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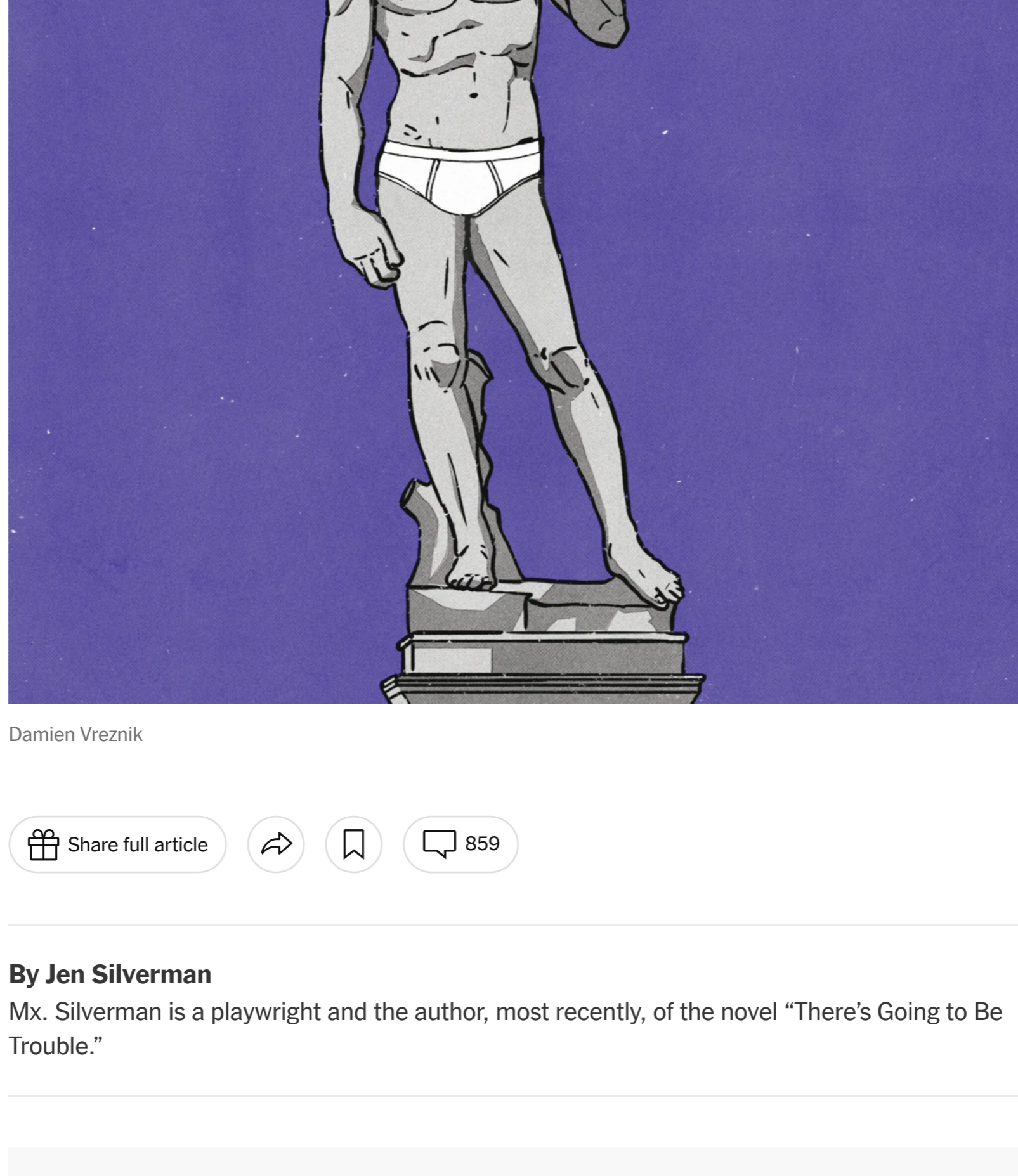
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OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Art Isn't Supposed to Make You Comfortable

April 28, 2024



Damien Vreznik

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When I was in college, I came across “The Sea and Poison,” a 1950s novel by Shusaku Endo. It tells the story of a doctor in postwar Japan who, as an intern years earlier, participated in a vivisection experiment on an American prisoner. Endo’s lens on the story is not the easiest one, ethically speaking; he doesn’t dwell on the suffering of the victim. Instead, he chooses to explore a more unsettling element: the humanity of the perpetrators.

