

Christopher Knowles and the Structured Logic of Play by Lauren DiGiulio

Chris is this his is is his Chris Chris Chris Chris...
Christopher Knowles, "Chris"

Robert Wilson once wrote that upon first hearing Christopher Knowles's poetry, he "began to realize that the words flowed to a patterned rhythm whose logic was self-supporting. It was a piece coded much like music...the effect was at once inspiring and charming." Indeed, to encounter the writing of Knowles is to find oneself ushered into an alternative world of language, one that operates according to its own highly structured logic. As readers, we are immediately struck by the dynamic rhythm of the phrasing, whose smooth lyricism is punctuated intermittently by unexpected elements that temporarily disorient our perception of how poetic language functions. This quality of instability invites us to approach the language with a new sense of awareness, and engage in a process of playful investigation that serves to gently question the extent to which language can enact, or depart from, its role as a bearer of meaning.

Born in 1959 in Brooklyn, New York, 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 and Robert Wilson met in 1973, when Knowles was 13 years old. Wilson had been introduced to Knowles's work when he was given one of the child's audio recordings by a former teacher, with whom he had studied architecture at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Upon having the work transcribed, he found that the language was organized in a highly formal visual pattern. He was immediately drawn to Knowles's employment of language, describing his discovery in the following manner: "The words had an obvious, careful, architectural patterning which created a whole new language using the building blocks of ours. It also seemed that Chris was able to compose words visually; as though he spoke having already seen the words mapped out before him. I saw this as a very special and unique view of language with strong connections to my own work at the time and ideas for the future."

Wilson invited Knowles and his parents to attend his 1973 production of *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. After meeting Knowles before the performance, the director invited him to perform in the play that evening. 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".

Wilson received a phone call from Knowles's father the next morning, explaining that his son had enjoyed participating in the play and that he would like to perform again that evening. It was arranged that Knowles would appear in all four performances of the production in Brooklyn.

At this time, the young teenager had been attending a school for special children in upstate New York (Knowles suffered some brain damage from toxoplasmosis in utero). After discovering his exceptional creative abilities, Wilson arranged, with the consent of Knowles's family, for the young artist to live with him and his acolytes in a New York City loft. The two began a period of close collaboration that resulted in the creation of a series of works based on Knowles's tapes, typings, and drawings.

In 1974, Wilson constructed *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, a large-scale theater work that explored themes of verbal communication, around text written by Knowles. The young man was featured as

a central performer and toured internationally with the production. The following year, Knowles and Wilson presented *The \$ Value of Man* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a piece in which Knowles used cassette tape recorders, radios, and an adding machine to assemble audio works onstage. The pair further collaborated on a series of performances titled *DiaLogs*, which they performed intermittently between 1974 and 1980 at various international venues. These works served to parody popular culture, employing references from film, television, and radio to explore themes of communication and disassociation.

The process of these collaborations would often begin with Wilson asking Knowles a series of questions, to which the younger artist would respond by creating texts and drawings that eventually became the structure and text of a given piece. Speaking of his collaboration with Knowles, Wilson has remarked, “Christopher and I just thought in a similar way, we were on the same wavelength so it was very easy to have these dialogues.” Knowles's use of language particularly inspired Wilson, and it was this element that most directly influenced the development of the director's work. Indeed, it was during the period of the two artists' close collaboration that words emerged to occupy a coherent place within Wilson's theatrical vocabulary, which had been initially built from movement and visual images.

In 1973, Wilson's loft at 147 Spring Street in New York also served as the meeting place for the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, an artistic collective that Wilson had established that formed the ensemble for his theatrical projects. Knowles led movement workshops at the loft and participated in group performance works. His engagement in these activities allowed him to develop his own practice while cultivating a strong sense of artistic community, and he has remained close to many of the friends he developed during this period.

Knowles created texts for the *Einstein on the Beach* libretto in 1974, as Wilson and Philip Glass were in the process of developing the opera. Wilson prompted Knowles for his contribution in a manner similar to that of their previous collaborations. “Chris, who is Einstein?” he asked. After initially responding that he didn't know, Knowles wrote 12 chapters of text that incorporated references to motifs around which the work is structured - trials, jails, communication and transportation. These typings, which represent one area of a career-long practice in this medium, employ his signature use of textual patterning, in which subtle linguistic variations are woven through a highly structured composition to create an intricate layering of visual, aural, and textual elements. Rendered on an electric typewriter, the works apply words and letters as building blocks to create geometric visual structures in black, red, and green ink.

Within these typings, language behaves in an unexpected manner. Words arrange themselves in unconventional syntactical patterns. 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. As readers, we begin to relate to the language in sensory terms, engaging aurally, visually, and tactilely with the words themselves. By engaging with the text in this heightened state of awareness, we can start to derive meaning from form. As we recombine the unraveled threads of language in a process of playful assembly, we each construct our own sense of meaning from the fragments of these elements, and depth re-emerges on the surface of the work.

Throughout the period of his close collaboration with Robert Wilson, Knowles proceeded to cultivate an incredibly diverse solo practice that continues to the present day. Working in a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, performance, and dance, he has developed a prolific body of work that diligently explores themes surrounding communication and sign systems. Knowles

first exhibited as a solo artist in 1974, when a collection of his typings was presented in a group show at the Musée Galliera in Paris. Since that time, his work has been exhibited in many solo and group showings internationally. His poetry has been published in a variety of magazines and journals, including *The New Yorker*, *The Village Voice*, and *Interview Magazine*, and his work is held in the permanent collections of major public institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

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. A 1978 solo show titled *About Earths and Universes*, presented at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, featured paintings that depict various sections of world maps. 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. Several typings and audio works feature a list of the "Top 100" songs of a given 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.

References to contemporary events have continued to perform as a major element within the artist's vocabulary. During the 2000 and 2004 United States presidential elections, Knowles created a series of oil marker paintings that depict the candidates' faces in blue or red. Additional paintings in the series include brightly-colored representations of the US Department of Homeland Security's "Security Advisory System" structure, in which the government's use of a color-coordinated system to signify levels of threat to national security is drily parodied, to sobering effect.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Knowles integrated portraiture into his practice. These images, which include renderings of himself, close friends, and family members including his long-time partner Sylvia, present a more personal insight into the artist's relationship with his community. The figures in these portraits are often shown smiling, with large eyes that gaze directly at the viewer. It is here that we begin to gain a sense of the artist's appreciation of his social relationships, as well as his dauntlessly positive outlook on human nature.

Broadly speaking, Knowles's work shifts rather effortlessly between the seemingly disparate aesthetics of minimalism and pop art. While the form of his typings remains invested in a rigorously minimalist program and shares themes with that of concrete poetry, its content frequently employs references from contemporary popular culture and everyday life. Similarly, his paintings and drawings often work within a pop vocabulary while maintaining a strict adherence to pared-down form.

Perhaps it is the extent to which his work slips between these elements that makes it so beguiling. By consistently subverting our expectations of how language behaves, and what form it takes, we are encouraged to examine the subtleties of the relationship between form and meaning. By turns witty, assertive, coy, and inquisitive, the work of Christopher Knowles beckons us toward a refracted landscape of play, one that operates according to its own elusive logic and revels in the material qualities of language itself. Mesmerized, we are compelled to follow.

Lauren DiGiulio is a New York-based writer. She holds an MA from King's College London and a BA from Vassar College, and has worked with The Byrd Hoffman Watermill Foundation in a variety of capacities.