

NICHOLAS GAMSO – Banksy Does Basquiat

The British street artist Banksy has debuted a new work in London, this time to coincide with a Jean-Michel Basquiat retrospective at the Barbican Centre. Banksy's mural depicts British police officers frisking and interrogating a figure from Basquiat's 1982 painting "Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump." The work invites us to confront the relation between race, space, and visual technology—a relation so uncontainable, as recent events have shown, that it is quickly coming to the center of global politics.

An instinctual reaction to the piece is merely a recognition of these events—spectacular acts of state violence perpetrated against minority communities and broadcast to the world. Basquiat's figure, in this view, stands in for the subjection of young black men in urban space. In the original painting, the figure's raised hands and open arms might be perceived as a gesture of warmth. But in Banksy's mural, this gesture expresses a state of plaintive overexposure—something like the feeling voiced by the credo "hands up, don't shoot," which has been chanted at protests against police violence across the United States. The work thus alludes to the ascendance of revanchist national politics in the midst of manufactured fears of terrorism and crime. It shows the hypocrisy of a society that claims to value cultural importation but denies asylum to migrants and engages in wanton violence against people of color.

This kind of hypocrisy, a stamp of neoliberal urbanism, was on full display during Basquiat's short rise to fame. As an exceptional figure in New

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Banksy's mural outside of the Barbican Centre in London.

York's downtown gallery scene in the 1970s and 1980s, Basquiat perfected a practice of urban authenticity by performing, indeed exalting, his estrangement from the bourgeois whites who constituted his audience. Developers and gallerists reproduced this dimension of the artist's style—what New Yorker art critic Adam Gopnik termed “Madison Avenue Primitive”—by enhancing stark social and visual contrasts in gentrifying neighborhoods. [1] The marketing of urban ruins, of grit-as-glamour, became a distinctive feature of these spaces, creating a theater for contrived encounters between natives and newcomers, primitives and moderns. The vision of such encounters provided this new urbanism with a familiar aesthetic vocabulary and thus marked a continuity between broadly modern and specifically neoliberal practices of racial capitalism.

This continuity became the object of virulent critical debate. According to the influential writings of Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, the breathless reception of Basquiat's work in the pages of *Artforum* and the *Village Voice* was a clear sign that a modernist aesthetics was shaping gentrification. The revival of *la vie boheme* had not only licensed Neo-Expressionism but was a coproduction of spatial development in general. [2] In making this argument, Deutsche and Ryan cite critic Rene Ricard, who argued in *Artforum* that Basquiat's meteoric rise could be a model for branding the intuitive, childlike “genius” of black graffiti artists in New York. [3] Such artists would constitute the critic's surplus army of exploited labor. “I want my soldiers, I mean artists, to be young and strong,” Ricard wrote, “with tireless energy performing impossible feats of cunning and bravura.” [4]

This kind of rhetoric portended a new subject of capitalism—a flexible, enterprising producer-consumer—and a new urban culture characterized by commodified difference. As art historian Craig Owens suggested as early as 1984, a whole generation of cultural practitioners were forged within these novel conditions. In the earliest articulation of what would later be termed “creative class” practice, Owens argued that the productive and consumptive powers of young people, always at a crucial limit with forms of racial and sexual difference, would extend over the whole process of neoliberal urban production. [5] Basquiat's legacy thus may be understood outside of painting, outside of graffiti. In this somewhat reductive view, Basquiat's work is a model for marketing urban diversity while denying its transgressive value.



[1] Adam Gopnik, “Madison Avenue Primitive,” *The New Yorker* (November 9, 1992), 137–139.

[2] Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *October* 31 (Winter 1984): 91–111.

[3] Rene Ricard, “The Radiant Child,” *Artforum*, vol. 20, no. 4 (December 1981): 35–43.

[4] Rene Ricard, “The Pledge of Allegiance,” *Artforum*, vol. 21, no. 3 (November 1982), 49.

[5] Craig Owens, “The Problem with Puerilism,” *Art in America* (Summer 1984): 162–3. Owens, along with Deutsche, Ryan, and other students of the influential art historian Rosalind Krauss, emphasized the downtown contemporary art scene as stage for an interdisciplinary inquiry into difference, postmodernism, space, and political economy. This discourse became, as a response to the kinds of heroics expressed by Ricard in *Artforum*, one of the central lines of inquiry forged by the new journal *October*—still the most prominent venue for theoretical writings on aesthetics.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump*, 1982.

