



Jean-Michel Basquiat

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Jean-Michel Basquiat, New York, Photo: Sabina Sarnitz



“It’s 80 percent about anger.”
Jean-Michel Basquiat

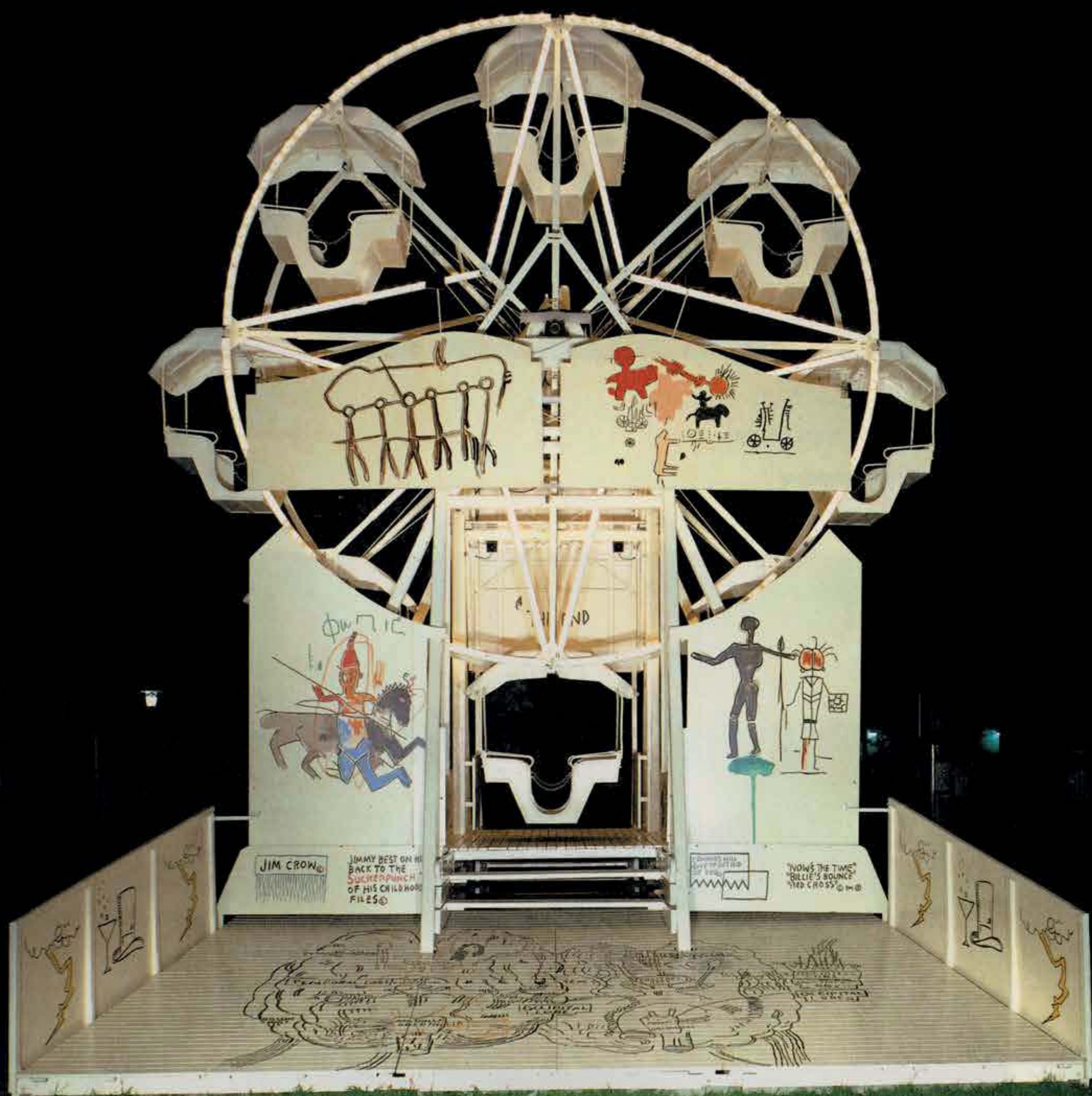
Jean-Michel Basquiat

Biography

Jean Michel Basquiat was born on December 22, 1960 in Brooklyn, New York. His father was Haitian, his mother from Puerto Rico. From 1977 to early 1979 he sprayed poetic graffiti together with Al Diaz as SAMO© on the walls of Manhattan. As a musician he played in the band Gray and worked in the years that followed in various clubs as a DJ.

Basquiat's art was exhibited in public for the first time in June 1980 at the *Times Square Show*. He played the leading role in the film *New York Beat*, which was first shown in 2000 under the title of *Downtown 81*. The art dealers Emilio Mazzoli, Bruno Bischofberger and Annina Nosei came across Basquiat's work at the curator Diego Cortez' exhibition *New York/New Wave* in February 1981, which was being held at the P.S.1 in Long Island City in Queens. After his first solo exhibition in May at the Galleria d'Arte Emilio Mazzoli in Modena, numerous further successful exhibitions followed in 1982 in the Annina Nosei Gallery and the Fun Gallery in New York, the Galerie Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich and the Larry Gagosian Gallery in L.A., to name but a few. His works were exhibited at the *Documenta 7* (1982) in Kassel as well as at the Whitney Biennial (1983) in New York and were also shown at the Galerie Beyeler (1983) in Basel.

Following the initiative of Bruno Bischofberger, Basquiat worked in 1984/5 on joint projects with Francesco Clemente and Andy Warhol, and later with Andy Warhol on his own. Solo exhibitions at Bruno Bischofberger's gallery, at the Mary Boone Gallery and the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York then followed. In November 1986 a retrospective of his work was shown at the *Kestner-Gesellschaft* in Hannover. On Friday August 12, 1988 Jean-Michel Basquiat died in his loft in the Great Jones Street. He was 27 years old.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Luna Luna*, 1987, front view

Dieter Buchhart interviews André Heller

June 1, 2016, Vienna

D.B: *How did you meet Jean-Michel Basquiat?*

A.H: I was travelling the world to recruit artists to join me in working on an exciting project entitled *Luna Luna*. It was intended as an amusement park designed by the most important artists of the period. I had read a short article in Time or in Newsweek about Basquiat and found something magnetic about both the person and the artworks shown in two photographs. I had a friend in New York, Lisa Ungar – she later founded a gallery in Munich – who then organized a meeting with the artist. That was really uncomplicated. I went to meet him and from then on we were something like friends. He reacted enthusiastically when I told him all the people who were already participating in *Luna Luna*, including Lichtenstein, Baselitz, Hockney, Haring, Scharf, and Dalí. Then he said, “I’ll design the Ferris wheel you suggest.”

D.B: *Where you at his legendary apartment with a studio at 57 Great Jones St., the one Basquiat rented from Warhol in August 1983?*

A.H.: Of course, with a huge open space on the ground floor. On the right there was a small kitchen, in the back countless paintings stacked up against the walls. In the front there was the important Xerox machine and very beautiful sculptures that I rarely saw at exhibitions. There’s one in the *Luna Luna* book. I went there with my girlfriend at the time, Sabina Sarnitz, who is an outstanding photographer and captured a great deal of what was in the studio. All the photographs for the opulent *Luna Luna* volume were taken there. I later came to the apartment, which really was a small two-storey building.

DB: *How did your collaboration with Basquiat work?*

He would call from time to time and we would set up a meeting. We then jointly selected designs. He created lots of new drawings. The ones chosen he assigned to certain surfaces of the Ferris wheel – that can be seen on some sheets of *Luna Luna*, pencil lines from left to right, from here to there, inscriptions and commentaries. Finally, I asked him to sign all the sheets, something that wasn’t self-evident to him. He then did it, because I explained to him that we would exhibit his designs for the opening of *Luna Luna* in Hamburg on the Moorweide and it would be nice if they bore his name.

DB: *The frame Untitled (Frame) was created as a part of your project Luna Luna that took place in Hamburg during the summer of 1987. Can you describe its emergence and Basquiat’s contribution to Luna Luna?*

AH: The reason why all these important artists participated for so little money was because I told them, “Listen, you are constantly getting the greatest commissions, everyone wants your paintings or sculpture, but I am inviting you to take a trip back to your own childhood. You can design your very own amusement park, just as you think would be right today, and really without exception everyone answered by saying, sure, that’s a nice, pleasant challenge.” After our second conversation, I quickly realized that Basquiat was a mixture of loveable

and someone prone to incredible, sudden volcanic outbursts. I like to call him a very nice, very wild spirit child. I thought at the time instinctively, he wasn’t so famous at the time, I’ll offer him the most spectacular and largest object as sign of my respect: the Ferris wheel. I was then, and I can say this without being overdramatic, at the latest by our second meeting it was clear to me that I was standing opposite a very young, absolute genius, really the only time in my entire life, and I have met many famous fine artists in my life: Chagall, Man Ray, De Chirico and all these masters, but they were already quite old. I know because I said to Sabina: “*This is like meeting the young Schiele in his studio, I think this dandy Jean-Michel is now writing art history.*”

D.B: *In a project drawing, Basquiat evoked the moon: “I CAN’T SEE ANYONE RIGHT NOW,” “THIS IS MY SENTENCE / LUNATIC” – can you say something more about that?*

AH: I asked participants to draw a moon and to add a sentence that they found fitting. When he wasn’t feeling well, “*I can’t see anyone right now*” was Basquiat’s standard sentence.

D.B: *Originally, the hand-colored drawing untitled (1987), which was reproduced fragmented on the entrance wall of the “big wheel” was in the frame. Was the frame produced for this drawing or produced as a work of art all its own?*

AH: I really liked the drawing with a man on horseback. He very nobly gave me all the sketches, although he only got 10,000 dollars for his work like everyone else: I couldn’t offer any more. A section of the drawing where there was still a black surface and a crown is also depicted in the book. I said I would like to have a picture with a frame he designed, and then I think he suggested hammering nails into broomsticks.

DB: *That makes sense, because he used nails for Grillo in 1984.*

AH: Ok, so then the idea was certainly his. An assistant organized the materials and then he assembled it, wrapped in twine. We were at his studio and assembled it on the floor; I helped to hammer in the nails because there were so many involved. The size of the sheet was fixed, because all the drawings were the same size. There were horizontal and vertical sheets. For me, all that came in question was a vertical format. Theoretically, we could have hung it horizontally. But he then cut up an especially richly detailed, wonderful drawing, pasted it in the frame, and covered it with red paint. One would have to say that the frame is a fully autonomous artwork, and that allowed me to chose the artwork to place in it. We could have chosen a different sheet. The frame wasn’t made by him as an artwork for a certain drawing.

DB: *Did Basquiat comment on the use of the nails?*

AH: It was absolutely clear to me that that was from voodoo. We spoke about this, that many African sculptures have nails. I said, “*Ah, it’s a kind of voodoo frame,*” and he said, “*kind of.*” There’s a lot of Haiti in there.

