

On Jean-Michel Basquiat, Graffiti, and Tradition

Jean-Michel Basquiat's work was a representation of cultural mindset at the time of its creation, a mindset that perhaps still persists through today. It is a mindset tied to New York City circa 1980, and to the youth tired with the prevailing cultural symbols and ideals of the past. From an art historical perspective, Basquiat's work represented an ideological break from the Hegelian / Greenbergian idea of work being a direct result of the work that preceded it, of art history being a linear progression. Furthermore, Basquiat (the best of his generation of street-turned-gallery artists, along with Francisco Clemente, Keith Haring, etc.) represented to his supporters an art world tired of issues of institutional critique, Minimalism, the legacy of Clement Greenberg – an art world tired of being insulated and only being concerned with issues that related to those familiar with the critical issues of art and art history in the 20th century.

Basquiat's work does not necessarily show a harsh *disinterest* in these issues, but rather does not have a total preoccupation with them (unlike, say, Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist artwork). His work represents a broad view of culture; he is just as interested in *Gray's Anatomy* and African history as he was in the D train and No Wave music. Basquiat's approach was to pull from all strata of New York City's contemporary culture and from world history, combining all of these interests into his artwork and in doing so creating a highly personal brand of painting that was a total rejection of the dominant and now-canonical work of the time (work by figures such as Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, the list goes on; figs. 1 – 4), which dealt with formal and conceptual issues, such as ideas of seriality and institutional critique, in a coldly matter-of-fact way, and never with personal narratives or emotion.

Similar to Warhol in his embrace and mixture of both high and low culture (no wonder they became friends and collaborators), Basquiat's interests seemed to spread much farther than Warhol's, whose low-culture interests were very specific (his work rarely left the topics of media and celebrity). Basquiat started out as a graffiti artist, collaborating with his friend Al Diaz to write under the name SAMO (short for "same old shit," fig 5.). Even after declaring "SAMO is dead" (fig. 6) on the walls of downtown Manhattan, Basquiat would still sign his paintings "SAMO" for a short period of time into the 1980s, and would often be credited and "SAMO" instead of as "Jean-Michel Basquiat" in his early painting career, before his name really took off. In a review of the Times Square Show¹ (Basquiat's, as well as Haring's and others', breakout show), Rene Ricard writes:

The most accessible and immediately contagious productions in these shows were those of the graffiti stylists. The graffiti style, so much a part of this town, New York, is in our blood now.

¹ Ricard, Rene. "The Radiant Child." *Artforum*, December 1981.

At this time, Basquiat, even if his paintings were not executed with spray paint, was very tied to graffiti and the SAMO name, and would have been identified as a graffiti or street artist. It is important to note that Basquiat's relationship to graffiti, and to low culture, separates his work completely from the two prevailing, canonized styles of the time: Pop and Minimalism.

Grffiti *is* New York, and in this way all of these young graffiti artists work had an impact on New Yorkers at the time (an impact that remains relevant in New York today). This is art for the inner city, for the urban dwellers, not for the suburbs. It is art the gritty neighborhoods; at the time it was for the people living downtown, the kids doing graffiti, the poor people taking the D train that Basquiat was bombing as a teenager. It was not for the Upper East Side, as you could say that Minimalist work was for (the breakout Minimalist show was *Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum; the breakout show of Basquiat's group was in seedy Times Square); it was anti-Upper East Side, and anti-establishment, both in terms of New York City and of the art world and market. A young Basquiat even vocalized this divide himself in a 1978 Village Voice article on the SAMO graffiti²:

Their epithet, BOOSH-WAH, seems to provoke the most hostile reactions. The word was Jean's contribution: "This city is crawling with uptight, middle-class pseudos trying to look like the money they don't have. Status symbols... It's like they're walking around with price tags stapled to their heads... But we cant stand on the sidewalk all day screaming at people to clean up their acts, so we write on walls."

