

JOSEPH GRIGELY

Ian Berry



62 Round Conversations, 2006. Courtesy: Cohan and Leslie, New York

WHAT would a conversation look like? In making our dialogues visible, what might be revealed and what obscured? Learning from sources that range from structuralist theorists to minimalist artists, Joseph Grigely has created a body of work that pushes viewers to think and act in ways that confuse how we look at art and experience relationships.

With a sly humour and precise touch, Grigely has added a poet's sensibility to the rule-based rigour of his influences. He recently wrote, 'The Saussurean tradition holds that language is what we speak; whether we speak with our mouths or our hands is immaterial, and most linguists today would agree. Writing isn't language – it's a material representation of language. But imagine if this materialisation happened in a different way; imagine if every word we spoke became palpable and dropped from our lips as we spoke. Think of 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. This is one reason I find written conversations so compelling – they're not so much writing as talking on paper, and could be described as drawings of speech.'

Grigely's focus on human communication is grounded in his biography. He was born with some hearing loss, but at the age of ten fell down a hill while playing with friends. The accident left him completely deaf. Grigely's alternately maddening and mundane experiences with the hearing world since then have led to his explorations of the failures, idiosyncrasies and ruptures of language and communication.

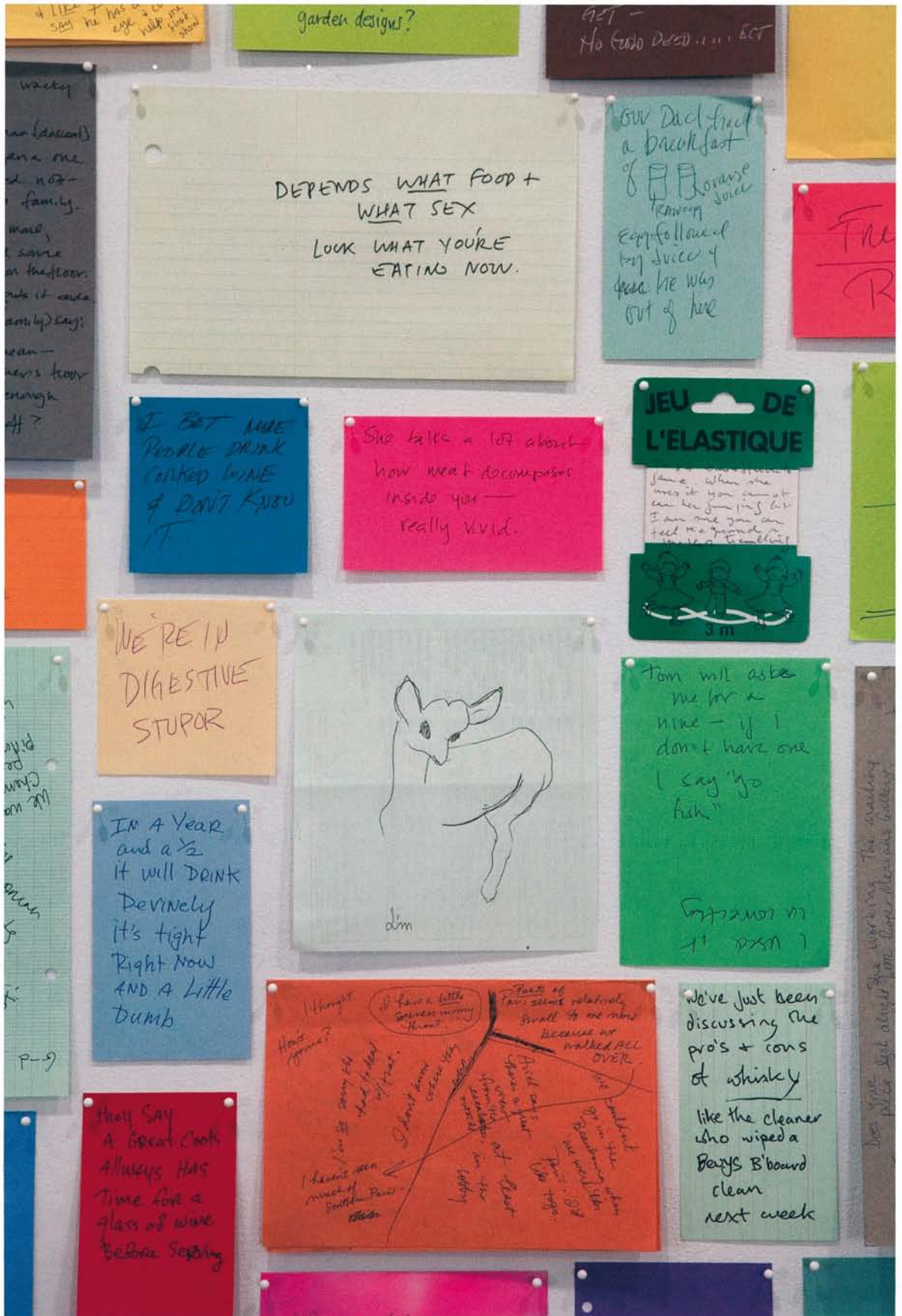
Grigely's work begins with discreet parts of conversations. These scraps are produced through the daily practice of communication, which, for Grigely, often starts with lip-reading and quickly moves to a scramble for pen and paper. Notes are passed to him, but he speaks his answers, rarely writing a response himself. In this way the written conversations are always one-sided, though we hardly recognise that on the wall. In the final works he remixes thousands of fragments into a new whole that offers an exponentially expansive set of possible narrative directions, all of which depend on the desires of the viewer. This interactive moment is critical to his work's power. The first versions of 'Conversations with the Hearing' were presented as tabletop installations, which confronted the audience with what seemed like a scene of everyday life left vacant by its actors: glasses, beer bottles, half-smoked cigarettes and, most importantly, scrawled-on notepapers strewn across tables. Over the ensuing years Grigely would experiment with ways of moving these fragments of written communication onto the gallery wall, first in discreet combinations with framed typewritten texts by the artist, and then as the wall-filling works he shows today. An important example is *White Noise*, exhibited at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2000, and later at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Here, the artist constructed an oval space that completely surrounded the viewer with fragments of conversations on white paper. Like the phenomenon its title references, the work had the curious effect of simultaneously evoking Zen-like absence and cacophonous sensory overload.

