Robert Heinecken
Robert Heinecken
Object Matter

Eva Respini
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Contents

6 Lenders to the Exhibition

7 Foreword
Glenn D. Lowry

9 Not a Picture of, but an Object about Something
Eva Respini

26 Plates

146 Pinups, Photograms, Polaroids, and Printing Plates:
Iterations in Robert Heinecken’s Work Process
Jennifer Jae Gutierrez

Writings by Robert Heinecken

154 Statements about Work
155 The Photograph: Not a Picture of, but an Object about Something
156 Manipulative Photography
158 I Am Involved in Learning to Perceive and Use Light
160 Untitled

162 Chronology
Drew Sawyer

170 List of Plates

174 Selected Bibliography

178 Selected Exhibition History

184 Index

187 Acknowledgments

188 Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art
The Museum of Modern Art is proud to present Robert Heinecken: Object Matter, the first major consideration of Heinecken’s art since his death in 2006. This exhibition surveys four decades of the artist’s remarkable and unique practice, from the early 1960s through the late 1990s. A West Coast pioneer in experimental photography, Heinecken described himself as a paraphotographer, because his work stood “beside” or “beyond” traditional ideas associated with photography. Although he was rarely behind the lens of a camera, Heinecken's photo-based works question the nature of photography and radically redefine the perception of it as an artistic medium. The Museum recognized Heinecken as an innovative experimenter early on—acquiring its first work by him in 1968—and continued to collect his work throughout his career. Heinecken's work was included in several landmark photography exhibitions at the Museum in the 1970s and 1980s, including Photography into Sculpture (1970), Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960 (1978), and California Photography: Remaking Make-Believe (1989). MoMA remains keenly attuned to the developments of art in our time, and in today's world of image oversaturation, photography plays a critical role in the visual culture. In the context of the twenty-first century, Heinecken is as contemporary as ever. His prescient explorations of the definition of photography, the possibilities of appropriation, and the limitations of artistic categories are as relevant today as they were fifty years ago. Robert Heinecken: Object Matter makes a major contribution to the reevaluation of significant artists of the 1960s and 1970s in the discourse of art today.

After its presentation in New York, this exhibition will be shown at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. This cross-country tour is possible only because the exhibition’s lenders (listed on the page opposite) have been willing to part with important works, and we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to them.

I would like to salute Eva Respini, Curator, Department of Photography, for skillfully and thoughtfully organizing this exhibition and preparing this catalogue, assisted by the fine staff throughout the Museum. I am grateful to The Robert Heinecken Trust and Heinecken’s family for their kind cooperation and support of this project. For their most generous support of the exhibition and publication, we extend our warmest thanks to our funders: The William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art, and the MoMA Annual Exhibition Fund.

Glenn D. Lowry  
Director, The Museum of Modern Art

Lenders to the Exhibition

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Foreword

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Director, The Museum of Modern Art
Not a Picture of, but an Object about Something

Robert Heinecken (1931–2006) is a difficult artist to categorize, and a man who thrived on contradiction, in both his work and his life. He was a photographer who rarely picked up a camera,2 a teacher well versed in photograph’s history who rebelled against the medium’s conventions; a trained fighter pilot who cultivated a radical artistic persona, complete with ponytail and beard; a charismatic figure respected by the women who knew him, whose use of pornographic material, however, drew fierce feminist critique; a profoundly American artist with a strong allegiance to the European avant-garde, America and its obsessions with sex, consumerism, violence, war, TV, and cheap copies are at the forefront of his art. Heinecken’s work is often messy, sometimes shocking, other times analytic, but always provocative—his examination of the particularly American terrain of sex and violence was unapologetic. He was a cross-disciplinary pioneer who used diverse techniques and materials to make his work. His free use of found images and inanity into the nature of representation anticipated the current use of photography as tools to investigate our culture’s self-definition as a world overflowing with images and copies of images. Heinecken’s photo-based works destabilize the very definition of photography, and essentially redefine its perception as an artistic medium. “The photograph,” he argued, “is not a picture of, but an object about something.”

Heinecken’s art has affinities with the work of artists such as John Baldessari, Wade Guyton, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Cady Noland, Richard Prince, Robert Rauschenberg, and Gerhard Richter—in his free use of mass-media images and his fascination with popular culture and its effect on society, as well as with the relationship between the original and the copy—yet he is completely unconnected from the history of Pop, Conceptual, and contemporary art. Thus may be due to the fact that his œuvre is difficult to codify and reproduce, his allegiance to the photographic medium—Heinecken, he argued, “is not a picture of, but an object about something.”—yet he is conspicuously absent from the histories of Pop, Conceptual, and contemporary art. This volume and the related exhibition survey four decades of Heinecken’s artistic practice, with a focus on his pioneering work, which were recast into the mainstream after his manipulation is part of his larger investigation into the very definition of art, into central aesthetic and Conceptual issues of his period—specifically the “dematerialization” of the art object. Anticipating postmodern art practices of the 1980s, Heinecken used almost exclusively found images early on to comment on the state of image making in a crowded media landscape. His prescient enterprises are as relevant today as they were fifty years ago: investigating the definition of photography, exploring the possibilities of appropriation, engaging with and locating new meanings in the tsunami of found images, and challenging the limitations of artistic categories.

