



Sister Corita's
Summer of Love

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Govett-
Brewster
Art
Gallery

**City
Gallery
Wellington**
Te Whare Toi



Sister Corita teaching at Immaculate Heart
College, Los Angeles, ca. 1967.



SISTER CORITA Kent is an artists' artist. In 2008, while travelling through the United States doing research, I kept encountering her work on the walls of artists I was visiting and fell in love with it. Happily, one of those artists steered me toward the Corita Art Center, in Los Angeles, where I could learn more. Our show *Sister Corita's Summer of Love* resulted from that visit and offers a journey through her life and work.

Corita was a Roman Catholic nun who lived and worked at the Immaculate Heart of Mary order in Los Angeles from 1936 to 1968, and headed the art department at the school there from 1964 to 1968. She made screenprints, often working with her students and with participants in her print workshops, which were popular in the heady days of 1960s West Coast activism. Corita borrowed, magpie-like, from signs and slogans, pop-song lyrics, billboards, product packaging, and magazine advertising, transporting messages of joy, faith, love, and the power of God, and protesting over the political crises of the times, including the civil-rights movement, the Vietnam war, and the assassinations of American political leaders. Her boldest, most typographically daring works were made between 1964 and 1969.

Corita's sensibilities were fostered by and advanced the concerns of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), commonly known as 'Vatican II', which moved to modernise the Catholic Church and make it more relevant to contemporary society. Among other things, it advocated changes to traditional liturgy, including conducting Mass in the vernacular instead of Latin. This inspired Corita's playful use of colloquial language.

After the death of Pope John XXIII in 1963, the church pulled back from its feel-good, socio-political activity, and, under conservative pressure, the order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary withdrew from the Church. In 1968, Corita left the order and moved to Boston, where she lived until her death in 1986. (Corita is still celebrated for her monumental 1971 *Rainbow Swash* gas-tank mural, which remains one of the city's most loved landmarks.) Corita's more expressive—or 'painterly'—works are from the 1970s, and represent a return in style (and religiosity) to work she was making in the 1950s. They include the iconic *Yes 3* (1979)—with the word 'Love' and a red heart—which many recognise even if they don't know the artist's name. It is her latest work in the show.

Corita's work is finally getting its due in the United States, with numerous recent shows, but she remains under-recognised outside the US. Despite our having the English language in common—and despite its resonance with Colin McCahon's—her work is little known in New Zealand. So, having already included her in several exhibitions in Europe, when I began my directorship at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, I resolved to bring her work to this country.

In the show, Corita's prints are hung in series or are grouped by subject matter: food, road signs, political protest, scripture. One group is all things orange—just for fun. The prints are accompanied by films about Corita, including *Mary's Day 1965* (1965), directed by Baylis Glascock—a recent acquisition for the Govett-Brewster collection—and *Alleluia: The Life and Art of Corita Kent: The '60s* (1967), directed by Thomas Conrad. Both include footage of Corita working and of Los Angeles at the time, showing the context out of which she operated.

The show is a joint project between the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and City Gallery Wellington, and, in each venue, Corita's work has kept different company. At the Govett-Brewster, we showed her work alongside works by her

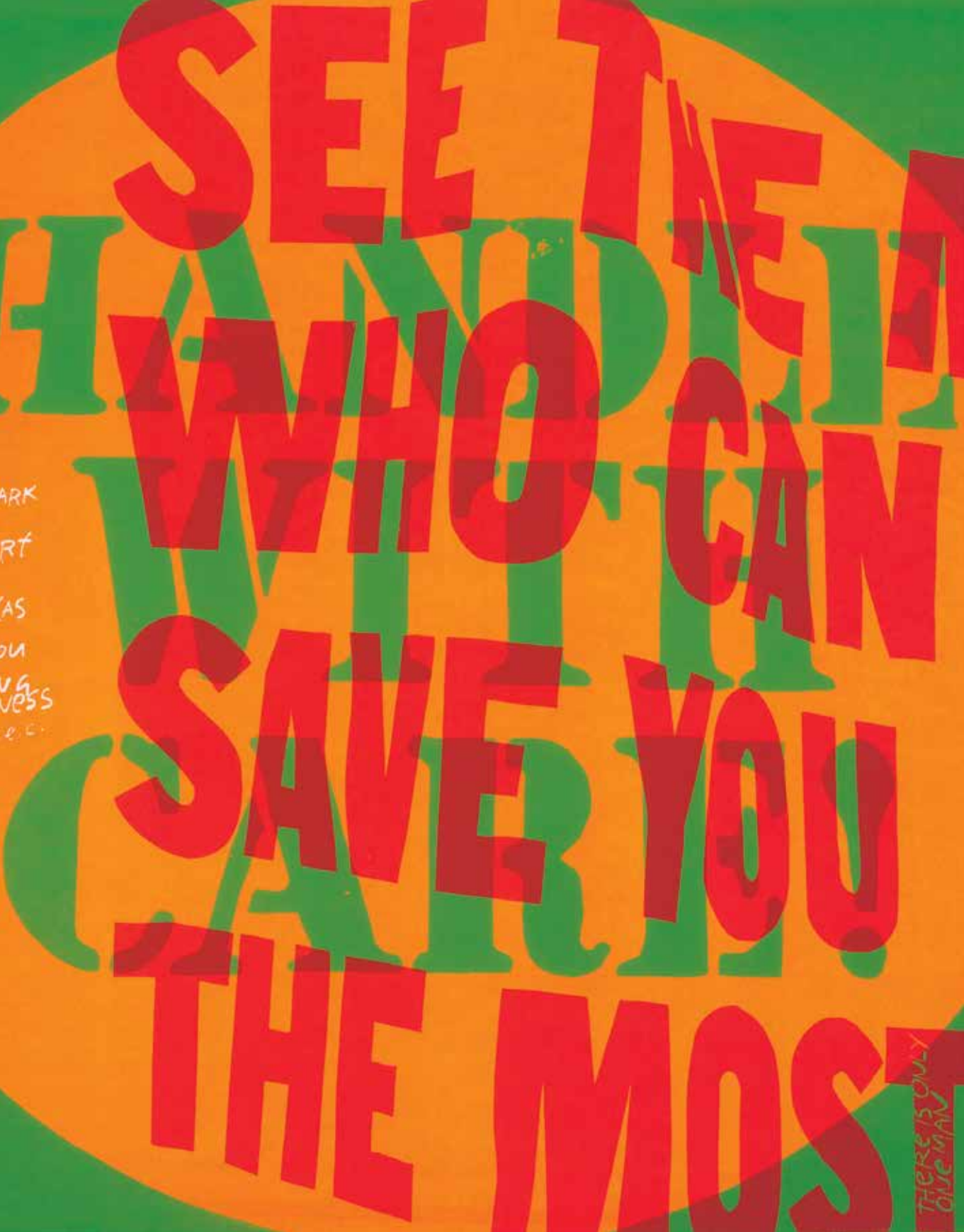
contemporaries Colin McCahon and Ed Ruscha, and by the Wellington Media Collective and Australian artist Marco Fusinato. Similarly, for the City Gallery Wellington show, their Chief Curator Robert Leonard has developed his own sidebar exhibition, including works by McCahon and Ruscha again, New Zealanders Jim Speers, Michael Parekowhai, and Michael Stevenson, Australian Scott Redford, and recent American Christian evangelical animated-text videos.

Like the best political orators and preachers, Corita's works deliver messages that touch everybody. Her works may remind New Zealand audiences of a collectivism missing from political expression today.

—Simon Rees, Director, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Mary's Day Parade, Immaculate Heart College,
Los Angeles, 1964. Courtesy Corita Art Center,
Los Angeles.





Sister Corita Kent

Aaron Rose

CREATIVITY BELONGS to the artist in each of us. To create means to relate. The root meaning of the word art is 'to fit together' and we all do this every day. Not all of us are painters but we are all artists. Each time we fit things together we are creating—whether it is to make a loaf of bread, a child, a day.
—Corita Kent

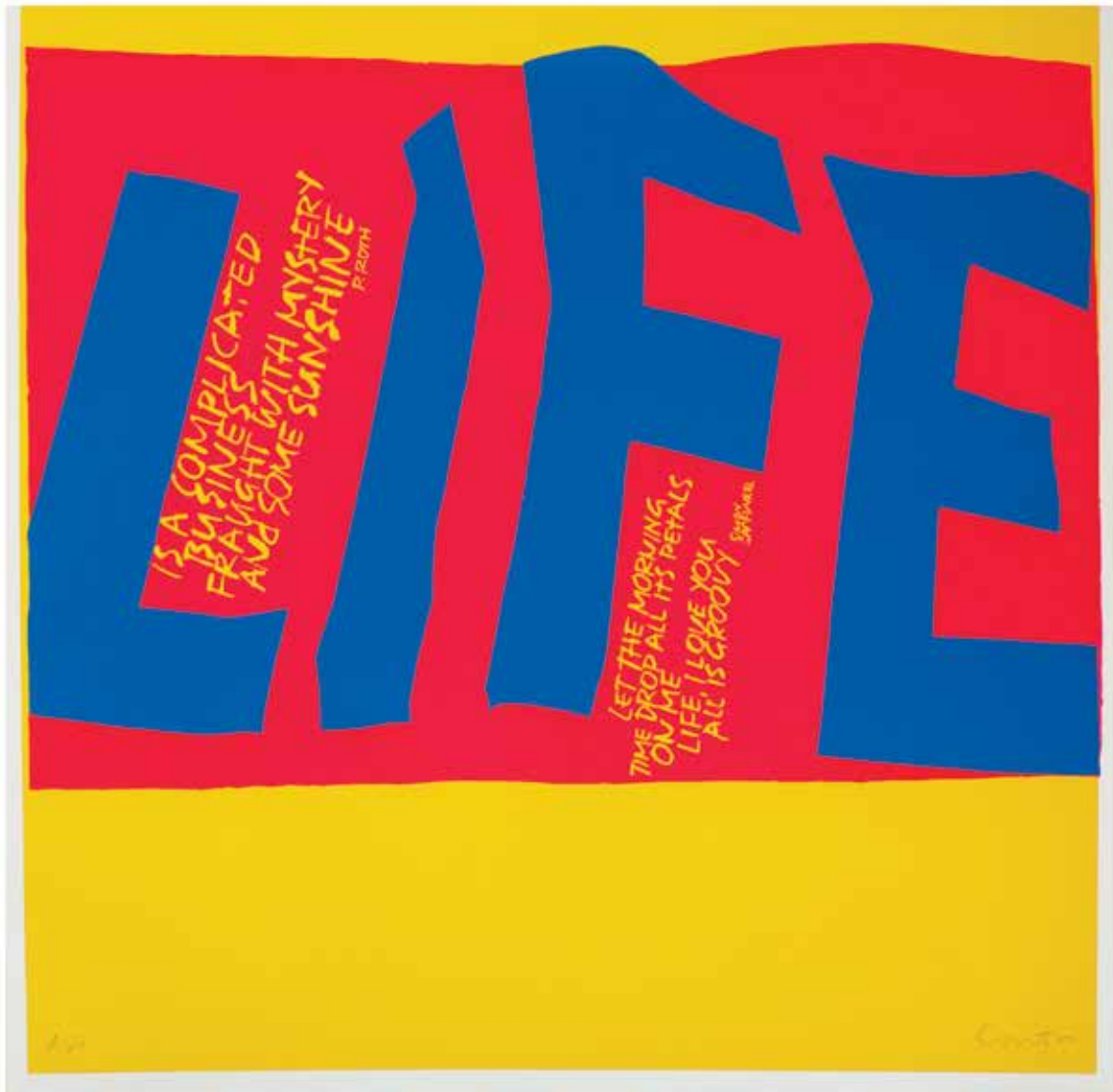
CORITA KENT was born Frances Kent in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1918. When she was a young child, her family moved to Los Angeles, and, as a teenager, she joined the Order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, taking the name Sister Mary Corita. As a Catholic nun, teaching and creating art would become her career path. Corita, however, was not your average art teacher. In fact, in my opinion, she was a revolutionary. She was a woman driven by a creative instinct so powerful that it by far transcended the uncommon circumstances from which her career sprang.

