Citation: Tucker-Abramson, Myka. "*The Flamethrowers* and the Making of Modern Art." In *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature*, edited by Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2019. https://pub.dartmouth.edu/ncal/the-flamethrowers-and-the-making-of-modern-art.

The Flamethrowers and the Making of Modern Art

Myka Tucker-Abramson

Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*[1] is a novel about neoliberalism's emergence in the 1970s and its crash in the financial crisis of 2008. At its center are two sites and struggles that were crucial to both the post-World War II reconstruction and expansion of US-led global capitalism under Keynesianism, and its consolidation under neoliberalism. First is the explosion of social and artistic movements that emerged in the lead up to, and fall out from the radical restructuring of New York City as a result of the fiscal crisis of 1974–1975 that culminated in what David Harvey and others have termed a "financial coup."[2] Second are the student and worker movements of Operaismo and Autonomia that shook Italy from 1962 to the late 1970s that formed in response to the so-called *miracolo italiano*, or Italian Miracle, the recapitalization and reconstruction of Italy that was carried out through the Marshall Plan.[3] *Flamethrowers* connects these two spaces through its protagonist, Reno, an aspiring land artist and motorcycle racer, and her relationship with the well-known minimalist artist, Sandro Valera, whose family owns the Valera motorcycle company — one of the automotive factories at the center of the novel's vision of this time of unrest in Italy.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that the myriad reviews this novel generated had so little to say about these two emblematic political moments (or even their relationship to the New York art scene that Reno stumbles into), instead focusing almost exclusively on how this bracingly masculine New York arts scene silences Reno, and in turn how today's equally bracingly masculine arts scene silences Kushner. Laura Miller's *Salon* review drew an analogy between the effacement of Reno's voice within the novel and contemporary critics effacement of Kushner's voice, reading the novel as being "concerned with the dilemma faced by female artists."[4] The *LA Review of Books*' Nicholas Miriello argued that the book's theme is "the deaf ears that receive a woman's mind, a woman's ambition,"[5] and Geoff Mak audaciously claimed that *The Flamethrowers* is essentially "a feminist novel, [rather] than a political novel, or a novel about art."[6]

Even those reviews that situated *The Flamethrowers* within its political moment of the 1970s ultimately effaced the novel's engagement with the politics of that moment. While, for instance, Nicholas Dames reads *The Flamethrowers* as part of a "burst" of nostalgic "fictional resurrections of the Seventies," his vision of the 1970s is ultimately a pastiche of stagflation and 1960s nostalgia. Thus, he suggests that what is at stake in these novels' nostalgia for this miserable time —"How sad does one have to be to want to resuscitate the era of stagflation?" he asks — is a contemporary desire to relish the "bygone experiments" of the 1960s while still being able to comfort ourselves with the "fate of consecration that befell them."[7] Both these feminist and periodizing readings of Kushner efface the underlying focus of the novel — the ascendancy

and as I will argue in the conclusion, decline, of a US-led global capitalism — and instead treats its vision of the 1970s as a set piece, implicitly casting the novel as an example of what Georg Lukács diagnosed as "so-called historical novels," that is, novels that treat history as "mere costumery" (19). In these novels, Lukács argued, while the setting may be historical, both "the psychology of the characters [and] the manners depicted are entirely those of the writer's own day" (19). Dames sees Kushner staging the cultural anomie of our present; Miller sees Kushner staging the misogyny of the contemporary art world. In both readings, the novel appears to project localized present-day characters and concerns against a 1970s backdrop.

What is at stake in these reviews, however, is not just the status of the 1970s, but also the status of art. That is, they raise the spectre of the art and autonomy debates, the question of whether art — both the 1970s art world the novel presents, as well as the novel itself — has become wholly "subsumed" by capital.[8] For Miller, *The Flamethrowers*' 1970s art world is a misogynist, cultural industry that fails to valorize Reno's work and voice, while for Dames, *The Flamethrowers*, like the numerous other 1970s novels he catalogues, is a parodic aesthetization of the past that transforms the 1970s into a consumable commodity. In both cases, this novel, like the art it depicts, appears to have become wholly subsumed. To a certain extent, this vision of both the novel and the world it depicts makes sense. Reno, after all, walks through the 1970s like a spectator through a set of famous historical photo stills of the 1970s and perceives the art world of the 1970s as free floating, a machine of commodification that she hopes will one day valorize her work.

But the positions heralded by these reviews depend upon a collapsing of the novel's perspective with that of Reno's. In this chapter, I want to offer a reading of *The Flamethrowers* against Reno, a reading that identifies Reno and her constant tendency to flatten, commodify, fragment, and misread the political and artistic world of the 1970s not as the operation, but the problem of the novel. In doing so, I aim to make an argument for *The Flamethrowers* as a properly, though necessarily revised, Lukácsian historical novel, that is a novel that transforms history, and particularly the 1970s, from a set piece into "a *mass experience*,"[9] an experience in which men and women shape history, though not as Marx famously wrote, "as they please [...but] under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."[10] By disarticulating the novel's standpoint from that of Reno, we can see how the novel ultimately refuses Reno's perspective and instead stages the 1970s as a fraught and explosive period in which the struggle over the uneven processes of global neoliberalism that created our present moment was being waged: a moment marked by stagflation, urban crisis, and decline, but also by the explosive and intertwined artistic and social movements that imagined and worked to create new kinds of societies from the ruins of Fordist-Keynesianism. And it suggests that key to resurrecting this *other* 1970s — not one of stagflation, decline, and disillusion, but of struggle and possibility — is the reclamation of art's potential to critique and historicize the present.

