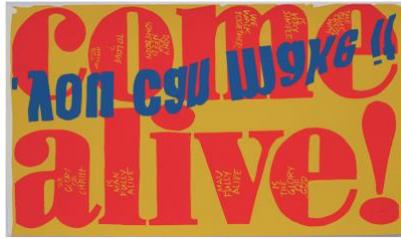


ARTFORUM

Sister Mary Corita
FEUER/MESSLER



The cover of *Newsweek* of April 12, 1965, shows a Vietnamese man, wearing only a pair of shorts, being pushed through a field by a helmeted American soldier. “Profile of the Viet Cong,” the caption reads. The man looks angry and desperate; the soldier’s face is turned away. The picture is included in *news of the week*, a 1969 serigraph by Sister Mary Corita, where it is washed in blood red. The poster’s lower third is tinted mint green, the contrasting colors buzzing urgently. At right in this green section, a *Life* magazine cover shows soldiers supporting a wounded comrade. In the center is stamped the infamous diagram of bodies wedged into a slave ship; pointing upward, the deck plan with its rounded prow looks like a bomb or a bullet. At left is a passage from Walt Whitman: “I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs / Hell and despair are upon me.”

Frances Elizabeth Kent (1918–1986) was the least likely Pop artist, an activist and friend of R. Buckminster Fuller’s who had joined the Immaculate Heart of Mary Convent in Los Angeles at age eighteen, taking the name Sister Mary Corita. Her hot-hued and typographically daring silk screens were largely produced with the help of her students at Immaculate Heart College, and in 1967 she was on the cover of *Newsweek* as the epitome of “The Nun: Going Modern.” The next year, she left the order to pursue an independent artist’s life. Her compassionate militancy and optimistic agitprop mellowed, perhaps inevitably, as the audience for her work enlarged; her beloved *rainbow swash* was painted on an enormous Boston gas tank in 1971, and she designed the anodyne “Love” stamp issued by the U.S. Postal Service in 1985. But she held on to her mastery of complex verbal meaning in visual space, and her eye for wild color never dimmed. Artists from Mike Kelley to Dana Frankfort could be read in terms of her precedent, and in 2007 Julie Ault published the first monograph on Corita’s art. This gathering of some fifty prints, watercolors, and books was the first gallery show mounted for her in New York. Colorists, graphic designers, concrete poets, and those who despair of unironic yet non-naive art statements on peace and justice, take note. Or, to quote Corita, COME ALIVE! YOU CAN MAKE IT. The fact that this latter declaration is written upside-down and backward (in the ocher-and-blue silk screen *come alive*, 1967) only emphasizes her belief that aesthetic, spiritual, and ethical action all require exquisite attentiveness.

Corita juxtaposed the Coca-Cola tag “Things Go Better With . . .” against a quotation from Father Daniel Berrigan concerning the importance of “justice, peace, unity and love” and appropriated the Wonder Bread logo to discuss transubstantiation. Images of street signs, American flags, and supermarket boxes found their way into her work. But, unlike Rauschenberg, Johns, or Warhol, she was wont to quote Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Albert Camus, Martin Luther King Jr., and e. e. cummings. Key to the exhibition (about two-thirds of which derived from the gallerist’s own collection) was a film shot on Mary’s Day 1964 on the Immaculate Heart campus. Happenings had been going on for several years, and Warhol’s Factory was already operational, though there were no hippies in Haight-Ashbury yet. Corita was, in short, ahead of the curve both artistically and socially when she staged a multimedia and interactive pageant focused on the eradication of hunger and celebration of divine nurturing. The film shows outdoor murals constructed from grocery-store packaging decorating the festival ground; the prayers sound like civil rights movement exhortations; grinning young nuns wear wreaths of flowers over their wimples; and college girls carry double-sided signs declaring in big pink letters I LIKE GOD / GOD LIKES ME. Imagine.

—Frances Richard