Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

MATRIX 134
organized by Julie Ault

Power Up: Reassembled Speech, Interlocking
Sister Corita and Donald Moffett

September 14 - November 16, 1997

This MATRIX exhibition is funded by
The Andy Warhol Foundation
for the Visual Arts and the
Peter Norton Family Foundation.
Biography often plays an ambiguous role in relation to what an artist actually does. An artist’s life and an artist’s work are neither synonymous nor symmetrical. But in respect to Sister Corita there was a remarkable confluence between her artistic practice and her religious practice, and it was particularly manifest during the 1960s.

Corita Kent was born in 1918, became a nun, Sister Mary Corita, in 1951, and soon after learned printmaking in order to disseminate affordable images in large volume. For Corita, distribution was a populist and Christian principle that determined her choice of medium. She utilized such forms as posters, advertisements, billboards, wrapping paper, window displays, and greeting cards. While committed to making her work accessible, she did not define accessibility based on an imagined lowest common level of visual literacy.

The works by Sister Corita selected for Power Up were made between 1964 and 1969. Using art as a platform, Corita turned her attention to consumer society, poverty and racism, U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, and the conflicts between radical and conservative positions in the Catholic Church.

Pope John XXIII’s Vatican II decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life in 1962 called for movement toward modern values, including an aesthetic and structural shift in how Mass was conducted, fewer restrictions imposed on nun’s daily lives, and the initiation of social action and service in American cities. In her art, and in her capacity as teacher and chair of the art department at the Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles, Corita embodied the modern nun. She embraced the Vatican II principles and expressed an urban spirit in step with the widespread critique of authority structures that personified America in the 1960s.

Despite the Second Vatican Council, “incumbent archbishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Cardinal James Francis McIntyre, opposed everything the majority of the sisters proposed, ordered the removal of all Immaculate Heart sisters teaching in the Los Angeles diocesan...
schools, and finally presented the community with an ultimatum: either conform with his wishes or seek dispensation from vows."¹ By 1970, ninety percent of the Immaculate Heart Community members had chosen the cardinal’s second option and formed an independent entity. In 1969, beleaguered by constant censure and pressure from local church officials to curtail the expression of her political views and fatigued from years of strenuous teaching, lecturing, and exhibiting, Corita decided to leave the order. She moved to Boston to pursue a less restricted personal life and concentrate on making her artwork, which grew more sentimental and more commercial. Corita Kent lived there until her death in 1986.

“Thank God for city scapes—they have signs. Thank God for magazines—they have ads. This sign language is infinitely rich.”³

tings close together and side by side

Corita created pictorial space as a forum in which a carefully orchestrated dialogue between historical and contemporary voices is typographically expressed. In addition to her own writing, Corita quotes, combines, extracts, highlights, and layers elements from a wide array of cultural sources including song lyrics, advertising slogans, scripture, newspapers and magazines, street and grocery store signage, theological criticism, literature, and philosophy.

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 any given print, as well as across her production, voices—both respected and denigrated, both commercial and philosophical—are brought into proximity, where they form highly distinctive, non-linear

ted to notice newly the uniqueness of people and things as they squirm out multiplying rapidly and giant rearrangements are happening all around us, it ter have, to want things not to be rearranged. It would be better to be able ness but even to help make it.”⁴
narratives. In Corita’s art, the fugitive elements of ephemeral culture are given permanence.

Many rules of legibility central to the formalism of modernist design principles are broken in Corita’s work. In her hands language is excerpted, disassembled, reassembled, and recontextualized. Typography is distorted, faced backwards and turned upside down. Letter forms are ungrounded, float, and interlock. To decipher her editorial vision and syntax the viewer must become mentally acrobatic. These destabilizing techniques mirror Corita’s own changing relationship with church officialdom and its hierarchies in the most personal realms of her life.

“We canonize and expose our politics and our advocacies every time we make or show art. [...]”

Donald Moffett was born in 1955. He lives in New York City and works individually and collaboratively as an artist and designer. For many years Moffett has been engaged in the gay and AIDS-activist movements. He began showing his own work publicly at the height of the Reagan and Bush era, while, at the same time, he became 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 critical media strategies in print and video to increase awareness of the AIDS healthcare crisis. He also works at the inter-disciplinary design company Bureau, which he co-founded in 1989.

