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Stonework

Travels in the art of transience

by Joseph Grigely

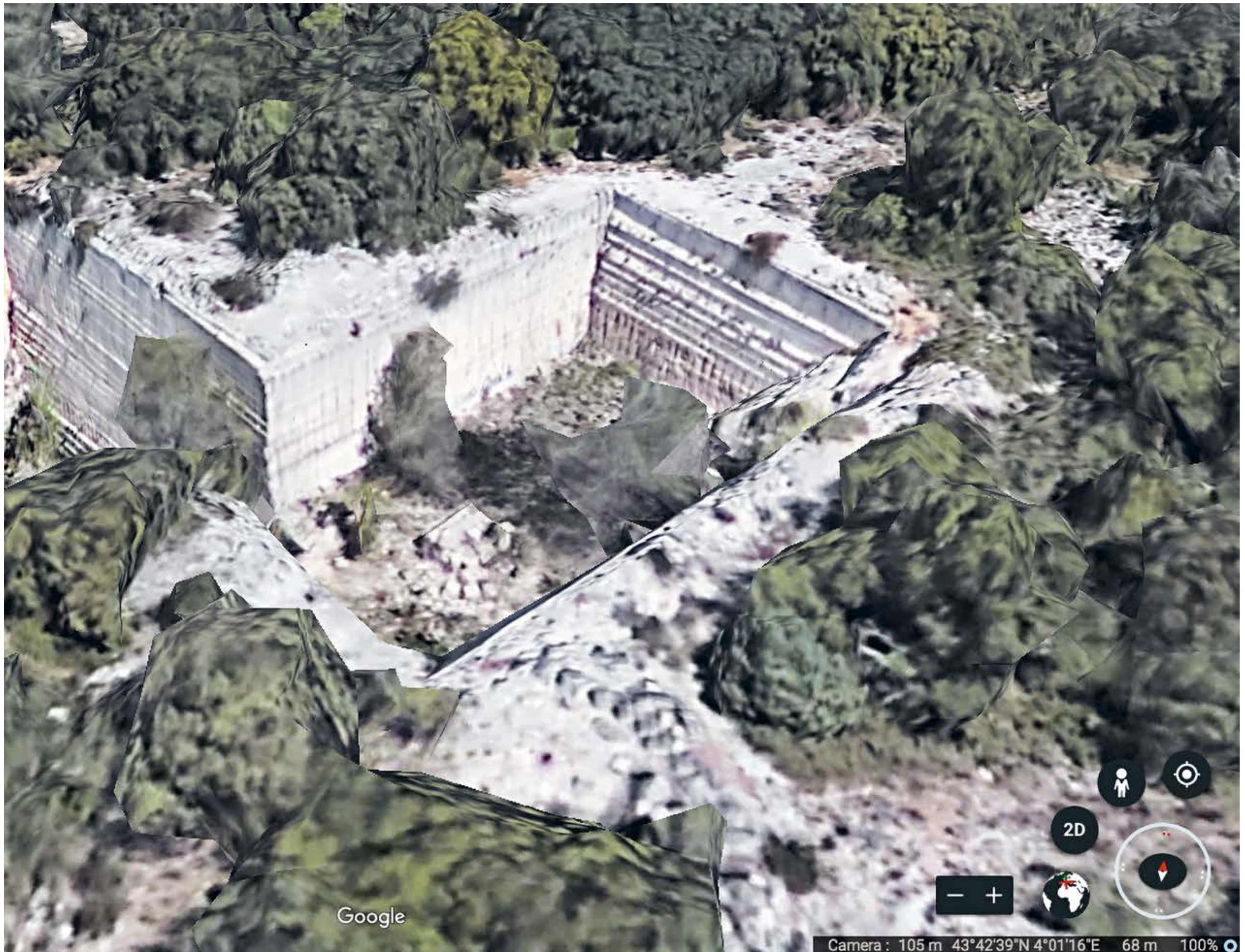
If things had gone a bit differently, I might have become a bricklayer instead of an artist. As it turned out, bricklaying led me to stonework, and stonework led me to making art, and in the process I learned about the pleasure of making. I also learned that, as an artist, a lot of what you make is simply for the meaning that comes from the making.

