

BRIAN ARNOLD

Book Review: *Cinque viaggi* (1990–98)

Cinque viaggi (1990–98) by Guido Guidi. Mack, 2021. 152 pp./\$60.00 (hb).

“Meaning is always in search of itself. Unexpected revelations await us around the next corner.”

—Charles Simic¹

“He speaks ‘not of a completed thought, but rather of a thought being developed, a path that is more closely linked to truth than to logic.’”

—Roberta Valtorta²

Making photographs is always a process, an inquiry in which we are constantly caught in a struggle between our ideas, our tools, and the environments or circumstances in which we are trying to photograph. It’s a balancing act in which we try to orchestrate all these elements and resolve them into clear, concise photographs. More often than not, photographers are looking for “the one,” the picture that best resolves the circumstances and engagement under which it was made. It’s rare that we are given a glimpse into the working process of a photographer, as typically exhibitions, books, and other publications emphasize the successful results, but occasionally we do get to see behind the curtain, so to speak, and are offered a clearer look at *how* ideas and photographs were discovered. Robert Adams’s great book *Listening to the River: Seasons in the American West* (1994) is one of the first examples that comes to mind, as the reader is taken on a photographic walk with each page spread, and we are given remarkable insight into the process of making pictures and how photographers discover visual meaning. In the new MACK publication by Guido Guidi, *Cinque viaggi* (1990–98), we are offered something similar. The book presents a series of pictures in which readers are given the unique opportunity to see how Guidi engaged the landscapes and people represented in the book, and readers are thus presented with something that feels like a treatise on *how* to make pictures, on how to use the camera as an opportunity to explore, engage, and understand a place.

Cinque viaggi collects 109 photographs—both color and black and white—made on public commissions developed by Archivio dello spazio and Milano senza confini, both

1. Charles Simic, “Street-Corner Theology,” in *Dime Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), 72, qtd. in Guido Guidi, *Cinque viaggi* (1990–98) (London: Mack, 2021).

2. Roberta Valtorta, “Guido Guidi in Milan and Other Places,” in *Cinque viaggi* (1990–98), Guido Guidi (London: Mack, 2021).

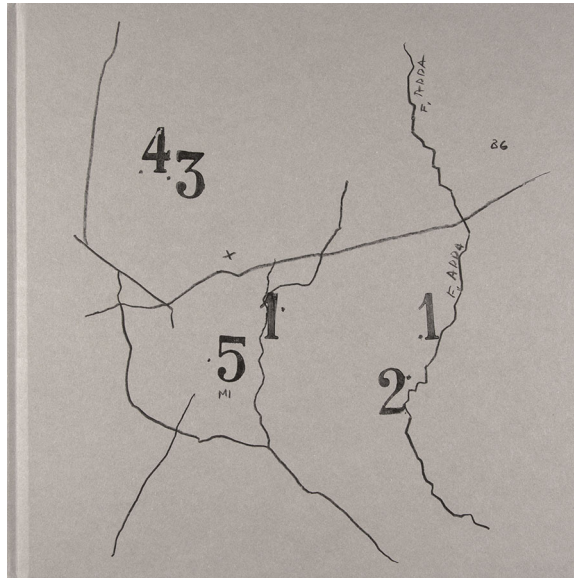


IMAGE 1. Front cover of *Cinque viaggi (1990–98)* (2021) by Guido Guidi; courtesy the artist and MACK.

administered by the Province of Milan in the 1990s and curated by Roberta Valtorta.³ These commissions were an attempt to document and understand the changing landscapes of Milan and greater Lombardy, a region undergoing tremendous transitions as the culture shifts to a more urban and commercial environment. With a career spanning four decades, Guidi has achieved international acclaim as a landscape photographer working in a style akin to the New Topographics movement emerging in the United States during the 1970s, and is recognized as an essential artist for understanding Italy in transition during the late twentieth century.⁴

Terrain vague started as an architectural term, addressing designers working with developing ambiguous spaces in and around urban centers.⁵ The term was coopted by photographers and is used to describe those who work in landscapes that are neither urban nor rural, making pictures in a sort of no-man's-land, a liminal space that can't be described as either agrarian or commercial. In writing about photographer John Gossage,

3. Roberta Valtorta has worked as a curator, historian, and critic since the 1970s, focusing on photography as a fine art. She has lectured on photography at the CFP Bauer School of Photography in Milan for over thirty years, and helped design the Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea (the Museum of Contemporary Photography, or MUFOCO) in Cinsello Balsamo-Milan. "Roberta Valtorta Archives," *Maize*, November 28, 2021, www.maize.io/contributors/roberta-valtorta.

