

# Joseph Grigely

by Ayden LeRoux



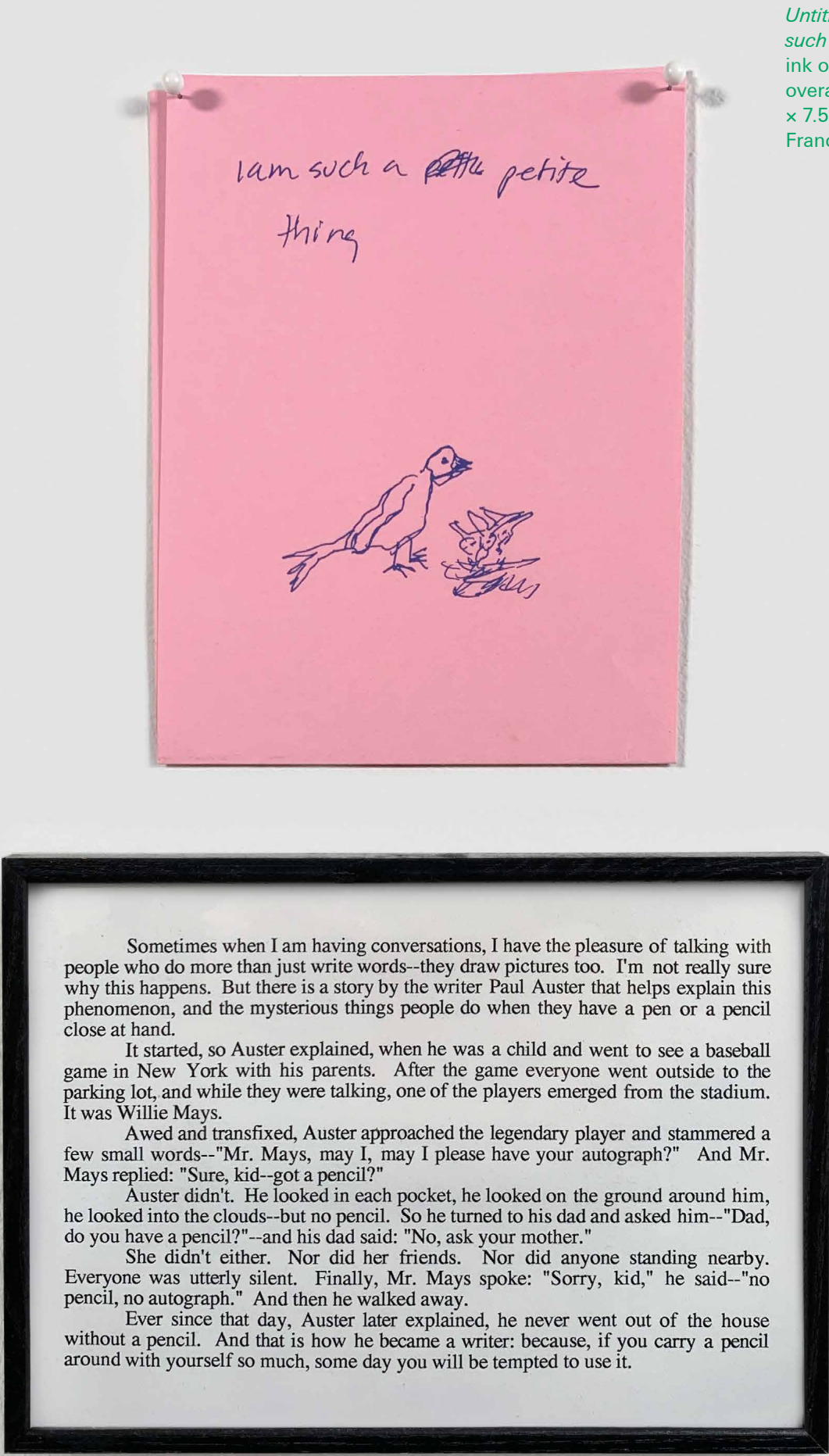


I can think of no artist better suited than Joseph Grigely for the pages of BOMB, a magazine that centers conversation as substance. Before he transitioned from working in the field of literature to making art in the mid-1980s, Grigely, who is deaf, was in the practice of asking hearing people to communicate with him via writing, rather than by reading their lips. For years, he had discarded the scraps of paper that held his dialogues with others, until one night after dinner with a friend, he looked at the linguistic detritus on the table and decided to save the papers. These fragments eventually accumulated to become *Conversations with the Hearing*, an ongoing project that was first shown at White Columns in New York City in 1994 and has since been presented in over one hundred exhibitions globally. Grigely's archive of his conversations is monumental; as of summer 2025, it totals over 120,000 notepapers, selections of which he meticulously curates and arranges anew for each installation.

