



'The Rhonda Lieberman Reader' Is The Answer To Our Prayers

Everybody's favourite underpaid, over-educated, raven-haired art critic, Rhonda Lieberman, is as relevant as ever

G BY [GILDA WILLIAMS](#) IN [OPINION](#) | 15 MAY 18



'Rhonda Lieberman! You're a legend!' gushes an art-world insider upon spotting the divine Ms L. at a crowded Armory Show brunch in 2005. 'I can't hear you', Lieberman demurely replies, 'Would you mind repeating that?' For those readers either too young or too un-Manhattan to know her, Rhonda Lieberman has been (for this reviewer) the most enjoyable writer in the entire art cosmos for decades, bar none. An *Artforum* regular and popular columnist ('Glamour Wounds', 1992–95; 'Diaries', 2005–2016), she stood out by a mile for her devastating humour, impeccable sentence structures and dizzying, out-of-the-blue references. This long-awaited 538-page binge-read includes essays, reviews, talks, interviews, and columns, 1991–2016, covering her pet topics: Jean Baudrillard, Roseanne Barr, Chanel couture, Jacques Derrida, Todd Solondz, Revlon nail polish, and more. Back in the early 1990s, when I was a junior copy editor and art wannabe, all art criticism was reliably dull – even when covering the sexiest new art. Why Lord, why?, I pleaded, struggling through the latest edition of *October*. Why must art writing be such relentless torture? Rhonda Lieberman answered my prayers. And now, a new collected book of her writing *Pep Talk #7: The Rhonda Lieberman Reader* (Pep Talk, 2018) – featuring more than 82 essays, reviews, columns and talks published or delivered between 1988 and 2016 – reminds us why.

In a prescient 1992 essay on Jeff Koons, she imagines the artist coming from 'the same petri dish as those helmet-haired guys on late-night infomercials'. Her analogies are uniformly brilliant. Her 1980s art-school education so ill-prepared students for the real world, graduates emerged with 'the survival chops of a deaf and blind kitten', she reflects in 2012. At art fairs, moneyed collectors bask in red-carpet treatment while 'artists are accorded the welcome that, say, truffle pigs would get in a four-star restaurant.' (2014). A perfect analogy! Both truffles and artworks are pricey, rare, and greedily devoured by HNWI – but their sources, alas, look a little gross and unwashed.

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Rhonda Lieberman, *Shalom (Barbra)*, From the series "Purse Pictures," 1992, glitter, mixed media, 9 × 11".
Courtesy: Rhonda Lieberman

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But she's more than just the art world's Joan Rivers – another declared Jewish diva comedian, whom the critic counts among her influences. With Lieberman you come for the wisecracks but stay for the content, especially her well-worded projectiles aimed at institutionalized hypocrisy. In 'Hoard d'Oeuvres: Art of the 1 Percent' (2014) she demolishes a sycophantic *New Yorker* piece about Alice Walton, the robber-baroness behind the evil Walmart empire. Lieberman, ever the virtuoso wordsmith, summarizes in a single sentence everything that's wrong with Walton's big-box vanity museum Crystal Bridges, the Arkansas home of her all-American art collection:

'Spanning the colonial era to the present, the exhibition space's fulsome celebration of the American spirit eulogizes the nation of shared confidence and abundance, sustainable mortgages, and worker dignity that Walmart has brutally demolished.'