In the early 1950s, Corita received a master's degree in art history from the University of Southern California. During this time, her works were largely iconographic, and were described by some as 'neo-gothic' because they primarily borrowed phrases and depicted images from the bible. By the early 1960s, however, and possibly because of her exposure to avantgarde art works of the day, Corita's art changed dramatically. Though she was a multifaceted artist who practiced painting, photography, typography, and graphic design, her real love was screenprinting. At that time, it was primarily considered a sign painter's medium and was not used much in fine-art circles, but Corita instantly fell in love with its astonishing effectiveness in combining words with colourful abstract images. She also loved that, through screenprinting, she was able to produce large quantities of beautiful images on a humble

budget. Corita was a populist in every sense. She chose to ignore the mechanisms of the art world and what she considered to be an 'elitist system of distribution' in favour of pricing her editions inexpensively, so anybody could afford them. She would sell her work at church gatherings, community centres, fairs, and other venues where a diverse cross-section of the public would have access to them.

In 1962, Corita began using popular culture as raw material for her work. Her screenprints often incorporated the archetypal product brands of American consumerism alongside spiritual texts. Her design process involved taking an original advertising graphic, perhaps something she found at a local shop, and appropriating it to suit her idea. Many times, she would tear, rip, or crumple the image, then rephotograph it. She frequently used grocery-store signage, scripture, newspaper clippings, song lyrics, and writings by literary greats such as Gertrude Stein, E.E. Cummings, and Albert Camus as the focus of her work. Taking cues from the mass media and advertising, she began her evocative use, reuse, and recontextualisation of everyday phrases and images to create modern art that addressed then-current political and social issues. Her artworks from this period featured subjects ranging from poverty, materialism, and environmental degradation to inequality, social injustice, and war. She combined common images and symbols—such as a logo, a magazine cover, or a bread wrapper—with text, redefining them.

Meanwhile, Corita's classes at Immaculate Heart were slowly becoming much more than your standard art course. They were beginning to be described as 'events', 'happenings'. In creative circles, she was becoming known as a 'challenger, a free-thinker, a celebrator, and an encourager'. She taught her students that one of the most



Life Is a Complicated Business
1967

important rules, when looking at art or watching films, was 'Never to allow yourself to blink because one might miss something extremely valuable.' It has been said that the quality the students cherished most about her teaching style was her direct involvement in their creative growth. She was known for always having eye contact with each individual in her class, focussing her attention at all times entirely on the students and their work. She was a firm believer in inspiring creativity in others, so much so that other nuns, as well as her own art students, often helped to produce the installations and banners featuring vibrant typography and huge psychedelic blocks of colour that hung around the conservative campus.

All this activity did not go unnoticed. By the mid-1960s, her unorthodox leadership of the Immaculate Heart art department brought fame, and, with it, crowds of visitors. The department became legendary because of all the illustrious figures that, at Corita's invitation, came to speak there. Guest lecturers included such luminaries as the designers Charles and Ray Eames, musician John Cage, graphic designer Saul Bass, and Alfred Hitchcock. By inviting these outside influences into her community, Corita beckoned people to sidestep convention in favour of challenging oppression and celebrating change.

As the tumultuous 1960s dragged on, Corita's personal work evolved again and began to focus on specific political issues, reflecting her powerful belief in social responsibility. In response to the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the escalating war in Vietnam, and continuing racial tensions in the United States, Corita produced a new series of emotionally raw screenprints. These works incorporated a new technique—stencilled photographic images—to express her distress and sorrow about events of the day, while still maintaining a positive message and reminding viewers that virtuous acts are never in vain.

Not surprisingly, Corita's teaching techniques, coupled with all the free-flowing creativity and controversial subject matter in her personal art, did not always sit well with the Church. There

were tensions and frequent clashes with the archdiocese. Her rebellious order encouraged members 'to do their own thing', such as wearing street clothes and, in her case, designing prints in support of social and political causes. During the late 1960s, the church, like the rest of the country, was going through significant changes, which angered, threatened, and tormented many of the faithful. To some, Corita's art became a de-facto representation of all this unrest, and this infuriated conservative church leaders, including Cardinal James Francis McIntyre, the head of the local archdiocese. Corita was considered dangerous. McIntyre actually accused her of being 'a guerrilla with a paint brush'. All this controversy took quite a toll on Corita and the entire Immaculate Heart community, which had been motivated only by love and joy of the creative spirit to experiment the way they had.

Perhaps celebrity came too soon for Corita. It was something she never asked for, but she bore the burdens of stardom with grace, kindness, and loving warmth. She never was arrogant and carried her prominent status because she believed it to be good for her community and to help the Immaculate Heart College, where she was teaching. However, in 1968, due to the immense pressure she was under, she took a leave of absence. Perhaps she was hoping to resurrect her drooping spirit. After this short sabbatical, she informed her associates that she would not return, and this literally broke the heart of her sisters and the entire Immaculate Heart community who loved her very much. Corita felt she was unable to radiate, give, or share, and needed time for healing. She began to make plans to return to private life and to have what she described in her words as 'more time for reflection and observation'.

She left the order in 1968 and moved to Boston, where she devoted herself entirely to making art. She lived there quietly, carrying out commissions for murals and other works. In the early 1970s, she developed cancer, and though her doctor originally only gave her six months to live, she knew she had major art pieces



to accomplish before she died. Corita entered an immensely productive period during which she created several hundred serigraph designs for posters, book covers, and murals. Her work from this time includes a massive mural on a natural-gas tank in the Dorchester neighbourhood of Boston and the 1985 *Love* stamp, reportedly the best-selling stamp in history. On 18 September 1986, Corita succumbed to the cancer and passed away.

Although I have had the pleasure of being exposed to the work of numerous wonderful creative minds in my career, few have really motivated me to take action. The first time I saw Corita's works was like a call to arms for me. Her absolute dedication to a 'populist' mentality, while never shunning the academic discourse, is a rare trait in an artist even today. To glance back at her body of work is a true lesson in the power that an artist can have in a society. Through both her artwork and her teaching, Corita touched many hearts and minds. In my opinion, her blueprint for a creative career is one that should be followed by each and every creative person ... to walk amongst nobility, yet never lose the common touch.

First published in *Power Up: Female Pop Art* (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2010). Aaron Rose is an artist, writer, musician, filmmaker, and curator based in Los Angeles. In 2009, he made the film *Become a Microscope: Ninety Statements on Sister Corita*.

Immaculate Heart College art department,
Los Angeles, ca. 1955. Courtesy Corita Art Center,
Los Angeles.

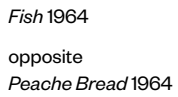
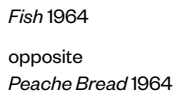
ENRICHED BREAD WONDER

Great idea. It has been said, since was the world
at going as doing. Perhaps then, if we listen attentively,
we shall hear, amid the uproar of commerce and nations,
a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope.
Some hold that their hope lies in a nation; others, in a man.

I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, enriched
by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds
and words every day re-define frontiers and the deepest
implications of history.
As against these things join fleetingly
the ever threatened path that each and every man
on the foundation of his own sufferings and joys
builds for all. common

helps build strong bodies 12 ways
STANDARD LARGE LOAF

no preservatives added







Someday Is Now 1964

opposite

Bread and Toast 1965

overleaf

With Love to the Everyday Miracle 1967

CONVERSION
IS REVOLUTION
IS GROWTH
IS LIVING IN A WAY
APPROPRIATE TO
THE COMING AGE
AND IS NOT UNDERSTOOD
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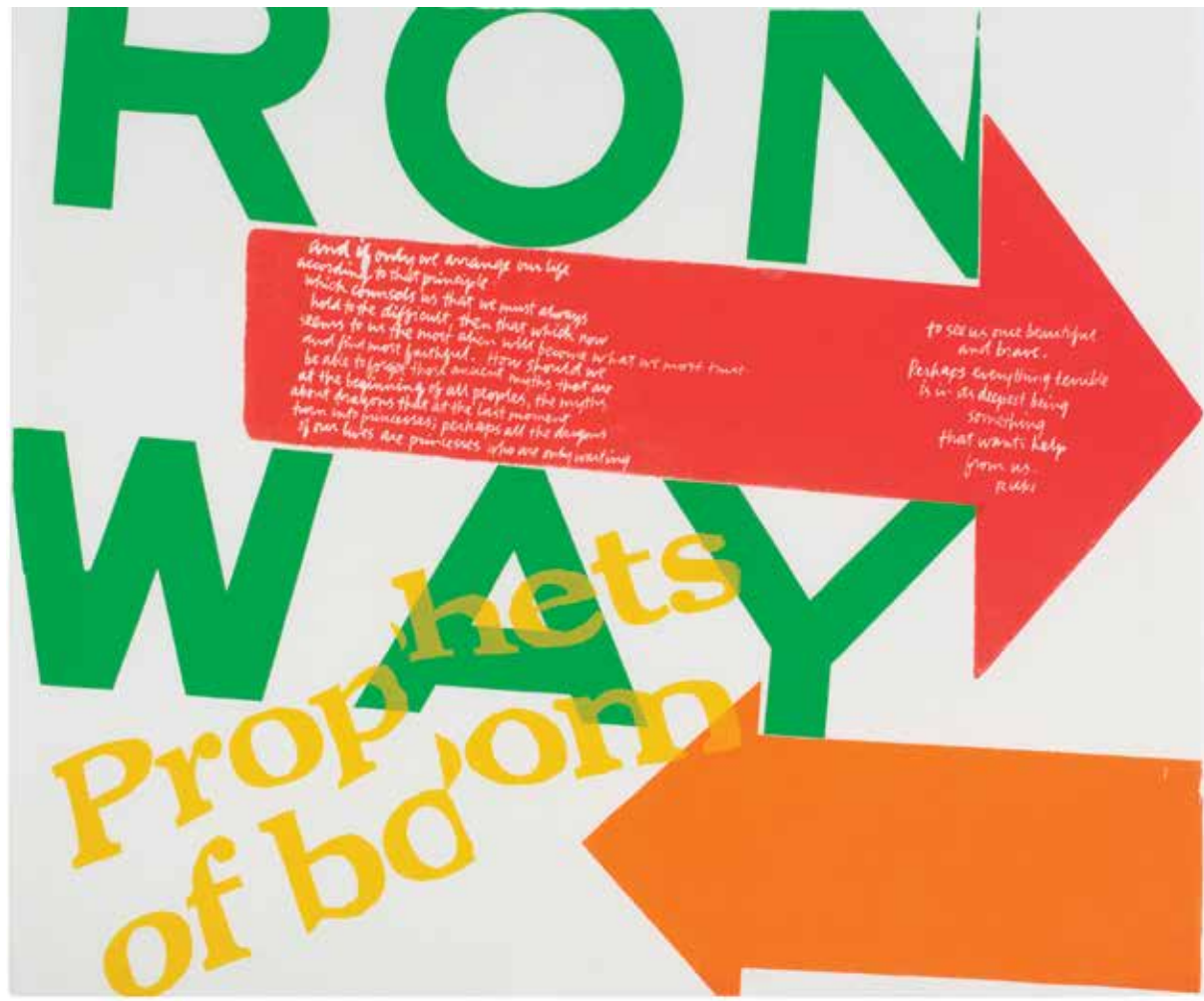


