

Commodification of Humanitarian Love, Faith, and Hope: The Evolution of Corita Kent

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Abstract

This thesis examines the evolution of Corita Kent's artistic oeuvre, highlighting her consistent themes of humanitarian love, faith, and hope. Initially recognized as a religious illustrator, Corita's work transitioned into potent social and political commentary as she innovatively incorporated text and imagery from commercial branding. This commodification of her art raises questions about the intersection of artistic intent and monetary value, shifting discussions toward the commercial aspects of the art world. Corita's later work, characterized by vibrant colors, bold text, and a blend of religious, poetic, and pop cultural references, reflects her commitment to activist messaging that engages broader audiences beyond Catholicism. Despite the commodification of her work, Corita's focus on social commentary and advocacy remained an impactful dissemination of her message. After her passing, the establishment of the Corita Art Center in Los Angeles, California, has helped preserve her legacy and promote her contributions to the Pop Art movement, affirming the timeless relevance of her art in the ongoing struggles for women's and civil rights.

Introduction

Corita Kent (1918-1986) was an educator, designer, printmaker, and advocate for social justice in Southern California and Boston. Being a former nun, she consistently conveys messages of humanitarian love, faith, and hope throughout her entire oeuvre. Her early projects focused on Catholic themes; in her pursuit of relaying “God’s message,” Corita said: “I was trying to make “religious art” that would be not quite as repulsive as what was around. And then pretty soon I realized that anything that was any good had a religious quality, so that it didn't matter whether it had that kind of subject.”¹ This quote encapsulates the beginning of Corita’s career as a religious illustrator. Over time, her art transformed into powerful political and social commentary. She became well-known for her innovative use of text and imagery from commercial products and independent inspirations, which served as vehicles for religious figures and messages in her prints.

Corita's work can be categorized in various ways; however, this paper will focus specifically on her prints that utilize commercial branding for symbolism, her joyful public happenings, and a selection of her commercial commissions. For the purposes of this discussion, when referring to the commodification of art, we are talking about objects treated as products – something that can be bought, sold, and traded. This perspective shifts the focus away from artistic intent or meaning and places more importance on monetary value. This change inspires conversations about the commercial side of the art world, potentially altering how artists create or for whom they create. In Corita’s case, I argue that much of her later work has been commodified, particularly as she embraced the commercial aspects of printmaking – specifically screen printing – before eventually moving more into the realm of design.

¹ Kent, Corita, “Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait Corita Kent,” interview by Bernard Galm, Oral History Program, University of California Los Angeles (1977): 46, <https://archive.org/details/coritakentoralhi00cori/page/n119/mode/2up?view=theater>.

Delving into the themes of humanitarian love, faith, and hope present in her work, it seems that Corita commodified this message in a manner similar to a brand slogan. She appropriates these interconnected and often religious terms, empowering her art initially aiming to convey “God’s message.” However, over time, these words became her own and took on a broader meaning. Michael Duncan wrote, “she addressed consumers not of products but of life,”² which supports the idea of the life-guiding messaging inherent in Corita’s art for art’s sake work, as opposed to a purely capitalist view of commodified art. Many of Corita’s commissions came from corporations that marketed to the general public, rather than exclusively serving an “art world” audience, helping her in this feat.

Sister Mary Corita began her journey as a religious illustrator and teacher before evolving into simply Corita, a bold activist and political commentator. Despite the various names she has been known by – including her birth name, Frances (Frannie) Elizabeth Kent (1918-1936); her name as a nun, Sister Mary Corita (1936-1968); and her name after dispensation, Corita Kent (1968-1986) – I will primarily refer to her simply as Corita. As her work progressed, the focus shifted toward activist messages, engaging audiences beyond Catholicism, and maintaining her commitment to her messaging, whether commercial, religious, or otherwise. A key aspect of my analysis is the notion that activist art can be commodified. Corita’s transition from exploring commodities through branding – from a design and symbolic perspective to ultimately creating commodities – was likely influenced by various factors, including cultural trends, her relationships with fellow artists, and her need to support herself after leaving the Catholic Church and her convent. The activist messages in her work, along with their effectiveness, highlight her steadfast commitment to these ideas.

² Michael Duncan, “Someday is Now,” in *Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent*, eds. Ian Berry and Michel Duncan (The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2013), 17.

In part, this thesis will explore Corita's early life as a nun and teacher in an effort to understand her background and its impact on her total body of work. During her time in the church, she informally embraced the principles of humanitarian love, faith, and hope while also beginning to formulate her own artistic practice. As a nun, she treated her art as a side project, prioritizing her role as an educator over a solo artist. Corita happened into Pop Art, significantly shifting her previous perspective. She began to tour and sell her work quite successfully, which put her in conversation with other artists, theologians, and designers in the scene, further transforming her artistic direction. Pop Art and the commodity give her an outlet to filter her and God's message in a new and exciting way. Following her difficult decision to leave her Los Angeles-based world for Boston, she opened a new chapter as a lay person. She took on more commissions while remaining steadfast to her social advocacy work in designing with humanitarian love, faith, and hope. I will highlight several major public-facing commissions that utilize Corita's message post-dispensation and underscore her commodification of the terms.

Understanding Corita and Immaculate Heart

Raised primarily in Los Angeles, California, Corita's upbringing significantly shaped the aesthetics of her work, which always stemmed from her "everyday."³ Her contemporary Southern California printmakers, such as Ed Ruscha, John Cage, and John Baldessari, developed a language of print heavily involving text and letters relating to design similar to Corita. Another significant facet of Corita's everyday hinges on her coming from a working-class Irish Catholic family. Following the suit of her siblings, Mark, a priest, and her sister, Sister Ruth, Frances Elizabeth Kent joined the Roman Catholic order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles and became Sister Mary Corita.⁴ When asked why, she said "I must have thought it a good thing to do... I don't think I was ever deeply religious."⁵

Corita's life is extensively detailed in the documentaries *Primary Colors: The Story of Corita* (1991, directed by Jeffrey Hayden) and *Rebel Hearts* (2021, directed by Pedro Kos). Both provide perspectives on the life of a nun at the Immaculate Heart of Mary and feature first-hand accounts and interviews with Corita in addition to her colleagues, friends, and many of her sisters, who lived and taught together during the tumultuous 1960s. Based on the interviews with the sisters and clergymen in these films, we know Immaculate Heart was a very progressive order, which helped their nuns gain their desired education, from a B.A. to a Ph.D.⁶ This was when many women did not get college educations, so a space that provides higher education and experimental and interdisciplinary practices is even more astounding.⁷ Immaculate Heart's art department is where Corita spent much of her time. She earned her

³ Duncan, "Someday is Now," 11.

⁴ Kent, interview, 15.

⁵ *Primary Colors: The Story of Corita*, directed by Jeffrey Hayden (1991; South Carolina ETV and the Saint/Hayden Company, n.d.), DVD, Chapter 2.

⁶ *Rebel Hearts*, directed by Pedro Kos (2021; United States: Level Forward/Discovery+, 2021), Film and Digital Streaming, 15:25, <https://play.max.co.m/video/watch/ae225dfc-e056-4f46-a7d6-be2db1f0d857/f8fc69e9-0f5c-4cd1-af4f-093ebf8987ba>

⁷ *Rebel Hearts*, 21:12.

B.A. from Immaculate Heart College in 1941, after which she was sent to Vancouver, British Columbia, to be a primary school teacher in the first year of a new Immaculate Heart Elementary School.⁸ Corita was not interested in teaching at this time, fearing that she “would never really be able to.”⁹ Despite her earlier doubts, she really took to the job and enjoyed it before being asked to return to Los Angeles in 1947 to teach upper-level courses in the art department at Immaculate Heart College.¹⁰ At this time, Corita was also working on her master’s degree in art history at the University of Southern California, which she completed in 1951.¹¹

Corita quickly became enamored with teaching at the college level and has prolifically written about her philosophies on such. Most famously, her “Ten Rules” created in the 1960s were a sort of collaboration with her students in which she asked them to collectively reimagine what a learning environment could be:

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

Rule 2: General duties of a student: pull everything out of your teacher; pull everything out of your fellow students.

Rule 3: General duties of a teacher: pull everything out of your students.

Rule 4: Consider everything an experiment.

Rule 5: Be self-disciplined: this means finding someone wise or smart and choosing to follow them. To be disciplined is to follow in a good way. To be self-disciplined is to follow in a better way.

Rule 6: Nothing is a mistake. There’s no win and no fail, there’s only make.

Rule 7: The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It’s the people who do all of the work all of the time who eventually catch on to things.

Rule 8: Don’t try to create and analyze at the same time. They’re different processes.

Rule 9: Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It’s lighter than you think.

Rule 10: We’re breaking all the rules. Even our own rules. And how do we do that? By leaving plenty of room for X quantities.

⁸ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 2.

⁹ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 2.

¹⁰ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 2.

¹¹ “Corita Kent in the Grunwald Center Collection: Teaching,” Hammer Museum, accessed August 24, 2024, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/collections/grunwald-center-collection/corita-kent/art/themes/teaching>.

Helpful Hints: Always be around. Come or go to everything. Always go to classes. Read anything you can get your hands on. Look at movies carefully, often. Save everything—it might come in handy later.¹²

Corita let these rules guide her personal art practice, much of her success as a teacher equated to her success as an artist, and it is likely her students taught her as much as she taught them in some ways.

Another example of this exchange can be seen in Corita's "quantity assignments," in which the students would have to make a hundred or more versions of the same idea, eventually leading to a "quality product," Corita explained, "they would just have to dig in!"¹³ Viewing Corita's own drafts in archives such as the Hammer's *Digital Archive Corita Kent in the Grunwald Center Collection* and the Schlesinger Library's *Corita Kent Papers*, one can see numerous mock-ups, sketches, and watercolor paintings before an idea was fully fleshed out. In many cases, she used tissue overlays, be they hand-painted or colorless-ly stenciled out, to move each element around until finding its perfect spot.¹⁴ Corita elaborated on this notion: "the creative is when you're putting things together, and the analytical part is when you're taking things apart and criticizing and observing – whereas the other part, you're in it."¹⁵

During her professorship, Corita went on to become the chairman of the art department at Immaculate Heart College in 1964 until 1968. Prior to Corita's chairmanship, her mentor, Sister Magdalen Mary (Maggie), held the position from 1936 to 1964.¹⁶ Sister Maggie and Corita shared the ideals that play is integral to art making, as well as teaching and learning being one in the same. Duncan cites Sister Maggie: "Educators are those who draw-out, not

¹² Corita Kent and Jan Steward, *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit* (Allworth Press, 2008), 176.

¹³ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 3.

¹⁴ "Corita Kent in the Grunwald Center Collection: Process," Hammer Museum, accessed August 24, 2024, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/collections/grunwald-center-collection/corita-kent/process>.

¹⁵ Kent, interview, 52.

¹⁶ Duncan, "Someday is Now," 11.

only from others but also from themselves...”¹⁷ The pair worked together often through lesson planning, spending Sundays discussing student work, and on a departmental zine entitled the *Irregular Bulletin*.¹⁸ The zine detailed anything Immaculate Heart art-related and was created by Sister Maggie, who crafted the publication through a “ransom-note” style of collage accompanied by film photographs taken by Corita.¹⁹

Beginning in 1956, Sister Maggie became Corita’s “unofficial manager,” promoting in unison Corita’s serigraph work and the pair’s pedagogical theory through slide talks.²⁰ In a two-week stint, the women lectured in eight different metropolitan cities, such as Chicago, New York, and Boston.²¹ Sister Maggie orchestrated shows and lectures in which Corita’s work was exhibited and sold, leading to commissions and more work for Corita, whose payment was funneled back into the Immaculate Heart College.²² While it might seem odd for Corita to forgo the money earned from her labor, one must understand that nuns are required to uphold a vow of poverty. These terms are outlined in *Catechism of The Vows* by Father Peter Cotel, S.J., which states, “What he acquires by his industry (labor, skill, etc.) or by reason of his membership in his institute is acquired for that institute.”²³ Outside of Catholicism, this concept may be foreign, but it demonstrates Corita’s selfless commitment to the church and her lifestyle at the time.

While Sister Maggie and Corita shared many attributes when it came to teaching, a specific to Corita’s lessons were the instructions on how to see. A teaching method Corita used to develop her students’ sight was detailed by their use of viewfinders, or simply “finders,” as

¹⁷ Duncan, “Someday is Now,” 11.

¹⁸ Duncan, “Someday is Now,” 12.

¹⁹ Duncan, “Someday is Now,” 12.

²⁰ Julie Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita* (Four Corners Books, 2006), 12.

²¹ Duncan, “Someday is Now,” 13.

²² Alexandra Carrera, “Oral History” in *Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent*, eds. Ian Berry and Michel Duncan (The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2013), 36.

