

# Drawing Attention: Sue Coe

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*Slaughterhouse Tucson May 88 Goats before Pigs*

Slaughterhouse Tucson, Goats Before Pigs, May 1988. Excerpted from *Cruel*, page 19.

ST Do you think it's enough to make artwork that deals with important issues, or do you think there's also a responsibility to be an activist?

SC That's an easy question. I absolutely think you have to be an activist. Part of your body is your collateral. It's one in the same. It's how you learn, being with activists. My first big demonstration was at Greenham Common—it was all women protesting the American nuclear cruise missiles being planted in the countryside. The UK was being used as an airstrip island for war. My sister had been living at Greenham for many months in a tent and I came to draw the women and maybe have their stories published, which happened. In our small group we knew there would be a raid by police and mass arrests and it was discussed first who would be arrested and who needed to go away. As I was reporting the story, and we wanted the story to get out, it was decided I would get out of the path of the raid and my sister would stay and she got arrested. This is how you learn about the body as collateral.

Another of my sisters friend's refused the plea deal after being arrested, and she had a child ... it is a big decision to risk going to court, and then possibly prison, if one is a mother or a caretaker of any kind of someone more vulnerable.

ST I definitely felt that being involved with Occupy Oakland. There is something so important about not only making commentary, but about being a body—a vulnerable body in space confronting violence with other bodies.

I wanted to ask you what the word “cruel” means to you?

SC It means, “It’s not acceptable.” This is not acceptable.

ST Could you talk about the differences for you between the act of painting and the act of drawing?

SC Oh, you’re going into very, very dangerous territory with this ...

ST Oh, no! Why?

SC Because I’m so tormented about which one to do. Most people are tormented with [thoughts like], Should I stay this person or not? I’ve never thought about that. I’ve known I’ve never wanted to be with a person. All I think is, Should I do drawing or paint?

ST Really? But you do both!

SC But I don’t, really. I’ve got to be committed to one or the other.

ST You seem so committed to both.

SC I’m not committed to both!

ST Why aren’t you?

SC I don’t know—it’s got to be one or the other. Drawing is sublime, truly sublime. Painting, painting is—

ST —torture?

SC Yeah.

ST I agree. I actually very much identify with that.

SC They like it, that’s all.

ST People like painting better?

SC Yeah. Then what do you do?

ST I don't know, though. I've been having this feeling recently—

SC You're a painter! Don't tell me you're not, because you're a painter.

ST I'm a painter, but I'm not having—maybe this is because I've been writing so much—but I'm not having as much fun. That's a weird word to use, but I'm not having as much fun or joy when I paint as I used to, and it's making me question whether I am the same kind of painter that I used to be.

SC Yeah.

ST When I draw, when I use watercolors, I have a lot of fun. I want to somehow figure out how to have fun with oil paint again.

SC I think you should maybe do it on paper. Because one of the hardest, most horrible things about oil painting is that you have to stretch fucking canvasses that follow you around like sailboats or something.

ST Indeed!

SC People like us should be free—we shouldn't be dragging huge ships. So there's the whole idea of male, patriarchal, Euro giant-canvas-fucking-things. As opposed to rolling up newspaper and running towards the border. I mean, how do you run to the border with like, four pints of turpentine and paint?

ST As someone who has made art about animal cruelty before, I wonder how you stick with it? Because the few years that I was directly and specifically painting factory farm images I really felt I was losing my mind because the imagery was just so upsetting.

SC It's really important to not witness in isolation ... because to witness in isolation is so destructive. You absolutely can't do it alone, because it's like looking into the sun too long—you'll go blind. You've got a consciousness in your mind that the majority of people cannot open—they're not going to go there. Once you open that door, you're in a very precarious state. If you don't have the ability to disengage, every single interaction is going to be like a thousand knives coming at you.

ST But art making can be a very solitary practice—how do you do that without being torn apart?

SC I think you are torn apart. My friends, they went to my show and they cried. That, to me, is great—it's like, You've got it! I think it's one of the hardest things because [meat-eating] is not commonly accepted as cruel.

