

# The Art of Corita Kent: Psalms of Lament and Praise

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For years, Sister Corita Kent has been overlooked as a significant artist of the 20th Century because of the fine line her work treads between secularism and Christianity. This paper seeks to grapple with the social and religious themes of Kent's work and defend a new interpretation of her art as containing psalms of both lament and praise. In a period where pop artists sought to trivialize the consumeristic world around them, Kent's art stands alone in its ability to bring meaning to society and work as a catalyst for true change.

In 1962, the cost of a can of Campbell's soup was approximately 89 cents. However, that very same year, a canvas painting depicting a can of Campbell's soup by burgeoning artist Andy Warhol sold in a New York gallery for \$100. By 2006, Warhol's soup paintings were selling at auction for over \$11.7 million each. Many art historians and critics relate the growing demand for "pop art", or art impacted by and reflecting the demands of popular society, to Americans' growing self-absorption during the mid-20th Century following the wake of two devastating world wars. The Civil Rights Movement was well underway, feminists were demanding equal rights with men and protests were already growing against another international conflict in Vietnam. Sandwiched between polarizing opposites of tragedy and consumerism, many Americans desire to poke fun at seemingly serious aspects of their culture skyrocketed during the 1950's and 60's. Claudia Pagliari of The University of Edinburgh sums up the opinions of many scholars when she postulates: "Warhol's use of everyday objects and commercial

poster art aimed to blur the lines between high and low art, and the aesthetic and ordinary, while his representation of the rich and powerful through a medium hitherto regarded as cheap and disposable evokes the transitory nature of success and status and implies a many-facedness on the part of its subjects" (Pagliari).

Paradoxically, however, historians also have to admit that the commodification of material objects in high art only served to inflate the shallowness of popular culture even more. Warhol may have taken an initial jab at consumerism by depicting a Campbell's soup can, but the selling price of his work, along with his own growing celebrity status, worked against him. At the end of the day, his painting of a can proved even more popular than the can itself and did little to combat the materialism he first sought to expose.

In the increasingly trivial art culture of the 1960's, many artists chose to exploit the perceived evils of their present society as a means of coping with heaviness. Following the earlier examples of

Duchamp and other Dada artists from the First World War, many midcentury artists highlighted the nonsensical meaningless of life, whether through depicting absolute nothingness like Yves Klein in his 1958 exhibition *The Void* (in which three thousand viewers lined up outside the gallery in anticipation, only to be led into an empty white room) or the accumulation of too much, as demonstrated by French artist Arman's *Full Up* two year later (in which Arman filled the same gallery to the point of overflowing with garbage).

However, of all the artists creating work as a reaction to the tension and materialism of the 1960's, one in particular has long been passed over by art critics due to the content of her pieces. While Warhol was replicating photographs of Elizabeth Taylor and Arman was selling his own canned waste, Sister Corita Kent was creating vibrant silkscreen posters that blurred the lines between the spiritual and secular and challenged the lifestyles of Americans everywhere. However, due to the theologically nuanced nature of her work, Corita's accomplishments as an artist have been widely ignored by the art world at large. Her first solo exhibition was not put together until 2013, twenty seven years after her death in 1986. The exhibition, entitled "Someday is Now", was first displayed at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs, New York in the spring of 2013. Before the featured installation of her work and publication of an accompanying book to follow, many art scholars and critics failed to give proper credit to Corita on the grounds of being both a female and a nun. Articles may take careful note of her "edgy optimism" or "social engagement", but her work is broadly considered to be too rebellious for Christians and too religious for atheists to. Because of this, many art historians have not fully balanced the playfulness of her pop art images with the theological depth of her metaphors. Even the accompanying publication to the "Someday is Now" retrospective hinges on the assumption that Corita's earlier religious work must be analyzed with consideration of her later departure from the Catholic Church and the implications this may have on the validity of her spiritual ideas. By contrast to these popular critics of her work, I would like to argue that Corita's work stands above other