Grigely's work approaches conversation in other ways, too, such as tables that display the traces of people's convening and conversing and his correspondence with institutions pressing upon how inaccessible they are. He is prolific in his exploration of how sound is seen, sensed, and represented, and over the course of his career, he has published more than twenty books and zines. He is funny and charming—he once gave a lecture about pizza and disability—and his intellect is seductive, drawing connections between how his work has been shaped by the traditions of still life, minimalism's love of the grid,

and the eighteenth-century genre of painting called conversation pieces. Grigely and I corresponded in several ways over the course of August and September 2025, often backtracking to earlier parts of our exchange to chime in with more to ask and add. While I longed for our conversation to occur in person, passing handwritten notes back and forth on a table while sharing a meal, our exchanges had a vibratory quality, echoing and intermingling with so many other dialogues I have had with disabled artists and scholars. Amid our correspondence, Grigely was in Paris working on a show at the Palais de Tokyo alongside artist Emily Barker, whom I interviewed for BOMB in 2022. Meanwhile, parts of my dialogue with him spilled into my interview with art historian Amanda Cachia, whom he had mentored at California College of the Arts over a decade ago. Though Grigely and I were not speaking in person, the exchange of ideas was reverberating among us all. What is life if not one long, ever-unfolding conversation?

pages 26–27: Detail of *People Are Overhearing Us*, 2005, pigment print on dibond with acrylic glass, 44 x 74 inches. Photo by Marc Domage. Courtesy of Air de Paris, Romainville, France.



*Untitled Conversation (I am such a petite thing)*, 1998, ink on paper, framed text, overall dimensions 12.5 x 7.5 inches. Courtesy of Francesca Pia, Zurich.





AYDEN LEROUX: Conversation as a tangible material and theoretical substance has been central to your work. What is a conversation to you? And what constitutes a meaningful conversation?

JOSEPH GRIGELY: My God, the first question of our interview and you ask me something that has an answer so long it could be a book. LOL. But a key part of the answer is this: I see a conversation as an exchange between two or more people. It doesn't always include words—sometimes a lot can be said when saying nothing at all: in the way the eyes move, the hands push, the body turns. In art history, there is the eighteenth-century genre of painting called the conversation piece: People are grouped together, obviously having a conversation or exchange of some kind, only we, as viewers, don't know what they are saying. This isn't confined to Western culture—the idiom is present in Japanese painting, and in 1998 I published a book that collects images like these with the Center for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu. I used to spend a lot of time watching people talk with each other on the bus or at airports or at restaurants—watching the world with the sound turned off. It's a bit different nowadays, when people have conversations through text and direct messaging—it's a more asynchronous world but forever chatty and talkative. Texting, people's conversations lack the embodiment of tone and facial expression.

For me, good conversation leaves me with a little buzz—it's like flirting almost; it makes you want to keep everything in motion, and you find yourself looking forward to the next exchange—.

AL: I'm interested in how you identified conversation as between at least two people, knowing that so much of the substance of conversation that you draw upon in your work is only half of the dialogue. Your article "Inventory of Apologies," for example, shows only the responses you received from institutions when you named the ableism and lack of access inherent in their programming during the pandemic. In *Postcards to Sophie Calle*, we see your notes to her but not her response,

though she ultimately did engage with your thinking about her exhibition *The Blind*.

JG: My strategy here is to give the viewer more room for their own imagination as part of the story. I'm always holding back something—either what I or others said—. There's more irresolution this way. I learned this from Miles Davis, via Jon Pareles, who remarked that once something has resolved itself, it's gone too far—.

