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LETTING THE DAYS GO BY:  
AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ARTISTIC AND FUNCTIONAL NATURE OF  
CALENDARS

By

Elise Alexandra Blankenship  
B.A., Western Kentucky University, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University  
of Louisville in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Art History: Concentration in Critical and Curatorial Studies

Department of Fine Arts  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2021

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2021



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A Thesis Approved on

May 26, 2021

By the Following Thesis Committee:

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking my advisor, Dr. Chris Reitz as he consistently gave excellent feedback and support during the past two years. I would also like to thank my committee, Dr. Jill Holaday and Dr. Ann Hall along with Dr. Reitz for their flexibility throughout this process and for being willing to be involved after the decision was made to extend this project into the summer. I must also thank my family and friends for being an excellent support system, even when things didn't go as planned as well as being a sounding board for my esoteric ideas. I am forever grateful for their willingness to listen and their reassurance in times of struggle.

ABSTRACT

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Elise Alexandra Blankenship

May 26, 2021

Calendars have been widely ignored as cultural objects in a contemporary context.

Because of this lack of consideration, analyzing a calendar as a work of art is theoretically interesting. This thesis uses the theory of Kitsch, philosophies concerning art in the home, and the theory of relational aesthetics to express the impact that calendars can have when considered works of art. This thesis also discovers the forgotten provenance of block print calendars from the University of Louisville's extensive print collection. This thesis attempts to coerce the viewer to consider the calendars in their homes as works of art.

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## PREFACE

The simultaneous fluidity of time was made abundantly clear in the year 2020: March felt like it lasted for months, the United States election cycle extends across years in an exceptionally draining way, and moments of connection in our lives felt cut short. Looking back at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, it feels as if time has barely passed. Time and the shifting of seasons have been something humanity has been tracking for centuries. While the passage of time is not man-made, the calendar is.<sup>1</sup> E.G. Richards writes that “the calendar is more abstract, it is a systematic way of naming the days by allocating each to a year and a month and maybe a week.”<sup>2</sup> Both ancient and contemporary life is heavily influenced by the organizational tool that is the calendar. More often than not, the calendar is rightfully seen as a tool for managing one’s life. Calendars trace the changing of days, but for many the calendar offers consistency and predictability in their lives.

The functionality of the calendar is the primary way that calendars are evaluated; whether or not a calendar can fit the specific needs of a student or a family are often the criteria used when purchasing a calendar. While their role as a tool is both crucial in the life of the user and the reason to produce the object, the calendar is often ignored in the way that it can function as a work of art. Jerome Hoxton describes calendars as the

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<sup>1</sup> E. G. Richards, “The Calendar,” in *Mapping Time: the Calendar and Its History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Richards, “The Calendar,” 3.

intersection of “aesthetics with utility.”<sup>3</sup> Wall calendars are typically thought of and discussed in this bifurcated fashion: the days of the week/month/year separated from the image accompanying it. Yes, the two can and often are independent as “any picture attached to the calendar is there purely for decoration.”<sup>4</sup> However, the images accompanying the calendar are important. The images can reflect the changing of the seasons or the beauty of a metropolitan skyline. One of the main reasons that calendars are rarely considered works of art is their familiarity. Calendars are widely used for the period that they are valid then quickly disposed of as they no longer have a functional value. Because they play an important role in the lives of everyday people, they lack the distance required for a work of art to be mysterious and therefore deemed important to arts institutions. Museums have been constructed as a hallowed site to encounter unfamiliar art. Because the art has been collected and made sacred by the museum, it is removed from daily life and made scarce. To most, anything used to facilitate the comings and goings of day-to-day activities is not going to be deemed worthy of being included with pieces that have gained a cult status through the mystification of art history unless they are removed from their historical and cultural contexts. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a variety of movements have taken commodities from daily life and have transformed them into art simply by declaring them as such. From Duchamp’s *Fountain* (fig. 1) consisting of a flipped urinal, the placement of minimalist’s purchased and unmodified steel beams in the gallery, to works like *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (fig. 2) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and its use of aesthetically unsophisticated pair of clocks,

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Mele, “Paper Calendars Endure Despite the Digital Age,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, December 29, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/business/paper-calendars.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Richards, “The Calendar,” 5.

everyday objects have been used for artistic purposes. So, it is confusing as to why calendars that include images that sometimes are and can stand alone as artistic objects are not considered as such. Commercially available calendars have the potential to reflect contemporary beliefs and values while providing a chronology of how what a society values changes and expands, yet they are rarely considered as cultural, aesthetic works and can be seen as unworthy of contemplation. Framing calendars as aesthetic objects worthy to be viewed as pieces of art allows for a variety of artistic theories to be applicable and helps examine the way they can function in a fine art context. Because they are widely used, calendars are a way that art is integrated into the home or office, potentially without the user being fully aware of its significance. Because they have been widely ignored by art criticism I believe that modern and contemporary calendars can and should be investigated as pieces of art. This analysis will be done through three theoretical lenses: artistic calendars as highly imaginative and influential works of kitsch, as cost-effective ways to decorate one's home and art's potential to have a positive effect on society, and as participatory and interactive works that mirror the relationships created by works of relational aesthetics. This will introduce and help explain the dual nature of the calendar as a functional device and an aesthetic object. For the purposes of this text, the term calendar will refer to contemporary wall or desk calendars as opposed to planners or a digital calendar.

My fascination with calendars has been a fixture in my life for quite some time. I grew up like many in a more analog era did with a calendar magnetically attached to the side of the refrigerator. Depending on the source you consult, I am either one of the youngest millennials or the oldest member of Generation Z, mostly experiencing life

through late millennial culture as my older siblings introduced me to the media they enjoyed. Growing up in a Kentucky college town makes my upbringing difficult to qualify as it was definitively southern but never felt like it. Being the youngest of three children with a wide variety of extracurricular interests, the calendar was a crucial tool, allowing our household to function. Its details composed by my mother, this calendar laid out the important dates and mundane activities for a family of five. An event or two was always missing yet remembered due to the busyness of the lives we led. Like many managing a multi-faceted life,<sup>5</sup> my mother used a calendar and a personal planner and the events on the two separate records often overlapped. This dual practice is something I adopted for myself once I began to take more control over my own schedule. Where my mother had a wall calendar that was specifically designed for tracking events, I chose calendars that focused more on aesthetics with a small functional quality of simply tracking the days. I still take the time to write most events on a physical calendar or planner, so much so that I wrote down activities and release dates for a variety of things that have ultimately been pushed back due to the pandemic. Taking the time to put an event or reminder on a physical calendar gives a feeling of enhanced commitment to the event because the time was taken to write it down in an age where it could just be a digital notification. When written on a calendar, the user can physically and emotionally prepare for it due to constant observation. Early on, my chosen calendars captured pop culture moments in mass-produced objects targeted to young women, shifted to art historical calendars for a period of time, and resting now on travel-centric calendars with

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<sup>5</sup> Christena E. Nippert-Eng, "Territories of the Self: Calendars," in *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries through Everyday Life* (Chicago, ill: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 43-47, [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=KEHjTYnT-MUC&oi=fnd&pg=PP13&dq=art+calendars+in+american+homes&ots=5pf6woGQdS&sig=yT\\_qk4sm9lPKzrpW3PTXBCdQPv4#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=KEHjTYnT-MUC&oi=fnd&pg=PP13&dq=art+calendars+in+american+homes&ots=5pf6woGQdS&sig=yT_qk4sm9lPKzrpW3PTXBCdQPv4#v=onepage&q&f=false). 43.

images and maps of the countries and monuments of the world as a way to visually remind myself of the wider world when traveling is not accessible due to being a graduate student or being in the middle of a global pandemic.

For the past three or four years, I have purchased or have been gifted a twelve-month wall calendar from Rifle Paper co.: a small, Florida-based stationery company focusing on “bold colors, hand-painted florals, and whimsical characters.”<sup>6</sup> Their pieces are beautiful and calming, evoking wistful spring days spent quietly reading or observantly exploring the world. Because I adored the images in the variety of calendars I have owned, I decided to make prints out of the artwork for several of the months. This practice is reminiscent of people framing recreations of art from magazines as a way to decorate their homes.<sup>7</sup> Depending on the image, I have been able to get a range of print sizes out of these calendars as an 11x17 in the calendar will typically make an 11x13 in print when the day portion of the calendar is cut out. Once removed from the rest of the pages, the print is framed in a premade frame from a craft store. To break down the costs associated, the twelve-month wall calendars from Rifle Paper co. are \$26 dollars at full price<sup>8</sup> and can go as low as \$9.10 a few months into the year the calendar represents. If one was to make prints of the full-priced calendar, each would come out to \$2 before framing. To contrast, a print of the British Isles- a work included in the 2019 travel calendar that I have removed and framed- is \$40 for an 11x14 in print.<sup>9</sup> The cost for the print itself as framing is not included and would cost an

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<sup>6</sup> “Our Story: Rifle Paper Co.,” Home, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://riflepaperco.com/our-story>.

<sup>7</sup> Washington, Tiffany “Selling Art in the Age of Retail Expansion and Corporate Patronage: Associated American Artists and the American Art Market of the 1930s and 1940s.” Electronic Thesis or Dissertation. Case Western Reserve University, 2013. <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>, 144.

<sup>8</sup> “2021 Wall Calendar,” Rifle Paper Co., 2020, <https://riflepaperco.com/2021-explore-the-world-wall-calendar>.

<sup>9</sup> “British Isles Art Print,” British Isles Art Print | Rifle Paper Co., 2017, <https://riflepaperco.com/british-isles-art-print>.

additional \$75 dollars to receive the print framed from Rifle Paper co.<sup>10</sup> This makes the print twenty times more expensive than the piece extracted from the calendar when looking at the broken-down costs without framing. It would still be cheaper by \$14 to buy the calendar than the print even if only one print is removed and displayed. As of March 2021, I have five prints that I have taken from these calendars as it is a simple and environmentally friendly way to decorate a space on a budget. This is not to say that the print is not worthy of the cost, but even buying prints can be expensive for those with a love of art and a minimal income.

This thesis will consist of four parts. The first will be an examination of kitsch, its intersection with taste, and how both interact with commercially produced wall calendars. The second will be a discussion of the calendar in the home, influenced by theorists from the British Arts and Craft movement, artists from the Hudson River School, and theorist John Dewey, their dedication to creating and exhibiting beauty in one's daily life and their belief on art's effects on society. The third will be a brief history and visual analysis of the calendar prints from the University of Louisville's print collection that I will be exhibiting. The fourth section will be an argument as to why a traditional calendar could be seen as a work of relational aesthetics according to the theory proposed by Nicholas Bourriaud. It also explores the differences between interaction and participation, and how both methods can be applied to calendars.

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<sup>10</sup> "British Isles Art Print," British Isles Art.



## CALENDARS AS KITSCH

Twentieth-century art critic Clement Greenberg popularized ‘kitsch’ and helped to give the term an elitist antithesis through his formulation of the ‘avant-garde’ in his 1939 essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch.’ Greenberg defines kitsch as “popular art and literature”<sup>11</sup> that “is a product of the industrial revolution that urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America.”<sup>12</sup> Others have defined kitsch “as a kind of pseudo, parasitic art whose essential function is to flatter, soothe, and reassure its viewer and consumer.”<sup>13</sup> The term fails to have a positive connotation independent of the voices of critics as it comes from one of several German words for ‘trash.’<sup>14</sup> To the American public, kitsch is familiar even if one doesn’t know it by name. Kitsch is a Thomas Kinkade painting adapted into a needle point project<sup>15</sup>, a soft muzak<sup>16</sup> track playing in a dentist’s office, or a small tchotchke being sold at a gift shop attached to a museum, national park, or any other tourist trap. Kitsch is the same ‘Live, Laugh, Love’ sign on kitchen counter tops or above doorways in suburban homes all across the country. It is designed to be universally beloved, inoffensive works that are often tied to the banalest

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<sup>11</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 9.

<sup>13</sup> Denis Dutton, “Kitsch.” *Grove Art Online*. 2003; Accessed March 23, 2021. <https://www-oxfordartonline-com.echo.louisville.edu/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000046768>.

<sup>14</sup> Dutton, “Kitsch.” *Grove Art Online*.

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia A. Freeland, “Money, Markets, Museums,” in *Art Theory: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63.

<sup>16</sup> Robert C. Solomon, “On Kitsch and Sentimentality.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 1 (1991): 1.

aspects of culture without offering much or any criticism of the structures that it is created in, while also being able to “reassure its consumers of their social standing, hence its association with the middle class.”<sup>17</sup> Despite being incredibly popular by design, kitsch is often looked down upon by those in the art world due to its mass production and its falsification of emotions.<sup>18</sup> Objects that fall into the category of kitsch are typically not elitist since they are widely available and commercially accessible to a large audience. However, the elitism comes from those dismissing these works because they are easily available. Many, both in the 1930s when ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ was written and now, dismiss the availability of kitsch for the exclusivity of the avant-garde as it delineates them from those who cannot afford to consume other forms of art.

Greenberg explains that when people moved to the cities from rural areas, they became divorced from the folk culture they once knew.<sup>19</sup> For those who moved to the urban centers, they became more independent and had less involvement with elder generations that would pass down that the folk knowledge that Greenberg discusses. Since they are detached from any kind of ancestral culture, they then seek out any cultural object they can find.<sup>20</sup> It is at this point in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” where Greenberg argues that normal people find cheaply made, easily available kitsch and find it somewhat satisfying.

