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Basquiat and Warhol "Togheter"

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Andy Warhol believed that every decade comes into sharper focus at its midpoint. In August, 1984, he expected the new fall season to be the critical turning point of the eighties, "when the people from the first five years will either become part of the future or part of the past."¹ He had had a leading role a similar rite twenty years before, when the mid-sixties winnowing process gave him his place in history, indelibly cross-referenced in the public's mind with tinned soup and trendsetting.

As 1985 approached it seems that Warhol wanted to be reminded that he was more than a sixties legend. Having befriended the rising star, Jean-Michel Basquiat, he was close to the newest art world intrigues. Warhol took note when the Village Voice called Basquiat "the most promising artist on the scene," and he happily recorded Keith Haring's judgment that Basquiat was "the biggest influence on the new artists." (*Diaries*, 5.22.84, and 8.20.84, respectively). In the early eighties Basquiat made the transition from Graffiti artist to successful Neo-Expressionist painter. Presenting crazy mask heads and stick figures in a chaos of frenetically scrawled words and abstract marks, his art epitomized the new brash style. In contrast to the apolitical lyricism of the Abstract Expressionists, Basquiat had a sardonic street-smart attitude and his subject involved biting rejoinders to American myths and racial stereotypes. His affinity with Warhol was one of content, rather than style: both artists responded to the joys and horrors of modern life with an ironic yet heartfelt ambivalence. The widespread resurgence of impassioned figuration and painterliness challenged Warhol, for his avant garde reputation hinged on his cool renunciations of Abstract Expressionist and modernist orthodoxies. After scandalizing the gullible mainstream in the sixties with the faulty news that assistants made his photo-derived silkscreened canvases in a factory-like situation, he had been imaginatively destabilizing the conventions and genres of painting ever since. Warhol's contributions to two exhibitions in September, 1984, illustrate his evolving contributions to the debate on the status of painting. In New York, Warhol's early paintings were featured in the exhibition *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance, 1958-1964*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. John Russell found the Warhols in *Blam!* to be a revelation: "Warhol's *Dick Tracy* of 1960 is not only a key image of its date, but an unexpectedly painterly one."² Concurrently in Zurich, Bruno Bischofberger exhibited new paintings on which Warhol had collaborated with the Neo-Expressionists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Francesco Clemente. (At the time the ages of the artists, were 56, 23, and 32, respectively). Thus, at the portentous midpoint of the eighties, Warhol could reassure himself he was instrumentally involved with the new generation

¹ *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, ed. Pat Hackett (New York: Warner Books, 1989), entry for 8.15.84. Quotations from this book are cited in the text as *Diaries*.

² John Russel, "When Art Came Out of the Studio and Mingled," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1984, p. 33.

of artists and take pride in the fact that his own classic works were now fueling a sixties revival. In 1984 Warhol and Basquiat were also engaged in another group of collaborative paintings, which they kept a secret from Bischofberger until the following years. (*Diaries*, 5.7.84). In contrast to the three-man collaborations, which involved transporting canvases back and forth to Clemente, most of these were executed in Warhol's studio. Basquiat's regular visits became a pleasurable combination of painting and socializing. Warhol was emotionally invested in this collaboration, so much so that he began to agonize about being jilted: "[Jean-Michel] is in Majorca. He's the new darling of the Bruno set. And I'm just expecting him one day to come and say, 'I hate all these paintings, rip them up'." (*Diaries*, 8.20.84). His worries were unfounded, for Tony Shafrazi presented the exhibition *Warhol / Basquiat Paintings* at his gallery in New York in September 1985. However, this show soured things for the artists. Shafrazi produced a poster that unwittingly undermined the idea of collaborative creativity. It showed the artists wearing Everlast boxing gear and masquerading as opponents ready to slug it out for the championship title. The poster was comic, provocative, and a visual treat. With hindsight I think this publicity was too smart for its own good, for all artist-personalities make easy targets, and Warhol regularly attracted criticism from those who see earnestness as a prerequisite of greatness. Shafrazi sold only one painting from the show and the reviews were very discouraging, causing the artists to drift apart. Neither lived long enough to see what time would make of their collaborations.

