

Joseph Grigely In What Way Wham?

White Noise and Other Works, 1996–2023



MASS MoCA

Mmmmmmmmm I look like crap Anyway—I'm pretty happy I got a lot of exercise this summer I shipped lots of leaves to LA yesterday I have 2 loaves of banana bread I want to give one to your parents—do you want some of the other one? Do you like my bathroom? You want fun? When you are a girl and you take a bath—Sometimes water gets in then when you relax it comes out it can happen hours later—walking along—whistling—then OOPS! down your leg Do you want to take a shower and rest while I get dinner ready? Do you ever go canoeing? What do you mean? I'm all wrong? Then what? Why? inside the Tomato and Mushrooms? good as in 'good looking'? I love scented geraniums Winnie the Pooh's birthday too give me Green a very feminine place a good walk that goes through the Arboretum Its rhythm is beautiful I can't exactly grasp it My mom is like that When I call her—everytime—no failure—She will say a list of vegetables—it's so funny! Even when she called to tell me my grandfather died and she'll talk about dirt English wool But sheep stuff is really great—shearing, spinning, spinning wool in the bright spring sun—The sun warms up the lanolin and the wheel—it's so fast and tactile—olfactory—orgasmic It seems so 'Quaint' or 'dumb'—but it's really Sexy Do you mind if I put my lady legs over you? Do I seem nervous? The hotel that I go to perform kinky acts is around here Your ticket? What's inside? I knew her dog before I knew her I used to bite the hell out of my sister's arm I have such a fat ass I'm pretty happy but I'm tired I was up till 2:00 last night I can't believe I'm doing this to you You like the possibility? I like it that you can't hear me pee because I've always been embarrassed by that—I would hold it all day in school because I wouldn't want any other girl to hear me It's a long story One of the best meals I ever had was when I was 11 years old—Baked beans, hot dogs, cooked outside by a snowy lake at twilight with my friend—it was so cold. After school we went up there with the stuff—got a fire going—it was SO delicious—I remember the smell of the snow, and the sky, and the fire, and my mittens, and my cold feet and packing it all up afterwards—home in the dark—But very delicious—the food in my mouth was exquisite A moveable land artificial at first I was throbbing I can't drive a stick shift or I'd offer to take over for a while Berry's has good dirty martinis Fiancée is such a good word What is your second best ideal? I'm too talkative aren't I? I feel bad about that You know, there is a lot said—I've taken so much for granted I really wish I could sign because I love quiet conversations Rachel said the exterminator's here & he was watching her get dressed It's comforting to have these gaps This is my favorite cupboard All silver & kind of empty Shall we go for dinner with my father tomorrow? What would you do if you had to do something completely opposite of what you do? your pants were hanging from a tree branch I can't believe it Is there anything you want to know? About the sound of the world? Here in this apartment? I think you can hear the buzz can you? I thought I caught you finally that you're not deaf The music is really horny obsessed I mean citrusy I want to tell you something—This friend of mine. She had a baby. She didn't discover until he was about 6 months that he was totally blind. She noticed weird things though. One was that he imitated perfectly the sound of the refrigerator. The sound of the car on the gravel approaching the house. They say things come full circle—it's all relative—perhaps they are right Beauty is difficult. Crunchy crispy with wispy fluffy inside Perfect watering always in cloud That's your excuse No one can communicate Not with words anyway Maybe smell or hair or something I said I'm oral not horrible Where were you raised? Do you want a beer? Fuzzy navel? Alabama slammer? I'm tempted to smoke cigarettes again Men are assholes Get me some wine Let's not hurt ourselves I look tired? Grey hair? My nerves have become so bad I think no more champagne for lunch for me Eric will join us a little later a pitcher is three glasses Roasted peppers balsamic vinegar foxy meow my mother's homemade applesauce I was thinking of a girly coffee drink I can't believe how talkative I am Have you ever lived in suburbs? Ramps? I don't know I get flustered in front of the broccoli Squid? Oh my When I was cycling home last night guess who I met? no—lying on the ground out cold—pissed—I got her up after repeatedly calling her name and walked her home If you start with a 1 carat diamond for example and in two years you want to purchase a two carat Diamond you can receive full value for the original purchase and just pay the difference loudness and laughing from other table They're talking about septic systems—Kirsten knows them He's got a great Irish accent Do any of your pockets work? Was it cold in the greenhouse last night? I had to set up cat litter Does it give away