4. *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* was an exhibition held at the George Eastman House (now the George Eastman Museum) in Rochester, New York, in 1975 (restaged in 2009) that came to define a style of photography rooted in vernacular interpretation of developing landscapes. "New Topographics Tour Organized by George Eastman House and Center for Creative Photography Begins June 13," George Eastman Museum website, April 2, 2009, www.eastman.org/new-topographics-tour-organized-george-eastman-house-and-center-creative-photography-begins-june-13.

5. Patrick Barron and Manuela Mariani, *Terrain Vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).



IMAGE 2. *Naviglio Martesana, Gorgonzola, 1990* from *Cinque viaggi (1990–98)* (2021) by Guido Guidi; courtesy the artist and MACK.

writer Gerry Badger offers a clear understanding of *terrain vague*: “It’s subject is not place-specific—indeed it is specifically about a non-place, the interface between city and country sometimes known as *terrain vague*.”⁶ Guidi’s pictures focus on the *terrain vague* that surrounds—or perhaps defines—Milan: peripheral and ambiguous spaces that are essential for creating the city but are largely forgotten or ignored. For most, Milan conjures images of towering buildings and high fashion, but in Guidi’s pictures we see something much more mundane and provincial, a nondescript landscape that feels caught between tradition and progress.

The book begins in the outskirts of Milan and ends in the heart of the city. The opening photographs show the *navigli*, or the canals and waterways that feed the city. In these photographs we see some of the traditional architecture of the city—ancient brick buildings both quaint and crumbling—with highway overpasses and industrial smokestacks looming above. We see bicycles propped up against walls (some of which look as though built in the eighteenth or nineteenth century), a community of men racing their Vespas, hay bales outside a home, concrete barriers built to hide the encroaching highway, propane tanks, and furniture burning along the waterfront. We also witness Guidi looking for the best way to make pictures of these landscapes, with the same scene

6. Gerry Badger and John Gossage, *John Gossage: The Pond* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2010).



IMAGE 3. *Cologno Monzese, 1991* from *Cinque viaggi (1990–98)* (2021) by Guido Guidi; courtesy the artist and MACK.

printed in color and black and white presented side by side, or Guidi's camera positioned in one direction looking down the canal with the next page spread showing his camera turned 180 degrees documenting the opposite view. We are also able to witness Guidi beneath an overpass, photographing the pillars supporting the highway above, views to the left and right, details of the posters plastered to the concrete, as well as the discarded wrappers found at his feet. The combined effect of all these views feels like a photographer sharing his creative process, walking us step-by-step as he navigates a space looking for a picture. When teaching beginning photography, I try to instill a specific kind of work ethic in my students, insisting that they never make a picture only one time, that they use the camera to probe a space or idea with different perspectives, ideas, and tonalities. In *Cinque viaggi* we are able to watch a master photographer employ this same strategy, repeatedly asking the question *what if*, and creatively finding new ways to use the camera to best understand the landscapes and ideas driving his work.

The cover of the book is a map and outlines how Guidi developed this project over time. *Cinque viaggi* itself reads like a map of time: as Guidi takes the reader closer to the city center, we witness an evolving landscape. After leading us down the *navigli*, he shows us more residential neighborhoods, many of which are filled with houses built in traditional architectural vernacular, but also clearly constructed after World War II. In the city center the homes give way to apartment buildings, and a whole new commercial



IMAGE 4. *Tra Cassano d'Adda e Groppello, 1990* from *Cinque viaggi (1990–98)* (2021) by Guido Guidi; courtesy the artist and MACK.

district. It is clear that the city portrayed in Guidi's photographs is one undergoing a profound shift, evolving with the new global economic paradigms. There are a few portraits in the book, mostly toward the end. These pictures emphasize the figures as components of the urban landscape much more than as uniquely identified individuals. Like the landscapes, the portraits strive for spontaneity but still reveal a sort of classic, rigid vision (a common characteristic of photographers working with a view camera), and describe the people with clarity and dignity. Reaching the end, the last two pictures beautifully define the whole book, showing different views of the same sign at a bus stop—a schedule that we can also understand as a map of sorts, showing different passages through the city and the exact time you expect to find a way through it.

