

Art Review: Sue Coe

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Spinning Anger into Art Sue Coe Gets the Gold

The color red excites. It increases the electrical conductance of skin (from sweating), quickens the heart and pulse rate, and raises blood pressure.¹ Its intense chroma suggests brightness, yet placed in the vicinity of lighter hues, red reveals its darkness. Associated with blood and fiery rage, it serves as a potent accent in black and white images. When covering an entire canvas, red attracts immediate attention.



^[1]*Dog of War* (1983, mixed media on heavy paper, 38" x 50" [96.5 x 127 cm]). Copyright 1983 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

Placed behind the reception desk at the [Galerie St. Etienne](#)^[2], in the neighborhood of mostly graphite drawings, *Dog of War* (1983) drew focus. A stand-out in the exhibit "*Mad as Hell!*" *New Work (and Some Classics) by Sue Coe*^[2], the large painting features an alligator-headed canine with a human arm, impaled on several of its shark-like teeth, dangling from its wide-open mouth. A man merges with the creature's underbelly, three mostly white fighter planes pass above, angular buildings fill the background, and red letters spelling "WAR" float in front of the black spaces between the structures.

The only contemporary artist represented by Galerie St. Etienne, which specializes in expressionism (mostly German) and self-taught art, Coe seems to have taken her cue for *Dog of War* from George Grosz's *Metropolis*^[3] and *Explosion*^[4] (both 1917) in her use of angularity and red.

Born in 1951, Coe emigrated to the United States when she was 21, having studied illustration in her native England.² Coming of age during the seventies and living through the politically reactionary eighties, she gravitated toward protest art when her work as an illustrator for *The New York Times* and other major publications failed to afford her the platform she craved for a more radical perspective.³

After producing enough work for her debut solo show in 1983, Coe illustrated her first book, *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa*, in collaboration with writer Holly Metz [5]. By doing so she joined the illustrious company of other artists who have used their work to protest the brutality of apartheid, particularly William Kentridge [6].



[7] *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa* (1983, mixed media and collage on paper, 38" x 52" [96.5 x 132.1 cm]). Copyright 1983 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

The cover-art painting, *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa* (1983), depicts two men shoving a third through a closed window while another man stands in the background, arms crossed in front of his chest, watching over the proceedings. Near him, a door with a small barred window implies a prison setting. As shattered glass flies toward the street far below so does the terrified victim. The overall darkness of the painting is punctuated by the aura of white surrounding the doomed man's torso, the bright headlights of the single car in the street, the cone of light emitted by a tall street lamp, and the bony rendering of a sharp-toothed dog with red tongue and eyes. Red inscribes the book's title and yellow its publisher. Yellow also casts an eerie light on the cell's interior, and defines the form of the falling man.

How to Commit Suicide in South Africa effectively leaves much to the viewer's imagination, depicting not a suicide but a murder. The implication that somehow the falling man is responsible for his impending demise makes one wonder what he might have done. Along the base of the building, the black letters "ANC" followed by "The Future is Black" link his fate to anti-apartheid activities.



[8] *We Come Grinning into Your Paradise* (1982, graphite, gouache and collage on heavy paper, 50¾" x 70" [128.9 x 177.8 cm]). Copyright 1982 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

Another painting associated with the turmoil in South Africa, *We Come Grinning into Your Paradise* (1982), brings to mind a similarly macabre scene of executioners reveling in the torture of victims. Like Max Beckmann's *The Night* [9] (1918-19), Coe's large painting alludes to less-than-transparent political practices designed to dissuade upstarts from fomenting rebellion.

Across the top of the work in the manner of a ransom note, Coe collaged individual letters that spell out "We Come Grinning into Your Paradise." Under that banner, five beings bathed in light from a skeleton's large flashlight and an overhead fixture cavort around a table on which a cadaver-like figure lies supine with arms and legs splayed. Superimposed on the leg hanging over the edge, drops of red trickle down to the bottom of the picture, threatening to drip into the viewer's space. A short stream of red gushes from the body's mouth.

The large creature in the foreground on the right, dressed in black and with the head of a jackal, opens its mouth to reveal white incisors embedded in blood-red gums. Its arms, like those of another similarly dressed being in the background, jut out at right angles suggestive of a swastika. Lest there be any doubt as to the identity of this brute, letters spell out "CIA" across its back like the name on a team uniform; one of its fingerless gloves sports the dollar sign and the other, the pound sterling.

A closer look at the imagery reveals that the black shadow cast by the CIA beast travels under the table (not across it) and morphs into its not-quite mirror image in the background, identical save for the reversed direction of the arms and the smiling humanoid face. In back of the table, Death illuminates the body's chest with its flashlight beam while an executioner wields a two-pronged instrument of torture that drips with crimson. The fifth creature, wide-eyed, with arms raised perhaps in surprise, seems to have just come upon the scene from stage right.

