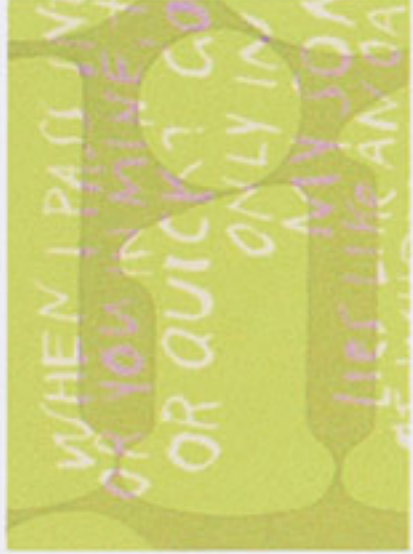


CYNTHIA BURLINGHAM

A Very Democratic Form

Corita Kent as a Printmaker

“ don't think I decided. I think I just made prints, and the next year I decided to make prints again.”

In her 1976 oral history Corita Kent characterized her decision to become a printmaker as almost accidental.¹ But by focusing her art practice on printmaking, she aligned herself with the history of a medium that had strong connections to her own progressive and democratic ideals. From the invention of the printed image in the late fifteenth century, prints provided the means for wide dissemination and accessible communication of ideas. Early Renaissance woodcuts, whether distributed in the form of broadsides or pasted directly to the walls of cities and villages, communicated religious or political ideologies to a wide and varied public. Prints were the antithesis of singular commissioned paintings intended for viewing only by wealthy patrons in their private chapels. Though electronic media came to dominate mass communication during the latter half of the twentieth century, the printed image remains prevalent in contemporary culture.

The populist aspect of printmaking was clearly important to Corita: “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.”² In keeping with this philosophy she priced her prints inexpensively and generally produced them in large unnumbered editions. Her entire oeuvre of over eight hundred prints, dating from 1951 to 1986, consists of screenprints. Screenprinting,

also known as serigraphy or silkscreen, had the practicality, flexibility and relative ease of use that Corita required in order to create large numbers of multi-colored prints. The only print medium that does not reverse the image produced on the matrix during the printing process, it was easy to learn and easy to teach. The same screens could be used repeatedly, allowing the artist to change colors easily, and the medium facilitated incorporation of photographs and texts from other sources. Compared with other printmaking media, it proved a pragmatic choice for an artist with limited financial resources as it required little space, few specialized facilities, and no large, expensive presses.

The historical origins of screenprinting lie in commercial printing, and this association with sign painting, labels, advertisements, and other commercial applications inhibited its struggle for artistic legitimacy in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The first non-commercial uses grew out of the Works Progress Administration’s Fine Arts Program (FAP). Few color prints had been made before this period, and the FAP, which established a screenprint unit in 1938, developed new methods for achieving more painterly effects with subtleties of color, modeling, and line.³ Though artists have continued to develop individual variations, there were then, as now, two basic methods of screenprinting. In the applied stencil method, a stencil attached to the underside of the screen keeps ink from that area during printing. In the tusche resist method, an image is painted on the

surface of the screen with a greasy substance, such as tusche or crayon, becomes soluble in turpentine when dry. After an overlay of glue blocks out the rest of the screen the original design is removed from the screen with the solvent, leaving a negative stencil.⁴



