Julian Schnabel has long been saddled with the word extreme. The adjective pops up consistently in the thirty-odd years worth of writing that has dissected his art practice, film career, personal style, and private life. The notion of extremity is applied in both positive and negative terms, and it equally mythicizes and demonizes. This descriptive has been employed by default in the reception, interpretation, and, more often than not, dismissal of the artist. “A symbol of the 1980s bombast;” “the easy-to-whip whipping boy for so much of '80s excess;” “It is hard to evoke the mix of generosity, backwardness and relentless, thick-skulled self-aggrandizement that Julian Schnabel and his broken-plate paintings brought to the 1980’s art world,” these all-too-familiar appraisals epitomize a journalistic shorthand that reduces the complex artistic career of this artist into caricature and systematically entwines his work with the economic art boom of the 1980s. In fact, it is almost impossible to find an objective art-historical assessment of his interdisciplinary practice—one that identifies and analyzes his unrivaled contributions to painting. Schnabel’s crucial role in this history so far remains unacknowledged. In fact, a careful examination of the historical record of Julian Schnabel’s work and its reception reveals a thoroughly stilted narrative, demonstrating that Schnabel’s work is not only unrecognized, it is actively repressed in the present tense.

Though Schnabel’s work has been radically omitted from art-historical discourse, a drop-cloth aesthetic is afoot that owes much to Schnabel: stains, scuffs, smears, dirt, drips, and other studio schmutz ground into unprimed canvas or fabric with minimal painterly intervention. Large-scale, gestural, and process-oriented painting populates the current landscape. New York galleries and auction houses and the glossy spreads of lifestyle magazines boast a new wave of fashionable painters (including Joe Bradley, Oscar Murillo, Sergej Jensen, Dan Colen, and Lucien Smith and prominent works by Urs Fischer and Nate Lowman) who embrace a material diversity and gestural audacity clearly indebted to and enabled by the early work of Schnabel as well as a handful of other artists of his generation.

The roots of the present-day painting Zeitgeist can be traced precisely to the last years of the 1970s, when Schnabel began to forge a pictorial language that employed unconventional methods and materials fused with emotive, optical, and tactile impact. Visceral (as opposed to cerebral), his position was at the opposite end of the aesthetic-political spectrum from Donald Judd and Robert Smithson, the discursive darlings who had defined and framed the avant-garde of the previous decade. As Schnabel quipped in recalling the oppositional nature of his stance in his memoir CVJ, “This type of work was not being celebrated in 1974 in New York. That was a time when everyone was talking about art and language, about the model of anonymity, mathematics, about philosophy—especially Wittgenstein.”

Only from its extremes can reality be revealed. —Siegfried Kracauer, The Salaried Masses (1930)
Despite his red-blooded American credentials (born in Brooklyn, raised in Texas), Schnabel can be credited with (re)introducing a particular strain of European postwar sensibility to the American contemporary art scene. Through his kinship with Francis Picabia and his personal exchanges with Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo, Schnabel championed a personal artistic pantheon that displayed an “irreverence” toward orthodox definitions of painting. Not so coincidentally, these European figures also loom large as precedents for today’s painters. At the same time, Schnabel revived the myth of the master. Romancing the physical and emotional toil of art making and by positing his studio as a chapel or theater, Schnabel easily inhabited this archetype and built on the examples of Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning. Similarly, Schnabel resuscitated figuration, personal narrative, and references to history and mythology as valid artistic terrain. His poetic use of found materials and chance operations are among his most fundamental contributions to late twentieth-century painting—whether in dragging a canvas on the ground with a performative bravado reminiscent of the bullfighters he admired, allowing a drop cloth to absorb the environmental stains of the studio, seeking out charged found fabrics as pictorial grounds (e.g. military tarpaulins, monumental swaths of sail cloth, canvas flooring from boxing rings, or fragments of carpet), or exposing paintings to the uncontrolled forces of weather (accumulating the traces of rain, mold, and sun) in his mythologized open-air studio in Montauk, New York. Combining all of these singular positions and postures, Schnabel established himself as an unapologetic auteur.