DB: *But you could basically call it an artwork on its own?*

AH: Absolutely. I still remember saying that we needed to place the drawing part with the signature in the lower right, so that the unique frame is also signed. Basquiat then said that it had something of a voodoo altar to it. I later had the feeling that you could place a top notch Schiele or Picasso in it. There are several examples in history where a picture is in the frame of another artist’s picture. If I have a wonderful drawing by someone where I have the feeling they are related to one another in terms of quality, I could imagine doing something like that. When I later saw the wonderful large head at an exhibition, all the other sheets were sold and only this wonderful drawing was left. It was waiting for me. It is a masterpiece in every detail. In terms of color and from the expressive use of lines, it’s impossible to take your eyes off it, and it remains unforgettable.

DB: *You are referring to the drawing currently in the frame, which you purchased in 1990 from New York’s Robert Miller Gallery. There was an impressive wall of expressive drawings of heads. What was it about this sheet that attracted you in particular?*

AH: I negotiated for a long time with Robert Miller for a price that I could afford, and celebrated when we came to a deal. Back in Vienna, I replaced the small man or horseback drawing in the frame. I think it’s an important improvement of the whole picture, because now a large head is placed in a busy frame and not something busy inside something busy. Jean-Michel would have loved it, and he originally said to me, “*Put whatever you think is right in the frame.*”

DB: *The monumentality of elements in the drawing was surprising in “big wheel.” Did Basquiat think about the dimensions?*

AH: He had precise architect’s plans and knew exactly the dimensions of the Ferris wheel, and then he decided to work that way. We sat there, my assistant Georg Resetschnig was on hand, the technical-architectural director of the project. He said to Basquiat, “*Look, this is the side part, this is the front, and this is this shape or this size.*”

DB: *The drawings he collaged in Untitled (Frame) seem virtually like the artist’s credo. Did Basquiat comment on this?*

AH: The drawings weren’t like what I would have imagined for the Ferris wheel. But he was entirely right, and he said, “*Sorry, look more closely. It’s just a picture book.*” That was his expression: “*The people will stand in front of it and have a lot to look at. A huge object should feature a great deal and a lot of different things.*”

DB: *But that is just what I meant by a credo, where he created truly different visual elements as pictures, where one moves in that direction.*

AH: That’s precisely what he wanted. And then he said: “*Now the dogs also have something to look at.*” In



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Luna Luna*, 1987, back view

“I can’t see anyone right now, ...this is my sentence”

Jean-Michel Basquiat



Jean-Michel Basquiat and André Heller in the artist's New York studio, 1987

retrospect, he did everything right, just where and how it should be.

DB: *Were these drawings originally all on one sheet of paper that Basquiat cut or ripped?*

AH: No, there were perhaps 20 large sheets. But the one cut for the frame, that was particularly detailed and excellent.

DB: *Can you remember Basquiat’s comments or associations with these drawings?*

AH: I already asked him, where this came from, but you know that much better than me. He said, “*I leaf through magazines, brochures, and advertising and then I draw whatever captures my attention.*” Whenever the fantasy gets arrested by something, it’s always possible to draw from it. He reported to me that in his childhood newspapers were lying around, just like for us in the countryside the church bulletin or the like, and quite early on he used all kinds of drawings as an inspiration. During our conversations he frequently ate ice from paper cups, and when he offered you something, it was rarely something to drink, it was usually an ice cream. Maybe twice he offered me something to drink, but at least 15 times an ice cream. Eating ice cream gave him a special kind of concentration. He said that all the catalogues and printed material that lay around at home were somehow picture books for him, although they in fact were just magazines. He then used these sentences and words as sources. I don’t think they were comic books, they were just normal newspapers.

DB: *He took things from whatever was around him, but it’s interesting that he began with these newspapers and then developed his visual language over books and films.*

AH: At first, it was what I would call something like church bulletins or advertising brochures from local newspapers.

DB: *I can believe that immediately, because the poetic, conceptual graffiti that he did at first were sayings that he extracted from newspapers and collaged together. Do you have any personal memories of Basquiat that you would like to share?*

AH: He once spoke very dismissively of his father, he was quite enraged about him. I told him about my family, also quite impossible, we originally owned a factory in Vienna, we were Jewish, then persecuted by the Nazis, so quite different to Jean-Michel. And he said for him the streets were more his family than his actual family. And about the graffiti, he said that it meant a lot to him to be able to work outside, outside means not in the narrow confines of one’s own home, and home was clearly negatively charged for him.

DB: *Did you learn anything about Basquiat’s connection to Warhol?*

AH: Of course, he held Warhol in high esteem, but at the same time it really bugged him that he scarcely ever painted himself.

DB: *For the collaborations, he convinced him to return to working with his own hand.*

AH: Basquiat never understood that an artist might not want to paint himself, because for him it was the ultimate artistic pleasure. And not having an assistant spray or brush something onto the canvas. But he knew that Warhol was a master and that collaboration with him would mean a lot in terms of promotion, the famous boxer poster, for example. Art dealers like Bischofberger cleverly used things like that to push Jean-Michel. Once we spoke in more detail about Warhol. At the time, I owned four large pencil portraits of me from the 1970s that Warhol drew (1979) and showed him one of them. He knew that I knew Andy. Then he said, “*Yeah, you know, it’s strange,*” not wanting to paint. “*The expressive, the wild element, there’s a white sheet and then there’s something on it, I have always loved smearing it with my own intentions.*” There was a fury in his creative process, Warhol was more like an engineer who told his deck hands to now make 20 variations of this or that. Andy was a uniquely gifted conceptualist.

DB: *Did Basquiat speak to you about topics like racism?*

AH: No, but we spoke a great deal about music and theater. I told him, for example, something he didn’t know about, Sergei Diaghilev’s wonderful undertaking *Ballet Russes*. Those collaborations between Satie, Cocteau, and Picasso – so difficult. That interested him in an extraordinary way. He then designed a curtain for a show entitled *Body and Soul*. I was rehearsing in New York, Roy Lichtenstein, Keith Haring and Basquiat each contributed a wonderful curtain. The one by Jean-Michel now hangs in my salon in Morocco and the ones by Lichtenstein and Haring are located in my Vienna depot. Haring’s curtain glowed in the dark, if you projected light onto it at the start of a scene, the pattern would continue to glow. I have photographs of Keith making the curtain. I visited Basquiat to discuss details in the studio, but he wanted the project to be managed by a gallerist, Vrej Baghoomian, the gallery where he was exhibiting at the time. He seemed to be in a difficult phase, as if he were fighting with himself.

DB: *But it was painted by Basquiat?*

AH: There was a design by Basquiat, but I don’t own that, because the gallerist kept the sheet and only gave me an ektachrome. This is exactly how it was: I had a date with him, because he wanted to give me his proposal, and a cleaning lady

opened the studio door, and said, “*He’s upstairs.*” I think Georg Resetschnig was with me. So I decided to walk upstairs, there was his bed and on the left and right walls of bookshelves, full of VHS cassettes, he was lying asleep on the bed, and I stood before him, called his name, touched and shook him, and realized that he was all drugged up, off in another space.

DB: *And that was in 1987 or 1988?*

AH: It was a year after *Luna Luna*, so 1988.

DB: *You met him 1986?*

AH: I met him in March or April 1986.

DB: *I remember that you told me that you had a fight with the artist over the rear end of a baboon. What was that like?*

AH: That was the fight where he went emotional from zero to thousand in just a second. I dared to ask whether it was wise to have the rear end of a baboon depicted at the highest spot in the amusement park. A stupid question of mine, because of course it was intelligent, striking, and provocative. He answered, “*If you need a symbol, it’s asshole,*” that was the asshole of the baboon, which was very clearly visible. Then I wanted to discuss with him whether that was the best of all possible solutions, and he flipped off the handle and screamed, “*If you don’t like it, do it yourself.*” It was amazing, and then I understood the rage inside him.

DB: *What music by Miles Davis did he choose as a backdrop for this work?*

AH: I told him that the individual pavilions and attractions would also have music, and that Philip Glass was doing the music for Lichtenstein’s glass labyrinth, or Karajan agreed to record a CD with the Berlin Philharmonic for Hockney’s room. And he said, “*For me, Miles Davis.*” Then I called Claude Nobs, who ran the legendary Montreux Jazz Festival, who was close friends with Miles Davis, and he answered within two days with the good message: “*Miles says take any recording you want.*”

DB: *And which one did he Basquiat choose?*

AH: *Tutu*. He loved that album.



Jean-Michel Basquiat

Untitled, 1983, acrylic and oilstick on paper, 76,2 x 55,88 cm

Untitled (Frame), 1987, wooden slats with nails, paper on wood, graphite, colored pencil, and acrylic, 120,7 x 101,4 cm

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- 1) See Dieter Buchhart, "Jean Michel-Basquiat. Revolutionär zwischen Alltag, Wissen und Mythos," Dieter Buchhart, et al., eds., *Basquiat* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010). Dieter Buchhart, "Against All Odds," *Now's the Time*, ed. Dieter Buchhart (New York: DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2015).
 - 2) Antonin Artaud, "Theatre and Science," *Antonin Artaud: Anthology*, ed. Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1965), 169.
 - 3) Dieter Buchhart, "Jean Michel-Basquiat: Revolutionär zwischen Alltag, Wissen und Mythos," ix–xx.
 - 4) Anthony Haden-Guest, "Burning Out," *Vanity Fair* (November 1988), 184.
 - 5) Richard D. Marshall, "Foreword and Forward: Jean-Michel Basquiat," *Jean Michel Basquiat* (New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1999), 24.
 - 6) Glenn O'Brien, quoted in Anthony Haden-Guest, "Burning Out," 198.
 - 7) Ingrid Sischy, "Jean-Michel Basquiat as told by Fred Braithwaite a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy," *Interview* (October 1992), 119.
 - 8) See discussions on Basquiat and "black art," Eurocentric art history, the white art world, etc. "A Day At the Races, Lorraine O'Grady on Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Black Art World," *Artforum* (April 1993), 10–12. Susanne Reichling, "Jean Michel Basquiat: Der afro-amerikanische Kontext seines Werkes," Ph.D. thesis, Universität Hamburg, 1999; Bell Hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat," *Art in America* (June 1993), 68–75. Thomas McEvilly, "Royal Slumming," *Artforum* (November 1992), 93–97; Greg Tate, "Black like B.," *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992) 56–59.
 - 9) By "unbounded art history," I intend a point of view going beyond the Eurocentric-Western gaze of art history in the sense of an explicitly trans-cultural approach. See also George Kubler, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).
 - 10) "Jean Michel-Basquiat interviewed by Becky Johnston and Tamra Davis, Beverly Hills, California, 1985: 'I Have to Have Some Source Material Around Me,'" *Basquiat*, eds. Dieter Buchhart et al., xxiii.
 - 11) Suzanne Mallouk, quoted in Jennifer Clement, *Widow Basquiat: A Love Story* (Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 2000), 73–74.
 - 12) Henry Geldzahler, "Art: From Subways to SoHo: Jean-Michel Basquiat," 46.
 - 13) Egon Schiele in a letter to Oskar Reichel, September 1911.
 - 14) Anthony Haden-Guest, "Burning Out," *Vanity Fair* (November 1988), 190.
 - 15) Keith Haring, *Journals* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010), 166.

