CORITA KENT and the LANGUAGE of POP

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"BY THE POWER OF SIGNS AND WONDERS": CORITA KENT, IBM, AND POLITICAL DESIGN

Julia Bryan-Wilson

By the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God . . . I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.

—Romans 16:9 (New Revised Standard Version)

Peace

In 1965, Corita Kent received an invitation from IBM to create a holiday display in the storefront windows of their Product Display Center showroom at the corner of 57th Street and Madison Avenue in New York (fig. 1). Kent turned the commission into a project for her lettering and design course at Immaculate Heart College, and the twenty-two students in the class worked collaboratively during the term to produce an installation that would be both eye-catching and meaningful to passersby at the bustling intersection. They focused on the phrase “peace on earth,” a sentiment so often uttered on Christmas cards that it can register as a hollow platitude, though it had recently been the topic of a stirring encyclical issued by Pope John XXIII that touched on human rights, economic justice, and Cold War disarmament. ¹ Through its stark juxtaposition of news photographs and judicious use of quotations, the IBM display fleshed out the concept of “peace” within the context of the specific conditions of 1965, including social unrest, civil rights, and an escalating war in Vietnam.

Following Kent’s established style, in which she gleaned widely from mass media images and the printed word, students were tasked with gathering quotes from five recently deceased figures who had been engaged in promoting global relations: Dag Hammarskjöld, Pope John XXIII, John F. Kennedy, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Adlai Stevenson. This group, while notably all male, is nonetheless

¹ Among the wide range of issues addressed in the Pope’s 1965 encyclical Pacem in Terris, his last, was the growing importance of women within political life. In her essay in this volume (pages 14–32), Susan Dackerman discusses this text and its resonance with Kent’s food-related art.
marked by geographic diversity and secular scope. (Kennedy was Catholic; Nehru, though critical of organized religion, was born to a Hindu mother; and Stevenson was a Presbyterian.) Phrases from these men, as well as vividly colored dots and stripes, geometric shapes, word fragments, and pictures of current events, were emblazoned on corrugated cardboard boxes—725 of them—that were stacked high to form patterned pyramids, columns, and walls. Dynamically occupying their allotted area and measuring 10 by 133 by 6 feet, the silkscreened and painted boxes of Peace on Earth arresting held the space of IBM's ground-floor corporate showroom, with lettering large enough to be visible to cars whizzing past and details sufficiently intimate to draw sustained attention from window-shoppers strolling by (fig. 2). In one photograph (fig. 3), a shopper clutching a bag pauses and looks down, perhaps in contemplation of the surrounding hectic signage, including a modified 7UP advertisement and a quote from former UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld, “No peace which is not peace for all.”

Headed up by two designated student leaders, Mickey Myers and Paula McGowan, the display was originally set up at Immaculate Heart College, where “it became a set for a production of the drama department,” emphasizing its bodily scale and showy, theatrical presence. In December, the boxes were numbered, collapsed, and shipped to New York, with Myers and McGowan flying in to oversee the installation by IBM workmen. Repetition of the word “peace” plays a prominent role in the overall look of the windows, unifying the display despite the variety in the styles of lettering. Bold, wavy lines covering the sides of boxes, akin to Bridget Riley's op art (cat. 8), create a sense of vibrant, flickering movement, and some words are split across multiple boxes, rendering them difficult to decipher by viewers, who must put the puzzle pieces together in their own minds (fig. 4). Single or coupled letters (Ud, N, ED) float free, unattached to larger semantic units, and are used as plastic design elements that emphasize swooping curves or angled lines, disrupting conventions of reading and forcing one to pay close attention to the formal look as well as the grammatical meaning of text. The inclusion of a street stop sign, visible in figure 1, underscores the idea that the entire installation was meant to intervene in or arrest the normal flow of signifying traffic.

3. In Baylis Glastock's 1967 documentary We Have No Art cat. 66. Kent discusses the importance of repetition for changing the meanings of words and pictures, citing Gertrude Stein.
Though a reviewer for *The New Yorker* called *Peace on Earth* "a wild Pop-Art array...a hodgepodge," the students had carefully considered formal decisions as they finalized the arrangement. They maximized the impact of the design, using typographic elements and emotionally potent news photographs of such events as the Watts riots in order to interrupt the well-to-do urban surroundings of the IBM showroom. "I wanted to get a sense of continuity between the inside and the outside," noted McGowan, who hoped to spark awareness among viewers that "peace isn't a passive thing." In other photographs of the IBM display, viewers' faces are reflected in the windows, mirroring those of the figures—soldiers, impoverished children, Coretta Scott King—found on select boxes. While the installation functioned as a literal stage set in Los Angeles, in New York it suggested that viewers on the street were potential actors in an unfolding drama. As Kent described it, "The show became a Christmas card to New York—greeting the people who walked by with a challenge to make peace today and to be not satisfied with simply repeating the words of the angels and not acting upon them."

