Little-Known Documents

BASQUIAT: The Poems

RENE RICARD

INTRODUCTION BY
PAUL BENZON

Introduction: Basquiat's Inscriptions

While Rene Ricard published prolifically in multiple genres across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, he is perhaps best known for his role in making Jean-Michel Basquiat well-known. His 1981 *Artforum* article "The Radiant Child" was the first major publication on Basquiat and is widely seen as an influential text in bringing the artist to a broader audience as he shifted from the aphoristic public graffiti of his SAMO project to painting on canvas within an established gallery system. Ricard's essay both charts this shift and plays an active role within it: writing after the end of SAMO in 1979, he imagines Basquiat within a genealogy of canonical painters, including Vincent van Gogh, Cy Twombly, and Jean Dubuffet.

Ricard's later essay "BASQUIAT: The Poems" marks a dramatic shift from this focus on the painterly dimensions of Basquiat's work. "The Poems" is an unpublished typescript in the Art Reference Library of the Brooklyn Museum. Dated 14 October 1992, just over four years after Basquiat's death, it focuses largely on Basquiat's written work, paying particular attention to SAMO and to four notebooks in which the artist recorded various writings. Since the time of Ricard's writing, the number of known notebooks produced by Basquiat has doubled to eight, all dating from between 1980 and roughly 1987 (Bloom 9).[1] These notebooks are all 9¾ × 7½-inch composition notebooks with marbled black covers and wide-ruled lined pages; designed for writing rather than drawing, they are decidedly not fully blank, unlined sketchbooks of the sort used by subway artists to plan their visual works.

Indeed, while drawn images including Basquiat's signature faces and crown do appear periodically throughout, his work in the notebooks is predominantly textual, appearing primarily on the recto surfaces of pages and written (with a handful of exceptions) almost entirely in the same uppercase handwriting that appears in his drawings and paintings. Most pages are written on with ink marker, wax crayon, or ink, and a smaller number with graphite, colored pencil, or other

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tools. Both writing and drawing appear primarily in black, and color is used fairly infrequently.

Yet if the work of the notebooks is predominantly textual, then the text in question is at the same time consciously and fundamentally visual. Blurring the line between text and image, writing and drawing, was one of Basquiat's key aesthetic interventions across his career, and the notebooks stand as one crucible for that work.[2] Nearly every page illustrates Basquiat's status as "an aphorist" in linguistic and visual terms (Stackhouse 62), emphasizing a great deal of white space around fragmentary, cryptic phrases often no more than a few words long, an approach that both resonates with his text-heavy paintings and drawings and stands distinct from them as its own visually oriented writerly practice. The aesthetic scope, eclecticism, and hybridity of the notebooks resist totalizing characterization, at least in the short space of this introduction; elsewhere, Dieter Buchhart offers a useful taxonomy of Basquiat's formal strategies within them and their relation to his larger career, tracing his inclusion of the mundane, his engagement with concrete poetics, his incorporation of visual images and icons, his compression and redaction of words and phrases, and the prevalence of lists and found text as recurrent approaches (35–45).

While the notebooks themselves belong to a private collection, several reproductions have appeared in the years since Basquiat's 1988 death. In 1989, Vrej Baghoomian, Basquiat's gallery at the time of his death, published a one-thousand-copy run of *Amateur Bout* ~~*N.Y.C.*~~ *New York*, a near facsimile version of Basquiat's last known notebook, which dates from circa 1987.[3] The first major publication of the notebooks occurred in a 1993 large-format art book that reproduced the first four notebooks dating from 1980–81, albeit in a different order from the reproductions published in 2015 and discussed below.[4] This edition is arguably the least faithful to the original documents of the three major reproductions published thus far: because it omits some blank pages (but not others) as well as some pages containing writing that might be seen by some readers as instrumental rather than literary (such as phone numbers, directions, shopping lists, and notes), it is not comprehensive and its pagination is different from either of the 2015 reproductions.[5] In addition, it reproduces the text of the notebooks on a bright white, unruled background, lending every page the appearance of a canvas or an artist's work on paper instead of a notebook page.

