PERFORMING BLACKNESS AT THE HEART OF WHITENESS: THE LIFE AND ART OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

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ABSTRACT

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Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1960 to a Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother, Jean-Michel Basquiat rose to prominence as a painter in the 1980s art world. When he died in 1988 at age twenty-seven from a drug overdose, he had achieved more fame and wealth than any black artist in history; he remains today the world’s most recognizable black painter. This study seeks to show how Basquiat’s racial and cultural background shaped his life and art.

In its first three chapters, this study examines Basquiat’s experiences in New York City in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s in a variety of contexts including his neighborhoods, schools, the graffiti movement, avant-gardism, and the art world. This study finds that the artist’s blackness often made him racially hyper-visible and the target of racism and stereotyping. It also finds that of all the artistic traditions that Basquiat was exposed to and involved in, his experiences with performance art had the most enduring impact on him artistically.

In its final two chapters, this study looks at Basquiat’s public persona and art. Chapter Four covers the way the artist walked, talked, dressed, wore his hair, acted in interviews, posed for photographs, and behaved in public in general. Chapter Five considers not just at his art’s aesthetic but also at the way he painted, talked about his art, and acted as an artist. This study finds that throughout his career from 1981 to 1988, Basquiat brought to his canvases a hasty, unfinished, and chaotic look while intentionally cementing an image of himself as rude, rebellious, and difficult.

This paper argues that Basquiat’s wild behavior and equally wild-looking art represent a performance of “blackness.” The artist embodied in his paintings and public
persona the stereotypical image of the young black male in order to comment on and locate the casual racism and racially naïve attitudes of his predominantly white liberal audiences. Although several popular and academic discourses explain Basquiat’s life and art in terms of the modernist construct of tortured genius, this study challenges this romanticized version by offering a more grounded and materialist interpretation.
To Mom and Dad
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Background

The career of black American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960 – 1988) spanned the 1980s and the globe. Between 1981 and 1988, Basquiat participated in several high profile solo and group exhibitions in the United States, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Scotland, and elsewhere. In 1983 he became, at age twenty-one, the youngest artist ever to be included in the prestigious Whitney Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City. In 1985, he and Andy Warhol collaborated in a much-hyped and subsequently panned show at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York City. Basquiat’s publicity matched his productivity. In 1982, Basquiat appeared in Warhol’s Interview magazine along with a series of portraits done by the renowned Harlem Renaissance photographer, James Van Der Zee. On February 10, 1985, he landed on the cover of The New York Times Magazine under the title “New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American Artist.” As Basquiat’s fame rose, so did the price of his artwork. While his paintings were going for between $5,000 and $10,000 in 1981 (Hoban 83), by 1985, his work was being sold for $25,000 in galleries and for even higher prices at auctions (Frohne 441). Although Basquiat’s productivity, prices, and popularity dropped slightly after 1985, he continued to exhibit his work in the United States and around the world, namely the Ivory Coast, Germany and France, up until his death on August 12, 1988 at age
twenty-seven from a heroin overdose. In a relatively brief period of time, Basquiat became one of the most well-known and well-compensated painters of the 1980s.

Basquiat and his artwork have continued to attract attention and money posthumously. He has been the subject of several art retrospectives, the first of which took place in 1992 at the Whitney Museum. In 1996, the artist’s life was made into a major motion picture. The film, entitled *Basquiat*, was written and directed by fellow 1980s artist, Julian Schnabel, and the title role was played by Jeffrey Wright. 2001 saw the restoration and release of *Downtown 81*, originally shot but shelved as *New York Beat* in late 1980 due to financial difficulties. The film, written by Glen O’Brien and directed by Edo Bertoglio, stars Basquiat as “Jean,” a character based loosely on the artist’s own life. In addition to these films, Basquiat has been the subject of several books. 1993 saw the release of the children’s book, *Life Doesn’t Frighten Me*, which combines Basquiat’s art with the poetry of Maya Angelou. Phoebe Hoban’s 1998 unofficial biography of the artist, entitled *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*, became a national bestseller.

The artist’s popularity has extended into the realm of the unlikely as well. In 2005, Reebok released a line of Basquiat-inspired sneakers called “Reeboppers,” which contain reprints and designs of the late artist’s work. Not surprisingly, the prices of his art have continued to rise. On June 23, 2004, one of Basquiat’s untitled 1982 paintings sold at Sotheby’s for $4.5 million (Hoban 345), far surpassing the $255,500 that another one of his untitled 1982 works sold for at Christy’s in November 1997 (Hoban 329). Interest in Basquiat’s life and art has, therefore, continued and even increased in the years since his death.

Remaining constant and untouched over the past several years, however, are Basquiat’s accomplishments and standing as a black artist. Although Basquiat was certainly not the first black painter in art history nor was he the most skilled representationally, he was and continues
to be the wealthiest and most famous. Writing shortly after the artist’s death, African-American cultural critic Greg Tate pointed out that “When Basquiat died last year at the age of 27 of a heroin overdose, he was the most financially successful Black visual artist in history and, depending on whether you listened to his admirers or detractors, either a genius, an idiot savant, or an overblown, overpriced fraud” (233). Phoebe Hoban, writing in 2004, maintained that Basquiat is “for better or worse, the world’s most famous black artist” (14). Despite the existence of some ambivalence and mixed feelings about Basquiat’s status, there appears to be no argument that he was and is more successful and more recognized than any other black fine artist. This dissertation, therefore, examines how the racial background of the most controversial and divisive black painter in art history impacted and figured into his life and artwork.

In exploring the life and art of Basquiat, this dissertation looks specifically at the connection between the significance of his racial background, the meaning behind his public persona, and the origins of and influences behind his paintings. Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1960 to a Haitian father and a mother of Puerto Rican descent, Basquiat’s racial blackness impacted him throughout his entire life. He encountered racism and racial stereotyping in the neighborhoods in which he grew up, in the schools he attended, in the popular culture around him, in the New York club scene he was so close to, and, most significantly, in the 1980s art world that largely embraced him. Although Basquiat was welcomed by a large and powerful segment of the art community between 1981 and 1988, his attitude and actions seemed to suggest that he was anything but thankful. Basquiat became infamous for his rebellious and outrageous behavior, including, of course, his much publicized drug usage. He was notoriously difficult to deal with and constantly rude to friends, fellow artists, and even to the dealers, critics, and buyers who supported him and his work. To his canvases, Basquiat consistently brought a rough and
unfinished look along with a diversity of subject matter. The combination of figures, symbols, and written text that appears in Basquiat’s art, often randomly juxtaposed, reflects his familiarity and interest in areas such as anatomy, art history, ancient history, black history, black athletes, jazz, food, comic books, and cartoons. This dissertation explores the intersections between the racism that Basquiat experienced, his disrespectful and wild behavior, and the hasty and chaotic look of his paintings.

In examining all of these relationships, this study addresses the following questions. Is there a connection between the way Basquiat was made to feel about his blackness and the unruly demeanor that marked his public image? Second, did Basquiat’s understanding of his racial reality have any impact on his decision to paint in a raw aesthetic and to incorporate an eclectic array of subject matter in a seemingly arbitrary manner? Third, is there a connection between the way Basquiat acted and the way he painted or, to put it another way, the way he treated his body and the way he treated the canvas? Most importantly, is there a relationship between all three parts of the artist’s life? In other words, is there a thread or logic that unites Basquiat’s blackness, his public image, and his artwork? In answering this and the other aforementioned questions, this dissertation argues that the defining and unifying feature of Basquiat’s life and art is racial performance. That Basquiat came to see both his body and the canvas as spaces in which to perform blackness was fostered by his understanding of his racial reality and his lifelong experience with racism and racial stereotyping.

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation examines the life and artwork of Basquiat through the theoretical lens of black performance. In the introduction to *African American Performance and Theater History: A*...
*Critical Reader*, Harry J. Elam, Jr., defines black performance as “the repetition, reinscription or even reconfiguration of established gestures, behaviors, linguistic patterns, cultural attitudes, and social expectation associated with blackness” (13). As an example of a black performer, Elam refers to the slave who “would wear the mask of ignorance and perform the role of black subservience in order to avoid punishment from the master’s lash” (13). As “racist constructions of blackness associate it with denigration, impurity, nature, and the body” (Johnson 7), performing blackness, then, often entails the black performer acting out racist stereotypes, as the case of the slave illustrates. This dissertation maintains that Basquiat’s public persona and artwork are dominated by black performance. In other words, with his body and on the space of the canvas, Basquiat exhibited a series of gestures, behaviors, and qualities all associated with racist notions of black maleness. Like the slave, Basquiat frequently played dumb and wore the mask of ignorance. Basquiat was, however, no slave; therefore, his black performance was motivated and shaped by his own unique set of circumstances.

Despite living well after the times of slavery and in the wake of the Civil Rights Era, Basquiat did not live in a society free from racism and racist ideas. In the preface to *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes the predicament of the contemporary black male as follows:

> The black male has been represented in Western culture as the central enigma of a humanity wrapped in the darkest and deepest subliminal fantasies of Europe and America’s collective id. And, tragically, every African male who walks down any street in America carries with him the hidden heritage of this negative cultural and psychological legacy, the burden of being perceived through what critic Barbara
Johnson calls a stereotype - an already-read text – the already-read text of debasedness and animality (13).

As Gates points out, although racist institutions such as slavery and segregation have been eliminated, racist ideas and racist perceptions, because they are so deeply ingrained in Western and American culture, persist into the present. They exist as a set of stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about black men and women. In this case, the black male often cannot escape those same beliefs that were used to justify institutions like slavery and segregation. He is still always already seen through a racial lens that posits him as inherently more debased and physical and less disciplined and intelligent than his non-black counterparts.

Gates helps to shed light on Basquiat’s racial predicament as a black artist in the United States in the 1980s. Despite the fact that Basquiat was a famous and revered painter, his racial background meant that he would always be viewed with some suspicion, even by those who appreciated his art. He would never, no matter what, be able to transcend or get around or beyond the fact of his blackness and all that it implied in the minds of his white audiences. Although Gates states that this is a feeling that all black men living in America encounter, Basquiat’s position and context suggests that this racial experience was especially intense and acute for him. He was not just any black man; he was one of the few black men in history to make it in the world of so-called “fine art,” and of those black artists, he was undoubtedly the one who received the most attention from the predominantly white art community. Thus, Basquiat lived, worked, and made art in a context in which it was nearly impossible for him not to address or to engage with the way his blackness was perceived by the art community.

It is from the reality of this racial predicament that Basquiat’s black performance emerged. In his essay, “The Black Performer and the Performance of Blackness,” Elam helps
shed light on how black performance works for a black performer like Basquiat. Elam does not refer specifically to Basquiat; however, the subject of his essay, the nineteenth century black author and orator, William Wells Brown, was faced with surprisingly similar circumstances. As an ex-slave who had escaped to the North, Wells Brown often spoke in front of white abolitionist audiences. Despite their good intentions, these audiences had flawed racial politics. They were “romantic racialists,” who “despite a commitment to abolition, continued to exoticize and patronize blacks and to maintain that innate differences existed between the Anglo-Saxon and African races” (291). Similarly, Basquiat was surrounded by romantic racialists in the 1980s art world. In the artist’s case, their love and appreciation of black culture flowed from a racist assumption that blackness was something more primitive or savage than whiteness. Thus, much like Wells Brown, Basquiat’s performance was given in front of and aimed and directed primarily at white liberal audiences. In the process, Basquiat, like Wells Brown, presented his white audiences with racial stereotypes.

William Sonnega in his essay, “Beyond a Liberal Audience,” captures the productiveness that can come out of a black performer presenting racist notions of blackness to a white liberal audience. Moreover, he captures the power and overall point of Basquiat’s black performance:

Racial stereotypes that resonate around rather than within a performance, that are referred to rather than represented, that are not explicitly satirized or subjected to a self- reflexive critique position an audience on a compelling, potentially transformative, yet dangerous edge. At stake is the extent to which the audience apprehends the presence of the stereotypes, and if so, questions their function in the performance of everyday life (92).
Importantly, Basquiat embodied racial stereotypes casually and without acknowledging them as such. In this regard, they were more referred to or hinted at than openly or directly represented. He never openly declared, for example, that he was satirizing black stereotypes. He would simply walk around at times dressed like Buckwheat or like a black “dandy.” He would stutter and shuffle his feet like a “sambo” and cover his canvases with “primitive” scratchings, but he would never present or say that any of these were open and deliberate racial critiques. Such a performance, as Sonnega points out, tests the self-proclaimed “liberal” appreciator of black art’s racial politics. Black performances, like Basquiat’s, aim to provoke and antagonize the white liberal audience with the hope that they will rethink and rework their racial politics and beliefs. Thus, Basquiat’s performance of blackness was ultimately pedagogical and instructive; he made himself and his work into a racial lightning rod so that he could expose the limits of his white audience’s racial politics. Through the “outrageous behavior” he exhibited in his public persona and art, Basquiat, put simply, made clear his “desire to fuck with people’s racism” (Clement 89).

**Primary Literature**

In demonstrating how racial performance constitutes the defining feature of Basquiat’s public persona and artwork, this dissertation draws upon primary sources such as printed and filmed interviews, memoirs, diaries, art reviews, photographs, and paintings. Many of the interviews are with the artist himself. Of particular importance are Basquiat’s conversations with art critics and writers such as Henry Geldzahler, Lisa Ponti, Isabelle Graw, Demosthenes Davvetas, and especially Marc Miller, who conducted an extended and videotaped interview with Basquiat in 1981. The Miller interview is essential to this dissertation because it is one of only two known filmed interviews with the artist (Basquiat did conduct another thorough and
filmed interview in 1986 with the filmmaker Tamra Davis, but it has not been released for
circulation). Moreover, the Miller interview captures Basquiat at his performative best; the artist
responds to Miller’s condescending tone and frequent evocation of racial stereotypes in his
questions by stuttering and mumbling through short and shallow responses. This dissertation,
therefore, refers frequently and at length to various sections of the Miller interview; included in
the following pages are long captions of their dialogue accompanied by an explanation of their
tone and body language and an overall analysis of the racial significance of the exchange.

In the context of this dissertation, interviews, both printed and filmed, are primarily
valued and cited for what they reveal about the racial performance that marked Basquiat’s public
image. This is not, however, to suggest that this is the only type of value that Basquiat’s
interviews possess. Although much of his behavior and many of his responses are performative
in that they are aimed to draw attention to what he perceives to be a racist question or comment,
there are also times and moments in which Basquiat lets down his guard a bit and offers a
straightforward and simple answer. Thus, Basquiat’s interviews are not only and entirely
performances devoid of any truth or genuineness. Asserting that such a distinction exists begs a
simple question. When is he performing and when is he being real and how is one to know the
difference? Much of this depends on the context of the interview; Basquiat’s performance is
impacted and driven by the way he interpreted the stakes of the interview, its setting, the
interviewer, their questions, and their choice of words. Basquiat entered most interviews, I
believe, with his back up, so to speak, and rightfully so; history told him that the interviewer was
more than likely going to unwittingly deploy a series of racial stereotypes in the process of
asking him about his background and his art. Despite this, Basquiat’s level of performance
appears to have intensified when the stakes seemed high and when the person interviewing him
seemed particularly rude or clueless. That much of Basquiat’s interview with Miller, for example, became such a profound racial performance had much to do with the fact that it was being filmed and that Miller persistently treated the artist with a combination of patronization and condescension. The same can be said of Basquiat’s interview with Henry Geldzahler, who was a major figure in the art world. Basquiat’s somewhat dull responses to his questions are meant to highlight Geldzahler’s arrogant and didactic posture toward him, which Basquiat perceives as emanating from the fact that he is black and young. Both of these interviews do, however, contain truths and facts about Basquiat, which are revealed in both the interviewers’ questions and in his responses. Therefore, while this dissertation uses interviews with Basquiat primarily as evidence of the way he performed blackness in public, these same interviews are also valued and referred to at times for the facts and truths that they reveal about the artist.

This study also examines several interviews that were conducted after Basquiat’s death with people who knew him personally and professionally. The testimony of close friends such as Fred Brathwaite, a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy, Glenn O’Brien, Keith Haring, and Nicholas Taylor are particularly helpful here as are the insights of girlfriends such as Paige Powell and Suzanne Mallouck, and art dealers such as Mary Boone and Bruno Bischofberger. Because Phoebe Hoban conducted interviews with a variety of people including Basquiat’s family, fellow artists, and art world denizens for her 1998 biography *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*, her book serves as a valuable source of primary documentation for this study as well.

Along with interviews, this study looks at memoirs. One memoir that has proven invaluable to this dissertation is Jennifer Clement’s *Widow Basquiat*. Clement’s account chronicles Basquiat’s relationship with his on-again-off-again girlfriend, Suzanne Mallouck. Clement’s memoir is a combination of her own poetic remembrances of the couple and
Mallouck’s own words and voice. Because Clement knew the couple very intimately, much of her account is included in this dissertation. However, Clement’s chronicle is more valuable for its testimonials by Mallouck. Of all of the voices that are given space in the following pages, the one that is given primacy is that of Suzanne Mallouck. There are three reasons for this decision. First, she knew Basquiat more intimately than anyone, and although their relationship was rocky at times, he trusted and confided in her more than anyone else. Second, Mallouck, who is of Palestinian descent, also, by her own accounts, knew what it was like to experience discrimination (Clement 37). Third, Mallouck is a psychiatrist, and moreover, her words reflect her interest in the psychology of race, particularly as it impacted Basquiat. This dissertation, therefore, relies heavily on Jennifer Clement’s *Widow Basquiat*.

In addition to interviews and memoirs, this study also looks at relevant diaries. Unfortunately, Basquiat did not keep a diary or journal in the traditional sense. He kept several notebooks which contain sketches and esoteric phrases, many of which served as the basis for later paintings, but nowhere in those pages did he ever record basic day-to-day observances or insights. Fortunately, many of Basquiat’s associates kept diaries and journals, and in them, they recorded not only many of his observances and insights but also their own private thoughts on the artist. The published diaries of Andy Warhol serve, in this regard, as a valuable resource for this dissertation. Basquiat and Warhol were close from roughly 1983 until Warhol’s death in 1987 due to complications from an appendectomy. Warhol’s diaries reveal Basquiat’s frustrations, joys, complaints, and insecurities, and they also detail what many others in the art world said and thought about Basquiat. Importantly, Warhol’s diaries expose both the elder artist’s own racial biases and penchant for racial stereotyping along with those of the larger 1980s art community.
Another set of primary sources that this study looks at are reviews of Basquiat and his art; these like Warhol’s diaries equally testify to the racism and stereotyping that the artist endured throughout his career. As Basquiat participated in numerous solo and group shows in the U.S. and throughout the world, he and his art were frequently written about by critics and writers working for different newspapers, magazines, and journals around the globe. This dissertation is by no means comprehensive in its examination of art reviews. It looks at those that are in English or have been translated into English, and it focuses on the reviews of influential and established critics writing for major papers and art publications. Thus, the criticisms of Thomas McEvilley, Peter Scheldajl, Jeffrey Deitch, Adam Gopnik, Vivian Raynor, and others are given close inspection in this project. That the aforementioned critics were some of the most influential is suggested by the fact that they have caught the attention and the eye of scholars like bell hooks, Greg Tate, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Dick Hebdige, and Jonathan Weinberg, all who have in their own work noted how critics casually and frequently deployed racist stereotypes in assessing Basquiat and his art. Of course, reviews of Basquiat’s posthumous retrospectives will not be considered in the following pages. As this dissertation is concerned with the relationship between the artist’s public person and work and the way his blackness was discussed and debated publicly, it only focuses on the popular and important interviews that Basquiat was more likely to have read or have heard about.

Along with interviews, diaries, and art reviews, this dissertation looks at several photographs of Basquiat. While many of these are solo shots of the artist, taken at various points throughout his life and career, others are photographs in which the artist appears with some of his white girlfriends or with other high profile members of the 1980s art world. This dissertation looks at pictures in which the artist appears with Madonna, Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, and
others. In some cases, the pictures were taken spontaneously by friends in a more casual setting; other photographs, such as publicity shots, are more staged and formal. In the framework of this dissertation, however, these photographs are all united in that they represent together visual evidence of the racial performance that dominated Basquiat’s public persona.

In terms of primary literature, this project looks lastly at several representative examples of Basquiat’s art. As Basquiat was a prolific artist, having completed “nearly 1,000 original paintings and almost 2,000 works on paper” (Shafrazi 21), it is not possible in the following pages to address all or even half of his oeuvre. Thus, this dissertation examines selected works from each year of his career between 1981 and 1988. Included are pieces that not only reflect his larger aesthetic and thematic choices, but that also highlight in particular how he brought racial performance to the space of the canvas. This study’s broad treatment of Basquiat’s work is not, however, meant to suggest that his art was static and never changed significantly in style or content over the course of his career. Basquiat did, to take but one example, use more written text and symbols in his later work whereas his earlier canvases from 1981 and 1982 are more focused on images of the body, the head, and the face. Despite such shifts, Basquiat never got away from performing blackness through his treatment of his art’s aesthetic and content.

Secondary Literature and Chapter Breakdown

In addition to its myriad primary sources, this study also makes use of several sets or bodies of secondary literature, the first and most obvious of which are essays and books written specifically on the artist. Despite Basquiat’s popularity there are only two biographies on the artist; the first one by Phoebe Hoban has already been mentioned and the second one is Leonhard Emmerling’s Jean-Michel Basquiat: 1960-1988. As Basquiat and his art have been the subject of
several retrospectives, there exists numerous catalogue essays on him and his work. One of the earliest was published in 1992 on the occasion of the exhibition “Jean-Michel Basquiat” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and one of the latest entitled *Factory Work: Warhol, Wyeth, Basquiat* was published in 2006 by the Farnsworth Art Museum and Wyeth Center. A third body of scholarship on the artist might be called “critical essays.” Unlike their catalogue counterparts, “critical” pieces are found in edited academic collections or are a chapter in a book by the same author. Two examples are “Jose Esteban Munoz’s “Famous and Dandy Like B ‘n’ Andy: Race, Pop, and Basquiat,” which is in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, whose editors are Munoz, Michele Aina Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, Michael Moon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and “The Bombing of Basquiat,” which is the eighth chapter in Jonathan Weinberg’s *Ambition and Love in Modern American Art*. This is not to suggest, of course, that all catalogue essays are uncritical. While many, given their context, authors, and purpose, tend to lean toward the celebratory, emotive, and hagiographical, others offer well-sourced and well-argued insights into Basquiat and his work. Thus, a combination of biographical, catalogue, and so-called critical works on the artist have contributed to the building of this dissertation’s main argument.

This dissertation also draws on secondary literature that does not mention Basquiat specifically but that nonetheless helps to shed light on his life and art. Many of these studies are cultural and social histories on race and representation in the United States, and they are used in this project to tease out and illuminate certain aspects of the primary and/or secondary work specifically on the artist. In this regard, they are valuable for particular concepts and for the implications of their conclusions. As the body of secondary literature both on and related to Basquiat is substantial and varied, it is organized and discussed below according to chapter.
What follows, then, is an introduction and discussion of key works and how they contribute to each chapter and to the dissertation overall.

Chapter One examines Basquiat’s early life, focusing on the time from his early childhood until he left his family’s home in Brooklyn in 1977 at age 17. Of specific concern is the young artist’s racial experiences in his neighborhood, at school, with popular culture, and as a graffiti writer. As much of the secondary literature on the artist is relatively silent on these issues, this chapter uses a variety of cultural histories and critical race studies to reconstruct Basquiat’s early days. For example, to better understand what it was like for Basquiat to grow up black and middle class, particularly in the areas of Brooklyn where he did, this dissertation looks at Kenneth T. Jackson’s *The Neighborhoods of Brooklyn*, Andrew Weise’s *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, Joe F. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes’ *Living with Racism: The Black Middle Class Experience*. These works help to show that Basquiat experienced racism where he grew up, and, in doing so, they also help to explain why he, although neither poor nor from the “ghetto,” liked to dress and pretend that he was. In this case, Basquiat was already using his body as a canvas to engage with the stereotypical white perception that all Haitian-Puerto Rican blacks must be poor or from the ghetto.

To get a sense of his school days, Chapter One draws on Jerald E. Podair’s *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*, Haroon Kharem’s *A Curriculum of Repression: A Pedagogy of Racial History in the United States*, and Ann Arnett Ferguson’s *Bad Boys: Public Schools and the Making of Black Masculinity*. These studies help to support this dissertation’s claim that Basquiat experienced a significant amount of racism as a student in the New York City school system in the 1960s and 1970s and that his highly stylized rebellion against the educational system was racially inflected.
Just as with his neighborhood and school experiences, Chapter One maintains that the young artist’s encounter with popular culture was a racially significant one. It looks, therefore, at Linda G. Tucker’s *Lockstep and Dance: Images of Black Men in Popular Culture*, John Starusbaugh’s *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, and Imitation in American Culture*. Since Basquiat was particularly fond of comic books, films, and television, this chapter also draws on Fredrick Stromberg’s *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*, Darnell M. Hunt’s *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Robin R. Means Coleman’s *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, Donald Bogle’s *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, and Daniel L. Leab’s *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. These studies work to show that Basquiat was inundated with racist and stereotypical images of blackness. Importantly, the images of black men he encountered as a young artist informed him that being a “black painter” would be a peculiar and even contradictory subjectivity to inhabit.

To round off its discussions of Basquiat’s early life, Chapter One looks lastly at Basquiat’s days as a graffiti writer. Of importance here are Joe Austin’s *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* and Craig Castleman’s *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*. These two works pinpoint some of the racial misperceptions that white middle class New Yorkers held about graffiti art, and they also help to highlight how different and unique Basquiat’s style of writing was from the rest of the New York graffiti artists. In doing so, they help to support this chapter’s claim that Basquiat’s street writing was less about working in an established school or tradition in graffiti and more about his own personal and individual effort to create graffiti that played with people’s racial assumptions. In this regard, the secondary literature on graffiti works hand-in-hand with the critical race studies on class, school, and
popular culture to show that race mattered in Basquiat’s early life and that much of his early behavior was related to his racial experiences. Thus, Chapter One adds to this dissertation’s overall argument by demonstrating that race and performance were significant aspects of the artist’s early days.

Chapter Two explores Basquiat’s days on the downtown New York City avant-garde art scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To demonstrate that during this time the artist was immersed in a significant artistic and cultural movement that was united by the concept of performance, this chapter draws on Marvin J. Taylor’s *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984*. This work helps to establish one of this study’s main points which is that, of all the artistic traditions that Basquiat worked in, performance art was the most significant. Chapter Two also works to show that Basquiat encountered a large amount of racism on the downtown scene. To this end, Bernard Gendron’s *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* is useful here as it makes the point that the predominantly white downtown scene’s animosity toward New York City’s mostly non-white disco scene was fueled by racism more so than musical taste. In doing so, Gendron helps to shed light on the fact that Basquiat was immersed in a cultural scene that at least in part felt an enmity toward blacks.

Yet, as Chapter Two also claims, Basquiat was surrounded by another more subtle, pervasive, and unintentional type of racism, termed “negrophilia,” which is a love or infatuation with black culture. As works such as Petrine Archer-Straw’s *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, Jon Panish’s *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture*, and Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* all point out, negrophilia has been a consistent and historic feature of both European and American avant-gardism. In this regard, the negrophilia that Basquiat
encountered in the people and art forms around him, just as with its earlier manifestations, was not so much racist in intent as it professed an appreciation for blackness; this appreciation was, however, predicated on the racist idea that blackness signifies something more primitive or savage. Just as with Chapter One, Chapter Two shows that both race and performance were significant features of Basquiat days on the downtown art scene. Much of his style and penchant for public spectacle during this time were also racially inflected, but more importantly, it was here that he was exposed to the idea that the canvas could be used as a performance space.

Chapter Three explores the array of racism and racial stereotyping that Basquiat encountered as an artist in the 1980s art world. Unlike the two previous chapters, there is a significant amount of secondary literature that supports this chapter’s claim that the racism that Basquiat experienced between 1981 and 1988 was persistent and all-encompassing. That the artist was “at the heart of whiteness” is substantiated by many scholars of Basquiat but most notably by bell hooks, Greg Tate, Andrea Frohne, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Jose-Esteban Munoz, Alison Pearlman, Dick Hebdige, Jonathan Weinberg, and Greg Dimitriadis and Cameron McCarthy. Also helpful is Teun A. van Dijk’s *Elite Discourse and Racism*, which points out that in elite institutions that are supposed to be free or absent of racism, there still exists racist feelings and tendencies; they are just expressed through more subtle and indirect gestures, behaviors, and language. Van Dijk’s study helps to show that at the center of the elite art world, Basquiat, although not immune to overt, aggressive, and blatant racism, more commonly felt its more slight and understated form.

Chapter Three offers, as an example of the subtle racism that inundated Basquiat, the language and thoughts of the art community about the black artist and his work, which came to him and circulated around him in the form of art reviews, interview questions, and casual
comments. That these acts were understood by the artist as racist is supported by Patricia Hill Collins’ work in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Hill Collins points out that black men and women living in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s were not immune from racism, but rather experienced it in new and more oblique ways, namely through the media in the form of an array of racial and gendered stereotypes deployed casually and frequently in talking about black people and black culture. Hill Collins’ insistence, then, that the image of the black male as lazy, stupid, physical, undisciplined, and sexually deviant, once used to justify slavery and segregation, is not gone but has assumed another more seemingly benign form, helps to shed light on how much of what was said and written about the artist relied on a racial stereotype of black manhood.

Along with the art community, much of the artwork that Basquiat saw also presented him with racist imagery. Martin A. Berger’s *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Culture*, Thelma Golden’s *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, Kymberly N. Pinder’s *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, and Michael D. Harris’ *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* all suggest that much of the visual iconography of modern art relies on the notion of blackness as something Other and primitive. In addition then to dealing with the gaze and patronization of the white art community, Basquiat was surrounded by images of blackness, all of which suggested that when it came to art, black men like himself were more likely to be found on the canvas rather than in front of it. Thus, Chapter Three shows that the racism that the artist felt was not a mere nuisance or hassle that could be avoided, negotiated, or confronted head on but was, in fact, far more extensive and expansiveness than has been previously understood by any Basquiat scholar. Understanding
Basquiat’s racial reality as a painter as such is central to being able to conceptualize both his public image and artwork as black performances.

Chapter Four looks at the public persona that Basquiat adopted as a painter; it examines the way he walked, talked, dressed, and behaved in general when he was being interviewed, filmed, photographed, and when he was in public places. In this regard, work on Basquiat by those such as Phoebe Hoban, Dick Hebdige, Alison Pearlman, Andrea Frohne, and Frances Negron-Muntaner all contribute to this chapter’s main argument that Basquiat sought in his public image to animate the black racial stereotypes that he encountered. These scholars all note, in one way or another, that the artist was highly self-aware, deliberate, and in-control of his public image, and that with his public image he often gave people the impression that he was the typical “dumb darkie.” Of particular importance here is bell hooks’ essay “Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Jean-Michel Basquiat.” hooks points out that Basquiat understood that the type of all or nothing racial performance he was engaged in would be frustrating and depressing. In this regard, the artist was casually throwing around all of these racial stereotypes only to find that most of his public did not “get it” or get him. That this black performance would quickly wear him down and out was something he understood but nonetheless participated in as he saw his life, according to hooks, as a racial sacrifice.

That Basquiat performed blackness in interviews is established not only by the text of the interviews themselves, but also by Harry van den Berg, Margaret Wetherell, and Hanneke Houtkoop-Steenstra’s Analyzing Race Talk: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Interview, all of whom suggest that the interview can act as a performance space as it is not a natural construct or conversation. The notion of the space in front of the camera lens as a performance space where notions of blackness can be acted out is laid out by Fatima Tobing Roy in The Third Eye: Race,
*Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle.* Here, the notion of the “third eye,” a form of self-awareness that, according to Roy, people of color possess as a result of being framed historically as “ethnographic spectacle” helps support this chapter’s claim that Basquiat saw photographic moments as well as those where he felt the intense gaze of white eyes as opportunities to “act up” and dramatize the fact that he was seen as “primitive.”

The fifth and final chapter addresses Basquiat’s artwork; it looks not only at the actual canvases themselves but also at Basquiat’s process and the way he presented his work to the public. This chapter argues that Basquiat’s painting was an “act.” The artist’s chaotic and rough-looking canvases emerged less from any artistic skill and technique and more from a personal desire to play out on the canvas the racial stereotypes that drove both positive and negative assessments of him and his work. The childish and seemingly insincere and irrational behavior that he brought to his work process and the way he presented his art further shows that the artist, above all else, sought to bring black performance art to the role of “black painter.” While most of this chapter’s argument and main points flow from close readings of his canvases and his actions, two secondary works, Frances Negron-Muntaner’s essay “The Writing on the Wall: The Life and Passion of Jean-Michel Basquiat,” and Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* help to support the point that the act of painting can be conceived of as an act of racial performance. Together Negron-Muntaner and Kelley point out that labor and work, especially in terms of work ethic and the value of labor and its product, are conceptualized along racial lines. As Kelley points out, black labor and its fruits are often devalued as “nigger-work.” Negron-Muntaner shows how Basquiat’s painting was seen and talked about as black labor, and, moreover, that Basquiat was highly aware and impacted by this impression. Rather than ignore this, he made this racial stereotype central to the way his art looked and to provoke
his audiences into seeing his paintings as “nigger-work.” He worked and presented his art in ways that often left them little choice but to see it as such.

This dissertation ends with an epilogue devoted to a close critique of Julian Schnabel’s 1996 biopic of the artist entitled Basquiat. Schnabel’s film is given such attention here because it plays a large role in the public remembrance of the artist. As the epilogue illustrates, the version of Basquiat that emerges in the film is much different than the one that is argued for in this dissertation. Rather than considering Basquiat’s racial and cultural reality in assessing his life and art, Schnabel’s film instead relies on a mythic and romantic notion of the artist. In the process, the film ignores just how important race and performance were in Basquiat’s public image and art. Thus, Basquiat comes off within the framework of the film as looking like a naïve and hapless victim of 1980s art world greed, whereas in reality it was more the racism he encountered and picked up on that drove his life, death, and art. In concluding with a critique of Basquiat, this dissertation hopes to position itself as an important intervention and challenge to what passes for popular knowledge of the artist.

**Methodology**

This dissertation’s methodology and way of assembling theoretical, primary, and secondary sources is not guided by an established model but rather by the assumption or principle that a more complete and grounded understanding of Basquiat’s life and artistic experiences yields a more accurate understanding of his artwork. Thus, much of this dissertation focuses on the details of Basquiat’s personal history. Although it is only the fifth and final chapter that deals directly with his paintings, this project maintains that the biographical analyses offered in the first four chapters act to create a lens through which to interpret his artwork. In
other words, seeing or the ability to see his art as a black performance is facilitated and aided by what is known about his life. Therefore, in reconstructing Basquiat’s life, this dissertation, first and foremost, works to establish three important facts about the artist’s background.

First, race and racism always played a significant role in the artist’s life. Although it is largely acknowledged that his blackness mattered while he was painter, this dissertation points out that it always mattered. Basquiat, in this sense, was always “at the heart of whiteness.” Second, of all the artistic traditions with which Basquiat was familiar, the one that he was most immersed in and indebted too was performance art. He was a founding member and contributor to the downtown arts scene, which was united by the idea of performance and of the performative and constructed nature of all art and media. He was also always participating in some kind of performance art, much of which was informal and subtle but highly racially inflected. While Basquiat certainly knew and appreciated a variety of artistic traditions including jazz, Beat literature, and expressionist and abstract painting, performance art overshadowed and, thus, mediated his understanding and use of them all. Third, Basquiat’s knowledge of painting technique was very limited. Put more simply, it is highly likely that Basquiat did not know much about “traditional” drawing or painting and thus had no choice but to perform blackness on the canvas. In this case, Basquiat could not work in any kind of established aesthetic but was left rather to work out on his own terms what preoccupied and impacted him the most, which was racism. Thus, this dissertation, in leading up to its examination of Basquiat’s artwork, aims to illustrate how he was, in fact, a black performance artist playing the role of a black painter. This role not only satisfied his desire to be famous; it also satisfied, more so than any other role could, his desire to engage with the racial misperceptions of white liberal audiences.
With these three facts fully discussed and their implications teased out, this dissertation then in its final chapter moves into an interpretation of Basquiat’s artwork. As, by this point in the study, it has already been highly suggested that the artwork of Basquiat, given who he was and what he knew, could only function in a certain way, the analysis of his aesthetic and subject matter focuses on pointing out and highlighting certain qualities and characteristics and the impressions and opinions that they attempted to evoke. This does not require an examination of every or even a majority of Basquiat’s oeuvre, but rather a few close readings of a select group of representative works from throughout his decade-long career. Each detailed reading merely highlights how Basquiat consistently used elements of his aesthetic and subject matter to perform blackness. In this case, the main goal of chapter five’s analysis of his artwork is to establish consistency in intent and purpose between his public persona and paintings. In short, Basquiat’s art was all about black performance because his art was an extension of his life, and the two most dominant themes in his life were race and performance.

