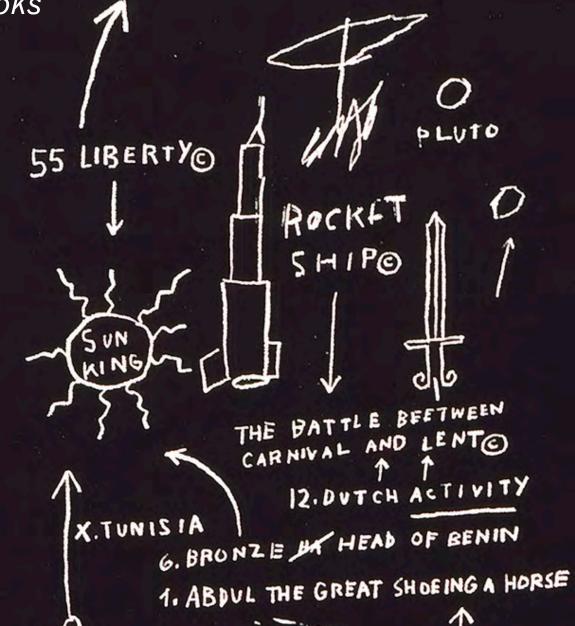
# Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks

April 3-August 23, 2015





# Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks

# **ABOUT THE ARTIST**

Born and raised in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Park Slope, East Flatbush, and Boerum Hill, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) was the son of a Haitian-born father and a Brooklyn-born mother of Puerto Rican descent. At an early age, he showed a talent for drawing, which his mother encouraged with visits to local museums. When he was six, she enrolled him as a Junior Member at the Brooklyn Museum.

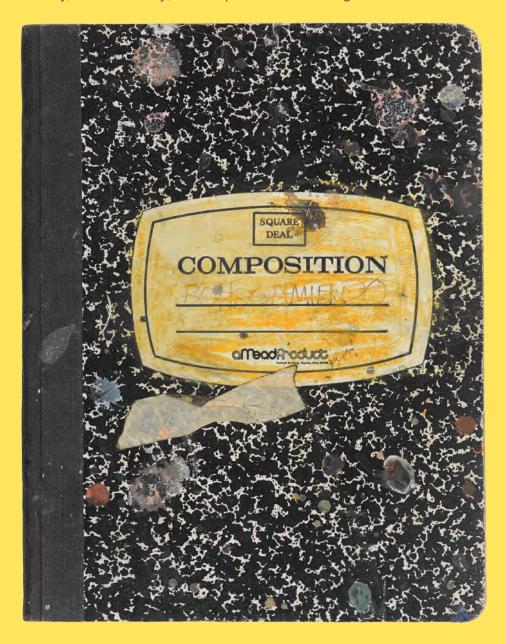
Basquiat first gained public attention as a graffiti poet and musician while still a teenager. By age twenty, he started selling paintings in galleries throughout lower Manhattan. Collectors began buying his art, and his gallery shows quickly sold out. His work was admired for its originality, emotional depth, use of unique symbols and imagery, and formal strengths in color, composition, and drawing. Jean-Michel Basquiat's career spanned the late 1970s through the 1980s until his death in 1988 at age twenty-seven.

"Every line means something."

—Jean-Michel Basquiat<sup>1</sup>

#### ABOUT THIS TEACHING RESOURCE

This packet features artwork from the special exhibition *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks*. It is intended as a tool to help you look at art with your students. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussions by reviewing the background information provided. Then use the Questions for Viewing and full-page reproductions to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together.



#### **ABOUT THE NOTEBOOKS**

Basquiat filled numerous notebooks with poetry fragments, wordplay, sketches, and personal observations on subjects ranging from street life and popular culture to themes of race, class, and world history. He used ordinary composition notebooks, with marbled black-and-white paperboard covers and blue-lined paper bound through the fold. He used these notebooks to draw and write in his own signature style. He generally left some of the pages blank and rarely used the left-hand side. The pages he did use include 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.

"If you read his canvases out loud to yourself, the repetition, the rhythm, you can hear Jean-Michel thinking. You can see that this is a poetic, rhythmic type of blending of word with image."