Both versions of the notebooks published in 2015 are more comprehensive and accurate than the 1993 version, although each of these versions has its own particular limitations and omissions. The facsimile version produced by Princeton University Press is designed to resemble the actual composition books Basquiat used and incorporates all eight known notebooks in chronological order, reproducing even pages left blank or marked with only a single crossed-out word (material that is lacking from either of the other major versions), yet it omits several pages that have only writing by individuals other than Basquiat. The catalog for the Brooklyn Museum exhibition *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks* includes these latter pages but not the blank ones, and it reproduces the notebooks' pages as individual objects in varying sizes, some close to full scale and others smaller and in groupings of three or four on a single page. Both of these versions appeared at a moment in the larger reception of Basquiat as an artist that was strikingly different from the moment of the 1993 publication. By 2015, there was not only increasing scholarly and curatorial interest in the textual dimensions of his work but also an increasing market demand for Basquiat's persona as a commodity, his likeness and work both being licensed for products sold by corporate entities in industries ranging from streetwear to mall retail to global fast fashion.[6]

In Ricard's eyes, the SAMO project and the notebooks collectively grant Basquiat purchase on the title of "the greatest poet in the world" ("BASQUIAT" 1).[7] While other critics and scholars have also treated Basquiat as a poet, Ricard is among the earliest to explore this dimension of his work in a sustained and focused way, particularly with regard to the notebooks, and his essay is almost certainly the first and only to make such a superlative claim on behalf of Basquiat's work. Yet in our current cultural moment, when Black conceptual poets and artists working with textuality are

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at the cultural forefront, such a claim acquires a new kind of prescience, shedding light on a complex interdisciplinary lineage by granting Basquiat a crucial place within it. More broadly, "The Poems" also invites us to rethink through Basquiat the aesthetic and political relations between and among text and image, reading and seeing, and writing and drawing in the contemporary moment.

This rethinking of the textual and visual bears on multiple intertwined poetic and artistic lineages running through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Perhaps most immediately and notably, understanding Basquiat as a poet allows for a reimagined genealogy of contemporary Black poetics, within which he might be seen as a node connecting Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, Ntozake Shange, and other experimentally oriented writers in and around the Black Arts movement to more recent experimental and conceptual Black poets such as Douglas Kearney, Robin Coste Lewis, M. NourbeSe Philip, Claudia Rankine, and Nicole Sealey. Indeed, numerous domains of experimental poetics—concrete poetry, language poetry, and conceptual writing, to name some of the most directly and visibly proximate to Basquiat's work—become clear as more multimodal, more visual, and more engaged with questions of power, history, and race through the inclusion of his writing within their lineages. Ricard says relatively little about the question of race in relation to Basquiat's writing in "The Poems." Yet his discussion of the broader racial politics surrounding street art and graffiti dovetails with his reading of Basquiat's poetics in illuminating ways, suggesting a politics of visual, material textuality of which Basquiat's work might serve as a crucial exemplar. Tracing these lineages through Basquiat's writing, then, brings into further relief the long history of a politically engaged experimental Black poetics.[8]

Ricard's reading of Basquiat as a poet also suggests fertile connections among Basquiat's writing, these historically adjacent poetic fields, and other postmodern and contemporary visual artists, both text-based and otherwise, and we might likewise see these artists in a different light through Ricard's argument. As Paul Stephens has recently noted with respect to figures such as Lawrence Weiner, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer, "[p]ost-1960s visual art is strongly characterized by the 'linguistic' turn." (7). By seeing Basquiat as a poet, particularly one troubling the borders among language, writing, and drawing, we might see this turn more precisely as a textual one; indeed, such a redefinition seems especially apt given the attention to the materiality of writing that Ricard positions as central to Basquiat's work as a poet (as well as to Ricard's own poetry). Basquiat's materialist poetics thus offers another point of genealogical connection between the experimental poets and linguistic-textual artists of earlier periods and more recent figures in both of those spheres. Contemporary poets such as Kearney, Lewis, Philip, Rankine, and Sealey, as well as Black visual artists including Renee Gladman, Glenn Ligon, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, and Lorna Simpson, all become newly visible as part of a larger textual or inscriptive cultural turn, exploring the materiality and politics of writing from various points of entry with regard to medium, material, substrate, and archive.[9]

