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Internship Report

The two things I offered to (founding Fluxus member, visual artist and writer) Alison Knowles this summer that seemed to impress her most were my organizational skills and a pun/corny joke I read in a bathroom stall. (The organization details are in this report's addendum.) The joke is in the bathroom stall at Bard's MFA exhibition space in Red Hook, NY and, in black sharpie, reads, "Q: What did the bra say to the hat? A: I'm going to stay here with these two, you go on ahead." Alison was excited to tell her brother, whom she bonds with (via phone) over jokes. She told me that she "got a lot of mileage" out of that joke and even e-mailed me weeks later as a response to my schedule update, writing, "Yogi [my dog] then yoga, okay, but we need more jokes of the caliber of the bra to the hat!" This exchange is merely one of my personal experiences with Alison's democratic attitude of finding joy and interest in seemingly insignificant things.

Her attitude in relation to art is the same. Her use of materials, the way she includes the audience in her installations and performances and the manner in which she discusses creative endeavors share the same importance as going to the produce market at the end of her street or boiling water for tea. Bill Wilson noted Alison's even-handed and expansive approach to art and life when he wrote about her 1968 installation piece entitled *The Big Book*, noting that she was able to "pursue artifice without pretense."¹

Wilson then elaborates on the domestic or apartment "page" in the eight-page, life-size

¹ Bill Wilson, "The Big Book," *Art in America*, July-August 1968, volume 56, Number 4. (New York: Art in America Corp.), p 102

book, “While life in the apartment is unpretentious, the compressed scale delineates every domestic activity with so much care and awareness that it achieves the radiance of ritual.”² *The Big Book* was meant to be walked through (it changed you as you changed it) and lived in ... people actually did squat in it. Alison made chicken soup in the book at one venue. She still makes a lot of soup. Even in her studio, it feels like a ritual or subtle performance.

I think Wilson did not go far enough though. Alison doesn’t just avoid “pretense” in her pursuit of “artifice.” She sees no divide between art (artifice) and life at all. She has no need to avoid symptoms of hierarchy (such as pretense) because, for her, what one does making art and what one does “making” (my quotes) life are not so different. To her this division is not realistic. It is not real. *It is artifice.* In 1981, Alison wrote about her work in *High Performance Magazine*:

The notations I make, the environments, and prints are all based on real life material: materials found in the streets, in my own domestic situation, or given to me by an outsider/stranger or friend. These materials are then organized to make a piece of art. They go through a metamorphosis that takes me a long time, and rather complicated and circuitous structures – at throw of the dice, opening of the dictionary, etc. – in order to find patterns for organizing these ‘collections’ into life (art). So, first, the raw material, then its organization into art/life.³

In *The Big Book*, Alison did just this, presenting items such as trash, screenprints, chicken soup, a chemical toilet and, most importantly, the audience/viewer on equal footing.

Like her scores that give basic instructions, but allow for variations within that score (based on the participants’ contributions), Alison’s actions in her daily life are deliberate,

² *ibid*

³ Alison Knowles, “Three Songs Gem Duck,” *High Performance*, Volume 4, Number 2, Summer 1981. (Los Angeles: Astro Arts), p. 43

but allow for and encourage surprises. This summer, something as simple as organizing a shelf often felt like a score in which I was participating, adding my own ideas and imagination, but within the “space” of her vocabulary (step A, step B, step C were spelled out, then we approached the process with an openness to our own variation). Like *The Big Book*, there was a suggested trajectory, but the audience was given ample leeway to contribute their own actions to or to even totally alter the process or progression. As an extension of her attitude toward art, Alison encourages equanimity between herself and the art viewer. She doesn’t encourage, I would dare to say, even allow the sort of admiration many artists today court.

This comes across in her artwork and was apparent during my internship. The rituals (or tasks we were to complete) were presented by her, but it was not as if she were a shaman or boss with a follower or employee. The situation always felt, almost uncomfortably, democratic. Alison Knowles and I were equals not because she said so, but because, in her eyes, everything and everyone reside on the same level of importance (art, Terri, Yogi, yoga, the sausage she slices at lunch are all to be approached with an equal dose of mindfulness). This was inspiring for me as a curator and a person. It inspired me to question my own existing prejudices about artists, curators and audience. In doing so, I realized I am not as egalitarian as I thought. Sometimes, a piece of trash looks like a piece of trash and a modernist painting looks like sublime art ... and sometimes I think of the audience as knowing less about art than I do as a negative thing... something they “lack” that I need to “teach.” Working with Alison reminded me that the ego is tricky and can fool us into thinking we have its snobbery and self-inflation beat.