Basquiat: Radical Innovator Between the Everyday, Knowledge, and Myth¹

Dieter Buchhart

[The theater] is a crucible of fire and real meat where by an anatomical trampling of bone, limbs, and syllables / bodies are renewed / and the mythical act of making a body makes presents itself physically and plainly.
Antonin Artaud²

Jean-Michel Basquiat was a pioneering artist who, against all odds, negotiated among everyday life, knowledge, and myth in his artistic practice.³ Not a street artist or a graffiti artist, he was in fact a key figure in the art of the second half of the twentieth century and the present. Briefly after his all-too-early, tragic death on August 12, 1988, Anthony Haden-Guest called him “*America’s first truly important black painter.*”⁴ Yet, as Richard D. Marshall later noted, categories like “*black artist,*” “*1980s artist,*” or “*dead young artist*” were not adequate for describing Basquiat come the turn of the millennium.⁵ Instead, his art reflects the exciting art world of 1980s Downtown New York just as it remains contemporary and topical today.

And Basquiat seems now to be in demand more than ever. More than twenty five years after his death, his works attract the greatest attention; both on the art market, with his works obtaining record prices at auctions, and in terms of his artistic practice and his unmistakable aesthetic. His works are compared to the works by the masters of classical modernism and the great post-war artists. Basquiat’s art is so unique that it is often placed on the same par as that of Edvard Munch, Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, or Cy Twombly. His works are also able to inspire a younger generation of artists, for example Rashid Johnson, José Parlá, and Oscar Murillo. But is it primarily his fast-paced career, his high market value, his drug addiction that continues to fascinate and inspire, or is it quite simply his art? Not unlike Egon Schiele, Basquiat created a comprehensive oeuvre in less than a decade, with around 1000 paintings and more than 2,000 drawings. But tempting as though it might be, we need to be careful not to cast Basquiat as a Jimi Hendrix of the art world.⁶ For what role does it ultimately play how early, how quickly, and how much an artist has produced? Let us reconsider Ingrid Sischy’s aptly posed question from 1992, “*What made Jean-Michel Basquiat so great as an artist?*,”⁷ by asking what importance can be attributed to Basquiat’s art in art history and what traces has he left in the present.

Blinded by the myth and charisma of the artist, a thematic analysis of his work has often been lacking. For it is ultimately his art practice and his artistic themes that inscribe his importance in both a Eurocentric⁸ as well as a “unbounded”⁹ art history. In his symbolically laden, often wrathful images, he dedicated himself with great intensity to the struggle against capitalism, inequality, and racism. Meanings and symbols can be found hidden behind signs, terms, and words like “SOAP” for “whitewashing,” “FOOL ©” for the tragedy of the black entertainer, “COTTON ©” for slavery. He found inspiration in cartoons, children’s drawings, advertising, and pop art, and in Aztec, African, Greek, Roman, or everyday culture for his powerful compositions against the hierarchy and rules. He always needed “*source material around [him] to work it off*”¹⁰ and found inspiration in everything around him: “*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.*”¹¹

A constant presence here were skeleton-like silhouettes, mask-like grimaces, pictograms, and works of the greatest topicality and explosiveness. Repeatedly, Basquiat’s works explore subjects such as music, anatomy, sport, comics, work, money, becoming and passing, history, the history of African-Americans, and the history of art. In “Untitled” and “Untitled (Frame)”, Basquiat’s broad engagement with socio-political issues like discrimination and prejudice, capitalism, the market, and oppression finds its impressive synthesis as a harsh analysis of identity and the self.

Self-Portrait as a Heroic Mirror: Between Cliché and Repression

During the course of 1981, beside his drawings on paper, Basquiat increasingly began to concentrate on working on canvas. His focus was placed on the dialogue between painting and drawing in a combination of acrylics and oil stick. In so doing, he continued to develop his motifs of African American athletes and musicians, as chosen very early in his career. Increasingly, however, Basquiat transferred the subject in more complex representation

with more painterly elements. He then began increasingly to differentiate his depictions and turned towards full body portraits of primarily African-American men. He depicted them as boxers, sufferers, saints, angels, or fighters. Their halos seem to oscillate between glorioles, laurel wreaths, or crowns of thorns, and their weapons stretch from fists, teeth, baseball bats, spears, arrows, and swords, to brooms, buckets of water, and angel’s wings.

In many of these works, Basquiat’s statement seems to apply: “*It’s about 80 percent anger.*”¹² The representations are always of the highest intensity. Threat, fear, and decay are inscribed in many of his head portraits, coming to a climax in *Untitled*. The eyes wide open, oversized, the white of the paper transformed to a signal yellow, the mouth seems virtually obliterated. Basquiat captured the silhouette with energetically applied black acrylic paint, where a few drops and splats of paint attest to a veritably gestural use of the brush. The black silhouette of the head he treated intensely using oil stick, and bracketed the yellow of the eyes in the lower right alongside facial contours. With white oil stick, he created a kind of skeleton, on the one hand dynamizing the depiction while at the same time evoking the anatomy of the head. He brought the eyes, nose, and chin areas out of the dense blue surfaces, adding hair and covering the forehead with lines in another shade of blue. The blackish-bluish tone of the head is contrasted in other drawings with black-red in other drawings, like a depiction of different emotional states. Contrary to the traceable aggression of the red tonality, in the blue-black there inheres a freezing, a fear, and speechlessness. Basquiat expresses the later by way of the obliteration of the mouth, which is alluded to with lines, but does not differ from the rest of the head in the color used. The figure is despairing, tortured, the body pressed together to a minimum existence by outside forces. Thus, after deformation by way of spatial forces pressing against physical intactness, all remains “*living dead,*” as Egon Schiele noted in 1910. The painting, whether marked by racism, drugs, violence, or war, becomes a protocol of being, of human presence in “*life, which should be understood as an inexorable wearing out.*”¹³ The maltreated human being finds his indelible sign.

The drawing is part of Basquiat’s estate and was exhibited two years after his early death in 1990 at the legendary exhibition at New York’s Robert Miller Gallery together with a series of other intense head depictions in the middle of the upper row and dated to 1983. Basquiat placed no title on the rear of the drawing, which is why this work like the other head portraits is called *Untitled*. All the same, the question is posed of whether the work is not perhaps a self-portrait, since many of his works include hidden depictions of himself. As Basquiat admitted to Henry Geldzahler, he did self-portraits “*every once in a while, yeah.*” But it was clearly much more than just “*once in a while,*” for the artist clearly reflected upon his identity in an entire series of works, not least because Basquiat, himself effected by everyday racism, identified with the heroes, saints, and martyrs he depicted. “*Untitled*” was created the same year as a series of self-portraits formed using these silhouettes that also serve as a foundation for this work. 1983 was the year of the murder of Michael Stewart, a sad culmination of the exclusion, oppression, and exploitation of African-Americans in the 1980s. Basquiat was deeply shocked by the death of the African-American graffiti artist at the hands of the police. “*He was completely freaked out,*” as Keith Haring put it. “*It was like it could have been him. It showed him how vulnerable he was.*”¹⁴ Afterwards, he processed the events in works like “The Death of Michael Stewart”, which is highly evocative despite the comic-like depiction of the policeman beating the black, anonymized silhouette of Stewart. With the word DEFACEMENT ©, he assigns copyright to the police for their brutal hate crime against Stewart. Basquiat then gave the painting to Keith Haring, who had even called for Old Testament justice: “*an eye for an eye.*”¹⁵ In *Untitled*, Basquiat is also reduced to a silhouette, that makes him into a maltreated, anonymous African-American, into Michael Stewart, a potential victim of arbitrary police violence and hate crimes. O’Brien told an informative story about this: “*Once, the car I was driving, with Jean-Michel*

“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.”

Gerard Basquiat

16) Glenn O’Brien, “Basquiat and the New York Scene 1978-82,” viii.
17) Basquiat’s response was preceded by the following dialog: “BJ: If you didn’t paint, what do you think you’d be doing? JMB: Directing movies, I guess. I mean ideally, yeah. BJ: What kind of movies would you want to do? “I Have to Have Some Source Material Around Me,”” xxvi.
18) “I Have to Have Some Source Material Around Me,”” xxvi.
19) Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 43-53.
20) Hans Biedermann, *Knauers Lexikon der Symbole* (Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag GmbH, 2000), 301-302.
21) See Dieter Buchhart, “Jean Michel-Basquiat. Revolutionär zwischen Alltag, Wissen und Mythos,” XV.
22) Cathleen McGuigan, “New Art, New Money,” *New York Times* (February 10, 1985), 33.
23) Bruno Bischofberger, quoted in McGuigan, “New Art, New Money,” 33.
24) In: André Heller, *Luna Luna* (Munich: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 1987), 9.
25) Stephen Torton in conversation with the author, February 3, 2010.
26) Marc H. Miller in conversation with Jean-Michel Basquiat, *ART/new york: A Video Series on Contemporary Art*, 1983.
27) “I Have to Have Some Source Material Around Me,”” xxvi.
28) Henry Geldzahler, “Art: From Subways to SoHo: Jean-Michel Basquiat,” 46. See also “I Have to Have Some Source Material Around Me,”” xxii.
29) Lisa Liebmann, “Jean-Michel Basquiat at Annina Nosei,” *Art In America*, 70 (October 1982), 130.
30) Franklin Sirmans, “In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip-Hop Culture,” *Basquiat*, ed. Marc Mayer (New York, 2005), 94.
31) Roland Barthes, “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,” trans. Richard Howard, *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 166.
32) Gerard Basquiat in His Own Words. In: Jeffrey Deitch, Franklin Sirmans and Nicola Vassell, eds., *Jean-Michel Basquiat. 1981: The Studio of the Street* (New York: Deitch Projects, 2007), 94.
33) Roberta Smith, “Basquiat: Man For His Decade,” *New York Times* (Oct. 23, 1992), C20.
34) Keith Haring, “Remembering Basquiat: Keith Haring on a Fellow Artist and a Friend,” *Jean Michel Basquiat* (New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1999), 24.

as a passenger, was stopped by the police, and we had legitimate reasons to worry about being searched. I said, ‘They can’t search us legally. They don’t have probable cause.’ To which Jean replied, ‘They can do anything they want.’”¹⁶ Basquiat was Michael Stewart. Basquiat depicts fragmented, torn people, who reflect both their own suffering past and the now.