Ricard's titling of his essay is ambiguous, and he never makes fully clear exactly what poems he refers to. Some of this ambiguity is circumstantial, a function of the essay's unpublished status, outside its intended context. Yet it is also suggestive: if Basquiat is a poet, it seems to propose, then perhaps all his works are poems, whether on notebook paper, canvas, or concrete; perhaps we might also understand all the textual-visual creators who are his contemporaries and successors to be poets as well, authors and artists alike deploying text as image and object across a range of media, surfaces, and contexts. In arguing for a transformed conception of one of the major artists of the past fifty years, Ricard lays the groundwork for a materialist poetics and a critical purchase on the politics of inscription that together enable us to understand the textual and visual economies of the contemporary period in new ways.

Notes

1. While the individual notebooks are themselves undated by the artist, scholars have established their approximate datings; see Buchhart and Bloom.

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2. Dieter Buchhart notes that "drawing *is* the foundation of Basquiat's artistic practice: drawn letters, words, lists, and phrases are often an integral component of his work." As such, the notebooks "are not sketchbooks in the classical sense"—preparatory, provisional, visual—but instead possess "an artistic status all their own" precisely in their deliberate and explicit blurring of the boundaries between text and image (27).

3. I use the term *near facsimile* here to convey that while *Amateur Bout* is packaged as a faux composition book similar in size, shape, pagination, and design to the 2015 Princeton UP edition, the gallery's edition is missing what appears to be a coffee stain at the top of some pages in that later edition, and its pages are a paler white in color. Thus it is likely a transposition of Basquiat's text onto a prefabricated notebook page template instead of a wholesale photographic reproduction of the original document, which appears to be the case for the 2015 version. *Amateur Bout* also renders one spread blank at the end of the notebook, moving its recto text ("Amateur Bout©/ ~~N.Y.C.~~/ New York") to the front of the volume as a sort of title page and altogether removing a list of celebrities and public figures on the verso.

4. While there is no explicit evidence to confirm it definitively, the dating of "The Poems" and Ricard's reference in it to "four notebooks (circa 1980)" suggest that the essay might have originally been intended for inclusion in this edition.

5. Given the prevalence of lists, found text, and other so-called instrumental or nonliterary writing in Basquiat's drawings and paintings, this omission circumscribes the archive of Basquiat's textual production in striking, and perhaps ironic, ways.

6. Even though the Princeton version is published by a university press, its paperboard facsimile cover and lack of any critical material other than a short introduction situate it at the intersection of these two cultural tendencies.

7. Ricard also discusses Basquiat as "near the acme of modern poetry" in a discussion of his overall body of work and legacy in his 1992 Whitney catalog essay ("World Crown" 47).

8. See Hong and Reed for foundational arguments on the racial politics of this lineage.

9. My use of *inscriptive* and *inscription* here, below, and in the title of this introduction draws on my work with Rita Raley to theorize the inscriptive as a category of contemporary text-based cultural production: "[I]nscriptive works focus on the stakes of writing, data, and the material record as both a means of production and a subject of inquiry" (229–30).

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BASQUIAT: The Poems

Had he reached artistic maturity at a slightly earlier (or later) time, Jean-Michel Basquiat would have manifested as a poet.

Looking through the four notebooks (circa 1980) that comprise the bulk of collected writings, it is evident that his initial mandate was literary, or more correctly, linguistic. Indeed his first public act in a graphic format—the SAMO tags—are purely and simply poems.

In these notebooks one can chart the process of refinement as Basquiat purges himself of syntax and the received structure of language, almost the

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entire apparatus of style, to arrive at the final and irreducible few blocks of substance that comprise his mature work: fewer than a dozen tags.

These notebooks, however, must not be regarded as juvenalia. The derivations (Burroughs most prominently) that occasionally jar an educated ear, and some momentarily included locations are to be executed in a collection that contains an almost total artistic education from callow experimentation to fully realized authorship.

