









DONDI paints one of his great top-to-bottom whole cars in the #2 yard, 1980.

# **SPRAY NATION**

**1980s NYC GRAFFITI PHOTOGRAPHS**

**MARTHA COOPER**

**Prestel**

**Munich • London • New York**









Double rows of barbed wire fences around the #7 yard in Queens kept out graffiti writers but allowed guard dogs to roam freely, 1981.





WELCOME TO GOTHAM CITY, writer unknown, 1981.









DUMP KOCH by SPIN, 1982.





1,000 CANS REWARD for New York City mayor Ed Koch, 1982.

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CRASHER by CRASH, 1981.





South Bronx, 1981.



# FOREWORD

Roger Gastman

As they say, two graffiti writers walk into a room, and there are three versions of what happened. It's part of the fun of documenting the culture. While we can point to specific things as fact, other things are much harder to prove. For me, it's turned into my life's work — a journey that continues with this exploration of the life and career of Martha Cooper.

I don't need to tell you the story about growing up in the early '90s, how I got into graffiti and found the book *Subway Art*, which impacted not only me but pretty much every graffiti writer ever. You can read about that later in the book. I don't need to tell you the history of Martha Cooper, how amazing she is and all of her traits and quirks. As I just said, you can read about that later on. What I do want to tell you about is how this book came to be — because everything needs an origin story.

Martha's photos have backed up graffiti writers' tall tales more times than I can count. They're like this crazy high school yearbook. As a result, Cooper is who every graffiti writer, fan, collector and researcher wants to come and see. Most of them have not had the privilege of going to her studio and seeing the great amount of work she has amassed over the years — it's truly awe inspiring. But every so often she pulls out yet another gem where we all scratch our heads and think, "Oh shit, what else is Martha holding?"

I was at her studio one evening in 2018 with my girlfriend Amanda and we were having a casual conversation about who knows what when I asked Martha if she had thought about doing one final graffiti-outtakes book of her early-'80s work. While she loves that body of work, she was both content with what was already out there and was — and still is — traveling the world shooting new photographs. It wasn't a



long conversation, but there was an important takeaway: “yes,” she had thought about it, but she wanted to know who was going to take the time and spend the energy going through thousands of slides, scanning, ID’ing, designing and all of the other things that go into making a book?

Of course I replied, “I’ll do it.” I knew her body of work, the context of the photos and was no stranger to packaging book projects. That very night Amanda and I began editing through her photos and stayed long after she went to sleep. We kept at it for a few days — including diving into the boxes of discarded shots she had not looked at since she first took them.

I thought I’d be able to fast-track the project and have it ready for several planned events in 2019. That didn’t happen, but the project is better because of the extra time we spent on it. We’ve wrestled with many formats and even started over completely. In the end, there are hundreds of incredible photos — most that are being seen for the first time.

By no means do I think that this project is the last involving Martha’s archives. Her files are just that deep. Just like a graffiti writer has his/her version of events, this is sorta like mine; a very specific vision of how I saw ’80s graffiti through Martha Cooper’s lens.

I’m happy this project was not always smooth. Martha and I set out to make a very particular book and then we decided to do something completely different. People toss around the word “collaboration” a lot. In this case, its usage is appropriate. I gave, Martha gave, and together we made something I’m very proud of.



DONDI in New Lots train yard, Brooklyn, 1981.











# WHO IS MARTHA COOPER?

Steven P. Harrington

“I always tried to give back pictures,” Martha Cooper says about her days shooting graffiti writers on trains in New York’s harrowing 1970s and 1980s. But she might as well be talking about her whole life.

Back then, few kids on NYC streets had access to a camera, and if they did it was usually a disposable one that produced blurry, poorly lit results, even in talented hands. The child of a Baltimore camera shop owner, Martha had been shooting with proper equipment for 30 years. When she met up with writers in abandoned lots or dicey train yards, they knew that she had the skills, but more importantly she had the curiosity, the reporter’s instinct and the resolute disposition to push through a freshly cut hole in a rusty fence when necessary to get pictures of their pieces to give to them.