I want to see the Warhol-Basquiat paintings through the lens of the artists' deep-felt, yet fragile friendship. It should be noted that many new stars, from Haring to Schnabel, would have loved to make a two-person collaboration with Warhol, but Basquiat was the partner he chose. Their affection grew under professional circumstances: in October 1982 Bruno Bischofberger, their mutual dealer, escorted Basquiat to a lunch at Warhol's studio on Union Square. Bischofberger was a veteran Warhol supporter, and he had been interested in Basquiat for about a year, after seeing his work in *New York / New Wave* at P.S. 1., Long Island City.³ The two artists agreed to the exchange of portraits that Bischofberger had hoped for. After the lunch Warhol described Basquiat as "one of those kids who drove me crazy," and remembered him "when he used the name SAMO and [sat] on the sidewalk in Greenwich Village [painting on] T-shirts." (*Diaries*, 10.4.82). Prior to this business lunch, Glenn O'Brien, the music editor for Warhol's monthly magazine, *Interview*, had been a connection between the artists. O'Brien knew Basquiat from the downtown music scene centered at the Mudd Club, and cast him in the film *New York Beat* (1980, never released). Around 1981 Basquiat had made a few visits to Warhol's studio, and tried to sell him his painted clothes, drawings, and collages. He had hoped to be "discovered," but Warhol simply gave him small amounts of cash, and once, some Liquitex paint. Warhol had also recommended that Basquiat visit Serendipity, the uptown restaurant where he had sold his own shoe and golden boy drawings in the 1950s.⁴ However, friendship did not happen when the Graffiti artist made overtures; it only took root after the same wild-looking young man had won the hacking of an influential and imaginative art dealer.

In the twelve months after the lunch the artists met on countless occasions, exercising, dining, and partying together. Warhol became Basquiat's landlord in August, 1983, leasing him the carriage

³ See the biographical chronology compiled by M. Franklin Sirmans in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), p. 238. "New York / New Wave" featured works by 119 artists, including Warhol.

⁴ The Liquitex paint story is from "Jean-Michel Basquiat, as Told by Fred Braithwaite", a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy, "Interview", October 1992, p. 120. For a discussion of Warhol's connection to Serendipity and his progression from gay illustrator to gay Pop artist, see Trevor Fairbrother, "Tomorrow's Man," in Donna M. De Salvo, ed., *Success is a job in New York: The Early Art and Business of Andy Warhol* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 1989), pp. 59-74.

house he owned on Great Jones Street. They had fun. For example, Warhol relished the camp aspects of their pedicure sessions: "Jean-Michel and I went over to Yanna's, and we had our nails done... The two of us make a good story for *Vogue*." (*Diaries*, 8.29.83). I experienced a similarly mixture of entrepreneurial thinking and camaraderie when I visited Warhol's in November, 1983. I had just presented Warhol with a copy of my book on Singer Sargent's portrait drawings when Basquiat stopped by; Warhol autographed one of his books for me, and then asked Basquiat ("He's a great portraitist") to draw my portrait on the same page with the same pen. After delineating a face, Basquiat completed his image with the capricious and contradictive words NO FORE HEAD.

The brotherliness between Basquiat and Warhol was complicated. The bond involved attraction between opposites, but mostly it was forged from an instinctive union of lonely and brilliant outsiders. Both men confronted psychological and sociological obstacles in their lives, and they turned to the language of art to express themselves. They were also quirky individuals who broke certain conventions in similar ways. For example, they perfected outlandish personas involving big hair: Warhol donned screwy wigs and Basquiat fashioned medusa dreads. Warhol and Basquiat certainly differed with respect to age, race, class, sexuality, and artistic training, but on close inspection some of these disparities are less pointed than they might seem. Basquiat's father was Haitian, and his mother was of Puerto Rican descent. Warhol was curious about this: "He's black, but some people say he's Puerto Rican, so I don't know." (*Diaries*, 10.4.82). When he finally learned more about the father, Warhol tellingly associated that heritage with the cock he had spied on the son: "Jean-Michel is half Haitian and he really does have the biggest one." (*Diaries*, 11.29.83). Warhol's ethnic background was probably not of comparable interest to Basquiat: he was a world-famous white man. Nonetheless, Warhol, the gay son of catholic, working-class, Czechoslovakian immigrants, was no WASP scion.

