The Insistence of the Letter in the Art of Robert Indiana

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I: The Shape of the Word

If you want to make your work look up to date, put some stenciled lettering into it.
—Bas Jan Ader, 1969

The artist responsible for this pronouncement—or words to the same effect—belongs to a category in recent art history far from the one occupied by Robert Indiana. Bas Jan Ader, at the time that he offered this maxim, was a young Dutch expatriate in southern California. He was in the process of showing to a group of students (including the present author) a group of disarming drawings that he had grouped into a spiral bound book, each image matched by a facing page of text in a looping cursive hand. In the drawings, stenciled word fragments function with the same degree of concreteness as the pictorial motifs adjacent to them.

No artist prior to Ader had made stenciled typography as salient to his entire project as had Robert Indiana. Jasper Johns, to name his obvious counterpart, is likely to have used everyday packaged stencils (punched into stiff fiberboard by the Stenso company of Baltimore) to trace his cutout letters and numerals; but he suppressed until 1959 the telltale internal breaks within each character that keep the template intact. At virtually the same moment, Indiana made these crisp demarcations a defining feature of his work, a commitment from which he would seldom subsequently waver.

In their origin, however, Indiana's letterforms recall a world far from the contemporary scene evoked by Ader. As in so much of his formative work, Indiana was drawing upon the detritus of his working environment in and around his studio at the lower tip of Manhattan. The neglected complex at Coenties Slip offered a palimpsest of layered discards from its history in maritime commerce, out of which arose the letters that would define his artistic identity. As he has written: "The brass stencils that I found in the loft—numbers, names of boats and companies from the nineteenth century—became the matrices and materials for my work . . ."[1]

Tracing the letter openings in such objects, Indiana began inscribing compact and resonant titles—ZIG, SOUL, AHAB, HUB, PAIR—onto his totemic wooden sculptures, the so-called Herms that he began fashioning from distressed wooden beams in 1960. In his embellishment of a founding example like *Zig*, not only did he deploy large stencil forms in plain sans-serif capitals, he went back with white borders against the black body of the type, implying either that the letters stand out like applied forms in relief or that they represent depressed areas sunk into

the wood like the voids in the original brass pattern. The archaic substrate of such works has frequently been compared, following Indiana's own indications, to Ishmael's vision in *Moby Dick*'s opening lines of New York's forlorn landsmen posted along the docks: "thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries . . . like silent sentinels all around the town . . ."[2] But references of this kind by no means precluded connotation of the latest developments in a streamlined late Modernism. The emphatic correlation between the row of three letters in the lower register and the routed-in band at the slab's midsection aligns the found stencils with a row of symmetrical chevrons that demand comparison with the uniform stripes with which Frank Stella was just then shaking up the New York art world.

That the well-worn relics of the old New York docks galvanized Indiana's emergence as a distinctive artist has been a commonplace of the artist's self-narration and virtually every commentary on his life and work. The remark carries a reassuring familiarity in its correspondence to the Surrealists' romance with the flea market or to the young Rauschenberg scouring the alleys and curbsides around his Pearl Street studio (only a few blocks away) for the found materials that went into his Combines of the mid- to late nineteen-fifties. But Indiana puts forward in a concise and seemingly offhand way a more powerful claim for his patterns in brass, which make of the stencil simultaneously an instrument and a model: a key example that Indiana has retained in his own collection constitutes an entire and integrated pattern, which could be used to emblazon any surface, after a quick pass of the paintbrush, with the complete logotype of the American Hay Company. The Roman type cut out within the circular band enclosing the company's diamond symbol presented Indiana with a found template, both literal and conceptual, for combining text with geometry that he would adopt wholesale as the foundation for his painting of the nineteen-sixties.

The decisive moment in his setting that course arrived when he destroyed a work as a condition for creating a new one. Indiana had called the 1959 painting that vanished in the process *Agadir,* the composition for which comprised four equivalent white circles set in the quadrants of a dark field horizontally traversed by three white bands, each of which wanders away from strict adherence to any underlying grid. The implied pressure of these slightly rising bars lifts the two circles on the right-hand side slightly above their counterparts on the left. The ostensible inspiration for the painting had been a massive earthquake on February 29, 1960, in the Moroccan city of that name, which killed a third of the population, some 15,000 people. Indiana, according to his journal entry devoted to the painting, had been ambivalent about the title, first suggesting that it might as readily commemorate a merely mundane and personal event, some loft-sharing fiasco of the previous year. As if to secure the more disinterested and high-minded reference, he went back the day after completing his entry and appended a newspaper clipping on the disaster—one that appears to extend and enlarge his characteristic drawn reproduction of the large (six by five feet) work in question; he pens in "Agadir" just above the headline.[3]

But that resolution did not prevail either. And indeed it would have been difficult to convince oneself that these abstract forms constitute an adequate response to a distant human catastrophe. Perhaps the white bands cutting through the dark field suggest some disturbed stratigraphy; perhaps the orbs reiterate the blinding white of the desert sun: but such conjectures only undermine the effort to move the reference beyond wishful sentiment. And the following year, Indiana seems to have reached the same conclusion—to the point of erasing his original exercise in non-objective form or, better to say, erasing everything that made it non-objective while leaving the remainder intact. Now the same canvas—including the identical circles and bars— would signify an American subject, indeed the essential formula of American self-mythology, just then given a mordant, absurdist spin in Edward Albee's short play, *The American Dream*.