THE 1940S MARKED THE HIGHPOINT of the artistic use of color serigraphy in the United States, with the formation of the Silk Screen Group, later the National Serigraph Society, in 1940 to promote the art. In 1941 Philadelphia Museum of Art curator Karl Zigrosser coined the expression “serigraph” to distinguish the form from its commercial beginnings, and the decade brought wide distribution of several influential artistic manuals, including one by the artist Harry Sternberg. The artist Guy Maccoy was the first to employ the process for limited edition artists’ prints. Maccoy moved to Los Angeles in 1947 to teach at the Jepson Art Institute and later Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) and in 1948 was one of the founders of the Western Serigraph Society. Still, the medium had difficulty disowning both its commercial origins. The fact that its primary artistic use was to mass-produce affordable reproductions of paintings also alienated it from more innovative art movements of the period. Important print exhibitions such as the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s National Print Annual, established in 1947, initially included few silkscreens.⁵ The screenprint soon became associated with social and political movements through the work of artists like Ben Shahn, who began making silkscreens in 1941 and continued for the next twenty-five years. Other artists like Sylvia Wald, Dorr Bothwell, and Warrington Colescott worked in an abstract idiom and became known for their artistic innovations in the screenprint medium in the 1950s. Though screenprinting would not achieve wide reception in

the mainstream art world until the 1960s, innovative abstract prints such as these led critic Dore Ashton to affirm in 1954 that screenprinting no longer was the choice for “pedestrian” artists working representationally, but was being employed by artists to create more experimental abstract prints.⁶

Corita’s formal education during the 1940s was rooted in the study of the history of art, though she maintained a profound interest in the art of her time. Of her undergraduate education at Immaculate Heart College, she recalled her art history teacher Alois Schardt, **“one of the greatest men I’ve ever known,” who taught her that change is constant, and that “each period really came out of the**

blood and bones and life of that time and couldn’t be any other.”⁷

Corita received her master’s degree in art history, with a thesis on medieval sculpture, from the University of Southern California in 1951, the same year she made her first print. Though her formal education focused on art history rather than art practice, she did take a silk-screen class in her last year of graduate school, most likely from Jules Heller, who had started a graphic studio at USC in 1947. But she recalled that as far as printmaking was concerned, it was

not her teachers who most influenced her.⁸ Instead she learned screenprinting from the wife of muralist Alfredo Ramos Martínez while attempting to teach herself from a manual, though she considered herself self-taught. Her most important artistic influence was the designer Charles Eames, though she cites the influence of other artists such as Robert Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Ben Shahn. Well acquainted with contemporary art, she regularly went to galleries in New York, as well as local exhibitions in Pasadena, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and at the galleries on La Cienega Boulevard. By the early 1950s she had actively joined the Los Angeles art scene, both making and exhibiting her own work.



