undistinguished black-and-white photographs, originated during the wide time-span between 1857 and 1938 and thus give a fascinating view of social changes, half-forgotten events and generally unknown scenes and personalities.

The variety of the material exhibited is such that one has to spend a considerable time to fully appreciate the historical panorama. Personally, I recall most vividly the splendid colour enlargement made from the original Paget transparencies by Frank Hurley (or under his supervision) during 1914-1918 and some of the early black-and-white scenes of the last quarter of the nineteenth century featuring the Aborigines of Australia and Tasmania as well as some of the telling images of social changes.

Photographically, it may be referred to (and possibly impractical) that there is an absence of any original historic material, which inhibits an understanding of the manifold fascinating changes in terms of photographic techniques and modes of presentation. The unbroken sequence of modern bromide prints seems to emphasise an apparent lack of stylistic and creative development of Australian photography during the years under review.

Parallel with the opening of the exhibition, The Fairfax Library published their excellently-printed picture book Fixed in Time — Photographs from another Australia 1900-1939. The book is imaginatively and thoughtfully edited and produced; it features over 170 illustrations drawn from the collections of the State Library of New South Wales and also from the archives of the publishers, John Fairfax & Son.

In contrast to the exhibition, which aimed, with fewer illustrations, at covering the enormous span of time of 140 years (1845-1985), the book limits itself strictly and with good reason to the very particular era of 40 years (1900-1939) between two wars, the Boer War (1899-1903) and the beginning of World War II (1939). Within this time, Australia witnessed momentous sociological, psychological and material changes. Professor Manning Clark, in his Foreword, describes this period as one in which ‘...Australia ceased to suffer from material backwardness and isolation (and) ... became a factory and quarry’.

Visually then, then the book is not concerned with photographic art nor with photographic history and techniques; neither is it a coffee-table book of precious images. It is an entertaining and interesting volume of good photographs which open up a new world to most of us and which present a total image of a society where the important and the profound rub shoulders with the frivolous and the inconsequential. Recommended.

The exhibition can be seen until 23 May at New South Wales House, 66 Strand, London WC2.

The book, which is not available from usual bookshops, can be obtained at £15 from Hatchards, 390 Strand, London, from the Australian Gift Shop, Western Australia House, 115 Strand, or by post, post free, from John Fairfax (UK) Ltd, 12 Norfolk Street, London EC4.

'Between' by Victor Burgin at the ICA, London reviewed by Jozef Gross

Some ten years ago the well-known American art critic and writer Tom Wolfe, published a long essay entitled: ‘The Painted Word’. In it, Wolfe attacked and pretty nearly demolished the entire establishment of ‘Abstract Expressionism’. His blasting criticism of this movement, then still in vogue, was sparked off by a remark made by Milton Kramer of the New York Times, when reviewing an exhibition of paintings at Yale University named ‘Seven Realists’. Kramer contended: ‘Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather conspicuously lack a persuasive theory. And given the nature of our intellectual commerce with works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial — the means by which our individual works are joined to our understanding of the visual values which they signify’. Wolfe, upon reading these lines, said: ‘...I experienced a flash known as the “Aha!" phenomenon, and the buried life of contemporary art was revealed to me for the first time.’ Tom Wolfe, at that moment realised that now Art Theory could almost totally replace the art of picture-making. At any rate, what was expected of the artist was in the first place a jolly-sounding art theory to be followed by a minimum of marks on a flat support, or even no marks at all.

Victor Burgin first impinged upon my awareness at practically the same time as Tom Wolfe's essay. Studio International published Burgin's essay 'Photographic Practice and Art Theory'. This was followed by a second essay 'Socialist Formalism'. Burgin, mindful of the great debates concerning Art and Art Theory of the early Soviet Revolutionary period,
thought it the right time to revive the controversy. The timing was masterly. In the wake of the tremendous burgeoning of the public’s interest in the art photographic throughout the industrialised world, something had to be done to stop people just taking pictures. This something would, thought Burgin, fittingly be a photographic art theory. Such a theory would, inter alia, help to bypass or even completely abolish the vexing problem of photographic aesthetic, though this was a minor problem, as we shall see. In the early days of the Soviet Revolution, when ideology meant a plan and a plan meant action, the art theory which was to teach the new generation of Soviet artists proper socialist art practice, was called Constructivism.

