



Magazine

# Corita Kent, Warhol's Kindred Spirit in the Convent

APRIL 10, 2015



Corita Art Center

“The only rule is work,” read the seventh point on the Immaculate Heart College art department’s list of rules, devised by Corita Kent, known as Sister Mary Corita, one of the most unlikely Pop Art phenomena of the 1960s and ’70s. “If you work, it will lead to something,” the edict continued. “It’s the people who do all of the work all the time who eventually catch on to things.”

Predating even Andy Warhol (who later became an influence on her work), Kent was an early adopter of serigraphy, or silk-screening — considered a sign painter’s lowly tool at the time. She shared Warhol’s interest in the iconography of advertising but used it to very different ends, lifting texts from advertisements and poems and deconstructing and juxtaposing them to form colorful typographic works to help people “use their whole selves better,” as she once said.

This idealism dovetailed with the zeitgeist — her work found its way into civil rights and Vietnam protests — and landed her on the cover of national magazines; a stamp she designed for the United States Postal Service sold more than 700 million copies. But today she’s mostly remembered as a cult icon of sorts, whose life and work suggest a kind of alternate history of Pop Art. The curator Ian Berry, who [recently assembled](#) a traveling exhibition of Kent’s work with another curator, Michael Duncan, describes her as “a key figure in the history of American art,” and “a fiercely independent maker with a unique voice and vision.”

Frances Elizabeth Kent was born in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1918 and grew up in Los Angeles. Her family was Catholic, and after high school, she joined the Order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, earning an arts degree at the college the order ran. Ten years later, while pursuing her master’s degree, Kent was introduced to print making, the medium that would later bring her to the attention of art world.

## RELATED COVERAGE

**LOOK**  
[‘Something About a Snake Brings Everybody Out’](#) APRIL 3, 2015

**LOOK**  
[Toshio Shibata’s Mesmerizing Photographs of Water](#) MARCH 27, 2015

**LOOK**  
[The Strange Beauty of Soviet-Era Nuclear Relics](#) MARCH 20, 2015

## Look

Photo essays from around the world.

[On Patrol With the Black Mambas](#)

[Work Spaces](#)

[The Internet I.R.L.](#)

[Candida Höfer’s Wide Open Spaces](#)

[Tod Papageorge’s Summers Amid the Ruins](#)

[SEE MORE »](#)

## RECENT COMMENTS

**Jensene** April 20, 2015  
That female artists are overlooked or underrated is an axiom of art valuation that persists even into our time. Some have had to use...

**Sal** April 20, 2015  
Forty or so years ago, words on a page ripped from a calendar, glued inside a kitchen cabinet door, saved a life. Page was orange. Script...

**Daniel Kennedy** April 20, 2015  
1968 was a turning point for nuns, priests, and seminarians in many locales. I’d happily spent four years in the Carmelite Order, looking to...

[SEE ALL COMMENTS](#)

By the early 1950s, she was forging her own unique aesthetic, and soon “priests and nuns from orders all over the country were sent to be educated at Immaculate Heart College,” wrote Ray Smith, director of the Corita Art Center in Los Angeles, in an email. For nearly a decade in the late '50s and early '60s, Kent toured widely, delivering lectures at institutions — religious and otherwise — across the country about her work.

In the late '60s, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council — a landmark effort to modernize the church, which many Catholic clergy members took as a blessing for social and political activism — the Immaculate Heart sisters began chafing at the strictures that had traditionally bound the order. Kent transformed Immaculate Heart College’s annual Mary’s Day procession from an austere march into a community celebration that included theatrical performances, food drives and masses of flower-decked followers holding up signs inspired by her art — part of the sisters’ campaign to bring secular and religious people closer together.




At the same time, Kent’s work was becoming increasingly political, addressing the Vietnam War and humanitarian crises. Tensions between the order and the church leadership in Los Angeles mounted, and Sister Mary Corita left the order in 1968, returning to secular life as Corita Kent. (Most of the other Immaculate Heart sisters followed suit not long after; in 1969, the order separated from the church, continuing its work as a lay organization. The Immaculate Heart College closed in 1980.)

### The New York Times Magazine

The best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week, including exclusive feature stories, photography, columns and more.

Enter your email address

You will receive emails containing news content, updates and promotions from The New York Times. You may opt-out at any time.

I'm not a robot  [Privacy - Terms](#)

[SEE SAMPLE](#) | [MANAGE EMAIL PREFERENCES](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)  
[OPT OUT OR CONTACT US ANYTIME](#)

Kent continued printmaking, even through the 12-year battle with the cancer that finally claimed her life in 1986, at age 67. Some of her work achieved prominence in the '80s, though few people who saw it would have known the name of the artist; she was commissioned for several corporate and public arts projects, including designs for a Boston Gas Company fuel tank and the Postal Service’s “Love” stamp. Still, her work is not in many large museum collections, and until recently

was rarely shown outside the Corita Art Center, which was established in her memory shortly after her death.

The Corita Art Center has a vast catalog of unprocessed photographs of Kent and her work. The photographer Suzanna Zak recently went digging through them and turned up a remarkable record of Kent’s life. The selection here includes images of Kent teaching as well as many photographs that Kent herself took.

“Someday Is Now: The Art of Corita Kent” is currently on view at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, closing after this week, and will move to the Pasadena Museum of California Art on June 14. *Romke Hoogwaerts*

#### Correction: April 13, 2015

An earlier version of this article omitted a curator for a traveling exhibition of Corita Kent’s work. Besides Ian Berry, Michael Duncan also assembled the show.

