

My Faith Of Graffiti

- Caleb Neelon a.k.a. SONIK

Sydney, Australia, 1997

I secured my camera around my waist and put my right foot up into a ring of the chain link fence. Being careful not to spike my fingers or my crotch, I swung my left foot up to the top of the fence, planted it, and leapt up and over to the other side. I landed with a soft crunch as the rough gravel that lines the tracks cushioned my fall. It was just noon and the sun was high and hot, melting the tar on the gravel and ties and scenting the air. Being on the inner-city mainline of the local rail system meant a wide, sheer corridor of sun beating down on me. It was like walking along in the middle of a highway.

Warsaw, Poland, 2001

Graffiti art is a spirituality of youth manifest: freedom and chaos, individuality and community, resistance and competition, mostly art and often gentle, chiding crime. The stylish, illegal chaos says the kids are in control: what better news can you give a child? At the same time, graffiti is a contest among its participants for individuality, originality, quantity, and style. While it is currently invisible on the New York City subways, it is now a worldwide movement.

In my own case, the particular sight that had me sneaking out of the house at night happened to be the just-fallen Berlin Wall, which my mother took me to see at age thirteen. In my youth, the Berlin Wall was the symbol of an era of fear and hostility, but one on the wane: the wall art was the symbol that hatred was fighting a losing battle. The sight of the graffiti-soaked Berlin Wall scared me as a youth; after all, it was the fence of the neighbor that Americans like myself were raised to fear. The Wall paintings, however, were pure freedom: eloquent cries for human dignity amid dick and fart jokes. It was a meeting of high and low which was so beautifully human, a quality so lacking in museums and so abundant in the streets. Some of the Wall art was good; most was bad.

Some was scholarly and skilled, most was not. On the West Berlin side, art, playful political commentary, egotism and toilet humor reigned.

Boston, Massachusetts, 2003

Norman Mailer wrote the first serious article about the graffiti boom on the New York subways. He called it “The Faith of Graffiti,” after the phrase escaped the lips of one of the young graffiti writers that he was interviewing. He saw in the repeated writing of a name not a declaration of ego, but a mantra. That was back in the early 1970’s, before I was born. It’s a rare youth subculture that can last so long, but graffiti is still blossoming.

There must be something in the zeitgeist of the past thirty-five years that explains why these thousands of young people are out creating art in the streets the world over, some of it illegal, and all of it ephemeral. Sociologists and criminologists have explained it in terms of 1960’s fallout, a cry for help from the ghetto and an attempt to form a parallel society that replaces the failings of the larger world. That misses the point nowadays, since to most graffiti writers, the sixties is distant history, and most of these artists, like most people, aren’t from ghettos, and are basically well-adjusted people. My suspicion is that Mr. Mailer, in a case of first thought, best thought, was dead on target. There is a faith to graffiti.

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