

Sheryl Conkelton, "An Ex-Marine Thrashes Doris Day and Ansel Adams while Waving at Warhol,"
X-TRA, Winter 2015.

X-TRA CONTEMPORARY ART QUARTERLY

REVIEW

An Ex-Marine Thrashes Doris Day and Ansel Adams while Waving at Warhol

Robert Heinecken: *Object Matter*
Museum of Modern Art, New York

—Sheryl Conkelton



Robert Heinecken, *Figure in Six Sections*, 1965. Gelatin silver prints on wood blocks, 8 ½ × 3 × 3 inches. Collection Kathe Heinecken; courtesy The Robert Heinecken Trust, Chicago. © 2014 The Robert Heinecken Trust.

Just before a public lecture, as an apocryphal story has it,¹ a slide tray was dropped and the slides fell out and onto the floor. The speaker, Robert Heinecken, asked that the slides simply be picked up and inserted into the tray as they were—out of order, upside down, and even backwards. He then proceeded to lecture from his prepared notes, allowing the audience to produce meaning from a completely random combination of image and text. The projected imagery became a gloss; with the audience's participation, it wandered from the provision of surprising but apt commentary to completely confounding contradiction. One reason this episode continues to circulate is that it is telling, in so many ways, about an artist whose production was premised on being actively engaged with what was encountered in the course of ordinary experience. Heinecken's art demands that the viewer respond; one might be bemused or enraged by his provocative imagery, but what matters is critical engagement and active participation.

Heinecken was an important figure, particularly in the development of art in Los Angeles in the second half

of the twentieth century—a prolific, inventive, and influential artist who is not nearly as well or widely known as he should be. Over a four-decades-long career, his production encompassed a wide variety of photographic processes as well as sculptures, collages, book forms, moving imagery, and installations. The work, in its materials and its subject matter, is challenging, often rough, and at times violent. Heinecken investigated certain social dynamics in consumer culture—namely the overt presence of

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sexualized and gendered imagery and their covert operations—and the work agitates for recognition of society’s narcotized complicity and the political and personal violence it generates.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, presented an exhibition of Heinecken’s art this past spring, which travels to the Hammer Museum (October 2, 2014–January 17, 2015). Curator Eva Respini made a careful selection of Heinecken’s work, showcasing his achievements, and in the accompanying catalog essay she argues eloquently for his inclusion in a certain history of photography alongside John Baldessari, Doug Huebler, Richard Prince, and Martha Rosler. Organized roughly by chronology and by projects, the exhibition at MoMA presented a cleanly structured overview of his work. The clarity of its installation initially appeared to subdue if not suppress the content, but it made visible Heinecken’s orderly and systematic way of working, allowing his reserved and wry sensibility to surface. Focused on his manipulations of photography, both as concrete investigation and as appropriationist operation, the exhibition outlined a materially based experimentation and a postmodern exploration of the animating force of popular imagery.

Heinecken’s elliptical methodology is manifest in the consistency of his subjects and his deliberate, intellectual investigation. His practice was firmly based in research, informed by a deep interest in many types of history and literature and an awareness of current developments in a wide range of artistic media. He began his career—both his artistic practice and his teaching—in the 1960s, in the midst of a strong interrogation of previous modernisms through the use of new and commercial materials, the development of alternative artistic processes, and the rise of performance and installation. After receiving his master’s degree in graphic design and printmaking from the University of California Los Angeles, he was hired there, in 1965, to develop the new photography program. Designing a curriculum outside his own expertise gave him an opportunity to research a history of the medium and engage it from an outsider perspective. The version he developed and taught included key episodes of photography-based design associated with twentieth-century artistic and political resistance: agitprop, Surrealism, and Dada, and in particular the work of anti-Nazi designer and guerilla satirist John Heartfield and that of the Dutch typographer and printmaker Hendrik Nicholaas Werkman.

Heinecken was particularly intrigued by the lines drawn around institutionally sanctioned photographic histories and how one might cross if not erase them. Like many other artists at the time, he immersed himself in alternative processes and unusual formats (negative printing, photograms, photolithography, and photographic emulsion-covered canvases, among others) that questioned “art photography’s” limits and proprieties, its regulation and definition. His early projects followed this inquiry, challenging then-defining characteristics of black-and-white printing, scrupulous darkroom work, and the singular image by working with multiple exposure, serial imagery, montage, and arbitrary color, as well as three-dimensional forms. In some of the earliest work included in the exhibition, he pushed the limits of black-



Robert Heinecken, *Figure Horizon #1*, 1971. Ten canvas panels with photographic emulsion, 11 13/16 × 11 13/16 inches each. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange. © 2014 The Robert Heinecken Trust.

