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 manmovie 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is that he was not a Postmodernist or a Modernist: he was both at the same time, a contradiction that could only be superseded by stepping up to the next level, as an extreme individualist (it hence became necessary to be a ‘mutant king’).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 fun’. The result of this 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’. 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 as...

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as stretched rectangular block canvases (objects charged with the long tradition and the mythical 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 system of marks that individual marks can be applied to. At one point, when, in 1978, Schnabel created his first paint-ings that included a flatted of broken plates, it might have seemed like an attempt to limit this adventure to the explo-ration of a signature image and medium from which unfore-seeable potentials could endlessly unfold. It could have been a reduction, blinding themselves to the rest of the artist's output. And if Schnabel has been returning to this medium with some frequency, it is not because he identifies with every-thing can become a mark and an image. It should be added that the sign of his visual language, his autographic over-writing. It has noted: 'White, for Schnabel, is the sign of his visual style in a postmodern era, Schnabel admires early on: ‘To select the material and let it stand as a place of meeting is a common painter’s solution. Sigmar Polke admired early on: ‘To select the material and let it stand as a place of meeting is a common painter’s solution. Sigmar Polke admiration early on: ‘To select the material and let it stand as a place of meeting is a common painter’s solution. Sigmar Polke admired early on: ‘To select the material and let it stand as a place of meeting is a common painter’s solution. Sigmar Polke admired early on: ‘To select the material and let it stand as a place of meeting is a common painter’s solution. Sigmar Polke admired early on: ‘To select the material and let it stand as a place of meeting is a common painter’s solution. Sigmar Polke admired early on: ‘To select the material and let it stand as a place of meeting is a common painter’s solution. Sigmar Polke admired early on: ‘To select the material and let it stand as a place of meeting is a common painter’s solution.
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 in the picture but an event’.12 But because Schnabel is a Postmodern artist, his paintings are events and images at the same...
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.’

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.’ 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.’ 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.’

Éric de Chassey, July 2018, Montesiepi.

Notes
3. CVJ, p. 18.
4. CVJ, p. 39.
9. CVJ, p. 146.
13. CVJ, p. 146.

Éric de Chassey, July 2018, Montesiepi.