

HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS - 1940 -

~~HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS~~ ©

~~MO O HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS~~

PDP  
CORN

SUGAR  
CANE

TOBACCO

TAX  
FREE.

SUGAR  
CANE.  
INC ©

HEROISM

TAR FOOTPRINTS ©

TOXIC.

ZEE

22 60

200  
YEN.

200 YEN.



SELF  
PORTRAIT  
AS A  
HEEL

\* 3



RMI 2

PAW

PAW,

HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS FROM THE  
NINETEEN FORTIES

HOLLYWOOD  
AFRICANS.

GANGSTERISM.

A-One

Jean-Michel Basquiat

ERO

Fab 5 Freddy

Futura

Keith Haring

Koolhaas

LA2

Lady Pink

Lee Quiñones

Rammellzee

Toxic

WRITING THE FUTURE

# Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Generation

EDITED BY

Liz Munsell and Greg Tate

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

J. Faith Almiron, Dakota DeVos,  
Hua Hsu, and Carlo McCormick

MFA Publications  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



MFA Publications  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 465 Huntington Avenue  
 Boston, Massachusetts 02115  
[www.mfa.org/publications](http://www.mfa.org/publications)

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *Writing the Future: Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Generation*, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: April 5–August 2, 2020  
 Pérez Art Museum Miami: September 18, 2020–February 14, 2021

Exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, sponsored by



Generous support for this publication provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Publications Fund

© 2020 by Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 Artworks by Jean-Michel Basquiat © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/Licensed by Artestar, New York. The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat does not warrant or represent that all of the works depicted in this catalogue were created by Jean-Michel Basquiat.

ISBN 978-0-87846-871-3  
 Library of Congress Control Number: 2019955618

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is a nonprofit institution devoted to the promotion and appreciation of the creative arts. The Museum endeavors to respect the copyrights of all authors and creators in a manner consistent with its nonprofit educational mission. If you feel any material has been included in this publication improperly, please contact the Department of Rights and Licensing at 617 267 9300, or by mail at the above address.

The Museum is proud to be a leader within the American museum community in sharing the objects in its collection via its website. Currently, information about approximately 400,000 objects is available to the public worldwide. To learn more about the MFA's collections, including provenance, publication, and exhibition history, kindly visit [www.mfa.org/collections](http://www.mfa.org/collections).

For a complete listing of MFA publications, please contact the publisher at the above address, or call 617 369 4233.

Front cover: Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Hollywood Africans*, 1983 (detail, no. 31)

Back cover: Multiple artists, *Untitled (Fun Fridge)*, 1982 (no. 6)

Illustrations in this book were photographed by the Imaging Studios, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, except where otherwise noted.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the copyright holders for permission to reproduce the works listed on pages 189–195.

Edited by Jennifer Snodgrass  
 Proofread by Dianne Woo  
 Designed by Rita Jules, Miko McGinty, Inc.  
 Production by Terry McAweeney  
 Image research and permissions by Jessica Altholz Eber

Typeset in Bau and Cosmica by Tina Henderson  
 Printed on Arctic Volume 150 gsm  
 Printed and bound at Graphicom, Verona, Italy

Distributed in the United States of America and Canada by  
 ARTBOOK | D.A.P.  
 75 Broad Street, Suite 630  
 New York, New York 10004  
[www.artbook.com](http://www.artbook.com)

Distributed outside the United States of America and Canada by  
 Thames & Hudson, Ltd.  
 181A High Holborn  
 London WC1V 7QX  
[www.thamesandhudson.com](http://www.thamesandhudson.com)

FIRST EDITION  
 Printed and bound in Italy  
 This book was printed on acid-free paper.

## Contents

Director's Foreword	7
<b>In the Beginning Was the Word: An Origin Story</b> Carlo McCormick	11
<b>Heroism, Gangsterism: The Languages of Post-Graffiti Art</b> Liz Munsell	33
<b>Ciphers</b>	62
<b>Beat Bop: Record of a Moment</b> Hua Hsu	71
<b>Fonts</b>	114
<b>We Are the Upsetters: The Social Consciousness of Basquiat and Rammellzee</b> J. Faith Almiron	121
<b>Reference Books</b>	138
<b>Hip-Hop's Afrofuturistic Hive Mind</b> Greg Tate	151
Timeline of Exhibitions	177
Artist Biographies	181
Notes	186
List of Illustrations	189
Acknowledgments	196
Contributors	199

## In the Beginning Was the Word: An Origin Story

Carlo McCormick

If this book and the exhibition it accompanies are about a particular set of creative and social exchanges that brought New York City train and street writers into the cultural mix of nightlife as well as the art world proper to create what we now call “post-graffiti art,” then graffiti itself is the origin story. It’s a very old story at that: graffiti dates back to the birth of written language, and even into prehistory when considered as part of a longer lineage of mark-making that seems hardwired into the human condition, a gesture recorded in cave paintings and petroglyphs. This collision of graffiti and the larger arts community was no more than a historical blip, a short-lived phenomenon when what was essentially a folk art transformed into a fine art and forever changed the visual language of both.