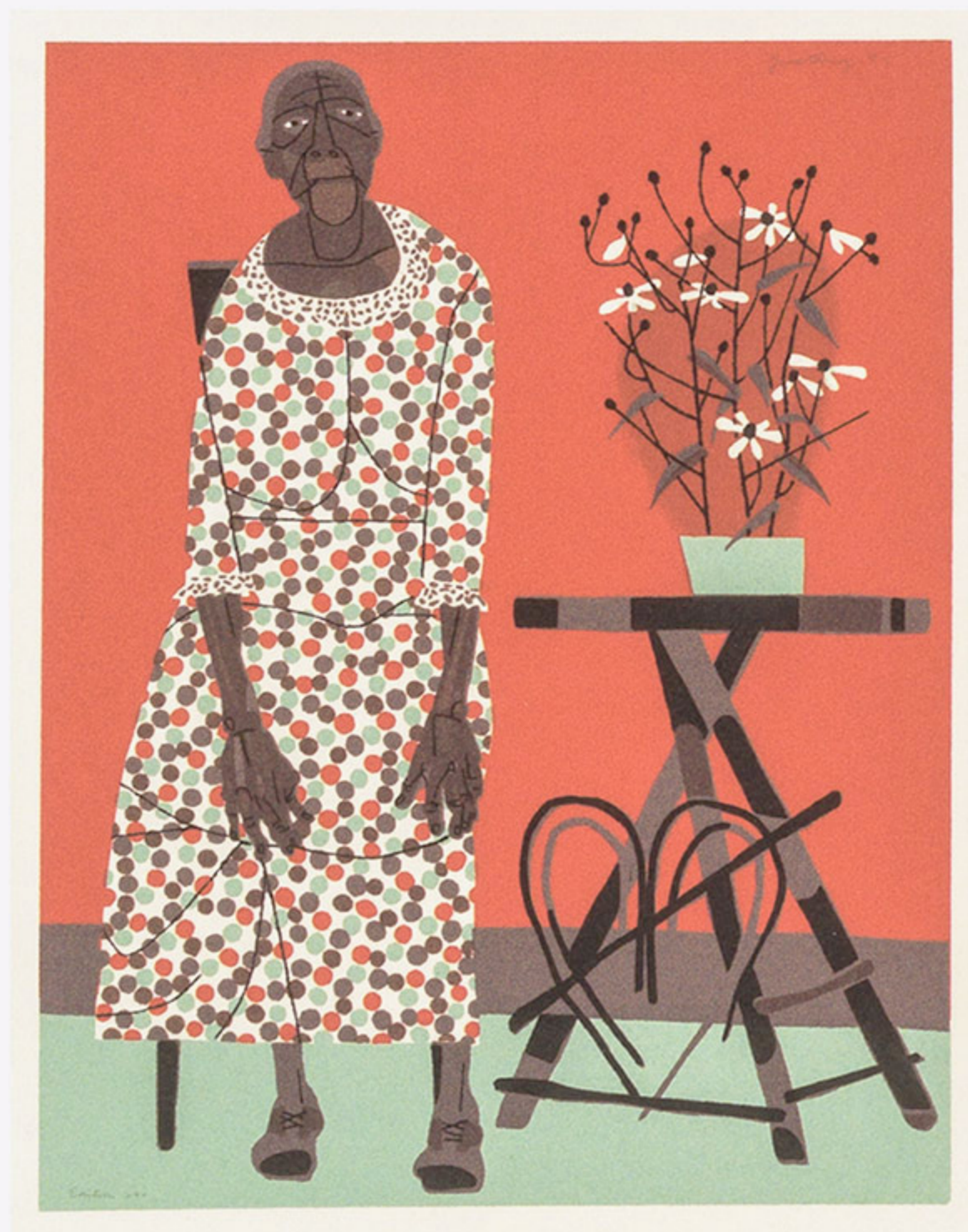
let all the world keep holiday, 1955
(55.10), 18 × 24 in.

Corita herself disparaged the derivative aspects of her prints of this period, calling them “**awkward and searchy**,” and indeed she varied her approach to silkscreening over the first several years, using both the stencil and resist methods and superimposing layers of opaque and translucent inks. In her earliest prints, her search for meaningful subjects in religious art took her back to medieval architecture and sculpture, and the compartmentalized sections and strong outlines of her earliest prints recall the stained glass windows and intricate sculptural portals of gothic cathedrals. She worked in an energetic, expressionistic style, with dynamic brushwork and multiple layers of vibrant color, frequently utilizing more than twenty colors in one print. She also made more reductive abstract works with veiled transparent colors similar to other contemporary screenprints by artists such as Wald. Though her prints remained figurative, they had little in common with the flat, opaque layers of ink in the figurative prints of artists who had pioneered the medium in the 1940s such as Maccoby and Robert Gwathmey, who used the medium to reproduce his own paintings. The painterly, evocative quality of her work during this period, achieved through printing many layers of opaque and transparent colors, instead allied her with the innovative practitioners of screenprinting allied with Abstract Expressionism during the 1950s.⁹

even superior to other print media because “the artist’s close, personal handling of each step in its creation gives a unique value,” and that prints made by other graphic methods are frequently printed by professional printers rather than by the artist. Here Corita affirmed the artistic importance and legitimacy of the serigraph by emphasizing both its rarity and the artist’s direct engagement with the creation of a work of art. The elaborate nature of these prints undoubtedly limited the number of individual impressions and the size of each edition, and indeed the overall number of prints she made in the 1950s was half of what she would create in the subsequent decade.¹¹

