CRITIQUES OF A STRATEGIST: JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

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BY
YASMIN ESPERT

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I. Introduction

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) was one of the most distinguished artists of the 1980s international art scene. His strategic alliances with the media and major galleries in New York City allowed him to legitimize his street art, make lucrative profits, and become the "ethnic artist" of his time. Art dealers, collectors, and critics appreciated Basquiat's work because he daringly combined popular graffiti and neo-expressionist aesthetics to comment on subjects that few of his renowned contemporaries addressed: power, commodification and the black celebrity. Although subject to the whims of the market and critics, he negotiated the demands of commercialism to create work with "in-your-face arrogance and suicidal honesty."¹ The directness of his work complemented the agency he exercised in making a distinguished career. This fact has often been downplayed by projections of Basquiat as a demure and impressionable artist. I argue that he was very much aware of how his works and companionships helped him maneuver his way through the commercial market and redefine expectations of black artists.

Between 1983 and 1987, Wall Street's bull market fueled a dramatic shift in the art world.² Money and media hype became the center of the arena for artists, art dealers, collectors, museum officials, and art critics. The Wall Street boom afforded a wider demographic to invest in the risqué.³ They were no longer limited by unpredictable finances and conservative styles of the 1970s art market. And, much to the chagrin of art critics, fine art and popular culture began to overlap at unprecedented levels. Their traditional approach to evaluating art was challenged by

an evolving market with an appetite for popular culture. At the heart of the art world, art dealers in New York City catered to their growing clientele by scouting and exploiting trends. Basquiat was one of the artists eager to capitalize on this situation. As he made the transition to the commercial arena, his text-based graffiti, once made under the tag name SAMO©, transformed into crude paintings bearing content with a historic and contemporary flare (Figure 1.1).

The press grew fond of Basquiat’s developing career and indelibly shaped how his contemporaries embraced him. Their writings also inform retrospective investigations of his life and work. Scholar Thomas Crow asserts that contemporary art cannot be understood through history books alone; considering the role of the art press is critical to comprehending the careers of artists, such as Basquiat, who were indelibly impacted by media hype.⁴ Through articles in magazines and journals, basic information about Basquiat reached the masses; they knew about his family history, his motivations, and his relationships with artists, art dealers and collectors. The dissemination of these facts, which were sometimes exaggerated, fell in line with the prevailing style of art criticism in the 1980s: the insider-journalistic approach.⁵ This popular form of art commentary in the 80s shared details of a public figure’s life, such as the social events they attended or the people they dated. Insider-journalistic writers built their credibility with “social proof,” and the ability to create hype around a public persona. This style of criticism focused on the details of Basquiat’s personality, his interactions with prominent art world figures, and his relevance in making and breaking trends. Sometimes this meant interest was diverted from the content of his work.⁶

⁵ Pearlman, 5.
One of the most consequential insider-journalistic pieces written about Basquiat was Rene Ricard’s “The Radiant Child.” Published by *Artforum International* in 1981, this article illustrated with detail the nature of the art world and how Basquiat situated himself in it. In the late 1970s, “every fad became an institution,” and that included Basquiat’s earliest public art form—graffiti. This “fad” granted Basquiat the opportunity to transition from illegally spray-painting his proverbs and tag name SAMO® on the exterior of buildings in New York to painting canvases for collectors across the globe. Basquiat was not like other graffiti artists in New York; he “was a graffiti artist in the classic Greek sense.” Through SAMO®, which stood for ‘same old shit,’ Basquiat’s text-based graffiti exposed the monotony and inequities of his society (Figure 1.2). He did not subscribe to the colorful and painterly, bubble style that made aerosol art fashionable (Figure 1.3 and 1.4). Although his alias was dropped when he transitioned into the legitimate art sphere, his socially conscious work maintained its gravity throughout his career.

His former SAMO® collaborator, Al Diaz recalled that: “Jean-Michel saw SAMO as a vehicle, the graffiti was an advertisement for himself...[and] all of a sudden he just started taking over.” The SAMO® writings around New York sparked so much interest that in 1978 the *Village Voice* featured an article on the “most ambitious—and sententious—of the new wave of Magic Marker Jeremias.” SAMO®’s identity was revealed at downtown Manhattan’s Mudd

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10 Sirmans, 236. Basquiat also sold painted t-shirts, postcards, drawings, and other artworks in and around Washington Square Park, SoHo, and the Museum of Modern Art.
11 Ibid.
Club soon thereafter. Rumor has it that everyone was shocked and excited to finally put a face to the name, "SAMO is here!" Sure enough, Basquiat had arrived.  

Graffiti was not the only trend Ricard took note of in "The Radiant Child." The article exposed the popular practice of art dealers who exploited the talent and naïveté of young artists:

It's cute to be 20 and be pursued when hundreds of young artists are dropping their slides off at these same galleries, but the crass fast-turnover speculators' market can have a deleterious effect on an artist's future career if you don't have protection. We are no longer collecting art we are buying individuals. This is no piece by SAMO. This is a piece of SAMO.  

Ricard's statement informs readers of two important facts. First, artists understood that their success was directly related to associations with the top art dealers in New York: Mary Boone, Annina Nosei, Leo Castelli, Tony Shafrazi, just to name a few. Secondly, an artist's success was equally affected by the quality of their work and the marketability of their persona.

Insider-journalistic commentary on Basquiat perpetuated the public perception of the artist as an intriguing, mercurial wild-child. In response to Basquiat's first major solo show at the Annina Nosei Gallery, the former gallerist Jeffrey Deitch said:

Basquiat is likened to the wild boy raised by wolves, corralled into Annina's basement and given nice clean canvases to work on instead of anonymous walls. A child of the streets hawked at by the intelligentsia. But Basquiat is hardly a primitive. He's more like a rockstar...[He] reminds me of Lou Reed singing brilliantly about heroin to nice college boys.  

Basquiat was well aware of the persona the media painted for him and he had mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, he liked being perceived as a "bad boy" and a "wild child."

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12 Ibid.
13 Ricard, 35.
14 Pealman, 4. Basquiat was represented by all of these dealers at some point in his career.
16 Ibid, 32.
On the other hand, he was troubled by the racial implications of their language; it often implied that he was a degenerate and a primitive being. For example, many claimed that he was locked in the basement of Annina Nosei’s gallery and forced to paint. This annoyed Basquiat because he would have been called the gallery’s artist-in-residence had he been white. It also perturbed him that many reviews of his work turned out to be commentary of his perceived character and behavior.17

Thorough assessments of the content in Basquiat’s work were not a priority for authors who wanted to satiate the public’s desire for terse and immediate updates on Basquiat’s personal and professional affairs. Academic and theoretical writings, however, were concerned with the content of his work, and placed it in the context of a broad art historical perspective. Still, most of that did not come until the post-mortem retrospective exhibitions in the 1990s. Unlike insider-journalistic writers, the believability of an author taking the academic-theoretic approach more is contingent on the writer’s academic credentials than their personal knowledge of the artist. Distance from the art market lends such writing further credibility.

Nevertheless, Basquiat’s interaction with social media served him beyond self-promotion. It not only allowed him to establish an extensive network within the art world, but also gave him agency to create a niche as the underrepresented ethnic artist in a predominantly white arena. In her description of the 80s art scene for black artists, Lorraine O’Grady said, “only black people were getting poorer, only black artists seemed to worry about the price of paint. And the white media remained the same...I had to admit, there were things Jean-Michel knew more about than I.”18 One of the things Basquiat knew was the effect media-hype could have on


18 Lorraine O’Grady, 12.
his career. By strategically aligning himself with the top-notch art dealers and remaining in the public eye, Basquiat figured that he too could play the game of commercial exploitation. Examining his legacy in the context of today’s popular culture will show how Basquiat, the spectacle of the eighties, became a celebrity by negotiating with the powers of commercialism.

II. Cultural Cannibalism
Art historian Thomas Crow asserts that painters are “curiously selective in their subjects” and the concepts they choose to explore are imbued with purposefulness. Basquiat’s subjects explicitly demonstrated a curiosity about his family history and his struggle with celebrity. When the black artist and critic Lorraine O’Grady said that his work had an air of “in-your-face arrogance and suicidal honesty,” she was referring to the inclusion of phrases, names, and portraits in his narrative paintings. Many of these identifiers and the dynamism of his work can be attributed to the multiple identities he straddled: Haitian, Puerto-Rican, and American. His father Gerard, with whom he often had tension, emigrated from Haiti to the United States in 1955. His ill mother, Matilde Andradas, was from Puerto Rico. The Basquiat family lived, for the most part, in a middle-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. O’Grady sees Basquiat as being stuck in the middle, answering to his “paternal role model” and being painfully separated from his institutionalized mother, all while not quite fitting in with the Americans at school. This childhood dynamic facilitated a body of work that cut across cultures and was not only semi-biographical, but also subversive to the society in which he lived.

Basquiat improvised and redefined words that stem from the languages of his parents, English, Spanish, and French, as he explored historic and contemporary power structures. In one particular work from 1982, Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari, the placement and meaning of words allude to Haiti and Puerto Rico’s rich colonial histories (Figure 2.1). The Iberian empire thrived in the Caribbean with the institution of the slave market in 1502, ten years after Christopher Columbus’ first arrival. Spain’s monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella,

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19 Thomas Crow, 13.
20 Lorraine O’Grady, 11.
22 M. Franklin Sirmans, 233. Matilde was born in Brooklyn, New York to Puerto Rican parents. The Basquiat’s resided in Park Slope, a middle-class section of Brooklyn. Jean-Michel repeatedly ran away from home. He left for good in 1978.
23 O’Grady, 11.
instituted a slave system on the island of Hispaniola that would become the archetype for English, Dutch, and French colonial practices across the Caribbean. Words at the top of the canvas read "COLONIALIZATION: PART TWO IN A SERIES, VOL. VI." This bold preface established a theme Basquiat often revisited—the subject of the oppressor versus the oppressed. "COLONIALIZATION" is a variation of the word "colonization." This word refers to an economic system but the misspelling indicates his critical analysis of the word and its practice. A series of arrows in Native guides the eye from one section of the painting to the next, ultimately inviting us to see how text and image communicate the subject.

Basquiat's variation, "COLONIALIZATION," could refer to the actual process of colonizing, or the making of towns and cities in the name of the Spanish crown. His emphasis on the colonizing process brings to mind the disparity between the Christian and capitalist incentives for "COLONIALIZATION." From the official colonizer's perspective, expeditions into the New World were supposed to spread Christianity. In reality, they were about exploitation. When the spoils of mercantilism are considered, namely monopoly, persecution, and slavery, the negative connotation of "COLONIALIZATION" is obvious. The following phrases and words written in capitalized letters refer to these atrocities: "GOOD MONEY IN SAVAGES VERSUS MISSIONARIES NOBLE PROVISIONS, POACHERS, TUSKS, $KINS, and CORTEZ." These words summarized Basquiat's understanding of European imperialism in the New World.

Let us examine the statements starting with, "GOOD MONEY IN SAVAGES VERSUS MISSIONARIES NOBLE PROVISIONS." It addresses the conflict between vague religious intentions for colonization and the greed that fueled unethical practices in the New World. On
May 4, 1493 Pope Alexander VI issued his statement of support for Spain’s conquest of the New World under the precept that converting indigenous peoples was the main goal. Papal documents were published to ensure that European presence abroad “attempted to protect and not despoil the American Indian.” Therefore, missionaries held a critical role in the conversion of the “low type of human race” that Columbus discovered in the New World. Native juxtaposes this idea against the reality of colonialism, showing that pious authorities could not mitigate the subjugation of natives for monetary prospects.

The process of “COLONIALIZATION” was not isolated to the New World. The appropriation and exchange of resources for money occurred between European powers, New World and African territories. The consistent use of dollar signs in lieu of the letter “s” in Native echoes this concern. “TUSK$,” or tusks, is reminiscent of elephant exploitation for ivory and commerce between African and European countries. In two locations, arrows connect “TUSK$” to “$KINS.” In the context of exploitation for monetary gains, “$KINS” can be read as both a reference to animal skins, also part of the trade, and to the impositions of slavery. The color of skin was a key definer in the enslavement and endenturement of Africans and natives respectively in the New World. Slavery literally objectified these groups and placed a dollar value on their skin and their “KIN.” Because slaves were bought and sold, their spiritual principles were replaced with Christian value system.

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26 R. Stuart, "Haiti, or Hispaniola," Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London 48(1878), 266.
27 Ibid: 266.
28 Julia J. Connor, "The Textbooks Never Said Anything about... Adolescents Respond to 'The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo,'" Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy 47, no. 3 (November 2003): 242. Also known as the Triangular Trade route. The Middle Passage, or the Triangular Trade Route, facilitated the transportation of African slaves from their native continent to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. About one-third of the 50 million Africans on this Middle Passage survived the voyage.
Above "TUSK$" and "$KIN$," Basquiat encased "POACHERS" in a large rectangle to emphasize the term's relevance to the entire composition, and not just its common association with game. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a poacher is a person who "trespasses in pursuit of game" or "kills game illegally." Yet, underneath "POACHERS," Basquiat wrote "MISSIONARIES" in small print, as if to suggest that missionaries laid the groundwork for the usurpation of foreign resources by misleading natives with religion. This contradicts the "noble provisions" promised by the papacy and the crown. "MISSIONARIES" could also be interpreted as poachers of souls; missionaries robbed natives of their religion to impose Christianity. Basquiat reinforced this obvious dilemma by drawing an arrow from "VERSUS" down to "GOD"; when words following the vertical axis of the arrow are put together, they read "GOOD VERSUS GOD." The "GOOD" intentions of these missionaries did not follow through, and in turn, opposed the Christian values delineated by their "GOD." The inherent nature of "COLONIALIZATION" has little connection to the pure, godly principles missionaries sought to embody.

