

Love, Robert Indiana



Courtesy of Robert Indiana
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An oral history of pop's most famous four-letter word.

By Rachel Wolff on December 11, 2013

The composition of Robert Indiana's unwaveringly iconic "LOVE" motif is simple enough: two pairs of letters stacked in a square, the L, the V and the E standing tall and crowded around an italicized O. But oh that O... Rarely is a word's meaning so cleverly embedded in its typography. Indiana's O swoons, knocked off balance by a four-letter force evoking every kind of passion, be it sexual ecstasy or godly devotion. The image is as universal as the word itself. Tourists drape themselves over the monumental LOVE on Manhattan's Sixth Avenue and lounge beneath the one at Philadelphia's eponymous LOVE Park, two of many such sculptures around the world. Other variations yet can be found on postage stamps, posters, coasters, notebooks, tote bags, T-shirts, magnets and mugs. And, naturally, on museum walls. It's fitting that Indiana's forthcoming retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art (on view September 26 through January 23, 2014) is titled "Robert Indiana: Beyond Love," as there is, of course, far more to the artist's oeuvre than that single word with its delightfully lovesick O, created in 1965. Throughout his career, Indiana has merged the look of Pop with the austerity of minimalism and the wordplay of Concrete Poetry, influencing every text-based artist since, from Jenny Holzer to Glenn Ligon. But one couldn't possibly leave LOVE behind.

Indiana certainly hasn't. At 85, the artist continues to riff on the work, which has become, in many ways, his identity. And yet, in the five decades since its inception, he has watched as artists, artisans and activists reproduced and transformed LOVE—"ripped off" is how he puts it—trading on the motif's universal recognizability. LOVE is in that sense the original meme, unusually suited for the Internet age. In anticipation of the Whitney show, Indiana—alongside friends, collaborators, critics and cultural luminaries—explains how his masterpiece took on a life of its own.

The Indiana-born artist Robert Clark moved to an Abstract Expressionism-dominated New York City in 1954. He eschewed the macho Cedar Tavern scene in favor of a circle of artists who were exploring a more minimal, more experimental thread of modern art. He settled in a studio space on Coenties Slip, a tiny enclave of Lower Manhattan, where his neighbors included Agnes Martin, James Rosenquist, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly (briefly) and his close friend Ellsworth Kelly. He soon changed his surname to Indiana, a nod to his native state and a coming out of sorts as an artist.

In 1961, Indiana made a red-on-red painting called Four Star Love, featuring four stars in that now-familiar square formation with the word "Love" stenciled below. In 1965, the Museum of Modern Art in New York commissioned Indiana to design a Christmas card. The resulting image was the LOVE we all know.

Robert Indiana: It all started with my being exposed to Christian Science as a child. At one time I was even a member of the Church. “Love” is the key word—it’s the only word that ever appears in a Christian Science church. No crucifixes, no baby Jesuses, no saints. Nothing except one word: “L-O-V-E.”

Susan Elizabeth Ryan, art historian and biographer, *Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech*: Robert is obsessively autobiographical. And love is a theme that really goes way back.

Indiana: I was encouraged by my father. He was not artistically inclined, but he played an important role in my life, too. He worked for Phillips 66, the gasoline company. [The original color scheme for LOVE] came from a Phillips 66 sign in Indianapolis. It was absolutely beautiful. I would be in the car and I’d see that red-and-green sign against the blue Indiana sky.

Martin Krause, curator of prints, drawings and photographs at the Indianapolis Museum of Art: LOVE became a sort of homage to Indiana’s father, because his father died at the end of 1965, when he was working on this motif.

Indiana: I was trying to bring [the word] down to its essence. In the most meaningful and recognizable form possible. The tilted O was not my invention. It was used frequently down through the ages, various times, various places. It was a typographic play, and I simply thought it made the word a little more dynamic.

Steven Heller, author, critic, former art director of *The New York Times*: The O becomes the mnemonic because it’s on its side. I wouldn’t even call it an italic. It’s on its side. It adds something to your eye. You remember that O.

Ryan: The motif first appeared as a series of rubbings in 1964 on his personal Christmas cards.

Indiana: There were a few variations, but MoMA happened to choose the one that became very, very popular—the most popular Christmas card the museum had ever issued.

Milton Glaser, graphic designer, cofounder of *New York* magazine in 1968, creator of 1977’s “I ? NY” campaign: LOVE was transgressive in that it blurred the distinction between graphic design and high art. And of course so much of what happened in the 1960s was exactly the blurring of that distinction. To some degree, [LOVE and “I ? NY”] came out of the same sensibility. I think it had some subliminal effect on me in terms of what was permissible. It was in the atmosphere.