Conclusion

This dissertation concludes, then, that the racial politics of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s public persona and art were primarily performative. That Basquiat came to address racism in this manner is, as this project maintains, reflective of his racial reality. While he, throughout his life, experienced overt and aggressive racism, he was engulfed by and hence more impacted by more subtle and indirect forms of racism, namely, causal and unintentional racial stereotyping. By its very nature, this latter type of racism is difficult to take on directly as it often comes in the form of praise or objective criticism and from those who claim to be either racially progressive or “colorblind.” Although he wanted to let the white liberals around him know that he thought that
they, despite their pretenses, still held racist beliefs and assumptions, the artist knew that he could not do this easily. For one, he wanted them to buy his artwork and to make him rich and famous. Also, they would not have believed him anyway and would have accused him of being paranoid, naïve, or of “playing the race card.” Therefore, outward accusations of racism by Basquiat would have fallen on deaf ears and left him with no stage upon which to perform blackness. As he could not be overtly confrontational, he relied on a racial politics that was suggestive and provocative.
CHAPTER ONE

TAKING THE STAGE:

RACE AND PERFORMANCE IN THE EARLY LIFE

OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

Introduction

Race and performance both played major roles in Jean-Michel Basquiat’s early life. In the neighborhoods he lived in and the private and public schools he attended, Basquiat’s Haitian-Puerto Rican blackness made him racially hyper-visible and, as such, the target of frequent racism. The racial representations that he encountered in the popular culture forms that he embraced also made the young artist particularly self-conscious and self-aware about his blackness. Thus, Basquiat learned early on that his racial background mattered greatly in how he was judged and how he would be judged. Performance was also integral to the artist’s early life. At a young age, Basquiat demonstrated a proclivity for drama, pretending, acting up, acting out, and public spectacle. He pretended to be a poor black child by dressing like a “street kid” and telling people he was from the “ghetto” even though, in truth, he heralded from a middle class background and was raised in relatively comfortable areas of Brooklyn. Although intellectually gifted, Basquiat did not excel in school. Rather, he was a constant discipline problem, often getting into trouble until dropping out in his junior year. During his last year of school, Basquiat also created for himself a fictional identity with the invention of his graffiti artist persona, SAMO. Basquiat’s early racial experiences and his penchant for public performance were not, however, unrelated. Rather, his desire to present himself as a kid from the “street,” his rebellious behavior at school, and his graffiti identity and writing as SAMO were all informed by his racial
reality and reflected the racism and the notions of blackness around him. In arguing that race and performance were central to his early years, this chapter illustrates that the foundation for the racial performance that came to be one of the defining aspects of Basquiat’s public persona and painting was laid very early on in the artist’s life.

**Neighborhood**

Basquiat was born on December 22, 1960, in Park Slope, a “comfortable, residential section of Brooklyn” (Emmerling 11). His father, Gerard, was an accountant who had emigrated from an “elite and affluent background in Haiti” in 1955 (Hoban 16). Basquiat’s mother, Matilde, was a stay at home spouse who was born in Brooklyn of Puerto Rican parentage. In 1966, the Basquiat family left Park Slope and moved to the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn. When Basquiat was seven years old, his parents separated, and Gerard kept custody of Basquiat and his two sisters, Lisane and Jeanine, because his mother had been institutionalized several times for mental depression. In 1968, Basquiat moved with his father and two sisters to a family-owned three story brownstone in the “semi-gentrified residential neighborhood” of Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, a “bit of an oasis in a somewhat seedy area” (Hoban 18). In 1974, due to a job promotion and relocation for his father, Basquiat moved along with his two sisters to Mira Mar, Puerto Rico, near San Juan. In 1976, after a job transfer, Gerard Basquiat and his three children returned from Puerto Rico to live in their Boerum Hill brownstone, where Basquiat would stay on and off until he eventually left home for good in 1978. Basquiat was, then, a middle class black kid who grew up in mostly “comfortable” and “residential” areas of Brooklyn.

The three sections of Brooklyn in which Basquiat grew up contained significant populations of older white ethnic groups such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and Jewish
Americans along with newer immigrant groups from Latin American and the Caribbean. For instance, Park Slope, where Basquiat lived from 1960 to 1966, was comprised of working-class Irish that had been there since World War II; however, by the 1970s, the southern part of Park Slope had become the home of newer immigrants from Latin American and the Caribbean (Jackson 168-169). East Flatbush, where Basquiat lived between 1966 and 1971, contained Jewish Americans and Italian Americans, who, as ethnic groups, had been there as early as the 1920s. African Americans, Latin Americans, and Caribbean Americans began moving into East Flatbush in the 1960s (Jackson 105-107). Boerum Hill, where Basquiat lived from 1971 to 1978, had a significant Irish American population that had been there since the 1920s; the 1940s and 1950s saw the arrival of numerous Puerto Rican immigrants (Jackson 23-24). Thus, the three sections of Brooklyn where Basquiat grew up were, over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, becoming more racially and ethnically mixed. More to the point, non-white ethnics from the Caribbean and Latin America were moving into sections of Brooklyn that had been historically and predominantly white ethnic, namely, Irish, Italian, and Jewish.

While it is difficult to know for certain whether or not Basquiat experienced racism growing up in Brooklyn, it is hard to believe, given his Haitian-Puerto Rican blackness and his Irish, Italian, and Jewish neighbors, that he was not made to feel unwelcome or “out of place” on at least a few occasions. Although uncertain, it is likely that Basquiat was made to feel that he was surrounded, and that he and his family “belonged” in the ghetto or that perhaps they were turning the areas they lived in into a “ghetto.” This might have been the case especially in Boerum Hill which by the late 1960s had become part of an urban renewal plan to prevent the demolition of homes that had fallen into disarray during the early 1960s (Jackson 24). Furthermore, several recent studies on the experience of the black middle class in historically
white neighborhoods in the United States suggest as well that Basquiat experienced racism in the
areas where he grew up. For example, Andrew Wiese in *Places of Their Own: African American
Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* argues that African Americans were “forbidden
neighbors in almost every white neighborhood” (99) in post-World War II America. According
to Wiese:

> Many whites projected their deepest fears about crime, disorder, health, status,
and sexuality, on to African Americans. Moreover, whites typically conflated
psychological expressions of racial fear with more straightforward economic
anxieties and assumptions of social privilege. Among their greatest concerns was
that “property values will experience a severe drop” with the arrival of black
neighbors…Real estate textbooks presented the hypothesis as fact, and for whites
who may have had reason to doubt, the dilapidation of city and suburban
neighborhoods where many African Americans lived provided apparent proof to
cement the link…Combined with violent fantasies about the social consequences
of racial integration – especially images of rape and miscegenation – economic
fear led millions of whites to view black neighbors as something like Visigoths at
the gates of Rome (98).

As Wiese suggests, a Haitian immigrant along with his Puerto Rican wife and mixed heritage
children would, for a number of reasons, probably not have been welcomed by the whites in the
Brooklyn neighborhoods they moved into. Race, therefore, mattered where Basquiat grew up just
as it did where and when he attended school.
In 1967, at the age of seven, Basquiat began his schooling at St. Ann’s, a private Catholic school in New York City, where he stayed until the fourth grade. After leaving St. Ann’s in 1971, Basquiat would go on to attend many New York City public schools, including P.S. 6, 101, 45, and I.S. 293. In 1976, after returning home from Puerto Rico with his father and his two sisters, Basquiat resumed his schooling at Edward R. Murrows High School, located right across from their house in Brooklyn. After only a few weeks there, however, Basquiat transferred to an “alternative high school” within the New York City public school system where “work-study internships are accepted as credit toward a high school degree” (“Chronology” 234). The alternative high school that Basquiat attended, called City-as-School, was “based on John Dewey’s theory that students learn by doing” and “designed for gifted and talented children who find the traditional educational processes difficult” (“Chronology” 234). As the name indicates, the school saw the city itself as “a great learning institution; kids were given subway tokens to get to classes at places like the Museum of Modern Art and the Hayden Planetarium” (Hoban 24). Basquiat never graduated from City-as-School; he dropped out in 1977, just one year away from graduation, claiming that “there was no point in going back” (quoted in “Chronology” 235).

Basquiat’s tenure as a student between 1967 and 1977 overlapped with an especially racially tense period for the New York City public school system. 1968, his second year in school, saw the start of a several month long battle between the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the school board of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, a predominantly black district located in Brooklyn. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville board, elected as part of an experiment in neighborhood control of schools in black areas called “community control” (Podair 21), “claimed sweeping powers in the district to determine curriculum, control expenditures, and hire and fire personnel”
When the predominantly white UFT, led by a German Jew, Fred Nauman, challenged this claim as “outrageous,” the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board accused Nauman and the UFT of racism. Apparently, the “threat” of too much black self-determination in the area of education evoked the ire of a predominantly white teacher’s union. According to historian Jerald E. Podair in *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*, the controversy at Ocean Hill-Brownsville was indicative of larger and “deep-seated” racial problems in the New York City public school system and in the city itself as “at its core is the story of black and white New Yorkers who spoke different languages to each other, like strangers and who were profoundly at odds over the shape and definition of human relations in the city and over the meanings of ‘racism,’ ‘equality,’ and ‘pluralism’” (Podair 5). Basquiat did not attend school in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district; yet, as a student in several New York City public schools, he was not immune to the racial divide that surfaced there as it permeated, according to Podair, the entire school system and the entire city. Not only that, the effects of Ocean Hill-Brownsville were felt “for decades to come” (Podair 5) because “the events of Ocean Hill quickly swept beyond the immediate protagonists into the public discourse of the city as a whole” (Podair 48).

The trajectory of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis suggests that Basquiat also experienced the city’s racial divide and tension not just in the several public schools he attended, but also at St. Ann’s, the private Catholic school he attended from 1967 to 1971. Richard Zweigenheft and G. William Domhoff in *Blacks in the White Establishment?: A Study of Race and Class in America*, point out that in elite private educational institutions such as Andover, the George School, and Choate, racism is likely to be part of a black student’s preparatory school experience (30). Granted, St. Ann’s was and is not as elite as the aforementioned prep schools;
however, as a “chic” (quoted in Warhol 592) private educational institution, it too could function in a similar way, by “reminding black students that they were in a white world” (Zweigenheft and Domhoff 37). Whether in private or public schools in New York, Basquiat was educated in settings in which his blackness made him highly visible. Raised in mostly middle class sections of Brooklyn by a Haitian immigrant father and by a Puerto Rican mother, Basquiat’s racial identity, combined with his class identity, practically guaranteed that his journey through the school system in the 1960s and 1970s would not only be an educational experience but a racial one as well.

Within the racially tense educational environment of the New York City school system, Basquiat was often the target of racism from white students. For a year, Basquiat was bussed into P.S. 101 in Bensonhurst as part of an integration program, where, according to teacher Cynthia Bogen Shechter, racism was a “problem” for him:

The school was in a completely white, Italian neighborhood. There were only a few kids bussed in and it was really difficult for them. The young artist used to wear a batch of pencils sticking out of his hair. He [Basquiat] said he wanted to be a cartoonist, and he drew cartoons all day long. He had a hard time relating to the other kids. He was an angry child (Hoban 20).

That Basquiat experienced racism at P.S. 101 is not surprising given that “integration was harmful to black children when they were bussed to predominantly white schools” (Khrarem 28). Even though Basquiat was only at P.S. 101 for a year, it must have made a significant impact on him as he recalled the nature of his schooling there later on in his life. An entry in Andy Warhol’s diary, dated August 5, 1984, shows that Basquiat told Warhol that “when his father lost money he had to be bussed to a public school that was a lot of Italians and the boys there used to
beat him up and he didn’t like it” (Warhol 592). Basquiat, however, remained particularly silent concerning his experiences as a student; therefore, it is difficult to know for certain whether or not he experienced similar acts of racism at the other schools he attended. According to Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes, authors of *Living with Racism: The Black Middle Class Experience*, “African American children in desegregated settings *at a very early age* (author’s emphasis) bear the extra burden of dealing with comments and taunts about their skin color, hair, and other physical characteristics” (89). Thus, it stands to reason that Basquiat experienced similar racism at the other New York schools he attended, both public and private. Even though Basquiat only talked about the racism he experienced at P.S. 101, it is more than likely that racism was a consistent feature of his schooling.

It is also possible that at P.S. 101, Basquiat was the target of racism from teachers. Kharem contends that “during the 1960s and 1970s, black children were bussed into predominantly white schools where many teachers held racist opinions of black students” (40). More often, however, teachers in desegregated racial settings often enact racism against black students in “subtle” (Feagin and Sikes 82) and “not fully conscious” (Feagin and Sikes 86) ways. This strongly suggests that unintentional racism, along with the blatant and malicious racism he received from the white students at P.S. 101, pervaded Basquiat’s schooling. Take, for example, the following statement made by one of Basquiat’s teachers at City-as-School, Sylvia Milgam, in an interview with Basquiat biographer, Phoebe Hoban: “He [Basquiat] was very abrasive and hostile, and it was very disruptive to everyone else. He had a terrible chip on his shoulder from his background. I had always managed to soothe the *savage beast* (emphasis added), not with Jean-Michel. We became mortal enemies” (quoted in Hoban 24 - 25). This is not a blatantly racist statement; Milgram does not overtly link Basquiat’s “abrasive, hostile, and disruptive”
behavior to his blackness. Yet, her casual suggestion that it has something to do with his “background” along with her referring to him and others like him as a “savage beast,” constitutes an act of subtle and unintended racism. According to Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism:*

> By being classified as proximate to wild animals and, by analogy, eventually being conceptualized as being animals (chattel), the alleged deviancy of people of African descent lay in a wildness that was also believed to characterize animal sexuality. Lacking the benefits of Western civilization, people of African descent were perceived as having a biological nature that was inherently more sexual than that of Europeans, thus creating the category of “beast” (100).

To refer to Basquiat as a “savage beast,” then, is not a racially benign act. As Hill Collins suggests, the usage of such terminology, especially within the context of a school setting, serves as a negative assessment of Basquiat’s intellect, manners, and ability. While Basquiat was the target of overt racial prejudice from white students, he endured from teachers more covert acts of racism that typically took the form of racially coded terms and labels.

Sylvia Milgram was probably not the only teacher who thought of or viewed Basquiat as a “savage beast.” According to Kharem in *A Curriculum of Repression: A Pedagogy of Racial History in the United States,* “old cultural beliefs” such as the one that perceives black people as savages lacking in intellectual and language skills “still influence the way some teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, and those who implement public policy perceive nonwhite students” (37). Kharem adds that the “racist epistemologies” central to organizations such as the American Colonization Society of the early 19th century and the eugenics movement of the early 20th century have been “continuously taught, supported, and upheld in American
culture and education” (21), and have “matured into a subtle and powerful educational tool to
maintain power and status of the white elite, which continually oppresses nonwhite people” (9).
Along the same lines, Ann Arnett Ferguson points out in Bad Boys: Public Schools and the
Making of Black Masculinity, that “racialized images, beliefs, and expectations frame teacher
appraisals of black children” (73), and, as a result, “African American boys are singled out for
punishment because of their race” (17). Thus, Milgram’s labeling of Basquiat as a “savage beast”
is not illustrative of only one teacher’s flawed racial thinking; rather, her comment illustrates
how schools as institutions have not been able to shake racist ideologies and how they then
surface in subtle and unintentional ways. Because a racial image like the “savage beast” has such
a long history, and because it and others endure through “mass produced images that are
omnipresent in our lives” (Ferguson 79), it is so familiar, over-mediated, and removed from its
original context that its racial connotations are often lost, as they seem to have been for Milgram.

Although Milgram’s comment stands as an indicator of continued and widespread racism
in New York schools in the post-civil rights era, albeit in more subtle and unconscious forms, the
majority of teachers that Basquiat encountered saw themselves as racially enlightened and liberal
and, hence, incapable of being racist. The teachers that dominated the schools Basquiat attended
were mostly Jewish and Catholic and the “epitome of the city’s postwar new middle class and its
values” (Podair 14).

[They] espoused a liberalism that was integrationist, cosmopolitan, and humanist.
It assumed that a consensus existed in New York City built around a set of basic
principles held by both blacks and whites: individualism within a broadly
pluralistic setting, equality of opportunity, and a race-blind, meritocratic approach
to the distribution of social rewards (Podair 5).
Yet, it is possible for “well intentioned teachers to actually and actively reproduce systems of oppression through institutional practices and symbolic forms of violence” (Ferguson 73). In this case, even the “self-confessed left-over hippies” (Hoban 24) at City-as-School, where “Basquiat got a lot of encouragement from teachers” (Hoban 25), could have participated in “colonizing the minds of black youth” despite their “intent on saving the minds of African American youth” (Kharem 17). Even though his teachers were influenced and shaped by “demeaning cultural images” (Kharem 4) of blackness which they then wielded “consciously or unconsciously” (Kharem 7), they believed they were racially progressive and, thus, probably would have denied any charges that they were racist or held racist assumptions.

**Popular Culture**

Along with his neighborhood and school experiences, Basquiat’s early encounters with popular culture were also racially significant. According to Linda G. Tucker in *Lockstep and Dance: Images of Black Men in Popular Culture*, contemporary American culture demonizes the black male by perpetuating the stereotype that he is predisposed to criminal behavior (4-5). Tucker argues that “contemporary representations constitute the legacy of stereotypes and beliefs about black men that underscore blackface minstrelsy and the ritualized lynchings that took place during the Jim Crow era” (11). Along the same lines, John Strausbaugh contends in *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, and Imitation in American Culture* that:

> However shameful we find it, blackface has played a large and integral role in the formation of American popular culture. It existed before the heyday of the minstrel show, and has persisted long after the minstrels faded away. Its influence
or at least echoes can be seen in American music, theatre, literature, film, and TV, right through to today (24).

Comic books, television, and films, the three popular culture forms with which Basquiat was most familiar, were, then, instrumental in informing him about what it meant to be a young black man in America.

Comic books, for example, which Basquiat, according to Suzanne Mallouck, “loved” and “which were a great inspiration to him” (quoted in Clement 40) were loaded with racist imagery and messages. In Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History, Fredrik Stromberg contends that “in American comic art, we find risible yet demeaning (and often dangerous) images of racial others” (10). Stromberg maintains that in comic books done before World War II, “stereotypical images of Black people were fairly common; it was in this period that all the stereotypical images of toms, mammies, piccaninnies, etc. were established” (226). Of black images in comics after the 1950s, Stromberg insists that “Blacks in comics are still sadly few, even if they – when they do appear – seem to be less stereotypical. Quite often the reader gets the feeling that a Black character is included just to be the [author’s emphasis] Black character in a certain context” (14). As a comic book fan, Basquiat would have been inundated and, no doubt, impacted by the racist messages contained in their pictures and words.

Television, which Basquiat also loved and found to be a great source of inspiration, also contained significant and long-lasting racist messages. Cartoons, which Basquiat, according to Glenn O’Brien, “knew everything about” (32) have a long history of offensive racial imagery. Strausbaugh notes that “Joel Chandler Harris’ Brer Rabbit is a largely forgotten bit of nineteenth-century Americana, but he lives on into the twentieth century as Bugs Bunny” (25). Here, Strausbaugh makes the point that many contemporary cartoons, Bugs Bunny being but one
example, have their roots in stories and images of blackface minstrelsy, and, therefore, contain
the various racist stereotypes that constituted this nineteenth-century art form. Thus, for
Basquiat, watching something as seemingly innocent as a cartoon was a racially important act
because it presented him with images that demeaned blackness.

Basquiat did not, however, just watch cartoon programs. Those close to him recall that he
always had the TV on (quoted in Hoban 105). The artist, therefore, would have been familiar
with American television, in general, and more importantly with the way black people and
blackness were portrayed in that medium. According to Darnell M. Hunt in Channeling
Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America, in the history of popular television,
blackness has been used both directly or indirectly “as a foil necessary for situating whiteness in
the American conscious” (2). Programs like situational comedies, according to Robin R. Means
Coleman in African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial
Comedy, have been particularly harmful in defining blackness. Coleman points out that sitcoms,
since their inception, have been “laden” with racial stereotypes (8). Moreover, studies that
Coleman has conducted indicate that African American viewers are largely aware that situation
comedies are “guilty of portraying African Americans as deviant and deficient” (223). As an
avid watcher of television throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Basquiat, then, encountered racist
images of blackness on a fairly persistent basis.

Along with television, Basquiat also was interested in several kinds of films. When he
was young, his mother often took him to the theatre (Hoban 17). Close friend, Justin Thyme,
recalled Basquiat’s love for French films by Jean-Luc Godard and Francoise Truffaut and for the
American classic Citizen Kane by Orson Welles (12). The filmmaker whose films Basquiat
watched the most, however, were Alfred Hitchcock’s. According to Glenn O’Brien, “he owned
every Hitchcock film money could buy” (32). Referring to a 1955 episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, Donald Bogle suggests that in much of Hitchcock’s work, black characters are “presented as an outcast from the dominant culture” and as a “threat to mainstream society that has to be removed from it” (59). In this regard, Basquiat’s encounter with Hitchcock’s subject matter and his racial sensibility entailed being presented with the notion that blackness was something malignant and dangerous.

Basquiat’s immersion in American silent films was also a racially significant activity. According to Suzanne Mallouck, “Jean loved silent films because they were like cartoons…He always kept watch for any black characters but, of course, they only appeared as servants, if at all. We watched D.W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* dozens of times and Jean could quote whole sections of it” (quoted in Clement 78). As Mallouck’s story indicates, Basquiat was fully aware of the way blackness was represented in early American films. Moreover, it appears as if it deeply affected him. Mallouck further states, “Sometimes, after a session of watching several silent movies, he would just be very quiet for hours and just mime to me anything he wanted or wanted to say” (quoted in Clement 78-79). If the racial content of these movies indeed had something to do with this odd behavior after, it should come as no surprise as many silent films contained particularly racist depictions of black people. In *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*, Daniel J. Leab contends that “almost from the beginning, the American film industry left the black out of the dream, either by ignoring him[sic] or by presenting him[sic] as an object incapable of enjoying it because of a nature that was not quite human” (2). Whether watching a film by Griffith or another early American director, Basquiat encountered, in the silent films he watched so often, racist notions of blackness.
Even as a young man, Basquiat would have known and recognized the fact that the popular culture forms he embraced maintained an unflattering opinion of his racial background. African American film and television scholar, Donald Bogle recalls in *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* that “before I could consciously express it, I think I was aware, as was most of black America, of a fundamental racism or a misinterpretation of African American life that underlay much of what appeared on the tube” (4). It stands to reason then that an intelligent young black youth like Basquiat also detected the way in which people who looked like him were represented in media such as television, films, and comics.

Many of the black actors who Basquiat encountered in television and film were, however, quite aware of the fact that the roles they were playing were racial stereotypes, and they often incorporated this awareness into their performances. According to Donald Bogle, this occurred with black television actors in the 1950s in particular as TV throughout this decade had more buffoonish African American characters than serious or complicated ones (56). Bogle argues that “in the early years, little was written that dealt honestly and perceptively with African American characters…The Black performers, however, had understood (at least intuitively) that rather than play a character (as written), they had to play against [author’s emphasis] the role” (90). As an example Bogle points to the black actor Willie Best insisting that “though he was funny and knew how to get mileage out of the briefest moments on-screen by gracing his fool character with a kind of daffy enlightenment, he also looked tired, aware certainly, that he had been playing the same fool role for twenty years” (46). Willie Best, then, through subtle expressions indicated to those watching closely indicated his cognizance and frustration with having to negotiate his way around a racial stereotype.
Black viewers, according to Bogle, pick up on and understand these nuanced cues from black performers and actors in a way that white audiences cannot. Bogle argues that “black viewers often intuitively responded to the personal messages the performers brought to their roles. White and Black viewers would read the performers on these shows in entirely different ways” (56-57). Perhaps, Basquiat never saw Willie Best in any of his television shows from the 1950s; however, many black performers used the same types of racially-specific subtle nods and cues so Basquiat would have encountered this in one form or another from the many black actors he saw on TV throughout his life. In this regard, Basquiat would have been “on” to what these black performers were “up to.” Importantly, he encountered early on in and throughout his life black “artists,” in this case, actors, who used their medium and art form, in this case, television, to reflect on and even critique the way in which they were made to deal with racist characters, stories, and scripts. Being presented with models in popular culture who engaged with racial stereotypes and also incorporated them into their “art” was instrumental in making racial performance the key component to Basquiat’s life and art.

At around the same time that Basquiat was encountering popular culture imagery in television, comic, and films, he also was beginning to take an interest in drawing and art. This is an important overlap because the young artist saw in the cultural images around him the possibility, or, for that matter, the impossibility that a black man like himself could become a painter. Television and film rarely considered the idea of a having a young black male character be a “fine” artist and when they did, it was treated as a joke or a gag. Of the characterization of J.J. on the 1970s television show *Good Times*, Bogle points out:

> When J.J.’s coonery was criticized, the writers sought to round him out and attempted to deepen the character by making him an artist (with actual paintings
done by the African American artist Ernie Barnes). But nothing about J.J. ever suggested he had any artistic impulse or temperament. Plain and simple, he just seemed jive, juvenile, and asinine (203).

It is hard to know whether or not Basquiat saw or heard about this episode of *Good Times*; in a way, it is not that important. More important is that this one instance reflects the general notion, fairly prevalent in the way young black men were represented in popular imagery, that people who looked like Basquiat did not have the “head” for painting or fine art. As Basquiat realized as a young man that wanted to be an artist, he would have seen in the culture around either no black artists or the idea of a black artist as comical. This process of realization or recognition, which happened very early for him, made him particularly self-aware and self-conscious of his peculiar and unique position, and this, in turn, informed the racial performance that constituted his life and art.

**Early Performances**

As Basquiat’s experiences in school, at home, and with popular culture suggest, race and racism played a major role in the artist’s early life. Not only was Basquiat raised in areas of Brooklyn where his blackness would have made him hyper-visible and, hence, the target of racism, he attended schools where he was subjected to malicious racism from fellow students and more subtle and unintentional racism from teachers and school authorities. In this case, Basquiat’s early experiences with race and racism help to explain how racial performance became the defining feature of his life and art as does another major feature of his early years, his flair for performance. As a youth, Basquiat displayed a penchant for drama; he was always pretending, acting up, acting out, and making a public spectacle of himself.
Basquiat, for example, “liked to tell people that he grew up in the ghetto” (quoted in Hoban 21) even though this was clearly not the case. In fact, he worked hard and took several steps to convey this image to people in several ways. Basquiat left home for the streets in 1975 at the age of fifteen. He lived in several places in New York City. He camped out in Harriman State Park for a few nights. Then, he stayed at a boy’s home but left because “he couldn’t take the criminal element” (Hoban 22). Eventually Basquiat ended up in Washington Square Park, which was “divided up into a loose group of gangs, each with its own turf” (Hoban 23). There, Basquiat “would drink wine with winos” and “think of being a bum for the rest of his life” (quoted in Hoban 22) until Gerard, with the help of the police, eventually found his son and convinced him to come home to Brooklyn. At school, among classmates and teachers, Basquiat “portrayed himself as a poor boy living on the edge” (quoted in Hoban 27). According to one of his teachers, Lester Denmark, “He looked like this little street kid. He dressed in rags and wore little psychedelic glasses and had natty hair” (quoted in Hoban 25). He told a schoolmate that he had been a prostitute on 42nd Street (Hoban 25). Soon after that, word began circulating that “Jean-Michel had been turning tricks in Times Square and had even contracted syphilis” (Hoban 25). It is hard to know how much of what Basquiat claimed actually happened; however, that he made such public claims, whether true or false, shows how concerned he was with trying to convince and impress upon those around him that he was a “ghetto” or “street” person.

Consistent with Basquiat’s act as a “ghetto kid” was his constant acting up and acting out at school. According to his father, Basquiat thought he was “above the school system and teachers” and “got thrown out of schools and couldn’t be disciplined” (quoted in Hoban 20). By the time he entered City-as-School in the eleventh grade, Basquiat had a “serious attitude” (Hoban 23). One of Basquiat’s school friends, Ken Cybulska, recalled that during an art history
course offered by City-as-School at the Museum of Modern Art “Jean-Michel jumped right into one of the exhibits” (quoted in Hoban 24). Basquiat’s final and most memorable school exploit occurred during the June 1978 City-as-School graduation. As Principal Fred Koury stood center stage, Basquiat “reached around the curtain and, perfect, hit him square in the face” with a pie and, then, “disappeared down the aisle and out of the building” (Hoban 30). Basquiat left before his senior year. According to Hoban, “He was already in trouble for making out with a white girl on the school premises and selling subway tokens instead of using them to get to class. The graduation fiasco was the final straw” (31).

In his last year of school, Basquiat also created a graffiti identity for himself. SAMO started as a fictional character by Basquiat and friend, Al Diaz, while both were attending City-as-School. An “acronym or corrupted shortening” (Emmerling 12) of the phrase, “Same Old Shit,” SAMO originated in the school lounge as a “stoned joke” (Hoban 25) between Basquiat and Diaz and first appeared in the school newspaper in the Spring of 1977 in “an essay on bogus religion” (Hoban 25). According to biographer, Leonhard Emmerling,

For the paper Basquiat drew a comic about a young searcher for truth, who wishes to find a modern and stylish form of spirituality, but who instead is confronted with a false priest who attempts to sell him on various established religions, including Judaism, Catholicism, and Zen Buddhism. Finally, the pseudo-religion of SAMO takes hold of the young man (12).

Basquiat and Diaz’s creation also made an appearance as a persona in a theatre-therapy group called Family Life which met as part of a program at City-as-School (Hoban 26-27). Although SAMO began in 1977 as a school project, in May 1978, Basquiat and Diaz began magic marker- and spray painting “witty and portentous” (Hoban 27) SAMO aphorisms throughout New
York City, mainly on subway trains throughout lower Manhattan (Sirmans 234), to the neighborhood of the School of the Visual Arts, and to the area around major art galleries located in SoHo and Tribeca areas of the city (Emmerling 12). Due to the ubiquity and popularity of SAMO, Basquiat and Diaz were able to sell their story to *The Village Voice* in late 1978 for $100. In 1979, shortly after the article appeared, Basquiat and Diaz had a falling out that ended the SAMO collaboration, and “SAMO is Dead” began appearing on various SoHo walls” (“Chronology” 236). SAMO’s official death was marked by graffiti artist, Keith Haring, in a poem entitled “SAMO is Dead” and in a eulogy performed at Club 57, a well-known nightspot in New York City.

The proclamation of SAMO’s death, however, seems to be just another one of Basquiat’s public acts or put-ons as he continued to identify himself and his art with SAMO in several ways after 1979. In 1980, for example, Basquiat “created a large SAMO installation” (“Chronology” 237) for the “Times Square Show,” a group exhibition held in a vacant building at 41st Street and Seventh Avenue in the Times Square area of New York. In the same year, Basquiat recreated some of his SAMO sayings for Glenn O’Brien’s film, *New York Beat*, which was later released in 2000 under the title, *Downtown 81*. Furthermore, the works that Basquiat submitted for the “New York/New Wave” show were, according to fellow painter, Brett De Palma, “halfway between his SAMO stuff and images that were kind of smeared, and everything was very violent and frenetic” (quoted in Hoban 67). Also, Basquiat’s first show at the Annina Nosei Gallery in 1982 “included a printed page of the text that appeared in his poem drawings. The list included a number of SAMO sayings. ‘Plush Safe…he think.’ ‘Pay for Soup. Build a Fort. Set that on Fire.’ ‘The whole livery line bow like this with big money all crushed into these feet’” (Hoban 41). In
this case, the symbolic killing of SAMO and his persistence as a specter represents yet another
one of Basquiat’s early public performances.

Basquiat’s early penchant for public spectacle, however, was not completely separate
from or unrelated to his racial experiences. For example, Basquiat’s rebellious behavior as a
student was linked to the racial reality of his schooling. According to Ann Arnett Ferguson, not
only do schools use race as “a filter in the interpretive work of making judgments about the
implications of children’s behaviors” (Ferguson 73), “school labeling practices and the exercise
of rules operate as part of a hidden curriculum to marginalize and isolate black youth in
disciplinary spaces and brand them as criminally inclined” (Ferguson 2). Moreover, school
children understand that this is the case and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Children are highly knowledgeable about teachers’ identifying practices and
assessments. They are sophisticated participant observers themselves, skilled
interpreters and astute analysts of social interactions, cognizant of a variety of
cues that signal teachers’ expectations of children. They are aware not only of the
institution’s ranking and labeling system, but of their own and other children’s
position within that system. This knowledge has a marked effect on concomitant
self-fashioning within school (Ferguson 97-98).

Through acts such as “constant noise, joking, shouting, uncooperative, and disruptive behavior
during lessons” (Ferguson 175), students deemed troublemakers “actively distance and separate
themselves from a school as a desirable and authoritative object of identification” (Ferguson 97).
In this case, Basquiat’s “bad boy” behavior was linked, at least in part, to how the schools he
attended perceived his blackness.
Ferguson’s study sheds new light on the meaning of Basquiat’s experiences and behavior in school. In this case, Basquiat’s “bad” attitude, his “ghetto” dress, and his rebellious pranks were not merely the acts of a restless youth or of a young artistic genius but rather a response to an institution that saw him, a young black male, as a “savage beast.” Of course, Basquiat had the intellectual capacity to do very well in school. According to his father, he was “so bright, absolutely an unbelievable mind, a genius” (quoted in Hoban 20). Teachers described Basquiat as “extremely witty and acerbic” and “almost too smart for his own good” (quoted in Hoban 29). Therefore, Basquiat’s failure in school, which culminated with him dropping out just a year before he was to graduate, was not the result of a lack of intelligence or ability on his part. Rather, his resistant attitude as a student through acting up, acting out, and eventually dropping out was determined in large part by the way that schools as institutions deploy race.

**Graffiti**

Much about Basquiat’s graffiti identity and writing as SAMO appears to have been driven by issues of race as well, even the moniker itself. The word, SAMO, “sounds suspiciously like (little black) Sambo” (Negron-Muntaner 117) and “invites white viewers to insert a ‘b’ between the ‘m’ and the ‘o’” (Hebdige 60). SAMO is also an “anagram of Amos, as in Amos ‘n’ Andy, famous racist characters Jean-Michel referred to later in his work” (Hoban 28). Besides its name, however, the aesthetic, thematic, and geographic uniqueness of SAMO in relation to other graffiti writing of the day similarly reflects a concern and engagement with issues of black and white.

For one, the style of SAMO made it somewhat unique among much of the graffiti writing of the day. According to Joe Austin, graffiti writers wrote in three main styles – softie,
blockbuster, and mechanical. The first is “three-dimensional, rounded, and ‘puffy’ or inflated in appearance,” the second “may or may not be three-dimensional” and are “squarish and sharp edged,” like “advertising sign lettering” (111), and the third is “twisted, fractured, or crumbled letters as well as interpenetrating arrows, bars, and ‘extensions’” and is not concerned with legibility at all” (112). Comprised of one-dimensional, basic black script, Basquiat’s SAMO writing did not line up with any of the three established styles of graffiti (see Figure 1).

According to friend and fellow graffiti artist, Fab 5 Freddy, Basquiat had no desire to write in one of the existing styles of graffiti:

Jean didn’t come from the traditional school of subway graffiti. He was curious about it and he liked it, you can see it in some of the early work, especially in his drawings, but he hadn’t been around the master spray painters. When I gave him the can he came up, and he was filling in, and I remember saying, “don’t let it drip.” So, he just came up to the plastic and painted one big black spot, for about two minutes. It dripped everywhere (43).

As his clear disregard for the instructions of an established graffiti artist such as Fab 5 Freddy indicates, Basquiat wanted his SAMO writings to possess a certain amount of aesthetic uniqueness in relation to the other graffiti art of the day.

Basquiat’s graffiti was also somewhat distinct in its content and themes. According to writer and friend, Glenn O’Brien, “Most graffiti writers were writing their names, however his was with very mysterious messages and slogans” (63), some of which are listed below.

- SAMO as a new art form. SAMO as an end to mindwash religion, nowhere politics and bogus philosophy. SAMO as an escape clause. SAMO saves idiots.
Figure 1

Basquiat recreating one of his SAMO phrases

for the film, *New York Beat*, a.k.a *Downtown 81*
SAMO as an end to bogus pseudo intellectual. My mouth, therefore, an error.
Plush safe...he think. SAMO as an alternative to God. SAMO as an end to playing artist. SAMO as an end 2 Vinyl Punkery. SAMO as an expression of spiritual love. SAMO for the so-called avant-garde. SAMO as an alternative 2 playing art with the “radical chic” set on Daddy’s $funds. SAMO as an end 2 confining art terms. Riding around in Daddy’s convertible trust fund company. SAMO as an alternative to the “meat rack” arteest on display (Emmerling 12).

Besides Basquiat’s SAMO, there was other message-based graffiti at the time. In Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York, Craig Castleman offers some examples of the other message-based graffiti that was written at the time: “Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow, We Bust Your Ass, and We’re Number One” (40). As is evident in the differences between these types of sayings and SAMO’s, Basquiat’s writing was not “message” graffiti in the same or traditional sense. SAMO was, according to fellow graffiti artist, Keith Haring “literary graffiti, one that wasn’t done just for the sake of writing a name or for making a formal mark. These were little poems, little statements – they were non sequitors – and they were on the street” (quoted in Gruen 52). Thus, Basquiat’s SAMO, although a form of “message” graffiti, was unique in the esoteric subject matter of its messages.

