

SISTERS

by Patricia Falguières

Here we are introduced to the work of the uncategorizable **Sister Corita Kent** through the tale of her rediscovery by another unique artist, **Julie Ault**, a co-founder of Group Material in New York in 1980. In *SISTERS*, **Patricia Falguières** recounts a recent chapter in art history that suggests some reasons for this ineluctable encounter of two major artistic figures: on the one hand, Sister Corita, a nun working in California in the 1950s and '60s in a realm somewhere between pop culture, political activism, and religion, and on the other hand Ault, whose artistic, critical and curatorial work constantly raises issues of exhibition, design, and politics.

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For travelers who stopped in Cologne on their return from *Documenta* in the summer of 2007, the exhibition galleries in the Ludwig Museum held a wonderful surprise. Scattered around the modernist white cube was an explosion of day-glo silkscreens, books, magazines, flyers, posters, texts, and photos; the space was dotted with painted boxes that could function as pedestal, chair or sculpture; the walls were studded with stickers and vinyl lettering on various scales, generating the euphoric dynamism typical of advertising and packaging of the late 1950s. This work was by Sister Corita, an artist unknown to most of the visitors. The name, which seemed to mask some trans-gender performer or perhaps a West Coast version of Belgium's Singing Nun, in fact belonged to a first-rate artist who was active in California in the 1950s and '60s, when she headed the art department of a Catholic college run by the Community of the Immaculate Heart. The show in Cologne, *Leute wie Wir: Grafiken von Sister Corita aus den 1960er Jahren* was the first European retrospective of this indefinable artist's indefinable oeuvre [1]. A nun inspired by Buckminster Fuller and Charles and Ray Eames as well as by Simon Rodia's *Watts Tower* and Ben Shahn's committed frescoes and lithographs, Sister Corita viewed the packaging seen in dry-goods stores and service stations, the urban signs, and advertising in general, as contemporary versions of the psalms. She called for prayers that would read like a grocery list, writing that, "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 magazine ads and TV commercials. In a sense this is simply to take signs as signs. Thank God for cityscapes—they have signs. Thank God for magazines—they have ads. This sign language is infinitely rich." [2]. But above all, Sister Corita was a genius of a graphic artist, as demonstrated by Julie Ault. Corita turned pictorial space into a forum where a dialogue of voices was expressed through typography by quoting, combining, fragmenting, mixing, excerpting, underlining, and layering levels of meaning from all sources, distorting the lettering at the risk of illegibility—with a freedom and power not matched until Jamie Reid produced the cover for the Sex Pistols' album, *Never Mind the Bollocks* (1977). Sister Corita's experimentation culminated in 1967 with a "play and pray book," *Footnotes and Headlines* (which was enthusiastically received by Marshall McLuhan, among others).

The curator of the Cologne show was a "sister" of another sort—Julie Ault, a name familiar to anyone who has followed developments on the New York art scene since the 1980s. With Felix Gonzalez-Torres she founded Group Material, pursuing a career as an artist, critic, and curator who has relentlessly interrogated systems of exhibition as well as the ordinary distinctions between art, design, and politics, explored through seminal Group Material exhibitions such as *Timeline: Consumption: Metaphor, Pastime, Necessity* (13th Street Space, 1981), *A Chronicle of US*

Intervention in Central and Latin America, (PS 1, 1984), *Americana* (Whitney Biennial, 1985), and *Education and Democracy* (Dia Art Center, 1988). These veritable revolutions in display employed