My father was a stonemason, and throughout high school and college, I spent my summers doing masonry. We mainly built fireplaces and chimneys and block-walled buildings. The traditional New England house was built up around a massive chimney system with multiple fireplaces, and this was one of my father's specialties. It was hard work, first as a mason's tender, which involves mixing cement, carrying it up scaffolding in a hod and moving around heavy concrete blocks. We didn't have mechanical lifts back in the 1970s; everything that went into a chimney we carried up a ladder on our shoulders. A hod full of 18 brick weighs 80 pounds. A single 16-inch concrete block weighs 55 pounds. Handling the materials of masonry made a mess of our hands—fingertips and knuckles skinned and bloodied. Our most important tool was a box of good Band-Aids.

For various reasons, the profession of bricklaying never worked out for me. Most contractors on our job sites, the plumbers and electricians and framers, also had their sons alongside them. The doors of their trucks said things like "William Creighton & Sons, Plumbers" or "Anthony Serafin & Sons, Electricians." But my dad's copper-brown dump truck said simply, "J.C. Grigely, Inc. Mason Contractor." The other contractors asked him why he left his sons out, and his reply was always the same: He wanted them to do something different. So he was very supportive when I later decided to study English literature as an undergraduate, even if I had no idea what I would do with an English degree. The idea, for a while anyway, was that I liked reading, and if I was going to read a lot of literature, why not get a degree in it? After I had become deaf at the age of 10—I fell down a hill during a game of King on the Mountain—reading was my one, essentially singular, way of learning.

But to get to the point of studying literature, I first had to graduate from high school, and this wasn't easy for a deaf person in the 1970s. There were no sign language interpreters in my school, so I took a lot of "see-and-do" classes. Like bricklaying, wood shop and metal shop involved working mostly with my hands. In other classes, I learned to feign understanding. To keep my sanity, I would often skip school altogether and go fishing. My parents, thankfully, understood. To assuage their guilt, they bought me outdoor magazines like *Field & Stream*, *Fly Fisherman* and *Outdoor Life*. From their perspective, I was reading, and that's what mattered. They wrote absentee notes that said, "Joey wasn't feeling well on Thursday, so he stayed home," when, in fact, I had been drifting muskrat nymphs on the Farmington River all day long. At least by tying flies and fishing, I was learning, which was more than I could say occurred in English class as I struggled to lip-read the mouths discussing *The Scarlet Letter* and other required texts. I flunked a lot of courses in high school. But somehow I graduated and got into college, and then made it into Oxford for graduate school. All those fishing stories I had read paid off. There would be rewards for the masonry, too, but they came later.

It was at Oxford that I met the artist Rob Evans, who is largely to blame for my interest in art. On a train from London to Oxford one day, Rob brought along a copy of Delacroix's *Journal* and gave me an emotional spiel about Delacroix's *The Shipwreck of Don Juan* and his handling of paint and scale. He gestured expansively, spelling out words in big letters with his index finger. From Delacroix, he went on to Géricault. This was the beginning of my art education. During a period when I was commuting to the Keats House in Hampstead, I'd spend mornings researching Keats manuscripts and afternoons in the galleries with Rob. London was intense in the early '80s—dungeon masters like Bacon and Freud and Auerbach ruled the Cork Street corridor, Schnabel's plate paintings were making a scene at the Royal Academy and Tate, and Tarkovsky was visiting Riverside Studios. We would sometimes hold all-night life-drawing sessions in the common room of my classmate's house, where we'd take turns being the model, the model being required to read poetry aloud. I got my first serious art lesson during one of these sessions, with a large sheet of paper in front of me and no idea what to do with



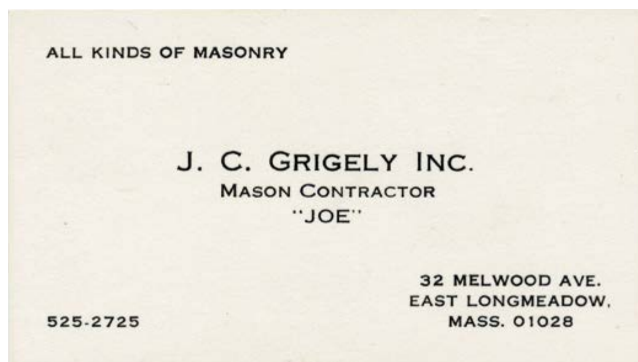
Google Earth view of a Joseph Grigely stonework still visible in a quarry in Montpellier, France. © Google 2018. All images: Courtesy Joseph Grigely.

it. Rob saw the situation and commanded: “Stop staring at that paper. Attack it!”

