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Four Corners Books
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EVERYTHING IS BEAUTIFUL
UP LIKE MAKING AND THE
SIDE HUMAN
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...
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 Loste 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 purple suit, 1966
 Newsweek, December 25, 1967
 ➔ Corita working on serigraphs
 ➔ Prints hanging to dry
during one month, and that was typical in 1959, even before Corita’s marquee appeal had burgeoned. 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,” 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. 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.” 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.

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.

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.” 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. 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. 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.”

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. Although the conflict applied pressure primarily on the mother superior and the college president, Cardinal McIntyre’s “displeasure was often personalized in Sister Corita,” 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. Newsweek magazine reported that:
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.”

Corita was frequently targeted for criticism by conservative Catholics, 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.”

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. 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.

The group removed themselves from Catholic Church supervision. 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 Carita. 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

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Los Angeles Nuns Wear Dresses, Get Permanents; Draw Wrath Of Cardinal

Los Angeles — They wear dresses, not habits. They keep their hair, not their habits. They have a professional firm to put in their hair that will last for years. They choose a color that is not unsuitable to their age. They do not have habits that are a disgrace to the Church. They have modern hairdos, not habits. They choose a color that is not unsuitable to their age. They do not have habits that are a disgrace to the Church. They have modern hairdos, not habits. They choose a color that is not unsuitable to their age. They do not have habits that are a disgrace to the Church.
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. 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. 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.” 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. 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.”

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 of Corita prints, 1966
Exhibit display of Corita prints at silk-screen studio, announcing the Friday evening sales held at the IHC art department, 1965
Power up and Life magazines installed at altar, c. 1966

and next page: Café collaboratively designed by Corita and art department students, Los Angeles
I thought if I were a woman I would wear coffee as a perfume.
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." 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.

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." 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," Corita welcomed the "clang and clatter" of what she called "marvelously unfinished Los Angeles." 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.

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
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.”

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.”

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*.

According to the *New York Times*, Sister Corita…did for bread and wine what Andy Warhol did for tomato soup.

By 1964 her iconography was derived predominantly from the booming media environment and urban surroundings.
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.93

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...90

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."94 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...
above and behind. She so piquantly exemplified daring to leave the rigid confined circle of orthodoxy and step into an area not defined and clearly dangerous. She stood to lose a great deal—in fact her entire committed life. She made her moves with such insouciance, with such a smiling air of: “look, it’s nothing much, try it,” that she gave numerous students and friends their freedom.

Cori’s compositions made between 1964 and 1966 are primarily silkscreened on a material called pellon, which was commonly used for lining clothes. These 1964 and 1965 works use the white of the cloth-like paper as a background for brightly colored phrases and letterforms that broadcast appropriated messages in a centralized compositional fashion—some neatly fitting into the perimeter of the print, and others featuring enlarged textual fragments that give the impression of bursting beyond the paper’s edge. In her 1966 works, slogans and sayings seem to float and interlock, which, in conjunction with distorting and spatializing techniques, create a sense of motion. A single print, for instance we care, or let’s talk, appears to capture an active arrangement of slogans and references, as if glimpsing an abundantly mediated environment, perhaps while walking or driving.

Between 1965 and 1969, Cori’s work composed pictorial space as a forum in which a carefully orchestrated dialogue between texts is typographically expressed. The work quotes, combines, extracts, highlights and layers elements from a wide array of cultural sources including advertising slogans, street and grocery store signage, poetry, scripture, newspapers and magazines, theological criticism, and song lyrics. Writings by Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jefferson Airplane, Albert Camus, Rainer Maria Rilke, the Beatles, Maurice Ouellet, Gerald Huckaby, Robert Frost, Alan Watts, and Leonard Cohen are quoted; Daniel Berrigan, Gertrude Stein, and E.E. Cummings being favorites.

Although authority is conferred on certain kinds of speech that are readily preserved in public records and historical archives, vernacular speech such as ad phraseology arrives and disappears from circulation swiftly. In Cori’s art, the fugitive elements of ephemeral culture are given permanence. In 1977, when questioned about how the legibility of phrases such as “a tiger in your tank” would fare over time, the artist responded: “I don’t think I ever worry about something I do lasting forever. I think at that time, those were very meaningful to some people, and it was a kind of contagious, fun thing that I got into.” She believed her prints would stand up visually. Cori did not subscribe to the notion that art is timeless, or that things that last longer are better than things that come from, and contribute to, a period.

In the culture of protest, which typified the late 1960s, posters and graphic materials were important tools that carried information and galvanized people. Declaring in 1967: “I admire people who march. I admire people who go to jail. I don’t have...
the guts to do that. So I do what I can,” Carita 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.”

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” that layer documentary material, including images from Life, Newsweek and Time, which she considered “contemporary manuals of contemplation,” 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. 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
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.”

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.

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. 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." 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. 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. 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." 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." 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..."
leave them with a lot of work to do.... So the fame sort of got in the way.... And they were just angry. But as I say, students were angry in those days." 66

Beyond general cross-influences that can happen in any close-knit setting, Corita relied on and received help from students, colleagues, and friends who assisted in printing her serigraphs. Furthermore, "...in those days, I was surrounded by very literate people. That community had some of the best women you could ever meet, and there were people in all different fields. So sometimes people would point things out to me or send things to me." 67 One can readily speculate that engaging in Corita's participatory environment involved not only contributing labor and technical assistance, and supplying references, but was bound to include aiding design, aesthetic, and content discussions and decisions. Many hands and minds may well have contributed to any given artwork, series of prints, or turn of method.

The fundamental creative and educative principles as well as the spirit identified with Corita's person and art were communally derived and shared. Corita did not hide that, but press coverage typically focused on her, and tended to omit the texture of the community's many generative individuals and collaborative methods. It would be difficult to ascertain definitively who, specifically, originated particular ideas. Corita was undeniably a catalyst and a force, however, it is vital to register the fact that informal processes of collaboration were at the heart of the IHC, its art department, and Corita's printmaking while there.66

Somebody had to break the rules68

Although Corita was committed to making her work accessible, she did not define accessibility based on an imagined lowest common level of visual literacy – quite the opposite. Her prints from the 1960s embodied broad knowledge, visual complexity, and sophistication, and thereby expressed deep respect for viewers. Corita's work of that decade proposes a symbolic template for blurring the boundaries between art and design, aesthetics and politics, and for decentralizing authority – be it monolithic or monologic – within the larger context of then-current struggles over restructuring society.

Many rules of legibility central to the formalism of modernist design principles are broken in Corita's 1960s work. Language is excerpted, disassembled, reassembled, recontextualized. Typography is distorted, turned upside down, and reversed. Letterforms are ungrounded, float, and interlock. The graphic space in some prints is layered with handwritten quotes integrated into individual letters.69 Handwriting done "in the spirit of" Corita's became a typographic blueprint for laying out bible verses in church posters; her style was often quoted in banners and printed material, thereafter identified as "nun art."

Corita's visual processes were in part informed by a distinction between contents and aesthetics. (Rule Eight "Don't try to create and analyze at the same time. They're different processes.") She encouraged students to "look at everything" in order to find a visual, or material, starting point,
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,” was key to her process of decontextualization. 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.”

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.

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.

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.*

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, 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,
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.* 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
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 Carita’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. 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
make Mary more relevant to our time – to dust off the habitual and update the content and form.  

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.” 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.*

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 gobs of quotations.” All art majors at the college were required to be English minors.

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

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.” 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
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 – peacemaking 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." 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.”

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.

**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...
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, 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?” 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.”

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.

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
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.” 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.” 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,” 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.”

...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.

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.” 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.”

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. "...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 timelines – 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.”

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,” 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
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 Boccalero, 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.109 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.”110 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.” And:

*I’m learning to sleep now. I just sleep at different times – whenever I feel like it.*

...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.

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. 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
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. 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 adornning 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.
who cleff
the red sea asunder
for his mercy is everlasting
to all of my calling your name
1963, 25 1/2 x 30 1/4 in.
OPEN
WIDE
IN THAT THE KING, OUR LORD, MAY ENTER IN THE EARTH FROM POVERTY TO THE GLORY OF THE CHILDREN OF THE POOR.
ENRICHED BREAD

WONDER

helps build strong bodies 12 ways
STANDARD LARGE LOAF

enriched bread
1500, 281/4 x 361/4 in.
IT'S ALL WAY!

