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BOOM, BOOM, BOOM FOR REAL

DIETER BUCHHART



Fig.1: Edo Bertoglio. *Boom for Real*, Jean-Michel Basquiat on the set of *Downtown 81*, 1980–81.

*Boom for real! Was I dreaming? No. Maybe I was just waking up. Waking up to my own luck. Luck is where you find it.*¹

A naked wall reads ‘BOOM FOR REAL’, spray-painted in large capital letters. Jean-Michel Basquiat stands in front of this wall with his left hand casually in his pocket, swinging a paper bag in his other hand, while looking at the camera with a faint smile (Fig. 1). In this still from *Downtown 81*, filmed in late 1980–81 (when the film was known as *New York Beat*), he is barely 20 years old and plays broadly himself: an artist in search of his artistic self. Yet he was not a street or graffiti artist, which he was often labelled as a result of his early graffiti works with his friend Al Diaz under the pseudonym of SAMO©. From 1977 to late 1978, the two wrote poetic and often critical phrases around downtown Manhattan, which earned them significant popularity.² In 1982, at the age of 21, Basquiat was invited to take part in *Documenta 7* in Kassel, the youngest artist in the show’s history at the time, where his works were exhibited alongside Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol, among others. Only six years later, Basquiat died on 12 August 1988.

NOW’S THE TIME

During his short life, Basquiat became one of the key figures of the downtown New York art scene and has since been ascribed a decisive role in the art of the second half of the 20th century. Almost 30 years after his death, his works continue to attract major attention, both on the art market and, more importantly, from art historians.³ His works are frequently compared to those of the great masters of classical modernism and the post-war era. Basquiat is considered in the same pantheon of artists as Edvard Munch, Warhol and Twombly. He has inspired generations of younger artists, including Rashid Johnson, José Parlá and Oscar Murillo.

It might be all too tempting to mythologise Basquiat as the Jimi Hendrix of the art world.⁴ But what does it matter in the end how early, how fast and in what quantity an artist’s work was produced? Let us re-pose Ingrid Sischy’s question ‘What made Jean-Michel Basquiat so great as an artist?’⁵ from today’s perspective, independently of drugs, fame and market values. Retrospective exhibitions since the turn of the century, such as at the Brooklyn Museum (2005)⁶ and the Fondation Beyeler (2010),⁷ have underscored his artistic importance in the Eurocentric⁸ and ‘entgrenzte’⁹ art historical canon through a curatorial presentation of his most significant work. *Now’s the Time* at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2015)¹⁰ traced his contemporary relevance through a thematic analysis of his work. The latter exhibition broached Basquiat’s multifaceted engagement with socio-political questions, ranging from the history of oppression

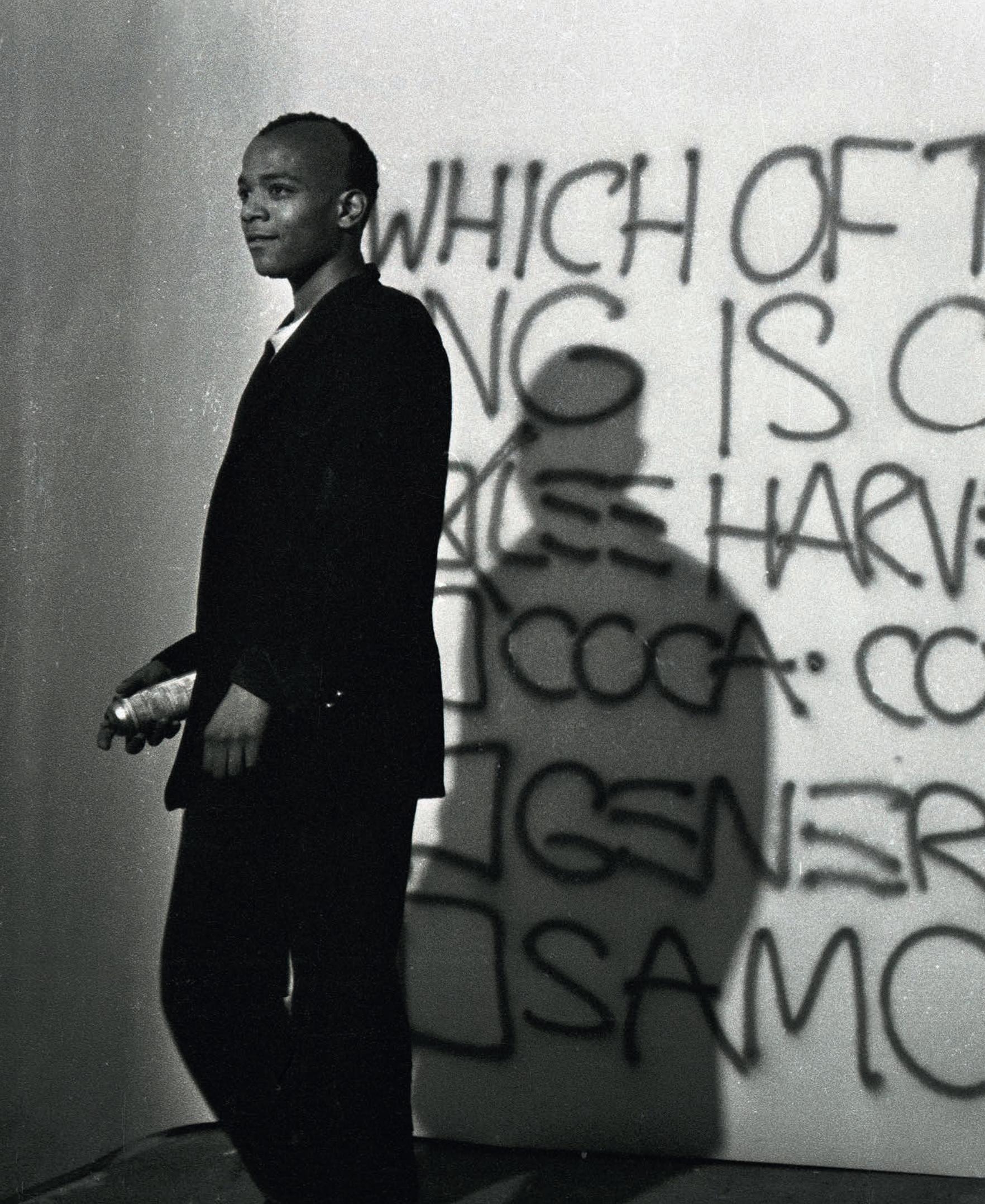
to free market capitalism, against the backdrop of recurring references to topics including music, anatomy, cartoons, economics and black cultural history.

