

Artist as a Guide to Help Fight Climate Change

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Abstract

As an artist exploring the role of art in addressing climate change, I wonder how artistic representations of factory farming can make people care more about its negative impact on climate change and the welfare of animals? Moreover, how does a viewer engage with an artwork that addresses these topics?

In this poster, I illustrate that the ethical value of the artist is conveyed through her artwork. I focus on painting and drawing for this project. I then switch to discussing the role of the viewer. I argue that a viewer can use her close observation and imagination skills to gain a better understanding of the artist's ethical value, and thereby, be inspired by the artist to make changes accordingly. I will demonstrate my argument by analyzing a drawing of slaughterhouse animals by artist Sue Coe.

Background/Intro

There are already many facts about the negative impact of commercial food systems and their connection with animal welfare issues. Yet, not enough actions have been taken to address these issues. People's values influence their choices and actions. In "Idea of Perfection," Iris Murdoch writes that when making a choice, most of our reasoning is already completed under the influence of our existing values and concepts (IP, 329). Therefore, fostering more actions addressing climate and animal welfare requires people to adopt values that prioritize these issues.

The work of an artist who prioritizes these issues can spark reflections among viewers. When people engage with art that expresses a clear ethical intention or content, one might naturally wonder about its artist's ethics. As a painter who makes work about animals and climate change, people often first ask me if I am a vegetarian. I suggest that the viewer's curiosity about the artist's values, in fact, prepares them to further examine the art and understand more in-depth about the artist's ethics.

An Example: Looking at Art with Ethical Content

To illustrate my argument, I chose a drawing of goats in slaughterhouse by artist Sue Coe (fig.a). By the content, we can assume that the artist is already interested in animals. Now, we take a closer look at how the artwork is made, in order to understand and imagine the artist's perspective in more detail.

Step 1: Observing the mark-making and visual choices made by the artist

1.1. There are a few reddish spots noted as blood. Together with the note on the left side "goats waiting to be slaughtered, Trenton, NJ", they indicate that the artist drew the goats inside the slaughterhouse (fig.a).

2.1. The drawing appears to be done quickly. One of the goats is alluded to with merely two lines (fig.b). Yet, each goat has a different expression. It reflects that the artist has carefully looked at each of them. (fig. c).

Step 2: Imagining the reasons behind the artist's choices

1.2. Visiting the slaughterhouse would be unpleasant, especially for someone who cares about animals. Knowing that Sue Coe was in a slaughterhouse confirms her care for animals and her courage to confront their suffering.

2.2. One might wonder why she gave such attention to each goat, knowing that they would die soon? Wouldn't this act make her connect with them more and bring herself more suffering? However, since she probably couldn't prevent their death, sketching the goats might be the most caring thing she could do in that moment. Giving each goat attention through drawing shows respect to them as individuals, which is different from how they are treated in the slaughterhouse. It would also be the last chance to depict them alive.

Step 3 Imagining adopting the artist's ethical values

As the viewer, I alternate between imagining being in the scene and being aware that I am looking at a drawing. I pay attention to the depiction of each goat, imagining their sentience, while I also realize that they are already dead. I feel a sense of injustice for the goats. I wish to share about this unfortunate situation, which seems to be what Sue Coe tried to do through the drawing.

Next time when you look at art addressing animal welfare and climate, try engaging with it this way! You can also do it together with a friend.



Fig. a. Sue Coe, *Sketch*, 1991



Fig. b. Sue Coe, *Sketch (detail)*, 1991



Fig. c. Sue Coe, *Sketch (detail)*, 1991

Bibliography

Coe, Sue and Brody, Judith. (2012) *Cruel: Bearing Witness to Animal Exploitation*. New York: OR Books.
Murdoch, Iris. (1997) *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. P. Conradi. London: Chatto & Windus, pp. 76 - 98 and pp. 299 - 336.