AL: I notice you sometimes end sentences with "—." Does that have particular significance for you?

JG: I like dashes, pauses; they feel more open-ended—as if we were speaking together—. It's a habit; I don't like closure of any kind, whether it's saying goodbye to a friend, closing an exhibition, or finishing a bottle of good wine—.

AL: What is the relationship between writing—that is, text and language—and art in your practice?

JG: Well, I love words, whether spoken or written or shaped with hands—. Before I became deaf when I was ten, I loved talking so much that I always got in trouble at school for talking when I shouldn't be. My fifth-grade teacher Ms. Corbett would make me write five hundred times, "I will not talk in class unless spoken to." Then she'd tear up the papers, just to make clear her point.

After I became deaf, the television failed me—there was no closed captioning in the 1970s. So, I read a lot—mostly books about fly fishing and fly tying. My parents subscribed to magazines on the outdoors for me—*Field & Stream* and *Outdoor Life*. I'd often skip school to go fishing in the Berkshires, mostly because in high school there were no interpreters. I flunked English and history and biology, but I aced the see-and-do courses like woodshop, metal shop, and mechanical drawing. Access the way we know it today simply didn't exist then.

In college I studied English literature—this was back in the 1970s, when literature was a cool major. I figured if I was going to read a lot, I might as well

get a degree for it. Graduate school was just a way of deferring unemployment—I had no idea what I was going to do—and a PhD at Oxford appealed to me because there were no classes—I could sit with a tutor and have one-on-one written conversations.

But once I started teaching—first at Gallaudet, then at Stanford—I started thinking more broadly about how academia is based on an idea for creating new knowledge, where new knowledge displaces old knowledge. It didn't feel quite right. I wanted more space for ambiguity, for irony, for contradiction—so, I started thinking about how to reshape my critical scholarship as visual art—. In 1985, when I was teaching at Gallaudet, I started painting using torn-up sheet music—I'd spread the music on the floor, drip paint all over it, let it dry, tear it up, and collage it onto canvas—making work that was primarily about how we see sound. I called them *Recompositions*—and this morphed a few years later into *Conversations with the Hearing*, a body of work about how we see conversations. It was based on the notepapers people wrote on to talk with me—which I arranged in grids and pinned to walls—a verbal narrative that was also visual—. The work didn't look much like art when I first showed it to people—they were like, "Huh?"—so that convinced me I was on the right track.

AL: Tell me about your time at Gallaudet.

JG: In 1983, when I was finishing up my PhD at Oxford, I joined the Gallaudet English faculty. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with a PhD, or even could do; but a year earlier when I gave a talk on sign language poetry at an international conference on sign language research, I met some Gallaudet faculty who encouraged me to come there to teach. At Gallaudet, I often found myself learning as much

opposite: Detail of *Fritz Kreisler: Caprice Viennois* from *Recompositions: Sheet Music Paintings*, 1985, acrylic and alkyd on sheet music mounted on canvas, 96 × 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.









types of paper in this archive. Text demands to be read and can have primacy over images when they are paired together, but I was picturing each time that paper and pen were reached for and the resourcefulness drawn from to find material for a note—from press releases to receipts and business cards and hotel stationary. It was a visual cacophony. What if we looked at text as a substance that is less about legibility or comprehension and more about sensation?

JG: When you look really closely at the papers in *White Noise*, you find they're much more than just "writing." There's the idiosyncratic nature of the handwriting—some are cursive, some printed, some block capitals—there's pen and pencil, colored Sharpies, some lipstick; the lines are rarely straight; words get smudged, crossed out, torn out; and there are drawings. There are the papers themselves—menus, envelopes, scratch pads, plane tickets, from the days of paper plane tickets—and how the marks sit on them. It's not really writing; it's more like a drawing of speech. The work and the notes that comprise it will have to transcend readability and survive in terms of legibility because a lot of young people today are not being taught cursive in school. And I've discovered fewer and fewer people carry a pen or a pencil with them. A lot of people would rather use their thumbs and a notes app or, sometimes, a voice-to-text app like Otter—which I have on my phone. But it only works where you have a good cell signal. I love people who love writing, and who have spent time cultivating their penmanship into something uniquely their own.

