



## ART

## “Jonathan Berger: An Introduction to Nameless Love”



Courtesy the artist and Participant Inc.

Feb. 23-Dec. 6

Participant Inc.  
253 E. Houston St.  
Downtown

212-254-4334

[Website](#)



**Jonathan Berger** is an unusual artist. You could mistake him for a biographer. One acclaimed piece—both a work of art and a curatorial project, as is Berger’s habit—divined the mysteries of Andy Kaufman. (Performance is often on Berger’s mind.) In the beautiful exhibition “An Introduction to Nameless Love,” at Participant Inc. (through Dec. 6; appointments, via [participantinc.org](http://participantinc.org), are necessary), which debuted at Harvard’s Carpenter Center, Berger again shares the lives of others. In this case, the subjects are six people who have found life-altering connections beyond the you-complete-me clichés of romance, including the autistic philosopher Mark Utter, the turtle conservationist Richard Ogust, and Maria A. Prado, who once lived in a homeless enclave beneath New York City. Their stories are spelled out in thirty-three thousand hand-cut tin letters suspended on nickel wire, shimmering planes that can turn the act of reading into a full-body experience. To take in the words of Brother Arnold Hadd, one of the last living Shakers, for instance, you have to pace methodically back and forth, as if performing a devotional ritual. A delightful book of inventive nonfiction—musings on intimacy—by Mady Schutzman, titled “Behold the Elusive Night Parrot,” was published in tandem with the exhibition.

— *Andrea K. Scott*

# The New York Times

ART REVIEWS

## Four Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Works by Jonathan Berger and Liu Xiaodong can be viewed virtually, but if you're up for venturing out, you'll want to see Cristine Brache and Vanessa Thill's art in person.



Jonathan Berger's installation "An Introduction to Nameless Love," which is on view at Participant Inc.'s website. [Mark Waldhauser](#)

By **Roberta Smith, Jason Farago, Will Heinrich and Jillian Steinhauer**

July 22, 2020



### Jonathan Berger

Through Oct. 11. Participant Inc.; [participantinc.org](https://participantinc.org).

"An introduction to Nameless Love," Jonathan Berger's large, text-based installation at Participant Inc., is one of the sleeping beauties of the New York gallery lockdown. Luckily, it will reawaken Sept. 9 for a month.

I saw it during its initial opening five months ago, and was dazzled by its silvery texts, seeming to hang in midair and surrounded by darkness. They have stayed in my mind, aided by the wise and generous love-knows-no-bounds title; the crucial phrase is Allen Ginsberg's, from a 1974 interview. The pieces make us privy to six unconventional relationships detailed in carefully culled words, and reiterated more abstractly in two tenderly handled complementary materials.

The show is an extensive collaboration, most of all between Mr. Berger and the people writing or talking about their own relationships or those they have witnessed. He knows most of them well, and participated in the creation of their texts, as did other friends, acting as facilitators or editors.

Made of one-inch letters punched out in a combination of tin and nickel, some of the texts are the size of walls; others aren't much bigger than the tops of card tables; one is in the shape of a sphere. The words pull you in. "My aunt Rhoda died at the age of thirty-seven when I was fifteen years old," begins a bit of memoir from Mady Schutzman's book "Behold the Elusive Night Parrot." She describes how inheriting and using her aunt's clothing, jewelry and artworks led her to become a "living archive."



Among the installation's texts are this excerpt from Mady Schutzman's "Behold the Elusive Night Parrot." Carter Seddon

An expanse of words in the shape of a towering gateway presents “The Tunnel,” in which Maria A. Prado is interviewed by Margaret Morton, known for documenting the homeless, with Esther Kaplan, the executive editor of the Reveal Center for Investigative Reporting. Ms. Prado, a former resident of New York City’s underground homeless community, describes how the experience shaped, and maybe saved, her life, making her more sensitive to others and also more assertive.

The turtle conservationist Richard Ogust recounts the chance meeting with a diamondback terrapin — a true romance in many ways — that set him on course to gather and oversee the second largest captive group of endangered turtles in the country. We also hear from the Shaker Brother Arnold Hadd; the autistic writer and philosopher Mark Utter; and former assistants of the dynamic design duo Ray and Charles Eames, about whom Michael Stipe has written a song — “My Name is Ray” — whose lyrics surround the sculptural sphere.