Let’s start with the beat. NYC has a rhythm and tempo unlike any other city. You can see it in Piet Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie*; in the 1970s and 1980s you could feel it in a hurtling, jostling subway car or hear it on most any street corner (1). This was the rush of the moment, and it was everywhere in the arts—all movement and sound, forces multiplying one another. The still and quiet of minimalism and conceptualism that had once reigned was pushed aside and drowned out by a youth culture that could not hear that Cagean silence and could not be moved by something that did not make them move. And they did dance this revolution, in a broken-down town where funk still held the beat. It was as if Funkadelic’s *Free Your Mind . . . and Your Ass Will Follow* promised a new kind of liberation far from heady rhetoric and grounded in radical gestures. It’s a tribal choreography of the underground, the heart-beat of a subculture, made iconic in Keith Haring’s spinning b-boys, armed for combat in the work of Rammellzee and his fellow Ikonoklastic Panzerists A-One, Kool Koor, and Toxic, swirling in the dynamic fluid abstractions of Futura, embedded in the manic ornamentation of LA2’s glyphic patterning, borne in the rhapsodic reveries of Lady Pink and Lee Quiñones’s urban romanticisms, filled with a ruthless grace in

the shattered poetics of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s lyric memory cabinets, and given the grit in Fab 5 Freddy’s funk.

The artworks they created are the soundtracks to a city on the verge: Can you hear it, can you *feel* it? It’s all a crazy-quilt conversation, talking in wildstyle tongues from the train yards to the writer’s bench, from bewildered commuters and savvy fans to the posturing politicians with their broken-windows theories and vandal squads, from little nightclub art shows and the ad hoc outposts like Fashion Moda and the Fun Gallery to a global stage of major exhibitions, from the primal voice of mark-making to the sweet sounds of the studio, where a generation of outlaws joined that historical confab of painters in the culture of canvas. It’s got a beat hard-scrabbled out like the scratching of those early playground turntablists, but it’s all about the language, transmuted beyond easy recognition, private in the most public of ways, the insider voice of the outsider externalizing the interior. It’s pure jive, freeform and freestyle, the deceptions of code carrying the truth of the heart, the lyrics to all our collective pain, anger, alienation, and hope writ large like an aerosol atom bomb. This is word of mouth carried in a can and spread like Technicolor bedbugs through the humming circuits of a city’s subway system. It spoke to everyone, even those who refused to listen, a bold and beautiful vox populi conjured by a DIY posse of provocateurs representing a racial and economic diversity the art world hasn’t experienced before or since (2).

This is the story of the stories that were told, with tremendous urgency and at great peril, when no one seemed to listen or to care what these kids had to say. It’s about a time, long ago now for even those of us who lived through it, when fantastical urban myths were spun and legends were born. Yes, it’s about the fame of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fab 5 Freddy’s social fabrics, Futura’s atmospheric attacks, the cult hero Lee, and the equation known as Rammellzee. It’s also about the diverse evolution of graffiti into a radical ornamentation of Gothic Futurism as well as the kind



1 Martha Cooper. *Break*, by Futura, 1980. © Martha Cooper



2 Marc Baron. A-One, Toxic, and Kool Koor, September 1982

of visual poetics and narrative force unleashed when a relatively few graffiti writers understood they could say so much more than their names. But it is also about the conversation and connectivity that spun a web of intricate social interface and influence within a small but dense creative community over a remarkably short period of time. It's about how the word was spread and splayed, transmitted, transmuted, and transgressed along the way into a wild style of rapid and radical hybridity. If history does rhyme but not repeat, let's try to imagine how a generation set loose on the dance floor—street corner—playground could suddenly find a shared beat and mutual dialect with the gatekeepers of high art in the 1980s. Individuals may assert their singularity—their individual class, race, identity—but in the density of the city at this moment, they moved together.

Graffiti emerged as a visual urban argot at a time when the city was failing, when the mass abandonment of its residential tax base—what we might describe now as second- or third-generation white ethnics

moving to the newly minted American dream of the suburbs—put the economy in peril and made the primary infrastructure dangerously unsustainable. The graffitied subways became the apparent sign of the city's dis-ease. Aboveground, the carving up of neighborhoods with highways and massive building projects like the World Trade Center unraveled the fabric of communities; arson (often perpetrated by property owners who figured that collecting insurance was more profitable than being landlords) gave urban blight a menacing face; strikes by city workers made life unpredictable or noxious; drugs became pandemic, corruption seemed endemic, and crime reached unprecedented levels, most notably with record-setting murder rates. Even the most hardened and intrepid residents of New York, however, found the subterranean city somehow worse.

While there were many emblems of the city's distress, from the wastelands of the South Bronx and the Lower East Side to the transformation of Times Square into a open-market sprawl of pornography and

prostitution, a virulent kind of dread made the subways its universal symbol. The actions of the racist subway shooter Bernie Goetz became a parable of the pain, and the rise of a costumed tribe of underground vigilantes called the Guardian Angels was regarded as a necessary antibody for an uncontrolled infection. Graffiti, though as condemned and reviled as any other symptom of disorder, became in the minds of many a kind of fever dream, an abject language of resistance that swarmed the senses with a visual vocabulary that was totally alien to the buttoned-down sensibilities of the old city.

