

BASQUIAT

BOOM

FOR REAL

EDITED BY DIETER BUCHHART
AND ELEANOR NAIRNE
WITH LOTTE JOHNSON

BASQUIAT

BOOM

FOR REAL

barbican

SCHIRN
KUNSTHALLE
FRANKFURT

PRESTEL
MUNICH · LONDON · NEW YORK

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Edo Bertoglio. Jean-Michel Basquiat wearing an American football helmet, 1981.

FOREWORD

JANE ALISON

Jean-Michel Basquiat is one of the most significant painters of the 20th century; his name has become synonymous with notions of cool. Yet he remains a somewhat misunderstood figure, a result, perhaps, of individual works seldom being given the scholarly attention that they deserve. The myth takes over. Too often his exquisite paintings and drawings are divorced from the context of their making, the downtown New York scene of the late 1970s and 80s, an extraordinary moment that shaped him and that he made entirely his own.

Basquiat: Boom for Real addresses these omissions. Deftly curated by Dieter Buchhart and the Barbican's own Eleanor Nairne, the show, to which this groundbreaking book is an accompaniment, is the first to present Basquiat's work to a British audience for more than 20 years. *Boom for Real* honours the multidisciplinary nature of Basquiat's work and encapsulates his vital spirit. In so doing, we present something far richer and more nuanced than is commonly understood.

Basquiat was an artist who consumed culture voraciously and channelled all that he found relevant – socially, politically and art historically – into paintings, drawings, objects as well as music and performance. His own persona became a cipher, as he was driven to re-fashion the world around him, swept up in a creative maelstrom that has become his signature. And yet all of this action tends to obscure an artist of fierce intelligence, poetic sensibility and profound depth. Basquiat's Haitian-Puerto Rican heritage played no small part in determining the artist that he became; and his success in the 1980s – when to receive such acclaim as a black artist was largely unheard of – has crucially made it possible for many others to follow in his footsteps.

This is therefore a timely presentation of a formidable talent and builds on an important history of Basquiat exhibitions here in the UK. Few people recall that his work was presented at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh in 1984. Curated by Mark Francis, this exhibition was Basquiat's first in a public gallery anywhere in the world. The Serpentine's 1996 exhibition was similarly a landmark occasion. That said, *Boom for Real* features more than 100 works, the majority of which are being seen here for the first time.

This book is rich in thought-provoking material, compiled to satisfy Basquiat scholars and admirers alike. It is fuelled by the same desire as that which underpins the exhibition – to forensically examine Basquiat's work and world. Dieter Buchhart's essay considers how we might look at the place of collaboration in his practice, while Eleanor Nairne sheds new light on Basquiat's relationship to performance. Following the various themes of the exhibition, Christian Campbell looks at Basquiat's graffiti project SAMO© through the anarchism of Dada, while Carlo McCormick recalls Diego Cortez's breakthrough *New York/New Wave* exhibition of 1981, positioning it in the context of a spate of other critical shows that year. Francesco Martinelli interrogates the bebop references that are so profuse within the work. Nairne's second essay looks at the impact of Basquiat's library of books, while Jordana Moore Saggese responds to his complex relationship to cinematic and televisual culture. We are honoured to include an essay by the ever erudite Glenn O'Brien, written shortly before his death earlier this year.

This project would not have been possible without the warm support of the family of Jean-Michel Basquiat – Nora Fitzpatrick, Lisane Basquiat and Jeanine Basquiat Heriveaux

– to whom we are hugely grateful for their collaborative energy. Nor would it have got very far without the patience and humour of David Stark and his team at Artestar – particularly, Sara Higgins, Ted Beckstead and Alex de Ronde.

Surprisingly few Basquiat works are in public collections and we feel honoured to have works loaned from such esteemed institutions as the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; the Fales Library & Special Collections, New York; the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao; the Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen; the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Marseille; the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; New York University Archives; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Equally, this exhibition owes an immense debt of gratitude to the community of international lenders who have committed their works. We would like to express our sincerest thanks to agnès b., The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kevin Bray, Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Alba and Francesco Clemente, Pierre Cornette de Saint Cyr, Eric Goode, Steven Hager, Yoav Harlap, Jennifer Von Holstein, The Kasper Collection, Lio Malca, Maripol, John McEnroe Gallery, Mugarbi Collection, Dorian Navarro, Enrico Navarro, Luigi Bonvicini Quina, Collection Thaddaeus Ropac, Schorr Family Collection, Daniel Schorr, Jonathan Schorr, Nicholas Taylor, Larry Warsh, W&K – Wienerroither & Kohlbacher, as well as to all those who wish to remain anonymous.

Boom for Real has been made possible as a result of a hugely valuable partnership with the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, where the exhibition will be seen next, the first such showing in Germany since Basquiat's death in 1988. Both the Barbican and the Schirn have a vision to show the most exciting work of the 20th and 21st centuries and to make exhibitions that are intellectually rigorous, curatorially brave and accessible to the widest possible audience.

The exhibition in London has been designed by Carmody Groarke, with graphic design from A Practice for Everyday Life – who are also responsible for the contemporary, elegant design of this book. We would like to thank Lincoln Dexter at Prestel; A Practice for Everyday Life; and Andy Groarke, Marcus Andrén, Ana Maria Ferreira and Han Wang at Carmody Groarke; it has been an immense pleasure to see the creativity with which they have brought this endeavour to fruition.

The project has been greatly enhanced by the guidance of an expert advisory group made up of Dr Celeste-Marie Bernier, Dr Augustus Casely-Hayford and Dr Jordana Moore Saggese; and those close to Basquiat while he was alive,

Michael Holman and Joe La Placa. The curators would like to give additional thanks to all those who have shared their time, thoughts and insights in what has been a remarkable period of research over the past three years: Alexis Adler, Patti Astor, Donald Baechler, Eszter Balint, Bruno Bischofberger, Victor Bockris, Kevin Bray, Brian Clarke, Wayne Clifford, Diego Cortez, Al Diaz, Geoff Dunlop, Henry Flynt, Mark Francis, Fab 5 Freddy, Ellen Gallagher, John Giorno, Jennifer Goode, Brian Gormley, Anthony Haden-Guest, Roland Hagenberg, Dick Hebdige, Vija Kern, Tim Lawrence, Arto Lindsay, Victor Littlejohn, Roxanne Lowit, John Lurie, Suzanne Mallouk, Maripol, Thurston Moore, Sandy Nairne, Jérôme de Noirmont, Annina Nosei, Brett de Palma, Stan Peskett, Paige Powell, Jonathan Sexton, Tony Shafrazi, Franklin Sirmans, Nick Taylor, Robert Farris Thompson and Dr Irene Whitfield.

Special thanks must also go to those who have tirelessly given their advice and support to help us realise our ambitions: Alex Acquavella, Fiona Armour, Katharine Arnold, Kelly Baum, Liz Beatty, Katy Bolger, Rupert Burgess, Erin Byrne, Elodie Cazes, Rebecca Chaiklin, Emma Chapoulie-Danjean, Brian Clarke, Emily DeRosa, Anthony D'Offay, Sara Driver, Tom Eddison, Ekow Eshun, Bruce Ferguson, Sophie Gliddon-Lyon, Caitlin Gongas, Beth Greenacre, Gerard Faggionato, Emily Florido, Brian Foote, Janis Gardner Cecil, Nicola Geerk, Stuart Ginsberg, Tara Hart, Anna Karina Hofbauer, Anton Jarrod, Emma Kane, Ron Kosa, Melissa Lazarov, Eykyn Maclean, Louise Makowski, Andy Massad, Alejandra Navarro, Allegra O'Cock, Lawrence O'Hana, Hiroko Onada, Midge Palley, Julia Peyton-Jones, Safdie Fine Art, Flora Schausberger, Lisa Schiff, Linda Silverman, Marvin Taylor, Andrew Turner, Elisabeth Thomas, Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, Adam Weinberg, Zoe Whitley, Anke Wiedmann and Christian Xatrec.

