

# IN CONVERSATION WITH SUE COE

*Sue Coe, one of the most committed activist artists in America, has during her thirty-five-year career charted an idiosyncratic course through an environment that is at best ambivalent toward art with overt socio-political content.*

*Interview by Giovanni Aloï*



Sue Coe

Man Followed by the Ghosts of His Meat, 1990. Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper.  
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Recently, Anita Guerrini, Professor of Environmental Studies and History at University of California stirred up a range of reactions in response to a thread she launched on H-Animal (the online-resource website for Animal Studies Scholars). Her question was: “does Animal Studies necessarily imply animal advocacy?”

The point of Animal Studies seems to be to advocate a certain political point of view, and this influences the kinds of work that have appeared thus far. Is there room in Animal Studies for people who, say, think eating meat is not wrong? Or that experimentation on animals in some circumstances is somehow justified? As someone who has written about animal

experimentation quite a lot, but who has not unreservedly condemned it, I am not sure that I have a place in Animal Studies as it is currently defined.”

### **What is your take on this subject?**

As one revolutionary in the times of South African apartheid stated “ I agree blacks and whites should co-exist, but first blacks have to actually exist.” People have to do what they believe to be right – I am a vegan, and am against all animal exploitation, and choose to be with humans of my own kind in my personal life, just to take a break from the larger world out there, that we animal activists are forced to witness and engage with nearly 24/7. I remember that I was a meat eater once, we all have different levels of awareness, and need to have patience with others, but on the other hand its important to create a sanctuary from all the suffering to refuel and get inspired to continue the struggle. Am not sure that answers your question, but I tried!

### **A number of your works revolve around animal rights activism. When and why did you become involved in animal rights?**

I grew up in the time of huge media attention to animal cruelty, and lived a block away from a slaughterhouse, and next door to a hog farm. The animals lived in tin sheds, and I could see what happened to them, and could not ignore it. As children we would rescue the animals from the school labs, and try and hide animals we knew were going to be slaughtered. It was an ongoing race to outwit those who would kill animals.

### **How do you feel about animal rights at present?**

I feel good about our progress, proud that so many people are involved, around the world, and it helps to look at historical social justice struggles, to realize how long it takes, how the resistance to change increases exponentially as progress is made, and then eventually turns into acceptance, just when one has despair of anything every changing – it all changes! All the people I know, are involved in animal issues, from stopping the horse carriage trade in central park, to being active in changing legislation to stop factory farming, to spay and neuter bills in California, or rescuing horses from killer buyers, the whole gamut of activism. I particularly respect Patty Mark of Animal Liberation Victoria (Australia) and Kim Stallwood in England, and all the staff at Farm Sanctuary USA. Then there are the small groups of activists on the front lines in countries that are desperately poor and in war zones, and they too are making a massive difference for animals, with very little money. It’s really an amazing thing that in the last 30 years, there are groups all over the planet that have a shared mission. I am an optimist.

### **In the past, Newspaper and magazine editors have restricted your freedom of expression because of the overt and political content involved with your work. Do you have a story that may not be yet published because deemed ‘too strong’?**

Some time ago, I stopped negotiating for crumbs with the mass media, and decided to publish my work in the form I intended, I can come up with my own dumb ideas, I do not need editors to tell me their dumb ideas. This does not mean that one should not continue to try to negotiate and learn from that process, but I did that for 30 odd years, and made the choice of a much smaller audience with a stronger content. Generally magazines do not want any images that contradict their advertising, which could be for fur or ‘meat’.

### **‘Sheep of Fools’ originated from brief news clipping about the sinking of a ship full of sheep bound from Australia to Jordan. The instance involved the death of 60.000 sheep and that of one man. Are you more sensitive to farmed animals issues or those related to wild animals?**

As I live in rural America, I am close to both farmed and wild animals. I can see men with guns shoot down animals only a few hundred yards away from me, I have seen deer shot but not killed, go to some secret place to die, I have seen hundreds of deer carcasses just dumped, murdered just for the joy of killing, this subsistence argument is generally a lie, and farms that chain replacement heifers down the road from where I live. From my experience of human beings, I know exactly why deer hunters, take the testicles of deer, and hang them from spiked branches – its so they can come back at night, and get a clear shot of coyotes. I can see the calves torn from their mothers and kept in bitter cold, with no licks or warmth of hay. It’s all right in front of my eyes, both the suffering and imprisonment of animals, and their freedom and beauty. Its taken much learning on my part, to take what I see and re-traumatize other people. It takes a real artist to re-traumatize people!

### **What role does ‘beauty’ play in your work?**

Its in the craft, the form, it entices people to look at the content.

