

Power Up, Reassembled
by Julie Ault



Power Up: Sister Corita and Donald Moffett. Interlocking is a three-way dialogue in the form of an exhibition. The version this brochure accompanies is expanded from the original exhibition which took place at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut in 1997. Sister Corita, later known as simply Corita, was a Catholic nun who lived and worked in Los Angeles for thirty years. She reached a wide audience with her popular silkscreen prints and engaging style of expressing her views on faith, art, and society. Donald Moffett is a

New York City-based artist who emerged in the context of the AIDS crisis. As activist, artist, and designer, Moffett has broadly contributed to the gay liberation and AIDS-activist movements. Moffett works in a variety of media and uses various modes of distribution in order to engage diverse audiences. My background as an artist has essentially been in collaborative processes of exhibition-making engaged with interrelationships between culture and politics. My role in this project is organizing **Power Up**, I regard conceptualizing the exhibi-

tion's structure and designing its aesthetic atmosphere as an artistic practice, the exhibition as a medium. Frances Elizabeth Kent was born in Iowa in 1918 to an Irish Catholic family who five years later moved to Los Angeles. Upon completing her Catholic education, Frances entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary Religious Community and took the name Sister Mary Corita. Between 1938 and 1958 Sister Corita lived and worked in the cloistered, communal environment of the Immaculate Heart Community



In 1962, Pope John XXIII's Vatican II decree on the "Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life" called for movement toward modern values, including fewer restrictions on nuns' daily lives, and a new focusing on social action and service. The IHC, like many Catholic institutions, was thrown into conflict over how previously accepted traditions were to be revised in practice. The nuns largely favored a progressive reading of Vatican II. Dramatic conflicts—simply covered in the media—erupted between the nuns and the relatively conservative, local archdiocese over the decree's interpretation. By 1969 the conflict resulted in an ultimatum from Archbishop James McIntyre to the community, either conform to his authority or seek dispensation from vows. By 1970, the IHC members had chosen the second option and formed an independent entity which exists to this day. They retained their name and structure of the organization, but



removed themselves from Catholic Church supervision. The Immaculate Heart Community had become infamous for its liberal orientation during the 1960s, as had the IHC College's Art Department for its progressive creative environment. Corita's celebrity seemed to run on a parallel track. In her art, and in her capacity as teacher and chair of the College's Art Department from 1964-68, she embodied the modern nun.

For Corita, wide distribution was a populist and Christian principle that determined her choice of artistic medium. She learned serigraphy in 1951 and regarded printmaking as "... the very democratic form, since it enables me to produce a quantity of original art that no one can afford to purchase high-priced art." Although she was committed to making her work accessible, Corita did not define accessibility based on an imagined lowest common level of visual literacy. Rather, the forms she utilized—serigraphs, greeting cards, publications, posters—and the venues through which she disseminated her work—churches, community centers, galleries, fairs, and corporations—made her art accessible to a broad range of viewers.



culture to ground her religious and political messages in contemporary urban life. Corita's cultural references and her palette and pictorial treatment increasingly became more pop. By 1964 her serigraphy was derived predominantly from urban surroundings and the newly booming media environment. In an essay from 1968 titled "art and beauty in the life of the street," Corita portrayed that period: "Our time is a time of erasing the lines that divided things neatly. Today we find all the superlatives and the infinite fulfillment man hungers for portrayed not only in fairy stories or poems but also in billboards and magazine ads and TV commercials. We are doing an age-old thing in new media. But when we learn (or teach) how to take fairy stories and myths and parables we must also learn (or teach) how to take billboards and maga-

zine ads and TV commercials. In a sense this is simply to take signs as they are. Thank God for city spaces—they have signs. Thank God for magazines—they have ads. This sign language is infinitely rich."

Between 1965 and 1969 Corita's work composes pictorial space as a forum in which a carefully orchestrated dialogue between voices is typographically expressed. The work quotes, combines, extracts, highlights, and layers elements from a wide array of cultural sources including



advertising slogans, street and grocery store signage, poetry, scriptures, newspapers and magazines, theological criticism, and song lyrics. Although authority is conferred on certain kinds of speech that are readily preserved in public records and historical archives, vernacular speech such as ad phraseology arrives and disappears from circulation swiftly. Corita's work does not reproduce the hierarchies common to such categorizing systems of information. In Corita's art, the fugitive elements of ephemeral culture are given permanence. Many rules of legibility central to the formation of modernist design principles are broken in Corita's 1960s work. Language is excerpted, disassembled, reassembled, re-contextualized. Typography is distorted, turned upside down, and faced backwards. Letter forms are ungrounded, float, and interlock.