Before 1960, most printmaking activities in the United States centered at universities and colleges, which had expanded and flourished after the Second World War. Prints were generally made by artists who identified themselves exclusively as printmakers, often even devoting themselves to one medium such as lithography or etching. Along with the formation of numerous print societies during the 1950s, there were many prestigious regional and national print annuals, invitationals, and other exhibitions established in the wake of the flourishing print activity in educational institutions. Corita’s prints enjoyed increasing public recognition during the 1950s and frequent exposure in these exhibitions. One of her first major prints, **the lord**

is with thee, a twenty-three color serigraph, was exhibited in the exhibition Artists of Los Angeles and Vicinity at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1952, where it won first prize in the print division. In the same year **this beginning of miracles** was one of the few serigraphs commissioned by the International Graphic Arts Society, selected by a panel of well-known print curators including Una Johnson, Carl Zigrosser, William Lieberman, and the artist Ben Shahn. The same print appeared in usc’s Second National Print Exhibition in 1953, where the panel included artist June Wayne. In 1953 and 1954 her **seat of wisdom**



Robert Gwathmey (American, 1903–1988),
Portrait of a Farmer’s Wife, 1954,
screen print, 22¾ × 17½ in.
Collection UCLA Grunwald Center
for the Graphic Arts, Hammer Museum.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Talpis.



ORITA HAD A CLEAR SENSE of her identity as both an artist and a printmaker. On the reverse of the 1954 print **christ and mary**, a text describes the history and definition of the serigraph medium.¹⁰ The text explains that serigraphs are “hand proofs” in the same classification as etchings, lithographs, and other more traditional prints, issued by the artist in restricted, signed editions. It suggests that serigraphs are

and **at cana of galilee** were selected for the Brooklyn Museum of Art's National Print Annual, and in 1953 her work was included in the Museum of Modern Art's *Young American Printmakers* exhibition alongside that of fellow Los Angeles printmakers Lee Chesney, Ynez Johnston, John Paul Jones, and June Wayne.¹² However, during the 1950s prints still struggled for larger recognition relative to other media. At the 1959 meeting of the College Art Association, Chesney, who taught printmaking at USC, complained of the lack of exhibition opportunities for printmakers, noting the recent demise of specialized print galleries in New York such as Margaret Lowengrund's *The Contemporaries*, which had devoted an exhibition to Corita's prints in 1957. Opportunities were even scarcer for screenprinters, often excluded from competitive print exhibitions. Still unfavorably associated with their commercial beginnings, screenprints fell outside the Print Council of America's definition of an original print, largely because of their potential use of photographically-derived imagery.¹³

After 1960, the establishment of numerous professional printmaking workshops, primarily in California and New York, prompted a significant shift in the way artists made prints. The establishment of collaborative printmaking workshops such as Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) in 1957, Tamarind in 1960, and Gemini GEL (Graphic Editions Limited) in 1965, introduced a new generation of American artists to printmaking. Unlike at university print studios, artists who came to these workshops did not need specific training in printmaking techniques, but could rely upon the expertise of resident professional master printers. Some, like Tamarind, were non-profits, and founder June Wayne refused an association with a university to avoid the conflict between a student-oriented school and a professional workshop.¹⁴ Others, like ULAE and Gemini, remained profit-making ventures. Most of these workshops produced prints by artists specifically invited by the publishers, and these artists

were most often painters and sculptors with international reputations. The success of these workshops spread quickly, and by the early 1960s, prints began to rival paintings in size and impact, editions were judiciously limited, and the professional training of master printers encouraged a high quality of execution.

