

## Sue Coe on Art and Politics

Sue Coe was born in 1951, in England, moved to New York in 1972, and has worked as an illustrator for magazines and newspapers, including the *Progressive*, the *Nation*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Times*. She is also a painter, printmaker, and muralist with works in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York Public Library, Museum of Modern Art (UK), Museum of Modern Art (New York), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, National Museum of Art, Library of Congress, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Hirshhorn Museum, and Whitney Museum of Art. She is the author of *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa* (1983), a visual essay with text on the death of Steven Biko, and *Dead Meat* (1996), an exposé of conditions in slaughterhouses and abattoirs. Her CD-ROMs include *Monkey Business* (1998) and *Dead Meat* (1998).

### **What caused you to marry politics and art?**

Art is that vehicle that exists between the state/social world and personal life. It describes the collision that is inevitable when profit is valued more than life. I could be looking out at a vast landscape of beauty and see an empty drum of herbicides, hidden in the field, and be incapable of avoiding that reality.

### **In a world full of contentless images, do you believe that art can make a difference in influencing individual and/or public opinion?**

There is an old story: A man was walking along the beach and saw another person doing something strange, bending down, picking something up, and throwing it into the ocean. As he got closer, he realized that in the high tide, the beach was covered with millions and millions of starfish. They were stranded and dying in the sun. As he got closer to the person, he said, "What you are doing cannot possibly matter. There are millions of them." The individual said, as he threw the starfish back. "It matters to this one."

### **Has illustration been a satisfying means of expression?**

For many years, illustration was my only means of expression. It was through that work that I learned how to draw because I drew every day. Through illustration I learned how to communicate. It turned out to be quite useful, as a print medium, because it still contained content that the fine art world avoided. The restriction of the printed page was a challenge to be overcome.

### **What determines what you choose as a theme for address and redress?**

If I thought about the choice of content, I would be overwhelmed with ideas. Whether it is war, prisons, the death penalty, the homeless, the slaughter of animals, the degradation

of nature and human nature itself, where to begin? To take on power, one has to feel empowered. One of the classic ways to make people feel powerless is to give the illusion of hopelessness.

The camera zooms in on some very rare bird, shows all the habits of that bird, baby birds in nest, shows the ten trees in existence that the bird needs to survive, then we hear the chain saw, then see the tree fall. End of documentary. What this scenario does not reveal is all the people struggling to keep the birds alive.

The content of my work comes from friends who are activists. They are active in the struggle for change, and if we can use artwork to create change, that is all the better. I have complete admiration, and wonder, for what they have achieved. These people are on the front lines, and I am usually on the drawing board.

**Many of your subjects—AIDS patients, Malcolm X, Steve Biko—require considerable dedication. How do you determine what your focus will be?**

The focus comes from being in the situation. Wherever possible, I attempt to get off the drawing board and into the content—life before art. Distance from the subject creates generalizations and irony. To put oneself in that situation is to find unity with most of the world's life, and one is helpless to avoid pain and suffering. There was an occasion when I had my drawing board and pencils and was going to make a portrait of a young man who was dying of AIDS. He had other plans: he wanted me to get cigarettes, then make out a grocery list, then go and pick his dog up from the pound. Reality intrudes.

**Your work is as much about research as it is about creating images. Are you looking for truth?**

There are different truths; there are gender truths, race truths, class truths, and species truths. The discovery is to reveal contradiction, not to resolve it. However urgent the appeals of those identity voices, there is a universal compassion that spins a web around the fabric of life. None of us would exist at all if it were not for the compassion and love of our parents and then strangers. As a summation for the research process, I would say, the devil is in the details. You could show a visual history of the wheel and reveal social struggle.

***Dead Meat* is a ten-year-old exploration of meat and poultry abattoirs and slaughterhouses. Did this originally begin as a metaphor for human violence or as a dedicated attack on inhumane conditions for animals?**

This was not a metaphor. It could have been but was not. The animals who died—and die—are like no other; they are idiosyncratic. By the time you read that sentence, thousands of animals would have died in slaughterhouses and laboratories. Eight billion a year. What does 8 billion mean? Those billions die and suffer unimaginable cruelties, and they do so because they are mute. Their piteous cries are not understood by the human ear. They have no rights. Their suffering is prolonged because they are property. I just saw a photograph that showed a calf with her back legs sawed off, just stumps. She dragged herself onto the auction block, and was bid on and sold to the slaughterhouse. I have witnessed the same animals with broken backs and gaping wounds left alive in the heat or bitter cold for days waiting to be dragged in chains to a rendering plant. When the animals are dragged, they are flayed, on the road surface, but still live. Food animals do not have the right to be euthanized. Activists are trying to change that.