The darkness enveloping all this shimmering language is most notable for a mysterious floor that seems covered entirely with tiny black tiles, strangely soft and a little dusty looking. They are actually small cubes of charcoal. This expanse of beautiful, immediate, absorbent, dumb material couldn’t be more different from the equally beautiful noise above. Constructed with great care — and no adhesives — the floor is a palpable act of love that, despite its muteness, amplifies the entire show as such. *ROBERTA SMITH*

---



**ArtSeen**

# Jonathan Berger: An Introduction to Nameless Love

By **Ksenia Soboleva**



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

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

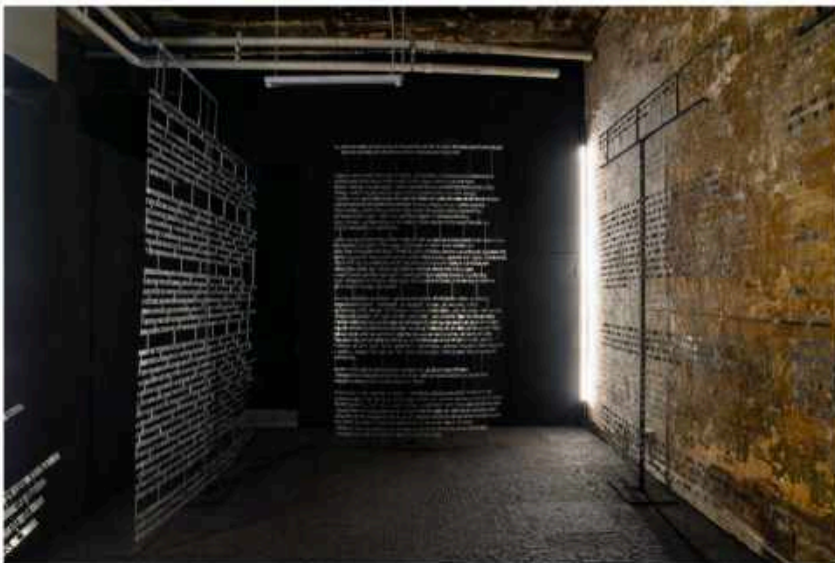


Installation view: *Jonathan Berger: An Introduction to Nameless Love*, Participant, Inc., New York, 2020. Courtesy Participant, Inc. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.

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.

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?



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

The Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector once wrote: “I want to grab the word in my hand. Is the word an object?”<sup>1</sup> 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.

### **Endnotes**

1. Clarice Lispector, *Agua Viva* (New Directions Publishing Corporation: New York, 2012),

---

### **Contributor**

#### **Ksenia Soboleva**

is an art historian, writer, and curator based in New York City. She is a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.



Aug 24, 2020, 10:54am EDT

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



**Brienne Walsh** Contributor @  
Arts



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

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



Jonathan Berger, Untitled (from Behold the Elusive Night Parrot, by Mady Schutzman), 2019. ... [+] PHOTO: CARTER SEDDON

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.



Jonathan Berger, *Untitled* (Emily Anderson and Mark Utter, with Erica Heilman), 2019.  
Installation ... [+] PHOTO: MARK WALDHAUSER

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 hatchlings 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.

## The Best Shows in New York During Armory Week



Jonathan Berger, *An Introduction to Nameless Love*, 2019, installation detail. Courtesy: the artist and Participant Inc, New York; photograph: Mark Waldhauser

**Jonathan Berger**

**Participant Inc.**

*23 February – 5 April*

I'll confess: I'm not fond of exhibitions that require a lot of reading, at least not in the gallery. Although 'An Introduction to Nameless Love', Jonathan Berger's show at Participant Inc., features a *lot* of text – 33,000 letters to be precise, each cut and hand-hammered individually from tin – it's like a book I'd love to live inside.

Glimmering quotes from interviews with a wide range of subjects – from Shaker Brother Arnold Hadd to turtle conservationist Richard Ogust – are mounted on wire grids so fine that they merge diaphanously with one another. A floor of cubed charcoal briquettes crackles underfoot. As the show's title suggests, the words here are all about kinds of love that aren't strictly romantic: for instance, our passion for animals or our devotion to god. Musings by designers Charles and Ray Eames form a celestial orb in the back of the gallery and unfurl like ribbons on the floor around it. Bring your glasses and plan to stay awhile.