The teens who inherited this land of broken promise had nothing to do, and little to do anything with, so they invented their own version of fun and identity. The many strategies of expression and modes of representation that were newly minted in a short period of time, across a myriad of pre-existing mediums like fashion, visual art, music, and dance, caused the derelict canvas of the city to experience a renaissance of style. This style was far more than a look or a sound—it was above all a signifier of attitude (3).

A pervasive and profoundly unjust historical misunderstanding casts the two significant movements of the seventies, punk and hip-hop, as somehow antithetical and oppositional forces when they were not only concurrent but also compatible and even collaborative. Punk and hip-hop found commonality in their inherently outsider status and were for a time tethered together by mutual influences and overlapping audiences in the hybrid mix of the downtown scene. Examples that contradict the traditional narrative are the first-generation punk band Blondie's early rap hit "Rapture," with the likes of Fab 5 Freddy, Lee Quiñones, and Jean-Michel Basquiat in the video; the extensive collaborations between the Clash and Futura; or the declarations by Afrika Bambaataa about the revelatory experience he had when he first came downtown to play the Mudd Club for a largely white audience who not only appreciated what he was doing but on some fundamental level got it.

New York City was far from a racial hegemony in those years, and its culture was an amalgamation in which mutant strains were valued more than those that were aesthetically or ideologically pure. Distinctions of race and class were all but meaningless in the graffiti movement as it emerged on the trains, where the necessary anonymity of the writers' illegal craft obscured their identities and made their backgrounds



3 Martha Cooper. Futura, 1983. © Martha Cooper

incidental to the primary qualifications of passion, technical virtuosity, and prolific all-city reach (4). But nowhere was this composite culture of the meaningful *mélange* more evident than in the nightclubs, in particular when it came to the social dynamics of the dance floor. Here the mix was everything, not simply a matter of the DJ's skills but the result of a concerted effort by owners, patrons, doormen, and promoters who intuitively understood that the best experience was predicated on an even, fluid blending of crowds of wildly different backgrounds.

The styles that evolved [within graffiti], hence wildstyle and things like that, was another form of dancing, body language. . . . It was very, very three-dimensional. Those letters became sculptures of our lives.  
—Lee Quiñones

subway drawings of Keith Haring were constantly reforming, subject to interjections by other writers, postering, and overpainting.

In addition to the link between dance and the extended gesture involved in making large-scale work, the ephemerality of these artists' interventions in the urban landscape links their painting and writing closely to how an audience experiences performance. Perhaps for this reason, experimental crossover between genres—whether they were heard, felt, or seen—became part of the ethos of hip-hop artistry during this period. Were it not for the committed efforts to document graffiti and hip-hop culture by the photographers Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, there would be little visual record of this movement (1, 3, 4, 16, 22, 91).

Taking a cue from graffiti artists who used New York's public spaces as their canvases, in 1980 Keith Haring began to create drawings in chalk on the black paper that was used to cover old advertisements in subway cars. He invited the photographer and conceptual artist Tseng Kwong Chi to document his interventions, emphasizing that these works had a performative dimension. That same year, Haring approached the thirteen-year-old graffiti writer LA2 (Angel Ortiz), after noticing his energetic and calligraphic tags on the Lower East Side, and the two began working side by side, filling in gaps between each other's markings on a multitude of surfaces. The choreography of the duo's process is further emphasized in their takeovers of architecture, such as when they moved through space to cover the walls and sets of the Muna Tseng Dance Projects, or inscribed dynamic columns in the round for their 1982 solo exhibition at Tony Shafrazi (27, 118).

Living in the distressed cityscapes of the Lower East Side and the East Village, artists from all backgrounds struggled to synchronize the deteriorated state of their physical surroundings with the unprecedented influx of technology and mass media—television, film, comics, advertisements, and new forms of music—into their everyday lives. Many artists either deliberately dismissed or did not have access to a formal arts education or to resources that would rigorously structure their artistic choices. Even for those who were schooled, academic influences were matched by the forces of urban environments and mass culture.<sup>30</sup> An unfiltered fusion of styles and inspirations generated a visual language that pertained solely to their generation.

Basquiat was not as deeply immersed in hip-hop as many of his peers were. Nevertheless, he was responsible for bringing elements of the avant-garde into this burgeoning culture and expanding its boundaries before they could be fully defined. A DJ himself, he integrated language into his visual artworks in modes that borrowed from the freestyle word associations of MC-ing and the postmodern sampling and cut-up techniques of DJ-ing (28). Soon after he produced his 1983 experimental hip-hop single, *Beat Bop*, Basquiat quickly became an icon of the movement, receiving shout-outs on hip-hop tracks released as early as that year.<sup>31</sup> As Franklin Sirmans affirms in his seminal 2005 essay, "No artist has ever so profoundly embodied a cultural movement as Jean-Michel Basquiat personified hip-hop culture in its brilliant infancy."<sup>32</sup>

Key to Basquiat's success as both an icon of a movement and an art-market darling was his ability to layer references into his work (also a trademark technique of hip-hop lyricism), as well as his ability to present images that could be read in starkly different ways depending on the audience. The prominent presence of crowns throughout his work is linked to graffiti writers' practice of using a crown to designate the king of a train line. Rene Ricard quotes Basquiat as saying, "Everybody does crowns."<sup>33</sup> Basquiat was a master of code-switching: he could speak to one audience in its native language and then turn to an entirely distinct public and take up a different conversation—all without ever compromising his voice, because all of these tongues were his own.