Along with its style and content, the location and placement of Basquiat’s SAMO writings also lent it a particular uniqueness. Basquiat mostly painted Basquiat “on the streets of SoHo” (O’Brien 63) and “across the power corridors of Manhattan” (Negron-Muntaner 116). The Bronx and Brooklyn-based graffiti gangs, however, were “not interested in SoHo” (Hoban 36). Basquiat, then, did not write in the same areas and on the same public spaces as established
graffiti artists. Therefore, in the manner and in the places it was written as well as in the topics it covered, SAMO stood out among other New York City graffiti art of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

The aesthetic, thematic, and geographic qualities of Basquiat’s graffiti writing did not, however, just make it particularly eye-catching; they combined to foster the impression that SAMO was the work of a white writer. Rather than evoking comparisons with other graffiti, SAMO more closely resembled the “slogan-filled plaques” of Jenny Holzer (see Figure 2) and the “sardonic comments in the didactic photographs” (Hoban 33) of Barbara Kruger (see Figure 3), both white female artists who were Basquiat’s contemporaries and who approached text in a similar stylistic manner. Keith Haring found that SAMO reminded him not only of the way Jenny Holzer used language but also of the cut-up writing of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin (quoted in Gruen 55). Because SAMO looked like “white conceptual art” (38), according to Fab 5 Freddy, most people assumed it was not done by a black or Latino writer.

Along with the aesthetics, themes, and locations of SAMO, the way Basquiat chose to identify with graffiti art is racially inflected as well. In this regard, Basquiat’s ambivalent relationship with SAMO throughout his career stemmed from popular racial perceptions of graffiti art and artists that abounded. Although writers were a “multiracial group” (Austin 152), graffiti was largely attributed to blacks and Latinos. According to Keith Haring, “The graffiti artists were evenly mixed between blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Chinese. It was a racist myth that graffiti artists were only blacks and Puerto Ricans. Some of the biggest names in graffiti were white kids” (quoted in Gruen 66). According to Suzanne Mallouck, Basquiat’s so-called “widow” (quoted in Clement 183), the perception of graffiti as primarily the domain of non-whites determined the way Basquiat chose to publicly identify with it.
Figure 2

*The Living Series: It Takes Awhile, 1980 – 1982*

by Jenny Holzer
Figure 3

Untitled (I shop therefore I am), 1987

by Barbara Kruger
Jean was black and had to present himself as separate from graffiti somehow. Keith [Haring] was gay and white and could glamorize graffiti in a way that Jean could not. Jean and Keith both understood this. Jean could only be seen hanging around with Toxie, Ramellzee, Dondi White, A-1, Futura 2000, and other graffiti artists when he had already established himself as a legitimate artist. He was always very conscious of how he was perceived. It was a real struggle for him, being Black, to be seen as separate from the graffiti artists. Even though he admired it and it was in his roots and he used it to start his career, he was never deep in the graffiti scene (quoted in Clement 136).

As Mallouck points out, the issue of race drove Basquiat’s decision to create public distance between himself and the graffiti movement. Basquiat’s blackness along with graffiti’s racial baggage determined who he could and could not be seen with in public; it also figured into how he handled interview questions about SAMO and graffiti.

In interviews, Basquiat constantly distanced himself from his graffiti identity by insisting that SAMO was essentially a superficial and artistically inconsequential publicity stunt to get noticed by the art world, and, as such, it had no bearing on his painting. Take, for example, some of the dialogue between Basquiat and Marc Miller, then curator and adjunct professor of art history at New York University, in a videotaped interview conducted in the artist’s studio on Crosby Street in SoHo in 1983:

MM: So, you’ve stopped doing works in the street. That was something that you did a number of years ago?

JMB: That was a really, really long time ago. That was with some friends from high school. We used to just drink Ballantine Ale all the time and just write stuff
on the walls and throw bottles and grab the wig off a lady working the Transit system because she took my bus pass from me one day...just teenage stuff.

MM: So, there was no ambition in your...

JMB: No, there was really no ambition in it all.

MM: You were writing under the name of SAMO?

JMB: SAMO, yeah

MM: And the works that were signed SAMO were done by you and other people?

JMB: No, no, no. It was me and Al Diaz.

MM: What were some of the things you used to write down?

JMB: It'd be too embarrassing to bring it up now. It was stuff from like a young mind.

This exchange between Basquiat and Miller demonstrates how Basquiat used the arena of the filmed interview to publicly distance himself from SAMO and from graffiti as well. In this case, Basquiat creates a distance between himself and SAMO and between himself and graffiti in the way he responds as well as in his facial and bodily expressions.

Basquiat, mainly near the end of the exchange with Miller, uses body language to indicate that he really does not want to talk about SAMO or graffiti and that he is eager to move on to a different topic. For instance, after Miller asks Basquiat to tell him some of the things he used to write as SAMO, Basquiat rests his head in his hand and then rubs his eyes sleepily to indicate to Miller that he is bored and uninterested in the discussion at hand. It was not just through facial and bodily expressions, however, that Basquiat expressed his unwillingness to talk about his graffiti work and identity. The artist’s actual answers to Miller’s questions clearly show that he is attempting to distance himself from SAMO and from graffiti. With his response to
Miller’s first question Basquiat places his SAMO graffiti in the distant past, even though it had been declared officially dead only four years earlier with Keith Haring’s 1979 “eulogy.” In response to Miller’s follow-up questions, Basquiat described his graffiti writing as naïve, drunken, and ambitionless teenage “stuff,” the artistic equivalent of “throwing bottles” and “grabbing wigs” off women’s heads. Thus, through his responses and body language, Basquiat used his interview with Marc Miller to establish separation between him and his SAMO graffiti.

Basquiat struck a similar pose in a 1983 interview for Andy Warhol’s Interview magazine, conducted by Henry Geldzahler, who was Curator of Twentieth Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1967 to 1978 and Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for the City of New York from 1978 to 1982. Take, for example, the following exchange between Basquiat and Geldzahler:

HG: Did you ever think of yourself as a graffiti artist, before the name became a middle class luxury?
JMB: I guess I did.
HG: Did you work in the streets and the subways because you didn’t have materials or because you wanted to communicate?
JMB: I wanted to build up a name for myself.
HG: Territory? Did you have an area that was yours?
JMB: Mostly downtown. Then the “D” train.
HG: How’d you pick the “D” train?
JMB: That was the one I went home on, from downtown to Brooklyn.
HG: But you knew Brooklyn wasn’t going to be your canvas from the beginning.
Manhattan was where the art goes on, so that was where you were going to work?
JMB: Well, SAMO wasn’t supposed to be art, really (57).

Just as he did in his interview with Miller earlier that same year, Basquiat used his discussion with Geldzahler as an opportunity to separate himself from SAMO and from graffiti. Although it is hard to know Basquiat’s facial and bodily expressions as Geldzahler’s interview, unlike Miller’s, was made for print rather than video, his responses are evidence enough of his effort to muddle his identification with SAMO and graffiti.

To Geldzahler’s first question, which acknowledges the mainstreaming of graffiti in the process of asking the artist if and when he first thought of himself as a graffiti artist, Basquiat’s short, vague, and generally unreflective answer reveals that he really hasn’t thought much about it, and it is not an area of concern or interest for him. With his second question, Geldzahler gives Basquiat an opportunity to talk about why he “worked in the streets.” By offering him two choices, one, “because you didn’t have materials,” or two, “because you wanted to communicate,” Geldzahler appears to be trying to get Basquiat to talk about graffiti in a way that shows that he didn’t just use or exploit it and contribute to its current status as a “middle class luxury.” Basquiat, perhaps sensing this endeavor in Geldzahler’s leading questions, does not give Geldzahler the answer he wants. Rather, by insisting that he wrote graffiti “to build a name for himself,” Basquiat distances himself from SAMO and graffiti by insisting that his relationship to graffiti was a superficial and selfish one. Basquiat suggests to Geldzahler that he only used SAMO to get famous and that it was discarded as an identity and influence once it served that purpose. Unsatisfied with Basquiat’s responses, Geldzahler seems committed to getting Basquiat to admit that his SAMO work was not merely a publicity stunt. When Basquiat states that he mainly wrote “downtown” and on the “D train,” Geldzahler is quick to point out that he also wrote in Manhattan, even going so as far as to suggest to the artist why he wrote there, stating
“Manhattan was where the art goes on, so that was where you were going to work.” With this, Geldzahler is trying to establish that Basquiat wanted his graffiti to be seen as “art”; Basquiat, however, refuses to allow his graffiti writing to be seen as anything other than an attention-getting scheme, stating “SAMO wasn’t supposed to be art.” Just as with Miller, Basquiat handled questions by Geldzahler concerning graffiti and SAMO in a way that distanced him from both.

Basquiat, moreover, appears to have maintained a consistent position on his SAMO writing throughout his entire career. To the comment by poet and professor of Aesthetics, Demosthenes Davvetas, in a 1988 interview “It seems like you don’t like to be treated like a graffiti artist,” (63) Basquiat replied, “Labels don’t mean anything to me. My work has nothing to do with graffiti. It’s painting, it’s always been. I’ve always painted. Well before painting was in fashion” (63). In this case, Basquiat takes Davvetas’ comment as yet another opportunity to proclaim that he has no connection to graffiti, by claiming that what he does and has always done is “painting,” which is different, according to Basquiat, from “graffiti.” As the artist’s interviews with Miller, Geldzahler, and Davvetas all indicate, Basquiat, throughout his career, sought to distance himself from SAMO and from graffiti. This tendency comes through in his body language and facial expressions that expressed disinterest, boredom, and irritation. In these interviews, he expressed a lack of desire to talk about the subject. When he did respond, his answers were curt testimonies to the fact that his graffiti writing was merely an attention-getting scheme that had no aesthetic bearing on the “real” art he was then engaged in. Through his attitude and answers to interviewers, Basquiat conveyed to them that SAMO had served its purpose; hence, there was really no point talking about it further.

That Basquiat’s efforts to publicly distance himself and his work from graffiti were driven by issues of race rather than aesthetics is evidenced in how his later canvases bear the
influence of SAMO and graffiti. In *Ambition and Love in Modern Art*, Jonathan Weinberg argues that Basquiat’s graffiti style can be detected in *Charles the First* (1982) (see Figure 4). According to Weinberg, “In painting one phrase over another or striking a line through a word, Basquiat was also mimicking public graffiti in which alternate words are scrawled over signs. Often the word that is written over the sign is the nickname, or ‘tag,’ of the graffiti artist” (215). In his assessment of *Charles the First* (1982) and Basquiat’s oeuvre as a whole, Nicholas Mirzoeff similarly detects the influence of graffiti:

> The scratch and mix method was at the heart of Basquiat’s work. Graffiti artists often worked in hip-hop clubs and venues, creating backdrops and murals, sometimes painting at the same time as the music was playing. This method can be located in the least discussed aspect of Basquiat’s work, namely his technique, requiring that his work be analysed for more than the verbal content of his graffiti (169).

Although *Charles the First* (1982), a painting allegedly about jazz musician, Charlie Parker, was done by “Basquiat, the painter,” and not by “SAMO, the graffiti writer” and contains no reference to SAMO or any of his slogans, the written language in this piece is evocative of Basquiat’s graffiti writing. As *Charles the First* (1982) and later canvases illustrate, the ghost of SAMO continued to haunt Basquiat’s art throughout his career. Yet, he consistently distanced himself and his art from SAMO and from graffiti, maintaining in several interviews that SAMO was an isolated and unimportant part of his life and art.

Some, however, in drawing their conclusions regarding Basquiat’s relationship to SAMO and graffiti, take the artist’s responses in interviews at face value. Phoebe Hoban maintains that “he had created an alter ego [SAMO] only to exploit it for it for promotional and financial gain”
Figure 4

*Charles the First*, 1982

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Along the same line, Leonhard Emmerling insists that “his loss of interest in spraying bares his fine sense for the mechanisms of the art scene: first riding the wave of the graffiti movement, then distancing himself from it again when public interest subsided and when other strategies proved to be more effective” (12). To take his responses to questions in interviews about SAMO and graffiti at face value is to ignore the extent to which his racial experiences drove the way he identified with SAMO. Such a conclusion also ignores how the aesthetic, thematic, and geographic qualities of Basquiat’s graffiti writing also reflect a concern with racial issues. That Basquiat’s effort to publicly distance himself from SAMO was driven by the issue of race is further supported by the fact that graffiti and SAMO continued to influence his painting throughout his career, as the writing in *Charles the First* (1982) illustrates.

**Conclusion**

Race and performance, then, both played major roles in Basquiat’s early life. Not only did he experience racism where he grew up, where he went to school, and in popular culture at large, Basquiat exhibited in his early years a penchant for performance and public spectacle. Moreover, many of the artist’s early cases of acting up and acting out were driven by the perceptions of blackness that surrounded him. His “street kid” image and “bad boy” behavior as a student, for example, can not be separated from the manner in which the schools he attended viewed him as a “savage beast.” Furthermore, his identity and writing as the graffito, SAMO, were directed by racial perceptions that surrounded him. In this case, Basquiat’s effort to publicly distance himself from graffiti and SAMO, despite still being influenced by it, along with the way in which the aesthetic, themes, and location of his graffiti gave the impression that it was done by a white writer, both reflect an engagement with the popular misperception of graffiti as
primarily the domain of non-white urban youth. In this sense, the intersections between race and performance in the early years of Basquiat represent an important movement toward the performance of blackness that would come to dominate his later life and artwork.
CHAPTER TWO
GOING DOWNTOWN:
JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT AND
THE RACIAL AND CULTURAL POLITICS OF
NEW YORK’S AVANT-GARDE

Introduction

Just as with Basquiat’s early years, race and performance played an equally, if not more, important role in his experiences in the New York avant-garde movement of the late 1970s and early 80s. During this time in his life, Basquiat became immersed in and influenced by an art scene that was driven in its cultural politics by performance art and performance artists. In this context, the artist also continued to experience racism. As one of only a few blacks on an art scene dominated by white participants, Basquiat’s skin color made him highly visible. He met, on the one hand, with a strain of negrophobia, or a fear of hatred of blackness that translated into him being the subject of aggressive and overt racism. On the other hand, he faced a brand of unintentional racism and stereotyping typical of avant-gardism in general called negrophilia, or a love or admiration of blackness. This translated into him being fetishized and exoticized as a black artist. Basquiat, not surprisingly, continued to exhibit a penchant for public performance, much of which was racially inflected. This chapter argues, then, that the racial and cultural politics of the downtown New York avant-garde art scene helped to make race and performance important to Basquiat between 1978 and 1981, and, more importantly, to lay the groundwork for the racial performance that would become the defining feature of his life and art.
The Downtown Scene

In 1978, Basquiat left his family’s home in Brooklyn for good and went to Manhattan. There, he kept numerous addresses staying with several friends and also became part of the burgeoning downtown New York avant-garde scene. This artistic movement, from now on referred to simply as the “downtown” scene, began around 1974 and lasted until roughly 1984. According to Marvin J. Taylor, director of the Downtown Collection at New York University’s Fales Library and author of *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974 – 1984*:

In the mid-1970s a distinctively new attitude toward artistic production surfaced in Downtown New York. It was not a new aesthetic, not a new style, and not a unified movement, but rather an attitude toward the possibilities of and production of art. Although for the most part unformulated, this attitude was shared by a wide range of writers, artists, performers, musicians, filmmakers, and video artists who moved to the relatively inexpensive lofts and tenements of SoHo and the Lower East Side (20).

What gave birth to and “fueled” the scene more than anything else was, according to Taylor, punk music (19). In this regard, the downtown scene’s formative artistic and cultural moment came in 1974 when the punk band Television played CBGB’s in the Bowery.

Other punk bands such as the Ramones, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, and Patti Smith soon emerged on the scene, and their music reached out beyond the clubs to impact the whole downtown area. Jeffrey Deitch argues that by 1976, punk music had energized the life of the streets in the area around the Bowery from the areas known as Nolita and Noho to the nearby blocks of the East Village. The streets were animated with stark handmade posters for band performances, and spillover
from clubs made the surrounding streets into a no-budget punk version of sidewalk cafes (8).

The energy of punk and new wave music clubs spilled over not just into the streets but into downtown art galleries as well. According to Phoebe Hoban, “The club scene, with its myriad art installations and – graffiti and performance art at the Mudd Club, blacklight and theme shows at Club 57 – had given birth to the East Village gallery scene” (152). As Hoban points out, art galleries and spaces soon sprung up throughout the East Village to accommodate and showcase the wide array of art that was already being done in music and dance clubs like the Mudd Club and Club 57. One of the first galleries to open was the Fun Gallery in 1981. By 1983 there were at least a dozen new galleries in the East Village, and by 1984, at the scene’s peak, there were close to seventy galleries (Hoban 158). By 1984, the larger uptown art scene had begun encroaching on alternative downtown spaces like P.S. 1 and the Artist’s Space. By 1985, a majority of the downtown art spaces had closed as the scene shifted further north to the SoHo art establishment.

Between 1978 and 1981, Basquiat deeply immersed himself in downtown music and art. He was the “consummate bohemian regular” (Gendron 302) at downtown hot spots such as the Mudd Club, Club 57, CBGB’s, Hurrah’s, and Tier 3. Basquiat was also a musician within the scene. In 1979 and 1980 Basquiat played in the self-proclaimed art-noise band, Gray, who performed regularly at the Mudd Club. Although Basquiat only stayed in Gray for about a year, his participation in downtown art and culture continued into the early 1980s. In 1980, Basquiat earned the lead role in Downtown 81, a film “loosely based on the downtown art scene and on Basquiat himself” (“Chronology” 238). In that same year, Basquiat publicly exhibited his artwork for the first time in the Times Square Show, which with its venue, a run-down former
massage parlor in New York City’s porno district and its inclusion of “everything from sex toys to punk art to graffiti” marked “the birth of the eighties art movement” (Hoban 36-37). In 1981, Basquiat participated in the downtown art scene’s most highly publicized and important show, “New York/New Wave,” which was held at the P.S. 1 Gallery and “put the whole downtown cultural scene on display” (Hoban 65). Not only was Basquiat a participant, his “work was the sensation of the show” (Hoban 67), and helped him to gain recognition from the larger gallery system of the New York art world. From the time Basquiat moved to New York City in 1978 until he was “discovered” by the art world in 1981, he was profoundly involved in downtown avant-garde art and culture.

For all of its diversity of art and artists, the downtown scene united around the concept of performance and performance art. According to Roselle Goldberg in “Art After Hours: Downtown Performance,” “Performance provided the vehicle for this two-way shuttle between art world and everyday, between art space and all-night club. By the late 1970s, it was clear that performance was the key factor in the connectedness of the Downtown community” (103). Marvin Taylor agrees, arguing that for all of the creativity and differences among the various artists, performativity was one of the “central themes” (24) of the downtown art scene. As such, Basquiat was surrounded by performance art and performance artists. For example, at Club 57, Basquiat was close with the well-known performance artists John Sex and Klaus Nomi. Similarly, the Mudd Club, where Basquiat was a regular, was inhabited by “punk rockers, performance artists, painters, designers, dilettantes, and uptown and bridge-and-tunnel tourists” (Hoban 44). In Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde, Bernard Gendron points out that the Mudd Club was not merely a night club or music club but also “a performance space and art gallery” (299). While new wave bands and music continued to
be featured at the Mudd Club, “adventurous new arts, such as video and performance, were the first to exploit the new spaces created by the club’s expansion to the upper floors” (Gendron 300). Thus, at the Mudd Club and on the downtown scene in general, Basquiat had an intense and thorough relationship with performance art and artists between 1978 and 1981.

This relationship between Basquiat and performance art had a strong impact on how he came to see the role of “painter” and the function of the “canvas”. Bernard Gendron points out:

As the New York new wave developed, young painters, filmmakers, and performance artists, mostly from the nearby East Village, were increasingly showing up at CBGB’s and fraternizing with the musicians, many of whom reciprocally took a strong interest in the doings of the art world. Rock musicians went to their friends’ art shows, took part in their independent film or performance projects, and began explicitly to appropriate devices of the musical avant-garde, just as art musicians were appropriating rock devices or even forming rock bands. All this crisscrossing peaked with the much publicized “punk” and “new wave” art movements of the early 1980 amid the emergence of that legendary art-punk nightclub, the Mudd Club (Gendron 228).

As Gendron points out, there existed on the downtown scene, particularly at the Mudd Club, a widespread blurring of all boundaries, such as between high and low culture as well as between different media including visual art, performance art, and rock music (305). Important here, of course, is the fact of Basquiat’s strong attachment to an artistic movement in which a traditional art form like painting crisscrossed with the philosophy of performance art.

Basquiat’s brief but intense time on the downtown scene proved central in making performance the defining feature of his public persona and painting. On the one hand, Basquiat
constantly saw and talked to performance artists. He learned through his constant exposure to them that the body can serve as a canvas and that public persona can be an artwork in itself. Of course, Basquiat had already begun to figure this out as his “ghetto kid” act at school indicates, but seeing it done by other artists in a more formal setting and deliberate manner made it seem in his eyes more legitimate and necessary. Moreover, as this chapter shows later on, Basquiat participated in a lot of casual and formal performance pieces on the downtown scene, many of which were racially inflected. His public persona became more racially performative after he left the downtown scene and moved on to the larger uptown art world. This is not because the downtown scene was absent of racism; in fact, the next section shows how Basquiat faced a combination of negrophobia and negrophilia. On the downtown scene, however, Basquiat was more insulated and less mediated; hence, he did not yet see the need for the type of racial performance that came to dominate his public image in the so-called “heart of whiteness.”

Basquiat also discovered that the concept of performance could be applied to the act of painting and to the space of the canvas. According to Marvin Taylor, downtown artists expressed an interest in drawing attention to “the performative aspects of traditional artworks” (25). To paint then meant to incorporate into the act itself a recognition of and commentary on the act itself. Downtown artists like Basquiat recognized traditional art forms like painting as “cultural constructs” (Taylor 23); they moreover sought in their art to expose the constructed nature of media and genre. Basquiat, in this regard, engaged in what might be called “performance painting.” Because painting had been constructed culturally and histrionically along such racial lines, with the white male genius as the ideal painter and the black male’s so-called primitive and savage nature preventing him from creating “high” art, Basquiat’s performance painting ultimately became devoted to dramatizing the fact that racist thinking had been the culprit in
preventing black men from being seen as serious painters and that such thinking would no doubt impact his reception as an artist. Thus, Basquiat painted and treated the canvas in way that would sarcastically remind his white audiences why black people shouldn’t paint in the first place; it would in other words, play with what he believed to be his white audiences’ deep-seated racism. In this way, Basquiat’s art always bore the mark of the downtown philosophy and aesthetic; his art was intended to provoke (Gumpert 9), and reflected an awareness of the “spectator’s heightened role” (Taylor 11). Yet, it also bore the mark of his racial experiences with negrophobia and negrophilia.

Negrophobia and Negrophilia

While on the downtown scene, Basquiat, put simply, lived surrounded by whites. According to Justin Thyme, one of the members of Gray, “At that time, all downtown clubs were dominated by white kids and he [Basquiat] was the only black kid among them” (12). Graffiti artist and downtown denizen, Fred Braithwaite, also known as Fab 5 Freddy, notes along the same lines that “the scene downtown was pretty much all white except for me, Jean-Michel, and a few other people” (quoted in “Chronology” 236). Moreover, Basquiat’s blackness, according to graffiti artist, Keith Haring, partly accounted for why he stood out as “uniquely different and interesting” (53). Even within Gray, Basquiat was the only black band member (see Figure 5). Although not the only black person in the entire scene, he was one of only a handful. In this regard, Basquiat’s blackness made him racially visible on a predominantly white scene. In addition, he stood at the center of a culture marked by what Frantz Fanon termed, “negrophobia,” a fear or hatred of blackness because it is “equated with ugliness, sin, darkness or immorality” (Fanon 192). According to black graffiti artist and friend, Fred Brathwaite, “Being black and
Figure 5

Basquiat with his band, Gray
dealing with race in America was an obvious aspect of our relationship. Taxis not picking us up, people looking at us and assuming we were criminals or threatening…Because skin color was a day-to-day reality in those times” (121).

The downtown scene, as mentioned earlier, was fueled by punk music more so than anything else, which is important especially considering punk’s conflicted relationship with blackness. According to Bernard Gendron, “punk/new wave is the first of the seventies rock genres to assume an explicitly hostile posture toward disco, the most popular black music of the time” (Gendron 284). That predominantly white punk despised predominantly black disco is no mere coincidence, according to Mikal Gilmore, who notes “in such a context, anti-disco slogan like ‘Death to Disco’ and ‘Disco Sucks’ have to be regarded more as racial and sexual epithets than as statements of musical preference” (quoted in Garofalo 252). In this sense, the downtown scene’s knee-jerk dislike and dismissal of the predominantly black and Latin disco scene stands as further proof of its racist tendencies.

Smaller episodes and incidents suggest as well that on the downtown scene Basquiat stood at the center of a racist culture. For example, John Lurie, who was a member of the downtown new wave band the Lounge Lizards, claims that he turned down the main role in Glenn O’Brien’s film, Downtown 81, because “Glenn asked my girlfriend of that time, who was black, to make pancakes. She was really angry at him” (40). Although this might seem like an unimportant and harmless comment and incident, it stands, nonetheless, as a measure of the type of racial thinking that permeated the downtown scene. In this case, it is no small matter that O’Brien, an influential and central figure on the downtown scene, in asking Lurie’s girlfriend to make pancakes, invoked the racial stereotype of the black mammy or Aunt Jemima figure. Black artist Joe Lewis, in an interview in The Downtown Book, recounts an episode that, like O’Brien’s
comment, reflects the downtown scene’s strong current of racism. According to Lewis, the East Village Gallery expressed interest in showing Lewis’ art after they saw some of it at a group show at the gallery, Fashion Moda; however, when they met him later to talk about the possibility of a show and saw that he was black, they declined stating “That must be a mistake. We don’t show Black Art” (104). Along the same lines, Suzanne Mallouck, whom Basquiat met and began dating in early 1980 and who worked at a downtown bar called Night Birds, claims that she had to quit working there because the owner caught her kissing Basquiat at the bar (Clement 29). According to Mallouck, “He [the owner] said he would never let his daughter do what I was doing and that I should look for a white boy” (quoted in 29). It is uncertain as to whether or not Mallouck shared this information with Basquiat; nonetheless, this episode along with O’Brien’s comment and Lewis’ experience with the East Village Gallery demonstrates that racism was a part of downtown culture.

Not surprisingly, Basquiat felt the racism of the downtown scene. He experienced racial prejudice first-hand and, more than likely, quite frequently. Basquiat, to take one example, would hear biased comments and insults whenever he appeared on Glenn O’Brien’s public access cable show called TV Party. According to biographer Phoebe Hoban,

> Viewers would call in and pepper Basqui at with questions about SAMO. “Hey, how did you finally get Buckwheat on the show? I thought he was dead. Are you going to get Spanky and Alfalfa too?” asked one caller, much to Basquiat’s delight. “Yeah, we’re making a comeback.” He laughs. But the smile freezes on his face when the caller suddenly adds, “Let me ask you a question – didn’t you snatch my chain last week on the subway?” (53).
By referring to Basquiat as “Buckwheat” and then asking him if he stole his chain last week on the subway, the caller touches on at least three racial stereotypes. Although Basquiat attempted to laugh off the Buckwheat comment he was undoubtedly aware of its racist implications. According to Donald Bogle, author of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, the Buckwheat character from The Little Rascals is a variation on the “coon” or “pickaninny” stereotypes in which blacks are “unreliable, crazy, lazy subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language” (7-8). The second racist stereotype evoked by the caller is that young black males are prone to criminality or are all “chain snatchers.” As it was more malicious in intent and implication than his Buckwheat comment, it warranted a more serious response from Basquiat. The final and perhaps least obvious racial stereotype deployed by the caller is that “all black people look alike,” which he hints at by not knowing for certain if it was Basquiat or some other black man who stole who his property. In other words, it could have been any black guy.

The artist’s first meeting with Suzanne Mallouck’s mother was also telling of his experiences as a young black man on the downtown scene. Mallouck recalled that,

Jean-Michel met my mother. She’s an intellectual, but very eccentric and very English- very colonialist. Just by the way she speaks she is racist, in a very covert way – even though she married my father who’s Palestinian. Jean-Michel picked up on this immediately…he was furious and hated my mother (102).

This incident is important for two reasons. First, it illustrates that much of the negrophobia that Basquiat encountered was more covert and coded than overt and blatant. According to Fred Brathwaite, black artists like he and Basquiat were more likely to encounter “occasional
ignorance” on the downtown scene than “overt racism” (121). Basquiat, here, seems more bothered by the avant-garde’s ignorance than does Brathwaite. Second, this incident shows how acutely the artist was tuned in to racist language. Whatever Mrs. Mallouck said, it must have been offensive as it led him to hate his girlfriend’s mother. As it was, according to Mallouck, the covert racism of a colonialist woman, it stands to reason that Mallouck’s mother probably talked down to him and treated him with condescension.

Basquiat also experienced racism first-hand at the Mudd Club, even though he was a regular there. According to Glenn O’Brien:

One night, late in the history of the club, we showed up at the front door and they wouldn’t let us in. This was unbelievable. Finally the doorman said no blacks were allowed in. Outraged, we called up to the owner Steve Mass. He came down, let us in the club, bought us drinks and then worked the door himself until 4 am (33).

This incident is instructive in two ways. First, the doorman’s effort to segregate the Mudd Club shows, yet again, that Basquiat was subjected to racism while he was on the downtown avant-garde art scene. Yet, owner Steve Mass’ reaction also illustrates that, of course, not everyone on the downtown scene was an unapologetic racist. Take, as another example, Glenn O’Brien. Although his “pancake” comment to John Lurie regarding his black girlfriend suggests that he harbored some racist tendencies, O’Brien was very friendly with Basquiat and even gave him the starring role in his film, Downtown 81. That his “pancake” comment was aimed at a black woman suggests that it might be a more sexist than racist. Although Basquiat experienced kindness and acceptance on the downtown scene from whites such as Mass, O’Brien, and others, he also, as the above examples illustrate, experienced racial discrimination in the form of insults
and exclusion. Thus, Basquiat, between 1978 and 1981, felt the tension of an avant-garde culture with a significant racist strain.

The artist was also surrounded by negrophobia’s opposite, negrophilia, which is “a love for black culture” (quoted in Archer-Straw 9). Historically, negrophilia has gone hand in hand with both European and American forms of avant-gardism and bohemianism. In Paris in the 1920s, the intense desire for all things black materialized mainly in the European avant-garde’s “lionization” (Gendron 9) of jazz; this “fad for all things Negro,” (Gendron 9) however, also entailed an embrace of other aspects of black culture “from African masks and myths, to the Brazilian samba and Josephine Baker” (Gendron 9). Gendron points out that “the preoccupation with things Africanesque went considerably beyond jazz, finding expression in almost every sector of French culture, from painting and dance to music hall and furniture design” (103). Post-World War I Paris, however, was not the only avant-garde and bohemian art scene to possess a strong strain of negrophilia. In The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture, Jon Panish notes that “the formation of the bohemian community in Greenwich village during the 1950s was catalyzed, in no small part, by jazz and the response to it by artists, writers, and intellectuals” (37). Furthermore, in Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, Eric Lott argues that “a major strain of American bohemia has its origins in blackface performers and enthusiasts” (50) who were “drawn to blackness” (50). As Basquiat stood between 1978 and 1981 at the heart and center of New York bohemia, he too stood within a long tradition and history of racism in the form of negrophilia.

That negrophilia is, like its opposite, negrophobia, a form of racism is perhaps in need of some explanation. After all, how can it be maintained that a love of blackness is as equally racist as a hatred of blackness? Getting to this question requires an examination of the motives driving
negrophilia, the impression of blackness that it draws on and adheres to, and the nature of the relationship between white bohemia and black art that results. In her discussion of the post-World War I Parisian avant-garde, Petrine Archer-Straw notes that the French love for black culture was not simply the product of an aesthetic development or realization but rather emerged out of a combined process of “self-definition,” (11) “a need to outrage,” and as “an expression of their romanticized interest in origins, the prehistoric, the archaic, and meso-American cultures” (11). In this case, it is less about the art itself and more about what the art can do psychologically for the European sense of self. Panish, in his assessment of post-World War II New York City bohemia, notes a similar self-centeredness with the American embrace of jazz and black culture. Panish writes:

Euro American members of these [jazz club] audiences characterize their participation not in terms of racial interaction but in terms of their rebellion against the more established segments of American culture. Being in the audience at a bop performance, in other words, was significant to white outsiders because it helped distinguish them from the mass of the American population (39).

In this case, much of what drives the European and American avant-garde’s love of jazz and black culture is self-serving.

Equally indicative of how negrophilia functions as a form of racism is the impression or image of blackness that it draws on and adheres to. According to Archer-Straw, negrophilia is bound up with the idea that black culture is more “primitive,” “savage,” and “deviant” (11). Archer-Straw points out, “The Primitive represented the process which Europeans suggested their own superiority by placing inferior status on others. This process was entirely one-sided: it was simply a way for Europeans to project their fear of difference onto other races” (12). Thus,
to love black art and culture because it is supposedly more “primitive” or “savage” has racist implications as “primitive was the bottom line in a hierarchy of categories that placed European civilization at its pinnacle” (Archer-Straw 11). Although such a designation was meant as a compliment by members of the avant-garde, in actuality, it assumes not just a difference between European and non-European culture, but also the superiority of the former over the latter.

Because bohemian love of blackness is marked by a large degree of self-interest as well as by a colonial and racist image of black culture, the resulting relationship between the two is problematic. According to Bernard Gendron, “negrophilia completely conflates African and African American cultural production, and the states of mind underlying them, while eliding all but the most superficial differences” (106). Gendron furthermore points out that the avant-garde’s negrophilia is not just troubling in its simplification of blackness and black culture.

The post-war avant-gardes did not restrict themselves to merely to being aficionados, mere “consumers” of “negro” art and music, but quite actively brought their negrophilia to bear in a variety of ways on their own aesthetic practices. They appropriated “negro” culture, parodied it, and subjected it to pastiche and bricolage; they exploited its formal properties and tapped its alleged spiritual powers; they claimed to synthesize it with European culture, to explore its roots, to reveal it in its authenticity, and to fulfill its hidden potential; they exhibited it, shared their aesthetic spaces with it, publicized it, and capitalized on its shock value (Gendron 110).

In this case, while the avant-garde professes a love and admiration of black culture, in actuality, it essentializes, appropriates, and exploits it. Although less malicious in intent than negrophobia, negrophilia’s self-serving interest in black culture, its fixing of it as the primitive and savage
inferior of European culture, and its oppressive uses of black culture brings it under the umbrella of racism. Thus, on the downtown New York avant-garde scene of the 1970s and 1980s, Basquiat experienced blatant and malicious racism in the form of insults and exclusion; equally, important and widespread, however, was the less deliberate racism he experienced in the form of negrophilia.

An example of the negrophiliac racism that Basquiat experienced on the downtown scene is captured and documented in Glen O’Brien’s film, *Downtown 81*. In one particularly telling scene, the main character, Jean, played by Basquiat and modeled closely after the artist’s own life, pays a visit to a character named Mrs. Cavalcanti, to whom Jean hopes to sell one of his paintings. Mrs. Cavalcanti is characterized in the film as a wealthy, European art patron and as a negrophile. Jazz music plays in the background and Mrs. Cavalcanti owns a book of photography by Man Ray, whose “particular brand of artistry and fashion photography created the celluloid negrophile” (Archer-Straw 82). In this regard, before we even meet Mrs. Cavalcanti in this scene, two signifiers, jazz music and a book of Man Ray’s photography, testify to her negrophilia and prophecy her reception of Jean and his painting. As is expected, Mrs. Cavalcanti is enamored of Jean. When she enters, she addresses him as “darling” and kisses him on the cheek and then on the mouth. As they sit on the couch, she flirts openly with him by touching his arm and chest and telling him how funny he is. The manner in which she admires the work he is attempting to sell her is equally telling of her negrophilia. Mrs. Cavalcanti tells him his painting is “absolutely marvelous,” describing it as “so strong, so savage.” Ultimately, Mrs. Cavalcanti’s decision to purchase Jean’s painting is determined by her negrophilia. This scene in *Downtown 81*, through its use of jazz music, the photography of Man Ray, and dialogue that conflates the quality of Jean’s work with its supposed “savagery,” suggests that Mrs. Cavalcanti desires his painting
because she desires his blackness and black culture in general. O’Brien’s film suggests through this scene between Jean and Mrs. Cavalcanti that while on the downtown scene Basquiat frequently encountered negrophiles.