How old was he when he wrote this? Basquiat's career was accelerated to Mach speed. Entire cycles of thought and work can be charted on an hourly basis. With fewer than ten years of public life available to him, this compression was a historical necessity, I mean a practical necessity. Given slightly different circumstances he would have accomplished his death as the greatest poet in the world, a position he could have claimed, but ignored, with the SAMO tags of 80–81.

The image worship of the eighties required a cult of painters not poets.

Since Basquiat rapidly developed a way to fabricate a painterly impression in his work for the galleries, the essential language nature of his art was neglected by wealthy collectors who were after all in the habit of expecting to see a lot of paint. His first dealer insisted that he not use words, so the general public can be forgiven for the totally erroneous impressions made by his shows. Connoisseurship must now sort out, from the enormous run-of-the-mill pieces that populate the major collections, the sparsely painted masterpieces that showcase his impeccable selection of words. These were mostly hoarded by friends. Perhaps the most meaningful is the Charlie Parker epitaph now owned by the painter Donald Baechler. I'm not saying that he wasn't painterly. To the contrary, he is a natural handler of whatever material he chose. It's that his primary talent was not figuration—it was in the area of abstract design. The bulk of figuration was connected to appease collectors who wanted a lot of paint on a lot of canvas. A Basquiat without writing is not finished—it's not even a Basquiat. He did excel, however, in the creation of exquisite characters of a cartoon type that have the pre-existing quality of Mayan drawing, as if to repopulate the world with the ghosts of vanished codices.

How to determine the quality of a Basquiat? Just ask me.

The very things that were poetic and heroic about Jean uniquely fit him for the position he was given by the art world. Fantastically young, physically exquisite, legendary lover with a monumental degree of sexual penetration, his person would become the natural starting place for his mystique.[1]

But more pertinent to the larger needs of society was the perception that he was an authentic genius, by birth and education suited to receive the trust of his generation as the repository of some sense of truth, and a creator of works that contained information somehow necessary for us to know, and finally that his works were more than just paintings; they conferred active participation in his glamour.

Then by the time his paintings hit the secondary market the participation became vicarious.

It is perhaps too much to say that the SAMO tags were purely poems. Disregarding the presentation of the SAMO tags on the walls as they were, we can see in the notebooks as we trace an idea to its ultimate format that the stripping away his writings undergo produces a laminate of the word with its reality that becomes visceral . . . er, visual.

Perhaps the chief distinction between a writer and a poet (well let's say between me and Jean and writers) is that writers are quite happy to take for granted the "non-thingness" of words.

The urge to return the word to the thing impels the artist into the hostile territory of picture making. It is to attempt the impossible.

Ignoring the irrelevant example of John Donne and Appolinaire's *Caligrammes*, and also ignoring the truly relevant Mallarmé, the "concretizing" of language hit its stride big-time in the second century.

Ignoring the bulk of "language painters" who are for the most part illiterate, and are all, as Firbank said about Cima's Madonnas, "Dull, dull, dull," a neglected and almost forgotten body of work from the middle sixties trespassed grandly across the frontier from poetry into picture making. Aram Saroyan's

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poster-poem is as natural and fresh as Joseph Kosuth is affected and stale. A possible prerequisite of a work of art is that it looks inevitable. Some art looks as if it was always there. Appropriate.

Saroyan's posters are usually one word (bear in mind that my abduction of these words from their format is merely a notation and not to be confused with the piece itself). For example

blud

or:

eyeye

Of course now they look cute (as perhaps SAMO will in the future) but they had a certain toughness at the time, coming, as they did, seemingly out of nowhere. And they are "punnish." But I would surely love a complete set.

Saroyan's work is, however, far from the subject. It is not enough that a work be charming. The eighties were looking for answers. Or at least a definition of the problem. Not only must the word become the thing; but the thing must reverberate. It must bear the weight of scrutiny into its meaning.

In form the SAMO tags were, for the most part, literary. Crucial to the direction Basquiat's career would take was the fact that they were solidly perceived as pictures. The reason can be summed up in one word: Graffiti.

First, I will throw a light into the dark well of the past.