To grasp the complexity and multidimensionality of Heinecken’s work, it is worth revisiting his formative cultural and artistic influences. He was born in Denver in 1931, during the Depression, into a Germanic family of Lutheran missionaries.3 In 1946 his family moved to Riverside, California, where Heinecken enrolled at Riverside Junior College, eventually transferring to the University of California, Los Angeles. He dropped out in 1953 to join the Naval Air Cadet Program, advancing to the Marine Corps as a jet fighter pilot and attaining the rank of captain. Just shy of the five-foot-six height requirement, Heinecken lined his socks with magazines in order to enlist—an amusing precursor to his extensive work with magazines.4 By all accounts, his military experience indelibly shaped Heinecken, who became confident and focused, with a strong work ethic.5 After his discharge from the military in 1957, Heinecken finished his studies at UCLA, culminating in 1960 with a master’s degree in art, with a focus on graphic design. In this, he followed the path of numerous canonical Pop artists—including Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist—who were likewise trained in graphic design and started their careers in that field. He studied printmaking under John Paul Jones and Den Chipperfield, took courses in typographic design, and worked at UCLA’s Art Galleries (now called the Wight Gallery) as an art installer and designer of the gallery’s invitations and catalogues.

Although Heinecken had a long-standing interest in art, design, and printed materials, he had yet to experiment with photography. In a 1973 interview, he recalled:

There were no photography courses at that time [ . . . ] Primarily my work was in printmaking. I was at this time in an art history seminar paper that I got into the idea, “In what way does the form of a thing communicate its essence?” The professor who was teaching the course suggested that I try to explore that proposition in terms of photographs. What was
the relationship of that kind of image making technique to a manually formed one? So I began in trying to make some photography and something happened, the bug hit.6

Heinecken began making photographs in the early 1960s, and he quickly became an obsessively prolific producer. Throughout his career, he was interested in the tease, the fine art print or direct observation. One could say that Heinecken was most interested in the objectification of the image, as he often translated that image into many different formats, from photographs to lithographic film to three-dimensional objects and participatory art. Presenting his work, variation, and plurality, Heinecken applied those ideas to photography. He often opted to work in series and sequences—transferring, recycling, and reworking images in the photograph album. Being self-taught in photography permitted him the freedom to experiment: “I was never in a school situation where someone said, ‘This is the way a photograph is supposed to look. I was completely open to cut them up, or do anything like that.”7 While Heinecken was not alone in questioning the traditions of photography in the early 1960s (contemporaries such as Ray Metzker and Jerry Uelmen were experimenting alongside him), his work challenged photographic conventions and social norms at a time when both were being reevaluated. Heinecken began teaching printmaking at UCLA shortly after receiving his master’s degree, just as the university was starting a photography program. A self-titled “gioccela,” Heinecken was instrumental in establishing that curriculum in 1962; it would become one of the most influential photography programs in the country, and remained under his leadership until his retirement in 1991. His legacy as a teacher is remarkable: his students’ work is wide-ranging, and a number of them went on to become leading voices in the field.9 Heinecken’s later works reveal a broad knowledge of contemporary photography and art—his lectures included works by artists such as Jonas Mekas, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Robert Rauschenberg, Martha Rosler, and Lucas Samaras. He encouraged his students to think critically regardless of mediums, genres, oragna, and this openness was reflected in his ideas of diverse reading materials, which included Sol LeWitt’s 1969 “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” Lucy Lippard’s 1973 “The Politics and Pleasures of Richelieu and American Women’s Body Art,” and John Szarkowski’s introduction to MoMA’s 1970 monograph William Wegman’s Guide.10

Heinecken’s challenge to photography’s conventions links him to the traditions of the European avant-garde, and as an artist he was unquestionably American: his reconceptualization of magazines, newspapers, advertisements, television, and other consumer ephemera places him within the distinctly American tradition of Pop and, later, of postmodernism. Furthermore, Heinecken’s brand of experimentation with obscurc, base, and “low-cultural” materials situates him within a particularly Californian visual context. Contemporaries such as Baldessari, Wallace Berman, Rauschenberg, and Ruscha, together with other Californian assemblage artists such as George Herms, Bruce Conner, and Lyonell Flusser, created a uniquely innovative visual language that seemed possible only in Los Angeles. During those two decades, Los Angeles was fertile ground for artistic explorations, which played out in various unconventional approaches to photography and materials for art. The working atmosphere, under the specter of the film industry, resulted in a fascination with the manufactured image, and the newly freed, man-made landscape was influential in many ways—for example, Ruscha’s interest in vernacular architecture, and John McCracken’s use of industrial materials inspired the readymade.”