John Wilmerding, art historian: It has power both for its graphics and for its meaning. You can see it against the background of the Cold War as if it were a wish for peace, a wish for brotherly love, easily associated with a pervasive American phenomenon going back to the Kennedys.

Love for Sale

In the spring of 1966, Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery held what has become known as the "LOVE Show," which contained many versions of the image, in different shapes and sizes and permutations. Though well attended—including by Indiana's friends, such as Andy Warhol, Marisol and James Rosenquist—the show was not a hit with critics. In his New York Times review, John Canaday wrote, "The show is bright and good fun, if one doesn't ask W. H. and Y. The answer, no doubt, is \$."

Barbara Haskell, curator, "Beyond Love" at the Whitney Museum: The year 1966 was the height of the counterculture movement, and Indiana introduced LOVE right at the time when that generation was proclaiming "Make love, not war." It was caught up immediately by the press and the public. They just embraced it as this icon of sexual freedom. So it arrived in the world already sort of famous.

Glaser: It was picked up because it was an easy image to reproduce powerfully on a page, so it got a lot of editorial coverage.

George Lois, art director for Esquire, 1962–1972: I remember when I first saw it. I was never blown away by it. The second people in advertising and in the design field saw it, we said, "Herb Lubalin," [the legendary typographer and graphic designer] who was doing things like that except more conceptual. If Indiana wasn't inspired by Herb Lubalin, then I'm a girl. [But] I guess LOVE is iconic because it's so ubiquitous.

Indiana: I never was very [politically] active myself. I was not a street person. I didn't run around and demonstrate and carry signs. I mainly stayed in my studio and painted.

Bill Katz, interior designer and architect, and Indiana's assistant at the time: I was helping in the studio while Bob was painting his "LOVE Show" for the Stable Gallery. Mostly doing very menial things. But at one point when he was thinking about making LOVE in two panels inside a box, I suggested it might be better in three dimensions outside the box. He said, "Why don't you make something to see what it might look like?" I made a version in papier-mâché. It gave Bob the idea to have a sculpture carved out of solid aluminum, which was in the exhibition in 1966.

Ryan: The whole art world was interested in multiples. And Marian Goodman's art printing and publishing house, Multiples, was very big when it existed. The idea was offering works of art in limited edition, not just prints. So Goodman commissioned Robert to do this carved aluminum LOVE sculpture. There were to be so many made, and they ranged in price. Goodman also commissioned a LOVE banner. She commissioned a whole lot of LOVE stuff from Robert; all of it was going to be limited edition.

Haskell: He sort of challenged the idea of the art elite that somehow quality had to do with scarcity.

Richard Phillips, American artist: The fact that he produced nearly unlimited editions of the LOVE print that were affordable was creating opportunities for people to participate with art and to have it be part of their lives.

Glaser: That was something that to some extent Warhol discovered and exploited. It was a big change in the consciousness about value and quality, things that were handmade, and things that were commercially reproduced. All these things were in the air at once. And Indiana was certainly an element in that mix.

Phillips: When you think of Pop Art, you have to count Indiana as ultimately one of the most important figures. His contribution is indelible. It's one of the main pillars of Pop Art.

Indiana also started making monumental variations of LOVE out of Cor-Ten steel in 1970. In 1975, a 12-by-12-foot variation of LOVE was acquired by the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Indiana: There is something about bigness. People like bigness, and that was a way of making LOVE even larger than how it started out. It started out as a one-foot sculpture and has grown immensely since.

Heller: When I saw the LOVE sculpture on Manhattan's Sixth Avenue, I was impressed that something that simple could be a sculpture and it was sitting on the street and you could climb on it. I've been to museums where you couldn't touch the sculptures. Well, why not? Having that physical connection with a piece of art is really wonderful, and this kind of broke that taboo.

Terry McCaffrey, former manager of stamp development for the United States Postal Service: It was probably in 1972 that we first made contact with Indiana. There was an artist who was under contract with the Postal Service, and he proposed the idea of using the LOVE image on the postage stamp for two reasons. First, it was a piece of Pop Art. And second, they wanted a stamp for Valentine's Day, because Valentine's Day cards were so prolific at that time.

Indiana: There ended up being 300 million LOVE stamps [released in 1973].

