

The Self & Basquiat: Limitations of Pedagogy in the  
Recognition of Post-Colonial Aesthetics

by

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## ABSTRACT

The life of Jean-Michel Basquiat is often misinterpreted in artistic discourse. From a social justice perspective, Basquiat's work is not merely art. Despite the symbolism and subject matter open for analysis, Basquiat articulated the self in relation to nuances of race, socio-economy, and historical scripts based upon real relations and conditions. Of the genre of Neo-Expressionism without a disciplined schooling in art, Jean-Michel is categorized as 'primitive' in style and form, labeled the "first black artist." Beyond the art world's possessive confines and according to post-colonial aesthetics, Jean-Michel articulates the existence of a learning self. With a pedagogical lens, a process of becoming an "artist" deepened Basquiat's expressions of self in relation to a "white" art world, which typically restricted the artist to specific categories and definitional parameters.

While recognition of the "artist" highlights the limitations of 'public' and 'self' in pedagogy, learning of the self through Neo-Expressionism is contingent upon articulating a situated existence among particular "publics," with regard to time and place. Variable dimensions of recognition create a fragmented self with transitional 'stages' and a series of acute shifts re-establish the definitional boundaries of art, definers, and ultimately the self and "Other". These shifts continuously create new margins of the avant-garde and the self is redefined by art and discourse to sustain capital inflow, thereby replicating the colonial nature of capitalism with regard to communication, material and discovery, and "Other". The process eschews a realized finality while expression as a relational communication of the situated persona redefines one's identity and demarcates a value of the self.

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## PREFACE

In 2015, a video documentary came across our streaming internet feed portraying a young, troubled artist named Jean-Michel Basquiat. Basquiat's work was beautifully critical, articulate, and ostensibly cognizant of "racism", materialism, and colonialism. However, a number of interviewers in said documentary—those of the art world, "friends", "acquaintances", and even partners—spoke of Basquiat in the context of paranoia and drug use, a complicated relationship with a father, or difficulty coping with fame. From a "social justice" perspective, the documentary was troubling, missing a deep dive into institutionalized disparities *beyond the individual* to include the ways personal experience shapes reality to *form* the "self." From this purview, how did art, material, relations, and the art world shape and define the individual? In what ways did personal experience further form Jean-Michel?

Born of Haitian and Puerto-Rican decent, Basquiat dealt with pervasive and subtle racism throughout a young life until the artist's passing in 1988. According to Fab 5 Freddy in *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (1998), "'Even after [Basquiat] was flying on the Concorde, he wouldn't be able to get a cab'" (Hoban., p. 237). "Even when he was with one of the world's most famous artists [Warhol], Basquiat was still treated with a mixture of racism and suspicion" (1998, p. 271). Leaving home at fifteen, Jean-Michel lived an eclectic and diverse lifestyle of the streets, determined never to return home. Attending City-As-School, Basquiat participated in writing for the school newspaper and yearbook and, sharing interests with Al Diaz, formed "SAMO". According to Jane Bell in Hoban (1998, p. 181), Basquiat's "short-lived notoriety as 'SAMO,' the poetic graffiti artist of SoHo, made him one of the most noticed, if also invisible, characters in lower

Manhattan...” SAMO was conceived in an essay as a bogus religion, which, to some degree, speaks to Basquiat’s critical aptitude toward culture and society, and a situational awareness of the “Same ‘ol Shit” (“SAMO”). These “sayings were a distilled version of the themes [Basquiat] would repeatedly return to in his later work: racism, materialism, capitalism, pop culture, mortality” (Hoban, 1998, p. 332).

Many ‘tags,’ stickers, and sayings embellished with SAMO included copyright symbols—visible from Brooklyn Bridge to West Broadway. Aesthetic elements describe “the streets” and Basquiat’s early career is often cited as activist “graffiti” which “did not solve problems, they capsulized the texture of life, how life felt... Some of the inscriptions were mini-poems, visually complemented by their location—transcending time, place, and satire” (Flynt, 1999, p. 7). According to Seed (2010), Jean-Michel did not describe oneself as a graffiti artist and “felt strongly that he was a fine artist, and his influences ranged from Leonardo da Vinci to Abstract Expressionists like Cy Twombly and Franz Kline. The influence of these and other artists is apparent in his best works.” Dealers and brokers alike claimed that the critical texts on SoHo walls with the copyright of SAMO were intended for the art world, not the broader social and cultural public. According to Hoban (1998, p. 182), “From a marketing point of view, the timing of Basquiat’s career couldn’t have been more perfect: he emerged into public view as a literate street poet on the crest of the soon-to-crash graffiti movement and surfed right into Neo-Expressionism, a jazzy black hero who shared with Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger a fashionably Postmodernist obsession of text.”

Despite this, Basquiat's work theoretically remains situated in the confines of 'Pop' art. Hoban, discussing SAMO and word play, proclaims that "Text, an important motif in numerous art movements from Cubism, Surrealism, and Dada right through Pop (Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers), was enjoying a resurgence as subject matter thanks to Postmodernism, and its fascination with deconstruction as exemplified by Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida" (1998, p. 33). While

Warhol famously painted a soup can symbolic an era and subject matter, Basquiat keenly defined value in a subject matter equally succinct and readily available in one's environment. In contrast to Warhol's era, success for Basquiat and Neo-Expressionists came from the 'inside' and personal experience. Julian Schnabel allegedly ushered in Neo-Expressionism as a movement in November 1979 with plate paintings. Hoban notes Schnabel found a



**Figure 1:** Basquiat featured on a "Complimentary Ticket" to Art Area Club on Hudson Street in NYC (1985). Notably Julian Schnabel was not participating, but was worthy of ticket feature. The original moment was captured by photo at Mr. Chow's (Hoban, 1998, p. 186). Source: Artsy (n.d).



relationship to the plates through a personal experience with food poisoning (1998, p. 230).

Neo-Expressionism, situated in post-graffiti movements and alternative spaces, for many, was “the new art movement, the stuff that was going to replace the Minimalism that had...plagued SoHo for the last several years, filling the galleries with...boxes, empty canvases, forms without content but with plenty of concept” (Cortez in Hoban, 1998, p. 66). The art world found a resilient short-term dependency in ‘Figurative art’, a revival during the genre of Neo-Expressionism. According to Cotter (1991, p. 7), the movement to Neo-Expressionism was attributed to “Julian Schnabel and the “return” of painting”. However, in contrast to Schnabel, Basquiat still critiqued the “same ol’ shit”: “Basquiat targeted the American new-commodities version of happiness which has spread to much of the world. Ought the average person expect a life which is not workaday? Ought the average person presently feel cheated?” (Flynt, 1999, p. 10).

The beginnings of Neo-Expressionism included an ongoing movement toward a new genre of “art” from the margins, wherein Neo-Expressionism still embodied elements of Pop. For some, it was something like a “transition” from a Minimalist movement to Neo-Expressionism. The latter for Basquiat exhausted a sort of expression, some three dimensionally using crafted materials to stretch canvas over frame constructed from what was refuse—cardboard, rubber, doors, glass, and discarded lumber—found in alleys. Rene Ricard, in *Artforum*, writes “For a while it looked as if the very early stuff was primo, but no longer. [Basquiat’s] finally figured out a way to make a stretcher...that is so consistent with the imagery...they do look like signs, but signs for a product modern civilization has no use for” (in Hoban, 1998, p. 102). These custom

craft frames prepared for a stretched canvas offer a physical element of visible feeling to “art”, provoking variable sensory characteristics for viewers. All of which, including material and self, the art world could not consume enough of.

The art market and Neo-Expressionism operated very much in sync during the 1980s, morphing the art world and merging the “underground” graffiti and art scenes. A booming Wall Street and the return of figuratism in Neo-Expressionism characterized a radically changing art world. “The late seventies paved the way for the eighties, which celebrated the materialism the sixties had rebelled against...And anything and everything was considered art” (Hoban, 1998, p. 8). Art became both a commodity and a mechanism for status mobility. Art, as a commodity and investment, remained such with galleries, constantly promoting and “looking out” for artists—meaning that investment was not simply in art, but in “artists” themselves, buying up large quantities of artwork, and making or “breaking” artists overnight.

Basquiat was allegedly established by 1979, with work remaining both cryptic and strategic. While Hoban (p. 9, 1998) references this period as the beginning of Basquiat’s *career in art*, Basquiat “...would be the only black artist to survive the graffiti label, and find a permanent place as a black painter in a white art world.” Despite this, the exoticism of certain bodies, including Basquiat’s, was and is attributed by some to ‘race’, and still characterized in the “primitive” descriptions of Jean-Michel’s work. Basquiat, while acknowledging such contexts in painting the ‘primitive’ and figurative in Neo-Expressionism, wanted to move beyond simple recognition and historical translation as a “black” artist (Hoban, p. 13, 1998).

The Times Square Show was important to Basquiat's early recognition as SAMO: "The show, widely considered an art-world turning point, placed him at ground zero in what was quickly recognized as a new art movement" (1998, p 52). Some of Basquiat's early works—including those shown at The Times Square Show—were still embellished with the signature of SAMO, an element of self-expression and identification. However, according to Hoban (1998, p. 68), Basquiat was first "discovered" and found recognition as an artist at the P.S. 1 show in 1981.



*Figure 2: "Untitled" triptych by Basquiat (1983). Note the creative use of text and striking methods, combined with a language of "self-emergence"—the figures and faces. The iconic three prong crown are present above the figure detail on the left and the face on the right, while the © is present below the head nearest the "skull" on the lowest portion of the right panel. Source: Art News (2014).*

Soon after, Basquiat's relationships with those in proximity were, in some cases, uncertainly reciprocal or symbiotic. Proyect (n.d.) notes "...Basquiat labored away in the windowless basement of an upscale gallery run by an Italian woman named Annina Nosei who saw herself as an "ex-hippie". If he was a slave, he was certainly a well-dressed one. Basquiat worked on his paintings in Armani suits and often appeared in public in these same paint-splattered \$1000 suits--a testament to his

affinity for both mammon and bohemia.” While Annina Nosei provided Basquiat with assistants, canvases and cash, Jean-Michel’s studio arrangements were questionable.

As such, Basquiat was equally transformed by the art world. Recognition as an artist propelled Basquiat beyond the experimental or radical confines of the avant-garde. Recognizing the “Faustian bargain,” the artist appreciated the benefits of working for oneself in business. However, Basquiat in September 1983’s *Art News* claims,

I felt much more happy about all this in the beginning, when I was coming from the extreme situation of not having any money at all; and then there was the fact that there weren’t many black painters—so I had the feeling that I was doing it for people other than just me—and the fun of being the youngest and being pitted against the adult element (Hoban, 1998, p. 141).

Basquiat’s words contrast the self—described as both young and black—against a tired and adversely “white” art world. The “doing it for people other than just me” highlights situational characteristics of relational expression, demonstrating Basquiat communicates not simply being a “black painter”, but something more intrinsic which is not adversely implied in counter definitions of “white”—or simply “artist” (Figure 1, p. vii). Hoban notes:

The titles of many of Basquiat’s paintings—“Irony of a Black Policeman,” “Jim Crow,” “History of Black People,” “Nothing to Be Gained Here,” “Most Young Kings Get Their Head Cut off,” “Origin of Cotton,” “Famous Negro Athletes,” “Slave Auction,” “Oreo”—as well as their subject matter, indicate that Basquiat never lost his sense of where he fit into the “white” art world. (1998, p. 341-342).

Basquiat’s subject matter, however, operates as a dualistic form of artistic production by

replicating knowledge through being and existence. The subject matter is initially materialistic (*art*), and the art secondarily functions as a pedagogical form of self-expression. The latter was negotiated by situational definitions of “black” and “primitive” confined to Neo-Expressionism.

Deconstructing Jean-Michel’s work requires moving beyond colors, texts, and placement by exploring self and environment, not limited to historical, social, or cultural content. Color, text, and placement are, however, important relations to artwork. While not explicitly referred to as pedagogy, Hoban, Thompson, and Proyect certainly characterize Basquiat and SAMO as critical, symbolic, original, and relational. ”The linear quality of his phrases and notations, whether graffiti or art, shows innate subtlety” (Lisa Liebmann in Hoban, 1998, p. 109). Contrarily, Basquiat positioned ‘social texts’ strategically and as a means of marketing oneself (Thompson, 2008). Jean-Michel’s use of text strikethrough and places an emphasis on them, prompting viewers to revisit and engage words as concepts and focal points. “Eye-catching and cryptic, the SAMO graffiti was Jean-Michel Basquiat’s unofficial entrée into the art world” writes Hoban— “Basquiat’s first foray into the public eye was telling; he had created an alter ego [SAMO] only to exploit it for promotional and financial gain” (1998, p. 33-34).