Exhibitions such as *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks* at the Brooklyn Museum (2015)¹¹ and *Words Are All We Have* at Nahmad Contemporary in New York (2016)¹² demonstrated the ease with which the artist deployed letters, words, numbers, lists and phrases as integral components of his work. As Klaus Kertess describes, he used ‘words like brushstrokes’.¹³ Kertess remarks: ‘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’.¹⁴ Yet still Basquiat gets categorised as a neo-expressionist, alongside artists including David Salle and Julian Schnabel, neo-expressionism being described in terms such as ‘Bad Painting’, ‘New Image Painting’ or ‘Wild Style’ as a counter-movement to conceptual art.¹⁵ Jordana Moore Saggese in her 2014 book *Reading Basquiat* anchors the artist between neo-expressionism and conceptualism,¹⁶ while I have focused on looking at Basquiat through a conceptual lens.¹⁷

But what role did SAMO© and the downtown New York art scene, which was heavily influenced by Andy Warhol, play in Basquiat’s development? And what was the impact of his attention-provoking participation in the *Times Square Show* (1980) and *New York/New Wave* at P.S.1 (1981)?¹⁸ What significance can be attributed to his rarely discussed interdisciplinary artistic practice and how did he channel the influence of his various source materials?¹⁹ These questions are addressed for the first time in *Basquiat: Boom for Real* at the Barbican, London, and the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. The first extensive Basquiat exhibition in either the UK or Germany, it focuses on the artist’s interdisciplinary practice and his encyclopaedic source material, from literature to bebop jazz to the history of film and television.

BASQUIAT’S INTERDISCIPLINARITY: BETWEEN LINE, WORD, PERFORMANCE, COLLABORATION AND MUSIC

In the art scene of downtown Manhattan in the late 1970s and early 1980s, working across different artistic media – such as painting, performance, music or film – was a widespread phenomenon, as was working collaboratively, especially among a younger generation of artists. An important role model in this regard was surely Andy Warhol, who since the 1960s had been furthering his repertoire. His practice extended from painting, graphics, drawing, photography, sculpture and film to fashion, TV, performance, theatre, music and literature. Warhol overcame traditional barriers between disciplines and cultural scenes.



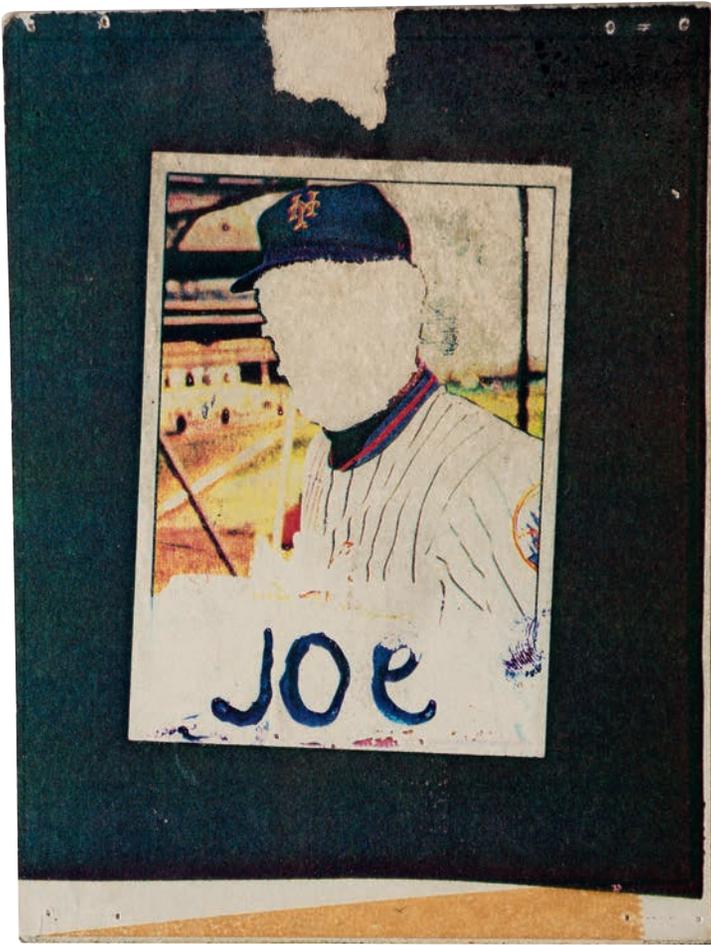
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© 111

Fig. 4: Anton Perich. Basquiat at the Canal Zone Party, 1979.







