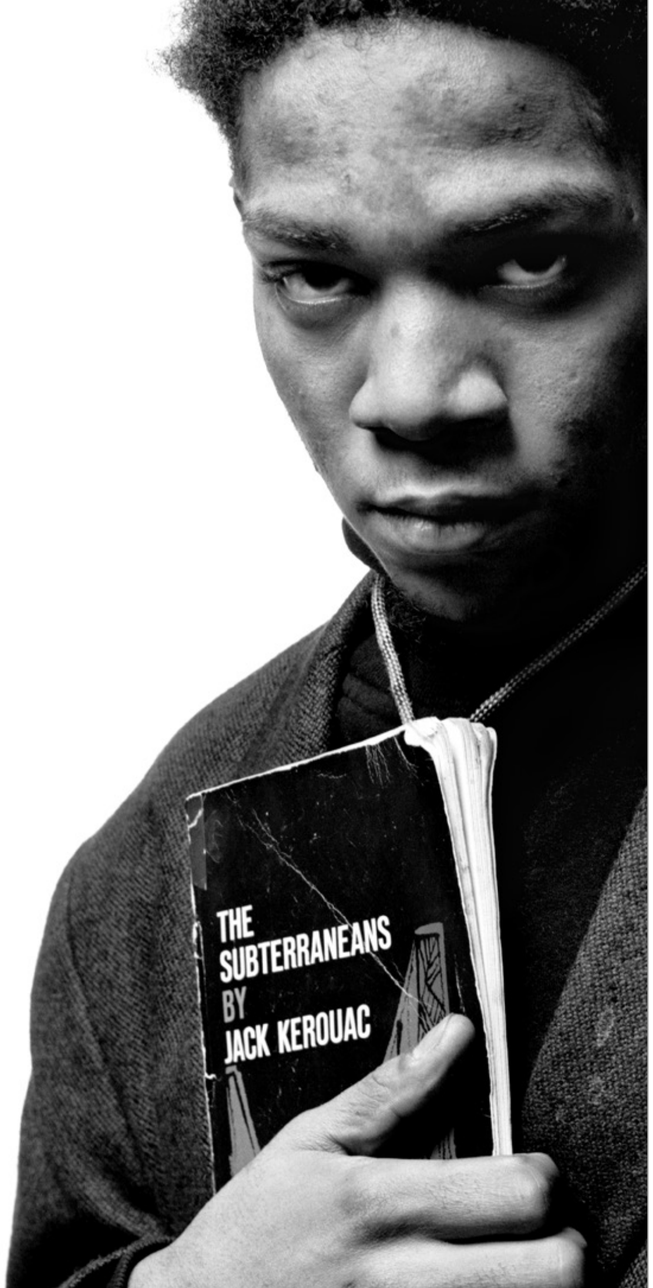


DIETER BUCHHART

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT: THE WORD AND POSTMODERN *DIFFÉRANCE*

"To write is to have the passion of the origin."

EDMOND JABÈS[1]

Jean-Michel Basquiat with *The Subterraneans* by Jack Kerouac, Paris, 1988.
© Jérôme Schlomoff

TRANSLATED BY BRIAN CURRID

(1) **Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Helmet)***, 1981
Acrylic and marker on football helmut
9 × 8 × 13 in. (23 × 20 × 33 cm)
Private Collection

"The word and the image are one. Painters and poets belong together," wrote Hugo Ball, the founder of the Dada movement, in his journal in 1916.[2] After Georges Braque's invention of *papier collé* in the fall of 1912, Dadaism and then Surrealism opened art to the overlap of writing and language. Following the Second World War, artists like Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha, On Kawara, Hanne Darboven, and Lawrence Weiner made words one of their main motifs and resources. Letters, numbers, words, and phrases became artistic motifs, objects, and part of artistic practice. Later with the conceptualism of the 1960s, artists declared written drafts, sketches, and instructions works of art, emphasizing the concept behind an artwork over its actual implementation.

Concordantly, Jean-Michel Basquiat turned to letters, words, numbers, lists, and phrases as artistic material in his own works. They were an integral part of his art, using "words like brushstrokes."[3] The Curator Klaus Kertess fittingly remarked: "In the beginning of [Basquiat's] 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."[4] And yet Basquiat, alongside artists such as David Salle or Julian Schnabel, usually associated with neo-expressionism, a movement counter to conceptualism that is described with terms such as "bad painting," "new image painting," or "wild style."[5] In her 2014 book, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, Jordana Moore Saggese sought to anchor the artist between neo- expressionism and conceptualism,[6] while in my own work I have focused on a conceptual view of Basquiat.[7] But to what extent did Basquiat differ from the neo-expressionists? How can his relationship to conceptual art be defined? And what role is played here by this intense use of words? The exhibition *The Unknown Notebooks* at the Brooklyn Museum established the importance of the artist's notebooks in his oeuvre,[8] but these questions can also be explored through his large-format drawings and paintings. The autonomous artistic value of his notebooks, which were not notebooks or sketchbooks in the classical sense, and their unique character [9] underscore the importance of the written word in Basquiat's artistic mission. The focus on Basquiat's word paintings enables a renewed look at his work and its place in art and cultural history.