Kent and her students had used grocery boxes as a portable, flexible, and lightweight design element before, most prominently in Mary's Day celebrations, including columns of stacked boxes used as an altar display in 1964 and as a mobile element carried by students in the procession of 1965 (cats. 35, 13). Warhol's *Brillo* boxes (see cat. 38), which he began in 1964, are one potential precedent; in addition, Kent stated that her friend and colleague Charles Eames's interactive work with blocks and stackable units was a direct inspiration. Boxes were an ingenious choice for the IBM windows, one that was at once practical and aesthetic. When flattened, they can be shipped at low cost, but for assembly they unfold into three-dimensional space, offering surfaces on all sides to work with. Walls can be built and rebuilt, making a changeable immersive environment. Boxes are also analogous to rooms, and these ordinary materials prefigured for Kent the construction of new kinds of spaces of worship. She proclaimed, "In the future when churches get smaller and less pretentious, people of a parish could work on the walls of the church instead of small boxes."

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5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
Alive

Though it might seem unusual for a corporation to commission a nun to produce a high-profile public installation during the season of heavy foot traffic, IBM's invitation speaks both to Kent's reputation as an innovative and compelling message-maker and to the company's interest in using art and design to brand itself as visually forward-thinking. Beginning in 1953, through a first-of-its-kind "corporate design program," IBM famously commissioned a number of projects with Eames and his partner, Ray Eames, and engaged other well-known architects, designers, and artists in order to enact the motto that "good design is good business." In 1963, IBM held a holiday-season exhibition of works by students in Sister Magdalen Mary's Immaculate Heart College mosaics class. Thus, while it could appear strange that Kent would accept a project of corporate window-dressing, she already had several connections to IBM, not least through the Eameses. In addition, artists have long been involved in decorating Manhattan shop windows: Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, for instance, all produced displays for the New York department store Bonwit Teller (fig. 5). Unlike Bonwit Teller's windows, IBM's were not produced in order to lure in the everyday customer to purchase its goods (computers were not yet "personal"), but rather served as part of an overall design identity and public relations strategy that emphasized the contemporary, even avant-garde, character of the corporation's brand.

The IBM showroom where *Peace on Earth* was mounted had been completely revamped in 1954, and the previous ornate marble, gold embellishments, and Persian rugs had been replaced with a sleek, clean interior in which a large computer with whirring noises and blinking lights could be seen at all hours (fig. 6). The showroom—a long, vertical stage-like room dramatically offset by a deep red back wall—was one of nested geometric volumes, from the rectangular columns that punctuated the space to the many computers on view. According to one account, "If you went by Madison Avenue in the middle of the night you would

12. For more on the queer aesthetics of consumerism found especially in the Rauschenberg/Johns collaboration, see Richard Meyer, "White Flag in the Window: Jasper Johns, Matison Jones, and the Culture of Display," lecture delivered at the conference *Craft* at the LACMA, Getty Center, Los Angeles, June 2007. Coincidentally, Johns and Rauschenberg reportedly met for the first time "on the corner of Madison Avenue and 17th Street," the same intersection as the IBM showroom (see Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Picador, 2005), 99.)
see it behind the big plate-glass windows, tended by well-dressed technicians in a brightly lit room." Exhibiting working computers inside this glossy showroom projected "an image of IBM as a provider of an essentially modern service: the handling of information." Though the computers served as the main attraction, the plate-glass windows were on occasion outfitted with rotating displays that showcased a diversity of design, art, and, otherwise "handled" information. Kent's signature method of reprocessing words, advertisements, and slogans might have felt like an ideal match for such a site. In addition, the stacked Peace on Earth boxes, with their almost architectural configuration, cleverly referred back to the columned space itself and, with their many facets of text and images, echoed the boxlike computers.

