

## INTRODUCTION

JORDANA MOORE SAGGESE

On the evening of May 18, 2017, the seventh-floor salesroom at Sotheby's New York headquarters was packed. Following two blockbuster days of auctions, where the world's wealthiest investors had dropped more than \$200 million on Impressionist and Modern Art sales, speculators had turned their attention to the fifty lots in the upcoming contemporary evening sale as a potential bellwether for the recovery of an art market that had seen declining value the two preceding years.<sup>1</sup> As noted by the cultural economist Clare McAndrew in her annual report on the global art market, published just two months before the May auction, the 2016 market had seen a significant decrease in global sales "due to a continued cooling of sales in certain sectors of the market." McAndrew found that in 2016 the US market, specifically, was 8 percent lower than in the ten previous years. "It has become harder to maintain growth," she noted, "particularly in a supply-limited market."<sup>2</sup> Despite this discouraging news, however, the excitement of buyers in the room that night was palpable.

Almost halfway through the proceedings, lot no. 24, an untitled painting of a skull by Jean-Michel Basquiat that had been unseen by the public for more than thirty years, came up to the auction stage. Despite the fact that Basquiat was the highest-grossing American artist at auction the previous year,<sup>3</sup> the starting bid of \$57 million elicited gasps from the audience, who then excitedly watched a bidding war between two unseen bidders, represented by Sotheby's employee Yuki Terasa and the art dealer Nicholas Maclean.<sup>4</sup> After ten minutes of back and forth, the bidding finally closed at \$110.5 million. Just as the raucous applause died down, the Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa, who had set a previous record with his purchase of a Basquiat painting for \$57.3 million the previous year, revealed himself as the winning bidder in an Instagram post.

The sale of *Untitled* (1982), for a price that surprised even the auction house, set several new records: for a work by an American artist, for a work by an African American artist, and as the first work created after 1980 to fetch over \$100 million. This historic moment solidified Basquiat's place in a pantheon of artists, which includes Francis Bacon, Pablo Picasso, and Basquiat's close friend and collaborator Andy Warhol.<sup>5</sup> In an interview for the *New York Times*, published the morning after the auction, the collector Larry Warsh characterized the record-breaking sale as "mind-blowing."<sup>6</sup> Art dealer Jeffrey Deitch proclaimed, "I remember astounding the art world back in [the] 1980s when I set an auction record for Basquiat at \$99,000 . . . I always thought he would be one day in the league of Picasso, Bacon and Van Gogh. The work has that iconic quality. His appeal is real."<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Jean-Michel Basquiat was nearly famous from the very start of his career. He entered the consciousness of the New York art world as a teenager. Collaborating with high school friends, Basquiat began to spray-paint aphorisms, slogans, and poetry along the walls and doorways of Lower Manhattan under the pseudonym SAMO©. SAMO (an abbreviation of “same old shit”) had begun as the main character of a comic strip Basquiat and his friend Al Diaz had created at the alternative high school City-as-School, but by 1978 it had evolved into a collaborative art project between Basquiat, Diaz, and another classmate, Shannon Dawson. The motives and the authors of the SAMO© texts were unknown to the larger public, and many residents of Lower Manhattan, where their work frequently appeared, openly questioned its origins. In December 1978 an article in the *Village Voice* propelled the mystery, identifying Diaz and Basquiat only by their first names and publishing a (miscaptioned) photo that obscured Basquiat’s face.<sup>8</sup> The initial confusion surrounding the identity of SAMO was complemented by the cryptic nature of the messages the young men painted. Elaborate poems and phrases, such as “SAMO© a pin drops like a pungent odor” exceeded the more common tags or images typically associated with graffiti. Many tags (such as “SAMO [. . .] as an alternative 2 playing art with the ‘radical chic’ sect on Daddy\$ funds”) seemed directed toward the increasingly consumerist culture of the 1980s, which saw the SoHo and Tribeca neighborhoods of Lower Manhattan suddenly transform industrial spaces into chic galleries and restaurants for an upscale clientele.

