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Photography View; ROBERT HEINECKEN- ASKING PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS

By Andy Grundberg
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Given the elan and virtuosity with which Robert Heinecken has combined photography with print-making and other media over the last two decades, one might expect him to have attained a measure of renown approaching that of Robert Rauschenberg, whose work Heinecken's superficially resembles. His reputation, however, is not nearly as widespread, nor has his work been as thoroughly examined. In part this is because he has chosen to be identified as a photographer, despite his training in the traditional fine arts and his position as a professor of art at U.C.L.A. The distinction is not incidental. As the Museum of Modern Art's John Szarkowski - one of the few to compare Heinecken's and Rauschenberg's work - noted in "Mirrors and Windows," Rauschenberg's prints absorb photographs, while Heinecken's allow a "precipitate of fact" to cling to them.

Yet as much as the art market may discriminate against photographers, it is just as likely that what has limited Heinecken's recognition is the nature of his work. It is difficult, perverse, defiant and suffused with sexual imagery. Heinecken's obsession with sexuality and with pornographic representations of the female figure is probably what is most obvious and easily comprehended about his current retrospective exhibition at Light Gallery (724 Fifth Avenue, through July 2), which is accompanied by a recently published monograph, "Heinecken" (Friends of Photography, Carmel, Calif.). Beyond this obsession, one notices the multiplicity of media, formats, shapes and sizes that Heinecken has employed in what seems a search for the right vessel for his message.

Heinecken's repertory of eclectic processes and his irreverent attitude toward the photographic original have influenced the course of contemporary photography, helping to steer it away from the documentary conception of the medium that dominated the 1950's. Over the years he has used photographic magazines, mail-order negatives of nude "art studies," television commercials and other found imagery as his "originals." These he has subjected to a variety of transformations involving such methods and materials as lithography, etching, photograms, photo emulsion on canvas and SX-70 Polaroid prints.

The resulting works - many of which resist the label "photographs" - reflect on the ways in which images are defined by their culture, and at the same time they seek to liberate them from these definitions. However obvious the sexual aspect of his work may appear, then, his work is not primarily about sex (although that is part of it, to be sure) so much as it is about presentation, representation, and the tensions between them. As William Jenkins observes in his introduction to "Heinecken," "His pictures are almost universally of pictures."

Unlike more traditional photographers, Heinecken is not especially interested in capturing the world; instead, he is interested in the context through which we perceive the world. To make us aware of these culturally determined contexts, Heinecken's main strategy is to scramble them by procedures that are random and arbitrary. (Just as his identity as a photographer reverses expectations, so too does his art.) This strategy of de-contextualization informs Heinecken's most recent production, a grid of 27 pictures called "Inaugural Excerpt Videograms." The "Videograms" - Heinecken's coined term for color photographs taken directly from a television screen without the aid of a camera - are uncharacteristic because they have no sexual over or undertones, yet they are typically inventive as to process. Also typically, they focus

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on the ways in which information is inflected by media - here, by the transmission of the TV image, as re-presented by Heinecken's novel image-making procedure.

Each single image in the grid depicts in blurry TV fashion, complete with bilious blue-green cast, some figure or event surrounding the inauguration of Ronald Reagan last January. Heinecken made pictures from the screen on three occasions: a celebrity gala before the inauguration, the inauguration itself, and President Reagan's subsequent speech to the nation. The main actor of the piece is Mr. Reagan himself, with guest appearances by his wife, Nancy, Chief Justice Warren Burger, Frank Sinatra, Jimmy Stewart and Debbie Boone. Underneath each image is penciled a three- or four-word excerpt from the inaugural address.

Because the technique of placing a piece of printing paper in front of a TV screen allows for no advance knowledge of what each photograph will contain, Heinecken's process has a built-in element of randomness. To this he adds his own arbitrary fillip, linking the text excerpts to the images without regard for the context in which they originated. This has the initial effect of confusing the viewer, who ordinarily might expect art to be consciously ordered; however, it also urges the viewer to reconsider the sources of the information Heinecken has excerpted, and thereby to become aware of the possible arbitrariness of their original presentation.

This kind of active response that Heinecken's art seeks to elicit has a better chance of occurring, it would seem, when his subject matter is no more shocking than the sight of the President - an assumption that may explain the success of the videogram piece. But when Heinecken insists on re-contextualizing heavily sexual imagery - as is the case with his "Cliche Vary/Lesbianism" of 1974, the very cultural prohibitions he wants re-examined can take precedence over his distancing devices - in the case of the "Cliche Vary," the use of a large, 16-panel grid as a formal structure. The same is true of his "Fourteen or Fifteen Buffalo Ladies" lithographs of 1969 and the "Erogenous Zone System Exercises" photographs of 1972, both of which are derived from pornographic originals.

A different sort of tension exists in Heinecken's "Are You Rea" series of 1966-67 - photograms that reveal both sides of magazine pages at once, overlapped - or the recent "He/She" photo texts, each of which consists of a row of SX-70 snapshots underneath which a male/female dialogue is penciled. In the "He/She" pieces the sexual content is mostly implied by the text, since only a few of the Polaroid prints are sexually explicit. "He" and "She" characters talk somewhat disjointedly about such matters as kissing and going to bed, but the main thrust of the dialogues is to explore what Heinecken has called "relational possibilities." The pictures, which often have little to do in any obvious way with the dialogue they frame, seem simply to offer a visual set of relational possibilities that interact with those of the text.

What is consistently striking about Heinecken's entire body of work is its adamant refusal to resolve any of the issues it raises. As Jenkins writes, "Heinecken always remains more interested than critical, and his examination of culture always involves more discovery than comment." In short, the combination of mixed media, mixed messages and mixed metaphors that Heinecken employs to such powerful effect is meant to raise questions, not answer them.

The important questions Heinecken poses involve the interaction of public and forbidden imagery, their meanings in the culture and the degree to which these meanings can be transformed. But there are other, more problematic questions raised by the work that reflect the limitations of Heinecken's achievement. How much is the artist using sex as an example of cultural taboo, and how much is he a prisoner of it? Why is it that some of the objects he creates are delicately beautiful - including, ironically, many of those utilizing pornography - while others are muddily unattractive? How is the artist's cool formalist facility reconciled with the anger and violence explicit in or implied by his chosen subject matter? These bothersome tensions are also left for the viewer to resolve.