Lithography and screenprint soon became the favored media in these workshops. The use of silkscreen, in particular, increased dramatically. No longer confined to specialized printmakers, silkscreen became an important element in the work of painters, both on paper and on canvas. In 1962 Andy Warhol began screenprinting photographic images on his paintings and also made thousands of unnumbered prints on paper for his series *Flowers*. Many artists of this

new generation such as Warhol, Robert Indiana, Ed Ruscha, and Roy Lichtenstein liked screenprinting's defined edges and opaque planes of color; it also allowed artists like Robert Rauschenberg to easily combine photographic images drawn from popular culture with gestural paint strokes in his paintings and prints. At the same time that screenprinting gained popularity in these professional workshops, the National Serigraph Society, which had proscribed the use of both photography and collaborative printing in order to distinguish the medium from its commercial origins, itself ceased to exist.¹⁵ Techniques that had developed during the WPA period to make screenprinting appeal more to artists, such as the use of transparent inks, were discarded in favor of the medium's original mechanical qualities. The reproductive and commercial aspects denigrated by the earlier generation were embraced by Pop artists drawn to its heavily-inked, hard-edge planes of color and its flexibility in incorporating photographic images from mass media into their work. Richard Hamilton noted that silkscreen was "less autographic than etching or litho—hasn't their dependence on the hand of the artist; in that sense it's a modern printmaker's



Ed Ruscha (American, b. 1937),
Standard Station, 1966, screen print,
 Achenbach Foundation
 for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums of
 San Francisco, Mrs. Paul L. Wattis
 Fund, 2000.131.5.1

medium."¹⁶ Because the silkscreen process was relatively uncomplicated, some artists continued to make silkscreens themselves, and artists like Warhol could easily produce his Factory Editions in his own studio. Others artists and studios employed the services of commercial silkscreen houses, but the number of workshops specializing in screenprinting grew, and major publishers such as Gemini and Cirrus in Los Angeles regularly provided artists the option to work in silkscreen as well as other media. The focus had shifted to artists who made prints, rather than those who specifically identified themselves as printmakers.

The printmaking boom of the professional workshops eclipsed the culture of the independent printmaker that had dominated the university workshops, regional invitationals, and national print exhibitions. Corita similarly remained on the periphery of the American print revival of the 1960s. While collaborative workshops dominated, her collaborations remained in the classroom. She never worked at any of the well-known professional workshops in Los Angeles, and until 1968 editioned her own prints. She saw herself primarily as a teacher, and engaged her students and other members of Immaculate Heart College—after 1970 Immaculate Heart Community—in the creation of her work. Her personal art-making activities were confined to a flurry of activity during the two- to three-week break between summer session and fall classes, when she would produce hundreds of screenprints in the studio at Immaculate Heart, pulling most of the large number of impressions herself. In maintaining herself as an independent printmaker who produced her own editions

and essentially acted as her own publisher, she remained aligned with the artist/printmaker tradition of 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s her production increased substantially, and instead of limiting editions like the professional workshops, she created even larger unnumbered editions than she had in the previous decade. While she maintained high technical standards, she avoided overemphasis on printmaking

skills for her students, contending that if acquired too soon, technique “**can give them a kind of deadening satisfaction that prevents their ever looking or growing any further.**”¹⁷ Rather than use fine papers, she began using Pellon, a cloth-like material used for lining clothes. Her choice of this material was typically pragmatic. But it also softened the sharp edges and lines of color, distinguishing her prints from the sharp precision of Pop and Op silkscreens. Her prints still give the impression of being hand-crafted: often the ink rests unevenly on the paper, the edges of the stencils show the irregularities of hand cutting, and the colors are imperfectly registered. Inscriptions in her distinctive handwriting lent a more personal character than the standard fonts of word-dominated works of some of her contemporaries.

Though the methods of producing and publishing may have diverged from those of many professional printshops,

in other ways Corita's art had much in common with that of her contemporaries. Her evolving style and subjects demonstrate her consistent engagement with contemporary discourse about art, culture, society, and politics, and her conviction that artists “**make pictures . . . with stuff that comes out of their own time.**”¹⁸ Like those of



ABOVE, TOP
**as witnesses to the light
 for john 23 and j.f.k.** (detail), 1964
 (64-01), 39¾ × 36 in. Collection
 UCLA Grunwald Center for
 the Graphic Arts, Hammer Museum.
 Corita Kent Bequest.