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Robert Heinecken, *Are You Rea #1*, 1964–68. Gelatin silver print, 10 13/16 × 7 7/8 inches. Collection Jeffrey Leifer, Los Angeles. © 2013 The Robert Heinecken Trust.

and-white film to dissolve physical forms, as in *Shadow of Figure* (1962), and played with imagery projected on bodies, as in *World War I Figure* (1964) and *Typographic Nude* (1965). He cut up and recombined imagery, as in *Twelve Figure Squares #2* (1967), and printed images on fabrics, as in *Figure Horizon #1* (1971). From 1965 to 1967, he produced a series of moveable-part sculptures and puzzles surfaced with pictures of body fragments that invited manipulation but could not be resolved into coherent, whole forms; more than suggesting contingency, they made literal the objectification of the female form.²

All of these formal experiments both acknowledged and challenged previous generations of artist-photographers, such as Edward Weston and Lazslo Moholy-Nagy. They are of a piece with the experiments of a loose circle of photographers spread out over the United States, including Robert Cumming, Jerry McMillan, and Jerry Uelsmann, whom Heinecken knew through organizations such as the newly formed Society for Photographic Education.³ Many artists at the time valued gesture and facture, where the hand of the artist expressed agency, often as a statement of

resistance against what many saw as growing anti-individual corporatization. Heinecken's project diverged from these concerns, however, as he began to recognize photography's significance and influence. Where many art photographers' were fundamentally concerned with an expansion of the medium's formal and physical limitations, Heinecken began to develop a view of the medium itself as a cultural mass medium and, not unlike Andy Warhol and other artists, to attempt to incorporate into his art some aspect of its affect and manufacturing of attitudes.

The project *Are you Rea*, a portfolio of 25 photograms (1964–68), is a fully realized demonstration of the operation of photographic images that forge and shape news and information. Heinecken allowed magazines to literally generate the art by using a single page (selected from more than 2000 he had researched and clipped) as a negative to make each print. In each, various types of editorial and marketing images were seamlessly combined, sometimes to shocking effect. He extended this project further by making his own magazines: in 1969 he cut and reassembled imagery from men's erotic magazines to make up his own, and gathered up *Time* magazines, which he took apart and reassembled with pornographic images. In works such as *Periodical #5* (1971) and *Newsweek, October 21, 1974* (1974) he both overprinted and inserted gruesome combat images among banal advertising and editorial content, intensifying the horror of the Viet Nam War imagery that was then regularly circulated and broadcast. Many of these magazines were left in his dentist's office to be picked up by unsuspecting patients, or

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Robert Heinecken, *Surrealism on TV*, 1986. 216 35-mm color slides, slideshow, variable duration. The Robert Heinecken Trust, Chicago; courtesy Cherry and Martin Gallery, Los Angeles. © 2014 The Robert Heinecken Trust.

placed back on newsstand shelves to be purchased, intended both as a critique of current politics and moral firebomb.

Heinecken's inquiry extended beyond media's iconicity to engage the effects of picture industries as systems that generate, distribute, and police values, and he examined their dynamics in the forming and informing of popular imagination. He explored the visual production of mainstream culture and its odd pockets; he took images from product catalogs, mail-order pornography, men's and women's magazines, and news periodicals. He was interested in chance combinations of imagery, not only from page to page but also from periodical to periodical, as they might be viewed on a newsstand or in a pile on a coffee table, as well as the contradictions and moral dilemmas these combinations might engender. He examined them for the attitudes they propagated and the psychologies they revealed, as well as the inconsistencies and oppositions they generated. He saw his production as an exploration of the commonly overlooked and "perhaps more socially important manufactured experiences which are being created daily by the mass media."⁴

Heinecken's preoccupation with the production of contradictory and inauthentic values extended to television and its imagery. He created several variants of a small installation, *TV/Time Environment* (1970), with a chair facing a television set; the broadcast image could be viewed only through a pornographic transparency, making the sexual nature of TV marketing, as well as its presence in the family home, explicit. For *Inaugural Excerpt Videograms* (1981) he directed his partner, artist Joyce Neimanas, via telephone, to expose photographic paper against the TV screen at certain moments during Ronald Reagan's televised inauguration speech. The resultant blurry images were annotated with