An exhibition of this scale can only be achieved with the generosity of our funders. We must fulsomely thank the sponsors of the exhibition – NET-A-PORTER, PHILLIPS, tp bennett and Momart – and the special group of supporters that comprise our Curators' Circle: agnès b., Almine Rech Gallery, Tim Jefferies at Hamiltons Gallery, The Mayor Gallery, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, the Schorr Family, Yoav Harlap, Wienerroither & Kohlbacher and those who wish to remain anonymous. ACE Hotel London has been the perfect partner for the exhibition. We are grateful to Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a donor-advised fund of the London Community Foundation, for making possible an ambitious public programme to accompany the exhibition, while an Art Fund Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Research Grant facilitated critical travel at an early stage.

Finally, an undertaking of this kind can only happen with the collective effort of a brilliant team and a forward-

thinking and ambitious organisation. Sir Nicholas Kenyon, Managing Director, and Louise Jeffreys, Director of Arts, have been supportive from the outset, and it has been made possible by the financial support and encouragement of the Barbican Centre's founder and principal funder, the City of London Corporation. The curators have been assisted by Lotte Johnson, Assistant Curator, and Thomas Kennedy, Exhibition Assistant, whose contributions have been utterly invaluable. Research assistance was provided by Coralie Malissard and Wells Fray Smith. Exhibition management has been led by Katrina Crookall, with Alice Lobb, Claire Feeley and Ross Head, further supported by Zoe Jackman and Priya Saujani at the front of house. Production, installation and technical support has been expertly handled by Peter Sutton, with support from Bruce Stracy and Margaret Liley. Additional contributions from Ann Berni, Lily Booth and Bréifne Ó Conbhuí in Media Relations; Phil Newby, Charlotte Kewell, Kate Robertson and Victoria Norton in Marketing; Lynette Brooks, Maria Carroll, Stuart Boxall, Camilla Lawson and Cassandra Scott in Development; and Jenny Mollica, Anthony Gray and Chris Webb in Creative Learning have all played their part in making this exhibition a reality.

Lastly, we must thank Jean-Michel Basquiat himself – whose work continues to be a sublime source of inspiration.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM FOR REAL

DIETER BUCHHART



Fig.1: Edo Bertoglio. *Boom for Real*, Jean-Michel Basquiat on the set of *Downtown 81*, 1980–81.

*Boom for real! Was I dreaming? No. Maybe I was just waking up. Waking up to my own luck. Luck is where you find it.*¹

A naked wall reads ‘BOOM FOR REAL’, spray-painted in large capital letters. Jean-Michel Basquiat stands in front of this wall with his left hand casually in his pocket, swinging a paper bag in his other hand, while looking at the camera with a faint smile (Fig. 1). In this still from *Downtown 81*, filmed in late 1980–81 (when the film was known as *New York Beat*), he is barely 20 years old and plays broadly himself: an artist in search of his artistic self. Yet he was not a street or graffiti artist, which he was often labelled as a result of his early graffiti works with his friend Al Diaz under the pseudonym of SAMO©. From 1977 to late 1978, the two wrote poetic and often critical phrases around downtown Manhattan, which earned them significant popularity.² In 1982, at the age of 21, Basquiat was invited to take part in *Documenta 7* in Kassel, the youngest artist in the show’s history at the time, where his works were exhibited alongside Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol, among others. Only six years later, Basquiat died on 12 August 1988.

NOW’S THE TIME

During his short life, Basquiat became one of the key figures of the downtown New York art scene and has since been ascribed a decisive role in the art of the second half of the 20th century. Almost 30 years after his death, his works continue to attract major attention, both on the art market and, more importantly, from art historians.³ His works are frequently compared to those of the great masters of classical modernism and the post-war era. Basquiat is considered in the same pantheon of artists as Edvard Munch, Warhol and Twombly. He has inspired generations of younger artists, including Rashid Johnson, José Parlá and Oscar Murillo.

It might be all too tempting to mythologise Basquiat as the Jimi Hendrix of the art world.⁴ But what does it matter in the end how early, how fast and in what quantity an artist’s work was produced? Let us re-pose Ingrid Sischy’s question ‘What made Jean-Michel Basquiat so great as an artist?’⁵ from today’s perspective, independently of drugs, fame and market values. Retrospective exhibitions since the turn of the century, such as at the Brooklyn Museum (2005)⁶ and the Fondation Beyeler (2010),⁷ have underscored his artistic importance in the Eurocentric⁸ and ‘entgrenzte’⁹ art historical canon through a curatorial presentation of his most significant work. *Now’s the Time* at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2015)¹⁰ traced his contemporary relevance through a thematic analysis of his work. The latter exhibition broached Basquiat’s multifaceted engagement with socio-political questions, ranging from the history of oppression

to free market capitalism, against the backdrop of recurring references to topics including music, anatomy, cartoons, economics and black cultural history.

Exhibitions such as *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks* at the Brooklyn Museum (2015)¹¹ and *Words Are All We Have* at Nahmad Contemporary in New York (2016)¹² demonstrated the ease with which the artist deployed letters, words, numbers, lists and phrases as integral components of his work. As Klaus Kertess describes, he used ‘words like brushstrokes’.¹³ Kertess remarks: ‘In the beginning of his creation, there was the word. He loved words for their sense, for their sound, and for their look; he gave eyes, ears, mouth – and soul – to words’.¹⁴ Yet still Basquiat gets categorised as a neo-expressionist, alongside artists including David Salle and Julian Schnabel, neo-expressionism being described in terms such as ‘Bad Painting’, ‘New Image Painting’ or ‘Wild Style’ as a counter-movement to conceptual art.¹⁵ Jordana Moore Saggese in her 2014 book *Reading Basquiat* anchors the artist between neo-expressionism and conceptualism,¹⁶ while I have focused on looking at Basquiat through a conceptual lens.¹⁷

But what role did SAMO© and the downtown New York art scene, which was heavily influenced by Andy Warhol, play in Basquiat’s development? And what was the impact of his attention-provoking participation in the *Times Square Show* (1980) and *New York/New Wave* at P.S.1 (1981)?¹⁸ What significance can be attributed to his rarely discussed interdisciplinary artistic practice and how did he channel the influence of his various source materials?¹⁹ These questions are addressed for the first time in *Basquiat: Boom for Real* at the Barbican, London, and the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. The first extensive Basquiat exhibition in either the UK or Germany, it focuses on the artist’s interdisciplinary practice and his encyclopaedic source material, from literature to bebop jazz to the history of film and television.

BASQUIAT’S INTERDISCIPLINARITY: BETWEEN LINE, WORD, PERFORMANCE, COLLABORATION AND MUSIC

In the art scene of downtown Manhattan in the late 1970s and early 1980s, working across different artistic media – such as painting, performance, music or film – was a widespread phenomenon, as was working collaboratively, especially among a younger generation of artists. An important role model in this regard was surely Andy Warhol, who since the 1960s had been furthering his repertoire. His practice extended from painting, graphics, drawing, photography, sculpture and film to fashion, TV, performance, theatre, music and literature. Warhol overcame traditional barriers between disciplines and cultural scenes.

Many other artists followed his example and began to work in multiple fields. Basquiat was active as a draughtsman, painter, performer, actor, poet, musician and DJ, while Keith Haring performed in public spaces, produced paintings, drawings and prints and worked with video and photography and also as a DJ. Haring created collaborative works with graffiti artist Little Angel Two (LA2)²⁰ as well as with artists, writers and performers such as Madonna, Grace Jones, William Burroughs, Timothy Leary, Bill T. Jones, Jenny Holzer, Yoko Ono and Warhol. Similarly, Julian Schnabel is today as known for his filmmaking as for his painting, not forgetting his interior design. As a result of this openness, moving between artistic disciplines virtually became a matter of course, anticipating the multidisciplinary work of many artists in the 1990s.

