The Art of Erasure: Jean-Michel Basquiat's Olympias

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The graffito, as a particular form of communication, has been extensively used throughout history, but its label has varied according to the age and context. Numerous signs show that each time has had its own vernacular marks carrying particular messages. The word "graffito" derives from the Latin *graphium* meaning "scribbling tool." *Graphium*, in turn, comes from the Greek *γράφειν*, which signifies a variety of creative activities related to visual arts, including "to draw," "to paint," and "to write" (Pereira 13). In this context, contemporary graffiti can be perceived as "modern hieroglyphics" (Keith Haring qtd. in Pereira 59), which usually incorporate drawing, painting, and writing into a complex form of visual communication which, especially since the last decades, has forged its way from the walls and objects of urban streets to museum walls and installations across the globe. This was the case of Jean-Michel Basquiat's (1960-1988) work, who used graffiti to make his visual art more persuasive.

Born in Brooklyn, the son of a Puerto Rican mother and a Haitian father, Basquiat grew up with a multicultural background, communicating in French, Spanish, and English. At the beginning of the 1980s, this *enfant terrible*, who was inscribing the walls of New York, became known for elevating the street culture of vernacular inscriptions into authentic forms bordering on high art (Davis). During the late 1970s and early 1980s, and in the midst of New York's emerging hip-hop culture, Basquiat's inscriptions were idiosyncratic "coded forms of representation" (Mirzoeff 164) emblematic of the vernacular culture of the City. Moreover, as his contemporary fellow graffiti artist, Scot Borofsky observed, Basquiat's work "typified a synthesis of the many artistic sensibilities and sociopolitical attitudes that coexisted in the late 1970s and early 1980s." Basquiat's first graffiti were conceived primarily as anti-art projects and appeared as language-oriented inscriptions signed with the "corrupted" acronym, the tag SAMO, substituting the embarrassing concoction of "Same Old" (Mirzoeff 162). During his first years as a street artist, Basquiat painted on anything he could get his hands or eyes on: his art surfaces ranged from the exterior walls of refrigerator doors, or just simply the doors of houses and flats, and various windows to numerous types of (used or reused) paper, tin foil, laboratory coats, cardboard boxes, and other unusual covers, coatings, screens, canvases, and wrappings. In 1979, the edifices of SoHo's urban environment started displaying a wide

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array of sprayed messages, among them the following: “POST NO BILLS,” “SAMO© WAS A CONGLOMERATE OF DORMANT-GENIUS,” “(SAMO©) A PIN DROPS/ LIKE A PUNGENT ODOR,,,, ” “LIFE IS CONFUSING AT THIS POINT,” “SAMO/FOR THE/ SO●CALLED/AVANT●GARD=,” along with other, multi-choice SAMO pieces (Davis), which shortly took control over the space they had been marked on. Gradually, with an increasing number of SAMO©—with the ironic copyright symbol attached—graffiti appearing on the streets of New York, Basquiat’s *nom de plum* became more than a usual tag: it reflected a definite artistic credo that aimed to be a “challenge to public order” and “an assault on the hegemonic values of the art world” (Mirzoeff 164). According to the artist himself, SAMO was

> . . . a new art form. SAMO as an end to mindwash religion, nowhere politics and bogus philosophy. SAMO as an escape clause. SAMO saves idiots. SAMO as an end to bogus pseudo intellectual. [. . .] SAMO as an alternative to God. SAMO as an end to playing art. SAMO as an end 2 Vinyl Punkery. SAMO as an expression of spiritual love. SAMO for the so-called avant-garde. SAMO as an alternative 2 playing art with the “radical chic” set on Daddy’s $funds. SAMO as an end 2 confining art terms. [. . .] SAMO as an alternative to the “meat rack” arteest on display.
>
> (Basquiat qtd. in Emmerling 12)

Due to his growing popularity among the street public, Basquiat-SAMO was soon commissioned to decorate the walls of various clubs, but he had to earn his living mostly by producing hand-painted postcards and creating diverse collages that sold for a few dollars. Later, the result of a smart strategy of putting his pieces next to New York’s SoHo art galleries on the night before the opening of an important art event (Mirzoeff 164), the art connoisseurs started taking notice of his “scratches” that, set in a completely different context, began to be reconsidered as possible valuable artifacts. Placed *de facto* at the threshold of canonized visual arts, the transgressive SAMO graffiti were thus on their way not only to be known by the art elites, but also *en route* to become appreciated and accepted as new artistic forms by the formal art world. Then Basquiat gradually went back to the “vocabulary of modern art for the technical means and painterly styles that would accommodate his message” (Borofsky). Shortly after this conscious intrusion of street art into the exhibition rooms of downtown Manhattan and world galleries, his name began to be known first in the Big Apple’s select art circles, and then throughout the entire art world; as a result, his artistic endeavors

