

Art and the Artist in Society

Edited by

José Jiménez-Justiniano, Elsa Luciano Feal
and Jane Elizabeth Alberdeston

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

LOVE AT 55TH AND 6TH AVENUE

EMILY NEWMAN

Robert Indiana's *LOVE* has taken on a life of its own. From its original conception as a Christmas card to the countless fine art prints to the massive sculptures, *LOVE* appeals to people of all generations. In 2000, one of the *LOVE* sculptures owned by Simon Salama-Caro was installed in the heart of New York City, just north of Rockefeller Center on 55th Street and 6th Avenue, a prominent corner always bustling with people. Street vendors typically set up shop behind *LOVE*, selling fruits, juice and hot dogs to those who frequently take their breaks in the plaza. Though tourists gawk at the sights of Rockefeller Center, Times Square, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Theatre District, to name a few, it is the vibrant red and blue *LOVE* that lights up the drab concrete and adds brightness to the space. Thus, *LOVE*, situated behind a bank and a large office building, brings life to an area that would otherwise be just another common, corporate space.

For tourists, the simple plaza is transformed into a photo opportunity. One employee of a nearby skyscraper remarked that if he had a nickel for every picture taken there, he would be an extremely rich man.¹ I even found myself photographing my sister and her boyfriend at the site, a memento from her trip to New York that she has framed on her wall. Standing around the piece, anyone can become a photographer, as countless groups and couples need someone to take their picture for them. It's not just one picture either; multiple pictures are normally taken as people crawl in and on the sculpture, posing inside it, standing on the sides and in the front often quite playfully. One tourist, when asked why he wanted a picture taken at *LOVE*, proudly proclaimed, "It's New York!"

Although for tourists, and even some New Yorkers, *LOVE* has become a work of public art representative of the city, the sculpture does not *just* exist in New York; there are other versions throughout the United States, Europe, Japan and Israel. *LOVE* functions as a personal piece that everyone can relate to and simultaneously claim as their own. While New York can be represented by *LOVE*, the Indianapolis Museum of Art uses their *LOVE*

¹ Through the course of several observations and surveys taken on the site of the sculpture during the months of January, February and March (2006), I compiled summaries of many of the comments from a wide variety of people.

on publicity materials, and, in Tokyo, the sculpture graces the cover of a public art guide. Perhaps this is because the piece feels at once familiar, yet often hard to place specifically. Many were surprised when I told them it had existed in numerous forms and places as sculpture. The story of *LOVE* deserves further examination, particularly in the way the image pervades society, though, with little recognition of the artist and his identity. The piece has come to walk the line between high art and kitsch, a misunderstanding that does not even cross the minds of tourists who just want their picture taken with a piece of art they see as representative of their New York experience (or their experience of Indianapolis or Tokyo, etc.)

Robert Indiana (born 1928 as Robert Clark) has often been lumped into the category of Pop Artist, though that seems to have evolved out of convenience as he was working at the same time as Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist and Roy Lichtenstein.² His graphic style and use of text reflects the commercialism that influenced Pop Art, yet his themes, which are often deeply personal, are based on a mythology he created that was entirely different from that of his peers. By cultivating a narrative concerning his life and history, Indiana's paintings and sculptures differ greatly from the cool, detached artworks created by Warhol et al. Furthermore, Indiana, having received a more traditional art education, lacks the commercial and graphic design background then prevalent among other pop artists.

Born in New Castle, Indiana, Robert Indiana knew early in his life he wanted to be an artist. He pursued his studies at the Art Institute of Chicago (1949–53), which he followed up with a summer at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine (1953) and a BFA from Edinburgh University (1953–4) before settling in New York in 1954. In the fifties Indiana developed his style, working and living in communities south of the Bowery in Manhattan. He explored figurative studies, but also began working in a hardedge style like his friend Ellsworth Kelly. Towards the end of the fifties, and even at the beginning of the sixties, he was experimenting with rough constructions bearing the influence of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns (Ryan; Wilmerding). At that time, he began to develop *LOVE* as a motif; he was in the midst of formulating his artistic identity.

While his career is obviously more varied than the *LOVE* pieces suggest, this essay necessitates a focus on their development. Inklings of the *LOVE*

² For examples of instances in which his work is grouped with pop art, see: Lucy Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966); Steven Henry Madoff, ed. *Pop Art: A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900, Rev. and Exp. Ed.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 189.

works emerge as early as the 1950s when Indiana wrote numerous poems on the theme. (Ryan; Simpson). Visually, the use of the word “love” originated in his painting commissioned by Larry Aldrich for his new museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut in 1964. In its previous role, the museum building had been a Christian Science church, which greatly interested Indiana who was raised as a Christian Scientist (Ryan 201–202). Reminded by the sign that hung in his church proclaiming, “God is Love,” he decided to reverse the phrase on a diamond shaped painting, where he centered “Love is God” in the midst of grayscale stripes (199). While this was his first piece to deal with “Love” as a text, aesthetically it was far removed from the design that makes up the simplified one-word artworks that eventually became the basis for *LOVE*.