Indiana was in the audience for Albee's comedy shortly after its opening in January 1961, and his new conception for the well-used *Agadir* canvas takes from Albee its title—*The American Dream, I*—along with its downbeat construal of those words to connote self-delusion and dashed hopes.[4] As in most works of such landmark status, the new work belonged to several different historical genealogies at once. The first might be called the "hidden in plain sight" lineage, as its moment of transformation bears direct comparison to another founding moment in postwar art— one frequently overlooked despite the overwhelming fame of its author.

In 1946 Jackson Pollock had looked with similar dissatisfaction at a painting already completed (and exhibited) under the title *The Little King*: an exercise in densely compacted, writhing mythic imagery with debts in the directions of both Picasso and André Masson.[5] In a moment of combined frustration and inspiration early in the following year, he went back over the finished canvas to create a new composition called *Galaxy,* an act that called forth one of his earliest applications of a poured or "drip" technique across the whole of a picture surface.

So it appears, at any rate; but the remarkable achievement of *Galaxy* is Pollock's conveying the effect of an allover coverage when the flung skeins of paint cover no more than half of the actual surface of the painting. If one knows where to look, *The Little King* remains strongly in evidence: nearly all of the new pigment is white or aluminum, while the work's striking notes of color are recruited from below. So, too, Indiana's *The American Dream, I* takes pains not to obliterate the substrate of *Agadir.* While he repainted the entire surface, the exact arrangement of major forms in the prior composition remains, down to the eccentrically crooked middle band, the shape of which has little to no counterpart in the painting that Indiana went on to do after this moment of epiphany.

Attention to one of the formerly white disks in the lower right—the one that contains the work's title—reveals one key to Indiana's sudden arrival as a recognizably Pop artist, the visual correlative to his self-transformation two years before from Bob Clark to Robert Indiana. The circle and star inside a symmetrical diamond is nearly all that separates that subfield from its counterpart in the anonymous design of the American Hay Company brass stencil. Even the

signature position of the R[obert] and the I[ndiana], picked out by the artist in bright yellow and red at the top of the arc, already occurs in the vernacular prototype. The other three circles each present a tight set of variations on the same theme. With *The American Dream, I*, Indiana submitted his composition to the entirety of a much older found artifact, but derives from that self-subordination a fresh and novel look to his art and with it a receptive field on which he could inscribe without apology any thought or idea that might currently be passing through his mind.

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The character of *The American Dream, I* as palimpsest of a prior, salient moment in American art history goes beyond the story of its making to include its reception as well. One of Indiana's first significant sales took him to the summit of the New York acquisition hierarchy, when Alfred H. Barr Jr., director of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, purchased *The American Dream, I* from its initial showing at the David Anderson Gallery in May 1961. The acquisition fund provided by the architect and trustee Philip Johnson then supported the purchase of Indiana's wooden sculpture *Moon* (1960) after it had appeared in the museum's landmark *Art of Assemblage* show of the same year.[6] All of this repeats a renowned earlier moment of transformation in an artist's fortunes, that is, the imprimatur bestowed by Barr in January 1958 on Jasper Johns, when he purchased three works from the unknown artist on the occasion of his first solo exhibition. In a further anticipation of Indiana's experience, Johnson had stepped in to buy Johns's signature *Flag* for future donation to the museum's collection (both of them fearing an inference of unpatriotic impertinence toward the national symbol).

In a press release to announce and explain the purchase of *The American Dream, I,* Barr called it "spellbinding," allowing that the intense impression it had made upon him had something to do with his failing to understand "why I like it so much."[7] The two works chosen by Barr and Johnson in 1961 have in common, despite their differences in medium, a strict avoidance of emphatic or unpredictable application of pigment. "Impasto," Indiana would later say, "is visual indigestion."[8] As Johns had by 1960 abandoned his originally exotic technique in wax encaustic and pieced-together appliqué in favor of freely brushed oil paint, Barr was likely to have been particularly receptive to the appearance of some commensurable artist who might maintain a firmer distance from the expressive rhetoric of the fading New York School. By comparison with Indiana's way of using his old type templates, the irresolute appearance of Johns's lettering suggests the accidents of age and the passage of time; the predetermined boundaries of each letter remain in tension with the smeared, sketchy, or incomplete manner with which the paint has been applied over them. By contrast, virtually no element of a sculpture or painting by Indiana during these same years is anything less than emphatic, whether these are the old wheels and drain covers that constituted his favorite found objects, the abstract painted circles that echoed those circular forms, or the large-scale lettering that traced the discarded brass stencils. In contrast to Johns, who painted over disposable stencils, Indiana used his permanent variety only to trace patterns onto another surface: "I never paint with stencils," he states, "but I design with

stencils, nineteenth-century brass stencils."[9] His use of these templates makes even more emphatic his choice to let the internal breaks in the character remain.

