Gahlberg Gallery
Thursday, Oct 2 to Saturday, Nov. 8, 2003

ALISON KNOWLES

College of DuPage
A SCULPTURE OF INDETERMINACY: Alison Knowles’ Beans and Variations

Alison Knowles’ work as an artist, spanning a period from the late 1950s to the present, has most often been discussed within the context of the radical performance activities of Fluxus. While this historical framework provides an essential context for Knowles’ evolution as an artist, it fails to account for the sizable body of work she has produced outside of her Fluxus activities. This brief text focuses exclusively on Knowles’ recent work, not as an outgrowth of Fluxus pure and simple, but as a production quite distinct from that of her 1960s colleagues, and one that has retained the influence of radical composer John Cage. In short, it is a body of work that might be thought of as a Sculpture of Indeterminacy. Unexpected media — like beans, shoe soles, textual and musical score formats — define this dynamic sculpting, but its ultimate frame and structuring apparatus is time itself. By proposing certain leitmotifs to read the work, the intention is not to fix it into a place, but rather to work as it works, through boundaries and between the genres of conventional artistic practice.

“Indeterminacy” is a premise Cage developed in the context of music that was taken up to greater and lesser degrees by a number of Fluxus artists, but developed thoroughly by Knowles. It involves the idea that an artist could compose a work or a performance on the basis that they do not determine how it will actually turn out. Contradicting the notion of “mastery” associated with traditional works of art, the radicalism of this concept lies in the artist’s willing surrender of control. The other key feature we find in Knowles’ art is the related idea of an utterly “open” work, whose only armature is the temporality and focus that organize it. Added to indeterminacy and openness, the structure of “performance” provides both concreteness and mobility to the different objects composed by Knowles. And the artist’s materials, discarded/found objects, beans and sculpted paper pulp (just to name a few), are brought in concert with forms of radical scoring and thereby reinvested with meaning; redeemed, through a new role and purpose. The everyday beauty of the raw material calls to mind the words of structural semiologist Roland Barthes, in his memorable description of the Japanese artist/artisan/chef, performing the making of tempura:

On cover: The Bean Rolls, mixed media, 1963

The eel (or the piece of vegetable, of shellfish), crystallized in grease ... is reduced to ... a collection of perforations: here the foodstuff joins the dream of a paradox: that of the purely interstitial object, all the more provocative in that this emptiness is produced in order to provide nourishment ...

Sometimes the piece of tempura is in stages ... but the contour is so light that it becomes abstract: the foodstuff has for its envelope nothing but time, the time (extremely tenuous, moreover) which has solidified it. (…) refined by the Japanese techniques of cancellation and exemption, it is the nutrient of another time ... a kind of meditation, as much ... fragile, the transparent ... but whose real name would be the interstice without specific edges, or again: the empty sign.
(The chef's) ... activity is literally graphic; he inscribes the foodstuff in the substance; his stall is arranged like a calligrapher's table; he touches the substances like the graphic artist (especially if he is Japanese) who alternates pots, brushes, ink stone, water, paper; he thereby accomplishes ... a hierarchized arrangement, not of time but of tenses (those of a grammar of tempura), makes visible an entire gamut of practices, recites the foodstuff not as a finished merchandise... but as a product whose meaning is not final but progressive, exhausted, so to speak, when its production has ended: it is you who eat, but it is he who has played, who has written, who has produced.

from Roland Barthes, The Interstice in Empire of Signs.¹

In the process of papermaking, particularly the shapes formed by the wet pulp as it is left to air dry are respected and become indigenous to the sculpture. In performances, I am drawn to objects for their sound. My orchestra consists of beans, toys, papers and words, (...) each instrument comes out of silence makes its performance and returns to silence.

Alison Knowles, Statement.²

Like the Japanese chef Barthes describes, Knowles' recent work has the quality of a lifetime of developing a certain ease and wisdom with a full gamut of materials. The quote above evokes Knowles' practice with accuracy that's impossible to equal, because it represents an art that is fully integrated with life: matter, fused with time.

Knowles' mature work has about it a fully developed experiential presence that has acceded to the conditions of pedagogy, but one of the highest orders — more Zen lesson than school. There is an effortlessness with which she “reorients” her objects, shifting them from the inalienable and rarefied space of the museum wall — unhesitatingly with her own hands — passing them to the audience, as though it was their right to know them. A hanging sheet of sculpted paper, with its extraordinary, ruddy topography, begs intense visual scrutiny, leading the eye through its many tributaries and eruptions. And then a moment later, one and the same paper piece is transformed.

