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“Come through with the ‘Ye mask on / spray everything like SAMO:” Jay Z, Kanye West, and fine art as luxury in contemporary hip hop

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“Come Through with the ‘Ye Mask On / Spray Everything Like SAMO:”
Jay Z, Kanye West, and Fine Art as Luxury in Contemporary Hip Hop

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American Studies 302/303: Senior Project

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Jay Z, Kanye West, and Conceptions of Luxury

In the summer of 2011, Jay Z and Kanye West released their highly anticipated collaborative album *Watch the Throne*. The album—Kanye’s 6th and Jay’s 12th—boasts an ornate, gilded cover designed by Givenchy creative director Riccardo Tisci; the album art was premiered well in advance of the album’s release on websites like *Rolling Stone*.¹ Everything about the album, from its cover to its rich and textured production to its name-drops (according to one reviewer, these references are of “brands so expensive that you’ve probably never heard of half of them”²), occurs on an extraordinarily large scale, one that Jay and Kanye have created for themselves. As Jon Caramanica writes in *The New York Times*’ review of *Watch the Throne*: “Mr. West and Jay Z have...necessitat[ed] a hip-hop category beyond street money, beyond new money...The signifiers aren’t jewelry and cars...but high fashion and high art.”³ On *Watch the Throne*, the two rappers ushered in a new era of hip hop: one defined by multi-layered signifiers of luxury, by “high fashion” and, in particular, “high art.” Since *Watch the Throne*’s release, both artists have continued to utilize fine art as cultural capital to signify the presence of luxury in their work. In this way, a critical analysis of Jay Z and Kanye West’s use of fine art in their work since 2011 provides a close look at an example of how cultural distinctions are

¹ See Figure 1.

² Tom Breihan, review of *Watch the Throne*, by Jay Z and Kanye West, *Pitchfork*, August 11, 2011, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15725-watch-the-throne/> (accessed April 5, 2016).

³ Jon Caramanica, review of *Watch the Throne*, by Jay Z and Kanye West, *The New York Times*, August 9, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/14/arts/music/jay-z-and-kanye-west-watch-the-throne.html> (accessed April 5, 2016).

problematized and utilized in hip hop and, more broadly, in the sphere of American popular culture.

Rolling Stone reviewer Jody Rosen draws attention to the specific relevance of the concept of luxury to contemporary hip hop by underscoring the uniqueness of the term “luxury rap,” a phrase coined by Kanye on the *Watch the Throne* track “Otis.” Rosen also takes care to differentiate “luxury rap” from “bling rap.” He writes in his review of *Watch the Throne*:

As Kanye puts it in the surging "Otis," this is "luxury rap." Which is not to say bling rap: Jay and 'Ye (who've taken to calling themselves the Throne) may be obsessed with their own king-size lives, but the tone here is serious, sober, weighty... Jay-Z and Kanye aren't nouveau riche upstarts. They're hip-hop monarchs, and *Watch the Throne* doesn't shrink from its own hype.⁴

“Bling rap” is a term and a concept that is certainly associated with Jay Z in his earlier days, but it is also associated with artists like Biggie, Lil Wayne, 50 Cent, and Diddy. It became a hip hop stereotype of the late 1990s and early-to-mid-2000s: the black rapper in his fancy car with big rims, sporting diamond grills and popping champagne—whether Cristal or Ace of Spades. In fact, a closer look at Jay’s role in a mid-2000s hip hop scandal involving both of those champagne brands provides an excellent precursor to an examination of Jay and Kanye’s referential usage of fine art.

In 2006, Frederic Rouzaud, managing director of the company that produces Cristal champagne, was quoted in an *Economist* article as saying, in response to a question about the prevalence of Cristal in “the bling lifestyle:” “[w]hat can we do? We can’t forbid people from buying it. I’m sure Dom Pérignon or Krug would be delighted to have their business.”⁵ Jay, then

⁴ Jody Rosen, review of *Watch the Throne*, by Jay Z and Kanye West, *Rolling Stone*, September 1, 2011, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/watch-the-throne-20110811> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁵ “Bubbles and Bling,” *The Economist*, May 8th, 2006, under “Intelligent Life,” <http://www.economist.com/node/6905921> (accessed April 5, 2016).

known with a hyphen as Jay-Z, rapper of songs like “Hard Knock Life” containing lines like “Let’s sip the Cris and get pissy pissy,” sprung into action. Jay launched a boycott of the champagne, which until then had been sold at his lounge chain, 40/40 Club, in \$450 and \$600 bottles. He released a statement announcing the boycott: “It has come to my attention that the managing director of Cristal...views the ‘hip-hop’ culture as ‘unwelcome attention.’ I view his comments as racist and will no longer support any of his products through any of my various brands including the 40/40 Club nor in my personal life.”⁶ The boycott quickly made national headlines, nearly all of which acknowledged the role that Jay and hip hop had in making Cristal a well-known brand. *The New York Times*, for example, ran an article called “Jay Z Puts a Cap on Cristal,” with the opening line: “Hip-hop made Cristal a household name. Can it also unmake it?”⁷

Jay embarked on a mission not only to unmake it, but to replace it. In the music video for his 2007 single “Show Me What You Got,” he passes the torch to another brand of champagne: Armand de Brignac, nicknamed Ace of Spades. He sits at a poker table, while a casino waiter offers him a bottle of Cristal; he waves the bottle away with an expression of such disdain that it’s almost boredom, and instead accepts a bottle of Ace of Spades, thereby christening it, on behalf of hip hop, as Cristal’s successor. Jay has maintained a financial stake in Ace of Spades

⁶ Associated Press, “Jay-Z launches Cristal bubbly boycott,” *Today*, June 15, 2006, under “Celebrities,” http://www.today.com/id/13350034/ns/today-today_entertainment/t/jay-z-launches-cristal-bubbly-boycott/#.VqqqXlMrLfY (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁷ Douglas Century, “Jay-Z Puts a Cap on Cristal,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/fashion/02cris.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> (accessed April 5, 2016).

since the brand's inception, eventually purchasing the entire company in 2014.⁸ He wrote of the Cristal boycott in his 2011 book *Decoded*:

[Rappers] were unpaid endorsers of [Cristal's] brand—which we thought was okay, because it was a two-way street. We used their band as a signifier of luxury and they got free advertising and credibility every time we mentioned it. We were trading cachet. But they didn't see it that way.⁹

By choosing to instead support, and maintain an increasingly significant financial interest in, Ace of Spades, Jay Z made it so that cachet didn't have to be traded. He controlled the cachet himself, both culturally and financially; he no longer needed to rely on partnerships with old, out-of-touch white businessmen in order to lend credibility to his own work. Through this act of control, he also took control of what he refers to as a signifier of luxury; in controlling what signifies luxury, he exhibits a significant amount of control over what *constitutes* luxury itself. In this way, the Cristal scandal served as a precursor to what has emerged since the release of *Watch the Throne* as the new frontier of the luxury debate in hip hop: the realm of fine art.

Contextualizing Art, Hip Hop, and Celebrity

The two industries of hip hop and fine art have a long and complicated relationship. There was a rush of artists in the late 1970s and 1980s—including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fab 5 Freddy, and others—who seamlessly transitioned between the worlds of visual art and hip hop. Curators Franklin Sirman and Lydia Yee write:

Artworks from the early 1980s by Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring were created in direct dialogue with the vibrant street culture that initially emerged in the Bronx and began to infuse the downtown Manhattan art and club street scene by the late 1980s through the efforts of people such as graffiti writer Fab 5 Freddy, artists Stefan Eins and

⁸ Zack O'Malley Greenburg, "The Real Story Behind Jay Z's Champagne Deal," *Forbes*, November 6, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2014/11/06/why-jay-zs-champagne-news-isnt-so-new/#6809c2b045d6> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁹ Jay Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010), 83.

Joe Lewis who ran the Fashion Moda gallery in the South Bronx, and *Wild Style* (1982) filmmaker Charlie Ahearn.¹⁰

The accomplishments of black visual artists during this time were not merely personal victories but revolutionary contestations of cultural gatekeeping. As Yee writes of Basquiat, “Like a DJ, he adeptly reworked Neo-Expressionism’s clichéd language of gesture, freedom, and angst and redirected Pop art’s strategy of appropriation to produce a body of work that at times celebrated black culture and history but also revealed its complexity and contradictions.”¹¹

According to author and hip hop scholar Jeff Chang, after Basquiat’s death from a heroin overdose at age 27 in 1988, “that initial cross-pollination subsided as art and hip-hop went their separate ways.”¹² The connection between fine art and hip hop experienced a resurgence within the fine art world in the early 2000s, thanks in large part to two groundbreaking museum exhibitions: 2002’s *One Planet Under a Groove: Hip-Hop and Contemporary Art* at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (curated by Yee and Sirmans), and 2005’s *Basquiat* at the Brooklyn Museum (curated by Sirmans). Because of this storied history of interaction between hip hop and fine art, the current existence or re-emergence of the relationship between the two industries is not particularly interesting in and of itself. What is noteworthy, however, is the correlation between fine art and luxury—the use of fine art as a signifier of luxury within lyrics, and the creation of hip hop songs, albums, and culture under the assumption that fine art is correlated with luxury.

¹⁰ Franklin Sirmans and Lydia Yee, introduction to *One Planet Under A Groove*, (New York: The Bronx Museum, 2011), 11.

¹¹ Lydia Yee, “Breaking and Entering,” in *One Planet Under A Groove*, 19.

¹² Jeff Chang, “From Basquiat to Jay Z: how the art world came to fully embrace hip-hop,” *The Guardian*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/jan/15/history-art-hip-hop-art-basel-miami-beach-kanye-jay-z-basquiat> (accessed April 5, 2016).

At the forefront of this cultural turn are Jay Z and his friend and frequent collaborator, Kanye West. Jay and Kanye have pioneered the connection between hip hop and fine-art-as-luxury since the 2011 release of *Watch the Throne*, and they each continued to explore this connection with their respective 2013 albums *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* and *Yeezus*.¹³ *Watch the Throne* establishes and reinforces this connection through the usage of cultural capital in its lyrical references, while *Magna Carta* and *Yeezus* continue to play with and expand upon the connection in separate ways. *Magna Carta* continues to utilize fine art primarily as a lyrical symbol of luxury and status in a similar vein to *Watch the Throne*, but Jay strengthens the connection with the lyrics of the song “Picasso Baby” and its accompanying “performance art” music video. With *Yeezus*, and also with his simultaneous forays into fashion, Kanye takes the connection in a completely different direction: he attempts to use his interpretation of artistic theories and ideology in order to redefine the concept of luxury itself.

It’s difficult to pinpoint exactly what we as a culture mean when we say “Jay Z” or “Kanye West”. They are people, they are celebrities, they are artists, they (Kanye more than Jay) are social media denizens—they’re *personas*. A construct made up of combinations of all of these things comes to mind when we hear the name “Kanye West” or “Jay Z.” To illustrate two extreme points on this matrix: this construct will be one thing for someone who, for example, has been a fan of Jay since his 1996 debut *Reasonable Doubt*, and it will be another for someone whose familiarity with Jay is solely based on his appearance in his wife Beyoncé’s Instagram posts.

A Note on Positionality

¹³ See Figures 2 and 3.

I come to this project from a strong point of interest in the particular space that hip-hop occupies in American culture. In general, my studies and my interests are guided by my confidence in the significance of everyday artifacts and interactions, and the idea that the cultural minutiae that make up our lives do not get nearly enough due in academia or in critical thought; it is this conviction that drives my academic interest in American popular culture. It's for partially for this reason that, throughout this essay, I refer to Jay Z and Kanye West with familiarity as "Jay" and "Kanye"—that's how everyone I know refers to them in conversation, and it seems fitting that that pattern should continue here. I also find that referring to Jay and Kanye by their first names is the best way to conjure up the particular person-celebrity-artist construction about which I am writing; to refer to them as, for example, Mr. Carter and Mr. West would be to refer to them solely as individuals, without the artistic, cultural, and of-the-zeitgeist connotations I would like to invoke.

Specifically, I am interested in looking critically at hip-hop because of the unique intersection of race, class, and gender that hip-hop explores and exemplifies in terms of its history as a genre, the nature of the art that it produces and has produced since its inception, and the evolution of the demographics of its consumption. I am also drawn to hip-hop because I believe that it is one of the most genuinely collaborative, innovative, and intelligent genres of art that American culture has to offer. I have been exploring the idea of hip-hop in relation to American conceptions of "high" and "low" or "serious" and "popular" culture for some time now, mostly as a result of classes that I have taken at Vassar with Professor Kiese Laymon ("Shawn Carter: Autobiography of an Autobiographer" in 2012, and "Writing the Diaspora: Verses/Versus" in 2013), in addition to Professor Mark Meigs' "American Cultural History" course in the Masters in American Studies program at the University of Paris Didérot in 2014,

and Professor Tyrone Simpson's "America in the World" course at Vassar in 2015. During these classes, I was encouraged to think critically and academically about hip-hop for the first time, despite having been a casual listener and fan of hip-hop since my early teen years.

As a result of my identity as a white middle-class woman, I have a very particular perception of hip-hop both as a listener and as an analyzer; hip-hop was not originally created for my consumption, and although one could argue that this has changed somewhat due to the staggering popularity and power that hip-hop has achieved as a cultural force in white America, I feel firmly that hip-hop will never fully be mine to consume or to critique. As a result, my ultimate goal is to use my position to advocate for an art form that was born out of and still continues to combat (in addition to facing in its own right) structural and institutional bias and oppression. My identity is impossible to escape or to neutralize, and I strive to remain as conscious of this fact as possible throughout my research and writing.