Despite all his difficulties and frustrations, Basquiat always took a profoundly humanist view. When, somewhat later, he was once asked what kind of films he would make, he formulated his goal as follows:¹⁷ “*Ones in which black people are portrayed as being people of the human race. And not aliens and not all negative and not all thieves and drug dealers and the whole bit. Just real stories.*”¹⁸ His head depictions become a mirror of himself, his fear, rage, and despair, giving these drawings a special intensity.

Untitled (Frame): Voodoo Altar as Artistic Credo

Speaking to André Heller, Basquiat called *Untitled (Frame)* a kind of voodoo altar, whereby he not only referred to the artistic autonomy of the frame, but also to his engagement with voodoo, which, like santería, umbanda, candomblé, and macumaba, has its origin in the religious tradition of the Yoruba, although they are also linked to one another and to Christianity. The Yoruba are West African people that comes from what is today southwestern Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, and whose current religious culture is influenced by Islam and Christianity.¹⁹ The trans-Atlantic slave trade, which forcefully brought Africans to the so-called New World, also brought these religious traditions to the Americas. At the latest in the mid 1980s, Basquiat began working intensely with the religious system of the African diaspora, as documented by the artist in his key monumental work *Grillo* from 1984. Here, Basquiat contrasts and overlaps signs and pictograms from the African tradition in the sense of a cultural continuity of Africa in America and thus an African-American consciousness with that of Western civilization, which he cites using Dreyfuss’ Symbol Sourcebook. The nails hammered into the wooden planks refer in part to a nail fetish and voodoo sculpture. The nails were beaten into anthropomorphous wooden figures during rituals to “*remind the being imagined in the figure of its duty to watch over and provide protection. Cruel intents were also linked to the act of nailing: the nail is a sign that the being in the idol truly hears the person who has a petition.*”²⁰ But the Christian symbolism of Christ’s crucifixion as an expression of suffering also resonates here, along with the secular central European tradition of hammering nails into trees or wooden figures as a sign of presence or the visit by a stranger. The emergence of Basquiat’s voodoo altar, which the artist created in the presence of Heller in 1986 and 1987, takes place within this broad field of association. By using twine, the artist referred to a group of works that he presented in the Fun Gallery in November 1982, marking the start of a new phase of work for the artist.²¹ Cathleen McGuigan described the exhibition as “*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, in part because he returned to a more intense drawing of words and symbols.*”²² And Bruno Bischofberger noted, “*I liked that show the best. The work was very rough, not easy, but likable. It was subtle and not too chic.*”²³ Basquiat showed works in which he clearly engaged with the support and its physicality, turning against the norm of canvas stretched onto a frame. Instead of using a standard frame, he affixed the canvas to wood palettes or timbers and wooden slats that he bound with twine or nailed together to form assemblages. The artist thus brings together various aspects of his art, as reflected in his choice of drawings collaged in *Untitled (Frame)*. The original drawings came from Heller’s monumental project *Luna Luna*, in which artists like Sonia Delaunay, Joseph Beuys, Kenny Scharf, Rebecca Horn, Keith Haring, Georg Baselitz, David Hockney, Salvador Dalí, Jean Tinguely or Roy Lichtenstein participated. *Luna Luna* was intended as an attempt to “*create a travelling terrain of modern art, that in the centuries-old principle of the fairground involves people of all ages and educational levels in playful acts.*”²⁴ Basquiat was commissioned to design the Ferris wheel as the centerpiece of this fairground designed by artists. This artistic laboratory remains unique today. As part of this project, Basquiat created a series of drawings from which he chose individual elements that were enlarged to a monumental form and then applied to the various panels of the Ferris wheel. The artist used at least one of these drawings as a source for his collaged frame work, cut up and arranged in a clockwise fashion. Here, the story of the frame’s emergence reflects a great deal of Basquiat’s artistic radicality, which is also revealed in his open collaboration with his assistants. In 1982 and 1983, Stephen Torton created most of

the unorthodox picture supports, from wood palettes nailed on top of one another or timber beams or strips of wood bound with cord,²⁵ as Basquiat mentioned in his 1983 interview with Marc H. Miller.²⁶ Torton also collaged Basquiat’s drawings onto supports, involving him in the work process. Basquiat not only sampled from the world around him, but also, like John Cage, let the everyday and other “*performers*” flow into his work. He refers to Cage’s concerts and forms of performance from the 1940s and 1950s, in which the “*composer*” had the musicians create their own interpretations of his randomly produced markings. In this sense, he took things previously produced and composed by his assistant and things from everyday life. For the voodoo altar, the artist left Heller with the choice of which work was to be placed in the frame. His first choice, due to the link to *Luna Luna*, was *Untitled*, one of the drawings that Basquiat created for the project. He then replaced this with *Untitled* from 1983. The drawings collaged in this frame add up to Basquiat’s artistic creed and refer from his earliest poetic conceptual graffiti to his artistic engagement in the mid and late 1980s.

Basquiat ordered the elements of drawings in a way characteristic for the years from 1986 to 1988, which can be defined by an alternation between the void and a *horror vacui*. Basquiat now works with a new kind of figuration, expanding his repertoire of sources, symbols, and content, even while maintaining his earlier approach.

Works of an unbelievable wealth of details in terms of signs, pictograms, words, and phrases stand thematically opposite highly concentrated works. But in the last years as well, Basquiat was never cynical,²⁷ but increasingly made use of the stylistic means of caricature and cartoons, an approach, that fascinated him from the very start: “*I wanted to be a cartoonist when I was young.*”²⁸ Already in the diptych *The Wolves* Basquiat used the visual language of cartoons: stick men-Mickey Mouse figures are threatened by wolves with huge tenths, whereby a large part of the visual event is obliterated, covered in gold. Alongside the remaining protagonists, there is the word MILK, for innocence as well as being white. The black over-painting of part of the drawing in *Pegasus* at the upper edge of this work, comparable to the red over-painting in *Untitled (Frame)* defined by the greatest possible density of signs, symbols, and words, alludes to the obliteration of this wealth of ideas. Basquiat obliterates his memory, knowledge, and everyday life and, with this, our collective memory as well. His interest, the context of words, drawings, and symbols to make clear, find their expression in his text-based graffiti, to which he also refers in the framed work.

“THE WHOLE LIVERY / LINE BOW LIKE / THIS WITH THE / ~~THE WHOLE LIVERY / LINE BOW LIKE / THIS WITH THE~~ / BIGM / BIG MONEY ALL / CRUSHED INTO / THESE FEET ©.” More than to graffiti, here Basquiat’s works clearly show their link “*with mid-20th-century art history.*” His works, “*oddly enough . . . give the impression of having been influenced by graffiti, rather than having evolved from it.*”²⁹ Liebmann points clearly to the artistic independence and different intention of Basquiat in relationship to graffiti, his search to link image and text to one another in an associative relationship. In *Untitled (Frame)* and *Pegasus*, the link to the parallel emergence of hip hop, Burroughs’ cut-up and concrete poetry, as Franklin Sirmans noted, remains 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.*”³⁰ And yet the power and clear direction of Basquiat’s lines and writing and its tie to the artist’s physicality remains always “*inimitable*”.³¹ His works are, however, always highly political. Here too, what his father Gerard said about his son applies: “*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.*”³² 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.*”³³ Yet under the surface, he uncompromisingly takes a position in his works. For Jean-Michel Basquiat is not just a great artist, but also a humanist who anticipated a great deal in his manner of working, not least as a predecessor of our copy and paste generation. “*Wielding his brush as a weapon*”³⁴ he struggled against exploitation, consumer society, repression, racism, and genocide.





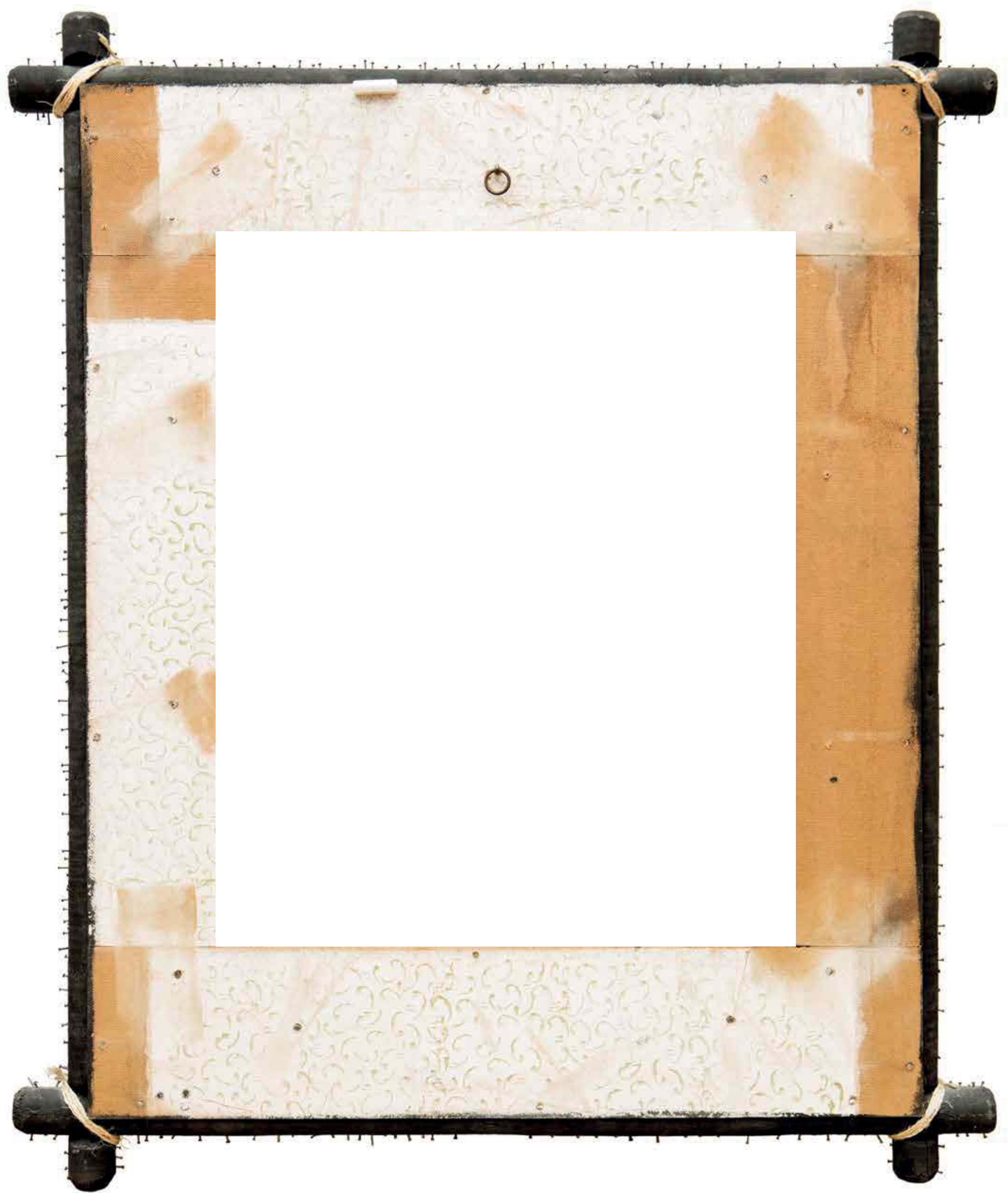
Jean-Michel Basquiat

Untitled, 1983, acrylic and oilstick on paper, 76,2 x 55,88 cm

Untitled (Frame), 1987, wooden slats with nails, paper on wood, graphite, colored pencil, and acrylic, 120,7 x 101,4 cm

“Yeah, you know, it’s strange [not wanting to paint]. The expressive, the wild element, there’s a white sheet and then there’s something on it, I have always loved smearing it with my own intentions.”

