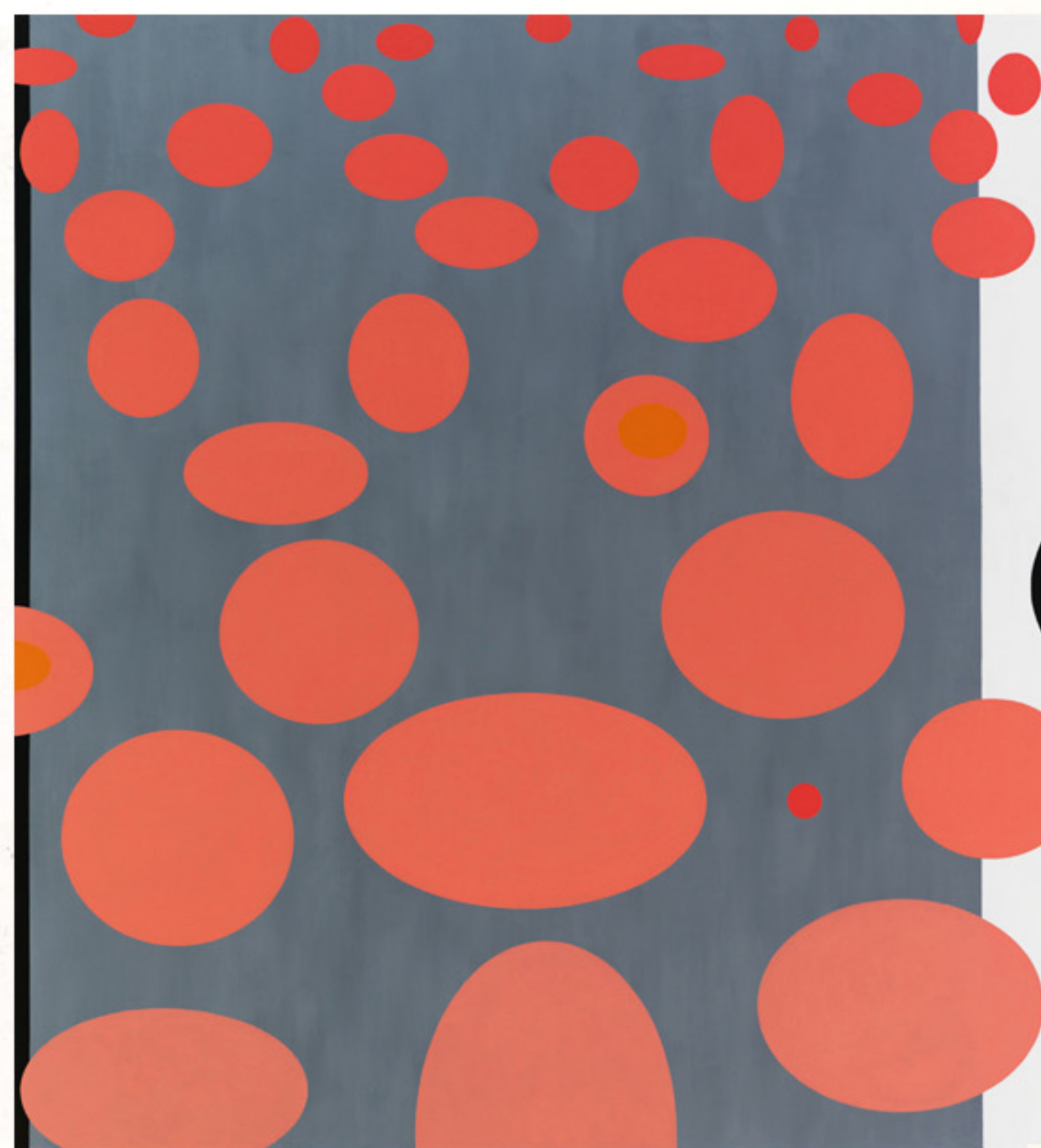
