

"The Frieze Futurist Cookbook," *Frieze*, August 2019

Frieze

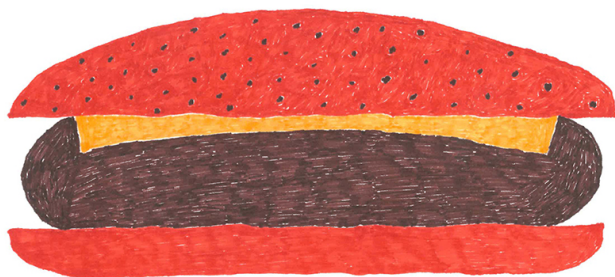
The Frieze Futurist Cookbook

Specially commissioned recipes by nine artists, including Otobong Nkanga, Heather Phillipson and Rirkrit Tiravanija, ranging from abstract to delectable

When Filippo Marinetti published *The Futurist Cookbook* in 1932, the world was in the grips of the Great Depression. 'We propose as an antidote to this panic a Futurist way of cooking, that is: optimism at the table,' he wrote. 'Zoological soup' and 'polyrhythmic salad' were never meant to grace a table; rather, they rethink our sensorial and cultural relationship to food in a time of scarcity. For our cookbook, nine artists – **Bea Bonafini, Débora Delmar, Olafur Eliasson, Christopher Knowles, Otobong Nkanga, Heather Phillipson, Slavs and Tatars, Rirkrit Tiravanija** and **Zheng Bo** – have created 'recipes' in a variety of formats. Though not all are edible – some are – they each bring optimism to the table. Theirs is a feast for both the palate and the mind.

Christopher Knowles

Cheddar Cheese and Bacon Hamburger



Christopher Knowles

My wife Sylvia Netzer and I live in The West Village in the tiny apartment. We don't cook but we eat out. My favorite food is Cheddar Cheeseburger. My favorite hamburger is at Elephant and Castle. Elephant and Castle Cheeseburgers are 20% fat. The rest is the mixture is Porter House and Chuck. They use rolls from Amy's Bakery. I really like it when bacon on top.

Christopher Knowles

Christopher Knowles,
*Cheddar Cheese and
Bacon Hamburger*, 2019,
marker on two sheets of
paper, 22 x 28 cm each.
Courtesy: the artist and
Gavin Brown's enterprise,
New York

Christopher Knowles is a visual artist and poet. In 2018, he had a solo exhibition at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, USA.

Vivian Li, "Christopher Knowles: In a Word," *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 5, 2018
<https://brooklynrail.org/2018/03/artseen/Christopher-Knowles-In-a-Word>

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

MARCH 5TH, 2018

ARTSEEN

WEBEXCLUSIVE

CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES: *In a Word*

by Vivian Li

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM HOUSTON
DECEMBER 16, 2017 – MARCH 25, 2018



Christopher Knowles, *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful*, 2013. Photo: Julian Mommert.

Though Brooklyn-based artist Christopher Knowles is renowned for his mathematical, oftentimes compulsive, use of language, his large retrospective show *Christopher Knowles: In a Word* is a revelation of how equally intense and curious he is throughout the breadth of his artmaking. Currently

on view at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston, the retrospective gathers together works that span a career more than four decades long, from his paintings and drawings of the late 1970s to today as well as archival documents and videos of his poetry, performances, and his audio collages.

Owing to his intuitive grasp of materials, it can feel rather pretentious calling what Knowles does artmaking rather than simply “making.” For his paintings, the humble oil marker is his often preferred paintbrush. Without any attempt at modeling, the flat fields of brilliantly vibrant hues accumulate on the unframed canvas to form pictures of rudimentary shapes and meanings. With a fully formed composition already in his mind, Knowles is known to paint one color as it would appear throughout the piece before moving on to the next color.

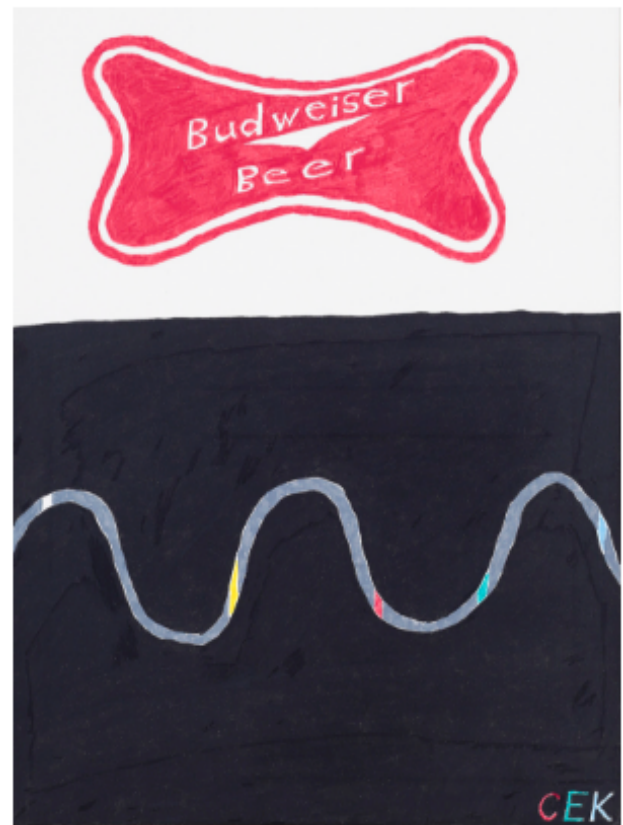
This build-up of the image as patterns of color also has a certain restlessness where the hand is trying to catch up to the mind’s eye. In *Radio City Music Hall at Christmas* (1993), for instance, the agitated streakiness of the oil marker lets us imagine Knowles’s hand going back and forth filling in the forms of the building, the windows, and the marquee. Even the prominent text, “Radio City,” running vertically and horizontally across the image, appears treated not as letters but as forms that the artist filled in. Growing up autistic and largely self-taught, Knowles retained the childlike vision of perceiving the world visually, yet with a sophisticated understanding of color and composition.

The exhibition invites a glimpse into how naturally art and life are interwoven in Knowles’s artmaking. Many of the paintings and drawings in the exhibition function not just as artworks but also as personal correspondences, such as his marker painting of a party invitation written on the naked backsides of a family in *Fire Island Party Invite* (1994), or his typewriter drawing as a birthday greeting to Sarah Knowles, *SEK 21st Birthday 1981 (Pyramid Skylight)* (1981). The short birthday greeting at the top appears in the standard letter format beginning with “Dear Sarah,” and ending with “Love, Chris,” yet the content’s language celebrating her twenty-first birthday is unusually structured around the repeated term “twenty-one.”

Similar to his use of language, the visual patterns of his typewriter drawings also revolve around a single motif, oftentimes the letter “c,” his first initial. Like the text-based ASCII art when the graphic capabilities of email was still in its infancy, the work’s central square pattern consists of a complex pattern or image made up of only the letter “c” in black and red. Unlike ASCII art on the computer, Knowles constructs his typewriter drawings carefully and meticulously from the fully formed image in his mind. The typewriter does not allow the option for mistakes.

The emphasis on Knowles as an active artistic collaborator adds to the personal intimacy of the show. Although his primary collaboration in the 1970s and 1980s with the theater director and artist Robert Wilson is celebrated as launching both of their careers, *In A Word* also references Knowles's fuller orbit of collaborators. While there is a section devoted to the archival material, photographs, and videos from his prolific projects with Wilson, there are also examples of work Knowles made with the director Richard Rutkowski, among others. Rutkowski's experimental documentary portrait of Knowles, *Sunshine Superman* (1987), gives invaluable context to the process, nuances, and humor of the artist. In the entrance to the exhibition their black and white film, *The Watch Movie* (1989), is also playing on a vintage Trinitron. Directed by Rutkowski with text by Knowles, the short movie shows a hapless watch vendor selling on the streets of New York. He suffers a repetitive string of emphatic "no"s from all who pass by him until he finally closes up shop. The predictability and regularity of the rejections make the words less brusque and, like in the repetitive structures and patterns Knowles creates in his other works, remarkably strange.

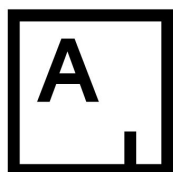
As a retrospective, *In A Word* successfully serves as a portrait not only of the artist's diverse oeuvre but of the mind of Knowles himself. In the end it feels like the only missing element is the artist. This absence is only augmented at the end of the exhibition by a large re-created stage set from his 2012 to 2015 performance piece *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful*. Taking up about a quarter of the exhibition space, the set is wallpapered over with pages from the *New York Times* and occupied by similarly papered over table and folding chair props. Three large paper cones decorated with colorful marker drawings also sit on the stage like oversized dunce caps, while alarm clocks are randomly scattered around the floor. Like this curiously devised set ready to stage any number of potential outcomes, the show offers numerous ways one could enter Christopher Knowles's boundless art practice and inventive mind. It gives reason to imagine that there is much more to come.



Christopher Knowles, *Untitled*, 2012, archival marker on canvas, 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

Jeff Goldberg, "How Christopher Knowles Became an Unlikely Art Star," *Artsy*, February 22, 2018

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-christopher-knowles-art-star>



Art

How Christopher Knowles Became an Unlikely Art Star

• Jeff Goldberg Feb 22, 2018 3:20 pm

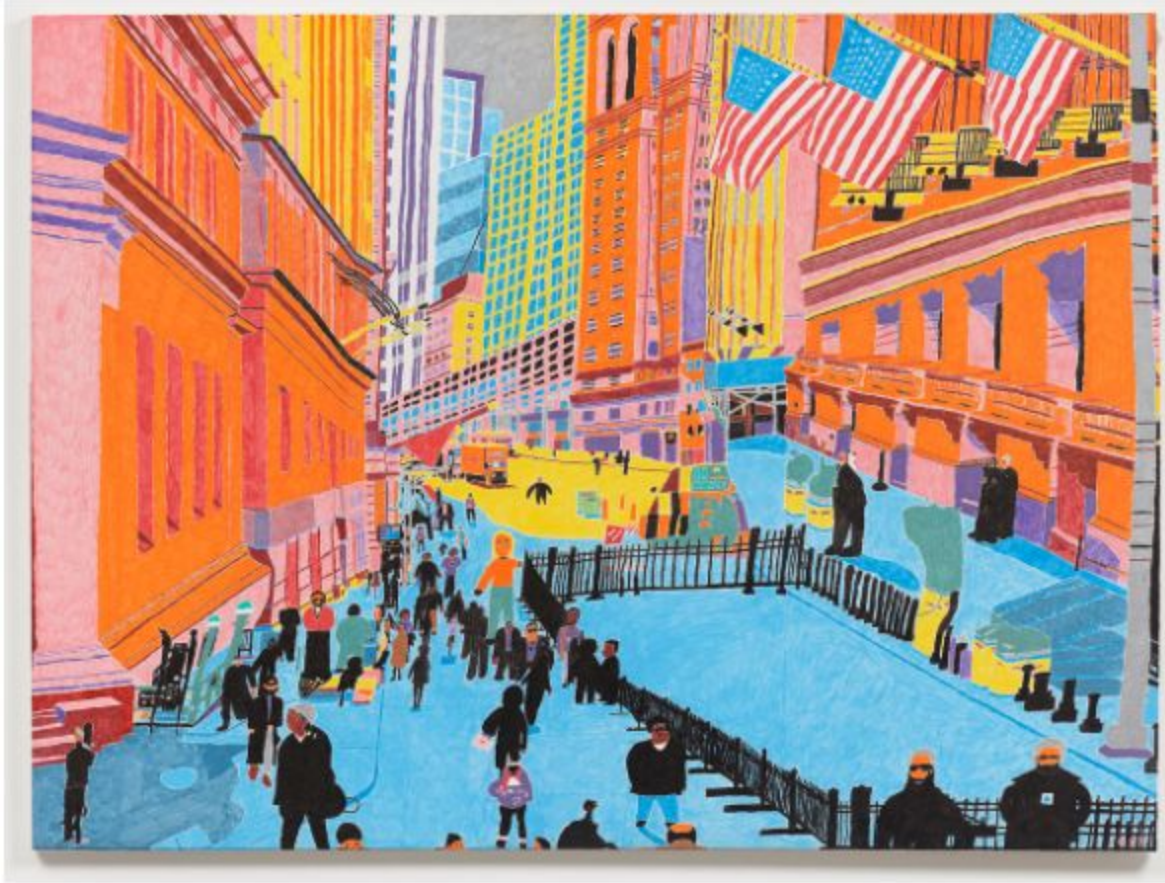


Christopher Knowles *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful*, 2013
ICA Philadelphia

For a person with autism, like the artist Christopher Knowles, the world outside can be so noisy, so busy, so full of information that it becomes overwhelming and, sometimes, terrifying. Knowles's response to the frenzied world around him is to construct islands of visual and auditory play in its midst. In his art—spanning text, sound, painting, sculpture, and performance—concrete facts, numbers, and patterns are basic elements that not only ground him in the world, but are a source of delight. His work can be disconcerting and strange, but is so imbued with Knowles's ebullient energy that it's always enchanting—and fun.

The stage set of Knowles's 2012 one-man performance, *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful*—the centerpiece of "In A Word," his current retrospective at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston—offers an illuminating glimpse into the artist's world. The walls and floor are papered with pages from the *New York Times*; headlines, photos, and blocks of print form a black-and-white babel that surrounds three brightly-painted cones and a few other simple objects: some chairs, a table with a can of Coca-Cola and a glass on it, a red alarm clock, and a green window-frame. It's a simple fortress in a world of information overload.

The artist's uncommon 40-year career began in his teens, when he was discovered by the experimental theater director Robert Wilson; Knowles began contributing to and performing in Wilson's epic avant-garde stage works, like the opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), for which Knowles wrote the libretto. While Knowles's work with Wilson is widely recognized, however, his own wide-ranging practice has received less attention; over the years, gallery and museum shows have been rare.



Christopher Knowles, *New York Stock Exchange*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

But with the retrospective exhibition in Houston now showing through the end of March; recent acclaimed performances of *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful* in New York and Philadelphia; and the release of a new vinyl record of his audio works, it's an exciting time for Christopher Knowles.

I join him and his wife, the artist Sylvia Netzer, for dinner at the Village Den, a block from their apartment in the West Village. At 58, Knowles has rounded into middle age; his hair is graying, and he's more outgoing than the quiet, haunted-looking teenager I first met in the mid-1970s. Back then, he was living in an all-red apartment, typically hunched over an Olivetti portable typewriter, obsessively typing, and listening to two different AM-radio stations at the same time.

The way Knowles communicates is unique, but he's comfortable being interviewed and clearly enjoys talking. Before we've taken our seats, he points out that the date is January 19, 2018. Dates and times are one of ways he orients himself, and he has a savant's ability to recall the date, time, and day of the week that historical and personal events occurred. "Today is the 44th year anniversary of when I first came to 147 Spring Street, Bob Wilson's loft," he says. "It was January 19, 1974. I lived with Bob, and we became collaborators and friends. I was 14."

Knowles first came to Wilson's attention when a family friend named George Klauber, who'd taught Wilson at the Pratt Institute, gave him a tape-recording Knowles had made.

Knowles first got "involved" with making tapes, he remembers, when his parents gave a reel-to-reel tape recorder to him and his sisters for Christmas, when he was 11 years old. "My mother showed me how to record something. I played it back, I rewound it, pressed the play button again. Each time it came out very different," he tells me. For Knowles, who hadn't spoken until age 10, the rhythmic variations of his recorded words were fascinating.



Christopher Knowles in *House*, a 2011 performance directed by Noah Khoshbin. Image courtesy of the Robert Wilson Studio.

On the tape, Wilson heard Knowles repeating variations of phrases about his sister Emily watching TV, in what seemed to be highly organized sequences ("Emily likes the TV because she watches the TV because she likes it. Emily likes the TV"). Intrigued by Knowles's unique use of language, Wilson invited the teen and his parents to attend the opening night performance of his new opera, *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Before the performance started, he asked Knowles to come out on stage with him, and, at several times during the production, they appeared together, extemporaneously trading lines of *Emily Likes the TV*, to the complete surprise of the rest of the well-rehearsed cast.

"That's when I met Bob Wilson," Knowles tells me. "We did *Emily Likes the TV*. But, it was getting late. So, my parents came backstage and said it's time for me to go home. So, I had to go. But, then, my father called Bob, and said it was okay for me to be in the other four performances. It was okay, because I was willing to communicate with Bob Wilson."

A willingness to communicate with others was unusual for the inward-directed child, and in the months that followed, Wilson befriended the family. At the time, Knowles was attending the O.D. Heck school, a state-run school for children with developmental disorders, near Schenectady, New York. Wilson visited him there, as he later recalled in a *New Yorker* interview: "I went upstate to

observe him...and I thought, ‘Why are they trying to correct his behavior when he’s obviously intelligent?’ The challenge was being allowed to enter his private kingdom.”



Christopher Knowles, *Untitled*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

At Wilson's urging, Knowles's parents agreed to let him live at his loft, where he could have a space to work and Wilson could help nurture the boy's unique gifts. Wilson's so-called "Byrd Loft," a converted industrial building in SoHo, was a vortex of creative activity when Knowles moved there in 1974. The large open space on the first floor (the living quarters were on the second) functioned not only as a rehearsal space for the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds—as Wilson had named the company of artists, musicians, and dancers who worked on his massive productions—but was a gathering place for the downtown art scene during Thursday night open houses.

Knowles blossomed in the energetic environment and became a key contributor to Wilson's next creation, *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, which had a limited engagement on Broadway, at the ANTA Theatre, in 1975. The backdrops and much of the sound and dialogue were constructed around Knowles's audio-tape collages, and he also performed in the piece. (*The Sundance Kid is Beautiful*, his recent one-man performance, took its name from a section of *Queen Victoria*, in which he and Wilson parroted an exchange of echoing phrases written by Knowles about the Sundance Kid.)

At the same time, he was tapping out astonishing typewritten pieces on his portable Olivetti in the Chelsea apartment he shared with Cindy Lubar Bishop, who played Queen Victoria in the 1975 production, and remained his companion through the early 1980s. With an uncanny ability to plot patterns in his mind, without making notes or preparatory sketches, he was able to type rows of black and red letter "c's" (for Christopher) into perfectly crafted complex images, ranging from a digital watch to the Seattle Space Needle. His

typings, which also included repeating blocks of sometimes nonsensical words and phrases, dovetailed with the concrete poetry of Dick Higgins and Aram Saroyan, and the text art being done by Lawrence Weiner and Ed Ruscha. Two solo exhibitions at the Holly Solomon Gallery, in 1978 and 1979, as well as a book of his typings, elevated him to unsought art-star status. “At the age of nineteen, without exactly meaning to,” the poet John Ashbery wrote in a review in *New York* magazine, “Christopher Knowles has become a major figure of the New York avant-garde.”

Knowles branched out into drawing in the 1980s. In 1984, he became interested in ceramics and signed up for classes at Greenwich House Pottery, where Netzer (now his wife) was teaching. His class ended at 10 in the evening. To leave enough time to clean up and change, Knowles—who collects wind-up alarm clocks and has dozens of them in his apartment—would bring one, sometimes two, clocks with him, set to ring around 9:30.

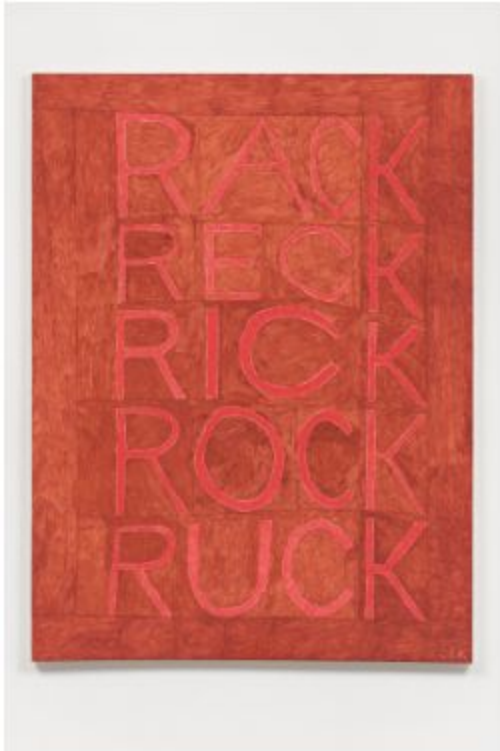


Christopher Knowles, *Parzival #12*, 1989. Courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art University of Pennsylvania.

