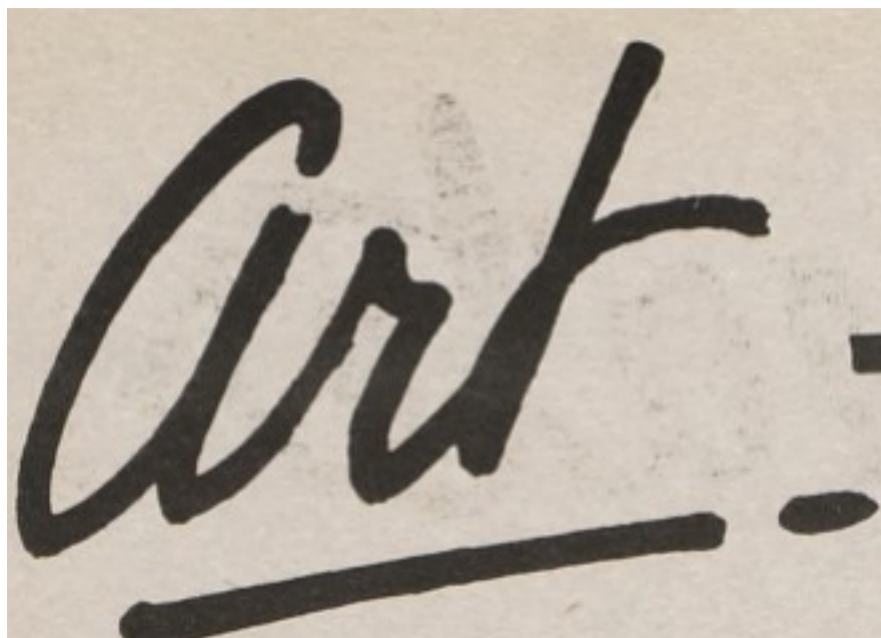


COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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Art.

Too Weighty a Premise

By Cleo Kung

I see what Dubuffet meant about . . . culture and anti-culture, that an obsolete notion of beauty which only appeals to an elite ought to be destroyed."

—Keith Haring

For the 10 short years of his career, Keith Haring took art to the streets and gave it a social conscience. Drawing over 5,000 pieces of black paper in subway stations, Haring was arrested three times before his efforts were recognized and channeled into projects such as "Art Against AIDS" (1985). No one of his generation will forget his "radiant child" (as Haring's crawling baby was named by the poet Rene Ricard). Haring's images were as ingrained as the arches of McD's.

Sadly enough, in the first U.S. retrospective of his work, **Future Primeval** at the Queens Museum, the challenge Haring posed to the increasingly autonomous art world is largely lost. While he has amassed a number of Haring's formative and lesser known works, Barry Blinderman curates with a heavy tone of pseudo-art-historical importance. Trying desperately to fashion Haring into the Future Primeval by comparing his work to "primitive" art, Blinderman chooses a title too weighty and problematic for the spontaneous energy of Haring's work to uphold.

Any surface was an instant blank page to Haring, and the exhibition highlights this seemingly anti-aesthetic sensibility: crutches, taxi hoods, a drum and a 1963 Buick Special all bear the characteristic Haring mark. More ambitious works like the painted wood and steel pieces are testament to the problems such a casual approach can engender: where does the decoration end and the artistic integrity begin?

The large selection of subway drawings provides an answer. In 1981 Haring began drawing on the black paper covering expired advertisements in subway stations. Often in the midst of rush hour, he would whip out his chalk and gain an immeasurable audience as he worked. 27 of the 5,000 completed drawings escaped destruction and are on display. Here is Haring's work at its black-and-white best. The hi-fi colors of later

pieces added verve but detracted from the essential—the curving, vibrant line that gave Haring's work its life and the ability to distill complex ideas into clear, striking images.

The tension of a city-crazed life radiates from a drawing of 1985 where a small figure marked with an X is pulled in all directions by huge hands emerging from each of the four corners. Haring deftly offsets the potentially dull symmetry of the image by slightly elongating the figure's left leg and right arm.

With similar skill, a drawing from 1982 displays the image soon immortalized in Haring's "Free South Africa" posters. In the first frame a huge person is leashed by a smaller; in the second frame the smaller figure is crushed as the larger is freed. Often dismissed as mere sketches by the icon of '80s pop art, these drawings warrant a more serious formal analysis. Blinderman forgoes this opportunity to discuss the work critically. In his notes accompanying the drawings he launches into an obtuse discussion of the various meanings of "underground."

