MASS APPEAL:
The art of CORITA KENT

JANUARY 27 THRU APRIL 3, 2017

CMATO
CIVIC ARTS PLAZA WEST • 1948 THOUSAND OAKS BLVD • THOUSAND OAKS • CA 91362
It's bad. You don't know what to do when you've got five children standing around crying for something to eat and you don't know where to get it and you don't know which way to start to get it. I just get nervous or something.

—Kentucky miner’s wife

This quote adorns two red dots on Sister Mary Corita’s 1964 work that they may have life. Scrawled across the middle of the work in large red letters is “ENRICHED BREAD”. The graphical motif of the work recalls the American flag and the design of Wonder Bread packaging. Wonder Bread is itself a bit of wonder. Early in the industrialization of bread production, people could no longer live off bread alone. The vitamin load that made bread a millennia-old staple of human beings had been processed out. The solution was to enrich the bleach-white loaves with vitamins, a government sponsored initiative during WWII rationing known as the “Quiet Miracle”. Wonder Bread could again sustain life. Plus, it was already sliced! This conjugation of symbols ripped from advertising contextualized with a heartfelt yearning for a just world epitomizes Corita’s practice.

The concept of transubstantiation within Catholic tradition holds that during the Mass, the bread and wine offered is transformed through the sacrament of the Eucharist into the body and blood of Jesus. This transformation of essence, not to be confused with symbolic transposition, is an artistically revolutionary activity and one that shares some commonality with the appropriative practices of Pop Art. This technique of taking something up and transforming it into something else with different messages and possibilities allows the freedom to critique and transform in the same act. However, Sister Mary Corita was not your average Pop artist.

Corita Kent, or Sister Mary Corita as she was known before she left the Order of the Immaculate Heart, was born in 1918 in Fort Dodge, Iowa. At the age of 18, she joined the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles, a teaching order originally founded in Spain with the goal to improve the educational prospects of young women as a means to benefit society. Kent took classes at Otis and Chouinard Institute of Art, going on to receive her MA from USC in Art History. Kent became well known as a teacher and chair of the Arts Department at Immaculate Heart College. Her classes were visited by Alfred Hitchcock, Saul Bass, and Buckminster Fuller and she entertained friendships with John Cage and the Eames brothers. Ed Ruscha would send his students to Kent’s openings. Kent, notes Art Historian Susan Dackerman, attended Andy Warhol’s 1962 opening at Ferus Gallery, the first time his soup can prints were shown in L.A.

That same year, as Pop Art looked critically upon a flattening, image-based culture, Kent and her religion were beginning to look critically at their own image. 1962 saw the formal opening of Vatican II, an ecumenical council convened to modernize the Catholic Church.

Vatican II would bring about great changes to the liturgy (such as Mass in native languages and congregant-facing clergy), while other modernizations failed to come to fruition. Priests still could not marry, the curia (Vatican administration) retained much of its power and women remained relegated to gender-specific religious orders. However, social teachings, or the social justice current of modern Catholicism, became central to many religious orders in the United States. The Church, once the bank, community center, hospital and undertaker of the American frontier was beginning to confront the necessities of the urban environment within consumer capitalism.

The recoiling changes of the modern landscape created a society alienated and dispossessed amongst a sprawling shroud of fetishized signifiers. Visual culture had entered a golden age. In his book, The First Pop Age, Hal Foster remarks, “the conflation of fetishisms...was...a function of a consumerist economy in the postwar period in which the actual production of commodities was evermore obscured and our libidinal investment in them evermore intense.” The spiritual animus of human beings was turning towards the product, the object, and the image.

Sister Mary Corita took a novel approach to criticizing this characteristic of modernity. Taking cues from the visual language of advertising, Corita began to insert the profound rather than merely causing an image to recoil upon itself.

—Continued on page 6
THE ART OF SCREEN PRINTING
by Jasmine Delgado

Corita Kent’s teaching methods were unique as she was often seen with her students holding up small viewfinders on field trips while observing local street signs, supermarket shelves, and shop window advertisements. This allowed her students to focus on particular elements of a sign or advertisement rather than the entirety of everything that was around them. She encouraged her students to find inspiration in their surroundings. This level of observation is evident in her own work as she treats signs and logos as objects that can be cropped, bent and obscured. Their original context fearlessly dismissed. Her sculptural manipulation of text implies that language has the ability to be transformative and fluid. She overlaps, rotates, and inverts text until it morphs into something entirely new. Her work is visually stunning and as vibrant letterforms, logos, and slogans command our attention and demand a closer look.