Give the Gang Our Best 1966

opposite top
(Give the Gang) The Clue Is in the Signs 1966

opposite below
(Our Best) Reality Proves Very Little 1966

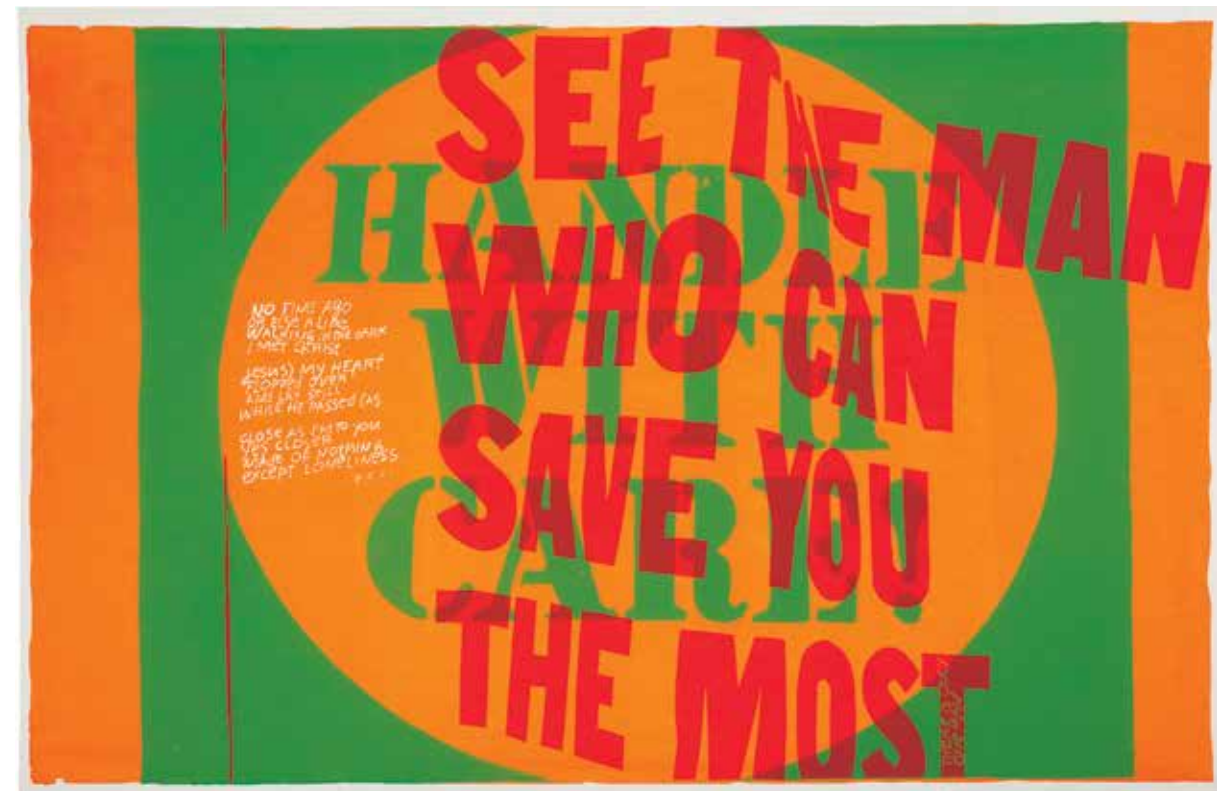




Left 1967
opposite
Right 1967



Somebody Had to Break the Rules 1967



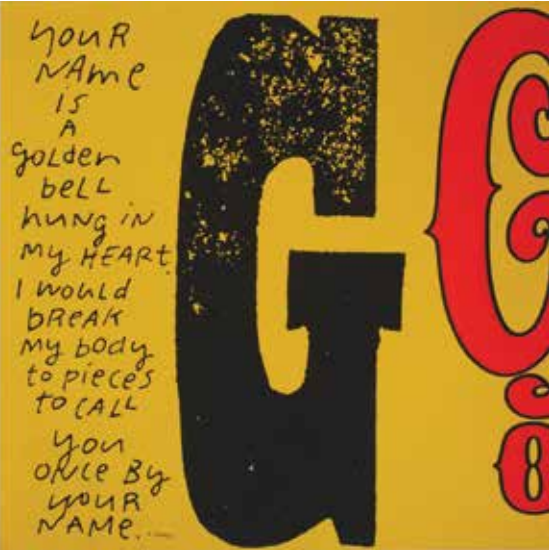
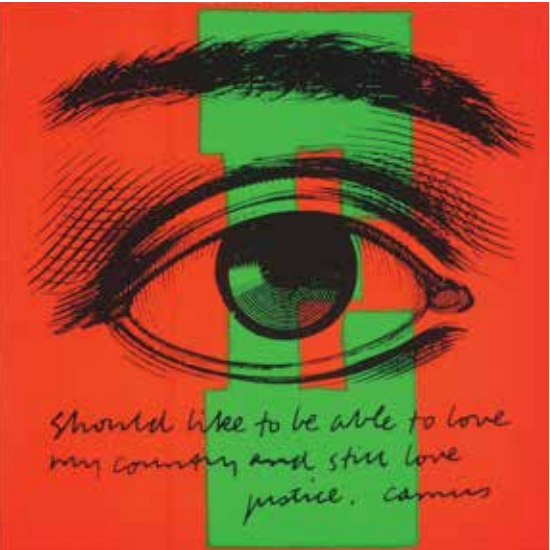
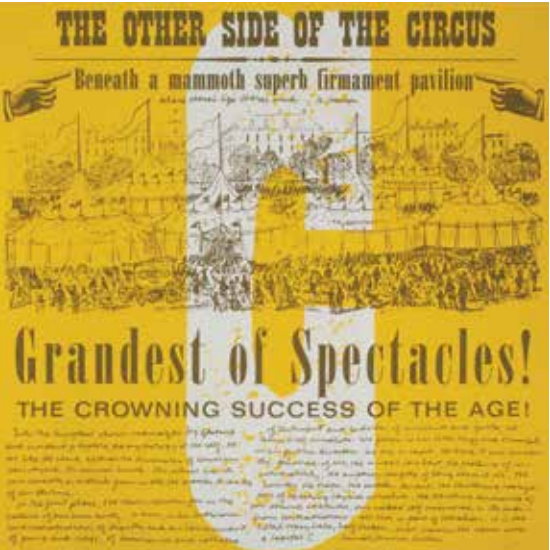
Wet and Wild 1967
 opposite
 Handle With Care 1967
 overleaf
 Things Go Better With 1967

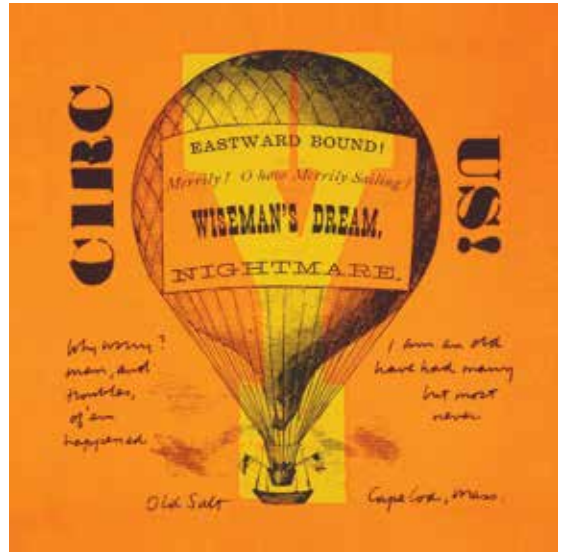
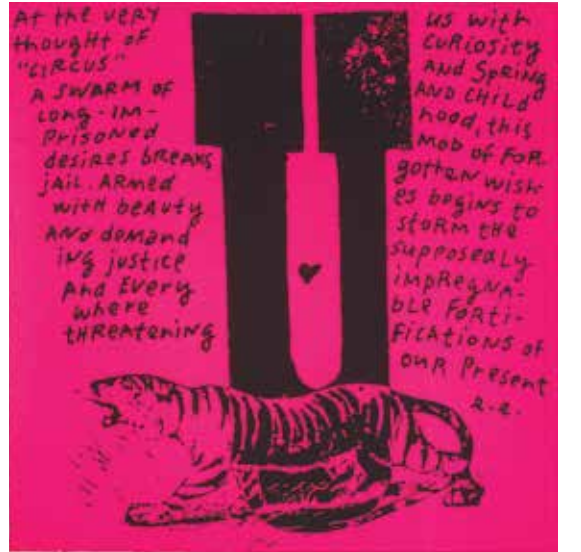
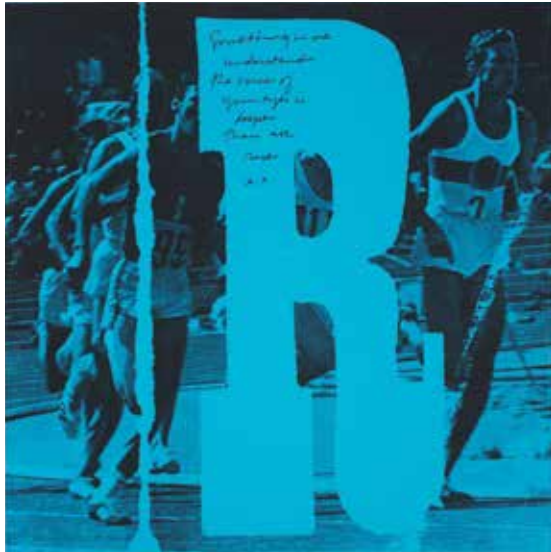
things go
better
with

Circus Alphabet 1968

A I Love that One
B Beauty You
C Capital Clown
D Everything Coming Up Daisies
E Eye Love
F Full of Clown
G O Greatest Show of Worth
H I Carry Your Heart
I I Am Coming Alive
J Gentle Stirring
K Kiss
L Love Drops
M However Measured
N Willing to Be Vulnerable
G O Greatest Show of Worth
P Prize Boxes
Q Elephant's Q
R Rosey Runners
S My Favourite Symbols
T The Tight Rope
U U Are a Tiger
V Very Interesting
W What Every Woman Knows
X Give a Damn
Y Why Worry
Z Do Your Thing