Basquiat’s beginnings as SAMO were more often than not later misconstrued by critics, who promoted false associations with street culture and graffiti, even calling Basquiat homeless or a runaway, despite his middle-class upbringing in a Brooklyn brownstone. In other words, the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat was misinterpreted from the start, and throughout his lifetime the artist struggled to break free of his alignment with stereotypes of the untrained, primitive artist that had been forced onto other African American painters in the twentieth century. For example, press surrounding the African American painter Palmer Hayden (1890–1973) similarly foregrounded his status as an “outsider,” emphasizing his work as a janitor in discussions of his artistic achievements, despite the fact that he had received his artistic training in Europe. A *New York Times* review of Hayden’s prizewinning work in the 1926 exhibition sponsored by the Harmon Foundation is typical: “For years, Palmer C. Hayden, a negro, has been cleaning houses and washing windows to make a living, and during his spare time has gone back to his room at 29 Greenwich Avenue to dabble in oil colors and paint coast and river scenes which appealed to him.”<sup>9</sup>

Nearly sixty years later, Basquiat received the same treatment. The very first line of a 1982 review published in *Artforum* claimed that Basquiat “comes, infamously by now, from a graffiti tradition (nom de spray: Samol).”<sup>10</sup> The critic Donald Kuspit described Basquiat’s early work as “an original primitivism, with a graffiti heritage.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout his career (and even after his death), the mythologies around Basquiat’s graffiti origins, his lack of artistic training, and his “primitiveness” have continued.

While it may be convenient to extrapolate this early SAMO work into reading Basquiat as a graffiti artist—perhaps because he used spray paint and markers—the content and the site-specificity of the SAMO© writings proves otherwise. It was no accident that those writings appeared most often on the walls outside the art galleries in these new neighborhoods; Basquiat and Diaz were writing specifically to an art audience.<sup>12</sup> As even Keith Haring recalled, “the need for labels and explanations [in the eighties] lumped artists into groups that were easy for the media. Thus, Jean-Michel got labeled a graffiti artist. The entire misrepresentation and manipulation of this hypothetical ‘group’ is a perfect example of the art world of the early eighties.”<sup>13</sup>

We might instead look at Basquiat’s language-based works as part of the SAMO collective, and indeed throughout his career, in relationship to the work of the artist Jenny Holzer, who already in the late 1970s was installing text-based works around New York City. For Holzer’s *Truisms* series (1977–79), for example, she created nearly three hundred statements—many based on common sayings and clichés—on posters that were wheat-pasted anonymously throughout Lower Manhattan. Holzer’s next project, titled *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82), comprised one hundred paragraphs printed on different-colored paper and installed in public spaces. As a frequent visitor to the Mudd Club and a member of the artist collective Colab (discussed below), Holzer certainly was in Basquiat’s orbit, and a further exploration of the relationship between the two artists’ works in the late 1970s is an opportunity for future scholarship.

Basquiat was never a graffiti artist. Period. Graffiti artists, many of whom Basquiat befriended through an association with Fab 5 Freddy, belonged to an entirely separate movement that included a tightly controlled network of hierarchies and apprenticeships. Also, in comparison to some of the images produced by graffiti artists, Basquiat’s own production at this time was more like public poetry; the prophecies, the criticisms, and other cryptic messages were unlike the graffiti artist’s “tag” (i.e., a stylized representation of one’s street name).<sup>14</sup> Basquiat himself explained the problems of linking his early work with graffiti, stating in his last known interview: “My work has nothing to do with graffiti. It’s painting, it always has been. I’ve always painted. Well before painting was in fashion.”<sup>15</sup> Fab 5 Freddy further summed up the implicit racism in the alignment of Basquiat with graffiti, explaining that at one point in the 1980s, “graffiti had become another word for nigger.”<sup>16</sup>

One could certainly argue that the initial reception of Basquiat’s works (and the attendant mythologies that were circulated early on) was related to an obsession with the so-called “primitive.” The now infamous photograph of the artist for the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in 1985 (see page 352) shows Basquiat in his studio in bare feet and a paint-splattered, pinstriped Armani suit. The tribal mask propped on the easel teases at the artist’s relationship to the “primitive”—both as a person of African descent and as an artist in the tradition of modernism, which is itself based on white culture imitating the works and habits of nonwhite culture. This photo was published just one month after the closing of the Museum of Modern Art’s controversial

exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern* (September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985). The exhibition, which Basquiat visited both in New York and in Dallas,<sup>17</sup> was based on formalist comparisons between Western and non-Western objects, and many critics claimed that it not only rehearsed a very limited understanding of tribal objects but also reinforced the racist hierarchies of East/West. None of the so-called "primitive" objects in the show were displayed with information on the artist or the original context of the work. Critic Thomas McEvilley asserted that MoMA's exhibition simply repeated an outdated, formalist hierarchy that placed Western art, even those examples that obviously drew upon African precedents, as superior.<sup>18</sup> James Clifford, taking issue with the word "tribal," wrote in 1985 that the MoMA exhibition (and perhaps the art world in general) had failed to question the limits of modernism's unselfconscious appropriation of otherness.<sup>19</sup> The show at MoMA was part of a larger trend of primitive art shows<sup>20</sup> taking place in New York at this time and, by extension, an aspect of the dominant thinking with regard to white supremacy.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout his life, Basquiat maintained an ambivalent relationship to this primitive mythology. Basquiat's *Untitled (Picasso Poster)* from 1983 highlights the complex relationship between primitivism and European modernism (plate 14). The artist's strokes in pink acrylic, brushed onto the surface of the poster, are most emphatic in the upper right corner of Picasso's image. Here Basquiat flattens the curve of the figure's hairline with one long horizontal mark at the top, following the contour down and alongside the left side of the face. The resulting shape, which Basquiat has isolated from the background of Picasso's original image, looks more like a mask than a face and further accentuates Picasso's well-known appropriations of African art. As a person of African descent, frequently plagued by myths of primitivism, Basquiat was surely invested in the irony of a modern art history that systematically excludes artists of African descent while remaining indebted to them.

