

BROOKLYN RAIL

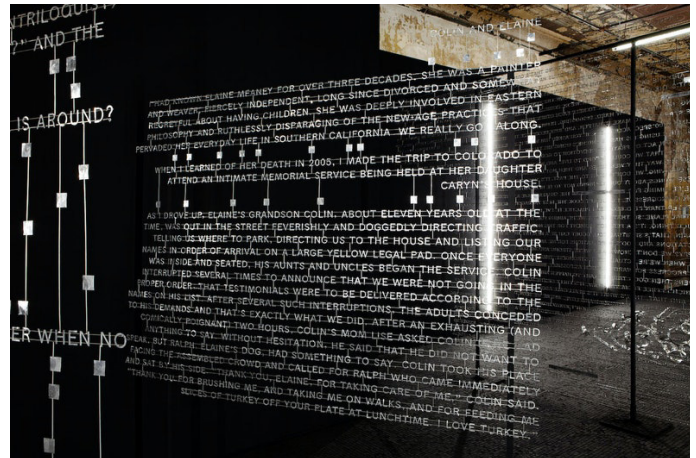
Jonathan Berger: An Introduction to Nameless Love

Ksenia Soboleva, August 2020

Not long before COVID-19 rendered in-person art viewing a faint memory, I walked into a dimly lit gallery where clusters of illuminated words appeared to float in space, like the digital rain of the *Matrix*. Yet unlike computer code, I could read these clusters of text—they were conversations, poems, confessions. “What can I ask you that nobody seems to ever ask you?” one began. “After months of being in that funk, I got accustomed to it,” another one continued.

Jonathan Berger’s large-scale installation *An Introduction to Nameless Love* has taken over every square foot of Participant Inc, curatorial icon Lia Gangitano’s beloved not-for-profit art space on the Lower East Side. As the press release states, the work is rooted in Berger’s exploration of relationships that exist “outside the bounds of conventional romance.” This concept is inspired by his close friendship with artist Ellen Cantor, who passed away in 2013—serendipitously, the two artists first met at Participant Inc in 2006. For several years now, Berger has been engaged in an ongoing and wide-ranging series of conversations about the idea of unconventional love. At Participant, six of these conversations have been materialized into skeins of letters mounted on wire armatures—they are textual sculptures, or perhaps more accurately, sculptural texts.

At the same time as he documents the dialogues he has carried out with his interlocutors, Berger also draws in excerpts from song lyrics, poetry, and nonfiction, and invites guest editors (none of whom are editors by profession) to work with him. What emerges are texts that balance oral history and poetry—grouped together like stanzas—that follow a mysterious structure. Consisting of tin, each letter is manually crafted with a consistency in shape and size that leaves the viewer mesmerized by the meticulous hand labor required. One sculpture departs from the flat, page-like form of the others. Instead, it curves into a multifaceted textual sphere that is placed



Installation view: Jonathan Berger: An Introduction to Nameless Love, Participant, Inc., New York, 2020. Courtesy Participant, Inc.
Photo: Mark Waldhauser.



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towards the back of the gallery, surrounded by intricate textual waves resting on the floor.

Berger's desire to think through the complexities of love is not particularly visionary, nor is he the first artist to materialize language. It is, however, his integration of these two impulses that is so alluring. Contemporary art historians often identify figures like Bruce Nauman and Jenny Holzer as artists who understand how tightly body and language are intertwined, even to the point that they can function one in place of the other. However, the groundbreaking work of these artists has parallels in the past. Those who have dipped into premodern art historical scholarship know that similar ideas existed during medieval times, when monastic script was considered to be a voice that speaks without a body, allowing the dead to converse with the living. It is this longer history that Berger draws upon.



Installation view: Jonathan Berger: *An Introduction to Nameless Love*, Participant, Inc., New York, 2020. Courtesy Participant, Inc.
Photo: Mark Waldhauser.

Berger's installation is not one of short, moralistic phrases or neon-lit, loaded words. The scope of the text he employs mimics that of memorials—think of the long list of names etched into the black graphite walls of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veteran Memorial* (1982), or Holzer's lengthy rendition of a Walt Whitman poem for the *New York City AIDS Memorial* (2016). Or, to once again take a longer view of history, think of ancient Egyptian stelae, many of which were used for memorial purposes. Berger's installation develops a parallel with traditional memorials, yet what he is trying to memorialize is something abstract, something not yet extinct but increasingly endangered: our ability to communicate intimacy through language. In *An Introduction to Nameless Love*, the word “nameless” sits in the sentence uncomfortably, exposing our failure to meaningfully describe and name certain forms of love. Berger's installation creates a haptic archive, in which a group of people commit to communicating their intimacies through language, shedding light on the “nameless” with words. Berger, in turn, allows for the words to take up real space, occupying the physical realm in which we are accustomed to manifesting our intimacies. Who can picture what words look like on their own, separate from a screen, or even a page?

The Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector once wrote: “I want to grab the word in my hand. Is the word an object?” This question has been lingering on my mind, as I find myself drafting handwritten letters for the first time in years, frantically searching for stamps in the junk drawer. In truth, there is nothing I can say with ink on paper that I cannot say with an email, only more room for grammatical error. Yet in this time of social distancing, when we are forced to imagine new ways of expressing intimacy, communicating my words as objects feels as if it gives more of myself than a text message or a Zoom session would allow. I find myself craving the objecthood of words, the physical movement my wrist makes as I construct a sentence. While Participant Inc has temporarily closed its doors, Berger's piece resonates even more powerfully now than when I saw it in person. Deprived of physical contact, I start to question the virtual forms of communication that we've all become so accustomed to. I relish the material presence of words. Like Lispector, I want to grab the word in my hand. I know that I am not alone in this.