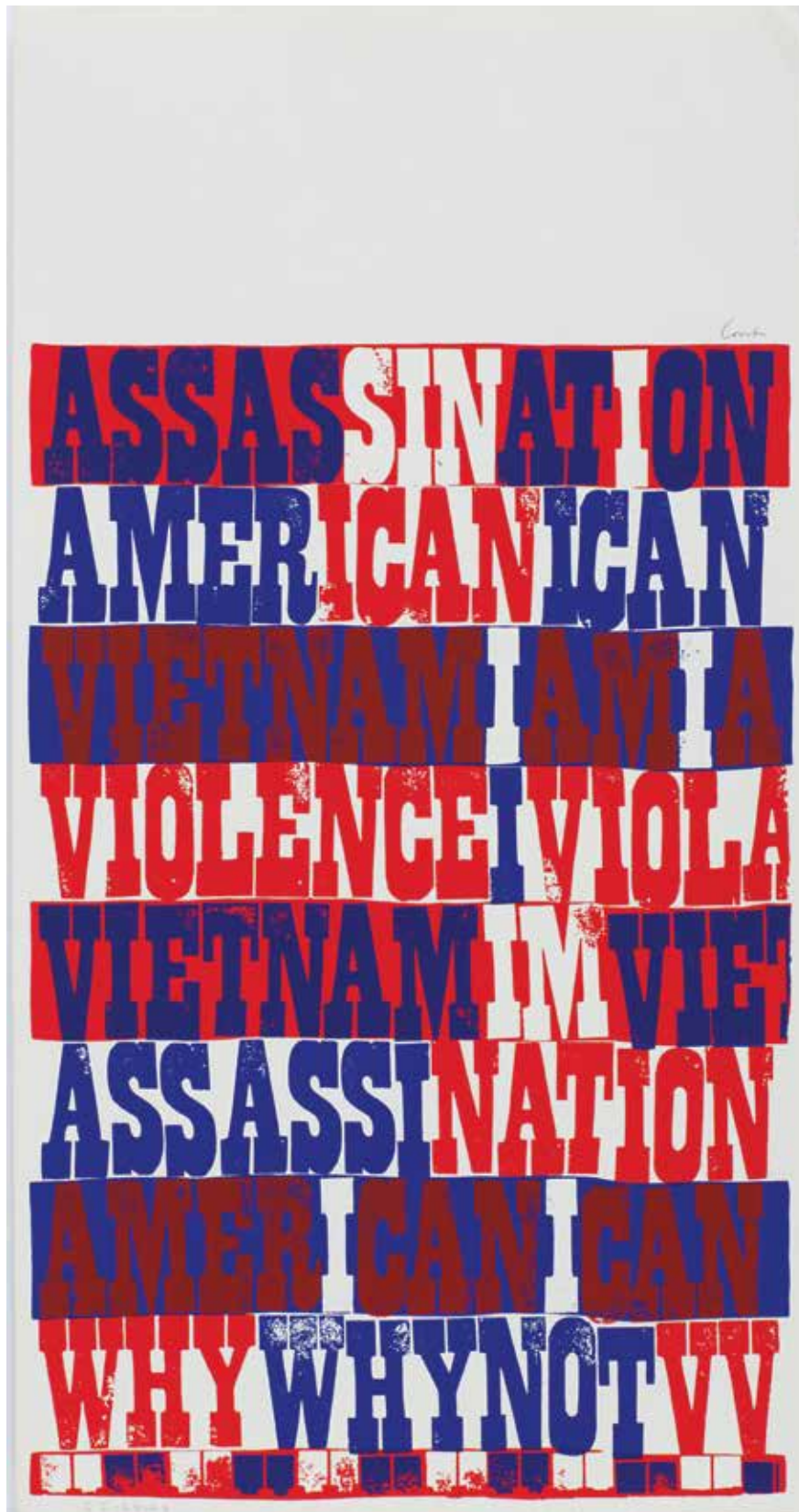




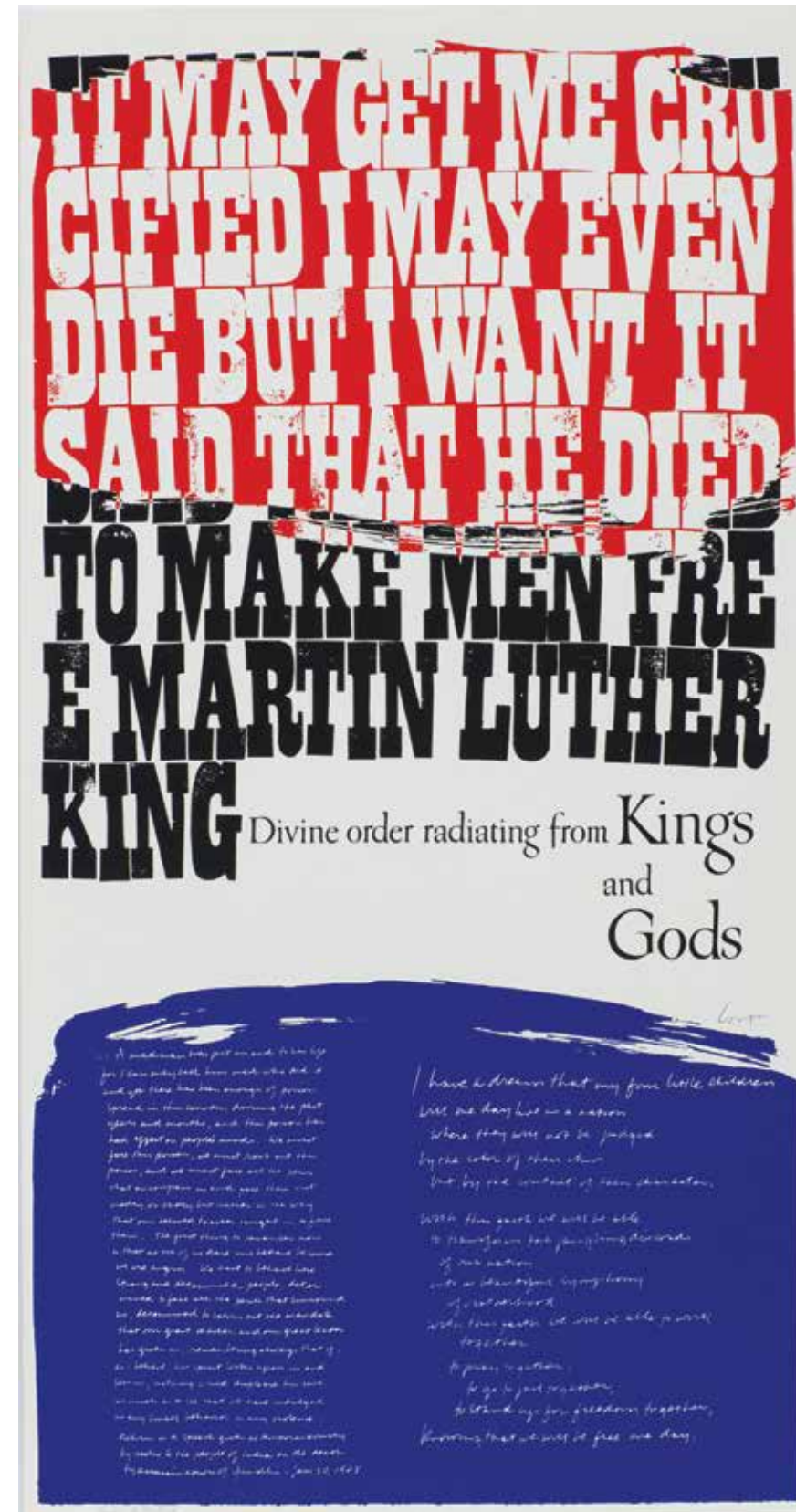


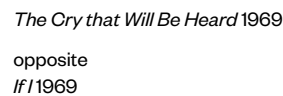
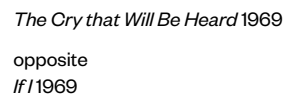
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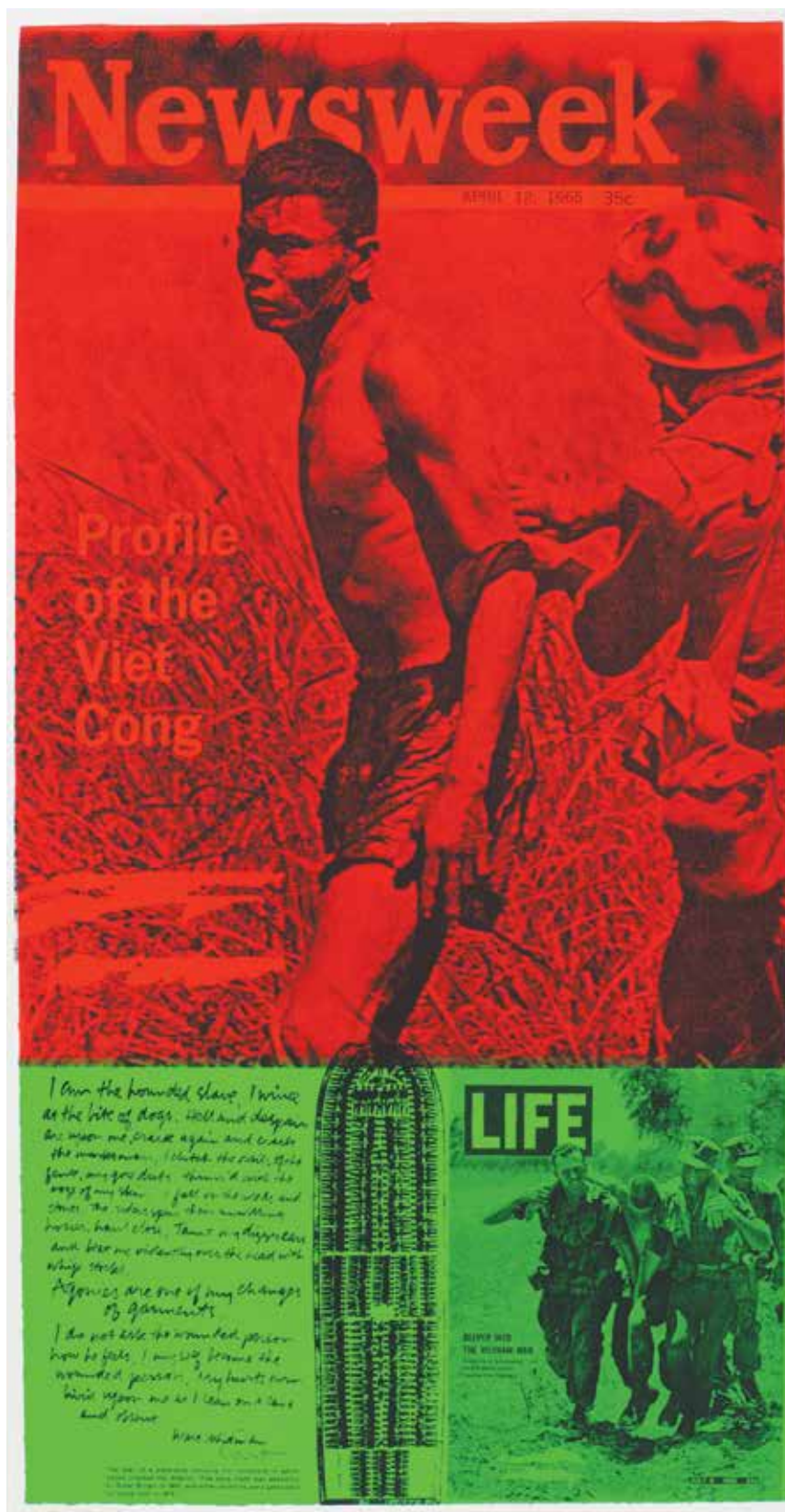
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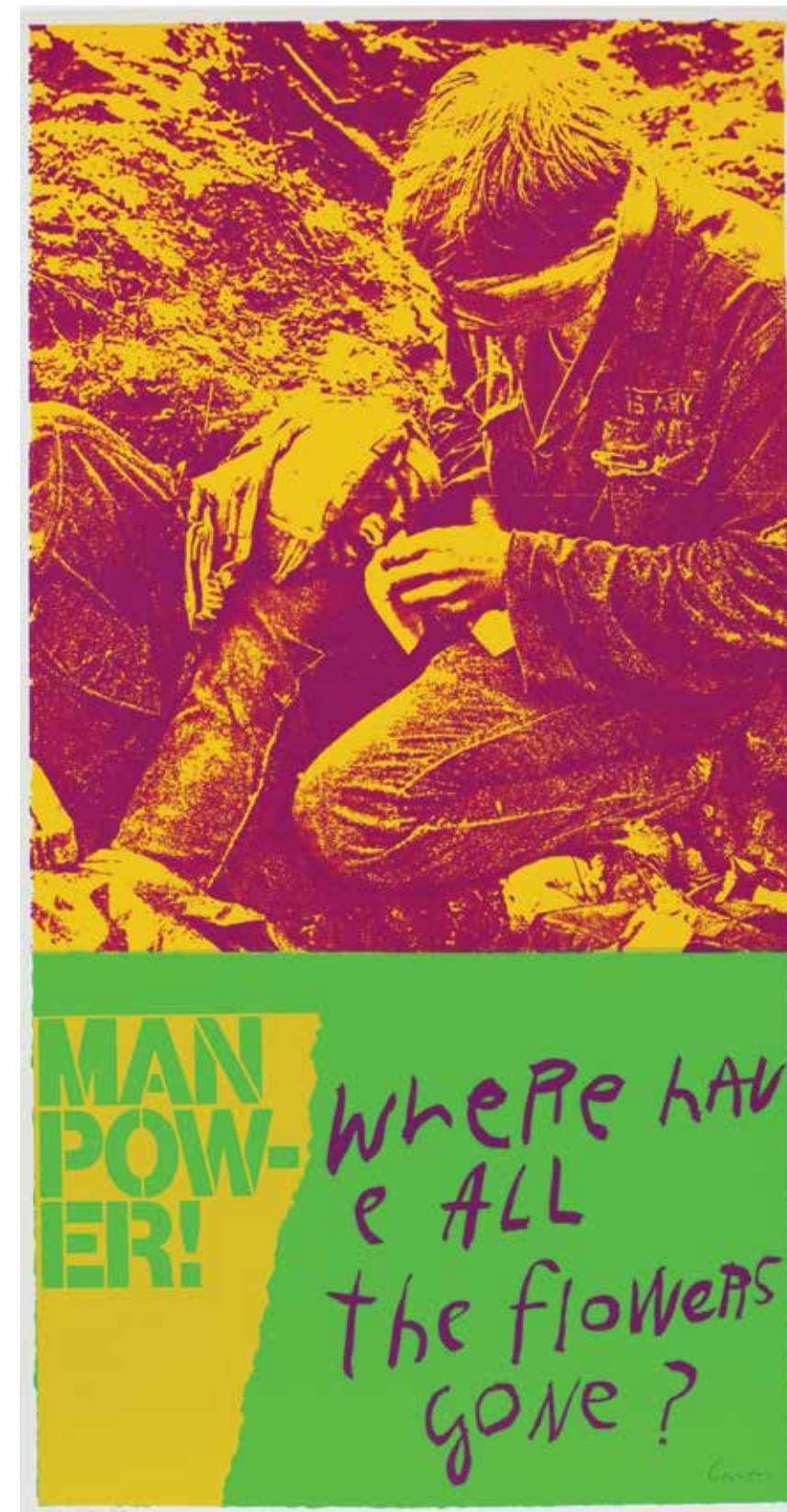
American Sampler 1969
opposite
King's Dream 1969