THE BLUE CROSS WAY

IS VERY SIMPLE

WE WALK TOGETHER

GLORY THE GOD OF GLORY

FULLY ALIVE
Fresh bread, what kind of a revolution would it be if all the people in the whole world would sit around in a circle and eat together?

A secret agent what you seek in vain for half your life, one day you come full upon, all the family at dinner.
The time is always out of joint....

If we are provided with a sign that declares Del Monte Tomatoes are juiciest it is not desirable to add:

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

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!"

He's own ridiculousness, allegry become symbol, wine becomes blood somehow we have been taken from the already signs of barter

The rose of all the world becomes, for awhile, and in one
the time is always
out of joint...
we are provided with
wine that
lances.

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 pack-
ed, the circle
of wine, the
symbol, wine becomes
now, becomes
beaten from the aleady signs of barter.
all the world becomes, for awhile, and in our

"grooming with good taste, let all

the juiciest
tomato of all."

What is meant when
said: "She's a peach."
COME AGAIN
FLAVOR
HOME
TO FLAVOR AGAIN HOME

HARNESSES THE SUN TO POWER THIS
People like us.
People take us.
LET THE SUN SHINE IN

let the sun shine
1968, 29 x 23 in.
LET THE SUN SHINE IN

The creative imagination
of man is the only
evidence of the
uniqueness of the
present.
A future
which
the future
and
the present
become.

SERVING ALONE

Somebody had to break the rules
1967, 30 x 36 in.
GET WITH THE ACTION
POWERFUL ENOUGH TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
MAN'S HEART REJOICES THAT WINE

for emergency use soft shoulder
1968, 30 x 26 in.
but the handling is in your hands
When God enters the world, he sets men in movement. He becomes a brother on the journey, so truly one of us, as to know at love and heart and marrow of the human mind. Later, much later (and then only for a time), comes the single big word to found the new faith: resurrection.

The world is perhaps too large for men today to cope with. We say ‘yes’ as best we can, and turn again in our unworn flesh and minds, to the unfinished business of living.

D. Berkhoff
makes meatball sing

song about the greatness
1966, 29 1/4 × 36 in.
people like us

yes

workpower
Give us our best now!
EIGHT MEN SLAIN: GUARD MOVES IN

Los Angeles Times

my people
1965, 23 x 35 in.
The body of Christ is no more comfortable now than it was when it hung from the cross.

Those who live in the well organized, well ordered, nourished, clean, calm and comfortable middle class part of Christ's body can easily forget that the body of Christ, as it now exists, is mostly disorganized, devoid of order, concerned with the material needs, hungry, dirty, not motivated by reason, fermenting in agonizing uncertainty and certainly most uncomfortable.

Youth is a time of rebellion. Rather than squelch the rebellion, we might better enlist the rebels to join that greatest rebel of his time —
I would like to be able to love my country and still love justice. Camus
WHO CAME OUT OF THE WATER

who came out of the water
1966, 36 x 30 in.
WHO CAME OUT OF THE WATER

Stop the Bombing

I am in Vietnam... who will comfort me?

I am in Vietnam... who will comfort me?

I am in Vietnam... who will comfort me?

I am in Vietnam... who will comfort me?

I am in Vietnam... who will comfort me?
Youth

Where have all the flowers gone?

Moonflowers
1969, 22½ x 11½ in.

Manpower
1969, 22½ x 11½ in.
ONLY

If only we would change our life
In that process if something
Should be that we not must always
Do the different, then that which now
Is must be changed. Could have a lot not must have
To help us more beautiful
And brings.
Perhaps everything handsome
Is not to change things.
Regardless of all people, the world
Always into the last moment
In moments passes all the rugged
But the permanent value and meaning
No time ago

or else a like

walking in the dark

I met Christ

Jesus) my heart

collapsed over

and lay still

while he passed (as

close as 1 to you)

you closer

made of nothing

except loneliness

of —
"Seek what is highest, what is purest, what is noblest in your own soul. A government whose purpose is to serve is the truest government. It is a government where the people are the masters. It is a government where the people are the rulers. It is a government where the people are the judges. It is a government where the people are the stewards. It is a government where the people are the protectors. It is a government where the people are the defenders. It is a government where the people are the educators. It is a government where the people are the creators. It is a government where the people are the destroyers. It is a government where the people are theingers. It is a government where the people are the workers. It is a government where the people are the thinkers. It is a government where the people are the dreamers. It is a government where the people are the doers. It is a government where the people are the believers. It is a government where the people are the seekers. It is a government where the people are the lovers. It is a government where the people are the fighters. It is a government where the people are the heroes. It is a government where the people are the winners. It is a government where the people are the champions.

Karl Marx - Defence League for Communist Kind
I give up. Things go better with...
Let's talk

WHAT BEING LOVED MAKES BEING DO IS PRECISELY BE
The Stars
Comes
Tomorrow,
WHY NOT GIVE A DAMN ABOUT YOUR OWN MAN?
The Cry That Will Be Heard

1969, 22 1/2 x 11 1/2 in.

Tender Love - part one - sr. william
1964, 30 x 36 in.
Rest at park evening.
A tall, thin tree.

Night coming underly.
Black like me. I waver.

I am the man I suffered. I was there.
I am the hounded star. I once
at the bite of dogs.
I do not ask the unkinded person
how he feels. I merely become
the unkinded person.
All these I feel or feel... in whom am

Aris the big bird
1966, 30 x 36 in.
Life is difficult isn't it Charlie Brown?

Yes, it is.

But I've developed a new philosophy...

I only dread one day at a time.
Life is difficult

Yes, it is

Brown

I only dread one day at a time!

Deved a new DOSP

Mary does laugh and the songs and news and newsnight sound

They could probably do heroin shopping at the nearest basket

Mary does laugh

1964, 29 1/4 x 39 1/4 in.
When I Hear Bread Breaking

I see something else; it seems almost as though God never meant us to do anything else. So beautiful a sound, the crust breaks up like Manna and falls all over everything. And then we eat; bread gets inside humans.
KEEP

STOP

IN

RIGHT
In 1959, through the good offices of Helen Kelley, president of Immaculate Heart College, I was introduced to the state of mind known as California. But let me step back a pace or two, and remove my shoes; we are on sacred turf. Our time is the mid-1950s. An east coast bishop, James Francis McIntyre, has been dispatched west, at the behest of our New York king maker, Cardinal Spellman. As shortly became evident, the new archbishop of Los Angeles intended to raise hackles and brows.

While we of the east went about our business in comparative calm and non-interference (there was as yet no war in Vietnam to bring matters to a boil), in southern California all was toil and trouble.

Shortly, there was created a species of clerical refugees. The Cuernavaca Center for Latin American Studies, where I was imported from time to time to work with Ivan Illich, offered solace to casualties of the New Ecclesiology of Southern California. A number of North American clerics were suddenly pushed out of Los Angeles, on a road leading anywhere – as long as the road led elsewhere. Some of the exiled priests found work in orphanages and schools and parishes of Mexico. Still others married and returned north to secular jobs. My impression was that those evicted were by and large, talented and devout priests; their loss to the church was a tragedy beyond telling.

Such was the atmosphere, as Immaculate Heart College invited me westward to deliver a public address. The lecture was never given. A day or two before the event, a phone message reached me in New York. It was from president Kelley: Cardinal McIntyre had ordered the lecture cancelled, no reason given. Beyond doubt, as she implied, the dis-scheduled speech was not the point; the speaker was.

And I was not even notorious as yet! When I consider my present disreputable estate vis a vis church and republic, the California episode takes on a loveably archaic look. So large a net cast for so small a fish! I would certainly not qualify at the time as an arsonist of draft files or a jailbird, or
even a renegade from the soporific decencies of academe. Memory summons a rather colorless earnest young cleric with as yet little capacity for trouble making; neither a nose to smell it out, nor the will to set it stirring. Why I asked, this sudden lightning bolt out of a clear sky? A disininvitation, and by decree of a cardinal! The mind boggled.

