

HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Sunday Edition**

A Tour Through Design and Social Activism in LA, From 1960s to Today

From the socially progressive prints of Sister Corita to the first major gay publication in the US.



by Matt Stromberg
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Educators at Immaculate Heart College (image courtesy the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community)

Editor's Note: This article is part of a series on the history of graphic design and social activism in California, with a focus on Los Angeles, published in partnership with KCET Artbound.

California's culture and art movements have long enjoyed a unique freedom from East Coast and European dogmas. This manifests itself in social, creative, and

aesthetic realms characterized by experimentation, openness, and independence. Graphic design is a key element of defining this California way of life, from the clean, unencumbered lines of mid-century modernism to the flamboyant psychedelia of counterculture posters and publications, and the post-modern graphics of the 1980s and '90s. “A mecca of consumerism, it is also a place of great creativity, freedom, and social consciousness, where the status quo undergoes constant renovation,” writes Louise Sandhaus in *Earthquakes, Mudslides, Fires & Riots: California and Graphic Design, 1936-1986*. “Without solid ground, tradition lacks secure footing; old rules go out the door and new motivations rush in, resulting in new and vibrant forms.”

At the same time, California has been an epicenter of social upheavals and cultural turmoil for decades. While San Francisco is arguably the state’s historical counterculture capital, no place epitomizes the sense of heterogeneous communities straining against the confines of conformity as much as Los Angeles. From this diverse populace comes equally diverse visual expressions, from the socially progressive prints of Sister Corita to *ONE Magazine*, the first major gay publication in the US, to Self Help Graphics & Art, a critical center for Chicana art, design, and printmaking.

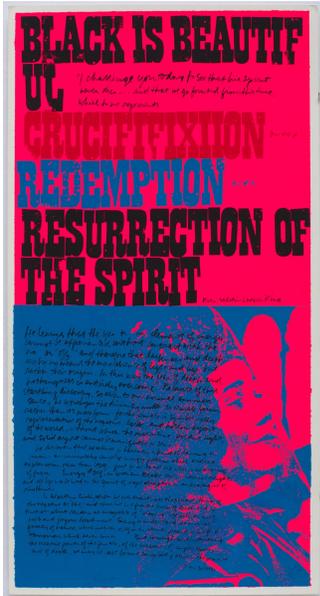
The concise guide below traces the history of graphic design and social activism in Los Angeles from the 1960s to the present. It is as much a history of aesthetic innovations as of political movements like feminism, the Chicano Movement, and the struggle for queer rights. Several of these spaces have been operating for decades, growing their presence in a city that continues to use design as a democratic tool to expand representation.

The Corita Art Center



Corita with artwork (image courtesy the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community)

Corita Kent (also known as Sister Mary Corita) was a tireless educator, artist, and advocate for social justice, who left an indelible mark upon the graphic and cultural landscape of LA. (So much so that in 2019 — on what would have been her 101st birthday— Los Angeles commemorated November 20 as Corita Day.) Kent became a nun at the age of 18, entering the Immaculate Heart of Mary religious order. In 1947 she began teaching art at the Immaculate Heart College in Los Feliz, eventually becoming chair of the art department there. Working primarily in the medium of serigraphy or silkscreen, Kent developed the bold, vibrant style she would become known for in the early '60s, bringing together images from mass media, advertising, and street signage with dynamically arranged text fragments pulled from songs, literature, or the Bible. Fusing Pop Art and innovative typographic design, her prints increasingly reflected her progressive politics, from racial justice and labor rights to nuclear disarmament and the anti-war movement.



Corita Kent, "ifi" (1969), serigraph, 23 x 12 inches (image courtesy the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community)

“Like other social-reform-minded avant-gardists, Kent sought to change the way the world looked, which, to her, meant reimagining its representations,” Sandhaus writes in *Earthquakes, Mudslides, Fires & Riots*. She created almost 800 serigraphs before her death in 1986, and, in keeping with her egalitarian streak, did not number her editions, in hopes that they could be affordable and accessible to as many people as possible.