In "Wages Against Artwork," Leigh Claire La Berge puts forward the idea of decommodification as an alternative to autonomy. While, La Berge argues, "one cannot locate a new, uncommodified ground of that long hoped for 'outside' [...one can] take objects, processes, anxieties out of circulation, making them available once again for the generation of a different value, and provide a model for doing so."[11] It is not my intention to delve into the aesthetic autonomy and immaterial labor debates, but rather to consider how

The Flamethrowers raises these debates — both the meaning of the 1970s alongside the autonomy of the role of art debates — in order to stake a claim for the political and critical potential of art, culture, and, particularly, the novel as able to operate both "within and against capital"[12] in our post-2008 moment.[13]

Specifically, I argue, *The Flamethrowers* puts forward what can best be understood as a theory of combined and uneven subsumption, a process that understands art as "caught," to borrow from Ericka Beckman's formulation in a somewhat different context, "between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production […in which] they are at different moments in history alternately brought into and thrown out of circuits of accumulation."[14] It is precisely this space of caughtness — never fully in or out — the novel suggests, that makes art an ideal site with which to understand the intertwined landscapes of industrialization and industrial abandonment that marked the 1970s, and the social and political uprisings that emerged in response. In reclaiming and repoliticizing the art practices of the 1970s as engaged in the process of decommodification, *The Flamethrowers* also models this process: that is, the novel itself reveals the role that art can play as tools of critique and revelation in our current moment at the end of neoliberal capitalism.

I

The Flamethrowers' historical referent is the moment of transformation between the post-World War II era of Fordist-Keynesian and that of neoliberalism. This novel focalizes this uneven, yet global transformation through the novel's three primary locales: New York City, abandoned by industry and the tax dollars of the white middle class, which triggered its fiscal crisis; Reno, Nevada where many of these corporations fled to in search of cheaper land and labor; and Italy during the period of the Italian Miracle, a moment marked by an unprecedented industrialization and urbanization, and then as a result of the 1973 oil shock, deindustrialization, structural reform, and unemployment. The novel centers these historical and geographical contexts repeatedly. Sandro, for instance, provides this historical context when he shoots down Reno's romantic visions by explaining that Italy is not the fantasy an American woman experiences on her year abroad to Florence (109), but a place bankrupted by the oil shock, of an "IMF loan. Inflation. Unemployment. […] Work stoppages. Sabotage. Wildcat strikes." (108). Similarly, the New York City that the novel gives us is marked by the garbage piling up as a result of a 1975 wildcat garbage strike and the 1977 blackout that leads to a fire at a chemical bank that kills three employees because "There had been no available fire truck to come and put out the fire" (353).

How, the novel asks, can we understand the connections between these three spaces? What connects Nevada, New York City, and Italy in the 1970s, as well as the Italian flamethrowers and motorcycle battalions of 1917, and the Brazilian rubber plantations of the 1940s? *The Flamethrowers* offers us two models, two ways to map this connection.[15] First is the model given by Reno, whose sentimental search for love takes both her and the reader from Nevada, to New York, and Italy, thus providing the window through which the reader is able to see the highways of the Southwest, the abandoned and impoverished spaces of New York City, and the protests and strikes of Italy. Reno provides us a map early on when she explains, "Flip recaptured the world record, the season after the Watts riots and kept it until last year, 1975, when an Italian stole it away in a rocket-fuelled vehicle and Flip officially retired. Now he does television commercials for after-market shocks. The Italian, Didi Bombonato, is sponsored by

Valera Tires, which is where the lines begin to cross. Didi Bombonato would be at the Bonneville Salt Flats to set a record. Sandro is Sandro Valera, of Valera Tires and Moto Valera motorcycles" (23). Reno's map is both geographical and sentimental, tracking the journey from her childhood crush on the racer Flip in Nevada to her first grown up love, Sandro in New York. For the novel, however, this map to Reno's heart is also a map of the uneven geographies of the post-war deal. In this reading, what connects these spaces and moments is not love or attraction, but rather the automobile. It is the rise of the automotive-fuelled white flight of the 1950s to places like the Sunbelt that at once caused the rise of motorcycle racers like Flip Farmer to become the heartthrobs of suburban teenagers like Reno, and that catalyzed urban unrest of the 1960s across Northern cities like Watts and New York, by hollowing out their tax bases. And it is the Marshall-plan backed explosion of the automotive industry as part of the Italian Miracle that lay at the center of the worker and student movements of Italy in the 1960s and 1970s.

More specifically, it is the automobile as a symbol of both the period of post-war national reconstruction and recapitalization and its undoing in the 1970s that led to some automobile workers (Flip) becoming subsumed into the US-backed culture industry, and other workers (those, for instance, left in Watts when the automobile factories left LA) becoming surplus populations in revolt. What connects these spaces, in other words, is not love, but the domestic and international strategies deployed by the United States to maintain political hegemony and expand and restabilize global capitalism, first through Keynesianism, and then, following its crash in 1973, through neoliberalism.[16]

This crash at once forms the backdrop of the novel — it is this crash that creates the "thoroughly abandoned" New York that Reno finds (44) — and is concretized within the novel through the oft-discussed scene of Reno's motorcycle crash. Early in the novel, Reno enters a competition, racing her new model Valera in the Bonneville salt flats in Nevada. Reno heeds the "timing official's" warning of "wind gusts" and irregular section of track around "mile three […that] didn't get smoothed out" (29), and sets off. However, part-way through the race, a sudden gust of wind knocks Reno over, "cracking and pulverizing" the "fiberglass bodywork," turning the bike's "beautiful teal fairing [to] sudden garbage" (113). As images for the crashing of the Fordist-Keynesianism into a new era of neoliberal financialization goes, the sudden transformation of Reno's beautiful teal motorcycle into mangled garbage as a result of fragile surfaces, speed, and a gust of wind, is not a bad one.