News of the Week 1969
 opposite
 Manflowers 1969





Possible Loves 1976



Impossible Loves 1976





Mary's Day Parade, Immaculate Heart College,
Los Angeles, 1964. Courtesy Corita Art Center,
Los Angeles.



Sister Act

Robert Leonard

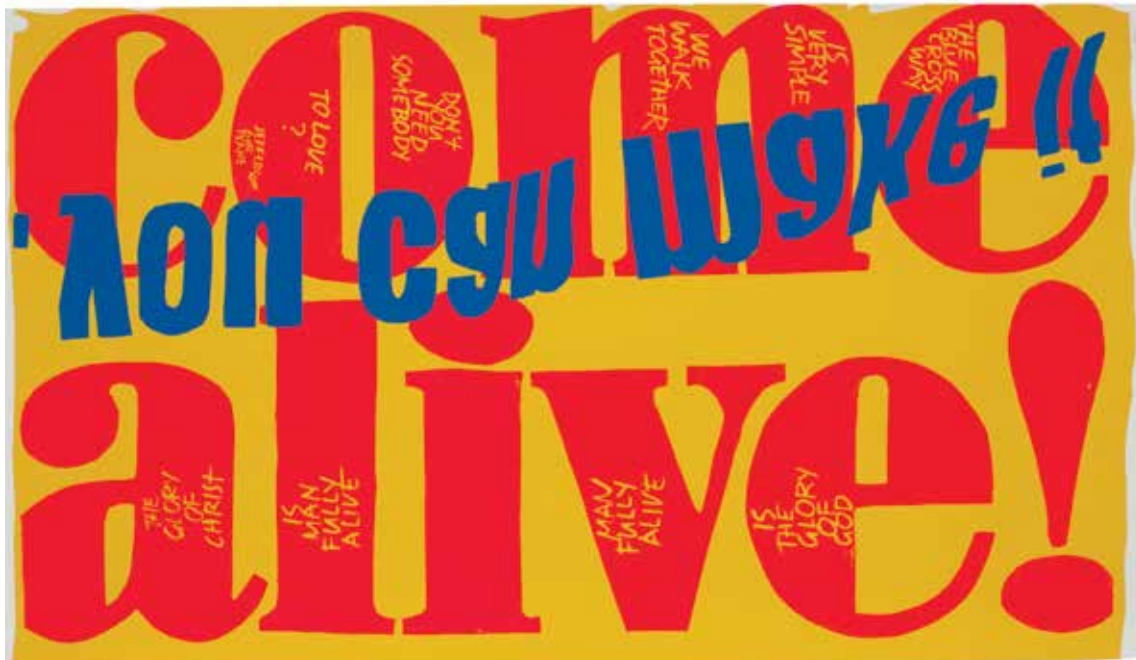
IN THE 1960s, nuns were out and about, playing guitars and singing songs, riding motorbikes and attending to the flock. *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* devotes a two-page entry to the 'perky nun'.¹ It opens with a Belgian Dominican, Sister Luc-Gabrielle, who became world famous with her 1963 hit song 'Dominique', spawning numerous imitators (including the Singing Nuns of Jesus and Mary). Debbie Reynolds played a role based on Luc-Gabrielle in the 1966 movie, *The Singing Nun*. The *Encyclopedia's* authors go on to explore the ubiquity of playful, modern nuns in other 1960s American movies, citing *Lilies of the Field* (1963), *The Trouble with Angels* (1966), and *Change of Habit* (1969), in which Mary Tyler Moore plays sexy Sister Michelle, whose vows are tested by a dashing Dr. Elvis. Of course, wholesome Sally Field, fresh from *Gidget*, would become the ultimate perky nun, as Sister Bertrille in the television series, *The Flying Nun* (1967–70).

Underpinning the perky-nun phenomena was something less laughable—massive reform in the Roman Catholic Church. In the late 1950s, the new Pope, John XXIII, saw that his Church was out of touch with its communities. It was time for the Church to open its windows and let in some fresh air, as he put it. From 1962 to 1965, the Roman Catholic Church convened the Second Vatican Council (a.k.a. Vatican II), seeking to become more relevant, to renew and renovate itself. As a result, mass came to be performed in the vernacular, rather than in Latin, with priests facing the congregation. Elaborate regalia was downplayed, Catholics were permitted to pray with non-Catholic Christians, and friendship with non-Christian believers was encouraged. Plus, priests and nuns were prompted to venture out, to engage with their communities.

Surprisingly, the *Encyclopedia* fails to mention the most famous nun artist, Sister Corita Kent. It could have—she was certainly a celebrity. Based in a progressive, liberal order, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, in Los Angeles, Kent was a poster girl for Vatican II. During the 1960s, she became renowned for her dynamic, brightly-coloured, text-based screenprints, whose forms, colours, and words expressed themes of hope and kindness, peace and love, and social justice. She also wrote and designed books, art-directed festivities, and produced a mural for the Vatican pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair. (The Fair's theme was 'Peace through Understanding', and the Vatican pavilion's theme was 'The Church Is Christ Living in the World'.²) In 1966, the *LA Times* chose Kent as one of their 'Women of the Year', and, in 1967, *Harper's Bazaar* included her in their '100 American Women of Accomplishment'. She also appeared on the cover of the 25 December 1967 issue of *Newsweek* under the banner 'The Nun: Going Modern'.³ Several films were made about her.

For her works, Kent drew inspiring words from writers and thinkers, from poems and pop-song lyrics, and from road signs, commercial packaging, and advertising. She piggybacked on the visual immediacy and urgency of commercial messages, often ventriloquising her right-on thinking through appropriated advertising copy—those madman inventions designed to worm their way into our heads 'like liquid gets into this chalk'.⁴ For Kent, Pepsi's tag line 'Come Alive!' suggested the Resurrection and a prompt to get a life. Wonder Bread stood in for the Host. The line, 'A Man You Can Lean On', came from a Klopman fabrics ad, and 'See the Man Who Can Save You the Most' from Chevrolet. Kent also used road signs as metaphors for spiritual guidance—'Turn' and 'One Way', of course. Exemplifying Vatican II's

Mary Tyler Moore and Elvis Presley in *Change of Habit* 1969



Come Alive 1967



In Memory of RFK 1968

imperative to speak in the common language of the people, Kent's work presented a world of profound religious significance lurking beneath the fleeting secular surfaces of the everyday.

In the past, there have been many attempts to update Christianity, to make it relevant, to express its sentiments in a more familiar, contemporary idiom, to make what was historical seem timeless. In the renaissance, painters rendered Christian stories as if they were happening in the here and now. In the 1920s, English painter Stanley Spencer imagined the Resurrection occurring in his local village of Cookham, and, in the 1940s, Colin McCahon relocated the Christian story to New Zealand's back blocks, adding speech bubbles from a Rinso packet. In the 1960s, Kent found God in the supermarket and on the interchange.

With her feel-good thoughts, Kent embodied her times, furnishing bumper-sticker homilies for the Age of Aquarius. Her work promoted the civil-rights movement, protested American involvement in the Vietnam war, and lamented the assassination of prominent American political figures, including Martin Luther King and, those Catholic martyrs, the Kennedys. Her project was timely. It coevolved with American pop art and the counterculture, and anticipated the Jesus Movement—a brand of evangelical hippie Christianity whose preachers wore blue jeans and spoke street.

Kent's prints operated in a space between the hygienic authority of hard-edged corporate branding and the funky organicism of late 1960s, West Coast, art-nouveau-inspired counterculture posters. Although her graphic treatments recalled advertisements, their hand-drawn, distorted, distressed, fractured letter forms looked less Swiss-corporate, more 'personal'. Kent played up their less-than-perfect, handmade quality, flaunting drips and smears, inconsistencies and registration slips. Her faux-informal, 'higglety-pigglety'⁵ typography was often based on her photos of bent and crumpled signs and on her found-text collages. Her prints also featured her spiky handwriting, with its quirky capitalisation,

suggesting intimate communication (letters and commonplace books).

Kent didn't operate in an art vacuum. She was a magpie and networker. While her work often feigned a direct, naive, childlike quality, it was steeped in art and graphic-arts history—she had an MA in art history. In her work, we can see the influence of Matisse's cutouts, abstract expressionism, Saul Bass's graphics, Charles and Ray Eames's folksy modernism, and Andy Warhol—she caught and was inspired by his breakthrough Campbell's Soup can show at LA's Ferus Gallery in 1962. Her art classes at Immaculate Heart College became a mecca for the avantgarde, with eminent visitors like film director Alfred Hitchcock, composer John Cage, and geodesic-dome prophet Buckminster Fuller.

Kent's art may have been easy on the eye and gentle on my mind, but it was smart graphically. Take her multi-panel work, *Circus Alphabet* (1968). With a panel for each letter of the alphabet, each panel does something different, riffing on a basic idea, building novelty. Kent contrasts and scrambles graphic and typographic techniques past and present, mixing found imagery (derived from antique sources) and text (in different typefaces alluding to different printing technologies), translating them all into the pop-graphic economy of colour-separated screenprinting. *Circus Alphabet* was both timely and retro. Its appropriation of vintage circus imagery was keyed to then-current counterculture nostalgia. It was made the year after the Beatles released *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*—which included the song 'Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite', based on a Victorian-period circus poster—and its eye-popping, fluoro colour scheme was similarly psychedelic.

Some consider Kent an unsung heroine of pop art. Currently, there's a campaign to squeeze her into the pop-art pantheon. This has been the agenda of several recent shows, notably 2015's *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*.⁶ However, for all this, Kent represents something of a dilemma. At first glance, her works look like



Roy Lichtenstein *Yellow and Green Brushstrokes* 1966, oil and magna on canvas, 213.4 x 457.2cm, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein.