Indiana's discipline arises out of a general regime of pattern-making of the kind imposed by stenciled typography. The four almanac-like phases of the moon that descend from the lettering of their namesake sculpture's title (which they also match in number) follow a predetermined pattern no less conventional than those that form the surmounting text. And those phases match the four flatly painted circles of *The American Dream, I*, each centered by its conventionally celestial star symbol. Indiana's hinterland iconography of highway signs, sheriff's badges, slot machines, and pinball illuminations need not have possessed for Barr anything like the personally coded significance that these things carried for the artist; but that opacity would have been entirely expected and welcome to Barr's particular form of urbanity as an agreeable mystery emanating from the distant parts of the continent, a quality that he no longer felt confident of discerning in the depths of a self-contained abstract art centered on New York.

<p align="center">*</p>

Indiana's inescapable salience at the moment that the Pop phenomenon first came into view has faded from historical memory, but a cursory look at the initial responses by critics and commentators is sufficient to correct any such misperception. In February 1962, the month of Lichtenstein's debut exhibition at the Castelli Gallery, the painter and astute writer Sidney Tillim used the theme of *The American Dream, I* to orient his readers to this novel fixation on the vernacular among the artists just then emerging as the Pop cohort.[10] As epigraphs to his essay he joins remarks made by Indiana about his painting ("The TILT of all those millions of Pinball Machines . . . and star-studded Take All, well-established American ethic in all realms . . .") with a quotation from Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita,* first published in the United States to legendary notoriety in 1958 and about to be lent new currency by Stanley Kubrick's no less notorious film version of 1962. The critic chooses a passage in which Professor Humbert lists the items he buys in some out-of-the-way town to please his "ultraviolet darling:"[11]

> I bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent rain coat, sunglasses, some more garments—swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks.

It would indeed be difficult to better Humbert's fascinated inventory, in its profuse jumble of categories, as an image repertory for the coming Pop wave. Alluding both to Indiana's art and to his verbal glosses upon it, Tillim imagines the wager of this new kind of artist: "In mass man and his artifacts, his cigarettes and beer cans and the library of refuse scattered along the highways of the land with their signs, supermarkets and drive-in motels, the new American Dreamer—let us

call him—finds the content that at once refreshes his visual experience and opens paths beyond the seemingly exhausted alternatives of abstraction—*without returning to the 'figure.'*"

In light of this analysis, the striking thing about the Indiana painting in question is the absence of anything like the items instanced by Tillim directly or via the voice of Nabokov. Such consumer products would proliferate in the comic book and advertising imagery that Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol were just bringing into public view as he wrote his essay, but their correlation to the work of Indiana was and would remain largely a matter of inference. Among the successes of *The American Dream, I,* which preceded the arrival of these artists as Pop exemplars by some months, was its translating an archaic arrangement of old-fashioned lettering into such a resonant symbol of the contemporary moment.

Admirers like Barr and Johnson might have argued that Indiana's success in this regard arose from the power of implication and suggestion, as opposed to anything that smacked of illustration, with all the inherent limitations to the merely local and particular connoted by that term. Of the artists grouped under the rubric of Pop in the early nineteen-sixties—to which the names of Claes Oldenburg and Tom Wesselmann should be added to those mentioned above—Indiana was, for a time, alone among them in eschewing recognizable figures or objects in his painting. That abstinence would shift dramatically when he began his *Mother and Father* diptych in 1963, but anything that might be termed illustration is rare over the long run of his career; flat signs and symbols, which require next to nothing in the way of illusionistic depth, remain his overwhelmingly dominant resource. So, too, his repertoire of typography adheres to his original evocation of traditional typefaces with a strong bias toward their rendering with the internal interruptions of cut stencils intact.