By now the story of this transformation from Fordist-Keynesianism into neoliberalism has become all but gospel. Following the Great Depression, Washington turned to Keynesian policies that attempted to regulate and prevent the excesses of capitalism and to stabilize the global economic system under its leadership. Defined by the Bretton Woods system, which created a system of fixed exchange rates, the assumption of a manipulable trade-off between inflation and employment rates, and the belief that the government could strike a balance between labor and capital ensuring prosperity for all, Keynesianism became the new common sense, but throughout the 1970s the Keynesian-inspired post-war deal stopped working. Corporate profit rates began to decline and a crisis in US global hegemony, as well as growing student and worker militancy, threatened the delicate compromise struck between capital and labor.

This crisis of profitability was at least partially solved by a shift in focus from revolutions in production and labor productivity to circulation and the shortening of what Marx calls "turnover

time," that is, the time in which capital valorizes itself (97). The so-called "revolution in logistics,"[17] that is revolutions in transportation such as containerization, and just-in-time production, and new instruments of credit allowed corporations to leave the traditional industrial centers to places where tax breaks and weaker or no unions or labor laws promised a reduction in costs. The economic shift from the industrial, urban north to the suburban Sun Belt of the South was a precursor to this process. Building on the industrial base secured by Roosevelt's 1940's announcement that most wartime production would occur not in the north, but in places like Georgia, the postwar period saw a flourishing of business, industry, and population in the South and Southwest. The combination of racist federal housing policies that subsidized middle-class homeownership for millions of white families, national highway acts that facilitated automobile-based commuting, Cold War spending policies and tax breaks that facilitated corporate relocation to areas with cheaper taxes, and less powerful unions, as well as numerous local initiatives carried out by boosters and businesses, led to a massive shift in economic power from industrial cities to the south and southwest.[18]

Reno embodies both the specific transformation from the industrial North to the Sun Belt South and the larger transformation from production to circulation. Not only is Reno from one of those working class families in Nevada, but her very desire to race motorcycles across the highways and landscapes of the United States mimics the shift from production to circulation. However, while Reno is both a product of and embodies these shifts, and while she sees that Nevada, New York, and Italy are connected, that the lines "cross" (23), she is unable to map these connections. She cannot see how the industrialization of Nevada, the deindustrialization of New York, and the eruption of student and worker movements in Italy are all part of this global reorganization of capital. For her, as I've argued, the lines that cross and intersect are not connected by these deeper political, ecological, and economic shifts, shifts in larger processes of life-making. They are simply connected by love and by coincidence. It is because of Chris Kelly that she moves from Nevada to New York; it is because of Sandro she ends up in Italy; it is because Sandro cheats on her and his chauffeur, Gianni, is there that she ends up at the center of the protests in Italy. For Reno, life is a series of singularities. As she explains, "Like all people who fall in love, I took the attraction between me and Sandro as singular and specific, not explainable to types and preferences" (94). The same reason she can't see Sandro for who he is, she can't figure out the larger social and political transformations that shape her movements. Hers is a world governed by chance and by singularities.

What looks like a love story, a story about a scorned lover who can't read her lover's infidelities and patterns because she is too deeply in love, might more accurately be read as a political allegory for the subject position that is unable to adequately map their surroundings for the simple reason that they have been subsumed in the system, their subjectivity has come to mirror the logics of capital. For Marx, "the analysis of the real, inner connections of the capitalist production process is a very intricate thing and a work of great detail" (144) and those inculcated within the system are unable to engage in such an analysis because their ideas were necessarily distorted: the ideas of those capitalists, he explains, involved in circulation "are necessarily quite upside-down" while those connected to manufacture are "vitiated by the acts of circulation to which their capital is subject" (145). Both subject positions, in other words, see the world upside down. Reno, encapsulated within and embodying the logic of circulation, sees the world in an upside-down way. And while Sandro, with his firm grounding in the production of automobiles, seems to offer a clearer vision of the world — we can think for instance of his lecture to Reno that

aims to show her that Italy is not the romantic place of Venetian canals and Florentine piazzas, but of economic precarity, structural adjustments, and worker unrest — he too can only see part of the picture. One way to think about this novel's aim, then, is to help the reader turn the world right side up by helping them to make these connections.

If neither Reno nor Sandro is able to turn the world right side up, Kushner wages that the art of the 1970s, or at least some of it, can. And the novel offers a panoramic view of 1970s art practices — the feminist conceptual art of Valie Export (fictionalized in that of Sandro's ex-girlfriend, Gloria), the land art of Robert Smithson, the anarchitecture of Gordon Matta-Clark, and the anarchist and dada-influenced political art of the Motherfuckers — all of which are similarly engaged in trying to map this rapidly transforming world. And it is, perhaps, no coincidence that these works of art are also engaged in one of the central aesthetic questions of the period: the extent to which art can be said to resist the real subsumption of capital, or the extent to which art is able to resist being wholly absorbed by the culture industry.

