

# Artistic Exercises in Creative Problem Solving: Freeing the Creative Spirit

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## **Abstract**

Sister Corita Kent (1918-1986) was an influential Pop artist and teacher in the 1960s. She expressed her views about art and creativity in a number of books. This paper reviews the book that most clearly articulates her philosophy: *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit* by Kent and former student Jan Steward. It examines the book's assignments for making art and relates them to the Thinking Skills model of Creative Problem Solving (CPS). The paper concludes with a section on the author's personal reflections.

*Keywords: Corita Kent, art instruction, Creative Problem Solving*

## **Artistic Exercises in Creative Problem Solving: Freeing the Creative Spirit**

When she taught art at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles in the 1960s, then-Sister Corita Kent was as famous for her unorthodox assignments as she was for her graphic antiwar, profeminist serigraphs. Artist Jan Steward, now in her 80s, was one of her students. In *Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit*, a book she and Kent wrote together in 1986, she gave an example of Kent's explicit, if unorthodox, style of art instruction:

Cut one hundred ten cards. Cards, for our purposes, are any rectangular section (two by three inches is a good size) cut from a magazine....Look at the shapes in the pictures you have cut. Make a list of the uses you could find for these pictures as layouts (Kent & Steward, 2008, p. 37).

The exercise was developed to help students understand how to free context and content from original sources, a necessary part of an artist's education (Sloan, 1977). To me, it also illustrates one of the many ways Kent's teachings—as set forth in *Learning by Heart*—employ a variety of techniques associated with Creative Problem Solving (CPS) to facilitate the principles involved in making art.

This paper examines Kent's background and discusses how her teachings and the work of her students, whose careers are ongoing, provide a framework that parallels CPS. It concludes by examining ways both Kent's method and CPS focus my output as a visual artist.

### **In tune with the times**

Gaining international fame as a Pop artist in the 1960s, Kent (1918-1986) was best known for her silkscreened posters that confronted political and religious establishments, even as she lived as a

Roman Catholic nun in California. Bright with blocks of saturated color juxtaposed with fragments of text appropriated from advertisements and poems—the 1965 print “someday is now” incorporated a logo from the supermarket chain Safeway—her posters were inexpensive, appealing, and accessible to a broad audience (Ault, 2007).

The novelty she embodied helped ensure she was featured in newsmagazines of the day. A *Time* profile noted that “she did a large serigraph exhibit for the Vatican pavilion at the New York World's Fair, designed advertisements for Westinghouse, and gift wrapping for Neiman-Marcus” (“Roman Catholics: Joyous Revolutionary,” 1967, para. 2).

Yet until she left religious life in 1968, Kent considered teaching, not art, her primary profession. Her interdisciplinary classroom mirrored the antiauthoritarianism of the day. Music and movies played simultaneously, forcing students to find their own aesthetic equilibrium. In her monograph on Kent, artist Julie Ault explains the effect: “Students learned to understand the stakes of self-discipline, that they were responsible not only for their experience and learning, but for the class itself and the caliber of its collective effect” (2007, p. 45)

The frenetic atmosphere intrigued the class’s many visitors. In part because of Immaculate Heart College’s location in Los Angeles, and in part because of her own celebrity, Kent was friends with influential people in the arts, and often invited them to speak to her classes. Among them were designer Charles Eames, artist Ben Shahn, and writer Buckminster Fuller, who called his visit to Kent’s department “among the most fundamentally inspiring experiences of my life” (Corita Art Center, 2010).

Barbara Loste, a student of Kent whose PhD dissertation explored the teacher's life and art, asserts that Kent's instruction rested on one foundation: "...that creativity is based on the close observation of the ordinary and that art cannot be learned except by the heart. (These) are primary tools for anyone interested in living, working, and playing creatively" (Kent & Steward, 2008, p. ix).

One of those tools is looking and concentrating with laser-like focus until the object under gaze and the action called for by the teacher automatically merged—the very definition of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Another might be considered overflow, translating that looking and concentrating into vast amounts of work. Kent's high-octane classroom assignments ("By tomorrow, do a hundred drawings of common objects—a chair, a hand, a shadow. Draw with a chopstick and India ink, use your non-dominant hand," Loste recalled) were designed to move students past the fear and self-censorship that sometimes accompanies art-making (Kent & Steward, 2007, p. vii). Instead, students stretched to meet an extraordinary goal, and in so doing produced work of originality in volume.

Another critical tool for Kent's method of teaching art is brainstorming. The work of Alex Osborne is acknowledged in *Learning by Heart*, which clearly delineates ground rules for divergent thinking: Record all ideas, suspend judgment, defer decisions, strive for quantity, seek wild and unusual ideas, and build on them (Kent & Steward, 2007). The guidelines of convergent thinking, as detailed by Miller, Vehar, and Firestien (2001)—be affirmative, be deliberate, check objectives, improve ideas, consider novelty—also factor in the assignments.

## Teaching art in CPS steps

Kent and Steward's book has eight chapters: Beginning, Looking, Sources, Structure, Connect & Create, Tools & Techniques, Work Play, and Celebration. Taken together, they parallel the Thinking Skills model of CPS described by Puccio, Murdock, and Mance (2007).

Beginning and Looking are illustrated with photographs of art made by people who do not call themselves artists, which the authors say emphasizes the necessity of keeping an open mind, "...shutting out everything else, slowing down, and being very patient" (Kent & Steward, 2007, p. 19). The emphasis in these two chapters on discarding habitual thinking in favor of clear-eyed observation shares common ground with the central aspect of CPS, Assessing the Situation, as characterized by Puccio, Murdock & Mance (2007).