—Fred Brathwaite (Fab 5 Freddy)<sup>2</sup>

### **EARLY WORKS**

As a teenager in the late 1970s, Basquiat joined the emerging New York art scene, where he met artists and celebrities. He was known for tagging the name SAMO® along with spray-painted phrases on downtown Manhattan buildings, selling hand-painted T-shirts and collages on the street, and making drawings. He became a frequent guest on *TV Party*, a cable television show about the downtown scene, and starred in an independent film based on his life titled *New York Beat* (released in 2000 as *Downtown 81*).

His big break came in 1980, when his work at the *Times Square Show*, showcasing young New York artists, was noticed by critics. Until then, Basquiat had little money to buy supplies, so he painted on whatever he could find—window frames, cabinet doors, and even football helmets—and used found materials to create collages that he photocopied, such as *Anti-Baseball Card Product*, circa 1979 (see above right [detail] and page 12). After Basquiat began to earn some money, he had access to quality art materials, but throughout his career he often chose to paint on canvases he made himself or to display Xeroxed prints of his work on wood and other natural materials, as in his *Untitled*, 1985 (see below right [detail] and page 13).

# **QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING**

Look carefully at these two works of art. What materials can you find? How have the materials been transformed? What evidence can you find of the artist's process?

What everyday item or natural material would you choose to use in a work of art?



# **FINDING FAME**

"Since I was seventeen, I thought I might be a star," Basquiat once told a reporter.<sup>3</sup> In 1982, at twenty-one, he was indeed a successful, well-known artist making a living from the sale of his artwork. That year he had six solo shows and became the youngest artist ever to be included in *Documenta*, a major international contemporary art exhibition held every five years in Germany. It was also Basquiat's most prolific year as an artist; at least two hundred of his paintings bear that date.

Despite gaining fame and success as a professional artist, Basquiat may have felt some discomfort about the way the art world treated him. In a notebook from 1980–81 (see right and page 14), he writes:

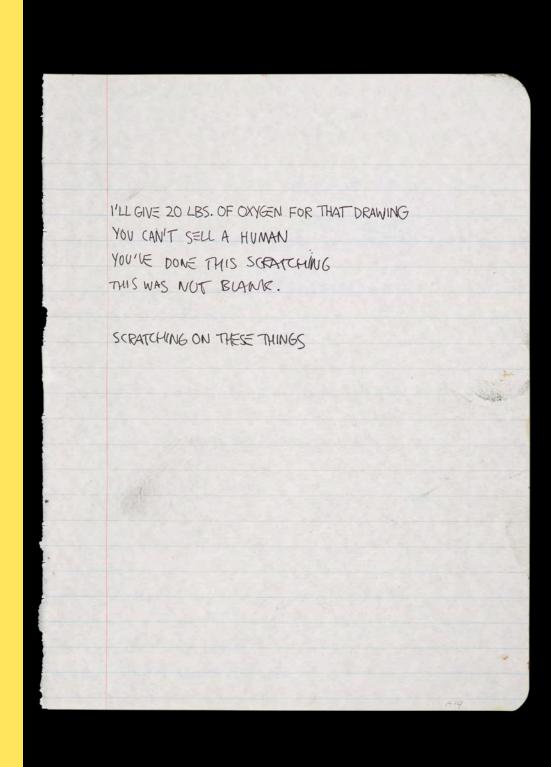
I'LL GIVE 20 LBS. OF OXYGEN FOR THAT DRAWING YOU CAN'T SELL A HUMAN YOU'VE DONE THIS SCRATCHING THIS WAS NOT BLANK.

SCRATCHING ON THESE THINGS

# **QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING**

Read the above text from the 1980–81 notebook. What do you think this text is about? What clues can you find to support your ideas?

Basquiat became famous for his work as an artist. What special talent would you like to be known for? What drawbacks could you experience?



# **WORKING WITH WORDS**

When he was a teen, Basquiat collaborated with his friend and fellow graffiti poet Al Diaz. They became famously known as SAMO®—a tag that appeared all over lower Manhattan in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The tag, standing for "same old, same old" or "same old shit," was spray-painted in a plain script along with mysterious phrases such as PLUSH SAFE HE THINK/SAMO®.

