Julian Schnabel foran *Homo Painting*, 1981
Julian Schnabel in front of *Homo Painting*, 1981
Photo by Hans Namuth, 1981

PONCIFS*

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In 1981, Julian Schnabel was photographed in his studio by Hans Namuth. One photograph, in black and white, shows the artist standing between two recent paintings – one is *The Mutant King* (see p. 14), the other is unidentifiable. Schnabel wears the stained pants and white T-shirt of a typical Abstract Expressionist painter from thirty years before, an outfit that could also be that of a young male movie star from the 1950s. He is leaning against the wall, crossing his legs; in his left hand, he holds an apple core – not a paintbrush, nor a cigarette. One other photograph, in colour, shows him stepping on a canvas lying on the floor, a long brush in hand, in what seems a preparation for a gesture to come; his pants are stained but his shirt is a striped one, like that of a Wall Street banker. Being photographed by Namuth immediately placed the young painter at the end of a long line of American art heroes, and specifically as an heir of Jackson Pollock (because of the legendary Namuth's photo report on 'Pollock paints a picture', featured in the May 1951 issue of *Art News*). Like all photographic portraits, these images are as much a creation of the sitter as of their maker and, in that sense, they embody what Schnabel wanted people to think about him and his work, even if, or because, he was then considered the epitome of Postmodernist Neo-Expressionism. And what they show is that he was not a Postmodernist or a Modernist: he was both at the same time, a contradiction that could only be superseded by stepping up to the next level, as an extreme individualist (it hence became necessary to be a 'mutant king'). At a time when becoming a major artist still entailed an explicit rupture with the immediate past (if you were a Modernist) or an ironic take on history (if you were a Postmodernist), this made Schnabel stand apart from the group he was associated with and whose members (Ross Bleckner, David Salle, Francesco Clemente, et al.) clearly belonged to the Postmodern trend. When looking at Schnabel's painted oeuvre since these photographs were taken, what is striking is that he has remained a modern Postmodernist or postmodern Modernist artist (the same could certainly be said about the rest of his creative

ventures, at least in film). The apple core in his hand, featured in one of Namuth's photographs, might well recall a famous image of Marlon Brando eating and laughing, from 1950 or 1951. I want to take it as an unintentional symbol of what remained after Schnabel ate the fruit of knowledge of good and evil and decided to sidestep any classification devised by others in favour of total individual artistic freedom.

For Schnabel, painting has always been an act of discovery: 'I don't know what it's going to look like when I'm done. ... I figure it out as I'm going along, and the process of doing it is the thing'.[1] The result of his first decision is always unpredictable and that, in itself, explains the diversity of his output, when, for most artists, the discovery is reduced to a limited world, in general their own selves. He thus is particularly, if paradoxically, faithful to the basic tenet of Modernism as summed-up in Édouard Manet's motto on a letter to Stéphane Mallarmé, sent in 1874 by the painter to thank the poet for his support when he had two of his paintings turned down from the Paris Salon: 'Anything [or everything] happens [*Tout arrive*]'. But Schnabel's postmodern Modernism does not start from scratch. As a principle, it acknowledges the past not as something dead to be plundered (as in Postmodernism) or as something to be superseded in a teleological way (as in Modernism) – nor as something to be ignored (as it is so often the case in today's art world, which has a tendency to ignore how much of what it admires has been foregrounded in Schnabel's work). As he himself emphasised in his 1987 'memoirs', which both looked back at his ten-year career and laid down the principles for the rest of his life: 'On the outside it may look as if art sprouts from a battle between generations. But that's not where it comes from'.[2] More importantly, because at the level of actual work, it always starts from something that moves him or grabs his attention: an object or an image that lived a life of its own prior to being chosen by him. And this includes found pieces of fabric, photographic reproductions, planks covered by broken plates, etc., as well

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as stretched rectangular blank canvases (objects charged with the long tradition and the myriad images that have been painted on them). The adventure of painting, the fact that each picture is found along the way, as the unpredictable sum total of several actions, starts from this first moment of electing a support to which individual marks can be applied.

