

FRIEZE

Rediscovering the Radical Photography of Corita Kent

Famous for her screenprints of the 1960s and '70s, the artist is the subject of a new book that reconsiders a lesser-known aspect of her multifaceted practice

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BY JORDAN WEITZMAN AND ANDREW DURBIN IN INTERVIEWS | 02 AUG 23



Andrew Durbin Most people will be familiar with Corita Kent's screenprints of the 1960s and '70s, in which she voiced the struggles of the era through her unique graphic language. Less well-known is her photography, which you've just co-edited for a collection titled *Ordinary Things Will Be Signs for Us* [2023], co-published by Magic Hour Press and J&L Books.

Jordan Weitzman The seed for the book was a couple of thumbnail photos I saw in Julie Ault's *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Corita* [2005], while simultaneously reading about photography being a big part of Corita's teaching methodology: she would take her students from Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles to a used car lot or supermarket with cardboard cutouts she called 'viewfinders' and have them just look through and crop out little bits of the world. It made me wonder whether she also took photographs herself. A mutual friend put me in touch with Julie, who told me that there were more than 15,000 photos in her archive, which, fortuitously, the Corita Art Center was in the process of scanning.



Corita Kent, *We Can Create Life Without War Billboard*, c.1984. Courtesy: Corita Art Center, Los Angeles

AD How did you approach translating Corita’s archival photos to the page?

JW We were dealing with 35mm slides, mostly shot in the 1960s. Artist and publisher Jason Fulford, Julie and I had a lot of discussions about how to honour the look and feel of the original images: for example, they are reproduced with rounded corners to reflect the appearance of a projector slide. Often, slides sit around for decades and, unless they are impeccably preserved, can shift in colour or fade. Thankfully, the scans that the Corita Art Center had made looked good, but Jason, who also designed and produced the book spent countless hours doing pre-press work on the files to ensure that they would reproduce as faithfully as possible on the printed page.

AD Did Corita’s activism or graphic design influence how you put this book together?

JW Her spirit and ethos did more than anything: the three of us all felt like she was talking to us, imparting wisdom, the whole time we were working on the book. There are so many inspiring quotes of hers, like what she said to a group of students in 1967: ‘Sometimes you can take the whole of the world in, and sometimes you need a small piece to take in. I think that is really what a work of art is: it is a small piece that you can ingest, that gives you an idea of the richness of the whole.’



Corita Kent, *Ordinary Things Will Be Signs for Us*, 2023. Courtesy: J&L Books and Magic Hour Press

One of the challenges with this book was how to make something about Corita that didn't imitate her, because there's so much to love in her work on a graphic level. The Immaculate Heart College put out a publication called *The Irregular Bulletin*, which was Sister Mag's [Corita's predecessor and mentor at IHC] baby and is made up of all kinds of playful content in the form of travelogues, interviews and events, for which Corita was the 'official' photographer. So, that became a big source of inspiration for us.

AD What is the state of photography book publishing today?

JW In the best cases, photography books are not just containers for an artist's work; they're an expression of their practice. When I started going to book fairs ten years ago, it seemed like there were vast numbers of photo books coming out. Yet, despite the number of books published yearly, and the engaged audiences who are hungry for them, it still feels like a niche industry. Even some of the big publishers only print editions of 1,000 copies. Jason, who started J&L Books more than 20 years ago, has told me that it was very different back then, with only a handful of publishers making photo books. As a young publisher, working on this book with him has been an amazing learning experience. Aside from being a master editor and designer, he has such a honed skill set in every aspect of putting a book together. It was such a special collaboration with Julie and Jason; we were all feeling our way through the material to create this book.