Louis Proyect (n.d.) suggests “Basquiat’s ploy was to write anti-materialism messages in plain view of some of the worst materialists around. This was not only a key to his rise to fame, but a stunning reflection of the tendency of the bourgeoisie to co-opt cultural opposition.” The co-opt seemingly meant Basquiat existed relationally both inside and outside art as an institution, recognized as an artist, though confined and adhering to qualifications which included phenotype, discourse, and categorically implied

definitions. While the artist brought the inside—or personal—out to make it public through expressions in text and later painting (Figure 2, p. x), an unjust pedagogy of relations consequently defined the “artist” through material. In the same sense that “race” moves within particular meanings given space and time, Basquiat both embraced and rejected a definitional identity of primitive within the vague era which encapsulated Neo-Expressionism. While Jean-Michel had the unique ability to reinterpret cultural texts and narratives, “some critics misplace the point. Didactically, they place his genius in single pigeonholes: Haitian “primitive”; barrio naïf; phenomenon of arrested childhood; on and on” (Thompson, 2008, p.). The emergence as an artist “explains, in part, the presence of copyright signs and trademarks in his paintings. Alchemy blends with irony in a language of self-emergence” (Thompson, 2008, p. 267).. Symbolism and expression is as much of a component of identity formation as knowledge construction is to pedagogy—the emergence of self (also see Figure 2, p. x). According to Pinn (2013, p.120), interpretations must be situated around “...a sense of socio-historical, political, and economic context informing his struggles with identity—to understand the implications of the age of crack on perceptions of life and death.”

As a result, SAMO and Basquiat are catalysts of the individual experience, ostensible realities and conditions of environment projected on the self. Louis Proyect of Columbia University claims Jean-Michel:

...combined Afrocentric themes mixed with graffiti based on his own hermetic universe of symbols. Painted on unconventional media, including objects retrieved from the junkyard, Basquiat seemed to be attacking bourgeois society...While ostensibly directed against racism, the painting [Hollywood

Africans, Figure 3] is so much the product of Basquiat's private imagination that one cannot possibly interpret it as a specific critique of anything. Anything too close to the bone would obviously not fit into the décor of Upper Manhattan or European apartments, where most of his work ended up (n.d.).

However, Basquiat had his own style and means for operation and it was through Neo-Expressionism that real relations and conditions manifest: participating with galleries and brokers, marketing oneself while adhering to categorical identities within a genre, and simultaneously revaluing oneself reciprocally from the limitations of 'history.' For Basquiat, recognition as an artist within the crucible of the East Village resulted in more harm than benefit.



**Figure 3:** “Hollywood Africans” by Basquiat (1983). Hoban (1998) suggests “Hollywood Africans” depicts Basquiat, Rammellzee, and Toxic, and is “about the institutionalized racism in the movie industry...” (p. 339). Source: Whitney (n.d.).

Jean-Michel’s own contribution to critical narratives was limited by his involvement in the art market; in a layered process, Basquiat’s messages are often muted or overlooked in contextual discussions of “race” rather than abstract or situated expression. “In this regard [Basquiat] is both a scapegoat and conjurer, with the signified and signifier revolving in certain

ways around the category of race as anti-meaning” (Pinn, 2013, p. 121). From the

perspectives of Fanon, Mannoni, and Pinn, if Basquiat accepted imposed definitions of primitive or “black” through artistic recognition, the artist redefines the roles and perceptual boundaries of the self. Similar to Mannoni’s central idea of confrontation and special situations, as discussed in Fanon (1967), the collusion between the “white” art world and Basquiat as a “black” artist creates an illusion of self-worth, defined in part by the ascription and value one finds in recognition and belonging. Writes Mannoni (in Fanon 1967, p. 85): “The central idea is that the confrontation of ‘civilized’ and ‘primitive’ men creates a special situation—the colonial situation—and brings about the emergence of a mass of illusions and misunderstandings that only a psychological analysis can place and define.” Fanon continues, pointing to the exacerbation of “colonial racism” by economic relations. As part of a dualistic process of production, the “art gallery circuit” was seeking to re-define itself through the avant-garde, specifically the expression of “marginal” artists in the context of capitalism and those in the East Village.

While Neo-Expressionism embodied elements of Pop, the “transition” from Minimalism to Neo-Expressionism included an ongoing movement toward a new genre “art.” Suzi Gablik (1994), questioning the “exploitation of the graffiti movement” notes:

Are we confronted with yet another instance where mass-consumption capitalist economy expands into a taboo area in order to transform private behaviors into a new commodity? Does becoming part of the art establishment give new meaning and purpose to these artists’ lives, or has it merely spawned another money-making game for its participants, while weakening graffiti’s soul energy as ‘outsider’ art? (in Hoban, 1998, p. 40)



Both questions proposed by Gablik apply to Basquiat's recognition as an artist, relations to the public, and the expansion of the art world through the artist's self and "Other".

Analyzing Gablik's choice of words, the term "taboo" is affiliated with the avant-garde.

While making very succinct points related to the appropriation of the "new" by the established, it

might be that these "private" behaviors were already concocted with attention to the "public".

However, it

becomes



*Figure 4: Basquiat and Warhol (1985). Source: NY News Daily (n.d.).*

questionable at which point SAMO became Basquiat "the artist"; meaning when does recognition as an artist genuinely move Basquiat beyond a critical natured SAMO, the graffiti "label", and "racialized" abstractions?

Commercialized 'transitions' of artistic recognition, moving from genre to genre formidably claiming 'art' and brilliance, shape, move, expand and contract definitional boundaries. For art, capital is the avant-garde—"radical" dimensions which stylistically change and move outside the boundary much like a standard deviation—only to acutely fit outside the ever-changing temporal characteristics of an art genre and "Other".

Reconciling the confines of art genres in a purview of power, placement outside these

characteristics can be strategic in nature: for example, in marketing oneself. However, artistic expression, art, and the artist become commodities to be bought and sold. Relationships with dealers, gallery owners, collectors and brokers in the art world further form the self through material relations (Figure 4 – p. xvi), and are equally observable in terms of self-identity and expression within Neo-Expressionism:

Jean-Michel layered relationships the way he layered his paintings;  
spontaneously, with an idiosyncratic mix of instinct and verve. And like his  
paintings, they reproduced obvious patterns and themes (Hoban, 1998, p. 55).

As such, “artistic” production becomes a relational mechanism and terrain of contest which self/collective speeches reconstitute Basquiat through material, and situate the artist in aesthetic relations through Neo-Expressionism which foreground one’s work in a layered process, but inhibit oneself.

Before proceeding, it must be acknowledged that the concept of “race” is politically charged, a biological myth structured into everyday lives. Though it’s been scientifically proven that there is only one human species, “race” is formally integrated into discourse, often confused or incorrectly applied as a synonym for ethnicity, phenotype, and difference. As used here, “race” functions as a mythical departure point for art discourse, recognition, and expression under the guise of economy. Moreover, Basquiat’s perspective on “race” cannot be speculated. For Basquiat, the struggle was not self-determination or self-definition. Basquiat knew oneself intimately.

## CHAPTER 1

### RECOGNIZING SELF & OTHER THROUGH MATERIAL RELATIONS

Two distinct pedagogies operate when exploring works by Basquiat: the first is *expression*, the second *art*. If viewing Basquiat's work from a perspective of expression defined *as art*, the definitional process crystallizes power by adhering a categorical imperative deeply rooted in settler-colonial ethics of economy, and subsequently postulates difference in the purview of a "public". Bolstering Fanon's sentiments on *disalienation*, the postulation of difference in art as industry moves beyond the limitations of self-expression to collide with collective boundaries reifying "an-other" in public spheres. Where the self is expressed, a specific pedagogy of situated relations combines the past and present to blend 'contemporary expression' as *art*.

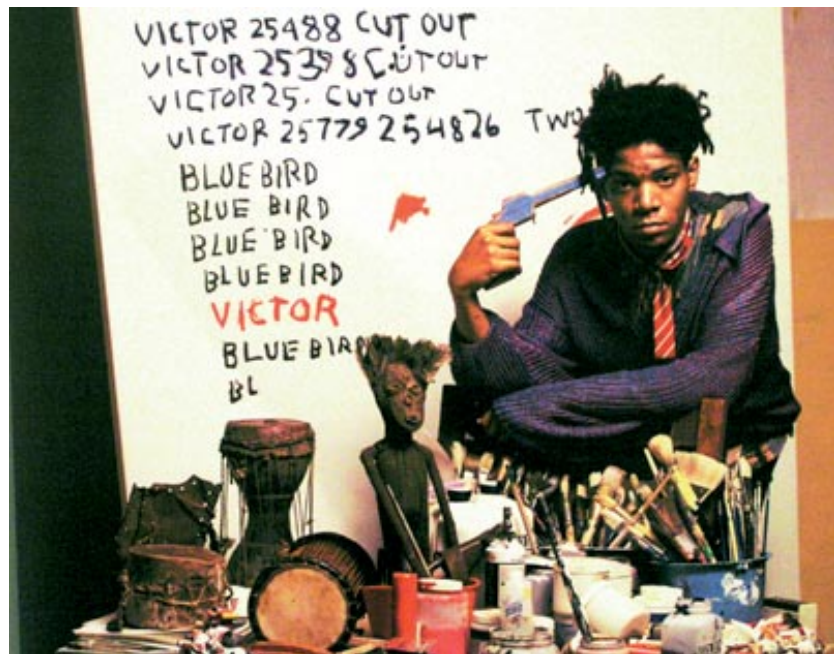
Fundamentally, this pedagogy is a totalizing process of *conditions* and *relations*—finding oneself through expression only to be dominated or redefined by industry. Dimensions beyond *relations* manifest significant power dynamics with latent conditional connections to colonization and control. One cannot deny the existence of the *real or imaginary* in art, nor encounters between the alienated, the Other, and the colonial experience. Like the *alienated consciousness*, the post-colonial artist is "To be homeless in one's home—to inherit both the wealth and violence of the encounter between indigenous and European cultures—is the fundamental postcolonial condition", according to Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001, p. 26-27). As such, the boundaries of representation and recognition in "popular culture" ever shift.

While recognition based practices re-evaluate the collective and individual self through culture, history, and identity, they hinge—in effect—on the affirmation of

retrospective difference as self-empowerment. Fanon’s work was ultimately ‘influenced’ by Sartre’s writings relating to recognition, reciprocity and freedom, and suggests that from recognition based practices we find *limited transitional function* (Coulthard, 2014, p. 133). Recognition for Sartre “constitutes a form of enslavement, of being “fixed” by “the look” of another” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 134). *The fixation* took hold during the definitional process through power dynamics and roles associated with “artists,” which included art dealers, collectors and investors. From this perspective, Neo-expressionism as a genre offers a guiding glimpse (or *look*) into the self, leaving “artists” open to

critique, categorical  
 fixation a priori  
 history, and in-  
 between spaces or  
 fields of  
 authentication or in-  
 authentication with  
 regard to self-  
 identification.

**Figure 5: Basquiat in front of “Victor 25488” - with a wooden gun to his head , uniquely framed in between symbolic objects (1987). Source: TML Arts (2016).**



Basquiat the

*artist* perceptualized oneself as moving and existing beyond SAMO and the ‘graffiti’ movement, outside the dimension of “Black” artist. Astutely defined in the art world’s situated definition of Basquiat as a “Black” artist or application of “primitive” and “African”, the abstract characterization of the art world becomes “white” (Figure 5). In retrospect, the rejection of the self is based on a perceived authenticity or validation of an

alternate system coupled with the subtle acknowledgement of being and self-expression in 'art'. If not part of an established genre or ethic, Basquiat evinced a defined style unique to oneself-expression, belonging to what could then be defined as the avant-garde.

According to Lacy (1994, p. 19-20):

...the term "new genre" has been used since the late sixties to describe art that departs from traditional boundaries of media...Attacking boundaries, new genre *public* artists draw on ideas from van-guard forms, but they add a developed sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness that is unique to visual art as we know it today.