Yet today, certain elements of Schnabel’s authorship has now been picked apart and distilled into a series of pictorial gimmicks that have been assimilated by younger artists. Instances of Schnabel’s pictorial influence on the current generation of American painters abound. Take, for example, the following emblematic descriptions of the drop-cloth aesthetic:

“The ‘paintings’ consist of white, unprimed, clearly soiled canvases, most of them baggily stretched, with all of their sundry imperfections (invasive paint splatters, unsightly folds) enhanced by the spartan compositions.”

“[His] large-scale paintings imply action, performance, and chaos, but are in fact methodically composed of rough-hewn, stitched canvases that often incorporate fragments of text as well as studio debris such as dirt and dust.”

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Sigmar Polke
Ashes to Ashes, 1992
Oil and ink on printed fabrics and velour
94 ¼ x 157 ¼ inches

Julian Schnabel
Maria Callas #2, 1982
Oil, modeling paste, aluminum paint on velvet
108 x 120 inches
As her snarky “diary” entry recounts:

“The point, one could indulge in this same exercise with the fabric’s own materiality. Stains, rips, or frayed edges are also used as inspiration, and often what would otherwise be seen as defects become the focal point of a work.”

And lest these examples do not fully demonstrate the point, one could indulge in this same exercise with extracts from recent articles on Lowman’s drop-cloth series, Colen’s various stain paintings (raw canvases dragged in mud or smudged with flower petals or grass), Rudolf Stingel’s distressed studio carpets-cum-wall paintings, and many others. Perhaps it is Linda Yablonsky, writing for Artforum on the occasion of the Frieze Art Fair in London in 2013, who offers the most exaggerated example of the importance of Schnabel’s aesthetic to today’s painters. As her snarky “diary” entry recounts:

“Because they believe that Julian Schnabel is primed for a reassessment, Contemporary Fine Art’s Bruno Brunnet and Nicole Hackett hung their walls with six Schnabel paintings dating from different years. Not everyone understood the strategy. As Brunnet reported, “One big collector came in and asked, ‘How much for that Oscar Murillo?’”

Without a doubt, Murillo is one of the artists on the present scene who most flagrantly borrows from Schnabel: some of the young artist’s work looks like a farcical update of one of Schnabel’s early “word” paintings. One could be fooled into mistaking a Schnabel for a Murillo if the words in, for example, Pope Pius IX (1987) were swapped with something like Milk or Yoga. Given the formal and structural overlaps between the two artists—the authentically “dirty” pictorial grounds, the oversize canvas formats, the inclusion of words in the composition, the splashes of gesso—this anecdote simply confirms that art-historical amnesia is a common affliction. The sarcasm of Yablonsky’s punch line is not so much aimed at the historical ignorance of collectors—who could understandably misfire—than at the audacity of anyone trying to assert Schnabel’s work into the present landscape.

While an examination of current criticism reveals Schnabel’s conspicuous absence from the discourse, this extreme exclusion is not limited to criticism—it is repeated in the curatorial world. His painting has been systematically omitted from encyclopedic overviews of postwar art, such as in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (which does conserve a copy of his feature film The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (2007), as well as relatively minor works on paper, an aquatint and a screenprint), as well as in recent revisionist exhibitions addressing the legacy of the 1980s. Even though it explicitly aimed to review the diversity and simultaneity of artistic practices and to deliberately confront the “canonical and almost forgotten,” the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston’s show This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s pointedly overlooked Schnabel’s contributions to the decade. This type of amnesia is not viral—it is the politics of art discourse in action.