President Helen Kelley of Immaculate Heart was a very mistress of improvisation; plan B was in her sleeve. The invitation to her campus, she said coolly, was by no means cancelled by this or that byzantine intervention. Would I come to Los Angeles anyway? If so, friends would assemble, making the best of rather straightened circumstance, to our mutual if modest benefit.

So it transpired. Instead of a large lecture hall, our setting was a kind of catacomb; in attendance was a knot of survivors, friends of friends.

There, for the first time, I encountered the Immaculate Heart Sisters, a faculty whose college lay under an ecclesiastical cloud, whose lecturers and guests had, so to speak, to pass through an early warning security system, run by ignorant outsiders. A community that, for a bitter and contentious decade, would be summoned arbitrarily to headquarters, dictated to, scolded, bullied, cribbed and confined.

The sisters were an improbable and varied group; they were talented, vivacious, marked by a democratic, disconcerting sense of dignity and of the consequent rights accruing. Though under considerable duress, they were good humored and calm of mein, skilled in a kind of communitarian patience.

Indeed, as the contest with the cardinal hotted up, it became clear that the sisters had at hand (and heart), resources for a long and bitter haul.

Confronting the sisters were the purveyors of a certain kind of 'ecclesiastical realism.' Among its heady ingredients were money, property, pride of place, strong (male) suppositions as to behavior and attitude befitting or unbefitting; if the latter, to be denounced – or, given plenary offence and absence of remorse, requiring amputation from the church.

The term of contention was implausibly simple. Who was in charge of Immaculate Heart College?

The question bit deep and ranged far. Indeed the stakes were immensely larger than the College. The final prey was the community itself, that seedbed of trouble, 'those women!' Who was to rein in and exact obedience of the community of Immaculate Heart Sisters, dispersed throughout the parochial schools of southern California?

Over the ensuing decade, there settled on the faces of the Immaculate Heart Sisters a look of fixed endurance. Harassment and dictation took their toll. Teaching, running the college in a coherent way, became an extremely penitential exercise.
As may be imagined, the intrusions convulsed the internal life of the community as well. Indeed its members, old and young, vigorous or cautious of mind, endured in a hundred ways the angst that was the common mood of church at war, and nation at war, in the 60s.

Shortly, the world fell apart; for the Sisters of Immaculate Heart, as for me. More nearly, as to Corita.

She was already famous in the early 1950s. The joy in her work, its riotous color, was her gift to a good gray world. It seemed as though in her art the juices of the world were running over, inundating the world, bursting the rotten wineskins of semblance, rote and rot.

It should in plain justice be set down, all she was offering at the time (and continued to offer, despite all) on behalf of the church.

One emotion seemed denied to Catholics; the lack might be thought of as biological, environmental, genetic, a matter of deficient diet or dour instruction, unrelieved by lively season or good sense. Alas, how plumb the heart of that plodding virtuous set-jawed lockstepping bemitred leadership, and the flock that doddered and tottered behind? They needed joy, joy, joy!

Corita Kent had it in abundance. She gave it, pressed down, flowing over. Her art poured out; she was a very witch of invention, holding aloft her cornucopia. The serigraphs hung on the clotheslines drying, in the little back shed where she worked, across the street from the campus of Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles, where she talked things through, planned, sketched with her students. It was like the mixing room of the hues of creation, colors in combat, contrast, harmony; enough and more for a century of sunrises. Or the room was like the wardrobe of a master clown, if God were a clown – a heresy she seemed secretly, bemusedly, more than lightly inclined toward. Confounding thereby colorless cardinals.

At that time, many of the nuns discarded the old garb. The new costumes were instructive as to personality, dreams, bemusements of the wearers. Corita began to array herself in outrageous nonfashions. She took her lead, by all evidence, from nature, a formerly forbidden ground. Orange boots, wild orange, yellow, plum, cerise gowns.

Was there a message? The gowns were another form of art, celebrational. They were an assault on horizontality, dead weight, dogmatics, liturgy stuck in Dies Irae,¹ the world (the church) as Haceldama. Oh, she was dangerous, that one!

As to her fame, it grew, and yet never seemed to matter. What was she to do with it, this unwieldy baggage of repute? she asked, looking at one with utter insouciance, an innocent in the garden of experience. Fame? The look gave the answer. Why, exactly nothing.
For a period, there was much soul searching in her community, the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart. Nothing like the church militantly in pursuit, one thought, to engender introspection in the hardiest spirits.

They brought in a psychologist for a plenary session. I was ferried westward to join in; on what basis was blessedly unclear. In any case, the meeting of the minds, with the Pacific beating outside the old beach house where we foregathered – the meeting went, in the opinion of a few, from burdensome to nigh intolerable. My sense, obscurely arrived at, was that such dissection, such autopsical pursuits, ought decently to wait on one's decease. One day I fled the premises as quietly as might be, and began walking along the shore. And there, walking toward me, was Corita, likewise fleeing.

Something here, I thought, of the brooding, cherishing, mothering even, of the nest of mystery. We laughed, and let it go at that.
You wouldn't believe it, at first sight. All that savvy and subtlety, the way she absorbed, as though through pores of the soul, the skill of self-concealment. ("She's so NATURAL!" they'd cry.)

She knew more than a few things, and told infinitely less than she knew; what art was, what the art of living was. She made it all look easy. And in a sense, when you thought about it, it was, the art and the living, and the living art she made of it.

You might have thought, if you were not a close friend, that there was no struggle in her life. No contrary winds, no exhaustion from teaching, travel, work, work. No sense of humiliation, no "woman bent double (under the law, that killer) for many years; and doctors hopeless to help." You might have thought, how easily she does it! And how wrong you'd be.

I arrived one Holy Week at the IHC Santa Barbara house to "conduct a retreat." It was that time of century when priests commended to women certain matters of the spirit, more or less evangelically related – (more or less) – matters, which, moreover, the preacher might or might not be thought to exemplify.

Preaching aside, example aside, it was a week that remains green and sunlit in memory. I arrived, to be shown my quarters. And lo, hands, presences, imaginations, had gone before. The walls of my dwelling were inundated, floor to ceiling, in a blaze of Corita serigraphs.

Did they have something in mind, those women? Would the preacher perhaps be enabled, in such a setting, to say something of a Love that bears even with our world, even with the Los Angeles Catholic church?

File under "our world," the news of that week: Holy Week, and the unholy bombing of North Vietnam.

The sisters were preparing the chapel for Holy Thursday, and after that, for the Great Leap of Easter. Whole buckets of orchids began arriving from the neighbors' bounty. One of the sisters asked, "Does your mother like orchids?"

Now in our straitened circumstance of Ol' Clay Farm, where the appearance of a turnip's pate above ground was in the nature of a major breakthrough, what might be called the California Question had not frequently risen.

I swallowed, "I expect she does."

Thus there arrived at my mother's door in Syracuse, New York, on Easter morning, a long elegant box containing, not one or another orchid bloom, but entire sprays of mauve, purple, and white. These were sights not often seen in our northern Appalachian setting.

The day I departed Santa Barbara for New York, the same hands, or others, came to my room, removed the serigraphs with care, packed them up, and presented the bundle. Happy Easter!
But first, as to Good Friday. As in the first instance, Year One, trouble was brewing. And yet, as the First Instance might have ruefully reflected under Pilate's lash or Herod's scorn — how innocently it all began!

The sisters and I planned a ceremony of reconciliation. It seemed no great matter. Prayers were composed, hymns sung, silence ensued. A sense was conveyed, and more than a sense, that the Lord's death had commended to us what we now commended to one another — the grace of God that renders us gracious.

There were, of course, older, more traditional forms of the sacrament. The sisters, for the most part, preferred the public ceremony of reconciliation. For those who did not, private "confession" was available.

However. Evidently, the group was not entirely composed of pioneers. On my return to New York, I was summoned to Jesuit headquarters. The message concerned a smoke signal from the chancery of Los Angeles. Yours truly had dared conduct a verboten form of the sacrament of penance. A wrist was slapped, dire warnings issued. O Corita!

Her work in the mid and late 1950s was still playfully devotional. "Devotional" was considered befitting. She was after all a nun; her turf was prayer, the saints, Jesus and Mary, the Bible. Nonetheless, it was that persistent playfulness that stuck in gravelly throats. How dare she?

