

A TEI Project

Interview of Corita Kent

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (APRIL 6, 1976)

GALM

Miss Kent, we usually start these interviews by getting some important facts such as when you were born, and where you were born.

CORITA

Um-hmm. I was born in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1918.

GALM

What was the month and day?

CORITA

November 20.

GALM

And I know from my research that the family didn't spend much time there.

CORITA

No, we left, I think, when I was about eighteen months, and we moved to Vancouver. We stayed there for maybe a couple of years, because when we then moved to Los Angeles, I was not yet ready for school. So I remember that I must have been by that time maybe four or five.

GALM

What had your father been doing in Fort Dodge?

CORITA

He was working with my mother's father in--what was their business? My grandfather had a farm, but he also had another business, but I can't think what it was. And then another brother came in, and there wasn't enough space for both of them. So then my father joined his brother, who had a restaurant in Vancouver. And that's why we moved there — it was for his work.

GALM

Had the Kents settled in Iowa?

CORITA

Yes, my grandmother and grandfather — these were the Sanders, now — my mother's mother and father had the farm. And the Kents had lived in Minnesota--Minneapolis . And how they got together I don't know. [laughter] Missed that part of the history. We're terrible about the history of our family.

GALM

Are those English or Irish?

CORITA

Irish, yes.

GALM

On both sides?

CORITA

No, my father, his parents were both born in Ireland. And my mother's father was born in Holland, and my grandmother was French-Canadian--and then previous to that, the family was in Chartres, that side of the family.

GALM

How many family members preceded you? How many children?

CORITA

We were six, and I was the fifth.

GALM

So then the family settled in Vancouver, and your father would have worked in the restaurant business for a while. What brought him to Hollywood?

CORITA

I don't know what brought him to Hollywood, except that I remember we came on a boat. [laughter] Ship, I guess, in those days. But we came--it was probably, again, a matter of work. But I don't remember what changed to bring him down here. But meanwhile, my mother's parents had moved out here. My grandfather must have been a very enterprising man in those days, being that age, and had bought property in Hollywood. He had, oh, several units, which he rented. And then we lived in one of those. And after my grandfather and grandmother died, my mother managed that until — really, until she died.

GALM

Where was that located?

CORITA

It was 6616 De Longpre Avenue.

GALM

Right in the heart of Hollywood.

CORITA

Right in Hollywood, yes. We used to At that time there was a vacant lot where there are now buildings, and across the street was this De Longpre

Park, which used to be called something else. But I think it's now back to De Longpre. It's just one--like a half a block. And there was moviemaking going on there, I remember, from time to time. So we were that close to Hollywood. That was about it.

GALM

So then when it was time to go to school, where did you go?

CORITA

I went to school about three or four blocks away, at the Catholic elementary school. Blessed Sacrament [School], which is on Sunset, and I went there for nine years. At that time they had a junior high system. And then I went to Catholic Girls High, which is now called Conaty High, on Pico street, which was a school for girls taught by different communities of nuns. And when I finished high school, I went that summer to Otis Art Institute, and then the following September [1936], I entered the community at Immaculate Heart.

GALM

How did you decide to go to Otis during the summer?

CORITA

Well, I had always been interested in art, since the time I was really a young kid.

GALM

How young a kid?

CORITA

Let's see, how young a kid? I can remember always making things, like designing things, paper dolls and their clothes, and then drawing. And I had a couple of nuns, especially one — in the sixth grade, I think--who at that time was taking courses herself at UCLA and took quite an interest in my talent; and she gave me the classes that she was getting. So it was really great fun. This was after school on a private basis, and I think that was the real beginning of that kind of encouragement. My parents — my father especially had always been very encouraging. But both my parents were always encouraging. I took

it very lightly; I didn't think of it as being anything too much. But I was always interested. I did the posters in school and all that.

GALM

What form did this encouragement from your father take?

CORITA

Well, it was interesting because outside of that one nun. Sister Noemi--who was really, I think, on to a more stable grasp of the field--most of the training I had was really very bad. I took art in high school, and we had this dear old nun who would let us copy things. We got to choose what we were to copy, and that was the extent of freedom there. [laughter] I missed the first year because I came in as a sophomore, but I think the first year we could choose anything from the drawer that had pencil drawings, and copy from that. And we would enlarge them. The second year was charcoal, and the third year was pen- and-ink. And the fourth year, which I never got to, was oil painting. [laughter] So it was very And I remember my father--getting back to that question--always saying, "Why don't you do something original?" And it just never occurred to me. I think as a younger child I did things out of my head. But then I got into this kind of training, and I thought that that's the way to I found in later years, though certainly it was balanced from a lot of other things, that it was not a bad thing to have as a kind of discipline and control, in a sense. In a lot of other ways it was terribly harmful because--certainly it's not the way I would go about teaching art to young people.

GALM

Did your father have some of the artist in him?

CORITA

Very much so, and I think it never got a chance to be developed because — well, I think he was probably meant to be a poet. He could play the piano; he was just a really fun guy. And he was burdened, I think, by six kids. And my mother, too, I think was really probably meant to be more a person of my kind of life, who had a chance to develop her own thing. So they were both, I think, people who were saddled with six kids at a time when Catholics had lots of kids--and I guess Catholics still do. [laughter]

GALM

If they're good Catholics.

CORITA

And so my father, I think, really would have loved to, was really gifted in his own right, and probably instinctively saw that in me as something he didn't have a chance to develop, and he meant to see, or was hoping, that I would. But he died when he was fifty-six, so he really didn't have much chance to see what happened--except I think he sees it from another space. [laughter]

GALM

Was there any art in the home?

CORITA

No, the usual reproductions, you know, that

GALM

It would have been more religious art?

CORITA

No, not necessarily. I can remember — and I should be able to say the artist — that kind of grand nineteenth-century picture of the three horses' heads. You probably have seen it.

GALM

Nothing comes to mind.

CORITA

Well, that, I remember, was in my parents' bedroom. Then there were a lot of my own things always framed around the house that I had done on my own in high school.

GALM

Did you sense in later years that the poster work that you'd done was really the beginning of the later work?

CORITA

Never thought of it until you just said so. Uh-huh. No. But the first time I used words in a picture was probably back in the early fifties. I began very soon after, when I began my prints. I began printing in 1951, and it was in those early prints that they did have words in. And I remember we had this very remarkable professor come to teach for us who had come from Germany with the general exodus in Hitler years. He had been the director of painting at the Berlin museum, I think, and was just a--oh, one of the greatest men I've ever known. Besides being a very good art historian, he had fathered many of the group, like [Paul] Klee and [Vasili] Kandinski, had arranged for some of their first one-man shows and that sort of thing, was a good friend of [Lyonel] Feininger (they were very close friends up until the end) . And I think he was the one who first — I always count him and Charles Eames as the people who educated me. Even going through school, the teachers I had were — many of them were probably splendid, but those were the men who really had, I think, the ability to pass on concepts, and not so much a string of facts.

GALM

Was that Mr. Laporte?

CORITA

No, this is Dr. [Alois] Schardt, who preceded him.

GALM

And he came out of Berlin?

CORITA

Paul Laporte also came from Germany. There was just I think a year in between when we lost Dr. Schardt and found Dr. Laporte.

GALM

Where did he go from Immaculate Heart?

CORITA

Dr. Schardt?

GALM

Yes.

CORITA

He died.

GALM

Oh, he died.

CORITA

Yes, in Christmas of — '56 comes to me, but I wouldn't be terribly sure of that date.

GALM

Did he come directly then from Berlin, or at least from Europe, to Immaculate Heart?

CORITA

No, I think he must have been around for a while before we found him. And at that time, he was also teaching courses at USC and Claremont. But he was a great combination of a real mystic, if I've ever known one, and a genuine historian. And he just had a remarkable sense of drama as a teacher. He really hated teaching; he just dreaded it. Monday morning: "This is no way to begin a week," as he always said, and I think felt especially cursed with teaching young kids, because their education in his eyes was just so abysmal. [laughter] He would talk about things that they had never heard of. They just didn't know stories from the Bible when he was trying to just tell the content of a picture, and he just couldn't believe what they didn't know.

GALM

Did he think that American education was to blame, or was it ... ?

CORITA

Oh, I'm sure he did, yes.

GALM

Do you think of any other stories that might illuminate his personality or his mystical quality?

CORITA

Well, there was one marvelous scene I have in my mind. At that time at school, we were making banners and getting people to bring us all their junk jewelry and old beads and buttons and things, and we had a great box of them. And I remember walking into the room once, where this box was. The light was not on, so it was in darkness, and here was Dr. Schardt. He was a large man, with white hair, and with great presence. And here he was, bending over this box, picking up pieces of jewelry. And he said, "I have a tree at home" — I don't know what he called it, the tree of wonder or the tree of delights or something like that — and he said, "I'm looking for pieces to hang on it." And this was a branch, a big branch with many little branches. But he had that kind of quality that really had reached the simplicity that you read about, that you would like to reach — you know, the simplicity of a child. And then I remember once when Mortimer Adler came to school to speak to the students, I was sitting next to Dr. Schardt. And at one point he pulled a piece of paper and pencil out of his pocket and started, and I thought, "Well, this is sort of the supreme honor to Adler, to have Dr. Schardt take down something he said." [laughter] I didn't really notice what he was doing, but pretty soon he handed me this piece of paper, and it was a drawing, a beautifully simple drawing of a rose, open, looking full into it. And he said to me, "This is the mystical rose. This is going to be my design when I make my banner." [laughter]

GALM

So he wasn't even listening to Adler at all.

CORITA

And then the next day, the next class we had, this very bright young nun came in. She was all agog from Adler's talk, so she said to Dr. Schardt, "Wasn't he marvelous?" And Dr. Schardt said, "Well, he is a bright young man," or something to that effect. The young nun thought he hadn't really understood what Adler had said, so she began to tell him what his talk was about, to explain it to him. It was a marvelous thing. [laughter] But it seems to me that at the same time — back into the room where he was choosing the jewelry — Charles Eames had come, dropped in for something. He had just come home from an exchange program between Germany and the United States. The German artists were to come here and bring something of America home to

Germany, and vice versa. And Charles had chosen to do the two churches--you may have seen his film called *Two Baroque Churches [in Germany]* ; one is Vierzen- Heiligen and the other is Ottobeuren, Franciscan and Benedictine baroque churches--because he thought that was a marvelous example to young architects of real enthusiasm that flowered into work, instead of just kind of heady stuff onto the drawing board adapted from somebody else's something. So he was fresh home from Germany, and he was describing these churches, which were of course very familiar to Dr. Schardt — the great drama of the architects. I think it was Vierzen- Heiligen where the approach is extremely simple farmland; and this is the way the film begins, showing the patterns of the earth and the growing green things. So that's rather plain and flat. And then the facade of the church is quite classical and simple, and then you open the door — and Charles is describing this — and then you open the door, and there's this great burst of, I don't know, like theater or something. And they both said at once, "And this was no accident!" [laughter] This was real planning. And it was so marvelous to see the two of them together, because of course Charles was much younger, and Dr. Schardt so seldom, I think, met a person who was kind of equal to him. He was always the sort of great-grandfather of it all.

GALM

Well, you mentioned that you were picking up concepts from him. What concepts?

CORITA

I think the main thing I got from him was the sort of the notion that change is the constant in art, and that each period really came out of the blood and bones and life of that time and couldn't be any other. He often took a subject matter and would trace it back through the periods and show how the same subject matter would be treated in completely different manners by different ages, and the difference between Northern and Southern Europe, how they expressed things. So you got a sense that . . . because, as I say, my knowledge was very ... I think I was in the middle of my college education at that time. I had gone through Immaculate Heart in kind of a fast way, while I was teaching. I would take courses at night and on Saturdays, and it was sort of squashed in between the teaching and what you had to have ready for the

next day. And so then when I went to Victoria, B.C., it wasn't until I think in the late forties that I came home from Canada and then finished my M.A. at USC. But it was during those years that I was part going to school and part teaching that I used to — in fact, I think for almost all of Dr. Schardt's classes, I showed slides for him because I wanted to be there. I could do it and hear him at the same time. But you didn't want to miss anything he said.

GALM

Had your own art developed at that point? I mean, could you see his influence upon your art, or ... ?

CORITA

No, not really, except that I had an exhibit which I remember he came to, and he pointed to one of the pictures, one of the very early ones [*Benedictio*] — well, this was a very early-on exhibit — that had words in it. And he said, "Ah, that is very good." And that from him was really fantastic, [laughter] because he really didn't ever say anything much about anything that was around. He said, "I think you have done something very special"--or words to that effect-- "with the words, the word and the other forms." That didn't strike me--I mean, I didn't then start doing words and form together because he said that. But a number of years later, that came back to me, and I thought, huh, you know, I went ahead and sort of developed that way. And how much that small word of praise was unconsciously influential, I don't know.

GALM

What did words mean to you as a child? Did they have special meaning?

CORITA

Yes, I always loved to read. I just was a great reader.

GALM

I'm trying to picture Hollywood at the time, whether it was as billboard-crazy as it is today or not.

CORITA

No, no, I think, especially our little neighborhood. It was kind of a simple little neighborhood, almost like this, and there really were no billboards, say,

between home and school, [laughter] or between home and Holly-. ... Of course, Hollywood Boulevard was a very familiar stretch to me. It wasn't quite as junky as it is now, but pretty much so. It was never very great architecture. [laughter] But I don't think the billboards or magazines — probably before the picture magazines, certainly But as you say, the fact that I had really — I think I always loved printing. In fact, I remember a friend in high school--we used to have kind of friendly rivalry going on together, and I remember she said to me on one occasion, "You can print, but I can draw." [laughter] So even my drawing ability wasn't quite up to snuff — or she thought so.

GALM

Did you have any calligraphy in high school, or would that come later?

CORITA

No, I really developed the — I mean, the posters I just did without very much, if any, help from anybody. The actual calligraphy came — well, there was a time when I met Martin Oberstein, who is a calligrapher , and he gave me a lesson. He'd dropped into the school for something and showed me how to use broad-edged pen. So from then on I was on my own and learned how to do that, and then I taught it. But then finally, I suppose from seeing posters and reproductions of posters, I got ideas of there being different possibilities of using letter forms. And I always think of the letter forms as much objects as people or flowers or other subject matter. I don't think of them as anything different. I think a picture with all words is as much a picture as something with abstract shapes or recognizable shapes. I think it's all a matter of the spacing and the kind of totality of the picture that either looks good or doesn't look good.

GALM

When you were doing these posters as a child, did you always like to hand-letter them, rather than using a form or cut-out letters?

CORITA

I think I always hand-lettered them because that was the only way available to me, and I probably hadn't thought of any other way of doing it. I would illustrate them from time to time, too, so it wasn't just printing.

GALM

Why don't we pick up with the chronology? At what point did you decide that you wanted to become a nun?

CORITA

That was just after high school.

GALM

So it wasn't something that was always . . . ?

CORITA

Yes, in fact, my very closest friend was just utterly shocked when I told her, during the summer after we graduated, that I was going to enter this community. So it was a well-guarded secret. I don't remember keeping it a secret, but I guess I just didn't talk about it. And she said, "When did you make up your mind?" And I said, "I don't know. I think I just always have wanted to be."

GALM

Had anyone preceded you into the order at that point?

CORITA

Yes, it was a typical Catholic family. I had an older brother [Mark] who was a priest and an older sister [Sister Ruth] who had entered that same community. These were the nuns who taught me in grammar school.

GALM

How much older is the older sister?

CORITA

Let's see, I'm going to be fifty-seven this year, and she must be sixty-four.

GALM

So having religious in the family was sort of a common thing, growing up?

CORITA

Oh, yes, and I'm sure my parents had the general idea that this was a great thing to be.

GALM

In one interview or article, it mentioned that you had wanted to become a missionary sister. Is that accurate?

CORITA

No — you can't really believe all these things. [laughter]

GALM

Well, that's why I asked — I thought we would at least...

CORITA

In fact, I remember the community opened a house in British Columbia, in which half of the nuns taught regular Canadian children in the elementary school in the city, and the other half taught on an Indian reservation. Everybody was just dying to go, and I wasn't. I thought there must be something wrong with me because I hadn't the slightest desire to go. And then during that first year that that mission had opened, one of the sisters up there became ill, and I was sent up to replace her. All through that whole period of my younger days in religious life, whenever I was changed from one house to another house, I just really hated to leave where I was; and then when I got to the new place, I hated to leave that. But so I did teach in Canada. I taught at the Indian school for about — let's see, I was up there three and a half years, and I think I taught a year and a half there, and the rest of the time at the Canadian school.

GALM

When you decided to enter the sisterhood, had you seen yourself as becoming an elementary teacher?

CORITA

No, in fact, it's always very humorous to me when I look back because I was quite sure that I couldn't teach. I had a low estimation of my intelligence, and I thought I really wouldn't ever be able to teach. And yet, that was the only thing these nuns did.

GALM

You couldn't even be a cook-sister.

CORITA

No, I had no notion of being a cook-sister, [laughter] I mean, I was very young, and that was how unrealistic I was. As a matter of fact, I began teaching almost as soon as I entered because I somehow was always chosen to go when they needed a replacement, even though I hadn't arrived at the teaching stage yet (because in the first year, year and a half, you were being trained, and you didn't teach at that time except in cases of extreme emergency) . So I really got my beginning in teaching in a very rough way because I had no training and not much education at that time, having just finished high school.

GALM

Did that make it better or worse?

CORITA

Both, I think. [laughter] Yes.

GALM

So then the chronology after that: Did you get a degree from Immaculate Heart?

CORITA

Yes, I got my B.A. from Immaculate Heart. And then I began taking courses. I took courses at Chouinard, and I took one summer at Woodbury and, I guess, several summers at use, and then I went to Canada. And I think it was then about '45 when the accreditors came to the college. At that time there was just one full-time member of the art department, and the other people were coming in from USC and UCLA to teach a class or two. And the accreditation group said that there would have to be at least two permanent members. So, I guess, of the community, I was the one who had the most points toward a degree and apparently the most talent, so then I was sent back down. I taught part time at the college and finished at USC whatever units I needed to complete the degree.

GALM

Why were you sent, or why did you select USC?

CORITA

I think the general idea was that Sister Magdalen Mary, who was the sole member of the art department, had gotten her training at UCLA, and she thought it would be a good idea to have a difference, if there was a difference between the two schools.