The boxes also evoke television screens. (Starting in the 1950s, TV was known in slang as "the box," or more pejoratively, the "idiot box.") And in fact, the physical display at 57th and Madison was only one part of the Peace on Earth project, which also included a related half-hour Christmastime television special, Wishes for Peace, that was broadcast on KNBC in Los Angeles in 1965. Narrated in part by Kent, the program shows footage of the all-female student crew painting and preparing boxes, intercut with Kent's source imagery for the display: hard-hitting magazine covers and headlines of wounded U.S. soldiers, coffins, bombings in Selma, and other evidence of contemporary strife. Kent explains, "Christmas is a time when we should all get together, at least in thought, the rich and the poor: the Pepsi Generation of affluent America who is told to 'come alive!' and the soldier of the same generation who is sent to a poor country and told to kill and perhaps die." Here she blends a pop cultural reference to a Pepsi-Cola ad, previously deployed in her work in a celebratory manner (see cat. 50), with a radical homily about inequity that ends on a bleak note.

Throughout Wishes for Peace, ads with upbeat verbiage are spliced into the film among distressing pictures, creating a dissonant visual stream that rivals the tonal jerks of changing channels on TV or flipping through the newspaper. The recursive embedding of the boxes (which may themselves refer to televisions) within actual TV sets brings another set of associations to bear, as the Vietnam War famously became known as the "living-room war," a phrase used by Michael Arlen in his book of the same name from 1969. That is, Wishes for Peace brought détourned grocery boxes (ones that ordinarily package household goods for shipping) into viewers' domestic interiors in order to stage a confrontation between the placid wealth of the United States and the disturbing wartime conflict abroad. One photograph used in Wishes for Peace, of a despairing Vietnamese mother with her injured child (fig. 7), was also used by feminist artist Martha Rosler in her 1967-72 House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home series, inserted incongruously into the crisp white stairwell of a well-appointed living room (fig. 8). Where Rosler created

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14. Ibid.
15. Produced by David Bell, photography and editing by Kent, soundtrack by Don Diimmer.
visual friction within a single frame to question her viewer’s complicity with the scene. Kent used editing — the image following that of the mother reads “HAVE I DONE WHAT’S RIGHT” (fig. 9) — to achieve a similar effect. The soundtrack features songs by the Byrds and the Beatles, and close-ups of inscriptions on the boxes, such as “no more war no more war no more war no,” make it clear that the message of Wishes for Peace, as well as that of the New York IBM display, was not a generalized, bland holiday sentiment, but a precise — and political — intervention.

Explosive

Indeed, it was understood as such. Though the IBM employee overseeing the showroom installation, Robert Monahan, was enthusiastic about the material as it was being constructed, after it was unveiled on December 10 there were rumbles of discontent, some quite extreme, both by onlookers and executives upstairs in the IBM headquarters. As The New York Times commented, the project “brought not peace but a sword to IBM officials, and they have ordered it closed for modifications.” The installation was accused of not being Christian enough, and criticized as “un-Christmassy.” Even more inflammatory, the boxes “might be interpreted as some sort of demonstration about Viet Nam.” Certain sections were flagged as inappropriate, including panels that “looked like placard pickets carried in those [antiwar] marches,” according to Monahan. The aesthetic of the boxes was certainly at issue — the boxes with stars and stripes that appeared to be riffing on, and perhaps disrespectful of, the U.S. flag were deemed particularly incendiary. So, too, was the content of the installation, especially the use of unattributed quotes that, sited as they were in the showroom, could have been misunderstood as issuing from the mouth of the corporation.

Window shades were hastily drawn to hide the boxes from the public as Kent’s students made small adjustments to the installation so it could remain on view, provoking less controversy, for the duration of its run. They added attributions to clarify that some of the phrases had specific origins (thus distancing them from IBM), and removed some of the more flaglike boxes. At the same time, though changes were requested, according to an IBM spokesman there was no “attempt to censor the exhibit.” Because the installation was made of separate, easily swappable units, this was not a particularly onerous physical task, though it required, as Myers later recounted, “some very fancy footwork.” Myers and McGowan had to make quick decisions themselves, as Kent herself was en route to New York from an engagement in Washington, D.C., and they acted swiftly to take off offending boxes and to add scriptural citations that might lend the work more biblical authority, as if grounding the word “peace” in a Christian context would soften or reduce its associations with protest. (Soon enough, leftist Catholics like Kent’s friend Daniel Berrigan and his brother Phil would orchestrate some of the most momentous and searing actions against the war, disproving the illusion that Christianity was uniformly quietist regarding dissent.)

