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The Immigrant Song

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Modernist art in our century has accomplished many things. It has created an international forum that transcends national borders and supersedes local languages and traditions. It has pushed the boundaries of our understanding of the psychological self again and again. It has engaged in constant bold experimentalism that has repeatedly altered its material, technical, and formal make-up.

However, it has seldom been recognized that in our century this same modernist art has also functioned as a means of integrating the cultural periphery with the expanding international cultural community. This has taken place numerous times as Western internationalism has repeatedly broadened its hegemony. It took place in Paris in the 10's and 20's when artists like Chagall, Brancusi and Mir - moved from provincial cultures such as Russia, Romania, and Catalonia, to take center stage in the European cultural world. It happened next in New York in the 40's and 50's when American Jews and Catholics gained a role in American cultural life from which they had previously been systematically excluded. And it is happening again today as people with non-European backgrounds, especially those of African and Asian heritage, are becoming active voices in contemporary culture. This integration is a double edged phenomenon. On the one hand, it reflects the constantly growing hegemony of Western capitalist values and their conquest of other cultures, resulting in a more homogeneous, less diverse world. On the other hand, it allows groups and individuals who were excluded from power to become integrated into the neo-bourgeois capitalist world-culture.

Both Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat were products of this process of cultural integration. The collaborations between them are of particular significance because each artist is representative of a distinct historical point in this integration process. Each artist's work also exemplifies the themes and strategies of his era. Thus, their collaboration represents a dialogue between two historical and cultural areas.

Andy Warhol grew up in a working class ghetto of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh at the time was America's premiere steel producer, an industrial city marred by pollution and defined by stark differences between rich and poor. His parents were immigrants from Slavic Europe. They were Catholic. His parents managed to establish a lower-middle class existence in Pittsburgh. Because Andy was the youngest child - and the most gifted - his family was able to send him to Carnegie Mellon University, a school specializing in art and technology. There he was first exposed to modernist art; he participated in a course of study that emphasized Bauhaus-derived teaching methods. Afterwards, he moved to New York and became a leading advertising designer. In 1960, he began his work as a Pop artist. To me, it is more than a coincidence that in that same year John F. Kennedy became the first Catholic President of the United States. Ten years earlier, it would have been impossible for a Catholic to be elected President. It would also have been more unlikely for a

poor Slavic boy to arrive at the pinnacle of the New York art world.

Jean-Michel Basquiat grew up in Brooklyn. He lived in Puerto Rico for a year when his father moved there for his work. Basquiat's father was an accountant born in Haiti. His mother was a first-generation Puerto Rico. Basquiat is sometimes labeled an African-American artist. However, despite the fact that he was obviously of African heritage, I believe it would be much more accurate to call him a Caribbean-American artist, since both his parents were of Caribbean background and the cultural tradition from which he emerged is very different from that of African-Americans, most of whom have been in the United States for over two hundred years. Basquiat first attended a Brooklyn private school for gifted children, St. Ann's. His parents divorced when he was seven. He subsequently also attended an experimental public high school, the City-as-School. By the age of 18, he had dropped out of school and left home to pursue a Bohemian fringe existence in the New York art music underground. By the age of 20, with the *Times Square Show*, he began exhibiting publicly.

Motivated by their outsider status, both Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat formed strategies for examining and critiquing the socio-political worlds in which they lived. Each artist was intent on unraveling the mysteries of the media-dominated capitalist culture which formed the world around him. Similarly, each artist struggled to achieve a definition of self based on his extreme sense of socially-triggered alienation. This commonality of purpose is at the heart of their collaboration. Andy Warhol was born into a simpler if more brutish world. It was a world that, following the war, was entirely ruled by American power and American cultural inventions. If mechanization had come to dominate exchange and production, Warhol wished to turn himself and his art into machines. If the value of the individual had been supplanted by the aura of the celebrity, he would become obsessed with fame and the famous, even attempting to turn everyday people into stars. If the culture had become addicted to periodic steroid-like charges of death and disaster, he would fill his art with dead movie stars, funereal Jackies, electric chairs, and car crashes.

By dint of his Caribbean background and New York upbringing, Jean-Michel Basquiat found very different ways of dealing with these same subjects. While Warhol sought to impersonalize his art-making mimicking the methods of American mass-production, Basquiat enthusiastically revived the spontaneous paint application and symbolic drawing of European modern art. If Warhol was disdainful of the heroic (and macho) anti-heroes of earlier decades, Basquiat sought to embrace heroic African-American musicians like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Jimi Hendrix, turning them into a lineage that could empower his own creative work. Like Warhol, Basquiat addresses the nature of industrial capitalism, but while Warhol focuses on images of the present, Basquiat work is filled with a complex, scholarly, Burroughs-inspired stream-of-consciousness tour through histories of the slave trade, traffic in agricultural commodities, and the role of currency. Perhaps only an artist of Caribbean background, a region dominated by a particularly cruel history of colonial domination, could be as passionate about these issues.