Robert Farris Thompson has observed that within the artist's practice, the "mnemonic and phonetic motors of the computer age, the keyboard of instant retrieval, the letters, the signs are used, as it were, as another kind of brushstroke. This recalls hip-hop, the current New York musical revolution, at once funky and futuristic. . . . The trick is having the beat, the visual metronome sense, to keep these various tendencies going all at once."<sup>34</sup> Thompson goes on to locate the root of Basquiat's repeated use of the sequence of symbols resembling the letters "JUMARIS" in several of his paintings, including *Hollywood Africans in Front of the Chinese Theater with Footprints of Movie Stars* (30). The word is Basquiat's own variation on Greek-style lettering graffitied onto rocks by indigenous people in Upper Egypt just before the collapse of the Roman Empire, which he derived from a book in his personal library, Burchard Brentjes's *African Rock Art*.



27 Tseng Kwong Chi. LA2 and Keith Haring at the Muna Tseng dance studio, New York, 1982



28 Jean-Michel Basquiat  
DJ-ing at Area nightclub, New  
York, 1985. Photograph ©  
Ben Buchanan/Bridgeman  
Images

This inscription demonstrates the diverse breadth of Basquiat's art-historical knowledge by drawing parallels between the mark-making of modern-day graffitiists and that of past civilizations. Basquiat saturated his process with material and media ("I'm usually in front of the television. I have to have some source material around me to work off . . . magazines, textbooks"). He also surrounded himself with music lyrics—"When I'm working, I hear them. I just throw them down"—echoing the terminology that graffiti writers used to describe their own lightning-quick process.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the aesthetic and disciplinary range within their respective bodies of work, Basquiat rose to prominence as a painter, while Rammellzee achieved renown mainly as a rapper. The names Lady Pink, Lee, and Futura are universally associated with street art (as opposed to fine art), as Fab 5 Freddy is with rap music. Yet all of these artists' efforts to connect across

genres and media would affect generations of artists to come, who saw no reason to keep up such divides.

Graffiti and post-graffiti art are often framed as the logical precedent to today's "street art" culture, which adheres to its own aesthetic value systems and circumscribed community, global in scale. Yet the omnipresence of urban graffiti in the 1970s and the influx of related imagery into the gallery system in the 1980s made an indelible mark on contemporary artists of the time, prompting them to return to a bold color palette, expressionism, pop-inspired figuration, and wild abstraction. Basquiat and his peers' influence on both contemporary art production and visual culture would last for decades to come. The coded and hybrid aesthetics born of their work provide the foundation for the multicultural generations of artists who are remixing and remaking culture today. ✕





34 JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT  
*Mitchell Crew*, 1983. Acrylic, oil stick, and photocopies on canvas mounted on wood supports with chain, 181.6 x 349.9 cm (71½ x 137¼ in.)



## Beat Bop: Record of a Moment

Hua Hsu

One day, in the early eighties, when he was already very famous, Jean-Michel Basquiat decided that he wanted to make a hip-hop track. He asked Rammellzee, a visual artist and occasional rapper, and K-Rob, a hotshot teenage lyricist, to meet him at a Midtown studio. K-Rob arrived first, amazed to see a professional studio. A kid whose idea of fun was sneaking into nightclubs and destroying older MCs who had underestimated him, he had no experience with the formal side of music making, and he had little idea that Basquiat was already a well-known artist. Later, K-Rob would recall that Ramm arrived in a trench coat and dark shades, “looking like Inspector Gadget.” Basquiat introduced them and then handed them verses he had written. “Me and Ramm looked at it,” K-Rob recounted, and immediately decided that the rhymes they’d been assigned were “corny.” “We crushed up his paper,” Rammellzee remembered, “and threw it back in his face.” They headed into the booth and proceeded to rap a story about a “pimp on the corner” selling visions of the fast life to a kid on his way home from school.<sup>1</sup>

Getting his rhymes rejected didn’t faze Basquiat, who acted as producer, working with the band on a spaced-out, dubby rhythm track that sounded like No Wave skronk slowed down to a crawl, or a disco party rap slowly losing its gravitational center. K-Rob played the wide-eyed kid trying to steer clear of all the desperate addicts and sleazy pushers, while Rammellzee raved and ranted on their behalf, sounding like a gangster warlord with stuffed-up sinuses. *Beat Bop* was weird for its time, when rap singles seemed split between body-rock utilitarianism and street-corner reportage. It will still be weird in 2083.

