

Looking for Creativity in Everyday Life:



Martha Cooper and Evan Pricco at the Scandinavian Premiere of *Martha: A Picture Story*.
Nuart Festival, Stavanger, Norway, September 2019. Photograph ©Runa Anderson.

Martha Cooper and Selina Miles in Conversation with Evan Pricco

The following is a transcript of an interview conducted by Editor-in-Chief of *Juxtapoz Magazine* Evan Pricco with photographer Martha Cooper and filmmaker Selina Miles, following the screening of the film *Martha: A Picture Story* during Nuart Festival in Stavanger, Norway in September 2019.

EVAN: Selina, you originally planned on this film being a 10 minute short – but what happened when Martha opened up her storage space of archives?

SELINA: I think it was on one of the first few days in New York that I realised. Like a lot of people, I had met Marty through the street art and graffiti connection, and I hadn't realised that she'd worked for *National Geographic*, or that she'd had this project in Baltimore, or done any of these other amazing things. So, as that kind of revealed itself I was like, 'Oh no. This is not going to fit in 10 minutes.' And it just kind of escalated from there.

EVAN: Martha, what was your first response when Selina said this is going to turn into a full feature documentary?

MARTHA: I was really surprised! But I don't think I quite realised how much time it would take.

EVAN: Was it interesting for you to look back at some of the early projects that you worked on? For example, the Japanese tattoo stuff and all of these subcultures that you've attached yourself to. You've had a focus on outsider art for so long – is there any sort of thread that you notice even more as you look back, watching this, about the way you approach these subjects?

MARTHA: You know, I think I approach them in the same way that I always did. Which is just a pretty much straight on literal approach – I'm usually focusing on something that I feel will make a good photograph, and I'm always looking for people being creative in everyday life. That's the common thread.

EVAN: Selina, how aware were you of all of Martha's career before this? You said that you learned about her *National Geographic* work, but were there other things that you discovered as the film was developing? And how did you start finding the narratives, as a filmmaker?

SELINA: That's a good question. I didn't even realise that I was making a feature until maybe a year into the project. I just kept following Martha around filming her, without really knowing what was going to come of it. It wasn't until I met my producer Daniel Joyce, who really gave me the confidence to believe that I could make a feature, and that this story warranted one. For him, the appeal was the story – which is a narrative that appeals to a lot of people – this idea of experiencing delayed success for this thing that you've put everything into. I feel like that's what happened with *Subway Art*. Martha worked so hard on that book and no one understood what she was trying to do for 20 years. So, that was really the spine of the story, but I also really wanted to show the ways in which she's been doing this for so long, across so many different genres. She wasn't a graffiti fan, she was doing it from a sort of anthropological interest, and seeing graffiti as a folk art, which nobody else could see – and I think that's what made her special. But it was hard to decide what to put in the film – she's published 17 books!

MARTHA: You counted?

SELINA: Yeah, I counted! 17. So, you can't fit all of her work in one film. It was also a matter of what we had to work with. Because most of the film I shot on my own or with one other person, so we just kind of grabbed everything that we could, and then we would sit down and start piecing the story together from those bits and pieces. Os Gêmeos was one of the last things that we shot because we knew we needed that story. Because their story is the uni-

versal story of *Subway Art* – so many writers have had that same experience of this book.

EVAN: Martha, one of the things that Selina really captures really well in this film is that your photos are very fucking good. I think that one of the parts of the story that needs to be talked about more is how great of a photographer you are.

MARTHA: Well, thank you very much, but let's remember I've been a photographer for about 70 years – a long time! I do think that people don't realise how technically skillful I am. They are not simply snapshots. I've worked hard on it.

EVAN: Do you ever miss film?

MARTHA: No! I would never go back to film. Digital is more versatile. But using film made me understand how to use a camera in ways that most people probably don't – changing shutter speeds and F stops and just automatically thinking through, 'OK the trains are moving, I'd better shoot this at 500th of a second, but then I need to up the ISO'. After so many years, I'm just automatically making those adjustments. With digital cameras you can immediately look at what you're getting, and if you're making a mistake you can correct it. With film, you didn't know whether or not you got the shot until you got the film back. I shot Kodachrome. You had to send it away to Kodak to be developed, so if I didn't get it back for a week, it would be too late to reshoot.

EVAN: Do you feel that because of the folk and underground aspect of graffiti, that as a fine art form it's still taking time for fine art institutions to see that this is actually a really critical part of American art history?

MARTHA: I feel that the major contemporary art museums have been very slow to embrace anything that has to do with graffiti. I haven't heard about the Museum of Modern Art looking for early graffiti pieces for their collection. I don't think they own any graffiti pieces. But they are a contemporary art museum and what could be more contemporary than this worldwide art form? You'd think that they'd be onto it, because now would be the time to go and grab those pieces because this movement is going to be around for forever. Graffiti will be important to the history of art from this time period and museums will have holes in their collections. Haring, Basquiat, and Banksy pieces have made their way into contemporary museums, but curators aren't seriously looking at letter graffiti.