Basquiat also experienced negrophilia in the work of the Beat literature he so greatly admired. According to Jon Panish, the negrophilia of the Beats can be detected and is visible in their literary construction of jazz, particularly, the figure of Charlie Parker, whom “Hipsters, Beats, and others seized on as the ‘high priest’ of rebellion” (44). Panish points out that Euro Americans used Charlie Parker to “emphasize the bankruptcy of dominant white culture and celebrate the greater spontaneity and emotionality of black culture” (56); in doing so, they “distorted African American rebellion to fit their own psychological, political, and cultural needs” (56). Basquiat was quite familiar with the writing of Beat authors such as Jack Kerouac, whom he “idolized” (Hoban 55). William Burroughs was, however, his favorite writer, and *Junky* his favorite book. Hence, the work of Kerouac and the Beats, particularly their literary construction of black jazz musician, Charlie Parker, represented yet another front on which Basquiat experienced bohemian negrophilia. That Basquiat was aware of this racial feature of Kerouac’s work is suggested in his ambivalence toward *Subterraneans*, a novel which he publicly embraced although somewhat “sullenly,” according to Klaus Kertess (see Figure 6).

The representation of Charlie Parker that Basquiat encountered in Kerouac’s *Subterraneans* was a “white fantasy of a black self” (Panish 57). According to Panish, Kerouac patronizingly reduces this undeniably complex human being into a single characteristic – kindness – that belies the tumult of his life. More important, the association of kindness (especially its connotations of natural gentleness and
Figure 6

Basquiat holding Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans*
helpfulness), Parker’s musicianship, and ‘nature’ evokes elements traditional in minstrel and minstrel-like depictions of black people (59).

Parker in Kerouac’s novel seemed “a static, stereotyped symbol who, as with most nonwhites in Kerouac’s novels, never speaks for himself, his silence necessary to maintain focus on Kerouac’s (and his cohort’s) experience as American outsiders” (60). Hence, Kerouac’s negrophiliac racism is embodied in the figure of Parker that emerges in his work, particularly in Subterraneans. Although Kerouac intended to elevate and praise Parker, his depiction of him serves, in actuality, to minstrelize him. The negrophiliac racism of Mrs. Cavalcanti works in a similar manner. Even though she intended her term, “savage” as a compliment, it evokes the racial stereotype of the black as the primitive Other, an image fixed and perpetuated by the European and American avant-garde which allows them to naively envy and admire non-white culture while simultaneously seeming to ignore the connection between the so-called natural “arrested development” of “natives” and the oppressive histories of colonialism and slavery. Thus, Basquiat, while experiencing malicious racial prejudice in the form of insults and exclusion, encountered an equally offensive, if more subtle, brand of negrophiliac racism in the books he read and in the ways he and his art were lauded.

Whether his blackness evoked love or hatred from the downtown community, Basquiat’s racial background, in one way or the other, would play a major role in how he and his art would be received and evaluated. Based on his extensive experiences with both negrophobic and negrophiliac racism, Basquiat could not have remained unaware of the possibility that his blackness would be the determining factor in how he and his art would be judged. This racial predicament was, furthermore, not unfamiliar territory for Basquiat. Prior to his arrival on the downtown scene in 1978, he was raised in neighborhoods in Brooklyn, attended schools, and
participated in a graffiti movement that all similarly rendered judgments of him and his
telestial and artistic production based on his racial background. Just as did race, performance
also continued to play a major role in Basquiat’s life in the downtown scene.

Performance Art

In the context of the downtown scene, it is not surprising that Basquiat’s penchant for
performance and public spectacle flourished. For example, at the Mudd Club, “even in a roomful
of outrageous characters, Basquiat stood out. He would lurk in the back of the cramped space,
dancing by himself. In the sweaty darkness, with its relentless pulse of punked-out people, the
women vamping like fifties sitcom housewives or glammed out in thrift-store black, the men
buttoned in too-small suits, he was a star” (Hoban 45). According to Emmerling, the Mudd Club:
established itself as a meeting spot for everyone who wanted to be famous, or
who already was – from Lydia Lunch, David Byrne, Kathy Acker, and Brian Eno
to Klaus Nomi, Iggy Pop, David Bowie, and Sid Vicious. Despite the presence of
these bright yet still rising stars, who were doing everything imaginable to attract
attention to themselves, Basquiat proved to be a light in his own right, noticed for
his unusual dancing and his dyed blond mohawk (14).

As Emmerling points out, Basquiat’s combination of fashion sense, hairstyle, and dancing
technique helped him to stand out in such a diverse setting. According to friend and fellow
member of Gray, Nick Taylor,

The dance he was doing [at the Mudd Club] was very unique. Michael Holman
would later call it “The Tyrannosaurus Rex” because Jean-Michel would hold his
hands close to his chest, his long legs lunging toward the nearby dancers and then
dropping back. Jean-Michel had an incredible hairstyle that resembled a bird’s footprint on the top of his head. He was wearing a polka-dot shirt with a kind of New-Wave white jacket (25).

At the Mudd Club, Basquiat’s “frenetic energy, idiosyncratic choreography, and weird hairdo made him a favorite with the club regulars and with [Anita] Sarko [the Mudd Club’s deejay]” (Hoban 45).

In other venues as well, Basquiat sought to make a public spectacle of himself. In 1980, Basquiat participated in a dance contest sponsored by the Squat Theater troupe. According to Eszter Balint, daughter of the troupe’s founder and the girlfriend to Basquiat, “Jean-Michel came out by himself. He danced this really strange solo dance. He was by far the coolest, really original” (quoted in Hoban 56). Although Basquiat’s choreography, “a combination of natural elegance and stylized bebopish boogie-woogie,” impressed the audience (Hoban 56), the judges awarded him second prize, a signed album and a poster. When Anya Philips, one of the judges, handed him his prize, Basquiat threw a “temper tantrum” and threw the record on the floor and stamped all over it, proclaiming “I don’t want this record, ma’am” and then left the club without saying another word. (Hoban 56). According to Hoban, “it is hard to say which performance was more impressive, his solo act or his acceptance speech” (57). Thus, at the Mudd Club as well as at other downtown club venues, Basquiat drew attention to himself through the way he dressed, wore his hair, danced, and acted, so much so that he stood out in a crowd of people who desperately sought to stand out themselves.

Basquiat’s involvement in his art-noise band, Gray, furthermore illustrates the major role that performance played in his life and art on the downtown scene. Basquiat founded Gray along with Michael Holman in 1979. According to Holman, “I met Jean in 1979. It was at an English
artist’s party downtown. We instantly got along and he said to me, “Let’s start a band. That’s how we formed Gray” (11). Along with Basquiat and Holman, Gray also included Vincent Gallo, Wayne Clifford, and Nick Taylor. Basquiat came up with the name, possibly derived from the medical textbook, *Gray’s Anatomy*, a copy of which his mother gave him when he was hospitalized at age seven to have his spleen removed as a result of being hit by a car while playing in the street. Not only the band’s founder and namer, Basquiat was Gray’s “leader” (Hoban 48) and its “artistic persona” (Hoban 57). In the band, he played bell, synthesizer, clarinet and “sometimes just raked a comb across his guitar” (Hoban 49). He also wrote some of the lyrics to Gray’s “weird assortment of songs” (Hoban 49-50). “Occasionally, he just lay on the floor of the stage, playing whatever was near him, while the other members provided the background beat” (quoted in Hoban 57). Hence, Basquiat was a key member in Gray, a band that combined sonic and visual spectacle.

As the nature of Basquiat’s musical contribution to the band indicates, Gray was a sonic spectacle. According to Emmerling, “Gray cultivated a kind of Art Noise style, eschewing musical perfection and technical smoothness and reveling in a raw honesty that relied more on tone and sound than on melody” (14). Band member Michael Holman describes Gray’s sound as a “style of ignorance” (Hoban 49). He adds that “Nick and Jean and me and Wayne, we were all about this concept of controlled naiveté. It was ignorance as an aesthetic. We would do these raw, wrong things that somehow worked” (quoted in Hoban 49). According to band member, Nick Taylor,

Gray was a very atypical band on the New York scene in the late 70s and early 80s. Jean-Michel Basquiat, Michael Holman, Wayne Clifford, Vincent Gallo (for a short time), and I created an automatic kind of musical art flux that was a
combination of avant-garde meets the poetic sounds of what was termed "ignorant musicians." I would begin a song with one chord, and then Jean-Michel, playing guitar on the floor with a metal file, would join in on a Wasp synthesizer. Wayne would enter with a riff on his keyboard, and Vince, in his statuesque pose, would experiment with sounds on his electronic equipment. Michael would join in with experimental percussion. Then we would take turns playing sounds and electronic effects in what became a carefully orchestrated chaos (27).

For Eszter Balint, “Gray was very experimental. Some of it was really good, some of it was just a come-on” (quoted in Hoban 57). As Balint’s assessment of Gray’s sound indicates, a large aspect of their music was about “making a scene” with sound. With their strange array of sound and instrumentation, Gray was largely trying to get a reaction from their audience and to challenge their perception of what music was and was not.

Much of Gray, particularly their live sets, was visual exhibition as well, as Nicholas Taylor’s description of one of their performances demonstrates.

Vincent Gallo played keyboards tilted at a 45-degree angle, while Michael played drums beneath a part of the floor that had been removed. Wayne Clifford played keyboards elevated halfway up, and I was so high up on the scaffolding playing guitar, the only thing the audience could see were my ankles and feet. Jean-Michel showed up with a wooden crate from Chinatown. He placed the box on stage right and crawled inside the crate with his wasp-synth, guitar, and microphone. He inspired the audience by remaining in the crate the entire performance. As he played, he read his poem “Mona Lisa.” (...
According to Hoban, “at one point, the band built an elaborate set at the Mudd Club out of scaffolding mounted on the metal security that acted as a stage curtain. Each band member was strapped in at a different level” (50). Holman recalls of the set, “We were playing this repetitive dirge stuff, and the gate comes down with all the band members in it, and I remember looking out into the audience. Everyone was in a state of shock!” (quoted in Hoban 50). Like Gray’s sound, then, its look was designed to elicit a shock from the audience.

Along with his activities in Gray, Basquiat also participated in more self conscious and deliberate types of public performance art. Nicholas Taylor recalls:

I introduced Dale and Jean-Michel and was mesmerized as I watched these two spirited artists talking about future fame and what courses to plot in order to achieve it. Jean-Michel told us about his idea called “Art-Corps.” The concept of this gorilla art/performance group was to deface existing gallery storefront windows with their own graffiti. As a first attack, they were planning a “hit” on the Leo Castelli Gallery, located at 420 West Broadway. The idea: a gigantic Art-Corps logo painted on the front gallery window.

Certain elements of Gray were even labeled “performance art.” One time Basquiat played a prank by calling the suicide hotline, then amused himself by speaking in cryptic phrases, naming colors, making up nonsense. According to Gray member Wayne Clifford, they both considered it a “bit of performance art” (quoted in Hoban 49). Hence, although Basquiat might not have self-identified as a performance artist in the way, say, Klaus Nomi and John Sex did, many of his activities on the downtown scene, namely his dress, style, hair, dance, and music appear to have been influenced by the concept of performance art.
Clearly, Basquiat, exhibited a penchant for performance and for making a public spectacle of himself. Basquiat’s efforts to engage the public with his sense of style and fashion were often, however, racially inflected. According to Mudd Club founder, Diego Cortez, “I remember being on the dance floor and seeing this black kid with a blond Mohawk. He had nothing to do with black culture. He was this Kraftwerkian techno-creature, sort of a character of the future. He wore this long green trench coat and jeans” (quoted in Hoban 47). As Cortez’s comment indicates, Basquiat’s embrace of punk new wave culture represented or was synonymous with an embrace of white culture and a rejection of black culture. Thus, Basquiat’s public performance on the downtown scene as a new wave punk, complete with “his blond Mohawk started midway toward the back of his skull” (Hoban 45) generated racial commentary from Cortez and presumably others (see Figures 7 and 8).

Basquiat, however, did not remain only or solely involved in “white” new wave punk music and culture. Dick Hebdige points out that “Memoirs from the East Village new wave/no wave days chart his progress through a series of disposable but memorable incarnations, from the punk with a green painted face and a Nosferatu haircut to the jazz and funk freak in dreadlocks and a Comme des Garçons coat” (63). By 1980 and 1981, Basquiat became more interested in “black” music and culture, namely, jazz, bebop, and hip hop. According to Fred Braithwaite,

I was the one who hipped Jean-Michel to Hip Hop and a little bit about Bebop. We would talk about Max Roach and the fact that there was this sort of connection between the two – Hip Hop and Bebop. I remember in a short period of time he [Basquiat] started buying up a lot of bebop records and immediately dissecting and breaking down Bebop…and to be like twenty years old at that
Figure 7

Basquiat being interviewed by Glenn O’Brien on TV Party in 1979
Figure 8

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1979
time, which we both were, was nuts! I mean, I grew up with it so I had been hearing it since I was a child and my family explained it to me, but Jean-Michel just absorbed the stuff (41).

Not only did Basquiat, at this time, become interested in black music such as jazz, bebop, and hip hop; he also became involved in its production. His interest with jazz, bebop, and hip hop in 1980 and 1981 led him to produce in 1982 a rap record with Braithwaite, Toxic, A-One, Al Diaz, and Rammellzee entitled “Beat Bop.”

Basquiat’s musical moves between new wave punk and jazz, bebop, and hip hop were reflected in his public image as well. According to Taylor, “[Basquiat] became more and more exotic, and his silhouette changed as he developed the ‘moose-head look’ with those outrageous dreadlocks” (11). That Basquiat’s change in style was perceived as a racial one is exemplified in Taylor’s use of the word “exotic” to describe the new “moose-head look” Basquiat’s dreadlocks give him. For Taylor and perhaps others, Basquiat was not just changing his style; he was becoming “blacker” or coming to embrace “black” culture more fully. Throughout 1980 and 1981, Basquiat incorporated signifiers of black fashion and style more fully into his repertoire. In 1980, he often embraced the figure of the jazz musician by wearing particular suits and hats (see Figure 9). In 1981, Basquiat frequently adopted a more Afrocentric look with his choice of headgear (see Figure 10). According to Jennifer Clement, the artist often made fun of everyone “by wearing pseudo-African garb to art openings” (80). With his dreadlocks fully grown in by 1982, Basquiat took on more of a black Caribbean look (see Figure 11). According to Alison Pearlman:

Attuned to the nuances of subcultural style, Basquiat deliberately mixed style
Figure 9

Fred Brathwaite, a.k.a, Fab 5 Freddy and Basquiat in 1980
Figure 10

Basquiat and Suzanne Mallounk in 1981
Figure 11

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1982
codes that were also racially coded. In the late 1970s, when he became a regular at the Mudd Club, Basquiat adopted the very white-associated Punk aesthetics of dress and hairstyle, at one point sporting a variation on a Mohawk. Soon thereafter, Basquiat morphed his appearance again, growing the crown of dreadlocks with which he was thereafter most identified. The dreads emulated Caribbean style, and, as such, were most notably not associated with American blacks at the time (85).

Thus, Basquiat’s cultural transformation from 1978 to 1981 was racially charged. In this regard, Basquiat’s move in style and public persona from new wave punk to jazz, bebop, and hip hop represents something of a move from white to black culture.

Perhaps aspects of Basquiat’s performance in Gray had something do with race. Thinking back on the band’s shows, Jeffrey Deitch, recalled that “Jean-Michel was performing with his band, Gray, frightening the art ladies with the mechanized robot he was using as his instrument” (10). In this case, Basquiat’s intent to frighten the “art ladies” could have been an attempt by the artist to draw attention to the simple fact that he was, by some, seen as threatening. The fact that they were frightened by this unruly black man would be enough for Basquiat to expose this reality. Although his participation in Gray illustrates his devotion and immersion in performance art, that his individual actions within the band could have been used to perform race should not, however, be entirely ruled out. Who, in this case, knows how often he became the stereotypical scary black man just to mess with the uptown art ladies who came downtown to take in a bit of the avant-garde? Thus, Basquiat’s individual performance within the larger performance of his band could have been used at times to address the racism he felt.
At this point in his life, however, much of Basquiat’s racial performance revolved around his fashion and style. Basquiat was very deliberate and racially motivated when it came to his hair and to his clothing. According to Suzanne Mallouck, “When he had a blonde girlfriend from a wasp background he dressed like a preppy, like a Kennedy. But he would do just one thing to throw the whole thing off, like keep his hair in crazy dreadlocks – and not the dreadlocks you see on anyone” (quoted in Clement 75). While on the downtown scene, Basquiat understood the connotations of his blackness, and he also came to see the power of the body as a performance space. Furthermore, incidents like the one described by Mallouck above indicate his desire to mess with white middle class racism and to play on the racial stereotypes he felt around him. With his combination of preppy clothing and wild hair, Basquiat reminds his girlfriend’s parents that “you can take man out of the jungle, but you can’t take the jungle out of the man,” a racist epithet that Basquiat no doubt would race through the minds of his rich girlfriend’s parents as they observed him, his dress, and his hair.

Conclusion

The racial and cultural politics of the “downtown” New York avant-garde art scene, then, had a significant impact on Basquiat. There, he was affected by the scene’s negrophobia and negrophilia. Either way, he could not have helped but notice that race played a major role in the way he and his artistic and intellectual productions would be evaluated. That such was the case was not, however, a new experience for Basquiat. His blackness also mattered where he grew up and attended school. Thus, his time on the downtown scene, combined with his earlier years as a student and as a middle class black kid, helped him to recognize that he would never be able to get beyond race in either his life or art. Also, Basquiat continued to perform and to make a public
spectacle of himself, just as he did as a student and graffiti artist in his early days. Moreover, these performances continued to reflect an engagement with matters of black and white. Just as his bad boy behavior as a student and his graffiti identity and writing were directed by race, his public image on the downtown scene, embodied by the way he dressed, danced, and wore his hair, were all racially significant in the way the moved between “white” new wave punk culture and “black” jazz, bebop, and hip hop culture. Yet, Basquiat’s time on the downtown scene was most important for the ideas and connections it planted within him. Immersed as he was, Basquiat encountered not only the idea of performance as art but of the performative aspects of traditional arts like painting. Therefore, Basquiat’s experience on the downtown scene was instrumental, along with his earlier years, in making the performance of blackness the defining feature of his public persona and paintings.
CHAPTER THREE

AT THE HEART OF WHITENESS:

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT AND THE ART WORLD

Introduction

By 1981, Basquiat was beginning to receive more attention from the art world. He was “discovered” (Hoban 68) at the New York/New Wave show in February of that year where his work “attracted the attention of dealers Emilio Mazzoli, Bruno Bischofberger, and Annina Nosei” (“Chronology” 238). Basquiat, so convinced of his eminent stardom, returned home to Brooklyn the day after the show opened and proclaimed to his father, “Papa I’ve made it!” (quoted in “Chronology” 238). In May 1981, Basquiat had his first solo exhibition, which was held at the Galleria d’Arte Emilio Mazzoli in Modena, Italy. Also, in that same month, Basquiat acquired his first major dealer, Annina Nosei, who, knowing that the artist had no studio space of his own, allowed him to use the basement of her New York City gallery as a studio. In December of 1981, Basquiat, along with others such as Francesco Clemente, Keith Haring, and Judy Rifka, was the subject of art critic Rene Ricard’s “The Radiant Child” which appeared in the December issue of Artforum. In that article, Ricard lent legitimacy and credibility to Basquiat and his work by proclaiming that “If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption, it would be Jean-Michel. The elegance of Twombly is there…and so is the brut of the young Dubuffet” (quoted in Hoban 89). For biographer, Phoebe Hoban, Ricard’s “long and elegiac” article represents Basquiat’s formal introduction into the art world (89). Thus, in 1981, Basquiat began his brief but intense formal relationship with the 1980s art world.
From 1981 until his death in 1988, Basquiat had an intimate and close relationship with many aspects of the art world. He participated in several group and solo shows in the United States and throughout the world, many of them high-profile, such as the international exhibition “Documenta 7” held in Kassel, West Germany in 1982 and the 1983 Whitney Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Basquiat’s career was well-covered by the art and mainstream press. In 1982, for example, he was interviewed by the “pope of pop art,” Henry Geldzahler, for Andy Warhol’s Interview magazine. The interview was accompanied by photos of the artist that were taken by famed Harlem Renaissance photographer, James Van Der Zee. Also, in 1985, Basquiat appeared on the cover of The New York Times Magazine posing for Cathleen McGuigan’s article “New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American artist.” Basquiat also worked with several dealers and galleries throughout his career. By 1984, Swiss dealer, Bruno Bischofberger, and New York-based Mary Boone had both replaced Annina Nosei as Basquiat’s primary dealers. His relationship with Boone, however, would only last a few years and in 1987 she was replaced by Vrej Baghoomian as the artist’s primary American dealer. Basquiat’s association with Andy Warhol, which began around 1983 and lasted until 1987, when Warhol died from complications during appendectomy surgery, kept both artists in the spotlight of the art community. They were often seen in public together and, in 1985, they put together a collaborative exhibit at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York City that received a significant amount of attention from art critics and writers. In this way, through his experiences with galleries and museums and his interactions with dealers, patrons, critics, and other members of the art community, Basquiat, for eight years, maintained a strong and thorough relationship with the world of the fine arts.
Just, however, as it did throughout his early years and during his time on the downtown scene, Basquiat’s blackness played a major role in his experiences as a painter in the 1980s art world. Phoebe Hoban contends that “even when he was one of the world’s most famous artists, Basquiat was still treated with a mixture of racism and suspicion” (271). Andrea Frohne points out that “his African American identity was cultivated by art critics and buyers as primitive, wild, an Other unknowable to buyers in the white art world” (439). According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, “in the eyes of some in the art world, Basquiat represented a tame primitive, an idiot savant [author’s emphasis] whose role was to entertain his superiors and to know his place” (167). Greg Dimitriadis and Cameron McCarthy argue that “his work was collected and validated in a context that fetishized his blackness” (93). For Frances Negron-Muntaner, in the 1980s art world, Basquiat faced a “sharply racialized cultural context that simultaneously valued his work in the marketplace and often humiliated him as a ‘colored’ artist” (117). Thus, Basquiat experienced a combination of suspicion, surveillance, condescension, exoticization, and humiliation, resulting from his status as a black man in the field of painting, a pursuit seen by the art world as traditionally the domain of white men. This chapter argues, therefore, that race and racism were central features of Basquiat’s experiences in the art community and that they had a significant impact on his public image and artwork. By showing that the racism that Basquiat faced was expansive and constant yet mostly indirect and unintentional, this chapter sheds light on why it is that the artist used performance as a way of engaging racial prejudice. In this case, Basquiat could not ignore such all-encompassing racism nor could he take it on directly as it was slight and subtle. Thus, as Chapters Five and Six demonstrate, respectively, Basquiat used elements of his public persona and paintings to play out the racial stereotypes that he faced in the art world.
The 1980s art world to which Basquiat was so well-connected was a racist context. According to Greg Tate,

No area of modern intellectual life has been more resistant to recognizing and authorizing people of color than the world of the “serious” visual arts. To this day, it remains a bastion of white supremacy, a sconce of the wealthy whose high-walled barricades are matched only by Wall Street and the White House and whose exclusionary practices are enforced 24-7-365. It is easier for a rich white man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a Black abstract and/or Conceptual artist to get a one-woman show in lower Manhattan, or a feature in the pages of *Artforum, Art in America* or *The Village Voice*. The prospect that such an artist could become a bone fide art-world celebrity was, until the advent of Jean Michel Basquiat, something of a joke (Tate 234).

Jose Esteban-Munoz agrees with Greg Tate in noting that the 1980s art world was marked by a “white supremacist bias” (146). For bell hooks, the racism of the art world was so all-encompassing for Basquiat that she terms his experience there a journey into “the heart of whiteness” (36). In this sense, the art world that Basquiat entered in 1981, with its historical preference for white artists and its relative occlusion of non-whites, was a racist environment.

As a black man in a racist setting, Basquiat was surrounded by and, not surprisingly, the target of a lot of racism, as the testimony of those who knew him attests. According to close friend Fred Baithwaite, “The fact that we were very conscious that we were black was important. And, of course, a lot of racism came up, particularly for Jean” (44). One-time girlfriend, Saskia Friedrich, recalled:
I met Jean-Michel in an elevator at Maripol’s house. He was living at Crosby Street. There were a lot of all kinds of different people there, constantly hanging out, and the television was always on. He was sort of nominated this “genius kid” but at the same time he was struggling with the racism in the art world, and people were like buying him, you know. And it was all happening so fast, it was like boom, boom, boom, boom, boom (quoted in Hoban 105).

Friedrich’s comment helps to highlight Basquiat’s racial predicament. Although he had been accepted by the art world and even become one of its most highly-celebrated members, he still continued to experience racism from the art community.

Racism is not, however, a singular or monolithic act. There is, on the one hand, racism that consists of “white supremacist ideologies” and of “overt or blatant discriminatory acts” (van Dijk 5), which is rooted in a logic of racial superiority and which openly oppresses through a combination of law and violence. Such racism is typically associated with older institutions and practices such as slavery, colonialism, and segregation but still exists today in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. On the other hand, there is a second kind of racism which Teun A. van Dijk describes in *Elite Discourse and Racism* as “the everyday, mundane, negative opinions, attitudes, and ideologies and the seemingly subtle acts and conditions of discrimination against minorities” (5). Unlike the first type, this form of racism is not rooted in a logic of racial superiority, but rather operates within the context of widespread claims that racism no longer exists or is no longer a “problem” as America, over the past several decades, has allegedly become more accepting and celebratory of its diversity and multiculturalism. Such racism is, thus, more a feature of post-Civil Rights America. In the context of the art world, Jeffrey Deitch, aptly sums up Basquiat’s experience with this type of racism in stating that “he faced the racism of some of
the most prominent people in the art establishment, all of whom claim that they’re not racist” (20).

The existence of racisms rather than a singular racism raises questions about claims by those such as Braithwaite and Friedrich that Basquiat encountered “racism” from the art world. For instance, what kind of racism did Basquiat face? Did he face blatant and overt racism or the more subtle and indirect type or a combination of both? If both were present, which did he see more of? Where did the racism he experienced come from? In other words, who or what in the art world was mainly responsible for discriminating against Basquiat on the basis of race? Furthermore, how aware was Basquiat of the racism that surrounded him? If he was surrounded by the more subtle and indirect type, did he recognize it as such? How, then, did he react to it? Perhaps, most important, how did the nature of the racism that Basquiat experienced at the center of the 1980s art world affect his artwork and his public image? As this chapter illustrates, in his experiences with the 1980s art world, Basquiat was surrounded and affected by both kinds of racism. While he experienced a certain amount of aggressive and malicious racism, he was also impacted, if not more so, by “a pervasive, if not, subtle sense of racism,” (quoted in Hoban 237), to borrow a line from Fred Braithwaite.

Overt and Aggressive Racism

Basquiat, for example, sensed that his blackness made him more susceptible to violence from the law. Although he was never the victim of a racially-motivated attack or violence, he was deeply affected by the death of Michael Stewart, a black graffiti writer who was choked to death by the transit police in September of 1983 under New York City’s “war on graffiti” policy. Negron-Muntaner insists that “whereas Keith Haring was distraught over Stewart’s death,
Basquiat became paranoid that he would be ‘next’, since both shared the ‘dreadlocks’ look. Basquiat’s fear was reportedly so great that he even refused to cooperate with his girlfriend Suzanne Mallouck’s legal efforts to learn more about what happened to Stewart” (128).

Mallouck who had actually been dating Stewart, not Basquiat, at the time of his death, began a campaign to investigate the incident and bring the police involved to trial. According to Phoebe Hoban, “She raised money from a number of artists, including Keith Haring. But Jean-Michel refused to donate a penny. When Mallouck asked him for a contribution, he kept repeating, ‘It could have been me! It could have been me!’” (213). In this case, Basquiat’s fear of retributive violence, and not a lack of concern with police brutality aimed at young “dreadlocked” black men, prevented him from getting involved in any direct way with Mallouck’s campaign for Stewart.

Other incidents suggest as well that Basquiat lived in fear of hate crimes and police brutality. According to Suzanne Mallouck, “We put a sophisticated alarm system on all of the windows. He thought the CIA was going to kill him because he was a famous black man” (quoted in Hoban 100). The artist also had particularly tense run-ins with the New York City police. One time, Basquiat and Tina Lhotksy, whom the artist dated briefly, somehow got locked into a fenced-off area in the East Village while taking a casual walk one night. While they were trying to scale the fifty foot fence to escape, the cops showed up to find “a young black kid with dreadlocks and a buxom blonde in a vintage dress” (Hoban 75). They asked Lhotsky if he was “bothering” her, a question which implies that someone who looks Basquiat can only be up to no good with a young white woman. When Lhotsky told them that he was her date, the policemen started giving him a hard time. That Basquiat, unlike Lhotsky, understood the potential for danger to him as a black man in such a situation is clear. According to her, “He was pissed that I
told them that I was with him. He said that was a dumb thing to say because they were racist” (quoted in Hoban 75). Another time, Basquiat was pulled over by the police while driving. According to friend and passenger Matt Dike, “We were driving along and these cops get behind us. Jean’s got dreadlocks out to there, and this big hat, and one of those intense suits, you know with paint on it. And the cops stop us, thinking the car was stolen” (quoted Hoban 129). As Dike’s assessment of the situation indicates, Basquiat by virtue of his blackness was pegged by the police as a criminal. Not only that, when Basquiat showed them his bank book and told them he was painter, they refused to believe him. Dike recalled, “They thought he was some big drug dealer or something” (quoted in Hoban 129). In the eyes of the law, someone who looked like Basquiat could not possibly be a “fine” artist; rather, he had to be some type of criminal whether a car thief or drug dealer.

Just as he felt vulnerable to racially motivated violence and attacks, Basquiat also was surrounded by prejudiced language and attitudes. For example, critic Steve Kaplan earned Basquiat’s hatred by publicly mocking him as the “pickaninny of SoHo” (Hoban 248). Patti Anne Blau was reluctant to date Basquiat at first because he black. She recalled, “I’d say, ‘Listen,’ I’m not going out with any black guys.’ I was scared” (quoted in Hoban 62). For Blau, young black men represented some type of physical or sexual threat. When Basquiat dated another white Paige Powell, her mother and friends were not so pleased. According to Powell, “My mom belongs to all these bridge clubs and she went to this party once, and one of her best friends said, ‘Oh, we feel so sorry for you that your daughter was involved with this black drug addict” (quoted in Hoban 196). In this case, it is not just sad that Powell is involved with a “drug addict,” it warrants particular sympathy because he is a “black drug addict.”
Basquiat was, however, around worse than that. Take, for example, the following passage from Andy Warhol’s diary on August 9, 1983: “Paige stayed overnight with Jean Michel in his dirty smelly loft downtown. How I know it smells is because Chris was there and said (laughs) it was like a nigger’s loft, that there were crumpled-up hundred dollar bills in the corner and bad b.o. all over and you step on paintings” (519). Here, Warhol’s associate uses the term “nigger” to encompass all of what he sees as the negative qualities of the way Basquiat lives. For Chris, Basquiat’s loft is “smelly” and “messy” because it is owned and cared for by a “nigger.” Moreover, Warhol, Basquiat’s friend, appears to have no problem with Chris’ use of this most offensive and inflammatory of all racial slurs. The parenthetical “laugh” that Warhol places before the phrase “nigger’s loft” in his diaries suggests that he finds the comment amusingly apropos rather than uncalled for and racially derogatory. Although Basquiat was not present for this utterance of the word “nigger,” he heard it directly on other occasions. Andy Warhol recalled: “Jean-Michel called me early in the morning to tell me about the fight with Philip Niarchos he had at Schnabel’s on Friday night. I guess he still remembers some funny comment Philip made once about how now they’re ‘letting niggers into St. Moritz’” (699). Here, Niarchos not only uses the term “nigger” but also seems to be complaining that black people are now allowed entrance in St. Moritz, a ritzy winter resort in Switzerland. Again, Warhol seems to have no problem with the use of this term as well as with his friend Philip’s call for segregation. Warhol finds the comment “funny” and even seems a bit annoyed that Basquiat calls him “early in the morning” to tell him about it. As the above incidents indicate, Basquiat was around people in the art world, including close friends like Warhol, who had no problem with the term “nigger” and who even used it in the artist’s presence.
Besides dealing with the racist language and attitudes, Basquiat also dealt with racially motivated exclusion as well. According to Valda Grinfelds, “He was very angry because Leo Castelli refused to take him on, and people dissed him because he was a black man, an outsider” (quoted in Hoban 96). An entry in Warhol’s dairy from August 5, 1984 is similarly telling. Warhol recalled: “Jean Michel wanted to go to the Jermaine Jackson party at Limelight. So we went down there (cab $7). And it was one of those parties where the bouncers were all dumb Mafia-type guys who didn’t know anybody. Jean Michel took us to the wrong section and they told us to beat it, and he said, ‘Now you see how it is to be black’” (592). In this sense, Basquiat’s comment to Warhol after being told to “beat it” by the white bouncers suggests that he had been excluded on enough occasions on the basis of race to conclude that it was a result of his blackness. Thus, being excluded from certain places on the basis of race, being called a “nigger” and the like, and living in fear of racially-motivated attacks and violence all illustrate that Basquiat was surrounded and affected by blatant and overt acts of racial discrimination.

Subtle and Indirect Racism

The artist also experienced more subtle forms of racism. Throughout his career, many in the art world, in offering assessments of Basquiat and his work, persistently and, more often than not, unknowingly, relied on and deployed the racist stereotype of the black male as violent, criminal, promiscuous, childlike, instinctual, undisciplined, and lacking in intelligence. As Hill Collins points out, “the combination of physicality over intellectual ability, a lack of restraint associated with incomplete socialization, and a predilection for violence has long been associated with African American men” (152). Hill Collins adds:
The controlling image of Black men as criminals or as deviant beings encapsulates this perception of Black men as inherently violent and/or hyper-heterosexual and links this representation to poor and/or working class African American men. Again, this representation is more often applied to poor and working class men than to their more affluent counterparts, but all Black men are under suspicion of criminal activity or breaking rules of some sort (158).

Thus, the contemporary image of the black male as “ruled by brute strength and natural instinct” as “promiscuous and violent” is a “reworking” of historical representations of the black male as “the buck, the brute, and the rapist” (Hill Collins 152). As this chapter demonstrates, this racist stereotype of black maleness was frequently written “between the lines” or was a subtext of art reviews, interviews, and of general discussions by critics, dealer, patrons, and others of Basquiat and his work.

**Art Reviews**

For instance, in a review titled “Royal Slumming: Jean-Michel Basquiat Here Below,” Thomas McEvilley wrote that “this black artist was doing exactly what classical-Modernist white artists such as Picasso and George Braque had done: deliberately echoing a primitive style,” and, in doing so, was “behaving like white men who think they are behaving like black men” (quoted in hooks 29-30). For hooks, McEvilley’s review “erases all of Basquiat’s distinct connections to a cultural and ancestral memory that linked him directly to ‘primitive’ traditions” (30). Andrea Frohne agrees arguing that it “removes Basquiat’s blackness and recreates him as white” (446). In this regard, McEvilley’s review is patronizing in the way it attempts to elevate or validate the artist and his work by insisting that he merely copies the style of prominent white artists. For
McEvilley, Basquiat can be seen as a good or acceptable artist, despite his blackness, because he mimics the work of primitivist painters like Picasso and Braque. For Andrea Frohne, who points out how McEvilley considers Basquiat’s “mimicry akin to ‘royal slumming’,” the review is further racially problematic because it conjures the racial stereotype of the non-white as a “mimic.”

McEvilley was not, however the only critic to suggest that Basquiat was merely aping white aesthetics. In an article published in *Elle* magazine in 1986, leading New York art critic Peter Scheldajl wrote:

> Most work by non-whites in the New York mainstream has been marked by a tendency, mordantly popularized by Spike Lee in *School Daze*, as “wannabe”: a diffident emulation of established modes, whether already academic or supposedly avant-garde. So I would not have expected from a black artist Basquiat’s vastly self-assured grasp of New York’s big-painting esthetics – generally, the presentation of mark-making activities as images of themselves in an enveloping field…I would have anticipated a well-schooled, very original white hipster behind the tantalizing pictures (quoted in Tate 242).

Greg Tate finds the tone of this review be “patronizing and patriarchal” (243). According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, in Scheldajl’s article, “the black artist was damned both ways,” adding:

> On the one hand, he or she was written off as a “wannabe,” a hustler with more ambition than talent, who did not make it because they did not deserve to. On the other hand, if success was forthcoming, the artist was the effectively “white” and could be condemned for abandoning his/her “roots” or, more exactly, the cultural role allotted to the black artist by the white critic. For artists like Basquiat, who
wished to use elements of the European tradition, but also sought to create a space within or perhaps beyond that tradition which could incorporate his sense of identity, Scheldajl offered only one role – that of mimic (167).