Moffett’s artistic practice is informed by intent for display and distribution both in and beyond the parameters of the art world. Conceptually driven, his work employs photographic images, montage strategies, light boxes such as those often used in advertising, 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 Power Up, Moffett’s work is 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. Many of Moffett’s works address issues of sexuality and desire. They have functioned as touch points for subjective and collective identification and affirmation in and around political conflicts.

The works included in this exhibition derive primarily from a series of montages made between 1989 and 1992 for the “Age of AIDS” column in The Village Voice. Generated on a tight weekly schedule, these artworks effected and contributed 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.

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 the text, often needing only one word or at most a phrase. Moffett’s style of pairing

To be precise, there is no art that does not advocate.

situation, the connection of the parts of a discourse, the

Traditions and histories are embraced and validated or cr

image and text and his staccato 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.

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 newsstands for one week, and then is only accessible in archives. For Power Up these pieces are rematerialized as Iris prints and have a greater potential and form to function within the fine art context.

Although deeply concerned with topical issues of social (in)justice, Moffett avoids the twin perils common to much political art: the exploita-
tive gratuitous use of representational violence and self-righteous didacticism. Instead, his is a different and more subtle tone. "These works announce a voice that is multi-chorded; it denounces corrupt regimes and makes a space for desire as a weapon, insisting on the expression of desire as a social right. This voice operates with cool strategies." 4

When asked in 1994 if he believed that art could change society, Moffett replied, "European history would demand an easy yes. But now? I'm not so sure. Art seems more and more like an anxious little peep next to the roar and glamour of film and TV (and their obvious ability to change society). It's kind of like asking if opera can change society. Not really, not anymore. The difference is that opera for the most part has abdicated interest in this role. So the real question for me is whether or not art can simply participate (or be allowed to 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, huh? It's kind of stuffy in here." 5 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-personal and political issues.

...the parts which immediately precede and follow any parts which are romanticized and rejected by virtually every artistic decision." 6

Juxtaposition and context—terms that typographically bifurcate this brochure—refer to key strategies in both Sister Corita's and Donald Moffett's works in Power Up. Both have used cut-and-paste techniques to make new unified wholes and to communicate their concerns visually. These terms also convey principles of a practice that set the stage for and determine the many particulars of this exhibition and how it looks.

Myriad decisions go into the making of an exhibition. Selecting works and materials, arranging them in a space, designing the exhibition and determining how things are displayed; where things are hung on the wall—how high, how low, next to what; whether or not to use color or some other wall treatment; writing text; designing brochures, and deciding what kind of interpretive and label information will be provided. These are all factors that shape how viewers experience art in the space. Approaching these activities and decisions anew in relation to the material contents and relevant contexts, rather than adhering to traditional modes of fine art display, produces a different practice, which can produce subtle but fundamental differences in what an exhibition consists of and what it looks like.

In Power Up specific context is constructed. The intended effect is that upon entering the exhibition the viewer crosses a threshold into a dynamic visual and contextual environment. Ephemeral materials relating
to how, when and why the artworks were produced are an important part of *Power Up*. Context implies symbiotic processes between images and ideas. It challenges any clear-cut notion of separation between objects, exhibitions, and the outside world. Context is the active ground on which circumstances, features, and relations—between people, events, ideas, activities, and objects—are not fixed but are constantly in dialogue.

The primary juxtaposition in *Power Up* is of these two artists who are not readily united either historically or formally. In the exhibition design, the art works are newly situated in actual and potential relations. Such juxtapositions and spatial arrangements render the works interactive in multiple combinations. Works co-mingle in circumstances that open up new and unprecedented relations and meanings.

In *Power Up* various tiers of juxtaposition and context are portrayed and activated as *practices*. One tier materializes within the art works themselves. Another materializes in the installation's own configuration. Still another crystallizes both mentally and emotionally in viewers as they navigate the exhibition using their own filters. Each viewer is a potential editor, invited to cross-reference the materials, fill in the gaps, and reassemble speech.  

---

*particular passage or text and determine its meaning*
PLEASE NOTE

Julie Ault will present an informal MATRIX lecture on Sunday, September 14, at 2 p.m. Donald Moffett will present an informal MATRIX lecture on Sunday, October 16, at 2 p.m. Both lectures are in The Hartford Courant Room. A reception in honor of the artist will follow each presentation. Eleanor Heartney will present a lecture, "Postmodern Heretics," on Sunday, November 2, at 2 p.m., co-sponsored by University of Connecticut School of Fine Arts.

Andrea Miller-Keller will give gallery talks on the exhibition on Tuesdays, September 30 and November 2, both at noon.

