

by *Alison Knowles*

#1 —

Shuffle (1961)

The performer or performers shuffle into the performance area and away from it, above, behind, around, or through the audience. They perform as a group or solo: but quietly.

Premiered August 1963 at National Association of Chemists and Perfumers in New York at the Advertisers' Club.

#2 —

Proposition (October, 1962)

Make a salad.

Premiered October 21st, 1962 at Institute for Contemporary Arts in London.

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ALISON BY KNOWLES

A Retrospective
(1960–2022)

Front Matter

Director's Foreword	6
Curator's Acknowledgments	8
Preface	12

Essays

by Alison Knowles: Make a Retrospective. <i>Karen Moss</i>	17
Do You Remember? Alison Knowles in Context <i>Nicole L. Woods</i>	31
Twins: A Parable <i>Hannah B Higgins</i>	45
Touch, Listen, Smell, Eat, Look: Intersensory Perception in the Work of Alison Knowles <i>Lucia Fabio</i>	55
Sonic Possibilities, Meditations on Being, and the Mysterious Wisdom of Alison Knowles <i>Lauren Fulton</i>	63
<i>The House of Dust</i> , a Work in Translation <i>Maud Jacquin and Sébastien Pluot</i>	71

Chronology

Alison Knowles: Art/Life/Events <i>Compiled by Lucia Fabio</i>	81
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Reprints

From a Dialogue on Transviromental Books Between George Quasha and Alison Knowles (1982)	241
Auto-dialogue on the Transviromental Book: Reflections on <i>The Book of Bean</i> (1982) <i>George Quasha</i>	243
Tuna and Other Fishy Thoughts on Fluxus Events (1992) <i>Kristine Stiles</i>	245
The Sculpture of Indeterminacy: Alison Knowles's Beans and Variations (2004) <i>Julia Robinson</i>	249
The Book of the Future: Alison Knowles's <i>The House of Dust</i> (2012) <i>Benjamin H. D. Buchloh</i>	259

Back Matter

Works in Exhibition	264
Image Credits	268
Selected Bibliography	269
Contributors	270

The first image one sees upon opening this book is the buff-colored cover of Alison Knowles's early publication *by Alison Knowles* (1965). This slim volume, published by Something Else Press as part of its Great Bear Pamphlets series, includes the earliest poetic event scores written by Knowles.¹ The collection is especially significant because it marks the first publication of the scores Knowles wrote for her initial forays into performance at Fluxus Festivals organized by George Maciunas throughout Europe between 1962–63.² Knowles's first event score in *by Alison Knowles* is *Shuffle* (1961), which instructs a performer or performers to meander in and around the audience while shuffling their feet, and the second is *Proposition #2: Make a Salad* (1962), first performed as part of the *Festival of Misfits* in London. One of the first food-based works of performance art, *Make a Salad* has become, for many, Knowles's signature work: she has been called to perform it at galleries, museums, and public sites internationally since the 2000s.

Yet if the present book begins by showing Knowles within the context for which she is most well-known—her participation in the Fluxus collective from 1962 through the late 1970s—the primary impetus for the exhibition *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960–2022)* and this accompanying publication—the most comprehensive published on the artist's work to date—is to document, interpret, and illustrate Knowles's extraordinary artistic production over her lifetime to date.

When curating a retrospective, it is daunting to find a title to convey the full extent of an artist's practice, especially an artist such as Knowles, whose production spans sixty-plus years. It became clear, as the curatorial project progressed, that the eponymous title *by Alison Knowles* should be incorporated into the naming of the artist's retrospective exhibition and publication, to honor Knowles's historical artist's publication and evoke the multiple meanings of the preposition *by* as applicable to her art, authorship, and achievements. Here is a sampling of those meanings:

- by*, preposition
 - identifying the agent performing an action
 - in proximity to
 - indicating the means of achieving something
 - in the vicinity of and beyond
 - through or through the medium³

Knowles's open scores are minimal, poetic texts that can be performed by others, yet they are clearly written *by* Knowles, reflecting her authorship. Referred to sometimes as “propositions,” the scores are invitations to perform simple actions or gestures, often in combination with found objects. Knowles's practice draws on the first definition of *by* from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: she is often “the agent performing an action,” leading participants in focused, embodied engagements that often involve not only sight and sound, but also the gustatory, the haptic, and the olfactory. As the sole female co-founder of Fluxus, Knowles's work is distinct from that of her male counterparts, particularly in her interest in food, domestic materials, and quotidian activities, and in observing what she has called the “secrets of ordinary things.”⁴ In its difference, Knowles's practice fulfills two of the other definitions of *by*: first, she worked “in proximity to” the Fluxus collective during a particular period (representing a relatively short amount of time within the scope her long career); and second, she has long developed her own “means of achieving something.”

