

Every time we converse with another person, we risk the possibility for a misunderstanding to occur. When a word is misspoken, a tone misconstrued, or meaning misinterpreted, slips in communication can trigger responses ranging from laughter to confusion to anger. The likelihood of a misunderstanding becomes greater and communication further complicated when a common language is not shared, or as is the case with artist Joseph Grigely (American, b. 1956), when someone is deaf.

Grigely has been deaf since the age of ten, a factor that has not only filtered and shaped his work but has also become a central aspect of an artistic practice that explores the dynamics of everyday conversation and the failures and idiosyncrasies of language. Grigely first became known in the early 1990s for a series of works he called *Conversations with the Hearing*. From small tabletop tableaux and intimate wall-based works to room-sized installations, these works are generated from the handwritten notes produced by hearing people during conversations with Grigely, when someone does not know sign language and lipreading proves difficult. Many of Grigely's *Conversation* works feature several scraps of paper pinned to the wall, each revealing a fragment of a past dialogue and the spontaneous, discursive nature of conversation. With these works, Grigely asks the question: "We presumably know what a conversation sounds like, but what does a conversation look like?"

Most recently, Grigely has expanded this inquiry to an exploration of music. These works mine his memories of music as a child and foreground his current relationship to music as an adult—experiencing music "with the sound turned off." This exhibition brings together a number of recent works in sound, video, and installation and features a newly commissioned video installation titled *St. Cecilia*. Named after the patron saint of music, this work explores the nuances in the relationship between seeing and hearing and how these experiences inform what we understand. *St. Cecilia* features the Baltimore Choral Arts Society chamber choir singing several beloved Christmas carols with new lyrics written by Grigely that reflect the misunderstandings and confusions of lipreading.

In *St. Cecilia* we see footage of the choir members on two screens appearing as if they are singing the same song, when in actuality the words being sung on each side are vastly different from one another. The sound tracks of each song version are isolated and separated in the installation; a viewer can have various aural experiences of this work—one of silence, one with the sound of familiar lyrics, and one that reveals Grigely's new lyrics. With two sets of lyrics sung to the same music and with words that look virtually the same on the lips, the songs remind us of the humor and misunderstandings of mondegreens—the mishearing of words that result in a complete change of meaning. Misunderstandings such as these underscore the pitfalls of language that are possible every day, even with the simplest exchange.

—Irene Hofmann, Executive Director of the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore



Stills from *St. Cecilia*, 2007

Joseph Grigely
St. Cecilia
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
November 22, 2008–February 22, 2009

Works in the exhibition

Fireside Talk #2, 1999
Fiberglass, urethane, and pigment prints
17½ × 55 × 14 in. (44.5 × 139.7 × 35.6 cm)
Collection of Orange County Museum of Art,
Gift of the Curator's Circle

Joseph Grigely (American, b. 1956) and
Amy Vogel (American, b. 1967)
Something Say, 1999
Super 8 and 16mm film transferred to DVD
7 minutes, 33 seconds
Courtesy of the artists and Cohan and Leslie, New York

Joseph Grigely (American, b. 1956) and
Amy Vogel (American, b. 1967)
You, 2001
Audio and pigment prints
7 minutes, 30 seconds
Commissioned by the Yokohama Triennial
Courtesy of the artists and Cohan and Leslie, New York

Blueberry Surprise, 2003
Pigment print
72 × 50 in. (189.2 × 127 cm)
Edition 9 of 12
Courtesy of the artist and Cohan and Leslie, New York

*Remembering is a difficult job,
but somebody has to do it*, 2005
Single-channel videos, artificial palm trees,
and pigment prints
4 minutes, 45 seconds
Courtesy of the artist and Cohan and Leslie, New York

Cold Comfort, 2006
Pigment print
16½ × 12¼ in. (41.9 × 31.1 cm)
Edition 1 of 10
Courtesy of the artist and Cohan and Leslie, New York

That's What We Live For, 2006
Crystal urethane
Two parts, each 14½ × 12 × 11 in.
(36.8 × 30.5 × 27.9 cm)
Edition 2 of 3
Courtesy of the artist and Cohan and Leslie, New York

St. Cecilia, 2007
Two-channel video installation
8 minutes, 43 seconds
Coproduced by the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore,
and the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport
Beach, California
Courtesy of the artist and Cohan and Leslie, New York