"THAT'S ALL WORDS, THEY'RE ALL I HAVE" [10]

The use of language was part of Basquiat's artistic practice from his very first drawings to his poetically conceptual graffiti, and from his notebooks to his later drawings and paintings. In an interview with Basquiat, his friend Becky Johnston referred to his conceptual graffiti stating: "It was cryptic. It was political. It was poetic. It was funny."[11] The artist wrote graffiti from 1977 to 1979 with Al Diaz under the pseudonym SAMO©, using poetic and often critical phrases that provided the nutrient medium for him to fully develop his approach to words. The initial observation by the art scene that a "white representative of conceptual art"[12] lurked behind the name SAMO© provides an indication of how Basquiat's interests and concerns clearly deviated from those of the New York graffiti writers of the early 1980s, whose work was typified by a complex, overlapping form of graffiti called "Wild Style"[13]—a term that calls upon the Fauvists, or the "wild beasts." In the years to follow, Basquiat painted, drew, and wrote not only on anything that surrounded him in the apartments of his friends — from walls, refrigerators, televisions, and radiators to pieces of clothing (fig. 1)[14]— but also on anything that he found on the street: discarded windows and doors, a mirror, a cigar box, rubber, plank or old boards. He placed his marks, drawings, and words on objects of

(2) **Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Big Shoes***, 1983
Mixed media and collage on canvas
84 ¼ × 84 ¼ in. (214 × 214 cm)
Collection Bischofberger, Switzerland

everyday life that he either accidentally found or that he literally found in his way. In this way, the processed objects of public spaces always remained metonymically linked to the site of the street.

The exhibition at Fun Gallery, New York in November 1982, represented the start of a new body of works and marked the beginning of the third phase in Basquiat's oeuvre.[15] In 1982, in her *New York Times Magazine* article, "New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American Artist," Cathleen McGuigan described the exhibition: "Bold and colorful, the canvases were crudely, irregularly stretched, and the works had more of the gritty immediacy of the paintings he had done before he joined the Nosei gallery, returning to a more intense drawing of words and symbols."[16] Bruno Bischofberger, Basquiat's European dealer, noted, "I liked that show the best. The work was very rough, not easy, but likable. It was subtle and not too chic."[17] Basquiat showed works in which he was clearly engaging with the canvas supports, turning against the norm of the canvas stretched to fit a frame. Instead, he affixed the canvas to wooden forklift palettes **(plates 9,10)**, pieces of lumber **(plate 13)**, or wooden slats **(plate 1, 14)** that he bound with twine or nailed together to form assemblages.

In *Jack Johnson* (1982) **(plate 9)**, as with his other representations of famous African American boxers such as Cassius Clay, Jersey Joe Walcott, and Sugar Ray Robinson, the artist fastened the canvas to a forklift palette, letting the canvas hang over the edge so that, while it largely covered the sides of the wooden construction, it also created irregular folds. The canvas, symbolically analogous to the famous boxers, seems literally untamed. Jack Johnson, the first African American world-champion heavyweight boxer—holding the title between 1908 and 1915—and one of the artist's heroes, is alluded to schematically in oil pastels. The anonymous figure is reduced to a black face and a black hand that is raised in a victorious gesture. The crown hovering above the figure along with the inscription of the subject's name in capital letters transform the silhouette of an African American man into a portrait of the famous boxer.

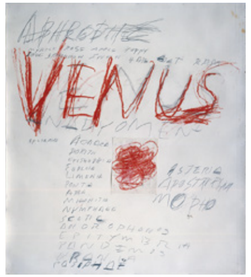
Basquiat created another word monument to the jazz musician Charlie Parker in *CPRKR* (1982) **(plate 1)** referring to him as CHARLES THE FIRST, focusing entirely on words and symbols, over figurative elements. He bound the lumber supports with twine and collaged a sheet

of paper onto the canvas, filling it almost entirely. The use of the cross and the largely symmetrical arrangement of words evoke a gravestone, whereas *CPRKR* consists of the initial C from the musician's first name and PRKR, the musician's surname without vowels, a term that derives from the Latin *vocalis*, or "vocal sounding (letters)." With the words STANHOPE HOTEL / APRIL SECOND / NINETEEN FIFTY ~~THREE~~ FIVE, Basquiat refers to three different events: the first being Parker's death at the Stanhope Hotel on March 12, 1955, and the second being April 2, 1955, the date of the posthumous memorial concert that took place at Carnegie Hall.[18] And third, as in *Big Shoes* (1983) **(fig. 2)**, Basquiat refers in the upper left-hand corner to the death of the musician's daughter Pree at age two. By crossing out the number, the artist sought to emphasize the date–once stating: "I cross out words… so you will see them more: the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them."[19] Here, the year of the daughter's death is overwritten with the year of the death of her father, who, without the vowels in his name, seems muted. At the same time, he lives on in his music, as the reference to the memorial concert conveys. The denomination of CHARLES THE FIRST makes him immortal, as Basquiat emphasizes by adding the Roman numeral I under FIRST, like that of a king or emperor.

The critical role of words in Basquiat's practice is summed up in *Moses and the Egyptians* (1982) **(plate 6)**, in which he references the narrative from the Old Testament by depicting the arches of the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, which Moses received from God on Mount Sinai. He creates an evocative space between the stone tablets, with the name MOSES repeated several times, an allusion to a male profile, an eye, the Israelites, the Egyptians, and reference to the ten plagues prophesied by God that beset the Egyptians. Through deep engagement with words from the Bible, Basquiat alludes to the religious belief that creation began with the word: "In the beginning, there was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God" (John 1:1). Basquiat intentionally misspelled words to create word mutations, thereby Egyptians became EYGYTIANS and Israelites ISREALLITES and Ten Plagues became TEN PLAUGES. In this way, the artist questioned the unchangeable, divine-like nature of language of the word. Even if he recognizes the word and language as a system of signs that serves the purpose of communication, and the foundation of human culture, he contradicts and questions its absolute character. He emphasizes *différance*—a word created by Jacques Derrida from the French words for "difference" and "deferral"—and the ambiguity of word and text in Derrida's sense.[20] As Basquiat alludes to in his association to events in the Torah and Bible (for example, STAFF INTO SERPENT TRICK, a reference to when Moses transformed a staff into a serpent and the Pharaoh dismissed the act as a magic trick) he frees the letters of the holy writ from the traditional use of language by means of William Burroughs's cut-up technique in which the writer disassembled texts and rearranged the pieces in order to create a new text.

