasure. *Sacre* presented sexuality in a similarly natural, yet more barbaric manner, and was also met with significant criticism. *Sacre* is famously known for the riots the first performance sparked in response to the barbaric movement and music. In his book *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, Ramsay Burt explains the presentation of gender in each work: “If *Faune* presented a pure, ‘natural’ masculinity, in *Sacre* Nijinsky has stripped this of its acceptable classical setting, to produce a representation of masculinity at its nastiest and most abject” (93). Natural and even repulsive, Nijinsky presented male sexuality in its primitive state. This representation likely aroused fear and shock from an audience who had up until this point been used to the female-centered Romantic and Petipa ballets of the nineteenth century, which focused largely on the ethereal and otherworldly female.

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Bill T. Jones and Keith Haring seem to have used this precedent of primitive sexuality in Nijinsky’s work to shed light upon male sexuality in the 1980s. The poses of the photographs by Tseng Kwong Chi recall images of Nijinsky from *Faune* in their two-dimensionality and sexual nature. One photograph in particular immediately evokes *Faune* for it nearly entirely mirrors a well-known pose from the ballet. Much of the imagery surrounding *Faune* consists of Nijinsky’s hands flattened and at an angle with his arms, elbows bent, head backwards seemingly luxuriating in some sort of pleasure, and knees bent. The striking similarity between one pose selected by Jones (p.21) and that of the iconic *Faune* (p.21) may be explained by Jones’ exploration of angularity and flatness to best display the paintings for the camera, but it would be wrong to discount the connotations associated with this pose. It opens up associations of homosexuality (due to Nijinsky’s relationship with Diaghilev), self-pleasure, narcissism, and eroticism, all central themes of *Faune*.

Primitiveness is further emphasized by the fact that Jones is completely nude, not something commonly associated with civilized society. Jones’s nude, black body recalls the same ideas described in relation to *Long Distance*. Jones is once again consciously and deliberately fetishizing himself, taking advantage of his race and body with its overtly eroticized and exoticized connotations. While the photographs alone reveal these ideas of primitivism and sexuality, recountings by Haring and Jones of the corporeal experience of creating the photographs further emphasize these concepts.
Haring recalls, “I wanted to paint every inch of his body, from head to toe to the tip of his foreskin!” Haring’s desire to paint every inch of Jones’s beautiful, black body, comes through in the photos. This is not merely a common instance of an artist emulating a naked body or observing that body, but instead the artist is touching and creating on the body itself. Jones’s body is Haring’s canvas, immediately establishing a sense of eroticism between the painter and painted. This is not the civilized, cultured artist painting on a flat, unfeeling canvas, but a sexual being creating work on and touching yet another sexual being.

About the experience of being painted by Haring, Jones recalled, “Finally he reaches my penis, and he does these last three stripes on it. He goes, ‘One, two, three!’ And he looks up at me in that kind of way he has, with that little smile of his – and it was total communion at that moment.” This feeling of communion Jones refers to can be equated in some way to the communion and fraternization of Nijinsky with Diaghilev in the Ballets Russes. In another interview Jones recounts the experience in different words:

And when it was all over he gave me a mischievous look, he looked up as if to say ‘shall we?’ And he hit three or four marks on my dick. Bing, bing, bing, bing! You know, that was our intimacy. It was a very playful, innocent moment.

Both the photos and descriptions of the experience both men had in creating these photos express this natural, primitive, yet playful sexuality that exudes from the male body, the same sexuality that would soon become feared by many due to AIDS. Much of the population would become extraordinarily fearful of exactly the primitive male sexuality of these photographs. However, perhaps it is precisely art like these photographs that would become necessary to combat stigmas against homosexuality and the gay, male body.

In discussing these photographs, Jones is quoted saying, “I’m very pleased to look at the body painting, that collaboration, and the way those glyphs work on my body, my black body, shaped as it’s shaped; my penchant for posing and making two-dimensional shapes…That is a very successful collaboration that transcends – it’s greater than the sum

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27 Ibid., 96.
of its parts.” These photographs do indeed transcend body painting and figured posing. They are part of a much larger narrative emerging and growing throughout the 1980s of gayness, race, fears, and primitivism connected with the appearance and epidemic of AIDS.

