

Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita

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Four Corners Books

The Spirited Art of Sister Corita

by Julie Ault

In August of 1968 Sister Corita made a bold move, surprising everyone, apparently even herself.¹ While on sabbatical from her position as chair of the art department at the Immaculate Heart College, after two months of staying with her friend Celia Hubbard in Massachusetts, she announced she was leaving Los Angeles, her life there, and her religious community altogether. She did not offer much explanation, at least not to the press: "My reasons are very personal and very hard to explain. It seems to be the right thing for me to do now."²

Immaculate Heart

What exactly was Corita leaving? She was parting from the sisterhood and the religious order that provided the spiritual, living, and working structure of her adult life as well as the vows that compose a sister's life – obedience, celibacy, and poverty. The cloistered, collective environment of the Immaculate Heart Community, in which Corita had lived since 1936, from the age of eighteen, was a singular milieu – renowned for its liberal orientation that she had helped generate. That community had in turn nurtured the prominent "modern nun,"³ and radically influenced the path of her art.

Corita was also leaving the Immaculate Heart College, where she taught for over twenty years and headed its art department during the last four. Since the 1950s the college had been both celebrated and criticized for its progressive educative environment. By the 1960s, the college's art department had become legendary – characterized as inspirational not only by Catholics and students, but by illustrious figures including Buckminster Fuller, who declared, "Amongst the most fundamentally inspiring experiences of my life have been my visits to the art department at Immaculate Heart College." Charles and Ray Eames, other luminary supporters, whom Corita counted as primary influences on her creative process, teaching, and art making, opened their house and studio to the sisters and their students annually in the 1950s and 1960s. Both Fuller and Charles Eames had participated in the Great Men lecture series that long-time art department chair Sister Magdalen Mary initiated and which Corita directed for some years. The series included James Elliot, Leonard Stein, John Cage, Alfred Hitchcock, Saul Bass, Herbert Bayer, Jean Renoir, and Virgil Thompson.⁴ Today, this list reads like a cultural who's who, but at the time they were

← Left to right: IHC student, IHC teacher Sister Helen Cary, Corita, Mary's Day, ✓ Buckminster Fuller visiting the IHC art department, with C



fairly accessible: Corita organized the lectures by simply writing to these men, inviting them to visit and talk about their lives, their thinking and working methods, and engage in Q&A with the students.⁵

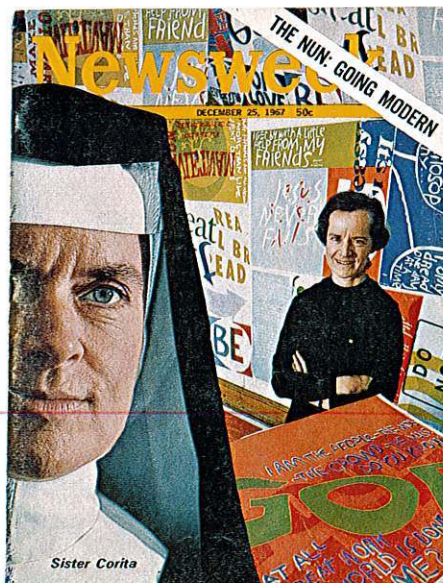
Corita's celebrity seemed to run on a parallel track with the college's. "Many nuns are caught between the traditional idea that they should be humble and not exalt their work and a contemporary culture that elevates the cult of the individual."⁶ Some say Corita was similarly conflicted, at least in the early years of her career, before she gained self-confidence.⁷ However, judging by contemporary accounts, she was not the kind of person to suppress the fullness of her character for long, or to marginalize her ideas – certainly not for the sake of adhering to traditions she found problematic. Corita was charismatic and she was fearless. She spoke and acted with conviction and verve, exuding good energy as she beckoned people to graciously sidestep oppressive cultural conventions in favor of a celebrational (perhaps subversive) interrogation of society through creativity and everyday actions. Likewise, her art was bold and aesthetically joyful in its offering of spiritual renewal, social critique, and political efficacy. The mix of disarming personality and daring art brought Corita into the public eye, and kept her in demand in the college, in Catholic communities, and in both local and national press.⁸ Barbara Losey claims, "By the mid-1960s, as a result of her growing recognition as an artist and teacher, Sister Corita began to experience

almost rock-star status among her students and some art collectors."⁹ Speaking about how fame affected her classroom, Corita explained:

I was a big old taskmaster and gave fantastic assignments. I don't suppose they ever screamed at me but they'd complain lots. One of the reasons I stopped teaching, I say it laughingly, was that I became a kind of celebrity and it started getting in the way. There would be visitors, very well intentioned, who just wanted to meet me – this sort of thing. Some of this was interesting because it brought interesting projects for the students to work on... But I think the students resented my fame because whenever they would do something they would be labeled as my students. I didn't give two hoots but they did. Some felt I was taking the credit for their work as well.¹⁰

With her resignation, Corita was saying goodbye to a relentless schedule filled with teaching, traveling, lecturing, and exhibiting, "I taught for about thirty-two years, and then I really felt that I had finished with that. I was very happy to drop it. The same with speaking. That was the thing I dropped most easily."¹¹ Corita and her mentor and unofficial manager until 1964, Sister Magdalen Mary (Margaret "Maggie" Martin), were both "demons for work."¹² Sister Mag, as she was known at the IHC, was the "impossible nourishment behind the blooming of the art department."¹³ She had scheduled travels for their collaborative slide talks visiting a different U.S. city every second day

← IHC art department Mickey Myers in pursuit, 1966
 ↙ Newsweek, Dec 25, 1967
 ↘ Corita working on serigraphs
 → Prints hanging to



during one month, and that was typical in 1959, even before Corita's marquee appeal had burgeoned.¹⁴

Corita Kent was leaving behind her over-scheduled insomniac life of teaching, running the art department, lecturing, exhibiting, fulfilling commissions, conducting workshops, and acting as spokesperson for the IHC, as well as icon for the rebellious "modern nun." She was taking leave of being "involved in too many things and constantly trying to remember stacks of deadlines,"¹⁵ within which art making – her primary passion – had from all accounts become confined to a frenzied period in the three-week summer vacation between semesters, taking place in the basement of the college or in the one-room cinder block workshop across from Immaculate Heart College.¹⁶ Despite Corita's seemingly relaxed attitude toward the in-between, speedy character of those work sessions, clearly the arrangement was less than ideal. "This year I did thirty or thirty-five [serigraphs], and printed about a hundred of each. I work very fast, and others help me mix paint and clean up. It's a standing joke that anyone who drops in in August helps."¹⁷ She reflected many years later on the period precipitating her transition:

Other people could see the pace at which I was going, which was really insane toward the end, and I don't think I quite realized it. I was young and healthy, and I said no to so many things that I thought I was saying no to as much as possible. But apparently I wasn't. So when

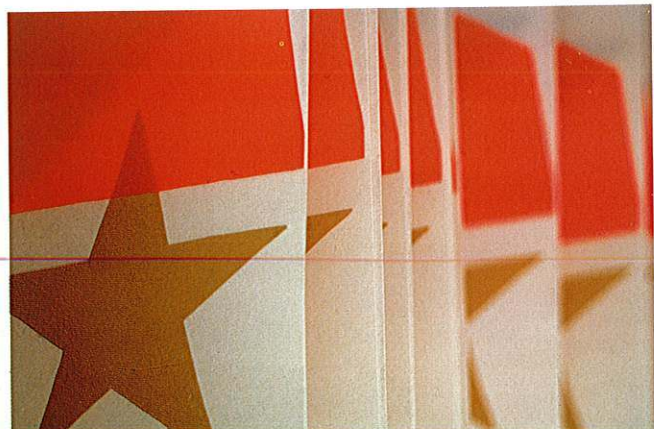
I found out how simple life was staying with one person and making prints for a whole summer, it began to dawn on me what I had been doing, and I just couldn't do it anymore.¹⁸

Corita had been living with the Immaculate Heart women her entire adult life: she was with people all the time, and the volume had been steadily increasing. The lure to design her own life, to compose a quieter, more self-directed existence, which would provide ample time for making her art, was powerful.¹⁹

Call for Renewal

While Corita's ever increasing workload was formidable enough, it coincided with changing circumstances in the Catholic Church in the 1960s: these brought certain institutional problems to the foreground, and brought tensions within Corita's immediate environment – and within her – to a crisis point.

In 1962, Pope John XXIII's Vatican II decree on the "Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life" called for movement towards modern values. "Post-Vatican II liturgy was to include the use of the vernacular – as opposed to Latin – in holy services such as the celebration of the Mass. The altar was turned to face participants so that they would 'really be at the table,' and the communion wafer was handed to the person receiving it instead of being placed by the priest on the communicant's tongue."²⁰ For nuns, who had been subject to traditionally gendered roles,



modernization meant a loosening of those functions, fewer restrictions on their daily lives, and a new focusing on social action and service.

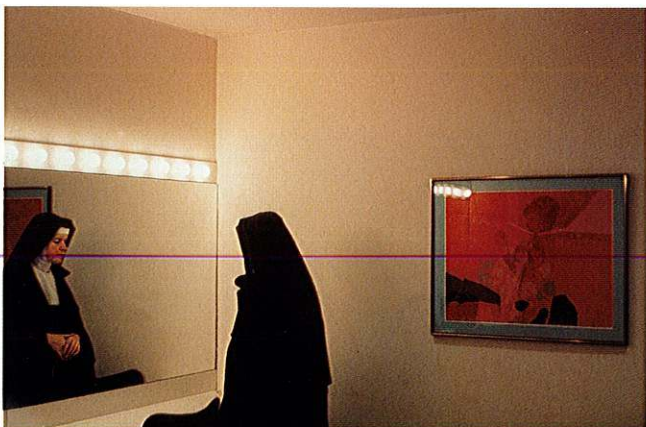
The Immaculate Heart Community and College, like many Catholic institutions, were thrown into conflict over how previously accepted traditions were to be revised *in practice*. The role of the sisterhood was service; traditionally sisters were not individuated or permitted to draw attention to themselves, hence the habit, or uniform, and the refutation of birth names.²¹ Many nuns were teachers and educational traditions dictated by standardized methods were in place. Corita and the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) nuns largely favored a progressive reading of Vatican II, which included not only modifying personal appearance and seeking more individuation, but taking seriously the Vatican's call for critical examination of their governance and the call to air their objections and propositions – even if these were at odds with the local church hierarchy to which they were supposed to be obedient. Corita and the IHM sisters questioned the notion of apparently absolute obedience that the Los Angeles archdiocese, and Cardinal James Francis McIntyre in particular, demanded – which in itself contrasted with the message of the decree on Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life. The sisters sought to contemporize their community work, their teaching methods and educational content, and connect more to people's lived experience, particularly through cultural practices. The symbolism invoked by some of those cultural practices,

notably by Sister Corita, was at times regarded by the Cardinal as sacrilegious. Dramatic disputes over the decree's interpretation – amply publicized in the media – ensued between the IHMs and the archdiocese.