The nuances of 'new genre' reclamation are genuine to a character of acclamation or 'acclaim-ation'—the continual claiming of genres to sustain 'art' and carry momentum as a force of definition. All of which manifest shifting and blurring boundaries of "public" and "private", 'self' and 'Other,' as well as 'artist' and 'Black artist.'

Despite being part of the "new genre," the artist retained a sensibility about the audience in witness. Basquiat was open to reshaping the self in painting, allowing for external definitions of the self as an "artist." Following Fanon, these reactions prescribe change and self-attention—similar to Nietzsche's framework of *resentment*, or defining oneself through the negation of another. The adoption and claiming of Basquiat into and by the "white" art world served as a form of realization through the pedagogical function of self-expression, which accompanied conscientious discourses of civilization, success, and self-gratification in belonging. "Such "authentic" notions of cultural inheritance have tended to both fetishize and marginalize the day-to-day realities of oppressed people" (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 95). As a consequence, belonging and recognition

only redefined social and cultural boundaries Basquiat sought to exist beyond, and reified feelings outside of and absent recognition—a sort of social, cultural, colonial and post-colonial “situation.”

Applying Sartre to Wolfe, negotiating the ‘Other’ in the creation of the self through expression is a byproduct of settler-colonialism. Post-colonial studies then applies to “art” as something to always be conquered within economy. Nonetheless the definitional process of “art” is a colonizing mechanism itself. The concept of “modern” art continuously consumes the avant-garde, creating new genres without *settlement*—hence the application of post-colonial aesthetics and settler-colonial theory. Moreover, settler-colonialism provides the foundation for a theoretical relational process, which is then a catalyst for self-expression. To understand Basquiat’s work as an expression of the self—not art—requires the openness to change. Art as an institution represents itself in a position of domination, a *selective perception* with regard to artists as producers of material. The sentiments of dealers and brokers of the art world manifest structural nuances of artistic pioneers, internalizing and reproducing settler-colonial approaches to “discovery.” While Basquiat interpreted or reasoned works as critiques or expressions, collectors, brokers, dealers, and viewers interpret such as investments—capital accumulation in “primitive” expressionism. Following Pinn, power and coercion are mobilized by those seeking to shift the definitional boundaries of what constitutes art and Other:

...the accumulation of artifacts from the “other” within British museums: the colonial power artistically inspired by the colonized—“Modern Primitivism.” In

this regard, the museum and/or gallery might be said to have replaced the colonial government agency as the symbol of control and power (2013, p. 112).

Self-claimed artists are powerless to market recognition, bestowed in some backwards fashion following a claim to artistic merit. In the era of Neo-Expressionism, a series of transformational shifts in SoHo and the East Village reverberated the booming Wall Street acquiring identities and the avant-garde. However, a deeper meaning and symbolism exists in “art”. Like the museum or government agency, art functions as structure and experience through the “Other”.

While situated experience guides the self in a sort of visual ‘structure’, art is a mutually constituting experience between parties; the visual becomes the “object” of fixation and consciousness for both Basquiat and the viewer (Figure 6). Self-consciousness, according to Hegel “exists in itself *and* for itself, *in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being*

**Figure 6:** Basquiat with “Flexible” (1984) in the background. Notice the immense detail (text and symbol) in the painting on the right in contrast to the focal area (head) in “Flexible”. Source: Tucson Weekly (2016).



*acknowledged or recognized*” (in Fanon, 1967, p. 216). The viewer defines and situates oneself through the definition of an artist and observable characteristics of time and place. Mobilizing Sartre from a pedagogical lens, “in the line of an unauthentic position, the past “takes” in quantity, and, when solidly constructed, *informs* the individual. He is the past in a changed value. But, too, I can recapture my past, validate it, or condemn it through my successive choices” (Fanon, 1967, p. 228). Dualistically, both form the individual where *existence* exists beyond understanding or relationality. The process problematically reinforces definitions of ‘Other’ through initial characterizations that define Basquiat’s work as ‘art’. Art as expression manifests cognizance and visual-speak in “terms” of the present and Other. Such characterizations perpetuate a pedagogy of difference via phenotypic abstractions which confuse “race” with ‘primitive’ figurations.

From the “authentic selves” and the situated nature of post-colonial artists, consideration exists by ‘Others’ for history, a contemporary in comparison to ‘primitive’, and “black” for “white”—not for oneself. In accordance with Hegel, “the body is no longer a cause of the structure of consciousness, it has become an object of consciousness” (in Fanon, 1967, p. 225). Objectified through art, the physical and observable characteristics of the body are no longer the cause though they may be integrated in super structure. “In the second case, it is a question of a victim of a system based on the exploitation of a given race by another, on the contempt in which a given branch of humanity is held by a form of civilization that pretends to superiority” (Fanon, 1967, p. 224). Operating within frames of representation and recognition, culture for Basquiat becomes a space related to the construction of the self outside anthropological models of “authentic” selves. For Jean-Michel, expression in painting constitutes a



situated relationship with a broker, dealer, collector or gallery operator who, in turn, with an implied legitimacy and authority to define ‘art’, reconstitutes a voice of the ‘Other’ being “primitive” or “black”. Absent any description, Basquiat expresses and embodied fragmentation of the self, shaped without linear narratives and often featuring layers of self and environment (Figure 7).

Jean-Michel, like viewers, grappled with interpreting one’s work, extensions of oneself and manifestations of a relational self-consciousness. However, reciprocity of the commercialized self exists at the intersection of mutual constitution and compromise in the recognition and establishment of the ‘selves’.



*Figure 7: “Furious Man” by Basquiat (1982). Source: The City Review (2013).*

In its immediacy, consciousness of self is simple being-for-itself. In order to win the certainty of oneself, the incorporation of the concept of recognition is essential. Similarly, the other is waiting for recognition by us, in order to burgeon in the universal consciousness of self (Fanon, 1967, p. 217).

A dualistic “complex of dependence” operates among mutually existing parties specific to time and place. Recognized as an artist, Jean-Michel is created by ‘Others’ who also define ‘art’ through their own being and “Other.” Hence a mutual dependency functions

through the theorization of recognition by those powerful enough to define realities and control “art”. According to Fanon:

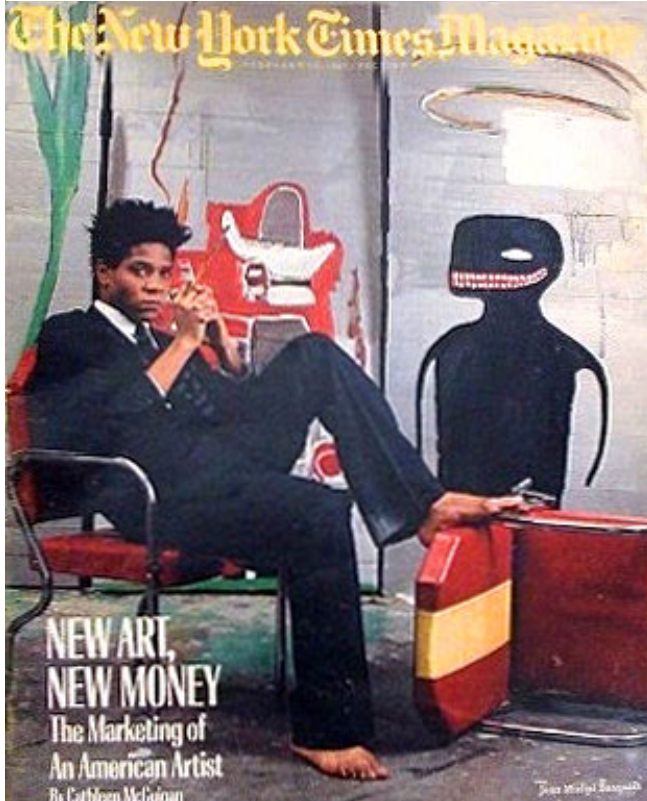
At the foundation of Hegelian dialectic there is an absolute reciprocity which must be emphasized. It is in the degree to which I go beyond my own immediate being that I apprehend the existence of the other as a natural and more than natural reality. If I close the circuit, if I prevent the accomplishment of movement in two directions, I keep the other within himself. Ultimately, I deprive him even of this being-for-itself (1967, p. 217).

Applying the concept of a circuit to Basquiat, a dualism deprives one another person in competing realities and power in “art” is not mutually constituting, but mobilized in one another and subsequently rejects the painter’s works as manifest of Self and expression. The ‘circuit’ refuses to validate the authentic self, and overlooks the artist’s situated relations-to as a ‘natural reality’ of manifest expression.

The relational process operates more succinctly when exploring the impact of lived experiences and “isms” in relation to bodies and power. For Basquiat, the process of becoming an artist “eschews finality” in identity politics through romanticized commercialization of the “Other”. Gilligan (1997, p. 96) writes, “...a person only develops a stable, integrated, and differentiated sense of selfhood or identity through the process of interacting with other humans in the community, or culture.” Not easily understood or articulable, Basquiat’s self was always changing inside and outside of painting and sketching. “Basquiat’s work is concerned primarily with the radical instability of identity in the American metropolis, the ways lived identities exceed the stable categories we have developed to understand them” (Dimitriadis and McCarthy,

2001, p. 84). Within this institution, Neo-Expressionism uniquely situates Basquiat within the confines of a contemporary “Black artist”, romanticized and fetishized without formal art education as “primitive”— the ‘Other’. Applying Gilligan, Basquiat’s acceptance into the art world marks the disintegration of group identity and reconfiguring of selfhood.

**Figure 8: “New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American Artist” (New York Times, 1985). No crown or ©, just Basquiat in a paint splattered Armani suit. Note the color placement (relations) between the red in the background and the chair which Basquiat rest’s a foot, and the suit and the figure placement on the right. Source: Art for a Change (2005).**



Destructive to the ‘artist’, the individual is shape shifted and framed in art discourse, negotiated in definition and understanding. The focus was not on the distinctive characteristics of artistic expression, which evokes pride from the center periphery individual, but an imposition of the social and cultural on the self. An artist’s ability to revalue oneself as outside of colonial institutions while simultaneously surmounting a critique of history, culture, and colonialism through Neo-Expressionism is

challenged by the latent ideological powers of self-interpretation (recognition). These reverberations create an unstable and “undisciplined” pedagogy of self-and-other plagued by situational asphyxiations surrounding *primitivity*, “folk,” and “marginal” art in Neo-Expressionism. Despite being a then contemporary ‘artist,’ and in comparison to stylistic

predecessors such as Julian Schnabel, Basquiat was arguably refused freedom to ‘integrate’ into the art world on one’s own terms, defined and redefined by totalized boundaries of phenotypic recognition, not by self-expression as an artist. The commercialization of Basquiat becomes a means of striving for inclusivity without critique, and compartmentalizing one’s existence within systemic categorical definitions of acceptance. Defined institutionally, “difference” and lived experience become something negotiated through artistic recognition. It becomes a process of adhering to categories in art or breaking out of such.

By 1985 there was a significant degree of contempt for the art world and “Basquiat’s growing disenchantment with the gallery system was evident in everything he did” (Hoban, 1998, p. 146). On February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1985 Jean-Michel received a cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*, notably seeking to re-assert and redefine the self in image (Figure 8, p. 9).

The article captures Basquiat’s precarious state at the peak of his art-world success, painting a cynical picture of an artist who was clearly suffering from a toxic case of too much, too soon...At first, Basquiat was thrilled with the publicity the piece generated—and with his image on the cover, his bare feet sending a not-too-subtle “fuck you” to the establishment. But before long the euphoria had faded. Basquiat complained bitterly about the spin of the piece, that it implied that he had been created by his dealers” (Hoban, 1998, p. 245-246). For Basquiat discontent became a process of becoming, not simply an act. The state of being an artist is grounded in feeling, knowledge in the moment, and rejects or accepts external impositions of the self. The ‘in-between’ spaces which conceive of the self were

in constant competition with external definitions of identity. As a byproduct of recognition, internalized conditions plague and strip the self. Refused belonging to a larger, ubiquitous group, the artist experiences the feeling of inferiority or rejection: the artist is not simply an “artist,” but confined to something Other-than, mobilized from the definition of a “first black artist.” The process of a dying self exists in acute stages over Basquiat’s brief lifetime as an artist, which eschews the stability and finality of the self.