Greenberg frames kitsch as the anthesis of the avant-garde, claiming that it lacks any true substance or cultural value since it caters to the bored masses.<sup>21</sup> Greenberg

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<sup>17</sup> Dutton, "Kitsch." *Grove Art Online*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

frames the avant-garde-- works of modernism, primarily the abstract expressionists that he would later champion-- as the direct opposite of kitsch. The avant-garde artist is an independent visionary creating work that derives its “chief inspiration from the medium they work in,”<sup>22</sup> rather than creating empty works of representational art. Paintings made by the avant-garde are about the material nature of paint on canvas and poems are about the sounds and aesthetics of the written word. It is abundantly clear from this essay, and from most of Greenberg’s texts, that he absolutely despised kitsch, writing:

Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this in sensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style but always remains the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money- not even their time.<sup>23</sup>

To an extent, Greenberg was justified in these claims. He actively saw kitsch as empty pieces of art that had no meaning other than being propaganda and pushing the agenda of abusive authoritarian regimes,<sup>24</sup> attesting that kitsch is overwhelmingly lacking in any substance that makes it worthy to be consumed. To Greenberg, avant-garde art is immune from being used for propagandic purposes. In the 1940s and 1950s, modernist art-- including the avant-garde-- was being used by the Museum of Modern Art to reinforce the freedom and independence of America through its artists.<sup>25</sup> After the CIA was founded in 1947, they helped fund exhibitions of American art that would register as bizarre to other

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<sup>22</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Lucie Levine, “Was Modern Art Really a CIA Psy-Op?,” Jstor Daily, April 1, 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/was-modern-art-really-a-cia-psy-op/>.

parts of the world.<sup>26</sup> Abstract expressionism is bombarding the world as a symbol of American exceptionalism and freedom, yet kitsch is a mirage of culture being churned out “in a way true culture could never be.”<sup>27</sup> Greenberg is wrong to put avant-garde on an unreachable pedestal since any work of art is able to have its meaning warped and be used as a tool of the state.

In his critique of kitsch, Greenberg degrades those who engage with it. He believed that people engaging with kitsch were consuming what was in front of them without any critical thought because it is available to them. He notes that since most people learned how to read in western industrial societies including America literacy “no longer served to distinguish an individual’s cultural inclinations.”<sup>28</sup> This appears as a veiled way to say that since all people are learning to read, literacy is no longer a way to measure who had the funds and the time to access education, who has some level of class-based capital.

Greenberg also fails to provide a path out of the hypnosis of kitsch. In ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch,’ he writes that “all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all that’s academic is kitsch. For what is called the academic as such no longer has an independent existence but has become the stuffed shirt ‘front’ for kitsch. The methods of industrialism displace the handicrafts.”<sup>29</sup> Greenberg sees the arts education system in 1939 to be in service to consumerism and not a viable option for learning about what he sees as true art: the avant-garde. If one cannot learn about art in a way that does not reinforce kitsch,

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<sup>26</sup> Levine, “Was Modern Art Really a CIA Psy-Op?”

<sup>27</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 11.

how can one's taste in art be developed? In 1972, Greenberg wrote the essay 'Can Taste be Objective?' and attempts to answer that question. To Greenberg, there is no way to develop taste: "taste which makes itself known by the durability of its verdicts and in this durability lies the proof of its objectivity"<sup>30</sup> Greenberg argues that taste is objective because the same works and artists have been consistently praised for generations.<sup>31</sup> He is fully aware of the cyclical nature of his statement as one criterion influences the other as the argument does somersaults. He actively defends the objectivity of taste while also insinuating the presence of an inherent elitism involved with developing taste and how it excludes many everyday people.<sup>32</sup> Since Greenberg believes that taste is objective and cannot be taught, it is independent of kitsch. The group of genius artists that Greenberg lists in the essay are worthy of being included due to the fact that they have withstood the test of time, which Greenberg argues. Yet, as someone living in contemporary society, present to conversations about inclusivity and representation, I am aware of who is not included on this list. There are no women or people of color, despite there being incredible artists with those identities that have reframed what is considered fine art and have redirected the course of art history. Artists like Hilma Af Klint force widely held narratives about abstraction to be rewritten as her work was not as critically appreciated during her lifetime.<sup>33</sup> There are potentially more artists whose work is obscured by different systems of prejudice that prevented their work from reaching the prominence it deserved. This is partially due to a lack of access from a historical perspective as the

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<sup>30</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Can Taste Be Objective?," in *Clement Greenberg, Late Writings and Interviews* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 53.

<sup>31</sup> Greenberg, "Can Taste Be Objective?," 53.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>33</sup> *Beyond the Visible: Hilma Af Klint* (Zeitgeist Films, 2020).

ancient apprentice system excluded those without wealth,<sup>34</sup> but it also because of who is defining good taste and what good art looks like. The white male tastemakers throughout history would reaffirm artists that prove what appears to be the inherent genius of the group when in actuality it is capital that has allowed more access to the development of skills not the increased level of genius that has brought prominence throughout time. Their prominence has persisted both because it is good work due to its formal elements and that the group discerning what is good remains in power. Greenberg would likely argue that many contemporary artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are not included because the next generation has not confirmed that the work created is in good taste. However, works and artists rose to prominence and acclaim in the art world before generations had changed due to the influence of critics like Greenberg. The canon is constantly shifting more than he knows or would care to admit. Greenberg writes that “as far back into the past that we can see, agreement has been overcoming disagreement.”<sup>35</sup> While this is true and a consensus of what is tasteful art was likely achieved, Greenberg fails to picture a reality of a singular voice refusing to concede and everyone else getting tired of arguing despite the loudest voice being wrong.

Kitsch is despised by Greenberg and other theorists because of its lack of authenticity. Dennis Dutton discusses kitsch in the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera through the concept of the ‘second tear’: “the first tear is shed out of pity; the second tear is shed out of feeling pity.”<sup>36</sup> It is the self-congratulatory

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<sup>34</sup> Linda Nochlin, “From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” ARTnews.com (ARTnews.com, October 20, 2020), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/>.

<sup>35</sup> Greenberg, “Can Taste Be Objective?,” 53.

<sup>36</sup> Dutton, “Kitsch.” *Grove Art Online*.

nature of kitsch that bothers so many. Adorno came to this conclusion as he writes: “pleasure masquerades beyond recognition in the Kantian disinterestedness. What popular consciousness and a complaisant aesthetics regard as the taking pleasure in art modeled on real enjoyment, probably does not exist.”<sup>37</sup> The false sense of emotion and enjoyment is inherent to kitsch as it all exists on the surface. For Greenberg specifically, he hated it because one “can enjoy kitsch without effort.”<sup>38</sup> However, he accounts for the rare substantive work of kitsch writing: “not every single item of kitsch is altogether worthless. Now and then, it produces something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor; these accidental and isolated instances have fooled people who should know better.”<sup>39</sup> Because the emotional qualities of a work are easily experienced without earning said emotions as well as the perceived lack of artistic integrity, a work of kitsch is seen as unworthy of the time or attention of many critics. In contrast, the avant-garde is seen as worthy of Greenberg’s time and critical focus because it is antagonistic to capitalistic structures initially and is about the creation of art rather than being about any held up idea only disseminated through artistic reproduction. For pieces of abstract expressionism, the aura is not only intact but magnified with critics like Greenberg himself amplifying the cult of the artist.

Mass production of a cultural object is central to kitsch. Because works of kitsch are so closely linked with consumerism and therefore profits, the ability to make a significant number of objects has a financial incentive for whoever is producing said work. This isn’t without detriment to the final work. In his 1935 essay ‘The Work of Art

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<sup>37</sup> Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Gretel Adorno, and Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Art, Society, and Aesthetics,” in *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 18.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' Walter Benjamin writes "a work of art has always been reproducible."<sup>40</sup> Offering a different perspective, Benjamin felt positive towards the increase of methods to mechanically reproduce art because it would lead to an increase in the spread of ideas and access to said ideas.<sup>41</sup> Benjamin argued that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be,"<sup>42</sup> or its aura. Yet unlike Greenberg, both the original work and the mechanically reproduced work had value to Benjamin: one had the aura while the other had a far-reaching "plurality."<sup>43</sup> As much as Benjamin championed mechanically reproduced art, especially film, he was also cognizant of its potential and eventual use of works by fascist authoritarian regimes.<sup>44</sup>

To go back to an earlier point, Greenberg says one "can enjoy kitsch without effort."<sup>45</sup> While this is in fact true, I take issue with Greenberg's assumption that enjoying fine art is an effortful experience. A work of art should be able to be appreciated independent of the context or history is known by the viewer; to insist otherwise is another example of Greenberg's refusal to expand the audience of who is able to see and experience art. While I am not arguing with Greenberg on the validity of kitsch as an art theoretical concept, that calendars are inherently works of kitsch, or that kitsch can be used in nefarious ways, what I am arguing is that the enjoyment of kitsch is not a moral or intellectual failing on the part of the viewer. In some cases, a work of kitsch may be

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<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, Harry Zohn, and Hannah Arendt, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 218.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 218.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 219.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 235.

<sup>45</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 18.



the only piece of humor or inspiration- however silly or unintelligent they are- one sees in the day. The hint of emotion beyond the circumstances of daily life can be beneficial, offering a respite from a sad moment or difficult task. It is clear that Greenberg sees kitsch as a method of propaganda used to impose harmful ideas upon society due to a belief that the sentimental and representational qualities of the work potentially forcing people to react emotionally rather than logically. In his essays, there is an undercurrent of avoidance of representational art and its ability to draw upon historical narratives and cultures that abstract paintings simply cannot. Even though he admonishes it as a genre of art, kitsch is easily understood and admired, thus adding to its popularity when coupled with the ease of production. Greenberg's main issue with kitsch is the lack of critique within it. As Robert Solomon discusses, kitsch has no tension within it.<sup>46</sup> The avant-garde is able to critique widely held conventions of painting by just focusing on the formal elements of the work. Representational works of kitsch present uncomplicated narratives and emotions without critique. By having uncomplicated and comfortable emotions easily and commercially available, there is a potential that audiences and consumers will only gravitate towards works of kitsch<sup>47</sup> refuse to engage with any work that has a complicated narrative or legacy regardless of its status in the art world.

Theorists like Adorno combat the seriousness proscribed to fine art. In his essay 'Is Art Lighthearted?' Adorno writes: "if art were not a source of pleasure for people, however mediated a form, it would not have been able to survive in the naked existence it contradicts and resists."<sup>48</sup> The enjoyment of art, and to an extent kitsch, is essential for its

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<sup>46</sup> Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality," 5.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, Shierry Weber Nicholsen, and Rolf Tiedemann, "Is Art Lighthearted?," in *Notes to Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992), 248.

endurance. Greenberg sees effort<sup>49</sup> as central to the enjoyment of the avant-garde; because one has put in the work, it should be a reward to enjoy the piece. For many viewers, that effort may not pay off and they still don't enjoy the work despite their understanding of it. Adorno counters this idea of enjoyment in his own writing; "yet if the last traces of pleasure were extirpated the question of what artworks are for would be an embarrassment. Actually, the more they are understood, the less they are enjoyed."<sup>50</sup> Adorno, though still not advocating for kitsch, stresses that art does not have to be dark or serious, rather that art as a whole is lighthearted and playful.<sup>51</sup> "Art is a critique of the brute seriousness that reality imposes upon human beings. Art imagines that by naming this fateful state of affairs it is loosening its hold. That is what is lighthearted in it; as a change in the existing mode of consciousness, that is also, to be sure, its seriousness."<sup>52</sup> The emotion present in the works that Adorno is referring to contain emotions that are joyful without using saccharine sentimentality to make them enjoyable. Art is often a reflection of the world that the artist is living in. If things are particularly difficult, it can be just as cathartic for an artist to paint something joyful in an attempt to make the viewer feel the potential for joy amidst strenuous circumstances.

In contrast to the previously mentioned theorists, Robert Solomon is one of few academics that argues in favor of kitsch. His essay *On Kitsch and Sentimentality*, critiques the widespread disdain for kitsch as an attack on easily accessible emotions and sentimentality in art.<sup>53</sup> Early on in the essay, Solomon explains that the primary issue

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<sup>49</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 18.

<sup>50</sup> Adorno, "Art, Society, and Aesthetics," 13.

<sup>51</sup> Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?," 248.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 248.

<sup>53</sup> Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality," 1-2.

with kitsch is not that it is bad art, but that it is sentimental, and that its sentimentality “stimulates the very best emotions—the ‘soft’ sentiments of kindness and sympathy and the calm passions of delight.”<sup>54</sup> The influx of emotion caused by kitsch is seen as indulgent, and therefore immoral.<sup>55</sup> Works that do not trigger emotions, especially positive emotions are given the moral high ground with this approach. It is important to note that most arguments against kitsch are not aesthetic, but political.<sup>56</sup> Greenberg would believe that the sentimental emotions of kitsch would lead to the viewer making decisions based on their emotions rather than making logical decisions, thus leaving them more susceptible to propaganda. Pieces of kitsch do not hide the fact that they are full of pleasant emotions. The emotions elicited by kitsch are the most important quality of the work, thus invalidating the formal role of the paint being at the forefront. To remove the emotional quality that a work of art is able to elicit from the viewer is to ignore the power of art. Solomon succinctly writes that “it is not self-indulgence that motivates us to absorb ourselves in a painting and welcome the emotions it evokes. It is part of our emotional engagement in the human drama.”<sup>57</sup>

Calendars in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries fall into the category of ever lamented kitsch: they are mechanically reproduced in bulk for mass consumption, often showing highly stylized or sentimental images that lack emotional depth. The simple wall or desk calendar is also easily adapted to fit purely commercial interests. Companies used easily produced calendars as ways of “providing another wrinkle in the commercialization of time, on which businesses printed advertisements about their wares

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<sup>54</sup> Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality, " 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 13.

or services.”<sup>58</sup> With many families and individuals using calendars to keep track of their lives, <sup>59</sup> it gives companies ample opportunities to market to said individuals. For the 2015-2016 year, decorative calendars grossed 65 million dollars, proving that they are a viable business.<sup>60</sup> Due to the ubiquity and availability of calendars, Marxists like Walter Benjamin would potentially view them as democratic. Calendars of all levels of quality are available at price points that would not prevent access to members of the working class.

Any if not all commercially available calendars are going to be considered kitsch. Dutton writes that “the impact of kitsch is therefore limited to reminding the viewer of great works of art, deep emotions, grand philosophic, religious, or patriotic sentiments.”<sup>61</sup> Calendars are designed to do just that independent of their aesthetics. Many events are recorded on a calendar despite the beliefs of the owner of said calendar. These events overlap with celebrations of most major global religions to cater to the widest possible audience. This adds to its value as a cultural object as well as making it more marketable. Many calendars include inspirational quotes in the margins that register as hollow platitudes. The sentimentality around pleasant emotions is the unifier of what can truly be considered kitsch. However, some pieces also belong in the category of fine art, existing in both categories depending on the theorist one is looking at. Greenberg would never allow something that was a commodity first to ever be considered avant-garde, but even he lays out the potential for a work perceived as kitsch to establish genuine emotion with

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<sup>58</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Commercialization of the Calendar: American Holidays and the Culture of Consumption, 1870-1930,” *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 3 (December 1991), 893.

