Liz K. Sheehan
"Robert Indiana: Painter of Signs" from *Robert Indiana: The Hartley Elegies*
Lewiston, ME: Bates College Museum of Art, 2005

"I feel that I am a sign painter. I mean, I make paintings that are signs, but as far as I'm concerned important signs, signs that say something, that have very meaningful messages, warnings, celebrations, things of that nature."[1]

Over the span of his career, Robert Indiana has been labeled in numerous ways, though none may be more accurate than his own modest, yet deceptively simple, descriptions: "I am a sign painter," "an American painter of signs." His commercial look – the hard-edged painting style, the industrial materials such as silkscreen and Cor-ten steel, the bright palette – links him most often to Pop art, but that label suggests a more narrow approach. Beyond the popular culture interests of his contemporaries, Indiana's work traces a collective narrative of American culture as seen through the eyes of an artist who exiled himself from its assumed center, New York, to Vinalhaven, Maine. By describing his work as signs, and his activity as sign painting, he suggests a universality concurrent with his formal choices of color, scale, and wordage. *The Hartley Elegies*, however, demonstrate that layers of entangled autobiographical, artistic, and socio-political references lie beneath the polished surface.

A love of numbers and their symbolic potential initially drew Indiana to Hartley's "German Officer" paintings as a subject for *The Hartley Elegies*: "It dawned on me after I saw more and more of the German military paintings that here was our real affinity…that with his numbers, [Hartley and I] had a distinct relationship."[2] Indiana's fascination with numbers began as a young man. By the artist's account, his family lived in twenty-one homes by the time he was

seventeen, and memorizing house numbers enabled Indiana to hold on to the various places he had been. Many of his print and sculpture series include number sequences as autonomous studies in color and form. In the *Elegies*, however, numbers take on the role of signifiers, connecting Indiana's life and work with Hartley's.[3]

For Hartley, numbers evoked a spiritual significance influenced by the writings of German mystic Jakob Boehme, among others. They also allowed him to encode his work with references to people and subjects that only his small circle of intimates would understand. In "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art," art historian Kenneth Silver traces these types of coded references in a "discourse of gay identity" from Hartley and his contemporary Charles Demuth to the community of artists associated with the Pop art movement, namely Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol.[4] Visual and textual signifiers for the gay American poets Walt Whitman, Frank O'Hara and Hart Crane, as well as what can be read as homoerotic iconography, linked these artists in what Michael Plante later called a "gay family tree."[5] Hartley's postmortem homage to the fallen soldier Karl von Freyburg participates in this discourse, and in turn, so too does Indiana's tribute to their relationship.

On the surface, Hartley's "German Officer" series is a modernist experiment in form, now recognized for its unique amalgamation of cubist structure and the expressionist style then developing in Germany. Metaphorically, however, these two modes of painting – one studied and objective, the other animated and evocative – mirror Hartley's internal struggle with his own subjectivity. Similarly, his writing asserts both that one's work is inseparable from one's self, while indicating a reluctance to suggest that any of his work is autobiographical. In the 1920s,

anxious about the emotional subtext of Expressionism, Hartley rejected it for the distance offered by "objectivism," stating that he could "hardly bear the sound of the words 'expressionism,' 'emotionalism,' 'personality'…because they imply the wish to express personal life and I prefer to have no personal life. Personal art is for me a matter of spiritual indelicacy. Persons of refined feeling should keep themselves out of their painting…"[6]

Privately, Hartley was more open, especially later in his life. A poet as well as a painter, Hartley's prolific writings include notebooks titled "Letters Never Sent – to the Dead." In one such handwritten letter, addressed to "Lieutenant Karl von Freyburg/ My Dear Karl," Hartley describes a dream in which a thunderstorm struck as he was walking through a field. From a white light arose the image of von Freyburg in uniform:

> …I looked at you as I turned my head toward the light – square in your incandescent face – and out of it, you smiled and I in return smiled. It was the sublimation of our intended relation and was without blemish – and you were therefore in this dream, immortalized.
>
> I have the few souvenirs of your departure still – your silver shoulder straps with glittering copper buttons of the now defunct regime – as brilliant as the day you wore them in your youth.
>
> Why does one hold to objects with affection – but, one does.
>
> It [all] this is to remind you that I think of you with the same affectionate regard as always…I am amazed to think as I say it you will be forty eight this year, whereas when I saw you last you were twenty four; all that I can say at present is auf weidersehen – mein lieber.[7]

Hartley's "letter never sent" makes plain what his paintings could not, two dozen years after the young soldier's death, and also points to the degree in which Hartley regarded "souvenirs." The Marsden Hartley Memorial Collection at Bates College includes hundreds of the personal tokens

that later inspired graphic elements in his work. For a man with no permanent home, that this collection remains intact is a testament to the regard in which he held these objects, which were his way of communicating affection.[8] The corresponding signs and symbols in his work functioned in much the same way. The Iron Cross, for example, has multiple referents: Hartley's affection for Germany; the country itself; the First World War; and Karl von Freyburg, who was awarded the medal after his death.