Restricting himself to that one category of found artifact allowed him to expand his range of reference considerably beyond the Humbertian inventory of consumer items with which Pop came to be identified. Any of his personal enthusiasms, extending from nineteenth-century literature to the campaign for nuclear disarmament, proved amenable to the format of planar color divisions overlain by this species of typography. Fine artists in this period, whatever their individual sentiments on such matters, lacked the means or encouragement for aligning them with their practice in any explicit way. Indiana's discovery bestowed a freedom to emblazon within his art the kinds of intellectual cultivation that other artists, if they undertook to address them at all, had been enjoined by the reigning modernist mindset to bury in a deep allusiveness. Again, the contrast between Indiana and Johns is instructive. The former's famous references to the suicide of poet Hart Crane assume between 1962 and 1963 in the *Diver* series and *Periscope (Hart Crane)*, a fragmentary and generalized presence via privately coded imprints of hands and extended arms. To understand the significance of the latter title would have required an erudite knowledge of one line in a very long poem, which is nowhere explicitly acknowledged in the painting.[12] The poem in question is of course *The Bridge,* Crane's self-described "mystical synthesis of America," orchestrated around the great crossing between Brooklyn and

Manhattan.[13] When Indiana came to paint his own series in homage to this icon—both poem and poet—for New York's gay artists, he could forthrightly borrow the Cubist-derived rendering of the Brooklyn Bridge by Joseph Stella from 1920, its solid pylons and rays of light being equally translatable into the crisp divisions of his hard-edge manner. In the same way lines of Crane's verse could take their places without any sense of intrusion in the four-paneled *The Bridge (Brooklyn Bridge)* of 1964 by aligning themselves in the familiar circular pattern of unadorned sans-serif stencil. As the viewer exercises an unfamiliar way of reading, following the all-capitals text around circles, comprehension of words and apprehension of visual design become increasingly difficult to distinguish from one another. The found, utilitarian character of that typography transfers the poetic reference from the artist's extraneous voice to the fabric of the work without recourse to ingenious misdirection. Johns's paintings allude to the depths of the past by looking older than they actually were; Indiana resuscitated the history that interested him by making it look like the newest thing going. Whatever the content of a piece might be, one could readily draw the same lesson from such paintings as Ader would later form into his maxim: "If you want to make your work look up to date, put some stenciled lettering into it."

II: Push Pin and *LOVE*

It may be, however, that the insistently contemporary feeling of Indiana's compositions during the nineteen-sixties may appear less anomalous when viewed from a somewhat larger perspective than the one provided by powerful museums, influential galleries, and established critics. Was there any other significant revival of old-fashioned typefaces going on at the time? More specifically, was there any other creative conflation taking place between outmoded typography and approaches to figuration that avoided pedestrian likenesses to observed reality? Both of these Indiana-like enterprises were in fact occurring simultaneously with the artist's early development, also in Manhattan, but inside an insurgent project of graphic design that went under the group name of Push Pin Studios.

The shifting personal makeup of the Push Pin collective had begun with a core group of design students at Cooper Union in the early nineteen-fifties, among them Milton Glaser, Seymour Chwast, Edward Sorel, and Reynolds Ruffin. The fact that Glaser has emerged over the intervening decades as a renowned, much loved, and still active public figure makes his invisibility in the history of art explicable only in terms of disciplinary blinders. But some similar barrier to art-historical cognition has likewise come to affect Indiana's reputation, the result being his partial disappearance from the perceived leading cohort of Pop artists.

Thinking about graphic design practice in terms commensurable to those applied to artists whose work appears in galleries and museums has at least the advantage of being relatively fresh as a way of understanding both areas of practice outside the conventional compartments to which each has been assigned.[14] The most obvious point of departure for such an endeavor might be

Indiana's own insouciant plunges into unabashed design activity, as when he answered a request from MoMA in 1965 for the design of a Christmas card with the composition and color scheme that would become his most famous canvas: the decisive, large-scale version of *LOVE* completed in 1966. The editions in a variety of media that followed from this popular breakthrough (overseen by the young gallerist Marian Goodman as head of Multiples Inc.) certainly strayed into the realm of outright décor.[15] But these later forays across professional boundaries had already been evident in the ways that the *American Dream* paintings of the early nineteen-sixties paralleled the Push Pin design philosophy, one sufficiently successful in those years as to be inescapable in the urban environment for anyone with half an eye.

Though formed in 1954, the group began to gain greater visibility in 1957 when they embarked on the regular production of an in-house publication called the *Monthly Graphic,* though the interval between issues was never quite so punctual as the title implied; after 1961, it became the *Push Pin Graphic.* Directed to no immediately remunerative purpose, the *Graphic* provided a vehicle for the varying interests and talents of the studio members, distributed largely within the professional magazine and advertising worlds as a way to expand awareness of Push Pin's distinctive approach among peers and potential clients.[16]

The themes for each number of the *Graphic,* however, were not tailored to the assumed interests of this audience; instead they ricocheted among the personal enthusiasms and non-commercial ambitions shared among the Push Pin principals, encompassing a range of intellectual topics that a largely vocational training had left to their own autodidactic imaginations. Unconventional subjects went along with their common aim of overturning accepted conventions in the design world. Chief among these was the separation between typography and illustration. On the former side lay the dominance of so-called Swiss design, a Bauhaus-descended modernism in type and layout, emphasizing grids, clean lines, white space, and maximum clarification of message; on the latter lay a generic naturalism in illustration that sought redundantly to provide the most accessible visual match to the accompanying copy (photography was then only beginning to supplant drawn and painted visuals). All the Push Pin artists were accomplished draftsmen, while Glaser and Chwast in particular were accomplished typographers, joined in their impatience with the Swiss style as it had become ineluctably linked to the interests and self-images of the dominant postwar corporations.

