



Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

JULIAN SCHNABEL INTERVIEW
FRAGMENTS OF PARADISE
LIFE STORIES

Julian Schnabel, Painter & Filmmaker
May 16, 2021
Interviewed by Katie Davison
Total Running Time: 39 minutes and 42 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

Julian Schnabel

Painter & Filmmaker

00:00:10:00

CREW:

Good. Good. Just take one mark.

00:00:18:00

KATIE DAVISON:

So first, who are you? What do you do?

00:00:21:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

Who am I? That's a very good question. I've been asking myself that ever since I was little. I'm still working on that. On my name from the moment is Julian Schnabel. And I'm a painter. Directed some movies. I've written a few



movies. And. Right. Some sculptures. What else did I do? Something like that. They quite made quite a few paintings. I think I made 3000 paintings and six films.

00:01:00:00

KATIE DAVISON:

So you and Jonas both were this kind of art? Renaissance man do a lot of different things. Do you? I mean, do you feel that lack of resistance to categorization?

00:01:13:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

No, no. I mean, I could have just said that I was a painter, but then I would have been being a little coy if I did that. And then I don't really feel like I would need to say that I was a multi-disciplinary artist in order to. I don't think that would necessarily explain anything. I mean, I don't know who said this, but, reason is the opposite of truth. So if I start explaining what I'm doing, it's already not the thing that I do, but. Obviously, I, you know, I make art, and and that's what Jonas did and, turned all sorts of things into art that one might not think, was.

00:02:09:00

KATIE DAVISON:

When did you first meet Jonas?

00:02:11:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:



I don't, more than 30 years ago. That doesn't seem like so long anymore, but. Let's see. It's the 25th year of the film *Bashir*. Right now. And when I was making and I as a role. Well, David Bowie plays Andy Warhol in the film, and Jonas made a film, *The Life of Andy Warhol*, and he gave me some footage where I was blending David Bowie. And I mean, they were David and Andy were doppelgangers in a sense. And so and he had film of What's her name? Jackie Kennedy. Sister Lee. I don't know her quite well, but I'm a little like that these days. Yes. Lee's kids are playing, in the grass at Yoast and at the house. They're. They're having a shaving cream fight, and Andy's filming, and there's a couple other moments. There's also a moment where, Caroline Kennedy is water skiing on Lake Montauk, and the sound of the microphone is very, disruptive and agitated. And it was perfect for this scene where Jean-Michel is where shot Michelle is looking, at the TV, and he's seeing all of these things that happened between Andy and him. And, and there's a moment after he finds out that Andy had died. Where you hear this, abrupt, erratic sound. And it was perfect. And Jonas just gave me the footage. I mean, he was extremely generous, and. Loving. And. It's funny because I've been working on this script with a writer named Daniel Kelman who wrote a book called *kill*. He also wrote a book called *Measuring the World*. He's born in Germany, but he lived in Austria until you feel was, a jester during the 30 Years War. But there was something about this character where I guess he sort of. Died when he was quite young, when he was a child. But he didn't die. But he went through that in a way to where he got through, went through something where he basically wasn't scared of anything, and he seemed to walk between the raindrops. And after going through something that's very traumatic and difficult, which I think. Jonas stood up. There was a sense of freedom. And he saw, opportunities in the most simple things. I mean, if you look at some of



the films, obviously you have been in, but he could be dancing with the broom. He could be opening or a ladder or opening and closing drawers and making that into something that's dramatic or something that's charming and. Yeah, I miss him. He was. What's amazing to me is that when he died. You know, at the Oscars, they show people that are filmmakers, actors, people that have been involved and no mention of Jonas Mekas because it's a whole different world. But his love of other people's work and his generosity to take care of all of this stuff. Was a real mission. And. But what a joyful, beautiful. You have to say something like. That might sound like a cliché, but, it's not. And. It's funny. I'm just thinking about. I mean, so many people love this guy. He was a lovable. Anyway, when I made, *At Eternity's Gate* film I made about Vincent Van Gogh with, with Willem Dafoe playing Vincent. Jonas came to see it, and there were about ten people. 12 people. People had opinions. And Jonas sat there. I mean, this is not long before he died. Maybe it was a year before. And he was sitting there and he said, I wouldn't change a frame. And, he got it. I didn't change for him. Somebody once said to me at one of these film festivals, if you're going to make a commercial film out of this, what will you do? And I said, yeah, I wouldn't change a fucking thing.

00:07:49:00

KATIE DAVISON:

When you first came to New York, did you see him like running around at a cent? He was always everywhere all the time.