“He’d set them to go off in the hall. It was really annoying.” Netzer laughs, thinking back. “That’s how we met.” Netzer admired Knowles’s earlier work and was interested in the drawings he was making. They became friends, then companions, and, on August 15, 2015, they were married, in a ceremony officiated by Robert Wilson.

But, by and large, the ensuing decades were quieter for Knowles. When he had a one-man show at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in 2004, it was his first in the United States in 25 years. His drawings and typings had been shown at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1985; he’d continued to perform, contributing text and playing the lead role in Wilson’s 1987 *Parzival* in Hamburg, Germany, and in a few smaller-scale productions throughout the 1990s. This slower pace was fine with Knowles. The concepts of career and art world success don’t resonate with him. He simply follows his creative impulses.

Those impulses have, since the '90s, led him increasingly toward painting. He uses oil-based markers to fill in sections of the canvas, working free-hand, without a sketch, the same way he constructed images using the typewriter. The subjects are highly idiosyncratic: traffic lights, 4th of July celebrations, the tennis player Pete Sampras. *The Life and Times of Florence Henderson* (2016) is a tribute to the actress who played Carol Brady on *The Brady Bunch*, one of Knowles's favorite TV shows growing up. "My sister and I used to watch it. *The Brady Bunch* started, I think it was on Friday, September the 26th, 1969," he says. (I checked the date later, and, of course, he was exactly right.)



Christopher Knowles, *Rack, Reck, Rick, Rock, Ruck*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.



Christopher Knowles, *Untitled* from the portfolio "Typings," 1986. Courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art University of Pennsylvania.

The game Scrabble, which Knowles enjoys playing, was the inspiration for *Rack, Reck, Rick, Rock, Ruck*, a text painting wherein the titular words are spelled out in red lettering on a brown background. "Rick is a name, but it's also a word in the dictionary. Reck without a W is a word in the dictionary, too," he explains.

"When Chris plays Scrabble, he always wins," Netzer adds.

Knowles's vibrant figurative painting, *Wall Street* (2017), was made at the suggestion of Gavin Brown, who thought Knowles's unique sensibility would work well with historical New York City sites. Knowles has never visited Wall Street, but instead worked from a black-and-white news photo, turning the dreary cityscape into a field of brilliant colors.

That's the kind of transformational energy Christopher Knowles brings to the crazy world around him. It's there in his paintings. It's there in his typings. It's there as he dances in place, snapping his fingers to music on the sound system, waiting to read from his texts at a party for the launch of his vinyl recording, *The Typing Poems*, produced by Matthew Higgs, director of the White Columns gallery in New York.

And that energy was there when I saw him skipping, creeping, and crawling through the newspaper stage-set at the Whitebox Art Center, during *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful*. “Christopher’s work is complex, it’s not as simple as you might think,” says Noah Khoshbin, who directed Knowles in that performance. “There are some dark undertones. But he’s just got this radiance about him.”

Molly Glentzer, "At CAMH, the sensationally ordered chaos of artist Christopher Knowles' mind," *Houston Chronicle*, December 22, 2017
<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/entertainment/theater/article/At-CAMH-the-sensationally-ordered-chaos-of-12450714.php>

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

At CAMH, the sensationally ordered chaos of artist Christopher Knowles' mind

By Molly Glentzer | December 22, 2017



IMAGE 1 OF 9

The re-created set for the performance piece "The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful With Christopher Knowles" is a highlight of "In a Word." The retrospective of works by Knowles, who has autism, is on view at the ... [more](#)

"Chill Billy. Is Billy chilly. Chilly is Billy."

"Would it get some wind for the sailboat. And it could get these for it is."

Excerpts from Christopher Knowles' poems sound like they might have been inspired by the seemingly nonsensical verse of Gertrude Stein, but his phrases come from an even more otherworldly place.

A window to that place cracks open with "In a Word," Knowles' big retrospective at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston featuring paintings, typewriter drawings, audio recordings, sculptures and a huge stage set.

Curators Anthony Elms and Hilton Als position Knowles as an important multidisciplinary talent and a kind of ultimate insider's outsider artist.

Knowles, who is 58 and has a form of autism, has been making art professionally for 43 years. He knows the exact time and day of the week he first appeared on a stage because that kind of information grounds him. It grounds him.

MORE INFORMATION

Christopher Knowles: 'In a Word'

When: 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays and Fridays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays, noon-6 p.m. Sundays, through March 25

Where: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 5216 Montrose

Info: Free; 713-284-8250, camh.org

He repeats things. He makes lists that expose relationships in words. He inhabits a realm of patterns and parts.

Knowles was 13 in December 1973, when his parents gave his audio-poem "Emily Likes the TV" to a friend of a friend who realized the tape's repetitive sound had purposeful patterns.

Knowles' parents are architects. Their friend of a friend was the then-young theater director and Waco native Robert Wilson, whose early work was partly inspired by the abilities of people with differences.

Wilson had already adopted Raymond Andrews, a deaf-mute boy, and founded the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds artist community in a New York warehouse. Wilson took Knowles under his wing as well, removing him from a school where teachers were trying to make him communicate conventionally.

Knowles had been able to speak only since he was 12, after about six years of intense, movement-based training. The timing of his discovery could not have been better: Knowles' free-falling language - words out of context mingling with made-up words, upended from the kind of structure most people understand - dovetailed with the experimental performance and poetry scene of the 1970s.

Soon after joining Wilson's group, the teenager was contributing to and performing in seminal Wilson productions that included "Einstein on the Beach," a 1976 collaboration with composer Philip Glass and choreographer Lucinda Childs.

"He went from zero to a thousand in a few years," said Elms, a curator at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, where the "In a Word" exhibition originated. (A sly title, if one thinks of autism as the "A" word.)

The show's highlight is the massive, re-created stage set for the 2012-15 performance piece "The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful With Christopher Knowles."

This long, narrow room is papered floor to ceiling with a grid of newsprint pages so dense it almost seems pixilated. Small retro alarm clocks, a few vintage cassette recorders, a table, a few chairs and a suspended window frame are scattered across the space, around several cone-shaped paper sculptures with drawings and text on them.

The imagery on the cones appears crudely naive, like art of the please-tell-me-how-this-is-art variety. You'd think a 5-year old executed the figures.

But even without being activated by humans and dramatic lights, the environment captures what one could imagine as the sensationally ordered chaos inside Knowles' head, and the isolation he might feel there.

There's a more intimate drilling-in with the typewriter drawings, which are just what they sound like: works made on paper with a typewriter to depict geometric forms, cars, watches, houses, pumpkins and people. Knowles composed these pieces in the 1970s and '80s, with alternating colors of ink, often using only the letter "C" - his initial. He created them from the bottom left corner upward, able to visualize the completed drawings before he began.

"There is nothing accidental in the typed designs and word lists; they fill their preordained places as accurately as though they had spilled out of a computer," poet John Ashbery once observed of Knowles.

Sounds permeate the gallery, including bouncy 1970s pop songs (important time markers for Knowles) and talky audio from several films that play on small monitors.

The show includes a number of small, rudimentary-looking oil-marker paintings on canvas that are also notable mostly for their process. Knowles doesn't sketch out the imagery: He applies the color in quadrants, like he's putting down the pieces of a puzzle. The most interesting paintings document his performances in Wilson's productions.

Letters he has written during the years to family and friends are framed and presented less successfully as artworks, although they show the artist at his most intimate.

A drawing with an awkwardly worded birthday greeting, a tiny storyboard and the outline of a cake with a wavy topping of candles carries the message, "I'm very sorry that I pounded on your cake." Next to that piece hangs a thank-you note whose message is repeated in a scrambled-letter code.

An undercurrent of tenderness and humor runs through much of Knowles' work.

The art needs to speak for itself, but "In a Word" inevitably stirs curiosity about the artist.

No one can say what or how, exactly, Knowles is thinking when he communicates. He functions conventionally in some ways. He is married, for example, and is apparently adept at tending to necessities. He works at his family's architecture firm, according to Elm. He likes shopping for records.

Knowles attended the show's opening with Elms, answering questions when prompted as they walked visitors through the galleries - perhaps in a peculiar way, without what Elms calls the "in-between" niceties most people utter when they're being social.

"There's a present tense to Christopher," Elms explained later. "You can ask, 'What does this mean?' and you're not likely to get an answer because it's not quite fact-based enough for the way he responds."

Elms doesn't question Knowles' abilities and importance as an artist. The artworks are made with great intent and attention to formal constraints, he said. "He's not a nonverbal person who scribbles until someone takes it away. Trying to explain it through any diagnosis is wrong."

When the show was up in Philadelphia, a few viewers complained to Elms, "Why are you showing this guy?"

Years ago, a New York magazine critic accused Wilson of exploiting Knowles - an incident Knowles responded to with a ceramic plate whose border reads, "John Ashberry Good John Simon Bad" and the text painting "John Simon Pollute Your Anger."

"The work is beautiful by a lot of standards," Elms said.

Spending time with Knowles' intricately detailed work reminds him that lives are full of everyday experiences and rhythms that many people block out or ignore.

And during an era when we let all kinds of differences divide us - political, cultural, social, on and on - "In a Word" offers an outlook so different it's oddly universal. Whatever one thinks of the art, that's worth experiencing.



Knowles' "Parzival" depicts him and other performers in one of Robert Wilson's productions.

Chris Becker, "Christopher Knowles: In a Word Offers An Intimate Look into an Impenetrable Mind," *Houstonia*, December 18, 2017
<https://www.houstoniamag.com/arts-and-culture/2017/12/christopher-knowles-in-a-word>

Houstonia.

Christopher Knowles: In a Word Offers An Intimate Look into an Impenetrable Mind

A new CAMH exhibition curates pieces of poetry, music, and painting of the celebrated artist.



Christopher Knowles, *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful*, 2013.

IMAGE: [JULIAN MOMMERT](#)

CONTAINING WORKS FROM 1974 TO THE PRESENT DAY shown only once before coming to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, *Christopher Knowles: In a Word* is a rare opportunity for visitors to enter what [theater director Robert Wilson](#) describes as Knowles's "private kingdom."

From within that kingdom, one views the world from several perspectives at once. The immersive and complex exhibit of paintings, drawings, sound collages and historical ephemera by the Manhattan-born artist, dancer and poet begins with red and black needlepoint-like patterns on cream colored paper.

Upon close observation, they reveal themselves to have been created by a typewriter using just the letter “c.” In another area, hundreds of pages from the *New York Times* cover the floor and walls of a reconstructed scene from “The Sundance Kid is Beautiful,” Knowles’s solo poetry and dance performance, creating an atmosphere that is more contemplative than chaotic.

On another wall, hung from left to right, smallest to largest—like the rising volume of a panicky voice—is a row of five almost identical but differently sized “Alert” paintings. Knowles uses an oil marker to conjure traffic sign colors and grim words (“Guarded,” “Alert,” “Severe”).



Christopher Knowles: *In a Word*, installation view, 2015, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

IMAGE: [CONSTANCE MENSCH](#)

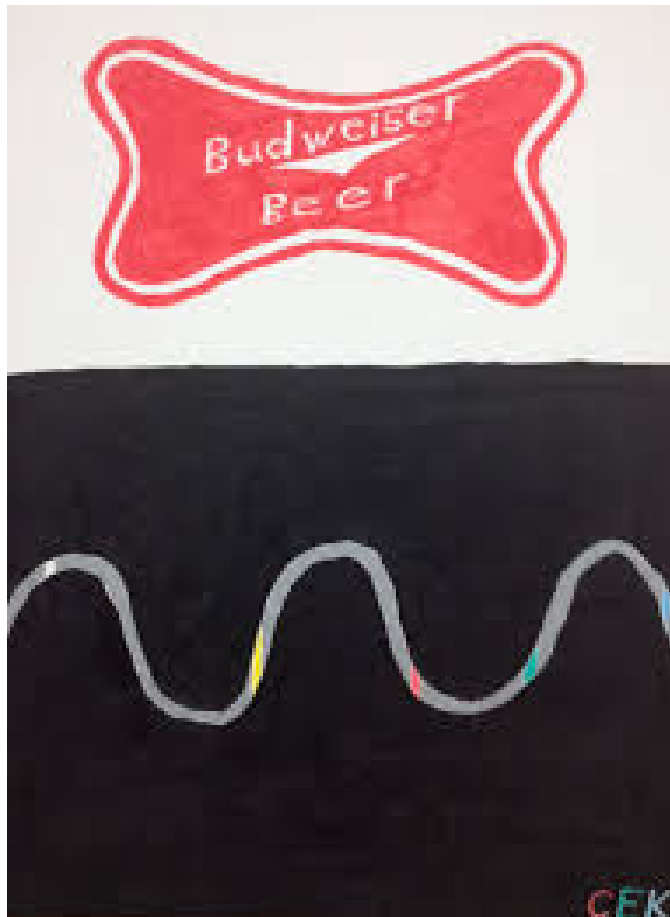
Wilson encountered Knowles in 1973 amid attempts to introduce words to his lengthy, nearly silent works for stage. By chance, he heard a recording of Knowles reading an original poem inspired by the artist’s sister, titled “Emily Watches the TV.” (“Emily” is one of several audio collages included throughout *In a Word*.) As a child, Knowles had been diagnosed as autistic, but Wilson immediately recognized a complex, internal pattern to Knowles’s recitation that, when transcribed, presented a consciously composed visual pattern of letters and words. Wilson later invited Knowles, then 14, to join the multidisciplinary theatrical collective known as the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. From there, Knowles went on to provide many texts for Wilson’s groundbreaking operas, including his 1976 collaboration with composer Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*.

For that project, Knowles responded to the question posed by Wilson: “Who is Einstein?” That now-famous text is recited at the beginning of the opera:

*“It could get the railroad for these workers. It could be a balloon.
It could be Franky, it could be very fresh and clean, it could be.
I could get some gasoline shortest one.
Al these are the days my friends and these are the days my
friends . . .”*
— Christopher Knowles, *These are the Days*

In Knowles’s writing, adjectives become nouns and nouns become verbs, but meaning is never divorced from the individual words, which speaks to Knowles’s genius as a visual poet. “These are the Days,” which is included in *In a Word* alongside several of Knowles’s other typed texts, could be the copy for a bizarre FM radio commercial, or a call to prayer.

In a Word incorporates several of these historical recordings and audio collages, playing simultaneously in different areas of the museum. The resulting layers compel visitors to “listen to the pictures,” as Wilson once said of his own work. When I visited, the sound throughout the gallery was nicely balanced, allowing visitors to discern the words and musical excerpts.



Christopher Knowles, *Untitled*, 2012, archival marker on canvas, 24 x 18 inches.

IMAGE: COURTESY OF ARTIST AND GAVIN BROWN’S ENTERPRISE

When he joined the Byrds, Knowles also began dancing with Wilson. Interestingly, Knowles's movement—both improvised and choreographed—closely mirrors the physical therapy regimen he began at the age of 6 to learn to crawl, walk and eventually speak. As *In a Word's* co-curator Anthony Elms writes in the show's catalog, "Christopher's language and movements have always been deeply entwined." With that in mind, it's surprising dance is not represented as part of *In a Word's* upcoming public programs. However, the show does include video of a recent revival of *Einstein on the Beach*, as well as several archival photographs of Knowles onstage in performance with Wilson.

All of these pieces come together for a celebration of how one extraordinary individual uses art to describe and communicate with his family, nurture friendships, and navigate the world and all its contradictions. With great care and love, Elms, co-curator Hilton Als, and CAMH's Dean Daderko have truly provided a gateway into Knowles's "private kingdom."

Thru Mar 25. Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Free. 5216 Montrose Blvd. 713-284-8250. More information at camh.org.

Filed under

[Contemporary Arts Museum](#), [Poetry](#), [Opera](#), [Exhibitions](#), [Dance](#), [Visual Arts](#), [Camh](#)

Mikkel Rosengaard, Robert Wilson, "Christopher Knowles: These are the Days My Friends and These are the Days", *Office Magazine*, Issue 6 (Spring/Summer 2017), 284-300

CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES

Christopher Knowles

These are the Days My Friends and These are the Days

Text by Mikkel Rosengaard with Robert Wilson

Daily Calendars photographed by Ben Pogue

Additional images courtesy of
Gavin Brown Enterprise and The Watermill Center

For Christopher Knowles, time is a landscape, a visual pattern. The poet and artist collects alarm clocks, he carries at least one wristwatch, and when he meets an acquaintance he might tell her: *It’s been 3,782 hours since I last saw you.* If she counts the days and hours she will find that he is correct. If you tell Knowles your birthday, he will tell you what day of week you were born, and for any historical date he can tell you exactly what phase the moon was in. Like a person on a hilltop surveying the landscape, Knowles seems to visualize the years and days and hours spreading out before him.

“There are patterns in his mind that organize time and space,” says Robert Wilson, the renowned avant-garde theater artist who has worked with Knowles for more than forty years. “I don’t know exactly how Chris’s mind is organized, but he can visualize time and language. Sometimes, if you record his sentences and listen carefully, you will find that every fourth word is ‘it’ and every tenth word is ‘with’ or that you can read the sentences backwards. There are structures at play.”