ST It reminds me of that quote from *Elizabeth Costello*, where she's in the car with her son and she asks, "How can all these people I love so much, who are all around me and are good people, be participating in such horrible violence ..."

What does bearing witness mean to you?

SC It has no religious connotation to me at all. What it means is that if all the chips are down, and we feel we cannot do anything, then what is left is to look. By looking, we become visible to those destroying this planet ... they know they are being watched.

ST I was wondering—and you can laugh at me if you want—do you have a secret stash of drawings of happy animals hidden somewhere?

SC I absolutely do!

ST You do!

SC Sketchbook upon sketchbook upon sketchbook of happy animals. And then I have my little seasons series of woodcuts, which is so sweet. It's all the seasons and different animals I see.

ST I knew it! I was like, She must have a secret stash of the happy animals somewhere! What do you think representational painting has to offer currently? It's not exactly seen as the coolest thing to be doing.

SC We make it easy for ourselves. We can be left-wing; we don't do any abstraction. We do animal subject matter ... that's just about—

ST —as uncool as we could be?

SC It's a total kiss of death.

ST (*laughter*) Animal work is the kiss of death! As a disabled artist I often joke that work about disability is the kiss of death ... so I guess I'm just being kissed all over ...

SC (*laughter*)

ST Was there a certain point when you felt that? Where you wondered if you went down this direction you'd lose any chance of exhibiting?

SC The gallery tells me that every time: "Oh, no, another slaughterhouse show." It's unsellable.

ST So how did you decide to risk it and make your passion for animals your career?

SC This is not a career. This is the most pathetic ... I'm too good an artist to be dismissed—otherwise they should've gotten rid of me in the '80s. They tried to get rid of me then, but it didn't quite work. But to say this is a career ... it's not a career, it's a mission. Sometimes I think it's been the best mission, because I've met the best people. But a career—I lurch for months and months in poverty, wondering, Oh, I wish I'd been able to sell that month, or something. But I'm so used to it by now—it's been decades and I'm still going. So I've never really thought about a career.

You're only an activist in this culture because you have no choice. You just cannot do anything else, and to meet other people who care and to meet so many of them, all around the country—if I was just alone in the studio and had no hope whatsoever, watching TV ... but I know, I know how many people are out there, and it's a lot.

ST (*laughter*) That's brilliant! But isn't that an argument for drawing, then?

SC Yes it is! That's part of us—that we have to be free. Right? And painting is not free. You have to stop protecting your studio, and thinking, Where am I going to store these stupid things? They can't be free with us. We have to hire trucks to move them around.

ST It's so true. My studio is filled with them right now, totally filled.

SC It doesn't seem fitting with us. We have to get the painting *look* on something that's free. We should be more mobile!

ST I want to ask you one last question. Why are animals important?

SC Including humans?

ST Sure.

SC I think it's like looking at all the stars—if you look at that, and you look at all the universes, and the universes in the universes, and the spiral of the arm of the galaxy we're on, and then you look at all the creatures and all the variety, you see that it almost melts the brain—the beauty of all these creatures, and all these forms, and all these rocks, and air. Everything about the earth is beautiful, it's so beautiful. Every speck of starlight, every speck of stardust that makes plants and makes ants and makes worms and makes whales—it's such a gift to even be alive here to see this.

It's awe, and I feel awed every time I see my dogs looking at me—and they're not my dogs, they're just dog creatures, dog persons—and I realize what communication we have, or what communication we all have with each other. It seems like it's some kind of paradise. And so to see that being hurt—it's just like the worst wound in your soul that you can imagine, to see

that being hurt. And once you start to see the hurt, it becomes almost unbearable. You see so much hurt of all this beauty. And then you realize about human hubris—that the oceans are turning acid, but acid creatures will form long after we've gone. Life will move on again.

And this is some gift we've been given, you know. I think the reason we're here is just to protect it a bit. Protect it slightly, and be protected as well. Because if we look at the animals we share our lives with, how protective they are, how amazing they are ...