Basquiat drew a cover and verso and the label stickers for the record (52, 53). The imagery looks less like a rap single than an ornate set of chalk outlines, bearing resemblance to *Tuxedo* (54) and numerous other black-and-white works he produced in silkscreen at the time. There’s a severed hand, bones, the word “BANG!” trying to burst out from an oval. Your eye is drawn to one of his famous crowns, which is shaded in

white. But Basquiat’s design also evokes early flashes of the hip-hop music industry, with its dollar signs, lightning bolts, and stars, even a faux signature line from a contract. Basquiat reportedly had five hundred copies pressed for his one-time record label, Tartown Record Co. According to Al Diaz, his friend and occasional collaborator, the records were available for sale only at an art gallery. Despite how much *Beat Bop* strayed from musical fashions of its time, the song is arguably one of the most conventional moments of either Basquiat’s or Rammellzee’s career. Because neither aspired to be a musical star, making a song together probably seemed a safe collaboration. By the next year, when Profile Records reissued the single, minus the famous sleeve art, Basquiat had become unfathomably famous, a superstar grappling with his sudden proximity to—and deep-seated ambivalence about—the establishment. Rammellzee, who rarely saw the point of being accommodating, would continue diving headlong into his wondrous, self-made cosmology.

*Beat Bop* makes for a good (if impossible to verify) story because it conforms to our sense of who we think these artists were. Here is Basquiat, the cool enthusiast, trying on different styles. Diaz, who had been one of Basquiat’s first collaborators when they painted together in the late seventies as SAMO©, played percussion on *Beat Bop*. He regarded the track as Basquiat’s attempt to reconnect with the energies and antagonisms he had begun to leave behind at a time when success was beginning to draw him into new spaces where nobody looked like him. It’s also a story that accentuates Rammellzee’s freewheeling brilliance, his ability to conjure some of the most colorful verses ever rapped out of thin air. But perhaps there were more trifling motivations. “Rammell often challenged Jean,” Diaz recalled. “He wasn’t buying the whole Basquiat thing.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout Rammellzee’s music career, he seemed uninterested in any kind of straight line from past to present, making him a counter of sorts to Basquiat’s ascendancy.



New York in the late seventies was a collage of neighborhoods and communities, tribes and scenes. This structural incoherence had been the legacy of Robert Moses, who pursued the modernist dream of city planning to disastrous ends. For the youth, knowledge was currency, and those who could see a slightly bigger picture of the city, and figure out how different pieces fit together, seemed like visionaries. Maybe they had just seen an article in the newspaper before all the other kids had, taken a trip to a neighboring borough and brought back news of something exciting and strange. Graffiti writers prided themselves as amateur cartographers, thieves in the night remapping the city according to their rivalries and whims. Boroughs became defined by artistic styles, like letterforms or spray-can technique, rather than borders. Only, those who worked on the trains had the power to go “all city.” Writers worshipped different canons: the pop art of Peter Max and Andy Warhol, the underground comics of Vaughn Bodé and Ralph Bakshi, American advertising at poster and billboard scale. Influence, the art of this period argued, could come from anywhere.

Creativity was a means of survival. Collaboration across artistic forms was a kind of communion—a desire to share a vibe. For her debut performance of the song “Dress You Up,” Madonna donned a jacket and skirt, adorned by Keith Haring and LA2, at the Paradise Garage, a haven for experimentation across

media (65). Graffiti became synonymous with hip-hop music thanks to films like *Wild Style* (1983)—which starred Lee and Lady Pink—and *Style Wars* (1983), for which *Beat Bop* served as the end-credit music. In 1982 the Celluloid Records label released a series of five 12-inch singles featuring raps by Phase 2, Futura (then known as Futura 2000), and Fab 5 Freddy. When placed side by side, the verso of the album sleeves form a five-foot-long painting by Futura (45-48).

Futura was a particularly inspired figure exploring this interface of art and music. He began working with the British punk band the Clash in 1981, when they visited New York for their historic string of gigs at Bonds. That year, Futura designed the sleeve for their single “This Is Radio Clash” and toured with them, rapping and painting backdrops live onstage. His style as a painter is wondrously airy, a cosmos of beautiful cursive and abstract squiggles. His colorful use of shading, as well as the tiny flecks and splatter marks that became his signature style, makes his letters look as though they’re glowing as they hurtle through space. Futura’s live painting introduced many of the Clash’s fans to graffiti. Onstage collaborations, album art, and music videos for hit songs, like Blondie’s “Rapture” (1981) or Chaka Khan’s “I Feel for You” (1984), conveyed the mystique of graffiti to faraway audiences (49).

Throughout America and Europe, this was an era of institutions spinning off their foundations, a reshuffling of order, the distance between high and low reorienting itself around new symbols. The eighties produced a new type of person, accustomed to the trash and junk, whose life was calibrated to maximum resourcefulness, cutting stuff apart and putting it back together. Different tribes, different artists, from William Burroughs and Andy Warhol to disco DJs and graffiti writers, all came to the same conclusion: making something new required a radical departure from preexisting norms and orthodoxies. It’s not that history ceased to matter. Rather, the entirety of the past could provide inspiration and source material. There were a lot of things you could

do by mixing up the stuff around you, and whether it was homage or satire was your secret to keep.