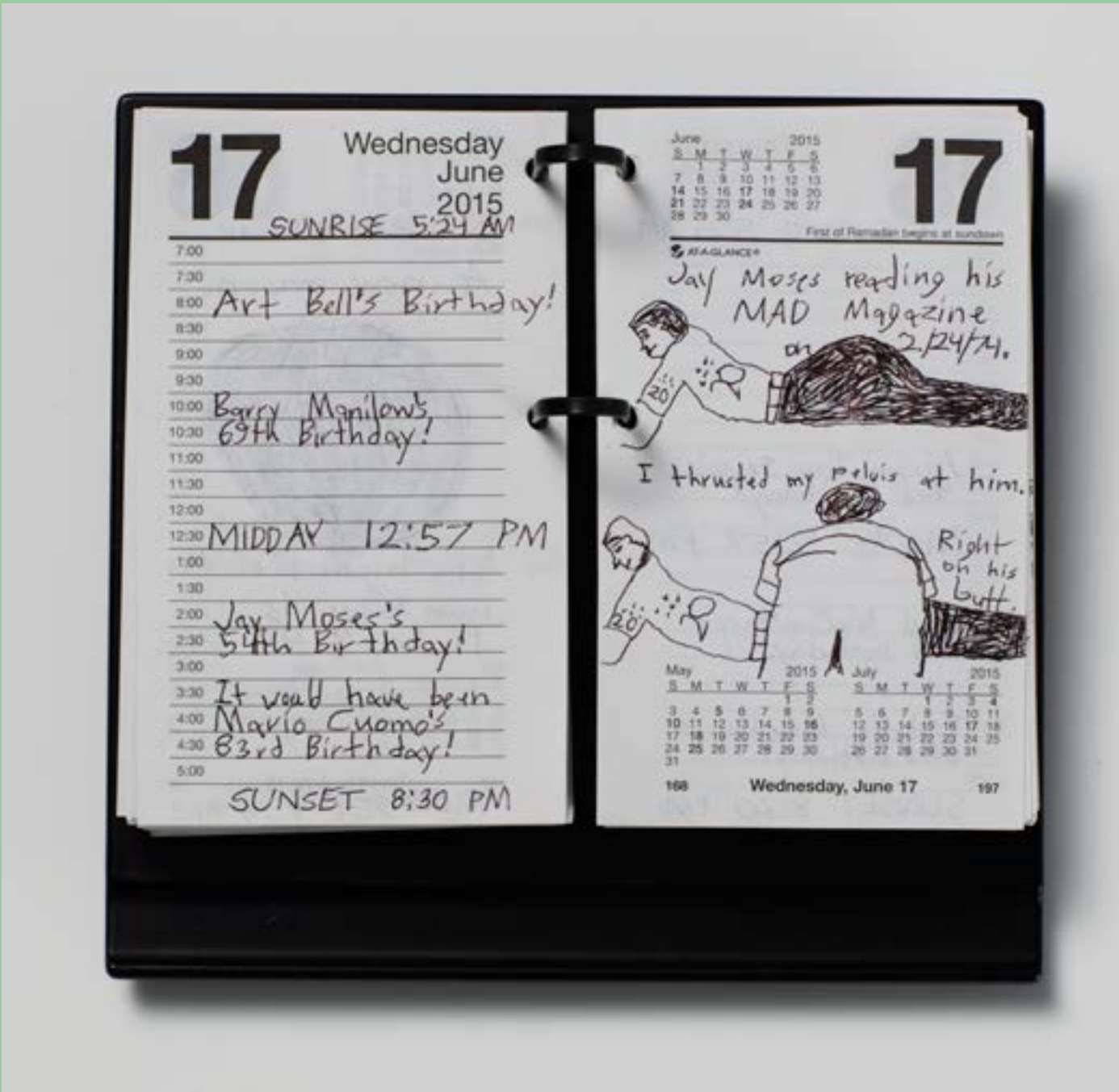
Across five decades, Knowles has explored these structures through a multidisciplinary practice of performance, poetry and art-making. His *typings*—geometric patterns of words and letters printed on a typewriter using colored inks—have been exhibited at



Untitled, 1985
Typing on paper, 22 1/2 x 17 1/2 inches
Signed and dated on verso (CK 1609)



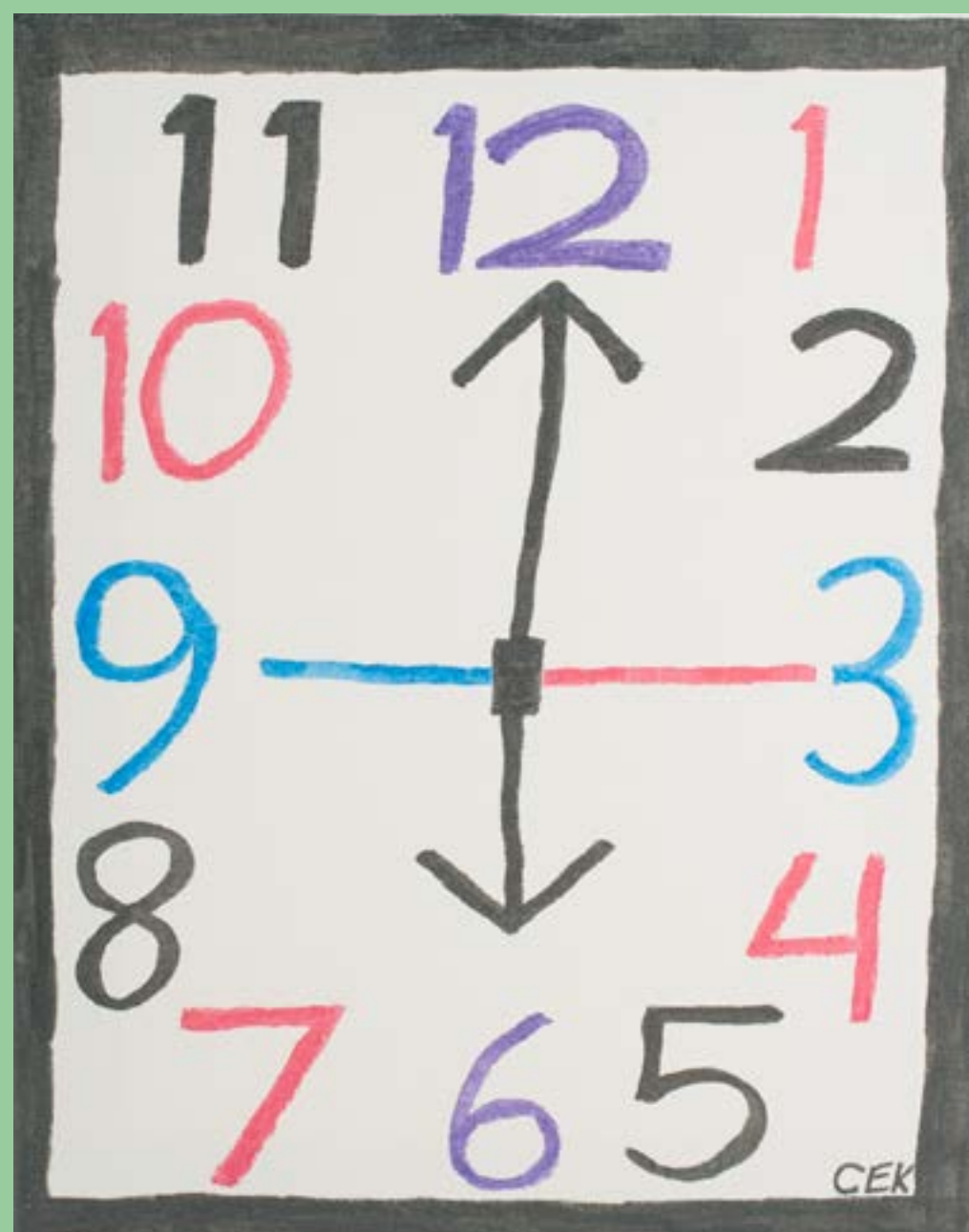
February 23rd, 2016, Christopher Knowles Daily Calendar



June 17th, 2015, Christopher Knowles Daily Calendar



After Salvador Dali's Persistence of Memory
2016, Marker on canvas, 30 x 40 inches,
Signed on recto (CK 1628)



Clock, 2009, marker on canvas, 10 x 12 inches, Watermill Center Collection

major museums and made their way into the collections of MoMA and the Museum Ludwig. At first glance Knowles's work can seem confusing, naïve and arbitrary, but when you pay attention precise patterns emerge from his poetry, his typings, his use of alarm clocks.

In 1973, when he was just thirteen years old, Knowles recorded an audio tape that wound up in the hands of Robert Wilson. On the tape, Knowles recites a poem about his sister, chanting a series of variations of the three phrases “Emily likes the TV,” “because she watches the TV,” and “because she likes it,” over and over again in different constellations, until the sentences dissolve into pure sound and all meaning is wiped away, only to be put back together again like Russian dolls being reassembled.

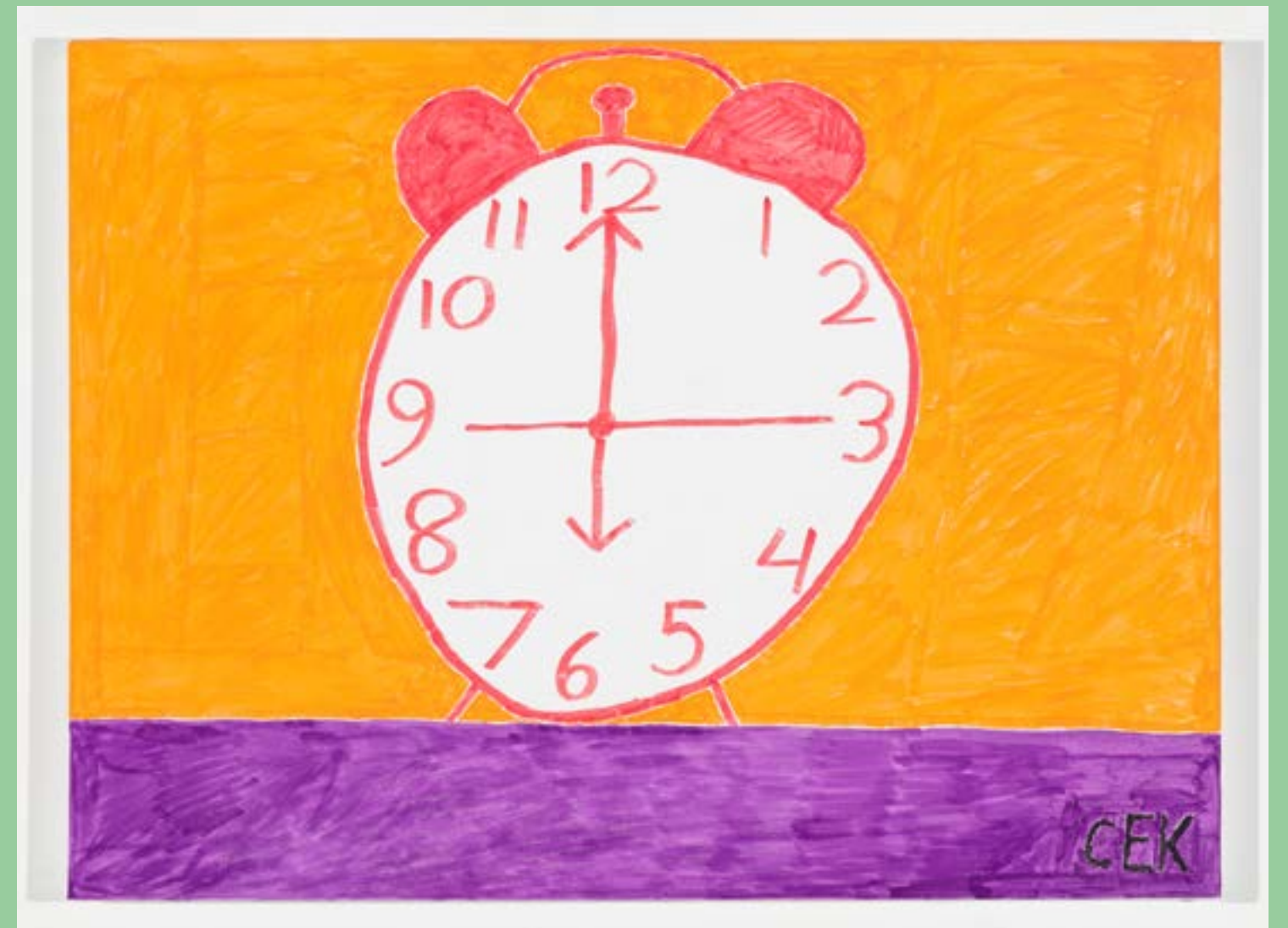
*...Emily likes the TV, because, Emily likes the TV, because, Emily
likes the TV, Emily likes the TV, Emily likes the TV, Emily likes the TV,
Emily likes the TV, Emily likes the TV, Emily likes the TV, Emily likes
the TV, Emily likes the T, Emily likes the T, Emily likes the T, Emily
likes the T, Emily likes it, Emily likes it, Emily likes, Emily, Emily,
Emily, Em, Em, Em, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m...*

Wilson was instantly intrigued. He transcribed Knowles's words and found that the seemingly random variations were not random at all. What at first had sounded arbitrary was in fact extremely structured and precise and constituted a pattern, establishing a world of its own. Wilson invited Knowles to see his play *The Life and Times of Josef Stalin*—a wordless, twelve-hour long piece with more than 120 performers—and he traveled to visit Knowles at his school in Schenectady, New York. Wilson didn't like the way the teachers were treating Knowles, correcting his actions and his speech, dogmatically imposing their reality onto his, and he convinced Knowles's parents to pull him out of school. Soon Knowles was living with Wilson, the beginning of a long and unusual collaboration.

In the '60s and early '70s, Wilson's works had been silent—no text, no libretto, no words. He had been creating plays with the deaf-mute Raymond Andrews, but now Knowles's formal and plastic approach to language started to enter Wilson's pieces. One day, Knowles was speaking in an elaborate Victorian English, apparently reciting a



untitled (Who Cares?), 1999, Oil marker on canvas,
24 x 18 inches (CK 018)

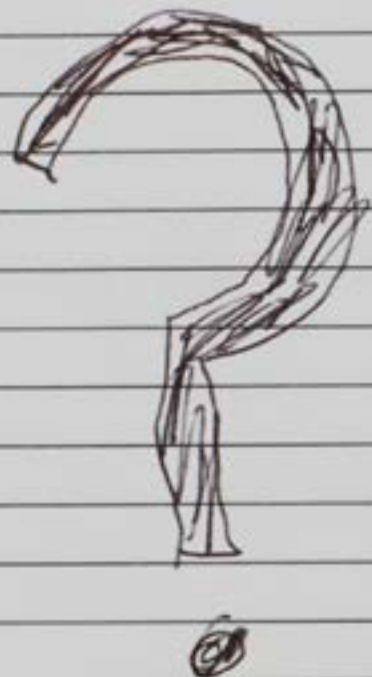


Untitled 2014, Oil marker on canvas,
18 x 24 inches (CK 1511)

12

Monday
November
2012

7:00
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4:00
4:30
5:00



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18	19	20	21	22	23	24
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AT-A-GLANCE®

12

October 2012						
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December 2012						
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23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

317

Monday, November 12

049

text he had read and memorized. This soliloquy became the central piece of Wilson's 1974 play *A Letter for Queen Victoria*.

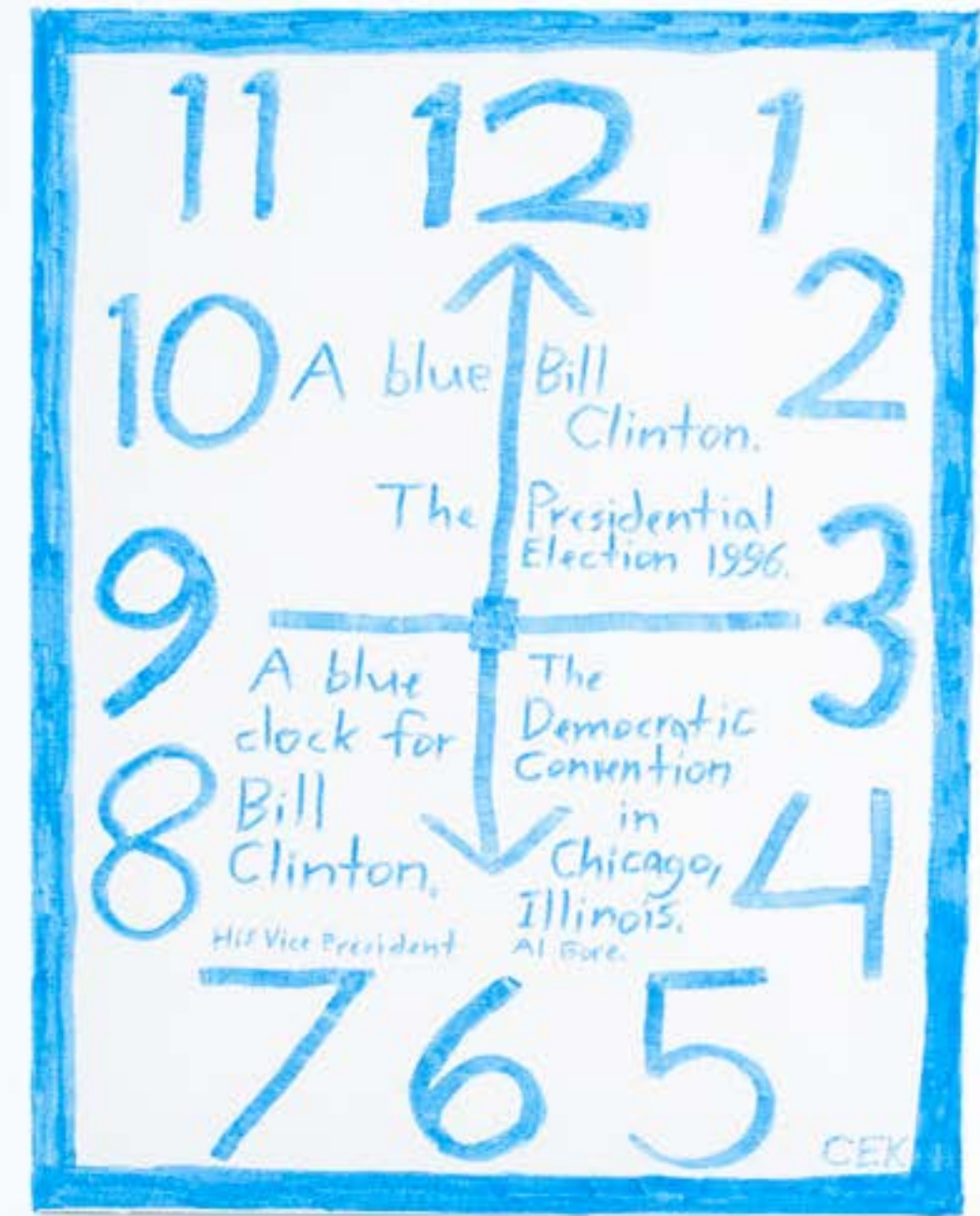
Two years later, Knowles's texts were used as the libretto for *Einstein on the Beach*, the era-defining opera directed by Wilson and composed by Philip Glass. The opera propelled Knowles into the center of the avant-garde art world, the New York social scene fascinated with his idiosyncratic ordering of language and time, his wit, his sincerity. In his diaries, Andy Warhol wrote "The Knowles boy, the star of the play, sounds so normal when you talk to him, you wouldn't know he's autistic. He answers whatever question you ask, but I guess the problem is he never says anything if you don't ask him."

It was an unlikely friendship, the avant-garde theater director in his thirties and the teenage poet on the autism spectrum. Opinions were divided. *New York* magazine's theater critic John Simon accused Wilson of taking advantage of 'a brain damaged child,' but the peculiar collaborators had struck a nerve of the times. The French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet was deeply fascinated with Knowles's structural approach to language, and John Ashbery called Knowles's poetry "pure conceptualism, which others have merely approximated."

It was as if Knowles were the embodiment of the postmodern ideas Wilson, Glass, Ashbery and Robbe-Grillet were wrestling with: how to free language from meaning, how to embrace contradictions, how to dissolve plot and structure to give way to something freer and more fractured. What was so difficult to achieve for Wilson and Glass and their baffled audiences—getting rid of narrative, not always looking for meaning—was second nature to Knowles.

"One has to be in awe with how he could work with time and space," says Wilson. "I think he visualizes language. Once you notice it, it is visually very precise and there are patterns that organize time and space."

Wilson relates how on a nine-hour flight from Amsterdam to New York, Knowles had secretly placed some of his forty-eight alarm clocks in overhead bins, under the seats and in restrooms. He had



Clinton Clock, Marker on canvas, 10 x 12 inches,
1996, Watermill Center Collection

1

Tuesday
March
2016

SUNRISE 6:30 AM

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7:30

8:00

8:30

9:00

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10:00

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11:00

11:30

MIDDAY 12:09 PM

12:30

Happy March
the first

2:00

2:30

3:00

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4:00



4:30

5:00

SUNSET 5:48 PM

March 2016						
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AT-A-GLANCE®

A half  waning
moon.


Last Quarter
10 hrs. 23 mins.

February 2016						
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28	29					

061

Tuesday, March 1

April 2016						
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17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

305

set them to go off at different intervals, creating a sonic a structure, a kind of symphony for the nine-hour flight. Wilson had fallen asleep, but was woken up when the alarms began going off.

“One alarm would go off in the back of the plane, and five minutes later another would go off in the front, it was a whole construction of time and sound. They were actually turning the plane around to Amsterdam because they didn’t know what was going on, so I had to explain them the situation. They didn’t appreciate it.”

For most people time has a flow. It runs like a river—from the past, through the present, towards the future. There are deadlines to deliver on, appointments to remember, and so we divide the plane of time into years and days and hours, and attempt to adhere to these schemes through an arsenal of alarm clocks, calendars, diaries and watches.

For some physicists, however, time is not a flow but a dimension much like a landscape. Just like Manhattan still exists while you and your consciousness are in Brooklyn, October 1976 still exists while your consciousness is in January 2017. According to this idea of the *block universe*, all moments exist simultaneously on the plane of time: your birth, your first kiss, last Saturday’s party and Sunday’s hangover too. All of it exists at once, and the sense that the present is somehow more real and alive than the past is just a trick of the consciousness, our limited minds trying to make sense of it all.

Christopher Knowles seems able to visualize the block universe more clearly than most people. In his calendars he skips between decade-old memories and seemingly random birthdays, in and out of the present day. He seems amused with our feeble attempts at measuring time, the alarm clocks, the calendars, the watches. By toying with the crushing conformity of these time-keeping devices, Knowles is creating his own patterns, a private kingdom. Or maybe a kingdom for two.

“Chris and I think alike,” says Wilson. “That’s why we work so well together. We think in the same time-space construct.”

Rachel Churner, "Looking Back: The 10th White Columns Annual," *Artforum*, April 2016

ARTFORUM

New York



Dave McKenzie,
Yesterday's Newspaper, 2007, day-old
newspaper, wood,
2¼ × 20½ × 17¼".

