Artforum, Basquiat, and the 1980s

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Jean Michel Basquiat’s move from unknown street artist to internationally known gallery star was solidified with a seminal review in *Artforum* in late 1981. His distinctive style merged cave-like drawings, the scrawl of the “untrained” artist, and astute observations of culture. His packaging of ethnicity, street background, and artistic style matched seamlessly with Ingrid Sischy’s *Artforum* agenda of art, culture, and race eclecticism. Sischy sought to remodel the magazine to reflect the 1980s fascination with product and image. Basquiat embodied both for *Artforum*, who shaped his image as an 80s style primitive for 20th century Western art imperialists.

Since the early 1960s, *Artforum* has held the influential position of art world kingmaker. The magazine’s primary focus was the traditional art world centered in New York until 1980, when Sischy took the helm of editor. She guided *Artforum* through a decade of blurring boundaries between money, fine art, and popular culture. Sischy’s changes reverberated throughout the art publishing industry. She introduced non-traditional art writers to the magazine, implemented cultural commentary with columns on advertising, television, and music, and added artist projects created specifically for *Artforum*.

The lower East Side of New York was a haven for a different style of artist. Alongside the homeless, prostitutes, and pawnshops grew a subculture of graffiti artists, galleries, and music and dance clubs. A young, African American of Haitian and Puerto
Rican descent, Basquiat, was a product of this street culture. Although not a traditional graffiti artist, his early work as part of the duo SAMO tagged walls, buildings, and doors with insightful aphorisms.

Though he brought a needed boost to the art market, Basquiat was not inoculated from art world prejudice. In this paper I will contrast the presentation of Basquiat with that of black British artists and filmmakers who directly challenged art racist practices. Through the magazine, *Third Text*, and film cooperatives like Black Audio Film Collective, they discussed race from the perspective of the non-western Other, something that was lacking in the coverage of Basquiat.

The 1980s art market composed of artists, art magazines, gallery owners, dealers, museums, auction houses, and corporate and individual art collectors was not immune to the effects of a culture pre-occupied with money and image. Young, brash business executives saw art as simply an investment vehicle. With thousands rather than millions to spend, auction houses and gallery owners nurtured these new collectors through art education, and appropriated business tactics, such as mortgage style loans and bank financing packages.

I selected *Artforum* because of its influence in the 80s and even today in establishing the career of an artist. Art writing contributes significantly to the success of specific artists, and particular artistic styles and movements. Since the bulk of art writing appears in art journals, these magazines are key in championing particular artists through artist profiles, exhibition reviews, and announcements of upcoming shows. These announcements, or gallery ads, also generate revenue for the magazine. Often artists featured in articles or reviews are the same artists promoted in ads purchased by
prestigious galleries, auction houses, and museums, thus illustrating the cyclical, self-serving nature of the art market.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Jeannette Klein

Chair, Art History and Scholarship
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INTRODUCTION

I. Why *Artforum*?

The mythology of the artist suggests that talent determines an artist’s success in the art world. In fact, it is the writing about an artist that leads to recognition, prominence, and longevity. Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci are proof of this point. Without the work of Vasari who transformed the role of the artist in his writings, they would be anonymous craftsmen who painted chapels, churches, and ceilings. Instead they have become legends. Even more so today, art is a business that requires promotion. If no one is writing about an artist or his or her work, no one is talking about their work, and few people will buy their work. Since the sixteenth century writers have used words to create geniuses. The aim of contemporary art writers has not always been so high. Most have settled for discovering the next rising star. During the 1980s, *Artforum* and the marketplace launched several artists’ careers, including Basquiat’s, into orbit.

For decades, *Artforum* has been the go to journal for artists, writers, and art enthusiasts. Its reputation and prestige legitimizes both artists and the critics who write about them. Critics, whose reviews and writing appear on the magazine’s pages, are validated as art authorities. The artists that critics critique are also validated by their work’s appearance in the journal. An appearance in *Artforum* signifies acceptance of their artistic credibility, and signals to the art market that they have been successfully vetted for collection and sale.
II. Why Basquiat?

Jean-Michel Basquiat’s career offers a textbook case for examining art writing’s influence and effect on an artist’s career. An early review that appeared in *Artforum* was pivotal to his career. “The Radiant Child” by Rene Ricard reviewed several New York group exhibitions, and although it discussed the work of numerous artists the majority of Ricard’s comments were reserved for Basquiat. He linked the young artist to the undiscovered genius Vincent Van Gogh, as well as to the artistic style of Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet. He concluded the piece by crowning Basquiat an art star. Within two years of that review, Basquiat skyrocketed from an unknown in the art world to international recognition and success. By the mid-80s, Basquiat’s work had appeared in nearly one hundred group and solo shows. Although his name and work consistently appeared in U.S. and international art magazines, much of the text was devoted to details about Basquiat’s personal life rather than his professional career.

Although other, more established black artists were working during the 1980s, Basquiat stood above everyone else from a market perspective. In such an image conscious, pop culture decade, his youth, energy, personality, and mixed racial heritage was an easy choice. The combination was ideal for enticing art collectors and investors to the sagging art market. He proved marketable across racial, national, and financial boundaries, and every aspect of the art marketplace (Figure 1) used him and his image to their economic advantage.

Basquiat’s career spanned a single decade, the 1980s. A major trend of the decade involved the constant merging and combining of ideas, people, and resources. Emerging
artists combined art historical images with twentieth century cultural references and street art to create a new style of art. Banks and corporations blended their marketplace expertise with art institutions to create new ways of buying and selling art objects, and the artists who created them.

III. Why combine a discussion of the two?

I was introduced to Basquiat by one of my art professors. He told me that he gave each of his children a copy of *Life Doesn’t Frighten Me* when they were little. The book combines Basquiat’s paintings with a poem written by Maya Angelou. These are not typical, gooey sweet children’s book illustrations with soft pastels, rosy cheeks, and large, round innocent eyes. In this book are black, sharp teethed dragons with crowns, vicious looking dogs and people emerging from flaming backdrops, and oddly shaped hard to identify figures and symbols. This is not a book of children’s dreams, but nightmares.

My professor’s wife thought is was an awful book to give a child. He disagreed believing it is perfect for helping children confront fear, and cope with the scary things that hide in the dark. Though I did not understand the symbols, references, or much of the artwork, I was drawn to the stark, unpretentious, unattractive images.

“Do you know what your thesis topic is?” It was the first question my department head asked when I arrived at graduate school. After a couple of false starts, I settled on art publishing. With more than ten years of publishing experience as an editor and writer under my belt, it is safe to say I enjoy dancing with words. With degrees in business and art and my background in publishing, art publishing seemed a natural fit. Moreover, the
art publishing industry is a microcosm of the broader publishing field where I had worked. There are differences, yet certain factors are common to both, products need to be created, and audiences are needed to buy those products. As I delved deeper, the power of the art journal’s text to lift artists from obscurity to stardom was fascinating and worth a closer look.

Since the early 60s *Artforum* has held a dominate position in the art market as an authority on high quality art and artists. Chapter 1 examines the history of *Artforum*, its importance to artists and art writers, and its influential fifth editor Ingrid Sischy, who introduced a boarder perspective of art to the *Artforum* audience, and reshaped the art magazine into a visual and cultural journal.

Basquiat gained international prominence as an artist in less than ten years, an incredible accomplishment for any artist, and one that was unprecedented for an African American. Chapter 2 offers an overview of Basquiat’s life, the art writing that constructed an image of him as the exotic Other, as well as how that writing both benefited and diminished his artistic achievement. In contrast, Black Audio Film Collective, a British based group of young filmmakers avoided a similar media construction through its extensive written discourse about its work and methodologies, as well as its use of avant-garde techniques to address racism.

Chapter 3 places *Artforum* and Basquiat within the context of the artistic 80s, a decade that saw the rebirth of figurative painting, the integration of street art and fine art, and new developments in photography and feminist art and theory. Graffiti and Neoexpressionist art accounted for tremendous interest and growth in the art market, but the artists who created it were denounced by art historians, who considered them image
and commodity conscious profiteers. Chapter 4 contrasts the way two journals, one market driven and the other government supported, addressed racism within the art world. *Artforum* used MOMA’s “Primitivism” exhibition to talk about the non-Western Other, while *Third Text*, a government financed British journal, provided an avenue for critics and artists outside of the West to discuss racism from their perspective.

The art writing in *Artforum* was instrumental in creating an image of Basquiat as a brilliant, creative primitive. This characterization and his mixed racial heritage coincided with lingering Western art imperialist beliefs about the exotic Other. Julian Schnabel, a painter and one of Basquiat’s contemporaries, wrote and directed a film that transformed this image into a mythic Basquiat. Although the events and dialogue for the movie was taken directly from the artist’s life and Ricard’s review in *Artforum*, they were combined in such a way that produced a fictionalized version of Basquiat. Chapter 5 discusses the way the movie effectively erased the real Basquiat and his work, and substituted Schnabel’s story that was told through the character of Basquiat.

The relationship between Basquiat and *Artforum* demonstrates the power and influence of art writing on an artist’s work and career. Moreover, Basquiat’s life illustrates how a constructed image can undermine an artist’s life and work. In failing to write and talk about his work, Basquiat allowed himself to become an 80s version of the 19th century primitive wild child. In both instances, the written discourse, rather than reality, became the primary source for image creation. Often that image had little to do with the actual artist and resulted in the image taking precedence over reality.
ARTFORUM

“Part of the artist’s job is to get the work where I will see it. I have to be aware of it before I can hype it.”3 Rene Ricard

Rene Ricard was a critic in 1981 for Artforum at the time of the above comments, yet his words are particularly insightful when attempting to define the art journal and its purpose. Art journals, after all, are publications where the majority of writing about art occurs. Since the earliest French journals, L’Artiste and L’Art, were published in the early eighteenth century, art magazines have been designed as a site, a location, a destination for artists and their work. These sites are multi-purposed. They are places to talk about art and art-making, discussion areas for defining, debating and defying the boundaries of art, and venues to highlight specific artists, and their styles and work. In Artwriting, David Carrier contends that “the present-day function of artwriting is to advertise art.”4 However, within many art magazines, including Artforum, art writing is multifaceted, though typically divided into two main areas: (1) art criticism in the form of art reviews, critical and theoretical discourse, art interpretation, and artist interviews, and (2) art historical writing that examines and interprets art objects, their creators, and theories about art.

As a result, a relationship has developed between the art magazine and the rest of the art world. The relationship between artist, critic, gallery owner, and curator is a symbiotic one, with each element of the system highly dependent and interdependent upon the others (Figure 1). For example, reviews written by critics that appear in print highlight specific artists, and bestow their work with significance. Such recognition, in
turn, leads to higher visibility for these artists within the art market, better gallery representation, increased sales, and inclusion in prestigious museum and gallery exhibitions. They are also important for the purposes of tenure and promotion within academia. These occurrences then advance an artist’s career and result in additional coverage in the art and general press, such as exhibition reviews, and artist’s interviews, frequent inclusion in prestigious gallery shows, higher prices for art work, and continued growth in private and institutional sales. Often the artists that are the subject of the feature articles and reviews are the same artists advertised by galleries in the glossy ads at the front and back of the magazines. Although they may protest against being overly influenced by the commerce of the market, when Artforum, and other commercial journals, need “to pay for color plates and an editorial staff, obviously it is difficult to keep criticism independent of advertising.”

