pieces to achieve this end. Highlighting the contributions of canonical figures, alongside the important work of contemporary artists, *Italianità* was a testament to the remarkable diversity of the Italian diaspora and furthered the museum's mission to engage with the history of the Italians of Los Angeles and beyond. By extension, the exhibit did a service to Italian diaspora studies, reminding specialists and the general public alike of the complexity and richness of the diasporic identity and culture.

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Italian Brooklyn: Photographs by Martha Cooper.
Curated by Martha Cooper.
John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, New York City, New York.
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What does Italian American life look like? A recent exhibition of Martha Cooper's photographs at Queens College's John D. Calandra Italian American Institute explored this question for a brief window of time in Brooklyn's history. Cooper's images in *Italian Brooklyn: Photographs by Martha Cooper* coincide with the era of films like *Saturday Night Fever*, *The Warriors*, and *Dog Day Afternoon*—that is to say a time before celebrity chefs, man-bunned hipsters, waterfront parks, and large-scale gentrification. The city teetered near insolvency, municipal services were cut, and labor strikes were commonplace. New York City was gritty, and Brooklyn, the most populous borough and largely working class, was grittier. White ethnics were the majority demographic group in Brooklyn, and Italian Americans dominated portions of Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst, Bath Beach, Williamsburg, and Gravesend (Romalewski 2013). That would shift dramatically in the 1990s and later, as Brooklyn became increasingly heterogeneous. *Italian Brooklyn: Photographs by Martha Cooper* documents without nostalgia or kitsch the vitality of Italian American vernacular culture in the early 1980s in a loving portrait that breathes life into a world largely gone.

Cooper and folklorist Joseph Sciorra were commissioned to document Italian American culture for the Brooklyn Educational and Cultural Alliance in 1981; Sciorra identified a rich variety of expressive activities, from cooking, to religious rites, to the care of shrines, to the construction of puppet theaters, to laboring in the community. Cooper, now seventy-five, is an internationally

recognized photojournalist, and she continues to exhibit and publish her work. This exhibition is the first devoted solely to Cooper's Italian American photographs. Cooper also served as the director of photography for City Lore, a nonprofit devoted to sustaining public space and New York's cultural heritage, according to a 2009 *New York Times* profile (Graustark 2009). City Lore cosponsored this exhibition and is the repository for her slide collection.

Cooper told the *Times* that her father owned a camera store in Baltimore; before she was ten she enjoyed picture-taking jaunts with him and a local camera club. Her training was varied—she did a stint in the Peace Corps, worked in Yale University's anthropological museum, and began her New York career for the *New York Post* in the 1970s (she was its first woman photographer) (Kurland 2016). She has photographed community gardens and *casitas de madera* (little wooden houses) in Puerto Rican neighborhoods, children's street play in Soweto and SoWeBo (Southwest Baltimore), early purveyors of hip-hop, including break dancing B-boys and B-girls, painted shrines, Japanese tattoos, and postal stickers as guerrilla art. But she is best known for her photographs of New York City's graffiti art during its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. *Subway Art* (Cooper and Chalfant 1984) is for many "the bible" of this movement, as Cooper befriended members of the tagging community for her inside look into the genre. She develops relationships and investigates her subjects, often for years on end.

Cooper claims an interest in preservation and, though considered a photojournalist, she might rightly be seen as a visual anthropologist. Photojournalism developed in the 1930s and 1940s, simultaneous with documentary photography, and historically it has illustrated and interpreted events through the camera. Today's practitioners consider photojournalism visual storytelling. However, a focus on newsworthy events and the "decisive moment" as Henri Cartier-Bresson called it, or capturing the essence of an event aesthetically and journalistically with a single image, remains a preoccupation.

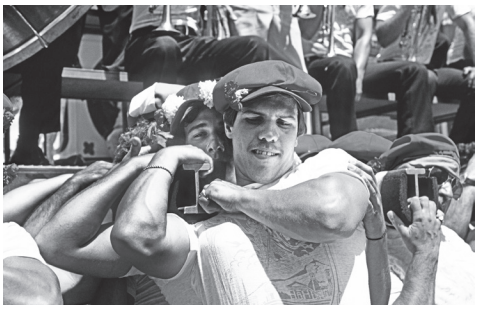
Documentary photography has roots in social reform. The truth value of the photograph was intended to help persuade citizens of the need for legislation or social programs aimed at addressing social wrongs. Cooper's work is in a different category. She documents social life—whether of spray-can artists or, in the case of Italian American Brooklyn, Catholic folk artists—with the aim of offering viewers a sense of communities as the communities themselves might experience it. And she engages deeply with vernacular cultural producers. Critical to visual anthropologists is the use of photography as a means to record, map, or inventory a culture so as to help understand how it is structured, what animates it, and how it creates meaning and creates itself.

