



Register • Login • Current Issue • Contact Us • Advertise

search GO

Resources Inspiration Competitions Directory Education DesignCasts Print Blogs Shop About Us Subscribe Job List

Witness to Slaughter

by Steven Heller

Share / Save

Sue Coe's art is stark, polemical, and gruesome—and beautiful in spite of itself.



Me Drawing in a Slaughterhouse, from Sue Coe's new book, *Cruel: Bearing Witness to Animal Exploitation*

When it was published in 1996, [Dead Meat](#), Sue Coe's graphic exposé of the meat-processing industry, was as shocking as Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* 90 years earlier. Both captured the horror of the slaughterhouse while critiquing the underlying barbarity of capitalism. This month, OR Books is publishing an update called [Cruel: Bearing Witness to Animal Exploitation](#) (\$25), which draws on Coe's "life" in slaughterhouses and stockyards, tackling subjects that she didn't feel qualified to deal with earlier—such as the infectious diseases that are now systemic in industrialized food and can spread globally in a matter of days. I asked Coe to discuss the artistic, aesthetic, and moral implications of a subject that has occupied more than 20 years of her life.

Since the publication of the original book, do you believe you've made a marked impact on behavior? You've turned me off red meat forever. Absolutely. My art has made thousands of people vegetarian or vegan. It is said that one needs to hear the truth ten times before one can change, and my work may have been lucky and been that tenth time. More important, my inspiration is other animal-rights activists, so I consider myself part of a team that is much larger than any one

PRINT Speaker Series Presents:
Vijay Mathews Live
Beyond Print: Digital Innovation
 Live DesignCast

Th., April 26, 2 PM ET // Price \$29.99 [Register Now](#)



Recommend

Sign Up to see what your friends recommend.

Share Share this page with your friends.

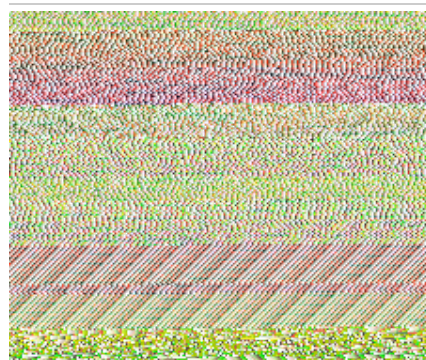


Image of the Day

painting or drawing. The people I know are truly courageous. I am just an artist standing behind them, part of a team that will never give up, never stop working, a team that the meat industry and its paid lobbyist lackeys fear very much.

You've used your art to examine and illuminate very difficult issues—AIDS treatment in the third world is another. And you put yourself into the situations you address. How do you prepare? The majority of humans in this world are forced to witness without power. When I enter a place where there is killing, I am powerless to change anything in that moment. People only want to witness when they feel they have the power to change something, or else they do not want to play. It is a very Western view. At the very heart of oppression is the desire for power and control. Animals and poor people are the unwanted and powerless. I drew people with full-blown AIDS in the early days of the pandemic, because one of my friends was a doctor on the front lines. It was a time when nearly everyone died. I was scared, not of contracting HIV, but of watching any human being dying. Dying is privatized—along with everything else—yet I witnessed people's courage and strength and all those who helped them on this journey. A few years ago, in a Texas prison, I drew women who were HIV positive. The prison was so frightening: It was all white, and the lights were the brightest, reflecting off the white walls, and the uniforms were all white; there was nowhere to rest the eyes, no shadows of quiet—the noise of the orders over the loudspeaker. The women had to walk in single file against a wall and be counted over and over again. It was terrible state cruelty inflicted on human beings, who were "guilty" of being poor and uneducated, some mentally ill, and physically sick. The women said the worst part of prison was that there is never any rest; they sleep in beds with a low partition between them, and young women, new to the prison system, would be screaming all night from drugs or mental-health disorders. I don't know how to prepare for any of it, to step in another's shoes; whatever I feel is magnified a thousand times by a person or animal in that situation. I cling to the idea that maybe the art will help change it.