a cut-and-paste policy across a range of media in order to juxtapose mass-produced items and artifacts, signs and artworks, labels, texts and figures, all in a graphic setting. Group Material's tactics transformed the exhibition into a forum that "provide[d] tools for critical thinking and analysis, access to information, visual thinking, pleasure, and so on," thereby taking a sledgehammer to the walls that divided art from politics. Exploiting posters on the sides of buses and street-corner billboards, Group Material's exhibitions, like those of Gran Fury and General Idea during the same period, contributed to the dismantling of the "white cube." Since 1996 Ault has consistently challenged, through her exhibitions and texts, what she calls modernism's "dispassionate display": its automatic style of hanging—works uniformly aligned along a wall, at eye level, isolated and framed, ballasted with the authority of artistic hierarchies—generates "hierarchical descriptions of culture" that protect the fine-art market from being mistaken for a market stall. In her shows with Martin Beck (*Outdoor Systems, Indoor Distribution*, Berlin, 2000; *Installation*, Vienna, 2006) and her writings (this year a magisterial foreword to *Lighter*, the lavish printed retrospective of her own "displays," published by Wolfgang Tillmans), Ault has pursued the work of deconstructing galleries and restoring art to the public sphere. Through the shows she has curated, she continues to undermine the division of labor that is key to the professionalization of art: "Embedded in the artist/curator distinction is the assumption that artists make things and curators present them: that artistic processes are speculative and subjective, while curators' methods are interpretative and analytic. We know, though, that aesthetic and informational contexts for presentation of work are integral to people's experiences of art. It is not, then, in artists' interests to yield critical and contextualizing functions to curators." In 1996, at the Drawing Center then headed by Catherine De Zegher, *Cultural Economies: Histories from the Alternative Arts Movements* proposed an original approach to the alternative scene in New York and the activism of the 1970s; the approach was simultaneously that of artist, critic, and historian who combined artworks with the documents and ephemera generated by the whole process of research. [3]. It was therefore perfectly logical that in 2000 Ault should suggest that the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles host a show devoted to a figure unknown to the art world, Sister Corita, whose name had been associated solely with a Catholic Community Center in L.A. since the 1980s. [4]. Ault thus exhumed the visionary artist from the hodgepodge of a grassroots community, far beyond the normal scope of art history. She presented Sister Corita not as some picturesque Pop nun, but as an activist and a total artist—an "artist in social communication"—a figure of empowerment in the America of the '60s. As part of the same show, Ault linked Sister Corita to another inspired activist, Donald Moffett, the founder of Gran Fury, one of the most vociferous and creative of the artists' collectives that emerged during the AIDS struggle in the 1980s. Comparison with the protagonists of Act up and Gran Fury lent full relevance to the "oeuvre" of a nun who, as early as the 1950s, had transformed a traditional procession of the Virgin into a vibrant, colorful happening in the streets of Los Angeles (nuns and students made hundreds of signs from fragments of supermarket posters with pictures of hamburgers, Campbell's hot sauce, and giant cans of coffee, while other signs bore statements such as "I Love God," "Join the Party," "Free Eggs," and "God Loves Me," later joined by anti-Vietnam-War slogans), and whose 1964 "Mary's Day" event was a prototype for the 1967 "Summer of Love" celebrated by San Francisco hippies. *Power-Up: Sister Corita and Donald Mofett, Interlocking* (a reduced version of which was hosted by the Ludwig Museum) launched Sister Corita on a dazzling, international post-mortem career. Meanwhile, older Angelenos who had a Catholic education have never forgotten Sister Corita's visual world. Mike Kelley—who as early as 1988 was producing acrylic "poetry paintings" in the spirit of Sister Corita and who later explicitly borrowed from her the banners now associated with him), had declared in an interview a few years earlier with John Miller: "Corita Kent, psychedelic posters, left-wing graphics, and underground comics were the first things I saw and thought of as art." [5]

Translated from the French by Deke Dusinbere

1. *At the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, back in 1997, Julie Ault conceived and curated Power Up: Reassembled Speech—Sister Corita and Donald Moffett, Interlocking.* A second

version of the show was hosted by the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2000, under the title of *Power Up: Sister Corita and Donald Moffett, Interlocking*. The 2007 exhibition at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, meanwhile, favored a monographic approach to Sister Corita's work: *Leute wie Wir: Grafiken von Sister Corita aus den 1960er Jahren*. Ault's two essays on the "resurrection" of Sister Corita ("Archives in Practice" and "Power Up Reassembled") are reprinted in Julie Ault & Martin Beck, *Critical Condition, Ausgewählte Texte im Dialog* (Essen: Kokerei Zollverein, 2003), pp. 267–278, 367–375. In 2006, Ault published a monograph titled *Come Alive! The Spirited Art of Sister Corita* (London: Four Corners Books).

2. Sister Corita Kent, "Art and beauty in the life of the sister," quoted in Ault & Beck, *Critical Condition*, p. 369

3. Ault edited a book on this subject with contributions from many authors. See *Alternative Art New York, 1965, 1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (New York: Drawing Center/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003)

4. Ault's comments on this exhumation can be found in "Archives in Practice," *Critical Condition*, pp. 266–278

5. "Interview with John Miller," William S. Bartman and Miyoshi Barosh, *Mike Kelley*, (New York: Art Resources Transfer, 1992), p. 36.