All events are free with museum admission.
The twentieth-century history of art is likely to be distinguished in part for the innovations of visual artists who have challenged long-standing definitions of art. As we reach the end of the century it is no longer common belief that visual artists should be valorized primarily for consummate hands-on craftsmanship. This in itself represents a seismic shift, since the word artist is rooted in the word artisan and, hence, in notions of technical skill. We no longer require an artist’s statement to fit within the confines of the rectangular frame or the pedestal-based sculpture. All available materials are acceptable mediums, whether human-made or natural, whether found or transformed by the artist. Furthermore, sometimes the artist’s work is not readily visible. For instance, the vision and integrity of an artist’s conceptual strategies are now rigorously evaluated along with, and sometimes instead of, technical accomplishments. As museum visitors, we have come to terms with many new approaches—from Sandy Skoglund’s photograph of an elaborate set-up tableau, The Revenge of the Goldfish (1981) to Christo’s Wrapped Reichstag (1995), from Carl Andre’s selected and arranged glacial boulders in Hartford’s Stone Field Sculpture (1977) to Janine Antoni’s performances of Loving Care (1992-1996).

Julie Ault is one of a distinguished series of artists who have successfully expanded our definition of what constitutes legitimate artistic practice. For Ault the exhibition gallery is akin to a blank canvas, and she assumes the role of curator as a primary mode of artistic expression. For Ault, teaching, guest lectures, public and private discourse, and writing are also important parts of her artistic practice. Not surprisingly, she pursues each of these assignments in distinctly effective but non-traditional ways.

In this MATRIX installation Power Up: Reassembled Speech, Interlocking Sister Corita and Donald Moffett, Ault draws together a substantial number of works by two artists, printmaker Corita Kent (1918-1986), formerly Sister Mary Corita, and contemporary artist and designer Donald Moffett (b. 1955). Active nearly three decades apart, both of these artists have featured bold graphic design and montage techniques in their work, and both artists have used multiple forms of distribution, including mass media, to communicate about complex socio-political issues with their audiences. Ault has observed the absence of the activist graphics of Corita and Moffett from current contemporary art exhibitions.

Just as the rectangular canvas is freighted with centuries of previous efforts that each new painter, willing or not, must engage in dialogue, so the museum exhibition itself is burdened by protocols and expectations that Ault and other artists before her (among others, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson) have opened to scrutiny. Objects within a museum context are understood to be high art. Ault, however, rejects the validity of such hierarchies as presently configured. Museum status usually is conferred when an object has some claims to a place of recognition in the annals of art history and is considered to have economic viability in the fine art marketplace. But, until recently, art history has been quite narrowly conceived, excluding many. To cite only one familiar example, the bible of undergraduate study, H.W. Janson’s History of Art, two decades ago did not include a single work of art made by either a woman or a person of color. In our economy, art is
evaluated primarily in terms of supply and demand. The most costly works of art, however, are not necessarily objects of the greatest historical and aesthetic significance.

Ault offers us a selection of powerful works that have been excluded from the category of high art because of their populist orientation and absence from the art market. Despite their lack of institutional validation as high art, she contends that these images are valuable and significant both in content and form. In presenting art that conventional curatorial expertise generally has ignored, Ault invites viewers to decide for themselves if these selections have a meaning and impact different from, but just as solid as, other, more traditional museum offerings.

Ault’s own openly subjective approach to the installation of works by Corita and Moffett presents a bold alternative to the prevailing but unrealistic goal of curatorial objectivity. The very notion of objectivity can be seen as delusional, a presumption that serves to heighten the curator’s authority. Rather, as an artist/curator Ault openly invokes artistic license for permission to shape the exhibition with greater freedom than a cautious full-time curator might enjoy. Ault has carefully gathered for display a range of explanatory support material and ephemera (video tapes, magazine covers, announcements, newspaper clippings) that she believes will enhance visitor enjoyment and understanding of the exhibition. In addition to her playful use of colorful walls and 1960s-style utopian modular units, Ault has provided for comfortable seating, which is too often a rare commodity in museum exhibitions. Together these components suggest to museum visitors that important ideas are being offered and that they are welcome to settle in, interact with new information, and think for themselves in a stimulating, informal, and hospitable environment.

Julie Ault was a founding member of Group Material (1979-1996), a collaborative of New York artists who together organized socially engaged exhibitions as their medium of artistic expression. Group Material’s goal was to offer “...a constructive response to the inadequate means for artistic representation and cultural dialogue in New York City... All of our exhibitions and projects are intended to question perceived notions of what art is and where it should be seen.” Initially its venues included storefronts, alternative spaces, billboards and newspapers. By 1985 Group Material was invited to participate in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Biennial where it presented a highly acclaimed installation called Americana. This was the first of numerous museum exhibitions.

