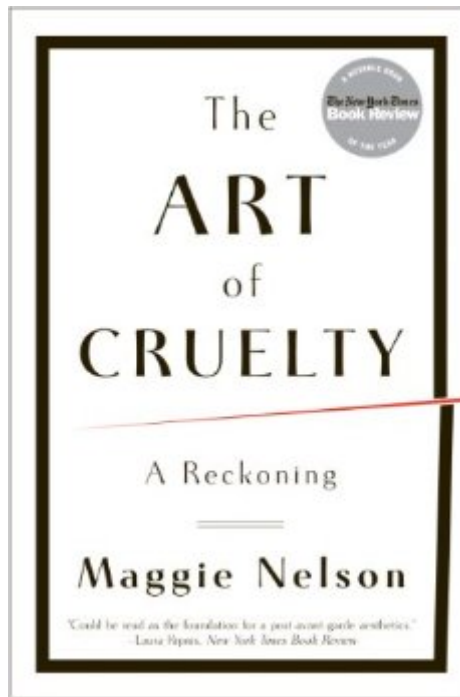


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The Art Of Cruelty: A Reckoning



Synopsis

•This is criticism at its best.â •Carolyn Kellogg, Los Angeles Times

Writing in the tradition of Susan Sontag and Elaine Scarry, Maggie Nelson has emerged as one of our foremost cultural critics with this landmark work about representations of cruelty and violence in art. From Sylvia Plath's poetry to Francis Bacon's paintings, from the Saw franchise to Yoko Ono's performance art, Nelson's nuanced exploration across the artistic landscape ultimately offers a model of how one might balance strong ethical convictions with an equally strong appreciation for work that tests the limits of taste, taboo, and permissibility.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Maggie Nelson brings a refreshingly direct poet's sensibility to this book of art/social criticism. The subject of "The Art of Cruelty" is 'shock art', but Nelson has expanded the focus to include literary expression as well. Thus, her starting point of avant dramatist Antoin Artaud is appropriate, because Artaud was obsessed with the notion of a "theater of cruelty", and the parallel with contemporary art--- which has become very theatrical in its nature--- is very easily drawn. The larger thesis is an examination of the merits and drawbacks of performance art as practiced by the " Viennese Actionist" group and their inheritors, such as Vito Acconci. I found this book valuable because as a reader of modern literature, I could relate to many figures Nelson discusses whom I have familiarity with: Sylvia Plath, Mary Gaitskill, Elfriede Jelinek---as well as artists I had researched like Diane Arbus and Ana Mendieta. Nelson also introduced me to many writers and artists that were new to me, like Ivy Compton-Burnett and William Pope.L. Because Nelson is a feminist, and because she is concerned with the degree to which "the avant-garde fetish of terrorizing the audience" has

penetrated our culture at large, it is easy to accuse her of being politically correct. The truth is that she makes it a point to criticize the modern college faculty practice of reprimanding students for transgressing borders of propriety, because she knows that runs very contrary to the encouragement of artistic expression. Still, she is concerned with the 'adolescent' practice of artists who bludgeon their audiences with shock for its own sake, and her solution is simple.

In the first chapter, "Styles of Imprisonment", the author sets her premise: to focus on works of art whose employment of cruelty seems to her "worthwhile"; she is not interested in "stupid" (stupidity vs. intelligence) cruelty. She attempts a "shaking" -- challenging the habits of thought of aging vanguardism. As for the interpretation of cruelty, the closest she arrives at, congruent with what Buddhists see it, is "the far enemy of compassion". The audacity of her proposition is impossible to overstate. However, "worthwhile" and "intelligent" cruelty, it seems to me, are her stipulative definitions and somewhat arbitrary; ultimately the discipline of keeping a coherent, focused linear progression is, unfortunately, absent. Having said that, I do find her insights on Plath and Arbus both interesting and illuminating (there are extensive pages of reflection on the poet). This book indeed has great potential. While I am not debating her reckoning, I have trouble with the structure and the indistinguishable principles she takes up. Nelson spends a considerable time in preparatory research, which is evident from the hundreds of quotes and names of artists, philosophers and critics that she includes in the book. But the problem with so much material packed into a 297 page book (Kindle edition) is that her own voice too often becomes merely the link between the notes and data she has collected; not enough in-depth exploration is offered. There is also the high possibility of misrepresentation from quotes taken out of context. In my opinion, it's a lot more fun, when an author is as intelligent as Nelson, to deliberately choose more aggressive demonstration AND an assertively articulate, restrained premise.

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