

TIKTOK ART. THE TAXIDERMISTRY OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

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Abstract

Performativity can rob movements, phenomena, places, and images of their substance. The purpose of this article is to study this function, as it engages with the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat. His work has been subjected to this process, suffering a taxidermy. His method, context, social engagement, and the urgency characteristic to his art have been reduced to self-referential symbols. This paper introduces the original concept of artistic taxidermy, aiming to analyze the evisceration undergone by the conceptual content of Basquiat's work, while providing a theoretical filter for the distinction between authentic artistic intention and taxidermy.

Keywords: Jean-Michel Basquiat; taxidermy; visual art; simulation; performativity.

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2026/22/1.02

1. Introduction

The enduring artistic legacy of Jean-Michel Basquiat occupies a paradoxical position as one of the most commercially potent yet critically intricate phenomena within the modern art canon. His art, forged at the volatile confluence of Neo-Expressionism, street iconography, and incisive social critique in 1980s New York, commands a formidable aura, an ineluctable presence rooted in its unique socio-historical moment.

However, in subsequent decades, Basquiat's essential visual lexicon – the signature crowns, skeletal motifs, and chaotic typography – has been decontextualized and assimilated, achieving unimpeded circulation across social media, most notably within the ephemeral format of short-form video art on TikTok. This paper undertakes a systematic analysis of the critical ramifications arising from this digital transformation.

This article introduces the original concept of artistic taxidermy, providing a derivative theoretical framework and an identification procedure. Employing the established theoretical tools of Walter Benjamin, specifically his concepts of aura, cult value, and exhibition value, in conjunction with Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation, and guided by John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, this study will systematically juxtapose Basquiat's pivotal original works against their

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contemporary digital echoes. It proposes a few characteristics of artistic taxidermy executed on the work of artists in the name of performativity, as well as a filter for identifying it. The case of Jean-Michel Basquiat provides a clear example of this phenomenon.

Thus, this paper will set to briefly explore the artistic taxidermy undergone by the visual vocabulary of Jean-Michel Basquiat, its evisceration in the process of “trendification” and performative reduction and imitation. The term it proposes, artistic “taxidermy” is meant to denominate an ampler phenomenon of deterioration through borrowing of visual elements while eviscerating the ineluctable social and political aspect of art and artmaking. The subsequent sections of this article will serve to provide the contextualization and the theoretical groundwork necessary for a proper triangulation of this novel concept in the wider field of cultural studies and critical engagement with art.

The process of taxidermy, of losing the “viscera” while maintaining the outer, immediately recognizable, layer, is not exclusive to the oeuvre of Jean-Michel Basquiat; nevertheless, this study employs his art pieces in order to exemplify the concept of taxidermy, and to offer a materialization of the theoretical filter created to distinguish this phenomenon from that of simple imitation or inspiration. The emergence of Basquiat-inspired art content on the social media platform TikTok is yet to be addressed in research or academic literature. The legacy of Basquiat is still visible and remains relevant in the art community as it appears in online spaces.

Furthermore, recent developments in the field that lies at the intersection of art history and cultural studies, have emphasized the importance of Basquiat’s work and artistic persona as a transition signifier, moving the art scene closer to commerce and publicity (Saggese, 2014: 1). In spite of the overarching research on the social content of his art, and its economic implications (Garay et al, 2022: 306), extending into contemporaneity, relatively little attention has been given to this phenomenon. It is the primary purpose of this study to shed light on this transformation, from a “living” body of art to a taxidermied object to be exposed.

Once the theoretical basis for the definition and recognition of this cultural phenomenon will have been established, a procedure will be described and put in place within the case study. Basquiat’s easily recognizable artistic style, rooted in his own experience and struggle, and constantly informed by anatomy, street-art, and pop culture, serves to provide a clear example of taxidermy. The TikTok artworks to be examined through this procedure by no means represent an affront to the oeuvre or legacy of Basquiat. They simply represent an instance of artistic taxidermy. The following sections of this study will aim to explore and explain this phenomenon and its implications.

2. Jean-Michel Basquiat – the Legacy

The art of Jean-Michel Basquiat shook the late 20th century scene, forcing uncomfortable confrontations with racism and images of real-life brutality, while his public image spoke about identity construction – crammed in between marginalization and fame – and the increasingly intimate relationship developing between art and commerce (Saggese, 2014: 1). A series of coordinates are required in order to produce an ample, albeit determined, observation of the place and legacy of Jean-Michel Basquiat within but not exclusive to the art scene.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, as an icon of Neo-Expressionism (Emmerling, 2003: 8), the direct descendant of Pop art (Hoban, 1998: 24), projected, along his messages and unique artistic methods, a solid persona of a young celebrity painter, closer to the aura of a rockstar (Hoban, 1998: 31), akin to Jimi Hendrix, for whom he held a particular admiration (Saggese, 2014: 194). His paintings touched on racial identity, police brutality, fighting, isolation, money, death (Rosenmeyer, 2014: 172). His art has been described as indicative of “unbelievable skills, [...] highly complex intellectual references, [...] evocative, emotional courage” (Rosenmeyer, 2014: 173).