The Flamethrowers raises the spectre of this question in order to ask a larger question: can art offer us a form capable of mapping and critiquing the uneven modes of development that characterized the shifts and transformations of the 1970s? And *The Flamethrowers* aims to answer this question in the affirmative, to show the potential of art as a site of critique, both in the 1970s and, as I will argue shortly, in our present moment. That is, while *The Flamethrowers* undoubtedly mocks the overindulgent bluster of the New York art scene, it takes the art itself quite seriously as an important and critical mode of mapping. While we could turn to many of the examples of emblematic art, the novel focuses its gaze on two particularly resonant examples: Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" (1970), located in Great Salt Lake in Utah, and Matta-Clark's "Day's End" (1975). The Spiral Jetty is located in Reno's hometown in Nevada. Reno learns about Smithson, she tells us, not from her art school, but from an obituary in which Smithson is quoted as "declaring that pollution and industry could be beautiful and that he chose this part of the Great Salt Lake for his project, where the lake's supply of fresh water had been artificially cut, rising the salt content so high that nothing but red algae grow" (7). Reno's imagination is seized by this description. "I had immediately wanted to see this thing made by a New York Artist in leather pants," she explains, "who described more or less the slag-heap world of the West I knew, as it looked to me, and found it worth his attentions" (23).

Kushner frames the Spiral Jetty within the history of de/industrialization. The Jetty, as Reno points out, could only have been built both because of the high salinity of the water and because of the building of a causeway by the Southern Pacific Railway in 1959, which isolated the lake from fresh water sources. Put differently, it is made possible by the postwar infrastructure projects that would soon help facilitate the movement of capital from the northeastern industrial cities and to the Southwest. The Spiral Jetty is a site where New York meets the Southwest — where the flagging industrial cities of the North meet the newly burgeoning economies of the Southwest. Deindustrialization meets industrialization.

Its counterpoint, also present within the novel, is the site of deindustrialization itself: New York through the work of Matta-Clark, and specifically his 1975 piece, "Day's End." Matta-Clark's artistic method famously consisted of him finding buildings that had been abandoned — largely from industry leaving New York — like this warehouse, but also apartment buildings that have been condemned, and he would make temporary installations that he knew would be

destroyed with the building. In "Day's End," Matta-Clark made sail-shaped cuts in the wall and roof of the derelict Pier 52 on Manhattan's West Side, creating what the novel describes as a "cathedral of water and light" (97) for the gay cruising scene that gathered there. And just as Reno stumbles upon Smithson's obituary, so too she stumbles upon Day's End, though as she archly comments, it was not so much stumbling as her being led by Sandro who led "by seeming to wander when he wasn't, we weren't" (97). The novel describes Matta-Clark's process: "Matta-Clark had cased the building quietly and with discipline for weeks before sneaking in and changing the locks, then slowly, stealthily, he'd moved in equipment, power saws, acetylene, torches, pulleys, and ropes to make his cuts. He had noted when, if ever, there was security around the pier. When, if ever, the building was in use. He had learned that its only use was for discreet sex acts between men" (98).

Like Smithson, Matta-Clark made art out of the waste products of capital; he turned the spaces abandoned by capital into art, and often he focused on buildings that were to be condemned and destroyed. This was art that could not be bought or even preserved; it was art that was meant to disappear. Taken separately, these are pieces that register, engage with, and are made possible by, industry's destruction of the Great Salt Lake on the one hand and the deindustrialization and abandonment of New York on the other. When brought together, however as the novel does, these two works ask us to think about how these seemingly opposed spaces are connected by the dialectic of development and neglect that characterizes the uneven processes of neoliberalization.

But ultimately the artworks most capable of mapping and critiquing the processes that heralded the neoliberal globalization of the 1970s are the fictional artworks of Sandro and Reno. Sandro, Reno explains, is a minimalist who made "large aluminum boxes" (93). These boxes, while produced in a factory in Connecticut, "had little to do with the assembly line imagery they implied: the factory, Lippincott, only fabricated artists' works, by hand, and very, very carefully" (93). While the novel finds much to be mocked in minimalism, it also suggests that minimalism's own simultaneous mimicking of, and withdrawal from industrial production (its refusal to have a use value) allows it to act as a site for the critique of these dual processes of amped up industrial exploitation and deindustrialization. Sandro's fascination with industrial objects produced under artisanal conditions stands as an expression of, and rebellion against, the highly exploitative industrial production his family is engaged in that also funds the production of his art. His art, within the novel at least, allegorizes the politics of minimalism's withdrawal from, as well as its implicit dependency on, global industrial production. Sandro is trying to escape the market and his family by using industrial processes to create products with no use value, and thus that are not commodities, while Reno, on the other hand, makes art out of the very industrial commodity, the motorcycle, that Sandro's family produces, and that created the landscapes of her childhood.