Taking contemporary views of constructivism as his text Mr Burgin identifies in his essay the task for a socialist art. It is ‘...to unmask the mystification of bourgeois culture by laying bare its codes, by exposing the devices through which it constructs its self-image. Another job for socialist art is to expose the contradictions in our class society ...’. With a tinge of sadness Burgin concludes: ‘To date, there is little evidence that the self-professing left of our art community has grasped constructivist principle in its application within our own media-dominated culture. Seemingly oblivious to the formal aspect of ideology, they address each other in a shop-worn rhetoric long ago appropriated by bourgeois ideology as “leftist dogma”, Thus they obligingly fill the beaches which bourgeois culture allocates to the “official opposition” endorsing the existing structure of social relations.’

All this was written ten years ago. Now faced with the second exhibition of Victor Burgin’s works at the Institute of Contemporary Arts I am happy to welcome him into the swelling ranks of the “official opposition”, with which I too used to identify.

The title of the current show is ‘Between’ and in his book of the same title, Burgin explains the choice of the word, in a statement so utterly arbitrary in its initial definitions that it exposes the essential weakness which underlines the entire enterprise: ‘My decision to base my work in contemporary cultural theory, rather than traditional aesthetics has resulted in a work whose location is uncertain, between gallery and book, between “visual art” and “theory”; between “image” and “narrative”, ...’

Burgin intended the show to provide ‘work’ for the viewer-reader. This he certainly does: the essence of the work which Burgin expects the viewer to do is to unravel the mystery of his intentions. It is not easy. It requires the visitor to have both Burgin’s preoccupations and an interest in his three favourite subjects: social history, psychology and photography.

The show opens with Burgin’s older works. These are his simplistic attempts at subverting the language of advertising by juxtaposing standard advertising texts with images which purport to show the gap between the dream and aspects of reality. Of the new works ‘In Lyon’ is perhaps easier to describe. ‘In Lyon’ is a series of nine panels, set out as three triptychs. They purport to be integrated by means of three strands: narrative, psychoanalytic and historical. The narrative and the psychoanalytic commentary on it, are derived from a paper by Sigmund Freud and concern a case of paranoia. The historic part concerns the city of Lyon. The photographs which were made in that city are illustrative, as far as possible, and complementary to the text. The entire piece is structured in a rhythm of three. This device, the author-photographer states, constitutes a point of departure for the associative thought, and makes me think of the Holy Trinity. Burgin sees in the trinity the three women which appear in Sigmund Freud’s text. This is about all. Freud’s story, like all stories told by fine writers, and Freud, like Karl Marx, was certainly that, reads very well. The bits about the history of Lyon are marginally of interest.

Freud’s speculation about paranoia must be left to the specialist to assess. Though it certainly sounds entertaining. The least palatable segment of the whole is Mr Burgin’s photography. It is inevitably the most subjective part and, in juxtaposition to pseudo-science, least comprehensible.

Burgin, quite intentionally, produces his photographs in such a way as to render them ambiguous or even incomprehensible without the backing of the text. Quite a few of us who consider the photographic image as autonomous find this practice infuriating. In this they may not be right. The aesthetic mechanism of Burgin’s images defies consciously any affinity with past conventions which creep into photography from fine art. Instead, and here I am somewhat puzzled, he prefers the traditional devices characteristic of book and magazine illustration: the same arbitrary use of space, same disregard for perspectival sion, same disregard for true, relative, sizes of objects. All this is much nearer to collage than objective photographic statement.

The exhibition, judged as a whole, can best be compared to the ‘Reader’s Digest’. It resembles this popular magazine in its selection of quasi-factual titbits, in its condescension and in its ghostly petty bourgeois preten
tiousness. Here however the similarity ends. For whereas the melange offered by ‘Reader’s Digest’ aims to lull the reader into a sense of cultural accomplishment and knowledgability, the Burgin exhibit leaves onlookers confused, mystified and, not infrequently, exasperated. Maybe it is Mr Burgin’s intention to leave his audience guessing. But then, how can one accept this departure from the earlier vows and dedication? Is this socialist formalism? Perhaps that is all over and done with. If Burgin is presenting us with a show in subjective works of art in mixed media then we know where we stand in relation to them. If he chooses to preach a sermon through personal art then this is not new to us at all. Stripped of all the high-sounding verbiage of his ‘theory’ we stand on the familiar ground of a contemporary art show. I find it lacking in originality, refinement and perception. Everything which I see there bores me. The sermon is preached with the authority of Mein Kampf and as much logic. It is bound to find some believers and mankind is impoverished thereby.