From Corita's point of view, "...there was an extreme rigidity on the part of the hierarchy. So that what should have been very normal growing changes were not allowed to be organic because everything that changed created such a big sensation..." People outside the community thought the nuns should continue wearing their habits, and didn't understand how it separated them from the people they worked with.²² Celia Hubbard recalls that after shedding the habit "Corita chose to wear stylish Marimekko dresses..." Corita's fashion sense was very much in keeping with her preference for bold shapes and primary colors in her art, and she loved to dress in a beautiful way."²³

It was a fateful irony that such a progressive community was located in what seemed to be the country's most conservative archdiocese, with Cardinal McIntyre at the helm.²⁴ Although the conflict applied pressure primarily on the mother superior and the college president,²⁵ Cardinal McIntyre's "displeasure was often personalized in Sister Corita,"²⁶ perhaps because she was so vibrantly in the public eye. Corita had been invited to make a wall mural for the Vatican Pavilion in the 1964 World's Fair that took place in New York, a more prominent venue did not exist.²⁷ *Newsweek* magazine reported that:

← Corita with very
edition for Hilton
New York, 1961
↙ Corita, c. 1968
→ News clipping, *Los Angeles Times*, Mar
1968



*Through her infectious vitality, Corita joyfully subverts the church's neat divisions between secular and sacred. "She merely steps outside the rules and does her dance," says Jesuit poet Daniel Berrigan... "But she is not frivolous, except to those who see life as a problem. She introduces the intuitive, the unpredictable into religion, and thereby threatens the essentially masculine, terribly efficient, chancery-ridden, law-abiding, file-cabinet church."*²⁸

Corita was frequently targeted for criticism by conservative Catholics,²⁹ including alumni and patrons whose financial support was considered essential, for her outspoken and engaging style of expressing her views on faith, art, and society. Beleaguered by frequent censure, upon leaving Los Angeles, she was escaping the restrictive judgment of authority that had ordered her life for so long.

Helen Kelley, president of the college between 1963 and 1977, wrote: "That Pope Paul VI had himself called for such review and revision mattered little at the local level. The incumbent archbishop... opposed everything the majority of the sisters proposed, ordered the removal of all Immaculate Heart Sisters teaching in the Los Angeles diocesan schools, and finally presented the community with an ultimatum: either conform with his wishes or seek dispensation from vows."³⁰

Cardinal McIntyre did in fact succeed in preventing the reform-minded sisters from teaching in his schools, but was unable to stop their programs and revisions altogether. He asked the Vatican's Congregation of the Religious for

ruling on their disobedience. The initial response: "the sisters must curb their experiments and submit to the authority of Cardinal McIntyre." Undeterred, they asked Pope Paul VI to clarify his directive on religious renewal – and, in effect, overturn the congregation's ruling.³¹ Ultimately, Rome deemed the IHC's renewal to be too far-reaching. This decision prompted the ensuing split. By 1970, many had left community life entirely, and then came the splintering of the organization. Ninety percent of the remaining IHM members chose to seek dispensation from their vows and reorganize as a voluntary community inspired by religious ideals.³² The group removed themselves from Catholic Church supervision.³³ Corita's departure had pre-dated the courageous action of the IHM sisters who sought freedom by two years.

A Democratic Form

Frances Elizabeth Kent was born in 1918 to an Irish Catholic family with six children living in Iowa. Five years later they moved to the Hollywood section of Los Angeles. Upon completing her Catholic education, Frances entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary Religious Community and took the name Sister Mary Corita. Religion was important in the Kent family; Corita's sister Ruth and her brother Mark also chose to enter religious orders.

Corita earned her Bachelor's degree from the Immaculate Heart College in 1941 and a Masters in Art History from the University of Southern



California in 1951. That same year she learned serigraphy from the wife of the artist Alfredo Martinez and began working primarily in silk-screen. At that time, serigraphy was considered a sign painter's medium and was not respected or accepted into some juried exhibitions.³⁴ A watershed moment that gave the artist a much-needed confidence boost was in 1952 when, unknown to Corita, Sister Mag entered one of her prints, *the lord is with thee*, into a Los Angeles County competition.³⁵ In the print division, her work won first prize, which was to be the first of many.

For Corita, wide distribution was a populist and Christian principle that determined her choice of artistic medium. "I'm a printmaker... a very democratic form, since it enables me to produce a quantity of original art for those who cannot afford to purchase high-priced art... the distribution of these prints to everyday places of work pleases me, and I hope they will give people a lift... more fun out of life."³⁶ She rejected what she perceived as an elitist distribution system and deliberately priced her large unnumbered editions of serigraphs inexpensively. Corita's choice of medium was in part influenced by Sister Mag's speculation that they would make more money at Friday night sales held by the department if they offered many inexpensive pieces rather than a few paintings.³⁷ The various forms Corita would utilize – serigraphs, greeting cards, publications, posters, events, disposable exhibits, murals, and billboards – and the venues through which she was to disseminate her work – churches, community

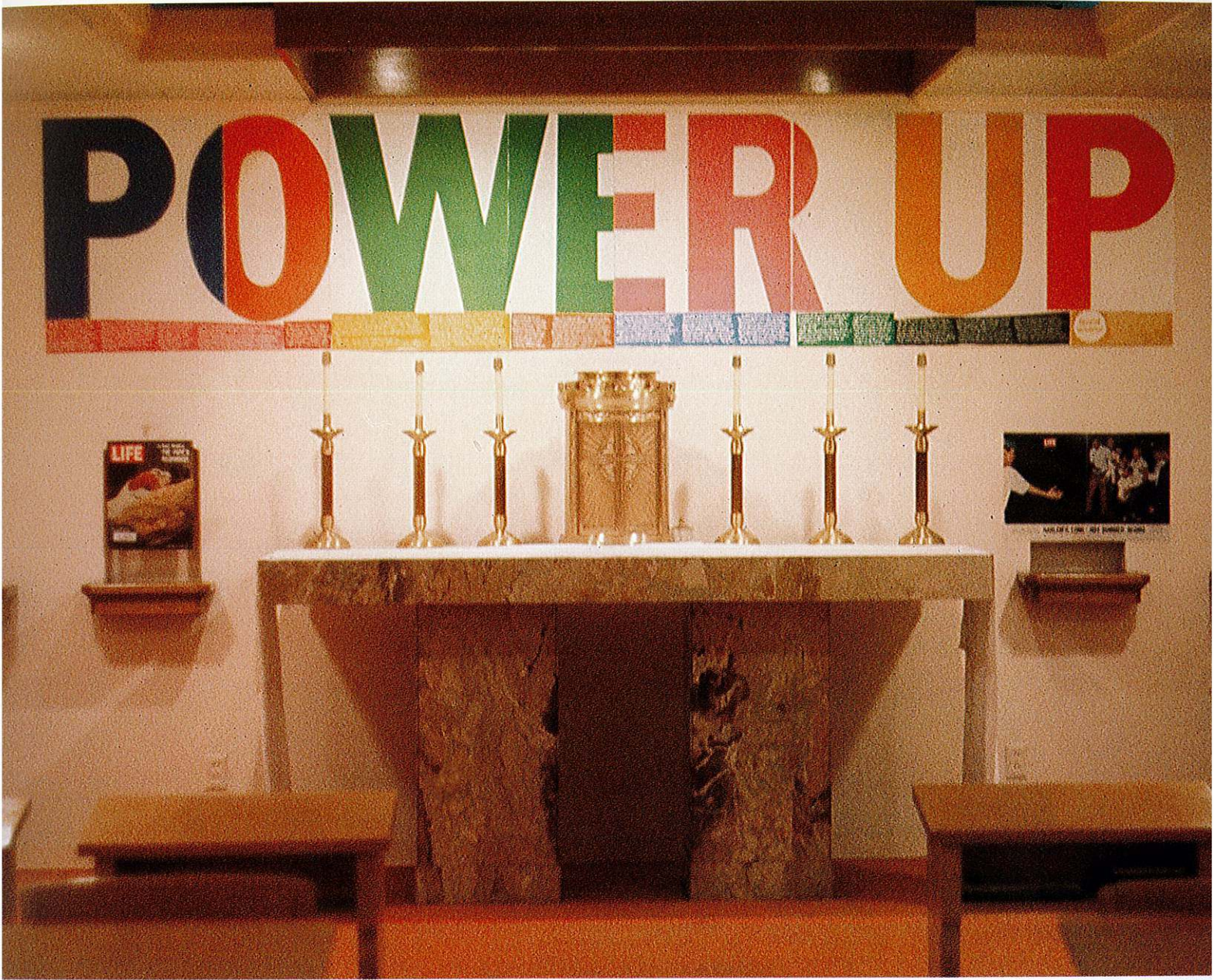
centers, galleries, fairs, corporations, and vans driven to gatherings – made her art available to a broad range of viewers.

