



## **The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning**

*Maggie Nelson*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online ➔](#)

# **The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning**

*Maggie Nelson*

## **The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning** Maggie Nelson

Today both reality and entertainment crowd our fields of vision with brutal imagery. The pervasiveness of images of torture, horror, and war has all but demolished the twentieth-century hope that such imagery might shock us into a less alienated state, or aid in the creation of a just social order. What to do now? When to look, when to turn away?

Genre-busting author Maggie Nelson brilliantly navigates this contemporary predicament, with an eye to the question of whether or not focusing on representations of cruelty makes us cruel. In a journey through high and low culture (Kafka to reality TV), the visual to the verbal (Paul McCarthy to Brian Evenson), and the apolitical to the political (Francis Bacon to Kara Walker), Nelson 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.

## **The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning Details**

Date : Published July 11th 2011 by W. W. Norton Company

ISBN : 9780393072150

Author : Maggie Nelson

Format : Hardcover 304 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Art, Criticism, Philosophy

 [Download The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning Maggie Nelson**

---

## From Reader Review The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning for online ebook

### Kusaimamekirai says

I went into this book with certain expectations and finished it in a completely different place.

When Nelson titled her book "The Art of Cruelty" she emphasized the "art" part. The majority of the book discusses performance art and the nature of its interaction with us as spectators.

One example I found particularly thought provoking was her examination of Yoko Ono's performance of "Cut Piece", where Ono sits silently on the stage with a pair of scissors in front of her. The audience is free to come to the stage and use the scissors to cut pieces of her clothing if they choose. Watching this video on YouTube, it's clear that there is an initial reluctance to be cruel to her. Many cut tentatively or small pieces. Until the end where one man gleefully cuts off huge swaths of clothing, including her bra. Nelson asks, is this cruelty? Ono willingly participates, knowing this is likely to happen, and yet as a spectator we are still taken aback by the meanness of it.

Reading this book, I thought quite a bit about the dynamics of cruelty not only about the art world (which I knew little about but learned a great deal) but cruelty in our everyday lives and public discourse as well. This book can be dense and difficult to read at times but it's well worth the effort.

---

### Thomas says

#### 3.5 stars

A thorough, disturbing, and intelligent book about cruelty and how we interact with it today. Maggie Nelson addresses an ambitious set of questions: with so many images of war, torture, and horror available to us, how do we best process such media to motivate us to act? Why do we draw such pleasure from gory video games and humiliating reality television shows? How do we separate cruelty and violence - and can cruelty coexist with love? Nelson alludes to a plethora of performance artists, philosophers, writers, sculptors, and filmmakers in *The Art of Cruelty*, ranging from Antonin Artaud to Susan Sontag to Yoko Ono and many more. Instead of delivering any kind of final verdict about cruelty, Nelson cleaves out space for the many complexities that come with it, urging us to examine cruelty with a critical and nuanced lens.

Nelson has such a fierce brain. Her intellect pulsed through these pages. Whether she wrote about how "the mainstream thrust of anti-intellectualism... characterizes thinking itself as an elitist activity," the awful and misogynistic ways society glorifies female victimhood, or the difference between witnessing cruelty on the page vs. on the screen, her analysis delved deep enough to pull insight even from the most nauseating of subjects. She keeps her heart open, too, writing both about the emotions and the thoughts inspired by art portraying cruelty. If you enjoy artistic, cultural, or literary criticism, this book may appeal to you, as Nelson holds nothing back in her pursuit for what cruelty has - and does not have - to offer us.

I lower my rating of *The Art of Cruelty* because I got lost in her writing sometimes. This in part falls on my shoulders because I did not recognize many of her allusions. However, Nelson throws out so many references on top of one another that her own voice gets submerged in the mix on occasion. I wanted more coherent and collected synthesis as opposed to an onslaught of artists and their works. Though Nelson aims to raise questions instead of providing answers, I still wish she had come down with a more thorough

argument in some chapters of this book.

Overall, a fascinating and difficult book that will make you more aware of and thoughtful toward the cruelty and violence so common in our culture. You may not walk away from this book feeling any better, but you will have gotten smarter, more woke, and more uncomfortable. And that may just be what we need more of in this world.