At one point, when, in 1978, Schnabel created his first paintings that included a flatbed of broken plates, it might have seemed that he was going to limit this adventure to the exploration of a signature image and medium from which unexpected potentials could endlessly unfold. It could have been an epiphanic breakthrough similar to Barnett Newman's *zip*, Clyfford Still's walls of jagged colour fields or Mark Rothko's stacked rectangles; and the story often told of how he 'could make a painting the size of the closet in [his] hotel room in Barcelona' and 'cover it with broken plates'[3], sounds similar to the one about Newman, on his 43rd birthday, applying a vertical stripe of cadmium red on a strip of masking tape he had placed on the red ground of a small canvas, and realising that he had found a formal device he would use for the rest of his life. But that never happened in Schnabel's case, and the plate paintings soon became one possibility among many, even if critics and art historians have since been prone to making such a reduction, blinding themselves to the rest of the artist's output. And if Schnabel has been returning to this medium several times over the years, it is not because he identifies with it, but because he does not see any reason not to use it and feels that he can try out new ways to do so. In 2015-16, for example, what had once been a broken field of discrete plate fragments that competed with the images painted on them without completely covering them (as in *The Patients and the Doctors*, 1978), what had been a continuous field of three-dimensional objects animated by juxtaposed homogeneous fields of various colours (as in *The Mud in Mudanza*, 1982), what had been a variegated ground for a continuous imagery that seemed alternately to be absorbed and made more alive

by the discontinuity of the plates (as in *Portrait of a Girl*, 1981, or *Portrait of Azzedine Alaïa*, 1983, and most of the portraits that have since recurrently appeared), gave way to a surface whose effects in terms of light and shadow, of recess and bulge, of voids and solid parts, is similar to (and homogeneous with) the rose bushes which are depicted on them and create a coherent object. Each of them is different, as each fragment of a rose bush in nature is different, depending on the amount of each colour that you see and its specific location on the bumpy surface, not as something contradictory with a mimetic model but as something that emulates its effects. In fact, Schnabel did depict a given motif, a rose bush that he saw near Van Gogh's grave in Auvers-sur-Oise while preparing his new movie, *At Eternity's Gate*. But it was from memory and not on the spot, and he did not try to be faithful to the specifics of a particular bush but used his on-the-spot impression to spark a series of autonomous paintings. The fields of green, black and (sometimes) blue, punctuated by discrete patches of pink, red and white, cover each field of broken plates with what are undeniably smears of paint, to be experienced as themselves in their physical specificity, but which are also the images of something (see p. 120-23).

From the start, Schnabel has denied the validity of strictly opposing figuration and abstraction, even if his work could appear at the turn of the 1980s as taking part in a return to figure. He has related that Blinky Palermo, who strictly adhered to abstraction during his short life, asked him: '… why I painted things that people could recognise. I thought that was the job of all painters, to paint something you could recognise'.[4] This statement can be taken literally as meaning, in a Postmodern way, that artists always work with images that viewers can decipher, even if these images are abstract. But it can also mean that the goal of an artist, in a Modernist way, is to create something that will stick in the eye and mind of the viewers, whatever its relationship to a mimetic logic: Baudelaire wrote in his notebooks (*Fusées*), 'To create a commonplace [*un pon-*

cif] – that's genius'. Working in a postmodern era, Schnabel inherits a world where everything potentially constitutes an image, because we all have seen images of everything. When he wrote, 'Actually there are no abstract paintings even if there are no figures in them. A painting can have an abstract image, but that doesn't make the painting abstract'[5], what he meant is that any figure, even linear and reduced to its minimum, as long as it is distinguishable from a background (which was forbidden by the rules of High Modernism), is an image in the sense that it can feel as alive and active in a picture as in the exterior world we live in. Ultimately, it is an image because it is a mark and not despite of that, the trace of a presence. Even the marks caused by natural elements on a surface that has been exposed to sun, rain, or dirt, which is a device frequently used by Schnabel, are such traces, because they have been chosen by a person.