Warhol knew that Basquiat was "a middle-class Brooklyn kid," and he assumed (wrongly) that he "went to college." (*Diaries*, 10.4.82). Basquiat had no formal artistic training, and Warhol was "surprised" when "Jean-Michel said he never finished high school." (*Diaries*, 8.22.83). Warhol was the more classic example of upward mobility and American success: he was a poor nobody whose art school degree brought escape from Pittsburgh, a job in New York, ascendancy and prosperity. But his first triumph was in the commercial world of illustration, a vocation traditionally deemed inferior to that of artist, and he remembered the stigma all his life. Having chosen to live as a non-closeted homosexual he experienced further social biases. Warhol's experiences differed from those of a black artist in a racist culture, but it is still fair to say that he, like Basquiat, knew what it is to be constantly dealt with as "other." Both artists had bodily scars to complement these psychic ones, for each suffered serious injuries in 1968: Warhol nearly died after being gunned down by an irate associate, and seven-year-old Basquiat had his spleen removed after being hit by a car. (In their 1985 boxing poster Warhol covered his body with a t-shirt, but Basquiat displayed the giant scar that ran down his belly.) Basquiat's obsession with anatomical diagrams and notations was directly connected to this accident: during his convalescence he received a copy of Gray's *Anatomy* from his mother, and the illustrations in that book had a profound impact on his mature art. After the shooting Warhol continued to be "Andy Warhol," when a more timid person would have changed the act. However, he became cautious about letting new people get too close too soon. Thus, Basquiat's use of hard drugs prevented Warhol from completely letting down his guard. After the artists had been good friends for over a year Warhol berated the studio assistant who didn't realize that Basquiat was not supposed to be told Warhol's home phone number: "He's a drug addict, so he's not dependable." (*Diaries*, 12.14.83).

Warhol's comments about Basquiat are often ambivalent and sometimes racist. "He has b. o." (*Diaries*, 8.17.83). "He was up front by the phones with big hard-on, like a baseball bat in his

pants." (*Diaries*, 4.12.84). "[His place is] a pigsty [and it] smells so much of pot." (*Diaries*, 8. 5.84). "[He] is so difficult, you never know what kind of mood he'll be in, what he'll be on." (*Diaries*, 10.7.84). "I think he's going to be the Big Black Painter... He just spends money." (*Diaries*, 10.31.84). Despite this litany of reservations, Warhol wanted the friendship. He would listen on the occasions when Basquiat got "paranoid" and said, "You're just using me, you're just using me" (*Diaries*, 10.7.84). He refused to allow Basquiat to romanticize the junkie life: "I told him that if he wanted to become a legend [like John Belushi], he should just keep going on like he was." (*Diaries*, 7.2.84). He tried to coach his friend about the social appearances he would have to make "as he becomes more and more famous." (*Diaries*, 10.7.84). Warhol also tried to alleviate his insecurities: "Jean-Michel called. He wanted some philosophy. He came over and we talked and he's afraid he's just going to be a flash in the pan." (*Diaries*, 9.5.83). He was surely flattered when Basquiat paid homage to him and his sixties work in a painting of a banana (*Brown Spots*, 1984). And he wisely anticipated the next hurdle that Basquiat would have to face, which was to take a pragmatic approach to the business side of being of famous artist: "Now he has to think about stuff to paint to sell. And how many screaming Negroes can you do? Well, I guess you can do them forever, but..." (*Diaries*, 10.31.84).

Warhol probably harbored a secret love for Basquiat. He made two full length portraits of him, wearing only a jockstrap, posed as Michelangelo's colossal statue of *David*. Warhol sent one of them to the exhibition *The New Portrait*, at P.S. 1, Long Island City, in April 1984.⁵ Moreover, he seemed comforted to hear Basquiat confess that he wouldn't accompany Warhol to a particular gay bar because it reminded him of "the old days when he didn't have any money and he would hustle and get ten dollars" (*Diaries*, 8.7.84). After Basquiat's death, Fred Braithwaite commented "Andy was a dad to him for sure."⁶

Basquiat and Warhol were equal partners in their collaborative paintings. Warhol seems to have been the first to paint on many of the canvases, and he was generous in leaving interesting spaces and providing lively visual situations for his buddy to play into. For example, in *Arm and Hammer II*, Warhol painted two copies of the macho logo for a leading American brand of baking soda. Basquiat chose to paint on only one of them: he depicted a black man playing a saxophone, turning the left half of the picture into an homage to the blues tradition and an affirmation of black achievement. Basquiat's Neo-Expressionist style guaranteed visual distortions, but his racial perspective and ironic attitude gave additional twists of meaning to his fiercely nonidealizing images: he seems to be saying "Here's the savage and primitive stuff that America expects from black artists." The two halves of the picture add up to an allegory of the inequality of American blacks and whites.