1. From 1963–74, Dick Higgins, Knowles's life partner for much of her life, published many of their Fluxus associates through Something Else Press, including George Brecht, Al Hansen, Nam June Paik, and Emmett Williams, as well as a broader array of artists and authors, among them John Cage, Henry Cowell, Merce Cunningham, Allan Kaprow, Marshall McLuhan, and Gertrude Stein. See *Intermedia, Fluxus and Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins* (New York: Siglio Press, 2018).

2. Maciunas organized *Fluxus international Festspiele Neuster Musik* (International Festival of the Newest Music) in Wiesbaden, Germany, in September 1962, which was the first concert for which he used the coinage “Fluxus.” Similar festivals took place in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Düsseldorf, London, Oslo, Paris, Rotterdam, Stockholm, and Wuppertal during 1962–63.

3. These definitions are loosely drawn from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam Webster Dictionary*.

4. Knowles chose this phrase for the title of her solo exhibition *Alison Knowles: Secrets of Ordinary Things*, which I curated at the Walter and McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute, April–June 2003.

5. Dick Higgins, “Statement on Intermedia,” written on August 3, 1966, and published in 1967 by Something Else Press and in the ephemeral publication *Dé-collage, Bulletin der Fluxus und Happening Avantgarde*, no. 6, ed. Wolf Vostell. See also Higgins, *Modernism Since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1997), where he cites Samuel Taylor Coleridge's use of the term *intermedium* in his notebooks in 1814 to describe his practice of combining writing, poetry, and drawing, often while listening to music (224).

In her association with Fluxus, Knowles worked *by* the cohort—“both in the vicinity of and beyond” them. Her experimental practices from the early 1960s to the early 1970s included screenprinted paintings, artists' books, event scores, mixed-media printmaking, sound works, visual poetry, and installation. Throughout her career, Knowles has continued to demonstrate an uncanny ability to combine diverse materials and processes, constantly iterating additional forms and developing unprecedented areas of investigation. In so doing, she has evidenced another definition of *by*, for she not only works “through the medium,” but through multiple forms of media that become interdependent and coalesce into *intermedia*. Knowles's artistic production embodies what Dick Higgins referred to as the “intermedial approach, to emphasize the dialectic between the media.”⁵ Exemplifying this are her late 1960s trio of projects combining elements of visual art, written texts including event scores, and performance: *The Big Book* (1966), *The Identical Lunch* (1967), and *The House of Dust* (1967)—all of which she would revisit in new forms into the present century.

During the pivotal period between Knowles's screenprinted canvases (which she began making in the late 1950s, before artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol) and these three major projects, Knowles experimented with everyday objects and materials as she instantiated intermedia sensibilities and iterative tendencies in her practice. This decade became a resource for her to return to again and again, looping back to mine her previous images and ideas, then synthesizing them into freshly novel works. As of the early 1970s, Knowles's work becomes even more process-oriented and recursive—in several instances she starts a series in one decade and revisits it again years later. Rather than progressing from one strict formal style or mode of practice to another, she innovates with myriad materials and engages with a plethora of subjects. A lifelong New Yorker, Knowles has traveled frequently to participate in events, exhibitions, and artist residencies internationally. Her inclination to be itinerant, while involved in different types of projects simultaneously, has made it difficult to establish a precise chronology for her work and nearly impossible to apprehend the total gestalt of her artistic production.

