Reality Effects
MATTHEW BIRO ON THE ART OF ROBERT HEINECKEN

In 1968, Robert Heinecken released one of the signal works of his career: Are You Real, a portfolio of twenty-five grainy, ghostly, tonally reversed photographs taken from the pages of popular magazines. His introductory text leaves no doubt as to why he is today considered one of the most precocious forebears of appropriation. Denying his debt to Surrealist theory, he professes his interest in “the multiplicity of meanings inherent in aleatory ideas and images” and declares that “these pictures do not represent first hand experiences, but are related to the perhaps more socially important manufactured experiences which are being created daily by the mass media.” He then quotes André Breton at length (“Everything, in effect is an image . . .”). One could hardly ask for a more concise articulation of the genealogy linking Dada and Surrealism, the assemblage and montage practices of West Coast artists such as Wallace Berman, Edward Kienholz, and John Baldessari, and the strategies of postmodern photography associated with Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, et al. Indeed, Heinecken’s work seems a more direct ancestor to the Pictures generation than that of his contemporaries.

Yet rather than viewing the art Heinecken (1931–2006) created between the 1960s and ’90s exclusively through the lens of postmodernism, it is perhaps best to understand the artist first and foremost in his own paradoxical terms—namely, as a “documentarian” of “manufactured experience.” His is an eye that reveals that, which describes experience not as given or spontaneous but as preconditioned and fabricated; and that sees contemporary existence as a process of consumption. At the same time, Heinecken also recognized that it was impossible to critique consumer ideology from within. Acknowledging his own implication within the systems that sustain and are sustained by this ideology, he frequently incorporated his own particular obsessions and biography into his art. In this respect, he finds common ground with the documentary photographers of the 1960s (e.g., Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand) in that his work, like theirs, constitutes an individualistic selection of motifs and details, a social statement from an unabashedly subjective point of view. But he took the implications of subjectivity considerably farther than they did, laying bare his own tastes and affinities in an often shocking and always unsettling way.

Heinecken’s practice ranged from photo-based painting and sculpture to collage, installation, and time-based work with TVs and slide projectors. Though his formal training was in printmaking, he began to explore photography in the early ’60s, when he was hired to teach it at his alma mater, UCLA. His earliest photographs, shot with a 35-mm camera, are his “straightest” or least manipulated, but he was already exploring the modernist photographic tradition most powerfully embodied on the West Coast by Ansel Adams and Group 16-4, with its emphasis on medium specificity, objective depiction, structure, and sharp focus. Many of his works from this period employ techniques of “bad photography,” such as shooting against the light, motion blur, and underexposure. Or they bring together opposites that the West Coast modernists preferred to keep separate, as in one image in which the cropped silhouette of an airplane reveals a vaguely nippilike contour, melding the organic and the technological. By the mid-’60s, Heinecken was committing even greater affronts against photographic purity, producing photo-sculpture hybrids—black-and-white prints of female nudes, segmented and reassembled like puzzle pieces or laminated onto the sides of wooden cubes. His Fractured Figure Sections of 1967, for example, is essentially a three-dimensional exquisite corpse, a tower of stacked sections that can be rotated to produce impossible composites of the human form.

Heinecken’s “Are You Real” series (from which the portfolio, a distinct work, emerged), 1964–68, was roughly contemporaneous with the sculptures, and in some ways complements

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HEINECKEN CONTINUED TO EXPLORE this tension in his altered magazines—a sprawling group of works he produced between 1969 and 1974. In Mmansmag, 1969, he employed lithography again, to print photographs of soft-core porn on top of one another in vivid color. Text, cartoons, and “real” bodies interact, their almost flickering forms approaching one another from various angles. Quickly, however, Heinecken turned to collaging magazine pages themselves. Timm (First Group), 1969, for example, consisted of pages cut from the famous newsmagazine, overlaid with lithographs of cheesecake shots and reassembled in an aleatory order. Then, in Periodical #1, 1969, he simply cut up and reconfigured a group of twenty-nine magazines ranging from Glamour and Good Housekeeping to Playboy and Guns and Ammo, without adding overlays. The end product was a set of nineteen twenty-nine-page volumes, or “variants” (the artist’s preferred term), each containing a single leaf from each magazine. When we flip through these reconstructions, we experience a cacophony: not only forms of advertising address...
geared toward different education levels and tastes but a mélange of subjects and voices, some first-person confessions, some omniscent and ostensibly ungendered news stories.