That's what it means to me—it means we're the luckiest creatures, because we're born on this planet, Planet Ocean. To see all this—to see the sparkle of it all—to know it'll continue on, no matter what, in different forms. I wish everyone felt that way. Maybe we all have the potential to feel that way. But certainly, the murder of other beings isn't helping anyone.

Sue Coe is best known for her paintings and drawings of animals in slaughterhouses and factory farms, but her work examines social justice issues ranging from union struggles to the civil rights movement, from prison abolition to rape. Coe's images have the urgency of someone trying to save a life, and in a way that is what she is doing—drawing attention to the death and exploitation that happens daily all around us in an attempt to awaken our compassion and move us to action. Coe's newest work, *Cruel*, is a harrowing and heart-wrenching examination of animal cruelty in the meat industry. Coe takes us into the slaughterhouse with her. Armed with her pencil and sketchpad, she allows us to be present with these animals, who are usually viewed as nothing more than a future meal, in the last moments of their lives. Coe's images often take on the dark humor of political cartoons and her graphic imagery sits burned into one's brain—as any successful piece of propaganda should.

I met Coe at Moo Shoes, a vegan shoe store on Orchard Street in Manhattan. It was an unusual place to do an interview, but as Coe had just celebrated the book release party for *Cruel* there a few weeks prior, it seemed fitting. It turned out to be a welcoming and quiet place to talk.

Coe's passion for heart-breaking subjects doesn't stop her from being a delightful, kind and funny woman to talk to. When I met Coe she was wearing a flowing black dress that matched her long black hair. Her attire was accompanied by bright red lipstick, which, along with her gentle accent and sweet tone, gave her the distinct look of some radical anarchist Hogwarts professor who had been edited out of the *Harry Potter* books.

We immediately began joking and ranting about the ins and outs of the animal rights movement, and before I knew it, our time was up and we had barely touched on Coe's work. We did a follow up interview a few weeks later over the telephone and were equally silly,

ranty, and loquacious. What no doubt could have been a depressing conversation between two people deeply worried about injustice in the world, was actually more like, as Coe described it after reading the transcript, “two drunken anarchist sailors in a bar.”

Sunaura Taylor Do you consider your work to be journalism?

Sue Coe Some parts are reportage, for example the parts where I’m in a slaughterhouse rescuing an animal, the drawings done in these places, and the text that’s in there—that’s exactly as I saw it. With other parts I had the luxury of making comment. It’s much more propaganda, it’s propagating ideas about the meat industry, which I didn’t touch in the first book. So the first book is much cleaner reportage ... the memory of me in the slaughterhouse. And then there’s much the more propaganda-type—you know, like this.

ST I agree with you.

SC But in its death throes, it’s extremely dangerous.

ST Can you talk a bit more about this idea that animals are part of the 99%?

SC Just as the human 99% is totally ignored because the dominant class has figured out they do not need a middle class anymore to stay rich and keep their power, animals are not just ignored—they are made invisible, because they are rarely mentioned in any social justice struggle. OWS was the first group that I can remember that mentioned animals as a part of the struggle. As Paul Watson says, “A worm can live without humans, humans cannot exist without worms.”

ST I’d like to talk about *Cruel*. It is a harrowing, difficult book to read—I felt like I was there in the slaughterhouse with you. You bring us in there. What is it like for you to really be there?

SC I think I’ve been inside between thirty-five to forty stockyards and slaughterhouses. It’s much easier to get into halal or ritual slaughterhouses, because they’re small—they’re family owned. The larger ones are IBP—International Pork and Beef. I actually did get in, but that was very, very hard. I’m going in saying, “I’m an artist. I’d like to draw. You can see what I’m doing. If you don’t like something, if there’s anything inaccurate, then just tell me and it won’t ever be seen if it’s wrong.” They either say yes or no—

Without the camera it’s more shared, because there’s an intimacy in drawing. That’s less threatening. There’s no hidden camera on me—and in the big slaughterhouses, they will search you and make you put on their uniform. There’s no hidden camera, here’s the sketchbook, you can look at it ... I’m not doing anything against working people. You can look at what I’m doing—if it’s inaccurate, you can tell me. There’s that sort of exchange.