The curatorial logic of *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960–2022)* has aimed to closely follow the artist's specific working methods and trajectory. The retrospective begins with “Art/Life/Events,” an illustrated time line to introduce important moments in Knowles's biography alongside the highlights of her career. The first part of the exhibition's installation is organized chronologically, from 1960 to the early 1970s, to show the transition from Knowles's early paintings and prints to the advent of her event scores and participation in Fluxus Festivals, as well as her collaborations with George Brecht and Robert Watts on *BLINK* and with additional Fluxus artists on performances and publications. This section culminates with installations of *The Big Book*, *The Identical Lunch*, and *The House of Dust*. The second, nonchronological part of the exhibition presents Knowles's work from the early 1970s to today, across various media and materials as well as subjects and themes. More specifically, it focuses on a range of experimental printmaking processes; hanging mixed-media works and scrolls; flax and bean instruments and sculptures; sound works; and artist's books, multiples, and other publications. Specific sections are devoted to Knowles's collaborative exhibitions and events since 2000, which include the most recent reactivations of her intermedia works.

The present book accompanies the exhibition as a collection of both new scholarship and previous writings by art historians, artists, and curators keenly attuned to Fluxus and Knowles's practice. My curatorial introduction is titled "by Alison Knowles: Make a Retrospective." and provides an overarching framework that aims to reveal the depth and breadth of Knowles's art, demonstrating why it is significant and how it has influenced younger generations of artists. The other new writings presented here include Hannah B Higgins's "Twins: A Parable," a detailed reading, comparative analysis, and poetic rumination on Knowles's print *Twins* (1979). As one of the artist's fraternal twin daughters, Higgins reflects on the proliferation of nonidentical duplication in Knowles's work and how her daily routines have impacted her artistic sensibility. Nicole L. Woods's "Do You Remember? Alison Knowles in Context" considers the artist's work in relation to the historical archive, opening up new pathways to explore how we remember women artists. Lauren Fulton's "Sonic Possibilities and Meditations on Being: The Mysterious Wisdom of Alison Knowles" addresses sound works from the 1980s and 1990s, both Knowles's audio recordings and found object assemblages that exude sonic potentiality. Maud Jacquin and Sébastien Pluot's "*The House of Dust*, a Work in Translation" discusses how Knowles's project deploys a "panorama" of procedures to translate poetry, art, music, dance, and architecture and to generate situations of radical hospitality and emancipatory experiences. In "Touch, Listen, Smell, Eat, Look: Intersensory Perception in the Work of Alison Knowles," Lucia Fabio looks at the sensory implications of Knowles's "transvironments," intermedia scores and performances, and artists' books.

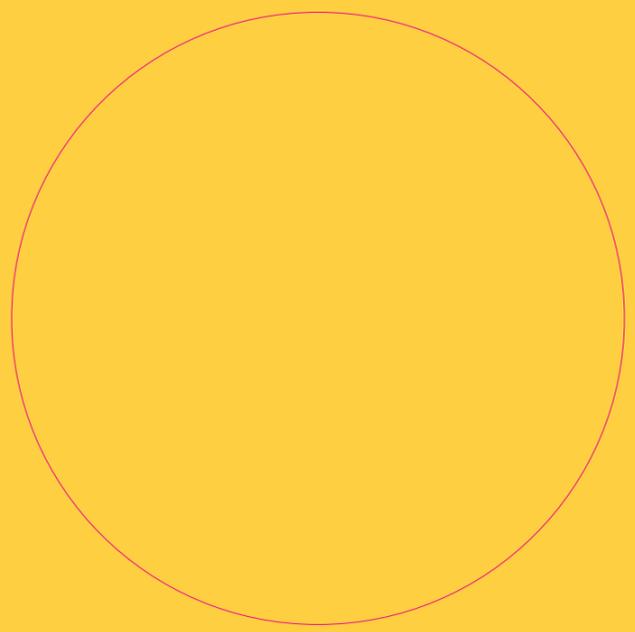
This publication also features reprints of several historically important articles that have had too limited circulation: Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's "The Book of the Future: Alison Knowles's *House of Dust*" (2012), Julia Robinson's "The Sculpture of Indeterminacy: Alison Knowles's Beans and Variations" (2004), and Kristine Stile's "Tuna and Other Fishy Thoughts on Fluxus Events" (1992). Also reprinted here is poet George Quasha and Knowles's conversation from 1982 about her artist's book installations, followed by Quasha's own "auto-dialogue" on "transvironments" and their transactional reception by reader/viewers.