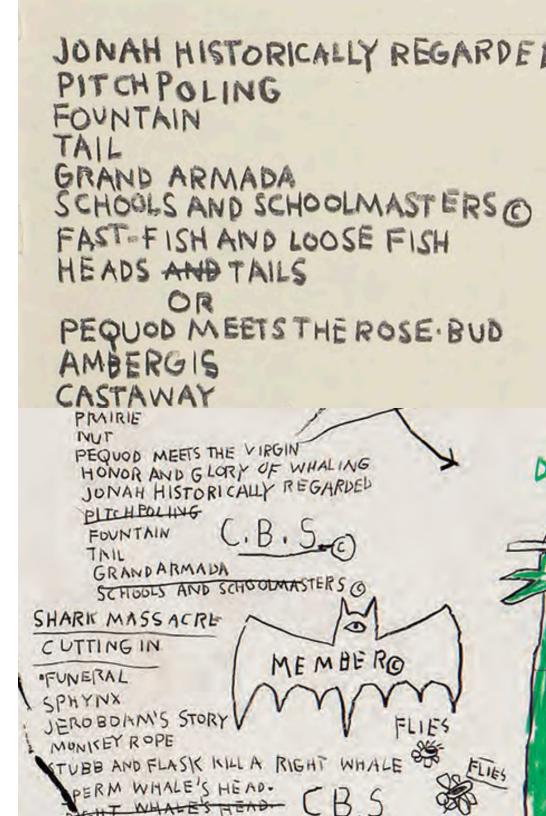
Language also became important for Basquiat in his later work. In some cases, he used words to fill the entire canvas of a painting, so that they served as the only content. In other cases, he used words to elaborate and complicate pictorial ideas, sometimes consciously misspelling them or crossing them out for emphasis.

In the 1987 text drawing *Melville* (see above right [detail] and page 15), Basquiat lists chapter headings from Herman Melville's 1851 novel, *Moby-Dick*. Selected chapter headings from the same book also appear in his 1986 drawing *Untitled* (see below right [detail] and page 16), along with a variety of music, pop culture, and religious references.

# **QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING**

Basquiat liked to play with words. He purposely crossed out and repeated words and phrases, and used incorrect spellings. Where do you see evidence of these techniques? Why do you think Basquiat used them?

Basquiat was inspired by a variety of sources, including well-known books such as the novel *Moby-Dick*. What books have inspired you?



### **CUT AND COPY**

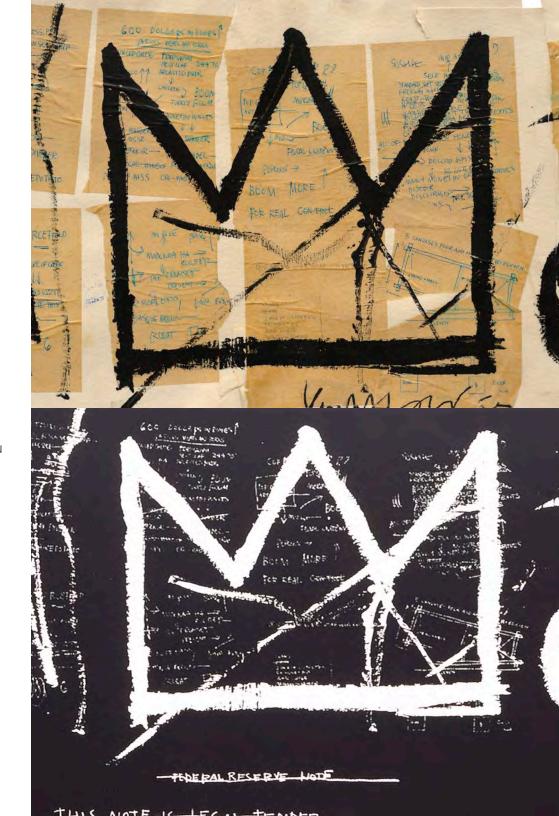
Basquiat's artistic process included pasting his own drawings or photocopies of them—onto canvas, and then painting on top of the collaged surface to create multilayered artworks rich with text and imagery.