New institutions cropped up in the 1960s and 1970s that had a profound impact on art in Southern California.2 The influential Fresno Gallery operated from 1957 to 1966; Barzholtz was both a founder and a featured artist, and Berman, Flusser, and Ruscha were in the gallery’s stable. The gallery presented Warhol’s first one-person exhibition in 1962. Artforum (1962) declared that “the influence of Warhol’s first major solo museum show in 1970 (Heinecken’s) would have a solo exhibition at the museums of 1972, and Man Ray’s posthumous survey at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1966. Moreover, there was a surge of new educational programs in photography across Southern California, including at UCLA and the California Institute for the Arts (Baldassari and Huerler taught at the latter, where photography was incorporated into the curriculum in 1975). New, young faculty members were being hired by many of these institutions—expanding ideas and possibilities for the photographic medium. At a time when there were few links among artists on the two coasts of the United States, Heinecken was an influential social connector between John Baldessari and Robert Morris—often cited Dada and Marcel Duchamp as his big influences in creating chaos out of order. His transgressions in photography permitted him the freedom to experiment: “I was never interested in photography’s conventions in how he shot and processed his early photographs. The antithesis of the fine-print tradition exemplified by East Coast gants Amed Allan and Edward Weston, he photographed landscapes and objects in sharp focus and with objective clarity. Heinecken’s early work is marked by high contrast, blur, and under- or overexposure, as seen in Shadows of Paper (1962; plate 2) and Street Light (1964; plate 3). In addition, he sometimes reversed, obscured, or flipped the negative, as in Tropicane Pigeon (1964; plate 4), to introduce new relationships between figure and ground. The female nude body is a recurring motif, featured in a series of photographs in which Heinecken rephotographed text and images and projected them onto the nude bodies of modeled girls with slide projectors. In a bold move, Heinecken gave 35 mm cameras to his models to make their own photographs as they were wandering around the space. By relinquishing the act of taking a photograph, Heinecken explored the possibilities of the performative, chance operations, and random juxtapositions—all dominant themes in his career. His antiformalist approach to the classic motifs of the female nude was vastly different from that of his modernist predecessors such as Weston, Bill Brandt, and André Kertész. The superimposed images include pictures of World War I soldiers (World War I II, 1964; plate 5) and truncated texts (This People Forget You, 1965; plate 7), subverting their original intention and exploring new associations for the viewer.

In the mid-1960s the artist began combining and sequencing disparate pictures, as in Visual Poem/About the Sexual Education of a Young Girl (1965; plate 1). Evolving the structure of poetry, this cross-shaped work is comprised of seven black and white photographs of dolls, with a portrait of his then-five-year-old daughter Karol at the center. Bemused by Hans Bellmer’s Surrealist experiment with dolls in the 1930s, Visual Poem prefigures the trend toward large-scale photography that would come several decades later, as well as the set-up works of artists such as Daido Moriyama and Laurie Simmons. Heinecken made a few other works in this series, but quickly moved to cutting and reassembling found images, making them into three-dimensional photo-objects. The mid-1960s was among Heinecken’s most radical and fertile periods, during which he moved away from engaging with discrete media and toward sculptural, environmental, and participatory practices. His photo-objects—intended to be manipulated by the viewer, so that there is never a single, fixed configuration—were central to Heinecken’s fundamental redefinition of photography’s possibilities. These works were aligned with larger art currents in Southern California, and were part of the so-called “tall poppy syndrome” of the mid-1960s, where artists—engineers, architects, and scientists—were producing innovative work in the arts during this period.

Through the SPE he also met curators Nathan Lyons (who would include Heinecken, the only West Coast artist, in his influential 1967 exhibition Persistence of Vision at the George Eastman House) and Peter Bunnell (who included him in his important 1970 MoMA exhibition Photography into Sculpture). Through Heinecken’s prominence at UCLA, his involvement with the SPE, and his active exhibition record on both coasts, he became one of the most influential voices in American photography, and the representative of experimental photography in the 1960s and 1970s.

Heinecken rarely used the camera in a conventional way in his art; it is thus interesting to note that his earliest photographic efforts were relatively straightforward images. He began working seriously with photography in the early 1960s, using a 35 mm camera to shoot signs, symbols, and graffiti found on the street (fig. 1). An avid reader, Heinecken delighted in the intersection of language and image, which evolved and developed in his work. He was already floating photographic conventions in how he shot and processed his early photographs. The antithesis of the fine-print tradition exemplified by East Coast gants Amed Allan and Edward Weston, he photographed landscapes and objects in sharp focus and with objective clarity. Heinecken’s early work is marked by high contrast, blur, and under- or overexposure, as seen in Shadows of Paper (1962; plate 2) and Street Light (1964; plate 3). In addition, he sometimes reversed, obscured, or flipped the negative, as in Tropicane Pigeon (1964; plate 4), to introduce new relationships between figure and ground. The female nude body is a recurring motif, featured in a series of photographs in which Heinecken rephotographed text and images and projected them onto the nude bodies of modeled girls with slide projectors. In a bold move, Heinecken gave 35 mm cameras to his models to make their own photographs as they were wandering around the space. By relinquishing the act of taking a photograph, Heinecken explored the possibilities of the performative, chance operations, and random juxtapositions—all dominant themes in his career. His antiformalist approach to the classic motifs of the female nude was vastly different from that of his modernist predecessors such as Weston, Bill Brandt, and André Kertész. The superimposed images include pictures of World War I soldiers (World War I II, 1964; plate 5) and truncated texts (This People Forget You, 1965; plate 7), subverting their original intention and exploring new associations for the viewer.