Finally, a word on my particular interest in Jay and Kanye as it pertains to this project: I have been a fan of both artists since I was in high school. However, my fascination with Kanye really developed after I saw him in concert in the summer of 2013, a few days before the release of his most recent album, *Yeezus*. Despite my position as a fan, my expectations for the concert were admittedly low—it was at a music festival, and I had heard horror stories about his "diva" behavior at the last festival he had played, years earlier, at which he took the stage hours late only to perform a disorganized and drastically shortened set. Instead of having any of these expectations met, I was blown away by a set that started on time, was meticulously crafted and scheduled, was performed largely on a small pop-up stage in the middle of the audience (so that Kanye faced the crowd with his back turned to the VIP section), and most of all, performed and executed with passion and energy that I had never before experienced as an audience member at

a live show. I spent the rest of that summer digging into Kanye's earlier albums, with which I was not familiar, and reading every promotional interview for *Yeezus* that came my way. After my respect and admiration for Kanye grew, I began listening to *Watch the Throne* more closely, which led me to *Magna Carta*.

I understand that Jay and Kanye, and even hip-hop as a genre, are not liked by everyone, so the development of my appreciation for these two artists is not the point of this anecdote. Rather, the point is that the experience caused me to reconsider my perception of them as artists and as public figures, and then to explore what had shaped these perceptions in the first place. What I discovered, and have continued to rediscover every time I revisit a critical analysis of hip-hop, is the pervasiveness of deeply engrained anti-black racism in every facet of American culture, from print news to online journalism, from awards shows to music reviews, from opinionated blog posts to casual conversations with friends. It is work to remind ourselves of this pervasiveness, and it can often be unpleasant work to remind ourselves of our own complicity in it, but it is work that needs to be done consistently, repeatedly, and with dedication.

Chapter 2

Binaries and Boundaries in Hip Hop and Society

“The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour.”

—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

Hip Hop Criticism and The Mid-2000s in Crisis

American commercial hip hop as a genre and as an industry experienced a serious transformation in the years surrounding the turn of the 21st century: the transformation towards commercialism. At that time, it seemed to many hip hop critics and critical listeners as if hip hop itself and the conversation surrounding the genre had stagnated on all levels. One such critic is academic Tricia Rose, whose comprehensive critical work about American commercial hip hop, *The Hip Hop Wars*, was published in 2008—right in the midst of this hip hop crisis. Rose laments in the preface to her book: “[T]he beauty and life force of hip hop have been squeezed out...as corporate influence has expanded, the quality of the public conversation has contracted, disabling progressive responses to both the conservative attacks and the commercial manipulations that have brought hip hop to the ICU ward.”¹⁴ One of the main contributing factors to this stagnation was the separation of hip hop into two separate stylistic, lyrical, and cultural universes in the late 1980s and early 1990s: one was a thriving so-called “underground” hip hop world, a fairly independent and inflexible realm to which overtly political lyrics and/or intellectual rhymes were relegated, and which was largely non-commercial in its lyrical content and the lives of its artists; the other was the anti-underground of “mainstream” rap music, which was largely commercial.

¹⁴ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), ix-x.

In his essay “The Culture Industry: Mainstream Success and Black Cultural Representation,” Gil Cook defines the term “mainstream” as “denot[ing] the systematic cultural projection of a cohesive majority value system through the use of mass media.”¹⁵ This definition applies readily to the dichotomy of mainstream and underground hip hop: for rap music to be part of the mainstream faction as opposed to the underground one at the turn of the 21st century meant primarily that it was commercially successful, got radio play, made money for artists and for record labels, and therefore became the public face of rap music and, by extension, of black culture in America. In addition, according to Rose, “...The most commercially promoted and financially successful hip hop—what has dominated mass-media outlets such as television, film, radio, and recording industries for a dozen years or so—has increasingly become a playground for caricatures of black gangstas, pimps, and hoes.”¹⁶

In this way, mainstream hip hop of the 1990s and 2000s also came to mean music that painted a very particular, limited and limiting picture of black culture in America—one predicated upon the “gangsta-pimp-ho” trifecta. As a result, most hip-hop that diverged from that formula in ways that were nuanced or “thoughtful,” to use Rose’s terminology, was relegated to the underground, where it would make little-to-no money for the artists and be unable to reach any kind of substantial mainstream audience. This distinction does not seek to demean or dismiss the artists whose work she deems mainstream or “commercial,” among whom Rose names Ludacris, T.I., 50 Cent, and Jay-Z. Rather, critics during this era often acknowledge the importance of the skills of these rappers and the producers with whom they work, citing their

¹⁵ Gil Cook, “The Culture Industry: Mainstream Success and Black Cultural Representation,” in *Jay-Z: Essays on Hip Hop’s Philosopher King*, ed. Julius Bailey (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 189.

¹⁶ Rose, 1.

talents as writers, performers, and music-makers. Rose elaborates specifically on the four aforementioned commercial rappers, stating: “They and many others whose careers are based on these hip hop images are quite talented in different ways: musically, lyrically, stylistically, and as entrepreneurs.”¹⁷ In Mark Anthony Neal’s 2001 book *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, he offers more a more holistically positive perspective on commercial rap at the turn of the millennium. He writes of Diddy:

As so-called gangsta rap has fallen out of vogue, it has been replaced with a kind of playa/pimp/baller/high-roller conflation that is the thematic foundation of his music. Despite some of the gangsterish trappings and the vulgar language, these tracks are at their core classic black middle-class uplift narratives, where folks work hard and ‘handle their bizness,’ whether the game is the drug game, the NBA, or the recording industry.¹⁸

Audience reaction to and engagement with hip hop plays a significant role in the distinction between the underground and commercial worlds of the genre. Rose, in particular, recalls conversations with “students, fans, and colleagues” that drew her attention to the importance of the divide between the commercial and the underground, and ultimately argues that it is the amount of faith that these conversation partners placed in the quality of the underground that convinced her that hip hop, though it may not have been dead, was “gravely ill.”¹⁹ This assertion might seem counterintuitive—shouldn’t the intelligent and artistically gifted output of the underground realm be proof enough of hip hop’s validity and worth as a genre? However, critics acknowledge and refute that cognitive dissonance, speaking to the importance of mainstream hip hop in addition to the underground world in determining the overall quality and state of the industry. Rose argues:

¹⁷ Rose, 4.

¹⁸ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 189.

¹⁹ Rose, 3, xi.

...It was as if the mere existence of underground artists meant that hip hop was healthy, and that because of such artists, [students, fans, and colleagues] didn't have to confront either what the most powerful and commercially viable brand of hip hop had become or its vast influence on an entire generation's creativity.²⁰

John McWhorter anticipates similar arguments in his 2008 book *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*, in which he argues against the larger political and activist significance of contemporary hip hop. He writes:

A lot of folks out there sit ever on the edge of their seats waiting to object that 'it's not all like that,' proud of their knowledge of the 'digging-in-the-crates'/'conscious' hip-hop and ready to rattle off the names of some groups... Waiting to pull out your Digable Planets or The Roots CDs as a response to what I want to get across in this book won't work.²¹

Hip hop critics at the turn of the 21st century ascribe great significance to what Rose calls the "hyper-gangsta-ization" of hip hop, a trait which resulted in the false construction of the gangsta-pimp-ho trifecta.²² In hip hop's earlier days, these characters still existed in songs; however, they were represented in ways that were nuanced and thereby more realistic. Even if certain features of these characters were exaggerated or otherwise distorted, they served as important storytelling devices within the narrative of the track or the album. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the depictions of such characters changed to become over-simplified and one-dimensional. These critics argue that not only is the trifecta that dominates the hip hop of the mid-2000s at once simplistic, destructive, and unrealistic—but that its success depends on the belief by a mainstream audience that it *is* realistic. In this way, the construction of the trifecta simultaneously played upon and negatively influenced the way in which commercial hip

²⁰ Rose, xi.

²¹ John McWhorter, *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America* (New York: Gotham Books, 2008), 8.

²² Rose, 3.

hop served as mainstream America's false window into black American culture: as Rose writes, "This grab bag of street criminal figures soon became the most powerful and, to some, the most 'authentic' spokesmen for hip hop, and, then, for black youth generally."²³

Hip Hop's Obama Era

Hip hop critics of the mid-2000s are not wrong about the impact that capitalism and commercialism have had on contemporary American hip hop, nor about the significance of mainstream commercial hip hop as "the most powerful and commercially viable brand of hip hop" and therefore as the lens through which a majority of Americans view hip hop music and culture. However, two main phenomena that transpired after the year 2007 indicate that the era of hip hop in which these critics were writing is markedly different than the playing field that exists today. Though hip hop is more popular today than ever, with rap verses to be found added onto remixes of songs from the fairly straightforward top-40 pop music of Justin Bieber to the garage-band-meets-soul-meets-pop sound of Maroon 5, hip hop is arguably no longer the foremost black American cultural event of the last few decades.

The first reason for that change occurred shortly after the publication of Rose's book, with the 2008 election of President Barack Obama. In addition to the historic importance of Obama's very election as the first black President, his presidency has had the result of exponentially increasing black visibility in Western elite roles. Obama, who was raised by a middle-class single mother and who got his political footing as a community activist on Chicago's South Side, is a figure of black mobility and success. He occupies the most visible and powerful political, governmental, and societal position in the world, and much has been made of how he got there—a tale of a self-made, obstacle-overcoming man not unlike the most classic of

²³ Rose, 3.

hip hop stories (as Mark Anthony Neal wrote of commercialized hip hop, a “classic black middle-class uplift narrative”).

In far more literal evidence of the connection between Obama’s presidency and hip hop, he is arguably the first president to declare himself a hip hop fan, and he’s had numerous public interactions and relationships with hip hop artists that extend beyond nominal interactions like photo ops. Jay Z famously campaigned for him during the 2008 election, even laying to rest his feud with Nas in order to record a joint track called “My President is Black” on the day that Obama received the Democratic nomination for president; Kanye performed at the the 2015 Democratic National Convention fundraiser in San Francisco. Perhaps the most convincing example of the effect of Obama’s presidency on today’s hip hop world occurred in a December 2015 interview *People Magazine*, a respectable tabloid with a white middle-class target audience, when Obama said that his favorite song of 2015 was Kendrick Lamar’s “How Much a Dollar Cost.”²⁴ The track is a fairly deep cut from Kendrick’s 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, so it’s evident that Obama is quite familiar with the album; in naming this song as his top pick of the year, Obama confirms the strength and importance of his position as a president who is also a hip hop fan.

It is particularly significant that Kendrick is the artist who produced Obama’s favorite song of 2015.²⁵ In fact, Kendrick’s success comprises the second major way through which one

²⁴ Tierny McAfee and Sandra Sobieraj Westfall, “Kendrick Lamar Vs. Bruno Mars: POTUS and FLOTUS’ Favorite Songs, Movies and Moments of 2015,” *People*, December 9, 2015, <http://www.people.com/article/barack-obama-michelle-obama-favorite-songs-movies-moments-2015> (accessed April 7, 2016).

²⁵ In fact, it was revealed in early 2016 that Kendrick had met with President Obama in the Oval Office, primarily to film a video promoting Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative, a program intended to aid young men of color. Andres Tardio, “What Kendrick Lamar and President Obama Talked About During Their White House Meeting,” *MTV*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2726936/kendrick-lamar-president-obama-white-house-oval-office/> (accessed April 6, 2016).

can observe the differences between the hip hop era of the turn of the millennium and the current one. Discussing the thematic differences between commercial and underground hip hop during her time, Rose writes:

If the late Tupac Shakur were a newly signed artist today, I believe he'd likely be considered a socially conscious rapper and thus relegated to the margins of the commercial hip hop field...his rhymes are perhaps too thoughtful for mainstream "radio friendly" hip hop as it has evolved since his death.²⁶

Kendrick Lamar is the hip hop artist of today who immediately comes to mind upon reading this statement. Kendrick's work is inescapably thoughtful and political in ways that are reminiscent of Tupac (and as the new "king of West Coast rap,"²⁷ he has received innumerable comparisons to the late rapper). Even the cover of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, which was released in an environment of immense hype after the critical and commercial success of his 2012 major-label debut *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*, serves as an example of Kendrick's politicization.²⁸ It features the show-stopping image of Kendrick in the midst of a group of his friends and family, all young black people and children, the men mostly shirtless; they're holding stacks of money and bottles, their expressions a mix of playfulness and joy and strength; they stand in the lawn in front of the White House, above a motionless, ostensibly dead white judge with x's drawn over his eyes.

Kendrick has dominated the radio and the charts since the release of *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*. That album was certified platinum—a rarity in contemporary hip hop—and *To Pimp a Butterfly* received a record-breaking 11 Grammy nominations, of which it won 5. Kendrick's popularity, combined with the political nature of both his work and his image, are indicative of a

²⁶ Rose, 3.

²⁷ Tom Barnes, "The Story Behind How Kendrick Lamar Became the King of West Coast Rap," *Mic*, May 27, 2015, <http://mic.com/articles/119372/the-story-behind-how-kendrick-lamar-became-the-king-of-west-coast-rap#.W19kTEISe> (accessed April 5, 2016).

²⁸ See Figure 4.

hip hop universe distinctly different, in some way, than the one about which critics wrote in the early-to-mid-2000s.

That difference has to do with binaries. Critics pinpoint a number of interconnected binaries that defined the hip hop world of the mid-2000s: underground/commercial, political/apolitical, progressive/harmful, real/constructed. No one strictly asserts the existence of a binary of talented/untalented or thoughtful/unthoughtful; however, though Rose attests to the skill of commercial rappers as a reason for their success, she does draw a distinction between the lyrical “talent” of the four rappers whom she uses as examples of commercial hip hop and the lyrical “thoughtfulness” of rappers like Tupac. Critics like Rose and her peers handily invoke the existence of these binaries, and document the ways in which they have contributed to the crisis that she identifies in hip hop. The difference between their era and Kendrick’s, then, largely comes with and from a fracturing and dissolution of these binaries, not least of which is the one between commercial and underground hip hop.

