

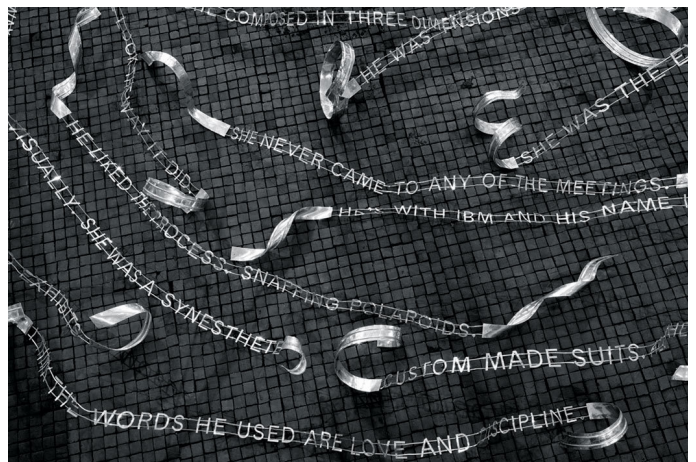
ARTFORUM

Jonathan Berger Carpenter Center For The Visual Arts

Abraham Adams, January 2020

Eros rides a dolphin or a swan—or else a crab, a snail, a dove, a lion, an aquatic goat, a unicorn-drawn chariot, a turtle. I thought about this history of images while reading of a man’s devotion to a turtle, on a visit to Jonathan Berger’s “An Introduction to Nameless Love,” a show with its own vision of those various conveyances. Made up of texts either written or edited by seventeen collaborators on “earnest but unusual love relationships” (to quote the scholar Mady Schutzman’s excellent accompanying book, *Behold the Elusive Night Parrot* [2019]), the installation had a rigorous simplicity: Letterforms arranged on rows of nickel rails suspended in the air evoked ghostly, abstract theater marquees, hovering within black walls above a floor of gridded charcoal blocks. The author of the turtle story, the conservationist Richard Ogust, wrote about the way RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE ARE ABOUT A HUNDRED DIFFERENT THINGS AT ONCE. WITH AN ANIMAL, YOU KNOW MUCH BETTER WHAT IS GOING ON, WHAT YOU ARE DOING AND WHAT YOU ARE FEELING. Anyone who loves an animal could recognize that cleansing unequivocal clarity.

The only two exceptions to the installation’s formal system happened where the armature became a sphere and a hinged-diptych/codex shape; the rest was repetition, endless black and silver lines. At first this seemed a bit austere, considering the subject matter; then I began to see its mutedness as loving self-effacement on the artist’s part, making way for a monument to the voices of his collaborators. One, Brother Arnold Hadd, a Shaker, insisted, THE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD HAS TO BE REALLY LIKE A LOVER; a former member of an underground squatter community recalled how THERE IS NOTHING LIKE LIVING LIFE ON THE LAM; a chronicler of Charles and Ray Eames reflected, THEY WERE THEIR OWN CLIENT. / EVERYTHING WAS THE PRODUCT OF THEIR LOVE. Most striking was a passage by the writer and filmmaker Mark Utter, on the desire to KNOW HOW IT FEELS TO HAVE OLD, COLD LONESOME LONGING



Jonathan Berger, *Untitled (Tina Beebe, Barbara Fahs Charles, Robert Staples, and Michael Wiener, with Matthew Brannon)* (detail), 2019, tin, nickel, dimensions variable.

FOR LOVE GONE and on the negotiation of his BODY AND MIND CONNECTION DISORDER (autism). Here, opaque spacers between the letters signified the time it took for him to choose them one by one with an assistant. Those of us who are permitted to forget that textual experience is always fragmentary and durational are prone to speak of it as though it could be otherwise.

I'm doing that right now, describing my encounter as if it had started out with understanding, when in fact the exhibition carefully preempted instantaneous consumption. The soft scrape of the charcoal blocks beneath my feet distracted me each time I moved to orient my body toward the hanging lines of words. The brightness of the lights' changing reflections on the metal letters hurt my eyes. My reading often dissipated in the overlapping interactions of the parallel, transparent, floating pages. As sensorial reminders of my presence in the gallery prolonged my effort to compose the words into a coherent text, I thought of Thomas Hobbes reflecting on the dictum "Read thyself." The formal textures Berger lent the textual encounter had accentuated a reflexiveness of reading that, according to the author of *Leviathan* (1651), is itself an instrument of care: "Whosoever looketh into himself and considereth what he doth when he does think, opine, reason, hope, fear, etc. . . . shall thereby read and know what are the thoughts and passions of all other men." Not only was this exhibition about some nameless loves, but it also pointed to and activated a persistent possibility of love within the structure of reception—of reading in general.