

CORITA KENT *and the* LANGUAGE *of* POP

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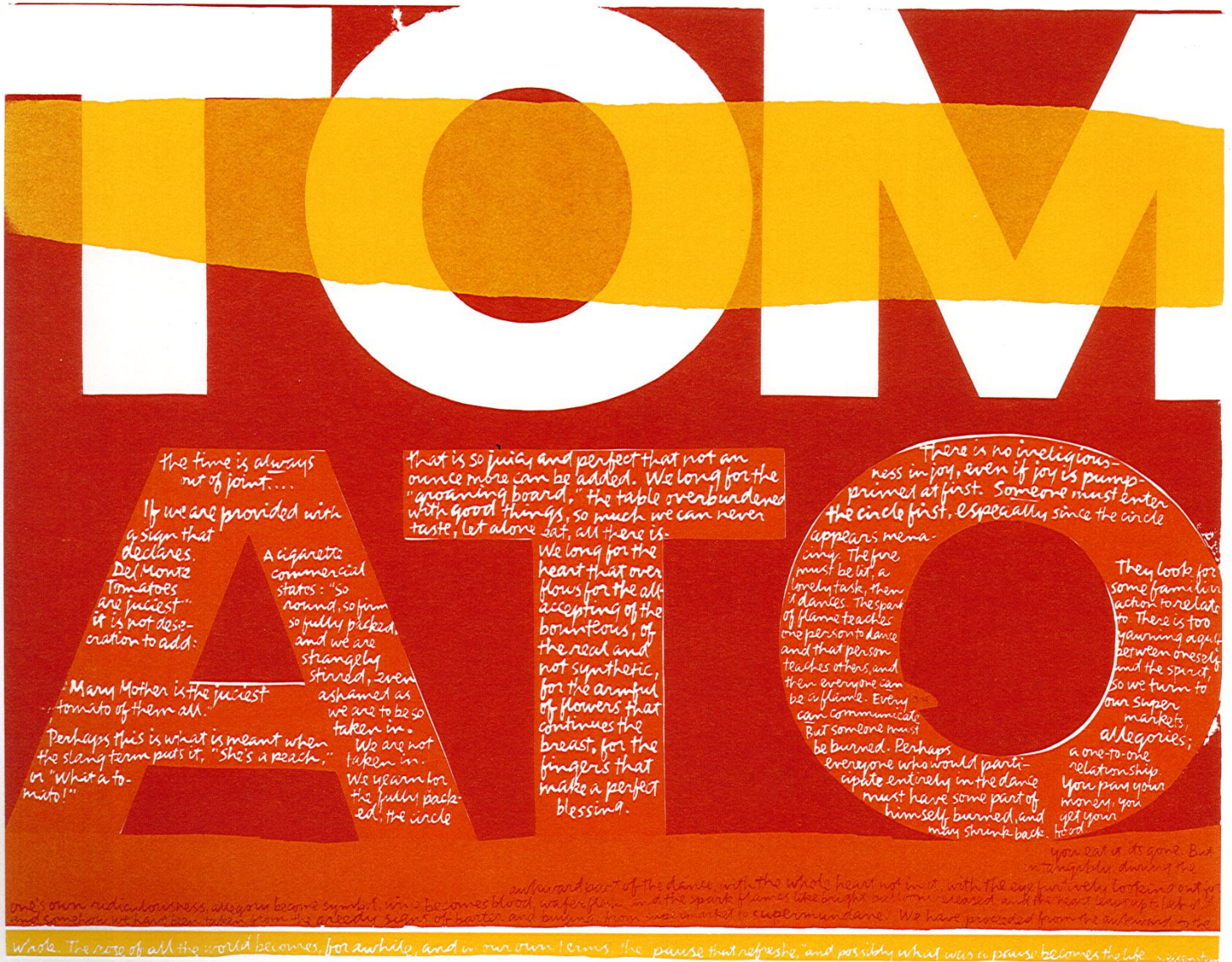


Fig. 1. Kent, the juiciest tomato of all (cat. 37).

CORITA KENT *and the* LANGUAGE *of* POP

Susan Dackerman

Corita Kent's 1964 screenprint *the juiciest tomato of all* (fig. 1) established her reputation as a renegade. Using red, yellow, and orange ink, she represented the Virgin Mary by spelling out the word "TOMATO," along with the inscription "Mary Mother is the juiciest tomato of them all."¹ An iconoclastic gesture that dismisses the long history of figurative depictions of the Virgin, the phrase is derived from a Del Monte tomato sauce slogan. Although the provocation of *the juiciest tomato* was interpreted as a challenge to church authority, for the Roman Catholic artist-nun the print was, to the contrary, an expression of the promised revitalization of church forms and functions by the Second Vatican Council (commonly known as Vatican II). Her depiction of Mary offered an updated conception of female divinity, one rooted in contemporary life and described in current parlance.

Kent's choice of a Del Monte jingle also signaled her affiliation with radical developments in the art world, especially the emergence of pop art. Two years prior, Andy Warhol had made canned goods—including Campbell's Tomato Soup—a much-discussed subject of representation. By making artworks that reference consumerism, Kent not only aligned herself with the mandates of Vatican II, but joined the fray of artists critiquing the ubiquity of commodity culture. While Kent never chose inflammatory language such as "Mary Mother is the juiciest tomato" again, she continued to mine advertising and other popular sources for her work. Although she participated in two heady cultural undertakings—the reformation of religion and art—during the 1960s, she was an outlier in both movements, seemingly, and paradoxically, because of her association with the other.

Kent lived an extraordinary life. She was born in 1918, moved with her family to Los Angeles when she was five years old, and in 1936 entered the Roman Catholic order of nuns of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (I.H.M.) in Hollywood, where she lived, studied, and taught until 1968. Up to the end of her life in 1986, she made nearly 700 screenprints, undertook commissions for public artworks and advertising

1. Composed by Samuel Eisenstein, an English professor at Los Angeles City College, the inscription was gleaned from a letter he wrote to Kent, responding to the 1964 Mary's Day celebration at Immaculate Heart College. For the print's full inscription and more on the event, see cat. 37.

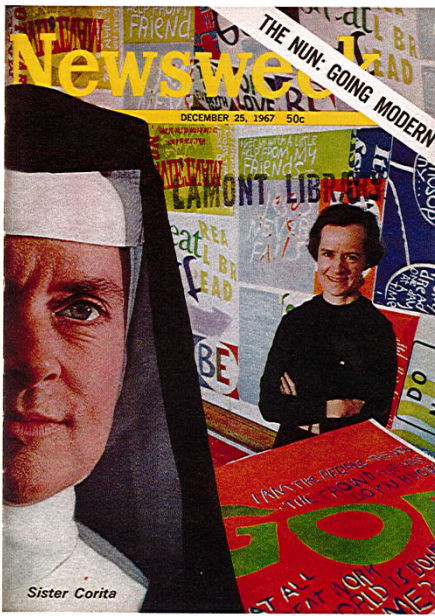


Fig. 2. Cover of *Newsweek*, December 25, 1967.

campaigns, wrote and designed books, produced films, orchestrated Happenings, and created a mural for the Vatican Pavilion of the 1964–65 New York World's Fair.² In 1966, she was one of the *Los Angeles Times*' "Women of the Year"; the following year she was profiled in *Harper's Bazaar*'s "100 American Women of Accomplishment" and featured on the cover of *Newsweek* as the exemplar of "the modern nun" (fig. 2). Much that has been written about Kent has focused on the exceptionalism of her life and work, including her innovative teaching methods at Immaculate Heart College.³ *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop* looks beyond her remarkable life and pedagogy to examine instead the body of artwork she and her students created between 1964 and 1969, a period of intense engagement with prevailing artistic, social, and religious movements. It focuses on a selection of screenprints, films, installations, and Happenings, as well as Kent's 1971 design for a roadside landmark in Boston, locating these works within their multifaceted art-historical and cultural contexts.

While her work coincides with the inception and ascendancy of the "pop art" style, and was labeled as such by the contemporary press, it was not shown at any of the seminal pop art galleries, nor in any of the early group shows presented by museums in California and New York. This is in part a consequence of the position of women within the movement. Pop was a style of making and being in the world that naturalized its exclusion of women—the artists who showed at the premier Los Angeles pop outlet, the Ferus Gallery, were hailed as the "Ferus Studs."⁴ Not only were women discounted as producers of pop, they were often hypersexualized as the represented objects of pop art.⁵ Kent's status as a pop artist was obfuscated still further because for most of the period under examination she lived and worked as a nun, which sidelined her even beyond other women artists working in the idiom.⁶ Although she employed many of pop's strategies, and her work was exhibited frequently and often acclaimed, Kent's prints did not receive the curatorial or critical attention awarded her contemporaries.⁷ Some early descriptions of pop art characterized it as cold and without affect, traits incompatible with her work's buoyant disposition.⁸ Instead, her prints were called

2. Images of Kent's screenprints, with complete inscriptions, are available on a database maintained by the Corita Art Center in Los Angeles (corita.org/pdf/catalog.pdf). Kent is the author of several significant books and essays that provide insight into her ambitions for her work, as well as the context in which the work emerged. Each is worthy of study in its own right, including Sister Mary Corita I.H.M., "Choose LIFE or Assign a Sign or Begin a Conversation," *Living Light* 3 (1) (Spring 1966); Sister Corita, *Footnotes and Headlines: A Play-Pray Book* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967); and Sister M. Corita Kent, I.H.M., "Art and Beauty in the Life of the Sister," originally published in *The Changing Sister*, ed. Sister M. Charles Borromeo Muckenhirn (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, 1965), and later in Sister Mary Corita, Harvey Cox, and Samuel A. Eisenstein, *Sister Corita* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1968), 7–26. These publications appear in the bibliography and notes in this volume under the surname Kent.

