When the Whitney Museum of American Art announced that the 2014 Whitney Biennial would take a bold new form with three curators from outside the museum offering their unique perspectives on the state of contemporary art in the United States, MSU and College of Arts and Letters alumnus Anthony Elms had already been working on his selections for two months.

But what Elms didn’t know was that, by making Joseph Grigely one of his choices of artists for the biennial, he would be adding two more MSU College of Arts and Letters connections to the nearly 80-year-old invitational exhibition.

“The Whitney decided to ask various people if they would be interested in putting together a proposal and submitting it to them, and I was one of those they asked,” says Elms. “So I thought about it, and told them I was interested in submitting a proposal, and, ultimately, was one of those selected.”

Elms earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art with a concentration in painting from Michigan State in 1992. He continued his studies at the University of Chicago where he received his Master of Fine Arts in 1995.

Elms, an associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia; Stuart Comer, then film curator at the Tate Modern in London, and currently chief curator of the Department of Media and Performance Art at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Michelle Grabner, a professor and chairwoman of the painting and drawing department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, were the three curators chosen to represent a range of geographic vantages and curatorial methodologies.

“I found out in September 2012, but the official announcement wasn’t made until November. So, while I began doing studio visits immediately, I couldn’t tell anyone publicly what I was doing until November,” Elms says. “However, with the relatively short timeframe, I pretty much had to have 95 percent of my choices of who I wanted in the Biennial made by June/July of 2013. There were some stragglers, of course; artists I was still trying to reach. But, for all intents and purposes, I had decided by July.”

As for his selection of Joseph Grigely for inclusion on his floor of artists and their work, Elms says it was a combination of reasons that led to his choice. What he didn’t know was that Grigely had an MSU connection, too, as his book, *Textuality: Art, Theory and Textual Criticism*, was the main text used in the Department of Art, Art History, and Design graduate seminar in 2010.
“I think that Joseph is a very thoughtful maker; one of the most thoughtful makers I’ve met. And he was working on a new project dealing with an archive of found materials from Gregory Battcock, a renowned New York City art critic who was also a painter.”

Grigely had discovered the Battcock materials some 20 years ago in the New Jersey building where his studio was then located, after a local storage company closed down, cleared out its spaces, and threw away or abandoned the contents of Battcock’s unit due to nonpayment. Nonpayment, in part, because on December 24, 1980, Gregory Battcock had been stabbed to death at his condo in Puerto Rico; his murder remains unsolved.

**ANOTHER MSU CONNECTION**

In process of researching Battcock’s life and work, Grigely had learned that Battcock had begun his formal study of painting at MSU where he received an A.B. He went on to graduate from Hunter College (now Hunter College, City University of New York) with an M.A., and received his Ph.D. from New York University in 1979.

“Joseph has, throughout the years, given the archive life through research and intervention,” Elms says. “And I felt the Battcock archive belonged in that building (The Whitney) and in New York City, given the time period and place where Battcock had been working on the upper eastside.

“And I liked that Joseph’s focus was on what a life’s work means for people; for people who put together exhibits; and who are dedicated to artists and their lives.”

Elms said that the curators and the museum had to figure out the summer before the show was held where and how everyone would fit, both in the museum and the space needed in the catalogue, as well as staffing for the artists. And they had to decide what would be shown, too.

“While Grigely had shown a version of the Battcock files in 2010, I’d heard that there was a new project he was working on, so I spoke with him about it and asked if he’d be interested,” Elms says. “We also spoke about whether Grigely’s Battcock was the piece that made the most sense for the Whitney, and we decided that it did.”

Like Elms, Grigely wanted Battcock in the Whitney’s space, there on the Upper East Side where the artist and critic had spent so much of his time and life. And there were many “ghosts” of Battcock still around the New York area, too.

**FROM OUT OF THE BLUE**

“The contact from the Whitney for the Biennial came out of the blue, and I was very thankful,” Elms says. “It was a pleasant surprise, and even though it was grueling hour-wise, and there was so little time to work on it from the standpoint of days, weeks and months, it was otherwise fantastic. And I’d do it again!

“Overall, I had no complaints. Everyone here at the ICA was forgiving and helpful, and the team at the Whitney was fantastic to work with. I felt truly blessed with two great teams. It was an exhausting experience, but a good one.”

Regarding the Whitney’s impending move from Upper East Side—Madison Avenue to downtown Manhattan—Elms says it is bittersweet.

“Anyone who has followed the story of their desire to expand the site on Madison Avenue knows it has been decades where they either couldn’t work through the plans or they couldn’t get neighbor approval,” Elms says. “The building is a child of the 1960s with old electrical, old walls, problems with the scale of the elevator and the weight it can handle, and yet, it’s a landmark. The move is bitter-sweet, but necessary.”

As for artist Grigely’s sense of the Biennial, Elms says he was grateful.

“Joseph Grigely was very thankful he participated in the Biennial. He loved having the piece there, and the installation in that space,” Elms says.

“And people came out of the woodwork who had known and/or worked with Battcock. These were people that Grigely didn’t even know to look for; people he didn’t know existed. And that greatly enriched the project overall.”