There is another critical relationship within the art world round robin, the one that exists between critic and artist. Just as artists need critics and art magazines to promote their work, critics need artists who will provide the style or theme of work they want to write about and discuss. The artist Philip Pearlstein believes that, “because writers too must present themselves as persons with identifiable attitudes in order to achieve recognition, publishing in the most significant publications is the parallel to the artist’s exhibiting in the best galleries.” The present system of art production and distribution relies heavily on mutual need and economic advancement. Unfortunately according to Pearlstein, many art writers offer little more than conjecture about an artist and her or his work, since few have actually studied studio art. Instead what these writers publish is a specific theory they want to advance, a particular artist or group of artists they like, or a
certain style they prefer over another. This was certainly the case with Ricard and Basquiat in *Artforum* during the 1980s. In “The Radiant Child” Ricard said, “Artists have a responsibility to their work to raise it above the vernacular. Perhaps it is the critic’s job to sort out from the melee of popular style the individuals who define the style, who perhaps inaugurated it and to bring them to public attention.”

*Artforum* is one of the most recognized and influential publications, with a reputation for covering the artists, movements, and trends of the contemporary art world. Artists and writers view the magazine as a site that legitimizes artistic and critical achievement. For artists, inclusion within its pages signifies the attainment of critical success for their work. Articles written by critics introduce and promote specific ideas or theories. Career minded scholars have used *Artforum’s* pages to publish individual articles that were later collected and published as full length books.

I. History of *Artforum*

*Artforum* was created in 1962 in San Francisco by three art world outsiders—John Irwin, John Coplans, and Philip Leider. Irwin, a printing salesman had little knowledge of or interest in art, but simply saw an art magazine as a way to expand his business by selling ads to local art galleries. Coplans was an artist and writer who favored the new critical discourse of the art world that other magazines at the time were not covering. Leider was an art gallery manager and former law student, with a passion for debate and intellectual curiosity.

Although the three knew little about the intricacies of the art world, in the early 1960s *Artforum’s* innovative style of writing about art established a new standard for art
and cultural criticism still used in newspapers and magazines today. Within its first five years, the magazine moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and then to its final location, New York City. During this transitional period, the magazine’s editorial style was established as a place for: critical writing grounded in art history and theory that was decisive, intellectually challenging, opinionated, and contentious, while featuring opposing points of views, and numerous expansive photographs of artist’s work.10

Everything about *Artforum* was radical, from the people who created it, the way the art was shown, to its size and physical appearance. It was published ten times a year, and retains its initial distinctive look and size, an almost 10 1/2” square that was designed by Ed Rusha, an Los Angeles based artist. Also, the initial basic format of the magazine remains intact with each issue featuring four to six feature articles highlighting specific artists, art styles, or theories, followed by a review section covering selected U.S. and international exhibitions. During the 1980s, reviews of performance, television, and film were added. Like parentheses, page after page of gallery ads bracketed the features and reviews sections. Though the page count mushroomed from 120 pages in 1964 to 168 in 1988, the structure of the magazine has remained the same.

Early on the audience for *Artforum* was “a new generation of university-educated, intellectually sophisticated writers who were dissatisfied with existing outlets for their work: *Art News, Art International*, and *Arts* magazines. They understood that in mid-twentieth-century America, the actual making of art was no longer mainly a matter of visual invention, skill and talent; intellectual theory had put art-making under a new sort of conceptual stress.”11 The first issue was published in June 1962, with no masthead, and a blurry, unidentified image on the cover (Figure 2). The majority of the contributors
to the issue were art establishment heavyweights such as John Johnson Sweeney (former director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at Museum of Modern Art, and the director of the Guggenheim), Lester Longman (chair, Department of Art, University of California, Los Angeles), Henry Seldis (Los Angeles art critic), Sidney Geist (New York artist and critic), and Arthur Secunda (artist). Reviews of exhibitions in Los Angeles and San Francisco were included, along with book reviews and a calendar of shows throughout the U.S. and Canada.

The birth of *Artforum* signaled the shift occurring within the art world—a movement away from heroic abstract painting toward Minimalism, Pop Art, Installation, Performance, and Conceptual Art. According to Amy Newman, “*Artforum* was the monthly magazine the artists read, replacing *Art News*, whose commitment to Abstract Expressionism was felt by the new generation to be too tied to the past. With its contemporary looking design and sans serif type, *Artforum* was where the cutting-edge dealers advertised, where ephemeral works were documented and artists’ writings were published, and the medium by which art students and new patrons were initiated and informed. It provoked the heated arguments that raged in university art departments and wherever artists congregated around the country.”

*Artforum* was immediately successful. Within its first five years, the staff expanded from one paid staff member, Leider, to twelve. Circulation grew from 5,483 in 1963 to 10,918 by 1967. The editorial staff by the early 70s included: John Coplans (Editor in Chief), Robert Pincus-Warren (Senior Editor), Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff, Rosalind E. Krauss, Annette Michelson (Associate Editors), and Walter D. Bannard, John Elderfield, Joseph Maschek, Peter Plagens (Contributing Editors). Yet, by
the late 1970s the magazine had grown into a staid, self-important journal that was heavily tied to academia and intellectual elitism, and had little in common with the rest of the art world. Prior to this *Artforum* had published numerous articles that were critically respected including “[Michael] Fried’s “Art and Objecthood,” artist Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” artist Robert Morris’ “Notes on Sculpture, Part 3,” and artist Robert Smithson’s “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site.” Peter Plagens called *Artforum* of the 1970s, “a ‘degree magazine,’ written by Ph.D.’s about M.F.A.’s.” According to Amy Newman, “to this day, *Artforum* of the 1960s and early ‘70s is remembered as a monolithic agent of power and coercion, anointing only those artists whose work could be elucidated through the criteria of formalist analysis.”

II. Sischy

By the early 80s, *Artforum* was in trouble, a victim of its own formulaic approach to artists and art work. With ad sales down, the defection of two of its most recognized and respected writers, Krauss and Michelson, and a new publisher, the magazine was ready for not just an overhaul, but a radical makeover. The agent of that makeover came in the form of Ingrid Sischy, *Artforum*’s fifth editor-in-chief. Part of *Artforum*’s distinctiveness over the years had come from the personalities of its staff, particularly its editors. From 1962 to 1990, there were six: John Irwin (September 1962-1963), Leider (September 1964-December 1971), Coplans (January 1972-February 1977), Joseph Mascheck (March 1977-January 1980), Sischy (February 1980-February 1988), and Ida Panicelli (March 1988-Summer 1992). Although her tenure was just shy of a decade, 1980-1988, Sischy’s influence on *Artforum* and the art press was considerable. Lisa
Liebmann explained that her “first issue sparked a significant new editorial trend, the revival of artist-project pages in all sorts of magazines.”

When she was hired to create a new look and direction for *Artforum* Sischy was 27 years old, from South Africa, Jewish, and gay (Figure 3). Sischy’s appeal to new publishers Amy Baker Sandback and Anthony Korner was that she, like them, had no previous magazine experience. As Sandback explained, “We didn’t know any of the things we should have, so we were fearless. The artist’s-book background was positive in that we didn’t see the magazine in a conventional sense, as simply text illustrated with pictures.” Sandback and Sischy had worked together at Printed Matter, an artist-book project in New York. With her unique publishing and art market experience, Sischy brought a broad perspective of art and the world to the magazine. Under her leadership, *Artforum* de-emphasized the critical, heavily footnoted writings of her predecessors and emphasized the visual impact of the publication. By simultaneously relaxing and expanding upon long held editorial rules, she revolutionized “the idea of what an art magazine could be.” Columns on fashion, music, and advertising were added, and Barbara Kruger was hired to write about television, a first for an artist in an art magazine.

Sischy’s first issue appeared in February 1980, and was a harbinger of the changes in store for readers. The cover was a reprint of the June 1942 issue of *VVV*, an American, avant-garde magazine devoted to poetry, the plastic arts, anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Figure 4). The interior included projects created by thirteen artists, such as signs by Jenny Holzer, photos by William Wegman, articles by Laurie Anderson, and images by conceptual artists Gilbert & George. Also, a satirical game on
how to get ahead in the art world was created by the editors of Heresies, a feminist magazine. With this first issue Sischy embraced pluralism, at least in appearance.

Sischy maintained the standard appearance of the magazine of 10 ½” width x 10 5/8” height, 9-pt. Helvetic Light typeface body text, 18-pt. Eurostyle Bold headings, while making drastic changes in terms of organization and emphasis. For example, several special issues were published during her tenure like the February 1982 issue that focused on high fashion (Figure 5). Sischy’s editorial explained the reasoning behind the issue,

“This issue seeks to confront artmaking that retains its autonomy as it enters mass culture at the blurred boundary of art and commerce. The threat to art no longer comes from the outside, but from within, from its isolation and conservatism. The tradition of Artforum is not to limit its territory to one visual world, and the borders of its coverage have fluctuated in order to maintain a fluidity toward, and a discussion of, the very definition of art, which needs to break down to affirm its strength. The history of this magazine lies in examining the resulting fragments.”

These words outlined Sischy’s intent for Artforum, to move beyond familiar territory, as well as recognize and acknowledge the merging of various aspects of art that were occurring within the art world, and the broader culture.

Sischy made Artforum once again a Who’s Who of the art world. Through previous stints at an artists’ book publisher and MOMA, she had developed a network of contacts and friends among established and new artists. These connections proved extremely useful, and helped her establish an atmosphere for the new, untested, and unexpected. Sischy described the magazine she inherited like an old hairstyle, presentable but a bit out of date. The Artforum of the past was widely “respected among academics,
[yet] was austerely intellectual, with strict ideas of what was progressive and avant-garde. It was filled with angular shapes and black paintings; paintings with human figures in them—or with any image in them at all, for that matter—were rare. The magazine was also extremely, ‘American’—male American, showing mostly the work of American men.24

These American, male artists were also white and, for the most part, heterosexual. Sischy expanded the coverage of the type of art that was discussed, and the artists who created it. One tactic was to review large, international art exhibitions such as Documenta. The following is from her introduction to the magazine’s feature on Documenta 7 in September 1982.

“Previous positions on nationalism and internationalism, production and expression can no longer simply be assumed. Historically, the international exposition implicitly promised a view of culture’s progress. It is because of this tradition that we pay such close attention to exhibitions with the ambit of Documenta 7, which included 180 artists from 21 countries, constituting three full chronological generations. The ideal is to gain a larger and less fragmented perception of where contemporary art is and toward what it might be moving than is possible through the more frequent glimpses permitted by smaller exhibits, one-person shows, or the biennials that usually project national self-images.”25

III. The Writers

Along with the new styles of art and new types of artists included in Artforum during the 1980s, was a new style of writer. No longer were its pages reserved only for art educated and credentialed writers and scholars. Prior to Sischy’s tenure Artforum’s writers, like the artists they covered, were college educated, white, and primarily male.
Artforum had been following an established practice of highlighting people who fit seamlessly into the established art structure.

Sischy sought to remedy the closed boy club by throwing open the door and offering readers a new style of art writing—a style more lyrical and literary than critical. During the 1980s, Rene Ricard and Edit deAk were Artforum’s kingmakers, writing about new and upcoming artists, such as Basquiat, Francesco Clemente, and Julian Schnabel, and styles such as graffiti that soon captured the attention of the art buying public. As Scott Rothkopf said, “In their day Ricard and deAk occupied indisputably prominent positions in the art press, inspiring their colleagues’ admiration and bemusement, as well as contempt.”

