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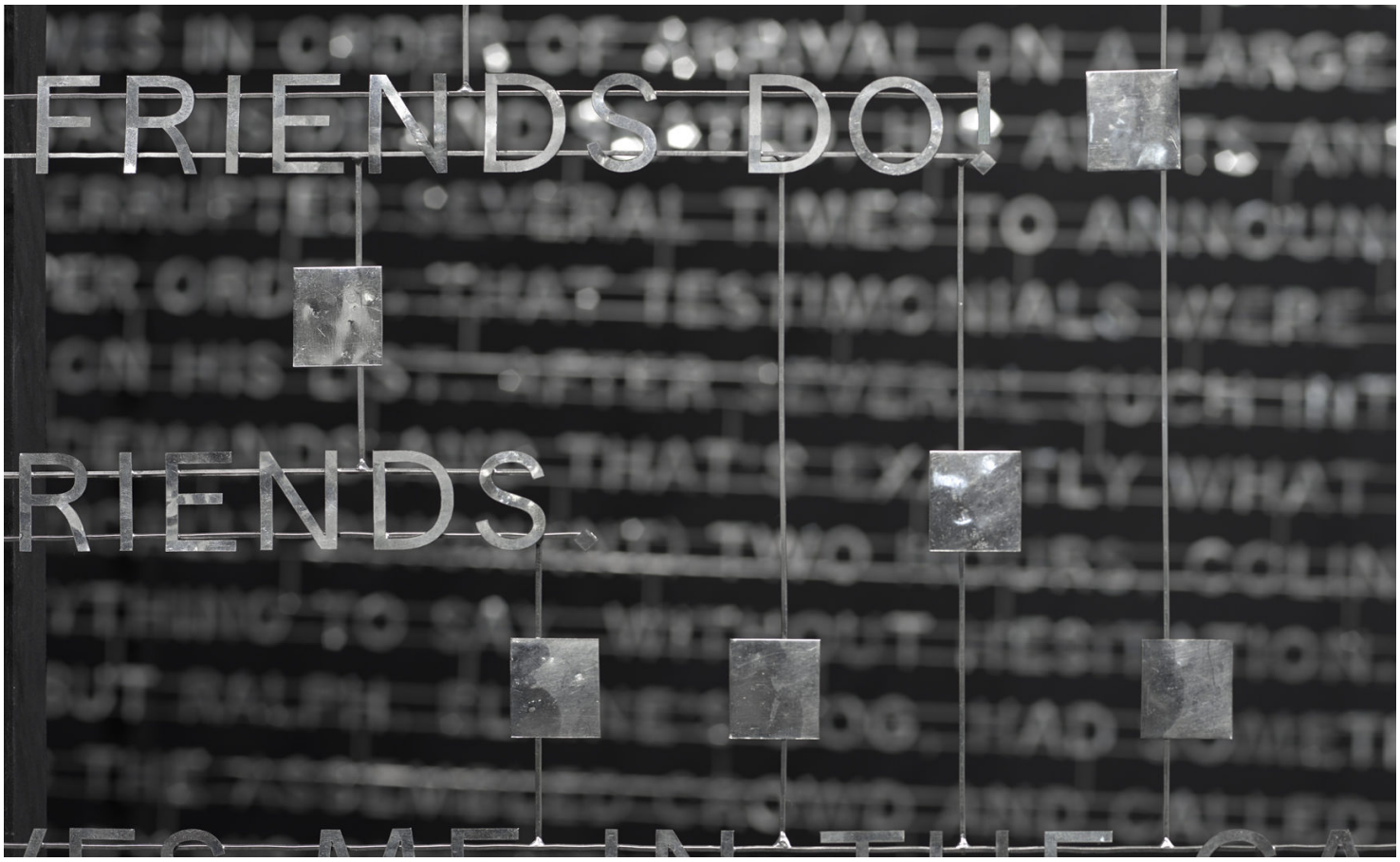

Text is central to the sculptures in *An Introduction to Nameless Love.*

Photo by Julia Featheringill/ Stewart Clements

LABOR OF LOVE

Jonathan Berger's riddle of an exhibition grapples with intimacy and partnership

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by Cate McQuaid

Thousands of little devotions tie us to those we love. Artist Jonathan Berger makes those devotions manifest in *An Introduction to Nameless Love*, a sweet and challenging exhibition on view at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts through December 29. Like love, the exhibition is edifying, supportive, and built on countless details.

