

How the Subject Became Slaughter

Here is a literary artist of such originality that it is not easy to conjecture what special influences have gone into the making of her. But the indwelling spirit of it all is a sweet enlightened sympathy, an unsleeping sense of humor, and an exquisite carefulness of detail. (16)

The wonder at such unique qualities of heart and mind ascribed to Gertrude Stein, in the passage quoted above, serves to describe Coe as well. In retrospect, Coe's development follows a logical path but hardly one that could have been predicted in 1972 when she arrived from England as a young pen for hire. She didn't choose the topics she illustrated for *The New York Times Magazine* and op-ed pages. She didn't work in series. She didn't think of herself as politically conscious. But all that changed.

In New York, she became involved with the "Workshop for People's Art,'...a volunteer association of artists who produced posters and pamphlets for community groups. Not only did the Workshop introduce overt social advocacy to Coe's assignments, but the adjunct Marxist Library provided her initial exposure to the work of politically oriented artists such as Otto Dix, John Heartfield and Jose Clemente Orozco." (17)

Occasionally she was asked to compromise or otherwise censor her images. Just as rejecting such suggestions reduced the number of jobs that art editors accepted, so her developing political consciousness reduced the number of jobs that were acceptable to her. Curiosity prompted her endless questioning, and a burgeoning political consciousness reinforced her commitment to social activism.

By 1974 she had started to investigate topics of her own choosing. A series on the Ku Klux Klan reinforced her choice to pursue an image-based journalism. The same year, she began "her first directly observed series, on Manhattan street life. With this Coe discovered another important core of her art: to transform *specific* events into shared ones through visual affirmation of them" (18) (emphasis added).

While the events may be current or historical, there is a historical component to all her research, as in the series on South Africa, the Ku Klux Klan, or Malcolm X. With increasing frequency, Coe becomes a living witness to the events she depicts: street life, sweat shops, slaughterhouses, AIDS wards. Her focus remains specific, exposing what is otherwise often hidden or ignored.

How to Commit Suicide in South Africa, co-authored with Holly Metz, is an excellent starting point from which to explore Coe's analytical perspective as well as her development. Viewed in a historical context, the book firmly establishes her as a late 20th century heir to Goya and Daumier, kin to Kathe Kollwitz, John Heartfield, and George Grosz. In *Suicide* her earlier work intersects the methodological path she would take in future projects: the book on Malcolm X, the AIDS series of paintings and prints, and *Porkopolis*, issued in book form as *Dead Meat*. *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa* defines with sonorous eloquence an activist role for art and artist on behalf of social justice.

The central image on *Suicide*'s front cover is a barefoot, bloody, and manacled man. He has just been thrown head first out of a high-rise window by two thugs who resemble, respectively, a denizen of Bosch's Purgatory and a Nazi Party regular by Grosz or Heartfield. Heartfield's genius was graphics. He pioneered the use of photomontage in the service of unsparing political caricatures published in posters and the German labor press during the 1930s. Coe is equally unsparing in her riveting presentation of horrific truths. Her intended audience is as proletarian as Heartfield's, and like him, she often wields text in companionable support of image.

The title chills as it informs. A thin line of red ink from one letter raggedly bisects the image. The red ink suggests a rivulet of blood or a lifeline that will not hold even if caught. It becomes a sub-vocal scream, this drawn out letter "i," pulled down to street level, where in a heartbeat the man and the jagged shards of window will land. Looking up is a ghostly human form, marking with its own shadow the probable landing site of this South African "suicide." Perhaps this ghost figure is a previous victim. Passersby have not yet taken notice of the event in progress. The scene is an eye-blink of stopped motion, the picture's frame wildly careening and on edge, like the rampaging automobile in the street below.

Open the book out to make a tent, cover side up. A single painting unfolds the contents; the story begun on the front cover continues on the back. The window from which the man has been thrown belongs to an interrogation chamber, with one barred door and blood stains on the floor. The thugs are uniformed, truncheon-equipped guards, directed from a distance by a solemn man in a business suit. A skeletal hell hound leaps through the outer darkness, in pursuit of the falling, manacled figure. Mirroring the front cover, a thin red crack bisects the back cover and the dog. Far below, the dog's shadowy outline echoes the human shadow on the ground.

This cover is a waking nightmare. While in no sense photo realistic, it depicts a specific, especially grotesque crime -- just one in a series of repeated horrors.