Ricard was a poet who in the late 1970s had published several short reviews in Art in America. A regular of Andy Warhol’s Factory, he appeared in Warhol’s film Chelsea Girls and was well acquainted with graffiti and street artists. Refusing to accept the label critic, Ricard proclaimed in Artforum’s Summer 1981 issue, “In point of fact I’m not an art critic. I’m an enthusiast. I like to drum up interesting artists who have somehow inspired me to be able to say something about their work.” Such assertions laid him bare to charges by Thomas Lawson that he and deAk were merely offering, “petulant self-advertisement in the name of a reactionary expressionism, a celebration of the author’s importance as a champion of the debasement of art to kitsch, fearful that anything more demanding might be no fun. The writing was mostly frivolous, but noisy, and must be considered a serious apologia for a certain anti-intellectual elite.”

deAk, Ricard’s counterpart at Artforum, advocated cutting through the usual critical rhetoric of most reviews and allowing the art work’s “voice to speak.”
Sischy deAk was an expatriate, who came to the U.S. from Hungary. She had a broad perspective of what constituted art. A longtime member of the art press, deAk had founded the ‘70s underground art magazine *ArtRite*. Moreover, she had little patience for “the new strain of theoretically sophisticated criticism that had gained currency in the early ‘80s. ‘There’s something rotten about a structure that produces terminological pollution and calls it theory, like a mob-controlled waste disposal company.’” She wrote, “These semiotician types intimidate through applying more expensive designer labels. It’s a means of holding onto power (by sequestering information), like the doctor’s wife who intimidates her friends by naming common illnesses with their Latin names.”

deAk was responding to the criticism of the generation of writers that had preceded her at *Artforum*, including Krauss, Fried, Michelson, and Leo Steinberg. These critics were heavily invested in formalist readings of art and art practice. They were not interested in issues that they considered trendy such as feminism and identity. Ultimately they split from *Artforum*, with Krauss and Michelson later founding the journal *October*. Krauss answered deAk with charges that *Artforum* had devolved into little more than a promotional space that was afraid to engage in intellectual debate or discourse.

Sischy ignored these critics, and concentrated on the philosophy that “the best way you can serve a magazine of the moment is to try and sort out the stuff that seems in some essential way to be significant and to represent the present.” This strategy was in line with her plan to broaden *Artforum’s* perspective on art and artists. In 1981 an African American painter working in an unusual style also worked well with her agenda for the magazine. His name was Jean-Michel Basquiat.
“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. 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 bona fide art-world celebrity was, until the advent of Jean Michel Basquiat, something of a joke.”

32 Greg Tate

By 1987, the year before his death, Jean Michel Basquiat’s fame had reached an extraordinary level for such a young artist. Within six years he had achieved a level of success in the art world previously unheard of for an African American artist of any sort, and a black male in particular. His work had been shown in numerous national and international exhibitions, and in 1982 he was the youngest of 176 artists invited to participate in Documenta 7. In addition, he was among a select group of 40 artists included in the 1983 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum, only a year after his initial debut.

Another significant indicator of Basquiat’s success was his numerous appearances in *Artforum*. From 1981 to 1988, his name appeared in the magazine seventy-five times (Table 1). This number included four feature articles and three reviews. Articles such as “The Radiant Child” and “The Pledge of Allegiance” (November 1982) were written by Ricard. Also, “Toward Another Laocoon Or, The Snake Pit,” Basquiat featured prominently in Thomas Lawson’s critique of 80s art criticism and the art market. In “Lines, Chapters, and Verses: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat” (April 1987), readers are offered a late career profile of the artist. The reviews covered prominent shows at the
Annina Nosei’s Gallery and the Mary Boone Gallery, as well as Basquiat’s collaboration with Andy Warhol at Gallery Bruno Bishofberger. These articles and reviews simultaneously discussed Basquiat and his work, and introduced his most recent work by showing images of his art. Twenty-two pieces of Basquiat’s work were shown in Artforum, with fifteen being used to illustrate various articles or reviews. In addition, his work illustrated two other articles on non-Basquiat topics, “On the Manner of Addressing Clouds” and “Andy Warhol: Inflation Artist.”

The bulk of Basquiat’s appearances in Artforum were in the form of sixty-six gallery ads that effectively kept his name before readers on an almost monthly basis. These ads ranged from full page, four color ads from prominent galleries, to quarter page, all text black and white ads from mid-sized galleries. Even single lines of text ads featuring Basquiat’s name were purchased by smaller galleries. These galleries were located across the U.S., and also in London, Paris, Canada, Austria, Amsterdam, Japan, Zurich, Germany, and Sweden.

Ricard introduced Artforum readers to Basquiat in December 1981 with witty quips such as, “If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption, it would be Jean-Michel.” Ricard used “The Radiant Child” to teach readers about Basquiat, and the street art of graffiti that was transitioning from New York’s subway trains and old buildings to exclusive gallery walls. Illustrating that he was on a first name basis with the graffiti stylist turned artist, Ricard referred to him as Jean-Michel throughout the article, and bestowed his highest praise on Basquiat by singling him out repeatedly.
“The Radiant Child” was a review of two New York group exhibitions that showcased the work of emerging artists. These shows, *The Times Square Show* and *The New York/New Wave Show at P. S. 1.*, were arranged by the artists themselves, and grew out of the creative milieu of music and dance clubs, independent filmmaking, and graffiti and visual art of New York’s Lower East Side. Typically, the shows were held at alternative exhibition spaces, such as the Mudd Club, or dilapidated or abandoned buildings. Several artists discussed in the article later achieved critical and commercial success, such as Keith Haring, Judy Rifka, John Ahearn, and Francesco Clemente. Although “The Radiant Child” was a button Haring created showing a baby surrounded by energetic lines, Ricard used the title to crown Basquiat an art world star. Ricard’s text covered a number of artists, yet primarily focused on Basquiat, the artist to watch.

I. Biography

Born in Brooklyn in 1960, Basquiat died at age twenty-seven of a drug overdose. A high school dropout, he left home at sixteen, slept on friends’ couches at night, drank, smoked and snorted drugs. As a teenager, he lived a 1970s version of the bohemian artist, bouncing between stints as an actor for independent films, a graffiti writer, leader of his own band Gray, and street hustler selling handmade cards. He was of mixed ethnicity with a father from Haiti, and a Brooklyn born mother of Puerto Rican descent.

Basquiat’s first taste of recognition came as half of the graffiti artistic team SAMO, pronounced SAY-MO meaning “same old shit.” He and collaborator Al Diaz spray-painted aphorisms around parts of Manhattan. By nineteen, he had quit SAMO, left his band, and appeared in his first group art show. At twenty, he achieved his career goal
of stardom as the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat35 with successful shows in 1982 at the Annina Nosei Gallery, Fun Gallery, Transavanguardia: Italia/America exhibition, and Galerie Bruno Bischofberger.

In the late 1970s, the concrete walls, old doors and the sides of abandoned buildings of New York were the sites for Basquiat’s work. By the 80s Basquiat was showing his work in galleries and getting reviewed in major art publications. Initially, his work was greeted with accolades. Kate Linker in an Artforum review said, “Basquiat’s lexicon of diagrams, animals, anatomical parts seemed able to encompass much of the verve and jostling rhythm of the street.”36 Jeffrey Deitch’s 1982 Flash Art review complemented Basquiat’s ability to assimilate and blend vast amounts of diverse information from sources such as street culture, newspapers and television, ethnic spirituality with an “intuitive understanding of the language of modern painting.”37

From the beginning Basquiat’s biography received as much, sometimes more, press ink as his work. In the same Flash Art review where he applauded Basquiat, Deitch also compared the young painter to “a wild boy raised by wolves,” who was locked in the basement and forced to paint.38 The reference was to Basquiat’s arrangement with Nosei, his first dealer, who provided him a studio in her gallery’s basement and supposedly demanded he churn out paintings. In addition, the back cover of a video interview described him as “the enfant terrible of the 1980s art scene.”39 Also mentioned is Basquiat’s “fondness for high jinks and exuberant spirit.”40 His difficulties with dealers Nosei (1982) and Mary Boone (1986) were often cited in artist profiles and articles, even appearing in “More Post-Modern than Primitive” as late as 1988.41 Certain anecdotes had a life of their own, and Basquiat was forced to live with many of these for years.
His portrayal as animalistic was reinforced in Jeanne Silverthorne’s 1982 *Artforum* review where she said, “there’s obviously a head at work here, and a hand; if Basquiat can put them together so that one doesn’t contradict the other, maybe he won’t get ulcers while chewing the cud of success.” Characterizations of Basquiat as savage and wild dogged him throughout his career. Clearly art writers for magazines such as *Artforum, Flash Art*, and *Art International*, and their readers continued to desire the modernist primitive in the form of the young, “feral” painter who happened to be other than white.

II. Critical Opposition

While many critics from other journals such as *Art in America* and *Flash Art* followed *Artforum’s* lead and celebrated Basquiat’s work, another group of critics, namely art historians, remained unconvinced that Basquiat was the heir apparent of contemporary art. Scholars such as Benjamin Buchloch, Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, and Hal Foster denounced him and other artists working in a similar manner as Neoexpressionists and commercial opportunists. They opposed the “stylistically eclectic, or pluralistic, character” of NeoExpressionism with Foster describing pluralism in two ways: “an outlook that embraced a variety of schools and styles in the contemporary art world, as well as a tendency in artistic practice of the time toward the omnivorous incorporation of stylistic features from past art.” One widespread practice NeoExpressionists used was to juxtapose divergent topics, such as narrative history and market culture, or art history and contemporary consumerism. Instead of approaching art as either fine art or popular art, these artists contended that art contained elements of
both. Foster and his colleagues refused to recognize this practice as a new style of art production and cultural commentary. Instead they considered this merging and the resulting pastiche capitalism’s further encroachment on high culture. They also believed that if all art was equal, as pluralism asserts, then historical artistic progress was erased.45

Alison Pearlman believed this resistance was the result of “anxious critical reactions to a specific group of artists and artistic trends—Julian Schnabel and David Salle in association with Neo-Expressionism, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring vis-à-vis Graffiti Art, and Peter Halley and Jeff Koons in relation to Simulationism.”46 Although Pearlman subdivided these artists into distinct categories, academic critics and the art press lumped them and their art practices together under the single heading Neoexpressionism. Although the bulk of opposition came later, several articles by Buloch and Crimp about Neoexpressionism were published in *October* in the early 1980s.