Departure from the small established repertoire of typefaces was rare, so Push Pin typography promoted itself as originators of no less than five hundred new alphabets by 1958.[17] This fecundity of invention plainly required some uncommon sources of information. The most immediate of these lay in their revival and adaptation of outmoded fonts going back to colonial typesetters of the eighteenth century, one effect of which was the ornament of the old-style letter forms taking on a more figural role in any overall composition. The *Monthly Graphic*'s thirteenth issue (January 1958) exemplifies these developments put to the service of eccentric expertise. The subject of its title essay, "George Bernard Shaw on Art," appears nowhere as such

on the front page; instead one finds in an open block between two columns of small type an arrangement of sans-serif capitals that spell out "GBSONART" in a vertical configuration that reads simultaneously as a schematically upright human figure. The inner pages contain an array of Glaser's ink drawings that document his efforts, in a variety of calligraphic techniques, to capture the likeness of the dead author, "this by way of admitting that he had never been very good at likenesses."[18] That disclaimer puts the focus back onto the letter-figure on the front page, an implicit intrusion of typography into the province of portraiture. Glaser places an explicit melding of the two in a similarly central position on the cover of a 1959 issue (no. 19), where he combines a profile bust and flamboyant monogram "HJ" to announce an issue on another retrospective literary topic: "Henry James in Italy," which reproduced an essay by the master titled "The Art of Travel." Erasing the boundary between his two distinct modes—typographical and figurative—with which he had earlier portrayed Shaw, he lets each partial mode of portraiture sustain the other: an intentional stuffiness in the rendering of the author's head finds more playful leavening in his initials via the impudently curving tail to the J and the serifs of the upright elements shaped to resemble columnar bases and capitals, the better to support the ponderous weight above.

From their differing professional directions, both Indiana and the Push Pin group were pushing to break the grip of aesthetic self-sufficiency as an unchallenged modernist precept. The term "modernism" meant quite different things in the two realms, but in this sense the meanings converged. For the graphic designers, applying formal ingenuity to someone else's agenda was a vocational given, but the *Monthly Graphic* asserted that departures in design could emerge— indeed needed to emerge—from broad humanistic commitments that ranged from the concrete poetry of Apollinaire (1957) and the art of Leonardo (1958) to the impending dangers to civil society of militarism (1958), nuclear armaments (1959), and endemic corruption of both political parties by moneyed interests (1960).

That Indiana invested parallel ambitions in his painting of the early nineteen-sixties, all the while maintaining his credibility in the museum and gallery worlds, is a tribute to the power of his *American Dream* synthesis between hard-edged form and stenciled inscriptions. Where the designers featured their eclectic interests in Shaw, James, or Henry David Thoreau, Indiana flagged Melville, Walt Whitman, Crane, and Albee. It may be telling that Push Pin (in 1958) and Indiana (in 1962) each created homages to the pacifism and anti-nuclear campaigning of Bertrand Russell. The latter's canvas, *Yield Brother*, presented as a gift to the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in London, sums up a good deal of what made his art so accomplished over this period: the composition melds with no appreciable remainder the famous three-pronged icon of the Committee for Nuclear Disarmament into the yellow-and-black traffic sign signaled by the title, a disarming feature of roadside Pop that nonetheless carries its own power of international legibility and command. The motto at its base, with each letter element limned with a raised (or sunken) edge in brightly contrasting color, stresses the hard substance of the stencil.

The direction taken in the coming years by Indiana's art and career allows the salient importance of the stencil form—so well comprehended in this painting—to be measured. That direction has but one looming signpost, the 1966 *LOVE,* toward which and from which whole populations of cognate objects and images flowed. That fact that it began as a piece of design for a museum greeting card is no oddity, but a defining foundation for its character and its effects, chiefly in its abandoning any reference to the stencil. While Glaser would design a successful stencil font of his own in 1970 (called straightforwardly Glaser Stencil), print designers had no need of the manual process of stenciling, and no such typefaces feature in Push Pin's output during these years. The signs of stenciling betoken a reproductive process, analogous to commercial printing, but one that must be manually repeated in each instance. The laborious implications of the procedure imply the continued salience of the artist's hand as well as the consequent uniqueness of the object, in that further repetitions of the same procedure would add nothing of artistic value to the first iteration; indeed they would only detract from its value.