During the seventies a tremendously accomplished body of painting developed within the New York transit system. These paintings, complete with their own traditions and iconography, conformed to a unique and highly evolved canon. This was the real New York School of painting. Although it was not recognized by critics at the time, these works embodied a sizable array of advanced art theory from "site-specific" through "found support." Mistakenly perceived by the uninitiated as "anonymous," stylistic developments and cross-influences (bites) were avidly followed by thousands of fans, who regarded the painters as celebrities. The actual names of the painters were classified information because, ironically, these painters were actively pursued, beaten, and served with outrageous prison sentences for vandalism. Perhaps confusing these and their works with the overwhelming popularity of written magic-marker tags that, during their hey-day, from reach height down on every available surface camouflaged the city with an unparalleled ubiquity of stylistic uniformity, prevented their real accomplishments from being approved of. I loved it. The notion of an art-obsessed teenage multitude (writing after all, the avatar of literacy, was lost by the authorities) was exciting. (In fact the racial dialogue opened up in this city as a result of hip hop, and its integrated effect on the young, was probably its most threatening aspect to the notoriously racist NYPD.) But I didn't need a socially redeeming aspect to justify my appreciation; I thought it was all beautiful.

The fact that it was illegal only was an encouragement and enhanced its appeal and underscored its heroic nature. Facing constant danger from the watchdogs and guards in the lay-ups that made getting out as dangerous as entering, risking visibility as they reclimbed the same wall. Many artists died at the hands of transit cops. (There is historic justification for the raging against the police in rap lyrics.)

Perceived, not entirely incorrectly, as a Black thing by the public triggered to a frenzied antipathy by the inflated costs (quoted by a transit system hungry for any excuse for funding) these pieced trains, rather than offer grants to these artists, while European, Japanese, and even a small number of American critics and collectors protested this outrageous legal position, these visible examples of Black indifference to law and order, were systematically defaced.[2]

The writers themselves place the blame for Graffiti's downfall on the shoulders of the very critics who championed their work, reasoning, with possible justification, that the influx of money killed Graffiti. The painter who actually made that statement in print, the great Lee (Quinones) suffered a prosperous international career that went

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into eclipse as perfidious collectors and dealers convinced themselves (the painters after all being mostly Latin and Black) that they'd probably made a mistake in the first place.

In fact it was time that killed Graffiti as it kills all things; time in its most seductive and devastating aspect: Fashion. The style played itself out. And the painters became too old to jump walls and risk jail with a new baby to buy Adidas for.

But in summary I'd like to clear up a popular misconception about the relationship of this art to the market.

The actual numbers of the painters who were actually involved in top-to-bottom whole-car painting were small. Including crews there were rarely more than twenty-five or thirty painters. A list of accepted masters would be smaller. Even fewer participated in the gallery system. Of those who did, only a handful managed to achieve a career of some sort. Since the medium was spray paint on metal cars of already determined size the transition to canvas was only partly successful in the majority of cases. Since most didn't have studios, actual painting was done only on the occasion of an exhibit, the number of works limited to the size of the space. The amount of paintings is in radically inverse proportion to the amount of publicity generated. There were few galleries that would risk showing the work. There is also an exaggerated notion of the quantity of collectors who bought the works. The actual period of these exhibitions is only a few years. There was considerable activity in Europe especially in Italy and Holland, where the paintings were bought cheap and sold high. Let me again emphasize that this entire opus is quite small. Someday "Graffiti" will be an exciting rediscovery.

The focus of critical attention on subway art, miscalled "Graffiti," provided context that allowed access to Basquiat's early writings that were in fact graffiti. But they were in the classic tradition of graffiti—the expression of solidarity and disenfranchised ideologues without access to other venues or the manifestoes of political dissidents.

Basquiat was already culturally active around New York. He was involved in music and filmmaking. With an art market that was beginning to burgeon, he began to produce large scale drawings and paintings on canvas that brought him immediate attention.

And although Basquiat's identification in the public mind with traditional subway art provided Basquiat with a strong and highly visible context that critics could float his work upon, there was a negative and for Basquiat a destructive side to this confusion. This was the "colonial" attitude of dealers and collectors towards Graffiti in general, a condescension that placed this urban phenomenon in the category of folk art.

This put Basquiat in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis his Black and Latin contemporaries.

