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Arm & Hammer

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Two artistic layers, like composite, double-sided transparencies have been shuffled together, one over the other, networking, questioning, working on and reacting to one other; their backgrounds are divergent; with their intention to author pictures together two dichotomous artistic and private personas meet, each based on different premises and experienced in starkly contrasting conceptual spaces. Here artistic prides clash and create an explosive "stuff" which takes on, in both essence and design, an unusual, unorthodox form which inspires unforeseeable dimensions of content. Still, this correspondence creates an unmistakable pictorial language, an orthography of joint authorship, which symbolises artistic autonomies which have grown together.

The creative path which these two artists follow on a canvas - which will become a painting panorama - is different. New "space" is created in which statements, signs, logos, shapes and painterly traces, graphic and orthographic elements clearly want to drift apart. The united Olympic rings (*Olympics*, 1984, illustration p. 102) are torn apart by physiognomic abscesses and psychological affront. Content and form are on collision course: on the large surfaces of *Zenith* (1985, illustration pp. 130, 131) half-truths and banalities, children dreams and mortal trauma, bourgeois and anti-bourgeois, clichés and contradictions are given centre-stage, an explosive chaos. Creating an unordered bundle of trivialisation and fright, of childishness and perfection, a conglomeration of nonchalance and style. "Professionalism" and "dilettantism" reveal themselves as attitudes, facades, images of the artistic authors Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who in their collaborations are unified, forming contradictory pictorial dialogues and a "doubtful" order. The collaboration of these two artists is not the means to an end, to paint interesting, innovative, original pictures; it is fate and drama, play and desire, it is message. The collaboration flirts with the incompatibility of personal and artistic languages that strive to become a multidimensional and complex whole: a whole in the sphere of authentic doubt.

The trademark of a leading American baking soda manufacturer, Arm & Hammer, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the unusual process of working and producing together. The imbalance of strength which is developed during this time is the subject of the second version of *Arm & Hammer* (1985, illustration p. 14). The logo is unmistakable in its masculine imagery, it constrains the self-confidence of the makers, whose power and penetrating, challenging character can be interpreted and associated in the most different ways. (*Hammer and Sickle* - a Warhol image from 1977; the thin skinned drawn contours evoke Warhols early drawings of the fifties). The observer, the "client" at the receiving end of culture, can associate: the development of energy, creative potential, artistic potency, energy, impulse, authority, power (from the military meaning of the word "arm"). The straining, muscular arms movements appear indefatigable in their effort to wield the dull hammer. The red ring on the white circle - similar to a traffic sign - symbolises the never-ending closed circuit of giving and taking, of cause and effect. In this sense the logo refers to

the idea of the collaborations, it suggests the "circulus vitiosus" of form and content, caught in the connection of the inner and outer world, the endless myth of Sisyphus (especially for "us", who do not necessarily know how the logo works in its commercial context). Except for a few paint drips (see Warhols hand painted pictures of 1960-61 with their precise - imprecise, glossy representation of images of goods, an ironic refrain on abstract expressionism) the logo is "painted" in acrylic on canvas, intact and unadulterated. It is open to continual reinterpretation. The left version of the trademark (without a bib) has been reworked by Basquiat, giving the painting two distinct sides (like the two sides of a coin), a logical and an alogical version of the same image. Basquiat confronts the original logo with an irrational version, which consciously differs in both content and form from it (bearing in mind that "to hammer" can mean to work something out, and can also be used in the phrase "to hammer something into somebodys head"). The play on two-sidedness continues in the one cent copper coin, the colour of which corresponds to the brown skin colour of the left, outsider author. The signs text, as well as the seemingly clumsily hand-written clues are struck through, yet remain legible. A musical sound (the "blues") wafts out of the saxophone and blue colour patches emanate from "Liberty", Basquiat's ghostly childish playing figure, in the opposite direction of the Arm & Hammer symbol. The blue colour tones (as in "to feel blue") fall and drip into the painting, they seem to be the careless traces of a highly individual artistic and reflective process, which in this painting requires its own discreet half to preserve its own identity, the identity of "Liberty" for blacks, of freedom for art.

The blue, round typographic ornament of "General Electric", which Warhol has generously strewn over many of the paintings, can be associated with different directions and temperatures. The openings and limits of this symbol, which circles around itself, gives the impression - in contrast to the company image - of being rather harmless, decorative, playful, curlicue, ironic. This logo communicates, in different pictorial versions, with the hand drawn, painted and written elements of Jean-Michel Basquiat. The symbol is placed, applied or worked over on the canvas, a location and orientation seem random and without direction. GE "signs" the cycle of paintings, which are given signature-like titles by Basquiat (*Keep Frozen*, 1985, *Polizia*, 1985, (illustration pp. 117, 118), in many of the collaborations combined with hidden or struck-out textual allusions. These "references" give the paintings a further dimension, because the pictorial effect of the connection of these two heterogeneous artistic elements develops another level of meaning which deepens, irritates, challenges and riddles that connection. These nuances in the collaborations are a hallmark of Basquiat's contributions. His "hand writing" is personal and subjective, compared to the seemingly strict or feigned harmless "authoritarian" and anonymous typography of Warhol. Basquiat does not adapt the images, he raises them to a new level. A few examples show how Warhol literally played his images, signs, phrases and typographies to Basquiat and how they were tailored to his mentality. In the painting *Clearboy*, 1985 (illustration p. 115) Basquiat shows, at bottom left, a distorted, fire breathing Negroid figure, under which he draws a horizontal line, under which he draws the word "Clearboy" five times, in which the first syllable seems transparent, dissolved, reduced. Warhol shows him, in large and mighty letters, the open-ended term PROBLEMS, Basquiat replying with energetic red on the E. *Drug King*, 1984 (illustration p.112) shows the dynamic arrangement of large scale letters in a challengingly skewed, "fleeting" typography which knocks the already open-ended contextual meaning out of balance, out of equilibrium. Basquiat paints over some of letters which have been thrown down as a challenge to him in white, he wipes over, dismembers them, so that the Warhols word fragments appear dissolved (SIDE, DIET). In the lower centre he puts the ghostly, fetishistic head of a monkey drawn vertically, spreading its arms horizontally across the painting. He paints this animal physiognomy in the middle of the conceptual centre of the painting, namely between the words DRUG and KING (to be interpreted as part of the phrase DIET DOC AS

