

INTRODUCTION

Jean-Michel Basquiat endures as a powerful figure in the art world and beyond, and this book aims to distill the passion, energy, and spirit of his extraordinary imagination and boundless creativity. Considering the recent history of twentieth-century global contemporary art, Basquiat's contribution remains unparalleled among his peers, and his legacy as a celebrated artist continues to inspire people around the world.

This publication was conceived to reveal the essence of Basquiat's mind through his highly poetic and distinctive thought processes. The phrases herein are culled from various sources, including interviews, articles, and recordings of the artist in conversation. As an early admirer

and collector of his work, I am humbled by this compilation of Basquiat's ideas that resound with all the passion and intensity of his singular worldview.

Basquiat was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1960 to parents of Haitian–Puerto Rican descent. During his youth he expressed interest in art, and as a mature teenager he became active in Manhattan's colorful downtown art scene. By his early twenties Basquiat was a revered artist immersed in the thriving culture of the times and rose to fame alongside figures such as Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, Madonna, Debbie Harry, and other well-known eccentrics. Basquiat died an untimely death in 1988 at the youthful age of twenty-seven—at the height of his artistic stardom. Although we still mourn the loss of this creative giant, the raw energy of his contribution continues to reach far and wide.

As Henry Geldzahler once eloquently wrote:

Jean-Michel lived a short life, but he left us with a lot of memorable work, an astonishing amount given the number of his working years. The ancient Greeks believed that lives were not tragically short or satisfyingly long; rather, they thought, each life is lived to its own termination, and should be valued in its own terms. One might think of him as a warrior who fell too soon in a battle not of his making.

Almost every work Basquiat produced contained some form of written word. As art critic René Ricard wrote in an unpublished essay, “Had he reached artistic maturity at a slightly earlier (or later) time, Jean-Michel Basquiat would have manifested as a poet.” Even Basquiat

himself once stated: “I’m going to become a writer. I want to become a writer. But I can’t write.”¹ Indeed, writing was always central to Basquiat’s artistic practice. From his early collaborative work as SAMO©, a text-based take on graffiti he produced on the streets of New York City from the late seventies through the early eighties, to his ongoing studio practice where text was integral to his visual vocabulary, the shards of language, often elusive in exact meaning and posed in the savvy staccato of urban vernacular, come together as a patchwork quilt of offhand provocations throughout his oeuvre into an extended, improvisatory kind of epic poem. Typically scrawled across his artwork in his characteristic all-capital letters, be it as enigmatic asides or titular titles, Basquiat’s texts within his canvases are as much a part of what he told us as the sum of those few interviews

he granted in his lifetime, with punchy phrases like:

“FAMOUS NEGRO ATHLETES”

“PLUSH SAFE HE THINK”

“MOST YOUNG KINGS GET THEIR HEAD CUT OFF”

“JIMMY BEST ON HIS BACK TO THE
SUCKERPUNCH OF HIS CHILDHOOD FILES”

“LOVE IS A LIE
LOVER = LIAR”

“ALOT OF BOWERY BUMS USED TO BE
EXECUTIVES”

“BOOM FOR REAL”

“ROME PAYS OFF ©”

“IT ALL DEPENDS WHO YOU ARE ON WHAT
STREET”

“VOICES OF AUTHORITY MAKE MAJOR CLAIMS”

“HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS IN FRONT OF THE
CHINESE THEATER WITH FOOTPRINTS OF
MOVIESTARS”

Though he never collected all the language that ran rampant through his mind like unruly youth in a schoolyard into anything as formal as a book—he always made the words subservient to the images in his art, and was, for someone so smart, articulate, and knowledgeable, notably reticent about speaking in public or for the record—Basquiat was a writer. Many years ago, I was blessed with the opportunity to collect Basquiat’s series of handwritten journals known as “The Notebooks” (published in facsimile form by Princeton University Press). The notebooks are distinct works of art in themselves, filled with highly poetic words and phrases, such as those above, laid out in a deliberately visual manner. It was through the study of these notebooks that I was inspired to explore another side of his voice—his spoken words—which evolved into this publication. Condensed from

the limited yet rich supply of firsthand material that exists, this book aims to give a more direct sense of who Basquiat was, how he spoke, and how he expressed himself in words.

The book is comprised of four chapters: “Process,” “Influence and Heroes,” “New York,” and “Art.” “Process” explores the motivations, ideas, and techniques behind Basquiat’s art practice. “Influence and Heroes” reveals his source material and the forces that shaped him as an artist. “New York” chronicles his experience of the city, both as a young child growing up in Brooklyn and as an initially struggling artist who quickly achieved art world fame. The final chapter, “Art,” delves into Basquiat’s unique perspectives, opinions, and experiences of art, the art world, and what it means to be an artist.

Basquiat was not ahead of his time; he was his time. He was an artist, a poet, a critical thinker,

a celebrity, a musician, an actor, and a wild child of the universe, full of consistencies and inconsistencies, whose artistic courage and bravery defined an era. It is my hope that this book provides a glimpse into Basquiat's incredible mind through his less examined spoken words, and serves as a foundation of thought for generations to come. May his words and thoughts enliven your thinking today as much as they have inspired me for many decades.

LARRY WARSH