As if the abundance of text at the top of the drawing does not give a complete description of "COLONIALIZATION," Basquiat included a final remark at the very bottom to quell any doubts: "I WON'T EVEN MENTION THE GOLD (ORO)." This is a reference to the many mines across the Americas that furnished the Spanish crown with gold. He promised not to mention the gold stolen from natives, but he slyly bypassed this promise by writing "ORO," the Spanish word for the precious metal. Even in the early seventeenth-century, Spain's excessive appetite for gold was common knowledge. The Peruvian artist Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala

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drew a representation of a Spanish conquistador interacting with the Inca, Guaya Capac (Figure 2.2). The image is accompanied by dialogue, which reads:

Guyana Capac, Inca: *Cay curitacho micunqui (Do you eat this gold?)*
Candidia, Spaniard: *Este oro comemos (We eat this gold).*  

Guaman Poma’s ironic image makes it evident that obtaining gold was a fixed goal for the Spaniards. Explorers did not consume gold in a literal sense, but their need for it was critical to the survival of their empire.

Basquiat subtly “mentions” gold by drawing an arrow up to “CORTEZ,” a Spanish conquistador, as well. This pioneer of European imperialism first stopped on the island of Hispaniola, present day Haiti and Dominican Republic. Historian J.H. Elliot referred to Cortez’ role of conqueror as a position rooted in his “intellectual ancestry” in the Romans—a territorial people whose language, religion, architecture, and philosophy impacted every region they conquered. The latter served as a precedent and a justification for the subjugation of natives and African slaves. Under Cortez’ conquest of Mexico between 1521 and 1548, the Spanish crown appropriated more than 40,500,000 Piastres worth of gold from two mines alone—the equivalent of $3,133,437 USD. Records of gold from other Spanish mining countries are similar. Between 1492 and 1803, Spanish and Portuguese colonies produced over 5,568,194,000 Piastres. This

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30 Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, "369," *The First Conquest of this Kingdom,* http://www-personal.umich.edu/~dfrye/guaman.htm (accessed November 16, 2010). Guaman Poma completed a book of text and images between 1615 and 1616 that recorded the history of Peru with the intention of sending it to its colonizer, the Spanish crown. What is most important is Poma’s focus on the abuses of the colonizing process. Many of his images speak to how Christian missionaries took advantage of Peruvian people and their natural resources.


does not include the unregistered gold mines that escaped taxation.\(^3^3\) The assumption of European imperial rights to this wealth is referred to in the three-pointed crown depicted below “COLONIALIZATION.” The inconsistency between European goals and actions could explain why the crown has been crossed out. Basquiat did not have to mention “GOLD” for viewers to understand the ambitions of the colonial enterprise. The visual and historical connotations of “TUSK$,” “SKIN$,” “POACHERS,” “MISSIONARIES” and “CORTEZ” provide ample associations.

*Native* also depicts two figures, an unidentified black man and a white gunman. Given the presence of the word “POACHERS,” it is safe to assume who this white man is. The black figure raises a sign colored the same tone as his dark skin. He can be read as an allegory for the millions of people who were enslaved and indentured under “COLONIALIZATION.” The sign reads “Royal Salt Inc.” Author Richard Marshall saw salt as a manifestation of Basquiat’s preoccupation with “the commodification of basic elements that are used as a monetary surrogate for commerce.”\(^3^4\) *Native* may be Basquiat’s attempt to show the parallel between humans and natural resources. In order for the poacher to do his job, he needs objects of value to prey upon. In the context of the Caribbean’s plantation system it is also worthwhile to consider sugar as the antithesis of salt, sweet as the antithesis of salty. Fifteen years after the discovery of Hispaniola, Spaniards consented to the production and sale of sugar. Native, and later African slaves toiled the land to harvest this cash crop along with spices, indigo, and tobacco.\(^3^5\) The mere mentioning

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\(^3^3\) T. Danson, "Of the Quantity of Gold and Silver supposed to have passed from America to Europe, from the Discovery of the Former Country to the Present time," *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 14, no. 1 (March 1851): 19.


\(^3^5\) John Gunther, "Hispaniola," *Foreign Affairs* 19, no. 4 (July 1941): 764.
of salt sparks a chain of associations to these various commodities and the money one could accumulate through ownership of such property.

A spirit of discontent and aggravated protest is suggested by the black figure’s colorful countenance. Basquiat draws an arrow from the black figure to the poacher, a white man raising his rifle. This gunman seems stoic and emotionless, suggesting the absence of a moral foundation associated with his trade. Basquiat’s art incites those who rise to power at the expense of others.

Beside the poacher’s deadly weapon, Basquiat places an “X” over “LANDAU, BISHOP.” With the exception of the letter “u,” this name matches that of Bishop Diego (Didicus) de Landa. Spanish spelling was not standardized until the nineteenth century, so colonial forms were not always consistent. Basquiat used this misspelling to his advantage, as it adds dynamism to the composition. From 1549 to 1579, Landa acted as the resident Bishop of the Diocese of Merida in Yucatan. (Figure 2.3) In 1574, Landa ordered the burning of “more than 20,000 [Mayan] idols and other ritual paraphernalia” at a massive bonfire. To make sure his message was most effective, he ordered the burning to take place in the presence of the Maya prisoners in a central plaza. Bishop de Landa’s order essentially eradicated centuries’ worth of cultural memory in one instance. Here, Basquiat revisits the dual, yet ambiguous, role of missionaries as messengers of the “GOOD” news and as trailblazers for the perversion of the papacy’s mandate.

Below “LANDAU, BISHOP” one sees “CORTEZ” written three times. However, the second and third time, it appears without the last letter as “CORTE.” It is possible that Basquiat, who was fluent in Spanish, wrote Cortez’s name as it was pronounced in Puerto Rico (without:

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the last consonant). He learned the Spanish language from his Puerto-Rican mother, Matilde. He also grew familiar with the language while living in Puerto Rico from the age of fourteen to sixteen.38 "CORTE" could also refer to the royal court, as that is what it translates to in Spanish. This meaning holds irony, for the polite manners of the court contradicted the inhumane "COLONIALIZATION" process. Lastly, "CORTÉ" in Spanish translates in English as "cut" or "short." Repeating a downsized, distorted form of the name complements the simplified, abstract style with which he represents the poacher. The alteration of Cortez' name possibly reflects the artist's disapproval of the conquistador's predatory motives. It may pertain to cutting the wealth of the colonized countries, as well—as they were cut from their traditional way of living and forced to submit to a foreign ideology. In essence, Europe became rich while they became poor. In addition to emphasizing the overall message of the piece, these visual puns provide a sort of comic relief.

The physical make-up of Native also contributes to a deconstruction of colonial thought. In 1982, Basquiat began to construct canvases with exposed wood supports at each corner.39 He tied intersecting pieces of wood molding with twine. Richard Marshall described the supports as "raw, askew, handmade—a primitive-looking object that recalled African shields, Polynesian navigation devices, Spanish devotional objects, and bones that have broken through the surface skin."40 His vivid description brings to mind the very subjects Basquiat explores in Native. Africa and Polynesia were just two regions subjected to the impulses and perils of colonialism. Applying the "primitive" style of these non-Western cultures to the canvas' structure reinforces

38 Robert Farris Thompson, Jean-Michel Basquiat (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 29. As a result of a job promotion in 1974, Gerard Basquiat relocated his family to Mira Mar, Puerto Rico. Jean-Michel attended an Episcopal school there. They returned to the United States in 1976. Jean-Michel attended an alternative high-school, City-as-School, in Manhattan for "gifted" children who "find the traditional educational process difficult." This is where Jean-Michel developed the SAMO alias with his peer and friend, Al Diaz.

39 Ibid, 18.
40 Ibid, 18.
Basquiat’s theme. Marshall’s allusion to sacred objects and bones exposed through flesh suggests that the spiritual and carnal changes demanded by imperialism are equally important to the content and physical make-up of Native. This framing device could also be the result of Basquiat’s roots in graffiti, or illegal image making. The coarse, unfinished (and non-traditional) quality of the wooden frame recalls the rough exteriors of the public buildings in New York City where SAMO© had free reign. The hand of the artist is apparent in both the graffiti and exposed canvas frames as they invite the viewer to take into account the work’s infrastructure in a historical context.

The exploration of hegemony and commodification can also be found in a more modern context with St. Joe Louis Surrounded by Snakes (Figures 2.4). Here the subject is the champion Afro-American boxer, Joe Louis, who received backhanded compliments for his talent because of his race. As the title suggests, Louis is physically fit and virtuous (as indicated by the halo above his head). Although he wears boxing gloves, he is not in a defensive stance. Louis sits and gazes out at the viewer seemingly unresponsive to the diminutive, yet vigilant, figures around him.

Louis’ back-story parallels this image and likely informed Basquiat’s motivation for choosing the subject. In 1938, Joe Louis defeated Nazi Germany’s Max Schmeling and became the second Afro-American to win the world heavyweight championship.41 This was a symbolic win for the democratic American state over Nazi Germany. St. Joe Louis, however, makes no reference to Schmeling or the politically motivated boxing match. In fact, it depicts a battle that

41 Art Evans, “Joe Louis as a Key Functionary: White Reactions Toward a Black Champion,” Journal of Black Studies 16, no. 1 (September 1985): 95. Jack Johnson (who Basquiat also alluded to in other works) was the first black American to win the title when he defeated Tommy Burns, a white boxer, in 1908. Whites were “disillusioned” with the sport of boxing due to the implications of Johnson’s win in the context of the contemporary theory of Social Darwinism. If a black man could succeed in this sport, the notion of white superiority was threatened. More importantly, “whites did not identify with Johnson as their [American] champion” due to his race.
extended beyond the boxing ring. The inscription “surrounded by snakes” at the bottom of the painting calls attention to the white American cohort that managed Louis career and helped perpetuate racial stigmas. Louis may have been a champion fighter, but they made sure he conformed to their image of a simple, naïve fighter who behaved well for his white audience. Author Art Evans describes the relationship between Joe Louis and his managers as such:

Louis’ behavior was carefully structured to meet white expectations. For example, Louis’s managers—John Roxborough, Julian Black, and James Blackwell—attempted to package their fighter so that race would be subordinate to his boxing skills. They taught Louis even such details as bathing hair care, and table manners. They controlled his car driving, airplane riding, and any other behaviors that might offend whites.42

In order to compete in the predominantly white field of professional boxing, Louis had to prove that he was worthy. He had to act (outside of the boxing ring) according to the standards set by his white managers and fans. These prerequisites were based on racist notions that black Americans were inferior to whites. The Literary Digest of 1936 stated, “Probably the most important asset of this kinky-haired, thick-lipped embalmer was the cool, expressionless manner in which he fought.”43 As apparent with this quote, commentary demeaned Louis with racial stereotypes while praising his skill. Louis could not appear as too much of a threat to white manhood. Consequently, the perceived racial hierarchy attributed to his marginality.44

Louis’ athletic prowess could never trump white attitudes about race. The orange figure at the left of St. Joe Louis gives the boxer a patronizing pat on the knee as if reminding him that athletic success would never make whites overlook racial differences. Louis may have had the stamina and potential worthy of international acclaim, but he was a black man whose confidence

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42 Ibid: 103. At the time, many of Louis' supporters did not identify with him because he was black.
44 Ibid: 96. At the time of the Louis-Schmeling match, race relations in the United States were hostile. Discrimination and segregation existed in nearly every aspect of American life: political, social, and judicial. White Americans had leverage in these arenas. Black Americans, regardless of their education or vocational training, were treated as second-class citizens.
was curbed by social limitations. Basquiat’s illustration of Louis’s doll-like, stoic demeanor emphasizes the meek caricature he had to portray. One would expect a champion boxer to defend themselves from the dangers imposed by his opponent; but, this was a battle Louis could fight with his fists. Even though he defeated Germany’s prizefighter, Louis was still considered an inferior Negro by Americans and Germans alike.45

Basquiat’s talent in painting, as with Louis’ in boxing, gave him credibility and greater opportunities than those available to most black artists.46 Like Louis, Basquiat became one the most successful practitioners in his field and did so with help of white people. Both men had an “outstanding competitive record” that proved they were investment-worthy.47 At twenty-one years old, Basquiat already established an international presence with the help of the art dealer, Bruno Bischofberger. His first solo show was in Italy and soon thereafter he was exhibiting with Annina Nosei’s up and coming gallery in New York City.48

45 Evans, 104. Blacks supported Louis wholeheartedly, as evidenced by their consistent appearances at his training sessions for his fight against Germany’s fighter, Schmeling. In days leading to the fight, Schmeling was often visited by white Americans at his training camp in New York despite his racist comments toward Louis that were published in a German publication.