GALM

Were you being then sort of trained as an art historian, or as a . . . ?

CORITA

Well, I got my degree in art history, but mostly I think it was because by that time, we really didn't respect any art teachers, [laughter] and so thought that the art history would be a better background, and that I could take care of the art — you know, what do you call them? — studio classes, so to speak, on my own. But there were, of course, studio classes. I mean, I did take studio classes along with the history classes.

GALM

When did Sister Magdalen Mary come to the department?

CORITA

Goodness. She is about ten years older than I am, and she was probably there — oh, I don't really know; I'm just making a rough guess — maybe from five to ten years before.

GALM

What status did the department have at that point?

CORITA

I suppose about the same as the other departments in the college. I think it was young and struggling, with some good teachers coming in and out, and Sister Magdalen Mary was an excellent teacher. But always, as far as students were concerned, there were always very few students. In fact, it wasn't really

till the last, oh, I'd say, ten years that we began to get art majors in greater quantity. It was always rather a small department in comparison with the other departments.

GALM

What would you do, just give a B.A. with a major in art?

CORITA

Um-hmm.

GALM

Had Sister Magdalen Mary been handling the painting and studio classes, too, at that point? Or some of them?

CORITA

Yes, and supplemented by outside visiting professors from UCLA and USC.

GALM

Again, in my research I'd read that she wasn't an artist herself.

CORITA

No. Of course, she painted while she was in school, but then she didn't ever really get started doing anything on her own as far as painting.

GALM

What kind of teacher was she?

CORITA

She was a marvelous teacher; she really was — a great teacher. In fact, I think she taught me a lot of things about teaching. We used to spend some time, Sundays usually, and pin up the students' work from our different classes and just talk about them; and I think those were great learning experiences for both of us and sharpened us from both sides. And then, let's see, she and I went to Europe for about three months at the end of '59 and beginning of '60. By that time we had begun the folk art collection, but then we just added tremendously to it. She was a just a fantastic businesswoman, as far as getting good bargains and finding good things. So we brought home just literally

truckloads full of things, and that was the great bulk of the collection, to which she then became very much attached and interested in. And her interest gradually went in that direction, I think even away from the teaching. And then I — let's see, '68, I left the college in '68, and I'm trying to work backward to think — I was probably head of the department about maybe five years, or does it say someplace authoritatively? It would be a help. [laughter]

GALM

I think you were head of the department for about four years.

CORITA

Four years. So then it was probably about in '64 that Sister Magdalen Mary decided to go to England and spend some time collecting and studying. She had not been very well, and I think she also wanted a change. So at that time, I was just the obvious next one, and so I became the head of the department until the time I left, which was in '68.

GALM

How did you work together then to build the department from what it had been to what it became?

CORITA

Well, I think we were both demons for work, and I was probably a little worse. I used to give very outlandish assignments, which I kind of gasp at now. But, well, I figured then, and think perhaps differently now, that there were people of different interests in the class, and that those who were really interested would be challenged, and wouldn't, wouldn't do it anyway; and so, somehow or other, things would level out. But then, I think it was in '51, because that was the year I finished at SC — the last four units I took were optional, and I could take anything at that point because I didn't need anything except the numbers, so I took a printmaking class. I had done some silk-screen work on my own, but not to any great extent, and so I decided to just take the class and do serigraphy the whole time for those four units. And I always got teased because they always called it my class at home, because I very seldom went to class. I would stay home and work and then go in and show them because it was simpler that way. And during that course I made two prints. And the

summer following that, I looked at one of them, and it was really so bad that I started adding colors on top of it, making a completely new print, which is that print hanging over there called *The Lord Is With Thee*. It turned into a completely different picture because underneath it was a picture of the Assumption, with a very, as I remember it, a kind of fashion-modelish lady in the center. It was a very unwhole picture. And the reason that that's kind of historic for me in a way is that we decided to enter it into the County Museum show where they had a show of prints, paintings, and sculpture in different divisions. And it won the first prize in the print division, which was just sort of overwhelming. And then that year, I entered it into a number — it won the first prize at the Sacramento State Fair and a number of other places . And so then we got into the exhibition work. We used to send the students' work to exhibitions along with my own things. We would go to the exhibit and then get to know the other printmakers and trade prints with them. So we began a print collection and got into the art world, so to speak, more than we had been before. And then yearly, around Christmastime, we would to to New York, by way of giving lectures along the way to pay for the trip, and see what in those days This was in the middle fifties to the middle sixties, before art got from New York out here so fast, or before Los Angeles was the kind of a center it is now. What was happening in New York was a number of years — at least a couple, maybe one--ahead of Los Angeles. So we would go to see what was going on at the Museum of Modern Art and the galleries, and do a little collecting, and, as I said, lecturing at different universities and schools as we went along the road.

GALM

Were these mainly Catholic schools at that time?

CORITA

No, not necessarily, not necessarily. It was wherever somebody had heard about us and wrote and asked. So I think that helped extend us into the art world. And then I remember, I initiated a program, which probably extended over the last two, maybe three years that I was at the college. We called it our Great Men series, which of course we wouldn't call it today! But I just invited people like Charles Eames and Peter Yates and, oh, a number of different

people. We had--who was the great director who discovered Marlene Dietrich?

GALM

[Josef] von Sternberg.

CORITA

Von Sternberg, yes. And I think they were all partly amused. Buckminster Fuller was another, and Virgil Thomson. I just wrote to them and said, "We have this program of great men; we would like you to be one of our great men and come." We asked them not to prepare a talk but just to come and tell whatever they wanted to tell about their own life, how they had gotten to where they were, and then to answer questions from the students. By this time, I guess Sister Magdalen Mary had left, but we had always felt a need to bring outside people in. For a long time we were limited to a faculty of three, and we thought bringing other people in to talk and lecture would be broadening for the students. And then we had the students keep their Friday afternoons free of any classes, and we went on field trips or had somebody come to talk to the students. We did that for, I suppose, the last ten years I was there.

GALM

Now, this Great Men series would have been for the entire student body?

CORITA

Well, no. We wanted to keep it rather small, so we had the art majors, and we would give like two invitations to each department, so that they could send members; and of course anybody from the faculty was always free to come. So it was a little bit exclusive.

GALM

Yeah, it sounds it. [laughter]

CORITA

And we taped those, and those tapes are around at the college someplace, I'm sure. They were really marvelous, marvelous nights.

GALM

Who taught you printmaking at USC? Do you recall?

CORITA

Yes, I recall him, and I'm trying to think of his name. He later went to New York to teach, and — [Michael] Andrews? Andrews comes, and I'm not sure. I have a terrible memory.

GALM

Much of an influence on you, or just mainly in teaching techniques?

CORITA

No, not really. In fact the person who really taught me serigraphy is Mrs. Martinez. I don't know if you're familiar with Alfredo Martinez, who was one of the Mexican muralists. He did murals, but in his spare moments he would do silk-screen prints, and he did them on newspaper, on anything. And then when he died, his widow decided that she wanted to perpetuate his work. So she went to one of the art schools, learned the technique, and reproduced a number of his paintings. And so going back, I'm not sure if he did silk-screen work himself or if these were all his wife's. But I remember before I had taken the class at SC, I had a silk-screen kit, and I wanted to teach the students how to do this. So I began experimenting, and I did — in fact, my first work was a little card with calligraphy on it. I was using the photographic process because that was the process described in this little kit, and I got along fine through the developing and the printing and then the printing on the silk screen. But when it came to the removing of the stencil from the silk screen, I evidently didn't have the proper solvent. I was scrubbing away one day at this screen, trying to get it off with different things, and one of the students came and said, "I know a lady who knows how to do silk-screen work. Would you like to meet her?" And I said, "Sure." So she came over and in an afternoon just told me all she knew. She showed me some things, and that was really all you needed to know. It's a very simple process. And from then on, with experiment and with just doing it, I think I learned the rest. But I don't think I really learned anything new at SC. It was just a time to be able to make prints.

GALM

And to get your degree.

CORITA

And to get my degree, right. Don Goodall was really a very good sport. I'll always remember him kindly because I remember looking at the program — see, I hadn't had an art major as an undergraduate--looking at the requirements for a master's and thinking, "My God, this is going to take me six years or so to fulfill all these requirements." So I went to see him, and I told him what I had been doing, what I had done. And he checked over and said, "Well, you don't need this, and you don't need this, and you don't need this"--because in experience, I had them, and he was great enough to recognize that. So actually it was cut down considerably, and I was able to finish. It only took me eleven years to get my master's all in all. [laughter] But that was along with teaching and all; it was a very minor issue on the side.

GALM

Was it mainly summer work?

CORITA

Yes, yes.

GALM

Was there anyone during that period, then, as a teacher, who you recall as having influence, or whose work you admired?

CORITA

No, not really. I think what influenced me much more were things I would see at exhibits. And even though we had some professional painters with names at USC, I don't recall their ever being enough to my taste to influence me. Sort of went through it to get the degree.

GALM

In New York, who were you seeing at that time?

CORITA

Well, the people I remember were people like [Robert] Motherwell, [Adolph] Gottlieb, and that whole abstract expressionist school. I guess that was at its

peak when we began our exhibit-going. I think that I kind of played back and forth, but I always come back to that kind of thing. I think I feel very much at home with it, with the loose forms and the simplicity. Mark Rothko was a great influence, I feel.

GALM

What about Ben Shahn?

CORITA

And Ben Shahn, yes--I love Ben Shahn.

GALM

Did you eventually then meet him?

CORITA

Yes. At that time, I had done a print for the International Graphic Arts Society, which was a group in New York organized to help people collect, people who wouldn't know how or wouldn't go to museums. They would send out a catalog, and they would commission artists to do a series for them and sell them at a lower than ordinary, lower than gallery price. So I had done one or two commissions for them, and Theodore Gusten, who was the head of that, was a friend of Ben Shahn ' s . And through him we met him, had a marvelous afternoon.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (APRIL 6, 1976)

GALM

You were talking about your meeting, your wonderful afternoon, with Ben Shahn.

CORITA

Yes, I remember one of the things he said was that — I think it was the first or second time we'd been to New York, and he said he so envied us, seeing New York for the first time as adults. He'd grown up there and knew it all, but he said it would be such a great experience to come on it fresh, as an adult.

GALM

How old were you at about that time — thirty?

CORITA

I would have been probably in my thirties, maybe midthirties.

GALM

Was there anything to follow in the Los Angeles art scene at that time?

CORITA

Not really much, as I remember; or, again, as I say, it wasn't exciting to us because we would see things in the art magazines and they wouldn't be here, so we would have to find them in New York. But I'm not sure. I think we were having those Friday afternoons, and we of course always found good shows at the County Museum or the Pasadena Museum or galleries. We used to spend a lot of afternoons at La Cienega when that got organized into the gallery district; we'd just go up and down. But we were really very broad in the sense that our interest in the so-called fine arts. We'd consider going to the beach and flying kites an artistic experience, or watching the sun set with some kind of ceremony. But it didn't matter to us whether it was a shop with foreign imports of folk things, whether they were--it didn't have to be paintings.

GALM

You mention watching a sunset with ceremony. When did the concept of ceremony enter your life, or had it always been a part of your life?

CORITA

Well, the school had always had a day in May which they called Mary's Day, and it was a very dismal affair. The students wore their caps and gowns, and they would each carry a calla lily, and we would have a ceremony. They'd go up and put the calla lily in a vase in front of the statue of Our Lady, and I'm sure they must have had Mass and processions and said the rosary and sung hymns. And it must have been about in '62 or '63 that a new nun had charge of it, Helen Kelley, who is now the president of the college. This job was sort of handed over to her from somebody else. And she was probably the last person in the world to have that — she has great appreciation for ceremony, but this whole thing didn't fit with her. And I can remember that there was a long line of girls in the corridor, and they were supposed to go someplace. And

I guess the leader was kind of asleep, and Kelley just grabbed her and started her in a direction, like you would a line of little kids. Instead of just thinking how to say it, she thought the easiest thing to do would be just to get her started and everybody would follow. So I think it was over a meal that I teased her and said how hilarious I thought it was, and she said, "How would you like the art department to take over Mary's Day?" [laughter] I said, "Sure." So in 1964 was the first big one we did, then. And I started out just brainstorming with the students. I asked if they had a day that they could do anything they wanted with some kind of ceremony, what would be good things to do? You know how kids can come up with marvelous ideas. So we just took them all in and discussed them and tried to find ones that were possible, and we put together some great days. And those have been all documented by film-- or most of them. We have some beautiful films on them, made by Baylis Glascock. But before that time, we had been interested in a lot of objects which had been ceremonial objects. So that was always there, the kind of folk art thing again. And I'd always been fascinated with the idea that a lot of the Italian professional artists--I may be wrong historically, but I think in general [I am] right — that some of the people like da Vinci or Michelangelo were in charge of the city's festivities and did the costumes and the floats and whatever they had. So that they were really considered an art.

GALM

Was there anything locally at that time that gave you ideas for the celebration for Mary's Day?

CORITA

I remember this psychologist friend who wrote and said he always thought that I had preceded and initiated the be-ins and the happenings that came after. Now, I don't know, historically, whether they happened first or we happened first. But it was about the same time.

GALM

But in other words, you weren't, in a sense, copying anything?

CORITA

No, it came out of this very sterile ceremony that had gone on for many years. [laughter] And we came in as good amateurs come in, with the idea that everything was possible. And then I would turn all my classes over to that, and they would make things for it, for the rest of the school. But it took a fantastic amount of organization because you were handling 500 or 600 people who really weren't--we tried to get them in on the preparation as much as possible by inviting people from different departments to come and discuss with us, but as far as the actual labor was concerned, some of them came, but they had their own interests and didn't have all that time. The art majors were doing it for credit, and so they had to do it. And then we had adult classes, and they did wonderful things for it, too.

GALM

And this preceded the [Renaissance] Pleasure Faire, too, didn't it?

CORITA

Yes, the Renaissance Faire, yes.

GALM

Because there seems to be a bit of a similar spirit.

CORITA

Um-hmm, yes.

GALM

A spring orgy, I guess. [laughter]

CORITA

Right, a spring orgy, right, yes. Yes, we always centered it around — well, I think there were several parts to it. I thought the assembling was very important. I remember being in New York once, on our way home from Europe, I think, the day of the Chinese New Year, and somebody got us a little balcony in a store right over the beginning of it. And it took them--if you've ever watched them--about a couple of hours to assemble. They were setting off firecrackers and milling around and talking and having a great time before the actual procession with the dragon got started. And I thought, "This is such a marvelous concept, just the getting together informally with some kind of

anticipation of what was to come." So that was always a very important part. And we always had some kind of a movement--left over from the procession, I suppose — from one part of the campus to the other, and then always a meal, like out on the grass. And then we usually ended up with Mass, or had Mass in the center, and tried to make it as special as we could within the confines of the L.A. laws. [laughter]

GALM

Were the festivities ever the object of criticism?

CORITA

Oh, yes. Every year.

GALM

Oh, every year. [laughter]

CORITA

Every year, yes.

GALM

You could anticipate

CORITA

In fact, Helen Kelley, who was (and still is) president of the college, was really a great person because she--well, for many reasons, but also because she would take the gaff. But we got it from inside, too, because some of the older nuns just felt bad that we weren't saying the rosary and weren't doing some of the things that had been a part of it and just saw to it that it was beautifully done. And we would try always to do things that wouldn't cause criticism, but — I mean, that was always kind of in the back of my mind, I'm sure. But of course, anything you would do would cause criticism because at that point everything we did was wrong. [laughter] We couldn't win for losing, so we might as well have a good time doing it.

GALM

What form would the criticism take?

CORITA

Well, the cardinal's office would call the president's office, and say, you know, "We hear such and such went on." And then some of the very conservative alumni members who came were very upset because as conservatives are, the first little sign of change is a real threat to them.

GALM

So they saw it as perhaps being sacrilegious, or ... ?

CORITA

Yes, and different from what it had been in their day, I think, was at the very base of it: that it wasn't their college anymore.

GALM

You'd broken with tradition.

CORITA

Yes, yes. And you see, we had a very different notion of tradition. [laughter]

GALM

Well, in a sense, a new tradition was established.

CORITA

Well, yes, in that traditions are what you pass on, but in the passing on, one would hope they grow and not stay the same, because if it stays the same, it's dead. This had been repeated year after year after year. We would try to have a theme each year, and in those years especially, I think there was so much happening that it was usually a social justice theme underlying it. Like one year we really did a big bang-up thing with billboards, collecting all the billboards we could find with food; and the whole thing had to do with being aware of the fact that much of the world didn't eat. And this worked into the program. So in preparation for that, the students would collect gobs of quotations. I remember one time we decided to do a lot with flowers--I think every class embroidered banners with flowers--I think every class had to do a flower banner of some kind. And in one class, I assigned each person to do 500 twelve-inch squares that had a bouquet of flowers on them. And they could

do it any way they wanted. I said they could contact elementary-school teachers and get them to have their whole classes do one, each do one; and so there were many, many ways. They could do them in multiple, do a print, do them lots of ways. So then we pasted these on the sides of cartons that size and used them as huge, big building blocks, just stacked them up in great piles behind the altar.

GALM

Did you get that building block idea from Charles Eames?

CORITA

We did indeed, yes. We went out to his house one time on a field trip. He had had his grandchildren visiting him, and to entertain them, he had bought them 100 cartons of about twelve inches square and made marvelous blocks. And then he had a rope hanging from the ceiling with a noose down toward the floor, and you could put your feet in it and swing, pile them up, and knock them all down. But when we brought this class, they all used them to sit on. We were doing boxes for quite a while after that in different ways.

GALM

Does that mean your IBM exhibit would have been a different use.

CORITA

Yes, right, exactly.

GALM

How did the folk art collection start at Immaculate Heart?

CORITA

I don't know. I think we always had the idea that the students should be surrounded by real art. And we found a way of gathering prints. But we really had practically no budget at that time. So we started collecting very simple little things, like Japanese paper things, objects that were beautifully made and were part of some- body's tradition. And I think I always felt more kind of in tune — well, I think I always sort of resented the division between the fine and the folk art, thought that [the folk arts] were just as fine, and the fine arts just as folk.

GALM

Was that shared by both of you?

CORITA

Um-hmm.

GALM

Was it reinforced then by Charles Eames?

CORITA

Oh, yes.

GALM

When did he enter the picture?

