

On trusting your intuition



Director and filmmaker Margot Bowman discusses club culture as the blueprint for her creative practice, collaboration as an act of love, and making work on your own terms.

July 31, 2023 -

As told to Sarah O'Neal, 2509 words.

Tags: Film, Video, Process, Collaboration, Identity, Inspiration.

From *Showing Up Showing Out* to some of your music videos, it feels like there's a deep love for the people that you're documenting. I wanted to know if there's a correlation between that and your initial desire to even get into filmmaking?

You have to be in love with the people that you're making a project with. I think to be in collaboration with people, it is a kind of love. What's the bell hooks definition? Wanting to extend myself for another person's spiritual growth. I feel like I do fall in love with the people I make films about, or I make films with.

There is a historical idea that narrative, that drama, comes from tension and conflict. And what's really interesting is trying to be a part of the group of people, contemporary filmmakers, who are actively looking for other devices to create a narrative that isn't about conflict, that's actually just about giving people the room to be the fascinating, complex, contradictory human beings that they are. And that's actually what's interesting. Someone doesn't need to have their house fall apart for it to be a good story.

You're telling stories that feel deeply connected to you in some ways, but that you're still an outsider, too. How do you navigate that role? What is your responsibility as somebody who's telling stories and documenting lives of people that aren't your immediate experience and community?

Well, moving to the US was a really interesting experience, because it showed me you are literally a guest. It says that on your visa.

Whoa, I didn't realize.

Yeah, well it says "alien with extraordinary ability," but you actually are an outsider. When I lived there, I was living in Crown Heights and Bedstuy which are both historically Black neighborhoods and just being really aware of, okay, *I'm an outsider, but I can be a good guest*. Honestly, it's so simple, it's just listening. It's literally just listening and connecting with people, and really being aware of what their concerns are.

There might be things that I just don't have awareness of, but that's why collaboration's such an important part of it. Even working with Boiler Room, I was a creative director there [from 2016-18], but we were working with groups of people who were from all over the world making all sorts of amazing music. It was a really great learning experience because it was like, *okay, it's not about what I want. It's actually about, what is this group of people communicating with their music and how can I facilitate and amplify that?*

I spent a lot of time in clubs and I love a group activity. So I always want the filmmaking process to feel like a

good party. And I think the best parties are made up of lots of different types of people. And that's my approach, is just trying to have as many different perspectives involved as possible.

That's funny because that was literally my next question, how has club culture shaped you as an artist?

Oh my god, totally. The club is the blueprint for my whole creative practice. I had a lot of really formative experiences as a young teen underage in the rave. There's so many facets to it, but I know I'm always interested in spaces where the social contract changes and we shift from the norms of 'the real world' into a different status quo. That's something I learnt first hand in the club and it's a dynamic I'm always interested in creating and making room for.

But also a really, really, really passionate belief in the fact that art, in its widest term, can bring people together to have these spiritual experiences, or these meaningful transformative experiences. Where you meet someone that night and then they end up being your best friend, or you find these kinds of environments or experiences that expose these deeper human truths and deeper levels of human connection that are possible, that maybe the societal construct we're living in currently doesn't really allow space for. That's why I try and make work. I want to make work that is able to facilitate that.

Your most recent film, *Coming Home*, about the Freedom Dabka group. I hadn't really seen you talk about Palestine before, so it was exciting to see this film from you. How did you find the project?

It was definitely a project where it found me, I didn't find it. In the pandemic, I got stuck in the UK. So I experienced this extreme displacement, where I couldn't get back into the US and I didn't really have any rights even though I had my Visa. Ali Rosa-Salas [associate producer], she's a really good friend of mine, initially reached out to me because she wanted to make a film about this Irish dancer who lived in Ireland. That didn't end up happening for various reasons. And I was like, "Well, is there anyone else else you're interested in? Because I'd love to make something together." And she was like, there are these guys in New York, Freedom Dabka Group. I looked them up and I was like, "Yeah, I'm down."

What was great about *Coming Home* was that we had really different skill sets, Naim [Naif, Bowman's co-creator] and I. There was definitely an insider-outsider vibe to it. But I feel like that was really important because of the conversations Naim and I had, that level of understanding led us to sharing a lot of roles [directing, productions, and writing] and contributing to them in really symbiotic ways.

At the start of 2020, no one in our circle really talked about Palestine with the intersectional understanding of colonization and white supremacy and all of those other things that are these massive global systems, you know what I mean? But in the spring of 2021 when that conversation shifted around Palestine, and that language did get brought into it, it really opened up the conversation for people.

I loved the ways you used family photos throughout *Coming Home*. It felt like I was being pulled into this family history. Those photos weren't specifically the families of the Freedom Dabka group, but it still created this feeling of being walked through somebody's family history, which made it so much more intimate. What influenced the choice to work with the Palestinian Museum?

We were put in touch with Serene Huleileh who's our associate producer. She's a Dabka academic and she was in El-Funoun, which was this really iconic Dabka group from the '70s. She is the one who introduced us to the Palestinian Museum and they were amazing. Anyone can go on it and use the photographs [in a non-commercial context] that are basically donated by families or their people's estates. We were the first people to use them in a film.

