**Robert Indiana, All-American**

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The history of art is inherently revisionist. That is to say, it emerges from the constant individual and collective reappraisal of "things the mind already knows"—borrowing Jasper Johns's famous phrase—or, at any rate, things the mind thinks it knows. Allow me, then, to start with a brief anecdote that brings home the significance of this claim.

Back in the early nineteen-nineties within the higher councils of the Museum of Modern Art, one of the senior members of the curatorial staff proposed the acquisition of a new work by the Canadian group, General Idea. The piece in question was one of a series of paintings, prints, sculptures, and objects that employed a pictorial device based on another such polymorphous series by the first generation Pop artist Robert Indiana. Indeed, it appropriated and redeployed the look of what was fated to be Indiana's signature contribution to American art of the nineteen-sixties, namely his graphically consistent but multiform interpretation of the word "LOVE," the ambiguously resonant slogan of an initially optimistic but exceptionally ill-starred era.

By the nineteen-nineties optimism was in short supply outside of deep dyed conservative circles. The fact that optimism of a particularly gung-ho kind was prevalent within them was one more reason for pessimism among those who grew up dreaming of a more egalitarian and tolerant, dare one say "liberal" United States in line with Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies, John F. Kennedy's eloquent promises of democratic renewal and Lyndon Baines Johnson's "Great Society" programs of economic and social reform. By the time of his assassination in 1963 Kennedy the social progressive was increasingly eclipsed by Kennedy the Cold Warrior, disillusioning many of his staunchest Center-Left supporters by sponsoring the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and by gradually embroiling America in a postcolonial war in Vietnam. After Kennedy's death President Johnson led the country "Waist Deep In The Big Muddy," and Richard Nixon, their backlash-driven successor, drove the country in still deeper yet. With time out for the largely failed presidency of moderate- to conservative-Democrat Jimmy Carter, Republican presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush Sr. restarted the conservative juggernaut of American politics that came to a temporary halt with the 1993 election of another middle-of-the-roader with a tendency for veering right, Bill Clinton. In this context the "love" generation reached a disabused middle age and their offspring approached an already compromised maturity.

Taking the long view, the single harshest blow to the spontaneous celebration of natural affinities that the sixties had seemed to augur was not the murderous second incarnation of Woodstock Nation at the Altamont Music Festival where Hells Angels beat a fan to death in front of the onstage Rolling Stones or the rampage of Charles Manson's cult followers and the rag-tag guerillas of the Symbionese Liberation Army with their captive princess Patty Hearst, but the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early nineteen-eighties and its scything of the gay community as well as its devastating impact on poor

people of color and many others at the margins of mainstream society. Against that backdrop Indiana's monolithic image acquired ever more poignant if not inadvertently ironic meanings. General Idea's decision to substitute another four letter word for the original—AIDS for LOVE—was a sign of those changing times. And of the dire new realities and the unpredictable, even foreclosed future facing the "twenty-somethings" who had been born as the sixties were cresting or immediately after when it collapsed into bitter chaos.

Still, until General Idea came along to cast a shadow across it, no matter how the setting darkened, Indiana's LOVE logo remained an agelessly stylish symbol of a cultural—preeminently sexual—sea change, and of carefree association if not careless libertinage. The reasons for this are several but most important are the sheer visual punch of the typographic amalgam Indiana fashioned out of slightly manipulated block letters and the shifting but usually eye-popping palette with which he tinted them. The net effect, which every logo designer of the period had reason to envy—art borrowing commercial techniques had trumped commerce itself—was an irresistibly engaging ideogram that appeared to say the same upbeat thing regardless of the second thoughts one might have about the cultural tide it rode in on and the undertow beneath the waves. Because of this, General Idea's adroit cooptation of Indiana's icon could easily be mistaken for another example in a long tradition of art-about-art that encompasses Indiana's own variations on Charles Demuth's *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928), along with Roy Lichtenstein's variations of Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, and the German Expressionists, and Johns's variations of Picasso, to cite only a few.

And so it was that when a version of General Idea's AIDS emblem came up for discussion in MoMA's Painting and Sculpture Department the main arguments made in its favor—arguments that ultimately counted against it—were art historical in a narrowly formalist, morphological sense. Validation of the work was sought in the fact that it was a sophisticated take-off on another canonical work—the original LOVE had been a Christmas card (in Yuletide colors) designed by Indiana for sale in the Museum of Modern Art store—without much if any discussion of the sexual politics of the second version.