46 O’Grady, 12. Author and critic Lorraine O’Grady states that in the eighties “‘only black people were getting poorer, only black artists seemed to worry about the price of paint.’”

47 Ibid: 104. In retrospect Basquiat was probably more like the “impudent” Jack Johnson that the “deadpan” Joe Louis who acted within the boundaries set for him by white management. Jack Johnson another champion black boxer and was too “impudent” for a black man; he “showed so much scorn for his white opponents, and was so unrepentant that for decades after his era whites feared that other black sports figures would do the same.” Johnson’s behavior outside of the ring was just unacceptable to whites. Even worse, he had white wives. Johnson was not the model whites wanted blacks to have. This fueled the strict methods used to tame Louis’ public persona.

48 Sirmans, 238-9. In a 1982 edition of New York Magazine, the renowned contemporary art dealer Leo Castelli called Annina Nosei “the real live filament [of the art world].” He predicted that this new, yet ambitious, art dealer would be the catalyst for a major change on the gallery scene. The following year, Basquiat has a solo show at Nosei’s gallery and was included in the Whitney Museum’s 1983 Biennial Exhibition.
At twenty-four, he had his first show with "the New Queen of the Art World," Mary Boone.\(^{49}\) Boone and her mentor, Leo Castelli, revolutionized the market by selling more than art; they sold artists. "Mary and I. We can make an artist charismatic," claimed Castelli.\(^{50}\)

Charisma, it seemed, was needed on all ends of art transactions. The new breed of collectors (i.e.: Boone) was ambitious and they ultimately determined what "hot commodities" art critics would write about in their gossip-ridden articles.\(^{51}\) Since these ambitious art dealers resembled their artists, it only made sense for these dealers to represent individuals who had an assertive presence. Mary Boone said, "We like controversy;" i.e. could bring anyone—even someone from humble beginnings—from "nowhere" to "making a style."\(^{52}\) With renewed interest in collecting contemporary art and hype from art critics thirsty for updates on the latest art stars, it was to Basquiat's advantage to situate himself among the "Boonettes."\(^{53}\) She could make him a star.\(^{54}\) The challenge would be acting within the expectations set by an aggressive art world that fetishized him.\(^{55}\)

Like the famous and unnamed black icons who came before him, Basquiat's race significantly influenced how he maneuvered through the art world's ivory tower. He knew people expected him to follow the rules and accept the fact that he was a small black fish in a sea of white sharks. His friend and fellow artist Keith Haring said: "Being Black and a kid having

\(^{49}\) Anthony Arden-Guest, "The New Queen of the Art Scene," *New York Magazine*, April 19, 1982, 24. Well aware of the implications of showing at Mary Boone, Basquiat made it his prerogative to have her as his dealer. Boone one of the major dealers who encouraged collectors to recover from the "mess" that was the seventies art market.

\(^{50}\) Ibid, 30.

\(^{51}\) Ibid, 29.

\(^{52}\) Ibid, 30.

\(^{53}\) Ibid, 29. The Times critic, Robert Hughes, accused Mary Boone of creating too much hype for her artist cohort, which he mockingly names the Boonettes, or "artists united only in mediocrity."

\(^{54}\) Taka Kawachi, 131.

dreadlocks, he couldn’t even get a taxi. But he could spend $10,000 in his pocket.”56 This was Basquiat’s way of “sticking [his] nose at people who were looking down on [him].”57 Instead of being introduced as a serious artist, “he was treated ‘as an inferior, as a pet’,” said his former art dealer Annina Nosei.58 His friends said he did not feel like he was completely accepted in New York’s “tight knit circles,” so proving his worth was a daily endeavor.59

The St. Joe Louis painting extends the metaphor of black bodies as property. By depicting Joe Louis in a sellable format (a painting), Basquiat transforms the boxer into a commodity. The same can be argued for Native, which is worth about $45,000 USD today.60 Although both works reenact the process of commodification, it is worth noting that the text asks the viewer (and the buyer) to reconsider the morally questionable history behind their power. It also forces the audience to reconsider how that history is relevant to a contemporary black icon like himself.

Interest in Basquiat’s work peaked in the mid 1980s then “sagged, partly for non-artistic reasons,” says the art dealer Jeffrey Deitch. “These reasons included gossip about his celebrity and his reputation among art dealers as a difficult personality. He gained notoriety for once dumping a bowl of fruit and nuts on a dealer’s head.”61 Acts like that were a direct reaction against the “pet” persona dealers, collectors, and critics tried to attach to his name. The art world wanted to be his bwana, or his master/boss.62 His work was an attack on this patriarchy.

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57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
61 Wines, “Jean Michel Basquiat: Hazards of Sudden Success And Fame.”
The term *bwana* holds special significance in Basquiat’s 1983 painting, *Hollywood Africans*. It examined the state of black celebrities in mainstream culture. By this time, Basquiat was immersed in the limelight. In fact, this was the year he was included in the Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He became one of the figures in *Hollywood Africans* (Figure 2.5), appearing at the right of the composition, next to “SELF PORTRAIT AS A HEEL.” He positions his “PAW” on his chin in the manner of his mentor and idol, Andy Warhol (Figure 2.6). Basquiat is accompanied by two other figures in *Hollywood Africans*. The figure in the center wearing eye-gear is the graffiti artist and rapper, Rammellzee, with whom Basquiat released a Hip-Hop record (Figure 2.7 and 2.8). The figure at the extreme left could be Freddy Braithwaite, better known as Fab 5 Freddy, who introduced Rammellzee to Basquiat. At the top left, Basquiat wrote (and crossed out): “WHAT IS BWANA?” Words and signs of imperialism and the African Diaspora surround this triad of Hollywood Africans: “TOBACCO,” “SUGAR CANE” and “CORN.” Words like “TAX FREE,” “200 YEN,” “NEW,” and “SEVEN STARS” call to mind marketing schemes and signs used by the *bwana* to lure consumers. This painting can be read as an advertisement—black talent is for sale. These black celebrities, or “Hollywood Africans,” are subject to a new, contemporary brand of commodification.

The text at the top reads “HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS—1940-.” He included the beginning but not the end date in which “HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS” are on sale. Perhaps, he is suggesting that this is an ongoing sale event that cannot and will not cease. The inventory will

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63 Sirmans, 242. In 1983, the same year *Hollywood Africans* was painted, Basquiat and Rammellzee collaborated on a Hip-Hop record. Basquiat produced the record, while Rammellzee contributed his raps.” Rammellzee highlighted and often brought out an identity complex in Jean-Michel…coming from that middle-class neighborhood and yet dressing so fucked up….Rammellzee often told Jean-Michel that he now had a responsibility to people of color. He brought him to meetings of the Five Percent Nation. At first, Jean-Michel seemed indifferent to this idea.”

64 Ibid, 236.
continue to replenish itself. Their value will continue to be determined in the same way that "TOBACCO," "SUGAR," "SUGAR CANE," and "CORN" were appraised and marketed.

The suggestion of colonialism is confirmed with the writing of "IDI AMIN" at the lower left of Hollywood Africans. Amin was Uganda’s infamous despot between 1971 and 1979, so his African roots aptly fit the requirements for being a subject in the painting.65 The West deemed Amin a monster and a clown for his despotic rule, but he rebutted their criticism by shamelessly rebuking their colonial history. Seven years before Basquiat created Hollywood Africans, Amin wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth II stating: “I would like you to arrange for me to visit Scotland, Ireland and Wales to meet the heads of revolutionary movements fighting against your imperialist oppression.”66 Many saw Amin’s wit as “buffoonery,” to Basquiat this may have been a legitimate instance of defiance, and a reordering of colonial hierarchies.

At the very bottom of the painting Basquiat wrote “GANSTERISM,” a term describing sadistic and threatening tactics used for personal gain. It is very likely that he equated the bwana with “GANSTERISM.” Much like the “POACHERS” in Native, they engage in a morally questionable and illicit enterprise. He also makes us reconsider the state of white Hollywood by suggesting that whites, and not blacks, are the gangsters.

Basquiat’s fascination with celebrity overlapped with his preoccupation with the dynamics of ownership.67 As seen with the repetition of dollar signs in Native and the marketing rhetoric in Hollywood Africans, Basquiat is concerned with the exchange of money and how it perpetuates inequality. Money allows those in power to maintain their control over subordinates,

65 Peter Beaumont, "Idi Amin 'Dada,' self-proclaimed King of Scotland, VC, CBE...RIP," (accessed November 17, 2010).
67 Sirmans, 235. Basquiat was obsessed with Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, two young celebrities who died of drug overdoses. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin both died when they was 27 years old. Basquiat died of a drug overdose at the age of 27, too.
even if the subordinates have proven their worth to the public and gained celebrity status. In drawing attention to the problems of this hierarchy, Basquiat points out the dichotomy between black talent and the hegemony of the mainstream arena.

Challenging authority is inherent to the early hip-hop aesthetic which Basquiat depicts in the painting P-Z (Figure 2.9). Two male figures with brown faces stand erect against a white background. The man at the left wears casual clothing, or the “look of black male hip-hop attire, circa 1984...a modified baseball jacket, with V form white elastic edge, and hiking boots.”68 His hair, represented by thick, horizontal strokes, looks like tight curls or even dreadlocks. Standing in front of him is a partially finished drawing of a man in a sub-Saharan pillbox hat and a shirt with a graphic representation of a mask on it. This man’s countenance, particularly his almond-shape eyes, is reminiscent of an African mask. Besides brown, the colors used to give this character life are red, black, and green, the colors of the Pan-African flag (Figure 2.10).69

Basquiat’s dates fall in line with the Old School era (1978-1984) and Golden Age (1985-1992) of the Hip-Hop movement.70 Although he fraternized with the elite of the art world, he was very familiar with the emceeing, graffiti, break-dancing, and DJ-ing trends emerging from the Bronx. His link to the uptown scene was Fab 5 Freddy. Since meeting in 1978, the two traveled to museums and galleries across the country, collaborated with other artists, and even starred in the film Downtown 81 together. As seen in the second chapter, both were featured in Hollywood Africans along with the rapper, Rammellzee. The trio also traveled to Los Angeles for Basquiat’s showing at Larry Gagosian’s gallery, where Hollywood Africans was on view.71

69 These colors were adopted in 1920.
71 Tamra Davis, Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child, DVD (2010; USA: Arthouse Films)
Fab 5 Freddy said that Basquiat’s “arsenal of imagery” undoubtedly reflected the essence of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and the Lower East Side of New York; and the burgeoning lifestyle of that time and space was Hip-Hop.\textsuperscript{72} He was creating images in the midst of Hip-Hop’s inception, a movement that enabled rap, or lyrics that employ figurative language, to “draw not only from the folk idioms of the African Diaspora but from the legacy of Western verse and the musical traditions of jazz, blues, funk, gospel and reggae.”\textsuperscript{73} Yale University Press’s The Anthology of Rap emphasizes the poetic nature of rap, a characteristic that falls in line with the construction of text and image in Basquiat’s work.\textsuperscript{74} The enjambment, similes, and metaphors of rap make hearing and reading this form of poetry an “aesthetic experience.”\textsuperscript{75}

Hip-hop was beginning to hit mainstream culture in the early eighties. The co-curator of the Brooklyn Museum’s Basquiat (2005) retrospective exhibition, Franklin Sirmans, said that “no artist has ever so profoundly embodied a cultural movement as Jean-Michel Basquiat personified hip-hop culture in its brilliant infancy.”\textsuperscript{76} So, what is hip-hop and how did Basquiat translate that emerging culture into a visual aesthetic? Author Tricia Rose defines hip-hop as a “hidden transcript… it uses cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities”.\textsuperscript{77} Some of Basquiat’s critics failed to notice this quality in early works like P-Z, as their attention was directed to his persona. In choosing to paint his black contemporaries, Basquiat elevated street culture to high art.\textsuperscript{78} Prioritizing this subject was certainly a response to the revival that was happening all around him. Art Historian Robert Farris Thompson describes the New York atmosphere from which hip-hop emerged:

\textsuperscript{72} Jeffrey Deitch, Jean Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street (New York: Charta, 2007), 118.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., xxxv.
\textsuperscript{76} Franklin Sirmans, “In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip-Hop Culture,” in Basquiat (New York: Merrell, 2005), 91.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., “In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip-Hop Culture,” 92. To be discussed further in chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{78} The same can be argued for Kehinde Wiley, a contemporary artist who paints black celebrities and common men in the heroic poses of Western kings, saints, and other icons.
In 1977-80 that “next great culture” pulled into station, “hip-hop”: break dancing, electric boogie, graffiti, rap. The women and men of hip-hop were Anglophonic Caribbean and mainland black as well as New York Puerto Rican. This reflected new immigration patterns since 1966...a crisscross of island-mediated African influences now illuminated New York: Afro-Cuban, Afro-Haitian, Afro-Jamaican, Afro-Dominican, and Afro-Puerto Rican. Creole Africa, to the power of five, intensifying the earlier gifts of Garvey, Parker, Coltrane and Malcolm X.\(^7\)

At its core, Hip-Hop was about black consciousness, much like the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968). Instead of marching and singing Negro spirituals, subscribers to this “volatile criticism of contemporary culture” were graff writing in subways, dancing on street corners, and freestyle rapping wherever they could find a beat.\(^8\) Creating popular culture in these art forms and critiquing society worked hand-in-hand. Each art form influenced the other, and Basquiat was an avid participant in this exchange. Graffiti, for example, was not the preferred medium to make political statements. Narratives were left to the words and sounds of emcees. Graffiti was mostly a way for creative minds to claim their territory by writing their tag names and symbols in a painterly, and sometimes illegible, manner. According to Fab 5 Freddy, “graffiti symbolizes people doing what they want to do, but...its only names.”\(^9\) Basquiat built on the idea of text-based graffiti by enhancing it with the loaded messages that emcees were known to communicate with provocative syntax.\(^10\) In essence, Basquiat combined images with a sense of rebellious lyricism that responded to the vibrant, emerging hip-hop culture and its roots in the greater African Diaspora. Critic Greg Tate stated it well:

Jean-Michel Basquiat’s art refuses to make a distinction between the vernacular and the cognitive, the cruel populous streets and the lonely garrey. Hip hop, as Basquiat so


\(^{8}\) Graf writing, or graffiti, is one of the four elements of Hip-Hop. Break-dancing, emcee-ing (MC, poet, or the “hype man”), and DJ-ing are the other three elements.

