

Collaborations

Reflections on the Experiences with Basquiat, Clemente and Warhol

Bruno Bischofberger, 1995



Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bruno Bischofberger and Francesco Clemente, New York, 1984
photo: Beth Philipps

In the winter 1983–1984, on the occasion of one of the many visits of Jean-Michel Basquiat at our home in St. Moritz, we spoke together about works that artists had done together, so called *Collaborations*. There were several reasons why we had started talking about them. Basquiat had done a 120 x 120 centimetre acrylic on canvas painting in our garage together with my daughter Cora, who was not quite four years old at the time. In my guest book in St. Moritz Basquiat drew, at the same time, a double page drawing, also with Cora. The babychild primitive technique of my daughter and Basquiat's independently chosen "primitive" style were a perfect fit. Already during my first visit to his studio in 1982 in New York he answered my question about which artists had influenced him: "What I really like and has influenced me are works by three- to four-year-old children." The same guest book shows, immediately preceding, a two-page coloured pastel, a collaboration between Francesco Clemente and Cora, dating from the preceding winter (January 1983) and signed by Francesco with both names. Again some pages earlier, dated March 1982, one finds two drawings by Walter Dahn and Dokoupil. These artists had, during that stay, painted a small group of collaborations using acrylic on canvas in our garage, one of which was hanging in our house in the winter of 1983–1984.

All these were reasons for Jean-Michel Basquiat and me to start talking about collaborations. I personally had been fascinated by such works for some time. I knew collaborations of painters from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries and the *cadavre exquis* of the Surrealists. For over twenty years I had owned a collaboration, dating from 1961, between Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint-Phalle and Daniel Spoerri. I also owned a painting, that had been jointly painted by Enzo Cucchi and Sandro Chia and since 1983 I had bought my first works by the New York artists David McDermott and Peter McGough.

The conceptuality of these paintings fascinated me, because through the voluntary act of collaborating a certain theory became more apparent than in works which the artists created individually.

I had noticed that in the works of the so called "postmodern" movement a certain kind of conceptual collaboration was taking place, because artists were referring to other artist's works or integrating parts thereof in their own paintings. From a large diversity of examples let me mention: Caravaggio in several early works of Julian Schnabel, from 1980–1981 (Illustration 1), Watteau and Giacometti in works by David Salle and early works of Warhol in his own series of *Reversal* paintings, 1979–1980 (Illustration 2).

When I asked Sandro Chia in Venice in 1980 why he had, admittedly in his own style, copied fairly exactly Kirchner's shower painting in the Museum of Modern Art in New York he responded: "Naturalmente, pesco nella pittura – Of course, I fish around in the history of painting." This programmatic statement was valid for many works of the then new painting and culminates in the conceptual work of Mike Bidlo, the radical finishing point of this development, in which the artist reproduces in the most direct way the work of other artists, which could be interpreted as simply copying by the uninitiated observer. This too is a kind of ultra-collaboration (Illustration 3).

A project had developed in my mind to ask Andy Warhol, whose main dealer I had become in 1968, whether he would make some works together with one or two younger artists that I represented. At that time I asked Jean-Michel Basquiat in St. Moritz whether he would be interested in doing some collaboration paintings with Warhol and perhaps another artist. Jean-Michel was exceptionally receptive to new ideas and immediately agreed. He was surely also interested in creating works together with the famous Warhol.

In the Autumn of 1982 I brought Jean-Michel to Andy Warhol in the Factory and this is how they really got to know each other. I had a firm agreement with Warhol that I could propose younger artists, which I found interesting for an article in *Interview Magazine*, which we had founded together in 1969. Warhol also let me decide which young artists I could bring with me to the Factory to have a portrait done, in exchange for which they could swap one of their works. Warhol trusted my judgment and it was of no consequence that the works that he received in exchange were often worth much less than his portraits. In this way Andy established a relationship with the generation of younger artists. When I told him that I would bring Jean-Michel Basquiat for a portrait session and the usual buffet lunch at the Factory on Union Square the next day he seemed rather surprised and asked me "Do you really think that Basquiat is such an important artist?" Warhol was not familiar with Basquiat's new work and told me that he remembered having met the artist on one or two occasions, on both of which Warhol had felt him to be too forward. Basquiat had been trying to get to know Warhol and had offered him his street sale art, small drawings on paper that Warhol had been very sceptical of.