When I say “humanity” I mean their confusion, self-justifications and willingness to lie to themselves. Atrocity doesn’t just come out of evil, Endo was saying, it emerges from self-interest, timidity, apathy and the desire for status. His novel showed me how, in the right crucible of social pressures, I, too, might delude myself into making a choice from which an atrocity results. Perhaps this is why the book has haunted me for nearly two decades, such that I’ve read it multiple times.

I was reminded of that novel at 2 o’clock in the morning recently as I scrolled through a social media account dedicated to collecting angry reader reviews. My attention was caught by someone named Nathan, whose take on “Paradise Lost” was: “Milton was a fascist turd.” But it was another reader, Ryan, who reeled me in with his response to John Updike’s “Rabbit, Run”: “This book made me oppose free speech.” From there, I hit the bank of “Lolita” reviews: Readers were appalled, frustrated, infuriated. What a disgusting man! How could Vladimir Nabokov have been permitted to write this book? Who let authors write such immoral, perverse characters anyway?

I was cackling as I scrolled but soon a realization struck me. Here on my screen was the distillation of a peculiar American illness: namely, that we have a profound and dangerous inclination to confuse art with moral instruction, and vice versa.

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As someone who was born in the States but partially raised in a series of other countries, I’ve always found the sheer uncompromising force of American morality to be mesmerizing and terrifying. Despite our plurality of influences and beliefs, our national character seems inescapably informed by an Old Testament relationship to the notions of good and evil. This powerful construct infuses everything from our advertising campaigns to our political ones — and has now filtered into, and shifted, the function of our artistic works.

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Maybe it’s because our political discourse swings between deranged and abhorrent on a daily basis and we would like to combat our feelings of powerlessness by insisting on moral simplicity in the stories we tell and receive. Or maybe it’s because many of the transgressions that flew under the radar in previous generations — acts of misogyny, racism and homophobia; abuses of power both macro and micro — are now being called out directly. We’re so intoxicated by openly naming these ills that we have begun operating under the misconception that to acknowledge each other’s complexity, in our communities as well as in our art, is to condone each other’s cruelties.

When I work with younger writers, I am frequently amazed by how quickly peer feedback sessions turn into a process of identifying which characters did or said insensitive things. Sometimes the writers rush to defend the character, but often they apologize shamefacedly for their own blind spot, and the discussion swerves into how to fix the morals of the piece. The suggestion that the values of a character can be neither the values of the writer, nor the entire point of the piece, seems more and more surprising — and apt to trigger discomfort.

While I typically share the progressive political views of my students, I’m troubled by their concern for righteousness over complexity. They do not want to be seen representing any values they do not personally hold. The result is that, in a moment in which our world has never felt so fast-changing and bewildering, our stories are getting simpler, less nuanced and less able to engage with the realities through which we’re living.

I can’t blame younger writers for believing that it is their job to convey a strenuously correct public morality. This same expectation filters into all the modes in which I work: novels, theater, TV and film. The demands of Internet Nathan and Internet Ryan — and the anxieties of my mentees — are not so different from those of the industry gatekeepers who work in the no-man’s land between art and money and whose job it is to strip stories of anything that could be ethically murky.

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I have worked in TV writers’ rooms where “likability notes” came from on high as soon as a complex character was on the page — particularly when the character was female. Concern about her likability was most often a concern about her morals: Could she be perceived as promiscuous? Selfish? Aggressive? Was she a bad girlfriend or a bad wife? How quickly could she be rehabilitated into a model citizen for the viewers?

TV is not alone in this. A director I’m working with recently pitched our screenplay to a studio. When the executives passed, they told our team it was because the characters were too morally ambiguous and they’d been tasked with seeking material wherein the lesson was clear, so as not to unsettle their customer base. What they did not say, but did not need to, is that in the absence of adequate federal arts funding, American art is tied to the marketplace. Money is tight, and many corporations do not want to pay for stories that viewers might object to if they can buy something that plays blandly in the background of our lives.

But what art offers us is crucial precisely because it is, not a bland backdrop or a platform for simple directives. Our books, plays, films and TV shows can do the most for us when they don’t serve as moral instruction manuals, but rather allow us to glimpse our own hidden capacities, the slippery social contracts inside which we function, and the contradictions we all contain.

We need more narratives that tell us the truth about how complex our world is. We need stories that help us name and accept paradoxes, not ones that erase or ignore them. After all, our experience of living in communities with one another is often much more fluid and changeable than it is rigidly black and white. We have the audiences that we cultivate, and the more we cultivate audiences who believe that the job of art is to instruct instead of investigate, to judge instead of question, to seek easy clarity instead of holding multiple uncertainties, the more we will find ourselves inside a culture defined by rigidity, knee-jerk judgments and incuriosity.