Kent’s prolific use of the screen printing medium stems from her commitment to make art that was accessible in terms of affordability and visibility. It is an inherently democratic medium that allows an artist to create identical multiple original prints of the same image that can be disseminated to a large audience at minimal cost to the buyer. She wanted her work and its message to reach as many people as possible. This method of art making enabled her to do just that.

—Continued on page 7
POSTERS—Left to Right

**let the sun shine—1968**
“The creative revolution to take a chunk of the imagined future and put it into the present to follow the law of the future and live it in the present.” —Waskow

**love your brother—1969**
The King is dead. Love your brother. Dr. King stares through the rain-splattered window of a police car after his arrest in Birmingham.

“...don't ever let anyone pull you so low as to hate them. We must use the weapon of love. We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate.”

**manflowers—1969**
MANPOWER! Where have all the flowers gone?

**i'm glad i can feel pain—1969**
Kennedy is dead. This is time to be strong.

“...Now his voice has been silenced but not really just physically. We all have to find our voice and the medium through which we can make it be heard...We all have a voice and we all have to listen. I'm very upset but I'm glad I can feel pain.”

—Love (a student)
Holding up a mirror to the world around her, Corita Kent’s artwork reflects the 1960’s social fabric of the anti-war and the civil rights movements. The CMATO exhibit bookends this period with Kent’s 1967 *stop the bombing* and 1972 *a wider stage*. Corita Kent’s 1968 *let the sun shine* projects a glimpse of hope that carries through her 1969 *king’s dream, road signs* and *a passion for the possible* that anticipates her future Love projects.

if i—1969

Black is beautiful. “I challenge you today to see that his spirit never dies...and that we go forward from this time, which to me represents CRUCIFIXION on to a REDEMPTION and a RESURRECTION OF THE SPIRIT. —Mrs. Martin Luther King

king’s dream—1969

“It may get me crucified I may even die but I want it said that he died to make men free.”

“Have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character...” —Martin Luther King

road signs—1969

HOPE is being able to go in any direction and to know it is the right direction. NOT I NOR ANYONE ELSE CAN TRAVEL THAT ROAD—for you, you must travel it for yourself. It is not far; it is within reach. Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know. —Walt Whitman

a passion for the possible—1969

PLAYBOY: Are you hopeful that we will choose our future?
It’s possible, if not probable. I think there’s a great difference between being optimistic and being hopeful. I am not optimistic but I am hopeful. Realism demands pessimism but hope demands that we hold a bright view of the future; and hope arouses as nothing else can arouse a passion for the possible.

—William Sloane Coffin
In their recent book, *Hippie Modernism*, published in conjunction with The Walker Art Center's eponymous 2015 exhibition, Lorraine Wild and David Karwan state, “Kent… took the language of commercial consumerism and transformed it into a vibrant picture of spiritual hunger and yearning for love and peace.” Kent, unlike her Pop Art contemporaries, saw an opportunity to imbue the graphic landscape with exactly what it was missing — heart.

Warhol, on the other hand, could be said to do little more than show the image back to itself, thereby betraying its vacuous nature. What remains intriguing about Kent now is her sincerity. Whereas Warhol entered into entertainment and transcended into image himself, Kent kept her activist core and set justice at the center of her work, imploring her viewers to not forget that we are all in this together.

From 1965-1968, Corita’s work would become more and more political, reflecting a popular frustration with the Vietnam War and consumer capitalism as well as a profound desire to find a life worth living. The political landscape of the United States and her engagement with it would put her at odds with the Church as resistance materialized to the modernization efforts of Vatican II. The male clergy who maintained power after Vatican II were beginning to clamp down on the female religious orders they viewed as taking liberties with the modernization edicts of Vatican II. In 1965, there were 180,000 religious sisters in the United States. Over the next decade, that number would drop to 135,000. Generally, this can be attributed to a decrease in the religiosity of the general public as well as an increase in the standard of living. However, this only accounts for the decline in new members. Many sisters chose to leave their orders, citing a frustration with the lack of true reform after Vatican II.