In paintings such as “La Hara” (1981), “Irony of the Negro Policeman” (1981), “Ashes” (1981), “All Colored Cast” (Parts I, II and III) (1982), “The Death of Michael Stuart”, also known as “Defacement” (1983), “Aboriginal” (1984), “Created Equal” (1984), “Jim Crow” (1986), “Caucasian, Negro” (1987) etc., Basquiat tackles race and racism, exploring elements of his individual identity (such as his Puerto Rican descent in the meaning and titling of *La Hara*), as well as elements of collective identities, depicting phenomena such as police brutality, incarceration, racial discrimination, and representation. His art appears striking and sincere, lacking in encodement and euphemism (Saggese, 2011: 89-90) (Connolly, 2018: 2).

Furthermore, works such as “Untitled” (Fallen Angel) (1981), “Poison Oasis” (1981), “Untitled” (Skull) (1982), “Eroica” (1987), “Riding with Death” (1988) etc. deal with morality, mortality, and fate. His work depicting death uses the same sincerity, while his perspective resembles his development of artistic technique: he learned about art simply “... by looking” (Gotthardt, 2019). Furthermore, this message is transmitted through his distinctive style, created with a borderline-anatomic method, inspired by his convalescent study of the notorious handbook, “Grey’s Anatomy” (Saggese, 2014: 63); this style appears, in the words of Jeffrey Deitch, as “a knockout combination of de Kooning and subway spray-paint scribbles” (Nairne, 2017: 20) (Gotthardt, 2017).

Therefore, Basquiat’s artistic project was rooted in and characterized by raw engagement with the socio-political exigencies of his era, offering a deconstruction and reconstruction of racial injustice and lived experience spread out between two

disconnected realities: money, stardom and glory, and marginalization, dissonance, discrimination. His recognizable method and style were an aesthetic choice, while simultaneously serving as a critical instrument of dissection. His art dismembered and analyzed old and new social wounds.

The truth in the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat is tied to the reality and experience it represented. This representation can sometimes outlive the aspect that is represented (Berger, 1972: 10). Subsequent to establishing the previous coordinates concerning his work, the perspective of this article will shift its focus on the analysis of the transformation undergone by the image, message, and method of Basquiat. The following sections will provide a definition for this transformation, a framework and methodological aspects for its analysis.

3. The Taxidermy

A taxidermy is performed by shelling the object, filling it with placeholders meant for endurance and appearance, and displaying it. This paper argues that the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat has been subjected to a taxidermy. Though the entire theoretical framework for the concept of artistic or cultural taxidermy cannot be established through the mere induction of the example provided by this study, it nevertheless aims to begin delimitating and establishing the theoretical coordinates for this original concept. The taxidermy of Jean-Michel Basquiat represents, thus, the borrowing of the visual vocabulary of his work, reproducing the surface while leaving behind the “viscera” of his artistic expression.

This evisceration of meaning, intention, or expression is final; there is no transplant of new meaning, intention, or expression. The act of taxidermy is the preservation of dead beings into a life-like position and shape, maintaining the outer appearance of an animal and decontextualizing it by turning it into a piece of décor. The look of a living, breathing being is the only thing that remains, since it is no longer living or breathing, and has been turned from a being to an inanimate object to be exhibited. The same process happens, albeit in the plane of symbols and meaning, for works of art that are repurposed into hollowed out aesthetic displays of themselves.

The beginning of the dissection and taxidermy of Basquiat lay in the commodification and subsequent “trendification” of his substantive oeuvre, that have given way to derivative artistic practices done in the name and style of Basquiat, with a visible lack of contextual engagement that was characteristic to his work. These contemporary appropriations, while echoing Basquiat visuals, are taxidermies. They are void of the original Basquiat substance and intention, and often manifest as performative acts of mimicry.

The taxidermy of Basquiat becomes visible through the observation of the placement of artistic intention: the taxidermies preserve the exterior of his style, with a

consistent lack of socio-political “organs”, that used to give Basquiat’s work its power, via recognizable “peculiarly political sensibility” (Ricard, 1981: 42). The re-popularization of Neo-Expressionism that has become visible on social media such as TikTok in the recent years (adamecrossbyw, 2024) (White Court Art, 2023) has given rise to an amount of Basquiat mimicry so significant that other artists now clarify they are not emulating him, in order to keep viewers engaged [for example Julia Wheatley (wheatatreat, 2024), Clara T. (clarity_t_, 2024), Sofia Garza (bloomandbowsart, 2024)].