These essays provide art historical, critical, and philosophical contexts for Knowles's work and bookend an illustrated chronology of the artist's education, exhibitions, performances, residencies, collaborations, and commemorations. Compiled by Lucia Fabio, it is an unprecedented attempt to construct a detailed narrative of Knowles's life and oeuvre. Commencing with her birth in Scarsdale, New York, in 1933, it ends with the most recent iteration of *The House of Dust*, a habitable house of mud produced in 2021 using digital 3D printing in collaboration with WASP (The World Advanced Saving Project) and installed in Wiesbaden, Germany, where the first Fluxus Festival took place in 1962.

Since that auspicious year, when Knowles first performed with Fluxus at twenty-nine years of age, she has had an astonishingly expansive and productive artistic career. Yet, as for many women of her generation, the extent of her practice has been too long underexamined. While no single exhibition or publication can do full justice to such a prolific eighty-nine-year-old artist, the goal of *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960–2022)* is to amplify her presence in art historical and critical discourse, and to bring into sharper relief Knowles's prescient contributions to contemporary art.

99 *Red North*, performed at *The House of Dust*, CalArts, Burbank, CA, 1970
FOLLOWING PAGE Maquette of *The Big Book*, c. 1966; index cards and tape





by Alison Knowles: Make a Retrospective.
Karen Moss



Onion Skin Song, 1971/2021; ink on archival paper, edition of 10

1. Alison Knowles, “Back to the Real Onion—Notes on *Song No. 1* of *Three Songs*,” in a broadside published by Galerie St. Petri Archive of Experimental and Marginal Art, Lund, Sweden, 1978.

When I first embarked on the project of an Alison Knowles retrospective, I considered a series of questions: What does it mean to “make a retrospective” for an artist whose production involves ephemeral, nontraditional materials and live, durational works that defy easy categorization and do not fit seamlessly into standard museum strictures? How does a curator start to research a prolific, process-oriented practice dispersed across the globe—from her New York studio (a wall-to-wall installation of art, found objects, specimens of nature, snippets of writing, and memorabilia) to international archives, foundations, and museums? Then, as one gains understanding of the artist’s diffuse yet deep production, how does one codify, organize, and develop a framework for such a multifaceted body of work? Finally, and most critically, how does one communicate the overarching significance of an octogenarian who has been duly acknowledged and appreciated by her avant-garde peers and subsequent generations of artists, but underrepresented in mainstream institutions and scholarship? What follows is a kind of “open score” for Knowles’s artistic practice; these “propositions,” to borrow her language, suggest how we might think about Knowles’s oeuvre through lenses of process, procedure, pedagogy, and impact.

Proposition I: Process

At first glance, it is difficult to identify the floating, fragmented shapes in the 2021 print *Onion Skin Song*, a continuation of Knowles’s print series *Three Songs*, begun in 1971; upon close inspection, the unmistakable striations of delicate organic matter become apparent. Knowles has explained that the prints are “made by running real onion skins through a blueprint machine”:

This method duplicates exactly, like a shadow image, the tone and striations of the skin and reproduces them on a vellum sheet. Finding in my environment a dozen onion skins, they were placed on a plastic sheet, covered with [Saran] wrap and the prints were run. The blueprint machine turns and crushes the skins as it makes the prints. Once the dials are set, the lights and darks of the skins are interpreted and printed by the voltage. These chance elements—the turning drum changing the position of the skins as on the plastic and the crushing action, plus the differing electrical charges—I find preferable to calligraphy I might draw by hand.¹

2. Among the artists in Cage's class who subsequently became closely associated with Fluxus were George Brecht, Al Hansen, Toshi Ichiyanagi, Allan Kaprow, and La Monte Young.

3. Aviva Rahmani, "Alison Knowles: An Interview," *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: Contemporary Art Issues*, no. 10, (Nov. 1991): 21–25.

4. Nicole L. Woods, "Performing Chance: Alison Knowles, Fluxus, and the *Enigmatic Work of Art*," PhD diss., University of California Irvine, 2010, 26. Woods's monograph based on this dissertation is forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press.

5. Rahmani, "Alison Knowles: An Interview," 24.

6. Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," *October* 95 (Winter 2001): 57.

Knowles's statement reveals salient qualities of her multiphased inter-media practice. First, she chooses a food item from her own domestic environment; next, she experiments with technology in order to make a machine-produced trace of it. The result is a long swath of vellum with scattered markings produced through novel, unpredictable procedures. What is also significant about *Onion Skin Song* is its recursive nature: Knowles loops back, mines specific elements, and repurposes ideas over decades.

