

Hilton Als and Anthony Elms, 'Christopher Knowles: In a Word. Gallery Guide',
Institute of Contemporary Art University of Pennsylvania, September 2015

SEPTEMBER 16–
DECEMBER 27, 2015

Christopher Knowles:
In a Word
Gallery Guide

The Eleanor Biddle
Lloyd Gallery

Christopher Knowles is regarded as a poet and painter, yet his output is broader and richer than this suggests. This exhibition, his most comprehensive to date, spans many mediums—text, sound, painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, and performance—and is an opportunity not only to appraise his far-ranging sensibility, but also to consider what we mean when we talk about self-expression.

The great subject for many twentieth-century artists is becoming. How does one become an “I,” and in the process, a conscience that reflects the fractured times? Knowles focuses on the fascinating question of self over and over again with powerful results. This salient point in his approach, which first became public while he was still a teenager and when the American cross-disciplinary avant-garde was at its apex, is the use of language—specifically speech.

Among the first to respond to the art of Knowles was George Klauber, a commercial artist and design instructor with an interest in artists who defied categorization, and who knew the Knowles family. It was Klauber who shared a cassette of an inventive audio collage by Christopher Knowles, *Emily Likes the TV*, with visionary American theater director Robert Wilson, whose interests included language. He immediately began working with Knowles, first introducing the theater-going public to the artist in 1973 as a performer in the run of *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Wilson was intrigued by Knowles’s sentence structures, word juxtapositions, and poetic vision. The liberating, disciplined approach to making work through collab-

oration and workshops developed by Wilson inspired Knowles to further test the limits of his own reach in language and movement. Until 1987 the two worked intensely together on a series of theatrical experiments; their many works for stage include *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, *The \$ Value of Man*, *Parsifal*, and the more intimate series, *DiaLog*.

Knowles’s poetry, audio collages, and typings show how language serves not only as our passport to the subconscious, where words play their anxious, fractious, and sometimes joyful games, but also the key to communicating with the other persons who help us articulate who we are. Knowles was already a master of language when that early audio collage was handed to Wilson in 1973, and in fact, Knowles can be considered the only true heir to that great American writer who put standard English on notice—Gertrude Stein.

Unlike that genius of productivity and invention, Knowles did not study formally; he came to the inventive rhythms of language through various everyday means—television, radio, records, and advertisements. Not content to watch and listen, Knowles began his career as an artist and author by “writing” his media impressions down on various twentieth-century devices such as tape recorders and typewriters. With these basic methods he recorded and reordered the pedestrian materials around us using incantatory rhythm and repetition.

Knowles was diagnosed early on as autistic. As a child he learned to speak through repeating and memory, such as recalling what the Beatles intoned, what songs were

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popular, and how his little sister, Emily, felt when she watched the TV. Recording his responses, Knowles's early work was a startling combination of words and performance—the voice looking for an “I.” Knowles measures himself, as he becomes an “I” in his sharing and documenting of the regulating routines of life—work, eat, watch, play, listen, sleep. Knowles's art, including his work as a photographer (seen here extensively for the first time), places him squarely in the tradition of twentieth-century artists who opened a large window on performance production, interiority, and the shifting registers by which an individual's voice enunciates against relative social settings and pressures.

— Hilton Als, guest curator, and
Anthony Elms, Chief Curator

Christopher Knowles (born 1959, New York; lives Brooklyn) has exhibited internationally, including shows at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and *Of Mice and Men: The 4th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*. He has performed solo as well as with Cindy Lubar and as part of the Byrd Hoffman ensemble extensively, with performances at White Columns, New York; Thalia Theater, Hamburg; The Kitchen, New York; the Louvre Museum, Paris; and touring duets with Robert Wilson the world-over.



Christopher Knowles, *Untitled* from the portfolio “Typings,” 1986, silkscreen on Ivorite paper, 25 1/2 x 19 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist.