Schnabel demonstrates the power of the artist's mark, of something you do on something that is already there, and which appears necessary because it feels right, because it makes that something that was already there a 'commonplace' [*un poncif*], or, in a literal sense, a place (a surface, a space) that several people can look at, around which they can gather. In numerous cases, the marks he applies to a surface are extremely reduced, but they always feel like they are not pre-existing prior to the encounter with the surface, to the encounter of the individual mark-maker with a support that conditions the type of mark that is going onto it. That is why they are not straight, not geometric (even if they can evoke simple geometric shapes, such as rectangles, which frequently reoccur in relation with darting lines), not simply because they are expressive of the artist's sensibility but because they are the result of an unpremeditated encounter between a surface, a tool, and a subjectivity. The first action, again, is to select a ground on which to apply the mark. This ground can almost stay as found; it is sufficient to create an image, as Schnabel learned early on from artists he (idiosyncratically at the time)

admired early on: 'To select the material and let it stand as a panel of meaning is a common painter's solution. Sigmar Polke did it, even if he painted on the material afterwards; Blinky Palermo selected different coloured fabrics and had them sewn together. I found this approach, in which allusion plays a significant role, much more intelligent than, say, Brice Marden's laboriously made encaustic paintings'.[6]

In 2015-16, Schnabel acquired several Mexican market stall canopies, made of very large swathes of fabric in various shades, sewn together, whose original rectangular shapes and uniform colours had been transformed into irregular and faded multicoloured surfaces by age and use, akin to the shaped canvases of Ellsworth Kelly. He stained some of them with a purple ink that created a shape governed by its liquidity, playing against the relative geometry of the support (*Landscape Paintings*, 2016). He covered others in marks of various types and materials, applied by various means (oil, spray paint and gesso in the case of *Untitled* (2016, see p.113). On one, composed of three swathes of delicate tones (ironically not unlike paintings by Marden from the turn of the 1970s, which does signal the respect Schnabel now holds for Marden), forming a stretched rectangle with beautiful curves on three sides, he simply covered the lower right corner with an elongated triangle of white gesso (*Untitled, 2016, see p.117*). David Moos has noted: 'White, for Schnabel, is the sign of his visual language, his autographic over-writing'.[7] It should be added that because, since the mid-1980s, the white Schnabel has been using as a medium for mark making is frequently not paint but gesso, i.e. the medium normally used for laying down a neutral ground on which to apply painted marks, the relationship between figure and ground is troubled. What should be a second, impersonal, ground, sitting on top of a chosen surface, becomes the image, a personal mark; the basic way to cover a surface becomes a shape in itself. In Schnabel's hand, everything can become a mark and an image.

This is because Schnabel's paintings are intensely metaphoric, even when they are formally reduced. And in that sense they are postmodern – or premodern: they seek to create feelings in their viewers and not only thought, to evoke other images that could spring from the marks and images that they see on the picture, rather than close themselves on tautology and self-reflexivity. 'All paintings, in fact, are metaphoric. … It reminds you of something that you might have seen, a key to your imagination … To those who think painting is just about itself, I'm saying the exact opposite. The concreteness of a painting can't help but allude to a world of associations that may have a completely other face than that of the image you are looking at. The concept of Formalism imposes false limits on painting under the guise of aesthetic purity, as if such a thing could exist in real life'.[8] It is not by chance that in some of his earlier paintings, from 1973-74, he was lifting his images from projective drawing tests. Subjective projection, both of the artist when he applies his marks and his viewers when they look at them, is crucial here, not because the pictures would hold a hidden meaning or a decipherable iconography but more as a way to experience a range of feelings that need not be clarified and analysed. The iconography of *A Carrot is a Diamond for a Rabbit* (1990, see p. 37) might be the most self-reflexive in the whole of Schnabel's oeuvre: it speaks of metaphors in a quasi-alchemical way, making use of an animal whose associations are multiple, from high (Albrecht Dürer, Josef Beuys) to low (Easter bunny, Jeff Koons). But it is impossible to decipher the meaning of all the various marks that populate its surface (including paint-soaked rags that have left their serendipitous imprints): they are the expression and components of a complex sentiment that words cannot translate, except to say that its humour is also tragic and elegiac.