This is what the world looks like when you're deaf: It's people moving and talking, and you don't have the captions of their speech to make sense of it all. In *White Noise*, all this gets reversed: It's a room filled with those missing verbal captions, the things people say every day, and the words that pile up in my life—on my desk, on bookshelves, on the kitchen counter, in the laundry room—but instead of floating off into silence, they remain present as inscriptions.

People typically think about archives in terms of how they are

structured and organized. My archives of papers are unstructured and disorganized, sometimes labeled by year, sometimes by a person's name or a place. Mostly the papers get thrown together—where they function as a resource for my wall works where the papers are slowly assembled into an irregular modular grid. I can work for two years on making just one of these that's three feet by six feet because I'll work through maybe 15,000 to 20,000 papers in the process. Not all of the archive notes have writing—there's a large collection of hotel stationary, announcement cards, Paris metro tickets, cut-up watercolors by my partner Amy Vogel, and other papers I gathered over a thirty-year period—a sort of sociology of the spaces through which I moved over those years. I recently completed a new work using these papers—there's no writing on them—it's just a minimal grid—. Want to guess the title?

AL: Oh gosh, I feel like I should have some really clever guess.

JG: *Speechless*. Because sometimes—often—we are without the words we want or need.

AL: Just as I was right now. That's perfect.

Regarding the longer ongoing conversations in your life, how are your and Amy's creative practices in dialogue?

JG: We've been sharing ideas and work for over twenty-five years. Sometimes our collaborations are explicit—especially our film and audio works—sometimes they're more implicit in how we assimilate feedback, edits, and other minute adjustments we share with each other. I'm lucky in the sense that I love her work—which spins around the idea of the difficulty of beauty.

AL: Since the Covid pandemic raised the public consciousness of issues of bodily fragility, care networks, and the medical-industrial complex, there has been a tidal change in the representation of disability in the art world. But at this point, art about disability often takes on an educational stance to

inform the able-bodied about what it's like to have different physical, sensory, or mental capacities and needs. How do you feel about disability art being didactic?

JG: I have mixed feelings about this. Sometimes it works well, and sometimes it doesn't, especially when it is trying too hard to prove a point. There are lessons to be learned from Black art history, where work like Adrian Piper's *Calling Card (I am black)* stands out for being especially incisive: It has this understatement and takes you by surprise—and it also takes art out of the gallery and puts it into society, where it's most needed. It's really a brilliant piece. The problem with a lot of disability art is that it's trying too hard to be relevant, to look like art and feel like art—rather than take a new course, like Piper did. I'm guilty of this myself at times.

AL: A lot of art has become about its *aboutness*, using buzzwords that get funding—though, of course, arts funding is suffering right now because of language about marginalized identities—rather than maintaining an expressive quality.

JG: The dilemma is that institutions have yet to learn what their obligations are if they want to become truly accessible. Their approach to accessibility has largely been a piecemeal DIY operation, and it has mostly focused on their interface with the public—not their own internal operations. When disabled people participate in exhibitions and request access as part of the planning process, there can be, and often is, a lot of foot dragging. I've had invitations to give talks withdrawn after asking for an interpreter. I've had institutions

opposite: Installation view of *White Noise (monochrome)*, 2000, and *White Noise (polychrome)*, 2023, oval-shaped rooms, conversations on paper, pins, dimensions variable, at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts, 2023. Photo by John Verney. Courtesy of Krakow Witkin, Boston, and Air de Paris, Romainville, France.



tell me I need to use my art production budget to pay for interpreting costs. And when you push back against this, you get marked as being a “difficult” artist, and this label sticks to you. This happened at the 2000 Whitney Biennial when I asked for an interpreter for the opening and the exhibition coordinator said no. And when I asked the director to intervene, he told me to take it up with my curator. It’s exasperating when you have to constantly be your own advocate—. Slowly, institutions learn—but the invisible changes to institutional administrative infrastructure that are the result of legislation and activism and making a fuss when needed are rarely acknowledged for what they are.