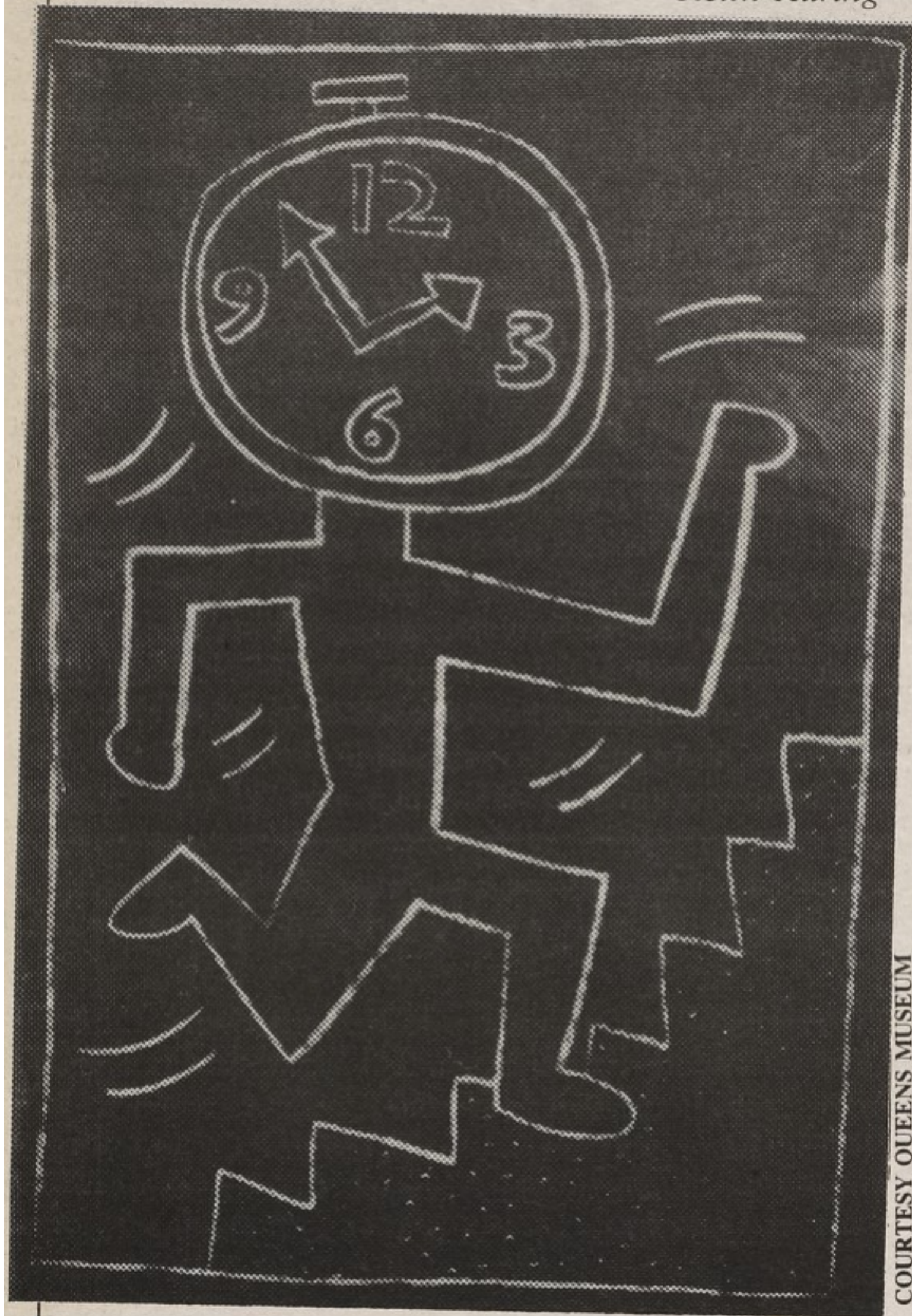
Throughout the show, his voice continues to detract from Haring's work. In 1981 Haring completed a series of drawings over prints of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis (a la Warhol). Three years later he painted the body of Grace Jones—her costume ornaments are included here. Blinderman recognizes the historical importance of these pieces in the development of Haring's work, yet when discussing the Marilyn and Elvis series, he

writes that Haring "creates a distinctively non-Western primitive aura for these 'typically American' icons," and links these works to "the body painting, tattooing, or scarification of some primitive society."

Haring's pieces may suggest the influence of African and Oceanic art, yet to equate them in this manner is merely fallacious. Blinderman apparently is unaware of the fact that the body paint and scarification of many African and Oceanic (the term "primitive" is clearly too general) societies is far from simple decoration, for each symbol or image carries a specific meaning and is often of vital ritualistic and cultural importance. As they became famous through billboards, posters, and the Pop Shop pins and T-shirts, Haring's images became his own—instantly recognizable—logos. But they remain just that: logos of Haring's gift, not specific cultural idioms.

