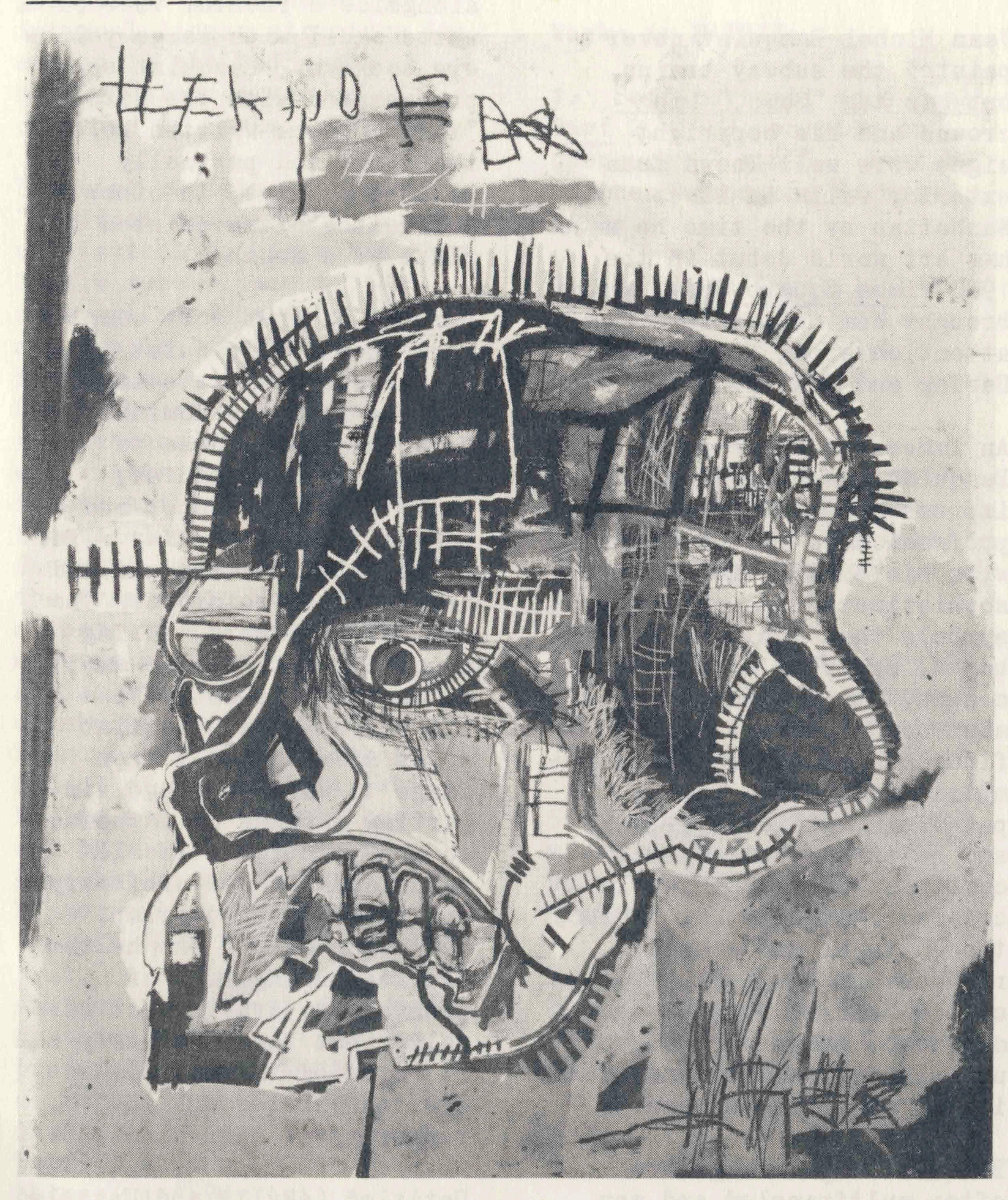
Untitled (skull), 1982



Graffiti art as we have come to understand it is the gallery version of graffiti found in the environment, particularly in and on the New York subway trains.

Wrought mostly by young, untrained male artists, it is characterized by exuberant, often Day-Glo color, usually applied with a spray can, and highly stylized words and names of the artist, known as "tags."

Jean Michel Basquiat never painted the subway trains, but his tag "Samo," his crowns and his copyright signs were well-known from exterior walls in lower Manhattan by the time he made his art world debut in the 1980 Times Square Show, which brought him national attention along with Keith Haring and others.

An immediate success, Basquiat has continued to impress other artists and professionals in the field with his distinctive and sophisticated iconography of symbols that includes skulls, bones, scrawled words, crowns, stick figures and abstract pictorial marks. He finds his images in the mass media, textbooks, famous paintings, ancient cultures and religion, successfully combining them in brightly colored canvases that reflect the cultural and ethnic richness of New York. As critic Jeffrey Deitch observed, Basquiat "vacuums up cultural fallout and spits it out on stretched canvas."