CORITA

Let's see, it must have been quite early on, probably around the early fifties, or maybe the late forties, because I know I was teaching the kindergarten, first, second, and third grade in the training school. We had a training school at that time where the college students did their practice teaching. They were very small classes; I had these three classes in one room. I would do that during the daytime, and then from four to six, I guess, I taught college classes. One of them was interior design. And I didn't have the ghost of a notion what to do in a class of interior design. I'd never had one; when I did have one, it didn't really help. [laughter] So one of the things I thought to do was to take the students around to see new homes that were built and, if possible, to try to get the architect to be there to talk about his work. So I remember having seen Charles's house, which was new at that time — fairly new; I think it was built in '51 or so. I had seen it in *Arts and Architecture*, and we had met John Entenza, who at that time was the editor of *Arts and Architecture*. I think I did covers for him, and the students did covers for that magazine at that time. So I think I might have called John Entenza and asked him how we could get the students into that house; and either he suggested it or I thought of it myself, just calling Charles and asking him if I could bring students out. And he said, "Sure." Life wasn't so hectic for him in those days. [laughter] We were really lucky. So we used to do that every year, and sometimes twice a year. I always

taught a class in the summer for people who were going to teach. That was really one of my joys because I thought it was a great chance to get into the schools, because those people would all be ordinary elementary-school teachers. I thought they would do a lot less harm if they had been through a good course. And really it turned out to be a class, as so many of the students have always said, a class in how to teach. Because I would just throw things at them to do that they had never done before, and they could see how that was possible, rather than showing you how to do everything.

GALM

You mentioned Eames — did you try to get in with [Richard] Neutra and [Rudolph] Schindler? They would have still been around. Did you make any effort to ... ?

CORITA

Yes, we saw Neutra and went to his house. And Schindler, no. We may have gone to houses he built, but I don't think that we met him.

GALM

So the relationship with Eames was mainly, then, through the class. Did you have a personal relationship then, too, that continued?

CORITA

Well, he was one of our Great Men, and we saw him from time to time. I think I've only been out there to the house socially about, maybe, three or four times, but then he doesn't do much of that, anyway; and I've been to the studio a number of times. Then he was a great help to us in just sitting around and talking when we were thinking of building a college at Claremont. He agreed to be in on the thinking part of it for us. So by that time he had a great affection, I think, for what the art department — because that's how he got to know the college--had done and was very enthusiastic about it.

GALM

Did his wife always sit in on these meetings, or did he operate individually?

CORITA

Let's see, no. When he came — he used to come by himself, and then when we would go to the studio or the home, Ray would always be there.

GALM

Okay. Why don't we go back to your work, then, how it developed from this first one in the corner onward. [laughter]

CORITA

Well, as I say, I think the success at the exhibitions gave it quite an impetus, that I may never have done anything if it hadn't been for that. You know, I may have just taught also and not done work on my own. But after that, I used to make a series of prints each year. The only time for it really was between summer school and the beginning of fall school. So in the beginning, it was a couple of weeks, and I would make one or two prints. And always, two or three of the nuns would come, drop in and help, and that got to be a great growing tradition. Then the students sometimes began to ask if they could come; some of the adult students came. I had one man, Hobart Burnett, who came every year; he was really the great solid one who was always there, first thing in the morning, to take down the prints that had dried. And then we got this little space across the street where the students had their serigraphy class, and in the summer, I just took the whole room over. And I would have up to maybe eight or ten people working, helping me. A marvelous woman, who came out from New York, Eleanor Carpenter, who was a grandmother, had lived on a farm and was working toward her degree and after that taught for about ten years in New York — she would stay after summer school for those two or three weeks and clean my screens and mix paint. So it was that group of people, really, who made the quantity possible, because I never would have done all that work all by myself.

GALM

How did you handle the first products of your work? Did you try to find a gallery?

CORITA

No. Sister Magdalen Mary, especially in the beginning, was much more what you might call a manager. One of the adults offered her services, and she

would mat things, my things and the students' things, to send to exhibits. And then we got requests for shows or sent out feelers for shows. And a lot of that sending out and making contact was done by Sister Magdalen Mary. I don't think I was terribly excited about doing it. I was really much more at that time concerned with the teaching, and this was very much a side thing always. And then, I think in the last year I was at the college, I had done a design--I was meanwhile doing a lot of freelance work on the side, designs for covers for people, magazines and inside illustrations, one thing and another. invitations — and I did a design for the annual report of a hospital up north. And they had it printed by silk-screen. It was such a beautiful job that I asked them who did it, and I got in touch with this Harry Hambly in Santa Clara. That year, I prepared the separations and sent half of my prints up to him to see how that would work out. And then from then on, he's done all my printing. It's just been a marvelous relationship, because we've always been far away-- now I'm even farther, in Boston--and he has always been just directly attuned to what I mean when I say something. So I can send him--I usually do my work about three inches square, sometimes--and say, "Enlarge this to such and such a size, and do this in this color, and this is this color." And he always either understands or knows enough to ask questions. So that actually now it's come down to my doing the design for them--he does the printing. I have a batch coming at the end of the month, and I'll have a show.

GALM

Where will the show be, here or in Boston?

CORITA

At the gallery.

GALM

At the gallery. At that point, did you already know that you might be leaving your working situation?

CORITA

No, no.

GALM

So it was just a blessing in disguise.

CORITA

Right, yes, yes. It came as a kind of inspiration, you know, that somebody could do this, could help, you know, because among all my helpers, I think I only had one, one man, who came who could really pull a squeegee across the screen and do a perfect print every time. And I was the other one. But no matter what size or shape these people were, they just didn't have the elbow grease that I had or the strength in their arms to really--so they could never do the printing part. They did the cleaning up and the hanging and all that. There's a lot of muscle work to the whole process.

GALM

Early on, you decided that this was going to be your medium.

CORITA

I don't think I decided. I think I just made prints, and the next year, I decided to make prints again.

GALM

So it just happened to happen year after year.

CORITA

Yes, uh-huh. And it got to be sort of expected, in a way, that I would make a new batch. The galleries would expect a new batch.

GALM

When did you find time to collect the quotations and slogans and so forth that became a part of them?

CORITA

Well, of course, in those days, I was surrounded by very literate people. That community had some of the best women you could ever meet, and these were all people in different fields. So sometimes people would point things out to me or send things to me. And I was--and I still am-- a great flipper, you know, rather than a reader: flip through a book and come across good things. And then sometimes you just found--like I think IBM put out a little magazine that I got for a time that would have a page of quotations, and sometimes

you'd find one good one there. So I think that people who think that I'm an avid reader — I don't read quite as much as it would seem. I've seen the quotation someplace.

GALM

So you haven't read all of Rilke.

CORITA

Right, right. Almost. Almost. But that was after I used him, for the most part.

GALM

So the first ones did contain some figures. How long did that keep up?

CORITA

Well, I think I was very much--not disillusioned, but I was not very pleased with what was happening in figurative art. I think figurative art had a hard time and still is having a hard time, except for a few people like Milton Avery and maybe Ben Shahn, people like that. So I think I went back to medieval things--and of course that [print] is very medieval--and worked from those sources because, in fact, I did my thesis on some medieval sculpture, It's a very miserable piece of scholarship, but the sculpture was good. But then, as I started getting into my own, as I say, being very much influenced by abstract expressionism, I found it much more my thing to be nonfigurative . And now I feel that in a sense the prints have kind of a mixed audience. I think a lot of people like them for what they say, and I always thought this was a nice thing because the people would then be attracted to the form and gradually get used to looking, whereas they might not if it were a picture without words. I've done lots of pictures without words. But I think it's helpful when they have words.

GALM

You also stretch their imagination as far as the words themselves are concerned, as far as seeing them and not seeing all of the word.

CORITA

I think so, yes. Right.

GALM

And reverse image and . . .

CORITA

Right.

GALM

. . . other things. And that wasn't present much in the early work, was it?

CORITA

No, no. I remember once that I was taking photographs of some of the For one of these Mary's days, we decided to cover every door of the administration building with one big poster that was the size of a door. So every student made about five. I was taking photographs of them one time and taking sections of some because they were very beautiful. One of them was curved, as I was taking the slide, and I thought, "Oh, that would be a nifty idea." So that year, I think almost in all of my prints, I took pictures from magazines and combined them the way I wanted, and then I would curl the paper to go the way I wanted it to and shoot the photograph, the slide, and then enlarge that and cut the stencil from that. So that's where all the curly ones came from.

GALM

Did what was happening in "liturgical art" (quote- unquote) at the time have any influence on you?

CORITA

Yes, I think that in the early days, especially, I was trying to make "religious art" (quote-unquote) that would be not quite as repulsive as what was around. And then pretty soon I realized that anything that was any good had a religious quality, so that it didn't matter whether it had that kind of subject.

GALM

Was there anyone doing religious art at that time who you could respect?

CORITA

I think at that time mostly what was being done was a kind of resurrection of the Byzantine and the Gothic, the strong things, and strong periods from the past. But I always laughed because I think my--well, I know my biggest rejection was from a liturgical art magazine we had. I can't think of the man's name, who is now dead. Maurice Lavanoux. I had agreed to make a serigraph that fit in the magazine as a double-page spread so that each person who subscribed to the magazine would get an original serigraph. And I did 2,100 prints. This was when I was printing by myself. [laughter] I did it in two colors, I think. So that was the longest job I ever did. And we sent them off to him and didn't hear from him. So after a long time, I wrote and said, "Did they get there?" And he wrote back, and he said he thought that it was a little too much ahead for his readers. So I said, "Send them back." So for years afterwards we were selling them, and finally, unbelievably, they became rare.

GALM

Do you recall what the design was?

CORITA

Yes. It was a figure of Christ and a figure of Our Lady, with words. [*Christ and Mary*]

GALM

What do you think really put him off about it?

CORITA

Well, I think that he probably had to play a safe line to keep subscribers, and even though they did sort of out of the way things for that time, I guess he must I didn't think it was; I mean, it seemed very tame to me. But apparently he didn't feel that his readers would think so. We did this as a gift for him, which was amazing. [laughter]

GALM

When you did start receiving some recognition, were you ever courted by the same people, as far as commissions or anything like that is concerned?

CORITA

Well, yes, I think eventually. I suppose the top thing in that regard would be the mural I did for the Vatican Pavilion [at the 1964 New York World's Fair]. But of course the person in charge of that section of the Vatican Pavilion was Norman Laliberte, who happened to be a friend and thought what we were doing was great. So it wasn't exactly that the officials in the church chose, or anybody official. That kind of recognition just didn't ever come.

GALM

Is any of your work in churches or convents, other than . . . ?

CORITA

Oh, some in convents. And let's see — I did one chapel, which we did the complete design of, in Palm Springs, which has since been sort of taken apart by different people who came along and thought otherwise. [laughter]

GALM

It's been dismantled?

CORITA

It's been dismantled. And I think I did a series of the stations of the cross for one chapel, which were then taken down the next year, sold to another chapel, which [laughter] Those were hard years because I think even the general public was still very much adverse to the notion of what they called modern art, you know, anything that was different from the bad copies of the great masters or the great masters themselves. So we were just part of the crowd.

GALM

It seems, though, that there would be more of an acceptance in the late sixties and

CORITA

Well, of course, within the community, it was always mixed. And I always laugh because in my own family, it was divided exactly in half, you know. [laughter] Let's see, well, it couldn't be divided exactly in half. I had my sister [Mary], whose home we are in, and my brother [Mark] who was a priest, and they were always very much in sympathy with what I was doing. But the rest

of the family thought I was out of my mind. [laughter] But they've mellowed over the years.

GALM

What is it that — it was just too far out for them?

CORITA

Yes. Well, two of my brothers have died during this last year, and those two brothers and then my sister, who is a religious--Sister Ruth--were very conservative people. In fact, you might say that one brother [Richard] and sister were extremely conservative, in many, many ways. And then the other half of the family, my sister and myself and my brother who was a priest (who is no longer a priest) were much more sort of into what was changing. And my mother — I used to bring her the batch of prints every year when I finished them, to show her, and I remember the last time I brought them to her. I think she always half-loved them because her daughter had done them, so she was much kinder toward them than the conservative part of the family. But she looked at them, and she said, "Don't you think you've gone a little too far this time?" [laughter] It's just marvelous. And then I said, "Well, which are your favorites?" And so she chose two. And one was kind of a logical choice: it was a beautiful heart with a crown of thorns, and then the [Juan] Jimenez "Heart of the City" written over it. [*The Heart of the City* print is actually based on a poem by Miguel de Unamuno; Jimenez's poems appear in other prints, however, such as *Yellow Spring* . --Ed.] But the other was what I called *Wonderbread* , for which I really got the idea from the Wonderbread loaf of bread. There were just twelve circular images, different colors. And that was one of her favorites, which I thought was quite far out, as they say, for her, who thought I had gone a little far that year.

GALM

How much did your students influence your work?

CORITA

I think there was a great exchange between us. First of all, we saw the same things, because we usually went to exhibits together. And then I think there was a great interchange as far as the class work was concerned, as to

assignments I would give them and ways they would interpret those assignments. I think we probably, from working so close together, had a very similar way of looking at things and probably similar tastes. I'm sure they were-- well, I think it was really a mutual kind of influence, that oftentimes I would be stimulated by something, as in the case of that banner, which was quite accidental: I had been looking at a student's work while I got that idea, but it was really the photography that led me into it.

GALM

Had you been doing photography all along, too?

CORITA

Yes. I used to take thousands of slides, and most of our lectures--I guess all of our lectures--we illustrated them with slides. And then I used to take slides for Paul Laporte, for his classes.

GALM

What were some of the assignments that you gave your students?

CORITA

Well, I always had, or developed later, I guess, this quantity business, with the notion that if they had to do a lot of things, they would just dig in, figuring that it was just hopeless, so they might as well just get them done. Whereas I think sometimes if you're faced by having to do a single thing, you have great expectations of your- self that it's got to be great, and you worry over it. The other way, you sort of get a lot of experience without — and you get quality through the experience, through doing it over and over again. For example, I would have them take a piece of cardboard with a hole in the center, a square in the center for a finder, and just go over pages of magazines, and when they found something they liked, a section of a picture, draw a line around it and cut it out. Well, I would have them do 500 of those at a time, and some of them got to be very smart. They would just take a magazine and the paper cutter and cut, and then go back and sift through and take out the ones they liked. [laughter] So it developed this marvelous kind of inventiveness to get the thing done. They would think of unbelievable ways of-- and I always said, if

you can get somebody to do it for you or with you or to help you, fine. And in that way it involved other students.

GALM

So it was still problem solving.

CORITA

Yes, right. Exactly. Which is what I think it ought — it's what it all was. And I think I always tried to do things that would — see, I think there's a creative aspect to art, and an analytical [telephone rings]

GALM

Do you want to take that, or ... ?

CORITA

No, is that going to bother your . . . ? The creative is when you're putting things together, and the analytical part is when you're taking things apart and criticizing and observing — whereas the other part, you're in it. This was in the days before mass meditation groups, but I think that I was always aware of that difference in consciousness, of when you were criticizing something and when you were making something, and that you couldn't do the two things at the same time, and that often people tried to--especially , you know, nonprofessionals. So especially in the night classes, where we had a lot of people who had never taken art, just had always wanted to, and real folk artists, and some of them marvelous — so I would try to do things. I would try to give them a list of things to do, and their mind would get so busy trying to fulfill those that the thing they actually did would be done freely because they wouldn't be so worried about the final result. They thought all these other things were important. Like to use maybe three colors and have it a particular size and a lot of little requirements that they could legitimately busy that part of themselves with [phone rings] while their creativity part could come out more easily.

GALM

Where were you getting those ideas for teaching, or were they your own?

CORITA

Well, I think that "necessity is the mother of invention" sort of thing, that I would just — I think I always had a horror of boring classes from having had so many boring classes myself. And so I would try to do things that would be stimulating and exciting, and so I would . . . When it stops I'll take it [the phone] off. So I spent a lot of time in preparation for classes, [gathering] materials that were not necessarily art magazines or art books, but just I think I'm naturally intuitive, and ideas just come.

GALM

Were you able to use some of the same ideas you used for your elementary school teaching that you did later on?

CORITA

Toward the end. But I think by the time I got into really knowing how to teach, I was teaching older people, college students, and adults. I often regretted the way I had taught, though I think I was a fun teacher in a way with the young kids because I enjoyed them so much. But I would have--I think I would have been much more challenging to them if I had known then what I knew later. And that's why I think I liked that class that was a requisite for people who were going to teach, because it was a chance to kind of undo what I had done. [laughter]

GALM

Make up for

CORITA

Yes. And could see the possibilities of what they could do.

GALM

What form did that class take, as far as handling the students?

CORITA

Well, I would give them many of the same problems I would give to the art students, and we would go on field trips, and I would try to make it as much as possible a problem class. I thought they really should be learning something about art, as far as tastes and recognition and so forth, because it seemed to me that as much as I could give them, they would have to have that kind of

appreciation to be able to intelligently get their students to do things. And I must say that we had marvelous equipment, like films. We had, in those days, all the Eames films; and those are, if you've seen them, I'm sure In fact, one of the assignments I gave them was when Charles first gave us the India film on the exhibit that Alexander Girard did at the Museum of Modern Art. [*Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India*] I showed them the film, and then afterwards I said, "Now, go home and come back tomorrow with 200 questions about the film." [laughter] And it was marvelous because any of these things are I would have them look at things for--like, we would sit around in a circle and each have a Coke bottle and look at it for say an hour, or maybe ten minutes sometimes, depending. And we did a lot of looking exercises. And you find that these things are very difficult to do. The first ten or twenty questions are painful. But after that you get very slaphappy, and you start opening up and expanding. A lot of the questions were worthless, but out of that whole batch, you would get some marvelous things; and, again, the whole process, I think, was a good stretching exercise. And some of them--I mean, some of them came back with 50 questions, and maybe two people out of the class did 200. But even that was fun.

GALM

They're the ones that couldn't stay awake for the class. [laughter]

CORITA

Right, right.

GALM

What did you do about grading them, the students?

CORITA

Well, in the last few years, that was the last assignment, to grade themselves and to justify the grade. And they were really pretty good. I very seldom had to change them. Ordinarily if they were too low, they would be wrong, or seem not right to me. And I used to tell them that I thought the important things were to be in class every day--not because I thought I was so great that they needed to hear me, but I think the things that happened when we were all together, the discussions and what have you, were the way they really

grew, and that they couldn't learn, they couldn't catch up if they weren't there. I'd be furious if they weren't there on the day that I gave an assignment, or on the first day of class, which was really a big bang-up sort of orientation. I said, "If you've missed the first class, you don't know what's happening in the rest of the class, because that's the only day I really teach."

