

TRAVIS KUROWSKI BASQUIAT AND SIX USES OF SPACE

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power.

-ADRIENNE RICH

1a.
WHITE MALE. TWENTY-SIX YEARS OLD. FORTY THOUSAND DOLLARS DEBT
AVERAGE HEIGHT, BUILD, WEIGHT, ETC. UNHEALTHY ROMANCE OF SUFFERING,
LOVE, AMBITION. ASHAMED. NEVER FELT HARDSHIP. TICKET, JFK
AIRPORT, NEW YORK CITY. WINDOW SEAT. \$365.00. DEPART
HATTIESBURG, MISSISSIPPI, TUESDAY, MARCH 15th. RETURN, SUNDAY,
MARCH 21st.

1b.
The Brooklyn Museum is a large, modern-looking steel building adjacent to
the Brooklyn Library in the northeast corner of Prospect Park; long,
slanting metal bars covered in clear glass panes stretch out
from the building's concrete front, capturing patrons from the sidewalk
in this wide, tarantular skirt. Inside is a reception room with forty-
foot ceilings and a circular, central desk; a large, paint-splattered POLLOCK
hangs oppressively twenty feet up the far wall.

The Basquiat exhibition on the fourth and fifth floors of the
museum is arranged chronologically so the viewer will retain a feeling
of the work as it was produced, giving insight into the linearity of
artistic production, and also possibly into the psyche of the artist
himself as one moves from one piece of work to the next—or so it is
hoped. Much can be learned from an exhibit of paintings by looking not
only at the work, but between them, contrapuntally examining piece against
piece. Comparing one piece of a series of works to the next gives greater
understanding to each individual artwork and wider comprehension of
the exhibit as a whole.

The painting I first saw entering the exhibit is titled *Jimmy
Best*... in the book on Basquiat's paintings I purchased at the museum's crowded
gift shop, into which the mass of Brooklyn Art Museum's customers
are deposited after examining over one hundred paintings sorted over the
museum's top two floors. The museum directors must suppose that,
following whatever catharses occur, people are then eager to purchase
numerous postcards or T-shirts with Basquiat's face or paintings on
them—which, as far as I could tell, was absolutely correct. I don't
know why I spend time criticizing apparent capitalism, when I too am
prey to its workings. The feeling in this for the consumer is perhaps best
communicated through my own experience. There was the desire to take a bit
of the feelings I had engaging with the original artworks back to my
apartment (which without these things seemed suddenly somehow

locking). I was in line buying my three obligatory postcards when I noticed
a large cloth book with an abstract painting of a human head by Basquiat
on the front cover. As I did not want this effect of the art to leave my
world so soon, like a therapist one is not ready to stop seeing even though
cured or perhaps a Godard film people attempt to work out for hours
afterwards over coffee at someone's kitchen table, I hastily scooped
up the book as I walked ahead in line toward the next available cashier.
The ellipsis I find in the book's rendition of the title replaces much of
what I feel is the work's power: words. Words are important to
Basquiat's work; his paintings are nearly all scrawled with language
in a juvenile hand. It is said that Basquiat never took the time to train
himself as an artist and so this may have something to do with his reliance
throughout his career on the power of painted words, although it also gave, I
suspect, more fodder to art critics such as Australian Robert Hughes who
denounced Basquiat's work as immature and trendy, just the unimportant effort
of someone who never bothered to become correctly trained. I've read in places
that Basquiat could draw very well, and elsewhere that he couldn't, but I still
cannot get myself to care about the contention such a distinction brings
up. I could never follow the logic of arguments which say to be considered
of worth, an artist must to some great extent be institutionalized into a
form, and just the same I could never as a fiction writer completely swallow
the sentiment I felt was behind statements such as John Gardner's in his
book *The Art of Fiction*: no one who kept himself ignorant has ever
produced great art. Although I generally believe this idea to be true,
behind it seems to lie a certain kind of corruption of the imagination
and standardization of form. Sure: the more tools one has, the more
options he or she will have in creation, but I do not see the logical
leap to denounce aesthetically pleasing works because the artist did
not jump through the same hoops as everyone else. It seems a bit of
jealousy at the luck of others (or it could be said, their hard, nontraditional
work). That they could have been better, I suspect is the idea. But
then we all could be.

From what I've read, Basquiat was by no means logically brilliant
or fluent as were such painters as Mark Rothko, whose journals are filled
with eloquent descriptions of the obstacles of painting, or
Gerhard Richter, who published an intricate and well-received
book on German philosopher Walter Benjamin. But Basquiat was certainly
not ignorant either, as his paintings show; he was certainly passionate
in the imaginative, which is sometimes exactly what people may

want or may even, without knowing, need.

The entire title of *Jimmy Best...* is the words on the canvas, which is the surface of a large piece of sheet metal, probably from the side of some building (people would, during the fever pitch of Basquiat's fame, remove parts of New York City buildings upon which the artist had graffitied and turn around and sell these pieces to art dealers), painted with thin strokes of black spray paint: JIMMY BEST ON HIS BACK TO THE SUCKER PUNCH OF HIS CHILDHOOD FILES. The penmanship is immature in form, but at the same time powerful in its surety, as though Basquiat knew early on of his eventual fame. He was certainly enamored with the idea of it. "Since I was seventeen," he said in an interview at twenty-five years old for a *New York Times Magazine* cover story, "I thought I might be a star. I'd think about all my heroes, Charlie Parker, Jimi Hendrix... I had a romantic feeling about how people become famous."

British author Patrick Neate recently wrote a book titled *Where You're At: Notes From the Frontline of a Hip-Hop Planet*, tracing the state of hip-hop music and its effects in vastly different cities around the world. The author traveled to impoverished, often violent places such as Rio de Janeiro to see what the youth there had adapted for themselves out of hip-hop's once dominantly American cultural framework.

In Capetown, South Africa, while being driven through shanty towns which were only a decade, post-apartheid, the local man driving the car told the author his views on the motivations behind hip-hop, calling his idea the "Fuck you, I'm King," theory. The driver saw the rappers' continual one-upmanship as a love for the microphone, the loudspeaker, into which they were basically saying "Fuck you, I'm King," this then causing another rapper to come out and say, "Fuck you, I'm King," and on and on, as the youths struggled for linguistic dominance.

For the first part of his career, Basquiat was the graffiti artist in New York City who signed his work with the name SAMO (for "same old, same old," or "same old shit"). During the popularization of graffiti as art in America during the early 1980s, Basquiat, too, took the city's walls as a canvas for direct expression. "Jimmy Best on his back to the sucker punch of his childhood files," Basquiat says, spray painted upon eight-foot high walls of steel. Childhood files of middle class angst, black angst, or inner city pride? Sucker punch, the longing of fame? Or "Fuck you," he says, "I'm King."

2a.

I arrived at JFK airport to near freezing weather and overcast skies. Robert met me at the subway, and we took the train to his Brooklyn apartment where we deposited my luggage and, after opening some beers, proceeded to climb out the kitchen window and onto the fire escape, up the ladder three more floors, and onto the roof of the six-story apartment building on Prospect Avenue. The ladder was rusty, one-inch diameter metal bars attached to the brick side of the building, spaced out in foot apart ascensions up the wall, opening onto the grass and garbage covered ground below. My arms trembled as I climbed, a beer bottle clutched between three fingers of my right hand.

On the rooftop, the southwest corner of Brooklyn stretched out from the ledge, and then the entire towering city of Manhattan floated in the sky before us, hovering it seemed on the the watery harbor itself. I knew it was beautiful, but at the same time I could not help myself from feeling: It's not much.