In the 1950s Corita's richly colored prints were painterly, typically referring to religious figures or themes from the Bible, such as the madonna, the nativity scene, and various psalms. Corita has cited art historian Dr. Alois Schardt – who taught at the Immaculate Heart College – Ben Shahn, abstract expressionism, and Simon Rodia's Watts Towers as early influences but she discovered her greatest source of inspiration later. "I had already finished school when I met my real teacher, Charles Eames. He was not an art teacher; he was an artist who taught by words, films, exhibits, buildings, classes, visits, phone conversations, and furniture."³⁸

Corita introduced words into her pictures in 1955; words infiltrate the pictorial in her prints throughout the late 1950s. *Word picture: gift of tongues*, from 1955, distinguishes text and image in its title, as does *word picture: christ calming the storm*, of 1956, indicating her reliance at that time on figurative subject matter. The former features figures amidst a sea of hot pink and red tones in the bottom section of the print while text fills the relatively neutral color field in the upper two thirds: "When the day of Pentecost came around, while they were all gathered together in a purpose of unity, all at once a sound came from Heaven like that of a strong wind." The serif classical type style predates Corita's individualistic handwriting. The subject matter points to Corita's interest in

← Exhibition o
prints, 1966
↙ Storefront d
Corita prints a
screen studio,
ing the Friday
sales held at t
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↗ power up an
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Los Angeles





the power of words stemming from religious belief and alludes to their sacredness, the word coming down from on high.

The artist also took notice of “posters... I got ideas of there being different possibilities of using letter forms. And I always think of the letter forms as much as objects as people or flowers or other subject matter.”³⁹ By 1960, Corita’s figurative style is replaced by a growing use of abstract color fields and shapes, many with psalms written out to form the central focus. By 1961, words primarily compose her prints. Over the following years, Corita increased their usage and scale until word became image.⁴⁰

The escalating size and quantity of words in Corita’s prints in the early 1960s can be linked to her growing interest in her immediate urban environment and its signage systems, which was also developing speedily and exerting visual force. The U.S. post-WWII financial boom produced new degrees and levels of consumer culture that registered in everyday life through media multiplication, including advertising on billboards. Hollywood must have felt like the pinnacle of that proliferation, a veritable explosion of images, slogans, textures, and colors.

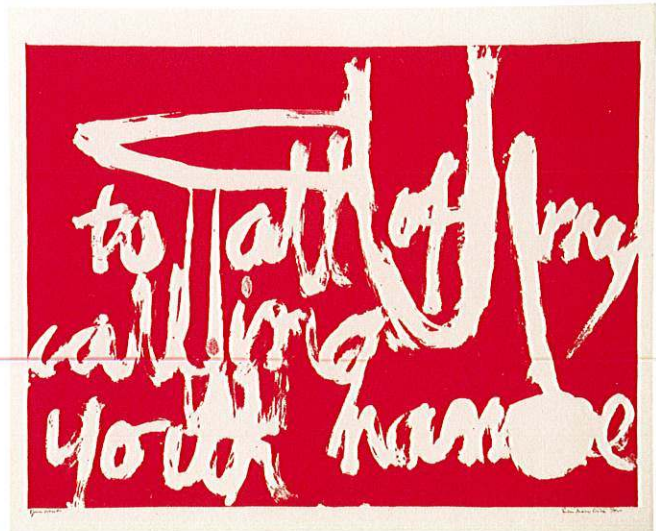
Corita’s prints in the mid-1950s display rich though muted colors, distinct from the clear intense colors she began using a few years later. Sister Mary William (Helen Kelley) explained, “Our colors are the colors of the marketplace, the colors of life-giving foods, and our sounds are the sounds of the here and now.”⁴¹

Although one does not usually associate the religious principles of the Catholic Church with supermarkets and the signage environment of city streets, for Corita, such vernacular culture was a source of inspiration and raw material. Corita’s fascination with advertisements and the languages of commercial culture extended to a fascination with the vernacular landscape which the city of Los Angeles offered. Whereas billboards and “decorated sheds” were indications for architectural critic Peter Blake that the contemporary city of the 1960s resembled “God’s Own Junkyard,”⁴² Corita welcomed the “clang and clatter” of what she called “marvelously unfinished Los Angeles.”⁴³ She elevated the commonplace through her methods of “snitching” symbols to expand their meaning. Harvey Cox has written that,

*Corita won my heart because she had an urban sensibility. She loved the city. The world of signs and sales slogans and plastic containers was not, for her, an empty wasteland. It was the dough out of which she baked the bread of life. Like a priest, a shaman, a magician, she could pass her hands over the commonest of the everyday, the superficial, the oh-so-ordinary, and make it a vehicle of the luminous, the only, and the hope-filled.*⁴⁴

At the end of 1962, Corita began adopting package design motifs and quoting advertising slogans. A pivotal work of that year, *wonderbread*, consists only of red, yellow and blue polka dots, inspired by the bread company’s packaging. “As

← left, 1967
↙ to all of
your name,
↗ Mobil gas
signage, L
↘ Street si
Angeles



the dots from the wrapper moved over into the picture...some people began a conversation and discovered them to be in the shape of hosts, though this was not in the mind of the bread maker or the picture maker.”⁴⁵ Corita appropriated the colors of the marketplace and the aesthetics of promotional culture to situate her messages in contemporary popular language. She crossed over to advertising communication to adopt poetic slogans and imbue them with spiritual and social meanings. In *for eleanor*, 1964, “The big G (of General Mills) stands for Goodness.” In *someday is now*, 1964, “the part of the print filled with fragmentary block letters spells SAFEWAY supermarket; SAFEWAY makes its presence felt regardless of whether the words can be read.”⁴⁶ The title of the four-part print, *power up*, 1965, derives from a gasoline ad. *Handle with care*, 1967, urges: “see the man who can save you the most” – the man is your Chevrolet car dealer and what he can save you is money. In *somebody had to break the rules*, 1967, the title, appearing in jumbled-up form in the print, is taken from a Dash laundry detergent campaign. “Come alive, you’re in the Pepsi generation!” becomes simply “come alive” in several prints from 1967. Humble Oil is the company “who cares” and claims, “the handling is in your hands.” And of course, *things go better with Coke*.⁴⁷ According to the *New York Times*, Sister Corita...did for bread and wine what Andy Warhol did for tomato soup.⁴⁸

By 1964 her iconography was derived predominantly from the booming media environment and urban surroundings.

- ↓ Wonderbread billboard, Los Angeles, 1961
- ↘ *for eleanor*, 1964
- ↘↘ *wonderbread*, 1962
- *someday is now*, 1964



The sign language is almost infinitely rich....Up and down the highways (good symbols too) we see words like "Cold, clear, well-water," "The best to you each morning," "Have a happy day," "Sunkist," "Del Monte's catsup makes meatballs sing," that read almost like contemporary translations of the psalms for us to be singing on our way. The game is endless, which makes it a good symbol of eternity which will be a great endless game.⁴⁹

The free flow between discourses – scripture and advertising – in Corita’s imagination and experience, was evident in her philosophy and in her artistic output.

Maybe you can't understand the psalms without understanding the newspaper and the other way around. Maybe that's why it sounds so good when a line from the newspaper is inserted after each line of a psalm – any lines – and read aloud. Maybe they were never meant to be separated....We choose to LOOK at LIFE all the TIME, and though we realize that they are in one sense adult comic books, they are also full of things that speak. A photo of a hurt soldier becomes a holy card...⁵⁰

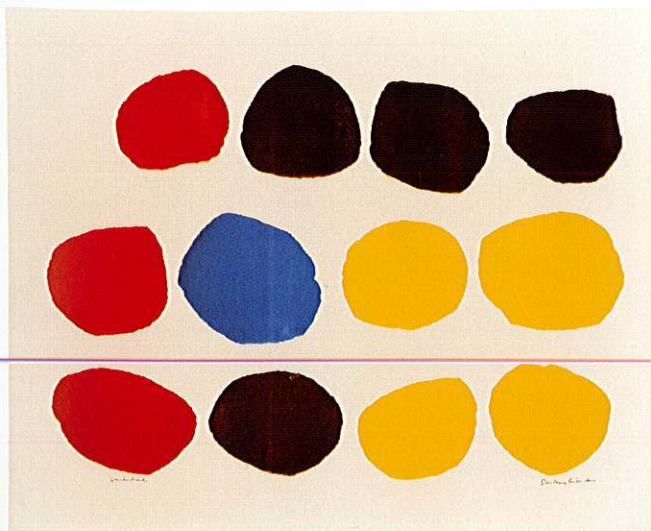
In 1964, English professor and writer, Samuel Eisenstein was moved by his visit to the IHC Mary’s Day celebration that Corita had orchestrated. He sent her a letter about his experience; including in it something he had written on Mary, which inspired her to make the print, *the juiciest tomato of all*, 1964. The print is an emblematic

expression of that free flow between the religious and the commonplace, between systems of symbols, which Corita embraced. Using Eisenstein’s words, it begins:

The time is always out of joint...If we are provided with a sign that declares "Del Monte tomatoes are juiciest" it is not desecration to add: "Mary Mother is the juiciest tomato of them all." Perhaps this is what is meant when the slang term puts it, "She's a peach," or "What a tomato!" A cigarette commercial states: "So round, so firm, so fully packed" and we are strangely stirred, even ashamed as we are to be so taken in. We are not taken in. We yearn for the fully packed, the circle that is so juicy and perfect that not an ounce more can be added....