Jean-Michel Basquiat



Jean-Michel Basquiat

Untitled (Frame), 1987, wooden slats with nails, paper on wood, graphite, colored pencil, and acrylic, 120,7 x 101,4 cm, rear view

Glossary

By Anke Wiedmann and Flora Schausberger

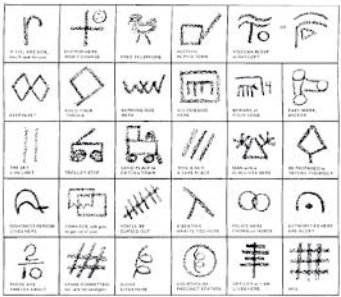
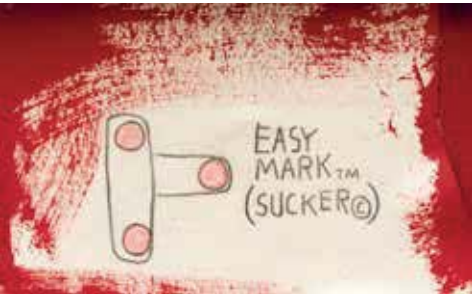
1. Man Eating Spaghetti

This image can be interpreted as a commentary on opulence and excess. When speaking with Tamra Davis about his teenage years, Basquiat notes that from his perspective, everyone else seemed “*filthy rich*”. He said watching people eat 25 dollar meals outraged him, because he realized how many meals he would be able to buy for that same amount.



2. EASY MARK™ (SUCKER©)

These terms reference the so called “Hobo Code”. This code was developed in the mid-to-late 1800s. Men that couldn’t find steady employment travelled across the United States by hopping illegally on freight trains, finding work where they could. Hobos were assigned an outsider status, and Basquiat identified with this. It is unclear where the term “hobo” or the codes themselves originated. The simple marks were used by the hobo community to communicate with each other, speaking of places to get food or warning about police presence. “Easy Mark” implies a person that is easy to con or swindle.



Hobo Code, in: Richard Marshall (ed.), Jean-Michel Basquiat, exhibition catalog, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York [23.10.1992 – 14.02.1993], Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York 1992, p.25.



Trophy, 1984, Acrylic on canvas, 219 x 173 cm, Private collection / Enrico Navarra, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris 2000, p.216.

3. BOOM!?

“*Boom for real!*” was a common expression that Basquiat used to comment on things he heard or saw that he liked. The imagery of an exploding or burning house can also be seen in his *Swiss House on Fire* (1983). Basquiat visited Switzerland on several occasions. In contrast to his hometown of New York, the alpine country seemed so clean and safe, that the idea of a Swiss house exploding or on fire seemed utterly absurd.



Swiss House on Fire, 1983, Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 70 cm, Private collection / Enrico Navarra, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris 2000, p.174.



Now's the Time, 1985, Acrylic and oilstick on wood, Diameter: 235 cm, Private collection, Courtesy The Brant Foundation, CT / Dieter Buchhart, Sam Keller. (ed.): Basquiat, exhibition catalog Fondation Beyeler, Basel [9. 5. – 5. 9. 2010], Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern 2010, p. 137.



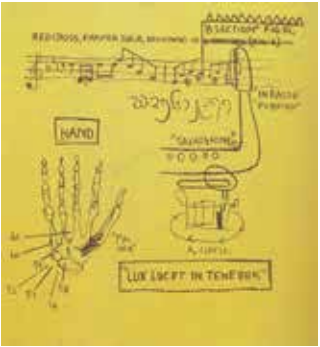
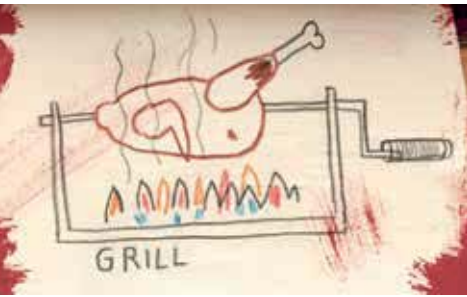
Billie, 1983 – 1987, Acrylic, oilstick, xerox collage on canvas, 218,5 x 177,5 cm, Private collection / Enrico Navarra, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris 2000, p.256.

“BILLIE’S BOUNCE”

Billie’s Bounce references a song by the same name that Charlie “Bird” Parker composed in 1945. It was also recorded in the aforementioned legendary Koko-Session. Although often said to be a dedication to Billie Holiday, not all scholars agree with this. Nonetheless, Basquiat was a big admirer of Holidays and said that he would have liked to have designed a gravestone for her. When Holiday died, almost penniless, her estranged husband was left to organize and pay for her funeral. Although a wealthy jazz fan eventually ended up covering the costs, her grave remained unmarked for over a year after her death. Today Holiday shares a gravestone with her mother, next to whom she was buried at St. Raymond’s Cemetery in the Bronx.

5. GRILL

The ambiguity of terms and symbols that Basquiat employs opens up a wide field of associations within the knowledge space he creates. He copies deliberately, shows chance to be an artistic strategy, and transforms the visual material he finds to suit his aesthetic understanding. The drawing of a rotisserie chicken, with the word GRILL written underneath, can be interpreted in manifold ways. From a rotisserie chicken as the epitome of comfort food and family values, to a possible reference to the emerging trend of teeth grills in Hip Hip culture in the 1980s, or simply a wordplay on “BBQ – grill” and “grilling someone” in an interrogation.



Low Boy in Junkie Paradise, 1983, Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 167,5 x 152,5 cm, Private collection / Enrico Navarra, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris 2000, p.148.

“RED CROSS”©™®

Another reference to one of Charlie “Bird” Parker’s songs. Basquiat’s abundant use of the copyright, trademark, and registered trademark symbols can be seen as a commentary on the many Afro-American musicians that were taken advantage of by the white music industry. By not copyrighting their compositions, many brilliant artists didn’t receive royalties and instead were only paid for the recording session. Basquiat’s idol Parker was one of them – he reportedly only received \$50 for the aforementioned *Now’s the Time*. On the one hand, Basquiat himself is quoted as saying he felt betrayed or taken advantage of by artistic or business partners. On the other, he was very business savvy in his contracts with his art dealers, choosing to only give them works if they bought them, not on commission.

Glossary

6. Cloud and Rain

This depiction of a cloud and rain drops could reference the famous 1952 musical film I’m Singin’ in the Rain. In his drawing *Untitled (Gene Kelly)* (ca. 1984), Basquiat explores this theme in more depth, explicitly referencing Gene Kelly and the Oscars the movie received. But more importantly, he places a giant black skull-like head on the bottom of the paper, whose distorted facial features stand in stark contrast to Kelly’s “handsome” depiction. In several of his works Basquiat deals with the Afro-American stereotypes as deployed by the entertainment industry, and reveals a critical debate concerning the continuing socio-political suppression of Afro-Americans.



Untitled (Gene Kelly), c. 1984, Oil paintstick on paper, 76,2 x 55,9 cm, Private collection / Gianni Mercurio (ed.), The Jean-Michel Basquiat Show, exhibition catalog Fondazione La Triennale di Milano, Milan [19.09.2006 – 28.01.2007], Skira Editore S.p.A., Milan 2006, p.171.



8. Police Officer with Batton

1925
26
27
28
29

Disproportionate police violence against Afro-Americans is a recurring theme in Basquiat’s oeuvre. Basquiat’s critique of the institutional prejudice and police brutality that people of color face in United States unfortunately still resonates today, as recent tragic events have shown. The years written below the sketch could allude to any number of examples of racially motivated violence: 1925 the civil rights activist Marcus Garvey was imprisoned and subsequently deported to Jamaica, the lynching of John Carter took place in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1927, and after Black Tuesday in 1929 Afro-Americans were not only among the first to lose their jobs, but the Great Depression also saw a spike in the number of lynching taking the lives of their own.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Death of Michael Stewart*, 1983, Acrylic and marker on wood, 63,5 x 77,5 cm, Private collection / Leonhard Emmerling, Jean-Michel Basquiat. 1960 – 1988 Taschen Verlag, Cologne 2007, p.83.

7. 50 x 100

The math equation “50 x 100” can be seen as part of Basquiat’s reflection on money and economic growth. In several of his works Basquiat uses currency symbols or spells out sums of money, as in *Untitled (Five Thousand Dollars)* from 1982. Furthermore the artist refers frequently to the five cents coin or the nickel, which can be interpreted as a general term for money and worth as such – underlined by using the term “PRICELESS ART” – or else it can be seen within the context of the third US-American president Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and his country home of Monticello, both of which are portrayed on the back of the coin. President Jefferson was the author of the American Declaration of Independence and believed in the separation of church and state as well as in the freedom of the individual. His position on the question of slavery is, however, ambivalent. He owned numerous Afro-American slaves himself while simultaneously advocating the abolition of slavery.



Untitled (Five Thousand Dollars), 1982, Acrylic and oilstick on canvas mounted on wood supports, 93,5 x 92,5 cm, The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, New York / Leonhard Emmerling, Jean-Michel Basquiat. 1960 – 1988 Taschen Verlag, Cologne 2007, p. 38.

9. Cocktail/Champagne and Top Hat

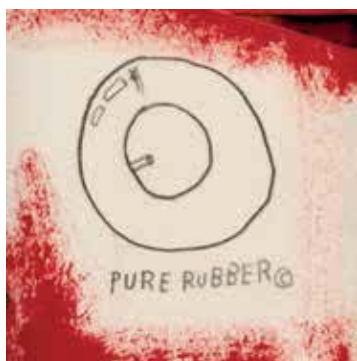
The cartoonish depictions of a martini glass and a top hat can be read as symbols of wealth, status and class. One has to think of the imagery of the classic board game Monopoly – the little white man with top hat and cane, who dictates the rules of the game: buy property, pay income tax, avoid jail, and most importantly, take as much money from the other players as possible to ruin them. In fact, the whole frame of this piece resembles a board game of sorts, with different steps to be completed along the way until one reaches ‘The End’. Only in this ‘game’, the rules aren’t clear.