²³ Peter Cotel, *Catechism of The Vows*, trans. William H. McCabe (Benziger Brothers, 1924), 61.

she calls them in *Learning by Heart: Teaching to Free the Creative Spirit*, a lesson and exercise based book Corita co-authored with Jan Steward. The finders are used to look with unconventional perspectives or, as Corita put it, “a device which does the same thing as the camera lens... It helps take things out of context, allows us to see for the sake of seeing, and enhances our quick-looking and decision-making skills.”²⁴ Corita and her classes employed low-tech paper or cardboard viewfinders which have been used as a composition tool for centuries. Bringing Corita’s creative process full circle, she often carried a film camera, documenting her everyday life, collecting slides for her presentations, and indulging in a practice that influenced her prints (before fully making their way into her works) and taught her the impact of seeing small sections of her surroundings.²⁵ An extensive survey of Corita’s film images is curated with quotes by her into a small book entitled *Ordinary Signs Will Be Signs for Us*, in which numerous references to her prints can be seen, further solidifying that she really formed her practice during her time at Immaculate Heart and that she taught her students her own method and process for creativity.²⁶

Overall, Corita learned and grew so much in her time at Immaculate Heart; she often spoke very fondly of it despite her troubles there. Immaculate Heart, at times, seemingly had a symbiotic relationship between college and convent in which many of the sisters were professors and worked together to create, learn, and teach. Corita describes this time at Immaculate Heart as:

The days that we were all together were golden years in a way for all of us. We came to lunch, and we historians and political scientists and artists and English teachers, all talked to one another about what was going on with them. We had this wonderful little college that was our own that we could do, what we wanted in, we could have an idea today and put it into practice tomorrow.²⁷

²⁴ Kent and Steward, *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit*, 26.

²⁵ Julie Ault, Jason Fulford, and Jordan Weitzman, eds., *Ordinary Things Will Be Signs For Us* (J&L Books, 2023).

²⁶ Ault, Fulford, and Weitzman, *Ordinary Things Will Be Signs For Us*.

²⁷ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 3.

At the time this environment challenged the sisters and students in healthy ways, but especially Corita as she really came into her own here by starting her teaching and art making career in Immaculate Heart.

Corita's Pop

From student to teacher

In 1951, Corita earned her master's degree in art history, which required a studio credit that she fulfilled by taking a course in silkscreen printing.²⁸ She quickly fell in love with this artistic process and ordered a kit to begin practicing. After being introduced by a student, Corita took a lesson from Maria Sodi de Ramos Martínez, a screen printer and the wife of the late painter and muralist Alfredo Ramos Martínez.²⁹ About the lesson Corita said "So she came over and in an afternoon just told me all she knew. She showed me some things, and that was really all you needed to know. It's a very simple process"³⁰ For context, after Alfredo's passing, Maria and friends of Alfredo set up The Martinez Foundation in an effort to share his work and continue his legacy. One goal of the foundation was to reproduce his murals in print to sell and distribute. Initially, The Martinez Foundation raised money for an unnamed New York serigraph artist to reproduce Alfredo's work; however Maria began taking serigraph classes, and the foundation decided to have her do the job instead. Little did they know this would be more than a sentimental project for the recent widow; it would also be a launch of women printmakers in Los Angeles. There are very few sources about Maria and her work; nonetheless, we know she learned how to produce serigraph prints from the artist credited with originating silkscreen as a fine art medium, Guy Maccoy (1904-1981), a Work Progress

²⁸ Carrera, "Oral History," 35.

²⁹ Mary Goodwin, "Printmaking in Los Angeles and the Role of Maria Sodi de Ramos Martínez," YouTube, May 21, 2014, symposium video, 41:30 to 1:07:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKWCQkbu_VU.

³⁰ Kent, interview, 26.

Administration (WPA) artist. Guy taught Maria his technique of painting directly upon a stretched screen with a lithographic tusche and water-based glue to create a stencil. Maria used this knowledge to print seven separate silkscreen editions reproducing Alfredo's works in the garage of her Los Angeles home between 1947 and 1951. Incredibly, the most complex of Maria's prints utilized 62 different colors, meaning 62 unique screen stencils had to be hand-painted – and possibly cleaned to be reused – to complete one image. Maria signed the works in pencil with her name, not just Alfredo's, which she faithfully reproduced in ink as part of the print, connecting herself to the lineage of the seven editions she created.

Before Guy Maccoy, screen printing was the primary reproduction method within commodity culture. This technique has been used in visual communication for decades, enabling manufacturers to produce billboards, packaging designs, and other advertisements. Screen printing allowed for the mass production of images and text with consistent quality, making it an essential tool for advertising and marketing. This production ability resulted in screen printing playing a critical role in shaping how products were presented and marketed, establishing a visual language that defined consumer culture during that era.³¹

As elaborated above, both Southern California printmakers Guy Maccoy and Maria Sodi de Ramos Martínez contributed greatly to Corita's screen printing process. At the time Corita was learning serigraphy, she was primarily making very painterly brushstroke-oriented prints, similar to her teacher Maria's technique of replicating Alfredo's mark-making. While this is where Corita's print journey originated, she later adopted fine serigraphy as her primary medium and fully leaned into the roots of mass print, embedding her work with commodity and product imagery as the commercial workers before Guy Maccoy.

³¹ Susan Dackerman, ed., *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop* (Harvard Art Museums, 2015), 21.

Corita's technique

Screenprinting (or serigraphy) let Corita create work with a practicality, versatility, and ease in producing significant quantities, as she strongly advocated for making art accessible. These characteristics allowed her to create original artwork for people without the means to pay for expensive one-of-one pieces, as it took considerably less time than traditional painting.³² As Corita expressed:

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.³³

Being true to this statement, Corita priced her items reasonably and often made large quantities of unusually numbered editions. Deviating from the standard as printmakers typically number, title, and sign their work in pencil along the bottom of each image, Corita skips the numbers on the paper indicating the edition size or the specific number of that sheet within the edition but keeps the convention of titling and her name placement. Her numbering system did not track the quantity in a singular edition – standard being 1/200, 2/200, 3/200, etcetera. However, she instead used “a two-part numbering system that reflected the year the print was published and its position in an alphabetical list of titles published that year.”³⁴ Examples of which can be seen on the Corita Art Center's collection web page; as each piece is listed by year and in alphabetical order for that year; for example, the last three pieces for 1962 are: *walking over the sea*, 1962, archive ID: 62-36, *wishbone*, 1962, archive ID: 62-37, and *wonderbread*, 1962,

³² Cynthia Burlingham, “A Very Democratic Form” in *Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent*, eds. Ian Berry and Michel Duncan (The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2013), 24.

³³ Individual exhibits: DeCordova Museum, 1980; includes clippings, brochures, invitations, press packet. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 10.10., Box: 10. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

³⁴ Harry Metcalf, “An Investigation of Some Screen-Prints by Corita Kent,” *The Book and Paper Group Annual* 33 (2014): 55, <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v33/bpga33-08.pdf>.

archive ID: 62-38.³⁵ Doss says Corita’s affordability philosophy is also why she places her titles solely in lowercase letters.³⁶

To outline Corita’s serigraphy process, it is important to understand that in the beginning, she was a teacher first. The art of screenprinting is an easily teachable technique as there is no image reversal in the making, unlike other print processes. For example, in relief printing, the maker is essentially carving a stamp and must carve a fresh block for each layer or color change. Relief printing works from mirror images, while the screen allows the creator to make an image in the same orientation as the final product. Since there are no confusing reversals, there is less mess and waste from mistakes. Corita often used hand-cut paper stencils for her design, but occasionally painted stop-out, a beeswax-based resist, directly to the screen, allowing for removal of the image and reuse of the same screens.³⁷ Unlike relief, which requires a newly carved block for each layer or color switch, driving up the cost and labor time significantly. Corita’s choice of medium is perfect for a teacher as creativity and play can flourish without the constraints of costly equipment, the need for a large work area, and the ability to achieve a final product in a timelier manner.³⁸

Another unusual quality of Corita’s Immaculate Heart work is that it is almost exclusively printed on Pellon, a stiffening and interfacing product used in clothing and quilting instead of paper. Justifying the oddity, Corita said, “this seemed so very practical and was much cheaper than the rice paper and much stronger.”³⁹ Beyond the Pellon, Corita also did not make prints in a standardized size; thinking about framing instead, she let the image dictate the sizing, saying, “I suppose, the way you feel at the moment, how you feel about the design, what size

³⁵ “Collection,” Corita Art Center, accessed November 13, 2023, <https://collection.corita.org>.

³⁶ Erika Doss, *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion* (The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 217.

³⁷ Metcalf, “An Investigation of Some Screen-Prints by Corita Kent,” 54.

³⁸ Burlingham, “A Very Democratic Form,” 24.

³⁹ Metcalf, “An Investigation of Some Screen-Prints by Corita Kent,” 54.

it should be.”⁴⁰ Due to the variations, her gallery, Corita Prints, had custom Plexiglass frames made when requested.⁴¹ The clear case gave the work an extra mid-century modern flair.

Between 1964 and mid-way through 1967, Corita used this process of serigraphy to produce her work herself in the basement of the Immaculate Heart College or in a one-room workshop across the street.⁴² She printed most of the work done in these years during her three-week summer vacation between summer school and the beginning of fall school.⁴³ In the “Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent” interview by Bernard Galm, Corita details the Immaculate Heart College faculty and students that voluntarily helped her in these days:

Hobart Burnett, who...first thing in the morning, [would] take down the prints that had dried... Eleanor Carpenter... would stay after summer school for those two or three weeks and clean my screens and mix paint. So it was that group of people, really, who made the quantity possible, because I never would have done all that work all by myself.⁴⁴

But no matter what size or shape these people were, they just didn't have the elbow grease that I had or the strength in their arms to really--so they could never do the printing part. They did the cleaning up and the hanging and all that. There's a lot of muscle work to the whole process.⁴⁵

While typically very meticulous in her making, Corita's Immaculate Heart work is often characterized by slight registration slips, color separations, and inconsistencies thought to be due to the short production window, tight studio space, and volunteer assistance.⁴⁶ An example of this can be seen in the two prints from the same edition of *where there's life there's mud (we don't turn out perfect)*, 1966, in which the right most orange stripe is obviously misaligned. (Fig. 1) Some printmakers would deem this unacceptable as they are not identical, revealing the hand and removing the illusion of mechanical reproduction, but not Corita. She celebrated

⁴⁰ Kent, interview, 122.

⁴¹ Kent, interview, 121.

⁴² In 1967, Corita began to utilize the help of Harry Hambly in his commercial screen-print workshop.

⁴³ Metcalf, “An Investigation of Some Screen-Prints by Corita Kent,” 54.

⁴⁴ Kent, interview, 41.

⁴⁵ Kent, interview, 43.

⁴⁶ Metcalf, “An Investigation of Some Screen-Prints by Corita Kent,” 54.

the imperfections, saying that focusing too much on technique “can give them a kind of deadening satisfaction that prevents their ever looking or growing any further.”⁴⁷ In April 2025, these two prints were auctioned together under one lot number from the estate of Iva Carrico; they are signed “Sister Mary Corita” in the bottom right corner, signifying their finality, instead of an unsigned draft print.⁴⁸

Figure 1.

Sister Mary Corita, where there's life there's mud (we don't turn out perfect), 1966, Serigraph on cotton paper, (top) 15"h x 28.75"w, (bottom), 15"h x 29.75"w.
<https://bid.billingsauction.com/online-auctions/billings/sister-mary-corita-kent-untitled-we-dont-turn-out-perfect-2-7177344>



⁴⁷ Cynthia Burlingham, “A Very Democratic Form,” 28.

⁴⁸ “Sister Mary Corita Kent: The Collection of Iva Carrico,” Billings, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.billingsauction.com/sister-mary-corita-kent>.

In addition to studio help, Iva Mae Carrico handled her correspondence along with gallery and museum bookings. While working and studying in the Immaculate Heart College art department, Carrico amassed many of Corita's originals as "Corita had no budget to pay her helpers: they were paid in prints!"⁴⁹ This brings into question the value of labor versus the value of Corita's prints. Since her helpers are willing to work for prints instead of cash, this could be seen as a commodification of her early work, possibly as the prints being even more valuable than cash. However, the devil's advocate might say this removes the commodity entirely, as money is completely rejected in this scenario.

Returning to the prints, Corita's process evolved throughout the years. Her early work served more as religious illustrations, as seen in *tobias*, 1956. (Fig. 2) The image is an amalgamation of many painterly layers, much like Maria Sodi de Ramos Martínez's prints. Corita's image plays tricks on the eyes, making it hard to decipher the figures and background; however, very clearly, a last light-colored layer with lettering left in the negative space Corita writes out her summary of the Book of Tobis 6 – "then it was that tobias took out the fish's gall and rubbed it on his father's eyes + how they praised god, he and his wife and all who knew them!" The abstraction of the figures versus the visual clarity of the biblical text reveals what was important to Corita, which is again the message. About Corita's religious work as a whole, Bill Bagnall, museum director says, "In those days, her prints were by and large influenced by rule, but they had a freshness and a color sense where there were saints, the crucifixion, whatever she felt was a suitable vehicle."⁵⁰ This "rule" Bagnall references might be Corita's commitment to sharing humanitarian love, faith, and hope.

⁴⁹ "Sister Mary Corita Kent: The Collection of Iva Carrico."

⁵⁰ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 3.

Figure 2.

Sister Mary Corita, tobias, 1956, Serigraph, 7.25"h x 13.5"w.

<https://collection.corita.org/piece/56-09>



In Corita's early career, one of the main obstacles stemmed from her relationship with Cardinal James Francis MacIntyre, the conservative archbishop of Los Angeles, as he did not approve of the way she depicted the holy family in her artwork.⁵¹ In 1959, MacIntyre went so far as to ask Mother Regina, head of Corita's order, to inform her and the rest of the art department to:

refrain from representations of our Saviour, Our Lady and the saints that are not obviously reverential. Figures that are burdened with a large element of uncertainty, as well as of the grotesque, are disturbing to pious souls, not excluding Religious.⁵²

This critique ultimately led to her shift into almost solely text-based images, a significant turning point in her artistic journey. Liberating the characters from their faces and signifiers gave a more direct and significant messaging to her work by telling the viewer what was meant instead of letting them visually infer who and what these people might stand for.