<sup>59</sup> Carman Neustaedter, A. Brush, and Saul Greenberg, “The Calendar Is Crucial: Coordination and Awareness through the Family Calendar,” *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 16, no. 1 (2009): 3,4.

<sup>60</sup> Mele, “Paper Calendars Endure Despite the Digital Age.”

<sup>61</sup> Dutton, “Kitsch.” *Grove Art Online*.

the viewer.<sup>62</sup> Works included in calendars that go deeper than surface-level emotions would likely be approved by Adorno as he could see the utility of the joy that the images would bring to the user's daily life. Artists are making calendars that draw from their fine arts practices, becoming indistinguishable from a work they are selling as an isolated print or painting. This is not enough to categorize it as fine art. To be such, these works need to be created by an artist or artistic collective, have a connection with the viewer that goes deeper than surface-level emotions while also offering some form of tension or critique within the thematic or formal elements. These elements do not absolve them fully of the inherent kitsch of the formal elements and its status as a commodity.

In a somewhat abstracted fashion, artist Jenna O'Brien of the brand TwentySeven creates calendars of simple dots of various colors, each receiving a short but descriptive caption, evoking a specific emotion or scenario that said color represents. (fig. 3)

Through an image shared by the brand's Instagram account, the November page of the 2020 calendar is filled with rusty reds, warm corals, and rich browns reminiscent of the leaves finally falling from the trees in late autumn. The creation of calendars forces the artists behind them to be both artist and graphic designer due to the necessary choices regarding fonts. For O'Brien and TwentySeven, the choice of a simple, yet fun font reinforces the whimsicality of the brand.<sup>63</sup> The most successful aspect of this choice is its coherence with both the dots and O'Brien's hand lettering on the calendars, simultaneously reinforcing the functionality of the calendar without impeding of the aesthetic elements of the calendar. Sketched and printed dots with fall captions like

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<sup>62</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 11.

<sup>63</sup> Jenna O'Brien, "About," Twenty Seven Creative, 2021, <https://shoptwentyseven.com/pages/about-1>.

“favorite jacket,” “sunlight through the trees,” and “early Christmas card” do fall into the kitschy traps of oversentimentality and surface level emotions, yet when combined with the humble hand lettering, there is a profound sense of earnestness as O’Brien makes it abundantly clear in both her business and online presence that her art is meant to “remind you of hope and joy.”<sup>64</sup> This work strives to be considered as art as opposed to kitsch because it forces the viewer to see both the good and the bad in the prompts posed by the dots. The viewer must ask themselves ‘why is the Christmas card coming early?’ Is it because the neighbors are ahead of their self-imposed schedule this year or is it because they wanted to share a happy memory after the loss of a loved one? When the time is taken to investigate the work further, sentimentality is present, but it is earned and does not congratulate itself.

Artist/journalist Hannah Good’s calendars are emotionally straight forward. Each year Good produces her “Pep Talk Calendars” (fig 4) featuring illustrations primarily of women and gender non-conforming individuals, acting as avatars for a monthly pep talk to the viewer. The calendars blend Good’s punchy yet polished aesthetic with the edge of self-produced zines to create a work that is forceful in its messaging on taking care of oneself and uncompromising in its standards. This specific image of February 2021 features an individual in a wheelchair, wearing a simple outfit and meeting the gaze of the viewer, thus following in the modernist tradition began by Manet. In his work, Manet often painted ordinary women and prostitutes in the nude when the Parisian academy only accepted nude paintings in the form of allegories, typically for Greek mythologies. Manet’s nude subjects were not mythological making it more upsetting. The women

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<sup>64</sup> O’Brien, “About,” Twenty Seven Creative.

painted challenge the viewer looking at them, by making direct eye contact. The subjects were no longer objects to be consumed but had agency of their own. Good mirrors this by having the individual make direct eye contact with the viewer. It is like they are giving the pep talk to the viewer, reinforcing the message through the shared gaze. Good also uses hand lettering in the calendar. In the calendar, this aesthetic choice gives cohesion to the piece as the image is separated from the calendar because of the device used to bind the pages together. The calendar itself is highly interactive as Good designed it to inspire the viewer's own art through visuals and text as the calendar includes prompts for writing and spaces for drawing. The calendar is the most traditional out of the three profiled in this section as it includes room for the user to write their own events on the calendar along with included natural and national events. The overarching theme of Good's calendar is perseverance and progression. This directly contrasts the frozen in time nostalgia commonly associated with kitsch. It actively combats the tendency of kitsch to ignore difficulties and encourages the viewer to embrace the challenges and the effort it took to get to where they are. The calendar also convinces viewer that attempt to seek love and joy—especially within themselves—will be worth it. The calendars are designed to be a bolstering force for the viewer. Because the formal qualities of a new calendar page and print for each month, the calendar encourages the viewer to take things one month at a time. As the viewer progresses through the month, they are provided with a message of perseverance, reminding them that struggling is human and resiliency is worth striving for.

The third calendar circumvents established notions of how a traditional calendar should look. Award winning illustrator Phoebe Wahl produced two types of calendars for

the 2021 year that challenge formal conventions and are useful in ways that traditional calendars cannot be. The first is a calendar of the phases of the moon for the year. (fig. 5) The work is long -8.5x24 in<sup>65</sup>- as it creates a grid with the months on the x-axis and the days on the y-axis. The piece is very serene as it is navy ink on a pale blue paper to give the impression of night. The work fits into the artist's readily established aesthetic of woodland creatures, fairy tales, and quiet scenes of nature, featuring a small cabin at night with a plume of smoke seeping from the chimney. There is a small porch, clothes drying on the clothesline with a small creature scurrying underneath, while a deer stands watch at the edge of the cabin's path. The house is surrounded by large trees with wildflowers acting as a transitional border from image to calendar. The moon is beautifully drawn overhead, flanked by stars and a soaring bird on the right of the composition. This piece is different as the calendar is comprised of images as well; the moon phases are drawn with the full and new moons completed with small faces. Like the other calendars, hand lettering is used. If a rigid font was used, it would disrupt the somewhat mystical, handmade feeling of the calendar. Wahl also includes a key at the bottom to remind the viewer of the different phases of the moon.

The second work is also an non-traditional calendar, despite being more conventional than the first. The difference lies in the functionality rather than the aesthetics as Wahl also designed and created a tea towel calendar for 2021. (fig. 6) The piece also uses Wahl's fairytale motif and features a group of friendly gnomes playing music surrounded by flowers. The piece continues Wahl's use of hand lettering and

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<sup>65</sup> Phoebe Wahl, "2021 Lunar Calendar," Phoebe Wahl, 2020, <https://phoebewahl.shop/collections/calendars/products/2021-lunar-calendar>.



marking the phases of the moon. Unlike Good's pep talk calendar with space to write upon it, Wahl's tea towel calendar allows the viewer to use it both as a calendar and as a tool for cleaning their home or they can use simply use it as a calendar and display it in a traditional way. Wahl's calendars are both undeniably kitschy in their aesthetics as they do draw on surface level sentimentality to make the viewer feel pleasant things.

However, they do offer a critique of the traditional formal elements of calendars as they are produced today. The moon phase calendar rejects the way that calendars are made in America by focusing on the night rather than the daytime. The calendar evokes feelings of rest and does not offer the space for the user to plan anything upon it, preventing the calendar from perpetuating the widespread culture of productivity seen on most calendars. The second calendar does this as well by challenging the materiality of the calendar. The tea towel, regardless of the image printed upon it, is useful but does so in a way that is typically not seen in a calendar.

These calendars are each beautiful and impactful in their own way, each converging on the central point that they want to be used and enjoyed. Yes, making money is a part of any business in a capitalist society. However, to take the time and energy to create an aesthetically pleasing calendar shows that there are more than just profits motivating the creative actions for these artists. These works allow for the viewer to have a piece of art in the home that they associate with joy that goes deeper than just the image. The calendars created become significant fixtures for people for a year of their life. Yes, they are mass produced works that lean towards sentimentality, but that should not be a deterrent to potentially consider them as pieces of fine art as they offer deeper emotions and critiques of the traditions they are created within.

## CALENDARS AS ART IN THE HOME

It could be argued that the first instances of art in the home can be traced back to the presence of cave paintings. Works from the Paleolithic period show illustrations on cave walls of wildlife that were used for educational purposes<sup>66</sup> or even “to ensure the survival of the herds.”<sup>67</sup> The ideas of being surrounded by art continues as it is used in Egyptian tombs<sup>68</sup> as well as being a central feature of ancient Grecian palaces.<sup>69</sup> While many of these decorations are confined to the past, decoration in the home has continued in daily life while also being a significant feature of certain art historical movements. Specifically, works and ideas from the Hudson River School and the Arts and Crafts movement and the philosophy of John Dewey advocate for the inclusion of art in the home for both the individuals displaying said art and those creating the work.

The Hudson River school emerged in the valley of the same name in New York State around 1850.<sup>70</sup> Artists like Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt created vast Romantic landscapes of scenes originally from the Hudson River Valley and later expanding west.<sup>71</sup> These artists, originally inspired by landscape artists in Europe,<sup>72</sup> were able to interpret

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<sup>66</sup> Helen Gardner, Fred S. Kleiner, and Christin J. Mamiya, *Gardner's Art through Ages 12th Edition (2005)* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Gardner, *Gardner's Art through Ages 12th Edition*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>70</sup> Kevin J. Avery, “Hudson River School,” The Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (The Metropolitan Museum, October 2004), [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hurs/hd\\_hurs.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hurs/hd_hurs.htm).

<sup>71</sup> Balasz Takac, “Revisiting the Art and Artists of the Hudson River School,” *Widewalls*, April 14, 2019, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/hudson-river-school-artists-paintings>.

<sup>72</sup> Takac, “Revisiting the Art and Artists of the Hudson River School.”

the sublime in the nature they were experiencing in the American landscape.<sup>73</sup> Hudson River School paintings, drawings, and later profitable reproductions,<sup>74</sup> served two different purposes: advancing the land territory of the United States and affecting the state of mind of the viewer. The works created by the Hudson River School painters can be attributed to changing mindsets on the preservation of nature as they “enhanced and promoted the sublime and even spiritual quality of the country as something of great inherent value and certainly worth preserving.”<sup>75</sup> With their work, people were convinced of the value of the land, even prompting the founding of national parks.<sup>76</sup> The other function of the works of the Hudson River School was their ability and the ability of the sublime in art to “transport the viewer out of his or her everyday reality and into the spirit and grandeur of nature.”<sup>77</sup> Looking at these works were a way to offer a respite from the rapid industrialization seen in the 1860s<sup>78</sup> and to inspire people to return to nature. The large scale paintings would have been inaccessible to be included in the homes of many collectors. As Kathleen Foster writes: “today, just as a century ago, most American homes are decorated with art on paper: drawings and watercolors made by the family, photographs, posters and prints, including reproductions of priceless works in other media. Art on paper is familiar, affordable, and accessible.”<sup>79</sup> The pieces included in decorating 19<sup>th</sup> century homes would have been smaller works like drawings,<sup>80</sup> rather

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<sup>73</sup> Emily E. Auger, "Grand Manner Aesthetics in Landscape: From Canvas to Celluloid." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43, no. 4 (2009): 100.

<sup>74</sup> Auger, "Grand Manner Aesthetics in Landscape," 100-101.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>76</sup> Auger, "Grand Manner Aesthetics in Landscape," 100.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>78</sup> David Jaffee, "Industrialization and Conflict in America: 1840–1875," The Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (The Metropolitan Museum, April 2007), [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/indu/hd\\_indu.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/indu/hd_indu.htm).

<sup>79</sup> Kathleen A. Foster, "American Drawings, Watercolors, and Prints." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 37, no. 4 (1980): 2-52. Accessed April 26, 2021. doi:10.2307/3261257. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Foster, "American Drawings, Watercolors, and Prints." 2.

than the massive paintings the school is known for. Hanging the small works on paper in the home<sup>81</sup> could offer a momentary break from the stressors of life both then and now.

Another period that is centered on art's involvement in the home is the British Arts and Crafts movement and its eventual migration to America. The movement begun in the 1860s also in response to the rise of industrialization.<sup>82</sup> Cynthia Freeland describes the period best by writing, "the Arts and Crafts movement, propelled by figures in England like John Ruskin and William Morris, aimed to enhance people's everyday experiences by bringing beauty to their usual aesthetic surroundings, indulging all aspects of the home, from architectural styles to furniture, lamps, textiles, dishes, and utensils."<sup>83</sup> Morris and others envisioned a world where the environment one lived in and the tools one used were not only functional, but beautiful.<sup>84</sup> Morris envisioned these beliefs through a socialist lens as well as an aesthetic one.<sup>85</sup> Those in the Arts and Crafts movement could feel that the pieces of furniture and home goods produced by more mechanical and industrial methods were lacking. Though not considering them as lacking, Benjamin was aware that the connection with the hand of the artist was being sacrificed for the democratic qualities of widespread access that was central to mechanical reproduction. Benjamin would later refer to this as the aura while those in the Arts and Crafts movement were opposed to this change. They largely believed that the rise in industrial manufacturing harmed those involved and "alienated workers from the

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<sup>81</sup> Foster, "American Drawings, Watercolors, and Prints." 2.

<sup>82</sup> "V&A · Arts and Crafts: an Introduction," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed 2021, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/arts-and-crafts-an-introduction>.

<sup>83</sup> Freeland, "Money, Markets, Museums," 79.

<sup>84</sup> "V&A · Arts and Crafts: an Introduction."