This book represents the middle period in the development of his handwriting.[3] The spineless letter E, for example, would later acquire a back.

These notebooks were never intended to be "works of art." They are his workshop. The reader is requested therefore to allow tolerance for the occasionally erratic spelling of a fast-moving eighteen-year-old operating without benefit of a copyeditor.

They are basically a "mine" of works in progress. Since none of them were published by him (to the best of my knowledge) it is impossible to know their status as finished works. Certain lines reappear and "pile up" toward the end of volume four. These are almost certainly incomplete works.

The only writings that can be considered complete or finished are the SAMO tags since they are the only works he chose to display to the public. Their evolution can often be traced in the notebooks. These books also contain shopping lists, memos, and phone numbers, most noticeably Francesco and Alba Clemente's first number in New York. This gives us a clue to the approximate date of that book. Unless of course he picked up the first thing at hand to write it in. In that case it stands to reason that if it was at hand it was probably current and being used.

Insert Two[4]

Basquiat's words must be decoded. To experience them is to unravel them. Their ambiguity is intentional. The successful interpreter feels the

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satisfaction of an initiate. This is a Black thing in a way—to express oneself in a manner that excludes The Man. This had a politically subversive effect on his White audience—whose vanity was flattered by feeling somehow accepted as an initiate into the SAMO mysteries—and made its impact propagandistically. SAMO is propaganda—but of what? This enigma energizes the work. Comprehending SAMO devitalizes it to an eerie extent.

Somehow if you can tell what it means without hesitance, much of SAMO's impact is lost. The viewer must be unsure of the artist's intention. It is the viewer's inability to comprehend the work decisively that is at the essence of its subversiveness.

The great SAMO tags propel the viewer's mind into various directions at once with or without giving any clues as to the ultimate meaning. A political being was expressed here—but what was it? As often as not the koan was a perverse joke. This politician had no agenda. SAMO is purely formal triumph.

When the value of a work is perceived without comprehension of the work's meaning, the reader is placed in a dilemma. Since one's own knowledge is insufficient to explain the work's effect, one comes to the conclusion that the writer possesses a copyright on the vocabulary of an entirely new myth. This places the artist in a superior position, vaguely pedagogical. The reader must then seek guidance. And the only guide is SAMO. And the only answer is more SAMO. And SAMO ain't talking.

Insert Three

Jean's last works are emotionally affecting to me. I sense his imminent death in his final works. He seemed to be aware of his mortality in a rush of magnificent drawings in large format consisting of finely lettered words, almost exclusively words, a pyramid of words. And a series of handsome reiterations of his old SAMOs on canvas as if reifying his roots once and for all, making up for the time he lost making a living with indifferent paintings, to proclaim himself finally as a poet.

Editor's Notes

Given that the running head of Ricard's document labels it as "1st galleys," it is clearly an unfinished and unedited manuscript. I have made minor editorial changes to correct and clarify Ricard's language, while still attempting to retain the tone and spirit of his prose as much as possible. I am grateful to the Skidmore College Faculty Development Committee for their support of research for this project, to the staff of the Brooklyn Museum Libraries and Archives for their assistance with research, and to Raymond Foye for his support of this project and for permission to reproduce Ricard's writing.

1. With this fetishistic stereotype of Black male sexuality, Ricard seems here to implicate himself as perpetuating a racial and sexual "mystique" around Basquiat as much as he reflects critically on it.

2. Ricard's sentence structure here is convoluted and confusing, and I have retained the original instead of making what would likely be a substantial change to the language. The paragraph seems to contain two separate but related claims: first, that the New York transit system is justifying increased costs to riders by stoking racist antipathy and subsequently using this additional funding to "systematically defac[e]," in Ricard's view, the trains by removing the graffiti; and, second, that a cross-cultural array of "critics and collectors" find this removal outrageous, instead preferring financial and cultural support for subway art.

3. I have omitted a phrase that was hand canceled by Ricard in this sentence (after "This book").

4. The sections labeled "Insert Two" and "Insert Three" appear at the end of the manuscript, without any indication of where they should be placed in the main text; there is no text labeled "Insert One."

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