While Hartley's "German Officer" paintings – and related abstract War Motif series – can be read on one level as portraits of Berlin, the *Elegies* are situated in a more global context. With the inclusion of geographic place names and emblems of Americana, Indiana brings the Officer series, and Hartley, home. Hartley had struggled to find acceptance in the States, often spending months of the year abroad (a calling card in the Bates College Museum of Art collection identifies his address as "Berlin-New York"). Following his return from Berlin and the production of the "German Officer" paintings, Hartley found he had to realign himself with American values when wartime audiences reacted with hostility to his pro-German vision, and so he insisted that the military motifs were merely formal.[9] By the time he settled on Vinalhaven in 1938, he had changed his focus to the rugged coastline of New England and the equally virile "Archaic" series of athletes and lobstermen (which were ironically – for their now clearly homoerotic slant – much more favorably received by the public).

While Hartley eventually declared himself "the painter from Maine" in his later years, Indiana's commitment to establishing an identity as an American artist has never wavered, nor has the propensity of others to emphasize this intention in his work. Indeed, he has been described as

"the most American of American artists."[10] Among the autobiographical content Indiana weaves into *The Hartley Elegies* are references to the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the fraternal organization in whose Vinalhaven lodge he has lived since 1978. Though British in origin, the Freemasons and Odd Fellows orders that sprung up in the United States were uniquely American, founded in the spirit of revolution.[11] Although the Order hasn't used the building since World War II, its presence is palpable in the ephemera preserved by Indiana throughout his home, and in fraternal symbols that have made their way into his work. Of these, the three linked oval rings are the most prevalent. Representing the Odd Fellows' motto "Friendship, Truth, and Love," the rings and their accompanying text are seen throughout Indiana's work. In the *Elegies*, they represent more broadly the numerous connections Indiana creates in the series.[12]

Whether or not one ascribes importance to the sexuality of an artist in regards to their output, it is clear that the love between two men is understood in Hartley's "German Officer" paintings and overtly honored in Indiana's *Elegies*. Translating and complicating Hartley's symbolic codes, Indiana connects Hartley with the object of his affection in the rings of text central to each print. In *KVF V* and *VIII*, for example, their surnames are paired with the phrase "Truth/Love/ Friendship," a modification of the Odd Fellows logo, with both the Iron Cross and American flag present. The *Elegies* thus continue the discourse of gay identity identified by Silver, as Indiana makes explicit the homoerotic content of Hartley's work.[13] The passion in these works, however, lies in the scope of Indiana's project (eighteen paintings and ten prints) and his intent to celebrate and memorialize. Similar to Hartley's later rejection of Expressionism, the *Elegies* are impassive in their hard-edged execution – typical of Indiana's work and of Pop art in general.

The Hartley Elegies unite Hartley and von Freyburg after death as Hartley longed for in life. On a broader level, the *Elegies* cement and celebrate the numerous connections between two men, their lives and artistic achievements, and honor one of Maine's most celebrated artists. The full suite of ten serigraphs, reproduced together for the first time in this volume, is one of Indiana's most complex projects. Robert Indiana's signs point us toward a broader understanding of Marsden Hartley's work and the inspiration it holds for contemporary artists, who continue to find relevance in its depths.

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[1] Quoted on CBS News Sunday Morning, "Artist Trapped by 'LOVE'," October 24, 2004.
[2] See Michael Plante, "Truth, Friendship and Love: Sexuality and Tradition in Robert Indiana's *Hartley Elegies*," in Patricia McDonnell, *Dictated by Life: Marsden Hartley and Robert Indiana* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, 1995).
[3] See the following "Decoding the Elegies" for an explanation of the most commonly appearing signs and symbols.
[4] In Russell Ferguson, ed., *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-1962* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993).
[5] Plante, p. 80.
[6] Marsden Hartley, "Art – and the Personal Life," in *On Art*, ed. Gail R. Scott (New York: New Horizon Press, 1982), p. 71.
[7] With permission of the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University [*auf weidersehen – mein lieber* translates to "goodbye, my dear"].
[8] From an early age, collecting filled an emotional void for Hartley, who likened it to "a sex expression."
[9] For more on Hartley's love of Germany and support of Nazi-era culture, see Donna Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley: Race, Region and Nation* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2005).
[10] Lyndel King, "Indiana and Hartley," *Robert Indiana: The Hartley Elegies* (brochure, Park Granada Editions, CA, 1991).
[11] Ritual and hierarchy were strong attractions to these and other fraternal organizations: elaborate processions, readings, titles, and clothing aroused the curiosity of many outsiders, swelling membership in the latter part of the 19th century. For more on the development of American fraternal organizations, see Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender and Fraternalism*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989).
[12] The linked ovals appear in the painted *Elegies*, but are absent from the serigraphs that are the concern of this publication.
[13] For more on this connection, see Michael Plante.