The piece caused a stir as it was regarded by some as an irreverent desecration of a sacred symbol: Cardinal McIntyre prohibited it from being displayed. In protest, the *National Catholic Reporter* ran a version of it as their Christmas insert. Corita seemed unfazed by the “offense” and explained, “A word like tomato, which has been distorted in some circles, is interesting to restore to a place of beauty – a lovely fruit to look at.” With quick wit, she added, “After all, Mary, Mother of Christ, has had her name on buildings, bridges, and so forth.”⁵¹ Recently reading his text, which appeared on the print, Eisenstein reflected,

...I really wonder whether it could ever have been written without the inspiring breath of Corita



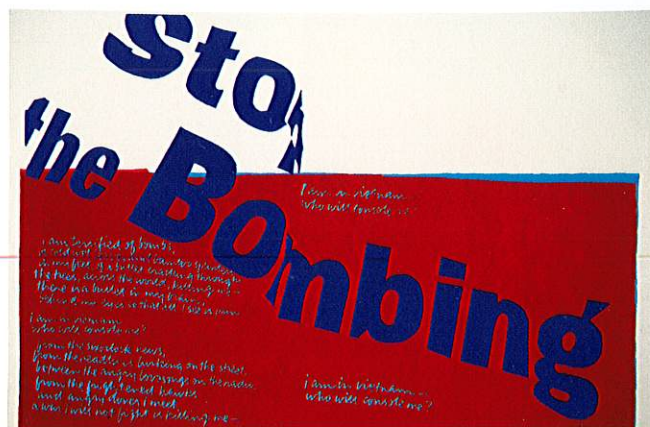
the guts to do that. So I do what I can,” Corita turned her attention to racism and poverty, U.S. military brutalities in Vietnam – brought to the foreground of her awareness by Daniel Berrigan – and the conflicts between radical and conservative positions in the Catholic Church. *Stop the bombing*, of 1967, is a red, white, and blue print with words by Gerald Huckaby, that begins: “I am in Vietnam – who will console me? I am terrified of bombs, of cold wet leaves and bamboo splinters in my feet, of a bullet cracking through the trees, across the world, killing me...” “Stop the bombing” is superimposed over the color ground of the print, its letterforms unfurling as if dropped from the sky. *Let the sun shine*, a nearly fluorescent yellow print from 1968, consists of an image of Pope Paul VI – degenerated nearly to the border of abstraction, and the words “let the sun shine in” followed by a quote by Rabbi Arthur Waskow. Corita regarded exercising her voice for social commentary as a right and requirement:

*If we separate ourselves from the great arts of our time, we cannot be leaven enriching our society from within. We may well be peripheral to our society – unaware of its pains and joys, unable to communicate with it, to benefit from it or to help it. We will be refusing to care about the fight to free man that James Baldwin speaks of: “The war of an artist with his society is a lover’s war. And he does at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, make freedom real.”*⁵⁴

Art as Social Process

Corita Kent’s art practice originated, formed, and developed within the milieu of the Immaculate Heart situated in Los Angeles. Upon leaving that environment, a dramatic shift occurred in her work. Formal differences and content variances between serigraphs made in 1969 and those made in 1970, are sudden, even shocking. Deprived of her influential contexts of many years, much of the complex spirit, formal innovation, and critical force of her prior work vanished.

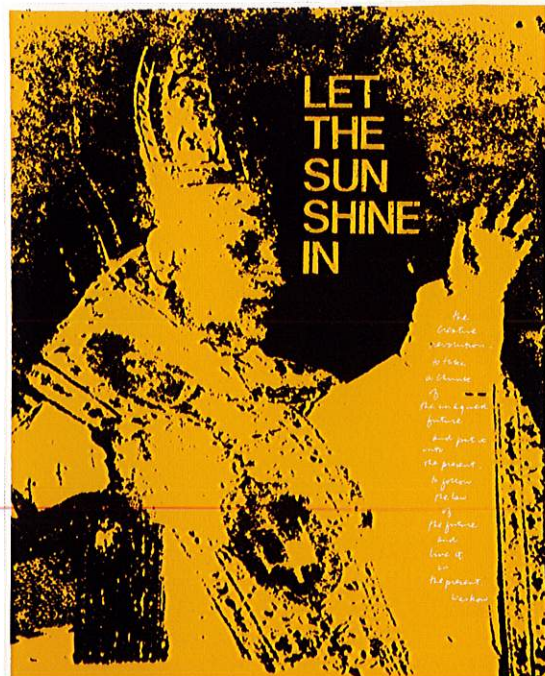
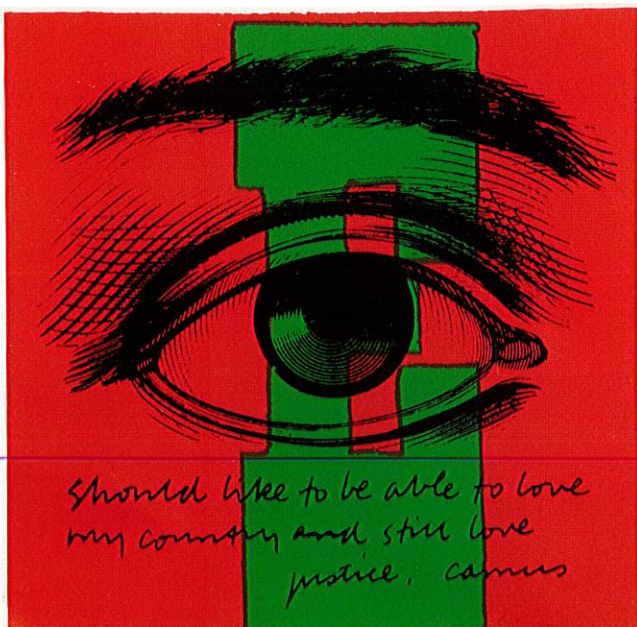
In 1969, Corita made a series of small-scale prints titled “Heroes and Sheroes”⁵⁵ that layer documentary material, including images from *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time*, which she considered “contemporary manuals of contemplation,”⁵⁶ with textual fragments, resulting in compelling statements about the then-current political landscape. The times were marked by cultural and political activism in the form of the anti-Vietnam war movement, the civil rights movement and struggles for racial equality, feminism, and a generalized conflict between those who sought to challenge, revise, and overturn existing authority structures in society and those who sought to hang on to and further reproduce the status quo. Corita’s “Heroes and Sheroes” includes *phil and dan*, which consists of a news photo of Philip and Daniel Berrigan burning draft records with napalm in protest of their country’s crimes in Vietnam at a Selective Service office in Catonsville, Maryland on May 17, 1968. The two were part of what became known as the Catonsville Nine, a group



of clergy and laypeople peace activists. They were arrested and Father Philip Berrigan became the first Catholic priest in the history of the United States to serve sentence as a political prisoner.⁵⁷ Father Daniel Berrigan was sentenced to three years in prison, but refused to serve the time and went into hiding. The FBI apprehended him after several months and he served sentence until 1972. Another print, *if i*, highlights a picture of Coretta Scott King at her husband, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral, alongside a quotation from her and a text about the "creative power of the female, of the negative, of empty space, and of death," by theologian and writer Alan Watts. "Heroes and Sheroes" juxtapose fluorescent colors to elicit dynamic effects, as did some of Corita's prints of 1967 and 1968, and have a visual affinity with both political graphics and psychedelic concert posters from the time.

Then, beginning in 1970, Corita's art grew increasingly reliant on color splashes and platitudes. Compositions are often made using a single quotation or maxim, handwritten, rather than transforming word into image through typographic experimentation; color splotches and shapes typically form the background. *Rest* consists of a few strokes of color surrounding the words, "today is the first day of the rest of your life." *Very* is composed of multi-colored circles, oddly reminiscent of the round shapes in *wonderbread*, 1962, and reads: "I love you very." In 1971 she began making watercolors, with similarly sentimental results. After 1969, Corita rarely used

- ↓ *E eye love*, 1968
- ↘ *let the sun shine*, 1968
- ↙ *phil and dan*, 1969
- *rest*, 1971



critical juxtaposition, layering, and montage as methods. Except for her distinctive handwriting, and allegiance to quotations and intense colors, one could misread her 1960s work and post-1970 work as being done by two different artists. Speaking about this aesthetic shift, Corita observed, “The serigraphs were bold, are bold, and they make statement. The watercolors, on the other hand, make conversation...I feel that the time for physically tearing things down is over. It is over because as we stand and listen we can hear it crumbling from within.”⁵⁸ Corita was not alone in her “activism exhaustion.” Many cultural protagonists of the sixties suffered similarly, and at the close of the decade, withdrew from public participation into privacy.

Although the divergence between the 1960s work and that which followed is extreme, compositionally and conceptually there is a strong resonance between the latter and the prints Corita was making between 1959 and 1963, though with fewer biblical references. Her palette is simplified and consists of clearer colors, but the marriage of inspirational phrase and color shape or field is congruent. In the scheme of Corita’s oeuvre, it is the bodies of work made between 1962 and 1969 that remarkably contrast with what came before and after.

The dissimilarity between Corita’s 1960s work and that which followed, suggests that the former was due not only to the larger perspective of 1960s cultural and political movements, but to the vibrant context of her creative community within

which nuns, teachers, students, visitors, and even the media participated, and contributed to. Although Corita was singled out as the guiding force and spokesperson for the college’s art department, and the signature on the prints was hers alone, deeper inquiry shows that the department’s achievements as well as her artworks were the results of social processes. When reading the *Irregular Bulletin*, written and edited by Sister Magdalen (“Mag”) Mary and inventively designed and produced by “industrious students and dedicated professors” of the art department, and in reviewing the public record about Immaculate Heart activities and Corita’s work specifically, intricate layers of collaboration are revealed. Large-scale disposable exhibitions and the Mary’s Day events that Corita initiated (discussed from p. 35) are indicative of the collaborative framework and spirit at the IHC.⁵⁹

The reputation of the art department, though often associated primarily with Corita, was largely due to the efforts of Sister Magdalen Mary, who from 1936–1964 headed the department, taught in it, and organized its programs. It was under her influence that the secular and the sacred were redefined according to her engagement with vernacular culture as creative terrain. Sister Mag, a strong-willed, ambitious, and vigorous force by all accounts, figures into Corita’s story prominently as the key person who encouraged her to overcome anxiety and self-doubt and become a teacher. A radical and innovative educator herself, Sister Mag influenced Corita profoundly.⁶⁰ She



tirelessly supported and promoted Corita and her work, and frequently advised her about all kinds of issues, including aesthetic ones. She was known to tell Corita what she should add, omit, or change in a given composition – and Corita was known to follow her lead. The two traveled together throughout the U.S., Europe and the Near East, in the 1950s and early 1960s, with Corita obsessively snapping photographs. This began an ongoing interest in photography, which would become integral to her artistic practice. During their travels Sister Mag and Corita built up the vernacular and folk art collection for the college that Sister Mag had started, the Gloria Folk Art Collection, because they believed: "...the students should be surrounded by real art... But we really had practically no budget at that time. So we started collecting very simple things, like Japanese paper things, objects that were beautifully made and were part of somebody's tradition."⁶¹ According to some, the sisters' relationship gradually became afflicted: Sister Mag felt Corita did not give her due respect once she became renowned, and Corita reportedly felt over managed and increasingly pressured to make good for the college, in part by producing saleable work and going on the road relentlessly.⁶² Partially due to those differences, in 1964, Sister Mag went to England to focus on collecting and studying and Corita was promoted to head of the art department.