Brion Gysin, a British artist and poet known for his use of the cut-up technique, summed up his own unorthodox use of language in the short essay "Minutes to Go" with the following striking words:

> Pick a book any book cut it up/ cut up/ prose/ poems/ newspapers/ magazines/ the bible/ the koran/ the book of mormon/ la-tzu/ confucius/ the bhagavad gita/ anything/ letters/ business correspondence/ ads/ all the words.[21]



(3) **Cy Twombly, *Venus*,** 1975
Collage, oil stick, pencil, oil paint
59 1/16 × 53 15/16 in. (150 × 137 cm)

(4) **Cy Twombly, *Apollo*,** 1975
Collage, oil stick, pencil, oil paint
59 1/16 × 52 3/4 in. (150 × 134 cm)

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS'S CUT-UPS AND BASQUIAT'S CONCRETE HIP-HOP POETRY

Basquiat appropriated the everyday and what he perceived by means of his five senses, placing not only language but also his entire environment, collective conscience, and knowledge onto various surfaces. Suzanne Mallouk —longtime romantic companion of Basquiat's— once described Basquiat's process by stating: "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." [22] Basquiat's art was based on personal and collected knowledge, consciously copying and introducing chance as an artistic strategy to transform found aesthetic material. His spaces of knowledge recall the copy-and-paste practice of sampling from the Internet and post-Internet generations, and recalls Burroughs's own literary practice. "Life is a cut-up," Burroughs once said. "As soon as you can 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." [23] During the emergence of hip-hop culture in the early 1980s, Burroughs struck a chord with the early practitioners, due to the similarities in their creative approaches. Basquiat's art can thus be seen in the field of overlaps marked by concrete poetry, Burroughs's cut-up technique, and the rise of rap in hip-hop.

In Basquiat's triptych *Five Fish Species* (1983) **(plate 15)**, he conveyed a dubious monument to the writer. The artist writes BURROUGH'S BULLET© and 1951, in reference to the fateful date of September 6, when Burroughs shot and killed his wife, Joan Vollmer, in Mexico City, while reenacting the legend of William Tell who shot an apple off his son's head. [24] Using a copyright symbol on the left panel, Basquiat mercilessly transforms the bullet that killed Vollmer to Burroughs's branding. Basquiat schematically depicts her skull, revealing parts of the anatomy beneath, marked as the bullet's target with an arrow at the end of a dotted line and a red cross in a circle—for it was the "MOTHERFUCKN SKULLBONE" that collapsed, allowing the bullet to enter into Vollmer's brain, ultimately killing her. In a provocative homage to Burroughs, Basquiat evokes Burroughs's own merciless depiction of life's sorrows and misfortunes while also emulating Burroughs's divergence from social norms and his radical artistic innovation: life as a permanent, brutal cut-up.

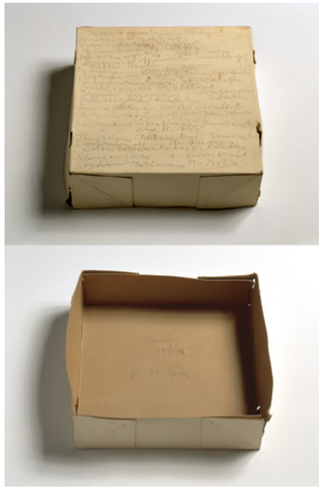
During the same period, Basquiat also underscored his great interest in the anatomy of the skull in his work *Masonic Lodge* (1983) **(plate 16)**, where, like a collection of quotations from the famous classic of human anatomy *Gray's Anatomy* [25] by Henry Gray and drawings by Leonardo da Vinci, he engaged with views of the skull and jaw from various angles and formal congruencies. By doing so, he created both a lexical and visual cut-up. Like a title, he wrote PARANOID SCHIZOPHRENIA, but, by crossing out most of the letters, he placed the human psyche at the opposite pole of the one-sided view of anatomy.

Öyvind Fahlström's reference in 1953 to the relation between content and form in his "Manifesto for Concrete Poetry" is echoed in *CPRKR* and *Moses and the Egyptians*: "Nowadays the connecting element has a tendency to be content, both descriptive and ideational content. But it is best if form and content are one." [26] In *CPRKR*, Basquiat created a visual unity of the text. Entirely in the sense of Fahlström's demand to make form and content one, as well as to define language as a material with a wealth of experimental possibilities, Basquiat not only freed himself from traditional language but also created a new network of references. "Squeeze the language material: that is what can be titled concrete." [27] Grammar is replaced by simple visual alternation, augmentation, and rhythms. The basis of Fahlström's concrete poetry is rhythm as a physically effective means of design as well as the joy of recognizing repetition. Basquiat takes this even further, using word mutations and repetitions like those of the name "Moses." His letters, words, and drawings create a visual rhythm, like drawn versions of sound poems by artists such as Raoul Hausmann or Kurt Schwitters and his "Ursonate." Accordingly, hip-hop artist Fab 5 Freddy once noted, "If you read the canvases out loud to yourself, the repetition, the rhythm, you can hear Jean-Michel thinking." [28] Although Basquiat's linguistic squeezing may be indebted to Fahlström, his sampling and scratching belongs to his own artistic practice. In his works, he deleted by way of crossing out letters and words, transforming words. He continuously tested letters and words both for their sound and for the context of their meaning. The use of frame shifts, word-point mutations, and sampling and scratching are among Basquiat's artistic strategies. His works are like a concrete poetry of hip-hop that were created using a cut-and-paste technique.