Clockwise from above
Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jennifer Stein
Joe, 1979

Colour photocopy
 14.4 × 10.8 cm (5 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.)
 Collection of Jennifer Von Holstein

Jerk, 1979

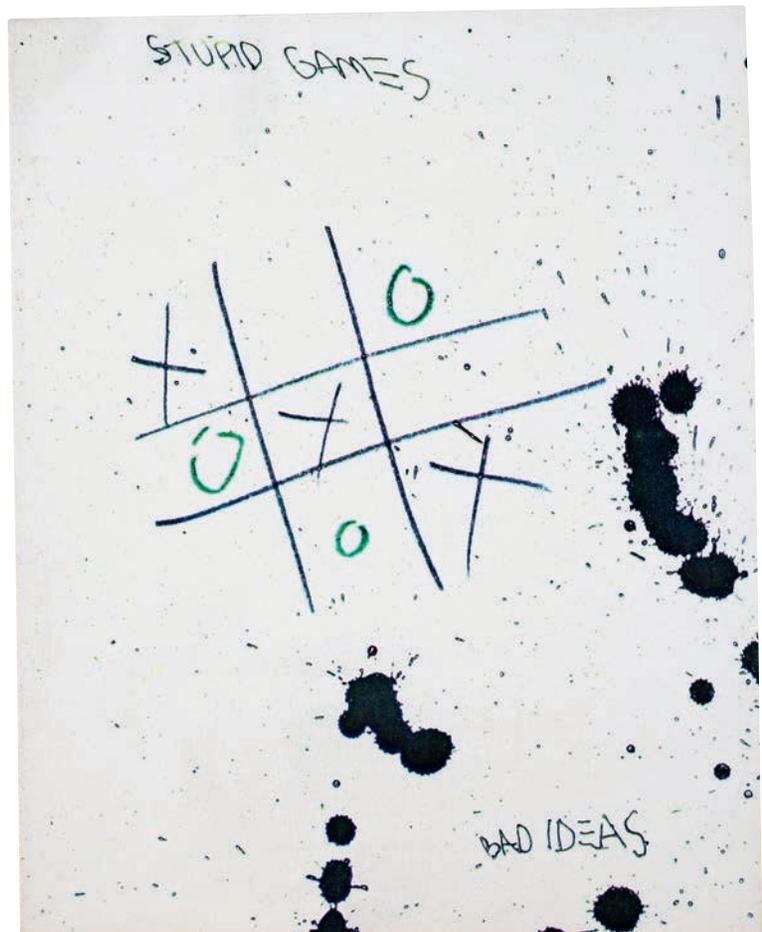
Colour photocopy
 13.6 × 11 cm (5 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.)
 Collection of Jennifer Von Holstein

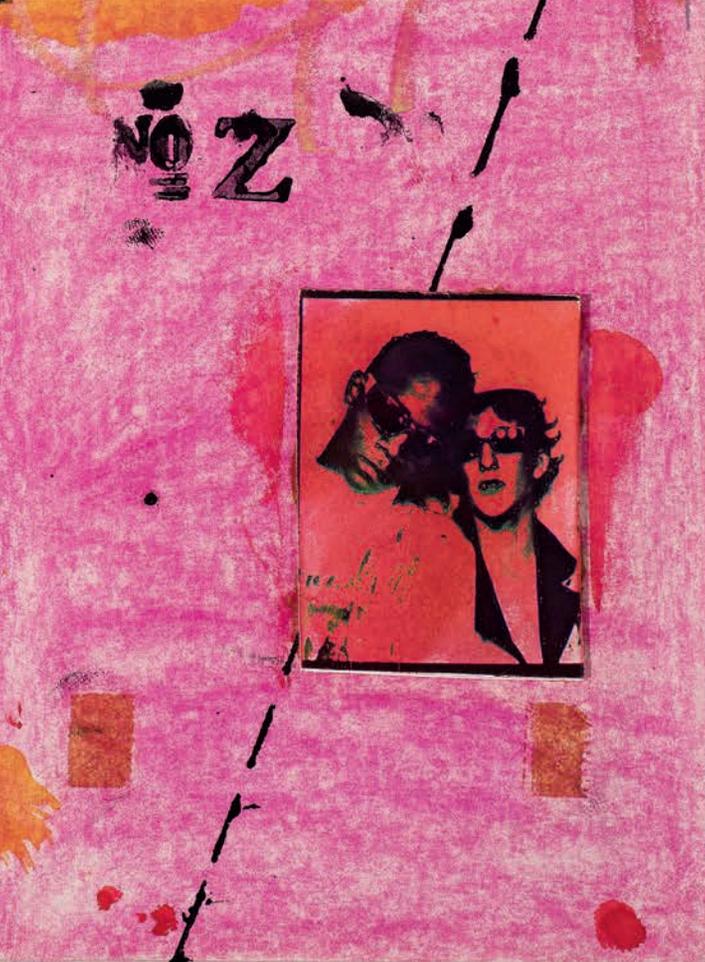
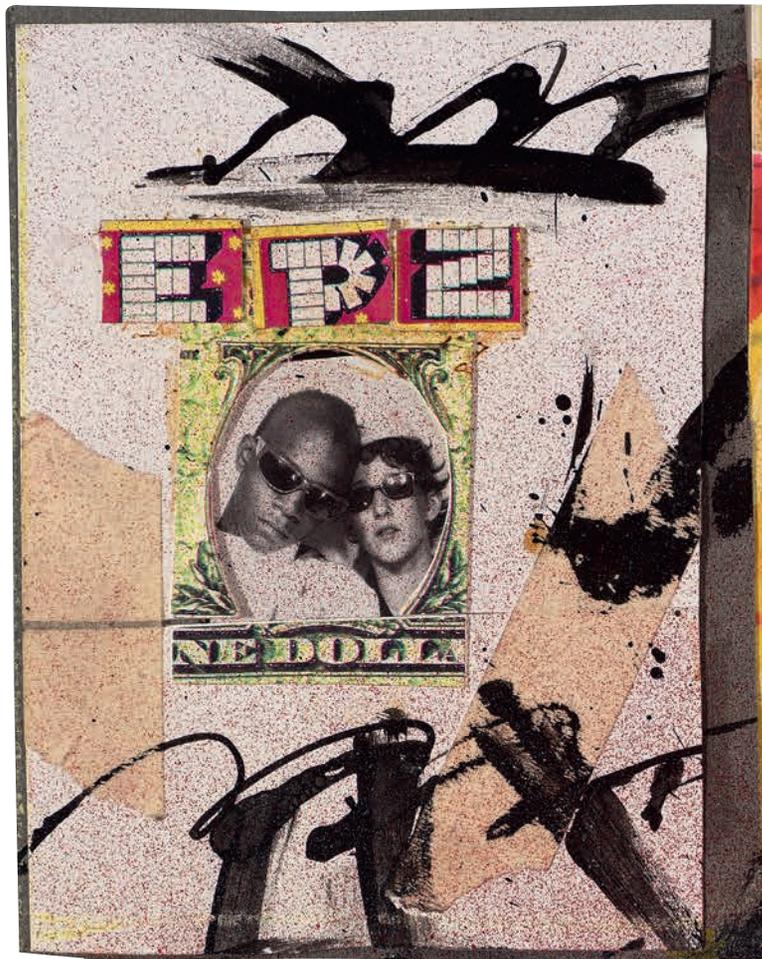
Stupid Games, Bad Ideas, 1979