\(^{9}\) Sirmons, “In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip-Hop Culture,” 93.

\(^{10}\) Ibid, 93.
eloquently made clear, is about mapping an urban subconscious—anybody’s urban subconscious. Hip Hop is about Afrikanzation and reverse colonization. Basquiat certainly brought the hip-hop aesthetic into the legitimate art world. If viewers want to understand the meaning of works like *Hollywood Africans* and *P-Z*, then they must understand the context in which they were made. Tate contends that Basquiat purposefully forces the audience to engage with hip-hop so viewers can participate in a discourse on power, commodification and the black celebrity.

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83 Ibid, 94.
III. The Aura and the Business of Being an Artist

*I don't know if the fact that I'm black has something to do with my success. I don't believe that I should be compared to black artists but rather all artists.* –Jean-Michel Basquiat

The media came to know Basquiat by what Andy Warhol called his "aura." It was something communicated without speech, something seen, not heard. The "aura" could only be activated in someone else's eyes, "you can only see an aura on people you don't know very well or don't know at all." This impersonal, yet visually stimulating distance aptly describes the lens through which the art world viewed Basquiat. Their perceptions sometimes worked along with the persona Basquiat created for himself—a persona that facilitated his entrance into the mainstream.

The public became fascinated by Basquiat's "aura;" they consumed his personal image as well as the images he created. Popular publications mediated the "aura"-viewing process by informing the public about what they should see in him. *Artforum International*’s popular critic Rene Ricard, for example, deemed Basquiat a protégé of Expressionist masters such as Jean Dubuffet and Cy Twombly (Figures 3.1 and 3.2). The connection between Dubuffet, Twombly and Basquiat was apparent in their child-like, coarse renderings of figures and words. This

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84 Kawachi, 125.
86 Ibid, 77. Only an outsider can see your “aura,” and that outsider can determine how much of your aura they want to acknowledge.
87 Ricard, 35. In this piece, Ricard wrote: "If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption, it would be Jean-Michel." Two years later in an interview with Henry Geldzahler for *Interview* magazine, Basquiat said: "My favorite Twombly is *Apollo and the Artist*, with the big "Apollo" written across it." See *Interview* magazine, vol. XIII, no. 1, January 1983, pp. 44-46 for full interview.
association between Basquiat and two well established masters informed readers of Basquiat’s aesthetic and elevated his public image.

Basquiat went from being a homeless street artist to a well-known, international art star. When he was poor, he worked a number of odd jobs. He sold low-end jewelry on the streets of Manhattan and painted designs on sweatshirts for money. It was at the epic Times Square Show in June of 1980 that he first showed his work in a formal exhibition space. Jeffrey Deitch described the show as an alternative “art funhouse” that showcased work of the emerging SoHo district of Manhattan and the Bronx. Multiple artists haphazardly displayed their work in what used to be a massage parlor near Times Square, New York; the journalist Cathleen McGuigan called the results “trashy exuberance.” The Times Square Show aptly represented the new bohemian movements of new-wave, neo-pop, rap, and graffiti. Although the exhibition was not sophisticated by mainstream standards, it marked the official emergence of the underground punk and graffiti era as the “heartbeat of New York.” It also marked Basquiat’s baptism into New York’s legitimate art scene.

One year later, in 1981, Basquiat’s work appeared in another groundbreaking exhibition, the “New York/New Wave” show at a new, alternative space for contemporary art called P.S.1. In her account of an artist’s reaction to the show, McGuigan remarked that it was “full of disparate elements that somehow worked together, though there was no apparent system linking them—just like New York.” The show’s curator, Diego Cortez, was also an artist and critic who had been following Basquiat since the Times Square Show. He knew that “New York/New

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88 McGuigan, 24.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Sirmans, 237.
92 Ricard, 35.
93 McGuigan, 24.
Wave” would show the what set Basquiat apart from his fellow punk and graffiti artists. Major art dealers such as Bruno Bischofberger and Henry Geldzahler were impressed by Basquiat’s eclectic submissions. As noted in the previous chapter, his work was informed by an array of historical events, figures, and art forms. Ricard said that “artists have a responsibility to raise [their work] above the vernacular;” and Basquiat did that as he encouraged his audience to look beyond the veil of graffiti text and crude images to find specific political messages. Explicit references to the past made the work intriguing as a work of graffiti and as high art.

When Ricard compared Basquiat to Twombly and Dubuffet, he also provided legitimizing references for the punk and graffiti movements as it fit them into the art historical canon. Historian Margaret Vandryes later pointed out that while comparisons to famous white artists were common, artists of color would have been “more appropriate progenitors” for Basquiat. She went on to say that their absence from works such as Ricard’s early coverage of Basquiat in “The Radiant Child” was due to the mainstream’s overall ignorance of minority artists.

We might ask if she was correct. Does an artist’s racial or ethnic background make him/her an “appropriate progenitor”? Vandryes suggests that the artist Bill Traylor offers a better parallel to Basquiat because he was a successful self-taught, black artist (Figure 3.3). But, it is worth noting that Traylor did not become famous until after his death in 1949. He was a former

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94 Ibid.
95 Ricard, 35.
96 Vendryes, 85.
97 Ibid.
slave (and outsider artist) with no interest in the art world, while Basquiat was determined to integrate into the mainstream.98

Twelve years after Ricard’s “Radiant Child” was published in Artforum, the black artist Lorraine O’Grady wrote a piece for the same publication claiming that Basquiat was completely unaware of black artists, both historical and contemporary. His career was blossoming while “much of the black avant-garde [was left] in limbo.”99 Linda Bryant, for example, exhibited works by the black avant-garde in her Just Above Midtown Gallery, but had to close the establishment in 1986.100 O’Grady also pointed out that he was included in only one show specific to the African American experience while he was alive.101 She was referring to “Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art,” an exhibition held at Bucknell University’s Center Gallery in 1985. Basquiat had two works in the show, an untitled painting of a crudely rendered figure and a mixed media drawing that immortalized the eighties actor, Danny Rosen.102 Curators of this retrospective show identified Basquiat as a self-taught, neo-expressionist artist who exemplified what was “fashionable in the East Village [of New York].” They even said that Basquiat contributed to the “art world’s [awakening] to the meaning and power of the rough edge in art.”103 Their evaluation served to reinforce perceptions of his agency in establishing a noteworthy, albeit atypical, career in the mainstream.

O’Grady was suspicious as to why Basquiat avoided the black art world; “he was perplexed, he’d never heard of it.” She was also irritated that Basquiat backed out of

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99 O’Grady, 12.
101 Ibid.
102 Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art (Lewisburg, PA: Center Gallery of Bucknell University, 1985), 118. Both Rosen and Basquiat appeared in the film, Downtown 81 (also known as: New York Beat), which was shot in 1981. At 19 years of age, Basquiat played a starving artist in New York’s downtown scene.
103 Ibid, 63.
participating in the “Black and White Show” (1983) she curated at the Kenkeleba Gallery. This was an exhibition of works in black and white by black and white artists. O’Grady suggests that he turned down the invitation because he was building his rapport with the prominent art dealer, Mary Boone, at the time. Associating with the low-end Kenkeleba by contrast “would not be cool.” Basquiat’s distance from marginalized black artists was furthered when he was chosen to be in the 1983 Biennial of the Whitney Museum of American Art. O’Grady notes that no other black artist on the contemporary scene was given such an opportunity. The founder of the black not-for-profit gallery Just Above Midtown, Linda Bryant, was in disbelief. Basquiat’s blossoming career was “too weird;” he was an unexpected exception.

For an artist like Basquiat to thrive in the mainstream, the market had to provide accommodation. This accommodation came in the form of comparisons to already established, mainstream artists. O’Grady argues that these associations made his style and aura “derivative...[he] enter[ed] as a consequence, not as an originator.” She implies that his aura could not be authentic unless viewed in the context of the traditional black artist.

According to Bucknell University’s catalog for “Since the Harlem Renaissance,” it is only content that separates black, self-taught artists from the Neo-expressionist masters of Europe and the America. Art Brut, or the idea that “the raw can be beautiful, expressive and meaningfully powerful,” is equally relevant to Basquiat’s work as it was to that of Dubuffet and

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104 O'Grady, 12. The gallery was a storefront that doubled as a gallery.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid. O'Grady was not the only one who wrote about Basquiat's transient 'blackness.' The popular hip hop artist and entrepreneur Jay-Z says in his memoir "Decoded" (2010) that Basquiat did not actually fit or subscribe to the many labels attached to his name by the public. "Decoded" dedicates an entire chapter to the 1980s art star and draws a comparison with Jay-Z himself, an artist from Brooklyn who has had to deal with the demons of fame. The final chapter of my thesis will discuss this comparison further.
107 Ibid, 11.
108 Ibid, 12.
Twombly. The catalog also states that black artists “understood all along the meaning and power of the rough edge in art.” The idea that artists of color collectively promoted Art Brut suggests that Basquiat should have been part of a black art trend. But because he was perceived to ignore the older generation of black artists, O’Grady said he falls short of completely identifying with this trend.

Despite O’Grady’s claims to the contrary, Basquiat did work alongside black artists. He painted a portrait of the famed Harlem photographer, James van der Zee after a photo-shoot for Interview magazine in 1982 (Figures 3.4 and 3.5). We also cannot discount the numerous graffiti-centered exhibitions in which he participated. Although Basquiat did not intend his early SAMO© work to be considered as high art, it did catch the attention of audiences in tune with the rise of graffiti, which was inextricable from the that of the Hip-Hop. In April of 1981 he was included in “Beyond Words: Graffiti Based-Rooted-Inspired Works,” an exhibition organized by the graffiti artists, Fred Braithwaite (Fab 5 Freddy) and Futura. Basquiat was often associated with the diverse group of artists in this show: Daze, Dondi, Rammellzee, Zephyr, among others. The following year, Art in America identified Basquiat as one of the key figures in the new graffiti movement. He was not the only contemporary black artist being recognized in this capacity; Fab 5 Freddy, his close associate was also a minority. Basquiat’s alignment with graffiti artists, and his interest in the greater Hip Hop aesthetic, is evidence of his participation in, not his isolation from, the black avant-garde.

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109 Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art, 63.
110 Ibid.
111 Sirmans, 241.
112 Marenzi, 36.
113 Sirmans, 238.
His collaborations and influences extended beyond U.S. borders, as well. From 1982 onward, Basquiat and the Barbadian artist Shenge Kapharoah were “inseparable.” They shared similar interests in African ideologies, the Diaspora, Egypt and Moses, “subjects that were not of interest to many of Basquiat’s [white] friends.” This association with Kapharoah counters O’Grady’s claims that Basquiat ignored and avoided black art and artists.

His subject matter also challenges O’Grady’s accusations. Discourse on the history surrounding colonialism and facets of modern culture parallel the concerns of artist’s with whom O’Grady associated, as well as the socio-political concerns emerging through Hip-Hop’s inception. In an interview just before his death, Basquiat said that the art historian Robert Farris Thompson was the critic who best understood his work. He owned Thompson’s book, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art and Philosophy* and often transposed its images to his canvases. Basquiat also requested Thompson to write a piece for his solo show at the Mary Boone gallery in 1985. His interest in Thompson’s work exemplifies his zeal to integrate the visual vocabulary of historic and contemporary sources.

