



KICK
CRIST

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"CHILDREN
OF THE
GROUND AGAIN"
★

Picturing Wild Style

Martha Cooper, Black Star, and New York's Underground

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One of Martha Cooper's first and most significant graffiti images is the portrait she took of a teenager named Edwin Serrano, who posed for her in front of a wall painted with the big block letters of the name he assumed as an aerosol writer, HE3 (fig. 9.2). In the picture, Serrano coolly stares back at the photographer, crouching low on the sidewalk and displaying a sketchbook open to his stylized signature. Cooper met Edwin in 1979, two years after she moved to New York City to become a photojournalist. With aspirations to shoot for *Life* or the *New York Times*, Cooper had taken a job as the only woman staff photographer at the *New York Post*. She would walk the boroughs of the city searching out pictures for daily assignments. Moving through the poorer neighbourhoods of the Lower East Side and Alphabet City, Cooper would use up her leftover roll film by snapping pictures of children and young people playing among abandoned buildings and rubble-filled lots. Noticing Cooper with her camera in hand, Edwin had asked, "Why don't you take pictures of graffiti?"¹

Cooper remembers this photographic encounter as a turning point in her understanding of the hyper-visible and esoteric forms of writing that proliferated on New York's public surfaces. In conversation with Edwin, Cooper learned that graffiti writers were signing their names in public, and she was fascinated by the planning and complex design processes that found expression in their work. "It was thought to be random vandalism," she recalled, "but in fact, it was highly organized."² This early portrait reveals the connection between self-naming and public writing while also narrating the creative process behind graffiti.

Figure 9.1

Martha Cooper, *Children of the Grave Again, Part 3*, by Dondi, 1980 (detail), in Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), 34–35. © Martha Cooper.

1 Martha Cooper, *Hip Hop Files: Photographs, 1979–1984* (Cologne: From Here to Fame, 2004), 14.

2 Martha Cooper, interview with the author, New York City, February 6, 2017.



Figure 9.2

Martha Cooper, *HE3 with Graffiti Notebook*, 1979, in Martha Cooper, *Hip Hop Files: Photographs, 1979-1984* (Cologne: From Here to Fame, 2004), 12-13.
© Martha Cooper.

Edwin offered to introduce Cooper to a graffiti “king,” initiating her into the society of aerosol artists who would break into subway yards to bomb the trains with paint. Cooper met the legendary writer Donald White, known as Dondi, who permitted Cooper to document his process of painting a whole-car subway masterpiece through the night, finishing at sunrise (fig. 9.3). Before long, Cooper’s interest in the cultural movement verged on obsession; by 1980 she had quit her unionized position at the *Post* so she would have more time to photograph the trains.³

Describing her attempts to publish her now-celebrated graffiti pictures, however, Cooper had three words: “Rejected, rejected, rejected.” Apart from a short profile that appeared in an art magazine, mainstream news outlets shied away from the material, and Cooper “never got the story [she] wanted.”⁴ Reconceiving her graffiti story as a photobook, co-authored with artist and documentarian Henry Chalfant, she finally found a publisher in Germany, resulting in the ground-breaking publication *Subway Art* (1984).⁵

My research on Cooper sought to contextualize the legacy of this understudied photographer and her contributions to photographic representations of graffiti. I drew upon various sources, including Cooper’s extensive personal archives, as well as the Black Star Collection. I wanted to understand her unique vision and the work she was creating as she turned away from photojournalism to pursue personally motivated documentary projects: shooting children’s play, street life, and the emergent forms of graffiti and hip hop.

While Cooper’s impact and legacy are recognized in hip-hop and street art scholarship, her work has not received enough attention from scholars of photography and visual culture. To better contextualize her images from the late 1970s and early 1980s, I turned to the Black Star Collection to explore the work of her predecessors and peers, New York-based photojournalists who encountered and pictured the city at a time of economic, social, and political upheaval—and enormous creative potential. Concentrating my search on the post-1960s era, I used place-based search terms to navigate Black Star’s subject categories—New York, the Bronx, and the Lower East

3 Cooper, interview.

4 Cooper, interview.

5 Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984).



Dondi painting, New Lots Yards, 1980

Figure 9.3

Martha Cooper, *Dondi with Cans, New Lots Yards, 1980* and *Dondi Painting, New Lots Yards, 1980* in Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), 32–33. © Martha Cooper.

Side among others—analyzing approximately 850 photographs. Organizing these by the makers' names inscribed or labelled on the prints' versos, I identified 130 creators, of whom 16 were women.