*We're Bantering Drunkening About What's Important
in Life*, 2007
Ink and graphite on paper, pins
46 × 168 in. (116.8 × 426.7 cm)
Collection Martin Z. Margulies, Miami

What Did I Say?, 2008
Ink and graphite on paper, pins
30 × 113 in. (76.2 × 287 cm)
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago,
purchased with a gift from the Stenn Family to the
Edlis/Neeson Art Acquisition Fund in honor of the
MCA's 40th anniversary

Songs Without Words, 2008
Pigment prints
12 parts, each 18 × 14 in. unframed
(45.7 × 36.5 cm)
Edition 1 of 10
Courtesy of the artist and Cohan and Leslie, New York

Related programs

Artist talk
Joseph Grigely
Tuesday, December 2, 6 pm

For more information, visit mcachicago.org.

Curator's tour
Tuesday, December 9, noon

Tours with ASL translator
Saturdays, December 20, 2008, and January 17 and
February 21, 2009
Noon and 1 pm

St. Cecilia is co-organized by Irene Hofmann, Executive Director of the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, and Ian Berry, Associate Director and Malloy Curator of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College. Joseph Grigely's video installation, *St. Cecilia*, is coproduced by the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, and the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California.

The MCA presentation is overseen by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, Pamela Alper Associate Curator.



Official Airline of the Museum of Contemporary Art

Museum of
Contemporary
Art
CHICAGO

JOLLY OLD SAINT NICHOLAS Traditional	CHECK CLOSE THOSE LUCKY LEGS Lyrics by Joseph Grigely
Jolly old Saint Nicholas, Lean your ear this way! Don't you tell a single soul What I'm going to say; Christmas Eve is coming soon; Now, you dear old man, Whisper what you'll bring to me; Tell me if you can.	Check close those lucky legs Lips and hair are white Don't foretell a seafood dog When I'm going to die Reevy Stevens coughs up blue Now you see our mind Whisper water works for me Tell me if you lied
When the clock is striking twelve, When I'm fast asleep, Down the chimney broad and black, With your pack you'll creep; All the stockings you will find Hanging in a row; Mine will be the shortest one, You'll be sure to know.	What the clock is trying to tock When I'm forced to slip Tell the chippers brown and black The weatherman is ripped All the socks flippin'-fly Hanging in the road My woman read the story once You'll be sure to know
Johnny wants a pair of skates; Susy wants a dolly; Nellie wants a story book; She thinks dolls are folly; As for me, my little brain Isn't very bright; Choose for me, old Santa Claus, What you think is right.	Johnny was a bastard child Doosie wants a collie Nellie wants a story book She thinks dogs are falling Ask for me my little bride In a flower pot Do for me hotel lots When it's thick it's fried

To: jalinde@exchange.calstatela.edu
From: Joseph Grigely <jgrigely@artic.edu>
Sent: July 7, 2003 7:06AM
Subject: another story

Dear Jasmine,

I just remembered a related incident that I want to re-count for you. I've been wanting to tell it for years--but for some reason, the right occasion, the right context--nothing has quite been right. Until now.

This was in the mid 1990s--1996 I think. Boston. I was doing a residency at MIT, working in the gallery installing a show, and doing the usual art-related things. My room was in Brookline, however--a big old Victorian mansion that had been converted into a B&B. It was comfortable, and suited me well.

One evening I had dinner with an old friend from grad school, Rob, and his wife Anne. Rob picked me up in Brookline and drove me out to their home in the sub-urbs, where we had a pleasant evening--and later Rob drove me back again, waved goodbye, and left me on the steps of the Mansion. It was about 11pm, 11:30. I walked up to the front door, opened it with my keys, closed it--and then, as it were, my evening began.

I walked upstairs to my room, put the key in the lock, turned it, turned the door handle--and the door swung open a few inches before the safety chain suddenly stopped it from swinging more. In a swift moment, the door slammed shut. I do not remember my initial thoughts just then--maybe I looked at my keys, maybe I looked at the number at the door--all I knew was that this was my room, as it had been for the past week. So I opened the door again.