Colour photocopy
 13.3 × 10.6 cm (5 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 4 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.)
 Collection of Jennifer Von Holstein

Opposite
Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jennifer Stein
Anti-Baseball Card Product, 1979

Mixed media on cardboard
 21.6 × 27.9 cm (11 × 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.)
 Collection of Jennifer Von Holstein



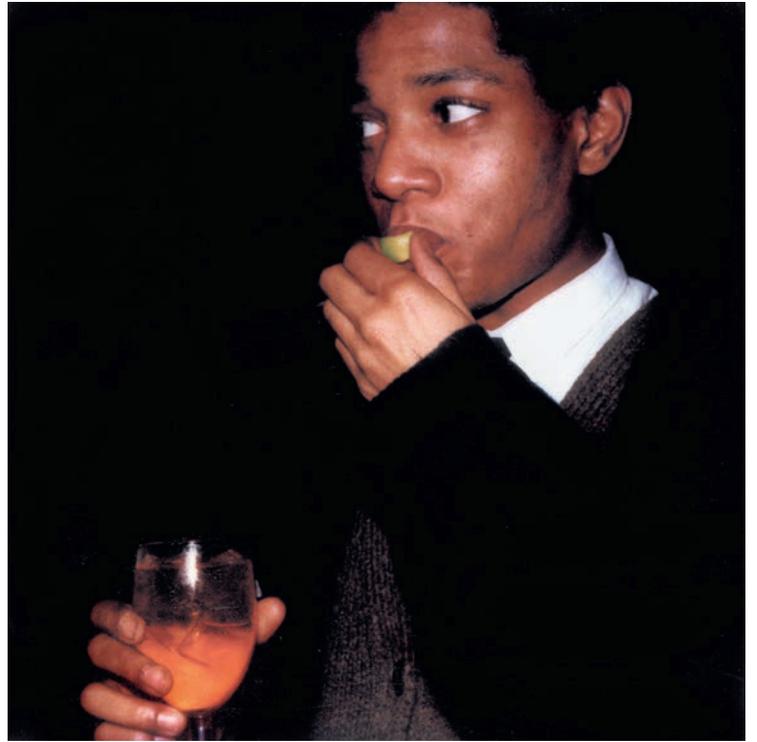


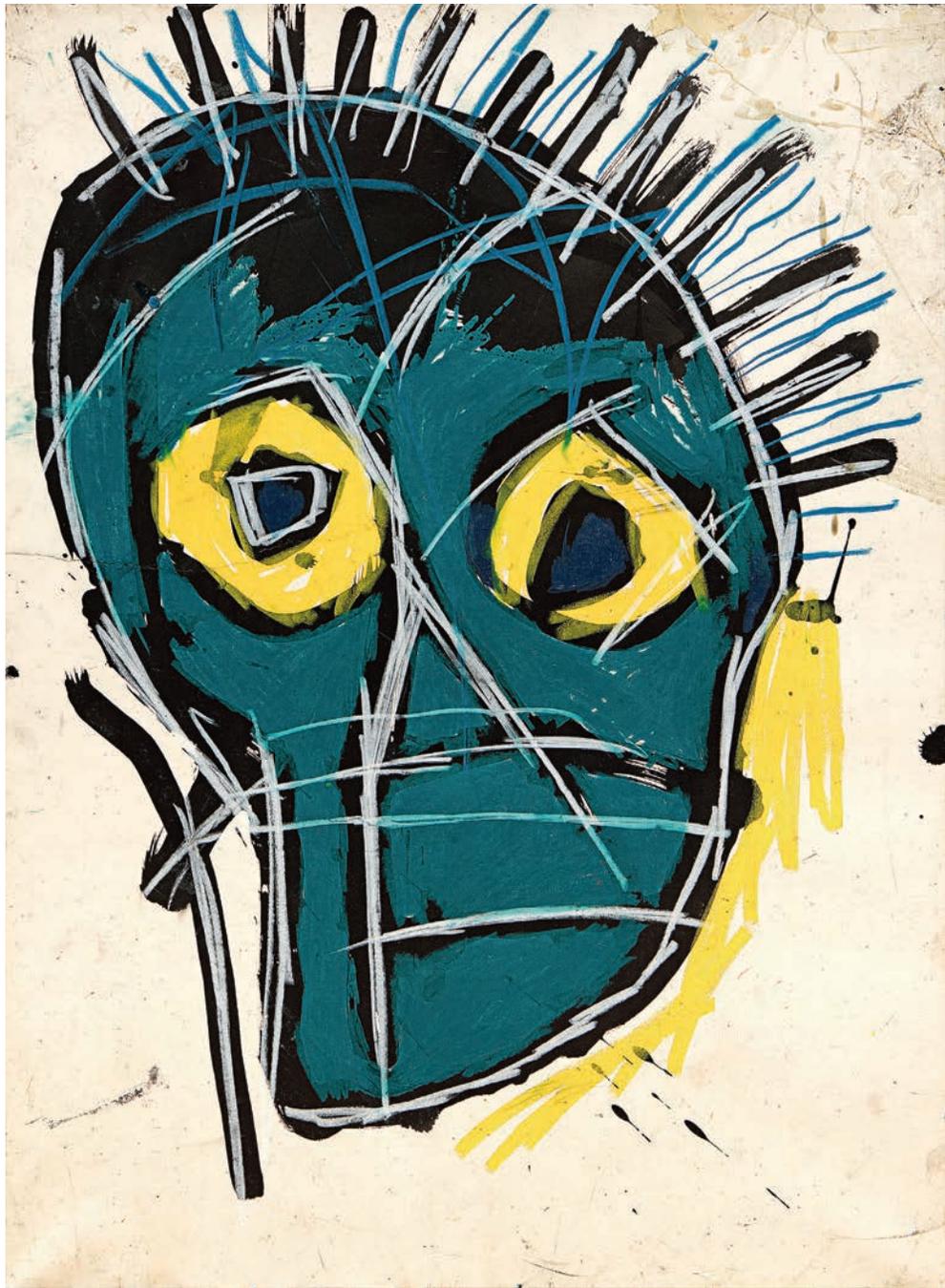


Maripol
SX-70 Polaroids, 1979–84

Collection of Maripol

Left to right: Grace Jones, Eszter Balint, Diego Cortez
and Patti Astor, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and
Debi Mazar, John Lurie, Andy Warhol, Debbie Harry





Untitled, 1983

Acrylic and oil stick on paper
76.2 × 55.9 cm (30 × 22 in.)
W&K-Wienerroither & Kohlbacher, Vienna



Self-Portrait, 1984

Acrylic and oil stick on paper mounted on canvas
100 × 70 cm (39³/₈ × 27¹/₂ in.)
Private collection – Yoav Harlap

Nov. 7 / 330 Broome / 8:00 PM

Wednesdays at A's

p r e s e n t s

performance

Static Gravity / Utopia... or Else!
featuring Susan Dallas, Flora Granet,
Julie Harrison, Jerry Horn, Jeffrey
Isaac, Diane Torr, Swann and E
Nem-Fracted