Nine predatory critters tattooed over the body are accompanied by the names of eight countries plus the Vatican. Clearly Coe intended to communicate some negative commonality they share, but

absent extensive knowledge of the history of that era, a viewer would be left to guess at their meaning.

Untutored audiences would have the same trouble with much of Coe's protest art. Even those who do keep up with current events might miss some of her allusions in much the same way they might miss some jokes in political cartoons. Most of it, unfortunately, required no special expertise to decipher. Torture, oppression, political corruption, and exploitation of the vulnerable continue unabated—mainstays on which the powerful depend in order to solidify and perpetuate their control; and for some, terrorizing others is powerfully erotic.



^[10] *BP Shares Take a Dive* (1987, graphite, watercolor and gouache on ivory Bristol board, 30" x 22" [76.2 x 55.9 cm]).

Copyright 1987 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

At her best, though, Coe successfully imbued universality into the time- and event-based medium of political cartoons. Or perhaps it's just that some things never change. In *BP Shares Take a Dive* (1987), one needed no additional information to recognize that a record drop in share price of an oil company is related to the dead northern flicker lying across the yellowed newspaper announcing the financial disaster.

Executed in graphite and enlivened with yellow paint, *BP Shares Take a Dive* showcased Coe's love affair with the immediacy of putting pencil marks on paper. Although she struggles when having to choose a medium for embodying a new idea, she gravitates toward drawing because of its "honesty...urgency [and] elegance." "Drawing is my true north," Coe declared.⁴ Viewers could gain an appreciation of that preference because, unlike previous exhibits of the artist's work at Galerie St. Etienne, *Mad As Hell* displayed mostly drawings and some paintings, but very few prints.



[11] *Political Television* (1986, graphite and gouache on white Bristol board, 12¾" x 13" 32.4 x 33 cm). Copyright 1986 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

A couple of truly timeless political cartoons, *Political Television* (1986) and *Politicians in the Pocket* (1994) addressed the way money taints the electoral process in the United States, though the setting could be anywhere. In the first, a rather literally-rendered donkey (Democratic party) and similarly drawn elephant (Republican party) toss bags of US currency into the shark jaws of a television, the legs and arm of which mark it as the personification of corporate media.



[12]

Politicians in the Pocket (1994, graphite and gouache on white board, 7¼" x 9⅞" [18.4 x 25.1 cm]). Copyright 1994 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

Politicians in the Pocket, published in the *Op-Ed* section of *The New York Times*, zooms in on a jacket pocket in which are stuffed five suited men. The paunchy wearer of the jacket, in white shirt and striped tie, pulls up the arm of one of his captives, as if selecting a politician for his next

assignment. In the background, a dark figure seen from behind is partly obscured by a domed building with cracks in its foundation. All is not well in the capitol.

In the late 1980s, not content with the limitations of conjuring images from secondhand sources, Coe sought an injustice for which she could bear witness through direct observation.⁵ One subject, the slaughtering of animals for human consumption, had lurked in her unconscious for years.

In the exhibition essay, Galerie St. Etienne director Jane Kallir wrote about Coe's childhood experience of seeing a pig escape "from a nearby slaughterhouse."⁶ Yes, the artist explained in an email interview, at nine years old she had watched "all the people...standing around laughing as the escaped pig wove in between traffic, being chased by men covered in blood, with knives." Then she added, "[t]he building behind our house was the hog factory farm, and that terrified us, as the pigs would be thrown against the tin walls, as they were getting them out to go into the slaughterhouse at 4am....it was very loud, lots of shouting and screaming pigs." The physical setting for that soundtrack was the "bombed out streets and buildings of [World War II]" in the English town where Coe grew up.⁷

Few artists possess the skill to successfully translate trauma into artwork that emotionally engages rather than repels and, at the same time, adequately communicates the extremity of life-threatening events. Spanish artist Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828) in his *Los Desastres de la Guerra (The Disasters of War)* [¹³] (1810-1823) and German Expressionist *Otto Dix* [¹⁴] (1891-1969) in his *Der Krieg (War)* [¹⁵] (1924) convincingly used prints derived from drawings to depict the horrors of combat. Artistic style and skillful handling of the medium invite viewers closer while the fantastical nature of the compositions creates just enough distance to prevent avoidant or dissociative responses.

Coe's depictions of the trauma of apartheid rose to that level but few of her images of animal suffering adequately conveyed the feelings of that vulnerable child subjected to the predawn sounds of the neighborhood slaughterhouse. To evoke in viewers the same empathic pain she felt for the terrified pigs, the artist faced the additional challenge of depicting animals as sentient creatures with the same emotional capacities as humans, and hence deserving of the same rights.