00:07:55:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:



Well, you know, when young people come to New York, they don't. Have the. I think he was very active with people that were a bit older than me. And but, you know, I started to go to Max's Kansas City, 1973, in the summer of 73. I knew or knew I met a lot of different people that I maybe I might have been the youngest person in Max's Kansas City, in a sense. Because if I think of. People that are from my generation, they they definitely weren't there. For some reason. I was comfortable in that peculiar place. And I had a friend named Bob Williamson who I used to hang around with the he is he was Lauren Hutton's boyfriend. He was much older than me anyway. But there I met Robert Smithson and Richard Serra and, well, Bill de Kooning. And he was around. But I mean, these were not these were people that I saw from afar. I mean, on occasion, I mean, I was actually talking to Robert Smithson or Richard Serra, but or Bryce Martin, but but I didn't, really know Andy at that time, but I was a witness and participant and all sorts of crazy stuff there. And obviously Jonas would come in and out, but he, he, he also was in another kind of, well, I think he was in an underground film world, and I think it was a bit different, but there was a big mix of everybody over at Max's City.

00:09:40:00

KATIE DAVISON:

When you did see him, would you have a camera like, was that a thing about him? You know.

00:09:46:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:



He wanted to record everything. But I guess I got to know him that, now with Joe in 1974. Right. That's almost 50 years ago. I know I don't look that old, but I really started to. Spend more time with Jonas after I made Basquiat and after when we had that interaction with the film. And then, whenever I could, you know, he was always trying to get some money to keep the place going and, you know, give him things to sell or help in some kind of way. Or my daughter Lola was very they were fond of each other. And he was. He was very free and and and I remember also at, he was really trying to save, the film for, the, Anthology Film Archives, and he wanted to save the building, and he wanted to develop the building. And there was a guy who I got to say he would fix the building if he. But he wanted to put a couple of theaters in there. He wouldn't. He wouldn't compromise. And I didn't know if that really was. But to him it was. And he also felt that. He didn't want the treasure of what? He had to be dispersed at the museum, modern art or in other kind of places where they didn't really like. He was a very hands on kind of guy. He was such a lovely, pure person. And also he. Have you read any of his books? I mean. He had a very simple and extraordinary ideas. You know, any talk about lawyers or people that, would complain about their jobs or you do something or what kind of a job is it to have a job if you want to get off and do something else? What kind of a job would that be? But, so I think the identity of the artist was a very, very important, philosophical stance that he, that he had. And I think that that kind of clarity was very attractive to a lot of other people. It's hard to talk about him in a way, because there was just this sort of wave of kindness and, even the way that he would move around, it seemed like he was like a leaf that was being blown around, by the wind. And it could go in any direction. And that's not saying that, he wasn't aware of that, but he



ascribed to it. He embraced it, and he discovered things in the practice of being like that.

00:13:15:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Did you see any of his films?

00:13:19:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

I'm just thinking about. But then he had these videos, video. He made all these videos, and there was a moment where people where he was having a show where he was having the videos. As works that you could, but you could buy a video. But not just that, where he could have, you know, ten television sets in there, but not all stacked like a Nam June Paik or whatever. But I'm talking about different works where you could buy a movie, essentially. I mean, I think if you think about it now with these nonrefundable or whatever, it might be a good thing to turn, you could probably do this or help turn one of or you could talk to Vito about that. I mean, Jonas's things into something like that, maybe finances, the film anthology archive. Building. If it's not, I don't even know what you know where it's at right now. But I thought about that a bit recently, because those images and the things that he has are so succinct and rare. He was there. I mean, when you asked me about there's just so many, he knew whether it was John Giordano or John Lennon. It was he was able to. But also, that whole thing, you know, I had nowhere to go. The feeling of. Somebody walking across Europe. My father came here from Czechoslovakia when he was 15. 16? 15. He was born in 1911, in Slovakia, a place called Justyna. And he So he went to his uncle Charlie. Thought he was



well-dressed and smart. His father died when he was eight years old, but he couldn't get him, passport. And he couldn't come to United States right away. So he went to Belgium. He worked in a bakery. And one day a guy came in and he said, you want it came. It was Arif Shah bus. You want to carry my bread home? What's your name? Says my name is Schnabel. He says my name is Schnabel, too. And he left the bakery and stayed with this guy for three years. And then he came as a stowaway. Basically, he gave his watch. When he got to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. He said he was going to get a paper for somebody. And I think he met his Uncle Charlie at Du Brouse. But the sense of being European, a sense of being, finding something or this freedom in America and having witnessed things that I, we don't really know about, I think was something that, soulfulness that Jonas, had he, he seemed to be always a refugee. But, there's a song, a Leonard Cohen song where he said, but when we come to love, we have to come as a refugee. And I think he palpable.

