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DEFACEMENT OF LIFE

Ryan Hester

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In my paper and proposition, I will seek to open and expand the viewer's current insights on graffiti art. To support my argument, I will be using Jean-Michel Basquiat's 1983 painting *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*. The title of this paper, *Defacement of Life*, is an expansion on the artwork that deals with life through a formal representation, and the paper acts as an extension of the work through an expansion of its relevance for the past, present, and future. As such, the latter part of this paper consists of a call for justice.

Graffiti seeks to provoke dialogue between the public and the political world. The American Minimalist artist Carl Andre once stated that "the time is now for artists to take political actions and [they] should take action in the art world and the world at large."<sup>1</sup> Graffiti art is revolutionary in the sense that it includes expression with life experiences while at the same time breaks breaking from the structure of the status quo by liberating itself from institutional confines. Artists such as Basquiat have found an aesthetic that molds and changes the views of political works through oblique interactions that mirror their position within society. Basquiat's work challenges us to become consciously aware of our own environment, making him one of the most prolific and exciting artists in contemporary culture.

Basquiat, an artistic genius and Neo-Expressionist painter, first garnered attention for his graffiti in New York City in the late 1970s under the pseudonym SAMO. Samo is a play on the word SAMBO meaning both a black person and "same ol' shit." Basquiat relates the meaning of this concept to life experiences, rousing an awareness to his diverse cultural background. Using a dynamic and primitive style of word fusion, the figures and symbols present in Basquiat's work

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, "From the Artist and Politics: A Symposium," *Artforum International*, (November, 2009). 22.

creates a new language similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics.<sup>2</sup> His work forever denies the viewer a clear reading of what they are seeing; it is an experience that captivates you and continues to draw you in. There are numerous examples of underlying meanings within his work such as the *Melting Point of Ice*, 1984, which expresses the moment a person transforms emotionally from being cool to outraged. There is a compressed emotion being built up and held within the figurative work, exploding simultaneously into multiple clashes. Black oppression continues to be a central issue in America; Basquiat's work is an important contribution to that legacy and offers particular relevance to a work that is created closer to his roots. He bridges the gap of adversity that fortifies the struggle of the black man in America.

There is a general ignorance when society thinks of "Black Lives Matter" and the graffiti art form, both of which one must fight for in order to protect life. In 1983 Basquiat created *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*, to memorialize Michael Stewart's death. He wanted to challenge the police brutality that black men so often face. Michael Stewart was a black man as well as a graffiti artist who was murdered by police in the streets of New York. Philip Shenon, a writer from the *New York Times*, interviewed witnesses who saw the police hitting Stewart with billy clubs while he laid passive and in handcuffs on the ground.<sup>3</sup> Stewart screamed for help but officers continued to beat, kick, and even choke him with a night stick until he stopped screaming. In the court case of Michael Stewart versus the NYPD, six officers were acquitted. The family was reminded that "justice is blind to the just." This tragedy could have easily happened to Basquiat since he was a street artist in New York at the time. I can tell

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Fretz, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: a Biography*, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Philip Shenon, Philip, "The Death of Michael Stewart," *The New York Times* (February 23, 1985).

from the way that the artist drew his image that he wanted his audience to understand and feel those atrocities through the technical sense of simplicity in the image. The black character is heavy in this image and the color black is often associated with death, power, fear, malevolence, and detachment. Black is powerful. The two pink characters set the tone for this piece by emphasizing the way in which the authorities abuse their power by beating the life out of this helpless man. The word *defacemento* drawn in the picture acts as a reference to defacement of property. The judicial system contradicts itself time and time again across the country as many police officers continue to abuse their power by using an excessive force that often escalates into manslaughter. This causes the public to distrust the law. The law was set to protect and serve but now the law is violating even that. Officers need to be held accountable for their actions. This crisis is fueling the fire of violence and causing more people to resist and fight back. Civil disobedience is the only thing that these people have against the police. Too many men of color face police brutality, whether they are artists painting on walls or just driving home while glancing at an officer. Basquiat reveals the African-American presence in America in its historical dimension. Robert Thompson, author of *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, defines Basquiat's process as, "self-creolization, which is the ability to fuse into effect his fluency in several languages. Or we could also say that he created his own language of self-emergence."<sup>4</sup> I argue that graffiti is the language he used.

Graffiti is debatably the first form of art to have ever existed. Dating back to the Lascaux Caves in France which, according to Robert Thomas, contains over six hundred paintings:

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

prehistoric artists created depictions of bulls and other animals on the cave walls more than 17,000 years ago.<sup>5</sup> Because the cave paintings were used to record what happened, I find graffiti to be very similar, reminding us of what is, and what was, important. What distinguishes street art from other forms of art is in its historical function for the voice of the people – a voice meant to be heard by the public. It is important to differentiate this form from “pure vandalism” because artists who use the streets as their medium prefer to do so because they wish to be free of the constraints of institutional formality. I do not believe that anyone knew that graffiti would evolve into an entire culture of expression, much less that it would develop into something that would come to be known as “street art.” Graffiti is the vehicle that drives street culture, creating the need to tell a story.<sup>6</sup> I find it curious that in our time of technological advertising, known otherwise as “legal graffiti,” artists still strive to make a space for their work to communicate to the masses. Under a capitalist, consumer-based society, the mainstream media paints graffiti and blacks as wild and uncontrollable.