ABOVE, BELOW
(tame) to leave to love (detail), 1966
 (66-31), 15 × 18 in. Collection UCLA
 Grunwald Center for the
 Graphic Arts, Hammer Museum.
 Corita Kent Bequest.

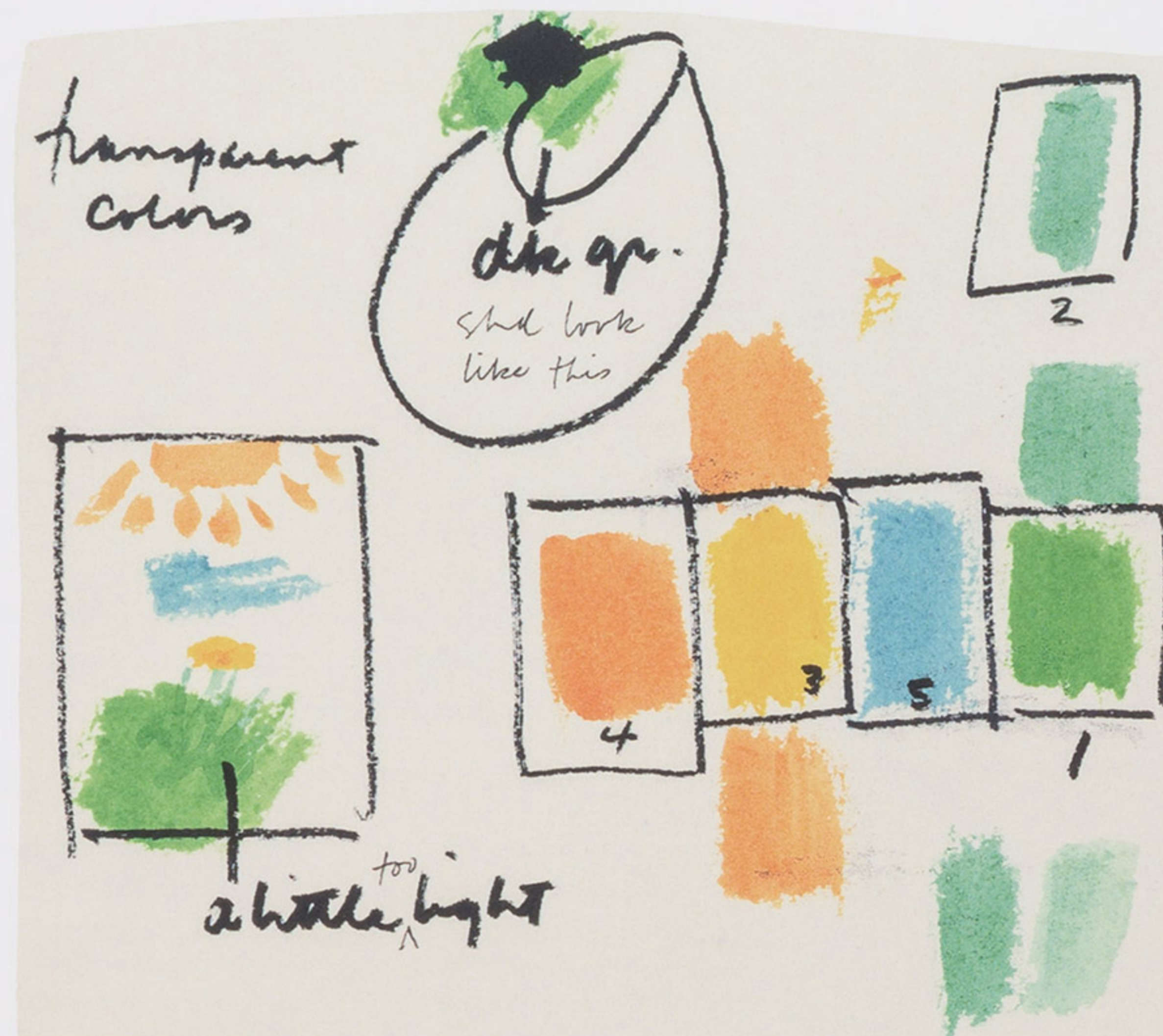
other Pop printmakers, her works increased in size and she embraced readily accessible popular imagery. Corita had introduced words into her work as early as 1955, and by 1961 words had largely replaced her figurative style. In 1962 she began using advertising slogans and package design motifs, and by 1964 her iconography derived primarily from mass media images in the urban environment. Her shift to using non-religious sources such as advertising slogans and other elements of contemporary culture in order to convey religious ideas expressed the prevalent notion that art could, as Rauschenberg stated, "bridge the gap between art and life."¹⁹ As did many Pop artists, she took her own photographs of billboards and magazine ads, manipulating the original images by cropping, folding, and otherwise distorting them, and kept them for future use. Like Claes Oldenburg, who produced ephemeral printed matter such as book jackets and announcements as a means of circulating images and seeing them in different contexts, she created a variety of printed materials, including greeting cards, book covers, posters, murals, and banners.²⁰ In the mid-1960s she began using fluorescent inks, which had been developed in the 1930s for marketing and packaging, and which by the 1960s had become a ubiquitous presence in everything from clothing, toys, and psychedelic posters to Warhol prints.

