

Nicholas Sinclair: Urban Palimpsests.

*Five Cities* reflects Nicholas Sinclair's ongoing interest in the textures and details of the urban landscape. The work develops and consolidates a trajectory that began in 1997 when he took a group of students to Budapest, where the telephone booths seen here were photographed. Further work was undertaken in Berlin in subsequent years. This new book expands the sphere of activity to include a further three cities; Palermo, Paris and Istanbul. Each location is represented by a set of five closely related photographs. Sinclair has visited his locations many times, gradually building up a grouping of related sets of images. Each set, while distinct from the others in terms of subject, exhibits a precise formal strategy of similarity and difference, achieved through a variety of compositional decisions.

As Sinclair says: "I don't want to pretend that there was a theory behind my choice of cities. Both Istanbul and Palermo were recommended to me as interesting cities so I planned trips on these recommendations." Sinclair is an artist-photographer who trained as painter, and who acknowledges the influence of gestural abstraction on his practice. What kind of theory could guide him to the "right" selection of cities? Given the project does not aim to uncover sociological, historical, or even topological features common to these cities, what criteria might be said to apply in choosing them? In the end, it is the contingent, the unexpected, and the unpredictable that is stimulating for the artist: the chance to be challenged by novel situations that will prevent him from resorting to tried and tested approaches. When artists fall back on familiar strategies, the results are often formulaic. This is why, to draw an analogy, the legendary free improvising guitarist Derek Bailey would seek out diverse new partners to play with: everything from Drum and Bass DJs to Tap dancers, as well as drummers and saxophonists, were enlisted so they could develop new avenues of music making that would mitigate the risks of resorting to the familiar. In any case, the act of isolating small fragments of the urban fabric renders more or less irrelevant the identity of any of the given locations. The focus of the project is the interplay, the clash and confrontation between the urban fabric and its

human agents, the way mark-making transforms and enlivens urban spaces, and the way individual citizens make a public space “theirs” by customizing it, inadvertently or not.

Fragmentary images of things which themselves are fragmented; unfinished, provisional, improvised. Graffiti, not as the commonly seen, competitive over-writing designed to obliterate an existing mark, but as (unwitting?) collaborative accumulations in which marks and meanings are supplemented or subverted by the addition of further material. These sites are in the nature of works in progress, or, more accurately, ongoing processes that will never have an end, because they lack the teleology implied by “work in progress”.

In the public telephone sequence the framing function of the photographs is paralleled in the way the enclosure of the phone box serves to create a semi-private refuge within which a confidential conversation can take place. The frame of the phone box reminds us that as much as photographs generate meaning by isolating features from the adjacent continuum, urban space is also composed of devices to break space up into further functional spaces, to create meaningful divisions from what was originally continuous. Taxonomic projects are common in contemporary photographic art, especially among documentarists like Bernd and Hiller Becher, who originated, and whose work exemplifies, this approach, along with that of their progeny. It often seems as if it is thought to be enough simply to gather together a group of images of similar objects or spaces, as if the quantitative accumulation will lead automatically to a qualitative breakthrough to new insights or meaning. Sinclair’s images do not arise from such an assumption, not least because there are only five of them: not enough to generate momentum through sheer repetition. Furthermore the framing is not identical in every case. Thus it eschews the rigorous uniformity of Becher-type work, leading to the realisation that Sinclair wants to draw our attention elsewhere, to effects which stem from the tension between the phone boxes as self-evidently ordered and regular, because mass-produced, and the way they have been subjected to unruly transformation and deformation through a combination of vandalism, graffiti-messaging and sheer hard use.

The grouping of these not quite identical images prompts us to scrutinise them and get to know them through their similarities and differences, both in terms of the effects of subtle variations in framing and in what is recorded. This way of viewing becomes a means to an end: by the necessarily extended act of scrutiny we come to know the pictures better, and spend more time looking at them, than we might have with a single image. But this is not a reductive, “spot the difference” exercise. The bare physical layout of the booths provide a matrix within which numerous, subtle variations become apparent. Our awareness of these differences leads us to perceptions that we probably wouldn’t have if we were presented with a sole picture.

The distribution and quality of light in each booth is different, despite their being uniformly top-lit by the booths’ own strip-light. (This light source is framed out of all but one of the images, but that one gives us a clear cue to understanding the lighting in the others, although its placement can also be inferred from the overall distribution of light in the space, as well as by cast shadows). The differences in light are generated by the variations in the placement of reflective features in the booths; in the design of the telephone keypads, in the official stickers and the graffiti on the walls, and the disposition and condition of the telephone directories and the hinged bars that hold them in place. Transient features, such as the way the handset cords hang differently in every case, become significant, prompting us to reflect on the endless variations in the arrangement and placement of objects in the landscape. Graffiti too, which we tend to register as generic and conformist in their style, are here shown to be considerably varied. These particular variations will be further explored throughout the book.

