

## Corita Kent and the Language of Pop

Edited by Susan Dackerman  
Essays by Jennifer Roberts and  
Richard Meyer  
Harvard Art Museums, 2015

Reviewed by Erin Devine

In *handle with care*, a 1967 screenprint by Pop artist and then-Catholic nun Corita Kent (1918–86), green stenciled letters overlap freer floating red ones on an orange, circular ground. The green set is titular, the red from a Chevrolet ad slogan of the mid-1960s: “See the man who can save you the most.” Bright colors and off-kilter fonts mimic the era’s design aesthetics that, along with directly appropriated texts, capitulate the Pop Art style in which Kent’s work was deeply entrenched. Using an existing ad slogan not as sardonic commentary but as a wry double entendre of theological import lends a sense of Kent’s unique and poignant perspective, enriched as it was by the revolutionary forces not only within art but the counterculture and the Catholic Church.

It’s said in the New Testament that in the beginning was the word, and in Kent’s images the word becomes the form. It was the basis for her visual compositions, both symbolically and aesthetically calling to mind the preeminence of highly ornamentalized letters and syncretic influences that comprised Christian manuscripts of the Middle Ages. Precise care seems given to every letter in her prints, and nuances of meaning are culled from the secular songs, poems, and advertisements she inventively aligned with Church doctrine. Kent selected passages and quotations that reflected ideals of compassion and community, newly elevated as part of Vatican II reforms. These sweeping changes in the Church—the most groundbreaking since the Council of Trent in the mid-fifteenth century—encouraged Kent’s appropriation of lines from writers such as Simon and Garfunkel, e.e. cummings, and Martin Luther King, granting currency to the Church as an ally in

harmony with the peace-love rhetoric of the decade.

Kent broached religious, cultural, and artistic revolutions during a tumultuous era, but she was not an easy placement within the vanguard milieu. Revisionist art historical inquiry situates the Los Angeles scene where Kent was based as a predominantly masculine one, as particularly noted in the stable of artists represented by the West Coast’s center for Pop Art, the Ferus Gallery (16).<sup>1</sup> With dual outsider status as a woman and a nun, this may explain why Kent was never included in the important galleries that exhibited Pop or the major museum showings of its artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Although some of these exhibitions were very near the Immaculate Heart College (IHC) where she lived and taught, and artists like Andy Warhol were aware of her output, it is perhaps also Kent’s singular approach, adhered as it was to her service to the Church, that may have worked against her in a time when religion in art was virtually obsolescent.

Her retrospective at the Harvard Art Museums in 2015 (the exhibition traveled to the San Antonio Museum of Art), the occasion for this catalogue, provided an important platform for the reinvestigation of an artist whose work bridged two important moments of 1962: Vatican II and the first major Pop Art exhibitions. Her contemporaries also utilized language and text in their work, but often only as incidental to the products, signs, and aesthetic concerns that captured their attention, such as Warhol’s cardboard boxes, Roy Lichtenstein’s comic strips, or Jasper Johns’s stenciling. Kent’s use of English text, however, coincided with the Church’s decision to end the use of Latin in the mass. Just as Warhol proclaimed Pop as an art for the masses, Vatican II called for a greater reconnection to its followers through more accessible worship (66). These turns toward the vernacular fueled Kent’s pictorial and symbolic strategies with language that fused modern advertising and secular writings to both art and spiritual experience.

Responsible for most of the exhibition’s material, Harvard Art Museums

obviously hoped to increase interest in their own vast holdings of the artist’s prints. Although much of her known output occurred in Los Angeles during the 1960s, by the end of that decade mounting tensions between the Church and the progressive nuns of IHC led Kent to renounce her vows in 1968 and move to Boston.

As the exhibition and catalogue suggest, the timeliness of a resurgent interest in Kent goes far beyond convenience and accessibility. Popular favor for Pope Francis I marks his arrival as perhaps the most radical impetus for change in the Church since Vatican II at the same time that the presence of a new counterculture movement seems afoot: from Occupy Wall Street, to the popularity of Bernie Sanders, to music festivals in the U.S. drawing tens of thousands of camping college-age youth to witness an atmosphere with similarities to the era of Woodstock. There is even a trendy reemergence of vintage letterpress, found in many of Kent’s prints, and her fascination with typeface.

The visual format of Kent’s prints is mirrored in the layout of *The Language of Pop*. Often sourcing at least three different texts in various fonts, including her own handwriting, Kent’s compositions demand that the viewer enter into a kind of optical sorting process, or what Harvard Professor Jennifer Roberts calls a “mental calisthenics” (75). Likewise, the dense catalogue is packed with Kent’s colorful images and the comparisons also included in the exhibition: works by Warhol, Lichtenstein, Johns, Ed Ruscha, Robert Indiana, Jim Dine, Marisol and others. Covering her work from 1962 to 1968 (the year she left the order), the essays and entries are divided along Kent’s central interests in text and language, the products (mainly food) from which she took inspiration, the street and traffic signage she appropriated, and the subjects of her political concerns. Exhibition curator Susan Dackerman’s excellent grounding essay contextualizes Kent within the framework of Pop Art while also correlating the style and subjects of the avant-garde movement to the re-identification efforts of the Church following Vatican II. Jennifer Roberts’s

thorough essay on Kent's printmaking process lends technical understanding to the unique style of her images, while Richard Meyer situates Kent's singularity as an artist to her social engagement, particularly in support of Civil Rights and against the Vietnam War.