Warhol photographed Basquiat with his special Polaroid portrait camera. Jean-Michel asked Warhol whether he could also take a photo of him, took some shots and then asked me to take some photos of him and Warhol together. We then wanted to go next door to have the customary cold buffet lunch. Basquiat did not want to stay and said goodbye. We had hardly finished lunch, one, at most one and half an hour later, when Basquiat's assistant appeared with a 150 x 150 centimetre work on canvas, still completely wet, a double portrait depicting Warhol and Basquiat: Andy on the left in his typical pose resting his chin on his hand, and Basquiat on the right with the wild hair that he had at the time. The painting was titled *Dos Cabezas*. The assistant had run the ten to fifteen blocks from Basquiat's studio on Crosby Street to the Factory on Union Square with the painting in his hands because it wouldn't fit into a taxi.

All visitors and employees at the Factory flocked around to see the painting, which was admired by all. Most astonished of all was Andy who said: "I'm really jealous—he is faster than me." Soon thereafter Warhol made a portrait of Basquiat on several equally

large canvases: Basquiat sporting his wild hairdo, silkscreened on the background of the "oxidation" type, the same as the *Oxidation* or *Piss* paintings of 1978. Basquiat subsequently painted another two portraits of Warhol. One in 1984 entitled *Brown Spots* (Illustration 4), which depicts Andy as a banana, and the other in 1984–1985 which shows Warhol with glasses and large white wig working out with a barbell in each hand.

Basquiat and I soon started to speak of Francesco Clemente as the third artist for the collaborations project and we decided together to invite him to join in. First, of course, we wanted to know whether Warhol would agree to do the project.

Jean-Michel knew and respected Clemente, whose studio was only two blocks away from Jean-Michel's. In the following years he became great friend with him and his wife Alba. Clemente had, in the summer of 1983, painted a group of twelve large paintings in Skowhegan, Maine, which I was able to purchase from him and which are also a sort of collaboration. He stretched fragments of painted theatre backdrops made of cloth on stretchers and added his own inventions to those already there. Schnabel had also, early in his career, painted on surfaces that had a clearly defined structure, in a sort of collaboration. In 1986 he painted a series of Japanese Kabuki theatre backdrops, and Enzo Cucchi also painted on four Italian theatre backdrops in 1987.

To get the most spontaneous work into the collaborations I suggested Basquiat that every artist should, without conferring with the others about iconography, style, size, technique, etc., independently start the paintings, of course in the knowledge that two further artists would be working on the same canvas, and that enough mental and physical space should be left to accommodate them. I further suggested him that each artist send one half of the started collaborations to each of the other artists and the works then be passed on to the remaining artist whose work was still missing. Basquiat liked my proposal and agreed.

On my next visit to New York I suggested the whole project to Andy Warhol and also to Francesco Clemente. Both found it interesting and surely a new challenge and soon started on their work. I suggested that each artist start four works with oil or acrylic, and one on paper.

Between September 15 and October 13, 1984, I showed the group of fifteen works at my Zurich gallery in an exhibition entitled "Collaborations – Basquiat Clemente Warhol," with a publication of the same name. In all works on canvas Warhol used a technique of the silkscreen that he had been using since 1962. In two of the works he repeated the first panel, which had been done by Basquiat and Clemente, five times in the same size using silkscreening. In three of the works Basquiat also used a silkscreen.

The three large drawings, in which the order the artists worked was different each time, were mounted on canvas with the agreement of the artists so that they could be exhibited without glass. Where Warhol was the last artist he again repeated the two other artists work using a silkscreen. On the drawing that he started himself he drew, using a projector, two GE (General Electric) logos and a spaceship, an image from a series of children's paintings, which I had commissioned from him for an exhibition the year before. In the third work on paper, *Alba's Breakfast*, that had been started by Clemente, Warhol again painted a GE logo and a washing machine, both in red, very much in the style of the hard painted works of the early sixties (Illustration 5).