Much the same can be said for any painting executed in a hard-edge technique, for want of a better term, from Mondrian to John McLaughlin to Indiana's one-time companion and mentor Ellsworth Kelly. There were no technical impediments preventing these artists replicating any one of their compositions. But standing in the way of this occurring—and it rarely happens—is the meaningless redundancy of the idea, the fruitless manual labor that would be expended in an exercise that would be bring little profit even to a forger. Stenciling maintains the printed word within the same economy, but rendering type in a way that mimics the appearance of print does not. Indiana's *LOVE* composition, enlarged from the MoMA greeting card to a six-foot square canvas in 1966, does the latter: its typographical ingenuity and communicative economy could have passed for a Push Pin design exercise of exactly the same vintage. Few in the fine art world would have possessed the habits of mind necessary to discern Indiana's artful way of abutting the abnormally thin bar of the L with the aperture of the V below, yielding the downward-pointing blue arrow; nor the multiple ramifications of his inspired tilting of the *O* that launches its green counter along a priapic diagonal, while calling attention to the red scaffolding that supports it. That interposition of italic into a Roman grid transforms one definition of "character" into another: a letter of the alphabet into an animating figure. Indiana's *O* stands behind the figure of the heart in Glaser's similarly stacked, four-element logo "I♥NY" of 1977, which struck an equally resonant and enduring chord across the wider culture.

Indiana surrendered any defense against the claims of design upon the work by proliferating the identical four-character motif within and around the Stable Gallery *LOVE* exhibition of the same year. The silk screen poster for the show, which redistributes the red, green, and blue color scheme from the signature icon across its tersely minimal copy, represents as valid a manifestation of the design as any of its open-ended series of painted repetitions. That potential endlessness makes the *LOVE* canvases as much like prints as paintings, the stricture against redundancy having been decisively broken, even before Goodman's Multiples Inc. transformed the core image into an upscale product line.

In the years between 1964, when he originated the design as a rubbing over a raised template of the four letters, and the Stable exhibition in 1966, a change had overtaken the work's conditions of reception that helped propel its dizzying popular success, a change to which the Push Pin group had measurably contributed. Their revival and romance with old-fashioned type encouraged a set of young designers in San Francisco—chiefly Rick Griffin, Victor Moscoso, Wes Wilson, Alton Kelley, and Stanley Mouse—to do likewise. Recruited by music impresarios Chet Helms and Bill Graham to promote the new psychedelic ballroom scene, they addressed an audience that responded to codes of counter-cultural solidarity, among them a figural approach to lettering that defied conventional legibility in favor of an intentionally disorienting abundance of motifs and embellishments. Old styles of lettering at once called to mind the ornaments of favored Victorian neighborhoods like the Haight-Ashbury, as well as the hippies' anti-technological atavism and the billowing extravagance of their thrift-store fashions.[19] Intricacy to the point of obscurity invited the attention of pedestrians in the Haight or along Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, hippies and students who enjoyed both the leisure and the inside knowledge required for savoring the psychedelic posters as promises and tokens of the drug-enhanced experiences to be had at the Avalon and Fillmore concerts—where the posters in the early days were handed out as souvenirs.

Among the devices deployed by the San Francisco poster artists were the eye-dazzling possibilities of complementary or near-complementary colors, the equal perceptual value of which confuses figure and ground, while setting up blurring optical oscillations at the boundaries between hues. Indiana's use of green and red in *LOVE,* along with the equal intensity he gives to the blue areas, serves in good formalist fashion to insist on the whole of the painted surface over and against the communicative function of the word. Within months of its making, however, the color scheme of the painting had been captured on behalf of attitudes and identities that had nothing to do with the compositional protocols of fine art. Still more, the word itself had been seized and transformed by the mass media as a convenient, incessantly repeated handle for the baffling counter-culture focused on San Francisco: the Love Generation was headed to the city for the Summer of Love. Indiana's image could not help being taken along for the ride, made over in the process into the ubiquitously safe, sentimental alternative to the actual products of the underground.[20] In contrast to the strictures against redundancy that obtain within fine-art practice, the success of a given piece of graphic design can be assessed, at least in broad terms, by the number of times it can be repeated before it wears out its welcome. Like the endurance of its offspring "I♥NY," the success of the non-stencil typography in *LOVE* has been extraordinary by this measure, but the achievement of its maker must be reckoned as a work of design in order for this success to register as such.

