

Martha Cooper & David Mesguich for Graffiti Art in Prison

Press file / installations, workshops and murals.

About :

At the start of 2021, my experience within the prison system led to an invitation from Gabriella Cianciolo, professor at the University of Cologne, to participate as a speaker in an interdisciplinary project named GAP, for "Graffiti Art in Prison".

Enthusiast, I accepted but suggested we could take it a step further by conducting a workshop with inmates in the Florence Sollicciano jail.

Like many penitentiaries around the world, Sollicciano prison is relegated to an amorphous periphery in-between two municipalities, Florence and Scandicci. A place separated from the rest of the city and deliberately forgotten like those who are left behind its walls.

Same time, I just had met with renowned New York-based photographer Martha Cooper in a train yard while I was painting graffiti so I proposed her to join us to document the entire process within the jail from 2022 to 2023.

With Martha we teamed up an entire year to give the best chance to the project and keep the promises we did to the participants.

With workshop participants we 3d scans volunteer inmates with the idea of using those scans to sculpt them later. Surprised by the respectful relation that existed between some guards and inmates I decided to include few in the process and we also scanned them.

After discussions and long negotiations with the jail administration, I finally obtained the permission to create two large scale installations on the jail fence at two different moments of the year.

I chose to portrait the two most discreet participants, a police woman and an inmate, not telling the public who was who. They are first individuals living this unusual place.

Despite numerous attempts by the jail's police commander to cancel the installations, we never gave up and managed to set them up in time.

The second moment was the creation of murals, 3 murals were done by inmates with total freedom then I completed 9 murals with the idea to paint portraits and sentences taken both from guards and inmates without revealing who is who or who said what in order to deconstruct first my own clichés and sometime pacify what could be.

This immersion became a beautiful human adventure, during which we conducted workshops and murals with Martha, the inmates and some students from GAP project that helped us with the inmates murals.

The enclosed pictures taken by Martha Cooper are the only remaining trace of this monumental but ephemeral project and this is also what make them precious. They are the witness to a moment when fences were crossed and differences erased.

David Mesguich

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Martha Cooper

Martha Cooper, born in 1943 in Baltimore, is an American photojournalist known for her work documenting the New York City graffiti scene of the 1970s and 1980s.

She began photography at the age of three and earned an art degree from Grinnell College.

She taught English as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand, journeyed by motorcycle from Bangkok to London, and received an anthropology diploma from the University of Oxford.

Her first experience in artistic photography began when she was in Japan, capturing images of elaborate tattoos.

She was a photography intern at National Geographic in the 1960s, and worked as a staff photographer at the New York Post in the 1970s. Her photographs have appeared in National Geographic, Smithsonian and Natural History magazines as well as several dozen books and journals.

Cooper is best known for her work documenting the emerging graffiti scene of the 1970s and 1980s in New York.

She met a young kid named Edwin Serrano (He3) who helped expose her to some of the graffiti around her neighborhood. Serrano introduced her to the graffiti "king", Dondi.

Dondi was the first to allow her to accompany him – while he was tagging she would take photos of his work.

In 1984, she put together a book of photographs illustrating the graffiti subculture called Subway Art. It became known as the Bible of street art. By 2009, sales had reached nearly half a million copies.

David Mesguich

David Mesguich is a French artist whose works create a dialogue between urban and figurative art. He began his artistic journey as a graffiti artist, but he is also known for the ephemeral installations that he places in public space: passages, non-places, borders, forgotten territories.

His monumental geometric sculptures draw inspiration from worlds as diverse as 3D retro gaming, vandalism, and baroque art for dramaturgy and aesthetics.

Mesguich questions boundaries and the artifacts that constrain freedom of movement in the public space.

By physically spanning elements of separation such as wire mesh, fences, and gates, he erases divisions and reappropriates some of these aseptic territories.

This stylistic trait was applied to the outer fence of Sollicciano prison, which became the support for spectacular installations.

His sculptures question the human condition by transiting between real and digital, places and non-places, legal and illegal, past and future. In his work, Mesguich addresses issues of great topicality and social relevance, such as the migrant crisis and the prison world.

He has experience in prison workshops: in 2012 and 2014 he organized participatory projects involving inmates of prisons in Paris and Marseille.

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GAP project / Graffiti Art in Prison

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Palazzo Chiaramonte (Steri) in Palermo was the site of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition and its prisons.

The graffiti, a palimpsest of writings and drawings painted on the cell walls, are a corpus of inestimable historical, artistic, and anthropological value.

Graffiti Art in Prison (GAP) project explores these historical graffiti and links them to artistic expression in prisons today.

The GAP project confronts issues of artistic production and reception in spaces of confinement, addressing both historical and contemporary graffiti in relation to prisons, psychiatric hospitals, detention camps, and other spaces characterized by conditions of deprivation, separation, and lack of freedom.

Through horizontal collaborations between the university and the prison context, the interdisciplinary project Graffiti Art in Prison (GAP) experiments with a new educational approach that combines scientific research, educational and artistic activities, and social engagement with the presence of artists, teachers, scholars, and the participation of 20 doctoral students from around the world.