

The Photography of Invention.  
 (American Pictures of the 1980s)

For: European Photography.

The covers of the book under consideration enclose an accumulation of intelligence, creativeness and commitment. So do the metal sheets of the motor car that stands in front of the house where I am writing these rather sad reflexions. Indeed: if we had a measuring rod to quantify creativeness, it might show that more of it is contained within the motor car than within the book in question. But there is a difference between those two accumulators of creativeness which has nothing to do with quantification. The inventor of the brake or of the wind shield has achieved the purpose of his commitment when Renault decided to include his invention within the motor car complex. But the inventor of the picture on page 73 or on page 145 of the book has in fact been diminished by his inclusion within a collective work, although of course he might have felt gratified by the choice of his picture. Which suggests that the term "invention" as used in the title of the book does not have the same meaning it has when applied to brakes or wind shields.

To invent ("invenire") means originally to come up with something. An element of chance seems to stick to it, as if it were a kind of accidental encounter between a searcher and a treasure. But now we tend to connect this "eureka"-experience with discovery, not with invention. It was Columbus who stumbled against America, and not Watt against a steam engine. To us "to invent" supposes a purpose, a search for a method to achieve that purpose, and finally the solution. To invent a brake supposes that there be a problem (how to stop a car), and that a method be found to solve the problem. This is why an inventor in this sense has achieved his goal, if his invention is put into practice. This goes for all inventions, even and especially for those gigantic ones which have shaped our existence, like the invention of the wheel or of fire. Thus there is nothing depreciative in saying that invention aims at practice: invention in this sense is what distinguishes us from other animals: tool making.

But if the term "invention" is applied to the esthetic realm (like in the title of the book), it is used more in the original meaning of the term. The idea is that the "artist" (whatever that term may mean if tool making is excluded) searches more or less blindly for something he does not know exactly what it is ("beauty"), and then suddenly stumbles against it, either by chance or by some genius which guides him. Now if that invention occurs, it is a moment of glory and splendor, and if the result is included in a collection of other such glorious moments it loses its singular splendor. This is the reason why it is so sad to look at a book of photos of invention: as inventions collected into a book they do not bear comparison with technical inventions such as surround us in all our gadgets.

I know of course why the term "photo invention" was invented. It was meant as a distinction from documentary photos, not as a glorification of the "artist". Still: the term was chosen because of its connotations. It was meant to show that there are two types of invention: the lowly one which results in brakes, and the noble one which brings about things of beauty. Precisely because the term "invention" re-

established the lost link between artistic and technical creativity (both were "inventors"), it was meant to show the purposeless purity of artistic commitment. Photos should not "document" (serve as tools for memorizing), but they should create esthetic experiences. Which indeed they do in a few instances, some of which are found in the book of photographic invention.

This is what is so ambiguous about the term "invention". It invites to compare between the esthetic and the practical, between experience and behavior, between this book and the motor car in front of my window. Fortunately we do not (yet) dispose of quantifying methods to say which is more creative, more "informative" of the two: Renault 11 or the American pictures of the 1980s. If taken as models of behavior, no doubt Renault is the stronger: I behave in function of the car more obviously than in function of any of the pictures shown in the book, or even less in function of the totality of the pictures. But if taken as models of experience, the comparison is not as easy. The Renault car is "pleasing", and its design is due to esthetic creativity (now to be called "invention"). The book on my desk too has been design with similar esthetic commitment, and the pictures in their totality show the same sort of pleasurable intention. But if I look at some of the pictures individually, (for instance on page 83 or on page 119) I find something which cannot be called pleasurable or pleasing. It is better called "surprising and unsettling". The curious thing about the book is that I have to stumble against those surprising pictures in the middle of the redundancy of all the other pictures. I have to "invent" those pictures in the original meaning of "inventing".

These reflexions are sad for two different reasons. One has to do with the fact that the moment you use term "invention" for things like photos, you see the power of technical invention based on scientific theory as opposed to the impotence of artistic invention based on empirical trial and error. The other reason for sadness has to do with the fact that production of everything (not only photos) has become so enormous that it becomes almost impossible to stumble against something really "inventive". In other words: the second reason says that it has become statistically improbable to "discover" anything of interest in the midst of such a gigantic amount of "inventions".

The book under consideration is beautifully made, it contains beautiful pictures, an intelligent introduction, and well thought through essay, and it shows the earnest commitment of many people. Which is what is so sad about it.