### **Which artists have influenced your work, both formally and contextually?**

Formally, it is Goya and Rembrandt – at heart, I am a medievalist, the ancient Bestiary’s and manuscripts, the carvings of animals in cathedrals, just the wonder of an artisan describing an elephant in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, despite having never seen one.





Sue Coe

Meat Flies, 1991 Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper. Copyright ©1991 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York ©

***Is there space for animal rights in the contemporary art scene?***

I make a historical connection to the artwork/poetry/journalism that came about in response to the slave trade, and then abolition of that trade, and the emancipation of slaves – same with other social justice movements. Art does not exist in a vacuum, it travels alongside political struggles. I was amazed to find a history of visual protest against animal exploitation that existed long before our movement became so popular. Of course as the art scene, is essentially bourgeois and controlled by that dominant class, they are unlikely to give space to any work that questions the status quo – its up to us, to make space, and there does exist within the art world, people of ethics and conscience. It's a strange thing, but human beings, even those who are aware, still want to see themselves as the centre of attention in a painting holding the viewers gaze. It's an uphill fight to make non-human animals the star of their own reality that have their own emotions and own lives. We always look to ourselves for the reaction shot, and never leave breathing room for any other creatures.

***What do you think of Damien Hirst's use of animals in his work?***

Post modernist critique is not my forte! His work reminds of visiting a seaside resort as a child, and seeing those sea horses suspended in snow globes, and trying to fathom why someone would do that – what was once alive is now a thing to be turned upside down and manipulated. In 1886, P.T. Barnum displayed the dead body of Jumbo; he got more money travelling a stuffed elephant than the living Jumbo. It's Carnival, with millions of dollars in swag at stake.

Would it educate the wealthy gallery goers, to have victims of genocide in Darfur or Kenya, suspended in tanks floating around 57<sup>th</sup> St? For Barnam and Hagenbeck of Germany, it was nothing new to have indigenous peoples and animals in the same display case. Hirst's work is a double-edged sword, it cuts both ways - on the one hand he reveals the normalcy when death becomes a thing, on the other the decadence of constantly striving to be new and different.