*Untitled (Crown)*, 1982, includes Basquiat's three-point crown atop sheets of paper collaged onto paper (see above right [detail] and page 17). A silkscreened image of this crown appears at the top of the canvas in his work *Tuxedo*, 1982 (see below right [detail] and page 18).

# **QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING**

First, take a close look at *Untitled (Crown)*. Try to describe the process for making this work. What do you think Basquiat did first? What step would be last? What do you see that makes you say that? Now, consider what you discovered in relation to *Tuxedo*. Do you think Basquiat used a similar or different process? What clues can you find to support your idea?

Both works feature a three-point crown, which Basquiat used as his signature and a sign of respect for his heroes. What symbol would you use to represent yourself?



# **MUSIC**

Music was extremely important to Basquiat. As a teenager, he cofounded a band called Gray that mixed ska and punk with "noise muzik." He performed in Debbie Harry's *Rapture* video and produced the record "Beat Bop," featuring the rapper K-Rob and a fellow graffiti artist, Rammellzee. Basquiat briefly dated Madonna and was also a close friend of Fab 5 Freddy (Fred Brathwaite), the hip-hop impresario and first MTV veejay.

Music also became a subject in his art. He often featured jazz musicians and singers, including Max Roach, Billie Holiday, Fats Waller, and Charlie Parker. On a page from a notebook from about 1983, Basquiat lists the titles of four albums, including two by the trumpeter and composer Miles Davis: *Sketches of Spain* and *Kind of Blue* (see above right [detail] and page 19). A list in a notebook page from four years later includes the musicians Stevie Wonder, Prince, and Elton John (see below right [detail] and page 20).

# **QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING**

Compare the lists on these two notebook pages. Now read "Who's Who in Basquiat's *Untitled Notebook Page*" included in this packet. What do the names have in common? What differences can you find? Does anything stand out to you? What are some of the possible reasons why Basquiat created lists like this?

Who would you include on a similar list? What might those figures tell us about your interests?

- STASH X-MAS ALBUM - VINCE GUARDILDI - TRIO - IKMD OF BLUE - SKETCHS OF SPAINI -

AMSTROT
JOHN GLENN
MILES DAVIS
KELLE
PRINCE
DAVID LWNCH
WILLIAM BURROWS
ELISABETH TAYLOR
ROBERT DENIRO
BERNARD GOETZ
PRINGO STAR
BOD ELTON JOHN
STEVE WONDER

#### PICTURING BLACK HEROES

Basquiat once said, "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." These individuals included jazz icons Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, and celebrated athletes such as Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Muhammad Ali, and Hank Aaron.

Basquiat used crowns, calling to mind the royal titles adopted by famous African American musicians such as Duke Ellington or Count Basie, as a symbol of his reverence. In the unusual portraits he created of his heroes, Basquiat made almost no effort to paint them with recognizable facial features but sometimes featured their names as a part of the painting or title.

Famous Negro Athletes, 1981, features the heads of four black men (see above right [detail] and page 21). Below the head of the third figure is a baseball. The title is written in capital letters across the bottom of the drawing. A page from a notebook from 1980–81 includes an image of the same subject, with several differences: there are three heads instead of four, famous negro atheletes is written above the figures' heads and composite drawings below them, and a crown is placed above the figure at the right (see below right [detail] and page 22).

# **QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING**

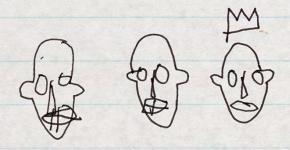
Compare these two artworks. What similarities do you notice? What differences can you find? Why do you think the artist made those changes?

Basquiat honored his heritage as an artist of African descent by featuring black history and culture in his art. What ways do you show others your heritage?

- 1. Quoted in Cathleen McGuigan, "New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American Artist," *New York Times Magazine*, February 10, 1985.
- 2. Quoted in Ingrid Sischy, "Jean-Michel Basquiat as Told by Fred Braithwaite, a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy," *Interview* (October 1992).
- 3. Quoted in McGuigan, "New Art, New Money."
- 4. Ibid.



