

Why Is Contemporary Art Addicted to Violence?

By LAURA KIPNIS

Well-meaning laments about violence in the media usually leave me wanting to bash someone upside the head with a tire iron. To begin with, the reformist spirit is invariably aimed down the rungs of cultural idioms, at cartoons, slasher films, pornography, rap music and video games, while the carnage and bloodletting in Shakespeare, Goya and the Bible get a pass. Low-culture violence is literal, while high-culture violence is symbolic or allegorical and subject to critical interpretation. Low-culture violence coarsens us, high-culture violence edifies us. And the lower the cultural form, or the ticket price, or — let's just say it — the presumed education level of the typical viewer, the more depictions of violence are suspected of inducing mindless emulation in their audiences, who will soon re-enact the mayhem like morally challenged monkeys, unlike the viewers of, say, "Titus Andronicus," about whose moral intelligence society is confident.

Maggie Nelson has her laments about violent representations, but in "The Art of Cruelty" she refreshingly aims them largely up the cultural ladder, at the fine arts, literature, theater — even poetry. What interests her is the "full-fledged assault on the barriers between art and life that much 20th-century art worked so hard to perform," often by enlisting violence and cruelty, simulated or actual, including cruelties inflicted physically on the person of the artist, or affectively on the psyches of the audience.

Of course, the aesthetic program of cultural modernism has long been summed up by the maxim *épater la bourgeoisie*. Rather than taking this directive for granted, Nelson delves into the varieties of cruelty perpetrated on us bourgeois for our supposed betterment, what the art critic Grant Kester has called the "orthopedic aesthetic." The art of cruelty aestheticizes violence, in not necessarily scrupulous ways. It can be reckless and scattershot, provoked by the desire to make others feel as bad as the sufferers of injustice and trauma whose experiences are vicariously borrowed by artists shopping for shocks. It bludgeons audiences into getting the point. It's responsible for a century of art-world Nurse Ratcheds, wielding jolts of aesthetic electroshock therapy and taking unseemly pleasure at rubbing people's noses in pain.

This is an important and frequently surprising book. By reframing the history of the avant-garde in terms of cruelty, and contesting the smugness and didacticism of artist-clinicians like the notorious Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch and other heirs of Sade and Artaud, Nelson is taking on modernism's (and postmodernism's) most cherished tenets. After all, aesthetic shock has underwritten most of our cultural innovation for over a century. So this book could be read as the foundation for a post-avant-garde aesthetics, one that, Nelson imagines, "might deliver us . . . to a more sensitive, perceptive, insightful, enlivened, collaborative and just way of inhabiting the earth."

But not so fast with the world-improvement plans. Nelson's punning title reflects a certain duality in her thinking: the dance of indictment is entwined with large doses of appreciation, not to say fascination, with the art of cruelty. She objects to its messianic impulses while being addicted to its frissons; though worried about art that perpetuates the cycle of violence, she's captivated by the brutality of artists like Francis Bacon, a touchstone for the book. She keeps coming back to him as if to an art-world bad boyfriend, circling his oeuvre, obsessing and remonstrating — he amplifies pain unnecessarily, he courts and exalts it — before finally renouncing him over his collages of Algerian body parts, the last straw in their relationship. Except this provides the opportunity to extol Warhol's car crash and electric chair images instead, because they're "clean and clear — without pretension, without existential apparatus."

Nelson's opinions can be quirky and hard to square with one another, but they never fail to be interesting, quite some accomplishment in what could have been a free-form ramble through the mires of someone else's aesthetic preoccupations. And to say she's contradictory is not a criticism: how exactly should we deal with the knowledge that something ethically squalid can also be exciting?

Hopping like a jackrabbit between genres and media, including forays into the swamps of pop culture, Nelson is strongest when at her most rageful, writing with controlled fury at the anti-intellectualism and crassness of the present. She has no time for fake populism, she's an unabashed cultural elitist: withering about reality TV, Lars von Trier and the middlebrow brutality dispenser Neil LaBute (whose plays she calls "sophomoric" and "weak-minded"). She employs herself as a registering instrument, constantly taking her aesthetic temperature: "I felt angry. Then I felt disgusted. Finally, I felt bored." These reports have a phenomenological brio, laced with physiological detail. She recalls "a kind of vibrating memory of the unnerving psychic state" induced by the video art of Ryan Trecartin. About a Yoko Ono piece, she writes: "I long to see Ono's clothes fall, to see her breasts bared. Yet I also feel a mounting sense of alarm, empathy and injustice in watching her body be made vulnerable." She likes art that makes her morally uncomfortable, and from the laudatory way she quotes Kafka — "What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune" — I assume she wishes to induce the same state in her readers.

Often she does, moving at breakneck speed from real-life political violence to the images of such violence (including those on human rights Web sites), to real violence in performance art (Chris Burden asking a friend to shoot him; Marina Abramovic inviting viewers to injure her), to the violent impulses of artists like Bacon. Occasionally I felt an urge to protest these rather balletic leaps, but Nelson, who is also a poet, is such a graceful writer that I finally just sat back and enjoyed the show. Along with her subjects, Nelson is constantly attenuating the art-life distinction, steering us, for example, from the cruelty of the artist Ana Mendieta's blood-spilling installations to an actual shooting spree by a female college professor, then pausing mid-jeté to deliver a figurative kneecapping to male critics who regard such instances of female violence as a perverse index of gender equality.

Nelson understands that what makes violence so absorbing, as subject and spectacle, is the impossibility of separating what's "out there" from what's "in here," and her distinction-blurring trains of association model the problem. Most of us, as she points out, have "wily reserves of malice, power-mongering, self-centeredness, fear, sadism or simple meanness of spirit." We do occasionally feel the urge to injure and destroy.

Nelson is no reformist — in fact, she's wonderfully fearless when it comes to belittling the well meaning, as critical of the "idiot compassion" of social justice seekers (too often patronizing and ineffectual) as she is of the misogynist gore in exploitation films. She suspects that the human condition *is* suffering. The best art dramatizes what happens when ethical impulses collide with the monsters within, but these enactments themselves leave behind a nasty residue.

What do we do with this violent surplus? It's a question that haunts the book. What's not mentioned is that Nelson has written two previous books, a memoir and a poetry-prose collection, about an instance of violence in her own family history: the 1969 murder of an aunt she'd never met, her mother's younger sister. So Nelson has been a practitioner of the art of cruelty, too, transforming violence into a *métier*. It's exactly these unsaids, the unmastered fascinations being worked out on the page, that make this book so unpredictable and original.

Laura Kipnis is a professor in the radio-TV-film department at Northwestern University. Her most recent book, "How to Become a Scandal," will be released in paperback next month.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 24, 2011

The picture on the cover last Sunday, with a review of “The Art of Cruelty,” by Maggie Nelson, was printed in mirror image. In the picture — showing a 1974 performance piece by Chris Burden entitled “Trans-fixed,” for which the artist was briefly crucified by the hands onto the back of a Volkswagen Beetle — the pair of metal posts should have appeared on the left-hand side of the garage door.