Basquiat's intensive collaboration with other artists contributes to our understanding of the multiplicity of his artistic practice. In favouring this approach, he seamlessly followed the examples of collaborative endeavours within the international art scene during the 1970s and early 1980s. Both the COBRA artists Karel Appel and Pierre Alechinsky (Fig. 3) worked collaboratively, as did Arnulf Rainer and Dieter Roth, who together created more than 100 drawings, paintings, photographs, experimental works, videos and books between 1972 and 1979.²¹ Since the 1960s, Roth had also formed a lively collaboration with Richard Hamilton, which found expression in various media.²² With the arrival of neo-expressionism and the Neuen Wilden (the German neo-expressionist movement) at the end of the 1970s, collective work, or *Gemeinschaftsbild*, took centre stage. Max Faust in 1983 summarised *Gemeinschaftsbild* as 'an aspect of the New Painting' in Germany.²³ Walter Dahn and Jiří Georg Dokoupil worked together, as did Albert and Markus Oehlen, Werner Büttner and Martin Kippenberger, as well

as Salomé, Luciano Castelli and Rainer Fetting. Faust explained that 'The basis of working collaboratively is the close relationships between the artists, their "pulling in the same direction", their curiosity for the collaboration, their closeness, provocation and responsibility'.²⁴ Because all collaborations share the 'principle of collective production',²⁵ there is an orchestrated tuning-in and harmonising, familiar to those working in music, performance and film – notably, Salomé, Castelli, Fetting, Dahn and Oehlen also worked as musicians.

At the beginning of his career, Basquiat created conceptual and politically charged collaborative graffiti with Al Diaz. On 29 April 1979, Basquiat 'performed' his first painting by spray-painting graffiti on a canvas mounted to the wall during the recording of *The Guy's Big Party* in Stan Peskett's 'Canal Zone' (Fig. 4).²⁶ As a musician, Basquiat performed as part of the band Gray with Michael Holman, Vincent Gallo and Nicholas Taylor (among others), and engaged with the early hip-hop movement with Fab 5 Freddy, Toxic and Rammellzee. He designed the cover for and produced the rap single 'Beat Bop', in collaboration with Rammellzee and K-Rob. For *Rodeo*, a short film by Salomon Emquies, he created neon drawings to be overlaid on the filmed performance of the single at the Rhythm Lounge in LA. His leading role in *Downtown 81* further underscores the breadth of his artistic engagements.

Another collaboration can be seen in a drawing with Keith Haring from 1982 (Fig. 2). Both worked with the same ink, thereby achieving a largely homogeneous appearance: Haring depicted outlined silhouettes of walking figures while Basquiat contributed a black angel balancing on the word 'TAR' (summoning associations of slavery, racism and lynching), which he partly erased with gestural touches of ink wash. Basquiat was also very open in his day-to-day collaboration with his studio assistants. As he explained in an interview with Marc H. Miller, from 1982 until 1983 Stephen Torton, for instance, put together most of his unorthodox supports, such as the 'cross-bar' canvases held together by nails and ties, assemblages of doors²⁷ and canvas stretched over industrial pallets, which became the base for some of Basquiat's most iconic paintings.²⁸ Torton also 'tiled' collections of Basquiat's drawings onto canvas, forming collages that provided the foundation of later works, such as *Glenn* (1984, pp. 222–223) and *King of the Zulus* (1984–85, p. 165). Basquiat sampled from the world around him; like the artist and composer John Cage, he brought chance elements from the 'everyday' into his works. He often spoke of Cage's concerts and performances of the 1940s and 50s, in which the composer let the musicians create their own interpretations based on arbitrary marks on the scores. In this vein, Basquiat invited the intervention of his studio assistants.²⁹



Fig. 2: Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. *Untitled*, 1982. Ink on rubber, 62.9 × 88.9 cm (24 3/4 × 35 in.). Keith Haring Foundation.

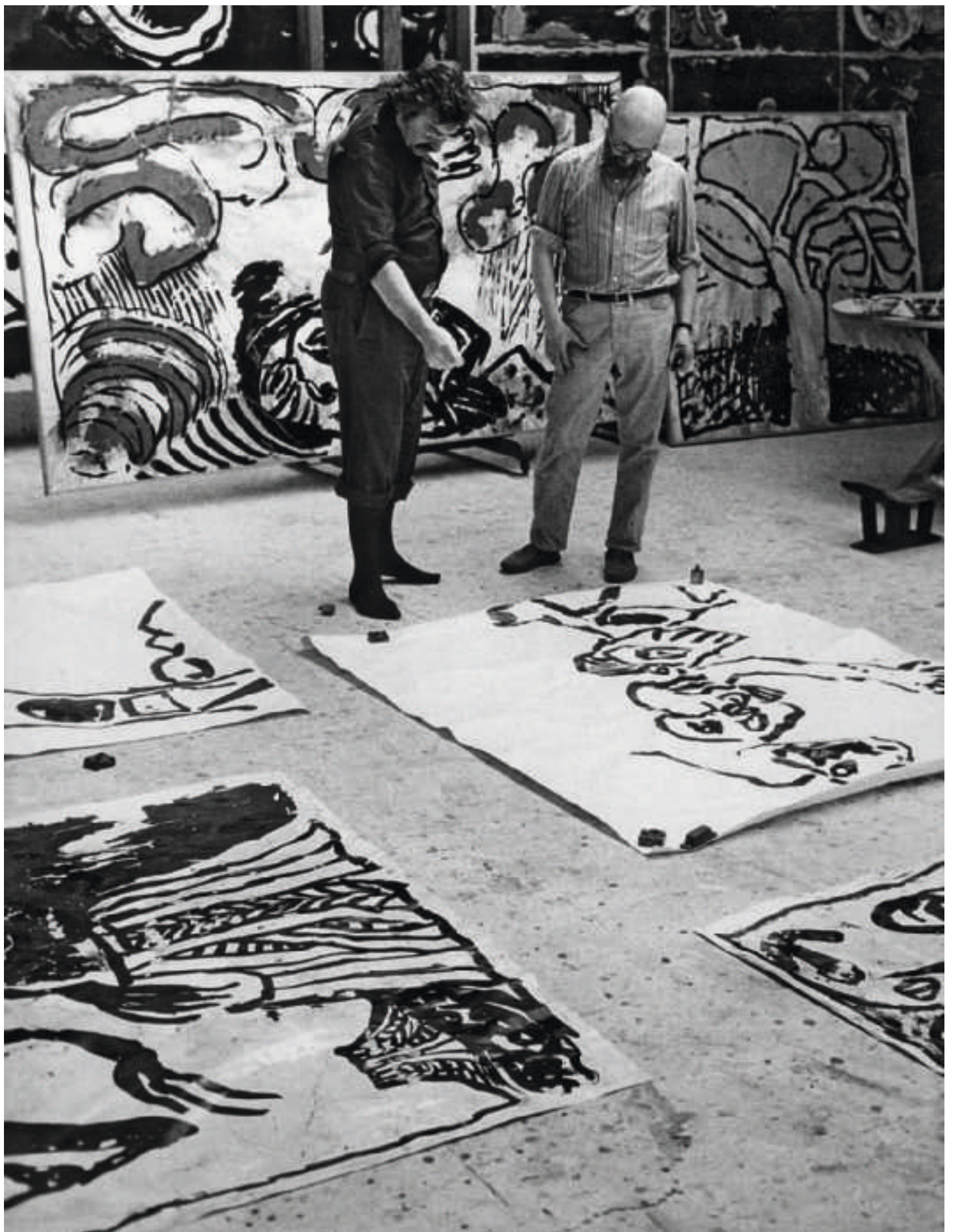
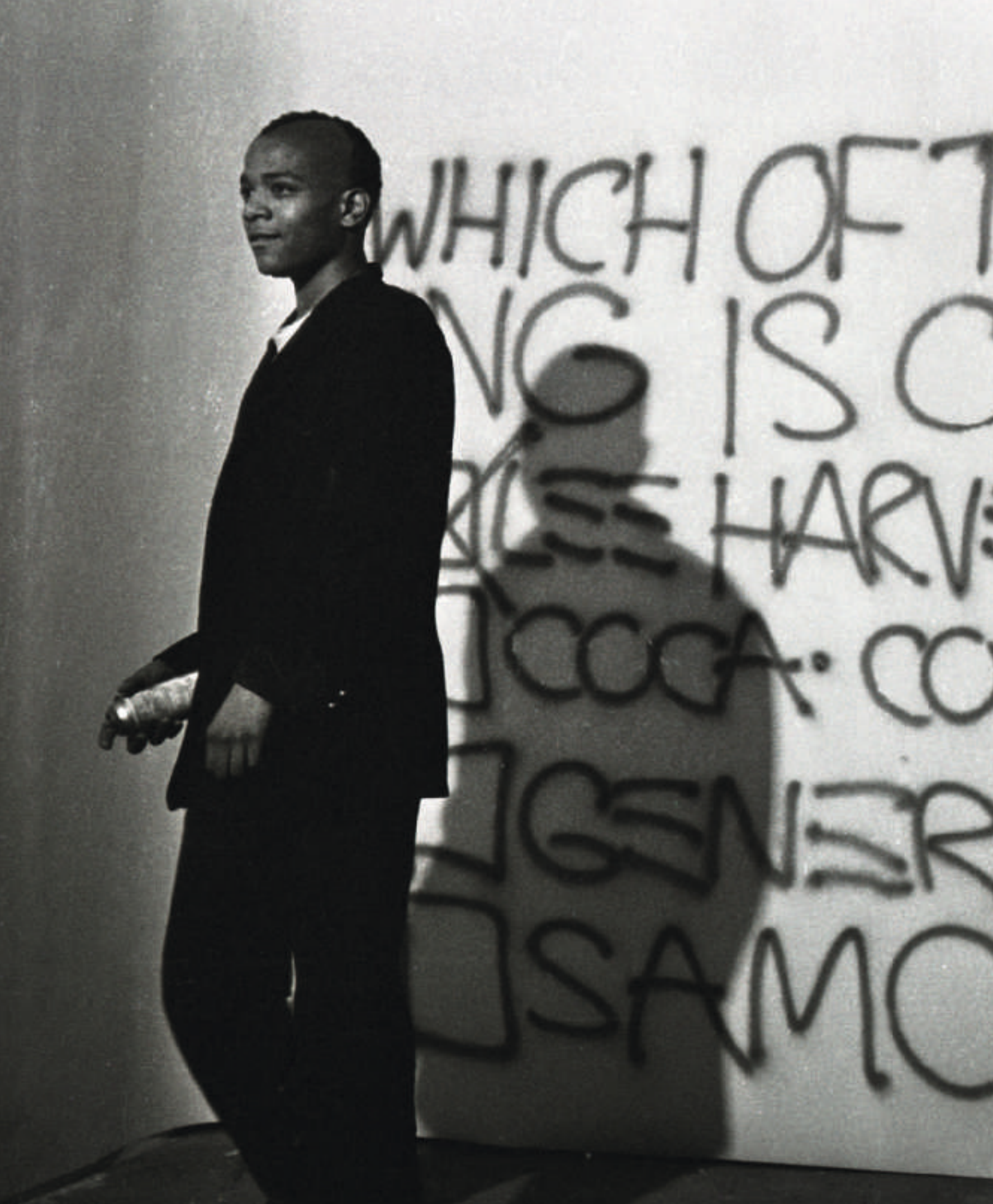