Being aware of the failure of news publishers to recognize the graffiti movement as worthy of documentation, I did not expect to find such imagery represented in the collection. To my surprise, graffiti was incorporated into press pictures not only as peripheral detail but also as a central focus, and sometimes named in the prints' inscriptions. Among these we can identify various types, including political wall writing, surfaces covered with signatures, train murals, subway car interiors, imagery associating writing with youth gangs, and in one instance, the surfacing of graffiti on canvas in the gallery world. Analyzing these images helped reveal what made Cooper's vision so distinctive, underscoring the level of trust and access she built up with her subjects and her refusal to pathologize the writing movement.

Examining this collection caused me to re-evaluate Cooper's visual contribution to the history of the graffiti movement. At the same time, the collection raised new questions for me about the conditions that framed how the ephemeral form was made visible and permanent in the historical record. This chapter begins by examining graffiti's emergence as a cultural movement in New York, exploring how writing was documented, preserved, suppressed, and disseminated. I then turn to my research in the Black Star Collection, its pictures of post-1960s New York, and my unexpected findings of graffiti images by numerous photojournalists. I reflect on how the collection complicated my earlier reading of Cooper's work, as well as what it clarified about her vision of writing culture. Considering the press and the archive as sites where underground acts might be either remembered or made invisible, I conclude by exploring the liminal nature of graffiti in the photographic record, oscillating between obscurity and infamy.

"Photography Was the Proof"

When I began to turn towards Cooper as a research subject, it was not because I was drawn to her images of aerosol writing and subway murals. Rather, it was Cooper's contribution to the early visual cultures of hip-hop dance that drew me to her work. Cooper played an instrumental role by

publishing her images in the first newspaper article on breakdancing, titled “Physical Graffiti” and written with performance scholar Sally Banes.⁶ This occurred when hip hop was transitioning from its original underground form and becoming more visible to a wider public, coming into view through performances, articles, how-to manuals, photographs, and films. In these early presentations to outsider audiences, graffiti was positioned as one of the foundational elements of the culture: the visual expression of hip hop’s innovative aesthetics.

At that early stage in my research process, I was hesitant to approach Cooper’s early pictures of subway writing, as well as her later images of aerosol pieces by muralists who had started to paint legally, moving their art practices above ground. I initially found the aesthetics of aerosol murals to be impenetrable; I stared at the images of writing and wondered if I would ever comprehend it. But, my interest in the subject grew as I considered how writing was being publicly defined to outsider audiences and what that meant for the creators of its forms.

The contagious nature of writing culture took hold in New York City during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when an explosion of names associated with numbers appeared and spread across walls, over subway cars, and along the routes of city buses. Writing first took the form of small-scale “tags” or signatures that often incorporated the number of the tagger’s street address. Writing culture spread widely, inviting participation by its aesthetic openness: all that was needed was a marker, a can of spray paint, and a name. By the mid-1970s graffiti had evolved as writers sought to execute increasingly elaborate, colourful, and labour-intensive pieces.⁷ Writers even modified the nozzles of aerosol cans to achieve a wider distribution of paint, setting their work apart from the skinny letters of the earlier generation of taggers.

While the movement was flourishing, with writers innovating in styles and techniques, city and transit authorities were actively working to curb their activities, which were characterized as signs of social dysfunction and criminality. Graffiti was first considered a public nuisance, but when the practice became defined as an urban problem associated with gang activity

6 Sally Banes, “Physical Graffiti: Breaking Is Hard to Do,” *Village Voice*, April 22, 1981, 31–33.

7 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 42.

and violence, anti-graffiti sentiment intensified.⁸ This introduced an era of “moral panics that fueled the surveillance and criminalization of graffiti writers.”⁹ The year 1972 marked a change in the political conception of the illicit form; the city council declared a “war on graffiti” and the first anti-writing laws were passed when Mayor John Lindsay made it illegal to carry a can of spray paint in any public space.¹⁰ Various other tactics were employed to suppress the actions of writers: razor wire and police dogs were added to train yards, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) began to use costly measures to clean the trains, taking painted subway cars out of service for treatment with a chemical solvent known to artists as “the Buff.”

Even as writing was being criminalized, discouraged, and erased, it emerged as a source and a subject of photographic and documentary material. As graffiti writers recognized the ephemeral nature of their creations, it became crucial to get good pictures of their pieces before they disappeared from view. Documentation gained currency as writing took on more aesthetic complexity and photographing walls and subway masterpieces became an integral part of the culture. As Tracy Fitzpatrick observes, “Documentation of subway writing was critically important to its development, particularly because the transit authority would erase what it could.”¹¹ In addition to photographing their own work, writers also looked for their tags in pictures that circulated in the news media. This was how Dondi first became aware of Cooper as a documenter of writing; he spotted his tag in the background of a news picture under her byline. “Photography was the proof,” Cooper stated, and she captured scenes of writers gathered in small living spaces, looking through albums of their snapshots of painted trains.¹²

In their efforts to suppress graffiti, law enforcement and vandal squads also photographed tags, walls, and trains, amassing collections of pictures used to identify repeat writers and to serve as evidence in criminal prosecutions. In a

8 Ronald Kramer, *The Rise of Legal Graffiti in New York and Beyond* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 14.