DRUG KING - a play on Basquiat's drug consumption, on health and dietary questions).

The dialogue in the collaborations is the result of the permutation of variants, of layers and inversions of the artistic languages on the canvas. Warhol and Basquiat are opposites, dealing with their own heterogeneous worlds, artistic concepts and contradictory identities. The two sides to their thinking are mirrored in their methodology and artistic pursuits, in which the content, techniques, images and colours are full of historical references. The "contours" of Basquiat and Warhol's artistic personalities are reflected in the contours of the drawn objects, signs and the steps on the way to artistic creation. On the painting *Olympics*, 1984 (illustration p. 102) Warhol's quietly ordered, colourfully painted multicoloured rings are concatenated - a metaphor for the partnership, and competition, between the artists. Basquiat's dull, rough and dryly applied "colourless" brown crosses the Olympic rings out. Warhol's slick contoured repetitions of Reagan's profile are countered by Basquiat with diabolical and grotesque faces, grimaces and reflections, and with derelict, dull brown coloured surfaces. (The amount for outlays in the red head of the former film star is a reminder of the large deficit in the Olympic year). Warhol's colours compete with black lines, the precise with the imprecise, historical importance with the banal, the objective with the subjective ego-trip of the young "outlaw". The numerical plays with the conceptual, the depth of space with the foreground. Tight, closed, knotted and tangled, the circles nevertheless present themselves as open; seemingly confident decisions appear in the midst of insecurity, the durable in the weak, in the search for the congruence of form and content.

The painting panorama *Sin more*, 1985 (illustration pp. 126, 127) is a paradigm of this dialogue principle. Two-sidedness is developed in extreme dialectic discourse, in the split of left and right, in the concreteness of black on white and with an extreme expansion of lines, contours and surfaces. Zones of conflict contain terms which communicate more or less easily (PYRAMID and PLASTIC BAG) or strictly and challengingly (SIN MORE - with parentheses or an exclamation mark?). The oversized glass symbolises content both metaphorically and of the inscribed word MILK. The instability of the dichotomy in the arrangement of the pictorial elements on the left and right of the painting is started by Warhol. The cut is not at the precise centre of the painting. The vague grey, which we know from the Tunafish Disasters and Crashes as an empty surface here meets a strict monochrome black surface - as a minimalistically constructed "hard edge" painting. Basquiat continues the dichotomy of the composition and completes it by adding containers to both sides, the bags and envelopes in complementary yellow and black - a colour combination which has proved popular throughout the history of art and design. The irony of the missing PYRAMID of three-dimensional, representational space is accentuated in the extreme flatness of Warhol and Basquiat's painting and in the use of the painted word PYRAMID itself, in which the letter A in the middle of the word - symbolises the issue at hand (accompanied by inconsequential numeric-statistical marks). The harmless openness of the beginning ends in an seemingly authoritarian order. SIN MORE is itself a stimulus in the alienation of values. By splitting these words between the black and grey surfaces and by highlighting them with a red surrounding we are confronted with an unexpected effect (IN RE). Contrary / inverse and centred, an essential and existential, subjective and objective identity is portrayed. This is the very centre of the meaning of the painting, the pure white of the letters attracts the attention of the spectator for whom the message is destined. At the same time it reflects the challenge with which the painting has presented itself and which is its *raison d'être*.

The collaborations of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol were done at a time which is associated with an enormous amount of political confrontation in domestic and international affairs, as well as in party politics and on social issues (the Reagan era). At the same time art was exploring new, free "space" to develop and itself became an important economic factor, which in turn

influenced the expectations of artists. (In his diary of the eighties Warhol reflects, time and again, on the development of prices of his works and those of his colleagues and compares them to the "going rate" for the collaborations). Warhol had reached the "zenith" of his world-wide fame. Basquiat, the young, underground artist could only have been amazed by the speed at which he had become the successful anti-star of the New York art scene. But this zenith turns out to be a questionable foundation. Whenever the logo Zenith (a manufacturer of electronic goods such as televisions) appears on one of their painting panoramas, for example in *Zenith*, 1985 (illustration pp. 130, 131) both Warhol and Basquiat - this collaborating pair of opposites - play, ironically, confidently and enigmatically with the questionability and weakness of apodictic signs, with the tipped scales that weigh "high" and "low", with the exchange and reversibility of hierarchic elements within a socio-cultural landscape: where artistic and trivial-cultural planes - as their collaborations show - are fusing together more and more.