# FAMOUS NEGRO ATHELETES



COMPOSITE DRAWINGS

### RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

www.basquiat.com

This official website of the Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat offers a timeline, photos, and essays that explore the life and work of the artist.

Angelou, Maya. *Life Doesn't Frighten Me.* Poems by Maya Angelou, paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat. Edited by Sara Jane Boyers. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1993.

A children's book of poetry by Maya Angelou paired with a selection of Basquiat's paintings.

Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child (2010). Directed by Tamra Davis. Trailer at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXjR-y0WH-I. This documentary features archival clips and interviews with Basquiat, close friends, and cultural critics to provide a look at his life and career. The full-length film is available for rent at YouTube.

Mayer, Marc, ed. *Basquiat*. Co-curated and with essays by Fred Hoffman, Kellie Jones, Marc Mayer, and Franklin Sirmans. New York and London: Brooklyn Museum in association with Merrell Publishers, 2005.

This companion catalogue to the Brooklyn Museum exhibition *Basquiat* features in-depth essays about Basquiat's artistic practice and the cultural impact of his life and works.

Cover (detail), pages 6, bottom (detail), and page 18: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Tuxedo*, 1982. Silkscreen on canvas. 109 x 69 x 3 in. (276.9 x 175.3 x 7.6 cm). Private collection. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich

**Page 1**: Tamra Davis (American, b. 1962). Still from *A Conversation with Basquiat* (detail), 2006. 23 min., 22 sec. © Tamra Davis. Courtesy of the artist. By permission of the Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Photo: Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum

**Page 2**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Untitled Notebook Page*, 1980–81. Mixed media on board,  $9^5/8 \times 7^5/8 \times 1/4$  in. (24.4 x 19.4 x 0.6 cm). Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum

**Pages 3, top (detail), and 12**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Anti-Baseball Card Product*, circa 1979. Xerographic print on board,  $5 \frac{1}{2} \times 4 \frac{1}{2}$  in. (14 x 11.4 cm). Collection of Nicholas Taylor. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum

**Pages 3, bottom (detail), and 13**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Untitled*, 1985. Xerox collage on wood box, 11½ x 8½ in. (28.3 x 21.6 x 21.6 cm). Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York

**Pages 4 and 14**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Untitled Notebook Page*, 1980–81. Ink on ruled notebook paper, 9 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 7 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (24.4 x 19.4 cm). Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum

**Pages 5, top (detail), and 15**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Melville*, 1987. Oilstick on paper, nine drawings, 38 x 24 in. (96.5 x 61 cm) overall. Courtesy of the Helios Trust, UK. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum

**Pages 5, bottom (detail), and 16**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Untitled*, 1986. Acrylic, collage, and oilstick on paper on canvas, 94 ½ x 136 ½ in. (239 x 346.5 cm). Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Gavin Ashworth, Brooklyn Museum

**Pages 6, top (detail), and 17**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Untitled (Crown)*, 1982. Acrylic, ink, and paper collage on paper, 20 x 29 in. (50.8 x 73.7 cm). Private collection, courtesy of Lio Malca. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Mark-Woods.com

**Pages 7, top (detail), and 19**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Untitled Notebook Page*, circa 1983. Graphite on ruled notebook paper, 9 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 7 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (24.4 x 19.4 cm). Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum

**Pages 7, bottom (detail), and 20**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Untitled Notebook Page*, circa 1987. Wax crayon on ruled notebook paper, 9  $^5/_8$  x 7  $^5/_8$  in. (24.4 x 19.4 cm). Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum

**Pages 8, top (detail), and 21**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Famous Negro Athletes*, 1981. Oilstick on paper, 27 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 35 in. (70.8 x 88.9 cm). Collection of Glenn O'Brien. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging

**Pages 8, bottom (detail), and 22**: Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Untitled Notebook Page*, 1980–81. Ink on ruled notebook paper, 9<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 7 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (24.4 x 19.4 cm). Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum

Text written by Nia I'man Smith, Museum Educator, and Alexa Fairchild, School Programs Manager, with assistance from Radiah Harper, Vice Director for Education and Program Development, and Tricia Laughlin Bloom, former Associate Curator of Exhibitions.

Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks is organized by the Brooklyn Museum and is curated by Dieter Buchhart, guest curator, with Tricia Laughlin Bloom, former Associate Curator of Exhibitions, Brooklyn Museum.