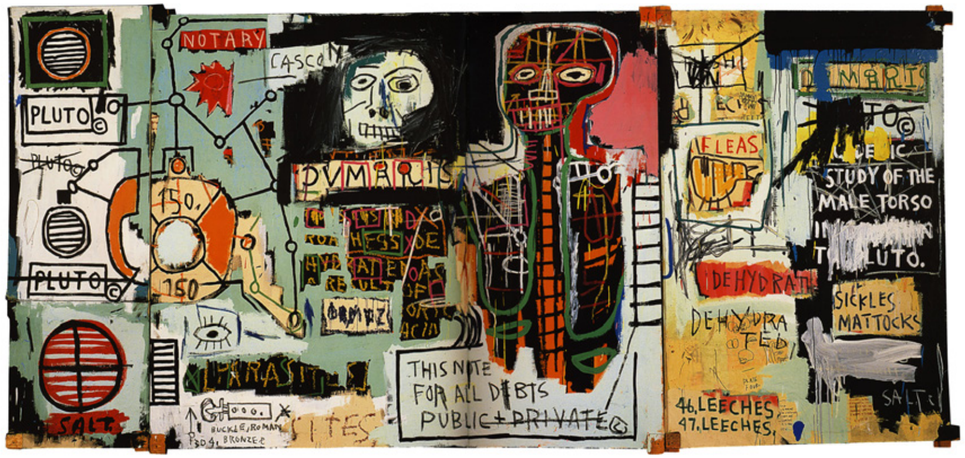
In his paintings, the combination of pentimento, acrylic, oil pastels, and collage resulted in a form of painted hip-hop. Music producer, Greg Tate noted that Basquiat was "hip-hop's greatest contribution to modernism (and vice versa)." [29] The comparison is justified in that Basquiat had a great interest in music, worked at various Manhattan clubs as a DJ, participated in rap collaborations, and created noise music along with Nicholas Taylor and Michael Holman in their band Gray. [30] Furthermore, this comparison is emphasized by the fact that his works virtually challenge the beholder to rap to them. Drawing on his musical interests, he produced a series of paintings that explicitly referenced his musical heroes, such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, or Duke Ellington, in works like *Discography (Two)* (1983) **(plate 11)** or *Now's the Time* (1985) **(plate 13)**.

In *Now's the Time*, a round wooden disc with a diameter of 92 ½ inches (2.35 meters) forms the basis for a monumental homage to Charlie Parker and his 1945 jazz composition "Now's the Time." The heavy support, forty years after Parker wrote the jazz standard, becomes itself an oversize representation of a record, which Basquiat alludes to with two concentric circles in oil pastel after painting the wood disk black. He notated the composition title with a copyright symbol and the soundless abbreviation of the artist's name PRKR without vowels on the record. In so doing, the letters and squeezed-out words remain the subjects of the painting, and, like *Discography (Two)*, form a concrete hip-hop poem.

Perceiving himself "not as a painter, but as 'writer' of tables, lists, and vocabulary books," Basquiat lists the discography of a jazz recording in *Fats II* (1987). [31] In an interview with Basquiat, art historian Henry Geldzahler articulated his interest in the artist's drawings that are like lists of things, to which Basquiat replied: "I was making one in an airplane once. I was copying some stuff out of a Roman sculpture book. This lady said, 'Oh, what are you studying.' I said, 'It's a drawing.'" [32] Basquiat's knowledge-based artistic strategies raise questions familiar to 1990s and current contextual art, rather than the formal and stylistic issues of 1980s painting. But there are also clear parallels between the work of Basquiat and the lists in Cy Twombly's *Venus* and *Apollo* (1975), for example **(fig. 3 and fig. 4)**, as well as with Joseph Beuys's lists. While the lists of Twombly and Basquiat share an "inimitable line," [33] Beuys's lists are either handwritten, as in *Unbetitelt (Heilkräuterverzeichnis der im Garten des Künstlers wachsenden Pflanzen)* from 1974 **(fig. 5)**, or typed. Geldzahler continues:



(5) **Joseph Beuys, *Unbetitelt (Heilkräuterverzeichnis der im Garten des Künstlers wachsenden Pflanzen)*,** 1974
Pencil on cardboard
13 × 13 × 6 in. (33.5 × 33.5 × 15 cm)
Sammlung Rheingold
Viehof Collection formerly Speck Collection



"Thus his preoccupation with lists; he once described his subject matter as 'Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets.' The lists that are one recurrent feature of his work in both drawing and painting are derived from 'copying names out of text books and condensed histories' (his words). Anatomy, geography, cartography, dentistry, the Bible, chemistry, alchemy and the dictionary itself provide him with subjects for his public musings. We are in the presence of both a blackboard in some college course, and the scribbled anger of contemporary urban graffiti. It is a semi-ironical respect for information gathering, a proper evaluation of its weights and pomposities, or rather its absurdities, that animates these works." [34]

In the same format as *Discography (Two)*, Basquiat also created *Low Boy in Junkie Paradise* (1983) **(plate 12)**, another homage to Charlie Parker, at around the same time. In contrast with *Discography (Two)*, the artist here draws with a brush in black against a yellow background, notating a bar of sheet music from the composition "Red Cross" by Parker. Basquiat couples an anatomical drawing of the musician's hand and the mouthpiece of his alto saxophone with the Latin phrase "LUX LUCET IN TENEBRIS," or "The light shines in the darkness," as a reference to the genius of the jazz musician.