Alison's ritual are not created to acquire some sort of spiritual enlightenment, but are, I suspect, the result of it. There is no pomp and circumstance. Every action she takes is elevated or reduced to the same level. She took as much care in preparing her lunch as she would when preparing a print. I once saw Patti Smith at a concert series in Nashville, Tennessee. The series was in a parking lot and she started with the statement, "Playing in a parking lot. This is either a new high or a new low. I think it's a new high." Smith then started wailing on her guitar and sang with the passion of someone fighting for her life. I think Patti Smith and Alison have something in common. They seem to believe to a large extent that life is what you make of it. It is all a frame of mind whether something is "high" or "low," and there is a freedom that comes with dismissing the differences all together. Working with someone who has this attitude created room for me to attempt to do the same.

Alison's sense of ritual is tied to one of her favorite materials for art making -- food. Food has been a part of Alison Knowles's creative process since the beginning of her career. Food finds its way into her art, including her famous, communal, ongoing piece *Identical Lunch* (1968) and the (often reprised by popular demand) score *Make a Salad* (1962). For Alison, food and ritual are inseparable. Being around someone with such a straightforward attitude to food and eating taught me a lot about my own relationship to food, which isn't unhealthy, but a little odd. When I told her this, she laughed lovingly and said, "Don't try to explain it." Eating food as a meditative ritual is what artist Philip

Corner, writes art historian Kristine Stiles, noticed about Alison that led to *Identical Lunch*. According to Stiles:

Corner had the opportunity, but equally the good sense and sensitivity, to observe her repetition, perhaps even ritualized reflection. [Knowles] remembers then that he then midwived it not actually preconceived' her meditation into a performative score that, together, they began to methodically investigate: 'The Identical Lunch: a tunafish sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo and a large glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup.'⁴

Of all the Alison Knowles books I inventoried, *Journal of the Identical Lunch* (1971) was the most revealing of Alison's process and how the loosely woven group activity of Fluxus unfolded in real time. Stiles adds, "Knowles remembered that Corner became 'so obsessed' with performing the score that she decided to abandon her habit for a time, but not before various individuals undertook the performance of the 'Identical Lunch' at Riss Food...."⁵

Alison has used bread (*Bread and Water* book and prints, 1995), salad (*Make a Salad*), onion skins (*Onion Skin Song*, 2003), and tunafish (*Identical Lunch*) in her art, but the food most commonly found in her work is the bean. One of the most ancient foods, it has appeared in works by Alison such as the installation *The Book of Bean* (1981), her early edition of sculpture *The Bean Rolls* (1962), as well as numerous prints (e.g. *Beans and Fish*, 1980 and *Bean Bag*, 1979) and performances (e.g. *The Bean Garden*, 1976 and *The Bean Sequences*, 1989). She continues to make bean turners that are "played" and sound similar to rainmakers. She has also centered books around the bean, including *A Bean*

⁴ Kristine Stiles, "Tuna and Other Fishy Thoughts" in *Indigo Island: Art Works by Alison Knowles*. (Warschau: Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken, 1994), p. 26

⁵ *ibid*

Concordance (1983) and a collaborative book with Michael Phillips called *A Common Boat* (2004). During my internship I saw several of the Bean artworks in person and was shown how the bean turner worked. I also, as we worked in her studio, would often begin laughing as red lentils would fall out of the bottom of a poster tube or brown beans would roll around the floor as I reorganized the print portfolios and sculptures stored in the loft of her studio in Barrytown, New York. The object of the bean is useful to Alison for its appearance (red lentils, sparsely and gracefully placed on handmade paper), feeling (small bags filled with beans that can be fondled like a worry stone) and sound (as with the bean turners). She has also explored their history and more topical associations such as researching people with the last name “Bean” and included that information in her art.

Currently, Knowles is concentrating on performances and readings, her paper objects and creating sun prints. She uses a special chemical process to make sun prints. To create these prints she expressionistically brushes the chemical onto muslin, waits for it to dry and then places found objects (often metal and fitting into the categories of circles or pronged garden tools or negatives shot of these objects and/or negatives of text) onto the fabric, moving the object-covered fabric into the sun and pressing everything in place using old iron weights and plexiglass. In the past year or so, her paper objects include “books” molded from bread pans and *Time Samples* (2006) which consist of found objects and handmade paper tagged with provocative and seemingly unrelated phrases such as “Each of us sits in the best seat.” Alison consistently writes in small journals she carries with her. These books feature everything from snippets of friends’ conversations to other observations and thoughts. Alison culls ideas from these journals when creating

her books, including *Bread and Water* (1995), *Footnotes* (2000) and *Natural Assemblages and the True Crow* (1980). She also finds inspiration for text in her artworks from these journals.