[16]

Slaughterhouse Trenton (2006, oil on canvas, 42" x 30" [106.7 x 76.2 cm]). Copyright 2006 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

In the painting *Slaughterhouse Trenton* (2006), Coe painted three lambs in the lower right corner about to step through the picture plane. The closest one gazes at a visitor innocently and hopefully, as do some others who make similar eye contact. The ears of all of them are pierced with number tags. In the middle ground, two men lead a white lamb that looks back at the others into a room where another man tends a moving rack of not-quite-dead animals, each suspended by one leg from a hook, blood dripping onto the floor from their wounds. The lamb on the far right has raised its head, an indication that it's still alive. The white lamb will soon hang like the rest.

Coe used value and color to create depth, to lead the eye toward the background, and to call attention to the slaughterhouse workers' next victim. The sheep's yellow ear tags mark their hours as numbered, and their emotionally expressive eyes elicit empathy, perhaps sufficiently enough to move an audience from denial to engagement.



[17]

Out of Sight Out of Mind (2010, graphite, gouache and watercolor on heavy white Strathmore Bristol board, 23" x 29" [58.4 x 73.7 cm]). Copyright 2010 Sue Coe.

Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

In a smaller piece akin to a political cartoon, *Out of Sight Out of Mind* (2010), Coe juxtaposed a parade of jacketed men—one carrying a red and yellow McDonald's takeout bag—against a backdrop of a couple of stores, several parked cars and a line of receding poles carrying electricity wires. The sign on one store announces "Rib Pit" and on the other, "Farm Fresh Organic." Above the latter store a vertical, arrow-shaped sign points the way to "Liquor," illuminated in yellow and red—the only two colors Coe used for this otherwise stormy gray and black scene.

A splatter of red that attracts attention to a young animal in the middle ground seems to originate from a dripping red gash in its throat. As they go about their business, the men in the front leave behind red footprints after passing through the puddle of red. Behind them in the store that promises "Farm Fresh Organic," instead of the usual display windows, a cut-away view of the interior of a slaughterhouse treats passersby to the truth about the fate of those free-to-wander animals. If they cared to look, they would see several butchers going about their business of transforming animals into oven-ready meat.

Out of Sight Out of Mind illustrates the disconnect between vendors' and customers' claims of free-range, antibiotic-free, contented cows, and the anything-but-compassionate killing of food animals. It highlights the enormous capacity for denial inherent in the human species,⁸ epitomized by one reviewer's reaction to Coe's graphic depictions of abuse and suffering. "Our world isn't quite as cruel or decadent as Ms. Coe makes it out to be," he declared with great authority, apparently oblivious to the news appearing elsewhere in his publication, *The Wall Street Journal*.⁹



[18]

Murder in the Gulf (2010, graphite, gouache, watercolor and oil on heavy white Strathmore Bristol board, 29" x 23" [73.7 x 58.4 cm]). Copyright 2010 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, NY.

In another tour de force, *Murder in the Gulf* (2010), Coe reminds her audience of the high cost of crude. On the far horizon, a white-hot explosion shoots up orange and red flames from a burning oil rig. A glow of similar colors advances on the water toward the foreground where a seabird (perhaps a brown pelican), dripping inky black and tattooed on its breast with BP's clean energy logo, lifts its open-mouthed head to the sky as if in a scream, while futilely attempting to protect two sleeping chicks in a nest at its feet.

Questionable adherence to safety practices in the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010 cost eleven men their lives and exacted an environmental toll the extent of which rapidly faded from public awareness but still goes on. Again and again, Coe employs the power of images to confront people with the devastating harm that humans are capable of inflicting on others, demanding notice and response.

Curiously, though, the exhibit included no artwork dealing with interpersonal violence. When asked about her advocacy for animal rights rather than, for example, the rights of children, Coe responded, "activists, who feel responsible, feel responsible for Everyone [sic], they do not discriminate between those who suffer, or make a hierarchy of need. Perhaps a better question is to ask why are trillions of dollars spent on wars and not on children, or the environment, or health care, or education."¹⁰

After looking at this reviewer's artwork depicting childhood trauma, Coe shared *Raped at 8* (2006), a drawing inspired by her work in Texas with her friend [Dr. Eric Avery](#).^[19] In interviewing nine imprisoned, HIV positive women, they found that all but one had been sexually abused as children.¹¹ For this and the other images appearing on [the artist's website](#)^[20] under the heading *Through Her Own Eyes*, Coe collaborated with her subjects to "make sure [the] images of their lives were accurate and they approved."¹²



[21]

Raped at 8 (2006, graphite and watercolor, 20" x 30" [50.8 x 76.2 cm]). Copyright 2006 Sue Coe.