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Page & Robert Heinecken, From Periscope 15, 1971 (cover, pg. 10)

1. Robert Heinecken, Victory Alley, 1963. Gelatin silver print, 25 1/8 x 39 11/16” (64.2 x 98.2 cm). The Robert Heinecken Trust, Chicago
of the time; on a formal level, there are clearly links to the sculptures of Minimalists (such as Robert Morris), but perhaps more significant are the connections to various forms of participatory art, such as Happenings, performance art, and happening.12 Viewer participation, crucial in activating Heinecken's sculptures, corresponds to a phenomenological reading of Minimalism put forth by art historian Michael Fried.13 While it might be said that Heinecken's photo-sculptures transcended media, he used representational, figurative photographic elements to build the sculptures. These photographs, because of their relationship to referents in the objective world, allow for a multiplicity of subjective engagements; the "objectified" (to borrow Fried's term) of the photograph combined with the participatory aspect of the sculptures results in a profound tension in Heinecken's work.14

Refractive Hexagon (1965; plate 17), one of several "photopuzzles," is comprised of photographs of female body parts mounted onto twenty-four individual "puzzle" pieces; the interchangeable elements never create a continuous picture, only an impossible anatomy, which, Heinecken suggested, produces "frightening Rorschach pattern overtones."15 The three-dimensional sculptures—geometric volumes ranging in height from five to twenty-two inches (12.7 to 55.9 centimeters)—consist of photographs mounted onto individual blocks, which rotate independently around a central axis. In Fractured Pipe/Scalpel (1967; plate 16), the female figure is never resolved as a single image; the body is always truncated, never contiguous. In contrast, a complete female figure can be reconstituted (fig. 2) in his largest photo-object, Transitional Pipe Figure Sculpture (1965; plate 15), a towering octagon comprised of twenty-six layers and drawn from photographs of a nude, altered through various printing techniques (fig. 3). As with other participatory art forms of the 1960s and 1970s, here viewer engagement is key to creating random configurations and relationships in the work; any number of possibilities may exist, only to be altered with the next manipulation.

In subsequent works, such as Pipe/Flower #2 (1968; plate 10 and Breast/Bomb #4 and #6 both 1967; plates 11, 12), Heinecken fixed the composition and displayed them on the wall. Reminiscent of Kertész’s and Brandt’s distorted nudes, Breast/Bomb #5 (iterations of which exist in different scales and materials [plate 6]) is comprised of nine separate prints made from the same negative, cut up, reassembled, and mounted to produce a continuous new image that, although bizarre, is recognizable as the female anatomy. Heinecken’s fixed picture configuration is drawn not from commercially available pornography, but from a rather traditional nude he made a few years earlier, in 1963 (fig. 4). Heinecken was actively using found images from magazines and other public sources, but the recycling and re-editing of his own work are hallmarks of his method.

Magazines became the principal source materials for Heinecken, and were central to his groundbreaking work Are You Real? (1964–68; plate 23i), a series of twenty-slide photographs16 made directly from magazine pages. Representative of a culture that was increasingly commercialized, technologically mediated, and susceptible of estab-
While the juxtapositions in Aye You Are found, Heinecken's choices of pages and imagery are calculated to reveal specific relationships and meanings. The materials are diverse, and include a profile on Lynda Bird Johnson's makeover (page 53, bottom), ads for Copperstone juxtaposed with ads for spaghetti dinners (page 55, upper right); an article about John F. Kennedy superimposed with an ad for Wessex carpets (page 59, upper left), and the cover story from Life's November 4, 1966, issue about Lyndon B. Johnson's visit to Vietnam (page 59, upper right). Heinecken's production materials reveal a deliberately calculated matrix and a sequential structure in five "chapters": cosmetics, women and children, lesbianism, marriage, and politics. The portfolio's narrative moves from relative commonplace and alluring images of women to representations of violence and the male body.

While Heinecken's work was closely associated with artistic developments in California, there are parallels between his brand of experimentation in Aye You Are and the sensibilities of photographers on the East Coast, particularly in New York. He placed very different materials in the portfolio's introduction, aligning it with conventional documentary photography and the "real," draws comparisons to his East Coast contemporary Stephen Shore, who around the same time created a body of work that considered the context and meaning of images. The project's narrative moves from the visual data from the original publication appearing in the issue, but now scrambled. He made a total of 120 MANSIMAG, each one unique, because the colors vary from magazine to magazine (some making this illegible).

Heinecken undertook a similar "guerrilla" action in 1971 with Periodical #5 (plate 38), wherein he printed an image of a grinning Cambodian soldier holding two severed heads on each page of fashion and home decor magazines. The original picture, taken by German photographer Dieter Ludwig and published in the February 1971 issue of Time magazine (fig. 8), is a particularly ghastly one among the influx of Vietnam War images published regularly at the time in the press. In Heinecken's magazines, a rhythm is developed through the varying darkness of the printed image of the soldier, so that he appears in front of, mixed with, or behind the existing magazine content. In what might be considered mail art, Heinecken also made single magazine pages with this image superimposed, and sent the pages to the entire membership of the SPE; he also made 24-by-20-inch Polaroids of the single pages (fig. 9). Depending on the magazine Heinecken used, the effect is startlingly different. For example, in the Penthouse #5 that uses Living Nine magazine, the soldier appears humorously located in modern home settings, whereas Vogue has a ghastly double in the high fashion models appearing across the magazine pages (fig. 10). Although it seems that they were not a literal representation of the war as seen in the press, and that the collective experience of war is shaped by and contextualized in the mass media.