Several assignments in the section ask that the reader spend time staring at a prescribed object in an effort to strengthen powers of observation. "Look at a tree for one hour..." directs one task. "Write every specific thing you see about that tree" (Kent & Steward, 2007, p. 20). Afterward, the reader is told the point is to look at an object until it loses its habitual meaning. In other words, new thinking is possible only with a fresh point of view.

Puccio, Murdock, and Mance (2007) say Assessing the Situation calls for a practitioner to understand exactly what is going on—precisely the purpose of the above exercise. Moreover, they assert that CPS requires the use of five senses, plus a mix of subconscious measures such as emotions and incongruities, to render a fuller picture. Just as an artist never really stops focusing on his or her subject, the process of CPS never ceases to require at least some degree of Assessing the Situation.

Further into *Learning by Heart*, chapters on Sources and Structures are concerned with commencing work. Ideas for art are tested and transformed by the limitations inherent in an assignment; structure becomes the scaffolding that holds ideas together. These chapters align with the clarification that takes place in the Exploring the Vision and Formulating Challenges steps of CPS (Puccio, Murdock & Mance, 2007).

One assignment from the Sources chapter suggests making invitations for the celebration that eventually becomes the book's overarching assignment (Kent & Steward, 2008). Options created during brainstorming spark concrete directions for making invitations. "One of the definitions of source is 'the origin, the ultimate cause,'" the authors write. "In that sense, the problem becomes the source" (p. 53). In the same manner, the CPS step of Exploring the Vision paves the way for all that follows. Beginning with the simple question "Wouldn't it be nice if..." practitioners start to focus on a single goal, wish, or challenge that can then be solved (Puccio, Murdock & Mance, 2007).

In the Structures chapter, the emphasis is on Formulating Challenges, the second part of CPS stage of Clarification. Readers are advised to gravitate to tangible subjects, which offer some necessary limitation to frame the structure of artwork. "When the focus is on something tangible, the course of the thing will carry you, rather than you carrying it...You can then apply your energy to the matter at hand," write Kent and Steward (2008, p. 71).

An attendant assignment furthers readers down the path of the celebration begun earlier: Research a time in history, paint boxes with related words and images, make puppets that relate, and write a script featuring the research and the puppets (Kent & Steward, 2008). Each component clarifies the

one that follows, in much the same way during the CPS process that revisiting key data can clarify matters in the creation of problem statements (Miller, Vehar, & Firestien, 2001)

Chapters entitled *Connect & Create*, *Tools & Techniques*, and *WorkPlay* concentrate on basic artistic facilities such as understanding an applying media, techniques, and processes, to the more sophisticated challenges of choosing and evaluating a range of subjects, using symbols and ideas, and relating them to other cultures and disciplines (Kent & Steward, 2008). These chapters move the book into the Transformation stage of CPS. (Puccio, Murdock & Mance, 2007)

The assignments range from making a multimedia slide show to learning papier-mâché, and staging the puppet play investigated earlier in the book. When the projects are begun, they link to the CPS step of Exploring Ideas; ideas are considered, and the most promising pursued. At execution, they echo the Formulating Solutions step; that is, the most workable idea is refined (Puccio, Murdock & Mance, 2007).

The final chapter in Kent and Steward's book (2008) is inspired by a Mary's Day happening that Kent oversaw at Immaculate Heart College in 1964, when Steward was in her class. The chapter concentrates on group collaborations and, it could be said, the final CPS steps of Implementation, Exploring Acceptance and Formulating a Plan (Puccio, Murdock & Mance, 2007). The sole assignment is to make a celebration. The directions—research, brainstorm, highlight, refine, analyze—require considerable work (Kent & Steward, 2008, p. 202).

In such an all-encompassing undertaking, each task calls for the strength at the core of CPS:

Approaching a challenge in an imaginative way that results in effective action (Noller, 1977). Like



CPS, Kent & Steward's method of instruction ultimately provides both individuals and teams with structured strategies for producing diverse and novel strategies for screening, refining, and analyzing options (Puccio, 1999).

### **Making the personal connection**

I required those strategies myself when I resumed making art ten years ago after a hiatus of decades. I thought at first that relearning technique was my primary challenge. But after taking a class from artist and teacher Betty Edwards, who wrote the book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, I began to realize seeing with accuracy was my true task. "I never really look at someone until I draw them," she said at the time. "Then I see things I never saw before" (personal communication, November 8, 2000).

Several other teachers and thousands of sketchbook pages ensued before 2007, when I came across Corita Kent's name in an online essay by Los Angeles designer Lorraine Wild (Design Observer, 2007). A year later, I bought the new edition of *Learning by Heart* and began using it as a guide.

Like meditation, gazing is hard, yet its cumulative effect is worth the effort. As Kent wrote in her 1967 work, *Footnotes and Headlines: A Play-Pray Book*: "To really see what we ordinarily look at from time to time makes fireworks happen inside us that can't always be contained when the brightness of a person or thing is discovered or uncovered" (p. 17).

Earlier this year, with that quote in mind, I created a multi-media assemblage of paintings cut apart and woven out of order back together. I've used Kent and Steward's book as a starting point for other projects as well, from a yearlong weekly self-portrait series to a sequence of large-scale oil

paintings that required me to fashion an incised alphabet of my own. These works, which require varying degrees of translating original sources, suggest I can literally draw from the book's principles for years, and in so doing, reach new artistic heights.

I think the same is true of CPS. Its inherent flexibility and insistence on thinking skills are ready tools for increasing the probability for success—not just in art, but many other areas besides. While reading my class assignments, I began to understand and appreciate how its process so neatly follows the outline of Kent and Steward's work. It's a serendipity that would have probably appealed to Kent, who asked in a poem, "If we knew what it was we would learn, it just wouldn't be research, would it?" (Sister Corita, 1967, pp. 4-5)

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