There is yet another aspect of Knowles's process to mention with regard to *Onion Skin Song*: while the print is typically hung vertically, it is intended to be taken off the wall and read horizontally as a score for others to perform. This affirms a hallmark of Knowles's practice: the invitation to others to engage in an activity in whatever manner they choose. *Onion Skin Song* is not precise musical notation; rather, it is a collection of abstract marks intended to compel nonliteral gestures and sounds from any interpreter. Like a Cagean chance operation, the visual score elicits a nonstatic, time-based, indeterminate, and often playful event.

Knowles's specific subject—onion skins—are paper thin and translucent, inedible and disposable. Her interest is in selecting seemingly insignificant, often ephemeral objects and natural specimens, studying them intently, and transforming them into aesthetic and poetic forms. She is particularly drawn to subjects that require focused attention and an extended research process. The onion, with its seemingly endless layers, is an apt metaphor for understanding Knowles's art: one must peel away the skins to delve deep and comprehend the essence.

Proposition 2: Procedure

Initially a French major at Middlebury College, Knowles returned home to New York in 1954 to study painting and printmaking at Pratt Institute with Richard Lindner and Adolph Gottlieb. After graduating in 1956, she moved into a loft in Soho, where she became acquainted with a close-knit community of visual and performance artists, in particular Ray Johnson and Dorothy Podber, who introduced her to Dick Higgins, her future husband. At the time Higgins was taking John Cage's legendary composition class at the New School for Social Research.² Knowles later recalled: "I wasn't in [Cage's] class, my connection was through Dick

Higgins, but the mechanisms and structure discussed in that class helped me escape the ravaging jaws of Abstract Expressionism."³

Knowles's early training is evident in the broad, gestural strokes of the paintings in her first exhibition at The Nonagon gallery in New York City in 1958. Later that year, however, the influence of Cage's aleatory procedures was emerging in her work. Enrolled in Josef Albers's summer course at Syracuse University, Knowles became disengaged from his lecturing on abstraction and color theory. She rebelled by making her first chance-based works: throwing dice onto canvas to determine the painted composition;⁴ sometimes folding the canvas, putting numbers onto sections, and throwing dice to determine color.⁵ *Taxis and Busses* (1959–60; p. 86) is one of the few extant paintings from this period; its layers of painted and screenprinted imagery and text derive from signage and advertising, and predate the adoption of similar iconography and techniques by Pop artists.

Proposition 3: Pedagogy

In her "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," Liz Kotz refers to event scores as "rubrics," a term educators use to refer to sets of guidelines:

What are these texts? They can be read (have been read) under a number of rubrics: music scores, visual art, poetic texts, performance instructions, or proposals for some kind of action or procedure. Most often, when they are read at all, these "short form" scores are seen as tools for something else, scripts for a performance or project or musical piece which is the "real" art.⁶

These ideas relate directly to Knowles's event scores, which offer not only information to be read but instructions to enact. The participants learn through doing—intellectually, perceptually, and sensorily.

When Allan Kaprow became associate dean of the newly established California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1970, he invited a Fluxus cohort that included Knowles to teach there. A proviso of her contract was that *The House of Dust*—her five-ton fiberglass sculptural installation built in 1969 from a score derived from a computer-generated quatrain composed in 1967—would be moved to the school's campus



Knowles with student inside *The House of Dust*, CalArts, Valencia, CA, c. 1971

7. See Karen Moss, “Performance into Pedagogy: Anna Halprin, Allan Kaprow, and Alison Knowles’s Score-based Events in Experimental Arts Education,” PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2016. I am indebted to Hannah B Higgins for her book *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), especially the closing chapter in which she discusses a range of teaching, learning styles, educational theories, and philosophy in the work of Cage, Kaprow, Brecht, and, of course, Knowles.

8. See John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938).

9. See Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

10. From a typed statement about Knowles’s work, 1981, Dick Higgins Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

to become the locus for workshops and classes. For her course called “House of Dust,” students gathered inside the biomorphic structures, held poetry readings, screened films, and gathered for meditation events, while outside they used scores based on gift exchange and hospitality.⁷

Knowles’s integration of performance and pedagogy recalls John Dewey’s writing on progressive education, emphasizing active, embodied, and discovery-based inquiry into one’s environment, rather than the passive, static, and rote learning of the traditional classroom.⁸ Knowles provides ways for artists to amplify their individual learning styles and access what educator Howard Gardner has theorized as our “multiple intelligences.”⁹ Codified into bodily/kinesthetic, logical/mathematical, linguistic, spatial, naturalist, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence, these disparate but often overlapping categories parallel different ways to acquire and share knowledge through the performative event scores at the core of Knowles’s informal, intuitive, and intermedial pedagogy.