Berger has set out to embody several deep relationships in sculptural installations. Text is central to the sculptures. Reading it, like a relationship, demands time and patience.

The show is curated by Dan Byers, the Carpenter Center's director, and Lia Gangitano, founder and director of PARTICIPANT INC in New York City, where it will travel next and be on view from February 23 to April 5, 2020.

Jonathan Berger worked with a team to craft and install the show, in which more than 30,000 tin letters were hand-soldered onto nickel supports.

Photo by Julia Featheringill/ Stewart Clements

Berger's largest project to date ambitiously weaves together disparate threads of his career. In addition to making art, he has a background in communal enterprises such as theater design and artistic activism. As director of New York University's 80 Washington Square East Gallery, or 80WSE, from 2013 to 2016, he fostered collaborative, interdisciplinary, and research-oriented exhibitions. Many of his projects have depended on relationships, which is the very mortar of this one.

After Berger's close friend, artist Ellen Cantor, died in 2013, he began to contemplate what constitutes an intimate connection. He interviewed people about their treasured relationships: Conservationist Richard Ogust spoke of his elemental bond with turtles; Brother Arnold Hadd, one of the last living Shakers, shared about his relationship to God. Berger researched the connection between married designers Charles and Ray Eames.

To cull hours of interviews down to crystalline nuggets, Berger called on guest editors. He invited a graphic designer to create a new font and lay out the text. He worked with a team to craft and install the show. Roughly 33,000 tin letters were individually laser cut, then hand-hammered and hand-soldered onto nickel supports (Berger also has some background in jewelry making), which stand on floors built from hundreds of thousands of tiny cubes of charcoal. Reflecting the hard work of many, *An Introduction to Nameless Love* is, quite intentionally, a labor of love.

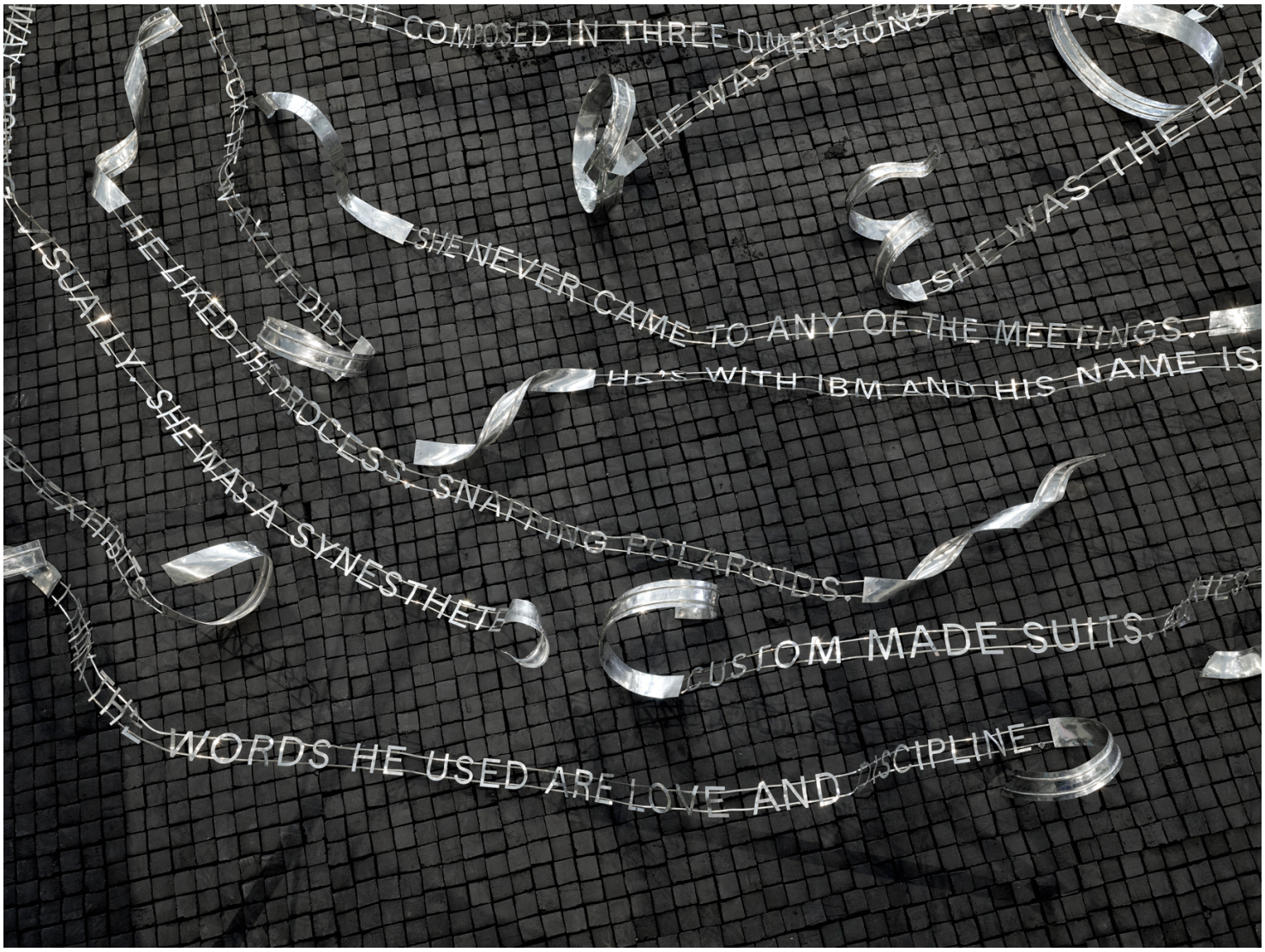
The effect of all that handwork is hushed and reverential. The sculptures, which take on different forms, are not easy to read; they perch on a narrow perceptual precipice between reading and looking, between text and object. Light and shadow play over their hammered surfaces, obscuring words. To read a whole sentence, you have to move. You have to concentrate.