Heinecken went on to create nine more issues in the "Periodical" series, using the appropriative and documentary strategies that were becoming his stock-in-trade. Fashion imagery and graphic ‘70s-style pornography appear in combination again and again: Cosmetics ads and nude photos are juxtaposed to suggest the interpretation of products and women, fashion models and centerfolds meet in faux Lesbian encounters that embody but also mock a male gaze. Marlboros and Virginia Slims, whiskey and TV dinners (a subject he committed to canvas in a suite of mixed-media works, TV Dinner/Strings, in 1971) jostle one another in high-key color.

The typological impulse that connects Heinecken’s work to that of Dan Graham and Ed Ruscha, among others (including artists outside LA such as Bernd and Hilla Becher), is much in evidence here, but again with some significant differences. His cohorts saw potential in the tropes of banality—gas stations, prefab homes—but Heinecken did not. Where taste figured into the equation, he was interested in the lowbrow more than the middlebrow; where sex was concerned, the graphic trumped the suggestive. Quotidian experience manifests itself in much conceptual photography, but Heinecken went right to experiences that surpass the everyday, and not just in the realm of sexuality. Imagery of extreme grotesque violence shadows the series. In Periodical #5, 1971, a smiling and androgynous soldier—presumably Vietnamese, though whether North or South isn’t clear—carrying two severed heads is repeatedly superimposed across the pages of a compendium of fashion ads. Heinecken also deployed this image for one of his most extraordinary works, using it for a guerrilla action he performed a few times in 1972, when he returned altered magazines to newsstands or doctor’s or dentist’s offices for an unsuspecting public to discover.1

While Heinecken continued to use lithographic overprinting and full-page reassembly in the "Periodical" series, with Periodical #9, 1972, he added a third technique, a form of photomontage. For him, though, photomontage was a process of subtraction rather than superimposition: the excising of shapes or elements on bound pages to let the adjacent pages bleed through. Carefully cutting out bras, panties, pantyhose, and other products, he revealed partial images, barely recognizable glimpses of people or objects, beneath. Heinecken’s cuts also created a puzzling shape on the excised leaf’s other side. Once again, the overall effect was

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Heinecken responded by magnifying the scale of his appropriations. The latest cinematic aspect of his work (with its frequent use of sequential imagery) is unmistakable in his large-scale transparencies from this period, which resemble enlarged film frames. *Film Strip 82, 1972*, is a six-frame strip, reproduced, sprocket holes and all, at fifty-four by seventeen inches; it consists of composite images wherein a nude body commingles with tree branches. *Porno Film Strip 82, 1972*, is a six-frame strip of composited but still discernibly explicit pornographic film. Like his magazines, Heinecken’s transparencies, with their deployment of such strategies as scale shift, tonal reversal, and overlays, stand outside traditional photographic and artistic media. Transformed records of a rapidly burgeoning industry, they evince a self-reflexive attention to medium, but this is no modernist gesture. Rather, it is a lurid admixture of document, art, and titillation— one that, Heinecken suggests, is reiterated in every film we watch, and perhaps in every moment of our lives. Experience is invaded at the smallest order of magnitude, in units so infinitesimal we cannot even perceive them as distinct, just as persistence of vision turns distinct frames into seamless footage.

NO SURPRISE, then, that the Polaroid SX-70 camera—the “bedroom camera,” Heineken called it—would prove a generative technology for him. The Polaroid instant process became commercially available in 1972, and the artist quickly saw its possibilities. The SX-70 was cheap and simple to manipulate, and the direct-positive snapshot it produced was almost a throwaway technology—it had none of the seriousness of the new social-documentary photography or even photojournalism. It was strongly associated with everyday life, and with its uniqueness, its images swimming into existence before one’s eyes, and its notorious propensity to pick up fingerprints, it was also emphatically indexical. Viewers tended to read such photographs as transcriptions of real events. At once personal and private (the consumer did not have to send the photographs out to be processed) and the quintessential branded object (Polaroid was a noun, and what it designated was both unique and ubiquitous), the SX-70 snapshot embodied the colonization of social life by the commodity. For Heineken, it became a way to investigate how this colonization operates, how life becomes lifestyle, how documentary becomes fiction and bodies become clichés.¹