21. “All Quiet.”
23. The reformist push within the U.S. Catholic Church during the 1960s is addressed in Susan Dockerman’s essay in this volume in Latin America. Liberation Theology offered a radical alternative to mainstream Catholicism.
Media accounts of this incident range in tone, though many humorously emphasize that the small furor was caused by young female college students and a Catholic nun, as if such women could not really pose a serious threat. The Chicago Tribune reported, “When gawkers stormed inside asking, ‘When are you guys going to start burning your draft cards?’ IBM officials dashed out to discover that quotes chosen by the sweet little nun were veritable hornets stinging their ‘Peace on Earth’ display.” The socialist paper The Militant was even more sarcastic about IBM’s censorship: “A number of quotations from well-known members of the international communist conspiracy were quickly blue-penciled. They included Pope Paul’s sinister advice to the UN, ‘Never, never again war.’”

Kent tended to downplay the more polemical elements of the display, saying, “I didn’t know peace could be such an explosive word.” It feels like a slightly disingenuous statement: surely Kent could have guessed that in such an “explosive time,” as she later put it, the graphic photographs and carefully curated text—including collaged headlines referring to Vietnam protesters being heckled—might touch a nerve. Her own writing, such as the book Footnotes and Headlines: A Play-Pray Book (cat. 12), demonstrates how politically astute she was about poverty and repression, as well as about the potency of words and the importance of reshaping malleable signs in a time when social meaning was up for grabs. In Footnotes and Headlines, she outlines how scarcity and structural racism lead to urban unrest in a place like Watts, “where humans have been denied the right to express need or anger or love.” Interestingly, Marshall McLuhan, who is cited in the book and whose oft-quoted theory that “the medium is the message” clearly influenced Kent, provided the following endorsement on its back cover: “A new form of book . . . an x-ray of human thought and social situation.”

Given how dedicated Kent was to these politics, why did she act surprised when the work’s pointedly antiwar message was correctly grasped? Above all, Kent comprehended the power of signs, and in this project—as in much of her work—she wielded them, dismantled them, and remade them, to striking effect. At the corner of 57th and Madison in 1965, those signs became a lightning rod for divisive opinions about progressive Christianity, corporate control, and the multipole, contested meaning of “peace.” Just as the boxes unraveled the alleged neutrality of the word “peace,” they also pointed to corporate complicity with the military-industrial complex during the escalating Vietnam War. The project takes on an urgent, even subversive, cast in light of the fact that IBM was widely known to be providing computers and information technology to the war effort. As early as 1964, it was reported in The New York Times that “the defense industry defies any convenient cataloging. Hundreds of electronics companies turn out military items. Such giants as American Telephone, General Electric, Sperry Rand I.B.M., and Westinghouse Electric are immensely important to the military arsenal, although they are better known for other activities.” By the early 1970s, protesters were targeting IBM directly for its involvement with the war. The corporation was understood as a key supplier that motored the automation of the war machine, and in 1972, some Quakers challenged executives at an annual stockholders meeting to “halt the sale to the Government of equipment that could be used to make war.”

27. Kent, interviewed by Galm, transcript, 1977, 73.
Propaganda

In some respects, the IBM display was not unique within Kent's oeuvre. For one thing, she accepted a number of other corporate commissions, most prominently for the Container Corporation and Westinghouse.32 But Peace on Earth catalyzed some nascent aspects of her work in 1965, functioning like a pivot between her earlier, more affirmative messages and the more explicitly polemical content of the years 1967–68, as she transitioned away from the Church. Kent's tone is often taken, incorrectly, to be largely positive, as if she only "proclaimed the good news of Christ," to refer back to this essay's epigraph. Wrote one admirer in 1967, "Her work is a powerful yes to the material creation, even to the most crass, materialistic expressions of it."33 Kent's purpose was sometimes confused with that of the very ads she appropriated: "Sister Corita makes ads, and nicely too. She advertises enthusiasm and peace, wonder and love, justice and joy and things theological."34 And though some of her work was optimistic, Peace on Earth reveals a persistent strand of something else, a grimmer and more pessimistic outlook.