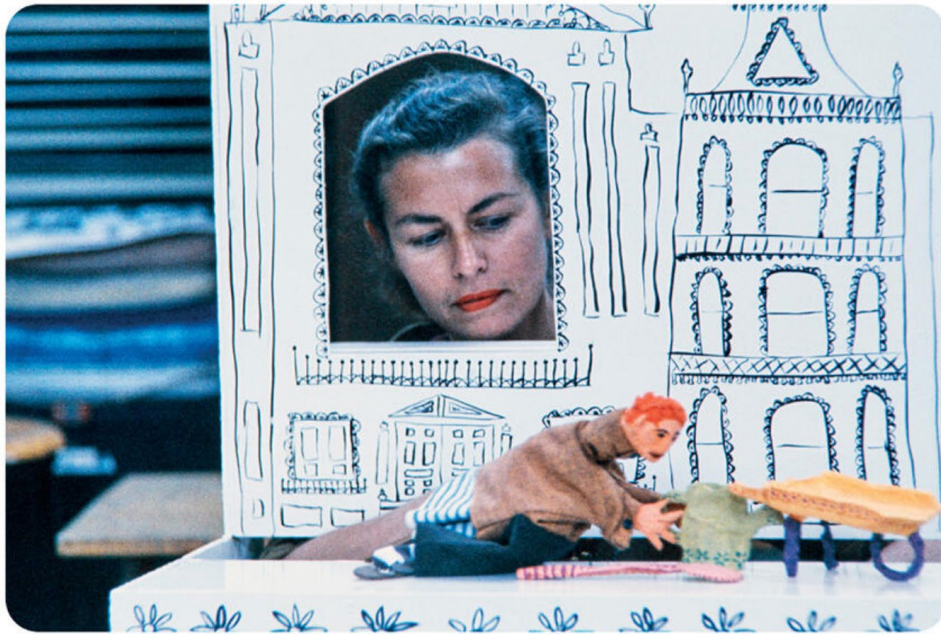
AD Are there any photo books that you return to time and again for inspiration?



Corita Kent photograph from *Ordinary Things Will Be Signs For Us*, 2023.
Courtesies: Corita Art Center, J&L Books and Magic Hour Press

JW For the past couple of months, I've been adding meaningful books to a dedicated shelf in my place. It's become such an eclectic selection, but oddly, they almost all have off-white covers – as do the first four books I've published through Magic Hour Press! One through line with everything on my bookshelf is an appreciation for publications that do heavy lifting with minimal means. By that I mean the economy with which a book is designed, the tightness of an edit, the curiosity in unexpected gestures: there are all kinds of things that might charm you and make you want to return to a book over and over. There's a tiny Hervé Guibert book of photos called *Le Seul Visage* [The Only Face, 1984], which has been hitting a lot of those notes for me lately.

I don't think there is one book that I return to above all others, though. Often, the publications I love the most contain a variety of influences which, channelled through an artist, emerge as a unique, new voice. Looking at my shelf now, I can see a copy of Moyra Davey's *Long Life Cool White* [2008], in which she intersperses her *Notes on Photography and Accident* essay with pictures of the surface of her desk. Alongside is Nobuyoshi Araki's *Sentimental Journey* [1971], which reminds me of how the most beautiful things are the simplest, as does Marguerite Duras's *La Vie matérielle* [Practicalities, 1987]. And every time I look at William Eggleston's *Los Alamos* [2003], I think about how good that title is, and the saturation and tonality of the printing.



Corita Kent photograph from *Ordinary Things Will Be Signs For Us*, 2023.
Courtesy: Corita Art Center, J&L Books and Magic Hour Press

AD Flickr, Tumblr and Instagram have been so important for young photographers, but social media now seems to be trending toward video content. Do you think we're about to see a shift in how photography is disseminated and discovered?

JW Of course, social media provides a huge platform for people to encounter images these days – one that will continue to change and evolve. But I really believe that photographs are like language. It's like how we might all use the same words on a daily basis in English, but writing a great poem is much more challenging. That's really where the art lies in making photo books: when someone takes those images and creates a world that is fascinating or mysterious.

Main image: Corita Kent, Ordinary Things Will Be Signs for Us, 2023. Courtesy: J&L Books and Magic Hour Press