color xerox works

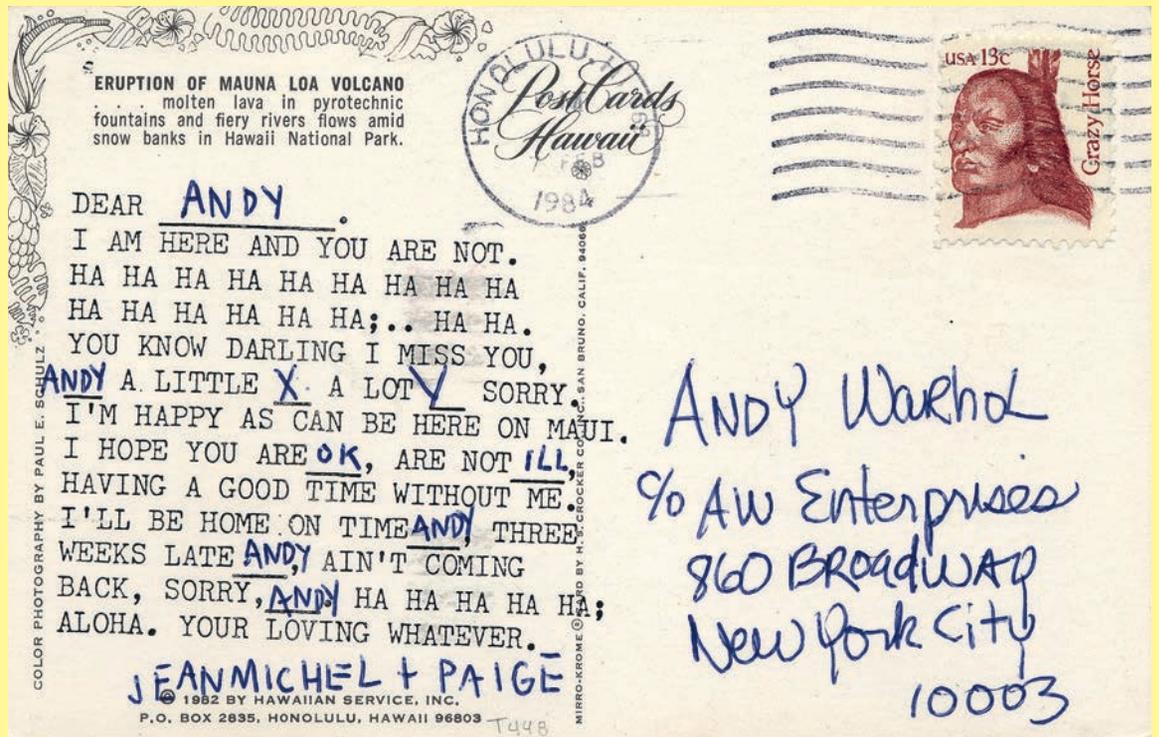
by Hawthorne, Diener, Rosen, Bucyala,
Miller, Cassandra, Glancy, Luet, Agloo
Astrom, Bedding, Samo@, Wilson Gordon
Fishkin, Schneeman, Herbert, Anery, Benny
Johnson, Seltman, Jorgensen, Richmond,
Chait, Higgins, Evans, Cleveland et al

music

by The Coachmen, Liquid Admit,
The Buster Cleveland Salsa Band, The
SAMO@ is Dead Jayy Band and
Harry Toledo + Friends

B.Y.O.

\$3



Postcard from Jean-Michel Basquiat to Andy Warhol,
postmarked 7 February 1984, Honolulu

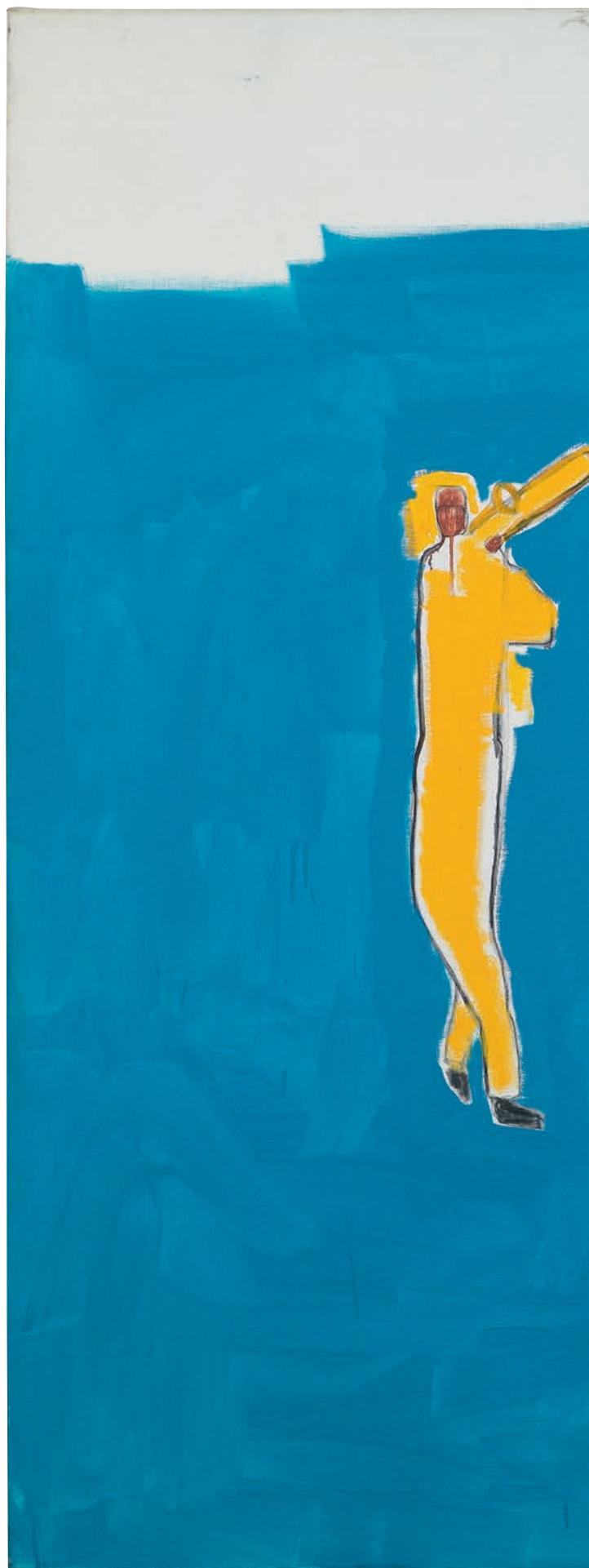
Felt-tip pen and printed ink on coated cardstock
10.2 × 15.2 cm (4 × 6 in.)
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh;
Founding Collection, Contribution The Andy Warhol
Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

King Zulu, 1986

Acrylic, wax and felt-tip pen on canvas

202.5 × 255 cm (79 3/4 × 100 3/8 in.)

MACBA Collection. Government of Catalonia
long-term loan. Formerly Salvador Riera Collection.