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random bits of the speech and news coverage of it, and organized as a 24-piece grid. The work involved several types of mediation in its making and, focusing on the “actor-president” as a media icon, pointedly displayed the conflation of politics, entertainment, and marketing, and its generation of ingenuous and expedient public speech. The project *Untitled (newswomen)* (1983–87)—which developed alongside his small book satirizing marketing science, *1984: A Case Study in Finding an Appropriate TV Newswoman (A CBS Docudrama in Words and Pictures)* (1985)—depicts female newscasters of the day in large Polaroids, and organizes a parodic typology using their common blondness. *Surrealism on TV* (1986) incorporates these and other images from newscasts, advertisements, public-access TV, and network programming. In the work, three slide carousels simultaneously project images at different speeds in random combinations, producing chance juxtapositions and absurd narrative possibilities, reflecting Heinecken’s long-held interest in Dada and its strategic deployment of contradiction.



Robert Heinecken, *Periodical* #5, 1971. Offset lithography on found magazine, 12 1/4 × 9 inches. Collection Philip Aarons, New York. © 2014 The Robert Heinecken Trust.

Some of the most important bodies of work Heinecken produced over his lifetime were the many “revised” or “compromised” magazine projects. Beginning with the *Periodical* series in 1969 and continuing up through the *Revised Magazine* series of 1989–94, he overprinted, substituted, reordered, and cut through magazine pages to invert or radicalize their meanings. He constructed his own narratives, some cynical and overtly critical, others more allusive in their connections and connotations. The earlier pieces juxtaposed illustrations from different kinds of publications—mingling high and low, violence with quiet domesticity, pornography with advertisements from *Glamour* or *Good Housekeeping* that were surprisingly similar in pose and affect. Heinecken repeatedly used an image of a Cambodian soldier holding two severed heads, iterating the ways he found it in many different publications, juxtaposed against so many different types of imagery that it became neutralized for the public and passed over without reaction or response.⁵ In the later projects, Heinecken would create series such as *Revised Magazine: Jungle Prints* and *Revised Magazine: Cigarette Ads/Woman* (all 1993) by collaging and

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cutting through pages to produce entirely new scenarios peopled by figures of different scales and from different realities to counter advertising messages. In these works it seems that he was interested not in demonstrating the banality or pervasiveness of media imagery but rather its dismissal of historical fact, its disinterest in relative significance, and what could be seen as its moral bankruptcy.

A pervasive theme throughout Heinecken's career and work concerned the values and behaviors prescribed by media, which churned individual difference into an impersonal average or spurned it altogether for unreal and idealized countenance. Early on he was very aware of the impact of the media's capacity to project models of behavior, and conceived of many of his pieces as means to interrogate their dynamics, for himself as well as for viewers. A recurring issue is the individual's capacity to reconcile what was being marketed with everyday life, not only the disparity between the ideal and actual, but the effort and the moral calculus required to determine an authentic and responsible response. When asked about the content and obscenity or sensuousness of his pictures, he would often talk about leaving all conclusions up to the audience, or evade the question as if to leave the space for active interpretation open for others.⁶ Some works relied on his giving up authority: the many incorporations of chance, the literal performance of others with the movable sculptures, the slide presentations he described as "happenings," in which he would assign the changing of the slides to a member of the audience. He invited, and sometimes demanded, viewers to resist the disinterest and apathy that media saturation could generate—to be seduced, to be outraged, to be active, and to locate their own sensibilities in relation to his imagery.



Robert Heinecken, *TV/Time Environment* (1970). Installation view, Robert Heinecken: *Object Matter*, The Museum of Modern Art, March 15–September 7, 2014. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. © The Museum of Modern Art.

Heinecken consistently used the female body's objectification in popular media to emphasize its ubiquitous use as a device to generate desire, his own unapologetically included. In the early 1960s, the burgeoning sexual revolution was idealized as a liberation of sorts; by the 1970s it had been coopted by mainstream marketing. Heinecken was interested not only in the imagery's efficacy and power but also in how context altered its meaning and impact. His montages amplified media's eliding of overt sex and violence and their insertion into everyday existence to point not only to the enervating effect but also to question the social values that made this possible.