Corita engendered devotion from many a student inspired by her presence and manner of

teaching. Many aimed to please her in whatever ways they could, including contributing physical and intellectual labor to her art. But this didn't prevent resentments from developing in some around the fact that their tangible and intangible contributions to Corita's work, her celebrity, and to the college went unacknowledged, and by some accounts, unappreciated.⁶³

Corita demanded a lot from herself and from her students. Rule Two of the art department rules states: "General duties of a student: pull everything out of your teacher. Pull everything out of your fellow students." Rule Three: "General duties of a teacher: Pull everything out of your students."⁶⁴ Answering the question to what degree her students influenced her work, she replied:

*I think there was a great exchange between us. First of all, we saw the same things, because we usually went to exhibits together. And then I think there was a great interchange as far as the classwork was concerned, as to assignments I would give them and ways they would interpret those assignments. I think we probably, from working so close together, had a very similar way of looking at things and probably similar tastes... I think it was really a mutual kind of influence...*⁶⁵

Corita's charisma and notoriety drew students to her, but it also got in the way: "It was a very difficult time for the students because I was away a lot more than they thought I should be away.... I thought that was good for them because I would

← Photo of Magdalen M Corita, publ *Irregular Bu* & *Survival* & the making ↗ Serigraph at IHC (Cori from left)



and then work with it – play with it – “eventually you’ll get somewhere, and stumble upon content in the process.” Although Corita’s serigraphs seem to exemplify a more integrated approach to form and content, some of the conceptual tools she used to generate them illustrate how decontextualizing, recasting, and juxtaposition function as productive forces in her art making.

A simple device Corita called a “finder,” a “looking tool” that “helps take things out of context, allows us to see for the sake of seeing, and enhances our quick-looking and decision-making skills,”⁷¹ was key to her process of decontextualization.⁷² A finder could be an empty slide frame, a cut-up piece of cardboard, or a camera. As a viewing and cropping apparatus, a finder excludes everything around it, and, in Corita’s words, allows for “[viewing] life without being distracted by content. You can make visual decisions – in fact, they are made for you.”⁷³

Corita often took her students to busy intersections and instructed them to look through finders, close up as well as from a distance, declaring that at a single intersection there was enough raw material for at least sixteen hours of scrutiny. Speaking about such excursions, Corita said:

I remember at that time I was very excited about billboards. I guess it was the whole era of pop art. And I also got very excited about sections of the city that I would have called ugly before. I took the students to...two Mark C. Bloome tire companies... we just went there, either with cameras or with

little finders.... And we just spent the afternoon, two afternoons, one at one place and one at the other, just looking. And of course, taking off small pieces, little rectangles, that are like taking a picture, you can take a section, or maybe a section of a letter [where] not the whole word shows and certainly not the whole gas station.⁷⁴

Corita was an avid photographer who shot thousands of slides documenting her travels, students’ work, teaching references, exhibits, Mary’s Day processions and other IHC events. She was inspired by the Eameses’ photographic documentation of the everyday. Her slide archive includes the following categories: cookies, toys, presents, flowers, seeds, puppets, trade fairs, mountains, textiles, artists’ work, theater, coke bottles, cards, icons, and boxes, and as a whole, formed a visual cache for presentations, teaching, as well as for illustrating the *Irregular Bulletin*. Corita also photographed magazine ads, billboards, hand-painted signage, street signs, and other references, which were primarily raw material for her printmaking process. She isolated fragments, and – in the process of framing an image through the camera’s viewfinder – highlighted a particular shape, part of a slogan, or portion of an image.⁷⁵

Photography was the tool that allowed Corita to mediate between the multi-dimensional experience of looking at the visual world and the two-dimensional possibilities of a serigraph. For example, she noticed that, through a viewfinder from a particular angle, type on a flat page or



billboard appears three-dimensional and suggests a quasi-architectural space. She captured dynamically distorted type and translated it into the two-dimensional surface of the photograph. Pushing this distortion process further, she crumpled, cropped, tore, and reformed advertisements and then rephotographed them. She then isolated the distorted type and transferred it to stencils used to produce individual layers in an overall composition. Pieces made using this method include *ha* and *now you can*, both 1966, and *fresh bread* and *that man loves*, from 1967.

Psychedelic concert posters of that era typically feature distorting type treatments, which look as though words have been poured into a shape, for instance a butterfly or a thought balloon. In those posters, type gets rounded, misshapen, and reshaped to suggest fluidity. Corita's typographic distortions differ in that they are not fashioned to fit inside another form. Instead, type itself dictates shape and composes central imagery, pictorial space, foreground and background. Using Corita's technique described above, manipulated and layered type is made to suggest a graphic three-dimensional space with an architectural sensibility, distinct from existing typographic possibilities of the 1960s. The results of Corita's low-tech type manipulations have since become defining features of many computer applications. Corita recalled her impetus for distorting letterforms:

I was taking photographs...for one of these Mary's days, we decided to cover every door of the

administration building with one big poster that was the size of a door. So every student made about five. I was taking photographs of them one time and taking sections of some because they were very beautiful. One of them was curved, as I was taking the slide, and I thought, "Oh, that would be a nifty idea." So that year, I think almost in all of my prints, I took pictures from magazines and combined them the way I wanted and then I would curl the paper to go the way I wanted it to and shoot the photograph, the slide, and then enlarge that and cut the stencil from that.⁷⁶

Another important design strategy for Corita is her use of cut-and-paste techniques, predating punk graphics by well over fifteen years. This strategy developed in her lettering and layout classes that involved collaboratively making placards and printed matter composited from various lettering styles and methods of individuals. Corita was clearly inspired by the layout of the Immaculate Heart College's art department newsletter, the *Irregular Bulletin*, published intermittently from 1956–1963,⁷⁷ which relied heavily on collage of cutout type and recycled material. The Bulletin editor, Sister Mag, was also the mastermind of its layout, in which headlines are pasted together from newspaper clippings in ransom-note style; typewritten essays are cut up into individual words, phrases and paragraphs, and scattered across pages – interconnecting and overlapping with images. Some flyers for Corita's "one-nun exhibitions" use similar techniques,

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I GET BY WITH A LITTLE
HELP FROM MY
FRIENDS
LEONARD
M. CITTA

JESUS
NEVER
FAILS

It's not easy
to do

When God enters the world, he sets men in movement

He becomes a brother on the journey, so touchy one of us as to know of love and heart and marrow all the perplexity and pain, the darkness and setbacks and fits and starts of the human march. Later, much later (and then only for a time), comes the single big word to bind our faith: resurrection.

The word is perhaps too large for men today to cope with. We say "yes" to it as best we can and turn again to our unwise flesh and minds, to the unfinished business of living.

BERNARD

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CONVERSION
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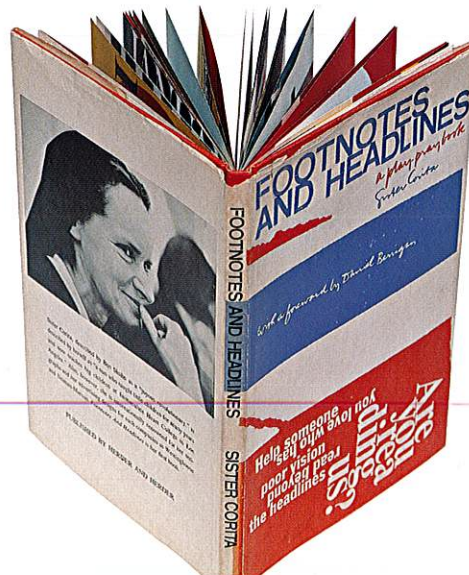
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predicting Jamie Reid's design for the Sex Pistols' album cover *Never Mind the Bollocks*, in 1977.

Collage played an important conceptual role in Corita's image making. The viewfinder is essential to her investment in formal decontextualization, and critical juxtaposition, as a method, is important in her recasting processes, and to the new content that results. Although her imaginative use of collage factors into many of her silkscreen prints, it is not immediately legible, due to their seamless quality. Consider for instance, *handle with care*, 1967, which layers an image derived from a photo of a button that reads, "handle with care" screened in equivalent tones of green letters on orange, and an advertisement for a Chevrolet car dealership photographed from crumpled newspaper that reads, "see the man who can save you the most." The latter "phrase as image," printed in transparent bright red ink, is superimposed onto the above-mentioned. A complex optical effect is created by the overlay, producing different alternating colors, depending on whether green or orange lies underneath. The overall effect of this specially colored collage is that the two slogans combine and intertwine in a seemingly reconciled manner.

How juxtapositions produce new contexts and generate content is also vividly demonstrated in Corita's 1967 book, *Footnotes and Headlines*.⁷⁸ The fifty-two page "play-pray book" is a tableau of typographic experimentation combining brightly colored type collages with Corita's writing – "prayers that read like a grocery list." The collages

Footnotes and
Headlines: a play-pray
book, 1967
Spread from
Footnotes and Headlines
read from
Footnotes and Headlines



turn fragments of letterforms into backgrounds, on top of which advertising slogans in various configurations, sizes and typefaces are laid out. The volume explores and challenges the conventions of reading. Marshall McLuhan, in a cover blurb, called it “a new form of book...an X-ray of human thought and social situations.” Each page in *Footnotes and Headlines* is apportioned with a section for Corita’s written text, which lies on top in the initial page spreads, and the montaged slogans and text fragments are in the bottom section. After a few page spreads, the order is reversed – found fragments or “text as image” fills the top part of the page, and her writing rests in the bottom. The book as a whole, and every page in itself, plays with Corita’s concept of “how a footnote almost became a headline.”

By pushing the boundaries of cutting and pasting as a graphic strategy, Corita turned decontextualization and recontextualization into emblems for her production of meaning, and, in the process, resolved the distinctions she professed allegiance to, between form and content and between creative and analytic thinking.