(6) **Jean-Michel Basquiat,** ***Notary,*** 1983
Acrylic, oilstick, and paper collage on canvas mounted on wood supports
Triptych: 71 × 158 in. (180 × 401 cm)

Basquiat's painting *Untitled (Hand Anatomy)* (1982) **(plate 14)**, also serves as a dedication to the anatomy of the hand. The hand is crucial to both the musician and the artist as a part of the body involved in the act of creation. With the attribute SENSORY and the mutation of the word MOTARY—probably derived from "motoric"—he evokes the sensory and the motoric EDUCATION required for the use of the hand.

DIFFÉRANCE AND POSTMODERN POLYVOCALITY

In the spring of 1983, Basquiat's works achieved their greatest complexity in terms of their visual themes and artistic strategies, which he combined and varied depending on the subject. Basquiat's work remained in part gestural, always rendering his line "inimitable" [35] and working in an energetic and uninhibited manner.[36] He masterfully contrasted the void of some works with the *horror vacui*—a space replete with detail resulting from a fear of emptiness — of others.

In this same year, in addition to notable paintings such as *Notary* **(fig. 6)**, *Mitchell Crew* **(fig. 7)**, and *In Italian* **(fig. 8)**, the artist created an important series of twelve monumental square canvases each measuring 84 × 84 in. (213.5 × 213.5 cm) in size.[37] These include paintings such as *Museum Security (Broadway Meltdown)* **(fig. 11)**, *Hollywood Africans* **(fig. 10)**, *Big Shoes* **(fig. 2)**, *New* **(plate 3)**, *Fake* **(plate 4)**,

(7) **Jean-Michel Basquiat,** ***Mitchell Crew,*** 1983
Acrylic, oilstick, and xerox collage on canvas mounted on wood supports with chain
Triptych: 71 ½ × 137 ¾ in. (181.5 × 350 cm)

(8) **Jean-Michel Basquiat, *In Italian*,** 1983
Acrylic, oilstick, and marker on canvas mounted on wood supports
Diptych: 88 ½ × 80 in. (225 × 203 cm)
Courtesy The Brant Foundation, Greenwich, CT.

Thesis (plate 5), and *Natives Carrying Things* (plate 2). Despite the variation of the works, their simultaneous production is evidenced through the unanimous play between complexity and reduction, and the recurrence of certain motifs and words.

These paintings clearly reflect how Basquiat set his powerful compositions against hierarchies and rules, taking inspiration from cartoons, children's drawings, advertising, and pop art, as well as Aztec, African, Greek, Roman, and everyday culture. He constantly needed "some source material around . . . to work off," [38] and found inspiration in everything around him. Filled with words, skeleton-like silhouettes, masklike grimaces, and pictograms, his works are highly contemporary and explosive. The series from 1983 includes all of Basquiat's major subjects: music, anatomy, sport, comics, work, money, economy, becoming and passing, the history of African Americans, and art history. His engagement with sociopolitical questions ranging from discrimination and prejudice to capitalism, the market, and repression reach a climax in these paintings.

Employing both verbal and visual contrasts, the diptych *New* (plate 3) and *Fake* (plate 4) reveal a basic principle of Basquiat's artistic practice: duality. In this diptych, Basquiat contrasts REAL and NEW LEONARDO-DA VINCI with FAKE LEONARDO. DA.VINCI. "New" is framed in the star-shaped symbol utilized by advertisers to draw attention to a word whereas "Fake" is definitively crossed out and then reinscribed above in larger, bolder letters.

In *Thesis* (plate 5), the visceral red paint that has been generously applied to the surface contrasts with fragmented phrases and erratically appearing words: "Mona Lisa/Falling the stairs/down," "Trojan horse," "A good painting," etc. A painting from the same series, *Leonardo and His Five Grotesque Heads* (fig. 9) associates the heads referenced in the title with GROTESQUE, UGLY, A. GROUP OF ELDERS, and PLAGUE. In so doing, the artist creates a relationship of tension between these different visual events. The striking opposition found in *NEW* and *FAKE* can

(9) **Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Leonardo and His Five Grotesque Heads*,** 1983
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas
84 × 84 in. (213.5 × 213.5 cm)
Private collection. Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

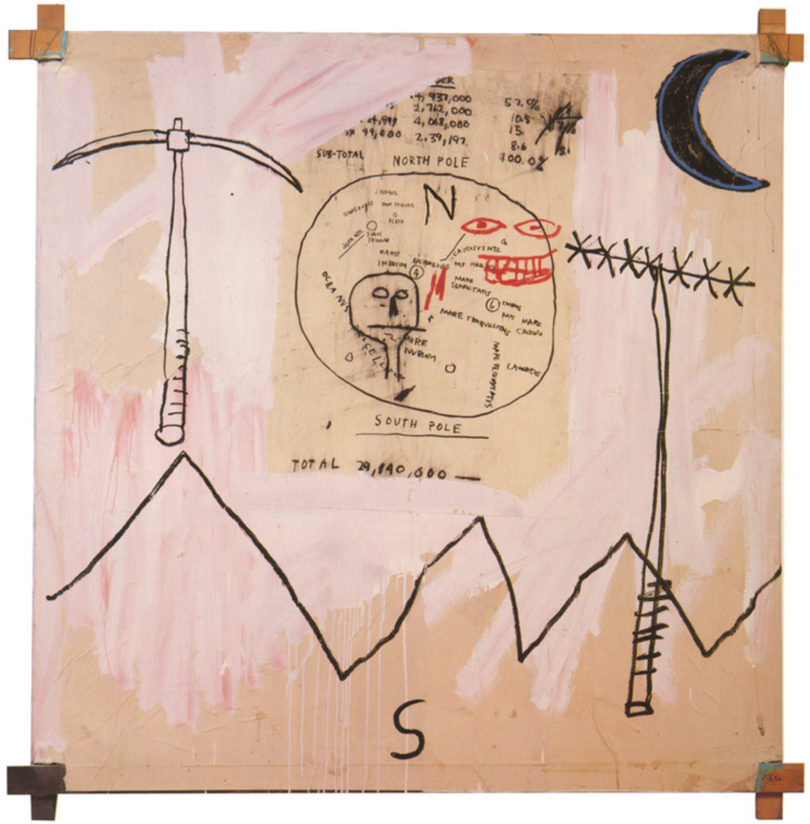
(10) **Jean-Michel Basquiat,** ***Hollywood Africans*****,** 1983
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas
84 × 84 in. (213.5 × 213.5 cm)
Gift of Douglas S. Cramer, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