"Looking Back: The 10th White Columns Annual"

WHITE COLUMNS

Yesterday's Newspaper, 2007, by Dave McKenzie, is just what its title announces: a folded issue of a day-old local paper resting on a low wooden platform. The piece provides a pause, a reminder of the headlines that earned our brief attention, one step out of sync with the nonstop twenty-four-hour news cycle. But it also repeats the pitiable fate of those above-the-fold stories: discarded one day past relevance, the paper on the pedestal must continually give way to time: another day, another yesterday. McKenzie's piece, which appeared at the forefront of the White Columns Annual, also served as compelling shorthand for the exhibition as a whole. Each year, the venerable nonprofit asks an artist, writer, curator, or collective to create a show from artworks of the previous season. The slim constraints—the works are meant to have been shown in New York in the year prior but can be from galleries, art fairs, studios—give the Annual a sense of critical urgency, a last-chance-before-it's-gone excitement, but it also means that the show can be burdened with the slightly exclusionary feel of an insider's club.

For the tenth anniversary of the exhibition, artist and White Columns director and chief curator Matthew Higgs chose works by twenty-five artists. True to his other prolific curatorial concerns, Higgs grouped the work of hot up-and-comers (Justin Adian's Flavin-like corner piece of painted foam, Bill Jenkins's thirty-nine-minute video of the street taken from a shopping cart) with that of more established outsider artists (Christopher Knowles's stunning typings *Lamp* and *Eight Ladders*, both 1985–86, with their grids of red and black typed c's and, in a pairing that was a high point of the exhibition, Birdie Lusch's rough-hewn "fork, spoon, and knife holders") and that of artists with mental and developmental disabilities who work with nonprofits such as Healing Arts Initiative and Creative Growth (Alyson Vega's bleak fabric pieces; William Scott's wholesome reimagining of the globe as an *Inner Skyline*

Opportunity Space for Peace Celebrating, 2014). The hang was refreshingly straightforward: McKenzie's paper, Jenkins's video, and Susan Cianciolo's accessories kit were on the floor, and almost everything else was placed at a comfortable eye level. Works on paper and small-scale sizes prevailed.

Higgs's preferences for the intimate, the bricolaged, and the unpolished opened up a welcome space for humor. Three of the most conceptually grounded works doubled as the funniest: Rainer Ganahl's series of photos from the Whitney Museum symposium "The Koons Effect Part 1" (part of his ongoing "S/L" series, 1995–) juxtaposes a wan group of panelists with the exuberance of projected images of Koons's shiny toys (along with the giddiness of a smiling Jeffrey Deitch in the audience); Mieko Meguro's sparse oil-and-pencil paintings of "world traveler Dan Graham having a rest" at various hotels have a Warholian paint-by-numbers flare perverted by a low vantage point that makes Graham's feet assume epic proportions; and Vaginal Davis's *Flirtation Walk (The Ho Stroll)*, 2015, is a suite of eighteen publicity photos and production stills and nine text-based sheets that "out" several famous stars (Frankie Avalon, Tommy Kirk) as Hollywood hustlers.

The White Columns Annual gives us a glimpse into someone else's navigation of the art world, and tells us more about a particular curator's taste than it does about current art trends. But the *New York Times* isn't objective either, and the show, like yesterday's paper, gives us a chance to catch our breath and reflect, even if the effect is fleeting.

—Rachel Churner

Blake Gopnik, "Christopher Knowles's 'Lamp' Enlightens a Critic," *artnet news*, February 9, 2016
<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/christopher-knowles-at-white-columns-annual-422627>

artnetnews

ART WORLD

Christopher Knowles's 'Lamp' Enlightens a Critic

Blake Gopnik, Tuesday, February 9, 2016



THE DAILY PIC (#1486): Art can make you smart, teaching you to notice things you might not have before, and to think deeper and better about them. It can also make you dumb, introducing a thick cultural filter between you and normal awareness. The latter, I have to admit, was the case with me when I first looked at this 1985-86 work by the

artist and author Christopher Knowles, best known as a longtime collaborator of the theater director Robert Wilson. I came across my Pic

by Knowles, and a few other pieces like it, in the 10th annual exhibition at White Columns art space in New York, assembled by the curator Matthew Higgs. (I'm proud to say that three of Higgs's choices had already appeared in this column.) Knowles's work immediately reminded me of the earliest experiments in computer-generated abstraction, just then underway by artists such as Manfred Mohr, combined with a whiff of red-and-black Russian constructivism. What I couldn't see – mild guffaws only, please – is the fact that Knowles's piece is actually a straightforward image of a table lamp, “typed out” in endless rows of the letter “c” in red and black.

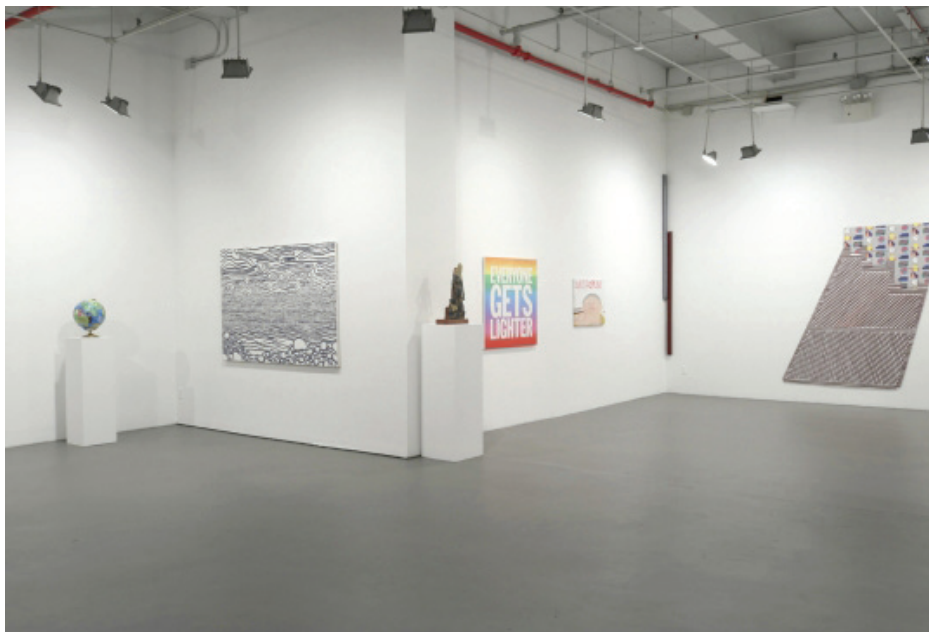
Or maybe my mistake points to something interesting, or at least less dumb: As it hovers perfectly between representation and its opposite, Knowles's piece literalizes the old, twin ideas that all abstraction descends from reality, and that reality is built on an abstract base. You could also argue that Knowles's *Lamp* gets at the gap between language and thing, using the letters that stand for the former to build an image that points to the latter. Knowles's characters don't spell the word “lamp” and his picture doesn't quite image one, either. Pointing at the world, with words or images, is harder-won than we realize. Sometimes, it requires a “c”-change in perception. (*Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York*)

For a full survey of past Daily Pics visit blakegopnik.com/archive.

"Looking Back: The 10th White Columns Annual," *Art in America*, February 2016

Art in America

EXHIBITIONS THE LOOKOUT



“Looking Back: The 10th White Columns Annual”

at White Columns,
through Feb. 20
320 West 13th Street

Over the past decade, the art world’s calendar has expanded into a far-flung 365-day-a-year whirlwind of openings, talks, performances, fairs and their attendant parties. That’s why the locally specific White Columns Annual, a roundup of art seen over the past year in New York through the subjective eyes of one curator, has become one of Chelsea’s most anticipated events. Celebrating a decade of helming White Columns, executive director Matthew Higgs has curated the tenth version of the show. The exhibition showcases Higgs’s singular sensibility for the conceptual, handwrought and humorous. A Ruth Root painting combining artist-made digital fabrics and handpainted geometric motifs, one of former fashion designer Susan Cianciolo’s showstopping kits, and a multimedia sculpture by wunderkind Kevin Beasley are three of the best-known works in the bunch. Also featured are downtown legends like genderqueer performer Vaginal Davis, John Giorno and Suicide frontman Alan Vega. Outsider art—just in time for this week’s fair—gets pride of place, with selections from artists such as Christopher Knowles, Ray Lopez, Birdie Lusch and William Scott. Don’t miss Marlon Mullen’s rendition of *A.i.A.’s* May cover above the reception desk.

Pictured: View of “Looking Back: The 10th White Columns Annual,” 2015, at White Columns. Courtesy White Columns, New York.

Cat Kron, "Philadelphia Reviews: Christopher Knowles," *Artforum*, January 2016

ARTFORUM

Philadelphia Reviews

Christopher Knowles

ICA - INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, PHILADELPHIA



View of "Christopher Knowles," 2015. From left: *A Red Clock for Bob Dole*, 2009; *Untitled*, 2012; *A Blue Clock for Bill Clinton*, 2009.

With works dictated by clear binary divisions and rules followed to the letter, "Christopher Knowles: In a Word" demonstrated the steady, straightforward logic of an assured practitioner. Although Knowles is an exemplary artist's artist—having developed something of a cult following within the art world—ICA's expansive midcareer show was his first of this scale. The survey, which predominantly featured text-based drawings and paintings (with the notable exceptions of a few representational paintings and a handful of sculptures), fleshed out a lexicon constructed around a singular preoccupation with time. Opening with the typewriter poems of Knowles's 1970s adolescence (when the autistic youth was "discovered" by Robert Wilson, who invited Knowles to perform with his Byrd Hoffman theatrical group and contribute a significant chunk of the script for Wilson's 1976 opera *Einstein on the Beach*), this open book of an exhibition culminated with a restaging of Knowles and Noah Khoshbin's 2012 performance piece *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful* this past November.

In *The Watch Movie*, Richard Rutkowski's 1989 filmic reenactment of Knowles's untitled poem installed at the entrance to the ICA's main first-floor gallery, the artist's voice can be heard reciting a description of a street-corner fence attempting to (re)sell his wares. "Hey, buddy, would you like to buy a watch?" On screen, an actor pantomimes to Knowles's narration, again and again to a disparate cast of would-be buyers. No one wants to buy a watch; not once during the entire day of hawking described during the six-minute-long film does a passerby bite. While this kind of repetition is a well established strategy

of contemporaneous video art (think of William Wegman's exercises in cheeky deadpan, for example), Knowles's repetitive structure conveys an indexical processing of the passing of time, a meditation on the correlation between the watch as an object that physically marks duration and the word *watch* that spans the length of the sound track—a series of moments from the protagonist's day, ticked off one by one in Knowles's steady monotone.

Knowles's use of time-marking appliances (alarm clocks, wall clocks, and digital watches, as well as calendar motifs, reappear throughout his oeuvre) is frequently documentary in its effect—the clock repurposed as a barometer of culturally and personally resonant occurrences. Here, *A Red Clock for Bob Dole* and *A Blue Clock for Bill Clinton*, both 2009, feature text detailing the 1996 campaigns of the presidential candidates for whom they are respectively named, scrawled between the four hands of the compass-like clock faces. (The works' minimal primary palettes and white grounds also demonstrate the influence of political signage within Knowles's practice.) These were installed to flank *Untitled*, 2012, which bears the words BARACK OBAMA ON TOP OF MITT ROMNEY, arranged exactly the way the phrase suggests.

The timepiece motifs of these works echo that of *Untitled*, 1986 (not on view), arguably the most iconic of Knowles's typings, his virtuosic compositions that recall, and often formally surpass, Carl Andre's celebrated typewritten graphic poems, but whose content is considerably less oblique. Knowles's drawing renders the contours of the artist's Casio stopwatch as a grid of meticulously typed red and black lowercase's, save for its face, which shows the date "12-27 FRI" above the hour "4:30," presumably the moment at which the work was started or finished.

Knowles is equally methodical in the construction of his more illustrative paintings, which depart from time as their explicit subject. Of these, the artist's Parzival works are exemplary, and were a highlight of the show. Knowles maps the works' compositions in his head first before filling in quadrants completely, one color at a time, with single layers of acrylic, oil markers, and felt pens. *Parzival #12*, 1989, depicts a pair of sleepers with limbs entwined, lying before a row of white-lab-coated institutional figures who observe them (and the viewer) from the composition's background. The feet of one of these individuals—a nurse?—dip into the teal horizontal plane on which the sleepers lie, bridging the predominately blue foreground and the industrial cement-gray floor on which the other recessed figures stand. The resulting image is both disconcerting and tender, as though the lovers are oblivious to the close observation of their embrace, or have decided to disregard the intrusion.

"Does he ever speak normally?" another visitor asked me with apparent sincerity as we listened to Knowles's recitations, leaving me at a momentary loss for words. The dubious taste of discussing expressive normality within the confines of someone's retrospective notwithstanding, questions of authorship haunt this work and color our reading of it. Yet the exhibition provided an eloquent rejoinder, simultaneously establishing graphic order within an irregular and often chaotic language and time-stamping a compelling individual daily experience.

—Cat Kron

Young, Logan K., "Audio Visual Arts Opens 2014 with 'Christopher Knowles..,'" *Classicalite*, January 6, 2014

Classicalite News, Commentary on Classical Music, Jazz, Theater, Dance & More

Audio Visual Arts Opens 2014 with 'Christopher Knowles: Audio Works & Objects' in East Village

Jan 06, 2014 08:19 PM EST | Logan K. Young (l.young@classicalite.com)



Poster image of Christopher Knowles cassettes from Esopus 20: Special Collections (Photo : Esopus)

2013 was a banner year for one of New York City's most underrated, often misunderstood galleries.

Of course, I'm talking about Audio Visual Arts in the East Village. (After all, *Ben Vida's Slipping Control* just barely missed our *year-end list of the city's best exhibits*.)

From Lesley Flanigan, Maria Chavez and MV Carbon high above midtown at Zabłudowicz to G Douglas Barrett's transgendered transcriptions of Schoenberg on St. Mark's, yes, AVA did some summer traveling.

In fact, head proprietor Justin Luke even took his curational skills out of the country--to much success, for sure.

Finishing out last season with a *spot-on recreation of Gen Ken Montgomery's old Generator Sound Art space* and a Xerox-ed retro of the last two decades of the *No-Neck Blues Band*, Luke has just announced his first show for 2014.

And, as per usual, *it's another must-not-miss*.

Opening on January 12 with a grand fête from 4 to 6 p.m. at AVA's home on 34 East 1st Street, Christopher Knowles' *Audio Works: '70s-'80s / Objects (a Simon and a few alarm clocks)* shows once again why Audio Visual Arts is fast becoming the première destination for recorded art.

Autistic auteur Christopher Knowles has been showing, reading and performing his poetry since his teens, back in the early '70s.

As Justin Luke explains, "he is perhaps best known for his text-based 'typings,' in which he organizes texts, ranging from lists of top 10 pop songs to single words, into intricate red, black or green patterns using an electric typewriter."

"Knowles has also created a significant amount of tape recordings," he says, "consisting of rhythmically, mathematically and visually organized poems, often involving repeated variations on a word or phrase."



I, myself, **hear Knowles' work as the closest American Outsider to Dutch sound poet Jaap Blonk.**

When Knowles was just 13, one of his tapes was given to director and playwright Robert Wilson. Wilson then invited the teenager to perform in his production of *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973).

Subsequently, Wilson asked Knowles to contribute to the libretto for his and Philip Glass' "opera," *Einstein on the Beach* ('76).

And as Luke notes, "Robert Wilson and Christopher Knowles have maintained a close collaborative partnership ever since."

Far from the accusations of director exploiting artist **that continue to dog their association**, the collaboration went both ways, indeed.

Featuring a selection of archived audio works and objects (i.e. that Simon and those few alarm clocks) from Knowles' personal collection, AVA's show presents a more varied, more aural look at the artist than, say, **his recent mounted poetry exhibit at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in the West Village.**

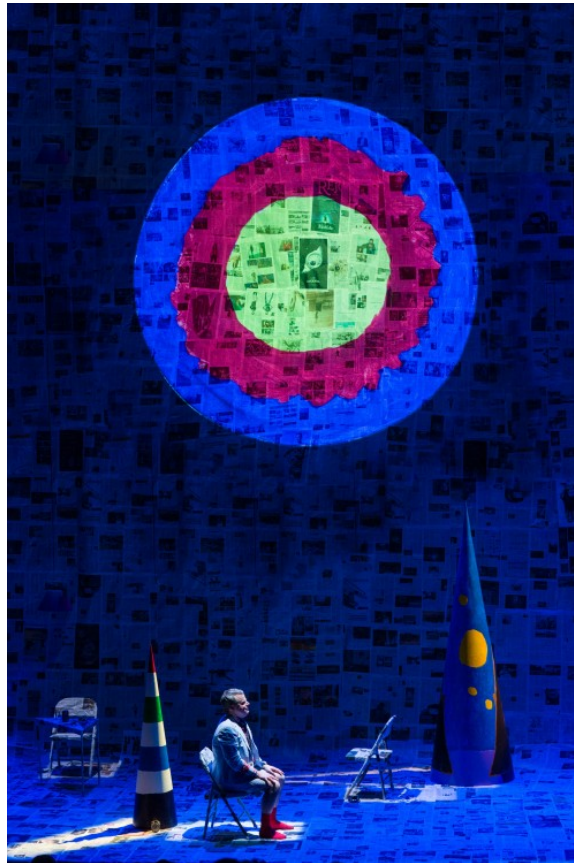
Open until February 16, once again, it's Justin Luke's Audio Visual Arts for the win.

Lauren DiGiulio, "The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles at University of Rochester," *Invisible Culture*, December 22, 2015

IN *InVisible Culture: An Electronic
Journal for Visual Culture*

"The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles" at the University of Rochester

Published on December 22, 2015
written by **Lauren DiGiulio**



A longtime collaborator of the artist Christopher Knowles once said, "everything Christopher knows makes sense, but not in the way we are familiar with." Indeed, Knowles's work functions according to its own logic. Articles and prepositions propagate in excess. Single words, groups of words, and larger blocks of phrasing repeat, proliferating to a point at which the implied meaning of the language begins to unravel. This disintegration allows us to focus on the text's material qualities—the sound and rhythm of the phrasing, the shape and color of the words on the page—rather than on its implied meaning or content.



Set view of *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles* by Christopher Knowles and Noah Khoshbin. Todd Theatre, University of Rochester, 2015. Photo by Brandon Vick.

Born in 1959 in New York City, Knowles exhibited a fascination with the aural elements of language at an early age. He began writing and performing concrete poetry in his early teenage years, and recorded these works, which are composed of spoken dialogue that often repeats and overlaps, using multiple cassette tape recorders simultaneously.

Knowles began to perform publicly in 1973 after meeting the renowned theater director and artist Robert Wilson, who had been introduced to Knowles's tape recordings by a mutual friend of Knowles's parents. This man, George Klauber, was a friend of the Knowles family, and Wilson had studied architecture under him at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Wilson invited Knowles, who was then 13 years old, to attend his 1973 production of *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. At several intervals throughout the otherwise carefully-rehearsed production, the two walked onstage together and performed improvised dialogues based on Knowles's recorded text "Emily Likes the TV."



Noah Khoshbin and Christopher Knowles in rehearsal for *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles*. Todd Theatre, University of Rochester, 2015. Photo by Brandon Vick.

This performance began a long period of close collaboration between the two artists, who wrote text and performed together through the mid-1980s. The work for which Knowles is perhaps best known outside of the downtown visual arts and theater worlds is his contribution to the libretto of *Einstein on the Beach*, the opera that Robert Wilson and Philip Glass created in 1976, a work that Susan Sontag described as “one of the great theater works of the twentieth century” that is now central to the canon of twentieth-century theater and music.

But Knowles’s practice extends far beyond these early collaborations with Wilson. Knowles paints, types, dances, and takes photographs. New typings and paintings are normally exhibited in solo shows at least once a year. He is an avid practitioner of contact improvisational dance, and attends several hours long “jam dance” sessions twice a week in New York City. Knowles’s art often exhibits an interest in themes related to the way we measure and communicate information about time and space. Maps and clocks emerge as recurring motifs throughout a variety of media. Alarm clocks, which the artist also personally collects, have featured prominently as both performance objects within his installations, and as motifs depicted in his paintings and typings. This interest in the measuring of time can also be observed in the proliferation of references to both popular music and radio schedules. Knowles’s typings and audio works feature a list of the “Top 100” or “Top 50” or “Top 10” songs of a given day, week, or year, while other pieces meticulously list the details of New York radio station schedules. These indications of popular culture not only refer to devices that quantify time, but offer empirical information that allows us to perhaps measure what it may mean to live in our own contemporary moment.