We're Drunken Bantering About What's Important in Life is the latest permutation in this series of carefully arranged selections from his archive of conversations, which opened this year at the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, as part of a travelling exhibition. The work consists of a large horizontal rectangle made from scraps of conversations, written on various types of paper and pinned to the wall with map tacks. A similar shape – a rainbow of coloured conversations – mirrors the first, forming a multi-hued shadow. What story is being told? Where do the threads lead?

Imagine if every word we spoke became palpable and dropped from our lips as we spoke

When installed in a corner the two halves resemble an open book, with its spine at the juncture of two gallery walls. This potent spatial play allows us to see the walls as pages, ripe with possible associations. In this way Grigely's art functions as a provocation, a catalyst for imagining other words. As artworks are hung and taken down, and a constant stream of viewers strolls through, an ever-shifting history of texts is added to the space. It is here, where we are trained by history and convention to lower our voices, acting as passive receptors rather than active participants, that he asks us to switch on and think.

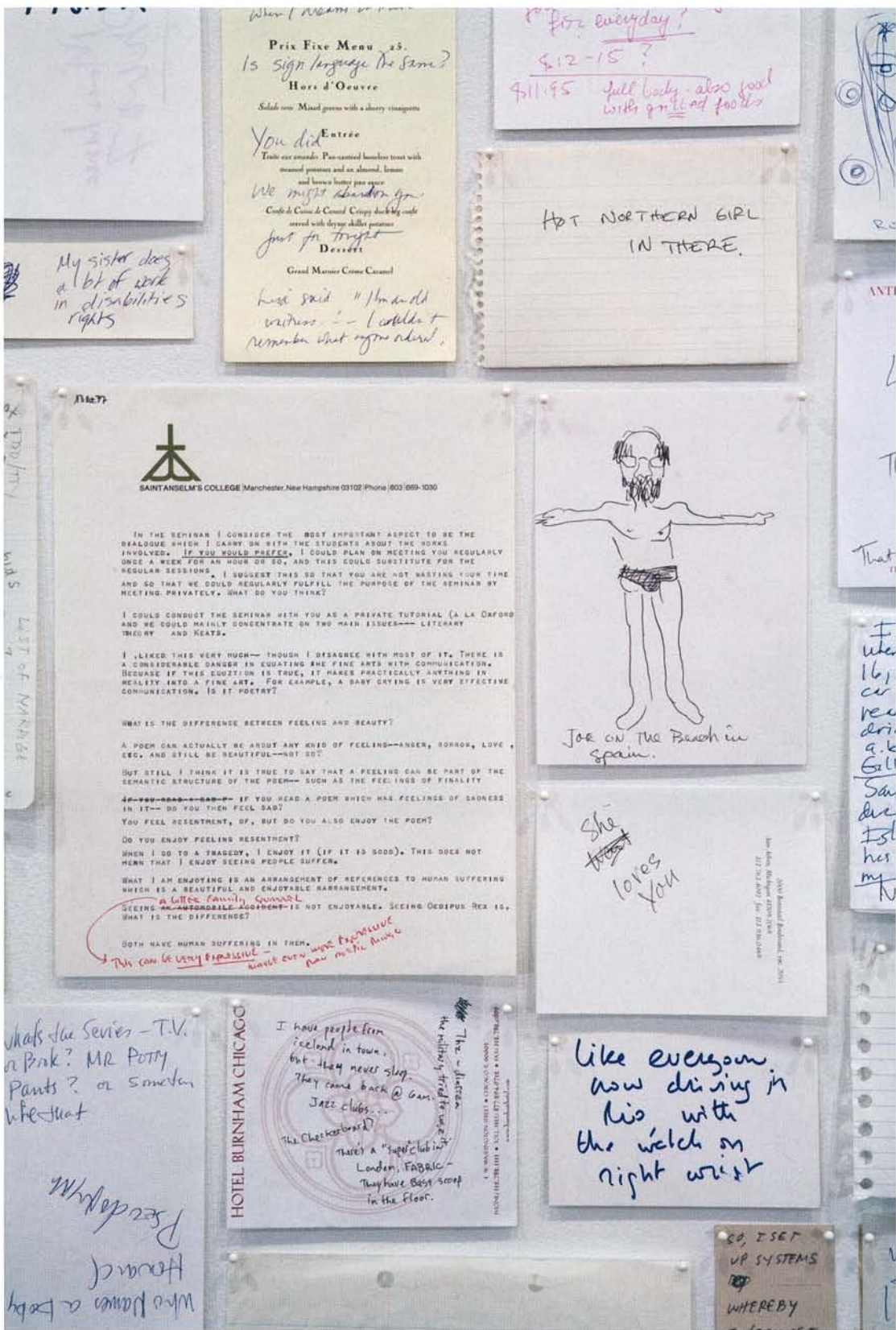
IAN BERRY IS MALLOY CURATOR OF THE TANG MUSEUM AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE, SARATOGA SPRINGS, NEW YORK