<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Jones, "William Morris: a Victorian Socialist Dreaming of a Life in Symmetry," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, March 24, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/mar/24/william-morris-google-doodle-socialist>.

fruits of their labor, depriving them of satisfaction and joy.”<sup>86</sup> Morris truly believed that the amplification of an aesthetic agenda could influence people’s lives. He was firm in his belief that “if the quality of design was improved, the character of the individual producing the design would be improved, and hence society would be improved.”<sup>87</sup>

While he did not advocate for a specific movement or genre of art, philosopher John Dewey was concerned with the way art interacted with life. He believed that art was an expression of the artist living the present moment to the fullest,<sup>88</sup> and would have aligned with Morris and Benjamin as he believed that there would be a missing aesthetic quality when the artist is not fully present in the creation of a work.<sup>89</sup> Primarily, Dewey takes an anti-capitalist approach to his theory of art as experience, stating that: “the growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper home for works of art and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life.”<sup>90</sup> Placing works in publicly and privately held institutions was a form of signaling “that a community is not wholly absorbed in material wealth, because it is willing to spend these gains in patronage of art.”<sup>91</sup> It is in the illusion of care for the arts that a society continues to accrue wealth while simultaneously separating art from the everyday person. Witnessing art became and still is an excursion that many cannot have due to time, financial, and locational restrictions. For most, art-- and what has become

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<sup>86</sup> Anika Dačić, “Arts and Crafts Movement - When Women United in Creativity,” Widewalls, March 8, 2018, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/arts-and-crafts-movement-women-artists>.

<sup>87</sup> “The Noble Craftsmen We Promote:” The Roots of Arts and Crafts, 2019. [https://www.utoledo.edu/library/canaday/exhibits/artsandcrafts/roots.html#:~:text=The%20Arts%20and%20Crafts%20Movement%20began%20in%20England%20in%20the,right%20\(1834%2D1896\).&text=Continuing%20this%20connection%2C%20Ruskin%20believed,the%20men%20who%20produced%20them](https://www.utoledo.edu/library/canaday/exhibits/artsandcrafts/roots.html#:~:text=The%20Arts%20and%20Crafts%20Movement%20began%20in%20England%20in%20the,right%20(1834%2D1896).&text=Continuing%20this%20connection%2C%20Ruskin%20believed,the%20men%20who%20produced%20them).

<sup>88</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, NY: Berkley Publishing Group, 2005), 27.

<sup>89</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 27.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 7.

'fine' art-- is divorced from the experience of everyday life. This separation was also present in the creation of various art theories.<sup>92</sup> To Dewey, this separation and classification of high and low art is seeking to create a false sense of order, often along class lines.<sup>93</sup> It reinforces the presumption that art is not for the common person, that is meant to be found in the hallow halls of an institution rather than in the home. Dewey makes it clear that he finds this presumption ludicrous as he believes that "art is prefigured in the very process of living."<sup>94</sup> He then argues that animals create their homes in artistic fashion and nature grows in artistic ways, making it against nature's intentions for humans to not surround themselves with art.<sup>95</sup> In line with his thoughts against separations on any kind, Dewey chooses not to discriminate against considering functional items used in the home as art, calling it "a matter of indifference."<sup>96</sup> In one of his most forceful claims, Dewey fully questions why the separation of art and life is so stringently upheld, with those keeping said separation becoming angry as the possibility of their status as gatekeepers removed stating "the hostility to the association of fine art with normal processes of living is a pathetic, even tragic, commentary on life as it is ordinarily lived."<sup>97</sup> Dewey believed that art was a pathway to the truth, providing "connections with what is good and right."<sup>98</sup> Placing art in the home that would help people start to make these connections from an early age would be beneficial for society at large as well as good for the individual.

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<sup>92</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 9.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid*, 25.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 25-26.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 27..

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 27-28.

<sup>98</sup> Patricia F. Goldblatt, "How John Dewey's Theories Underpin Art and Art Education," *Education and Culture* 22, no. 1 (2006): 17.

The examples of the Hudson River School, the British Arts & Crafts movement along with the philosophies of John Dewey can be related to the display of calendars in the home. Calendars that are created with artistic inclinations are almost exclusively works on paper. This allows the calendars to be easily accessible and affordable like prints that are made and sold today. In line with Morris and those from the British Arts & Crafts movements, the artists creating calendars are often doing so on a small scale and are involved in every step of production. This aligns with the values of having the artists connected to their works in a way that calendars with wider manufacturing are not. Buying these calendars from artist also reinforces the connections between artist and their audience, leading to confidence in the artist since they know they have a viewership that is supportive of their artistic endeavors. Finally, Dewey is abundantly clear that functional works in the home can be considered art. Artistic calendars fall into this category as they work both as a display piece that is changing monthly, but also as a functional tool to improve the lives of those using it.

## PROVENANCE AND DISCUSSION OF CALENDARS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

In this section, I will be exclusively discussing the block print calendars in the University of Louisville's print collection. This collection, founded by Dr. Richard Krautheimer,<sup>99</sup> is a vast and rich resource that includes works from a variety of cultures and time periods. In 1962, these calendars and other pieces were donated to the university by a Mrs. Arthur Ehrenstrom.<sup>100</sup> Her contribution to the collection was to honor her second husband, C. J. Bulliet.<sup>101</sup> Despite her generosity independent of either of her husbands, Mrs. Ehrenstrom is nearly erased from the records of the objects she gave to her alma mater as she is only referred to as Mr. Ehrenstrom's wife. Mrs. Ehrenstrom was originally known as Catherine Girdler before any of her marriages. Born in 1903 to Tracy Girdler and Mary Catherine McCabe,<sup>102</sup> Catherine Girdler was raised in Jefferson Co. Kentucky, became a member of high society,<sup>103</sup> and was involved with various camps in the area.<sup>104</sup> She attended the University of Louisville and was an active member of the

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<sup>99</sup> "University Art Collection," University Art Collection - Hite Art Institute, Department of Fine Arts, accessed 2021, <https://louisville.edu/art/facilities-resources/university-art-collection>.

<sup>100</sup> "3 Appointments Approved for U.L. Medical School," *Courier Journal*, December 20, 1962, p. 22, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/107157023/>.

<sup>101</sup> "3 Appointments Approved for U.L. Medical School," *Courier Journal*, December 20, 1962, p. 22, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/107157023/>.

<sup>102</sup> "Lineage," Girdler, accessed 2021, <http://www.girdler.com/lineage.htm>.

<sup>103</sup> "In Louisville Society: Informal Tea," *Courier Journal*, June 29, 1919, p. 17, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/118909527/?terms=catherine%20girdler&match=1>.

<sup>104</sup> Ruth Wilson, ed., "Catherine Girdler Appointed Guard," *Courier Journal*, May 27, 1923, p. 72, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/107041488/?terms=catherine%20girdler&match=1>.



theater department as it is documented that she wrote and directed at least one play,<sup>105</sup> if not more. In the 1940's, she was a reporter for Louisville's *Courier Journal*,<sup>106</sup> writing on a variety of subjects, including fashion trends.<sup>107</sup> From the records of the *Courier Journal*, it is likely that Catherine Girdler had three husbands: William C. Hartough, married in 1938;<sup>108</sup> art critic C.J. Bulliet, married in 1949;<sup>109</sup> and Arthur Ehrenstrom,<sup>110</sup> with the year of their marriage unknown. Catherine is last mentioned as surviving Ehrenstrom in a 1984 edition of the *Arizona Daily Star* as she and Ehrenstrom moved to Tucson in 1976.<sup>111</sup> The date of Catherine Girdler's own death is unknown. This biographical information is important not only because the lives and identity of women are overshadowed by their husbands, but because it gives contextual information to the calendars Girdler donated to the university's collection. By knowing this information about her life, it makes sense that Girdler would have been a repeated patron of the arts and could have potentially purchased these calendars herself.

However, the assumption can also be made that the majority of the calendars did not belong to her. The thematic elements of the calendars and the location of their production make it reasonable to believe that the calendars belonged to Girdler's second

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<sup>105</sup> "University of Louisville Students to Stage Satire on Modern Drama at Annual Picnic Tuesday of Louisville Conference of Social Workers," *Courier Journal*, June 10, 1923, sec. 1, p. 7, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/107064051/?terms=catherine%20girdler&match=1>.

<sup>106</sup> "C.J. Bulliet, Art Expert, Ex-Louisvillian, Is Dead," *Courier Journal*, October 21, 1952, p. 10, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/107750113/?terms=%22catherine%20girdler%22&match=1>.

<sup>107</sup> Catherine Girdler, "Just Like Mom," *Courier Journal*, November 2, 1947, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/108405732/?terms=%22catherine%20girdler%22&match=1>.

<sup>108</sup> Donie Carmack, ed., "The Social Side," *Courier Journal*, May 31, 1938, sec. 1, p. 10, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/108001245/?terms=%22catherine%20girdler%22&match=1>.

<sup>109</sup> "The Social Side: Weddings," *Courier Journal*, December 29, 1949, sec. 1, p. 15, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/110487131/?terms=%22Catherine%20Girdler%22%20%22Bulliet%22&match=1>.

<sup>110</sup> "3 Appointments Approved for U.L. Medical School," *Courier Journal*, December 20, 1962, p. 22, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/107157023/>.

<sup>111</sup> "Journalist, Ex-Tucsonan Arthur Ehrenstrom Dies," *Arizona Daily Star*, May 29, 1984, sec. A, p. 5, <https://tucson.newspapers.com/image/164064086/?article=ccf1ed43-24c6-4b54-acf1-de3fe688c90e>.

husband, C.J. Bulliet. There is a possibility that the calendars did belong to Girdler as she likely lived with her first husband in Detroit during the time when these calendars would have been used, but I believe that it is unlikely.<sup>112</sup> Thematically, the calendars revolve around traditional elements of life in the Midwest: scenes of snowy neighborhoods and images of industry. There is also the potential that the calendars would have either not been available or would have been extremely strenuous for Girdner to get access to in Detroit. The calendars also have ties to the Midwest with all of the seven calendars in the collection having direct ties to Chicago: the calendar from 1941, and the 1937 and 1938 calendars from Gutenberg publishing were printed in the city, while the calendars from 1937, 1939, 1940, and 1947 were all produced and printed by the Chicago Society of Artists. The calendars belonging to Bulliet is the logical assumption to make since he worked as an art critic in Chicago,<sup>113</sup> and potentially championed the artists whose work is in the calendars. It is fair to make this assumption as the pieces were donated in Bulliet's name to the University,<sup>114</sup> all of the calendars account for years before the two married in 1949, and Girdler had made donations of works from Bulliet's collections to other arts institutions.<sup>115</sup>

Catherine Girdler donated seven calendars to the University of Louisville. There are two calendars for the year 1937, and one calendar for the years of 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, and 1947. One of the calendars from 1937 and the calendar from 1938 were

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<sup>112</sup> Donie Carmack, ed., "The Social Side," *Courier Journal*, May 31, 1938, sec. 1, p. 10, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/108001245/?terms=%22catherine%20girdler%22&match=1>.

<sup>113</sup> "C.J. Bulliet, Art Expert, Ex-Louisvillian, Is Dead," *Courier Journal*, October 21, 1952, p. 10, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/107750113/?terms=%22catherine%20girdler%22&match=1>.

<sup>114</sup> "3 Appointments Approved for U.L. Medical School," *Courier Journal*, December 20, 1962, p. 22, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/107157023/>.

<sup>115</sup> Constantin Brancusi, "Head of a Woman," The Art Institute of Chicago (Prints and Drawings), accessed 2021, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/82106/head-of-a-woman>.

published by the Gutenberg Publishing company based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The calendar from 1941 was produced by the Chicago chapter of United American Artists. The rest of the calendars-- the years of 1937, 1939, 1940, 1947-- were produced by the Chicago Society of Artists. This is a crucial detail for these works. Artists created them to function in the home as a piece of functional art. Every print or drawing included in these calendars were created by an artist with the intention of being a work of art. This is opposed to a calendar being produced and designed by a calendar company that is solely focused on making a profit with some consideration for the functionality of the calendars. Calendars created outside of this artistic legacy almost immediately fall victim to the smothering sentimentality of kitsch.

The state that the works are in are a testament to both Catherine Girdler and C.J. Bulliet to keep them safe; the works are still in great condition even as they were donated in 1962, ten years after his death. The calendars are free from any major cosmetic damage to the prints. Both calendars from 1937 and the calendars from 1939 through 1947 are spiral bound. The binding mechanisms are still in good shape; however, the pages have become delicate over time and require a bit of extra patience and gentleness to properly turn them. The prints included in these calendars are still crisp, with little fading. Yet, there are some examples of ink transferring to the backs of other pages in some of the calendars due to the amount of time that the piece has been sealed. The only calendar that is not spiral bound is the 1938 calendar from Gutenberg Publishing. This calendar is bound using a strip of cardboard or metal encased in linen fabric clasped with upholstery style round, brass pins to the backing cardboard or metal wrapped in the same

linen. The individual month is able to either be removed from the calendar itself or flipped over the top.

All of the calendars utilize block printing as their primary method of constructing an image. The 1937 calendar from Gutenberg Publishing is the only calendar that isn't exclusively made of block prints as it includes some drawings as well. All of the calendars donated by Girdler had first editions limited to 1000 copies making them a somewhat valuable item dependent upon the careers of the artists. These images are simultaneously simple and complex as a different artist is associated with the particular week or month depending on the calendar. The number of images varies for each calendar due to the way they organize time. The calendars from 1937, -- both from the Chicago Society of Artists and Gutenberg Publishing-- 1939, 1940, and 1947 have a calendar page for each week. This allows the works to be highly interactive, forcing weekly engagement from the user. The calendar from 1941 cuts the number of pages in half as it is organized with two weeks on a single page. The calendar from 1938 has the fewest number of prints as it is a monthly calendar. The calendars from the 1930s are all vertically orientated, whereas all of the calendars from the 1940s are horizontally orientated. This doesn't affect the image but shifts the amount of space the dates receive in a specific calendar. There are also additional pages in some of these calendars due to index pages and cover images.