The IBM display also raises several critical questions regarding Kent's practice. One is the status of what I am calling "political design" — work in which the formal elements of a design, perhaps even more than its content, contribute to its radical valences. Of course, all design is political; Kent's unique relationship with text — inverting, flipping, resignifying, and decontextualizing it — transformed and sometimes actively negated the standard meanings of familiar phrases. Her unmoored words highlight the inherent ambiguity of interpretation, which is what makes them so starkly different from ads. Ads advocate, convince, and promise. They are not usually intended to be ambiguous — when selling a product, clarity is prized. Likewise, one of the most frequently discussed types of political visual imagery is propaganda; it, too, functions best when it has a strong and readable message. Kent occasionally identified with the project of persuasion; as she stated in 1965, "I went through a formal training in which the look of the thing was all that was important, but nowadays I think I'm just a straight old propagandist."35 Yet Kent's claim that her work is "straight old propaganda" does not do justice to her complex and nuanced approach — her political design — which insisted on the strategic and sly undermining of previously familiar language, advertising, and cliché. By making the ordinary extraordinary, or illegible, or charged, Kent turned commercial design against itself, revealing its instabilities for often unexpected ends.

Another issue raised by the IBM project was the nature of Kent's frequently distributed authorship, particularly regarding collaboration with students, a method that took on a political valence due to its proposed leveling of the normal student/teacher hierarchy. How do we properly credit Peace on Earth, given that it was the outcome of the group efforts of twenty-two students, guided by two leaders under the supervision of Kent? How did this collective work take shape, and how did the power differential between acclaimed teacher and (sometimes unnamed) student play out? The tensions that arose from this dynamic became increasingly acute: Kent recalled that some students "didn't want to be involved in a great big group project that was really under my name."36 Long before the so-called pedagogic turn in contemporary art, Kent used her students in her work, for her work, and as her work; she claimed that they — more than her printmaking — were her greatest achievement.

32. Eliot Nesse, who headed IBM's Design Program in the 1950s, later consulted at Westinghouse; see Harwood, The Interface, 14.
35. Quoted in Stevenson, "Talk of the Town," 23.
According to Kent, *Peace on Earth* was the pinnacle of her students' involvement in activist efforts. But the easy expurgation of the IBM project raises a query: what kind of activist was Corita Kent? It is a deceptively simple question to ask about an artist who so obviously infused much of her work with political concerns. Yet as she herself admitted, "I'm not good at marching and speaking politically." Though many of her colleagues, like the Berrigan brothers, were joining street demonstrations and going to jail, Kent used prints, performances, teaching, and installations to carry her message. Especially around 1968, her work was consistently informed by the social movements of the day, with screenprints featuring figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., references to hot-button issues like the Vietnam War (cat. 71), and slogans such as "Black Is Beautiful" (cat. 80).

Even after she left Immaculate Heart College, Kent continued to make posters, billboards, and prints related to concerns about war and justice. When Daniel Berrigan prepared *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* in 1970, he asked Kent to design the cover (fig. 10). The book is an account in play form of the trial proceedings for the offense of burning over 300 draft cards with homemade napalm. On the cover, the title and author's name are scrawled in Kent's unmistakable handwriting over a detail of her *phil and dan* (cat. 73). Printed with black ink over an orange-red ground, the swirling flames of burning draft cards and the curved wire rubbish baskets compose an almost mythic inferno.

Noting the drastic shift from Kent's strident prints of about 1968 to her later, more expressive watercolor work, Julie Ault comments: "Corita was not alone in her 'activism exhaustion.' Many cultural protagonists of the sixties suffered similarly, and at the close of the decade, withdrew from public participation into privacy." As Kent moved out of the shared environment of the college's workshop, she lost the sorts of critical conversations fostered by collective production. However, her association with politically explicit material lingered. When she made a "rainbow swash" for a gas tank in Boston in 1971 (cat. 88), some saw in the blue brushstroke a phantom face of Ho Chi Minh. (People do take signs for wonders.) With the IBM project, she skirted, even denied, her antiwar stance; while with the "rainbow swash," viewers saw propaganda even when it was not there. It was an uncanny inversion of what transpired with *Peace on Earth*, when a defiant politics, sited within the very heart of a corporate war collaborator, was disavowed by her. Instead, here an abstract shape was misconceived as profoundly political. This imagined apparition demonstrates one of Kent's keenest lessons: the power of projection and the instability of meaning.

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37. Ibid., 74-75. Kent describes the political atmosphere at Immaculate Heart College as "mild," but its student paper tells a different story, reporting that students were galvanized by many of the revolutionary protests of the time.

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