By 1968, Sister Mary Corita was gaining a level of celebrity and maintaining an exhaustive schedule. She decided to take a sabbatical, intending to return the following year according to those close to her. However, at some point she decided to leave the order and sought a dispensation from the Bishop to do so. She moved to Boston and continued to work. Two years later, the order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary reformed as a lay community, leaving the church en masse. Kent maintained close ties to the community and would bequeath much of her estate to the Immaculate Heart Community when she passed away in 1986.

Corita Kent’s work is often held up as a curiosity — “the nun that made Pop Art”, being a common moniker. But Kent’s work was doing something wholly different. While Pop artists like Warhol, Lichtenstein, Ruscha and Hamilton were cynically turning America’s images upon themselves, stripping them of their intended meaning and thereby making the image an object, Kent saw another option. Is an image not meant to convey? Is it not a vessel? Can it not sustain us? Might it only need to be enriched to once again become the bread of life?

Joel Kuennen is an arts writer and curator. He is the Chief Operations Officer and a Senior Editor at ArtSlant.com. He holds an MA in Visual and Critical Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
THE ART OF SCREEN PRINTING
—continued from page 3

Screen printing, also known as silkscreen, or serigraphy is a printmaking process where an artist creates a stencil using hand cut or photographic methods on the surface of a prepared screen. This screen is made of a tightly woven mesh stretched and adhered around a wood or aluminum frame. Ink is then pushed or pulled through the stencil with a squeegee onto a substrate such as paper or fabric. The process can seem rigid and limiting, but once a stencil is applied to a screen, that screen can then be rotated and printed in many ways with a variety of colors to achieve dramatically different results.

There is an immediacy to working this way that allows for playful exploration. Kent approaches screen printing much like a collage, bringing in various graphic elements and overlapping them to achieve the desired results. The screen printing process allowed her to manipulate the orientation and placement of the text on the paper to achieve the distinct look of overlapping color and text that is evident in much of her work.

In a world of digital programs that quickly and perfectly warp, stretch, and invert all manner of visual forms, Corita Kent's work feels fresh and tangible. The artist's hand is evident in the cut stencils and hand written text that dominates her work. The ink on the paper is a physical record of the moment she pulled ink across the screen. Her prints carry with them a powerful history whose message of love, peace, hope, and social justice will always be needed.

Jasmine Delgado, Assistant Professor of Art, CSUCI, is a printmaker, educator, consumer, and self proclaimed visual historian. She teaches screen printing, visual technologies and 2D Foundations.

REFERENCES

The Corita Art Center has a wide range of resources on their website: www.corita.org/


Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent, an online exhibition at the Andy Warhol Museum: www.warhol.org/coritakent

IMMACULATE HEART COLLEGE ART DEPARTMENT RULES

Rule 1
Find a place you trust and then try trusting it for a while.

Rule 2

Rule 3
General Duties of a Teacher: Pull Everything Out of Your Students.

Rule 4
Consider Everything an Experiment. It's the People Who Do All of the Work All the Time Who Eventually Catch on to Things.

Rule 5
Be Self Disciplined. This Means Finding Someone Wise or Smart and Choosing to Follow Them.

Rule 6
To Be Disciplined Is to Follow in a Good Way. To Be Self Disciplined Is to Follow in a Better Way.

Rule 7
The only rule is work. 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. Save everything it might come in handy later. There should be new rules next week.

TEN RULES FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Corita Kent's leadership as head of the Art Department fostered a Renaissance environment enlivened by visits from pioneering contemporary artists, designers, and musicians including Charles and Ray Eames, Buckminster Fuller, and John Cage. Artist Ben Shahn dubbed Kent a “joyous revolutionary”. Contrary to the withdrawn life one might expect for a nun, Kent lectured widely, appeared frequently in media interviews, and was on the cover of NEWSWEEK in 1967.

Kent's “Rules” for the Immaculate Heart College Art Department have become legendary in their own right. Sometimes misattributed as originating from John Cage, who contributed to their popularization and whose quoted statement forms the last rule, the list of 10 rules upends traditional teaching pedagogy and gives a glimpse into Kent's vibrant personality.

—Excerpt from Corita Kent's Joyous Art by Sarah Reeder, ARTIFACTUAL HISTORY APPRAISAL, July 22, 2016
BECOME A MEMBER • There has never been a better time to join!

GREAT MUSEUMS DON'T JUST HAPPEN
They reflect the loyalty and support of dedicated and generous members and patrons over many years.