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Christine Dennis
Loyola Marymount University

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Corita Kent and the Resurrection of Communication in the Digital Age

Christine Dennis

Today's Top Headlines

"Deadly Explosion Rocks Chinese Kindergarten. 7 Killed."

"Grandmother in Custody for Triple Stabbing That Left 18 Month Granddaughter Dead."

"2 Maryland Teens Found Shot Dead the Night Before High School Graduation."

Today's top headlines are testaments to the age-old trope, "If it bleeds, it leads." Does this approach to news media serve the collective healing of humanity? Waking up in the morning to disturbing headlines seed the psyche with negative vibrations. We must take responsibility for the words, images, and vibrations that we communicate across the globe. When I was a child, my mother taught me that our bodies are natural and should be loved, but she warned me that violence is wildly unnatural. I have carried these lessons with me while searching for a spiritual practice of nonviolence and self-love. My journey has yielded an empowering unity of art, technology, and service to others. The coming together of art and technology has drastically transformed the ways we communicate and express ourselves as human beings. Humanity has entered a new paradigm of instant connection, propelling a radical evolution of the human consciousness, and a resurrection of communication in the digital age. What does it mean to be born again in the digital age? What is it that dies, and how does the aesthetic experience facilitate this transition? It is imperative that our expressions and engagement with media culture reflect this new consciousness, elevating humanity to a vision of light and compassion. Creative expression holds the power to positive change.

The art and activism of Sr. Corita Kent [1918-1986] are powerful catalysts for the resurrection of communication in the 21st century. We have birthed new ways to connect and communicate through digital waves, graphic arts, and social media. From the 1960's war on peace to the present political devastation in America, it is at this fertile ground of transformation that new visions are born.

Spirit Speaks in Brushstrokes

In addition to deep reflection, the Spirit needs creative ways to communicate her transformation because death is not the end, it is the most fertile beginning. Through our engagement with art, we open ourselves to the messages of Spirit. The wisdom of Spirit-Sophia may then speak to us, inspiring the hearts of all those who encounter her. Corita's later work [1970-1980s] following complex life changes and her diagnosis of cancer has been described by curators as "introspective."



These works illumined an intimate dimension of Corita’s creative expression, because art is a medium that allows the Spirit to speak in brushstrokes. In the midst of doubt, Spirit says, “Yes we can.”

The rebirth of communication, therefore, contributes to the ways in which we engage with art and social justice in the 21st century. We live in an era where humanity has forgotten who she is. Humanity has fallen asleep to the illusory lullaby of separation from the divine. I believe that the suffering of humanity is not only a result of material crisis, but a *spiritual* crisis and the resurrection of communication in the digital age is a compelling response. The death of old illusions creates an opportunity to shift our consciousness in order to awaken to the truth that is our nature. It is the reclamation of our spiritual identity that allows the world to heal. This rebirth is an active, creative process in which all beings partake in the awakening. If the Spirit truly speaks in brushstrokes, then the aesthetic experience offered to us by artists, healers, and awakeners like Corita Kent has the power to awaken the collective consciousness of humanity in this new digital age.

Corita recognized the power of pop culture language to communicate with mass audiences. She intelligently integrated this language with spirituality, beauty, and social justice. In doing so, she created a portal between the past, the present, and the future. Through the retrieval of theological and literary voices from the past and juxtaposing the text with the lens of pop culture, she gave voice to a new future. Through this aesthetic experience, she inspires action and social change. Her work whispers an invitation for viewers to encounter the divine in the lived moments of one’s present context. One must focus and spend time with the image in order to fully comprehend the message of the medium. Consequently, her work transcends time and history as the Spirit is still speaking through artists and activists today.

Art and Activism

The work of Corita Kent invites all people into the mirror of aesthetic transcendence.

¹ Corita Kent, *Dust of the Earth*, 1982.

² Corita Kent, *Yes We Can*, 1985.

This mirror invites the onlooker to seek his or her reflection in the creative mystery of being. Corita does this by consciously contrasting the crises and sufferings of humanity with the spiritual truths of faith. She calls us to remember who we are in the image and likeness of the divine. Corita’s work awakens the inner light within and is an invitation to seek one’s truth. Corita does not impose dogmas; she speaks her truth and in so doing calls all of us to speak our truth.