the story? She & her mother baked a carrot cake for the wedding—was a little overbaked—they had to cut it with an electric knife in the summer my friend Fred would like to go up there with us, he Fishes! My aunt used to date him Played for Red Wings She had fingers in her hair Beaujolais Oldeau But that sounds like a vaginal suppository the Teddy Roosevelt syndrome Mom always took pix of us with mouths full He's being very rude about me—I, unfortunately, am too small to fit a wonderbra—it's not something I would have told you if you could hear—I would still have written it down Pink bits? You don't think I'm getting ugly? I'm living very hard—Scarily so but I like this fantasy over here Nice body? Do I have a nice body? Who told you that? I have a headache—took some aspirin—I smoked a cigarette just kidding I'm tired as hell too—I wonder if I'll ever not be tired Do I look like shit? Not literally my grandmother's apartment plastic covered couch Some friends of mine asked me to take care of their fish during spring break in college. It died. punch sound don't even try it I heard that the whole cigar market has tanked I heard it smells in the summer I normally create a situation wherever I go It's good for you bad for the atmosphere We went to the 8 ball. Karl and Patrick lost a game to two young women. We went back and played cards outside until around 2 and then we washed all the dishes I'm trying to get you drunk so I can take advantage of you We can leave the guys here We're trying to seduce Paul with a drumstick We'll really be able to eat off the floor Let me know when is good for you—I'll prove myself The bed isn't made—but the floor smells fresh I just bought some amazing Moroccan olives Road kill is my favorite meat My horoscope says that I have to dare to be different How many wines could we choose from in Beaune? wines, not wives Do you have tylenol or something? A headache from food? I've had them from the lack of food My sister called last night—I said I was stressed & spending lots & lots of time at school. She asked if I had begun drinking coffee yet? I've had it—but I only like it with lots of booze Strange—I feel so calm now—I was really a mess A lot of masturbation—Not enough shots of gin could help but I can't think about food anymore I just giggle a lot You want the drink stix? Can you strap it on? Don't—at least not now that cigarette was a bad idea We should consider returning to the other place for ice cream cocktails I used to do it when I was younger You have a fuzzy green sweater I love The feminine spirit in a place. The world wouldn't exist without insects Quirky Beauty musicians Tennessee and lots of deer Absinthe is big also in Vancouver I don't know why the mosquitoes are so bad now later in the summer the fireflies sit in the trees & light them up like Christmas lights What d'you want to do? What did you think of the gravy? What about the apple? No one ate the apple I pleaded not guilty and have a court date in January—Do you want to be my lawyer? You've been watching LA Law? What about Gilligan's Island? You stay here? Or come to the hotel? I probably should have shown you that before you got in my car Empty one for the boss That's an Italian gesture Pretty good really, we've been cooking a lot and drinking and watching videos Me too but I've just been sitting around playing with Chris' cats all week So who's in line for a date when you go to NY? They say at Dublin airport it is very good to eat oysters with ale They have comics too And all those cute punks who work there Horny girls with no men We were just discussing getting a TV California 1995 Chardonnays steak or catfish And to make little girls find plain old food more exciting We were commenting on our awe of the attitude in so much of academia—hostile—negative—closed to anything other than their perspective they're slaves to the system with dirty gutters "Is good to have no brain" he said unlike the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz KLM phoned There is only one seat on the 6:15 flight—but you need to upgrade to the next fare—this means you pay an extra £914! to get naked fish or baby fish? I want to eat them all now Gus wants to go dancing I grew up in the Monarch butterfly capital of the world Pacific Grove, California Every year we had a butterfly parade and we all dressed up as Monarchs—3rd-5th grade—I suggested we go as old decrepit butterflies one year and I always handed out candy along the route as I had some idea that that was appropriate for parade marchers, hard candy naturally so you could pelt the crowd I think they are chirping but hard to hear them over the crowd hubub They are sensitively shaped Amaretto Pineapple Cheaper and shorter cigarettes This metronome is for you We fixed it up We were working late the night the game was on So cards are passed around and you look at each one, decide if you want it—then keep it or pass it on It's a stupid game on-a-mana-pee-a It's strong and it's vodka Do you

Soft Eye Music: Joseph Grigely's Visual Sound

By Denise Markonish

“In my case, silence is not absence of sound but of movement.”