While many of Basquiat's works are charged with explicit references to colonialism and resistance, others elide these questions altogether. "Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump" may seem an example of a bowdlerized Basquiat. There are no political referents, no memories of historical violence. There is merely the urban idyll, a perfect tableau for naïve appropriation. This is not to say that race is absent from the image: the boy is black; his hair is braided. These features call to mind the overfamiliar notion that the black body is socially anomalous. But the effect is primarily graphic; it does not appear to conceal a politics. When the figure is displaced from Basquiat's field of colors, however, it attains new meaning. In front of the light stone walls of the Barbican's pedestrian corridor, the figure evokes Zora Neal Hurston's statement on achievement and alienation: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." [6]

The Barbican Centre is central to this critique. The institution has branded itself with reproductions of Basquiat's famous crown—which as critic bell hooks observed, at the height of Basquiat's popularity, symbolized the "only possible path to subjectivity for the black male artist." The crown had offered the promise of success under a certain set of racializing conditions: "You either enter the phallogocentric battlefield of representation and play the game, or you are doomed to exist outside history." [7] The reduction of a principal motif in Basquiat's work to a trademark or logo reflects the status of black masculinity as a site of total extraction.

Banksy might also be accused of participating in this process, having employed Basquiat's figure as a self-evident symbol of racial difference. The (presumably) white artist has instrumentalized one of the most visible objects of black art history in order to support an appeal for the value of urban diversity. Like the museum, and like the art bureaucracies that sustain the museum, Banksy stands to benefit from the reemergence of multiculturalism as a lodestar of liberal politics in the post-Brexit United Kingdom. While he attempts to preserve an oppositional point of view by holding the Barbican Centre as the mural's contextual referent, he nevertheless shows the limits of an institutional critique that proceeds by way of the institution's own appropriative logic. It is this logic—itsself supported by a politics of visibility—that accounts for the greater dilemmas posed by the mural.

If Banksy's use of Basquiat's work prompts us to consider the interplay of race, aesthetics, and cultural institutions as structuring features of urban development, it does so through a related line of questioning: What is the role of the visual in sanctioning racial capitalism more generally?

One answer lies in the liberal injunction to self-disclose. While "Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump" evokes the problem of disclosure by way of its transparent figure—a black body structured by a visible white skeleton—Banksy's mural engages the problem through direct political comment. Basquiat's work becomes the medium of Banksy's message by virtue of a new spatial context. The mural thus demonstrates what W.J.T. Mitchell has termed "ekphrastic hope": the hope that a visual condition (here the ubiquity of consumer urbanism and the currency of black bodies among white publics) can attain some measure of political value through expository discourse. In

[6] Zora Neal Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (Washington, DC: Library of America, 1995), 816.

[7] bell hooks, "Alters of Sacrifice: Re-memembering Basquiat," *Art in America* (June 1993); reprinted in hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36.

its attempt to “overcome otherness,” as Mitchell says, ekphrasis releases an artwork into a worldly arena of public debate—a space classically conceived as the public sphere. The term also implies an inverse hope: that an intolerable aspect of banal criticism might take flight through visual metaphor and be crystalized in the form of an image. In this way, ekphrasis may illuminate a constant interplay between complementary concepts in the social field. “Racial otherness” provides a familiar semantic repository for this idea:

RACE IS WHAT CAN BE *SEEN* (AND THEREFORE NAMED) IN SKIN COLOR, FACIAL FEATURES, HAIR, ETC. WHITENESS, BY CONTRAST, IS INVISIBLE, UNMARKED; IT HAS NO RACIAL IDENTITY, BUT IS EQUATED WITH A NORMATIVE SUBJECTIVITY AND HUMANITY FROM WHICH “RACE” IS A VISIBLE DEVIATION. IT’S NOT MERELY A QUESTION OF ANALOGY, THEN, BETWEEN SOCIAL AND SEMIOTIC STEREOTYPES OF THE OTHER, BUT OF MUTUAL INTER-ARTICULATION. [8]

[8] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 162.

In Mitchell’s understanding of this reciprocal exchange, “hope” is placed squarely in the conceptual Other, who becomes a distorted mirror for the normative subject and who thus licenses a mode of formal translation.

The extent to which this *visual-discursive relation* reappears in *spatial-political relations* is startling, especially when race is adopted as a field of referential attachment. This is very much the point Banksy makes with his mural, taking the boy and dog out of their johnnypump and recontextualizing them among the artifacts of exploitive urbanism. Basquiat’s own paintings worked by way of an opposite logic, taking the volatility of the street and displaying it on a gallery wall. While Banksy’s work thus rebukes the overt politics of the police state, where black lives are reduced to black bodies, Basquiat’s oeuvre attempted to excavate the discrete politics of “culture” in general. The relation between the works thus marks the movement between spatial and historical contexts—a transference that Soraya Murray has written about with regard to Basquiat’s purchase in the contemporary: “In the company of Basquiat’s intellectually searching works, one is quickly reminded of how much the Eighties retain their overbearing grasp on the present, and how very little of that time has been fully elucidated.” [9]

[9] Soraya Murray, “Basquiat at the Brooklyn Museum,” *NKA*, vol. 2007, issue 21 (Fall 2007): 118.