What would Corita do today? As I reflect, I transport myself to the 1960’s anti-war culture in America carried by the slogan, “make love, not war.” Perhaps the hippie movement has died, but the spirit of the movement remains alive. The cultural images designated by flower crowns, peace signs, and rainbow hearts are evidence of the power of art and activism. Is today so different than the political turmoil, racial discrimination, and divided nation of Corita’s context? Did Buckley and Vidal not set the stage for Trump and Hillary? Has history not repeated itself from Vietnam to Syria? Has mass media entertainment not drastically perpetuated the idolatries of disconnection, individualism, and relativism?

In the digital cacophony of 2017 entertainment media, communication is instant and cultural language has been deconstructed to memes. The flow of the spirit has shapeshifted from liquid paint to digital vibrations, in which the meme phenomenon reflects a cultural desire to interweave art with activism. It is through this contemporary cultural practice that I witness the spirit of Corita Kent resurrected in the communication of the digital age. Memes carry cultural ideas and symbols that are easily transmitted through text and visuals. The meme phenomena in pop culture today is a testament to the pluralistic platform of America in the 21st century, and humanity’s strong cry to be heard.



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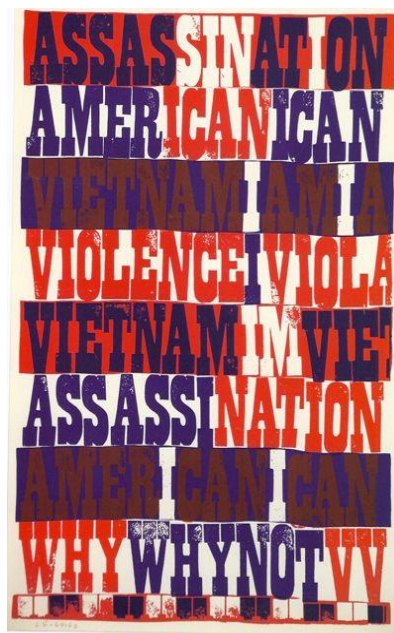
The meme culture lacks the elegance natural to the fine art of Corita Kent, but similarly, the medium juxtaposes images with popular phrases or quotes that insight inspiration, provoke debate, and call for change. This experiment with deconstruction and reconstruction paves the way for the resurrection of communication, so that renewed creative expression may flourish.

Mass media has evolved rapidly in the thirty years since the time of Corita Kent. As an

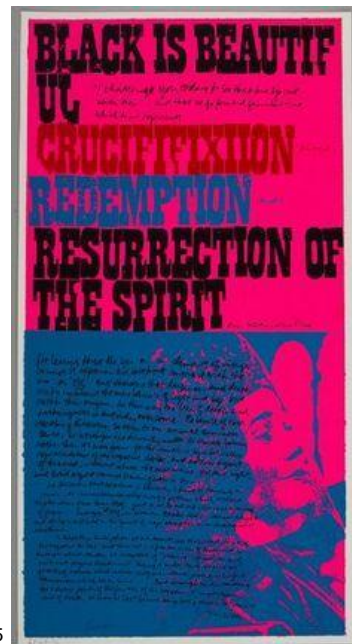
³ Artwork by @memes.catholic. 2017.

⁴ Artist unknown. 2017.

awakened artist and consumer, I am consciously aware of the inauthenticity of mass entertainment media today. American television channels are plagued by violence and destruction. Contrary to what American television perpetuates, I believe that we live in a beautiful world where more good exists than evil. It would be naiveté to assert that every single story on television is superficial, but my communication studies have taught me that the majority of programming is deeply destructive to the human psyche. What would Corita Kent do in this complicated context of mass media culture?



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Humanity is a storytelling people, and we must celebrate the powerful stories that make us human in the image and likeness of the divine. I endeavor to produce a “positive news network” whose mission is to share stories of the compassionate and transformational work that human beings are generating across the world. I believe that Corita Kent would be a champion alongside me in this endeavor. It is not enough to critique the ways that humanity needs to change, but we must also recognize the ways that humanity inspires love and healing. I do not wish to negate attention from third world famine, lack of clean water, or violent war that continues to ensue. I argue that the ways in which the media engages with the problems of the world must transform. I wish to shift the media attention to the ways that human beings are serving to assist in healing these complex and painful situations. I want to wake up in the morning, turn on the news, and be **INSPIRED BY HUMANITY**.

