

## Rachel Kushner on What She Takes From Art (and Artists)

Her books are filled with insights into art world types and their relationships to the wider world.

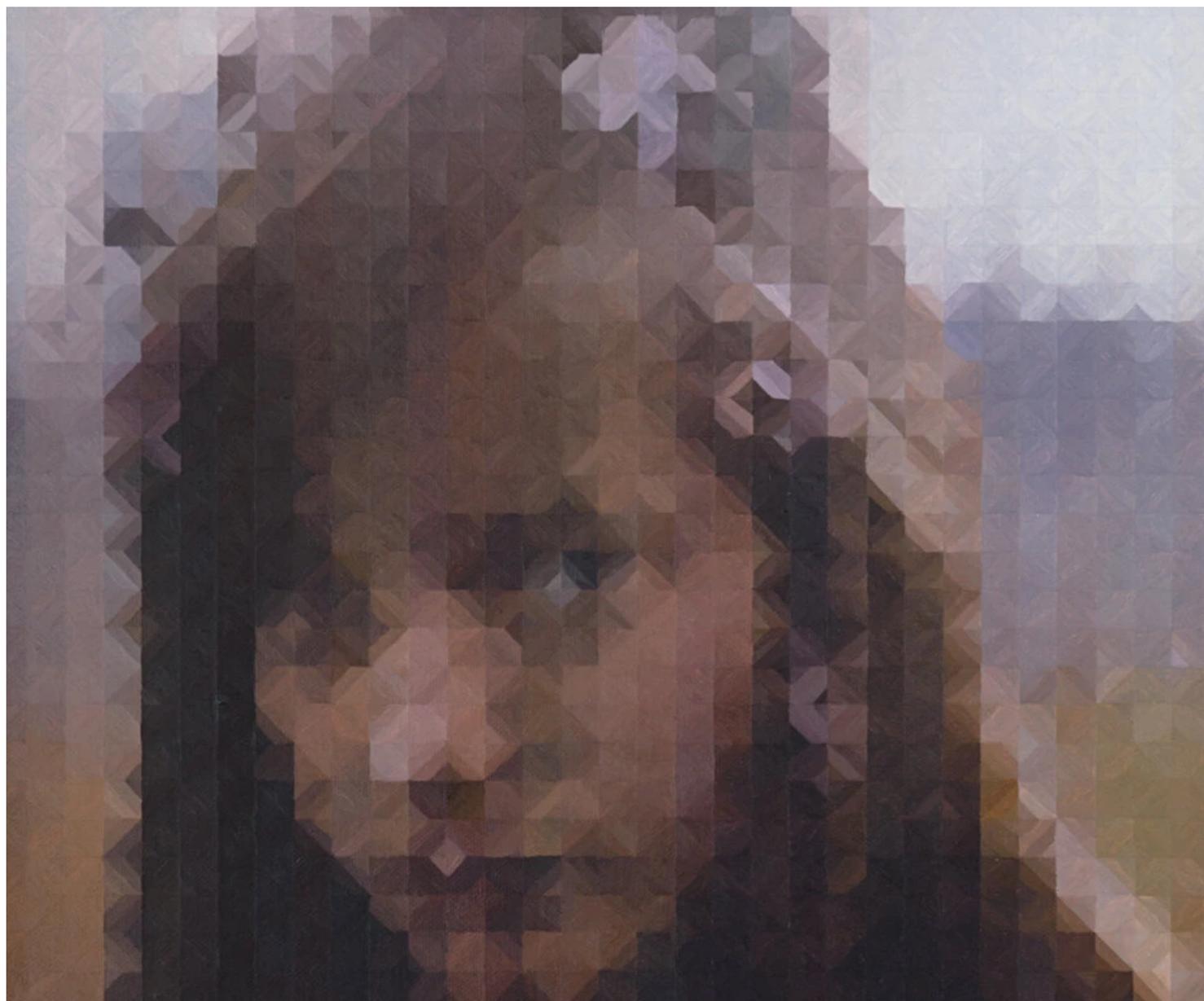
By Jonathan Griffin

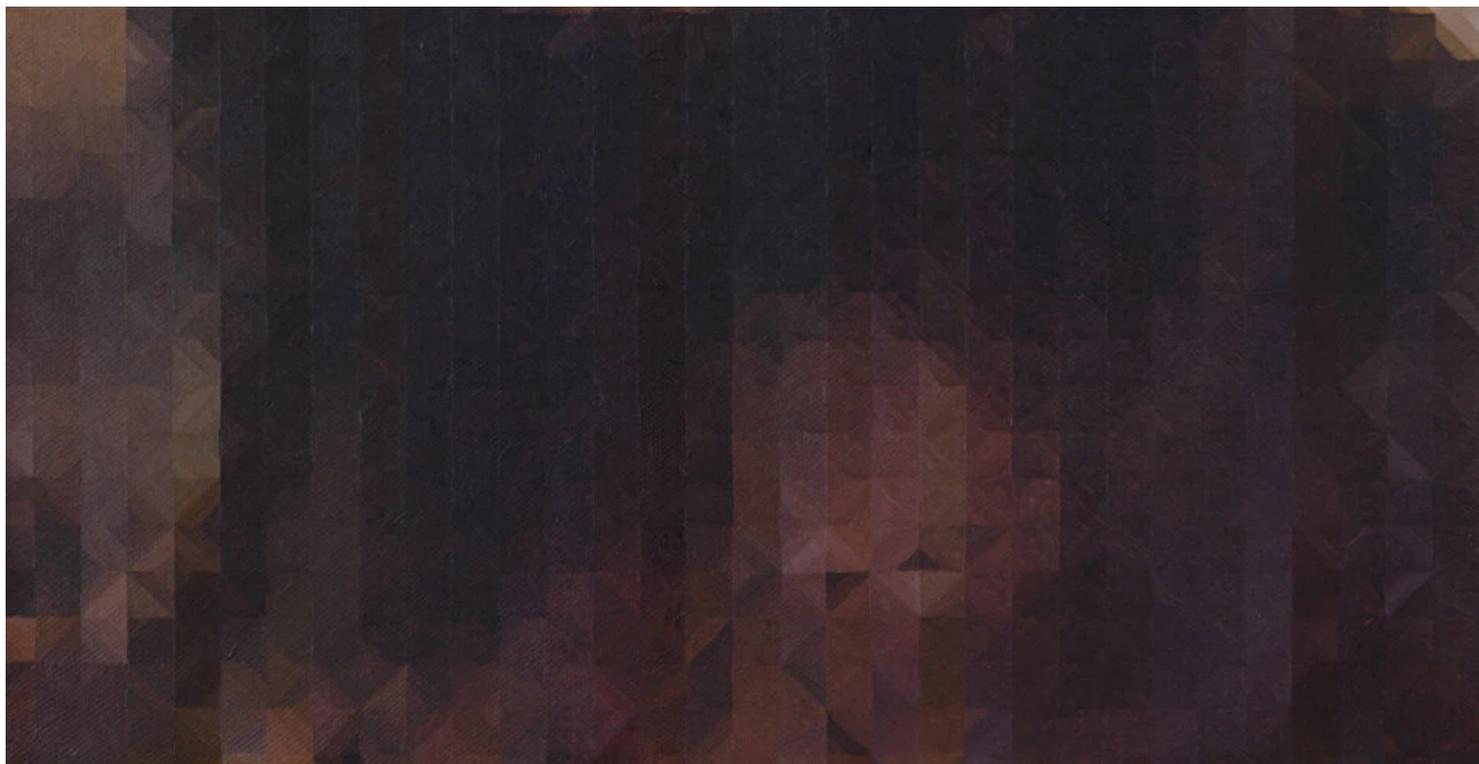
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LOS ANGELES — At one point in Rachel Kushner’s recently published novella, “The Mayor of Leipzig,” the narrator, an American artist, reveals: “I personally know the author of this story you’re reading. Because she thinks of herself as an art-world type, a hanger-on.”