Recognition and relational being is a process of transformation, and Basquiat’s alleged “self-destructive” behavior exemplifies his critical consciousness of Other

definitions. “The year 1982 emerges as pivotal, with the artist repeatedly

painting and drawing himself, as if newly discovering himself as an artist” (Hoban, 1998, p. 338 [also see Figure 7]). For many observing Jean-Michel’s behaviors it was an either/or situation: painting, or engaging in a means of “self-destruction.” However, the process of becoming an artist for Basquiat was equally *deconstructive*— asserting market values on situational expressions of the self in painting, stripping the critical self and identity through recognition, and redefining the confines of material and production.

An object to ever-girding currents of art, Neo-Expressionism and the reconciliation of phenotypic abstractions offer themselves as venues of relationality and



**Figure 9: “Riding with Death” by Basquiat (1988). Likely one of the most direct paintings produced by Jean-Michel. Content is immediate with clarity. Source: WikiArt (n.d).**

recognition for self and Other (Figure 9). “Basquiat’s last self-portrait, “Riding with Death,” is a tragic ode to his own mortality. Stripped of all wordplay, lists, and pop-culture interference, rendered in a spare, lyrical line, it depicts the artist as a skeleton on a skeletal horse, completely alone on canvas” claims Hoban (1998, p. 340). Despite being painted in Jean-Michel’s last year of life, “Riding with Death” is not a premonition of what was to come. Rather, a death of the self is evident throughout Basquiat’s career as an ‘artist’. For Pinn, Basquiat grappled with a sense of twoness:

The pulling of this blackness out of him, placing it beside his body for visual consumption and artistic use, is damaging: it threatens to kill or end his life meaning, to kill identity and to kill the body. What is the price of belonging to the West? (2013, p. 119).

Within the evolving demands required to be recognized as an artist, the power to normalize culture as exotic or different in relation-to something operates under the guise of art as economy—real relations and conditions which foreground any experience of the expressional self.

## CHAPTER 2

### RECOGNIZING SELF & OTHER THROUGH EXPRESSION & RELATIONS

While Basquiat's works manifest a sort of cognitive disequilibrium by conflicting text and message, re-configuring events, persons and paintings, elements of Basquiat's identity are a result of recognition and self-realization. As an "up-and-coming artist", Basquiat understood power, commodification, symbols, and labels. Before the early 1980s, SAMO

was established and recognized by the art world—*intended for the art world.*

Knowing this, Basquiat was still signing with the name SAMO;



Figure 10: "King Brand" by Basquiat (1983). Source: WikiArt (n.d.).

"But soon afterwards, he started painting little crowns on his work" (Hoban, 1998, p. 70-71). The use of the crown, or the signature of SAMO signifies elements of self-recognition as an artist in relation-to publics, including the art world, the social, and the cultural. For Basquiat, however, the crown symbolizes a desire to be 'king', a signification of power in becoming the "artist" (Figure 10).

Through relations-to "others," Jean-Michel Basquiat's work meets a sort of dualistic definition. The first appeals to a sphere of "*private indulgence*" through

material, and the second appeals to a learning-self through experience and expression. Here, the discussion deepens as art meaningfully confers the expression of ideas, feelings, rationale and emotion of Jean-Michel's via Neo-Expressionism. In contrast, art is an 'object,' an instrument of self-expression that evokes the detriments of institutionalized disparities such as "racism" and the effect on the "self" from social and cultural spheres.

States Fanon (1967, p. 212), "I try not to be naked in the sight of the object. The object is denied in terms of individuality and liberty. The object is an instrument." In the



context of expression, art is the making of oneself through an

**Figure 11: "Weisman", painting by Basquiat (circa 1983). Source: Huffington Post (2010).**

object only to be denied liberty and individuality (Figure 12, p. 16). Writes Pinn (2013):

The postcolonial environment involves a struggle over ontology as well as the meaning of aesthetics as once subjected bodies—the embodied black body as savage for instance—seek to reconstitute themselves through an alternate cultural meaning. Involved in this proves is a signifying of the rules and assumptions of the art world, tied as they have been to dominant discourses of European superiority (p. 111).



The self is denied and negotiated by categories attributed to perceptions, recognitions, and relations within social and cultural spheres related to the post-colonial. As a process of *what is* and *what is to be*—borrowing from Fanon—Neo-Expressionists had “...defined rights of passage, each of them *is*. Each one of them wants to *be, to emerge*” (Fanon, 1967, p. 212) and is denied. Defining self and “Other” in artistic discourse prompts competing self and collective value in interpretation.

To combat definition and imposition, to maintain the self and freedom, Basquiat refused to explain or articulate the meaning behind texts and visual elements in painting when asked by dealers, buyers, and gallery owners. Notes Seed (2010):

It wasn't uncommon for Jean to show hostility towards people who expressed interest in his work...When [Marcia Weisman] arrived at his studio, he took an immediate dislike to her. While she looked uncertainly at his work he became defensive and silent, and worked on an oilstick drawing on a very large piece of butcher paper. The drawing, which showed a sort of frightening caveman holding a bone, was a kind of cartoon parody of savagery. As Marcia was getting ready to leave he added a penis and testicles to the image and later told a gallery employee that it was a depiction of Mrs. Weisman [Figure 11, p. 14].

If art is genuine expression of self, the refusal to define or explain complicates the ability for knowledge transfer, situated meaning, and limits or hinders the ability of persons to impose external definitions of the self onto art and the artist—expressively and politically. Politically, the “refusal to define” results in the artist’s singular artistic translation absent “primitive”, “black” or “graffiti,” which it is believed that Basquiat appreciated *when expressing oneself* through art. However:

Basquiat's black identity is manifest throughout his art. Not overtly political, his sense of what it means to be a black man in contemporary America couldn't be more clearly conveyed, whether it's in the grinning heads in "Hollywood Africans," or the poignant tribute to his idol Charlie Parker, "Charles the First" or the ironic "Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta (Hoban, p. 11, 1998).

Hoban and equally Pinn's (2013) words manifest an exoticism of certain bodies in art discourse—including Basquiat's—namely phenotypic characteristics attributed to 'race' and characterized in descriptions of Jean-Michel's work (Figure 12). Basquiat, while



*Figure 12: "Profit I" by Basquiat (1982). Source: WikiArt (n.d.).*

accepting 'primitive' and figurative labels in Neo-Expressionism, wanted to move beyond simple recognition and historical translation as a "black" artist. "Ironically, given his obsession with anatomy, Basquiat deconstructed himself. Perhaps the trademark erasures were his most heartfelt gesture" (Hoban, p. 15, 1998). As such, characteristics of Basquiat's paintings and texts can challenge and evoke experiential learning through

environmental relations in discovery; art becomes a terrain of contest between competing definitions of the situation, specifically artist versus definers, and expression versus “art”.

For Basquiat and those in close proximity, a pedagogy of *relationality* unfolds: an action that move peoples (self-included), identities, and meanings across social, cultural, and historical contexts. *Meaning* can be produced, re-produced, or re-interpreted every time a painting or text is viewed or re-visited. Art becomes a relational mechanism recreating perspectives of time, space, and location (Figure 13). For example, when traveling with Cortez and Basquiat in Modena in 1981, Audiello, looking out the window of the hotel claims:

The view was famous from Bertolucci’s film *1900*. I felt sick. That site was historical. It was this glorious revolutionary past. And there was no trace of it anywhere. I was horrified by the emptiness. Then I looked at what Jean-Michel was

drawing.

He was

making

barbed

wire, and

cannons,

and plows, which the workmen of the time used as weapons, since they had no guns (in Hoban, 1998, p. 72).

**Figure 13: “Untitled” (Boxer) by Basquiat (1982). Source: New York Times (2008).**



The degree of symbolism or knowledge making of the *self in relation-to* cannot be guided by typical parameters of learning for Basquiat and viewer. If not locking oneself into a

world of retroactive associations, the action of *relation* can be defined as a “movement” through an “object”, bridging the individual experience and the contemporary, reshaping the “encounter” of self and Other

Within such a process, text, lines, and characteristics cautiously guide the viewer in a focused direction from expression, experience, and situational relations. Basquiat the “artists” often included:

...everything from subjects that appear in his more elaborate paintings, such as crowns and human figures, to everyday information such as lists, names, and telephone numbers. Treating words like visual elements in a composition, he freely arranged words and phrases as a designer would—balancing lines and shapes on the page—and collaging together a wide range of subjects in a single composition (Brooklyn Museum, 2015, p. 3).

Basquiat’s use of text, word repetition, characters, symbols, and layered backgrounds is an appeal to viewers, which offers itself for response-interpretation. The proximity to situational expression or public response to art is an undergirding current of the definitional boundaries of self, art, and pedagogy. As in Marcia Weisman’s “parody of savagery” or the use of figures as in “Profit I”, the concept of “public” offers itself as a departure point for expression through real relations and conditions of the encounter, which creates a learning-self and “Other”.

## CHAPTER 3

### PUBLIC PEDAGOGY THEORY & LEARNING AN OTHER

While contemporary public pedagogy theory often locates itself in museums, libraries, pop culture, activism, and media studies, qualifications of “public” are extended to include the domain of identity politics and institutions in public pedagogy. Carmen Luke, for example, “...positions pedagogy as necessarily defined by and a product of a network of historical, political, sociocultural and knowledge relations” (in Gaztambide-  
*Figure 14: “Notary” by Basquiat (1983). Source: WikiArt (n.d).*



Fernández & Matute, 2014, p. 62). “Public” becomes the social and cultural context reflective of and respective to relationships which result in the formation of a learning “self” in art (Figure 14). Conducive to feelings and experiences, the environment or “encounter” itself is relationally significant to the story or image produced on canvas between Basquiat and definers through a process of learning self and “Other” in broader social and cultural struggles. In contrast, while the encounter produces self and “Other” through dialogues of difference, the recognition of an “artist” produces the effect of a collective “public” established in relation-to the “Other”, or non-white artist in adjectives

of “black”. From abstracted relations, knowledge in the moment, and historical translation, the recognition process becomes an experiential pedagogy of “public” and “Other”.

According to Gaztambide-Fernández & Matute, pedagogy should not overlook facets of intentional influence and enters “...into relations based on the ethical imperative of the encounter” (2014, p. 56). Absent *ethics*—a multifaceted canon of colonization—how does it become possible to shape intentions, goals, and re-shape encounters outside of previous experience and physical existence via the ‘human’ experience? This process is an “un-disciplined” and “primitive” element of pedagogy in comparison to ‘art’ or ‘high-art,’ which features frames that clarify and limit the possibility for distraction, relation, and public visibility via ethics and intention.

*Public*, according to Mitchell (1995, p. 115), is a “...sphere best imagined as the suite of institutions and activities that mediate the relations between society and the state” (in Biesta, 2014, p. 17). Within these institutions the parameters of public pedagogy are defined insofar that it “...is situated within a broader politics of representation, one that suggests that the struggle over meaning is, in part, defined as the struggle over culture, power, and politics” (Giroux, 2001, p. 593). In contrast, Biesta theorizes ‘becoming public’ is not necessarily physicality as much as it is a degree of human solidarity, political existence (2014, p. 23) —similar purviews of “post-colonial artists” including Gordon Bennett, Wilson Harris, Toni Morrison, Arnaldo Roche-Rabell as pedagogy scholarship. However, a common problematic characteristic of public pedagogy—which also applies to the ‘post-colonial artists’ above—is the “...contraction of phenomena to

prior interpretive commitments through which difference is brought into conformity with a prior image...” (Wallin, 2014, p. 41).

As “knowledge is what is already there”, “always in the Other”, and a “structural dynamic,” it becomes increasingly helpful to approach public and self as categories that operate symbiotically to form real relations and conditions. “Every experience, especially if it turns out to be sterile, has to become a component of reality and thus play a part in the restructuring of reality” (Fanon, 1967, p. 48). Ellsworth similarly maintains:

The experience of the learning self is not composed of the steps up a curricular scaffold of objectives as cognitive schemas, nor is it composed of the standardized tests used to supposedly “measure” its progress,



**Figure 15: “Self Portrait” by Basquiat (1982). The figure, dark and without detail with an arrow in-hand interpreted as a situational environment in contrast to a background which utilizes straight lines, possibly indicative of buildings or a “civilization” . Source: Sotheby’s (2012).**

retrospectively, after it has already occurred. The only material evidence we have of what makes a curriculum or pedagogy “educational” is that [of] lived experience (2005, p. 35).