There was the Case of the Notorious Serigraph. It depicted an indubitable; large, rotund — yes, even piggish — tomato. It was overweening in its pop presence; so much had seldom been made of the commonplace. It was as though a whole bushel of tomatoes had incontinently converged in one.
Or as if Corita's elbow had toppled her pot of crimson paint over the paper; as then she decided to make sport of the mishap, rounding things off to a nicety, to a joke.

And then, and then – straight-faced, she scrawled words along the bottom edge, something to the effect of “Mary, the Juiciest Tomato of All”!

In a manner of speaking, all hell broke loose.

There were, after all, traditional images of Mary. These had the iconic character of the sacred, out of time, out of place – out of (most of all) youthful hands, playful hands.

There were questions and implications aplenty here, not all of them aesthetic.

Questions like: Who owned the images, anyway?

It was clear, at least it was becoming clearer, especially to women, that the purported owners of the images also placed a heavy hand, a claim, on those who approached the images, those who believed in the presences, those who sought in the icons ways and means of coping, rhythms and beckonings of the human.

Was it to be borne that the human achieve a breakaway, escape custody, scrutiny, no one laying commands, warnings, declaring limits?

There were authorities all over the place (all over the church) raising just such dire possibilities, raising such questions. It was quite simple. They owned the icons, so they defined the human. In casu, they said who Mary was, and who she was not.

More to the point, they decreed what metaphors, images, forms, tropes,
poems, hymns, dances, sculptures – they did the sorting out, sober as a final judgment – which of these befitted and which did not.

This way of proceeding, a favorite tactic in church and state, was inviolate, sanctified (as was decreed by the authorities). Various weighty names were invoked; such and such was “God’s will,” or indubitably was not. Such and such honored, or dishonored, the saints. The pronouncements had the mordant quality of magic, incantations; they were beyond cavil or reproach, certainly beyond discussion.

Thus in controlling the icons, a powerful aura was created around a certain conception of the human. And this operated with particular force, when the feminine-as-holy was invoked, sculpted, painted, praised, celebrated. Touchy! Who owned the Blessed Virgin?

Well, one thing was clear: Women didn’t.

A second thing was clear, clearly a heavenly mandate (to the owners): Men did.

The consequence was weighty indeed. If men owned the icons of the Blessed Virgin, it followed that men had a large say on the subject of women – who they were, how they were to conduct themselves, where and when
they fitted or exceeded something known in certain circles as “their place.”

Would it be intolerable to state the following bit of logic? If men owned the icons of women, men owned women.

Beyond doubt, dynamite dwelt in the images. And to speak of the nefarious Sacred Tomato, it was as though this innocent, Corita, had wantonly planted a charge of dynamite in the fruity heart of things, the ecological original. And then hung around, while a (male) foot (whose else?), provoked beyond bearing, gave the image, so to speak, a vigorous kick – and thereby set off the charge.

I often thought of it. The best weapon was a light touch. The best revenge was an unswipable smile.

She had claimed the icon; reclaimed it, better.

Why get lathered up about such things? A smile of recognition and relief comes to one's face, at thought of her. How guileless she was, and yet how stunningly wise.

Tomato indeed!

She broke the claim, writ on tablets of stone, with the light stave of her innocence.

What’s the problem? What’s your difficulty? They fumed away, impossible to ignore her, equally impossible to control her.

It was as if the images, noble and precious and under triple lockup, suddenly had been sprung. The doors opened, the holy ones walked free; out of the stale sacristies, away from “close custody.”

Corita and I were invited to a Chicago panel. The subject was “religion and the arts.” Also summoned was a liberal East Coast bishop, a Bishop Wright, considered at the time a kind of public advocate for lively minds.

The bishop, as became apparent, was leaning toward larger honors. He issued portentous pronunciamentos concerning, well, not much. He would in a season of due ripening, turn red, or rather purple, in visage and raiment.

Corita, nothing daunted, referred to his Eminence mischievously and publicly as “Bishop Wrong.” We also discovered a prop which we placed surreptitiously on stage, just before the bishop was to speak. It was a ridiculously elaborate Louis Quinze throne; on it, a mannequin, legs crossed idiotically.

The jest was not well received. Corita predictably took the worst of the riposte. The bishop referred to Lady Bird Johnson’s effort to “clean up the billboards that deface public highways.” “Alas,” he said, “Corita has brought the billboards indoors; she obviously considers them art.”

She was diminutive, and in the latter years, frail.

I never saw her angry or out of sorts, though I frequently beheld her in
physical and psychic pain. She seemed constitutionally unable to harbor a grievance.

This is what her friends remember, and mourn—her capacity for friendship, for them.

She knew that the times were a very breaker of bones. Often, friendships tore apart. No point in dwelling on a tragic truism. (Except to dwell on her, and her struggle to remain faithful to her community and those beyond.)

"Those beyond," including myself, never considered ourselves (never were considered) at the periphery of her affection. Did her love for us allow of such an image—periphery, center? We all felt ourselves at center. She made certain we did. She beckoned us there. The gesture was irresistible.

In the 1970s, she accepted work for the great corporations, and a few of us were taken aback, wondering what this might mean. Her designs appeared in the pages of Newsweek and Time, sometimes double spreads. Was she being taken in? We wondered if anyone was advising her of the activities of these corporate sharks, always anxious to "front" as patrons of the arts, latter-day Maecenases, scattering largesse even as they milked and bilked the world.

At the same time, during those same years, twenty or more, she could be counted on to devote her talents to this or that cause. Thus the posters on behalf of peace, the women's movement, anti-hunger events, ecology. The work was invariably donated.

Images, images. The image maker herself exists in the public image. They "know who she is," it goes without saying. And all wrong, it goes without saying. Nevertheless, she is dealt with mercilessly, arbitrarily, is turned and hefted and tossed about according to the vagaries of public appetite, socialized greed, the preening and scheming.

Who gave a damn about her sense of herself, her dignity, privacy? She must give a damn, and then some; she and a few friends. If they don't persistently, no one will. She (and they, which is to say, we) bid fair to become mere grist for the mills of the demigods, provender of the consumer clutch.

Tread easy. Many have perished without a cry.

Every artist, in a sense, asks for it. The packaging and huckstering of the product includes the image on the wrapping. You, Corita.

By and large, she dealt skillfully with a punishing life. There was something unkillable in her, untouchable even, reserved to a few. Noli me tangere. Some tried to own her, and were rebuffed. Her implacable courtesy could turn an assault to a standoff, or better.

Her art followed the course of life, as a shadow follows a form. At the start, she concentrated on images and words drawn from nature and the Bible. (It was a principle she never abandoned that words and images belong together.
Sometimes, not often, the principle got too industrious, plying both sides of
the street, so to speak. Then the work reached a point of illegibility.)

In the early fifties, she quickly endeared herself to liturgico-literary middle-
professional Catholics. Her serigraphs illustrated the psalms and prophets
and prayers of the church. Her naive eye caught resonances and reflections
and hints of the natural world, translated them in a tender wash, just short of
sentimental.

And that calligraphy! She drew words rather than wrote them; her brush
danced across the page in a lively farandole. The writing was worlds apart
from the impersonal ersatz “excellence” of that truly awful “Palmer Method,” a
form of torture in my childhood. (It occurred to me later that the handwriting
corresponded exactly with the theology of extra ecclesiam nulla salus.5)

Corita’s script was backhanded, informal, flowing. It was pleasantly offbeat,
sophisticated; the scrawl, intermittently legible, of a child who wrote for the
fun of it, and was apt to abandon words, as fancy caught, in favor of doodles,
stick drawings, or plain daydreaming.

That was her knack: writing that looked improvised, a second thought
hurrying after the first. And yet there was seriousness too. In the first years,
a word or phrase of scripture set the tone. Later, mockery was often the
message. She held up to gentle derision – consumerism, glowing ads for
second-rate products, the volatile appetite of the marketplace. And then on to
the women’s movement, the antiwar movement, billboards, even on a huge
gas storage tank in Boston. All grist for the golden mill.

She was neither an art historian nor a philosopher. Her comments on her
own work invariably took the form of a gentle nudge toward freedom.
Freedom now! The medium was the message.

