

Eric Konigsberg, 'Encore', The New Yorker, April 2015

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ENCORE

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