Heineken conducted this investigation in a massive body of work titled “He/Shes,” 1977–80, primarily comprising montages of Polaroids and handwritten texts. The photos include self-portraits, portraits, and snapshots of the artist with various women and close-ups of objects and body parts (e.g., a bright red high heel and a bright red telephone between the naked artist’s legs), as well as shots of drinks and other images that suggest intimacy and sexuality. The handwritten snippets of dialogue that accompany the images—which tend to be arranged in short rows, like comic-strip panels—are amusing and aphoristic. Sex is their primary topic, but they also touch quite frequently on other subjects, such as art, life, the body, food, drink, traveling, relationships, sleeping, teaching, vision, names, and popular culture. They are pervaded by a sense that male-female relationships are inextricably connected with consumption. And while the man’s desires are sometimes frustrated, there is an unequal power relationship in most of the scenes that works to “his” advantage. For example: She: What makes you happy? He: Not being asked about it.

The early “He/Shes” works seem to confirm their texts, thus proving their truth—a conversation about spike heels, for example, accompanies the spike-heel images. Likewise, Heineken’s presence within some of the Polaroids seems to authenticate the stories and confirm their autobiographical nature. But the artificial quality of the conversations—the repartee is just too snappy and hard-boiled, too contrived and elliptical—suggests that they might be fictional at all. And in many of the “He/Shes” works, snapshots of everyday life get mixed in with staged still lifes—symbolic arrangements of dolls, toys, and other objects. We are constantly aware that Heineken is turning moments in his life into emblems, parables, or signs of something more general.

In 1980, Heineken concluded “He/Shes” by publishing a sixty-six-page spiral-bound book consisting of photographs of couples juxtaposed with dialogues between a man, again presumably Heineken, and a series of female conversational partners. To create each of the ten images that illustrate the book, he used the SX-70 camera to rephotograph staged, costumed, and artificially lit images of fashion models posing in clothing catalogues. By appropriating staged images of ideal couples, Heineken blended fantasy and real life, associating the indexical qualities of the Polaroid with the airbrushed clichés of ’70s-singer style. Despite the ostensible immediacy of the Polaroid format, the obviously posed and commercial nature of the images calls the truth of both “his” and “her” statements into question. Heineken was influenced by Alain Robbe-Grillet, and as we read through Heineken’s text, with its noireish ambience and free-floating identities, we hear echoes of the Nouveau Roman and its eschewal of literary realism’s “three-dimensional” characters. ² As is the case with all the “He/Shes” works, the book calls for reflection on the ways in which the photograph allows us not only to objectify but also to script ourselves.

This kind of scripting of experience was being carried out on a much larger scale in the world of television, where the consumer fantasies of corporate broadcasting were incontrovertibly inserted into the intimate domestic settings of the home. By the time Heineken concluded “He/Shes,” he had already made highly innovative work related to this state of affairs. During an exhibition of his 1970 installation TV/Time Environment at the Pasadena Art Museum, he photographed a television set with a 35-mm camera—one of the first times an artist had done
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This installation, somewhat reminiscent of William Leavitt's contemporary environments, parodied an average middle-class living room with a constantly running television, in front of which was hung a positive transparency with an image of a nude torso. Visitors could sit in an armchair and watch, but only through an overlay that emphasized the erotics of televised spectatorship and consumption. Heinecken took pictures of the screen through the transparency, and a few years later printed some of the images as 3M prints ("Daytime Color TV Fantasy," 1974-75) and four-color lithographs ("Daytime TV Fantasy," 1976). He only turned to an intensive consideration of television, however, around 1980, with a massive outpouring of TV-screen appropriations in a variety of media. His incredible 1981 "videograms" of Ronald Reagan's inaugural speech were among the first of these. He produced them by pausing a VHS video on the frame he wanted to capture, turning the TV off, pressing Cibachrome paper against the screen, and then turning the TV quickly on and off again to expose the emulsion. Yet another transformation of the photocopy technique, the videograms morph the president into an electronic ghost. Blurry and effulgent, the images remind viewers of the constructedness of Reagan's vaunted persona—the famous pompadour and the midwestern bonhymie just so many dissolving pixel fragments. Heinecken's technique foregrounds the former GE spokesman as actor-president, who sold "morning in America" in just the same way that sexy women sell products and that Reagan himself had sold TVs.

