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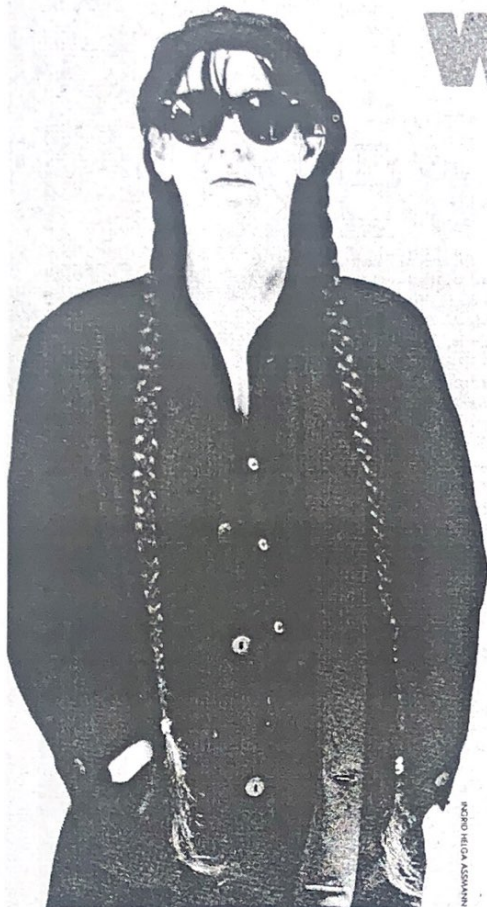
EAST VILLAGE ART:
SLOUCHING
TOWARD WALL
STREET?

SUE COE
ARTIST
PROVOCATEUR



HERE ARE THE FACTS INTERVIEW WITH SUE COE

By Sylvia Falcon



Sue Coe is the most ambitious artist I know. Coe wants to enact change through her work; change through the dissemination of information.

Born in London, Coe has lived in New York for ten years. Since the early 70s she has done series on the Ku Klux Klan, terrorists and mercenaries, Bobby Sands, vivisection, El Salvador and the Brixton riots. Her illustrations have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Mother Jones*, *The Progressive* and numerous other publications. Working in collaboration with journalists, she often presents her work with text, to provide statistical and historical information.

Though the subject and style are bleak, the message is one of positivism and hope, that the recognition of inequities will affect recourse.

Most well-known for her 1983 publication with Holly Metz, *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa*, she is now preparing a new book chronicling the pacifist and nuclear disarmament movements in this country and in Europe.

This interview was conducted last July.

not just saying it's good enough to draw people being tortured, because I don't think it is. I think it fits in so well with sensationalism.

Your work is called "sensationalist," but it isn't just brutal pictures meant to shock.

Of course there's an element of shock in it. That's how I felt when I read the first information about South Africa, when I first heard about Steve Biko, that people were being tortured and murdered. I was very shocked, and I immediately started doing drawings on it, just to get that information out so people can spread it around. Talking about distribution, the American ruling class has got it neatly packaged up; we have freedom of speech, but we don't have freedom of distribution.

You've been here for ten years. Most Europeans find the American public rather apathetic; I would think you'd find it rather frustrating to do work here.

I don't find it frustrating. The American people are not being given information. All the times I've talked about the cruise missiles, or missiles in Europe, people are ignorant of the facts.

But you hear about these little kids who are terrified of nuclear holocaust, the ones who write to the president.

Oh yes, that's the type of information one does get, anxiety information, which I think is very, very calculated to make people impotent. It's fear, you'll get that from a lot of young students that I've talked to. There's no point in organizing, or going on a demonstration because we're all going to get wiped out in a nuclear holocaust, and that's the point of putting that in prime time television. We're only seconds away from doom.

Well that's the level of a lot of work you see today, it's apocalyptic work, but it's just this free-floating anxiety with a bomb exploding in the background.

That's individual neurosis, it has nothing to do with the economic situation. People can be individually neurotic if they choose, but they shouldn't align that with the armaments in-

dustry which is a whole different issue. So I'm [not] really interested in looking at art works, it's very depressing.

So how come you're at P.P.O.W.?

When I started at P.P.O.W. the East Village was not the great Capezio shoe store that it is now. [Laughter.] It was to market the book [*South Africa*] and the show came out at the same time as the book. None of us had any idea it would manifest into this instant commodity, art-star consumerism that it's turned into.