There are two calendars that are particularly interesting in regard to the calendar making a transformation from commercial, functional object to an aesthetic work of art. The calendars from 1938 and 1941 were printed in such a way that the artistic print is on a separate piece of paper, independent from the dates of the calendar. For those who

owned these calendars, the artistic print was able to be easily removed from the bound calendar and potentially framed. For those who did not own the calendar, they would not know the difference between the print from the calendar or any other print on the basis of origin. The binding of these calendars determines the level of effort required to making a particular calendar page into a print. The calendar from 1938 would have been very easy for the user to manipulate and extract prints from. As previously mentioned, this is the only calendar that is not spiral bound. The fabric mechanism for keeping the pages in place would have been easy to disassemble and be put back together by the user. Due to this ease, the owner of this calendar could remove and display a print at any time, regardless of whether the month it corresponded with was still happening. If one were to do this in the middle of the month, the duality present in these calendars would be invalidated as one can be used the way it was designed without the other. The calendar from 1941 makes the process of removing the prints within it more difficult as it is spiral bound. Removing the prints from the calendar would require a complete disassembling of the calendar, potentially putting some of the other prints and calendar pages in jeopardy. Doing so only makes sense after the year has ended and the calendar has lost its functionality.

In chronological order, the first calendar is the 1937 block print calendar from the Chicago Society of Artists. The calendar has a page for every week of the year, with an extra introductory page and a page crediting the artists whose work the calendar features. The vertically orientated calendar prominently features the print as it gives ample space for the printmaker to work with. Certain pieces like V. M. S. Hannell's *Lunch* (fig. 7) or Carl Hoeckner's *Visions* (fig. 8) take up a great deal of space on the page, whereas works

like Emile J. Grumieaux's *In the Woods* (fig. 9) take up less space as the block carved by the artist is smaller. The ability for each artist to choose the size and aesthetics of the calendar-- within the limits prescribed by the physical object of the paper-- allows for both artistic freedom and marketability. The calendar portion of the calendar is highly designed as well. Depending on the particular week, the name of the month is centered underneath the print, flanked by thin stripes, reminiscent of the staff lines on sheet music. On weeks that contain two separate months, the names of said months are nearly at the edge of the paper with a small section of the lines hitting the edge of the paper with more lines filling the gap in between the two names. The days of the week are encased in between two lines slightly thicker than the ones surrounding the name of the month. The days of the week are separated by a bold dot. All of the text of the calendar portion is written in all caps in a simple, yet energetic font. The numbers corresponding to the days of the week are underneath. They are the largest size and boldest text on the page, making them particularly easy to see from a distance.

Highlights of the 1937 calendar include *Lunch* and *Visions*, an image by V. M. S. Hannell that perfectly encapsulate the rise of industry at the end of the 1930s. The print is of construction workers eating their lunch on scaffolding above the city. Thematically reminiscent of *Lunch atop a Skyscraper* [1932], Hannell's print feels more naturalistic despite it being completely fabricated by the artist. The workers look relaxed despite their altitude while eating their lunch and having conversations. The print's most interesting feature is the use of single point perspective on the scaffolding. It makes the scaffolding appear realistic as it wraps around the building on the left side of the composition. The diagonal formed by the top of the roof of the building is seamlessly continued by the

scaffolding reinforces the eyes motion through the piece. This work sets itself apart aesthetically from other works in the calendar because of its use of negative space. The print does not utilize a border, allowing the white space of the print to be nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the page around it. It also adds to the illusion of the workers being high in the air as there is no indication of the earth below them. This work is in direct contrast to Carl Hoeckner's *Vision*. The work is almost entirely black with small amounts of white to create the illusion of shading. The print can seem somewhat misleading upon first glance as it appears like sharp faces of a cliff edge. When studied further, it becomes clear that the gradient rows of forms in the print are faces. Young and old, the faces look strained. It is somewhat unclear, but it appears that rain is falling on the people in the print. The falling water makes itself clearest on the heads of those in the bottom row. The effect of the rain makes a white strip, the boldest use of white in the entire composition, with small flecks breaking forth giving the appearance of both liquid and motion. The rows become clearly defined by the thin strips of white as they softly ripple with the different heights of the people within them. The bottom row sees the faces looking down with little exposure to light. The middle row has the faces staring straight ahead. The third row is the lightest with the faces turned to the sky with the rain falling upon them. The pattern begins to repeat with the final section in the upper corner of the composition as the faces are as dark as the bottom row and are looking down yet again. Like Hannell, Hoeckner does interesting things with diagonal lines in the composition. He places faint lines of light running from the right to the left that intersect with the waves of faces. The title likely refers to the third row of faces that see the light beams break through the clouds. This work counters many assumptions about block prints due to

the delicate nature of the lines Hoeckner is able to achieve. Aside from the visual differences of tonality and thickness of lines, these pieces are both attached to summer months and reflect that in separate ways. *Lunch* is connected to a week in June. Construction can happen in any month, but it feels fitting for this moment of respite to take place in the summer as it oscillates between stillness and the constant downpour of a summer rain. That motion is seen in *Visions*. Since it is attached to July, it makes sense that the constant mark making in the print would be reminiscent of a summer storm. These works allow the viewer to connect to the emotions that the artist is giving to the work. *Lunch* makes the viewer envision and feel the relief of a mid-day break from doing strenuous work. *Visions* has a sense of reverence and potential redemption that is amplified by the repeating pattern of faces. Both works do not utilize surface level emotions as a way to falsify a connect like a work of kitsch would try to do.

The second calendar in the collection produced in 1937 was by Gutenberg Publishing. This work is different from the rest of the works as it also includes drawings rather than exclusively showing block prints like the other calendars. The introductory text on the 1938 calendar from the Milwaukee based company reveals that this calendar is the first block print calendar produced by them as opposed to them printing calendars from other organizations.<sup>116</sup> The calendar is vertically orientated, organized weekly, and spiral bound much like the CSA calendar for the same year. The calendar is also similar in the way it arranges the calendar in relation to the print as the days of the week are underneath the print, near the bottom of the page. The name of the month is orientated on the right side of the paper without any additional ornamentation. When the week spans

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<sup>116</sup> Gutenberg Publishing, "1938 Block Print Calendar." (Milwaukee WI, 1938).



two months, the second month follows the first, separated by a thick dot. The days of the week are incased in bold lines and mirrors the CSA 1937 calendar as the days of the week are also written in capital letters and separated by dots. In another similarity, the numbers attached to the days of the week are underneath. This calendar has some originality in the fonts it uses. The text of the cover of the calendar evokes a feeling medieval Germany to reinforce the company's branding as a tribute to the inventor of the printing press. The text on the calendar is reminiscent of many art deco fonts and plays with the proportion especially in the numbers. The font is very simple with few flourishes and the more angular numbers being particularly crisp. The print also takes up a similar amount of space in this calendar as it does in the CSA calendar from 1937. An interesting facet of this calendar is that comes with a display mechanism integrated into the calendar. The cardboard backing of the calendar has an additional piece of cardboard adhered to it, turning the piece into a tabletop easel. (fig. 10) The adhered piece has perforations within it to ensure the stability of the calendar when it is resting on a surface. However, the copy of the calendar in the university's collection appears to not have been used in this manner. There is no evidence that the perforation has been broken and the elements to make the work into a tabletop easel has ever been engaged. This raises some interesting questions of how and if this calendar was used. Working off of the theory that this calendar and all of the calendars belonged to C.J. Bulliet, it is likely that he either purchased it to collect work from one or more of the artists featured within it, that he found a different way to display it, or that he originally used it with a different display method then began to use the 1937 CSA calendar instead.

While this calendar is limited in the number of block prints it features, there are still significant works within it, including *February* by Wharton Esherick. (fig. 11) The depicts a tree and a pathway into the woods covered in snow. The title of the work is fitting not only because of the deep winter felt in February, but because this piece is attached to the week in 1937 that included both January and February. The piece is mesmerizing and slightly confusing when thinking about the carving Esherick had to complete to make the work legible, let alone aesthetically pleasing. While it is simple in subject matter, the piece is frenetic as Esherick had to carve such small segments to make the trees appear to be receding into the distance. There is a rhythm to the use of space in the composition. The snow covered leaves seem to reverberate against one another, while the thicker trunks of the trees give the eye a landing spot amongst the chaos. The piece uses the negative to its advantage as the path resolves in the center of the composition, balancing out the beginning of the white path with the darkened corner from the thickest tree trunk. The piece firmly separates itself from the rest of the paper as it is surrounded by thick black border separating the aesthetics from the functional element of the calendar. To be truly understood formally, the work requires a great deal of investigation and contemplation. This quality forces the work to be abstract at points, with the eye making sense of the pattern. Dismissing it as another winter scene prevents the rhythmic qualities to be fully appreciated as it would be if the work stood alone as a solitary print.

The two calendars from 1937 were relatively cheap, costing \$1.00 for the calendar produced by the Chicago Society of Artists and \$1.50 for the calendar from Gutenberg

Publishing.<sup>117</sup> Inflation has skyrocketed since 1937. In 2021, the CSA calendar would cost approximately \$18.39, and the Gutenberg Publishing calendar would cost \$27.59, both values showing how much things have changed in the last eighty-four years. Despite the inflation, these calendars would be affordable in a contemporary context. A review in the journal *Parnassus* compares the two calendars without telling the viewer which one they should purchase but rather writing “It would be hard to choose between these admirable calendars, but that is really not necessary, as everybody can use at least two calendars, and those interested in contemporary American prints will want both.”<sup>118</sup> This review gives proof to the fact that these calendars were being sold in the same regional market based around Chicago. This is another point that helps to confirm the theory that the calendars belonged to C.J. Bulliet.

The 1938 calendar from Gutenberg Publishing is drastically different from the 1937 edition. It is not a spiral bound calendar nor is it a weekly calendar. The calendar is organized monthly. This unfortunately means less art for the owner of the calendar, but it allows for each print to be an actual block print which is significant since calendar is one of two in the collection that is able to separate the work of art from the calendar easily. The print itself is printed on a white piece that varies in size depending on the actual print. For certain works, the printed page is the same width as the page and cropped short enough that just the calendar portion is left visible. The backing piece with the calendar information is a soft grey with black text printed on it. The font used on the calendar is consistent with the 1937 calendar. The date portion of the calendar itself is different as it

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<sup>117</sup>A. Philip McMahon, “Print Calendars. American Block Print Calendar, 1937,” *Parnassus* 9, no. 1 (1937): p. 43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/771192>.

<sup>118</sup>McMahon, “Print Calendars. American Block Print Calendar, 1937.”

includes the entire month on a single page. The month is listed on the far right with the days of the week listed below starting with Sunday. The days of the week stay static from month to month with the numbers being placed within four lines below. This calendar features prominent holidays and celebrations being added to the calendar as well as giving the location of the artist whereas the previous two calendars just give the title and artist's name.

A dynamic piece from the 1938 calendar is Ernest A. Pickup's *Neighbors*. (fig. 12) The print shows a farmer with his donkeys plowing the field in the early morning light. The farmer is not alone in this task as he sees the neighboring farmer also plowing his field. The work is an earnest portrayal of agricultural work and comradery amongst neighbors. Pickup's depiction of the scene does not offer any visual platitudes of provincial life, but rather an image of solidarity within the struggle. Nothing in the picture implies that farming is easy work; it requires difficult hours and constant attention for a product that can be ruined by a variety of factors. Pickup is able to create a great deal of nuance in the print through linear density. Horizontal lines are the most represented line in the piece as they are used to construct the sky, taking up more than half of the composition. Pickup is effective in making the viewer feel like the new light of the sun is just breaking over the hills as the lines are thinner and more isolated from one another. The lines get denser and denser further into the stratosphere, even converging to make dark clouds. The light from the rising sun faintly gives details to the work the farmers are doing. The peaks of the mounds of dirt formed by the plowing are lit with the rest cast in a dramatic shadow. The same can be said for the donkeys and the farmer himself, each receiving a little more than an outline of white to demarcate their

forms. The neighboring farmer receives the same treatment on his hill alone, existing in the print only as a silhouette. There's a sense of ritual and joy within the stances of these two men. They likely take the time to stop and wave at one another whenever the opportunity arises. This is seen in the farmer closest to the viewer as he slightly leans back, easing into the familiar motion of waving. The two mirror one another as a visual sign of their solidarity. The sense of joy in this work is tangible, yet it comes with a sense of struggle. The work shows the two farmers already accomplishing a significant amount of work by the time the sun is visible in the sky. There is an inherent struggle to get to the place of joy, giving the piece substance.

The 1939 vertically orientated, spiral bound calendar is visually similar to the three calendars that preceded it. The print takes up the majority of the paper with the calendar portion relegated to the bottom fourth of the page. This calendar arranges the information differently than the others from the 1930s as the month and year are written perpendicular to the days of the week. The days then are written in a single column with the numbers beside them. The month and the year are written with the same boldness as the numbers. This leaves each weekly page with a great deal of unutilized space in the lower left corner of the page. As the prints vary in size, certain weeks feel particularly unbalanced.

Certain works in this calendar feel particularly emotional while others are more formalist abstractions. A. Raymond Katz's *Unemployed* (fig. 13) is harrowing. Those who purchased and used this calendar would have been familiar if not directly affected by the stock market crash and the great depression happening just ten years earlier. The print is horizontally orientated and takes up a significant amount of space on the page. The

image centers around a set of grieving parents. By the title, we know that the father has lost his job and is mournful and worried about how to support his family. Katz registers this pain by showing the father in the middle of actively crying, wiping tears from his face. The mother crouches over him, attempting to comfort him by wrapping her arm around him while she tries to mask her own emotions by covering her mouth. As the couple is in the center, their children and neighbors are oblivious to the catastrophe occurring. The child on the right side of the composition begins to walk out of view with a hot meal, potentially their last one for a while. The other child, just a baby, is crawling to the back wall of the home, keeping themselves occupied while their parents deal with the immediate aftermath of losing the family's income. The scene also depicts neighbors outside of the window; two men, appearing to be nicely dressed and denoting some wealth, walk past having their own conversations about the world outside. Katz further complicates the situation and the struggle that this family will endure by subtly alluding to the fact that this family is actively growing. Due to her stance and the soft curvature of her dress around the abdomen it can be assumed that the woman is pregnant with the newest child coming soon. Compounded by the fact that the only light is a candle, and the baby is crawling around without diapers, this family was already struggling. The print does not try to solve this struggle, but rather asks the viewer to sit in the pain felt by this family, potentially allowing them to be empathetic to those struggling in their own lives.