Secret Pastures


Secret Pastures premiered in 1984 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and was the result of a number of collaborative efforts. With music by Peter Gordon, costumes by Willi Smith, sets by Keith Haring, and choreography by Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, this piece became one of Jones’s most well known from the 1980s. Secret Pastures is a narrative dance with a loose plot and defined characters. However, in watching the piece

29 Ibid., 3.
what emerges as important is the “how” as opposed to the “what.” The actual plot, vague to begin with, is not the star of this piece, but it is the elements of the piece that drive it along, including Haring’s sets and Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane’s choreography. Although more artists are added into the collaborative mix in this evening-length work, similar ideas and themes of sexuality, primitivism, and race reveal themselves as important.

To begin, similar to the photographs, Secret Pastures recalls the work of Nijinsky in many ways and further explores the theme of primitive sexuality. The opening duet consists of a two-dimensionality recalling Faune and Sacre, with flattened hands and angularity throughout the body. Primitivism is further emphasized by the pounding beat of the music that gives a tribal feel to the work. The movements utilize very straight, defined lines and at times recall folk dances, similar to the way Nijinsky utilized traditional Russian folk dances in Sacre, again suggesting an earlier state of humanity. Jones’s character is called the “Fabricated Man,” an ironic title since fabricated suggests manufactured and fake, but his character is arguably the most natural, genuine, and uncivilized one. He moves in a much more fluid and natural way than other characters. In particular, his movement is in direct contrast to Arnie Zane’s character, “The Professor,” whose movements are much sharper and defined. The central set piece of the work, a tent covered with Keith Haring’s paintings, further emphasizes primitivism.

The paintings are largely of two-dimensional, abstract human figures with various shapes and lines scattered within and around these figures. Similar to the body paintings, these paintings feel connected to primitive humanity, yet extraordinarily lively. The outline of the human figures is made of thick black strokes while red lines and shapes occupy the empty space within and between figures. There is a ritualistic sense to
these paintings mirrored in the choreography and music. The canvas is white and the painting is in red and black – strong, emotive colors. In addition, these are the predominant colors of the costumes seen in the reconstruction of *Sacre* by the Joffrey ballet, meant to closely imitate Nijinsky’s original production. Furthermore, Jones’s costume recalls both Haring’s body paintings as well as Nijinsky’s Faun. It is likely no coincidence that one review noted the similarity to Nijinsky’s *Faune*: “What’s discovered is a half-animal creature: Jones, body soft and involuted, in a streaked unitard that might do for *Afternoon of a Faun*.”

Jones’s movement as the "Fabricated Man," as noted earlier, however, is quite different from Nijinsky’s in its fluidity and animalism compared to Nijinsky’s two-dimensionality and numerous poses.

Primitivism and sexuality are played out most explicitly in the sixth scene of *Secret Pastures* called “The Rain Forest.” In her review in the *New York Times*, Anna Kisselgoff wrote quite bluntly, “The choreography is sexually explicit” (6). The dancers all wear bright colored, revealing costumes in this scene, different from previous scenes. They form a tableau, each dancer assuming a pose one after the other, each pose sexually explicit, including one man’s mouth directly between the legs of another man, one woman appearing to bite a man’s neck, and another woman’s head thrown back in ecstasy. The dancer’s leave this tableau, but return to it later, not allowing us to forget what is happening in this scene. Later, the dancers form a line with each dancer’s head in-between another’s legs. Jones slides onto stage in a pose similar to that from the end of *Faune*, with hips thrust into the floor and head arched back. Yet, in *Faune* the natural creature is in fact the sexual one, whereas here the natural creature is the only one not

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taking part in the orgy. Still the sense of barbaric and almost disgusting sexuality like in *Sacre* comes through in this piece, though it is certainly questioned as being potentially risky in its destructive and corrupting capabilities. Perhaps in fact barbaric and primitive sexuality in this piece is encompassed by narcissistic, civilized society, whereas the most uncivilized, natural character is the least barbaric and risky in his sexuality. Is this possibly a warning against the very bathhouses and cruising with which Haring and Jones had a great deal of experience? While the risky behavior taking place in these bathhouses often generated a sense of excitement and thrill for men like Jones and Haring, in the wake of the AIDS, these risky sexual behaviors represented the ultimate danger and even the idea of risk itself became dangerous.