I remember this cooperative in the East Village that showed the kind of political work that really bothers me; it was simplistic and really trite.

If I had a choice to look at bad political art or just bad art, I would choose bad political art. And I think the so-called political art is more rigorously criticized than just bad art.

Why isn't Andy Warhol a political artist? He's more of a political artist than myself.

He puts himself out as being so trivial that to me the reason he's made it is because he fulfills what people expect an artist to be, some flaky, odd-looking person who makes little comments off the top of his head.

Andy Warhol presents the political ideology of the Right—consumerism, money is everything, the cult of the individual is everything; therefore he's a political artist and should be criticized on that basis. He's presenting one political ideology over any other—to be rich and successful is the ultimate in America.

Well I think most people in America do embrace that idea. Your next book is about war resisters?

Yes, it's called *War Resisters of the Twentieth Century* and it will be out hopefully next summer. It's going to be a history and it's also going to be an organizing tool like the South Africa book inasmuch as it will give people inspiration and show them how they can actively fight weapons of genocide. It will not tell them how to do it; but it will show by example all the folks in America that do it

and all the folks in Europe that don't get any media attention, or when they do, it's "these are these crazy people throwing themselves in front of trains."

It's going to be showing what women and children and people of all different class groups can do, and have done and are doing very successfully in impeding the process of the American war machine. This is with the same journalist Holly Metz. It's taken us a long time to do this book.

Who buys your work?

The majority of people who buy my work, as far as I know, buy it because they're supporting the ideas in my work and they're supporting me. To know that a young working class person will come into the gallery and pay a bit every week out of their limited paycheck to buy this art. That's very special to me. So I don't get masses. The Rockefeller's aren't exactly flocking to the content. People that buy art usually have money and are usually not people that buy my art. [Laughter.] Of course there are exceptions.

I wanted to ask you about Greenham Common.

My sister is involved and all our friends in England, my mother went down there. It's very, very exciting and it works. And it's certainly changed, literally changed my whole way of seeing because previous to going to Greenham Common I'd always sort of had this cynical view of change. I'd always done what I thought but I never thought it had any effect.

Well what changes have been made? They did go in and install the missiles. You mean in terms of generating publicity, focusing attention?

No, because the press didn't cover that for a long, long time. I think it's created a consciousness and it's created a positive life-affirming statement that people in England are not going to passively watch their country be destroyed. They're going to put up a struggle and they're going to put up resistance.

Well how much faith do you place in the democratic process? We elected Ronald Reagan, and

What are your criteria for art?

Well, first comes the content and content creates the form. Aside from your commission work, do you do work that doesn't have an overtly political overtone?

Of course, that's personal work; I don't show that. That's portraits of my family and friends. I wouldn't consider that valid to show, but I draw baskets of fruit and vases of flowers.

Really?

Certainly.

What do you think about your own work?

I think 90% of my work fails; I'm certainly not happy with it. None of my work is political, if we're going to be accurate about the terminology, which no one bothers about but me. [Laughter.] My work's called Social Realist, not political. Political art puts forth one ideology over another, one political ideology over another; my work's not political in that sense. Social Realist art is depicting conflict and contradiction and what is real, what the artist sees.

Do you always tie your work to a text?

I prefer to do so because I don't like free-ranged, loosely-based paintings floating around. It's not sufficient to put symbols in art assuming the person looking at it knows your moral viewpoint. When people see the swastika, for example, young kids might not know that's derogatory. So I prefer to tie it down with text, to give people information. That's why I always work with journalists.

When we were talking about the South Africa book [*How to Commit Suicide in South Africa*] you seemed disturbed about the limited production. You obviously want to reach a larger audience.

The book's going to be reprinted and it's going to be in Europe which makes me very, very happy. But assume the South Africa book was without text, for me it would be a lot of indulgent S&M pictures, but the text gives it a viewpoint, this is about class struggle—apartheid in South Africa—and then we tie in all the economic statistics. I'm



Nuclear Missiles on German Soil, 1984



Mother and Child, 1984

lots of people say they'll elect him again, because they say he's improving the economy. Do you think that consciousness-raising is really going to make a difference?

Of course it makes a difference, and that's where artists, writers and musicians enter the picture, because one picture's worth a thousand words. If they start putting these contradictions into their work, which very few artists do now, then more people in America would have real information, and you'd see it in the media.

Ronald always says, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" I think it just

gets down to bread and butter for a lot of people.