Decades later, in another economically bombed-out U.S. neighborhood, this one called Sowebo in Baltimore, Martha again made it her business to make friends first and broaden her circle through photography. In the more than 200 trips she made over 10 years from her home in Manhattan via the 3-hour bargain bus to “Charm City,” she never showed up empty-handed.

She found a photo lab where she could buy 4-by-6-inch prints by the thousands, and she was determined to bring those birthdays, barbecues, parades, block parties, stoop-front stories and children’s sidewalk games back to the people who were in them. She walked through potholed streets of boarded-up buildings and scattered crack vials with a sixth sense and camera in hand, ready for a reunion with a mother or an uncle who would call out to her, “Hey Picture Lady!”

Rifling quickly through envelopes that she’d prepared and labeled ahead of time, she would match the families with the photos, recalling names and relationships and stories told the last time she was there for a special occasion or just an everyday one. Actually somewhat shy, the photographer behind the lens found a conduit for a connection that brought special attention and preserved memories for a community.

This Baltimore adventure was just one of her many personal projects, “a self-given grant” as she puts it, combining her ►





Martha Cooper, Lower East Side, photo ©Dan Brinzac, 1978.



interests in art and ethnography — always hoping to stumble upon an unknown treasure. With persistence as her motto, this is the Martha (Marty to her friends) you get to know just by being in her orbit through the years.

Some of those early graffiti writers may have thought she needed their permission as a woman to scale trains and jump the third rail. However, any permission or confidence that she may have needed to explore had already been given to her by her father when he took her out on “camera runs” as a girl in their hometown, both capturing city scenes and appreciating the historical and modern architecture of the built environment. Even then he must have seen the glint of excitement in her eyes when on an adventure. Without question the self-confident woman we know today is in no small way the product of that attentive education and the encouragement she received at home from both her father and her mother, who taught high school English and journalism. Indeed, their daughter graduated from high school early and received a degree in art from Grinnell College ahead of schedule.

Courage was already encoded in Martha’s character by the time she ventured into the train yards to capture nighttime scenes of aerosol virtuosity. After teaching English with Kennedy’s newly created Peace Corps in the early 1960s in Thailand, she had driven her motorcycle from Bangkok to England via Afghanistan, Iran, Russia and Europe. She’d received a graduate degree in ethnology from Oxford, worked at the Smithsonian and Yale University and interned at *National Geographic*. She wound up in 1977 with a gig as the first female photojournalist at the *New York Post* — by no means the last trail she would blaze.

## A MATTER OF TIMING

“If you want to publish your work, you cannot be ahead of or behind your time,” she says as she reflects on an impeccable sense for capturing the birth of scenes like graffiti, hip-hop and b-boying. “I was lucky to be at the right place and time.” It is a modest statement that belies the hundreds of hours of waiting in empty lots for fresh graffiti pieces along the 1 and 2 train lines and the daily zigzagging through New York’s decimated Lower East Side looking for pictures while on her job at the

*New York Post*. Back then she was looking for street scenes that interested her, not just her employer, to finish off her film rolls before taking them in to be developed.

Martha is heralded today for capturing those trains and scenes along with Henry Chalfant in the seminal graffiti holy book *Subway Art*, but few appreciate how painfully ahead of their time they really were at that point, unable to find a single publisher among over 50 they’d contacted who would agree to bring their work to a broader audience. After they did finally manage to publish, sales were lackluster. Shops kept the book in locked cases to prevent it from getting stolen, and school librarians hid it behind the counter, afraid to encourage an illegal activity.