Coe describes the impetus to choose this topic: "I first got involved in South Africa when I read about Steven Biko in 1976...When I found out how many people had died in detention, many of them young idealists, I became enraged. Holly and I wanted to make a record of all the people who died in detention who supposedly committed suicide. We both believe that if

people know the facts, they'll change the system. When divestment became an issue on college campuses, students read the book. It became an organizing tool, which is our highest ideal of how the book could be used." (19)

Not surprisingly, Coe's pointed images, whether early or more recent, are often combined with text. "Words [are] necessary to smooth over art's inherent ambiguities and transform it into an organizing tool." (20) The collaboration of text with and within the image conveys information, drives the story and engages the reader/viewer. Her text supports a variety of functions and is employed in a variety of formats.

In *Suicide* the text is organized into four chapters: 1) a chronology of South African history; 2) a description of living and working conditions for the non-white majority representing 84% of the population; 3) the workings of BOSS (Bureau of State Security) reflected in news reports about the torture and murder of detainees, including a list of deaths whose official explanations generated the book's title; and finally, 4) the free world's political and economic connections supporting apartheid.

Most of the text is typeset; white letters emerge from a black background, in well-footnoted vertical columns or in horizontal blocks beneath the images that fill each page. The reportage argues from factual, dispassionate evidence and yields an explication of the reality that was South Africa at the time. Occasionally, a newspaper clipping with headline, photo, and text is inserted into a drawing or is re-drawn and put into the hands of one of the figures.

Hand drawn text is often integral to her images, and some text appears like graffiti on a wall in the depicted landscape. "Peoples Republic" is an answer to a scrawled "white republic," effaced by a large red "NO." In another image, "HARLEM U\$A SOWETO \$A" appears as if chalked on the sidewalk in the foreground, balancing a background sign proclaiming "Europeans Only Dry Cleaners."

Sometimes these words function as headlines or titles, that is, "cops fire into a crowd of UNARMED demonstrators KILLING 70 wounding 200 SHARPeVILLE," or, most starkly in the book's centerpiece illustration, "S O U T H a F R I C A," where each letter appears crudely clipped out and re-set, like a ransom note.

Coe appreciates and employs a caricaturist's sense of humor to deliver her truths; a momentary assurance of something fun before the gravity of the information takes hold. What we might otherwise deny or avoid has breached our defenses, and little by little, as we laugh, we learn. *Suicide* is not a funny book, but the inside front cover prepares the reader for a darkly humorous journey using "illustrations and copy from assorted South African tourist brochures." They extol "a world in one country, where summer is four seasons long." Coe unerringly skewers the contradictions inherent in this hyperbole. The pretty pictures and holiday phrases are transformed into a compendium of terminal social ills, by no means limited to South Africa: racism, sexism, monetarism, and the attendant clash of economic classes. Pictures and captions float on a sea of dollar signs. This might well be the world in

one country but only for those who can afford it. The bikini clad models luxuriating poolside demonstrate that "You can't be too thin or too rich" -- the title of one image the reader will find inside. Another model presages Coe's animal rights investigations. She wears an annoyed expression and an anomalous fur dress; given year-round summertime, the fashion appears silly at first glance. A second glance conjures up class, caste, and bloodshed.

These images and tourist come-ons frame a poem that also urges a visit to South Africa, but here the perspective has shifted: "...come/feel free/to admire jim crow's big brother whose superfine head/is a gold bullet, come/to where the white in your flag is the law, come/be comfortable/in the land that provides yours with/the diamonds you wear and want, come/to where friendship with other colors is il-/legal/as we know you know it should be, watch/how enforcement-en forces this and glance/at a deformed justice successfully justifying, come/...to south africa." (21)

Coe maintains "...you don't take the particular to analyze the whole; you take the whole to analyze the particular." (22) To understand a condition, one must look at it in its larger context, yet this vastness is not easily grasped. A specific event may be comprehensible, but its meaning cannot be adequately analyzed without recourse to the wider perspective. Moved by outrage and sustained by research, Coe and Metz focus on Steven Biko and others who died while in detention. These specific, personal tragedies are seen to be inevitable, given the larger context of impersonal economic evils that legislate apartheid, promote racism, and promise monetary glories.

The inside back cover provides a practical list of specifics: a thoughtful bibliography "meant to spark further interest and action." There are notes on sources and the addresses of relevant organizations. Such resource lists are central to Coe's activist motivation; they encourage and facilitate the reader's independent inquiry.

