

CRISTIN TIERNEY

# LEONARDO

reviews

## Some Cities by Victor Burgin

Reviewed by Molly B Hankwitz

Occasionally it seems the form of a book speaks more of its overall intention than form might ordinarily imply. There is a subtlety of meaning to be derived from artist/theorist Victor Burgin's new work on his travels, *Some Cities*, a 223 page book with 175 black and white photographic illustrations in paperback. It is actually a photographic artists' book with text.

*Some Cities* is a travelogue with an insightful, analytical writing style to coincide with page after page of minimalist photographs taken from Northern England to his present home in northern California. It is an itinerary including stops in Sheffield, Berlin, Malmo, Warsaw, Woomera, New York, and the islands of Stromboli and Tobago. It is a modern (some may say postmodern?) inquiry about spaces and places, memory, childhood, looking, distance, loss, perspective, urban history, social and architectural change. Underlying the spare black and white images which are focused in the main on public spaces, urban information systems, and the places of transportation is a stylish text in which Burgin occasionally breaks through into substantial descriptive writing for example his discussion of displacement of laboring classes in England or the new multimedia libraries (mediatheques) arising in French cities and spaces of information underlying public infrastructures and new technologies and urbanism. At times the text moves from personal, anecdotal, even extremely casually directed remarks, into deeper theoretical terrain, enabling a suggestive, sustainable landscape to vibrate between text and image, a landscape of mediated, it would seem, by the traveler, floating somewhere between diary, document, memory, space and desire. Burgin's photographs express these relationships to the cities in which he finds himself, taken as they are of places one might pass through rather than actually connect with for any extended period of time. The photos are of passages, passings, phenomena and moments.

Thus, *Some Cities* has a dissonance to it; a joy and an anguish, a deliberate reductive and reluctant quality. Its form is interactive, suggestive of artists' books from the late-sixties and the seventies such as Sol Lewitt's early works, the emptiness of Ed Ruscha or more recently the travelogues of Martin Kippenberger. Picture for picture one can enter this book at any point. The book is a space. The book is about space. Text forms a narrative. Richly reproduced photos layer the narrative like so many memories or snapshots. One experiences travel at its heart; emotional engagement or lack thereof with the places which one visits in a travel scenario and annotates. There is a Benjaminian reverberation to *Some Cities*' disparate critical style. One image, reminiscent of a dream, of a woman standing with her back to us in a hallway is repeated, reiterating Burgin's main thesis that memory of place, space itself is integrally tied to childhood, loss and integral memory.

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A tenuous, often broken foray into subjectivity and space, a glimpse at places close to the author's heart, some less known to him *Some Cities* is a modern (some might say postmodern?) meditation on the role of the traveler as well as a kind of obtuse anti-document in which experience cannot be known.

The photos are interesting intersections of public and private. The text is poetic and intelligent. Overall the book lends itself to being perused and gives us a refreshed look at the where the work of Victor Burgin, ex-member of the artists' group Art+ Language, now a Professor in the Board of Studies in History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, public artist, photographer, theorist and widely published writer for his books *In/Different Spaces* (California, 1996), *The End of Art Theory* (1986) and the collection *Thinking Photography* (1982) is at present.

While *Some Cities* attempts to be a statement of personal experience it falls short of the mark by remaining too abstract, perhaps even unfinished. What international culture doesn't need, especially from theorists, is yet another excursion into the predictable wasteland of post modernity. Yet Victor Burgin's solid, passionate writing on urban history contrasts with a plethora of bad publishing on the subject and overly intellectual attempts to assuage human reality. His offbeat and unusual takes on architectural space are most pleasurable pronounced. Hopefully, this will be Burgin's trajectory in any future publication.