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soon sold extremely well, and he became as famous as the rock celebrities and film stars of his time, receiving the nickname "the Eddie Murphy of the art world" (Schnabel). Paradoxically, Basquiat later denied any connection with graffiti art (Pereira 54), unlike his equally famous peer graffiti artist and social activist, Keith Allen Haring (1958-1990), who remained a faithful adept of the art form that launched his name to fame.

With his visual works, Basquiat posed a real challenge to previous modes of visual representation in urban America. An ironic art maverick, he sensed that the "division line between high art and trivial culture that Pop Art questioned and transgressed" was less radical for what he coined as "Neo Art form" (Emmerling 8, 11) and, therefore, he applied a "boom for real" style that aimed to reflect a galaxy of exploded reality which was, at the same time, both incredibly exciting and irritatingly powerful. This uncompromising sense of style was another factor that catapulted him into a canonized status in contemporary art (Davis). Besides the influence of various anatomy books, historical texts and data, jazz music, popular culture, museum exhibitions, and films, Basquiat's paintings inherited much from the semiotics and practice of the graffiti: his honestly straightforward representations and the use of words appear in an ingenuously candid, unrefined form that hide powerful but subtly packed messages of basic truths locked within a given event and thought (Hoffman). In connection with the use—and abuse—of words in this visual poetry-type of art, Basquiat confessed that his aim was to exploit the curiosity of the audience by testing the limits of the viewer's inquisitiveness; he said that "I cross out words so you will see them more: the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them" (qtd. in Davis). Nevertheless, a central part of Basquiat's art was the human figure. Soon after he was discovered, Basquiat "abandoned the automobile and cityscape as subject, and introduced his unique depiction of man," specifically that of the black subject (Borofsky).

Furthermore, many of Basquiat's canvasses painted with words and focusing on the human body also display references to the works of great masters, or simply paraphrase their themes. SAMO, as many of his precursors, reinterpreted the works of other, intriguing artists by improvising, as he claimed, "a total revision" of another art piece, as if "someone's idea was going through a new mind" (qtd. in Davis). Among other emblematic images in his appropriation of various masters (Moore Saggese 72), Basquiat re-visioned Leonardo da Vinci's *La Gioconda* (1503-1519) in his *Mona Lisa*, painted in 1983; redrew Vincent Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889) as *Untitled Head of a Madman* (1982); paraphrased Pablo Picasso's *Le*

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Demoiselle d'Avignon [*The Young Ladies of Avignon*] (1907) in *Untitled* (1983); and recast Jackson Pollock's *Stenographic Figure* (1942) in his *Profit 1* (1982).

One of the most intriguing reinterpretations of a masterwork is, however, also one of his most celebrated paraphrase-paintings, *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant* (1982), with which Basquiat recreated the world of Édouard Manet's legendary *Olympia* (1863) by deleting the figure of the black woman servant that counterpoints the figure of the white female nude, combined with references to Edgar Degas's works (Moore Saggese 72). Manet's work, conceived as a version to Titian's *Venus d'Urbino*, which was painted in 1538, displays a reclining white nude—obviously, the courtesan Olympia—who is looking at her audience with a powerful, outward stare, confronting the viewer with an unexpected gaze.[1]

As Borofsky recalled, Manet's *Olympia* held special interest for Basquiat because of the "black maid at Olympia's side" reminding him of "the Aztec female earth goddess, Tlazolteotl" that "intrigued him because she is also referred to as the goddess of vice and 'filth eater,' personifying cruel and evil forces"; she has, according to Borofsky, a "black face soap," which was "a joke item advertised in the back of comic books, represented the internalized racism characteristic of American society and promulgated in young readers."

