Artist's Inquest
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FOOD

Artist's Inquest

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If you enjoy chomping into that juicy burger, munching on a chicken leg or savoring pepperoni pizza, why not get up close and personal with your breakfast, lunch and dinner? Now you can (if you're tough enough) in Sue Coe's Dead Meat (136 pages, Four Walls Eight Windows, US$40). Sketch book in hand and unmindful of even a death threat, Coe spent six years, in Canada and the US, documenting slaughter of cows, calves, goats, sheep, chickens, pigs and horses.

Her disturbing portraits comprise a compelling visual inquest. She observes animals dragged when so ill they cannot stand. Or those fearfully walking onto the "killing floor" where knife-wielding workers slice, carve and chainsaw their way through hundreds of animals a day. Not to mention the "left over" chicks plowed into fields as fertilizer--while still alive. Special

"hydroclippers" make cutting a pig's head a snap. According to Coe, life is drained from "food animals" more than 10,000 times a minute in the US--over six billion times a year. In the 1920s US slaughterhouses proudly offered tours to showcase the carnage. Today's abattoirs are "guarded like military compounds," says Coe, and appointments made months earlier were sometimes rescinded upon her arrival.

Can wholesome food come from such nauseating butcheries? Ironically, "a few slaughterhouse bosses... tried hard to be helpful," writes Coe. "They understood the contradictions of their actions and were willing to reveal the concealed industry, to open the debate." She asked one Pennsylvania slaughterhouse boss, "Are the workers upset by the killing?" He replied, "They see so much animal blood, they don't care, but if one man cuts his little finger, they all go crazy." Complimenting Coe's account is Tom Regan's The Burden of Complicity, a text articulating our kinship with all animals and suggesting, "If abattoirs had glass walls, we'd all be vegetarians."

Caution! With hardcore graphics and some explicit language, this book isn't appropriate for children. Personally, I didn't let anyone in my own house even open it. It's that grisly. But it does have its place as an effective way to discover what happens behind those closed slaughterhouse doors.

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