It is worth talking about Guidi's building blocks, the tools he selected for approaching the Italian landscape. All the pictures were made with an 8x10 view camera; I admire photographers that can work with such a cumbersome set of tools and yet display such remarkable intuition and fluidity while making pictures, a process that somehow feels both deliberate and spontaneous.⁷ The quality of color in Guidi's pictures can only be

7. On a personal note, I think one has to work with an 8x10 camera at least once before really deserving the label *photographer*. The camera demands a strong understanding of the process and materials that defined the medium for generations.



IMAGE 5. *Milano, 1998* from *Cinque viaggi (1990–98)* (2021) by Guido Guidi; courtesy the artist and MACK.

found in film, with a palette undeniably created by the idiosyncrasies of the material. His pictures reveal a great understanding of color as a compositional element, but not the same rigor in the technique; often the pictures read a touch too cyan or green, which gives the photographs an unnecessarily abrasive quality (this might say as much about the lab he used as it does Guidi's picturemaking).

The book also includes two afterwords in the form of essays by Valtorta and author Corrado Benigni (both presented in English and Italian). Benigni, a frequent contributor to books by Italian photographers, addresses the specifics of Guidi's vision. His essay, "La Città Nella Città" (The City within the City) breaks down some of the strategies at work in the photographs and attempts to parse out the essentials of the pictures. He presents the idea that at their core, Guidi's pictures question the reality of the city—perhaps occupying some nebulous space between fiction and documentation—and that they are an attempt to find some tangible truth in an ever-expanding environment: "Guido



IMAGE 6. *Barlassina, 1996* from *Cinque viaggi (1990–98)* (2021) by Guido Guidi; courtesy the artist and MACK.

Guidi's city is realistic and at the same time fantastical, a space with frayed, fluid boundaries, the ultimate setting for today's sprawling disconnectedness." Valtorta's essay, "Guido Guidi a Milano E In Altri Luoghi" (Guido Guidi in Milan), provides a historical context for understanding the photographs. As an influential curator of Italian photography, one whose career grew parallel with Guidi's, Valtorta is able to describe the historical significance of Guidi's oeuvre and articulate it as a necessary vision for understanding the evolving cultures of both Italy and photography.

As a landscape photographer myself, I've been deeply influenced by the New Topographics movement and a vision of landscape as a stage for understanding cultural evolution. In this sense, Guidi's pictures feel like an affirmation of values I hold dear. But as I have spent limited time in Italy myself, the pictures also offer a view of Italian landscapes that feels new to me, more nuanced than my tourist visits to Pisa or Florence. Repeatedly, however, I come back to the idea that the book is helping the reader understand a creative thought process, guiding us through the act of visualizing ideas and interpreting landscapes. Throughout, we witness Guidi's creative thinking in action, as the sequencing of the pictures reveals his process of using photography to best view and understand the spaces he pictures. I encourage my students to think of the camera as a sketching tool, to use it as a tool for visualizing ideas and spaces. It's essential to find the "right" perspective and walk through a landscape looking for as many ways to visualize



IMAGE 7. *Cogliate*, 1995 from *Cinque viaggi (1990–98)* (2021) by Guido Guidi; courtesy the artist and MACK.

the space as possible. This involves not only the camera, but also how the image is recorded. Should it be seen from here or there? From below or above? In color or black and white? In *Cinque viaggi (1990–98)*, we see Guidi asking himself these questions while at the same time documenting a new urban destiny, a place where banks and industry rule the day, and no longer just a quiet place along the canals where young men race their motorbikes and you're more likely to stumble upon a sheep than a taxi. ■

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