Jean-Michel Basquiat Reading Comprehension
Name ________________________________________

American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat was born in New York City in 1960 to a Haitian father and
Puerto Rican mother. At age 15, he decided to leave his family’s house in Brooklyn to explore the
world for himself. Basquiat was an autodidact—he wanted to learn about and understand the world
by himself. As he became more and more familiar with the New York underground community, he
started using magic marker and spray paint to put his own poems and messages on the walls using
the alias SAMO. Basquiat’s unique form of self-expression at an early age eventually helped elevate
street graffiti into the modern art world, putting it on the same level as New York’s gallery artists.

Basquiat abandoned his alter ego of SAMO in 1981 and began painting and drawing on canvas. He
sold his first painting that same year, and by 1982, his work was very popular. The New York Times
Magazine put Basquiat on their cover in 1985, and his unique style was in high demand. Basquiat
often combined drawing, painting, history, and poetry, weaving together an artistic language that had
never before been seen. Sometimes, Basquiat even pulled on the art style of bricolage by creating
art from whatever spare materials he had available: creating something beautiful from objects most
people might consider mundane. Often inspired by his own urban origins and African-Caribbean
culture, Basquiat produced visual collages like no other. He used his art to communicate social
messages relating to race, culture, and society. One symbol he used very frequently was that of the
crown, representing royalty. Basquiat frequently adorned images of Black athletes, musicians, and
writers with the crown, symbolizing their importance and elevating them to a royal status that boldly
contradicted the racial tensions of the time period. The Neo-Expressionism movement—one that was
centered on the human figure and its role in contemporary art—took Basquiat as one of its leaders.

Basquiat’s illustrious and daring art career unfortunately was short-lived, as he died of a drug
overdose in 1988 at age 27. At that time, he had done collaborative projects with many artists,
including Andy Warhol, whose Campbell Soup paintings are very popular today. Basquiat also
became the youngest ever artist to exhibit his work at the Documenta in Kassel, Germany, in 1982,
indicating his international notoriety. After his death, many of his paintings were auctioned off; one
sold for 110.5 million dollars, a record for the highest ever price paid at an auction for an American
artist’s work. From the streets of Brooklyn to art galleries across the globe, Basquiat challenged
artistic norms with his vision.

1. The word “autodidact,” used in line 3, comes from the two Greek roots autos and
didaskein. Based on the definition of autodidact as used in the passage, which of the
following meanings are most appropriate?
   a. Auto: together; didasklein: art
   b. Auto: self; didasklein: teach/taught
   c. Auto: world; didasklein: destroy/destroyed
   d. Auto: paint; didasklein: house
2. Fill in the blank in the following diagram.

CAUSE: Basquiat’s style of graffiti artwork becomes very popular in galleries.

EFFECT: __________________
_____________________
_____________________

a. Street graffiti becomes a more respected art form by the New York elite.
b. New York art galleries decide to showcase exclusively local talent.
c. Basquiat is arrested and convicted for defacing public property.
d. All modern artists switch their styles to that of Brooklyn graffiti artists.

3. What was the racial impact of Basquiat using crowns in his artwork?
   a. Basquiat caused America to elect its first Black monarch.
b. Basquiat lowered the morale of Black individuals growing up during the time period.
c. Basquiat gave Black figures importance during a time period when racism was rampant.
d. Basquiat’s art caused a steep increase in the number of Black athletes hired during the time period.

4. Which of the following projects would be an example of bricolage?
   a. Painting a photo of a rabbit using watercolors
   b. Reusing recyclable objects to make a sculpture of a dog
   c. Sculpting a swan out of newly-cut marble
   d. Using finger-paints to decorate an old canvas

5. Which of the following was not a factor influencing Basquiat’s artwork?
   a. His African-Caribbean roots
   b. The role of race in society
   c. His childhood in Brooklyn
   d. His passion for Germany

6. Which statement is false?
   a. Basquiat worked together with fellow artist Andy Warhol.
b. Basquiat was on the cover of the New York Times Magazine.
c. From the beginning of his career, Basquiat signed his art under his own name.
d. Basquiat was the youngest artist to display his work in the Documenta.

7. Which medium of Basquiat is not mentioned in this article?
   a. Street graffiti
   b. Poetry
   c. Visual collage
   d. Etching