---

## Antigone says

I've become more and more caught by social cruelty in recent years - stopped short, eyes blinking, "You're kidding me, right?" caught by it - and I think this is because I'm growing older. I just have this tendency to imagine, in an incredibly solipsistic way, that everyone's maturing with me. That we're all in this together. That as the years pass we're all having (not the same but) similar experiences, learning similar lessons, absorbing similar outlooks on the realities of this life-thing, and so it always shocks me when I come across someone who's doing some genuinely thoughtless sort of damage to another human being. Really base, stupid sort of stuff that's not going to result in more than the briefest instant of one-upsmanship. It's often of the wink-wink, nudge-nudge variety that leaves its object slumped in shame and me, unwittingly drafted as a witness, cringing beneath the onslaught of an entirely disproportionate amount of empathy and rage. (Disproportionate to the act, completely proportionate to the senselessness.) I'm tired of this, worn out by it, feel pretty powerless against it, and so a thought-filled book titled *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* is going to have a certain appeal.

Maggie Nelson, a poet and teacher, takes on the subject of cruelty (and violence and brutality) as they appear in art, film, photography, cyberspace, fiction, theater, culture and pornography. For those unfamiliar with criticism, this is not a lecture or a diatribe. It's the separation and examination of a series of stock ideas and rationales. It's the creation of an intellectual space within which one can better think about these elements of existence. What purpose do they serve? What do they mean? What can I learn here, and how can that help me to better understand the reactions they engender? Nelson opens her mind and dumps the contents out with no further intent than to ponder, process and connect.

Topics touched upon include artistic violence as catharsis, as confrontation, as distraction; censorship vs. engaged withdrawal; the difference between truth and fact, spirituality and knowledge; denial, repression, power and control. Time is spent with Aristotle and Freud, Plath, Sontag, Didion, Warhol, Artaud, Francis Bacon, the Marquis de Sade, Wittgenstein, Kafka and many more. Much avails itself to quotage. Here's a section I liked on honesty:

*For not all frankness is created equal. "Brutal honesty" is honesty that either aims to hurt someone or doesn't care if it does. ("No one wants to be friends with you." "You smell bad." "You've always been less attractive than your sister." "I never loved you.") While the words often arrive sutured together, I think it worthwhile to breathe some space between them, so that one might see "brutal honesty" not as a more forceful version of honesty itself, but as one possible use of honesty. One that doesn't necessarily lay truth bare by dint of force, but that actually overlays something on top of it - something that can get in its way. That something is cruelty.*

Nelson succeeds on many levels with this work. There were certain references that overshot my experience - especially concerning performance art - but they passed quickly as the focus realigned. (And I should include a warning here. The material on pornography is graphic, to my eye understandably so, yet those with

heightened sensibilities might take heed.) Be assured, though, the majority of the provocation is intellectual. If you're ready to expand your mind; agree, disagree, accept, reject and reassess the subject of cruelty - this is the place to go.

---

## Ellie says

### REVIEW

Maggie Nelson has become one of my favorite writers: intelligent, with beautiful prose written with precision, personal yet always aware and tending to the larger picture. To review a work such as *The Art of Cruelty* is a daunting effort. The book is extremely complex and dense. It examines what art is as much as the role of cruelty in art (and, sometimes, in life).

The catalogue of painters, sculptors, performance artists, filmmakers, philosophers, and writers is intimidating and impossible to justice to. Of course, Antonin Artaud, with his *Theater of Cruelty*, and the Marquis de Sade are here but also Susan Sontag, Sylvia Plath, and Henry James. Performance artists such as Nao Bustamante, Karen Finley, Yoko Ono, Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy, and Marina Abramović, are all examined. The list of quotes I jotted down is almost as long as any review I could write would be).

That being said, I think what this book gave to me was the interest in exploring what makes us uncomfortable, what is unsettling (although not necessarily violent). Nelson writes, "...an art that affects you in the moment, but which you then find hard to remember, is straining to bring you to another level." P.28 "...it has opened you to the possibility of growing into what you are not yet..." p.28 sums up how I feel about this book and the sense that only through multiple readings would I get a better sense of what it is about.