pop art pieces created during the same timeline. Art historian Thomas Crow once complained that "The debate over Warhol centers on whether his art fosters critical or subversive apprehension of mass culture and the power of the image as commodity [e.g., Ranier Crone], succumbs in an innocent but telling way to that numbing power [e.g., Carter Ratcliff], or exploits it cynically and meretriciously [e.g., Robert Hughes]" (Anderson and Dryness, 314). Drawing meaning from Corita's work is not so ambiguous. As opposed to constantly bouncing between the submissive and the exploitative, Corita managed to draw humorous and relevant images from popular culture, representing them in ways that exposed the hypocrisy of well-meaning Americans and served as a catalyst for change. The comments made toward the end of her life expressing remorse over the growing meaningless of Christian conversation in the Church at large in no way disrupt the validity of her own work, but rather create a psalm-like meaning to the varying tone of her silkscreen posters. In more ways than one, Corita was a psalmist of her own times—an artist unafraid of the balance between lament and praise. Her work makes space for meaning to be found within the Pop Art movement in ways that Warhol and other contemporary artists never achieved.

Sister Corita Kent in no way began her life as a controversial figure. She was actually born as Frances Elizabeth Kent in 1918, to an Irish Catholic family living in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Her family moved to Canada and then Hollywood, where she graduated from a Catholic high school in 1936 and joined the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Upon taking her vows as a nun, she changed her name to Sister Mary Corita Kent and began taking art lessons at the Immaculate Heart College in Hollywood. It is at the IHC where Corita first took a class in silkscreen printing to fulfill a studio requirement. Though she had dabbled in painting and drawing, it was quickly apparent that Corita's artistic gifts were well-suited for the speed and ingenuity that the silkscreen printers required. One of her first attempts at silkscreening was entered and won first place in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art print competition and the California State Fair—a 1951 serigraph entitled *the lord is with thee*. A second image completed in 1954

and entitled *benedictio* (Fig. 1.) marked another milestone in Corita's career—the first time she experimented with text in a silkscreen image.

It was about this time that she perfected her method of combining ripped slogans from magazine ads with handwritten letters applied directly to the screen with her own mixture of glue, water, and vinegar. She was offered a position teaching art at the Immaculate Heart College, largely based on her knowledge of silkscreen printing, but was quickly promoted to the position of the Art Department Chair in 1964. It was in the early 60's that Kent's work began to stretch and blossom as she drew constant inspiration from the students surrounding her and the way in which they saw and discussed the world in all its baldness.

The classroom environment that Corita and her fellow teacher Sister Maggie created was based on the principles of experimentation and wonder. Students were given incredibly enormous tasks on a daily basis, whether it was going home and finding five hundred verses on love or carrying a paper viewfinder around the streets of Hollywood and sketching compositions inspired by pedestrian life. Many of Corita's students described her as meticulous and organized, but also as possessing abundant love and a "largesse of spirit". During this time, she experimented with color-saturated text-based prints riffing off the praise lyrics of the Psalms, with lines like "you founded the earth and what fills it" and "tree you are moss, you are violets...and all this is folly to the world".

In 1961, Corita met with the fellow heads of the Immaculate Heart College about the college's annual Mary's Day celebration—a holiday that one student described had once been "a God-awful, dismal affair of girls processing past the statue of Our Lady" (Burlingham, 43). Under the direction of Corita, the art department created dozens of vibrant silkscreen posters heralding the beauty of life, salvation, and mankind. The posters touted short, quippy slogans like "God likes me", "Give us this day our daily bread" and "Peace, Peace, Peace"—sayings that were both reflective of the school's growing social consciousness and California's burgeoning hippie movement. The students also relied on the use of flowers, banners, music, and printed quotes to create an environment that reflected the changing direction of the school.