Both Corita's working process and the character of her prints changed significantly during the two years after she left Immaculate Heart in 1968. As of late 1967/1968 she no longer printed her work herself but had her editions printed by silkscreen printer Harry Hambly at Hambly Studios in northern California, sending him mock-ups with instructions regarding colors, size, and placement of elements. Hambly

had specialized in printing posters, especially in neon inks, and his studio was better known for its commercial work, in contrast to the collaborative studios, such as Gemini, that catered specifically to artists. The schematic graphics and conventional fonts of her two elaborate alphabet series of 1968 represent a departure from the improvisational spirit of the manipulated advertising graphics of a few years before. In the late 1960s social and political themes such as poverty, the war in Vietnam, racial discrimination, and controversies within the church in-

creasingly dominated Corita's work. Her focus on political subjects links her work to that of other independent printmakers who were also long-standing committed activists and used their art as a platform for social change, such as Shahn, Elizabeth Catlett, Antonio Frasconi, and Rupert Garcia. In 1968 and 1969 she increasingly appropriated photographs from newspapers, magazines, and other mainstream media, ranging from images of the War in Vietnam to portraits of contemporary activists such as Daniel Berrigan and Coretta Scott King, and often focused on a single photographic image or an entire magazine cover.

She gradually abandoned the powerful social and political visual and textual sources and bold fluorescent inks of the late 1960s. By 1970 she had reduced her forms to simplified painterly gestures in primary and pastel colors. Residing in a small apartment in Boston, she no longer had access to a large studio with scores of student assistants, which suggests a partial explanation for the substantive changes in her work during this time. As her production methods simplified, so did her imagery, which was increasingly based on her own watercolors rather than on outside sources. Throughout the 1970s her standard practice for making



Color divisions and layout for **sun on a dandelion**, 1980 (80-09), watercolor, ink, and tissue, 6 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Collection UCLA Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, Hammer Museum. Corita Kent Bequest.

screenprints was to send Hambley small watercolor maquettes, relying upon the printer to scale up the design and produce the finished print. Increased sentimentality and her typical optimism characterized both her individual prints and the many corporate commissions that she completed before her death.