Fig.3: Micky Alechinsky. Karel Appel (left) and Pierre Alechinsky (right), working on their collaborative series in Alechinsky's studio, Bougival, France, 1976.



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Fig. 4: Anton Perich. Basquiat at the Canal Zone Party, 1979.

Basquiat's artistic collaboration with Warhol in the mid-1980s evolved quite differently from those described so far. Rather than emerging out of a close artistic friendship, their project was initiated in 1983 by the Swiss art dealer and collector Bruno Bischofberger, who convinced three of the very different artists that he represented – Basquiat, Warhol and Francesco Clemente – to embark on a series of collaborative works. Among other historical precedents, Bischofberger was inspired by the surrealist game of 'cadavre exquis'.³⁰ Given *Kunstforum International's* issue on collaboration in 1983, the timeliness was tangible.³¹ Clemente had already been engaging with others, for example on the 'illuminated manuscripts' he made with Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley, Rene Ricard and John Wieners.³² On his long visits to India – before his permanent move to New York in 1981 – Clemente had also worked with miniature painters in Jaipur and Orissa, papermakers in Pondicherry and sign painters in Tamil Nadu.³³ As noted in a diary entry by Warhol dated 20 December 1983, the three artists began their collaboration over the course of several months.³⁴

Nina Zimmer points out that the 'societal climate for collaborative works' changed considerably after 1968 as 'group and communal strategies found their way into pedagogy, psychology, psychoanalysis and the popular sociology'.³⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's thesis that a fantasy was never individual, but always a group fantasy, began to circulate.³⁶ As a result of the propagation of collaboration 'from kindergartens to universities',³⁷ the idea became broadly accepted in society. This meant that the significance of a temporary collaboration, such as the one between Warhol, Basquiat and Clemente, was found not in its initiation, but rather in the physical act of creation and the artworks themselves. Warhol and Basquiat subsequently continued their collaboration. A comment by Basquiat hints at the intensity of this project: the two worked together 'on a million paintings',³⁸ without rules: 'we used to paint over each other's stuff all the time'.³⁹ Over the years 1984–85, Warhol and Basquiat created more than 150 collaborations, which account for more than ten per cent of Basquiat's painting oeuvre.

'COPY-AND-PASTE' AS THE TRADEMARK OF 'REPRO-CULTURE' IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

The multidisciplinary practices of a number of artists in the 1980s reflect the increasing 'technical reproducibility'⁴⁰ of images and works of art, which today is almost taken for granted as the basis of our society and communication structures. Hans-Jürgen Seemann in his book *Copy: Auf dem Weg in die Repro-Kultur* in 1992 summarised: 'We live in a repro-culture: imitation, reproduction and emulation become the "trademarks" of our society. We find copying in

the media, fashion, sciences and art. And nowadays people even copy themselves'.⁴¹ Basquiat too sampled from everything that he perceived. He collaged aspects of his everyday environment and proclaimed that he constantly needed 'source material around [him] to work off'.⁴² As Suzanne Mallouk recalled, 'He picks up books, cereal boxes, the newspaper or whatever is around. He finds a word or phrase and paints it on his board or canvas'.⁴³ It is this appropriation of the everyday, the incidental, as well as the seemingly significant, that makes his work so distinctive. His principle of 'copy-and-paste' seems to echo an early anonymous graffito: 'Only Xerox is live, you are just a copy'.⁴⁴ Basquiat's work is 'knowledge-based', yet he samples from what surrounds him and what he chooses to surround himself with. As in the 'copy-and-paste' sampling of the internet and post-internet generations, he consciously copies and transforms the materials he finds into his own aesthetic. In doing so he plays a part in the 'copy society',⁴⁵ in which 'the process of copying' is 'a key cultural technique of modernity'.⁴⁶

Basquiat's work was inspired by the 'cut-up' technique, pioneered by Brion Gysin and William Burroughs. In his short essay 'Minutes to Go', Gysin concisely summarised this unorthodox attitude to language: 'Pick a book/any book/cut it up/cut up/prose/poems/newspapers/magazines/the bible/the koran/the book of moroni/la-tzu/confucius/the bhagavad gita/anything/letters/business correspondence/ads/all the words'.⁴⁷ The technique involved cutting up text and rearranging the individual pieces to obtain a new text. In the context of the emerging hip-hop culture at the beginning of the 1980s, this chimed with the sensibility of the 'copy society', bringing Burroughs to popular attention again. Basquiat created an equivocal memorial to Burroughs in his triptych *Five Fish Species* (1983, pp.216–217). In the work he includes 'BURROUGH'S BULLET©' and '1951' as references to 6 September, the day on which Burroughs, under the influence of drugs, shot his wife Joan Vollmer in Mexico City when he restaged the apple scene from Friedrich von Schiller's drama *Wilhelm Tell*.⁴⁸ In the spirit of Burroughs, whose work often addressed the ruthless nature of life's ups and downs, Basquiat made his monument to the writer a radical acknowledgement of this brutal incident. Basquiat associates Burroughs' eventful life, his break with societal norms and his far-reaching artistic innovations with life as a permanent and relentless cut-up. For Burroughs, 'Life is a cut-up. As soon as you walk down the street your consciousness is being cut by random factors. The cut-up is closer to the facts of human perception than linear narrative'.⁴⁹

Basquiat's letters, words, marks and figures create a pictorial rhythm equalling the spoken poems of Dadaists such as Raoul Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters and the latter's *Ursonate* (1922–32). As Fab 5 Freddy perceptively remarks,



Fig. 5: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Jimmy Best*, 1981 (detail). Spray paint and oil stick on metal, 244 × 244 cm (96 1/8 × 96 1/8 in.). Private collection.