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A surviving example of the MoMA *LOVE* Christmas card provides a fortuitous object lesson in the split character that overtook Indiana's career at this mid-sixties watershed moment. Inscribed

by the artist with a message to an older and influential friend, composer Virgil Thomson, it includes a hand-stenciled numeral 2 as a kind of greeting and monogram (his address was 2 Spring Street). Brief as it is, the note implies sympathetic knowledge of Indiana's work on the part of the recipient (as well there might be, as the two of them were then collaborating in the staging of Thomson's opera *The Mother of Us All*). Dated November 29, 1965, Indiana relates hearing his friend interviewed on the radio the day he had completed "my new work, 'Louisiana.'" One of a four-part series called *The Confederacy*—each canvas identified with the name and map of a different southern American state—this work pulled Indiana strongly back toward the independent, disinterested direction of his earlier work. *Louisiana* joined *Florida, Alabama,* and *Mississippi* in a suite unified by theme, format, and a single slogan rendered in the artist's customary circular configuration. In this instance, however, there was nothing literary or dignified about the message; the outer circle reads, "JUST AS IN THE ANATOMY OF MAN EVERY NATION"; the inner, "MUST HAVE ITS HIND PART." Each of the state maps is rendered in a fleshy shade of pink to second the indication of buttocks in the text.

This emblazoned jocularity, however, represents a disarming entrée to a level of thematic and formal acuity raised to deadly seriousness. Three of four paintings (*Florida* is the exception) label one specific town within their respective states, their unifying trait being sites where civil rights activists had been assassinated: Philadelphia, Mississippi, had seen the kidnapping and triple murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in June 1964; gunmen outside Selma, Alabama, had slain the northern protester and mother of five Viola Liuzzo after the famous voting rights march led from that city by Martin Luther King Jr. in March 1965; Bogalusa, Louisiana acquired the name "Bloody Bogalusa" in the late spring and summer of the same year, its signature murder (amidst a sickening spree of Klan violence) being the ambush of the town's only African-American policemen, which killed officer O'Neal Moore and disabled his partner David Rogers.

Indiana distinguishes his demarcation of Bogalusa with a circular text of its own, which adds the self-advertisement "The Fair City," an epithet so freighted with contrary meanings as to pass beyond irony. The civil rights campaign there had been led by James Farmer's Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a group not so much in the national spotlight as the Mississippi Summer Project or King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but one to which Indiana felt close, having donated two paintings to them (including a second version of *Yield Brother*). CORE's efforts to compel compliance with the most basic provisions of the 1964 Civil Rights Act provoked such savage and unrelenting retaliation that a new group, the Deacons for Defense and Justice, joined the struggle prepared to use weapons and paramilitary organization on the side of the demonstrators. The Deacons' presence, bolstered by belated federal intervention, had cowed the local police and the white mobs by the end of July.

Indiana's *Confederacy* paintings, especially *Louisiana,* were thus more than timely and ran against the grain of American Pop Art's great refusal to confront the gigantic component of the

national vernacular that is African American in origin; Warhol's press images of non-violent demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama, set upon with dogs and police batons (the misnamed *Race Riot* paintings of 1963) offer the other, if oblique, exception to the rule. It may be that African American style, sport, and music held little attraction for New York artists (in contrast to an exemplar of British Pop like Peter Blake, not to mention connoisseurs with art connections like the Rolling Stones).[21] Perhaps closer to the mark is the subject of race coming under the heading of political crisis, which demanded a moral response likely to undermine the detachment and indirection enjoined upon American artists as guarantee of their serious intent.

Warhol's public persona of cool indifference provided the protective cover he required to put on display a range of open sores in contemporary society. And his friend Indiana had never been afraid to write, literally, his heart-on-the-sleeve commitments across the face of his paintings. His means of defying the shibboleths of the art world on this score had always lain in the spare rigor of his technique, and a painting like *Louisiana* shows that command at an even higher power. The stencil breaks invade the integral outline of each letter, pushing their geometric enchainment and cognitive demands closer to the status of abstract form. What nails this effect into place is his now-consummate technical command of paint application. Where *The American Dream, I* displays ample evidence of manual handling in the way he had filled in his letters and surface motifs, such traces are almost impossible to detect by this later juncture, even at close quarters. Yet hand-painted they are and must be (no reproduction can do them justice). The precision in handling does not reduce itself to the impersonality of mechanical reproduction; instead it serves as a tribute of skill and care paid to the import of his theme.

The convolutions of the *Confederacy* series were never going to lend themselves to the graphic impact and poster-style circulation of *LOVE*. The simultaneity of the two projects, however, suggests a complementary relationship between them, a layering of address and effect. The former directs the attention of a jaded and by now Pop-sated art world to something larger than its typically parochial concerns; it tested the boundaries of what painting could show. *LOVE* began from a position outside the circuit of skeptically critical attention, and it surrendered his broken lettering in favor of the elegant typographical solutions of the graphic designer. After the consciousness-raising then comes the Sunday sermon, a King-like exhortation to human brotherhood, a command that went over the heads of art insiders. The advent of the counter-culture propelled *LOVE* onto a plateau of public awareness so extensive as to dwarf the fine art sector and thereby threaten the visibility of the main body of work that Indiana had formed within it. Lettering and language, as he discovered, are powerful in themselves beyond the complete control of a single talent. But the afterlife of *LOVE* should not, from a historical perspective, obscure the balance he achieved at this mid-sixties moment, simultaneously holding two sets of skills and two professional formations in suspension, thereby joining two divergent publics in a rare moment of contiguity.