Perhaps it was no surprise that the graffiti writers, musicians, and dancers who rallied under the banner of hip-hop prized juxtaposition and hybridity, given their roots in mostly Caribbean American communities. Rammellzee once described Basquiat as a “sponge artist,” someone whose talent lay in absorbing influences and turning them into something his own. He considered himself a different kind of artist, largely uninterested in lineage and beholden to no influence, and yet, befitting someone whose pieces often consisted of salvaged junk, open to influence from anywhere. He was less interested in carving out a place in

45-48 Three Celluloid Records album front covers, and five back covers aligned to compose a painting by Futura, 1982





**65 KEITH HARING  
AND LA2**

Decorated suit, 1983. Ink on  
three-piece leather suit,  
designed by Stephen Sprouse;  
jacket length, 86.3 cm  
(34 in.); skirt length, 60.9 cm  
(24 in.)

**opposite: 66** Stills from  
video by Courtney Harmel of  
the "Party of Life," showing  
Madonna performing in a  
jacket and skirt designed by  
Stephen Sprouse and painted  
by Keith Haring and LA2,  
1983

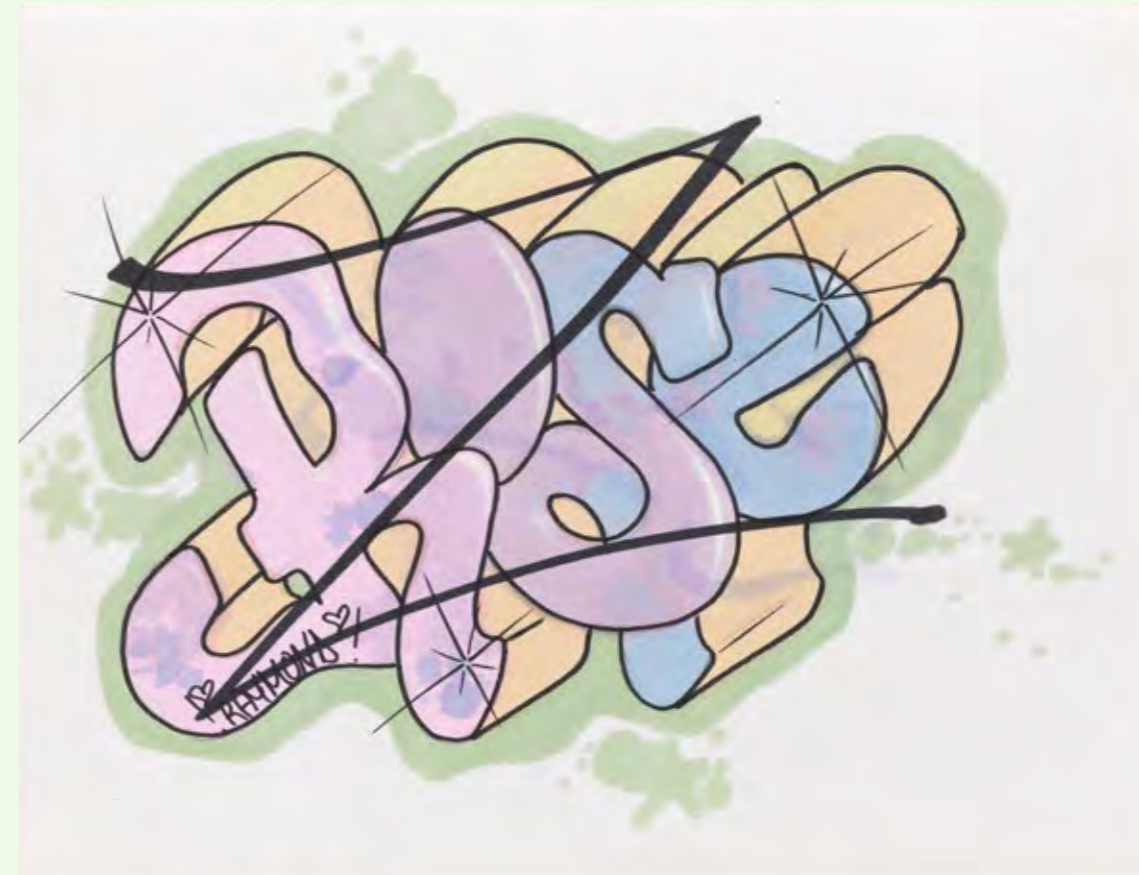


# FONTS

Graffiti writers passionately explored the written word as both visual subject and conveyor of meaning. Young writers honed their skills by studying the scripts of master writers from widely circulated “black books” of writing samples, in service of developing their own unique alphabets. These urban typographers honed their distinctive typefaces on the pages of subway trains. The style of each font bore markers of the writer’s personal identity. For example, without knowing a tag’s authorship, Lady Pink’s fellow writers would be able to discern instantly from her block and bubble letters that they were designed by a woman from Queens whose style had developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s (82).<sup>1</sup> Signature lettering styles became an extension of personal branding, as typographic stylization elicited associations for the reader-turned-viewer and often made obvious nods to the artist’s visual source material. From his collaborative SAMO© sprayings in 1978 to his last paintings in 1988, Basquiat’s recognizable letterforms bore strong resemblance to the angular block uppercase of comic book dialogue, while simultaneously registering the crude scratchiness of the rock drawings reproduced in Burchard Brentjes’s book *African Rock Art*. Both of these sources were continuous influences throughout Basquiat’s oeuvre; integrated into his personal script, they communicated the fantasy, wit, and futurism of superheroes’ speech bubbles together with the writing traditions of ancient African peoples.