3. In recent years, two significant studies of Kent have been published: Julie Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita* (London: Four Corners Books, 2006); and Ian Berry and Michael Duncan, eds., *Someday Is Now: The Art of Corita Kent* (Saratoga Springs, N.Y.: Frances Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2013). Both provide comprehensive biographical sketches. Baylis Glascock's film *We Have No Art* (cat. 66) and Thomas Conrad's film *Alleluia* (cat. 22), both 1967, offer views of Kent's pedagogy. And in 1992, Jan Steward, a former student of Kent's, published a book of Kent's writings on her teaching methods: Corita Kent and Jan Steward, *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992).

4. In recent years, there have been several exhibitions featuring the pop work of women artists. See, for instance, those at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, and the Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna, documented in Sid Sachs and Kalliopi Minioudaki, eds., *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968* (Philadelphia: University of the Arts; New York: Abbeville Press, 2010), and Angela Stief, ed., *Power Up: Female Pop Art* (Cologne: DuMont, 2011), respectively.

5. "The vast historical writings on Pop make one thing clear: the roster of artists generally considered members of the Pop camp barely included the mention of women. While history marks the '60s as the era of liberation, you would hardly know it from the case study of Pop": Steven Henry Madoff, "Wham! Bam! How Pop Stormed the High-Art Citadel and What the Critics Said," in *Pop Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xviii. Hal Foster accounts for the exclusion in his own study of pop art by saying, "To be sure, there were female artists involved in Pop (for example, Pauline Boty, Vija Celmins, Niki de Saint Phalle, Rosalyn Drexler, Lee Lozano); yet, finally, women could not act as its principal subjects in large part because they were conscripted as its primary objects, even its primary fetishes." See Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 14–15.

6. I'm grateful to Cindy Burlingham for pointing out to me that Kent's work was marginalized further because she was trained in a university-based print workshop, identified primarily as a printmaker, and participated in exhibitions that were mostly medium-specific. In the 1960s, new commercial publishers such as Gemini G.E.L. in L.A. bridged the gap between contemporary art practice and printmaking, bringing well-known painters to printmaking rather than focusing on artists who were specifically printmakers.

7. Kent's work did appear in a 1968 exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, alongside that of Warhol, Rauschenberg, Johns, Oldenburg, Marisol, Lichtenstein, Riley, and others. See Edgar J. Driscoll, Jr., "Prints of the '60s," *The Boston Globe*, December 13, 1968.

8. The critic Dore Ashton stated: "The attitude of the pop artist is diffident. He doesn't aspire to interpret or re-present, but only to present"; from "Symposium on Pop Art Held at the Museum of Modern Art on December 13, 1962," *Arts* 37 (7) (April 1963); reprinted in *Pop Art*, ed. Madoff, 70. G. R. Swenson claimed that pop artists "point quite coolly to things quite close at hand"; Swenson, "The New American Sign Painters," *ARTnews* 61 (5) (September 1962); reprinted in *Pop Art*, ed. Madoff, 38.

affirmative and celebratory, qualities that didn't suit the critical conversation. As one magazine writer observed:

Long before those young men in New York invented pop art, a small nun in Los Angeles was showing her students at Immaculate Heart College how to discover the novel and beautiful in popular magazines and packages from the Supermarket. But Sister Mary Corita is a different kind of pop artist. Whereas the New York boys deal in a certain brittle archness (they are chic), Sister Corita and her students unabashedly affirm and celebrate the here-and-now glories of God's world—the words of Beatles' songs, the pictures on cereal boxes, the sheen of stamps, the typography in movie magazines.⁹

Against such claims of exceptionalism, which have cordoned off the reception of Kent's work from that of her peers, this exhibition and catalogue situate Kent's approach to pop within the art-historical discourses of 1960s art-making practices. The project also considers the proceedings and reception of Vatican II, which gave voice to a momentous religious and societal shift that profoundly influenced the artist's work. Certainly, Kent's Catholicism has fostered the ubiquitous readings of her work that spotlight its uniqueness; but what this exhibition reveals is that it is her reform-minded religiosity that finally grounds her in pop art's operations, and conversely, it is the strategies of pop art that provide her with the means to express the aspirations of Vatican II. By looking at Kent's work as both aligned with and cutting across the grain of other pop art, this investigation aspires to broaden the parameters of the idiom's discourse.

c. 1962

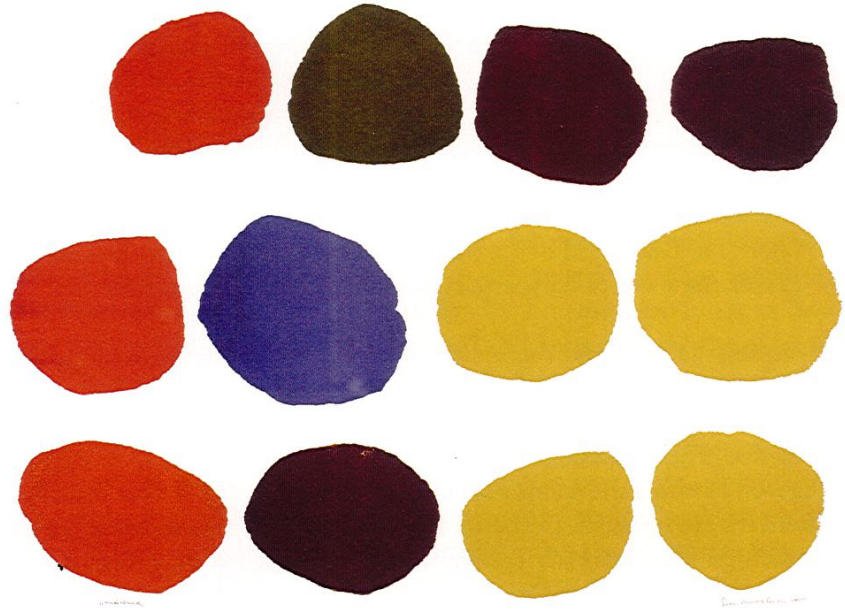
The year 1962 was a significant one for both the art world and the Catholic universe, heralding profound transformations to come in each, as well as to the lives of Kent and others at Immaculate Heart in Los Angeles. Three years earlier, Pope John XXIII had announced the formation of the Second Vatican Council—which was to begin meeting in 1962—to make recommendations for *aggiornamento*, the updating of Catholic liturgy for the modern world. The progressive I.H.M. nuns welcomed the impending church reform and revitalization, and began deliberating the renewal of their own mission, rules, and lifestyle.¹⁰ Knowledge of the proceedings of the Vatican Council was not limited to Catholics. Major national news outlets reported frequently on Vatican II deliberations and their effects, with the *Los Angeles Times* pronouncing in a 1965 editorial: “Not since the Council of Trent in the 16th Century has the Roman Catholic hierarchy undertaken so great a rejuvenation of the church. Although the Vatican II council has concluded, the reforms it initiated will have a profound effect upon Catholics—and non-Catholics—for an indefinite period.”¹¹ The Vatican Council issued sixteen

9. George B. Leonard, “The Turned-On People,” *Look*, June 26, 1966, 36.

10. The order had been founded in Spain in 1848 to serve the poor through schools and orphanages, and in 1871 established an outpost in L.A., where the nuns taught the city's growing Catholic population. In 1905, the well-educated and resourceful sisters founded Immaculate Heart College alongside a new motherhouse in Hollywood to carry out their ministry both at the college and in the city's parochial schools; by the late 1950s, the I.H.M. sisters were renowned for the enlightened and innovative education offered at the women's college and its coeducational extension school. The history of the order, from its founding through its members' disavowal of church supervision in 1969–70, is well documented in Mark Stephen Massa, *The American Catholic Revolution: How the '60s Changed the Church Forever* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 75–102. A description of the order in the 1960s is also given in Colleen McDannell, *The Spirit of Vatican II: A History of Catholic Reform in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 119–49. For a more general account of the proceedings and effects of Vatican II, see John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

11. “Vatican II—An Ending and a Beginning,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1965. Newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* also provided readers with detailed accounts of doctrinal debates, such as the granting of indulgences (Dan L. Thrapp, “Indulgences Document Rapped as Frightening,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1965) and ecumenism (Milton Bracker, “Church Reforms Taking Shape,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 1963). *The New York Times* published translations of the full texts of the Vatican Council's decrees as they were issued, such as the one that was focused on ecumenism (in the November 22, 1964, edition).