9 Stefano Bloch, *Going All City: Struggle and Survival in LA's Graffiti Subculture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 190.

10 Kramer, *Rise of Legal Graffiti*, 14.

11 Tracy Fitzpatrick, *Art and the Subway: New York Underground* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 181.

12 Cooper, interview.



Figure 9.4

Michael L. Abramson, *Members of Seven Immortals, the Bronx, New York, ca. 1972*. Gelatin silver print, 18.5 x 25.2 cm. BS.2005.253193.

telling anecdote from his memoir as a young writer, Stefano Bloch recalls feeling lucky that he did not have a personal archive of his graffiti work the day police came and raided his home. Once he was in custody, a detective asked Bloch for his autograph and showed him binders full of signatures of “other writers he had captured, and pictures of his favourite graffiti.”¹³ The police could be as obsessive and knowledgeable about writing as writers were among themselves.¹⁴

Examining early published works on graffiti reveals how documentarians first grappled with the form and how they sought to make it understandable to a broader public. One of the first news media profiles on the subject was published by an anonymous author in the *New York Times* in 1971: “‘Taki 183’ Spawns Pen Pals.”¹⁵ The text spotlighted a writer whose moniker could be seen across the city, and it conveyed the excitement writing held for young people, suggesting that TAKI 183 was a possible originator of the form. But after 1971, newspaper editorials and letters in news publications tended to portray graffiti as an urban crisis.¹⁶

In 1972 Herbert Kohl published his photo-essay on graffiti and self-naming, *Golden Boy as Anthony Cool*, featuring black-and-white photographs by James Hinton.¹⁷ Kohl, an educator who reflects on his experiences teaching in low-income communities in New York, explores writing as a form of communication and personal expression for young people. His essay orients the reader in neighbourhoods where there are “gaping holes on most of the streets where buildings have burned down or been condemned and torn down.”¹⁸ But the photographs illustrating this work do not focus on poverty, instead dealing explicitly with walls and writing. Another early publication, *The Faith of Graffiti*, with text by Norman Mailer and colour photographs by Jon Naar, sought to position aerosol writing as a valid form of art, asserting that the form is “the expression of the ghetto.”¹⁹

13 Bloch, *Going All City*, 193–94.

14 Bloch, *Going All City*.

15 “‘Taki 183’ Spawns Pen Pals,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1971, 37.

16 See Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Came to Be an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

17 Herbert Kohl, *Golden Boy as Anthony Cool* (New York: Dial Press, 1972).

18 Kohl, *Golden Boy as Anthony Cool*, 3.

19 Mervyn Kurlansky, Jon Naar, and Norman Mailer, *Faith of Graffiti* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1974).

When Cooper began photographing public writing seriously in 1979, the movement had evolved to become a remarkable aesthetic form. She was determined to make her subjects and their works visible as something more than an urban problem. Cooper and Chalfant's *Subway Art* presented more than two hundred colour photographs documenting aerosol paintings on trains, while also revealing the process of the work and the sociality of writing culture. Cooper's images are impressive and dynamic, featuring murals blazing against the backdrop of the city. Her use of colour film was a significant creative choice in her documentation of the art form, exalting the chromatic expressions of Wild Style writing and the full vibrancy of train murals pictured in the city context.²⁰ The trust and access she gained among writers allowed her to create photographs for which there was no aesthetic precedent. Shot from inside an adjacent subway car, Cooper's image of Dondi at work on a whole-car mural depicts the artist balancing between the two trains, holding a can of spray paint, his face illuminated by a blue pre-dawn light (fig. 9.3).

But despite the aesthetic innovation of these images, the early reception of *Subway Art* was mixed, evidencing the skepticism of critics and publishers who struggled to understand the "painters (or vandals)" at the centre of her lens.²¹ One reviewer called Cooper and Chalfant's pictures "bold and subtly threatening," while denouncing subway graffiti as "gang warfare by spray-can."²² Even after Cooper and Chalfant's 1984 publication, writing and aerosol art remained contested territory in contemporary discourse.