In addition to the dichotomy of civilization and the primitive in this piece, the dichotomy of black and white is extraordinarily prevalent. Jones is one of the few black dancers on stage, and as in *Long Distance* and the photographs, seems to be taking part in the objectification of his own body. The black man is the opposite of society: animalistic, unrefined, physical, and sensual. At one memorable moment in Jones’s first solo on stage, Zane walks around Jones in a circle as Jones dances, as if Zane is inspecting and observing a creature or an object. Haring’s white tent with black figures on a white canvas further emphasizes this dichotomy between black and white. Jones never enters or emerges from the white tent, which may represent the refined and civilized. Again, Jones seems to be acknowledging and taking advantage of the image of the exotic, black body.

In the end, the Fabricated Man, Jones, quivers and convulses alone on stage within a cage-like structure, the frame of the tent that had previously adorned Haring’s paintings. The animal has been caged. His movements, in direct contrast to his earlier
solo with its extraordinarily physical tumbling, cartwheels, and jumps, are constrained and bound. The loose narrative of the piece seems to be about the corrupting and constraining influence of civilization, Zane and others, on natural man, Jones. But this is not necessarily an endorsing or critique of the primitive or, alternatively, of civilization. Rather the intersection of the primitive and the civilized is highlighted, the way AIDS represented primitive fears in a civilized, modern medical setting. This intersection of civilization and the primitive is a fundamental aspect of this piece and an important narrative unfolding in the AIDS crisis.

The AIDS pandemic reduced the image of the gay, male body to that of disease, inciting widespread fear of any physical contact with that body; this despite the knowledge of the disease that would soon become available proving many of the rumors false. For example, many would come to fear handshakes, toilet seats, doorknobs, and any other object that may have been touched by a person with AIDS. The gay man’s bodily fluids became, according to David Gere, “harbingers of doom, and dancing, by virtue of its associations with homosexuality and its palpable activation of the fluid systems of the body, came to share, and in some cases amplify that stigmatization.”31 Art in the AIDS epidemic played an important role in demystifying these terrors of the dancing, gay, male body. The beginnings of this can be seen in Secret Pastures, which (although not explicitly about AIDS) displays and even shocks in its crude presentation of the sexually potent male body rather than the diseased, infected, and contagious male body.

Implications of AIDS on Primitivism, Race, and Sexuality

In displaying the male body in this primal, sexual manner, Jones and Haring are doing something quite important, the implications of which are even greater within the context of the early AIDS crisis. In a 1985 edition of *Ballet News*, Jones is quoted saying, “For the public at large that sees a performer in leotard and tights, dance is about display and seduction. And most people believe men should be watching it, not doing it” (23). In *Masculinity as Spectacle*, Steve Neale discusses the way in which the male body cannot be on display solely for the gaze of the spectator. He argues that in a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked as the erotic object of another’s gaze. Nijinsky challenged this, arousing criticism and fear in much of the audience. Jones and Haring are dealing with these same issues of gender and sexuality in a turbulent time in which the homosexual body and gaze becomes the target of fear and disease. In this way, presenting natural, primitive, and explicit male sexuality on stage was important to begin a conversation to demystify much of the terror surrounding AIDS and the gay male body.

In many ways, AIDS brought man back to a primitive state of fear for survival, yet in a modern medical setting. The themes of race, sexuality, and primitivism in the works created by Haring and Jones seem to continue telling a narrative set out at the beginning of the twentieth century by Nijinsky while beginning to explore fears and terrors associated with this sexuality that would soon emerge in both the personal and public lives of these two men. The presence of the primitive, sexual being is
extraordinarily clear in these three works, but there is not a clear endorsing or critiquing of this state of man, merely the continuation of an extremely important conversation.

These works are not explicitly about AIDS, and it would be wrong to argue that Jones and Haring approached these works the way they approached their later works about death, mourning, and contagion i.e. AIDS. However, the story told through these works about the primitive, sexual, potent, gay male body is just as much a part of the story of AIDS and the gay, urban culture of the 1980s as their other later works.

**Untitled, Still/Here, Silence=Death, and STOP AIDS**

After 1984, the two men seem to have maintained some sort of relationship or contact as evidenced in part by Haring’s published journals in which he describes attending a performance of “Bill’s and Arnie’s company” in 1987. However, they did not collaborate on any other works after 1984. Yet, they both did move on to encounter AIDS in their personal lives and to create art explicitly about the disease. I have selected two works about AIDS by both artists. The purpose is not to simply detail these four extraordinarily important works, but to show how they are in some sort of dialogue with the three works from the collaboration and represent a compelling story of the urban, gay, male experience of the 1980s due to AIDS.