The format of the *LOVE* artworks derives from a piece he did after a break-up with the artist Ellsworth Kelly in 1964. Using the same square format that is so familiar, the piece spelled out its title, *FUCK*, allowing the simplicity of the four-letter word to convey his anger with the situation. He then experimented with the texts “four” and “love” with similar compositions and ended up sending out versions of *LOVE* as personal Christmas cards in the same year. The “LO” is placed on top of the “VE”, and Indiana uses an italicized “O” to break up the staidness of the form. Formally, the italicized “O” infuses the design with life, disrupting the space as Joachim Pissarro notes in *Robert Indiana: Retrospective*:

LOVE constitutes a principal example of Indiana's system: built according to his usual cruciform axis, cut into two monosyllabic units, the word seems “reduced” to its mere letters, to the gigantic, three-dimensional forms of its stacked letters... At the same time, the O... is an italicized O: it is tilting away, threatening to fall off the lower rank of letters VE, and break the complete square structure of these four neatly composed letters. In other words, spiritual as it may be, *LOVE* also indicates that precarity, fragility, break up are almost inevitably part of the story. (27)

Early in 1965, The Museum of Modern Art commissioned Indiana to create similar Christmas cards for the museum's store, and the artist chose to use the square format of *LOVE*. While he sent them twelve different colored versions of the design, MoMA chose the version that we are most familiar with today, the one that uses a combination of red, blue and green (Simpson 80–85).

LOVE took shape in 1965 with the Christmas cards, but it was not until 1966 with the “Love Show” at the Stable Gallery, that Indiana exhibited the *LOVE* images, connecting them with his artistic career. In this exhibit, he

showed works such as the *LOVE Wall*, *Imperial Love* diptych, and assorted versions of *LOVE*. This show also contained mini-*LOVE* sculptures made by Multiples, Inc., a company interested in producing art that was more affordable for the public. In a similar manner, the company commissioned an inexpensive *LOVE* banner in red, blue and green felt, signed by Indiana and numbered.

Indiana faced copyright problems immediately; even the Christmas cards were made personal and intimate just by the nature of the way the product was sold.³ Hundreds of people purchased the cards, mailing them all over the world. For the "Love Show," Indiana, in concert with Poster Originals, also made an exhibition poster with the *LOVE* design, and with that came his first egregious copyright error. Feeling that the copyright logo would make the poster too commercial, he left it off entirely. In an almost unbelievable situation, Robert Indiana failed to copyright *LOVE*, and in 1966, the same year of the show, the first unauthorized use of the design occurred when a Philadelphia company used it to make cheap, aluminum paperweights. By not consistently providing full information (mainly his name and the date of the work) on early versions, Indiana and *LOVE* could not be protected by any copyright law (Simpson 85-88). Multiples, Inc., founded by Marian Goodman, and their lawyer encouraged Indiana to pursue actual copyright registration. While he reluctantly sent off the appropriate paperwork, it was returned to him and rejected on the grounds that the law didn't provide protection for a single word. He was encouraged to patent the image as a trademark—an idea Indiana found reprehensible; he only later realized he should have protested the ruling on grounds of "creative enhancement" (Simpson 89). Meanwhile, in the seventies, he continued to produce variations of the *LOVE* design without any copyright or signature attached to them. Art historian Susan Ryan suggests that "Indiana seemed to feel that because the role of the artist in any work of art was so primary, no one could really gain by not citing the artist in a reproduction. There would be no luster; no aura would transfer without the artist" (211).

Even from the beginning, *LOVE* was intended to circulate, passing through thousands of hands around the holiday. The instant the piece changed hands, society claimed ownership of it; *LOVE* seemed to belong

³ Indiana's failure to copyright the piece and his subsequent lawsuits are frequently cited as the most egregious example of an artist losing control of his creation. His problems were used to encourage artists to be more prepared and willing to copyright their material, as can be seen in Remi Clignet's article "On Artistic Property and Aesthetic Propriety" and Michael O'Hare's article "When is Monopoly Efficient?" (for the full bibliographical information see the Works Cited page).

to the public. This was further complicated by Indiana's own participation in the circulation of the image. Besides the sculptures and felt banners, he allowed the Beautiful Box and Bag Company to make one hundred 18-karat gold rings. In 1968, he also gave consent for *Imperial LOVE* to be used on the cover of a record album of Olivier Messiaen's orchestral love poems. The album, entitled *Turangalia-Symphonie*, means "love" in Sanskrit (among many other things). In the same year, he worked with Mass Originals to create several thousand unsigned serigraphs at \$25 for anyone to purchase. All of this happened within three years of the first incarnation of *LOVE*; suddenly, Indiana realized he had created a sign that symbolized an entire generation.

