

Thomas Hine, 'The art of Christopher Knowles: Pondering the imponderable', The Philadelphia Inquirer, October 2015

The Philadelphia Inquirer
philly.com

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 MOMMERT

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.

googleoff: all

googleon: all 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.

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."

Stein, though, was more than capable of writing standard English when she chose. Knowles seems not to be. I am unable, when I look at his work, to decide what's an achievement and what's a symptom. I feel most comfortable thinking of Knowles not so much as an artist but as a muse - a figure whose pure existence and way of being inspired art in others.

But a muse is a really, really old-fashioned idea. Nowadays, people are more likely to assess his achievement in a Knowlesian circle: Christopher Knowles must make art because he makes us think about art. And art is the thing that makes us think about art.

What we don't know is what Christopher Knowles thinks about art.

Thomas Hine, *Inquirer Contributing Art Critic*

Art: FOOD FOR THOUGHT

StartText

Christopher Knowles: In a Word

Through Dec. 27 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 118 S. 36th St.

Hours: 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Wednesday; 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Admission: Free.

Information: 215-898-7108 or www.icaphila.org.