

Creative Counterpoints: Women, Difference, and the Arts
Transcript of Conversation with Maria Popova

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Maria Popova, writer and critic, has written for *Wired UK*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *Harvard's Nieman Journalism Lab*. She is also an MIT "Futures of Entertainment" Fellow. Maria is the founder of *Brain Pickings*, a one-of-a-kind curatorial experiment of literary and artistic wisdom she started in 2006, which she describes as "an inventory of the meaningful life" and "a human-powered discovery engine for interestingness."

Marika Preziuso: Thank you for being part of this event. I must admit that when I started to think seriously about this event, and gathering people that did not know each other and work in different fields to discuss women and creativity, I drew inspiration from the cross-pollination that takes place in your website, *Brain Pickings*. Let's start with talking about the genealogy of *Brain Pickings*. How did this project come about?

Maria Popova: It is interesting to consider it as a “project,” because at this point *Brain Pickings* is my life: it is my livelihood, and it is my day-to-day mental, creative, spiritual emerging. It started ten years ago, which means that it has taken up the entirety of my adult life. It has also changed tremendously since it began, but it started when I was still in college.

I had come to the USA from Bulgaria, which is where I grew up. I came to the USA to engage in the liberal arts education that was “sold” to me as the pinnacle of the humanistic education. I had a different experience than what I had expected. I did not go to a wonderful art college like MassArt, but I went to a very traditional school. I found myself in this 400-people lecture hall where this middle-aged white man was reading from a PowerPoint, and we were supposed to prepare for standardized tests from those very PowerPoint slides. This was the Greek idea of the liberal arts education I had expected to benefit from—the quest to find out who you are, and how to live meaningfully and fully. Meanwhile, I was working four jobs to pay for this “questionable” experience. In all fairness, my school [I went to U Penn] was wonderful, if you knew how to navigate it, so only toward the end I discovered the miracle of the seminar, which was very satisfying, but I found out about seminars too late.

Anyway, in order to give myself what I was looking for, I began to keep a record of the readings I was doing late at night, or in the library, outside of the classroom. I found that these answered more fully the questions: “What does it mean to live a meaningful life?” One of the jobs I was working was at this agency—a kind of creative incubator [in the design industry]. The seven men and women working there were circulating inspiring ideas, but only relevant to their industry. I had this intuition that creativity is not about sharing the best examples of what has been done before in any one field, but instead works by taking sensibilities, fields, areas and ways of thinking, and combining them into a new idea. *Brain Pickings* was born out of these two experiences: the readings I was doing, and my instinct that we must combine ideas in order to inspire ourselves. At work, then, I started collecting ideas from both my readings and what I thought were important questions that had nothing to do with the kind of communication exchanges that were happening at my job.

Preziuso: That's great! So, it all started from there!

Popova: Yes! It started as a newsletter to seven people at work, then I noticed that they were forwarding these emails to others, whose lives were very different—their parents and soccer buddies, for instance. I thought that maybe there was an intellectual hunger for this type of indiscriminate interdisciplinary ideas, so I decided to put these ideas on a—very rudimentary—website. This was before *Tumblr*, so I made a static webpage every Friday and replaced it after a week. It all happened very organically from there—I began to write more and moved to WordPress. From then to today's *Brain Pickings*, from seven readers a week to seven million readers a month, ten years later. However, it all happened very incrementally.

Preziuso: Which sounds like the best project ever—one that develops organically.

Popova: There is a term by anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson that I like a lot: “Composing a life.” I think that that is the ultimate creative project—the composition on a life. I fully subscribe to this idea and witnessed it in the letters of artists, writers I read all the time.

Preziuso: This takes me to my next question. One thing that strikes any attentive reader of *Brain Pickings* are the many intersections between the choices you make about the art, literature, design, and knowledge that finds its way into *Brain Pickings*, and your own *ethos*, by which I mean your values, and what you care about in the world. In other words, I wonder how and in which way *Brain Pickings* reflects in its structure, form, and content the values of its creator. This is a question dear to my heart, as I think about ways of making my “intangibles”—emotions, values, desires, imperfect ideas, even obsessions—“tangible” and material in my teaching, writing, as well as my personal relations.

Popova: I have thought of *Brain Pickings* as a record of my becoming as a person. What is interesting, however, is that, as in the case of all artists' work, the process of becoming *becomes* the becoming. In the act of finding out who you are, and, in keeping a record of that process, you evolve.

The sculptor Ann Truitt said that artists have no choice but to express their inner lives. It sounds like an obvious statement, but when you think about it, in the kind of compulsion to express your inner life, the life changes. This is a long way of saying that when a reader thinks that she knows me, even in my thinking that I know Anne Truitt, there is always a negotiation between the present self and the aspirational self. The work lives in that gap between who you are and who you are becoming or aspire to be.