ST So let's talk about this word *propaganda*. Because—

SC —that's a good word to me. It means "to propagate ideas." It fell on bad times in the First World War, when regular young men and women were saying how many kids were dying in WWI, and were talking about it, and that was called "enemy propaganda." But the original word came from the Roman Catholic Church—obviously there was propaganda in the fifteenth century—and it just means to spread an idea.

ST That's great.

SC So I love the word *propaganda*. It means to propagate thoughts. And the oppressive classes obviously are the meat industry, [the] gas and oil fossil fuel industries, propagating their dominance on us all day and night ... We cannot possibly even come close to the oppression of the corporate right. [Our propaganda] is like a tiny thimble full of truth—a tiny speck. But that speck is very dangerous to them. That's why they're constantly trying to crush it. I mean all we have to do is make a pamphlet, or a poster—or graffiti—and that can blow them down in a puff, because they're about lies. One little bit of truth can spread on the oily waters.

We only need ten percent to change society. We only need ten percent activist people. I mean the Tea Party has ten percent. Look what they did. We have about seven.

ST What does it mean to say that animals are the ninety-nine percent?

SC When I made *Animals Are the 99%*, humans were very nervous about it. They said it could be derogatory, and I said, "no activist is ever going to see this as being derogatory. They're going to love it." And they do. The Occupy movement is the first time in my lifetime in America that I've seen hope. That's how long it's been since we've seen resistance. And the forces of oppression will create the resistance. That's just science, almost. So the more this economy declines, the more resistance—which has been dealt with in this culture by an exploding prison population, and by a mercenary army ... We now have over ten percent of people unemployed, which according to any economist—even Milton Friedman—is revolutionary conditions. That's very unstable capitalism. Now capitalism, I don't think can be fixed.

ST It's pretty incredible you can get in, especially given the new "ag-gag" laws making it much harder for images of factory farms and slaughterhouses to be made ...

SC That's in Utah, because IBP is in Utah. That's the largest—a huge slaughterhouse, it's massive. So it didn't surprise me that [those laws] passed in Utah.

ST It's interesting, the way in which drawing is somehow seen as nonthreatening—or less threatening—than a camera is. Even though your drawings have reached so many people and have brought so much awareness over the years about animals in slaughterhouses.

SC Thank you for saying that.

ST You write, “Drawing reveals intimacy of shared time.” I was thinking about you being there with these animals in the last moments of their lives—it’s such a moving and powerful thing to do.

SC I think that makes my struggle so much more urgent, because even though I know everything intellectually—it’s not necessary for someone to go into a slaughterhouse to see it and understand—you forget very quickly. People forget. But I’ll never forget. It just makes the work more lifelong; I’ll do it until I die. Because that’s my responsibility to the faces that I saw—that’s my job. That was their life. I saw them; they looked into my eyes, and they saw me.

ST One criticism I hear about animal activists is that we care more about animals than we do humans. With your work the symbols of greed and cruelty are nearly always the corporations—the CEOs, the businessmen. With your slaughterhouse work and much of your other work on unions, prisons, and so forth, it seems you are thinking about the human people who are exploited as much as you are about the animals.

SC It’s very easy to be seduced by the idea that humans are evil. Because if you see what we do deliberately and unconsciously—to other beasts, to ourselves, everything—it’s very easy to start thinking it’s hopeless. It’s very seductive, but it’s not true.

We have an economic structure now that panders to the worst part of the human species. I imagine a society with a different kind of economic structure—because I absolutely believe that human beings will do the best thing—always—if given the opportunity to try. I’ve seen this in so many different countries in the world where people are so poor, but still share their last things—whatever they’ve got. I think human beings are generally very noble—we’re just stuck in this fucking system that doesn’t reflect us. It’s political naïveté to think that animal rights activism is one issue—that any activist is “one-issue.”