

Interview by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Mars 1999, New-York City

Grigely, Joseph

*Joseph Grigely was born, in 1956, in Springfield, Massachusetts. He currently lives and works in New Jersey and Michigan. Grigely became deaf as a result of a childhood accident at the age of 10. He received his formal education at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester from 1974 to 1975, and studied mechanical engineering before turning to Nineteenthnineteenth-Century century British literature and critical theory. He received a his PhD from Oxford University in 1984. Used to situations in which he speaks and his hearing interlocutor has to write everything down, Grigely has often introduced these writings of others made in the process of dialogue with him, into tableaux and spatial arrangements, sometimes alongside texts of his own. Grigely first started to exhibit these pieces exploring and reflecting upon the generation of meaning in the beginning of the early '90s. Grigely has had solo shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (date; ), Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London (date; ), the ARC/Musée d'art d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (date; ), and the Barbican Centre in London (date). His work has been included in group shows including the "2000 Biennial Exhibition" (Whitney Museum of American Art), Biennial; at the (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, date), and the Venice, Berlin, and Sydney biennials [dates? And correct titles!]. Grigely teaches art history and critical theory at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and is the author of Textualterity: Art, Theory and Textual Criticism published by the University of Michigan Press in 1995. This interview was recorded in New York in March 1999, and revised by the artist in 2002.*

HUO: I want to begin with a set of questions concerning the parallels, the differences and the bridges that exist between art and science. How can we bring art and science together in a comprehensive context?

JG: This is a huge question. One of the more manageable approaches concerns ideas related to reproduction and replication. The dissemination of art, like the dissemination of humanity, depends upon how both textual bodies and biological bodies distribute themselves through reproduction. This brings together two seemingly disparate fields: textual criticism and biology. Walter Benjamin's idea of "mechanical reproduction" is important too. But Benjamin seems to have missed how the production of "types" and "copies" also involves the production unpredictable variations, so a copy is never wholly identical to its original model or form. The same poem printed in a different context ultimately inflects how the poem is read—just as the display of one painting in different sites affects how it too is read. Thus the sequence of exhibition spaces allows for infinite variation—repetition and difference. That's why contemporary culture is so obsessed with cloning. So obsessed with control. Not that this is new: Diderot, in the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772), remarked how the graft is a triumph of art over nature. Only now, with recent advances in biological engineering, the graft as a paradigm is much more complex in how it addresses the very idea of "reproduction technology."

HUO: In a previous conversation, you mentioned your idea of a new kind of "Interdisciplinary Institute." I recall you once referred to it in terms of "post-humanities." Can you tell me about it?

JG: The term "post humanities" comes out of the book, *Posthuman Bodies* that Ira Livingston and Judith Halberstam edited in 1995—though the term had been talked about for years prior to this. Historically, the typical Institute for the Humanities explores the various arts—including literature

and music—as being part of the continuum of the “natural” human body. But what is a “natural” human body? There is an immense space between Darwin’s “natural” world and the “natural” world of creatures that appear in the tabloid *Weekly World News*: Batboy, frog boy, and the horse born with a human face. Jackalopes, wolpertingers, professors of interdisciplinary studies. Mutation is most interesting not as a biological fact, but as an etymological construct that emphasizes changed and changing states. Absurd as it may seem, it is the world of the constructed body that is most natural now. Grafting, splicing, eclecticism, conflation—these things happen, not arbitrarily, but because of a certain human will and desire.

HUO: What about Donna Haraway? Is her work an example of “post human” criticism?

JG: Haraway’s an excellent example. Starting with *Primate Visions* (1989) and later in *Modest Witness* (1997), Haraway’s work has focused on how the post human body is fundamentally a constructed body. One of the characteristics of postmodern bodies is that their filiation is non-linear. Their genealogies do not have straight lines. Our natural world is a world we had once called “artificial.” It is the word “natural” that now wears the scare quotes: “natural,” with its Eden-like mystique and untainted purity represents a perpetual nostalgia for something that is and is not present. Haraway’s universe is a terribly complex universe of transgenic foods, mice with patented cancer-bearing genes, and related fabrications. Frankenstein was relatively simple in comparison: the monster was the product of edited phenotypes. “OncoMouse,” as it is known, is the product of edited genotypes. There’s a world of difference between the two. What we need is more critical discourse like Haraway’s to address the comparative importance of this difference. The traditional American institute for the humanities rarely addresses these issues—which is why we need, in some form, an institute for the post humanities.