Temporary Art

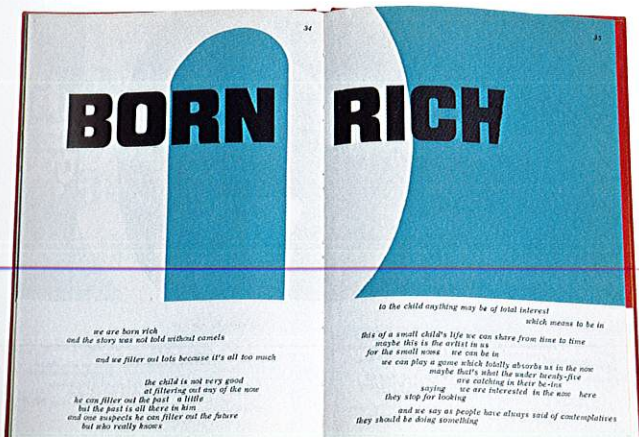
Though certainly they are the most lasting and coherent of the mediums she employed, Corita’s serigraphs and works on paper are only part of her artistic output. In addition to prints and other publication formats, Corita focused her creative intelligence, design principles, and organizational

skills on producing large temporary exhibitions – such as the collapsible cardboard-box exhibit, *Survival With Style*, 1966, and on choreographing extensive events – such as the annual Mary’s Day celebrations held at the college, all of which stemmed from her art classes and collaborations with her students.

In the case of Mary’s Day, starting in 1964, Immaculate Heart College president Helen Kelley invited Corita to take over its planning.⁷⁹ The art department therefore became primarily responsible for making the event, although Corita attempted to involve the other departments, given that Mary’s Day celebrations were labor intensive and involved hundreds of participants and visitors.

Mary’s Day was a tradition at Immaculate Heart. The school was dedicated to her. The day had originated in another time, and the circumstances of that time had formed it. There was a solemn procession with students dressed in black academic caps and gowns – only the faculty looked festive in colors from many universities. There was a quiet Mass and sacred music.... There were speeches and awards and a sit-down meal.... I was commissioned to make the day new.

As with any commission in those days, I started it going and the students did immense amounts of work and shared much of the responsibility.... I think celebrations are always meant to instruct and inspire, to empower people to use their own creative skills through images and ritual to action.... Our celebration grew out of a desire to

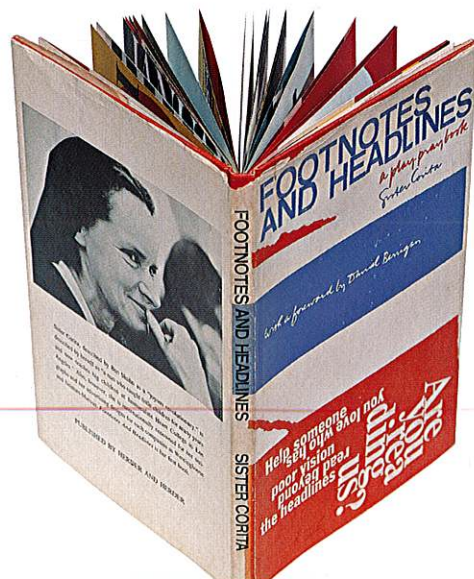


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↘↘ Spread from *Footnotes and Headlines*
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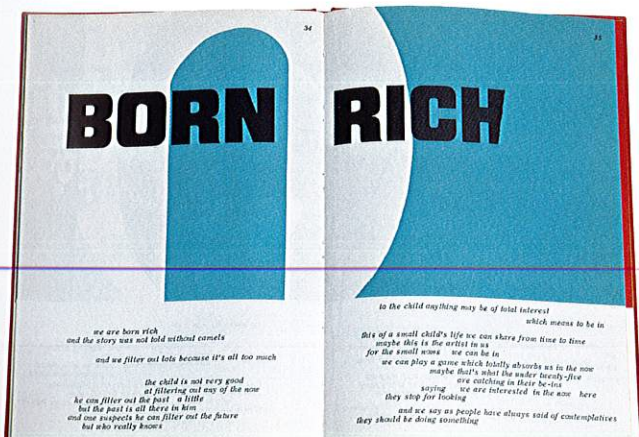
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make Mary more relevant to our time – to dust off the habitual and update the content and form.⁸⁰

The 1964 Mary's Day expressed Corita and company's foray into supermarket and billboard culture and celebrated the everyday through food: "We lift the common stuff – groceries and signs about groceries – out of the everyday and give it a place in our celebration."⁸¹ The food theme was invoked to celebrate abundance, but also to make people aware that much of the world's population did not have enough to eat. Vatican II had impelled the IHM sisters to attune themselves to examining the problems that affected the constituencies they sought to aid and countering injustices in current society. So issues such as hunger and poverty, as well as finding joy, color, and inspiration in supermarkets and in the relatively new language of advertising, were articulated in the name of Mary, bringing her "down to earth." In Corita's serigraph, *mary does laugh*, of 1964, the central text fragment reads: "mary does laugh, and if she were alive today, she would shop at the market basket." The Market Basket supermarket chain had a gigantic store across the street from the IHC, where Corita collected discarded signage to be used as class material, classroom decorations, and specifically for the '64 Mary's Day. Cropped billboards with Kodacolor pictures of Del Monte juicy-looking canned fruit, whole raw chickens, and supermarket weekly-sale signs adorned the fence on the driveway to the college. Hundreds of signs were made using fragments of supermarket posters

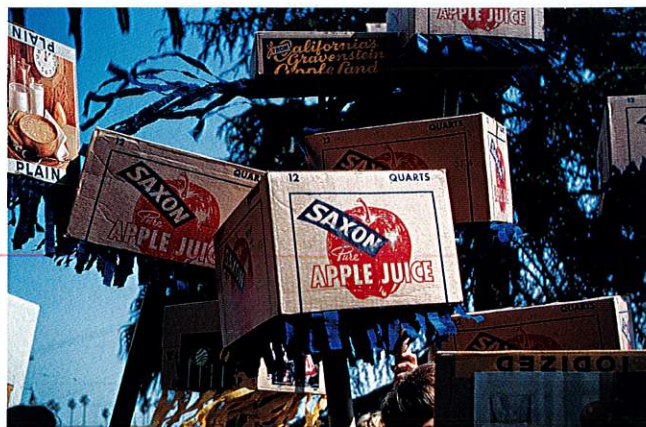
featuring pictures of hamburgers with Hunt's catsup, Campbell's soups, and giant cans of coffee, which became placards carried by nuns, students, and visitors in the procession. Other placards read: "Come to the feast," "Free Eggs," "I like God," "God Likes Me." Colorful pictorial advertising sections hung in the windows of the school. Jan Steward describes how the theme extended to the interior design atmosphere:

Five hundred loaves of bread and five hundred baskets of fruit were stacked on tables before the altar. People processed to the stage, bringing more food. Newspaper galleys, with their messages of disaster, hung down the walls, grim reminder that our work, to make changes, was heavy....our tables were cardboard cartons that had been painted and collaged with the words of the day – the words of Kennedy, King, Gandhi, Pope John XXIII, and others. These same boxes had also been used in parts of the ceremony as walls or structures to walk through.⁸²

As with most Corita steered projects, reading, researching and gathering quotations was an important aspect of the work. In preparation for Mary's Day, "the students would collect gobbs of quotations."⁸³ All art majors at the college were required to be English minors.⁸⁴

Preparations begin in February or March with student-faculty brainstorming sessions to determine a theme and ideas for the verbal-visual expression

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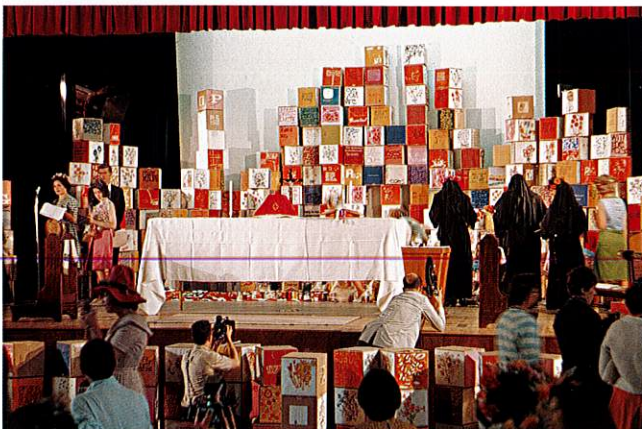


of that theme....students and faculty consider important events and trends of the world they live in. Out of such considerations have come the themes "Food for Peace," "Challenge to Change," and "Revolving." Once a general theme is decided, students begin formulating questions and researching the writings of great philosophers, politicians, theologians, and poets. Then they organize the results of their research into a visually and verbally impact-full presentation.⁸⁵

Though it was unlikely their agenda, the 1964 Mary's Day celebration could not have been a more effective campaign for the explosion of advertising into people's daily environment. In subsequent years, Mary's Day continued its popularity and attracted media attention, including national coverage. *Newsweek* magazine declared that: "...Corita's best medium is people. In 1964, for example, she transformed Immaculate Heart College's staid religious festival, Mary's Day, into a religious happening. With black-robed nuns parading in flowered necklaces, poets declaiming from platforms and painted students dancing in the grass, Mary's Day became a prototype for the hippies' 1967 be-in in San Francisco."⁸⁶ Not everyone, however, was enamored; some community members were offended by the disavowal of traditions, such as somber garb and saying the rosary. Criticisms from patrons and the archdiocese reached Helen Kelley.