GALM

Was the adult class already going when you . . . ?

CORITA

Um-hmm, um-hmm, yes. But in those days, there would be about six people in the class. And in the adult classes. And then there got to be about fifty or sixty in the class.

GALM

And there was just a one-session class.

CORITA

Yes, once a week, um-hmm. And at night. And Saturday mornings we had adult classes, too. Those were mostly teachers, people working for their degrees. But I remember once we did a--what is it?--the NAEA. The National Art Education Association had its meeting in Los Angeles, and we were asked if we would like to do the commercial exhibits. All the people who had commercial products that they wanted to sell to schools set up their exhibits. And you've probably been to some of those exhibits --tables with green felt and all that -- they're really ghastly. So we took it on, and I think it was at the Statler [Hotel] downtown when it was in its first year. And we took over some huge room, and I assigned each student in my classes to....

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (APRIL 6, 1976 and APRIL 13, 1976)

GALM

You were talking about an exhibit that your students did at the Statler for the National Education

CORITA

National Art Education Association. Each student was responsible for getting in touch with the manufacturer or distributor--the salesman, I guess--of a particular company — like, say, the American Crayon Company — getting materials from them and getting enough things made out of those materials that we could cover We got these metal sections that you make bookcases out of, and every- body used those. We got a whole batch of them, and they had to all paint them white. That was the only kind of regulation thing. And they could set them up in any way they wanted. Their job was to sell the product that they were in charge of. We had two companies who came in and changed their exhibit back to the old thing, but that was out of about, oh, eighty some companies that we were working for. And that was a fantastic experience that we probably never would have gotten into if we had realized how much work it was going to be.

GALM

I'm sure that must have happened more than once, [laughter]

CORITA

Yes, exactly. One of the things Charles said that always stuck with me, he said that they always tried to maintain their amateur status, because an amateur was a person who was always willing to do something because he didn't know it couldn't be done. [laughter] And he would do it.

GALM

Does this then predate the — I know you did an exhibition

CORITA

This was in 1957.

GALM

I know you did an exhibition of banners at the . . .

CORITA

. . . National Gallery [in Washington, D.C.].

GALM

Was it at the National Gallery?

CORITA

Um-hmm, yes. We had done the banners. In fact, we had done the banners before the celebration days began, because I think I had gotten the idea from looking at a picture. I thought it would be a super project. And everybody thought they were outrageous. So we decided that we would go down to Watts, to the [Watts] Towers--you're familiar with them. And in those days, nobody knew where they were, even in Watts. We'd ask somebody on the next corner, and they wouldn't know. We had a kind of little procession around in and out of the towers, mostly to take pictures, just to see how they looked, objectively. And they were reproduced in *Arts and Architecture*, some of the photographs. And Fritz Gutheim, who was, and I think still is, professionally doing exhibits for big occasions, was in charge of the AIA [American Institute of Architects] centennial, which was to be in the National Gallery and was to consist of photographs. And he thought the exhibit would be pretty dull and that the banners hung with them would make it more lively. So that was one of the early-on things that got the people in the community impressed. We always thought it was great fun if we could impress the people in the community, because they took us as a little offbeat, as I say. We had our supporters, but most of the people thought we were a little bit odd.

GALM

When you say, "the community," do you mean . . . ?

CORITA

The sisters, the nuns.

GALM

The religious community.

CORITA

Yes. And this surprised us no end, because they were so impressed. Everybody was so impressed that we had something in the National Gallery. It's just marvelous how people make their judgments.

GALM

But was that the only time you hung banners, did a banner exhibit?

CORITA

Oh, no. We had a marvelous banner exhibit at the County Museum.

GALM

At Exhibition Park.

CORITA

Yes.

GALM

Now, were those banners left over then from Mary's Day, or were those different banners?

CORITA

Well, for a number of years, at least one class a year I would have make banners. We were always rather brutal in those days because we said that anything the students did really belonged to the college if the college wanted it. We collected all the banners, so we had a great accumulation because the people were doing them for several years, so that on the big days, we would have enough for most of the people to carry. But that exhibition was great fun. [Jim] Elliott was the one who got us to do it, asked for it. It was in the rotunda. And I had this idea --we had made small banners, silk-screen rectangles about, oh, maybe, sixteen inches square, and I had the idea of their hanging horizontally in space, way above--you know how high that room is. And then I think the other banners were hung from the four corners, where there must have been something to attach them to. So we got four poles established on the floor, and strung these banners, probably about, oh, maybe sixty or seventy of these sixteen-inch squares. From the corner of each one to the four poles went a string. So there was this whole maze of banners that were beautifully spaced. And then the problem was to get the whole thing up into the air, which we did by taking one pole up and fastening it to a light, a chandelier, while everybody else held the other parts as they went up. It was beautiful. But again it was kind of an impossible thing. And that was happening during summer school: summer school meant something like a three-hour class in the morning and a three-hour class in the afternoon, and

after the last class, we would get a gang and go down there and work on it. So we were crazy in a way, like I guess all enthusiastic people are.

GALM

Here again, your making of banners — do you think that had an influence on a popularity for banners among other groups?

CORITA

I think it could have. These days got to be very well known, and toward the end, there were probably about half students and half outsiders, because people just heard about them, and they wanted to bring their kids to them; they just wanted to come and be a part of it.

GALM

Because I know banners always had been, of course, a part of religious celebration or any celebration.

CORITA

Any celebration, right.

GALM

But there was a period there in the sixties in which they became more of a liturgical expression, too.

CORITA

Well, yes. I think the banners really did have a great — well, I would say they had a wide influence, not a great influence. I picked up a little Hallmark [Cards, Inc.] book the other day--in fact, somebody sent it to me because they were laughing over it--and as you turn page after page, it looked like stuff that had been thrown away in the art department. It was a very bad copy of almost everything we had ever thought of doing. And I think with the banners, the same thing has happened. People have started making banners, but they're dead. They have a kind of nonenthusiasm to them.

GALM

Why don't we stop for today and then we'll resume?

CORITA

Okay, fine.

APRIL 13, 1976

GALM

Before we continue with the interview, I would like to clarify something. We talked last time about two banner shows, one at the National Gallery and one at our Los Angeles County Museum of Art (and at that time, I think it was in Exposition Park) . Was this one and the same show?

CORITA

There may have been banners that were repeated in both shows, because as I think I said, we collected them from the students, and they thought of--I think they were forewarned that they were doing this for the cause, so to speak, and that other people could use them. So that some of them may--no, I take it back, because it's coming to me now that we did those banners especially for that Washington show. I gave the students the theme of "House or Home," and they were to do some research. I think at that point we did mostly biblical research and just found great quotations about the home or the house or the building, anything to do with that area that we'd hopefully somehow tie in with the American Institute of Architects show, which they were helping. And then probably some of those banners, or all of them, were used in the Los Angeles County Museum show.

GALM

Was the curator at the museum actually just bringing that show from the National Gallery?

CORITA

No, this was a banner show we did for the County Museum, and had no relation to the architects' show.

GALM

Because it occurred in the same year. [1958]

CORITA

Well, it could have been. See, my memory is not terribly efficient. It could have been; it was certainly differently arranged because we had the arrangement of it here in Los Angeles. I remember in the National Gallery they were hung in a very static manner, and I was very shocked when I saw them because they were almost hung as other pictures, and banners are meant to hang freely.

GALM

In other words, you produced the banners for the Washington show. You didn't install them.

CORITA

That's right, that's right.

GALM

You installed them very definitely at the County Museum.

CORITA

Yes, yes. And we had the great help of Jim Elliott, who was one of the curators there.

GALM

So that was in '58, I believe. What other student exhibits--was the next large one, then, for the IBM people?

CORITA

We sent out a lot of student shows for the art department, which included paintings, ceramics, some ceramic sculpture, prints, and so forth. And then I think I mentioned the NAEA exhibit we did. And we did

GALM

"Survival with Style" — that came later.

CORITA

Yes. "Survival with Style" we did originally for the college, and that travelled. The only other time I saw it aside from our own use of it was when Boston University had a retrospective of my work, and they included that as part of

the teaching work. The last summer I was at the college, in 1968, I did an exhibit with the students for the World Council of Churches when they met in Uppsala [Sweden]. And that consisted of about, oh, sixty to seventy structures, which were made of two pieces of cardboard eight feet square that intersected and stood like you'd stand two cards, slit one and slide the other one into it, so they were at right angles and supported themselves. It was John Taylor, who is the head of film and communication for the World Council, who got us to do that. And I was to go, but I was on my way [out] ; so I chose a very remarkable student we had [Donna Villicich] , and she went with the exhibit and talked to the people and to the press and so forth about it, over there. And they had made a film, which I have seen, in which Pete Seeger is singing and the young people are dancing around in and out of the exhibit. And they opened some great castle in Uppsala that was used as a kind of museum but had never had an exhibit in it, and they filled this huge hall with the structures. And again, I only saw photographs of that exhibit, but they really did a marvelous job of setting it up.

GALM

Pete Seeger was there in person?

CORITA

Yes.

GALM

Did that show then go on to Geneva, or was that still yet another show for the World Council?

CORITA

I had a show at the World Council building itself.

GALM

I see, in 1970.

CORITA

I guess, yes. Was it in 1970?

GALM

That's what it says.

CORITA

Yes, yes, it was.

GALM

Were parts of that . . . ?

CORITA

They used their big main entry place, which is an exhibit space, for that, hanging some of them from the ceiling; and it's like a great — more than two stories, two extra stories high. And that was a beautiful exhibit.

GALM

Did you go for that one or not?

CORITA

No. My sister and brother-in-law were in Europe at the time, and they were there in time to see it. But for that, the Franciscans, the people who do the "Hour of St. Francis" and those commercials that you may have seen, lent us their television studio to do those in. They weren't doing anything at the moment in the studio, so we had it for about — it must have been a month and a half. Both the day students, again, and the night students worked on that; so they just could come in and out and down there and leave their stuff out. So you can imagine, there were — let's see, I think each person had to do four complete structures. And it was again probably bigger than I would have done, if I had known ahead of time how much work it was going to be. Some of the students fell by the wayside, and others profited by it immensely. So again it was a kind of mixed blessing.

GALM

When you say "wayside," they actually dropped out, or they just . . . ?

CORITA

Right, um-hmm, or finished some and not others.

GALM

Would you assign a general theme?

CORITA

Well, that was in the sixties, and there was a great deal of social consciousness among students at that time anyway, so it wasn't difficult. And it seemed that it largely centered around poverty and justice, injustice and justice--however you want to put it. But again, the students found dozens of quotations and did them in connection with visual things.

GALM

You mentioned students' social consciousness.

CORITA

Well, I probably urged them. [laughter]

GALM

When was your social consciousness awakened? I'm sure it was always there, but in the direction of your art?

CORITA

I suppose people like Dan [Berrigan] had a lot to do with it because I remember he was the first one I ever heard of speaking about the Vietnam War. And this was way back in the early days. I had hardly caught up with him in relation to the black problem and poverty, and suddenly he was saying, before I had heard anybody else — or I'm sure before I had thought of it myself — that it was wrong for us to be at war. And I thought, "How can he say that?" [laughter] So I think that meeting people like him, and then people I think particularly of Mary Jean Pew, who was in the community and is now still teaching at the college, in political science. She was in charge of the sodality which was in charge of this Mary's Day, which the art department took over the visual aspect of it; so we worked together. And I think living with people who were also socially conscious helped a lot. I'm sure if I had been a nice proper housewife, I would not have bumped into all of these ideas. And of course once they get into you, you start noticing and expanding, too.

GALM

Did the war seem to stimulate the consciousness more than, say, the civil rights movement had?

CORITA

No, I don't think so. I think they were both very real issues to us. Perhaps more in the community than among the students: I think it really originated in the community and then, through the teachers, filtered into the students.

GALM

Were any members of the community going to the South in those years and marching?

CORITA

Yes, I think somebody went to Selma, yes.

GALM

Off the tape, I was asking when you first met Dan Berrigan, and you said that the first real meaningful contact had been during a summer at Montecito. Could you describe that?

CORITA

Well, it was extremely informal. We would celebrate the Eucharist every day. And Dan is so magic with words that they just pour out of him in glorious form. So those were always very special events in which he would tell a story or would usually have maybe a kind of sermon. And then we would just meet to talk a couple of times a day. And again it was largely informal, though I'm sure Dan did most of the talking, because he was so good at it. But in a sense he doesn't ever take over, so that what he says is probably not more in quantity but more in quality; and I remember it as being the most talking. He says so many things by not saying them and by understatement, which is, of course, the poet in him. He's going to teach a course this summer at the college.

GALM

What is the course?

CORITA

It's called tentatively "From Poetry to Politics."

GALM

[laughter] And back again to poetry.

CORITA

Back again to poetry, yes, indeed. Because he's gotten very rauch--well, he did a book [*The Raft Is Not the Shore*] with [Thich Nhat] Hanh, the head of the Buddhist community in Paris. He was a very good friend of Thomas Merton's, and he started the Thomas Merton Center in New York, which was a place of contemplation, really. So I think part of him has always moved in the direction of contemplation, without disturbing his activities.

GALM

In looking through your prints, I don't see too much Thomas Merton. Have you used . . . ?

CORITA

No, I don't think so. I think I read Thomas Merton — when everybody was reading *Seven Story Mountain*, I read it. But for me — I'm sure I would feel differently if I knew him, but I've heard a tape of his recently, and it really just turned me off. I think his ideas are marvelous, but I think the way in which he states the ideas are still enveloped in a kind of church language, which is That's unfair, because it's probably more of a classic church language than we are used to hearing. But I always think of it as coming largely from working with the adult classes, who were mostly--certainly most of them were not Catholics, and many of them were Jews Most of them, I think, were Jews. I think we would not have the arts without them. But I think in working with those people, I was always very conscious of trying not to talk in a way that would sound proselytizing to them. And we had some rather delicate things because they often worked on these exhibits and projects that we were doing, group projects. So that the themes were really broad enough, certainly, not to be called Catholic themes--but I wanted that to be understood. Of course, these people had come to take an art course, not to take a political science course or a social awareness course. But by that time, I didn't know how to separate the two. So they got involved, and so on. I think in working to keep it

being an art course and an idea course that I got accustomed to choose statements that would be understandable by everybody, rather than by just the Catholic community or a church-affiliated community.

GALM

You said that you learned to separate the two. How did you . . . ?

CORITA

No, I learned that I couldn't separate the two.

GALM

Oh, that you couldn't separate the two. I see. Because I was curious how you could. [laughter]

CORITA

No, I couldn't.

GALM

In describing Dan Berrigan, you had mentioned that he was a pixie. Why "pixie"?

CORITA

Well, when he speaks he has a kind of a--he is small and slight, and he has a kind of twinkling Irish way, and he never comes down on anything heavily. His brother [Philip] is much heavier. But Dan always says things with such indirection and such humor that you're taken a little off guard. He's always asking the probing question, but he's asking it in a kind of surprising way, rather than coming down on you hard. He has the light touch.

GALM

Did you ever feel the need to be out in the front lines with him?

CORITA

No, in fact I think I really had no guts at all, until it finally occurred to me that I really had my own place. But certainly Dan never felt this. He felt that what I was doing was — and Phil also, which surprised me, felt that I was doing great things for whatever movement was going on, in my own way. So then I figured

I was more comfortable with that and could do that. I couldn't march and be in the public that way. I had to bring it into the work and into the students' work, make it available that way. And I thought--again, the idea that using words with visual forms and using just short passages is often a way to help awaken people to something they may not be aware of, rather than enclosing it in a book or making a speech about it.

GALM

Let's shift back over to the IBM exhibit [1963]. How did you get that invitation, or did it just come in the mail?

CORITA

No, it came by phone call. [laughter] I often remember, because that exhibit got to be pretty hard. It was at the time when the students were just beginning to be restive about being given assignments; they wanted to go off and do things on their own. And that increased after that until — I think that's where we had so much difficulty with the exhibit for Uppsala, because that was again a group project, and some of the students were just finding their own individuality and didn't want to be involved in a great big group project that was really under my name. This really disturbed some of them, and it disturbed me, too. But there wasn't anything I could do about it because that was where the publicity was; so we just had to take that. But the IBM exhibit was a good experience for me, because I--I think I was always very good at getting other people to work. I worked very hard myself, but I was also very good in sharing responsibility, even though I had to have the final responsibility, because I was the one who had accepted to do the thing. So for the IBM exhibit, I chose two seniors (Michaela Myers and Paula McGowan) to be in charge, one in charge of one half, and the other in charge of the other half. They were really in charge of seeing that the students were doing what they were supposed to do; and they kept track of the supplies, which is a monumental task with that kind of exhibit. They took all that off my hands. It was very good experience for them. And then IBM flew them to New York to put the exhibit up. And then I think I was in Washington--we were on one of our tours, and I guess I'd gone to Georgetown to speak, so I was in Georgetown--and I got a phone call during my own exhibit from one of the student leaders who was setting up the exhibit, saying they were having a

terrible time. I don't know if you've heard the history of this, of the exhibit.
CALM: I've heard a little bit about it, the reaction to it.

CORITA

It was at Christmastime, and we did it with boxes. We had one whole section, which was probably the size of that wall, composed of boxes, which when they all fit together said, "Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men." And when that got up, people started coming in off the streets. It was a very — what shall I say? — explosive time. Anyway, I guess people looking at IBM didn't know what to make of this, and they thought it was kind of a hippie thing. So they came in and questioned the IBM people, and so they got them to — what did they ask them to do? Oh, to put the scriptural source underneath it. [laughter]

GALM

Give it validity.

CORITA

Made it okay, you see. Put a different tone on it. And then there was something else very humorous. I can't remember [it exactly] , but it was a statement from Pope John which a number of people came in and reacted to very violently, and we had to take that out. So the students were there making these decisions, you see, because I was in transit. So they called to tell me what they had done. So there wasn't much we could do about that. I said, "Just do whatever you think is best on the spot." But it really created a great — I suppose not a very great percentage of New Yorkers complained, but enough to make a little trouble there.

GALM

Why did IBM choose Immaculate Heart to do it?