HUO: Can such an Institute of Interdisciplinarity happen within the existing structures of the academy, where one can sense some kind of omnipresent anxiety of interdisciplinarity?

JG: Well, this is complex—being as it is an administrative sort of question. Many institutional think tanks are already doing engaging interdisciplinary work, both in the US and Europe, as well as in Asia and Latin America. But only to a certain extent. What you describe as “the omnipresent anxiety of interdisciplinarity” is a very real anxiety, since it goes against the grain of institutional history: the Western university is traditionally devoted to the process of taxonomizing knowledge, of breaking it down into discrete categories of disciplinary thought and discourse. The anxiety comes from being in a realm that lacks the precepts of historical continuity. People are for the most part reticent to embrace any school of thought whose fundamental superstructure lacks a positivist impulse. Look at deconstruction as an example. In a very broad sense, deconstruction is “interdisciplinary” in the ways that it explores the practice of reading: reading poems, reading novels, reading paintings, reading virtually any act of human communication. Like the philosopher Nelson Goodman, Derrida created a vocabulary to suit his own disciplinary needs: his is a vocabulary of linguistics without being linguistic, a vocabulary of anthropology without being anthropological. Which is precisely why his work is troubling for some people: his notion of difference takes pleasure in the very idea of difference, and the peregrinations of the mind.

HUO: What are the advantages and the dangers of interdisciplinarity?

JG: The ostensible danger is that because people like to label other people—and their work—they tend to ignore or disparage those they can’t easily compartmentalize. On the other hand, the most compelling attraction of interdisciplinary work is how it invokes the constant flux of humanist and post humanist inquiry. It’s not inherently better than mono-theological forms of inquiry—there’s

some pretty bad “interdisciplinary” stuff out there—but when good, as it is in Donna Haraway’s work, it’s engaging, enlightening, intelligent, and accessible.

HUO: In interdisciplinary projects there is sometimes a disappearance of differences between the disciplines and an adjustment of vocabularies, how is it possible to have an interdisciplinary situation that at the same time allows very complex discourses to develop?

JG: This is difficult, and I have a relevant anecdote that illustrates the dilemma. A little while ago, I asked several colleagues of mine who were participating in a yearlong seminar at the University of Michigan Institute for the Humanities to read a chapter of Richard Leppert’s book, *The Sight of Sound* (1993). The book is an historical study of visual representations of domestically produced music in the eighteenth century. It covers various fields: history, musicology, art history, and social anthropology. What intrigued me was the way the book explored how ubiquitous sonic experiences—music and conversation for example—are represented in painting and drawing. Deep down, it’s really an amazing topic: how do we take an auditory experience and translate it into a visual experience? How do we take the discourse of speech, and translate it into a discourse of visual representation? How do conversations draw themselves in two-dimensional space? My colleagues seemed unimpressed, if not also unchallenged; one historian was concerned about Leppert’s definition of “medieval.” A composer was troubled by Leppert’s description of a composition. The key thing is that they ultimately read Leppert through a template of their own disciplinary discourse. Cultural criticism is very much a territorial sort of business. The sense of resistance, though somewhat disconcerting, is also a necessary resistance: without the tensions of disagreement and conflict, the practice of criticism would simply implode.

HUO: You often speak about the Library of Alexandria as a model ...

JG: It was at the Library of Alexandria that some of the first efforts were made to explore issues related to textual dissemination and reproduction. The efforts centered around Homer's lost texts, and attempts were made to reconstruct them by examining fragments and secondary texts. Ultimately, the Homer we read today is a Homer that has been unmade, remade, and made over—a Homer whose texts live not because they depend upon maintaining a specific form, but because of their malleability, and their ability to sustain themselves through these inevitable re-makings.