Artists associated with Graffiti Art, in particular, were singled out by scholars such as Foster, Owens, Rosalyn Deutsche, and Cara Gendel Ryan. The majority of the critical opposition was not generally targeted at specific artists, but framed as an argument condemning “the artists and promoters of the entire East Village art world for violating the culture of the poor and people of color.”47 Deutsche and Ryan specifically addressed the gentrification of New York’s Lower East Side, renamed the East Village in 1984 in “The Fine Art of Gentrification.” They defined Neoexpressionism as an “embrace of commercialism, opportunism, and a concomitant rejection of the radical art practices of the past twenty years,”48 and contended that it was not liberating, innovative, or new, but in fact restrictive and rigid. The article portrayed the neighborhood residents as underdogs, and cast Basquiat, Haring, and other graffiti artists as part of a larger art
practice of appropriation that resulted in the area’s redevelopment and a proliferation of new, high priced condos, galleries, restaurants, and business. As these establishments moved in, they pushed existing low-income residents out.\textsuperscript{49}

Although Foster also wrote an article that was highly critical of NeoExpressionism, he was the sole scholar to single out Basquiat, Haring, and Graffiti Art as participants in the exploitation of the East Village. While Owens, Deutsche, and Ryan simply implied it, Foster wrote, “The galleries absorb the graffitists. Thus the street-artist Samo becomes Jean-Michel Basquiat, the new art-world primitive/prodigy; and the work of Keith Haring, a mediatory figure in graffiti-become-art, appears on the huge Spectacolor sign atop Times Square.”\textsuperscript{50}

Although Basquiat and Haring were repeatedly identified with graffiti art, both were peripheral figures at best. Neither actually painted subway trains, which was the litmus test for a true graffiti artist. Diego Cortez, a New York underground insider, curator, and writer called the pair, “straddlers, neatly positioned between the new wave movement and the graffiti movement.”\textsuperscript{51} Writers and critics like Foster, who were nominally acquainted with the subculture, often made inaccurate assumptions about Graffiti Art such as, “graffiti is a symbolic activity of individuals who have no access to the media, who are represented (if at all) in the register of the stereotype (vandal, victim, unemployed youth)—a response of people denied response.”\textsuperscript{52} Cortez countered, “fifty percent [of graffitists] are highly educated and very lucid. Most people still think that graffiti kids are just poor Latins and blacks. But they’re wrong, because it’s a totally interracial, interclass movement.”\textsuperscript{53}
At the beginning of his career, the bulk of Basquiat’s support came from writers, such as Ricard, deAk, Cortez, and Deitch, who used an insider journalistic style. Later, strident critical opinion surfaced and was more reactionary toward him personally and his success. Ironically, this late scholarly criticism has had the longer shelf life, as thesis articles and theories have entered academia as the main voice of the decade. While these writers were the minority opinion during the 80s, they have successfully rewritten Basquiat’s history with their longevity. Scholars like Foster who initially published their work in non-academic journals have been more adept than other writers of the period at gathering their work into collections, or having them reprinted in anthologies. These books, now regularly used in academic courses, have usurped the other more favorable writing of non-academics to become the primary voices that define the decade. Foster’s *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* is an example. Seven of the nine essays included in the collection were originally published in *Art in America* between 1982 and 1985.

Finally, much of what has been written under the guise of scholarly critique concerning Basquiat does not actually address his art. Although none of the academic critics, such as Deutsche, Ryan, Foster, or Owens, actually analyzed any of Basquiat’s specific works of art or his body of work, they freely used it to further their own agenda. Foster exploits Basquiat’s painting “In Italian” by using it to illustrate “Between Modernism and the Media,” where he attacks the artist and Graffiti Art, yet never mentions the work. In addition, Donald Kuspit’s “The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s” includes one of Basquiat’s untitled pieces, but does not discuss the drawing or the artist at all. This practice was unchallenged until scholars such as Richard Marshall in
“Repelling Ghosts” and Robert Farris Thompson in “Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets” began to critically assess Basquiat’s oeuvre and the earlier writing about his work.

III. Basquiat’s Art

Like the layers of paint, paper, and text that Basquiat used to create his art, the messages contained in his work derived from a variety of sources. Frequently he interwove his art with multiple meanings, often relying on a bricolage of images, symbols, and words to discuss race, identity, and politics. Basquiat also used codes and misdirection to obscure his message, a practice prevalent with Mali women in West Africa when creating bogolonfini or mudcloth, as well as with African American slaves needing to conceal information about the Underground Railroad.

In “Quality Meats for the Public,” (Figure 6) Basquiat discusses the politics of food, particularly chicken and pork, the meats traditionally most affordable and available to low income residents in African American communities. The canvas, divided into three sections, features cartoonish images of a chicken and a pig. A crown is drawn above the words *quality meats* referring to the marketing language frequently used by stores to entice buyers to purchase their products. The word *new* is written like a label across a swatch of black mimicking another marketing ploy that replaces traditional labels, such as swine and chicken, with the more refined terms, poultry and pork. A row of dollar signs appear across the bottom of the painting indicating the high cost of meat, both in terms of price and health.
The African American male was a frequent subject in Basquiat’s work. In “Ribs Ribs” (Figure 7), the image of a human rib is used to demonstrate the multiple meanings of the word for African Americans. The drawing features a male figure holding a scepter in one hand, while clutching a rib bone in the other. Three other rib bones similar to the one he holds are suspension in air, emphasizing the importance of the bone. The figure, also suspended, has a halo hovering above his head. The word *rib* appears twice along his upper right chest indicating the position of the human rib that shelters the heart and lungs. For African American Christians, the rib is symbolic of the rib taken from Adam to create Eve. The word also refers to the beef and pork ribs that have been traditional food staples within the African American community. The figure’s clutching of the rib demonstrates the important position the meat holds in many African Americans’ households. Finally, the haloed figure symbolizes the high mortality rate among African American men with diets high in rib consumption.

In “Ironic of the Negro Policeman” (Figure 8), Basquiat explores the paradox of power, authority, and the African American male. The painting shows an awkward, misaligned black male with his left arm twice as long as his right. The blue suit of authority he wears does not fit his warped body. The significance here is that the effects of racism often leave black males grotesquely broken and misshaped physically and emotionally. In addition, they are often viewed by a criminal justice system dominated by white males as criminals, and are perceived as little more than animals. In such an environment, a black policeman is incongruous, and becomes a caricature of the authority and power he supposedly represents.
IV. Black Audio Film Collective

Basquiat’s portrayal in the media can be productively compared with that of Black Audio Film Collective, a group of young filmmakers of Afro-Caribbean, African, and Asian origin in Britain. In the early 80s racial tensions in Great Britain reached a crisis. For over a decade people of color had encountered continual harassment by the police and right-wing groups, as well as institutional racism without recourse. As a result, a series of violent outbreaks occurred after the suspicious deaths of three youths. Yet, as Coco Fusco observed “the riots that took place in 1981 mark a watershed moment in the history of British race relations,” because of the positive media changes that resulted.

The affected communities questioned the governmental explanation of the reason for the riots and the way the mass media portrayed the events. Independent and organized members of the television and filmmaking community’s lobbying efforts resulted in a governmental channel devoted to multicultural programming, and the Workshop Declaration of 1981. The declaration gave “nonprofit media-production units with at least four salaried members the right to be franchised and eligible for production and operating monies as nonprofit companies.” In 1981, the Black Arts Division of the Greater London Council was created, and provided money for “Black cultural activity, particularly those areas such as film and video that had previously been inaccessible due to high costs.” Film workshops like Black Audio formed shortly afterward, composed of academically and technically trained young people with educational backgrounds in
arts theory, communications theory, and sociology, which in British universities focused on theory and research methodology.

A key component of Black Audio was its emphasis on writing, as a means of talking about its members work and sharing their theories about race and film. Of its seven members, five wrote and published extensively in the areas of “formulation of theories, propositions, statements, positions, hypotheses, interventions, speculations, dialogues, debates and conversations.” In addition, their written discourse opened avenues to form alliances with other avant-garde groups, both nationally and internationally, such as in the U. S., Britain, West Africa, Canada, and India. They disseminated their work through a variety of creative methods, such as exhibitions, forums, screenings, conferences and symposiums, as well as publication in various anthologies, journals, and magazines.

Black Audio’s primary focus though was on filmmaking, and “their insistence on shifting the terms of avant-garde film theory and practice to include an ongoing engagement with the politics of race set them apart from long-standing traditions of documentary realism in British and Back film cultures.” Although Black Audio received coveted national and international awards for their films, they also experienced harsh criticism for their innovative techniques that radically departed from traditional filmic strategies considered appropriate for Blacks. Films like *Handsworth Songs*, which recounted the Brixton riots of 1981 through the interweaving of “archival footage with reportage, interior monologue, and evocative music to create a gracefully orchestrated panopoly of signs and sounds that evoke Black British experiences,” received bad reviews from the mainstream and black press. Salman Rushdie’s review in
The Guardian offers an example of an analysis that failed to address the film, instead he focused on the filmmakers’ authentic voice and image manipulation.63 In this respect, Black Audio’s experience with critics and the press was similar to Basquiat’s. The work they each created at times faced strong opposition from various sources because it defied convention. Too often, the criticism did not address the work, but were personal attacks on the individuals who created it. Their work was dismissed and invalidated for not meeting preconceived expectations and ideas about black authenticity.64 As a result, the unique points of view expressed by artists with roots in the African Diaspora, or those from other non-Western regions, were continually limited and marginalized.

V. Black Audio Film Collective versus Basquiat

The main difference between Basquiat and Black Audio was that the former was represented by the critical discourse that surrounded him, whereas the latter represented themselves in films and writing that was theoretically informed and socially aware. As a result, Basquiat became an empty figurehead. He was the embodiment of the pastiche of the 80s for Artforum, and Sischy embraced him wholeheartedly. Basquiat was used by Artforum to suggest the illusion of difference without difference actually being present. Basquiat was considered exotic because he was of mixed ethnicity with brown skin.Accentuating that exoticism were his locks, or dreadlocks (the derogatory European term) that derived from a traditional religion in Jamaica. He was also young and attractive, key factors in promoting his image. Later, his association with Warhol would make him even more attractive in the marketplace. Cathleen McGuigan in the New York
*Times Magazine* wrote, “As the elder statesman of the avant-garde, Warhol stamps the newcomer Basquiat with approval. In social circles and through his magazine *Interview*, he has given Basquiat a good deal of exposure.”65 However, the benefits did not only flow one way. Warhol’s celebrity was also heightened by his connection to the latest, hot art star.

Basquiat’s lack of formal training as an artist was treated as an asset. He was an outsider with personal experience with the street. He challenged established rules with a style that embraced the look of the primitive, untrained artist. He was as comfortable painting crude drawings interspersed with hand lettered block letters on a concrete wall as on a gallery canvas. Yet, he managed to interject cultural, historical, and political references in his work. His ironic wordplay of crossed out words and letters, backward letters, and interaction between image and text was his means of presenting messages about race, inequities, and recasting past wrongs.

Unlike Black Audio, Basquiat did not write or even like to talk much about his work. He left no written documentation of his art practice or theory that influenced his work, which made his art vulnerable to speculation and interpretation by others. Given the lack of critical analysis of his work during his life and career, such interpretation is more personal observation than objective. Often critics express more about their preconceived perceptions of Basquiat than about his work.

*Henry Geldzahler:* Is there anger in your work now?
*Jean-Michel Basquiat:* It’s about 80 percent anger.

*Henry Geldzahler:* But’s there’s also humor,
*Jean-Michel Basquiat:* People laugh when you fall on your ass. What’s humor?66
Marc Miller: Of course you know a lot of the artists working today, coming from the graffiti side. You must know…

Jean-Michel Basquiat: All those people?

Marc Miller: Yeah, those people.

Jean-Michel Basquiat: Yeah, I know some of them, and some from the academic side too.⁶⁷

Too often his artistic influences were seen strictly in light of the Western art historical canon, with little regard for African American, African, or Caribbean art traditions. The depth and multiple messages within Basquiat’s work were often misread, overlooked, or ignored by art critics and historians. Their lack of knowledge and experience with African, black American, or street culture led them to miss the broad ranging messages he presented.