(11) **Jean-Michel Basquiat,** ***Museum Security (Broadway Meltdown)*****,** 1983
Acrylic, oilstick, and paper collage on canvas
84 × 84 in. (213.5 × 213.5 cm)
Private collection, on permanent loan to the Fondation Beyeler

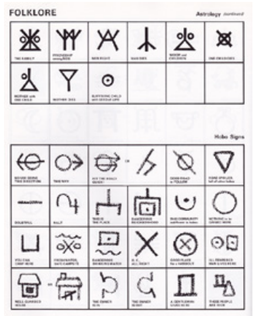
also be found in *Dos Pájaros* from 1985 (fig. 12), which portrays two bird heads labeled with BUENO and MALO. In other works, he makes use of opposites such as LEFT and RIGHT, FAMOUS and NOT FAMOUS, or SALT and PEPPER. In *Both Poles* (fig. 13), the South Pole is opposed with the North Pole, which, like everything else in this world, exist because of the other, like white and black, salt and pepper, left and right, good and bad. Basquiat builds, on the one hand, an arc of tension using juxtaposition; on the other hand, he brings them together—like yin and yang—in their mutual dependency. Accordingly, the artist uses the oppositions of language, but, like Derrida, he rejects the idea that these opposites are true or REAL, thus revealing their arbitrary nature.

Basquiat was never interested in painting per se. His works are always borne by the polyvocality of postmodernism [39] in the sense of polymorphism as a key paradigm of modernity.[40] For example, in *Untitled (Oreo)* (1988) (plate. 21) the artist plays against the strong green background of the

(12) **Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Dos Pájaros*,** 1985
Acrylic and oilstick on wood
60 × 96 in. (152.5 × 244 cm)



(13) **Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Both Poles*,** 1982
Acrylic, oilstick and, paper collage on paper mounted on canvas with tied wood supports
67 × 67 in. (170 × 170 cm)



canvas, "like a giant notebook page," [41] with the ambiguity of the word OREO and the monumental impact of the concept. Here, Basquiat was possibly referring to the logo of the American cookie (fig. 14) that consists of two black wafers with a white filling, while simultaneously referring to the idea that "in the African-American community . . . an Oreo is used as a racial slur to insult blacks who 'act white' or identify as such." [42] The logo of the double cookie thus becomes perhaps a hidden self-portrait, since Basquiat was accused of adapting to the white art world.[43]

In *Eroica I* (plate 7) and *Eroica II* (plate 8), both dating from 1988, which had originally been a single work that was cut into two parts after completion, the artist's engagement with death is revealed through the words MAN DIES as well as through the sign for "Man Dies" that Basquiat sourced from the "Astrology" section of Henry Dreyfuss's *Symbol Sourcebook* (fig. 15).[44] The repetition of MAN DIES and the word EROICA—referring to Beethoven's Third Symphony, along with the lexical list of terms, the explosive TNT, and the clear obliteration of other words by means of a bluish-white color field, Basquiat opens a rich space of association. Here, he seems to follow the model of improvisation, appropriation,[45] and intuition,[46] which art historian Robert Farris Thompson theorizes that Basquiat "cancels to reveal." [47] In this process, the legibility of the words and concepts, including those that are crossed out, move to the forefront of the work: "He was endlessly crossing out words, writing them again, correcting, emphasizing, obliterating, inexplicably changing the subject, and pulling it all together with a grimacing mask." [48] Similarly, in the drawing *Pegasus* (fig. 16) from 1987, a black mass obstructs the upper portion of a great density of signs, symbols, and words, alluding to an obliteration of a wealth of ideas. Employing this black over-paint, Basquiat obliterates his memory, knowledge, and everyday life, and by this our collective memory.

As art critic Lisa Liebmann pointed out in 1982, his interest in making the context of his words, signs, and symbols clear finds its basis in his text-based graffiti works. His works "oddly enough . . . give the impression of having been influenced by graffiti, rather than having evolved from it." [49] Liebmann points to the artistic independence and unique intention of Basquiat's relation to graffiti—his search to link image and text to one another in an associative relationship.

