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ART VIEW

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There is always something disconcerting in the spectacle of immensely sophisticated technology, —which artists sometimes call “science”—serving as the vehicle for some perfectly trivial conception. Depending on the character of the result, such discrepancies between means and ends tend to induce either laughter or anger or what may come to the same thing—a woeful sense of wasted opportunity. In art, if not always in life, we expect method and medium to bear some meaningful or intelligent relation to an accomplished, result. There is a difference, after all, between the laboratory and the exhibition gallery —between, as Picasso once put it, seeking and finding.

This is a difference that has been wholly lost, however, on the organizers of the “Holography '75” exhibition, now occupying the second-floor galleries of the International Center of Photography. The esthetic naiveté of this show must really be seen to be believed. No mere description could begin to do it justice. Images of a stupefying innocuousness, ranging from peep-show porn and low-grade beer commercials to the even more ludicrous parodies of so-called “serious” art, are unrelieved by the slightest trace of esthetic intelligence. A more dismal demonstration of the distance that still obtains between advanced technological invention and the serious artistic mind could scarcely be imagined.

What is holography? It is a form of lensless photography, invented in 1947 by Dr. Dennis Gabor, that employs laser light to produce three-dimensional images of the most startling illusionistic “reality.” Since Dr. Gabor's discovery was first published, others have gone on to extend the holograph—or the hologram, as it is sometimes called—to a circular, 360-degree “screen” so that the image imprinted on the photographic plate appears to “move” as we move around it. In the present exhibition, which includes the work of 35 holographers, both types of holographic image—the “flat” and the circular—are represented, though there is little to choose between them so far as esthetic interest is concerned.

The physical dimensions of holography are small: most of the flat prints measure little more than a few square inches, and the circular prints are roughly the size of a cake platter. Their color, moreover, is atrocious. There is said to be a lot of work now going on in what is called “natural color” as well as black and white holography, but what we get for the moment are what holographers are pleased to call “rainbow hues,” which is a comical euphemism for the kind of sleazy, acid reds, blues and greens we used to find adorning juke boxes and still find in the cheapest kinds of picture postcards. Perhaps

some genius is waiting in the wings to make something memorable of this combination of peep-show realism and juke-box color, but he is nowhere in evidence here.

What is worse, however, is what might be called the “culture” of holography. It is, to judge by the present exhibition, a gadget culture, strictly concerned with and immensely pleased by its bag of illusionistic tricks and completely mindless about what, if any, expressive possibility may lie hidden in its technological resources. There are, to be sure, a few “artistic” attempts here at abstraction and pop art and the familiar neo-dada repertory, but these are even more laughable than the outright examples of kitsch. Much of the work in this show has, I gather, been produced not by “artists” but by physicists professionally involved in holographic technology. The physicists appear to favor objects out of the local gift shop, whereas the “artists” do their shopping in provincial art galleries, and both, it seems, are much taken with television commercials. It is difficult to know which is the more repugnant: the abysmal level of taste or the awful air of solemnity that supports it.

For “Holography '75” is being offered to us as nothing less than “an event of historic importance.” It even claims to be the “first” show of its kind—which is unkind to the “?? Dimensional Show” of holography that the Finch College Museum of Art mounted several years ago. Reviewing that exhibition, my colleague Grace Glueck wrote that it had “all the esthetic kick of a postcard from Montauk,” and “Holography '75” certainly marks no discernible esthetic advance. It will be said, of course, that holography is still, both technically and esthetically, in its infancy—an argument that brooks no quarrel. But the place for such infancy is the nursery, not a place of public exhibition, and the welcome given this unfortunate, amateurish show by the International Center of Photography raises some serious questions about the purpose of this new institution.

The Center was established by Cornell Capa less than a year ago—in November, 1974. Describing itself as the city's “first museum devoted exclusively to photography,” it has already mounted eight exhibitions, representing the work of more than 40 photographers, some celebrated (Henri Cartier-Bresson, W. Eugene Smith, et al.), some still obscure. It seemed, at the start, to have a point view, favoring social reportage of the sort that gave to the great photo-journalists of an earlier generation their special sense of mission and their special glamour. But this point of view was founded from the beginning on a curious paradox. The age of photo-journalism has clearly come to an end. It survives, to the extent that it survives at all, as something marginal to the mainstream of serious photographic endeavor. The great picture magazines are gone, their function having been effectively usurped by the television screen, and the surviving corps of photo-journalists has been obliged to turn to the museum, the gallery and the expensive art book for their new public—a public more likely to judge their work by detached esthetic standards than by the old criteria of front-line communication.

The very notion of a museum devoted to the photography of social reportage implied that a significant shift had taken place in the way we looked at such photographs, but the center has always been a little diffident about articulating that shift—a little reluctant, perhaps, to acknowledge it as a *fait accompli*. It shies away from any conscious esthetic program, and from the standards such a program would entail.

Orphaned from the history of social action and mass-media communications —a history that reached its zenith in the exploits of war photography—it yet retains a certain nostalgia for that bygone era, and seems to regard the new aestheticizing tendencies in photography and in photographic thought as some sort of denial of photography's true purpose. It seems reluctant, in other words, to face up to the fact that it is a museum and not a magazine.

It was inevitable, I think, for such an attitude to come to grief sooner or later, and the worst appears now to have happened sooner than expected. The “Holography '75” exhibition dramatically underscores the center's refusal to confront the difficult esthetic problems that a museum specializing in photography is now obliged to deal with. An esthetic void is always vulnerable to the romance of technology, and this is all that the present exhibition offers u??. It thus remains to be seen whether the Center, which opened last fall with so much promise and so much fanfare, is prepared to make a serious contribution for the new photography scene or is interested only in exploiting it.

“Holography '75: The First Decade” at the International Center of Photography, 1130 Fifth Avenue, through Sept. 21. Open 11 A.M. to 5 P.M. Tuesday through Sunday; closed Monday.