



View of “Corita Kent and Matt Keegan,” 2019. Top row: Matt Keegan, “Cutouts (c is for Corita),” 2019; Bottom row: Corita Kent, “International Signal Code Alphabet,” 1968.

Corita Kent and Matt Keegan

POTTS

Amid the swelling civil unrest that would culminate in the international protest movements of 1968, a nun in Los Angeles was wavering in her faith. “I’m really frightened to say this,” Sister Corita Kent (1912–1986) wrote in a letter to a friend, “but everything appears different to me, even God, and I’m so afraid that I’m losing the foundation of my belief.” Soon thereafter, Kent took a sabbatical from her chairship of art at her order’s college and absconded to Cape Cod for the summer; by the end of her time there, she had decided to leave the order and renounce her vows. During this soul-searching break, Kent would watch the boats moving in and out of the harbor; inspired by the twenty-six letter flags of the International Code of Signals, a system used to communicate messages between ships, she created an elaborate series of serigraphic prints.

The installation of Kent’s series “International Signal Code Alphabet,” 1968, at the Potts gallery might be best appreciated within this larger frame of her crisis of faith. Installed alongside a suite of responsive works by Matt Keegan, Kent’s prints are hung in a neat horizontal line and faced with highly reflective glass that sometimes frustrates looking. Like much of Kent’s output, the prints feature dense layers of meaning, graphically finessed to the point of deceptive simplicity. The print for *B*, which is usually read as *Bravo* (and communicates that a ship is unloading, off-loading, or carrying dangerous goods), pairs

the red polygonal flag with the corresponding letter in large calligraphy and a few “handwritten” lines from W. H. Auden’s “Prologue at Sixty” (1967):

CAN SIXTY MAKE SENSE TO SIXTEEN-PLUS?

WHAT HAS MY CAMP IN COMMON WITH THEIRS, WITH BUTTONS AND
BEARDS AND BE-INS?

MUCH I HOPE. IN ACTS IT IS WRITTEN

TASTE WAS NO PROBLEM AT PENTECOST.

Auden’s words might have appealed to both Kent’s religious sensibilities and her connection to a politically active younger generation, who clearly inspired Kent and for whom she was also an inspiration. Throughout the series, the divine (*j is for jesús* and *s is for saint*) sits alongside the mundane (*d is for digging it* and *l is for ladybug*). In some prints, the two meet. Ventriloquizing George Harrison, Kent asserts in *v is for vibrations* that God is found in the act WHERE YOU’RE NOT DOING IT PARTICULARLY FOR YOURSELF, BUT YOU’RE DOING IT FOR EVERYONE ELSE, FOR WHOEVER WANTS IT. . . . Such a statement handily applies to Kent’s outlook on art as an unpretentious gift for an unknown other, a potential sibling in the struggle for a more peaceful, compassionate world.

Movingly titled “Cutouts (c is for Corita),” Keegan’s 2019 series of monochromatic silk-screen prints manages to humbly amplify the affect of the nun’s abecedary, proposing a countermelody of abstract gestures. Starting with the palette of primary colors dominant in Kent’s prints and taking the form of a folded piece of paper, Keegan made full and partial symmetrical cutouts in the internal spaces and edges of each sheet; these flaps and folds give the paper a third dimension absent in Kent’s prints. The resulting forms at times echo flags, crosses, and letters themselves.

This is not the first time that Keegan has shown work in tandem with, and in response to, a fellow artist interested in the communicative powers and impasses of text. His epistolary exchange with Kay Rosen was the subject of the wanly named 2016–17 exhibition “A Travelling Show.” Unlike in that dialogue, which hinged on the hidey-holes and iterative possibilities of language, Keegan’s work here is almost entirely devoid of text. The only

exception is *It Goes Without Saying*, 2011, a circle of yellow steel hung high on the wall, an errant sun in which the work's titular phrase is laser-cut in eight successive semicircles. Installed near the gallery's entrance, it serves as both a greeting and a farewell.

How does one say goodbye to a part of their identity? This question must have nagged at Kent during the summer of 1968. Thankfully, she was transparent about her process of transformation, even when she was unsure of her destination.

—Andy Campbell