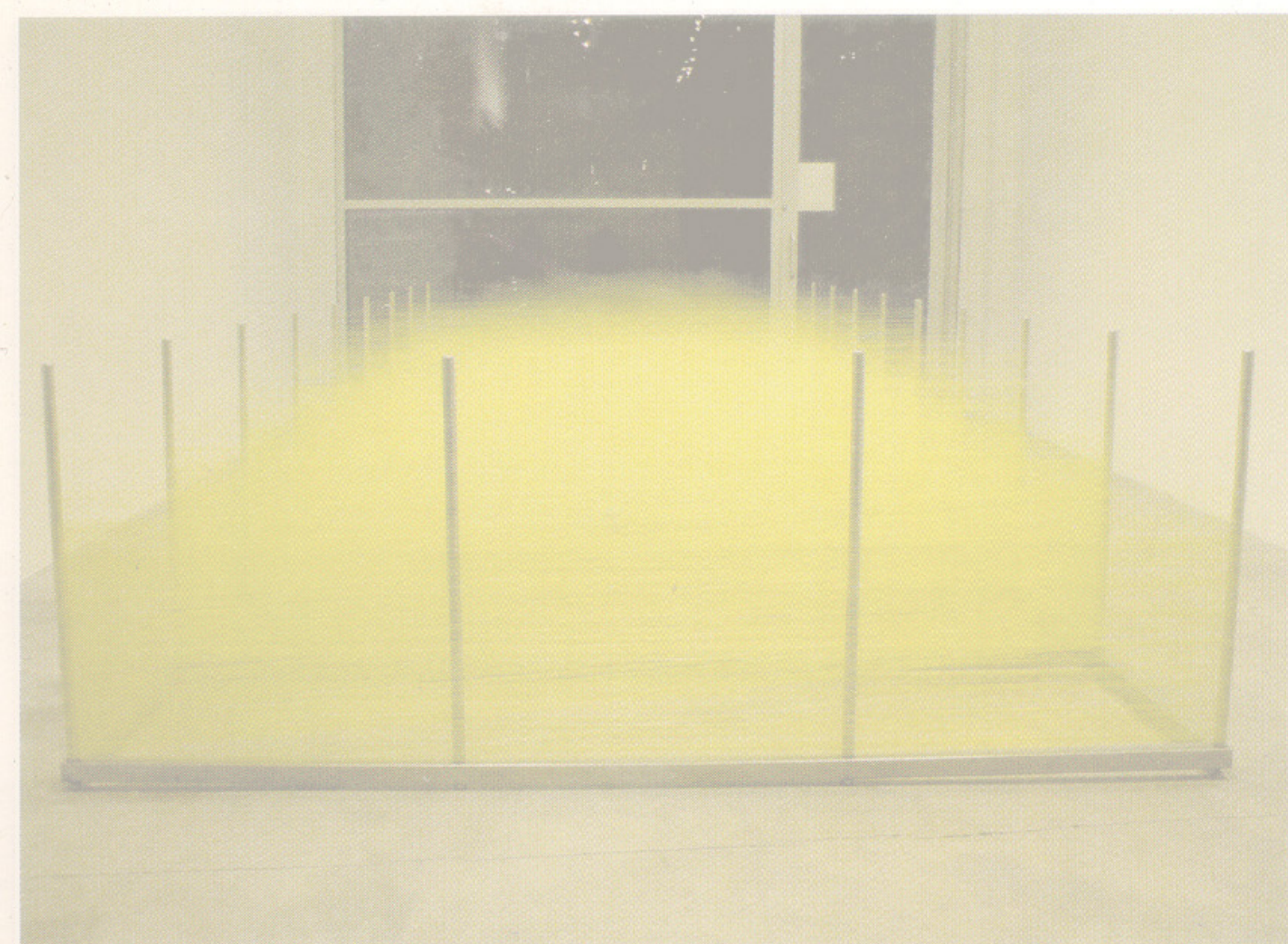