Glossary

10. PURE RUBBER©

Both the word “rubber” as well as what could be interpreted as a depiction of a tire, also appear in Basquiat’s *Rubber* (1985). Very prominent in the work are the flames shooting up from various points, engulfing both the background and seemingly the figure. While tires are often symbols of status – as pertaining to cars - burning tires are either a sign of demonstration and protest or a source of heat for those that have no other option. In the 1970s and 1980s the Bronx saw a sheer unbelievable number of fires. In some census tracts more than 97% of the buildings were burnt down. Cause in a lot of cases was arson, as the landlords stood to gain far more from the insurance money collected than from the underprivileged tenants. But many fires were also the result of neglected properties and the resulting faulty wiring or makeshift heating. “*The Bronx is burning*” was a well-known phrase, and Basquiat no doubt was aware what racial and social injustices these fires symbolized.



Untitled, 1986, Graphite, colored pencil and oilstick on paper, 76 x 104 cm, Private collection / John Cheim (ed.), Jean-Michel Basquiat. Drawings, exhibition catalog, Robert Miller Gallery, New York [November 1990], Robert Miller Gallery, 1990, p.123.



Rubber, 1985, Acrylic, oilstick and paper collage on canvas, 218,5 x 173 cm, Private collection / Enrico Navarra, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Galerie Enrico Navarra, Paris 2000, p.232.

12. EASY MARK™ (SUCKER©)

See description 2 (p. 20).



14. 20 BY 17 INCHES

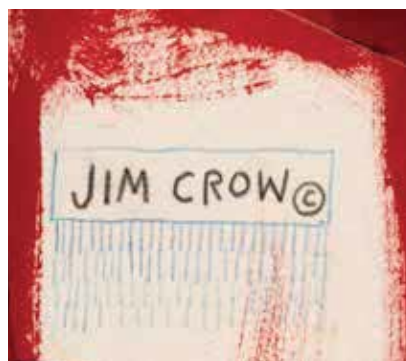
“20 x 17” is a standard size in frames. Prices of artworks, especially of sought after contemporary artists, are often defined by size and not necessarily by the quality of the work. In addition, some collectors prefer to buy certain sizes of works that are easily framed, or not too difficult to handle. Although Basquiat was represented by several galleries throughout his career, he remained ambiguous about the commercial aspects of the art world.



11. JIM CROW©

The term “Jim Crow”, derived from the infamous Jim Crow Laws which enforced segregation in the United States from the 1870s until 1965, is the epitome of racial injustice and prejudice. It is a stereotype, which casts Afro-Americans as dancing, singing, docile, and simple minded people.

The horrendous violence condoned by these laws was one of the main factors of the so called Great Migration, which between 1915 and 1970 saw over 6 million Afro-American Southerners fleeing to the North. This migration transformed urban America and gave rise to the urban music, art, and culture we know today and which influenced Basquiat tremendously. At the same time, many of the social injustices that people of color face in urban America stem from this time of great upheaval: desolate housing, underprivileged schools and thus insufficient employment opportunities, as well as lacking infrastructure, to name only a few.



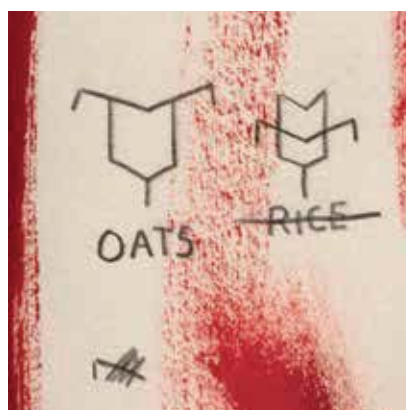
Jim Crow, 1986, Acrylic and oilstick on wood, 206 x 244 cm, Private collection / Leonhard Emmerling, Jean-Michel Basquiat. 1960 – 1988 Taschen Verlag, Cologne 2007, p.91.

13. OATS RICE [

Basquiat owned a copy of Henry Dreyfuss’ *Symbols Sourcebook, An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*, which he often referenced and where these symbols for oats and rice can be found.

Once again there are a multitude of possible readings. “Rice” could refer to Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a New York actor who popularized a racist song and dance routine called “The Jim Crow”, which ultimately lent its name to the so called Jim Crow Laws.

Basquiat could also be alluding to food staples that could and can be found in almost every American household: oats and rice in the form of the brands Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben’s, both of which employ racist stereotypes. The character of Aunt Jemima belongs to the “Mammy archetype”, the docile female slave that takes care of the white plantation owner and his family. The term “uncle” was commonly used when talking to older slaves or servants.



Agriculture Signs, in: Henry Dreyfuss, *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*, New York (John Wiley & Sons) 1984, p. 39.

15. MEGAPHONE©

This can be interpreted as a commentary on the difficulty the Afro-American community faces in having its voice heard.



Glossary

16. Man in Hat smoking

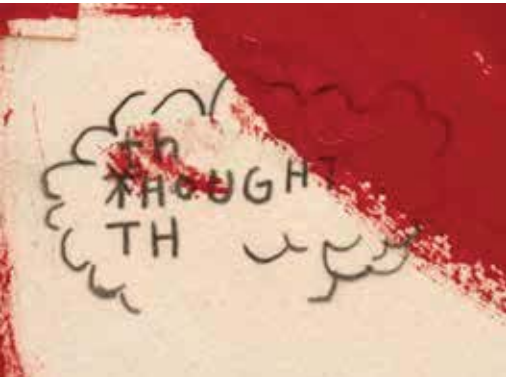
Depicted is an Afro-American man with an old-fashioned bowler hat. Borrowed from the iconography of cartoons, the two “x” in his eyes indicate that he is either dead or drunk. Considering the time the piece was painted, Basquiat is most likely referencing the crack epidemic that hit New York in the 1980s. Images of Afro-American men high on crack cocaine were omnipresent in the media at the time.



René Ricard, 1984, Oilstick on paper, 76.2 x 55.9 cm, Private collection / Gianni Mercurio (ed.), The Jean-Michel Basquiat Show, exhibition catalog, Fondazione La Triennale di Milano, Milan [19.09.2006 – 28.01.2007], Skira Editore S.p.A., Milan 2006, p.168.

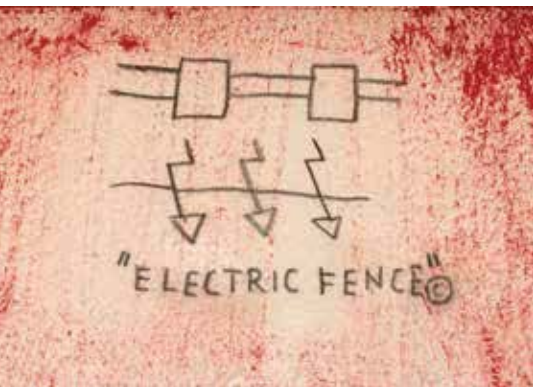
18. THOUGHT

Letters, words, lists and phrases are often an integral part of Basquiat’s art. The curator Klaus Kertess wrote pertinently: “In the beginning of his 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. He liked to say he used words like brushstrokes.”



20. “ELECTRIC FENCE©”

Electric fences are a very physical and painful reminder for those who are on the outside, that they do not belong on the ‘inside’. Basquiat was all too aware of the boundaries he and others faced, due to the color of their skin.



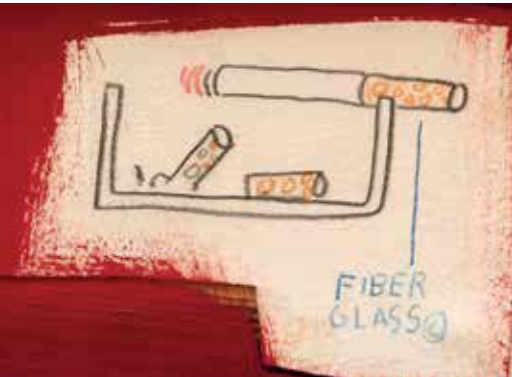
17. HATCHET©

The hatchet can be read as an expression of revolt and defiance against the oppression Afro-Americans experience(d). All of Basquiat’s senses are acutely alert to his immediate surroundings from which he derives his words, signs and terms. Indeed the appropriation of the everyday, the incidental and the seemingly meaningful are the elements which make his art so distinctive and unique. Basquiat’s art is based on knowledge and yet he samples the things which surround him. He deduces abbreviations and words which are barely decipherable.



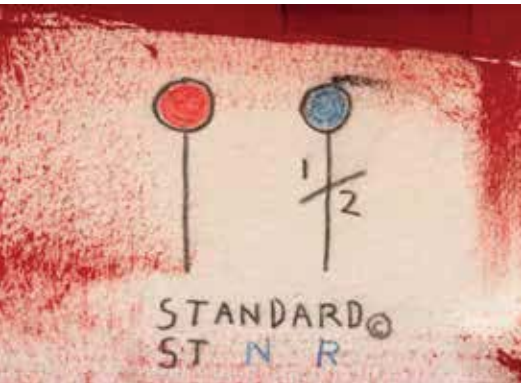
19. FIBER GLASS© / Ashtray

For Basquiat’s artistic practice sampling his surroundings was detrimental: “I have to have some source material around me.” As Basquiat took inspiration from an abundance of stimuli, the sources for symbols and words cannot always be identified, and the meanings behind their combinations at times remains obscure.



21. STANDARD©

ST N R
Basquiat did not consider himself to be only a draftsman or artist, but also a writer. The hip-hop techniques of sampling and scratching relate to his artistic practice: He tests letters and words both for their sounds and their constellations of meaning, trying out word mutations and permutations. Henry Geldzahler refers in an interview to the interest which he had expressed in Basquiat’s drawings of lists, whereupon the artist recounted: “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.’”



Glossary

22. COWARDS WILL GIVE TO GET RID OF YOU©

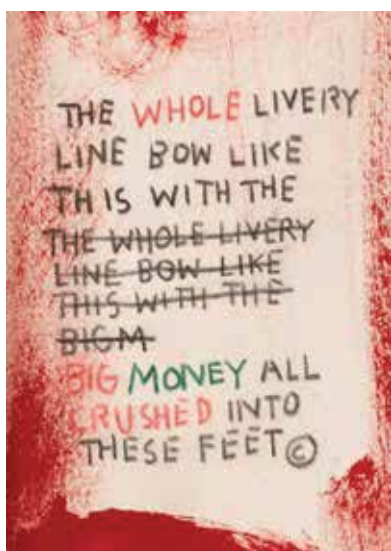
This phrase is taken from Henry Dreyfuss' *Symbol Sourcebook, An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*, more specifically from the so called "Hobo Code". When a house is marked with the corresponding symbol, it tells others in the hobo community that the owners will give either food or money, in exchange for you vacating the premises.



