Letter to the Editor

When writers contact me, I'm happy to answer their questions, refer them to any relevant texts of mine, and provide publication stills free of charge. As a rule, though, I don't read what they end up writing.

However, when Bill T. Jones asked me to read and react to Tiffany Barber's recent article on our work, I did. He's since written a blog post about it, a few parts of which draw upon a phone conversation we'd had.

Now I offer three further thoughts of my own.[1]

1. The art of collaboration is easily misunderstood, as I'm sorry to say it is here by Barber. She and many other writers go wrong in two ways: first, by assuming that a collaboration is weighted toward its most famous member, whose vision the others help realize as creatively as they can; and second, by imagining that there's a single set of artistic intentions that then gives rise to the work.

    And so Barber reads *Ghostcatching* and *After Ghostcatching* purely in the arc of Bill T. Jones's career, which then leads to her exclusive focus on race as their defining element.

    It is certainly *one* element, but you restrict your experience of the works when you regard them only through that lens. If instead you remember that the collaborations were between a dancer/choreographer and two digital artists, each with their own histories and obsessions, then you open yourself up to a much wider range of meanings and resonances.

    Let's look at possible metaphors, comparing the first and last scenes of the works. The first scene shows an "ancestor" figure, trapped in a box, who moves in a looped sequence through six lettered poses and eventually breaks free of both the sequence and the confinement. If race is your lens, then you might see the box as an auction block for slave trading or as an isolation cell in a prison. But if you then switch lenses, you might make it out to be a cryogenic chamber; or a robot assembly station; or Superman's telephone booth; or a special zone in Limbo for fledgling souls; or any number of other closely related but not equivalent things.

    The last scene shows a multiplication of the dancer's body into more radically abstracted figures chained together by interconnected lines and by the synchrony of their movement. With race still your lens, you might think of a chain gang. If you widen your view, but with slavery still in mind, you might imagine other forms of contemporary enslavement: networking, tracking, and reduction to bits . . .

    But don't take my word for any of these readings, which come to me after the fact. In creating these works, we groped forward with perhaps a few of these thoughts vaguely in mind, but with no thesis to prove and no answers to give. We asked ourselves questions and made works to ask more questions.

2. Scholars too often opt for a specialized word when a common one is better. In this case, *haptic* for *touch*, in Barber's discussion of the stereoscopic illusions of 3D in *After Ghostcatching*. *Haptic* most often refers to the feedback touch affords, for example when you reach for something in the dark or when your cellphone vibrates in your pocket; it's a useful technical word for perceptual psychologists and interface

designers. I don't know what *haptic visuality* means, but I'm pretty sure the term doesn't illuminate *After Ghostcatching*'s extreme 3D illusions. That work dangles the promise of touch before you, but then snatches it away: when you reach for a line about to graze your forehead, you find your fingers go right through it; the chasm between looking and touching gapes before you—as it constantly does for ghosts, who by tradition can see but cannot touch (and can smell but cannot eat). Obviously this goes straight to the heart of *After Ghostcatching*; its illusions of embodiment are even more treacherous than in the prior work.

The simpler word *touch* is also the richer in meaning; it would have led Barber down a more profitable path. For the seemingly "hand-drawn" figures that our collaborator Shelley Eshkar so brilliantly devised both evoked and called into question the very idea of the artist's touch—for whose touch was it? Was it the touch of his mouse and stylus? The touch of Bill's moving body? The touch of Marc Downie's algorithms rendering each frame? (This loops back to the question of collaboration raised in my first point.)

3. Here, as an artist, I'd like to briefly and fruitlessly register my larger objection to scholars' standard operating procedure, which resembles the children's game of telephone: errors accrue along the way and garble the final output. Scholars are obliged to cite prior scholarship, so once one has described an artwork, that description becomes part of the next account, which becomes part of the next, and before long the artwork is reduced to the filtered sum of these scholars' accounts, with never a clean sweep to start over and see anew.

Come to think of it, though, this sad situation isn't a million miles away from the enslaving loops of the two works in question.

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Note

Response to Paul Kaiser's Letter to the Editor

I have been an admirer of Bill T. Jones's work for many years. I discovered his unique way of working when I was finding my own way as a dancer. Known for his rigorous engagement with identity politics, Jones has used improvised dance to investigate the nuances of human difference, interracial love, and the potential of pure movement. The OpenEndedGroup has explored similar topics in its varied collaborations with choreographers over the past twenty years. In recent years, Jones has spurned reductive, racially specific readings of his work, advocating for more expansive modes of criticism. Like Jones, I question categories of movement, identity, and aesthetic criticism in my research on the political efficacy of contemporary black art and performance in a putatively post-racial moment. It is from this perspective that I analyze *Ghostcatching* (1999) and *After Ghostcatching* (2010) in my *Dance Research Journal* essay.

Both pieces are the result of collaborations between Shelley Eshkar, Jones, and Paul Kaiser with Marc Downie joining the team for *After Ghostcatching*. As Kaiser and Jones both point out in their responses to my essay, the artists