But what if we were to look differently at Basquiat's SAMO works—not as graffiti or as evidence of some sort of primitive impulse, but instead as part of the artist's larger interests in language, which continued throughout his career? What if we were to consider the SAMO works in dialogue with the artist's text-based drawings and paintings, or alongside the poetry culled from his notebooks? After all, in the late 1970s and the 1980s, text was the preferred medium for many artists who, like Basquiat, turned to language as the primary vehicle for their work. One motivation for this *Basquiat Reader* is to reframe the earliest responses to the artist's work and to reconsider their impact on his lasting critical reception. By looking anew (and collectively) at these documents, we can see how early myths were established, how Basquiat himself cultivated an ambivalent relationship to them, and how they continue to impact our understanding of the artist.

Although Basquiat has frequently been positioned by critics as "untrained," we might instead consider him as "self-taught." As a child growing up in Brooklyn, New York, Jean-Michel Basquiat frequented the museums and galleries of his surround-

ing neighborhood and made drawings on the office paper his accountant father, Gerard, brought home. He grew up listening to Gerard's collection of jazz and classical records, speaking Spanish with his mother, Matilde, and making cartoonlike drawings from comic books, Hitchcock films, and *Mad* magazine. Basquiat was hit by a car while playing ball in the street when he was just seven years old; his spleen had to be removed, and he was hospitalized for nearly a month. His mother brought him a copy of the medical textbook *Gray's Anatomy*, which showed the young artist the inner workings of the body in great detail; it would become a favorite source throughout his life.

In an untitled drawing from 1983 (see page 344), Basquiat also highlighted his early engagement with contemporary politics, writing under the category of "EARLY THEMES": "NIXON," "WARS," "WEAPONS." He also notes that he "SENT A DRAWING OF A GUN TO J. EDGAR HOOVER IN THIRD GRADE." The time of Basquiat's childhood was, in fact, a period of sweeping political unrest—on both the national and the local levels. In 1968 Black\* radical protest gained an international audience when two members of the US track team (Tommie Smith and John Carlos) raised gloved Black fists in response to the playing of the national anthem after their victory at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City. In 1969—the year that Basquiat would have been in the third grade—Black Panther party leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were killed by police during a raid in Chicago. Closer to home, in the 1960s New York City underwent a significant transition, from a city divided by religion (i.e., Catholics and Jews) to one divided by race and ethnicity.<sup>22</sup> The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated the numerical limitations placed on immigrants from non-European countries, allowed increasing numbers of migrants from Africa and Asia to enter the United States. Although we typically think of the city as a "melting pot," open to new groups and with unimpeded access to opportunities for all residents, New York in reality was quite different. In the words of J. Faith Almiron, "the growing presence of a new Black, brown, and Asian labor force pushed up against white sovereignty in American's urban neighborhoods. Contrary to white flight, many white people stayed in the 'hood. They fiercely guarded their property and all that came with it, including the taxes to influence school districting."<sup>23</sup> There was a marked increase in violence against immigrants of color. The Brooklyn of Basquiat's youth was slowly moving from complacency to militancy as the Black intelligentsia (including the Nation of Islam) began to shape an environment of increased activism in response to these new conditions.

All these early influences—from both art and life—provided source material for Basquiat's artistic practice, and he continued his informal education throughout his

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\* Throughout this text I have capitalized *Black* and *Blackness* when in reference to race. Because the capitalization of these terms is becoming more widely accepted (e.g., institutions like the *New York Times* and the Associated Press have recently changed their style guidelines to capitalize *Black*), I have also reformatted previously published texts within this volume to capitalize *Black* and *Blackness*. This provides consistency throughout the text, but more importantly it recognizes the shared culture and history of peoples of the African diaspora—an explicit theme, to be sure, in the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat.