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Exhibition review

***Writing the Future: Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Generation*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 18 October 2020–25 July 2021**

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This review contains comparisons and throughlines between Jean-Michel Basquiat's artistic experimental trajectory and his decentralization of industry to that of the Hallyu wave and K-pop in recent years. I *am* aware that these are topics that many in the field of music may be tired of hearing about. While this review may not be what you expected when you opened this page—you probably clicked on this to brush up on Jean-Michel Basquiat or possibly to read about his connections to jazz—my jarring introduction of K-pop is done to thread the needle between generations of genre destabilizers. As a museum curator and exhibition professional by day and Hallyu and K-pop scholar by night, I could not stop my mind from making comparisons, especially when discussing the subversion of genre and the de-centering of Euro-Americanness in art and music. This is 'an ode to the subversion of genre', if you will. But I digress.

In their exhibition *Writing the Future: Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Generation*, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston worked to contextualize Basquiat's and other post-graffiti artists' play on genre and medium with that of the hip-hop generation, namely how the inversion of power, racial/ethnic tradition and memory, and the deployment of language manifested similarly in both movements. (In addition, here I encourage you to think of K-pop's effect on Global North media flows since 2008's 'Gangnam Style' to the recent 'BTS phenomenon'. Keep it in the back of your mind as another ode to the subversion of genre.) Overall, you will read about Basquiat and the Museum of Fine Arts' curation of his work and the work of others in the post-graffiti movement. At the heart of this review is a reflection on the exhibit's messaging relating to hybridity and a legacy of remixing. The MFA's thesis articulates that Basquiat, his contemporaries, and the hip-hop generation were working in analogous ways to redefine art as

well as create legacies that their heirs (both expected and unexpected) could extend. Before this show, no other exhibition had explored the interplays between post-graffiti and hip-hop in this explicit way (Munsell and Tate 2020a). If you so choose, take the journey of reflection with me with this Spotify playlist (QR code below). The playlist also begins with the same jarring K-pop introduction as this piece did and then dives into the sounds of the post-graffiti and hip-hop movements with a homage to jazz's initial legacy of writing the future.

The music video for K-Pop group Pentagon's June 2020 release, entitled 'Basquiat', opens with a provocative declaration: 'I resist the gaze created by the times'. In brushed strokes resembling crude paint, the name Basquiat fills the screen, written in both Korean and English. The video continues to unfold with themes of post-apocalyptic, futuristic revolution while the song itself is filled with a genre-defying cacophony of rock, hip-hop, and pop with symphonic undertones (Cube Entertainment 2020). While fans of Pentagon speculate that the group wrote the song to celebrate the protest of people, namely the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020, Pentagon evokes Basquiat's name beyond a celebration of revolutions past, present and future, and into the space of art-crafting itself. Mimicking a hybridity of genre (Kim 2019)—we can go as far as calling it a subversion and adaptation of genre also found at the core of Basquiat's work—Pentagon produces a song that refuses to conform to any sort of monolithic standard of sound. Aesthetically, the video deploys elements of Basquiat's futurism, continuing its emulation. Though sung in Korean, the song 'Basquiat' speaks the same language as Basquiat's work, a language of remixing, sampling, and scratching into and through one another, offering a look into the future.

It is through this subversion of genre that the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston explored Jean-Michel Basquiat's legacy and continued influence in the street art and hip-hop scene. *Writing the Future: Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Generation*, on view at the museum from late 2020 into mid-2021, presented the post-graffiti movement of New York City in the 1980s as a multi-disciplinary artist collective that played with medium, challenged notions of art and design, and dismantled genre. The exhibit introduces a relationship between the post-graffiti and the hip-hop generation, offering a comparative analysis between their use of language, remixing, and heritage. While focused on Basquiat's centrality to the movement, the exhibition also emphasized the network of collaborators and fellow artists who Basquiat worked with and took inspiration from. Monikered as 'writers', despite their unique medium of craft, the creators within the post-graffiti movement freely remixed various threads of life, notably drawing from their ethnic and racial memory, to create sights and sounds that decentralized the racially homogenous world of 'high art' on a global scale (Munsell and Tate 2020b).

The exhibition itself was housed in the MFA's new(ish) Ann and Graham Gund Gallery, a subterranean space underneath an airy courtyard. This space was strangely appropriate for an exhibition about Basquiat and his peers, recalling the days when these artists used the walls of the subway as both their canvas and gallery; as you descended into the lower, darker levels of the museum, it felt as if something monumental—yet still out of view—was waiting to meet you in the low-lit underground spaces of the galleries around the corner. While the galleries remained dark, the art and artifacts housed in the subsequent rooms were explosively displayed. Much like the way the post-graffiti movement shook up the art world in the 1980s, so did the exhibit's chaotic yet carefully curated selection of material. Auditory and visual elements launched us into a multi-sensory kaleidoscope of text, color, and sound. No aspect of the post-graffiti streetscape or soundscape was left out of this exhibition and as you turned around each corner, a new exploration of space, place, heart, and thought revealed itself. Set against, for the most part, plain white and black backdrops, the artists' works were the portals by which you were transported into the dynamism of the post-graffiti artists.

Parceled into thematic groupings confronting the ways each writer and their 'covalent' bonds with Basquiat situated themselves in the scene at large, each grouping presented a different medley of mediums and pieces. The themes were 'Writing the Future', 'Post-Graffiti', 'Portraiture', 'Writers',

'Big Screen', 'Music', 'Futurisms', 'Bodies', and 'Ascension', while the highlighted artists included A-One, ERO, Fab 5 Freddy, Futura, Kool Koor, LA2, Lady Pink, Rammellzee, and Toxic. The first theme introduced the 'Big Idea' (museum jargon for the thesis) of the exhibit as noted above, while the second—'Post-Graffiti'—dove into the artistic heritage of the 'writers'. It followed the trajectory of these artists from the literal underground to being helmed as an avant-garde movement of high art. In 'Portraiture', the exhibition disproves Basquiat's persona as the 'lone wolf' artist, crafting a picture of his network of Black and Latinx 'producers', and fellow artists, while also dissecting how Basquiat situated himself as a Black artist and part of the Black community (Munsell 2020).

The 'Writers' section drew some of the most obvious comparisons and contextualizations with the hip-hop generation. Interrogating the deployment of language, this part of the exhibition explored the modalities in which these artists abstracted and re-interpreted the written word. Here, the artists are posited as the same kind of remixers and songwriters as their counterparts in the hip-hop generation—artists who drew words and language from life experiences as people of colour and made them into art forms that had both commercial draw and resonance with the community it was written out of. This section also discussed how their unique use of language and words made them stand apart from other artists engaging in 'street art' at the time. While the latter focused on visual arts as the main mechanism of artistic storytelling, this group of post-graffiti artists did not hesitate to explore the world outside of the visual, dabbling in both the sonic and the affectual.

It is in this thematic section that I recalled a tenement of *affect theory* that seemed to resonate with the subversion of genre and the decentralization of whiteness that both the hip-hop generation and the post-graffiti movement (and, ahem, K-pop) catalysed. 'Plasticity' refutes the linear trajectory of 'the overcoming' of awareness following what many affect theorists and researchers (Libet et al. 1983; Malabou 2012; Figlerowicz 2012) cast as a binary to articulate unconscious and conscious affect. Instead, plasticity refers to a continued inversion of awareness and unawareness (Figlerowicz 2012). In this same framework, the deployment of language in the post-graffiti movement moved the pieces and its artists in and out of spaces of conscious subversion of genre (street art) and modality. In some ways, the artists were more than conscious of its unique renderings of art but, in many ways, they did not know nor could know how much they were speaking the same language as their hip-hop counterparts and what

revolutionary potential their work could possibly have. They also may not have consciously known how decentralizing their work would become to the commercial art world.

'Big Screens' was the fourth theme introduced in the exhibit covering the presence of Basquiat and his fellow artists' audio-visual productions throughout the 1980s into the new millennia. The film projects that these artists engaged in were seminal to the overall 'street' arts, including the first music video that featured rap on MTV in 1981, Blondie's 'Rapture' (it featured, on camera, Basquiat as the DJ). Moving out of 'Big Screens', the next grouping was 'Music': a celebration of Black sounds and symphonics where the hip-hop aesthetic was extrapolated from the post-graffiti one via mutual collaborations.

'Futurisms' launched me into a world of galactic activity where language and cosmic iconography both clashed and married into the vision of Afrofuturism, which Rammellzee spearheaded in American street soundscapes and visual arts in the 1970s. Rammellzee's work in this section particularly emphasized the multi-modal, interdisciplinary, and hybridized genius of the post-graffiti movement. Rammellzee himself was a kind of Renaissance man of a dystopian, nihilistic nature which was evident in the pieces presented here. A mix of the visual, auditory, and written word, this section imagined and articulated a future that many of us would not have conceived even as science fiction. It was a rendering of futuristic ethnic power told through robots and music. From 'Futurisms', I moved into 'Bodies'. These two spaces were where, I believe, the exhibition excelled. In 'Bodies', the exhibit covered Basquiat's existential fascination with 'embattled' corporeality. Basquiat was enthralled with Black bodies being subjected to the hands of others such as victims of lynching. Similarly, Lady Pink explored the body in her work, examining the battle scars of the 'body' of Latin America as a region by governments like the United States. Lady Pink, an immigrant from Ecuador, explored a variety of Latinx themes in her work. Basquiat's reimagining of anatomical sketches and Lady Pink's reinterpretation of 'war' photography in Latin America were the material stars of the exhibit for me, as it realized a phenomenological theory of bodies understood as both subjects and objects (Csordas 1990).

In the final themed section, 'Ascension', the future and questions of mortality collided. While the art on view here presented themes of the post-apocalyptic and robot-zombies, the real message embedded in the final section was how Basquiat and the other artists in this time and space projected themselves into this unexpected, almost unexplainable

future. Through this decentralization, done through wild experimentation of genre, subject and medium, Basquiat and others wrote a language that outlived many of them and continues to prescribe future artists, thinkers, and producers.

It is important to note here, particularly given where this review is housed, how profoundly connected the art of these 'writers' of the post-graffiti movement and the hip-hop generation is to the legacy of jazz. The early genesis of both jazz and hip-hop represent a decentralizing 'creolization' of art, music, and media. It is the aspect of 'streetification' that was so significant to the very core of the culture of music itself that—by injecting ethnic memory and subverting and recrafting genre—dismantled the notion of what music and sound could be, and who could be at the center of it (Williams 2011). In this way, jazz 'wrote the future' for hip-hop, which in turn collaborated with Basquiat and his contemporaries, who then 'wrote the future' for many other artists. Here is where I agree with the Museum of Fine Arts' thesis that the legacies of the post-graffiti movement and the hip-hop generation's artists (and jazz artists) are in a historically linked conversation with one another. They all deal with an abstraction of language, a legacy of subversion and genre remixing, and an inversion of power that is history-making. It is a language that even Korean language speakers, listening to 'Basquiat' by Pentagon, can engage with and potentially understand.

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