

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT & ANDY WARHOL 6.99 – THE MASTERPIECE OF TWO BRILLIANT HEADS

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“Down to meet Bruno Bischofberger. He brought Jean Michel Basquiat with him. He’s the kid who used the name ‘Samo’ [...]. He was just one of those kids who drove me crazy.”¹

ANDY WARHOL

It is the very first diary entry in which the famous artist, photographer, and producer Andy Warhol mentions the twenty-two-year-old newcomer artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. Warhol clearly categorized Basquiat to a bunch of young artists working at the time—yet he could not foresee that this “crazy kid” would soon become part of his inner circle as a true friend and work collaborator. In fact the two artists had already met on another occasion when Basquiat approached Warhol at the WPA restaurant to sell one of his self-made postcards in 1978.² To his surprise, Warhol acquired two of them.

Andy Warhol mutated within a short time to one of the most celebrated artistic allrounders during the early 1960s, when he began to paint comic-strip characters and images derived from advertisements such as Coca-Cola bottles or the famous Campbell’s soup cans. With the silkscreen process he generated image repetition on two-dimensional surfaces but also created sculptural works based on well-known household products. When he officially became acquainted with Basquiat through the Swiss art dealer and gallerist Bruno Bischofberger, Warhol decided to produce a series of paintings and subsequently returned to the manual working method.³ In contrast to Warhol, Basquiat was still at the very



RICHARD AVEDON
Andy Warhol, artist, New York,
August 8, 1969
Gelatin silver print
Image: 147.5 x 118 cm

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT & ANDY WARHOL
6.99, 1985
Acrylic and oil crayon on canvas
297 x 410 cm

beginning of his artistic career in 1982. He had just had his first solo show at Bruno Bischofberger’s gallery in Zurich and a few months before had been invited to participate at *documenta 7* in Kassel.⁴ Although they pursued different working methods and avowed for another perception of art, they shared a broad interest in contemporary consumerism, mass media, and popular culture. It seems that for both artists Bischofberger’s idea of collaborating at the same level came at the right moment.

Between 1984 and 1985 Warhol and Basquiat created about 130 works, a few of them executed on large-scale canvases, in Warhol’s studio at 860 Broadway, where his third “Factory” was located.⁵ The two artists were keen to react on the other’s artistic decisions. As a result Basquiat persuaded Warhol to return to hand-painted imagery, and by implication the latter showed Basquiat how to work using the silkscreen process.⁶ On many of the collaborations different layers of paint are applied. The structure of layering resulted in a back-and-forth process between the two artists which is clearly visible on the four-meter long canvas titled *6.99*, created in 1985 and currently exhibited at the Nicola Erni Collection. Several parts of this monumental work were overpainted with sweeping brush strokes of

white paint in a way that the lower layer still shines through slightly.

The applied motifs and their position on the surface disguise any narrative content at first glance. There is a larger-than-life female nude with a camouflage-like pattern hiding various body parts. Whereas Basquiat or Warhol drew this nude with a certain naturalistic claim, other figures are painted in a bold, expressive, two-dimensional way and their body parts seem to float disjointedly across the surface. At the lower edge of the painting two mirrored baseball players seem to run towards each other, the direct repetition of this subject implies its possible creator Andy Warhol. To their right, the expressive head created in strong colors reads as one of Basquiat’s recurrent and favourite subjects which he included on several individual works on paper and in paintings.⁷ Its features, the big eyes and the gaping mouth, are more reminiscent of African masks than living human beings and thus contrast with the big female nude. All over the plane, dark painted lines like surgical sutures seem to hold the canvas together. Especially the central one, consisting of three strands, is a reminder of the scars which Warhol was left with after an attack in 1968. The photographer Richard Avedon photographically documented

his body showing the torso with the structure of the scars. Such physical marks on the body were also very much part of Basquiat’s life. When he was eight years old he was hit by a car while playing in the street. He suffered a broken arm and finally had to have his spleen removed.⁸ In addition, many consumer references which Basquiat as well as Warhol included in their own individual works are repeated here in bold lettering that invoke a kind of discount campaign with reduced prices. The painted price tag “6.99” gives the painting its name.

In an interview Bruno Bischofberger recalls that this work is one of two collaborative paintings which Warhol appreciated the most.⁹ It visualizes evidently that the two artists contributed to the same extent with their bodies and minds reflecting on their shared past. On the one hand, the artistic language presents a complementary act based on common interests as friends and partners. But on the other, a glimmer of competition dominates, generated through gestural spontaneity, its overpainting and the shared critical attitude against certain social and economic values.