To understand how this could be amidst an ever-growing death toll from AIDS, one must recall how assiduously the topic of homosexuality was avoided in "polite society" even when the work of openly gay artists was at issue. Although MoMA eventually mounted a series of events and exhibitions focused on the HIV/AIDS crisis, until that happened and for a considerable while thereafter questions regarding the sexual orientation of artists were rarely raised and still more rarely delved into, even when the work they made implicitly if not explicitly addressed such matters. Thus passing mention of gay concerns or sensibility substituted for in-depth discussion of "differently" different perspectives on such issues. In the case of General Idea's piece, vague art-historical alignments replaced the real topic at hand, namely the bitter "queering" by a gay collective of the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties—two of whose members died of AIDS—of a branded image by a gay artist of the nineteen-sixties. In the final analysis the piece was not presented for acquisition in part because its sharp, polyvalent thrust was not adequately

articulated and in part because some who were party to the deliberations felt—understandably enough—that the plague then ravaging several generations of young men and women was not a joking matter, especially if the gag was merely art historical.

Revisiting this incident is not intended as MoMA-bashing and, while I was not the curator who proposed the work, in order to do the situation justice I must assume a measure of responsibility for the failure of imagination just described. Nor is bringing the matter up a way of voting in General Idea's favor ex post facto, though the exceedingly bitter ironies of their piece strike me as far richer in meaning now than they did then. Rather, the object of bringing this breakdown of critical dialogue to light is to establish a pivot point for examining the dramatically altered appreciation of an American artist's seminal oeuvre in a dramatically changed America.

By design, Indiana's work was, and to a fair degree remains, deceptively open and direct, and, if spontaneous public response is an accurate indicator, overtly likable. Which would seem natural enough even in the patently "artificial" if not subversively "unnatural" zones of contemporary art—given that, so Andy Warhol explained it to gadfly critic Gene Swenson, in essence Pop Art "is about liking things." Specifically, the author of LOVE likes all-American things. In the annals of "the family romance" as Freud described it—that is to say the process by which children replace their parents with imaginary surrogates so as to free themselves from the ties that bind and alter their destiny—Robert Clark's decision to assume the pseudonym Robert Indiana amounts to trading in one's paternal name and putting oneself up for adoption by one's entire home state, a Midwestern, largely agrarian state at that. With the regionalists Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry, and Grant Wood in the not-too-distant background, such wholesome affiliations were the unexpected guise Indiana chose at a time when American art looked ever more exclusively to New York rather than to the "heartland." That Indiana frequented circles that included Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, and Johns and were largely albeit discreetly gay and lesbian, as well as devoted himself to projects—notably sets for Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's feminist opera *The Mother of Us All* (1946–47)—that connected him to previous generations of gay and lesbian artists, while affirming a bond with Demuth and Marsden Hartley, two other openly homosexual artists of the same period and milieu (and to properly queer regionalism's family values for good measure we should add the covertly homosexual Grant Wood) meant that from the outset the superficially cheerful, seemingly transparent pictures Indiana made were in fact picture puzzles with encoded messages that spoke to an American experience both mainstream art and Main Street mores habitually turn away from.

Indeed, in the much-closeted culture of mid-century America, that was Indiana's gambit: to hide in plain sight, to show and to tell what was on the back side, the dark side of the shiny façade the country presented to the world while simultaneously making that façade brighter than bright, newer than new. Thus, when the young Warhol was still perfecting a fusion of crackling Madison Avenue illustration with languorous neo-Beardsleyian elegance and neo-Firbankian wit and while he continued throughout his life to cultivate a sulfurously decadent aura, Indiana deployed a hybrid of classical vernacular signage and

clean-cut Bauhaus graphics that put the lie to our national delusions, much as Edward Albee used snappy, slangy dialogue to do the same in the whimsically cruel one-act masterpiece *The American Dream* (1960), which inspired Indiana's eponymous painting of a year later.

