

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

***Hip Hop: Conscious, Unconscious, Fotografiska.* The Contemporary Museum of Photography, Art & Culture, Berlin, 20.09.2024-26.01.2025**



Hip Hop: Conscious, Unconscious is an exhibition through which Fotografiska. The Contemporary Museum of Photography, Art & Culture and Mass Appeal (an American media and content company) celebrate 50 years of hip hop culture. Before discussing the exhibition, a few words should be dedicated to the museum. Versions of this museum exist in Stockholm, New York,

Shanghai, Tallinn, and Oslo, each offering unique experiences brought together by the same concept and the attempt to expose the public to astounding photography. More than a museum *per se*, Fotografiska is a concept and a space and, at least in Berlin, a place of memory and commemoration. The Berlin Museum is located within the space of the former Tacheles, an iconic squat and alternative creative space which was born in the 1990s in former East Berlin. The site had previously housed the Wertheim Department Store, confiscated from its Jewish owners during World War II. Thus, in time, the space has embodied three identities, which kept, in their own way, traces of their former selves. Even in its current metamorphosis, older parts of the building are integrated into the new structure and its overall vibe is kept alive by the abundance of graffiti covering the walls of the stairwell and hallways.

Curated by Sascha Jenkins (Mass Appeal) and Sally Berman (Hearst Visual Group) and showing 200 photographs taken by 50 artists (such as Martha Cooper, Jonathan Mannon, Janette Beckman, Campbell Addy), the exhibition invites its viewers to explore how collective expression connects to empowerment. In the intention of its curators, the exhibition traces hip hop's dynamic evolution from its underground origins in the Bronx to its status as a global phenomenon today. According to their presentation, its curators did not intend to offer a retrospective, a mere chronological account of events and emerging genres but rather to capture hip hop's "(r)evolution" from an "unconscious force into a conscious global movement, influencing music, art, fashion and language worldwide".

From a different perspective, the exhibition focuses on space, tracing a story that began on the gritty streets of the South Bronx in the 1970s—photographed by Martha Cooper—before moving from the East Coast to the West Coast, then to the South, and eventually spreading worldwide.

The global perspective is in this case provided by Germany, a decision doubtlessly inspired by the exhibition's location, which renders to the public a "unique Hip Hop in Deutschland chapter". Curated separately by a rather larger team (Yolandé Gouws, Davide Bortot, Miriam Davoudvandi, Ron Schindler (DJ Ron), Götz Gottschalk, Buyan Vit of the Freies Hip Hop Institute, Heidelberg, and Lina Czerny), this section intends to explore the cultural and political impact of rap in Germany, offering "fresh insights into Hip Hop's global reach". While the attempt is worthy of note and suggests new perspectives on the topic, this part of the exhibition is incongruent with the rest, giving the impression that two exhibitions were pasted together. By charting hip hop's move from an imported, American cultural genre to a locally embraced one, the section does raise important issues, such as imitation, appropriation, and adaptation, although they remain largely unexplored.

Given that the exhibition is a visual account of a cultural movement and, as such, intended to explore the many ways that hip hop has been captured through a photographic lens, surprisingly little attention has been bestowed on the photographers who first began to document this movement/trend, and their motives, although a photograph taken by Martha Cooper, a politically-conscious photographer, published in the *Village Voice*, is shown in one of the display cases.¹

¹ Martha Cooper is recognized as the photographer of Graffiti's golden age, a chronicler of Street Art, of early hip hop and breakdance, of children fashioning their own imaginative toys in a derelict urban environment, allowing one to glimpse a commitment to the pursuit of ingenious artistic expressions.

Another “road not taken” is the meaning of the changing context. Although photographers seem to have turned from a focus on the neighborhoods, the DJs, the street parties that were the original contexts for this movement, to the carefully-staged studio shoots and from the anonymous protagonists to the icons of the scene, such as Lauryn Hill, Tupac Shakur, Kendrick Lamar, the transformation of the genre from a mass-movement, where underprivileged and dissatisfied youths, members of the post-civil rights generation, were searching for new forms of expression, to the careful packaging of a cultural product of mass-consumption is not sufficiently addressed, although mention is perfunctorily made of the rise of high-production studio shoots. Another overlooked opportunity made worse by its primarily visual nature is the transition from the bold and individualistic aesthetics of the first generation of hip hop to today’s hip hop icons who double as initiators of fashion trends. Left equally unexplored is the specific cultural context of hip hop, rooted as it was in the multi-ethnic and culturally diverse communities of New York’s boroughs, such as the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem.

Beyond its effort to situate the German hip hop scene within a global movement, the exhibition pays little attention to the changes within the genre, as topics like the differences between rap and hip hop are hardly addressed. And finally, very little is said about the music itself, although the images are placed in the context of a soundtrack of the exhibition, which accompanies the public’s journey from room to room. In this context, the dance scene is quasi-ignored although visible in some of the photographs, for instance Martha Cooper’s images of the early days of hip hop. Equally little is said about the texts, the lyrics often spoken over the break beat of the music, the connections with the Graffiti genre, which was equally new at that time and the political undertones of hip hop. Silence also reigns when it comes to hip hop’s move from street and protest to the status of cultural artifact, deployed for different purposes or donned as needed according to prevailing trends. Much of this might have been avoided if the exhibition had been accompanied by a catalogue, able to put the movement itself and the photography dedicated to it in context. There is, in the end, a world of difference between a photographer like Martha Cooper, who created an interest where there was none, by documenting Graffiti and breakdance when few people were interested in these artistic expressions,² and someone hired by a studio to do “a job”. No matter how well-done, the latter will not replace commitment and a struggle to understand. However, the exhibition does much to create awareness

² Martha Cooper published *Subway Art* (Thames and Hudson, 1984) with Henry Chalfant, another photographer with an interest in Graffiti as a form of artistic expression.

of a multifaceted genre, encompassing music, art and dance, created from next-to-nothing with the help of turntables, spray paint, and linoleum and, sometimes, the surfaces of abandoned train carriages. It also suggests, however discreetly, that dangers may be lurking when all this has morphed into a global billion-dollar industry.

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