—David Wright¹

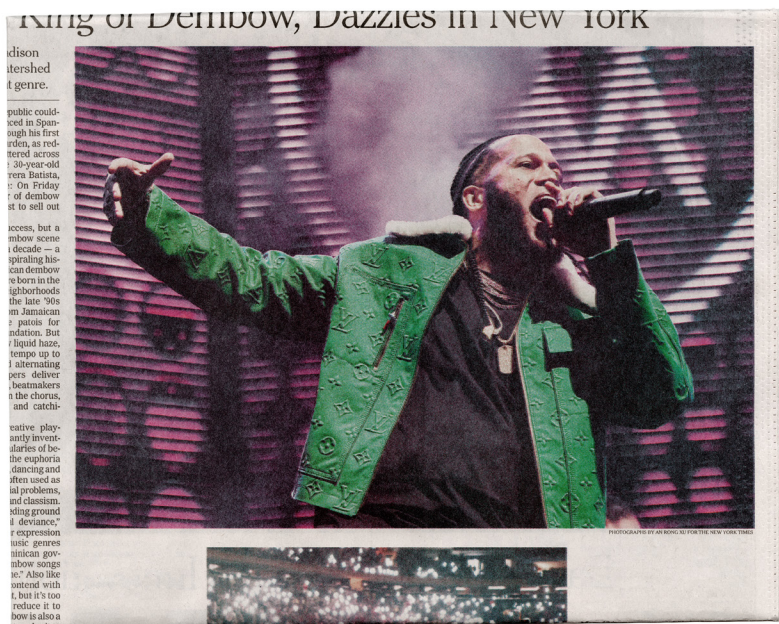
What would you do if the world suddenly went mute? Would you, like South African poet David Wright, who became deaf as a child, depend on the cues of movement to understand the sound associated with a bird's wings, something poet William Wordsworth called “soft eye-music”?² Or would you, like artist Joseph Grigely, dive into the inconsistencies of sound—its absence and presence—and unravel the absurdities of communication, both abling and disabling?

At ten years old, Grigely was playing with friends and fell down a hill, where a branch lodged into his ear, rendering him deaf. From this point forward, Grigely began to consider the material of sound rather than the act of hearing. He states: “when the words can no longer be heard, language is transformed into what is visible: glances, gestures, movements of the mouth...The beauty of being deaf is the privilege of watching the world with the sound turned off.”³ This world with the “sound turned” is a driving force in the artist's life and art, where he delves into the mechanizations of communication and the seen rather than heard conversation.

To communicate with most people, Grigely relies on handwritten notes. Initially he discarded these but soon saw them as an archive, occupying a space between speech and writing. Communicating through writing made Grigely aware of the materiality of language, how gestures and fragments are emphasized physically, not orally. He states, “Imagine if every

word we spoke became palpable and dropped from our lips...Think about what would happen, and the places we would find the residue of our words. Imagine scraps of language lying on countertops. Drawers full of sentences. Peelings of words in the sink. Imagine the dashboards of our cars covered with everyday conversations. That is the one reason I find written conversations so compelling—they're not so much writing as they are talking on paper. They could be described as drawings of speech.”⁴ This recalls Wright or Wordsworth's “eye music” as it highlights Grigely's question of what a conversation *looks* rather than sounds like.

Peelings of words are found throughout the exhibition, including its title. *In What Way Wham?* comes from ***Blueberry Surprise* (2003)**, a work of text, audio, and theater composed from thousands of utterances from Grigely's archive. Like concrete poetry, he combined phrases such as “Beauty is difficult. Crunchy crispy with wispy fluffy inside,” and texts appear in red, black, and orange, each standing for a different speaker. Alongside *Blueberry Surprise*, works such as ***Fourteen Untitled Conversations* (2001/2014)**, which contains slips of paper with texts and drawings, or ***Paula's Birthday Party* (1998/2016)**, where the text is jumbled together at the bottom of the paper, evidencing a lively conversation, speak to both the visual experience of conversation and also formalities that Grigely adheres to, much like artist Sol LeWitt's use of geometry and color iteration, or Josef Albers' studies on color adjacencies. In *The Interaction of Color* Albers writes: “We are able to hear a single tone. But we almost never (that is, without special devices)



Joseph Grigely, *Songs Without Words (King of Dembow)*, 2023. Digital pigment print. 30 x 36 inches. Edition of 3

see a single color unconnected or unrelated to other colors.”⁵ And while Grigely is interested in scale, material, and color, he is equally concerned with how setting one phrase next to another inherently alters the meaning of both.

The largest gathering of Grigely’s notes is presented in *White Noise (2023)*,⁶ an installation consisting of two conjoined rooms, each approximately twenty-five feet across. The phrase “White Noise” is used by audiologists to describe a noise that occupies a wide bandwidth of random frequencies. Grigely’s version provides a visual equivalent of that experience. The work immerses the viewer in a floor-to-ceiling array of thousands of notes: some can be read, others are out of eye range, and all function as remnants of past conversations, eavesdropping on private jokes, arguments, and discussions from thirty years of the artist’s life. The first room’s conversations are on various white papers, and the second is filled with colored papers. While the rooms are silent, the cacophony of visual sound chatters loudly.