Fig. 3. Kent, *wonderbread*, screenprint, 1962. Corita Art Center.



documents between December 1963 and December 1965, the most consequential for the I.H.M. sisters being the October 1965 *Perfectae Caritatis*, or *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*, which called for the reform of work and lifestyle among male and female religious communities.¹² The decree seemed to speak to the order's modernizing ambitions, most importantly recommending a reevaluation of the order's work at the convent and in public. In its wake, some I.H.M. nuns began wearing updated habits or modest street clothes better suited to their work and the Los Angeles climate. It was hoped that these, and other changes, such as dropping "Sister" from their titles, would lessen their distinctiveness and invite closer connections with the communities they served. The proposals made by the Second Vatican Council rhymed in many ways with the updated pedagogy already underway at the college, especially in the art and theater departments. Art projects and theatrical performances at Immaculate Heart College engaged contemporary themes, such as world hunger, and utilized forms and practices common to avant-garde artists and progressive educational theorists. For Kent and many of the I.H.M. nuns, the decree affirmed their inclination to ally their religious order and its work with the outside world.

In 1962, Kent was already an admired teacher in the art department of the college, as well as a nationally recognized artist, with her prints (fig. 3) appearing in exhibitions across the country, including New York's Morris Gallery, which presented an annual winter exhibition of her work throughout the 1960s.¹³ After traveling to New York with Kent for one of her exhibition openings at the Morris Gallery in the early 1960s, fellow I.H.M. nun Sister Fleurette (Elizabeth Bugental) reported: "The opening is crowded with her fans. Andy Warhol is there. (He *would* be captivated by the idea of an artist-nun, especially one who uses Wonder bread

12. Translations of Vatican II documents are available at vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm.

13. Her work was first exhibited in New York in 1957 at the Contemporaries Gallery. The Morris Gallery at 174 Waverly Place, run by Morris Weisenthal, showed Kent's prints through 1969. Dorothy Townsend briefly describes Kent's early exhibition history in "Woman of the Year: Sister Corita Draws the Line," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1966.

wrapping as a symbol for the Eucharist.)”¹⁴ An exhibition of Kent’s prints held in 1962 in Los Angeles at the Comara Gallery was reviewed in *Artforum*, an art journal that had recently been founded in San Francisco, and the following year one of her prints entered the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.¹⁵ Kent traveled widely to give lectures about her teaching at Immaculate Heart and slide talks about her artwork, and in 1960 visited Europe and the Middle East with another sister. Yearly trips to New York kept her abreast of current trends in the art world, as did the weekly field trips she made with students in her native Los Angeles. She claimed the visits to local museums and galleries had a profound influence on her work.¹⁶

The bishop of the Los Angeles archdiocese, however, did not support the magnitude of the I.H.M. sisters’ aspirations for living and working in the modern world, and hampered their realization of Vatican II goals.¹⁷ In 1968, for reasons never fully articulated, Kent left the order, her teaching post at Immaculate Heart College, Catholicism, and all forms of organized religion. Two years later, in 1970, the majority of I.H.M. nuns chose exclaustation – the dispensation of their vows – and reconstituted themselves as the lay Immaculate Heart Community. This horizon, however, was not visible to Kent and her colleagues in 1962 when the Vatican II talks began. Instead, they imagined they were being invited to adapt their lives and practices to the world around them: Los Angeles in the midst of a modernizing boom.

The 1960s was a time of pronounced revitalization and evolution of Los Angeles’ cultural life.¹⁸ The decade marked the expansion of the city’s art scene, and 1962 was a particularly momentous year for the production of pioneering forms of art and the presentation of trailblazing exhibitions. Questions of what constituted art were in the air, begetting new styles in the thriving urban center. Artists turned away from abstract expressionism, instead representing ordinary objects in a straightforward figurative manner. Similar trends were emerging among New York artists, but some of the earliest exhibitions – and the first American museum presentation – of the style that has come to be termed “pop” occurred on the West Coast, where Kent and her students encountered them on their field trips.¹⁹ Later in her life she recalled: “We of course always found good shows at the County Museum or the Pasadena Museum or galleries. We used to spend a lot of afternoons at La Cienega when that got organized into the gallery district; we’d just go up and down.”²⁰

14. Elizabeth Bugental, “Corita: Connecting to Change,” in “A Pride of Women: A Life Full of Female Power,” 1990, unpublished manuscript, 84; Corita Art Center Archives, Los Angeles.

15. Doug McClellan, “Sister Mary Corita, Serigraphs, Comara Gallery,” *Artforum* 1 (6) (November 1962): 48. At least two other presentations of Kent’s work, at the Laguna Beach Art Association and Roberts Gallery, Encino, were reviewed in the journal as well, by H. G. Weeks and Fidel A. Danieli; see, respectively, *Artforum* 3 (3) (December 1964): 45, and *Artforum* 4 (6) (February 1966): 18.

16. In tape-recorded interview by Paul Laporte, late May 1979, transcript handwritten by Kent, 1, 9–10; Corita Papers, 1936–1992, MC 583, folder 2.9; Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

17. At the I.H.M.’s October 1967 General Chapter meeting, two years after the promulgation of the *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*, the sisters elected to take up the call for renewal and enhanced corporate responsibility in defining their identity and mission by experimenting with modifications to their communal life and work. They proposed temporarily enacting such radical changes as altering common prayer and giving the sisters the freedom to choose professions other than teaching, to determine how they would be addressed and whether to wear the traditional habit, a modified version, or no habit at all. In June 1968, in response to the proposals of the I.H.M. sisters’ General Chapter meeting, a committee formed by the Vatican’s Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes decided to permit those who wanted to experiment with the customs of the order to proceed, and those who did not, to carry on as before. The sisters of I.H.M. and the Vatican and local church authorities, however, never came to see eye-to-eye on the sisters’ aspirations for renewal. While 50 of the I.H.M. sisters chose to remain committed to the Church, 350 sought and were granted dispensation from their vows and in 1970 formed a lay community; close to 150 I.H.M. sisters chose to leave religious life altogether. See Massa, *American Catholic Revolution*, 80–82. The account of the conflict as told by the Archdiocese archivist can be found in Monsignor Francis J. Weber, *His Eminence of Los Angeles: James Francis Cardinal McIntyre* (Mission Hills, Calif.: Saint Francis Historical Society, 1997), 2:416–43. See also Ann Carey, *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women’s Religious Communities* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1997), 184–91.

18. For a history of the emergence of L.A. as an art center and progenitor of pop, see Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Ken D. Allan, Lucy Bradnock, and Lisa Turvey, “For People Who Know the Difference,” in *Pacific Standard Time*, ed. Rebecca Peabody et al. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 124–85.

19. For an early account of the style in L.A., see Nancy Marmer, “Pop Art in California,” in Lucy R. Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

20. Kent, interviewed by Bernard Galm, April 6–20, 1976, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, “Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent,” transcript, 1977, 29, archive.org/stream/coritakentoralhiioocori#page/n85/mode/zup.



Fig. 4. Andy Warhol, *Soup Cans*, 1962, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. The Museum of Modern Art.

What could be seen in Los Angeles in 1962 was indeed groundbreaking. In July, the Ferus Gallery on La Cienega presented the first exhibition of work by Andy Warhol, then a little-known commercial artist from New York.²¹ The show comprised thirty-two paintings of Campbell's Soup cans, each depicting a different variety of the product (fig. 4). *New Painting of Common Objects*, which opened at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum) in September, also included work by Warhol as well as his New York-based contemporaries Roy Lichtenstein and Jim Dine, and California residents Ed Ruscha and Wayne Thiebaud. As the title of the exhibition suggests, curator Walter Hopps deemed depictions of unremarkable objects acceptable subject matter for artwork shown in a museum.²² In November, *My Country 'Tis of Thee* opened at Brentwood's Dwan Gallery. The catalogue text by Gerald Nordland describes the innovative vision of contemporary American artists: "They are able to see formal values in beer can emblems, in the fractured marvels of the cropped photograph, the innumerable visual flashes of billboards, TV, pinball machines, comic strips, and supermarket stands of endless and standardized NUPRODUCTS."²³ Kent, according to one of her students from the time, assigned her class a visit to "the first Pop art exhibition any of us had ever seen at the Dwan Gallery near UCLA, of work by Warhol and Oldenburg and Johns."²⁴ Exhibitions across the city demonstrated that artists from Los Angeles and elsewhere were redefining the parameters of art, offering

21. For an account of Warhol's early work and introduction to the art world, see Kirk Varnedoe, "Campbell's Soup Cans, 1962," in *Andy Warhol: Retrospective*, ed. Heiner Bastian (London: Tate Publishing; Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002); and Brandon W. Joseph, "1962," *October* 132 (Spring 2010): 114-34.