Ricard was first to draw an imaginary line from Basquiat backward to Twombly and Dubuffet. Other writers followed Ricard’s lead, such as Foster, McGuigan, Marshall, Geldzahler, Arthur C. Danto, Lisa Liebmann, and Demonsthenes Davvetas.⁶⁸ As a result, much of his meaning was unrecognized by scholars and critics who viewed Basquiat’s work solely through the lens of western artistic forefathers. More importantly, they failed to see that his work was shaped by multiple histories such as African, African American, American, Puerto Rican, Haitian, street culture, spirituality, middle class, and young black male culture.

During his short career, Basquiat achieved an unprecedented level of success, yet for many in the art market his mixed heritage simply made him a 20th century exotic. The art writing was deceptive concerning Basquiat, with art journalists competing for
titillating details about his personal life, and academics denouncing him while simultaneously using him to further their individual agendas. The 1980s were a period of overwhelming growth, excess, and diversity, particularly in art. Basquiat’s life and career appeared tailored for the time.
“The ’80s were many things: They were a moment of development for feminism, of photography escaping its ghetto, of figurative painting and sculpture vitally expressing all sorts of identities. As for commerce, one reason new galleries were starting was that new art was starting. Artforum was no longer a place where only one kind of art was acceptable as avant-garde. We weren’t championing only one group of artists or writers. What we were championing was debate, the idea of different kinds of art and of different kinds of critical writing. Artforum wasn’t a kind of comfortable academia; it was a place for people with something to say.”

Ingrid Sischy

In Sischy’s view of the art world in the 80s, various kinds of art—from figurative painting to postmodern photography—was shown in the galleries. In the ‘60s and ‘70s, art was concerned with institutional critique, questioning the nature of art, and exploring various anti-establishment paths through the avenues of conceptualism and performance. By the 1980s, there was a return to figurative painting, as well as the acceptance of mediated, postmodern photography. Artist began addressing specific cultural issues and ideas on a variety of topics, such as: sexuality, gender, race, politics, and social activism.

The Guerrilla Girls, an activist group of women art world insiders who donned guerilla masks to maintain their anonymity, began a campaign of posters, magazine ads, and protests to highlight “the absence of women and artists of color in museums, commercial galleries, and criticism.”

With the emergence of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS, organizations like Gran Fury and Act-Up, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, emerged from the gay community. They initiated projects such as Gran Fury’s *Let the Record Show*, an installation that included a scrolling LED timeline showing the escalating number of deaths from AIDS, and Reagan’s conservative governmental agenda that refused to acknowledge the disease, or intervene in the health
In 1988, Howardena Pindell, an African American artist, published “Art (World) & Racism: Testimony, Documentation and Statistics.” Pindell, who also worked as an Associate Curator at a major New York museum for twelve years, documented her study of the omission of artists of color in publicly and privately funded exhibitions, public institutions, galleries, art magazines, etc.

Alison Pearlman identifies this diversity within art as eclecticism, but confines her analysis to aspects which mirrored the commodity producing apparatus of the marketplace, such as fashion, interior design, celebrity, media, and popular movies. Just as consumers were offered an almost inexhaustible range of product choices, artists and art became just as highly specialized. Immersed in an array of pop culture and art historical visual images, artists could not help but be influenced by what they saw and experienced. Artists such as Basquiat, Haring, and Kenny Scharf, who emerged from the economically depressed Lower East Side integrated elements of early hip hop, graffiti, and underground music, film, and art into their work. As these artists became more successful and well known, they moved to more prestigious galleries in SoHo. As a result, these galleries, along with the rest of the art market, adjusted their offerings toward objects, such as paintings, created by artists, such as Schnabel, David Salle, Basquiat, and Haring. In addition to their commodity value, paintings also satisfied a more subtle agenda. Craig Owens linked the reemergence of painting to the country’s new conservatism that arrived in the politics of Ronald Reagan. He believed the “return to the tangible—and, what is more important, marketable—object’ must be seen as part of a ‘widespread backlash against the ‘60s counterculture,’” and non-object oriented art such as Conceptualism.
The 1980s swept in a tidal wave of profits for the U.S. economy. Astounding economic growth resulted in roof raising corporate profits, and good times for Wall Street corporations and individual investors. The latest crop of newly minted professionals, armed with prestigious degrees from respected graduate schools, earned high salaries and were eager to discover new ways to make their money grow. For many of them, the art market became synonymous with the stock market.

The art market was not immune from the effects of a culture pre-occupied with money and image. Art sellers recognized an untapped pool of dollars in this new brand of collector. In some cases, dealers and gallery owners began encouraging a short term investing mentality among new buyers, which resulted in a spike in contemporary art sales. A different breed of art buyer, these investors had interests unlike those of the traditional, art astute collector who purchased art to accentuate or expand an existing collection. This new collector was determined to build wealth through innovative means, such as art. The nearest art gallery became the trendiest investment firm, with dealers vying for the role of stockbroker. Much like a parking lot, art became a place to leave available money. On this lot though, investors literally watched their investments appreciate in value within a matter of weeks. A buyer could purchase a painting from a gallery for a few thousand dollars, and resell it within months for tens of thousands of dollars.

Recognizing the growth potential of this new audience, auction houses and gallery owners adjusted their selling strategies to nurture these collecting neophytes. With thousands rather than millions to spend and little art knowledge, auction houses and galleries designed programs and strategies to nurture these buyers. In addition, much of
the language used to discuss contemporary art and artists mimicked the political rhetoric of Reagan’s White House, by asserting “traditional values, such as individual creativity, accountability, [and] quality.”75 Along with offering art education vehicles, such as exhibition catalogs, lectures, and workshops, many adopted standard business tactics, such as mortgage style loans and bank financing packages, to provide opportunities for individuals at varying income levels to purchase art,76 specifically paintings that reflected the entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, ambition, and materialism77 of many of the new buyers. Graffiti artists, in particular, embodied this spirit, with their rags to riches rise in the art world.

The public auction was also instrumental in expanding the audience for contemporary art and publicizing specific artists. Museums and auction houses teamed up with art historians and critics, who provided documentation for featured works and about key artists in their exhibitions. This stamp of approval through scholarship helped validate specific works, and made them worthy of collecting. The information was then used to educate and interest new investors in specific types of art, and in particular artists. Lisa Koenigsberg explains, “Galleries and auction houses seek the benefits of what might be termed “the hype” that a publication and exhibition can provide and which often translates into increased profits for their operations. Scholarship also assists in locating works that might eventually come to the gallery or auction house for sale.”78 Many of the same historians and critics that worked for houses and galleries, also wrote articles for art magazines like Artforum, thus further adding credibility to their role as art authorities, and illustrating the cyclical, self-serving nature of the art market.
Veteran collectors in the late 1960s and early 1970s limited and even curtailed their purchases for several reasons. In addition to the uninviting, barren content of Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd and Frank Stella, there was a segment of artists that altogether subverted “the market by making deliberately uncollectible installations, performances, and Earthworks.” By the early 1980s, a debate about the death of painting was raging among scholars and theorists, many believing that the medium had no more to say. Thomas Lawson in “Last Exit: Painting,” however, shifted the argument to say that, “while there may be no point in continuing to make certain kinds of art, art as a mode of cultural discourse has not yet been rendered completely irrelevant.” Yet, it was contemporary painting that enticed collectors like Eugene and Barbara Schwartz to begin buying art again. Moreover, it was the “shift in the direction that art itself was taking” that appealed “to an art public that had been starved, baffled or bored for a decade.” Though they received lots of criticism for their commercial success and appropriation of art history and popular culture, it was contemporary painters like Schnabel, Salle, and Basquiat whose work reinvigorated the art market of the 1980s.

While Lawson lamented these painters’ “emphasis on additive collage, [that] sanctions an uncontrolled annexation of material,” such as Renaissance painting, cheap religious artifact, and ethnic spirituality, seasoned collectors found the work of contemporary painters refreshing after the dearth of figurative imagery in the ‘70s. Basquiat though was particularly appealing because he embodied both America and the exotic. His mixed racial heritage and style of work made him extremely attractive to both dealers and collectors because he was exotic, yet not foreign. His images, though perhaps unfamiliar to some collectors, were tied to the national lexicon rather than a foreign
culture. Americans, though fascinated by the exotic, dislike the inconvenience of having to learn another language or of needing to understand a different culture. Basquiat, then, represented exoticism without the discomfort. Though some of his work did address racism, his heavy use of coded messages failed to challenge viewers to examine their individual racism as Adrian Piper’s more direct calling cards did.

In addition, Basquiat captured the attention of a public becoming image obsessed. His heritage provided an exoticism that the typical African American male lacked. He was also young, attractive and cultivated an eccentric persona. Stories of his behavior fueled his art bad boy image, and only stroked the fire of interest in him. The dealers that represented him, used some of these stories to singling him out from the rest of the pack. Too often though, this simply encouraged a practice by the media and critics to emphasize his personal life over his work. During a video interview, Basquiat refused to respond on camera to questions about his characterization as an angry young artist, and complained of his tendency “to put his foot in his mouth” during interviews.⁸⁵

_Artforum_, along with the art market, was resurrected by contemporary painting. Sischy was attempting to break the magazine of its past cultural detachment, and engage it with a culture fascinated by image and product. Basquiat’s packaging of ethnicity, street background, and artistic style fit neatly with Sischy’s agenda of artistic, cultural, and racial eclecticism. In addition, contemporary painting was one of the few art territorial areas still open to the magazine. The _October_ editors had already commandeered photography as art as their domain. _Artforum_ then claimed contemporary painting for itself. In addition to championing Basquiat, Ricard wrote lengthy reviews of Schnabel in “Not About Julian Schnabel” (1981), and Scharf in “The Pledge of
Allegiance” (1982), while deArk threw strong support behind Clemente in “A Chameleon in a State of Grace” (1981).

During the 1980s, the conversation about art and its history shifted as the traditional practices of art, and art historical scholarship, were re-examined and redefined. Judy Chicago focused attention on the way women artists had been left out and erased from art history through *The Dinner Party*. Interestingly, although “the most important painters to emerge in the states at the end of the seventies were women,”86 with the resurgence of painting in the 80s came the message “that painting [was] once again ‘man’s work.’”87 Women were once again excluded from major exhibitions and galleries.

In contrast, gender difference was a major topic of study during the decade. In 1984, Jane Weinstock and Kate Linker curated the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*. The show was less about women, than “the gendered system of looking and the implication of the art object and its viewer within the scene.”88 Several British artists such as Mary Kelly, Yve Lomax, and Marie Yates, along with American artists like Jennie Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Sherrie Levine were included, as well as four men since the examination of constructions of gender and sexuality also affected men. Owens in “The Discourse of Others: On Feminism and Postmodernism” performed a critical rereading from a feminist perspective of “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art” and “Allegorical Impulse.” Also, Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis in “Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making” examined past forms of women’s artistic production, and advocated for an evaluation of “how ‘femininity’ itself is a social construct with a particular form of representation under patriarchy.”89
The diversity of work and writing within the feminist art movement demonstrated that there was no single female artistic or critical voice. This was also the case with contemporary art, where the conversation about art also was changing. The work of late ‘70s artists Susan Rothenberg, Neil Jenney, and Jonathan Borofsky, who were first to reintroduced the figure in painting, differed from Schnabel, Salle, Basquiat, and their contemporaries. Although the style of their worked differed, sometimes markedly, each purported to challenge traditional thinking about art making, and what constituted art. Lawson, though speaking specifically of Salle’s work could have been addressing much of Neoexpressionist work, when he asserted “these juxtapositions prime us to understand the work metaphorically, but in the end the metaphors refuse to jell.”