“There were 20 years where almost nothing happened for me,” she says of the book. It wasn’t until she traveled to Europe for a promotional tour for her book *Hip Hop Files* in the 2000s that she realized that graffiti had taken root throughout the world, and *Subway Art* was highly revered. The fires of thousands of imaginations had been lit by the photos of New York train writers, and she was unaware of it.

Simultaneously, a nascent global street art scene with new aesthetics, different rules and wildly diverse participants had germinated and bloomed via the Internet on walls in the neglected margins of cities like New York, London, Paris, Barcelona, Berlin and, well, everywhere.

With renewed interest in graffiti and art in the streets in general, Ms. Cooper has been lifted and carried around the world again, traveling to multiple cities around the globe annually to street art festivals, exhibitions, museum openings, graffiti jams and a variety of academic symposia. You can walk alongside her on the streets through any of these cities, as I have many times, and you’ll find awestruck fans in their teens or their 50s who walk up to her and tell her a personal story about the significant impact of *Subway Art* on their development as an artist.

They may ask for an autograph or a selfie, but the more pertinent exchange is the sincere thanks that they offer. Unendingly gracious in these instances, Martha flashes her megawatt effervescent smile, says thank you and invariably



asks them about themselves or their art. There is a genuine sense of gratitude for the exchange, possibly because for many years she felt her own work had not made a meaningful impact despite all of her efforts, and now she never takes these compliments for granted.

## A PROLIFIC COMPETITOR

By the way, if you are going to hang with Martha Cooper, be prepared to run.

An aesthetic urban-culture omnivore with a voracious appetite, Martha has an acute sense for things that are happening or are about to happen. And she is going to be there whether you keep pace with her or not.

First.

Many times I've been walking with her on the street and she is just ahead of me. I speed up to tell her something and out of the corner of her eye she sees me and moves just a little faster to stay ahead. It's a natural response honed from years of being a reporter, ready to catch the story before the competition, willing to sacrifice personal comfort to get it.

I've seen her hobbled by a twisted muscle in her back while walking up Broadway (probably from lugging two cameras and multiple lenses around everywhere). With little ceremony, she places her backpack on the sidewalk, and I watch her jerk her back in two or three directions with the force of a welterweight to straighten herself out. No trips to the masseuse for Ms. Cooper.

Similarly, she will refuse your offer of water on the mind-warpingly hottest day, or hot cocoa on the bitterest one, if she's tracking an artist who is painting a wall. Consuming liquids might prompt a trip to the restroom, and she might miss a critical moment. It may be learned behavior by a photographer who waited hours outside of courthouses for a verdict — or one who waited five hours in an empty Bronx lot for a top-to-bottom whole car on the number 2 train. Don't let the call of nature make you miss the story. As her dear friend Susan Welchman — who edited her photos at the *Post* and whom Martha helped get a job as photo editor at *National Geographic* — would tell you, if you want to be

a successful photographer, the shot must be your top priority. Martha embodies this credo.

Aside from her more famous projects, she has published a number of books on other areas that interest her, a long list that includes: Japanese paper making (her first book ever); a traditional Japanese tattoo practice called *irezumi*; the burgeoning global b-girl movement in the early 2000s (with photographer Nika Kramer); a sister-city examination of the street-cultural similarities between Sowebo in Baltimore and Soweto in South Africa; handmade postal-sticker art; New York's 9/11 memorials; and the significance of memorial murals to urban communities, with folklorist Joseph Sciorra.

She also has many photo archives loaned as a repository to City Lore, a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to New York City's vibrant ethnic cultures. A recent Martha Cooper exhibition featured photos of Brooklyn's rich Italian American traditions. For every book published, there are probably one or two potential ones on a shelf, wholly conceptualized, neatly collated and laid out in detail from start to finish.

## PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

Every experience, good and bad, has led her to this point in her life and career, and she trusts the wisdom of this stepping-stone approach. Case in point: On a vacation trip to Haiti in 1978, she saw children making their own toys from recycled materials on the street. It was that discovery that made her see New York's Lower East Side through this lens and led her to Edwin, the boy who wrote HE3 in his piece book and on the wall. It was a conversation with him that led her to drive out to Brooklyn to meet "the King," DONDI. It was meeting DONDI that led her to snap photos of trains and to discover the entire global graffiti community. These interconnections repeat throughout her life, and if she likes the work you are doing, she is likely to help connect you with someone or something else, because she quite naturally shares in that way.►



## WHO IS MARTHA?

In the applied sciences, the formula used to arrive at a result is as important as the outcome itself. When calculating the question of who a person is, one should consider their environment, their innate qualities and aspirations, their collected experiences, the tools available to them, the social, political and economic dynamics at play and the evolutionary effect of their life path on their core personality.

This is an inexact science, but as prone to error as my assessments have at times proven when applying this complex formulation for taking the measure of a person, I'm confident when I offer this: Martha is a brave, fearless, rebellious fighter who questions authority, dares you to prove your hypothesis, has a higher threshold for risk and discomfort than 95 percent of people I've met and is fiercely committed to getting the right picture in its context.

She's an intellectually curious ethnographer, a student of people, culture, tools and techniques who would rather experience things than read a book about them, and preferably right now. She's a true feminist who prizes the contributions of her sisters at whatever their station, and she has used her talents, personal network and industry to open doors and provide a stage for them to succeed. She listens to your stories, and if you say you learned a lesson, she asks you what you learned. Martha is a doubtful optimist, a playful pragmatist and an occasionally adorable profane witticist who can laugh so hard she cries.

## KID AT HEART

Martha loves kids, and she is a kid.

She is a childlike explorer, a player of games, a solver of puzzles, a competitive rival, a collector of points who will lord her winnings over you boastfully and who likes to end any outing with a visit to the ice cream shop, regardless of time or location. Among the objects she collects are children's hand-crafted toys. Games in general capture her imagination, and you are as likely to find her scanning the streets for graffiti tags as you are seeing her marching with her eyes glued to her phone hanging

on a lanyard around her neck in hot pursuit of a Pokémon. The Pokémon GO app is perfect for her because it combines escapism, adventure, discovery and the urban environment. One valid reason she has offered for her to travel to Australia is that Kangaskhan is a Pokémon that you can only capture on that continent.

Along with her cousin Sally, a lifelong confidante and science teacher with a great sense of humor, Martha has climbed over hills and through wooded areas around the world in search of hidden Letterboxes. This multiplayer participatory outdoor game of art and sleuthing rewards you with individualized stamps and shared experiences entered in a journal.

Sally's laid-back personality pairs perfectly with the hard-driving Martha, and seven decades of friendship have molded their dynamic of traveling together. As Martha is invited throughout the world to graffiti jams and street art festivals, Sally often discovers a new city with her — getting up very early, immediately hitting the streets on foot, meeting with artists to appreciate aesthetics and technique. After Sally returns to her home in Maryland and Martha to Manhattan, they'll call each other on the phone to relate family matters or discuss the latest episode of *Shark Tank*.

## THE Hardcore ADVENTURER

"Mademoiselle, this is the last time I'm telling you," bellowed the flight attendant on an Air Tahiti flight from Raiatea to Bora Bora a couple of years ago. "Please remain seated!" Photographer Jaime Rojo laughs as he repeats this story about Martha discovering that the "good" shot out the window at the upcoming island was frustratingly located on the opposite side of the aisle from where she was sitting. The PA-system tongue lashing had come after the attendant had told her twice in person that she could not move from her seat during landing. For Martha, the word "forbidden" is only a suggestion, especially if it gets between her and a good shot.

Lest we overlook the obvious, Martha has also traveled underground and in the margins of major cities around the world, chasing the shot with graffiti writers and street artists — the surreptitious and illegal painting of trains and walls that are





Martha Cooper unveiling an original TAKI 183 tag, photo ©Stewart Guthrie, 1982.

only gained access to via potholes, tunnels or holes in fences, through tall, overgrown brush or over intimidating, sometimes crumbling walls.