CORITA

I wish I could think of the man who was in charge of their design department who had known of our work and just knew we would put on a good show.
[Robert Monahan]

GALM

And just didn't see that a peace theme could be a radical . . .

CORITA

. . . could be dangerous. No, in fact, he came out during the preparation of the exhibit and looked at most of the material that we had and just thought it was marvelous. I guess they had never done anything quite like this and didn't know what the man in the street was going to make of it.

GALM

Was there much student activity at Immaculate Heart during the disruptive campus years?

CORITA

Well, it was very mild, whatever there was, compared with what was going on at Berkeley, for example. Nothing like that. It was at that time almost totally a girls' school. There were some boys in the music department. I think the students were involved, but they were Well, at that time--I can't speak of now, but at that time — none of them were involved in drugs or in that end of the scene, and they were probably involved in school and their own social life.

GALM

Did the art department ever become a hub of political activity?

CORITA

No. Other than those things like the IBM exhibit. That's as far as we went. And the Mary's Day things, which were political in a sense, as far as issues were concerned. But certainly not about candidates.

GALM

Why don't we shift over to a major commission that you had, and that was the Vatican Pavilion wall. You mentioned last time that the invitation to do it did not come from church authorities.

CORITA

Didn't come from Rome. [laughter]

GALM

Who did it come from?

CORITA

Norman Laliberte was in charge of a large area on the first floor. It was a two-floor exhibit. Did you see it?

GALM

No.

CORITA

So he was really the one who wrote to me and asked if I would do it. So I did three and chose the one I liked best and sent it.

GALM

You did three, what? In scale or in full?

CORITA

No, I did three full ones because I had never done anything that big. Well, I had done, I think, a billboard, small, and then it was blown up. I've forgotten what it was for, even. But I just felt I wanted to do more than one. In fact, I usually do more than one of a thing when I'm doing a job because I work very much from a kind of intuitive level; I have to be very free when I'm working, and sometimes you're not free when you start. And then you get relaxed into an idea, and there is a greater communication, I think, between what starts at the gut level and what comes out of your hand. At that time, I had a good friend who was principal over at the [Mother of] Good Counsel School [Carol Carrig], which was close to the college, and she lent me their school basement, which was stored with all kinds of furniture, including two large tables. So we moved all the furniture to one side of the room — this was forty feet long — and I would spread out the area I was working on, on two big tables, probably about once and a half again the size of this room. And then the other part--as I finished it, I'd drape it over the furniture and then pull it down as I needed it. [laughter] CALM: Were you given the theme — the Beatitudes--or was that . . . ?

CORITA

I think I was, yes.

GALM

I came across something, and it sounded like it was the description for the commission, that it had to be 4 X 40 feet, or was that just . . . ?

CORITA

That's right, no, that's right. That was the space that they had for it.

GALM

And were you given \$2,500 to do it?

CORITA

Yes.

GALM

It had to be to New York by March 1?

CORITA

Right.

GALM

You got \$700 for two sisters to fly out to check it out?

CORITA

Right.

GALM

You mentioned that you did three. Would you recall which one you actually took?

CORITA

Yes. I'm trying to remember whether it was first, second, or third, in order. Is that what you're asking?

GALM

I'm trying to test your feeling of opening up after you've worked with-- whether it actually was one of the later ones.

CORITA

I'm not really sure. It was either the second or the third. I did one that was very, very much like my prints, very free shapes, and just the words of the Beatitudes themselves. I had made my own set of Beatitudes by taking phrases from different translations of Scripture that I liked. None of them quite seemed all good, but some of them were good in parts. I put my own together, so to speak. The first one had just the words, and then--don't remember the order of the other two, but for one I chose words from John F. Kennedy and Pope John, who were, of course, the great heroes of the time; and then the other one was much smaller in scale. In fact, I really liked it better than the one I sent, but it was to be up above eye level, probably from about eight feet down four feet. And the one that consisted of quotations from many, many people was much smaller in scale. The words were too small, I felt, to be read at that level, though I liked it better than the one I sent. And later, that one, the first one, got sold at an art sale when I was away. And the one with the smaller words was purchased by the United Church people; they circulated it for a number of years, and I don't know where it finally ended up. And--or did they buy the . . . ? Yes, I take it back. They purchased the one from the Vatican Pavilion and circulated it among their groups. And the one with the small printing, I exhibited in a couple of places; and then it was finally purchased by Fullerton Junior College, and it's in their cafeteria now. And that's kind of a nice offshoot. It's right down above the table which holds the food, so it's great. The students can read at eye level as they go by.

GALM

What was the reaction to it? I've heard of the positive reaction. Was there much negative reaction to it?

CORITA

I don't remember any negative reaction connected with that. Actually, Laliberte's work was very much, at that time, in tune with it. So that whole area was really very nicely designed as a kind of unit. The mural you passed by just before you got into the Pieta area. And if there were bad things, I don't remember ever hearing them. I got a lot of good response from it, but I don't remember ever hearing anything negative. Probably was said, I'm sure, among all those people.

GALM

Then you did get some other major commissions. The Westinghouse — that came a little bit later, 1966.

CORITA

You're so good with my dates.

GALM

I've looked them up.

CORITA

The Westinghouse series, I guess you'd call them. David Lewis, who is in charge of advertising — or sales promotion, some such thing — came out to see me in the art department when I was still teaching and talked about this series. At that time, neither of us knew how long it was going to go on. So I said, yes, I would be interested. So I did it, and it's still going on. About three or four years ago, they made a portfolio. When they put the ad in the magazine each time, they also have a silk-screen print made from it in an edition of about 200 or 300, and these are sent as gifts to the people on the president's mailing list — that is, [Donald H.] McGannon. Not the president of the United States, [laughter] the president of Group W. And they also have reprints which they send to people who write in for them, which are printed on better paper. They made a portfolio of the past designs--I think they're the first sixteen, beautifully presented--and then this also was mailed to that same mailing list [*The Corita Collection : An Expression of Broadcasting Philosophy*].

GALM

It's unfortunate that's such a limited edition.

CORITA

Yes, right. Except the original thing in the magazine is not very limited, and usually it's in about three or four magazines. Not always the same ones: sometimes in a trade magazine, and then sometimes in *Fortune*, sometimes in *Time* and *Newsweek*, or

GALM

Did that please your goals, the fact that it would receive such wide circulation?

CORITA

Very much. Because I think this is what really kept me in prints after I got started, though I have done some paintings. I really like the idea of lots of people being able to have them and my being able to keep one myself. So, yes, I've always had the feeling that I want the stuff to get out. Like I would love to do billboards.

GALM

You've done one, haven't you?

CORITA

Yes, I've done one, and I've done another one that will go up this summer, I think, for the college.

GALM

For Immaculate Heart?

CORITA

For Immaculate Heart. But I just love the idea of the work being really public. I think I feel a bit private now about myself, but I like the work to be public.

GALM

Was the Container Corporation [of America] --was that a similar project?

CORITA

That was just a single invitation.

GALM

In other words, that wasn't a series.

CORITA

No, no. It was a series, but I was just one of the people in the series.

GALM

Oh, I see.

CORITA

In fact, I think they sort of really had a great deal of influence on magazine ads. At least some companies since have done that sort of thing, giving an artist a whole page and just a byline for the company. And of course the Westinghouse people went one step further and gave me the whole page without a byline. They have a separate page with their information on it.

GALM

Did you have any input as to the selection of the men, the words of wisdom?

CORITA

No, David usually chooses those. I always have the freedom to refuse to do it if I don't like it, and they'll find another one. But they've always just been things that were very much to my liking.

GALM

Never refused a one.

CORITA

Never refused a one, yes. That's been a lovely kind of relationship because there has never been any kind of written contract or any confusion or complexity or trouble. It just has been a very simple arrangement.

GALM

I heard through a second or a third or a fourth party that you also did a happening for the Westinghouse people back in Philadelphia. Would you describe that?

CORITA

Yes. It was in a program with an architect and a city planner, so there were three of us on the program. No, I'm getting it mixed up with Winterfest, which I did for Boston. Well, I did several of these, and they mainly consisted of an introductory talk, in which I would discuss a bit of the feeling and reason behind celebration, what visual things did for us, and what it meant for a group of people to do things together. [I would] just sort of get the people to the point where they would do the things from a spirit of their own understanding rather than having something silly dictated to them to do or something that would make them feel silly, because I think if they were taken

out of context, they might feel silly doing them. We had prepared, I think, a bag for each person, and there were — let's see — there were balloons and hats and I can't remember what

GALM

I think a quotation, too, possibly.

CORITA

A quotation, yes, a quotation that they were to read to the person next to them. So it was an effort to have a small celebration just about being together because it really wasn't commemorating anything or celebrating anything outside of just the fact that we were there together.

GALM

This individual said that they all broke out singing "Auld Lang Syne. "

CORITA

Yes, now that you say that, yes. [laughter]

GALM

Which does seem to indicate that the spirit was moved.

CORITA

Yes, yes. Well, again, then I think--maybe I mentioned this to you when I was talking about giving assignments

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GALM

You were going to mention something about student assignments in connection with — did you actually call these happenings, or . . . ?

CORITA

Yes, they did.

GALM

Oh, they did. [laughter] What did you call them?

CORITA

I don't know--they were just jobs. [laughter] But in giving assignments to the students, I think I talked to you about trying to separate their reasoning function from their intuitive function, or maybe more their analytical function from their synthetic function, their putting things together. Or their critical — that's better — the critical from their creative function. So that if you could get people to the point where their critical faculties were involved in something, almost anything, their creative functions could function more freely, because they don't go together: one is taking apart, and one is putting together; one is making, and one is reviewing what has been made. And if you're reviewing while you are making, you become very awkward in the making. I suppose it would be like an actor thinking "Now I am acting and what is the audience thinking?" instead of just being fully in the part. So for the happening, I usually had about five or six things as instructions that I would tell them to do, and they were very definite with very short-term goals so that nobody in the room would feel that they were difficult to do. I mean, trained as we are to do what we're told to do, they were very serious about this and they would do them — one, two, three, four, five. And they were so constructed, the directions, that they created the form for the celebration, and the people then brought that form to life.

GALM

What was the company trying to accomplish by these assignments?

CORITA

I think companies or anybody that puts on conventions is always trying to do something that will make the convention less deadly, [laughter] rather than just having all speeches or all discussions--to have something. In fact, where was it that we did a program with . . . ? Oh, I know. I was invited to put on one of these happenings at a What was it called? I'm trying to think if it was at Yale or some comparable institution, and they were having a meeting of theologians. And we were on the last night. I brought two people along to help me. And all of the people said, "You know, it would have been much better if this had happened at the beginning of the conference instead of at the end." Because it just sort of undid everybody: they started talking to each

other and being very relaxed. And it would have been a good thing to start with and then carry on their deep theological discussions.

GALM

I know when we ended last time, you mentioned that you had just received from a friend a Hallmark brochure or something ...

CORITA

A book.

GALM

. . . and that what they were doing were things that you and your students at Immaculate Heart had thrown away, or had

CORITA

Well, I was thinking not so much that we had thrown away, but they were obviously borrowed techniques. They were poor examples of things that we would have discarded if I had the group. You know, if I had each person do a group of fifty, then we would choose the best from that. And I think it had the tone that they were things we wouldn't have taken.

GALM

You mentioned that they were dead. What techniques did you use to infuse life into . . . ?

CORITA

Well, I think for me, in a picture, life is a sort of synonym for quality. And if a thing has quality, it lives. And if it's hackneyed or if it's amateurish, or if it just doesn't have good form, doesn't have good shapes, it just doesn't work. Like bad poetry, you know. They can use marvelous words, but put them together in the wrong order, or use corny words--you know the difference between a good poem and a bad poem, or one that just really excites you and which you can live with for a long time or something you read and you say, "Well, that's rather obvious." So I think some of those same distinctions hold, and it's a matter of just exercising yourself in looking until you become more and more refined. And then, of course, you always have surprises, too. I always had great surprises with the students. As they would put out their things, we

would all stand around and talk about them. A lot of times, I would look at a certain piece and say, "I don't like that." I would say this to myself, and as different people talked about it, a lot of times I would look at it again and find that there was something in it that my set of prejudices had prevented me from seeing; I began to see it differently and liked it. So that it wasn't a matter of quality, it was a matter of myself blocking myself from seeing what may have been a new form to me.

GALM

I noticed in one of the things that you'd written — I assume that maybe it was a pass-out to the students--that you were talking about screens that operate and that there are two major screens, one being the screen of history, and I think the other screen being that--it has to do with ugliness, that

CORITA

We have in our minds that certain things are ugly, and so we don't really look at them.

GALM

Did you have any specific assignments for them to overcome this prejudice?

CORITA

Yes, I remember at that time I was very excited about billboards. I guess it was the whole era of pop art. And I also got very excited about sections of the city that I would have called ugly before. I took the students to — there were two Mark [C.] Bloome tire companies; one was the one on Sunset Boulevard, I think, and the other was down on La Brea, perhaps, or in that area below Wilshire. So we just went there, either with cameras or with little finders, you know, a piece of paper with a rectangle cut out of the center which you can look in and just see a small section. And we just spent the afternoon, two afternoons, one at one place and one at the other, just looking. And of course, taking off small pieces, little rectangles, that are like taking a picture, you can take a section, or maybe a section of a letter [where] not the whole word shows and certainly not the whole gas station. There were some things you couldn't do anything good with, like artificial flowers. And there was a marvelously funny wall behind the one down on La Brea, behind piles of tires.

The piles of tires were beautiful because they were really just piled up so nicely, and they were nice looking as tires, and all. And behind them was painted — or I guess it was wallpaper — a kind of imitation bricks and ivy. [laughter] It was hysterical. But then I was thinking the other day — I was driving down, riding down Western Avenue, down as far as Third street, and I couldn't believe how ugly a place could be. And then of course I think I feel very differently about Hollywood, having lived in Boston, because I'm living in a part of Boston in which the houses were built in the late 1800s, and they have such a community. They belong together, even though they're very different and have kind of funny parts to them, as if they were taken out of a catalog and put together. But they're all kind of brownstone, and they're all about the same height, and they're all residences — though by now cut up into apartments, but they were residences .

GALM

Of course, massage parlors moved into Western after you left.

CORITA

Right. Oh, yes, yes.

GALM

Can you see beauty in those signs? [laughter]

CORITA

No, I couldn't. I said to myself, "This is really depressing. This is really ugly." So I think it had to do with selecting out of that. It was not really Then, of course, if you put a lot of things together, like a whole row of neon signs, for example, even if they have little cocktail signs with water dripping into them, still, the conglomerate can be kind of exciting. Like Broadway, I guess. Somebody said if you couldn't read English, Broadway would be beautiful with its night lights.

GALM

Your prints that now depend — no, I shouldn't use the word "depend" — that use phrases that are so well known to the mind, like "a tiger in your tank"-- well, of course, twenty years, thirty years from now, no one'll realize the significance of some of those phrases, those catch phrases.

CORITA

I don't think I ever worry about something I do lasting forever. I think at that time, those were very meaningful to some people, and it was just a kind of contagious, fun thing that I got into.

GALM

Do you think they can still stand on their own merit, then?

CORITA

I think so, visually, um-hmm. Not in the same sense, I suppose, as the more poetic ones would, but I think those distinctions are not really valid. Things are different, and maybe one isn't better than the other. And some things that last longer may not be better than some things that are just good for the moment. I think I don't like distinctions much. [laughter]

GALM

Can you remember the first time that you decided to take a slogan, a TV slogan, or a Madison Avenue phrase?

CORITA

Yes. One summer, the last print I made — I think it was the last print I made — was *Go Slow*. Well, that was taken from just a traffic signal, and it had a — what is it? — a reverse curve, that warns you that you're coming to the end. It also has an arrow. And then I entitled it *Luke* --I've forgotten the chapter and verse, but it was that section in St. Luke where he talks about Mary keeping all these things in her heart [Luke 2:14,51]. And there was a big, red heart in it also. So I really thought of that as my then picture of the Immaculate Heart, which was just a very bold, graphic set of symbols. That was the first one. And then another one of the very early ones was, I took the "In" from the parking lot next to us and the arrow and used that pretty literally [In] . But it depends on the colors and shapes and what you do with them. I did this for two or three years, two at least, and I remember it was the second year, that summer we were up at Montecito with Dan Berrigan. And I remember once, we had a marvelous night. There were about four of us with Dan, and I knew that I was going to come home and make my prints. And I thought, "Well, this is a great opportunity. I'll get some help before I go." So we all got together with a

bunch of magazines and tore phrases. I suggested that everybody take two phrases from separate ads that were fun together. And some of those I actually pasted up and used.

GALM

Was there an inclination at first to tie in the phrases to something more--such as a biblical phrase, or a . . . ?

CORITA

Yes, for the most part, I thought of them as meaning something else. Like, "put a tiger in your tank" I really think of as saying [that] the spirit, whatever the spirit means to us, is inside of us, the God who is in us, or who is us, whatever, however you want to say it. Coming out of me, I think people read them on that level. And usually, these prints were seen in the context of a show, where there was enough — how shall I say it? — well, there might be a poem or another phrase, or it might even be a scriptural phrase juxtaposed or a poetic phrase juxtaposed. So they got the idea that these were to be read on another level. So they became symbols, in a sense.

GALM

Did you always feel that juxtaposition was necessary for the people to understand? Or eventually could the phrase stand on its own, even though it was, say, a common phrase?

CORITA

I think I always wanted to do something with it myself, because even the *In* print, as I now think, had a little phrase from Lewis Carroll which says, [laughter] "When I choose a word, it means just what I choose it to mean."

GALM

I guess that's exactly what you're doing, isn't it?

CORITA

Yes. [laughter] It's the old teacher in me, I guess, yes.

GALM

What about colors? When you decide upon color That one is black, and it's blue, and it's very strong.

CORITA

Yes, yes. I love that print [*In*]. It's one of my very favorites. Well, the color-- you know, it was funny: in that time when I was describing working with a group of people helping, a lot of times whoever was mixing the paint would say, "What color are you going to use next?" And I would say, "Why don't you make one, and we'll see if it works?" So, sometimes it was a surprising thing like that because somebody else would be throwing in a color. I'm sure if I hadn't liked it, I would have said no. But if it came from somebody else, and I liked it, I took it. For example, the colors in my newest prints, I just felt a need to move away from the primary colors, the rainbow colors, which I'd been using for a number of years, and do something that was just a little different, kind of off, kind of calm. And these prints — they just came this morning — as I look at them, I find them very calm and quiet. From time to time I have read myself, and now I think I'm more up with myself, and I know that there is a calming in me. When I was making the prints, I didn't think, "I am feeling calmer now," but as I look at them now, I say, "Yeah, that's what's happening in me, too."

