

Samuel Adams, 'Christopher Knowles at Institute of Contemporary Art',
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ARTNEWS

CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES AT INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART



Christopher Knowles, *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful*, 2013, performance view.

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In a video from the mid-1980s, Knowles hammers away at a typewriter, as if playing piano. The hypnotic sound of that action becomes a visual effect marked in ink. From a distance, the resulting “typings” appear as pixilated images—an alarm clock, a rooster shaking a man’s hand, the cover of *Life* magazine—or abstract diagrams.

Knowles composes these images by repeating a single letter, name, or line from a song, inserting phonetic fragments into the forms. His use of algorithmic structures is frequently ascribed to his autism, an essentializing view downplayed in [the present exhibition](#).

Knowles has been dissolving boundaries between sound, language, image, and gesture since his early teenage years, when [Robert Wilson](#) inducted him into a circle of avant-garde artists in New York. (Wilson and Philip Glass used his poetry for their 1976 opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, when he was only 17.) In a relatively small space, curators Hilton Als and Anthony Elms accommodated Knowles’s performance—live and documented—poetry, video, photography, scenography, drawing, painting, and ceramics.

These medium-specific designations, however, fail to signify within Knowles's oeuvre. For instance, his series of five increasingly large oil marker *Alert Paintings* (2004)—based on the now-phased-out Homeland Security Advisory System, which assessed terrorism threats in terms of color: red for “severe,” orange for “high,” and so on—are paintings, linguistic exercises, and dry political commentary at once.

Knowles's performance style is rigidly structured yet open to variation. A gallery papered floor to ceiling with newsprint was the setting for the ICA's presentation of *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful* (2013), Knowles's theatrical staging of his own writings. In the intervals between scenes, lights dimmed and alarm clocks rang before he began his next poem. About Knowles, Wilson once remarked, “Language is his own kingdom.” Fortunately, we are all invited.

BY *Samuel Adams*