22. See a review by John Coplans, "The New Painting of Common Objects," *Artforum* 1 (6) (November 1962): 26-29. An exhibition of Kent's screenprints is reviewed in the same issue (p. 48).

23. Gerald Nordland, *My Country 'Tis of Thee* (Los Angeles: Dwan Gallery, 1962). The show was held November 18 to December 15, 1962.

24. Mickey Myers, remarks during the panel discussion "The Corita Kent Gas Tank," Savin Hill Yacht Club, October 27, 2007. A video by Matt Walczak is available at vimeo.com/22526855.

Kent and her students a fresh artistic vision to incorporate into Immaculate Heart College's inventive pedagogy and practice.²⁵

In October of the following year, the Pasadena Art Museum staged a retrospective of the work of French artist Marcel Duchamp, providing a historical underpinning for pop art's concerns with everyday objects.²⁶ Although the pre-eminence of pop art in Los Angeles lasted only through the end of the decade, the city, by then the third largest in the country, had garnered a reputation as an international art capital. With the 1966 closing of the Ferus Gallery, the 1967 closing of Dwan Gallery, and the departure from Los Angeles of Hopps, one of the founders of Ferus as well as the curator of numerous groundbreaking exhibitions at the Pasadena Art Museum, the face of the city's art scene changed.²⁷ In 1968, Kent left Immaculate Heart College and relocated to Boston, thus bracketing the short but fertile intersection of Kent, the order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and its college, and avant-garde art practice in Los Angeles.

Kent, Pop Art, and Vatican II

During the decade that pop art emerged in Los Angeles and New York, Kent produced over 400 prints that fit the prevailing (and sometimes nebulous) definition of pop art. Like the artists whose work defined the style, she co-opted mass-produced forms and texts, combined figural and abstract pictorial modes, used production techniques derived from consumer culture, and integrated handmade with mechanical methods of making.²⁸ Screenprinting, the standard mode of reproduction within commodity culture, was the only technique Kent used. For decades, manufacturers had been employing screenprinting for the production of billboards, as well as product announcements and packaging.²⁹ Until Kent left Immaculate Heart College, the majority of her prints were created in the college's screenprint workshop, where the help of other nuns, students, and volunteers enabled factory-like mass production.³⁰ The collaborative atmosphere of Kent's classroom mirrors cooperative art-making environments emerging in the wake of the isolationism of abstract expressionism, such as the formation of Warhol's Factory in 1964.³¹ Kent's prints from these years conspicuously reveal their methods of making—they show registration slipups, color inaccuracies, and dripped and smeared ink. Yet the traces of the handcrafted accompany sophisticated compositional arrangements.

Words and phrases are the principal elements of Kent's compositions, often coupled with abstract forms or product logos. Her prints from 1964 through 1967 typically combine two linguistic registers, one drawn from the visual environment of consumer culture or the urban landscape, and the second derived from literature, philosophy, theology, scripture, music, lectures, performances, or historical

25. In his "Los Angeles Letter," Jules Langsner comments on exhibitions at various L.A. museums and galleries, including *New Painting of Common Objects* at the Pasadena Art Museum, Albers's work at the Ferus Gallery, and Kent's prints at the Comara Gallery; Langsner, "Los Angeles Letter, September 1962," *Art International* 1 (7) (September 1962): 49–52. The establishment of pop art in New York followed later that same year. Reviewing the exhibition *New Realists* at the Sidney Janis Gallery, art critic Brian Doherty declared, "With this show, 'pop' is officially here"; Doherty, "Art: Avant-Garde Revolt," *The New York Times*, October 31, 1962. In December 1962, the Museum of Modern Art held a symposium on pop art, and from March through June 1963, the Guggenheim Museum presented the first group show of pop art in New York, *Six Painters and the Object*.

26. The exhibition was titled *By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy*. See Ken D. Allan, "Duchamp in Pasadena," in *Pacific Standard Time*, ed. Peabody et al., 135. The June–July 1965 class notes of Kent's student Mary Anne Karia (née Mikulka) refer to Duchamp and the Armory Show, where the "phenomenon of pop art was invented," suggesting Kent's assessment of Duchamp's pivotal role in relation to the formation of pop art.

27. In addition to *New Painting of Common Objects* and the Duchamp retrospective, Hopps was responsible for the first American presentation of Kurt Schwitters's work in 1962, a Jasper Johns exhibition in 1965, and Joseph Cornell and Frank Stella shows in 1966.

28. For a general overview of pop art, see Mark Francis, ed., *Pop*, with a survey by Hal Foster (London: Phaidon, 2005). See also Foster, *First Pop Age*.

29. See Guido Lengwiler, *A History of Screen Printing* (Cincinnati: ST Media Group International, 2013).

30. For a description of the practices and atmosphere of the workshop, see Kent, interviewed by Galm, transcript, 1977, 40–41.

31. Thanks to Taylor Walsh for sharing this observation.



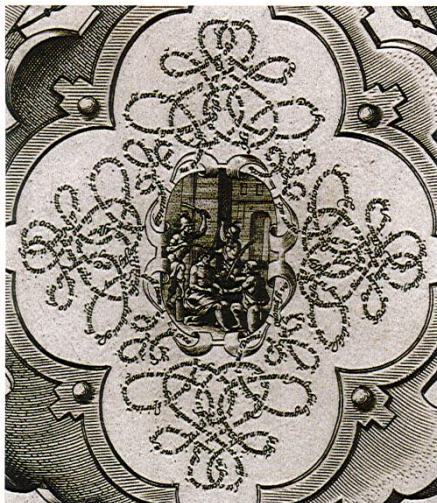
Fig. 5. Kent, (*give the gang*) and (*our best*) (cat. 21).

commentary.³² Beginning in the prints of the mid-1960s, the first register of text typically dominates the visual field, with the second register tailored to augment the overall composition. Borrowing the primary text or logo from a recognizable source, Kent almost always maintains its graphic identity, as in her 1964 *for eleanor* (cat. 33) and 1965 *enriched bread* (cat. 45), which co-opt the typography, palette, and logos of General Mills and Wonder Bread (in the manner of Warhol's 1962 depictions of Campbell's and Coca-Cola's trademarked product designs).³³ Similarly, in her depictions of city street signs, she faithfully maintained the visual appearance of traffic signs and their terse messages, as in her 1967 *dip* (cat. 55). She faithfully reproduced those "trademarked" elements through photographic means – taking slides of advertisements and road signs, and then projecting enlarged images of them onto sheets of paper for tracing. The slogans and logos were then cut out of the paper, which became the stencil that she affixed to the silkscreen. Stencils act as physical barriers to the ink pressed through the screens, which permeates only the excised areas. Kent applied secondary texts directly to the screens in her distinctive script using a glue-based resist, which, like a stencil, blocked the ink from passing through the matrix. Consequently, it is the area of color around the handwritten texts that is printed on the sheet. Thus, the primary texts usually are printed as positive images and the handwritten texts in the negative, rendered white within a colored field.

This approach is evident in the two prints that comprise the 1966 diptych (*give the gang*) *the clue is in the signs* and (*our best*) *reality proves very little* (fig. 5). The beverage maker Canada Dry promoted the genial potential of its Tom Collins mix, ginger ale, quinine water, and club soda with the slogan "Give the gang our best." Printed in large black letters stacked to fill the space, the linguistic forms have been manipulated so that the letters and graphic identity of the brand name are legible but misshapen. Kent accomplished this by cutting and distorting the printed text she culled from a magazine advertisement before photographing it for the stencil. This technique altered the visual appearance of the words, giving them dimensionality and physical presence on the sheet. Manipulating the text enabled Kent to present "the" and "our" upside down, forcing an alternating right-to-left, left-to-right reading of the phrase.

An emphatic red "NOW!" on the left balances quotations from activist priest Daniel Berrigan on the right, located within a mustard-colored rectangle and blue circle; an eclipsed view of Pete Seeger's lyric "turn turn" in yellow provides an underlying architecture to the composition. Even with its verbal twists, the declarative advertising refrain is easily read from a distance, whereas the Berrigan citations are indecipherable except at close range. Kent creates for the viewer/reader a dual relationship to the print: one from afar that conveys the impact of the bold forms, and another that requires proximity for reading the hand-scrawled texts. This dichotomy recalls the experience of seeing large-scale images on church walls while reading a hand-held prayer book. The larger, mechanically transferred texts convey familiar public statements, while the smaller handwritten ones are more personal, requiring an intimate rapport of extended duration for their content to be absorbed. The print's multiple orientations and difficult-to-decipher script slow the viewer/reader and encourage increased attention to its multivalent meanings. The tactic has a precedent in early devotional prints, where scriptural text is presented in intricate, intertwining patterns that make it difficult to decode (fig. 6). Likewise, Kent configures assorted visual information to create new connotations, assembling disparate words and forms into coherent wholes that assert their own logic.