How do you stomach being in the midst of a killing floor? Does making the images help you cope? Or do you become numb after a while? The images are about me retraumatizing you, the viewer. Trauma is like having acid thrown onto your brain: Like an etching plate, it eats into it, and you are compelled to keep imprinting it onto other people, until they feel it too. It's not my stomach I worry about; it's my mind, or wherever my soul is located, because it gets broken every time animals suffer. When I make art, I make more witnesses, and when there are enough witnesses, the horror stops. Insanity comes from isolation, feeling you are alone in seeing what most do not. Many animal-protection activists suffer immensely, because they have opened a door of consciousness that enables them to see a reality that very few want to see. Tactically, rather than stressing the moment of personal transformation, and its subsequent isolation, the animal-rights debate must enter public policy, enter the realm of political debate—this is happening, with many bills being introduced. The animal-rights movement is global and it is growing.

How so? An example is my congressman, Maurice Hinchey, an animal-rights activist; he says so very clearly and directly when he cosponsors animal-protection legislation. This is so different from even a decade ago. There will come a day when eating meat will be illegal.



Cover for *Cruel: Bearing Witness to Animal Exploitation* (left); *You Consume Their Terror* (right),



Because [Magic Johnson](#) (and some other people) bought the Dodgers for \$2 Billion. Because [Frank McCourt](#) is no longer the owner. Because we still have "Fernandomania." And the call because [Koufax's perfect game](#) still rings in our ears. Images by [Butter 'N' Bacon Studio](#).

[Image of the Day Archive](#)



Most Recent Articles

Perhaps. But for now, I can see from your work that butchery has become more efficient but not more humane. Is this ever possible? Should it be? This is a serious question and one that is debated constantly. No, it is never possible to make slaughter more humane. The process of breeding animals only to murder them at a very young age for no reason other than to make money is cruel and immoral. Slaughter can be made more efficient, and animal scientists can debate whether or not decompression or gassing involves less suffering to the animal than electrocution or “exsanguination,” with or without stun. But these are bizarre and delusional mental gymnastics. The meat industry does not care about animals. It cares about making the most profit in the fastest way. Once you, the person who cares about animals, enter their world in an attempt to negotiate gradations of suffering, then you have got seriously lost and fucked up. There is legislation that is important as it pertains to food and animal protection—downed animals must be euthanized immediately and not dragged into slaughterhouses in chains or left to die by the side of the road; tail docking must be made illegal; cameras need to be in all slaughterhouses—but debating with the meat industry about cage sizes and slaughtering methodology is indirectly enabling the industry to sell the idea of happy meat to a more middle-class customer.

Happier meat is more expensive meat. It is expanding their business, not reducing it. It has always been this way in any social-justice movement: people’s compassion and good intentions are used as a weapon against them by the dominant class. It can be legitimately argued that discussion of these issues brings to the attention of consumers that their food had a mother who was torn away from them, food who felt pain in a tiny cage, food whose leg was torn out when they were dragged from that cage, food who suffocated to death in a net or on a hook—but given limited time and resources, promotion of a plant-based diet over humane animal slaughter saves more animals.

Do we actually need to eat meat to stay alive? None of us needs animal products to be healthy and well fed. That is a total and complete lie. The meat industry states, as though they have a crystal ball, that by 2050 meat production will have doubled. My crystal ball, which is more valid than theirs, because it’s not smeared with blood money, says that by the year 2050 the mass of humanity will be vegan.

“The highest quality I can aim for is: ‘This drawing kills the animal-exploitation industry.’ ”



Finning

In your experience, how does working in a slaughterhouse impact the workers? Are they numb off the killing floors? The staff I have met on the kill floor are usually fully aware of how the animals suffer. They see this up close more than anyone. They either despise the job, and leave at the earliest opportunity (the majority); or justify the work as providing “food”; or they are numbed and feel powerless in their own lives and enjoy inflicting

[Magic-Ink Testing with Brian McMullen](#)

[Ink on Plastic](#)

[Tips for Business Growth](#)

[Why Designers Still Can't Think](#)

[Power by Design](#)

Most Popular

[Print's Power 2012 Issue](#)

[Print's December 2011 Issue](#)

[25 Best iPhone Apps on Color](#)

[Print's October 2011 Issue: Table of Contents](#)

more pain on the helpless animal. It is the same process with farmed animals. The farmer justifies the tail docking, the rape of cows, the sow-gestation crates, the debeaking of hens, the chaining of replacement heifers with well-memorized science babble and talking points pushed at them by industry publications, and they can get away with blatant cruelty, because animals are just property. The irony is that those slaughterhouse workers and farmers are themselves the property of the global meat industry, which funded them for all the equipment of factory farming. Humans are becoming the factory farmed, trained to look away and just consume, never question, live in fear and debt, and die quietly and efficiently, be that docile animal body in the capitalist labor process. Yet quite a few of the animals are fighting back. They are not going quietly.