Noah Khoshbin and Christopher Knowles in rehearsal for *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles*. Todd Theatre, University of Rochester, 2015. Photo by Brandon Vick.

I first met Christopher in the summer of 2007 at The Watermill Center, a laboratory for performance that Robert Wilson established on the east end of Long Island as a place where artists could create performance in residency among Wilson’s vast collection of art objects. Christopher attends this program every year, and often creates new work for the Watermill Benefit and open house events. In 2007, I arrived at Watermill, 23 years old, and freshly graduated from Vassar College. My New England liberal arts education had given me very little preparation for what I encountered. I spent most of my time working in the garden, planting blueberry bushes placed precisely ten inches apart in a carefully conceived staggered diamond

pattern, according to Wilson's exacting standards. On the creative end, I was assigned to be an assistant director for a benefit performance, and found myself negotiating between Wilson, whom everyone colloquially calls Bob, and a collaborator who had fallen out of his favor. Meanwhile, the place was crawling with devastatingly good-looking European men. Needless to say, I was completely overwhelmed.

In the midst of what felt like controlled chaos, there was Christopher Knowles. He would often stand in the middle of a large circle of stones that he had installed in the forest, looking peacefully up at the sky and waiting for the planes to fly overhead. When he saw them pass, he would sometimes comment on whether or not they were late, and by how much time. He surreptitiously installed groups of alarm clocks in different corners of the building, and set them to ring in layered patterns, giggling when they startled unsuspecting passersby. His laughter was infectious. I began driving him to Watermill every afternoon from his residence at the Staff House in Southampton, and we sang along to Bette Midler's 1972 album *The Divine Miss M*, which lived in the cassette tape player of my 1990 Volvo 240.



Christopher Knowles in *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful* with Christopher Knowles. Todd Theatre, University of Rochester, 2015. Photo by Brandon Vick.

Hilton Als, the theater critic for the *The New Yorker* magazine, recently wrote that Christopher's writings "amount to stories about the soul, that ineffable thing that can either be got at a glance or not at all." His work is very deeply connected to his personal life. Friendships and family relations are carefully cultivated and maintained, and it is through his friendship with me, and my friendship with him, and the other members of our collaborative team, Noah Khoshbin, Andrew Gilchrist, Stephen Crawford, and our sound and light designers, Paul Coleman and Scott Bolman, that *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful* with Christopher Knowles has come into being.



Christopher Knowles in The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles. Todd Theatre, University of Rochester, 2015. Photo by Brandon Vick.

In October 2015, Christopher Knowles came to the University of Rochester to workshop a multidisciplinary, collaborative performance work titled *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles*. The weeklong residency was presented with support from The Humanities Project at the University of Rochester School of Arts and Sciences, the Program in Visual and Culture Studies, and the Program in Film and Media Studies, with additional support from the University of Rochester International Theatre Program. It culminated in a public presentation of the work in Todd Theatre, with a discussion among the project's primary collaborators following the performance.

The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles was presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania on November 11th and 12th, 2015 as part of a midcareer retrospective of Knowles's work titled "Christopher Knowles: In a Word." The exhibition, which is co-curated by Anthony Elms and Hilton Als, runs through December 27th. *This post is a slightly revised version of Lauren DiGiulio's introduction of Christopher Knowles's talkback with the audience following the presentation of *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles* on October 26th, 2015 in Todd Theatre, University of Rochester.

Lauren DiGiulio is a PhD candidate in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester and is Dramaturg and Associate Artistic Director of *The Sundance Kid is Beautiful with Christopher Knowles*.

Ken Johnson,, "Four Rewarding Shows in Philadelphia," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2015
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/arts/design/four-rewarding-shows-in-philadelphia.html>

The New York Times

Four Rewarding Shows in Philadelphia

By KEN JOHNSON DEC. 10, 2015

PHILADELPHIA — Rarely is it a better time than now for a trip to Philadelphia, where four of the city's major art institutions are presenting exceptionally rewarding shows, each distinctively its own thing. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts offers a comprehensive retrospective of the career of Norman Lewis, the first such exhibition to be devoted to this African-American Modernist painter and one that invites viewers to consider Mr. Lewis's place in the history of the country's art. Dazzling the eyes and intriguing the mind, the Philadelphia Museum of Art presents two centuries' worth of American still-life paintings and sculptures, from John James Audubon's images of birds and mammals to Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes. The Barnes Foundation has an astounding presentation of extravagantly ornamental antique works of wrought iron from a French museum, including door knockers with demonic faces and coffee grinders that look as if dreamed up by a steampunk artist. And the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania has a solo show of delightfully offbeat works by the self-taught New York artist Christopher Knowles.



Untitled Christopher Knowles work from the portfolio "Typings" (1986). Credit Courtesy the artist

Institute of Contemporary Art

A poet, visual artist and performance artist who lives in New York, Christopher Knowles (born 1959) produces works in many different mediums that revolve principally around language, to which he relates in an unusually concrete way. Mr. Knowles, who has autism, brings to his projects an idiosyncratic, impressively versatile and infectious playful sensibility and an evidently unstoppable creative drive.

One of Mr. Knowles's signature art-making tools is the typewriter. Typing in black and red, he produces intricate abstract patterns, images like that of a much-enlarged wristwatch and lists of rhyming words and popular songs titles. "What I do on a Typical Day" (2011), a matter-of-fact paragraph recounting a series of unremarkable activities, has a comically deadpan effect. He also creates percussive audio collages of words and sentences using a hand-held tape recorder and makes boldly graphic paintings, like a series of five canvases in graduated sizes from 2004, each a copy of the familiar rainbow-colored terrorist alert chart announcing states of risk from low to severe. The exhibition includes a stage set with walls and floor covered by pages of The New York Times and punctuated by alarm clocks and oversize megaphones, all assembled for a performance called "The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful" that took place in November.



"The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful" by Christopher Knowles. Credit: Courtesy the artist and Julian Mommert

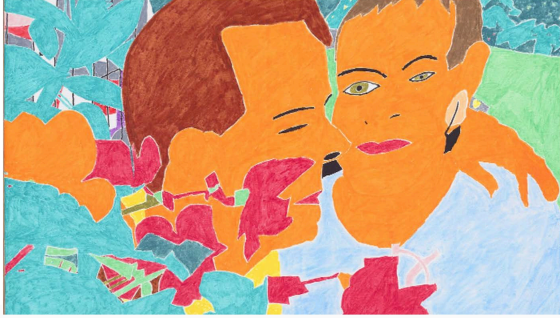
To experience this inspiring show of more than 100 works (organized by the writer Hilton Als and Anthony Elms, the institute's chief curator) is to take a mental trip into a refreshingly foreign mode of consciousness. It might rewire your brain.

Ross Simonini, and Andrew Leland, "Episode:53 This is Chris His," *The Organist*, October 23, 2015

THE ORGANIST

Episode 53: This is Chris His

Hosted by Andrew Leland • Oct. 23, 2015 ARTS



FROM THIS EPISODE

Christopher Knowles is often described as autistic, and his relationship to language is repetitive, humorous, and singular. He has worked with the theater director Robert Wilson and composer Philip Glass to write and perform massive, influential 20th century stage works including *Einstein on the Beach* and *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*. Knowles is also a visual artist; his paintings are currently on display in his first retrospective, at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. He recently sat down with the Organist along with his new bride, the artist Sylvia Netzer, to discuss art making, mutual marital caretaking, and bad reviews.



Painting by Christopher Knowles: Courtesy of Christopher Knowles and Gavin Brown's Enterprise

ore:

Exhibition: Christopher Knowles: In a Word

Producers:

Ross Simonini

Andrew Leland

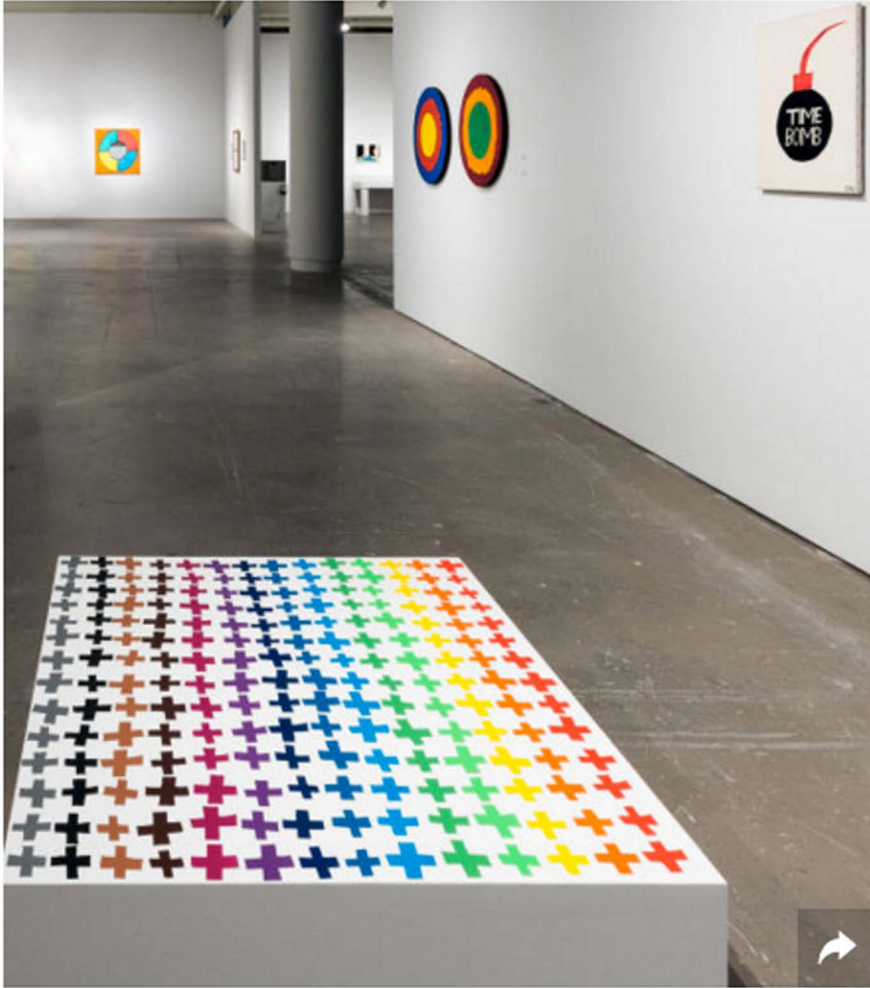
Andrea Andersson, "#Thelist: Andrea Andersson's Fall Museum Guide," Harper's Bazaar (October 15)
<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/art-books-music/g6343/fall-2015-museum-guide/>

BAZAAR Harper's #THELIST: ANDREA ANDERSSON'S FALL

Oct 15, 2015 @ 9:52 AM

MUSEUM GUIDE

From Los Angeles to London, 10 must-see exhibits.



6

Christopher Knowles: In A Word – ICA Philadelphia

I heard Knowles read a few years back at White Columns. I had seen his typed works before, but only in hearing his compositions could I fully appreciate his patterns and variations. This exhibition will bring together Knowles' independent work along with his works for Robert Wilson's productions, including *Einstein on the Beach*.

Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia

Through December 27, 2015

Thomas Hine, "Art: The art of Christopher Knowles: Pondering the imponderable," *Philly.com*, October 4, 2015

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Art: The art of Christopher Knowles: Pondering the imponderable



Much of the gallery space at the Institute of Contemporary Art is taken up by a huge stage setting for Christopher Knowles' performance of "The Sundance Kid is Beautiful" which he will do there Nov. 11-12. JULIAN MOMERT

Thomas Hine, *Inquirer Contributing Art Critic*

POSTED: Sunday, October 4, 2015, 3:01 AM

I have two things to report about "Christopher Knowles: In a Word" now on display at the Institute of Contemporary Art:

There's nothing in it that is visually compelling.

And I can't stop thinking about it.

The reason I can't stop thinking about it, perhaps, is that I can't figure out what I think. Knowles' work is often about repetitive, overlapping swirls of verbiage that never conclude or reach a point. It is about the chunkiness and oddity of words, not about logic or meaning. Knowles draws us into a way of thinking that is somehow incapable of producing thought.

Knowles, born in 1959, is a relatively little-known figure, but from the time he was a teenager he collaborated with some of the most important cultural figures of his time, chief among them the theater artist Robert Wilson. Knowles is credited as librettist of what is perhaps the defining project of the late-20th-century New York avant garde, *Einstein on the Beach*, composed by Philip Glass with choreography by Lucinda Childs. Knowles has performed throughout the world,

exhibited in galleries, had poems published in the New Yorker.

He was diagnosed early in his life as autistic. He had supportive parents who encouraged his experiments and showed them to others.



GALLERY: Art: The art of Christopher Knowles: Pondering the Imponderable

George Klauber, a designer and teacher who was a family friend, brought Knowles to Wilson's attention when he produced an overlapping sound loop with two tape recorders: "Emily likes the TV. Because she watches the TV. Because she likes it." Wilson immediately cast him in work he was doing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and he became part of Wilson's circle.

Wilson and his collaborators at the time were interested in the idea of theater without drama. They were replacing standard forms of musical and dramatic structure with repetition and layering. Christopher Knowles seems to have come into their midst like a good-looking boy from Mars who could effortlessly think in a way they were trying so hard to achieve.

When you look at Knowles' work, there is no way to tell what is early or what is late. Preoccupations recur, but there is no sense of conscious development. He takes his mind as he finds it.

But because he began this work as an adolescent during the 1970s, much of it seems to explore the moment when analog tools were starting to give way to digital tools that now appear crude. In his "Typings," he used a manual typewriter with a two-color ribbon. Using primarily the lowercase C, he typed images on long rolls of paper that recall patterned fabric, the early video game *Space Invaders*, or a Casio stopwatch. They are very much like the depictions of Santa and his sleigh that office computer nerds used to produce on their dot-matrix printers for the holidays. Knowles did not use a computer, but he mimicked the aesthetic.

One of the most vigorous works in the exhibition shows the late-1970s toy Simon, a circular music, color, and memory toy that was among the first introductions of computer technology into people's homes. Knowles' painting of Simon comes early in the show, and I reflexively saw its dark black lines and primary colors as a play on Mondrian.

As I went deeper and began to enter Knowles' world, I realized the painting was nothing more or less than a picture of something he loves. In a video shown in the gallery, we see a much-younger Knowles joyfully playing two Simons at once. Simon produces only four tones, two of which are the same note an octave apart, but Knowles seems to like such limitations. He still seems devoted to Simon; the painting here was made only last year.

Much of the gallery space is taken up with a huge stage setting for Knowles' performance, *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful*, which he will do there Nov. 11-12. New Yorker theater critic Hilton Als, guest curator of the show, will have a public conversation Wednesday about Knowles with ICA curator Anthony Elms, and Robert Wilson is scheduled to lecture Oct. 12.

The ICA's gallery guide, written by Als and Elms, describes Knowles as "the only true heir to that great American writer who put standard English on notice - Gertrude Stein."

Ann Doran, "Christopher Knowles," *Time Out* NY, January 2013



Christopher Knowles

Until Sat Feb 23

Gavin Brown's Enterprise
620 Greenwich St, New York

Exhibitions

Drawing, Painting

FREE 

Time Out rating:



Time Out says

Fri Jan 18 2013

An autistic poet and artist, Christopher Knowles provided the libretto for Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's 1976 avant-garde opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, while he was still a teenager. His drawings done on typewriter—which include pictograms forming progressions of the letter C (for Christopher), as well as top-of-the-pop-chart lists—were widely shown during the late '70s, their seriality and repetitions dovetailing neatly with the era's minimalist aesthetic. Of late, these works have been turning up in numerous group exhibitions, most recently in a show at Paula Cooper commemorating *Einstein's* revival.

This is Knowles's second solo outing at Gavin Brown's Enterprise (his first was in 2004), and it showcases a different aspect of his art: colorful, figurative oil-marker drawings on canvas. The compositions include Pop-like images of objects, texts, cityscapes, portraits, sporting events and theatrical performances. A pair of still lifes picture pieces of fruit (along with a wedge of pie or cake in one) arranged in regimented rows against watery blue backgrounds. Another work—a knockout reminiscent of 1970s New Image painting—pairs a red Budweiser beer logo with a strange, undulating gray line striped with red, yellow and blue. More complex are a series of football scenes. Collapsing foreground and background into arrangements of interlocking shapes, they recall Malcolm Morley's NASCAR canvases. A drawing of a woman sunning by a pool is similarly constructed and full of wonderful incident, including a line of trees—each reduced to its essential form—marching across the top.

Though not as well-known as Knowles's "typings," these paintings have their own considerable interest. And while they seem quite disparate from the artist's earlier work, they share the same idiosyncratic ordering of spoken and visual information, as well as a characteristic tenderness, directness and wit.—*Anne Doran*

Harriet Staff, "Sibyl Kempson, Kenny Goldsmith, Judith Malina, Ariana Reines & More.," *Poetry Foundation*, July 2013



POETRY
FOUNDATION

HARRIET

a poetry blog

POETRY NEWS

Sibyl Kempson, Kenny Goldsmith, Judith Malina, Ariana Reines & More Featured in CUNY Poetry in Theatre Program

BY HARRIET STAFF



Poetry and theater are necking in the coat closet again—if you're in New York on June 3, check out the CUNY Graduate Center Segal Theatre's latest extraordinary programming, "[Poetry in Theatre: Early Frank O'Hara + Plays by Contemporary Poets, with Judith Malina](#)," which features Ariana Reines & Jim Fletcher, Kenneth Goldsmith, Bob Holman, Yusef Komunyakaa; and a reading of Frank O'Hara's early play *Try! Try! A Noh Play*, presentations of poetry by Lemon Andersen, [Sibyl Kempson](#) (above, from her amazing *Crime or Emergency*, PS122, December 2009), and Christopher Knowles, and "an unmissable conversation with Judith Malina (Co-Founder, The Living Theatre)."

The now-legendary group of 1950s American poets called the New York School—including John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O'Hara—crossed artistic disciplines and collaborated frequently with painters, sculptors, and theatre artists including Julian Beck and Judith Malina of The Living Theatre. Together, these forward-thinking artists created a hive of activity that might be considered a precursor to today's Off-Off Broadway theatre scene. But what is the state of such cross-disciplinary involvement today? The Segal devotes a day to revisiting these seminal collaborations between poetry and theatre and to highlighting the legacy of the poetry/theatre connection in New York.

Lunch *and* dinner. Here's the schedule:

2pm: SOMEWHERE NEAR HERE by Yusef Komunyakaa (Pulitzer Prize-winning poet), directed by Kenneth Sean Collins

3pm: LORNA written and directed by Ariana Reines and Jim Fletcher

4pm: FIDGET by Kenneth Goldsmith, directed by Tom King

5pm: CLEAR THE RANGE by Bob Holman and Bob Rosenthal, directed by Allison Troup-Jensen

6:30pm: Christopher Knowles reads THE SUNDANCE KID IS BEAUTIFUL and other poems

6:45pm: Lemon Andersen

7pm: TRY! TRY! by Frank O'Hara, directed by Elise Thoron and featuring Judith Malina (The Living Theatre), Michael Laurence, and David Margulies

7:30pm: Panel with writers and Judith Malina, moderated by Frank Hentschker

8:30pm: Sibyl Kempson

Find the full event info [here](#). And for more information on O'Hara and Ashbery's ventures into playwriting, might we suggest the very enjoyable memoir by V.R. "Bunny" Lang, *V.R. Lang: Poems and Plays, With a Memoir by Alison Lurie* (1975).

Tags: Ariana Reines, Bob Holman, Christopher Knowles, Frank O'Hara, Jim Fletcher, Judith Malina, Kenny Goldsmith, Lemon Andersen, Sibyl Kempson, V.R. Lang, Yusef Komunyakaa

Posted in Poetry News on Friday, May 24th, 2013 by Harriet Staff.

