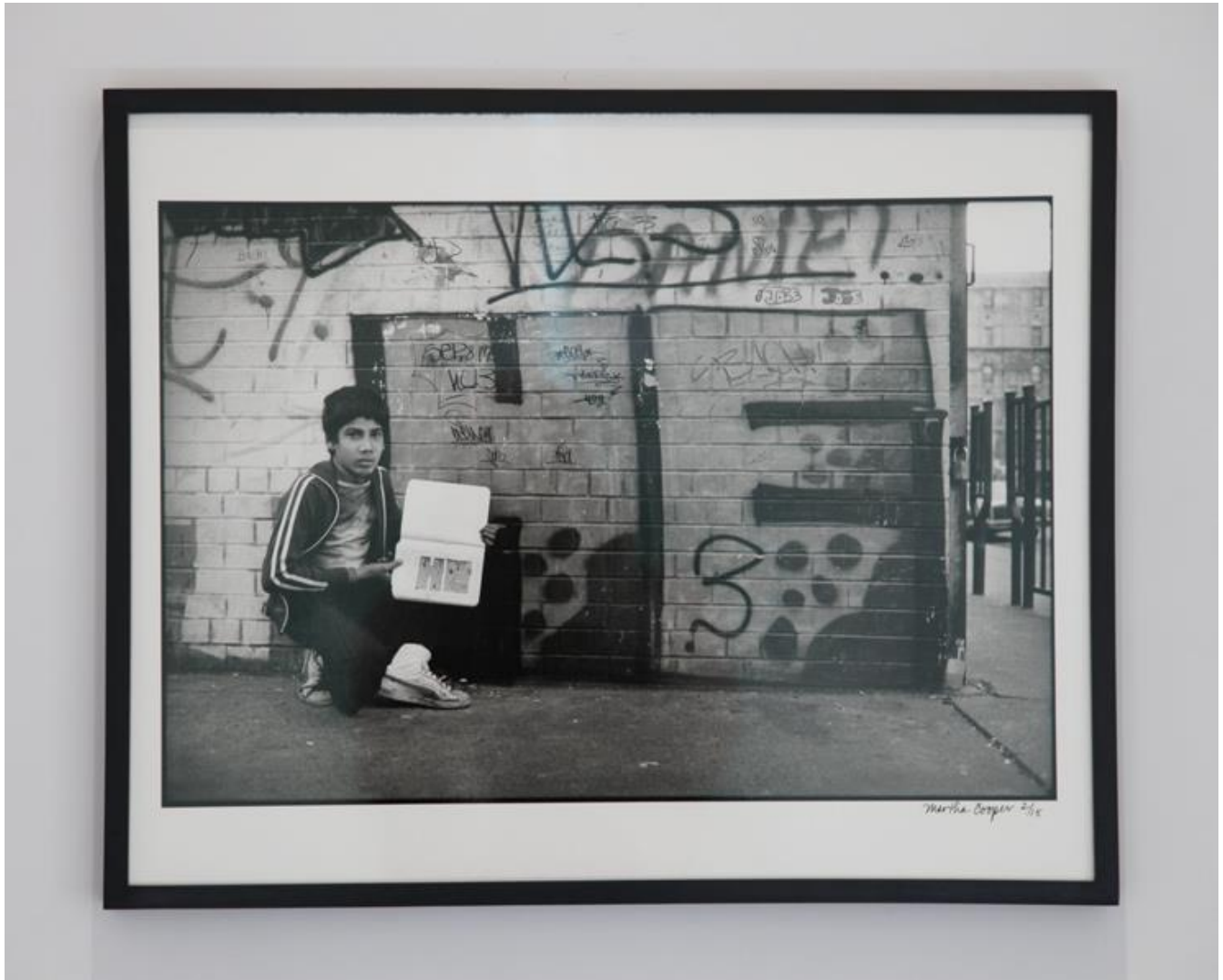


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Brooklyn Street Art

“MARTHA COOPER” SOLO EXHIBITION REVEALS MANY UNSEEN
“ACTION SHOTS”

April 20, 2017



An intrepid photographer who has launched a million dreams (and perhaps a few thousand careers) in graffiti and Street Art with her photography that captured crucial and seminal aspects of our culture that others overlooked.

That is just one way of seeing this brand new collection of images by Martha Cooper that is spread across one wall featuring artists at work, sometimes intimately. Here is where you see 102 individual shots of artists at work, a stunning testament to the range of art-making techniques that are practiced in the public realm, as well as a testament to the passion and curiosity of the woman behind the lens.