Primarily, the “trendification” presents a remnant of Basquiat, a visual representation of his particular style that appears sometimes merely ossified, and other times entirely hollowed out. Basquiat’s artistry stemmed not solely from his visual lexicon, but also from the interactions in the plane of meanings. Symbols, textual fragments, themes, methods were more than just an artistic choice (Emmerling, 2003: 36).

This surge of copycats, notably on social media platforms, starkly severs his style from its vital contextual roots. A telling example is his crown motif (Ricard, 1981: 37): scholars interpret it as a complex symbol – royalty, martyrdom, self-awareness, race (Rosenmeyer, 2014: 171). Yet, in these derivative works, it often becomes a simple embellishment, its historical and personal weight lost. Similarly, Basquiat’s deliberate, confrontational, and deconstructed (Ricard, 1981: 37) use of text is frequently reduced to illegible scribbles in imitations, its critical power neutered. This superficial visual appropriation, detached from its intellectual and emotional origins, enacts a performative mimicry. The same phenomenon of hollowing out motifs has not spared other elements of the Basquiat visual universe, such as the skull, the Black head, the iron bars, the veins etc. [see Parker Hippe (parkerhippe____. 2025) and Brody Sol (brody_sol_art, 2024)]. The appearance of Basquiat’s art is there. However, its substantive and critical intent has been eviscerated.

Furthermore, social media, notably TikTok, cultivates a culture of rapid visual assimilation, wherein the elaborate artistic idiom of Basquiat is frequently reduced to easily reproducible aesthetic signifiers. As long as it replicates the Basquiat aesthetic values, it is sufficient for the algorithm and its users. This trend-driven approach prioritizes surface resemblance for online validation and sales, obscuring any meaning or emotional urgency that were undeniably linked to his artistic act. The copycats perform none of the fragmented realities, none of the anxieties, or no other meaning besides pure aesthetic resemblance, thus successfully producing a series of visual tropes. The raw linearity and immediacy of the original technique devolve into mere ornamentation. The prevalent focus on this ornamentation reveals the performative aestheticism of the “movement”, where the visual performance of Basquiat’s style is emptied of its contents and repackaged as a readily consumable aesthetic commodity, the vital organs discarded through imitation, in the ultimate act of taxidermy.

The fundamental origins of this phenomenon of performativity, despite their relevance to a comprehensive understanding of its mechanics in eviscerating artistic substance, fall beyond the purview of this concise analysis. Their coordinates can vary and be attributed to several phenomena, from the rise of short-form content and the dominion of social media (Gomes, 2022), to human hypocrisy (Rothman, 2014: 31), to the fall of the artisan class (Farr, 2006: 98), forcing artists into content creation.

Once the taxidermy has been identified, a set of theoretical tools is required in order to produce observations on this process. The evisceration of original artistic intention and contextual engagement is undergone through a transmutation towards another category of intention, represented by performativity.

4. Performativity and Simulation

The transformation from a substantiated intention to just the appearance or a performance of it, can amputate the essence out of movements, phenomena, places, and images. While the immediately recognizable outer shell of the object is maintained, an evisceration is performed. Performativity presents a taxidermied version of the original, as the original, stripping various vital aspects. It represents both a replacement and a sacrifice, its cost being a harmful reduction of the object, the intention of it being gutted and replaced with performance for its own sake.

The art world is constantly negotiating its function against the risk of falling into performativity. The act of saying something elicits a reaction – perception, interaction, revolt, negation, but it is equally prone to being repurposed into the act of pretending to say something. When art is repackaged, one must always wonder why.

The repackaging – via resurrections and imitations – can arrive as an answer to a need. This need can be localized anywhere on the plane of intention, from the genuine demand for a message which has already been told, to a bringing forth of an old value, and even to a commodification of the original art. This substitution is the essence of performative replication. This last iteration of imitation operates not in order to extend the original message, but to cite its form in a ritualistic and repetitive identity meant to cover the loss of artistic substance. When this phenomenon seizes the oeuvre of a specific artist as its object, a taxidermy happens. The original methods, messages, and styles are hollowed out and presented to the audience in a show of similitude.

In order to identify the occurrence of this process, a theoretical filter is required. This filter is created through a set of concepts, and it aims to provide a basis of judgment for the identification of artistic taxidermy. Performativity as the basis for this taxidermy is defined in a Butlerian manner, as “not a singular act, but a repetition

and a ritual” (Butler, 1999: xv), whereas the nature of performative replication is explained through Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum, and the filter is structured via Benjamin’s concept of aura.

The idea of performativity emerged from John Austin’s “Performative Utterances”, as a linguistic observation on the function of some utterances. These performative utterances are neither true nor false, and the person making them is using them to signify doing something rather than simply saying something (Austin, 1979: 235). An utterance is, thus, regarded as performative when it carries out the action stated by itself. Furthermore, by extrapolating Judith Butler’s understanding, performativity is a repetition of acts that have undergone stylization (Butler, 1988: 519). Ergo, in visual arts, performativity is reached through repeated stylization and reproduction, to the point where the initial or original meaning has gone from being reproduced to being implied, referenced, and eventually lost in the efforts of constructed similarity.

Performativity in visual arts is achieved through repeated simulation of the original, through self-sufficient, referential imitation. The taxidermy undergone by the visual vocabulary of Basquiat can be further understood as the Baudrillardian simulation – surpassing representation and opposing it. Representation aims towards equivalence to its object, whereas simulation encompasses and surpasses it in endless, alienating reference (Baudrillard, 1995: 6). Taxidermy empties the object of content and context, losing original artistic intention without replacing it with any other meaning.

Subjecting Basquiat’s artistic motifs and methods to taxidermy deprives them of any original significance, while maintaining similar aesthetic features in order to preserve a connection to Basquiat. The repeated imitation of his artistic style estranges similarity from admiration, artistic inspiration or position; similarity for the sake of similarity arises.

4.1 The originality-performativity distinction

Once the definitions and implications have been explored, the final step for constructing the filter of distinction between truthful artistic intention and taxidermy is the development of a procedure of recognition. Thus, the framework of distinction relies on Jean Baudrillard’s simulation, and Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. This framework shall serve as the contrasting substance for the case study of this article.

The first lens of this theoretical filter is based on Benjamin’s concept of aura. The aura of a work of visual art lies in its “presence in time and space” (Benjamin, 1969: 4), determined by the precise coordinates of its existence, the core of its authenticity (Benjamin, 1969: 3). The loss of aura alienates the object from its original historical landscape. In the distinction mechanism of this paper, the aura coordinates of a work

of art are established through contextualization. Since social and political “viscera” were representative for the work of Basquiat, an observation of their presence or absence can contribute to the identification of artistic taxidermy. When one engages with a taxidermied version of Basquiat, the essential act of situating oneself in the historical landscape provided by art (Berger, 1972: 11) does not happen anymore.

The second lens is rooted at the intersection of Benjamin’s critique of reproduction and Baudrillard’s perspective on simulation. According to Baudrillard, the alienating simulation “is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (1995: 2). Mechanical reproduction, in its capacity to estrange the original from itself and its context (Benjamin, 1969: 4-5), is akin to trendified imitation of visual art. Taxidermy arises when the initial intention is lost under layers of reference and stylistic borrowing.

The final lens relies on the dichotomy of cult value and exhibition value (Benjamin, 1969: 7). While earlier art emphasized the ceremonial aspect of creating, hidden from critique, recent developments focus on showcasing new productions. Therefore, “its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature” (Benjamin, 1969: 7). Imitation and mass production weigh more than depth and original intent. Furthermore, through continuously emerging, self-referential layers, the imitations (taxidermies) create a simulation of the represented original. The cult value/exhibition value dichotomy is visible when dealing with Basquiat and his taxidermy: his work started as an artistic intervention in the public space, whereas the contemporary emulation of his style appears as social media content.

Thus, this theoretical filter can establish how the replicated work is severed from its historical witness (its unique location in time and space), becoming a sterile cultural artifact. The imitation retains the look of rebellion but is devoid of the necessary historical and critical substance that grounded the power of the original. Additionally, it can show when the taxidermy presents an estranged image focused on reference rather than engagement. Finally, it demonstrates its place in the art ecosystem as a piece of culture or an exhibit.

In conclusion, the previous theoretical sections serve to establish the conceptual framework for analyzing the artistic taxidermy of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work, defining it as a performative simulation that fundamentally severs style from critical substance. Basquiat’s foundational work, rooted in the lived experience of socio-political confrontation, leveraged a distinctive, anatomical aesthetic as a critical instrument. The taxidermy thesis posits that contemporary appropriations, particularly those proliferating on TikTok, retain only the aesthetic signifiers while excising the critical organs of contextual engagement and authentic intention. This

reduction of his visual lexicon to easily reproducible, decontextualized tropes constitutes a shift toward a Baudrillardian simulation, where the signs of style supersede the reality of meaning.