Warhol's most recognizable contributions to the collaborations are flat graphic motifs copied from advertisements and newspaper headlines. He often painted them so big as to be oppressive, but his deadpan technique gave them a worn-out, almost bogus aura. These passages become vaporous wails that hang in the air, dissolving very slowly. In contrast, Basquiat exercised a frenetic dancing force: his contributions often glower like damage. While he mimicked the rawness of pictures by children and naives, Basquiat made his marks with eloquence and assurance. He endowed them with a fierce presence that defies us with questions and refutations. On many occasions he wrote a word then drew a line through it, contradicting and interrogating all of its meanings and

⁵ See, Victor Bokris, *Warhol* (London: Frederick Muller, 1989), p. 462. Bokris provides an interesting set of opinions on the nature of Warhol's love for Basquiat. Jeffrey Deitch, curator of *The New Portrait*, made Warhol the literal and symbolic center of the large group exhibition.

⁶ Braithwaite quoted by Phoebe Hoban in "Samo is Dead: The Fall of Jean-Michel Basquiat," New York, September, 26, 1988, p. 42.

associations. For example, in *Arm and Hammer II* he cancelled out the white words ARM and HAMMER with broad black bands; then over those bands he painted and cancelled the words COMMEMORATIVE and ONE CENT. When he added the black musician to the middle of this clash of words, he confronted the viewer with his biggest concerns: Greg Tate has defined this as Basquiat's "obsession with the Black male body's history as property, pulverized meat, and popular entertainment," an obsession which involved "exhuming, exposing, and cutting up the nation's deep-sixed racial history."⁷

Paramount (1984) is a crowded atmosphere in which ragged swatches of color abutt and jostle each other, like a homespun response to Hans Hofmann's Abstract Expressionism. One of the areas of solid color is the red circle of the Paramount corporate logo: a mighty peak framed by a halo of stars. When you think about it, it's a classy yet cliched symbol of all that is good, optimistic, commercial, and corny in American culture; of course, most of us couldn't see it quite like that until Warhol quoted it in his paintings and prints of 1984-85. The Paramount logo dominated the canvas when Basquiat began to paint. He brushed on several areas of nasty fifties pink and painted onto the center one of his black spirits, a bestial soul with bared teeth and bloody eyes. This menacing presence is near a loony guy in a yellow flying saucer, and together they threaten access to the magic mountain. The painting is full to bursting with such disconcerting juxtapositions, involving words, numbers, lists, calculations, objectives, destinations, and three unfriendly silhouettes resembling that movie star President. Paramount is a disjointed visualization of the fleeting, fragmented experience that Baudelaire long ago called Modern Life. It is a reflection of the anguished place and time in which it was executed: Manhattan at the midpoint of a decade characterized by greed and excess.

In *Pontiac* (1984) the artists addressed racial and political issues even more bluntly. The painting is predominantly black and white, and its images shout over each other a kind of tough graffiti realness. A giant black Pontiac logo - a stereotypical image of a "Native American" warrior used to advertise Pontiac automobiles - prepares to scream. Two black crow stereotypes stand in front of the Pontiac, like neighborhood guys hanging out on a street corner. Even the defiant and deadly snake is getting freaked out by the mean looks ricocheting around the picture.⁸ "Repent and sin no more" is Warhol's chant off in the farthest corner of the canvas.