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For Ms. Cooper's first solo photography show in New York, Steven Kasher Gallery is featuring 30 new editions of her legendary street art photographs, the ones that have burned themselves into the collective memory of New York and of our streets in the 1970s and 1980s. While her photographs in the 1984 seminal "Subway Art" and her early Hip Hop street shots may be what she is most known for by artists and collectors and fans in cities around the world to which she travels, the new exhibit also contains more than a foreshadowing into the vast collection of important images she has not shown to us.

Clearly she could fill her own museum with the ephemera she has collected as well; the books, clothing articles, black books, stickers, personal drawings that capture her eye and invoke a conversation that happened in the street, under ground, in the train yards. Some of the ephemera is here in a vitrine, much too small to contain everything for additional context and perhaps to burnish the "living legend" Street Cred that one gains by sticking in the trenches with artists over many decades.

This week during the installation of the show Ms. Cooper also shared with us with the valuable history that illustrates the significance of some of the pieces.

Of a 1982 vest painted by graffiti writer Caine1, she explains that shortly after he made the vest for her he was shot – and the photo of the train with the skyline is a memorial to him. A photo spread of a train painted by graffiti writer Spin from that same year is accompanied by the original sketch he did for it in carefully drawn bold letters aimed at the New York Mayor who made war against graffiti, "Dump Koch". The Keith Haring drawing and dedication in her note book we recognize because she brought it with her to the Haring exhibit dinner at the Brooklyn Museum a few years ago, occasionally bringing it out to show to other guests. Next to it a photo of Martha as a small child, camera in hand, the daughter of a photographer and camera store owner in Baltimore. These are objects and memories that have great meaning to her, and to many others who will see this collection.

This is not a retrospective but it is the first time a New York gallery has dedicated a serious solo show to a photographer whose work has received numerous tributes throughout the world, including the dedication of a new library in her name in the Urban Nation museum in Berlin opening this September. In many ways it is remarkable that aside from the Museum of The City of New York no major museum in New York has recognized the invaluable contributions her professional life's work has made to the city, let alone to the history of graffiti, hip hop, Street Art, photography, popular culture.

As appreciable as the well-mounted collection here is, it is a small, potent sampling of Cooper's careers as a photographer, documentarian, ethnographer, preservationist, and reporter worldwide over a half century of travel and investigation. Without these images, crucial information about the creators, techniques and culture of graffiti and Street Art and the culture of art in the streets would be unknown, yet she's eager to share more of her many excursions of study into other cultures and subcultures, like traditional tattooing in Japan, and a project comparing two neighborhoods in Baltimore and Southwest Township, South Africa, a uniquely artful recycling program in Brazil. Even the simple practices of city kids at play has often captured her attention and she has documented it for decades.

The last few years have been a whirlwind of global travel for Ms. Cooper, including trips to nearly every continent for Street Art festivals, graffiti jams, museum and gallery exhibitions, and special events in her honor – she even gave a TED talk in Vienna recently. Taking a moment to cool her heels back in NYC, this show gives us a glimpse into the outstanding and valuable historical archives that Ms. Cooper is turning her attention to these days.

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“This show is important to me at this time because I’m at a point in my life where I want to shoot less and organize my archives more,” she tells us. “I’ve been a professional photographer since 1968, almost 50 years. Exhibits help me think about how my work fits together. I want people to see me as a photographer first, not only a documenter of graffiti and hip hop.”

“Having a show at a gallery that specializes in photography helps accomplish this goal. Although I was never interested in being a fine art photographer, I’m happy and somewhat surprised to see that my photographs have a collectible value.” Modest about her talents as usual, even Martha appears to not realize the value of her contribution to so many and so much of the culture.

BSA: Is this your first solo exhibition in NYC?

Martha Cooper: Not really. I had a solo Street Play exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York in 1980, I had a lot of exhibits that Akim Walta organized when Hip Hop Files came out in 2004. I also had the NYCasitas show in East Harlem last year, and there have been others. However it’s my first solo exhibition in NYC at a photography gallery.

BSA: Is this sort of a retrospective?

MC: Again—not really. Although there are photos from 1970 (tattoo) to 2016, there are major projects that this exhibit doesn’t include—for example all the documentation I did for City Lore, or in Baltimore. My archive contains many, many more topics and projects than are included in this exhibit so I don’t want to call it a retrospective. This show is heavy on graffiti and street art with a couple of photos each from Tokyo Tattoo and New York State of Mind.