Fig. 6. Detail of Hieronymus Wierix, *The Mocking of Christ*, engraving, from *The Seven Psalms of Penitence*, 1604. The British Museum.



32. After 1968, when Kent's work became more politicized, the pattern shifted. In the *Heroes* and *Sheroes* series of 1969, she often replaced the found language of ads and street signs with images drawn from popular media.

33. It is worth noting that Ruscha made a preparatory drawing in 1962 for an unrealized large-scale painting of a loaf of Wonder Bread in its packaging. The drawing is in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Kent's interest in the avant-garde art of the 1960s, as exemplified by her prints, is linked to her commitment to the recommendations of Vatican II. The principal goal of the Vatican Council was to address the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world, finding ways to make the Church more germane to the lives of present-day Catholics. Consequently, the Council endorsed making the liturgy more accessible during Mass, most notably by turning the altar to face the congregation, sanctioning the use of vernacular languages, interjecting music (often modern) into the service, and encouraging greater exchange between clergy and congregation.³⁴ More pointedly for the sisters of I.H.M., the *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* stipulated the modernization of their work:

Religious communities should continue to maintain and fulfill the ministries proper to them. . . . They should adapt them to the requirements of time and place, employing appropriate and even new programs and abandoning those works, which today are less relevant to the spirit and authentic nature of the community . . . so that the preaching of the Gospel may be carried out more effectively in every nation.³⁵

Kent's printmaking practice responds to the spirit of the decree. Her early prints had included biblical texts – psalms and other scriptural excerpts – but in adapting her work to “the requirements of time and place,” she chose texts “relevant to the spirit and authentic nature of the community,” such as product slogans, magazine headlines, images from the media, and local traffic signage. Kent found in these contemporary phrases a modern gospel, one familiar and relevant to Americans during a time of radical social and cultural change. Her 1967 *handle with care* (cat. 23) reads “See the man who can save you the most.” The intended subject of Chevrolet's counsel is a local car dealer, but Kent saw updated scripture in the readymade text. Similarly, in *for eleanor*, Kent identified General Mills' slogan “the big G stands for goodness” as having significance beyond the quality of the company's breakfast cereal. In a 1966 essay, Kent described this strategy: “When someone drew a picture of Pope John wearing an Avis ‘we try harder’ button, those words no longer meant which car rental to patronize, and yet some of the overtones from its original meaning are there and make a contribution to the new situation.”³⁶

Conversant with the techniques and styles of her pop art contemporaries, Kent adjusted her work to serve the context of 1960s Los Angeles, “so that the preaching of the Gospel might be carried out more effectively.”³⁷ Like Warhol, Ruscha, or Lichtenstein, and as recommended by the Second Vatican Council, Kent turned to the familiar – ordinary objects and texts – for artistic fodder. In a 1964 essay, she defended her contemporaries' subject matter, and by extension her own: “They [artists] know about the past and traditionally work with the same stuff artists have always worked with, the stuff that is around them. In the eighteenth century, it was ladies and gentlemen and swings in a garden; today it may be Campbell's soup cans or highway signs. There is no real difference. The artist still takes his everyday world and tries to make something out of it.”³⁸

34. See Mark Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 62–94.

35. *Perfectae Caritatis* or *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*, para. 20. vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html.

36. Kent, “Choose LIFE,” n.p. This essay, in which Kent describes her philosophy of signs and signifying texts, can be understood as a prelude to her 1967 book *Footnotes and Headlines* (cat. 12).

37. For Kent, artists had a particular responsibility to the project of revitalization of the Church and its customs. She repeatedly referred to Pope Paul VI's plea to artists: “He started out by saying, you know, we need you and we are unable to communicate the Christian message without you. Because you make it tangible, understandable, to people in a way that we never do.” See Marj Shippey, “Art Is To Be Enjoyed,” interview with Corita Kent, *Lamp: A Catholic Family Journal* (November 1965): 7.

38. Kent, untitled text, *The Critic* 22 (4) (February–March 1964): 61.

Fig. 7. Andy Warhol, *Yellow Brillo Box*; *Heinz Tomato Ketchup Box*; *White Brillo Box*; *Mott's Apple Juice Box*; *Del Monte Peach Halves Box*; *Campbell's Tomato Juice Box*; *Kellogg's Corn Flakes Box*, 1964, synthetic polymer paint and screenprint on wood. Walker Art Center.



Using a dialect recognizable from the mass media, commerce, and the urban environment enabled Kent to make the work of the Church more accessible to an expanded audience.

Food, as well as its promotion and packaging, was a favorite subject of Kent's from 1964 through 1967, likely for a variety of reasons. Its possibilities may have emerged for her from Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Can* paintings presented at the Ferus Gallery in 1962, as well as his *Brillo* and *Heinz Tomato Ketchup* boxes (fig. 7), first shown at the Dwan Gallery in February 1964.³⁹ Groceries had also appeared in *New Painting of Common Objects* in the form of a milk bottle Joe Goode placed in front of one of his canvases, and Ruscha's painted portrayals of Spam and Sun-Maid Raisin packages; in addition, Oldenburg's *The Store* and its handcrafted commodities were well known in the art world by this time.⁴⁰ Like Warhol, Kent often had her camera in hand, and her familiarity with her contemporaries' portrayals of food seems obvious in the hundreds of Kodachrome slides she took at a local Market Basket supermarket, which include shots of stacked Brillo boxes (fig. 8) and bread wrappers. These slides, of both the exterior and interior of the store, show its windows (fig. 9), parking lot, laden shelves, and promotional materials (fig. 10). They demonstrate not only her fluency with current pop art trends, but also her interest in pictorial structure, as she carefully composed long views of aisles and close-ups of graphic elements on signage (fig. 11). The content and composition of these slides fed her printmaking practice through the mid-1960s.

39. Warhol first exhibited three *Brillo (3¢ Off)* boxes and one *Heinz Tomato Ketchup* box at the Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, in *Boxes*, February 2 to 29, 1964. Two months later, the Factory produced editions of the *Brillo (3¢ Off)*, *Mott's Apple Juice*, *Del Monte Peach Halves*, *Kellogg's Corn Flakes*, *Heinz Tomato Ketchup*, *Brillo*, and *Campbell's Tomato Juice* boxes to be shown at the Stable Gallery, New York, April 21 to May 9, 1964.

40. Claes Oldenburg, too, introduced food into the representational realm, in both drawings and sculpture. From December 1, 1961, to January 31, 1962, he staged handcrafted commodities, including cake, ice cream, bread, and eggs, at his *The Store*, which occupied a storefront on New York's Lower East Side (see cat. 3). Although it is not known whether Kent visited *The Store*, she was in New York during its presentation: "And then yearly, around Christmastime, we would go to New York. . . . This was in the middle fifties to the middle sixties, before art from New York got out here so fast. . . . So we would go to see what was going on at the Museum of Modern Art and at the galleries"; Kent, interviewed by Galm, transcript, 1977, 23. She could also have seen Oldenburg's latest innovations in L.A. in October 1963, when the Dwan Gallery presented an exhibition of his vinyl sculptures, including *Floor Cone*, a soft, large-scale depiction of an ice cream cone. Kent's familiarity with Oldenburg's work is referenced in the June–July 1965 class notes of her student Mary Anne Karia (née Mikulka), which include mention of a gallery show that presented "mass production of food sculpture."



The opening of the Market Basket in 1963, on the corner of Western and Franklin Avenues directly across the street from Immaculate Heart College, was an epiphany for Kent. As she once exclaimed to a reporter: “Groceries became a revelation; the people coming out with bundles of food. It’s all like a great ceremony, and the whole drudgery of shopping has become my inspiration.”⁴¹ The store also served as a rich source of project materials for her and the students, with the grocery store staff saving sales circulars, window posters, and packing boxes – embellished with brand logos and slogans – for use in their work.

Pope John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*), a 1963 dispatch addressed to Catholic clergy on establishing universal peace, also motivated the incorporation of food in Kent’s Vatican II-era art production. Under the section titled “Rights,” the Pope wrote: “We must speak of man’s rights. Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food.”⁴² Kent deduced from the Pope’s words that in order for peace on earth to be possible, world hunger had to be alleviated. In light of the availability of food at the new supermarket across the street and its ubiquity in the galleries and museums in Los Angeles and New York, the papal declaration of the right to food pointed Kent toward a new idiom for her prints. For instance, Pepsi-Cola’s motto “Come alive!” became the focal point of a number of her prints (cat. 50), its message speaking not only to the boost of caffeine, but also the reanimation of the human spirit, and even the Resurrection. Kent’s unique take on pop art’s food fixation revealed new meanings in commercial jingles, while providing a means to promulgate gospel in language relevant to modern-day Americans.

Fig. 8. Slide of Brillo boxes, from Kent archive. Corita Art Center.

Fig. 9. Slide of Market Basket exterior window, from Kent archive. Corita Art Center.