Ellsworth’s words provoke thought of a *conversation* or *literary text* of lived experience in artistic dialogue: texts by which knowledge exists and creates conversations for

mutually constituting identities (Figure 15, p. 21); however, this process operates latent in structure, symbolism, and power.

Knowledge, in other words, is not a substance but a structural dynamic: it is not contained by any individual but comes about out of the mutual apprenticeship between two partially unconscious speeches which both say more than they know (Felman, 1982, p. 33).

**Figure 16:** “Slave Auction” by Basquiat (1982). A figure in a hat waves hands, a number of heads—bodies not visible—behind the fore figure. Source: Huffington Post (2010).



These dimensions suggest the locations in which identity formation can occur of *relation-*to in “object”-ive reality, and illustrate how identities influence or conflict with one another in “unconscious speeches” between a public, self, and “Other”. Within the art world, a power dynamic replicates a larger system in communication.

A *relational aesthetic* exists, which offers communicatory elements of the self to oneself, a new expression in situations connected to social, cultural and environmental



conditions, wherein a person or “public” may or may not locate power in relation to external identities *for the self* in understanding. As Ellsworth remarks (1997, p. 66):

All this is another way of saying that once a belief in direct knowledge of the self and the world is made impossible by the discovery of a splitting, a cleaving of the self’s relation to the world and to others; “knowing” the self and the world becomes an indirect matter of *interpretation*. Knowing can no longer be believed to be a direct result of observation, empathy, careful listening, objectivity, self-reflection, exchange, communication, or even (maybe especially) understanding.

Paramount to self-definition and expression is Fanon’s writings of a ‘certain uncertainty’:

“Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.” As a third-person and negating activity, expression is a consequential *relation-to* wherein the self is defined or negated through public and Other. This definition of the situation reconstitutes “race”-typical relational boundaries defined by phenotype. Following Nietzsche’s framework of ‘ressentiment’ –or resentment “the practice by which one defines one’s identity through the negation of the other” (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 4). From the relation of self and Other, Fanon (1967) points to Mannoni and the ‘Prospero complex’ as the ‘root of the colonial vocation’, wherein the arrival of the colonizer creates “the feeling of inferiority” and “dependency complex” among the original people. This perspective ushers in a frame of “being for others”, a dependency which, in order to be sustained, one must be involved in the art world. However, only those who experience the requisite for dependency can be colonized—meaning those willing to be recognized as an artist and participate within the purview of definers, for

example, can be materialized (Figure 17). Theoretically, Basquiat's work exemplifies lived experience through environmental relationships and varying schemas circumnavigating the self as an artist. For Basquiat, the artist came to understand the self through a relationship with a specific public—where the “marginal” artist may communicate a post-colonial or embodied struggle representative of *just* discourse, the broker, dealer, or “art” buyer re-defines or negotiates said struggles through a “colonial” encounter, ascribing their positionality in aesthetics as relational material (Figure 16, p. 22).



**Figure 17:** “Untitled (Head)” by Basquiat (1982). Recently sold at auction by Sotheby’s in May, 2017. Source: New York Times (2017).

## CHAPTER 4

### A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO LAYERED IDENTITIES

To remain cognizant of coding and power in artistic definitions of the encounter is to recognize that ‘art’ *represents*—not simply *is*—lived experience, symbolism, and meaning in production. Art *is* not simply ‘art’, but *operates in* and *represents* dimensions of expression for self and “Other”. Visual schemas uniquely fit within ‘naturally’ defined codes that fashion and ‘recognize’ works as “art” from the perspectives of social and cultural struggles, and historical translations. Folk art, for example, “reflects the constraints and opportunities of that community, rather than the constraints and opportunities of the art worlds...” (Becker, 1982, p. 248). Folk and primitive art is a location filled with in-articulable meaning, relations to ‘objects’, and experiences which, for Basquiat and “folk”, further define real relations and conditions in the (then) present. For Basquiat and “Other”, expression is very much a process of sampling “textual knowledge”. However, the self finds limitations rather than freedom in art.

Textual knowledge—the very stuff the literature teacher is supposed to deal in—is knowledge of the functioning of language, of symbolic structures, of the signifier, knowledge at once derived from—and directed towards—interpretation (Felman, 1982, p. 31).

Following Felman, Ellsworth suggests textual knowledge is un-decidable as a process and “cannot be settled once and for all” (1997, p. 67). Applying Ellsworth to Basquiat, knowledge making of the self becomes ‘un-decidable’ or problematic, and speaks to the ways in which expression is interpreted by the self and public, ‘spoken’ outward and reinterpreted by the art world through the lens of “race” or history. In contrast, Basquiat’s

work is similar to the composition of jazz and layering between self and Other. Like a jazz offering of multiple voices, Basquiat's works blur "the lines between what has been composed in the past and what is realized in the moment, making linear narrative progression seem entirely anomalous" (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 24).

Moreover, jazz becomes a contest of artists—a contest between self and public—which:

...represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it (Ellison in Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 24).

If identities can be found in jazz,

realized in the moment, and lost in transition, so can identities be found and displaced in expressional painting through translation. By imposing external definitions of the "Other" in art, one lost as one finds, reinterpreted, dominated or muted as one expresses from the



Figure 18: "Horn Players" by Basquiat (1983). Figure on the right holds a horn and the left a saxophone. The repetition of "ornithology"—the study of birds, and "pree"—meaning to take notice, check out or pay attention. Notably, the figure on the left is without bodily definition, hidden behind musical notes in red and a saxophone. Source: Khan Academy (n.d.).

center periphery (Figure 18, p. 26). Identity, manifest expression, begins with experience from the individual and is circumvented in public contest. States Becker (1982, p. 202), “Artists similarly take on the imagined responses of others, learned through their experience in an art world, into account when they complete a work.” Taking experiences into account, a dimensions of realism exists for said ‘artists.’ Similar to Roche-Rabell in the context of Puerto Rico’s struggle with hegemony, history of domination, and constructs of identity, Basquiat’s paintings act as a vehicle to manifest the “concern with the politics of identity and anti-colonialism in the creation of larger-than-life figures that often seem buried or interred in some kind of deeper structure...denied corporeal completeness or unity” (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 23). From this purview, identities involved manifest that of a concrete experience, which becomes the tactile material of art, and when commercialized rearticulates the expressional self and identity in relation to another by re-inscribing conflated historical narratives.

In consequence, ‘contemporary’ artist speak is similarly regulated by economy and the process of selection and confinement in artistic genres (or waves)—post-colonial aesthetics included. Neither victory nor solution is easily found and the degree of ambiguity in post-colonial artistic analysis does not provide firm solutions, only questions. Questions manifest broader critiques of self and Other in art discourse, exposing frameworks or bridges to highlight ways in which competing identities can be re-claimed or re-integrated during ‘in-between’ activity as experience in art. Activities such as Yong Soon Min’s installation titled *The Bridge of no Return* “explores the parallel realities of the separated peoples of Korea (North and South) and their desires for reintegration across divides of perspectives and territory” and “offers a metaphor for the

latent connection that course through the divisions of all races and peoples at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 31). Similar to Min, Basquiat’s installations, specifically painting and drawing, investigate realities, territories, and cross-divides. Basquiat, however, explores territories of the self; the component of desire is recognition as an artist, which consequentially exposes ostensible relational perspectives of “race” and phenotype, equality, and a multiplicity or bridge between “here” and “there” – “pre” and “post” settler-colonial history (Figure 19).

Recognition in art negates dimensions of struggle, freedom, and the self—real relations and conditions—to embellish an ulterior reality of the ‘viewer’. Recreations of the self are exemplified in aesthetic layers. “Discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product not of the transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language

**Figure 19:** “Untitled” (History of Black People), by Basquiat (1983). The combination of variable language and multiple symbols. The word “SLAVE” boxed and mangled as if in an effort to cross such out. “EL GRAN ESPECTACULO” at the top of the center panel translates to “the big show”. “HEMLOCK” and subtle green leaves below a spider and positioned next to “THEBES”—a reminder of Socrates’ decision to drink the hemlock rather than flee to Thebes. “NUBA”—a collective term for the various Indigenous people inhabiting the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan in Sudan—is positioned on the left panel above two faces. Nuba combined with the dogish outline (“A DOG GUARDING THE PHAROH”) evokes thoughts of colonization, specifically Egypt’s “conquering” of Nubia circa 1500 B.C. (citation in cellular phone @ anth.ucsb.edu) and thoughts of empire or superstructure—possibly “the big show”. Source: WikiArt (n.d.).



upon real relations and conditions” notes Stuart Hall (1990, p. 511). Applying Hall’s methodology, each painting, phrase, or use of text is unique as viewers interpret varying “*real relations and conditions*” of categorical identities, “race,” and recognition in the confines of “Neo-Expressionism.” From this perspective, post-colonialism situates itself in a lens of *relationality*—a pedagogy of encounter and periphery relations through aesthetic definition—not simply a study after colonialism.

Dimitriadis and McCarthy suggest “post-colonial” painters, such as Basquiat, seek to problematize the post-colonial condition:

...postcolonial artists have theorized—and have been theorizing for many years—the tensions in and contradictions of the colonial encounter that have come to preoccupy scholars so recently. Artists have also opened up the spatial referent of the postcolonial landscape, suggesting that there is no necessary or fixed geography to center-periphery relations (2001, p. 80).

The “post” becomes a relational narrative to understand the negation of the self and “Other” from a center-periphery of expression in art.

As used here, the “post” in the postcolonial is not to be understood as a temporal register as in “hereafter,” but as a marker of spatial challenge of the occupying powers of the West by the ethical, political and aesthetic forms of the marginalized...products of colonial histories of disruption, forced migration, false imprisonment and pacification. The violence of the colonial practices is so great that European aesthetics’ old claim on ethical and epistemological authority over knowledge and narrative fullness can only be treated as a hoax (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 7).

However, the ambivalence of the “post”-colonial must still be questioned. While maintaining that Dimitriadis and McCarthy’s analysis holds true, settler-colonialism foregrounds any conversation of “colonialism” in the context of relation and proximity. As such, settler-colonialism varies from “colonialism” in combination with theories of *relationality* to situate a conversation (verbal and non-verbal) of “relational aesthetics” as a result of globalization, power, violence, and “settling” in site, sight, and space. Again, for some artists this space becomes a relational situation that commands visualization of here and there, rooted in a particular understanding of now and then, “us” and “them” (Figure 20).

As these practices can be associated with broader struggles for humanistic freedom across critical encounters, the post-colonial dialogue itself is not a “disciplined” pedagogy between center-periphery and the social-cultural world. The concept of “post-colonial,” or settler-colonial when considering the sustained relational element, in art is



**Figure 20 (right):** “Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari” by Basquiat (1982). The © symbol placed nearest a crate carried by figure on the left under the word “COLONIZATION”. The figure on the right, offers oneself in contrast to a bleak background and text, suggesting the figure on the left as a focal point. The words “CORTEZ”, “POACHERS”, “MISSIONARIES”, “TUSKS”, and “SKINS” portray a vivid picture when combined with “COLONIZATION”. The word “SAVAGE” is contrast against “NOBLE” and a gun fortifies power for the figure on the right with “JOLLY GOOD MONEY IN SAVAGES” above. Source: Wiki Paintings (n.d.).



equally contradictory. Post-colonial art, for example, exists within a categorical space for situated interactions; becoming an academic genre itself, it further enables and legitimizes the retrospective application of ‘primitive’ to Basquiat when recognized as an artist. As Fanon writes, “Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*? At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness” (1967, p. 232). Applying Fanon, the open door of every consciousness is to create a world for oneself by implicating an Other in artistic expression and aesthetic theory, the observing, construction, and framing of one-another and self through specific, static lenses (Figure 21).

A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world—such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world (Fanon, 1967, p. 111).



**Figure 21 (below): Basquiat and the Polaroid camera (n.d.). Source: PBS (2015).**

Basquiat, when recognized as an artist, received the “freedom” to build and replicate “the world of the *You*”—for those apart from the description of the “first black artist,” the civilized absent the primitive, and the authentic or inauthentic collective in relational comparisons to the self.