The five phone booth images are the book’s conceptual fulcrum, offering a template for how to read the others, but also differing significantly from them. The photos of Palermo seem at first glance very different, as indeed they are: framing here is much freer, and much less obviously determined by the form of the subject matter. Nevertheless, the chaotic, organic forms of the giant Banyan trees in the Garibaldi Gardens in the centre of the city still demand a framing strategy just as considered, in its own way, as that of the phone booths. In both cases the theme of the interplay between given features and their

transformation or modification by human intervention is much present, and just as the variations between the images in a set prompts the scrutinising kind of attention on the part of the viewer suggested above, so the variations between the five sets similarly draws attention to different framing strategies between them.

In the phone booth photos, graffiti, metallic forms and stickers combine in a complex of textured surfaces and signs, united by their being both artificial and rendered in black and white, which helps to integrate the diverse elements in the scenes as well as emphasising the play of light. The Palermo photos are also black and white, but here a completely different dynamic is at play, in which the ancient tree receives, transforms and ultimately consumes the graffiti made upon it by passing humans. These marks become indistinguishable from the other, unidentifiable, marks that abound on its surfaces. The tree's evident transformation of its marks functions to state explicitly what is implicit in all the other images in the book; the ephemeral character of alterations made to objects and surfaces by humans. In time these marks, and eventually the objects upon which they were made, will all be replaced or will disappear entirely (in the phone booth pictures the telephone directories fulfil this point in an accelerated fashion). As much as the Palermo images trace the graffiti's journey, from wounds to shallow relief images to vestigial abrasions, the forms of the subject equally give Sinclair a free hand to create a pure study of three dimensional modelling, of the play of light and shade on something real yet non-signifying. In this regard the images recall the work of photographers like Imogen Cunningham, except that whereas Cunningham attempted to create abstract images by the very self-conscious framing of strongly signifying objects, including naked women as well as plant forms, Sinclair's subject is already, if not innately, abstract, notwithstanding that it is recognisably an image of tree roots: one has the sense that abstraction is not simply a function of framing strategy in the way one does with Cunningham's photographs and others like them. The images can also be read anthropomorphically, but the possibilities here are so numerous and overlapping; legs, arms, tendons, hips, torsos, heads, tails, genitalia, piling up on each other, that one becomes acutely aware of the over-excited play of the imagination, so as to see through

the anthropomorphic urge. One is drawn back into the concrete, to calmly seeing the roots and branches as nothing other than what they are.

In the three sets of images of graffiti –Istanbul, Paris, Berlin- distinct compositional strategies are deployed in which the process whereby new graffiti are added to existing ones is itself extended through Sinclair’s composition of the photographs. Although the photos are presented sequentially, the Istanbul sequence consists of closely overlapping framings of an iron door covered with a permutative, asymmetrical cruciform text composed around the word “KILOT”. In the central of the five pictures, “KILOT” is centrally placed so that its simple rhomboid form is fully discernable. The letters, in white chalk, float above a dense ground of more or less erased marks that form a deep cloud of blue-grey-yellow scribblings. Nevertheless, the framings of the word in relation to its immediate surroundings affect the degree to which the former is discernible from the latter. This separation of figure from ground is quite different to the sparse, detached disposition of letters in the Paris section, which could be thought of as Bonnardian, or the intermingling, transparent layers of the Berlin facial image, where it is tempting to suggest Michel Basquiat for comparison. Istanbul’s companion artist would have to be Cy Twombly. Perhaps these comparisons seem trite, and one does not want to undermine the specificity of the images, their distinctive qualities. However, it is worth considering how drawing, or, more generally, mark-making, is an activity common to fine and street art, illustration, cartoon, lettering, graphic design and painting. The distinction between colour and drawing, theorised in the Renaissance as the tension between *Colore* and *Disegno* as it was thought to apply to Venetian and Florentine styles of painting respectively, is further blurred here, much as it is in the contemporaneous work of Twombly, Robert Ryman, Georg Baselitz, Brice Marden, and countless others (1).

The vertical spelling of “KILOT” forms the spine for all the possible horizontal realisations of the word using one letter from the vertical in their spelling. This creates a diagonally shifting matrix of the variations and it is this matrix that informs Sinclair’s composition. Roughly, if one reads the sequence from right to left (against the grain) the framings shift in the opposite direction. One might want to think of them as composed

from a pan, but they don't form a pan because there are subtle changes in framing in terms of degrees of closeness, in a manner that while technically possible with a film camera, would produce abrupt jumps –“jump cuts” -if projected as a movie. (Movies are in any case made up of still images: there is no moving image other than in the viewer's head). In all the framings the word is visible, except in the first, where the “T”, while cropped off the bottom of the frame, is visible in a ghostly, older yellow version, hovering above and to one side of the “K”. In the second image the word is available only in an “L” shaped configuration that reflects the L shaped composition of the image in respect to its framing edge.