Much attention has been paid to Heinecken's use of sexist imagery, yet comparatively little of that discussion has elucidated his motivations or the complexity of his position, which involved both participation and critique. Heinecken characteristically refused to comment on the subject or specify appropriate responses, admitting only to his self-awareness as a sexual being.⁷ His preoccupation with

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Robert Heinecken, installation view with vitrine of altered magazines, *Robert Heinecken: Object Matter*, The Museum of Modern Art, March 15–September 7, 2014. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. © The Museum of Modern Art

sexuality can be seen as a response to the radical and confounding changes that occurred in social attitudes as he established himself as an artist and over the course of his career: his rejection (following his Marine service) of the military and its male-dominated culture, not coincidentally inhabited by pin-ups and nudie magazines; the Beat-literature-inspired resistance to bourgeois, mainstream American taste; the women's movement; the increasingly activist political tenor of the 1960s, especially on California campuses; the importance of magazines in that period and the growing recognition of the influence of all media on culture; and the intense disillusionment of the 1970s and 1980s as culture and government grew more corporatized. In this context of flux and influence, Heinecken's insertion of pornography into marketing and news imagery in series such as *Are You Rea* and *Daytime Color TV Fantasy* (1974) can be considered, rather than a simple sexing up, as a strategy to pull those contradictions into tighter conflict, to represent the ways in which women were portrayed, and to make apparent what an absurd, confusing, and demeaning environment modern media presented. Iterated over forty years of production, it was clearly Heinecken's definitive focus, but rather than an anti-feminist obsession—which his colleagues and students dismiss as uncharacteristic—it was a subject matter and an image world that, for him, with its contradiction of taboo and ubiquity, could be compellingly instrumentalized as agitprop.

The desire for active social participation and insistence on individual agency were also signaled in the literal confrontations set up in his overprinting, collage, and montage. He manifested the competition for attention among media-portrayed subjects and its dislocating effects in his assemblies of carefully researched imagery, and he developed searing combinations that expressed not only the collision of ideas

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but also the contradictions in value systems. He saw media as a ubiquitous distraction that introduced conflict between the individual and the social and diminished the capacity to discern differences among forms of entertainment and information, and he employed startling juxtapositions to expose these effects.

The objective of a retrospective is to mark a place for an artist and his or her life's work, a process that necessarily reduces the complexity of a lifetime of production in order to fit into a history. Clearly, one objective of the MoMA retrospective was to situate Heinecken within the institution's history of photography—as well as to contribute to a corrective expansion of that narrow history. But Heinecken's work somewhat eludes the positions assigned to him, particularly as he is portrayed in the catalog essay as an early appropriationist alongside Pictures Generation artists. The rawness of much of Heinecken's imagery and the confrontations in his montage bump up against the cool seamlessness of works by artists such as John Baldessari and Richard Prince, pointing to their differences in both motivation and effect. Heinecken's images and objects investigate photographs as cultural traces but, rather than iterate the operation of advertising and marketing photographs as evidence of simulacra, as many of those later artists did, he instead revealed the challenges and confusions embedded in the collision of the personal and the public. As the absorption of individual realities into a mediated social regime began to be recognized, he insisted on action and fomented it. Heinecken's production can be viewed as a link between the earlier modern strategies of Dada and Surrealism and the Pictures Generation, similar to the Neo-Dada projects of Robert Rauschenberg, to whom he was often compared. Heinecken occupied a still somewhat optimistic position of postwar experimentation, a different kind of manipulation of media than the more cynical, theoretically informed production that followed with the Pictures group. Heinecken's cohort would include Bruce Conner, Wallace Berman, who was his close friend, and other artists—even Carolee Schneemann in the skillful use of images of sex and their generated anxieties—grappling with the rise of postwar consumer culture, the increasing presence of sex and sexualized imagery in the media, and their own countercultural opposition and alienation.

Heinecken explored appetites as a means of limning the shifting boundaries of individual consciousness and social connectivity. Although during his career much artistic investigation turned toward institutional critique and theoretical discourses, he did not shift his point of view from a deep consideration of real human life and its balancing act of everything from quotidian responsibilities to sexual fantasies. He produced work as an emphatic provocation in that life and as *realpolitik* rather than intellectually distanced commentary. Heinecken's art and its context are far messier, more sprawling, and more complex than aligning it with a generation of appropriationists would suggest, and the history that accommodates his production must be one that accounts for the issues that were so pressingly present in those moments.

Sheryl Conkelton is a curator and educator based in Houston.

<http://x-traonline.org/article/an-ex-marine-thrashes-doris-day-and-ansel-adams-while-waving-at-warhol/>