Housed in the Immaculate Heart Community, on the grounds of the former college, the **Corita Art Center** preserves Kent’s legacy, supporting exhibition loans, selling prints, and designing **programs** that continue her inclusive and inspirational pedagogy. On June 2, Kent’s original studio, located across the street from the Art Center, was designated a **Historic-Cultural Monument** by the LA City Council, opening the possibility that it can one day be a space for sharing Kent’s life and work with future generations of artists, designers, and students.

Self Help Graphics & Art



Self Help Graphic's Barrio Mobile Art Studio (1970s) (image courtesy Self Help Graphics & Art)

Fifty years ago, a Franciscan nun and printmaker and a group of Latinx artists founded **Self Help Graphics & Art** in an East LA garage. Sister Karen Bocalero (herself mentored by Sister Corita), Carlos Bueno, Antonio Ibáñez, and Frank Hernández were motivated to form the group by the lack of opportunities and facilities for young Latinx artists looking to develop their creative skills. Several influential Chicano artists produced early prints at Self Help Graphics, including Carlos Almaraz, Barbara Carrasco, Yreina Cervantez, and Diane Gamboa. What began primarily as a printmaking workshop expanded to include other art forms, like performance art and music. From 1975 to 1985, a customized van dubbed the Barrio Mobile Art Studio would drive to elementary schools in East Los Angeles, teaching kids filmmaking, photography, sculpture, painting, and puppetry.

Emerging from the Chicano Movement of the early '70s, Self Help Graphics is more than an art studio: it is a hub of Latinx culture and community, organizing events like the wildly popular annual Día de los Muertos Celebration in East LA, which it coordinated from 1974 to 1985. Annually since 1983, it has commissioned a local artist to create a **Día de los Muertos Commemorative Serigraph**, providing a diverse, multi-generational array of interpretations of the holiday.



Alfredo de Batuc, "Four Seasons" (1979) (image courtesy Self Help Graphics & Art)

It continues its mission of working at the juncture of art and social justice, partnering with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) on the “**Know Your Rights**” campaign, designing and printing handouts stating people’s rights when they encounter police or immigration officers. Last summer, Self Help Graphics **printed and distributed hundreds of Black Lives Matter posters** designed by Dewey Tafoya and Andi Xoch of the Ni Santas artist collective for people to bring to protests. Earlier this year, students in the Youth Artivism Internship program researched and illustrated **a zine outlining tenant rights and resources** for those facing eviction or landlord harassment.

Self Help Graphics continues to offer classes and host exhibitions in its current Boyle Heights location, **which it purchased in 2018**, securing a home against gentrification and displacement that is rapidly changing the character of LA’s east side. And, significantly, in June it announced that it had received a \$1 million grant from MacKenzie Scott as part of the **billionaire philanthropist’s series of gifts** to 286 arts and culture groups.

Social and Public Art Resource Center



Judy Baca and youth artists (1970s) (image courtesy SPARC Archives)

The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) began in 1976 with a mission to “produce, preserve, and promote activist and socially relevant artwork,” specifically murals, in and around Los Angeles. Some of its founding principles were that “art was for everyone regardless of their status in society,” and “art should not dwell only in rarefied halls but in the places where people live and work.” Its first and most famous project is “The History of California” — more commonly known as **“The Great Wall of Los Angeles”** — a half-mile mural in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel of the San Fernando Valley depicting California from prehistory through the 1950s, as told through the stories of People of Color in the Golden State. These include the Zoot Suit Riots, the Japanese Internment during World War II, and the founders of Los Angeles, who were primarily Black and Indigenous. Designed by Chicana muralist and SPARC co-founder Judith F. Baca, the mural took six summers to complete, and employed a diverse crew of over 400 youth artists. In February, **SPARC received a \$5 million grant** from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to expand the mural, bringing its timeline up to 2020, with painting to begin in early 2023. Although SPARC has hosted exhibitions at its Venice headquarters in the past, in the wake of the pandemic it has shifted to focus on outside projects, including programming around the “Great Wall” and its restoration.