Graffiti writers’ fonts aimed at embellishment and the expression of character over legibility, often to the point where words were readable only to those trained in the style in which they were written. This intentional illegibility took on particular significance in the practice of Rammellzee and his Tag Master Killers crew, composed of A-One, Kool Koor, and Toxic. In figuratively arming their wildstyle letters with arrow-shaped “missiles” extending from the letters’ serifs, they prepared the alphabet for symbolic battle (101). Yet this obfuscation through ornament was also an antagonistic act, signaling exclusion to viewers, as if to say, “If you cannot read this message, you are unworthy of its meaning.” Like other post-graffiti artists transitioning their practices to the studio, Rammellzee continued to test the boundaries of the relationship between the letter’s form and its function. With a broader range of materials and mediums available, he experimented with sculptural representations of the alphabet, giving his abstracted letters weight, texture, and three-dimensionality that entirely divested them of their utilitarian ability to represent semantic meaning. In this way, Rammellzee and his post-graffiti peers shared conceptual concerns with artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Bruce Nauman, and Mel Bochner, who had sought to complicate the functionality of the letter by allowing it to become a pure object.

Dakota DeVos



## 82 LADY PINK

Rose, from sketchbook belonging to Lady Pink, around 1983

## 83 LEE QUIÑONES

Zoro, from sketchbook belonging to Lady Pink, around 1983



94 Jean-Michel Basquiat. *The Death of Michael Stewart*, 1983. Acrylic and marker on wood, 63.5 x 77.5 cm (25 x 30½ in.)

your title. They want to emasculate you, make you compromise or sacrifice in a way that no man, or woman, should." Fame and fortune can amplify the assaults of everyday racism: "You have a target on your back from other people—rappers, hustlers, angry cops—who feel like your success should be theirs."<sup>14</sup> In each encounter with the LAPD, Rammellzee and Basquiat kept cool and effervescent. Although they wore the mask of insouciance, that did not mean they were unaffected.

Back in New York in the wake of Stewart's death, Basquiat visited Keith Haring's studio in the Cable Building, a gathering place for writers, where he drew *The Death of Michael Stewart*

(also known as *Defacement*) on the wall (94). It depicts a scene with two pinkish figures dressed in blue attacking a black silhouette wielding phallic orange batons in a furious blur. The police creatures wear hats with stars on them, symbolizing authority. One of them bares his fangs, while the other has only his eyes showing. Graffiti tags such as Zephyr and Doze encircled the piece on the wall. Although *Defacement* articulates Basquiat's direct response to the fate of his contemporary, he had created several earlier large-scale portraits of police officers, including *Irony of the Negro Policeman* and *La Hara*.<sup>15</sup> At six feet each in height, both paintings loom large, crackling with the white noise of police surveillance (95, 96). As if to personify the consequences of evildoing,



95 Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Irony of the Negro Policeman*, 1981. Acrylic and oil paint stick on canvas, 183 x 122 cm (72 x 48 in.)



**97 RAMMELLZEE**

*Hell, the Finance Field Wars, unfinished studies in second dimension, first six panels, merging of Decoyism (Back-up unit) 6-delig, 1979.*  
 Marker on artist board, two parts of three panels each, overall: 45.1 x 365.8 cm (17¼ x 144 in.)

**Following pages: 98 RAMMELLZEE**

*Evolution of the World, 1979 or 1982. Marker on artist board, two parts of three panels each, overall: 44.5 x 362 cm (17½ x 142½ in.)*

108 West Indian Day Parade, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, September 5, 2015

109 Philip Bell. *Jouvert Devil Mas*, 2016

110 Gus Nul. *Damballa*, 2016. Sequined and beaded flag on satin, 95.2 x 71.1 cm (37½ x 28 in.)



That “bomb all lines” dictate of the writers also motivated the first hip-hop generation to explore, exploit, and burst wide open every medium in sight. The emergent creative dynamo surging through Gotham’s Afro-diasporic and Latinx streets and its blanched cultural institutions and media networks demanded nothing less.

Basquiat, Fab 5 Freddy, and Rammellzee were to all prove especially adept during hip-hop’s early years at bum-rushing and masterfully navigating not only the white-cube art game but indie film, music, and television as well. The classroom, museum, and street-acculturated skills that led them to invade the art world and hold their ground with such confidence is also apparent in the work of their fellow super-luminous futurists, surrealists, and expressionists.