In this way, the style is very representative of the body, of the ideas, of the principles and interests of the group and of the work. Unlike Pop Art though, the style is not lifted with the intent of making a statement. It is not appropriation of a low-culture style the way Warhol appropriated screenprinting; it just *is* low culture. Graffiti was Basquiat's life, as well as Haring's, Kenny Scharf's, the whole Times Square group. This work is autobiography, not sampling, and comes out of a much more personal and emotional place than Pop, which was just as cold as Minimalism. Furthermore, this kind of autobiography and emotion was something that the art world had almost universally shunned since the fall of Abstract Expressionism and the rise of both Pop and Minimalism, and was continuing to support in the work of the Pictures Generation. In the same article¹, Ricard writes of Basquiat's work:

We are no longer collecting art we are buying individuals. This is no piece by SAMO. This is a piece of SAMO.

Jean-Michels don't look like the others. His don't have that superbomb panache that is the first turn-on of the pop graffitist. Nor does his marker have that tai-chi touch. He doesn't use spray but he's got the dope, and right now what we need is information; I want to know what is going on in

² Faflick, Philip. "SAMO Graffiti: BOOSH-WAH or CIA?" *Village Voice*, December 11th, 1978.

people's minds and these pictures are useful. This article is about work that is information, not work that is about information.

Basquiat's work functions in similar way to Cy Twombly's (fig. 7); the canvas becomes more like a giant notebook page than a finished composition, with words and images, along with scratch marks and other artifacts of the thought process, intermingling freely as a pictorial representation of a train of thought. The work is really a portrait of Basquiat; what he is thinking about, who his influences are, he wears them all on the surface of his canvas like a patch on his sleeve. Ricard sums it up beautifully later in the article¹:

When Jean-Michel writes in almost subliterate scrawl "Safe plush he think" it is not on a Park Avenue facade that would be totally outside the beggar's venue but on a rusted-out door in a godforsaken neighborhood. Plush to whom safe from what? His is also the elegance of the clochard who lights up a megot with his pinkie raised. If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption, it would be Jean-Michel. The elegance of Twombly is there but from the same source (graffiti) and so is the brut of the young Dubuffet. Except the politics of Dubuffet needed a lecture to show, needed a separate text, whereas in Jean-Michel they are integrated by the picture's necessity. I'd rather have a Jean-Michel than a Cy Twombly. I do not live in the classical city. My neighborhood is unsafe.

In an art historical context, Basquiat's project is very similar to Rauschenberg's combines (fig. 8) in this way, with the notable exception that instead of employing collage (a technique that Basquiat actually did work with when he was still trying to get his name out, right before starting to paint; fig. 9), Basquiat uses paint. While Rauschenberg's combines give off the feeling of neutrality, of being an objective collection of the detritus of the world, Basquiat's work is hand painted, inherently personal and emotional. It could only be made by Jean-Michel, and because of this the work takes Rauschenberg's street detritus project to another, more intimate, level. With Basquiat, we have an identifiable figure tied to the detritus, a face to the chaos. We aren't just looking at collected trash and remnants of society, but rather looking at a life and a person constructed out of this trash and salvageable chaos.

Throughout all of art history, there have been woefully few well-known or critically lauded black artists. Basquiat is probably the most well known black artist of the 20th Century (a large part of this fame probably having to do more with his personal life than with his artwork), with the second most well known black artist of the century probably being Romare Bearden (although there are possible exceptions, such as David Hammonds or Kara Walker). However, the comparison with Bearden goes beyond just fame; it is also important due to their timing and their generations. Bearden was of the generation of artists making work right before Basquiat's, with his "mature" and most often cited works being produced in the 1960s and 1970s, while almost all of Basquiat's work was produced in the 1980s. Looking at Basquiat's work in comparison to Bearden's might help to expose the social significance and impact of Basquiat's work in an art