Nelson's focus (as the title implies) is on the use of cruelty in art (in its broad sense of the visual arts, literature, performance art, theater) but she also makes connection to life in the "real" world, including Puritanism and Abu Grahaib and the use of torture. She questions whether cruelty in life or art is cathartic, if in fact such a thing as "catharsis" exists. She questions the value of cruelty as an end in itself, as an expression of some ultimate truth about either humanity or art.

Representations of cruelty may move us but, as Susan Sontag pointed out, not necessarily to action. "Literature is not self-help" (p.127). Violence can become a kind of porn that leads to nothing beyond itself (or worse). "Cruelty bears an intimate relationship to stupidity as well as to intelligence, and I am not interested in stupid cruelty...." (P. 124)

There is no simple understanding of what cruelty means or accomplishes. "By virtue of its being multiply sourced, art cannot help but offer up multiple truths." (p.117) Always, Nelson seems to come down on the side of complexity. I was not always clear about her own stance vis-à-vis cruelty, other than she seems to dislike it as an expression of some ultimate truth or artistic summation of human experience. Yet she seems obsessed with the work of Francis Bacon, whose paintings are saturated in blood and violence (she devotes a great deal of space to the reduction of the body, in various artists including Bacon, to "meat"-but she does spend a great deal of space on it).

Nelson examines the way artists have used cruelty, explicitly or implicitly. Yoko Ono with her performance

work "Cut Piece" or Marina Abramović with her "Rhythm O" both leave themselves vulnerable with instruments of violence (a scissors in Ono's case, a gun in Abramović's) at the disposal of a participatory audience. With these pieces, and others, Nelson also examines the 1) use of the female body and its history of victimization and 2) the complex issue of consent in violence.

I seem to have side-stepped a lot of Nelson's examinations of more brutal work. I suppose one of the strengths of this book is that it has many points of entry for the reader and many paths to wander along. She certainly spends a great deal of space discussing art works of great gore, although I find her exploration of the violence in Plath's poetry of more interest to me personally. However, she does make a case for withstanding the discomfort in cruelty to see where it takes you. On the other hand, she writes of the exhilarating feeling of walking out on something or closing the book on something or just turning away for something that feels (as one complainant puts it) "too poisonous to ingest" without any salutary benefit.

I think Nelson left me with what Henry James called "the right degree of bewilderment" (p.198), not sure where Nelson stands on the overall topic of cruelty. She writes about a particular work "I like it...because it bothers me, and I'm not sure why....it places us in the 'lived moment of contraries where we all have to deal.' I'm not sure where this is, but I'm glad to be here." (pp.183-183) Which is how *The Art of Cruelty* left me: not exactly sure where I was, bothered by a lot of what I had read, but definitely glad to be there.

---

### **Pamela says**

I admire Maggie Nelson for the way she approaches her subject: art (painting, writing, cinema, dance, performance art) that either employs cruelty (to the art-maker or to the audience) or depicts it. She is curious, unafraid of being or seeming "too interested," yet at the same time ready to tell us when her ethics are offended or her gorge rises. It's true: much art either courts or skirts or revels in cruelty. Does that make it offensive or bad? Clearly Nelson doesn't think so, but she also doesn't think cruelty in art should get a free pass. She wants to know why certain acts or depictions affect us (or at least her) the way they do, why it might be worth viewing "cruel art," why certain works in this genre are powerful while others fail or even seem ridiculous. Among the artists she explores in some detail are Francis Bacon, Franz Kafka, Sylvia Plath, Brian Evenson, Lars von Trier, Kara Walker, Paul McCarthy (not McCartney--I kept misreading it!), Elizabeth Streb, Chris Burden, and Yoko Ono.

If I fault the book for anything, it's that it's so compacted--the book bears the mark of being written by a very careful thinker and writer, one who has gone over and over her prose so many times that all the fat is gone. Which oddly resulted (if I'm correct) in my not always being able to follow Nelson's train of thought. I needed a little more hand-holding, perhaps, since not all of the artists were familiar to me and Nelson's thinking is very nuanced. I probably will need to read the book again to take in all that it has to give.