In the *Porkopolis* series, she focuses on frightened and bewildered animals, shackled and conveyed along slaughterhouse disassembly lines. Her compassionate gaze rests on the workers as well, workers who sacrifice their fingers and lives to the speed of the line. It gets very specific. The egg industry's superfluous male hatchlings are efficiently plowed under the soil, whether alive, dead, or dying. The specifics inevitably lead to broader concepts like sustainable economies and ecologies, but these are not what Coe draws. Instead, she invites the viewer to "look through her eyes, to see things as she sees them. Thus viewer and artist are implicitly joined in a shared exploration of reality, a search for meaning." (23)

She prefers the editorial page to the museum exhibition as a venue to indict economic and political crimes. She would put her artistic evidence, literally, into the hands of the jury, believing people are the ultimate source of justice. She believes that once an injustice becomes public knowledge, rectification follows. "Of course I'm an optimist -- how could I do this work if I wasn't? If I wasn't an optimist, I'd deny it existed, because I wouldn't think it could be changed. But I think it will change -- it is changing." (24) Her democratic stance combined with forceful and original work, much of which first appeared in the press, has led

to gallery and museum exhibitions worldwide and a demand for her as guest artist and lecturer. She has created more than 100 print images, both large and small editions, that she frequently gives away or sells, as she says, "cheap, cheap, cheap," for the benefit of progressive causes.

The Politics of Art

Art Young (1866-1943), a political cartoonist and one of the original editors of *The Masses*, were he still alive, would applaud Coe's approach and find humorous those critics who think otherwise: "These propagandists against propaganda amuse me. Propaganda is a kind of enthusiasm, for or against something that you think ought to be spread that is, propagated. Your propaganda may be wrong or not worth while from another's viewpoint, but that is a personal matter...*There never was a real work of art in which it is not plain that the author wants you to share his loves and sympathies and his ideas of right and wrong*" (25) (emphasis added).

The notion of political art continues to raise hackles and "difficult questions." (26) Is the concept valid? Michael Brenson thinks it is, and valuable, but he cautions that "the best political art...should be art first and political second." (27) Brenson includes Coe among the few contemporary artists able to successfully transform their political passions into art.

Art historian Ralph Shikes, in his book *The Indignant Eye*, asks and answers a similar question: "At what point does a caricature or satirical political cartoon transcend topical comment and become 'art'? Probably when its draftsmanship is superior and controlled, the composition inherently striking, the impact of the conception immediate, the message of lasting interest and perhaps when the artist's reputation is secure in art history books." (28) Shikes maintains that social realism as an art form has lost much of its impact and relevance, thanks to the development of photography, television and a "contemporary eye...accustomed to abstraction. [T]he contemporary mind with any sensitivity to the compelling problems and injustices of today boggles at direct confrontation with social realism. A glancing blow, an indirect expostulation, is more bearable." (29) Though apt, that bleak image of social realism's relevance in 1969 was offset by the hope Shikes offered. In retrospect, he appears to have been prescient: "...[I]t would be premature to assign realism permanently to the graveyard of art styles. It is always possible that there will appear a representational artist of sufficient power and masterful draughtsmanship to overcome prejudice against [her] images." (30)

She has appeared. Coe seems to take Walt Whitman's advice as her personal credo:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown. (31)

Coe's work outrages even as it garners praise, a sure indication we have struck Art -- alive and enduring.

Footnotes

(1) Susan Geer, *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1991.

(2) Joanna Shaw-Eagle, *The Washington Times*, March 24, 1994.

(3) Hank Burchard, *The Washington Post*, March 25, 1994.

(4) M.D. Carnegie, *City Paper*, Washington, DC, April 29, 1994.

(5) Martha Sherrill, *The Washington Post*, March 19, 1994.

(6) *Ibid.*

(7) *Ibid.*

(8) Paul Richard, *The Washington Post*, March 19, 1994.

(9) *Ibid.*

(10) *Ibid.*

(11) *Ibid.*

(12) Holland Cotter, *Arts Magazine*, April 1985.

(13) Donald Kuspit, *Artforum*, 1985.

(14) Michael Brenson, *The New York Times*, April 19, 1985.

(15) Sue Coe, from *X*, 1986.

(16) Anonymous review of *Three Lives* by Gertrude Stein, *Kansas City Star*, December 18, 1909, p. 5.

(17) Jane Kallir, 1991.

(18) Jane Kallir, 1989.

(19) Susan Gill, *ARTnews*, October 1987.

(20) Jane Kallir, 1989.

(21) Bernadine, from "where the sun always sits on your shoulders," in *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa*, 1983.

(22) Sue Coe, interviewed by Mark Scala, *New Art Examiner*, April 1987.

(23) Jane Kallir, 1991.

(24) Kristine McKenna, *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1991.

(25) Art Young, *On My Way*, 1928.

(26) Michael Brenson, *The New York Times*, April 29, 1984.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Ralph Shikes, *The Indignant Eye*, 1969, p. xxvi.

(29) Ibid. p. 392-393.

(30) Ibid.

(31) Walt Whitman, cited by Paul Berman, *The New Yorker Magazine*, June 12, 1995.

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