As an artist, do you feel you've achieved the quality of work that you've wanted to achieve? As a female, I am socialized to be depreciating and humble and nonthreatening, but I'm afraid that programming did not work too well. My work speaks for itself. If I have doubts, I would never reveal them, as I exist in a very hostile censorious environment. Making direct social-political art, devoid of irony and money, with no postmodernist grease to oil the art-world wheels, takes strength and persistence. I hope the killers of animals choke on my work, spit it out, regret they ever saw it, regret me—that is my idea of quality in art. Art does not become art until the viewer makes it so; they decide. Woody Guthrie carved "This machine kills fascists" into his guitar; the highest quality I can aim for is: "This drawing kills the animal-exploitation industry."

Is your art entirely in the service of the message? Or do you allow yourself certain aesthetic pleasures? A few years ago, oil painting seduced me. It was a confusing time. I went over to the dark side and discovered color. Hours would go by, and I would gaze at glazes of a palette loaded with squeezable colors and realized I was happy; this was fun! Art had become fun! The clouds in the sky, the lighting effects, became very important—and so many choices with the colors, all must be tried. Of course I thought I could control it, be sparing with the color, only paint on the side, but then it became every day. Artists understand what I am talking about. Yet the ghosts started to speak to me, whispers at first, and they appeared as ghosts always do, in black-and-white, garbed in a certain graphic elegance. They all had those eyes, of all the animals I have seen suffer, which say, "Why is this happening to me? What did I do wrong?" It is the injustice—that is what their eyes say. My pleasure is that the ghosts are still in contact, never that far away.

Reader Comments

[Login](#) to add a comment. Not a registered user? [Register Now!](#)



Free Knife!

With any purchase of Columbia River Knife and Tool products valued at \$50 or More



Carry Hope

13 designers create a custom tote bag for their favorite charity. Featuring the work of: Atelier Télescopique, Büro Destruct, Christoph Niemann, Deanne Cheuk, Ed Fella, Geoff McFetridge, Hort, James Joyce, Laurent Fetis, Rick Valicenti, Si Scott, Spin, and Sawdust. [Order one today!](#)



Subscribe to Print and get all 6 issues for just \$40

In This Issue: [The New Visual Artists Issue](#), in which we celebrate the best and brightest young artists in the field. On the cover: For this issue's cover, we wanted to highlight the amazing work being showcased inside by our NVA selections, but the question quickly arose: how do you show 20 designers' works on one cover? [Read More](#)

Check Out Past Issues



Google Sponsored Links

[Drug & Alcohol Rehab](#)

Affordable Leading Residential Rehab.
Non-12 Step Program
www.StGregoryCtr.com

[Guaranteed Home Exchange](#)

Worldwide Home Swaps since 1953 Get
\$30 Off with 'Feb30' Promo Code
www.intervac-homeexchange.com

[Save \\$10,000 On New Home](#)

Get A \$10,000 Finished Basement Package
Offer At Vista Woods.
www.vistawoodsny.com

Sponsored Links

[2010 Pantone Plus Series at Great Discounts](#)

Hundreds of new colors to inspire your creativity!

[75,000+ Design Products at MyDesignShop](#)

Find design-related products - books, software, more!

[Get Organized and Make Your Ideas Happen](#)

Action Method - Special Offer from HOW

[Become a Design Rockstar!](#)

Subscriptions, DesignCasts and Much More.

[Upgrade to CS5.5 starting at \\$399!](#)

Only at Adobe.com

Featured Links

[Stay on top of your Graphic Design Skills](#)

Online Workshops Available at HOW University

[HOW Mind Your Own Business Conf.](#)

Gain a new perspective on your creative firm

[Check Out All of the Print DesignCasts](#)

Improve your career and your business.

[More than 1,100 Color Combinations](#)

Plus free swatch downloads.

[Supercharge your Self-Promotion Efforts](#)

The Step-by-Step Marketing Machine

AdChoices 

Contact Us

Privacy Policy

Site Map

Job List

Copyright © 2012 by F+W Media.