A framework has been thus created, in order to construct an operational mechanism for distinguishing authentic engagement from stylistic mimicry. This theoretical toolbox establishes that the “trendification” of Basquiat’s aesthetic on digital platforms presents a paradigmatic case of artistic taxidermy: a process of aesthetic preservation devoid of political or emotional substance, culminating in a sterile cultural artifact that is a visually familiar but critically eviscerated simulacrum of the artist’s legacy.

5. Case Study

The upcoming analysis will systematically employ the previously-developed tripartite theoretical filter, examining contextual engagement, the nature of reproduction, and the underlying value system, in order to dissect the specific visual content generated by contemporary artists displaying their work on TikTok and emulating Basquiat’s style. By applying this analytical filter to a targeted case study, the following sections aim to demonstrate how the mass-produced (or mass-simulated), performative mimicry of Basquiat’s method and visual vernacular is structurally disconnected from the critical urgency and biographical necessity of the original oeuvre.

This study employs a qualitative, comparative methodology, structured by the established framework, in order to reveal the taxidermy undergone by Jean-Michel Basquiat’s art. The case study directly and systematically compares two selected pairs of artworks – an original Basquiat and a visually similar TikTok replication – against the three criteria drawn from the theoretical filter. This approach transforms abstract theoretical concepts into operational mechanisms for identifying the loss of intention in the process of artistic taxidermy.

The analysis for each comparative case will be structured as a three-part investigation into the work’s historical authority and commodity function: the Benjaminian aura, dealing with historical authority and contextual rootedness, the Baudrillardian interaction between reality, reproduction, and simulation, dealing with the movement from political representation to pure, self-referential aesthetics, and, finally, the cult value/exhibition value dichotomy, dealing with the functional shift of the artwork.

By applying these three lenses to each comparative case, the practical section of this article aims to demonstrate how the process of performative replication structurally disconnects the original’s critical urgency from its marketable aesthetic, concluding that the “trendified” art is a visually familiar but critically eviscerated simulacrum.

The works selected for this case study are Basquiat's "Rome Pays Off" (1984) and "La Hara" (1981), and a piece by Parker Hippe (2025), and one by brody_sol_art (2024), both retrieved on TikTok. The pairing has been done through common visual elements such as visual motifs, structure and composition, and color palette.

The first pair, "Rome Pays Off" (1984) and the untitled work by Parker Hippe (2025) both feature the crown, a notorious element of Basquiat's array of visual leitmotifs, associated with royalty, martyrdom, race, and self-awareness. Both artworks use yellow backgrounds, deconstructive styles, and immediately recognizable Basquiat brushstrokes.

"Rome Pays Off" (1984) features a yellow background, a skeletal, deconstructed face, a grid construction, the word "salt", as well as the copyright symbol referencing his graffiti (My Art Broker, 2024). Basquiat 'crowned', either with this distinctive three-point crown, either with a symbolic crown of thorns, central figures in oftentimes tense power relations, while salt was relevant to colonial Africa (My Art Broker, 2024). Rome was also the capital of one of the most notorious empires in Europe, its expansion driven by resources.

In contrast, the untitled work by Parker Hippe displays a yellow background, a head deconstructed via simplification with the same three-pointed crown above, and the word "Empire", alongside silhouettes of skyscrapers in the recognizable Basquiat reductive strokes. The use of the explicit text, "Empire", and its juxtaposition with the crown symbol point explicitly to structures of power and leadership.

The second pair, "La Hara" (1981) and the untitled work by brody_sol_art, further identified as brody_sol (2024) both feature a person as the central object of the painting, a vaguely-male being situated in a place of authority. "La Hara" (1981) shows a white policeman, while the work of brody_sol presents a figure engaged in business, with a business suit and a tie. Both artworks feature the specific deconstructive, anatomical style of Basquiat.

"La Hara" (1981) depicts a metallic, skeletal figure of a police officer alongside scribbled text reiterating the title. The figure is aggressive and intimidating, often interpreted as a commentary on police brutality and authority. The title itself is significant, as "La Hara" is a colloquial slang term in Puerto Rican communities (reflective of Basquiat's heritage) for the police, emphasizing the painting's theme of racial tension and confrontation with law enforcement (Saggese, 2011: 89-90).

The untitled work by brody_sol, revealed in a 2024 TikTok video, depicts a business-suited figure with an aggravated expression and a speech bubble quoting "Do I really need another [DENTIST]?", alongside several texts referencing housing acquisition and loss, a dollar sign symbol, and a three-pointed crown. The color palette is more diverse than in the case of the Basquiat. The derivative quality of the work by brody_sol can be observed from the borrowed elements of visual vocabulary, as well

as the style and method. The Basquiat influence is also stated by the author in the caption of the TikTok video (brody_sol_art, 2024).