It was so interesting because those are not my family photographs, but I had memories like that. Universalizing the story around these intimate moments, these deeply personal moments, is the complete antithesis of news headlines, bias, media representation. And tragically, the huge amount of just really traumatic images that circulate on social media. I spend a lot of the time thinking, "Okay, what could a film do that social media can't

do?" Film has this ability to allow us to time travel. And that's what those moments were about, creating time travel and creating history. The [archival] photos being in color was really important because we wanted to show Palestine in color.

Why was it important to show Palestine in color?

From the beginning we really wanted to film the New York scenes in black and white on 16 mm film, because there's such an iconic history in New York of black and white photography. Incorporating the guys and the Palestinian community into that historical language, using that color choice, embedded them in the history of New York. And then simultaneously, making the history of Palestine or any kind of footage that felt like Palestine being in color was about showing that Palestine has a future and that it's alive. It's not something in the past.

In my practice, I use a lot of collage, I come from animation, and it was an amazing part of the edit just to be like, "Okay, we need an image of a tomato," and you just put into the archive "tomato" and it'll be people picking tomatoes, people eating tomato pasta, a kid in a tomato t-shirt. And that was amazing just from a visual perspective... And it was really in line with a lot of the feelings I had about going through COVID and having so much of my own life change. It's really important to actually archive what's happening, because it's not a guarantee that it will be this forever.

How do you navigate working across so many different mediums and forms and genres with such fluidity?

I don't know. I'm glad it looks fluid, but I think it's not. You just get opportunities and most of the time if you need the money, you do them. And if you don't, or it's super whack, you don't do it. The best advice, it's such an obvious one, but making work makes work. And things come to you or people cross your path and opportunities just arise out of that. And when it feels right, you keep doing it. And when it doesn't feel right anymore, you don't do it.

When I first came out of art school, I was making a lot of really visually striking, very creative animation and more digital art, new media. And when you are working in that kind of way, you're just using your intuition about color and shape. You don't rationalize it. You just choose those things. And as I've continued, I've tried to trust in my intuition more and more and more. The more I am connected to my body and the more present I can be, the more I hear that voice. Not even hear it, I actually believe it.

Yeah, that's really interesting. Intuition as your guiding force... your compass through your work as well. It feels like a little superpower, almost.

Totally. And I feel like it's one that everybody has. It's just a lot of us just aren't using it because we haven't been conditioned to. We live in a society that encourages basically everybody who isn't a straight white man to doubt themselves, doubt their inner voice. It's a bit confusing when people say, "You should just trust your gut." It's kind of like, *what?*

But I just did this thing, it's called Zoe. It's basically about looking at health through your gut microbiome. I have always struggled with my weight and food. That's just been a place I've taken a lot of stress out and I've always wanted to eat peanut butter, but I've always stopped myself from eating it because I thought it was bad for me or whatever. And on that list of food that's good for my gut, me personally, as an individual, peanut butter was in the top 10 foods.

Wow.

Yeah, and it's like, wow, this thing that I've wanted and I've denied myself. Because I've literally not listened to my gut.

Yeah, it's like, "I could have been listening to myself this whole time."

Literally. I literally could have been listening to myself this whole time. I know we touched on this earlier, but it's kind of about differentiating between your intuition and your ego, and which voice are you actually hearing?

And a friend of mine who's had way more therapy than I have, but is a great friend to have, she said the ego is "I want, I need, I should," that kind of angry voice. And your intuition is "what if," it's suggesting stuff. "Maybe" or "I could." The tone is so much more inviting because your intuition is about growth and it's about joy and you becoming your best self.

In the last few years I've really felt like online spaces create more disconnection and isolation. But when I hear you talk about it, you seem to be able to see the possibilities for reconnection that is helping me reframe my own outlook and maybe stop being so... jaded, I guess.

Yeah, I mean, it is bleak for sure. But then do you remember in the wake of summer of 2020, do you remember how Instagram actually became? I just want to caveat by saying that that period was also a really traumatic period in terms of images that were circulating, but I think there was a lot of information being shared and a lot of diagrams being made, that we might see some of them as kind of cliché, but it was phenomenal how a space that had gone from being selfies and holidays and sponsored content turned into this open access MA in post-colonial psychology. There was so much info, it was an amazing total re-imagining of what the platform could be and how it could be used.

It seems like you've found a way to create the rules for yourself, or just more on your own terms.

A hundred percent, a hundred percent. I don't really believe in a world governed by Instagram or TikTok or whatever. That's not the utopia I'm working towards. So when I post something and it doesn't get a lot of engagement, I actually see it as a successful piece of work, because it's not in line with the platform's values. So it must be in line with my values. That is something that came out of working on *Coming Home* and seeing how shadow-banning is real, and it is around specific keywords and topics. That experience just laid out for me how biased and ridiculous the algorithm is on social media. After that I was just like, this is a joke, because we would post about the film or about anything related to Palestinian liberation and the numbers are just like meh.

So I think it's all about us creating these pockets of time to connect with ourselves and with each other outside of productivity outside of anxiety and stress, having these moments to connect to our truest self, the essence of who we are, whether that's in a nightclub or at the beach or in the cinema, in a forest. Wherever we can activate those spaces, I think there's so much growth and joy and that's where the hope is.

Margot Bowman Recommends:

Rest is Resistance by Tricia Hersey

Saving Time by Jenny Odell

All the Beauty and the Bloodshed by Laura Poitras

Radiant Life on NTS Radio by Ruby Savage

Grenfell by Steve McQueen at The Serpentine

Name

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Vocation

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