Preziuso: Yes, and as I said earlier in my introduction, I had the feeling that *Brain Pickings* is a “hospitable” place [quoting Yo-Yo Ma on NPR, March 2016]. If that was your intention, I think that it worked.

Popova: I don’t know how much of it is deliberate, and how much of it is the necessity of the project. I read and write across disparate fields, but undergirding all of the readings and writing is that they give *me* some answer, however bleak, to the question, “What does it mean to live a meaningful life?”

The site is in itself a magnified version of marginalia to what I read, so it is interesting to think of it as a “hospitable space,” since this comes from the necessity of giving space to the writers, artists and scholars and honoring their space. There would be no other way of honoring their work but an extended, contemplative space.

Preziuso: Staying with this idea of “hospitality,” I think also your personal sense of time is aligned to this. Your posts are not in any chronological order, but they create a kind of rhizomatic space full of hyperlinks that gently suggest to the readers a number of ways in which they can be read and engaged with.

Popova: Hmm. I feel very strongly about the question of temporality, and especially about today’s culture of *reverse chronology*. The latest post in Facebook, newsfeed, is always at the top, which I think reflects how we conceptualize “the new.” This creates the illusion that the most important and meaningful idea is always at the top, which is simply not true [...]. For instance, in his writing, James Baldwin nailed so much of the current discourse [on race] more than today’s news does. I think that it is important to force the readers to step

outside of the temporal dictatorship of the news culture. Very deliberately, in *Brain Pickings*, there are no date stamps on my posts. A post on Aristotle from a month ago cannot be read as old or “dead”—Aristotle himself being no more dead now than he was a month ago [smile].

Preziuso: You once said, “Literature is the first internet.”

Popova: Yes. In literature, every allusion, every citation, every footnote is essentially a hyperlink to another text that is contextually linked to the current text. The thing is that this only works backward because the writer can only cite texts that have been published previously. Literature hyperlinks structures of ideas. Even if you read Shakespeare, there is no footnote, but there are so many references—for instance, he was very inspired by Galileo and astronomy. This *is* an example of the kind of hypertext that exists all over the body of literature.

Preziuso: So the question becomes how to gauge the specificity of a writer and their supposed universality or potential for connecting with other writers via “hyperlink.” How do you gauge that?

Popova: [*Brain Pickings*] is incredibly subjective, because it has to do with my life. Some things are bound to be universal. For instance, we all struggle with grief, love. Most things, however, are bound to be the reflection of my mood, my preoccupations, what I encounter by chance or choice.

What I think—and this is maybe why other people read what is essentially one person’s subjective little corner—is that when you read, for instance, Iris Murdoch’s *Love Letters*, and to you she is able to articulate something that you had not found the language for—that the whole centripetal force of the universe converges in one person, the person that you love—then you feel both less alone and more connected to this universal experience that is love.

Preziuso: Indeed. This is a quote from your interview in *Copyblogger* [August 2013]: “Having to pay my way through school by working up to four jobs at a time taught me a great deal about making do, about time management, and about the difference between what you’re good at versus what makes your heart sing.” I

would love if you could expand on this point—and how has this experience oriented you and informed your subsequent creative choices?

Popova: So, the thought about the difference between what you are good at and what makes you *feel* good came to me while I was working for the student newspaper in college, one of the largest operations—they take themselves *very* seriously. I was on the business side and we were figuring out ways of funding the newspaper without many sponsors. I was pretty good at it, and ended up getting this award—I don't remember what was called—something about the “business person of the year.” While everybody else was excited, I had this moment when I realized, “Oh, my God, this is really scary. I am doing a job that I do not enjoy and gives me no sense of meaning, and I am receiving a public recognition for it.” It is very hard to step back and ask, “Are these rewards the rewards I want?”

This was a turning point for me when I realize that just because the world is telling me that I am good at something, it does not mean that this is your purpose.

This is also why I think about the question of “making do” (...) I get a lot of questions from students and artists starting out about how to make a living out of what one loves. For me, it only worked because it was a byproduct of finding a way for the things that felt purposeful. Making do is what carries art, and life, but it has to be in the service of the art, I guess.

Prezioso: I love that! Going off of the cultural adjustment you experienced, there is a wonderful quote by Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat. I am paraphrasing her: Every immigrant is an artist, because to invent a new life in a new place requires creative skills—including, I guess, “making do.”

Popova: Yes, and it ties into the aphorism that “Necessity is the mother of invention,” and especially of “self-invention.”

Prezioso: I think you have written somewhere that “necessity is the fairy godmother of self-invention.”

Popova: Sure!