---

### **Adam Dalva says**

Sharp, well-thought-out, relevant survey of cruelty in 20th century art, centering loosely on Artaud and engaging with questions of artistic obligations w/r/t torture, pain, and brutality. Nelson has a bad habit of over-praising her source material (everything is either "justly famous" or "iconic" or "important" and often they are NONE of these things) that became more grating as I read on, and also has a frustrating fixation on a

couple of figures (Francis Bacon, Brian Evenson) who never quite hold the water that she's hoping for. But other sections, like the one on Chris Burden, are illuminating and the more personal the book gets, the better it is. Her experiences with her own students were particularly strong.

---

### **Dan says**

i'm a little biased in this rating, because *the art of cruelty* is pretty much custom-made for me. nelson's obsessions - violence, empathy, representation, gender, horror, community, politics - are virtually identical to my own. she likes a lot of the same art as me too (ana mendieta, william pope l., paul mc carthy) - and even hates some of the same stuff (*funny games*, for example). in addition, she writes in a personal, theoretical-but-accessible style not unlike rebecca solnit or susan sontag that i also find irresistible. there was pretty much no way i was giving this less than 5 stars, haha...

beyond all that, this is a deeply personal look at images/representations of violence. accordingly, there are big name people that never show up in the analysis, as well as some idiosyncratic digressions that reflect the author's interests. so if you're looking for a rigidly arranged analysis of contemporary culture, you might find yourself disappointed by the digressions into eastern spirituality or the fact that yoko ono shows up more often than francisco goya as the subject of analysis. i found all this refreshing. nelson realizes that "cruelty" is too immense a subject to cover with any kind of grand authority, so she gets right to the work she really has something to say about. she jettisons a lot of crapola along the way too - i can't tell you how happy it makes me that this book does NOT include a few token pages about the chapman brothers.

---

### **Viv JM says**

In this collection of essays, Maggie Nelson looks at the role of cruelty and violence in art and poses ethical questions surrounding that topic. Her examples take in fine art, poetry, performance art, dance, film, photography and television and her criticism has a feminist and Buddhist slant. These essays certainly gave food for thought but I didn't enjoy this book as much as the other of hers I have read and loved (*The Argonauts*). At times, I found this one slightly rambling and repetitive.

---

### **Iris says**

i really enjoyed this -- tho 1 part im confused abt / take issue with. she talks about "daddy" where plath compares the doings of her father to those of the nazi regime, and addresses the indignation of jewish critics re: this poem, and while she makes an interesting point that plath wasn't necessarily drawing equivalencies (tho maggie nelson doesn't offer any alternatives), her ultimate point asks, "And why ring the 'appropriateness' alarm, when the injunction to behave appropriately--as both Plath and Walker know well--is but a death knell for art-making, especially for women?" but there is, or at least should be, a distinction between pushing the boundaries of 'art-making' and disregarding deeply personal / painful histories.

she also compares this to one of black artist kara walker's pieces in which she states "all black people in

america want to be slaves a little bit", in an attempt to equate + categorize both under the same label of 'boundary-pushing'. maybe these 2 works do question what's 'appropriate' in art - but nelson forgets that the two artists are approaching this from completely different realities. who is nelson, as a white woman, to police walker's usage of her own black history in her own art? and who is nelson, as a non-jewish person, to devalue jewish responses to abuses of their own history by other people (by plath)?

and then 20 pages later nelson is saying about jenny holzer's "lustmord", it "could easily be accused of 'vicarious possession,' artist Adrian Piper's term for the 'inappropriate level of imaginative involvement' that characterizes the attempt to speak for others, especially others who have been deprived of the right to speak for themselves." she also mentions another aspect that's "politically rotten" about holzer's piece -- "the fear-- or the conviction--that certain consciousnesses or hearts or events should *not* be rendered poetically" which then im going to ask, isnt that a death-knell for art-making, and werent u just trying to speak over / for jewish ppl and black ppl respectively. this probabbly doesnt make sense its 1am im tired. i want 2 add onto this later bc this bothers me a lot. i dont think nelson can ever understand Other Peoples' erasure / flippant uses of a very violent part of ur ethnic / racial / religious past. im still giving this 5 stars tho cos the rest of this i loved enough 2 make up for it

---

### **Jacob Wren says**

Maggie Nelson writes:

Even if and when Santiago Sierra's diagnoses are spot-on, the pity he has expressed toward his subjects gives me pause, and evaporates whatever interest in the work I might have otherwise been able to muster. For this pity doesn't just stand behind the scenes; it also structures the forms of the artwork at hand. As he told the BBC about 10 people paid to masturbate, "Nobody said no and for me that was very tough. When I made this piece I would go to bed crying." It's one thing to set up situations that aim to alert the world – even if just the art world – to the bad news of radical exploitation, even if one feels the lamentable need to exploit others to make one's point. It's quite another to decide in advance on the terms of human dignity (i.e., that a willingness to film oneself jerking off for money signifies that you have none), set up situations which prove (to you) that someone is utterly debased, then weep over the fulfillment of your puritanical prognostication.

