

Sue Coe's Animal Rights Art Compels You To Look

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Sue Coe in her upstate New York studio, holding her "Abolition" print. Photo by Sasha Bezzubov for LAIKA.

For over four decades, Sue Coe has been at the forefront of social-political art. Unsettling and raw, her work is a protest against all forms of oppression. Born in England, she studied at the Royal College of Art in London before coming to New York in 1972, where she was an illustrator for publications like *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*. Through the mediums of drawing, painting and printmaking, Coe explored themes ranging from capitalist greed, to war, to human rights abuses. Twenty years ago, she turned her focus to the plight of animals. Her many books on the subject include *Dead Meat*, a visual chronicle of her visits to

farms and slaughterhouses (1996); *Cruel*, a summation of global animal exploitation (2013); and *The Animals' Vegan Manifesto*, her 2017 collection of 115 black-and-white woodcut illustrations.

Coe's sketchbook goes with her where cameras are rarely allowed: the kill floor of the slaughterhouse, the stockyard, the meatpacking plant. "My art begins with sketches drawn from the reality," she says. A four-decade retrospective of her work, "Sue Coe: It Can Happen Here," was recently on view at Galerie St. Etienne in New York. Here, we revisit her illuminating conversation with fellow artist Ruby Roth, author of children's books *That's Why We Don't Eat Animals* and *Bad Day*. It was originally published exclusively in *LAIKA*'s 5th print edition.

Ruby Roth: You've called yourself "a worm in the dirt." Can you explain that analogy?

Sue Coe: Worms are just eating their way through dirt, making a tunnel, moving forward. That's the way I think. I don't really look back on the work. It's gone. It's consumed, and it has its own life out there, not in my control anymore.

You do the art because you have to, and other people label it art, or not.

If the viewer decides that's what they want to look at, then it becomes culturally viable. Like [German artist] Käthe Kollwitz, I've always tried to make work that is for the viewer, not about me. That's why I've never really pushed boundaries at all in terms of form. I'm only pushing boundaries of art in terms of content. So I'm not really interested in modernity and using the audience. Especially with this subject of animal liberation, I absolutely must get people to see the content, and realize that they're empowered to change it.

Were you an artistic child?

Sue Coe: My father got *The Daily Express*, a right-wing newspaper, and in it was a cartoon strip called *Rupert*, about a bear who had friends, and so that was the art I saw. I drew chalk drawings on the sidewalk. All I've ever wanted to do was to draw animals, be with animals. I was brought up next to a slaughterhouse that was at the back of an intensive hog farm. So a huge part of childhood was wanting to be with the pigs. There were all these visions of what was [inside], and the reasoning of the adults did not convince me. [They said] that animals were food, and that it was childish and immature of me to care about them.

Were your parents right-wing?

They deferred to a class they were not, which was very typical of that era. They were not middle class but wanted to be. Because of the Second World War, they could never be themselves. My mother wanted to be an artist, but she couldn't, because she had to go do war work.

It seems from your childhood experience that you were aware of labor, class, and animal rights issues — is that what drew you to social justice?

It was all those things, and seeing the poor kids at school keep falling down. They could not compete. Seeing the terrible unfairness of being the kid who doesn't have food, who doesn't have the school uniform, who's looking after other kids at home, and just cannot survive.

At what point in your life did you commit fully to being an artist? Being a professional artist is risky. Society loves art, yet it's the first to go when budgets are cut. When I first created my books about veganism for kids, I was teaching art at an after-school program. The kids all wanted to know why [I was vegan], so I went to look for a book because I know that books and artwork can be a true friend to a child. There's a big rift between how powerful we know that art is, and how artists are compensated in society.

There was never any idea that women could be artists. I had an art history book and there was one woman artist in it — Georgia O'Keeffe. You were supposed to be out and earning a living at 16, or 15. That was not unusual for that time period. I got factory work, and then I thought I could go to art school, and I filled out forms and got in. It was amazing. And I worked, and got jobs almost immediately.

What was the process of getting your artwork in front of the right people?

I had this strange affliction that I believed I was a genius, [*laughs*] so I'd go to art directors and suggest to them that I was indeed a genius and that they absolutely had to employ me. And I believed it. And they believed it! And we labored under that fantasy for about 40 years. I loved the political-concept newspapers; it was very low pay, but it kept me drawing every day. And then I started going into the gallery situation. Then I could show the work, and I chose a gallery that represented Käthe Kollwitz.

Which artists have do you return to again and again for inspiration?

In terms of the artist, it would be Goya, number one. It would be Rembrandt. It would be any Mexican muralist. Leopoldo Méndez. Kollwitz is just such a genius. *Love Supreme* by Coltrane. There's just work ... it's [*like*] food. It's what you said earlier about how a book can be your best friend when you're a child. Art and culture are friends when you think you're just a lone voice, and no one else feels the way you do. And then you see a painting, read a poem, and you become not lonely anymore.

You were always creating sociopolitical art. When did you realize that you should have been vegan the whole time?

The culture of my age group suggested that being a vegetarian was preferable to being a meat eater, and that one was really doing a good thing [*by being vegetarian*]. As I got more educated, I realized that eating dairy and eggs is exactly the same. It's very easy to stay in

that comfort zone, and once I realized the suffering of cows in the dairy industry, I just couldn't tolerate it. I can't even believe I was a vegetarian for so long. I'm using the culture back then as an excuse. There's no excuse now.