The expressional learning self as an artist is negotiated publically as the limitations of experience reify social and cultural parameters of the individual and collective identity. From this perspective, interpretations of self and Other redefine experience and being from static locations of structured knowledge. Ellsworth (2005, p. 130) notes the limits of relationality in expression and variation within particular contexts, events, and environments:

The *social* body reaches the limits of the very expression of its potential and variation when the reciprocal variations and shifting characteristics of *individual* bodies are constrained from moving about, combining, and inflecting.

In combination with Fanon, Ellsworth provokes conceptualizations of art as an “in-between” space or object absent the embodied self; and, while expression can shift boundaries of one’s identity, the collective establishes the limitations of the body via the physical environment. Theoretically, the relational process is an early envisioning of possibility (*a critical SAMO, questioning or envisioning freedom, admiring recognition*) while expression as art is a process of ‘becoming public’ by bridging the self and the collective public, secreting the dialectic of the ‘in-between’ space—between the body and public, or historical translation of the situation.

While the use of ‘in-between’ spaces may theoretically suspend such definitional power relations in inflection or expression, meaning “is not the correspondence of language to reality as realism implies, nor is it the endless play of the sign as linguistic theory suggests,” it is a social relation that promotes meaning (Teresa Ebert in Jaramillo, 2008, p. 509). When empowered through relations or recognition, expression is a means of identity formation and self-learning which cannot cross institutionally defined

limitations of physical embodiment—locations of the transformational process wherein identities are often conceptualized as fixed or static. Such a conceptualization of self becomes a point of power or contention, a terrain of contest, or “transitional space,” a means *to attempt* or *test*. This transitional space is, according to Ellsworth, self-knowledge *in the making*. It “is the space where both real and imagined physical boundaries between the body’s “inside” and “outside” are put into play” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 32). Movement into transitional spaces may create identity crises:

It is the productive irritation of, say, the aesthetic experience described by de Bolla which dissolves the illusion that we are the authors of our actions and knowledge and replaces it with the irritating reality that we both make ourselves and are made by what we collectively and individually have made to be our other (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 141).

This irritation, unlimited in “scripted” conversation, puts forth unknowable circumstances of learning the self, or a certain uncertainty. The process operates reciprocally: a pedagogy of the public results in a pedagogy of the self which is then expressed via art—citing contradictions in power, phenotype and socio-historical conditions (Figure 22).

**Figure 22: “Irony of a Negro Policeman” by Basquiat (1981). Source: Cargo Collective (n.d).**



Explicit or implicit, articulations of the self require an active sense of visual-listening as interpretation is part of a process and self-expression shifts or confronts popular discourses of understanding. According to Suzi Gablik in *Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism* (1994):

Art that is rooted in a “listening” self, that cultivates the intertwining of self and Other, suggests a flow-through experience which is not delimited by the self but extends into the community through modes of reciprocal empathy. Because this is listener-centered rather than vision-oriented, it cannot be fully realized through the mode of self-expression it can only come into its own through dialogue, as open conversation, in which one listens to and includes other voices (p. 82-3).

The approach enables one to look beyond the confines of expressional learning as a field of fluid interpretations of the self-public, and unbounded definitional parameters. No longer is the self something in relation-to, but something in perspective of—an identity interrelated and never fixed. While a “listening” self is a response to the individual or collective, the process does not negotiate power relations because expression is a catalyst of experience which creates value in difference for the purpose of defining Others.

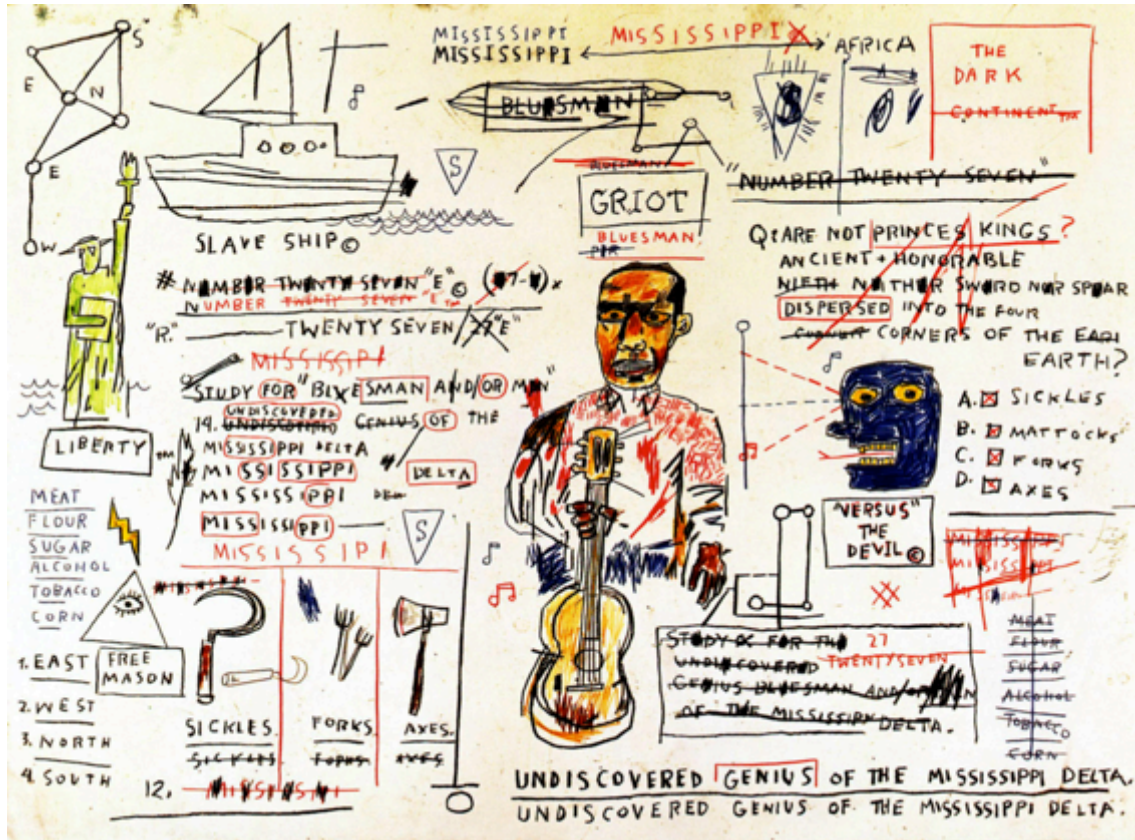
Identities in relation-to via artistic expression rely upon social and cultural understanding; from such, critics easily differentiated Jean-Michel’s work from Neo-Expressionist artists of the period. As Marcia Tucker suggests, Basquiat’s “work is embroiled in the intersection of race and class, and that has very much distorted everything. He was always dealt with as an exoticized other, and it was very rarely about the work itself” (in Hoban, 1998, p. 343). Experience and ‘the Other’ hindered Basquiat’s learning and the process of defining self through expression.

However, moving beyond a simple artist-audience relational analysis, constructions of events and relations extend well beyond post-colonial aesthetics. Sustained settler-colonial relations both define and further skew the fluid boundaries where art meets the self in pedagogical definition. Coupled with the institutional application of ‘black’ and ‘primitive’ in definition, the interpretation of individual experience from a pedagogical perspective situates Basquiat in relation-to an art world that problematically moves beyond simple questioning and a listening self. Dimitriadis and McCarthy note:

Just as Roche-Rabell as a Puerto-Rican wrestled with his “blackness,” so did Basquiat. On one level, his work was collected and validated in a context that fetishized his “blackness,” especially vis-à-vis the nascent hip-hop scene in New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Basquiat himself produced a rap single). He was used by (and used) an art market that fetishized and hyperbolized him as the “first great black American painter” (2001, p. 93-94).

For if the artist finds freedom in self-expression, not within the definitional confines of ‘black’ or ‘primitive’, where do the limitations of reality, entrapment, freedom, certainty and uncertainty truly subsist? Psychoanalytic limitations exist in the philosophy of identity politics. The lens of culture, however, rearticulates expression as capital and the self as exotic. Basquiat’s ‘art’ offers itself as a vehicle encoded with symbolism and the self while primed for a miscommunication of value as Neo-Expressionism.

Figure 23: “Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta” by Basquiat (1983). Source: WikiArt (n.d.).



Such a pedagogy of relations is contingent upon circumstances of recognition and historical transference. Even in layers, knowledge in the making binds a knowledge of the past to a knowledge of the present, and Basquiat’s work still operates within a universal symbolism defined by relations, reflective of both society and culture. The reflection subsequently confers a degree of legitimacy in reciprocity—re-cycling components of society and culture in self-expression. As Basquiat drew from both for inspiration in painting and power in visual augmentation, jazz music, mathematics, science, ‘history’, and ‘Other’ knowledge are replicated within unique frames as micro ‘definitions of the situation’ (Figure 23). In contrast, power for the “artist” is communicating oneself, ones’ identity in frames of expression while observers of a defining nature—a particular “gaze”—lack understanding or depth in “reading” outside

of epistemological imposition. Basquiat provides “brave essays in cultural self-definition”—“how he made sense of all those realms”, suggests Thompson (2008, p. 255). Basquiat’s work is a material conversation or “speech” which includes messages not easily articulated; the works define and frame the parameters available for purview, and color the canvas edge-to-edge as the *in-between space* in dialogue.

Things are left contingent, partial, wonderfully open and incomplete for the reader to develop and to realize, to be compelled to read what they have never done so, to look at pictures they have never seen, to attend to music they have heard only in the distance if at all (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. viii).

While the paradigm of response-interpretation defines situations, identities, and art, not all art is pedagogy.

For de Bolla, the “art component” of an artwork is not something that we can point to in its content; rather, we can detect the “art component” of a work only through the nature of our response to the work... The same can be said of pedagogy. Our lived experience of pedagogy is what makes its features as *pedagogy* visible and remarkable (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 23).

Both visible and remarkable, lived experience of the artist becomes a detectable component in expressional works (Figure 24, p. 39).

Caught at the crossroads of past and present, Basquiat offers a complex logic to tell stories, refute *dominating* narratives, and de / re-construct reality. However, the “art component” remains victim to art industry. A process unfolds where the artist produces art and subsequently communicates the self and feeling. Basquiat, like de Bolla, “disconnects object/subject from fixed positions on the grid of social significations and

sets each into motion in the spaces between fixed meanings and identities, where identities become smudged by the space and time of pure relationality” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 136). Lacking rigidity, the fluid articulation and logic shift boundaries of reality as performance—a compellingly political articulation of the self manifest by “history”. Basquiat layers images, frames, and symbols of “history” *without order*; this “example” of Neo-Expressionism grants credibility to the unspoken difficulty of articulation and complexity of self from a “complex moral universe”. Basquiat’s expressional self refuses to accept the linear transgressions of history, though accepts characteristics of a defining art world—an offering of self in the face of definers (*see Figure 33*). In contrast Neo-Expressionists of the era, Basquiat’s “is a quest for a sharper, ecumenical assessment of the troubling—yet promising—configurations of our urban destiny and predicament” (Thompson, 2008, p. 254). When viewed as an artist in production—specifically a “Black artist”—recognition is a discourse of misunderstanding or misinterpretation wherein meaning and message reproduces of a pattern of domination as a communicatory process of artistic expression. Identity, “blackness,” and the voice of the artist is not limited to a particular generation or artistic era; rather, the fluidity of self and Other, struggle, lived experience and expression move beyond the value and understanding ascribed by commercialization, as well as post-colonial aesthetic theory.



**Figure 24: “Obnoxious Liberals” by Basquiat (1982).** The subtle inclusion of arrows in the center figure’s hands. Chains on the left with “ASBESTOS” above and “GOLD” below. Large leaves and \$ symbols compliment the figure on the right. Interestingly, note the placement of the crown above the center figure and the words “NOT FOR SALE” across the body. According to Widewalls (n.d.), “The rich social scene made Jean-Michel Basquiat very uncomfortable and it surfaced in images such as Obnoxious Liberals, with dollar signs and Not for Sale slogans appearing, along with the cowboy hat representing capitalism and exploitation. The figure on the left is Samson and his positioning is also a representation of the exploitation of African people.” Source: Hyper Allergic (2015).