We're Drunken Bantering About What's Important in Life, 2007. Courtesy: Cohan and Leslie, New York

my broke & I'm used to being more casual with money I guess it will be OK
 Last night the candles were too squishy to get out We're going on a trip to
 the Smoky Mountains Stay in a grass hut on the beach for \$7 a night It's ve
 ways be in the summer perhaps he's good in bed—whispering sweet nothin
 eful Everywhere is cold for her compared to India It's very toxic there lots
 o happy Josie bought me an old book how to make marionettes You're lu
 ou have to spend at least 50% of your check F. Scott Fitzgerald only got \$13
 ne expression that requires one to conjugate shit shat shate They open th
 nom went there in the 40's she got patted on the ass every block salt is go
 out I had a big, perfect fish! Minumental story it gets liquid even yellow
 s other brothers I have lost touch with for a while they are becoming mytl
 can sell more Why did you move to Detroit? what do you usually eat in y
 ld, I closed the door I figured we'd try it out. It's awful, so I'm going to talk
 s of holding it in I need old metal garden furniture Are you taking pictur
 r the part he likes rough fucking stuff not delicate intricate elliptic narrat
 rumor spread. That's the same deal with the prospective boss for the Virgin
 arty was like (a little bit) a wedding party. And after wedding—A funeral Ta
 opping bags And Warhol had a giant coloring book I visited you in Rotter
 u can go with toothpaste on your t-shirt It's so funny—in my dictionary ye
 era to my mouth as though it were a tape recorder like yours—the idea was t
 n's bitching "Nam Pla Aong" Not curry Chicken Ginger raw pork I'm
 gume longis Cool mom you have My mother refused to buy avocado bec
 w does Michigan like your warrior driving technique? Why are you yelling
 u into town? Do I look tired? Stressed out, anxiety over separation from k
 on I'm ready for bed She would look sexy in rags She's too busy—she's g
 inese—very very amazing but after a while incredibly boring I want Snow
 e down the shower curtain when they came? Friday it's going to be 102 deg
 ate Because it's fall colors It's strong & it's vodka My mom says the colle
 r scorpion that is? how old is she? How old is Stanislaw Lem? I read Joar
 s "Volba" with beer. I think this just refers to dried fish. Don't know seems
 lly care To the station with the bikes We try to determine who Louise We
 ly in front of the cook & said "A double cheeseburger with fries" Then the t
 -local knowledge required. Some people say don't eat a reef fish if it doesn'
 traps at Federal Surplus of course it made me quite sad, being a sympathize
 e a cafe and went in to ask for all kinds of information. Everything went gre
 ? I guess it comes down to me waiting until next Wednesday. Or me takin
 t pen That's an amazing opera! I've been trying to get a fucking dog but
 e from a sledgehammer to the head from my brother—the other a golf club
 mories of sounds? This is a soundtrack whistling wind high-pitched ambi
 am I just flattering myself? Are you questioning the phone charges? And
 ain His parents still live there Black Flies snakes & bears this is really
 hrase which says in German: beer on wine las des sein (leave it!) Stay awa
 the way home & abducted you to do with as they liked? I'm sorry I put ou
 g speech—usually He read the German in a French accent I hear backgrou
 sign: DEAF-MUTE need \$ for my family. I gave \$1 he left. I left the store, wall
 ound That pepper paste is a really great thing to have on hand These are

Blueberry Surprise, 2003. Courtesy: Cohan and Leslie, New York



We're Drunken Bantering About What's Important in Life (Detail), 2007. Courtesy: Cohen and Leslie, New York