Fig. 10. Slide of Market Basket produce aisle, from Kent archive. Corita Art Center.

Fig. 11. Slide of supermarket announcement, from Kent archive. Corita Art Center.

41. Kent, quoted in Bill Cunningham, “Nun Startles N.Y. with Her Graphic Art,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 1965.

42. See Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, April 11, 1963, sec. 1, para. 11, w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

Surprising as it may seem, Vatican II-inspired religious renewal shared certain ambitions and strategies with pop art. One of the primary objectives of Vatican II was to reconnect the Church with a wider congregation, which is akin to pop's bringing art to a more popular audience. In a 1967 interview, Warhol, in many ways the figurehead of the style, said: "Pop art is for everyone. I don't think art should be only for the select few, I think it should be for the mass of American people."⁴³ As described by Colleen McDannell, the Vatican Council debates and documents also advocated greater ecumenism, privileging the following ideals: "reform, relevancy, experimentation, collaboration, youthfulness, intentionality, openness, humor, protest, and the vernacular."⁴⁴ Artist Richard Hamilton laid out a similar roster of principles for pop art, calling it "Popular (designed for mass production), Transient (short-term solution), Expendable (easily-forgotten), Low cost, Mass produced, Young (aimed at youth), Witty, Sexy, Gimmicky, Glamorous, Big business."⁴⁵ Although not all of Hamilton's stated characteristics of pop art are aligned with issues taken up by the Vatican Council, the tenor of the times pervades both. Both the religious and artistic movements were inclined toward greater access and immediacy, especially among youthful audiences.

Kent intuited the parallelism of the two tracks and merged them in her work. The 1964 print *song about the greatness* (fig. 12a) depicts a cropped Del Monte tomato sauce jingle, "Makes meatballs sing!" (fig. 12b), against a red background, with the words of Psalm 98:7-9 overlaid on the word "sing." The comical coupling of God's word and a sales pitch—an experimental and gimmicky gesture—would have appealed to young, reform-minded viewers familiar with the advertising campaigns of the day. A low-cost, mass-produced print that used the vernacular to make a biblical passage relevant, thought provoking, and accessible in 1964 was tapping into both art world tactics and Vatican II concerns in a novel way. And Kent wasn't the only artist to sense how the goals of pop art dovetailed with Christianity. Robert Indiana announced in 1963: "Pop is Instant Art. . . . Its comprehension can be as immediate as a Crucifixion. Its appeal may be as broad as its range; it is the wide-screen of the Late Show. It is not the Latin of the hierarchy, it is vulgar."⁴⁶ The pop art shift to "common objects," a perceived

Fig. 12a. Kent, *song about the greatness* (cat. 42).
Fig. 12b. Slide of Del Monte Tomato Sauce advertisement, from Kent archive. Corita Art Center.



43. Quoted in Andy Warhol and Gretchen Berg, "Andy: My True Story," *Los Angeles Free Press*, March 17, 1967.

44. McDannell, *The Spirit of Vatican II*, 135.

45. Letter from Hamilton to Peter and Alison Smithson, January 16, 1957; reprinted in *Pop Art*, ed. Madoff, 5-6.

46. Indiana, interviewed in G. R. Swenson, "What Is Pop Art? Answers from Eight Painters, Part I," *ARTnews* 62 (7) (November 1963): 24-27; reprinted in *Pop Art*, ed. Madoff, 106.

downgrade from a “high art” idiom, coincided with the proposals of Vatican II to transition from Latin to the vernacular, also understood by some as a devaluation of the language of Mass. Both trends, however, invited broader participation by making art and the Catholic Mass seemingly more intelligible.

Kent’s conception of the possibilities that pop art offered may have derived from her encounters with its early presentations in Los Angeles, as well as from Marcel Duchamp’s first American retrospective in Pasadena. Duchamp served as an important precedent for many pop artists because of his response to the avant-garde challenge of reconciling the relationship between art and life, demonstrated most explicitly in his readymades. In 1917, Duchamp notoriously submitted an inverted urinal to the first annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York. The motto of the exhibition, “No jury, no prizes,” ostensibly meant that “anything” could be art, and Duchamp, under a pseudonym, tested the premise. The ultimate fate of the first public readymade was ambiguous—it was neither exhibited nor rejected—but what the experiment established was profound. It was clear that art, far from having a secure ontological status, was defined by convention and institutional consensus. What Kent appears to have absorbed from Duchamp’s work is twofold. On the one hand, the transformation of found objects into “art” through their display within the sanctified space of a museum or gallery laid the foundation for Kent to subject found words to the same aestheticizing, and ultimately elevating, process. But Kent’s understanding of the readymade may have had more to do with transubstantiation: if the everyday object’s value can be shifted through context and faith, it can be seen as analogous to the host in the Catholic Mass. Duchamp’s work affirmed a notion that was well known to Kent from Catholic liturgy, that institutions and their congregations are necessary to authenticate the transformation of everyday objects, whether that object is an overturned urinal or a transubstantiated bit of bread. Duchamp’s practice bolstered her faith that the status of objects could be changed through intention and shared conviction. The process was described in 1962 by gallerist Sidney Janis, an early proponent of pop art: “Rediscovered by the artist and lifted out of its commonplace milieu, the daily object, unembellished and without ‘artistic’ pretensions is revealed and intensified and becomes through the awareness it evokes a new aesthetic experience. In the unplanned transformation the ordinary becomes extraordinary, the common, uncommon.”⁴⁷

Kent’s perception of the process of transformation is apparent throughout her work, but it is most obvious in her repeated depictions of and references to bread. In her prints, even processed bread embodies the possibility of converting the ordinary into the wondrous, as is visually evident in *round wonder* (cat. 45), where the Wonder Bread logo is located within a white circle resembling a communion wafer. As Kent remarked in 1966, “Any bread means communion.”⁴⁸ This view informed her Happenings and other celebrations of the mid-1960s, in which she passed around store-bought bread.⁴⁹ In a 1966 lecture at Palomar College, Kent aligned Christ at the Last Supper with avant-garde art practice, proclaiming, “By taking bread out of its ordinary form, and presenting it as his body, He originated pop art.”⁵⁰ Harvard Divinity School

47. Sidney Janis, “On the Theme of the Exhibition,” in *The New Realists* (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1962), n.p.

48. Kent, “Choose LIFE,” n.p.

49. For a detailed account of the passing of bread at a public Happening, see Thomas M. Gannon, “Sorceress at Work,” *America* 118 (14) (April 6, 1968): 434–36. Kent was aware of the liturgical significance of such a gesture and recounted the response of traditional Catholics to a 1967 event, “An Evening with God,” at the Boston Tea Party, a nightclub in Boston. She said: “Some of the older Botolph [Gallery] board members got a little disturbed because they thought we were having communion—which indeed we were. But we were not trying to usurp the powers of the church. We were just eating and drinking together”; Kent, interviewed by Galm, transcript, 1977, 40–41. The event is also described in a Boston College newspaper: Mike Peterson, “Botolph Is Back,” *The Heights*, November 17, 1967. For more on Kent’s depictions of bread, see cats. 45–48.

50. Related by Kathy Phillips, in her unpublished “Report on Palomar College Fine Arts Festival, April 14–16, 1966”; Corita Art Center Archive, Los Angeles.

professor Harvey Cox elaborated on the idea: “I once suggested to Marshall McLuhan that the sacrament was the first form of pop art. You take a piece of bread, or a cup, and you put it in a very unusual setting, namely the High Mass. You lift it up and look at it. And from then on you never see bread and wine in quite the same way again.” Cox continued: “That’s the whole thing about the reproduction of the tomato soup can in pop art. It is put in a new context. You see it in a new way.”⁵¹ Through the representational methods and underlying philosophies of contemporary art, Kent found an artistic mode with which to disseminate a renewed understanding of Catholicism that appealed to those attuned to the contemporary world around them.

The Word and the Language of Reform

The most powerful, and ultimately productive, lesson that Kent took from the Vatican II proposals and the procedures of pop art was the turn to a vernacular idiom. When in 1964 the Vatican Council authorized the use of modern, local language during Mass, Kent also recognized its potential as the predominant dialect for her prints. Although prior to that time she had included non-biblical texts in her prints, in 1964 she turned decisively to the language of popular and commodity culture. Kent’s use of current parlance corresponds to the historian John O’Malley’s description of Vatican II as a “language event”: a new style of “thinking, speaking, and behaving” that signified “a change from a more authoritarian and unidirectional style to a more reciprocal and responsive model.”⁵² In Kent’s prints, this new, more casual style of communication coaxes faith and moral responsibility rather than demands obedience. In her choice of texts, she exemplified the Vatican Council’s new style to entice viewers to engage with a revitalized Catholicism.