Manet's anti-academic painting caused an ardent public dispute when it was first exhibited in Paris because, for the curators and some of the artists exhibiting there, its subject alongside its composition suggested an excessive sexuality quite unusual in Western academic arts for those times. And indeed, this painting displays a candid scene from a French brothel, a far too explicit manifestation of corrupt eroticism, too abrasive for the prudish target audience of those times. The African servant in the background and the black cat encode the presence of lavish sensuality, open prostitution, and the dangers of venereal disease, marking the painting as an excessively intimate representation of a house of ill repute. Olympia's accessories—her choker, Oriental shawl, bracelet, earrings, and exotic slippers, as well as the orchid in her hair—are some of the "visual clues" (Mirzoeff 177) that identify her not as a simple prostitute but a high-class courtesan staring in the eyes of those who look at her. Moreover, the figure of the ebony-colored cat—usually an accompanying icon of witches and an emblem of lawlessness in European symbolism—along with the figure of the black helper reinforce Olympia's status as a "fallen woman" (Mirzoeff 178). As Sander Gilman writes,"[B]lack females do not merely represent the sexualized female; they also represent the female as source of corruption and disease. It is the black female—as

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emblem of illness—who haunts the background of Manet's *Olympia*" (qtd. in Mirzoeff 174). Actually, most Occidental pictures about harems hold an ambivalence "heightened by the desire to transgress its boundaries," which "had only been reinforced and reinvigorated by the pathologization of the Orient" (Mirzoeff 111). The stigmatization of the Oriental is revealed through the body of the black female servant, who is marginalized in her gendered, racial, Oriental Other position. She stands behind Olympia's bed, part of an enigmatically dim background in which she virtually blends into; while the harem, as the location of tabooed sensuality, becomes Westernized through the microcosm of a Parisian brothel.

In this context, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Odalisque with a Slave* (1839-1840) can be considered a more genuine precursor of Manet's *Olympia* than Titian's masterpiece. Ingres's work—similar in its gender representation to that of Francisco Goya's *La maja desnuda* [*The Nude Maja*] (1797-1800)—renders an analogous subject and an identical visual set-up with that of Manet's. Moreover, in the *Zeitgeist* of mid-nineteenth-century France, Ingres's painting was considered less provocative than Manet's *Olympia* because the visual horizon of the time accepted Ingres's work as fashionable, Orientalist discourse conceived as an innocently curious introspection into the "exotic," virtually inaccessible "alterity of the harem" (Mirzoeff 114), which was, for most Westerners at the time, a fantasy displayed as "mythical domestic sphere" (115) inhabited by the sultan's concubines. *Odalisque* and *Olympia*, however, have an intriguing point in common besides the representation of the central woman, and that concerns the issue of race. In spite of gender differences, the black eunuch in the background of Ingres's work has the same function as the black servant in Manet's painting: placed in the darkest corner of the room, he remains secluded in a mysterious shade, conveying an abundance of exoticism and sexual excess that the passive, white nude is not able to fully accomplish by herself—and even less only in the presence of her white musician-companion. For this reason, the world of the Odalisque constitutes a paradigmatic representation of not only gender power relations but also of an underlying racism (Emmerling 50) and Oriental stereotyping customary in mainstream nineteen-century Western visual arts.[2]

At first, Manet's work was not just a subtle transgression into the world of forbidden desires by enhancing an increased activity on the part of a more daring nineteenth-century viewer. *Olympia*, however, held an engaging trick: it changed the usual voyeur-power of the spectator into that of the courtesan's intriguingly direct stare, daring to look back at those who ventured to peep into her world. While her attractive body poses invitingly,

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her eyes and gaze depict a powerful, assertive, independent woman, who can easily manipulate anyone by looking fearlessly back—at her possible customers. Olympia's commanding stare elevates her from a submissive prostitute to a skilled observer of her client's assets. And for nineteen-century art audiences, this defiant, provocative stare was more than troublesome; it made this work of art in 1865 an unwanted, dangerously immoral apparition in the Paris Salon. Later, however, this feature made *Olympia* the seminal painting of early modernism (Emmerling 50).

119 years later, Basquiat's *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant* was conceived as the artist's "interpellation of the modernist construction of a visual system around racial difference" and, subsequently, as "exploration of an alternative notion of identity" (Mirzoeff 168). The American painter, by aiming to erase the racial difference present in the original painting, simply "took away" the black servant and inserted instead a number of special cultural codes into his homage to Manet's *Olympia*, considered "one of the high points of the art historical canon in general and that of modernism in particular" (Mirzoeff 179) also during Basquiat's time. But this erasure emphasized even more the artist's preoccupation with the issue of race because with the absence of the black figure he created a "painting of Olympia alone" (Smith 112) with the servant present subversively in the title below the canvas.[3]