Proposition 4: Impact

As Dick Higgins once poignantly observed:

*Alison Knowles was the only woman artist who took part in the original [1962–63] Fluxus festivals; but to describe her performance works only in terms of Fluxus is like describing an elephant only in terms of its trunk—an important and unique part of the beast, but it neglects the rest of the body. . . . [I]n fact, she is the link between Fluxus and Performance Art.*¹⁰

Knowles’s participation in early Fluxus was the “trunk” that provided the impetus for her to write her first event scores, but, as Higgins noted, it is reductive to discuss her work only in terms of these collective events. From the very beginning, her larger “body” of work was distinguished by its immense diversity: painting, experimental printmaking and papermaking, artist’s books and multiples, performance, intermedia projects, sound and radio works, visual poetry, and more. Knowles’s link to a multitude of other artists is the real “elephant in the room.”

FOLLOWING SPREAD Knowles performing *Bean Garden*, Munich, 1980

11. Woods, “Performing Chance,” 3.

12. The exhibitions include *Viva Video! The Art and Life of Shigeo Kubota*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2021–22); *A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s–1980s*, Grey Art Gallery, New York (2016); *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting*, MoMA P&L, New York (2017–18); and *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960–1971*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015).

13. Some of the major group exhibitions in which Knowles has participated include *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1993); *John Cage, Rolywholyover A Circus and Out of Actions: Between the Object and Performance, 1949–1979* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1993 and 1998, respectively); and *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2009).

14. See this book’s chronology, “Art/Life/Events,” for details on these events.

Knowles’s unique experiments in intermedia and performance—both within Fluxus and apart from it—have been critically influential on contemporary artists. Her two-year *The Identical Lunch*, scored in 1967, serves as an early example of durational performance art. *The Big Book* (1966) expanded a hand-held form into a monumentally scaled, phenomenological “transenvironment.” Meanwhile, *The House of Dust* was a forerunner to interactive, media-based public sculpture installations; a precursor to a new kind of computational poetics; and an active, pedagogical space. Her scores proposed communal and convivial events in the very early 1960s, as she incorporated notions of hospitality and gift exchange into her work long before those artists associated with relational aesthetics in the 1990s or social practices in the 2000s. Indeed, throughout the years, Knowles’s performances and workshops have influenced younger artists working across genres. Ultimately, the impact of her intermedia oeuvre emanates from her extended engagement with ordinary materials, found objects, and everyday life in performative, poetic iterations with pedagogical implications.

Even as Knowles developed her own methodologies and inspired other artists over her long and peripatetic career, as art historian Nicole L. Woods astutely notes:

*In terms of historical reception, the clever and indeterminate nature of Knowles’s production has often suffered a double exclusion: first, because of the probing, elusive, and ephemeral character of her work; and second, owing to her marginalized relation to male peers and collaborators who have received significantly greater recognition for their experimental practices.*¹¹

I would add a third exclusion: other Fluxus-associated women of Knowles’s generation—Shigeo Kubota, Charlotte Moorman, Carolee Schneemann, and Yoko Ono—have had major solo exhibitions or retrospectives during the past decade, yet Knowles’s is only arriving now.¹² Though since the 1990s she has participated in major group exhibitions¹³ and performed her events at international art fairs, galleries, and museums,¹⁴ after six decades this comprehensive examination of her work is long overdue. It is time to *make a retrospective*.





Knowles in her studio, New York, c. 1966

Exhibition Guide

As noted in this book's preface, *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960–2022)* starts with a chronological installation of the artist's practice from the early 1960s to the 1970s, followed by thematic sections leading up to the present. Her early works represent a microcosm of the practices, methods, subjects, and themes with which she has continued to engage to this day.

From Early Paintings to European Fluxus Festivals At the start of her career, Knowles experimented with chance-based painting, sometimes throwing dice to determine a composition, as in the screenprinted painting *Taxis and Busses*. During the European Fluxus Festivals of 1962–63, she began to write minimal, poetic event scores utilizing everyday materials to provoke maximal experiences of the mind, body, and senses. Knowles's work became increasingly multisensory, engaging new ideas about “found sounds” and framing everyday actions as live art.