Kent describes her approach in her 1967 book *Footnotes and Headlines: A Play-Pray Book* (cat. 12), an illustrated prose poem that serves, in an unstated way, as a handbook to her pictorial and linguistic strategies: “In a way all the words we need are in the ads, they can be endlessly re-sorted and reassembled / it is a huge game / it is a way of confronting mystery, unless you are so poor, you think you need all the things they say you need, and take them on a single meaning level.”⁵³ While she acknowledges the fluency of ads for communicating messages about the products they endorse, she puts that fluency to other uses. As she says: “Playing around with words, taking them out of one context and putting them in another, is a way of preserving or restoring their life. . . . The most noble words can become ineffective cliché, but clichés when put into a new context can become unclichéd.”⁵⁴

Kent’s incorporation of words into the pictorial field accords to some degree with related practices undertaken by her contemporaries. Many of the best-known examples of pop art conspicuously feature language, such as Warhol’s soup cans (cat. 1) and Lichtenstein’s comic strips, yet Kent’s use of language differs from their more literal deployment. Slides that Kent took at the 1965 Jasper Johns exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum reveal her interest in the depiction of words stripped of their usual meaning. Close-ups of Johns’s 1959 *False Start* (fig. 13) show the words “orange,” “blue,” “red,” “white,” and “green” applied to the painting via stencils, mostly in colors other than those designated by each color’s name. In 1962–63, Johns again employed this strategy in a monochromatic lithograph, *Red, Yellow, Blue* (cat. 4). The color names, divested of their customary meaning, can be read as marks or objects, and are therefore available as ciphers for new

51. Harvey Cox, “Corita,” in Kent, Cox, and Eisenstein, *Sister Corita*, 104.

52. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 11–12.

53. Kent, *Footnotes and Headlines* (cat. 12), 29.

54. *Ibid.*, 40–41.

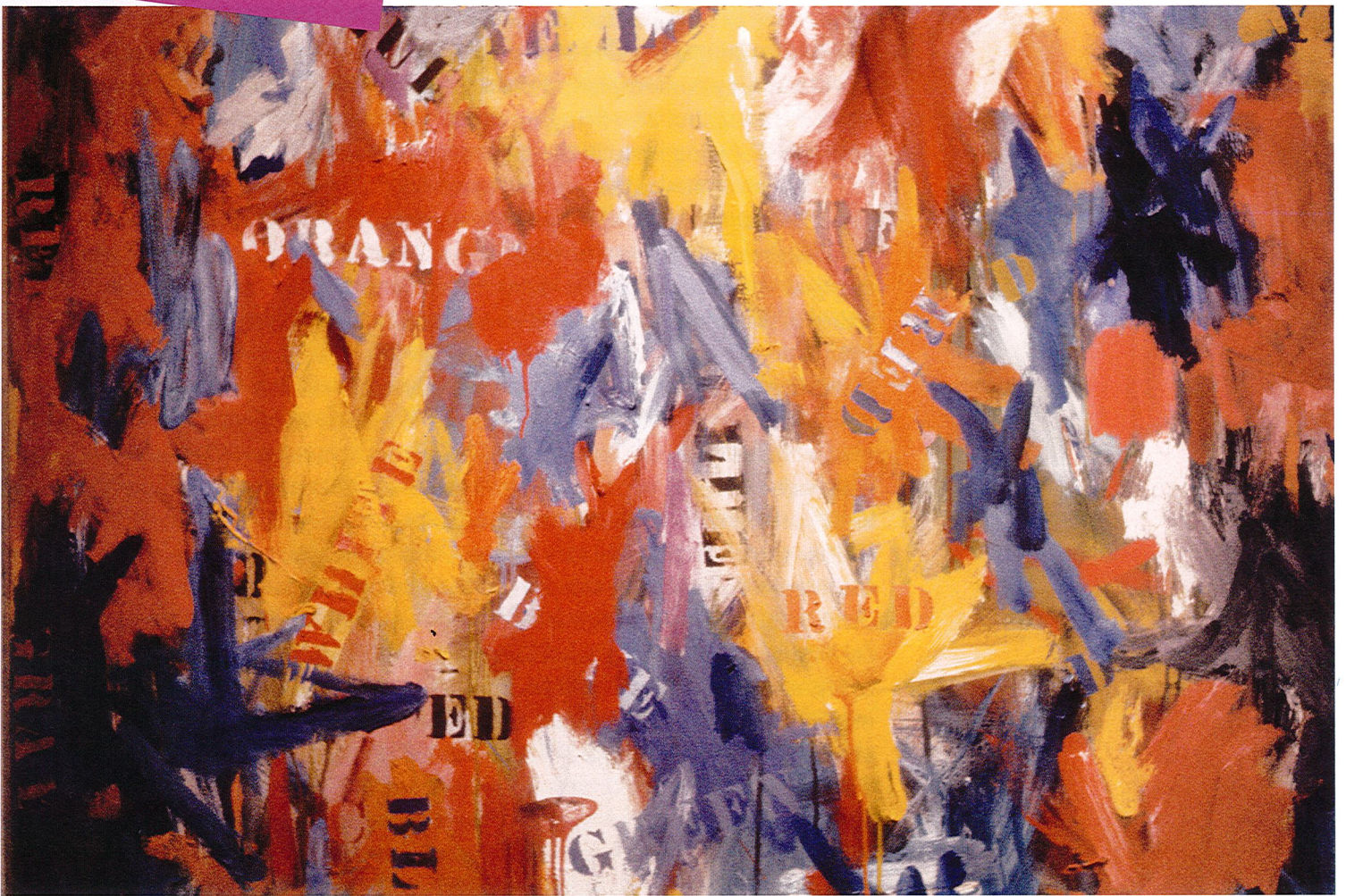


Fig. 13. Slide of a detail of Jasper Johns, *False Start*, 1959, from Kent archive. Corita Art Center.

meaning. The procedure, however, is not only about how context shifts meaning, but how meaning itself comes into being. In the work of Kent, like that of Johns, meaning emerges through representation. By stripping advertising slogans of their intended purpose, she not only reinvests them with new significance, but also creates a vehicle for engendering and communicating faith.

In a 1962 essay, the critic Gene Swenson discusses the use of words in art, detailing in particular the work of Jim Dine: “We find Dine mocking the meanings we conventionally invest in words and images. Both the word and the image in his work may refer to something well-known, like hair; in combining the two Dine has changed them both and revealed our arbitrary ideas of them.”⁵⁵ Dine illustrates (and upends) this practice in his 1969 print series *Vegetables* (cat. 40), in which eight sheets are collaged with photographic images of vegetables: tomatoes, onions, lettuce, carrots, and eggplant, among others. Alongside the vegetables, he adds lithographically printed labels that both enable and confound their identification – some words accurately name the corresponding vegetables, while others, like the word “eggplant” beside an onion, do not. By “naming” vegetables with alternate words, Dine exaggerates the arbitrary relationship between word and meaning, pointing out what Swenson called the “deadness of definitions.”⁵⁶ Such “deadness” can be likened to Kent’s idea of cliché, whereby the repetition and consequent overuse of words drains and devalues them. Unlike Dine, however, Kent is not interested in the void created by the arbitrariness of meaning. Her project is one of resurrection, rehabilitating exhausted language to enable the

55. Swenson, “The New American Sign Painters,” in *Pop Art*, ed. Madoff, 35.

56. *Ibid.*

emergence of the spiritual and political concerns inspired by Vatican II. Thus, when Kent adapts the Del Monte tomato sauce jingle “Makes meatballs sing!,” she is not only contemplating the availability of the words for investment with fresh meaning, but also bringing the revolutionary ambitions of Vatican II into being and locating them in the presence of the print’s viewers through language.

Kent endowed her depicted texts with the semblance of materiality by twisting, crimping, and tearing the advertising slogans that she photographed for use as stencils, thus giving the words a physical presence on the printed sheets. Ruscha also engaged in this practice (cats. 6, 15): “Some say that Ruscha’s interest in the materiality of the word may stem, however unconsciously, from his Catholic upbringing, from years of catechism classes on how ‘the Word became flesh.’”⁵⁷ The “word becoming flesh” must have resonated for Kent as well, inspiring a sense of words’ potential for animation and enlivenment. With this in mind, Chevrolet’s “See the man who can save you the most” becomes a commandment to bring God into one’s daily sight, perhaps to perceive the divine every time one passes a car dealership. Kent’s print *handle with care* (cat. 23) enables us to visualize “the man who can save you the most” dressed as a car salesman, wearing a smart 1960s suit, a man among the people. Accordingly, words have the power to make the heavenly present on earth, to bring God into being before us. Just as Kent invokes a God rehabilitated for ’60s culture, she materializes the Virgin as “the juiciest tomato”—an attractive, modern woman full of verve. Kent capitalizes on Catholicism’s conviction in the word becoming flesh by engaging the language of a purveyor of canned goods. Mary’s sauciness empowers her to enact the tenets of Christianity in the modern world. Thus, Kent’s prints, while cleverly reinvesting commodity culture’s language with renewed meaning, more importantly utilize that language to animate the charge of Christianity for contemporary American society.