Writing, because it was so unavoidably public, was the first of hip-hop’s elements to burst into cosmopolitan consciousness. Laying claim to the world’s biggest exhibition space—the Apple-snaking train lines of the MTA—the work of the subway writers became as optically and optimally omnipresent as the Manhattan skyline. The writers’ unbridled energy and mad enthusiasm for their daunting, acrobatic work sustained the movement for a dozen years of battle with the MTA. Their adventures in subterranean mural painting went on underground in the wee hours, in tunnels and rail-yards infested with gruesome dangers: rats, police dogs, the NYPD’s anti-graffiti squad, potholes, fifty-foot drops, high-voltage third rails.

Being criminalized and stigmatized by authorities as vandals who defaced city property may have added to the anarchic and romantic appeal of the endeavor for the adolescent writers. Suddenly Gotham’s most disenfranchised, harassed, over-policed, and invisibilized citizenry—its wise-assed tactical bombing youth—were impossible to ignore or to stop from dropping their wildstyle bombs on all lines. On a daily basis, the MTA dutifully and disparagingly painted over their spectacular ten-car pieces—a jack move that ironically served to provide the writers with a metropolis full of fresh canvases, ensuring the next detonation of stoopid-fresh mobile murals would roll out of the yards the morning after.

The galvanized young subway writers shared neighborhoods, communities, and recreational rooms with peers whose talents also encompassed break dancing, DJ-ing, and rapping. Early hip-hop culture set the precedent for them to freely engage and entertain

their own multidisciplinary desires and muses. They rearticulated, reformulated, and transfigured the high-handed cultural mission they’d inherited from the bombing practices of the writers. They also brought well-articulated radical-oppositional intentions and theory to the table. As Miles Davis did, they used their racial alienation and sense of ethnic difference from the white world as ideological and ideographic rocket fuel.

Basquiat’s big reveal came in his famous claim that his prime motivation as an artist was to render spiritual oblations to a personal triffecta of “royalty, heroism, and the streets.”<sup>2</sup> As eagerly as some may attempt to align Basquiat’s practice solely with his museum favorites—Picasso, Warhol, De Kooning, Dubuffet, and Franz Kline (all per JMB’s own misdirection)—it’s clear that being a Do or Die Brooklynite of Puerto Rican and Haitian parentage also majorly informed his painterly bent.

The artist’s father, Gerard Basquiat, waxed profuse about his belief that Basquiat’s sensibility evolved on home grounds during his tween years: “A lot of the imagery, I feel, is Brooklyn born. Jean-Michel’s room was upstairs in the back of the building that we lived in, so from his window he could see a fantastic skyline, and great buildings like the bank near BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music]. I think that is the skyline he references in the early paintings. The kids playing games on the sidewalks of Boerum Hill were also a clear source of inspiration. Then of course there was Flats Fix, the F-L-A-T-S F-I-X signs on Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn. It’s one of the things he remembered well and extracted multiple meanings from.”<sup>3</sup>

Basquiat grew up privy to the carnivalesque glories provided his impressionable young eyes by Brooklyn’s annual West Indian Day Parade—a daylong pan-ethnic procession of lavishly decorated floats, glittering spangled flesh-baring costumes, Calypso-booming sound trucks, and characters who costumed themselves as hellish Haitian Vodou deities like Baron Samedi and Damballah (108-110).

Haiti, always well represented in the parade, has a votive art practice of sequined fabrics and metal sculptures that pop with depictions of mystical imagery drawn from Vodou. This system of divination and spirit-possession originated in Benin and Dahomey, survived the slave trade, and proved crucial to the successes of the Haitian Revolution. Vodou also deploys a magical form of incantatory illustrative writing called *veve*, using symbols that are said to guide the gods, or *loa*, to any Vodou ceremony with



the accuracy of satellite telemetry. The ubiquitous appearance of scriptural writing as graphic talismans in Basquiat’s work suggests an oblique reference to this aspect of Vodou.

We know that Basquiat’s Puerto Rican mother Matilde Andrades frequently took her radiant child Jean-Michel to city museums, but we should not discount the effect of the borough’s street and retail facades on the young artist (111). The resonance between JMB’s visual sensibility and Brooklyn’s Santeria and Vodou botanicas and altars expands our understanding of his visual storehouse beyond the confines of MoMA.

The repetition of highly expressive Black masculine figures is a thematic constant in the Basquiat canon.

111 James and Karla Murray. *Botanica Elegua* in the Bronx, 2003





**114 JENNY HOLZER AND LADY PINK**

*When You Expect Fair Play You Create an Infectious Bubble of Madness around You*, about 1983–84. Spray paint on canvas, 221 x 195.6 cm (87 x 77 in.)



**115 JENNY HOLZER AND LADY PINK**

*Tear Ducts Seem To Be a Grief Provision*, about 1983–84. Spray paint on canvas, 229.9 x 294.6 cm (90½ x 116 in.)

**Following pages: 116 JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT**

*Anatomy*, 1982. Screen print on paper, 18 pieces, each: 76.2 x 56.5 cm (30 x 22¼ in.)



**121 GEORGE DUBOSE**  
Rammellzee as an early  
iteration of GASH-O-LEAR,  
1988

**122 RAMMELLZEE**  
GASH-O-LEAR, 1989. Mixed  
media, about 213.4 x 152.4 x  
127 cm (84 x 60 x 50 in.)

