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“MARTHA COOPER CAPTURES THE TRANSIENT SPLENDOR OF  
EIGHTIES-ERA NEW YORK GRAFFITI ART”

By Hannah Stamler, May 9, 2017



In the wake of recent calls to "delete Uber" — spurred in part by the app's lowering of surge prices during a taxi workers' strike at JFK airport amid the January protests against Donald Trump's immigrant ban — the company's San Francisco employees launched a guerrilla PR campaign. They took to the streets to spray-paint the message "#undelete" on city walls, pausing, of course, to snap a photograph kneeling before their handiwork, all smiles and jocular start-up swagger.

A welcome antidote to this image — which was posted, reposted, and ridiculed online — can be found in an exhibition of Martha Cooper's photography, on view at Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea through June 3. The show, which centers on a thoughtfully curated selection of her output from the early Eighties, serves as a

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reminder of a time before street art went corporate, before it even had a marketable, and thus appropriable, genre.

In the late Seventies, Cooper, then in her mid-thirties and working as a photographer for the New York Post, became interested in what New Yorkers, in varied tones of admiration and contempt, called graffiti. In that day there was no Banksy or Shepard Fairey, and although some of the pieces Cooper photographed would later accrue art-market value — Keith Haring's Pop murals, for example — that wasn't true of the majority of the looping, freeform drawings and names (or, simply, "tags") spread across lampposts, buildings, and train cars.

Most wouldn't even survive into the next month or year, let alone the next decade. And, indeed, visitors accustomed to the look of today's subway system may be surprised by images that depict MTA trains as they appeared over three decades ago, covered wall-to-wall in thick paint that obscured windows and doors. Photographs taken in Queens and the Bronx, where subways emerge above ground, show trains spray-painted with block text in sunny pinks, yellows, and greens — bright bullets rocketing past rows of dull-brown apartment buildings.

Subway exteriors and interiors were delectable spots for graffiti artists and, in turn, a favorite subject of Cooper's. The exhibition includes one of her most iconic photographs, of Dondi, the aerosol virtuoso responsible for inducting her into the graffiti scene; set in a train yard, the image presents Dondi spraying in a hero's pose, straddling two subway cars, his lithe figure silhouetted against a soft and misty sky. A shot from two years later, in 1982, catches a young boy as he runs buoyantly across parked trains. Another picture taken that same year features Lady Pink, a rare female graffitist, perched on a subway bench and smirking in front of her freshly applied tag; her hands are still clenched around a spray can, her white Keds stained by a film of sidewalk grime.

Hung on the gallery's backmost wall are highlights from Cooper's ongoing series of global, contemporary street artists at work, a complement to the older portraits that shows how younger generations — including Fairey and other bold-name graffiti artists like Space Invader and Swoon — expanded upon the form Dondi and Lady Pink helped pioneer. But these photographs, constrained by their purpose of documenting graffiti's past and present, prove far less memorable in composition than the images of ordinary New Yorkers merely going about their daily routines.

If, as Susan Sontag wrote, "to photograph is to frame," then what Cooper did throughout her early series was an act of framing squared. One of the extraordinary things about what we now term "street art" is its ability to envelop unaware passersby in its narrative, and Cooper had an incisive eye for the moments when graffiti lent particularly surreal or droll character to everyday life. Meticulous shots capture adults made captive and complicit in the feverish, often adolescent, fantasies of the city's young artists. A subway conductor peers out of a car spray-painted with the video game character Luigi, turning the workday into a game of Mario Kart. At the 96th Street station, a middle-aged woman boards a train decorated with a hyper-curved and orgasmic blonde — the sort of dirty cartoon that would send a kid to detention if doodled in the margins of a pop quiz.

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Cooper also recorded instances when commuting bodies interrupted or altered graffiti's effects. A businessman buried in his newspaper, photographed through the sliver of closing doors, embodies a sense of profound calm at odds with the frenzied energy of the subway's outer-shell mural, his focus a gently funny testament to the absorptive power of reading. At 180th Street, the outlines of people waiting in the shadows on the subway platform make black imprints on the multicolored train stopped on the opposite side of the tracks.

Cooper distinguishes herself from other street-art chroniclers by operating not only as a documentarian or a photojournalist but also as a street photographer in the tradition of such New York greats as Garry Winogrand and Diane Arbus. This is evident in both her New York subway scenes and in a suite of black-and-white pictures shot between 1978 and 1980, among the earliest works included, which explore children using the city landscape in imaginative play: leaping across puddles and out of fire escapes, or racing across the now-vanished West Side piers. Street-art diehards will cherish Cooper's exhibition for the rich graffiti archive it comprises, but these silver-gelatin prints offer the key to a second interpretation: namely, that the show is as much about graffiti as it is about youthfulness — its creativity, its rebelliousness, its wisdom, its folly.