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Related Programming

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16
5PM

Private Preview (ICA Members Only)
With the artist and co-curators Hilton Als and
Anthony Elms

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 7
6:30PM

Conversation: Hilton Als and Anthony Elms on
Christopher Knowles

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12
6:30PM

Lauder Lecture on Contemporary Art: Robert Wilson

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 11
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12
6:30 PM

Christopher Knowles Performance:
The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful



Photo: Julian Mommert, 2013

Co-organized by Chief Curator Anthony Elms and guest curator Hilton Als, writer and chief theater critic for *The New Yorker*. A fully illustrated catalogue, published later in 2015, will include essays by the curators, a reprint of an autobiographical text by Knowles, and a new essay by art historian Lauren DiGiulio.

This exhibition travels to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 2017.

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Major support for *Christopher Knowles: In a Word* has been provided by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Additional funding has been provided by Pamela Toub Berkman & David J. Berkman, Julie & Larry Bernstein, Charles X. Block, Carol T. & John G. Finley, Cheri S. & Steven M. Friedman, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, Kirk Kirkpatrick, Toby Devan Lewis, and Mari & Peter Shaw.

Support for *The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful* at ICA has been provided by the Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation.

ICA is always Free For All. Free admission is courtesy of Amanda and Glenn Fuhrman.

ICA acknowledges the generous sponsorship of Barbara B. & Theodore R. Aronson for exhibition catalogues. Programming at ICA has been made possible in part by the Emily and Jerry Spiegel Fund to Support Contemporary Culture and Visual Arts and the Lise Spiegel Wilks and Jeffrey Wilks Family Foundation, the Ruth Ivor Foundation, and by Hilarie L. & Mitchell Morgan. Marketing is supported by Pamela Toub Berkman & David J. Berkman and by Lisa A. & Steven A. Tananbaum. Additional funding has been provided by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the Dietrich Foundation and the Daniel W. Dietrich, II Trust, the Overseers Board for the Institute of Contemporary Art, friends and members of ICA, and the University of Pennsylvania. General operating support is provided, in part, by the Philadelphia Cultural Fund. ICA receives state arts funding support through a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. ICA acknowledges Le Méridien Philadelphia as our official Unlock Art™ partner hotel.



Institute of Contemporary University Art of Pennsylvania



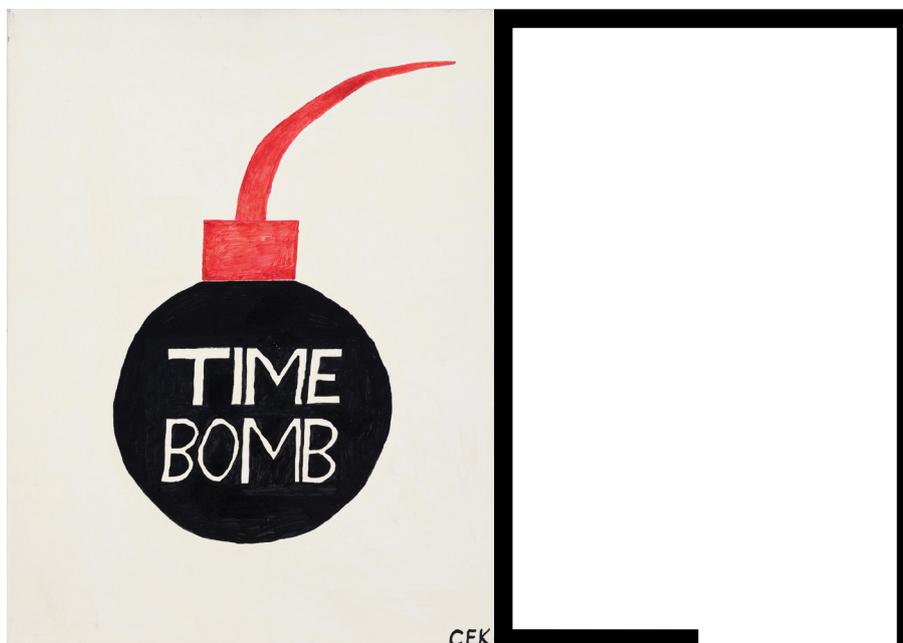
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Image: Christopher Knowles, *Time Bomb*, 2002, oil marker on canvas, 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy the artist and Water Mill Center, New York.