Heller: Having it as a U.S. postage stamp when the Postal Service was our only means of interpersonal communication certainly helped a lot. It was a brilliant business ploy, but it was also a way of opening the door to art. It really is the biggest tiniest thing you can do in a public space.

McCaffrey: Afterward, people kept writing in and asking for another "love" stamp. Then it became almost a yearly thing.

“Ripped Off”

In addition to Indiana’s authorized stamps, editions and subsequent artworks, unauthorized tchotchkes and reproductions of LOVE proliferated in the late ‘60s and ‘70s. A 1973 New York Times article name-checks “coasters, glasses, lamps, paperweights, buttons, posters, cigarette lighters, matchbox covers, notebooks, junk jewelry, cosmetics, bath mats, wastepaper baskets and hippie patches” all bearing Indiana’s motif.

Indiana: I have quite a collection myself, much of it by my own hand and some of it by other people’s. I have LOVE prints and paintings and sculptures. I have bracelets and pendants and paperweights and baseballs and lightbulbs that light up and say “love.” And I have a LOVE wall with thousands of little sequins made in Haiti. It just goes on and on. People have sent them to me over the years.

Theodore Feder, president, Artists Rights Society: The United States was unique among the major industrialized nations before 1978 in that it had a copyright law that said that in order for your creation to be protected, you had to have either registered it and/or put a copyright notice on it. If it was published without a copyright notice, then it was projected into the public domain. At that time, to register all these artworks, you would have had to fill out forms, pay fees, and you would have had to do it hundreds of times a year. It simply was not done.

Ryan: Indiana didn’t like the idea of having his name put onto LOVE because he thought it sort of was his name, in a sense, and he didn’t want to muck it up.

Indiana: The great disappointment was that I didn’t know enough about copyright, and my work wasn’t properly copyrighted. So I had all these rip-offs, and everybody presumed I was getting terribly wealthy because LOVE was popping up all over the world. That happened very quickly. And painfully. All kinds of rip-offs, and not all the rip-offs were well done. There are other people who greatly benefited from that same situation. Dealers like to sell art. If they have a popular subject, all the better.

Feder: A new copyright law went into effect in 1978 that said it was no longer necessary to have a copyright notice on the artwork, and slowly Indiana began to recapture his rights. Now there are fewer unauthorized works. There used to be quite a number, and that has led some people to believe the work is still in the public domain.

Haskell: In 1972, Indiana had another gallery show in New York, where he showed some other LOVE images. But by 1972, the whole of America had changed. The riots against Vietnam were escalating, Robert Kennedy had been shot and the art world just turned against [Indiana].

Gavin Turk, British artist: Somehow, the art world felt that his work was commercially too viable, and then they felt that he was simply a commercial artist. And so then his work was simply graphic design. I think that was the art world not understanding that [LOVE] was just a great bit of art.

Haskell: Indiana never quite recovered. He went up to Vinalhaven in 1978 as a kind of self-imposed exile, and he's lived and worked on the small fisherman's island off the coast of Maine ever since.

Krause: I don't think he ever despised the image. It had a pretty profound meaning for him, and it was anchored to his childhood. He just couldn't control what became of it, and he sort of resented what became of it.

Haskell: I think it had a terrible impact on his career, but somehow he persisted with it. It was almost as if he put his faith in it, and it turned out he was right—that people still love LOVE.

In 1977, Indiana translated his LOVE motif into another language for the first time with AHAVA (i.e., "love" in Hebrew). The piece was exhibited in Central Park, acquired by Connecticut collectors Beverly and Raymond Sackler and gifted to the Israel Museum.

Mira Lapidot, chief curator of fine arts, the Israel Museum: In Hebrew, it sort of takes on different meanings because of the positioning of the letters. If you cross it horizontally, you have the word "love" like you have it in English. But vertically, it could also be read as two different Hebrew words. You have "av," which is the Hebrew word for father; then you have the double "hay," which is an acronym or a symbol for God. So suddenly you have "God the father," which is interesting because it goes back to why Indiana began his engagement with the LOVE logo—"God is love" from the Christian Science Church.

Indiana: I have done AMOR, I have done the Chinese word for "love." I would like to do LOVE in every language, except it begins to get complicated. It turns out people really only want one word and that's "L-O-V-E."

In Other Words

As early as 1970, artists began to appropriate Indiana's motif and use it in their own works. The best-known variation remains AIDS, by the Canadian artist collective General Idea.