The graffiti in the Paris pictures, made near Jim Morrison's grave in the Père Lachaise cemetery, are the familiarly chaotic kind, the least amenable to aesthetic recuperation, consisting as they do of written messages, scrawled declarations of love, and signed and dated “woz 'ere” statements. Despite the disconnectedness of the graffiti there is a fortuitous unity in the white, beige and maroon colour scheme. The beige surface of discoloured plaster is etched with fine spidery lines that reveal the whiteness of the plaster beneath its weathered surface. The bold red marks, of spray or crayon, sit on the surface of the plaster in contrast to the white lines. The inevitable coarse black felt-pen names, spelt out with laborious care, are the only sour note, but even they serve, in their crudity, to highlight the delicate beauty of the scratched white lines.

In this set, more than the others, Sinclair seems happy to let the graffiti speak for itself. Nevertheless, there are compositional principles at work. Adjacent areas of wall are framed at different magnifications, resulting in a sequence which foregrounds the inexhaustible compositional possibilities of a given subject. The options include overlapping framings of adjacent areas, but also different degrees of magnification that significantly reconfigure the formal stresses in a framing. For example, the strong red diagonal line that crosses the first image is reduced to an isolated mark in the extreme top left corner of the third, so that the diagonal energy in the first is reduced to a triangular motif that gives way to a blank area in the centre of the frame in the third. However, that triangle is picked up and acknowledged by the horizontal line in the diagonally opposite

corner. This line points to a cluster of three names in felt pen and these, in turn, refer back to the three words that sit immediately underneath the red diagonal mark. Thus a clockwise, triangular movement is instigated that is a pure effect of the way these otherwise disconnected marks are framed.

The Berlin set, which gave rise to the Paris one discussed above, contains the least graffiti-like images of all. There is a strong sense of an idea being worked through in a series of variations of a face, painted in white, almost as if we are looking at preparatory sketches for a painting. Most of the visible marks are painterly or graphic, as opposed to textual. The hesitant, almost clumsy quality of line brings to mind Georg Baselitz, but also Jackson Pollock, for the way in which an “all-over” character leads the eye on an endless journey in and around the surfaces. The images, however, are distinct from palimpsests, with which it is tempting to compare them. The palimpsest implies hierarchy, in that the latest layer of writing supersedes and all but obliterates the previous layers, both visually and semantically. Here the brightest, white, lines stand out above darker marks, so there is an implied spatial depth to the image, but not a concomitant relegation of the darker marks. In a purely visual-spatial sense the darker marks could be said to underlie the brighter ones, but this does not mean they can be disentangled from them. One’s attention oscillates between the layers, so that one cannot talk about the uppermost network of lines independent of the way in which the darker layers inflect and complicate that top layer.

Two of the images are details of the others, all three of which appear to be framed at roughly the same magnification. Yet here one has to question the notion of magnification, given that there is no strictly given place from which to start in terms of scale, even if trying to relate the size of the image to the human, as one could if examining a horse or a beetle. At any given magnification the image yields superimposed layers of open textures, and it is the purpose of Sinclair’s strategy to foreground the images’ inherent complexities at different degrees of closeness. The anonymous artist who added the final layer, the face delineated in white paint, has both acknowledged and exploited the

existing layers to create another one that consolidates, in a calculated way, those pre-existing layers. This is an unusually collaborative venture, and one that, in its spontaneous and generous acknowledgment of the contribution of others, constitutes a truly “relational” aesthetic dialogue, as opposed to that mooted in the wishful thinking of art theorists like Nicolas Bourriaud (2). To these layers Sinclair adds his own, not with a paintbrush, but through the distinctively photographic act of framing, by which the tendency of graffiti sites to a decentred slackness is centripetally energised and focused by the framing edges.

The various formal strategies deployed in these five sets of photographs focus the question of photography as art, specifically in relation to painting. The compositional procedures are indistinguishable from those found in painting, notwithstanding the fact that Sinclair’s compositions are “found”. This raises the question of what is important about the difference between found and formed, and to what extent the distinction is clear-cut, given the role of framing as a determinant force in composition. Photography has fretted about its status as art ever since its triumphal emergence in the 1830s. Sinclair supersedes these perennial anxieties by embracing photography’s evident strength as a documentary medium while at the same time foregrounding some key formal features that it shares with painting; the frame with its dynamic, consolidating function, the abstract, graphic qualities of texture and line, and the cumulative effect of repetition-with-variation.

1. See John Gage: *Colour in Art*, Thames and Hudson, 2006, page 95.
2. Bourriaud, Nicolas, 1998: *Relational Aesthetics*, France: Les Presses du Réel.