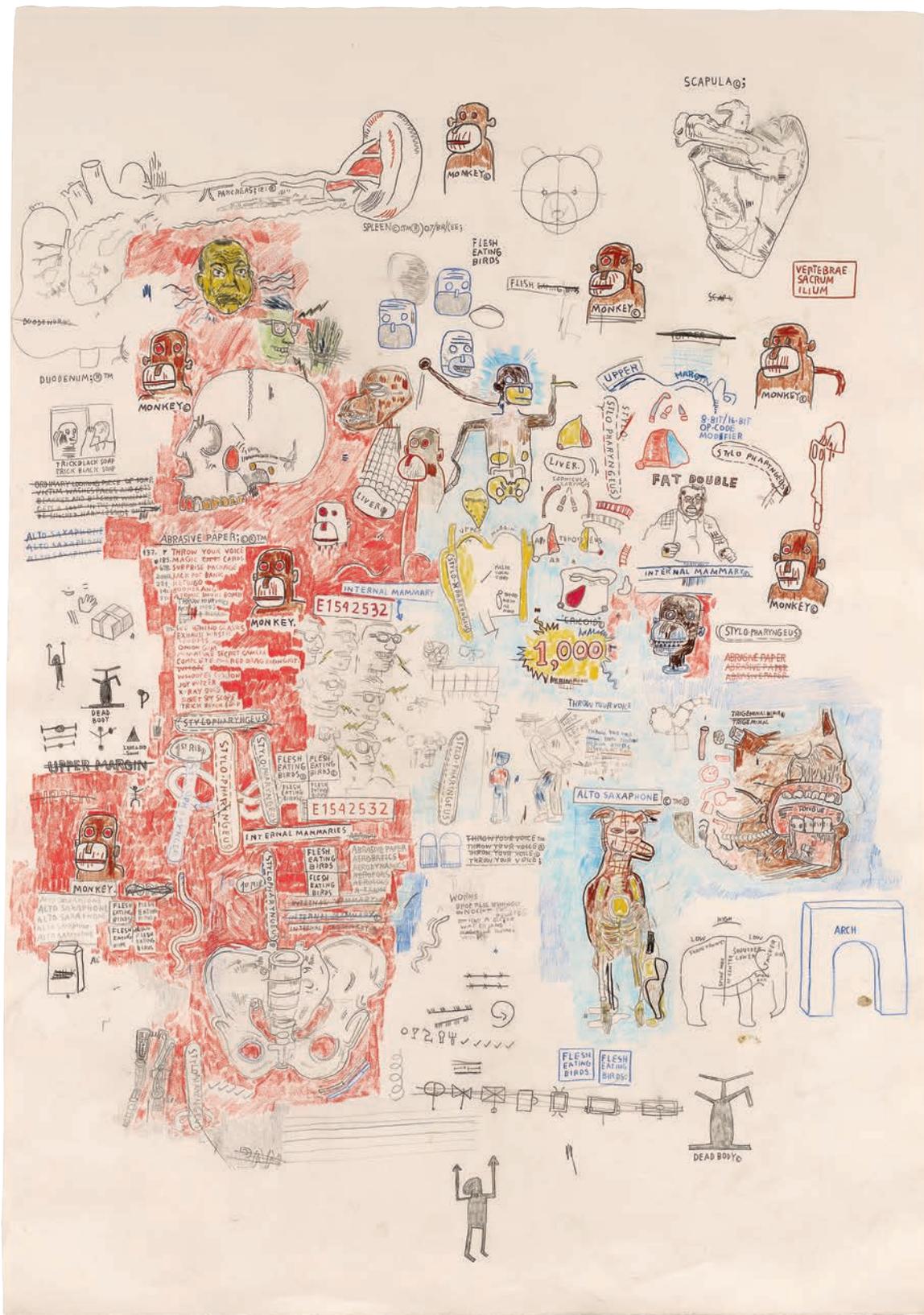
KING ZULU



5542-A

DO NOT STAND
IN FRONT OF
ORCHESTRA





Alto Saxophone, 1986

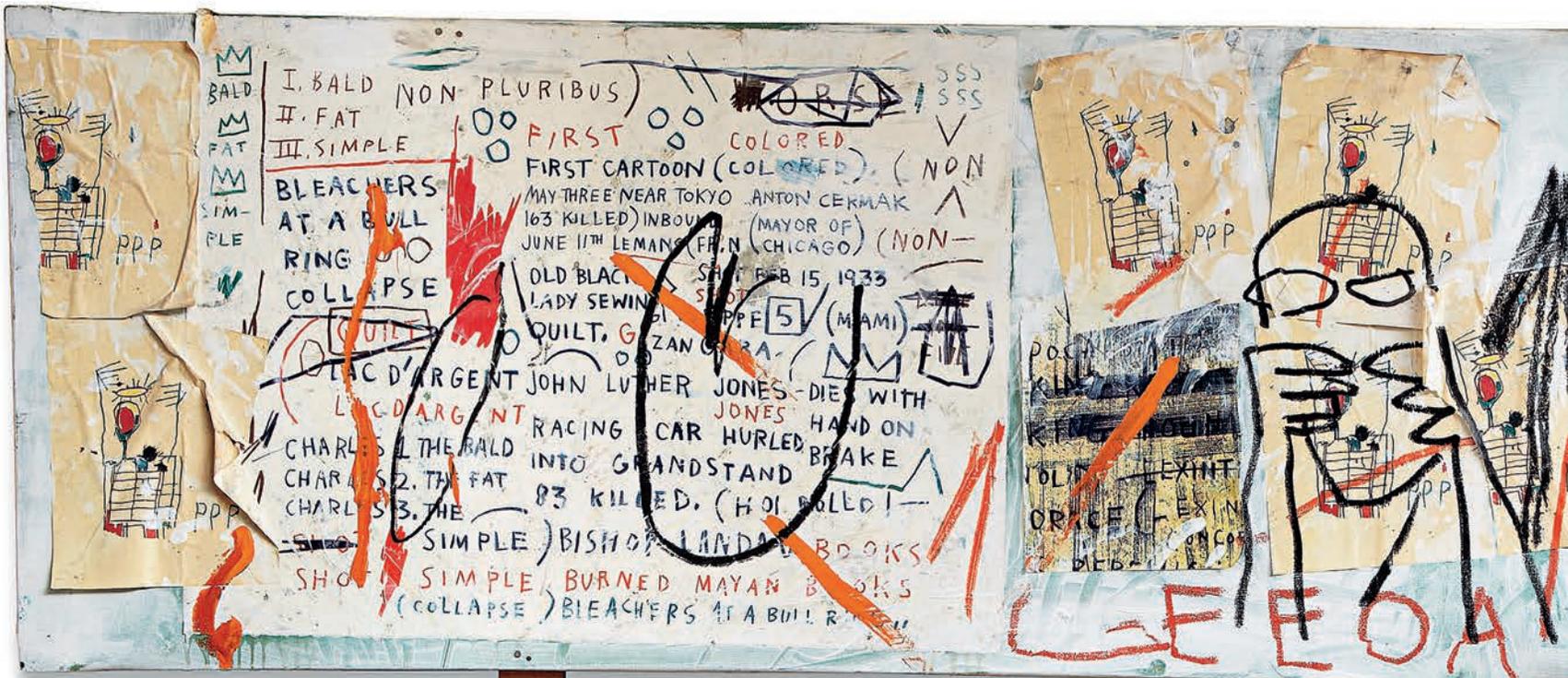
Oil stick, coloured pencil and pencil on paper
 106.5 x 75 cm (41 7/8 x 29 1/2 in.)
 Guarded by Bischofberger,
 Männedorf-Zurich, Switzerland



Untitled, 1985

Cut-and-pasted paper and oil stick on paper
 105.4 x 75 cm (41½ x 29½ in.)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired in memory of Kevin W. Robbins through funds provided by his family and friends and by the Committee on Drawings.



Piscine Versus the Best Hotels, 1982

Acrylic, oil stick and photocopy collage on canvas mounted on wooden supports
 158 x 210 cm (62 1/4 x 82 5/8 in.)
 Schorr Family Collection



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Glenn, 1984

Acrylic, oil stick and photocopy
collage on canvas
254 × 289.5 cm (100 × 114 in.)
Private collection





A PANEL OF EXPERTS, 1982

A Panel of Experts marks a pivotal moment in Basquiat's practice. Created for his solo exhibition at the Fun Gallery in November 1982, the work is composed on canvas stretched over wooden supports bound together by twine, the crossed bars exposed at each corner. Improvised supports became a trademark of Basquiat's work during this period, employed for *Leonardo da Vinci's Greatest Hits* and *Piscine Versus the Best Hotels* (both 1982, p.207 and pp.204–205), which were also on display in the show. Opened in 1981, the Fun Gallery was set up by Bill Stelling and underground film actress Patti Astor. The gallery was the first space in New York to offer graffiti artists, including Fab 5 Freddy and DONDI, the opportunity to display their work in a public setting.