The Shift from Bling Rap to Luxury Rap

Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson, drummer of hip-hop band The Roots, pinpoints specific moments in hip hop history along the timeline of true commercial hip hop’s birth and evolution in his book *Mo’ Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove*. According to Thompson, commercial hip hop has its roots in the release of Dr. Dre’s 1992 album *The Chronic*; he asserts that *The Chronic*’s success “forced credible artists to consider commerce, which was then taken to an even higher altitude when Puffy and Biggie made *Ready to Die*.”²⁹ Richard Nichols, comanager of The Roots and contributor to Thompson’s book, adds on, arguing that commercial

²⁹ Ben Greenman and Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson, *Mo’ Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013), 112.

hip hop as an industry and as a phenomenon truly solidified with the release of Biggie's "One More Chance" video. Nichols writes:

Before that, hip-hop had a sense of belonging. When Run DMC did "My Adidas," you could go out and get a pair of Adidas. You could put on jeans and a Kangol hat. You could be part of that club. When motherfuckers are talking about buying a jet or a speedboat, well, that's not inclusive. And think of where the videos are set. Early on there was lots of on-your-block shit, videos with regular locations: street corners, houses, empty lots. People could identify with that in ways they couldn't identify with mansions.³⁰

Biggie's 1994 video for "One More Chance," which was directed by Hype Williams, serves as an excellent example of the ways in which Biggie was one of the founding fathers of the "bling rap" subgenre, which brought flashy qualifiers of wealth to the hip hop stage through lyrical references and music videos. Biggie first appears in the video at around the 45 second mark; he's sitting on the stairs of his house party, wearing bejeweled sunglasses even though it's nighttime and he's inside, as well as two gold chains with large pendants. The video's "blingy" qualities only escalate as the video progresses. The camera cuts to another man, who is cooking with about 15 or 20 bottles of champagne; then, about halfway through the video, Biggie himself reappears, seated this time not on a townhouse staircase or on a couch but on a golden throne.

The video received widespread criticism from members of the underground side of hip hop for these "blingy" connotations. In fact, the bling mentality of "One More Chance" worked its way into the collective hip hop psyche so deftly and so instantaneously that it made its way into underground hip hop's collective subconscious. Discussing the music video for the Roots' 1996 song "What They Do," Thompson writes of his underground group's take on the bling-saturated hip hop of the mid-1990s: "The 'What They Do' video had a little glitz and glamour, although it was done satirically." Even when the final cut was screened, he elaborates, it didn't

³⁰ Greenman and Thompson, 147.

occur to him “that we were mocking Biggie’s “One More Chance” video, as some people later charged. And yet, in retrospect, it seems obvious. There was no good way to isolate and critique the direction hip-hop was heading in without targeting the videos that Biggie was making with Puff and Hype Williams.”³¹

Perhaps the best example of the “bling rap” of the 1990s and 2000s manifested onscreen also involves Diddy (known then as Puff Daddy), Hype Williams, and Biggie: the 1997 video for “Mo Money Mo Problems.” The song was a wildly popular single from Biggie’s posthumous album of the same year, *Life After Death*; as the song and video were released within months of Biggie’s death, Biggie himself does not feature in the majority of the video, save for some archival footage that appears during his verse. The video is set at a golf tournament; Diddy is a participant in the tournament, featured rapper Mase is the tournament’s host, and the spectators are a typical golf tournament crowd of almost entirely old and middle-aged white people.³² Diddy wins the tournament, and shots of him doing celebratory laps across the golf course are interspersed with shots of him and Mase in various sensory-stimulating environments, wearing matching shiny tracksuits, fancy sunglasses, and jewelry. The video’s trappings are ridiculous: the larger-than-life outfits, the antigravity room, the shots of Diddy’s gold chain bouncing in the wind as he runs across the course in celebration.

Still, there is a difference between the kind of quasi-luxury depicted in quintessential Hype Williams videos of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the “luxury rap” espoused by Kanye

³¹ Greenman and Thompson, 147.

³² It’s worth noting that the plot of the video is a reference to the 1997 success of black golfer Tiger Woods in the heretofore white-dominated sporting environment of golf, a success that only continued to shake up established race relations in American popular culture in the following years. The significance of this was not lost on the American public, with black NBA star Charles Barkley commenting to the *New York Post* in 2000, in reference to the popularity of white rapper Eminem, “You know it’s gone to hell...when the best rapper out there is a white guy and the best golfer is a black guy.” Peter Vecsey, “Barkley Looking Like a Real Gem These Days,” *The New York Post*, October 22, 2000.

and Jay on *Watch the Throne*. “One More Chance,” for example, still has a touch of relatability to it, namely in terms of its setting and its characters. It’s set, as a caption early in the video states, “somewhere in Brooklyn,” a location that would have been recognizable and relatable to many American hip hop listeners at the time.; it depicts Biggie sitting on a throne at a crowded, in-demand house party at which people are cooking with champagne. These scenes are larger-than-life, but still grounded in a representation of life that’s somewhat familiar, at least in theory: a Brooklyn house party. Compare that imagery to that of the music video for *N****s in Paris*, *Watch the Throne*’s biggest single. The *N****s in Paris* video depicts Jay and Kanye performing the song at a concert in Paris, but it’s not that simple: the footage is run through some sort of funhouse-mirror kaleidoscope effect. The effect has the striking consequence of rendering Jay, Kanye, and their audience as shining, 2-dimensional geometric constructions, which look a lot like jewels or gems. The video is also interspersed with shots of iconic Parisian buildings and landmarks run through the same effect, and it comes with a disclaimer stating that the video can cause seizures in people with epilepsy.

Videos like Biggie’s of the mid 1990s to early 2000s bridge a certain kind of ideological gap between the “sense-of-belonging” commercialism of Run DMC and the “luxury rap” of Jay and Kanye. As articulated by Nichols, groups like Run DMC—the immediate predecessors to artists like Biggie and Diddy—promoted a kind of realistic, achievable commercialism. The commercialism espoused by the luxury rap of artists like Jay and Kanye in the post-2010 world of hip hop can only be defined as surrealistic. Videos like “One More Chance” and “Mo Money Mo Problems” lie squarely in the middle, both chronologically and ideologically, of these two eras of hip hop.

In this way, Jody Rosen is correct in his assertion in that luxury rap is something new and different from the “bling rap” of the heyday of Hype Williams videos and the songs for which they were produced. So, then, what defines the surrealistic commercialism of luxury rap as espoused on *Watch the Throne*? As in bling rap, there are name drops of luxury items. However, the references that define luxury rap span across all types of media in terms of what they reference and how those references are manifested. Luxury rap makes ample use of what hip hop scholar Imani Perry, borrowing from and extrapolating upon Henry Louis Gates, calls “the Signifyin(g):” it “far exceeds a simple reference or response—it is engagement with other texts and their traditions in the midst of one’s own piece, using the former as part of the ultimate creation of the latter.”³³ However, luxury rap is not just a singular rap verse, song, or even album, which is the kind of text that Perry discusses above and refers to as “[t]he Signifyin(g) rap in sophistication.” Luxury rap is a concept that relies on the sheer depth and breadth of its influences to make its point. As Jon Caramanica writes in his *Watch the Throne* review, the references are “high fashion and high art,” not “fashion and art” without any qualifiers. Luxury rap’s references depend on the designation of high status conferred onto them by their long-held context in American society.

So on *Watch the Throne*, the references are not just lyrical. They are not even just visual, though visual references certainly exist on the album as well; see, for example, the embossed gold baroque design of the album cover; the jeweled effect of the *N****s in Paris* music video. The real punch of luxury rap comes from the multilayered associations that those references carry with them: the cover, for example, is designed by Givenchy creative director Riccardo Tisci, and one can gather that it’s not just because they liked Tisci’s style that Jay and Kanye

³³ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 63.

tapped him to design the cover. Rather, they likely commissioned him because of the connotations of his position at Givenchy, of the luxury that Givenchy represents, and therefore of Tisci's very existence—and because those connotations would therefore necessarily carry over from *Watch the Throne*'s cover to then associate with the album in its entirety. This association is evidenced, for example, in *Rolling Stone*'s coverage of the album art. Colleen Nika writes :

[A] representative for the house of Givenchy provided further insight into the process that went into Tisci's imagining and creation of the product... Givenchy's rep notes that the “cover seems to be embroidered, while the inside artwork looks painted and printed,” a duality that heavily references Tisci's Couture-directed decorative principles, as spectators of his dramatic runway presentations will recognize.³⁴

Firstly, it is significant that the press release for the album art comes not from a representative for Tisci the individual, but from a representative for Givenchy as a fashion house and as a brand: Givenchy is a couture label that has established and cemented its luxury reputation over the past half-century. In addition, by linking the aesthetics of the album art to trademarks of Givenchy's couture collections, *Rolling Stone* strengthens the associations between the luxury implied by the concept of couture, Tisci, *Watch the Throne*'s album art, and the content of the album itself.

Bourdieu, Berger, and Cultural Capital

The kind of multifaceted, status-based references utilized in luxury rap constitute a particular deployment of “cultural capital,” a term first established by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his 1977 essay with Jean-Claude Passeron entitled “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction.” According to Bourdieu scholar David Swartz, “[Bourdieu's] concept of cultural capital covers a wide variety of resources including such things as verbal ability, general

³⁴ Colleen Nika, “Givenchy's Riccardo Tisci Unveils Album Art for Jay-Z and Kanye West's ‘Watch the Throne,’” *Rolling Stone*, August 10, 2011, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/givenchys-riccardo-tisci-unveils-album-art-for-jay-z-and-kanye-west-watches-watch-the-throne-20110810> (April 5, 2016).

awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials. His point is to suggest that culture (in the broadest sense of the term) can become a power resource.”³⁵

Bourdieu observed what he defines as “cultural capital” as existing in three separate states, the first of which he terms cultural capital’s “embodied form.” This state, according to Swartz, has to do with “the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalized by the individual through socialization and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding.”³⁶ Bourdieu elaborates on the difference between “cultural goods” and “material goods” by emphasizing that in order to be a consumer of and therefore to “consume” cultural goods or artifacts, which include works of art such as music, fine art, theater, etc., as well as artifacts of popular culture and scientific formulas, one must understand the meaning of the artifact, rather than simply exhibiting physical or material ownership over it.³⁷ In the creation of these theories, Bourdieu builds upon the economic theories of many prominent sociologists of the 20th century, including Marx and Weber. In particular, he utilizes Weber’s concept of boundaries known as “social closure,” and he expands upon it to include subtler and more casual “exclusionary practices,” thereby “conceptualiz[ing] resources as capital when they function as a ‘social relation of *power*’ by becoming objects of struggle as valued resources.”³⁸ According to Swartz, Bourdieu readily “admits that cultural capital is not as stable or as universal a currency as is economic capital;” Bourdieu himself identifies capital in his 1990 book *The Logic of*

³⁵ David Swartz, *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 75.

³⁶ Ibid., 76.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 42-3.

Practice as an “energy of social physics,” with all the nebulousity and movement implied by the word “energy.”³⁹

However, the cultural capital deployed in luxury rap has less to do with interpersonal relations and with the static reinforcement of existing power structures than Bourdieu’s original definition and usage of the term, and more to do with a many-layered language of references like the kind deployed by Jay and Kanye’s commission of Tisci. Art historian and scholar John Berger’s 1972 book *Ways of Seeing* offers ample theory with which to bolster Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, particularly with regards to the intersecting realms of art and popular culture, in a way that strengthens cultural capital’s ties to the contemporary hip hop landscape.

Berger speaks in particular to the role of advertising and publicity in everyday life and culture, and even more particularly to the role of fine art within advertising. He states that when a work of art is “quoted” in a piece of advertising, it “...suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar material interest...it is a reminder of what it is to be a cultivated European.”⁴⁰ He continues: “the quoted work of art...denotes wealth and spirituality: it implies that the purchase being proposed is both a luxury and a cultural value.”⁴¹

Berger’s analysis here goes hand in hand with Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory in a way that applies quite literally to Jay and Kanye’s referential usage of fine art in luxury rap. Berger is talking not only about the specific use of fine art in advertising, but about the way in which artifacts of culture are packaged and utilized for a purpose, and the idea that those artifacts carry

³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 122.

⁴⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 135.

⁴¹ Ibid.

meaning to particular people or groups of people. When applied to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, especially to the first state of the "embodied form," Berger's analysis of a cultural artifact, such as a work of art, as a signifier with particular connotations helps Bourdieu's theory transition from the more static hierarchical structure (such as through parental lineage or through a statically hierarchical education system) to being a method more akin to osmosis. This method is less direct but perhaps more insidious, enforced not by systems in which we take part but by our very existence in a capitalistic setting, a setting that shapes and defines the world of contemporary hip hop.

Cultural Capital and Hip Hop

The idea of cultural capital applying to pop culture references is quite germane today, especially with the quick cultural turnaround provided by technology—cultural events such as awards shows or music video premieres can be broadcast into millions of homes through live TV, and if you miss it on TV, you can watch it on the internet within hours of the event's occurrence—or even stream it live on the internet as it occurs. An incredibly salient contemporary example of the way that referential culture can be used as a language and therefore as capital, and the prevalence of this phenomenon in hip hop, can be found in author and academic David J. Leonard's 2014 essay "You Got Kanyed: Seen But Not Heard." Leonard's essay focuses on two live televised incidents involving Kanye. During the first, which occurred in 2005, West went off-script during a live telecast for victims of Hurricane Katrina, in order to express his anger at the Bush administration's handling of the crisis, in particular at FEMA's racism. The second took place in 2009, and occurred when West interrupted Taylor Swift's acceptance speech at the MTV Video Music Awards in order to assert that he thought Beyoncé should have won instead. Leonard explains that he owns a t-shirt that bears the words "KANYE

WAS RIGHT,” purchased immediately after and designed in reference to the first incident. He continues:

...While walking the streets of Los Angeles, several young women of color passed by me, apparently randomly commenting that “Kanye was right.” Looking down, I realized I was wearing the shirt. Before parting (with one of them photographing the shirt and posting it to Instagram), we spoke about the shirt’s message. I quickly learned that for them, the shirt was about Kanye and Taylor Swift, not Kanye and George Bush:

“He was right about Beyoncé deserving the award more than Taylor.”