While Reno's art is tied to the production of the Valera motorcycle, that *ur* symbol of Fordist production within the novel, her art, as I've argued, is focused on speed itself: it consists of documenting the marks that speed leave on the earth. She explains that as a child "the two things I loved were drawing and speed, and in skiing I had combined them. It was drawing in order to win" (9). Her movement from skiing to motorcycle racing, we're meant to understand, is a continuation of this fusing. Sandro describes her art this way, her art practice as a motorcycle racer is the acting of "draw[ing] a line across the salt flats" (7). Reno's artwork literally concretizes the processes of speed up and the shift from production to circulation that characterized the 1970s. In other words, the very art Reno deploys to escape her home also

replicates the processes that created Nevada in the first place. Like Sandro, Reno's art both attempts to escape and recreates the conditions of their class and geographic positions. Reno's friend Giddle tells Reno repeatedly that Sandro likes her because she's an ingénue, but the novel suggests that Sandro's attraction to her is also tied up in her fetishization of the very objects he disavows. Reno's art both takes as its object and requires the real industrial machinery produced by Sandro's family, even as it deploys it for completely abstract aims. There is something in each of them that requires the other.

Like with Smithson and Matta-Clark, read together, Sandro and Reno's artwork allow us to see the two sides of circulation and production within this new mode of production. They allow us, to return to Marx, to turn the world upside down. In one of the more oft-quoted passages of *Capital*, Marx writes:

> The consumption of labour-power is completed, as in the case of every other commodity, outside the limits of the market or of the sphere of circulation. Accompanied by Mr. Moneybags and by the possessor of labour-power, we therefore take leave for a time of this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men, and follow them both into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face "No admittance except on business." Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making. (195)

Marx's point is that we need to see both circulation and production to understand "the secret of profit making." In *The Flamethrowers*, it is through the art of Reno and Sandro, and through their love story, that we are able to see both, to link circulation and production.

Kushner's depictions of these art works, both real and fictional, is not invested in arguing for the autonomy of 1970s artwork. Rather, Kushner's depictions of the 1970s art scene appear to be caught between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production, both caught up within and about the mobility of capital and the fixity of the soil; they are works that reveal the impossibility of autonomy, showing how different art movements, like the spaces in which their art is carried out, are alternately incorporated into and ejected from the circuits of accumulation. But in that sliver of autonomy, that caughtness, Kushner is also invested in showing how, through their very attempt to grapple with their own conditions of production, these artistic practices are able to offer critical maps of the processes of economic globalization that join the slavery of the Brazilian rubber workers with the art economy of New York and the factory work of Italy, all existing within a single, uneven whole.

What, then, are the stakes of this recuperation of the 1970s artistic landscape as a critical practice and why is *The Flamethrowers* so invested in it? Hal Foster offers one suggestion in "The Crux of Minimalism" when he argues that the dismissal of minimalism in the 1980s was rooted in a desire of "rightists" to "cancel the cultural claims and to reverse the political gains of the 1960s, so traumatic were they to these neoconservatives."[19] For Foster, the contemporary rejection of the 1970s is part of an effacement of the radical culture of the 1960s and 1970s. This is the project that allows Dames to comment — and many to agree —"How sad does one have to be to want to resuscitate the era of stagflation?" *The*

Flamethrowers response is that whatever the numerous flaws of the art world and the political movements it was connected with, art offered a crucial site of critique.

But for all the pieces of art that Kushner points to that are able to maintain that limited autonomy and that are able to critically map the world around them, there is one object of art that is ultimately unable to do so, and that is the novel's protagonist, Reno herself. Reno is also the one character whose psychology and manners turn out to be, to return to Lukács, "those of the writer's own day" (19). I want to suggest that the novel addresses the problem of art and the commodity, and more sharply the problem of art's potential as a site of and space for critique, not through a defense of Reno, but rather by distancing itself from her. And it is within this context of distancing rather than identification that we need to consider the novel's feminist politics. Numerous critics have pointed out that Reno is a woman in a man's world. Or in men's worlds. From the motorcycle racing of her youth to the New York art scene she is trying to break into, Reno constantly struggles to prove herself their equal. And Reno's frustration at the machismo she experiences is more than justified. From the New York art scene to her attempt to break into motorcycle racing to Sandro's Italian Villa, Reno is alternately terrorized by women and ignored or sexualized be men, and in each case she becomes entirely commodified: her success as a motorcycle racer is effaced as she is transformed into a poster girl, a stylized image of a girl and a motorcycle; her work as an artist is effaced and she becomes a China Girl. Read within this context, Miller's claim that the novel's tragedy is that only Reno can hear her voice makes sense. We as the reader want to rescue Reno from the margins of commodification. We want others to hear her voice.

And yet, there is something peculiar about this narrow focus on the commodification of Reno as the locus of the text's feminist politics, particularly given Kushner's attempt to redefine the 1970s as an era of insurgency. The process through which Reno is flattened into a poster girl is, of course, not unique to Reno. It is the same process that has flattened the intellectual and political movements of the 1970s into the iconography of armed masculine virility that endlessly circulate today. As Kushner herself wrote in her essay on the research and writing of *The Flamethrowers*, "I looked at a lot of photographs and other evidentiary traces of downtown New York and art of the mid-1970s" and what "I kept finding were nude women and [men with] guns."[20] But these images of naked women and men with guns are not the truth of the 1970s, but rather one story that is told of the 1970s, and the problem of the novel is not simply that Reno has been transformed into one of these nude women in love with endless men with guns, but that Reno has been so interpolated into this commodified vision of the 1970s that she too can only read the 1970s through these images. It is her vision that ultimately presents us a vision of the 1970s as mere set piece.