Notes

Epigraph quotation: Quoted freely from memory by the author.

[1] Robert Indiana, artist's statement, in *Stankiewicz & Indiana*, in Jan van der Marck, ed., exh. cat. Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, 1963), n.p.
[2] Herman Melville, *The Writings of Herman Melville,* VI*: Moby Dick or the Whale* (Evanston and Chicago, 1988), p. 3; see Indiana, artist's statement, as in note 1.
[3] See Daniel E. O'Leary, "The Journals of Robert Indiana," in Aprile Gallant, ed., *Love and the American Dream: The Art of Robert Indiana,* exh. cat. Portland Museum of Art, Maine (Seattle, 1999), pp. 9, 21.
[4] See Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech* (New Haven and London, 2000), p. 93.
[5] See Francis Valentine O'Connor and Eugene Victor Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: Catalogue Raisonné,* I (New Haven and London, 1978), pp. 136–37, 166–67.
[6] *Law,* a sculpture begun in the same year and completed in 1962, later came to MoMA from Johnson's own collection.
[7] See Ryan 2000 (see note 5), pp. 89, 95.
[8] See "What Is Pop Art? I," *ARTnews* (November 1963), p. 27.
[9] See Indiana, interview with Barbaralee Diamonstein, in idem, ed., *Inside New York's Art World* (New York, 1979), p. 153.
[10] Sidney Tillim, "Month in Review: New York Exhibitions," *Arts Magazine* (February 1962), pp. 34–37.
[11] Ibid., p. 34.
[12] See *The Poems of Hart Crane,* ed. Marc Simon (New York, 1986), p. 77.
". . . Relapsing into silence, time clears
Our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects
A periscope to glimpse what joys or pain
Our eyes can share or answer – then deflects
Us, shunting to a labyrinth submersed
Where each sees only his dim past reversed . . ."
[13] See Allan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol,* 2nd ed. (Chicago and London, 1979), pp. 143–66.
[14] The first imperative of the young designers who came together under the Push Pin label was to attract paying work. That defining requirement for any graphic designer has been taken as sufficient to transgress the disinterestedness presumed to distinguish the fine artist and so qualify him or her for high-minded critical and historical attention. Exactly how the young designer's need for paying clients differs from the young fine artist seeking a gallery, the gallery in turn calculating the salability of the work before taking the young artist on, the young artist then assisting in cultivating the collectors who will purchase the work, is surely a more subtle distinction than is generally assumed. Calculations of utility are more overt in the former case, but these do not differ in any degree from those that obtain in the securing of architectural commissions, and the practice of architecture, for extraneous reasons of permanence and cultural prestige, has always enjoyed the same intellectual consideration as the practice of fine art.
[15] See Ryan 2000 (see note 4), pp. 211–12.
[16] See Seymour Chwast, Steven Heller, and Martin Venezky, eds., *The Push Pin Graphic: A Quarter Century of Design and Illustration* (San Francisco, 2004), pp. 6–137.
[17] Ibid., p. 45.
[18] Ibid., p. 42.
[19] Chwast cast his prescient 1964 poster protesting American intervention in Vietnam ("War is Good Business: Invest your Son") into the form of a Victorian handbill.
[20] The example set by the half-trained young poster artists on the West Coast created problems as well for the decidedly New York-centric Push Pin group. They attempted to absorb and surpass the psychedelic style on behalf of mainstream clients like *Life* magazine, but the results can seem stilted and contrived by comparison with the genuine article: see Glaser's 1967 double cover-spread on the hippie-driven romance with Native Americans, cluelessly headlined "The Return of the Red Man." Even his famous Bob Dylan poster of the same year, first issued as an insert for a CBS greatest hits album, can appear mannered and contrived alongside the best amalgams of text and image fashioned for rock musicians in San Francisco (Rick Griffin on the Grateful Dead need only be mentioned). But such judgments entail only matters of distinction within the realm of graphic design, where Push Pin's off-balance response to psychedelia represented no more than a small deviation from their customary

professional competence—if it counts for one at all, as many people to this day regard Glaser's Dylan poster as the quintessential icon of the 1960s.

[21] Robert Fraser, old Etonian and son of a wealthy trustee of the Tate, was the leading dealer of Pop Art in London, representing Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Bridget Riley, Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, Jann Haworth, and Peter Blake. He counted many friendships among the pop-music aristocracy and would be arrested with the Rolling Stones and Marianne Faithfull in their famous Sussex drug arrest of 1967.

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