While *Unemployed* is very figural, works like Karl Gasslander's *Controlled Movement* (fig. 14) is completely abstracted. The print is a juxtaposition of different lines and shapes, with dots and crosshatches. The piece is evocative of experimentation as the forms intersecting do not necessarily work with one another. However, the shapes play

off of one another becoming cacophonous as they are each independent, offering their own type of shape and mark making to the composition. The piece has a focal point on the center line of the black circle hitting that upper third. In an odd way, the piece with its constant energy is reminiscent of a contemporary city. The gridded rectangular shapes and the forms with dots appear like skyscrapers with the sun peaking over. Abstraction in a work is automatically a critique of figural and narrative art and thus introduces tension in addition to the tension created by the incongruent shapes and patterns that comprise the composition. Works like this and its abstraction would be familiar to some yet would be an excellent introduction to more modern works for many.

The 1940 calendar from CSA is the first of the horizontally oriented calendars donated by Catherine Girdler. The piece begins with a brief history of block printing and its origin in China and its expansion to the rest of the world.<sup>119</sup> With this introduction, the piece also sets itself apart aesthetically by using a pale blue ink for the weekly calendar portion to juxtapose the black ink used for the artistic prints. The page is organized with the print on the left side of the page. The calendar is on the right side beginning about halfway down the page. The month is written to be the same width as the year below it. The days of the week are written out with like proper nouns with only the first letter capitalized. Like many of the other calendars, the numbers are the boldest form of text on the page. Unfortunately, this piece contains significant errors not seen in the other calendars and weathering of the pages. This is not to say that other copies of the calendars do not contain these errors, but that those errors are not reflected in the

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<sup>119</sup> Chicago Society of Artists, "1940 Block Print Calendar." Chicago, IL, 1940.

university's collection. Due to time, the calendar pages have begun to yellow as well as ink from one print transferring to the back of the page that it is resting against. The biggest issue is the misprinting of several pages. Pages for Ethel Spear's *Winter Scene* (fig. 15) and John F. Stenvall's *Ancestors* (fig. 16) are printed completely upside down making them difficult to display when the calendar was in use.

One of the most striking works from the calendar is Kathleen Blackshear's *Tommy*. (fig. 17) The piece is a simple scene of a Black man standing outside of a storefront. The print excels in several ways. The titular Tommy is the focal point of the image boldly situated in a contrapposto stance evocative of classical Greek sculptures. The image feels joyful as Blackshear juxtaposes patterns and textures. Through these patterns, Blackshear is able to visually create different tones in the work despite only using black ink. The striping on the store's banner feels like with its vertical lines breaking up the pattern while the stripes on the man's shirt register as darker because they are bolder. This is in contrast with the same shirt and the pants Tommy is wearing becoming similar shades despite being different, bold patterns. An interesting detail in the work is the piece of paper in his back pocket. Either a receipt or a ticket, allows the viewer, especially those who owned the calendar and used it in 1940, to give the man a complex narrative and backstory. In one created narrative, the paper is a receipt for the store he stands in front of potentially purchasing the hat he's wearing or some other good hidden from view. Another potential story is that the paper is a ticket for the young man to see a film or play at the neighboring theater "The Popular." Both of these are just theories as I was unable to discern the role "The Popular" had in Chicago if it is in fact a real store or venue. Blackshear's involvement in the calendar makes it even more likely



that the calendar did belong to C.J. Bulliet. Bulliet being an art critic in Chicago was aware of Blackshear's work, even applauding the artist's depictions of Black Americans.<sup>120</sup>

The 1941 calendar stands alone in several ways. Most notably, this is the only calendar to feature colored prints. It is the only calendar in this group that was produced by United American Artists and is the only calendar to be organized into bi-weekly segments. President Morris Topchevsky states in the introduction to the calendar that the works within in are mostly centered around the industry present in Chicago.<sup>121</sup> While showcasing the efforts of the United Office and Professional Workers of America, C.I.O, Topchevsky also makes it clear that the calendar is for the working class writing, "this calendar makes it possible for the average worker from the office, shop, or factory to procure works of art at a very low price."<sup>122</sup> As previously mentioned, this calendar prints the dates on one page with the artistic print on a separate page both spiral bound. The calendar is a mid-tone grey with pulpy tan flecks embedded in it. The calendar is printed on the right side of the page in a vertical format, almost the exact same as the 1940 CSA calendar, the only differences being the font and color of the ink with the font used in the 1941 calendar registering as more playful.

Though not every work is printed in color, those that are become focal points of the calendar. Cliffla Corson's *Oil Refinery Worker* (fig. 18) is a highlight. Not only does the piece assert itself as a work of art through the color and the individual page it is

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<sup>120</sup> Susan Weininger and Lisa Meyerowitz, "Kathleen Blackshear," Kathleen Blackshear | Artists | Modernism in the New City: Chicago Artists, 1920-1950, accessed 2021, [http://www.chicagomodern.org/artists/kathleen\\_blackshear/](http://www.chicagomodern.org/artists/kathleen_blackshear/).

<sup>121</sup> United American Artists, "1941 Block Print Calendar." Chicago, IL, 1941.

<sup>122</sup> United American Artists, "1941 Block Print Calendar."

printed on, but this work, and each print in the calendar are signed and dated by the artist. When removed from the calendar, the print fully exists on its own as a work of art. The piece is fairly simple, just using red, yellow, blue, and black ink to depict a worker actively refining oil. Yet it is the qualities of the colors used and the composition that make the work special. The print shows a worker, adjusting some machinery while positioned atop a large tube, likely used in transporting oil. The tube shoots swiftly towards the background, revealing the larger structures shaded in blue and black. Starting with the colors, none of them are too saturated to make the work seem obnoxious. The red operates more like a compositional tool than as a way to shade particular forms. As it is the most sparingly used color, red leads the viewer from the middle of the composition to the right bottom corner. Corson also uses it in interesting ways as some of the rivets are printed in red. The blue is almost exclusively used as a shading device, giving dimension to both the worker's hat and the presumed metal buildings in the background. The yellow operates as a mid-tone highlight and it allows Corson to decide how bright something should be in the print. By placing the refinery worker so prominently in the foreground of the piece, Corson is making a statement aligned with the pro-union message of the calendar. Their position alludes to the fact that the soaring infrastructure and progress in the background has not magically appeared, it is all because of the labor of the refinery worker.

The last calendar included is the 1947 CSA block print calendar. The piece is horizontally orientated, spiral bound, and organized into weekly calendar pages. This piece differs visually through the variety of fonts used. The artist and title of the work are written below the print. The title is written in all caps, while the artist's name follows

standard capitalization practices. The font is the same as the font used for the days of the week which are also written exclusively in capital letters. The month is written above the days of the week in a bolded, italicized font that is different from any other font used on the page. The month is also separated from the week by a thin line and followed by a series of dots, depending on the length of the month's name.

The pieces in this work tend to be fairly simple prints, yet many of them carry an emotional weight. Two pieces for weeks in the fall express a sense of isolation and loneliness many feel as the days grow shorter. The first is Laura Van Pappelendam's *In the Living Room*. (fig. 19) The artwork is restrained in terms of what can be achieved in block printing. It centers around a woman appearing to tinker with the innerworkings of a piano while a group plays polo outside. The work is primarily black, with the forms created by thin white absences in the ink. Van Pappelendam's allows the forms to breathe as she loosely articulates them, giving a loose impression of the human form and allowing the viewer to construct the rest. Neither arm is fully illustrated nor is the interior she is confined in, only a weak and broken line in the bottom right of the composition indicates a border between the inside and outside. Even the game outside is not fully rendered as the horses and the men upon them seem choppy as they are moving too quickly to be registered. Van Pappelendam's does take great care to depict the architecture of the piano. The legs and the mechanisms for the foot pedals are rigid as they appear in real life. The piece speaks to a great deal of isolation that many women felt and still feel when they are relegated to domestic interiors. However, this isolation might be a needed respite for this woman. Her head is pointed down alluding to the possibility that she is uninterested in polo and devoted to the upkeep of the piano.

Another work that shows this loneliness is Tunis Ponsen's *Late Afternoon*. (fig. 20) The print shows an individual walking alone out of a seemingly abandoned city. While there are many ways one can read the presence of white in the print, the fact that this corresponds to a week where November and December overlap makes the idea that the person is walking through snow a plausible one. There are buildings extending through the middle of the composition that stand at a distance from both the viewer and the individual walking. The person walking is heading for the break in the buildings indicated by the small sliver of space and the building in the foreground that has become a silhouette. Another strength of the piece is the implied light sources. While it is not realized in color or tone due to the nature of using one color of ink, Ponsen creates the presence of light through including shadows. The light in the scene is near and it is bright as all of the shadows in the work are harsh and long. The light post is not present in the print, but its shadow extends well into it, breaking up the monotony of the field of white in the middle of the work. The same can be said for the person trudging along. They are small in comparison to the buildings, but the shadow they cast is long, indicating that the light source is low in the sky. There is also a sense of pain with the isolation with this work. While the form is solid without many details, it can be inferred that there is a pain or weariness within them. They are bent over, likely with their arms crossed in an attempt to keep warm and taking wide strides to get where they are going as quick as possible. The isolation is reinforced in this posture as there is no one around to assist in his journey.

The lengthy visual analysis is provided to prove that these works are thematically and aesthetically relevant as works of art independent from the functionality of the

calendars that they are a part of. The prints included are emotional, being able to convey deep sadness and lighthearted joy that is deeper than just surface level, kitschy sentimentality. The calendars found in the university's collection would have likely been seen as functional objects for Dewey, been praised by Morris, and likely completely overlooked by members of the Hudson River School. The use of artistic grade paper, the prints, the aesthetic integrity, as well as the branding of the calendars helps to position them as pieces of art rather than simply functional calendars. The functionality of the work is not necessarily unimportant, but the works all state in their brief introductions that they were for the purpose of bringing art into the lives of everyday people, thus removing the financial barrier of collecting art. The fact that they have been so carefully preserved by their original owner and donated to the university to care for them further reinforces the idea of these works being art. Most importantly, they were created by artists to be considered art, while having a democratic reach as they were inexpensive. These reasons declare that these calendars are works of art. Yes, they were once calendars that served a function. But now that their period of usefulness as calendars has expired, they can be viewed as works of art first.

## CALENDARS AS PARTICIPATORY AND INTERACTIVE ART

The user is required to do more than just look in regard to a calendar. By using the calendar for its intended purposes as a tool for organization, the owner of said calendar become a collaborator with the object. Because they are an ordinary part of many people's daily lives, calendars lack the qualities of a spectacle; the user knows they have the power to intervene and make the object work for them. This contrasts the standard role as viewers of a spectacle prescribed to arts audiences. Looking at a work of art can be a rich experience, sometimes garnering a physiological response. More often than not, looking at works of art either in a seat at a theater or in a museum the viewer is kept at a distance from the work of art without much agency concerning their encounter with the work. Jacques Rancière writes in "The Emancipated Spectator" that:

Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle. And looking is a bad thing for two reasons. First, looking is deemed the opposite of knowing. It means standing before an appearance without knowing the conditions which produced that appearance or the reality that lies behind it. Second, looking is deemed the opposite of acting. He who looks at the spectacle remains motionless in his seat, lacking any power of intervention. Being a spectator means being passive. The spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as he is separated from the possibility of acting.<sup>123</sup>

In his essay, Rancière is primarily discussing the role of the audience in theater.

However, his ideas about spectatorship are applicable in many art encounters since spectatorship is expected, leaving the audience powerless to affect the experience in any

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<sup>123</sup>Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum*, March 2007, <https://www.artforum.com/print/200703/the-emancipated-spectator-12847>, 272.

way. In regard to audiences in museums, there is an inherent apprehension of interacting with art, even if participation was something the artist intended. This stems from several different anxieties present in the audience: a fear of breaking something priceless, a fear of gallery attendants gently reprimanding them, a fear of looking foolish in front of others in the gallery, and other more minute fears. Most of these worries are valid as no one wants to be corrected or have to deal with the guilt of potentially ruining a priceless work of art. However, the perception that museums are for those who already know about the art within it is continually perpetuated. With it, stereotypes of how to dress and act inside of a museum continue as people outside of the art world can feel like museums are restrictive, elitist places. One way that these anxieties manifest in museums and galleries is when participative and interactive art is exhibited as many- I included- are continuously told both in pop culture and in arts institutions that art is simply to be viewed. The urge of the artist to incorporate audience interaction into a work of art has been well documented since the 1960s. This rise in the interplay between artist, audience, and object-- especially in American art --is a result of “the wave of democratic populism that sent citizens out into the streets to campaign for justice, equality, and the empowerment of disenfranchised people.”<sup>124</sup> Participation in activism was visible throughout the 60s, 70s, and 80s, waning slightly in the 90s and 2000s, ultimately resurfacing to a national level in the 2010s with the Occupy and Black Lives Matters movements up into the 2020s. There is a potential for audience participation to feel approachable for audiences again. However, those who participate in social movements

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<sup>124</sup> Kelly Baum, “The Raw and the Cooked: Unfinishedness in Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Art,” in *Unfinished* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 213.

and museum goers have some overlap, but do not consist of entirely the same people, allowing some museum audiences to still feel apprehensive about their participation. Activism in art is not strictly needed for participatory works: Robert Morris' 1971 retrospective was themed focused on largely apolitical interactive forms that heavily participated in, forcing the show to be closed after five days due to several injuries sustained<sup>125</sup> by the audience's over-exuberance for Morris' tunnels and structures.<sup>126</sup> The level of participation in Morris' works is the exception not the rule; a variety of works from different cultures and movements require participation, yet this can be worrisome to an audience member; any piece that challenges the role of museum goer that they already hesitantly filling can cause confusion and apprehension to the point of not engaging fully with the work. Lack of engagement can be detrimental to any work, but crucially damaging to works like so called "relational aesthetics" art that relies on audience participation. Nicholas Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as "an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and private symbolic space."<sup>127</sup> Bourriaud uses the term to describe works created in the 1990s that focus on the relationship between the artwork and its audience, the audience's relationship with the artist, or of the relationships between the audience members themselves. These examples reinforce the lineage of participation in recent western art history.