historical context, and there are some definite similarities between the two artists. Both seem to be capturing a moment in black history, and in American history. With Bearden though, this seems to be the overt goal of the work, while with Basquiat this seems to be only an element. Bearden's mature work, like Rauschenberg, is done through the format of collage (fig. 10). What this does is to both give the impression of the all-seeing observer (rather than an objective and individual viewer), and also, like Warhol's use of silkscreened newspaper images, draws issues of media representation into the work. The work is political, and is just as much about how blacks are shown in the media as it is about the genuine black experience. Basquiat's work can also be political, but it is not always necessarily so. Take his 1981 painting *Irony of a Negro Policeman* (fig. 11). The work is obviously political, showing Basquiat's take on the black policeman as a figure repressing other blacks while he too is being repressed by a white-controlled legal and social system. Another important and highly political work, about the relationship of blacks in 1980s New York City to the NYPD, is the 1983 *Defacement (the Death of Michael Stewart)*, fig. 12. However, what separates these works from Bearden's is that while Bearden's works may be about issues that affect him personally, they are not *personal* in the way that Basquiat's work is. *Defacement* is about the death of Basquiat's friend and fellow graffiti writer, Michael Stewart, after being beaten by the NYPD, who caught him tagging a subway station wall; it both represents his sorrow about Stewart's death, but also his fear of being caught in a dangerous situation with the police, who would not recognize him as the famous painter Basquiat, but instead just another nameless black criminal (represented by the silhouette, instead of individual portrait, of Michael Stewart – or is Basquiat?). The Bearden work, and the employment of collage, is to be universally understood, and is done in a way that the viewer can imagine himself or herself as one of the figures seen in the works. Basquiat's work is about *him* instead of being about all blacks; it is primarily autobiographical, with the incidents and ideas being depicted also being applicable to many other people. The difference is in the context; Bearden's work is primarily about everyone and secondarily about himself, while Basquiat's is the opposite (this goes back to Ricard's idea that when you are buying a Basquiat, you are buying Basquiat the person; in a Twombly-esque way, you are buying a piece of his life, not just a painting by him). The mediums used are an essential difference in this understanding, with collage historically being used to give a universal understanding to work, while painting has historically been a highly personal practice, especially with the romantic image of the artist alone in the studio pouring his life into his art (think Van Gogh, Pollock, etc.). Bearden seems to be trying to capture a universal moment, while Basquiat is visualizing his individual world view, a mode of taking in all of New York City's input and making sense (or not making sense) of it. The result of capturing an important moment in New York City's history seems to be an unintended (but welcome) result of the work, rather than the goal.

