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PSA: STOP CALLING MARTHA COOPER AN ART CRITIC

By Keith Estiler, February 14, 2018



Age is nothing but a number for Martha Cooper. The legendary photojournalist is turning 75 years young and she's still capturing street photography as well as adding to her growing list of published books. Her most notable book is none other than *Subway Art*, first published in 1984. Renowned artists such as Shepard Fairey (Obey Giant), OSGEMEOS and art connoisseurs have praised the book, expressing that it was one of the reasons why graffiti became an international phenomenon and that it changed the course of art history as a whole.

Cooper is widely-recognized for documenting the New York graffiti scene in the '70s, when it was still an unrecognized art form. One of her most infamous subjects is subway art pioneer DONDI (pictured below), considered to be the leader of the CIA crew (Crazy Inside Artists). From tagging along with graffiti writers for frequent train-bombing outings in the Big Apple, to propping herself up onto crane machines for street art muralists in Tahiti, Cooper has captured all sorts of urban art processes across the globe.

Living Walls curator Monica Campana is set to host a new exhibit titled "Then & Now" that spotlights select works by Cooper. The showcase will be the first one hosted at WISH ATL's brand new gallery, focusing on Cooper's graffiti and

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street art documentation, alongside intimate Atlanta photos that have never been shown anywhere before. "Then & Now" is currently on view up until March 2.

We sat down with Martha Cooper to discuss her latest exhibit alongside insightful tête-à-tête on graffiti, street art and what she finds incredibly annoying about photography. Check out the interview below and whatever you do, don't ever call Martha Cooper an art critic.

Can you tell us a little more about your new show at WISH ATL?

This show is not exactly a retrospective, but it does feature a few more recent bodies of work as well as the old work, so that's where the "Then & Now" comes from. It's basically street art and graffiti, but there are some Atlanta pictures that I haven't shown anywhere before. I also have about 50 pictures of more recent artists at work in street art, many of which I haven't shown before. I don't have pictures of completed walls, but artists working.

Why Atlanta?

I didn't choose Atlanta, Atlanta chose me. I've known Monica for a while and she directed festivals for Living Walls and invited me to have the first show in this new gallery. There's been quite a lot of street art in Atlanta over the few years and also in the book that I did called We B*Girlz. I came to Atlanta to shoot some B-Girls in this crew called Burn Unit. So, this isn't my first trip to Atlanta.

You must be ecstatic to be the first artist to be shown at this gallery.

It's a beautiful gallery and they're hanging it now. I'm very happy with the way it looks. I'm honored about it. They've spent a lot of money to put it up and I spent a lot of money on the pictures. I've only recently embarked on the idea of selling photos. I've never considered myself an artist. Please call me a photographer, I don't want to be a fine artist.

What's your go-to camera and lenses?

I've used Nikon for over 50 years and I wish they would support me because I have supported them. I use a Nikon D810, I'm all digital now and I don't do analog. I don't want to do analog or ever go back to it, but I do use some of the old lenses that work with my camera.

Why are you so attracted to capturing street photography?

I'm not a very good "Why" person. I don't analyze things. For me, I like to look for things and I like to collect things and I like to be surprised by things. The thing is when you're walking down the street, you'll never know what you're going to see. With a camera in your hands and you're out, it sort of keeps you looking for something you've never seen before or something with an odd twist to it. That's the kind of thing that makes me happy. I don't like to set up pictures, I just like to see something and grab it. New York City is really great for that. I always take pictures of dog walkers and bottle collectors, I've been working on a recycling project. Those kinds of things.

The '70s graffiti scene must've been so dangerous to document. Were you ever hesitant to capture it?

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Whenever you go into the yards at night, it's scary because you hear the trains making weird noises and you hear somebody coming along and you crouch behind the train. I should say that I've been working with the 1UP crew in Berlin along with my photographer friend, Nika Kramer. We're doing a book with them called 1 Week with 1UP, and I've been reliving some of those scary situations, and I think the thrill of being scared kind of drives the whole movement in a way. You definitely understand how scary it is and how relieved you are when you're not caught. You're running, hiding and hearing weird noises. I'd say that it hasn't changed that much.

It's definitely not something for everybody and not something that I want to do every day. In fact, I feel like I'd be happy if I never do that again, but when you're in the thick of a moment, it's exciting. Your heart can literally be pounding and you know, I fall down or slip on the tracks, I drop my lenses, all of it.

What's the most important subject in your the photos?

As a photographer, I'm always looking for something different to photograph, something that excites me. Sometimes I don't get to take a picture of a finished wall, sometimes I don't even care. It's all about the process and not so much about the finished work. I think that's a different point of view for street art. I'm not an art critic in any way.

Do you like being photographed?

I hate to be photographed. You never like your own photos, you're always like "God, I look so old. I look so ugly. I look so fat." I always tell people to hold on to those photos for five years and you'll like it better.

What do you find most annoying about photography?

This is going to sound really selfish, but I don't like a lot of photographers around. I like to think that I'm the only person with the exclusive shot. I'm sure all photographers are like that. Now, in the street art world, of course, it's really impossible to be the only person with a camera. Another annoying thing is that there are artists who don't want their face in the picture and they go to great lengths to remove it in a picture. The Banksy effect. I'm not talking about Banksy, I'm talking about other artists. They're constantly turning away. For me, if you don't see the face, you're missing the most interesting part of the picture. I like to be able to see what the artist looks like and the expression.

Any awkward situations with fans?

I have kids who come to me and ask me to sign prints that they printed off the web and I don't do that and their feelings are hurt. They're fans and, you know, I sign a lot of stuff, but I don't want to sign a print of a file they grabbed online, especially when I'm at a show where they're selling the same print. It's a little awkward.

What are your thoughts on artists being too invasive or disrespectful when placing works on the streets?

I'm not going to be specific about the pieces, but sometimes artists just breeze in with some preconceived ideas. They know the dimensions of the wall, but don't know anything about the neighborhood. It's not really their fault because maybe they only have four or five days [to prepare], but it doesn't fit that particular community in any way and after they leave, that community is left to live with the wall. The best pieces are the ones that should be loved by the community. It doesn't necessarily have to depict the community, but something that feels like it's theirs.

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On the contrary, what are your thoughts on people excavating public artworks to sell for profit?

It's a case by case basis. I steal hand-drawn stickers on the street. I always photograph it before I steal it and I never have the intent to sell. I would only give it to a museum. My ideal thing is to find a home for it. I'm starting this library with Urban Nation and I've given them a lot of stuff. Maybe that's not as bad as that guy who drilled out a Banksy. If you're only doing it to sell, that's kind of horrifying.

How often are you traveling these days?

Too many times. The last few years I've traveled to maybe 20 different places. There's something happening and I'm not sure what and I keep thinking that I'd better take advantage of this because I have this feeling that it could stop. It's as if the world can decide to go and move on to something else and they don't want anymore paint on walls. You have no idea. I can't predict the future, so I do try and take advantage of all the invitations that I get.

What's your end goal?

I don't want to diminish the game, but I'm going to be 75 this year. You know, still running around on these assignments. Working as a freelance photographer for the past 50 years, I don't have a retirement plan. Most photographers don't.