**Catalogue #5: 1971. Periodical #5. 1971. Offset lithography on found magazine pages. Published in Time magazine, February 1971. 10" x 14 1/2" (25.4 x 37.0 cm). The Robert Heinecken Trust, Chicago.**

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Heinecken’s incised magazines recall Are You Re?, in which recto and verso merge, and figure and ground, text and image are combined to reveal new readings. Notable among these is a 1974 issue of Newsweek magazine. “I listed to use whatever my feelings told me about the material that was being presented to the public: after all it was in a specific rather than a random way,” he said of this work, titled Newsweek (October 21, 1974; plate 12). “So by putting an African person into an Ansel Adams landscape or by giving Diane Arbus, who committed suicide, a censor’s mark, I attempted to expand a sick bed idea into something more expres- sive.”

The artist repurposed this technique in 1989 with a meticulously altered issue of Time titled 120 Issues of Photomontage (plate 44), a greatest hits of historical events seen through the lens of photography. In Heinecken’s version, issues of popular magazines were digitized and text becomes a key component. The issue of Time had a single advertisement—Kodak—and the company’s distinct red-and-yellow logo appears consistently throughout. Scrolling through pages and inserting itself into gritty black-and-white images, here, consumerism and branding are entangled with images sewn into the collective consciousness.

Ever the experimenter, Heinecken began using transparent film in 1965 to explore different kinds of juxtapositions. He observed: “The fact that light initially causes density and hence a reversed image, seems relevant. The fact that the emulsion is on a trans- parental base seems important. The fact that the emulsion can be applied in almost any surface seems like a gift.”

Early experiments with transparency include Child Gasoline Toys (1965; plate 23), which depicts a child aiming a toy gun at a doll of John F. Kennedy in his rocking chair, an image found in an advertising supplement to a Los Angeles newspaper shortly after Kennedy’s assassination. Like the juxtapositions in Are You Re?, this was found as is. Heinecken points to it as a way to decode cultural artifacts. The series experiment with larger-scale transparencies, which he hung unframed from the ceiling, allowing them to curl and sway, taking on dimensionality and material presence as objects. Frequently hung a few feet from the gallery wall, they were lit in such a way that the image (often a found image) was doubled, recast, and amplified onto the wall. Heinecken’s large transparencies simulate film neg- atives and strips (as many, the sporekit holes are visible) in a greatly enlarged size, and feature pornography—female nude-supernum- terous onto nature imagery. In one instance, pornographic images are superimposed on a Christmas snapshot of Heinecken’s kids (Kodak Silhouette Film/Christmas intrusion, 1971; plate 49), with the suggestion in the title that somehow two rolls of film were mixed up at the photo lab. Kodak Silhouette Film/Twas Church (1972; plate 51) takes photography itself as a subject, picturing an adobe church in New Mexico that was famously photographed by Ansel Adams and Paul Strand, and painted by Georgia O’Keeffe and John Marin. Presented as a negative, Heinecken’s version transforms an icon of modernism into a murky structure flanked by a pickup truck, tele- phone wires, and other modern-day detritus.

Heinecken utilized positive transparencies in combination with collages made from magazines and newspapers in a series of works that addressed the Vietnam War and social unrest in the United States, such as student demonstrations and riots in the late 1960s (plates 28–30). The glossy surface of the transparency and texture of the collages produces a combination that is simultaneously pleasing and disturbing, and repurposes the technique of layering text and politics over the body. The source material for these transparencies is the now-defunct company The Latent Image, a mail-order outfit that sold unpre- cedented rolls of film of pinups and soft-core pornography, to be developed by individuals in their homes as a way to treat the illegality of importing sexuality explicit images over state lines. Operating during the boom in the porn industry in Southern California, the company marketed itself to amateur photo- graphers—each roll of film included printing instructions and sample model releases, presumably so that the client could begin making his own nude images from home. The company’s catalogues (fig. 13) featured short descriptions of the models or the types of pho- tographs on a roll of film. Heinecken delighted in using these existing images. “Why should I hire a model or get a friend to pose in a way which neither of us know anything about, when an authent- ic source exists for four or five dollars?”