HUO: Is this exploration of the transmission of cultural texts what you defined as “Textualterity” in your book (*Textualterity. Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism*, 1995)?

JG: In a way, yes. Literally, textualterity is textual alterity: an understanding that a specific text will have many different forms, all of which express a degree or variation. The variation is rarely merely arbitrary, but rather reflects the possibilities of human intention. One of my favorite examples is Thomas Bowdler's 1807 Family Edition of Shakespeare's plays (*Family Shakespeare*). History regards Bowdler as a miscreant: he edited Shakespeare's plays in such a way as to omit, as he said, words and expressions, which cannot, with propriety, be read aloud in a family. A man of considerable moral probity, Bowdler saw himself performing a public service. Most editors do. Even censors do. This issue for me isn't whether he was “right” or “wrong” to do what he did, but how it reflected his own moral interests, and how he was perfectly honest about it all. His text is not Shakespeare's text, but Shakespeare's as inflected by Bowdler: it is a text of culturally motivated difference. The key idea behind textualterity is that it looks at variation and change not as being “good” or “bad” but as something that is inevitably part of the expression of the vicissitudes of our human nature.

HUO: Can one use notions such as “complex dynamic system,” “non-linearity,” and “in-betweenness” to describe this ever-growing text?

JG: Yes, so much so that it’s hard to think of an existence that is otherwise. I’m momentarily reminded of Marc Auge’s book on super-modernity (*Non-Lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, 1992; *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*)—and how our everyday lives now consist of constant spatial displacement. So-called “transit lounges” or “waiting rooms,” which once had the apparition of being points of stasis, are now points of motion. People used to take vacations; they now take “working vacations.” We are constantly developing a technological architecture to support this dynamic: wireless communications, in particular, have freed us from the anchorage of a physical place. In another sense, it seems to me that the entire notion of interactive dynamics is fundamental to our human existence. At almost every level of human evolution, a certain kind of dynamic friction had the effect of challenging the mind, forcing it to push itself a little further and a little harder. And what’s especially wonderful is not knowing where the twists and turns of these peregrinations will take us.

HUO: What’s your opinion on the current debate on the origins of language, where a structuralist approach is more and more contradicted by a more contextual and evolutionary approach of dynamic parameters in which language develops? What do you think of this argument between Noam Chomsky and Luc Steels or Brian MacWhinney who attempt to propose an alternative theory?

JG: Well, Chomsky’s been around for a long time now, and for good reasons. But this also means that evolutionary and syntactic theorists have the inevitable obligation of ramifying his arguments. How can one decide between a primarily innate theory of language—Chomsky’s position—and one in which a minimal innate capacity is developed through a highly interactive environment—which is

Steels' position? In a way, Steels is putting to test some very interesting Enlightenment philosophy. Rousseau and Condillac had both argued that deaf people were incapable of acquiring language. They reasoned that deaf people, lacking auditory input, could not participate in the crucial sort of "language game" that Steels—and others—have found to be fundamental to linguistic development. But the problem is that Rousseau and Condillac equated speech with language, and neglected to explore the significance of visual languages such as sign language. It took another Enlightenment thinker—the Abbe de L'Epée—to discover how two deaf siblings were using, and developing, a sign language with each other—and then go on to establish the first school for the deaf to use sign. This was in Paris in the middle of the eighteenth century. L'Epée's experience with the siblings parallels Steels' recent experiments: a human brain, when provided with meaningful linguistic input, will play with it, develop it, and make something out of it. The modality is not important: speech, signing, or colored squares. The amazing thing about the brain is its adaptability. It will make a communication system, if not a language, when provided with appropriate stimuli. In this respect, Chomsky and Steels aren't necessarily counterpoints: their research is in fact complementary in fundamental ways.

HUO: Let's discuss your artistic work, precisely when did you install the fragments in an exhibition for the first time text?

