

Graffiti on trains, photography and *Subterráneos*

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When contemporary graffiti first emerged in the New York of the 1970s, the game was about making your name travel around the city by painting it on the sides of subway cars, a particularly visible surface. Original graffiti writers did not need to photograph their works: contact with their audience was direct, and painted cars could circulate for months or even years before the graffiti was removed. In the eighties, many European adolescents, myself among them, began to reproduce this practice, but in our cities, painted cars were rarely allowed to go into circulation.

Unlike the original writers, we did not paint trains to make our names visible. In most cases we knew that the trains would only be seen by the workers who cleaned them. We painted the trains mostly because of tradition, to reproduce a phenomenon that fascinated us. Thus, to prove our accomplishments, we needed to document the pieces after completing them. For European graffiti writers, photography was, from the very beginning, the main medium.

One of the consequences of the use of photography was the possibility of expanding the audience. Images were exchanged by mail and printed in fanzines, and for the most ambitious writers, competition would soon take on an international scale. This made travel increasingly common, until it became a cornerstone of the culture. Train writers today don't necessarily focus on their own cities, their main goal is often to paint the transit systems of different cities, and the more the better.

While in some cities painted trains are regularly put into circulation, most transit systems remove the paintings before they are seen by the public. Therefore, the result of a writer's work is still a trophy in the form of a photograph, carefully collected in his personal album. Some hoard the

images vigilantly and show them only to people they trust, others are quick to send them to specialised media outlets and upload them to social networks.

In the last thirty years the phenomenon has grown incessantly, and the competition for recognition is increasingly hard. As this competition takes place through documentation, photographic and video techniques have become more and more sophisticated. Today, the most visible writers and crews are those who best document their work in photography, and particularly in video. In today's forays it is not uncommon for one party member to be there for the sole sake of recording the action.

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As fans of urban exploration know well, one of the attractions of infiltrating infrastructures is that explorers get to visit extremely photogenic environments. So much that many haul along heavy and expensive photographic equipment on their expeditions. Following a similar impulse, in the middle of the last decade, some train writers turned photographers by necessity started to focus on the infiltration processes, the peculiar spaces where the forays take place and the tense atmospheres they create. In 2006 the Italian Alex Fakso published his book *Heavy Metal*, the founding volume of a form of photography which has come to be known as graffiti action photography.

Ten years later, the number of photographers who, inspired by Fakso, have dropped the aerosol to grab a camera instead, is in the dozens, and graffiti action photography has become an established genre. Enrique Escandell, who has spent fifteen years of deep involvement at the forefront of the scene – he appears in a picture taken by Fakso in the

Barcelona subway in 2007 –, is one of those photographers. But his recently published book *Subterráneos* goes beyond the clichés of the genre. It is not only a work of action photography of exceptional quality, it is also a fully fledged artistic project which combines different approaches to portray the experience of train graffiti with rare narrative intensity.

The culture of graffiti has a hierarchy of surfaces that places a much higher value on trains than it does on walls, by tradition and mainly because painting trains is more difficult. Subway cars in particular are the most prized targets, and the writers who specialise in this kind of trains are the most respected subgroup. This is because infiltrating the hangars and tunnels of the subway is much more demanding and risky than working on other kinds of trains, which tend to circulate above-ground and to sleep in open, even rural environments.

For the most part, action photographers document graffiti on overground trains. In *Subterráneos* however, Escandell shows five years of work across Europe dedicated solely to subway systems and to the elite class of writers who explore them. This implies a notable level of dedication and effort, but most importantly it allows his photographs to portray environments and processes of infiltration more interesting and with a greater visual and narrative potential.

The adjective “atmospheric” is often used to describe graffiti action photography. It is usual in this genre to portray the atmosphere of the incursions, and blurry moving figures abound. In contrast to this, Escandell’s pictures are conspicuously sharp. This approach makes it possible to go beyond the atmospheric and into the more difficult and rich field of the narrative. In his best shots Escandell succeeds in identifying and capturing inflection points in the action which convey the intrigue and tension of a whole story.

But what most clearly makes *Subterráneos* stand out is that it is not simply a series of graffiti action photography. Escandell’s ability to identify images that condense a story goes beyond the limits of that genre. *Subterráneos* includes two series that feature two unprecedented perspectives in the photographic exploration of train writing. Two rare cases

of very simple and abstract imagery full of narrative content.

One of these series features close-ups of the grids that close off the vents connecting the street and the subway tunnels. After writers force their way through them using angle grinders, transit companies weld them closed again. This process is repeated indefinitely, and grids get scarred with violent patchworks of molten metal in which stories are superimposed.

The second series is made up of cryptic black images sprinkled with tiny colored dots. These are scans of jackets worn by writers in subway tunnels. In these closed spaces aerosol paint floats in the air and gradually descends, landing on the writers’ clothing like a shower of particles. In each constellation captured by Escandell there is an accumulation of forays into multiple tunnels in different parts of the world.

The last component of *Subterráneos* are the photocopied images that appear facing the action shots. These are photographs taken by the police and the transit companies to be used as incriminating documents in trials against writers. As a native to the post-photographic era, Escandell naturally combines his own work with these appropriated images, letting the viewer empathise also with the police and security guards, the opposite team that makes the game possible. Again, these are strong photographs, formally as well as in their ability to evoke the intensity of the experience, and they effectively complement the narrative that unfolds in *Subterráneos*.