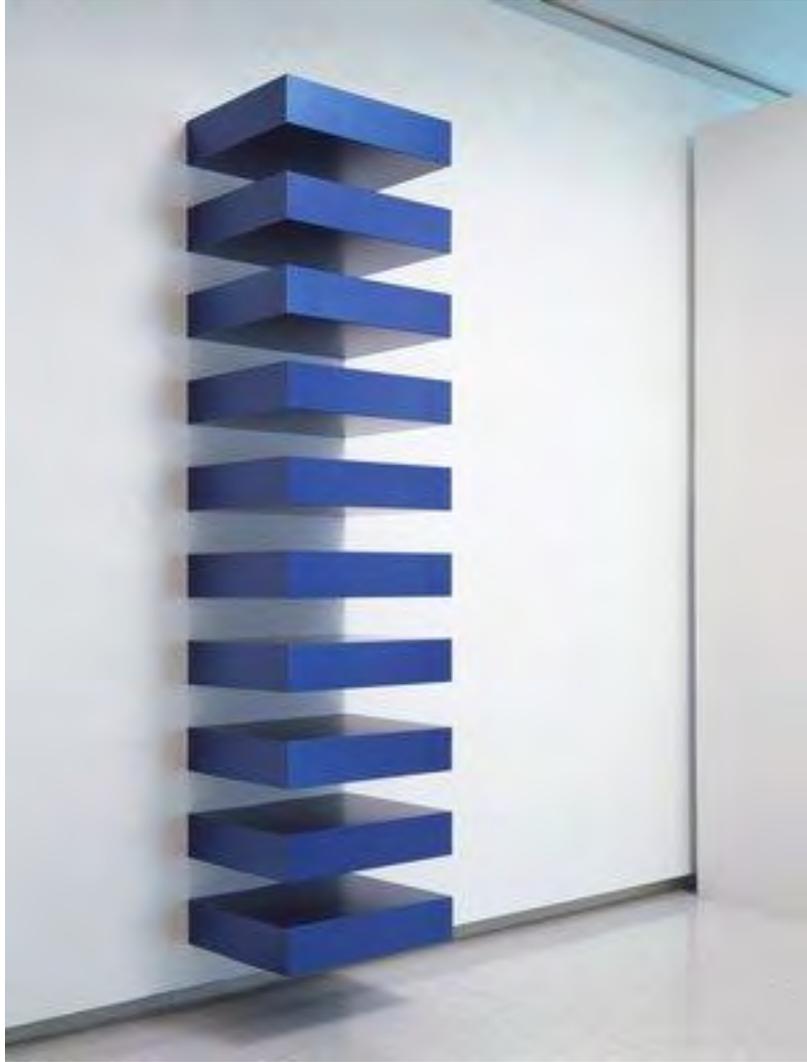


Fig. 1: Donald Judd, *Untitled (Stacks)*, 1969



Fig. 2: Frank Stella, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II*, 1959

