



# Italian Brooklyn

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

# Martha Cooper

Cover image:

The Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and St. Paulinus, Williamsburg, 1981

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Catalog for an exhibition at the  
John D. Calandra Italian American Institute  
in collaboration with City Lore

April 18–August 31, 2018



I first met Martha Cooper in 1981 when we were both hired to document vernacular expressive culture in Brooklyn, New York. Folklorists Maxine Miska and I. Sheldon “Shelley” Posen headed up this research project of urban folklore as part of the Brooklyn Educational and Cultural Alliance, a consortium of cultural and university institutions. I remember clearly Marty—as everyone called her—showing us her black-and-white photographs of kids playing in the gritty streets of New York City. I was familiar with these games (e.g., stickball, skelly) and ludic activities (e.g., opening the fire hydrant in the summer), having grown up in Brooklyn. At the time, I thought how marvelous it was that someone had considered quotidian children’s play important enough to photograph and had done so with such attention and sympathy.

I had been tapped to work specifically with the Italian American community, documenting with Shelley and Marty the game of bocce, Vincenzo Ancona’s dioramas woven from multihued wires, the Manteo family’s Sicilian marionette theater, the magnificent Catholic *giglio* feast, and even my mother’s homemade Christmas desserts. Many of Marty’s photographs in the current exhibit were taken as part of that extraordinary undertaking.

It was through working with Marty at this time that I—a young scholar and budding folklorist—came to appreciate the challenges of learning about the lives and creativity of others. For example, it was upon seeing Marty’s color slides several days after attending the multifaceted *giglio* feast—a public event that culminates with more than a hundred able-bodied men carrying the multistoried, ceremonial tower—that I better understood what I had experienced. Her images zeroed in on significant moments that I had not seen, or more specifically had not fully appreciated, even though I was with her when she took the photographs: an adult tutoring a child in the nuance of the feast; the synergy of the *giglio* lifters; or a glance exchanged by a feast participant and a loved one in the crowd. These moments of visual revelation, a sort of photographic satori, helped me better understand how people interact creatively and religiously to create a sense of community and place in the complicated and heterogeneous environs of Brooklyn.

Marty and I would go on to collaborate on folklife research in the city over the course of several years: on Italian American yard shrines (also seen in this exhibit); *presepi* (domestic Nativity landscapes); and Christmas house displays; and later, on Puerto Rican community gardens and *casitas de madera*, a form of Caribbean vernacular architecture reconstituted in empty plots of land in the South Bronx, East Harlem, and Lower East Side; and on memorial murals

painted for the vast number of those who died prematurely during the crack epidemic of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was always a joy to work with Marty because she often took great pains to capture a unique shot by, for example, climbing to the roof of an abandoned building for an aerial view or waiting till dusk for the perfect lighting. And she consistently provided me the space for properly interviewing the people who would teach us about their artistry and worlds. Because of her skills and sensitivity, other folklorists and ethnographers in the city and elsewhere sought out Marty as the photographer for a wide range of projects.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge Marty's groundbreaking and influential work on New York City graffiti and her 1984 book with Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art*, subsequently dubbed the "graffiti bible," which remains in print. In fact, Marty continues to photograph street art all over the world. A number of publishers, especially in Europe, have mined her archive of older images—many shot originally as Kodachrome slides—to publish books about the early days of hip-hop in New York City.

It was after seeing a 2016 exhibit of Marty's *casita* oeuvre at the storefront Hi-ARTS Gallery that I suggested to her that we reexamine her earlier Italian American photos for an exhibit at the Calandra Institute. There had never been an exhibition exclusively devoted to her Italian American photographs, although they have been published in magazine articles (e.g., *Natural History* and *Smithsonian*) and in various books. In collaboration with City Lore, we are excited to show these images, now digitized from photo slides and printed at poster sizes. City Lore, a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to documenting and promoting New York City's vibrant folk arts, houses Marty's extensive slide collection.

As Susan Sontag noted, "all photographs are *memento mori*." A number of the people seen in these images are now gone, and their artistic practices are no longer. The blocks of ice once transported on shoulders have long melted, and the wash drying on a backyard clothesline seem a nostalgic reminder of the fading "old neighborhood." The Brooklyn depicted in these images has been dramatically altered, for better or worse. Martha Cooper's *Italian Brooklyn* photographs are documents of a specific time and place, a chapter in the ongoing story of the borough's Italian Americans.

—JOSEPH SCIORRA

Selected images



Vincenzo and Virginia Ancona, Gravesend, Brooklyn, 1986





Yard shrine, 1985



Dashboard altar, Williamsburg, 1981



The Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and St. Paulinus, Williamsburg, 1981



Ice man, 1981



The Manteo Family Sicilian Puppet Theater, Gravesend, Brooklyn, 1982



Anna Sciorra's Christmas desserts, Bergen Beach, 1981



The Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and St. Paulinus, Williamsburg, 1981



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The Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and St. Paulinus, Williamsburg, 1981





The *Questua*, 1981

MARTHA COOPER is a documentary photographer who has specialized in shooting urban vernacular art and architecture for forty years. In 1977, Cooper moved from Rhode Island to New York City and worked as a staff photographer at the *New York Post* for three years. During that time she began to document graffiti and b-boying, subjects that led to her extensive coverage of early hip-hop as it emerged from the Bronx. These photos, published worldwide, helped make hip-hop the predominant international youth movement it is today.

Cooper's first book, *Subway Art* (with Henry Chalfant), has been in print since 1984 and is affectionately called the "bible" by graffiti artists. Her next book, *R.I.P.: Memorial Wall Art*, looks at memorial murals in New York City, and *Hip Hop Files 1980–1984* contains hundreds of rare, early hip-hop photos. *We B\*Girlz* is an intensive look at girls who breakdance worldwide, and *Street Play* and *New York State of Mind* are Cooper's collections of New York City photos from the late '70s. *Tag Town* shows the evolution of graffiti style from early tags to complicated pieces. Her books *Going Postal* and *Name Tagging* contain hundreds of images of graffiti and street art on postal stickers. *Remembering 9/11* captures the variety of spontaneous memorials that sprang up in New York after the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. *Tokyo Tattoo 1970*, published in 2011 by Dokument in Sweden, showcases photos she took while living in Japan in the '70s.

Cooper's work has been exhibited in museums and galleries worldwide and published in numerous magazines from *National Geographic* to *Vibe*. She still lives in Manhattan but travels frequently to urban art festivals around the world. Recently Cooper has been documenting street artists painting in Wynwood, Miami, as well as shooting an ongoing personal project comparing SoWeBo, a neighborhood in Southwest Baltimore, to Soweto, South Africa. She is presently working on a book with 1UP, a notorious graffiti crew in Berlin.





John D. Calandra Italian American Institute  
Queens College/CUNY  
25 West 43rd Street, 17th Floor  
New York, NY 10036  
212-642-2094  
[www.qc.edu/calandra](http://www.qc.edu/calandra)