

COMPASSION
AND PROTEST

RECENT
SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL ART
FROM THE
ELI BROAD
FAMILY
FOUNDATION
COLLECTION

SUE COE

Sue Coe was born in Tamworth, Staffordshire, England, in 1951. She grew up in London and attended the Chelsea School of Art as a teenager. From 1970 to 1973 she studied at the Royal College of Art. She moved to New York in 1972.

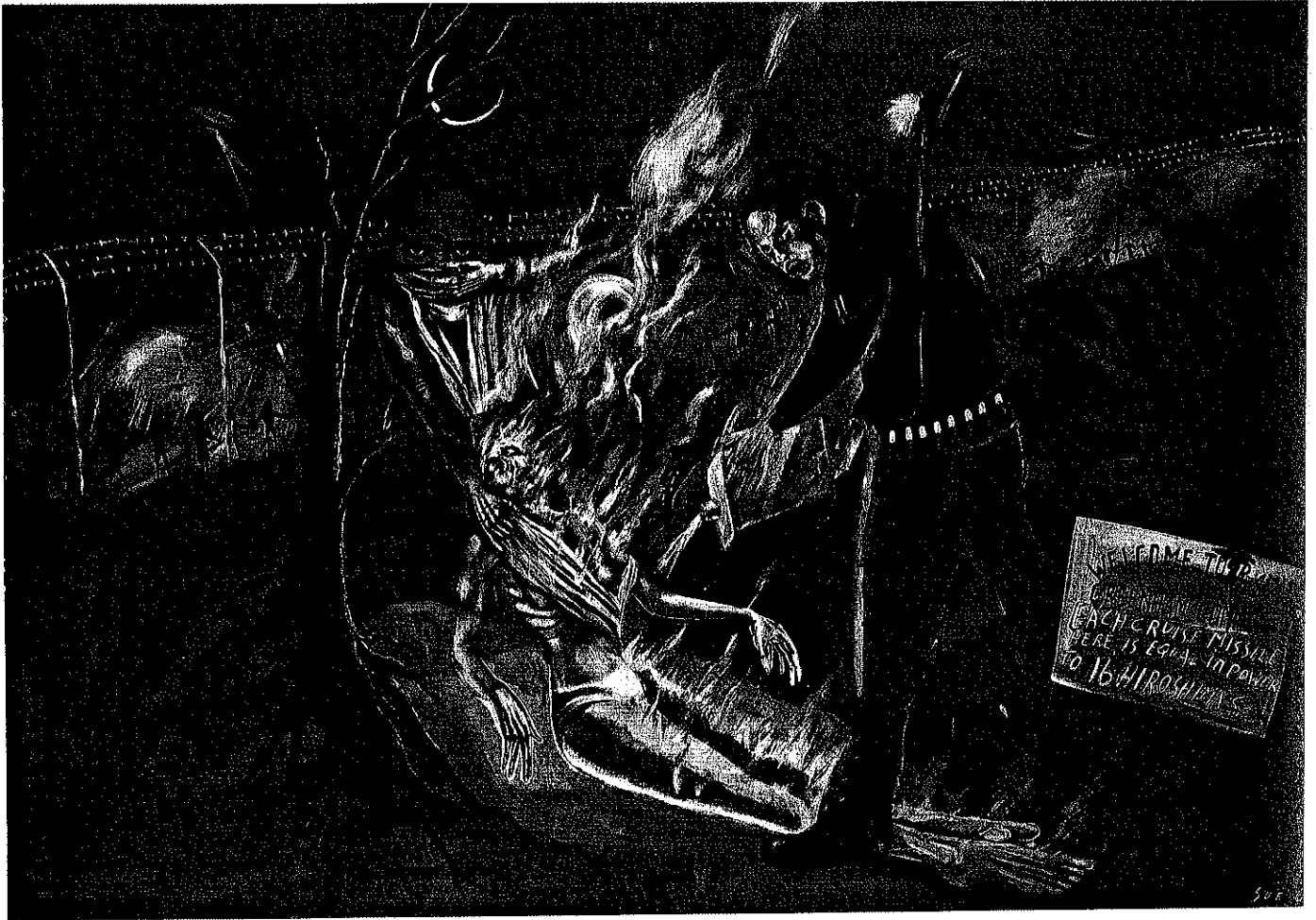
With desperate urgency, Sue Coe confronts the unpleasant realities of life under late twentieth-century capitalism. Poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, sexism, rape, vivisection, racism, apartheid, political repression, and nuclear proliferation are some of the topics she has addressed with uncompromising directness in her art. Although she is driven by leftist and feminist convictions, Coe considers herself a Social Realist rather than a political propagandist, pointing out that her goal has always been to document injustice and make information available to people so that they can act on it.¹