‘If you read the canvases out loud to yourself, the repetition, the rhythm, you can hear Jean-Michel thinking’.⁵⁰ Basquiat’s art can be considered in the space between Gysin’s and Burroughs’ ‘cut-up’ technique, ‘concrete poetry’⁵¹ and the emerging spoken word of the hip-hop scene. Sampling and scratching as well as ‘copy-and-paste’ are part of Basquiat’s art practice. His work appears just like a ‘language of rupture’,⁵² a concrete poetry of hip-hop created in a ‘cut-and-paste’ process. It offers what Laura Hoptman describes in reference to contemporary collage and assemblage as the opportunity ‘to experience information simultaneously’; the ‘horizontal cloud of information’ shifts in Basquiat’s work towards a poetic condition.⁵³

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM FOR REAL

‘Boom for real’⁵⁴ was one of Basquiat’s ‘trademark phrases’,⁵⁵ similar to his crown motifs and the © and ™ signs. Yet ‘Boom for real’ was more the spoken and the performed than the drawn word. Only on occasion did he write ‘BOOM FOR REAL’, as seen in *Jimmy Best* (1981, Fig. 5) or the drawing *Untitled (Crown)* (1982, p.218). Unlike many of his other words, applied with heavy strokes of oil stick, the phrase ‘BOOM FOR REAL’ appears to be added casually, connoting a graffiti tag in a public toilet or prison cell – the exception being the bold lettering on the concrete wall in *Downtown 81*. ‘Boom for real’ was more of an expression and artistic strategy; as Diego Cortez underscores in Tamra Davis’ documentary film: ‘He had the expression “Boom for real” – explosion – and

then you end up with fragments rather than the Cubist and post-Cubist way of building sections, hatching things together, a quilt work. Jean-Michel’s work was not about a quilt, it was about a galaxy of reality that has been again exploded. So everything is equal’.⁵⁶ This reading can also be drawn from Nicholas Taylor’s recollections, placing the origins of this phrase in a TV interview with a homeless man during a blizzard: ‘One evening Michael Holman and I went up to Wayne [Clifford]’s loft where Wayne and Jean-Michel were taking vocal samples from the television news. Wayne pushed the record button while a homeless person was commenting on the icy conditions in New York City. The man said to the reporter: “Fell on my ass, boom, for real!” Since the tape was at the beginning, Wayne could push “play” and then “rewind” quickly, and the audio was “ignorantly” looped to sound like: “Fell on my ass, boom, for real, boom, boom, boom, for real, fell on my ass, boom”’.⁵⁷ This audio piece reflects Basquiat’s playful use of words, his interest in rhythm and repetition, his sampling and scratching. The ‘Boom’ was ‘for real’ – inspiration and explosion. The phrase is also associated with the immediacy and rapidness that shaped his graffiti and early paintings. This swiftness is documented in *Downtown 81*, in which we see Basquiat’s right hand, holding a can of spray paint, smoothly glide along the wall, while his body harmoniously follows that hand.⁵⁸ It can be seen in his dance-like body movements while he draws and paints, or while he is DJ-ing and dancing in the Mudd Club.

‘Boom for real’ could be seen to reflect the ‘upheaval of rupture’⁵⁹ in Basquiat’s work – a rupture of the truth, of sounds, of rhythm. The phrase exemplifies what Robert Storr termed ‘eye-rap’.⁶⁰ By sampling from all cultures in his postmodernist fashion, with the ease of today’s ‘copy-and-paste’ society, he opens new spaces for thinking, which are able to transform the traditional patterns of thought. As curator Lydia Yee remarks: ‘Like a DJ, he adeptly reworked Neo-Expressionism’s clichéd language of gesture, freedom, and angst and redirected Pop Art’s strategy of appropriation to produce a body of work that at times celebrated black culture and history but also revealed its complexity and contradictions’.⁶¹ Basquiat positions himself against political apathy with his words, word mutations and erasings. ‘Wielding his brush as a weapon’,⁶² or rather his oil stick, he fights against exploitation, consumer society, oppression, racism and police brutality. He employs his words and marks as weapons. Because Basquiat was, and remains, boom for real.

Translated by Marian Schmidt

THE PERFORMANCE OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

ELEANOR
NAIRNE



Fig. 1: Edo Bertoglio. Jean-Michel Basquiat on the set of *Downtown 81* (formerly known as *New York Beat*), 1980–81.

In the autumn of 1980, Jean-Michel Basquiat was cast in the starring role of *New York Beat*, an independent feature film that aimed to capture the post-punk, underground art scene in lower Manhattan (Fig. 1).¹ He was 19 years old and had only exhibited once to date – a single work that was included in the *Times Square Show* that June.² The screenplay was written by Glenn O'Brien, famed for his music column for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine as well as for his cult cable-television show *TV Party*. Crucially, it was O'Brien who persuaded the producer Maripol and her director boyfriend Edo Bertoglio that Basquiat (rather than Danny Rosen³) had to play the lead. The story would be based on a day in the life of a down-and-out artist, enriched by a live musical soundtrack from Mudd Club favourites including DNA, the Lounge Lizards and James White and the Blacks, with a few whimsical touches, such as a cameo appearance from Blondie's Debbie Harry as a fairytale princess.

What is remarkable about this story is not so much the film itself (although it does offer a great cross-section of the No Wave scene, as well as shots of a dilapidated city that is barely recognisable as New York today) but its uncanny foretelling of what was to come. As Basquiat's bandmate Michael Holman reflects, 'it's almost too strange how prescient [it] was in predicting Jean's stardom without ever intending to'.⁴ When shooting began in December 1980, Basquiat had no fixed address and so moved into the production office at 54 Great Jones Street, which became in effect his first studio, directly opposite the loft at 57 Great Jones Street that he would later rent from Warhol at the height of his career.⁵ The canvases that were bought for him to work on for the film became some of the first paintings that he ever made, and Debbie Harry, who purchased one of these paintings, *Cadillac Moon*, for \$100, became one of his first collectors – a real-life fairy godmother.⁶

A great deal has been written on Basquiat over the years, but little has been said about the concept of performance. Ultimately, he was cast in *New York Beat* because he already embodied the artist he would become. As friend and co-star Fred Brathwaite (aka Fab 5 Freddy) explains, 'the way he lived was all a part of the work and the work was part of his life'.⁷ Although it would be his only feature film appearance, *New York Beat* is indicative of the wider creative community to which Basquiat belonged, of the rich variety of his work (especially in the early years) and of the ways in which a kind of theatricality resonates throughout his practice. In an interview in 1985 he explained, 'I wanted to paint like the Lower East Side and what it was like to live there'.⁸ The phrase is intriguing (like dancing about architecture), revealing an artist who wanted to capture his experience of his moment in time in all its complexity. One critical aspect of this was how he felt he had to perform as an artist of Haitian-Puerto Rican heritage in a largely white art world.

As Greg Tate writes, he was a 'lonesome flyboy in the buttermilk of the '80s Downtown art boom' who learned how to play 'the game of securing patronage [...] with ambition, nerve and delight'.⁹ To say so is not to detract from the brilliance of his work; on the contrary, it gives us a deeper understanding of why performance – considered here in relation to concepts of identity, knowledge and expression – permeates his compositions.

PERFORMING IDENTITY:

*'The city is crawling with uptight middle-class pseudos trying to look like the money they don't have. Status symbols. It cracks me up.'*¹⁰

Basquiat first came to public attention in 1978, when he teamed up with his classmate Al Diaz to spray-paint enigmatic statements across the city, signed by SAMO©.¹¹ The pseudonym stood for 'same old, same old shit' and many of the phrases were a playful attack on the banalities of American culture: 'SAMO© AS AN END 2 THE NEON FANTASY CALLED "LIFE"' or 'IN THIS POLY-URETHANE EXISTENCE... SAMO©'. For Henry Flynt, an artist who documented the project, the tone of the aphorisms was a clear riposte to the 1970s as a 'decade of gurus, seminars and identity-shopping'.¹² The young pair were industrious (Basquiat claimed to write 30 a day at his peak¹³) and soon the city was awash with cryptic SAMO© commentary, which fomented debate about who was responsible. As art critic Jeffrey Deitch wrote in *Flash Art International*: 'you couldn't go anywhere [...] without noticing that someone named Samo had been there first. His disjointed street poetry marked a trail for devotees of below ground art/rock culture'.¹⁴

Of particular interest here is the way in which Basquiat developed SAMO© as a fictional persona, as well as his use of the hype the project generated to launch himself as an artist. He first met Diaz in 1976 when he transferred to City-As-School, a pioneering alternative high school founded in 1972 for gifted students who struggled in traditional classroom scenarios.¹⁵ Basquiat was placed with Family Life Theater, an Upper West Side drama group, which is where he first workshopped a character named 'Samo'. This then morphed into a story written for the student newspaper (p.58) about a man shopping for a religion: 'we're running a Zen Buddhist 2-for-1 sale this month', offers the 'Relig-o-Mat' salesman, before whispering, 'Or... What about Samo?... I am a Samoid myself... we do all we want here on earth and then rely totally on the mercy of God on the pretense that we didn't know'.¹⁶ The wonderfully adolescent premise of the story took on greater sophistication when distilled down into the pithy SAMO© writings that appeared on the streets – popularly presumed to be the work of an older, disillusioned, conceptual artist.