Across decades, the production of white liberal urbanism has appeared in reaction to the overdetermined black body and its exposition in urban space. Claims of an enlightened identification with the other—voiced all the time by exponents of gentrification—are made precisely by way of this exposition. So are more explicit regimes of privation, which include the building of vast surveillance and media infrastructures, ordered in relation to the specter of encroaching difference. But this reactive process also springs resistance movements—including Black Lives Matter—which produce alternative spatial and visual relations and thus alternative understandings of race and subjectivity.

While space offers the conditions for political action, the image provides a medium. Today, live video streams proliferate every conflict across countless

devices and digital platforms. These images, in their ubiquity, spill violently into the social world—saturating every aspect of collective life and provoking a helplessness that Mitchell names “ekphrastic fear.” Racial capitalism and its violent consequences are in this sense structurally inextricable from a set of visual technologies. The spectacle of Philando Castile’s murder by a Minnesota police officer, broadcast to hundreds of viewers in a Facebook video, underscores this point with appalling clarity.

The exploitation of this kind of visual conceit is so ubiquitous that many black critical cultural practitioners have voiced a preference for the politics of *opacity*. [10] This preference has been expressed, in response to the murders of young black men, as an indictment of the latent power relations that characterize calls for disclosure. As Joao-Costa Vargas and Joy James explain, taking the murder of Trayvon Martin as their principal example, these relations must themselves be challenged in order to dismantle a greater oppositional framework.

PART OF THE BROAD APPEAL, AND ULTIMATE INEFFECTIVENESS, OF ORGANIZING AROUND CASES OF LETHAL VIOLENCE AGAINST BLACKS IN THE UNITED STATES (AND IN THE BLACK DIASPORA) IS THE SEEMINGLY EVER-RENEWED WILL TO BELIEVE IN A SOCIAL ORGANIZATION, ITS INSTITUTIONS AND PEOPLE, AS IF THEY WERE NOT INTESTINALLY ANTI-BLACK, POSSESSED NO RACIAL LOGIC THAT HELD ITS OWN IN CONSISTENCY DESPITE ACTIONS THAT ARE AFFIRMATIVE OR LAWS THAT ARE CIVIL RIGHTS ORIENTED OR BLACKS THAT ARE POLICE CHIEFS, MAYORS, CEOS, GOVERNORS, OR PRESIDENTS. A GENOCIDAL LOGIC CANNOT BE ALTERED OR REMEDIED WITHOUT THE ERASURE OF BOTH PARTIES, THE COLONIZER AND THE COLONIZED.

[11]

It is through this prism that a great deal of Basquiat’s oeuvre can be viewed—as off limits to conventional modes of critical interpretation. The politics of the original “Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump” lies precisely in refusing legibility. The gush of the johnnypump, rendered in great strokes of red, tangerine, and chartreuse, obscures meaning and thus preserves some measure of autonomous subjectivity. Banksy’s work, by contrast, demands political interpretation. The artist’s trademark anonymity constitutes an embrace of universal status—his mask a digital balaclava and thus a referent for the “common people.” Yet this anonymity is also the very condition for the existence of his oeuvre, which remains illegal under most precedents.

Both works, in short, contest the proprietary bases of liberal culture and neoliberal political economy. The pairing of the works proposes that attempts to “overcome otherness” may indeed shape the extractive processes that constitute contemporary racial capitalism. [12] While much of the artistic work aimed at redressing these processes has attempted to take control of the overexposed black body, Banksy’s mural challenges the scene of object-encounter altogether and may thus be understood as an effort to radically redraw the rules of representation. It urges us to ask whether opacity, anonymity, and visual obstruction can ameliorate a collective state of “ekphrastic fear” and instead produce something altogether different: justice.

[10] See for Eduard Glissant’s discussion of the “Right to Opacity,” *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1990), 189–94; see also Audra Simpson, “Ethnographic Refusal,” *Junctures* 9 (2007): 67–80.

[11] Joao Costa Vargas and Joy James, “Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization,” in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*, eds. George Yancy and Janine Jones (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 199–200.

[12] See Simone Browne on biometrics in *On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 109–111.