This aside is typical of Kushner, both in its self-deprecating humor and its metafictional address. Kushner, however, is scarcely a hanger-on. While she is best known as the author of three widely acclaimed novels — “Telex from Cuba,” “The Flamethrowers” and “The Mars Room” — she has also written incisively about art and artists for magazines and journals including *Artforum* and *BOMB*.

She often features the art world in her fiction, too. “The Flamethrowers” describes, in part, the protagonist Reno’s entree into the downtown art scene of 1970s New York (Reno sharing certain traits, such as a passion for motorcycles, with Kushner). It includes cameos from real artists, such as the sculptor John Chamberlain, mixed with invented ones in locations both historical — Max’s Kansas City, Andy Warhol’s Factory — and made up.





Alex Brown, "Girl" (2017). The painter and musician "had introduced me to an entire milieu, one that influenced the direction of my life." Estate of Alex Brown

An anthology of her essays, "The Hard Crowd," was published this month. Alongside tales of motorcycle racing, bartending in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco, and reflections on cult writers including Marguerite Duras, Denis Johnson and Clarice Lispector, the book includes essays on the artists Jeff Koons, Thomas Demand and Alex Brown. In another essay, "Made to Burn," she reveals some of the art-historical inspirations for "The Flamethrowers," such as Los Angeles artist Jack Goldstein's vinyl record of sound effects and the Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico's 1984 series "Contact," showing the imprint of various designer chairs on a woman's bottom. ("The link between violence and modernism is everywhere but too broad to get into the form of a caption," she writes beneath the image.)

On the porch of her home in Angelino Heights here, Kushner, 52, spoke about her enduring interest in art and the individuals who make it. Here are edited excerpts from that conversation.

#### **What's in it for you, writing about visual art?**

It's something of a natural affinity for me. I was always interested in art, even as a kid. I'm originally from Eugene, Ore., then we moved to San Francisco. But I was lucky enough to get to visit New York in the 1970s and '80s and be exposed to the art world there. My aunt, the media activist and artist DeeDee Halleck, made films with the Land artist Nancy Holt and Richard Serra, and was friends with the installation artist Gordon Matta-Clark. When I was about 5, I remember visiting the artists' Gate Hill Cooperative outside New York City, where DeeDee was living along with John Cage and the experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek. A friend's mother worked for Donald Judd as his studio manager. So I got a glimpse of things.





Kushner looks to certain artists “probably more than I look to other writers, for how to be an artist, how to recognize what’s yours for the taking.” Clifford Prince King for The New York Times

**What impression did that make on you?**

I was interested in it not just for the work people were making but how they talked and how they lived and the way they performed their personalities, which seemed to me a component of what they do. The way they move toward their curiosity, stay interested in new things happening around them. I look to them, probably more than I look to other writers, for how to be an artist, how to recognize what's yours for the taking.