Heinecken’s use of found images is clearly an investigation into photography’s conceptual possibilities. And yet, perhaps due to his activities within and allegiance to the photographic community, he has scarcely been considered within the lineage of Conceptual art. In many ways, Heinecken’s approach to photography is analogous to that of artists such as Vito Acconci, Mel Bochner, Hans Haacke, and Douglas Huebler, who emphasized ideas and meaning over form, and utilized grid, seriality, and chance—all tenets central to Conceptual art. Consider Bochner’s influential 1966 exhibition at New York’s School of Visual Arts, Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art, for which he collected drawings and documents (as the title indicates, they weren’t necessarily intended as “art”) from artists and friends, and placed photostyles of them into binders, which were presented in the gallery on pedestals. This relates to Heinecken’s magazines, wherein he questioned the status of both the magazine and the work of art, especially when they were shipped back into the newsstand to circulate as ordinary publications. Another icon of Conceptualism, Huebler’s 1970 Location Piece #6 National (fig. 14), consists of collected found images of “local interest” published in newspapers throughout the country, which encapsulates the art- ist’s attitude about photography: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting, I do not wish to add any more.” On this case of found images, Heinecken had a similar insight: “I find these found,
anonymous images to be more interesting and strangely more authentic than one’s might make myself.”

It is true, however, that Heinecken’s work does not often fit neatly into a single category or reading. While many Conceptual artists similarly drew upon commercial and vernacular photographic sources and practices, many, such as Bochner, were focused mostly on the image’s conceptual and philosophical implications. Heinecken’s work was first and foremost concerned with photography’s practical uses and social role. His interest in the most diverges from the more credulous approach of his Conceptual peers, setting him apart as a figure engaged, somewhat paradoxically, with conceptual approaches to photography as well as with the social signification of borrowed images.

Hemmerle’s first large-scale sculptural installation, TV/Time Environment (1970; plate 52), is the earliest in a series of works addressing the increasingly dominant presence of television. The work explores random relationships through live television and plays off ideas of violence and desire found in the underbelly of American culture, seen also in the work of Los Angeles contemporaries such as Ed Kemble (fig. 15). Kemble, an assemblage artist whose materials were often found or scavenged—a predecessor to artists such as Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Glenn Ligon, Paul McCarthy, and Noland—was, like Heinecken, interested in the exploration of the dark impulses in the American psyche. In Heinecken’s installation, which varied with every display, a positive film transparency of a female nude (borrowed from The Latent Image) was placed in front of a functioning television set in an environment that evokes a middle-class living room, complete with recliner chair, plastic plants, and rug (fig. 16). The images that are visible—flickering and changing—through the nude figure in TV/Time Environment include Vietnam news updates, ads for local car dealerships, and sitcoms, producing surreal moments of social satire and commentary. Heinecken produced several iterations of TV/Time Environment, translating a live sculptural environment into two-dimensional still works in several mediums. In one 1970 installation, Heinecken photographed the television set with a 35 mm camera, resulting in set of 3M prints—a process that allowed Heinecken to manipulate and intensify the color (plates S3–S5); five of them were also produced as four-color lithographs in 1976. TV/Time Environment underscores the complexity of Heinecken’s relationship to photography on one hand, his sculptural installation, which become the mechanism for producing a new set of two-dimensional works, illustrates how he started with conventional notions of medium and conceptually sought to transform one medium into another. On the other hand, from the live television images, he created still, “decades” images (a practice he later revisited with Inaugural Excerpt Videograms [plate 81]), revealing a continued engagement with the temporality of photography; seen in subsequent works, such as Vanishing Photographs (1973; plate 50). A sequence of enigmatic images (originally twelve in number; one has been lost), Vanishing Photographs represents a departure for Heinecken. Each print is composed of up to three superimposed images and is unified, so when they are exhibited, the photographs darken to eventual illegibility. Heinecken layered works by his friends Uebschmann and Les Krims, including the latter’s controversial photograph Les Krims Performing Aerosol Pinch with Leslie Krims, Pier A, Downtown: Buffalo, New York, 1969 (fig. 17).35 Heinecken stipulated that four pictures from the group should be on view at one time and swapped out at regular intervals throughout the duration of an exhibition. This time-based work is part of a small group of images and is unfixed, so when they are exhibited, the photographs on transparencies in multiple sizes and displayed them in a variety of ways (plates 59, 62), including pinned to the wall, hung from the ceiling in a transparent bag affixed to fishing wire, and framed and wrapped around the corner of a wall (fig. 18). A canvas version, Figure Horizone 42 (1971; plate 60), is comprised of ten individual canvases and can be arranged in a variety of configurations on the wall.36 The sense of play, re-arranging, and re-editing of his own work is typical—like Heinecken there was never one fixed image, but rather many possible permutations, all equal in status.

A related work, Le Voyeur/Robe-Grillet #2 (1972; plate 61), is perhaps the ultimate example of Heinecken’s interest in multiple iterations. The title refers to one of Heinecken’s favorite novels, the 1955 mystery Le Voyeur by French theorist, critic, and writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, who developed narrative by describing events from multiple points of view. Heinecken printed the same fragments of female body on a stretched canvas, then treated the image with bleach, stained it, scored the surface, and drew on it with chalk. In his three-panel homage, small sections of the female body are selected, magnified, and reworked to simulate a body viewed from different perspectives. Heinecken situates himself as both author and viewer, proposing a new paradigm for picture making.