Although Scheldajl does not go as so far as to use blatant racist stereotypes in his criticism, he does, like McEvilley employ a tone and certain words that are patronizing and condescending. For Scheldajl, Basquiat can be at worst a “wannabe” and at best a “mimic.” That the critic is “surprised” that a black artist could “grasp” such a significant style of painting also stands as racially derogatory remark. In this regard, his surprise emanates from the racist logic that blacks, with a few exceptions of course, do not have the artistic talent, intellectual ability, and restraint to learn and then work within “established traditions.” Less intelligent and less scrupulous by Scheldajl’s logic, black artists “steal” rather honor and add to artistic traditions.

The words of art critic, Jeffrey Deitch, are similarly indicative of the racism that Basquiat encountered in art reviews. According to Deitch, Basquiat’s paintings are “a canvas jungle that harness[es] the traditions of modern art to portray the ecstatic violence of the New York street” (quoted in Weinberg 222). According to Weinberg, “Deitch brings together several words - jungle, violence, ecstatic, street [author’s emphasis] – that together add up to a racial stereotype. Regardless of the sophisticated urbanism of Basquiat’s imagery, jungle is still the word used by Deitch to evoke his work” (222). Although Deitch’s review is actually intended as positive commentary on the artist and his work, it, nonetheless, as Weinberg notes, relies on racially demeaning imagery and descriptors. Particularly telling is not just Deitch’s insistence that Basquiat’s work is jungle-like but also his suggestion that street violence is somehow a delightful and euphoric experience for the artist.
This is not, however, the only art review in which Jeffrey Deitch used such racially provocative language and references. In a review of Basquiat’s show at Annina Nosei’s gallery in 1982, Deitch wrote:

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 gawked at by the intelligentsia. But Basquiat is hardly a primitive. He’s more like a rock star, seemingly savage but completely in control; astonishingly prolific, but scornful of the tough discipline that normally begets such virtuosity. Basquiat reminds me of Lou Reed singing brilliantly about heroin to nice college boys (quoted in Hoban 110).

Again, Deitch’s assessment of Basquiat is meant as a positive one. He touches on some of the racist notions held by other critics in his attempt to distance himself from them. While others may see Basquiat as “wild,” the child of “wolves” who has been “corralled” like an untamed animal so that he can be “gawked” at like some primitive spectacle, Deitch disagrees, arguing instead that Basquiat only appears savage. Unconvinced by Deitch’s effort, however, Dick Hebdige insists that there are “racist implications” (60) attached to the critic’s allusion to “the wild boy raised by wolves” comment. Furthermore, Deitch’s comment that Basquiat reminds him of the white rock star, Lou Reed, speaks to the racial logic of the review as a whole as it implies that “if Jean-Michel was to be taken seriously as an artist he had first to be skinned alive, bleached of his blackness and delivered into the hands of the right foster parents” (Hebdige 60).

Like McEvilley and Deitch, the art critic Adam Gopnik also found it difficult to elude racist overtones when analyzing Basquiat and his work. In his article, “Madison Avenue Primitive,” written in 1992, the critic wrote “no harm, perhaps, is done by the endless
comparisons in the catalogue of Basquiat to Goya, Picasso, and other big names. What is unforgivable is the endless comparisons in the catalogue essays of Basquiat to the masters of American jazz” (quoted in hooks 35). For bell hooks, the tone and nature of Gopnik’s objection reeks of racism.

This connection is misunderstood and belittled by Gopnik in his essay “Madison Avenue Primitive” (note the derision of the title) when he arrogantly voices his indignation at Basquiat’s work being linked with that of great black jazz musicians. With the graciousness and high-handedness of an old-world paternalistic colonizer, Gopnik declares that he can accept that the curator of the Basquiat show attempted to place him in a high-art tradition (hooks 35). What bothered Gopnik most about discussions of Basquiat’s art were the connections made between it and jazz. Gopnik took such exception to this comparison because he felt that Basquiat was a “lousy musician” (hooks 35).

For hooks, then, it is the basis on which or the way he goes about leveling his criticism of the way Basquiat’s art and jazz are connected. That Gopnik does not take Basquiat seriously to begin with is indicated in the condescending nature of his article’s title. In line with the title’s tone, the content of Gopnik’s article is belittling and arrogant, proclaiming who Basquiat can and cannot be compared to. Telling of Gopnik’s condescending tone is his insistence that “no harm” is done by comparing Basquiat to other artists but the act of comparing him to jazz musicians is “unforgivable.” The implication is that Basquiat is a nuisance who has to be dealt with and neutralized.

In her assessment of Basquiat and Warhol’s 1985 collaboration New York Times art critic, Vivian Raynor also calls up racist language.
Last year, I wrote of Jean-Michel Basquiat that he had a chance of becoming a very good painter providing he didn’t succumb to the forces that would make him an art-world mascot. This year, it appears that those forces have prevailed, for Basquiat is now onstage at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery…doing a pas de deux with Andy Warhol, a mentor who assisted in his rise to fame…the collaboration looks like one of Warhol’s manipulations, which increasingly seemed based on the Mencken theory about nobody going broke underestimating the public’s intelligence. Basquiat, meanwhile, comes across as the all too willing accessory. Offered in the same spirit as the shows poster…the verdict is: “Warhol TKO in 16 rounds (quoted in Hoban 265).

As with the other art reviews mentioned above, the racism is subtle, oblique, and located in tone and word choice. According to Jonathan Weinberg, “Indeed, built into Vivian Raynor’s condescending description of Basquiat as an art world-mascot was the implication that the pairing of the established white artist with his young black collaborator had to reproduce racial inequality as well as sexual perversion” (234). As Weinberg notes, the racism of Raynor’s review lay, in one regard, in the insulting reference to the artist as an “art-world mascot.” Raynor dehumanizes Basquiat further by referring to him as Warhol’s “accessory.” Thus, this review turns Basquiat into an object by suggesting that he was merely Warhol’s puppet.

In her assessment of the Basquiat-Warhol collaboration in Flash Art, Eleanor Heartney wrote:

The show offers the spectacle of America’s best known cynic working alongside the “wild child” of contemporary art, who we are told, embodies the raw primal energy of the urban jungle. And a curious spectacle it is. Once again, Warhol
reveals his version of the Midas touch, whereby everything he handles is infused with banality. Basquiat’s “authentic” images—those gritty figures and that hastily scrawled lettering— as well as the big issues of life, death, greed, and lust that the show purportedly tackles, are all revealed to be as canned as Warhol’s celebrated soup. The real question is who is using whom here? (quoted in Hoban 265).

Although Heartney playfully leaves the last question unanswered, the way she characterizes both men in her review strongly suggests that she believes Warhol to be the user and Basquiat the used. Warhol is presented as calculated and in control while Basquiat is constructed by the reviewer as “raw,” “primal,” and “gritty.”

In much of the same manner, L.A. critic Suzanne Muchnic wrote the following about Basquiat:

Basquiat looks like the real thing, not a painted interpretation, and therein lies the difference between his work and much of the New Wave or Neo-Expressionist painting…We see art that delivers a graphic punch and conveys a convincing air of urban anxiety. Current works seem less painterly than the batch he showed here about a year ago, but what they lack in surface interest, they make up for in brutish stylishness (quoted in Hoban 180).

Like the aforementioned review by Deitch, Muchnic’s also is meant as a positive one and appears equally unable to use racially-charged language in describing the artist and his work. Here, the term “graphic punch” suggests that Basquiat and his artwork are violent as does her use of the word “brutish” to describe his style. Although her use of the word “brutish” could be a reference to the style “art brut,” it seems, given it juxtaposition to the term “graphic punch,” which suggests a bodily movement, to be more a commentary on Basquiat’s physicality.
Of course, the interpretations of the art reviews offered above raise questions about the intentions of the art critics and Basquiat’s reception of the wording and terminology in the reviews. In this case, to what extent are these reviews actual racial commentaries and also to what extent did Basquiat understand them as such? In this regard, it is quite possible that Basquiat did not see all of these reviews as examples of racism in the ways they are presented above. The above interpretations are offered to show the many possible ways in which the artist could have read them as racially offensive. For example, it is possible that if Basquiat did, in fact, read Muchnic’s review and came across the words “graphic punch” and “brutish” that he did not immediately interpret them as yet another example of the subtle ways in which racist notions of black maleness crept into the language of art criticism. Yet, a later section of this chapter entitled “Sensing Racism” shows that Basquiat was clearly tuned into the racial connotations of terms used to describe him and his art. He knew that he was surrounded by people with racist leanings and he was constantly looking for manifestations of their stereotypical image of him. Thus, Basquiat might not have understood every single review as racist, but

The interpretations of the art reviews offered above also raise another important question. Was it possible for an art critic or art historian in the 1980s to write a criticism that was racially reflective and not merely a blind deployment of racial stereotypes? It is of course possible although, given the art establishment’s attitude toward the “primitive” in the 1980s, it would have been highly unlikely and rare. For example, when the MOMA was questioned and criticized about the language and implications of their 1984-1985 exhibition, “Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,” they argued that “primitivism” was an art historical term that, despite its colonial and racial underpinnings, could be used benignly and
academically. Obviously, the art establishment was not unaware of the racial connotations of words like “primitive,” “wild,” and “savage” especially in using them to describe the work of a dreadlocked black artist. Art critics and art historians simply felt that these were art historical terms and that they could be used to describe the work of a black artist in the same way they were used to describe the work of white artists. In fact, art critics might have felt that by not directly making an issue of race and racism, that they were treating Basquiat “equally.” As the section “Sensing Racism” illustrates, however, Basquiat strongly disagreed with the white art establishment’s feeling that they could so loosely use terms such as “primitive” and “wild.”

Interviews

Just as in art reviews, Basquiat encountered the racism of art critics in interviews as well. For instance, much of the language and wording deployed by art historian, Marc Miller in a filmed 1983 interview is laden with racial stereotypes of black males. Shortly into the interview, Miller, in response to Basquiat’s discussion of his days doing graffiti, comments “There was no ambition in it?” In referring to Basquiat’s work, later on, Miller asks Basquiat, “Are you quick? How quick do these things get done?,” two questions that imply that Basquiat’s work reflects that he is more concerned with turning out work for money and notoriety than with making work that is focused and has depth. At another point in the interview, when Basquiat replies to Miller’s question of whether or not he is “surprised” by his success, by saying he “used to be more surprised,” Miller responds, “You used to be more. Now, you’re spoiled.” In discussing his artwork, specifically, the images of bones and skeletons in his work, Basquiat tells Miller “I wanted to do some anatomy stuff so I went out and bought some books that are on anatomy,” to which Miller quickly retorts “And then you started imitating….,”
Basquiat’s images, in this case, skulls, Miller states, “There’s a certain, let’s use the term, ‘crudity,’ to your heads. Do you like it that way or would you like to get them more refined and realistic?” Shortly after that, when discussing where the words in Basquiat’s paintings “come from,” Miller asks if he “skims” and “snatches” them from books. Near the end of the interview, Miller asks Basquiat some questions about Notary (1983), a painting which stands right behind them. Regarding his use of seemingly unrelated terms such as “Pluto” and “notary,” Miller asks him, “Is there any logic here?” Whether Miller knows it or not, his suggestion in the questions and comments above that Basquiat is angry, lacking ambition, spoiled, unoriginal, crude, illogical, and prone to plagiarism amounts to a racial stereotype of black manhood.

Along with his word choice, Miller’s tone and questioning and interview method also demonstrates his reliance on racial and gendered stereotypes. Throughout the interview, Miller speaks to Basquiat very slowly and deliberately, just as an adult would talk to a child. Along with his tone, some of Miller’s questions serve as negative comments on Basquiat’s intellectual as well as artistic abilities. For instance, at one point in the interview, Miller asks Basquiat “Are you surprised by your success?,” a question which implies that he should be or that many are surprised by his success. Miller follows that up by asking him, “What do people like in your art?,” which, again, serves a negative commentary on Basquiat’s art. In this regard, if Basquiat’s art was good, he wouldn’t need to explain its popularity. The way in which Miller poses and constructs his questions for Basquiat also operates as an implicit commentary on the artist’s intellect. The interviewer seems to be trying to “help” Basquiat along by giving him brief, leading questions or ones requiring an either/or answer. Much of the time Miller is not even asking Basquiat questions. Instead, he seems to be providing the artist with cues or directive
statements to help him along. In doing so, Miller makes several racist assumptions about his black interviewee.

Miller was not, however, the only interviewer to treat the artist with condescension and patronization. For example, Isabelle Graw opens her interview by berating Basquiat like a child for failing to appear at the opening of his museum survey show in Hanover, Germany in 1986.

IG: Why didn’t you come to Hanover? I waited for you at the airport?
JMB: I’m sorry about that. I wasn’t in the traveling mood.
IG: You are mistaken if you think that you upset anyone. By not coming you really only did everyone a favor.
JMB: I don’t think that’s true.
IG: Do you feel like talking about your paintings?
JMB: Let’s just talk and get it over with (67).

Upset by Basquiat’s truancy and apparently not buying his apology, Graw takes it upon herself to “put him in his place” before getting into a discussion of his art. In the process, she chastises the artist in a didactic and corrective way as if he is beneath her. Although, by 1986, Basquiat had already cemented his reputation as an artist, this does not appear to be a factor for Graw, who is outraged and indignant that he had the audacity to stand her up. Her treatment of Basquiat raises the hypothetical question of whether or not she would be more forgiving if a white artist acted in the same manner.

Other interviewers sought in their line of questioning to exoticize the artist. For instance, Demosthenes Davvetas informs Basquiat in questioning him about his art’s “African roots” that “There are almost always totems, primitive signs, and fetishes in your works” and later on in that same interview, “In your work, the magical element doesn’t seem like a cult. You use it with
distance, like a child who plays with objects” (63). For Davevetas, Africa is a place of magic and Basquiat’s use of certain images, evidence of his relationship with something different and “other.” Davvetas later informs Basquiat that he uses “magical elements” like a “child” at play.

Just as with this chapter’s readings of art reviews, its interpretation of interviews also raises questions about the intent of the interviewer and Basquiat’s reception of their questions and comments. Again, these issues are related to the interpretive traps and problems inherent in trying to make the argument that minor and seemingly benign word choices are examples and manifestations of a deep-seeded racism. There is, of course, a fine line between exposing subtle moments of racism and imposing racial significance on certain word and language choices by reading too far into them. In this regard, did Basquiat, in his interview with Davvetas, to take one example, really interpret the interviewer’s comment about his “child-like” way of using “magical” elements in his work as racist? It is, of course, possible that Basquiat did not; but the very stylized and playful yet deliberate ways in which he carried himself and handled questions and comments in interviews suggests that he was locked into even the slightest move on the part of the interviewer. This chapter, because its purpose is to illuminate the many ways and forms in which Basquiat encountered racism “at the heart of whiteness,” focuses primarily on the interviewers’ actions and, hence, does not address the artist’s role in the interview. However, the section “Sensing Racism” of this chapter and, to a greater extent, Chapter Four “Acting Up in Public” both demonstrate how the artist incorporated racial performance into the space of the interview.
Everyday Acts

While art critics in their reviews and interviews continued to be a main source of racism throughout his career, others in the art world, even those whom he considered to be close friends, were also guilty of much of the same. Take, as a prime example, Andy Warhol. According to those close to him, Warhol had “ambivalent” (Hoban 205) feelings toward blacks. On the one hand, Warhol was afraid of Basquiat. Bob Colacello, former Interview magazine editor, recalled that although Warhol’s impression of Basquiat would soften, he initially saw him as a “rough looking black boy who might mug him” (quoted in Hoban 137). According to Colacello, Andy was kind of afraid of Jean-Michel, because he was a young black kid. His brother Paul told me that when he was a young child, he had been beaten up by a young black girl. He used to cross the street if we saw a scraggly-looking black guy walking in our direction. Jean-Michel was the only black who ever had a significant role in Andy’s life (quoted in Hoban 206).

One of Warhol’s assistants, Walter Steding, remembered an equally telling incident:

One day he came over and tagged the door. He wrote “Famous Negro Athletes,” or something, and Andy saw it and said, “Don’t let that colored boy inside.” He was afraid of him, but he saw the meteoric rise of Jean-Michel and he wanted to participate in it. I don’t think Andy ever got over his fear of Jean-Michel” (quoted in Hoban 205-206).

Warhol’s fear of Basquiat was tempered, however, by an appreciation for the young black artist’s body. For Jonathan Weinberg, Warhol’s admiration for Basquiat’s physicality is captured in a portrait of the black artist entitled, Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1984 (see Figure 12), in
Figure 12

Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1984

by Andy Warhol
which Warhol renders Basquiat as Michelangelo’s *David*. This portrait is made up of several Polaroids of his body, including a crotch shot in a jock strap. According to Weinberg, “Warhol’s gaze exalts Basquiat, even as his act of objectification, fractures his image” (231). In Warhol’s eyes, then, Basquiat wavered somewhere between an object to be feared and an object to be desired.

Warhol’s flawed racial politics were linked to those of the “pop” art to which he was so closely associated. According to Jose Esteban Munoz:

> Although it should be obvious to most, there is still a pressing need to articulate a truism about Pop Art’s racist ideology: next to no people of color populate the world of Pop Art, as either producers or subjects. Representations of people of color are scarce, and, more often than not, worn-out stereotypes. Warhol’s work is no exception: one need only think of the portrait of a Native American, which is titled *American Indian*, the drag queens of *Ladies and Gentleman*, and the Mammy from the *Myths* series. The paintings reproduce images that are ingrained in the North American racist imagination. There is not challenge or complication of these constructs on the level of title or image. Pop Art’s racial iconography is racist (146).

Frances Negron- Muntaner argues that one of the main reasons why Basquiat “opted to break up the friendship” with Warhol was because he “could not (or would not) protect him from racist remarks” (124). In this sense, Warhol could not protect Basquiat from racism because he was a racist himself.

Furthermore, Warhol paints a racist image of Basquiat in his personal diaries. For example, Warhol makes continual comments about Basquait not paying his rent. When he finally
does, it is a “good surprise” (Warhol 557). Although Warhol never actually connects it to
Basquiat’s blackness, he does not have to. His constant concern and surprise when Basquiat does
pay is commentary enough. Although Warhol rented to many people, many of whom were
probably late with rent, he seems more concerned with his black tenant, Basquiat. Of course, this
is not to say that Warhol was making these things up, but rather that certain aspects of Basquiat’s
behavior were magnified by his race. There were many aspects of Basquiat’s personality and
traits that Warhol could have focused on and included in his dairy; however, as Nicholas
Mirzoeff notes, “in the space of a few pages [of Warhol’s dairy], Basquiat is painted as
hypersexual, wealthy but mean, and mentally unstable” (189).

Many of Warhol’s comments in his dairy are full of references to Basquiat’s sexual
prowess and the size of his genitals, which Warhol “attributes to his racial inheritance”
on AIDS. The tourist business in Haiti is down to nothing. Probably the tourists were only there
secretly for the big cocks. Because Jean Michel is half Haitian and he really does have the
biggest one” (541). For Warhol, the size of Jean’s penis which he refers to again in his diaries as
a “baseball bat” (565) is linked clearly to his racial background. He has a large penis because he
is Haitian. For Negron Muntaner, this “fetishizes” (126) Basquiat’s sexuality. Hill Collins
contends that “the penis becomes the defining feature of Black men that contributes yet another
piece to the commodification of Black male bodies” (161).

Along with comments about his rent-paying and sexual prowess, Warhol’s constant
commentary on Basquiat’s hygiene evokes the image of the “dirty nigger.” On August 17, 1983,
Warhol wrote:
Went down to meet Jean Michel and did a workout with him and Lidija. And he
has b.o. It’s like Chris who also thinks it’s sexy when you exercise to have b.o.,
but I want to say, it sure isn’t. And all this b.o. has made me think about my life
and how I’m not really missing anything great. I mean, I think of Paige having
sex with Jean Michel and I think, how could she do it. I mean, what do you do,
say some hint like, “Uh, gee, why don’t we do something wild like take a shower
together (520).

On October 5, 1983, Warhol again mocks what he sees as Basquiat’s lack of hygiene, noting “He
had snot all over the place. He was blowing his nose in paper bags…Paige has turned him into
sort of a gentleman, though, because now he’s taking baths” (534). That Warhol believes that
Basquiat’s lack of hygiene is, like his sexual prowess and penis size, a racial attribute is captured
in the following entry from August 5, 1984: “So anyway, Jean Michel wanted me to see his
paintings down on Great Jones Street, so we went there and it’s a pigsty. His friend Shenge – this
black guy – lives with him and he’s supposed to be taking care of the place, but it’s a sty” (592).
Here, Warhol does not openly say that dirtiness is linked to blackness, but it is implied in the
way he connects the condition of Basquiat’s loft to the fact that it is being taken care of by “this
black guy.” In this sense, Warhol’s emphasis on particular traits of Basquiat reflects his racist
tendencies.

Along with Warhol and several other members of the art world, art patrons, collectors,
and dealers also represented another major source of racism that Basquiat had to endure. For
instance, Basquiat’s tenure working in the basement of his first dealer, Annina Nosei inspired a
lot of “racially inspired rumors” of “this wild black man in this basement that’s uncontrollable”
(Hoban 132). According to collector, Doug Cramer, for example, “He was painting away. He
looked like a slave, or very close to it” (quoted in Negron-Muntaner 119). For Diego Cortez, “It was a really bad model to have an artist in the basement making work. It was like, ‘I’ve got this black laborer in the basement. Look at this kind of zombie freak circus person making art.’ She [Nosei] would drag all these suburban white people that she was bringing in there” (quoted in Hoban 89). In agreement with Cortez, Steve Rubell noted, “It wasn’t handled well. He quickly became a commodity: ‘Come and watch the artist perform.’ He could put out two or three paintings a day” (quoted in Hoban 83). Similarly, Liz Gold, Nosei’s assistant, recalled, “Every top collector came in. What I didn’t like about it was it was kind of like show-and-tell – ‘Look what we have down here.’ Anytime, an important collector came, it was like ‘let’s go down to the basement.’” (quoted in Hoban 84). Thus, during his time using Nosei’s space as a studio, Basquiat was seen as a racial curiosity or spectacle (Negron-Muntaner 119). He was seen by some as a slave and by others as an exotic freak of nature.

Larry Gagosian, an art dealer and collector, recalled his first impression of Basquiat after meeting him at Annina Nosei’s in 1981.

He was in Annina’s office wearing some kind of work clothes that were splattered with paint. I was startled to see a black artist, and particularly one that was – you know – with the hair. I was taken a back by it, and kind of put off, I guess, because I wasn’t prepared to relate to someone who looked like that. He reminded me of Mike Tyson, the fighter. But as soon as I started talking to him, he had this kind of high, sweet voice, and he was disarmingly articulate. And I just felt immediately comfortable and uncomfortable, which was a feeling I had as long as I knew him (quoted in Hoban 118).
Here, Gagosian openly admits that it was hard for him to get excited about Basquiat and his work because he was black and that disappointment was probably written all over his face. After taking a look at Basquiat’s clothing, hair, body, and skin color, Gagosian felt that Basquiat was more suited for the boxing ring than the world of the “fine” arts. He is, in fact, surprised and “disarmed” by the fact that a black man who looks like Basquiat can speak so articulately. Even so, Gagosian acknowledges that he could never feel quite at ease around the black artist for as long as he knew him.

Even after he was an established artist, Basquiat continued to experience racism, not just from the art world, but in various public arenas as well. According to Fab 5 Freddy, “Even after he was flying on the Concorde, he wouldn’t be able to get a cab” (quoted in Hoban 237). Basquiat talked about this problem in an interview with Isabelle Graw.

IG: Is it still a problem to be black in America today?

JMB: Sure. You can’t get taxis. I go on the street, wave my hand and they just drive past me. Normally I have to wait for three or four cabs. A few taxi companies tell their drivers not to pick up blacks.

IG: What will you do about it?

JMB: Nothing. Black drivers drive past me too (67).

Basquiat, however, did not just experience racism from taxi drivers and cab companies. The artist’s blackness also made him a target at airports. Kai Eric recalled the following incident which took place at an airport in Italy:

On either side of Jean-Michel were two Italian policemen with Uzis, and a detective in a trench coat from Interpol. They took us into the bowels of airport security. All our luggage was there, including the cardboard box full of cassettes,
which had somehow remained intact for the whole trip. I think they thought we had drugs. You know, because Jean-Michel was black, and he didn’t fit any profile. They found the money right away. They were very polite about the whole thing. They marched us through the airport to Interpol. They wanted to know where we got the money. We told them Jean-Michel earned it. And it was like, sure, this black guy made a hundred thousand dollars for eight paintings. They didn’t believe it for a minute (quoted in Hoban 115).

As Eric suggests, the Italian police relied on a common racial stereotype in detaining Basquiat, which is that any young black man with that much money more than likely came about it by illegal means. At airports, Basquiat often had difficulty in simply purchasing his tickets. Assistant Stephen Torton remembered one time when he and Basquiat almost missed a flight because the airlines did not believe that the hundred dollar bills the artist was trying to pay with were real (Hoban 130).

Basquiat experienced racism overseas in other ways as well. According to photographer Michael Halsband, who once accompanied Basquiat to Europe:

He was treated weirdly, strangely, like he was an oddity. People were entertained by him, fascinated for the moment, but would sooner or later throw him away. Or he was feared, you know? Just genuinely feared. They didn’t know that he was a soft, mild guy who really wouldn’t hurt anybody. In situations where I felt confident, he felt really, really vulnerable. Really scared. Were they looking at his skin color, his hairstyle, his dress, the amount of money he was flashing around? I mean there are different things people could have resented. But the energy always got the same. As soon as I separated myself from him, I realized that I was
anonymous, just another person, another white person (quoted in Hoban 258-259).

As Halsband points out, Basquiat’s blackness made him hyper-visible in certain parts of Europe, where he was an object of both fascination and fear.

The artist also was treated with suspicion and with close “inspection” and surveillance at stores and restaurants. On December 22, 1985, Andy Warhol recorded the following incident: “And then afterwards Jean Michel wanted to go to Bloomingdale’s, it was 4:30. So we went over there. He wanted to get a $3,000 gift certificate for his mother and when he took out his gold Amex card one guy asked to see ID but the other guy nudged him and said, ‘It’s okay’” (702). Jennifer Clement recalled the following incident,

Jean-Michel likes to take Suzanne to fancy restaurants. One night at an expensive Italian restaurant there is a long table with twenty white businessmen having dinner. Jean-Michel says “They are the kind who have their own private jets.” The businessmen stare, whisper racist remarks and drunkenly laugh at Jean-Michel. They think he is a pimp because he is black and has dreadlocks and is wearing messy clothes (89).

Basquiat often went to upscale restaurants so it is safe to assume that he experienced this type of treatment frequently. Whiling he was dining publicly, then, it was not uncommon for him to be ogled and mocked by white patrons. In this regard, not only did Basquiat encounter racism from those in the art world, mainly, critics, patrons, friend, dealers, and buyers, he continued to face racism, even as a highly recognizable and bankable painter, in a variety of everyday situations.

Of course, the examples offered above represent only known and recorded instances of the subtle and indirect racism that he encountered. It is hard to know exactly how many times
Basquiat was stared at in restaurants, had his money and ID checked extra hard by security, was passed up by cabs, heard racist comments in passing, or just felt that he was being gazed at; the several examples offered above, however, suggest that this was a major feature of his everyday life. In this sense, these types of seemingly minor insults added up to something much more substantial. While it is hard to imagine “a day in the life” of the artist, it is safe to assume that it was marked by several encounters with this subtle brand of racism. If he if didn’t get it from reading art reviews or conducting interviews, it seems more than likely at some point in his day, Basquiat was going to have deal with some kind of racial discrimination or stereotyping.

**Racism in Art**

Importantly, Basquiat did not just encounter racism from people in the art world; he saw and felt it in the artwork itself. This is no small point as Basquiat was very familiar with art history. When he was a young man, his mother often took him to art museums, and as part of his schooling at City-as-School, he spent a lot of time in the Museum of Modern Art. According to Suzanne Mallouck,

> I realized that Jean must have been to the MOMA millions of times. I had no idea. I never knew when he went. He never mentioned it to me. I know that his mother had taken him to museums. Jean knew every inch of that museum, every painting, every room. I was astonished at his knowledge and intelligence…” (quoted in Clement 39).

While it is impossible to know every piece of art that Basquiat saw, it is safe to assume that from his travels to the MOMA and to New York City’s other major art museums, the artist saw many major works spanning hundreds of years of art history. This is a particularly important aspect of
his biography especially considering the representation of blackness and black people throughout much of art history.

In this regard, Basquiat’s encounter with a large amount of Western art of the nineteenth century was a racially significant experience. In Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation, Michael D. Harris argues that Western art has worked to “discredit” blackness as a racial signifier (3). In nineteenth century American art work in particular,

Images of blacks in artworks most often iterated limited or derogatory perceptions held by most whites and helped create a visual iconography for black representation. Usually they naturalized a social order with black subjects on the periphery doing menial tasks or exhibiting stereotypical behavior so as to emphasize their social and political inferiority (Harris 40).

As Basquiat was very knowledgeable in art history, it stands to reason that he would have had some familiarity with the work of 19th Century American painters. Basquiat would have seen much of the same in European art of the early modern period. In his examination of Edouard Manet’s Olympia (1865), often regarded as the first “modern” painting (Mirzoeff 172), as well of other works, Sander Gilman in his essay “The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality,” argues that “the black, both male and female, becomes by the eighteenth century an icon of deviant sexuality in general” (121). Importantly, in early Euro-American art, Basquiat would have encountered the equation of blackness with marginality and otherness.

In art of the twentieth century, Basquiat would have witnessed the equation of blackness with primitivism and backwardness. In “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” James Clifford shows how the 1984-85 MOMA exhibition “Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the
Tribal and the Modern,” reflects how modern art from Picasso on treats or conceptualizes the non-West. The exhibition, which paired modern Euro-American masterpieces with “tribal” or “primitive” art of was designed to show how non-Western art influenced many of the great Western artists. The exhibition demonstrates, according to Clifford, the hundred year history of the West’s collection, classification, and appropriation of non-Western arts and objects. As Clifford points out, the MOMA exhibition highlighted modern art’s treatment of blackness vis-à-vis its conceptualization of African-ness and African art and its visual coding of black bodies. For artists like Picasso, Leger, and Apollinaire, blackness and non-white art and objects were a desirable source of inspiration because, for them, it represented something “irrational, savage, base, and a flight from civilization,” (221) which set it apart from the supposed rationality of the West. In their artworks, black bodies were, then, often coded and presented as vital, rhythmic, magical, and erotic (221). Although this exhibition occurred during Basquiat’s lifetime and very close to home, it is hard to know as to whether or not he attended it. No matter, Basquiat was very familiar with 20th century art. Moreover, as Chapter One notes in its discussion of Basquiat and his relationship with popular culture, the artist watched silent films with a careful eye on the racial representation. It stands to reason that Basquiat would have brought a similar concern to the way blackness and black people figured into and were framed in “high” art, especially as this was the visual medium in which he worked. Undoubtedly, Basquiat recognized in his lifetime the way blackness was deployed and objectified in the history of art.

Even among his contemporaries, Basquiat would have witnessed art that took liberties with racial images. Robert Mapplethorpe, for example, used the nude black male as the subject of many of his photographs in two collections of his work, Black Males (1980) and Black Book (1986). According to Thelma Golden in her essay “My Brother” Mapplethorpe often denied the
subject-hood of the black men he photographed (33). Although bell hooks, like many, acknowledges the complexity of Mapplethorpe’s images and even that some of his pictures “disrupt and challenge conventional ways of seeing” (136), she ultimately believes that Mapplethorpe’s photographs are yet another example of the “commodification and fetishization” (136) of the black male body. According to hooks:

Subversive elements within any image or series of images do not necessarily counter the myriad ways those same images may reinscribe and perpetuate existing structures of racial and/or sexual domination…the racist/sexist iconography of the black male body is reaffirmed and celebrated by much of Mapplethorpe’s work (136).

Again, because biographical treatments of Basquiat rarely consider the mundane, albeit significant, details of his daily life such as what he watched and saw in the culture around him, it is difficult to say for certain how much of Mapplethorpe’s work Basquiat knew. Basquiat certainly knew Mapplethorpe and, given the controversy regarding his photographs, was familiar with his depiction of the black male body. In this regard, Basquiat’s encounter as a black painter with Mapplethorpe’s artwork would have presented him with a notion that much of art history presented him with, that being that black bodies were the raw materials and inspiration of great art, not the producers of it.

**Sensing Racism**

Basquiat was aware of and affected by what the art world, meaning its members and its images, thought and said about him. According to Michael Holman, “He was a very sensitive person, especially about the negative criticism directed toward him. He was called ‘Warhol’s
mascot,” and even ‘the Eddie Murphy of the art world.’ Sometimes critics wrote decent things, but most articles were negative comments about Jean’s personality, not his paintings. Those criticisms hurt him a lot” (11). Although much of the racism that pervaded Basquiat’s art career was subtle, the artist understood it as racism nonetheless. Alison Pearlman argues that Basquiat “understood that crudeness and refinement were racially coded concepts; especially in terms of the labels ‘primitive’ as well as a ‘primitivist’ which he was labeled and called in various quarters at the time” (85). It comes as no surprise, then, that the artist once objected to critic’s reviews, “And then they have this image of me [as a] wild man, a wild, monkey man, whatever the fuck they thought” (quoted in Negron-Muntaner 130). Similarly, Basquiat once grabbed author, Tama Janowitz, saying “You bigot” because he was upset about his father posing for a picture in her book, *Cannibal in Manhattan*. Here, the artist illustrates his awareness and frustration with how the art world threw around loaded terms like “wild,” “primitive”, and “cannibal,” which it believed to be racially benign but which Basquiat recognized as racially offensive. In this sense, Basquiat was well tuned in to the subtleties of the racism that he was surrounded by.

Several episodes and moments indicate just how tuned in he was to the subtleness of the art world’s racism. When, for example, Miller asked Basquiat in their interview, “And you’re seen as some kind of primal expressionism?,” Basquiat responded, “You mean, like an ape, a primate?.” In doing so, Basquiat, in a joking but also serious manner, criticizes and rebukes Miller for invoking a racially derogatory term so casually. In this regard, all Basquiat has to do is to point out that to use a term like “primal” to describe the black artist’s brand of expressionism is to associate him to an animal, mainly, some kind of primate like an ape or monkey. Later on in the interview, Miler, in talking to Basquiat about his Haitian background, asks him, “So, no
Haitian primitives on your wall?” to which Basquiat retorts, “At home, Haitian primitives? What do you mean…people? People nailed up on the walls?.” Again, Basquiat draws attention to the meaning and implication of the term “primitive” and how it is deployed by the art world. As Basquiat’s mocking comments suggest, Miller and others like him should not feel so comfortable and free using such a term, especially in front of a young black man.

In that same interview, Basquiat also acknowledged that he understood the racial meaning behind the way the art world interpreted his tenure working in Annina Nosei’s basement studio, as the following exchange indicates.

MM: Let’s talk a bit about the story that you’re always being locked in the basement in order to paint.

JMB: That’s just…um…That’s just got a nasty edge to it. I was never locked anywhere. I mean…Oh Christ…If I was white they would just say artist-in-residence rather than saying all that other stuff.

In this case, Basquiat’s response indicates that he is aware that his work process and his relationship with his dealers are viewed differently by the art world because he is a black artist. Basquiat recognized the racial double standard he was subjected to in other instances as well. For example, he was once asked by a potential buyer for a copy of his C.V. According to Suzanne Mallouck, Basquiat was “furious,” and asked her, “Do you think they ever asked Picasso for his curriculum vitae?” (quoted in Clement 63). As his question to Mallouck suggests, Basquiat believes that were he a white artist, he would not be asked to produce a resume for a potential buyer.
Conclusion

As this chapter illustrates, race and racism were major features of Basquiat’s existence at the center of the 1980s art world. In 1981 Basquiat entered into a racist context where, for his eight year career, he was the frequent target of racism. The artist, however, dealt with different and varied forms of racism. He experienced blatant and malicious acts of discrimination as well as more subtle and unintentional forms of racism. While the first took the form of threats of violence, racial epithets, and exclusion, the second took the shape of racial stereotyping, frequently deployed by members of the art community in the way they assessed Basquiat and his artwork. Through their language, word choice, and tone, art critics, dealers, patrons, and the like often evoked the stereotype of the black male as violent, promiscuous, criminal, childlike, and more instinctual than intelligent in assessing the merits and demerits of the artist and his work. The racism of the 1980s art world had a strong impact on Basquiat. Not only did he address, on several occasions, the blatant and aggressive prejudice he encountered, he recognized and also dealt with the art world’s frequent deployment of black racial stereotypes in judging him and his paintings.