Graffiti provides a different dimension to this scenario. Language can be used as a powerful weapon by those in power to oppress and suppress the less powerful. At the same time, the oppressed could use language to try and gain their freedom through this social and intellectual development of expression.<sup>7</sup> The function and role of graffiti will then began to take shape, acting as a weapon for this particular group of people. Graffiti acts as an avenue through which a minority group, most often in an oppressive situation, can express their opinions. In most cases such groups are usually denied other legitimate ways of expressing their opinions in matters that they feel affect them. Minority groups in this case are the key focus of social issues.

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<sup>7</sup> Franklin Sirmans, “*In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip-Hop Culture*,” in Marc Mayer, ed., *Basquiat* (London: Merrell, 2005), 91–105.

## A Call for Justice

Basquiat was famous for not avoiding social or political commentary in regards to issues of oppression. And yet, the tragic incidents of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Oscar Grant, and many more continue to suffer at the hands of an unjust and inherently racist system. Recently, I attended a peaceful protest in Los Angeles (December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014). The event included an array of ethnicities, proving that we are *all* affected by the hypocritical activities caused by the police. Protesting is only the first step in the process. And in order for our voices to continue to be heard we must continue to organize and meet within our communities. There is a big difference between protesting and organizing. Protesting provides the platform for our community to be heard; however, organizing implements the work that needs to be done.

Justice is defined as just behavior, treatment, or, "a concern for justice, peace, and genuine respect for people." The one thing that we are asking for, which is justice, is FREE. It does not cost money to simply show respect or concern for another human being. We will continue to show our respect by peacefully protesting because the moment we are disorganized, the mainstream will call us violent. The sad truth is that we don't even need a weapon to be considered dangerous; our black skin is a threat already. We must continue to strive and be patient, and just because it does not happen to you does not mean that it will not happen to you. Martin Luther King once said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." I feel that as a young African American male some of these incidents could have happened to me and in the past it almost has. I have been a victim of racial profiling and have been handcuffed because the officer thought he smelled marijuana in my vicinity. It is one of the most embarrassing and degrading feelings to be watched and treated like a criminal everywhere I go because of the color of my skin. I feel that with the Eric Garner case he was fed up with the police always harassing

him and had decided that enough was enough. The sentiment here is similar to Basquiat's expression in *Melting Point of Ice*. Is our world so desensitized that we can watch a man be killed, see the case be brought to trial, and then have the killer walk free? I'm fighting for justice. The illusion of race is the sickness. The only race is the human race.

There is a disruption in the social fabric of America. After the abolishment of slavery and the implementation of black voting rights, America has given blacks a false hope; that if a person works hard they will be accepted into the white American world. It has become grossly apparent that no matter how hard they work, racism and prejudice is inescapable in the Eurocentric world. This same notion applies to black artists as well. Through freedom of expression black artists believed there was a way out of this impenetrable problem. Keeping quiet and not complaining is what black people have grown to accept but now it is unacceptable for this hatred to continue.

Racial hatred is the disease that tears this country apart. Those that resist change are afflicted with the disease of racial hatred. The time for freedom is now, not tomorrow. We cannot wait and be patient any longer. W.E.B. Du Bois explains that, as an artist, he has an obligation to tell the truth. He states, "I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with beauty and for beauty to set the world right."<sup>5</sup> Basquiat's 1984 *Defacement* can yet again be said to mirror the death of another black male thirty years later.<sup>8</sup> His response to the brutal beating and significant death of the twenty-five year old Michael Stewart in 1983 is identical to

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<sup>5</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *W.E.B. DuBois: A Reader* (NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1995).p.511.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Emmerling, *Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1960-1988* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003). 11.

<sup>9</sup> Kellie Jones and Marc Mayer, *Lost in Translation: Jean-Michel in the (Re)Mix* (London: Merrell Publishers, 2005). 163



what is going on today in 2015. Many are fed up and outraged from the perpetual injustices resulting in the deaths of so many due to police brutality.

One of Basquiat's most prolific quotes stated that, "I don't think about art when I'm working. I try to think about life". I feel this both relates and resonates with the painful past for the black community as well as with the artist who speaks out through graffiti. Basquiat's message is still alive and well today. As police deliberately continue to kill blacks in America, society continues to be desensitized to what is going on, making viewers accept the killings as the norm. Instead of continuing the chaos, artists must create work that results in a culminating effect with an impact that hits harder than police beatings. And while art may not be the solution, it's certainly a great alternative to help the cause. I want to challenge more artists to create during this time of need. To end this, more people of all ethnicities must SPEAK up.