⁵¹ Carrera, "Oral History," 42.

⁵² Carrera, "Oral History," 42.

Gallery showing

In her book, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, Susan Dackerman examines how Corita was marginalized within the Pop Art movement despite her perfectly fitting in by drawing inspiration from popular and commercial culture by aesthetic, process, and political messaging. To further define the Pop movement Jessica Morgan states in *The World Goes Pop* that global Pop encompasses:

graphic techniques that mimicked popular, commercial and media art, with flattened, simplified and cut away imagery, bright artificial colours, and the combination of text with image. Achieved through projecting an image onto a flat surface and tracing it, or through various types of printing processes although serigraphy was not always available the resulting abridged figuration also drew from street signs a universal and yet localised language. Mass media, desire, culture: the most iconic terms associated with pop art must be reconsidered in its global contexts, where 'the masses' and 'culture' had no single hegemonic definition.⁵³

This fully encompasses Corita's work at the time. Her bold imagery, bright colors, and mass-produced techniques were entirely Pop. Despite Corita's critical acclaim and early involvement – as Pop emerged in the late 1950s – Dackerman says this exclusion was partly due to the male-dominated nature of the movement, which largely dismissed women artists and often objectified them. Corita's identity as a Catholic nun also distanced her from the mainstream Pop Art scene, exemplified by the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, where male artists such as Ed Ruscha, Craig Kauffman, and John Altoon were celebrated as the "Ferus Studs."⁵⁴ Dackerman notes that, as a result, Corita's work was overlooked by curators and critics despite her innovative contributions to the genre. Nonetheless, she highlights that Corita was a nationally recognized artist, with her prints exhibited across the country, including at New York's Morris Gallery and Los Angeles' Comara Gallery. One of her prints even became part of the collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art collection around this time.⁵⁵

⁵³ Jessica Morgan and Flavia Frigeri, eds., *The World Goes Pop* (Yale University Press, 2015), 16.

⁵⁴ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 16.

⁵⁵ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 19.

In July 1962, Andy Warhol showcased his iconic Campbell's Soup Can paintings at Ferus. The show consisted of thirty-two individual canvases featuring all thirty-two different flavors of Campbell's Soup. This was Warhol's first solo exhibition of paintings and is also considered the first Pop art exhibition on the West Coast.⁵⁶ Warhol could not be at the gallery during installation, so Ferus director Irving Blum hung the show but struggled to level the paintings before placing a ledge beneath to assist with the process.⁵⁷ Later, when asked about this installation, Blum said, "Cans sit on shelves. Why not?"⁵⁸ While it was not Warhol himself who made this decision, simple interventions like this enriched the work, forcing it to read even more into the commodity aspects and influences that define Pop. This diversion from Corita is important as it heavily influenced her work. The following month, in August, she produced *wonderbread*, (Fig. 3) which marked her first dip into Pop Art.⁵⁹ Due to this timeline, most scholars attribute Corita's stylistic shift to Warhol; however, in *Spiritual Moderns - Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion*, Doss's work tells the story of their mutual influence on each other. The two attended one another's gallery openings, shared several commercial clientele, and both were commissioned for the 1964 New York World's Fair, but above all else they were both devout Catholics.⁶⁰ Doss's Chapter *Andy Warhol and Catholicism* brings to light largely disregarded religious themes in his work due to his complicated and misunderstood relationship to his religion because of his sexuality and public appearance.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Hillary Reder, "Serial & Singular: Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans," *Inside/Out* (blog), April 29, 2015, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/tag/ferus-gallery/.

⁵⁷ Reder, "Serial & Singular: Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans."

⁵⁸ Reder, "Serial & Singular: Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans."

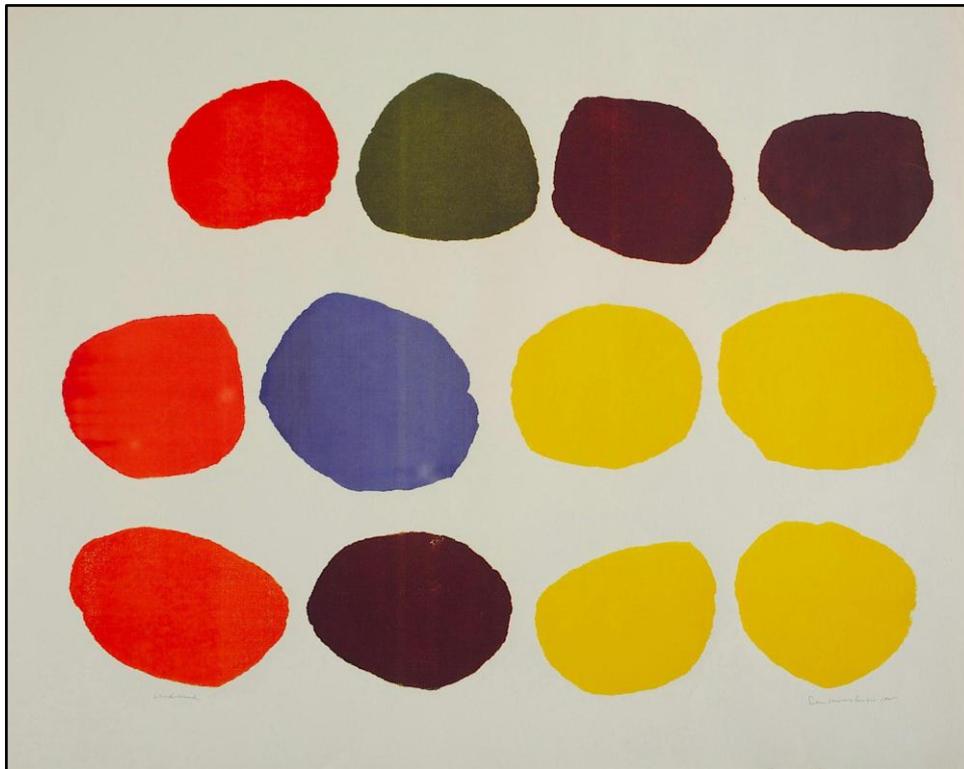
⁵⁹ Carrera, "Oral History," 43.

⁶⁰ Doss, *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion*, 218.

⁶¹ Doss, *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion* 191-195.

Figure 3.

Sister Mary Corita, wonderbread, 1962, Serigraph, 30 ½" h x 25 ½" w.
<https://collection.corita.org/piece/62-38>



Reflecting back to Corita's *wonderbread*, 1962 the bold, irregularly shaped, primary-colored dots reference the brand's packaging without fully reproducing the logos. Corita employed the original red, yellow, and blue but added one green and three brown spots, arranging them in fairly tidy rows and columns. This composition contrasts with the Wonder Bread bag designs (Fig. 4), which vary in size, typically are consistently round, and often feature an overall print rather than the specific vignette focus that Corita adopted. Unlike Warhol, who faithfully copied and pasted the cans in their entirety, Corita pulled specific aspects of the commodities she deemed relevant to her message and how she wanted the work to be read.

Figure 4.

Wonder Bread Co., product packaging. <https://www.wonderbread.com/about>



Corita uses these twelve dots and Wonder Bread branding as symbols of the Eucharist, a Catholic sacrament observed to commemorate Jesus' sacrifice, during which bread and wine are consecrated and consumed as his body and blood.⁶² In reference to the Eucharist, she even said, “by taking bread out of its ordinary form, and presenting it as his body, He originated pop art.”⁶³ Focusing more on color, Corita might have used the primary colors to signify the Holy Trinity, a belief that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one entity or God. April Dammann hypothesizes in her book, *Corita Kent: Art and Soul: the Biography*, that the brown and green spots in *wonderbread*, 1962 could be referring to the verses, Matthew 14:17-19, in which Jesus feeds a crowd of 4,000 with just five loaves and two fish.⁶⁴ The number twelve may also hold significance, relating to Jesus' apostles who participated in the last supper, which is the reason for the reminder that is the Eucharist. Using numerology and color meaning often assists in decoding Corita's layered work. In the early 1960s, the mass production and commercialization of food products like Wonder Bread symbolized American post-war prosperity and industrialization. Kent's appropriation of this familiar icon critiques consumerism while simultaneously embedding it with spiritual and moral messages.

⁶² Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 18.

⁶³ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 27.

⁶⁴ April Dammann, *Corita Kent: Art and Soul: the Biography* (Angel City Press, 2015), 82.

By the mid-1960s, Ferus Gallery had become increasingly out of step with the times as feminist and civil rights movements began to emerge. The boys' club atmosphere at Ferus, marked by a sense of elitism, was waning, leading to the gallery's closure in 1966.⁶⁵ This shift in the cultural landscape emphasizes that Corita's work was not only ahead of its time but also politically challenged the exclusivity and gender bias that defined the Pop Art movement during its peak.

Corita and Warhol

Many of Corita's prints from the sixties and onward are heavily focused on the commodity using text from ads, packaging, and labels to convey her message of religious and humanitarian love. These pieces are visually taking on a language similar to Warhol's depictions of Brillo pads and Campbell's products. Unlike Warhol, Corita did not just replicate the advertising critique of consumerism as most scholars say of Warhol's branded Pop; instead, Corita sliced, diced, and repurposed them adding her own meaning to the brands' bright logos. Dackerman asserts that Corita's artistic focus on themes of consumerism stems from her deep alignment with the objectives of Vatican II, a pivotal initiative aimed at modernizing Catholic liturgy and practices to better resonate with contemporary society. It is also worth noting, that out of obedience to conservative Cardinal McIntyre's earlier limitation of Corita's direct depictions of holy figures, she morphed her work to align with his directives, but still makes her progressive religious views apparent in her work. McIntyre's order propelled her straight into her symbolic commodity embedded interpretations of biblical text and figures, which ultimately contradicted his goals for Immaculate Heart. This alignment positioned her alongside a select group of artists who critically examined the persuasive influence of commodity culture in the mid-20th century. By participating in the efforts to reform both

⁶⁵ Abigail Cain, "How the Legendary Ferus Gallery Put L.A. on the Art World's Map. Artsy Editorial, March 7, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-legendary-gallery-la-art-worlds-map>.

religion and art during the 1960s, Corita challenged traditional boundaries and stood out as a unique figure within these movements. Her dual engagement with the evolving landscape of faith and the critique of materialism creates a paradox; she is considered an outlier, yet her work is intrinsically linked to the larger currents of change in both the artistic and religious spheres. This complexity underscores the intricate relationship between her art and the cultural transformations of her time.⁶⁶ Duncan says:

Toying with Pop's roots in advertising, Corita employs the movement's style of bold graphics and billboard-like immediacy not to critique consumerism but to promote the importance of reflection and contemplation. Her Pop addresses something very different from soup cans.⁶⁷

In *as a witness to the light (for john 23 and j.f.k.)*, 1964. (Fig. 5) Corita juxtaposes a split version of the Sunkist logo above four plain lemons with the phrases "two men called john" and "were sent by God" each in a lime silhouette framing her own handwriting. The simple two-color print becomes three, with the first layer being purplish blue, and the second layer a bright yellow, overlaid to produce the lime green.

⁶⁶ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 15.

⁶⁷ Duncan, "Someday is Now," 16.

Figure 5.

Sister Mary Corita, as a witness to the light for john 23 and j.f.k., 1964, Serigraph on Pellon, 39 3/4" h x 36" w. <https://hammer.ucla.edu/collections/grunwald-center-collection/corita-kent/art/as-a-witness-to-the-light-for-john-23-and-jfk>



Corita explains her message contained in the print as:

Sunkist is the word for all things and all men ever since the Son (or the sun which is his picture) became a man and did kiss us in a most human fashion. John XXIII and John Kennedy were also good pictures of the light spreader sun kissing one. They carried on good conversations about the Son and did his work (which was also their work) well. So they are like Christ, described by still another John as a witness to the light.⁶⁸

Corita references Pope John XXIII and President John F. Kennedy, who were both Catholic public leaders – one of the church and one of America, Corita called them “the great heroes of the time.”⁶⁹ As both Johns died in 1963, so this is a type of memorial and another example of her using scripture and interlacing it in a politically charged message. Her use of the Sunkist

⁶⁸ Ian Berry and Michael Duncan, eds., *Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent*. (The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2013), 252.

⁶⁹ Kent, interview, 79.

logo links the Son, or Jesus, to leaders whose work she greatly admired. Delving into the quote's final line, one fully comprehends Corita's title and message. She references a third John in *as a witness to the light (for john 23 and j.f.k.)*, 1964. John the Apostle details how John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus (the Light) to share his teachings: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to give testimony of the light, that all men might believe through him. He was not that light, but was to give testimony of the light."⁷⁰ (John 1:6-8 [Douay-Rheims Bible]). Corita's layering of politics and religion was fairly unique in the Pop movement, emphasizing Duncan's quote that they do address something very different than Warhol's soup cans; however, Warhol's works also often contained religious undertones. For example, Warhol's, *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962 is often compared to Christian art examples where two canvases with separate compositions are used in a complimentary story, often hinged together with depictions of the Virgin Mary on one side and the crucified Jesus on the other. Warhol's variation does not depict two different figures. Instead, the left side of the diptych features twenty-five lively colored repetitions of Marilyn, while the right has a ghostlier rendition of the same image in an equal twenty-five grid. Warhol's Marilyn Monroe works started a month after she died tragically from an overdose of sleeping pills on August 5, 1962, much like Corita's memorial to the late Pope and president in *as a witness to the light for john 23 and j.f.k.*, 1964.