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<sup>125</sup> Catherine Wood, "The Rules of Engagement: Displaced Figuration in Robert Morris' Mise-En-Scene," in *The "Do-It-Yourself" Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2012), 124.

<sup>126</sup> Wood, "The Rules of Engagement," 122.

<sup>127</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, "Relational Aesthetics," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London, UK: Whitechapel, 2006), 160.



Many have rightfully claimed that these works, including pieces of relational aesthetics and DIY artworks, are not bound by their visual aesthetics, but by the relationships created by the artists through the events they plan or the objects they create.<sup>128</sup> Works from artists like Yoko Ono, Lygia Clark, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres often require the audience's participation and interaction across several decades, including the 1990s. Works from these artists, and others employing relational and participatory techniques also involve time into their works,<sup>129</sup> as a condition of the work is creating a relationship within a particular moment often under some time restriction. Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* from 1964 consists of several performances of Ono sitting on an empty stage, inviting the audience to come cut pieces of her clothing.<sup>130</sup> (fig. 21) One of the performances in New York City quickly turned into an assault on the artist as audience members decide to cut her undergarments instead of just her clothing.<sup>131</sup> Ono is unable to respond appropriately as the performance is predicated on her inaction to what is being done to her.<sup>132</sup> The work creates a relationship between the artist and the individual participant and between the members of the audience themselves as cutting someone's clothing is an odd and intimate occurrence that will create some kind of bond for any and all involved. The participation and interaction of the audience is crucial to the execution of the work since the piece would consist of Ono sitting alone on a stage without their involvement. However, *Cut Piece* shows that the audience can be antagonistic to the artist and may not be able to be trusted. This is especially true for Ono

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<sup>128</sup> Anna Dezeuze, "An Introduction to the 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork," in *The "Do-It-Yourself" Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>129</sup> Dezeuze, "An Introduction to the 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork," 7.

<sup>130</sup> Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's Cut Piece: From Text to Performance and Back Again," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 30, no. 3 (2008): pp. 81-93, <https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj.2008.30.3.81>, 81.

<sup>131</sup> Concannon, "Yoko Ono's Cut Piece," 81.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

and other female performance artists, as performers like Marina Abramovic have also had their safety threatened by members of the audience<sup>133</sup> that they are in supposed collaboration with. For Ono, her safety is compromised when participants decided to cut pieces of her undergarments as opposed to just cutting her clothing. This leaves her visibly trying to conceal her naked body whilst attempting to complete the work with the inaction she envisioned for it. For Abramovic, the audience's participation and interaction has jeopardized both her safety and the work she is attempting to perform. Her 1974 piece *Rhythm 5* is a performance where the artist lies motionless within the outline of a star that has been set on fire. (fig. 22) The fire surrounding her consumed all of the oxygen that Abramovic needed to remain conscious during the work.<sup>134</sup> The audience watching the work pull Abramovic's unconscious body from the flames, saving her life, but ending the work.<sup>135</sup> These examples show inherent unpredictability of an audience as participation creates the possibility of harming the work and the artist. In contrast to Ono's performance based works, artists like Lygia Clark and Felix Gonzalez-Torres create participation based works that are centered around the aesthetic object. Clark wrote in a 1968 letter to fellow Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica, "the object for me has lost its significance, and if I still use it, it is so that it becomes a mediator for participation,"<sup>136</sup> and "in all that I do, there really is the necessity of the human body."<sup>137</sup> Clark viewed a large portion, if not all of her work, through the lens participation and how the audience can activate art through interaction. Clark's *Bichos* do just this as they were designed to

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<sup>133</sup> Frazer Ward, "Marina Abramovic: Approaching Zero," in *The "Do-It-Yourself" Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2012), 137.

<sup>134</sup> Ward, "Marina Abramovic: Approaching Zero," 134.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>136</sup> Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica, "Letters// 1968-69," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London, UK: Whitechapel, 2006), 110.

<sup>137</sup> Clark and Oiticica, "Letters// 1968-69," 110.

force the viewer to interact with small metal sculptures with free flowing lines and structures. (fig. 23) Yet, she does not conceal the fact that these pieces are meant to move as the hinges are structurally crucial and visually accentuated.<sup>138</sup> The audience is required to transform them and shape them into several somewhat predestined shapes in any way they see fit as “the work of art is not the viewing of the sculpture itself, but one’s participation with it.”<sup>139</sup> The work uses participation to force the viewer to interrogate their relationship with art and the various functional objects in their own lives in a more aesthetic manner than the objects exhibited by the minimalists. The *Bicho*, unfortunately oppose the artist’s intentions when exhibited due to their scarcity after the artist’s death. They are displayed like sculptures or pieces of ephemera,<sup>140</sup> rather than works for the audience manipulate as she intended. Walter Benjamin argues that the aura is the intangible quality that is imbedded in a work of art by the artist that disappears if the work is mechanically produced.<sup>141</sup> Since Clark created these works, they are instilled with said aura, thus giving each object an element of originality despite being created as a group. The aura and scarcity of a work somewhat increases the monetary value of a work and the investment an institution has in a particular piece, especially after an artist is no longer living. The urge to protect these works is a valid one, yet it invalidates the will of the artist, acting in a way that runs counter to the explicit intentions of the artist. Felix Gonzalez-Torres challenges this conflict between the aura and audience participation as he created works to be manipulated by the audience. Many of Gonzalez-Torres’ interactive works of relational aesthetics consists of piles or sheets of small shiny pieces

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<sup>138</sup> Maya Jiménez, “Lygia Clark, *Bicho*,” Khan Academy (Khan Academy, 2017), <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/latin-america-modernism/constructivism/a/lygia-clark-bicho>.

<sup>139</sup> Jiménez, “Lygia Clark, *Bicho*,”

<sup>140</sup> Baum, “The Raw and the Cooked,” 215.

<sup>141</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 219-220.

of candy meant to represent a person or concept. Works like *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* consists of a mound of candy in the corner of the gallery, mirroring the *Fat Corners* of Joseph Beuys. (fig. 24) The piece is an abstracted portrait of Gonzalez-Torres' partner Ross, who died of AIDS in 1991.<sup>142</sup> We know this because the pile is installed to weigh exactly 175 Pounds, Ross' "ideal weight."<sup>143</sup> The audience is invited to take a piece of candy from the pile and reflect on the generous life of Ross and his impending deterioration and death. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* is relational in the way it mirrors the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>144</sup> Gonzalez-Torres creates the work as a depiction of Ross to be disseminated and consumed like the body of Christ at a time when conservative Christians were actively preventing information about the spread of AIDS the ability to educate the public.<sup>145</sup> The participant acts like those in power at the height of the AIDS crisis as when they take a piece of candy, the conceptual representation of Ross is destroyed because of their action. The relationship created between the audience and the work takes on political undercurrents. The audience is forced to question their role in the oppression of groups that they may not belong to as those in power aided in the destruction of those suffering with AIDS. The audience is destroying the sculpture by taking the candy, like those in power during the AIDS crisis destroyed lives by preventing the spread of information. Unlike Clark's *Bichos*, Gonzalez-Torres' works combat the issue of audience intervention and the aura by imbuing the formal elements of many of his pieces of relational aesthetics with a conceptual framework as he stipulated that his candy sculptures are to be replenished by

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<sup>142</sup> Kelly Baum, "Works in the Exhibition: *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*," *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*, 292.

<sup>143</sup> Baum, "Works in the Exhibition: *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*," 292.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 292.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 292.

the institution exhibiting his work on a regular basis.<sup>146</sup> These works and countless others highlight the artist's shifting role: they can act as a scientist, setting up conditions for an experiment, or as a facilitator for dialog and action between audience and object. Works of interactive and relational art operate in the post-minimalist tradition of reflecting and critiquing structures of power in our society. These works require the audience to be uncomfortable whilst confronting the ideas that they have been conditioned to believe, and to an extent the authority that dictates said ideas.<sup>147</sup> Challenging these ideas in the somewhat safe space of the gallery can allow the participant to be more willing to challenge ideas outside of the gallery and to make change in their daily lives. It isn't necessarily the case but can be a lofty goal of some of these relational and participatory works.

Participatory works can cause anxieties in the audience that will potentially force them to disengage with the art. Most of these issues likely stem from not being informed of their intended role in the work. The role of the curator and exhibition designer are crucial when it comes to participatory pieces: by using didactic information and the architecture of the gallery, interaction with a work can almost be forced. However, interaction will always be uncomfortable and will be avoided by some audience members. Works like *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres confronts the staunch rule that one is unable to touch the art and raises the stakes by asking the participant to touch, take, and eat the artwork likely moments after they saw a sign stating that eating is not allowed in the gallery. Other pieces like Jitish Kallat's

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<sup>146</sup> Baum, "Works in the Exhibition: *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*," 292.

<sup>147</sup> Bourriaud, "Relational Aesthetics," 167.

*Covering Letter* (fig. 25) allow the audience to interact without a physical object to easily be touched. The piece consists of the projection of a letter written by Gandhi to Hitler, desperately asking him to act in the spirit of friendship and peace to prevent the disaster that is World War II onto a screen of mist. The piece is designed to have the viewer interact with it both by reading the letter and by exiting the gallery the work is isolated in through the mist, having the viewer physically be covered by the letter. The work utilizes the architecture in the gallery to force the viewer to interact with the work, but even that can fail. By refusing to exit through the work as the artist intended, the audience is preventing the work from being completed as the artist intended. These works, and many other interactive works, benefit greatly from experiencing it around others. Humans often don't want to be the first to do something, especially something they are conditioned not to do like touching art. By seeing someone else interfere with the work and not be reprimanded for it makes the action safe for others in the gallery. Seeing this action helps to remove the sense of preciousness that has been ascribed to art.

Up to this point, I have used interaction and participation interchangeably. Yet, further distinction is necessary. In the introduction to her book, *The 'do-it-yourself' artwork: Participation from Fluxus to new media*, Anna Dezeuze explains that the difference lies in the way the audience engages with the formal elements of the work.<sup>148</sup> A work is interactive when a work is not changed formally,<sup>149</sup> participatory works exist when the formal elements of the work are changed by the audience.<sup>150</sup> These descriptors, however, are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. Works like Ono's *Cut Piece* are

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<sup>148</sup> Dezeuze, "An Introduction to the 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork," 6.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 6.

participatory as the formal elements of the work, like clothing, are affected by the audience's involvement. Clark's *Bichos* and Kallat's *Covering Letter* are interactive, since the audience does not create a lasting change to the foundational formal elements of the work. Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* could easily exist as both a participatory and interactive work. The work is formally changed as the viewer takes a piece of candy and the pile diminishes. Since the work is replenished daily to a set weight, the work is temporarily participatory and interactive during the period when the work is exposed to the public and not replenished. These distinctions are important when discussing work relying on audience interventions as knowing what is expected of them can help the audience to interact in the way that the artist intended.

Calendars operate in the same fashion as the works listed above in terms of creating relationships and requiring the audience member to interact and participate. As previously mentioned, calendars, by definition, belong in the category of kitsch; for the most part, they are mass produced on subpar paper and feature images meant to get a quick chuckle out of the viewer. They can also fall into propaganda as Greenberg claims in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' and are definitively not art in the critic's eyes. However, calendars can and should be closely examined as high art objects. Calendars do not fit into Greenberg's narrow definition of high art. Yet, when they are produced as works of art paired with the functional element of the calendar, they can be considered art by Adorno's argument of the lighthearted nature of art. This also can be coupled with Solomon's distinction that kitsch is not bad art aesthetically, but rather attacked for its lack of critique and tension.<sup>151</sup> Calendars have been interactive and participatory since

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<sup>151</sup> Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality," 5.

their inception, it is relevant to investigate them as such because they are widely ignored as cultural objects when actively being used. The action that a work of participatory art is asking of the viewer is normalized when they are interacting with a calendar. By revealing that these somewhat radical behaviors towards art are not that radical can potentially influence those opposed to art to reconsider their position. This is where a distinction must be made; the calendars of television characters or stereotypical beaches mass produced for mall kiosks likely shouldn't be viewed as high art objects because they are made with solely as commercial objects containing the surface level emotions of kitsch without any conflict or critique in the aesthetic or the formal elements of the calendar. Yet, any calendar with an image attached to a range of dates that is physically printed can be discussed under the framework of participatory art because the participatory and interactive elements of a calendar are independent of the images in it and more concerned with the form. This analysis is not conclusive for all calendars as some calendars like those previously discussed by Phoebe Wahl are not participatory or interactive since they do not have pages to be flipped, nor do they have spaces for the user to plan and write upon the calendar.

Calendars are inherently interactive objects. As proposed by Deuze, interaction with a work of art is any intervention that does not change the formal elements of the piece. Collaborative interactive actions that one can take with a calendar exist as looking at the calendar and turning the pages of the calendar. Looking at the pages of a calendar is an action rooted in spectatorship. This looking automatically becomes applicable to the viewer's life as those in the same country arrange their lives using the same base



calendar. The calendar most used globally is the Gregorian calendar.<sup>152</sup> Calendars as functional objects are tied to nature, prompting the observation of natural signs to anticipate the changing of the seasons.<sup>153</sup> With perception being at the core of calendars, the act of looking does not just end at the work like it would with a traditional painting or sculpture. Looking at a calendar forces the viewer to begin to think about the upcoming events and obligations in their own lives, even prompting them to begin to plan for the days ahead. The second interactive action one can take when observing a calendar is flipping the page. Due to the nature of the work, calendars are organized and sold by the progression of time. They can contain the year in monthly, bi-weekly, weekly, or daily segments. The more divided the units of time are, the more the viewer is forced to interact with the piece to maintain its relevancy and functionality to reflect the current day, week, or month. Both of these actions-looking and flipping the pages of the calendar- are interactive rather than participatory as the formal quality of the work are not affected by the actions performed upon the calendar.