The “pervasive, if subtle, sense of racism,” of the 1980s art world was particularly important in laying the groundwork for the racial performance that dominated the artist’s public persona and paintings. As Hill Collins points out, the kind of racism that largely impacts “black youth born after the great social movements of the 1950s and 1960s” (53) such as Basquiat who lived from 1960 to 1988 is “colorblind racism” (85). Hill Collins adds: “The new racism relies more heavily on the manipulation of ideas within mass media. These new techniques present hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism is over. They work to obscure the racism that does exist, and they undercut antiracist protest” (54). In this sense, much of the racism that Basquiat
encountered in the art world would not have called itself such nor would many of the people who made racist comments consider themselves racially prejudiced. Because the art community saw itself as colorblind in its judgments or even racially liberal, but never racially discriminatory, Basquiat could not have used traditional modes of protest and redress to deal with the racism he felt. Charges of racism, in this case, would have fallen on deaf ears as members of the art community, all mostly highly educated and “cultured” would have denied such claims. Yet, Basquiat did not just ignore or accept the racism around him; rather, he “vocalized” and announced its continued presence in other ways. As the following chapters illustrate, Basquiat used his public image and his paintings as performance spaces in which to expose the way racism in the art world worked and impacted him.
CHAPTER FOUR

ACTING UP IN PUBLIC:

RACIAL PERFORMANCE IN

THE PUBLIC PERSONA OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

Introduction

That racial performance came to dominate Basquiat’s public persona as a 1980s art star should come as no surprise. As the first part of this dissertation illustrates, both race and performance played major roles in the artist’s life prior to his entrance into the art world in 1981. Chapter One shows how Basquiat’s blackness mattered greatly where he grew up, where he went to school, what he watched and read, and how he approached and identified with graffiti art. In this regard, his “bad boy” behavior at school and his graffiti writing and identity as SAMO can be seen as early examples of racially inflected performances. Chapter Two maintains that the artist’s racial background and his flair for acting out in public continued to be an important part of his life and art while a part of the New York City’s “downtown” avant-garde arts scene. There he encountered racism and stereotypical notions of blackness which he frequently addressed through his hair, dress, dance, and overall personal style and attitude. That race and performance played such central roles in Basquiat’s life before 1981 practically guaranteed that the performance of blackness would become the defining feature of his public persona within the art market or, to borrow a phrase from bell hooks, at “the heart of whiteness.”

Along with his earlier experiences with race and performance, Basquiat’s encounter with art world racism between 1981 and 1988 was also essential in making racial performance the key component of his public image. As Chapter Three demonstrates, because young black males are
often stereotyped as violent, criminal, promiscuous, childlike, instinctual, lazy, and lacking in intelligence, Basquiat’s physicality, sexuality, intellect, work ethic, discipline, and maturity were under frequent scrutiny and the source of constant conversation and concern with art critics, dealers, patrons, and others. In this regard, assessments and reviews of Basquiat and his artwork, whether positive or negative, were intertwined with the fact of his blackness. Drawing on his lifelong experiences with racism and with “acting up in public,” Basquiat cultivated a public image as a black painter that served to dramatize and animate the “pervasive, if not subtle” racism that he encountered at the center of the 1980s art world. As this chapter argues, Basquiat used several aspects of his body such as his walk, talk, facial expression, and clothing to mock the racist way in which his blackness magnified and framed discussions of his sexual activities, intellect, discipline, and maturity. In examining the way the artist behaved and carried himself when being photographed, interviewed, and filmed and when in the public eye in general, this chapter claims that Basquiat’s public persona relied heavily on playing on the notions of blackness that surrounded him.

Reputation and Life

There was not much that was incidental or unplanned when it came to Basquiat and his public image. Many familiar with the artist note the extent to which he was in control of his life and reputation. According to Robert Farris Thompson, “Basquiat was quite cognizant of the impression he was creating; at times it seemed as if he were playing himself” (quoted in Hoban 243). Along the same lines, Suzanne Mallouck insists that “Jean was always watching himself from outside of himself and laughing” (quoted in Clement 75). Benjamin Liu, an assistant to Warhol, compares Basquiat to Warhol in that they are both “very aware of the part they play in
public” (quoted in Hoban 203). In the way he spoke, walked, dressed, and acted in general, Basquiat was very deliberate and plotting, so much so that Dick Hebdige calls Basquiat’s body both “his first masterpiece” (63) and a “studio unto itself” (64) while Hoban concludes that his life was a “stylish performance” (80).

Apparently, Basquiat worked hard to cement a reputation of himself as childish, disrespectful, and spoiled as it is these words and similar ones that seem to be used most often in describing the artist. Matt Dike recalled that he “was the biggest slob I’ve ever seen. He acted like a three year old kid” (quoted in Hoban 176). For Paige Powell, Basquiat played up a “cute-black-boy routine. He was so childish” (quoted in Hoban 267). Although Liz Williams and Basquiat were the same age, she saw him as a child, stating that “He had the same sort of impatience as a three year old. He believed he was the center of the world. He was a big spoiled baby” (quoted in Hoban 256). These are not merely isolated statements by people who had a particular dislike for Basquiat; rather, they reflect the art world’s general impression of the artist as a naughty little boy.

Others described Basquiat as flashy and arrogant. Band mate and friend, Nicholas Taylor says of the artist that “He was always striving for attention and was always very showy. He enjoyed the attention he got; he always played it up, even its negative aspects” (34). One of Basquiat’s friends, John Lurie said of Basquiat’s flamboyant behavior that with more and more fame “he turned into Don King” (quoted in Hoban 102). Bruno Bischofberger recalled how unreasonably “demanding” (153) Basquiat could be with dealers and exhibitions, suggesting that he was a diva. Again, these are not isolated opinions of the artist; it is hard in fact to find anyone that describes Basquiat as modest and subdued.
Many in the art world also appear to have believed that Basquiat was lazy, stupid, and irrational. Nicholas Taylor’s contention, in talking about the artist’s clothes and appearance, that Basquiat was “not a lazy guy” (13), implies that many got this impression of him based on the way he looked, dressed, and behaved. According to Glenn O’Brien, “He was a young guy, and he was black, so it was easy to have this kind of babe-in-the-woods scenario. But Jean-Michel wasn’t stupid. He knew what was going on” (quoted in Hoban 90). Here, O’Brien points out that Basquiat was not clueless, but that his acting that way had something to with his youth and race. Referring to Basquiat’s outrageous behavior and wastefulness, Negron-Muntaner argues that these things “should not be confused with him lacking a work ethic or not understanding exchange value” (122). These comments show that Basquiat was not in fact stupid or lazy, but rather that he merely worked to cultivate that impression among the art community.

The question, of course, is why Basquiat would want to create such an impression of himself. According to Suzanne Mallouck, “What most people don’t understand about Jean-Michel was that his crazy behavior had nothing to do with being an ‘enfant terrible.’ Everything he did was an attack on racism and I loved him for this” (quoted in Clement 36). Importantly, Mallouck points out that Basquiat’s wild behavior was mediated by the racial perceptions around him. He was not just acting like the typical rebellious artist, as he was not the typical artist. Mallouck helps to shed light on the fact that much of the artist’s persona revolved around playing the stereotypical black male. The artist, seemingly spoiled by fame and wealth, acted unapologetically childish, boastful, and irrational. In this regard, Basquiat “attacked racism,” as Mallouck suggests, by playing on and satirizing the racist perceptions of black maleness around him.
Interestingly enough, the amount of drugs that Basquiat took throughout his life did not translate into him being unaware or out of control. It is no secret that the artist’s drug use was heavy. Suzanne Mallouck put it simply, saying that “Jean always did drugs, he never stopped” (quoted in Clement 56). While Mallouck’s statement should not perhaps be taken too literally, it does rightly acknowledge that Basquiat was on some type of drug most of the time. The artist, however, appears to have had a high tolerance for drugs. B. Dub, one of Basquiat’s friends, recalls, “I’ve never seen somebody so smart about so many things. And he had so much energy. The thing was as much weed as he smoked, he never seemed stoned or tired” (quoted in Hoban 280). It seems then that despite his use of illegal substances, the artist managed to maintain a clear head and a high level of clarity. Mallouck’s assessment of the artist’s cocaine use is similar, According to her, “He was such a barometer for the racist culture he lived in. He felt everything around him in a very heightened way. It was not only cocaine paranoia” (quoted in Clement 132). Here, Mallouck does not completely discount the very real possibility that his drug use had some effect on him; yet, she is more convinced that the artist’s behavior was more impacted by the racism that he perceived to be around him. In this regard, Basquiat’s wild and seemingly out of control behavior was not the result of him actually being out of his head, so to speak. While his drug use played a part in his public image, it was not the reason for it.

Of course, Basquiat’s death at a relatively young age from a heroin overdose suggests that hard drugs ruled his life and ultimately overwhelmed him. Yet, it is worth mentioning that Basquiat’s drug use was not inconsistent with the way he saw his life and death playing out. According to those who knew him closely, the artist did not plan on sticking around for too long. Close friend and band mate, Michael Holman recalls that “He kept saying that he would die at the age of twenty seven. You know, it’s the same age that Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Janis
Joplin died. He also said, ‘I just want to live life like James Dean.’ Live fast and die young, I suppose” (11). Mallouck tells a similar story, saying “Jean-Michel said outright that he thought it was cool that James Dean, Billie Holiday, and Marilyn Monroe died young. He was very open about that. He thought dying young was the best thing there ever was” (103). In this regard, Basquiat’s death at age twenty seven should not be met with too much surprise as he made it clear on more than one occasion that he planned to die at that exact age.

Basquiat’s desire to die young should not, however, be chalked up to mere hero worship of those like Dean and Hendrix. Although Basquiat was young and famous just as they were, his life was not like theirs in every way, and he certainly did not follow their lead in every single way. In this case, Basquiat, it seems, never really revealed his own personal reasons for wanting to die young. This decision is connected, however, to his own experiences and expectations as a black painter. In “Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat,” bell hooks contends that

Basquiat journeyed into the heart of whiteness. White territory he named a savage and brutal place. The journey is embarked upon with no certainty of return. Nor is there any way to know what you’ll find or who you will be at journey’s end…Working the stereotypical darky image, playing the trickster, Basquiat understood that he was risking his life – that this journey was all about sacrifice (36).

As hooks suggests, Basquiat was well aware of what he was getting into in becoming a painter. He knew that he would face racism, just he had felt racism all of his life. Although he planned to “work the stereotypical darky image” for the art world, he also, as hooks also notes, recognized that this was one performance that could not and need not go on too long. Basquiat wanted his
life and art to serve as a lightning rod for art world racism. Doing so takes its toll on the mind and body, and in the end it requires the ultimate sacrifice.

Contrary then to its outward appearance, Basquiat’s life and public image were in his control and, more importantly, well planned around a brief yet powerful racial performance. This is not to say that Basquiat should be seen as some type of black saint, but rather that the risky and casual type of black performance that the artist relied on is consistent with the way he saw his life and death playing out. In other words, Basquiat knew that the art community would not “get him” or his art. To a certain extent, that was good for him. It was the racist belief that he and his art were particularly “primitive” and “savage” that drove interest in him and it in the first place. It was this reality that both frustrated and depressed him. Meaning, his being embraced and welcomed as an artist at same time required and was authorized by a very stereotypical view of black manhood. Basquiat could not destroy the façade completely, as it made him famous and wealthy, but he tried in his black performance to place small cracks and fissures in this façade. He hoped that some people would get it and get him and his predicament, but it was the not knowing that got to him the most. Thus, Basquiat, when he became an artist, knew he would have to deal with this contradiction. As this chapter shows, rather than to try to tear down the racial discourse that afforded him a public stage, he brought them to together by embodying in a variety of public arenas the racial stereotypes that drove his life and death.

Photographs

Of course not every single photograph that Basquiat posed for can be considered a racial performance. There are, in fact, many pictures of the artist in which he appears to be up to nothing of any racial importance. There are, however, many pictures in which he does use
several aspects of his body and surroundings to animate the way he was stereotyped. In this regard, Basquiat’s self-awareness in front of the camera is connected to what Fatima Tobing Roy terms “the third eye,” which is a sensibility shared by people of color in the United States deriving from “the formative experience of viewing oneself as an object” (4). In *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Roy argues that this form of double-consciousness among non-whites in the U.S. is informed by their encounter with “ethnographic cinema,” which is a body of disparate films all connected in their representation of dark skinned people as backward (8). As the previous chapter lays out, Basquiat watched a lot of television and film. Thus, when Basquiat and people who like him are placed in front of the camera, they bring with them a cognizance of themselves as ethnographic spectacle and, more importantly, they often use strategies that acknowledge this awareness and expose this historical relationship between the camera and the non-white. One such strategy, according to Roy, is parody, which she contends was used quite effectively by Josephine Baker. According to Roy,

> Sometime the third eye winks at us. Parody is present in the spectacular performances of Josephine Baker, singing in her flimsy golden cage masquerade. See me as a Primitive if you want to, but notice how ridiculous my cage and my image are, Baker seems to say as she pushes her Mae West-like mink stole over her shoulder (215).

In a way Baker and Basquiat’s experiences, although obviously different in many ways, shared some important similarities. Like Baker, Basquiat too was expected by white audiences to inhabit the role of the “Primitive.” It is then no surprise that Basquiat treated the photographic moment as well as other public arenas as spaces in which to play on popular misperceptions of blackness.
In photographs with white girlfriends such as Kelle Inman and Madonna, for example, Basquiat addressed the fact that his sexual practices and prowess were the topic of much discussion in the art world. In the Inman photograph, she and Basquiat pose in front of one of the artist’s works (see Figure 13). The table in front of them contains several paint containers and paint brushes along with what appears to be some African collectibles, including a few drums and a small, wooden sculpture. The not-so-subtle inclusion of such black cultural signifiers alongside the artist’s painting materials serves to comment on his supposed “primitivism,” a point which is also driven home by the potentially violent pose he strikes with Inman. Basquiat stands behind Inman and has his left arm around her chest while his right hand is placed along the side of her head so as to push it to the side slightly. The facial expressions of Basquiat and Inman’s appear calm as both of their eyes confront the camera. Through its composition and comportment, this picture calls up the racist notion that black manhood represents a sexual and physical threat to white womanhood. While Inman’s position and calm and innocent look suggests vulnerability, clearly such trust is unfounded as Basquiat, the black “primitive,” appears to be on the verge of twisting and breaking her neck.

In another photograph, Basquiat along with the assistance of onetime girlfriend, Madonna, similarly lampoons fears of black sexual and physical power overtaking and harming white women (see Figure 14). This picture, taken by Basquiat’s assistant, Stephen Torton, while more spontaneous than the one with Inman, still addresses the way his blackness framed the art world’s conceptualization of his sexuality. In this case, Madonna’s pose gives the photograph much of its racial meaning. She kneels before Basquiat with eyes closed with her mouth around an artichoke that is suspended from a string. Basquiat, who holds an artichoke in his hands, has his head turned to the right so that he is staring directly into the camera. His facial expression is
Figure 13

Basquiat and Kelle Inman
Figure 14

Basquiat and Madonna
sly and serious. Like this Inman photograph, this one as well in its composition and comportment plays on fears associated with black male hyper-sexuality. Here, Madonna appears to be completely under Basquiat’s control and to have “gone native.” Kneeling before him with her eyes closed and her mouth wrapped around the dangling piece of jungle fruit, she appears to be under Basquiat’s control or under his spell, suggesting that he possesses some type of magical or inexplicable sexual power with white women. No doubt aware of what Madonna was doing behind him and its racial connotations, Basquiat’s performance, which is more subtle, consists of him looking coolly into the camera.

In photographs with white men as well, Basquiat similarly attempted to mock the racist notion that black men possess an innate and insatiable desire for white females. In a picture with Keith Haring, for instance, Basquiat kisses the openly gay artist on the side of his face (see Figure 15), and, in doing so, subverts the racial stereotype of black male hyper-heterosexuality. This photograph, moreover, calls attention to the gap between Basquiat’s actual sexual practices and the public’s perception of them. While Basquiat was seen publicly, according to bell hooks, as “a stereotypical black stud fucking randomly fucking white women” (35), he also more privately was involved in several sexual relationships with men. According to Suzanne Mallouck, “It was clear that his sexual interest was not monochromatic. It did not rely on visual stimulation, such as a pretty girl. It was a very rich multi-chromatic sexuality. He was attracted to people for all different reasons. They could be boys, girls, thin, fat, pretty, ugly” (quoted in Clement 32). Here, Mallouck does not claim that Basquiat was “bisexual” as the artist himself never identified as such. She merely suggests that the artist engaged in sexual desires that were not heterosexual. Keith Haring was not, however, one of the men with whom Basquiat had
Figure 15

Basquiat Kissing Keith Haring
sexual relations. In this picture, Haring stands as a symbol of gayness and whiteness, which Basquiat knows just as he knows that he stands as a symbol of blackness and compulsive heterosexuality. Thus, even though Basquiat only gives Haring a kiss on the side of the head, the action, given the public knowledge of both men, possesses a lot of racial and sexual significance. By kissing the gay white artist publicly, Basquiat mocks the way the way in which his blackness contributes to misperceptions of his sexual activities.

In a series of photographs with Andy Warhol for their 1985 collaborative exhibition, Basquiat parodied the myth of black hyper-masculinity (see Figures 16, 17, and 18). These pictures, in which Basquiat and Warhol pose as sparring boxers, are actually a takeoff on the 1930s fights between the German Max Schmeling and the famous black American boxer Joe Louis. As such, they are primarily a tongue-in-cheek attempt to present their collaboration as a battle between the world’s greatest white artist and the world’s greatest black artist. However, Basquiat through very subtle gestures and movements also made this already racially-inflected set of photographs about widely held perceptions of black masculinity. Even though in taking on the image of the black boxer, Basquiat embodied the ultimate symbol of black physicality and manliness, he often conveys in this series of pictures a lack of manliness.

In all three photographs, for instance, his body, while lean and somewhat muscular, is not posed in a very athletic and intimidating manner. In Figure 16, he places his arms across his body so as to cover the majority of his bare chest and torso as does the shirted Andy Warhol. Such postures suggest shyness as they work to hide and cover the body. Furthermore, the long scar running down his chest, the result of a surgery to remove his spleen as a young man, suggests bodily deterioration and frailty. Not only that, Basquiat’s stance lacks a certain
Figure 16

Warhol and Basquiat Posing as Boxers
Figure 17

Warhol and Basquiat Exhibition Poster
Figure 18

Warhol Delivering the Knockout Punch to Basquiat
manliness as well. Rather than standing straight and erect to convey the strength and confidence of a boxer, he juts his hip out just slightly to the right, a move which is particularly noticeable in juxtaposition to Warhol’s more straightened waist. This stance, which borders on effeminate, is clearly not part of the classic boxer pose. Figure 17 also highlights how unboxer-like Basquiat looks in these series of photographs. Rather than making himself large by placing his dukes up and in way that makes him look like he is ready to fight, Basquiat seems to shrink himself and become smaller by keeping his arms tucked in close to his chest, in a defensive posture. The picture in Figure 18, however, drives home the extent to which this series of photos represented for Basquiat a moment in which to play on the way his sexuality and masculinity were connected to his blackness. The black artist, here, is overpowered and knocked out by a queer, white older man.

Basquiat also used particularly poignant group photographs to comment on the way the art world viewed his racial background. In a photograph taken at Mr. Chow’s restaurant, (see Figure 19), Basquiat is surrounded by several famous members of the art community including Andy Warhol, Kenny Scharf, Keith Haring, David Hockney, and Robert Mapplethorpe. As the photograph clearly shows, of the twenty eight people posing for the picture at the dinner party, Basquiat is the sole black person in the room. Dressed in a suit with a bowtie and a white shirt, Basquiat stares into the camera with a blank look while holding an empty serving plate in front of him. His clothing along with his facial expression and the way in which holds the plate makes it seem as though he is either a waiter or a busboy at the restaurant rather than an equal or colleague of the room full of white artists and critics. This pose and gesture lowers Basquiat’s status as he appears to be a common laborer rather than a highly renowned painter.
As this photograph suggests, Basquiat was often met with the assumption that he was more likely a common laborer rather than a fine artist. Liz Williams, a wealthy New York woman with whom Basquiat had a brief affair, recalled a particularly telling incident. One time, the artist came over to her luxurious home on Park Avenue late at night carrying with him a bag of hamburgers from a fast-food restaurant. After a while, remembers Williams, the doorman called up and asked “Has the delivery boy left yet?” (quoted in Hoban 256). Although Basquiat at this time was a well-established artist, he was nonetheless mistaken for a delivery boy. Moreover, the fact that the doorman called up to check on Basquiat and Williams suggests that he thought something wrong was going on. In the group photo, Basquiat animates this aspect of his racial reality, something which he did on other occasions as well. Glenn O’Brien recalled the following incident, “One night we went to a chi-chi party and Jean looked amazing and some rich guy came over and said to us ‘And what do you do?’ Jean said, ‘I’m the manager of a McDonald’s,’ and the guy just turned and walked away” (32). Here, Basquiat’s lie is strategic in that it aims to comment on the motive behind the anonymous guy’s question. Why, in other words, ask this question? Would he believe that Basquiat was a painter anyway? Should he have known that Basquiat was a painter? Thus, this moment functions, like the picture of him holding the serving plate, to address how the art world felt about the possibility of a black painter.

In this group photograph as well as several individual photographs, Basquiat confronted another racial stereotype he encountered often from the fine arts community, the image of the young black male as lacking in intelligence, discipline, and maturity. This is not to say, of course, that everyone thought that Basquiat was dumb, lazy, and immature because he was young and black, but rather that because he was young and black, the art community got
particularly caught up in discussing and debating exactly how smart, disciplined, and mature he was. In the case of the group picture in Figure 19, Basquiat comments on his anomalous and precarious status as a black fine artist in a predominantly white art world by suggesting that he and his “kind” do not “belong” and that they are more suitable for jobs that require less brain power and responsibility and more physical and mindless work. This is, however, but one instance in which Basquiat used the space of the photograph to address questions concerning his capacity for learning, culture, and so-called civilization.

In a series of individual photographs taken for *The New York Times Magazine*, Basquiat similarly played or acted the “fool.” In the cover shot (see Figure 20), the dreadlocked artist wears an expensive, designer Giorgio Armani suit that has paint smudges on the legs. He is seated in a relaxed pose on a red chair with one bare foot on the floor and the other bare foot resting on an overturned chair. He rests his elbows on the chair and a paint brush protrudes from his hands which are clasped together in front of his chin. Basquiat stares into the camera with a “frosty, slightly hostile look…which seems to say to the viewer ‘who the hell are you looking at?’” (Hebdige 62). Behind him, “a painted cowboy grabs at him and a primitive, tooth-baring monster grins savagely” (Frohne 444). That Basquiat was in control of the photo shoot is clear. According to Mary Boone, Basquiat “stood up the photographer three times and refused to wear his shoes” (quoted in Hoban 323). This photograph represents another moment in which the artist plays the part of the stereotypical “dumb darky,” so-to-speak, for the art world and larger public. In this shot, Basquiat conveys the message that he lacks the ability to be uplifted by civilization and culture. Although he wears an expensive, designer suit, a symbol of white middle class assimilation, he still cannot leave behind his “savage” ways as the paint stains, “wild” hair, and bare feet indicate.
Figure 20

Basquiat on the cover of The New York Times Magazine,

February 10, 1985
Figure 21

Basquiat Sitting on Art
Figure 22

Basquiat Sitting on Art
In other photographs taken for the same shoot (see Figures 21 and 22), Basquiat similarly commented on the way his intellect, discipline, and maturity were, because of his racial background, under particular scrutiny by the art world. In Figures 21 and 22, Basquiat’s suit is gone, and he wears instead a colorful hat and clothing that gives him a more “primitive” or “native” appearance. Instead of sitting in a chair, the artist is now seated atop one of his three-dimensional works of art. In Figure 21, Basquiat sits with his bare feet overhanging while he stares just off to the side of the camera. In Figure 22, his feet are on top of the work, and he looks directly into the camera with an almost a bashful and childish stare. In both cases, Basquiat’s decision to don more “native” garb and to position himself on top of his artwork are both significant ones. In doing so, the artist shows a lack of respect for “fine art,” even his own, which is supposed to be looked at and appreciated and handled with the utmost care. Here, Basquiat straddles and lies across it as an unknowing or bad child would, a decision which, like many others, serves to dramatize the way the art world saw him as a young and untutored black male.

In another solo picture of Basquiat (see Figure 23), this one not for The New York Times Magazine, Basquiat again plays on the art world’s image of him as being violent, instinctual, and immature while lacking in self-control and restraint. In Figure 11, the artist poses in front of one of his text-rich canvases. The table in front of him is a bit of a mess. Just as with the Inman picture, it contains paints, brushes, and containers along with several African-esque artifacts including a wooden statuette and three small drums. Behind the table, Basquiat confronts the camera with a serious, unhappy gaze as he points what appears to be a fake handgun to his head. Moreover, his clothes and dreadlocked hair are in disarray. He wears a purple sweater that hangs off his shoulder because it is either too big, too worn, or a combination of both. The sleeves are
Figure 23
Basquiat Posing with Fake Gun to Head
so baggy and long that it almost completely covers his left hand. Although he is not wearing a
dress shirt underneath his sweater, he dons a red and white striped tie. Even though this
photograph was taken well after Basquiat had “made it” in the art world, his look, his clothing,
and certainly his gestures do not suggest a man that is thankful for his “success,” or fame and
money. In fact, Basquiat suggests in the photograph that he is suicidal. As no black man had
achieved Basquiat’s status in the world, his nihilism is not just surprising, but also stands to
conjure the opinion that he is ungrateful, spoiled, or immature. By embodying the young black
man who cannot handle, understand, and appreciate the patronage of the art world, Basquiat
plays with the image of the ungrateful and “uppity darky” that he encountered so often.

**Interviews**

Like these photographs, interviews served as another public arena for Basquiat to
dramatize the racism and racial misperceptions that he experienced. That such was the case for
the artist is highlighted by Harry Van den Berg, Margaret Wetherell, and Hanneke Houtkoop-
Steenstra in *Analyzing Race Talk: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Research Interview*. As
these authors point out, the interview is, rather than merely an act of date collection, a social
construct in which the interviewees’ answers are often produced in a highly specific context (4).
These authors argue that “interviewees typically articulate opinions that do not necessarily
correspond with those articulated in other conversational situations such as in a conversation
with friends or neighbors and conversations in the workplace” (5). In this sense, Basquiat’s
interviews cannot be taken at face value nor can the answers he gave be treated simply as “facts”
about his life and art. The artist recognized the constructed nature of the interviews he
participated in. He knew that the interviewers held certain racial assumptions, which in turn
influenced the types of questions they asked. Rather than ignore this fact, Basquiat used the
interview as a performance space in which to comment on the racist logic that constructed the
interviewers’ questions and comments he faced. He did this through deliberately exaggerated and
ridiculous acts and behavior which in the end served to give the impression that he was lacking
in thought, depth, and intellect. There is, of course, a certain danger in dealing with racism in this
manner, and that is of perpetuating the very stereotype that is being challenged. Basquiat, I
believe, hoped that his racial performances in both their absurdity and frequency would get
people to talk about him and to vocalize their prejudices. Once vocalized and recognized, they
could then be dealt with and seen for what they were. In interviews and in public in general,
Basquiat made himself a lightning rod for racialized conversation as he was trying to pull from
people their hidden racism and to get them to see how their prejudice operated.

In this regard, Basquiat’s interview with Lisa Licitra Ponti is particularly instructive. To
most of her questions, he offers several one word and one sentence answers, many of which are
bratty and sarcastic. When she asks him, for instance, who comes to mind when he thinks of
American painting, Basquiat replies, “Franz Kline, Norman Rockwell, Henry Ford, Wendell
Willkie” (70). Of course, Basquiat knew that the industrial magnate Ford and the Republican
politician Willkie were not artists, or certainly not in the way that Kline and Rockwell were. He
was being deliberately difficult. The artist exudes evasiveness and uncooperativeness in the way
he handles other questions as well. When, at the end of the interview, Ponti awkwardly asks him
“Which are the people you like to discuss art with?” Basquiat could have named several people;
instead, he responds bluntly “I don’t like to discuss art at all” (70). In this regard, it is not that
Basquiat was lacking in depth, thought, or intellect. In fact, it was quite the opposite. He chose to
come off as a racial stereotype to dramatize the way that racism worked and reached him in the
The artist struck a similar pose in other interviews as well. In 1986, Basquiat was supposed to meet with Isabelle Graw for an interview at the opening of one of his shows in Hanover, Germany; however, he stood her up. When she finally did get her interview with him she asked him why he did that, to which the artist responded, “I’m sorry about that. I wasn’t in a traveling mood” (67). Not surprisingly Graw was unconvinced by Basquiat’s half-hearted apology and somewhat lame excuse, and she begins her line of questioning by chastising the world-renowned artist as if he were a child and exudes her dislike and disrespect for him throughout the interview, particularly near the end when she asks him antagonistic questions such as “Do you think drugs can help you?”, “Aren’t you worried that you might run out of ideas and that people won’t be interested in you anymore?”, and “Is it true that your paintings have been selling at a discount recently?” (67). As Graw was a “nobody” in the art community in relation to Basquiat, it is a particular notion of black manhood that authorizes her treatment of her art world superior. In other words, no matter Basquiat’s status, this young black man does not “know his place” and Graw, an older white woman, takes it upon herself to put him in his place through a series of questions that were meant to humble him. Basquiat, who had been in similar situations numerous times before, no doubt sensed that this was the case and became and embodied the racist stereotype that Graw deployed. Throughout the interview, he answered questions and offered comments that make him appear “uppity.” When she asked him matter-of-factly “Do you feel like talking about your paintings?” at the beginning of the interview, he responded, “Let’s just talk and get it over with” (67).
Basquiat similarly performed the stereotypes of blackness that he felt shaped and drove interviewer’s questions and comments, no matter who they were. When faced up with Henry Geldzhaler, one time Curator of Twentieth Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for the City of New York, Basquiat acted the same way he did with lesser figures like Ponti and Graw. Once again, the artist offers answers and comments that make him appear immature and intellectually wanting. Take, for example, the following exchange:

HG: All artists, or all art movements, when they get down to basics, eliminate color for a while, then go back to color. Color is the rococo stage, and black and white is the constructed, bare bones. You swing back and forth in your work. Are you aware of that?
JMB: I don’t know.
HG: If the color gets too beautiful, you retreat from it to something angrier and more basic…
JMB: I like the ones where I don’t paint as much as others, where it’s just a direct idea.
HG: Like the one I have upstairs.
JMB: Yeah. I don’t think that there’s anything under that gold paint. Most of the pictures have one or two paintings under them. I’m worried that in the future, parts might fall off and some of the heads underneath might show through.
HG: They might not fall off, but paint changes in time. Many Renaissance paintings have what’s called “pentimenti”, changes where the “ghost” head underneath which was five degrees off will appear.
JMB: I have a painting where somebody’s holding a chicken, and underneath the chicken is somebody’s head.

HG: It won’t fall off like that. The whole chicken won’t fall off.

JMB: Oh (laughs) (58).

The subject matter of Geldzahler’s questions and comments relies in many ways on a racist notion of black manhood. He suggests that Basquiat’s art reflects anger and simplicity more than beauty. Furthermore, Geldzahler assumes a didactic role in the interview. He does not merely ask Basquiat questions about his art. He also offers him a few mini-lessons in art history. In this way, Geldzahler sees his role as not just an interviewer but also as someone who can uplift the black artist by offering him the knowledge he needs in order to be considered “civilized” and “cultured.” Not surprisingly, Basquiat appears to pick up on this and plays up this image. To Geldzahler’s well thought out and imposing questions, Basquiat offers him the image of the “ignorant darky.” Through his answers, Basquiat portrays himself as an artist who does not put much thought and time into his paintings and as someone who cannot keep up with a sophisticated and intelligent person like Geldzahler.

Often Basquiat showcased brattiness and uppity-ness by simply refusing or bowing out of interviews at the last minute, apparently on a whim. His father Gerard recalled a particularly poignant incident. At the time of Basquiat’s tenure working in Annina Nosei’s basement studio, he called his father and asked him to come by the studio to see the space and to meet Nosei. Gerard remembers,

There were two people from England waiting to interview Jean-Michel. Suddenly, he walks in eating a mango. Not actually eating it-sucking through it. The two people said to him, “Jean-Michel, we have been waiting for over an hour to
interview you,” and Jean-Michel suddenly said, “The interview is off. I don’t want to talk. Not right now.” And that was it. They were embarrassed and tried to talk to Annina a bit, but eventually they walked out (91).

That Basquiat presented himself to the two interviewers munching on a mango, seems important, as Gerard even takes time to point out that his son was not merely eating it, but sucking on it. Here, then, the artist enters the interview eating a piece of jungle fruit in a highly uncivilized and ill-mannered way. Moreover, he has left them waiting for over an hour, a move that could suggest that he was on “colored people’s time.” Then, to cement his image as the stereotypical black man, he impulsively and selfishly calls off the interview off for no good reason. Given this series of events, if the two English interviewers did indeed hold any type of deep-seeded racial animosity or racist leanings, it would have been really hard for them to repress them and to not think that here is another young black man who does not know how to handle wealth and fame.

Of course, the interpretations of the interviews above raise some important questions. For one, is there any point in any interview in which Basquiat simply answered the question? Meaning, rather than seeing certain responses as racially-inflected performances, can’t they be seen as just honest answers to questions? Although the artist brought to interviews and to public arenas in general both a self-consciousness about the way his race was talked about and a desire to expose hidden racism, not every single one of his answers and comments was intended as some oblique yet larger critique of the racial stereotypes that framed the way interviewers and most others saw him. They did not, however, need to be. In interviews, Basquiat’s performance was not merely about the answers and comments he offered, but also about the way he dressed, looked, spoke, and acted in general. In this regard, any answer or comment that Basquiat gave was framed by certain physical factors, including his deliberate way of stuttering his speech, his
wild hair and messy clothing, his disinterested facial expressions, and his languid body language. Unfortunately, the printed interviews discussed above do not capture these bodily acts; they are, however, well-documented in a videotaped interview that Basquiat conducted with art historian Marc Miller in 1981.

In his interview with Marc Miller, Basquiat’s handles questions and answers in typical fashion. The Miller interview, because it was filmed, however, documents other aspects of the racial performance in Basquiat’s public persona that cannot be captured in a photograph or printed interview. For instance, Basquiat conducts the last segment of his interview with Miller by answering questions with a mouthful of food. While Miller laughs nervously, Basquiat continues to mutter incomprehensible grunts as he stuffs his face with a bowlful of asparagus. This decision on the part of the artist follows a very significant line of questioning in which Miller asks Basquiat to explain why he places certain words next to each other in his art and what, if any, relational meaning they have.

    MM: (referring to the panting) Is there any logic here?
    JMB: (smiling) Is there any logic here?
    MM: Yeah.
    JMB: God man. Like if you were talking to Marcel Duchamp or even Rauschenberg or something, you know, you wouldn’t tell them why something was next to something else except for it was just there.

In this regard, Basquiat feels that Miller is pressing particularly hard on him to defend his work’s logic simply because he, unlike Duchamp and Rauschenberg who also worked with the random, is a black painter working in a similar aesthetic. By grunting and eating with his mouthful, Basquiat becomes the childlike savage that Miller believes him to be.
The Miller interview also captured the stylized and deliberate way in which Basquiat spoke. Although the artist had the ability to speak clearly, he spoke with an occasional stammer. He did this, according to Phoebe Hoban, to “comment on the racism he often felt” (55). Basquiat stutters and stammers throughout his interview with Miller, and, as a result of this, he is often repetitive. On several occasions, the artist takes long and uncomfortable pauses before answering Miller’s questions which makes it seem as though he is really trying and struggling to get the words out. When speaking, Basquiat frequently keeps a low tone and his head down suggesting a certain amount of childlike shyness. All of this appears to have the desired effect on Miller. Shortly into the interview, Miller begins to talk more slowly and carefully and to frame his questions in a much more leading and helpful way. In doing so, the interviewer appears to have subscribed to the idea that the young black man in front of him was a bit “slow,” although this was certainly not the case.

In the Miller interview, we also witness what Basquiat’s friends called “The Stare.” According to Nicholas Taylor: “Jean-Michel had this pretentious look he would give people…he would idly stare into your eyes with this intense, almost expressionless look on his face. Caught in deep concentration, Jean-Michel would stare at you and, without speaking, let you know how meaningless—almost foolish—your question was to him” (16). In his discussion with Franklin Sirmans about the racism Basquiat faced, Fred Braithwaite also talked about “The Stare” and its purpose.

Jean was able to fry a person’s whole sense of self with one glance, make them feel really guilty about some shit they did, and even when they hadn’t done anything, he could detect that vibe in people, and really check them, make them feel very uncomfortable. He had a really amazing energy about doing that and he
would consciously do it to check you and make your knees shake. Then, he would look over me at me and kind of grin. Like: “Just to let you know, I got that nigga right.” And I’d be looking at him like, “Put it on ‘em baby” (44).

As Braitwaite suggests, Basquiat frequently employed “The Stare” to create discomfort and produce guilt in people within whom he detected a racist “vibe.” He does this several times in his interview with Marc Miller. With his “uppity” stare, Basquiat reflected back and antagonized those who held racist beliefs and thought that the black artist should have acted with more respect, gratitude, and deference.

**Everyday Situations**

Although not captured in the Miller interview or in any film for that matter, another major component to Basquiat’s performance of blackness was the way he walked. Nicholas Taylor remembers the artist’s walk as follows: “Jean-Michel walked a very unique walk – literally. When he walked down the street, his swagger was very recognizable. He had a very charismatic strut with a kind of endearing innocence. He leaned forward, tilting his head from side to side with every step while checking out the sights on both sides of the street” (32).