The globelike sculpture about Charles and Ray Eames features lyrics by Michael Stipe of R.E.M. Photo by Julia Featheringill/ Stewart Clements

The forms of certain sculptures make them easier to decipher than others. Hadd's reflection on his life in God's service—"The work goes on. The hands fall off, the feet fall off, the work goes on"—is presented in a stout, approachable T formation.

The globelike sculpture about Charles and Ray Eames is harder to decode. Michael Stipe, who was the lead singer of the band R.E.M., has composed a lyric, written from Ray's

perspective, that circles the orb. It's all starlight and imagination: "Spectacular things! / A rush of creation / of brass and gold rings— / a carnival flutter, / and shudder and dreams."



Ribbons of text from Berger's interviews with colleagues of the designers sit on the floor. Photo by Julia Featheringill/ Stewart Clements

On the floor, ribbons of text from Berger's interviews with the designers' colleagues—snippets selected by artist Matthew Brannon—bring us down to earth. "It wasn't like one imagines a couple. I think in many ways they were their own client." The Eames piece addresses the quicksilver and the mundane of creative partnership, but since Berger didn't interview the couple—they died decades ago—it doesn't murmur in your ear the way the first-person works do.

A dialogue between autistic writer and philosopher Mark Utter and his communication supporter Emily Anderson is the most rewardingly intimate work, made up of several sculptures including vertical panels and a giant open book. Utter has a sparkling mind, but

he must type into a computer to communicate. Berger inserts lengths of hammered tin between each letter of Utter's words, clotting up the reading process to reflect his subject's laborious expression.

Stuttering and slow as it is to read, Utter's interview is heartrending.

"I felt deeply aware of love for a long time," he says. "But I was not a participant. Though I found I felt it in me. I want the transformational soothing of someone knowing me. And vice versa."

The sculptures perch on a narrow perceptual precipice between reading and looking, between text and object.

Photo by Julia Featheringill/ Stewart Clements

He needed help, but help, as Anderson discovered, is not a one-way street. "There were things in my life that weren't working. Mark helped me realize I didn't want to be at my job anymore. Or in my relationship anymore," she says. "So Mark and I made a deal. I would help him get out in the world. But he would help me with my inner world."

We enter into closeness because we seek something—help, laughter, solace, intimacy. To build it—letter by letter, charcoal brick by charcoal brick—we must sacrifice and face ourselves in new ways. *An Introduction to Nameless Love* gives form, in act and material, to the thousand devotions of friendship. Viewing it commands similar challenges. Like a rewarding relationship, it, too, opens us.

AUTHOR

Cate McQuaid is a freelance writer. She covers galleries for *The Boston Globe*.

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