GALM

So in that middle period, say in the sixties, there was perhaps more of a need to make strong statements with strong color?

CORITA

Yes.

GALM

You mention community. You mentioned the students began to reject the idea of working in a group assignment.

CORITA

Some, not all. Some were the good old-fashioned kind who were willing, gung-ho to do anything. And I thought of these group projects as marvelous experiences for the students, because I thought, well, if they're going to get into art work, this is what they're going to be doing. They're going to be

working for somebody, and they're going to have to take orders from someone; and they'll never have it this good because they'll never get to really do their own things. They'll probably in the beginning be more often told what to do more specifically than I was telling them. But I thought here was a chance to have their work shown publicly and also to be a part of something bigger. But that was my view of it, and it wasn't always theirs — or the view of all of them.

GALM

Do you think the Immaculate Heart art department was unique in that it undertook so many group projects?

CORITA

Yes, I think so.

GALM

Anybody else that you know of that was doing . . . ?

CORITA

No, no. People were having exhibits of student work, but they would be assemblages of individual work. I'm not saying again that one is better or one is worse, but they're just — it was a kind of different experience.

GALM

Was that an approach that you began immediately as soon as you started teaching in art?

CORITA

No, no. I think in the beginning I taught more as I had been taught, and this sort of evolved as we bumped into different things, as we bumped into new problems.

GALM

Do you think that the fact that you were part of a community--did that have any bearing on your ability, perhaps, to work with community projects?

CORITA

I never thought of it, but I'm sure it made it a very natural thing to do, yes.

GALM

Because there must have been other things within the community that you did as a community.

CORITA

Um-hmm, um-hmm, right.

GALM

Learned how to make use of the best.

CORITA

Yes, that's right, um-hmm. In fact, the whole community was just that.
[laughter] With each person doing what she could do best.

GALM

Well, it sort of struck me when you said that about the students beginning not to want to do as much as group projects that maybe--was it just a reflection of time change?

CORITA

Well, I think maybe that was a reflection, and maybe this is getting back to the question you asked earlier, that that was probably the form that revolt took place. I mean, the form which the revolt took on our campus was that the students got to be not wanting to be told what to do. And it began to sort of disintegrate all of the requirements and the prepared programs. Now I think there are no requirements except those that each department sets up. And those are very few. I think in one sense, it was a necessity, and they probably had to come to it. But I think in another sense, something is lost because there were many required classes that the students would take and would then get wildly interested in. It may just have turned their whole direction or made them change their major, and if they hadn't been forced into the class, they would never have chosen to take it. So I suppose it's like anybody, like people raising children. It's always a hard line; it's always hard to draw the line or hit the balance as to what young people should be just commanded to do which they'll never have sense enough to choose for themselves, or how much they

should be allowed I remember Margaret Mead saying — I went to a very small seminar of hers in the East, and there were about four students who came with this one teacher. They were college-age students, young college. And Margaret Mead was saying that she thought everyone should put in two years of voluntary service to their country — certainly not going to war, but just helping people. And this one young man said, "I don't think that's a good idea. I wouldn't mind volunteering, but I wouldn't like to be told what to do." And she turned on him, and she said, "That's just the trouble with you young people today. You don't want to be told to do anything." [laughter] She said, "You know very well that if it weren't enforced, or if it weren't an obligation, most young people wouldn't do it." She really gave it to him in no uncertain terms. But I think that's true: a lot of people wouldn't. And yet at the same time, it's awful to force people to do things.

GALM

You also mentioned that there was perhaps a certain resentment of your growing reputation as an artist.

CORITA

Um-hmm. It was a very difficult time, I think, for the students because I was away a lot more than they thought I should be away. And again, I thought that was good for them because I would leave them with a lot of work to do. They had peace and quiet to do it in, and then when I came back, you know, we would look at the work. And then it got also very difficult because we began to have a lot of visitors at the college, and sometimes that interfered with classes, or it would take me out of the class. And some of the students resented that. So the fame sort of got in the way, in a sense. And they were just angry. But as I say, students were angry in those days. So it was . . .

GALM

You were a focus for some of it.

CORITA

Yes, yes.

GALM

When did your fame really begin?

CORITA

I think it just sort of grew as I began to exhibit and then do some public things.

GALM

Was there any one particular . . . ?

CORITA

You see, I've been at work a long time.

GALM

From '51 to [laughter] That's pretty good.

CORITA

Yes, to '76. At one of my exhibits, this young boy came up to me and said, "You know, I really like the sort of stuff you're doing, this putting words and shapes together." He said, "You know, I'm out of a job now, and I was wondering if you could tell me how to get started in this, producing these things." He was looking at the cards that were made from the prints. And I had such a sinking feeling because I thought, here's this young kid who just thinks he can start, and what a rude awakening he has in store for him! So then I think I said something about, well, you know, I taught for thirty-two years and did this on the side, and then I began — I was finished teaching — doing it full time or as much time as I wanted to spend on it. So I said, "It's a matter of working at it for a long time."

GALM

Was there ever a point before you stopped teaching, that you thought to yourself that you wanted to be artist first and teacher second?

CORITA

No. No, I always thought I wanted it the other way around. I always thought that I was a teacher and not an artist, and that I really did that on the side.

GALM

Was there a great enough shift in feeling that it entered into your leaving the community?

CORITA

No, no. I think — well, I shouldn't say that, because I think that first summer that I went away, it was [with] this friend of mine, Celia Hubbard, with whom I went to stay in Cape Cod, who lives in Boston. She was the one who had, I think, written a letter--I found this out later--to the president of the college to say if something weren't done about me, I was going to have a nervous breakdown. Other people could see the pace at which I was going, which was really insane toward the end, and I don't think I quite realized it. I was young and healthy, and I said no to so many things that I thought I was saying no to as much as was possible. But apparently I wasn't. So when I found out how simple life was just staying with one person and making prints for a whole summer, it began to dawn on me what I had been doing, and I just couldn't do it anymore. I had to get away from it, I think, to see it, get out of it to experience what it was to be out of it, before I could realize it. And it was at that point that I decided that I just couldn't teach anymore, that I didn't want to teach anymore. Because I had a lot of offers to teach after I left, marvelous people who wrote, you know. Some of them were worried about what I was going to do. [laughter] "We'll take you!" And in fact a couple of years ago, I was asked to be the artist in residence at Harvard, and I just burst out laughing because it just struck me as so funny, really. I said I was sorry; I was really very impressed and very honored, but I just couldn't connect it with me. But then I said I really wasn't ready to get back into that, if I ever would be, because it would mean, you know, going to the school two or three days a week, being there, doing my own work, and letting the students come as they wanted to — and I think I can't work anymore except by myself. So to think of having students around--I suppose if I did it, it might be fun; and I really don't ever close the door and say I will never teach again. In fact, I did teach a night [class] --this time I was in Los Angeles--for a group, but it was because I was very interested in the person who had the group and I wanted to do it. And it was a fun experience. But I love the freedom of not being responsible for anybody else.

GALM

But during those last years, you had never got to the point where you actually resented the students?

CORITA

As interfering with my own work? No. Because I really thought that was my work. See, I think I am very creative, and I think my teaching was very creative. I think it's possible to do anything, like to teach — almost anything that's relatively human--and be creative in it. I don't think you have to be painting or sculpting or composing music to be artistic or to be creative. And I think that that satisfied my creative I found teaching really always very hard because I think I always maintained the feeling that I couldn't do it, that I wasn't quite up to it. So I worked very hard, and I think I made classes very good because I wasn't too sure of myself. So that was a kind of a bonus, a painful bonus.

GALM

Were your students able to go out and be themselves as artists, or was there an inclination for them to be other Coritas?

CORITA

Little Coritas. Very few of the students in the early days went into the arts. In fact, we used to discourage them against it. We said to them very frankly, you know, "If you go into the art field, you will start at the bottom; you will do things that you know you don't want to do and that you know you are not good at. It would be much better if you got a job typing or teaching or doing something and did your art on the side until you got to the point"-- which I suppose was really my own pattern — "got to the point where it would be acceptable. And then you could switch over into the art." And for the most part, the art majors became teachers. And I suppose this was a very natural outcome because they were taught in such a way that they made great teachers. They learned how to throw problems to their students and let them open up under the problems, instead of just sort of teaching them in a routine fashion. We really, I think, sent out some spectacular teachers.

GALM

You had mentioned Celia Hubbard. Now, wasn't she the woman who . . . ?

CORITA

She was the director of the Botolph [Group Inc.].

GALM

Botolph. Were you connected with the Botolph Group from the very beginning?

CORITA

Yes, we had things on exhibit. I had things on exhibit — and I think the students did, too — in the first exhibit they put on. And then, whenever we'd go East, that was always one of the places we stopped and spoke for that group.

GALM

How did she form that center?

CORITA

She was a convert to Catholicism. She had been a professional artist, and coming into the Church, she could see the kind of ugly artifacts that were available to most people and thought it would be a good thing to do to create a place where people could come to find things for the home that were beautiful, like crucifixes and pictures and sculptures and creche sets and so forth. And then they also did some consulting jobs for churches and chapels in the East.

GALM

So her relationship with you would have been just to invite you to show your work or to actually purchase your work . . .

CORITA

. . . and to come and speak, yes.

GALM

But you wouldn't have been active in, say, its continuing philosophy.

CORITA

No, I think at least toward the end, that need is melting away, people are also learning that a lot of objects are religious which we didn't formerly think were religious. So it [Botolph Group Gallery] grew into a kind of a shop. It was always a very sparkling kind of thing because Celia's a very sparkling kind of person, and they always had a lot of my things around, a lot of my cards and

prints. I suppose I was sort of their chief permanent artist, so to speak. But there were always interesting things there, and it attracted a lot of young people.

GALM

I know there was a Boston Tea Party held there. When was that? I wasn't able to establish the date. Harvey Cox and . . .

CORITA

. . . and Dan Berrigan and Judy Collins, yes.

GALM

Was that after you moved back?

CORITA

Yes. I was living with Celia. I stayed with Celia that first year when we moved from the Cape back up to Boston. I stayed with her. And it was during that year--so it must have been '69 or '70. I think it could have been around Christmastime. And we put it on in a place called the Boston Tea Party, which was a discotheque, [laughter] which had been an old church. It had been many different kinds of churches, but it had originally been built for a church and had been taken over by different denominations. In fact, it still had the words sort of sculptured over a great central arch that said something about — it was a scriptural quotation; I can't think of what it was. But it had just stayed there all the time. So it was just really for the building that

GALM

Was it just sort of a fund raiser, or was it just an evening of celebration?

CORITA

No, it was just an evening of celebration. No hat was passed. [laughter] No admission was charged. It was just a celebration, and it really went I showed a lot of slides, and we had, of course, music with them. That was during the wartime, so there were a lot of visual commentaries on that. And then Harvey and Dan spoke, and Judy sang, and I spoke, and then we had enough bread and wine for everybody. We passed it around. It was an unbelievable crowd, but we did it.

GALM

Did you multiply it a bit, or ... ?

CORITA

No, we just bought enough. [laughter] But that was a really marvelous evening, and it was great. And some people got a little disturbed. Some of the older Botolph board members got a little disturbed because they thought we were having communion--which indeed we were. [laughter] But we were not trying to usurp the powers of the Church. We were just eating and drinking together.

GALM

Now, with these commissions, you were making some money. Right?

CORITA

Um-hmm, yes, yes.

GALM

Now at that time, was the money then funneled back into the community?

CORITA

Into the college.

GALM

Into the college.

CORITA

Um-hmm, yes. And then, whenever--toward the end, it was really, you know, greater amounts, as jobs began to multiply, and so it would go to the college. And then, whenever we needed anything, we would just get it and send the bills to the business department. So that in a sense we could do a lot of things because we really had money to work with.

GALM

When the college was contemplating a move to Claremont, did the fact that you and the art department were so active as far as commissions play into the possibility of its having money to move?

CORITA

No, it never was that much money. No. I think it was more that--I mean, the contribution we made in that area was more that we had sort of publicized and helped to create first, I think, some of the spirit that was communicable. A lot of spirit had always been going on before the art department got active because we always really had a very creative faculty. But I think we gave it a kind of push from the inside. Also I think we could make it public, in a way. For example, the science department or the language department, though they were good departments and doing perhaps as effective work as we were doing with their students, had no way of making themselves known--somewhat to the resentment, understandably, of, say, the science teachers, who would go to a convention, and if they said they were from Immaculate Heart — "Oh, that's that art college." [laughter] And they didn't like being called an art college. So that was difficult. But, no, the money wasn't that much.

GALM

Did you play a part administratively within the college, other than chairman of the department? Did you serve on any boards of note?

CORITA

There was something — what was it called? I think it was called the academic senate, but I wouldn't be too sure--which was composed of the heads of the departments. And we discussed programs and such like.

GALM

Did you ever enter into any heavy decision making for the college?

CORITA

I don't know. I used to try to avoid committees as far as possible. I'm not a meeting person. But there was so much interchange among us as faculty that I think if there was any contribution made, it was made more on those terms than in a kind of political fashion. I think it's a better kind of politics.

GALM

When did you get into the book publishing business? What was the first book?

CORITA

Continuum was a magazine — I don't know if it's still in existence--that was printed in Chicago, which was kind of a quality theological popular magazine, probably not too popular, but good quality. I'm trying to think of the man's name who wrote and asked me if I would do a section for them that would be published in the magazine and later would be published as a book. [doorbell rings; tape recorder turned off]

GALM

You were talking about *Continuum*. Was it *Continuum*?

CORITA

Continuum, yes. And so then they — I think Herder and Herder; there was some connection with Herder and Herder — and then they published it in a book form. It was called *Footnotes and Headlines*. [1967]

GALM

So the prayer book was the first publication.

CORITA

That's right. That's really the only one that I've written, if you would call it written. The others are all books which I've sort of coauthored, by the fact that someone wrote the words and I did the visual part.

GALM

How did--like the To-Believe-In series--how did you get caught up with the poet?

CORITA

Well, I had met Joe Pintauro--in fact, he was a priest in the early days, when I was going to New York. There was sort of a group of friends in New York whom we'd see all the time, and he was sort of in that group. And then when he began working in the publishing department--he 's working for an

advertising agency and writes on the side. And he — oh, I know. I used to answer letters on things that I had printed. No, that doesn't make sense. If I did something for a company or an organization, I would usually say, especially in the days before I got paid, do 500 extra for us or 300 extra for us. And then we would give these away, or I would write letters on them. And I had answered one of his letters on the back of a reproduction of one of my prints which says, "To believe in God is to know that all the rules are fair, and there will be wonderful surprises." And he just got all inspired by that and started to write, wrote me a great letter--I think it came for Easter--filled with all kinds of confetti and what have you. But on each page he had written his own "To believe in God is" And that was the book [*To Believe in God*]. So then later we got the idea of publishing it.

GALM

What about the other book?

CORITA

There's one *To Believe in Man* and one *To Believe in Things*.

GALM

The other question I had is, tell me about Easter tomatoes. Was that the Heinz Ketchup series, or is that something else?

CORITA

Well, I did a print — Sam Eisenstein is a teacher at [L.A.] City College, an English teacher who writes. He had come to one of the Mary's Days and had been very moved and wrote me this letter saying how great it was. And he included this marvelous thing which he had written on Mary; and one of the phrases that really made it memorable was "Mary was the juiciest tomato of all." [laughter] And in the context, it was really beautiful. The whole thing was gracefully done. So I made a print from it, using those words [*Tomato* (1967)]. Well, I was aware of how "tomato" was used colloquially, but I felt--you know, at that time, language was taking a turn [such that] you could hardly use a word without it having some other meaning. And I figured that wasn't fair for people to destroy words that — and at that time, I did a lot of research into tomato, and Sam did some for me, too, and found out that it really had a

marvelous history and was connected in fact, at one point, I'm quite sure, with the mystical rose.

**1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (APRIL 13, 1976 and APRIL 20, 1976)
)[video session]**

GALM

I believe you were tracing the origins of tomato and the mystical rose.

CORITA

Yeah, there was some medieval use of it as a religious symbol for Our Lady, I think. I hope I'm not making this up. But that caused just more trouble than could be imagined over such a simple thing, because people said, you know, "That's a dirty word. How can you use that in connection with the Blessed Mother?" So that was

GALM

Did you get in trouble with the chancery on that, or just overall criticism?

CORITA

Well, they had a funny way of acting. I suppose it was very normal, because it was a very hierarchical way. I never got into trouble: the head of the community and the head of the college got into trouble. [laughter] But they [the chancery] wouldn't bother dealing with me.

GALM

How would the head of the college and the head of the community then deal with you?

CORITA

Well, fortunately, they liked what I was doing, you see, and believed that we should be able to do what we wanted to do. So they would tell me about it, and we would kind of groan together, and GAUI: Go on.

CORITA

Yes. But nobody said, "Don't do that anymore."

GALM

So was the community life ever a restriction on your artistic endeavor?

CORITA

No. I remember we had a few — two people I think of who were at one time or other the heads of the community who really didn't like what we were doing, tastewise. I mean, it wasn't to their taste. But there was never any kind of restriction about it. And I thought it was very interesting, because one of these people [Sister Regina McPartlin] is now working in a hospital and came to me the other day to ask me to design three rooms in the hospital. So if you wait long enough, [laughter] things come round.

GALM

Why don't we stop for today?

APRIL 20, 1976 [video session]

GALM

We're here in North Hollywood at 5126 Vineland Avenue, and we're speaking with Corita Kent in her gallery [Corita Prints]. And with us are two members of the gallery family, Mary Downey (Mrs. Frank Downey) and Gladys Collins. I think we might first find out how the two women became members of Corita's gallery family. Mary, when did you become active in Corita's art life?

DOWNEY

Well, Corita first called me in about 1968 and asked if I would come up and help her just for a few hours a week. I was glad to do that because I've loved this woman all of my life and knew how hard she'd worked. Before that, the students had helped with the exhibits going out, and friends [had helped], but this seemed to be a bleak period, where everyone had abandoned the ship for some reason.

CORITA

And the work got heavier.