In 1989, Jones choreographed *Untitled*, one of his first works created after the loss of his partner, Arnie Zane. The piece begins with a recording of Zane’s voice and the movement that develops throughout the dance is based off of a single phrase created by

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Zane in 1977. In one brief segment, Zane’s image appears as a holograph executing part of this phrase. Jones then steps into the space of the holograph as it dissolves, and Jones completes the phrase. Jones explains, “I was just grieving. When you're grieving you're really trying to find a way to connect with the person you've lost.” It is a piece, according to David Gere, about AIDS, full of loss, mourning, eroticism, anger and death. Gere writes, “He celebrates a mourning that refuses to end, and that is built so extraordinarily upon the fetishes of movement and memory” (61). This is a piece haunted with all that is absent and the disease that has brought about that absence.

In contrast to the earlier works of collaboration with Keith Haring where Jones’s body became the object of desire, primitivism, and fetishization, here this same body is haunted with loss and fetishized memories of Zane. And this transformation is an integral piece of the trajectory of AIDS and the experience of gay men through the 1980s. *Untitled* compared to the three collaborative works discussed earlier tells us more than a book can about the experience of a gay, male artist through the 1980s AIDS pandemic. Jones is no longer exploiting the desires, perceptions, and fears about his body the way he did in his earlier works and in the bathhouses in the early 1980s. Instead, Jones is attempting, through his body, to keep that which is lost alive. The sexually powerful, male body is now attempting to connect with the absent and dead through his body. Both bodies represent an important piece of the story of AIDS and how it entered, affected, and transformed the lives of gay men.

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34 Ibid., 125.
Five years after *Untitled* in 1994, Jones choreographed one of his most controversial and well-known works entitled *Still/Here*, a piece that has been both celebrated and derided as “victim art.” Jones conducted various “Survival Workshops” throughout the United States in which participants suffering from diseases such as AIDS, cancer, leukemia, etc. talked about their experiences through speech and movement. Jones used these workshops as the basis of the choreography. While Jones did not intend for the work to be specifically about AIDS, it has been the central focus of most commentator’s and scholars writing on the piece due to the context in which the piece was created and Jones’s personal connection with the disease.\(^3\) According to Gere, this piece “silently speaks” AIDS.\(^4\)

However, unlike the three pieces of the collaboration, Jones does not dance in this piece. Instead, his body only appears briefly on a small television screen at the conclusion of the work. Again, this is a powerful story of the transformation of the gay, male body from the fetishized object of desire to the absent body. At the same time, *Still/Here* is working to eradicate the idea of the gay dancing body as the body of AIDS. According to Felicia McCarren, “By openly addressing the connections between dance and medicine, and making a dance explicitly addressing these connections, the piece was able to move

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\(^3\) A discussion of AIDS in relation to *Still/Here* is present in most scholarly articles about the piece, reviews, as well as responses to Arlene Croce’s controversial article “Discussing the Undiscussable.” An article from the *New Yorker* from January 30, 1995 entitled “Who’s the Victim?” calls the work “AIDS-driven.” AIDS manifests itself throughout the piece in the movement, text, and imagery Jones utilizes, including a scene meant to depict a woman being anonymously tested for AIDS.

beyond pathology to comment on the possibility of danced expression as cure.”

Still/Here is simultaneously about absence, death, suffering, and cure, the thoughts in the minds of most gay men in New York City at the beginning of the 1990s as AIDS had stolen the lives of countless partners and friends. This is a story of the experience of disease and illness, but the story leading up to and the culture surrounding that disease is no less important, and this story is told through Jones and Haring’s collaborative efforts. Like Jones, Haring also created many works about AIDS.

Keith Haring created countless works in an effort to combat AIDS and the stigmas surrounding the disease. He became known for his social activism in the fight against AIDS, but lost his own personal battle with the disease in 1990. In 1989, Haring painted the iconic work Silence=Death (see image on p.4). It depicts white figures covering their eyes, mouth, and ears along with a pink triangle, representative of the badge gay men were forced to wear in Nazi concentration camps. This painting, advocating for raising awareness of AIDS and preventing its spreading through knowledge and conversation, became an important symbol in the struggle against AIDS.