Continuing this comparison with regard to Thierry De Duve's "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected," the idea of an artist becoming a commodity emerges. While Corita is not mentioned in this article, there is space for her as Warhol and she are so often compared. Due to their similar aesthetics, religious affiliations, and simply the fact that they were fans of each

⁷⁰ I have not been able to identify the translation of the Bible Corita is using. However, I have landed on the Douay-Rheims Bible, as it was considered the official translation of the Roman Catholic Church for English speakers from the 1950s until the early 1970s.

other's work, this lends room to respond to De Duve in a way that situates Corita as a "machine perfected" with almost opposite desires than Warhol's. To quote De Duve:

His (Warhol's) philosophy (*From A to B and Back Again*) turns on the sentence "I started out as a commercial artist and I want to end up a business artist." Which is what he did, yet not without having slipped in a dazzling and prolific career as artist between his career in the 1950s as an advertising illustrator and his career in the 1970s as a go-between in the culture industry.⁷¹

In comparison, Corita's artistic journey originated as a religious illustrator before evolving into a social commentator. Without Cardinal McIntyre's imposed sanction, Corita may have peacefully continued her reinterpretations of historical biblical events versus her sharp shift into a graphic world. While Warhol commodifies images, Corita commodifies a message. His reproductions had messages but not in the same layer and detail of Corita's, she typically involved multiple found phrases, overlaying and intertwining them to create one, consistently reverting back to that of humanitarian love, faith, and hope. Early in her career, Corita connects this message to color. When referencing *fiat*, 1953, (Fig. 6) she is quoted as saying, "I have tried to show the unison of love, faith and hope by a distribution of their three colors red, blue, and green..."⁷² In this case, Corita uses these three colors to address the message present in almost all of her work, which is set up here but does not focus on the commodity until the 1960s, unlike Warhol's canned glorification of consumerism, as interpreted by De Duve in the quotation above.

⁷¹ Thierry De Duve, "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected," *October* 48 (1989): 19-20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778945>.

⁷² Doss, *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion*, 217.

Figure 6.

Sister Mary Corita, fiat, 1953, Serigraph, 18 ½" h x 24 ½" w.
<https://collection.corita.org/piece/53-04>



In addition, one could examine Corita and Warhol's factory adjacent production styles. While they had different intentions and reasons for this production method the process was highly related. Dackerman cites that:

Until Kent left Immaculate Heart College, the majority of her prints were created in the college's screenprint workshop, where the help of other nuns, students, and volunteers enabled factory-like mass production. The collaborative atmosphere of Kent's classroom mirrors cooperative art-making environments emerging in the wake of the isolationism of abstract expressionism, such as the formation of Warhol's Factory in 1964. Kent's prints from these years conspicuously reveal their methods of making — they show registration slipups, color inaccuracies, and dripped and smeared ink. Yet the traces of the handcrafted accompany sophisticated compositional arrangements.⁷³

While the pair widely differ from each other, their production styles and the embrace of “imperfections” are notably similar. At the time, Corita's print was not about the mechanical factory production, but instead the ability to work with others on a common message, teaching

⁷³ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 21.

the process, showing the human hand, and above all else, sharing the unison of love, faith, and hope. Corita's duplication was a vehicle for her message while Warhol's duplication was rooted in the ritualized repetition in his Byzantine Catholicism practice.⁷⁴ As Doss says "repetition is a practice of memory (or recall) and persuasion. Its rhythmic use in Byzantine Catholic rituals holds and strengthens spiritual contemplation."⁷⁵ The example she uses is Warhol's *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*, 1962, by saying he started repeating the same image because he liked the way the repetition changed the same image.⁷⁶ The seven-high by sixteen-across grid of green and black bottles above the red Coca-Cola logo shows the mistakes and variations Warhol speaks about; his repetition is not monotonous, but instead affirms both his religious and sexual differences while layering in a critique of consumerism.⁷⁷ Revisiting De Duve's reference of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*, Warhol wrote,

You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.

This brings our pair full circle in their shared theme of using the commodity and its relationship to consumerism to show humanitarian and even religious love, breaking down social hierarchies.

⁷⁴ Doss, *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion*, 206-207.

⁷⁵ Doss, *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion*, 206-207.

⁷⁶ Doss, *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion*, 206-207.

⁷⁷ Doss, *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion*, 206-207.

The *Sister Corita* box set and Her Happenings

In 1968, Corita left Immaculate Heart and moved to Boston; this is also the year the *Sister Corita* box set and book by Corita, Harvey Cox, and Samuel A. Eisenstein came out. Based on this timeline and the book's title, this collection was already close to production before Corita's dispensation. It leads to the question as to why she might create something so commercial while still being a part of the Catholic church and under a poverty vow. As a nun, Corita was expected to renounce personal ownership of material possessions and live simply, ideally sharing everything with the community while focusing on service and spiritual growth. In the fourth chapter, the discussion will detail Corita's departure from Immaculate Heart and Catholicism and her heightened romance with commercial work. The catalogue of prints and writings included in the *Sister Corita* box set was created during Corita's tenure at Immaculate Heart College well before the conception of the box set; this conversation will focus on the box set as a singular project.

Subjectively, this is the first real fully commodified work Corita makes, as it was mass-marketed like a product – a book and box set including prints that are meant to be framed and displayed or shared. The unique presentation adds a collectability and marketing aspect for people outside of the traditional art market and aligns with the progressive Vatican II goals of modernization and inclusion. In the Papers of Corita in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, I found the pamphlet mailed out to order the book and box set; it self-describes as:

It comes in a groovy box called CORITA, and when you open it, you'll discover 32 reproductions of her world famous serigraphs, faithfully reproduced in full color. Each 10" x 14" reproduction is separate, and suitable for framing. Look at them — frame them — put them all together on your wall for a riot of colorful celebration. Or separate them and share them with friends.

Then take out Sister Corita, a big (10" x 14") book carrying over 200 photographs which include many shots of Sister Corita at work. You'll also find a comprehensive catalog of Sister Corita's art from 1952 to 1967, with interesting data on exhibits, special commissions, permanent collections, and galleries where her work is available. Of special interest is an essay from Sister Corita's own pen, and articles by Harvey Cox and Samuel A. Eisenstein. Look it over — read it — lend it at your own risk.

Next, take out a gaily colored 20" x 28" poster created by Sister Corita especially for this surprise package. Display where it will do the most good.

Now take out a five-foot long vibrant full-color reproduction of the "Beatitude Wall," created originally as a mural for the Vatican Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. Look at it and rejoice in the wonder of it all.

Once the box is empty, you'll discover that it's really not! Sister Corita, true to her thing, has playfully created a do-it-yourself happening from an empty box. It becomes a fun kind of mod reliquary that you must experience to appreciate.

\$17.50 now 'till Christmas 1968; \$20.00 thereafter⁷⁸ (Fig. 7)

The marketing read above is casual and fun while giving strict instructions on how to interact with the box set. The pamphlet's phrasing combines verbiage uniquely combining religion and activism: "Display where it will do the most good." and "Look at it and rejoice in the wonder of it all." Both statements encourage the viewer to engage with Corita's work in a way that shows how Vatican II influenced Corita and her colleagues at Immaculate Heart. These phrases modernize Catholicism and make it more approachable to people interested in Corita's work while not being too aggressive.

⁷⁸ Exhibit and gallery ephemera, 1961-1987, n.d.; includes fliers, programs, postcards, Botolph Group (Boston), Corita Prints (Hollywood). Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 10.4-10.7., Box: 10. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

Figure 7.

Sister Corita instructional pamphlet, 1968, Paper and ink, Size unverified. Source: Exhibit and gallery ephemera, 1961-1987, n.d.; includes fliers, programs, postcards, Botolph Group (Boston), Corita Prints (Hollywood). Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 10.4-10.7., Box: 10. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.



The Mod Reliquary

Reading further into the pamphlet's text the term "mod reliquary" jumps out. Historically, Catholic reliquaries are containers designed to hold and display relics, typically physical remains or objects associated with saints or important religious figures. Reliquaries were often made with great care, and fine materials were used to match the spiritual value of the relics they contained. They serve as a tangible connection to the divine and foster devotion. For example, at the Basilica of St. Anthony in Padua in the Chapel of the Relics, they self-describe their collection as:

In the left niche there is a modern reliquary containing a relic of Saint Pope John Paul II. The precious central reliquary by R. Cremesini (1982) contains a bone from the foot, a fragment of skin, and some hair from the body of St. Anthony. In the central niche, in a splendid reliquary by the goldsmith Giuliano da Firenze (1436), the Incorrupt Tongue of St. Anthony is kept.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ "The Chapel of the Relics," Saint Anthony of Padua, accessed January 20, 2025, [https://www.santantonio.org/en/content/chapel-relics-treasury-chapel#:~:text=Fabbro%20\(1437\)%2C%20in%20which,The%20chapel%20also%20houses%20St.](https://www.santantonio.org/en/content/chapel-relics-treasury-chapel#:~:text=Fabbro%20(1437)%2C%20in%20which,The%20chapel%20also%20houses%20St.)

These reliquaries residing in the Chapel of the Relics are important in relation to Corita's as they show a progression of reliquaries throughout the years. To analyze in chronological order, the piece encased first is the Incorrupt Tongue of St. Anthony cited as 1436 to establish a base, next in order, *Sister Corita* box set 1968 would be a "mod reliquary," then the "modern reliquary" of Saint Pope John Paul II was created in 1981, followed shortly by the central reliquary of St. Anthony in 1982. Looking at these, we can situate and distinguish Corita's "reliquary" visually and also through the terms "mod" versus "modern" used. Corita's verbiage of mod relates to the popular styling and essence of the 1960s, while the Saint Pope John Paul II "modern" terminology designates the period. The Pope's reliquary is fashioned in a similar Baroque style to the "base model" of the two St. Anthony reliquaries. Despite all the artifacts in this room of the Basilica of St. Anthony being fashioned in the same style, there is no stylistic requirement to reliquary making. Thus, Corita's box set could hypothetically stand in this collection. As developed in this logic, if a reliquary is a box holding a relic, the *Sister Corita* book and accompanying prints are religious relics associated with an important religious figure. Theoretically, it is implied that Corita is an important religious figure, and these items serve as a tangible connection to the divine and foster devotion. While Corita's relics are not physical pieces of body or clothing like most Catholic relics, they contain her metaphorical heart and devotion to fostering community.

Sister Corita's Text and The Happenings

Included in the *Sister Corita* box set is the *Sister Corita* book, containing three essays. The first is Corita's charming essay, *Art and Beauty in the Life of the Sister*; in her writing, she hops from reference to reference, from quoting Linus from Peanuts to analyzing Albert Camus' *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*. She reflects on how art is not just an aesthetic pursuit but a spiritual practice that can deepen faith and connection to the world. One way she does this is

by reinterpreting commercials into psalms. Typically used in prayer or during Catholic services, psalms by definition fall somewhere between a story, poem, or song if not belonging to all these categories; their purposes can be to praise, repent, guide, reflect, and so on. Her example was from a Hunt's catsup ad, but she argues that any ad would work by saying:

Nobody should believe ads and billboards. They are contemporary fairy tales and are the carriers, as fairy tales have always been, of man's hopes and beliefs... like contemporary translations of the psalms for us to be singing on our merry way. The game is endless, which makes it a good symbol of eternity which will be a great endless game.⁸⁰

This quotation gives insight into how and why she is commodifying her work and message. Corita uses ads to create her own message, at times fully reinterpreting the ad but frequently using the logos and words as symbols, turning them into her message and something completely new but maintaining a familiar aura, welcoming her audience into the practice with her contemporary psalms. Those outside Catholicism may not be as familiar, but St. Augustine taught that "if the psalm prays, pray. If it laments, lament. If it rejoices, rejoice. If it hopes, hope. If it fears, fear. For everything which is written here is a reflection of us."⁸¹ Corita appropriates ads and their directness to help guide her viewer in the ways of St. Augustine and psalms. Reflecting helps guide. The presence of play or game-making is deliberate here and can be seen throughout her practice.

The second portion of the *Sister Corita* book is an essay titled *Corita: Celebration and Creativity* by Harvey Cox, credited as an associate professor of church and society at the Harvard Divinity School. Cox restates Corita's belief in creativity as a form of worship and activism.⁸² His praises described her as a revolutionary figure who used art to inspire faith, joy, and social change, ultimately circling back to her message of humanitarian love, faith, and

⁸⁰ Sister Mary Corita Kent, Harvey Cox, and Samuel A. Eisenstein, *Sister Corita* (Pilgrim Press, 1968), 12.

⁸¹ Mark Giszczak, "Psalms," Catholic News Agency, accessed January 22, 2025, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource/56241/psalms>.