---

### **Francesca says**

I think it would be interesting to read this as a horror fan and see where our thought processes may differ or match up.

---

### **Patrick Bella Gone says**

Nelson's book provides a context not just for the cruelty of Hollywood and television (a subject already overwrought and boring), but takes the reader into the realm of art intended to 'better' the bourgeois through its graphic nature. She's skeptical of the notion of being scared or shocked into knowledge. Because I see a rape on film or in art, does that make me more empathetic to cases of the crime in general? Does seeing

atrocities or torture 'improve' me? Nelson argues that these notions promote a self-righteousness. We don't need Von Trier or Haneke or Bacon gore to know what cruelty is. This is not to say Nelson argues for censorship, much the contrary, rather that cruelty can be compelling when coupled with other intentions that extend beyond didactic cruelty.

---

### **Arielle Walker says**

"While the two words often arrive sutured together, I think it worthwhile to breathe some space between them, so that one might see "brutal honesty" not as a more forceful version of honesty itself, but as one possible use of honesty. One that doesn't necessarily lay truth barer by dint of force, but that actually overlays something on top of it—something that can get in its way. That something is cruelty."

Mind is in a tangle but this was brilliant. Review to come. Maybe.

"So long as we exalt artists as beautiful liars or as the world's most profound truth-tellers, we remain locked in a moralistic paradigm that doesn't even begin to engage art's most exciting provinces."

"Writing hasn't changed a thing; when the writer puts down the pen, no matter how lucid or brutally honest his insights may have been, it is back to business as usual, which means, in this case, shooting up. This is depressing, but its honesty heartens me. It disallows the delusion that the act of writing necessarily connects us to humanity, that it will help us quit noxious substances, that it will restore us to love lost, or at least serve as a consolation. Literature is not, after all, self-help."

---

### **Rob Atkinson says**

I was excited to read this book after reading the laudatory review on the cover of the New York Times Book Review, but honestly I found "The Art Of Cruelty" a bit of a disappointment. In part this is due to the fact that I was most interested in reading a critique of cruelty as it is manifested in contemporary visual and performance art, and it turns out the focus of this work is much broader. This is a very personal, subjective work of criticism, most heavily informed by the author's obvious affinity for Buddhist thought and old-school feminism. It also takes a rather scattershot approach to the subject, leaping from literature to drama to film to art but frustratingly focusing on only a very limited number of artists while ignoring some of the most relevant subjects for such an inquiry. Francis Bacon is central to her analysis of the visual arts, her touchstone throughout; the work of Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Diane Arbus, Yoko Ono, Marina Abramovic and Karen Finley are also briefly addressed. But there isn't a single mention of Bruce Nauman, whose aggressive and often claustrophobic phenomenological work arguably is the most relevant to her subject. The list of artists and writers she addresses are mostly women, and one senses that rather than thoroughly researching her subject and writing on the most appropriate exemplars of her theme, she instead largely sticks to the comfort zone of those women artists with which she is already most familiar. To a large extent she also facilely equates 'cruelty' with 'violence' (particularly violence towards women), skewing the balance of her whole analysis and ignoring some of the subtlest and best work out there. Beyond visual and performance art, of course Artaud is here, as is Sylvia Plath; refreshingly (and aptly) so is Ivy Compton-Burnett. A few pithy points are made. But overall there is little cohesion and no real development of any central argument. In closing, Nelson finally presents something of a thesis, almost as an afterthought; it's something along the obvious lines of "the employment of cruelty in art is justified if it is socially

redeeming/enlightening and does not just add to humankind's natural state of suffering". For this reader at least, it's just not that simple.

---

### **Sarahc Caflisch says**

I am profoundly more knowledgeable and disturbed since reading this book. Highly recommended.

---