JOHN PHILLIPS CHICAGO

I first met John Phillips in 1980, soon after his graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He was installing large abstract paintings in a group show at N.A.M.E. Gallery, which was then on Hubbard Street—a great incubator for young artists whose energy and cultivated unorthodoxy became evident in self-curated loft exhibitions like the 1981 *Black Light Planet Picasso*, which coupled rock & roll revisionism with the return to painting. These were but two of a number of generational ventures by independent painters, which were followed by a half dozen new galleries just north of the Loop. New alternative spaces also emerged—like Randolph Street Gallery—to help redefine the city's artworld tag.

During that time, N.A.M.E. members organized a show of works by four painters. Here, *Humbert's Dilemma*, Phillips' provocatively titled, faux-heroic black, pink, and white geometric canvas—think Good-N-Plenty—was the most memorable. The work was so huge that only N.A.M.E.'s groundfloor, double-door back alley exit on Hubbard could accommodate it. I recall Phillips teetering on a twelve-foot stepladder as he extolled the virtues and pitfalls of early R&B and pluralist painting strategies. He was a well-known club DJ and remains conversant in both the obscure influences of postwar Black music forms and the language of abstraction. For thirty years, he's been reconstructing the mythologies of both genres and laying playful jabs at them in his meticulous and sometimes perversely arranged compositions.

He has wrestled what he once gleaned from artists such as the young Barnett Newman, Frank Stella, and Larry Poons, into destabilizing reflections on formal abstraction and painting in general. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Phillips' work was more fluid and lyrical. Color and line trumped his earlier hard edges and assertive planes. Then, and until 2000, billowing ribbon forms animated his canvases, producing patterns and a pictorialism that he had earlier avoided. But his obsession with color and composition remained. Humorous

tubular shapes and soft mechanical forms skewed formal logic, suspending his sophisticated color in a stew of ornamental scrawls and effortless-looking improvisation.

At Tony Wight Gallery, Phillips' exhibition of nine new paintings further establishes his quirky musical and post-formalist roots [February 29–April 12, 2008]. Here, ellipses and grayness are more pervasive. Some of the paintings improvise on a geometric pattern and a simple gray scale. Dots or ellipses shift from light to dark across a gradient ground that turns in the opposite direction, deflecting our normal spatial reading. In *Jill*, awkward deflated oval shapes float on a semblance of a television test pattern, circa 1950. In the large gray painting *My Daddy Drives a UFO*, two arching trails of elliptical rings fly in formation across a gloomy furrowed sky.

The stunning *Fats Domingo* features hot pink discs and circles that, spilling from the top of a gray field, balloon as they descend to the bottom—as if they were expelled from a large Lava lamp. The radiant yellow *Untitled (Puppy)* is my favorite; it's also Phillips' best shot at pulling the rug out from anyone looking to decode his elaborate bargains with form and language. Here, a large white donut shape is tacked to a central, flat, black cartoon eye socket. To the right is a white "Little Orphan Annie" aperture. A squat caramel-colored nose makes up the rest of the image, and a simple black hole for a mouth gapes to see Max Fleischer's crow quill pen aimed right at him.

Phillips' work is a hybrid of art historical and populist impulses. Muscular and witty, it plays with anecdotal details of the descent of the modernist canon and the rise of America's anti-intellectualism in the arts. But he distances himself from the popular indifference to the question of artistic genealogies by probing the formal rigors and conceptual pleasures of paint while grounding this inquiry in things that are incredibly fun to look at and ponder.

—Paul Krainak

Those who shine like the sun
have no need of noise
all these poor idiots who think
that noise
can make them shine

—Anthony E. Elms

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Anne Wilson, *Wind-Up*, 2008, stainless steel, thread, 30 inches x 17 feet x 7 feet (courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago); John Phillips, *Fats Domingo*, 2007, oil on canvas, 78 x 70 inches (courtesy of the artist and Tony Wight Gallery, Chicago)