⁸² Kent, Cox, and Eisenstein, *Sister Corita*, 17-21.

hope. Lastly, a third essay, *Communications Primer* by Samuel A. Eisenstein, who is listed as an associate professor of English and Creative Writing at Los Angeles City College. In his essay, Eisenstein recounts a weekend retreat titled “Art and Communications Workshop,” where seventy participants led by three nuns (Sisters Corita, Fleurette, and Lenore) participated in a happening.⁸³

Corita's happenings were immersive events that often combined art, music, poetry, film, and social engagement, reflecting the experimental spirit of the mid to late 60s. Unlike the happenings of John Cage and Allan Kaprow, who coined the term, Kaprow – drawing inspiration from Cage – chose the word "happening" to suggest "something spontaneous, something that just happens to happen" despite the fact that these participatory performances were typically well-planned and orchestrated.⁸⁴ Corita, a friend and fan of Cage, embraced the concept of happenings and rooted her interpretations in Catholicism, spirituality, and celebration. She utilized this avant-garde artistic practice to break down the barriers between the artist and the audience, as well as the barriers people think exist between each other, fostering a sense of community. Corita's happenings often included her Catholic community or a broader audience in what she sometimes called “instant celebrations.”⁸⁵

During the “Art and Communications Workshop” happening, Corita led a collage-making class in which people filled notebooks with their own work about God; they found images that resonated with them and shared ones that their neighbors would enjoy to foster community and conversations further.⁸⁶ *Newsweek* said about her happenings, “In fact, Corita’s best medium is people,”⁸⁷ highlighting her leadership and influence. At the workshop,

⁸³ Kent, Cox, and Eisenstein, *Sister Corita*, 21.

⁸⁴ Kristie Beaven, “Performance Art: The Happening,” Tate, accessed February 1, 2025, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/h/happening/happening>.

⁸⁵ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 6.

⁸⁶ Kent, Cox, and Eisenstein, *Sister Corita*, 23.

⁸⁷ Kenneth L. Woodward, “The Nun: A Joyous Revolution,” *Newsweek*, December 25, 1967, 46, https://kaufmannrepetto.com/site/web/app/uploads/2020/01/19671225_Newsweek.pdf.

the participants used *Life*, *Fortune*, *Vogue*, and *Look* magazines to make this process as current and relatable as possible. They followed Corita's philosophy that artists used their "everyday" to create, sticking to common material for inspiration.⁸⁸ The combination of the three essays in *Sister Corita* shows that she was striving to share her joyful and loving message with the world, through all her work, be it teaching, printmaking, or her happenings. Consistency is a virtue.

Returning to the marketing pamphlet, there is a call to action to engage in a happening, inviting the owner to practice art making. The instructions are minimal, saying, "Once the box is empty, you'll discover that it's really not! Sister Corita, true to her thing, has playfully created a do-it-yourself happening from an empty box."⁸⁹ This leaves room for interpretation but does not describe the so-called empty box or really how to interact with it, so I will describe my experience:

Upon opening the *Sister Corita* box set, the happening participant is greeted by a black and white halftone photo of Corita smiling as she speaks on a landline telephone in front of a fraction of a print on the interior of the connected lid. She is facing the contents, excited for the participant to remove the book and print reproductions, uncovering the base of the box to reveal a red-inked statement in her handwriting saying, "to understand is to stand under which is to look up to which is a good way to understand." This text is written in one tall column, with only one syllable per row, and grounded by an asymmetrical heart. This symbol is probably a stand-in for Corita's signature; as her name while in the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary was Sister Mary Corita, meaning "little heart" in Latin.⁹⁰ A name change is customary as nuns take on a new name upon entering a religious order to signify a shift in identity and a new life dedicated to God.⁹¹ Despite the previously mentioned little to no instructions for the

⁸⁸ Kent, Cox, and Eisenstein, *Sister Corita*, 23.

⁸⁹ Commercial catalogs and advertisements for prints, 1975-1980, n.d.. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 10.9., Box: 10. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

⁹⁰ Barbara Loste, "Corita: A Biography" in *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit*, by Corita Kent and Jan Steward (Allworth Press, 2008), Frontmatter.

⁹¹ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 2.

empty box happening, the way the text is displayed encourages the reader to follow by syllable instead of word on the first read. Subsequent readings allow the participant to view the short poem in different ways, as it feels important to interact and spend time with her words. Much of Corita's writing requires re-reading to understand her multifaceted offerings. (Fig. 8)

Figure 8.

Corita, empty Sister Corita box, 1968, Cardboard (paper and ink), 1½ "h x 10 ½ "w x 14 ½ "l. Personal collection.



In addition, the pamphlet's verbiage also self-describes as “a riot of colorful celebration,”⁹² possibly alluding to one of Corita's most famous happenings, the 1964 Mary's Day processions at Immaculate Heart College. This happening was based on the traditional Catholic holiday typically celebrated through masses and to honor the Virgin Mary, who was the namesake of Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Before Corita and the art department were asked to recreate the holiday to properly celebrate “the real woman of Nazareth,” the

⁹² Commercial catalogs and advertisements for prints, 1975-1980, n.d.. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 10.9., Box: 10. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

college treated Mary's Day as a somber convocation ceremony complete with caps, gowns, and a lecture.⁹³ Vividly depicted by Richard Meyer's description of a photo from Mary's Day 1951 in his essay *Corita Kent's Supermarket Politics*:

The picture shows a group of female students with excellent posture wearing matching long white dresses, smiling demurely for the camera. The woman in the central foreground, sporting an open cape over her dress, looks especially regal. Leading the other students to the statue of Mary, this woman was the so-called Sodality President and the surrounding figures her "court." The overall visual effect of the photograph of the Sodality Club on Mary's Day lies somewhere between beauty pageant and bridal party.⁹⁴

Despite this photograph being taken thirteen years before Corita's Mary's Day takeover, it gives room to compare the stark differences between the celebrations due to changing political and societal evolutions. To start, Sheila Briggs, professor of religion and gender studies at the University of Southern California, points out that at the time many independently-minded women who were not interested in marriage and staying home to take care of children joined religious orders, as it was a way to get a formal education.⁹⁵ As enticing as this may have been at the time, there were sacrifices as all nuns had to take extensive vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, heavily outlined in the *Catechism of The Vows* by Father Peter Cotel, S.J.⁹⁶ After the women had sufficiently memorized these words, there was a mass resembling an initiation ceremony symbolizing the ladies "marrying Christ," in which the soon-to-be nuns donned white wedding gowns and veils and walked down the aisle in groups before reciting a prayer at the head of an altar. While the women pray, the priest goes to bless the habits, after which the new nuns change into their new uniform and are given their new names.⁹⁷ This process varies from convent to convent; however, this initiation ritual remains mostly the same today, despite Vatican II's modernization.

⁹³ Anita M. Caspary, *Witness to Integrity* (The Liturgical Press, 2003), 38.

⁹⁴ Richard Meyer, "Shop Rite: Corita Kent's Supermarket Politics," in *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, Susan Dackerman (Harvard Art Museums, 2015), 132.

⁹⁵ *Rebel Hearts*, 6:26.

⁹⁶ Cotel, *Catechism of The Vows*.

⁹⁷ *Rebel Hearts*, 9:89.

Culturally, the 1960s marked the rise of second-wave feminism alongside the transformative changes brought about by Vatican II; this combination influenced one another in significant ways. A notable example of this exchange can be seen in a *Newsweek* report on the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, who were subject to new, experimental rules that granted them greater freedom and autonomy.⁹⁸ These changes allowed the nuns to reclaim their family names, receive modest stipends, and choose their own clothing – many, like Sister Corita, opting for simple dresses instead of the traditional habit.⁹⁹ Prior to Vatican II, the role of nuns was solely focused on service, requiring the women to remain almost anonymous and function as a unit, symbolized by their habit and the refutation of their birth names.¹⁰⁰ With the move away from these expectations, the nuns' focus also began shifting from solely church-related services to addressing the wider community's social, economic, intellectual, and spiritual needs.¹⁰¹ As these changes were implemented, there was no longer room for the previously patriarchal “beauty pageant and bridal party” style celebration of Mary's Day, which focused on the purity of the women in the community. Instead, Corita responded:

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.¹⁰²

In pursuit of the aforementioned changing ideals, Corita and her crew took on the commission, infusing joy into the celebration and challenging what Mary's Day could be! They used traditional religious imagery but reimagined it with bold colors, modern symbols, and joyful

⁹⁸ The *Newsweek* article primarily refers to the women as the IHM nuns, but for the sake of all the Immaculate Heart branches this paper includes, I am using the convent's official title, “Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.”

⁹⁹ Woodward, “The Nun: A Joyous Revolution,” 47.

¹⁰⁰ Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita*, 14.

¹⁰¹ Woodward, “The Nun: A Joyous Revolution,” 47.

¹⁰² Kent and Steward, *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit*, 178-181.

energy much like her print practice and Pop as a whole. Once a solemn Catholic observance, this event became a dynamic, happy festival featuring banners, music, and contemporary artistic influences.¹⁰³ *Newsweek* goes so far as to say:

With black-robed nuns parading in flowered necklaces, poets declaiming from platforms and painted students dancing in the grass, Mary's Day (1964) became a prototype for the hippies' 1967 be-in in San Francisco.

The connection is neither frivolous nor profane. Corita sees in happenings a genuine effort to integrate the arts in a multimedia celebration of God's creation.¹⁰⁴

While the holiday had already been given a joyful upgrade, the 1964 celebration went further than just play by integrating service and activism with Corita, Immaculate Heart College students, and Pop's fascination with food, naming the event "Food for Peace" after President Johnson's War on Poverty speech ascribing further political messages to the religious event.¹⁰⁵ The Mary's Day committee elected for food donations to be collected for those in need in Los Angeles, encouraging participants to bring canned goods for a banquet following a Mass, and the leftover food was delivered to various community centers, including St. Vibiana's and St. Thomas.¹⁰⁶ This was done to celebrate abundance while highlighting hunger and poverty. The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary felt that the Vatican II's policies urged them to address the issues affecting the communities they served and confront societal injustices, with themes like hunger, poverty, and the joy, color, and inspiration found in supermarkets and the new language of advertising expressed through Mary, bringing her "down to earth."¹⁰⁷ Anita M. Caspary, the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary former Mother General, relays in her book, *Witness to Integrity*, that the word of Corita's Mary's Day quickly spread bringing crowds, press, and even TV crews which highly upset the cardinal.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Carrera, "Oral History," 43.

¹⁰⁴ Woodward, "The Nun: A Joyous Revolution," 46.

¹⁰⁵ Carrera, "Oral History," 70.

¹⁰⁶ Meyer, "Shop Rite: Corita Kent's Supermarket Politics," 132.

¹⁰⁷ Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita*, 36.

¹⁰⁸ Caspary, *Witness to Integrity*, 38.

Compared to Mary's Day, the *Sister Corita* box set's happening allows participants to engage similarly with print, as some of the food brand-themed reproductions of Corita's work could mimic the posters and banners used at the Mary's Day parade. Prints by Corita included in *Sister Corita* box set, such as *wonderbread*, 1962 (Fig. 3) *as a witness to the light (for john 23 and j.f.k.)*, 1964, (Fig. 5), and *song with an apple*, 1964, (Fig. 9) are reminiscent of the hand-painted and screen-printed Mary's Day posters carried by the participants, which read things like "God Likes Canned Peaches" while others might be simple collages of V-8 juice cans and Golden Delicious apple wrappers. In addition, the *Sister Corita* box set's "empty box" happening also ties in heavily to Corita and her students' practice of using boxes from the supermarket as a canvas and then as props for happenings and installations. The "empty box" is still decorated and gives instructions as previously reviewed; this was done in a similar fashion to some of the Mary's Day student installations and props. (Fig. 10)

Figure 9.

Corita, song with an apple, 1964, Serigraph, 29 ½" h × 39 ¼" w.
<https://collection.corita.org/piece/64-20>

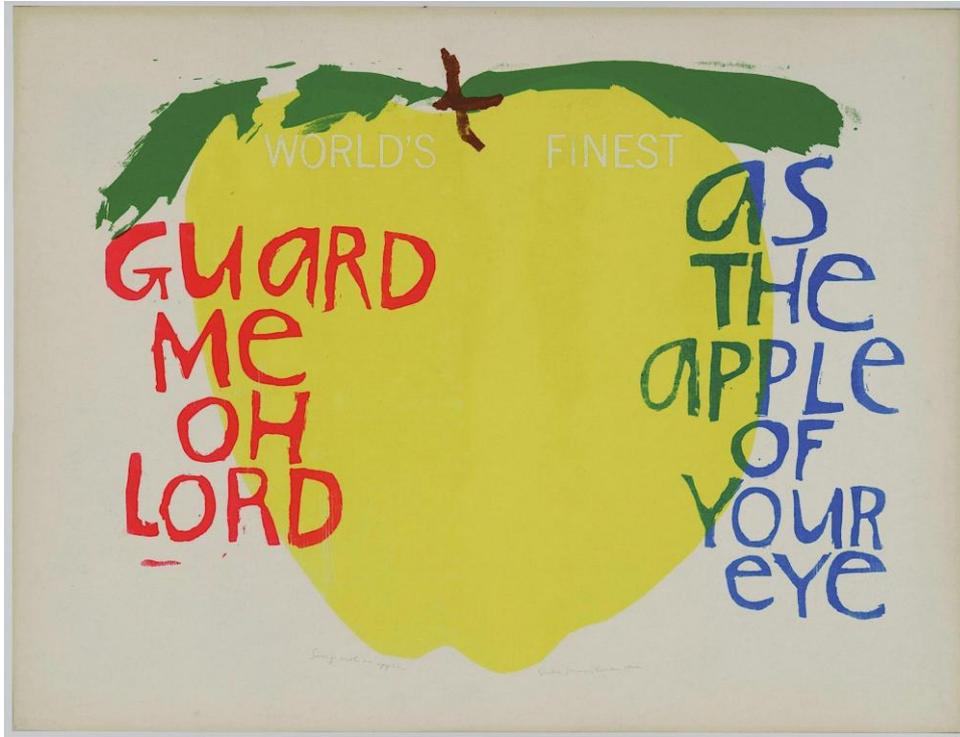


Figure 10.