Rainbow Swash
1971

pop art—and the documentation of the Mary's Day festivities she art directed may remind us of happenings (hippie be-ins, more like)—but, in her time, she was remote from the pop-art discussion, being understood and distributed more as a graphic designer. At the time, she was not included in books on pop art, although she certainly is now. Corita Kent pop artist belongs to a new idea of pop. She is a product of revisionism.

Actually, at the time, Kent's work ran against the grain of pop. It was an anomaly. Pop art started out as aggressively secular, a response to abstract expressionism's quasi-religious and humanist pretensions. Pop artists embraced commercial imagery to escape abstract expressionism's gravity and mystique—it was lite, but with a purpose. In the 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had satirised and evacuated the expressionist brushstroke, putting it in inverted commas, mocking its claims to immediacy. But, it has been argued that pop art only really began when Warhol finally 'dropped the drip' around 1962.⁷ Yet, even after he did so—and while clearly under his influence—Kent kept leaning the other way. With her hand-drawn letters, she asserted a personal, informal, warm-fuzzy humanism—an expressive 'brushstroke' logic.

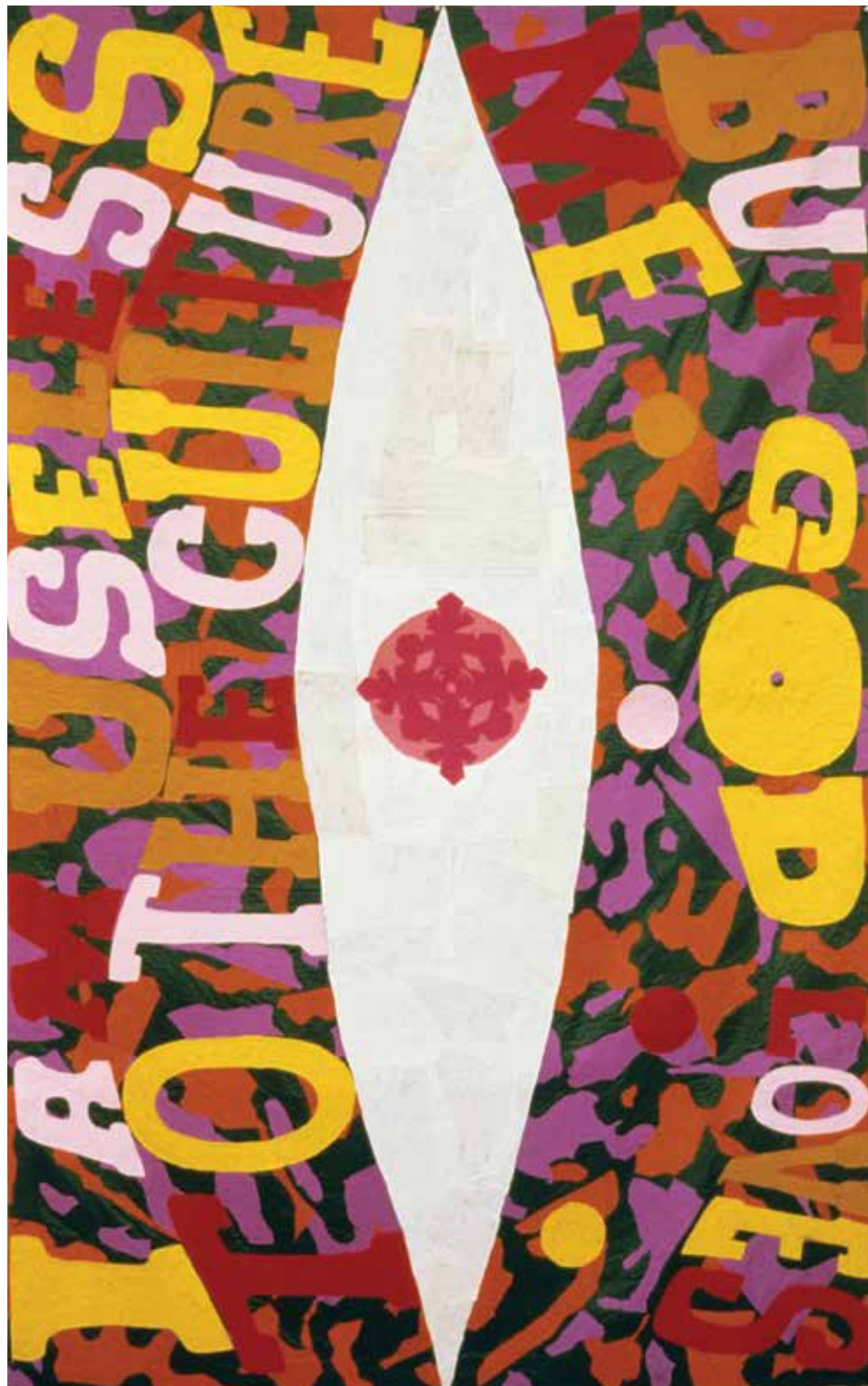
Even after Roy Lichtenstein gutted the brushstroke in his *Brushstrokes* works of 1965–6, Kent continued to reiterate brushstroke logic as shorthand for unmediated creativity, spontaneity, and freedom, personal expression and love. In the 1970s, after leaving the order, the brushstrokes became explicit. In 1971, she created *Rainbow Swash*, a public work on a 43-metre-high gas tank in Boston. Seemingly blind to her support's industrial function, she decorated it with a rainbow of colour brushstrokes. No irony.⁸

Irony was irrelevant to Kent, but crucial for pop. The 1960s was a time of both excitement and paranoia about advertising and consumerism. This ambivalence found its ultimate expression in James Rosenquist's massive wrap-around painting *F-111* (1964–5), in which ad images were set into an image of the F-111, the US's

new tactical fighter-and-bomber plane destined for Vietnam, partly camouflaging it.⁹ Textbook irony. The 1960s were complicated. While anxiety about consumerism underpinned the counterculture (drop out), it was itself a product of middle-class affluence (only some could afford to drop out)—and Madison Avenue moved quickly to understand and exploit the hippies as a market. But Kent was not so interested in complexity. She suppressed the contradiction between secular advertising and her religious message, even though this was and remains the source of her work's frisson for audiences.

Kent was agreeable. She is seen as an activist, but her politics were limited: war is bad, love one another, be nice, 'today is the first day of the rest of your life'. Beyond rubber-stamping causes, her work offered little analysis or argument. While making Catholicism palatable, she steered away from thorny matters, like birth control and abortion, gay rights, or what to do about capitalism.¹⁰ Perhaps her work anticipated slacktivism, our current habit of branding ourselves with righteous issues rather than actually doing anything about them: buy the button badge or poster, like it on Facebook.

The tendency to frame Kent as a political activist leans on knowing the hostility she endured from LA's super-conservative Archbishop, Cardinal James Francis McIntyre. A Vatican II resister and stick-in-the-mud, he wouldn't get with Catholicism's new-and-improved programme. He was no fan of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in general or of Kent in particular. Indeed, he castigated the good sister for daring to compare the Virgin to a ripe tomato in her famous print, *The Juiciest Tomato of All* (1964), and resented her visibility and popularity. McIntyre suppressed the Immaculate Heart order. In 1967, after they began promoting liberalism and abandoned the habit and compulsory daily prayer, Cardinal McIntyre barred them from teaching. He is blamed for Kent's leaving the order in 1968. Because of him, she occupies an ambiguous position. We're able to cast her as epitomising a sea change in the Catholic Church and as a radical within it—whichever we prefer.



Kent's works may be upbeat and friendly, but they're also righteous—full of moral imperatives. Her bright colours and simple forms speak to the child in us, instructing us in charity and hope, peace and love, keeping us on the straight and narrow. Not everyone took kindly to her Sunday-school rainbows. For some of the artists who followed, her work was pure—pure cheese. One LA artist certainly thought so. Mike Kelley had been raised a Catholic in a working-class Detroit family, and Kent's images were among the first things he had seen and thought of as art. In 1987, the year after Kent died, he made a series of handmade felt banners that included various Kent pastiches: *Trash Picker* (a vibrant, happy-clappy patchwork, bearing the pathetic legend, 'I Am Useless to the Culture but God Loves Me'), *The Escaped Bird* (a childish, abject School-of-Paris bird accompanied by the word 'Joy'), and *Let's Talk* (a cookies jar, with the injunction 'Let's Talk About Disobeying'). Ever the contrarian, Kelley cast Kent's messages as saccharine, asinine, and a tad sinister.¹¹

Andy Warhol *The Last Supper* 1986, acrylic on canvas, 302.9 x 668.7cm, collection Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2016 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. © Photo, SCALA, Florence.

opposite
Mike Kelley *Trash Picker* 1987. © Mike Kelley / VAGA.
Licensed by Viscopy, 2016.

Kelley and Kent were oil and water. Kent doesn't relate to the suspicious, conflicted, cynical, agonistic (aka 'critical') attitude we typically associate with contemporary art. And she doesn't easily fit into pop, so much as sit alongside it. Now, forcibly inserting her into the pop-art canon makes pop art itself seem different. Her work offers an oblique vantage point for considering pop art and its legacy. For instance, it draws attention to religious subtexts in the work of canonical, supposedly secular pop artists—her contemporaries. Take Warhol, a Ruthenian Catholic, a committed church goer. Kent reminds us of the icon-like quality of his *Marilyns*, of his religious preoccupation with sanctity, death, and disaster, and of his late *The Last Supper* works (1986–7). In *The Last Suppers*, Warhol collages a Dove soap logo (suggesting the Holy Spirit) and a body-building ad slogan, 'Be a SOMEBODY with a BODY' (suggesting the Incarnation) into Leonardo's masterpiece—a classic Kent move. Similarly, with lapsed-Catholic Ed Ruscha, also from the City of Angels, Kent's proximity alerts us to his preference for visions of miraculous light and for painting loaded religious words (including 'Gospel', 'Faith', 'Mercy', 'Purity', 'Sin', and 'The End'). Etcetera.

In the beginning, pop art and abstract expressionism were polar opposites. However, as



Michael Parekowhai 'Everyone Will Live Quietly' Micah 4:4 1990



Jim Speers Honeywell 1998

we increasingly engage with pop art independently of its formative issues with abstract expressionism, this oppositional characterisation loses its grip. These days, we increasingly enjoy pop art's belied quasi-religious edge, as artists conjure with the auratic power of mass-media images and the magical animism of commodity fetishism. Suddenly, pop and religion don't seem necessarily antithetical. Kent's pre-critical, affirmative approach also resonates with Jeff Koons's neo-pop, post-critical, people-pleasing work. Koons compared his topiary *Puppy* (1992) to 'the Sacred Heart of Jesus'.¹²

In New Zealand, we see such magical thinking let loose in the work of artists negotiating pop's legacy. For instance, Michael Parekowhai's early word sculpture, 'Everyone Will Live Quietly' *Micah 4:4* (1990), discovers the sacred in the profane. The then-young Māori artist spells out the name of the Old Testament prophet Micah four times in block letters, like a trademark, and titles it with an optimistic quote from Micah's brief book. (Chapter 4, verse 4—get it?) The letters are laminated with a common Formica that resembles sacred pounamu. Like many of Parekowhai's early works, this piece suggests the way post-contact Māori read their own thinking into the products of the dominant culture, particularly the bible, making them their own. The parallel with Kent is clear, but the logic reversed. She imposes enduring Christian import onto our secular world, whereas Māori projected their own urgent needs onto the bible.