**How did you first come to write about art?**

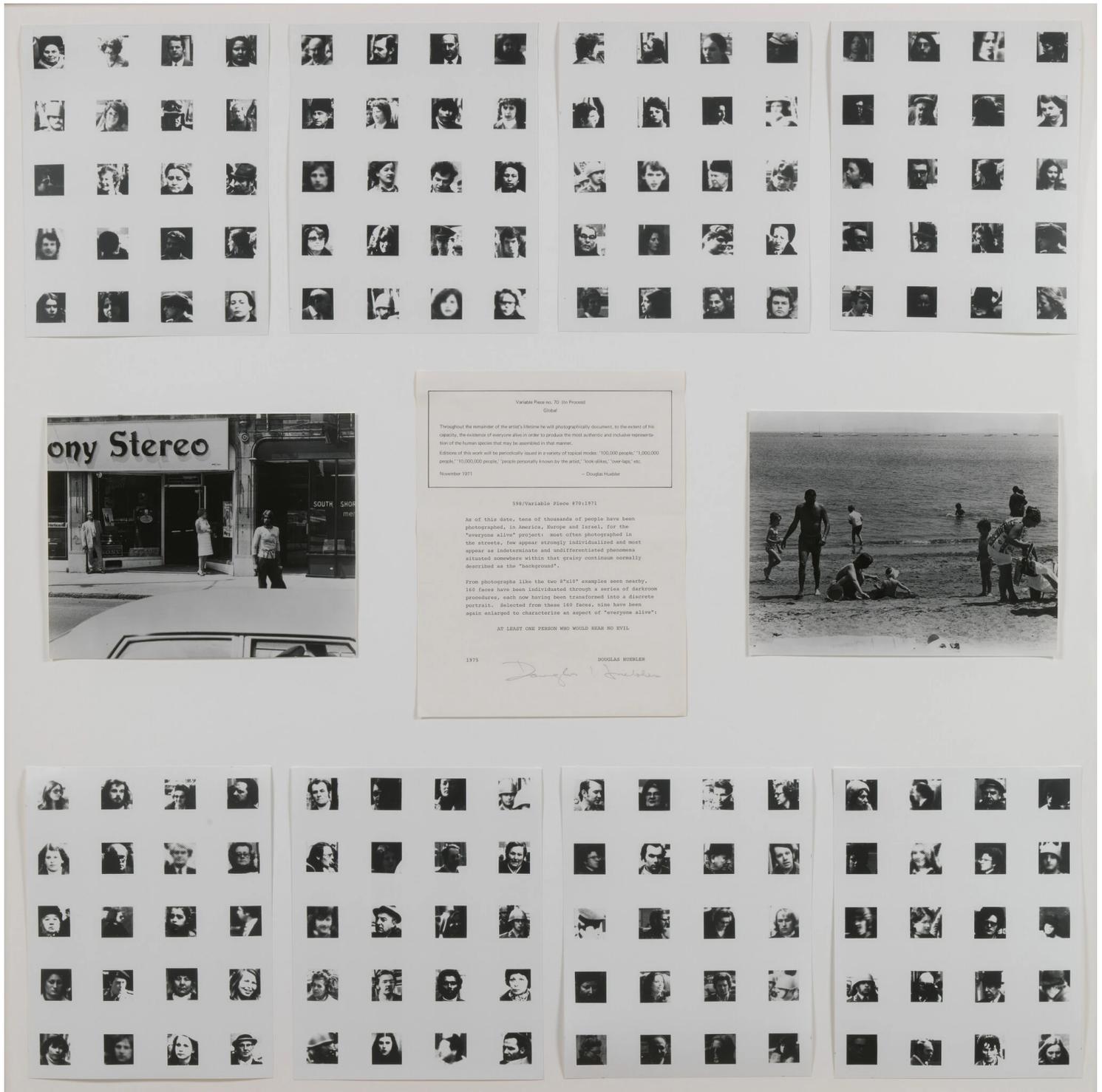
When I moved to New York in the mid-90s, I worked at a now defunct magazine called Grand Street, where the legendary curator Walter Hopps [the founding director of the Menil Collection in Houston] was the art editor. I had aspirations to write a novel, but hadn't figured out how to do that yet. Writing about art was a simpler proposition for me. Jack Bankowsky, then editor of Artforum, invited me to write for that magazine. And, separately, my social life was pretty quickly all artists. I felt comfortable in that world.

**In "The Hard Crowd" you describe this period of your life in your essay about the painter and musician Alex Brown.**

I wrote that piece right after Alex died, in 2019. In writing it, I realized that Alex had introduced me to an entire milieu, one that influenced the direction of my life. When I moved to New York, I met Alex right away, then his gallerist, Hudson, who ran Feature Inc., which was a gallery of artists who pretty much all hung out together, such as Huma Bhabha, Jason Fox and Alexander Ross. Really smart people. Older than me. I loved to listen to them having these late-night discussions, and it was all kind of over my head, but it was absorbing.