Schnabel's paintings are but common grounds for subjective responses. A lot of them display the very metaphor of the power of metaphors, letters that sometimes form a word, standing out as images and marks in themselves that can

evince different reactions depending on what the viewers know and what their situation is when looking at the artwork. The lettering 'AD', for instance, in the centre of *Anno Domini* (1990, see p. 33), evoked different feelings when the picture was shown inside an ancient Roman temple, the Maison Carrée in Nîmes, and when it was seen in the Ala Napoleonica of the Museo Correr in Venice. Embracing the metaphoric means that when an explicit image appears, it can be given full sway; discrete, and narrative, images can be courted and created as such. Some paintings, such as the *Mexican Paintings* (see p. 75-79) painted on gigantic found tarpaulins, can emphasise these immediately readable images (all the more readable because they are traced in white lines on a dark background, even if their meaning remains uncertain, if not unclear, further than a feeling of animosity and monstrosity, because, as Schnabel said: 'I felt like I was really painting Mexico when I did them, and that the blood of this tradition of cruelty was coming up through my feet and was coming out in the paintings'.[9]). Some, such as the 1994 *Last Attempt at Attracting Butterflies* paintings (see p. 38-41), can transform non-mimetic marks as trivial as footprints into extraordinary delicate creatures through their repetition, placement and colouring. Some, such as the 2006 *Untitled (Goya)* paintings (see p. 82-85), seem to stem from the support itself, or as a reaction to the image of a landscape evoked by the aged awnings that constitute the support in this case, as if it needed a population, now consisting of ghostly white figures (while similarly white shapes contradict the found landscape by opening a window or suggesting a sky on top of it).

For Schnabel, everything can become a material to work with: already existing images as well as the different ways to apply paint or any other material (a Moroccan silk curtain, for instance, in *El Espontaneo (for Abelardo Matinez)* (1990, see p. 31) to a surface. His first action, his first gesture, is one of appropriation. It can be appropriating the history of the arts, but he is not interested in the way duplication questions

authorship, but in how it can enable the artist to create an image that would be his own through a subjective mark applied to it, while, sometimes, emulating artists he admires. In fact, when Schnabel works with found images, he uses them as grounds (not necessarily as background, though, as they play an active role in the picture). These images might be linked with personal events, as are the ones that constitute the backgrounds in the 2006 *Painting for Malik Joyeux and Bernardo Bertolucci (surfer)* series (see p. 95): they are photographs of big waves in Hawaii, taken by his friend, legendary surfer Herbie Fletcher, in December 2004, while Schnabel was present – and he too is an experienced surfer. They can be apparently more generic, as are the wallpapers from the American Revolution era which he has been using since 2011 for various series. They can be more paradoxical, such as the X-ray images he found in a house near the Berck-sur-Mer hospital where he was shooting his movie *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* in 2006-07. He had them enlarged and transferred onto canvas. Most of the pictures he first made from them, in the *Untitled (Christ's Last Day)* series from 2007, are only enlargements, transfers and croppings of the found images, with no additional marks or barely none; some were reprised in 2011 for a new series which features marks in purple ink, superimposed on and playing with the X-rayed bones (for instance *Untitled (Christ's Last Day, IX)* from 2007 was reworked in 2011 into *Untitled (X-ray) (see p. 71)* , with the addition of a large biomorphic shape). He has explained: 'These X-rays looked like abstract expressionist paintings to me. But they were the inside of somebody's body'.[10]

This statement again implies an absence of separation between abstraction and figuration, but it should be emphasised that Schnabel also plays on another blurring. In Abstract Expressionism, artists were putting their own selves on the canvas, an Action painter was supposed to project his own body into the arena; here, the image is of someone else's body, not the artist's, and it was taken nearly 100 years (in 1911)

before it was reused. What counts in the end are the individual actions of Schnabel that are involved in the making of a painting, appropriating and encompassing any means and material encountered in the process. It will be seen as the sum of these actions and will spark other actions in its viewers at a time when the validity of an individual mark on the world is either perversely elevated to a cult status which only covers up an actual lack of interiority (as epitomised by Donald Trump), or more directly denied (each mark and each individual are seen only as elements to be aggregated into the big data).