She saw life as redemptive, rewarding. To her, original sin was, so to
speak, a recessive gene. It showed up only in the shadows; its forms were
negation, cowardice, self-distrust.

This was where her art came in. Subtly, not so subtly, she kept offering
forms of the joy that finally prevails, keeps going. In the face of the sin that
says dourly nothing can be done. Or says (the same thing) the church is
hopeless, life is a drag, don’t bother me, time on my hands.

Corita was in and out of bouts of serious illness for many years. She
underwent a wearisome series of operations; she survived, went on with her
work. To inquiries about her health, she would say ruefully, things like, “Some
of me that was inside me is now outside me.”

She would urge me to visit her gallery in New York, near the United
Nations, and “choose what you want.”

Once in 1981 she gathered her unsold works, made a great roll of them,
sizzling with her colors, and shipped them on. “To make use of as you want. Sell them, give them away.”

It was typical of those we love. Some live long, under sentence of death even. And we forget the sentence, the death. We think of them as perpetually in the world, at our side. Fiction? Coping? Something of these.

So in summer of 1986, a friend called. Corita was back in the hospital, surgery again, it looks grim. And I thought, When hasn’t it?

It was so grim this time, as to be final. I thought, I must get to Boston.

She had survived the surgery, lost considerable weight, even from that destitute little frame. I found her in a tiny room of an old wing of the hospital. When I came in unannounced, bearing a flowering plant, she broke out weeping. “You make me cry,” she said through tears. (She had said to a friend sometime before, “Oh, if I could only weep.”)

I said, “I hope you won’t have that put on my tombstone, ‘I make my friends cry!’” Then she laughed.

We had a good hour together. She was weak as the newborn, but perked up wonderfully for the occasion, very much herself, propped there on pillows, with her own art on the walls, undoubtedly the most cheerful thing her friends could come upon.

We talked and reminisced and wandered far afield in time, calling up friends, occasions, the dreadful years of war when our only recourse, it seemed, was to “have a party,” and the only reason to announce one was to plan another.

That was the last visit. A day or two later, she signed herself out of the hospital, and friends took her into their home where she died ever so gently. She left instructions: no funeral. Her friends, she wrote, might decide to gather for a party, that would be just fine.

East Coast and West, they did.

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Notes
1 Day of Wrath.
2 This description blends two prints from memory: the first from 1964, which caused the fury, consisted of letterforms spelling the word "tomato" with a lengthy text by Samuel Eisenstein featuring the words, "Mary Mother is the juiciest tomato of them all," and the second from 1967, composed of an image of a Del Monte tomato with a shorter text by Eisenstein, which made no mention of Mary. (Ed.)
3 In this case.
4 Touch me not.
5 There is no salvation outside the Church.
Appendix

What follows is a transcript of the texts in the serigraphs included in this volume. The layout and punctuation of the quoted texts follows that of the original, rather than Cortà's transcription, except in the case of power up. Very short texts are not included here.

song about the greatness, 1964

Let the ocean thunder with all its waves the world and all who dwell there. The rivers clap their hands, the mountains shout together with joy before the Lord, for he comes.
- Psalm 98.7–9

wide open, 1964

Open wide... that the King of Glory may enter in.
- Psalm 24.9

Open wide the exits from poverty to the children of the poor.
- Lyndon B. Johnson

the juiciest tomato of all, 1964

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. We long for the "groaning board," the table overburdened with good things, so much we can never taste, let alone eat, all there is. We long for the heart that overflows for the all-accepting of the bounteous, of the whole heart not in it, with the eye furtively looking out for one's own ridiculousness, the real and not synthetic, for the armful of flowers that continues the breast, for the fingers that make a perfect blessing.

There is no irreducible in joy, even if joy is pump-primed at first. Someone must enter the circle first, especially since the circle appears menacing. The fire must be lit, a lonely task, then it dances. The spark of flame teaches one person to dance and that person teaches others, and then everyone can be a flame. Everyone can communicate. But someone must be burned. Perhaps everyone who would participate entirely in the dance must have some part of himself burned, and may shrink back. They look for some familiar action to relate to. There is too yawning a gulf between oneself and the spirit, so we turn to our supermarkets, allegories; a one-to-one relationship. You pay your money, you get your food, you eat it, it's gone. But intangibly, during the awkward part of the dance, with the whole heart not in it, with the eye fleetingly looking out for one's own ridiculousness, allegory becomes symbol, wine becomes blood, wafer flesh and the spark flames like tender be – part one – sr. william, 1964

So yes, I think Mary laughed out loud – she laughed wholeheartedly, without rancor, and with great compassion, and with real reverence. If she were here today in her physical nature she would surely laugh. She would laugh at our wreaths; she would laugh at our pop art; she would laugh – compassionately – at the consternation of some of us at this riot of sound and color, at our uncertainty about its suitability for a day of religious celebration. Frankly, I think Mary would want this day, that she would like to think that it was well explained by calling it her day. She is the cause of our joy – and I hope that we bring her joy by praising her with our hearts on high. If we were only loud and bright, perhaps we could hope only for the indulgent smile of the mother of very small children. Our colors, however are the colors of the marketplace, the colors of life-giving food, and our sounds are the sounds of the here and now, and they are meant to say: mother, I am concerned for my brother, who is your son. My brother starves, he weeps, he dies. He is myself. Today is a loud call to our mother asking her to teach us what she knows of filling the emptiness, drying the tears, and easing the death of our brother. We ask to be taken out of ourselves (this is the whole burden of "Pacem in Terris").
- Sr. William (Helen Kelley) on Mary's Day 1964

Rest at pale evening... A tall, slim tree... Night coming tenderly Black like me.
- Langston Hughes, "Dream Variations" (From The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, published by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.)

I am the man, I suffered, I was there... I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs...
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person... All these I feel or am.
- Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

mary does laugh, 1964

Mary does laugh, and she sings and runs and wears bright orange. Today she'd probably do something else; it seems almost as though God never meant us to do anything else. So beautiful a sound, the crust breaks up like manna and falls all over everything, and then we eat; bread gets inside humans.
- Daniel Berrigan

people like us yes, 1965

Text by Maurice Ouellet, as quoted in my people (above).

power up, 1965

God has chosen his mother to put an end to all distance. The first choice of Christians is Christ. Where is your brother? Want nothing small about men. Except maybe their words, which should be modest and thoughtful and almost inaudible before their DEEDS. For the rest, bigness; heart, brain; Imagination too; let it take the world in two hands and show us what it's like to BE! Tell us about it, we're around on a thin margin - a life, maybe, but what for? And who wants it anyway?

Where's the man who says yes, and says no, like a thunderclap? Where's the man whose no turns to yes in his mouth - he can't deny life, he asks for a new flower or a new day or a hero even; what more is there to love than I have loved?

When I hear bread breaking, I see something else; it seems almost as though God never meant us to do anything else. So beautiful a sound, the crust breaks up like manna and falls all over everything, and then we EAT; bread gets inside humans and turns into what the early Jews called "focal glory of god." But don't let that worry you. Sometime in your life, hope you might see one starved man, the look on his face when the bread finally arrives.

Hope you might have baked it or bought it...
or even needed it for yourself. For the look on
his face for your hands meeting his across a
piece of bread, you might be willing to lose a
lot or suffer a lot — or die a little, even.

"Formal glory," well yes. Maybe what we're
trying to understand is what they're trying to
say, who knows? I don't think they understand
— or every theologian would be working part
time in a breadline. Who knows. Who might
greet them there or how their words might
change afterwards like stones into bread?
Most theologians have never broken bread for
anyone in their lives. Do you know, I think they
think Christ is as well fed as his statues are?

But I don't know. Man keeps breaking in.

Take your "typical man" across the world.
Let him in. Look at him, he isn't white, he
probably isn't clean. He certainly isn't fed or
American, or Catholic. So then what? What's
left? Well, maybe now we're getting
somewhere; Christ is ALL that's left if you're
looking for a mystery. He's real as a man.

Don't just stand there! Sit him down. Offer him
some bread! He'll understand that; bread
comes across. So does Christ; Luke says so —
in the breaking of the bread. What a beautiful
sound — try and see!