Support for this exhibition is provided by the Steven & Alexandra Cohen Foundation and Christie's.



# WHO'S WHO IN BASQUIAT'S UNTITLED NOTEBOOK PAGE, CIRCA 1987

**Madonna** (American, born 1958): Pop singer and songwriter who gained acclaim in the 1980s for albums such as *Madonna* and *Like a Prayer*. She briefly dated Basquiat.

Bruce Wallace: Unknown.

**Walter Cronkite** (American, 1916–2009): Broadcast journalist best known for serving as anchorman for the CBS Evening News from 1962 to 1981.

(Jim) Jarmusch (American, born 1953): Film director and screenwriter who has consistently been a major advocate for independent cinema since the 1980s.

(Jean-Luc) Godard (French, born 1930): Film director, screenwriter, and film critic associated with the 1960s French New Wave film movement.

**Pee Wee (Pee-wee Herman)**: A popular fictional film and television character created and played by actor Paul Reubens (American, born 1952).

(Jack) Nicholson (American, born 1937): Academy Award—winning actor known for his roles in films such as *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *The Shining* (1980).

**J. (John) Huston** (American, 1906–1987): Film director and screenwriter noted for directing *Moby Dick* (1956) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).

(Muhammad) Ali (American, born 1942): Former professional heavyweight boxer celebrated for his boxing abilities, witty wordplay, and refusal to be inducted into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War because of his religious and political beliefs.

**John Glenn** (American, born 1921): Former NASA astronaut, the first American to orbit the Earth, who later became a U.S. senator representing the state of Ohio.

**Miles Davis** (American, 1926–1991): Jazz musician, trumpeter, and composer cited as one of jazz's most influential artists for albums such as *Kind of Blue* (1959), *On the Corner* (1972), and *Star People* (1983).

Kelle (Inman): Basquiat's girlfriend just prior to his death.

**Prince** (American, born 1958): Multigenre singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist who gained acclaim in the 1980s for albums such as 1999 (1982), *Purple Rain* (1984), and *Sign 'o' the Times* (1987).

**David Lynch** (American, born 1946): Film and television director known for his surrealist and noir-inspired films such as *Blue Velvet* (1986).

**William Burrows (William S. Burroughs)** (American, 1914–1997): Novelist and essayist whose work, including *Junky* (1953) and *Queer* (1985), drew upon semi-autobiographical themes. Basquiat reportedly carried a copy of *Junky* around with him.

**Elisabeth (Elizabeth) Taylor** (British and American, 1932–2011): Academy Award—winning actress known for her roles in films such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* (1965).

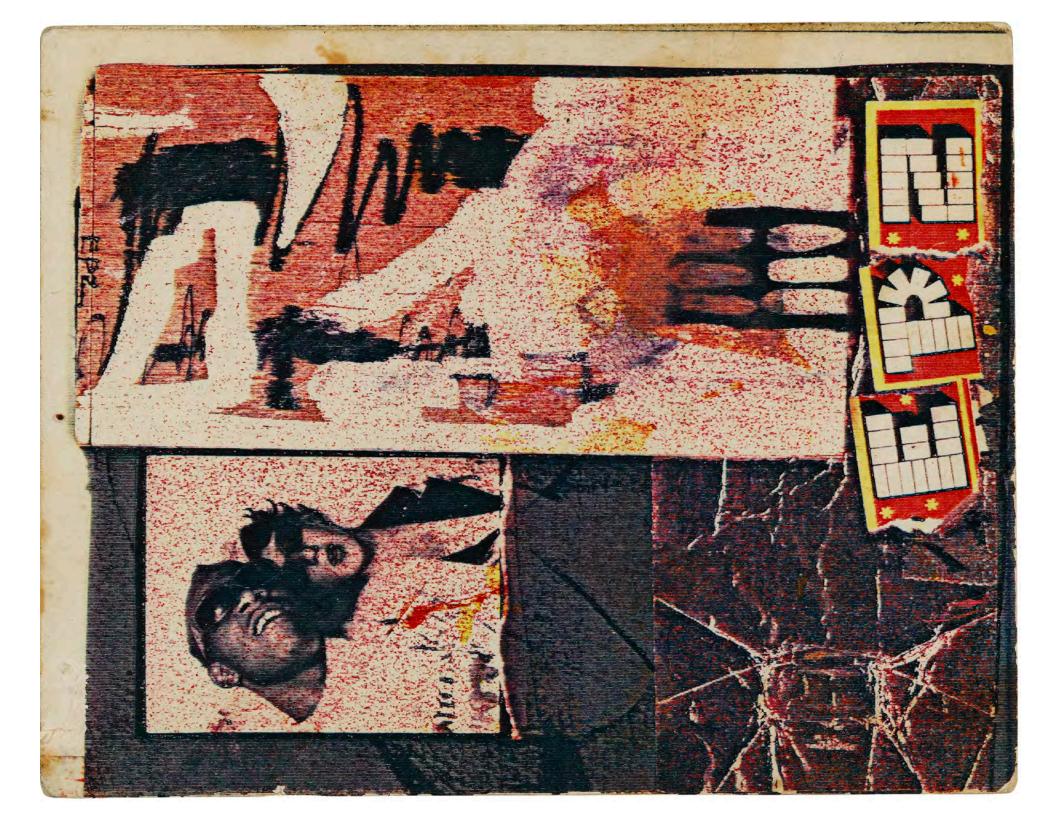
**Robert De Niro** (American, born 1943): Academy Award—winning actor renowned for his roles in films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980).