With Warhol's excursions into "fin de siècle" aestheticism in mind, it should be said that there is also a Wildean aspect to Indiana's approach to painting, though he is by no means the Dorian Gray of art. Neither old school Dandyism or modern Camp as Susan Sontag defined it—"seriousness that fails," indeed seriousness that is intended to fail—enter into his classic Pop works. If anything, even his obviously satirical, borderline cartoonish works—*Mother and Father* (1963–67) being the most loaded example—have a kind of residual earnestness and poignancy to them, although at the other extreme, even images that skirt corniness—for example, Indiana's version of a weeping Statue of Liberty with the legend "Mother of Exiles"—are mordant to the extent that America has not only welcomed refugees from foreign persecution but has also condemned some of its own citizens to internal exile due to the hostility they have confronted domestically. (Indiana himself left New York for an island off the coast of Maine, and while it would be an exaggeration to say that he fled any kind of menace, he clearly feels more at home at distance from the turmoil at the center of American culture than in its midst.) Nor is there any suggestion that Indiana viewed the tragic dimensions of the American Way—its racism, avarice, and sexual taboos—through the lens of tragic "perversity," and even less from the vantage point of someone who imagined that libidinous homosexuality was typified by monstrous solipsism punishable by hideous decay. No, the facet of the scintillating, mirror-clad Oscar Wilde which best reflects Indiana is the one etched with the words "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."

Pop's dazzling, impregnable surfaces provided just such a protective covering. Other contributors to this volume look behind it and closely examine what they have found. Thus, Allison Unruh sets the scene and brings Indiana on stage, describing the nature of his entrance and the basic elements that contributed to the construction of his character, including his richly detailed but also artfully evasive "Autochronology." (From Ad Reinhardt to Gerhard Richter, nearly all such accounts have these qualities in common.) Choosing an epigraph by the self-dramatizing conceptualist Bas Jan Ader, Thomas Crow spells out the text-as-image logic behind Indiana's work, flaying *The American Dream* in the process to reveal the apocalyptic—but not American themed—work that undergirds it and drawing connections and distinctions between Indiana's typographic tactics and those of contemporary designers such as Milton Glaser. For her part Kalliopi Minioudaki scrutinizes the alternately confrontational and oblique references to political conflict that fill Indiana's art throughout the nineteen-sixties, notably Indiana's four "Confederacy" paintings that named names—Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi—to identify states in which traditional Southern bigotry raged during the Civil Rights struggles of the period; and his commentaries on the Cold War arms race, showing the congruence between his work and that of Warhol and James Rosenquist among others. Finally, Jonathan D. Katz carefully explores and forthrightly addresses the sexual politics of Indiana's art and the specific nature and timing of the masquerade he performed in and

through it.

It is not my aim to steal their thunder or rival their research but simply to underscore the particular combination of identification and alienation, of unhedged patriotism and profound skepticism and disaffection embedded in the apparently shallow surfaces of Indiana's art. These combinations are not so contradictory as they may seem. From Warhol's *Death and Disaster* paintings, we know how dizzying the concealed depths of such superficiality or shallowness can be; they can be just as unnerving in Indiana's work. After all, a decade before Bruce Nauman made an existentially loaded neon in which the word EAT is cyclically enmeshed and highlighted in the word DEATH, Indiana painted the diptych *EAT/DIE* (1962). The French critic Hélène Depotte ascribes a specific autobiographical import to this verbal juxtaposition—Indiana's father died while eating breakfast—while the erotic connotations of the pairing suggest other meanings—oral sex and orgasm. And of course there are the purely existential realities summed up by it; we eat to live but we live to die. The crucial aesthetic fact is that the words are polyvalent in all these ways and more. Which is why the particular spin given to them—and Nauman has made exploding circular neons on the themes of death and the fear of death that are visually and verbally charged in ways not dissimilar to Indiana's optically spinning paintings of compound diamonds, squares, circles, and lettering—opens up new mental circuits each time we see them.

Meanwhile, if the word "patriotism" rings strangely in the ears of critically minded readers today—Kalliopi Minioudaki uses it without apology in the title of her essay—especially those habituated to sweeping challenges to all expressions of national sentiment, it bears saying that throughout American history many of those who have most ardently opposed the distortion of our democratic values are those who have most fervently cherished our flawed democratic heritage.