I keep thinking of that poor man. And his
face, when someone on earth shows up
against all odds to treat him like a human
being. But that isn't all, or even half the truth.
The half, or more, is what he sees is you.

And that's a mercy, because Christ is
merciless about the poor. He wants them
around — always, and everywhere. He's
condemned them to live with us. It's terrifying.
I mean it too. It's not only that we are
ordered, rigorously ordered, to serve the poor.
That's hard enough; Christ gives so few
orders in all the gospel. But the point is, what
the poor see in us — and don't see, too. We
stand there, American, white, Catholic, with
the keys of the kingdom and the keys of the
world in our pocket. Everything about us says:
Be like me! I've got it made. But the poor man
sees the emperor — naked. Like the look of
Christ, the poor man strips us down to the
bone. And then if we're lucky something
dawns — even on us.

Why, we're the poor. The reel plays backward,
everything's reversed when the gospel is in
the air. The clothes fly off Dives, he's negro,
he's nothing, he's got his hand out forever.
Empty as a turned up skull. Watch the reel
now — it's important to see which way the
bread is passing. To you, to me! We're in luck.
This is our day.

If you come from or where we are (just possibly)
going — in spite of tons of catechisms and the
ten editions of the Handbook for Instant
Salvation and the best of sellers, I Kept You
Know Who Out and Found god.

On the cloud of unknowing; hog Blind as
bats. Then a poor man (they are all miracle
men, they have to be to live one day in our
world) stands there. His poverty is like a few
loaves and fishes — enough for everyone!

He breaks and breaks bread and feeds us
and we live up again and again literally
bottomless with sour need, going for broke,
sore and ill tempered and justling one another,
hearing the word pass down the line, there's
hardly any left, resenting straining forward in
a frenzy of despair. But there's always enough,
always some more. Christ guarantees it — I
Don't know why. The poor you have always
with you. Like a marvelous legacy of god. His
beat possession, in our hands. Undeserved,
like the Eucharist. O send someone in from
the gate where Dives sits on a dungheap in his
sores, send even one of the dogs to whimper
for us — would Lazarus of his heart's goodness
let a dog lick up the crumbs from the floor,
and carry even in a dog's mouth something
for the damned.

This is the truth about the world, our Lord
said. Everything comes right, all the deep
wrongs of evil are made out, the rich are
stripped even of their shrouds, the
poor men go in wedding garments.

The first way to defeat Christianity is to
strike the Christians blind. Let the rich really
think they have made it and can hang on to it
all, and wheeler deal even with the angel of
judgement named Christ, and (imagine) face
him for the first time in death — when all of life
is a great tragic Greek chorale sung by Christa
in masks, sometimes furies, sometimes racked
women. Sometimes a foul wino in a pimisr
sings it out like a bird of paradise remembering
his last incarnation, but never, never looks up
when Mr. Big goes by. The untranslated,
unbearable unbearable cry, pure judgement,
pure anger, pure rejection. Reality! Reality!

The poor will line up before the Judge with
Horrible Eyes, a handful of daisies in His right
hand, a sword in the other. They look gently
toward His right side. They know. Come.
They were the workers of corporal mercy.
They are saved for having been, for being,
for being others.

They save even us. They carry refreshed bread
to stale lives.

Come, beloved of my Father.

— Daniel Berrigan

right, 1967

If and only we arrange our life according to
that principle which counsels us that we must
always hold to the difficult, then that which
now seems to us the most alien will become
what we most trust and find most faithful. How
should we be able to forget those ancient
myths that at the beginning of all peoples,
the myths about dragons that at the last
moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the
dragons of our lives are princesses who are
only waiting to see us once beautiful and
brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its
deepest being something that wants help
from us.

— Rainer Maria Rilke, "Letter Eight," Letters To
A Young Poet

somebody had to break the rules, 1967

The rose is a rose,
And was always a rose.
But the theory now goes
That the apple's a rose,
And the pear is, and so's
The plum, I suppose.
The dear only knows
What will next prove a rose.
You, of course, are a rose —
But were always a rose.

— Robert Frost, "The Rose Family"

("The Rose Family" from THE POETRY OF
ROBERT FROST, edited by Edward Connery
Lathem, © Copyright 1928, 1969 by Henry
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in the UK by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by
permission of The Random House Group Ltd.)

stop the bombing, 1967

I am in Vietnam
who will consulate 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 —
there is a bullet in my brain,
behind my eyes, so that all I see is pain

I am in Vietnam
who will consulate me?

from the six o'clock news,
from the headlines lurking on the street,
between the angry love songs on the radio,
from the frightened hawks
and angry doves I meet,
a war I will not fight is killing me —

I am in Vietnam
who will consulate me?

— Gerald Huckaby, "I am in Vietnam"

greetings, 1967

When I hear bread breaking, I see something
else; it seems almost as though God never
meant us to do anything else. So beautiful a
sound, the crust breaks like manna and falls all
erver everything and then we eat; bread gets
inside humans. Sometime in your life, hope
you might see one starved man, the look on
his face when the bread finally arrives. Hope
you might have baked it or bought it or even
needed it for your self. For the look on his face
for your hands meeting his across a piece of
bread, you might be willing to lose a lot or
suffer a lot — or die a little, even.

— Daniel Berrigan

lesson nine, 1966

The sun is very full of sunshine which is very
pleasant just at nine, when the wash is
hanging out on the line. Turkeys are wild and
turkeys are tame which is a shame. Peacocks
too and they are blue and if all this is true who
are you. This is what the sun said when after
having been up since nine he thought of
setting time after time, but they said no, what
is there to show that the sun has sunshine
if he is setting all the time. So the sun said he
would shine even if it was nine and he did
just as if he was a lid which he was because
there was a cover which did cover all around
the sun cover the sun all up and after that
there was no bother nobody had to get up
even at nine. Anyway there was no sunshine,
not yesterday. It is different today. Thank you
very much for such.

— Gertrude Stein

I am in Vietnam

— A Young Poet

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fresh bread, 1967
A jug of wine a loaf of bread and WOW.
- Unidentified author

What kind of a revolution would it be if all the people in the world would sit around in a circle and eat together?
- Unidentified author

What you seek in vain for half your life, one day you come full upon, all the family at dinner.
- Henry David Thoreau

handle with care, 1967
no time ago or else a life walking in the dark i met christ
- Unidentified author

jesus/my heart flopped over and lay still while he passed(ass)
close as i'm to you yes closer made of nothing except loneliness
- E.E. Cummings, "no time ago"
(["no time ago"] is reprinted from COMPLETE POEMS 1904–1962, by E.E. Cummings, edited by George J. Firmage, by permission of W.W. Norton & Company. © Copyright 1991 by the Trustees for the E.E. Cummings Trust and George James Firmage.)

There is only one man.
- Unidentified author

harness the sun, 1967
So: I see you = a very fresh, unique, wonderful individual. When I see you I can believe in lots of things: creativity, individuality, humanity, love, reciprocity = when I write, talk or think about you, clouds lift, light filters through and for a brief instant, I can see almost forever. And that's more than any human being such as I have a right to: and to have it so much, so often, makes me want to say grace all day long.
- Unidentified author

I fall on the weeds and stones,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person,
My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.
- Walt Whitman, "Song Of Myself"

The plan of a slave ship, showing the conditions in which slaves crossed the Atlantic. The slave trade was abolished by Great Britain in 1807, and other countries were persuaded to follow suit in 1815.
- Illustration caption

DEEPER INTO THE VIETNAM WAR:
A Marine is evacuated during patrol action against the Vietcong.
- Life magazine caption, July 2, 1965

phil and dan, 1969
I recall what Thoreau said in his famous essay on civil disobedience, "under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison." To me therefore, prison is a very creative way to say yes to life and not to war.
- Thomas Lewis

They were trying to make an outcry, an outraged outcry to reach the American community before it was too late. I think this is an element of free speech to try = when all else fails = to reach the community.
- William Kunstler

if i, 1969
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.
- Coretta Scott King

He learns that the "yes" or "on" elements of energy cannot be experienced without contrast with the "no" or "off," and therefore that darkness and death are by no means the mere absence of light and life, but rather their origin. In this way the fear of death and nothingness is entirely overcome.