Me: “Indeed, but the shirt is in reference to his comments about President Bush after Katrina”

“He was right about that too.”⁴²

In this encounter, the two cultural artifacts of West’s 2005 Katrina speech and West’s 2009 VMA speech serve as this particular kind of cultural capital. The very existence of Leonard’s shirt is based upon a number of presumptions: that other people will see the shirt and not only understand the cultural reference implied therein, but thereby comprehend certain things about the shirt’s wearer (the wearer is a Kanye fan, they are interested in and keep up with popular culture, they are cool and culturally relevant, etc.) much like Berger’s “quoted work of art” in advertising. In this example, the cultural artifact acting as referential language serves as cultural capital because of the way that it facilitates interactions both within and across the exclusionary social borders that Bourdieu describes. Looking at cultural capital as it pertains to the work and public lives of Jay and Kanye allows for further analysis of situations like the one Leonard describes, especially factoring in the way that live TV and internet technology affect the proliferation of popular culture in today’s increasingly globalized world.

In this way, cultural capital is a pervasive and widely used tool in today’s hip hop landscape: it’s deployed by both hip hop audiences (e.g. Leonard and the two women) and hip hop artists (e.g. Jay and Kanye commissioning Tisci). Audiences use it to communicate

⁴² David J. Leonard, “You Got Kanyed: Seen but Not Heard,” in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, ed. Julius Bailey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 45-6.

associations and connotations to their peers, while artists utilize it in order to communicate associations and connotations to their audiences. As evidenced by the meticulously referential nature of every layer of *Watch the Throne*, Jay and Kanye are at the forefront of this deployment of cultural capital within hip hop, and their mastery of it has only grown in the five years since *Watch the Throne*'s release. In examining each artist's individual relationship with fine art by framing the deployment of fine art references and influences in their recent work as a deliberate usage of cultural capital, key differences in their work and their personas come to light.

Chapter 3

Jay Z

“This is a game people sometimes play with musicians: that to be real, to be authentic, you have to hate having money or that success has to feel like such a burden you want to kill yourself.”

-Jay Z, *Decoded*

Jay and Jean-Michel

On March 4, 2010, Jay Z visited the White House at the invitation of President Obama. It was his second time visiting, but his first had been with a large group that included CEOs and athletes; on this visit, which was much more individualized, he was accompanied by Beyoncé, her mother, and his own mother. Media coverage of the visit was fairly scarce; a few photos of Jay and Beyoncé waiting for the President surfaced on websites like MTV News, but few more details than that emerged at the time. According to writer Davey D’s 2011 essay “The Meeting with a President and a ‘King,’” however, Jay purposefully avoided conversation about rap or his career. Instead, Davey D writes, Jay “sparked up a conversation where he got to demonstrate his keen insight, knowledge, and interest in the fancy paintings by Josef Albers on display at the White House. In doing so he shattered the stereotype of his being ‘just a rapper.’”⁴³ In this way, fine art has always been a useful tool for Jay Z; he has used it throughout his career as a way to grant himself depth as an artist and to challenge people’s perceptions of him. However, fine art and hip hop are not separate worlds for Jay—that much is clear from even a cursory look at the primary object of Jay’s fine art fascination, fellow Brooklyn-born artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

⁴³ Davey D, “The Meeting with a President and a ‘King,’” in *Jay-Z: Essays on Hip Hop’s Philosopher King*, 59.

Jay Z's formal introduction to Basquiat was Sirmans' "expansive"⁴⁴ Basquiat exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2005. Sirmans explains, "Basquiat is sort of a heroic entry point [for Jay]. He was born in the same borough. He even made real hip-hop music."⁴⁵ It is in large part Jay's fascination with Basquiat that has brought the latter artist, and the connection between hip hop and fine art, back into the cultural spotlight in the last decade—Jay even dressed up as Basquiat for Halloween in 2014. However, a critical reading of Jay's references to Basquiat and other fine artists throughout his career reveals a different type of connection than the one originally practiced and envisioned by Basquiat and his peers: it's not as seamless, or as simple, as the art-world/hip hop connection was 30 years ago. Thanks to the advent of digital technologies, the evolution of American capitalism, and the transformation of the hip hop world into a highly commercial one as detailed by Tricia Rose, Mark Anthony Neal, John McWhorter, and others, the relationship between mainstream hip-hop and fine art is primarily manifested as the purposeful deployment of cultural capital—and there's no clearer example of this than the evolution of Jay's relationship with fine art as evidenced by his career moves.

The first connection to Basquiat that can be found in Jay's work occurs in a series of officially unreleased verses from around 2006 (shortly after the Brooklyn Museum exhibit). The lyrics to these verses are published in Jay's 2011 book *Decoded* under the song title "Most Kings." However, most versions of these verses that appear on the internet are either under the slightly different title "Most Kingz," or some variation of "Hot 97 Grammy Family Freestyle" (according to most outlets, this latter incarnation is the original version of the verses, which he freestyled in this incarnation over the Kanye-produced beat of "Grammy Family" by

⁴⁴ Chang, "From Basquiat to Jay Z."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Consequence live on radio station Hot 97). In *Decoded*, Jay writes about how the lyrics are inspired by the Basquiat painting *Charles the First*, which includes the text “MOST ~~YOUNG~~ KINGS GET THEIR HEAD CUT OFF.”⁴⁶ He writes about how he interprets the painting (particularly that one line of text): “I read [that line] as a statement about what happens when you achieve a certain position. You become a target. People want to take your head, your crown, your title. They want to emasculate you, make you compromise or sacrifice in a way that no man, or woman, should.”⁴⁷ For Jay, this idea is one that is central to the commercial rap game of the 1990s and 2000s. He elaborates: “The cliché is, be careful what you wish for, because you might get it. Nearly every rapper who’s made it big—or has even been modestly successful—has had to deal with getting one of his heads chopped.”⁴⁸ Jay related to *Charles the First* because of its depiction of the perils and risks of success, in particular of the success of young black artists; for many, including the painting’s namesake Charlie Parker, Basquiat himself, and hip hop artists like Biggie and Tupac, the risks included and ultimately resulted in death.

One does not need to read Jay’s editorializing of the “Most Kings” verses in *Decoded* to coax out the connection to Basquiat. The first verse opens with the line “inspired by Basquiat,” and the one of the verses following includes the line, taken almost directly from the painting, “most kings get their heads cut off;” a later verse also plays on that line’s structure, with the line “most kings get driven so insane.” The “Most Kingz” version of the song that can be found online features a chorus from Coldplay frontman Chris Martin, which also includes the “most kings get their heads cut off” line repeated as a refrain. Interestingly, the only version of the

⁴⁶ See Figure 5.

⁴⁷ Jay Z, *Decoded*, 93.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

“Most Kings” verses that ever received any kind of official release is a 2008 Coldplay song on which Jay-Z is featured called “Lost+”—a remix of their song “Lost!”, in which the only ostensible difference from the original is the addition of one of Jay’s verses from “Most Kings.”⁴⁹ However, the excerpt of “Most Kings” featured on “Lost+” omits any direct mention to Basquiat or to the text of *Charles the First*, leaving the general pop music-listening public in the dark about Jay’s connection with Basquiat.

Jay and Fine Art: A Timeline

Though Jay began to publicly show an interest in creating an art collection, mentioning his purchase of a Damien Hirst piece on The Jonathan Ross Show in 2008 and being photographed at Art Basel in Miami that same year, the next homage to fine art in his music appears in 2009. It is also a reference to Basquiat; however, the mention differs from “Most Kings” in that it marks Jay’s transition into talking about art collecting in his music. The track, an unreleased song entitled “Ain’t I,” was originally recorded for Jay’s album *The Blueprint 3*. The reference occurs in the middle of the song, with the lines: “I spent that on furniture/I got Warhols on my hall’s wall/I got Basquiats in the lobby of my spot/I’m so sophisticatedly hood, S. Carter cashmere premium goods/Thousand dollars for the sneaks.”

These lines foreshadow the kinds of references that Jay Z continued to make to fine art and artists, including but not limited to Basquiat, in the rest of his career. He’s not talking about a particular work of art, like he does in “Most Kings;” he’s not even directly exploring themes found throughout a particular artist’s career, the way that one could make the connection from the verse used in “Lost+” to *Charles the First* with some prior knowledge of the influence.

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that Chris Martin was also working with Kanye at the time, in the form of a feature on Kanye’s late 2007 album *Graduation*.

Instead, he is using the names Warhol and Basquiat symbolically, as referential status symbols. He's not talking about the paintings' artistic or esoteric value; he's not even truly talking about their monetary value—or at least, he's not *just* talking about their monetary value. He's placing them in the midst of a laundry list of items, equating them on some level, and not just the level of their cost, with expensive furniture and premium cashmere: his ownership of them is a consequence of him being “sophisticatedly hood.”

Hip-hop magazine *Complex* wrote of “Ain’t I:” “Before, Jay’s namedrops [of fine artists] felt forced, as if he was just trying to sound knowledgeable. But on this line, Jay was actually *boasting* about owning art. Not bad for a guy who once claimed all he needed was some Nike Airs and a bucket hat.”⁵⁰ Clearly, audiences who discovered the track (unreleased as it was) found the line convincing. “Ain’t I” marks the first time that we see Jay using the cultural capital of Basquiat and Warhol in order to define himself this way, which is a type of referential usage of symbols of fine art that Jay comes to revisit again and again with exponentially increasing frequency throughout his career from this point forwards.⁵¹

Though Jay continued to make references to fine art in some of his work (mostly on guest verses on other rappers’ songs) in the next few years, his fascination with fine art truly came to light with the release of *Watch the Throne* in 2011. *Watch the Throne* contains a plethora of lyrical references on Jay’s part to various aspects of the fine art world. Many of the references are simple name-drops, though some are more complex; he also expands beyond his previous staples of Basquiat, Warhol, and Picasso to include other artists as well as other art-world names and institutions like gallerists and museums. On the track “That’s my Bitch,” Jay compliments

⁵⁰ Insanul Ahmed and Andre Grant, “Timeline: Jay-Z’s Obsession With Art,” *Complex*, August 11, 2011, <http://www.complex.com/music/2011/08/timeline-jay-z-obsession-with-art/> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁵¹ Ibid.

Beyoncé by asserting that Picasso could have made her, in addition to praising black women's beauty by lamenting that he only has artistic representations of white women to which to compare Beyoncé; he asks for gallerist Larry Gagosian's help to include more black women—including Beyoncé herself—in New York's Museum of Modern Art. On "Who Gon Stop Me," Jay references works by Picasso and Rothko, and compares his own art collection to that of MoMA. On "Illest Motherfucker Alive," he refers to various works by Basquiat and Andy Warhol that he owns as his muses; he compares his own house to a museum, packed so full that he has to keep those works in the bathroom, "so I see 'em when I'm peeing." Jay's name-dropping references continue throughout the remainder of the album, mentioning couture designer Dries van Noten on "Murder for Excellence" and prestigious French-Japanese fashion line Comme des Garçons on "H•A•M."

The nature of Jay's art references did not change very much from those on *Watch the Throne* with his next musical output 2 years later, the album *Magna Carta... Holy Grail*. *Magna Carta* is littered with references to the worlds of fine art and fashion. There's a song entitled "Tom Ford," an homage to the highly respected menswear designer and film director; the hook of the song just consists of the words "Tom Ford" repeated multiple times, in addition to the line "I don't pop molly, I rock Tom Ford." The chorus of "Oceans," sung by R&B/hip-hop artist Frank Ocean, references Basquiat by name ("I hope my black skin don't dirt this white tuxedo before the Basquiat show"). Also on "Oceans," Jay references Shepard Fairey, a graffiti artist who is perhaps most well-known for his 2008 work "Hope," which features a portrait of Barack Obama positioned over the piece's title, and became widely used throughout Obama's campaign: "Shepard Fairey, they finally gave me some hope." On "BBC," he references Bally and Gucci ("Bally shoes, Gucci sneakers"); he also shouts out to Gianni Versace, particularly to his

acquisition of a Basquiat from Versace's own private collection ("got the Basquiat collab from Versace's place").

Picasso Baby Lyrics

Magna Carta's most overt links to the fine art world come on the album's second track, *Picasso Baby*. Over the course of the song, Jay name-drops multiple artists spanning from the Renaissance to the 1980s, with each reference used in a different context to a different end. He references Pablo Picasso ("I just want a Picasso, in my casa/no, my castle;" "I'm the modern day Pablo/Picasso, baby"), Mark Rothko ("I want a Rothko, no, I want a brothel"), Jeff Koons and George Condo ("Jeff Koons balloons, I just want to blow up/Condos in my condos"), Basquiat ("I'm the new Jean Michel"), Warhol ("Surrounded by Warhols, my whole team ball"), Leonardo da Vinci ("Leonardo Da Vinci flows"), and Riccardo Tisci ("Riccardo Tisci, Givenchy clothes"). In addition, he references various art-world institutions by name: Christie's and MoMA, ("I want a row of/Christie's with my missy, live at the MoMA"), Art Basel ("Twin Bugattis outside the Art Basel"), the Met ("See me throning at the Met"), the Louvre and the Tate Modern ("House like the Louvre or the Tate Modern"), and art auctions in general ("I be going ape at the auction...fuck it, I want a trillion").