News of Basquiat’s “exploitation” by white patrons had spread among the black artist community. As a young artist, he was susceptible to the chicanery of dealers and he admitted to being ripped-off more than once. In a 1983 interview, he laconically explained that a

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115 Sirmans, 239.
117 Vendryes, 90.
118 O’Grady, 11.
119 Marenzi, 36.
European dealer once sold his work in bulk and did not give him the money commensurate to the sales.\textsuperscript{120}

Julian Schnabel's semi-biographical film \textit{Basquiat} (1996) gives us a sense of the artist's naïveté, as well. The sight of Basquiat's characteristic limp walk, mumbled speech, and overall indulgences in worldly things (drugs, women, money) supports the notion that he had strange and sometimes destructive habits. Schnabel's film draws from facts, but it places a great emphasis on the artist's boyish nature, suggesting that Basquiat's success was completely motivated and controlled by his white dealers. In the film, the only aspects of his life in which he seemed to have any agency were related to dangerous behavior. The film did take notice of Basquiat's wit through some reenactments of critical interviews, such as that with the art historian Marc H. Miller (1981). This dialogue reveals that Basquiat had a sense of humor, but also felt more comfortable talking about his work than his personal life. But, overall, we see that the film downplays Basquiat's active role in his career so much that we perceive him as a puppet of the art market rather than as an ambitious artist.

O'Grady also thought he was a pawn. After meeting Basquiat in his studio, she recalled:

I knew the art world was about to eat him up and before it did, I hoped to connect him to black artists who, picked up in the '60s and then dropped, could give him perspective on its mores in a way his graffiti friends could not. I also wanted to connect \textit{them} to his hunger, his lack of fear.\textsuperscript{121}

She cites Fred Wilson and David Hammons as two older black artists who would have warned him about racial politics. By the same token, she thought Basquiat's young, daring approach

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{120} Marenzi, 36. 
\textsuperscript{121} O'Grady, 11.}
would be a breath of fresh air for the veteran artists who ignored the art press because they were not a part of that mainstream culture.\textsuperscript{122}

But Basquiat knew that to make it to the center, one had to know what the critics valued. The 1983 documentary \textit{The Business of Being an Artist} tells us that the art world’s commercialism was booming in the late seventies. It was a boom that Basquiat, unlike other black artists, could find a way to participate in.\textsuperscript{123} Distributed by the Kenkeleba Gallery, the film provides an insider’s view of the New York art world and gives advice to artists of his generation seeking to enter the legitimate art world. It begins with a discussion of the commercial gallery, an entity that helps to shape market trends. These art galleries also link artists to the general public, and more specifically art collectors. But, unlike museums and some alternative exhibition spaces, their primary function is not education. Selling an artist’s concept is their priority.\textsuperscript{124}

Art professionals interviewed for the film said that the most successful artists “do their homework.”\textsuperscript{125} They know what specific galleries specialize in, and they understand that networking with fellow artists and dealers is far more effective than haplessly walking into galleries with a portfolio.\textsuperscript{126} Basquiat was one of these artists. He quite consciously looked to the career of his biggest competitor, Julian Schnabel (b. 1951), to make the right connections (Figure 3.6). Mary Boone and her mentor Leo Castelli had been the masterminds behind the “Schnabel Phenomenon,” in the 1980s. When Schnabel declared he wanted to drop his job as a restaurant cook to become “the most famous painter in New York,” he turned to Boone and Castelli. From that point on, Schnabel was touring Milan, Paris, Dusseldorf, and Barcelona. Bruno

\textsuperscript{122} O’Grady, 11.
\textsuperscript{123} Kuyk, 104.
\textsuperscript{124} \textit{The Business of Being an Artist}, VHS (New York: Just Above Midtown Gallery, 1983).
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
Bischofberger, a dealer based in Zurich, as well, later represented him.\textsuperscript{127} At the height of the Schnabel Phenomenon, Boone recalled that “she hadn’t had an art world conversation in over six months in which Schnabel’s name hadn’t come up.”\textsuperscript{128} Basquiat wanted to have a similar impact. He had his eye on Mary Boone’s gallery for some time.\textsuperscript{129} She and Castelli knew the formula for bringing artists of his generation to the public eye. Basquiat had the same ambitions as Schnabel and, consequently, had similar successes. His associations with these dealers point to his determination and strategy.

Schnabel and Basquiat were acquainted as early as 1984 and their careers overlapped in numerous ways (Figure 3.7). Schnabel made his debut at the Mary Boone Gallery with two solo shows in 1979.\textsuperscript{130} Critics proclaimed that his monumental canvases, like The Death of Fashion, were “the return of painting” (Figure 3.8).\textsuperscript{131} The overall composition, complete with plate shards, was indeed reminiscent of the preceding Abstract Expressionist movement. The neo-expressionist movement that Schnabel represented was the first since abstract expressionism and pop to open-up to the “outside world.”\textsuperscript{132} The minimalist movement that preceded this was too distant from the realities of the world. The Business of Being an Artist even suggests that minimalism required too much “intellectual rigor” for the increasing number of young collectors at the time.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{127} Arden-Guest, 26-28.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 28.
\textsuperscript{129} Kawachi, 131.
\textsuperscript{130} David Moss, Summer: Julian Schnabel Paintings 1976-2007 (Milan: Skira, 2008), 418. All of the paintings at Schnabel’s first show at Mary Boone sold before the opening.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid, 418.
\textsuperscript{132} Arden-Guest, 27.
\textsuperscript{133} The Business of Being an Artist, VHS.
Critic Arthur C. Danto said that Schnabel intentionally created work that also complemented the tastes of dealers and collectors. This was due to the fact that emerging artists of his era expected to make riches and achieve fame by their early twenties. Since collectors were not interested in small canvases, Schnabel made large ones; “these days, making it large is a condition for making it big. If you do not make it big, you do not make it at all.” Celebrity not only required large scale artwork, but an excessive amount of paint. A thick impasto appealed to collectors because it was “evidence of creative frenzy on the very surface of the work, smearing, scooping, dripping, squeezing, gouging, and scraping...” Schnabel’s signature style made use of these techniques. His creative process included an intimate application of paint with his hands, writing, and even the use of found objects. A crude application of paint, child-like drawings, and ubiquitous text worked in Basquiat’s favor, as well. These techniques allowed the viewer to trace the artist’s hand and decipher the historically and socially relevant concepts in works like Hollywood Africans. Arousing the viewer’s intellect with seemingly naive imagery was a major selling point because it was a refreshing departure from the monotony of 1970s minimalism and because it gave collectors an opportunity to gaze at the taboo subjects they “feared.”

As with Basquiat, critics found “cultural cannibalism” and controversy to be the center of Schnabel’s work. He made use of art history to explore the “emotional quality” of historic

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135 The Business of Being an Artist, VHS. Marcia Tucker (1940-2006), the founder of the New Museum, New York made this statement while commenting on the absurdity and exaggeration of media hype.
136 Danto, 43.
137 Ibid 43.
138 Moss, 18-20.
139 The Business of Being an Artist, VHS. The film alludes to graffiti as an art form that elite collectors feared, and therefore, loved to procure.
140 Moss, 418.
figures, architectural spaces, and mediums. A number of his paintings, for example, were heavily painted pieces of velvet. Danto argues that attacking such a lavish material equated to the “crass” nuances that belied the art world’s bourgeois facade. Much like Basquiat, his work was embedded with a message that responded to his immediate surroundings. Schnabel’s efforts to appease (and criticize) the masses succeeded in attracting the attention of critics. In response to one of Schnabel’s shows, Danto said “it was difficult to imagine a more amiable show; the paintings are so anxious to please that it is as thought they are wagging their tails.” This proves that artists strategically employed aspects of a dominant style and used media hype to become “art stars.”

Because Basquiat’s entry into the legitimate art world fell under circumstances similar to Schnabel, competition between the two was naturally palpable. They were the only two artists interviewed for the short documentary, *Young Expressionists* in 1983. Basquiat then joined the Mary Boone Gallery in 1984, where Schnabel had already been represented for four years. Although they were well acquainted, Basquiat did not hesitate to promote his artistic skill at his competitor’s expense; he drew a portrait of Julian Schnabel as a crowned pig (Figure 3.9).

Despite his ability to compete with Schnabel’s celebrity status, navigating the art market grew difficult for Basquiat as the eighties progressed. The relationship with his dealer, Annina Nosci began to unravel in 1982. After failed attempts to secure another, he publically professed that maintaining good relationships with his dealers was as difficult as with his girlfriends. Basquiat was notorious among gallerists for his mercurial outbursts. He only spent two years

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141 Moss, 21.
142 Danto, 44.
143 Ibid.
144 Marenzi, 36.
with the Mary Boone Gallery (1984-1986), and had other short stints with galleries nationally and internationally throughout the rest of his career.

These troubled relationships contributed to the bleak outlook his contemporaries had of the art world; David Hammons said, “once an artist walks into gallery, he has lost control.” Benny Andrews agreed that art dealers control the development and promotion of the avant-garde. Artists from other backgrounds, especially those in their youth, echoed these concerns. They felt ill-prepared to manage the business side of their profession. From this we can gather that artists entering the legitimate art world were expected to go through some trial and error. They were also expected to manage the critiques of ambitious dealers and bargain with eager collectors. If they could negotiate with the market well enough, they could garner enough hype and rise to the status of Julian Schnabel.

Artists of the 80s, particularly Schnabel and Basquiat, benefitted from being “hyped-up.” Narration in The Business of Being an Artist referred to it as “a disease in the art world [that was] getting worse.” Some were outraged that Schnabel, then a young artist, had one of his paintings sell at auction for $85,000. They argued that the inflated price was due to unwarranted promotion in the media. Mary Boone rebutted by saying that hype was an indication and validation of the success Schnabel had already achieved. Artists are only featured in popular media after they gain a certain level of recognition within the art world. This can certainly be applied to Basquiat. Because he was legitimised in the art world through associations with major galleries, collectors, and critics, his images continue to appear in popular media.148

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145 The Business of Being an Artist, VHS.
146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 The proliferation of Basquiat’s images and “aura” in popular media will be discussed in the following chapter.
Before attempting to perfect the art of negotiating within the legitimate art world, Basquiat perfected the art of self-promotion. Since his days as a street artist, he deliberately tagged SAMO© and encrypted messages on public spaces where gallerists and collectors in New York made the most traffic (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). I propose he did so for two reasons. Primarily, the content of the work targeted the art world’s exclusivity. Second, he wanted to be famous. As one could guess, his guerilla graffiti tactic worked.

Advertising himself through street art and looking to Julian Schnabel were not his only avenues to fame. He also made use of New York’s night scene, as well. His daily attendance at the Mudd Club allowed him to secure a number of professional connections, and use that party scene as his “calling card.” The Mudd Club was his connection to the curator of P.S. 1’s “New York/New Wave” show, Diego Cortez. Cortez was also the individual who encouraged the international art dealer Henry Geldzahler to collect Basquiat’s work. And, that exhibition was also his connection to his first New York-based dealer, Annina Nosei. In 1979, Basquiat collaborated with five other men at the club to form the noise band, Test Pattern, later called Gray. This band was yet another medium for Basquiat’s “aura” to reach the masses.\(^{149}\)

His appeal went beyond street art and cacophonic sounds; his taste in friends also added to his persona. The Business of Being an Artist tells us that serious artists maintain a network of “artist-friends.” One dealer remarked that he respected the opinions of good artists and would often take their recommendations as to what new work he should see.\(^{150}\) According to the Radiant Child Basquiat was part of the downtown crowd, a group of approximately 500 visual artists, musicians, writers, dancers trying to make it big in New York.\(^{151}\) Reminders of his

\(^{149}\) Sirmans, 236-37.
\(^{150}\) The Business of Being an Artist, VHS.
platonic and romantic relationships can be found in a number of photographs. He and the popular singer, then Mudd Club dancer, Madonna were involved for some time (Figure 3.10). He was involved with Keith Haring, the subway graffiti artist, as well (Figure 3.11). His most important friend was Andy Warhol. The editor of Interview magazine Paige Powell introduced the two in 1983. She was also Basquiat’s girlfriend at the time. Building a personal and professional relationship with Warhol, the founder of Interview magazine, was another turning point in Basquiat’s career. His excitement about the new relationship materialized in the form of the portrait of both artists called Dos Cabezas (Figure 3.12).

Basquiat situated himself with the ‘in’ crowd and his “diva personality” helped him maintain an aura that merited hype. As previously discussed, his professional entourage was predominantly white, and that caused friction with some black artists. His conflicted sexuality and the common knowledge that he was “constantly fucking white women” was also a point of contention for some black artists. It seems that O’Grady and others were concerned that this “aura” would make him more of a spectacle than a serious artist. It could be argued that twenty years after the Civil Rights Movement, Basquiat was emulating the men he idolized. Like Jack Johnson, he was a renegade in that he defied many expectations for black men, including dating white women (Figure 3.13). Basquiat’s aura and his different lifestyle was defined by a variety of status symbols: money, drugs, and romantic affairs.