Heinecken's gesture marked a qualitative shift. Though Kennedy may have been the first televisual president, it was with the Reagan presidency that politicians were first fully submitted to the glare of objectifying desire. From this point on, the pretense of a difference between the logic of advertising, marketing, and consumption and the logic of electoral politics was unsustainable. In some of the videograms, Nancy Reagan is clearly recognizable, even though she is reduced to nothing more than a blur of her trademark color, red. An entire section of the electromagnetic spectrum becomes a logo, a first lady becomes a brand. Fittingly, even the light that renders her visible is artificial. It is not "natural" light that forms the photosensitive image—it is the cathode-ray screen, the ultimate spectacular and ephemeral vision. The collapse of distance and the intimacy promised by TV prove illusory. Nothing is transmitted but these electronic wrinkles.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was newswomen, the most notoriously "plastic" of public figures, to whom Heinecken next turned his attention. "Untitled (Newswomen)," 1983-87, is a series of twenty-by-twenty-four-inch Polaroid head shots taken off of a TV screen and displayed in grids. Here again, we see signs not of physical presence but of an electronic medium. In a photo of Diane Sawyer, the famous anchorwoman becomes a configuration of fluorescing optical patterns in a related ink-jet print, Connie Chung is bleached and blurred nearly to the point of abstraction. The grids, some of which also contain composites of different visages, suggest strange museum displays, collections of hairstyles, clothing, backdrops, and gestures. In his book 1984: A Case Study in Finding an Appropriate TV Newswoman (A CBS Documentary in Words and Pictures), 1983, Heinecken more directly connected American broadcast TV to certain of its forebears: nineteenth-century photography and the pseudosciences, such as phrenology and physiognomy, to which it was sometimes yoked. Comprising eighteen pages with approximately ninety-four color plates depicting male and female anchors, the volume uses an abductive text to present the images as part of a scientific visual analysis designed to help television executives pick the best female cohost for a morning news program. We are informed, for example, that against the foil of a wave-patterned dress a cohost's face appears to be an "island in the world storm." A page may present multiple columns of three images each; the top portrait is a woman, the bottom a man, and the one in the middle a ludicrous androgynous created
by layering one atop the other to form a composite. Through this strategy, marketing science is parodied and fixed categories of gender and race are pointedly undermined. Oblique references to the history of photography and, in particular, to the use of composite images in the 1860s remind us that our understanding of how human vision functions continually lags behind the technologies of vision we invent. By the nineteenth century, English eugenist Francis Galton had combined portraits of soldiers, prisoners, and other human groups in the mistaken belief that he could reveal physiognomic types that defined fundamental structures of race, class, health and sickness, family, etc. The composites in 1864, however, with their crossing of ages, races, and genders, give the lie to the idea of ideal types. They seem no truer than Galton’s images—nor falser. These new women are not ideal, but neither are they real. They are nothing but Q ratings, immaterial projections of focus-group consensus.

Yet if the tension between disembodiment and disembodiment can be understood as a thread running through Heinecken’s work, it was the latter that took precedence in the late 1980s. Between 1987 and 1991, the artist created approximately 125 Cibachrome photograms, which he produced in editions of one to fifty, using Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, and other magazines. He issued these under a number of series titles, including “Possible Prints” (P.P.), “Recto/ Verso,” “Whiskey and Cigarettes,” and “Move to Malibu.” Unlike the “Are You Red” photograms in which photograms are positive images and thus, although similarly morphed, they are much more legible. They are also more disturbing. The Cibachrome process blended the two sides of the magazine leaf with greater variation of tone and color, and as a result, human bodies merge convincingly with one another as well as with processed foods and other consumer products, producing excruciatingly grotesque chimeras. The images not only bespeak the tastes and excesses of the period but also evoke the financial crisis following the 1987 crash and the AIDS crisis—“as well as a sense that all aspects of humanity can be bought and sold.”