Although at five feet, ten inches tall, Basquiat had been a runner as a teenager, and possessed an “athlete’s grace,” he deliberately walked with a “self-conscious shuffle,” which like his speech according to Phoebe Hoban served to “comment on the racism he felt” (55).

Even when not being photographed, interviewed, and filmed, Basquiat continued to perform blackness in more subtle and informal ways in everyday life. Once, when asked by a potential buyer for a curriculum vita, a gesture that Basquiat interpreted as racist, he produced
JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT BORN DEC. 22/1960/BROOKLYN/N.Y.)
ST. ANNS
P.S. 6
P.S. 101
P.S. 45
I.S. 293
CITY AS SCHOOL
MOTHER: PUERTO RICAN (FIRST GENERATION)
FATHER: PORT AU PRINCE, HAITI.
(Divorced)

11TH GRADE DROP OUT

1. THE SEAVIEW FROM "VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA"
2. ALFRED E. NEUMAN
3. ALFRED HITCHCOCK (HIS FACE OVER AND OVER)
4. NIXON
5. CARS (MOSTLY DRAGSTERS)
6. WARS
7. WEAPONS
     MADE DRAWINGS OF OOPICK, FRITZ, WARR, YABBO

10. PUT A BOX OF SHAVING CREAM IN PRINCIPAL'S FACE AT GRADUATION

FIRST AMBITION: FIREMAN
FIRST ARTISTIC AMBITION: CARTOONIST

EARLY THEMES WERE THE:

1. SENT A DRAWING OF A GUN TO J. EDGAR HOOVER IN 3RD GRD.
   (NO REPLY)

TAUGHT SECOND GRADERS WHEN I WAS IN THE FOURTH GRD.

SCHOOLING: SOME LIFE DRAWING IN NINTH GRADE
   ACADEMIC
   (WAS THE ONLY CHILD THAT FAILED)

EARLY MUSIC INFLUENCES: WEST SIDE STORY
   "WATUSI"
   ROUND & ROUND MIDNIGHT WALKING HAPPY
   BLACK ORPHEUS

Figure 24
Basquiat’s Curriculum Vitae
and delivered to her a document (see Figure 24) that called up the stereotype of black intellectual
inferiority that the artist believed to be the reason why she demanded to see his “qualifications”
before agreeing to buy his artwork. In more ways than one, Basquiat’s version of a C.V.
addresses all of the buyers’ worst fears regarding the artist’s background. In terms of its
organization, Basquiat’s vita reflects a lack of thought and organization. It is handwritten on
unlined paper and, as a result, some of the lines are uneven. Its various ellipses, erasures, and
arrows indicate that it was put together hastily and without much care or knowledge of what a
C.V. should look like. Its content also reflects Basquiat’s eagerness to call out the buyer on her
subtle act of racism. The question mark between St. Ann’s and P.S. 6 makes it seem as though
his education was inconsequential to him, a point also driven home by his willingness to reveal
how it is he came to drop out of high school in the eleventh grade. Basquiat’s “early themes”
along with his misspelling of “Hitchcock” as “Hicthcock” suggests an undeveloped and
unserious mind as does the revelation that he was the only child to fail life drawing in the ninth
grade. Because Basquiat was offended by the racial implications of being asked for a C.V. in the
first place, he drew attention to the nature of the offense in the way he constructed the document.
As he believed his intelligence, education, and qualifications were under particular scrutiny by
the potential buyer, he called out her racist expectation by making fun of and throwing back in
her face the stereotype of black intellectual inferiority.

In the way Basquiat treated money and property in general, he played with the notion of
“nigger rich,” or the racist notion that black people have a penchant for spending money
unwisely and extravagantly. Such a stereotype assumes that blacks, more so than whites, lack
restraint and know-how when it comes to wealth. Like the other racial stereotypes that artist
evoked, he was also highly aware that the way he treated money and property would be judged
through a racial lens. He thus called attention to this by living “nigger rich.” Basquiat “deliberately mismanaged his finances” (Hoban 107). He never saved any of his money in a bank account, and he never paid his taxes. What interested Basquiat most was “conspicuous consumption” (Hoban 108), or public displays of wealth. He would give bums and homeless people hundred dollar bills, and spend “hundreds of dollars a day on food at Dean and DeLuca” (Hoban 108). At upscale restaurants Basquiat would often leave large tips. According to Mallouck, “When he could, he always left enormous tips. He loved to shock, even shock with generosity. It was like punching someone” (quoted in Clement 44). Here, Mallouck points out that Basquiat’s public displays of wealth were driven by people’s perceptions of him. As the previous chapter shows, the artist often encountered racism related to his wealth. People frequently treated him like he was a criminal or had obtained his money illegally. Store clerks, for example, looked extra hard at his bills as if they were counterfeit, and he was usually delayed at airport security whenever he was entering the country after a lucrative show.

As Basquiat was often eyed up and own in high-end stores and shops, he often liked to play with the notion of “nigger-rich” in these settings. Take, for example, the following incident recounted by Jennifer Clement.

One day Jean-Michel, Suzanne, and Andy Warhol go to Balducci’s to buy caviar for a party. Jean-Michel looks like a bum. His dreadlocks are matted against one side of his face and his clothes are wrinkled and look as if he has not changed them for weeks. Jean Michel asks for two thousand dollars worth of caviar. The man behind the counter begrudgingly hands it to Jean. The security guard follows Jean-Michel to the register. He stands close behind Jean ready to arrest him. Jean-Michel never carries a wallet and he begins to take out crumpled ten and twenty
dollar bills from his pockets. The customers behind him watch in silence. It is quite a spectacle and takes a lot of time. When Jean-Michel, Suzanne, and Andy leave the store Jean-Michel says, ‘boy, did we fuck with them!’ and burst out laughing (145).

Basquiat’s reaction and commentary to Warhol and Mallouck after leaving the store reveals his intent all along. The artist as he was in similar situations before when trying to buy expensive goods that young black men like him would not normally buy knew that he would arouse the suspicion of the owners and security as well as the gaze of customers. Basquiat, thus, turns the act of buying caviar into a highly provocative racial performance. Everything about his appearance suggests that he or someone that looks like him would not have the means to afford caviar. To draw attention to this perception, he, as Clement points out, makes a “spectacle” out of it. The lack of a wallet and the crumpled up bills work to assure those around him that this is just another young black man who does not know how to handle money or wealth.

Another component of Basquiat’s more everyday racial performances was the way he kept and lived in his New York City loft. Importantly, his private residence on Crosby Street was hardly “private.” According to Phoebe Hoban, “Between Basquiat’s endless parade of women and the small band of graffiti artists who clung to his coattails, the loft was always crowded with hangers-on” (99). It was “sparsely furnished” and a “haphazardly hung sheet separated the unmade bed from the rest of the space” (Hoban 98-99). Hoban adds that “There were usually piles of food and coke spread around, and loose cash everywhere” (99-100). The look and smell of Basquiat’s loft once prompted one of his friends to confide in Andy Warhol that it was like a “nigger’s loft.” While it is hard to know exactly how many similar statements circulated or got back to the artist, Basquiat nonetheless understood that the messy and disorganized condition of
his apartment was and would undoubtedly be judged and talked about through a racial lens, and he frequently engaged and played with that perception. On his doorbell, for instance, he wrote the word, “tar,” a reference to “being black in America” (Hoban 99). According to Jennifer Clement, the artist once said that he wrote “tar” on everything because he often felt as black as tar (35). Basquiat also would hang an “Out for Ribs” sign on his door when he was not at home, a gesture that Phoebe Hoban argues served to parody his love of soul food (78). However, it also is important to remember that terms like “savage” and “primitive” were widely used to describe the artist and his work. Thus, the phrase “Out for Ribs” might be humorously playing on the perception of black males as more physical and violent by leaving open to interpretation the kind of “ribs,” meaning human or animal, the artist was supposedly out seeking.

Basquiat’s behavior in expensive and fancy restaurants was also intended to generate and bring to the surface deep-seated racial animosities and stereotypes. Frequently, the artist used the way he dressed and tipped at exclusive restaurants to animate the racism he experienced there. Nicholas Taylor recalls a particularly illustrative incident:

This particular evening, Jean-Michel wanted to take me to a new bar that had opened up on Wooster Street. As we pulled up in the cab, I remember seeing two glass pink flamingos at the entrance. Walking in, we saw all of these Wall Street executive types standing at the bar in their three-piece suits. As we waited for the bartender, we noticed that most of the men in their “monkey suits” were laughing and pointing at us. Jean-Michel had paint smears all over his overcoat and trousers, which were actually custom-tailored Giorgio Armani. I had a Nike running suit on, with a pork-pie hat tilted to the side. We stuck out like sore thumbs. Jean-Michel ordered two Remy Martin Cognac doubles for us. As we
waited for our drinks, Jean whispered in my ear, "When the drinks come, don't pick them up." Since they were top shelf doubles, the drinks were over $30 dollars. With perfect timing and a flair only Jean-Michel could pull off, as the other patrons were eavesdropping on us and thinking we wouldn’t be able to pay the bill, Jean-Michel paid for the drinks and threw two extra twenty-dollar bills on the bar. Then he said to me aloud so that all could hear, "Com'on Nick, let's blow this joint!" We turned around and left the patrons to ponder the sparkling drinks.

As Talyor’s story demonstrates, Basquiat’s behavior in public places, especially where there were a lot of wealthy white people, was heavily influenced by the way the artist felt his blackness was perceived. By going out to dinner at exclusive restaurants wearing designer Giorgio Armani and Comme des Garcons suits that were dirty and smudged with paint, Basquiat came off as the stereotypical “dandy,” or a black man who tries to live above his station by mimicking white behavior but usually to no good effect. In Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, Eric Lott describes the “black dandy” as a 19th century minstrelsy character who was “self-satisfied” and “considered themselves better than the rest” (133). In this case, although Basquiat has money and was successful, so much so that he could afford expensive suits and buy expensive drinks, he appears unable to appreciate his clothing and also lacks restraint and discipline when it comes to spending and consuming. He, therefore, treats designer suits like they are rags and wastes money on drinks he doesn’t drink and on needless over-tipping.
Conclusion

As this chapter demonstrates, much of how Basquiat carried himself in front of the camera, in interviews, and in the public eye in general was engaged with the art community’s conceptualization of his racial background. Throughout the 1980s, the art community subjected Basquiat to a “pervasive, if not subtle sense of racism.” This amounted to an overemphasis by art critics, dealers, patrons and others on Basquiat’s work ethnic, discipline, intelligence, and maturity. Such an overemphasis on these qualities was driven by a racial stereotype of young black men as inherently violent, criminal, promiscuous, childlike, instinctual, lazy, and lacking in intelligence. Although Basquiat was aware and angered by the fact that this notion of blackness played such major role in the way he and his art were either lauded or panned, the nature of the racism that he faced made it difficult for him to take it on and confront it directly. As it was often indirect and “colorblind” racism coming from people and institutions that saw themselves as racially progressive and inclusive and as appreciators of “black art,” charges of racism from Basquiat might not have stuck or been well-received. Thus, the strategy of addressing and challenging racism that the artist developed was specific to the kind of racism he experienced and the context in which he experienced it. He used subtle and dramatic public acts to convey to the public the way that racism reached in the context of the art world. By embodying and becoming several racial stereotypes, Basquiat helped to locate racism where it said it didn’t exist, in this case, among an art community that saw itself as sophisticated collectors of “primitive” art. Importantly, however, Basquiat’s public image was not the only public space in which he chose to perform “blackness” as way to pinpoint, expose, and critique racism. As the next chapter illustrates, much about Basquiat’s artwork was similarly devoted to the performance of blackness “at the heart of whiteness.”
CHAPTER FIVE
THE ACT OF PAINTING:
RACIAL PERFORMANCE IN THE ARTWORK
OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

Introduction
As Chapter Four illustrates, Basquiat’s proclivity for “acting up” in interviews, photographs, and in public spaces in general reflected his desire to expose and illuminate the racism he experienced at the heart of whiteness. This chapter claims that the artist brought the racial performance that marked his public persona to his artwork as well. Just as with the way he dressed, looked, talked, walked, and behaved in general, several aspects of Basquiat’s artwork were devoted to drawing attention to the subtle and pervasive racism of the 1980s art world. Through his work process, his art’s aesthetic and subject matter, and the way he presented and showed his art, Basquiat sought to make it almost impossible for his so-called liberal and racially progressive white audience to not fall back on racist ideologies and stereotypes. By acting up in his studio, in galleries, and at his shows and by creating art with an unfinished and haphazard look and with seemingly random themes and topics, Basquiat aspired to lead his white audiences to question the artist’s integrity, sincerity, intellect, and work ethic. For Basquiat, the act of painting was just that; it was a highly stylized and well-thought out performance intended primarily to comment on his racial reality. Although elements of his painting process, his finished product, and his way of showing his art had also been employed by abstract and primitivist artists before him, Basquiat recognized that such tendencies by a black artist would be treated with more skepticism and suspicion. As black artist Joe Lewis points out, “There is the
pervasive notion in our society that ‘high art’ cannot be made anyone who is not white, male, and Yale” (25). Rather than ignore or excuse this widely held perception, Basquiat played out for all to see the predicament of inhabiting the peculiar and even contradictory subjectivity of “black painter.” In examining several representative works from the artist’s career between 1981 and 1988 as well as his work process and presentation, this chapter argues that racial performance is the defining feature of Basquiat’s artwork.

The idea that all of Basqui at’s painting can be attributed to a single motivation or characteristic, in this case, black performance, may at first seem to be reductive or simplistic. It pays to acknowledge, however, that work and labor or what jobs people can and can not do are often seen through a racial lens. In *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, Robin D.G. Kelley notes the existence of the idea of “nigger work” or “nigger labor” (31). According to Kelley, “once derogatory social meaning is inscribed upon the work itself (let alone the black bodies that perform the work), it has the effect of undermining its potential dignity and worth” (31). Of course, as a high artist, Basquiat was not engaged in so-called nigger work. However, his work, in terms of its process and final product, were seen by those who were quite used to and comfortable with the idea that works of so-called artistic genius came from white Euro-American male painters. Put simply, Basquiat had to constantly work and present his art to people who largely considered painting to be “white man’s work.” Although Basquiat’s work was accepted, admired, and fetched high prices, it did so in a different way. As black people in the larger scale of art history were more likely to be seen on the canvas as objects rather than as painting subjects, the idea that a black man was the creator of a painting was seen as something of an oddity or spectacle. As Frances Negron-Muntaner points out in “The Writing on the Wall: The Life and Passion of Jean-Michel Basquiat,” the artist was highly impacted by the fact that
his artistic labor was given different value and treatment by the art establishment. According to Negron-Muntaner, Basquiat’s body and way of working were driven by his own sense that he was seen and judged as a “black laborer” who had to perform before demanding white audiences (120).

Like his body, Basquiat’s canvases were not blank and un-politicized spaces. Just as his body carried with it hundreds of years of racism and racial stereotyping, his paintings, as the fruits of his labor, bore the history and the idea that black men were more suited for dirty, physical, and mindless labor than were white men. Rather than ignore this fact, Basquiat played it out on the space of the canvas for his white audiences to see and ponder. In this regard, Basquiat public persona and artwork worked to the same end. According to Negron-Muntaner, “Although art critics have often decried the fact that attention to Basquiat’s biography has to date overshadowed his art, both can be seen as performances that used different media toward the same aim” (118). In arguing that Basquiat’s painting like his public persona was devoted to performing popular misperceptions of blackness, it is also important to consider, in addition to the notions of race and labor, Basquiat’s technical limitations as a painter. As the next section illustrates, Basquiat’s decision to perform race on the space of the canvas, while motivated by his desire to engage art world racism, was facilitated by the fact that he did not have the technical know-how to do much else.

Training

That Basquiat’s artwork came to be about performing blackness rather than about working in an artistic school or tradition speaks to the nature of his training as an artist. Although he began drawing constantly at three years old (Hoban 16), this did not translate into him
attending art school or receiving any formal art training. Basquiat was not, however, secretive or embarrassed about his lack of formal art training. Take, for example, the following exchange between Basquiat and Marc Miller.

MM: Your art schooling is…

JMB: Oh, I’ve had none.

MM: You’ve had none.

JMB: I tried to get into Parsons ‘cause a couple of years ago I had no money. Someone told me if you went to art school they would pay your outside life, you know. So I looked into this but it never really happened. I’m kind of grateful too. You start working on illustration board and stuff like that and you have to erase all the time, you know what I mean? And if an artist was really good he wouldn’t be teaching.

Here, Basquiat admits not only to having no art training; he questions the value of formal schooling period. For him, the work itself seems pointless as does the experience of being taught art by artists he deems to be, at best, mediocre. He claims that he would only have gone to Parsons for the money.

Although Basquiat might be called a “self-taught” painter, it appears that he never really taught himself or to have learned much about painting methods and techniques. Although the artist claimed in the same interview with Miller that he really could draw but that he “tried to fight against it,” it is hard to find any evidence suggesting that Basquiat could draw more realistically or representationally, if that is, in fact, what he meant with his statement to Miller, “Believe it or not, I can really draw.” Even though Basquiat took an interest in drawing at a very early age, he even admits that his enthusiasm and output outweighed his talent. The artist once
told Henry Geldzahler in an interview that, “I was a really lousy artist as a kid. Too abstract expressionist; or I’d draw a big ram’s head, really messy. I’d never win painting contests. I remember losing to a guy who did a perfect Spider-Man…I really wanted to be the best artist in the class, but my work had a really ugly edge to it” (quoted in Hoban 21).

Moreover, Basquiat appears never, at any point in his career, to have learned much about painting methods or techniques. In her memoir Jennifer Clement recalls the following discussion between the artist and Suzanne Mallouck:

One day he says, “Suzanne, I’m almost a famous artist now and I don’t know how to draw. Do you think I should be concerned? She says, “Well, just teach yourself and there will be no problem.” Later that day Jean-Michel comes back with seven “How to Draw” books - *How to Draw Horses, How to Draw Flowers, How to Draw Landscapes*, etc. This was all tongue-in-cheek. He thought the books were hilarious and did several paintings where he copied the drawings (56).

Here, Basquiat not only admits that he cannot draw; he makes a joke out of his technical limitations. Rather than actually using the “How to Draw” books to hone his skills, he uses them as source material.

Of course, given Basquiat’s penchant for public performance, such admissions of ineptitude should perhaps be treated with some skepticism, particularly in his discussion with Geldzahler. It is worth mentioning, however, that he artist’s public confession in this interview is substantiated by his much more private one to Mallouck. It appears then that in both instances that Basquiat was telling Geldzahler and Mallouck the truth; although he might have made light of it in the latter instance, Basquiat never really learned or knew much about the nuances or the act of painting. Why, then, did the artist tell Miller then that he could draw, when it appears that
this was not the case? While it is hard to know for certain why Basquiat made such a statement to Miller, the dialogue that preceded the artist’s claim might offer an answer. The following conversation immediately precedes Basquiat’s insistence on an existent but unused painting deftness.

MM: There’s a certain, let’s use the term, “crudity” to your heads (referring to the artist’s drawing of heads in his art). And you like it that way or would you like to get them more refined and realistic?

JMB: I haven’t really met that many refined people. Most people are generally crude.

MM: And that’s why you keep your images crude?

Here, Miller is trying to find out ever-so-subtly whether Basquiat’s so-called crude aesthetic is the product of choice or of a lack of skill. Basquiat, perhaps sensing that this is Miller’s agenda, responds defensively albeit disingenuously that he could draw in a more realistic and refined way but that he just chooses not to. Despite Basquiat’s proclamation, it is hard to find a work done by the artist at any point in his career in which he paints in a more representational and realistic way. All published and printed work by the artist has the so-called crude look that Miller points to in his interview with Basquiat. While it is of course possible that Basquiat could draw or paint, his statement to Miller should be taken with some caution. It appears in this instance that the artist was trying to save face.

Although Basquiat, according to Phoebe Hoban, once told his close friend, Arden Scott, that “celebrity was more important to him than the actual quality of his art,” telling her that “he would have time to learn how to draw later,” (342), it appears that the artist upheld only one part of this promise. Basquiat was prolific and drew and painted constantly; however, his aesthetic
and style remained relatively the same because he never learned more about painting techniques or processes. This lack of formal knowledge extended even into the realm of materials and supplies. Henry Geldzahler recalled a particularly telling moment, “The same day I bought him a painting, I took him to an art store and bought him a hundred dollars’ worth of paper. At that point he didn’t even know what acid-free paper was” (quoted in Hoban 68). Perhaps, Basquiat learned more about materials throughout his career; Geldzahler’s experience with the artist suggests once again, however, that Basquiat possessed a rudimentary understanding of the painting process.

Such space and time is devoted here to making an argument for Basquiat’s technical limitation not for the sake of “calling out” the artist but rather to make the point that for him the act of painting was an intensely individual and personal activity. As he was unencumbered by any concern for correct or incorrect composition, Basquiat used the canvas to deal with those issues that were closest and most important to him, which for him was the issue of his racial blackness. According to Hoban, “Basquiat deliberately refused to impose any obvious formal order on this visual anarchy. Instead, his paintings iterate and reiterate the personal, historical, and cultural chaos he felt as a black man living the dysfunctional American dream” (80). Although Hoban here misjudges the extent to which the artist could have painted in any other way, she rightly points out that his artwork, above all else, an expression of his blackness. On the canvas, he communicated what it meant to be a black man at the heart of whiteness. As this chapter demonstrates, Basquiat accomplished this performance not only thorough the aesthetic and subject matter of his art but also in the way he approached his work process and in the way he presented his paintings.
Process

Like his skimpy background in art training and schooling, Basquiat’s way of treating the process of painting also supports the idea that his artwork was all about racial performance. Take, as a prime example, art dealer Fred Hoffman’s recollection of the artist at work.

I turned him on to the sketchbooks of Leonardo [da Vinci] once, and so he made this five-part print. The images took him maybe twenty minutes to draw. He was always going so fast you never could take time to teach him anything. He would draw right on the acetates, which we would photograph from the back so he wouldn’t have to draw backwards. One day I came over to see how he was doing on the print, and all of the acetates were lying all over the studio. I said, “Let me pick these up for you, so they won’t get screwed up.” But he said, “No leave them right there.” You could hardly see them, there was so much junk around. The next time I went back, they were hanging on the wall. And he said, “They’re ready.” (quoted in Hoban 177).

This passage is quoted at length because it hints at and captures several of the performative aspects of Basquiat’s working process. In this regard, painting became and was treated as performance by Basquiat because dealers and collectors like Hoffman often came by his studio to watch him. There was, then, a certain amount of public spectacle attached to his work process. Perceiving, rightfully so, that he and his labor were seen as racial curiosity, Basquiat brought this to bear on the way he worked. As the passage by Hoffman illustrates, he painted in a way that might lead audiences to see him through the lens of a black male stereotype. He was quick and physical, spontaneous rather than cerebral. He appeared ignorant and uncaring when it came to treating art materials and his studio. For the white art viewer who encountered this spectacle, it
would have been hard not to fall back on the racist idea that Basquiat was more fraud and hustler than high artist.

A major part of the artist’s process was the way he looked or handled himself and his body while painting. In this regard, Basquiat’s bodily movement and motions while painting stressed physicality and quickness. According to Nicholas Taylor, Basquiat was a very “physical” painter (19), adding that “usually artists paint slowly as processes develop, but his body kept moving in a unique way” (13). Taylor also remembers that: “He worked so fast, almost manic at times. The paintings flowed right out of his hand automatically. It was a spiritual experience to watch him paint. He seemed possessed” (29). According to Gene Sizemore, who worked as Basquiat’s assistant for a brief time, “He would move from one canvas to another like a ballet dancer. He was extremely graceful, agile, and athletic. He worked very fast. He would step back to see what he had done, without ever breaking his rhythm, very reminiscent of Ali in his prime, backpedaling with his guard down, but totally in control” (quoted in Hoban 87). The way Basquiat worked played into and conjured images of the stereotypical black male. By working in such a physical and rapid manner, he gave the impression that his work reflected more physical and instinctual prowess than intellectual and artistic skill.

Basquiat’s treatment of the space of the studio also played on the art world’s racial misperceptions. Mary Boone, one of Basquiat’s dealers, recalls, “His studio was very close to my place, so I went to see him very often. It was big chaos”(133). It was chaos not only in that there were supplies and materials scattered all over the place; it also was noisy. According to Phoebe Hoban, Basquiat was always “watching television as he doodled; he rarely if ever painted in silence; there was always either music or the drone of the TV” (334). According to friend Nicholas Taylor, “he left the TV on and played various music all the time” while he was painting
While working in Annina Nosei’s basement studio, Basquiat played his boom box so loudly that Nosei who was upstairs often had to stomp her foot to get him to turn it down; he would, according to Hoban, play Ravel’s *Bolero* over and over while he “painted on several canvases at once, walking all over the pictures and leaving his trademark footprints” (87). Basquiat did not, however, just listen to classical; opera, jazz, and other musical genres often accompanied his working process. According to his friend Kai Eric, “Jean-Michel was into music from Talking Heads to Miles Davis and everything else in between” (quoted in Hoban 112). Working while listening to music or watching televisions stands to give someone the impression that the canvas or what he was doing was not important enough to require concentration or deep reflection. Painting while watching television suggests a lack of commitment to what should be the major task at hand. As the case of Bolero in Nosei’s basement studio suggests, his music seems in its loudness and presence to dominate his painting. If Nosei herself found it distracting, what impact did she and her clients believe it was having on the black painter in the basement?

Like his studio, his treatment of the canvas also conveyed a chaotic and haphazard work process. Hoban points out that “Basquiat frequently spread his canvases on the floor, walking over them as he worked on each. Sometimes he crouched in the middle of the drawing” (334). Mary Boone remembers the “Many canvases on the wall and floor, and he was stepping on every painting as if he cared for nothing. He painted over some parts even as he said it was finished” (133). Nicholas Taylor also recalls how Basquiat “would actually walk all over his paintings while working on them, which sometimes resulted in multi-colored footprints” (26). Taylor describes his working process in detail as follows:

I was fortunate to be with Jean-Michel a lot when he painted. Along with his painting assistant, Steven Torton, his painting assistant, and his girlfriend,
In this case, Basquiat’s studio and work process risked giving the public the impression that he did put much time, care, or thought into his art. Not only does he walk on his canvases, he childishly changes them to spite dealers. His method of working on many pieces at once while also watching TV makes it seem that he is more interested in turning out any and all work for profit rather than working from inspiration and deep reflection. His way of painting, in short, shows disrespect for the canvas and for the endeavor of so-called high art. Although Basquiat did this deliberately and knowingly, those who witnessed or heard about this might have not have seen it as such but rather as evidence of the artist’s lack of sincerity, integrity, and intellect.

Take, for example, two photographs both of which document the artist’s treatment of the canvas and his studio space. In the first (see Figure 25), Basquiat sits on top of a large, presumably unfinished, work. His right foot, which is bare, is planted firmly on the canvas. He looks dazed and sleepy as he holds in one hand, a coffee cup, and, in the other, what looks like a joint. In the second photograph (see Figure 26), which appears to be from the same shoot,
Figure 25

Basquiat Squatting on his Art
Figure 26

Basquiat Lying on his Art
Basquiat again lies across one of his large canvases. This time he appears more alert as he looks brightly and directly into the camera. He lies on his stomach, with his head resting on his hands which are folded and under his chin. Again, he is barefoot, but in this shot, it is only the toes of both of his feet that rest on the canvas. To his right but still on top of the painting are what appear to be a knapsack and one of his old shoes. Both pictures also capture some of the disarray of his studio. More importantly, though, both photographs capture a moment in which Basquiat deliberately disrespects the canvas. It is not so much that his is simply on top of them, but rather that he seems not to care what spills, lands, or falls on them.

The way Basquiat behaved in front of art world heavyweights, namely, dealers and buyers, was also part of the public performance that constituted his work process. According to Phoebe Hoban, “he dumped a jar of fruit and nuts on the head of Michelle Rosenfeld, an art dealer who had gone to Crosby Street to but some of Basquiat’s work, bringing with her an offering of health food” (209). According to one time girlfriend, Paige Powell, Basquiat also would act up with collectors by lobbing stink bombs at them from out of his studio window (quoted in Hoban 208). Mary Boone recalls, “One time I arranged a notable collector from Connecticut to see his works and meet with him, but he didn’t show up for the occasion. These things happened very often and bothered me a lot” (133). Biographer Phoebe Hoban describes in detail a similar incident.

Down in the basement of the Annina Nosei Gallery, Basquiat was painting up a storm. The room was filled with a haze of pot smoke. There was a mound of coke on the table, a couple of funky chairs, and a boom box, playing a steady stream of Charlie Parker. “Jean-Michel,” came the taught voice with the rich Italian accent. “I’m bringing someone down.” Basquiat continued painting as Nosei burst into
the studio with two middle-aged collectors in tow. “What is that image you are working on?” asked one of the women. Basquiat swung around and came toward her with the paintbrush, as if he planned to splatter her paint. Then he backed off. The women laughed and sat down in a chair, continuing her childish questions as Basquiat returned to his canvas (Hoban 82).

Here Basquiat understood that his racial background authorized collectors and buyers to try to get away with things that they perhaps wouldn’t otherwise. In this regard, there is no hesitation in treating the black artist as a spectacle or in interrupting his work so that he can answer mundane questions from potential buyers. Thus, he often played this up by making a spectacle of himself.

Basquiat’s way of incorporating source material into his work also played with the art world’s suspicion of a young black man being able to be a serious painter. For instance, Basquiat often sent his cook, Jennifer Stein to the bookstore for source books which were “randomly selected by their covers” (Hoban 170). According to Stein, “I would just buy things on subjects that I thought were interesting. I got him books on ancient history, linear measurements, and mathematics. He would just open the book and copy it into the paintings” (quoted in Hoban 170). Friend Kai Eric recalls a similar instance, “The spontaneity was incredible. Then, when the spontaneity began to run out, he started picking up all of these books to copy from. Children’s books on dinosaurs, dictionaries” (quoted in Hoban 113). In both cases, Basquiat appears unafraid to let people get the impression that very little thought and effort goes into his work. No only does he leave a seemingly unqualified person in charge of a major aspect of his art; he allows himself to be seen engaged in the very lazy and mindless activity of copying the content of random books onto his canvases.
According to art critic, Rene Ricard, “he didn’t seem to know a lot about art. One time I mentioned that his art has elements of Twombly, and the next day he had bought a beautiful expensive coffee table book on Twombly, to learn about him” (quoted in Hoban 88). Basquiat himself acknowledged as well that he did not look primarily to the history of art and painting as aesthetic and technical models. When asked by art dealer, Bruno Bischofberger, which artist influenced him the most, Basquiat answered “Drawings of three-or four-year-old infants” (155). An ex-girlfriend, Paige Powell, recalled the following discussion:

And after we broke up and he said “Oh, you’re going to tell everybody my secret to painting, and I said I wouldn’t, even though he did a lot of mean things to me. But I always kept his secret, and his secret is that he would draw from cartoons on TV. That was like his main thing. That was sort of his inspiration for a lot of his stuff (quoted in Hoban 215).

Whether or not Basquiat’s true artistic sources were children’s work and cartoons is of course hard to know, given his penchant for public performance; it is clear, however, that he did not attempt to train or teach himself to paint using an established artist as a model. Basquiat certainly knew a little something about artists and painters before and during his time; he did not, however, look to them when considering his technique and aesthetic.

Clement also remembers Basquiat’s process as an unabashed combination of copying from both books and television. According to Clement, “Jean-Michel never reads. He picks up books on mythology, history, and anatomy, comic books or newspapers. He looks for words that attack him and puts them on the canvas. He listens for things Suzanne says and writes them on his drawings. He listens to the television” (56). Basquiat did not, however, just listen to the television; according to Clement, “if Jean-Michel hears an interesting word or phrase 9on the
television], he jumps up and paints it on the canvas” (142). No doubt, word of this artistic process getting around the art community would have fueled the idea that the young black artist was a hustler and a fraud.

Basquiat, furthermore, allowed himself to be caught copying in front of important buyers. According to Don and Mera Rubell, who visited the artist in his basement studio,

Of course, we were curious. We went downstairs, and there was this stunningly beautiful person with a Cy Twombly book in one hand and painting with the other. At first we thought it was a little suspicious, but soon we saw that he was really terrific. We were totally astonished, and we immediately bought to paintings (quoted in Hoban 83).

Given Basquiat’s highly developed sense of his public image, the artist no doubt staged this encounter to rattle these potential buyers and to play with the strong possibility that they viewed a black artist with some skepticism. It appears to have worked as the Rubells were indeed a bit suspicious about his working process. It is difficult to know exactly what Basquiat did to allay their uncertainty or even if they were convinced that he was terrific as they later testified.

Perhaps, they put such concerns aside and simply decided to invest in a valuable piece of art. Whatever the case, Basquiat’s willingness to put such mimic-like behavior on display shows how he treated his process as a racial spectacle by acting like a “little savage.”

Presentation

Basquiat’s manner of publicly presenting his work was in itself a show. Take, for example, the artist’s behavior at a 1982 show at Larry Gagosian’s gallery in Los Angeles. First, he didn’t show up for the opening, and when he did arrive he was rude to nearly everyone there.
According to Matt Dike, one of Gagosian’s assistant, “Jean was wearing a Walkman and giving everyone an evil stare, and wouldn’t talk to anyone, including all the heavy-duty collectors. He could have won the Asshole of the Year award that night. He was a brat before he was famous, and he was a brat after he was famous” (quoted in Hoban 127-128). The recollection of the evening by Claudia James, also one of Gagosian’s assistants, is particularly telling.

It was one of Jean-Michel’s best shows, but he was already acting disturbed. There was this dynamic going on of he was the bad child, and Annina was saying, “Come on, be good,” and Larry was kind of playing on that a little bit, because he thought he was more hip. Jean was smoking pot and listening to headphones the whole time. He was rude to collectors, turning on his heel, and walking away. In my opinion, it seemed that even at that time he knew what was going on. That he was being used. And he went along with it, but begrudgingly. And then he would be angry and act out. It wasn’t as if he had no inkling of how the system worked (quoted in Hoban 128).

In this case, both Basquiat’s behavior and its retelling by Dike and James shed light on the deliberateness and racial motivation behind his “uppity” behavior at his shows. Of course, neither outwardly connects this behavior to race, but their word choice and interpretation of the situation speaks to how central the artist’s blackness was to his actions. Rather than choosing a more artistic term like elusive, eccentric, or tortured to described Basquiat’s behavior, Dike’s choice of “bratty” is mediated by the artist’s age, skin color, sex, and overall appearance. James, however, believes that there is something deeper behind the artist’s behavior. While he too acknowledges the artist’s rudeness, he sees it not as the manifestation of some inherent brattiness, but as deriving from the way the art world treated and condescended to Basquiat.
Here, Basquiat’s bad child behavior is connected to the fact that Annina Nosei was talking down him and telling him to “be good.”

The artist took other measures as well in the space of the gallery to provoke any racist tendencies his white audiences might hold. Bruno Bischofberger, one of Basquiat’s dealers, recalls that “when a gallery tried to hang them [his paintings] in a sophisticated way, he rearranged the whole wall and made the gallery look like kindergarten” (154). In this regard, the motivation and intention behind Basquiat’s work process and work process are similar. He hangs his work in a gallery as a kindergartener would for the same reason he throws stink bombs at collectors and copies from art books in front of buyers. The artist wants to embody and confront the art world with the black racial stereotype that he knows and feels is driving their understanding and even appreciation of him and his work.

Even when not in the context of a gallery or show, Basquiat often made a public spectacle of himself at parties where major art dealers and collectors were present. For example, Marcia May, a high society uptown lady, invited Basquiat to stay with her at her place in Dallas for the opening of the Primitive Art show which was on loan from the Museum of Modern Art. Shortly after the artist arrived, he painted all over her and her neighbor’s terrace. According to May, “he made the biggest mess. There was paint everywhere. I had to have the whole thing repainted” (quoted in Hoban 254). May also threw a party for Basquiat to introduce him to Dallas’ high society, whom he had already “scandalized by showing up at the museum opening with his walkman on” (Hoban 254). May recalls that “Everyone still talks about how he wore this little plaid knapsack and earphones at this black tie event. And I think people were kind of terrified that I was having a party for him” (quoted in Hoban 254). Perhaps, Basquiat’s behavior was driven by a heightened awareness of his blackness. Not only was he in the South, he was
surrounded by upper class whites who had just seen a show on “primitive” art. In this situation, Basquiat more than likely expected to get and probably got the worst in terms of subtle and unintentional racism.

It easy to understand Basquiat’s desire to misbehave in front of Marcia May and others like her as she represented everything about the art world that frustrated Basquiat the most. According to Jennifer Clement, Basquiat was “sick of white liberal art collectors” and “furious” with them calling him a “primitive” (80). Often, “He makes fun of everyone by wearing pseudo-African garb to important art openings” (Clement 80). As Clement notes, much of the way Basquiat presented himself to art collectors was driven by what he saw as their hypocritical racial beliefs. In this regard, their love of black art was predicated on a racist and stereotypical understanding of black people and culture. Thus, Basquiat often dressed and acted like a so-called primitive at high class parties where important collectors were present.