Different groups began to pick up *LOVE* and manipulate it for their own benefit. The Broadway cast of *Hair* was photographed with the piece for a magazine. The artist Bob Cenedella used the same format but replaced "love" with "shit" for his poster for Pandora Productions. Wallach's Department Store produced *LOVE/HATE* cufflinks, and that combination of Indiana's *LOVE* with its opposite *HATE* became a popular variant of Indiana's theme. One of the most famous exploitations of *LOVE* was the cover of Erich Segal's sentimental novel *Love Story*, which manipulated the title of the book into Indiana's format of *LOVE*. The vast proliferation of the work certainly encouraged the public's ownership of the image. Noted scholar Hélène Depotte acknowledged that the work went beyond Indiana, observing that even though the piece was "...still linked to Indiana, it has left its creator behind to attain an expansive autonomy of its own. *LOVE* reflected a whole state of mind, a general aspiration, and a universal utopia" (Indiana, *Robert Indiana: Retrospective* 39).

Indiana did try to copyright the piece again, retaining lawyers and registering some versions of *LOVE* in the 1990s (Ryan 223-224). Yet, since lawsuits have to be filed on a case-by-case basis, it was rather hard to catch all the offenders; certainly the work's appearance in different types of media, both museum-quality and commercial work, became overwhelming. For example, Indiana refused to give Charles Revson's Ultima II company permission to use *LOVE* on a perfume campaign, which offered a cheap version of the *LOVE* ring, but the company proceeded to make the jewelry anyway (Simpson 94). Ryan argues:

If beyond the art world, in the mass culture, Indiana's identity had been severed from his image, within the art world the perception was that *LOVE* was making him a rich man. He had 'sold out'... In his own account, not only did he receive nothing from the exploitations, but they led to professional losses. (223-224)

While he may not have directly profited from the work's overexposure, he made many attempts to associate himself with *LOVE*, mainly by continually photographing himself with the piece, reminding audiences he had created it.

Indiana did have control when it came to the *LOVE* stamp, which the United States Postal Service (USPS) commissioned him to design in 1972. The stamp was intended to respond to the requests that the USPS was receiving for stamps that would be appropriate for Valentine's Day, weddings, love letters and shower invitations. Indiana's only condition was that he design the stamp himself; in return, he received a small fee. Issued in Philadelphia on Valentine's Day 1973, the stamp was so popular the USPS reissued it again the next year. In total, over 330 million were sold. The stamp's transmission around the world harkens back to the idea of *LOVE* as an artwork shared and loved by people everywhere (Ryan 233-235). The purplish color that was originally printed in the stamp was a mistake; while it was later corrected to the intended blue, the purple color inspired Indiana and he began incorporating it into his work (Perrault par. 14). Even in this instance, where Indiana did have control of the design, the stamp's mass production removed Indiana from the process. Nonetheless, the mishap allowed Indiana to grow, widening his scope and use of color.

Concurrent with the development of the postage stamp, *LOVE* was being transferred into multiple, large-scale sculptures. As Indiana continued to pursue the *LOVE* series, he began to branch out into monumental sculpture. In 1970, he financed a twelve foot high steel *LOVE*, fabricated at Lippincott's in North Haven, Connecticut. He documented the making of *LOVE* through both photography and film, hoping to visually capture his artistic ownership (Dannatt 14-19). This piece then toured the United States, first stopping at the newly constructed Indianapolis Museum of Art (which would eventually purchase the piece). The work was then temporarily placed in front of the new Boston City Hall. The next stop on the tour was Central Park, where it was met with much fanfare, including a large ceremony despite the bad weather. The success of this sculpture and its grand tour undoubtedly sparked the idea of making the piece a public art sculpture, leading to the production of many other large sculptural *LOVE*s.