The representation of the human form as well as the minimal use of color is consistent in this painting with his work in the collaboration. Thematically, this is explicitly about AIDS and the struggle against it. However, it remains in conversation with his earlier work through its form and use of the human figure.

Yet the body in this painting is the body of silence, similar to Jones’s absent body in Still/Here. Haring’s use of the silent body is certainly a message about raising awareness of AIDS and giving a voice and presence to the invisible AIDS victim. But it

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may also represent one of the effects of AIDS: silencing through death. The pink triangle, recalling all of the homosexual men murdered in the Holocaust, further emphasizes the idea of the silent and absent male body. This is again an important piece of the artistic narrative of AIDS. Combining this representation of the body with the representation of the body seen in Haring’s collaboration with Jones tells a much fuller and dynamic story about transformation and the experience of the gay man in New York City throughout the 1980s due to AIDS.

Finally, in 1989 Haring painted another iconic work entitled STOP AIDS (see image on p.4). It depicts two green human figures forming the shape of scissors cutting a large, red snake-like figure, meant to represent a sperm infected with HIV, with the words “STOP AIDS” along the bottom of the painting. This image became iconic, like Silence=Death, in the effort to combat AIDS and the cultural stigmas surrounding the disease. Here, two nearly identical human figures come together to form a method of destroying the virus. However, this snake-like sperm appears strikingly similar to the phallus on the backdrop from Long Distance. This similarity is important in the way it links the sexualized male body seen in the collaboration to the diseased, destructive body here. The human figure in this image is both destroying the disease and its prior, sexually risky self. In the wake of AIDS, risky behavior was exceedingly dangerous and therefore the bathhouse culture Haring happily participated in just a few years earlier no longer represented excitement and thrill, but danger and death.

Jones and Haring’s later works about AIDS tell a part of the story of the disease with which art about AIDS is most commonly associated, i.e. death, contagion, suffering, and mourning. However, how this comes about and the way AIDS transformed lives
cannot be appreciated without an understanding of the artistic context within which the
disease emerged, and that is captured through Jones and Haring’s work together. While
the two did not enter the collaboration with any intent to create work about a disease they
likely knew little of at the time, looking back today on those three works created in the
collaboration, while not explicitly about AIDS, I believe it is quite safe to say that they
are also not not about AIDS.

Conclusion

Jones has said, “I’ve never made work specifically about AIDS. I’ve made work
about loss, about sex, about death but never specifically about AIDS.”39 While making
works about AIDS may never have been Jones’s intention, many scholars, writers, and
audience members, including myself, find this subject inextricably present in his work.
Haring, on the other hand, was hugely active both personally and artistically in the fight
against AIDS, creating countless works of art permeated with the theme of AIDS. Jones
and Haring’s collaboration tells a piece of the narrative of AIDS not often discussed
about the gay, male body as sexually powerful and the urban spaces and lifestyle that
body engaged in.

The collaboration between Bill T. Jones and Keith Haring occurred before either
man had been diagnosed as HIV-positive and before the full effect the AIDS pandemic
had on the lives of gay men became widely known. Therefore, my exploration of this
collaboration was in no way meant to prove that the three pieces emerging from it were

39 Gere, How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of
AIDS, 20.
about AIDS. Instead, I hoped to explore how looking back on this collaboration with the foreknowledge of AIDS and how both men would be affected personally and artistically by the disease colors our understanding of the three pieces of art produced. In doing so, I identified key thematic elements emerging from each piece created between 1982 and 1984 connecting them to a broad narrative about sex, race, and primitivism, which are themselves part of a story of AIDS. How these pieces relate to later works by each artist more explicitly about AIDS hopefully shed further light on how the collaborative pieces are part of this narrative of AIDS and transformation that occurred in the lives of countless gay men throughout the 1980s. Observing this transformation in these artist’s work and their representations of the body throughout the 1980s allows us to more fully appreciate and understand the devastating affects of AIDS.

Two extraordinary artists created three special and distinct pieces of art together, pieces of art with elements that resonate deeply with me and I imagine many others. AIDS and art is a story of creation and destruction; while AIDS stole the lives of Keith Haring, Arnie Zane, and countless other extraordinary artists, it also facilitated discussions that led to the creation of lasting, honest, and moving art.
Bibliography