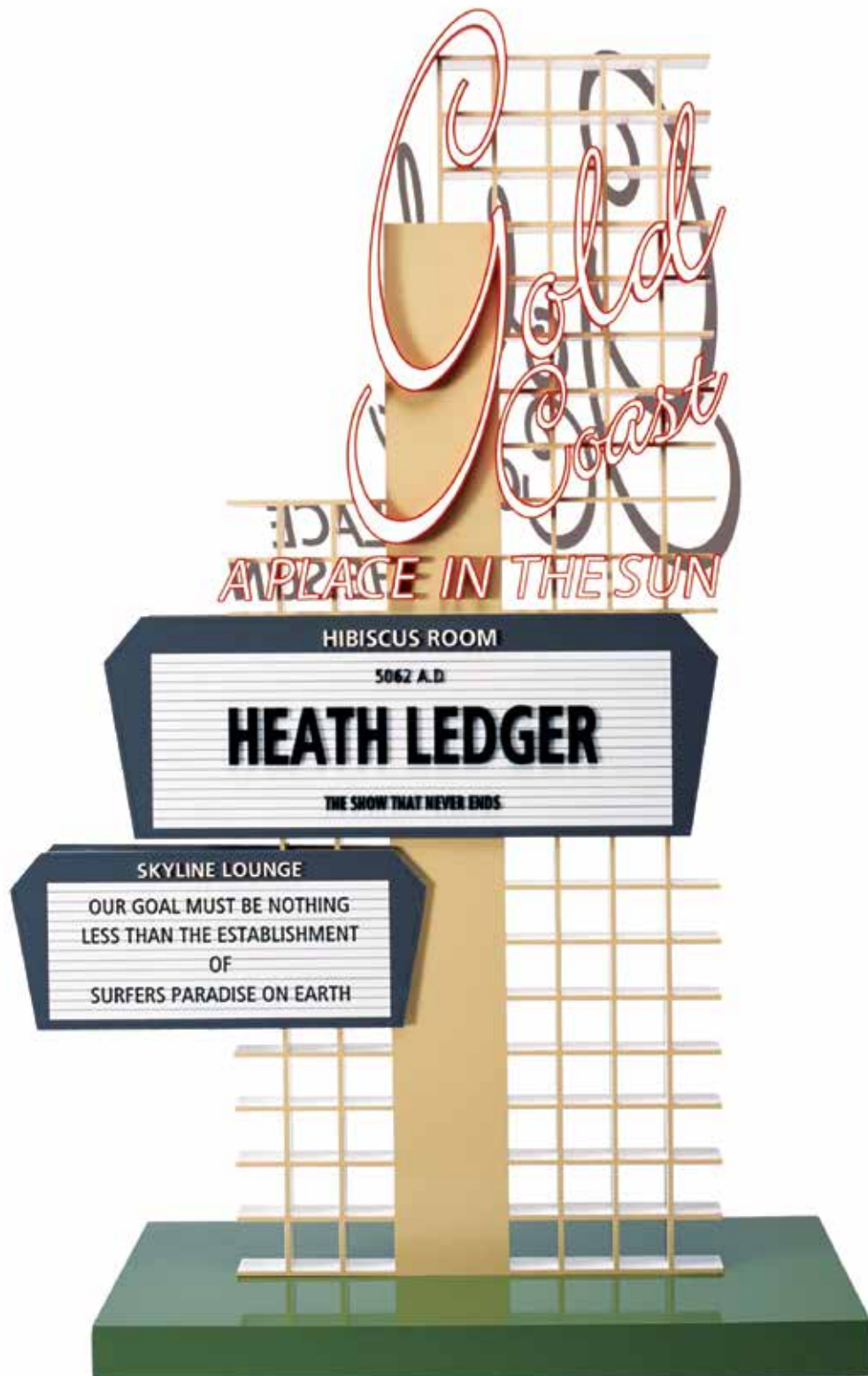
In the mid-1990s, Jim Speers similarly celebrated poetic-religious-transcendent possibilities persisting in corporate liveries and advertising lightboxes. His lightbox installation, *Honeywell* (1998), resembles a disassembled computer-company shop sign. Speers turns a found company trademark—which we would normally not give a second glance—into a utopian haiku. Split into three units, spaced across the floor, *Honeywell* combines 1960s secular pop (appropriated trademarks) and 1960s secular minimalism (industrially fabricated boxes) to create a quasi-religious beacon—a lighthouse.

But, the antipodean artist who best exemplifies the conflation of religion and pop is an Australian. Scott Redford was born on the Gold Coast, a famously trashy, culture-free zone—a shameless mash-up of LA, Vegas, and Miami aesthetics and lifestyles. Since the turn of the millennium, Redford has embraced the Coast's slick aesthetic, imagining the residents of Surfers Paradise to be already living in the promised land, albeit oblivious of the fact. He's made surfboard crosses and has emblazoned surfboards with impossibly futuristic, portentous dates; he's made paintings using surfboard-making materials and techniques, where commercial logos become mystic talismans; and he's made photographs of surfers carrying a surfboard cross and pointing to heaven in the manner of Leonardo da Vinci's *John the Baptist* (1513–6). For Redford, the local surfers have replaced Galilee fishermen. Maybe it's a joke, maybe not. For a moment, Redford asks us to consider his birthplace as a singularity—the marriage of spirituality and capitalism, post-modernism and eschatology. Redemption.

God is everywhere: Kent finds him in the supermarket, Redford at the beach. And he is inescapable. It seems, the closer you get to the secular, the more you eliminate religion, the more religion raises its head.

Kent's legacy also operates outside of art, in those contemporary forms of American Christian propaganda that have learnt from advertising and pop culture in order to compete with it, to turn us on to God instead of godless materialism. This is particularly visible in the use of computer-generated animated type in Christian evangelical videos, to make religious messages dramatic and infectious; to criticise us, to motivate us. These videos promote all manner of messages across the denominational and political spectrums. The church has become a 'video ministry'—a videodrome.

Some of the videos are sophisticated, some mawkish. One King Productions' hectoring *Fan or Follower* (ca. 2011) is based on a stirring sermon from Pastor Darrell Schaeffer of Ohio's One Way Church. It has the urgency and cadence of a disaster-movie trailer. As we hear the pastor



and Co. inciting us to be not simply Christ's fan but his follower, we also read the words—seeing reinforces hearing. Presented in a straight-up serif typeface, white on black, the words quiver, as though we are watching them in a state of rapture. As the diatribe builds to a crescendo, the tremulous words expand and explode in light as if in some cosmic cataclysm, leaving just one word on screen, the self-evident conclusion—'Follower'.

Equally orgasmic is *Revolution* (2014). Director James Grochowalski, a motion-graphics designer for Central Christian Church in Las Vegas, calls his music clip an 'inspirational mini-movie'. It asks 'how we can be the hands and feet of Jesus in this hurting world', and argues that 'we shouldn't just stand by and wait for change, we should be the change'. Featuring block letters, geometric forms, and flaming

graphics, edited to generic electronic dance music, it is catalogued at Sermoncentral.com: 'Tags: Change, Evangelize, Changed Life, Revolution, Be the Church; Audience: Teens, Adults; Genre: Emotional, Powerful, Reflective; Style: Progressive.' Grochowalski says his videos are mostly played either at the beginning of services, to kick off the worship, or to set the stage immediately before the pastor speaks. Stirring stuff.

Like Kent's prints, video sermons seek to make Christianity contemporary, vital, and viral. They use the latest techniques of persuasion to tell us what we need to know—and why wouldn't they? I must say, I am split. I am not a Christian, but I see no good reason for Christianity not to advertise itself like any and every other belief system or product, to plead its case in the free market of ideas. But, I don't buy it. I know that Christianity, like all the great religions, is a man-made thing. It originates long, long ago, in a place far, far away, when the issues were different—before the enlightenment, before science, before

Michael Stevenson *Jesus Changed My Life* 1988

opposite

Scott Redford *Proposal for a Gold Coast Public Sculpture / A Place in the Sun* 2005



feminism, before Wonder Bread, before pop, before the pill, before we put someone on the moon—and it speaks to the needs of those times, not to now. In the rush to update it, to make it contemporary, to make the mummies dance, that is lost—history collapses.

On the other hand, the Christian arts of Kent in her day and the video ministers of today are also a reminder that we can never escape history, that the church art of the Western tradition was always already advertising before advertising, and that, even in the most cynical work of the most sceptical pop and post-pop artists, religiosity lingers, like background microwave radiation from the Big Bang. Kent's work reminds me of all this because it does and doesn't fit into art history. Kent may not have made pop art at the time, but her legacy is remaking pop art now.

—

Robert Leonard is Chief Curator at City Gallery Wellington.

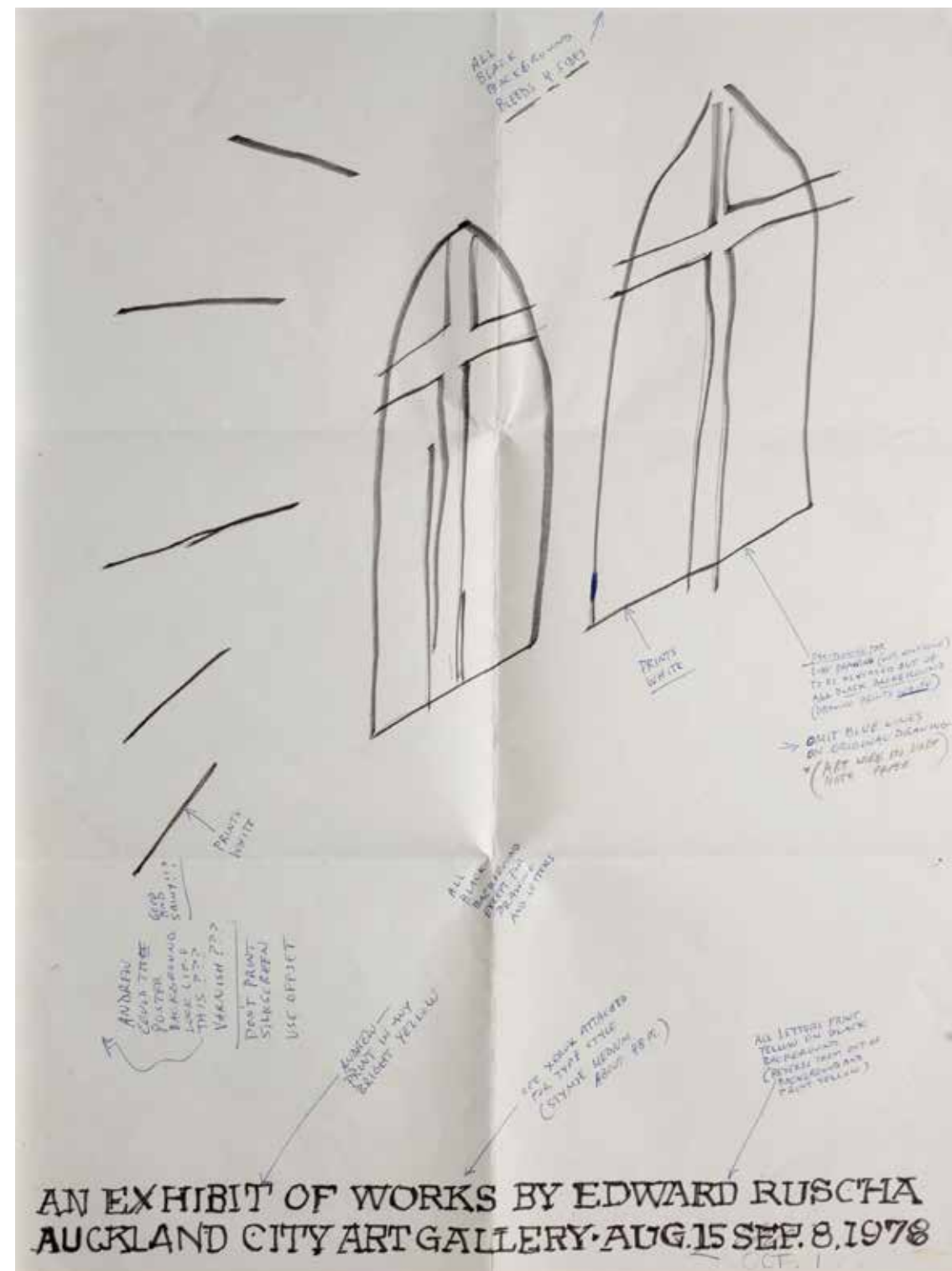
1. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 243–4.
2. The World's Fair was not completely tolerant and inclusive. Andy Warhol's mural on the exterior of the New York state pavilion, *The Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, was painted over.
3. Susan Dackerman, 'Corita Kent and the Language of Pop', *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2015), 16.
4. For non-antipodeans, I should explain. This was Mrs. Marsh's inevitable refrain on Australian ads for Colgate toothpaste in the 1970s and 1980s. Colgate toothpaste gets into your teeth 'like liquid gets into this chalk'.
5. Karen Carson in *Someday Is Now: The Art of Corita Kent*, ed. Michael Duncan and Ian Berry (New York: Prestel, 2013), 126.
6. *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop* (2015), Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge MA, and San Antonio Museum of Art.
7. There's a great story. Early on, Warhol did two paintings of a Coke bottle, one in a flat commercial-art style, the other a more painterly treatment, a nod to abstract expressionism. He asked filmmaker Emile De Antonio which was best. De Antonio went for the first. He said, 'I think that helped Andy make up his mind ... that was almost the birth of Pop.' Warhol dropped the drip, negating both the hand of the artist and the transcendental status of art, consigning 'handpainted pop' to the past. See Benjamin Buchloch, 'Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956–1966', in Annette Michelson ed., *October Files 2: Andy Warhol* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001): 39, fn22.
8. The brushstroke has become a graphic-design cliché, regularly reiterated in arts-organisation and arts-festival logos as shorthand for childish creativity, expression, freedom, and happiness, at a time when contemporary art has largely lost faith in these values.
9. The F-111 was then new. It would not enter service until 1967.
10. By contrast, in 1967, prompted by the Church's failure to fully implement the spirit of Vatican II, Luc-Gabrielle, who had already left the convent, released, under her new stage name Luc Dominique, her song 'Glory Be to God for the Golden Pill', defending contraception.
11. See Cary Levine, *Pay for Your Pleasures: Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
12. See *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1992), 160; and Koons's interview with Anthony Haden Guest, in *Jeff Koons* (Munich: Taschen, 1992), 33. See also Veit Loers, 'Puppy, the Sacred Heart of Jesus', *Parkett*, no. 50/51, 1997.