The subway train took center stage in New York during this decade. It was a people mover, a mobile canvas, an emblem of the city, with Artforum even featuring a train and subway token on the cover of its 1981 issue that introduced Basquiat and Haring to its audience (Figure 9). The trains were moveable billboards showcasing the images and commentary of a young subculture of graffiti artists. They used the trains to exhibit their work, and also declare their individuality and existence to the city as a whole. City officials declared war on the creators of what many considered moving public eyesores. However, for the artists living in economically neglected and forgotten neighborhoods, such as the Lower East Side, of one of American’s most prominent cities, graffiti tagging provided a visible means of expression for their bold and unique voices or tags.

Within the art world graffiti represented rebellion, and with its co-option it became the constructed voice of the street. The work of graffiti artists was at once
transgressive and expressive. The graffiti artists that were successful in new Lower East Side galleries were quickly gobbled up by more prestigious SoHo galleries. As a result, street culture and graffiti were quickly appropriated, and became simply the latest, hot trend for buyers, galleries, and dealers. With the transfer of graffiti from trains to canvas to gallery wall, dealers were able to satisfy the growing demand for marketable, and profitable, art objects such as paintings.

Although a number of graffiti artists, such as Rammellzee and Fab 5 Freddie, moved from the trains to the gallery, Basquiat, and to a lesser degree Haring, achieved the greatest visibility and success. They were considered representatives of this street subculture, yet, neither ever actually painted trains.

The false construction of Basquiat as a true graffiti voice of the street, began with the art press and was perpetuated throughout the art marketplace. Basquiat was ambivalent about his relationship with graffiti, even though it was his SAMO tag that brought him to Deitch’s attention, who recalled, “Whenever you went to an art opening or a hot new club, SAMO had been there first.”91 In interviews, Basquiat distanced himself from graffiti.92 Yet, he confounded the art market with a show at the Fun Gallery, the premiere graffiti art gallery of the East Village, after his inaugural splash in the art world. Diego Cortez, who acted as his first agent, recognized the difference early on even when he included Basquiat in his New York/New Wave show that primarily featured graffiti artists. Cortez remembered that though he, like the other artists in the show had grown up on comic books and cartoons, “Basquiat’s paintings embodied more formal ties to the history of art.”93
The legacy of the 80s had lasting effects not only on the art market, but also on art-making. Basquiat and his contemporaries’ practice of appropriating, discarding, and combining references provided a model for later artists to follow. Artist Matthew Ritchie observed, “American artists of the ‘80s had disconnected themselves from the entire structure and burden of art history. They embraced and as quickly rejected anything that took their fancy. The ambition and greed of this scorched-earth approach ended up being totally liberating. When the smoke cleared, anything was possible, and with that freedom came the redefinitions of context, responsibility, and practice.”

The 80s, though a period of great excess was also a time of incredible growth that reshaped and reinvented culture, the marketplace, and art.
AN 80S STYLE PRIMITIVISM

“Part of the problem has to do with the question of whether Black people should be involved in visual arts, in creating aesthetically challenging visual work. The assumption when we foreground avant-garde technique is either that we don’t know anything else, and have stumbled across it by accident, or that we are imitating other forms.”

Coco Fusco

I. Primitivism in 20th Century Art

Few of the theorists or scholars working during the 1980s would describe Artforum as a place of intense critical writing or engaging thoughtful discussion. Yet, it was a lengthy debate between Artforum’s Thomas McEvilley and the Museum of Modern Art’s William Rubin that ignited a conversation about the relationship between Western art institutions and the non-Western Other. McEvilley, a professor of Art Criticism at Rice University, was also a longtime critic and writer for Artforum. Rubin, Director of MOMA’s Painting and Sculpture Department, was the curator of the 1984 exhibition ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern. The show presented the work of Modern artists alongside the art of non-Western artists. A two-volume, seven hundred page exhibition catalogue included nineteen essays written by 15 well-known scholars that were accompanied by 1,000 illustrations.

McEvilley’s review of the show titled, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief,” was published in Artforum in November 1984. The review resulted in a pointed exchange between McEvilley and Rubin in the form of letters published in the magazine. McEvilley, who had previously written about the use of primitivism by contemporary artists, asserted that the “exhibition shows Western egotism still as unbridled as in the
centuries of colonialism and souvenirism. The Museum pretends to confront the Third World while really co-opting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority. He goes on to declare that the true intent of the show was not primitivism, but a validation of Modernism.

The bulk of the review identifies several tactics the curators used to perpetuate the prevailing thinking concerning the superiority of Modernism and Western art. One method concerned the information that was provided about each art object. While detailed information was included for the Modernist works, such as artist name, date of work, and location, similar information was not provided for the art of the non-Western cultural groups, like African and Inuit, that were included. Labels for the non-Western art included no artist name or date, only a title and description of the object. The exhibition celebrated the Modern artists for their individual artistic achievements, while refusing to acknowledge non-Western artists as artists.

As expected, Rubin sharply challenged McEvilley’s review through a lengthy Letter to the Editor. The debate lasted several months, and was an unexpected benefit to both McEvilley and Artforum. McEvilley was able to provide an in-depth discussion of his views on race and primitivism to a larger audience. As an educator, the magazine became another classroom for him, and the Artforum readership, an international class of students.

Also, through the debate Sischy was able to address the issue of race within the art market from a safe distance that would not alienate Artforum advertisers or its core readership. Recognizing the importance of the discussion, she shrewdly allowed it to unfold through the magazine, yet confined it to the “Letters to the Editor” section. She
allowed space for the debate to occur, while firmly maintaining the magazine’s focus on its larger agenda, broadening the conversation about art. Moreover, this was a safe way to discuss racism. The primitivism debate dealt with African art and Modernist art, rather than the more problematic colonization of an African American painter such as Basquiat.

Even as *Artforum* attempted to present itself as a forerunner in the discussion of art world racism, it neglected to address the ways other areas of the art market perpetuated the same Western art imperialism. Reviews in magazines, such as *Artforum*, *Flash Art*, and *ArtNews*, exhibition catalogs, and gallery brochures were written from this perspective. The way dealers, galleries, auction houses, and museums described and categorized art objects promoted Western art dominance. Moreover, since Western scholars created the documentation and scholarship for auction, museum, and gallery catalogs, the art market had several means of perpetuating such thinking in the next generation of collectors, artists, and scholars.

The major reason *Artforum* was hesitant to explicitly confront art world racism had more to do with the bottom line than with Western art views. As a publication dependent on advertising dollars for its survival, Sischy could not afford to alienate the galleries, museums, and auction houses that regularly purchased ads in the magazine. During the 1980s only the work of a single black artist, Robert Colescott, was featured on the magazine’s cover. The prestigious galleries and auction house that purchased expensive ads for upcoming exhibitions for the most part did not represent black artists. Since the artists primarily featured in *Artforum* were represented by the galleries that purchased advertising, few African American artists appeared in the magazine.
II. Third Text

Other journals were not as reluctant as *Artforum* to directly challenge art racism, and address the issues faced by artists of color within the art world. Here, it is useful to contrast the approach of *Third Text*, a British journal created by Rasheed Araeen in 1987 to examine the continuing legacy of Western imperialism within the visual arts. The editorial from the first issue discusses the magazine’s purpose.

“*Third Text* offers a platform, not only for the contestation of the racism and sexism inherent in the dominant discourse on art and culture, but also of those essentialist assumptions which define ‘black art’ as simply the work of artists who happen to be black analogous to the notion of feminist art as any work produced by a woman artist. *Third Text* represents a historical shift away from the centre of the dominant culture to its periphery in order to consider the centre critically. This does not imply a fixed distance. The movement can be repeated or reversed as long as a critical relationship with the dominant discourses is maintained. In view of the crisis of Western corporate culture, it appears necessary to develop a constructive international communication beyond the intellectual paralysis which has characterized much of Western critical discourse in the ‘80s.”

Unlike *Artforum* which was tied to the marketplace, *Third Text* was supported by government funding, which allowed more autonomy in subject matter. *Third Text* developed from *Black Phoenix* which published only three issues in the late 70s because it lacked similar funding support.

*Third Text* focused on aspects of race and colonialism that restricted the artistic freedom and potential of black artists, and limited their full participation in the mainstream artistic conversation. No longer willing to allow Western art writers and...
scholars to speak for them, *Third Text* provided a site for non-Western artists and scholars to speak for themselves. The opportunity and freedom to speak from the perspective of ‘Other’ permitted these writers to become visible to and within the art world, and also added a different timbre to the discussion of race. This is evident in Araeen’s review of the ‘Primitivism’ show:

I came out of the Museum with a mixed feeling of exhilaration and also with some anger. It seems that the purpose underlying all this scholarship was to perpetuate further the idea of Primitivism, to remind the so-called ‘primitives’ how the West admires (and protects and gives value to) their cultures and at the same time tell the modern artist, who could only be the Western artist, the importance of this in his continuing historical role as an advancing force.  

Later he writes:

It is not my aim to denounce this exhibition as merely an imperialist enterprise or turn my back on it in favor of more contingent social and political issues in the Third World. We have a responsibility to look at such cultural manifestations critically, more importantly, with a perspective which is not Eurocentric, and at the same time it should be done within the framework of contemporary practices: art, art criticism and art historical scholarship. The point is that those who have been seen as ‘primitives’ are in fact part of today’s society, and to ignore their actual position in this respect is to indulge again in imperialist fantasies.

III. Magiciens de la Terre

In 1989 *Magiciens de la terre* was presented at the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris as a contrast to MOMA’s “Primitivism” show. Jean-Hubert Martin, Director of the Pompidou, also served as the Commissioner of “Magiciens.” The Spring 1989 issue of *Third Text* was comprised of all but one of the articles from the exhibition catalog, *Les Cahiers du Musée d’Art Moderne*. The purpose of reprinting the articles was to make the information available in English, and to further the ongoing discussion surrounding the
exhibition. Martin outlined these goals for the exhibition: (1) to present “the first world-wide exhibition of contemporary art; (2) to question the false distinction between Western cultures and other cultures; and (3) to create a dialogue between Western cultures and other cultures.”

*Third Text* did not agree with the viewpoint of many of the catalog essays, and provided its own critical assessment of the exhibition. Unlike the “Primitivism” show, *Magiciens* included living artists from other cultures, not just their objects. The show was also equally divided between non-Western and Western artists as a means of placing the world on equal footing. Araeen questioned this premise asking, “What is the significance of this departure? Does the mere inclusion of non-Western artists in the exhibition question the basic assumptions on which past similar exhibitions were based? Are these not the same assumptions that privilege the Western artist (modern, white and male) and exclude the non-Western artist (the ‘other’) from the domain of modern art?” He felt the show failed to address these questions.

