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[Review] Sue Coe, *Zoicide: Seeing Cruelty, Demanding Abolition*. With an Essay by Stephen F. Eisenman AK Press, 2018. 128pp

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Abstract

Eisenman imagines, in 2050, in a scenario devoutly to be wished and striven for, that animals are no longer ill-treated in zoos, factory farms or laboratories. His informative essay substantiates debates in animal ethics, historically and in art, relating the 'thingification' of animals to colonial notions of 'racial' superiority. Sue Coe's work, he demonstrates, comes from a long history of protest against the treatment of animals in zoos and menageries. Like John Berger in *Why Look at Animals?* (Penguin, 2009), he connects zoos with money-making, dismissing the claims that zoos are geared for conservation. Eisenman regards Sue Coe as the foremost artist inspired to 'witness' and 'represent' animal suffering. We, the viewers, witness this suffering anew through Coe's powerful, devastating artworks. Coe shows the effects on animals of being transformed into entertainment for unappreciative and unsympathetic humans. The very first illustration obliterates any possibilities of zoo or circus animals being happy: in nightmarish half-light, circus animals lie splayed next to a wrecked train in Pennsylvania in 1893. A few have been liberated from their cages but not for long. At the centre of the action stands a man with a pitchfork like the devil incarnate. The live animals seem immobilised by shock; only a lion has taken advantage of his freedom and is attacking a cow. The animals themselves are emaciated, which attests to their lives of suffering even before this illustrated horror.

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The collection shifts to an outing to the Zoo. As viewers we are complicit in what Coe refers to as ‘the wicked human gaze’ (121). A plaque at Bronx Zoo boasts of corporate supporters – firms like petrol companies known for ravaging environments and indigenous

lifeways. Our vantage point is from the back of a queue for chicken served at a food stall, close to the water bird enclosure at Bronx Zoo. At a petting zoo, with a quaint Dutch windmill visible through a door, domestic animals wear striped pyjamas like prisoners in the holocaust. The animals are grouped round a pig speaking from a podium, but perhaps the most poignant being is the cow in the centre who gazes directly and appealingly at the viewer. Through the door a farmer brutally carries a piglet by his hindlegs – so much for animals being petted.

That many of the animals in zoos have been named renders their experiences even more painful. Naming has counted for nothing as the zooicide of the placid gorilla Harambe in Cincinnati after a child fell into his enclosure shows. Coe's portraits of other primates – chimpanzees and orang-utans – depict their faces at close range, their depth of feeling and intelligence; the depressed orang-utans' acrobatics curtailed by the wire they hang from. The strength and sincerity of animals' emotions recur as Coe shows the psychological impact of captivity for animals used to wide-ranging habitats – in a tragically understated portrait a slump-shouldered gorilla constantly carries a toy chimp. Such images of incarceration seem, for a moment, to be contradicted by baboons who escaped from the Paris Zoo romping on a gargoye, but then one wonders how they were recaptured and Eisenman tells us that monkeys in Paris Zoo generally survive for eighteen months.

When animals are in the care of zoos, they should, at the very least, provide a 'safe place' for them. But a four-year-old rhino is 'murdered' for his horn in Paris Zoo and a young giraffe is shot in the head in Copenhagen Zoo in front of children because he is 'genetic surplus'. Reading rather than seeing this young animal's suffering may permit some turning-away from the trauma, but Coe insist that we witness it. A close-up of the giraffe, with blood streaming from a head wound, shocks, as does the subsequent depiction of the dismembering of his beautifully patterned body. It will be fed to the resident lions, who are themselves to be sacrificed with their two young cubs to make way for a new lion Coe tells us. Coe's short narratives next to some of the artworks reveal the pitiless continuities of human violence against animals in zoos. Yet, when a hippo is shown beaten to death at El Salvador Zoo, Coe does not

give a context for the act nor provide the identities of the perpetrators – perhaps because such gratuitous violence can never be accounted for.

Coe shows different categories of animal suffering. Science is held up for scrutiny in ‘The mirror test’ where at least the chimp seems to have some agency, in that she holds a mirror up to a man’s face, but the human avoids his own reflection in a cameo synecdochic of tests done on primates and other animals. During wars, animals in zoos become enemies. The possibility of being liberated from their cages through bombing was so terrifying at a zoo in Tokyo at the end of World War II that all the animals were shot or poisoned. Three elephants, who refused the poison were starved to death in spite of their performing circus tricks to cajole their keepers into providing sustenance for them.

If animals are killed without an ethical qualm by humans, a tragic agency recurs in zooicide which comes in many forms: life-in-death neurotic activities like constant pacing or head swingings or a bolder self-sacrifice. The most shocking instances of zooicide are the animals who turn savage and are killed and the actual suicide of an Orca at Miami Aquarium smashing his head on the tank walls until he died. In Copenhagen Zoo after two polar bear companions are separated so that one can be instrumentalised as a breeding machine at another zoo, the remaining bear dies soon after in grief. Parallels between the treatment of women’s bodies and those of animals whose fertility is harvested are stark.

In the final ‘reflection’ Coe’s serious self-portrait in the act of drawing has the large octopus, Cleo, seemingly undiminished by the walls of the tank. In her ‘Artist’s Statement’ Coe dedicates this book to Cleo whose capabilities and intelligence ‘confound [...] science’ (121). Cleo’s name contains the letters of Coe’s name; they are interconnected, but tragically: ‘She saw me, and I saw myself’, Coe says, ‘only as a reflection in her tank prison’ (121). Yet unlike the man who refuses to encounter his reflection in a mirror held up by an animal, Sue Coe locates herself in relation to the suffering of animal beings and insists that we, the viewers and readers, have the courage to do so too.