Although Kent’s semantic and formal linguistic innovations rhyme with contemporary artistic practice and the goals of Vatican II, they also correspond to historical modes of church reform, including the reevaluation of its image regime. The Reformation of the Church, as initiated by Martin Luther in 1517, was intended to redirect the attention of the devout to the basic tenets of Christianity. According to reformers, the faith had wandered too far from its scriptural basis. The reformers sought to focus religious practice on scripture rather than imagery, so that the word of God would powerfully materialize his presence for believers. To combat the abuses that images provoked, some reformers discouraged the production of figural imagery. Kent’s prints emerge during a time of similar reformation of religious life and devotional practices, and likewise rejected the pictorial in favor of “the word.”⁵⁸

One of the outcomes of the reassessment of images in the sixteenth century was their elimination. Acts of iconoclasm broke out across northern Europe in the wake of the reformers’ call to reconsider the function and validity of religious icons. Finally, paintings and sculpture were purged from reformed churches, with scriptural texts taking their place on church walls. By the mid-1960s, Kent had rejected the religious iconography she had previously employed and substituted outsized textual statements, not unlike the replacement of religious images in churches.⁵⁹

57. The quote continues, “Although Ruscha equated his move to California in 1956 with his abandonment of the church, he has acknowledged the influence”; Lisa Pasquariello, “Ed Ruscha and the Language that He Used,” *October* (111) (Winter 2005): 85–110.

58. The resonance of Kent’s prints with the goals of Luther’s reformation was publicly recognized. For the 450th anniversary of Luther’s nailing of the 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral, Kent was commissioned to assemble an exhibition of her work, because “her prints not only reflected the spirit of the Reformation of 450 years past, but also the deep ecumenical spirit of our time. . . . Corita is an artist of the ‘word.’” See Connie Parvey, “Look at Life All the Time: The Art of Sister Mary Corita,” *Lutheran Forum*, October 1967, 11.

59. Kent maintained this strategy through 1967, when, instead of product slogans, many of her prints began to feature urban street signage, with sayings such as “Keep right,” “Highway entrance,” and “Wrong way” (cat. 55). Her almost exclusive reliance on text diminished in 1968, the year she left Immaculate Heart. Working with a professional printer, she began assimilating images into her prints, using photographic techniques that weren’t easily available to her in Immaculate Heart College’s print workshop. Mostly from the media, many of the images she employed were political and spoke of her activist impulse in relation to civil rights (cat. 80) and the Vietnam War (cat. 73).

In 1964, she voiced her latter-day iconoclasm in a critique of church decoration, condemning places of worship where “figures stand distant and removed and posed in attitudes and styles of another age’s set of circumstances. . . . The music and words and forms are in a foreign language. . . . To [the congregants] the pages of *Time* for January 3 with its Martin Luther King story enlarged to fill a wall of the church for a few weeks might make for a more uplifting heart action.”⁶⁰

The legacy of reform and iconoclasm also underlies the conception of one of the most iconic pop images of the 1960s, Robert Indiana’s 1965 *LOVE* (cat. 19). The design for this ubiquitous image emerged out of the artist’s religious upbringing: “It all started with my being exposed to Christian Science as a child. At one point I was even a member of the Church. ‘Love’ is the key word—it’s the only word that ever appears in a Christian Science church. No crucifixes, no baby Jesuses, no saints. Nothing except one word: ‘L-O-V-E.’”⁶¹ The reformation impulse that shaped the decorative program of Christian Science churches seems also to have informed Indiana’s practice of limiting the visual field to the depiction of words, such as “LOVE,” “EAT,” and “DIE,” which pointedly echo religious notions of God, communion, and resurrection. Indiana and Kent’s shared language points to artists’ engagement, whether stated or unstated, conscious or unconscious, in mediating larger “values” and “truths” in an increasingly secularized society.

Usurping slogans invented by Madison Avenue’s advertising agencies to heighten the appeal of commercial products, Kent crafted a modern language of spiritual and cultural reform. Irving Sussman argued in 1967 that “ad men” knowingly co-opted the language of scripture to facilitate the sale of goods. He cites the adoption of the Old Testament dove of peace as a sales pitch for Dove soap and the Three-in-One oil company slogan “the best oil to anoint your electric motor with” as examples of Madison Avenue’s “encroaching upon and perverting Christian symbolism.”⁶² Kent’s co-optation of advertising refrains is, for Sussman, a principled taking back of “the word.” By doing so, she reendows words with their traditional meaning, while taking advantage of their contemporary resonance. For instance, in Kent’s hands, “A man you can lean on” (see cat. 14) is not an entreaty to buy Klopman sewing patterns, even as it relies on viewers’ recognition that salvation can be found in the conveniences of the modern world.⁶³ In 1970, Kent implicitly affirmed Sussman’s insights: “You can enjoy the quality of the ad and not let them pressure you to buy what you don’t really need. I have had fun taking back superlatives and just ordinary good words and phrases from ads and trying to restore some of their life to them. Words have life and must be cared for. If they are stolen for ugly uses or careless slang or false promotion work, they need to be brought back to their original meaning—back to their roots.”⁶⁴

While peers such as Warhol, Ruscha, and Dine made images of products, Kent iconoclastically returned to “the word” in order to convey current social conditions as well as to undermine the significance of language’s commercial use.⁶⁵

60. Kent, untitled text, *The Critic* 22 (4) (February–March 1964), 61.

61. This recent statement by Indiana is from an interview by Rachel Wolff, “What the World Needs Now Is . . . Love,” *Departures*, September 2013, 198. It reiterates a comment he made at the height of the artwork’s popularity: “Know the reason that I became so involved with *LOVE* is that it is so much a part of the peculiar American environment, particularly in my own background, which was Christian Scientist. ‘God is Love’ is spelled out in every church”; Indiana, quoted in Vivien Raynor, “The Man Who Invented Love,” *ARTnews* 72 (2) (February 1973): 60.

62. Irving Sussman, “Man Cannot Live by Wonderbread Alone,” *Ave Maria*, November 18, 1967, 25.

63. “A Man You Can Lean On/That’s Klopman!” is the text for a 1960 ad by Altman-Stoller Advertising, reproduced on a Klopman pattern package in 1965.

64. Kent, interviewed in Pamela Rothon, “A Conversation with Corita Kent,” *The American Way* 3 (11) (November 1970): 7–14.

65. While Kent was undertaking her subtle and subversive form of iconoclasm, some of the critical dialogue emerging around pop art also was steeped in language reminiscent of the early reformers’ call for a reevaluation of imagery. In a 1963 appraisal of the developing pop art movement, art critic Barbara Rose disparagingly comments on practitioners’ choice of subject matter, condemning it as materialistic and idolatrous. She writes that the pop artist “embraces what he probably hates the most, exalting into icons the consumer products (what Rilke called the ‘life-decoys from America’). The soup cans, the money, the movie stars, the Good Humors (in your choice of six delicious artificial flavors), the beer cans, are the altarpieces of our religion. The artist, after a century of abstaining from painting the saints, once again turns to religious subjects.” See Rose, “Dada, Then and Now,” *Art International* 7 (1) (January 1963): 23–28; reprinted in *Pop Art*, ed. Madoff, 62.

Yet she also supported her fellow artists' critical position regarding the depiction of commodities and ambitions for cultural, if not spiritual, reform. By the mid-1960s, most artists and critics perceived pop as a critique of consumer culture. In describing Warhol's seeming embrace of consumerism, Hal Foster remarks, "If you can't beat it, Warhol implies, join it; more, if you enter it totally, you might expose it; you might reveal its enforced automatism through your own excessive example."⁶⁶ When questioned in 1965 about her attitude toward pop art, Kent replied: "The idea is to beat the system of advertising at its own game. Signs are good looking for the most part. Pop artists use these signs and do something else to them. The idea is to oppose crass realism, crass materialism, with religious values, or at least with real values."⁶⁷

As imagined by Kent, her work and that of her contemporaries was an attempt to convert the coercion of consumer culture into an active search for meaning. In her prints, she deployed the language of the marketplace in order to reinvest it with meaning other than "Buy this." Using this common idiom enabled a visualization of the divine suited to the contemporary world. The alternative to a straightforward critique of consumerism that Kent offered demonstrates that it's possible to accede to the language of commerce while directing its persuasive capacity to purposes that are, oddly enough, complementary. So when she inscribed her most notorious print with the phrase "Mary Mother is the juiciest tomato of them all," she was imbuing the holy figure with the potency of words, relying on the efficacy of language to bring her to life; and through the vernacular, making the divine legible to the artistically, spiritually, and politically reforming world of the 1960s. Although best known as a visual artist, Kent was an artist of the word.

⁶⁶ Hal Foster, "Survey," in *Pop*, ed. Francis, 30.

⁶⁷ Kent, quoted in Rev. Don Ranly, "Sister Corita: Tomatoes and Happy Beatitudes," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 22, 1965, 2.

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