At my request, Warhol left naming the works to Basquiat and Clemente. In the summer of 1984 my family, Basquiat and I flew to Rome to have a family portrait done by Clemente. During a break in the portrait session Basquiat, Clemente and I went into the restaurant Casa del Popolo which was in the vicinity and which lent its name to one of the paintings (Illustration 6). The artists discussed possible names for all the fifteen works on the basis of the transparencies I had brought with me. One of the works was entitled *Ex-Ringeye* (Illustration 7). This work was started by Warhol. Basquiat, the last artist to work on the painting, put a white ring around the head of the central figure done

by Clemente and also painted white rings around its eyes. After a discussion between the two and with mutual consent the circle around the head and the circles around the eyes were removed again.

During this trip, which took us to see Enzo Cucchi in Ancona and Miquel Barceló in Majorca, Basquiat said to me, mentioning Warhol's hand painting in *Alba's Breakfast*: "Andy is such a fantastic painter! His hand painting is as good as it was in his early years. I am going to try and convince him to start painting by hand again."

When I met Warhol again, about half a year later in the Spring of 1985, on one of my almost monthly visits to New York, he revealed to me that he and Jean-Michel Basquiat had for several months been working together in the Factory on a large number of further collaborations. He seemed a bit embarrassed, presumably because he and Basquiat had not mentioned it earlier to me. He also said that both he and Basquiat felt that I was not in a privileged position regarding these paintings, since they were not a commission of mine as the three-way collaboration had been. I had to accept his point. He immediately agreed, however, that as his and Basquiat's dealer I was nevertheless the best suited person to be sold the paintings to and they entrusted me with them. He showed me a large number of these paintings—large scale works, most of which approximately 200 x 300 centimetre, some 300 x 500 or 600 centimetre, a few 200 x 150 centimetre—I was both extremely surprised and enthusiastic about them. Warhol's entire contribution was partly in a kind of poster style featuring heraldically hand painted enlargements of advertising images, headlines and company logos but partly in painterly free brushstrokes, similar to a part of his early works of 1961 and early 1962. Basquiat was usually the second painter to work on the canvases and had fused his spontaneous, expressive and effusive iconography with that of Warhol. It was also surprising that Basquiat had used silkscreens for a large number of the paintings. In these works it was almost always Warhol who was the second artist to work on the paintings. I purchased a large group of them from the two artists and we decided to exhibit them in New York; our mutual choice was the gallery of Tony Shafrazi. Andy was especially interested in showing the collaborations downtown and not uptown because, as he put it, there was a livelier and younger art scene there. The show was held at the end of September 1985, with sixteen of the paintings that I had purchased and had given to Tony Shafrazi on consignment. The critiques of the show were almost uniformly negative. The works were described by Vivien Raynor, on 20 September in *The New York Times*, as Warhol's manipulations, and that he was using Basquiat as his mascot.

After twenty years as an art dealer I was used to the fact that practically all my best and most important exhibitions had received almost entirely negative critiques. I have always believed that this helps keep the artist's creative and fighting spirit strong, and prevents risking that, due to a large and general acclaim of his art, the artist becomes less involved and rests on what he has already created, in the worst case repeating and imitating himself.

Warhol had been familiar with this phenomenon for many years. On the other hand, Basquiat, who had hoped to gain a higher status with this exhibition and through this "baptism" by the famous Warhol, was unhappy about the critical reaction and broke off, almost entirely, the painting session in the Factory that had been so frequent until then. Andy was not very happy about this, since he apparently had planned further work. The larger part of the hand painted works, the later and large works by Warhol that were shown by the Estate on various occasions only after his death, seem to me to be started collaborations for stylistic and iconographic reasons, in which Basquiat's contribution is missing.



Illustration 1: Julian Schnabel, *The Exile*, 1980, Oil, antlers, gold pigment and mixed media on wood, 229 x 305 x 63 cm



Illustration 2: Andy Warhol, *Retrospective*, 1978, Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 203 x 203 cm



Illustration 3: Mike Bidlo *Not Picasso (Les demoiselles d'Avignon, 1907)*, 1984, Oil on canvas, 244 x 234 cm



Illustration 4: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Brown Spots (Portrait of Andy Warhol as a Banana), 1984, Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 193 x 213 cm



Illustration 5: Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat & Francesco Clemente, Alba's Breakfast, 1984, Mixed media on paper, mounted on canvas, 117 x 150 cm



Illustration 6: Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat & Francesco Clemente, Casa del Popolo, 1984, Mixed media on canvas, 128 x 215 cm



Illustration 7: Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat & Francesco Clemente, Ex-Ringeye, 1984, Mixed media on canvas, 122 x 167.5 cm