Critical to SAMO©'s success was its staging—predominantly amid the new art quarter of SoHo—which piqued the media's interest. On 21 September 1978, the *SoHo Weekly News* ran a photo of 'SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO BOOSH-WAH-ZEE FANTASIES... THINK...' with a plea for its author to get in touch (p.62). The following week a reply appeared in the paper: 'SAMO© AS A MEANS OF DRAWING ATTENTION TO INSIGNIFICANCE... WE'LL CONTACT YOU' (p.63).¹⁷ The irreverent response only heightened the intrigue, until that December, when Philip Faflick of the *Village Voice* paid 'Jean and Al' \$100 for a profile on 'the most ambitious and sententious of the new wave of Magic Marker Jeremiahs' (p.65).¹⁸ Never one to renounce his mystique entirely, Basquiat sported an enormous pair of sunglasses for the photo, obscuring almost all of his face.

Just 17 and already the subject of a published article, Basquiat used 'SAMO' as his calling card in the coming years, sporadically signing work with this name as late as his first solo exhibition at Galleria d'Arte Emilio Mazzoli in Italy in 1981 (Fig. 2). He also adopted a number of other personae, notably Aaron (a likely reference to the baseball player Hank Aaron but also plausibly to the black anti-hero of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*), Willie Mays (his nickname among friends) and Jimmy Best (the protagonist of one of his most formidable SAMO© poems: 'JIMMY BEST ON HIS BACK TO THE SUCKERPUNCH OF HIS CHILDHOOD FILES'). As a true postmodernist, Basquiat understood identity to be a construct—and therefore fertile ground for experiment.¹⁹ The role of the suffering artist, captured by *New York Beat*, was one with which he would continue to play long after he achieved significant success. Rene Ricard references this in 'The Radiant Child' for *Artforum* in 1981: 'the idea of the unrecognized genius slaving away in a garret is a deliciously foolish one', he admonishes; 'we must credit the life of Van Gogh for really sending that myth into orbit'.²⁰

On 4 October 1982, Warhol recorded in his diary his first proper meeting with Basquiat: 'he's the kid who used the name "Samo" when he used to sit on the sidewalk in Greenwich Village and paint T-shirts [...] now he's on Easy Street [...] He was a middle-class Brooklyn kid [...] and he was trying to be like that, painting in the Greenwich Village'.²¹ The irony is that it was Warhol who had taught Basquiat about the power of shaping one's artistic image. Like many of his generation, Basquiat was an avid reader of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (1975), in which confessions include, 'I usually accept people on the basis of their self-images, because their self-images have more to do with the way they think than their objective-images do'.²² The day of their meeting, Basquiat rushed back to his Crosby Street studio to paint a vivid portrait that captures a remarkable likeness of the pair—Warhol with his wild wig and Basquiat with his dishevelled dreadlocks—while also expressing his desire to achieve parity with his idol (*Dos Cabezas*, 1982, p.133). That ambition would soon be realised (that year Basquiat became the youngest artist ever to be included in *Documenta*), and in the autumn of 1985 he reflected that maybe it was 'because of people like Andy' that 'the artist can be viewed more as a "hero", an image'.²³

PERFORMING KNOWLEDGE:

*'I'm not an elitist, but an autodidact, who would like to be part of the family of artists.'*²⁴

Basquiat was both self-conscious and mocking of his image; as his former girlfriend Suzanne Mallouk recalls, 'how he dressed, how he spoke, how he thought [...] Jean was always watching himself from outside of himself and laughing'.²⁵ A point of sensitivity was his education. While he may have dropped out of City-As-School at 16 and had no formal artistic training, he was thoughtfully schooled over the years and grew up in an intellectual family that made frequent visits to the city's museums.²⁶ In January 1983, when his work was included in *Champions*, a group exhibition at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, he refused to submit a CV. When the gallery insisted that one was needed for the publication, he created *Untitled (Biography)* (1983, p.269)—a work that satirises brilliantly the art world's love of reducing artists down to their essential information (name, date of birth, etc.). Alongside influences ranging from 'ALFRED HITCHCOCK' to 'CARS (MOSTLY DRAGSTERS)', he proudly states his schooling to be 'SOME ACADEMIC LIFE DRAWING IN NINTH GRADE (WAS THE ONLY CHILD THAT FAILED)'.²⁷

From the outset, Basquiat turned his intellect into sport—using the speed with which he executed work to lure viewers into false presumptions before delivering a blow with the depth of his references. In his earliest paintings, he showcased



Fig. 2: Invitation for Basquiat's first solo show, at Galleria d'Arte Emilio Mazzoli, 1981.



Fig. 3: Francis Bacon. *Study for Portrait on Folding Bed*, 1963.
Oil and sand on canvas, 198.1 × 147.3 cm (78 × 58 in.). Tate, purchased 1963.
Basquiat had a poster of this work on his wall in 1979.

his capacity to appropriate and integrate the visual vocabulary of 20th-century western painting, while developing a style that was entirely his own. The first work he exhibited, in the *Times Square Show* in June 1980, was described by Jeffrey Deitch as ‘a knockout combination of de Kooning and subway spray-paint scribbles’.²⁷ In his ‘Radiant Child’ article, Rene Ricard famously wrote that ‘If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption, it would be Jean-Michel’.²⁸ It is tempting but misleading to suggest that Basquiat’s white male critics did not have the imagination to reach beyond canonical reference points. After all, Basquiat had an extensive collection of artist monographs that he used as source material, and when he and Mallouk visited MoMA she was struck that he ‘knew every inch of that museum, every painting, every room’.²⁹ Surely the critics responded to exactly his intention—to perform his art historical fluency in order to legitimise himself as an unknown, untrained, adolescent artist.

When Basquiat began to incorporate language into his work, it allowed his reference points to proliferate. These have often been treated tentatively, as if they were selected for their image over their meaning. But, as Greg Tate points out, ‘Basquiat comes from a people once forbidden literacy [...] [for whom] virtuosic wordplay pulls rank as a measure of one’s personal prowess [...] there are no such things as empty signifiers, only misapprehended ones’.³⁰ A shining example is *Jawbone of an Ass* (1982, pp.202–203), the title of which is taken from the King James Bible: ‘And Samson said, with the jawbone of an ass [...] have I slain a thousand men’.³¹ Samson was gifted with supernatural strength, which Basquiat conjures with the names of ancient warriors – Alexander the Great and Cleopatra but also obscure figures such as ‘SCIPIO’, a Roman general whose nickname ‘Scipio the African’ may have caught Basquiat’s attention. He was famed for defeating Hannibal, whose name is written elsewhere, offering a secondary allusion to the serial killer Dr Hannibal Lecter, who first appeared in Thomas Harris’ thriller *Red Dragon* in 1981. The connection is endorsed by the rhyme with ‘HECTOR’, a warrior renowned for his role in the Trojan War. These fighters are interspersed with the names of philosophers – ‘SOCRATES’, ‘VIRGIL’, ‘ANAXAGORAS’ – alongside a drawing of a pensive figure with the words ‘RODIN’S THINKER’ (an icon for philosophy). The conflation of these two strands suggests that the work can be read as a re-enactment of ‘the war of the mind’, often considered the theme of the biblical story. And perhaps Basquiat is also offering a playful nod to himself, given that Samson’s two weaknesses were a proclivity for untrustworthy women and his hair, without which he was powerless.