00:16:48:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Right now, the tentative title of the film is Fragments of Paradise, and it is a thing that I find so fascinating about him is here. It seems like you have this connection to like it's suffering. But if we can find that beauty and capture it, and that is also what art is. You know, that's what makes life worth living. There's beauty in the mundane.

00:17:10:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

He found peace. He made peace with it. The funny thing is, you know, when we showed At Eternity's Gate, he was very sick. I mean, he was dying. And we



showed it at the New York Film Festival. And I knew that he was going to come. And there he was, 96, sitting in the middle of the auditorium. But he didn't get there right away and before the movie. So I said, excuse me, I just to say, hi, Jonas, it's great to see you here. We couldn't start the film without you. And he was very, very sick. But he never complained. It was amazing. I mean, he was a. So. You know, when you make paintings, I mean, we make them, you know, we make things. We make things, and everything else doesn't exist. Really. I mean, there's a painting in my bedroom from 1979, and I just look at this thing. I see the edge of where the painting is. And whoever is not in the painting is basically Ariel. The painter will stay there. And you have to put everything into that thing so it'll be sound in its own nature, eternally. It will bring other people into its present. The difference between art and life is that art is a representation of life. Life contains death. Art being representation of life doesn't contain death. So ultimately it is optimistic whether the subject matter is tragic or not. I mean, this is something from Tarkovsky. You know, where he from? Instant light, where he says so there can never be, pessimistic or optimistic. It's all optimistic. There can only be talent and mediocrity. And I used to struggle with the idea of I knew Bob Hoskins, the actor, and I said, you know, it must be really, difficult to be an actor, and you're living your life. You do something in a particular performance, and all of a sudden people treat you differently. A painter can look at the painting they made, or they can go back and they can find the stability in that. And he said to me, well. I don't think that's right. He said, I think that moment when you do that thing, whether you're acting that part, you're painting that stroke, you're breathing that pause. Paraphrasing. Yeah, it's the same. And so in describing Jonas's body of work, I think it's so ethereal. And he's kind of like there's a word called duende. Garcia Lorca word, it means, magic person. Or, when they like.



Jiminy Cricket was the Dwayne De of Pinocchio, but he was like that. There was something that, you know, because we make things that are physical things or we leave things, but there's something about him that was as light as something that's almost inexpressible. And that's an extraordinary thing to touch on and to find in people, humanity that he would find in people and that he could record. But it would be as soon as it was there, it was passing in a way. So I was always it was hard for him to finance things that he wanted to do, because what he made was out in the air somehow. But that being said, I think people that did make things gave him things or tried to support him because that thing of the inexpressible that he captured was so valuable, meaningful.

00:21:39:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Both you and John, to share this quality of of this fearless quality, like you're not plagued by insecurity. There's not like, oh, what does the audience want? What are they going to think of it? I mean, am I wrong or is there something it's something else. And I'm like wondering what that is.

00:21:59:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

Oh, thank you for saying that. No I don't. It's great to be unemployable. It's very difficult to work for other people. I mean, people that do, I commend them. I mean, it's amazing that people can do it, but I couldn't. I mean, I have worked at different jobs or whatever, in my life, but, I'm still, surprised when I don't have to go cook somewhere or do something. And then I, we live in a house. But. Work. I work all the time and it's my pleasure to do it. And I



definitely don't do it thinking, oh, is somebody going to like this painting? Is this going to please someone else? It's a nice quality. If my wife looks at the painting and she says, oh, that is good. Because I think that she can see. But I think that when you're young, you look for agreement, you know, you look for agreement in the community, whatever. I think if you live long in that, you forget about that and you just, the more you do whatever you're doing, the further it takes you into something that you never thought you'd see. Diane or I ever said, it's never like they said it would be. It's always what I've never seen before that I recognize. And, so for me, I mean, I think Jonas felt like he was he was interested. He was still discovering things all the time, and and. And I feel that way. I don't feel like I need to copy myself in order, and I don't need to make something to sell it. I never made anything to sell it. People could take that as arrogance. If you don't care or you're not trying to be part of. It's a real privilege to be able to do that. And then I kind of wouldn't know how to do it a different way, and maybe it could rub some people the wrong way or whatever. But. You know, there's a great, line in, in. And I love Dennis Hopper. He was a very good friend of mine. But there's a great line in, Easy Rider where Jack Nicholson, you could see that scene. Maybe it'd be a good place to just cut to that where he's saying, you know, people talk about freedom, but, when they see a free individual, it scares him. But, I mean, it's I'm butchering this line right there, but. If you think of what happened in this country over the past year or what's been brewing till we ended up with this guy who's not even worth mentioning as the president, I mean. That particular moment. An easy rider says everything. And. But when they see a free individual scares him. And. He was free. Somehow, somewhere along the line he was free. And its. And the way his. The language. The way he could talk about things was. You could always go back to it and pick something up.