Photo credit not confirmed, Mary's Day Photographs, digital source.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjEOig94Xlw&t=243s>





As seen here, the Mary's Day supermarket boxes are used in two ways: one is a stationary painted installation, and the second being a carried three-dimensional sign with crepe paper fringe. The box installation was placed at the end of the processional route, on the Immaculate Heart College lawn where speeches were given. The asymmetrical structure, consisting of boxes all painted in various solid colors, towered over attendees. It read "free world" and quotations like "along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love - M. L. King JR." again referencing political issues, however this time more of civil rights than food insecurity. The second Mary's Day box usage to review is the rectangular prism signs, unpainted and still showing off their original Saxon brand apple labeling straight from the supermarket. The only interventions were the cardboard pole attached for holding and the blue crepe paper fringe, which together allowed these boxes to move dynamically, fluctuating to the heart of the handler's desire.

The Mary's Day boxes and *Sister Corita* box set have much in common. They invite interaction without detailed and set-in-stone rules allowing people to facilitate their own relationship with the objects. While each of the three box-based works allows for engagement, they do so in different ways, be it spoken word poetry reading, interpretive dancing, or even

just looking and taking in the messages, they are used to instruct and inspire. Corita and her students' integration of commercial imagery into the context of Mary's Day exemplifies a blend of artistic innovation and social activism in practical application, rather than just a theoretical concept. Beyond their volunteer work and physical donations, Immaculate Heart reinterpreted commercial imagery in a manner that resonated with progressive Catholicism. This effort contributed to a broader conversation about the role of everyday images and consumer products in modern religious practice. Corita's approach combined activism, education, and avant-garde art, drawing influence from the pop art trends of the time, which carried into the capstone piece of her time at Immaculate Heart – the *Sister Corita* book and box set.

Corita's Dispensation and commercial endeavors

Corita went on a sabbatical from Immaculate Heart College and moved in with Cecilia Hubbard, director of the Botolph Group Inc., who described the decision as “She said to me, “can I come to the Cape and do my prints down there?”...I said, yes, and so she came and it was just to be really as far as I knew for the summer.”¹⁰⁹ That summer Corita made 90 silkscreen prints, saying, “the first time in my life I ever turned out so much work.”¹¹⁰ Having a break from her previously self-described lifestyle as being a “demon for work” seemed to give Corita the clarity and space she needed to be more creative.¹¹¹ While this may not be the whole story, Corita did say:

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 was possible. But apparently I wasn't. So when I found out how simple life was just 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. I had to get away from it, I think, to see it, get out of it to experience what it was to be out of it, before I could realize it. And it was at that point that I decided that I just couldn't teach anymore, that I didn't want to teach anymore. Because I had a lot of offers to teach after I left, marvelous people who wrote, you know. Some of them were worried about what I was going to do.¹¹²

So despite the necessity, it could not have been an easy decision, highlighted in Corita's comment: “I agonized over that decision over the past six months, but now that I've made up my mind. I feel very peaceful.”¹¹³ Referencing that in 1968, Corita sought dispensation from her vows and relocated to Boston, Massachusetts, at age 50, after 32 years of being a nun.¹¹⁴

Her struggles with Cardinal MacIntyre significantly influenced this major life change. In addition to this, two short years later, many of the women in the Sisters of the Immaculate

¹⁰⁹ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 8.

¹¹⁰ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 8.

¹¹¹ Kent, interview, 12.

¹¹² Kent, interview, 100.

¹¹³ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 8.

¹¹⁴ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 19.

Heart of Mary decided to leave and form a lay society that they named Immaculate Heart Community, still in Los Angeles as Cardinal MacIntyre did not support the Vatican II initiatives they wanted to integrate.¹¹⁵ MacIntyre's former secretary, Monsignor Clement Connoly, said that MacIntyre viewed the sisters' disagreement as a personal attack, as well as ungodly and being in opposition to the church.¹¹⁶ In reality, the women stood up for themselves and tried to live by Vatican II's progressive movements that conservative MacIntyre wholeheartedly rebuked. Connoly later goes on to highlight MacIntyre's pre-clergyman career in finance on Wall Street and his continued involvement with his old colleagues.¹¹⁷ He was dubbed the "Education Cardinal" as he opened schools and allowed overfilled classrooms staffed with under-trained nuns, forcing them into borderline labor trafficking situations disguised as service in an effort to cut salary costs.¹¹⁸ With so many of these young women flocking to the church as they sought education and validation of their decision to opt out of the patriarchal duties of marriage and childcare, it is disheartening to see that Cardinal MacIntyre led the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary down such a similar path. Conversely, it is empowering to see the same women stand for what they wanted by defying him and leaving the church altogether, creating their own lay society, and continuing to fight for women's rights, as seen in the beginning of *Rebel Hearts*.¹¹⁹

Mickey Myers, a student and close friend of Corita, said, "In one gesture, Corita not only left the convent...she left that community of women she loved, she left college and teaching, and she left the Catholic church."¹²⁰ The church and Corita's sisters were part of her identity, as the act of becoming a nun symbolically removes so much of the individual with a required name change and typically enforced uniform that is the habit. Because of the hive

¹¹⁵ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 19.

¹¹⁶ *Rebel Hearts*, 5:15.

¹¹⁷ *Rebel Hearts*, 14:10.

¹¹⁸ *Rebel Hearts*, 15:25.

¹¹⁹ *Rebel Hearts*, 00:28.

¹²⁰ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 8.

mentality, it is not surprising that Joe Pintauro, a former priest, shared the anecdote that when Corita transitioned from nun back to lay person, she called him to inform him that she was re-assuming her birth name, Frannie Kent, to which he told her was a terrible idea as she was an artist whose work was branded by her moniker.¹²¹ An artist's name is like a fashion label's logo; the maker and their signature go hand in hand and, in some instances make the product more valuable and desirable. While she was on a quest for individualism, she did not part with her Catholic name, Corita, as it really could not be separated from her work.

While this is not to be forgotten, Corita forged her own way in Boston. However she was not alone, as her biological sister, Mary Catherine, was one of the many who maintained a lifeline despite still residing in Los Angeles. Mary Catherine founded Corita Prints and became her new manager, as Corita had to support herself financially for the first time in her adult life.¹²² In order to do so, Corita fulfilled additional corporate commissions while selectively accepting projects from companies that aligned with her own values. She viewed these commercial endeavors as avenues to promote social justice and joy in the everyday.¹²³

After the New England move, her personal work felt liberated; it became more introspective and free from censorship, even brighter and more political. Corita ceased printing her own work and outsourced it to Harry Hambly in his commercial screen-print workshop. Contracting with Hambly allowed her to focus more on the content and less on the process, possibly inviting the aforementioned introspection. As for the Harry Hambly partnership, Corita said:

I did a design for the annual report of a hospital up north. And they had it printed by silk-screen. It was such a beautiful job that I asked them who did it, and I got in touch with this Harry Hambly in Santa Clara. That year, I prepared the separations and sent half of my prints up to him to see how that would work out. And then from then on, he's done all my printing.¹²⁴

¹²¹ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 8.

¹²² Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita*, 49.

¹²³ Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita*, 49.

¹²⁴ Kent, interview, 42.

This collaboration started in 1967 through mail and telephone, Corita sending her designs and instructions to Harry, who called if clarification was needed.¹²⁵ In reference to their exchanges, Hambly said: “she would be sending us artwork, little pieces written on the back of envelopes.”¹²⁶ Regarding the same topic, Corita also likened her process closer to designing after removing herself from the screen, saying:

So I can send him – I usually do my work about three inches square, sometimes – and say, "Enlarge this to such and such a size, and do this in this color, and this is this color." And he always either understands or knows enough to ask questions. So that actually now it's come down to my doing the design for them – he does the printing¹²⁷

In addition to the process changes in Corita’s practice, Hambly introduced differences in materiality by printing all of Corita’s work on off-white wove paper instead of the Pellon fabric she often used.¹²⁸ While they did change to higher quality material than Pellon, Corita reportedly did not want to switch to a more archival paper as she wanted to keep her work “reasonably priced.”¹²⁹ Hambly Studios used an industrial screen printing press, eradicating the handmade qualities present in Corita’s earlier work, pushing it into a more commercial lane.

Julie Ault lists much of Corita’s New England work and commissions, saying:

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.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Metcalf, “An Investigation of Some Screen-Prints by Corita Kent,” 55.

¹²⁶ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 9.

¹²⁷ Kent, interview, 42.

¹²⁸ Metcalf, “An Investigation of Some Screen-Prints by Corita Kent,” 55.

¹²⁹ Dammann, *Corita Kent: Art and Soul: the Biography*, 129.

¹³⁰ Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita*, 49.

This long list is not exhaustive, nor will the rest of this chapter's survey, as Corita quite prolifically took on commissions despite still often saying no to contracts and clients that did not align with her ideals.

As seen in a few major commissions soon to be discussed, there are recurring patterns throughout Corita's post-dispensation work; many of these collaborations feature a bold primary and secondary color exclusive palette and feature very confident painterly brushstroke motifs. These pieces are not only visually similar but also carry her same message of humanitarian love, faith, and hope, which can be seen through her pursuit of making joyful art to be shared. Many of these commissions do not have the religious love present in past work, but it is not altogether gone! Regardless, this time for Corita was about sharing and producing her work. When asked about how she felt about the wide circulation of her work, she said:

I think this is what really kept me in prints after I got started, though I have done some paintings. I really like the idea of lots of people being able to have them and my being able to keep one myself. So, yes, I've always had the feeling that I want the stuff to get out¹³¹

While this statement refers to her print work, specifically her Group W Westinghouse Broadcasting Company prints, it applies to many of her commissions as paper-based pieces are a "very democratic form" as they are easily distributed. Public works such as murals and billboards have a similar quality of message sharing despite being stationary; therefore, Corita's commission still got "the stuff out."

Group W Westinghouse Broadcasting Company

From 1966 through the early 1980s, Corita designed ads for Group W, the broadcasting division of Westinghouse Electric Corporation and Broadcasting Company. Group W published a series of her prints in magazines such as *Fortune*, *Look*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* based

¹³¹ Kent, interview, 80.

on quotations she picked for the company's beliefs and practices.¹³² Corita's selection of quotes had less to do with her idea of Group W but was more part of her getting art out to people; she viewed them as an extension of her own point of view that art was a common everyday experience that everyone should have.¹³³

Corita's Group W advertisement in the December 26, 1967 edition of *Look* magazine is a two-page spread inspired by the Walt Whitman statement, "to have great poets there must be great audiences."¹³⁴ (Fig. 11) The left page is black with small white type of an interpretation by, at the time, Sister Mary Corita of the Whitman quote formatted as:

The rule is the same in broadcasting.

As an audience grows more sophisticated, so must the material the broadcaster presents to it.

A flood of congratulatory mail after a particularly good radio or television program not only increases the likelihood of its being repeated, but gives the broadcaster a needed indication of what his audience wants.

Conversely, an audience too apathetic to respond to excellence can make the broadcaster wonder if excellence is worth achieving.

The colloquy between broadcaster and audience is essential to the improvement of programming and performance. When it stops, we, the broadcasters, operate in a void. When the noise starts again, whether it be bravos or blasts, a mutually nourishing contact is established. So communicate with us.

Make us great.¹³⁵

¹³² Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita*, 49.

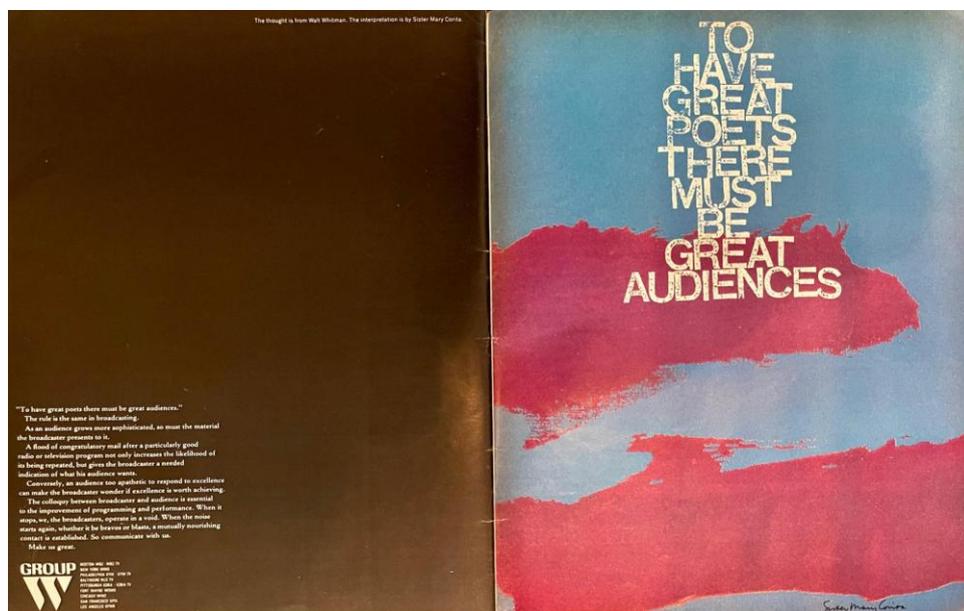
¹³³ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 10.