The oversimplified, naïve figure of Olympia's head and hand constitute a re-tagging of the initial painting's *pars pro toto*. Basquiat's canvas features only three-quarters of Manet's Olympia because in the creative transposition of the American artist she has been deprived of her gender, another significant element of identity representation. In his otherwise detailed analysis of Basquiat's *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant*, Mirzoeff, however, fails to mention portrayals of gender and focuses on the agency of race by obviously assuming that the title makes gender issues clear. Despite the straightforwardness of the title, the painting still suggests the opposite: the visually disembodied Olympia, dispersed into metaphorical body fragments becomes, as Mirzoeff suggests, a "bald, frightening" genderless "creature, reaching for the spectator with her massive disembodied hand" (179). Mirzoeff's word choice for Olympia—"creature" rather than woman—is symptomatic of this gender neglect. In addition, the face of the "creature" is far from being feminine at all; it rather depicts an androgynous figure, which, in the absence of the title, suggests a genderless person and not a woman. Furthermore, the right eyebrow of this figure, which is the focal point at the center of the painting, consists of two thick

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black strokes of paint that stand as a memento for the (absent) African maid, who has been obliterated from this work. The "liberated" black servant's figure in *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant* is consequently substituted by three (obviously white) peeping faces (caught behind the strokes of white paint like the large bars of an imaginary cage), who represent clients the "creature" entrapped from outside by her powerful gaze and placed them into the confined world of a new visual syntax.

Basquiat's pastiche-vision of the famous nude transcends not only the category of race but also that of gender by addressing universal issues in which the painter's "freedom of his own creative expression" goes along with his "requirements of social responsibility" (Hoffman "The Defining Years"). The modernist dichotomy of the white-black and woman-man is erased here allowing for more openness in Olympia's twentieth-century interpretation. Furthermore, Basquiat's *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant* has several intriguing graffiti paraphrasing a couple of cultural codes the initial painting contained. The most important allusion, as Mirzoeff emphasizes, is ""WOMAN DRY/ HER NECK" by EDGAR©," referring to Edgar Degas' *La Toilette* [*Woman Combing Her Hair*] (1884-1886) and *After the Bath, Woman Drying Her Nape* (1890-1895). Both Degas paintings display the importance and practice of hygiene that was intrinsically linked in the nineteenth century with prostitution. The letter 'N' in the top left part of the painting refers to the initial of the last French emperor's name, **N**apoleon III, that appears next to the stylized coat of arms of the House of Bonaparte. These cultural codes allude to the French socio-political context of Manet's *Olympia*, which was painted during the transitional period between the fall of the Second Empire and the assumption of the Third Republic in France and, as such, consciously place the picture into this socio-political discourse that further encodes the work's reading. Furthermore, the third graffito on Basquiat's canvas features the word "ABSYNTH[E]," an alcoholic drink popular among the bohemian artists and progressive minds of the nineteenth-century France. Basquiat's insertion of this word alongside three peeping male figures on the right side (referring either to Olympia's past or prospective clients) can be read as the American artist's own indication of the "key social problems of the period" (Mirzoeff 178), especially in terms of alcohol or drug abuse in certain environments and the subsequent aggression that follows these addictions.

Basquiat's *Olympia* resulted in a "black painted outline" with "figures and words" that have "been overpainted" and "obliterated, especially by the swathes of white paint which seem designed to erase the painting altogether," claimed Mirzoeff (173-74), and proposed that this picture be seen as an

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"exploration of the longevity of cultural stereotypes of race" and as an experiment of which of these were simply "bypassed" (177) either by removal of figures or by any other artistic means. By exporting the black servant into a "series of re-imaginings of Olympia" (177), and especially into that of the *Untitled* (*Maid from Olympia*), Basquiat, according to Mirzoeff, managed to eliminate the dichotomy of race in the manner Manet's painting exposed it by confronting "(the mostly) white New York art public" with a new work seemingly devoid of "racial difference" (179).[4]