Following the success of the first Mary's Day Parade, Corita's attentions began to turn to other socially charged issues in contemporary society that she and her students could engage with. One issue that changed the direction of her art almost radically was the growing disparity between middle-class Americans and lower income workers struggling for food. The topic of food was not foreign to the art world during the 1960's by any means. As mentioned previously, Andy Warhol's 32 *Campbell Soup Cans* (Fig. 2.) were first displayed in 1962—an exhibit Corita saw on display in Los Angeles that July. Warhol's influence moved Corita into her first pop-art print one month later in her poster simply entitled *wonder bread* (Fig. 3.). However, unlike Warhol's print, which displays a solitary soup can devoid of comment or interpretation, Corita takes the liberty of morphing Wonder Bread's perfectly rounded circles into more abstract shapes. Some art critics have interpreted this abstraction as a means of riffing off the gradual shift from Communion bread to Communion wafers within the Catholic Church (Dackerman, 174). Her clear and directed attention on the discrepancy between the Church's teachings on spiritual food and the growing poverty and disorder in the country increased during this time, exemplified by her later, bolder works referencing poverty.

A 1964 article in TIME Magazine entitled "War on Poverty: Portraits from an Appalachian Battleground" showcased images by photographer John Dominis of children scavenging in the snow for frozen lumps of coal and a distressed mother attempting to nurse a child writhing from measles. Along with these photographs, the article stated: "In a lonely valley in eastern Kentucky, in the heart of the mountainous region called Appalachia, live an impoverished people whose plight has long been ignored by affluent America. Their homes are shacks without plumbing or sanitation. Their landscape is a man-made desolation of corrugated hills and hollows laced with polluted streams. The people, themselves—often disease-ridden and unschooled—are without jobs and even without hope" (Time Magazine). As a response to this article, Corita created a serigraph entitled *that they may have life* (Fig. 4.), in which she quotes both a Kentucky miner's wife words. "It's bad you don't know what to do," they say, "when

you've got five children standing around crying for something to eat and you don't know where to get it, and you don't know which way to start to get it. I just get nervous or something. Kentucky miner's wife." Directly following her words, scattered across dots a little to the right, a Ghandi quote: "There are so many hungry people that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

This quote is, of course, a play on words in more way than one. The idea of God appearing in the form of bread is reference to the concept of Eucharistic Communion, a rite observed by Catholics and Protestants in churches on a consistent basis. Corita's choice of words, however, also plays up the stark contrast between the Church's emphasis on spiritual food—taking in the body and blood of Christ—and its un-attentiveness to the lack of physical food in the world around it. In John 10:10 Jesus told his disciples "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." In a country where children's hands bled as they dug in the snow each morning searching for the means of providing their next meal, Corita's poster simply asked the question: How do we say we care for the soul while we watch the body suffer?

Her growing frustration over the Catholic Church's inattentiveness to poverty in America combined with a growing interest in using pop art as a means of social change impacted Corita's decision to host the 1964 Mary's Day Parade with the theme of "Food for Peace". Unlike previous years, the 1964 procession contained mostly collaged posters with advertisements and slogans for various food products, with songs, film, theater, flowers, and the delivery of food to poor families in the community. Surprisingly, however, the Catholic Church took immediate offense to Corita's actions, and Cardinal McIntyre dispatched a letter condemning the march as "inappropriate" and disruptive to the Church's prescribed liturgy. It was the first time Corita's position as a leader of the Immaculate Heart College was in limbo, a situation that only worsened throughout the rest of the decade as she continued to make politically aware posters that challenged the Church's actions and called attention to the lack of Christlike love poured out into the world during her lifetime.

As Corita grew older, many believed her to

gradually slip away from her Christian roots into a more humanistic faith, primarily as a result of the Catholic Church's pushback against her calls for justice. Critics define this as a "crisis of faith" (Burlingham, 21) and separate her interest in faith from her former expression of religion. At the beginning of her work as a teacher, she had expressed remorse that religious art was, at the time, of a very "sort of late nineteenth century, but a bad nineteenth-century quality" (Burlingham, 13) and that she was motivated to go back earlier and find something stronger, all the way back to the Byzantine era "where at least there was strength and beauty." However, by the end of her career, Corita demonstrated a very different ideology and stated that "we went, just as the prints go, from very definitely—narrowly, perhaps—religious matter from the point where it dawned on me that any subject matter was religious" (Burlingham, 15). This newfound connection between Christ and the secular world was controversial. In a time when the Church was emphasizing meaning in the spiritual and Yves Klein was emphasizing meaning in nothing, Corita was drawing a bridge between pop culture and everlasting life. She did not gloss over the injustices in modern society, but rather used her posters as a spotlight on the way Americans, and Christians in particular, had glanced away from the blood staining our country.