Although I lived in New York at the time of the Warhol-Basquiat collaboration, I never met Basquiat and visited with Andy Warhol only twice. Therefore, my impressions of their complex relation are primarily taken from the public and artistic record. According to his *Diary*, Warhol was capable of making blatantly racist remarks about Basquiat, especially at the beginning of their relationship. However, he also seems to have genuinely admired Basquiat's talent, and he soon became involved in trying to keep his young protégé off drugs. The relationship very much echoed Warhol's pattern in the 60's, when he had again and again become involved with highly creative, highly self-destructive younger people. From Basquiat's point of view, Warhol represented both a likely and unlikely mentor. Basquiat seems to have considered Warhol part of the mythology of the underground 60's that he so much admired. In addition, Basquiat was obsessively ambitious, and

Warhol certainly represented the height of visibility in the cultural world of New York. However, the pairing of the impulsive, highly sexual Basquiat with the aloof, delicate Warhol seems almost comically incongruous. Finally, it is ironic that the Warhol/Basquiat collaborations, which are a unique testament to their friendship, precipitated a major rift in the relationship between the two. When exhibited at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in 1985, the paintings were unfavorably received, with one reviewer implying Basquiat was even becoming Warhol's "mascot." After this event, Basquiat immediately began to distance himself from his friendship with Warhol.

The Warhol/Basquiat collaborations are unique because they represent both a confrontation and dialogue between two artists who used different methodologies to express similar political ideologies. Warhol believed in the simple "foregrounding" of images found in mass culture to reveal their significance. In most cases, he refuses to combine images in collage fashion, thus refusing to make linguistic connections between images, thus forcing the viewer to create any possible linguistic meaning. In this way, he refutes the methodology of his predecessor, Rauschenberg, and embraces Duchamp's earlier experiments with the ready-made.

In the collaborations, Warhol steadfastly adheres to this methodology. In all the paintings, it was Warhol who executed the bottom layer, over which Basquiat would paint. Warhol maintains his stance of radical passivity by declining to alter or cover any of Basquiat's contributions. But in his typically passive-dominant way, he creates both the composition and subject matter to which Basquiat must react.

In the collaborations, Warhol also maintains his classic iconography of images from the current capital cosmos. There are supermarket advertisements for "specials" on beef and for bananas. There are illustrations of consumer products such as stoves, lawn chairs, and sneakers. There are also newspaper headlines - a motif that Warhol had not used for many years. The most frequent element, though, that Warhol uses in the paintings is a group of American corporate logos - G.E., Mobil, Zenith, Arm and Hammer, Ford, Pontiac, and Paramount. Unlike Warhol's work of the 60's, most of these logos have a nostalgic quality - for example the Pontiac, Arm and Hammer, and Mobil logos were clearly designed in the 40's or 50's. One feels that, influenced by Basquiat, Warhol is flirting with subjective associations and memories in his choice of symbols. This is clearly true of the use of the Paramount logo - since in the early 80's Warhol was obsessively enamored of a young man who was an executive at the movie company. In addition, in certain canvases, Warhol introduces slogans from Christian revivalist literature, a move that may also have been inspired by Basquiat's example. At the same time, Warhol, with infinite subtlety, gives Basquiat a perfectly constructed world in which the younger artist can carry out his historical, political and spiritual commentaries. With his headlines, supermarket advertisements and corporate symbols, Warhol provides Basquiat an effective template of the commodified America against which Basquiat so passionately protested.

Given Warhol's rejection of much of the artistic culture of the 50's, it is ironic that in the collaborations, Basquiat performs a set of improvisations on Warhol's world reminiscent of the free associations of Beat poetry and avant-garde jazz. Like the artists, poets, and musicians of the 50's, Basquiat is intent on reinvesting banal commodity culture with spirituality while at the same time criticizing its hypocrisy. In *Drug King*, Warhol has silk-screened a newspaper headline that reads, "Nab E. Side Diet Doc As Drug King." Over this, Basquiat has painted a primitivistic African-influenced totem, whose shocking spiritual power is enhanced when we read it as a comment on the headline. In *Arm and Hammer II*, Warhol has silk-screened two Arm and Hammer logos side by side on the large canvas. (The depiction of the muscular white arm wielding a large metal hammer certainly harks back to Warhol's youth in industrial Pittsburgh.) Basquiat leaves the right-hand logo completely alone, but he transforms the left-hand logo into a poignant portrait of a black saxophone

player (probably Charlie Parker) that he labels "1955" and "one cent." In *Pontiac* Basquiat transforms the racist image of the Native American used in the logo into a god-like figure of mysterious power, while peppering the rest of the canvas with a series of talismanic figures, words, and symbols that establish a world of total animism. Throughout the collaborations, Basquiat powers of improvisation and invention are at their peak.

Finally, perhaps the richest aspect of these collaborations is their conversational quality and the respect each artist maintains for the very different point-of-view of his partner. We usually think of a collaboration as a creative act by which two people of similar persuasion work to achieve a unified and synthetic result. In the case of Basquiat and Warhol, collaboration is about dialogue and difference. Each artist steadfastly maintains his ideological and stylistic point of view. The play between the two men of dramatically different cultural heritages speaking to each other through the language of modernism is the unique achievement of these works.