While the artistic achievements of immigrants from European countries were celebrated as groundbreaking and innovative, art created by artists designated as “Other” was branded primitive, authentic, and unfettered by intellect or conscious reasoning. In a review by Deitch and an article by Allen Schwartzman, words such as *savage, exotic virility,* and *primitive unleashed* were used to describe Basquiat’s work. Such descriptors were used by various elements of the art market, such as critics, the press, dealers, and collectors, as a code to support Western art dominance, while marginalizing work created outside of the western world. Specific tactics were used to support Western superiority, such as focusing on the details of a non-Western artist’s personal life rather than
critiquing his or her work; placing a non-Western artist’s work outside the art historical frame of reference; disconnecting and discounting the significant contribution and achievements of other cultural art practices; and usurping an artist’s creative vision by reserving creative originality solely for Western artists.

IV. 80s Style Primitive

In the West, Basquiat and his work were subjected to all of the above tactics. Though the art world purported to be objective and impartial, his work was too often labeled *primitive, crude, and innate* for that to be true. These coded labels invited critics and scholars to dismiss, discount, or ignore his work. This must have been a bitter pill for Basquiat given his own heavy use of coded messages that masked and obscured his true meaning. For many art historians, Basquiat was simply an 80s style primitive of their Western art imperialism.

*Basquiat: An Interview* captures a typical encounter with an art critic. The video opens with a text overlay on a black background that explains the interview was filmed in Basquiat’s studio at 3 p.m., just after he awoke for the day. Marc H. Miller, Ph.D., art historian, and curator conducted the interview, which begins with Basquiat appearing subdued, but intelligent, thoughtful, and well read. Miller often repeats the same questions when Basquiat’s responses do not fit the image of the uniformed, untamed genius that he attempts to construct. He appears surprised by Basquiat’s quick wit, knowledge of art history, and the work of other artists.

Miller: “You’re seen as some sort of primal expressionist.
Basquiat: “Like an ape? Like a primate?”
Miller: “Well, I don’t know.”
Basquiat: “You said it.”

Later in the interview, Miller asks about the frequent appearance of bones in Basquiat’s work.

Miller: So you were just thumbing through some books and hit upon these pictures of skeletons?
Basquiat: No, I wanted to do some anatomy stuff. Then I went out and bought some books about anatomy.
Miller: Then you started imitating…
Basquiat: Well, not really imitating…I used them as source material.
Miller: So why’d you want to do anatomy stuff?
Basquiat: Because I felt like it.

Throughout the interview, Miller attempts to box Basquiat into narrow artistic confines with verbal slights and condescension. After his answers are repeatedly challenged and dismissed, Basquiat slips into Miller’s characterization of him. He offers nonsensical answers to the inane questions. At one point he even responds through a mouthful of food. With a quick glance at the camera, Miller appears irritated when Basquiat embodies the characterization Miller instigated.

Art critics and journalists have had a long practice of using the written text to support and maintain artistic Western dominance, and subordinate the non-Western “Other.” Artforum through its young, innovative editor embarked on a program during the 80s to expand the conversation about art. A twenty-something painter, by some hailed
a genius and others an opportunist, embodied that expansion through his mixed race, crown of locks, and distinctive style. The decade illustrated the power of the written text to influence careers, interpret art, and shape images. *Third Text* and *Black Audio* recognized the primacy of the text, and refused to allow their voices, images, or work to be shaped in ways that conformed to Western imperialist manipulation. They used the power of the text to discuss their own work, offer their own perspectives of living and working as artists with differing perspectives in the West, establish their own agenda on race and art, and situate their work in the context of critical and cinema theory. Basquiat, who did not write about or discuss his work much, left the job of interpreting his art to others and fell victim to interpretation by others. With his lack of understanding of the primacy of the text and sudden death at twenty-seven, he became a perfect candidate for myth creation.
THE MYTHIC PRINCE

“I have made my liaisons in print and as these artists’ fortunes rise and fall so do mine. I will be forever in league with them, and if they slip I’ll look like hell. I have championed them. I’ve pledged allegiance. I’ve signed my name, and there my reputation sits.”

Rene Ricard

In 1980, Ricard anointed Basquiat as a newly discovered, mythical, exotic crowned prince. The image shadowed him for the rest of his career, and even after his death. Though famous throughout the international art world, he was virtually unknown by the general public. That changed with the movie *Basquiat*. Written and directed by artist Julian Schnabel, the film is based loosely on Basquiat’s life. Although many scenes are lifted directly from the events of his life, they are cut then spliced together to create a fictional Basquiat. The film then is simply another of Schnabel’s paintings where he juxtaposes unrelated ideas to create a different meaning. Elements of the actual story were melded together to create a new Basquiat that looks much different from the original.

The movie’s all-star cast included David Bowie as Andy Warhol, Benicio Del Toro as Bennie, a character resembling Basquiat’s SAMO partner Al Diaz, and Gary Oldman as Albert Milo, a Schnabel-like character. Parker Posey played well-known New York art dealer Mary Boone, who represented Basquiat after his split from his first dealer Annina Nosei. Dennis Hopper was Bruno Bischofberger, a Swiss dealer that represented Basquiat and Warhol in the international art market.

Most important to the film is Jeffrey Wright, who starred as Basquiat. His performance crystallized for audiences an image of Basquiat as a brilliantly creative, ill-
fated, drug addicted artist enfant with little sense of the real world or knowledge of people. The movie was instrumental in creating a visual representation of a mythic Basquiat that had been constructed by writers, dealers, and the press during his lifetime, and that remains prevalent even now.

The movie, which premiered in 1996, received critical acclaim. Yet audiences with little previous knowledge of Basquiat left theaters believing that they had seen a docudrama, rather than fiction. As one of his contemporaries, Schnabel’s acquaintance with Basquiat lent credence to this belief. Few knew of the movies’ high fiction quotient, or that Basquiat’s estate refused to work with the filmmaker or allow him use of the artist’s original work for the movie. All of the paintings in the film, including the pieces attributed to Basquiat,108 Schnabel painted. As a result, Schnabel’s fiction successfully overwrote Basquiat’s life, and his art as well.

During their first meeting on screen, Ricard tells Basquiat he is going to make him a star, since “when I speak nobody believes me, but when I write it down everybody knows it to be true.”109 Schnabel had good reason for using this line. He knew the truth of such a statement. Like Basquiat, he had experienced the power of Ricard's words first hand. In 1981, Ricard had written an Artforum review of his work, “Not Julian Schnabel," that helped launch his career, just as he had with Basquiat.

Much of the film’s dialogue is composed of text from Ricard’s initial review “The Radiant Child” in Artforum, and from the video Basquiat: An Interview. Within the first few minutes of the film, Basquiat is connected to the art world’s greatest shame, an unrecognized genius, through Ricard’s words. “The idea of the unrecognized genius slaving away in a garret is a deliciously foolish one. We must credit the life of Vincent
Van Gogh for really sending that myth into orbit. We’re so ashamed of his life that the rest of art history will be retribution for van Gogh’s neglect.” Van Gogh not only went unrecognized during his lifetime, but was also sorely misunderstood. His story ended in tragedy, as did Basquiat’s. In the 20th century, the art genius was reframed in a new exterior, that of a young, black male—Basquiat.

Ricard’s words not only fueled Basquiat’s initial art market ascent, but also were the starting point for his myth. For the movie, Schnabel turned to the text—the site where it all began, at least that is what Schnabel and Ricard would have audiences believe. In Basquiat, it is Ricard’s text that takes precedence over Basquiat’s life, and commandeers it in the service of a new creation. Basquiat demonstrates the primacy of text, and its ability to lay the foundation for image and myth creation.

An early scene shows Ricard sitting on a park bench writing, while a voiceover quotes from “The Radiant Child.” Behind him Basquiat awakens and emerges from a box, his bed for the previous night, like an infant emerging from the womb. The scene attempts to illustrate that Ricard’s writing birthed Basquiat the artist. Ricard’s words, like God’s breath, spoke Basquiat, the larger than life persona, into being.

The Basquiat of Schnabel’s film is a simulacrum of the truth, a myth. Like any good work of fiction it is constructed through words that ignite the imagination and draw a picture. For Basquiat, the construction of him as a crowned prince began with Ricard’s words in Artforum, “The crown sits securely on the head of Jean-Michel’s repertory so that it is of no importance where he got it bought it stole it; it’s his.”

Even though he uses Ricard’s words and imagery of royalty, Schnabel painted Basquiat as both a 20th century prince and primitive. In a scene where he visits Milo at
his studio, Basquiat draws Milo’s daughter a portrait. The two exchange a special moment, showing that Basquiat, the manchild, more easily connects with children than with adults. Abruptly he leaves, and Milo finds him in the stairwell urinating. Here the gifted, yet uncouth native is served up for audiences as a talented, eccentric exotic. Basquiat’s story worked for Schnabel and audiences because his ethnicity linked him to lingering Western imperialist beliefs and fears about the Other as primitive, uncultured, and wild. Basquiat’s youthful exploits were often interpreted in ways that supported the myth of him as a genius wild child.

Much like the 19th century Other, Basquiat was portrayed as a passive figure, often idly sitting, smoking or snorting dope, and buffeted back and forth by other people’s opinions and whims. Toward the end of the film, he is shown dazed, disoriented, and isolated—a disheveled, incoherent figure shuffling down the sidewalk in dirty sabots, pajamas, and a bathrobe dancing behind him in the wind. Throughout the movie, he is the submissive brown-skinned Other, surrounded and manipulated by white, elite, and powerful Western figures, such as dealers, other artists, and the press, who are shown actively engaged in business and work.

The movie Basquiat can be contrasted with Downtown 81, a film where Basquiat plays a character similar to himself, but in the music business. This young musician is an active participant in his own life and destiny. He is shown working, striving, and creating. Moreover, he is engaged in his artistic community and neighborhood, a young man driving his own destiny. Although both movies show Basquiat in motion, the contrast between the two is striking. In Downtown 81, he is an artist self-assured, and in forward
motion, while in *Basquiat* his motion is like a leaf at the mercy of a cool, fall wind, aimlessly blown about by each gust and direction shift.

Although Basquiat's style was repeatedly linked to graffiti in the art press such as *Artforum*, *Flash Art*, and *Art in America*, and the general media, especially *The New York Times Magazine*, the movie erases any direct connection to graffiti art or New York's Lower East Side. In addition, his style is characterized as emanating from divine inspiration. Yet even as his artistic influences are ignored, the movie constructs him as simply another isolated, misunderstood artistic genius, albeit one who is black rather than white. Basquiat thus gains membership in a long line of male artists/geniuses who suffered and died young for the most part—Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Toulouse-Lautrec, Egon Schiele, Ernst Kirchner, Paul Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Jackson Pollock. By situating Basquiat within this discourse of sameness, his actual difference—becomes subsumed in a market driven discourse of male artistic genius that has little in common with the actual circumstances of his life.

Basquiat was raised and educated in the ethnically diverse middle class of Brooklyn. Though not a university trained artist, Basquiat was not without education or intellect. He took art classes until leaving school as a teenager, and admitted to frequently reading books on art and art history.\(^{114}\)

As a New Yorker, he had access and opportunity to visit the city’s numerous museums. As a child, his mother took him to the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where he saw the work of Western art masters. Schnabel attributes the frequent appearance of crowns in Basquiat’s work to one of these museum visits. In the movie, mother and son stand in front of Picasso’s *Guernica*. Overwhelmed with emotion, she begins to cry, and turns to
see a brilliant crown on her son’s head. Basquiat’s father refuted this notion, “I have tons of his childhood notebooks with drawings, paintings. No crown.” Apparently, the crown entered Basquiat’s artistic vocabulary prior to the Times Square Show, but not as early as his childhood museum visits, since one of the images featured in “The Radiant Child” showed a black figure dressed in red and blue wearing a crown.