Black Star Underground

The first place I spotted graffiti in the Black Star Collection was in a group of photographs by Michael Abramson, who shot an in-depth assignment on youth gangs in the Bronx in 1973. Abramson's black-and-white

20 "Wild style" is a lettering style that is deliberately illegible to outsider audiences.

21 Unknown author, "Subway Art by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant," *Amateur Photographer*, 29 September 1984. [Press clipping]. Martha Cooper Personal Archives, New York, NY, United States.

22 Clancy Sigal, "Spray Can Gang," *New Society*, ca. 1984. [Press clipping review of *Subway Art*]. Martha Cooper Personal Archives.

photographs of the allegedly fearsome gangs—the Black Spades, Savage Skulls, and Seven Immortals—depict teenagers wearing embellished vests and denim jackets, roughhousing and embracing on the street and in their clubhouses. I recognized some of the images from books chronicling hip hop’s early cultural formation. Steven Hager’s 1984 book *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti* uses some of Abramson’s images in its first section, titled “Fire in the Bronx,” with text that suggests hip hop evolved from (and as an alternative to) gang activity and violence in the devastated neighbourhood. This is important to note because of the parallel with graffiti, which was also portrayed in print as gang-related, a sign and symptom of crime in the city.

Without publication stamps, it is not clear where else Abramson’s images may have been circulated in mainstream publications, but his pictures do provide insight into less visible forms of wall writing. For example, a group photograph of members of the Seven Immortals depicts a central figure with his back to the camera, displaying his adorned jacket to the photographer (fig. 9.4). The walls in the interior space have been written and drawn on with black marker, using simple lettering. The Seven Immortals insignia is drawn on the back wall in a style consistent with the jacket’s design. It is possible that Abramson was deliberately incorporating this writing into his composition to emphasize the linkage and reveal the importance of aesthetics and style to expressions of identity and belonging for his young subjects.

Some Black Star photographers, such as Barbara Pfeffer, seemed to shoot graffiti in a way that intentionally emphasized its associations with social marginalization. In one example, Pfeffer created a stark photograph presenting a poorly lit image of a narrow entry leading down a flight of stairs, where numerous tags have been painted across the walls. The print is inscribed “Graffiti – Slums” on its verso. Another image by Pfeffer was taken as she held up her camera to peer through a wire fence at a Black teenager playing handball (fig. 9.5). Pictured with his back to the photographer, the teen is poised mid-step, aiming his ball towards a concrete wall painted with tags. Like Pfeffer’s image of the stairwell, the photographer’s disciplinary perception of her subject is evident in the framing and starkness of the composition. The wire fence in the image’s foreground reinforces the divide between the photographer and her subject. Such imagery associating wall writing with poverty and city slums reflects a vision that is both



Figure 9.5

Barbara Pfeffer, *Playing Handball in New York City*, ca. 1965. Gelatin silver print, 17.4 x 23.4 cm. BS.2005.265888.



Figure 9.6
Hiroyuki Matsumoto,
Graffiti on a Subway Train,
New York, 1973. Gelatin
silver print, 17.2 x 25.2 cm.
BS.2005.276113.

pathologizing and paradoxical. Appearing to relate a story of urban abandonment and neglect, the presence of this writing also evidences the presence of the everyday young people who dwelled in these environments.

In other visions of graffiti in the Black Star Collection, there are surprising examples of photographers who, like Cooper, seem to have had a visual interest in the subject and worked creatively to capture its elusive forms. Hiroyuki Matsumoto has several images of train murals, suggesting that he may also have been interested in writing and appreciative of the colourful paintings that would come into view on the crowded subway platform. One of his photographs of a train mural is shot from a mid-low angle as the subway doors open, revealing the passengers inside (fig. 9.6). I can imagine the photographer spending time on underground subway platforms waiting for a painted train to pull into the station, picturing graffiti in the quotidian space of daily travel.

Likewise, Kathleen Foster sought out aerosol writing as a photographic subject. She photographed a subway platform wall covered in tags by foundational writers of the movement (fig. 9.7). Moreover, Foster was the only photographer in my sample who followed graffiti above ground into legal spaces, when it became a gallery trend in New York's art scene. In 1981 Foster photographed a canvas by Bama, then a member of the United Graffiti Artists (UGA) collective, whose code of conduct forbade them to paint illegally (fig. 9.8).