## CHAPTER 5

### BASQUIAT & POST-COLONIAL AESTHETIC RELATIONS

Artists, musicians, and writers acutely fit within a post-colonial performance. While post-colonial aesthetics may conflict with contemporary social and cultural discourses by producing various images with reference to the colonial situation—for example, Jean-Michel’s references to mathematics, text, and history in paintings—post-colonial aesthetics is an inversion of such a situation, replicating knowledge already made or functioning in the powerful confines of colonial structure. The work of Bennett, Roche-Rabell, and Basquiat:

...evidence a common struggle to come to terms with self through history and community, and the use of myriad tools—some of which “belong” to the colonizer. They show evidence of profound personal struggles that transcend the limits of ancestry, language, and geography while being bound to the particularity of the situation (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 85).

Borrowing from Biesta (2014), art seemingly replicates a larger system in communication of the public, for the public, or by the public. “Art” as a concept is a “myriad tool”—and when belonging to the colonizer in the context of material, seemingly strips self-expression and broader struggles of meaning. While not limited to New York or SoHo, metaphors of a sharpened consciousness are presented in material, Basquiat offers insights into a historical realization situated in locality and experience of the self (Figure 25, p. 41). Basquiat is omnipresently quoted to have stated, “The black person is the protagonist in most of my paintings. I realized that I didn’t see many paintings with black

people in them.” As such, the *artist* was everything that was missing from *high art* in the 1980s.

A learning of oneself, Other, and environment is a subsequent and ongoing process of *relationality* between publics and self.

Definitions of *art* appeal to categorical dimensions of difference by first defining art as material, then

operating through artistic definitions to shape relative

constructs of identity and Other. These

dimensions are pedagogical insofar that public and self-definitional learning occurs through expression.



*Figure 25: “Lead Plate with a Hole” by Basquiat (1984). Three faces immediately present, one only partially visible—smeared and met in the foreground taking precedent on the left. An outline of a buildings and palm tress on the left, the words “THE APPLE OF SODOM – SOLANUM SODOMEUM” above and “MEDEITERRANEAN DRY UPLAND [sp]” below contrast the city street sign in the background. The striking possibly counter-suggestive of location (origin) of such a fruit which disappears into smoke and ash when plucked. The upper portion of another building on the bottom left is clouded by belts, symbols, and alphanumeric sequences. According to Christie’s (n.d.), “Here, Basquiat’s alien is perhaps representative of the black American, marginalized [sp] by dominantly white society and treated pejoratively by popular culture.” Source: Christie’s (n.d.).*

Public becomes a space for re-transmission and re-creation of meaning in symbol and text, offering itself as a point of re-claiming power, re-envisioning social and cultural relations. Seed (2010) describes Basquiat's work as '*second nature*' – poetic, direct, emotional and complete with symbolism; Basquiat “definitely made powerful art about the problems of race, and the sheer vitality of his ideas and imagery continues to dazzle me.” According to Hoban (1998):

Basquiat's work falls into several different periods, with a great deal of overlap. One of his strongest suits was his artistic ability to constantly absorb apparently random material—and technique—and to make it unmistakably his own. Critics have compared his aesthetic to sampling, as if this child of the media were a highly tuned antenna who received, and then broadcast, urgent bits of his message, loud, clear, and often angry (p. 334).

Extending Seed's (2010) comments above to Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) and Hoban (1998), aesthetics offers genres in which appropriation and the inheritance of cultures succinctly open up “new modes of association” for identities and operates as a form of transference, signifying self and culture by way of *relationality*.

Though Basquiat remains extremely receptive—replicating a synergy of publics and conditions—the envisioning of possibility is not without limitation. Identity construction operates through inclusion and exclusion in the arts, which employ languages of the “Other”, dilemmas presented through historical imagery. Basquiat “...promotes a messy and alternate depiction of blackness—one not easily borrowed by whites” to construe dialogues of difference (Pinn, 2013, p.117). Pinder (1999) acknowledges “...the authenticity of African American art is inextricably bound to its

racial content, either overt or implied.” Pinder cites Hughes who situates the discussion around interpretation of work by ‘whites,’ and the missing “depth of feeling.” Hughes’ contextual analysis manifests a discourse of power present in the construction and deconstruction of identity, colonial assimilations in the arts, and appropriations of work as a sort of domestic symbolism. Missing the “depth of feeling,” those who cannot relate limit the interpretation of self-expression to material value and capital (Figure 26)—a language of economy reinforced by a complex colonial encounter. Notably, Basquiat the artist never explicitly defined oneself within the colonial imposition of “black” and “primitive”, though encountered such definitions as a historical reflection of a larger institutional system in communication.

Every  
colonized  
people—in  
other words,  
every people  
in whose soul  
an inferiority



Figure 26: Sold by Sotheby's for \$110.5 million (2017). Source: Sotheby's (2017).

complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality— finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is with the culture of the mother country (Fanon, 1967, p. 18).

Fanon's reflections following the revaluation of “black antiquity” uncovered that “...not only was the white man wrong, black people were not “primitive or subhuman” and

belonged to a civilization in its own right—with its own history, values, traditions, and achievements” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 141). However, while Fanon refused to accept the complexity associated with the colonial gaze, Basquiat desired recognition as an artist.

Basquiat’s work depicts, redefines, colors, and revalues landscapes in theory, though not in practice as an artist. Rather, Basquiat’s situational voice positions the artist in the confines of recognition which, borrowing from Ellsworth (2005, p. 135), the “interleaving of affective and cognitive responses” drives an awareness of the self to Other. Keenly aware, Basquiat’s refusal to accept personal requests for paintings is interpreted as seeking to exist outside the colonial structures which shape narratives and identities. Following Coulthard, “...colonial recognition will often provoke within the oppressed a desire to “escape” their particularity, to negate their differences that mark them as morally deficient and inferior in the eyes of the colonizer” (2014, p. 140). While the self sought to move beyond ideological entrapment by way of expression, relations became dimensions of entrapment as an artist. Pinn (2013, p. 110) suggests:

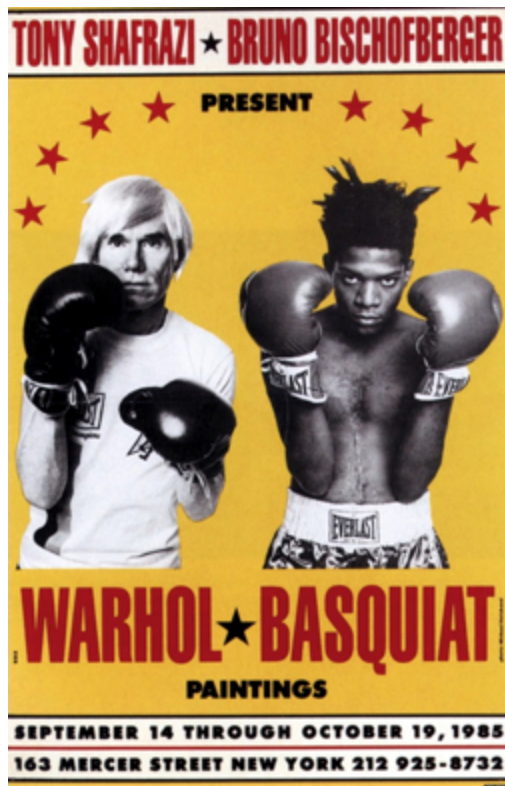
Basquiat’s work provides an interesting case study because his art and embodied history delineate the movement between Africa and the American hemisphere in ways that speak to elements of a shared experience of the world in the context of black bodies framed by a politics and aesthetics of whiteness.

Though Basquiat sought to define oneself in relation to the world one encompassed, the “artist”, redefined by capital, cannot move beyond recognition as “black” and “primitive” within colonial structures further framed “by a politics and aesthetics of whiteness”.

Basquiat became the ‘artist’ dependent on regular access to supplies, materials, and relations to those organizationally inclined to make decisions impacting the lives of

Others within the art world. Though once achieved, nothing changed. Notably, Coulthard suggests that while the Negritude movement sought to ascribe self-value and worth in the subjective sphere—“namely, the rehabilitation of the colonized subject based on a revaluation of black history and culture,” doing so failed to negate the structure still in place (2014, p. 141). While any interpretation is difficult to distinguish without Basquiat’s sentiments, Basquiat exemplifies the adoption, understanding, and promotion of a new “self-value and worth in the subjective sphere”. In the context of Warhol,

*Figure 27: Warhol-Basquiat exhibition in the fall of 1985—heavy hitters, notably then of the same weight class. Source: Sotheby’s (2016).*



Basquiat evidences a new speak, style of being an ‘artist’—achievement in a process of becoming that is accepted by the individual, but denied sovereignty and unity in expression by structure when defined as the Other. Absent “equality” through achievement in material, the “artist” steps in the “ring” with notable figures of the art world, enabling the framing of difference in art discourse; problematic for the artist, difference in art sustains value in material, and allows for the claiming and extrapolation of labor of those at the margins (Figure 27).

In consequence, relationality is a pedagogical lens wherein recognition confers a dramatic finding of agony lacking self-fulfillment. Pedagogy, situated in the context of painting and self-expression, is a learning of self-worth through the replication of “history”, culture, and politics. The relational process re-totalizes European superiority in

politics, economics, social structure, and as one enters into art discourse. Examining through Fanon (1967), one would argue that Basquiat's becoming an artist is "evidence of a dislocation, a separation" in which "all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements." Framed situationally, the "European" is Warhol and the conference of recognition as an artist conveys "a feeling of equality" in the art world. Writes Hoban (1998, p. 267) "Basquiat bought into the romance of being an artist, but Warhol was a businessman." The innate power of the art broker, gallery owner, and collector creates a self narrative of the dominated, the misunderstood, and contrasts "black" from "white" through "artistic" interpretation. Applying Mannoni:

The equality he seeks would have been beneficial before he started asking for it, but afterwards it proves inadequate to remedy his ills—for every increase in equality makes the remaining differences seem the more intolerable, for they suddenly appear agonizingly irremovable. This is the road...from psychological dependence to psychological inferiority (in Fanon, 1967, p. 98).

Additionally, Basquiat cannot "...free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment" (Fanon, 1967, p. 30). Dependent, recognition in art operates in conjunction with a knowledge making and the domination of the Other. The analysis is not "them," but "us" and an unrealized responsibility to the consequences of definitional power by the art world; in a process of acceptance and selection, entering this arena creates recognition as an artist and power relations are maintained through difference.





**Figure 28:** A noticeable difference in aesthetic expression. Basquiat’s “Hollywood Africans” (left) and a painting of a later date on the right. Notably style, content, and symbolism varied over Basquiat’s brief career. However, what was constant was both simple and complex works were defined as art, and confined to the era of Neo-Expressionism and phenotype alike. Source: New York Times (2015).

The communicative nature of art manifests an unfolding series of stages, communication styles, and learning periods for Basquiat: the construction of Basquiat the artist and the erasure of self-expression are evident in both content and form. In some respects, notable observations of differential content move the dialogue deeper, questioning why Basquiat’s use of figures, critique, text, and color varied over one’s career. From a “layered” perspective, changes in aesthetic style and feeling vary from painting to painting, gallery to gallery, and dealer to dealer while visual intake of symbols and expressions fluctuate in a mildly interpretable basis. Less apparent is the adoption of Basquiat by the Western art world followed by the subsequent claiming of “African” aesthetics—somewhat stylistically variable from earlier genres in both form and content—as “primitive” in the emerging era of Neo-Expressionism. From a structured, colonial lens, “race” operates in definitional vehicles to sustain power relations in processes of recognition and economy. “The ‘origin’ of the capitalist mode in conditions

of conquest, coupled with the ‘peculiar institutions’ of unfree labour [sp], thus preserve, at the economic level, and secure its continuing racially ascriptive features” (Hall, 1980, p. 311). In the context of *modernism* and artistic production, two components emerge in the enlivening of Western art: “...content (economic/politics of colonialism) and form (Western versus African aesthetics)” (Pinn, 2013, p. 115). Thus, capital, economics, and material continually redefine expressionistic landscapes of 'primitivity' and difference in art while conquering ideological spaces of contest at the avant-garde.