If we read the text through Reno and a desire to save Reno, we end up enacting the very problem the novel attempts to address: that is, we read the 1970s as a period of nude women and men with guns and not as a tumultuous, fraught, and turbulent period of revolt that produced the present. The feminist movements of the 1970s is crucial to this story. After all, the 1970s was also a high water mark of the feminist liberation struggles and thought, particularly in Italy and across the cities of the northern United States. This is the period of

Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* (1967), Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James's *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1972), the formation of the National Black Feminist Organization (1973–1976), Autonomia, the international Wages for Housework movement with its manifesto, *Wages Against Housework* (1975), and the *Combahanee River Collective Statement* (1977), to name just a few.

One question worth asking is, given the novel's feminist politics, why aren't these movements within the novel and, more to the point, why aren't people like Valerie Solanas, the Italian feminists, or even more pressingly absent, black feminists and activists, among the cast of characters Reno encounters? Solanas, after all, shot and almost killed Andy Warhol for many of the reasons that reviewers of the novel are so frustrated with Reno's treatment at the hands of a patriarchal art scene.[21] Moreover, while Solanas isn't in *The Flamethrowers*, both the Motherfuckers — the one group of artists who supported Solanas — and Warhol are. Why can the novel see the Motherfuckers and particularly the misogyny of the Motherfuckers — the novel has Burdmoore explain "We hated women. Women had no place in the movement unless they wanted to cook us a meal or clean the floor or strip down. There are people who've tried to renovate our ideas, claim we weren't chauvinists" (158) — but not Solanas, who is making these critiques at that very moment in New York?

I want to suggest that the *seeming* absence of this militant feminism is a deliberate one that serves to highlight Reno's own blind spots. While there is no explicit mention of Marxist feminism in *The Flamethrowers*, no mention of the feminist thinkers such as Luisa Passerini, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Sylvia Federici or movements like Lotta Femminista or the Committees for Wages for Housework that emerged out of militant groups like Lotta Continua and which spread to the United States in the 1970s,[22] there are traces of these movements and intellectual currents. For instance, when Ronnie discusses a *Time* article about random events, such as when a meteor fell on a housewife, Reno muses, "The job of a housework is a little vague […] The woman senses that time is more purely hers if she squanders it and keeps it empty" (149). In both content and style, this passage evokes the *Wages Against Housework* manifesto and its demand that we place reproductive labor at the center of our understanding of work. However, this is just a passing thought, one that is quickly folded into the main point: Ronnie's seriality and Sandro's singularity. It is part of a point to do with love.

And yet the spectre of Italian workerism, and particularly its feminist iterations, keeps resurfacing in the love story of Reno and Sandro, but it does so not through Sandro's singularity — his "one pair of work boots, one nice jacket […] one girlfriend" (149) — but rather through his decidedly less singular pattern of infidelity. When Sandro takes Reno to Italy to visit his family, Reno catches him kissing his cousin, Talia, in the alley behind his factory (where all the workers are on strike). To get revenge, Reno runs off with his chauffeur, Gianni, who it turns out is a spy for the movement and his job has been to gain access to the Valera family (presumably to carry out the kidnapping of Sandro's brother). Gianni takes her to a communal apartment where she meets Gianni's maybe girlfriend or

lover, Bene.

The novel emphasizes that the radicalism of 1970s Italy operates outside of Reno's comprehension. She repeatedly attempts to import her distinctly New York conceptual frameworks, an attempt that fails. When she first enters the apartment, for instance, she surveys everyone and notes "They weren't a type I could place […] They reminded me of the plainclothes cops in Tompkins Square Park, who were always too severe and ominous despite their efforts to pass for hippies" (267). Similarly, she cannot decipher the role she plays in this scene, assuming that as in New York, her role is that of the ingénue, the eventual love interest of whoever she perceives to be the group's leader, in this case Gianni. One day, after she goes out with Gianni, Gianni and Bene get into a massive fight in their bedroom. Storming out of her room, Bene walks into kitchen, calls "Gianni various names" and then turns to Reno and says "Go ahead. Just go with him" (292). Reno, in typical fashion, misinterprets their fight, assuming that Bene is jealous because Gianni wants to sleep with her. Right up until the end, Reno remains bewildered by Bene's rage, explaining that "It wasn't at all like Bene seemed to think […] It was all extremely proper" (376). But it is not Bene, but Reno who gets it wrong. Bene knows that Gianni is about to use Reno to help drive him to the Alps to escape from Italy. What specifically Bene's anger is about — is it a political disagreement about tactics? Is it simply fear of losing her lover? — we never get to find out, but clearly it has nothing to do with jealousy or Reno. Bene is a revolutionary — likely a feminist revolutionary — but we never get to find out more about her because Reno can only think of the personal; she can only see the singular, she can think about love and jealousy, about infidelity and desire. She cannot see the political or the patterns around her.

To read the novel with Reno is to precisely miss the novel's point. Reno is not the hero, but the idiot of the novel. The novel opens with Sandro's father, Valera, reading Gustauve Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education* (33), a novel about a similarly guileless young man who finds himself in the middle of the 1848 French Revolution — but of course, as James Wood and others have pointed out, it is Reno who is Frederic Moreau.[23] Like Frederic, Reno is a passive figure, unengaged and largely ignorant of the existing world-historical social and political crises that surround her. Lacking independent ideas, Reno simply parrots a pastiche of the ideas of the artistic societies she aims to inhabit.