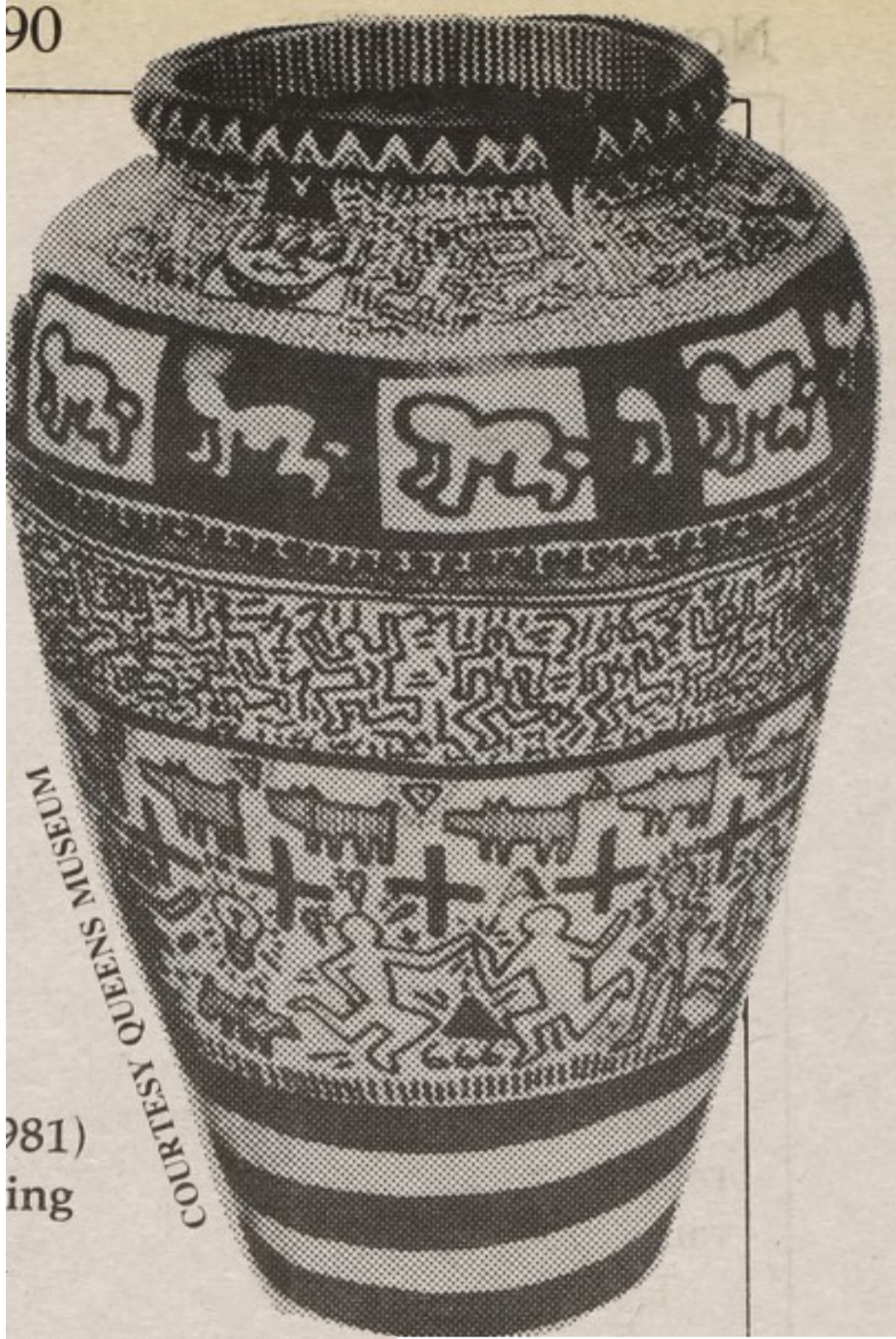
Well attuned to the performance aspects of his work, Haring often created in open-air studios. His work graced the Spectacolor Billboard of Times Square and a multitude of murals throughout the U.S., Japan, Australia and Europe. The performance attitude also produced one of the most well-documented careers of the decade. The exhibition includes a slide show of Tseng Kwong Chi's photographs of Haring's subway drawings and "Untitled" (1982) hangs next to a video of its creation. Haring was an artist of and for his time.

The Queens museum show profits from its opportune appearance, but the positing of weighty titles is a task best left to time and history. Let Haring stand on his own; not on the premise of a vague and ill-defined **Future Primeval**.



COURTESY QUEENS MUSEUM

"Untitled" (1982) by Keith Haring



COURTESY QUEENS MUSEUM

1981)
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"Untitled" (1981)
by Keith Haring