

# SUE COE: I AM AN ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST ARTIST

*Sue Coe, one of the most committed activist artists in America, has during her thirty-five-year career charted an idiosyncratic course through an environment that is at best ambivalent toward art with overt socio-political content. In this issue of Antennae, the artist presents a new portfolio of images on the subject of animal welfare. Questions by Giovanni Aloï and Rod Bennison*

**Giovanni Aloï and Rod Bennison:** Your work seems to have more recently focused on a wider range of subject than ever before. Are there specific reasons for this?

**Sue Coe:** Don't think so. I have never seen wide range as being particularly desirable. I could draw a tree for the rest of my life, and that tree could incorporate the entire history of culture. My preference is to choose a topic, or have it choose me, and research it and do it well over a decade.

**Aloï and Bennison:** Your graphic portrayal of hammer head sharks being de-finned and discarded is a confronting depiction of how modern society treats wildlife. Where does the inspiration for the creation of this image come from? How and why do images of blood influence your artwork?

**Coe:** I was researching "finning" about which I knew next to nothing, and found the hammerhead shark is the most popular victim because this species has more fins. It occurred to me that this shark has excellent stereo vision and depth perception, so can watch herself being mutilated then discarded to drown. I noticed that the human slaughterer was exactly the same position as when slaughtering sheep or goats. The boot goes into the chest to hold the animal on the ground, then the knife goes in. The fins are used as a supposed aphrodisiac, and are tasteless fiber in a soup, but sell for huge amounts of money, giving great incentive for

murder. I am an animal rights activist artist. 50 billion non human animals are slaughtered every year. This number does not include oceanic life. They bleed red, same us. The predictable answer is I grew up a block away from a slaughterhouse and lived in front of an intensive hog farm, so was accustomed to being around slaughter. My childhood was dripping in blood, but I would hope that, personal psychology aside, the apology we owe non-human animals for their suffering, at our hands, is more of a motivator.

**Aloï and Bennison:** You have been producing animal welfare oriented work for many years. How has your art more tangibly contributed to sensitize people to environmentalist concerns for wildlife slaughter? What impact do you believe your portrayal of slaughterhouses has on animal protection?

**Coe:** My focus is not animal welfare, but animal rights; as in the abolition of all exploitation of animals, specifically for "food production." I do not dismiss animal welfare, nor question the sincerity of those involved with it. Nor can I say, not having a crystal ball, that incremental change and awareness will or will not bring people to the road to abolition. There is some evidence that increased awareness on the part of the public, as to cage size and living (death) conditions of the farmed animals, does lead to avoidance of animal products. But the data is incomplete. For example, meat consumption in the USA is down for beef and hogs,

from 112 lbs annually to 108lbs, but up for chickens. This could be the economy, human health concerns, or an increased level of awareness.

Some of my work is graphic, and some is reportage. In the reportage work, direct drawings in slaughterhouses or stockyards, I am revealing what is concealed. What the viewer does with that information is up to them. The more graphic (I mean that in the formal sense) work is more personal rage and sarcasm, and takes more liberties. I try not to get the two confused. They have different purposes. The former is for people who have never given food animals a thought, and the latter is for my community. My work is used in fund raisers all the time by animal protection groups. So firstly, it provides money to save animals, it educates and makes aware, and unlike much of my other social political work, the viewer gets the message. Then rather than feeling helpless, that same viewer can do something about this immediately: becoming a vegan, and avoid all animal products, including the wearing of their skins, and the eating of their bodies. It's very empowering and opens up another world of choices.

The area in which I live is rural, and so is the epicenter of dairy farming, and hunting. I have quite a few interesting conversations with my neighbors and have learned a lot about how they think....Many no longer hunt, and when they did, always found it disturbing. They always have a story to tell of a crying bear that has been shot, or a wounded deer, that stopped their hunting in that moment. For the older males, it's about bonding with other men with beer, not guns. There are a few women that hunt, but mainly I have discovered it's a way for a young boy to bond with their emotionally absent father. A rare minority enjoy killing and will go on killing, even after it's made illegal. The farmers who are animal slavers have the science, the verbiage, of animal exploitation, and justify the practice under providing "food." But it is really a matter of government subsidies keeping those unhealthy and cruel herding rituals going. Many of the farmers would be happy to just focus on plant agriculture. They are doing this for money, and if enough money is in grains and vegetables, they would change.