One of those sculptures was adopted by the City of Brotherly Love in 1976. In celebration of the country's bicentennial, the piece was brought to the prominent JFK Plaza located in the heart of downtown Philadelphia. When the city took the sculpture down in 1978, the act was met with public outcry. The public missed the piece, eventually causing the city to purchase the sculpture and return it to the plaza, which was then named "LOVE

Park." The park so embraced the sculpture that the local skateboarders used it as their logo in their campaign to allow skateboarding to be reinstated in the park.⁴ Philadelphia was not the only city that wanted a *LOVE*. Indiana created a special version of *LOVE*, called *AHAVA*, the Hebrew word for love. The piece was intended for the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, but before its trip there, just as the Lippincott piece did, the *AHAVA* made a stop in New York in 1978. Additionally, Monte Carlo showed a *LOVE* at the Third Biennale of Sculpture in Monaco in 1991. Two years later, Tokyo installed a *LOVE*. *LOVE* was shown in Montreal in 1996, and in 1998; one was installed at Bay Harbor Island, Florida. New York City seemed to be one of the few major cities without a *LOVE* sculpture, so it seemed logical that in 2000 the city received its own *LOVE*, and it was installed on the prominent corner of 55th Street and 6th Avenue (Wilmerding 288).

The sculpture, still owned by Simon Salama-Caro, a major collector and curator of Indiana's work, is displayed on a slight platform. Unlike Philadelphia's *LOVE*, which is smaller and raised high above the ground, or the one in Tokyo that is placed directly on the ground, New York's *LOVE* exists somewhere in the middle. By resting on a small platform, this *LOVE* emphasizes its sculptural essence and its high art quality, while still allowing easy access to pedestrians and children who climb on the piece. The dates on the piece are listed as 1966-1999, and inside the sculpture, located on the side of the "E" across from the "V," Indiana has placed his name, edition 5 of 6 and a small attempt at a copyright logo. By signing the piece, Robert Indiana stressed that it was *his* own creation.

Additionally, the small platform that the work is on was also used to place a plaque identifying the work and its owner even further. The order of names on the plaque is pivotal—Robert Indiana's name is listed larger and above every other detail. Below the artist's name is the title of the work, followed by the date. At the bottom of the plaque, the company that owns the plaza, Shearbrook (US) LLC, is also identified. Just below that, a note stating "Courtesy of Simon Salama-Caro, New York" makes clear that Salama-Caro is the owner of the piece. The confluence of all these different figures and businesses can be confusing to the viewer, but it also illustrates the problem of presenting a work in public. Many of the people who view the sculpture do simply that—they view the work but do not bother seeking out the artist or the owner. Nevertheless, the hierarchy of the names on the

⁴ Information on that project can be found on a local webpage, which describes the proposals made by skateboarders, see Independence Hall Association, "Free Love Park, Philadelphia PA" <http://www.ushistory.org/lovepark/index.htm>, accessed September 13, 2009.

plaque and Indiana's signature on the work itself emphasize, if not assert, Indiana's authorship. While the plaque clearly recognizes those who made the work's presence in the plaza possible (Shearbrook and Salama-Caro), they remain separate from Indiana and do not diminish his claim as an artist.

When standing on the corner observing the piece, it is clear, though, that the piece is not just Robert Indiana's. The public loves and adores it. The vendors profit by their proximity to the sculpture, and even employees are prone to stand on the side of the building where they can see *LOVE*. In the few years it has been there, it has affected the urban terrain. While most people do not go out of their way to look at the sculpture, just happening upon it can be a delightful surprise, causing many to smile as they wait for the bus or dash by on their way to the subway. For both tourists and New Yorkers, the work inspires a nod, a look of recognition, perhaps even a subject for conversation. Yet, though people pass by the piece, and even engage with it, no one knows anything about the artist behind the work. As Robert Indiana said in 1976, "Everybody knows my *LOVE*, but they don't have the slightest idea what I look like. I'm practically anonymous" (Ryan 235).

Neither the artist nor his intentions—the meaning he might give the piece—seem to matter to observers. That ambiguous familiarity haunts the viewers, despite the plaque's presentation of authorship; this information is rarely ever sought out. Robert Pincus-Witten argues that the piece has become a sign, yet synonymous with nothing. He continues:

Like the art of the anonymous forbear, the fame of "LOVE" (the crux of the dilemma) has grown so familiar as to seemingly dissociate creation from creator – less by virtue of Christian humility... than by force of the sculpture's ubiquity. Like many works of hyper-fame, "LOVE" appears to exist as logo and icon, slimmed down from its physicality into a figment of mass consciousness, so much as part of the scene as to inure us to its sensuous appeals. This paradox signals a fame that confers anonymity, or so it would have seemed. (Wilmerding 243)

LOVE has become a logo, but a logo for what? The abstract concept of "love"? Arguably, *LOVE* does not stand for anything other than the image that Indiana has created. It can easily become a deeply personal symbol, but the emphasis is on the idea that the work is just that – a symbol. Not effectively copyrighted and no longer associated with Indiana, *LOVE* can be used by the hippies of *Hair*, for the cover of *Love Story*, and even for cufflinks.