There are also a number of subtler art-world connections on "Picasso Baby." He mentions Basquiat's graffiti tagline "SAMO" ("Spray everything like SAMO"), and mentions "the 'Ye mask," which is a reference to the Maison Martin Margiela masks that Kanye began wearing at his concerts in 2012.⁵² In a French-language spoken-word bridge in the middle of the song, he references Fibonnaci's golden ratio in relation to his daughter Blue Ivy: "Et là je t'ai tout donné, montré, rien à cacher, tu es là Ivy, comme le nombre d'or" ("And I've given and

⁵² See Figure 6.

shown you everything, nothing to hide, there you are Ivy, like the golden number”). “Picasso Baby” also reiterates two of the art-world-related themes that first surfaced on *Watch the Throne*: he again likens Beyoncé to a work of fine art (“sleeping every day next to Mona Lisa/the modern day version, with better features”) and he adds to the list of inconvenient and inappropriate places in his house into which his private Basquiat collection overflows with the line, directed at Blue Ivy, “yellow Basquiat on my kitchen counter/go ‘head, lean on that shit Blue, you own it.”

The lyrics of “Picasso Baby” are significant not just because of the sheer volume of art-world references that they contain, but because they serve as an excellent example of the particular nature of Jay’s relationship with fine art as it is manifested in his work. For the most part, Jay’s art references have to do with some aspect of art ownership. Not only does he make numerous lyrical references to his own literal art collection, but the majority of the references on “Picasso Baby” push the collecting motif even further. In “Picasso Baby,” Jay repeatedly treats artworks as individual commodities. The song is not inspired by the content of a particular work of art, as was “Most Kings,” for example. Rather, here Jay blends artworks and artists across centuries without abandon, not making any meaningful differentiation between any of them in terms of their content (the closest he gets to alluding to any artwork or artist’s specific qualities is with the line “Jeff Koons balloons,” which could refer to any number of Koons’ works). In this way, Jay equates the value all of these artworks and artists solely on their already-widely-accepted cultural designation as markers of fine art. He references turning his house into a museum (no matter whether it’s the Louvre, the Tate Modern, or MoMA) because of the value of all that he owns and therefore all that is inside his house. In some cases, he doesn’t even care about looking at the art itself, and he only wants it to collect it for collection’s sake—see his multiple references to having to keep art in his bathroom.

Despite its thematic uniqueness, however, “Picasso Baby” is still a typical Jay Z song in one important way: it displays the exceptional blend of aspiration and boast that has been Jay Z’s trademark since well before he was rapping about Rothko. He’s talking aspirationally about things he wants; he’s using the ostensibly unreachable value and status of the things he wants as a symbol not only of his own out-of-this-world greatness, but of his trademark ambition and hustling ability. This tool is uniquely successful for Jay because of the way he combines it with the longtime rap staple of boasting: in the same breath as things he wants, he talks about things he already has. Equating things he wants with things he has makes his aspirations seem attainable: he and everyone listening knows that he could probably actually obtain and achieve them. In this way, he blends fantasy and rhetoric with just enough reality to form a narrative that’s at once compelling and dazzling.

With the art references on *Watch the Throne* and *Magna Carta*, and particularly on “Picasso Baby,” this aspect of reality is in fact very real. Many of the references to artworks as objects of status are factual, Jay’s personal art collection (which he shares with Beyoncé) has attracted lots of attention outside of his lyrics in the years since the release of *Watch the Throne* in 2011. There is no shortage of internet roundups of and speculation about his collection on websites ranging from hip-hop sites like Complex, to business sites like Forbes, to art-world sites like Artspace and Artnet News. He famously employs Jeanne Greenberg Rohaytn, owner of Upper East Side gallery Salon 94, as his art advisor; she also served as the producer as the music video for “Picasso Baby.”

Picasso Baby: A Performance Art Film

The accompanying video for “Picasso Baby” is perhaps the ultimate example of how Jay merges fantasy with reality. It was labeled and advertised as a “performance art film” rather than

a music video. It was filmed in July 2013 over the course of 6 hours at the Pace Gallery in Chelsea, and consists of Jay rapping the track to a packed crowd in the Pace's white-walled room. Jay invited audience members, who were described in the event's invitation as "a cross section of the New York art and cultural world" and included celebrities such as art critic Jerry Saltz, film director Judd Apatow, and hip hop pioneer Fab Five Freddy, to position themselves across from him as he rapped the song directly at them. The invitation, obtained in 2013 by *The FADER*, described the shoot as "experimental and collaborative;" people gathered outside the gallery on the day of the shoot referred to it as a "promotional video."⁵³

The video is heavily inspired by performance artist Marina Abramović's 2010 MoMA work "The Artist is Present," at which she invited audience members to sit down directly across from her and make silent eye contact with her for as long as the audience member wished (Abramović's project, unlike Jay's, lasted for months). In fact, for "Picasso Baby," the two concepts were so similar that the video's director, Mark Romanek, requested permission from Abramović to create the video, and Abramović herself even makes an appearance as one of Jay's participants.⁵⁴ The nearly nine-minute video opens with title credits and various shots of the empty, all-white Pace gallery, while Jay provides a voiceover about the video's concept. He says: "Concerts are pretty much performance art but the venues changed, and just by nature of the venues the performance change, right? You're in a smaller venue, it's a bit more intimate, so you get to feel the, you know, the energy of the people."⁵⁵ The video then cuts to shots of the

⁵³ Naomi Zeichner, "Outside Jay-Z's Marina Abramović-Inspired 'Picasso Baby' Video Shoot," *The FADER*, July 10, 2013, <http://www.thefader.com/2013/07/10/outside-jay-zs-marina-Abramović-inspired-picasso-baby-video-shoot/> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁵⁴ Kyle Buchanan, "The Inside Story of Jay Z's 'Picasso Baby' Video," *Vulture*, August 2, 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/08/jay-z-picasso-baby-video-mark-romanek-hbo.html> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁵⁵ Mark Romanek, "Picasso Baby: A Performance Art Film," *Vimeo*, 2013. <https://vimeo.com/80930630> (accessed April 5, 2016).

crowd standing outside the gallery and waiting inside the gallery for the performance to start, while Jay continues:

In a concert, especially a large concert, all that energy comes to you. Like what do you do with that energy? So today, it's kind of an exchange. You have somewhere to drop it back off, you know. When art started becoming part of the galleries, it became a separation between culture, and even in hip hop, people were like, almost like, art is too bourgeois. We're artists! We're alike; we're cousins. That's really exciting for me, bringing the worlds back together. I try not to have any expectations going into a performance. I try to just let it happen, just get into the moment and, you know, whatever happens happens.⁵⁶

The video then cuts to Jay, ready to perform, in the center of the crowded gallery, while the crowd cheers and claps.

Audience members venture to the center of the gallery one by one; some of them sit on the bench that's placed directly in front of the platform on which Jay stands, some of them walk around or interact more with Jay. Sometimes Jay moves around too, sitting with audience members on the bench, moving around them as they sit, or even sitting on the bench himself as they dance or, in one case, sing, on the platform. Abramović, however, is the only audience member in the video to stand together with Jay on the platform. At the end of the song, the audience cheers as Jay hugs Abramović, whispering in her ear, "you're amazing." The video then cuts to Abramović saying to a reporter, "It was great; there's so much energy, it's hot!...It's also wonderful for a visual artist to cross the borders, different medium, and music always being the most immaterial form of art, which is so wonderful."⁵⁷

The performance is then over. As the audience leaves, Jay has a final voiceover: "Rap is pretty much thinking out loud—you're talking, and you're putting your fears and your vulnerabilities and your, you know, you're putting your bravado and your insecurities all on

⁵⁶ Romanek.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

music. And it's there for the world to see. You're really giving a glimpse into who you are."⁵⁸

The end credits roll, with shots of various audience members, both famous and non-famous, and credits giving their names and professions; some examples include: "Judd Apatow // Writer," "George Condo // Artist," "Rosie Perez // Actor," "George Drakoulias // Bon Vivant,"⁵⁹ "and "Kit Keenan // 9th Grader."

A certain amount of art-world controversy resulted from the video's creation, but not for the boundary-crossing or cultural-gatekeeping reasons one might expect from a collaboration between a hip-hop star and an avant-garde performance artist. Instead, the controversy was financial. In 2015, Abramović gave an interview with Kolja Reichert for *Spike Art Magazine* entitled "I Will Never Do It Again: Marina Abramović is disappointed by Jay-Z." The interview originally began by discussing Abramović's own work with cameras, and how the involvement of the camera has changed her work throughout the last three or four decades. However, the conversation quickly turned to the "Picasso Baby" video:

[Reichert:] How did you feel when Jay-Z told you that he would be adapting "The Artist is Present" for his music video "Picasso Baby" in 2013?

[Abramović:] I didn't feel much. There are hundreds of people adapting my work. I have young pop groups who adapt my work. Just now, somebody's made a porno movie called "Zadie is present", have you seen that? [laughs] It's insane!

[R:] But the difference with Jay-Z was that you yourself took part in his video shoot.

[A:] Yes, but there was one reason for this that I can't talk about. I am very pissed by this, since he adapted my work only under one condition: that he would help my institute. Which he didn't.

...

[R:] Jay-Z turned your structure into an economic model: everyone who showed up had been promised to be part of an exclusive event. You fed the one who held the attention capital.

[A:] And you were totally used and came out with nothing. It's very unfair.

[R, describing one scene from the video:] When you rubbed your forehead with Jay-Z's, it seemed like an economical transaction: I grant you the right to use my piece, but in reverse you have to provide a space for my brand within your campaign.

⁵⁸ Romanek.

⁵⁹ Drakoulias is a well-known hip hop producer and A&R executive, historically involved with Def Jam.

[A:] And in the end it was only a one-way transaction. I will never do it again, that I can say. Never. I was really naive in this kind of world. It was really new to me, and I had no idea that this would happen. It's so cruel, it's incredible. I will stay away from it for sure.⁶⁰

In the days after the interview came out, according to Artnet News, "[t]he Internet went wild...Outlets from *Time* to BET to Gawker and *Rolling Stone* reported on the dispute."⁶¹

However, Abramović was soon proven to be mistaken about Jay's lack of donation to the Institute: Rohaytn produced a receipt from the institute, which she read over the phone to Artnet News. The Institute released a statement two days after the interview's release that read:

Marina Abramović was not informed of Shawn "JAY Z" Carter's donation from two years ago when she recently did an interview with *Spike Magazine* in Brazil. We are sincerely sorry to both Marina Abramović and Shawn "JAY Z" Carter for this, and since then we have taken to appropriate actions to reconcile this matter.⁶²

The entire concept of the "Picasso Baby" video is tinged with inequalities in economic and cultural power and capital. The video's very existence was predicated upon a financial transaction between Jay and Abramović. As Reichert's comments in his interview with Abramović illustrate, there was clearly a cultural transaction at play as well—not entirely dissimilar from Jay's description of the hip hop industry's relationship with Cristal as "trading cachet." As evidenced by The FADER's coverage of the video shoot, it was billed as an exclusive event (no less because of the secrecy which surrounded the actual invitations) and surrounded by talk of promotion from the beginning. Despite Jay's designation of the video as performance art in and of itself, and his inclusion of voiceovers that eloquently and sharply

⁶⁰ Kolja Reichert, "'I Will Never Do It Again': Marina Abramović is disappointed by Jay-Z," *Spike Art Magazine*, May 18, 2015, <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/i-will-never-do-it-again> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁶¹ Brian Boucher, "Self-Centered Marina Abramović Throws Her Own Staff Under Bus in Dispute with Jay Z," *Artnet News*, May 21, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/marina-Abramović-institute-dispute-jay-z-300786> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁶² Ibid.

discuss the conceptual and historical connections between fine art and hip hop, this transactional tone is clearly present throughout the video.

The video's end features names and faces that offer varying degrees of recognizability to a mainstream audience. For example, actors like Rosie Perez and Alan Cumming are recognizable to the larger audience of consumers of American popular culture because their work necessitates the ubiquity of their faces; George Condo is semi-recognizable in that a fan of Kanye's might know that he is an artist because of his visual work for Kanye, but not be able to recognize him by his face; art-world figures like Sandra Gering (identified in the credits as "art dealer") and Roselee Goldberg ("founder of Performa") are largely unrecognizable by face or by name to the average Jay Z fan. This variation illustrates the imbalance in cultural capital depicted in the video: certain faces are more inherently recognizable, and therefore their appearance in the video wields more cultural capital to the video's audience, than others. The peak in this imbalance comes to light via Jay's self-conscious attempt to minimize it. He slips his own footage and name squarely into the middle of the credits, as if anyone watching the video would find his face, his profession, or his identity as culturally unfamiliar as they would Gering or Goldberg: "Jay Z // Hip Hop Artist."

Chapter 4

Kanye West

“You remember Jay Z has the rap: ‘I’m not a businessman/I’m a *business*, man’? I got a rap that’s like this: ‘I’m not a business, man/I’m not a businessman.’”

-Kanye West, lecture at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2015

Kanye and Fine Art: A Timeline

The timeline of Kanye’s involvement with the art and couture worlds is a bit murkier than Jay’s. He expressed an interest in high fashion early on, releasing his first fashion line *Pastelle* in 2006. In 2009, he designed a sneaker for Louis Vuitton; he also interned for Fendi in Rome for four months of that year. He debuted his first womenswear line in 2011, which was poorly received; he showed another, better-received line in 2012. Also in 2012, he began performing concerts in the now-iconic Maison Martin Margiela full-face masks; this look became the staple of his 2013-2014 *Yeezus* tour. In 2013, Kanye completed a small menswear capsule collection of jeans, t-shirts, and a hoodie for French brand A.P.C.; the line was a hit, and he produced another, larger, capsule for the brand in the fall/winter season of 2014. He designed 2 lines for Adidas in 2015, *Yeezy Season 1* and *Yeezy Season 2* (the names of which reference the opening lines of lines of *Yeezus*: “Yeezy season approaching”), the Paris Fashion Week runway shows for which were both collaborations with artist and choreographer Vanessa Beecroft. In 2016, he designed his 3rd line for Adidas, *Yeezy Season 3*. He premiered this line at New York Fashion week with another Beecroft show; notably, this show also served as an album release event for his 2016 album, *The Life of Pablo*.