Over time, Group Material received international recognition for its exploration of complex topics such as the current crisis in democracy (education, electoral politics, etc.), definitions of American culture, and how ideology manifests itself in the marketplace. Group Material was widely admired for constructing installations for the general public that illuminated the multiplicity of distinct meanings and opinions that surround a given theme. Offering the viewer an unusually broad range of materials and viewpoints, Group Material hoped that such information would help empower visitors to make their own individual and informed decisions. Group Material tried to bypass most aspects of the art market, and its viewpoint remained avowedly populist. Eighteen artists participated in Group Material during its existence, including Tim Rollins, Doug Ashford, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Karen Rispensker, and Jochen Klein. Julie Ault was the only original founder who worked with Group Material over its full lifespan.
In 1995, Ault was introduced to Corita Kent's work by artist Jim Hodges. Its appeal to Ault, both in form and content, was nearly instantaneous. Here was an artist whose early radical work from the 1960s had been forgotten. Kent had constructed her prints intuitively from a wide variety of sources, including literature, advertising, Catholic doctrine, and popular culture. Her serigraphs anticipated the anti-authoritarian spirit that would motivate Group Material. They were multivalent works made from diverse parts. Such an approach rejects a singular point of view in favor of acknowledging the complexities inherent in most aspects of life. For Kent, for Ault, and for many other artists the Brechtian strategy of montage proved an effective mode of cultural critique, since it disrupts the otherwise apparently seamless nature of representation and ideological systems. Ault's wording of the title for this exhibition, Power Up: Reassembled Speech, Interlocking Sister Corita and Donald Moffett, further reflects Ault's preference for bringing together visual and textual elements to form a new and dynamic situation in which a variety of meanings can be constructed.

For quite some time Ault had been impressed with the power of Donald Moffett's activist graphics. He has worked both as an individual artist and collaboratively for Gran Fury. She admired the poetic and forceful images he made for a weekly “Age of AIDS” column in The Village Voice (1989-1992). Because these were just newspaper images, they are
at great risk of vanishing from our cultural history. For a long time Ault has wondered what she could do to re-present these ephemeral images in a public venue. When she encountered the radical work of Corita Kent, she saw parallels between these two bodies of work. This exhibition is her creative response to these deeply held concerns.

Equal in interest to the works of Corita and Moffett are the challenges Ault’s own work presents to traditional categories of discipline in the visual arts. In her proposal for this MATRIX exhibition Ault wrote, “Although exhibitions materialize only temporarily, I view the selection and arrangement of materials within a designed installation environment as an artistic practice, as a kind of artistic production. For me it’s important to retain the status of artist, which affords more freedom in the cultural arena.” Focusing in depth on works by two compelling and under-recognized artists, Ault structures a situation in which her role as an artist questions existing museological limits and barriers. In the process, Ault’s project raises important definitional questions for artists, critics, museum curators and the general public. This presents an opportunity to reexamine our assumptions about the separation between artistic and curatorial practices.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
Works by Sister Corita Kent in MATRIX

for eleanor, 1964, 30" x 36"; left, 1964, 30" x 36"; mary does laugh, 1964, 30" x 39"; somedays is now, 1964, 24" x 35 3/4"; growing up, 1965, 30" x 36"; people like us yes, 1965, 23" x 35"; yes people like us, 1965, 30" x 36"; come alive/tomorrow the stars, 1966, 30" x 36"; come off it, 1966, 30" x 36"; for emergency use soft shoulder, 1966, 36" x 30"; give the gang our best/now, 1966, 30" x 36"; hal, 1966, 30" x 36"; help the big bird, 1966, 30" x 36"; mad for each other, 1966, 30" x 36"; we care, 1966, 30" x 36"; what being loved makes being do is precisely be, 1966, 15" x 36"; who came out of the water, 1966, 30" x 36"; come alive, 1967 13" x 23"; fresh bread, 1967, 14 1/2" x 22 5/8"; harness the sun, 1967, 20 1/2" x 23"; miracle, 1967, 23" x 35"; see the man who can save you the most, 1967, 23" x 35"; somebody had to break the rules, 1967, 30" x 36"; stop the bombing, 1967, 15 1/2" x 23"; things go better with, 1967, 23" x 35"; wet and wild, 1967, 18" x 23"; with love to the everyday that man loves, 1967, 19 1/2" x 23"; let the sun shine in, 1968, 29" x 23"; “o” is for o my god, 1968 17 1/2" x 23"; american sampler, 1969, 23" x 12"; ifi, 1969, 23" x 12"; love at the end, 1969, 23” x 12”; love your brother, 1969, 23” x 12”; manflowers, 1969, 23” x 12”; moonflowers, 1969, 23” x 12”; news of the week, 1969, 23” x 12”; phil and dan, 1969, 23” x 12”; the cry that will be heard, 1969, 23” x 12”.