Preziuso: You also said somewhere, maybe [in] your conversation on “onBeing,” that “Your experience is what you choose to attend to in life.”

Popova: These are actually William James’ words, who said, “My experience is what I choose to pay attention to.”

Preziuso: And again, that idea of creation as a choice. To me, this quote speaks of creativity not being something that drops from the heavens, but it is a personal choice. I have a feeling that responsibility and agency are not taken for granted in the discourses around art and creativity. To this effect, what would be your advice to young artists striving to be creative and work in the creative industry?

Popova: Hmm. To me, the most important inner choice we can make is to not only resist but actively *deny* cynicism in ourselves, in how we deal with others, with the world. Nothing poisons the creative work [more] than embitterment and cynicism. We live in a culture where we are constantly fed cynicism, especially by the news culture, which is predicated on this kind of dejected negativity. Cynicism is essentially a relinquishing of one’s agency, and so has a real sense of disempowerment, which is ironic because people use cynicism as a self-defense against things going wrong. I think that it is so important to catch these impulses and be mindful of them, by looking for delight—and not in a kind of naive, “everything will be all right” way, but to live with a sense of radiance and hopefulness, because if that does not happen, there will be no fertilizers for the creative act. Every creative act is an act of optimism: “I am going to contribute something to the world in meaningful ways.” Cynicism is the defeat of that, it is like saying, “I have nothing to contribute.”

Preziuso: I find it interesting that you play optimism against cynicism...

Popova: Again, hope. I think that hope is the counterpoint to cynicism. Optimism can be somewhat passive.

Preziuso: I find it especially poignant to examine optimism, as I come from Italy, a country with a long history of cynicism and survival, and I thought of this

country—the USA—as the land of optimism. Yet, as you said in an interview, optimism without critical thinking is also not productive...

Popova: We can be equally clouded by blinded faith and cynicism, so we need a way for a hopeful clarity, which, in dealing with the outside world, requires discipline and psychological hygiene and not letting in things that are just draining. Patti Smith talks about people who “magnify your spirit,” which is the common denominator of all the artists, writers and scientists I read and write about: they magnify my spirit, instead of shrinking it. The fine-tuning of this mechanism is a real discipline.

Preziuso: Going off of that, productivity is another seductive “myth.”

Popova: Hmm. The culture of workaholism, which has been around for the last half-century, has its way of making you feel like it is a badge of honor to say, “I only slept four hours last night. I was working.” To me, this is a profound self-disrespect. The most important resources you have are your sanity, peace of mind, your health, and to know that you devalue them in order to “produce” something is really backward.

Popova: Going off from what I said earlier, there needs to be a discipline to avoid these cases. It is a form of hygiene—it’s like flossing. You may not like it, but you have to do it.

Preziuso: I am going to end my questions by asking you how you feel to have been named one of *Fast Company’s* “100 Most Creative People in Business.” This is a threefold question: I am curious about what the word “business” means to you, and which aspects of your work you are most pleased and frustrated about, and finally, if you have any advice to the young women in this room who would like to start their own creative business.

Popova: I should start by saying that I have no say in what *Fast Company* writes about me, or anybody else. It sounds strange to me, because I don’t think of my life as a business. Like I said before, it is an accidental entrepreneurship. For those who don’t know, my site [*Brain Pickings*] is supported by donations, there is no advertising, so it is not a commercial entity in this way. It follows the oldest model

of patronage. The reason why it is so is because I think that advertisement poisons journalism and creative culture by placing a middleman between art and its beneficiaries—the public. I did not make a business plan, but I just said to myself, “These are my values; what options do I have to give this [*Brain Pickings*] a go?” I didn’t know any other options at the time, and it worked pretty well for me, *ten years in*.

Weeks ago, a young woman said to me, “I created this blog, but it’s not working very well. I just can’t get any traction. I should just give up.” I asked her, “How long have you been doing this?” She answered, “Three weeks.” [Laugh] “Okay, then, let’s talk again in a few years. Also, let’s think about what is your measure of traction: is it the number of followers you have on Twitter, or getting up in the morning being excited about the day ahead, going to bed not starving, and being grateful to have had the day you had?”

I think that when you start out with some external idea of the measure of success, like X many dollars, X numbers of ideas, it is hard to sustain any project over the years, because you must hop on the hamster wheel of people’s approval, achievement, rewards, etc., and it’s not tenable.

This is a long way to say that I have zero advice for people, because I can only speak for my own experience. My hope, though, is that, to people who want to do something that is nourishing to them and keeps them alive is to think long term, to not buy into the commodification of culture that much of our culture is based on, and to just find a way that comes out of their values, rather than from the “shoulds” of the world.

Prezioso: Thank you, Maria!