Kanye’s first major connection with the visual art sector of the fine art world came about with the release of his 2007 album *Graduation*. The album is the third and final album in

Kanye's "higher education trilogy,"⁶³ and like the previous two albums in the trilogy, the cover features Kanye's Dropout Bear mascot. However, the first two album covers are similar to each other in that they feature photographs of Kanye himself inside a bear mascot suit and head, and in that they were both designed by firms related to or commissioned by Def Jam, the label that Kanye was signed to.⁶⁴ *Graduation* marked a deeper foray into artistic collaboration for Kanye. For the *Graduation* album cover, Kanye commissioned artist Takashi Murakami, a Japanese artist whose works had been deemed by ArtNews in 2003 some of the most desired works of art in the world;⁶⁵ on the cover, Murakami re-envisioned the Dropout Bear in his signature, anime-inspired, two-dimensional style. Murakami also collaborated with West for the music video for the album's single "Good Morning," which depicts a day in the life of Murakami's version of the Dropout Bear.

Kanye continued to make art-world waves via his album covers with the release of his 2010 album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*.⁶⁶ The album's original cover art, designed by American painter George Condo, depicts a representation of Kanye engaged in a sexual act with a white female phoenix; both figures are nude, and the female figure's breast is fully visible. The cover sparked a significant amount of controversy, as many retailers chose to display either a blurred and pixilated version of the phoenix painting, or a version with one of four other (non-sexually-explicit) paintings by Condo that Kanye had commissioned for the album; these other paintings were included as inserts in the album's liner notes.

⁶³ Heidi R. Lewis, "An Examination of the Kanye West Higher Education Trilogy," in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, 65.

⁶⁵ Kelly Devine Thomas, "The Most Wanted Works of Art," *ArtNews*, November 1, 2003, <http://www.artnews.com/2003/11/01/the-most-wanted-works-of-art/> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁶⁶ See Figure 7.

Despite the fact that his pre-2011 career featured more art-world connections than Jay's, Kanye's references to fine art and fashion on *Watch the Throne* are less numerous than Jay's. On "Otis," in addition to the "luxury rap" line, Kanye raps that his and Jay's "couture level flow is never going on sale." On "That's My Bitch," a track which (as discussed in Chapter 3) contains lots of references from Jay, Kanye makes fun of his girl mispronouncing "Basquiat," because she's not sophisticated enough to be familiar with him: "You say I care more about them Basquiones, Basquiats/She learning a new word, it's 'yacht.'" On "Illest Motherfucker Alive," Kanye references couture women's shoe designers Manolo Blahnik and Giuseppe Zanotti: "Sponsored by Manolo/She got Zeppi Notos ready for some photos." However, in terms of fine art connections, *Watch the Throne* belongs more to Jay.⁶⁷

Kanye as a Pop Artist

Kanye's immersion in the fine art world truly took off in the summer of 2013, in the lead-up to the release of his album *Yeezus*. In June of that year, he held an impromptu listening party for the album at the Art Basel festival in Basel, Switzerland. Before he played the album, he gave a short introductory speech. He ruminated a bit on how he perceives American culture today, and how in his position of cultural power, as a household name with 21 Grammy awards and a net worth of \$130 million, and as, as he half-jokingly pointed out, "a very commercial celebrity boyfriend" (at that point West was dating TV star and fashion fixture Kim Kardashian; they are now married with 2 children), he tries to influence American culture to incorporate the values

⁶⁷ When talking about individual lines and verses on *Watch the Throne*, I am assuming, for the sake of simplicity, that the content of a line or verse is the brainchild of the rapper who delivers it. However, it is worth noting that these two artists in particular have a history of inspiring and borrowing from each other in the studio. For example, the 2004 documentary *Fade to Black*, which follows Jay Z as he records *The Black Album*, includes video footage of Kanye in the studio with Jay; though Kanye is working only as a producer on this album and not as the rapper, the footage shows him freestyling the single "Lucifer's" famous hook, "I'm from the/murder capital, where they murder for capital." Patrick Paulson and Michael John Warren, *Fade to Black* (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Classics, 2004).

that he finds and so appreciates in fine art, architecture, design, and high fashion. In fact, he primarily spoke about his interest and experience in fine art; though the speech was obviously tailored towards his audience of Art Basel attendees, it was nevertheless substantive and revealed aspects of his past and his artistic process that he had rarely discussed before. On this subject, he said, in part:

[I hate YouTube because] the player is so ugly, and it's presented in such a terrible manner. I want everything I do to be presented in an art context, as this is a form of sonic art. I was an artist originally, I have been in art school since I was 5 years old. I got scholarships to three art schools, Art Institute of Chicago, Saint Xavier, and the American Academy of Art, where I ended up going—and I dropped out because I had an assignment where I was supposed to do an ink painting or something, and I would take two weeks to do it, and when I looked at my work, I just felt that I would never be one of the great visual artists of the world. I just felt like I would end up like—and this is no knock to anybody that does this—but I felt like I would end up working at an ad agency or something like that. I wanted to make something of impact. I found that when I would drop samples, my friends would react to it more. I felt that I had a real talent in chopping and appropriating music. What I want people to understand about sampling and producing is that it's really similar to—and I know this is obvious what I'm going to say, because I'm a black guy so I'm gonna name the 'most obvious artist in the world'—Warhol, but it's very similar to the way Warhol would appropriate a Campbell's Soup can is the way I would sonically appropriate a Ray Charles sample or a Michael Jackson sample. Right now it's a fight against the separation and constant dumbing down of culture, and I'm standing in the middle of it. So if you know what people say are my lowest moments, those moments where I sat and saw them try to dumb down culture, and I would not allow it to happen on my clock.⁶⁸

He then played *Yeezus* in its entirety from a laptop while the room listened, stopping to perform a couple of the album's songs at the audience's request. After the album ended, he shook everyone's hand as they left the room.⁶⁹

Kanye's comparison of himself to Andy Warhol is not the only one of its kind: he also referred to himself as a “pop artist” in his acceptance speech for his honorary doctorate from the

⁶⁸ Isabel Wilkinson, “Kanye West Hosts Impromptu Listening Party During Art Basel Switzerland,” *The Daily Beast*, June 12, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/12/kanye-west-hosts-impromptu-listening-party-at-art-basel-switzerland.html> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2015. These references to Warhol and pop art are more complex than it appears on the surface—they are definitely not just, as Kanye joked, “a black guy...nam[ing] the ‘most obvious artist in the world.’” It is impossible to overstate the central importance of sampling technology and techniques to the creation and development of hip hop, and Kanye is hardly the first person to make the connection between hip-hop sampling and Warhol or his ilk. In his comprehensive book *Pop Music, Pop Culture*, Chris Rojek describes the role of technology of popularizing the role of the DJ, which is similar in this context to the role of the hip hop producer: “The technology brings sonic *bricolage* and Pop Art within the reach of anyone who can afford a sampler, a turntable, and an amplification system.”⁷⁰ This is not to say that good sampling does not require genuine talent and artistry in addition to readily available technology; obviously, not everyone who can afford the items on Rojek’s list can be Kanye, the same way that not anyone with access to a photocopier and an image from an advertisement could be Andy Warhol. In her essay “Kanye Omari West: Visions of Modernity,” Dawn Boeck discusses the artistry that comes through in Kanye’s use of sampling. She writes:

Sampling also builds a connection between artist and audience in its creation of a multilayered product. The artist pulls in outside musical texts that have their own emotions, associations, and memories and melds them with their own vision and purpose. West’s experiences as producer prior to his solo debut in 2004 enable him to recognize the historical, artistic, and rhetorical value of using samples within his own work as he appropriates them to create his own unique aesthetic products.⁷¹

When thinking about sampling in this way, Kanye’s connection to Warhol is clear. Sampling—or, to use Kanye’s terminology, which more readily applies to Warhol and to the visual arts in general, “appropriation”—is a way for both Kanye and Warhol to connect with their audiences through the usage of cultural capital. This appropriation feeds off of multiple layers of reference,

⁷⁰ Chris Rojek, *Pop Music, Pop Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), 185.

⁷¹ Dawn Boeck, “Kanye Omari West: Visions of Modernity,” in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, 216.

which all work in tandem with each other: the audience's familiarity (or lack thereof) with the appropriation's source material, the cultural context of the source material, the sensory qualities (color/sound/etc.) of the source material, and the cultural context and sensory qualities of the re-appropriated final product, just to name a few. In this way, Kanye's comparison of himself to Warhol stands to reason; it is not just an effort to name drop an artist in order to impress an art-world audience, but a clear demonstration of familiarity with art. He recognizes the similarities between his process as a hip hop artist and a visual pop artist's process, as detailed by Rojek; he also exceeds the generic pop art formula of Rojek's DJ by comparing himself specifically and with great detail to one of the most original and celebrated pop artists of all time.

Kanye and Multimedia Metaphor

The Art Basel appearance was the first of many public appearances and interviews that Kanye would conduct in the following months, ostensibly for the album's promotion, in which he would reference fine artists and artworks, namely by comparing himself to those artists and talking about how *Yeezus* itself was influenced by particular works of fine art and design. The day before the impromptu Art Basel listening party, the *New York Times* published a long-form interview with Kanye, written by music critic Jon Caramanica and entitled "Behind Kanye's Mask"—the first long-form interview that Kanye had done since 2009. The interview largely focuses on the ways in which *Yeezus* is a minimalist album, and the development and various manifestations of Kanye's interest in minimalism as a concept and as an art movement. This tone is set early on in the interview's introduction, as Caramanica recounts a quote from producer Rick Rubin during the recording of *Yeezus*: "One afternoon, Mr. Rubin exited the studio and declared, to everyone and no one, 'It's un-bee-leave-able what's happening in there.' If by that he meant the paring-down to what Mr. West lightheartedly referred to as 'aspiration

minimalism,' then yes, it was somewhat unbelievable."⁷² Kanye displays particular interest in French architect and furniture designer Le Corbusier. He talks about being directly inspired by Le Corbusier, and the ways in which developing a familiarity with the work of Le Corbusier allowed Kanye to see and capitalize on already-existing spaces for minimalism in hip hop.

[Caramanica:] One of the things I thought when I heard [Yeezus] was, "This is the anti-College Dropout." "It feels like you're shedding skin. Back then, you were like: "I want more sounds. I want more complicated raps. I want all the things." At what point did that change?

[Kanye:] Architecture — you know, this one Corbusier lamp was like, my greatest inspiration.⁷³ I lived in Paris in this loft space and recorded in my living room, and it just had the worst acoustics possible, but also the songs had to be super simple, because if you turned up some complicated sound and a track with too much bass, it's not going to work in that space. This is earlier this year. I would go to museums and just like, the Louvre would have a furniture exhibit, and I visited it like, five times, even privately. And I would go see actual Corbusier homes in real life and just talk about, you know, why did they design it? They did like, the biggest glass panes that had ever been done. Like I say, I'm a minimalist in a rapper's body. It's cool to bring all those vibes and then eventually come back to Rick [Rubin], because I would always think about Def Jam....I'm still just a kid learning about minimalism, and [Rubin is] a master of it.⁷⁴

Though minimalism is a relatively new foray for Kanye, equally of note is the simple fact of his ability to translate non-musical influences (in this case, architecture and furniture) into his work. Kanye's tendency to think about his work a multidimensional and multimedia manner can be traced back to his time as a producer, before the start of his individual rap career. The documentary film *Fade to Black* utilizes video footage from his time in the studio working as a producer on Jay's album *The Black Album* in 2003; in some of this footage, Kanye explains, "When I was making that Twista song, I was making that shit like it was a sitcom, itself, or like a piece of a movie or something." Jay Z responds incredulously to the cameraman, "Tape this

⁷² Jon Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/arts/music/kanye-west-talks-about-his-career-and-album-yeezus.html> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁷³ See Figure 8.

⁷⁴ Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask.

n***a, man, are you taping him?” Kanye continues, “See, like, if *The Black Album* was like *The Black Movie* or something. So, the songs are like soundtracks, like scores, to the scene that’s going on in the movie.” A few minutes later in the video, Kanye reiterates: “This record ain’t a record; it’s a movie and shit. Like a scene from a movie.”⁷⁵ In this footage, Kanye displays how he saw his production work for *The Black Album* as if it were a movie or a sitcom; in this way, *Fade to Black* shows that as early as 2003, Kanye was thinking about his own work in multimedia terms.

However, despite Kanye’s clear longtime penchant for multimedia metaphor, his language when discussing his own work has gotten more specific and more visual since the release of *Yeezus*. Even when his language doesn’t directly relate to fine art, it has developed to consistently exhibit a distinct and specific visceral quality that demonstrates his experience in the visual arts. Elaborating on the minimalist sound of *Yeezus* in a January 2014 interview with filmmaker Steve McQueen for *Interview*, Kanye describes the abrasive sound effect that introduces the album’s opening track, “On Sight.” He states: “It’s the sonic version of what internet static would be—that’s how I would describe that opening...It was just like that moment of being in a restaurant and ripping the tablecloth out from under all the glasses. That’s what ‘On Sight’ does sonically.”⁷⁶ Elsewhere in the Steve McQueen interview, he refers to certain songs throughout his career as “sonic paintings,” and explicitly identifies himself as a fine artist: “[T]he joke that I’ve actually played on everyone is that the entire time, I’ve actually just been a fine artist. I just make sonic paintings, and these sonic paintings have led me to become

⁷⁵ Paulson and Warren, *Fade to Black*.