Another aspect of Basquiat’s presentation was the way he talked about his work in public. In interviews Basquiat often let on that there was not much thought or depth behind his work. When, for example, Isabelle Graw asked him, “How do you work?” Basquiat responded briefly and vaguely, “I start with a picture and then finish it. I don’t think about art when I’m working. I try to think about life” (67). Perhaps, Basquiat is simply being genuine; given, however, his incredible self-consciousness and his typically playful behavior in interviews, it is more than likely that his somewhat glib and facile answer was intended more for effect. His interview with Henry Geldzahler more fully illustrates the artist’s way of deliberately making it seem as though there was not much to his process. Take, as an example, the following exchange.

HG: What about the list of pre-Socratic philosophers in the recent paintings, and the kinds of materials which get into your paintings always, that derive not so
much from Twombly, as from the same kind of synthetic thinking. Is that something you’ve done from your childhood, lists of things?

JMB: That was from going to Italy, and copying names out of tour books, and condensed histories.

HG: Is the impulse to know a lot, or is the impulse to copy out things that strike you?

JMB: Well, originally I wanted to copy the whole history down, but it was too tedious so I just stuck to the cast of characters.

HG: So they’re kind of indexes to encyclopedias that don’t exist.

JMB: I just like the names.

Despite Geldzahler’s continued efforts to elicit more substantial answers from the artist, Basquiat seems determined to come off as an artist who knows and cares very little about art. He openly admits that his reference to philosophy and ancient history has nothing to do with any intellectual affinity. His understanding of and relationship to his source material is superficial; he simply and for whatever reason “likes the names.”

Basquiat was equally tight-lipped about his artwork and his working process in his interview with Marc Miller. Time and again, questions by Miller about the artist’s paintings are met with responses by Basquiat that make him look like the stereotypical young black man. Take, for instance, the following exchange which occurs early in the interview.

MM: How do you work? You just start with a blank canvas and start painting?

JMB: Well lately I’ve been taking all these paintings that are older and were less successful and cropping them to like four foot, four by three squares and then hinging them you know, to make like these long type of comic strip things.
MM: But when you paint them, are you coming from sketches or just
spontaneously working on them?
JMB: Sketches, gluing paper down onto the canvases. I don’t know. It usually has
something to do with that day.
MM: The images?
JMB: Yeah, sometimes.
MM: Are you quick? How quick do these things get done?
JMB: (smiling): How quick? It depends. Approximately?
MM: A normal canvas, four feet by six feet or something. What is that a day’s
work pulled out again and reworked?
JMB: Yeah, usually like that. I usually put a lot down and then I take a lot away.
Then I put some more down and then I take some more away. It’s like a constant
editing process.
MM: What determines what stays and what comes?
MM: You. And it’s just intuitive.
JMB: Mostly, I take suggestions to.
MM: People come in and say scratch that.
JMB: No, No, No. I work with some people. There might be something they
might be bothering me and I’ll just ask somebody. It’s hard to say. It’s really not
one way.
MM: And one of the most conspicuous things in your work is the way things are
crossed out. You must like the way they looked crossed out.
JMB: Sometimes I just want to retract it. They stick out a little too much. The words. So it just kind of blends it into the rest of the painting.

Again, Basquiat’s responses reflect his lack of concern with being seen as well-studied or intellectual artist, as it is the racist notion of him being “instinctual” and “primitive” that drives interest in his art. Thus, Basquiat makes it clear that there is not much to or behind his working process. He recycles old, unsuccessful work, and he simply paints images that come to him that day. For Basquiat, the process of editing and reworking also appears arbitrary as he and others takes things away and adds things as they feel. Even Basquiat’s comment on his signature move, crossing out words, appears disingenuous as he lets on that there is no deeper meaning behind such a unique and symbolic act. Like his answers, Basquiat body language during the interview is equally telling. As he responds, he stutters and takes long pauses. He also acts very child-like; he squirms and fidgets around uncomfortably, and he frequently plays with his hair. The way his eyes constantly shift suggest that he is eager to get the interview over and done with.

A vital part of understanding Basquiat’s artwork as finished product is not just his level of art training but also his way his working process and the way he presented his work publicly. As a self-taught artist with no formal training and no formal mentor, he was limited technically as a painter, unless one subscribes to the romantic notion that he was a born or natural painter who just knew how to do it. That Basquiat saw the canvas primarily as a space to expose and draw out the racial stereotypes that dominated art world thinking rather than as a space to work in some artistic or aesthetic tradition was then both a function of desire and necessity. He not only wanted to work in rough and unfinished style, but also, to a certain extent, he could not do anything but work in such a style. That he wanted to become a painter despite such technical limitations indicates not only his desire to become famous, but also his desire to bring racial
performance to the category of “black fine artist” or “black painter” and to the heart of whiteness itself, while in the process also becoming famous. Moreover, the way he chose to represent his working process and the way he behaved in galleries further points to the fact that his art was all about playing on the way his public perceived his racial background. His actions as an artist gave meaning to and defined the way people understood his art. Combined with his childish and often irrational behavior, Basquiat’s aesthetic and subject matter also sought to push the limits of his white audience’s racially liberal attitudes.

Product

Throughout his career, roughly between 1981 and 1988, Basquiat consistently created work that reflected an apparent lack of knowledge and/or concern with arrangement, composition, and mastery. According to one of Basquiat’s dealers, Bruno Bischofberger, his canvases looked “like the work of a disturbed child” (quoted in Hoban 223). Along the same lines, Greg Dimitriadis and Cameron McCarthy point out that Basquiat’s images, signs, and symbols possess a “cartoonish and childish” quality (92). Speaking of his artwork, art historian Richard Marshall also gives an accurate description of Basquiat’s art and the types of impressions it generated in the mind of his audiences. For him, Basquiat’s work is “rough” and “awkward” and “rejects perspective for an intentionally naïve presentation of space” (15). Like Bischofberger, Dimitriadis, and McCarthy, Marshall too describes Basquiat’s drawing and painting as the work of an “unruly child” (17). Much of Basquiat’s art, Marshall contends, possesses a “frenetic, abstract, overall composition with a two-dimensionality that allows no suggestion of depth, narrative, or overall sizing” (18). Often, as these descriptions illustrate, the
figure drawings and representations of people and objects in Basquiat’s work appear rudimentary and undeveloped.

His rendition of an airplane in an untitled work from 1981 (see Figure 27), for example, looks as if it was drawn by a child. The same can be said of the figures in another untitled work, this one from 1982 (see Figure 28), and in *The Dingoes That Park Their Brains With Their Gum*, 1988 (see Figure 29) as well as his rendition of jazz musician, Max Roach, in the aptly titled *Max Roach*, 1984 (see Figure 30). Like his figures and objects, Basquiat’s use of text, meaning the words and phrases that make up a large amount of his art, also have a juvenile quality. As works such as *Pegasus*, 1987 (see Figure 31), words and phrases in his work are often too small, too close together, crossed out, and, as a result, illegible. Furthermore, the relationship of text and figure in Basquiat’s work seems messy and random. In *Untitled (Crown)*, 1983 (see Figure 32), for example, a large messily-painted black crown overlays several pages of scribbled text. Along the same line, the text and figures in *Untitled*, 1985 (see Figure 33) are crowded and cluttered, giving the work a chaotic feel. Basquiat’s canvases, in their texture and layout also appear to be the work of someone who does not know or care much about technique. Two works from 1986, *King Zulu* (see Figure 34) and *The Elephant* (see Figure 35) illustrate the manner in which Basquiat made poor and inefficient use of the space of the canvas. Both not only lack balance and symmetry, they also contain large areas of unused or monochromatic canvas space. He, thus, employed an aesthetic that would practically lead people to question his ability, sincerity, integrity, and work ethic. Of course, as a black artist in white art world these were always and already under question.

Of course, it should go without saying that Basquiat was not the first artist to paint abstractly or in a style that appeared “primitive.” Basquiat’s aesthetic bears some resemblance to
Figure 27

*Untitled*, 1981

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 28

*Untitled*, 1982

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 29

_The Dingoes That Park Their Brains With Their Gum, 1988_

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 30

*Max Roach*, 1984

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 31

*Pegasus*, 1987

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 32

*Untitled (Crown)*, 1983

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 33

*Untitled*, 1985

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 34

*King Zulu*, 1986

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 35

*The Elephant*, 1986

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
the work of those such as Cy Twombly (see Figure 36), Jean Dubuffet (see Figure 37), Pablo Picasso (see Figure 38), and Jackson Pollock (see Figure 39), all of whom created work that appeared to choose and embrace randomness and chaos over logic and skill. However, this aesthetic means and connotes something entirely different in the hands of an artist who looked, acted, dressed, walked, and talked like Basquiat. Acts of randomness, nonsense, and irrationality on a black artist’s canvas can be attributed, and were, as was the case with Basquiat, to certain racial inheritances whereas, with white artists, the same acts do not stand as a commentary or reflection on their white racial background. Artists such as Twombly or Pollock might have been accused of poor technique, but it was not seen or framed as deriving from any inherent racial deficiency. Because blackness as a signifier has so long been associated with an innate lack of intellect and development, Basquiat ran the risk of evoking these racist discourses in working in an aesthetic that seemed to reflect a lack of intelligence, discipline, and knowledge on the part of the artist. As Chapter Four illustrates, Basquiat knew fair well that even though his work shared stylistic similarities to that of white artists such as Twombly, Dubuffet, Picasso, Pollock, and others, the randomness on his canvases would be looked at and talked about differently because it was done by a black man. Surrounded by this inescapable predicament, Basquiat worked in an aesthetic that reflected and animated further the racial double standard that determined the way he and his art would be assessed. As an artist committed to fighting racism, Basquiat wanted the deep-seeded racism of the art world brought to the surface and aired out in the open, and his aesthetic worked to that end.

This aesthetic extends to the way Basquiat and his assistant stretched the artist’s canvases, a look which caught the eye of many. For Hoban, his canvases were “raw looking” and his frames “rough-hewn” (102). According to Marshall, beginning around 1982, Basquiat began
Figure 36

*Apollo and the Artist*, 1975

by Cy Twombly
Figure 37

*Pisseur a Droite X, 1961*

by Jean Dubuffet
Figure 38

Hommee assis, 1971

by Pablo Picasso
Figure 39

*The She Wolf*, 1943

by Jackson Pollock
utilizing a “unique” canvas structure; “these canvas supports utilized four strips of wood molding, crossed at the corners and lashed together with twine. The canvas was then stretched over the bars, leaving the corners exposed. The effect was raw, askew – a primitive looking object…(18). Basquiat maintained that “everything is well stretched even though it looks like it may not be, in response to interviewer Henry Geldzahler who commented that “I’ve noticed in recent works you’ve gone back to the idea of not caring how well stretched it is; part of the work seems to be casual” (57). Basquiat’s canvases and frames were mostly put together by his assistant, Stephen Torton, under the artist’s close supervision. Basquiat’s canvases, whether by design or default, worked in conjunction with his painting aesthetic to give his finished product an amateurish, naïve, and childish look.

Like his style, Basquiat’s treatment of subject matter and content in his art also stood to validate racist notions of blackness in the minds of the white art public. Themes, topics, and knowledge as they emerge in his artwork suggest that the artist lacks originality, depth, effort, focus, and logic. Basquiat’s work frequently lacks narrative cohesion, clarity, and development. In other words, works that contain a combination of figures, symbols, and text often fail to make sense. Untitled, 1980 (see Figure 40), for example, contains a drawing of two cars crashing into each other head and caption below that which reads “Pay for Soup-Build a Fort-Set That on Fire.” Not only is that phrase a bit cryptic, its relationship to the car drawing as well as to the other symbols and words in the painting is not clear. The same applies to Portrait of an Artist as a Young Derelict, 1982 (see Figure 41), which exudes disparity in juxtaposing a labeled drawing of an ankle, a crown symbol, and the word “salt,” and to Notary, 1983 (see Figure 42 and 43) which contains drawings of faces or masks along with words such as “notary,” “pluto,” “fleas,”
Figure 40

*Untitled*, 1980

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 41

*Portrait of an Artist as a Young Derelict, 1982*

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 42

*Notary*, 1983

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 43

*Notary*, 1983 (continued)

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
and “sickles.” Here, it is hard to know the relationship between word and figure as well as between word and word.

Basquiat also treats so-called serious topics or topics that people would think are serious to him with what can be construed as laxity, ignorance, and disrespect. In *Cassius Clay*, 1982 (see Figure 44) and *Untitled (Sugar Ray Robinson)*, 1982 (see Figure 45), it is hard to now whether he is mocking or paying homage to these two black sports heroes and boxing legends. Although Basquiat chose them as his subject matter, the final product makes it look as though he didn’t put much thought or effort into their likenesses. Basquiat seems equally aloof in his treatment of issues of race, racism, and colonialism. One might expect that a black artist of Haitian-Puerto Rican descent to take a strong and clear stance on the issue of colonization; however, Basquiat’s treatment of the topic in *Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari*, 1982 (see Figure 46) is anything but that. Any attempt at a serious critique or interrogation of colonialism is undermined at several points in the painting itself. Basquiat, to begin with, incorrectly spells the word as “colonialization.” Furthermore, the title does not correctly narrate the content of the painting; the native, for one, is not carrying some guns but rather a box labeled “royal salt, inc.” The colonial agent carries the gun. Although the words, figures, and symbols could all be said to have some relationship to colonialism, it is unclear as to what to the message or intent is. In this regard, what does Basquiat mean with phrases such as “Good money in savages” and “I won’t even mention gold, (oro)”?

Basquiat also made a practice of deliberately misspelling, crossing out, and repeating words, letters, and phrases in his art. In *Charles the First*, 1982 (see Figure 47), “their” is misspelled as “thier” and in *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, 1983 (see Figure 48 and 49), the words “Mississippi,” “Mark Twain,” and “Negroes,” are all written several times
Figure 44

*Cassius Clay*, 1982

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 45

*Untitled (Sugar Ray Robinson), 1982*

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 46

_Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari, 1982_

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 47

*Charles the First*, 1982

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 48

Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta, 1983

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
Figure 49

Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta, 1983 (continued)

by Jean-Michel Basquiat
over. Both works also contain phrases or parts of phrases that are crossed out. *Charles the First*, 1982 contains “Most **Young** Kings Get Thier Head Cut Off,” and *Undiscovered*, 1983 has “A **Diet Rich in Pork Products**.” Because these writing acts are the product of a black artist, they have the power to stand as evidence in the mind of white art spectators of Basquiat’s lack of intelligence and discipline. In this regard, Basquiat’s language use in his art is consistent with the rest of his subject matter choices and also with his aesthetic. All reflect the artist’s awareness of and attempt to engage the fact that what his racial background drove readings and interpretations of his art’s look and content.

That Basquiat’s subject matter, like his aesthetic, is linked to the racial performance that dominated his life and public persona is suggested by Suzanne Mallouck, who recalled: “He tried to make people notice him, wake them up, by using a symbol out of context. This occurred in his paintings and in his actions. He never took anything as it was. Any idea, belief, any norm was very quickly examined and used in his art” (quoted in Clement 75). Importantly, Mallouck points out here that the non-sequential and nonsensical qualities of Basquiat’s art are not a nod to or the influence of white artists who worked in a similar style but rather are an extension of his public persona and entire way of being. In this regard, his artwork like his way of walking, talking, dressing, and behaving in general was intended to make people think about and examine what they took for granted or assumed about his him simply because he was black.

**Conclusion**

That Basquiat came to see the canvas as a space to dramatize and draw out the racism around him should come as no surprise. Several aspects of his biography suggest that such is the case. First, the artist was from a very young age until his death highly aware and impacted by the
racism around him. As this dissertation argues, Basquiat not only felt racism from the 1980s art world, he encountered it where he grew up, where he went to school, in popular and high culture, and in the downtown New York avant-garde scene to which he was so deeply attached. Moreover, Basquiat, while experiencing blatant and open racism in his life, more frequently and more significantly felt the subtle and colorblind racism of self-professed white liberals. Second, Basquiat’s most profound art training was in performance art, meaning, the artistic tradition he was most indebted to and immersed in was the downtown avant-garde. As Chapter Two illustrates, Basquiat’s understanding of the constructed-ness of the label “painter” and of the space of the “canvas” came from the time he spent on the downtown scene in the late 1970s. This dissertation argues, then, that the artist’s artwork between 1981 and 1988 represents the merging together of these two aspects of his life, the first being his experience with racism and the second, his coming to see the canvas and the role of painter as performances. Basquiat might not have seen or called himself as a “black performance artist” or what he did as black performance art,” but as this dissertation shows the two most important and consistent strains in Basquiat life were race and performance. His artwork merely reflects this reality. For Basquiat, the act of painting was not only about the finished product; it also extended to the process of painting itself. In this regard, the way the artist worked, his behavior while working, and the way he talked about his work process were all meant to impart racial meaning onto the his art as were his chosen aesthetic and subject matter.
Jean-Michel Basquiat died on August 12, 1988. He was found unconscious in his Great
Jones Street loft by his friend, Kelle Inman. The paramedics arrived at around 7pm and tried to
resuscitate him. He was then rushed to Cabrini Medical Center where he was pronounced dead at
7:23 pm. The autopsy report from the office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Manhattan
Mortuary, lists cause of death as an “acute mixed drug intoxication (opiates-cocaine)”
(“Chronology 249). A private funeral was held on August 17, and was attended by only family
and close friends. Jeffrey Deitch, one of Basquiat’s earliest supporters, delivered the eulogy. The
artist was buried at Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Because Basquiat’s father, Gerard, “had
to say no to many people” (quoted in Hoban 310), regarding attendance at his son’s wake,
several hundred of the artist’s friends and admirers held their own memorial for him on
November 5, 1988 at St. Peter’s Church in New York City.

The most significant and most far-reaching effort to publicly and popularly remember
Basquiat came eight years after his death in the form of fellow 1980s artist Julian Schnabel’s
1996 biopic, *Basquiat*. As this remains the only feature film devoted to Basquiat and, moreover,
the version of the artist people are most likely to encounter, Schnabel’s film stands to have a lot
of say and influence in how the artist and his work should be remembered. Although the film is
not a documentary, its title may lead many to wrongly believe that what they are seeing is an
actual and accurate account of Basquiat’s life. Brooks Adams writes that “The title of the movie
is somewhat misleading: this is no documentary, but a highly entertaining fiction based on real
people and actual events” (1). Along the same lines, bell hooks insists that “tragically, this film will not be seen by many people as a fiction – an imaginative interpretation. Instead, they will treat it as documentary” (5). Most people will never get the chance to see an actual Basquiat painting nor will they have the opportunity or the inclination to read or watch an interview with the artist or to talk to someone who knew him closely; they may, however, encounter Schnabel’s pseudo-documentary as it is widely available on DVD and often plays on cable. As Adams and hooks suggest, the viewing public may treat much of what they see as “truths” or “facts” about the artist. Given this dissertation’s effort to present a new interpretation of Basquiat’s life and art, it pays to consider it and its conclusions in relation to Schnabel’s *Basquiat*, as it is the text most responsible for educating the public on the artist.

This epilogue, then, looks at the way in which Schnabel frames Basquiat’s life and art. What image or version of Basquiat does the filmmaker offer for mass consumption by virtue of what he chose to include and not include about the artist? This epilogue argues that Schnabel’s film ultimately misremembers Basquiat. First, it misgauges the role that racism played in his life. bell hooks offers an explanation as to why *Basquiat* fails to come to grips with 1980s art world racism, insisting that the film is a “white liberal fantasy” (2) done by and for a “racially unenlightened art world” (1). Second, although aspects of the artist’s public persona are well captured by actor Jeffrey Wright, namely his walk, speech, and demeanor, because the film underestimates 1980s art world racism, it attributes the artist’s penchant for “acting up” to a combination of precocity, youth, drug use, and artistic genius rather than to the highly stylized racial politics that dominated his life. Kenneth Turan calls the film a “troubled genius movie cliché” (1). For David Rimanelli, *Basquiat* is a “paean to Romantic myths of creativity and alienation” (1). Along the same lines, Adams attributes Schnabel’s film to “popularizing the
myth of Basquiat as a young, gorgeous, doomed, yet ultimately transcendent black male artist” (1). Third, Schnabel’s representation of Basquiat’s art and particularly his working process is highly selective. Even though Basquiat worked with and in many artistic and cultural traditions, Schnabel suggests that it was ultimately a combination of drug-induced inspiration and jazz music that drove his paintings. Although, as this dissertation argues, performance art, like racism, was a constant in Basquiat’s life, the film generally ignores both of these factors in its look at the artist.

This epilogue offers an extended critique of Schnabel’s film. In doing so, it is not suggesting that the film should have been made in another way. Of primary concern here is that the film, given its pretense to biography, not be understood and interpreted as an accurate and complete history of the artist. This dissertation goes to great lengths to provide a grounded and materialist analysis of Basquiat’s life and art. As such, its conclusions present a challenge to the mythic and romantic Basquiat that emerges in Schnabel’s film and that dominates the image of him in mainstream culture today. Thus, this critique aims to highlight this dissertation’s usefulness as an intervention in the popular wisdom on the artist. This project offers a de-mythologized and de-romanticized version of Basquiat that runs in stark contrast to the version of the artist that is presented in Schnabel’s film.

Although this dissertation illustrates that where Basquiat grew up, went to school, what he watched and read, and his involvement in graffiti were central to his public persona and art, Schnabel’s film quickly glosses over these aspects of his early life. The film is particularly brief regarding the artist’s childhood. The opening scene shows a young Basquiat accompanied by his mother, Matilde, walking down a long corridor in the Museum of Modern Art on their way to Picasso’s Guernica. As Basquiat’s mother views the painting, she begins to cry. Her tears and
sadness soon turn to a smile and a look of hope when upon looking at her son she sees that a gold crown had magically appeared atop his head. The final shot of the sequence shows Basquiat placing his hand on the imaginary crown as he stares back at his mother with an innocent look. From here the film jumps forward about ten years to 1979.

This scene, of course, is a blend of fact and fiction. Matilde often took Basquiat to the MOMA where he presumably saw Guernica. Maybe his mother cried, but it’s almost certain that no gold crown magically appeared on top of Basquiat’s head. It’s hard to know exactly what Schnabel intended with this scene. Why Guernica? Why does his mother cry when she sees it? Why does the crown magically appear? Here it seems that Schnabel is trying to say that Basquiat is perhaps Picasso’s true heir. Perhaps the mother cries because she is moved by the piece or by a sense of loss. Where, in other words, have all the Picassos gone? She brightens up when she sees the crown on her son’s head because she knows that he is going to save art; he is the newly anointed king or art’s savior. The crown is an apt symbol here because it was a recurring symbol in Basquiat’s artwork. Here it is used to convey the filmmaker’s point that this is the inspirational moment in which Basquiat became an “artist” or in which Basquiat the artist was born.

The problem with the film’s treatment of the artist’s childhood is not so much its magical elements nor is it its failure to examine factors such as where he lived and went to school, but rather its willingness to reduce and romanticize the artist’s “birth” around a singular moment that did not happen. In the process, the idea that more mundane and non-artistic factors such as where Basquiat grew up, went to school, and what he watched and read in popular culture could have played in role in his life and art is largely pushed aside. Furthermore, Schnabel misuses the symbol of the crown. Those close to Basquiat know that his use of the crown was not an act by
the artist to anoint himself the king of painting. According to Justin Thyme, the crown came from the character Buckwheat who was always wearing one in the television show *The Little Rascals*; according to Thyme, “Buckwheat was Jean-Michel’s hero, yeah, you know a king of blood” (12). This, however, is a more complicated and much less heroic and mythic narrative. Yet, to condense Basquiat’s childhood into this one fictional yet formative moment related to Picasso is to push from view the centrality that race and performance played in his early life.

The film then hops to New York City 1979. Here, Schnabel devotes more of his film to Basquiat’s graffiti writing. In this regard, Schnabel is right to show the artist’s tagging as largely an individual act as Basquiat was not part of any of the Brooklyn or Bronx based schools. The scene shows Basquiat doing his SAMO graffiti throughout the city while in a voiceover Rene Ricard reads excerpts of “The Radiant Child,” the article said to have “broke” Basquiat. Also playing over top of the scene is the song “Public Image” by the post-punk band, Public Image Limited. Removed from consideration is the idea that Basquiat’s graffiti writing could have had anything to do with race or the larger public discourse on graffiti and race. Here Basquiat and his writing are one-track. The reading of Ricard’s piece establishes that Basquiat is “an artist blessed at birth with remarkable natural talents” (1). All that needs to be known about Basquiat and his influences is that he is good because he was born that way. His graffiti writing then is merely a means to get recognized; it is self-hype and self-promotion, made apparent by Schnabel’s choice of soundtrack. This is acceptable because he is an artistic genius and should be recognized. Ricard’s essay provides a reminder that “Nobody wants to be part of a generation that ignores another Van Gogh.” Basquiat is, according to Schnabel, a modern day Van Gogh crying out for recognition through his strategically-placed tags. Certainly, Basquiat wanted to get recognized and graffiti served this one need, but, as this dissertation maintains, Basquiat’s graffiti writing
was part of his larger lifelong project to mess with people’s racial perceptions. Schnabel’s
cursory treatment of this aspect of the artist’s life and art wrongly presents it as only a publicity
stunt.

Very little attention is paid to his time on the downtown scene, a facet of his life that this
dissertation argues was highly significant. There is a brief scene showing the artist playing in his
band Gray at the Mudd Club; however, the film’s treatment of this period of his life focuses
more on the development of his relationship with Suzanne Mallouck and on establishing
Basquiat as someone who was perhaps a little too hungry for fame. In one scene, for example,
Basquiat stares through the window of the Mary Boone Gallery to catch a glimpse of Andy
Warhol and other art big shots, which is something that the artist may or may not have done.
Upon leaving he writes one of his SAMO tags on a wall next to the gallery suggesting that he is
craving their attention. Much more time is devoted to his relationship with Mallouck, who is
represented in the film by the character Gina. Although this dissertation posits the so-called
“Widow Basquiat” as a figure who understood the deeper meaning behind the artist’s behavior
and art, Schnabel’s film presents her more as a muse. According to Brooks Adams, Basquiat
“diminishes the true feistiness and strength of the actual woman” (3). Not only is Mallouck’s
relevance sidelined, so is the idea that performance art had much to do with New York avant-
gardism or with Basquiat. In the film, Basquiat floats around the downtown scene; it has in the
eyes of Schnabel little impact on his artistic or cultural formation, a point that this dissertation
contends is not true.

Schnabel does not ignore completely the racism that Basquiat experienced on the
downtown scene; rather he reduces it to a singular act. In one scene in which Basquiat and Gina
are leaving the Mudd Club to return to her apartment, Basquiat is shown as having little success
in hailing in cab. When he steps back and lets Gina give it a try, a cab instantly pulls over for them. Here Schnabel rightly points out that the artist frequently had a difficult time getting a cab, a problem that Basquiat interpreted as having to do with his blackness. In the film, this moment does not generate any type of acknowledgment by the artist or Gina about racism or discrimination. Rather, the couple quietly enters the cab, and the film cuts to the next scene with them in bed together. That this is the first time in the film that racism is even implied is troubling. First, the artist had dealt with issues of overt and subtle racism since he was young. Also troubling is the way in which the racism he encountered downtown is centered in the film on this one act. As this dissertation points outs, the artist was surrounded by both negrophobes and negrophiles. The film, however, seems uninterested in considering the racial politics of those he knew so closely and instead places the entire onus on a random cab driver. In this case, Schnabel underestimates the power and impact of what it meant for Basquiat to be a black male on the New York avant-garde scene of the late 1970s and early 80s.

A majority of the film deals expectedly with Basquiat’s career as painter in the 1980s art world. After he is “discovered” by art critic Rene Ricard, the film moves to his first big exhibition, the 1980 P.S. 1 Group Show. At the show he is already being courted by the power players in the art world, and throughout the film Schnabel focuses heavily on the types of dealers, critics, collectors, and artists that Basquiat is surrounded by. Ricard is eventually pushed aside for more important dealers, such as Mary Boone, Annina Nosei, and Bruno Bischofberger, all of whom receive much screen time in the film. Schnabel also recreates a piece of Basquiat’s filmed interview with Miller, although the questions and responses are a combination of several, different interviews. As Basquiat’s fame increases, he becomes less involved with Gina as well as with his old best friend Benny, another composite character, and the film shifts to his
relationship with Andy Warhol. The film suggests a strong like between Basquiat’s and Warhol’s
death. Basquiat was undoubtedly devastated by the death of one of his idols; their deaths are
framed so closely together in the film, however, that the implication is that Warhol’s passing was
the immediate cause of Basquiat’s overdose, or the final straw for the artist.

For the most part, Schnabel represents the 1980s art world as greedy, exploitative, and
cold. Warhol and Ricard might be seen as exceptions. Warhol is presented as genuinely
interested and supportive of Basquiat. And while Ricard is interested like everyone in hyping
Basquiat, his motives seem to be purer than others. He genuinely sees him as a natural talent
unlike many of the others who are more concerned with getting their hands on a profitable, new
sensation. As Janet Maslin points out in her review of the film, dealers like Boone, Nosei, and
Bischofberger are presented as “exploiting his novelty as a young black star in SoHo” while
well-known art patrons like the Krugers are portrayed as “rich and witless” (2).

Schnabel suggests on more than one occasion and in more than one way that interest in as
well as disdain for the artist was racially driven. For instance, Annina Nosei introduces Basquiat
to the Krugers as the “true voice of the gutter,” and the ensuing dialogue highlights how these
collectors represent the romantic racialists who wanted to buy Basquiat’s art for the sake of
supporting black art. Mary Boone, who “comes off as a snippy little racist” (Adams 3), initially
blows Basquiat off and only becomes interested in him when she realizes that she can make
some money off of him. Schnabel, therefore, does not let the art world off the hook for its
racism; he is rather selective in what he decides to show. He ignores, for example, the fact that
Warhol was initially scared of Basquiat because he saw him as a rough looking black guy. Also,
Schnabel focuses more on the racism that the artist experienced in everyday life. He includes a
scene in which Basquiat was gazed at and laughed at by white patrons in an expensive restaurant
and another one in which his money is closely inspected by a cashier at a high-end store, both of which did happen to him quite often.

Schnabel, then, does not deny that Basquiat felt discrimination as a 1980s art star. However, he places most of it beyond the art world and suggests that when he did encounter it, he dealt with it and moved on. In the film, the artist addresses racism when he encounters it. He walks out on the Krugers, perceiving their treatment of him to be evidence of their latent racism. At the fancy restaurant, he secretly picks up the check of the table of white businessmen who are laughing and pointing at him, and then turns to Gina and asks “What year is this anyway?” At the upscale store he rebukes the clerk for looking at his money so suspiciously. According to Schnabel, Basquiat was frustrated by racism but able to deal with it when it surfaced. For the filmmaker what becomes intolerable for the artist is the greed of the art world. Certainly there is racism in the art community, but the quality that the film highlights more is its avarice. For Schnabel, the greed and insensitivity of the art world trumps its racism in terms of its defining quality. This dissertation does not deny the art world’s profit-mindedness, but it also, in contrast to Schnabel’s film, shows that the 1980s art world was “the heart of whiteness.” In this regard, the filmmaker’s understanding of the public person and painting of Basquiat is premised on a misunderstanding of his experience with racism.

Basquiat is played in the film by Jeffrey Wright, who perfectly captures Basquiat’s deliberate stutter, languid shuffle, and public persona in general. The film includes scenes in which Basquiat acts up in front of white audiences. As the Krugers condescend and patronize him, he peals and eats a banana, an act which comments his so-called “primal” instincts as an artist. Schnabel’s recreation of his filmed interview with Marc Miller highlights his desire to mess with white critics by “playing dumb.” One scene shows him entering one of his shows
wearing headphones, something which Basquiat did quite often to scandalize his audiences. The problem is that these acts and Basquiat’s public persona are largely uncontextualized. That Basquiat’s whole way of being reflects a lifetime of dealing with racism and stereotyping is not established by the filmmaker. These are more playful and clever acts to mess with people who are more clueless and stupid than racist. As this dissertation point out, Basquiat was highly self-conscious and his public image was a well-conceived performance that was mostly aimed at drawing attention to and animating art world racism.

Schnabel’s film suffers most in the way it frames Basquiat’s paintings and artistic process. This dissertation sees the artist’s canvases and everything related to his canvases including the way he represented his method and talked about his work and presented it as a racial spectacle. This is predicated not only on the central role that race and performance played in his life but also on the simple fact that the artist’s aesthetic and technique were intensely personal and individual as he had no formal training, schooling, or mentoring. The film, however, sees Basquiat’s art as flowing from a combination of two sources, drug-induced inspiration or black music such as jazz and hip-hop. In one scene Basquiat in a drug-induced haze sees his art simply happening before his eyes. It is as if he was channeling something; he sees it and then he paints it in a moment of inspiration. That Basquiat often copied directly from books and television is ignored as this would detract from a more romanticized image of the artist. Another scene shows him walking across a large canvas as he paints, which he actually did. The scene is accompanied by the jazz of Max Roach, and then by the hip-hop of Grandmaster Flash. The implication is that black music fueled his art more than anything else. However, as this dissertation illustrates, the artist listened to a lot of different music while he worked and also frequently kept the television on. Why, then, does Schnabel only single out
these one or two possible influences? Whatever the reason, the film presents a less than accurate and complete rendering of the artist’s work, and in doing so takes away from the performative aspects of his canvas, his method of painting, and his way of presenting and talking about his art.

As troubling as its representation of the artist’s actual work is the way Basquiat frames his death. The film does not actually show Basquiat dying from an overdose although it does throughout the film point out that he took an array of drugs and alludes to the fact that this is what will cause his death. Although the film shows Basquiat in poor condition after Warhol’s death, wandering aimlessly around the City in his pajamas, the film actually ends on an upbeat and triumphant note. The artist is reunited with Benny whom he had discarded as he grew more famous. Together they drive around the East Village in Benny’s jeep just for kicks. Benny drives as the artist stands up in the topless jeep looking like a king parading one last time through his realm. The final scene is a dream sequence told by the artist to Benny as they walk down the street. It ends with Basquiat telling Benny that they should go to Ireland and have a drink in every pub. The film then cuts to a black screen with a single sentence announcing the date and cause of the artist’s death.

It is not so much the representation or lack thereof of his actual death that is misleading but rather what the film implies about what ultimately killed the artist. According to Hal Hinson, “In the end, Schnabel falls back on an old idea: that the young genius was a sacrificial lamb, destroyed by the same hype machine that created him. Ultimately, he says, it was fame that killed the artist” (2). In this sense, Basquiat is ultimately portrayed as naïve and overwhelmed by celebrity and attention. By the film’s logic, he was just like any other artist or musician who got too much too soon. Thus, Basquiat is then an allegory of the downside and dangers of instant celebrity and fame.
Yet, as this dissertation illustrates, Basquiat was much more aware of what was going on around him, certainly more so than Schnabel’s film gives him credit for. Even the actor who played the artist felt his portrayal was inaccurate. According to Jeffrey Wright, “Julian Schnabel made him out to be too docile and too much a victim and too passive and not as dangerous as he really was” (quoted in Hoban 328). In this regard, Basquiat’s life did not spin out of control as a result of him being shocked or surprised by being embraced by the art world so voraciously. He knew what his blackness meant in the eyes of white liberal art patrons and that he would be seen as an exotic and a primitive. It was this problem of being admired and loved for all of the wrong reasons that Basquiat wanted to illustrate and draw attention to with every aspect of his life and art. He and his artwork were appreciated but largely by people whose racial politics only reminded Basquiat of how entrenched racism was and how hard it was to extricate it from even what were supposed to be the more enlightened and educated segments of society, i.e., the realm of “high art”. While Schnabel suggests that fame and celebrity killed Basquiat, it was racism that drove his life, art, and death. Allegorically, Basquiat speaks to the tenacity, pervasiveness, and impact of the colorblind racism that the artist endured. It does not pay to see Basquiat, as Schnabel does, as just another tortured artist, as his life and art spoke to the specificities of his time and place.

Schnabel’s *Basquiat* should not be seen as a biography of the artist. It might look like one and thus be mistaken for one, but as this dissertation highlights, Schnabel’s version of what drove the artist’s life and art is highly selective, inaccurate, and romantic. This dissertation, thus, offers an intervention into what the public memory on Basquiat might be. If Schnabel’s film stands as any indication of what people understand as “facts” and “truths” about the artist, it stands to reason that much about him and his artwork is misunderstood. In contrast to *Basquiat,*
this study sets forth a more grounded and realistic picture of the artist. It relies not on a romantic notion of the artist as a person who possesses some inherent and inexplicable talent and foresight and ability to transcend the mundane, but rather as a person whose art and sense of self can be explained by examining the social and cultural forces that most shaped him. Thus, this study hopes to play an important role in challenging the way the artist has been popularly remembered.


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