Meyer notes that Kent "urges us to make meaningful change in the world" (141), thereby differing from the Pop artists of her age, transforming brand designs and popular texts into calls for political and cultural intervention. Kent's focus on food consumption especially provided allegories for the value the Church placed upon charity for the hungry. *Enriched bread* (1965) adapts the well-known Wonder Bread brand to the "wonder" of transubstantiation in communion as well as the social transformation of community as outlined in a passage by Albert Camus. Kent directly references the bells on a Bell Brand potato chip bag in the print *bell brand* (1967), overlaid with the Granny Goose Foods slogan, "Why not put a little snap in your life?," and a quote from the enigmatic comedian Lord Buckley, "Would it embarrass you very much if I were to tell you that I love you?" Kent's cleverly wrought iconography combining brand imagery, random texts, and Catholic doctrine recontextualizes both spirituality and social awareness in surprising ways, as in the catalogue's cover image, *the juiciest tomato of all* (1964; Fig. 1), in which the Virgin Mary is likened to a red, ripe Del Monte tomato. Her use of the supermarket as a site of information that can be reintroduced in enlightening ways represented a completely different strategy from those of her contemporaries such as Warhol and Claes Oldenburg—of whom she was well aware (19–20)—utilizing the same sources.

Current interest in social practice as integral to the artist's process positions Kent again as a prescient figure whose work has too long been undervalued. Meyer addresses Kent's direction of the IHC's 1964 Mary's Day as an example of her performative intervention congruent with the Happenings of her era. Traditionally a processional feast with donations from the congregation of food for the poor, Kent and her students

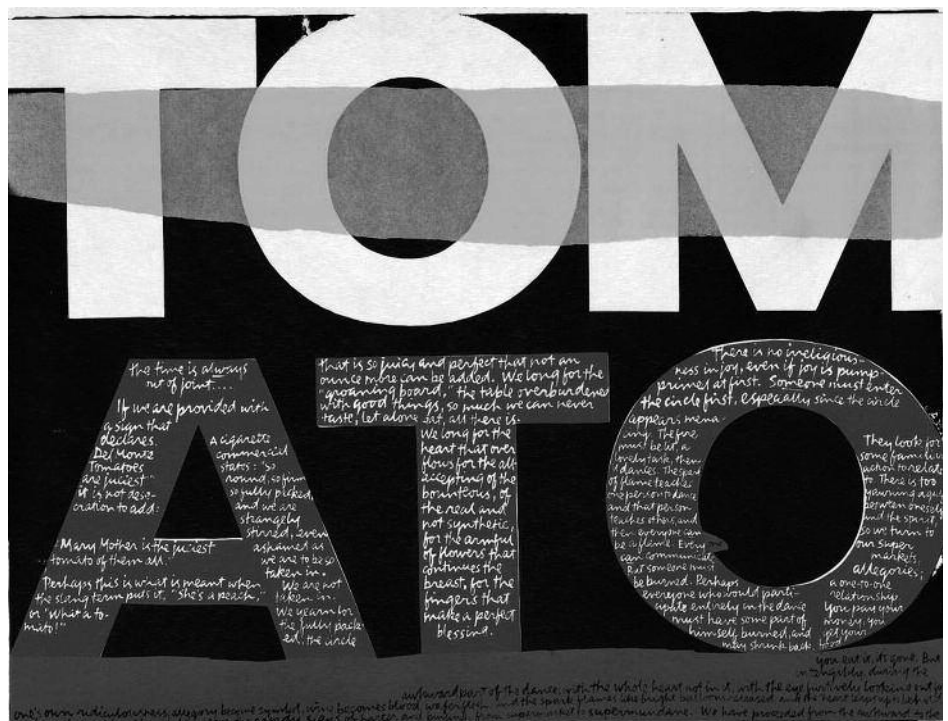


Fig. 1, Corita Kent, *the juiciest tomato of all* (1964), screenprint, 29 3/4" x 36". Collection of Jason Simon, New York.

turned the event into a visual extravaganza with the theme "Food for Peace." Little is stated in this catalogue on the disintegration in relations between the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart and the Catholic Church. But it is likely that Kent, spurred by the Church's failure to consistently live up to its own reforms and its criticism of her Order, left under a cloud of disappointment and disillusionment. The catalogue ends with a summary of the Boston Gas Tank—commissioned in 1971, this bright vision still can be seen along Interstate 93—Kent's largest and only permanent public work that is also her least socio-political one, leaving readers frustrated with

unanswered questions about this lost radical while also opening the doors to expand upon her life and work. •

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**Notes**

1. Dackerman points this out in her essay, but further research is evident; see especially Cécile Whiting's *Pop LA: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006).

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