⁷⁶ Steve McQueen, “Kanye West,” *Interview*, January 19, 2014, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/kanye-west> (accessed April 5, 2016).

whatever people think of when you say ‘Kanye West.’”⁷⁷ Of course, it’s not just West’s songs, or his “sonic paintings,” that “people” think of when they think of Kanye West; it’s his entire celebrity persona, moments like the Katrina telecast and VMA incidents—moments of which he is well aware, having referred to them as times when he has “actively decided” to not “dumb [him]self down or make [him]self palatable for a certain audience.”⁷⁸ However, those moments, as with any artifacts of popular culture, and particularly in what journalist George Packer calls “the modern culture of celebrity,”⁷⁹ are not indistinguishable from the work of an artist like West. As author A.D. Carson writes in his essay “Trimalchio from Chicago: Flashing Lights and the Great Kanye in West Egg:” “No author, no artist, is so independent of his work that his craft, his brushstrokes, his personality, some degree of his being is not recognizable in the stories he tells.”⁸⁰

For Kanye, the story he tells came full circle, in a sense, in May 2015: the man who titled his first album “The College Dropout” received his aforementioned honorary doctorate from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He gave two speeches there. One was a lecture that took the form of a question-and-answer session; as he explained at the start of that lecture, “I’d like to start with a question that can build an idea, energy, vibe, or something you’d like to know, and I riff off that—as opposed to preparing anything.”⁸¹ The other was a 4-minute acceptance speech

⁷⁷ McQueen.

⁷⁸ Jian Deleon and Karizza Sanchez, “You Can Now Listen to Kanye West’s Full Lecture From SAIC,” *Complex*, May 11, 2015, <http://www.complex.com/style/2015/05/kanye-west-saic-lecture-transcript> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁷⁹ George Packer, “Celebrating Inequality,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/opinion/inequality-and-the-modern-culture-of-celebrity.html> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁸⁰ A.D. Carson, “Trimalchio from Chicago: Flashing Lights and The Great Kanye in West Egg,” in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, 185.

⁸¹ Deleon and Sanchez.

during the actual ceremony, which offered a rare moment in which he seemed to falter and his voice shook, followed by: “I felt my nerves a bit [just now], and I don’t feel that feeling a lot.”⁸²

Kanye’s Anti-Consumerist Luxury

A somewhat unexpected aspect of Kanye’s Art Basel speech nevertheless came to be a recurring theme throughout the next few years: his marked de-emphasis on consumerism, and his repeated articulation, in some form, of his desire to make art for art’s sake instead of for commercial gain. This desire is particularly evident in the line: “...I felt like I would end up working at an ad agency or something like that. I wanted to make something of impact.” In the realm of the visual arts, the idea of producing art for advertising is perhaps the most straightforward way of producing art for money. Of course, this disavowing of commercialism has to be taken with a grain of salt—see Kanye’s reference to himself as “a very commercial celebrity boyfriend.” However, this sentiment overall stands in marked opposition to the rhetoric that Jay Z has espoused throughout his career. Jay writes in *Decoded*:

A lot of people came to hip-hop...not out of a pure love of music, but as a legit hustle, another path out of the hood. I’ve reflected some of that in my music because, to be honest, it was my mentality to some degree—when I committed to a career in rap, I wasn’t taking a vow of poverty. I saw it as another hustle, one that happened to coincide with my natural talents and the culture I loved. I was an eager hustler and a reluctant artist.⁸³

If Kanye had, like Jay, been an eager hustler and reluctant artist, an ad agency, or some other corporate venture in which he could have made use of his artistic skills, would ostensibly have been the way to go. However, throughout his various appearances and interviews in the summer

⁸² Sabrina Toppa, “Listen to Kanye West’s Honorary Doctorate Acceptance Speech at SAIC,” *Time*, May 12, 2015, <http://time.com/3854985/kanye-west-honorary-doctorate-acceptance-speech-saic/> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁸³ Jay Z, *Decoded*, 130.

of 2013, Kanye revealed himself to be the opposite of Jay in that regard: eager artist, reluctant hustler.

Kanye's anti-consumerist rhetoric has been particularly evident in a number of addresses and interviews that he's given about fashion in the last few years. His Yeezy Season collections for Adidas are decidedly mass-market, at least in concept if not in price;⁸⁴ one *Vogue* writer finds "the impetus behind his Adidas line, which is essentially to bring the same level of integrity to mass-market clothing that a company like Apple brings to its products," to be "a timely and valid one."⁸⁵ Kanye appears to be genuinely dedicated to the mass-market concept from a moral standpoint, particularly to the qualities of affordability, availability, and conceptual accessibility. Talking to Caramanica in 2013 about a "clothing guy [whose name he] won't mention" who asked him why he hadn't been more successful in the fashion world, Kanye explained, "...[U]ltimately, this guy that was talking to me doesn't make Christmas presents, meaning that nobody was asking for his [stuff] as a Christmas present. If you don't make Christmas presents, meaning making something that's so emotionally connected to people, don't talk to me."⁸⁶

Kanye's dedication to the mass-market concept does not just apply to his fashion lines—it's easy to trace his influences throughout all of his cultural and artistic outputs in this regard. As late as his SAIC lecture in 2015, he continued to discuss his fascination with the one

⁸⁴ Kanye has expressed dissatisfaction with the prices of the pieces, saying that a jacket isn't "...as cheap as [he] would like it to be. We're working on the prices now. I don't have the exact prices. But what I will tell you is that we'll eventually get them super-inexpensive. And it will be all about everyone having them." Dirk Standen, "Exclusive: The Kanye West Interview," *Vogue*, February 16, 2015, <http://www.vogue.com/13277553/kanye-west-adidas-originals-interview/> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁸⁵ Standen.

⁸⁶ Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask."

particular Le Corbusier lamp that inspired the sound of *Yeezus*; however, this time, it was in reference to his mass-market ideas about fashion. He said:

I'd look at that Corbusier lamp and think: 'He made this, and he put this lamp in zoos, so everyone could have it.' It was about everyone having an opportunity to have beauty, to be inspired. How many times have you walked into a designer store, where you really like the head designer a lot, and you just grab a piece, and it's just impossible to even consider how you could possibly ever afford that?⁸⁷

He attempts to anticipate any potential criticism for the irony inherent in the idea that he bought a Le Corbusier lamp for the self-proclaimed “dumb expensive” price of \$110,000 because of the sentiment of class equality that it stood for and stirred within him. He continues, “So, one of the things that I loved about being nouveau riche was the ability to take those things out of the dressing room, and by doing that, I was able to learn and educate myself.”⁸⁸

In identifying himself as nouveau riche, he acknowledges his wealth in anticipation of any aforementioned criticism, while still distancing himself from his wealth enough to maintain credibility as a designer of and for the masses. In this way, he articulates the tension between his anti-consumerist ideology and his desire to contribute to the mass market. As journalist David Samuels writes in his article “American Mozart” for *The Atlantic*: “[Kanye] buys into the national dream of high-end consumption, while also maintaining a critical distance that allows him to create rhymes and characters that his audience of aspiring consumers can identify with.”⁸⁹ In addition, even while turning to the mass market, Kanye identifies as an artist through and through: he acknowledges that “you gotta have something to have something;” in other words, you need to have the means in order to become educated in a craft, and while Christian Dior, for

⁸⁷ Deleon and Sanchez.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ David Samuels, “American Mozart,” *The Atlantic*, May 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/american-mozart/308931/> (accessed April 5, 2016).

example, gained access to his education because “[h]e was born with wealth,” Kanye had access to his education because another option is that, in his words, “you have an extremely amazing talent, and you get a scholarship, like I did at one point.”⁹⁰

It’s clear that Kanye exhibits a serious and consistent ideological dedication to the concept of mass-market clothing and to the art that inspired that dedication in him. In this way, the connection between his clothing lines, the Le Corbusier lamp, and *Yeezus* makes a lot of sense: it’s clear that he’s an ideologically and conceptually driven artist (“eager artist, reluctant hustler”), so it stands to reason that the same themes would run through all of his work, no matter the medium. However, one can’t forget the luxury rap of *Watch the Throne*, and isn’t mass market the polar opposite of luxury?

Kanye states in his 2013 interview with Caramanica:

I need to be able to give people more of what they want that currently is behind a glass. I don’t believe that it’s luxury to go into a store and not be able to afford something. I believe luxury is to be able to go into a store and be able to afford something.⁹¹

He’s careful not to eschew the concept of luxury entirely. Instead, he is attempting to redefine it by stripping of it what seem to be its defining qualities: high monetary value, desirability, and status as a result of limited supply. Once these qualities are stripped, the only quality left that could possibly deem a luxury item as such is its inherent *quality*—whether or not it’s *good* art, whether or not it’s *good* design (fitting, from a man whose record label is called G.O.O.D. Music). It’s admittedly a confusing prospect, but Kanye’s the only one who could make it seem as convincing as he does: as the man who coined the phrase “luxury rap,” he knows luxury, and he knows certainly knows how to break cultural boundaries.

⁹⁰ Deleon and Sanchez.

⁹¹ Caramanica, “Behind Kanye’s Mask.”

Chapter 5

Conclusion

When President Obama was asked, “Kanye or Jay-Z?” he picked Jay Z. The question was a loaded one, posed by David Samuels and recounted in his “American Mozart” article; Samuels was unsurprised by Obama’s answer, and elaborated freely on what that answer signified:

Barack Obama is clearly a Jay-Z guy. Jay-Z is about control. Jay-Z is about success. He’s a natural-born leader...Jay fills arenas and announces clearly—unlike Kanye West, who jumps onstage and interrupts during award ceremonies, cries on talk shows, and jets off to Rome to apprentice with the House of Fendi.⁹²

Samuels’ piece is from nearly four years ago. However, his neat distillation of the respective personas of Jay and Kanye is today more accurate than ever.

Kanye is well-known for his “rants,” his “arrogance,” his “ridiculous beefs,” and his “over-the-top wedding.” Popular lifestyle website Refinery29 states: “In 2014, Kanye West went from rapper to adjective. He’s been A-list for quite some time, but this year we saw a sharp transition in the way people talk about him. Comments went from ‘Look what Kanye said’ to ‘How Kanye is *that*?’ Now, Kanye is a lifestyle. He’s the tortured artist to a point of self-parody. He is larger than life.” Kanye’s “self-parodic” reputation only exploded when he began discussing fine art in the media. After his Art Basel *Yeezus* premiere, *The Hollywood Reporter* ran an article that begrudgingly admitted referred to the art schools to which he was accepted as “admittedly prestigious.” He participated in Art Basel’s Miami incarnation a few months later, and following that event, *Vanity Fair* published a piece entitled “The Best Kanye West Quotes from Art Basel;” the article sardonically refers to an event at which Kanye conversed with

⁹² Samuels.

Jacques Herzog as “an infinitely wise lecture on art” that featured “an extended rant about a Le Corbusier lamp.” Throughout 2013, news outlets from The Daily Beast to Buzzfeed to Us Magazine to Business Insider all ran listicle-style articles with some variation of the headline “The Craziest Kanye Quotes from X Interview/Event/Appearance,” and many of those quotes consisted of his references to Le Corbusier or Rick Owens.⁹³

Jay, on the other hand, appears far less in this type of media. He rarely grants interviews, let alone participates in the kind of impromptu events that provide fodder for Buzzfeed, such as Kanye’s Art Basel Speech. His public image is that of the “businessman” and the “business, *man*,” and that is a deliberate choice on his behalf; as Michael Eric Dyson writes, “In Jay-Z’s mouth, business sounds more like a verb, functions more as an action than a denominator of a person, place, or thing.”⁹⁴ Jay maintains a certain amount of distance between Jay Z and Shawn Carter, a quality he attributes in *Decoded* to his own talent and mental fortitude:

...I never had to reject Shawn Carter to become Jay Z. Shawn Carter’s life lives in Jay’s rhymes—transformed, of course: Flesh and blood become words, ideas, metaphors, fantasies, and jokes. But those two characters come together through the rhymes, become whole again. The multitude is contained. It’s a powerful magic. No wonder so many MCs lose their minds.⁹⁵

The details of his personal life are meticulously guarded, and because of that, his entire persona is mysterious and tantalizing: the grand finale of the show during his 2014 joint “On the Run” tour with Beyoncé consisted of a projected medley of carefully selected home videos of never-before-seen moments that included their wedding and shots of infant Blue Ivy accompanied by the caption: “This Is Real Life.” Somehow, it was a powerful and entirely believable statement,

⁹³ Lily Shell, “I Am A God: Kanye West and Commercial Culture,” *Boilerplate Magazine*, May 6, 2015, <http://boilerplatemagazine.com/?p=1344> (accessed April 5, 2016).

⁹⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007), 52.

⁹⁵ Jay Z, *Decoded*, 245.

despite its existence in the face of the glaring surreality of the power couple—celebrity, materialized and personified—that stood on stage in front of the screen.

Since 2011, Jay and Kanye have both deliberately referenced fine art in every facet of their work. They do this in order to engage with their audiences in a variety of ways. Both artists' deployment of fine art as cultural capital results in the crossing of certain exclusionary social boundaries—whether those boundaries are between different groups of audience members, as in David J. Leonard's t-shirt anecdote, or between audience members and the artists themselves, as evidenced by Jay Z's designation of himself as “hip hop artist” amongst gallery owners and fans alike in the “Picasso Baby” video. Despite this core similarity, however, Jay and Kanye's respective public images—one calm, controlled, and calculated, the other erratic, arrogant, and ridiculed—correspond exactly to each artist's relationships with the world of fine art. On *Watch the Throne* and *Magna Carta*, Jay focuses his lyrical attention on his own art collection, thereby prioritizing the monetary value of art over its esoteric or conceptual value. Even when he purports to make fine art himself with the “Picasso Baby” video, he maintains the connection to luxury through the video's social dynamics: by attempting to immerse himself amongst art-world celebrities like well-known gallery owners and art-fair patrons. In this way, though he expands upon it and takes it in new and interesting directions by exploring its connections to hip hop as an art form, he maintains the status quo of the fine art/luxury dynamic.

By contrast, Kanye breaks with the status quo in his attempts to redefine luxury by identifying himself as a fine artist. It appears that the public discourse may be beginning to turn in his favor: PBS Digital Studios' YouTube Channel “The Art Assignment” produced a video in January 2016 entitled “The Case for Kanye,” which discusses Kanye's SAIC doctorate and

makes, as the title implies, a case for Kanye to be taken seriously in the fine-art world.⁹⁶

However, it is this breaking of boundaries that largely accounts for his negative public persona.