1. Power Up exhibition, 1997, at the Wadsworth Atheneum. 2. Let The Sun Shine, Corita Kent, 1968; the image is of Pope John XXIII. 3. Mary's Day procession, organized by the IHC Art Department, 1964; the tradition of Mary's Day became a lively happening under Corita's direction; photo by Corita Kent. 4. Hi!, Corita Kent, 1966. 5. Use in generating one of her prints, 1964. 10. Lettering; cut-up and photographed by Corita Kent, 1964.

In the culture of protest which typified the late 1960s, posters and graphic materials were important tools which carried information and galvanized people. Declaring in 1967, "I admire people who march. I admire people who go to jail. I don't have the guts to do that. So I do what I can," Corita turned her attention to racism and poverty, U.S. military brutalities in Vietnam, and the conflicts between radical and conservative positions in the Catholic Church. Corita's prints made between 1967 and 1969 juxtapose nearly-fluorescent colors to elicit dynamic effects. They have a visual affinity with both political graphics and psychedelic concert posters from the time. Compositions are formed by dense layering of textual fragments and pictorial documentary material, resulting in compelling statements about the then-current political landscape. These visual dialogues are emblematic of the debate

over social and political issues which defined the time. From the late 1950s through 1968 Corita upheld a strenuous teaching, lecturing and exhibiting schedule which allowed only a two-week summer vacation annually, during which—with a burst of energy and assistance from fellow nuns and students—she made her prints. Despite what seemed to be her avid participation in public life, by 1968 she was seriously fatigued. Betaguered as well by frequent census from the archdiocese, Corita decided to leave the order and move to Boston to pursue a less restricted personal life and concentrate on her art. Deprived of her influential contexts of many years, the critical force and formal innovation of Corita's print work vanished. Her art work grew more sentimental and increasingly reliant on platitudes and color splashes. Nevertheless she remained a popular artist. Distribution to broad audiences continued to be

important and Corita accepted many corporate commissions. In 1985 the U.S. Postal Authority published her "Love" stamp in an edition of 700 million. Corita died the year after.

Corita Kent's work featured in **Power Up** proposes a symbolic template for blurring the boundaries between art and design, aesthetics and politics, and for decentralizing authority—be it monolithic or monologic—within the larger context of then-current struggles over restructuring society.

Donald Moffett was born in Texas in 1955. In 1970 Moffett moved to New York City where he continues to live and work as an artist and designer. He began showing his art work publicly at the height of the Reagan/Bush era while simultaneously being involved in political activism within ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power). Moffett was a founding member of Gran Fury (1987-1993), the collaborative that effectively employed criti-

cal media strategies in print and video to increase awareness of the AIDS healthcare crisis. He also works at the inter-disciplinary design company of Bureau BNY, which he co-founded in 1989 with Marlene McCarty.

Conceptually driven, Moffett's work in **Power Up** primarily employs montage photographic images. He has also worked with light boxes, painting, large print runs of cards and posters, and sculpture. There is a free-flow between each of Moffett's differentiated ways of working, with the artist moving from gallery to street with canny dexterity.

In the framework of the 1991 congressional debates over the efficacy of the National Endowment for the Arts, Moffett explained his perspective at a hearing on Government Operations to the U.S. House of Representatives: "I ask you to suspend belief in what, through conditioning, has thoroughly organized itself in all of our minds as disciplines and professions—distinct and discreet...

The categories do not fit the impulses, the drive and—at times—the personal imperatives of what I find myself and where Bureau has found itself. What we do mixes design, photography, performance, writing, painting, sculpture, film, and video. We also mix our individual practices with our collective practice. But an equal and dangerous part of the mix is the larger episodic social narrative that educates an artist's choices—like, in my case, growing up gay in Texas with its chaotic intrusion on the psyche and the family, not to mention its political and legislative consequences. On a larger stage, there is the AIDS catastrophe with its social, economic, personal, and historical consequences."