Pegasus, 1987, Acrylic, oil paintstick, pencil and colored pencil on paper on canvas, 223,5 x 228,5 cm
Private collection /
Dieter Buchhart, Sam Keller. (ed.): Basquiat, exhibition catalog Fondation Beyeler, Basel [9. 5. – 5. 9. 2010], Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern 2010, p. 170-171.

24. THE WHOLE LIVERY LINE BOW LIKE THIS WITH THE THE WHOLE LIVERY LINE BOW LIKE THIS WITH THE BIGM BIG MONEY ALL CRUSHED INTO THESE FEET©

Crossing out single words or whole sentences is one of Basquiat's trademarks. The artist said that he crosses out words or phrases that he wants to emphasize, as people are more interested in what they supposedly are not allowed to see. The same phrase, with variations concerning the crossed out sections, was spray painted by Basquiat on a wall in the film *Downtown 81*, and appears again on the canvas *The Whole Livery* (1987). Basquiat's poetic conceptual graffiti first appeared in the late 1970s, when he and Alex Diaz sprayed their SAMO© tag and aphorisms on the streets of downtown New York.



The Whole Livery, 1987, Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 125 x 100 cm, Private collection /
Exhibition catalog, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Vrej Baghoomian Inc., New York [21.10.1989 – 25.11.1989], Vrej Baghoomian 1989, pl.32.

23. RAKE©

A similar object is held by an Afro-American man wearing a prison uniform in Basquiat's *Untitled* (1981). In this painting the prisoner brandishes the rake like a weapon. Basquiat's paintings from the 1980s are of a political nature and he often depicts Afro-Americans in defiant stances, ready to defend themselves against the oppression they face. But as can be seen in *Untitled* (1981), the artist is well aware that in the struggle against the repression, the odds are not in favor of the defiant and the resources available to them insufficient.

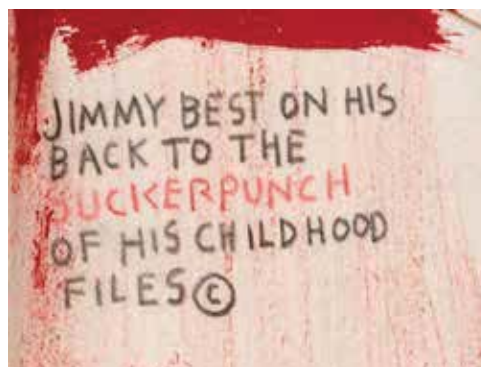


Untitled, 1981, Acrylic, oilstick and paper collage on wood, 183 x 122 cm, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles / Gianni Mercurio (ed.), The Jean-Michel Basquiat Show, exhibition catalog Fondazione La Triennale di Milano, Milan [19.09.2006 – 28.01.2007], Skira Editore S.p.A., Milan 2006, p.199., © Photo Squidids and Nunns

25. JIMMY BEST ON HIS BACK TO THE SUCKERPUNCH OF HIS CHILDHOOD FILES©

'Jimmy' is a common diminutive of Jim, a possible reference to the racial slur Jim Crow. The mentioned "files" could allude to social services files, used to document endangered or "problematic" youths. The aphorism can be seen as a commentary on the unfair, if not impossible, situation young urban Afro-Americans faced in light of severe cut backs in social services offered to poorer communities and the lack of job opportunities available to them.

The same phrase is spray painted on metal in the work *Jimmy Best...* (1981). Although identifying as neither a Graffiti nor a Street Artist, Basquiat started writing and drawing on the streets of New York at a very early age. This included the infamous SAMO© tags, which he sprayed together with his friend Al Diaz.



Jimmy Best..., 1981, Spray paint and oilstick on metal panel, diptych: 244 x 244 cm, Private collection /
Leonhard Emmerling, Jean-Michel Basquiat. 1960 – 1988 Taschen Verlag, Cologne 2007, p.58.

Glossary

26. Head with Band-Aid.

Depicted is a cartoon head of a man, who through his red nose, missing teeth, bad shave, and Band-Aid on his forehead is easily identifiable as down on his luck. It is his hairstyle, resembling Bantu knots, which “confirms” that he is black. By repeatedly using the words “BLACK”, “TAR” and “ASBESTOS” as a designation of Blackness, as well as the mask-like black face, Basquiat connects being black-skinned with being institutionally ostracized by the police. he connects it with suppression and with implied racism. commonly used when talking to older slaves or servants.



Untitled, 1981, Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 205.7 x 175.9 cm, The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection / Dieter Buchhart, Sam Keller. (ed.): Basquiat, exhibition catalog Fondation Beyeler, Basel [9. 5. – 5. 9. 2010], Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern 2010, p. 43., © Douglas M. Parker Studio, Los Angeles

27. World War I

Placed right after the derogatory image of an Afro-American man, the typical “Pickelhelm” of the Prussian army can be seen as the polar opposite of all perceived “vices” of the Afro-American man. The Prussian army was famous for its discipline, was highly organized and its efficiency was often said to be the result of its strict and aggressive hierarchal structure.



28. Lighting Bolt and Cloud

The flash references the symbol of the comic character Flash Gordon, originally drawn by Alex Raymond. The comic strip was first published 1934, but many variations followed. Among those, the 1979 cartoon The New Adventures of Flash Gordon, which aired for two seasons. Basquiat wanted to be a cartoonist when he was younger and obsessively watched cartoons throughout his life. Various comic and cartoon references can be found in his work. The flash of lightning is a recurrent symbol standing for strength, violence, combat and super heroes as in *BAP* (1983), *Flash in Naples* (1983), or *A Panel of Experts* (1982).