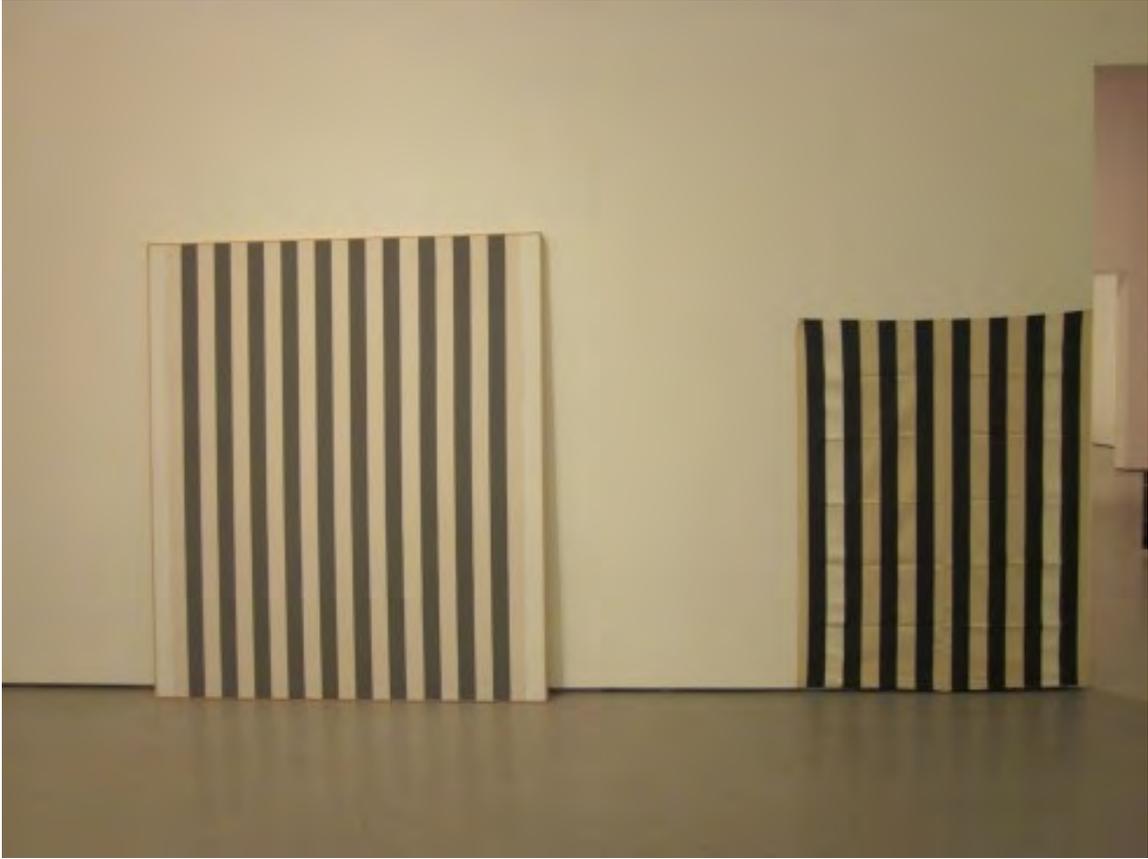


Fig. 3: Daniel Buren, *White Acrylic Painting on White and Anthracite Gray Striped Cloth*, 1966 (left), and *Black and white striped cloth. External white bands covered over with white paint, recto-verso*, 1970 (right)