00:25:45:00

KATIE DAVISON:

Jonas didn't have this. Like you didn't feel like you had to overthink or become a perfectionist about something. He would just be so clear about, like, this is done, and it's good. Even if somebody else said, oh, well, that's a home video.

00:25:58:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

He was in the present. He knew how to be in the present. I think that's what we're talking about. He really. I think. I think he's probably more fearless than I am. I mean, he wasn't. I don't think he was scared to die at all. And, he took it. Well. Anyway, you should read this book till. Because he seemed to just beyond beyond gravity and the judgment of others. Because he'd already been somewhere and something happened to him. You don't exactly know what. Cause it's never over described in Daniel Cullen's book.

00:26:42:00

KATIE DAVISON:

There's this incredible diary entry from Jonas from, like, 2006 when you go to his loft and we're looking at some of the archive, and he was showing you some of the Fluxus works, and you guys got into this argument about whether or not the avant garde exists. I mean, do you remember, do you remember.

00:27:00:00



JULIAN SCHNABEL:

That there are different permutations of avant garde? I mean, if you think of Asger Yorn and people working or thinking about going back to the. I mean, you have different kind of, enclaves of this sort of thing. Then you go to, you think about Paul Surette sort people making movies like that. But on the other hand, you've got somebody like Vito Akanji who, is, is using other kind of elements to get at this poetic. It's so, so it can be so generic in a way, because the idea that, materialism. It's something that's bourgeois. Or and and time materialist kind of thing. Something that. Is, doesn't fit into a house, doesn't fit into some kind of, structure that is, containable. Seems to me that. But I think it's the gesture. No matter what form it takes. Let's go. Let's think about, say, Clyfford Still looks at a painting. He thinks that portrait painting, the paintings that say Goya made whatever of, the portraits because they're to please, an audience or to please the sitter. They're basically just, illustrating some kind of narcissistic or placating something in society. Even though he painted figurative paintings when he started out, and he abandoned that a moment and he felt like in order to be free, he had to get rid of things and invent a new kind of language. That being said, okay, so then he finds his irreducible language, which looks sort of like, ravines or peaks, mountain peaks, the Grand Canyon, but it's paint sitting on a ground, unnamable. But somebody could look at that and say, okay, I mean, and Clyfford Still, I mean, he was so angry at Alfonso Ossorio because he lent the painting to some show that he didn't want to be in, that he went to his house and cut a hole in the painting. But someone could think that Clyfford Still paintings were not avant garde because they they're it's painting and that and and and and it's it's it's such a. Arctic archetypal compromise, some sort of decorative practice. In fact, I saw somebody talking about, I think there was a



documentary by Kenny Scharf, and some guy was talking about abstract painting as, decoration, like it was wallpaper. I mean, I was it was amazing to. He wasn't saying that, but there was some guy named William something or other like, I mean, it was astoundingly stupid. But. I think the things that are avant avant garde just means before sight, before you can see something else. You might be involved in a practice that might be very old, but you're doing something with it that is something that people don't understand. I mean, if you look at the 20th 20th century art and you think of the trajectory of modernism and you think of Picasso and what was the, central centrist, let's say, notion of modernism going from figuration to abstraction and as if there was some kind of a. Well, you had people like Francis Picabia and. An artist that didn't quite fit into that canon and ultimately get man right, I don't know, there's Duchamp. People saw him as a anti painting, force. Not true. He actually made works that I think, if you think of the, stoppages, he made works that were really, a key for painting also. So you end up with a, you look fast forward into the 20th, 20th, late 20th century, early 21st century. And if you look at, say, Sigmar Poca's work. You see, or Blinky Palermo, you see, or my work. I mean, you see a different kind of of emphasis on what you think is possible as art. And you can look at, say something that looks like, say, Helen Frankenthaler, stain paintings. And they might have a similar appearance to Sigmar Poca's paintings. That might be where he's using materials that might be bleeding into it, but they're radically different philosophically, physically, I mean, they just mean totally different things. And so the avant garde that's a long winded answer to your question is, is has to do with the unseeable.