Perhaps because of its three-dimensional, corporeal qualities, excision still held attractions for Heinecken. He returned to this technique in a series of “revised” or “compromised” magazines made between 1989 and 1994. Most notable in this group is 130 Years of Photojournalism, 1989, a carefully altered copy of a Time “Special Collector’s Edition” that presented a time line of famous events and photographers. Through Heinecken’s incisions, well-known photographs pale up and interact in new ways, and text used on one page is allowed to bleed through to another. The nurse in Alfred Eisenstaedt’s V-J Day photo clutches the Hindenburg, which explodes on the leaf preceding it; and the mouth of the Vietcong prisoner in Eddie Adams’s famous shot of a summary execution has been cut away, while an...
In 150 Years of Photojournalism, the artist reveals what seem to be bottomless strata of iconography, almost universally recognizable and yet shot through with randomness and disorder.

incision on his killer's back reveals the words LOOK AND SEE. By jumbling both time and logic, the cuts make the idea of any single history of photojournalism seem ridiculous, and they also imply that photography can just as easily falsify a historical event as document it. However, this is more than a simple elucidation of!! the profound unreliability of photography as historical document. The magazine here is proposed as a most paradoxical, indeed impossible object, a three-dimensional stack of two-dimensional images. Cutting into this stack, the artist reveals what seem to be bottomless strata of iconography, almost universally recognizable and yet shot through with randomness and disorder. With the radical proposition of "Are You Ready?"—the magazine photomontage as an assertion of the mutability of reality—in these photomontages the suggestion is that we will never get to bedrock. There is no fundamental reality on which an orderly historical structure can be built.

As the magazine work progressed in the 1990s, Heinecken developed his photomontage technique, creating overcrowded tableaux of people and objects cooled in tight interactions. The cuts between elements collapse spatially and create discrepancies of scale and perspective, but they also connect opposites: nudity versus dress, male versus female, and celebrities versus the average Joe. In many ways, the magazines are a reaction to the contemporaneous electronic shopping of the world, a kind of return to the physical cut at a time when editing was becoming digital and, hence, virtual. In his revised Gap ads created between 1994 and 1999 (and also in his book...Wore Khakis, 1999), the artist homed in on the famous campaign featuring a succession of iconic personalities, all garbed in khakis. Saturating celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, and Marcel Duchamp, he allowed their individual looks and messages to intrude on one another, disrupting advertising's ostensibly personal address to the viewer. With its 1994-ish promise that wearing what everyone else is wearing will release your individuality, the Gap's...Wore khakis campaign pioneered the marketing of the no-collar lifestyle. (You're not just another struggling member of the precariat; you're a maverick, like Steve McQueen.) And like that no-collar worker, Heinecken played many roles, acting simultaneously as artist, editor, graphic designer, and critic—but he never wore khakis.

This mutability seems apt, since, after all, Heinecken's art thrives on contradiction, confrontation, and strategic shifts in medium and subject position. But those very qualities raise the question: How are we to assess Heinecken's work, with its complexity and its incredible profusion of operations (superimposition, composting, decontextualization, transposition, inversion, displacement, and random permutation)? Part of the answer may lie in what is most the confounding aspect of his art, its near-obsessive return to sex. It is libidinousness, perhaps, that characterizes not only Heinecken's iconography but also his intense engagement with his mediums, the promiscuity of his practice and its messiness. His documents of manufactured experience, however, acerbic and ironic, stand in vivid contrast to the archival or ethnographic turn encompassing not only conceptual photography and the work of the Pictures generation but much of postwar and contemporary art. Against the "cultural studies" of Dan Graham, for example—against the dryness of Graham's tactics, their near-clinical activation of spectatorship—in Heinecken's work we confront sex, violence, and the body and its fragmentation and estrangements from itself. His career spans a period when the brutality of physical control was increasingly giving way to stealthier and more seductive technologies of power, and when lived experience was undergoing its uncanny transformation into electronic signals and, later, digital code. To trace his work across the decades is to understand why he seems to have found that any apprehending these developments must be an art of extremes.