A black artist who steps over the boundaries of what's expected of him—a traditional rap career, with traditional ideological emphasis on money, whether that's in the form of bling or luxury—reads as a threat to an American culture that is steeped in white supremacy.

This is not to say that Kanye has all the answers, that he's a responsible role model for celebrity behavior (see his nasty, misogynistic public takedowns of his ex-fiancée Amber Rose, or his tweet in support of Bill Cosby amidst more than 50 rape allegations), or that he will never make an artistic misstep. However, to step out of his lane in the way that he does in a society that has such rigidly prescribed roles for black hip-hop artists takes guts, and the territory that he's stepping into (anti-consumerist ideology in two fields, hip hop and the contemporary fine art industry, that are dominated by consumerism) sits at the cross-section of innumerable contradictions. To inhabit that space of contradictions the way that Kanye does also takes—yes, that famous Kanye adjective—arrogance. It certainly takes arrogance to say to the institutional bible of the Western fashion industry, as Kanye did to *Vogue* in 2015, “Now it's up to you to choose whether or not I'm chic enough to sit at your dinner table. And I could give a fuck about your dinner table, by the way. I've got my own petrified Rick Owens table in my house. Is that chic enough?”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ The Art Assignment/PBS Digital Studios, “The Case For Kanye,” *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8cCSRIk9c8> (accessed April 6, 2016).

⁹⁷ Standen.

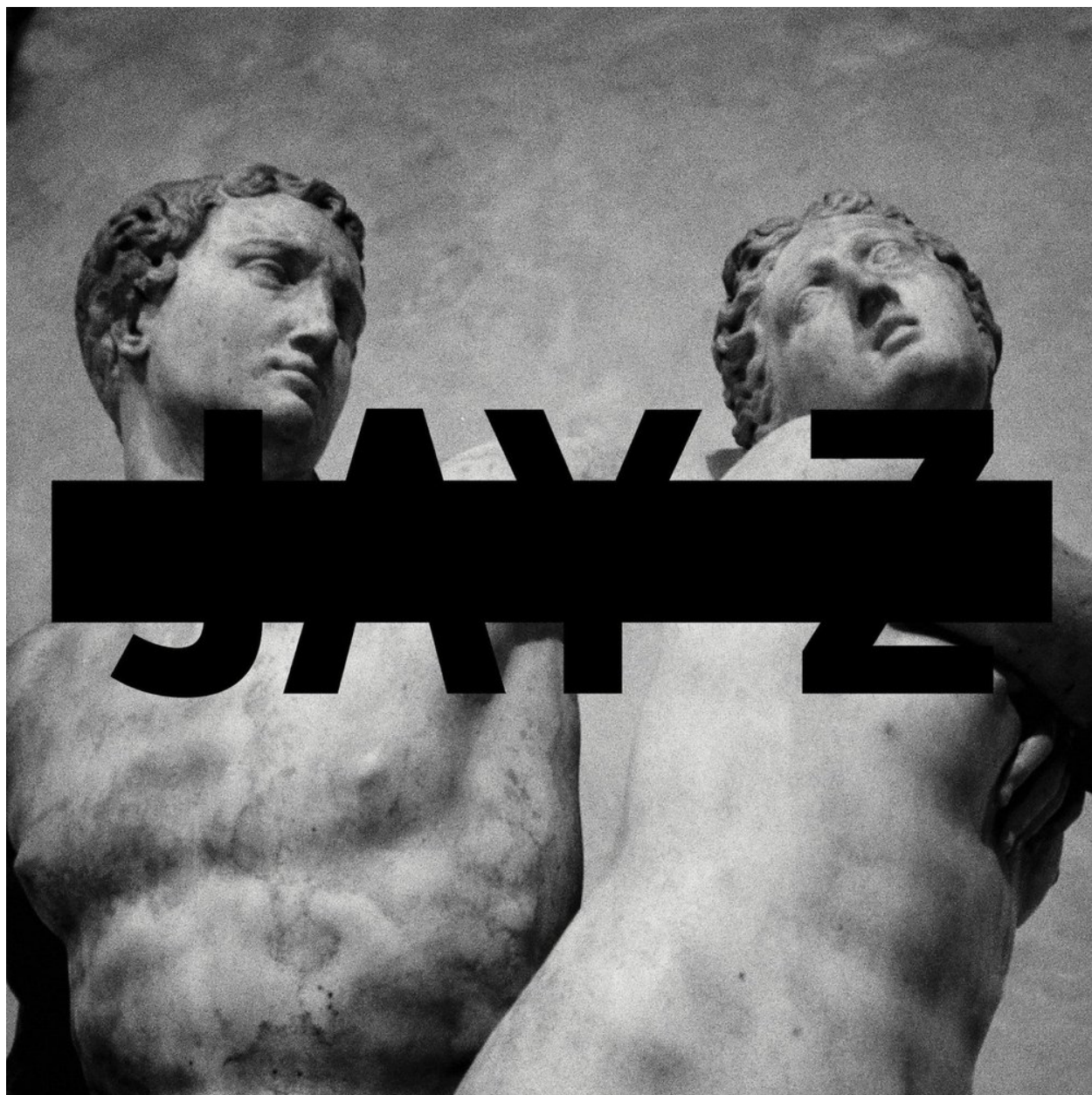
Images

Figure 1



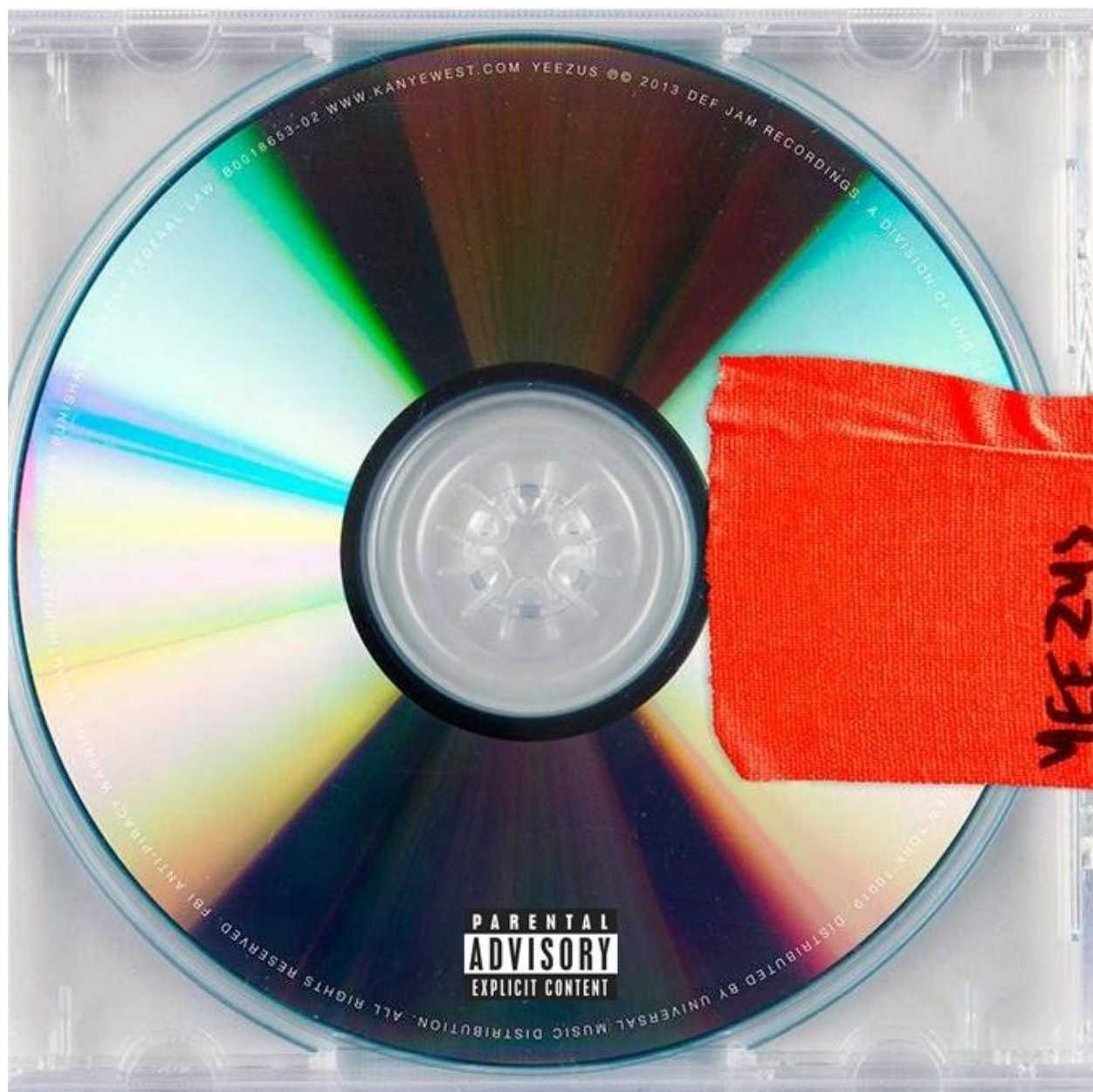
Jay Z and Kanye West, 2011, *Watch the Throne*, Compact disc.

Figure 2



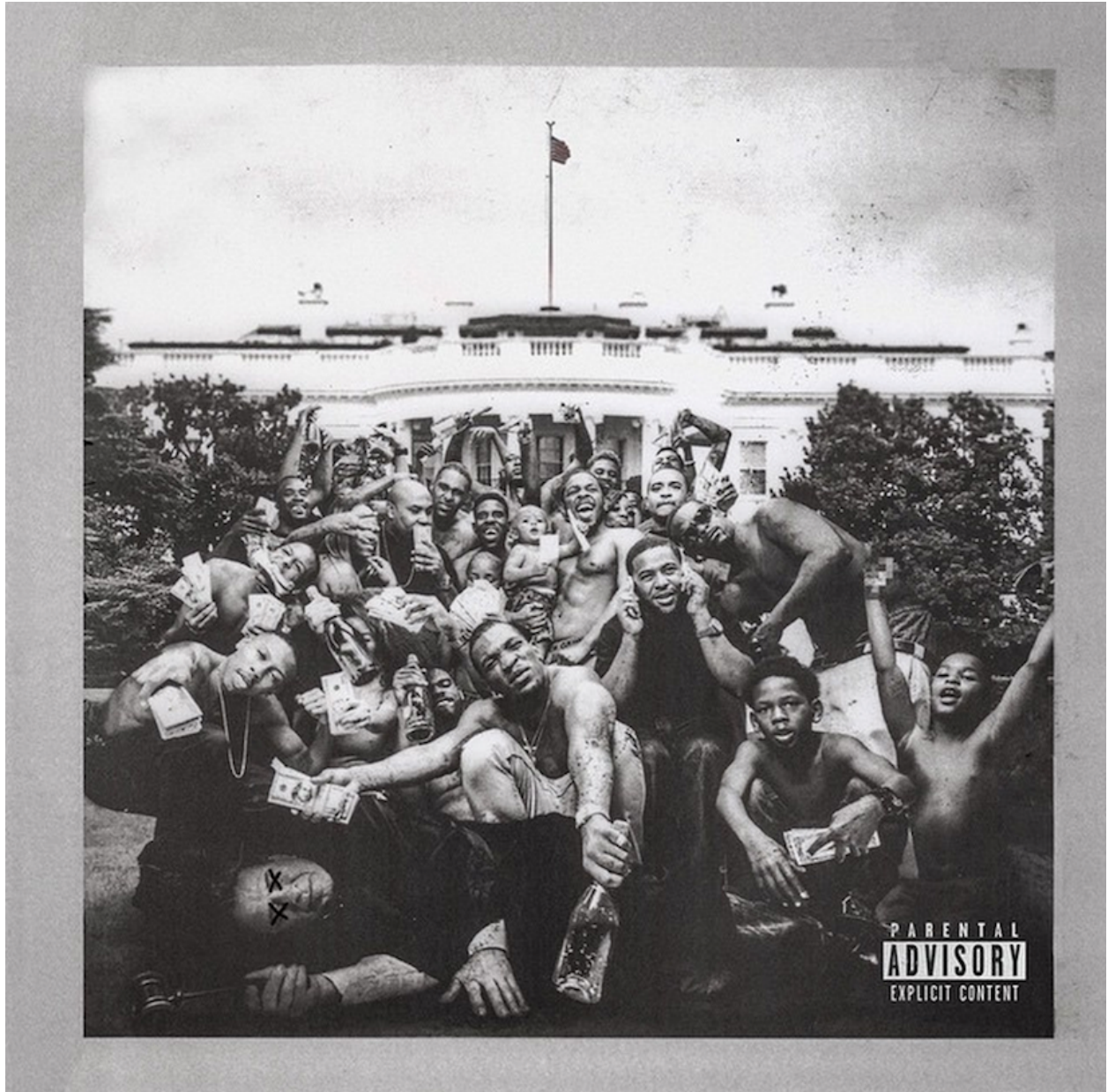
Jay Z, *Magna Carta... Holy Grail*, 2013, Compact disc.

Figure 3



Kanye West, *Yeezus*, 2013, Compact disc.

Figure 4



Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp A Butterfly*, 2015, Compact disc.

Figure 5



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Charles the First*, 1982, screenprint, 54 ½ in. x 40 in., Soho Contemporary Art, New York.

Figure 6



Examples of Kanye's Maison Martin Margiela masks, worn on the *Yeezus* tour, 2013.

Figure 7



Kanye West, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, 2010, Compact disc.

Figure 8



Le Corbusier, *Outdoor light from Chandigarh Zoo*, 1952, cast concrete, 35 ½ w x 22 ½ d x 34 ½ h in., private collection, Paris.

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