**Bernard (Bernhard) Goetz** (American, born 1947): Dubbed the "Subway Vigilante" by the New York City press, Goetz shot and seriously wounded four young black men who allegedly tried to rob him on a subway train in Manhattan in 1984. He was eventually charged with attempted murder and firearms offenses, but a jury found him not guilty of all charges except one count of carrying an unlicensed firearm.

**Ringo Star (Starr)** (British, born 1940): Drummer for the phenomenally popular 1960s rock band the Beatles.

**Elton John** (British, 1947): Pop-rock singer, songwriter, and pianist known for albums such as *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (1973).

**Steve (Stevie) Wonder** (American, born 1950): R&B singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist, especially acclaimed for his album releases throughout the 1970s, including *Music of My Mind*, *Talking Book*, and *Songs in the Key of Life*.





I'LL GIVE 20 LBS. OF OXYGEN FOR THAT DRAWING YOU'VE DONE THIS SCRATCHING THIS WAS NOT BLANK. YOU CAN'T SELL A HUMAN

SCRATCHING ON THESE THINGS

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CETOLOGY
SPECKSYNDER
CABN TABLE
MAST-HEAD
QUARTER DECIR
SUNSET
DUSI
FIRST NIGHT WATCH
MIDNIGHT FOR ECASTLE
MORY DICK
THE WHITENESS OF THE WHALE
HARK!
CHART
AFFIDAY
SURMISES
MAT MAKER
FIRST LOWERING
HYENA
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GRAND ARMADA
SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMAST ERS ©
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HEADS AND TAILS
OR
PEQUOD MEETS THE ROSE BUD
AMBERGIS
CASTAWAY
SQUEEZE OF THE HAND
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CARPENTER
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PACIFIC
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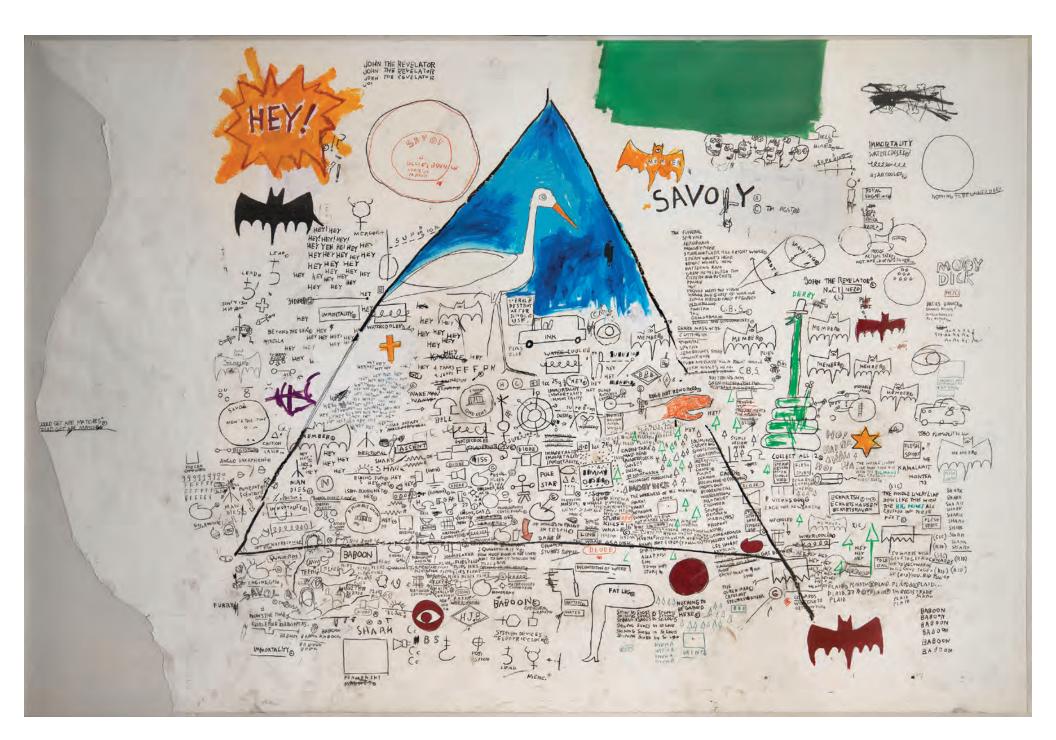
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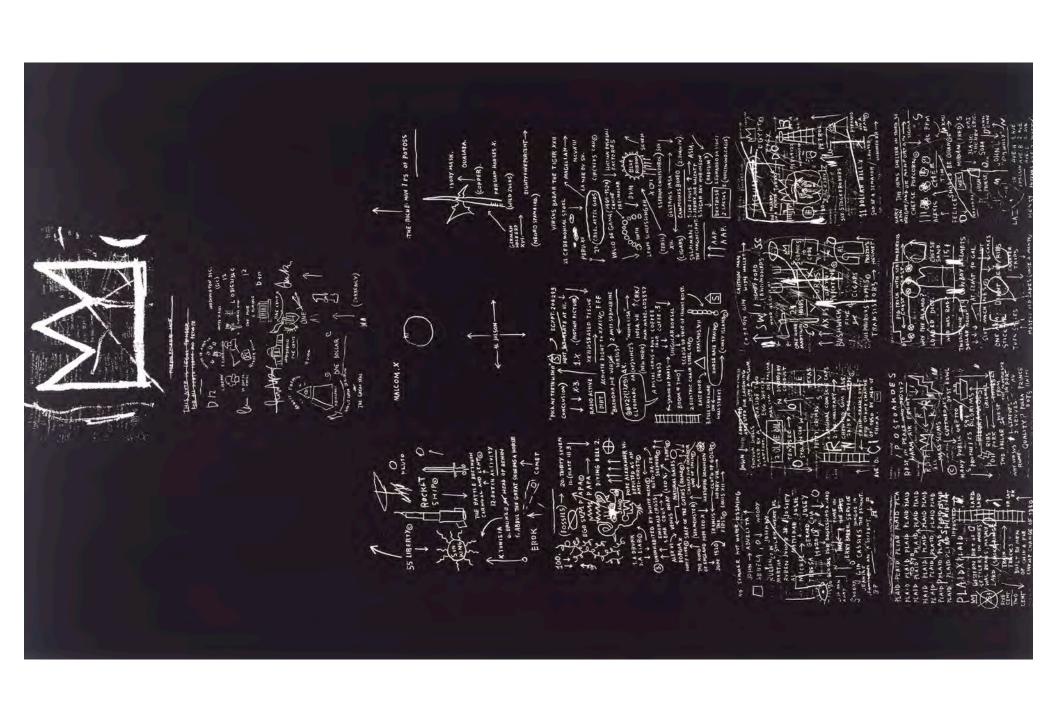
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