While Reno doesn't get it — she doesn't get what's going on with Sandro (who is cheating on her with lots of women), she doesn't get the political situation in New York that leads to the blackouts and garbage strikes, she doesn't get what's happening in Italy, and she certainly can't assimilate these events or mark the connections — the novel does. The novel ends with Reno waiting at the bottom of a ski hill in the French Alps, waiting for Gianni to arrive. He doesn't. Because of the temporally jumbled nature of the novel, we know that Reno will return to New York where Sandro will have another girlfriend, and where Ronnie will break her heart again. There will be a blackout, riots will erupt, Reno will think back to Gianni and muse "he's either hurt, or possibly dead, or he has deceived me, and I won't ever know which" (353), and three chemical bank employees will die, and Reno will never connect any

of these events except as a sentimental pastiche of aestheticized images that may or may not appear in her next art project.

This is the error that Andrew Strombeck makes when he reads the different parts of the novel, or what he terms the "two responses to crisis" (452) — namely the artistic response of New York artists and the autonomist Marxism of Italy — as "inassimilable" (452). In Strombeck's Latour-inspired reading, the novel's use of the motorcycle as the detached and untimely event linking and delinking the novel's many contexts serves to "rework the project of the historical novel by emphasizing historical discontinuity" through the motorcycle's many fractured meanings (472). But such a claim depends on aligning Reno's failure to link and assimilate these diverse events as part of an interconnected, if uneven, global economic system, with the novel's failure or refusal. It is a claim that is based on a US-centered model of history, one that ignores Italy's cultural and economic entanglements with the United States — as Jaleh Mansoor points out, the Economic Miracle was accompanied by the sudden hegemony of American artists within Italy such that "thanks to the CIA…the Venice Prize was awarded to Robert Rauschenberg" in 1964 (20) — and the central role that US global policy played in shaping the motorcycle's diffuse meanings as symbols of both global production and then circulation. What then does it mean that the main response to *The Flamethrowers* has been, to borrow again from Miller, that it is a tragedy that the only character who can hear Reno's "potent" voice is Reno herself, when Reno's voice misses the very connections and histories the novel traces?

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that this valorization of Reno is itself a symptom of the 2008 global financial crisis. The economist Mirowski argues that this crisis was not just economic, but ontological, "inflict[ing] a breakdown in confidence that we can adequately comprehend the system within which we are now entrammelled. After the crisis, professional explainers from all over the map were throwing up their hands and pleading that the economy was just *too complex* to understand."[24] For Mirowski, "professional explainers" could find no standpoint from which to analyze the system, consistently concluding that the market was too smart for them, and they, in turn, are just part of a global market that wasn't meant to be understood, but that would hopefully self-correct and keep on going.

I argued earlier that Reno's art — her desire to go faster and faster — symbolized the larger transformations in the 1970s global economy, in which the crisis in corporate profitability was resolved, at least partially, through developments in logistics and transportation technology that in turn allowed a rapid speed up of capital's circulation. If Reno's motorcycle racing exemplifies this new form of neoliberal economics, her crash doubles as the crash of that system. That is, in the weird structure of the novel that intertwines temporal and narrative threads, her crash both heralds the beginning and the end of neoliberalism. "What seemed like endless perfect white on white," the novel explains, "was only a very thin crust of salt" (114), a crust that she ultimately "breaks through" (114). What seemed solid and stable, the ground on which Reno could go faster and faster, turns out to be thin and fragile, far less stable than it initially appears. And as with the crash to which it refers, nothing changes. Reno learns nothing from the crash and continues living life trying to skim the surfaces of things.

One of the reasons, then, that so many reviewers love Reno is that her inability to understand what is happening in the 1970s both valorizes the incomprehension many of us felt in the wake of the 2008 housing crash and subsequent financial crisis, *and* offers a fantasy of the repair of that economic system. This suggests that the valorization of Reno is profoundly entangled with post-2008 fantasy about the future of circulation-capital within a US-controlled system of global capitalism. Read as a love story, *The Flamethrowers* narrates the fantasy of production (Sandro) catalyzing circulation (Reno) and, in turn, circulation (Reno) revivifying production (Sandro). Read as a *künstlerroman*, it is a story of circulation (Reno) valorizing her/itself. In both of these fantasies, the system continues as is. Nothing has to change. But this, of course, is not what actually happens in the novel. The love story remains broken, Reno's own aesthetic career remains uncertain, and social and economic crises continue both within and outside of the novel. How then should we read *The Flamethrowers*?

I opened by making the claim for *The Flamethrowers* as a properly historical novel, that it is a novel about history as a mass experience, and a novel that is explicitly about the necessity of understanding the rebellious mass experience of the 1970s if we are to understand the development of neoliberalism. And yet, as the above claim suggests, this isn't exactly true, or at least Kushner's historical novel doesn't function quite as it did for Lukács. For Lukács, the historical novel was directly focalized through its "mediocre" (35) protagonist whose participation in the making of history is allegorical of the democratization of history, and thus of the potential of the reader herself to participate in the making of history. In *The Flamethrowers*, this can't happen because the main characters are not so much allegorical of people or even "the people," as they are of fantasies about capitalist regeneration under US hegemony. And yet for all of this, the mass experience of history is not calcified or commodified, nor does it form the set piece of the novel, but it does move into the background. I thus want to maintain my insistence that we understand *The Flamethrowers* as a properly historical novel, but with the caveat that we do so, only insofar as we read the novel *against* the foreground and the main characters, and *with* those characters and movements that form the backdrop of the novel. In *The Flamethrowers*, it is the fantasies of capital that form the surface of the novel, while its histories and struggles form the background. It is this background that *The Flamethrowers* asks we turn our gaze to.