**It seems you mine art — as well as film and literature — as raw material for your fiction.**

Yes, I do do that. People in novels can and should be able to upholster their realities with art and films from this one. Plus, I never like reading about made up works of art. It seldom works and tends to feel coy and phony. For example, in "The Flamethrowers," the character Ronnie Fontaine claims to want to photograph every living person, which was what the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler said he wanted to do [for his 1971 "Variable Piece #70 (In Process) Global"]. Or evocative details that I borrowed, like the artist and choreographer Yvonne Rainer removing thousands of pins from crevices in the floor of her SoHo loft, a former dress factory, with a magnet, in an era when artists were moving into former manufacturing spaces in New York.



In "The Flamethrowers," the character Ronnie Fontaine claims to want to photograph every living person, which was what the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler said he wanted to do for his "Variable Piece #70 1971 (In Process) Global" 1975. Douglas Huebler, via Darcy Huebler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art

### Are there particular artists who have influenced you?

The filmmaker and artist James Benning is somebody I have grown quite close to, after he wrote me out the blue after he read "The Flamethrowers." I was already thinking of his work, particularly the beautiful film he made in 2007, "Casting a Glance," about Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty." When I first watched his "California Trilogy," I was just absolutely blown away by those films, and the way that he forces the viewer to sit with these long takes.

In 2018, I was at Scripps College as the Mary Routh Chair of Writing. As an assignment, I asked my students to come to the "Skyspace" installation they have on the Pomona campus by James Turrell. For two hours at sunset, we lay on cement benches and looked up at this rectangular cutout of sky. At one point, the sky started to vibrate, and the edges glowed violet and green.

**Do you conflate looking and seeing and bearing witness? There's a big difference between looking at the sky and visiting the Shuafat Refugee Camp in East Jerusalem, as you do in "We Are Orphans Here" from "The Hard Crowd." (That essay appeared in The New York Times Magazine in 2016).**

I'm hesitant about this concept of bearing witness, because it suggests that there's a social importance to simply that, to being on the scene. But I was drawn to Shuafat, and writing about a place that few outsiders have been to. I'm interested in the less and more visible elements of how a society organizes itself, and the way that people are sorted. I like to be immersed in worlds that are full of invisible codes that have to be teased out — that have to be experienced directly, rather than through books.

**In the new book, you credit the artist Richard Prince as an inspiration.**

Richard has become a friend of mine. In "The Flamethrowers," I included a character called John Dogg, which was Richard's alter ego early in his career. In my story he made different work. In the catalog for his 2007 Guggenheim retrospective, there was a great essay by Glenn O'Brien, which I loved because it was about humor and sensibility which, for me, really is what the art world is. You either get it or you don't. You just have to have the sense of play. Irony, too.

**You have a lot of friends in the art world. Do you feel like an outsider?**

Let's say I'm more of an independent agent than an outsider. A floater. Like I could just go from one social scene to another but don't have to be defined or limited by each one.

**Are your readers floaters, too? It seems unlikely that many will be as familiar with Jeff Koons as Marguerite Duras or Denis Johnson.**

I wanted to make it so even somebody who had never heard of Jeff Koons could hopefully read the essay and get something out of it.

**I love the part about the 1975 video clip you found, in which a young, mustachioed Koons, not yet "performing his man-child consumerism," as you write, sweatily interviews David Byrne. "He wanted to be cool, and he was cool," you said of Koons.**

He's the artist who is appreciated by people who are completely repulsed by and suspicious of the art world. I wanted to think about populism and in what way Koons is or isn't a populist artist, and in what way he's just kind of toying with populism.

**One through line in the book seems to be this idea of being at the apex of your life, being "finished with the new," and turning "reflective, interior, to examine and sort and tally."**

I wanted to give the reader an experience of these different worlds that I've passed through and thought about. I think about something that was mentioned in the Peter Schjeldahl profile of my friend Laura Owens, the painter, from her diaries when she was young. Something like "How to be an artist." One of her rules was "contradict yourself constantly." I think that's totally amazing and insightful because it happens anyway. Cop to it, rather than always trying to present yourself as a seamlessly coherent narrative of mythology.