I was interested in the mass mechanization of slaughter, why this existed, and is, for the most part, ignored and normalized. As children, my sister and I grew up next to a small pig farm, which was next to a slaughterhouse. We thought the crashing of chains and screaming of hogs at 4 A.M. was totally normal—and it is. We ate bacon and lard; it was cheap and tasty. The kids who couldn't afford to eat chips wrapped in newspaper would get, for a few pennies, the bits and "scrappings" in the congealed lard at the bottom of the fryer. If as children we questioned the sight of suffering, we were called "soft" and "sissies," "crybabies," "too emotional." The state requires the passive consumer, especially for those bottom feeders, the working class.

**What did you learn from your years of research into the meat-producing industry?**

The meat industry, the second-largest manufacturing industry in the United States, exists not to feed the hungry but to make profit. By deforestation, the meat industry removes natural habitat for animals and humans; it makes countries involved in raising livestock for meat dependent on the pharmaceutical industry. It takes people off their small homesteads and creates slave labor. The transnational corporations exploit public lands and parks, killing indigenous species. The industry pollutes and creates dependency and starvation. It is the most wasteful use of grains that one could imagine. Eight pounds of grain for one pound of meat. Humans need meat like a hole in the head. For most workers in packing plants, it's the only job in town. Most of them would leave in a second for another job. Unfortunately, they do often leave, with a disability. A few will put forth a frail argument about the importance of supplying the public with meat they supposedly need.

**So this is the big lesson?**

I learned the art of not forgetting. I learned that suffering is mute, that some animals cannot vocalize for help, make a plea or a case for themselves. They cannot compete with the chattering demands of human animals. In the history of oppression, certain humans join animals in their loss of freedom and life. It is complex to attempt to "grant" rights to those who have none. The earth and all the creatures on her do not exist to be murdered, plundered, and sold. Transnational corporations hunt down life at every turn and eventually will cannibalize themselves. It is those conditions that will create the reaction.

The tragedy is that so much suffering of humans and animals is needless and unnecessary.

**Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle* in 1906, bringing to light the horrible conditions in Chicago's slaughterhouses. Do you think that his work—and, by extension, your work—has made any difference in attitudes?**

The situation since Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* is far more sinister. He had difficulty in publishing that book then, and today it would not be published at all. Not only have the conditions worsened for both the workers and the animals, but publishing and the meat industry and the media have become hand in glove—bandits together. The small farmer has gone the way of the small publisher. Publications take money in the form of advertising from the meat industry. Now there are laws protecting the purveyors of flesh from any type of criticism.

**You mean the libel trial against Oprah Winfrey in February 1998, which she won?**

Although the industry lost its lawsuit against Ms. Winfrey, the message is clear. Question

what goes in your mouth and be tied up in court for years. What small publisher or newspaper will take the risk? Whether it is that type of bullying or decapitating the heads of workers who struggle against cattle barons in Central America, the industry knows freedom of speech is not in its interest.

**Does cloning and genetic engineering enter into this?**

What Sinclair Lewis did not envision was the genetic engineering that makes it possible to splice human genes with pig genes and for that new life form to be patented, owned by a corporation. As the conditions have worsened, so has the resistance. Many more people now are concerned about the food supply and the rights of animals than in Sinclair's day. The global use of recourse is an issue, along with the internationalism of the working class.

**What has been your goal in bringing this material to public attention?**

I have been muckraking. I want to know why this issue is so concealed? What is the meat industry afraid of? Why shouldn't the public have access to the truth about their food supply? Why shouldn't the public see animals still alive after having their throats cut and being shot through the head? Why can't the public decide if they want to continue consuming flesh after seeing this? I think the public should get to see what is being concealed from them. Why can't the content of art be reality?

**With the *Dead Meat* CD-ROM, you have created a powerful piece of propaganda for your ideas—art, history, commentary, satire all rolled into one kinetic and interactive experience. Can you describe the difference in form, content, and effect of this new medium?**

That is a hard question. The CD-ROM is a massive compilation of text, poetry, live action, animation, music, and many more facts and statistics than we used in the book. It also has contributions from activists I very much admire and respect—Lorri and Gene Bauston, Peter Singer, John Carlin, et al worked on this. The process was much more of a collaboration because so many people were needed to pull all this together. I find doing computer animation to be the equivalent of swimming the Atlantic in a wheelchair; it's so much easier for me to draw and paint. So, experts like Peter Girardi and the guys at Antenna not only helped create animation from my existing static work but also improved the content. They made my paintings and drawing move without undermining the integrity of those works. The question is, Will that be more effective than looking at a simple pencil drawing of an animal about to be slaughtered? I don't know.

**Is art like yours a caution, curative, or attack? Do you see any redemptive power in your work?**

It's been all three. But before it is any of those, it first has to be art that is passably well drawn and painted. Technique is the test of sincerity. Redemption is hard, artistically. The crucifixion is more believable than the resurrection. It's true that people change, that people are, generally speaking, good. How to show that without falling into the pit of false humanism?

**How has your art changed you as a person?**

Art has changed everything, from giving me a mission to a gateway to meeting some amazing people, to a way to vent, heal, and enter painting—and get lost in it. And who knows, the work could create change for the better.