**Aloi and Bennison: How do you think your drawing/painting style has developed over the past few years? Are we right to suggest that your recent body of work seems to present more three-dimensional/theatrical sceneries that in turn appear to convey a deeper sense of dramatization of your narratives?**

**Coe:** I do not have much of an idea. I am an art worm eating dirt. Mounds of it are piled up behind me, digested. It's dark in here. I am compelled to keep crawling through the dirt. I do not look back, nor contemplate. Dirt has to be churned for other stuff to grow. It's not for the artist to make these observations. My art history is formed by the Royal College of Art, being influenced by Eduardo Paolozzi and Peter Blake, who were teachers, and then by David Hockney, who was taught by Carel Weight, the professor of painting who influenced so many of that era. Despite living all of my adult life in America, that early education in British culture, the use of sarcasm, the use of black and white, the history of animal protection, as linked to the working class in England, are all factors. Carel Weight used to say he did not teach painting, he taught artists how to paint what they wanted to.

**Aloi and Bennison: Your image of the gassing of pigs is possibly one of your most depressing yet powerful images. How do you think that equating the slaughter of pigs, not kosher in a Jewish diet, with the Holocaust will be seen by the Jewish community?**

**Coe:** Around 15% of Jewish people in America keep kosher. It's impossible to generalize about how any one person can perceive anything. They will respond to images in a unique way. I am certainly not equating gassing hogs with gassing human beings, as I rarely use analogies or symbols. I stay within reality, reportage if possible. It is interesting that ritual slaughterhouses are shared between Hal-AI and Kosher slaughter, two cultures working together in that not so proverbial sea of blood. I very much doubt if the meat industry has even made that comparison themselves. I have drawn in those slaughterhouses. Gassing hogs is less labor intensive (cheaper) than the single stun method, and is becoming, along with decompression for poultry, standard practice for killing and stunning. Six hogs at one time can be stunned, as opposed to one. Or in other words, one worker can stun six hogs at once. For all the racism that abounds about Shariah law infiltrating American culture . . . to consume a burger in a fast food restaurant in a major city, could mean chowing down on Shariah law, as that animal was killed in a ritual way. Same with many restaurants in NYC, that flesh is either Kosher or Hal-AI. That meat product has an invisible past, how the animal was slaughtered and by which method. What will be most profitable in that community will be what is used.

**Aloi and Bennison:** Several of your recent works involve images of fish. Perhaps not surprisingly, they each depict fish with open mouths, gasping for air and life. Are you implying that the slaughter and consumption of fish is of equal concern as the exploitation of other animals?

**Coe:** Fish feel pain, flee death, and struggle against capture. The saddest part of drawing from "life" is to go to any fish market and see fishes that have been flown in (poached) from the protected area of the Galapagos, their sparkling colors fading in the dawn of a grey city, falling to the sidewalk, still struggling for life. We are destroying all ocean life, and so will be destroyed in turn. Many species get caught in nets that are 90 miles long, including endangered birds and whales, porpoises, dolphins and turtles. The solution is to not consume fish, and free born life is saved. Fish farms are another blight on the planet. Fish swim in chemicals and are then "harvested." The escapees into the "wild" can pose a danger. In my first book, *Dead Meat*, the subject of fishes was completely ignored, but the updated version, *Cruel*, will certainly include fish.

**Aloi and Bennison:** You worked on subjects such as Jumbo and Topsy, the unlucky elephants of the early modern period. Aside from these examples, your main body of work largely revolves around slaughtering and other direct human actions upon animals. Have you entertained the idea of considered other animal-related subjects for your drawings?