While 1964 seems to have been the most spectacular, and certainly hard to beat, the following

- ↓ Interior view at IHC on Mary's Day, 1964
- ↘ Exterior of IHC, Mary's Day, 1964
- ↘↘ Box signs, Mary's Day, 1964
- IHM sisters and art department students visiting Charles and Ray Eames in Pacific Palisades, 1958



years were also organized by Corita and the department, and thematized around social issues. Constant features, embellished and implemented differently each year, included the use of cardboard boxes as building blocks for setting the scene, the production of placards and signs then carried by participants, banners made by art students, and colorful patterned cloth and clothing worn by participants. Corita explains the impetus for the use of boxes:

We went out to Charles Eames' house one time on a field trip. He had had his grandchildren visiting him, and to entertain them, he had bought them a hundred cartons of about twelve inches square and made marvelous blocks. And then he had a rope hanging from the ceiling with a noose down toward the floor, and you could put your feet in it and swing, pile them up, and knock them all down. But when we brought this class, they all used them to sit on. We were doing boxes for quite a while after that in different ways.⁸⁷

Corita and her students produced a number of large-scale disposable exhibitions that used cardboard boxes as a structuring device – *Peace on Earth*, 1965, and *Survival With Style*, 1966, being the most prominent examples. In the middle of teaching a class one day, Corita received a phone call inviting her to make a Christmas exhibition for the IBM Product Display Center at Madison Avenue and 57th Street in New York. She responded, “we don’t have the time – but we’ll do

it.” There were no strings attached by the company.⁸⁸ The Eameses had by this time done several commissions for IBM, including films beginning in 1957 and exhibitions beginning in 1961.⁸⁹ Corita turned the invitation into the main work of the semester and the final exam for her lettering and display class. “She divided the class in half to work under two student directors, Mickey Myers and Paula McGowan, ‘who are most able to hold up under the strain. It was up to them to create the project and portion out the work,’ Sister Corita explained.”⁹⁰ *Peace on Earth* was one hundred and thirty-three feet long, ten feet high, and six feet deep and was constructed from seven hundred and twenty-five corrugated packing boxes.⁹¹ “We thought: Christmas – peace – peace-making is up to us – how is it made? – how do we do it? – who has already made some? We chose five men – John XXIII, John Kennedy, Nehru, Hammarskjöld, and Stevenson. Each student found sixty statements from the writings of these men that showed how they tried to make peace.”⁹²

The avant-garde exhibit opened but was abruptly closed by the company until modifications were made to “satisfy IBM officials who thought the original design was not ‘Christmas-y’ enough and ‘might be interpreted as some sort of demonstration about Vietnam.’” “We did some re-arranging and deleting of the material that looked like placard pickets carried in those marches,” curator, Robert Monahon said. “One panel that came down was a red, white and blue one, with white stars, that had the word ‘Peace’



at the bottom.”⁹³ Myers and McGowan, who had installed the exhibit, made the changes, and Corita, who responded to press queries while traveling elsewhere, rejected the idea that the show was censored, saying she didn’t want to make a fuss. “It just goes to show the power of words, though doesn’t it? I didn’t think the messages were that strong, but apparently they are.”⁹⁴

Although technically not a corporate commission, the *Peace on Earth* situation, with its zone of compromise encompassing the multiple agendas of Corita, her students, and IBM employees, paved the way for, and predicted, the many corporate commissions Corita was to take on in the following decades. Arguably, corporate sponsorship for art did not have the same inferences of blatant co-optation that it does now. As a willing participant in such exchanges, Corita was in good company alongside artists such as Jim Dine and designers such as the Eameses and George Nelson, who accepted corporate commissions optimistically in order to utilize resources and mass communication venues, and to promote their versions of social responsibility and utopian philosophy. It is interesting to look at Corita’s responses to compromise and censorship in context. Though she was certainly beleaguered by, and aggravated with, the repeated censure pressed upon her by the Los Angeles archdiocese in the mid- and late-1960s, her documented response to IBM was lighthearted, as was her approach working elsewhere in the wider world after leaving the Immaculate Heart.

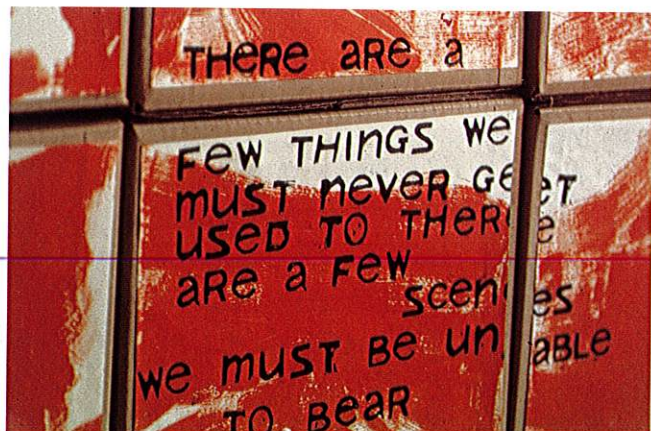
Extending from the *Peace on Earth* project, *Survival With Style*, created the following year, was a disposable exhibition produced over one semester by about thirty-five students for the college, and later shown at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden and the International Congress on Religion, Architecture and the Visual Arts in New York. The exhibition was made from over fifteen hundred cardboard boxes, stacked in configurations to form temporary architectural structures. The boxes composed walls and islands that ultimately produced a maze for viewers to wander through. The boxes cum walls were adorned with bright colored paint, hand-lettered quotations, clippings from newspapers and magazines, graphics, and slogans, resulting in a media-infused and visually dynamic environment.⁹⁵

The Ecstatic Classroom

Corita had a talent for galvanizing students’ creative forces and for channeling their energies into ambitious projects requiring tremendous amounts of planning, research, labor, and organization. How did she engender such industriousness? By what means did she stimulate eyes and minds and activate the creative impulse in so many, from young women in daytime courses to men and women of all ages in the extension classes? What educative philosophy and teaching methods did Corita employ? What was the culture of her classroom like?

In her capacity as teacher, and chair of the college’s art department from 1964–1968, Corita

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expressed a spirit in step with the widespread critique of authority structures that personified America in the paradigm shift of the 1960s. Corita's classroom, where she taught lettering and layout, image finding, drawing, and art structure,⁹⁶ was renowned for its lively interdisciplinary environment, in which multiple films were screened simultaneously, pop music played on the stereo, and large-scale collaborative projects were usually in process.

The art department at Immaculate Heart is a place full of questions, a place whose only answer is really an attitude of openness to and celebration of life. It is part of Sister Corita's teaching method to keep her students constantly struggling with the kind of questions that make them open up to all their experience, sifting it for possible answers. Students live with such questions as "What is a revolution?" "How are food and peace related?"⁹⁷

Corita preached meticulous ways of looking and doing. "Save everything - it might come in handy later." "Look at everything." "Pretend you are a microscope." "Make a movie with your eyes." "Look hard." "Always be around. Come or go to everything. Always go to classes. Read everything you can get your hands on. Look at movies carefully, often." "Don't blink when you're watching a movie or a cut-up page, you may miss some frames which is like missing whole pages from a book." The rules of the IHC art department also reflected Corita's philosophy. Rule Four: "Consider

everything an experiment." Rule Six: "Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and no fail. There's only make. Anything that comes your way, including the work of artists, is a place for starting."⁹⁸

Corita's proposal that *everything* is potentially motivating must have been tremendously refreshing, liberating students from academic traditions of what art can be, and its accepted forms. The following student, after participating in a workshop with Corita, testifies:

With our textbook ideas about art, we came together this summer, 1958, to find ourselves thrust into a whole new schema of thought. The "lights went out" in all the corridors that were thought to lead to ART and we have been left groping in what we may fear to be the wrong direction....

Our explorations into this new world through creative thinking, coupled with creative doing, in such projects as collages, wall books, posters, and contour drawings left us wondering (in that uncomfortable darkness!). We have been dug out of our complacent, neat little ruts and have been challenged to go beyond the narrow confines of our Puritanical heritage - to plunge - and into a whole wonderful new world of sensitive perceptions.⁹⁹

Corita's philosophy, presence, and style were crucial factors in producing a permissive atmosphere in which people would relax, and gauge their own finding processes and visual fascinations. This environment made space for embracing new ideas and developing creative fluency, independently and

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in groups. "In a non-directive teaching method as spontaneous as her style of art, she presents her students with stimuli – records, tapes, photographs, films – without any kind of introduction. In this way she flings them into an exercise of their own judgment, which is what very few people ever learn to do in the visual arts."¹⁰⁰ Attendance was required: "You aren't needed to be there to get grades or pass the course – you are needed to help make the class."¹⁰¹ Students learned to understand the stakes of self-discipline, that they were responsible not only for their experience and learning, but for the class itself and the caliber of its collective effect.

Corita was a believer in high-volume assignments, what Jan Steward termed "red-eye-specials,"¹⁰² geared to developing observational consciousness and analytic skills. For example, she asked students to select a photograph and then write twenty-five ways the photograph differed from what it recorded. As an exercise, a class, each person with a Coke bottle in front of them, might sit in a circle for an hour, and look at it. Another assignment asked students to list one hundred reasons why they are taking art in a liberal arts college; this "immediately releases the student from the crushing responsibility to produce something great."¹⁰³

...one of the assignments I gave them was when Charles [Eames] first gave us the India film on the exhibit that Alexander Girard did at the Museum of Modern Art. [Textiles and Ornamental

Arts of India] I showed them the film, and then afterward I said, "Now, go home and come back tomorrow with two hundred questions about the film." And you find that these things are very difficult to do. The first ten or twenty questions are painful. But after that you get very slaphappy, and you start opening up and expanding. A lot of the questions were worthless, but out of that whole batch, you would get some marvelous things; and, again, the whole process, I think, was a good stretching exercise."¹⁰⁴

Corita was also an advocate and practitioner of formal experimentation. In Baylis Glascock's vivid documentary film, *Corita Kent: On Teaching and Celebration*, she advises her students never to start a project with a content-driven idea, but to focus first on shapes, colors, or whatever interests them visually, which in the process of engagement, she assures them, will naturally produce content. Work and play were not regarded as mutually exclusive in this set-up. Rule Nine: "Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It's lighter than you think."

Corita considered herself more of a teacher than an artist; "I really did art on the side."¹⁰⁵ In fact, the two seem to have been inseparable in her practice. The mutual stimulation and influence flowing between Corita and her students is palpable in their collective artistic output. Many of the projects produced by class groups extend from the sources and methods Corita applied in making her own work. She activated the apprentice system



as an educative structure; therefore it is natural that the artistic manifestations produced remind viewers of Corita's style. However, the giant disposable exhibits and Mary's Day celebrations were the creative work of many; the collaborative process is mirrored in the ambitious, complex results. Of course, not everything in the department was done collectively. Students also conducted independent investigations and made visual art in various media, which Corita consistently documented.