Jerry Saltz, "Jet-Propelled Painting," *New York Magazine*, February 2013, 162

NEW YORK

Art

EDITED BY
MIRANDA
SIEGEL



JET-PROPELLED PAINTING Christopher Knowles, noted poet-painter, writer of operas (with Robert Wilson and Philip Glass), and active explorer of visionary text, is showing a new grouping of gorgeously colored, brilliantly realized paintings and drawings. I want them all. Signs, symbols, fruit, sports, stoplights, and wordplay predominate. A chartlike image of apples, oranges, and bananas as complex as any Jasper Johns; all the losing slips happily away in dense renditions of Jets football. Everywhere space flattens, merges with backgrounds that come alive with intensity. You're as inside this world as you'll ever see. Go. Let go. And revel (at Gavin Brown's Enterprise through February 23).

JERRY SALTZ

Eric Konigsberg, "Ars Longa: Encore," *The New Yorker*, April 15, 2013, 26



THE NEW YORKER

who had received a diagnosis of possible brain damage and spoke very little, is often referred to as autistic. He had recorded a long poem about his sister that repeated variations on a single line—"Emily likes the TV, because she watches the TV, because she likes it"—in what Wilson sensed were highly organized sequences. "I knew it was clear in his mind, but I couldn't follow it, so I transcribed the text, and it was visually stunning," he said from Berlin, between rehearsals for a new version of "Peter Pan." "If you looked at the piece of paper from far away, you could see the use of language was mathematical. There were patterns vertically, horizontally, diagonally."

Wilson, who had grown up with an auditory-processing disorder and a severe stutter, befriended Knowles and his family. "I went upstate to observe him at the O. D. Heck school, and I thought, Why are they trying to correct this behavior when he's obviously intelligent?" Wilson said. "The challenge was being allowed to enter his private kingdom." He cast the teen-ager in a number of productions, including the experimental 1976 opera "Einstein on the Beach," whose libretto was composed, in part, of Knowles's poems. "Einstein on the Beach" launched the careers of Wilson and his collaborators, the composer Philip Glass and the choreographer Lucinda Childs. Knowles, meanwhile, took up painting.

This year, the Museum of Modern Art acquired several of Knowles's "typings"—pictures created with a typewriter by using colored inks to make geometric patterns out of letters and numbers. He and Wilson are going to stage a short theatrical piece at the Louvre this fall. And the other day Knowles did a reading of several poems at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, a gallery in the West Village, which had mounted an exhibition of his new paintings.

"I think the idea for the show came from my mother," Knowles said, upstairs at the gallery before the event. "I started going to my father's office on West Fifty-sixth Street to paint. My father is an architect, and my mother is a graphic designer." Knowles, who has graying sandy hair and a compact build, wore blue-framed reading glasses, baggy corduroys, and a zippered sweater.

The paintings depict Sicilian cityscapes, bright-colored pieces of fruit in rows, and football scenes based on photographs from the *Times*. "I like to do the signature early, and work my way up and to the left," he said. His father, Edward, said, "We noticed he would start in one corner and paint all the reds that he was going to paint throughout the piece, and then he'd do all the blues, and so on. It meant he had the entire composition in his head already."

Another painting, which consisted solely of the words "JOHN SIMON POLLUTE YOUR ANGER," had been inspired by the theatre critic John Simon's dismissive treatment of Wilson's work. (Simon called him "a charlatan" and accused him of exploiting Knowles.) He pointed at the edge of the canvas, where he'd drawn Simon with a cartoonish face, and giggled. "He's not smiling at all," he said.

Knowles and Bridget Donahue, a director of the gallery, spent a few hours listening to his early tapes so that they could play selections from them during the reception. They chose a thirty-one-minute version of "Emily Likes the TV" and several shorter poems. Knowles said, "I'll need a half hour to get ready. I read. Then I'll go on at four. I've spoken with my parents, and they have to leave at five-thirty for a reservation at the Blue Ribbon restaurant. They need to be finished by seven-forty-five for people to have the table after them."

About a hundred and fifty people turned up to hear Knowles, including art collectors, museum curators, and his girlfriend, Sylvia Netzer, a sculptor on the faculty at City College, who, upon being told that his favorite painting in the show was a portrait of the two of them, smiled and said, "It is *not*!"

When it came time for the performance, Knowles stood very straight, with his hands at his sides, and ran through poems that referred to another time ("Sundance Kid," "I Feel the Earth Move") and poems that didn't ("This Is Chris His," "Pack, Peck, Pick, Pock, Puck"). The crowd especially liked it when he sped up and made lines overlap, like a d.j. mucking around with a single loop, working his voice into a falsetto. He drew a breath, said "So," and smiled. Then he went on to the next verse.

—Eric Konigsberg

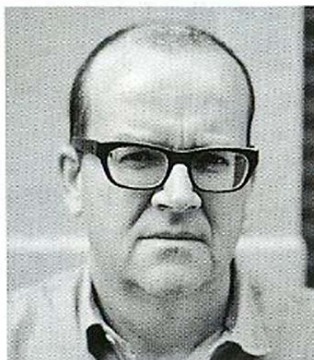
ARS LONGA ENCORE



Christopher Knowles was thirteen years old in 1973, when a friend of his parents gave an audiotope he made to Robert Wilson, the avant-garde theatre director and playwright. Knowles,

Matthew Higgs, "Einstein on the Beach," *Artforum*, 2012

Matthew Higgs



Matthew Higgs is an artist; the director and chief curator of White Columns, New York; and a regular contributor to *Artforum*. In January, he will have a two-person exhibition with Margaret Lee at Murray Guy, New York. Photo: Aubrey Mayer

6

EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH (BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC, SEPTEMBER 14–23)
The two best theatrical spectacles I saw in 2012 were Danny Boyle's opening ceremony for the London Olympics, which I watched on TV at home in New York, and BAM's revival of *Einstein on the Beach*, Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's legendary 1976 "opera," which is four and a half hours long but never boring. The juxtaposition of Glass's iconic score, Wilson's surreal theatrical tableaux, Lucinda Childs's breathless and breathtaking choreography, and Christopher Knowles's gnomic texts should have made for a unholy mess, but it somehow cohered into a unique and truly compelling form of entertainment.

6. Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, *Einstein on the Beach, an Opera in Four Acts*, 1976. Rehearsal view, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, September 13, 2012. Photo: Stephanie Berger.



Hilton Als, "Slow Man," *The New Yorker*, September 17, 2012, 78 - 83

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

SLOW MAN

Robert Wilson and his first masterpiece.

BY HILTON ALS

It was a little before midnight. A muggy night in May. The hundred-odd people gathered in the window-lined lounge of the Renaissance New York Times Square Hotel had come to see the latest work by the protean director Robert Wilson. For almost forty-five years, Wilson has been producing singular theatrical events, in which pristine, classical details coexist with an overspilling Wagnerian romanticism and strangeness, and actors, texts, light, sound, and décor merge into a visually startling, implicitly political whole. But the spectators at the Renaissance, who included the singers Rufus Wainwright and Michael Stipe, were there for something different. Times Square Arts had invited Wilson to show selections from a cache of three-minute video portraits that he has been making for the past five years. On more than twenty digital screens that lined Times Square, amid bright-colored ads for "War Horse" and Pepsi, were Wilson's subjects, among them an owl perched on a white branch in a field of blue light; Johnny Depp, staring straight ahead, in a big fur coat; Salma Hayek, posed languidly against a black backdrop; and the Mongolian sumo wrestler Byamba Ulambayar, sitting, smiling, with his legs spread, in front of a pink curtain. (The videos were screened nightly, at 11:57 P.M., in May.)

Wilson, who is seventy, is a great proponent of eclectic casting and of silence. (He usually watches television with the sound turned off.) His subjects moved

only slightly in the videos and said nothing. This was the approach that he, too, adopted in the Renaissance lounge when he was asked to speak, as cameras flashed and the crowd bathed him in post-viewing congratulations. A minute passed, then another, and another. The party grew quieter and quieter. Finally, Wilson, who is six feet four and wore a black suit and a crisp white shirt, looked around the room and said, slowly and deliberately, "If you slow things down, you notice things you hadn't seen before."

Nearly five hours long, "Einstein on the Beach," Wilson's historic 1976 opera, co-written with Philip Glass, and with choreography by Lucinda Childs, has no central narrative, and the stories that it tells are associative, not linear. (The third full revival of "Einstein," which began a fifteen-month world tour in January, comes to the Brooklyn Academy of Music this month. Glass's original score and more than a hundred of Wilson's stage designs are on view at the Morgan Library through November 4th.) Unlike other operas, "Einstein on the Beach" keeps what it does and what it says almost entirely separate. Seeing the show for the first time can feel a bit like space travel: the immediate atmosphere is so unfamiliar and discomfiting that you find it difficult to focus. It is precisely this lack of focus that appeals to Wilson: he wants to allow viewers to *not* pay attention, to take in only what they like. The critic Edwin Denby

described watching a Wilson work this way: "People have said that it's like watching clouds, and it is a good deal like that, in that sense that you see something over there in the sky and you get interested in it, and, meanwhile, something else is happening somewhere else. And somebody says, 'Look over there!'"

At the same time, "Einstein on the Beach" is a deeply unified work. It uses our collective knowledge of Albert Einstein—both the wild-haired genius of Princeton, the mind behind the deceptively simple theorem that led to the nuclear age and a prototypical suspenders-wearing hippie nerd who wasn't above sticking his tongue out at the camera—to draw us into a meditation on the myths that are born of genius. But "Einstein" is not a bio-opera, like "Doctor Atomic," John Adams's 2005 take on J. Robert Oppenheimer and the detonation of the first atomic bomb (which was also choreographed by Childs). It is not about history or nostalgia. With its unmitigated ambition, it continues to *make* history.

Seeing the current production, first in Ann Arbor, and then at the Luminato Festival, in Toronto, I witnessed a range of responses offstage. In Michigan, I sat next to a woman who began to leave through a catalogue ten minutes into the performance. For those first ten minutes, the show's two female principals (Helga Davis and Kate Moran), dressed in trousers, suspenders, and white shirts, sat on two chairs in a square of bright light, pantomiming the slow turning of knobs and writing invisible symbols in space, to the sound of Glass's sinuous, fuguelike organ music. There was no dialogue, just a periodic recitation of numbers. (The entire text for "Einstein" would fill a handful of pages.) Eventually, the woman with the catalogue and a friend beside her began to jeer at the actresses, mocking their gestures. Fifteen minutes in, they made a great show of leaving the theatre.

In Toronto, I saw "Einstein" with a young painter, who wept during the "Spaceship" sequence, which falls near the end of the opera's fourth, and final, act, and was inspired by the U.S. military's first test of a nuclear weapon, code-named Trinity, in New Mexico in 1945. Through the frenzied use of lights, sound, movement, and vocals, Wilson and Glass

Lucinda Childs, Philip Glass, and Robert Wilson, in Toronto in June, for the third revival of their opera "Einstein on the Beach."



PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC

build a landscape of apocalyptic horror and beauty. As we watched, two hatches opened downstage. Shafts of gloomy light and vapor rose from the portals, followed by Davis and Moran, who crawled out, looking less like bedraggled survivors of an explosion than like wide-eyed children discovering a new world. A curtain fell behind them as they sat quietly on a bench, and Glass's score returned to the mournful slowness of the beginning of the piece.

Before the opera was over, a speech was offered up by a stately black man (Charles Williams) sitting in a bus pointed toward Davis and Moran:

Two lovers sat on a park bench, with their bodies touching each other, holding hands in the moonlight.

There was silence between them. So profound was their love for each other, they needed no words to express it. . . .

Finally she spoke. "Do you love me, John?" she asked. "You know I love you, darling," he replied. "I love you more than tongue can tell. You are the light of my life, my sun, moon and stars. You are my everything. Without you I have no reason for being." . . .

Once more she spoke. "How much do you love me, John?" she asked. He answered: "How much do I love you? Count the stars in the sky. Measure the waters of the oceans with a teaspoon. Number the grains of sand on the sea shore. Impossible, you say."

What did those lyrical words issuing from a bus symbolize? That, despite all that had gone before, the world was moving forward? That, in a culture dominated by Cold War paranoia, love might still be

waiting at the next stop? My friend, overcome, looked away from the stage for the first time that evening.

The final message of Wilson's first masterpiece is both disjunctive and spiritually apt, both hopeful and unbearable, coming, as it does, after hours of alienation, fragmentation, and isolation. It is fitting, given Wilson's emotional biography—the primary "text" that he refers to in "Einstein"—that he saved love for last.

Wilson's parents, Loree and Digid Mims Wilson, who married in 1936, were prominent figures in Waco, Texas. Digid was a respected, handsome lawyer, and Loree a dark-haired beauty from Mississippi. (The couple met while Loree was working as an office manager at a Waco insurance company.) Though the Wilsons came from opposite ends of the Bible Belt, economically speaking—Digid was the child of a wealthy entrepreneur, while Loree, whose father died when she was seven, grew up in an orphanage—they shared a strict belief in appearances. They showed little interest in discovering who their children—Robert, who was born in 1941, and his sister, Suzanne, who is three years younger—actually were. Instead, they tried to mold them into the kind of people they would approve of. In Katharina Otto-Bernstein's book "Absolute Wilson" (2006), Suzanne says that Loree "was very ambitious for her children. Good manners were the most important thing at our home." Robert adds, "My

mother was a beautiful, intelligent, cold, and distant woman. . . . She sat beautifully in chairs . . . there was no personal communication. We could sit in a room together for hours and not talk."

Speech was difficult for Wilson, in any case. As a child, he suffered from an auditory-processing disorder: he couldn't grasp how sounds were associated with words and meaning. Teased at school because he stuttered (he also had trouble reading), he felt that he was a disappointment to his learned father, who, unlike him, also loved to fish and hunt and play sports. Wilson was helped with his speech problem by a woman named Byrd Hoffman, who ran a school where Suzanne took dance lessons. Hoffman observed that much of Wilson's difficulty had to do with the fact that he tried to speak too quickly. If he slowed the process down and took his time, he could get the words out. Eventually, he trained himself to do just that.

In Howard Brookner's wonderful 1986 documentary, "Robert Wilson and the CIVIL wars," a Waco neighbor recalls the young Wilson's preternatural ability to organize and entertain other children. Suzanne told Otto-Bernstein, "In Waco it gets very hot in the summertime, and Bob would talk us into building clubhouses, and we would believe him when he told us we were having a wonderful time." A burgeoning aesthete, the young Wilson was also very taken with the spectacle he found in the black church. Possibly he saw in black Southern spiritual culture—in its songs of uplift, its narratives of hope—a reflection of his own tenacity when it came to freeing himself from what others saw as his deficiencies, one of which, he discovered at the age of fourteen, was homosexuality.

By the time Wilson entered the University of Texas, in the late fifties, the emotional elements that he was to explore in "Einstein on the Beach" were in place. There was the issue of language and speech (which is represented in "Einstein" by the use of repetitive texts); there was his distant mother (represented by Moran, who for part of the show sits in a high chair, away from the other actors); and there was a significant black presence (represented by Davis, in the current show). Hoffman's advice to slow things down no doubt had an impact on his style. And his ambivalent view of his father enriched the figure of Einstein, who is both central and tangential to the opera's meditations.



Kanin

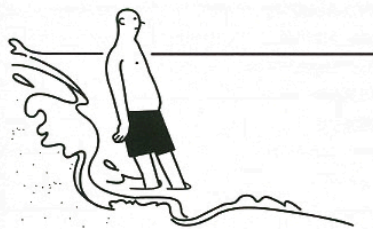
Another experience influenced the form that Wilson's imaginings would take: while at university, where he enrolled in business administration to please his father, he took a job as a kitchen aide at the Austin State Hospital for the Mentally Handicapped. When he was asked to help out in the recreational department, he began to apply the skills that he had been taught, showing patients how to slow things down and how to use their unfocused—or too focussed—energy to make art. For one project, he dipped his hair in paint and rolled around on a large canvas. This melding of body and creativity was a watershed for Wilson, as was a summer spent in Paris, after his junior year, working with the abstract painter George McNeil, who introduced him to the work of such cultural revolutionaries as Stravinsky, and taught him that all the arts—painting, writing, dance, music—were connected.

Abandoning his business major, in 1962 Wilson moved to New York to study architecture at the Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, where he flourished, often changing his instructors' assignments to suit his own interests. But it soon became clear that he was drawn more to the school's dance and performance programs than to architecture. He choreographed a dance for himself that made use of his unathletic awkwardness, and he made a theatre piece in which there was no language at all. Hungry for direction, he sat in on a rehearsal of a Martha Graham performance. When he admitted to the dance titan that he had no idea what he wanted to do, Graham told him that if he worked long and hard enough he would find his purpose. Time was a continuum.

While still a student, Wilson became increasingly successful as a recreational therapist for hyperactive and brain-damaged children. "I think my interest in education came through my roots," he told Otto-Bernstein. "I could understand it, because I had been there. . . . Many of the children were traumatized because we are so rigid in our education. My main objective was to help them gain confidence. . . . I created environments in which a child could discover for himself what he was interested in doing. . . . That really led into what I'm doing now: theatrical performances." When working with children, Wilson sometimes showed up dressed as a character; one was the Ice Man, who wore a long coat and carried a

block of ice in each hand, like a suitcase.

After graduating from Pratt, in 1966, Wilson, at his parents' insistence, returned to Waco. Once there, however, he became depressed. If this is living, he thought, I don't want to live. In a motel room in a nearby town, he took pills and drank a bottle of Scotch, but the concoction made him sick, and he threw it up. His parents found him and had him institutionalized. At the mental hospital, where he stayed for several months, Wilson saw a sympa-



thetic psychiatrist who asked him if he had a problem with being homosexual. Wilson said that he didn't, but maybe his father did. The psychiatrist said, "Maybe I should start talking to your dad." Wilson was released that day, and, with a hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket, he jumped on a Greyhound bus back to New York.

Elia Kazan's naturalism was the dominant force on Broadway when Wilson arrived. Wilson hated naturalism. He considered the stage an artificial space, meant for play and experimentation. He revelled in George Balanchine's "plotless" ballets at Lincoln Center, and in Merce Cunningham and John Cage's fecund collaborations. He also responded to the graphically strong, minimalist work of Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, and Trisha Brown. "It was classicism, pure and simple," he told me. For his own work, however, he had little interest in minimalism. In 1967, in a loft in SoHo, he opened the Byrd Hoffman School of Birds, named for the woman who had helped him to become himself. There he taught movement and developed solo works that were visually gothic and sumptuous. In photographs of one of his first pieces, Wilson appears half-naked in a world of light and shadow that rivals Carl Dreyer's. With the emotional support of a lover, the choreographer Andy deGroat, who later created the first dances for "Einstein," Wilson began to think about making something on a larger scale.

The year 1968 was a bloody one in America's history. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in April, and racial tensions were high. Wilson was teaching a movement class in Summit, New Jersey. (Newark, a dozen miles away, had been overrun by race riots the previous year.) Walking down the street one day, he saw a white cop about to strike a black adolescent. It became clear to Wilson that the teen-ager was deaf and couldn't defend himself verbally. Wilson stepped in. The boy, Raymond Andrews, had no legal guardian; Wilson went to court with him, and subsequently adopted him. He was fascinated by the way Andrews perceived the world, picking up cues that hearing people missed amid all the chatter. Wilson wanted to explore onstage what would happen to vision in the absence of sound. In 1969, his first significant work, "The King of Spain," opened at the Anderson Theatre, in the East Village. The three-hour show had no real text, and included a pair of giant walking cat legs, a woman decorating herself with feathers, and three men moving objects on a chessboard. Each tableau gave the audience not only food for thought but a visual feast: boxes of theatre within theatre. The piece got little press, but it was noticed by several show-business figures, including the director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Harvey Lichtenstein. Later that year, Lichtenstein leased BAM to Wilson for his "dance play" "The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud." The production, which lasted four hours, was in part about grief—Freud's sadness over the death of his grandson. Andrews was onstage, observing the proceedings, like a character watching his own dreams. "Unfortunately not too many people made the long trip to the Brooklyn Academy of Music to see . . . 'The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud,'" another rule-breaker, the director Richard Foreman, wrote in the *Village Voice*. "Unfortunately because Wilson has created one of the major works of the decade, based on an aesthetic quite different from one that underlies most of the current work in the theatrical avant-garde."