Notes

[1] Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers* (New York: Scribner, 2013). Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[2] Sasha Lilley, "On Neoliberalism: An Interview with David Harvey," *MR* Zine (June 19, 2006), http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2006/lilley190606.html. For more on the fiscal crisis and the following coup, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jamie Peck, *Construction of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); William Sites, *Remaking New York* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003); Alice O'Connor, "The Privatized City: The Manhattan Institute, the Urban Crisis, and the Conservative Counterrevolution in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 34:2 (2008): 333–353; and Kim Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate*. *Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2007).
[3] For more on the rise of Operaismo (or workerism) and Autonomia in Italy, see Georgy Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Oakland, CA: AK

Press, 1997), Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), and Mario Tronti's "Our Operaismo" *New Left Review* 73 (January/February 2012): 119–139.
[4] Laura Miller, "Rachel Kushner's Ambitious New Novel Scares Male Critics," *Salon* (May 5, 2013), http://www.salon.com/2013/06/05/rachel_kushners_ambitious_new_novel_scares_male_critics/.
[5] Nicholas Miriello, "What is this review interested in?: On Frederick Seidel's Review of Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*," *LA Review of Books* (July 13, 2013), https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/what-is-this-review-interested-in-on-frederick-seidels-review-of-rachel-kushners-the-flamethrowers/.
[6] Geoff Mak, "Art, Revolution, and Echoes of the Present: A Review of Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*," *Vol 1 Brooklyn* (April 25, 2013), http://vol1brooklyn.com/author/geoff-mak/.
[7] Nicholas Dames, "Seventies Throwback Fiction," *N+1* 15 (Winter 2015), https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-21/reviews/seventies-throwback-fiction/.
[8] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 24.
[9] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 19. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[10] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, Trans Ben Fowkes (New York, Penguin, 1992), 161. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
[11] Leigh Claire La Berge, "Wages Against Artwork: The Social Practice of Decommodification," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114:3 (July 2015): 574.
[12] Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
[13] See for instance, Nicholas Brown's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption Under Capital," *Nonsite* (March 13, 2012), https://nonsite.org/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital/, Boris Groys' "On Art Activism," *e-flux* 56 (June 2014), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/, Steven Shaviro's "Accelerationist Aesthetics," *e-flux* 46 (June 2013), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60070/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/, and Stewart Martin's "The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity," *Radical Philosophy* 146 (November/December 2007): 15–25.
[14] Ericka Beckman, "Unfinished Transitions: The Dialectics of Rural Modernization in Latin American Fiction," *Modernism/Modernity* 23:48 (2016): 813–832, 816.
[15] Andrew Strombeck offers a third, and somewhat bewildering model in the form of the motorcycle, which does "its unruly, unintegrated work" (453) and serves not, ultimately, to connect these sites but reveal them in their discontinuous, undefined paths and histories (454). I will take up this reading in the essay's conclusion. Andrew Strombeck, "The Post-Fordist Motorcycle: Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* and the 1970s Crisis in Fordist Capitalism," *Contemporary Literature*, 56:3, (2015): 450–475.
[16] What is missing from this map, but which the novel makes clear underpins all these spaces, is the rubber plantation in Brazil where Sandro's father travels in 1942 to source rubber after the Japanese overran the previous global rubber frontier, Malaysia, cutting Italy off from its rubber supply (130). Geographer Jason Moore argues that revolutions in productivity, like that which occurred in the postwar period, fuse together the plunder and "enclosure of new geographical frontiers (including subterranean resources) and new scientific-technological revolutions in labor productivity" (228). While absent from Reno's vision, the rubber frontier of Brazil, and specifically the violent control and extraction of cheap labor from the Brazilian workers that produced the rubber necessary to fuel this period of relative prosperity and freedom in the global north, is also central to the novel. Its enclosure is the precursor to the rise of Valera tires and thus, the absent cause of the entire network that shapes the novel's form. See Jason W. Moore, "Cheap Food & Bad Money: Food, Frontiers, and Financialization in the Rise and Demise of Neoliberalism," *Review: A Journal of the Ferdinand Braudel Center*, 33:2–3 (2010): 225–261.
[17] Deb Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 23.
[18] See Elisabeth Tandy Shermer, "Sunbelt Boosterism: Industrial Recruitment, Economic Development, and Growth Politics in the Developing Sunbelt," in *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region*, eds. Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 31–58, Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), Blaine Brownwell, "Introduction," in *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*, ed. Raymond A. Mohl. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990).
[19] Hal Foster, "Crux of Minimalism," *The Return of the Real*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 35.

[20] Rachel Kushner, “Curated by Rachel Kushner,” *The Paris Review* 203 (Winter 2012), https://www.theparisreview.org/art-photography/6197/the-flamethrowers-rachel-kushner.

[21] See Dana Heller, “Shooting Solanas: Radical Feminist History and the Technology of Failure,” *Feminist Studies* 27:1 (Spring 2001): 167–189.

[22] For more on the Italian Feminist movements of the 1970s, see Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy 1968* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “The Door to the Garden: Feminism and Operaismo,” *Libcom*, https://libcom.org/article/door-garden-feminism-and-operaismo-mariarosa-dalla-costa, 2002. For more on Wages Against Housework, see Sylvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), and Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol, UK: Falling Wall Press, 1975).

[23] James Wood, “Youth in Revolt: Rachel Kushner’s *Flamethrowers*,” *New Yorker* (April 8, 2013), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/08/youth-in-revolt.

[24] Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (New York: Verso, 2014), 11.