Sissor Bros. Warehouse In 1963, Knowles joined George Brecht and Robert Watts under the pseudonym Sissor Bros. Warehouse, randomly selected from the phonebook. Together they produced *BLINK*, a collaborative image that they screenprinted onto objects including gloves, light bulbs, a bathing suit, jewelry, tool chests, pillows, and the walls and floors of Rolf Nelson Gallery, Los Angeles. A woman in a “BLINK” dress acted as a gallery docent as everything was auctioned off, starting at a price of 99 cents, in a critique of consumerism and the commodification of Pop art.

New York Fluxus Performances and Publications In a storefront on Canal Street, Fluxhall became a hub for events such as *Fully Guaranteed 12 Fluxus Concerts* in 1964, for which Knowles designed a poster collage overlaid with fluorescent pink text proclaiming “Fluxus Comes to New York.” In the exhibition, related ephemera from the period includes photographic and film documentation of Fluxus performances: Knowles and Ben Vautier's *Street Events* (1964); Dick Higgins and Knowles enacting her *Variation #2 Make a Soup* (1964) at the Greenwich Village nightclub Café a Go-Go; and Knowles and Ay-O performing her *String Piece* (1964) at the Third Annual Avant-garde Festival in 1965, organized by Charlotte Moorman. This

section includes *by Alison Knowles*, the book that inspired the title of this exhibition, and Knowles's *Bean Rolls* (1963–64), from George Maciunas's *Fluxkit* (1965).

The Big Book and The Boat Book Knowles's *The Big Book* (1966) is a walk-in installation organized around a spine of “pages” forming small rooms and filled with objects from Knowles's domestic surroundings—a stove, a teakettle, a chair, a toilet. Extant documentation of *The Big Book* shows that the “reader” could interact with objects, texts, photographs, and prints to feel a semblance of Knowles's New York loft life and also imagine their own narratives. This phenomenological effect is what Knowles and poet George Quasha call a “transenvironment,” a neologism for a transformationally experienced environment. Knowles's *The Boat Book* (2014), dedicated to her brother Lawrence, who was a fisherman, has a similarly large format; it is constructed with found objects and screenprints representing navigation and nautical themes.

The Identical Lunch At Riss Restaurant in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, Knowles would often have lunch with the composer Philip Corner, who observed that she ate the same meal every day. After he suggested that this ritual might become a performance, Knowles wrote *The Identical Lunch* event score in 1967: “A tuna fish sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo and a large glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup was and is eaten many days of each week at the same place and at about the same time.” She invited friends to consume the meal with her and took Polaroids of a number of artists eating *The Identical Lunch* at George Maciunas's New Years Fluxbanquet circa 1969, which she later used for several series of screenprints on canvas, also featured in this section.

The House of Dust James Tenney, artist-in-residence at Bell Labs, led a seminar on computers and the arts at Knowles and Dick Higgins's home in 1967. Shortly after, Knowles and Tenney generated the computerized poem *The House of Dust*. The lines of the poem's quatrains are randomly drawn from a set list: a material, a location, a light source, and types of human inhabitants. The quatrain that reads “a house of dust / in an open ground / lit by natural light / inhabited by friends



and enemies” became the score for the fiberglass public sculpture *The House of Dust*, funded by a Guggenheim grant and initially installed in 1969 at a housing development in New York. After it was damaged by arson, Knowles had the sculpture restored and transported to CalArts, where it became the locus of her teaching practice, existing as an outdoor art installation and a site for events, activations, and pedagogy.