In many ways Corita Kent's career trajectory followed that of other artist/printmakers of her generation, but her legacy was perhaps adversely affected by the dominance of the professional collaborative workshops that define much of the history of the contem-

porary print. Retrospective survey exhibitions of the 1960s and 1970s devoted to printmaking of the 1950s and 1960s often include Corita's earliest works but omit her seminal work of the 1960s, and her prints are generally not found in major institutional print collections.²¹ But her prolific activities at Immaculate Heart, particularly during the height of the 1960s, led to the rise of other local community-based organizations such as Self-Help Graphics, which continued to engage in the production of prints in support of activism and community beyond the professional workshop.

1 Corita Kent, interview by Bernard Galm, in "Los Angeles Art Community Group Portrait: Corita Kent," transcript, Oral History Program, UCLA Center for Oral History Research, Los Angeles, 1977, 43.

2 Corita Kent, quoted in Julie Ault, *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita* (London: Four Corners Books, 20016) 16.

3 See David Acton, *A Spectrum of Innovation: Color in American Printmaking, 1890–1960*. Exh. cat. Worcester Art Museum (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 41. See also Trudy Hansen, et al., *Printmaking in America: Collaborative Prints and Presses, 1960–1990*. Exh. cat. Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University (New York: Abrams, 1995) 25. For an overview of the history of silkscreen in the twentieth century see Richard S. Field, *Silkscreen: History of a Medium*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1972).

4 Acton, *A Spectrum of Innovation*, 41.

5 The Brooklyn National Print Exhibition was held annually from 1947 to 1956, and was restructured as a biennial in 1958. Other print exhibitions included those sponsored by the Library of Congress, the Society of American Etchers, and the Philadelphia Print Club. See Una Johnson, *American Prints and Printmakers: A Chronicle of over 400 Artists and their Prints from 1900 to the Present* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1980) 119–121.

6 Dore Ashton's review of the 15th Annual exhibition of the National Serigraph Society, quoted in James Watrous, *A Century of American Printmaking, 1880–1980* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) 222.

7 Corita, in "Los Angeles Art Community Group Portrait, Corita Kent," 7, 11.

8 Corita, in "Los Angeles Art Community Group Portrait, Corita Kent," 7.

9 See Watrous, *A Century of American Printmaking*, 222.

10 The print was made for the February issue of Liturgical Arts.

11 The UCLA Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts at the Hammer Museum received a bequest of Corita's personal collection of her prints upon the artist's death. The collection includes 72 prints dated from 1952 to 1959; 392 prints dated from 1960 to 1969; 212 prints dating from 1970 to 1979; and 122 prints dated from 1980 to 1985.

12 Watrous, *A Century of American Printmaking*, 218. For a discussion of printmaking in Los Angeles during this period see Leah Lehmebeck et al., *Proof: The Rise of Printmaking in Southern California*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications in association with the Norton Simon Museum, 2011), and Ebrina Feinblatt and Bruce Davis, *Los Angeles Prints, 1883–1980*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980) 23ff.

13 See Hansen, *Printmaking in America*, 23, and Watrous, *A Century of American Printmaking*, 223–225.

14 See Hansen, *Printmaking in America*, 98.

15 See Richard S. Field's essay "Contemporary Trends" in Michel Melot et. al., *Prints: History of an Art* (Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1981) 200.

16 Quoted in Sarah Suzuki, *What is a Print? Selections from The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 124.

17 Martha Monigle, "Sister Mary Corita: 'Be Aware! Be Curious! Be Joyous!'" *Print*, vol. 201, 1966, 18.

18 Corita, in "Los Angeles Art Community Group Portrait, Corita Kent," 11.

19 Quoted in Richard S. Field, *Silkscreen*, 2.

20 See Richard Axsom and David Platzker, *Printed Stuff: Prints, Posters, and Ephemera by Claes Oldenberg: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1958–1996* (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with the Madison Art Center, Wisconsin, 1996) 6, 45.

21 For example, only Corita's early works from the 1950s were included in the 1980 exhibition *Los Angeles Prints, 1883–1980* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and in the 1972 exhibition *Silkscreen: History of a Medium* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.