The relationship between representation and reproduction is at play in Heinecken’s study of Zinovy for a Feminist Summer (1973; plates 64, 65).37 Crafted from photo-linen, canvases, and Mylar, these life-scale presels incorporate an image of the female body with these three-dimensional undergarments dangling from clothes hangers in front of the canvas ground. The shadow behind the bra is constructed of unprocessed photo-linen; the darkness of the shadow is dictated by the raw material’s exposure to light; it becomes darker each time it is exhibited. In addition, the outline of a bikini has been added to the female body with pastel chalk, acrylic paint, and colored pencil. Always a fan of wordplay, Heinecken commented: “The title, Zinovy for a Feminist Summer, doesn’t tell the viewer what the piece is about, but the language used is within the grasp of most people and does suggest a mild political stance which
Robert Heinecken: Object Matter

is inherent in the work. In fact the obliqueness of titles and levels of content are sometimes as important to me as the illusionary qualities of the piece.

A midcareer survey organized by the George Eastman House in 1976 marked an important juncture for Heinecken: “In that year...”

In the mid-1970s Heinecken became interested in photographic technologies that were being introduced by Polaroid and began a new chapter of his career. In his continued exploration of the medium of photography as a reproductive technology, Polaroid—specifically the SX-70 (which required no darkroom or technical know-how)—was perfectly suited to Heinecken. He called it the “bedroom camera,” and indeed it affected his operators’ privacy, as they did not have to send images out to be developed. Neimanas introduced him to the SX-70; she was using it in unique ways to make large-scale collages, such as TV and Drug #4 (1981: fig. 203). However, unlike Neimanas, or Luccas Samaras, who were both experimenting with expanding the physical capacities of the SX-70, Heinecken purposefully used it as an amateur might. For his series He/She, he paired self-portraits, close-ups of objects, and images of body parts that suggested intimacy and sex—with short lines of a conversation between a man and a woman (plates 70–74). The relationship between text and image in He/She is a complex weave of fiction, autobiography, narrative, and dissociation. While the use of text was new for Heinecken, there is here an unprecedented strong sense of autobiography, as the “Ie” is presumed to be Heinecken. However, the images and text seem clearly staged, and the relationship between performance and photograpy is seen in the self-consciously theatrical of the images. The photographs do not function as illustrations for the text; they run tangent to it, and the conversations can be seen as a kind of sound track or screenplay. Raising questions about what Hemmogen would later call “relational possibilities,” He/She offers a set of texts and dissociated images about sexual relations, undermining expected narrative resolutions.

With his series Lessons in Angoua Subjects (1981–82), Heinecken used the SX-70 to rephotograph images of models posing in clothing catalogues and presented as typologies of body positions and facial expressions (plates 75–79). Building on ideas in Erving Goffman’s 1956 book, Gender Advertisements, Heinecken’s mocking, sociocritical critique of mass-media imagery reduces standard fashion poses to formal gestures and the textbook tone of the accompanying copy functions as exploration of the cultural values communicated with such stances. This analytical impulse is repeated in his 1984 Tanslo- Striiphese (plate 80), in which he used the 24-by-20-inch camera to photograph cheesecake images of women (and a picture of one baby) wearing tawdry-inspired clothing or lingerie, organizing them in order of increasing disrobing (ending with the fully tormented infant). These sociocritical works can be understood within a tradition of Conceptual photography (56), in that they take on the utilitarian aspects of photography, but exploit the medium to express an idea through simple reprographic and text. Like Bascha, who used applied and vernacular photography in his artist’s books, here Heinecken celebrated the amateur applications of photography, underscoring its reproductive qualities and its capacity to function as “document.”

Heinecken’s most physically impressive and conceptually ambitious Thomasian work with instant prints is the two-panel S.S. Copyright Project: “On Photography” (1957; plate 608, made the year after the publication of Susan Sontag’s collection of essays On Photography. The S.S. Copyright Project consists of a magnified and doubled picture (taken by Sontag, derived from the book’s dust-covei portrait [taken by Remington]), and an explanatory text written by Heinecken. The project equates legibility with physical proximity—from afar, the portraits appear to be grinny emaciations from a negative (or, to...
Robert Heinecken:

Object Matter

Eva Respini: Not a Picture of, but an Object about Something

Surrealism on TV

Heinecken focused on newscasters—and, in the case of his impres-}

sive and chance possibilities of the medium in the early 1960s. For

Among Heinecken’s most interesting artistic activities in the late

1970s, when artists were attuned to the illusory manipulations of 

an American culture, Heinecken underscored that meaning is con- 

structed symbolically; it is not inherent to photographs themselves.

The raw quality of Heineken’s œuvre, and his reliance on visual 

cliches, can at times obscure our understanding of it—although in 

some ways, his focus on sex seems prescient when considered from 

today’s culture of instantly available, sexually explicit images. For

Heinecken, America is a place of brutal extremes.67

Perhaps Heinecken’s most significant challenge was to photog- 
araphy itself. His love of visual codes and photomechanical processes 
resulted in a body of work that runs the gamut from photograms to 
photographs. Can Heinecken’s work be viewed as a kind of detri- 
uction, and questions about authorship. With this work, Heinecken 
investigates a culturally determined context through a series of 
random and arbitrary actions.