In February 18, 2007, *The New York Times* published an article accompanied with a photograph of *LOVE* that addressed the homophobia expressed in a Super Bowl Commercial. The sculpture, shown from reverse, became the background for two men kissing, illustrating the affection between the two figures. The article did not mention the sculpture, nor Robert Indiana and his homosexuality.⁵ *LOVE* was a logical location to present two people in love, regardless of gender. The article itself, however, could have benefited from an incorporation of the ideas behind the sculpture, adding a sense of depth and culture that the piece lacked. This is just one more overt instance in which a person and/or organization incorporated *LOVE* into their own agenda without actually considering the artist or allowing for the possibility of multiple meanings.

On 55th Street, *LOVE* occupies a plaza that otherwise is completely unadorned. It can provide a quick place to sit while someone pauses to find her cell phone or a place to lean and take a break. *LOVE* adds a welcome spot of color as it organizes the space, separating the vendors and the street from the entrances to the corporate buildings. The bright red and the blue of the piece jump out from the dark concrete and surrounding buildings. The fact is that most people seem to enjoy the piece, whether they are tourists who stop to take a picture of it or local residents bemused by the visitors that gather around it. By indefinitely loaning the Robert Indiana piece to the plaza, the collector Salama-Caro is inserting culture, recognition, and a museum quality work into the space.

If the success of a piece is often contingent upon the reaction of the public, *LOVE* seems to be the perfect model. This is also greatly enhanced by *LOVE*'s non-offensive message of goodwill. At the same time, many of the critiques that have been levied against Indiana can easily be raised against the sculpture. The commercialization, the selling-out of the art world, the convenient choice of subject matter all could apply to *LOVE*. In the end, though, *LOVE* is adored by the public, its ownership has been completely subsumed by the community where it is located, be it Wichita State University or New York City. The fact that Robert Indiana never successfully copyrighted the piece only contributes to the public's idea of its collective ownership. Perhaps, Indiana's role as creator is diminished, as he has become "anonymous" in conjunction with this work. However, he never fully surrendered his ownership rights, as evidenced by the postage stamp

⁵ Guy Trebay, "A Kiss Too Far," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2007. The article without the picture that accompanied it in the print version can be accessed at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C03E7D6143EF93BA25751C0A9619C8B63>.

and the continual re-visioning of the sculpture all over the world. In the end, he has embraced the public's reception of the piece. Although the collector, in this case Salama-Caro, may seem to be donating the sculpture for public enjoyment and display, he asserts ownership of the work by prominently placing his name on the plaque of the sculpture.

With *LOVE*, the artist, the collector and the public all claim ownership of the piece. The artwork manages to at once embody a location and become a universal symbol of the abstract emotion, love. *LOVE* serves as a lesson for artists today for not only is it a successful work that is beloved and desired by the viewing public all around the world, but also for the way a work can transcend the artist who created it and the collector who owns it. This is precisely what attracted me to the piece. In the simplest of sculptures and words, *LOVE* can relate to the artist who made it, the person who buys it, but most dramatically, the public who loves it.

Works Cited

- Clignet, Remi. "On Artistic Property and Aesthetic Propriety." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 4.2 (Winter 1990): 229-28.
- Dannatt, Adrian. *Robert Indiana: Hard Edge*. New York: Paul Kasmin Gallery, 2008.
- Indiana, Robert. *Robert Indiana: Letters, Words and Numbers*. New York: C&M Arts, 2003.
- . *Robert Indiana: Retrospective 1958-1998*. Nice: GS Editions, 1998.
- O'Hare, Michael. "When is Monopoly Efficient?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 4.3 (Spring 1985): 407-418.
- Perrault, John. "Robert Indiana's Peace Signs" *Artopia* 3 May 2004. 20 Feb. 2010. <http://www.artsjournal.com/artopia/2004/05/robert_indianas_peace_signs.html>.
- Ryan, Susan Elizabeth. *Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2000.
- Simpson, Fronia W., ed. *Love and the American Dream: the Art of Robert Indiana*. Portland, OR: Portland Museum of Art, 1999.
- Weinhardt Jr., Carl J. *Robert Indiana*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990.
- Whyte, William H. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. New York: Project for Public Spaces, Inc., 2001.
- Wilmerding, John, Joachim Pissarro, Robert Pincus-Witten and Peter Halley. *Robert Indiana.: The Artist and his Work 1955-2005*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2006.