DOWNEY

That's right. The stacks — the exhibits went up that high. So I went up at first for just a few hours a week. But then it soon increased, because during that time, right at that time, I might say, the change in the community began yeasting. So then that's when I began actually working directly with Corita in this work.

GALM

Had something happened in your own personal life that allowed you the freedom at this point?

DOWNEY

Well, I had lots of boys at home, and I knew when I had finished with the boys and they had all gone on their own way that that was going to be my fun work. I was going up to help Corita at the art department. I didn't know what I could do, but I knew I could do something to be of help — scrub floors or something. [laughter] So at this time, some of the boys had left--one was in Vietnam, and one had left unhappily, so I was kind of unhappy myself. So it was nice to have that break. It was an exciting place to be.

GALM

Mrs. Collins, when did you come to the gallery?

COLLINS

Well, I had known the both of them for a long time, and I wasn't doing anything, and [I was] feeling useless, you know, like I should do something for humanity or something. So I'd help somebody, and I went and asked Mary if I might come up and help her one day a week. And in about two weeks after that, I was helping every day.

CORITA

We never let her go. [laughter]

COLLINS

We moved out here, and from then on Oh, my friends are so envious of me, to have such a beautiful job, which is just as I want, you know, to come and go as I please, almost, and its being such a lovely place. "How did [you] fall into it?" they say.

GALM

At that time, had you any inkling of what it might become for you?

COLLINS

Oh, not at all; oh, not at all. I had no thought of it. I was just getting tired staying home, and wanted to--I've always loved Immaculate Heart. The art department there was an inspiration, really. It was just nice to be there, and I thought I'd go back, be with the young people and the arts and that.

GALM

Corita, when did you meet Gladys, then?

CORITA

Well, I had met Gladys, I'm sure, because she was a longtime friend of Mary's. But I think I--well, I was away, actually, when she came to help Mary. So I really met her, got to know her, when she was working in the gallery.

GALM

But didn't you know her also as a student, then?

CORITA

Yes, I knew her as a student, true. Those were big crowded classes, and we didn't get very much chance to have contact. But Gladys was in classes for quite a while.

COLLINS

Eight years.

CORITA

Eight years, during those times, yes.

COLLINS

Adult education.

GALM

How large were those classes?

CORITA

Well, they started out at about--they could be sixty or seventy, the first night. They weren't always that big the second night. [laughter]

GALM

What did you do to scare them away?

CORITA

Well, the first night was sort of an indoctrination and the beginning assignment.

COLLINS

Oh, that did it.

CORITA

That did it. I remember once we had a mathematician who did a great deal of traveling in his work, and he had to miss classes once in a while. He finally came and said, — he was doing his work on the plane going back and forth, what could be done in a small space — and he said, "When I came to take the course, I didn't know it was going to take my whole life." [laughter] But the weak ones dropped out quickly.

GALM

So you must have been a very strong one, Gladys, because you stayed for six or eight years. [laughter]

CORITA

She was a strong one, yes.

GALM

What was your feeling, the first assignment period that . . . ?

COLLINS

Well, as she said, the first day, she would tell them a big assignment, and that would scare a lot of people. But I thought maybe I could get [by] with not so much.

DOWNEY

She being a teacher knew some of the tricks.

GALM

So you thought perhaps there was a little bit of bluff there.

COLLINS

I thought there was a little break I could get by with.

GALM

Over the years, over the time that you were a student, what assignment stood out as being the most exciting?

COLLINS

Making banners, I believe. Corita had charge of those banners, and during several years at Immaculate Heart, they made huge banners. They would have parades, and they were tall--they were as tall as a room. We'd make those, and very often we'd make a story, in the banner, of some kind.

GALM

Did you participate in Mary's Day?

COLLINS

Yes, yes. I did.

GALM

Can you describe what it was like to be a participant?

COLLINS

Well, very exhilarating, very exciting, color and happiness. And everybody was happy, walking up the hill with their banners flying, and color, and sitting down and eating bread. I don't know whether they had wine or not.

CORITA

Yes, we had wine, I think.

COLLINS

I don't remember that.

DOWNEY

It was real, wasn't it?

COLLINS

Yes, it was a spontaneous movement, I believe. I don't think anybody--it was never rehearsed.

CORITA

No.

COLLINS

They just did it, and they did what they felt like doing.

CORITA

There was a lot of planning behind it, but it wasn't

COLLINS

Oh, I'm sure.

CORITA

But the actions weren't rehearsed.

GALM

Why did you need a gallery at this point?

CORITA

Well, at that time, the art department was getting more and more crowded, partly because of the folk art collection and partly because the students were increasing. We finally got down to having one big room where everything happened. So Mary and Gladys would be wrapping exhibits to go or taking care of their business, and the lights would go out for that class to show a film. So it was partly crowded and partly the amount of activity there. And we decided that it would be better for the prints to be out someplace else. It was at that time that Mary and Frank located this place, which was close to their home.

We thought of it at that time just as a storage space, and then it gradually worked into a gallery.

GALM

Were you having any problem with security of the prints at Immaculate Heart at that point?

CORITA

No, not really. I think we used to have a kind of joking curse over the door that — I mean, it was purely mental — that anyone who took anything would really feel bad about it.

GALM

For days.

CORITA

Right, right. [laughter] No, it was really amazing, but we didn't have that problem.

GALM

Or even, I mean, the handling--perhaps too much handling?

CORITA

Well, they were always in cabinets and fairly safe, or up on the wall where people could look at them.

GALM

I see. Well, once you had decided on the property, Mary, how did you go about creating a gallery?

DOWNEY

Well, just as Gladys said earlier, it just evolved. Because first we kept pouring the stuff in from the art department up here, and our boys helped and some students helped and Frank helped. And it was just like Bekins storage: we got a big truck and just carried them in and carried them in. We've taken pictures of them, of the gallery in those early days--just stores, stacks of these prints. And we brought the drawers right out from the cabinets up there, rolled the

drawers out. And then the boys brought the shelves and they drove them right in here. And then the other prints — Frank made all those cabinets, those levels of shelves. And we got the idea to make boxes, so we made our own boxes, with staplers and such, and numbered them and all. And we were just so much intent on that, on caring for the prints and getting them in an order, that I don't think we ever thought of it as a gallery.

COLLINS

We just kept — one thing would happen, and then something else, and we would change.

GALM

What prompted you to start thinking of it as a gallery?

DOWNEY

Well, I think some of the people did know we had moved here with Corita's prints. That's the attraction, you must remember. And they kept coming in. And then I can't stand a place when it's ugly. And I think Corita's prints are so beautiful that they really deserve a beautiful background. So Corita paid to have — we asked her, and she said, "Just go ahead," so we had it painted, we all pitched in and painted; and then later on, we had the floor laid, and it came to be what it is today. The background is nice, and it's not really very pretentious; but it is an atmosphere like Corita and her prints are, that everybody feels welcome. They're not put off, like a fancy gallery might. They feel welcome and at home and able to look at the prints, no pressure for them to buy. We know they'll buy; [laughter] they can't help but buy.

GALM

This is an iffy question. Do you think the gallery would have its same popularity — or not popularity, but perhaps atmosphere — if it were located on La Cienega or in Beverly Hills?

CORITA

I think that's an easy question to answer. I think it would have the same atmosphere if the same people were in charge. I think it's these two people and their helpers who are behind the scenes right now who really make the

place, rather than the address. I don't think we could ever get fancy. [laughter]
We can be beautiful, but not fancy.

GALM

At this point, were you represented by any galleries in Los Angeles?

CORITA

Yes. Early on, when I started to make prints, we began sending them out to galleries. We usually had about twenty-five to thirty galleries that handled the prints and would have shows, perhaps once a year, when I would do a new set of prints.

GALM

Did you have any outlet, though, in Los Angeles, other than Immaculate Heart?

CORITA

No. That was its own good outlet.

GALM

So what were the first duties, then, as far as the gallery? You created storage for the prints, but then what?

DOWNEY

Well, that did take some time and some doing. And then Corita--this Plexiglas frame that is so beautiful combined with Corita's prints We asked Corita if we could have some frames to hang, and she said yes, but she said she didn't want us to get involved in frames because she didn't want us to work too hard. But we chose to get involved in frames. And they caused us many headaches, the frames. But so we did begin hanging them. And then people did keep coming in. And then your big--it was Jack, a friend of Corita's, Jack Mullen, who has since died, but he was a super swell guy. It was his idea that as long as it's going to be a little gallery that Corita should have good publicity. He was a PR man for the movies, and he had a beautiful spread in the *L. A. Times* when we decided it would be a gallery. We had nobody who knew we were here. That was a very, very lovely time. And it had a great deal to do, its

success, in a sense, with Jack, who had the know-how and the gift to--he wanted Corita to have the best.

GALM

Do you recall the date of that opening, the year, at least?

CORITA

It must have been about '70, I would say.

DOWNEY

Yes, it was.

CORITA

In '69 or '70.

GALM

When you first started using the Plexiglas, was this before they became sort of standard sizes, or did you have to actually have it custom-made?

DOWNEY

It was very new then.

CORITA

And hard, because I'd forget to make things standard size. [laughter]

DOWNEY

We feel she shouldn't be bothered with that limitation either.

GALM

So since that time, it is not even a consideration when you do a print.

CORITA

No, no.

GALM

It's just the design itself that determines the size, or ... ?

CORITA

Yes, it's sort of, I suppose, the way you feel at the moment, how you feel about the design, what size it should be.

DOWNEY

Well, and too, people have asked her, if she's done little ones, "Oh, why don't you make big ones." She used to make really a lot of big ones, the size of this one, *A Man You Can Lean On*. And then she's made little bitty ones, as tiny as the ones to the left, there. So in one way, you try to accommodate people who ask you; and in another way, she does what she feels like.

GALM

Does it have anything to do with being able to offer something that is less expensive than, say, a print of this size?

CORITA

Well, it's not always that the print is more expensive if it's bigger. That's not always the case. But the frames are always more expensive if they're bigger. So that's a big item. Often the frames are more expensive than the prints.

GALM

What type of person comes here to the gallery? Can you sort of give a general description?

DOWNEY

Really, it's varied. Teachers bring their students here, elementary on through high school; and students themselves, art students from the colleges, come and just practically spend a day here. And we have movie actresses and TV people, engineers and artists themselves. And there are a number of Oriental architects: some come from San Francisco, and this is their favorite stop when they come down on a business trip here. And Corita's work is admired and respected by I think a wide, wide spectrum of old, young, poor, rich. It has in a way a very universal appeal, it seems, from who comes in here.

COLLINS

Yes, oh, yes, they do. People who are — they don't know very much about art at all. They are not art collectors, or they don't know very much about art, but they just like this. It's vivid, and it just suits the people.

DOWNEY

And others are very sophisticated art collectors.

COLLINS

Oh, yes.

DOWNEY

So it is a kind of a broad spectrum.

GALM

Do they want to know a lot about the artist?

DOWNEY

Oh, yes, yes. It means a lot to them to know about Corita.

GALM

What was Corita like as a young child, as a member of the family, Mary?

DOWNEY

Well, I'm prejudiced, because I've said she's my favorite person. She was delightful. She was the next to the youngest. So at this time I'm speaking of, in Canada, she was the youngest. So Mother would give her to us, the older ones, on vacation. We'd take her off; we'd play in the woods up in Canada. And when we'd bring her back, or when we'd go back to school. Mother has often said later that she couldn't do anything with her because she was so spoiled. But she was a little pixie kind of a young girl. And then as a girl in high school, when she graduated. Mother made her a beautiful white organdy dress; I curled her hair for her, and she really was beautiful. We have the picture of her — just lovely. And always a lilt about her. She had a great group of high school girlfriends, who she had such fun with. They had a car--one of the girls had a car in those days--and that was pretty racy, to have a car with the rumble seat in. They would drive to high school in the car, and there would be a standard argument in the morning: Mother would want her to wear a sweater, and she would not wear a sweater. She was a free spirit, I think.

GALM

What was the family's reaction to her decision to become a nun?

DOWNEY

Well, you see, our oldest brother — first, our oldest sister had already become a nun. And then our brother, who was the next in line, was becoming a priest. So I think with Mother and Daddy, it was probably in that day they were very happy.

CORITA

A-OK. [laughter]

DOWNEY

In those days, that was supposed to be the highest, the bestest that you could do.

GALM

How do you arrange your hours here in the gallery, Gladys?

COLLINS

From eleven to four, and we are very free to come and go. If we have something else to do for the day, we just speak to the other one, and we have another helper, too, Evelyn [Neuendorff] , who comes in on Saturdays. We don't like to work on Saturdays, so she works, comes in Saturdays. But usually, one of us will take one day off a week sometime to do something else that we want to do. And one will come a little early, and the other one come later and go home. It's very free, very easy.

GALM

Are you open year-round?

COLLINS

No, no.

DOWNEY

Yes, yes.

GALM

Is the gallery open year-round?

COLLINS

Oh, the gallery is open year-round, but we are not always here, both of us. Mary takes three months vacation. [laughter] I take a month, maybe two, a different time. I'll take a month at a time.

DOWNEY

Glady is very faithful to stay. She really does carry the whole. We've left her sometimes with a whole series of new prints to get out . . .

COLLINS

. . . and new exhibits. That was one.

DOWNEY

And new exhibits. And she's carried on, and . . .

GALM

When did you decide to expand the activities of the gallery, or the activities, really, of your art work, to include greeting cards and your High Cards?

CORITA

Well, the high cards were actually the fourth book that I did with Harper and Row [*High Cards*]. We simply decided not to bind them, not to bind the pages, and have them just be cards and printed on the back with postcard material. So that was what happened with the High Cards. I had already done three little books with them: *To Believe in God*, *To Believe in Man*, and *To Believe in Things*. And then some of the other cards were done when I was staying with Celia Hubbard. I stayed with her when I went back to live in Boston for that first year. She operated a gallery shop called the Botolph Group. And I had some of my prints reproduced for cards and did some original cards for them. They were sold from the store, and then they also began to distribute them. So that was really the beginning. And then another couple picked them up. The greeting card company business is very difficult. And now I'm going to have them with the American Artist Group, so they will take care of the distribution. So this is the way things happen. They start in a bungling way and eventually get shaped up so they work — or get dropped.

GALM

How often do you come back to North Hollywood and to the gallery?

CORITA

I'm usually back here at least once a year, some- times twice. When I have my prints, I have them sent out here to sign them. I have a group of prints ready for a show the last of this month. And other times when I come out, I just have a sense that it's time to come, and then things happen around that coming that probably wouldn't happen if I weren't here. So it has worked out very well that way. And then I go back for a little peace and quiet and come back again.

GALM

How do you arrange the exhibit when you show new things? Do you take everything down? Or what do you do?

CORITA

Well, it depends. I think the present plan is to take everything down and start again for this exhibit. We'll play around with perhaps having some of the--a very few of the older prints because I think people are interested in seeing what happened in the beginning, back in the fifties.

DOWNEY

We did have a fun Never-Never show.

CORITA

Never-Again.

DOWNEY

Never-Again show. So many people cooperated, who loaned their old, old prints of Corita's. They weren't for sale, of course, but people enjoyed that so much because many of the people who had come to know Corita in her later years had no idea of the quality or the type of her design in the early days. And they were so generous, because you're always running a risk, as Gladly well knows, in loaning your precious prints. [laughter]

GALM

Why does she well know? Why do you well know?

COLLINS

Well, one sold that was not supposed to have been sold. [laughter]

DOWNEY

Not at our gallery. At a gallery up north.

GALM

I see. Well, perhaps we could go into the other room and look at some of your prints.

CORITA

Okay. [tape recorder turned off]

GALM

Well, you've laid out some prints, Corita.

CORITA

Here we are.

GALM

Why don't we look at this early one? This is the first one, right? [*The Lord Is with Thee*]

CORITA

Well, no, it isn't actually the first one. It's probably about the third or fourth one.

GALM

Oh, this isn't the one that you did that summer?

CORITA

Yes, it is. Underneath is another print which I had done that summer, and I had made a couple of prints before I took that class and one other print in the class before this one. But this was the one I revised into this when I got home, after summer school was over. And I think it was really this one that started

me exhibiting because we sent it to the County Museum show and it won the first prize, and then we sent it to the State Fair and it won the first prize. We sent it here and there, and it would either win a first prize or not be accepted in the show. [laughter]

GALM

So it was an either-or situation.

CORITA

So those were the days that we learned that you didn't base your reputation or your confidence on what the jurors said. I think that was a marvelous lesson for me and the students, too: that it didn't have anything to do with the quality of the print, what the juries said. It could be the same print, and some juries would turn it down, while others would think it was good. But this did get me started on the printing.

GALM

You have moved so far away from this approach. Is it still a favorite, or how do you feel about it?

CORITA

A lot of the early ones I really can't bear to look at, but this is not — not too bad. To me now.

GALM

What is the quality that you don't like?

CORITA

Well, I feel that it's extremely derivative. It was in my very learning days. It's very Byzantine, and I think it doesn't have much of me in it. So it feels awkward and searching.

GALM

Sort of representative of what "religious art" (quote-unquote) was doing at that time?

CORITA

Well, no, it really wasn't, because religious art was at that time very sort of late nineteenth-century, but a bad nineteenth-century quality, sort of the last unflowering of the Renaissance. I went back earlier to try to find something that was stronger, and that's what got me into the Byzantine era, where at least there was strength and beauty. I thought that was a better thing to be working from.

GALM

Were the French doing much in the Byzantine style at that time?

CORITA

Yes, yes.

GALM

I'm trying to think of the sculptor.

CORITA

Marvelous sculpture on the cathedrals.

GALM

No, no. I mean in the nineteen-fifties.

CORITA

Oh, in the nineteen-fifties . I'm trying to

GALM

Is it [Lambert] Rucki?

CORITA

The church at Assy was built either in the fifties or early sixties, which combined a group of artists to work in a single church. Then I think it was [Henri] Matisse's chapel [Chapelle du Rosaire, Vence] . Was that in the fifties? I think so. And those were

GALM

Now, this is another one from the early period.

CORITA

That's the same era. And that's beginning to have a little something because this was really meant to be a picture of the Christ with a home in his hand, as sort of a house blessing, and it has the word *benediction*, which is for blessing. [*Benedictio*] And I tried to do a little drawing of the Eames house. So it's sort of the modern sneaking in, [laughter] which is in itself an old tradition because in the early paintings, if you looked out the window, or if you looked down in the left-hand corner, you could almost tell what was coming in the next period. I think that almost told what was coming in the next period for me.