Robert was my closest friend, and, having not seen him for some time, I felt compelled to convince him of the falseness I was finding in what used to inspire me. I could not swallow the art which had once propelled me into higher education and out of drugs and the acceptance of the less desirable lives we are often handed. The same books I had often called and told him to buy or even mailed to him myself, I recently sold for cash. I didn't realize at the time I was cyclically depressed, because the excuses depression makes for inaction are nearly impregnable once accepted. The attention necessary for art and the catharsis inspired by it don't fit into the depressive equation, and are actually antithetical to what seems a recursive loop of stasis. Don't move, pain says, you are hurt, fragile. Reason doesn't seem to enter in, because where did I get off becoming jaded? A love lost? Regret it was my fault? Morals slipping? My romantic sensibilities said, yes, that's exactly it, but those were also the sentimental, sympathetic voices of the books I sold and poetry I could not read. The woman I had recently left had, a year before we met, lost her fiancé to cancer. He, Steve, was dead. Is. Though I had nothing socially consequential to be depressed for, it is a lie to say that I wasn't, for some time, quite lost, not outside, but in my heart, where the day chips away and, if you awake in the night and find yourself very alone, the moorings can slip and drag.

In America, middle class youth seem to find themselves, absolutely free to suffer listlessly, coddled by a preaching of freedom and security in

a good-old-boy, slap on the shoulder tone; with universities seeing difficulty as an obstacle to education—so then perhaps do we become a crop of consumers fertilized by cynicism and forever allowed to weep. Are we seem to know this which is why we are, at least on the front page of many newspapers, so afraid of obviously non-lethargic China.

"Let's get some food," I said.

After a dinner of tamales and margaritas seated behind a local woman with a thick Brooklyn accent complaining about the Mexican restaurant being owned by gooks, meaning, we were told by her, the Chinese couple living downstairs. Robert and I walked to Freddy's, a local bar a block off of Vanderbilt Avenue, one of those bars and restaurants in metropolises around the world reflecting the flavor of the working class men and women living in the surrounding apartments and houses. The tables and bar top were of dark stained wood, with dim lights hanging from the ceiling above. A juke box was shoved into the corner farthest from the entrance, a picture of Bukowski hung at the end of the bar, and books lined the windowsills. The locals were all darkly dressed, as I noticed was a good portion of the city of Brooklyn. I was told the fire station across the street lost all but one of their men in the collapse of the World Trade Towers. In a few months, eminent domain laws will take the private property away from the owners of Freddy's and most of the surrounding neighborhood. It will all be leveled. Millionaire and Billionaire businessmen will then finance the building of a new New York Nets basketball stadium on the empty lots. A sign on the wall next to the booth where we sat said to stop eminent (spelled here "immanent") domain, and save the Brooklyn neighborhood. (If only Jane Jacobs were alive today.)

Due to some malfunction, the jukebox had given us an unlimited number of songs for only a dollar, so we continued plugging in Wilco, David Bowie, Tom Waits, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs—all the music which reassured our feelings of desperation, guilt, and hope, coated in guitar chords, drums, and voices from the speaker; but we were, by that time, certainly drunk.

"Philip Roth is a misogynist," I began after my third whiskey. "I can't read his books. I pull open Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and I just say, bleh. Blah. Please. I can only read non-white people, non-male, now. They are all dead white guys; all my books were by a bunch of dead white guys and I was disgusted by how terrible that was. No wonder I don't understand women. I always felt I was understanding of others, only now I see I'm that some middle class white guy who doesn't fucking get it. Rigid. Nullified."

"Really," Robert said.

"I'm probably wrong here, I'm probably going to eat my words, but it all seems terribly pointless and masturbatory."

"And you don't like poetry any more?"

"I can't hardly get through a line."

More drinks.

Soon the owner began buying them for us.

On the way out the owner stopped by our table, quite drunk, sixty or so years old and with a figure resembling Bukowski. Earlier that evening, as I put glam rock songs on the jukebox, this man told me that he was going to take a baseball bat to my head if the songs I picked sucked. Two hours later, he was buying us drinks. Now at our table, he was shaking my hand. As he turned to leave, he bumped against a bar stool, and almost fell over. "No dancing in the bar," he said.