Interestingly, although an essential part in representing the reinterpretation of race, Mirzoeff does not write about another important derivative *Olympia* work by Basquiat. Nevertheless, one of the most intriguing paintings in the painter's oeuvre is *Untitled* (*Maid from Olympia*), made in the same year as *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant* and which focuses on the black maid that has been wiped out of *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant*. In *Untitled* (*Maid from Olympia*), the black figure does not seem to be have been a servant (before). Despite the parenthesized title (which directs us to the origin of the work), the main title allows a free play of interpretations alluding to an emancipated person. Moreover, separated from Olympia, the black figure's gender here is obvious through her accessories: she is a black woman placed in the center of the work taking Olympia's place and perhaps even her role, too. Whiteness is thus erased from this canvas as blackness has been in the other. In a similar line of thought as in the previous painting, this work represents either racial erasure (as in *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant*) from its modernist circumstance or, on the contrary—and especially in the nascent post-colonial streams of the eighties in the US and throughout the world—it can be read as an explicit illustration of race in the twentieth century with an African woman at the center of the field of vision. And indeed, the figure from *Untitled* (*Maid from Olympia*) suggests a powerful black presence: the woman poses as a diva by holding as her paraphernalia a huge bouquet of flowers. The liberated maid becomes a "dignified figure" (Smith 113), despite the fact that she looks cartoonish or unpolished, posing—in bel hooks' words—as "ugly and grotesque" (343). Additionally, the caption on the lower left side of this work features the following graffito: "DETAIL OF/ MAID FROM "OLYMPIA"/ ©." This caption draws attention to the details of the maid's body, which connect the figure to her African or Caribbean heritage represented by the scarf, the ethnic jewelry of round earrings and the big necklace. Besides, she is framed in a "blaze of red paint which drips like blood" (hooks 343), embodying the anguish inflicted by the colonization of the black body and mind, a representation functioning also

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as a critique of colonialism (Smith 114). As almost all of Basquiat's works, *Untitled (Maid from Olympia)* contains two indecipherable symbols: "100/49" and "#27," probably suggesting visually unpresentable experiences to which one can only refer in terms of numbers. With Olympia and the cat absent from the set, the Maid rules over her new space of encounters populated with black, yellow, red, and white pools symbolizing human skin colors, all an integral part of her discourse in which she can set her "FEET" free, as the painting suggests.

Overall, the woman in *Untitled* (*Maid from Olympia*) appears more stylish than Manet's servant, and unlike Basquiat's Olympia, she has retained her gender marks while achieving an obvious power over her context. Moreover, her configuration shifts from Manet's black servant lurking in the chiaroscuro of the painting's background through Basquiat's erasure-pastiche into an *Untitled* position of a gratified postmodern figure that not only looks back but also talks with the narrative power of graffito-words by which she attains a commanding presence. In terms of representing racial equality, *Untitled (Maid from Olympia)* proved more successful than *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant*. The latter erased the black figure from the binary set-up of a modernist context in order to remove any trace of racial difference; the first deleted the white figure but placed the African maid at the center along with all colors and races present in the field of vision. And whereas *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant* offers "the West an image of its own imaginary" (Mirzoeff 179), the derivative work of *Untitled* (*Maid from Olympia*) is more inclusive and tells a more complete visual story of equally important colors and races in contemporary visual arts.

Leonardo da Vinci did not believe that "one body alone could signify perfectly without outside assistance" and argued that the "natural figure of Man needed to be completed and supplemented with artificial techniques of the body" (qtd. in Mirzoeff 21). Olympia alone could not signify perfectly in Manet's painting: she needed the black servant. She could not signify perfectly either in Basquiat's three-quarters rehash, nor could the Maid in *Untitled*. The split of Manet's work into two Basquiat derivatives conceived as fragmented bodies by the art of erasure recast not only Olympia but also her assisting figures into da Vinci's interpretive frame: they signify perfectly only if "completed and supplemented" with effective graffiti techniques to express both race and gender by emphasis or lack thereof.

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Notes

A shorter version of this essay appeared in *Költők, kémek, detektívek, pirítós és fordítások: Írások Novák György tiszteletére. Poets, Spies, Detectives, Pieces of Toast, and Translation: Essays in Honor of György Novák*. Ed. Vajda Zoltán. Szeged: JATE P, 2012. 33-42. Print.

[1] Édouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863). Oil on canvas painting. 130.5 × 190 cm, 51 x 74.8 in. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (musee-orsay.fr/en/home.html).

[2] Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with a Slave* (1839-1840). Oil on canvas, 72.1 x 100.3 cm, 28 3/8 x 39 ½ (harvardartmuseums.org)

[3] Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Three-Quarters of Olympia Minus the Servant* (1982). Acrylic, crayon, oil paintstick, graphite, and paper collage on canvas mounted on tied wood supports. 121.9 x 111.8 cm, 48 x 44 in. The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat (http://basquiat.com)

[4] Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Maid from Olympia)* (1982). Acrylic, crayon, oil paintstick and paper collage on canvas mounted on tied wood supports (private collection).

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