As much as they reflect all manner of pain, in ways appropriate to the eighties, these collaborative paintings also exist to bring distraction, release, and aesthetic pleasure. Many of them involve subjects that symbolize anguish, but others tip in the direction of playfulness and whimsy. These remind us of the brotherly spirit in which the artists worked. *Stoves* is relatively simple and charming: a heavenly blue background; folk-art flowers whose silhouettes look like crowned heads; and a chorus of comically defiant home appliances. Warhol painted the domestic machines by hand tracing over images he projected onto the canvas with an epidiascope. Basquiat's' imagination transformed them into exuberant characters, possibly recalling the children's books and cartoons in which inanimate things take on human faces. But on another level, he was also being SAMO, defacing an unblemished facade, challenging old orders, complicating the picture.

Hot Water feels grown up and sophisticated in comparison to *Stoves*. It is more abstract, and the canvas fails to contain the expansive mood of the composition. Letters of various sizes roll across the picture like racing clouds; some make words, but they leave no particular message. A golden trumpet floats on high, but the words HOT WATER mute its presence. Night and nightlife are

⁷ Greg Tate, *Flyboy In The Buttermilk: Essays On Contemporary America* (New York: Fireside, 1992), p. 238 (reprint of Tate's 1989 essay "Nobody Loves A Genius Child").

⁸ DON'T TREAD ON ME, the words that accompany the snake, was the motto of the first official American Flag, created during the War of Independence, and first raised on December 3, 1775.

suggested by diagrams of the moon's phases. This painting offers an experience akin to improvisatory music: pleasure comes from being with it and in it, catching the rhythms of colors, words, and images. Such magic grew confirms that the artists' friendship was also magical: it is the warmest legacy of their art.

It is sad that the collaboration led to a gradual separation. Warhol's art probably grew most as a result of their times together: he was inspired to create handpainted images for the first time in almost twenty years. Examples of his early presilkscreen canvases were warmly received in the 1984 exhibition *Blam!*, and it is now clear that he was revisiting such pictures as *\$199 Television* (1960) when he worked with Basquiat. Warhol admitted that he tried to paint some images "like Jean-Michel" and he said that the "paintings we're doing together are better when you can't tell who did which parts." (*Diaries*, 4.16.84). He was also frank about the aesthetic risk involved in the collaborations: "[Jean-Michel] painted over a painting that I did, and I don't know if it got better or not." (*Diaries*, 4.17.84). Warhol gave credit where it was due: "Jean-Michel got me into painting differently, and that's a good thing." (*Diaries*, 9.17.84). And he did this knowing that some considered him a bad influence on Basquiat. He even witnessed the dismay of Bruno and Yoyo Bischofberger when Basquiat began to use silkscreening in his own paintings: "They said it ruined his 'intuitive primitivism'." (*Diaries*, 10.30.84).

As I noted at the beginning of this text, Basquiat distanced himself Warhol after critics panned their 1985 exhibition at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery. In 1984 Vivien Raynor had heaped guarded praise on Basquiat in *The New York Times*: "[He] is a very promising painter, who has a chance of becoming a very good one, as long as he can withstand the forces that would make him an art-world mascot."⁹ Few, if any, artists are subjected to such a mascot challenge by America's mightiest newspaper, but then again no black artist had ever won the kind of "overnight success" that Raynor described with suspicion. A year later, Raynor reviewed the Warhol-Basquiat exhibition for the same newspaper. She began by reiterating her mascot comment, then delivered a failing grade to both artists: "The collaboration looks like one of Warhol's manipulations, [with Basquiat] as the all too willing accessory."¹⁰ Basquiat took these words to heart and distanced himself from Warhol. Three years later, *The New York Times* published a fairly long obituary notice for Basquiat, written by Michael Wines.¹¹ It listed the factors that might have contributed to the death of a reputed "genius" - the "whims of an all-white jury of artistic powers;" exploitation by "greedy art dealers and collectors;" and the fiber of the "social and artistic prodigy" who "pined for fame" and was "crushed by its burdens." With no hint of Vincent Fremont, Randi Hopkins, Margery King, John Kirk, Paige Powell, and Tony Shafrazi.

⁹ Vivien Raynor, "Art: Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat at Boone," *The New York Times*, May 11, 1984, p. 26.

¹⁰ Vivien Raynor, "Art: A Basquiat-Warhol Pas de Deux," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1985, p. 85.

¹¹ Michael Wines, "Jean-Michel Basquiat: Hazards of Sudden Success and Fame," *The New York Times*, August, 27, 1988, p. 9.