In *Eroica I*, *Eroica II*, and *Pegasus*, Basquiat's engagement with *différance* reaches its culmination. The link to the parallel development of hip-hop, Burroughs's cut-ups, and concrete poetry, as curator Franklin Sirmans noted, is distinctly palpable. "Aside from the 'explicit lyrics' of these public wall writings and early drawings, it is Basquiat's overall inventiveness in marrying text and image—with words cut, pasted, recycled, scratched out, and repeated—that speaks out for the innovation inherent in the hip-hop moment of the late 1970s." [50]

The power of Basquiat's lines and their ties to the artist's physicality remains unique. The line in works like *Thesis* (plate 5) is a battle-ready, injurious line, executed in a razor-sharp way. His

(14) Oreo cookie

(15) Astrology and hobo signs from *Symbol Sourcebook. An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols* by Henry Dreyfuss (1972; reprint, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984).

canvases like a TROJAN HORSE serve as vehicles to smuggle multiple meanings and polymorphous messages into the art world, the homes of collectors, and society in general. Another example of this can be seen in *Natives Carrying Things* (1983), as the words FOOD and SALT offer a representation of repression, exploitation, colonization, and slavery. The figures depicted in *Natives Carrying Things* stand in contrast with those depicted in the previously mentioned paintings *Jersey Joe* and *Jack Johnson*, who raise their hands in a victorious gesture, mimicking Christ as martyr and the angry hero, while the same action of the later figures connotes repression and enslavement. His personally and politically charged representations sway between victim and rebel, attack and defense, and beneath the expressive surfaces he takes an uncompromising position against the backdrop of his conceptual practice. What Gerard Basquiat said about his son applies here: "Jean-Michel was very bright, very social, and very politically oriented. He didn't have to politicize through a microphone. The works possess messages and speak for themselves." [51] Even if Basquiat's works are read in a superficial way, "a recurring theme is the volatile mix in white America, of blackness, talent, fame, and death." [52]

Jean-Michel Basquiat was not just a great artist, but also a humanist who, through his practice, anticipated technological and social changes that had yet to emerge. By sampling from all cultures in his "post-modernist fashion," [53] Basquiat created new spaces of thought that dismantled traditional ways of thinking. "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." [54] In so doing, he emphasized *différance*, by utilizing the oppositional structure of language without granting it the final say, deconstructing in Derrida's sense and emphasizing ambiguity. But through his words, linguistic mutations, and obliterations, he took a stance against indifference, "wielding his brush as a weapon," [55] fighting against exploitation, consumerism, repression, racism, police violence, and genocide. He used his words as weapons, in a manner that echos the powerful words of Samuel Beckett, when he stated: "That's all words, they're all I have." [56]

(16) **Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Pegasus*,** 1987
Acrylic, graphite, and colored pencil on paper mounted on canvas
88 × 90 in. (223.5 × 228.5 cm)

NOTES

1. Quoted in Jacques Derrida, "Ellipsis," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 372.
2. Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1931), 99.
3. Klaus Kertess, "The Word," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Notebooks*, ed. Larry Warsh (New York: Art + Knowledge, 1993), 17.
4. Ibid.
5. See Karin Thomas, *Bis Heute: Stilgeschichte der bildenden Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: DuMont, 1986), 354–59.
6. Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).
7. Dieter Buchhart, "Against All Odds," in *Now's the Time*, exh. cat. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario; Munich, London, New York: DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2015), 11–23; Buchhart, "Basquiat's Notebooks: Words and Knowledge, Scratched and Sampled," in Basquiat: *The Unknown Notebooks*, eds. Dieter Buchhart and Tricia L. Bloom (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2015), 27–47; Buchhart, "It's All Drawing: The Act of Drawing as Evidence of Everyday Being," *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Works on Paper* (Hong Kong, Ticolat Tamura, 2013); Buchhart, "Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Anatomy of the Street," in *Street and Studio: From Basquiat to Séripop*, ed. Gerald Matt et al. (Nuremberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2010), 10–25.
8. Dieter Buchhart and Tricia L. Bloom, eds., *Basquiat. The Unknown Notebooks* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2015).
9. See Dieter Buchhart, "Basquiat's Notebooks."
10. Samuel Beckett, "The Unnamable," *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 413.
11. Jean Michel-Basquiat interviewed by Becky Johnston and Tamra Davis, Beverly Hills, California, 1985: "I Have to Have Some Source Material Around Me," Basquiat, ed. Buchhart, xxiii.
12. Fab 5 Freddy, quoted in Ingrid Sischy, "Jean-Michel Basquiat as Told by Fred Braithwaite a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy," *Interview* 22 (October 1992), 119.
13. Karin Thomas, *Bis Heute*, 354–59.
14. Franklin Sirmans in conversation with Mary Ann Monforton, January 31, 1992. Quoted in M. Franklin Sirmans, "Chronology," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 235.
15. Dieter Buchhart: "A revolutionary caught between everyday life, knowledge, and myth", in: Dieter Buchhart and others (ed.): Basquiat, Exhibition catalogue Fondation Beyeler, Basel [9 May – 5 September 2010] (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), IX-XX.
16. Cathleen McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," *New York Times* (February 10, 1985), 33.
17. Bruno Bischofberger, quoted in McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," 33.
18. See Franklin Sirmans, "Basquiat and the Bayou," *Basquiat and the Bayou*, ed. Franklin Sirmans (New York: Prestel, 2014), 27–28.
19. Basquiat, quoted in Robert Farris Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean- Michel Basquiat," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 32.
20. The term *différance* is a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida, consciously written with an "a," which combines the French words *differ* and *defer*. The philosopher seeks thus to deconstruct two foundational phenomena and mistakes of language: the arbitrary and un-reflected positing of pairs of opposites like good and evil, and the changing meaning of the spoken. In so doing, he argues against the proposition that each term basically refers to a *differentiation* between opposites, to two fully different things in the world. Here, Derrida refers to the structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure, for whom language represents a system of different signs, where the value of a sign depends on its difference from other signs. Even if Derrida recognizes this oppositional structure of language, he rejects understanding this contrast as real or true. In so doing, he uncovers the oppositional structure as arbitrary and unreal. Further, Derrida understands that the meaning of a word, sentence, or text is fundamentally not concluded, for as long as there is speaking, the meaning of what preceded changes. With the flow of language, ever-new words and meanings, significance, come together and result only in a preliminary meaning, that is dependent on the context of what is said. The meaning of the text is temporary and relative, because it circulates in a permanent loop of deferral. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.
21. Brion Gysin, "Minutes to Go," *The Third Mind*, William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 40.
22. Suzanne Mallouk, quoted in Jennifer Clement, *Widow Basquiat: A Love Story* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2000), 73f.
23. William Burroughs, quoted in Tim Head, "Interlude I: A Chance Encounter with William S. Burroughs," in *Cut-Ups, Cut-Ins, Cut-Outs: The Art of William S. Burroughs*, eds. Colin Fallows and Synne Genzmer (Vienna: Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012), 32.
24. See "William S. Burroughs Chronology," in *Cut-Ups, Cut-Ins, Cut-Outs: The Art of William S. Burroughs*, 53.
25. Henry Gray, *Anatomy, Descriptive and Surgical*, eds. T. Pickering Pick and Robert Howden (1901; reprinted New York: Bounty Books, 1977).
26. Öyvind Fahlström, "Manifesto for Concrete Poetry" (1954), see http://feastofhateandfear.com/archives/fahlstrom.html (accessed May 14, 2016).
27. Ibid.