5.1 The First Filter – Aura, Historical Authority and Contextualization

The first pair of artworks, when examined through the first of the established lenses, reveals the artistic approaches and relations to history and contextual engagement. The original work was created by Basquiat at the height of his sudden ascent, but also at a moment of intense scrutiny regarding the commodification of Black artists in the white-dominated 1980s New York art world. This specific, high-stakes biographical and cultural moment is the source of its aura.

Furthermore, the interaction with imperialism, commodification, power, and its homage to Basquiat's transition from a graffitiist to a visual artist is paired with an irony of "market value", the force that simultaneously elevated and exploited Basquiat. The scrawled text, including "market value", "estimated value", and "graft", is not merely stylistic; it is an urgent, location-specific auto-critique of capitalism and the art market that bought him. The viewing of this work of art demands a contextual understanding of its fraught genesis: the artist's struggle with fame, race, and systemic power. The raw, aggressive execution, the very trace of Basquiat's hand in a moment of critical intent, is inseparable from the object and generates its aura. These are the socio-political viscera of a work of art.

In contrast, the adjacent work of Parker Hippe, regardless of its execution quality, is a product of artistic reproduction and digital dissemination. Its reason of being is not unique presence but rapid, mass distribution across a platform optimized for fleeting attention. The object is inherently detached from any specific "here and now" of critical pressure. The TikTok work borrows the signs, the crowns, the skeletal figures, the scribbled text, but eviscerates the critical intention. The marks cease to be historical documentation of a lived confrontation and become reproducible tropes. The textual elements, if present, are likely aesthetic placeholders that cite the look of Basquiat's critique without engaging with any contemporary socio-political issue of comparable weight.

Therefore, "Rome Pays Off" (1984) possesses aura because its style is necessitated by its critical content and its specific moment in history. The work of Hippe, conversely, operates in the domain of taxidermy, successfully reproducing the aesthetic shell while sustaining a loss of aura that accompanies art detached from the ritualistic, biographical, and political urgency of its creation.

Additionally, the second pair of artworks, when examined through the first layer of the theoretical filter, further illuminates the dichotomy between original critique and digital mimicry. Basquiat's "La Hara" (1981) emerges directly from the crucible of early 1980s New York, a period marked by heightened racial tensions, urban unrest,

and aggressive policing tactics. Basquiat, as a young, Black artist navigating this environment, imbues the work with his direct, visceral experience of systemic oppression. This specific, high-stakes biographical and cultural moment is the source of its aura. The work's meaning is inextricably linked to its subject: the oppressive force of "La Hara", the police. This is a stylistic choice and a specific cultural and political indictment, rooted in Basquiat's own identity and community. The menacing, skeletal depiction of the officer is a raw, unflinching reflection of a very real societal menace perceived by Basquiat.

Conversely, the TikTok artwork by brody_sol exists as a medium-native artifact prioritizing digital ubiquity. It is inherently detached from a singular, high-stakes, urgent, 'here-and-now' of creation, thus preventing the formation of Benjaminian aura. The visual language, decipherable through elements such as the crown, the scribble, the anxious text, the method of applying color to the canvas, is borrowed without the contextual referent. The scribbled phrases become generalized anxieties, stripped of the specific institutional confrontation that drove Basquiat's work. The resulting output is taxidermy: an aesthetic shell reproducing the appearance of critical urgency but lacking the historical viscera that once made the original meaningful.

In conclusion, when passing both pairs of artworks through the first layer of the theoretical filter, the works of Basquiat appear to possess aura through their historical situation, whereas the works of art by Parker Hippe and brody_sol, while maintaining the appearance and visual mannerisms of Jean-Michel Basquiat's art, perform taxidermies on his distinctive style.

5.2 The Second Filter – Reproduction and Simulation

The first pair of artworks, when observed through the second filter, dealing with Benjamin's reproduction and Baudrillard's simulation, is able to produce observations about originality, symbolism, and materiality.

As an original "Rome Pays Off" (1984) is defined by its authenticity, tied to the unique materiality that Benjamin references (its physical duration and ownership history). Each mark is a unique, unrepeatable and historically placeable physical act. Furthermore, while it has been mechanically reproduced, each reproduction clearly functions as a diminished copy; it is a means of detaching the image from tradition, but it does not *replace* the original. The value hierarchy remains intact. The work exists in the first order of Baudrillardian simulation: it is a faithful reflection of a profound reality, representing the artist's critique of the market and retains a clear relationship with the referent of Basquiat's biographical and socio-political experience. It has no set of interdependent references to base its existence on.