Noni Olabisi, “To Protect and Serve” (painted in 1993, restored in 2015), located at 3406 11th Avenue, Los Angeles (image courtesy SPARC Archives)

From 1988 to 2002, SPARC produced over 100 murals all over Los Angeles, working with almost as many muralists as part of the Neighborhood Pride Mural Program, which grew out of the “Great Wall” project. And in 2015-16, SPARC’s Mural Rescue Program restored nine of those murals judged “historically significant” by LA’s Department of Cultural Affairs. These include “To Protect and Serve” by Noni Olabisi, which pays tribute to the Black Panthers; “Love is for Everyone” by Mary-Linn Hughes and Reginald Zachary, painted outside the Minority AIDS Project Building in South LA; and a mural honoring crossover Mexican film star Dolores del Rio by Alfredo de Batuc in Hollywood.



Mary-Linn Hughes and Reginald Zachary, "Love is for Everyone" (painted in 1991; restored in 2015), located at the Minority AIDS Project Building, 5149 West Jefferson Boulevard (image courtesy SPARC Archives)

Later this month, Baca's 1984 mural "Hitting the Wall" in Downtown LA — which commemorated the first time female runners were allowed to compete in the Olympic marathon — will be restored. It was unceremoniously painted over by LA Metro in 2019, and is expected to reopen to the public in late July.

The Feminist Center for Creative Work



Salima magazine, issue 1 (image courtesy FCCW)

The Feminist Center for Creative Work (FCCW) was founded in 2013 as an organization dedicated to “cultivat[ing] feminist creative practice,” through workshops, discussions, exhibitions, and artist residencies. Originally called the Women’s Center for Creative Work, it recently changed its name to reaffirm its commitment to an inclusive “feminism prioritizing Black and Indigenous people of color, queer, trans and nonbinary people, and other historically marginalized communities.”

Design has always been a key element of their project, owing in part to the influence of co-founder Kate Johnson,



slow and soft and righteous, improvising at the end of the world (and how we make a new one)
by sonia louise davis, published by Co-Conspirator Press (image courtesy FCCW)

information.”

The FCCW also recently launched *Salima*, a magazine “made by and for Black, Indigenous, people of color, queer, trans, nonbinary, low-income, folks living with disabilities, and all those most affected by — and working to take down — the white supremacist, capitalist, colonialist, ableist, cis-hetero patriarchy,” as per their mission statement. The first issue, structured around the theme of “emergence,” features a cover story on Ali Anderson of *Feed Black Futures*, an organization that supports food justice in the Black community.

ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives

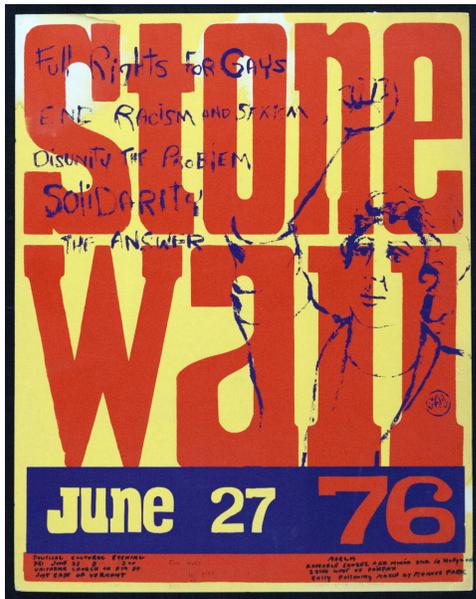
a graphic designer. Their publishing arm, **Co-Conspirator Press**, puts out books on decolonization, ecology, race, gender, and imagining a radical future, all printed on their in-house risograph machine, and featuring experimental design to complement progressive content. “At Co-Conspirator Press, our intention is to disseminate and redistribute critical thought through books,” Co-Conspirator’s printer Neko Natalia told Hyperallergic via email. “We also draw inspiration from the utilitarian function of the riso and its use by community centers and schools to cheaply and quickly disseminate



ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives (photo by Christine Hahn)

The **ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives** at the USC Libraries contains over 700 collections of personal documents, records, photographs, publications, and other ephemera from LGBTQ+ activists, artists, and organizations, making it the largest collection of LGBTQ+ material in the world. Over 3,000 posters from the collection are digitized and accessible online, covering AIDS Activism, Gay Rodeos, Pride festivities, and much more. The archives grew out of ONE Inc., which published *ONE Magazine*, the first widely distributed gay publication in the country, from 1953 to 1967. “The early issues are such great encapsulations of mid-century graphic design,” Andy Campbell, associate professor of Critical Studies at USC Roski School of Art & Design told Hyperallergic via email.