**Coe:** I just read a brilliant book: *Fear of an Animal Planet*, and it gave me ideas to focus on animals who resist their oppression. Topsy, and elephants like her today, have an idea of justice, which is one reason why they kill. There is evidence, as recounted in the *Fear* book, that elephants and other species in zoos and entertainment, and slaughterhouses, deliberately plan their escapes, and can focus on killing the human that has tortured them. Part of the problem for us, in terms of other social justice movements, is that humans speak for the animals when they can actually speak for themselves, if we listen and look. If there is one main element I have noticed with all the non-human animals I have known, it is that they have a strong idea of justice and injustice, and it hurts them when they see injustice, in more ways than just physical harm.

**Aloi and Bennison:** With the impact of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear reactor meltdown, many thousands of animals were left without

food and water for weeks. Many have died. How does the impact of the nuclear power industry feature in your work? Should animal activists be more vocal in their condemnation of such environmental issues?

**Coe:** Rather, environmental activists should make the links and be vegan, as factory farming (CAFO's) is the number one cause of climate change. Like most people, I have been to fund raisers and awards ceremonies that celebrate different social justice issues. I attended one, for human rights activists, at which they served veal and chicken, on a table lit with candles floating in bowls of living goldfish. Obscene. Compassionate people not making the connection at all is tragic. We all have blinders on about our own human-centric view of the world, our own cultures. We could be just another short lived species. We are highly adaptable to breed and thrive in the most extreme areas of the planet. Our success as a species will be our inevitable end, as nature abhors a stand.

Humans want their toys: the "Wants," the "crackberries," the microwaves, the plasma screens. These devices are plugged in all night, and power comes from coal or nuclear power primarily. They are not designed to save power, but to consume it endlessly. If you have solar power as a prime source, which I do, I can see that a TV that is not designed to ever turn off just drains the power down.

For us to change, we have to use less, consume less, buy less. It is the antithesis of capitalism. How many machines do you have in your home? How many can you live without? Refrigerators and microwaves use up an enormous amount of power. The solution is re-designing those products to use less. If every decision is to make the most profit in the shortest amount of time, then we have no future. Having "Stuff" is not a measure of human happiness.

**Aloi and Bennison:** Australians were recently presented with graphic television images of cattle that had been sourced from Australia being inhumanely treated by Indonesian abattoir workers. Because of those images, the story became world news that was followed by the Australian Government placing a moratorium on live animal transport to Indonesia. How can art influence public debate on live transport and other inhumane treatment of animals in developing countries?

**Coe:** That ban has since been lifted. Awareness of an issue is uneven, and easily forgotten. A three pronged approach works.....rescue, legislation,

education. As one activist has said, "being an animal rights activist is like pushing a boulder up a mountain with the tip of your nose." It's never one thing that creates change. It's multiple exposures to different facets that creates a different heart. In America, animal issues are regarded as the domain of consumer choice and individual purity in lifestyle, rather than as a social justice issue (with animals being an exploited class) with the concurrent links to political activism. But this is changing. Art, culture, and mass media, change people - but it is easy to forget. I am a vegan, but have to keep educating myself as to the suffering of animals. My sharing of my art is a re-traumatization, sent toward the viewer. We are the developing nations, in a nation of many others species more morally and ethically advanced than we are. We are backward. We are ignorant, even within our own species. Many "poorer" countries do not deny animals have emotions, and they do not eat the same amount of dead corpses. Capitalism is the crime, the global blight. The way we live is just not sustainable. Economics has to re-calibrate and celebrate a lack of growth as being the most desirable state, for our own and others survival.

**Aloi and Bennison: What are you currently working on?**

**Coe:** Finishing up *Cruel*, then more work on *Topsy*.

*Sue Coe* is considered one of the foremost political artists working today. Born in England in 1951, she moved to New York in the early 1970's. Coe has been featured on the cover of *Art News* and has been included in numerous museum and gallery exhibitions nationally and internationally, including a one-person retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. Sue Coe's work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, and many other periodicals. While Coe's work covers a variety of subjects, she has spent years documenting the atrocities committed by people against animals. Her most recent series examines the atrocities that humans commit against one another, specifically revealed by the horrors of war. Coe's own publications include *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa*, *X (The Life and Times of Malcolm X)*, *Police State*, *Dead Meat*, and the recently published *Pill's Letter*.

Sue Coe was interviewed for *Antennae* in Summer 2011 © *Antennae*