‘Originally I wanted to copy the whole [of] history down’, he explained in an interview with Henry Geldzahler in

1983, ‘but it was too tedious so I just stuck to the cast of characters’.³² Basquiat was a voracious autodidact, and what he wrote into his paintings was not just what he learned but *how* he learned. Like an exploded thesis, the work teems with the language of citation—footnotes, roman numerals, indices—as well as with grids, lines and vectors suggestive of a mind map or flow chart. Some of his most treasured source material consisted of diagrams designed to aid comprehension—from Leonardo da Vinci’s codices to astronomy charts to the illustrations in his volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Sometimes the connections between these fragments are transparent but often they are not, encouraging the viewer to engage actively in these complex fields of information if his meaning is to be understood. In this respect, Basquiat’s work enacts the epistemological anxieties of his age: the certainty of the grand Enlightenment narratives becoming redundant and giving way to a new era of relativism, pluralism and irony. As bell hooks notes, ‘like a secret chamber that can only be opened by those who can decipher hidden codes, Basquiat’s painting challenges folks who think that by merely looking they can “see”’.³³

PERFORMING EXPRESSION:

‘I wanted to make very direct paintings that people would feel the emotion behind.’³⁴

When Basquiat burst onto the scene in *New York/New Wave* at P.S.1 in February 1981, it was with a body of work that appeared to be a homage to abstract expressionism. There was the bold, monochromatic mark-making of Franz Kline, the striking colour of Mark Rothko, the delicate scratched lettering of Cy Twombly. Even the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, who like most visitors to the exhibition had not encountered Basquiat’s work before, picked it out in an interview as some of the best: ‘a little bit Cy Twombly but somehow that was interesting’.³⁵ Basquiat deeply admired these artists (and was clearly affected by Twombly’s retrospective at the Whitney in spring 1979) but he also used them as shorthand for the *idea* of expression.³⁶ The cage-like grimace of a head such as *Untitled* (1981, p.78) echoes the contorted mouths of paintings by Francis Bacon, whose work we know he admired (Fig. 3) and saw at Marlborough Gallery in spring 1980. ‘Some paint comes across directly on to the nervous system’, Bacon observed, in a comment that aptly describes Basquiat’s work of this period.³⁷ When asked which contemporary artists he liked, Basquiat frequently mentioned Francesco Clemente and Enzo Cucchi of the Transavanguardia movement. It was inevitable that he too would soon be labelled a ‘neo-expressionist’ – a sprawling category including artists ranging from Susan Rothenberg to Julian Schnabel and sometimes as far as Keith Haring – which may have proved helpful in providing a context (the international revival



Fig. 4: Tseng Kwong Chi. Window for Jean-Michel Basquiat's exhibition at Fun Gallery, New York, November 1982.

of expressionist painting) but which fails to address the complexity of how Basquiat played with and performed emotion within his work.

In his first American solo exhibition at the Annina Nosei Gallery, in March 1982, his canvases seethed with energy, literally dripping in paint, with layers of intense colours worked over one another into which he scrawled passages of swirling incisions, like the motion lines of action comics. Looking at a work such as *Untitled* (1982, pp.144–145), with its victorious boxer crowned with a thorny nimbus, fist held aloft, it is hard not to imagine the vigour required for its execution, especially given its scale. In the months leading up to the exhibition, Nosei offered the basement of her gallery to Basquiat as a studio, where he worked furiously to the repeated soundtrack of Ravel's *Boléro* – a piece of orchestral music as insistent as it is dramatic. Soon word had spread that his gallerist had locked him in a 'dungeon' to produce work. Even a review in *Flash Art International* mentioned the rumours that he was like a 'wild boy raised by wolves corralled into Annina's' when in fact he was 'more like a rock star, seemingly savage, but completely in control'.³⁸ When asked directly about the experience, Basquiat retorted, 'Oh Christ. If I was white, they would just call it an artist-in-residence'.³⁹

While undoubtedly true, Basquiat also deliberately underplays the degree to which he crafted the image of wild brilliance (this is an artist with such a keen sense of self-parody that he was known to hang a 'gone for ribs' sign on his door⁴⁰). With blue-chip gallery representation from Larry Gagosian on the West Coast and Bruno Bischofberger in Europe, Basquiat began to worry that he would be considered too slick. In the autumn of 1982, against the wishes of Annina Nosei, he worked feverishly in his Crosby Street loft on a new body of work to be shown in a solo exhibition at the Fun Gallery in the East Village. The gallery, which was opened by Patti Astor, an underground film star, and her partner Bill Stelling, offered Basquiat the right context in which to make a self-conscious return to a grittier aesthetic. The show was an enormous success but the drama with which it was staged is rarely discussed. In a letter to curator Richard Marshall in 1991, Stelling explained how Basquiat conceived it 'as a total installation where the architecture reflected the rawness of the work. He designed [...] a couple of sheetrock walls dividing the gallery space into three areas [which] were left half-finished, with exposed joint compound and metal studs'.⁴¹ Even the gallery windows were soaped up with glass wax so that they could be 'graffitied' before *St. Joe Louis* was hung in the middle (Fig. 4).

Basquiat frequently experimented with supports—from architectural salvage to canvases lashed to wooden cross-bars—which gave his work the desired look of improvised genius. Indeed, his dissemblance was so successful that he had to remind Henry Geldzahler (commissioner of cultural affairs for New York City) that all of his canvases were ‘well stretched even though it looks like [they] may not be’.⁴² Drawn to stories of passionate excess, Basquiat was able in some of his most powerful artwork to use the

materiality of his support to enhance the subject of the piece, as in *Eroica I* and *Eroica II* (1988, Fig. 6). Titled after Beethoven’s Third Symphony, the works bear a notable resemblance to the composer’s original manuscript, with lines of text and symbols reading like musical staves and the backgrounds given a tea-stained hue to resemble a historic patina. Beethoven’s symphony was originally dedicated to Napoleon, whom he held in great esteem, but when Napoleon declared himself ‘Emperor of France’ in 1804 the composer felt betrayed, famously tearing out the title page in a fit of rage, crossing out Napoleon’s name and retitling his composition *Eroica* (Fig. 5). The legendary story (which might have appealed to Basquiat given his particular love of crossing out words ‘so you will see them more’⁴³) is reflected in these compositions, which were originally made on a single sheet of paper before being torn in two and mounted on separate canvases.

‘Believe it or not I can actually draw [...] but I try and fight against it mostly.’⁴⁴

Jean-Michel Basquiat was an extraordinary painter and draughtsman, but he was so much more besides. He adored the Xerox machine, making collages, postcards and baseball cards (sometimes in collaboration with fellow artists Jennifer Stein and John Sex) and selling these wares outside MoMA (Fig. 7). He restyled T-shirts and boiler suits into abstract expressionist masterpieces with the tag ‘MAN-MADE’ long before Dapper Dan opened his hip-hop boutique in Harlem.⁴⁵ He donned these for performances, along with football helmets, painted and reworked with his own hair (p.131), and made drawings with his own blood (p.104). He was part of the ‘baby crowd’ at the Mudd Club, performing with Klaus Nomi in the early years and creating music that was ‘incomplete, abrasive and oddly beautiful’ with his band Gray.⁴⁶ He starred not only in *New York Beat* but also in nine episodes of Glenn O’Brien’s *TV Party* (and wrote live poetry across the screen from the control room), as well as in the video for Blondie’s ‘Rapture’ (1981) after Grandmaster Flash failed to show up. He was a regular DJ and produced the legendary single ‘Beat Bop’ with Rammellzee and K-Rob in 1983 (pp.172–173).⁴⁷ He sat for the great Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee (p.293) and was a model for the fashion house Comme des Garçons. It is no wonder that Basquiat’s work remains so popular: he was, as we would say today, the ultimate multi-hyphenate.⁴⁸

If performance is the common thread through this rich variety of activity then truth was its common aim. As the great writer and critic John Berger notes, ‘confronting his work, or being confronted by it, [is like] seeing through the lies (visual, verbal and acoustic) that are imposed on us every minute. Seeing those lies dismembered and undone



Fig. 5: Ludwig van Beethoven. Third Symphony, op.55, *Eroica*. Manuscript copy of the score with corrections and notes in Beethoven’s own hand, 1806. Archiv, Bibliothek und Sammlungen der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien.