Calendars are at their most functional when the owner is in active participation with the object. By using the calendar to plan for and record certain event, the owner is changing the formal aesthetics of the calendar. They become just as much of an artist in the work as the designer and artist who created the work to be manufactured. By using and interacting with a calendar in the way it is intended, the object becomes a written record of one's past actions and how they reflect on their future. This required interaction helps to advance the conceptualization of the physical calendar as an artistic object.

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<sup>152</sup> Vigdis Hocken, "The Gregorian Calendar," timeanddate.com, accessed 2021, <https://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/gregorian-calendar.html>.

<sup>153</sup> Richards, "The Calendar," 7.

Though Benjamin was clear in his assertion that mechanically produced objects lacked an individual aura associated with said work,<sup>154</sup> the aura of a work can potentially be created and restored. He writes: “in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced.”<sup>155</sup> By using the calendar for its functional qualities- for writing notes, planning events, and circling important days- the calendar as an aesthetic object becomes personalized and individualized and by Benjamin’s logic, regains the aura lost during its mechanical production. This regaining of a unique aura through interaction and participation further solidifies that calendars have the potential to be seen as art. The collaboration differentiates a specific calendar from all others, even the other calendars that were printed and produced at the exact time.

It can also be argued that calendars can be analyzed under the framework of relational aesthetics and its ties to “social context”<sup>156</sup> of human relationships.<sup>157</sup> In some way, calendars are a tool to aid in the facilitation of relationships. By remembering certain events, dates, and anniversaries, relationships operate smoother as people feel validated as important aspects of lives of the people around them are not forgotten. Calendars also allow the user to plan in a variety of ways that lets them come across to others as punctual and dependable, making them easier to work and live with. There is also a relationship created between the user and the calendar itself. One aspect of this relationship can tie back to the aesthetics of the calendar itself as many choose a specific theme or genre of images to somehow shape their year or reinforce their particular tastes.

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<sup>154</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 219.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

<sup>156</sup> Bourriaud, “Relational Aesthetics,” 160.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

The other aspect of this relationship is an authoritative one; a calendar is a fairly accurate record of the days and general events of the year that can be depended upon, but it is also an authority on how the user must live their life on a particular day or week.

Unlike many pieces of relational aesthetics, a calendar is interacted with in the home or the office rather than in an art institution like a museum or gallery. The apprehension of interacting with an artistic work is completely removed in the context of the calendar because they are framed as an organizational tool rather than an aesthetic object. It is also important to note that many in American society are taught and somewhat conditioned to know how to use calendars. This allows for the user to know how to use the calendar with little apprehension. In some cases, an opposite anxiety can be felt when the user is not using the calendar either enough or at all. This anxiety likely stems more from a financial perspective of the user wasting money for not using the calendar as a tool enough. Calendars are easily and effectively used for many individuals, without any additional information needed unlike encountering a work of relational aesthetic in a gallery or museums.

In viewing them as interactive, participatory works of relational aesthetics, calendars are invalidated in the same way as participatory works if they are not used the way that they are designed. It forces them to exist as purely aesthetic and lose any functional element. Deuze describes this as “when a participatory work is exhibited as a traditional form of painting or sculpture that cannot be touched, or presented as a performance to be watched by an audience, it is deprived of its central defining feature: the do-it-yourself artwork is a practice that exists *only* through a potential

participation.”<sup>158</sup> A calendar’s usefulness is more restricted than other art forms and mediums because their functionality is dependent on being used within a certain window of time. Yet, this is similar to works of relational aesthetics and performance based works as they are also bound by the restrictive quality of the moment of encounter. The main difference is that they- especially object based works like *Bichos* or *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*- can be repeatedly experienced, whereas the calendar cannot be encountered in the present moment after the unit of time it represents has passed. Looking at contemporary as aesthetic objects with interactive and participatory elements has the potential to expand the definition of what types of works can viewed under the framework of relational aesthetics.

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<sup>158</sup> Dezeuze, “An Introduction to the ‘Do-It-Yourself’ Artwork,” 3-4.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis began as a curatorial exercise. I began by taking a deeper look into the University of Louisville's print collection to formulate something that would be both critically and aesthetically interesting. The collection is full of beautiful works, but from the beginning of my search the block print calendars caught my attention. This thesis is not about block printing making as an artistic medium, but rather is about focusing on an object that is commonly infused with art but is never considered as such and investigating different methods of validating it as an art object.

This investigation is completed through the theories of kitsch, theories about the role of art in the home, and theories about participatory and interactive works. The portion on kitsch relies heavily on the theories of Greenberg, Adorno, Benjamin, and Solomon to weave together arguments both against and for Kitsch. All of the theorists against kitsch disavow it in similar but different fashions. Greenberg is the harshest critic of kitsch. He believes that it has the ability to cause serious harm to society at large. To Greenberg, a page of a calendar can never be considered as a piece of fine art since it was created as a commodity first, rather than being a pure creation of artistic talent the way he envisions the avant-garde. Adorno is less angry towards kitsch as he advocates for lightheartedness being an essential quality of some works of art. Greenberg would almost assuredly deem this lightheartedness as frivolous sentimentality and dismiss it as kitsch. Benjamin would appreciate the mechanical reproducibility of calendars and their

widespread availability. Like Greenberg, he too would be concerned about the propagandistic uses for kitsch by oppressive governments. Solomon is the only advocate for kitsch, as he believes that the sentimentality may be overtly present in the work but is deeper than just surface level joy. Each of these theories affects how calendars can operate as a work of kitsch. They reinforce different cultural elements such as holidays or the changing of time regardless of the beliefs of the viewer, potentially veering into propaganda of celebration of certain figures. The images used in calendars are often sentimental works of kitsch, but not all. Works that are able to connect with the viewer, are created as an extension of a preexisting artistic practice, and offer a critical element of tension somehow exist in a hybrid state of both kitsch and art. They exist in this duality where form and production method slightly contradict the aesthetic power of the visuals included.

This research expands on the ideas of art being a social good. Art found in the home is often a different caliber than art seen in museum setting due to space and financial investments. The average consumer is going to seek out smaller works for their home. These smaller works allow for more prolonged contemplation due to access to the work. The British Arts and Crafts movement believed that industrialization was separating the craftsman from the satisfaction of creation. By advocating for more hand crafted art as functional pieces in the home, many—especially William Morris—felt that society would be made better because the aura of the artist was restored to pieces found in the home, leading those witnessing said art to seek good and beautiful things in all they do. The artists from the Hudson River School advocated for a more intimate connection with art, believing that a work of art in the home could relieve the effects of

industrialization and urbanization on the viewer. John Dewey used theories rather than artistic movements to justify the integration of art and life. Dewey was specifically against distinctions made between high and low art, even disregarding functionality as a way to prevent an object from being art. These artists and theorists would have likely seen the aura and functionality of these calendars and see it as worthy of artistic consideration.

One of the most illuminating portions of this research was discovering the identity of Mrs. Arthur Ehrenstrom and piecing together some of the provenance of these calendars. By looking in the archives of the *Courier Journal*, I was able to piece together some of Catherine Girdler's history and her involvement with men that would shape her life. Through this research, the fact that these calendars were likely owned by C.J. Bulliet is reintroduced into the story of these calendars.

The calendars in the collections and most commercially available calendars were or are participatory, interactive, and can be viewed as relational. This dependence upon the calendar by certain users allows certain works is what allows the relational theory to be applied to the work. This is because there is a bond being formed between the object and the participant that has a time constraint due to the nature of the calendar, with the relationship ending when the calendar runs out. The act of flipping the page and studying the dates upon it make the work interactive as the formal qualities of the calendar are rearranged. Participatory qualities of the work include the ability to write upon it and schedule events thus changing the content of the calendar. These two methods are crucial for envisioning them as pieces of art. There is a well-established precedent of the audience using these methods to engage with works of art. As many are already familiar

with engaging with the calendar and with certain art works in this fashion, the correlation can be made that these objects behave like a work of art and should be considered as such.

Through the ideas presented in this thesis, I believe that calendars created with artistic intentions can and should be considered works of art. The prints from the university's collection provide insight to the dual nature of the calendar as they exist as functional and aesthetic object. These works are able to engage with the emotions of the viewer while serving a role in their daily lives, reinforcing the inseparable ties between art and life.



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## IMAGES REFRENCED



Fig. 1

Marcel Duchamp

*Fountain*

1917, replica 1964

Porcelain

360 × 480 × 610 mm

Tate, London, United Kingdom

Image courtesy of Tate.org.uk



Fig. 2

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

*Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*

1991

Clocks, paint on wall

14 x 28 x 2 3/4"

Museum of Modern Art, New York

City, NY

Image courtesy of MoMA.org



Fig. 3

TwentySeven (Jenna O'Brien)

*November (From the 2020 Color Dot Calendar)*

2019

Image courtesy of Aubrey Stewart (@Aubrey.Madelaine on Instagram, November 10, 2020)



Fig. 4

Hannah Good

*February (From the 2021 Pep Talk Calendar)*

2020

Image courtesy of the listing for the work on the artist's Etsy store page



Fig. 5

Phoebe Wahl

*2021 Lunar Calendar*

2020

Image courtesy of the artist's website,  
Phoebewahl.shop



Fig. 6

Phoebe Wahl

*2021 Tea Towel Calendar*

2020

Image courtesy of the artist's website,  
Phoebewahl.shop



Fig. 7

V.M.S. Hannell

*Lunch from the 1937 Chicago Society  
of Artists Block Print Calendar*

1936

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the  
University of Louisville

Image courtesy of E.A. Blankenship





Fig. 8

Carl Hoeckner

*Visions from the 1937 Chicago Society of Artists Block Print Calendar*

1936

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the University of Louisville



Fig. 9

Emile J. Grumieaux

*In the Woods from the 1937 Chicago Society of Artists Block Print Calendar*

1936

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the University of Louisville



Fig. 10

Rear View of the 1937 *Chicago Society of Artists Block Print Calendar*

1936

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the University of Louisville

Image courtesy of E.A. Blankenship



Fig. 11

Wharton Esherick

*February* from the 1937 *American Block Print Calendar* Produced by Gutenberg Publishing

1936

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the University of Louisville

Image courtesy of E.A. Blankenship



Fig. 12

Ernest A. Pickup

*Neighbors* from the 1938 *American Block Print Calendar* Produced by Gutenberg Publishing

1937

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the University of Louisville



Fig. 13

A Raymond Katz

*Unemployed* from the 1939 *Chicago Society of Artists Block Print Calendar*

1938

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the University of Louisville



Fig. 14

Karl Gasslander

*Controlled Movement* from the 1939  
*Chicago Society of Artists Block Print*  
*Calendar*

1938

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the  
University of Louisville

Image courtesy of E.A. Blankenship



Fig. 15

Ethel Spears

*Winter Scene* from the 1940 *Chicago*  
*Society of Artists Block Print*  
*Calendar*

1939

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the  
University of Louisville



Fig. 16

John F. Stenvall

*Ancestors* from the 1940 *Chicago*  
*Society of Artists Block Print*  
*Calendar*

1939

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the  
University of Louisville



Fig. 17

Kathleen Blackshear

*Tommy* from the 1940 *Chicago Society of Artists Block Print Calendar*

1939

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the University of Louisville



Fig. 18

Cliffa Corson

*Oil Refinery Worker* from the 1941 *United American Artists Block Print Calendar*

1940

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the University of Louisville

Image courtesy of E.A. Blankenship



Fig. 19

Laura Van Pappelendam

*In the Living Room* from the 1947  
Chicago Society of Artists Block Print  
Calendar

1946

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the  
University of Louisville

Image courtesy of E.A. Blankenship

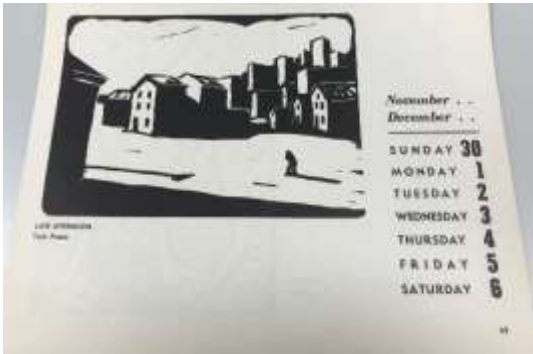


Fig. 20

Tunis Ponsen

*Late Afternoon* from the 1947 Chicago  
Society of Artists Block Print  
Calendar

1946

Gift of Mrs. A. Ehrenstrom to the  
University of Louisville



Fig. 21

Yoko Ono

*Cut Piece*

1964

Performance

Image courtesy of MoMA.org



Fig. 22

Marina Abramovic

*Rhythm 5*

1974

Performance

Image courtesy of MoMA.org



Fig. 23

Lygia Clark

*Bicho*

1962

aluminum

Image courtesy of Khan Academy,  
Photographed by Trevor Platt c. 2014



Fig. 24

Félix González-Torres

*Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*

1991

Candies individually wrapped in  
multicolor cellophane, endless supply

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
Foundation



Fig. 25

Jitish Kallat

Installation view of *Covering Letter*

2012

Fog Screen Projection, Installation  
dimensions variable

(Image courtesy Galerie Templon,  
Paris and Brussels. © B.Huet/Tutti)





## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

The Kentucky Museum, Western Kentucky University	Fall 2016
Collections Department	
Student Volunteer	
Frist Art Museum, Nashville TN	Spring 2019
Curatorial Intern	
21c Museum Hotel, Louisville KY	Spring 2020
Collections Management Intern	

## **VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE**

Western Kentucky University's Cultural Enhancement Series	Fall 2018
Patrick Dougherty Stick-work Sculpture	
Student volunteer	

## **AWARDS & HONORS**

Regents Scholarship Recipient, Western Kentucky University	Fall 2015- Dec. 2018
Mildred T. Hardcastle Scholarship Recipient	Fall 2016- Spring 2017
Richarris Fund Recipient, Art History	Fall 2017- Spring 2018
Allen R. Hite Scholarship Recipient	Fall 2019- Spring 2021

## **MEMBERSHIPS**

Western Kentucky University Art Guild	Fall 2016
The National Society of Leadership and Success	Fall 2017

## **INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Harlaxton College, Grantham, England	Jan. 2017- April 2017
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