This time the door slammed shut even before the chain had reached the end of its length. I was pretty tired when my friend Rob had dropped me off on the steps, but by now I was pretty much wide awake. Either there was a ghost in my room, or a burglar, or just an ordinary person--it's hard to talk with someone on the other side of a door when you're deaf. But I tried to: "hellooooo," I said. "My name is Joe. I'm sorry, I'm deaf, I can't hear whatever you might say, but I want to say that something's wrong here, this is my room, or it was my room for the past week, and when I left it this morning my belongings were in it, and I'd like them back, if it's not too much trouble." I tried to open the door again, but it wouldn't open much--I could see through a crack that it looked like a dresser or bureau had been pushed up against it.

I tried again: "I really don't know what's going on here, maybe if you could step out for a minute we could figure it out together. Like I said, I'm deaf, and I can't lipread through doors, I really wish I could."

No response. In any case, no visible response. I tried my key once more--the door wouldn't move. "I'm really sorry about this situation," I said, "but please--I'm not a burglar I'm not a bad guy, I'm just a guy who has been sleeping in this room for the past week--I mean, how would I have this key to open the door if I didn't?"

No response. I went downstairs to the lobby. There was no night attendant--it was a Saturday night--but there was a night-stand with a telephone and a number to call in case of emergencies. In a situation like this, when you are deaf, and a telephone sits in front of you so innocently, it's really hard to measure your emotions--something so close that's also so far away.

I picked up the phone anyhow, and dialed the number. "Hello I'm Joe I'm deaf there's a problem at the B&B please come, Hello I'm Joe I'm deaf there's a problem at the B&B please come, Hello I'm Joe I'm deaf there's a problem at the B&B please come." I suppose I could have been a little more specific, but in situations like this you don't have the sort of perspective that nuance and subtlety require.

There wasn't too much to do at that point except wait--so I sat on the steps outside, and waited. Five minutes. Ten. Twenty. A half hour--a car swung by, two people got out, and walked up the steps.

I tried to explain my situation. "I'm Joe. I'm deaf. I'm a resident here, see, these are my keys. Except there's a problem, there's some people in my room and I can't get in, and the people won't come out so I can talk with them, and there's no night staff, but there's a phone, could you please call the emergency number for me so someone can come and help me?"

They looked at each other, then they looked at me, then the man picked up the phone and dialed the number. His brows went up, folded together into an arch, and then he shook his head--no answer. He hung up. Could you call the police I said? Maybe they can help? But the woman tugged at the hand of the man, and before I could plead my case further, they were on their way up the stairs.

By now it was getting a little late--well after midnight. The people in my room probably had every piece of furniture at their disposal piled up against the door--so i didn't see the point in trying them again.

I went outside, walked down the stairs to the street, turned, and walked down the street.

At this point I could have used a drink--and it occurred to me that going to a bar might not be a bad idea--I could ask the bartender to call the police, and the police could come back with me, and everything would be solved.

Except that in the particular neighborhood I was in, I couldn't find a bar. I did however find a 24 hour copy shop, so I went inside and explained to the guy working there that I was locked out of my B&B, and there were people in my room who wouldn't let me in, would he please call the police for me? He said no. I asked him why, and he said no outside calls for people. I said I'd be happy to make the call myself if my ears worked, but because they didn't, it would help a lot if he could make the call for me. He said no. Then he said something else, I'm not sure what exactly, and turned away from me. I got a little bitchy at that point--I think I said something bad, I don't remember what, and he came back and said to me that if I didn't get off their property he'd call the police and have me arrested for trespassing.

Please, I said. The police took their sweet time arriving. They pulled up at the curb, rolled down their window, and I told my story yet again: "I'm deaf," I said. I usually say this first, I'm not sure why. I continued: "I'm staying at this B&B three blocks away. I'm working on an art exhibition at MIT. I've been here for a week. Tonight I came home after a dinner with a friend, and when I tried to get in my room, there were people there, and they slammed the door on me. Even when I explained to them what I'm explaining to you now. And they wouldn't come out. All I know is I've been sleeping in that room the past week, and my stuff should still be there. And I have a key to the room too--see?"

And the first thing the police guy says to me is: How much have you been drinking tonight?

I'm taken aback a little--it's bad enough that the couple that showed up at the B&B didn't take me seriously, or the guy at the copy shop, but the cops too? So I said I had two glasses of Chateau Langoa Barton with dinner, and a glass of Lagavulin whisky with two ice cubes after dinner, and that this was three hours ago, and did it matter?