I plan to assist Alison in organizing her archives in New York further. That process is about ninety percent complete and will only require a few more afternoons. In organizing and helping Alison date the brochures, invitations, articles, scores, photographs, press releases etc. in her archive, I gained a good overview of her practice. I also noticed the undulating popularity of Fluxus, which, while remaining pretty consistent, seemed to have a resurgence of interest in the 1990s. I also familiarized myself and found out more about her collaborations with other artists, including John Cage, Philip Corner, Marcel Duchamp, Jackson MacLow, Nam June Paik, Ben Vautier, and Emmett Williams.

Most importantly, this summer I got a sense of the spirit of Fluxus collaboration from Alison. Alison is on her way to Berlin to do a talk with her daughter and art historian Hannah Higgins. They will perform her daughter's talk on Fluxus together. The last time they performed it, Hannah talked and Alison was at a table in the foreground acting it out through sound and gesture. Alison mentioned that they might just switch this time with Alison reading Hannah's talk and Hannah acting it out. In organizing her archive she had to be convinced to keep bits of correspondence she found unimportant, but were historically interesting. In her studio, one had to be cautious and ask if virtually anything was trash because seemingly unimportant objects or materials were often materials she

planned to use (or use again) to make works. With Alison, assumptions are often disrupted in a spirit of play and equality.

In one of her recent e-mails she left me with this poem, writing:

Here is a poem by one of my favorites, Kurt Schwitters (1922)

It's autumn.

Swans are eating their masters' bread in which tears are baked.

Rundown expressionists cry out for wine, because there's lots of wine

But no more expressionism.

Long live the Kaiser, because there's no more Kaiser.

Clocks clock the hours twenty-five thousand times.

I'm gliding.

A glide knot.

A machine is screeching.

Cats are hanging on the wall.

A Jew fiddles a cow out the window.

And through.

It's autumn.

And the swans are autumning too.

ADDENDUM: THE LOGISTICS

I worked with Alison Knowles, one of the founding members of Fluxus, during the summer. I assisted her in two locations – her studio in Barrytown, New York and her loft on Spring Street, working approximately 180 hours (the extra 20 hours will happen this fall as I help her tweak her NYC archives). Actual works and materials for making art are stored in Barrytown. We organized her screenprint negatives into categories and stored them in a safer, more accessible manner. We organized her materials, putting like things together and purchasing baskets etc. for storage. All of the shelves were cleaned and objects were organized as needed. She was storing artworks and books upstairs at Barrytown. I inventoried the books, re-boxing them as needed and moved them to the garage for easier access (and to separate them from the artwork). The remaining objects and prints upstairs were placed in specific areas based on their category. In Barrytown I also assisted Alison with making sun prints and preparing scrolls for an exhibition. Much of the work this summer was in New York. There, Alison and I went through hundreds of photographs, press releases, invitations, posters, programs etc., organizing them by type of document and year. Additionally, separate files were made for major works such as *The Identical Lunch*, *The House of Dust* (1968) and *The Big Book*. I also scanned prints and took photos of objects from *The House of Dust* and burned them to a disk as part of Alison's communication with gallery director James Fuentes. I took photographs of Alison working and made a short video of her working. I am sending these materials to the person who designs her website for inclusion on www.acknowledges.com. I assisted her in organizing her thoughts and typing up the first draft of her "Top Ten" list for

September's *ArtForum*. I did quite a bit of research at the CCS library on her, finding articles that we will use to flesh out her NYC archive. I also am in the process of coordinating a gift of her books to the CCS library.

On a less formal, but equally enriching level, she and I viewed the Martin Creed exhibition at Bard together and she came to the MFA show I curated to see those artists' work. It was interesting to hear her opinions about the different artworks we saw together. As we went through the archives, I also asked questions and heard stories about events and artworks, giving me a better overview of her practice. I believe that the most enriching thing about this internship, however, was Alison Knowles's example. Her sincerity, frankness, respectfulness and generosity were inspiring. Her attentiveness to sound and the specificity of language was also intriguing and has enriched the ways in which I view art and think about curating. I believe in taking in/on environments for art exhibitions, my experience with Alison and my understanding of her performances and large-scale installations like *The Big Book* will help me be more in tune with subtle spatial and thematic relationships as I consider the space and content.