Aesthetic relations highlight dimensions of artists’ experiences with colonialism, racism, and imperial histories. All visible and remarkable, these *relations-to* foreground the post-colonial aesthetic experience of the self. Fanon once stated: “...if I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am one who waits; I investigate my surroundings, I interpret everything in terms of what I discover, I become more sensitive” (Fanon, 1967, 120). Overlapping with Fanon, a pedagogical intersection of self-understanding and definition exists in expression for post-colonial artists and Basquiat, though not for an overt art public. “Basquiat’s work reflects the complexity of the contemporary cultural moment for nonwhite people in the United States and around the globe”, note Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001, p. 94). Imposed categorically and misunderstood, content and form should be defined through and by Jean-Michel. The artist, once asked by Geldzahler, “What’s your subject matter?”—responded with “Royalty, heroism, and the streets.” Each facet fitting of a King (Figure 29, p. 49).

According to Hoban, Basquiat “...took the [crown] symbol from the King World Productions trademark at the end of “The Little Rascals” but he made it his own” (1998, p. vii). However, the crown symbolized the a desire to be ‘king’ and such paintings and



This depth of feeling is part of the knowledge making process itself in various dimensions. From this perspective, art is pedagogical, strategic, relational in affect, producing principles and the capability for self-learning. However, since the proximity of closeness to situational definitions is an undergirding current of a learning-self in Neo-Expressionism, the environment itself—conducive to entrapment—is just as salient as the story or image produced on canvas. According to Hoban (1998, p. 190), “The love affair with art seemed to extend to the general public. In 1983, 4.5 million people attended the Metropolitan Museum; about 40 million a year visited art museums as across America. Stoking the desire of the masses, the media viewed the ever-growing art bubble as one superlative headline.” Absent this closeness to community, the symbolism of time, place and audience affects the elements of expressional definition in commercialization.

## CHAPTER 6

### JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT & THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE SELF

Like the individual, post-colonial art similarly remains victim of the “culture industry”, adoption, and appropriation, exposed to “the risk of being domesticated, robbed of their emancipatory potential, as they come to serve the imperatives of industry first and foremost” (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, 2001, p. 35). While Dimitriadis and McCarthy point to the emancipatory potential being robbed from post-colonial artists, this also assumes said “artists” operate within industries conducive to emancipation, which overlooks personal narratives and experiences to assume all “post-colonial” artists are seeking to be “free.” In contrast, Basquiat desired recognition as an artist, and an artist Basquiat became. Basquiat reconstituted landscapes of culture, including “racial” dialogues, by reconfiguring texts and spatial placements to construct knowledge. When combining knowledge making with shared experience, pedagogy combines political and critical self. Structured in political action or grounded in symbolism, Basquiat’s work is mobilized in individual and collective interpretation, movement, and meaning beyond “minimal” aesthetic value. Jean-Michel is ‘direct’, containing ‘immediate content’, and different than minimal art:

He deals with more than bones and texts. He confronts the anatomy of the city at its racial, linguistic, and cultural cutting edges. He gives you influences in conflict, and casts them into coherence. And we are the ones who benefit, not he, destroyed by one of the more virulent “disease cultures” of the streets, heroin (Thompson, 2008, p. 256).



It was only after he became successful that Basquiat began to see, much to his despair, that for the dealers, collectors, and even his friends, money was the first priority; that the art world was primarily a market-place that functioned according the laws of supply and demand...he found himself inextricably trapped in an industry that rivaled Wall Street for insider trading, power plays, and corruption (Hoban, 1998, p. 268).

The art world claimed the medium of self-expression as something for the taking when the boundaries shifted to define Basquiat as an artist. While expression is a relational mechanism of self-understanding, the self became something to be conquered and commodified in the market. Neo-Expressionism was a new language of the art world, and the self was to be sold at “face” value to a “public.”

**Figure 31:** “Philistines” by Basquiat (1982). Source: WikiArt (n.d.).



External definitions of being encapsulate the ability to speak a certain language, a dialect of economics, commodification of the self, and an existence *for* or *in* the worldly

confines of external dimensions for “Others.” Interestingly, Basquiat “deliberately refused to impose an obvious formal order on this visual anarchy. Instead, his paintings iterate and reiterate the personal, historical, and cultural chaos he felt as a black man living the dysfunctional American dream” (Hoban, 1998, p. 80). While the late Picasso enables connections to figurative imagery visible in Basquiat’s work—a characteristic that enables the definitional parameters of ‘Primitive’ artist—such language, in combination with the application of “black”, mobilizes connotative meaning in ‘Primitive’. Moreover, Basquiat’s recognition as an artist results in conflicting definitions of expression, which negotiate the pedagogical elements of post-colonial aesthetics to the extent that Basquiat’s is interpreted as primitive or ‘black’ in art. Applying Fanon in Coulthard, Basquiat becomes “...*the field of power through which colonial relations are produced and maintained.*” (2014, p. 17). Colonial power is instituted beyond measures of violence in a state of hegemony, requiring “...the production of specific modes of colonial thought, desire, and behavior that implicitly or explicitly commit the colonized to the types of practices and subject positions that are required for their continued domination” (Fanon in Coulthard, 2014, p. 16). From this perspective, the re-production or reclamation of colonial thought, symbol, imagery, and text is coupled with a desire to *be king and belong* in an art-world; the latter positions an artist for “continued domination” by way of relational understandings (Figure 31, p. 53).

Recognition as an artist confers and incentivizes a sense or degree of self-affirmation based on collective definitions of interests, resulting in participatory relations. For Fanon (1967, p. 10-11)—and similar Basquiat—“effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities” wherein



‘inferiority’ is primarily a process of economic and class relations. In contrast, Coulthard, discussing Marx, primitive accumulation, and the nature of capitalism states “... that capital is not a “thing,” but rather “social relation” dependent on the perpetual separation of workers from the means of production” (2014, p. 11). Dependence and participation in a market was fueled by a desire to be recognized, fixated on social and cultural relations. However, the *perpetual separation*—the creation of difference between self and Other, characterized by “race” and primitivity—was the birth of Basquiat the artist and the death

**Figure 32: “50 Cent Piece” by Basquiat (circa 1982-1983).** “U.S. OCCUPATION OF HAITI ENDS IN 1936”, “INDUSTRY”, and “BAUXITE” stand out while “FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE” and “BANK OF JAMAICA” are positioned immediately above “ROYAL SUGAR CORP”, “SUGAR”, “RUM”, and “BANANAS”. Marcus Garvey is protected with a © while the words “BACK TO AFRICA” are repeated until untranslatable. Operation Bootstrap is mentioned nearest the bottom and Dr. Francois Duvalier, former ruler of Haiti, is mentioned nearer the top left. The Ark is depicted. Source: Widewalls (n.d).



of critically observant expressions . This is the ‘in-between’ space and the process becoming and artist, making knowledge of oneself while redefining experience through the ‘object’ of the Other.

Understandably, post-colonial aesthetics is a lens for viewing situated experiences, specifically broader social and cultural struggles. Moreover, post-colonial artists such as Basquiat operates from an inescapable, particular history. Speaking from “particular histories”, the ‘object’—art—permits critique and experiential learning of self, but remains rooted in knowledge already constructed. Basquiat’s expression exemplifies a complex articulation of a situated and political self in the making, a special projection of being and those at the ‘margins’. However, according to Kuspit (1991) the concept of ‘marginal art’ is indefinable, establishing meaning and historical perspective, the social construction of primitivism that the mainstream desires. A structural, hierarchical relationship exists between the “marginal” artist and the art world. Artists who embody “blackness”, according to Pinn (2013), are limited to “a history of silent meaning”. From this perspective, paintings are recursive purviews into a myriad of social and cultural sensibilities, all of which compete to become forces of “common sense” in popular knowledge (Figure 32, p. 55). A “history of silent meaning” is forever in debt to *common sense*.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Nearing three decades since Basquiat's passing, value is still inscribed by auctioneers often absent relation to meaning or feeling beyond definition. The self, in the confines of Neo-Expressionism and Basquiat, is still commodified as 'art', something to be conquered in collection, investment, or genre. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017 an untitled painting by Jean-Michel brought \$110.5 million into a Sotheby's auction—making up more than one third of the total auctions for the evening between five artists. From this perspective Jean-Michel Basquiat belongs to a larger discipline of 'post-colonial' expressionists from the margins, robbed of self by industry when recognized as artists.

Applying a framework of recognition to Jean-Michel Basquiat and the process of becoming an artist demonstrates how *relations-to* operate pedagogically through self-expression, subsequently rearticulating self and 'Other'. Relational degrees function in-synchronization while varying reverberations of power asphyxiate self-expression as markers of identity formation in Neo-Expressionism for Basquiat. Within the process, art and expression function as a *pedagogy of relationality*. Since relational aesthetics remain contingent upon articulating a deeper existence among "publics"—experiences of the social, cultural, and historical are redefined through material and production—the latter creates limitations of a learning self in Neo-Expressionism and re-inscribes real relations and conditions. From something already established we find something new in self-expression as 'art'. However, art as an institution incorporates a 'broader post-colonial discourse' confusing self-expression as mythical racialized abstractions relative to "human development;" a romanticized definition of 'primitive' artistic characteristics

define the “first black artist.” Freedom of identity is not achieved through recognition as an artist, and “marginal” expression is conquered at the avant-garde—compromised in relations-to and redefined through material production. For if Neo-Expressionism is the contemporary, the recognition of difference adversely characterizes a predominantly “white” art world so evolution-ized in the power to define Others in painting. The self is expressed, created, maintained, sold, and negotiated—stripped of meaning when redefined through art



**Figure 33: Basquiat at Great Jones Street Studio (1987). Barefoot and in a suit, the repetition of text on the left. Notice the figure on the right, in a Shakespearian style of Hamlet holding the skull of Yorick—reminding death, humanity, and finality—and giving of oneself. Source: Art News (2015).**

and recognized as an artist. Expression, from a particularly colonizing gaze, is circumscribed in historical definition and absent feeling, interpreted retroactively by an art world. Evident in content and form, redefined and negotiated by artistic discourse, the communicative nature of art manifests an unfolding stages of styles and learning periods for Basquiat.

From a social justice perspective, Basquiat's art is the practice of a relational and critical self—though Basquiat as an artist never truly transcended the structures SAMO critiqued. The process of becoming recognized as an artist for Basquiat was equally deconstructive, participating in an economic machination foregrounded in the confines of defining an Other for capital. Deconstructing and offering oneself, the artist is not simply

an “artist,” but confined to something Other-than and mobilized through capital (Figure 33). Within the evolving demands required to be recognized as an artist, the power to normalize culture as exotic or different in relation-to definers operates under the guise of art as economy; real relations and conditions which foreground any experience of the expressional self redefine identity through recognition, material, production, and by asserting market values on an expressional self (lived experience and identity) in painting. The commercialization of the self in art relies heavily on symbols and concepts already constructed—a knowledge making in the moment. Politically charged features carry threads into modern economy and appear in the application and definitional parameters of art and artists in Neo-Expressionism. However, where in the process is a complexity of power subsequently normalized into a sort of collective unconscious as a preface for real relations and conditions?

Building upon relations and conditions, the art world extrapolates labor at the intersections of self and phenotype, and re-articulates meaning through settler-colonial relationships of power. Pinn notes, “It was, after all, globalization marked by colonial endeavors and American empire that gave occasion for more contact with African art and its underlying stylistic qualities” (2013, p. 114). Beyond stylistic qualities, according to Wolfe (2006, p. 401), re-naming and assimilation are “of a range of strategies of elimination become favoured [sp] in particular historical circumstances.” Moreover, Fanon states (1967, p. 231), “it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom.” Fanon continues, “And even today they subsist, to organize this dehumanization rationally...” and acknowledges that I “do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations” (1967, p. 231).

Applying Wolfe's sentiments to Basquiat and Fanon, in what ways does re-naming, retroactive reparations, and elimination of the self takes place during the reinterpretation of an artist as a "black artist"? In what situations is self-expression in art based upon phenotypic characteristics of 'primitivity' or 'marginal', 'pigeonholed' as an exotic landscape to be exploited by interpretation? Collusion in the art world faces a similar problematic characteristic of public pedagogy theory: artistic expression and definition is compromised by contraction of phenomena a priori wherein "difference is brought into conformity with a prior image." While situational or textual analysis offer strong departure points, post-colonial theory and aesthetics operates in a similar function, bringing pedagogy into alignment with concepts and symbolism already defined and articulated through relations. Acknowledging a theoretical relationship between situational self-expression and historical contraction to difference through a framework of recognition, how does critical theory and practice move beyond ideological entrapment to genuinely liberate the self, and avoid like compromise to the avant-garde?

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