Fig. 4: Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971*



Fig. 5: Jean-Michel Basquiat and Al Diaz, SAMO graffiti, circa 1977 – 1979

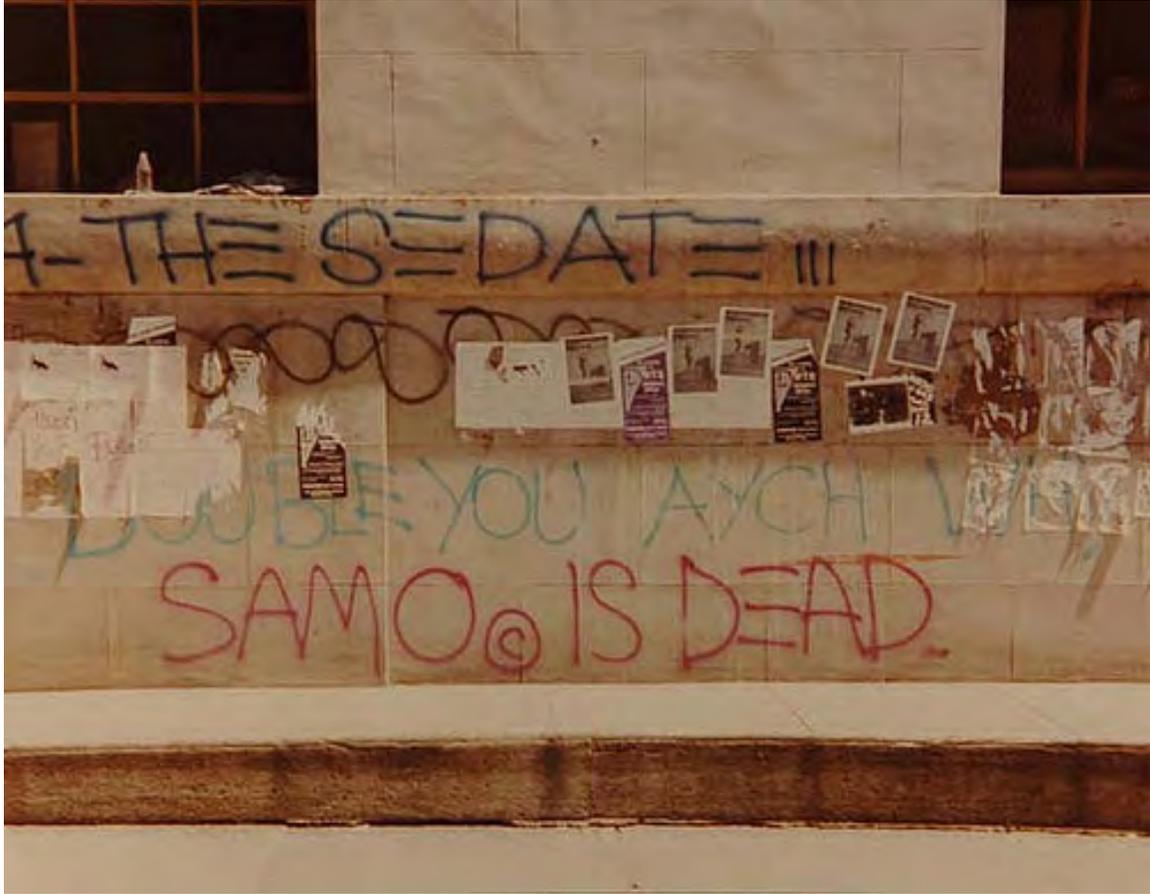


Fig. 6: Jean-Michel Basquiat, "SAMO Is Dead" graffiti, 1980



Fig. 7: *Apollo and the Artist*, Cy Twombly, 1975

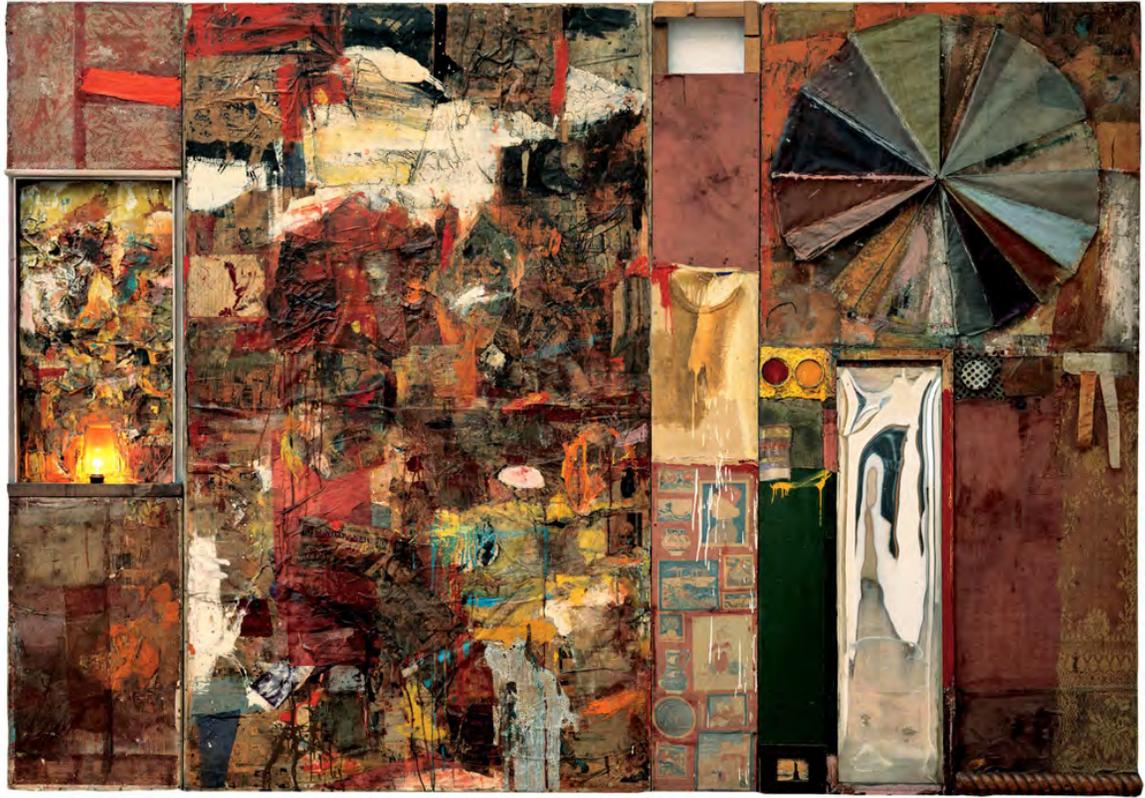


Fig. 8: Robert Rauschenberg, *Charlene*, 1954



Fig. 9: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Postcards, 1978



Fig. 10: Romare Bearden, *The Calabash*, 1970



Fig. 11: Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Irony of a Negro Policeman*, 1981



Fig. 12: Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Defacement (the Death of Michael Stewart)*, 1983