Politics and polarity have always been part of Schnabel’s brand. Early on, he was pejoratively grouped with other painters of his generation under the label of Neoexpressionism. While affixing a label or movement to any artist’s oeuvre is often reductive or dismissive, the “expressionist” category is particularly fraught with implicit negative value judgment—artists oriented towards an essentialized vision of painting (heavy impasto, excited brushstrokes, and “other codes of painterly authenticity”). As art historian Isabelle Graf argues, these artists were accused of regression to “an essentialized vision of painting” (heavy impasto, excited brushstrokes, and “other codes of painterly authenticity”). As she writes:
Julian Schnabel

Jane Birkin (Egypt), 1990
Oil, gesso on sailcloth
204 × 229 inches
As a symbol of the decade’s return to painting, Schnabel became in Graw’s words “the enemy incarnate.” Pouring fuel on an already fiery situation, Schnabel’s well-publicized early financial success and his unapologetically high-profile public persona reinforced the antagonism. Infamously proclaiming, “I am as close to Picasso as you’re going to get in this fucking life,” Schnabel cultivated a hyperbolic self-image that alienated numerous curatorial and critical factions who silenced supportive voices. This phenomenon was well articulated in Janet Malcolm’s notorious New Yorker profile of Schnabel’s Neoexpressionist compatriot David Salle, “The idea of a rich avant-garde model of the authentic, bohemian artist. His uninhibited social climbing and financial success—which his Academy Award-nominated forays into Hollywood filmmaking only bolstered—compromised his credibility within the critical community.

Painting has always been subject to the shifting winds of context. More than any other medium, it is a battleground for politics and meaning. It is easy to forget, for example, that Martin Kippenberger was found guilty of similar transgressions: his unapologetic embrace of expressionism and figuration; his unabashed self-publicism/self-promotion; and investment in narrative and myth are clichés of the macho European male artist. Yet “Kippy” was redeemed because he died young. At least as a result of both reviving the authenticity of painting and betraying the model of the authentic, bohemian artist. His unhindered social climbing and financial success—which his Academy Award-nominated forays into Hollywood filmmaking only bolstered—compromised his credibility within the critical community.

The critics once tried and convicted Schnabel in a court of opinion, but Schnabel-style transgressions have since been decriminalized and the statute of limitations for his offenses has passed. It is time to recognize that the contemporary schmutzgeist is directly indebted to his formal legacy; young painters can be spared the extreme disavowal of it. In our current age, when it is impossible to disseminate market value from so-called pure artistic or critical value, it is quaint, if not laughable, to imagine an artist being either dismissed as invalid for monetary success or ostracized for his celebrity status. Both camps (and their present-day hybrids) are ambivalent bedfellows in the pluralist Kippenberger’s initial reception has been overhauled; gradually, he has acquired cult status, and his paintings have become hot commodities. Posthumously Kippenberger has been rehabilitated and rebranded—his brushy, messy, materialist canvases are heralded as a groundbreaking hybrid of conceptualism and expressionism. His public behavior, which in his lifetime was considered repellent, antagonistic, and even abusive, is now canonized as a deliberate work of performance. But Schnabel’s work might actually become visible again,”

On one side were the advocates of the "Pictures Generation," influenced by post-structuralist theory and favoring media such as photography and video; and the other, their ultimate bugbear, the Neo-Expressionist painters. Progressive critics were occupied primarily with denying the artistic legitimacy of the kind of painting that they believed was flooding the market.1

We are thus back to the question of extremity. Enlisting Siegfried Kracauer at the start of this essay, a great Frankfurt School sociologist and film theorist, to introduce a discussion of an artist who has long been pigeonholed in opposition to "critical" art is admittedly perverse. Yet this succinct rhetorical move points to a truth: Kracauer’s maxims can illuminate the underlying hypocrical value system that has long suppressed Schnabel’s role in art history even while the ramifications of his legacy are so visible.

Much has changed since the long lost days of caustic ideological divides and politico-aesthetic debate. Long-standing oppositions are now defunct, and Schnabel’s painterly ambitions no longer need to be seen as in conflict with his more pure conceptual gestures. His unapologetic, painterly marks—as well as his unrepentant outreur status—certainly seem as relevant to Richard Prince’s large-scale gestural and smudgy Joke paintings as the dry wordplay of Art and Language. The iron curtain between “painting” and “conceptualism” has fallen.

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3. Andrew Russeth, Galleryist, online at http://galleryist. (2014/01/julian-schnabel-at-the-brant-foundation-
6. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 98.
18. In writing this essay, I am a willing participant in the competitive deployment of the network of power. Such shows of support can be used not only to make visible or validate an artist such as Schnabel, but also to reinvigorate its marketability.