

## Jonathan Berger's New Exhibition Is A Cathedral To True Love

Brienne Walsh, Aug 24, 2020

The genesis of Jonathan Berger's exhibition *An Introduction to Nameless Love*, which will be open at Participant Inc in New York from September 9 through October 11, 2020, was the five-year-long friendship the artist had with fellow artist Ellen Cantor, who died in 2013. The relationship was platonic, but intense. "I realized, after she died, that it was the closest that I had ever come to true love," Berger said.

True love, Berger notes, is at the top of our society's hierarchy of romance. Traditionally, in popular culture, it is embodied by heterosexual couples that meet, and cannot deny their attraction to one another, no matter how hard they fight it. But true love, Berger realized in the process of mourning Cantor, can encompass many different types of relationships — the relationship between friends, or collaborators, or caretakers, or even with animals. It can encompass relationships conducted entirely over text message, or relationships that don't have language at all. The deeper the love, the harder it is to define. "To me, true love is when something is happening beyond your comprehension," Berger say

Berger, whose practice is very much research based, began examining relationships that, to him, defined a more inclusive, and elusive, form of true love than that captured by princes and princesses, hot skinny models and bulky men. He met with people, and recorded their stories. In the end, for the exhibition at Participant — the show has already appeared at Harvard University's Carpenter Center — he focused on five different love stories, featuring designers Charles and Ray Eames, turtle conservationist Richard Ogust, the last living Shaker brother, Arnold Hadd, the autistic philosopher and writer Mark Utter and his communicator, Emily Anderson, and Maria Prado, a former resident of the New York City underground homeless community known as The Tunnel. Their narratives are joined by *Behold the Elusive Night Parrot*, informed by a two-year correspondence between



Jonathan Berger, *An Introduction to Nameless Love*, installation view at Participant Inc, New York.  
PHOTO: MARK WALDHAUSER.



Jonathan Berger, *Untitled (from Behold the Elusive Night Parrot, by Mady Schutzman)*, 2019. Installation view at Participant Inc, New York.  
PHOTO: CARTER SEDDON

Berger and the text's author, scholar Mady Schutzman.

Working with editors to provide a grounding perspective, Berger distilled each of the many interviews he did with his subjects down to a single chapter on each, which he then manifested in the physical realm. Which is to say that he created the chapters out of 33,000 individual tin letters, meticulously fashioned by Berger and a team of associates, and hand soldered them on nickel wire backings. The resulting works are gleaming, delicate tapestries that will hang from the ceiling in Participant like shrouds, dividing the gallery. In the center of the room, a string of text bent to resemble a globe surrounded by ribbons, will provide as an axis point in the gallery. The floor of the gallery will be covered in 500,000 charcoal cubes that swallow light, and have the effect of making the tapestries gleam even more.

Berger very much wanted to create an installation that was labor intensive. "We made the pieces the way we did, with such long, complicated, and meticulous work, because we wanted the exhibition to be devotional."

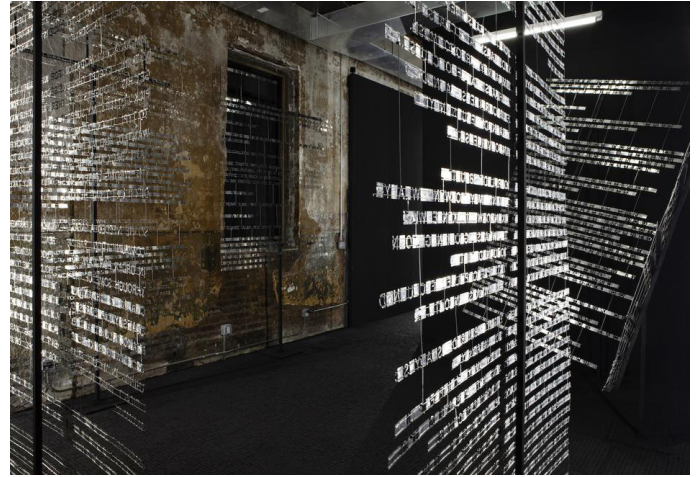
He sees the final exhibition as a manifestation of the ephemeral that you might ordinarily find in a site like Pompeii, or in a cathedral. "I hesitate to use the word holy, but there is a sort of importance or grandeur to the installation that aligns with the meaning in the stories," he says.

The works are both easy, and impossible, to read. At first glance, they resemble streams of computer code, or a waterfall. It takes some concentration to step close to the work, and ground your mind in the stories.

"I was already in love with this turtle," reads one wall of text. "But seeing the hatchings emerge from their eggs I was completely overtaken."

"Emily: For two hours a week he came. I only knew his mind," begins another.

The exhibition initially opened in March, right before New York City shut down — it quickly was shuttered. After six months lockdown and heartache, when the world recalibrated what human relationships mean when you cannot touch one another, and in turn, found new ways to fall in love, the exhibition will be alive, poignant, and exquisite beyond measure, especially if you have found your version of true love in this strange reality. If you are in New York, go see it. I'll be jealous of you all the way south, in Savannah.



Jonathan Berger, *Untitled* (Emily Anderson and Mark Utter, with Erica Heilman), 2019. Installation view at Participant Inc, New York.

PHOTO: MARK WALDHAUSER.