Well I don't believe that to be true. I think that's part of the propaganda, because if you personally were better, based on the exploitation of someone you couldn't see, I doubt if you would choose to take that betterment. Well, you and I aren't any different from the majority of Americans, and I think if people had real information they wouldn't choose to have that better standard of living based on the exploitation and murder of Third World people.

I think despair is 90% of our reality and 10% is hope; as

despair serves no significant purpose, then we have to dismiss that and just work with the 10% of hope that there'll be change. That's basically what the American media perpetrates—the idea of helplessness and despair and we have to withdraw into our little fantasy world of aspiring to win the lottery. See, we could change everything very quickly, they know that, the American corporations know people can change things literally in a week, with a general strike; there won't be any nuclear weapons and that's what they don't want to let people know, that they have the power to withdraw their labor.

This isn't a fat, rich country, this is a country where 25% of the children are on food stamps. This is a country where, I think, it has the 18th place in child mortality, and this is the richest country in the world and the children aren't even fed correctly. We went to a playground in Washington where the children are meant to play on used missiles. This is a playground a few blocks from the Pentagon, old tanks and broken glass. Of course, no children play on these things, it's just for drug deals. That's how this country respects children, who are the life force, who are the future. They're not even given anywhere to play. I couldn't believe it! They're supposed to run up and down these missiles. What great content for art.

The whole world isn't white American males; yet the world is set up to serve them. And all the art work is by and about white American males. That sounds like Barbara Kruger.

I agree with Barbara Kruger. We're not interested in looking at white American males any more; their time has come and gone. [Laughter.] I can't respond to any of this. Yeah, it's like a speech. [Laughter.]

Has your work always been Social Realist? It would never occur to me to do

any other type of work.

Did it happen because you started as an illustrator?

No, I'd always done that since the age of twelve, so I got assignments based on the content of my work. It's always a struggle to get your stuff in print. It's never gotten any easier, it's never gotten any more difficult. I just assume this is reality, and I more or less demand they print reality. When I go down to get a cup of coffee or something, there's six people sleeping out in my doorway, who are dying of malnutrition. Am I supposed to step over that and pretend I'm in the art world? I'm not in the art world. I'm here.

So everyone is supposed to take some active step?

Well they can take an active step in stepping over the body or they can take an active step in at least acknowledging what they've just stepped over.

What kind of journalism would you like to see?

Historical journalism, journalism that this is a continuing struggle, nothing here is a new phenomenon, everything has happened before. Everything has to do with class, everything has to do with economics, either you serve the rich or you serve your own class. Many of these artists unfortunately have been so brutalized by propaganda that even though they don't come from that class they will serve the ideology of the rich, and that's what the training is about in art schools.

Well art has almost always been based on some kind of patronage system, now we have the gallery system.

Yes, but all that is artificially created because artists like Millet were supported by the workers. That's where we get back to distribution because if you can't distribute work cheaply—by postcards, prints and posters—you have no other alternative than to be supported by the rich. Working people never get a chance to buy art at a reasonable price. You know working people, poor people want work on

their walls as well. Why shouldn't they have it? They don't have it because art and the artists are the exclusive property and commodity of the rich, and that's artificial. Going back through history, there was people's art even though to a certain extent it was funded by the church. Grunewald was a revolutionary artist when he did the *Ishenheim Altarpiece*. People wrote about Goya being a political artist but they never mention that Goya was banned. *The Disasters of War* weren't published until he was dead. His work certainly wasn't ambiguous; he was removed from the royal court, which was why he painted in puns, and all of a sudden Goya's being used, because of his ambiguity, it's high art. Well that's just bull and it's historically inaccurate. All these artists have political content, even Caravaggio. Political and Social Realist art are the norm in history; they're not the exception.

What is the exception is Abstract Expressionism which created the form of newness. Content wasn't an issue anymore but that was economically created because the WPA and the Artist's Congress became too powerful and they were removed, and this whole movement was created artificially. Jackson Pollock, the cult of the individual.

Who do you include today as being the norm?

Then I definitely wouldn't look at the fine arts I would look at commercial art, Brad Hollands, Marshall Artisman and Robert Wever. As always with America the great art is in magazines and newspapers. It's called commercial art but in fact it's less commercial than this gallery art.

How do you view graffiti work? I'm much more interested in spraying graffiti on cruise missiles and going in there with the old can of spray paint. [Those people] are arrested immediately and they're put in prison, that's how powerful art can be.