Z.b.

From an essay on Basquiat by Fred Hoffman: "Showing little regard for either physiognomic accuracy or individual likeness, Basquiat chose to emphasize the expressive qualities of the head. With its public presentation, this painting declared Basquiat's arrival as a new and authentic voice in the world of contemporary art."

A small bench was situated a few feet in front of the painting Hoffman's essay describes. The crowd in the exhibition was generally young.

Two women stood next to me looking at the same piece of work. A few inches from me stood one—an attractive woman about my age—but I didn't look over at her. After a minute, I decided to sit down and take the painting in for a while. Focusing on the painting ahead of me, I moved slowly, carefully sitting on the edge of the bench. At the same time, and just as carefully and slowly, the young woman sat as well. "She sat down at exactly the same time," I would later say to some people at the Soda Bar where Robert worked. "It was very moving. The timing was perfect." We sat inches from one another for a minute or so, never acknowledging one another, nor the awkward simultaneity of our sitting a moment before. An inconsequential moment likely (I left after another minute and never saw the woman again), but within the circumstances it seemed to hold significance, as though moving through a gallery of art is theater, and the viewers, actors.

Untitled Head is one of Basquiat's last paintings in 1985, before the fame which came upon him almost instantly after his stunning debut in 1982 at New York's Annina Nosei Gallery. The canvas is

A Frankenstein image, a pastiche of various colors and forms. The entire piece feels schizophrenic. The eyes are sad, the mouth frowning. The head has no lips, just teeth. It is the prerogative of each viewer to become angry at that chaos and label it as simply stupid and derivative of a culturally hollow decade, or to see more important themes about art and humanity. Madness or genius? Fashion or consequential? Are we always forced into such dichotomies when observing art?

It is a little admitted fact that what we want in America of our artists is madness, that we want to see their dirty laundry—even better their bloody laundry—hung out before us in their works. This is not shocking, as we have been desensitized much faster these past decades, thanks to the sensationist journalism of FOX and CNN and the more constant proliferation of lazy Hollywood stereotypes in all forms of representation. It is no wonder America wants violent escapism in its entertainment—always faster, larger, more shocking; this is a country kept in a constant state of fear by its own government, moving security levels up and down, releasing their own news reports to the media while launching preemptive strikes against countries who may someday strike out at us; a nation whose military budget equals the military budgets of every other country in the world combined. The world is large and frightening, we are told, and we are right to be frightened of it.

After reading the *Times* in the morning about more servicemen dead in Iraq, more Iraqis dead, and hearing on NPR about contemporary female genital mutilations in parts of Africa, I then enter the Basquiat exhibit. Do I expect the art to compare to what I see as a very painful world? If so, how? What I felt looking at *Untitled, Head*—rationally or not, whether or not the work "deserved it"—was a cleansing through another's display. So sense of forgiveness or allowing.

Susan Sontag, the wide-ranging cultural critic who died earlier this year and who wrote illuminatingly on a variety of subjects such as photography, Artaud's theater of cruelty, and camp humor, came out with her final book last year titled *Regarding the Pain of Others*. The book, written much in reaction to the tortures done by American soldiers of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghariib, is about people becoming desensitized toward others' pain. Near the end of the book, Sontag says that the role of the writer, someone like her, is to keep one's eyes on the misery of the world without becoming jaded. While writing those lines, Sontag was already fighting cancer—the which would take her life the following winter.

3.0

Before boredom, is an aversion to create. After, seems like one more step toward chaos that shouldn't have been taken, which may have been the last step, one can never be too sure. Sanity and insanity, not distinctly divided, but blurred.