These are missions amid clouds of soot and aerosol and silent signaling in silhouette, carefully negotiating unpredictable terrain on foot, knees and bended back carrying heavy camera equipment. Sometimes a long night garners only a ripped pair of pants and a dusting of paint from head to foot. Other times it's a bruised leg, a bloodied hand or a pulled muscle in her

back from falling over an unseen obstacle or a sudden drop in the darkness while in a hurry.

Nothing fully describes the tenacity required and the electricity of raw fear that charges through the mind as one calculates the risk and payoff of following a crew of vandals who may exhibit various levels of regard for your work, your gender, your safety and your right to be there. A well-educated person with sincere curiosity, athletic comportment and a professional work ethic can make missions like these pay off academically, but only one ►





Martha in Tallin, Estonia, photo by Sigre Tompel, 2017.



with a studied diplomacy and teamlike disposition will earn respect from so many in the process.

Then again, this is a photographer who also traveled for days as the only woman with Surinamese ex-rebel leader Ronnie Brunswijk and his band of jungle commandos while on assignment with the German magazine *Geo* in the 1980s. In addition to hiking through rainforests and visiting the Saamaka Maroon village of Asindoo, Martha brought back rolls of film and hand-carved calabash bowls in her backpack as physical evidence of her research into traditional artisan techniques and practices.

One great irony of her multiple photographic forays over seven decades is that much of this work and sacrifice has gone unrewarded or overlooked professionally. Regardless, Martha has persisted, because she sees her work as a form of historic preservation and feels that her photos will be more valuable in the future when the subject matter in them is no longer around.

## BEYOND LUCK AND VISION

In the end, one should view this picture through a lens called context.

It is easy to frame the contribution of a photographer like Martha Cooper as that of a documentarian who was lucky at some juncture with her timing to capture important players and pieces in the birth of graffiti, the birth of b-boying and hip-hop culture and the emergence of street art as a global phenomenon.

But that analysis overlooks Martha's dogged determination to follow a lead and her eye for spotting subtle, innate qualities. It also entirely misses a sixth sense that can see the intrinsic value of a cultural contribution and a respect for the raw creative spirit at a time when something is being dismissed, derided, even demonized by the dominant culture. At the time she was recording these practices, being interested in graffiti and studying it with any seriousness meant following your instinct through a phalanx of social and political hostility, so unpopular had it become on news programs and in stump speeches. It was only her intuition and her intellectual curiosity that led

Martha to go there, because her employer and peers couldn't appreciate it, saw little value in it, perhaps even scolded her for it. But she persisted.

Martha could see something much greater happening, and it electrified her. She was fascinated by kids who were creating drawings in a piece book and translating them to entire subway cars; who fashioned art tools out of household items; who made toys out of other people's garbage. Her mind jumped with excitement when she discovered youth who created dance routines from athletic moves practiced on flattened cardboard boxes; who hand-made hundreds of stickers at a kitchen table; who composed spoken lyrics over prerecorded music on hand-engineered custom equipment. This ability to see something more led her to recognize the fundamental DNA of a culture while it was still coalescing as a subculture — and to document it.

The societal and legal debates about art, vandalism and criminality have necessarily followed this scene through its many decades, and Martha herself acknowledges the gray areas, choosing to be honest about conflicting perspectives. As regards the documentation of creative phenomena that went on to spawn a global grassroots art movement, she has no question. Hers is a curiosity born of academic knowledge of art history, a fundamental respect for creativity and the thrill of discovery that comes from experimentation and pure ingenuity.

I'm always listening to Martha to learn about what she finds next. Hopefully, she will show me the picture.





Graffiti Hall of Fame, DEZ, SKEME & DAZE, East Harlem, 1982.