Throughout my samples from the Black Star Collection were examples of graffiti pictured as peripheral details or in the background of a scene, sometimes occupying a large or small area of the print but not mentioned in the inscriptions and subject headings found on the versos. It is often unclear whether Black Star photographers were consciously incorporating the form into their work or the writing was simply making itself known through its proliferation on city surfaces. Shelly Rusten's photograph of a Black couple embracing on a sidewalk is a striking example of this (fig. 9.9). The photographer captured the pair holding one another closely, seemingly unaware of the presence of her camera or the two white passersby staring openly at them. The presence of a tag, "Bobby XX Revolt," on the wall at the right of the frame adds a coded element to Rusten's complex and evocative image. Inscribed on the verso of the print is **BLACKS – ADULTS**, a subject heading that does not offer clues as to how the image was interpreted or used (fig. 9.10).



Figure 9.7

Kathleen Foster, *Hunts Point Avenue Subway Station, New York City*, ca. 1981. Gelatin silver print, 20.1 x 25.3 cm. BS.2005.253534.



Figure 9.8

Kathleen Foster, *Bama*,
ca. 1981. Gelatin silver
print, 20.4 x 25.2 cm.
BS.2005.253532.

With the exception of some of Abramson's work, the photographs in my sample did not come with information that would help trace where they might have been circulated and seen. Nevertheless, these works were collected through a network of visual agents: photographers filing their pictures and editors marking and sorting them along the lines of publishable categories. Recognizing the ephemeral nature of writing's markings on the city and the active pursuit of its eradication, those agents may have considered the photographs as evidence, as potentially holding historical significance. Others may have seen writing only through its fragmentary symbolic associations with other picture categories, such as NEW YORK/GANGS, NEW YORK/SLUMS, OR NEW YORK/SUBWAYS.

Graffiti in the Archive

In the historical record, aerosol writing emerges as a movement shaped alternately by possibilities of visibility and processes of invisibilization. Even as photography and print documentation have been critically important to how the ephemeral form is seen, celebrated, and remembered, other sources hold charged symbolic associations, distortions, and silences. Examining how graffiti was envisioned by Black Star photographers exposes multiple ways in which the form was contended with and visually managed. These works' inscriptions and subject headings offer additional clues to how writing was coming into view as it moved above ground through a network of photographers and editors. At the same time, those inscriptions, labels, and subject headings can also serve to obscure the presence of graffiti in the collection, distributing its form among other publishable fields.

The sample of New York pictures in the Black Star Collection confirms in some ways the pathologized vision of early graffiti that seems to have fixed itself in the public imagination. In images of poor neighbourhoods there are visual associations between urban abandonment and public writing, appearing like a target within targeted communities. But there also emerge other publishable horizons for writing, found in the works of photojournalists who evinced curiosity and visual interest in the form and who worked skilfully to incorporate it into their press images. Within these we can observe various gazes upon graffiti, including the diverse perspectives of women creators

Figures 9.9 and 9.10

Shelly Rusten, *Couple Embracing in the Street, New York City*, 1970 (recto and verso). Gelatin silver print, 28.3 x 19.3 cm. BS.2005.266374.





Figure 9.11

Martha Cooper, *Children of the Grave Again, Part 3*, by Dondi, 1980, in Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), 34–35.
© Martha Cooper.

such as Foster, Pfeffer, and Rusten, as well as notable creators of colour such as Matsumoto, who, like Cooper, followed train murals with his camera. Their works and others reveal multiple points of view on writing at a significant historical moment, when public walls both above and underground were covered in the signatures of the movement's foundational creators.²³ It was also a time when writing's aesthetics were evolving in train murals, the creators of this culture were being criminalized by city and transit authorities, and some writers began moving their work onto graffiti canvases in gallery spaces. The Black Star Collection speaks to the specific conditions that framed how writing was becoming visible.

Positioning Cooper against these makers, it is possible to observe how she was building on this visual repertoire and what set her apart as a documentarian: shooting subway art on Kodachrome film in good light, in places where the train tracks moved above ground (fig. 9.11). Cooper formed important relationships with the writers, with whom she worked collaboratively to achieve her powerful documentation of their train murals. She recalls how writers would call her after they had completed a piece, with directions to the subway line and whether to look for the mural on the “morning” or the “afternoon” side of the car. The writers valued good documentation of their work, and Cooper provided them with copies of her photographs. The level of trust and access she gained enabled her to create images of train murals in full colour against the backdrop of the city, moments before they disappeared from view. The relationships she developed with her subjects also allowed Cooper to document previously unseen aspects of writing culture: writers in subway cars and train yards, gathered in their living spaces, and posing in front of collections of spray cans, as well as in action executing their murals. Cooper's work made visible people who were barely recognized in the public life of middle-class America, making permanent the ephemeral traces of an aesthetic movement and the individuals who contributed to its development.

23 These include BARBARA 62, EVA 62, EDDIE 181, LIONEL 168, TABU, and CHARMIN 65, among other recognizable names.