In contrast, the work by Parker Hippe has been immediately digitized by the platform it was distributed on. It fundamentally rejects the Benjaminian notion of a single unique location. The digital file is the art, and its value can be derived from its plurality (views, likes, shares).

In addition, its Basquiat-emulating quality bears no relation to any immediate reality. It is a copy whose style has been reinterpreted so often that the signifiers, such as the crown, the skull, the scribbles refer only to themselves or to the style, not to the original context of race, death, or capitalism that motivated Basquiat. The aesthetic signals of Basquiat resemblance produce a substitution of signs for references, confirming its function as a taxidermy.

The second pair of artworks, when passed through this filter, reveals that “La Hara” (1981) is a powerful, distorting reflection that still clearly points back to a verifiable, external reality, the oppressive machinery of the state. Its mechanical reproductions, such as posters, catalogue images are always identifiable as copies, reinforcing the scarcity and material primacy of the original.

The artwork displayed on TikTok, however, operates as a simulation. Its design is predicated on infinite, frictionless reproduction and digital flow. The style, similarly to Parker Hippe’s work, having been copied repeatedly, has become an emulation where the signifiers, the aesthetic chaos, the typography, refer only to the idea of Basquiat’s style, not to the social reality that necessitated that style. The art is born from the circulation of images, not a confrontation with the real; it is a copy that has lost its original referent, completing the substitution of the sign for reality itself.

In conclusion, both sets of artworks, when viewed through the second theoretical filter, reveal that taxidermy is further performed on the oeuvre of Basquiat as an estrangement through a long chain of reference and self-reference. This estrangement further decontextualizes the symbolic content.

5.3 The Third Filter – Cult Value and Exhibition Value

This final filter, rooted in Benjamin’s dichotomy, determines the ultimate functional value of the artwork and whether it is valued for its rooted existence, its cult value, or for its capacity for mass display and consumption, its exhibition value.

“Rome Pays Off” (1984) inherits cult value despite its critique of commodification. Its functional origin lies not in mass consumption, but in the biographical ritual of Basquiat’s necessary, cathartic confrontation with the market that consumed him. The required reception of the work is one of contemplation and exegesis; its layered text and symbolic richness demand historical and cultural decoding, reinforcing the distance and aura that define cult value, even when displayed publicly in galleries.

The artwork of Parker Hippe, displayed in a TikTok video is created for the digital economy, where exhibition value is supreme. Its design is optimized for digital exhibition, instant visual impact, and rapid assimilation. The work functions as a highly stylized content asset. The intended reception is one of rapid engagement or instant gratification of the artistic effort, through liking or sharing. Though the TikTok medium may serve as a tool for artistic promotion, it shifts the value from cult to exhibition. It sacrifices socio-political and personal, non-referential viscera for legibility, ensuring immediate visual recognition of the 'Basquiat style' signifiers for algorithmic success. The user, watching the video and seeing the artwork, is positioned as a consumer of style, not a decipherer of meaning.

The perceived value of a work of art exhibited through a short video can be measured through metrics of plurality such as views, likes, shares, velocity, popularity, rather than scarcity. The style is valuable precisely because it is easily replicable and instantly consumable, demonstrating the third symptom of artistic taxidermy. The artwork is meant to *be seen*, rather than *mean*, which does not alter its placement as a work of art, but it changes its position against meaning.

Furthermore, in the second set of artworks, the painting by Basquiat is also defined by its cult value. It serves a foundational, almost ritualistic purpose: it is an act of political denunciation and testimonial documentation that transcends simple aesthetics. Viewing it requires contemplation and intellectual labor to decode its cultural and biographical origins, the relation of the author with the subject of the painting and his engagement with it in his life and the lives of those around him. In "Defacement" (1983), similar policemen are depicted beating the sanctified yet anonymized black silhouette of Michael Stewart – Michael Stewart's death after an arrest for alleged vandalism had sparked a divisive discourse about police brutality (Mitter, 2019). Its cultural significance is tied directly to its scarcity and its fixed historical placement.

Conversely, the TikTok artwork is wholly driven by exhibition value. Its entire structure is built upon an intended reception that is instant and passive. Its role, adjacent to that of a work of art, is becoming a visual commodity whose effectiveness lies in its capacity for mass digital display. This heavy accent on exhibition value, as made evident by the third lens of this theoretical filter, does not speak on its intrinsic value as an artwork, but rather on the purpose it takes on by becoming short-form content.

To conclude the third layer of this analysis, the dichotomy of cult value and exhibition value is a lens which exposes the final act of artistic taxidermy. This act places the work of art in a different environment, affecting the way the public engages with it, where it is encountered, and the knowledge it is able to produce or transmit.