It was later in the year in 1964, however, that Corita finally took a step too far for the Catholic Church to allow. She produced a pop art serigraph entitled *the juiciest tomato of all* (Fig. 5.) in which she quoted fellow professor Sam Einsenstein's poem comparing the Virgin Mary to a juicy tomato. Corita defended her use of the metaphor, stating: "I did a lot of research into tomato, and Sam did some for me too, and found that it really had a marvelous history and was connected in fact, at one point... with the mystical rose" (Dackerman, 156). Despite her defense, however, Corita's work was deemed radical and irreligious by Cardinal McIntyre and other conservative Catholics, who submitted a list of grievances against Corita to the head of the Immaculate Heart College that resulted in Corita's sabbatical and then resignation a few years later.

Toward the end of her life, many art critics, including the authors of the *Someday is Now*

publication, will concur that Corita walked away from Christianity completely after breaking from the Catholic Church. In an interview with Newsweek Magazine in 1984, she admitted that she “gradually became aware of a lot of things in Christian terminology that just didn’t have meaning anymore” (Burlingham, 21). Her works did become less focused on spiritual matters and more involved with political and social justice movements. Critics admire her move from “religious rebellion” to a more humanist approach to art and love in the late 60’s and early 70’s, as evidenced by the art historical emphasis on Corita’s use of graphic design rather than strong analysis of the content of her work.

However, Corita’s body of work, when studied in its entirety, directly contradicts any idea that references to Christianity in her art could have completely lost their meaning. One of her most famous serigraphs, *song about the greatness* (Fig. 6.), was completed in 1964 and draws direct inspiration from a Del Monte advertisement for canned meatballs. In faded script, so light you can barely read it, Corita has scribbled these words: “MAKES MEATBAL SING / let the ocean thunder with all its waves / the world and all who dwell there / the rivers clap their hands / the mountains shout together with joy before the lord / for he comes”.

These words almost directly parallel Psalm 98, in which the psalmist urges the sea to resound, the rivers to clap their hands and the mountains to sing with joy before the day that the Lord will finally judge the world with righteousness and equality.

The most beautiful aspect of the Book of Psalms is perhaps its variety of tone. Suffering and anguish is as common a theme as joyfulness and thanksgiving. The writer is not afraid to question God’s mercy and love, just as he is not hesitant to declare God’s grace. In a moment, the psalmist may find all that he knows about his faith to seem void of meaning. But in the next breath his faith is renewed, and he finds love rich enough to make mountains and yes, perhaps meatballs sing. Corita wasn’t afraid to compare herself to the psalmist, stating in a 1967 article, “This sign language [of advertisements] is almost infinitely rich. ... Up and down the highways (good symbols too) we see words like ‘Cold, clear, well-water,’ ‘The best to you each morn ing,’ ‘Have a happy day,’ ‘Sunkist,’ ‘Del

Monte’s catsup makes meatballs sing,’ that read almost like contemporary translations of the psalms for us to be singing on our way. The game is endless, which makes it a good symbol of eternity which will be great endless game” (Kent, 11-12).

Unlike the majority of other pop artists, the backbone of Corita Kent’s prints are psalms of lament and of praise. They search inward, into our hearts and motives, but they also look up, into the beauty of a love that can with surety be a catalyst for change. This theologically verbose interpretation of her artwork sets it apart from other pop art of the same decade. Corita’s prints are different in kind than the work of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Klein or Armand because she reminds us that change is not only possible, but necessary in order to fully live out the Christian life. David sought God’s grace in the presence of great trials, but Corita’s work boldly declares that grace is a tool we already have, with the potential to redeem the society around us.

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