Because of this startling discovery, so alien to the normal common sense, he worships the divinity under its female form rather than its male form — for the female is symbolically representative of the negative, dark, and hollow aspect of the world, without which the masculine, positive, light, and solid aspect cannot be manifested or seen . . . he discovers that existence is basically a kind of dancing or music — an immensely complex energy pattern which needs no explanation other than itself — just as we do not ask what is the meaning of fugues . . . Energy itself, as William Blake said, is eternal delight — and all life is to be lived in the spirit of rapt absorption in an arabesque of rhythms . . . [In] Western Civilization . . . we over accentuate the positive, think of the negative
as "bad," and thus live in a frantic terror of
death and extinction which renders us
incapable of "playing" life with a noble and
joyous detachment. Failing to understand the
musical quality of nature, which fulfills itself in
an eternal present, we live for a tomorrow
which never comes... But through
understanding the creative power of the
female, of the negative, of empty space, and of
death, we may at least become completely
alive in the present.
- Alan Watts, "On the Tantra"
(From CLOUD-HIDDEN, WHEREABOUTS
UNKNOWN by Alan Watts, copyright © 1968,
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Books, a division of Random House, Inc. and
by the permission of Russell & Volkening as
agents for the author.)

the cry that will be heard, 1969
Or put your girl to sleep sometime
With rats instead of nursery rhymes,
With hunger and your other children
By her side.
And wonder if you’ll share your bed
With something else that must be fed,
For fear may lie beside you
Or it may sleep down the hall.

And it might begin to teach you
How to give a damn about your fellow man.

Come and see how well despair
Is seasoned by the stifling air
See your ghetto in the good old
Sizzling summertime.
Suppose the streets were all on fire,
The flames like tempers leaping higher,
Suppose you’d lived there all your life,
D’you think that you would mind?

And it might begin to reach you
Why I gave a damn about my fellow man,
And I might begin to teach you
How to give a damn about your fellow man.
- Stuart Scharf and Robert Dorough,
("Give A Damn" (As recorded by Spanky &
Our Gang / Mercury)
© Copyright 1968 Takya Music Inc.
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Notes
1 This appears in the serigraph as "Many
more than live next door."
2 Thomas Lewis was one of the Catonsville
Nine.
3 William Kunstler was the defense lawyer
for the Catonsville Nine.
4 Coretta Scott King, after the death of her
husband Martin Luther King, Jr.

Endnotes

The Spirited Art of Sister Corita
by Julie Ault

This essay draws on ideas expressed in my
earlier writings and exhibitions about Corita:

"Archives in Practice," Interarchive. Archival
Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Art
Field, edited by Beatrice von Blanack et al.,
(Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter
König, 2002);
reprinted in Julie Ault, Martin
Beck, Critical Condition, Selected Texts in
Dialogue (Essen: Kokerei Zollverein/
Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kritik, 2003),
267–278.

Julie Ault and Martin Beck, "All you need is
love: pictures, words and worship by Corita
Kent," Eye 35/00, spring 2000. Special thanks
to Martin Beck for allowing me to draw on
ideas developed in this essay, 48–57.

"Building and Unbuilding," in Covering the
Room: 8 Ausstellungsflächen, edited by
Florian Pumhösl and Mathias Duaini, (Salzburg
and Vienna: Salzburger Kunstverein and

Power Up, Reassembled (Los Angeles:
UCLA Hammer Museum, 2000), exhibition
brochure, n.p.; reprinted in Julie Ault, Martin
Beck, Critical Condition, Selected Texts in
Dialogue (Essen: Kokerei Zollverein/
Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kritik, 2003),
367–375.

"Somebody had to break the rules," in
springer Bd. III Heft 4, winter 1997, 42–44.

Power Up: Reassembled Speech,
Interlocking, Sister Corita and Donald Moffett
(Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1997),
exhibition brochure, n.p.

1 In the existing public record, Corita
reflected in 1976, "Because I had never
thought of leaving up till that point, so I wasn’t
having any difficulty with the thought. But after
I left, I looked back. And I’ve never had any
regrets about leaving, even though there have
been difficulties." Kent, Corita. Los Angeles
Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent.
Transcript of oral history conducted in 1976 by
Department of Special Collections, Charles E.
Young Research Library, University of
California, Los Angeles, 149. Despite this
statement, Corita was likely to have given her
decision prior consideration and may have had
sight of, or known, her intentions privately. Jan
Steward and Corita had abstractly discussed
"leaving" when they said goodbye for that
summer. Corita referenced their conversation
in a postcard she sent to Jan after she had
moved. Jan Steward, correspondence with the
author, June 2006.

2 All of the newspaper accounts I came
across that covered Conita’s resignation cite
this quote.

3 Sister Corita graced the cover of the
December 25, 1967 issue of Newsweek,
which read, "The Nun: Going Modern," and
announced the feature article inside, Kenneth

4 A culturally rich and seemingly innocuous
list, conservative critics regarded some of the
"Great Men," as morally tainted and accused
them of being "communists."

5 Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group
Portrait, Corita Kent, 24.

6 Dan Paulos quoted in Barbara Marianne
Loste, Life Stories of Artist Corita Kent
(1918–1986): Her Spirit, Her Art, The Woman
Within, Dissertation submitted for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational
Leadership, School of Education, Gonzaga
University, March 2000, 53.

7 See for instance the play based on review
of the public record, including Corita’s
personal papers, and many interviews the
writer conducted with Corita’s friends,
colleagues, and former students: Irene
O’Garden, Little Heart, 2005.

8 National publications that featured coverage
of Corita, or invited her to contribute art
inserts, included Newsweek, Look, the
Saturday Evening Post, the Los Angeles
Times, the Boston Globe, the Boston Herald,
the New York Times, The New Yorker, the
Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune,
Harper’s Bazaar, Women’s World, The Lamp,
The Catholic Voice and many other local as
well as Catholic publications.

9 Loste, 121.

10 Pamela Rothon, “A Conversation with
Corita Kent,” The American Way, November

11 Loste, 164. Corita had previous teaching
appointments in southern California and
taught for five years in Vancouver, but taught
at the college for approximately twenty-three
years, from 1945–1968.

12 Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group
Portrait, Corita Kent, 21.

13 Jan Steward, correspondence with the
author, June 2006.

14 Irregular Bulletin #13, Immaculate Heart
College art department, December 1958, n.p.

15 Rothon, 11.

16 Mickey Myers vividly recalls those periods,
"It was always August, the hottest time of the
year in LA, and that confined cinderblock
studio was not air conditioned, and the sun
beat down on the plate glass windows along
Franklin... There was Corita in her habit – the
whole bloody habit – woolen scapular, and
starched coif, and two layers of veil, and long
indigo woolen dress, pulling a three-foot long
squeegee that took strength and muscle to
pull evenly, especially when you were printing
prints that were large and the color coverage
was solid. She did all the printing herself,
pulling that squeegee thirty prints times one
hundred images times how ever many colors
there were in each print... There were other
sisters helping her, and some friends who
came all the way across the country, and
everyone had their job... And it smelled, of
paint thinner and the awful thick, heavy smell
of silkscreen paint, and transparent base...
The more she printed, the more it smelled,
until the air was so thick with the fumes and the exhaust and the sweat of summer, that I am told luncheon was a heavenly relief, back at the convent. But I think the most important thing about this scene is that everyone who was there, wanted to be there . . . .”  (Myers, in correspondence with the author, June 2006.)


18 Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent, 100.

19 O’Garden, n.p.

20 Loste, 66.

21 Corita kept that name after leaving the order, because she preferred it to her given name, Frances Kent. Mary Seth, “Corita says, To Create is to relate.” Presbyterian Life, April 15, 1968. No doubt another factor was that her artistic reputation had been made with the name Corita.

22 Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent, 145.

23 Quoted in Loste, 110.


25 Anita Caspary was president of Immaculate Heart College from 1958–1963, followed by Helen Kelley, who was college president from 1963 to 1977. Caspary was mother superior of the community from 1963 to 1969, and was the first president of the new lay community, when the Immaculate Heart Community members were no longer nuns, between 1969 and 1973.