A recent example of this kind of institutional change took place at the show I did at MASS MoCA. The general plan was to include ASL tours in the public programming. During the installation, I met with three Deaf candidates for the job—Kristin Johnson, Stephen Braithwaite, and Cai Steele—and we did a walk-through of the show. They intuitively understood the work with a kind of nuanced understanding that critics had missed. Right at that point I realized we did not need ASL tours for Deaf people; we needed Deaf experience tours for hearing people. The idea was for Kristin, Stephen, and Cai to lead hearing people through the show and have interpreters interpret their takes on the work from ASL to spoken English. I wanted to make their tours an integrated extension of the exhibition—turning the idea of access inside out. It flummoxed the public programming officers and took a lot of work on the part of my curator and the museum director to make it happen—but it turned out to be perhaps the most significant step forward in the show and the idea of access—showing how access has to work two ways—it’s not just for the disabled—it’s for everyone.

AL: It seems like your aim was more than just having an empathetic understanding of being d/Deaf but about the way the senses create an existential point of view. What was the response to the tours?

JG: I talked with the tour guides about their experiences—and while the general sentiment is that people

responded well, it’s really hard to know what sort of takeaways visitors had—. One of the works, *What the Stress Amounts To*, a thirty-six-foot-high tower of almost six hundred wine capsules, perplexed people. The initial response of visitors was one of mild amusement. But Cai Steele gave the work context and talked about how substance abuse is a lot higher among disabled people than those who are able bodied. Then, to make things more complicated, as disabled people seek mental health care for their substance abuse and find obstacles to access, the problem exacerbates. When a docent says, “This is the experience we share in our community, not just the experience of the artist”—people are inclined to listen. At least I hope so.

AL: One of the things I admire most about your work is that it is both a sensorial and an intellectual register of your experience. Perhaps that’s the

answer to my earlier question about art that is didactic—you are teaching through feeling rather than telling. I taught a class last spring about art and (dis)ability that encouraged the students to use their bodies as a research tool, and it felt radical to invite them into a posture of inquiry rather than explanation with their own bodies. Your work *My Sick Eye Drawings* is another great example of this. You talk about the cascade of first losing hearing in one ear from a fever, then a branch puncturing your other ear drum at age ten while playing with friends, then your vision being altered by a hemorrhage, and how, rather than

above: *Sick Eye (The Kitchen, 4 March 2022)*, 2022, framed watercolor and pencil on notepad page, 5.5 × 4.25 inches. Photo by Pauline Assathiany. Courtesy of Air de Paris, Romainville, France.



“overcoming,” you needed to “intercome” or make friends with these changes in your perceptual and sensorial life. Your friend, fellow deaf artist Aaron Williamson, said that becoming deaf wasn’t so much about losing hearing but gaining deafness. What do you feel you gained in those twenty-three days of altered vision and blindness?

JG: I feel more urgency in what I do now—and even though my vision is not as good as I wish it were, it’s good enough to work. So, I’m working a lot: writing, designing projects, planning exhibitions, tying flies, even though I know I won’t see the end of this work—I want to feel that I am using the resources I have to do what I can.

AL: Our bodies are never static.

JG: My body has altered its relationship with me—telling me it’s tired, telling me to ease up, telling me to spend more time with people I love.

AL: I want to talk about damage, intervention, and editing. Your 1995 book *Textualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* is, among many things, an astute analysis of how the practices of editing and art preservation can enact “textual eugenics,” altering work to “improve” it with a lens of (racial or other) bias. I was really excited by this idea as a carrier of BRCA1, a genetic mutation with a very high predisposition for breast and ovarian cancer. *Textualterity* made me think about James C. Wilson’s essay “(Re)writing the Genetic Body-Text,” which unpacks how the Human Genome Project has metaphorized the body as a book that has typos needing correction.

JG: This is a very real dilemma about how we position two prevailing theories about disability in society. There’s the

left: Installation view of *What the Stress Amounts To*, 2023, wine bottle capsules, 36.5 feet, at MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts, 2023. Photo by John Verney. Courtesy of Krakow Witkin, Boston, and Air de Paris, Romainville, France.

medical model, which operates under the premise Wilson talks about here: Illness is something to fix. And there’s the social model, which is predicated on the idea that disabled bodies don’t need to be fixed, but rather people are “disabled” by the built environment. These distinctions are often too perfect. There are a lot of people who justifiably don’t identify as disabled, don’t want to be disabled, and want to be cured—and why not? I am sometimes asked if I would ever want my hearing back, and it’s a good question: Yes, in part out of curiosity—there are voices of certain people I’d love to hear—but also out of care for those who live and work with me, seeing how my deafness affects their lives and attention. The lived experience isn’t disabled people’s alone: It affects their friends and families as well.