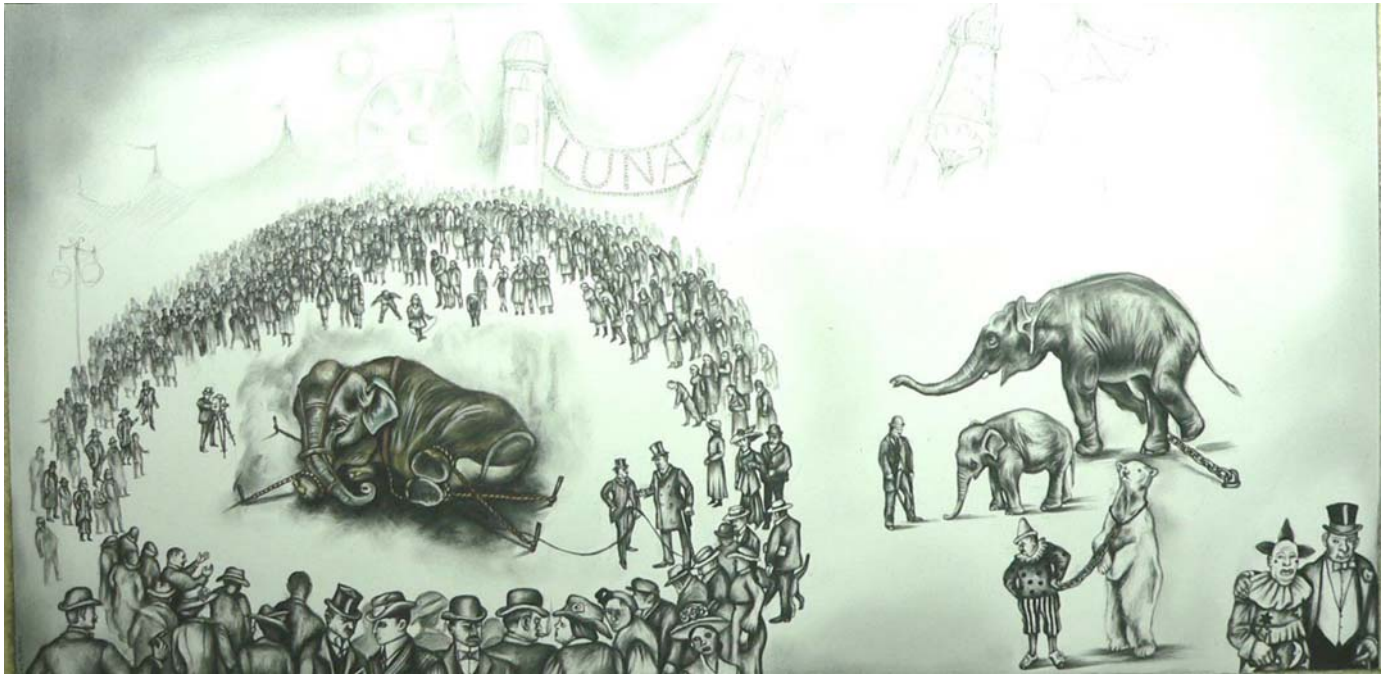
Sue Coe

Selection for the Slaughter, 1991 Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper. Copyright ©1991 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne. New York ©

***Your work springs from lengthy and difficult investigations. You said: "In art, I believe that technique is the test of sincerity, so for art to become a weapon, it first has to be art. Slaughter has been normalised by being concealed, and we need the light of day to spotlight these places. When I draw, there is***

***also time that is spent with the subject, there is an intimacy in drawing. The meat packers could see what I was drawing, it was being drawn on the kill floor, and was the truth, it was not my 'taking' a photo, and 'taking' it away from them.... if they wanted the drawing they could have it."***





Sue Coe

Thomas Edison Kills Topsy the Elephant to Promote the Electric Chair, 2007 Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper. Copyright ©2007 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York ©

“They say an elephant never forgets. But there is one elephant who we should always remember every time we turn on the light. Her name was Topsy. She was electrocuted by Thomas Edison in New York in 1903 before a crowd of 1,500 spectators who each paid 10 cents to watch. Why electrocute an elephant? Edison wanted to win the “Battle of the Currents” against George Westinghouse and feed America’s industry with power. Topsy was an Asian elephant who became a dangerous embarrassment to one of America’s first amusement parks on Coney Island. She killed people through no fault of her own. Topsy was murdered when expediency and spectacle conspired with power and profit.”

*Text by Kim Stallwood from Coe and Stallwood’s new project*

**Traditionally, photography or film (as in documentary) hold the false pretence of representing reality. How does ‘drawing something’ become more truthful than ‘photographing something’ in your work?**

It’s more truthful to me because I am spending time with the subject, and they can see what I am doing. There are some amazing photographers, the work of Sebastiao Salgado, he is a Rembrandt of the camera. When I started the Sheep of Fools series, I felt that I knew nothing about sheep, I knew what they looked like, that was all – so I went to draw them at Farm Sanctuary, all of them had been rescued, had escaped slaughterhouses, or had been found frozen into the sides of trucks, or just abandoned and left to starve. At dusk, the sheep went into the barn. There were around 90 sheep, I sat near Bronwyn, who feels he is the alpha guard sheep, and he felt I should be observed. Darkness came, and the stars came out, as well as some snow – this was the first snow of the season, and the sheep all went to the barn door to watch it fall out of

the sky, and see the last of the cows, walk down the mountain to their barns – the sheep had such a full concentration and silence at the watching of snow, and then they went back to chewing on the hay, and settled in their nests for the night. It was such a feeling of complete unity and connection with all things, the rustle of the hay, the soft snow, the sweet smell of sheep’s breath, and I was drawing, even though it was too dark to see. I felt that sheep think as one being, that their security resides with the flock.

**Generally, who do you think is the target audience of your work?**

Oh, I don’t know, once the art is done, it’s gone away from me, on its own journey, it ends up in places I never expect. What is in my mind, is this the truthful depiction of the animals life, represented in a way that can change things for the better.

**‘Modern Man Followed by the Ghosts of his Meat’ is a great piece that makes you laugh**



Sue Coe

The Killing of Dumbo, 2007 Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper. Copyright ©2007 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York ©

**In addition, chills you to the bone at the same time. How did the idea come about?**

Its been so many years.....I was thinking of the hidden consequences of our actions, and how would it be if we were always followed by the creatures we have harmed, that they were never out of our sight.

**What are currently working on?**

I am working on Topsy the elephant that was electrocuted by Edison in 1903, to entertain and prove that DC power was preferable to AC power, to get the contract for the electric chair. Kim Stallwood is working with me on this project.

*Born in Tamworth, Staffordshire, England, Sue Coe, who had studied at the Royal College of Art in London, emigrated to the United States in 1972. She settled in New York City from where she has established a reputation as a socio-political artist, mostly doing charcoal drawings. Her work references a wide range of 'not-easy-on-the-eyes' issues including the Ku Klux Klan, sweatshop conditions, animal rights, petroleum industry violations, apartheid, women's rights and AIDS.*

*Sue Coe was interviewed by Antennae in February 2008 ©*