# Contemporary Art Daily

July 17th, 2020

## Jonathan Berger at Participant Inc.



**Artist:** Jonathan Berger

**In Collaboration With:** Mady Schutzman, Emily Anderson, Tina Beebe, Julian Bittiner, Matthew Brannon, Barbara Fahs Charles, Brother Arnold Hadd, Erica Heilman, Esther Kaplan, Margaret Morton, Richard Ogust, Maria A. Prado, Robert Staples, Michael Stipe, Mark Utter, Michael Wiener, Sara Workneh

**Venue:** Participant Inc., New York

**Exhibition Title:** An Introduction to Nameless Love

**Date:** February 23, 2020 - October 11, 2020

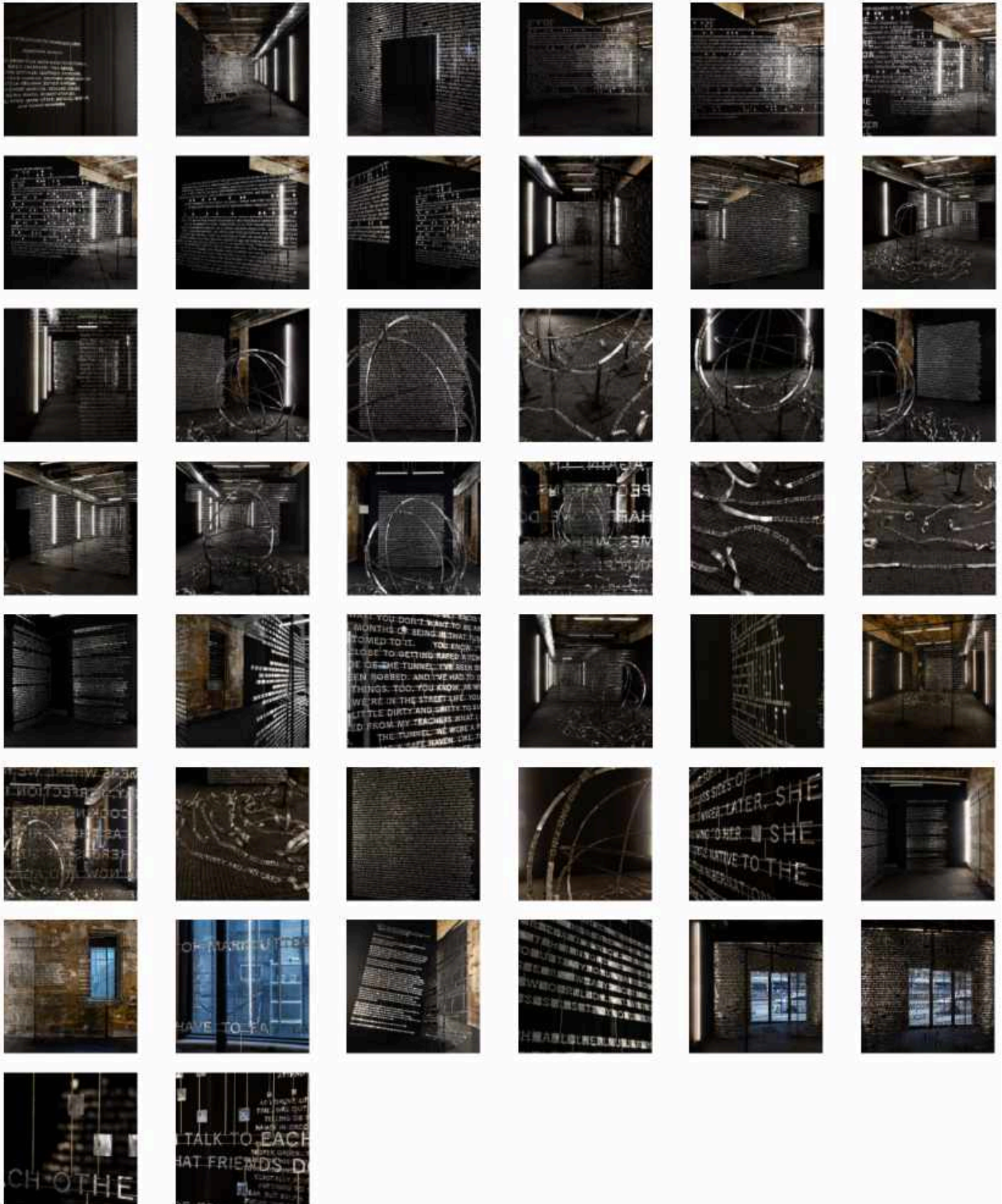
**Curated By:** Lia Gangitano, Dan Byers, John R. and Barbara Robinson

**Organized By:** Participant Inc., New York and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge

[Click here to view slideshow](#)

Full gallery of images, press release and link available after the jump.

Images:



Images courtesy of Participant Inc., New York. Photos by Mark Waldhauser and Carter Seddon.