Videos, which offered the potential to record or copy television 
images, allowed Heinecken to produce a number of other TV-related 
works, including the 1986 slide show Surrealism on TV (plates 82, 
83). Heinecken created an “ace” channel flip-

er,46 isolated humorous and kitschy moments from public-access television, local and national news, and late-night shows to be displayed in retail outlets or movie theaters. Heinecken collaged 
images onto the found cutout figures of recognizable icons, such as 
the comic strip characters Andre Agassi and actress Cybill Shepherd 
(plate 88), and then rephotographed and remounted the images onto 
foamcore. By subverting the commercial intent of these images, 
Heinecken critiques the very images they are used to project.

23
Sve Reprint: Not a Picture of, but an Object about Something

Robert Heinecken: Object Matter

Eva Respini: Not a Picture of, but an Object about Something

Surrealism on TV

Waking Up in News America

Around 1980, television became a focal point for a vast number 
of works Heinecken produced in a variety of media, including direct 
capture from the TV, slide shows, and room-sized sculptural instal-
lations here, for instance. His 1986 Waking Up in News America, fig. 24, 
direct captures from the direct images Heinecken called kaleograms, 
were produced by pressing Cyborga machine paper onto the screen (turning the television off and off to expose the sensitized 
paper. The one or two seconds of flickering, colored light forms an 
image on the paper, due to the relative long exposure, however, each 
video in itself is a compendium of images, resulting in a blurry blur-

green image. Since a single talking head sufficed this process best, 
Heinecken focused on newscasters—and, in the case of his impres-
sive and chance possibilities of the medium in the early 1960s. For

various readings and narratives through repetition, manipulation, 
and cinematic sequencing, and then subverted the systems he cre-
ted. When television arrived in his own work, Heinecken described his process as “loop-feeding,”48 and in essence, he was 
more than an editor as a picture maker. This is a vital connection to 
the ways in today’s art—among them Daniel Gordon, Wade Guyton, 
and Mariah Robertson—engage with photography in a world of utter image saturation: as editors and curators.

In assessing Heinecken’s career, it is imperative to acknowledge 
that he was deeply committed to photography, even as he was
breaking its rules. Who better to rebel against the medium than 
the director of UCLA’s photography program and the chairman of 
the Society for Photographic Education? Just as Heinecken’s cri-
ticisms of the system, he came to photography in a spirit of re- 
newal and change to photography. Rather than venerating the medium, Heinecken celebrated photography’s limitless permutations and possibilities, and proposed alternate narratives—narratives that continue to re-
shape well into the twenty-first century.
6. Heinecken, interview in Steven Lewis, James  
5. Luke Batten, director of The Robert Heinecken  
4. Among Heinecken’s students were Ellen Brooker, Erik Enge, John Devla, and Uta Barth.  
3. Heinecken’s paternal grandfather and his great-  
2. Heinecken, “The Photograph: Not a Picture of,  
1. Heinecken used the term paraphotography to  
NOTES  
Heinecken: An Interview,”  
tenure  

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25. Colin Westerbeck, “Tongue in Cheek,” in Bohn-  
20. Heinecken, adapted from a lecture given at the  
19. From a 1976 interview, Heinecken  
18. In many ways, Heinecken’s photo-objects make  
17. Heinecken cited the influence of “an artistic  
16. Among Heinecken’s students were Ellen Brooks,  
15. For an overview of California photography of this  
14. For an overview of California photography of the  
13. Heinecken’s card from Mike Mandel’s series of  
12. Heinecken described this in his 1970 interview  
11. Luke Batten, director of The Robert Heinecken  
10. Among Heinecken’s students were Ellen Brooker,  
9. Heinecken often used the word gaucho to describe  
8. Heinecken, untitled lecture. Symposia on  
7. Heinecken, “Statement by the Artist,” in ibid.,  
6. Heinecken, untitled lecture. Symposia on Photography, Forum Stanford, Gau,  
5. Heinecken, untitled lecture. Symposia on Photography, Forum Stanford, Gau,  
4. Heinecken, untitled lecture. Symposia on Photography, Forum Stanford, Gau,  
3. Heinecken, untitled lecture. Symposia on Photography, Forum Stanford, Gau,  
2. Heinecken, untitled lecture. Symposia on Photography, Forum Stanford, Gau,  
1. Heinecken, untitled lecture. Symposia on Photography, Forum Stanford, Gau,  

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25. Colin Westerbeck, “Tongue in Cheek,” in Bohn-  
20. Heinecken, adapted from a lecture given at the  
19. From a 1976 interview, Heinecken  
18. In many ways, Heinecken’s photo-objects make  
17. Heinecke...
Plates
1. Visual Poem/About the Sexual Education of a Young Girl. 1965
2. Shadow of Figure. 1962
3. Strip of Light. 1964
4. Trapeze Figure. 1964
5. World War I Figure. 1964

6. Typographic Nude. 1965
7. Then People Forget You. 1965

8. Man and Figure. 1965
9. Twelve Figure Squares #2. 1967

10. Figure/Flower #1. 1968
11. Breast/Bomb #5. 1967

13. Figure Cube. 1965

14. Figure in Six Sections. 1965
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