

Cherry and Martin

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Robert Heinecken's "Cybill Shepherd/Phone Sex" (1992).

The conceptual photographer Robert Heinecken, who died in 2006 at 74, was ahead of his time in some ways — and hopelessly retrograde in others. The technically experimental, media-savvy work he made in the 1960s and '70s paved the way for appropriation artists like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, and for the digital-image samplers who dominate photo exhibitions today. Yet much of it looked, and still looks, oblivious to the advent of feminism.

That backward-forward sensibility is highly apparent in Heinecken's first posthumous retrospective, at the Museum of Modern Art. Looking at the show, "[Robert Heinecken: Object Matter](#)," you can appreciate his place in photographic history and visual culture while acknowledging that his images can come across as simplistic or sexist.

Heinecken called himself a "paraphotographer," because he tended to work with photographs that had been taken by other people: everything from photo essays in *Time* and *Newsweek*, to artworks by friends, to pornographic nudes he printed from mail-order negatives. Straightforward rephotography was just one of his many techniques; he also used photograms, photolithography, collage and assemblage, and various printmaking methods. All are accounted for in this concise survey, organized by Eva Respini, a MoMA curator, with Drew Sawyer, a curatorial fellow.

"I don't think that, as a term, photography goes very far to define certain kinds of photographic activity," Heinecken wrote in 1967. "It goes no further than the word sculpture goes to define the various processes by which a three-dimensional object might be formed."

And a photograph, to him, was as important as a piece of sculpture — not a window on the world, or a content-delivery system. He titled an earlier essay, from 1965, "The Photograph: Not a Picture of, but an Object About Something."

This part of Heinecken's philosophy, shared by Conceptual art peers like John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler, is hardly controversial today. What is difficult, for many viewers, is that he often made his point about the object-ness of the photograph by objectifying the female body. (When a journalist called him a "misogynist photographer," he said that he wasn't sure "whether to be more insulted at being called a 'misogynist' or a 'photographer.'")

Among his tamer works are the late-1960s "photopuzzles" that turn the female nude into a kind of Rubik's Cube, with body parts mounted onto the faces of rotating blocks, and panoramic collages that present cutup and reassembled figures as landscapes. They recall Surrealist photography and parlor games like *exquisite corpse*, with a dash of Fluxus DIY, and are playful, though not particularly profound.

Also unlikely to offend is the contemporaneous series of photograms, “Are You Rea?,” which collapses double-sided pages from periodicals like *Time*, *Life* and *Woman’s Day* into single, densely layered images. They’re a poke in the eye of a magazine culture that was then robust, merging ads with editorial features and making both illegible in the process. And like the truncated title, which could be read as “Are You Real?” or “Are You Ready?,” they’re wonderfully open-ended.

More aggressive Dadaist strategies are at work in the altered magazines Heinecken started to make in 1969 and continued into the 1990s, which occupy a large display case at the museum. In these works, Heinecken dropped violent war imagery into shelter magazines (echoing Martha Rosler’s Vietnam-era series “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Back Home”) and cut away parts of pages to put advertising in the foreground. (A special 150th-anniversary issue of *Time* was tweaked to read, “Share Kodak.”)

But, more often, Heinecken made mash-ups of men’s magazines like *Cavalcade* and popular newsweeklies, which he would then leave on newsstands and in waiting rooms to shock and titillate the unsuspecting reader. Contemporary viewers will probably feel ennui, such images — and juxtapositions of images — being readily accessible on the Internet. They may also wonder whether Heinecken’s use of pornography was really, as Ms. Respini suggests, “part of a larger project to shed light on hidden late-capitalist exploitation and hypocrisy” — or, at least, whether that project was successful.

To Heinecken’s credit, he realized early in his career that the “photographic activity” that interested him could be expanded to include television. In the museum’s update of his 1970 installation “TV/Time Environment,” visitors can sit in a living room and watch daytime talk shows on a television partly masked by a film transparency of a female nude.

Also here are his more sophisticated “videograms,” blurry images made by pressing Cibachrome paper against a television screen. A set from 1981 turns Ronald Reagan’s inauguration speech into a murky blue-and-green abstraction.

But the works most in tune with our own image culture are Heinecken’s late-1970s and early-’80s experiments with the Polaroid SX-70 camera, which presciently recognized the instant print as an enabler of intimacy. (He called it the “bedroom camera.”) The series “He/She,” in which close-ups of an erection and other boudoir shots are accompanied by candid handwritten dialogues, is sexting *avant la lettre*.

Likewise, the Polaroids that make up the deadpan sequence “Lessons in Posing Subjects” anticipate the posting and parsing of selfies, now routine, even though the pictures of smiling men and women are rephotographed details from clothing catalogs.

“Robert Heinecken: Object Matter” has moments of relevance, and even brilliance. And it may have more of them when it travels next fall to the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, where Heinecken taught for more than three decades. In the meantime, it leaves you wondering how an artist who saw so many ways to make a photograph could be so limited and predictable in his depiction of women.