EVAN: Selina, you've looked at the world through Martha's lens for the last couple of years. Has making this film changed how you're going to approach your own practice?

SELINA: It's hard to remember where I was at, and the way I was thinking about things, before this two year project! I went from doing everything alone as a self-shooter and self-editor, to working with a huge crew. Working with Martha and with Susan Welchman, a former photo editor at *The New York Post*, and Senior Picture Editor at *National Geographic*, was incredible. Having those types of mentors has changed everything.

Also, a lot of the decisions about the way I shot the documentary were based on Martha's approach to photography. So, everything in the cinematography of the film is very straight up. It's all shot on a 35mm lens – there's no interesting angles, there's no shooting through things.

MARTHA: I'm not a fan of interesting angles!

SELINA: It's all just like: here it is. And it's the same with the presentation of Martha's photographs in the film. I've just tried to be super respectful of the presentation of the photographs. So yeah, it's influenced me in lots of ways.

EVAN: Martha, what was it about the 1 UP crew that has caught your attention in recent years? It seems as if there's an energy there that might remind you of some earlier times?

MARTHA: Yes, it was a welcome reminder of those exciting times because I'd gotten used to shooting so many legal walls.

EVAN: You like the playful risk part of it?

MARTHA: I do. It's very exciting which makes it easier to understand why so many people want to do it. Maybe if you live in the country, it's like climbing a tree or something dangerous, but if you're in a cement desert, then the trains are an urban adventure.

AUDIENCE: Martha, can you remember a time when there were like-minded people who were photographing the same things that you were? When you were documenting the early trains, were there other people there?

MARTHA: There were only a handful of photographers, and we pretty much knew who. Jon Naar and Jack Stewart shot the earlier generation of writers. Henry Chalfant shot the most trains, but he was doing it completely differently from me, so that wasn't a conflict. Flint Gennari and Wesley Boxce were both writers who were also good photographers.

AUDIENCE: And where are they all now?

MARTHA: I'm still in touch with a lot of these writers, and actually they frequently documented their own work but often did so with a disposable cardboard camera. If you troll the Internet you can find a lot of sites that have those early pictures. Mostly they're not very good pictures, but they are important historical records. In one of my photos in Dondi's room, he's holding a photo album full of pictures of graffiti pieces on trains and those are pictures that he took himself. He told me that he didn't want to paint a train unless he had a camera. He got his cameras the same way he got his paint – for free. But some of those little cameras did a pretty good job. The photos were the only proof of what you had painted, so photography was always very important. There are many writers today that try to tell me about the trains they painted in Queens but they don't have the photos. These were subway lines that neither Henry or I photographed. Those writers always ask why we didn't shoot those lines. Both Henry and I lived in the Upper West Side in Manhattan and so we mostly photographed the lines that ran up and down the west side. Those were our favorite lines, because both the Brooklyn writers and the Manhattan writers were painting on those trains. We kind of ignored the other lines, and those writers are sad about that today.

EVAN: This is also a good story about the importance of keeping your archives. Because you still have most of everything you shot, I assume?

MARTHA: Well a few photos got lost along the way, but I have most of it. I'm sure that everybody tries to keep their archives but people move around a lot. Things get lost so easily – the box gets stored somewhere and forgotten, or there's a fire, or you give it to your mom and after 10 years she throws it out. I've heard every possible story.

AUDIENCE: It seems to me that you're facing a double challenge in your life. You're a woman in a man's world, and you are a photographer taking street pictures in a fine art world. It seems that one of the themes of that film is the search for recognition, and I wondered whether you are you still looking for recognition, even though there are millions of people who know your work?

MARTHA: I feel like I'm recognised within the graffiti and street art world, but I would just like to be recognised in the photography world a little more. I know the names of so many contemporary photographers in New York – I know who they are, but they have no idea who I am. I read about them but I don't go to their events, because I'm not invited. There are as many photography festivals as there are street art festivals. I would just like to be included in the world of photography in New York City today.

AUDIENCE: Does the impact of your history on graffiti overshadow the impact of your history on photography?

MARTHA: Apparently! But I'm very happy about my impact on graffiti and I feel lucky to have had this impact. But I worry that photography editors and curators dismiss my work as 'graffiti photography'.

AUDIENCE: What would you like to be remembered for?

MARTHA: Just that I was a good photographer. That's all.

AUDIENCE: Have you ever had any legal problems, or been asked to produce evidence, or actually been caught in train yards or anything?

MARTHA: Not yet.

SELINA: This film was funded by the Australian government, so from a filmmaking perspective we had to be pretty watertight legally. We got legal opinions in three different countries about the footage that we used, and what it might mean for Martha. In Germany, the USA, and Australia, everybody said that it would be unprecedented for a journalist to be prosecuted for documenting something like this. So, for anyone out there who might be thinking about making a film about this kind of stuff, it's probably not as serious as you think. Martha was a little worried she might have trespassed, but she didn't commit any serious crimes! She could be subpoenaed, but it would be unprecedented. That was the three time opinion. But we put money aside for her legal fees just in case!