It might be because of the apparent contradiction between the emphasis on the individual, subjective, mark as a tool and as an image, and the will to create a common place, that Schnabel's paintings are so big. His own declarations go seamlessly from his own need to that of the viewers: 'Ultimately, I make paintings to see them. They are large because that's a necessary part of the content. The scale and size of a painting has a physical reality that affects its meaning and summons associations'.[11] The paintings are large because they want to impress on their viewers the fact that the images they present are physical marks while the marks they are made of are images. They also are large because, as the definition of Action Painting by Harold Rosenberg implies if it is taken literally (and not metaphorically, as it was intended to), they are arenas for the painter 'in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse or express an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event'.[12] But because Schnabel is a Postmodern Modernist, his paintings are events and images at the same time and he does not have to let go of the image if he wants to emphasise the event (as Allan Kaprow had to, at the turn of the 1960s). Schnabel frequently speaks of his works as 'arenas' and it is easy to see how it can point to the theatricality of his art, but an arena is also a gathering place, a common place, where the action of one becomes the shared concern of many. Rudi Fuchs' explanation of Schnabel's big sizes actually points

to the same direction: 'That is why these paintings have to be big. Not to show off, as I might have thought before, but to create an echoing space, literally, for the great lamentation, the sentiment, that Schnabel had to let loose'.[13]

The specificity of Schnabel's action painting explains why it subsumes what in the work of others would seem contradictory. In 1987, he wrote: 'For me art isn't about self-expression. Painting your guts out has never been an interesting idea or made an interesting painting. Feeling cannot be separated from intellect. In that sense, Neo-Expressionism doesn't exist; it never has'.[14] And this was a few pages after a quote from his 1978 Madrid notebooks which seemed to say the contrary: 'I want my life to be in my work, crushed into my painting like a pressed car. If it's not, my work is just some stuff. … If the spirit of being isn't present in the face of this work, it should be destroyed because it's meaningless'.[15] Of course, expressing oneself, from inside towards the outside, is not the same thing as crushing the outside into the inside, but in this case what is to be crushed into the painting is 'my life', not the outside world. The key might be that, in Schnabel's paintings, contradictions are not to be solved but shown as themselves onto a surface, available to anyone although not tamed. In 2010, Schnabel indeed said so: 'Putting whatever is inside or outside of your consciousness into that thing. Depositing it there. Well, that's the whole sense of the arena. Whether it's a screen in a movie or whether it's the rectangle that is the perimeter of a painting, it's an arena where this battle takes place, between everything that you know and don't know'.[16]

Éric de Chassey, July 2018, Montesiepi.

Notes
1. Julian Schnabel, 'Julian Schnabel in conversation with David Moos', in David Moos (ed.), *Julian Schnabel: Art and Film*, exh. cat., Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010, p. 117.
2. Julian Schnabel, *C.V.J.: Nicknames of Maitre D's and Other Excerpts from Life*, New York: Random House, 1987, p. 133 [hereafter CVJ].
3. *CVJ*, p. 149.
4. *CVJ*, p. 30.
5. *CVJ*, p. 32.
6. Julian Schnabel, in Julian Schnabel and Louise Neri, 'The *Christ's Last Day* Paintings', in David Moos (ed.), *Summer Julian Schnabel: Paintings 1976-2007*, exh. cat., Milan: Skira, 2008, p. 63.
7. David Moos, 'Scene by Scene: Ten Paintings by Julian Schnabel from 1976 to Toda', *ibid*, p. 46.
8. *CVJ*, p. 41.
9. Julian Schnabel in *Julian Schnabel*, exh. cat., Prato: Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, 1989, p. 22.
10. Julian Schnabel, 'Julian Schnabel in conversation with David Moos', *op. cit.*, p. 131.
11. Julian Schnabel, in Julian Schnabel and Louise Neri, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
12. Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', *Art News* [New York], vol. 51, n°8, December 1952, p. 22.
13. Rudi Fuchs, 'Forest on forest hung about his head / like cloud on cloud', in Julian Schnabel (dir.), *Julian Schnabel: Versions of Chuck & Other Works*, exh. cat., Derneburg, Schloss Derneburg, 2007, n.p.
14. *CVJ*, p. 205
15. *CVJ*, p. 146.
16. Julian Schnabel, 'Julian Schnabel in conversation with David Moos', *op. cit.*, p. 117.

El Espontaneo (for Abelardo Martinez), 1990, Montauk, NY
Photo from Julian Schnabel Archive, 1990