

THE DICTATES OF CONSCIENCE

Artwell
4/16/1987

San Francisco / **Maria Porges**

A hundred years from now when historians look back on the cultural life of the present era, it's unlikely that the Reagan/Thatcher/Botha years will be remembered for political activism or a strong display of social conscience. In art, literature and music, very little is going on that makes more than a superficial comment on society and its problems.

A courageous exception to this somewhat solipsistic behavior is the work of Sue Coe. Her intention is to speak through her art as the conscience of the eighties, exposing racism, sexism and other forms of oppression in a vivid and immediate way. Coe's works on paper, presently on view at Gallery Paule Anglim, clearly function as propaganda for various causes. It's important to remember, as Coe herself pointed out several times at heavily attended talks around the city, that propaganda merely refers to information that is spread systematically with the intention of helping or harming some individual, institution or movement. She tries to accomplish both of these ends—helping and harming—by alternately showing, for instance, the plight of the homeless in the face of the largest arms dealer in the world. Her concerns are global but are expressed through the portrayal of individuals and particular incidents.

This exhibit is in two parts. The first consists of works made for the printed page—small drawings executed specifically for publication as editorial art in newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times*, *Mother Jones* and the *People's Daily World*, among others. A portfolio of the actual pages on which the drawings appeared is available for examination. The

second part of the exhibition is a larger group of paintings and drawings, including several under the heading of *Monetarism*. These are the first of a series on this subject, all of which will eventually appear as a book (like Coe's *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa* [with Holly Metz] or *X*, the story of Malcolm X's assassination).

Mass reproduction in a form that is relatively easily obtainable and affordable is Coe's avowed goal for all of her work. She speaks of herself as an illustrator, and though this may not seem to do justice to the scope of her talents, it's an accurate description in the sense that all of these images—unlike most high art—work brilliantly in reproduction. Her black and white compositions (relieved only occasionally

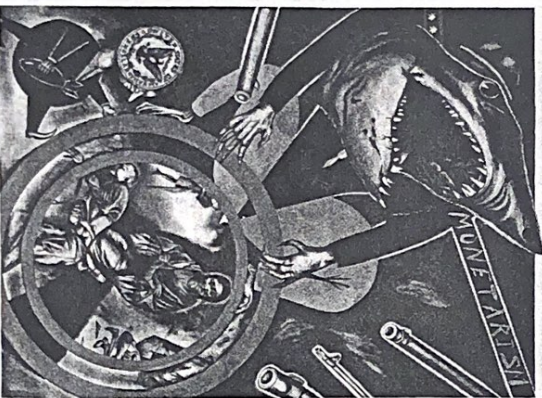
with a slash of violent red used for punctuation or emphasis) have the raw graphic power of pieces by Goya and Kollwitz, enhanced with the nightmarish, dark sensibility of Munch or Ensor. Although Coe really wants the formal qualities of her work to be ignored and only the content to be discussed, the fact remains that it is her gift for drawing and her chilling manipulation of deep chiaroscuro that makes these images so compelling. We are constantly bombarded with propaganda in the form of news and advertising, most of which has lost the power to move us (except, perhaps, by wearing us down). Under these conditions, it is Coe's talent that has made it possible for her savage compassion to receive attention.

Looking at the newspaper pages and at Coe's books, however, an interesting paradox emerges: Although Coe believes in the intimacy of the printed image—the personal experience each viewer has with the work—it isn't clear whether it's the closeness or the distance of the mechanical reproduction that makes it work so well for us. The uniform blackness of the printing process has a way of evening things out, and the inevitable reduction in scale makes almost any carnage easier to deal with. And that previously mentioned barrage of printed matter leveled at us daily creates a sad kind of immunity to all books and magazines—a distance material created by the need to keep such material at arm's length in order not to be engulfed by it.

It's important to remember that art can investigate a kind of revolution through means other than the ones pictured or suggested by Coe's work. Society can be altered profoundly through the develop-

ment of new ways of perceiving or experiencing the world, though such changes usually take place at the speed of advancing glaciers, rather than with the bulletlike swiftness of political upheaval. A small selection of work by Irvin Tepper, on exhibit concurrently with Coe's, follows this slower route. Tepper eschews the explicitly political (in all but the most lighthearted way—for example, a drawing titled *Self-Portrait as Mao*) but has been involved in the revelation of new ways of seeing for most of his varied career, during which he has created videos, films, ceramic works and drawings. Although the graphic works included lack much of the interest and intelligence that marked drawings shown here in the past, the other pieces—several of the "conceptual" cups Tepper is known for—are truly magical. Somewhat larger than life-size, these pieces are deformed almost to the point of disintegration through a process of being sanded to a translucent thinness so that they often tear apart in firing, unable to hold up their own weight. They look impossibly fragile, like archaeological artifacts made out of the curling ash of burned paper or, somehow, of light itself.

Coe examines and reveals the immediate issues of survival, human rights and political structures and their effects on individual lives, while Tepper's investigation is clearly of a more abstract, rarefied nature. The question posed by these two very different points of view isn't really, which is "better"? but, What do we believe the real purpose of art to be and, therefore, the job of the artists? This exhibition and Coe's visit to San Francisco may make many people think about these questions and the values that lie behind them. □



Sue Coe, *Monetarism*, 1987, mixed media, 40" x 30", at Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco.