

THE 27 CLUB, 27 YEARS LATER
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I'm 25 years old; when Jean-Michel Basquiat died, he was 27. Like many other members of the 27 Club, he's become an idol to many, myself included. Basquiat's narrative is compellingly relatable: a native New Yorker interested in street culture, inherently left out of the existing art structure, he was able to break in and find success, and in doing so became a figure that we look up to. Also like many other members of the 27 Club, it's unclear whether his success and acclaim was sustainable; his short but prolific career, coupled with his drug-laden lifestyle and followed by a sudden and tragic death, cemented his legacy before he was able to have a potentially calamitous artistic decline. Basquiat's way of life, more than his physical work, seems to have become his main impact on American culture, and this is what I found troublesome about the *Unknown Notebooks* show at the Brooklyn Museum.

I felt uncomfortable walking through the show. The work on display is enticing – I'm very fond of artists' notebooks, and getting to look at Basquiat's was an especially rare treat. You also get the sense that he approached his notebooks more as artworks in their own right than as short records of his thoughts. His handwriting is beautiful, extremely stylish and original. My notebooks, which I've always been a bit proud of, are shitty compared to his.



But the show isn't just notebooks. There's a large amount of secondary media – a few paintings, some video of Basquiat in action, some ephemera that seems to vary in quality. One that particularly struck me is a standard notebook cover, with no intervention by Basquiat other than two globs of paint on the back cover, protected by a plexiglass display case. Maybe this is a conceptual masterpiece, but I think Basquiat was more likely just mixing paint on a notebook that was lying around.

In one of my college art history courses, our professor told us about the situation of a Carl Andre brick piece in a particular museum collection. The pieces were made with ostensibly any cheap bricks purchased from a hardware store – the point was the idea, not the physical object. Anyone could potentially go out, buy some bricks, and make an authentic Carl Andre. Ironically, the museum in question fetishized the exact bricks of their Andre piece – instead of just buying new bricks when they needed to show the work, they made special cases for each individual brick, to store and protect them. They tried to inject value into objects that weren't meant to have them. Taking in the show, I felt similarly conflicted: if we value everything Basquiat touched as a masterpiece (especially given his extensive production), doesn't that water down his legacy?

The larger implication I took from the inclusion of objects other than his notebook pages was that the notebooks themselves weren't "enough", and that may be true. I'm imagining a show that is only framed pages from his notebooks; no paintings, no videos, no covers. A minimally hung show might not match Basquiat's aesthetic, but furthermore, the show would feel repetitive, and drag on. We need the other objects to balance out the notebook pages, because as beautiful as they are, they're just notes.

There was recently a show of nude photos of Basquiat. Why? Was it because the photos are great on their own, or is it because we want to see how big his dick was₁?

I enjoyed the *Notebooks* show, and I'm certainly glad I saw it. But when I walked through the show, I thought more about these issues than the work itself. And that made me sad. The show leads directly into the gift shop. I spent longer contemplating whether or not to buy a t-shirt than I did contemplating an individual piece in the show, and that made me sad.



₁: According to a friend that saw the show, it was pretty big.



@EdwardTufte on Twitter feeling some type of way about the encased notebook cover