Ed Ruscha *Love Chief* 1986. © Ed Ruscha.

opposite

Ed Ruscha *Design for Exhibition Poster 'Graphic Works by Edward Ruscha'* 1978. © Ed Ruscha.



It's time to DECIDE:
are you just a Fan of Jesus
or a Follower

One King Productions *Fan or Follower* ca. 2011
opposite
James Grochowalski *Revolution* 2014

DO YOU WANT TO BE A PART OF A
REVOLUTION?

**A REVOLUTION
FOR GOD?**

LET'S BECOME PART OF
THE CHANGE

DON'T STAND BY AND WAIT
FOR CHANGE

DON'T SAY
**YOU WILL LIVE
FOR CHRIST**

THIS IS
**A HURTING
WORLD**

**THE LORD WILL
LEAD YOU**

WORKS

Sister Corita's Summer of Love	<i>Highly Prized</i> 1967
Sister Corita Kent	<i>Left</i> 1967
<i>To All of My Calling Your Name</i> 1962	<i>Life Is a Complicated Business</i> 1967
<i>That Evil Is Never the Climax of History</i> 1963	<i>Right</i> 1967
<i>This Joy</i> 1963	<i>Somebody Had to Break the Rules</i> 1967
<i>Fish</i> 1964	<i>Stop the Bombing</i> 1967
<i>Mary Does Laugh</i> 1964	<i>Things Go Better With</i> 1967
<i>Peache Bread</i> 1964	<i>Wet and Wild</i> 1967
<i>Someday Is Now</i> 1964	<i>With Love to the Everyday Miracle</i> 1967
<i>Bread and Toast</i> 1965	<i>Circus Alphabet</i> 1968
<i>Enriched Bread</i> 1965	<i>In Memory of RFK</i> 1968
<i>Life</i> 1965	<i>Words of Prayer</i> 1968
<i>People Like Us Yes</i> 1965	<i>A Passion for the Possible</i> 1969
<i>Power Up</i> 1965	<i>American Sampler</i> 1969
<i>Apples Are Basic</i> 1966	<i>If I</i> 1969
<i>For Emergency Use Soft Shoulder</i> 1966	<i>King's Dream</i> 1969
<i>Give the Gang Our Best</i> 1966	<i>Manflowers</i> 1969
<i>(Give the Gang) The Clue Is in the Signs</i> 1966	<i>Moonflowers</i> 1969
<i>Green Up</i> 1966	<i>News of the Week</i> 1969
<i>Ha,</i> 1966	<i>The Cry that Will Be Heard</i> 1969
<i>Lesson Nine</i> 1966	<i>Commission—Ellsberg Poster</i> 1972
<i>Now You Can</i> 1966	<i>Men Will Kindle Light</i> 1972
<i>(Our Best) Reality Proves Very Little</i> 1966	<i>I Go in to Come Out</i> 1976
<i>Shalom</i> 1966	<i>Impossible Loves</i> 1976
<i>The Handling Is in Your Hands</i> 1966	<i>Possible Loves</i> 1976
<i>Come Alive</i> 1967	<i>The Dove and the Walrus</i> 1976
<i>Fresh Bread</i> 1967	<i>Yes</i> 3 1979
<i>Handle With Care</i> 1967	screenprints
<i>Harness the Sun</i> 1967	collections Corita Art Center, Los Angeles; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; Deborah Collins; and Julliette Bellocq

with films

Thomas Conrad

Alleluia: The Life and Art of Corita Kent: The '60s 1967
16mm film transferred to video
23min

Baylis Glascock

Mary's Day 1965 1965
16mm films transfered to video
11min 25sec
collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

We Have No Art 1967
16mm film transfered to video
26min
Courtesy Corita Art Center, Los Angeles

Aaron Rose

Become a Microscope: Ninety Statements on Sister Corita 2009
video
23min 40sec

and at City Gallery

David Bowden

'I Am' 2014
video
6min 15sec

James Grochowalski

Revolution 2014
video
1 min 32sec

Colin McCahon

A Grain of Wheat 1970
acrylic on unstretched canvas
208 x 343.5cm
collection Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, Wellington

One King Productions

Fan or Follower ca. 2011
video
4min 20sec

Michael Parekowhai

'Everyone Will Live Quietly' Micah 4:4 1990
wood, laminates
25.5 x 220 x 150cm
collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth
(purchased 1991)

Scott Redford

Boy with Surfboard Cross 1999
offset lithograph on paper
71 x 50cm

Proposal for a Gold Coast Public Sculpture/A Place in the Sun 2005
Painted laser-cut acrylic and metal
108 x 48 x 20cm
Gordon and Leanne Bennett Collection, Brisbane

This Side of Paradise/Kristen 2005
Giclee print
85 x 85cm

Surf Painting: The Higher Beings Command Paint Palm Trees Instead 2007
resin and fibreglass over acrylic on foam, decals
124 x 84cm

Ed Ruscha

Design for Exhibition Poster 'Graphic Works by Edward Ruscha' 1978
ink on paper
71 x 54 cm
collection E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

Love Chief 1986
acrylic on canvas
167 x 167cm
collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
(purchased 1989)

Jim Speers

Honeywell 1998
vinyl on Perspex, fluorescent light tubes
42.5 x 248.5 x 30.5cm
collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
(purchased 2003)

Michael Stevenson

Jesus Changed My Life 1988
acrylic on paper
33 x 50.8 cm
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
(purchased 1994)

IMMACULATE HEART COLLEGE ART DEPARTMENT RULES

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

SISTER CORITA'S SUMMER OF LOVE

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth
18 December 2015–3 April 2016

City Gallery Wellington
23 July–16 October 2016

Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne
22 November 2016—26 March 2017

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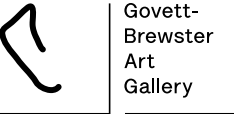
Corita Kent favoured lowercase titles, however we have followed our own style with capitalisation.

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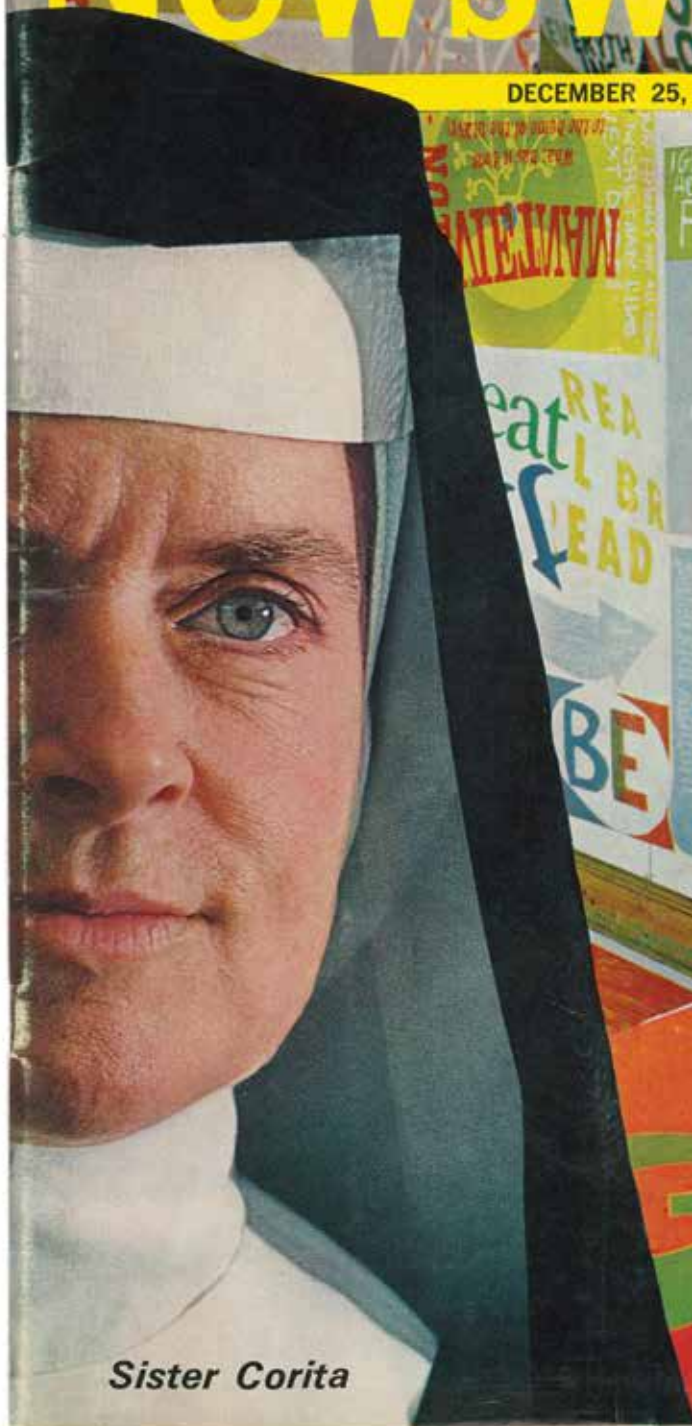
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ART CENTER

Newsweek

THE NUN: GOING MODERN

DECEMBER 25, 1967

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Sister Corita

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