JG: I started working with the *Conversations with the Hearing* in the early '90s, and the first exhibition of them was at White Columns in New York in 1994. The paradox, however is that it took so long. When I became deaf at the age of ten, there was this social expectation that I learn to lip-read. I was really terrible [at it] though. I still am. But when I could, I'd ask people to write things down for me. Most people were happy to do this. It was efficient and simple, and even if it went against the grain of social expectations, it worked for both [of us]. Then there was a day in the early '90s when I had dinner with a friend, and afterwards there were scraps of paper all over the table with

fragments of our conversation. They were all disconnected, quite lacking continuity, and somehow more engaging that way—as if they told a story without telling too much. After that dinner, I started saving the papers on which people had written until I had a good-sized archive, and one day I spread them on the floor of my studio. I had expected to see a lot of writing, but what I saw instead was a lot of talking—and the difference is a big one. The words simply went all over the pages. Sometimes there was only one word. Sometimes there were words on top of words. The most interesting stuff was ironically the most banal and ordinary stuff—stuff that hardly ever gets written down. What was so crucial as part of this discovery was to find a way to share the experience of communicating, rather than simply narrate that experience? This is part of an ongoing process for me. The most recent installation of the “Conversations” was a project at the Whitney Museum in New York called “White Noise”: an oval room filled floor to ceiling with over 2,500 sheets of white paper on which people have conversed (“Joseph Grigely: White Noise,” Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001)

HUO: Could you tell me about how your work refers to the tradition of the “Conversation Piece” and then about the collection of the Sir John Soane’s Museum in London?

JG: The Conversation Piece is an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century genre of painting and drawing typically practiced in England and the lowlands. The genre is distinguished by the fact that people are present and seem to be talking, but their words are absent. Their bodies and gestures are positioned in a way as to suggest para-linguistic traces of the conversation. [Antoine] Watteau, [Thomas] Gainsborough, and [Thomas] Rowlandson all painted Conversation Pieces. Soane’s collection of works by [William] Hogarth and Canaletto could be included in this genre. Take for example Soane’s copy of *The Riva degli Schiavoni: A view of Venice Looking West* from 1736—a very conventional Canaletto of the sort he painted for the English tourist crowd. Whether he was painting a palazzo or a lido, Canaletto typically filled his canvases with small groups of people who seem to be chatting,

people who seem to yell, and people whose gestures bespeak directions. In *The Riva degli Schiavoni* a dog's head is cocked to the conversation of a cluster of people a few steps away; nearby, a bargeman gestures and yells loudly enough to capture the attention of a woman walking by; beyond them heads are turned and bodies are positioned in a way that says only one thing: words are moving. This is the secret of the Conversation Piece as a genre: it is not just a visual scene being represented—a visual experience—but the human occupation of that expanse, and the fact that this occupation is characterized not by things seen, but by things heard. In this respect, I consider Canaletto a noisy painter. Strictly speaking, most art historians would not consider Canaletto or even Watteau as being painters of Conversation Pieces, but their work is nonetheless about the auditory field. This is very similar to the dilemma posed by my “Conversations with the Hearing”: we all know what a conversation sounds like—but what does a conversation look like?

HUO: About conversations, one of the interesting things is silence also. Hans Georg Gadamer pointed out to me that the problem with conversations that are transcribed—particularly in the case of interviews—is that language contains many non-verbal utterances and silences that cannot be transcribed or written down. The only thing possible is to indicate “silence” or “gesture” which is of course unsatisfactory. What do you think about this issue?

JG: I agree wholeheartedly with Gadamer's point that speech is so nuanced that writing cannot convey its emotional complexity. This is one reason why computer-based speech-to-text recognition programs are so fallible: as humans, we inflect our speech in an incessant variety of changing ways. Silence to a speech recognition program is represented as a gap in the speech stream. But silence is never really “empty” or “redundant,” even for a deaf person—it's always filled with visual information of some kind—the gestures we make when the voice pauses, for example. Or the weight of one's eyes, or the turn of the brows. Only we don't have a critical or scientific discourse that

explores the richness of silence in a way that goes beyond kinesics and the over-worn notion of “body language”—so silence has some of its greatest moments in spoken arts. Shakespeare in particular is a master of the pause.