

# THE BIRTH OF GRAFFITI BY JON NAAR



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## Review

"The book is beautifully produced, with stunning photos and an authoritative introduction."... a real treat for graffiti fans..."... an invaluable reference as well as a visual feast of great photography."Total Tadoo, September 2007'... this book scores highly in the authenticity stakes..."The atmospheric shots... reveal a New York that's long gone..."...its simplicity and spontaneity (along with the massive afros) make you feel nostalgic for a more innocent time.'Grafik, August 2007

## From the Inside Flap

Presented full-frame, at high resolution, and with meticulous attention to the original color, this book brings to life the gritty, exciting Germany of the early 1970s and the raw visual power of early graffiti.

## About the Author

Jon Naar's work has appeared for more than four decades in publications including *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *The London Times* and has been exhibited at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art. His books of photographs include *The Faith of Graffiti* and *Getting the Picture*.

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The now global phenomenon of graffiti was first captured in Germany by a professional photographer, Jon Naar, in early 1973. *The Faith of Graffiti*, the first and most celebrated book about this controversial new art form, reproduced just over forty selections from the hundreds of photographs he took. Now more than one hundred thirty never-before-published pictures from that landmark body of work, together with a selection of key photographs from *The Faith of Graffiti*, are brought together in a book destined to become a classic in its own right. Presented full-frame, at high resolution, and with meticulous attention to the original color, this book brings to life the gritty, exciting Germany of the early 1970s and the raw visual power of early graffiti. These photographs recall a time when subway cars and tenement walls seemed to explode overnight into bursts of color and energy. Today these ephemeral works survive only in Naar's masterful photographs. Sacha Jenkins, an authority on graffiti's history, places these pictures within an emerging youth culture that now reaches into every corner of art, fashion, and entertainment.

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Most helpful customer reviews

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

One of the BEST books on this topic.

By Maxim

I was a kid in those days, grew up in Washington Heights, and actually attended PS 192 (featured in several of the shots). These photos are awesome - they really captured the spirit of the times (at least how those times felt to me, an elementary school student).

Naar has done what David Plowden (check him out too!) has done for small town America. It is so hard to explain to people what NYC was like before the Disney Store came to 42nd Street, in the days when "everyone" was a renter, when Washington Heights still had many Jewish and Russian (they are moving back, by the way) immigrants, when getting on the "wrong" subway was a scary experience, before Donald Trump, pre-Starbucks, when Union Square was a sleazy area, etc.

So, as someone who lived then and there, I can say Naar has done a masterful job of presenting those "graffiti days" without sentimentality, glorification, or any other irrelevancies.

Wonderful job - I look forward to investigating more of his work!

18 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

In The Jungle of Cities

By Richard Behrens

Over a two week period in the winter of 1973, photographer Jon Naar and designer Mervyn Kurlansky journeyed about New York City, riding the subways, prowling the streets, scanning the walls of buildings to capture with a single lens reflex camera the growing phenomenon of inner city graffiti. A few dozen of these images, out of hundreds, was published as *The Faith of Graffiti* with an Introduction by Norman Mailer in 1974, and at the time the colorful and starkly beautiful images that appeared were current events. The controversial practice of graffiti writing was being hotly debated by the press and by politicians and was the bane of Mayor John Lindsay's administration. But Jon Naar's photographic approach to the tags and pieces that decorated the subway trains, buses and buildings of New York City was a work of photojournalism. He viewed his material with the eye of a true archivist, one who wanted to capture and document the growth of a phenomenon without judgment or politicizing. With Norman Mailer on board giving his own literary and artistic interpretation of graffiti, the book received great critical acclaim and became a classic in the genre, a much sought after photography book, but one that only contained a fraction of the images that Naar had assembled.

*The Birth of Graffiti* (Prestel Press, 2007) is Jon's first graffiti book in nearly 35 years and gives more reverence to his photographic art than *Faith of Graffiti* did. Limiting the text to a few short essays, the book emphasizes the images in a beautifully designed volume that presents many of the photographs uncropped and lovingly selected by the photographer.