The strength of the gallery system influenced his aura as well as the ambitions of major museums. One of the most defining moments in Basquiat’s career was his participation in the

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152 Sirmans, 236. Rene Ricard’s Radiant Child also referenced Basquiat’s bisexuality. The title of the Artforum piece was actually influenced by Haring’s iconic image of a crawling baby with rays of light emanating from its body (Vendryes, 90).
153 Marenzi, 184.
1983 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He was the youngest artist to participate in this survey of contemporary American art. Due to the current nature of the show, the museum looked to commercial galleries for the most promising artists, including Basquiat. The museum was a non-profit entity, but their interpretation and promotion of his work significantly affected its market value. Basquiat’s Skull (1983) sold for $4000 in 1983, but the year after the Biennial it was auctioned at Christie’s for $19,000 (Figure 3.14).155

The Whitney Museum also recognized Julian Schnabel’s accomplishments with a mid-career retrospective.156 Author Alison Pearlman argues that exhibiting a fad (i.e.: Basquiat and Schnabel) was evidence of a much broader trend; museums were now looking to the “whims of the marketplace” to attract more visitors to their shows.157 Museums were traditionally perceived as alternatives to the art market because they promoted masters who only earned the right to experiment after years of academic training. Curatorial work seemed to be moving away from scholarly pursuits and gravitating toward galleries to find the next “hot” artist. Critics who still subscribed to this belief protested the recognition of Basquiat’s and Schnabel’s works at the major New York museum because their inclusion seemed to be about marketability of popular culture rather than skill or merit.158

Criticism of Basquiat’s career, both good and bad, contributed to his celebrity. Former editor of Artforum International Ingrid Sischy stated that the primary purpose of criticism was to reveal contemporary art; hype is only a byproduct of that art criticism.159 The inclusion of Basquiat’s artwork so frequently in museums and galleries exposed it to a large audience and

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155 Marenzi, 185.
157 Ibid.
158 Pearlman, 12.
159 The Business of Being an Artist, VHS.
facilitated his conversation with the media. This was not the norm for black artists. Basquiat was not on the periphery because his aura brought him to the mainstream. Since his days as SAMO©, Basquiat demonstrated his ability to attract media publications. Tagging walls in SoHo was no accident—that is where the new galleries were. Neither was his decision to make downtown Manhattan his permanent residence. As a regular at the Mudd Club, as a musician-art, and as a frequent dater, he formed relationships with influential people, celebrities, and professionals. He was, as Alison Pearlman says, “a culturally versatile opportunist.” At the same time, he made explicit attempts to understand the business side of his profession, namely by looking to Boone’s “Schnabel Phenomenon.” In doing so, he redefined the standards for the black artist and established for himself the aura of a legend.

\[160\] Pearlman, 12.
IV. The Legacy

Basquiat’s work, actions, and entourage constantly defied expectations.\(^{161}\) His exceptional career proved he had the artistic skill and intellectual capacity to surpass many of his peers. He understood the stereotypes and racial codes of his day and, consequently, fashioned his work and public image to offset his “primitiveness.” Flaunting cash and painting in Italian designer suits were two ways he accomplished this (Figure 4.1).\(^{162}\) He chose not to follow in the footsteps of the older generation of black fine artists like Lorraine O’Grady, David Hammons, and Fred Wilson. Instead, he maintained relationships with his immediate contemporaries—graffiti artists—as well as celebrity artists and dealers. This balance of perceived whiteness and blackness confused some, but allowed Basquiat to build a brand and establish a reputation that evaded labeling from outsiders.

Some tried to situate Basquiat in the graffiti genre; others spoke of him as a primitive, wild child. Neither description is accurate. In 1982, Suzi Gablik published an article in *Art in America* that identified Basquiat as a contributor to the new “graffiti movement.” This statement was made well after he had dropped the SAMO© name; in fact, he declared the transition by writing “SAMO IS DEAD” throughout Manhattan as early as 1979. Gablik’s article was a failed attempt to define the new 80s art aesthetic.

Even though he was a street artist, Basquiat did not take the same approach to the art form as his contemporaries. Let us use John “Crash” Matos as an example. Crash fit the mold of the typical graffiti artist because he had an alias, or a tag name and because he made vibrantly colored, painterly markings (Figure 4.2). The latter was not a formal concern for Basquiat.

\(^{161}\) Pearlman, 73.
\(^{162}\) Pearlman, 85.
Instead he engaged his public audience with an eclectic grouping of words, a style greatly influenced by the Beat author William S. Burroughs’s cut-up technique, where words from disparate sources would come together to make something “profoundly profound” (Figures 4.3 and 4.4).\textsuperscript{163}

The difference between Basquiat and his graffiti contemporaries can further be measured in the collective transition of the graffiti art movement from the streets to galleries. Like Basquiat, Crash also made the transition into the commercial art world, but his status did not rise to that of Basquiat. In a review of Crash’s 1984 show at the Sidney Janis gallery, art critic Arthur C. Danto said that the work did not present itself well against white walls. Part of its appeal was lost because it was removed from its original space. The lure of graffiti is partly due to the illicit act and the space inherent to its creation. By removing the illicit and anonymous aspects of the image, part of its appeal is lost. In response to Crash’s show, Danto asserted that “energy alone can only carry you so far.”\textsuperscript{164} Basquiat’s work, on the contrary, had the energy and content to be sustained in the pristine, formal setting of a commercial gallery.

Scholar Alison Pearlman contends that Basquiat believed that avoiding singularization, or stereotyping, was more important than directly communicating his thoughts.\textsuperscript{165} His temperamental disposition when dealing with dealers and critics proved he was not a passive artist; Henry Geldzahler, former critic and curator for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said Basquiat was “both charming and disdainful.”\textsuperscript{166} Basquiat fashioned an identity that demanded attention. His assertive, yet culturally equivocal personality helped make underground movements relevant and transformed how black artists were accepted into popular circles.

\textsuperscript{163} Tamra Davis, \textit{Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child}, DVD (2010; USA: Arthouse Films). William S. Burroughs was one of his favorite authors.
\textsuperscript{164} Danto, 28-30.
\textsuperscript{165} Pearlman, 82.
\textsuperscript{166} McGuigan, 24.
Despite obvious financial success, his personal life suffered. His long-time friend Freddy Braithwaite said,

The unfortunate thing was once you did figure out how to get into the art world, it was like, well, shit where am I? You’ve pulled off this amazing feat, you’ve waltzed your way right into the thick of it…but once you got in you were standing around wondering where you were.\textsuperscript{167}

Although he negotiated his way into a vibrant, commercial system, he could not stand the pressures of the business. Friends recall that fame, money, and eventual drug abuse changed him. His addiction eventually led to an overdose of heroin and cocaine that took his life in the summer of 1988.\textsuperscript{168} His father was upset that none of his son’s “friends” had told him about the severity of the drug habit, but media sources, both pre- and post-mortem, referred to it as Basquiat’s most frequent coping method.\textsuperscript{169}

His “friendships” in the business were often motivated by monetary transactions, oftentimes making them exploitative. This was the danger that some of his black contemporaries predicted. Artist David Hammons echoed Lorraine O’Grady’s premonitions when he said that Basquiat “had no one to watch his back,” he should have been more in tune with the older generation of black artists that were familiar with the woes of the art world.\textsuperscript{170} His graffiti contemporaries were just as new to the field as he was, so the concerns Hammons and O’Grady expressed were legitimate. In realizing that others did not always have his best interests in mind, Basquiat took measures to amend the circumstances. For instance, he stopped giving away paintings to “friends” since they were selling them for profit. Even Al Diaz, his SAMO collaborator, sold a painting Basquiat had given to him.\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{167} Hooks, 43.
\textsuperscript{168} Sirmans, 249.
\textsuperscript{169} Wines, 9-14.
While worrying friends with his excessive drug habit, he made work that foreshadowed his death. Between 1986 and 1988, Basquiat had one solo show in New York; his only solo show in 1987 took place in Paris.\textsuperscript{172} Some say that his public presence, or his aura, was fading by the late 80s.\textsuperscript{173} His drug habit and strained relationships in and outside the art world likely contributed to the significant drop in showings and public appearances.

Harsh criticism from the press tested his relationships. Critics attacked the collaborative paintings he did with Warhol in 1985. Arranged by Bruno Bischofberger to premier at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York, these collaborations fed the public suspicion that Warhol was using Basquiat to maintain his relevance in the art world. This was mainly because Warhol was thirty-three years older than Basquiat, and by the 80s, he was regarded as passé. Art dealer Ivan Karp said in an interview published in 1979 that “Warhol’s work is now diminishing in importance.”\textsuperscript{174} Their racial differences contributed to the perception of a patriarchal relationship, as well.

Scholar Margaret Vendryes claims that critics rejected the collaborations because it was a “clash between the generations.”\textsuperscript{175} A younger generation of artists was building upon, and essentially replacing, the pop aesthetic of the sixties. Pearlman said that “opinions about the Warhol-Basquiat partnership run the gamut from warm father-son intimacy to mutual exploitation for professional gain. In the end, it was probably all of the above, for, like Warhol, Basquiat wanted more than the prerequisite fifteen minutes of fame.”

\textsuperscript{172} Sirmans, 248.
\textsuperscript{175} Vandryes, 68.
To Warhol, Basquiat was a manifestation of perfection. The famed Pop artist made a silkscreen image of the young Basquiat in the guise of a semi-nude Roman god (Figure 4.2). Warhol believed that when making portraits, one should “always omit the blemishes—they’re not part of the good picture you want.” The homo-erotic, black-and-white silkscreen image of Basquiat makes references to the idealized forms sculpted in antiquity. Critic and curator Robert Storr suggests that Warhol saw Basquiat as a reflection of himself, making the portrait of Basquiat a mirror. He took on a paternal role, hoping to help bring Basquiat to reach his full potential, as envisioned in the silkscreen print. Warhol did have a positive influence on the young artist. Many attested to an increase in Basquiat’s healthy habits when their relationship burgeoned in 1984. Basquiat even said that because of Warhol, “I wear clean pants all the time now.”

When Andy Warhol died in 1987, Basquiat’s self-destructive behavior could no longer be tamed. Warhol’s death left him without an anchor. This was especially difficult for Basquiat because Warhol was the only one who could call him out on his bad habits. Storr mentions that the relationship between these two artists was the last fruitful one for each of them, so it is no surprise that Basquiat’s life spiraled downward after Warhol’s passing.

His reintroduction to the art world in 1988 was marked by a solo show at Vrej Baghoomian’s gallery in New York. The work at this exhibition reflected the state to which Basquiat was relegated in the final years of his life. The work was morbid and certainly reflected

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177 Warhol, 62.
178 Storr, xxxv.
179 McGuigan, 35.
181 Storr, xxxv.
the reclusive life he was leading. In his last eighteen months alive he withdrew from those around him and found solace in a perpetually intoxicated state.

His last works, which were exhibited for one night in April 1988 at Baghoomian, included *Eroica I, Eroica II, The Dingoes that Park Their Brains with their Brains with their Gum*, and *Riding with Death* (Figures 4.3-4.6). These works all explicitly referenced symbols of death. Friends of the artist say he was still grieving from Warhol’s death and was deeply involved in a losing battle with drugs. He was so downtrodden and afraid of the press’s backlash that he wanted to cancel the exhibition. Gallerist Larry Gagosian said that the work was “stark... spacious and reduced;” he was creating late work at the age of twenty-seven.182

Eroica is the Italian word for heroic, and aptly fits as the title of Basquiat’s paintings at this late stage in his life. The word appears thirteen times in *Eroica I.* “MAN DIES” also appears several times, both as an international symbol and as text in the English language. Repetition of these terms suggests that they are the most relevant on the canvas.

The *Eroica* paintings repeat “MAN DIES” and the symbol for the phrase as listed in Henry Dreyfuss’ *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols.* The symbol for “MAN DIES” is a vertical line with its bottom diverging into three lines, like a chicken foot. Basquiat owned this book and frequently applied its symbols to encode messages in his paintings.183 The tense of the phrase implies that death is a process. By communicating the process of dying in a universal code, he asserts that everyone should be aware of the event.

Escaping to distant locations may have been his way of slowing down the dying process.184 Recognizing his problems, he traveled extensively to separate himself from the

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184 Marenzi, 188.
temptations of New York. Where heroine was so immediately accessible. He said, “I gotta get out of New York; I hate it.” One of his favorite locations was Maui, Hawaii; he stayed on the island until a few weeks before his death.

Basquiat’s fascination with celebrity and death was evident in a number of his paintings. He idolized Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, two talented artists who also died at the age of 27 due to drug overdoses. Basquiat once said “Since I was seventeen, I thought I might be a star. I’d think about all my heroes… I had a romantic feeling of how people had become famous.” This romanticism existed as a mix of talent, adversity, public admiration, the numbing effects of narcotics, and eventually a widely publicized death. The romantic interpretation leads to a perception of all of these public figures as heroic individuals.

“MAN DIES,” the symbol and the written word, appears multiple times in *Eroica II*. It seems as if the focus shifts from the romantic to the doomng fate of the heroic. Basquiat writes a list of objects and people that could contribute to the suffering and eventual death of an icon. He identifies marijuana, balls and testicles, women, narcotics, sex, and skin in the painting. The choice of words is just as interesting as the words he pairs together. BALL CHAIN is paired with WIFE; BALLS is paired with TESTICLES; BALE OF STRAW with WHITE BLONDE FEMALE; BANANA with BLACK FEMALE; BANG with NARCOTICS OR SEX; BANK with TOILET; BARK with HUMAN SKIN.