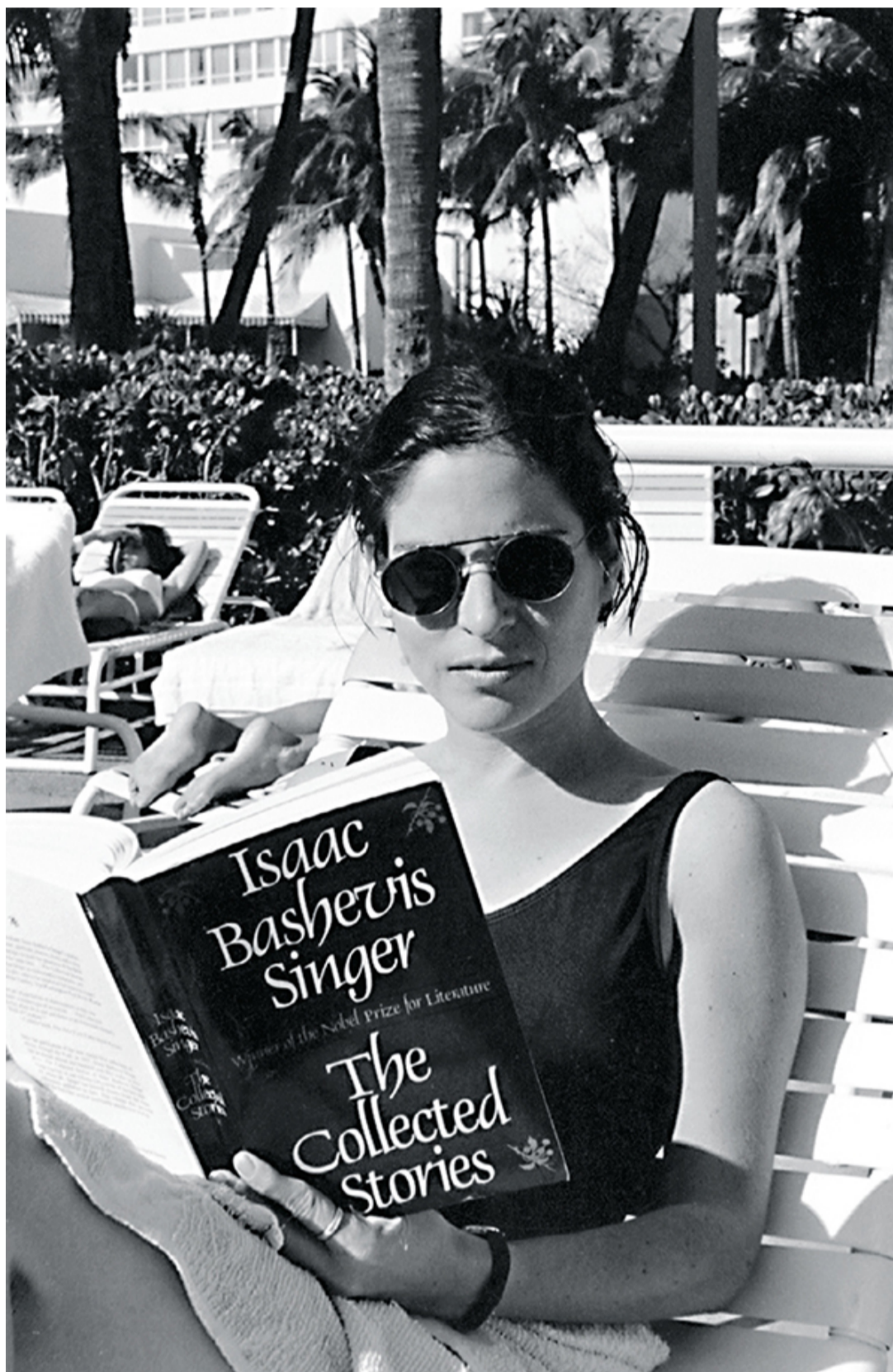
she's furious about the new corporatized university, dominated by cost-cutting administrators who exploit adjunct teachers as

cheap labour, forced to compete in academia's 'reignite version of *The Hunger Games*'

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Resilient and hard-working, Lieberman is the perennial art trouper, game for whatever MFA teaching gig, feminist panel or travel junket is on offer – including an exhilarating trip to Stockholm where she gets swept into 12-hour studio visits 'before you can say "reindeer burger".' She proves loyally devoted to select artists (Cary Leibowitz, Kay Rosen), but her straight art-critical texts, honestly, are the collection's weakest. Lieberman's still astute and funny ('It's as if Jim Isermann asked, "How faggy could I make the Minimalist object?")', but she's best when dishing the dirt, crossing the mischievousness of a gossip magazine with the vocabulary of a Brandeis/Yale-educated Proust scholar (which she is). She holds no sacred cows, not even Hannah 'I can't believe she dated Heidegger!' Arendt, or boyfriend Martin, dubbed 'the adulterous pedagogue'.