Sigmund Freud" differed from other avant-garde works both in its rejection of minimalism and in its representation of racial issues. The play included a troubling scene: several performers in Mammy costumes and blackface cavorting

to "The Blue Danube." Like Freud, Wilson wanted people to question the notion of motherhood. But the image was also tinged with the acknowledgment that Wilson himself had grown up in a racist environment. (His one close childhood friend was a black boy who worked as a domestic for his family. "My father was not a Klansman, but segregation was part of his education and environment," Wilson told Otto-Bernstein.) The kind of visual and political integration that Wilson was proposing is still rare in the largely white avant-garde. But, at the time, there was no critical inquiry into this aspect of his work, because there was no ongoing conversation on the subject: few of his contemporaries were putting that kind of painful baggage out there. (The Wooster Group's tricky and distanced use of blackface came more than a decade later.)

Wilson's 1971 piece "Deafman Gance," which he conceived with Andrews, featured an extraordinary black actress from New Orleans named Sheryl Sutton, whose character, the Byrdwoman, methodically murdered her children. Sutton worked with Wilson on and off for more than two decades. In Laurence Shyer's book "Robert Wilson and His Collaborators" (1989), she says that she liked performing for him because she liked the koanlike challenge of being seen and not seen at the same time. In a Wilson piece, she explains, there was no need for self-exposure, no need to project or express oneself. Instead, Wilson's actors had to "find a way of personalizing what he's given you. It not only has to make physical sense but mental sense. You have to embrace it."

Wilson's directing is precise and as wordless as possible; he often lets the performer know what he wants by doing it himself. The director Anne Bogart, in her book "A Director Prepares" (2001), describes watching Wilson in rehearsal:

The rehearsal was scheduled to begin at 7 P.M. . . . In the back row of the theatre, PhD students and scholars waited expectantly, pens poised, for Wilson's entrance. On the stage young actors warmed up. . . . Wilson arrived at 7:15. He sat down in the middle of the audience risers amidst the bustle and noise and proceeded to gaze intently at the stage. Gradually everyone in the theatre quieted down until the silence was penetrating. After about five excruciating minutes of utter stillness, Wilson stood up, walked towards a chair on the stage and stared at it. After what felt to me an eternity, he reached down,

touched the chair and moved it less than an inch. . . . The tension in the room was palpable, almost unbearable. Next, Wilson motioned an actress towards him in order to show her what he wanted her to do. He demonstrated by sitting on the chair, tilting forward and moving his fingers slightly. . . . I felt like I was watching other people in a private, intimate act.

By 1973, when Philip Glass approached Wilson about the possibility of collaborating, both artists, still in their thirties, had developed a considerable reputation among their peers, if not in the artistic mainstream. Although Glass was composing the landmark "Music in Twelve Parts" for his seven-piece ensemble when they met, he had yet to make a living with his music, and was working part-time jobs—cabdriver, plumber, handyman—to help support his family. At first, Wilson suggested that they work on a piece about Charlie Chaplin—he liked to take on historical figures, because he enjoyed upsetting the audience's preconceived notions—but Glass vetoed the idea; you'd have to find a performer who was greater than Chaplin to play Chaplin, he argued. What about Hitler? Wilson countered. Too loaded, Glass said. He proposed Gandhi, but that didn't grab Wilson's interest. When Wilson hit on the idea of Einstein, Glass wrote in "Music by Philip Glass" (1995), "that immediately clicked with me."

The opera would have four acts, the artists agreed, separated by what Wilson called "knee plays"—short scenes that linked the acts together. They eventually chose three motifs: the train, the trial, and the spaceship. The train segments would use elements of Einstein's life and work; the trial involved, among other things, Patty Hearst; and the spaceship would revolve around the development of the atomic bomb. Using those motifs, Wilson decided to measure space onstage in three ways, he told a *Times* reporter in 1984: "If I see you this close, it's a portrait. If I move back, you're a still-life. If I go three blocks away, you're part of a landscape. And so some parts of 'Einstein' are portraits, the courtroom and the train scenes are still-life, and the dance sections are the landscapes, the deepest space. . . . I guess Texas is still in my head when I want more space around everything."

Meanwhile, Glass, inspired by his association with Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha, was exploring the possibility of

"using rhythmic structure to generate an over-all form." He composed the score for "Einstein" very quickly, and by the autumn of 1975 the show was in rehearsals, with Sutton and Childs as the featured players. Wilson rarely writes his own texts; the first drafts of his shows are drawings, not words. He prefers to take other people's texts and rearrange them in a way that he thinks will interact effectively with the space. "The eyes are listening," he has said. The result is a collage in which intention doesn't necessarily follow thought, and thought abstracts feeling. For "Einstein," he invited Samuel M. Johnson, a seventy-seven-year-old black performer, to write two texts, including the final speech about love. Wilson also asked the autistic poet and performer Christopher Knowles to contribute text. A former instructor of Wilson's had sent him a tape of Knowles speaking, and Wilson was struck by his way of articulating what he saw. For "Einstein," Knowles melded popular-song lyrics with his own Steinian repetitions: "I feel the earth move. . . . I feel the tumbling down tumbling down. . . . There was a judge who like puts in a court. And the judge have like in what able jail what it could be a spanking. Or a whack. Or a smack. Or a swat. Or a hit."

"Einstein on the Beach" premiered in the summer of 1976, at the Avignon Festival, before travelling on an acclaimed six-city tour in Europe. But the artists wanted their piece to be shown on native soil. Wilson's friend Jerome Robbins helped arrange for the duo to rent the Metropolitan Opera, in New York, for two Sundays, when it would otherwise be dark. On Saturday, November 20th, stagehands waited for the last note of the repertory opera to sound before unloading Wilson's sets for the performance the following day. At approximately 6:30 P.M. on Sunday, Sutton and Childs took their places and began fiddling with invisible knobs, while Glass conducted in the orchestra pit. Four hours later, Wilson danced a solo in the "Spaceship" scene. Dressed in black, and made up like a devil or a trickster, the director brandished flashlights as the women crawled out of darkness into a world illuminated by the promise of love.

The reviews were enthusiastic. "You can read about [Wilson] and conceive him as a phony," Clive Barnes wrote in

the *Times*. "You can watch him, become excruciatingly bored, and nail him down as a fake. You would be wrong. Mr. Wilson is one of the few original minds working in the theatre today." *Time* noted, "So mesmerizing are the proceedings that it is startling when the curtain finally drops."

When the curtain dropped after the two performances at the Met, Wilson was more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in debt. His company, the Byrd Hoffman Foundation, was the official producer of the show; to get his cast to Europe he'd charged all the plane tickets on his credit card. Two weeks later, Glass was back driving a cab, and Wilson was in Europe, giving lectures and selling furniture to earn some money while working on his next production. But "Einstein" made their careers.

If you compare the current staging of the opera with footage of the earlier versions, the extent to which Wilson has honed and refined his vision becomes startlingly clear. Backdrops and other extraneous set elements have disappeared; the number of dancers has been reduced. (The cast includes more black performers, one of whom, Joe Damon Chappel, does a modified version of voguing, which is both audience-pleasing and cringe-inducing; in conflict with the essentially integrationist impulses of the show.) The pared-down purity of this staging draws one deeper into the central pathos of the piece: Wilson's struggle and fascination with language.

"Einstein on the Beach" is, ultimately, an opera about broken speech, utterances that falter. How do we talk about love? Desire? Violence? Does a word that feels this way in my mouth sound the same in your ear? And why do we have this constant yearning to speak, to listen? The poet David Shapiro, in his essay "Notes on 'Einstein on the Beach,'" writes of Wilson, "His repetitions remind us that as William James said: there is no repetition, only persistence." That questioning persistence is what defines Wilson. After the second performance in Toronto, in June, Wilson, clutching his notebook, asked me, tentatively, "Does 'Einstein' look old?" I told him that it didn't. Wilson paused before nodding. Another moment passed, followed by another, and then he spoke. "It has what they call *good bones*, doesn't it?" he said. ♦

Jochen Volz, "Looking Back", *Frieze*, January 2007, 78-83

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Issue 104

frieze asked critics and curators from around the world to choose what, and who, they felt to be the most significant shows and artists of 2006

IN CRITIC'S GUIDES | 01 JAN 07



Jochen Volz

Borrowed from John Steinbeck's 1937 novel, 'Of Mice and Men' was the title of the 4th Berlin Biennial, curated by Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick. Presented in a series of revealing sites along Berlin Mitte's Auguststrasse – such as an office, a ballroom, a school, the church, the cemetery and the galleries of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art – the exhibition managed to develop some impressive narratives. Highlights included Paul McCarthy's Bang-Bang Room (1992), Thomas Bayrle's 16mm film Autobahnkopf (Motorway Head, 1988–9), Victor Alimpiev's video Summer Lighting (2004), the typewriter drawings by Christopher Knowles in the former Jewish School for Girls, installations by Pawel Althamer, Michael Beutler and Jeremy Deller in the Post Office stables, and a series of Sergej Jensen's paintings in a private apartment.

"Christopher Knowles," *The Guide of Mice and Men, 4th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*, 2006

Christopher Knowles

* 1959 in Brooklyn, New York

lebt und arbeitet **lives and works**
in Brooklyn, New York

Dadurch wie Christopher Knowles in seinen Gemälden und „Typologien“ Text einsetzt, ordnet er die Welt auf beunruhigende Weise neu. Knowles, bei dem im Kindesalter Autismus diagnostiziert worden war, erlangte in den 1970er Jahren in New York schon als Teenager künstlerische Anerkennung und hatte dort mit 19 seine erste Einzelausstellung. Seine raffinierten und witzigen Wortexperimente wurden von dem amerikanischen Stückeschreiber und Schauspieler Robert Wilson gefördert, mit dem er in den 1970ern und 1980ern zusammenarbeitete. Knowles' Autismus mag das zwanghafte Inventarisieren und Ordnen seiner Umgebung prägen, doch sein Werk wächst darüber hinaus.

Knowles' getippte Zeichnungen dokumentieren seinen durch die Popkultur gefilterten Alltag. Dazu zählen Top-40-Hitlisten oder sich reimende Worte ebenso wie Knowles' eigene, durch den Buchstaben c gekennzeichnete Persona. Diese in roter, schwarzer und grüner Tinte „gezeichneten“ Typologien erinnern an Tippübungen. Doch in Knowles' Gliederungen nehmen Worte und Buchstaben eine abstrakte Form an oder werden gar zu Bildern. In *Untitled (42 Relationships)* (ca.1983) werden 42 Paare in zwei eingerückten Spalten aufgelistet. Die Liste enthält den Künstler und seine Freundin sowie andere Paare aus seinem Freundeskreis, aber auch Figuren des öffentlichen Lebens wie Paul und Linda McCartney. Diese scheinbar willkürliche Auswahl – sowie die Tatsache, dass Knowles überraschenderweise unmittelbar darunter sechs „der derzeit besten Number-One-Songs“ hinzufügt – scheint der präzisen Anlage der Zeichnung zu widersprechen.

Im gleichen reduzierten und selektiven Stil präsentieren Knowles' Gemälde seine Weltsicht. Neben autobiographischen Szenen und Ereignissen wie der Präsidentschaftswahl 2004 malt Knowles' Ordnungssysteme, zum Beispiel Schilder, die eine Geschwindigkeitsbegrenzung anzeigen oder die des farbig kodierten „Homeland Security Advisory System“ (*Untitled [Alert Paintings]*, 2004). Im Gegensatz zu den präzisen Schriftzeichen der Typologien sind die fetten schwarzen Buchstaben hier grob gemalt; eine ähnliche Serie zeigt eine Skala von „very fat“ bis „very thin“ (*Untitled [Very Fat]*, 2004). Derartige bizarre Kombinationen erzeugen einen dekadethetischen Effekt; Versuche unsere vorgefertigten Ideen aus Knowles' Ordnungssystem zu übertragen, führen nur zum Zusammenbruch unseres eigenen.

Christopher Knowles's use of text in his paintings and typologies offers an uncannily reordered version of the world. Diagnosed as autistic as a child, Knowles went on to achieve artistic recognition in New York in the 1970s while still a teenager, and had his first solo exhibition there when he was 19. The artist's sly and witty experimentations with words were greatly encouraged by the American playwright and actor Robert Wilson, with whom he collaborated frequently during in the 1970s and 1980s. Knowles's autism may inform his compulsive listing and ordering of his environs, but his work transcends the limitations that the condition can often connote.

Knowles's typed drawings document his daily life as filtered through popular culture, including lists of Top 40 songs or rhyming words, as well as Knowles's own persona, signified by the letter c. These typologies – “drawn” in red, black, and green inks – resemble typing exercises; however, in Knowles's arrangements of words and letters take on an abstract form or even become images. In *Untitled (42 Relationships)* (ca.1983) 42 couples are listed in two indented columns. The list includes the artist and his girlfriend alongside other couples from his circle of friends, but also public figures such as Paul and Linda McCartney. This apparently arbitrary selection – as well as Knowles's surprising addition directly below them of six of “the best number one songs now” – seems to contradict the drawing's precise layout.

Knowles's paintings also present his world view, in the same flat, filtered style. Alongside autobiographical scenes and events such as the 2004 presidential election, Knowles paints systems of classification, from speed limit signs to the color-coded “Homeland Security Advisory System” (*Untitled [Alert Paintings]*, 2004). In contrast to the typologies' precise typing, here the broad black letters are crudely painted; a similar series shows a scale from very fat to very thin (*Untitled [Very Fat]*, 2004). Such bizarre combinations work to decaethetic effect; attempts to impose our preconceived ideas onto Knowles's system of ordering only cause the collapse of our own. ESM

TOP 50 OF 1967

TOP 50 OF 1967

1. GROOVIN The Rascals
2. ODE TO BILLY JOE Bobbie Gentry
3. THE LETTER The Box Tops
4. LIGHT MY FIRE The Doors
5. I'M A BELIEVER The Monkees
6. TO SIR, WITH LOVE Lulu
7. RESPECT Aretha Franklin
8. I SAY A LITTLE PRAYER Dionne Warwick
9. ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE The Beatles
10. APPLES, PEACHES, PUMPKIN PIE Jay and The Techniques
11. A WHITER SHADE OF PALE Procol Harum
12. KIND OF A DRAG The Buckingham
13. WINDY The Association
14. HELLO GOODBYE The Beatles
15. EXPRESSWAY TO YOUR HEART Soul Survivors
16. A LITTLE BIT OF SOUL The Music Explosion
17. MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR The Beatles
18. BROWN EYED GIRL Van Morrison and The Dominos
19. AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell
20. I GOT RHYTHM The Happenings
21. I WAS MADE TO LOVE Stevie Wonder
22. DAYDREAM BELIEVER The Monkees
23. HAPPY TOGETHER The Turtles
24. PENNY LANE The Beatles
25. RUBY TUESDAY The Rolling Stones
26. CAN'T TAKE MY EYES OFF YOU Frankie Valli
27. COME ON DOWN TO MY BALL Every Mother Son
28. COME BACK WHEN YOU GROW UP Bobby Vee
29. INCENSE AND PEPPERMINTS Strawberry Alarm Clock
30. LIVE FOR TODAY The Grassroots
31. JUDY IN THE SKY WITH GLASSES John Fred and The Playboy Band
32. NEVER MY LOVE The Association
33. GEORGY GIRL The Seekers
34. I THINK WE'RE ALONE NOW Tommy James and The Shondells
35. DEDICATED TO THE ONE I LOVE The Mama,s and Papa,s
36. YOU BETTER SIT DOWN KIDS Cher
37. TO LOVE SOMEBODY The Bee Gees
38. THE HAPPENING The Supremes
39. GENTLE ON MY MIND Glen Campbell
40. FOR WHAT IS WORTH Buffalo Springfield
41. SOMEBODY TO LOVE The Jefferson Airplane
42. WESTERN UNION The Five Americans
43. I DIG ROCK AND ROLL MUSIC Peter Paul and Mary
44. CARRY ANN The Hollies
45. I HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE Gladys Knight and The Pips
46. I'M A SOUL MAN Sam and Dave
47. THE RAIN, THE PARK, AND THE OTHER THINGS The Cowsills
48. SUNDAY WILL NEVER BE THE SAME Spanky and Argang
49. LOVE ME TONIGHT Tom Jones
50. THERE'S A KIND OF HUSH Herman,s Hermits

easy to experience a butterfly-inducing rush of adrenalin and vertigo in front of this work – the whole panorama of the Tirana skyline being flattened into a shallow but spectacular depth – and an overwhelming melancholy at the sheer futility of its enterprise. Exploding as they do in the middle distance, fireworks represent an explicitly artificial form of the sublime. In a different sense, the real beauty, or even the incomprehensible thing about *Mixed Behaviour*, combined with its awkward optimism, is the DJ's single-handed attempt to compete with and simulate the sheer delirious volume of the night's pyrotechnics.

Questions about the films in this exhibition may come from the symbolic and fictive nature of Sala's work; he consistently disrupts his own use of loaded personal experience and reconstructs histories through a documentary film language stripped of narrative structures. The real sting in the tail is the openness of his production process, which still manages effectively to bisect current forms of political and social reality with an honesty and poetic conviction. **Andrew Hunt**

Christopher Knowles

Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, USA

In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (1985) neurologist Oliver Sacks describes a case in which he studied the reaction of patients with aphasia and agnosia to a televised address by the late 'Great Communicator' Ronald Reagan. Unable, owing to their brain disorders to process the president's words, but acutely attuned to the phony intonation and affected cadence of his voice, the aphasiacs collapsed with mirth. Conversely, an agnosiac patient, keyed-in to the speech but not its delivery, commented blankly that Reagan 'didn't speak good prose'.

Christopher Knowles' typed work on paper *Untitled (Ronald Reagan's Budget)* (c.1983) simply enumerates an amount of money so unfathomably immense even now (two trillion dollars) that it remains abstract even when committed to the page. This humble sheet somehow lies at the crux of this show, curated by Matthew Higgs, which like a compound Sacks patient is hypersensitive to both the colour and physicality of language, and has a piquant political savvy. Knowles' peculiar plastic management of words is the consequence of neurological damage he sustained before birth, which led to a form of autism. A self-taped recording of his speech-poems brought him, as a teenager in 1973, to the attention of the theatre and opera director Robert Wilson, and he has acted in and contributed dialogue to many performances since then. But save for a suite of paintings related to Wilson's *Parzival* (1987), in which he took the lead role, this show focuses on his off-stage activities as a painter, draughtsman and typist.

Standard white stationery and long sheets of rice paper become settings for typed pictograms of alarm clocks, a window, a space needle and chequerboard patterns, all made up of accumulations of the letter 'C', Knowles' first initial. The selection of his 'typings' here shows a preoccupation with repetition, permutation and seriality – qualities so dear to classic Minimalist art. Indeed *Untitled (Black and Red Grids)* (2004) bears a conspicuous resemblance to Sol LeWitt's wall drawings, and like Knowles, Carl Andre has also produced a body of Concrete poetry using a typewriter. Yet Knowles' favoured formats in these typed works are music charts, where titles and careers are restacked and resculpted in permutations according to popular or personal whim. There are several such favourites lists, including

the 35 foot long *Untitled (Top 3000 of Rock and Roll)* (c.1981–2), presented partially unrolled in a vitrine.

But the most intriguing works are those that overlay his delegation of letters as pictures or visual librettos with operations that have a chromatic logic. Latent in the binary black-red ribbon of his typewriter – red being the secretary's typographical last resort and only alternative colour – Knowles' illustration of the capricious nature of decision-making becomes increasingly synaesthetic and political. In two works from 1985 referred to as *Untitled (Paper Sculpture)*, hundreds of cut coloured-paper shapes – octagons in one work, crosses in the other – are laid out in grids on two low plinths as if in preparation for a board game. Like brightly coloured xylophones and kiddie keyboards, both arrangements conjure up musical associations. The grid of crosses is a simple rainbow scale, while the octagon version unfolds like a piano roll, with colourful, harmonic flourishes positioned in flushes and runs.

Untitled (Al Gore, George W. Bush) (2000) serves as a reminder of how colour choice can also service power. Gore in Democratic red and Bush in Republican blue – labelled 'lost' and 'won' accordingly – stare glumly from two canvases. Two political stooges with almost identically lumpy coifs, dotted nostrils and zipper mouths, their faces are like hopelessly vague police-artist photo-fit renderings. Knowles plays out the 2000 presidential elections as a matter of colour-coded marketing, and despite the various shades of grey that marked the Bush team's shenanigans in the electoral process, the eventual result is plain to see, painted in patriotic red, white and blue. 'You know what a creep means, don't you?' taunts Knowles in one of his typings.