The previous night Robert and I did something unplanned and which I generally find unpleasant: cocaine. We finally went to sleep at eight in the morning. Did I wonder then still out of sorts as I wandered through the city that never sleeps after not sleeping myself, how I ever got to such a place? No, it all seemed fairly correct to me. From the outside, I am sure there must have been the desire these past months of selfish suffering for others to want to shake me, snap me out of my lethargy, my desire for sleep, flowing down whatever destructively romantic load came available. But from the inside, it of course didn't look that way—it seemed that there was no reality to snap back into; you were just going along, as planned, as you liked to suffer sometimes. An artist meaning one habitually producing, who isaverse to create, is highly likely to painfully dramatize the self. But there is a freedom in the recovering after a wasting away of a clean slate, a synthetic tabula rasa. Somerset Maugham wrote of this in *The Moon and Sixpence*, his novel fictionalizing the painter Paul Gauguin. The narrator says to the Gauguin character that he is sure the painter can't understand why sometimes after he drinks heavily and has sex with the meanest, wildest prostitute in the mud, tearing at each other's skin and barking like animals, that after this painter feels the as though beauty is somehow tangible and flesh is made of air. In the book the painter stares at the narrator in silence for a moment then walks away.

Robert and I walked through the streets, angry we had tried the drug, that we were sobered to do so, so bourgeois, so curious for experience—but also, beneath the surface skin of regret, we were a touch happy we were seeing the world in a new light as we wandered through Prospect Park under the late afternoon sun. And, though we never wanted to do it again, we were since one cannot go back, somewhat glad.

We had awakened at noon to sun at the windows. Somehow we made it through the sudden difficulty of cooking breakfast and showering. After staying up all night, we were raw or felt we were. We put on our coats and scarves and headed north through the park toward the museum. We felt dumbly, a little bit alive. Our minds, raw from the blow, were like any wound, sensitive to touch.

3.b.

Basquiat did many paintings about boxing. It is the simplistic brutality of these paintings, especially of the one untitled piece about Sugar Ray Robinson, which drew my gaze: absence as captivating. The canvas is a dirty piece of black cloth stapled onto a simple wooden frame. On the cloth is written at the top in chalky white paint, in, once again, a child's handwriting: SUGAR RAY ROBINSON. Just below this, in the same chalk-like paint is Basquiat's standard three-pointed crown (a symbol Basquiat often used, representing perhaps what he felt he deserved, but boyishly, crudely imagined), and a few inches below that, not yet even to the center of the canvas, is the rudimentary mask of a face—a large circle for the head, two small circles for eyes, and lines for the teeth. The rest of the canvas is black.

Crowns and Kings...

4.a.

Coming out of the museum, book in hand, along with three postcards and a writing notebook, I passed everything to Robert so I could put on my coat and hat, as it was sure to be cold outside.

The museum was closing, and the guards had rushed us through the last bit of the exhibit.

We got onto the elevator heading down.

"It's like a return to life," I said. (I actually said this.)

"Good," Robert said. We were both still very tired from the lack of sleep.

"He was a year older than you when he died," I added, slapping Robert on the shoulder. "Guess you've still got one left."

Robert looked over at me; I could see he was too scared to laugh. I wondered how close he had been to it, fear, in the city not getting acting jobs? Alone in the city? (I believe it is true what some people say, that people here can be more alone than in less populated areas. The novelist William Maxwell once wrote that New York City is a place where a person can cry on the sidewalk in absolute privacy.)

"We're almost to the subway," Robert said.

The sky was getting dark; it was nearly six o'clock. I tore the wrapping off the book and started flipping through the pictures, pointing them out to Robert next to me, the ones I liked, the ones which had moved me. We flipped through page after page on the subway together until Robert got out the book at short stories he was in the middle of and began reading it. It was a new book a girl had bought for him, Amy, a friend of both of us. She got it along with some other books for him, she said, so that he wouldn't forget the erotic and beautiful as he was in New York, so far from the people he once knew and loved. The book's title was *Interpreter of Maladies*.

I read alone, absorbing the paintings on each page, but every once in awhile I would get to an epigram or quote which particularly moved me and I would read it aloud to Robert. He would look up from his book and smile, maybe even say something about it. Then go back to the book he seemed to be enjoying, then I, too, to the large book on my lap. The subway whistled as it raced between stops.