Coe with cherry wood blocks that were made from trees that were cleared in her backyard to make room for a pipeline. "Thousands of trees were destroyed, the homes to so many animals and birds." Photo by Sasha Bezzubov for LAIKA.



Coe's sketchbook from a 2013 halal slaughterhouse visit in Abu Dhabi. The right page depicts a machine that renders hides. "Animals who were living persons moments ago, are now going to be shoes." Photo by Sasha Bezzubov for LAIKA.

Was it research that cleared your path to veganism, or someone you knew?

It was Lorri Houston, the cofounder of Farm Sanctuary. I admired her tremendously, and she became a friend. She would come to stay with me, and she'd go to my fridge and say, "This has egg whites in it!" and throw it in the garbage. She felt so strongly, and I respected her so much, that I thought, "This isn't good enough. I absolutely should do what she's doing." And then all the research I'd done about dairy. There's this hot-wiring between the cows and their newborn calves. The calves are chained in the plastic kennels, even in the coldest weather. It's just so cruel. On a scale of 1 to 10, it's a 10. The cows are constantly

being forced to give birth, and then separated. They keep looking for their calf, going up and down the wire fence. Crying, crying, crying. Living [Upstate] , I can hear the cows cry. It will go on for three days, for three nights.

It's definitely a visual that is so far beyond what people imagine when they think of milking a cow. So many vegans struggle with, "How do I help my friends and family understand?"

What works is direct confrontation that it's immoral to eat any animal products. Fifty-one percent [of annual worldwide greenhouse-gas emissions] is animal agriculture. So the message is — don't wait until tomorrow. This is your next meal. You change right now. [Being direct] works, and I've road-tested this. I want to treat people like I want to be treated. I want the truth. I'm not an infant, and even if I was an infant, most children learn very early on, before they're adulterated into lying.

Absolutely. Kids seem to handle the truth much more diplomatically than adults do. They're not defensive, and they don't come up with 5,000 excuses.

Yes. I don't care if it's a factory farm or a farm with five animals. Why aren't we supporting small family farmers who do plant-based agriculture? They are the ones trying to provide real food, organic food. This should be our priority, and we don't have any more time left. There's a level of urgency. We're starving the world with this diet. We're starving children. We're taking all potable water. There is no excuse for this. People deserve the respect to be told the truth.



Coe with her dogs Mantis, Carlin and Lamb. Her painting "Slaughterhouse Trenton" hangs behind her. "They were beautiful, gentle animals, who trembled, cried and huddled away from the kill floor, after a horrendous journey from South Carolina of three days in a truck," she recalls of the scene she witnessed. "They were so thirsty, when unloaded from the truck, they fell on their knees to drink the blood of the animals who were slaughtered before them. I thought at the time, that art seemed so useless in the face of this, art could not save those animals. But it can serve to save animals in the future." Photo by Sasha Bezzubov for LAIKA.

How have you seen the vegan movement change over the years?

Now [people] say, "I go out of my way to get free-range." The meat-industrial complex, including Whole Foods, gets a massive amount of profit from selling the idea of welfare. We're not in the business to sell that idea. If you give people conflicting information, you cannot have a unified movement. Imagine if we were all promoting veganism what we could accomplish, with all of our skills.

Have you ever been afraid to release a painting because of the subject matter?

I did a series on a slaughterhouse that was nearly fully automated. I'm still very upset by the memory. If I can't communicate that particular animal's life and death in a way that's going

to enable people to go vegan, I won't show the work yet. This particular slaughterhouse is Halal, so I have to explain this in a way where it doesn't continue to victimize Muslims. So I have to be very careful about how I put that in a context.

So it's a level of self-preparation for being responsible for your artwork.

I hope it's that, yes, because I think trauma is like having acid thrown on the brain, and that's what animals suffer. Every single animal I've seen dying in the slaughterhouse knows what's going to happen and they'll make direct eye contact, and in that eye contact is the question, "Why?" And I think that happens with animals at the last second, when they're looking for reason of justice or injustice—something they did to deserve this. Which is a lot like humans, too. There's no difference. And to think because they're cows or goats or sheep, that they don't have that emotion to search your face! Even when their throat is cut, they'll be searching your face for the motive.

I'm sure that you've witnessed people standing in front of your paintings, being transformed. Can you recall any specific stories?

It would be very rare for people that have my work not to go vegan. I absolutely expect that. And if I don't get that reaction, then I humbly would ask the audience or the person looking at the work, "What can I do to help you go vegan? What am I missing?" And they will say, "You're not showing me a vegan world. I need to see a vegan world." And that's a really interesting answer. So for that person, it's not just about the horror. They need to see the next stage before they're prepared to go there. So that's what's wonderful about being an artist and having the work in front of people, and they can look, and then you can ask them questions.

Your *Abolition* piece — what is the story behind it?

The block is from 2014, and it's a positive image of the future for animals, as I feel about the abolition movement — of a vision, not of compromise. Wood-block printing is very easy. The block is carved into, then inked. Then we get a wooden spoon, or door handle, and rub it over very thin paper that absorbs the ink. And then carefully pull the paper away. And there is the image. No fancy equipment is needed, just wood, or ordinary floor lino, and ink and paper. You can roll different colors on the block. Wood is stronger than metal, and old wood blocks last for centuries. The artist only gets cut when the knives are not sharp. There is a metaphor there somewhere!