

MASS MoCA

Joseph Grigely celebrates the beauty and complexity of communication in the exhibition *In What Way Wham?*

Decades of work exploring language, representation, deafness, and the perception of sound by the Chicago-based artist are on view May 28, 2023 – March 2024

North Adams, MA, March 31, 2023 – MASS MoCA announces Joseph Grigely's exhibition *In What Way Wham? (White Noise and Other Works, 1996-2023)*, opening May 28, 2023. The exhibition will occupy MASS MoCA's ground-floor galleries, and will debut a new, monumental, installation consisting of two intersecting oval rooms that surround the viewer with thousands of handwritten conversation papers passed between the artist and friends and colleagues over the course of three decades.

Grigely is a native of Western Massachusetts. He was born and raised in East Longmeadow, where at the age of ten he fell down a hill and became completely deaf. At this point, he began a journey that he describes as "watching the world with the sound turned off," paying close attention to language, communication, and the vagaries of human interaction. His appreciation of language – deepened through his pursuit of a PhD in English literature at Oxford University – extends to celebrating the beauty of inconsequential daily exchanges, and using them to create artworks of understated complexity.

Grigely's work explores the visual representation of speech and sound in the form of installations, sculptures, photographs, films, and books. In the mid-1990s, he first exhibited his ongoing series, *Conversations With the Hearing*, composed of notes written during conversations with people who do not know sign language. They are conversations from daily encounters with family, friends, and strangers, and for years, Grigely mostly discarded them after the conversation's end. But when he noticed they occupied a unique space between speech and writing, he began to save them. Subsequently, he amassed an archive of tens of thousands of conversation papers which provide the raw material for much of his work.

White Noise was first presented as a single elliptical room at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2000) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (2001). For his show at MASS MoCA, Grigely has been commissioned to expand the installation from one to two rooms, each roughly twenty-five feet across, in the triple-height space of the museum's first-floor galleries. *White Noise* is Grigely's most significant work, showcasing three decades of conversational exchanges. The phrase "White Noise" is used by audiologists to describe a noise that occupies a wide bandwidth of random frequencies and the installation *White Noise* is intended to provide a visual equivalent of this experience. The viewer is

immersed in a floor-to-ceiling installation of thousands of written notes, allowing them to experience, and read, the remnants of past conversations, eavesdropping on private jokes, confidences, arguments, and discussions from thirty years of the artist's life. The first room will feature conversations on different shades of white paper, and the second connected room will be filled with a riot of colored papers.

Most are informal conversational banter, but sometimes words are replaced with drawings, emphasizing marks and gestures all rendered in endlessly varying styles of handwriting representing the myriad voices of Grigely's interlocutors. In composing these "utterances" on the wall, he considers not only the ebb and flow of the conversation's subject matter, but also its formal qualities. He considers as part of the overall composition the size, shape, and color of each piece of paper, recalling the formal approaches of Russian Constructivism, Minimalism, and Conceptualism, and artists like Josef Albers and Sol LeWitt. Just as Grigely is concerned with how a word or phrase flows into and affects adjacent utterances, he also considers each individual paper an element of a unified visual composition.

Grigely's work often depends on the slow accumulation of material in the form of archival collections, and using this archive as resource material for serial projects. One example is an ongoing photographic series entitled *Songs Without Words*. In this series, Grigely has collected images of people singing and performing music from paper copies of *The New York Times*, and edited out the captions in a way that leaves the images devoid of contextual words. What remains is a body that can be seen singing, but cannot be heard, and in the absence of language creates new forms of meaning. In another series called *Craptions*, Grigely investigates the use of AI and autocaptioning, and the surprisingly convoluted relationship between speech and text. *Blueberry Surprise* (2003) is drawn from Grigely's archive of conversations: it consists of a carefully edited narrative of thousands of utterances, the speaker of each utterance distinguished by a shift of color of the text, from orange to red to black to orange again. Presented as a wall frieze, as a print, as a book, and as an audio play for three voices, *Blueberry Surprise* reveals Grigely's deft way of reshaping ordinary conversation into a creative form that folds art and literature into each other.

Grigely's exhibition asks us to think deeply about human communication, about the formal and informal qualities of language, and about what happens when language is rendered inaudible. "Part of my interest is to convey in some sense the experience of being deaf," says Grigely. As much as the exhibition explores the enabling side of being deaf, it also includes two new sculptures that explore the disabling side of the experience. *Between the Walls and Me* and *What the Stress Amounts To* (both 2023) are essentially archives of social contact, where the frustrations and complications of disability cannot be ignored, and where they have deeply unsettling consequences.

This exhibition strives to provide accessibility resources for the deaf and blind, including ASL tours and audio descriptions. Please check the exhibition website and MASS MoCA's accessibility page for information and updates: massmoca.org/visit/accessibility/

About the artist:

Joseph Grigely (b. 1956, lives and works in Chicago) has exhibited extensively in Europe and the U.S.. His work is in collections that include the Tate Modern, London; The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; SMAK, Ghent, Belgium; the MCA, Chicago; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Recent exhibitions and projects took place at Grazer Kunstverein, Graz; the Serpentine, London; FRAC Île-de-France/ Le Plateau, Paris; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Foundation Serralves, Porto; and the Centre Pompidou, Metz. His work has been shown in the Whitney, Berlin, Venice, Istanbul, Liverpool, and Sydney Biennials. In 2007, the Baltimore Contemporary and Tang Museum published a monograph on his work, *Joseph Grigely: St. Cecilia*. His books include *Textualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (1995), *Conversation Pieces* (1998), *Blueberry Surprise* (2006), *Exhibition Prosthetics* (2010) and *Oceans of Love: The Uncontainable Gregory Battcock* (2016). Grigely is represented by Krakow Witkin, Boston, and Air de Paris, Paris.

About MASS MoCA

MASS MoCA is one of the world's liveliest centers for making and enjoying today's most evocative art. With vast galleries and a stunning collection of indoor and outdoor performing arts venues, MASS MoCA is able to embrace all forms of art: music, sculpture, dance, film, painting, photography, theater, and new, boundary-crossing works of art that defy easy classification. Much of the work we show in our light-filled spaces, on our technically sophisticated stages, and within our lovely network of late 19th-century courtyards is made here during extended fabrication and rehearsal residencies that bring hundreds of the world's most brilliant and innovative artists to North Adams all year round. For more information about MASS MoCA, visit www.massmoca.org.

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