The first word of each pair is an object or a sound, and each acts as a symbol for the words following it. Therefore, BALL CHAIN is a symbol for WIFE; BALLS for TESTICLES; STRAW for WHITE BLONDE FEMALE; BANANA for BLACK FEMALE; BANG for NARCOTICS OR SEX; BANK for TOILET; and BARK for HUMAN SKIN. It seems that

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185 Wines, 14.
186 Sirmans, 235.
Basquiat was illustrating an encyclopedia of symbols in the way Dreyfuss did in 1972. Some of the associations are not as clear as others; take BARK as HUMAN SKIN and BANK as TOILET for example. BARK as HUMAN SKIN brings to mind the concepts covered in *Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari*. The dark, external covering of a tree (BARK) is comparable to Basquiat’s exterior, or dark HUMAN SKIN. This lapse in BANK and TOILET could be the result of his excessive drug use. It may refer to the money he wasted on drugs, clothing, partying, and “friends” that only stuck around for exploitive reasons. The associative leap also calls to William S. Burrough’s cut-up technique, once again. Lastly, these extended metaphors could be compared to the freestyle technique of rapping, where emcees spontaneously verbalize a stream of consciousness to a rhythm. Both the cut-up and freestyle techniques provide the artist with a means to express his personal struggles without inhibition.

Many of his closer friends admitted that Basquiat was very lonely toward the end of his life. His long-time girlfriend Suzanne Mallouk said that he was paranoid around his new friends, so he made attempts to reconnect with people who knew him before his big break. The former art dealer, Jeffrey Deitch, recalls seeing Basquiat sitting alone at a bar on New Year’s Eve; that was the last time he saw the artist and that image haunts him to this day. Julian Schnabel echoed Deitch when he said “people were using him and that really fucked him up...he didn’t have the tools to navigate the sea of shit.”\(^{187}\) It is unsettling that Basquiat abused drugs to evade the pressure and exploitation, but the truth is that these methods romanticized his identity and created a legend akin to the figures he often illustrated.

Storr said that the era in which Basquiat died was about mythmaking. In the years surrounding Basquiat’s death, Keith Haring, Jimmy de Sana, Greer Lankton, Michael Stewart,

and David Wojnarowicz were just a few of the controversial artists whose legacy was partially created by a highly publicized death. They all achieved celebrity status.

The idea of dying a heroic death appealed to Basquiat so using icons of death in his last paintings was appropriate. The painting *The Dingoes that Park their Brains with their Gum* illustrates a group of cartoonish figures against a blue backdrop. As Gagosian noted, *The Dingoes* is characteristic of a late painting because the composition is so open. The number of words has also been reduced, tersely communicating the process of preserving dead bodies. The words “KEEP FROZEN” and “FREYTAG” are clear references to embalming cadavers. The humanoid figures have an animalistic and assertive look; they could be the undertakers of the operation. The figure at the far right looks strikingly similar to the Vodou god of the dead, or “caballero of death,” Baron Samedi. Baron Samedi is usually identified by his skeletal figure, top hat, and tuxedo (Figure 4.9). He is indeed dressed for burial as Basquiat places him above roaring flames and “ASHES.”

The artist’s contemplations of death are visible in *The Dingoes* but are even more explicit with the next image, *Riding with Death*. We can assume that the crawling skeleton is a metaphor for death and the brown figure can be a stand-in for the artist himself. In a 1985 interview, Basquiat solemnly stated that he had a love-hate relationship with the fame. Even though he was aware of historic precedents, such as Joe Louis, he did attempt to stay away from the limelight at times: “I try to be a little reclusive…and not be out there…just to be brought up and be brought down, you know, like they do to most of them.” Even though the “in” crowd could elevate his status, he saw first-hand how greed and exploitation go hand-in-hand. In regard to dealers, he

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188 *Sorrell, xxv.*
189 *Jones, 177.*
said "they’re all mercenaries trying to make as much money as they can, as fast as they can." 191 His decision to remain in the midst of this exploitive environment was narcissistic, but it surely laid the groundwork for later generations of "Hollywood Africans."

Although artist and critic Lorraine O’Grady represented a generation of artists that did not agree with Basquiat’s decisions, she did agree that "black people [would] monumentalize him." 192 In recent years, Basquiat’s image has resurfaced and proliferated in popular culture. Clothing designers have looked to his canvases for inspiration, and Reebok has created several lines of athletic footwear that bears his likeness. His impact on contemporary black culture is just as palpable. His images and ideas continue to inform the work of the top musicians, one of them being the rapper and entrepreneur, Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter.

In 2010, Carter released a memoir Decoded, which dedicates a chapter to Jean-Michel Basquiat: “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Star.” It begins with a comparison of the artists and speaks to the Brooklyn environment with which they were both familiar. Carter discussed his reaction to Charles the First, a Basquiat painting he now owns (Figure 4.10). Upon reading the text in the bottom right corner of the painting ("MOST YOUNG-KINGS GET THEIR HEAD CUT OFF.")}, he realized that the painting had many layers; it was not just about the execution of the seventeenth-century English monarch, but the universally fatal trials associated with prominence. This realization inspired Carter’s song, "Most Kings." The songs assess the dichotomy between celebrity and strife, hegemony and commodification. The lyrics to the tune are juxtaposed against a copy of the painting in the publication. 193 An excerpt reads:

Inspired by Basquiat, my chariots of fire/ Everybody took shots hit my body up I’m tired/ Build me up, break me down, to build me up again...See Jesus, see Judas/ See Caesar, see Brutus/ See success is like suicide/ Suicide, it’s a suicide/ If you succeed prepare to

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192 O’Grady, 12.
be crucified...Everybody want to be the king till shots ring/ You laying on the balcony
with holes in your dream/Or you Malcolm Xed out getting distracted by screams.\(^{194}\)

Jay-Z's lyrics to the earlier song “Lost One” (2006) also reflect the concept that Basquiat
explored in *Charles the First*; it is about his rise to fame as a rap artist in the nineties and early
two-thousands: “And I ain’t even know how it came to this/Except that fame is/The worst drug
known to man/It’s stronger than/heroin/When you could look in the mirror like/ “There I am”/
And still not see, what you’ve become/ I know I’m guilty of it too but, not like them/ You lost
one.” The chorus goes on to say “Lose one, let go to get one/ Left one, lose some you win some/
Story of a champion, sorry I’m a champion/ You lost one.”

Artists are looking to his example as a means to map out their success and avoid the
pitfalls of fame. Although Carter sympathizes with the troubles of being a Hollywood African
himself, he does not think the great fall (i.e.: death) should be the outcome. He said that *Charles
the First* sits on his wall as a warning; his goal is to “rewrite the old script.”\(^{195}\) Like Basquiat,
contemporary artists are expanding their repertoire and crossing unfamiliar boundaries. They
look to his work, as if they were instruction manuals, to redefine the qualities necessary for
creating a lasting legacy.

Rap lyrics function similarly to Basquiat’s paintings because both communicate
messages/stories that are sometimes confrontational in their allusions to the condition and history
of being human. As one of the few minorities of the downtown scene along with Basquiat, Fab 5
Freddy knew first-hand how “overt racism...[and] occasional ignorance” shaped their
experiences and artwork. Basquiat fused into his work these feelings about being a black man,
and a black artist, making his work racially motivated and sociopolitical.\(^{196}\)

\(^{194}\) Jay-Z, 98-100.
\(^{195}\) Jay-Z, 95.
\(^{196}\) Deitch, 118.
At a 2007 Basquiat exhibition, Jay-Z told Fab 5 Freddy how much he appreciated Basquiat’s work and that he had acquired a piece. Fab 5 Freddy said in response that “Jean would’ve loved Jay’s music.”197 Jay-Z’s eventual sampling of Basquiat’s words in his lyrics brings the conversation between the fine artist and a musical tradition full circle. While Basquiat was alive, it was common knowledge that there were not many black people in the downtown art scene. What perplexed Basquiat and Fab 5 Freddy was that the older generation didn’t seem to be as receptive to their work as they had hoped. Fab 5 Freddy said, “another thing I’d like to point out—an unfortunate aspect of the art world at the time—was there were no blacks buying the work. I can remember Jean and I sitting around talking about this and we were like, ‘well who’s out there? What can we do to make some wealthy black folks aware of what’s going on with our work.’”198 His statement echoes the generational gap that Hammons and O’Grady referred to earlier. It also provides a point of reference to see how black artists have perceived and embraced Basquiat in the last thirty-five years.

Basquiat’s dialog with Hip-Hop has been evident since its inception. He befriended the Bronx-native Fab 5 Freddy, worked alongside Rammellzee, and was even featured in one of the first major music videos influenced by Hip Hop (Figure 4.11).199 His impact has reached contemporary culture, as well. Hip Hop artists collect his work and used his aura to launch their own enterprises. Reebok, an athletic brand that has lost its lure among the masses in recent years, has collaborated with these Hip Hop entrepreneurs to launch Reestyle Collective, an effort that “conceives and produces a wide range of creative content in the realms of dance, music, art and

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197 Deitch, 118.
198 Ibid.
style.” (Figure 4.12) Their curator is the well known producer Kasseem “Swizz Beatz” Dean whose Grammy-winning record “On to the Next One” (2010) actually featured Jay-Z. Swizz Beatz’s push to have Basquiat at the forefront Reestyle Collective, set to premiere in the fall of 2011, will revitalize Reebok from its dormant existence and make the artist more a vernacular phenomenon. Basquiat’s relevance, in turn, will be associated with Hip Hop moguls (Figure 4.13).

The sale of his images and “aura” to promote Hip-Hop should make us reflect on a concern Rene Ricard raised in Radiant Child; he said that “every fad became an institution.” Although this statement was made in regards to the rise of graffiti in the seventies, it can apply to the resurgence of Basquiat’s paintings to authenticate/legitimize the endeavors of the celebrities who use them. In the fall of 2010, Swizz Beatz launched Basquiat Music, an online venue through which he would release one song that he produced every Monday, free of charge. Given the title of the website, the beats and lyrics were presumably inspired by Jean-Michel Basquiat (Figure 4.14). The website underwent a name change (Basquiat Music and the signature crown was removed from the site, leaving only Monster Mondays as the heading), but the music remains available for free download. The uncomplicated site quickly grew into a more elaborate enterprise when Swizz Beatz released swizzworld.com, a virtual database for the most contemporary art and cultural products. Basquiat’s image appears on the homepage and is listed as the first of eight muses on the “Inspiration” module (Figure 4.15).

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201 Ricard, 35.
This site still connects viewers to Monster Mondays tracks, but instead of being produced by Swizz Beatz, they are **curated** by him. His incorporation of art into the contemporary Hip Hop arena brings Basquiat’s aura back into the context in which it emerged, an environment textured by poetry and music. This dialog with Hip Hop, however, takes on a different spin when contemporary artists or companies use his “aura” for monetary gain. Part of Reestyle Collective initiative is a sneaker called the “Basquiat x Reebok Pump Omi Lite” (Figure 4.16). The athletic shoe comes in a variety of styles and colors. Each also features an image by or of Basquiat, and a prominent inscription, which reads “I AM BASQUIAT.” These sneakers are intended to complete the attire of a present day Hip Hop aesthetician, much like P-Z did for Basquiat in the 80s (Figure 2.9). This partnership should make us think about the dynamic between fame and commodification. Is this kind of commodification viable if it makes art accessible to anyone that can afford apparel screen printed with Basquiat’s images and silhouettes?

The transfer of image from canvas to mass produced books and footwear will indelibly make Basquiat a more relevant contemporary phenomenon, given that the products sell. Basquiat said to the entertainer, Madonna Louise Ciccone, that he envied her ability to reach the masses through her music.\(^{202}\) He did not like the exclusivity of the art world, especially since he was one of the few minorities in the mix. The music industry was not like the art world where only the elite could appreciate and own innovative work. This statement from the artist would have us believe that Basquiat would want to have his work distributed among the masses, even in the form of apparel. However, paintings like *Obnoxious Liberals* explicitly tells the viewer that his black body is “NOT FOR SALE” (Figure 4.17).

This should bring us back to the concept behind the painting *Native*, which lays out a comparison between the motives and actions of proprietors (Figure 2.1). Are individuals pursuing these enterprises doing so solely to exploit Basquiat’s aura? Interviews with Jay-Z and Swizz Beatz give some insight. Swizz Beatz said his partnership with Reebok was about “reintroducing the brand in a way that’s classic.” Reebok was a staple of Hip Hop fashion in the 80s and early 90s; it has remained a symbol of that bygone era. Reestyle Collective hopes to revive Reebok’s credibility while integrating the iconic art specific to the period in which the company thrived. For Swizz Beatz, it is also about challenging himself to expand beyond music, and excel as a visual artist and a fashion-forward celebrity. The fact that Swizz Beatz has a tattoo of Basquiat’s face on his wrist shows his commitment to the artist’s aura. But it also promotes his brand and aura among pop culture fiends (Figure 4.18).