Moffett's artistic practice is informed by intent for display and distribution both in and beyond the parameters of the art world. He sometimes recycles images and slogans, recasting them into different forms and thereby changing their content by opening in a traditional art setting to a specific discourse concerning AIDS in the column itself. But they also function well as self-contained

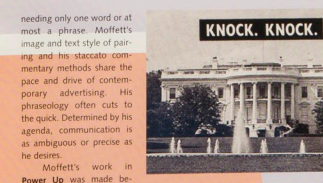
images whose meanings are more open-ended when isolated from the texts. These ephemeral pieces enabled Moffett to express his observations in a highly distinctive visual shorthand. In their original context, the "Age of AIDS" pieces were high-level art-as-propaganda. They are also sophisticated works in which metaphor is utilized for political effect. The Village Voice is on newstands for one week, and then is only accessible in archives.

For **Power Up** these pieces are digitized and reprinted as fine prints to retrieve and stabilize the works for new contexts. They are featured in the exhibition along with several of Moffett's sculptures and ephemera from the same period.

The video store, picture archives, and our vernacular visual culture are fertile sources for the phrases and images of Moffett's recombinant practice. For the "Age of AIDS" pieces he mined these repositories in search of ground imagery in relation to which he placed text, often

needing only one word or at most a phrase. Moffett's image and text style of pairing, and his stylized commentary methods share the pace and drive of contemporary advertising. His phraseology often cuts to the quick. Determined by his agenda, communication is as ambiguous or precise as he desires.

Moffett's work in **Power Up** was made between 1987 and 1992, a period in which the contested area of representation was an important subject in contemporary art and its related discourses. These works are chiefly concerned with public morality as interpreted and legislated by conservative religious and political institutions. Alert to the subtle control apparatuses that are used to impose and enforce such morality, his works succinctly articulate those configurations of power, at times with wicked humor.



like an anxious little peep next to the roar and glambour of commercial film and TV (and then the observability to change society). The real question for me is whether or not art can simply participate in the process of social change. Will art and the industries that clamor about it reinvent its integrative link to a larger community, i.e., the world? Let's hope, it's kind of stuffy in here."

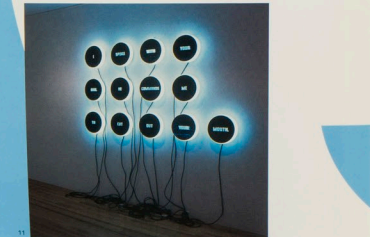
Moffett often turns up the volume in his work, not simply to compete with the roar of media, but to amplify his position vis-à-vis significant and affecting socio-political and political issues.

Donald Moffett's methodological model proposes a strategy for dislodging the boundaries between artistic mediums, and between art and design. Whether in traditional art venues, in the mass media, or in the

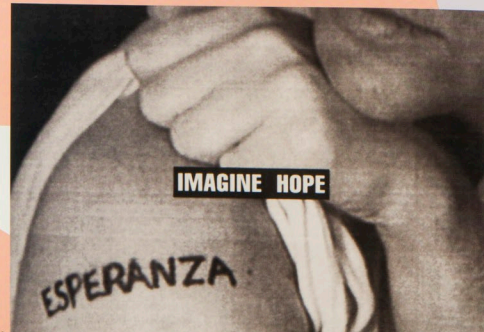
street, Moffett's work articulates and advocates art's integrative link to larger social narratives.

Power Up juxtaposes these two artists who are not readily united either historically or formally. They are paired for their overlapping methods and parallel convictions, as well as for their distinctive subjectivities. Both Moffett and Corita commandeer graphic design as strategy for social commentary. Both share a laissez-faire approach to vernacular terrain as source. They have each used the distribution frameworks of mass media to reach broad audiences. Through using multiple mediums and traversing limits that demarcate the art world and the world outside, both artists have challenged the elitist structure of fine art and its system of circulation. As the third artist in this project, I like to see Moffett design and politics via exhibition-making, and share Corita's and Moffett's points of contact in my practice.

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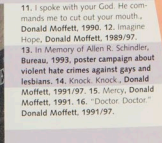
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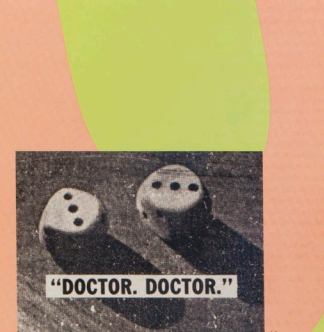
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