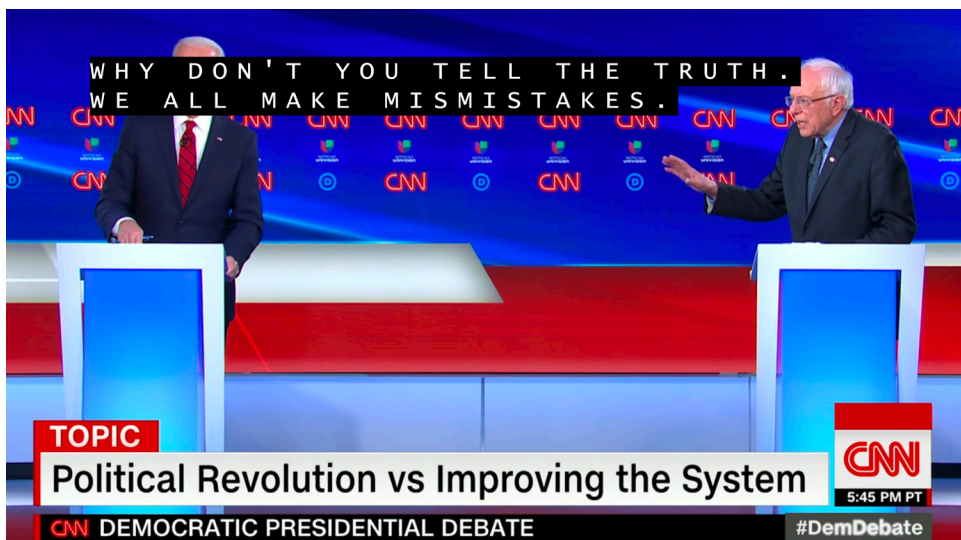
In an adjacent gallery, *Travels with Tess (2023)* illustrates how technology has shifted communication. Each work contains a grid of black and white photographs of a hand⁷ holding an iPhone that displays typed conversations. Like *Blueberry Surprise* or *White Noise*, we create our own narratives: “I walked very confidently into the men’s washroom,” “Shit,” “I’m hiccupping,” and “I’m getting confused typing for so many voices haha.” This last text in particular is poignant because the screen does not provide the same visual of unique voices present in handwriting. Seeing these works alongside Grigely’s *Portraits series (1995–1997)* is particularly telling. These close-up photographs depict people’s hands writing, emphasizing activity over legibility. The intimacy in these images—hands cover words, lighting is dim—counters the open display of digital language in *Travels with Tess*.

Along with writing, silence is palpable in Grigely’s work. *Songs Without Words (2012–ongoing)* isolates images of singers and

musicians from *The New York Times*. He erases the captions, further rendering the singers mute. *With a Sampler of What's to Come* features two formally dressed people hand in hand with their mouths open; *Andrea Bocelli* depicts the opera singer, who is blind, singing in front of a conductor/orchestra; and *Eartha Kitt* shows the singer, mouth open, hands gesturing. This series emphasizes “eye music,” asking us to imagine instead of listen. Grigely states: “Even without actually hearing an orchestra or a choir or a rock band, the visual nature of the performance permits one to ‘hear’ the sound as a fiction: when you watch the bows of the violins, or the conductor, or the faces of the choir, or the wrenched-up faces of rockers, implied sound comes together in an ineffable way.”⁸

Like visual language, Grigely takes miscommunication to seriously comical ends in *Remembering is a difficult job, but somebody has to do it* (2005), *Music from St. Cecilia* (2012), and *Craptions* (2023). Grigely often cites music as a primary cultural experience growing up. When he became deaf, that changed, yet the importance of music remains a touchstone. *Remembering is a difficult job, but somebody has to do it*

(2005) starts with a video projection of what appears to be a frothy ocean shore; it is flanked by potted palm trees on the floor, next to which is a monitor showing Grigely at a press conference. On the wall hang video stills of the landscape and a portrait of the *Gilligan's Island* cast. These disparate elements start falling apart as they are examined—the palm trees are fake, and the waves are actually ice chunks—only to be united as Grigely speaks about his recollections of music, eventually singing from memory a rendition of the *Gilligan's Island* theme song. Paired with *Music from St. Cecilia* (2012), the role that memory, absence, and music plays in Grigely's work becomes clear. Named after the patron saint of music, the *St. Cecilia* project highlights lip-misreading. When lip-reading, it is common for similar mouth formations to correlate to different words/phrases. For example, “vacuum” looks like “fuck you,” a mix-up best avoided. Grigely exposes inexactitude by creating versions of three popular songs—“Silent Night,” “My Favorite Things,” and “Jolly Old Saint Nicholas”—and based on lip-misreading. The new titles become “Cy Licks Light,”



“The Czar is Afraid of Everything,” and “Check Close Those Lucky Legs.” While these are funny, the intent is to create conditions for the hearing to experience linguistic misunderstandings prevalent for the deaf.