Rhonda Lieberman, Fontainebleau Hotel, Miami, 1992. Courtesy: Rhonda Lieberman; Photograph: Dana Byerly

Present, MOMA, 2012). Often, she's self-deprecating, playing trumpy veima to the many statuesque Dapnnes who populate the glittering society Lieberman adores. Forced to walk shoeless into a glamorous crowd while visiting a billionaire's art collection, she enters 'with all the swagger of a garden gnome'. Supermodels ('prime evidence of a pitiless, silent God') provide special hate/love targets, triumphant in the genetic lottery and – worse still – potentially nice people, too. 'I don't want to meet them', she despairs; I picture a designer-dressed gnome, waving a little white flag in defeat.

Lieberman's in top form when tackling borderline figures like Sandra Bernhard or Liza Minnelli (both in 1993): bona fide celebrities yet plagued with crippling insecurities and the stigma of on-again-off-again careers. Lieberman's gallery of *grandes dames* includes the low-born, vindictive Coco Chanel (1992); Elizabeth Nietzsche, Friedrich's terrifying sister blessed with 'epistolary shit-stirring skills' (2003); and the legendary, short-legged movie star Elizabeth 'she-really-should-have-skipped-the-hotpants' Taylor (2011). Lieberman roams the earth on permanent wardrobe patrol, whether scrutinizing an enviable auction-night ensemble ('high strappy lizard sandals and lavender duster coat') or admiring a heavyweight Yale professor able to intimidate the 'scariest, most cooler-than-thou Literature students ... even the day she sported a bedazzled tiger sweatshirt.' No one is spared, not even Slavoj Žižek, 'everybody's favourite Slovenian Hegelian reader of Jacques Lacan'. With his 'medieval-looking hairdo (bangs and a bob), he's the Lacanian one most easily imagines in a fairy tale, residing under a bridge.'

'Whenever I see a Rothko I think of [Bernie] Madoff', declares Lieberman, in reference to the USD\$310 million worth of blurry Ab Ex paintings flogged by a close Madoff associate when the notorious Ponzi scheme went bust. Art historians may claim that a Rothko triggers the emotions of sublime transcendence – but who are they kidding? Lieberman's smart enough to know that art doesn't magically cleanse the spectator's mind of clutter: career anxieties; financial melt-downs; celebrity crushes; sartorial dos and don'ts; snatches of post-structuralist theory; last night's CNN. Lieberman embraces all the concomitant mental noise accompanying the art experience, then expertly extracts all the literary and comedic potential from the art/life contamination.

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Rhonda Lieberman with Yingy, 2003, New York. Courtesy: Rhonda Lieberman

that the spheres of art, academia, fashion and finance are not so different, each regulated by a fierce pecking order whether measured by auction price, intellect, beauty, education, wealth, square footage, Instagram followers or Ivy League invitations. The art scene is where all those social ladders balance and intersect, often at weird angles. That's good news for everybody's favourite underpaid, over-educated, raven-haired art critic, literary maven, sometimes artist, and recovering Jewish suburban 'ghetto' survivor. The art circuit – 'buoyed by the random camaraderie of mutual vulnerability and the subterranean buzz of ambition' – generously provides her with a steady stream of good material.

Sadly, *The Rhonda Lieberman Reader* suffers multiple editorial shortcomings. No index, for this name-dropping extravaganza? No book blurb, no biographies? A detailed contents list would help, complete with subtitle and publication date for easy reference (her 2012 book review of Barbara Kruger's *Remote Control*, for example, is wholly concealed under the title 'Broadcast Muse'). The sporadic lavender-type-on-black-background is a headache for this old-school book-underliner, though the Kindle generation couldn't care less.

If you're worried this review's burned through Lieberman's best lines – no way! There are plenty more gems, plus quiet asides of wisdom. 'What is glamour without her handmaiden, humiliation?', she ponders in a pensive moment. Lieberman's not just a limitless fount of exquisite prose, killer metaphors, and razor-sharp observations. She displays real sensitivity, even bemused kindness, towards a tainted art world she ultimately forgives. I don't want to meet her.

Main image: Cover of Pep Talk #7: The Rhonda Lieberman Reader, 2018, Pep Talk, Los Angeles.

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