Like much art of the nineteen-sixties, Pop first and foremost, Indiana's was perched on the divide between affirmation and disillusionment. During the nineteen-sixties the public was often so mesmerized by the vitality of contemporary work that they missed its adversarial or dissenting subtexts. One after another, revisionist readings of the period have teased out the exceptional strands woven into the tight, homogenizing fabric of formalist thinking, discovering previously invisible or at least seldom remarked upon patterns. Feminism did this first in the nineteen-seventies. The study of ethnic and cultural diversity has further opened things up, and attention to sexual orientation continues this process today. Occasionally, such inquiry has erred on the side of one-dimensionality and determinism. Art by Black, Hispanic, or Asian artists is not necessarily about being Black or Hispanic or Asian, much less about hypothetically "essential" qualities governing what having any of these backgrounds might mean to an artist.

Recent writing about gay and lesbian artists risks the same reductivism. With the result that many of those concerned are leery of having their sexuality discussed, despite having long since made it known in their work and their lives. However, as the best of revisionist history and criticism in this domain has shown—and I am thinking here not only of

Jonathan D. Katz's work but that of Gavin Butt, Richard Meyer, Justin Spring, Jonathan Weinberg, and numerous others—suppression of that information locks away much that is necessary to understanding these writers' creative ambitions and approaches, including their strategies for dealing with external repression in pre-Stonewall times. And so it has been that deciphering Johns and Rauschenberg or fleshing out biographical portraits of Fairfield Porter while doubling back to do the same with Wood, Hartley, Demuth, and more has vastly improved our grasp of what it was like to be a modern American artist at odds with every definition of America, which excluded them in all their complexity. Reevaluation of Indiana's career raises similar questions at the same time as it helps to complete the still fragmentary picture of mid-twentieth-century art in which he so boldly figures.

When, in 1961, Alfred H. Barr Jr. bought the first work by Indiana to enter a museum from a two man-show at the Anderson Gallery—the other artist was Peter Forakis—he said "Because I do not know why I like it so much, Robert Indiana's *The American Dream* is for me one of the two most spell-binding paintings in the show." Is it too far-fetched to suppose that he actually did know why he liked it, but that, because what he saw in the painting or knew about the context that engendered it and the truths it gave voice to was still unacceptable to a general audience as yet unable to digest Dr. Alfred Kinsey's report *On the Sexuality of the Human Male* (1948) and still subject to paranoid correlations between homosexuality and "un-American activities," he just could not say it.

Lest we forget the social and political predicates for this lapse, it needs to be stressed that when Barr persuaded his friend, curatorial colleague and patron Philip Johnson to buy Johns's enigmatic *Flag* (1954–55)—a painting completed just as the national anti-communist hysteria ignited by Senator Joseph McCarthy was beginning to burn out—he also requested that Johnson hold on to the canvas until it was politically safe to put it to a vote of the museum's trustees. (Can it be entirely incidental that Johns painted a flag that no one can wrap themselves in or maps of the lower forty-eight states where all of the internal and external boundary lines are blurred?) As a sidebar to that discretion, it is also noteworthy that while Johnson's homosexuality was common knowledge within the museum it was never mentioned, and until the last decade of his long life his partners were never invited to accompany him on social occasions. Barr's vagueness about why he was attracted to *The American Dream,* coupled with his certain awareness of the estrangement Indiana had inscribed into the work, estrangement Albee's play had helped the artist both to articulate and encode, was of the same order in the same period.

And when General Idea's AIDS painting almost entered into direct dialogue on the walls of MoMA with Indiana's LOVE, there was much that still could not be said. Yet if, in one sense, Indiana's LOVE spoke of a universal condition or desire because at that time in this country it could not utter its particular name, if it wore the cool mask of conventional sentiment to hide the anxiety of unaccepted longing, in another sense, by speaking of universals from the perspective of such desire, it dared to equate what Walt Whitman called "adhesiveness" to less contested varieties of affection. To the extent that this is true—and I believe it is—then Indiana's early work, including the single example

that was almost indiscriminately embraced by a culture that would have shunned the artist and his work had it actually known "where he was coming from," count among the signal declarations of a cultural transformation—and sexual revolution—that has stalled, been pushed back, but is still in progress. Moreover, it stood as a flashy but firm assertion of the American right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, however constitutionally free individuals may imagine them. That is an idealistic, even romantic claim, but behind his stylishly upbeat mask with its disturbingly downbeat accents, Indiana is nothing if not an idealistic artist.

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