My first exhibition, which opened at Washington Project for the Arts in DC in December 1993, was titled *Body Signs: Deviance, Difference, and Eugenics*. At this time, I was also writing what would become *Textualterity*—trying to get inside the idea that the eugenicists’ desire for “perfect” bodies ran parallel to the desire of textual critics to have “perfect” texts—. I wanted to emphasize the ways texts are extensions of the bodies that produce them and how the diversity and range of “imperfect” texts is a reflection of who we are as a society.

AL: Two of the cases you describe in *Textualterity* create an interesting tension in the moral aims of accessibility. The first is editing *Tom Sawyer* to create a condensed version of the book for young readers that erases many of the racial dynamics but is more compact and “approachable.” The second is the David Hammons piece *How Ya Like Me Now?*, which portrays civil rights leader Jesse Jackson as white to comment on how few people of color were displayed in the National Portrait Gallery. The work was damaged by a group of Black pedestrians who saw the piece as racist and, later, was intentionally displayed with the damage. The connection you make about how public art is accessible and therefore vulnerable has really stayed with me.

JG: I suppose every work every artist makes is a moment of vulnerability; anything we say at any moment of time is a moment of vulnerability—there are no safe places anymore, nowhere to hide. And people will get things wrong—misread the work, misread your intentions, misread what they see and hear—because that’s how art works. It survives beyond the intentions we hold for it. This is one reason why I left academia: I didn’t like being in the position where I had to prove I was right about something—as an artist I have more freedom to just put something out there and let it have a life of its own, whatever that life may be.

AL: You made a beautiful artist’s book, *Acknowledgments*, in tandem with your MASS MoCA show that has photographs of all the people who have supported and shaped your work. What forms of support have most surprised you in the impact they’ve had?

JG: I haven’t really thought about it in quite this way—because I’m not often immediately aware of how support systems play out—it sometimes might be months later, even years later, before I realize the kind of impact a person or experience might have had on me. The surprising experiences have been with art handlers, assistants, friends, and sign language interpreters, people whose place in my life initially affected seemingly small things, but those small things were what held together my art and life and made it a lot more satisfying.

AL: Now you are working on a book with Primary Information called *Otherhow: Essays and Documents on Art and Disability, 1985–2024*. What has the process of collecting your writing for *Otherhow* been like? How does publication as a practice play a role in your studio?

JG: A lot of the books I’ve composed over the years are extensions of my studio practice—in the sense that they take my art places the art itself does not go. *Otherhow* is a little different; the scope is broader. It tries to step back from four decades of teaching and making art as a disabled person and to look at what happened, incident

by incident, encounter by encounter. It wasn’t an easy book to put together. Many of the documents that comprise it relate to some pretty awful experiences of ableism in both academia and the art world—. Collecting and editing this material also meant reliving those experiences—many of which were painful—and there were a couple of times I wanted to give up—.

AL: How do you feel your perspective is changing at this stage in your career? What ambitions do you have for your work now, at age sixty-eight?

JG: Well, I’ve been teaching for forty-odd years, and I’d like to retire—not from making art or even from teaching as a practice but from the institutional morass that teaching has become. Likewise, I’d like to retire from access battles and filing complaints with the Department of Justice—which is now quite a futile activity. It’s hard to think about disability justice at a time when fundamental human justice has been reshaped in a way I never imagined would happen in my lifetime—when democracy is being erased, when genders are being dictated, when people are being disappeared, when the genocide of unarmed people is legitimized politically. It’s a world that’s been inverted, turned inside out, twisted in ineffable ways. I used to think that law mattered; but in recent years we’ve seen American and international law so stripped of meaning and relevance that I really don’t know what to say about it all. I wish I could end this interview on a happy note, but this is not a happy time. We have work to do, not because we want to but because we have to.

# Susan Howe by Elizabeth Willis

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