What do we know of Italian American Brooklyn from Cooper's slice-of-life photographs? Included in the exhibition were several shots of male laborers,

such as an ice carter and a landscaper. The "ice man" hefts a block of ice upon his shoulders; a shock of gray hair mirrors a bubble inside the ice. He looks toward the camera, a cigarette poised in his lips—he could be an Italian American Marlboro Man. The landscaper, similarly masculine, appraises the camera eye, one hand holding a cigarette, the other lodged on his hip; both of these photographs are in the documentary-style tradition, akin to August Sander's types in his famous study *People of the Twentieth Century*. They are exemplars of the heroic laborer—confident in their bodies, their stances, and their place within the world. Their female counterparts appear in another photograph, which shows four women beside a shrine to the Madonna. Two smile diffidently; the other two, proud and imperious like the workmen, stare implacably at the camera. One wears a bright floral housecoat, the other sports an obvious wig, but their expressions and stances brook no disregard—these women have the hauteur of formal portrait subjects going back to the sixteenth century.

These caretakers of the Madonna are examples of Cooper's primary exploration, Italian Americans in their private and public labors, outside their economic lives. We see a woman making the sign of the cross before a yard shrine, women on lawn chairs on their front stoops, men at their social clubs holding up blessed bread, processions of priests and marching bands, and an altar on a car dashboard. The dashboard's religious figurines hold their hands up in vulnerability and beatitude, although the curled ribbon bows, the Madonna that has fallen askew, and the industrial blur outside the car windshield remind us that this spirituality is staged, a ritualistic space created by a believer. Similarly, Cooper's photographs of the "Manteo Family Sicilian Puppet Theater, Gravesend, Brooklyn, 1982" and "Anna Sciorra's Christmas Desserts, Bergen Beach, 1981" appear as sets, one literal, the other figurative. In these photographs, the theater or the kitchen table are locations for

Photographs by Martha Cooper/City Lore.



Photographs by Martha Cooper/City Lore.

expressive activity. This is not to say that her photos are "posed," but rather that she is attentive to the performativity of these rituals of everyday life.

The most colorful photographs were of the many religious festivals, particularly the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and St. Paulinus, celebrated annually for over a century. At the feast, young and old men, more than a hundred of them, heave a giant towering *giglio* (lily) upon their shoulders and parade it through the streets, along with a *barca* (boat) carrying a live band. Cooper's bird's-eye view of the giglio steeple, more than eighty feet tall with a figure of St. Paulinus atop it, offers an incredible panorama. The tower is higher than the four-story apartment buildings and vies for attention with Williamsburg's water towers and television antennae; its colorful yellows and reds stand out against the drab industrial neighborhood.[1] From Cooper's vantage the *paranze* (teams of lifters), most of the men wearing red berets, seem minuscule, but her perspective also captures their exaggerated muscular poses.

In another shot taken from a lower vantage, Cooper shows the cooperation of the lifters in the patterns of arms holding up the tower, which point in a contrary direction from the waves on the boat. It is as if we are seeing a dance. But a few outthrust hips (or bellies), or a leg positioned for stability, remind us of the weight of this endeavor. Confetti rains down on the scene, as one figure in the *barca*'s bow holds out a staff, seeming to direct a grand opera of joyous, popular religiosity. In another photograph the men holding the *giglio* sway, their arms held up in a nearly feminine wave. The sheer physicality is emphasized in

another photograph portraying a red-capped lifter, who bites his lip from the strain. Veins pop from his muscled arm, and behind him is another face, and another arm, then two others. The entire bottom picture frame is convulsed with their efforts, while above them are the musicians' legs, their instruments dangling as they enjoy the ride.

Here also is a gender divide in the imagery. Women often look out of windows at the feast, a metaphor for their distance from public celebration. And, interestingly, while Cooper shows us many matrons, there are few younger women. One of the few is seen from directly behind. Held close by her paramour, she sports a short white romper, emphasizing her tan and her figure. The young woman watches the festivities, somewhat separated from the crowd, almost an outside viewer, like us. Is Cooper capturing a generational change, signaling the decline of Brooklyn's Italian American community? Or is she documenting a gender divide, of public and private spheres and labors, as an anthropologist might, or is she creating it?

Cooper's *Italian Brooklyn* illuminates a rich vein of communal, populist spirituality. The collective portrait is so lovely, I wish to see an even larger slice of an immigrant and second-generation community, now replaced by glass condos and kombucha teahouses.

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Note

1. For more information about the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and in particular the history and enactment of the *giglio* ritual, see www.olmcfeast.com/about/about-the-feast.

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