Raped at 8 powerfully demonstrates Coe's virtuosity at deploying color and illumination in an otherwise dark interior to immediately direct the eye to its intended location. Radiating from under the tilted shade of a lamp set on a nightstand, an almost pure white light with hints of pale yellow silhouettes the left shoulder, back and bare buttocks of a seemingly headless man climbing onto the foot of a bed. A sliver of white from the same source connects his right shoulder with the left one of his intended object—a young black girl whose white shirt with green and red designs rides up to expose her navel, while her yellow-tinted, pushed-up skirt forms several folds around her waist and underneath her very white underpants.

Coe's sparing use of color in this otherwise black and white image forces the viewer to contemplate the fate of the girl, whose wide-eyed expression speaks to her dissociated terror. One small, red flip-flop hangs from her right foot, while the other has been knocked off, coming to rest near the shod feet of her assailant. That, plus the way her right foot peaks out from underneath his crotch, heel to heel with his right foot, emphasizes an-eight-year old's littleness against the grownup's massiveness. The bed sags under his weight but makes no imprint under her.

The sexual nature of the assault is suggested by the perpetrator's pulled down pants and the victim's exposed underwear. Her pink foot situated just under his crotch, looking unnervingly like a scrotum, leaves no doubt as to his intention, as does the title of the work.

The strength of Coe's image was also its weakness. When shared with a survivor of years of father-daughter incest, *Raped at 8* evoked a visceral response of nausea in her; it struck too close to home. An audience that finds itself front and center at a common offense many believe a rarity might quickly move along to the next piece of art, letting unconscious defense mechanisms erase the previous image.

The same holds true for Coe's animal rights work. Carnivores with an appetite for flesh aren't led willingly to slaughter. Art about the ugly must be attractive enough to compel attention, mysterious enough to invite reflection, and clear enough to enlighten the unknowing. When Coe arrives at the right combination, her artwork confronts viewers with uncomfortable truths about the human capacity for cruelty.

¹ Keith W. Jacobs and Frank E. Hustmyer, "Effects of four primary colors on GSR, heart rate and respiration rate," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 38 (June 1974):763-766 quoted in Deborah Feller, *The Effect of Color on the Emotional Response to the Thematic Apperception Test*, unpublished master's thesis, 1977.

² "Chronology and Exhibition History; Biography Sue Coe," Artists and Inventory (Galerie St. Etienne, 2012). <<http://www.gseart.com/Artists-Gallery/Coe-Sue/Coe-Sue-Biography.php>>

³ Jane Kallir, exhibition essay, 2012, 1.

⁴ Sue Coe, email response to questions, May 21, 2012.

⁵ Kallir, exhibition essay, 2.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Coe, email response to questions.

⁸ Cordelia Fine, *A Mind of Its Own: How the Brain Distorts and Deceives* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

⁹ "Mad as Hell" New Work (and Some Classics) by Sue Coe," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 2012.

¹⁰ Coe, email response to questions.

¹¹ Sue Coe, email correspondence, May 20, 2012.

¹² Sue Coe, email correspondence, May 22, 2012.

"Mad as Hell!" New Work

(and Some Classics) by Sue Coe [22]

The Galerie St. Etienne [2]

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[1] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoeDogOfWar.jpg>

[2] Galerie St. Etienne: <http://www.gseart.com/>

[3] Metropolis: <http://rogersmithlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/george-grosz-Metropolis.jpg>

[4] *Explosion*: <http://rogersmithlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/george-grosz-explosion.jpg>

[5] Holly Metz: http://www.hollymetz.net/how_to_commit_suicide_in_south_africa.php

[6] William Kentridge: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/?p=123>

[7] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoeHowToCommitSuicide.jpg>

[8] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoeWeComeGrinningYourParadise.jpg>

[9] *The Night*: <http://www.openmuseum.org/objet/show/1259?facet=2963>

[10] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoeBPSSharesTakeDive.jpg>

[11] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoePoliticalTelevision.jpg>

[12] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoePoliticiansInPocket.jpg>

[13] *Los Desastres de la Guerra (The Disasters of War)*:
http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchresult.cfm?parent_id=352258&word

[14] Otto Dix: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/?p=157>

[15] *Der Krieg (War)*: http://www.moma.org/collection_ge/browse_results.php?object_id=63259

[16] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoeSlaughterhouse.jpg>

[17] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoeOutOfSightOutOfMind1.jpg>

[18] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CoeMurderInTheGulf.jpg>

[19] Dr. Eric Avery: <http://www.docart.com/>

[20] the artist's website: <http://www.graphicwitness.org/coe/utmb.htm>

[21] Image: <http://www.deborahfeller.com/news-and-views/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Coe-raped-age-8.jpg>

[22] Sue Coe: <http://www.graphicwitness.org/coe/enter.htm>