Yet the show's tracking of 'chromopolitics' is at its most pointed in a series of five canvases of increasing size depicting the Department of Homeland Security's Threat Advisory System, with its notorious colour-coded danger levels ascending from 'Low' (green) to 'Severe' (red). *Untitled (Alert Paintings)* (2004) visualizes this attempt to quantify and quarantine the threat of terrorism as an exercise in hysterical abstraction. Knowles' unique understanding of visual grammar finds its climax in this indictment of the Bush administration's management of fear under the farcical banner of a candy-coloured pop chart. **Max Andrews**

Art of the Garden

Tate Britain, London, UK

On 7 March 1804 seven men, including John Wedgwood, of the pottery dynasty, and Sir Joseph Banks, the botanist who accompanied Captain Cook on the *Endeavour*, gathered at a London bookshop for the inaugural meeting of the Royal Horticultural Society. Two hundred years on, the society has 345,000 members and the UK has more gardens per head of population than any other European country. The bicentenary of the RHS has been celebrated with exhibitions at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Museum of Garden History, the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television and, most ambitiously, at Tate Britain.

'Art of the Garden' explores the garden in British art over a period in which it developed from a status symbol of the aristocracy into, first, a valuable resource for the working classes and then, in the 20th century, a nationwide hobby. The exhibition was divided into themed sections demonstrating the garden as, for example, a site of childhood enchantment, as a metaphor for female sexuality and as a place for contemplation. The works selected to illustrate such complex ideas naturally varied in quality, but a few paintings stood out. Samuel Palmer's intriguing *In a Shoreham Garden*

(c.1829), depicting a regal female figure at the end of a garden path beneath a canopy of white blossom, is full of romantic mysticism and remarkable in its loose, almost Post-Impressionist brushstrokes. Richard Dadd's *Portrait of a Young Man* (1853), painted while the artist was in the asylum at Bethlem Hospital, shows its subject seated on a bench engulfed by ivy; beside him a fez recalls Dadd's travels in the Middle East. In the background are a Grecian folly and a lawn roller (the philosophy and labour of the garden?). Behind the man an enormous sunflower shoots towards the sky like a hopeful escape route.

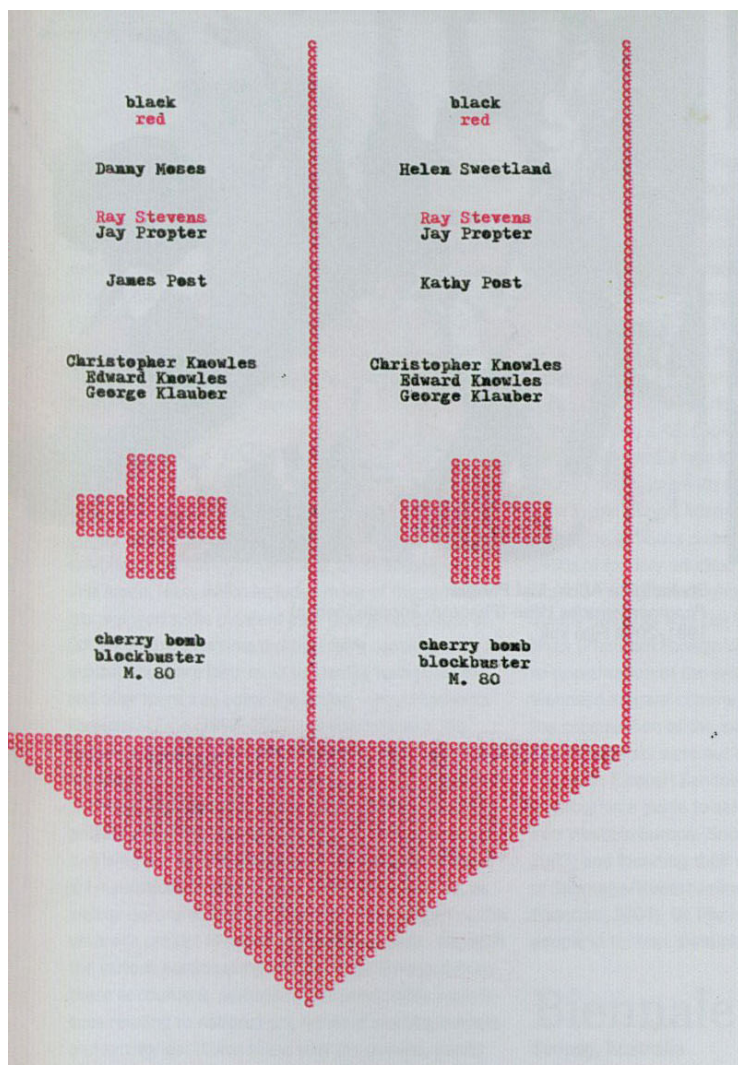
Gardening is such a British passion the exhibition couldn't avoid reflecting social history, not only in the older work but also in George Shaw and David Rayson's images of contemporary suburbia and in Martin Parr's photographs of garden ornaments. Visiting the exhibition a couple of days before the 60th anniversary of D-Day made you particularly aware of the number of works about war: the garden as a symbol of hard-working resistance and a quintessential right of freedom. James McIntosh Patrick's *A City Garden* (1940), for example, portrays the artist's wife and daughter taking in the washing in the long shadows of early evening. Patrick, who was waiting to be called up, preserves this memory of his family protected by the high garden walls from the encroaching world outside them. In other wartime works London squares are transformed into vegetable patches, and wild flowers burst forth with the enduring hope of nature among the rubble of the blitz.

The exhibition's attempts to establish exchanges between the practices of gardening and art were less convincing. The only 'pure' gardener included was Gertrude Jekyll. On display was one of her copies of a seascape by Turner, an artist whose use of colour she studied closely and applied to her own garden schemes. Jekyll was also an advocate of the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris and talked of 'painting a picture' with living plants. However, the garden painters that were inspired by her work, such as Alfred Parsons and Margaret Waterfield, are now largely forgotten and feel like mere illustrators of a greater and more complex talent. Alongside them, however, were works by major artists who were or are keen gardeners, such as Ivon Hitchens, Barbara Hepworth, Patrick Heron and Ian Hamilton Finlay – the latter the most interesting in that his artworks, whether intended for gallery space or his own garden, play with ideas of arcadia and the classical tradition of landscape gardening.

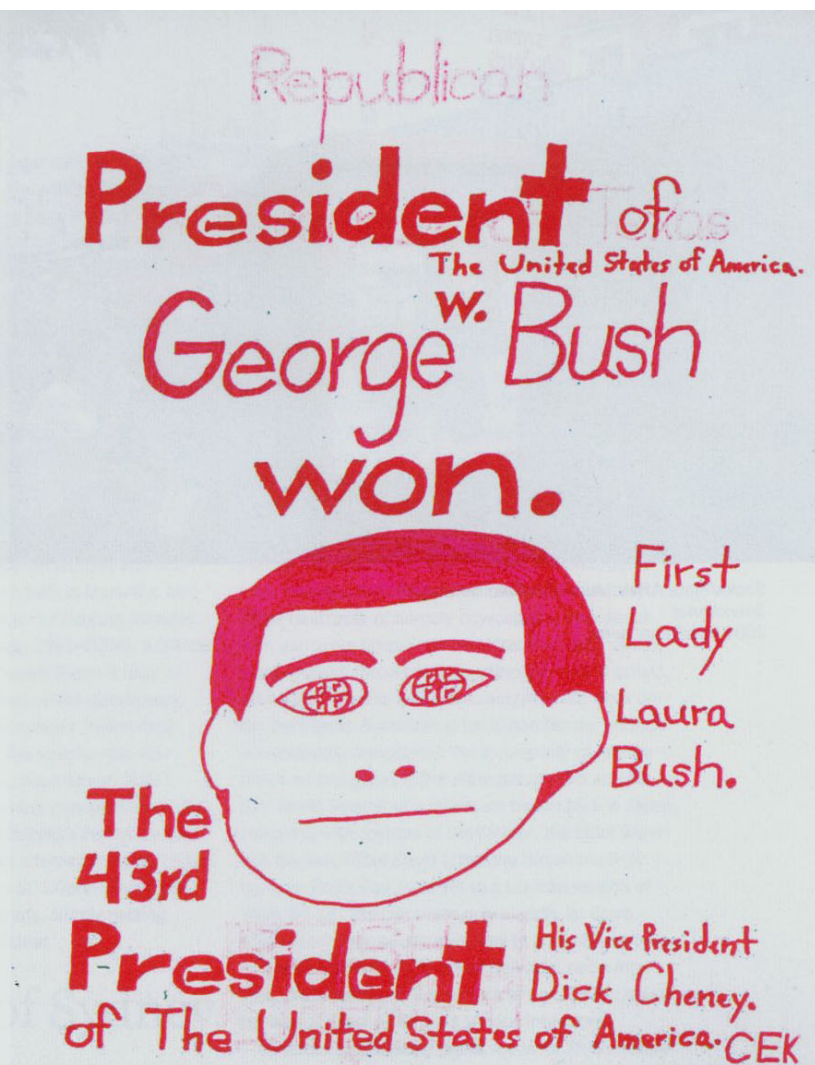
Gardens have always been someone's attempt to mould nature, and as modern cultivation techniques have made this process more extreme it is unsurprising that contemporary artists reflect a more suspicious and less romantic approach to the garden than their precursors. Marc Quinn exemplifies this trend: his fascination with science's attempts to improve on nature, such as his enormous triffid-like orchid, result in gaudy, unnatural results. Sarah Jones' photograph of a fence submerged beneath a vigorous passion flower (*The Fence (Passion Flower) II*, 2002), with its rich colours and flat perspective, recalls Pre-Raphaelite paintings, but the dramatic lighting and stripping away of foreground figures reinterpret the garden in a more sinister fashion.

Our experience of gardening is increasingly filtered through TV shows, websites and magazines. For *Home Climate Gardens* (2003) Janice Kerbel designed gardens for interior spaces – a Victorian terrace and a council flat – yet, although her ideas look like professional designs, they clearly exist in a fictitious realm. Ivan and Heather Morison's recordings of people talking about their gardens in *Global Survey* (2003) bring to life the enthusiasm and creativity of the hobbyist, such as the

Max Andrews, "Christopher Knowles," *Frieze*, October 2004, 166-167



Christopher Knowles
 Untitled (Cherry Bomb Blockbuster)
 1982 Typing on paper 28x22cm



Christopher Knowles
 Untitled (Al Gore, George W. Bush) (detail)
 2000 Oil marker on canvas Two parts, each 61x46cm

Jeffrey Kastner, "Christopher Knowles: Gavin Brown's enterprise," *Artforum*, Spetember 2004

Christopher Knowles: Gavin Brown's Enterprise

ArtForum, Sept, 2004 by Jeffrey Kastner

"Christopher Knowles," wrote John Ashbery in 1978, "at the age of nineteen, without exactly meaning to, has become a major figure of the New York avant-garde." For viewers encountering the artist's work for the first time in this engaging survey--the forty-five-year-old's first solo since 1988, which features a selection of his figurative oil-marker drawings, modest object arrangements, and typed text and image works--Ashbery's description is a helpful prologue. It drops clues to the story of an outside who, for thirty years, has cut a distinctive path through that most "inside" of social environments, the contemporary-art world. That Knowles has done so "without exactly meaning to" is part of the reason that his work is so intriguing.



Christopher Knowles, *Untitled (Self Portrait #1)*, 1985, ink on paper, 13 x 10".

Curator Matthew Higgs's exhibition notes explain how a prenatal condition left the artist with a form of "neurological damage" that contributed to his "complex relationship with written and spoken language." Yet despite his condition, Knowles has hardly lived the life of an isolate. In the early '70s, theater director Robert Wilson heard the boy's poetic sound recordings through a mutual friend and drafted the fourteen-year-old into an impromptu onstage appearance in *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), the beginning of an ongoing collaboration between the two men involving writing as well as performance. And Knowles's signature "Typings"--works on paper that involve idiosyncratic uses of language and simple designs produced on an electric typewriter--were published widely in the mid-'80s.

Yet despite such indicators of status in the art world, what emerged from the recent exhibition was a compelling picture of a man very much in his own world. *Sunshine Superman* (1987), a fifteen-minute film about Knowles made by Richard Rutkowski, depicts the artist engaged in activities that suggest the roots of the seriality, repetition, and obsessive particularity of his practice. It documents Knowles's project of taping and categorizing his favorite pop songs (such lists also figure in many of his typed works) and shows him carefully arranging toy figures according to color (an impulse toward typological ordering recapitulated in a pair of mid-'80s sculptures made from stacks of colored paper). And, always, we see him typing, producing pages of minimal forms like windows and grids. There are also bursts of free-form language, which include everything from a disjointed paean to radio DJ George Michael to a scrolling list that proposes an abstruse connection between the artist, Brady Bunch star Christopher Knight, and actor Christopher Reeve (here renamed "Reeves"). There are also numerous moments of unexpected poetry, as in *Untitled (Say the Word Which Rhymes)*, 2004, which begins: "What in the world/What is all of this? / Well it is the way of time / Well, let's get on with it."

To its credit, Higgs's show never seemed in thrall of Knowles's difference." Yet there's no denying that the championing of functional limitation as a form of creative exceptionalism plays out a wish-fulfillment scenario for the art world. Free from the artifice that colors even the most sincere art, Knowles represents the uramateur, whose intuitive approach and apparent lack of ambition are both touchstone for and bete noire of the professional. Knowles's work is genuinely charming, but a show like this says as much about its curator as it does about its subject. Higgs and Gavin Brown's decision to pair Knowles's oeuvre with Jeremy Deller's *Uses of Literacy*, 1997--a project with which Higgs has also been involved featuring amateur artwork by fans of a Welsh band, the Manic Street Preachers--paints a picture of a curator on a quest, searching for authentic passion along the margins of an art world that craves extreme emotion yet remains squeamish about true love.

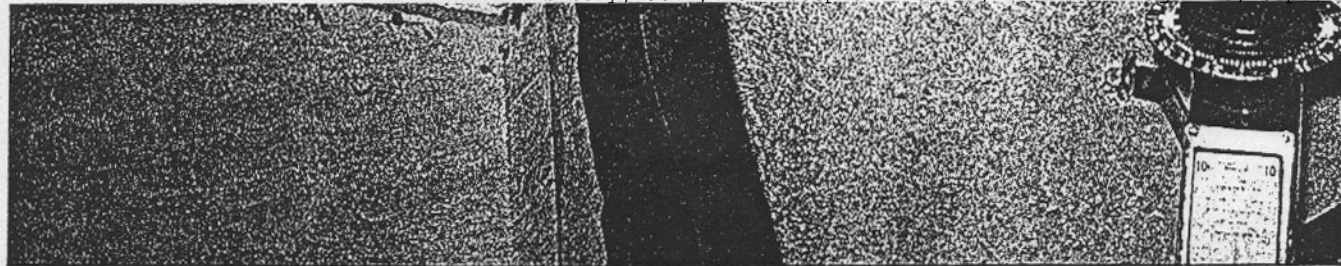
John Ashbery, "Christopher Knowles," *New York Magazine*, September 1978

CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES

ART

"... Christopher Knowles, without exactly meaning to, has become a major figure in the New York avant-garde at age nineteen..."





View from the heights: Christopher Knowles surveys his city from atop the Empire State Building.

FALL PREVIEW



ings by Christopher Knowles, who, at the age of nineteen, without exactly meaning to, has become a major figure of the New York avant-garde. Called "About Earths and Universes," the show will run until September 30.

Christopher's unusual history is now well known. To summarize: He was considered an autistic child and was attending a special school upstate when a mutual friend of dramaturge-thaumaturge Robert Wilson and Christopher's parents heard a tape of Christopher reciting his poetry. He played it for Wilson, who immediately brought Christopher here to be in his 1973 dream-play, *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*.

His last-minute appearance was a complete surprise to the other cast members in that twelve-hour spectacular. Cindy Lubar, the remarkable young actress who spoke the prologue from a corner of the orchestra pit, says she was suddenly aware that there were two people on the stage in a section that was supposed to be acted by Wilson himself. The other figure was Christopher, whose long dialogue with Wilson, sounding rather like Gertrude Stein delivered with the passion of a Wagnerian recitative, was one of the most memorable things about the whole memorable evening—or night, rather.

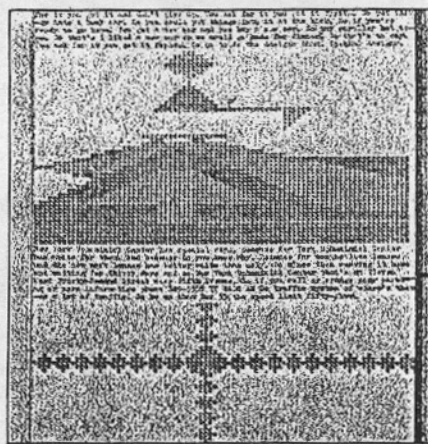
After that Christopher went to live with Wilson and his theater group at the Byrd Hoffman Studio in SoHo and appeared in other Wilson plays, including *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, and in collaborations with Wilson and with Cindy Lubar (a play by Cindy and Christopher called *Everyday Business* is scheduled for production in March). Using teaching methods of his own which he had already employed successfully with "backward" children, Wilson seems to have expanded greatly Christopher's creativity, though a cre-

ative impulse of a similar mingled verbal and architectonic kind was always there: His father recalls him as a small boy filling up the apartment with vast constructions of building blocks.

Christopher had also written poetry before, but under Wilson's guidance he began the typed drawings or "typings" which Holly Solomon showed last year. These are combinations of words and typed designs (the latter formed exclusively of the letter c, his initial) on scrolls of Xerox paper.

The texts range from poetry to lists of the top 40 songs on the charts, with frequent repetitions. It's impossible to read very much at once; one is forced back to contemplating the design elements—carefully crafted, rather Art Deco-looking silhouettes of Christmas trees or the Space Needle in Seattle, one of Christopher's favorite motifs.

But even here, the words keep leading one's attention away from the pictorial elements. Reviewing the show in *Artforum*, Leo Rubinfien noted that "it



A "typing" from Knowles's last show.

is very much the story of a visual artist at work in a world where words, spoken or written, are virtually omnipotent. . . . Where we tend to think of words and pictures in an adversary relation . . . Knowles describes the two as intimately linked."

"He speaks visually," Wilson recently said. "Chris shuts out a lot, it's true, because he's specializing in his area of research. But if he wasn't able to concentrate his energy in this one area, he wouldn't be a genius."

In fact, Christopher has the ability to conceive of his works in minute de-

tail before executing them. There is nothing accidental in the typed designs and word lists; they fill their preordained places as accurately as though they had spilled out of a computer. This pure conceptualism, which others have merely approximated using mechanical aids, is one reason that so many young artists have been drawn to Christopher's work.

Despite or because of his celebrity, Christopher is extremely reluctant to talk. One communicates with him, if at all, through Cindy, his companion. According to her, he spends most of his time working and listening to the radio, usually to at least two stations at once. "Not for the words or the songs or whatever, but for the rhythms of communicating. They're in his work."

Christopher was eager to be photographed at the top of the Empire State Building, which provides him with the "overview" Cindy also feels is a basic ingredient in his work—one needs a vantage point to "read" the typings, and even then one will do so imperfectly, as one misreads the city from a great height. This event didn't seem to be in any way like a treat or an excursion for him, though. When I asked him what he did to have fun, he answered, "I don't know." And it was a stupid question: His life and his work are the same, and a concept such as "fun" probably doesn't exist for him.

The new paintings have a very different look from the typings. They are all tondo-shaped canvases in several categories: multicolored clock faces, world maps, diagrams of the universe taken from a child's astronomy book, and "sun, moon, and earth paintings"—targetlike images in primary and secondary colors, the pigment applied loosely but with no trace of sensual "painterliness."

The relative looseness is surprising after the rigidity of the typings, with their rectilinear outlines and hieratic incantations. Yet, bright and lyrical as they are, they are no whit less schematic and determinist than the typings, and perhaps even more so. Christopher seems to be providing the world of his elders with a much needed object lesson: that it is possible, in art, to be both careless and rigorous at the same time.

—John Ashbery