

Inventions 1915–1938, from the Gas Mask to the Washing Machine

Sara Knelman

Luce Lebart, ed.

Inventions 1915–1938

RVB Books/CNRS, Paris, 2019. Designed by RVB Books.
Arnaud Cordel. 8 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. (17 x 24 cm). 304 pages.
142 black-and-white images. Softcover. rvb-books.com



Long wiry string connecting handles and stone wheels, a corrugated cylinder with its melon like cork heavy beside it, metal prongs fanned out in a circle amid an explosion of confetti or shrapnel. The uncaptioned black-and-white images that open Luce Lebart's book *Inventions 1915–1938* are intriguing, if unsettling. As the sequence builds, more familiar, though no less troubling, forms appear: bullets, guns, uniformed men in gas masks; then a slow slide from instruments of war to the tools of modern convenience: telephones, mops, dishwashers. Devoid of any information, the photographs appear unspecifically modern and industrial. With little sense of scale or perspective, their purpose is curiously aloof—they might be art or evidence, advertisements or theater; banal or insidious. Perhaps all of the above.

Despite the malevolent purpose of many of the objects pictured, the images appear as exquisite celebrations of ingenuity and functional design.

Like any good book of puzzles, the back half provides answers, here in the form of a long illustrated essay and an annotated index. Lebart traces in great detail the remarkable development of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), the institutional body responsible for commissioning, collecting, and archiving this trove of photographs, and many thousands more like them. In an impressive piece of research, Lebart details the CNRS's major figures (such as Jules-Louis Breton, inventor of the tank and the washing machine), the evolutionary plot points and directives that have shaped its character and mandate, and the many cultural factors that have shaped its curiously humorous aesthetics.

Despite the malevolent purpose of many of the objects pictured, the images appear as exquisite celebrations of ingenuity and functional design. Their uses—to kill, to resist being killed—seem in some ways secondary to their presentation, a cultivated "look" that blends surrealism with crime-scene objectivity and the burgeoning reduction of advertising and consumerism. As Lebart writes, the "hint of humor in the staging is one of

the specific features of this archive of inventions and, we might note in passing, is seldom seen in photography. In contrast with cinema in the age of the pioneers, photography is only rarely amusing." There is a palpable spirit of pleasure and pride in both making the objects and in staging their representation.

Originally created to develop inventions designed for military use, the mandate of the CNRS (initially the ONRSII, National Office for Scientific and Industrial Research and Inventions) shifted between the wars, turning from war to the war on dust. Lebart suggests this change in emphasis was deeply related to the times: "the sweeper, like the vacuum cleaner, is a fundamental tool for hygiene and cleanliness in the homes to which soldiers were returning after so many months and years spent caked in the mud of the trenches." The dynamics of gender and the changing roles of women in the work force are interesting to consider as the social backdrop here. While Lebart pitches the new tools for household work "as paving the way to greater social equality," I wonder if they weren't as much a part of a distinctly male fantasy as the tools of war, reengineered to evade domestic labor.

Lebart has a gift for diving deep into archives and coming up with incredible and often complicated material. *Inventions*, like Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's *Evidence* (Clayton Koppelman, 1977), is motivated by a voracious curiosity about the specific contexts and circumstances that generate often-surprising meanings from images. While *Evidence* looked to a range of archives in the US and pointed out the fallacy of photographic truth, Lebart looks to a single archive and fetes the French culture of research—not because it succeeds in any obvious way, but because it persists, despite failures and in the face of futility. "Given the hundreds of inventions photographed systematically beginning in 1917, how many of them actually resulted in mass-produced everyday objects?" Lebart wonders. (There's no clear answer, but many were not, including a horse gas mask.) Indeed, the freedom to create without success, without a prescribed function, is much like the uncaptioned image: "These photographed objects, without function or use, thus more readily take on the guise of 'images' or 'sculptures.'" Indeed, research itself—as a creative activity, as an end in itself, and as a pleasure—is the point.

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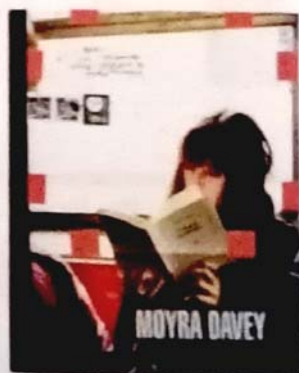
Moyra Davey Jennifer Blessing

In the photograph on the cover of *Moyra Davey*, a young woman reads a paperback book, framed by a window emitting soft light that burnishes her dark hair and glows magically in her hand. The small volume she cradles, Hervé Guibert's *L'Image fantôme* (*Ghost Image*, 1981), is a reverie on photography that Davey holds dear, thus the woman on the cover stands in for the artist, whose name (the title of the book) creates a caption for the absorbed figure on its cover. Her act of reading also mirrors mine when I pick up the heavy catalogue and open its pages.

The image on the cover is a reproduction of an unfolded letter with canceled stamps and addresses to a recipient—Dancing Foxes, the art book publisher—and the sender, who is none other than M. Davey of River-side Drive. Neat squares of orange tape and orderly yet vitalizing creases in the print's surface provide clues to how the image circulated. The catalogue's cover also literally unfolds, disclosing the rest of the photo, which features an older woman, who sits next to the young woman like a sentinel, black eyes blindly staring me down. The setting in a New York City subway car is confirmed by a cropped poster that reads: "IT KILLS NEW YORKERS WAITING FOR A / SaveLivesNew." If you know Davey's work, you will recognize that these fragments of text are unannounced by another title by Guibert, his autofiction, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990).

Moyra Davey was published this year by Steidl as part of the 2018 Scotiabank Photography Award for "a mature and accomplished body of work by an established Canadian photographic artist." The 288-page catalogue provides an almost forty-year review of the artist's work, which integrates photography, video, and writing in multilayered, self-referential pieces that obsessively explore embodiment and loss, especially through experiences of illness and aging, motherhood, and bereavement. A voracious reader, Davey engages other artists and writers through their books—as well as their photographs and films—which spurs her to create narratives that in turn, "fuel" her artistic productions. In the catalogue, she writes, "I like containment. I like intimacy with the object and I think of my 'work' as everything that goes into the frame of the photograph or the cinematic frame, or the frame of the book. I consider the forms distinct, but also inter-connected and additive." Designed by Barr Gilmore, the catalogue exemplifies Davey's interwoven process by alternating four discrete text sections, printed on warm gray matte card stock, with four expansive sections of glistening, spot-varnished plate images on very white glossy paper.

The book opens with a lovely, succinct introduction penned by writer and editor Brian Sholis and includes an epistolary conversation with novelist and poet Ben Lerner and an interview with critic Elisabeth Leboyec. The artist, however, wrote most of the book herself, both new and previously published essays that often launch extended reflections on artists and writers she admires, such as Guibert, Chantal Akerman, Jean Genet, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Francesca Woodman, among many others. While the catalogue privileges Davey's photography and writing (the writers of printed books), her videos are represented by scripts for *Les Goddesses* (2011) and



Moyra Davey

Moyra Davey

Steidl, Germany, 2019. Designed by Barr Gilmore. 8 x 9 1/2 in.
203 x 24.8 cm. 288 pages. 368 color and black-and-white images.
Softcover. steidl.de