¹³⁴ Group W, advertisement, *Look*, December 26, 1967, 90-91.

¹³⁵ Group W, advertisement, 90-91.

Figure 11.

Sister Mary Corita, Group W advertisement, December 26, 1967, Magazine, 13 ½”h x 10 ¾”w. Personal collection.



Corita's text plays well with the Whitman words and stays true to her overarching theme, even asking the *Look* readers to reach out and rise up! The full pages filled with color, black, blue, and purple, stand out in relation to the rest of the magazine, which is primarily cigarette and alcohol ads. Corita's ad is just that, an ad. However, it might contain a more substantive and enriching message than the main article highlighted in this issue of *Look*, "Dean Martin Talks About His Drinking, the Mafia, Frank Sinatra, Women, Bobby Kennedy" by Orianna Fiallaci.¹³⁶ In this specific case and the majority of Corita's other Group W advertisements, there is a formula, a quote Corita selects overlaid with her trademark painterly design coupled with a black page and white type that reflects Corita and Group W's shared values. One can assume this black page is a very deliberate marketing technique as it catches the viewer's eye by just serving a message unlike the flashy, shiny, colorful images dispersed throughout the publication to catch a buyer's attention. Group W and Corita's ad stands out in this sea of monotony.

¹³⁶ Group W, advertisement, 90-91.

In addition to the magazine advertisements, Corita describes print editions:

When they put the ad in the magazine each time, they also have a silk-screen print made from it in an edition of about 200 or 300, and these are sent as gifts to the people on the [Group W] president's mailing list. They also have reprints which they send to people who write in for them, which are printed on better paper. They made a portfolio of the past designs – !¹³⁷

One portfolio she references is the *Corita Collection: An Expression of Broadcasting Philosophy*, which was in the “October 30th, 2024, Online+ auction, Rare Books, Prints & Roseville Pottery” from Concept Art Gallery.¹³⁸ This portfolio consisted of 14 color prints of just the right pages from the two-page spreads mounted on a neutral-toned sheet with Corita’s philosophy typed out.¹³⁹ (Fig. 12) This action separates the art and message from the advertising, presenting it as a fine art collectible item rather than a magazine spread, further commodifying Corita’s work and message.

Figure 12.

Corita, Corita Collection: An Expression of Broadcasting Philosophy, portfolio of 14 color prints, c.1972, published by Westinghouse Broadcasting Company, sheet size 13.75 inches square, the offset printed color plates are 11 x 8.25 and are tipped-in along the upper edge, sheets housed in original folder and slipcase.

¹³⁷ Kent, interview, 80.

¹³⁸ “Live Auction: Sister Mary Corita Portfolio,” Concept Art Gallery, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://bid.conceptgallery.com/online-auctions/concept-gallery/sister-mary-corita-kent-portfolio-with-14-prints-6721611#mz-expanded-view-209803941570>.

¹³⁹ “Live Auction: Sister Mary Corita Portfolio,”



Rainbow Swash mural on Boston Gas Company Tank

The largest copyrighted painting, known as the "Rainbow Swash," is a rainbow-colored design painted on a 150-foot-tall natural gas storage tank in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts, and was copyrighted in 1972.¹⁴⁰ (Fig. 13) Eli Goldston of Boston Gas commissioned the work as an effort to beautify the city, so Corita worked out her rainbow design on a 7-inch-high replica of the tank, calling it "a sign of hope that urges you to go on."¹⁴¹ (Fig. 14) After the design was agreed upon, professional sign painters began to transfer the "swashes" onto the Boston Gas Company tank. Corita, meticulous as always, told Bill Bagnall that she was highly disappointed in the way the mural was going as:

¹⁴⁰ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 1.

¹⁴¹ Carrera, "Oral History," 160.

The painters didn't follow her design exactly but, as she described it, were doing a "rough approximation." The public television station, WGBH, filmed the progress and asked Corita if she'd put her signature on the tank or if the painters would do it. "They can put their own names," she said. "It doesn't have much to do with my design." The sign painters then "went away and did their homework; they made a grid. It was never perfect, but it was much better.... They could have done it, it was not impossible."¹⁴²

As seen in this anecdote and throughout this chapter, the selection of case studies to follow emphasizes that Corita was very detail-oriented and connected to the messaging of her work.

Any slight deviation from her simple design negates her work in her mind.

Figure 13.

Corita, Rainbow Swash, 1972, Natural Gas Storage Tank (metal tank painted with a durable, weather-resistant coating), 150'h. <https://www.imaging-resource.com/news/2014/08/06/rainbow-of-terror-how-a-government-program-to-track-suspicious-activities>



¹⁴² Carrera, "Oral History," 160.

Figure 14.

Corita, *Rainbow Swash maquette*, 1971, Acrylic and paper on plaster, 7”h.
<https://harvardartmuseums.org/article/boston-s-pop-landmark>



The completed design and painting of *Rainbow Swash* is relatively simple but still quite striking as it consists solely of her six arch-like paint swashes draped over the Boston Gas Company Tank’s cylindrical facade. Corita said the stylistic choices are “very rough... with a real intention of conviction and power that satisfied me. The edges come from the oomph or vitality that you put in it... so the edges are important.”¹⁴³ The six paint swashes are each a different color, completely flat with no variation in value or tone, a very present motif in Corita’s post-dispensation commissions. Facing northwest on the east side of I-93, you see the orange, yellow, and red streaks of *Rainbow Swash* straddle a red script “corita” before the following blue, green, and dark purple. The rainbow motif Corita often works into her commissions means to her: “a rainbow represents hope, uplifting, spring.... It’s a joyous expression, joining heaven and earth together.”¹⁴⁴ Dackerman says the tank “can be viewed as the culmination of her engagement with pop art,” in reference to works like “Roy Lichtenstein’s

¹⁴³ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 312.

¹⁴⁴ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 312.

mid-1960s brushstrokes, similarly turning the rudiments of painting into stand-alone pop subject matter” or “Claes Oldenburg's "proposed monuments" of the mid-1960s envisioned pop art on an architectural scale, trading on the humor and surprise of seeing everyday objects (a clothespin, scissors, a baseball bat) the size of skyscrapers.”¹⁴⁵ Both of Dackerman’s comparisons situate *Rainbow Swash* in a larger Pop Art discourse, which breathes new life into the piece as most Boston locals seemingly recognize the piece for either its controversy or as a nice view on their commute.

Two things might come up when discussing the controversy of *Rainbow Swash*: the conspiracy theory that the blue swash is the face of Ho Chi Minh, the founder and first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam War, or its reinstallation. As for the Ho Chi Minh controversy, not long after the works installation, Myers says, “she (Corita) was in California, and I said, "You'll never believe what they're saying in the Boston Globe," and I read her the piece where the wife of someone had found a face [supposedly of Ho Chi Minh] in the blue streak, and she said she wouldn't even answer it. She said, “That is so stupid, that's so ludicrous, that's not me, that's not how I work.”¹⁴⁶ While this anecdote and theory would fit into a Pop artwork, that is not Corita’s Pop, she spoke about *Rainbow Swash* as a sign of hope. In addition, there was a second tank on site where Corita had designed a butterfly-based mural. However, it was never painted as “the first tank caused enough controversy all on its own.”¹⁴⁷

Again, in the early 1990s, *Rainbow Swash* received press as Boston Gas was removing the tank due to obsolescence, and locals battled over what the opposers deemed juvenile or a waste of funds versus those in favor of wanting the nostalgic pop landmark to return.¹⁴⁸ Boston

¹⁴⁵ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 307 and 312.

¹⁴⁶ Carrera, “Oral History,” 160.

¹⁴⁷ Carrera, “Oral History,” 160.

¹⁴⁸ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 312.

Gas ended up reinstating *Rainbow Swash* with the original sign-painting firm, and Mickey Myers taking Corita's role as project manager, as she had died a few years before in 1986.¹⁴⁹

Digital Equipment Corporation

The 1978 collaboration between Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) and Corita, titled *joyful purpose*, stands out as her most commercial work. She was commissioned to design panels to adorn the sides of its computers, cubicle walls, and office furniture based on the company statement: "We must consider humanity - people's emotional reactions to their visible environment and the effect that environment has on their attitude toward work."¹⁵⁰ Before production, DEC press kits compared their motives with Corita's, saying she desired "to bring art out of the museums into the world at large."¹⁵¹ In addition, the press kit promoted the new product line with the following message: "This is why we asked Corita to help us express visually something of our philosophy about computing – that it should respond to the individual and bring some pleasure to everyday labors." as well as "We believe she has achieved her goal with joyful purpose, and that the result brings a new dimension to that catch-phrase, 'state of the art.'"¹⁵² This combination of statements connects what is seemingly an unusual collaboration through shared ideals.

The original designs Corita and DEC agreed upon consisted of three color stories (the Brown Series, the Blue Series, and the Bright Series) with each set containing three components – a wall hanging and twin patterned panels, all of which are hand-made serigraphs that connect to DEC office furniture. The panels were configured to fit the side of DEC's

¹⁴⁹ Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, 312.

¹⁵⁰ Individual exhibits: DeCordova Museum, 1980; includes clippings, brochures, invitations, press packet. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 10.10., Box: 10. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

¹⁵¹ Digital Equipment Corporation office equipment design, 1978; includes brochure, press release, invitation, remarks by Julian Marcus.. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 9.5., Box: 9. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

¹⁵² Digital Equipment Corporation office equipment design, 1978; includes brochure, press release, invitation, remarks by Julian Marcus.. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 9.5., Box: 9. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

computer system cabinets and a workstation/desk and offered in 30in. by 30in. or 40in. by 30in.. Each serigraph employed color blocking and bold brushstrokes hinting at naturalistic scenes revealed by their names. Highlighting the Brown Series' wall hanging *Red Moon*, a sand-colored path and wild black strokes leads the viewer's eye from the lower half of the print to the central "red moon" grounded by a solid deep brown background. (Fig. 15) The scene depicted is intended to be calming, symbolically bringing the outdoors into the office and making computer workers more relaxed and productive.¹⁵³

¹⁵³Corita Art Center, "From the Archives, vol. 3: Digital Equipment Corporation, Corita Kent, 1978," YouTube, October 3, 2019. educational video, 0:00 to 1:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pesqoIKlf8>

Figure 15.

Corita, joyful purpose, Brown Series, 1978, Serigraph, 30”h x 30”w or 40”h x 30”w.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CaphehsgJ9P/>



Due to significant manufacturing issues, the fully realized DEC and Corita collaboration pieces were never produced for sale. Originally, magnets were utilized to secure the hand-printed panels to the computer storage cabinet, which ultimately led to the corruption of the computer’s memory disks. Engineers were unsuccessful in designing a solution to protect the artist's work without compromising computer functionality.¹⁵⁴ Thankfully, the few samples made before full-scale production are preserved at Harvard’s Schlesinger Library. Joe Nahil, the owner of DEC, donated six silkscreen originals from the collaboration, in addition to a

¹⁵⁴ Colleen Walsh, “Out of the Blue, Strokes of Brilliance,” *The Harvard Gazette*, September 15, 2015, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/09/out-of-the-blue-strokes-of-brilliance/>.

small-scale replica of the Boston Gas Company tank with Corita’s design, a few letters from her, and two catalogs of her work.¹⁵⁵ This commission originated from DEC’s determination that:

minicomputers — massive by today’s standards — were beginning to catch on among businesses around the country. To help them appear less imposing, Digital’s marketing and public relations team, which included Nahil, suggested decorating the machines with artwork.¹⁵⁶

Nahil specifically suggested Corita for the project after frequently passing her *Rainbow Swash* mural on a Boston Gas Company tank along Interstate 93. While he could not recall the exact amount agreed upon for her commission, he knew it was substantial, remarking, “We paid her handsomely.”¹⁵⁷ According to Nahil, Corita worked on her own schedule and terms, and once the work was completed, her obligations ended.¹⁵⁸ This sentiment is echoed in an interview with Nahil featured in the *Harvard Gazette*, where he noted that Corita declined to attend a flashy promotional event at the Lincoln Center, stating, “It was way too commercial for her.” Nahil reminded her the commission itself was a commercial endeavor, to which Corita simply replied, “No, no, no, Joe. That’s different.”¹⁵⁹ Signifying that she did not view this collaboration as purely commercial or commodity-based. Instead, the *joyful purpose* collection was her way of engaging a different audience and bringing more pep to office workers in their daily routines, as *Rainbow Swash* did for Nahil. To solidify this thought, at the top of a press release about the collaboration, a quote from Corita decorated the top of the page formatted as below:

I like to feel

¹⁵⁵ During my visit in the summer of 2024, the cubicle wall panels were on display in a private office that visitors could request to see.

¹⁵⁶ Walsh, “Out of the Blue,” <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/09/out-of-the-blue-strokes-of-brilliance/>.

¹⁵⁷ Walsh, “Out of the Blue,” <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/09/out-of-the-blue-strokes-of-brilliance/>.