AUDIENCE: As a filmmaker, you're tasked with finding an ending, especially when your subject still has a very active career. Was there an element of this being a closure on the story of graffiti into street art? By the end of the film, we get to the point where it's become a global phenomenon, with Wynwood walls and Instagram. Do you see that being the final piece of that story?

MARTHA: I would say no. The film ends with ‘what’s next’ basically and my feeling is that I’m not leading, but I’m following, and I’m always looking to see what’s next. There are always things that are next. I’m doing projects with Charlotte Pyatt about sustainability for example, and I recently shot a project in Brazil with the artist Mundano about recycling, so I feel like there’s a lot more to come, and if I’m able, I will try to keep following.

SELINA: I learned a lot from Martha, because she’s seen so much, and she’s experienced so many chapters of this story. And she is also just a very pragmatic person. I can’t imagine Martha ever saying, ‘Oh, it was better back in the ‘70s when I was doing stuff’. Martha just seems very aware that her role as a photographer only goes so far, and she’s been very good at saying, ‘Well this is what I can do, and all I’m doing is documenting, and no matter where it goes – if it goes in a direction that I don’t agree with, as long as I get a picture of that, then that’s my job.’ I really admire that.

But for me, in the editing process it was very difficult to chart you know, hip-hop spreading around the world, and all of the things going on during this time. It was like, ‘how the hell do we explain this?’. It was really challenging, and the mantra with my editor ended up being, ‘just stick with Martha. It’s her story.’ We’re not trying to tell the story of the history of graffiti and street art, because it’s just huge and impossible. This is Martha’s story. So, there were heaps of interviews that we got with really smart people like Carlo McCormick and Sean Corcoran from the Museum of the City of New York that didn’t even make it into the film, because they weren’t there that in that particular moment in time that we’re talking about. That was a system of deduction that helped us to find our way through. But from early on we knew that we were going to end with a shot of Martha running away. There was no other way it was going to go down. I’m so glad I got that shot – I think it’s the best one in the whole film. Martha giggling and running off into the night.

AUDIENCE: Martha, you’ve been in documenting the graffiti evolution from the beginning, and nowadays it’s changing. Do you see this as a change into street art, or is graffiti on a parallel course? Do you see graffiti and street art as the same thing?

MARTHA: I do NOT see graffiti and street art as the same thing! I see them as very different with an overlap. There are a lot of street artists that started out doing graffiti, but graffiti is about letters, it’s about writing. The letters can be written in any alphabet – Arabic or Hebrew or Hindi. I’ve seen graffiti in many letters other than the Roman alphabet. Graffiti writers mostly use markers and spray cans, but street artists use absolutely anything and is more about images. So, I see the two as very different phenomena.

AUDIENCE: Do you feel people often get the two mixed up?

MARTHA: Yes, they completely get it mixed up, and they call street art graffiti, and graffiti street art – but we just have to educate them.

AUDIENCE: Selina, for a long time you were typecast as ‘the *Limitless* girl’. You became known for that one thing – and all of the other brilliant things that you were doing almost didn’t matter. Do you feel the same kind of pressure now having done a feature on Martha Cooper?

SELINA: I made *Limitless*, a video that went viral, about five or six years ago – and it’s true that for a long time I was known just for that video. Do I feel that now that I’ve done a feature film there’s the same pressure? No, not so much, because I think that doing a two-year project has made me a lot less concerned about outwardly facing things, like goals. Because it breaks that habit of constantly having to be doing something new, and posting something new. For two years, everyone that talks to you asks what you are up to, and I was like, ‘I’m still doing the documentary’. So, it changes your mindset. But I do get asked what’s next all the time, and I’ve got a few things in development. I’ve also realised that the whole process of making the film – writing it, shooting it, editing it, and then touring and speaking about the film in different cities for months – means that it has to be the right project. There’s no rush in figuring out what the next project is, because you have to really love it, and believe in it. Luckily I’m so proud of this film. I was thinking today, imagine if you weren’t quite happy with it, how painful it would be to have to go and watch it hundreds of times, and talk to people about it!

EVAN: Can you tell us about the wider release of this film?

SELINA: From the first meeting, the distributors that we worked with, said, ‘this is going to be a theatrical release’ – and I was like, ‘Really?’ And they said that the biggest consumers of cinema right now are women over the age of 55, and they thought that this would be a perfect film for them, because it’s about this inspirational woman who has found success later in life. I was like, ‘what about the fire extinguisher graffiti? Are they gonna like that?’ And they said, ‘Yeah, they’re gonna love it!’



Selina Miles discussing her new documentary, *Martha: A Picture Story*. Nuart Plus, Stavanger, Norway, September 2019. Photograph ©Susan Hansen.