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The Giant Bean Turner (instrument), flax, soybeans, 2000
into an instrument: an Aduki Bean Turner or Oat Flax Chime. There are no hierarchies. A “noise-maker” belongs on the wall with other “works of art” and a vast, impressive expanse of sculpted paper is just as “at home” out of the frame, manipulated by the crowd, all its internal beans racing through it apace.

“I don’t ever want the art to be still, finished,” says Knowles. “I want it to be available for somebody to do something else with it ... [something] that I wouldn’t have thought of ...”3

The paper pieces used in Knowles’ performances constitute an indeterminate sculpture because, as Knowles explains, in all modesty, “I think the main thing I’ve discovered about paper in the past five years is that it forms itself. You get something which you could never predict.”4 All of them become remarkable sculptural objects, only to be re-oriented and narrowed down, to those that fit the body or have a particular sound-making capability. Of her hard, white shells of paper, titled Robes of the Saints, Knowles explains, “I dried about seven of them and only one fit my arm.”5 She then demonstrates how she saws on this arm-shaped form to “sound it.” In the performances, Knowles gives the audience the opportunity to do the same. To encourage those who are unsure or inhibited, she makes a point of handing them her art, the paper objects they may be afraid to touch, giving them a new potential out of that simple gesture and act.

Gentle Surprises for the Ear (with Philip Corner and Bill Fontana), found objects ticketed for sound, installation shot from Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1975
The *Onion Skin Song* (2003) is actually made before the eyes of the audience: Pieces of real onion skin are sandwiched in plastic film forming an environmental score. The onion skin is the unorthodox material that promotes experimental musical action, persuading the performer away from old musical habits, as a traditional score never could. Some read its natural striations as the graphemes of musical notation, while others take the pieces whole as a moment of sound, the gaps between them signaling silence. The audience becomes fully involved, at all levels of action, sounding and observing, and soon no one can tell the dancer from the dance.

In a recent statement, Knowles described the process of discovery in her work, with these words:

> ... I collect shoe heels ...
> I am not hunting usually, just rushing to get somewhere like everybody else, but suddenly, unexpectedly, akin to the found item, a found time opens up ...
> The heel I pick up ... quickly, offhandedly ... gets stashed in my pocket. There is a peculiar chemistry to the mysterious terrain I find myself in at that time ...
> ... I love to surf the street ...
> ... At home it gets cleaned, studied, drawn in silhouette, perhaps screen printed with the name of an animal ...
> ... You know that shoe heels can't be bought. Not for sale anywhere. Isn't it special to have recognized the energy expended in the shoe heel?

In that description, she defines the sculpture of indeterminacy in an inimitable manner that took a lifetime to learn. For it is surely this “found time” that Knowles has always created in her work, sculpting it into a form in which apprehension is possible, attentiveness to it and so much else, making brackets around it so it might not go by unnoticed. Recognizing “the energy expended in the shoe heel” seems like an inordinately modest reckoning of a life’s work. But then perhaps it is not.
Contrary to most readings of Knowles’ work, her own representations included, it seems more and more apparent that such a project is fundamentally political (even anarchical in the sense that Cage was committed to anarchy, though more subtle or undeclared). It is work against all odds. The way in which it restores time and labor to our experience of objects — be they shoe soles or beans and paper — is partly captured by Knowles’ statement, “As we know, time spent on shoes is never wasted.”

Beginning at the moment of pop art, Knowles’ work has opened up time where commodity culture has sought to squander it, or erode it altogether. It has picked up the castoffs of that system, those items suddenly rendered “out of the running” (in a market driven sense) — the used, the soiled, the broken — and inducted them into a hypothesis about a level of experience that still might be possible, if everyone is willing to perform.

Julia Robinson is a curator and art historian based in New York. She is currently completing her doctoral dissertation on Fluxus artist George Brecht at Princeton University.

2 Knowles, Statement (2003), unpublished typed page given to me by the artist.
3 Knowles, interview with the author, July 2003.
4 Knowles, interview with the author, May 2003.
5 Knowles, ibid.
7 Knowles, ibid.

North Sea, collage with shoe sole, 2002
**Alison Knowles** is a born New Yorker who has traveled to Japan, Europe, Korea and the Netherlands the past 40 years to perform on her own or with her Fluxus group. She also makes direct image sun prints and fabricates her own paper in a studio in Barrytown, NY, a stone’s throw from the Hudson River.

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Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator

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On back cover:
**Street Embedments, 1970**

**Dick’s Brown Bread Book,**
mixed media 2000