Fig. 6: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Eroica II*, 1988. Acrylic and oil stick on paper mounted on canvas, 230 × 225.5 cm (90½ × 88¾ in.). Private collection.



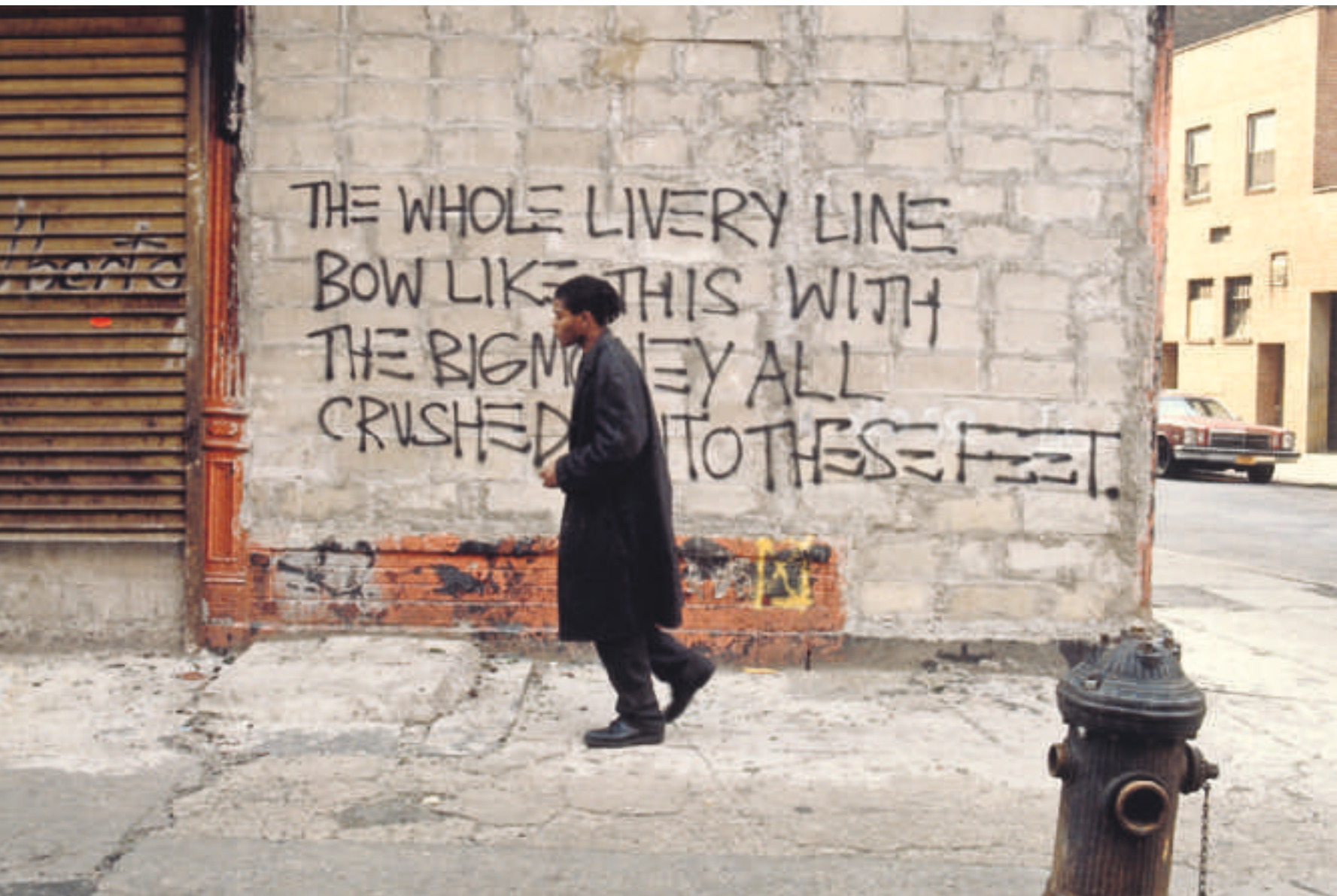
Fig.7: Robert Carrithers. Jean-Michel Basquiat outside Todd's Copy Shop, New York, 1980.

is the revelation'.⁴⁹ By all accounts, Basquiat was acutely perceptive—always watching how others responded to him and his work and playing with these insights to turn presumptions back on themselves. As Mallouk recalls, 'everything he did was an attack on racism and I loved him for that'.⁵⁰ So when we consider his performance of identity, knowledge and expression, we must think not only of the cultural climate that made these such hot topics for debate but also of the resistance that Basquiat continually faced in being accepted as an artist worthy of recognition regardless of his race. It is easy to forget that despite all of the commercial exhibitions, critical accolades and international

press, he never had a solo exhibition in an American museum in his lifetime. Basquiat used a whole encyclopaedia of subject matter to interrogate his experience of the world. A formidable work such as *Self-Portrait* (1981, p.168) captures this well: his image is distilled down into two silhouetted black heads, a crown of dreadlocks on each, the eyes and mouth lined with a menacing red crayon; to the left is the repeated name of the tenor sax player Ben Webster; to the right are lyrics from the bebop pioneer Thelonious Monk. Basquiat found a way to immortalise Rene Ricard's observation that 'one must become the iconic representation of oneself in this town'.⁵¹

1. SAMO©

Edo Bertoglio. *The Whole Livery Line*, Jean-Michel Basquiat on the set of *Downtown 81*, 1980–81.



In 1978, New York was on the brink of collapse. Three years earlier, in the midst of a financial crisis, President Gerald Ford had denied federal assistance to spare the city from bankruptcy. Violent crime in New York had doubled in the preceding decade, as had car thefts and assaults, while rape and burglary had tripled and robberies had increased a startling tenfold.¹ Bastions of middle-class life, such as the Bronx, were now nightly lit up by flames, as landlords looked to dispose of buildings that they could no longer let or maintain. Even Jackie Kennedy was compelled to compose a handwritten letter to Mayor Abraham Beame pleading, 'is it not cruel to let our city die by degrees, stripped of all her proud monuments?'²

It was in this context that a 17-year-old Jean-Michel Basquiat left home for good, and began writing cryptic graffiti with his former City-As-School classmate Al Diaz, signed by SAMO©. The city was awash with graffiti but the tone of theirs was different, capturing the imagination of the burgeoning art world in SoHo and the Lower East Side, where they focused their activity. Avant-garde musician, artist and philosopher Henry Flynt took 57 photographs that captured slogans ranging from 'SAMO© AS A CONGLOMERATE OF DORMANT-GENIOUS' to 'MY MOUTH / THEREFORE AN ERROR©'.³ Rumours were rife as to who was responsible (popular thought was an older, disgruntled conceptual artist) and on 21 September 1978 the *SoHo Weekly News* ran a photo of 'SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO BOOSH-WAH-ZEE FANTASIES... THINK...' accompanied by an appeal for the author to get in touch. A collaged response was composed, which the *SoHo Weekly News* published the following week: 'SAMO© AS A MEANS OF DRAWING ATTENTION TO INSIGNIFICANCE... WE'LL CONTACT YOU'.⁴

In the end, 'Jean' and 'Al' were revealed by Philip Faflick in the *Village Voice* on 11 December,⁵ which marked an end to their collaboration, underlined by Basquiat, who sprayed 'SAMO© IS DEAD' across their former territories. However, now that the name had earned him a certain degree of renown, Basquiat continued to use it – appearing as 'Samo' with Lisa Rosen on Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party* in April 1979; spray-painting live at the Canal Zone Party later that month; performing as part of his 'SAMO© Is Dead Jazz Band' at Arleen Schloss' loft in December; and exhibiting his first work in the *Times Square Show* in June 1980. SAMO© had tapped into the zeitgeist, bringing the satirical bite of the Beat writers into a new age. As a young Keith Haring (not yet aware of Basquiat) wrote in his journal about the recent Nova Convention on William Burroughs in 1978: 'it tied together all sorts of things that I was seeing – the way SAMO was using language on the street, the way Jenny Holzer was using language – and the whole performance aspect of language'.⁶

Eleanor Nairne