Since 1972 Coe has provided illustrations for the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, has contributed to a wide range of other publications, and has illustrated two books. *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa* (1983),² a collaboration between Coe and journalist Holly Metz, documented the history of atrocities under apartheid. *X* (1986),³ combining illustrations and poems by Coe with a text by Judith Moore, chronicled the life and death of civil rights leader Malcolm X.

Coe favors the printed page for its ability to reach the working class, normally absent from the elitist spaces of art museums and galleries. In seeking to expose to a wide audience the realities of injustice, oppression, and degradation, Coe participates in the critical tradition of protest art that stretches from Goya and Daumier to Käthe Kollwitz, Otto Dix, George Grosz, William Gropper, Philip Evergood, and the Mexican muralists. Like them, she is known primarily for the content of her work rather than its aesthetics. But in Coe's best pieces there is a formal power that dramatically heightens the impact of the content.

Such is the case with *The Children Are Going Insane* (1983), a wall-size drawing that pictures a malevolent nocturnal world of violence, desperation, and dissipation in the heart of the ghetto. This nightmarish scene is rendered in jet blacks and murky grays punctuated by splashes of blood red and bursts of harsh light that reveal jagged buildings and angular bodies. Embodied in a text that trips in lurid red fragments down the surface of the drawing is the bleak poetry of these streets: THE CHILDREN ARE GOING INSANE / EVERYTHING TAKES PLACE AT NIGHT / THE NIGHT IS RED.

Coe's use of text and collaged flat articles, such as playing cards and a news photo of a mugging, creates perceptual tension between the flat, literal existence of words and objects and the spatial illusionism of the image. The work's spatial integrity is also violated by unnaturally rapid shifts in scale



WELCOME TO R.A.F. GREENHAM COMMON 1984

mixed media and collage on paper

50 x 73 1/2

between the large central figures — a slick, card-playing pimp, a howling cat, and a devilish dog dying of a bloody stab wound — and diminutive background personages. This jarring lack of cohesion expresses what Donald Kuspit has termed a "pathological vision of human and social disintegration" in Coe's art.⁴

Less formally adventuresome but offering an even more explicit vision of nocturnal violence is *Welcome to R.A.F. Greenham Common* (1984). Here a swooning, emaciated woman (women are frequently seen as victims in Coe's art) is being burned alive by militaristic thugs who douse her with gasoline. A bloodstained sign identifies Greenham Common, in Berkshire, England, site of a U.S. Air Force base that houses cruise missiles. Since 1981 the base has seen frequent antiwar demonstrations and civil disobedience by women from around the world who have converged on Greenham Common and set up camps along the perimeter fence. These women have routinely attempted to interfere with the deployment of missiles, often being arrested and imprisoned. In Coe's painting they are pictured in the background as a human chain, protesting witnesses to the horrific immolation occurring on the viewer's side of the "security" fence.

These watchful figures indicate that works like *Welcome to R.A.F. Greenham Common* embody, for all their pessimism, a degree of hope. Coe has visited the activist community at Greenham Common and feels that "it's created a consciousness and . . . a positive life-affirming statement that people in England are not going to passively watch their country be destroyed. They're going to put up a struggle, and they're going to put up resistance."⁵ With her illustrations, books, drawings, and paintings, Coe participates in that resistance, and urges the viewer to act as well in helping to bring about positive social change.

DC

NOTES

1. Sylvia Falcon, "Here Are the Facts: Interview with Sue Coe," *East Village Eye* 5 (October 1984), pp. 16-17.
2. Sue Coe and Holly Metz, *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa* (New York: Raw Books and Graphics, 1983; second printing, London: Knockabout, 1983).
3. Sue Coe and Judith Moore, *X* (New York: Raw Books and Graphics, 1986).
4. Donald Kuspit, "Sue Coe," in *Police State* (Richmond, Va.: Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1987), n.p.
5. Falcon, "Here Are the Facts," p. 16.

FOR
FURTHER
READING

Gill, Susan. "Sue Coe's Interno." *Art News* 86 (October 1987), pp. 110-15.