Homage, Collaboration, and Experimental Printmaking In 1967, Knowles worked with Marcel Duchamp on a reprint of his *Coeurs Volants*, first realized for the journal *Cahiers d’Art* in 1936. Their collaboration resulted in both a limited edition screenprint and the cover for Emmett Williams’s book *Sweethearts*, published by the Something Else Press. Another screenprint edition, Knowles’s *Leone d’Oro* (1978), produced with Francesco Conz, combines shoe parts found at the Bay of Naples with a label from an orange crate. Knowles’s innovative printmaking techniques also produced *For Dick* (1976), dedicated to Dick Higgins and made using an early photocopier; a hanging scroll digitally printed in collaboration with Rirkrit Tiranvanija (2011); and the woodblock prints *Nori Hermit* (2014), a collaboration with Jessica Higgins. Among the homages featured in the exhibition are Knowles’s offset lithograph *White Stripes for John Cage* (1967/68) and the print *Twins* (1979), dedicated to her daughters Hannah B and Jessica Higgins. For her *Bread and Water* series, Knowles experimented with historical methods such as Palladium printing and cyanotypes. The latter she also used in *Iliad Oddities (Greene Street)* (2010), a nine-foot-long textile hung with a net, a rope, a mask, tools, and pieces of flax—the same objects used to print on the cloth.

Assemblages and Mixed-Media Works Knowles’s ongoing engagement with mixed-media assemblages takes different forms: hanging sculptures, panels, and scrolls. *Broken Line with Slippers* (1991), made of mulberry leaves, has shoes that imply the presence of an absent body. Knowles’s *Event Threads* (begun 2006) are made up of wires strung with both human-made items and natural elements; they underscore her enduring practice of collecting mundane objects to shape significant forms.

Loose Pages, Flax Instruments, and Paper Works In 1983, Knowles collaborated with papermaker Coco Gordon on *Loose Pages*, a “performance

book” consisting of flax and cotton pages that become wearable garments: arm and leg flaps, a hat, and slippers. Knowles dresses the performer, most often Jessica Higgins, as the body becomes the “spine” of the book; meanwhile, the moving pages add a sonic element to the intermedia performance. Knowles’s *Flat Paper Gong* (1998) and her large- and small-scale *Bean Turners* (begun 2000) are flax-pulp sculptures filled with legumes to function as musical instruments: they produce subtle to jarring sounds depending on the speed and angle at which they are moved. She has also embedded legumes into the large-scale flax panel *Pagina Lenticchia* (1983) and used them to create the delicate patterns in *Rice and Beans* (c. 1995).

Sound Performances and Installations Knowles’s sound works since the 1960s have taken form as scrolls, installations, and intermedia performances, recordings, and radio plays. Among them are *Onion Skin Song*, as discussed above, and *Bean Garden* (1971), a sandbox-like structure filled with navy beans and amplified, or “played,” by visitors’ footsteps. Other sound-based performances by Knowles are well-documented in photographs and videos, such as *Mantra for Jessie* (1970), composed for her daughter, and a collaboration in 1998 between Knowles and Cage for which they recited Stephane Mallarmé’s poetry while cooking.

Beans Multiples and The Book of the Bean Since her initial experiments with the *Bean Roll* multiple in the mid-1960s, Knowles has made numerous small-scale editions combining beans and found objects, among them her interactive *Bean Bags* and other multiples from the 1970s and 1980s. Her second large-scale “transvirement,” *The Book of Bean* (1981), premiered at Franklin Furnace in New York; the sounds played during the performance were recorded for the 1981 tape *8112A*, which was recently remastered as the vinyl LP *Sounds from the Book of Bean* (2021).

Artist’s Books Knowles’s significant production of artist’s books varies in design and format, from intimate, hand-held booklets to large-scale, three-dimensional sculptures. *Notations* (1967) is a book of visual scores by artists and composers that she co-edited and designed with John Cage. *A Finger Book 3* (1987/88) is a three-dimensional, mixed-media work on a circular aluminum base with texts in Braille that refer to

Knowles at her *Indigo Island* exhibition, Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 1995



15. *Tamashi* notably features text excerpts from George Quasha and Chie Higaswa's *Ainu Dreams* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1999) and William Romain's *Mysteries of the Hopewell* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2000).

ancient languages and sites. *Tamashi* (2002), produced by Knowles in collaboration with Amanda Degener, is an accordion-folded circular construction printed on handmade and dyed paper.¹⁵

Recent Performance Events, Exhibitions, and Installations The exhibition's final section includes documentation of Knowles's public presentations in recent decades. Highlighted are several *Make a Salad* events in institutions and at public sites internationally as well as new versions of *The Identical Lunch*, one of which temporarily transformed a portion of the café at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, into a 1950s-style diner. This section also documents recent iterations of *The House of Dust*, including the activation of a new quatrain for a *House of Glass* at CalArts (2018) and *The House of Dust* at the Kranzplatz in Wiesbaden, Germany (2021–22).