26 Loste, 110.

27 The mural, The Beatitudes, was one of the fifteen exhibits in the Vatican Pavilion. According to the pavilion guidebook, “The eight evidences of blessedness or happiness, known as The Beatitudes, form the background for an interesting interplay of quotations from two men named John, Pope John XXII and John F. Kennedy, in the forty-foot painting on the left gallery wall by Sister Mary Corita, IHM.”


31 “Fighting Nuns,” Newsweek, April 1, 1968, 100.

32 Kelley, n.p.

33 Opposed, were “fifty sisters, desiring to remain in canonical status, retaining the name (the California Institute of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart) and organizational structure, which would adhere to the pre-

34 Corita Kent, “Art Is To Be Enjoyed,” The Lamp, November 1965, 19.

35 “Helen Kelley does not recall whether Sister Mag entered it behind Corita’s back or strongly urged her (under some well-meaning threat) to enter it.” Correspondence between Sasha Carrera and the author, May 2006.


37 This reference to Sister Mag’s strategy from correspondence with Jan Steward, June 2006.


39 Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent, 14.

40 The trajectories in Corita’s prints and subsequent descriptions throughout this essay were ascertained from visual research done at the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), to which Corita donated examples of her serigraphs that amounted to over nine hundred prints as well as related drawings and sketchbooks, and, at the Corita Art Center at the Immaculate Heart Community (IHC), also in Los Angeles, which houses the inventory of prints, watercolors, and other printed matter that remained upon the artist’s death. Corita bequeathed her inventory to the IHC along with her photographic archive and many papers and documents from the period in which she lived at the community and worked at the college. The Corita Art Center’s website (www.corita.org) contains a database listing Corita’s serigraphs and posters.

41 Kent and Steward, 184.


43 Quoted in Woodward, 46.

44 Harvey Cox, Commonweal, October 24, 1986.


47 Many of these references are elaborated in the untitled booklet Corita published at the Immaculate Heart Community, 1966, n.p.

48 Loste, 108.


50 Sister Mary Corita, IHM, “Choose Life or Assign a Sign or Begin a Conversation,” n.p.


52 Correspondence from Samuel Eisenstein to Elinor Jansz, May 2006.

53 Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent, 90–91.

54 Kent, “art and beauty in the life of the sister,” 15.

55 This first series Corita made outside of the IHC were transitional in that they shared certain attributes with previous prints, including fluorescent colors and political subject matter, yet used different graphic strategies. Notably, they were not printed by Corita herself, but sent to Hambley Studios in California, which from then on did all her printing. Mickey Myers commented, “As intense and mutually rewarding as that relationship was, something was lost in the immediacy of Corita’s creative process. For those of us on the scene in both places – Los Angeles and Boston – it was a real relief to see her free from the arduous silkscreen process. But from that time on, her prints became something else.” (Myers, in correspondence with the author, June 2006.)


59 The college at large embodied collaboration in the form of team teaching a single course by as many as four professors from various departments.

60 Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent, 20.

61 Ibid, 37.

62 See O’Garden and the interviews she conducted. I have not found hard-and-fast data on this subject, but the character of Sister Mag’s and Corita’s relationship and its conflicts have been alluded to and discussed informally on several occasions with people at the IHC. Jan Steward has also spoken about the subject, “Maggie wanted to continue as they had been for all those successful years. As Corita grew – older, experienced, aware – she wanted to change.” Steward regarded their divergence as very sad, but also inevitable. Correspondence with the author, June 2006. Conflicts of this nature are easy to imagine between the two women, who were so closely associated and laboring under a host of pressures.
May 1. It is not a specific date or feast day, usually takes place in early May, sometimes on

Portait, Carita Kent, 78.

Mary's Day is a day that honors Mary and Herder, 1967). (New York: Herder and

With the exception of Immaculate Heart College, The Happy Ending issue, published in 1980.


Mary's Day is a day that honors Mary and usually takes place in early May, sometimes on May 1. It is not a specific date or feast day.

Kent and Steward, 178-81.

Ibid, 182.

Ibid, 186.

Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent, 35.

Kent and Steward, 206.

Sandy Cutuli, "From Sister Mary Corita and the Art Department of Immaculate Heart College," Our Sunday Visitor, August 7, 1966.

Woodward, 46.

Kent, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent, 36.


IBM commissioned the Eames office to make the film, The Information Machine: Creative Man and the Data Processor in 1957, which was shown at the IBM Corporation Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, and another film, Introduction to Feedback in 1960. In 1961 IBM commissioned the exhibition Mathematica: A World of Numbers... and Beyond, and the IBM Pavilion at the 1964–65 New York World's Fair contained several film projects that the Eames office made including the multiscreen presentation Think, 1962. Corita's slide archive contains many pictures of the Brussels fair and the New York fair, with many shots of Charles and Ray Eames among them, indicating that she spent time in the exhibits with them. It is possible that Charles Eames provided the initial link between Corita and IBM.

90 Shulte.

91 Cunningham.

92 Sister Mary Corita, IHM, "Choose Life or Assign a Sign or Begin a Conversation," n.p.

93 "All Quiet on Eastern Front as 'Peace on Earth' Reopens," Los Angeles Times, December 20, 1965.


96 "The titles of the classes were used to satisfy requirements from the state officials who sought to define what art was about. In my first class with Corita, Drawing, we had three hours to draw three inches of our own arm." Jan Steward, correspondence with the author, June 2006.

97 Cutuli.

98 Kent and Steward, 48.


100 Martha Monigle, "Sister Mary Corita: 'Be Aware! Be Curious! Be Joyous!'" Alumni Review (University of Southern California, September–October 1966), 4.

101 Kent and Steward, 48.

102 Ibid, 6.
Acknowledgments

I am thankful to Martin Beck for our dialogue and long shared passion for Carita’s work, which have consequences throughout this book. Appreciation is due Nils Norman and Alex Farquharson for their preliminary discussions with Elinor Jansz, which helped bring us into contact.

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My experiences visiting the IHC were infused with Carita’s presence. Her prints hang on every wall; she is frequently spoken about and her creative principles are referenced by many of the women I met there. Those encounters were invariably informative and stimulating.

This book is dedicated to my friend, Jim Hodges, who first pointed me in the direction of Corita.

J.A.

Contributors


Nick Bell Design is an independent, multi-disciplinary graphic design consultancy based in London. Their approach to visual communication is driven by a close attention to context. Nick Bell, their director, was creative director of Eye, the highly influential international review of graphic design from 1997 to 2005. His experience on Eye enabled him to develop a more curatorial method of editorial design—one his studio has adapted very successfully for the design of exhibitions. Clients have included the V&A, the Science Museum, Tate, the British Council, National Portrait Gallery and the new award-winning Churchill Museum in London.

Born in Minnesota in 1921, Daniel Berrigan is a Jesuit priest, poet, and peace activist who has been nominated many times for the Nobel Peace Prize and is a recipient of the Thomas Merton and the Pacem in Terris awards. He has written over fifty books including The Bride: Images of the Church and Uncommon Prayer. A member of the Catonsville Nine and Plowshares Eight, Daniel Berrigan continues to demonstrate against war and nuclear weapons and give lectures across the country about the scriptures and the call to peacemaking. He lives at the West Side Jesuit Community in New York City.

Established by Elinor Jansz in 2003, Four Corners Books is an independent publisher based in London, specializing in books by artists and books about art. Publishers Jansz and Richard Embry work closely with artists and curators, tailoring each book to the individual needs of the project. Already published are: An Architecture Of Play by Nils Norman and Brian Wilson: An Art Book edited by Alex Farquharson.

About this book

Some of Sister Corita’s prints included in this book (specifically many of those between pages 65 and 96) include fluorescent colors that are impossible to reproduce in the standard 4-color printing process. As the inks that Corita used were made from different substances and applied repeatedly using a hand held squeegee, rather than a mechanical press, it is not possible to mimic them precisely. However, by using day-glo inks where appropriate and thanks to the expertise of our printers the colors reproduced here are a good likeness to the original serigraphs.

A comparison between the reproductions of E eye love on pages 26 and 80 gives an indication of the difference between traditional 4-color reproduction and that using fluorescent ink.

This book has been typeset using Century ATF Schoolbook BO and Akzidenz Grotesk BO from the H. Berthold AG typefoundry.
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