All works are silkscreen prints on paper. They are lent courtesy of the Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles, and private collections, NYC.

Works by Donald Moffett in MATRIX

He Kills Me, 1987, offset lithography poster, 23 1/2" x 37 1/2"; Kiss me long deep and hard until I forget what’s been going on around here, 1989, Plexiglas, fluorescent light, Cibatransparency, 24 1/4" x 29 3/4"; Check Out Your Violence of Opinion, 1989/97, 19” x 14”; Come Out Come Out, 1989/97, 19” x 14”; Examine the Blindness of Your Science, 1989/97, 13” x 19”; I Am a Female Impersonator, 1989/97, 19" x 14”; Imagine Hope, 1989/97, 19" x 24”; I Was Kind of Hoping, 1989/97, 13” x 19”; Meet Me at the Vortex, 1989/97, 13” x 19”; Poof, You Just Disappeared, 1989/97, 13” x 19”; Practice Saying Sodomy Without Flinching, 1989/97, 13” x 19”; You Are the Power and the Glory, 1989/97, 14 1/2" x 14 1/2”; You Get these Weird Ideas, 1989/97, 13” x 19”; You Tease Me to Death, 1989/97, 19” x 24”; I spoke with your god. He commands me to cut out your mouth.,1990, Plexiglas, fluorescent light, Cibatransparency, 14” diameter each, 13 parts, overall dimensions variable; There’s a Season for Defiance, 1990/97, 14 1/2" x 14 1/2”; Wolf, 1990/97, 19” x 24”; You and your kind are not wanted here, 1990, Plexiglas, fluorescent light, Cibatransparency, 14” x 160”; Mercy, 1991, Plexiglas, fluorescent light, Cibatransparency, four parts, 14” diameter each, 34” x 34” installed, lent courtesy of The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City; If We’re the 1000 Points of Light, 1991/97, 13” x 19”; Knock Knock, 1991/97, 13” x 19”; Still Our Man, 1991/97, 14 1/2” x 14 1/2”; 200, 1991/97, 19” x 14”; Doctor Doctor, 1992/97, 13” x 19”; Evil Circus, 1992/97, 13” x 19”, What Now, My Love?, 1992/97, 14 1/2” x 14 1/2”.

Unless otherwise noted all works are Iris prints. They are lent courtesy of the artist.
Ephemeral materials on display modules in MATRIX
Videotapes: Corita Kent On Teaching & Celebration, 1986, Baylis Glascock Films; excerpts from Stop the Church: Target City Hall, 1989, DIVA TV; Voices From the Front, 1991, Testing the Limits; selected Newsweek, Life magazines; selected publications (as indicated with * in bibliographies); selected tear sheets from The Village Voice, “Age of AIDS” columns 1989-1992; ACT UP Fact Sheets; postcards by Donald Moffett; posters by Sister Corita Kent; photographs; photocopied articles; and quotations.

Sister Corita Kent

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

Selected Projects and Commissions

Selected Bibliography by Sister Corita Kent

Selected Bibliography about Sister Corita Kent
Julie Ault


Selected Exhibitions and Projects

International Center of Photography, NYC, Complete Control, 1990 (organized lecture series about censorship and patronage); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, The Resource Room, for The Rhetorical Image, 1991 (organized with Susan Cahan) including A Viewer Participation Project Booklet; The Drawing Center, NYC, Cultural Economies: Histories from the Alternative Arts Movement, NYC, 1996; Sous-Sol, Geneva, Switzerland Display as Discourse: Exhibition Case Studies, 1996; Shedhalle, Zürich, Switzerland Alternative is always contextual, for Art is not enough, 1997.

Selected Bibliography and Interviews by Julie Ault


Selected Bibliography about Julie Ault

Donald Moffett

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

Selected Group Exhibitions

Selected Bibliography about Donald Moffett