The cop said no, as long as I could really remember which room was mine. I don't think he was trying to be funny, but I had this very distinct impression they didn't believe me. So they said I should walk back to the B&B and they'd come along. They didn't even offer me a lift.

In fact, they seemed genuinely surprised when my key opened the front door to the mansion. And they seemed even more surprised when I led them upstairs to room 3, put my key in the door, and turned the deadbolt open.

They took over at that point. I'm not sure exactly what transpired, only that they said something back and forth with the people in the room, and it went on for about 10 minutes before the door finally opened a bit, and I could see the visage of a woman. She looked a little scared too, and I suppose she was. The cops asked her to look around for my stuff, but she couldn't find anything except a couple of "Conversation" papers of mine

that had slipped behind a dresser onto the floor. "See?" I said to the police: "my stuff."

We decided to let the lady and her husband keep the room and get some sleep and work on finding if we could my clothes & chattels, and maybe even a room with a bed where I could sleep. The first thing we did was go down to the nightstand phone and call the emergency number. No answer. No machine. So then we did a little looking around for my stuff--they tried a bunch of doors, the kitchen, the basement--then they tried all the guest room doors, but they were all locked tight. Every door was--and my key only opened room 3.

By now it was getting really late. One cop said he'd tear the place apart if they did something like that to him. I asked him if he would tear the place apart on my behalf, but he said no, because he was in uniform. I felt a little triumphant that he finally believed my story, even if I didn't have my stuff or my room. One of the really frustrating things about being deaf is getting people to believe you, period. It doesn't matter what the issue is. The fact you're deaf makes you suspect.

By now the cops themselves were getting a little tired. It was probably past their 2am coffee break, so I couldn't blame them. They asked me who I was working with at MIT, maybe I could stay with them? Well, I said, Katy is the director, and Toby's the person who dealt with my housing and all--and they inquired: Katy who? Toby who? Did I have their phone numbers?

I didn't have their phone numbers--when you're deaf you might have a couple of numbers, but you just don't use the phone the same way as hearing people, so phone numbers just sort of evaporate--their importance exists on another level--primarily that of social closeness & intimacy, but not business. So no, I said, no numbers.

They called MIT security, and asked around a bit--apparently I was not on the official list of official visitors for the week, but because I had a few MIT papers and a gallery floor-plan in my backpack, they weren't too put off by this response. They made some more calls, talked a bit, and the MIT security people contacted the MIT housing people, and the housing people called the Brookline police, and the Brookline police routed them back to my two cops--and finally the MIT housing people said no, they didn't have any rooms, but they would find a cot for me--so the plan was for the Brookline police to deliver me to the MIT police, and the MIT police would deliver me to the MIT housing people, and the MIT housing people would deliver me to a cot somewhere.

The handover happened on a bridge above the Charles River separating Boston from Cambridge: one police car met another, I was traded off at 3:30 in the morning. I said thank you to the Brookline police, and they seemed as pleased with my gratitude as they were to get rid of me.

I don't remember a lot about the MIT police. They drove me to a building, I'm not sure what kind it was, and

handed me over to a housing officer, who apologized for not having a suitable room for me--would I mind sleeping in a cafeteria? No, I said, that's fine--so sometime around 4am, I curled up in a cot and went to sleep.

In the morning, Toby and her husband picked me up--the MIT people did all the calling to find the right Toby--then we drove to Brookline. The B&B people were unapologetic: they said it was my fault, I had not returned before the night person left for the night, so they could not give me a key to the new room to which they had moved me. It didn't occur to them they could have left a note for me, or maybe left the key for me too.

I flew back to Michigan that day. I think I said I wasn't feeling too well or something--.

A few weeks later, I received in Michigan a letter whose return address I didn't recognize. It was from the lady who had been in the room with her husband. She was apologetic, and explained how scared she had been--not sure what was happening, and not sure what to do. It was only later, she said, after returning home, that this deafness thing started to make sense to her, and how her daughter had told her she had a deaf professor who actually taught art history, and how the professor was so cut off when the room was darkened when he showed slides--he'd be talking and they'd be laughing and there was this imbroglio of miscommunication at times. She said it was like the door that separated us that night. And she said again she was sorry, because it was after she told the story to her daughter that her daughter thought about it for a while, then told her mom that the deaf guy on the other side of the door that night in Brookline was actually her professor from Michigan.

There might be a moral here. But if there is, I'm not sure what it is.

Love,
Joe