Grigely’s humor also has a dark side, which reveals the complications of disability, ability, and accessibility. He states: “Disability is not inherently the privilege of those who are physically impaired; rather, our presence disables those who interact with us.”⁹ Three of his newest works confront this head-on (in one case, quite literally). *Craptions* (2023) addresses the frustration of auto-captioning and how during the pandemic, while the world shifted to online content, many ignored accessibility. Grigely writes that captions “are about inclusion: not just for those who are deaf, but also for those who benefit from seeing what they are hearing. If art is going to be a critical part of our social and political moment, and if diversity is to encompass the intersectional enfolding of race and disability, it needs to be accessible for everybody.”¹⁰ Via printed screenshots, *Craptions* documents failed attempts at captioning containing phrases as vague as “music” or “non-English,” both of which are deeply inaccessible.

What the Stress Amounts To (2023) and *Between the Walls and Me* (2023) also address frustration. The former is a 35-foot column of wine capsules (foil covers over corks). Like *White Noise*, the accumulation and color adjacencies are beautiful and overwhelming. But unlike the stability of the former, the tower is tenuous. *Between the Walls and Me* is a replica of Grigely’s head that was smashed into the gallery wall, damaging both surfaces. It lays on the floor in defeat. Of these works Grigely writes: “As a disabled person, you spend a lot of time explaining, negotiating, and advocating, not just for access, but for a basic level of dignity. Moreover, advocacy is not just about accommodations requests; it’s about facilitating them, explaining them, shepherding them through a very long



Joseph Grigely, *Between the Walls and Me* (in progress), 2023. Cast stone and damaged walls. 15 x 12 x 8 inches. Edition of 3

process...This kind of advocacy is essentially uncompensated labor...It’s stressful. It’s wearying. You Drink. You bang your head against the walls.”¹¹

Writing, head-banging, drinking, singing, humor, and pain are all soft eye music and peelings of language caught and examined by Grigely. Through humor, pointed commentary, and flipping the script on the ability of disability, Grigely asks us to join him in scrutinizing communication, with its noise *and* silence, asking us in what way we may wham.

- 1 David Wright, *Deafness: A Personal Account* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 11
- 2 William Wordsworth, *Airey-Force Valley*, 1836. “A soft eye-music of slow-waving boughs”
- 3 Joseph Grigely, “Soundscaping”, *Artforum*, November, 2016, p. 236.
- 4 Ian Berry, “Nudist Plays: A Dialogue with Joseph Grigely” in Eds. Ian Berry and Irene Hofmann, *Joseph Grigely: St. Cecilia* (Opener 13) (Saratoga Springs: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum, 2007), p. 18–19.
- 5 Josef Albers, *The Interaction of Color*, 1963. <https://lookingatlooking.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/albersinteractionofcolor.pdf>, p. 5.
- 6 Smaller single-room versions of *White Noise* showed at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2000) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (2001).
- 7 Tess Davey, Grigely’s studio assistant
- 8 Berry, p. 6
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 22.
- 10 Joseph Grigely, “An Inventory of Apologies,” <https://journal.voca.network/inventory-of-apologies/>
- 11 From an email to the author, March 16, 2023.



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image and video
descriptions

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. 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, MA and Air de Paris, Romainville, France.

**Joseph Grigely:
In What Way Wham?**

White Noise and Other Works, 1996 – 2023

May 28, 2023 – March 2024

Curated by Denise Markonish, Chief Curator, MASS MoCA

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All Joseph Grigely images courtesy of the artist, Krakow Witkin, Boston, MA, and Air de Paris, Romainville, France.

Front cover: Joseph Grigely, *Chris O., Copenhagen, May 1996 (detail)*, 1997. C-Print. 5 × 3 inches. Edition of 3

Back cover: Joseph Grigely, *Amy V. Ghent, 29 January 1997, 1997*. R-print. 5 × 3 inches. Edition of 3

Poster: Joseph Grigely, *People Are Overhearing Us (detail)*, 2012. Pigment print. 44 × 148 inches. Edition of 3. Photo by James Prinz