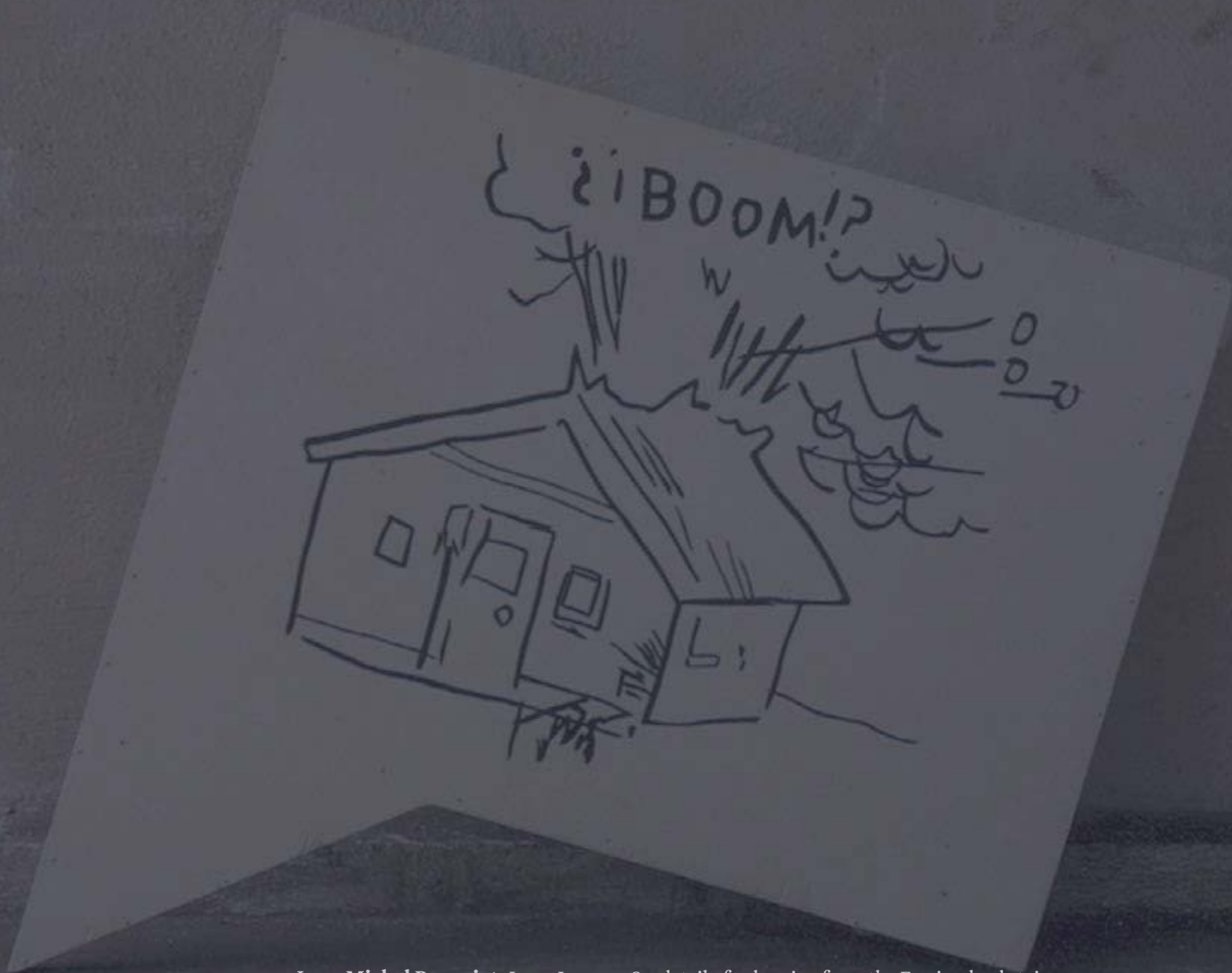


29. THE END

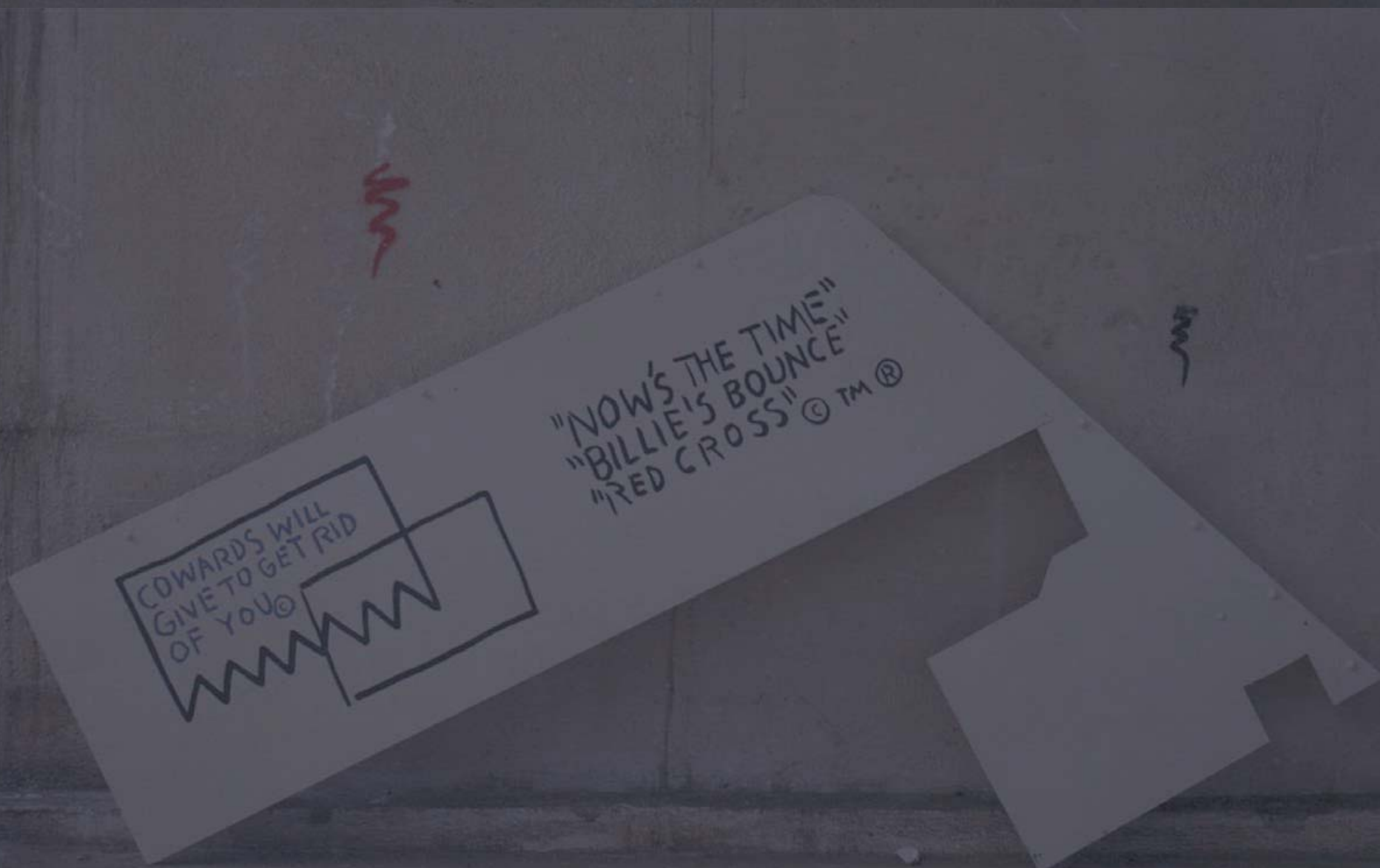
The end of the story or game board frame.



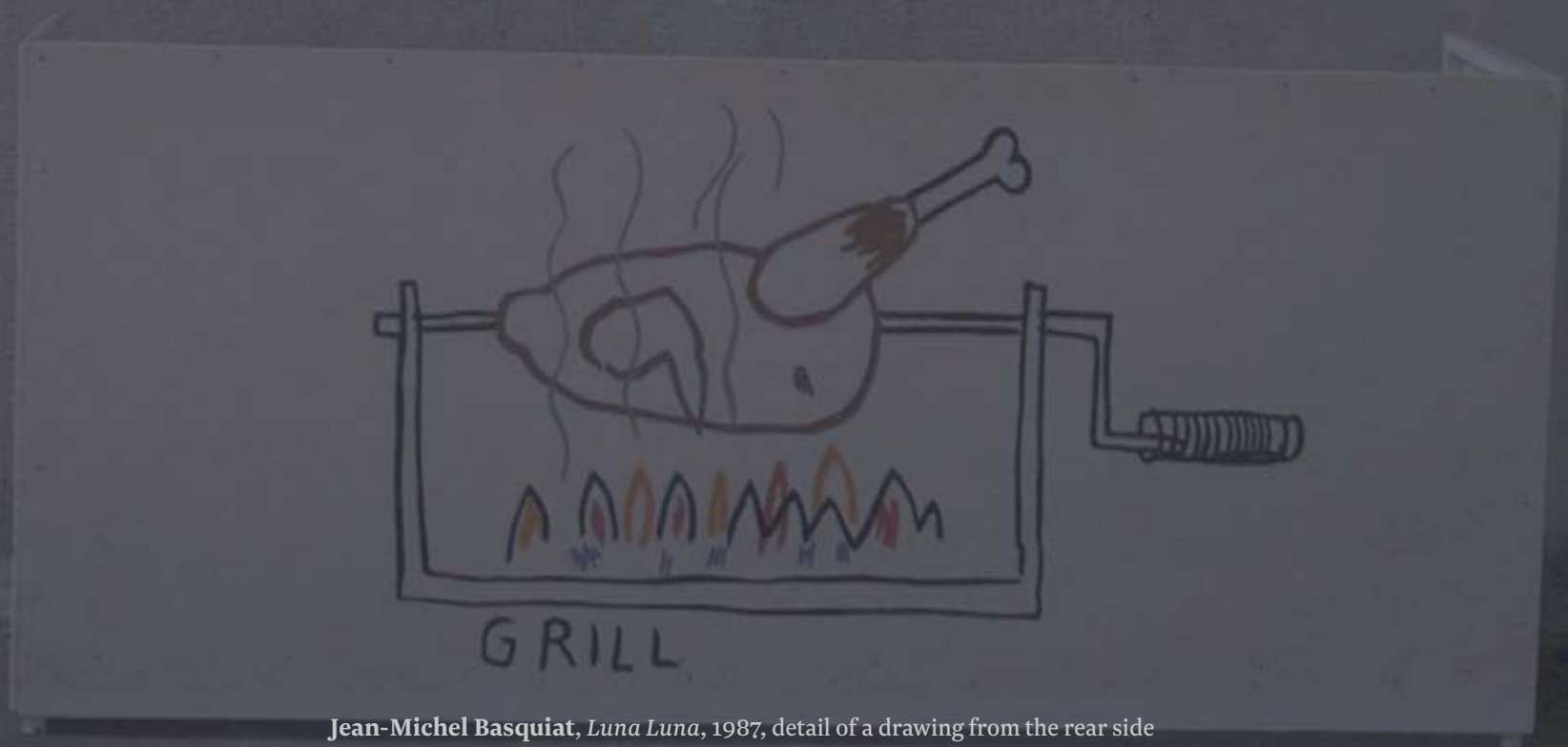
Flash in Naples, 1983, Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 167,5 x 152,5 cm, The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, New York / Dieter Buchhart, Anna Karina Hofbauer (ed.), Basquiat. Museums Security (Meltedown), Hirmer Verlag, 2015, p. 35.



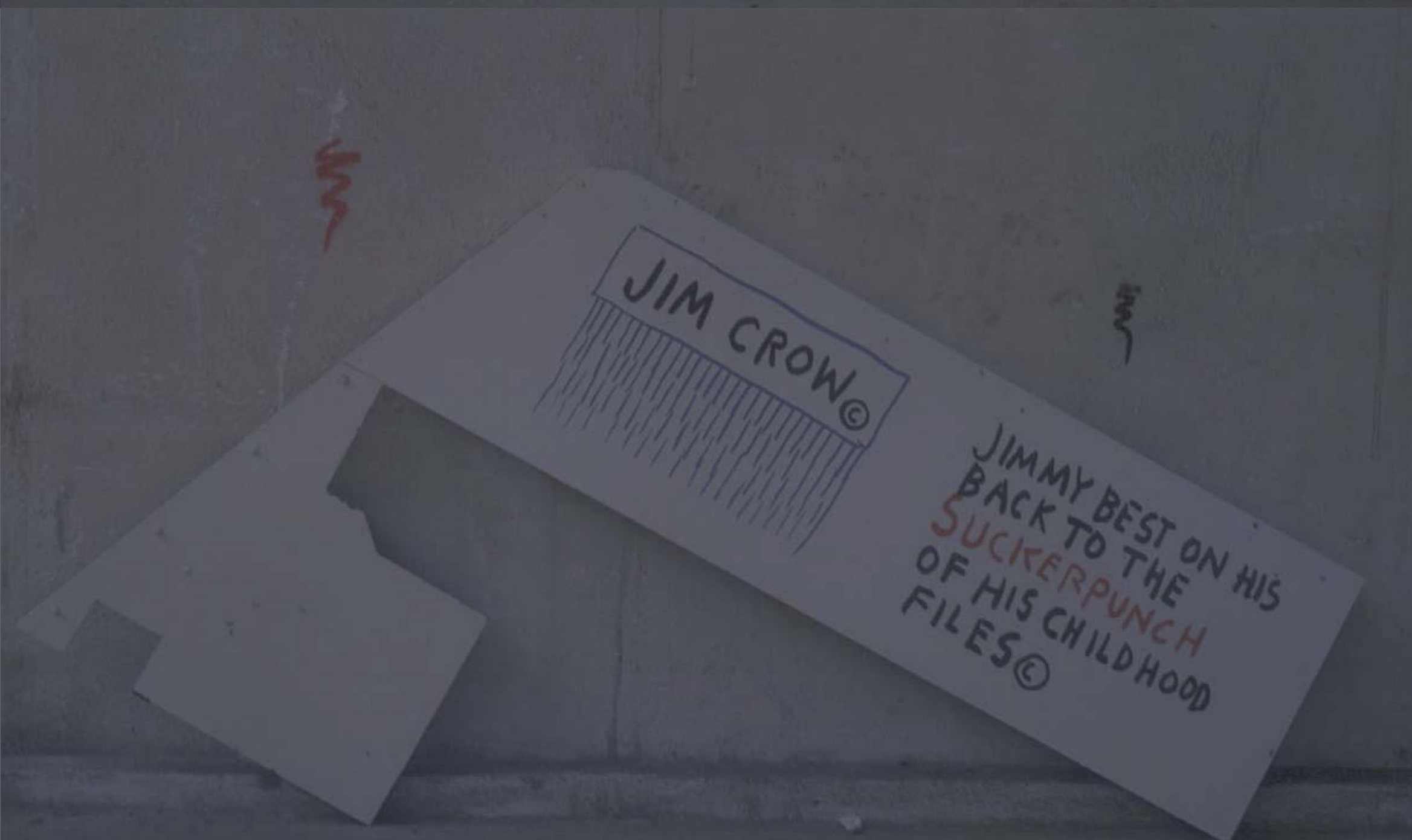
Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Luna Luna*, 1987, detail of a drawing from the Ferris wheel staircase



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Luna Luna*, 1987, detail of the drawing from the right-hand side facade



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Luna Luna*, 1987, detail of a drawing from the rear side



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Luna Luna*, 1987, detail of a drawing from the left-hand side facade