The art department's influence was inspiring in various ways. For years, classes made banners, which in the wider culture were termed "church-style" or "nun-art." The art department staged several banner exhibitions, the most spectacular being in the hall of the National Gallery in Washington, DC, and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Corita commented, "I think the banners really did have a great - well, I would say they had a wide influence, not a great influence. I picked up a little Hallmark book the other day - in fact, somebody sent it to me because they were laughing over it - and as you turn page after page, it looked like stuff that had been thrown away in the art department. It was a very bad copy of almost everything we had ever thought of doing. And I think with the banners, the same thing happened. People have started making banners, but they're dead. They have a kind of nonenthusiasm to them."¹⁰⁶

Another common activity in the culture of Corita's classroom was making walls and other

structures that functioned as scaffolding for students to articulate and contribute parts to.¹⁰⁷ "...a wall was any wall-sized picture, combining images and sometimes using words. The size of the wall was determined by the last fraction of available space. Projects at IHC included murals on buildings, Corita's commissions (often done as class projects), theatrical back-drops and time-lines - the wonderful device perfected by Charles and Ray Eames to present a rich accumulation of data in the context of time. Corita used the term *time-line* for any project whose purpose was to show layers of relationships."¹⁰⁸

When Corita stopped teaching at Immaculate Heart College, she wanted to pass on some of the educative philosophy of the art department, in which "a gifted faculty shone the light of poetry on basic skills and daily living,"¹⁰⁹ and impart ways of working that students had found useful. After ten years went by, she asked her friend and former student, Jan Steward, to collaborate on doing that in book form. The resulting volume, *Learning By Heart. Teaching to Free the Creative Spirit*, is a vibrant textual and pictorial resource that reflects their experiences on how creative impulses are catalyzed, not only for making art, but also in daily life. Divided into sections including Looking, Sources, Structure, Tools and Techniques and Work Play, it is a loaded resource, at once informative, rousing, and playful.

The forms and styles propagated by Corita and the college's art department students do not engender reproductions, copies, and "in the spirit

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IMMACULATE HEART COLLEGE ART DEPARTMENT RULES

- Rule 1** FIND A PLACE YOU TRUST AND THEN TRY TRUSTING IT FOR A WHILE.
- Rule 2** GENERAL DUTIES OF A STUDENT: PULL EVERYTHING OUT OF YOUR TEACHER. PULL EVERYTHING OUT OF YOUR FELLOW STUDENTS.
- Rule 3** GENERAL DUTIES OF A TEACHER: PULL EVERYTHING OUT OF YOUR STUDENTS.
- Rule 4** CONSIDER EVERYTHING AN EXPERIMENT.
- Rule 5** BE SELF DISCIPLINED. THIS MEANS FINDING SOMEONE WISE OR SMART AND CHOOSING TO FOLLOW THEM. TO BE DISCIPLINED IS TO FOLLOW IN A GOOD WAY. TO BE SELF DISCIPLINED IS TO FOLLOW IN A BETTER WAY.
- Rule 6** NOTHING IS A MISTAKE. THERE'S NO WIN AND NO FAIL. THERE'S ONLY MAKE.
- Rule 7** The only rule is work. IF YOU WORK IT WILL LEAD TO SOMETHING. IT'S THE PEOPLE WHO DO ALL OF THE WORK ALL THE TIME WHO EVENTUALLY CATCH ON TO THINGS.
- Rule 8** DON'T TRY TO CREATE AND ANALYZE AT THE SAME TIME. THEY'RE DIFFERENT PROCESSES.
- Rule 9** BE HAPPY WHENEVER YOU CAN MANAGE IT. ENJOY YOURSELF. IT'S LIGHTER THAN YOU THINK.
- Rule 10** "WE'RE BREAKING ALL OF THE RULES. EVEN OUR OWN RULES. AND HOW DO WE DO THAT? BY LEAVING PLENTY OF ROOM FOR X QUANTITIES." JOHN CAGE
- HELPFUL HINTS: ALWAYS BE AROUND. COME OR GO TO EVERYTHING. ALWAYS GO TO CLASSES. READ ANYTHING YOU CAN GET YOUR HANDS ON. LOOK AT MOVIES CAREFULLY OFTEN. SAVE EVERYTHING. IT MIGHT COME IN HANDY LATER. THERE SHOULD BE NEW RULES NEXT WEEK.

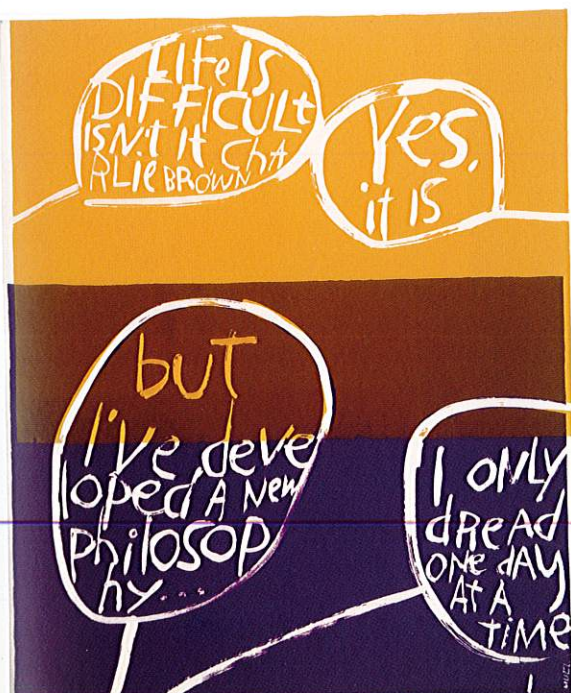
of" versions as they once did. But the legacy of Corita's teaching is not only apparent from the artists who emerged from her classroom, but in the fact that many of the women and men who studied with her and other like-minded faculty at the college, have since incorporated the educational principles that fueled those classrooms, gone on to become teachers, and apply and extend such methods in various capacities and settings. In 1972, artist Sister Karen Bocalero, for whom Corita had been both teacher and mentor, founded Self Help Graphics, the grassroots East Los Angeles visual arts institution which, since 1972, has been dedicated to producing, supporting, and exhibiting printmaking and art by Chicano artists.¹¹⁰ As teacher, Corita seemed to generate an empowerment movement of sorts, profoundly changing people's ways of seeing, thinking, and doing. Steward has said, "She taught with the pull of a strong tide."¹¹¹ Many former students cite Corita's teachings as life changing in so far as she attuned their attention to the aesthetics of everyday life and their actions within that, no matter what their activity or profession. This makes sense, given that the art department's motto was, "We have no art, we do everything as well as we can."¹¹²

After moving to Boston, Corita was invited to teach at Harvard, but declined in favor of a quieter life than she had experienced for the past decade.

Corita had scores of admirers throughout her life, and since her death. Despite such notoriety, her legacy is somewhat marginalized in cultural

history. Corita was resolutely unconventional: in the Church her voice was deemed radical, and in the broader contexts of social and political conflicts of the 1960s she was individualistic and unclassifiable. Corita created her own distinct visual language. Still, her work does not fit easily into categories although it has resonance in both art and graphic design. Lorraine Wild has speculated that the term graphic design was not in common use during Corita's era, "...It also may be that her vision of art and design was so inclusive, and focused on that creative process over the final product, that she did not see a need to define what she did as a subset of a general design practice."¹¹³ A number of well-known designers, including Wild and Jeffrey Keedy, as well as artists, including Ed Ruscha and Mike Kelley,¹¹⁴ express evidence of Corita's influence. However, as a Catholic woman populist printmaker, Corita was rendered secondary status in the art world and her prints have never achieved "fine art" status in the eyes of many curators, art critics and historians. It may well be that the popularity and sentimental currency of Corita's 1970s and 1980s work has undermined her previous work of the 1960s from being properly evaluated and registered as seminal within the canons of pop art.

How did Corita fare on a personal level during the latter part of her life, after leaving the IHC? Did she fashion her life anew? Did she get to work on her art exclusively, as she had desired? Speaking about the changes and joys that came from leaving Los Angeles and moving to Boston,



she said, "I make my home which I think of as a large piece of sculpture."¹¹⁵ And:

I'm learning to sleep now. I just sleep at different times – whenever I feel like it.¹¹⁶ ... I think I have a calmer life, and a chance for more inner development, which I think is not only different but also normal for a person. As you know, as you finish the extreme active part of your life, the part that is outward, you tend then to want to develop what hasn't had a chance yet. And I think I'm having that chance to develop more inwardly than I had before.¹¹⁷

Corita's family was very important to her during this period, and her sister, Mary Catherine, largely supplied her support system after she left the convent. Mary founded Corita Prints, located in Los Angeles, and became Corita's manager, as Corita had to make a living for the first time in her life.¹¹⁸ Although a shift occurred in her art upon relocating to New England, Corita's political convictions as well as her optimism about society carried through her entire life. She contributed prints and designs to numerous political causes, including the George McGovern presidential campaign, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, the Washington March on Poverty, the Michael Harrington Campaign, and Project Hope. Commissions from various companies and organizations had been a strong component of her career for some time as had designing book jackets for Daniel Berrigan; magazine covers and

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inserts for *Psychology Today* and the *Saturday Evening Post* among others; greeting cards; logos, including that of the World Council of Churches; and other commercial items including a Christmas pattern of Neiman Marcus wrapping paper, a holiday card for Revlon, and the design for a line of Samsonite luggage. After her move, Corita increased the volume of corporate commissions, mystifying some of her friends.¹¹⁹ She considered the companies she worked with powerful sites for communication and the commissions as opportunities to promote social justice and celebration. From 1966 through the early 1980s she designed ads for Group W (Westinghouse Broadcasting Company), who also published a series of her prints based on a quotation each, used by the company as advertising to spell out their credo, beliefs and practices. She designed computer desk panels and wall hangings for the Digital Equipment Corporation in 1978. Distribution to broad audiences continued to be important for Corita and she remained a popular artist. Corita made several widely circulated books and continued to create between ten and thirty serigraph designs and watercolors each year. Her post-1970 art is perhaps her most well liked, and most purchased. Corita is renowned in the area for adorning the Boston Gas Company's natural gas tank with a hundred and fifty foot rainbow, which quickly became a local icon. And in 1985 the U.S. Postal Authority published her *Love* stamp in an edition of seven hundred million. Corita Kent died the year after.

With enthusiasm and a celebratory position on life, through her teaching and through her art, Corita opened the way for various forms of liberation in the many individuals and institutions she affected over time. Heightened awareness, analytic consciousness, aesthetic innovation, political activism, collaborative spirit, collective experience, visual pleasure, intellectual empowerment, and serious fun are just a few of those forms.

Work was Corita's wellspring. Rule Seven: "The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It's the people who do all of the work all the time who eventually catch on to things." Corita herself is testament to this adage.

Endnotes begin on page 122.