Basquiat's paintings are often multipaneled and may contain drawings collaged onto the surface, as in Ski Lift. The skull-like heads against the dark backgrounds of the two left panels of Ski Lift recall the black skulls

in Jake Berthot's drawings, recently seen in MATRIX, but whereas Berthot's skulls refer to the refined anatomical sketches of Renaissance masters, Basquiat's are more akin to mock-terrifying Halloween masks.

Another multi-image work,

Untitled (1984), revolves

around the theme of evolution. The words "chimpanzee"
and "neanderthal" appear
alongside a frontal view of a
white skull with large yellow
eye sockets. Basquiat seems
preoccupied with the word
"teeth," here written below
the skull and partially
painted out but, in other
portraits, often printed in
place of a mouth.

Pyro is an even more complex work in which Basquiat juxtaposes disparate imagery ranging from the dominant Mayan head and torso to animals, stick figures, rockets, a skyscraper and a pagoda. The title may refer to rocket fire; the red and orange color reinforces the explosive imagery. Using an associative technique similar to the psychic automatism of the Surrealists, Basquiat moves spontaneously from image to word to image, imparting a sense of immediacy to the paintings. Scale relationships are arbitrary and forms often overlap, reminding one of the helterskelter arrangement of prehistoric drawings on cave walls, put there by early man as he tried to control his environment through the rendering of magical signs.

Untitled (skull) and Untitled (fish) are powerful examples of single-image works. In the former, Basquiat depicts a three-quarter view of a disembodied head/skull. The multitude of colors within

the head, along with indications of cranial fissures and myriad other markings and scratchings, suggest the turmoil of the mind, further implied by the indecipherable letters at the top of the canvas.

Untitled (fish) is one of
Basquiat's most poetic
paintings. The fish, a
Christian symbol for Christ,
swims in an aqueous ground of
pale pinks and greens. Its
internal linear structure is
echoed by the red arrow
below, which serves as a
reminder of Christ's fate.

Basquiat resists the label "graffiti artist" and, stylistically, his works have little resemblance to the spray-painted cartoon imagery and bubble letters of graffitists such as Daze and Crash who made their initial reputations as subway painters. Although he had no formal art training apart from a class in high school, Basquiat successfully made the transition from the streets to galleries and museums because he had assimilated much of the vocabulary of modern art by hanging around New York's School of Visual Arts (while Haring was a student there) and by visiting museums. Basquiat's work has art historical precedents that include Jean Dubuffet's "Art Brut," a style that found its sources in objects produced by those isolated from the professional art world-children, the insane and the untutored, as well as in Cy Twombly's elegant scribblings, and Pop Art, a movement that legitimatized pop culture as subject-matter.

Basquiat was born in Brooklyn, New York, where he attended public schools. He droppped out of high school in eleventh grade and, at the age of twenty-four, has already achieved international acclaim. After its presentation in Berkeley, the exhibition will be shown at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art and the University Art Museum, UC Santa Barbara.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

- 1. Self-portrait as a Heel,
 Part 2, 1982, acrylic on
 canvas, 96" x 60". Lent by
 Stephane Janssen, Beverly
 Hills.
- 2. Untitled (skull), 1982, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 81-1/2" x 79-1/2". Lent by Edythe and Eli Broad, Los Angeles.
- 3. Ski Lift, 1984, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 72" x 120". Lent by Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles.
- 4. Untitled, 1984, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 68" x 86". Lent by Stephane Janssen, Beverly Hills.
- 5. Untitled, 1984, oil and mixed media on canvas, 72" x 96". Lent by Douglas S. Cramer, Los Angeles.
- 6. Pyro, 1984, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 86" x 68". Lent by Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Annina Nosei Gallery, NY,
'81, '82; Emilio Mazzoli
Gallery, Modena, Italy, '81;
Larry Gagosian Gallery, L.A.,
'82; Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich, '82, '83;
Mary Boone Gallery, NY, '84;
The Fruitmarket Gallery,
Edinburgh, Scotland, '84
(traveled; catalogue).

Selected group exhibitions:

New York, Times Square Show,
'80; P.S. I, NY, New York,
New Wave, '81; Aurelian
Walls, Rome, Avantgarde and
Transavantgarde '68 to '77,
'82; Kassel, W. Germany,
Documenta 7, '82 (catalogue);
Whitney Museum of American
Art, NY, Biennale, '83
(catalogue); Sidney Janis
Gallery, NY, Post Graffiti,
'82; Musee d'Art
Contemporain, Montreal,
Canada, New Art, '84.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Ricard, Rene. "The Radiant Child," Artforum, Dec. '81.

Deitch, Jeffrey. "Jean Michel Basquiat," Flash Art (Milan), May '82.

Pincus-Witten, Robert.

Los Angeles Times, July 16,

'82.

Gablik, Suzi. "Report from New York--The Graffiti Question", Art in America, Oct. '82.

Clarke, John R. "Up Against the Wall, Transavanguardia," Arts, Dec. '82.

DeAk, Edit and Diego
Cortez. "Baby Talk," Flash
Art (Milan), May '82.

Tomkins, Calvin. "The
Art World--Up from the
I.R.T.," The New Yorker,
March 26, '84.

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.