00:33:00:00

KATIE DAVISON:



I mean, I have I recently rewatched *At Eternity's Gate* and it reminded me something about it reminded me deeply of jazz. And I think that there's like the, the subjectivity a little bit about like how he always documented the world, but he was doing it in this poetic way. I don't know. And just being on this edge where you can't really understand what what it is you're looking at.

00:33:23:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

It's the idiosyncratic nature of the camera, of the materials, of the the tenuousness of the day, the accidents that happen, different people's personalities being open to change. All of that stuff comes into it. And it's an interesting when somebody can actually claim that as their style. It's an accomplishment. I mean, it's also invisible. Anyway, it's funny because I wrote this script about 18 years ago about perfume by Patrick Suskind that was never used. A guy bought it and buried it, and I might still make it into whether it be a movie or a six part, series. I rewrote it with my wife. Her name is Louise Kugel Berg and, Daniel Kellman over the during the pandemic. But *Grenouille*, I never saw it about being about a serial killer. I just I just looked at him as he was an artist, but he couldn't share his contribution with anybody because when they saw it or when they when they smelled it, they were under its influence. They couldn't tell what was happening because that's how it functioned. And in a sense, I think that, it's good that you're doing this because it's nuanced that *Jonah's*, there's something there's an there's a there's really an unknown you're talking about kind of an unknown genius, really, who people know in this community. But, it's a real plethora of stuff that people can use. And I guess also in, in, in my films, I don't really have hierarchical notions of, I never went to film school. I never had a camera, actually, either, before I started to



make a movie, I thought that was for somebody else. I made paintings, people, other people can use a camera. But I also looked at moviemaking as, when I shot basket, I just shot 90,000ft². I mean, 90,000 running feet, which is not very much, and treated it like a found object. That's what I had. I figured I turned it into something like that is what it became and became what it is. But anyway. So I'm not. And one of the reasons why I wanted to make the diving bell in the butterfly was if the main character can't move, you could. It doesn't mean that your DP is blind and he's cutting the heads off of the people in the frame. It's a different way that you can frame your story and show things that maybe people didn't see before, or that I wanted to see. So, it's funny because I wanted to show, we're going to show it the Basquiat, the museum, modern art in the garden, on the on the, it's a 25th anniversary. So on the I think it's the 17th of June when to come. And we were making it into black and white. It's really interesting to interesting is an innocuous word, but really far out to see how the language and whatever, when it's black and white, it's more like a Shirley Clarke film or something. There was a wonderful guy named Peter Doyle who's a colorist, and we were. oh. And so the next day, I have the finished version of the film from night from 25 years ago, but also and we did a black and white version, but the. Next day we were together from. Well, why don't we make an experimental version? So then I came back to. To Technicolor. Clark said to me. So, you're going to experiment today? And I said to him, we experiment every day, which really, we do. I mean, even making a plate painting of somebody or, I was painting a portrait the other day, I definitely the reason I keep doing it is because I don't have a system for it. And I was painting a young woman the other day, and I was thinking, I'm surprised as hell when it looks like anybody but, it. If you just keep leaning towards the Divine light, it might hit you.

00:38:09:00

KATIE DAVISON:

At the end of eternity. You say? Defoe says something like, I will butcher it. I used to think an artist.

00:38:17:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

What? What do you say?

00:38:19:00

KATIE DAVISON:

I used to think it was an art.

00:38:21:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

Alright.

00:38:22:00

KATIE DAVISON:

How to see now? Thinking about. Is it eternity or. I mean, is that is that reflective of the where your mind is at?

00:38:29:00

JULIAN SCHNABEL:

I loved writing that. I used to think that it was an artist's job to show people how to see. But I don't feel that way anymore. I just think about my



relationship to eternity. Yeah. I think when you're young, you're trying to tell somebody else something or you're looking for agreement as you. Maybe not everybody, but it was my plight. Maybe. And then later, the more you do, you're just. And I think that's what you want to tell a young artist or whatever. Just do it because you want to do it. The that's that's the thing doing it. Whether you're making a film or you're making a painting, that's the reward to be engaged. Acting. You know, if you'd asked me to say, yeah, I want to be awake.

END TC: 00:39:42:00