GALM

In our other discussions, you mentioned that one of the professors at Immaculate Heart had reacted to — I believe it was to this work — the fact that it had contained words. And this is perhaps what really set you to explore further in this direction.

CORITA

Well, I think, first of all, he was so choice with his compliments that it was a rare thing, and I think that must have stuck with me, I didn't think — as I think I mentioned to you — I didn't think at that time, "Ah, now I will do pictures with words in them." But I think that was in one. And in the early poster making, I think those two things came together in the picture making.

GALM

That was Doctor...

CORITA

. . . Dr. Schardt. so those were the early days.

GALM

Then what happened? [laughter]

CORITA

Then what happened!

GALM

I'm going to let you just sort of at random pick them, and perhaps we can discuss.

CORITA

All right. This is from about four, five years back, perhaps. [*I Love You Very*] I think I've never lost the words, except occasionally I do prints without words. But this was when I moved back into the era of great, free brushstrokes, which I was doing in the early sixties. This is a much older print than that without words. [*Let Him Easter in Us*] But in between these two came many of the ones that had rather commercial letters, which in fact were taken from billboards. Let's see if we can find one. I'm trying to reach that one that says, "The." These two, yes. In some cases they were billboards; in some cases they were words cut out of magazines and photographed, and sometimes photographed with a curve in them so that when I projected them and made the stencils, they seemed to have that kind of movement. And there were two pictures, one quite similar to this. The other one says, "Who came out of the water?" [*Who Came out of the Water*] And this one just says, as you see, "Ha!" [*Ha*]

GALM

Now, you were beginning to print on a different type of paper, too.

CORITA

Yes, these are on pellon, which is a 3M product. It's actually cloth material, used for clothes lining, like men's coats, in tailoring.

GALM

Now was this something that you discovered, or were other printers using it for production?

CORITA

I don't know that anybody else used it. They were using rice paper and similar papers, but this seemed so very practical and was much cheaper than the rice paper and much stronger.

GALM

Did it give your serigraphs a different quality?

CORITA

The paint does look different on them. When you take a slicker surface or a harder surface, the paint has a more brittle quality — a brighter, sharper quality, whereas these, no matter how sharp the line is, the paint has a soft look. So there is that difference. This is one [untitled] I did for L.A. city, for their celebration of the Bicentennial. So it was done in Boston for L.A. This whole pile, right in here, are prints that I did as commissions for groups who wanted to raise money. This one was for the Chavez people, taking one of Cesar Chavez's statements ["He gives us the gift of life . . ."] and making an edition. Sometimes I write the edition on and sometimes I don't. [laughter]

GALM

Did they usually come to you, the people with the cause, and say, "Would you do this for us?"?

CORITA

Yes, yes. Right. And then sometimes — it depends on the group. If I feel that it's a group that has no money and can't raise any money, then I will do it for them for nothing; and if it's a group that can afford to pay, then they pay. So it's almost as if they're paying to help the other people. And this was a group of prints done for the Hunger Walk. [International Walk for Development, May 8-9]

GALM

Is the dove out of your toy collection or your folk art collection?

CORITA

No, the dove is from my own apartment. It's a beautiful wooden dove made by probably a Maine primitive. It's a lovely, very roughly hewn wood. I've used it in a new print this year because it's just a favorite of mine.

GALM

Now, from the older ones to, say, the more bold ones, is there a difference in technique, or is it just in interpretation?

CORITA

Just in interpretation, yes. The technique is the same.

GALM

So that hasn't changed at all.

CORITA

Well, to a certain extent. Some of these were done with a cut paper stencil, and others were done by painting a stencil with glue onto the screen. So there can be a rougher texture, as in these, and again in the new one. Well, in this one, perhaps, but also in the close-up strokes, you can see here that this actually was done originally as a painted stroke, [Bicentennial Print] And then it was--I now have someone do my printing for me. So he takes my small original and blows it up, so that it has left a painterly quality to it. But that can also be achieved by the brush stencil technique. whereas the cut stencil technique comes out sharp and clear like that.

GALM

Do you have any of the--this is not watercolor here, is it?

CORITA

No.

GALM

Do you have any of the ones that were based on watercolor?

CORITA

Yes, I think we have some in here that are done. Maybe, Gladys, those two. One is a print, and one is a watercolor. This is a watercolor [untitled] from which a print could be made, except that the shading would not show: they would turn out as solid colors. And I'll show you one in which — that's right. [*Bird of the Rainbow*] Now, this was a painting that I had done as a watercolor. And then I had a print made from it. And you can see the difference, that the gradation of colors is missing. In some cases it gets a little heavier because the camera picks up just the very strong things and tends to drop out the weaker. So it really becomes different because it's a different medium. But if I feel that it's going to work all right, I can use it. And let's see. Now, this is one made

from a photograph with a screen as you use to reproduce photographs and then simply printed with a silk screen. [*Growing*]

GALM

Is it one of your own photographs?

CORITA

Yes. And this is one of the brushier-looking ones. [Rainbow]

GALM

Let's see, when was that done? About the nineteen- seventies or ... ?

CORITA

This was one of the seventies, I think, yes.

GALM

Now, you were saying that you've sort of gone out of this. This would be in your rainbow series?

CORITA

That's right.

GALM

And you sort of moved away from that somewhat?

CORITA

Yes. In fact the new ones, which I have over here-- now, these are the brand-new ones, just four of the set which I'll have in the show Sunday. And as you can see-- well, the camera can't see, but

GALM

The camera can't see. What are they?

CORITA

We can see that this [*Our Original Nature : shell writing #7*] is a lavender and a gray, which is very different from this, which is the straight rainbow array of

colors, the very vivid primaries. So these are much subtler in color, closer in value.

GALM

Now are these again making use of photographs?

CORITA

Yes. These four, and about three or four of the other new ones, are done from photographs of shells. In fact, this one [*Now Is Enough : shell writing #8*] is done from a shell which is about, oh, I would say, three-eighths of an inch big, and then just simply blown up, so that it has a rather monumental quality. This one [*Our Original Nature*] has an even more monumental quality, I think. It could be the picture of the moon or the world, or some other planet — or, as it was, a small shell. That was probably about an inch-large shell. And then these two are sections from a shell. [*I Am the Sacred Words of the Earth : shell writing #3; You Are Alive : shell writing #4*] I don't think that in any of them you would know that they were shells, because they're sections of them. But I was fascinated by the design on them and thought they would make good prints. And I call them shell writings. This is my writing; this is the shell writing.

GALM

I see. How many are in the series?

CORITA

There are about six or eight, I think.

GALM

You've always, of course, incorporated your own writing on almost every one, haven't you, in some way?

CORITA

Except for the ones when I was using the magazine words or the billboard letters, yes. And then, as in the case with the "magical friend," of different kinds of script, of printing. [*You Can Never Lose Me*]

GALM

Why do you like to use your own writing, other than it being, of course, the most intimate expression of yourself, personal expression?

CORITA

Well, I really think of the writing as drawing. I think I have stayed away from the figurative work lately because I think somehow we haven't been able to find a figurative manner that works in our own time. Or at least I can't find one that I'm comfortable with. And I feel that letters are objects, just like fruit and people and roads and cars; so that I'm just drawing the words.

GALM

Do you ever purposely slow down the viewer, so that they will actually read what you've chosen?

CORITA

Well, this has been one of the nice by-products, I think. I don't think I intended it that way in the first place because I think when I'm writing the words, I am some- what conscious of the legibility. That is, if I know it really can't be read, I'll go back and change a word. But if it's just slightly difficult, I think that's okay — if it looks good. So that those things, I suppose, are of equal concern — that it look good, and that it be legible, at least with some work. But I don't try to make it difficult.

GALM

I think there is quite a difference in color, too, in your latest ones.

CORITA

Very different, yes. These are very muted colors. And those are very bright.

GALM

Do you have any from the Vietnam days?

CORITA

Yes. This one [*Stop the Bombing*] was one based on a poem written by Gerald Huckaby, with whom I did a book [*City , Uncity*] at one time; and again, these are words probably taken from a newspaper or magazine and photographed on a curve, with the words of the poem written smaller. And then there were

a couple here, this--the two Berrigans burning the draft cards, with the beautiful statement which Thoreau made about--what does he say? "Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison." [*Phil and Dan*] And another — this is a kind of interesting print, which I just noticed this morning in looking through these. [*Love at the End*] This section in here, without the little square, was a book cover I did for one of Dan Berrigan's books [*Love, Love at the End*] ; and then later we got the idea, when I was working with the people at Botolph, of using just the heart and the word as a greeting card. And then this year, I've taken that design and blown it up into a serigraph. [Yes]

GALM

I believe that's the one on the front door that we saw.

CORITA

The one on the front door, right. So it's had an interesting history.

GALM

Talking about the gallery itself, when did you put up the sign [the large "Corita" signature] out front? When did you have that done?

CORITA

I think that must be about three years old by now.

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GALM

And when was that? Was that used before, somewhere else?

CORITA

No, that was just a plain unused fence. And we just took a signature and had a sign painter blow it up.

GALM

It's very dramatic.

CORITA

People were having a hard time finding us, for one thing. They would get lost in the neighborhood. So we thought that would be a help to them to find us.

GALM

I think it's curious that when we came today--I had been here, of course, before--and this morning, when I arrived, there was all kinds of graffiti on the walls, on the building surrounding the fence, but nothing on the fence itself.

CORITA

Yes, we were grateful for that.

GALM

Sacred property or something.

CORITA

Yes.

GALM

Why don't we look at something from the circus series? Do you have something from there, like *The Greatest Show of Worth*?

CORITA

Yes, we have *The Greatest Show*.

GALM

Does that come in two sections?

CORITA

Yes, in fact these are two letters. It was the summer of '68- '69 that I did-- maybe if you hold that one. I'll hold this one--I did two alphabets, one of them with the circus letters and the circus theme. And this was for the *G* and that was for the *O*. Put them together, it reads "GO."

GALM

Oh, I see. [laughter]

CORITA

And they were meant to be used separately, if anybody wanted to. I felt they worked as single prints, and yet, at the same time, they could be put together and used as a big print. And then that same summer, I did the International Signal Code flags and worked designs in with them. That's the *O* of the Signal Code. [*O my God*]

GALM

How many are in that series?

CORITA

There are twenty-seven. I think there are more, because they have other words that they have, but I just did the twenty-seven. And then these worked into the circus book. We just simply reproduced them into the book that Holt published [*Damn Everything but the Circus*].

GALM

Is the Love series one of the more popular prints that you've done?

CORITA

Well, I think Love is always a very popular

GALM

Or don't you even think of one being more popular than the other?

CORITA

Or one being more loved than the other, yes.

GALM

Okay. Why don't we sit down and talk about a few other things surrounding your life, or as part of your life? This interview, of course, is being done as part of the series that we're doing at UCLA on the Los Angeles art community. And you've mentioned some of the individuals. You've mentioned Charles Eames and the role that he played in your life and really within the art department as a visitor at Immaculate Heart. Were there any other artists in the Los Angeles area that you knew well?

CORITA

It's hard for me to distinguish, because the first person who came to my mind was Buckminster Fuller. I think we were never too choosy about whether people were artists or just people with ideas. So we kind of sought out the people with ideas and principles and made our association with them, rather than just finding artists.

GALM

Did you interact at all with, say, other art departments in the area, or wasn't it really necessary?

CORITA

No, we really didn't. We would try to. We would take the students out to different exhibits and galleries. And of course many, many times, we'd go to UCLA or USC for shows, because they put on some very good shows. But outside of that, we didn't really work with any other art departments.

GALM

Was there an art community?

CORITA

A student art community?

GALM

No, no. A practicing artist that you really . . . ?

CORITA

Well, in the fifties, when I first started exhibiting prints, we met a lot of the printmakers who were in the same shows. We traded prints and got to know some of them. I'm trying to think and see if I can remember some of the names. They don't come to me now. But we were associated more with printmakers, I think, than with painters.

GALM

Were there any particular galleries that you followed religiously, their shows?

CORITA

Well, of course, when La Cienega started, we found that, and the County Museum was always a favorite. I'm trying to think of the name of the gallery out on Sunset, which was really the first gallery that brought the New York work to L.A. quickly. I don't remember the name of that.

GALM

I don't think it's the Ferus gallery, is it? That would be later; that was on La Cienega.

CORITA

Was that on La Cienega? Was it originally on Sunset?

GALM

Possibly.

CORITA

Yes, it could have been, could have been.

GALM

Well, in our other interviews, we sort of brought you up to the point at which you left for Boston, but we really never talked too much about your decision to leave. How did the decision within the community itself to form a lay community affect your decision?

CORITA

Well, actually that decision was made after I left.

GALM

So that didn't apply at all.

CORITA

By about two years. No.

GALM

Did you participate at all in the general chapter of [the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary]?

CORITA

Yes, yes. I was at the chapters the two summers before I left, in which the changes certainly began. I suppose those were really the two important ones which were the turning point of the community.

GALM

Were you one of the delegates, then?

CORITA

Yes, yes.

GALM

At that point, when you established, as a result of the chapters — are they called decrees of renewal?

CORITA

Yes.

GALM

Did you feel that it would run into the problems that they eventually did?

CORITA

Well, I think that it was a funny situation, a rather unique situation, because I think we were used to being in trouble, you know, in many ways. I think especially in the art department we were, both because some of the alumni who were more conservative and were nervous about any kind of change were nervous about us as we changed-- and I think, as long as we kept alive, we keep changing--and then [also because] the community at large, I think, was somewhat nervous because the I.H.M.'s were doing things that they thought hadn't been done before. Actually, I think many of the things that the I.H. community was doing had already been done by other communities in the East or in the Midwest. But it depends so much on the attitude of the hierarchy in the different areas. If the top man is a progressive person, then the changes come much more gradually and gently. But in the Los Angeles situation, there was an extreme rigidity on the part of the hierarchy. So that what should have been very normal growing — organic changes were not

allowed to be organic because everything that changed created such a big sensation that it blew it out of proportion. So that that was unfortunate, especially for the people outside the community who didn't quite understand what all the fuss was about, or why we made such a big fuss — for example, why we were so insistent about changing the habit or not wearing the habit, whereas that didn't seem a very big thing to them (they thought we should just continue wearing it) . But we began to feel that it was a long overdue change, and that this separated us from the people we were working with, and that it also had something to do in sort of allowing the people in the community to be individuals. Like any kind of uniform, it had serious drawbacks. And I think as we became more and more alerted to the drawbacks, we thought it was normal to change. But the people who were more conservative — I think they often feel that one little change is going to lead to many others (and they're certainly right). I think that's why they're so frightened by little changes.

GALM

Where did they really feel that you were going? What was the real danger that they saw, or was it an unknown danger?

CORITA

Well, I think it was the unknown, largely, because the nuns had always looked like this. And I think that one of the very serious reasons for our being so insistent on the habit was that people, for the most part, or many people — I'm not talking about the people who are able to carry themselves—but many people sort of had their religion in us. And when we changed, it was almost as if their religion was changing. Which is a very sad commentary on their religion, you know, if the mode of dress — which, as we know, has always changed through the centuries — would mean that much to them, would become that big an issue. It was really a nonissue.

GALM

Yes. Did Immaculate Heart lose much support from its alumni as a result of the change?

CORITA

I don't know. We've never had, especially in the past, much financial support from the alumni, mostly because the people who went to school were not that wealthy or their husbands graduated from other schools, which made it difficult. [laughter] But I think the alumni support has increased within the last few years.

GALM

Was the community surprised by the action that Rome took on the decrees?

CORITA

I think by the time they were actually out, we knew there would be difficulty. We had hopes that they would see what was happening as an organic movement. And I think, perhaps again, if we had had a different hierarchy, Rome might have heard a different story.

GALM

But you, of course, had anticipated that you wouldn't be getting strong support.

CORITA

Or strong approval. We never expected strong support.

GALM

From the local hierarchy. But possibly that Rome might go along with you?

CORITA

Yes.

GALM

Well, I know that in one of the issues of the alumni news [*Alumnae on the Move*, Spring 1968] , there was an article which really explained the community's position. And the position that it seemed to delineate was that a nun was also a woman. ["We'll Admit It: A Nun Is a Woman"]

CORITA

Right.

GALM

When did that start opening up within the community, the sort of almost a tie-in with the feminist movement, but probably at a different level?

CORITA

Well, I think in history, there comes a time for things, and then they pop up in different areas, without the different areas being aware that the other is doing the same things. And I think that this was one of those cases where the time had come when people were beginning to pay much more attention to the fact of individuality. Of course, the rules of the communities were written by men originally, and they had been followed for so many centuries. And I think the longer things aren't done, the harder it is to change them. So I think a great many of us went along being very concerned with the work we were doing, teaching and so forth, and were not as concerned with ourselves as people until we began to realize, along with everybody else, that what happened to the individual is largely what happens to the community; and that if the individual is developed to her fullest extent, that can only be good for the other people that she's working with or for. But I think that's a new concept — say, since Jung and Freud and the people who first began to see that individual problems meant that the people were individual.

GALM

It must have been a difficult decision to make — to leave.

CORITA

For me to leave?

GALM

The community. Or again, was it maybe a decision that made itself?

CORITA

Well, in a way, I suppose when I left that summer, it was only for the summer. And then when I got back East and was all quiet and peaceful, it just seemed that it wasn't possible to go back. So in a sense, I made the decision after I had gotten out, or after I had gone away. And I think the decision was then made in the years that followed, rather than the years that preceded, with a lot of

the thinking. Because I had never thought of leaving up till that point, so I wasn't having any difficulty with the thought. But after I left, I looked back. And I've never had any regrets about leaving, even though there have been difficulties.

GALM

What have been some of those difficulties?

CORITA

Well, I think the idea of living alone for the first time in my life. I'd grown up in a big family and had always been with a large group of people. Of course, in the community there were 500 or 600. And in the house I lived for about fifteen years, there were about 110 people. So I was accustomed to having a lot of stimulating people around me.

GALM

Are there new joys that come with it?

CORITA

Certainly.

GALM

What are those?

CORITA

Well, I think a calmer life, and a chance for more inner development, which I think is not only different but also normal for a person. As you know, as you finish the extreme active part of your life, the part that is outward, you tend then to want to develop what hasn't had a chance yet. And I think I'm having that chance to develop more inwardly than I had before.

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