Dead Meat

Excuse me, sir, there's a piece of dead cow on your fork

Alon K. Raab

1997

a review of

Dead Meat, drawings by Sue Coe, with an essay by Alexander Cockburn, Four Walls Eight Windows Press, New York-London, 1996, $22.

"As often as Herman had witnessed the slaughter of animals and fish, he always had the same thought: in their behavior towards creatures, all men were Nazis. The smugness which man could do with other species as he pleased exemplified the most extreme racist theories, the principle that might is right…for the animals, life is always Treblinka."

— from *Enemies: A Love Story*, Isaac Bashevis Singer

By now the facts are well known: Every minute about ten thousand animals are murdered in the United States—more than five billion animals a year end their lives on someone's plate.

The facade of "Happy Meals" served at McDeath, and McGarbage outlets, under signs proudly proclaiming "over zillions slaughtered," no longer manages to hide the destruction of tropical rain forests burned to raise cattle, or the great misery involved in the "meat industry." Yet, even for long-time vegans and those active in the animal liberation movement, Sue Coe's book manages to disturb, anger, and sadden.

Dead Meat is comprised of Coe's startling drawings and accompanying descriptions of her two years in a world governed under the sign of the exploitation and murder of animals. We are taken along on her journey through hell.

From a Liverpool slaughter house, straight out of the 19th century, where the workers wade up to their knees in the blood of their victims, to an ultra modern "state of the art" assembly line where every operation is mechanized and computerized, we experience the horrors. In the factory farms where the animals are born, the crowded cages devoid of sun, air or soil, the snatching of animals and their long journeys on crowded trains or trucks in the heat and cold, the herding with electric prods, the loss of their babies and friends—Coe is there with her pen. She shows the terror in the eyes of the animals, the speed of the knife, the internal organs spilling from living creatures still breathing, the rivers of muck and blood, the cries of helplessness and incomprehension.

Animals are at the center of the book, but Coe also pays attention to the humans with whom they come in deadly contact. The people appearing in her drawings include workers toiling under humiliating conditions, rich farm barons, and "scientists" at respectable universities who, under the pretense of engaging in genetics research, play at being gods. Coe shows what this industry of torture does to animals whose sacredness has been violated, and to the humans as well. There are workers who have lost fingers and suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome, whose eyes often betray cruelty or callousness to the suffering of others.

Coe excels at pointing out the hypocrisies rampant in modern industrial society, such as showing the "Say no to drugs" cliché adorning cartons with milk that flows from cows pumped throughout their lives with growth hormones and antibiotics. The power that propels her art, however, is the ability to face the atrocities, as well as her world view. Coe is not a liberal who hopes animals will have a little more grass or bigger cages. She is a radical,

a descendent of such artists as Goya, Grosz, and Kollowitz who wanted to change the world, and she uses details in order to sharpen the way we relate to animals, to each other, and to ourselves.

Coe emphasizes class divisions of the meat industry. The bosses and factory owners who reap gigantic profits leave the bloody slush and filth to the mostly uneducated people of color for whom these jobs are often the only way to survive. She exposes politicians like Clinton who, as Arkansas governor, enjoyed large campaign contributions from chicken farm empire owners such as Tyson, later rewarding them with generous corporate welfare handouts.

A major part of the work's impact is derived from Coe's refusal to feel morally superior to the workers. She talks with them, befriends several, and refuses to view-them as mere abstractions. Reflecting on her own life as a daughter of an English working class family whose childhood home was close by a slaughterhouse, Coe knows these workers are also victims.

Coe's work has always been about debunking the myths of capitalism, industrialization, the modern state. In How to commit Suicide in South Africa she highlighted the apartheid system and the corporations and individuals in the "free world" who propped it up while enjoying its benefits.

In *X*, she focused on the life and murder of Malcolm X but also on the forces of racism that poison the world. In *Police State*, her gaze turned to the war society and its violence, from Reagan and his cronies waging wars abroad to the cop beating up ghetto poor. *Dead Meat* exposes the myth of happy animals living on a family farm under the loving care of a smiling farmer. She also demolishes the myth that it is possible to separate what we swallow every day from how that food came to be.

As Coe emphasizes, everything in modern industrial society is connected, and the way animals are treated is but part of the larger relations of power and exploitation on which the lie of civilization is based. It is therefore no coincidence that so many of the factory farms resemble the death camps we have become familiar with in this century of "progress"—in Nazi Europe, Cambodia, China, the Gulags, Bosnia, Rwanda, Chile.

In one painting, we see a pile of carcasses and above them, Mr. Swift of Swift and Company, "Butcher to the World", and in his hands, bags of money, dripping blood. In the next painting, titled simply, "Wall Street," a river of blood and animal parts flows outside the Stock Exchange. Even the sign announcing this center of international business is splattered with blood, and two business men, burying themselves in their financial paper, are oblivious of their actions.

"Wall Street was originally an abattoir; blood drained from the street into the East river," Coe reminds us. "The stockyard became the Stock Market."

There are no solutions offered in these pages. No paintings of Animal Liberation Front (ALF) activists destroying torture equipment or happy vegans playing with happy sheep in sunny meadows grace this book. Yet the lines and images contain within them a call for making connections and moving beyond the horror.

There are many good people who know and care about the exploitation of Nike workers in Indonesia and the destruction of native sacred sites in the Pacific Northwest, yet are ignorant of animal suffering. Or, if they know, still prefer to ignore it as they bite into fish, cow, or lamb meat.

Alexander Cockburn, who has contributed the illuminating essay to this book, "A short meat-oriented history of the world from Eden to the Mattole," is one of these people. He writes about his meat eating habits, devouring animals raised by his Humboldt County, Calif. neighbors as if that is better than what is produced from factory farming. Those who buy so-called "organic" meat might feel this is a more "humane" manner to participate in the consumption of flesh, but it makes no difference to the animal who still is treated as an object without a will of her own, and who is still slaughtered.

One of Coe's most powerful paintings, which she also sent to Cockburn, shows a parade of animals under the harsh glare of a street light. Pigs, goats, sheep, cows, and chickens are crowded together, moving past a butcher shop displaying dangling carcasses, following a man who has a McDonald's bag in his hands. Surprised, he turns and looks at the animals. The title of the painting is "Modern man followed by the ghosts of his meat."

Dead Meat gives those ghosts faces, legs, hearts, souls, and dignity, and for those of us who still eat, wear or use animal products, this is a strong call for personal responsibility and action.

Related in this issue

"Looking At Animals: Is There A Third Choice?" FE 349, Summer 1997

Alon K. Raab
Dead Meat
Excuse me, sir, there's a piece of dead cow on your fork
1997

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/349-summer-1997/dead-meat
Fifth Estate #349, Summer 1997

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net