Reebok released an interview called “Swizz Beatz: Sounds Off” in which the producer, now visual artist and designer, said “when I start to make music, art, fashion, I think about making history... Make a classic and the rest will follow.” It seems as if he is attempting to achieve the same aura Basquiat created for himself. Swizz said that he chooses projects “based on the growth [he] can have with that company.” This “growth” is undoubtedly, if not partially, measured in dollars.

The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat “owns the international copyright to all artwork created by Jean-Michel Basquiat, regardless of who owns the specific works of art. Anyone wishing to reproduce Basquiat’s artwork in editorial, advertising or other commercial ways such as licensed merchandise” must contact the estate’s licensing agency.203 Based on this stipulation,

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203 “Frequently Asked Questions: Who can I contact regarding rights and reproductions of artwork by Jean-Michel Basquiat?” Jean-Michel Basquiat, accessed April 1, 2011, last modified 2011, [http://basquiat.com/faq.htm](http://basquiat.com/faq.htm). This information was taken from the website for the Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. The artist’s father, Gerard Basquiat,
it can be assumed that Jay-Z, Reebok, and Swizz Beatz have been permitted to appropriate images for their ventures and they must be paying royalties to the Estate. Julian Schnabel did not receive permission from the Estate to make his film *Basquiat*, and had to make his own versions of Basquiat’s paintings for the project. But Tamra Davis did receive permission for her 2010 documentary, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child* (2010). Schnabel’s film has been widely influential in shaping how the world sees the New York artist, but that perception has and will continue to change now that the new documentary is available. Swizz Beatz and Reebok clearly intend to make an impact as great as the biographical films and retrospective exhibitions. The potential is there, especially if they transform Basquiat’s work and aura into a product of mass consumption.

The commodification of the artist’s “aura” allows a broader audience to see how he contributed to major cultural movements of the 20th and 21st century. Doing so also runs the risk of overlooking what Basquiat ardently queried—the game of commercial exploitation. He spent much of his prosperous, albeit short, career grappling with the concept and the practice of commodification. In collaborating with great minds while he was alive, Basquiat created an aura that could be sustained though high- and low-end retail. Merchandising his work has also been a lucrative endeavor in the twenty-three years since his death, proving that the dynamic between “poachers” and “Hollywood Africans” is still worth examining.
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CHRONOLOGY


JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

1960

- Born on December 22 at Brooklyn Hospital, New York to Gerard Basquiat, an accountant, and Matilde Andradas. The Basquiat family lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

1964

- Basquiat begins to show interest in art by drawing on paper his father brings home from work.

1965

- Basquiat's mother begins to instill in him a love for art and education. She brings him to museums across New York, including the Brooklyn Museum, the MoMA, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

1967

- The Basquiat family moves to East Flatbush, Brooklyn.

1968

- Basquiat suffers injuries after being hit by a car. He is hospitalized at Kings County Hospital for one month; Matilde gives him a copy of Gray's Anatomy to occupy his time. This book inspires his later drawings and his band, Gray.
- Gerard and Matilde separate. Jean-Michel and his sisters, Lisane and Jeanine, stay with their father in East Flatbush.

1974

- Gerard Basquiat is offered a job promotion in Mira Mar, Puerto Rico. Jean-Michel moves there with his father and two sisters; he attends an Episcopalian School on the island. A year later, he flees home and hides at a local radio station.

1976

- The Basquiat family returns to Brooklyn, New York. Soon after his arrival, Jean-Michel transfers from the Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn to the City-as-School alternative education program in Manhattan. The school gives internships to students who cannot go through the traditional school system. There, Basquiat meets the graffiti artist Al Diaz.
- Basquiat runs away from home. He stays in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. His father makes him return home after two weeks.
1977

- Basquiat and Al Diaz collaborate on the SAMO ("Same Old Shit") graffiti tag name. Both tagged sayings of this an alternative religion on D train and around downtown Manhattan. The writings promoted “SAMO as an end to mindwash religion, nowhere politics, and bogus philosophy.”

1978

- Jean-Michel Basquiat leaves home for good. Gerard gives his blessing by giving his son money. Jean-Michel lives with friends, including the artist Stan Peskett. Peskett invites graffiti artists and musicians to his parties and through these events, Basquiat meets Fred Braithwaite (Fab 5 Freddy) and Lee Quinones. He also meets Michael Holman, a future member of Gray.
- He earns money by selling painted postcards and t-shirts. He sells a postcard to the dealer, Henry Geldzahler after spotting him in a New York City restaurant with Andy Warhol.
- He lives with girlfriend, Alexis Adler in a friend’s apartment.
- Basquiat becomes a fixture in downtown clubs: the Mudd Club, Club 57, Hurrah’s, etc. David Byrne, Blondie, Madonna and Diego Cortez were among the other filmmakers, musicians and artists that created this downtown crowd.
- Hip-hop culture (rap, DJ-ing, graffiti, break-dancing) is cultivated in Bronx, New York. Fab 5 Freddy links Basquiat to this uptown scene. Through Fab 5 Freddy, Basquiat is formally introduced to Rammellzee.
- Philip Faflick writes “The SAMO Graffiti...Boosh Wah or CIA?” Village Voice, December 11, 1978. The article only identifies Jean-Michel and Al Diaz by their first names.

1979

- “SAMO is dead” appears on walls in the SoHo area.
- Julian Schnabel has his first two solo shows at the Mary Boone Gallery.
- Basquiat, Michael Holman, Shannon Dawsom, Vincent Gallo, Wayne Clifford, and Nick Taylor create the noise band Gray (first names Channel 9, then Test Pattern).
- He meets Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf at the School of Visual Arts. Haring and Basquiat have an on-again, off-again relationship for the rest of their lives.
- Fab 5 Freddy introduces Basquiat to Glenn O’Brien, and often appears on his show TV Party.

1980

- Basquiat participates in the group exhibition, “Times Square Show”
- Performs with Gray for the last time on August 3.
- Plays lead role in Glenn O’Brien’s film, New York Beat (Downtown 81). Basquiat uses the money from the film to pay for supplies. He uses the film production space to paint.

1981

- Moves into the apartment of his girlfriend, Suzanne Mallouk. The artist and singer would have her comments on the relationship included in a Widow Basquiat (2000), a book by Jennifer Clement.
- Basquiat participates in “New York /New Wave” group show at P.S. 1. Curated by Diego Cortez, the show brings Basquiat to the attention of Bruno Bischofberger, Emilio Mazzoli, and Annina Nosei.
- Exhibits in the “Beyond Words: Graffiti Based-Roots-Inspired Works” show at the Mudd Club. The show is organized by Fab 5 Freddy and Futura 2000.
- SAMO exhibits his first solo-show at Galleria d’Arte Emilio Mazzoli in Modena, Italy.
• Basquiat exhibits in the group show, “Public Address” at Annina Nosei’s eponymous gallery in New York. Basquiat’s works include policemen, rabbis, and Native Americans to complement the show’s sociopolitical theme.
• Annina Nosei becomes Basquiat’s dealer and she offers him the basement of her gallery as his studio space.
• Rene Ricard writes “The Radiant Child” for *Artforum International* to cover the rising Mudd Club artists.

1982

• Befriends the Barbadian artist, Shenge Kapharoah.
• His first solo show in the United States at the Annina Nosei Gallery gets great reviews.
• Exhibits in the group show “Transavanguardia: Italia/America” at the Galleria Civica del Comune in Modena, Italy. The show includes work by Italian and American artists including Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Francesco Clemente.
• Exhibits at the Larry Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles. Annina Nosei helps arrange the show. He visits Los Angeles several times a year from now on.
• At 21, Basquiat is the youngest artist in “Documenta 7,” an international exhibition in Germany. Works by Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol and Keith Haring were also shown.
• His first portfolio of prints, *Anatomy* is published by the Annina Nosei Gallery.
• Solo exhibition at the Galerie Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich. The first time his exposed corner cross bar paintings are shown.
• Bruno Bischofberger becomes his exclusive dealer in Europe.
• *Art in America* publishes “Report from New York: The Graffiti Question” and identifies Basquiat as a graffiti artist. By 1982, most of the graffiti artists were now exhibiting in alternative gallery spaces instead of clubs.
• Fall of 1982: Basquiat’s ties with Nosei dwindle.
• Solo Show at Patti Astor’s Fun Gallery, NY. Artwork in this show was arranged in a “messy” character to complement the crude aura of his work. This was a stark contrast to the clean and finished spaces that made Basquiat’s work “lose some of its originality.”
• He poses for the photographer, James Van Der Zee. The photograph was paired with Henry Geldzahler’s interview with Basquiat for *Interview* magazine. Basquiat also painted a portrait of Van Der Zee.
• Solo exhibition of paintings with crossbar corners at the Galerie Delta in Rotterdam.
• Exchanges paintings for food at Mr. Chow’s restaurant in Beverly Hills.
• Produces rap record with Fab 5 Freddy and Rammellzee, Toxic, and A-One. He also Dj’s at Manhattan clubs.

1983

• Solo show at the Annina Nosei Gallery.
• Solo Show at the Larry Gagosian Gallery, CA. Works include *Hollywood Africans* and *Jack Johnson*.
• Included in the Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.
• Starts dating Paige Powell, editor at *Interview*. Through Powell, Basquiat develops a relationship with the magazine’s publisher, Andy Warhol.
• Basquiat and friends travel to Jamaica for one week. He completes drawings there.
• Leases a building in New York from Andy Warhol. A relationship between the two artists burgeons.
• Basquiat is affected by the wrongful death of Michael Stewart, a young black graffiti artist. He was beat to death by New York City police. *It could have been me* -Basquiat
• Travels to Milan, Madrid, Zurich and Tokyo. Bruno Bischofberger arranges collaborative paintings with Warhol and Clemente.
• Spends time with Madonna in Los Angeles and rents a studio in Venice, CA.
• Issues with dealers escalate and Bischofberger becomes Basquiat’s only primary dealer.
• Travels to Maui, Hawaii. He sets up a studio in the town of Hana.

1984

• He joins the Mary Boone Gallery, NY. Boone and Bischofberger arrange joint exhibitions for Basquiat.
• Photograph taken of Warhol, Schnabel, Basquiat and Scharf at the Indochine restaurant, NY.
• His first solo show at Mary Boone gets mixed reviews.
• Included in the exhibition that marked the reopening of the MoMA, “An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture.”
• Untitled (Skull) sells for $19,000 at Christie’s. It was purchased for $4000 the previous year.
• His first museum show is a traveling exhibition that opens at The Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. It includes work created between 1981 and 1984.
• Collaborations with Warhol and Clemente are shown at Galerie Bruno Bischofberger.
• Though Basquiat’s acceptance within the smaller art community of people of color has not been very warm, he is included in the exhibition “Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of African American Art” at Center Gallery, Bucknell University in Pennsylvania.
• Becomes romantically involved with a New York club owner, Jennifer Goode.
• Basquiat has extreme paranoia. His friends become concerned about his excessive drug use.

1985

• Solo show at Galerie Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich.
• Basquiat’s second solo show at the Mary Boone Gallery. Robert Farris Thompson writes for the exhibition catalog. This is the first time Basquiat’s work is discussed in the Afro-Atlantic tradition.
• Basquiat creates two large-scale paintings for the Palladium club, NY.
• The Warhol and Basquiat collaborations are shown at the Tony Shafrazi gallery. Bad reviews challenge the relationship between the two artists.
• Solo show at Akira Ikeda gallery in Tokyo and Annina Nosei holds an exhibition of 1982 paintings.

1986

• Last show at the Larry Gagosian galley in Los Angeles.
• His only exhibition in the south is at Fay Gold Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia.
• Travels to the Abidjan, Ivory Coast for a show arranged by Bruno Bischofberger.
• Basquiat breaks ties with Mary Boone after two years of a strained partnership. Bischofberger tries to help Basquiat find another New York dealer.
• Exhibits paintings and drawings at the Kestner-Gesellschaft museum in Hanover. At 25, he is the youngest artist to have an exhibition there.
• Participating artist in Andre Heller’s Luna Luna, an art-filled amusement park in Hamburg.
• Jennifer Goode ends her relationship with Basquiat due to his drug abuse.

1987

• Solo show at Galerie Daniel Tempolin in Paris, France.
• Andy Warhol dies.
• Through exhibition of his drawings at Tony Shafrazi Gallery, Basquiat meets Vrej Baghoomian and he becomes his dealer.
• His friend and painter, Rick Prol becomes his assistant.

1988

• Exhibits paintings in New York for the first time in a year and a half. The show is one night at Baghoomian’s gallery in SoHo.
• Exhibits at the Galerie Yvone Lambert in Paris. Meets the West African painter, Ouattara.
• After a trip to his solo show at Galerie Hans Mayer in Dusseldorf, he returns to New York for a solo show at Baghoomian Gallery.
• He attempts to quit his drug habit by traveling to Dallas, Los Angeles, and Hawaii.
• On August 12, Basquiat dies in his loft at the age of 27 from “acute mixed drug intoxication.”
• On August 17, a private funeral is held at the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel, New York for family and close friends.
• On November 5, a larger funerary gathering is held at St. Peter’s Church, New York.
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