

Was Robert Indiana's Last Sculpture This Homage to the Bratwurst?



One early design for Mr. Indiana's "BRAT" sculpture before it was fabricated. Monumental in scale, like his "LOVE," this tribute to bratwurst was commissioned by one of the country's major sausage makers. Credit...

By [Graham Bowley](#) and Murray Carpenter

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The odd, isolated end of Robert Indiana's life included a lawsuit filed in his final days that accused two associates of taking advantage of the elderly artist in his later years by churning out inauthentic works under his name.

Some friends and art experts joined in the debate, questioning whether Mr. Indiana, who died on Saturday at 89, was really the creative force behind a series of prints from 2016 that included images of Bob Dylan lyrics and a sculpture this year titled "WINE."

That conversation is likely to escalate with the discovery Thursday that Mr. Indiana's last monumental sculpture was a tribute to bratwurst. It was commissioned by the owners of Johnsonville Sausage, in Wisconsin, that is one of the country's largest producers.

Mr. Indiana appears to have taken to the task of designing “BRAT” with (sorry) relish, working in the distinctive letters-over-letters format of “LOVE,” his signature work. But the 20-by-20-by-10 foot-“BRAT” shakes things up a little by not tilting any of the letters.



Typically, Mr. Indiana tilted one letter in his sculptures that featured words, as was the case here with his best known work, “LOVE” in Philadelphia. Credit...Matt Rourke/Associated Press

Kathleen Rogers, who worked for Mr. Indiana as a publicist, was one of several people who had trouble identifying the artist with the work, which was built by fabricators in upstate New York.

“He had been branded a commercial artist after the success of ‘LOVE,’” Ms. Rogers said. “He worked so hard to separate himself from that. He would never agree again to this commercialism.”

But Michael McKenzie, a New York art publisher and an associate of Mr. Indiana, who worked with the fabricators on the sculpture, said in text messages on Thursday that the concept was indeed Mr. Indiana’s and that it had been his last monumental work.

“The big thrill for Bob with ‘BRAT’ was the scale,” Mr. McKenzie said. “He’s really into major scale and ‘BRAT’ was out of the box.”

He said Mr. Indiana, who took the surname of the state where he was born — he lived in Vinalhaven, Me. — also felt a connection with the Wisconsin company.

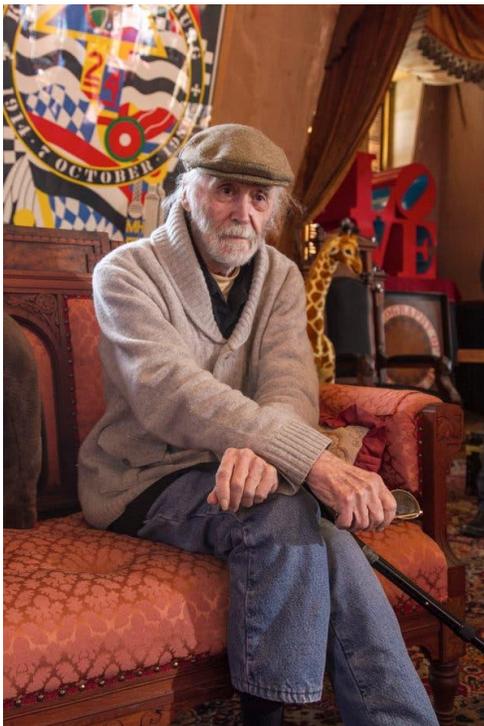
“BRAT and Johnsonville are like him,” he said, “Midwest people made good with their things all over the world, including Vinalhaven.”

In the federal lawsuit filed last week, a company that had long acted as Mr. Indiana’s business agent, Morgan Art Foundation, accused Mr. McKenzie and the artist’s caretaker in Maine of isolating him from his old friends and business connections so they could market unauthorized or adulterated versions of his work.

Mr. McKenzie has said it was the Morgan company that had been mistreating Mr. Indiana by not paying him the proper royalties on works he and the company had jointly agreed to sell, a charge the company denied. Mr. McKenzie said that all of the artwork he helped Mr. Indiana create and distribute in recent years had been conceived and authorized by the artist. “I don’t forge stuff,” he said in an interview last week.

Jamie L. Thomas, the man who helped care for Mr. Indiana at home on Vinalhaven, an island off the coast of Maine, has not responded to phone calls and emails.

The dispute drew a federal investigator to the island on Tuesday, according to Sean Hillgrove, 49, who worked for Mr. Indiana for many years, often as a driver or maintenance man or as a helper in his studio with his art.



Mr. Indiana about five years ago. His caretaker told friends in recent years that the artist was not feeling well enough to receive visitors.

Mr. Hillgrove said the F.B.I. agent had spoken to him for more than hour, asking questions that largely tracked with the accusations in the lawsuit and included whether he knew if some of Mr. Indiana's most recent works had been unauthorized forgeries put forward by people close to the artist. Mr. Hillgrove said he did not know.

The agent was also concerned with assessing whether many of Mr. Indiana's artworks had recently been taken from the house, he said.

The future of those works and other property owned by Mr. Indiana is now certain to be a matter of debate. Mr. Indiana was not married and had no children.

A lawyer for Morgan Art Foundation, Luke Nikas, said that Mr. Indiana had, until a few years ago, intended to create a foundation directed by a New York attorney that would have included his art and house, Star of Hope, a former chapter headquarters of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows on Main Street.

But in 2016, Mr. Indiana granted power of attorney to Mr. Thomas, which gave him the authority to make decisions, and the New York attorney was let go.

Mr. McKenzie said that Mr. Thomas had created a foundation, also called Star of Hope, to protect Mr. Indiana's legacy. He said that Mr. Thomas had simply been following the artist's own wishes to be left alone in recent years and to limit visitors to his home.

Emails between Mr. McKenzie and the foundry where "BRAT" was created indicate that the full design of the sculpture had not been settled as of May 2017, but the plan was to create it out of aluminum and then send it to an airbrushing company to be painted. Images of the proposed artwork, contained in an email sent to Mr. McKenzie by KC Fabrications Inc. in Gardiner, N.Y., show two versions of the work with different bases, but both were painted in several shades of red.

Mr. Nikas said the Morgan company does not believe Mr. Indiana conceived the new sculpture. "We do not believe that the "BRAT" sculpture is consistent with the artistic vision behind Indiana's known works," he said.

A second version of the “BRAT” sculpture with a different base. It is not clear what final design was chosen by the company that commissioned the piece.



A spokeswoman for Johnsonville Sausage, Stephanie Dlugopolski, said the company expected to receive the “BRAT” sculpture in two to three weeks and would be installing it outside their corporate headquarters. The company did not disclose the price.

Though Mr. McKenzie attributed Mr. Indiana’s attraction to the project to a reflection of his Midwestern roots, Mr. Hillgrove, his former aide, said he did not know the artist to have a particular affinity for brats, which are quite popular in that region, especially in Wisconsin.

“He would eat sausages for breakfast and stuff like that,” Mr. Hillgrove said. “I don’t know about being a huge fan of them.”