

A Year at a Glance

In the periodical sections of bookstores and newsstands, the front covers of magazines fight for our attention and may very well determine which ones we select and ultimately buy. A tremendous amount of time and consideration is devoted to the content and design of this highly visible portion of these publications. In addition to selling magazines, the front covers reveal who a particular editorial staff believes are the most important artists, and what exhibitions and other art world events should be highlighted at the time of publication and distribution. There is much more information to be found between the front and back covers, but a person has to pick up the magazine before he or she will gain access to it—creative packaging should not be overlooked or underestimated. And let us not forget about the less visible back covers. This space is controlled to a large degree by free market principles, or other political maneuvering, which does not necessarily result in equal opportunity, or in this case, equal visibility.

This project takes a new look at the old phrase, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” The project is made up of composite images, or multiple exposures—an amalgamation of the front and back covers of every issue of a particular magazine’s annual output. Each print in this series denotes an entire year of covers—one image represents the front cover while a separate image stands for the back—condensed into single images, thus a year at a glance. The specific information contained on the individual covers becomes blurred due to the layering of images and text; the referential qualities are camouflaged to various degrees depending upon the number of issues per year. The titles of the magazines usually remain intact, however, since the design keeps the text in near perfect registration from issue to issue. Like composite portraits that merge multiple human faces to create an “average” likeness meant to represent an entire population, these images result in an “average,” which symbolize the past year as presented on the front and back covers of each publication.

A Year at a Glance heightens the seductive quality of this arbiter of popular culture, while at the same time taking a critical look at the system of advertising and marketing integrated within the distribution of art news. Artists use a wide variety of media today, yet the most diverse output must be reproduced upon a printed page when it is reviewed in professional journals. The limits of another, often more traditional medium are imposed upon all works of art. In order to be celebrated or criticized within the pages of art magazines or to gain the coveted place on the cover—the locations that can make or break an artist’s career, even in a world in which the internet is supposed to have created a more varied and democratic distribution network—the message must conform to the printing press. This puts a somewhat different spin on Marshall McLuhan’s declaration that “the medium is the message.” It reveals that a work of art has to conform to the dots of ink used to reproduce images in these publications, or at the very least, it must be translated through the written word, which usually includes the author’s interpretations and may result in misunderstandings. Having one’s work presented on the cover of national and international art magazines will have a major impact on an artist’s career, so this project raises questions that have real consequences.

I am interested in appropriating the front and back covers of art magazines—the place where specific art and artists are used to sell a product—to open up a dialogue on capitalism’s impact on what works of art are placed in this popular form of circulation. To have one’s work reproduced on the cover may reflect a certain level of prior recognition, but it will certainly open up more visibility, as was alluded to above. This attention may lead to an artist’s work being included in exhibitions at prestigious galleries and museums, purchased and collected more vigorously, and potentially being written into the history of art. It can be argued that the front covers of publications are not for sale, but the back covers, and a large percentage of the interior pages, are most definitely bought and sold. Museums, galleries, and events also benefit from being selected for the cover of a magazine, which begs one to question how much advertising costs influence a particular institution’s position on the cover, or whether they are covered at all. By combining the covers and blurring the images and text, I am subverting the privilege that is bestowed on individual artists and institutions.

Dean Kessmann