In our hair-trigger world of condemnation, division and isolation, art — not moralizing — has never been more crucial.

Jen Silverman is a playwright and the author of the novels “We Play Ourselves” and “There’s Going to Be Trouble.”

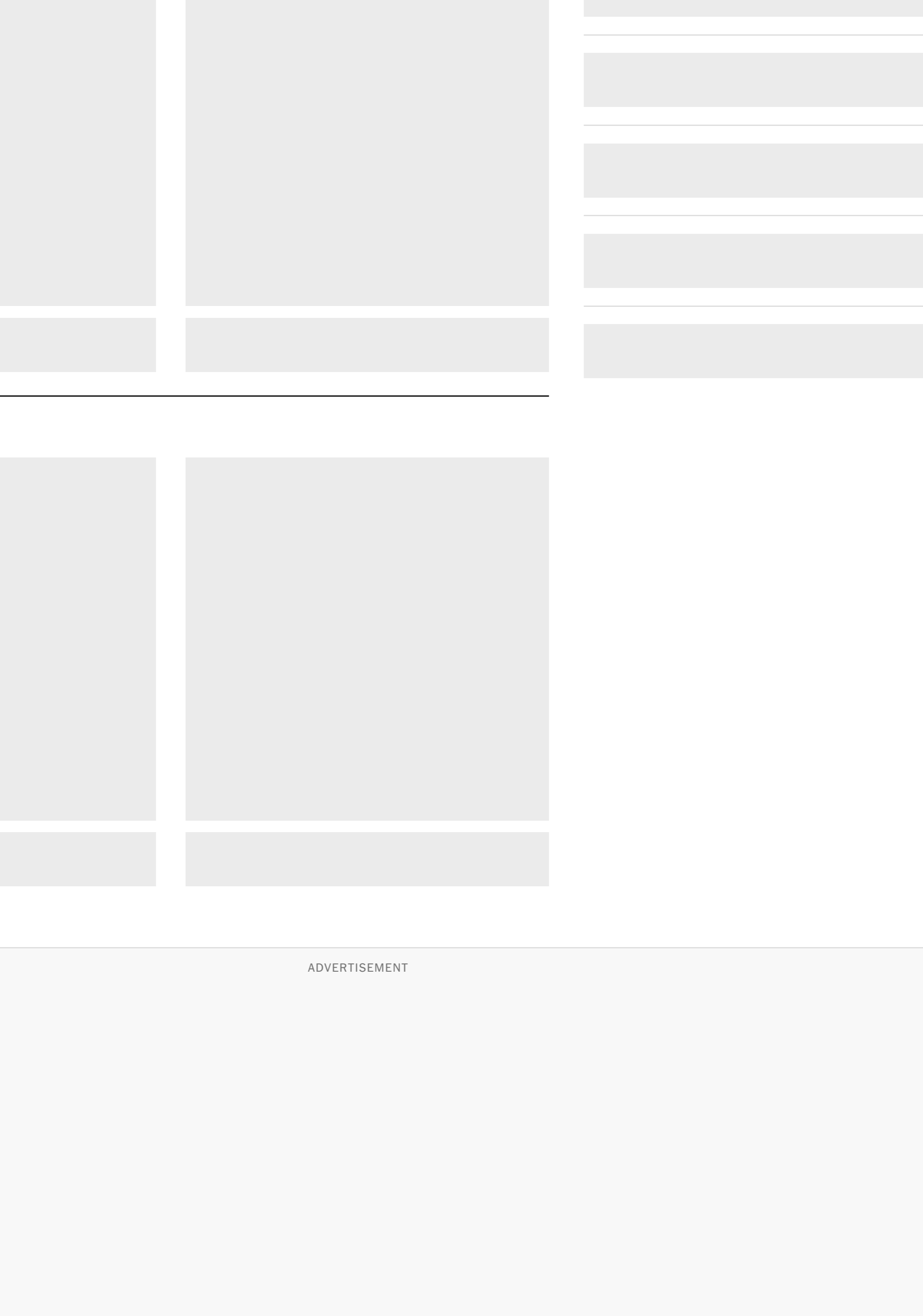
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A version of this article appears in print on May 3, 2024, Section A, Page 24 of the New York edition with the headline: Art Isn’t Supposed to Make You Comfortable. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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