I believe that Corita Kent would be a proponent of this shift in consciousness in order to bring the aesthetic experience to the masses for the purpose of spreading love and light. We may not speak the same languages across the globe, but art is a medium that transcends the barriers of language. Imagine a creative news network that highlights the triumphs of a struggling community, teaching us the power of perseverance. Imagine a global news network that

⁵ Corita Kent, *American Sampler*, 1969.

⁶ Corita Kent, *Black is Beautiful*, 1969.

highlights the unity of “ubuntu” in Africa, teaching us compassionate discipline. Imagine a global news network that highlights street artists in New York City, teaching us the freedom of creative expression. Imagine a global news network that highlights school children who grow food for the homeless, teaching us the value of Christian stewardship. It is my mission as a filmmaker to produce creative media that serves humanity, inspiring us to evolve in compassion and service to others. This transformative energy is the legacy of Corita Kent.

My Dance with Corita

In reflecting upon the pop culture expressions of today, how is Corita not present! She exists in every march, every protest poster, every victim of discrimination, every healer, and every leader. Corita is present in the social activism of today, and in the minds and in the hearts of those who seek creative ways to heal the world.



Corita has reawakened within me a renewed commitment to my role as a theologian. As a theologian, I struggle to express my convictions using arguments of reason, but as an artist, the expression flows like an endless ocean. I must not suppress my creative expression to the confines of the academy and the tradition. Corita herself was a kind of rebel, beating to the vibrational truths of her own drum in service of the greater good. The spirit of Corita Kent inspires my creative expression in this resurrection of communication in the digital age. Corita offers a lighthouse, a beacon of creativity that we may harness to anchor ourselves into the truths of who we are, both individually and as a community. We cannot heal the world by constantly telling her that she is sinful. We must show the world with the utmost EMBODIED conviction that she is unconditionally loved. We must recognize ourselves in the mirror of each other. Corita’s aesthetic voice and popular style provide the gateway.

The theme of my creative endeavors revolves around a retrieved spiritual practice of self-love. In a culture addicted to ego and consumerism, it is critical that we retrieve what Jesus teaches in the second great commandment, “Love your neighbor, *as yourself*.” Somewhere along the way, we forgot about that last part. Unfortunately, the overemphasis on self-emptying has negated the practice of self-love altogether. It is vital that we reclaim a practice of self-love for the 21st century so that we can truly love our neighbor as we love ourselves. My aesthetic voice

⁷ Photo by Ben Steinberger. Women’s March, Los Angeles, 2017.

has become the medium through which I engage with this compassionate endeavor. My photographs and films are designed to reflect this self-love to others because I wish to be a mirror of love and compassion. My spiritual awakening has taught me that my human being is a pivotal vehicle for my creative expression.



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I AM the spiritual and physical embodiment of my theological convictions. I will BE the change I wish to see. My dance with Corita has reminded me that the Spirit also flows through me. I accept the mission to take responsibility for my voice and contribute to the evolution of humanity's collective consciousness within mass media culture today.

⁸ "Photo by Christine Dennis. "Healer." Moonstone Beach, CA. 2016.

⁹ Photo by Christine Dennis. "Feather of Transformation." Los Angeles, CA. 2016

¹⁰ Photo by Christine Dennis. "Seeker." Yellowsprings, Ohio. 2017

Illustrations Cited

1. Corita Kent, *Dust of the Earth*, 1982.
2. Corita Kent, *Yes We Can*, 1985.
3. Artwork by @memes.catholic. 2017.
4. Artist unknown. 2017.
5. Corita Kent, *American Sampler*, 1969.
6. Corita Kent, *Black is Beautiful*, 1969.
7. Photo by Ben Steinberger. Women’s March, Los Angeles, 2017.
8. Photo by Christine Dennis. “Healer.” Moonstone Beach, CA. 2016.
9. Photo by Christine Dennis. “Feather of Transformation.” Los Angeles, CA. 2016.
10. Photo by Christine Dennis. “Seeker.” Yellow Springs, Ohio. 2017.