Greg Humeniuk, curatorial assistant of Canadian art, Art Gallery of Ontario: It started in 1987. General Idea was invited to contribute to an amfAR fund-raiser and did a

painting that used the LOVE formatting but said "AIDS." A few months later it did a poster, which began to appear in the streets of New York, San Francisco, Toronto and other cities. In the broader community, AIDS was still something with a huge amount of stigma, mystery and fear—many of the fears being around transmission, and that connected to the Robert Indiana piece as something that went into unauthorized transmission itself. Because it was so oblique, AIDS was a way of putting it out there for people who weren't necessarily engaged with the crisis.

Indiana: I was aware of it. And of course AIDS—the whole business was so devastating. So many friends and artists were stricken with that problem that I felt very involved. But that was not the happiest variation; they did that on their own.

Marlene McCarty, artist and member of the artist/AIDS-activist group Gran Fury: In Gran Fury we were all about taking action and claiming an active opposition to AIDS. So when we saw the AIDS poster by General Idea, we thought it was so evil. To take AIDS and convolute it with the word "love" and not point in any other direction did not seem effective. In a way, we probably even felt that it was fueling the hysteria.

Tom Kalin, filmmaker; member, Gran Fury: In 1988 we made this giant painting [in reaction], RIOT. We were all so shocked by the AIDS piece, but now I don't think I see the piece at all in the way I did then. Of course it pissed us off. That was the point. And two of the three General Idea members—Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal—were dying during that period of time from AIDS themselves.

Heller: [In 1986] Paul Rand did the logo for NeXT computer, which was Steve Jobs's computer after he left Apple for the first time. And Paul did it in the same manner as Robert Indiana. He put "Ne" and then "XT" on the next line and then put it in a box, because that's what the computer was. But he says in his own explanation of the logo that the Robert Indiana [LOVE] became so widespread, so well known, you now could read that way.

Kendell Geers, South African artist: I have used the LOVE icon in numerous works of art. The first was in 1993, during the very violent and chaotic period of transition from apartheid to democracy. It was an extremely volatile time in which bombs were being detonated almost every week as political extremists from both sides of the spectrum tried to scare their opposition into silence. I made a poster in the same colors and with the same typeface and design as LOVE but with the word "bomb" instead. These posters were pasted all around Johannesburg in places where one might expect a bomb to be placed. I called it After Love. It marked a shift in the time and values from the utopian movements of the hippie '60s to the paranoia of the escalating violence in a country in transition.

Turk: I had been doing a series of works with the idea of signatures and used my own name in that process. I realized that because my surname has only four letters, it could

fit perfectly within this LOVE hieroglyph. [LOVE] wasn't made for the elite. It was made for everybody. And everybody recognized that, and they took it and ran with it. That was its job.

Meaghan Burdick, grassroots fundraising and merchandising director for the 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaign: Mr. Indiana contacted me through a representative of his, and it was said that he had been working on a "hope" edition of his LOVE artwork. He was extremely interested in donating this piece to the campaign. We had a big unveiling of the sculpture outside Denver's Pepsi Center at the start of the Democratic National Convention, and it became a phenomenon. The enthusiasm opened the floodgates for us to use the image everywhere. We put it on buttons and T-shirts and necklaces, which became popular.

Indiana: HOPE came about because of my desire to help Obama become president. These days my word is "hope"—H-O-P-E. That's what the world needs a great deal of now. I'm also simply partial to words with the possibility for a tilted O. It's my trademark.

Recently, an artist claimed that Indiana authorized him to make a licensed variation using the word "prem"—"love" in Hindi—and the collector who bought the work sued when Indiana publicly denied any such agreement. In January, a federal judge ruled in Indiana's favor. Indiana is currently working on his autobiography in Maine.

Love the Outfit

In celebration of his forthcoming retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Robert Indiana is collaborating with New York fashion designer Lisa Perry for an exclusive collection of apparel and accessories for fall 2013. An avid art collector in her own right, Perry says, "Indiana's famous LOVE image has made me happy since I first saw it when I was a little girl." With the release of the limited-edition capsule collection, Indiana joins the ranks of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and Jeff Koons, whose works have been incorporated in Perry's past annual artist capsule collections. So what's next for the designer? When asked which artists she would love to collaborate with, she said Nate Lowman, Barbara Kruger, Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley and Tom Wesselmann are all on the wish list. You can shop Perry's collection of LOVE—dresses, sweaters, a leather jacket and a tote—at Lisa Perry's Madison Avenue store in New York City (988 Madison Ave.) or via lisaperrystyle.com. —Cary Leitzes

Additional reporting by Maud Doyle and Rory Tolan.

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