28. See Sischy, "Jean-Michel Basquiat as told by Fred Braithwaite," 120.
29. Greg Tate in conversation with producer Djindi Brown, "In Praise of Shadow Boxers: The Crises of Originality and Authority in African-American Visual Art vs. The Wu Tang Clan," in *Other Narratives*, ed. Dana Fris-Hansen et al. (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1999), 40.
30. Dieter Buchhart: "A revolutionary caught between everyday life, knowledge, and myth", in: Dieter Buchhart and others (ed.): Basquiat, Exhibition catalogue Fondation Beyeler, Basel [9 May – 5 September 2010] (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), IX-XX.
31. Susanne Reichling, "Jean Michel Basquiat," 53.
32. Henry Geldzahler, "Art: From Subways to Soho. Jean Michel Basquiat," *Interview* Magazine 13 (January, 1983), 45.
33. Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," in The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 170; see also Dieter Buchhart, "Egon Schiele – Cy Twombly – Jean-Michel Basquiat: It's All Drawing and the Emancipation of Dissonance," Schiele – Twombly – Basquiat, ed. Dieter Buchhart (New York: Nahmad Contemporary, 2014), 16.
34. Henry Geldzahler, "Introduction," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat. The Notebooks*, ed. Larry Warsh (New York: Art + Knowledge, 1993), 8.
35. Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly."
36. Dieter Buchhart: "A revolutionary caught between everyday life, knowledge, and myth", in: Dieter Buchhart and others (ed.): Basquiat, Exhibition catalogue Fondation Beyeler, Basel [9 May – 5 September 2010] (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), IX-XX.
37. See Dieter Buchhart and Anna Karina Hofbauer, eds., *Basquiat: Museum Security* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2015).
38. Jean Michel-Basquiat interviewed by Becky Johnston and Tamra Davis, "I Have to Have Some Source Material Around Me," xxvi.
39. Werner Hofmann, "Ein Amerikaner zu Fin de siècle oder: Kulturfinale als Dauerwerbung," in *Die Presse: 25 Jahre freies Österreich* (May 1980).
40. Werner Hofmann, quoted in Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), 193f.
41. Esteban Jefferson, "On Jean-Michel Basquiat, Graffiti, and Tradition," May 14, 2016, http://www.estebanjefferson.com/essays/basquiatsmall.pdf, 2.
42. Nadra Kareem Nittle, "Definition of Oreo," about.com, accessed May 14, 2016, http://racerelations.about.com/od/understandingract1/g/Definition-Of-Oreo.htm.
43. See Clement, *Widow Basquiat: A Love Story*, 94. On the Oreo, see also Susanne Reichling, "Jean Michel Basquiat: der afro-amerikanische Kontext seines Werkes," PhD diss., Universität Hamburg 1999, publ. 1998, www.sub.uni-hamburg.de/opus/frontdoor.php?source_opus=65, 140.
44. Henry Dreyfuss, *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols* (New York, 1984).
45. See Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 11.
46. Compare the concept of intuition, Christine Eckett, *Kurt Schwitters: Zwischen Geist und Materie* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2012), 59–116.
47. Ibid., 32.
48. Marc Mayer, "Basquiat in History," in *Basquiat*, ed. Marc Mayer (New York: Merrell Publishers, 2005), 50.
49. Lisa Liebmann, "Jean-Michel Basquiat at Annina Nosei," Art in America 70 (October 1982), 130.
50. Franklin Sirmans, "In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip-Hop Culture," in *Basquiat*, ed. Marc Mayer (New York: Merrell Publishers, 2005), 94.
51. "Gerard Basquiat in His Own Words," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat: 1981: The Studio of the Street*, eds. Jeffrey Deitch, Franklin Sirmans, and Nicola Vassell (Milan: Charta; New York: Deitch Projects, 2007), 94.
52. Roberta Smith, "Basquiat: Man for His Decade," *New York Times* (October 23, 1992), C20.
53. Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*.
54. Lydia Yee, "Breaking and Entering," in *One Planet under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art*, eds. Lydia Yee and Franklin Sirmans (New York: Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2001), 19.
55. Keith Haring, "Remembering Basquiat: Keith Haring on a Fellow Artist and a Friend," *Vogue (November, 1988)* , 24.
56. Samuel Beckett, "The Unnamable," 413.