Other important pieces in the collection highlighted by Campbell include **Chicos Modernos**, a Spanish-language comic illustrated by queer Chicano artist Joey Terrill; protest posters by Robert Birch (aka Cardiac Arrest), whose **caustic and satirical graphics** often targeted politicians for their inadequate response to AIDS; **BLK Magazine**, which provided support and awareness for Black LGBTQ+ communities; and a trove of material focused on queer nightlife, including this 1976 poster advertising a party at **legendary club Jewel’s Catch One**. “Nightlife plays such an important role in organizing and keeping spirits up during a long fight,” Campbell said of the significance of these items, located at the intersection of celebration and struggle.



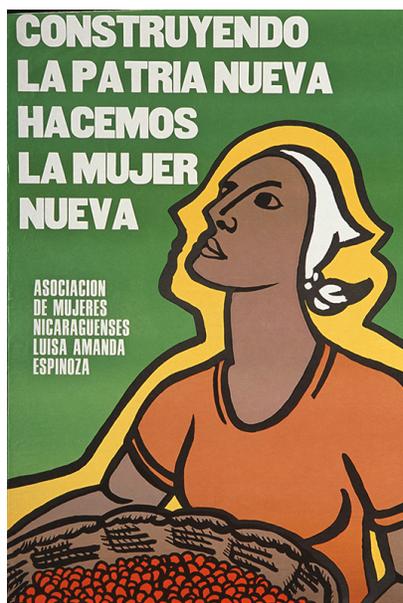
"Stonewall: June 27 76" poster from the collection of the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at USC Libraries

The archives are accessible for research via a [reservation system](#), though it is currently closed due to the pandemic with no opening date announced. The ONE Gallery in West Hollywood, which hosts its exhibitions, is also currently closed; however, the first iteration of the multi-site exhibition [Pride Publics: Words and Actions](#) will run through July 1 on Robertson Boulevard South of Santa Monica Boulevard. Curated by Rubén Esparza and organized by the ONE Archives Foundation, the show features wheatpasted posters showcasing a multigenerational group of 28 LGBTQ+ pioneers, including Tom of Finland co-founder Durk Dehner, Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors, artist Paul Pescador, and writer Raquel Gutiérrez.

[Center for the Study of Political Graphics](#)

The Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) has collected over 90,000 political posters related to social movements around the globe, 8,000 of which are currently [available to browse online](#). CSPG founder Carol Wells was a medievalist in the early '80s when she went to Nicaragua to help a UCLA professor collect political posters, changing the course of her career. She was given a stack of revolutionary posters that proclaimed "*Construyendo La Patria Nueva Hacemos La Mujer Nueva* (In building the new county, we're making the new woman)." She gave

one to the pro-Sandinista family she was staying with, who put it up on their wall. When a neighboring anti-Sandinista family came over for a visit, their young child became entranced by the poster. “I watched him walk over, mouth the words and try to figure it out,” Wells told Hyperallergic over the phone. “That was my moment of epiphany. I understood how posters worked. We’re going through our daily life in our bubble, and the goal of a good political poster is to break through that bubble and get our attention. It pulls you in. I became obsessed with collecting posters at that moment.”



Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMNLAE), “Construyendo La Patria Nueva Hacemos La Mujer Nueva” (1981), offset, Nicaragua (image courtesy the Center for the Study of Political Graphics)

“I put aside the 12th century and jumped into the 20th,” she told Hyperallergic last year. Wells founded the center in 1988 and has spent the past 30 years collecting and exhibiting posters and graphics related to protest, activism, resistance, and struggles for equality. Recent exhibitions include *To Protect & Serve?*, covering 50 years of posters protesting police violence, and *Activists, Artists, and Sisters*, an online exhibition featuring posters advocating for women’s rights from 13 countries. On June 30, they’ll open an online exhibition of posters chronicling LGBTQ struggles and celebrations, drawing on other collections, including the ONE Archives. While in-person exhibitions won’t resume until next year, the center will reopen on June 15 for those interested in making research appointments to peruse their extensive archive.

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