A few years later, in the summer of 1986, when I was in Chicago and should have been writing on Keats as part of my Mellon Fellowship obligations, I chanced upon an empty lot in Hyde Park littered with rubble from a demolished building. The rubble sang a siren’s song that said: touch me, lift me, pile me up. And so for a week I gathered the stones and piled them. I didn’t have equipment to help me, not even a wheelbarrow, so it was a bit slow. I had no mason’s level, either, so I had to do it all by eye. Finally, I had no scaffolding. As the stack rose higher and higher, I made narrow tottering shelves of stone and timber to get each stone up to the next level. It took three levels of shelves and four lifts to put the last row of stones in place, one by one. I learned by mistake a very important rule that every builder of stone walls knows: When you pick up a stone, you want to know where it is going in the wall, because you don’t want to have to put it back into the pile of loose stone and pick it up a second time.

In the summer of 1989, I spent two months in France—first in Bordeaux and later in Montpellier. While in Montpellier, I passed a lot of time in the workshop of ABRP, a small masonry atelier on the outskirts of the city near the village of Saint-Geniès-des-Mourgues. ABRP was run by Antoine Bekker and Reginald Pineau. I had previously met Bekker in Chicago, where, during the opening of a show of Ulrich Rückriem’s work at the Donald Young Gallery in 1987, he explained with a series of gestures that only a stoneworker would know how Rückriem’s minimal monoliths of Normandy blue granite were cut and assembled. Bekker invited me to visit his workshop should I come to France and I took him up on the offer. ABRP specialized in *maçonnerie traditionnelle* and restoration using soft limestone from the nearby quarries in Castries and Beaulieu. Its atelier was only a short walk from the abandoned part of the quarries.

For several weeks, I’d walk into the quarry daily. I’d proceed along the roadway verge for a half kilometer, turn left at the first vineyard, then take another left at a two-track into the quarry. At this point the landscape became a maze of paths among shrubs, small trees and limestone pits. The walls were scarred with deep cuts from the huge carbide and diamond saw-wheels that had excised slabs from the quarry decades ago. In one area containing



three large pits, I gathered and piled stones as I had done three years earlier in Chicago. The sculptures were bigger and harder to make this time: The taller one was 14 feet high, on the edge of a pit, so I could work from only three sides. The second was longer and wider, less a tower than a blocky edifice. The stones that went into the second piece were big, some of them almost 18 inches square and weighing more than 200 pounds. They were too heavy to lift. Instead, I tumbled them to the site from different nearby locations using a simple lever apparatus to help prod them along. When they reached the rim of the pit, I'd push them over the edge. It was immensely satisfying to watch them fall 30 feet and thud into the limestone sand, to see the small puff of dust rise into the hot Mediterranean air. Sometimes, when you are making things, small moments like these are their own reward.

The second sculpture was not quite right—a fact my father pointed out the moment he saw pictures of it. When building with dry stone and no mortar, gravity and friction hold things together—the more contact between stones, the better. The second sculpture had long seams and was therefore less stable. To avoid this problem, I'd needed half stones, but I wasn't able to find any, and cutting stones was out of the question. Sometimes you have to overrule your knowledge as a way of getting things done. It was hot, dry, exhausting work, but I had two important tools at my disposal: a broad-rimmed straw hat and a pair of heavy gloves. By the time I was done, the gloves had holes worn clean through the fingers. Over the years, I have glanced at photos of these sculptures as a reminder that sometimes, when making art, you are doing it solely for the satisfaction of making it.

I had imagined that the sculptures probably wouldn't last long. But a little while ago, on a whim, I went looking for them via Google Earth. I started by finding the atelier of ABRP, then retracing my walk into the quarry. The two-track that led into the quarry remained amazingly clear, and before long I located the three pits where I had worked. The tall sculpture was gone, probably pushed into the pit beside it, though it was hard to tell for sure because the site was overgrown with trees. But the large blocky sculpture was still largely there, mostly intact, missing only a corner. With Google Earth in 3-D, I could swivel around the piece and see it from different angles. The trees, which had had 30 years to grow, obscured some views. But as I sat in front of my computer, it felt like a small miracle to be able to see the sculpture again at all.

In the mid-'80s I was trying to develop some kind of creative pathway as an artist—testing various media forms in particular. My initial attraction was to the outdoors, in part because it was a defining place for me, especially hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Around this time, I started experimenting with a genre that I called site-reflexive sculpture. Like site-specific sculpture, the work is made for a specific location; but crucial to the process is that all the materials used to make the work also come from the site itself. The stone piles I made in Chicago and in the quarries near Castries were the beginnings of this idea.