4.b.

While I was looking at it, I never seriously considered what it meant, *NOW'S THE TIME* ©, painted in white across the center of an eight-foot in diameter roughly cut circle of wood. Nor did I understand at first that this black painted wood with a smaller diameter circle painted in white toward its center greatly resembled a gigantic record album. There is even a small circle right in the center of the wood, like the hole cut in the center of a vinyl record to hold it on the player.

While examining the painting at the exhibit, I never considered what it meant beyond mere aesthetics—meaning I did not put time into making connections between the history of painting the music, or the painter's biography with what the painting was saying. But I still took whatever surface implications I could make as a starting point toward my interpretation. But of what? For what? Rebel? Live? Buy art? I never considered the answers (instead, I continued my lemming-like rotation around the painting filled rooms), but, entranced by the audacity and size of the piece, by the sheer statement it self, I only accepted without thinking. Already impressed by the artist and his work, I began unconsciously to encounter all the work in a wash of that same impression.

Now I still see the piece as powerful, but in a different way. After reading much of history and connectedness of jazz and other types of music with Basquiat's life and work, I now see *NOW'S THE TIME* as a comment on corporate music. It is a trophy of a record album, and on that trophy album is copyrighted rebellion. It is an angry piece, lashing out at the purveyors of contemporary culture. If art is rebellion (and Basquiat's work seems to enjoy this description, with satirical images of dollar bills and brutal artistic stabs at Jim Crow laws), then the selling of it is somewhat of a hypocrisy. This is nothing new for artists or philosophers to confront, and it illuminates the influence of Warhol, the American art world icon for witty capitalistic rebellion for, had on young Basquiat.

But I knew only partly of this walking through the exhibit. The piece didn't open up to me in this way until after research on Basquiat and the flashy art scene of New York in the 1980s. How much then did I miss as I wandered about, my head filled with wonder and awe, far from the estrangement Brecht said we needed from our engagements with artistic representations? Without this estrangement, Brecht wrote in essays on early twentieth-century drama, without continually shocking the audience awake, they will become stuck into the illusion of the drama and succumb to the unreliability of feeling, a mass mind, swayed solely by the heart.

5.a.

That following day after the Basquiat exhibition, I attend the National Book Critics Circle Award ceremony at the New School auditorium on 12th Street in downtown Manhattan. The evening before, Robert and I had listened to readings by some of the nominees. My feeling at the time was that of a pilgrim on the shores as I had never before in my life been around so many writers I had admired. That they really existed was almost too much to bear, I very nearly squirmed in my seat. (The writer nominated who I most wanted to see, Philip Roth, was not present. Still, the fact that he may have come, that he had been invited to an event I was at, was wonderful in my mind. Not that I had hero-worship exactly, but it gave that much more reality to what had until then existed largely in my imagination.)

Before the awards ceremony, I picked up a book of Adrienne Rich's poetry, which I was hoping I could get signed for a woman I knew back in Mississippi. I had enjoyed Rich's reading the previous evening and had read her poetry in college, but it honestly never made much of an impression. In the poetry aisle of Barnes & Noble, I flipped through Rich's *Dream of a Common Language*. In the middle of the book, there is a linked set of poems titled "Twenty-one Love Poems." The work is breathtaking. In this section Rich warns the reader about making an occupation of pain. Since then—standing in Barnes & Noble with Rich's book, reflecting over Basquiat's exhibit—I believe a seventy-six year old poet and a dead expressionist painter kept me from having worthless dreams.

For a person to feel they have "come back to life" is not uncommon—a regeneration myth is a part of nearly all religions. The season of spring shows us this transition of death to birth every year. It is the feeling that you have been given a second chance, an essential part of making it through the world in the imperfect human skin, and the only requirement of love. Just as from Basquiat I stole his passionate display of pain, with Adrienne Rich's poems I was stealing her sense of beauty. I stole the gentleness, the honesty she left sitting on the page for anyone to see and take. I hoarded their treasures, sure sometime in the future I would continue the process I had then begun, making them my own, which is all it is once we step out of the solitude: trees no longer, but encouraging woods.