5.4 Case Study conclusions

The comparative analyses of the two sets of paintings, using the critical lens of Benjaminian aura and Baudrillardian simulation, consistently map the migration of Basquiat's artistic legacy from historical critique to digital commodity. The findings demonstrate a definitive structural shift: Basquiat's original canvases derive power from their unique, time-bound confrontation with real-world socio-political issues. In stark contrast, the derivative TikTok artworks function as reference-centered, exhibition-driven reproductions, where success becomes measurable in metrics of plurality, velocity, and instantaneous visual recognition due to the nature of social media.

It is crucial to clarify that this study does not cast blame on contemporary digital artists. The act of inspiration and reinterpretation, even from a notorious and influential figure like Basquiat, can be a vital, perennial function of artistic practice. The act of utilizing the aesthetic language of a predecessor in art is not and should not be culpable in itself.

The findings speak solely to the phenomenon of artistic taxidermy, the process by which the digital infrastructure strips a potent, critically engaged legacy of its essential historical referents. The digital ecosystem is designed to reduce complex visual and textual vocabularies, like Basquiat's commentary on imperialism, race, or police brutality, into universally legible, performative, and frictionless signs. These signs are then instantly consumable and infinitely reproducible, confirming that the critical spirit of Basquiat's work has been neutralized and repurposed for the endless, context-free flow of digital content. The critique itself is preserved, but only under a layer of glass, detached from the urgent, biographical reality that gave it its original, immediately recognizable aura.

6. Conclusion

The systematic application of the theoretical framework across two distinct pairings of Basquiat's original works, "Rome Pays Off" (1984) and "La Hara" (1981), versus their modern digital descendants, serves to validate the central thesis: the potent artistic legacy of Jean-Michel Basquiat has undergone a process of artistic taxidermy within the contemporary digital ecosystem.

The core finding is a definitive structural shift. Basquiat's original canvases are historically rooted, charged with aura, and function as authentic interventions of artistic intention, characterized by cult value. They derive their power from their unique, time-bound confrontation with real-world issues, demanding contemplation and contextual understanding.

In direct contrast, the derivative TikTok artworks consistently function as aesthetic borrowings estranged through continuous reference, driven by the dictates of exhibition value. The analysis across all three filters maps the evisceration of the work's critical referent. The visual vocabulary is reduced to a set of easily recognizable, universally legible signs that no longer reference the realities they once confronted, but merely refer to the style of confrontation itself.

The element of novelty of this paper lies in the original concept of artistic taxidermy, as well as the content of its analysis, the systematic approach, and the epistemology created for the theoretical framework. The theoretical filter put in place by this paper provides a novel procedure for the observation of the phenomenon of taxidermy in art, with a potential for further systematization in future research. In addition, the subject of the case study gains an innovative quality through its profoundly contemporary aspect.

The phenomenon of taxidermy, the removal of contextual viscera of works of art or entire artistic methods, their subsequent decontextualization, reutilization, and processing for mere performance, as it is visible on TikTok, is more ample than the scope of this paper. The phenomenon's real dimensions and effects extend beyond the findings of the previous case study, representing a limitation of this article. Artistic taxidermy, especially incentivized by the social media apparatus, its stripping of artistic intention and its other consequences on important artistic legacies are some further research paths implied by this study.

Additionally, this study represents the opening of a new dimension in engagement with art, namely contemporary, online art. By introducing the novel concept of taxidermy, it sheds light on the threshold of a new way to observe and analyze art. Though the theoretical groundwork for this concept is in its incipient phase, this article reveals multiple possibilities for further research and theorization. The phenomenon of artistic taxidermy is not particular to the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat. The procedure for identifying its occurrence can benefit from an ampler array of theoretical tools, surpassing the heavily Baudrillardian and Benjaminian framework provided by this article. Further classifications of taxidermy as an artistic phenomenon can be uncovered by cultivating and analyzing larger corpora.

Nevertheless, this paper does not intend to condemn contemporary digital art, inspiration, or the use of artistic ancestors in the path to developing and discovering one's own style, as the act of reinterpretation is a vital function of artistic practice. Instead, the findings speak solely to the systemic phenomenon. The digital infrastructure itself appears as the mechanism of taxidermy. The artists engaging, willingly or unwillingly, in it, may bear no individual responsibility for such an overarching and intricate phenomenon. This article aims not to position itself counter to contemporary art, to imitation in art, or to the use of social media in relation to art and the artistic process.

The digital ecosystem itself preserves the aesthetic shell of Basquiat's genius while stripping it of the urgent, time-bound, and biographical reality that powered its initial, formidable aura. Performing Basquiat turns Basquiat into a symbol of himself. Thus, the taxidermy takes place, facilitated by the ever-speeding hunger for engagement and easily palatable, visually engaging content.

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