What is stunning about *The Birth of Graffiti*, and indeed is inherent in the title of the book itself, is that many of these photographs have lain unpublished in protective storage for three and a half decades and are now important historical documents. What we are witnessing in these hauntingly beautiful images is a time locked period of history where New York City lay buried under a cosmetic layer of hieroglyphic writing that many praised as a powerful expression of the inner city imagination and others cursed as an urban blight at best and downright vandalism at worst. To anyone who lived in the city at that time, or even gazed with wide

eyed fascination at the tags and pieces that decorated the buses, subway trains, storefronts and public monuments can approach this book with a sense of nostalgia and a memory of lost landscapes that once characterized New York.

Page after page brings us back to 1974 when New York was just a little less splashy than it is today, before Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump or Edward Koch, when it was still on a financial decline that in 1975-1976 almost brought it to bankruptcy. These photos show us a world that once was but is no more. Because graffiti was his subject, Jon Naar did not shoot around the tourist traps. We don't see Times Square or Lincoln Center or the grand brownstones of Brooklyn. Instead we are taken on a tour of forgotten walls and doorways, Spanish bodegas and tenement apartments, subway corridors and abandoned buildings, Harlem handball walls and Brooklyn boardwalks, the empty spaces of housing projects and school yards. If the graffiti was somehow airbrushed from these photos, they would still hold our fascination. They document the fine grained details of the landscape known by the few people who move through the images: the Spanish mother walking her daughter, the tired looking subway riders, the workers huddled in a doorway, a security guard taking a break by a utility exit. They go about their daily affairs with a fatigue and boredom that comes with any housing project or straphanger existence, walking past the urban sigils and tags and pieces and cryptic names and numbers as if they are just one more oppressive aspect of their city environment that they must endure from day to day.

But one must not neglect the writers themselves. When Naar and Kurlansky went off into the streets looking for graffiti, they had the good fortune of meeting, purely by chance, a gang of graffiti writers, young boys who ranged from ten to fourteen years old. Their group shot appear on the title page of *The Birth of Graffiti* and many more shots of them appear throughout, whether gathered together or posing separately in front of their tags. What I love about these shots is that rarely does Naar photograph them without some ghostly motion blur. These blurs give us a sense of the graffiti writer's energy who no doubt found it very difficult to stand still. As they write, the wall and the tag stays in clear focus while the writer is a whirling motion, connoting the artist in the instant moment of creation.

The writers were young, innocent, not the dangerous gang members that middle class New Yorkers feared were responsible for the defacements. They are multi-racial, black, white, Hispanic, mixed. They came out of their inner city neighborhoods via the subway, targeted the subway to "watch their names go by" and to carry their tags and their fame to the outer boroughs and beyond. In their lifetime, they would no doubt never be famous, never been known, always thought of as a statistic in some rich white writers sociological assessment of modern urban issues. But by putting their tags on a moving vehicle that will carry their names as far off as the northern Bronx, as far south as Sheephead's Bay, as far East as Jamaica Estates, they will be seen, their name will be known.

Jon Naar has given these artists expression, decades later, long after their names have been scrubbed from their surfaces, by showing these writers at work at the moment in history where they had seized the spotlight and forced us to recognize their existence. Like the Neolithic handprint that anthropologists found on an Australian cave wall, someone once spoke the words, "I am human. I was here. I am me. This is my name."

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

*Birth of Graffiti: A culture at it's best.*

By J.SON

*Birth of Graffiti* could easily have been titled *Faith of Graffiti 2*. It is basically *Faith of Graffiti* with added photos from Jon Naar's archives. Some of these photos such as a *The Man 550* piece and marker tags on long extinct subway vending machines bring me back to the days before a slew of talking heads with erroneous sociological and psychological theories started writing books explaining our culture. Mr. Naar's photos are striking and capture graffiti in the transitional period between tagging (single hits) and piecing. Many of the writers documented quit before piecing became the fashion, but the emphasis they put on handwriting style is more formidable than the signatures most writers throw up today. I watched this movement from birth to death on the NYC subways and was lucky enough to participate in it. Although not as visually dynamic as

the work that came later, this period fascinates me more than any other. I grew up seeing the names featured in Naar's photos, wanting to meet them and follow in their footsteps. We all owe Jon Naar a debt of thanks for preserving the roots of an ever-changing culture. The book is a must have for any old-timers who want to re-live their glory days and neophytes who want to learn who the real pioneers of the culture were.

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