Just before the awards ceremony, I saw Rich on the sidewalk just outside of the New School. Nervous and shy, I approached her in the crowd of well-dressed intellectuals she was standing in. My jeans were ripped; I was wearing my father's old peacoat from the Navy. She said she would gladly sign the book. "We need to move over here," she said to the woman whose arm she was resting on, "so I can sign this young man's book."

Rich was about five feet tall, but a terrible case of arthritis caused her to hunch over, seeming even shorter. Her hands shook as she signed. I thanked her again and again.

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The Soda Bar was packed when I arrived and Robert was too busy making drinks behind the bar to even say hello. I waited for twenty minutes until a table opened up. "Here," a waitress said, handing me a beer. "Robert said give this to that guy, you," she said, smiled, then disappeared into the crowd of bodies.

At a small table in the center of the barroom, I looked over the book I had bought at the exhibition. Where I was sitting, across from the bar, a bench runs along the wall, in front of which four small tables have been spaced out, each with a single chair the opposite end from the bench. There were people seated at every table, people standing everywhere else. Two guys sat across from each other next to me, discussing whether or not to go to the bar and get a drink or to wait for the waitress. "They probably split the tips," one said. On the other side of me were a young man and a woman. Another young woman came to join this couple and apologized as she squeezed in between the woman and me on the bench.

"Did you go to the exhibit?" one of them asked me, but I had been too involved in the book to notice which one of them had spoken. When I looked up, all three were looking over at me, smiling and curious. Gabe, Cynthia and their less loquacious roommate talked with me for a while about art. I told them what I thought about Basquiat, and the essay I planned to write about him. Gabe, a philosopher studying the Kabbalah and Gnosticism in Walter Benjamin's writings, and Cynthia, an aspiring filmmaker interning with Aronofsky on his new film, had also gone to the Basquiat exhibit. "Did you go see Twombly?" Gabe suddenly asked me. I said I didn't know who that was. "Basquiat got a lot of his ideas from Twombly. Twombly was doing the same stuff decades before - is still doing it. You should see his show at the Whitney." I told him I would certainly try.

5.b

How much of life is thievery? There is contention about Basquiat. Some criticize him or the managers who promoted him for acting as though he was doing something fresh and new, when he clearly was not. Artists like Cy Twombly, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning all did much of the same things in the 1950s that Basquiat was doing in the 1980s. Or so runs some of the argument.

I came along a rather blatant piece of thievery toward the end of the exhibition: a door and two pieces of wall that had been appropriated by Basquiat for his canvas. The piece is titled "Gravestone." This is nothing new, of course, for artists to do - using random scraps to paint on - but I feel Basquiat did it extremely well. Whether this is because he thought it was cool or stole the idea from someone else, doesn't seem to matter as compared to the quality of the work. In his autobiography, Laurence Olivier, arguably the finest actor of the past century, told his readers to "steal from the best."

We love the inspired, the desiring. We may want (why we go to exhibits, watch movies, read books, do drugs, drink,) to feel the state of inspired desire more than anything else in the world, want it enough to steal from those we see as inspired, the artists we admire. And this makes sense to me about why I would want to lift lines straight out of texts I admire and put them into my own work. I have often titled stories after a rock song I like. Maybe this is because I want to be a part of the emotion I hear. Aristotle said to want is to be human.

6.a.

The question these days is not are we mad, but how much we are going to let out. The question is how much madness are we going to exhibit.

6.b.

The *Pegasus* painting, one of the final works of the Basquiat retrospective and the most stylistically different and terminal piece in the show, with its wash of language threatened by the encroaching strokes of black paint in the upper right corner is entropy on pause.