Basquiat’s friendship with Warhol further heightened the value of his image in the media and to moviegoers. The association is presented as a one sided affair, with Warhol the wise elder, and Basquiat the attentive pupil. In reality, Warhol benefited from the pairing as much as Basquiat. The young artist reinvigorated Warhol’s star quotient. Jose Esteban Munoz writes, “Few would deny that making appearances with hot young world superstars upped Andy’s glamour rating.” Also, after finishing their collaborative painting series, Warhol began painting by hand which signaled a new developmental phase in his work.

For the art market, Basquiat’s image was a more valuable commodity than the actual artist. Ricard, other writers, the media, and Basquiat’s dealers were adept at manipulating his image to their advantage. His image survived his death and has been reshaped in ways that continued to support the commodity producing machine such as the film about Basquiat, retrospectives of his work, and glossy catalogues. As a society Ricard observed, “We're no longer collecting art; we are buying individuals.” These individuals though must have an image. Schnabel painted Basquiat as an overly sensitive, tragic figure who was too weak to endure the harsh reality of the world, yet he achieved phenomenal success as an artist in less than a decade. His death and a movie brought him mythic status. Moreover, his story offered a cautionary tale with all the right Hollywood
ingredients—a tragic, misunderstood, yet brilliant hero, drugs, women, money, sex, and death.

As Ricard's opening quote indicates, he along with many others staked their reputations and livelihoods on Basquiat. Although the movie offers an insiders view of the art world, it does nothing to dispel the fiction surrounding him. Writing formed the foundation of the Basquiat myth. Yet, it was that writing paired with cinematic images that left the lasting impression of Basquiat. Through the movie, the public connected with him. In reality, they only came to know a projected image on the screen. Schnabel's movie shifts between retelling Basquiat’s life narrative and creating a new one. In the end, the latter wins, with the film overwriting Basquiat's story to tell Schnabel's.

In 1982 Basquiat agreed to have his portrait made by famed photographer James VanDerZee, who was best known for photographs that documented urban Black New York culture and society between the two world wars. VanDerZee’s photographs showed Harlem’s elite and ordinary folk engaged in business, leisure, religious, cultural, educational, community, family, and social activities. The breath and depth of the black community pictured in VanDerZee’s images “bore witness to the men, women, and children who had, with a quiet dignity and a profound ordinariness, populated this community in the twenties, thirties, and forties.” The portraits allowed individuals, and the collective community, to exert its power in challenging and reshaping the image of African Americans. In addition, his photographs countered the negative images that had been constructed by whites with self-affirming and self-determined positive ones.

By posing for VanDerZee, Basquiat attempted to exert control over his image, and offset the unflattering and inaccurate portrayals of himself. Also, he was placing
himself within the strong lineage of African American artistic and cultural figures that had been captured by VanDerZee’s camera, starting with religious leader Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., entertainers Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and Florence Mills, athletes Jack Johnson and the New York Black Yankees, and political leader Marcus Garvey. This line continued into the 20th century with personalities such as Bill Cosby, Muhammed Ali, Eubie Blake, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, Lou Rawls, and Romare Bearden. As photographer and critic Dawoud Bey explained, “In coming to VanDerZee’s studio, his clients were hoping to have their best face preserved for posterity.” Through a variety of props, furniture, specially created backdrops, and tailored garments, VanDerZee helped them create the images of themselves that they wanted to project. This collaboration between photographer and client created a unique style of portrait that attempted to capture the essence of the person before the camera.

In the VanDerZee portrait (Figure 10), the young painter is seated in a throne like high back chair. He sits a bit uncomfortably with his right side forward and left back, ready to spring out of the chair at any moment. With his shoulders hunched slightly forward and hands clasped before his chest, he stares directly at the camera, serious and pensive. He wears a dress shirt, tie, and jacket, with paint splatter pants, the attire of rough around the edges working gentleman. Although perhaps hesitant about exposing too much of himself to the photographer’s sharp eye and camera, the two created an image of restrained energy that was not captured again in a portrait. Basquiat thought highly of the photographer, and in that same year created a portrait of VanDerZee (Figure 11).
As his success grew, Basquiat’s image, along with his art, became a commodity that was bought and sold in the market. Yet, he was not immune from cashing in on his image. Also in 1982, Basquiat re-created an image similar to his VanDerZee portrait in Zurich (Figure 12). In this photograph, Basquiat is transformed into an urbane sophisticate. His upswept locks, twisted to form a crown, appear more pronounced against the backdrop of one of his paintings. Bischofberger stands in the background on the phone presumably conducting business while Basquiat, stylishly in a tailored designer jacket, tie, pocket square, and dark sunglasses, stands out front, self-assured, solemn, and aloof. The lack of extraneous pictorial details isolates the focus of the portrait to the artist, his work, and his dealer, the white man behind the scenes. The paint stained trousers of the working artist in the earlier portrait are hidden from view. In this way his previous image was upgraded from middle to upper-class, but also standardized to reflect a typical young, well-to-do African American male professional of the 80s. Viewers with no previous knowledge of Basquiat’s profession were offered few clues about the identity of this mysterious African American male. Others more familiar with the artist found a tightly controlled projection that concealed the reality the lay behind the image.

Although the 1982 portraits may have been Basquiat’s attempt to counter the image that had been constructed of him, his image was again co-opted when in February 1985 his photograph appeared on the cover of The New York Times Magazine (Figure 13). The previous image of the young sophisticate reverted to a cool, colorful, New Jack juvenile who had unexpectedly hit the big time. Once again he became the paint splattered, street primitive dressed up in a suit. An overturned chair, bare feet, a
paintbrush, and a background detail of a creature from one of his paintings attempted
to situate him as the representative, untamed Other of the white art world. In addition, the
subtitle printed below the headline, “The Marketing of An American Artist,” was an
effort to align his success with marketing prowess rather than artistic talent.

In a portrait taken the year he died (Figure 14), Basquiat gazes directly into the
camera with a hard, unflinching stare that conveys a remoteness that is closed to the
outside world. His once bright, unblemished face is dotted with the effects of long term
drug use, and his eyes are lackluster, weary, and wary. His art is not pictured, illustrating
an artist completely divorced from his work. His posture gives away little, and he looks
older than his twenty-seven years. Gone are the paintbrushes and paint splattered pants in
his earlier paintings, and replaced with a worn copy of Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans*
that he clutches to his chest like a Bible. He replaces his primary relationship with visual
art with the written word, and in this image the text has superceded his art.

Basquiat’s career is bracketed by the *Artforum* article “The Radiant Child” and
the film *Basquiat*. Each owes its success to the written text. Vasari’s *Lives* established a
practice that has continued for centuries, the creation of the art genius through words.
Basquiat’s career illustrates how those words can be used to construct an image, shape a
career, and establish a myth. As a young, African American of Haitian and Puerto Rican
descent, Basquiat had a rich racial and spiritual heritage to draw on. Yet, as Dick Hebdige
points out, “the racist implications of the conditions attached to Basquiat’s adoption by
the art world were painfully apparent. 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.”121 Yet, he never stopped working, and even as writers
and critics attempted to pigeonhole him into narrow categories and a limited artistic lineage, he continued to broaden, expand, and integration his artistic repertoire. As scholars continue re-examining the art writing of the 80s, analyzing Basquiat’s work, and adding more objective evaluations to the discussion of the artist, the breath of critical assessment will expand and diversify. As this happens perhaps the myth will recede and a truer picture of Basquiat will emerge.
ART MARKETPLACE

Figure 1: Diagram of art marketplace.
Figure 2: Cover, *Artforum* (June 1962).
Figure 3: Ingrid Sischy. Artforum, September 1993. Photograph by Bruce Weber.
Figure 4: Cover, *Artforum* (February 1980). Reprint of cover of *VVV*, Number 1, June 1942, by Max Ernst.
Figure 5: Cover, *Artforum* (February 1982). Issey Miyake Spring-Summer Collection. Photography by Eichiro Sakata.
Table 1: Basquiat in *Artforum*: December 1981-February 1988.

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<td>“Expressionist Painting Beyond Picasso” (13 artists group show) October-November, Galerie Beyeler Basel/Switzerland</td>
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<td>&quot;Chi Show&quot; group show of 14 artists, March 16-April 21, Massimo Audiello Gallery, NY</td>
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“Levitation” (1987)
Figure 6: “Quality Meats for the Public” (1982) Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, three panels: 84 x 54 inches.
Figure 7: “Ribs Ribs” (1982) Crayon on paper: 98 x 96 inches.
Figure 8: “Irony of the Negro Policeman” (1981) Acrylic and oil paintstick on wood: 72 x 48 inches.
Figure 9: Cover, Artforum (December 1981).
Figure 10: Portrait of Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1982. Photograph by James VanDerZee. © Donna Mussenden VanDerZee.
Figure 11: “VNDRZ” (1982), Acrylic and oilstick on canvas: 60 x 30 inches.
Figure 12: Jean-Michel Basquiat with Bruno Bischofberger at the Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich, 1982. Photograph by Beth Phillips.
Figure 14: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Paris 1988. Photograph by Jérome Schلومoff.
NOTES

5. Ibid., 114.
7. Ibid., 152.
11. Ibid., 3.
12. Ibid., 5.
13. Ibid., 11.
16. Ibid., 15.
22. Ibid., 26.
27. Ibid., 51.
28. Ibid., 259.
29. Ibid., 259.
30. Ibid., 51.
35. Taka Kawachi, ed., *King for a Decade* (Kyoto, Japan: Korinsha Press, 1997), 164-165.
38 Ibid., 50.
40 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 15.
46 Ibid., 3.
47 Ibid., 18.
49 Ibid., 91-94, 102-105.
52 Foster, *Recodings*, 49.
54 Pearlman, *Unpackaging Art*, 5.
55 Ibid., 5-6.
57 Ibid., 10.
58 Ibid., 11.
60 Fusco, *Young British and Black*, 8.
61 Ibid., 8.
62 Ibid., 8.
63 Ibid., 49.
64 Ibid., 58, n. 11.
67 Jean-Michel Basquiat, *An Interview*, DVD.

69 Frankel, “Salad Days,” 228.


71 Ibid.,” 85.


73 Pearlman. Unpackaging Art, 17.

74 Singerman, “Pictures and Positions,” 92-93.

75 Ibid., 94.


77 Singerman, “Pictures and Positions,” 94.

78 Koenigsberg, “Art as a Commodity?,” 29.


83 Ibid., 24.


85 Jean-Michel Basquiat, An Interview, DVD, directed by Paul Tschinkel.

86 Singerman, “Pictures and Positions,” 97.

87 Ibid., 97.

88 Ibid., 100.


91 Ibid., 26.


95 Fusco, Young British and Black, 51.


The term black in Britain refers to anyone whose ethnic origin is from outside of the West.


Ibid., 11.


Ibid., 11.


Ibid.

Ibid.


*Basquiat*, DVD, directed by Julian Schnabel.


*Basquiat*, DVD, directed by Julian Schnabel.


Schnabel may have been drawing a parallel here to Jackson Pollock, when he famously urinated in Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace. The scene was repeated in the movie Pollock, which depicted Pollock in much the same light as Basquiat.


*Basquiat*, DVD, directed by Julian Schnabel.


Ibid., 33.

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