In those years I also made sculptures from fallen trees. One such project took place in the woods of northwest New Jersey, on the slope below the Appalachian Trail, near the town of Branchville. I was working part time as an assistant for the sculptor Robert Lobe, whose hammered aluminum rocks and trees were produced in the same area. One day I saw a tree that had been struck by lightning and had fallen atop two rocks. It was about 40 feet long, and the way it intersected the verticality of the trees around it with its horizontality intrigued me. For a couple of weeks I worked on it, hewing the log into a four-sided beam. I made shallow crosscuts with a chainsaw, then used a small ax to hack through the sapwood. Cleaving the underside of the log was the hardest part—it was like working in a crawl space. When I began, the nearby trees were just budding, but by the time I finished, they had fully leafed out. The beam curved slowly, then reverted back to a section of tree, then ended with a small knob of beam as a coda. Finishing a project like this, it's hard to describe your feelings, knowing that the work has no audience, except maybe for some juncos and squirrels.

Not all of the log projects were made in the woods. For five years, when I was teaching in Washington, D.C., and kept a studio in Baltimore, I made a series of sculptures I called *Morphemes* and *Perforated Tympani*. The logs, carcasses of trees felled by storms, came mostly from a log lot maintained by Montgomery County, Maryland. The wood was beautiful: cherry, red oak, ash and walnut. The *Morphemes* were about two feet thick, cut with a chain saw then planed with a drawknife to taper at the ends—they were named for how they looked like an elemental shape in the morphology of visual form. The *Perforated Tympani* were named for

Grigely with his Montpellier stonework, 1988.

Grigely's stonework in Hyde Park, Chicago, 1986.

Tympanum #16, 1990.

the way in which I became deaf: I had fallen down a hill and a tree branch perforated my eardrum, totally destroying the ear. The sculptures reversed this, consisting of slabs of tree trunks that I cut and shaped with a chain saw, then perforated with steel beams so that the wood dried and shrunk around the beam. They were a form of art that combined identity and abstraction, without privileging one over the other.

When I moved my studio to the New Jersey waterfront in 1991, I started to develop more conceptual work that eventually became the basis for my first New York show at White Columns, "Conversations With the Hearing." These conversations consisted of scraps of paper onto which people had written notes to me in the process of communicating. The notes were arranged into formal grids; the handwriting, the shape and color of the paper, and the narrative content all played a role in organizing the work. With the stoneworks, I had employed a similar process of organizing material as an irregular grid—that is, to minimize the length of the seams so that constituent elements appeared to be more integrated with one another—more of a piece, or a whole. As an artist, you learn a lot directly from your material, and you don't always learn it consciously—it becomes an ineffably intuitive operation. Years later, this became evident when working on installations of a piece called *White Noise* at ARC in Paris (in 2000), the Whitney (in 2001), and the Pompidou Metz (in 2009). *White Noise* is an oval-shaped room, almost 30 feet long, 20 feet wide and 14 feet high, filled floor to ceiling with conversations on white paper. Unlike my smaller wall works, the installation has no template to guide it—it is done largely by intuition, until all 2,300 papers that comprise it have been attached to the wall, a process that takes a team of five people ten days to accomplish.

The opportunity to turn from puttering in quarry pits and the studio to showing the work in a public setting occurred in 1994, when the curator Bill Arning came to my studio and offered me the show at White Columns, saying that I could do what I wanted—show the Tympani and Morphemes, or the *Conversations With the Hearing*. In the end, I decided to show the work that I had developed in the time since I had been in New York, the conversations. The Tympani, especially, had led me in a new direction, personalizing abstraction without letting it become too didactic. The stoneworks had done their job in cultivating the grid as a narrative form. It was, in a sense, time to move on.

It's a given that you have to make bad stuff in order to make good stuff—work that doesn't get seen by others, work that you do because you have to get past it. The trick is to know when to let go. Warhol said to save everything—as if it's easy to lug around and save sculptures for 10 or 20 or 30 years. Sometimes you just need to destroy the work, like Baldessari did with his paintings—making the act of kicking in the canvas a performative turning point in his career. Yet works of art are not easily destroyed, unless they can also be destroyed from memory—they linger, even in their material absence. The stonework in Hyde Park is long since gone, but the one photograph I still have keeps it alive. The Montpellier work remains, though as a ruin. If the Branchville beam is still there, shrouded under a canopy of green, I can't find it on Google Earth. Ultimately, the *Morphemes* and *Tympani* were destroyed, starting in 1999. Of course, I wish I had saved one, or even the parts of one—but experience and evanescence are as meaningful as materiality. Sometimes, that's all you can hope for as an artist: to make meaning.

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