¹⁵⁸ Walsh, “Out of the Blue,” <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/09/out-of-the-blue-strokes-of-brilliance/>.

¹⁵⁹ Walsh, “Out of the Blue,” <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/09/out-of-the-blue-strokes-of-brilliance/>.

that my work
is adding
perhaps
a bit of color
to
everydayness¹⁶⁰

These pieces are fascinating. Without this background information, they seem like a departure from her usual message. As requested by DEC, the panels are absent of text and religious symbolism, which is prominently displayed in her prior Pop work; the intended communication found in the abstract images is harder to read.¹⁶¹ Despite DEC's conditions eliminating key elements of majority of Corita's oeuvre, she reportedly said, "The designer panel project allowed me to do things my way; I was given a nice kind of freedom...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."¹⁶² This statement situates even this commercial of a commission fully in line with her core themes of humanitarian love, faith, and hope.

Keeping this in mind, the broadside from *Corita: A Retrospective* claims, "Such collaboration between artist and corporation became a success because of shared fundamental values. On Digital's part, their philosophy about computers, carefully crafted to the human being, was parallel to Corita's own feelings and thoughts."¹⁶³ While this is a nice sentiment, is it plausible to consider a collaboration that resulted in only prototypes, without a single production model, a success?

¹⁶⁰ Digital Equipment Corporation office equipment design, 1978; includes brochure, press release, invitation, remarks by Julian Marcus.. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 9.5., Box: 9. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

¹⁶¹ Corita Art Center, "From the Archives," 0:00 to 1:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pesqolKlf8>

¹⁶² Digital Equipment Corporation office equipment design, 1978; includes brochure, press release, invitation, remarks by Julian Marcus.. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 9.5., Box: 9. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

¹⁶³ Individual exhibits: DeCordova Museum, 1980; includes clippings, brochures, invitations, press packet. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 10.10., Box: 10. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

The Love Stamp

In 1980, the search committee for the United States Postal Service (USPS) sought a design from Corita for a stamp commission. She submitted multiple rainbow-based designs that the committee approved, but the Postmaster General rejected.¹⁶⁴ Corita continued with other work when, in 1984, the USPS committee submitted her designs again to the Postmaster, who accepted these four years later, and it was officially issued on April 17, 1985.¹⁶⁵ For more context, the USPS issued the first Love stamp in 1973, designed by Robert Indiana, a fellow Pop artist known for his bold stacked letter compositions.¹⁶⁶ Indiana's Love Stamp was initially called a "Special Stamp for Someone Special" and sold more than 300 million stamps. Despite this success, the second Love Stamp by Mary Faulconer did not debut until nine years later in 1982, and the third by Bradbury Thompson in 1984, after which the USPS produced a Love Stamp yearly.¹⁶⁷

Corita's final design was schmears of colors that are not quite rainbow-letical design, in descending order; the purple, blue, and green are stacked above the red, orange, and yellow with the bottom featuring an all caps purple LOVE, red USA, and lastly a green 22, highlighting the cost of the single stamp at the time.¹⁶⁸ (Fig. 16) Howard Payne of the Stamp Advisory Council said, "Corita Kent and I have many phone calls about what should a love stamp

¹⁶⁴ Berry, Ian and Michael Duncan, eds. *Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent*. Saratoga Springs, NY: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2013. Pg. 167

¹⁶⁵ Berry, Ian and Michael Duncan, eds. *Someday is Now: The Art of Corita Kent*. Saratoga Springs, NY: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2013. Pg. 167

¹⁶⁶ "History: Love Series Stamps," United States Postal Service, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/pdf/love-series-stamps.pdf>

¹⁶⁷ "History: Love Series Stamps," United States Postal Service, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/pdf/love-series-stamps.pdf>

¹⁶⁸ "Rainbow-letical" is a term I picked up from printmaker and professor, Sean P. Morrissey, meaning organized in rainbow order.

express, and a love stamp to us wasn't a boy, girl, hearts, and flowers; but it was love of humanity and love of fellow man, love of family.”¹⁶⁹

Figure 16.

Corita, Love Stamp, 1985, USPS Postage Stamp, Mixed Media (paper; ink (multicolored); adhesive / photogravure), 1-9/16”h x 1”w. [https://www.si.edu/object/22c-love-](https://www.si.edu/object/22c-love-single%3Anpm)

single%3Anpm 1999.2004.431



Another key aspect of the Love Stamp series is that they were meant to be collectibles. Artist series could be purchased as a commemorative sheet; in Corita’s case, this was panes of fifty. (Fig. 17) These sheets are designed for the philatelic collection and even exhibition, ideally not just being posted on letters even though they are functional and could be used to send 22 cents worth of mail or 44 cents with two stamps, and so on. Further playing into the

¹⁶⁹ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 10.

commoditization of stamps, the photo-mechanically reproduced poster the USPS created to market the stamps features a slogan of the series reading “Add a little “*Love*” to your collection.” (Fig. 18) The short and sweet phrase holds much weight in the argument that not only Corita’s work but her message is commodified since they are using the design and wording to sell a standard priced sheet at the post office counter but also acknowledging the collector culture surrounding stamps will increase in value in aftermarket venues. Commemorative sheets play a role here since a full incorrupt sheet is worth so much more than a partial sheet or a single stamp separated. Adding to the novelty of Corita’s Love Stamp, it was physically the smallest work she ever did, as it is about one square inch, but it is the largest edition of hers as 700 million of these stamps were produced.¹⁷⁰

Figure 17.

Corita, Love Stamp, 1985, USPS Stamp Commemorative Sheet (50 panes), 9”h x 10”w.
<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/sheet-50-rainbow-swash-love-22-stamps-2106905201>



¹⁷⁰ Primary Colors (chapter 10)

Figure 18.

USPS marketing poster for Corita Kent Love Stamp, 1985, Photomechanical reproduction, 36“h x 24”w. <https://hammer.ucla.edu/collections/grunwald-center-collection/corita-kent/art/love-stamp>



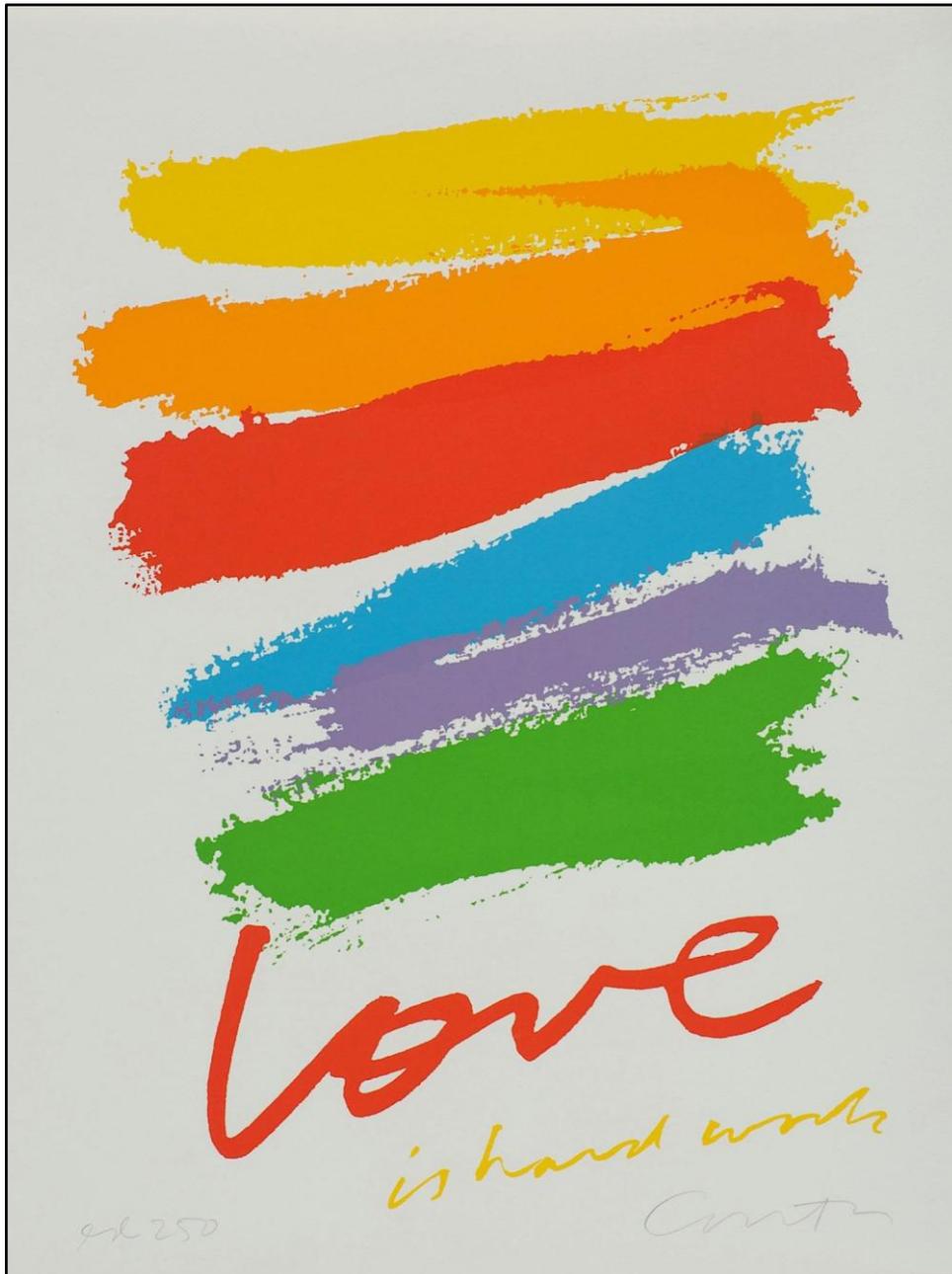
Now, seven years after the Digital Equipment Corporation promotional event at the Lincoln Center, a launch party for the Love Stamp was held at the Love Boat set at Warner Brother Studios. Corita again declined to attend this publicity occasion, protesting the interpretation of her work, as she deemed the United Nations a better environment for the launch, as it aligned more with her message of humanitarian love. Her opposition to the event was confirmed by Payne saying, “she felt that because of being held on the lock boat, she needed to boycott it, she said that's not the love I'm talking about. She said this stamp means more than just boy girls and romance on a TV show.”¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ *Primary Colors*, Chapter 10.

In response to “Love Boat Gate,” she produced the print *love is hard work*, 1985. (Fig. 19) While Corita never said this herself, it is irrefutable that *love is hard work*, 1985 is a rebuttal to the Love Boat launch party, as the print is an almost identical design to her Love Stamp. The differences in the two works are minimal as both pieces feature the same color palette and swashes stacked over the word love; however, the colors change order with the stamp being purple, blue, green, red, orange, and yellow, while the print is yellow, orange, red, blue, purple, and green. This color change could simply be a way to avoid a copyright issue or a symbolic switch, of which I am not sure, regardless there is an undeniable message in the addition of the text following the script Love “is hard work.” Again, Corita proves that her message and intent are her primary point in art making.

Figure 19.

Corita, love is hard work, 1985, Serigraph, 24"h x 18"w.
<https://collection.corita.org/piece/85-06>



Conclusion

Today, Corita's body of work remains strikingly relevant, evident through her vibrant colors, bold text, newspaper clippings, and quotations from religious texts, poets, and pop music, all of which promote her core themes of humanitarian love, faith, and hope. Her art is a testament to the timelessness and ongoing impact of her statements on society as we are still dealing with women's and civil rights almost seventy-five years after the start of Corita's shift

into political print. This continuity is possible due to her strength and commitment to sharing her work versus the commercialization and commodification of her public works. Corita worked almost exclusively in some of the most democratic forms – print, advertising, and public installations – allowing her work to reach a wide and diverse audience.

In the past 10 years, there has been a significant increase in scholarly interest and writing about Corita, indicating a growing recognition of her contributions to the Pop Art movement. After her passing in 1986, Corita Kent bequeathed all of her unsold work and copyrights to the Immaculate Heart Community. In 1997, her sisters in the lay society founded the Corita Art Center, an affiliate of the Immaculate Heart Community, that preserves and promotes Corita’s art, teaching, and passion for social justice.¹⁷² This organization serves as the primary resource for all things Corita as they oversee her image rights, are involved with the majority of the exhibitions of her work, and develop educational programs based on her work and pedagogy. Corita herself said, “I love to have my art seen, and that's why I have done big things, but big or small, art belongs with us every day, wherever we are. Art can express life's joy, and that is something we should all share.”¹⁷³

Corita's social advocacy and messaging has always been significant and continues to resonate today as she did “big things.” Her unwavering commitment to her message, along with her innovative use of print and design, effectively communicates these ideas to the public. My analysis covers Corita's early, straightforward religious works, her layered Pop prints, her celebratory events, and her later commercial commissions, all of which highlight this core tenet. This thesis and tour serve as a retrospective, emphasizing the commodification of her enduring message: humanitarian love, faith, and hope.

¹⁷² Corita Art Center, “About the Center,” accessed November 13, 2023, <https://www.corita.org>.

¹⁷³ Digital Equipment Corporation office equipment design, 1978; includes brochure, press release, invitation, remarks by Julian Marcus.. Papers of Corita, 1936-2015 (inclusive), 1955-1986 (bulk), MC 583: T-247, 9.5., Box: 9. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

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