



Sue Coe, *New York 1985—Car Hookers Age 13, 1985*, mixed media and collage on canvas, 8 x 10".

the West. And all of these are made to seem absurd.

This pair of troublemakers, like Laurel and Hardy, move around in the territory of the obvious and the banal, turning everything upside down. They undermine common sense by reversing logical consequences, and, with a surprisingly light touch, they make what was thought to be heroic seem ridiculous.

—IDA PANICELLI

Translated from the Italian by Meg Shore.

Sue Coe PPOW

Sue Coe's paintings are fierce and aggressive, but not phallogocentric; their violence comes from another source—Coe's activism. She offers a truly psychotic realism, to use a concept I first developed in dealing with Leon Golub's art, and which also seems applicable to Max Beckmann and Eric Fischl. That is, she develops a mad art in response to a mad world—a "negative" art of violent fantasy and grotesque illustration to protest the "negativity" of reality, as Theodor Adorno calls it. Ugliness combats ugliness, disintegration combats disintegration, in a kind of mithridatic act of appropriation. Coe has developed a new kind of journalistic art, essentially an expressionist/surrealist high-art political cartoon, easily as pointed and as rich with drama and satire as comparable works by Goya and Honoré Daumier. Her book, *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa* (a collaboration with Holly Metz), is the most brilliant example of her work to date.

How does an illustrator move

beyond the book and onto the wall? In this exhibition Coe had two major strategies: to cover the wall from top to bottom with unstretched canvases, as if by being cloaked it became a swaggering, daredevil, overbearing hero, and to create a turbulent sea of almost-pure-black paintings, in which scenes and figures float like momentary wave formations, at times no more than bloody accents on the overall deadly black. It is as though the scenes were debris from some shipwreck of meaning, floating on an anonymous, indifferent ocean of nothingness. I may overstate the blackness of Coe's paintings, but it seems to be fraught with all the meaning in the work, at once epitomizing and broad-casting it beyond the events and figures depicted. The blackness is itself the message, if not all the message, one needs.

Coe realizes that making pictures for a wall requires a different dynamic than for a book; she must achieve carrying power through other than strictly narrative means. The "form" of blackness becomes the scene, rather than functioning as mere atmosphere, coloring the narrative message. For the wall, abstract atmosphere must become narrative substance; the official narrative line is subsumed in it, almost the way a libretto is dissolved in the music in an opera. The black itself is the primary narrative; the actual story line of each picture becomes secondary incident. The viewer of a painting is not the reader of a book: Coe's wall paintings must hit one with something more than their readability at first glance, if they are to have effect. A wall painting is not integrated into a larger story the way the book illustration is—it is on its own,

whatever its allusions, and thus must tell its story in a different way. Coe's wall paintings are as hardhitting as her book illustrations, but they start from a different premise. Coe seems to establish a new genre, somewhere between political cartoon and history painting. She certainly creates a visual space rich in discontinuities and indirection, altogether new in effect however much it is a "slang space" deriving from 20th-century spatial syntax. Her violent space correlates with her disturbing, macabre, social-realist vision.

In the section on "Black as an ideal" in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno writes, "If works of art are to survive in the context of extremity and darkness, which is social reality, and if they are to avoid being sold as mere comfort, they have to assimilate themselves to that reality. Radical art today is the same as dark art: its background color is black. Much of contemporary art is irrelevant because it does not take note of this fact, continuing instead to take a childish delight in bright colors." Coe's paintings may look childish, not because of any bright colors (although their red is furious, intending to outrage, like punk fashion), but because of their populist wit; their instant if quirky readability makes them seem facile initially, but their blackness signifies a mature consciousness of social—and artistic—reality. There is no comfort in Coe's paintings, not even the kind of longing for comfort found in Mark Rothko's late works, in which abstract beauty converts the negative into positive. Black is neither background nor foreground in Coe, but both overground and underground—the vacuum jar and underground in

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which the figures exist. This is all that is left of social reality: imprisonment, from above and from below.

Coe's use of black also epitomizes her revolutionary feminism, feminism that is not only a means of female self-assertion and rebirth, but that bears on human issues of social oppression, merging its force with other revolutionary forces. It wants to change the world as a whole, not just the world of and for women. Coe is dynamically moral, treading a tightwire between consciousness of herself as an outsider female artist and of general human suffering. She has a courage of conviction that is always special wherever it appears, not only because it is rare but because it is so necessary, both to make art and to survive in the world. Coe offers a powerful art of conscience that successfully manages to create a new sense of what public statement means without any loss of the kind of intimacy and immediacy of effect one experiences with a book illustration. She has created an original moral style of picture, in which social truth is hammered home without becoming artistically trivial.

—DONALD KUSPIT

Houston

Michael Heizer Rice University

A large version of Michael Heizer's 45°, 90°, 180° was installed in front of the engineering building on the Rice University campus on December 8 and 9 of 1984. The piece's three stone slabs are of Texas pink granite, cut about 180