As a young child Basquiat had aspired to be a cartoonist; later he often worked in front of the television in his studio, creating gestural drawings inspired by what he was watching. The striking composition of *A Panel of Experts* could allude to the form of the small screen—a painted black frame masks out the majority of the surface, leaving two patches of exposed white canvas populated by cartoon-like drawings. On the right, a bespectacled bird accompanied by the words 'BEEP BEEP' perhaps alludes to the Road Runner, whose exploits were chronicled in slapstick fashion in the series *Looney Tunes*. To the left, a Superman-like character is hit by lightning, accompanied by the repeated word 'KRAK', relating to the comic book tradition of writing out onomatopoeic sound effects. The explicit reference to 'SATURDAY MORNING CARTOON©' further underlines the great influence that television exerted on Basquiat's practice, while the phrases 'SUGAR COATED CORN PUFFS© TM' and 'MILK-SUGAR (DEXTROSE)' evoke the morning ritual of breakfast while watching cartoons. The symbols '©' and 'TM', recurring motifs in Basquiat's work, nod to the commodification of the television industry.

In the left section of the work, two stick figures are engaged in a fistfight, which, along with the volcano and gun on the right, introduces the characteristic (often comical) violence of animated shorts. The macabre playfulness of this scene is offset by the two words inscribed—and redacted, for emphasis—above: 'VENUS' and 'MADONNA©'. These names carry the gravitas of art history, alluding to the Venus de Milo and the pictorial tradition of the Madonna and Child.

The spontaneity and velocity of Basquiat's painting practice is evidenced in footage of an interview with the artist by Marc Miller at the Fun Gallery in 1982, in which *A Panel of Experts* can be seen in the background.¹ The painting appears to include very little white writing, highlighting both how late Basquiat had added the text (perhaps just before the opening) and how instinctively he expressed himself.

Thomas Kennedy

