

**Alison Knowles****ARTIST**

First I was a solo artist, painter...Yeah that is what people went for. You wanted to be a sculptor, or a painter. I wasn't satisfied with the amount of visibility. I wanted to speak more directly to people, or anyway I imagine that in retrospect. And also, maybe the paintings weren't very good. My poor daughter Hannah, she has Dick's and my paintings filling her basement. Because that is what an artist did, you painted. So actions began to come in and I was happy to stand up on a stage and talk about my shoes, or speak about the weather today. My access to people is friendly and easy and I really kind of... I'm happy with humankind in general. I don't feel distanced with anybody. So I would be the female in the Fluxus troupe along with people like Eric Andersen and Ben Vautier and Dick Higgins and... offered, I think, a sort of women's view on many things. One of my main pieces was "make a salad" which I have done at the Tate and other great museums. At the beginning of course, it was perceived as a rather strange group of performers that call themselves this George Maciunas concept of Fluxus, but it had to have a name because we were traveling and so, our individual identities, and I like that, were sort of lost under this allegiance to Fluxus. And just what Fluxus meant, it breaks down to be flux and change and it's ok...it's an ok word. Because at that time the other things around town were called Action Art, actions, happenings. It was all the effort to define art away from theatre, because theatre you have definite lines that you memorize and practice to deliver according to someone else's idea of expression. But the idea of those Fluxus pieces was that if you gonna talk about your shoes, there is no one in this room that has the same pair of shoes in any way or the same history about them. So, it brings out the individual flavor of the person and their life.

**ARTWORK**

We call it Intermedia. Dick Higgins coined the term and gave me license to do all these different things. Which he, by the way, was not interested in doing. He did not want to publish books so, there wasn't any difficulty there. He didn't go on tour or he didn't enjoy, you know, performing before people. Once I began, I began to do performance art it was interesting that I just immediately dropped painting because I realized that most of my painting had been aimed at sort of a career as a painter and when I realized that it wasn't going to happen nor did I perhaps want it to happen because George and Dick and the Fluxus group, I had a certain authority in my work and in my person that was very fulfilling, very sustaining as an artist and allowed me to be adventurous. Do things like putting beans into paper, or making these sound instruments.

This is a work with three artists. This is Bob Watts at the top, this is the Balinese wedding, this is George Brecht, who always worked with words... BLINK, and my scissors. Again I find a sort of domestic touch to most of what I was doing in those years. There were solo pieces and group pieces. one of the pieces that I enjoyed most to do was called "Song of your choice" and that was five or six performers lined up on stage and than with a conductors baton, you all break into a song, whatever song you want to sing, and this was very amusing and a very interesting piece because you always would have a few people who would belt it out, and then you would have a gentler voice. But you sang it to the end of the song. It's not like I ended it. So would have someone still finishing up their song and this end of the line. "Song of your choice" I didn't many times, and the solo piece I did often was "shoes of your choice," which could nicely follow a piece like "song of your choice" where, with a microphone, the performer or beckoning someone from the audience who would like to speak about their shoes, could come up to the microphone and describe everything they could about the shoes they are wearing.

"Make a salad." Yes, I think it was first done in London. I'm not sure...But it was absolutely stunningly different from anything that had gone on the stage. To have food prepared live on the stage, and I would mic the sounds of the chopping at each of the tables. It was London were we threw the choppings into a huge tarp which was held at each end and the dressing was pored into the tarp and it was rustled around and then the audience lined up and I served it with thongs out of the tarp. It almost seems kind of matter of fact now, but something like that in a theatre was...We had to go

through all kinds of shenanigans. To get the chef, to get food on the stage, to get napkins. I mean all that, feeding people in the theatre. You just don't do that. So, to bring food into the idea of performing with people is something that I'm happy that I could help with. I also have a piece "Make a soup." And I've done this several times in this country in a huge pickle barrel, or a can of... Having a basic broth and then having vegetables chopped and put into the broth which is being heated. And then people would have to wait while the carrots were cooked and I could talk about different things. I mean, I think the important thing about a piece like "Child art piece" or "Make a salad" is that it always performed. Women perform "Make a salad" all the time in their homes. So I'm sort of elevating that action to having everybody consider. Not just melt it down, but what is in this salad? What is this dressing? What kind of lettuce did this person chose to use for me? So I think, „Make a soup“ and „Make a salad“, I'm very happy to have brought those into the Fluxus tradition early. It's kind of signature piece of mine and it doesn't have to be a huge salad. I've prepared a salad just for the performers, for instance, rather than the audience. I'm sure I've done it a dozen times at least.

## PRODUCTION

Well...Radio. Of course, in Cologne I was always going on the radio, so I would have a radio script. And the radio scripts were very simply the time of day, the weather, whom I might be seeing that day and did I really not like my hair cut today? Which, I really don't like. The quality of the text was immediate, personal and pretty boring I guess. Or...Trying to remember the ingredients of a certain dish, someone from the audience might ask, just what did I put in my beans when I cook them? So I'd go through the process of soaking them overnight, sautéing the onions and putting the spice and again I was... I think I brought a lot of domesticity into performance that wasn't there at all. And I think it has changed, but I think young men are more interested in looking at a certain way... speaking of higher things (laughs).

Say I go to another country, in Cologne and they would like me to do a performance, then I bring my...I have a bag of beans and I have my performance drum, so I can shake the drum before the microphone and click the beans in the air. Also, I like very much the sound of different papers, so I usually have three or four different qualities of paper. A very fine thin one, and a heavier one, and all this is going on while I'm talking. So it's like a couple of things at the same time. I very much enjoy again, using the audience. "Will someone come up and play with this paper and I'll play with this paper." and you get three people all doing paper sound. Because people don't think of paper except to write on or wrap something up. But the sounds of varieties of paper, it's really an instrument...I would carry around different papers. Well, because I had this brown paper in my file and I noticed that having torn these, I didn't want the white wall behind, I wanted to see the tears, so I got the brown paper out and than this I had around for ages. I don't know how this got bent from being, you know, a regular thing in the closet, but somehow, I mean I did not do this, so I must've found it on the street. Why would it be bent like this unless someone wanted to hang something? So that interested me, and I picked that up. Of course these bean works are, they look like simple, easily made, but as a matter of fact, these take a lot of work, because the beans have to be baked for two hours and they have to be frozen overnight, so they are completely without any life. They have been stilled I call it, and then I can wrap them into wet paper, and they don't sprout [Demonstration of Bean instrument with paper]. This feels good. Beans feel good, haha! (laughing).

## MATERIAL

The materials that I use in the artwork are usually woman oriented, kitchen oriented, street oriented...Like beans, I got beans everywhere here. Those are bean rubbers up there. I use paper of many different types, and I like paper that... a good quality paper that can be ripped or you can put things into it like beans, or you can roll it up and travel with it. I put really good money, you can't just go to the art store and grab a piece of paper, it has to be laid, it has to be good paper that you can fool around with. Paper has always been my main material but then the beans, because they sound in the paper and after that, physical things: hats, shoes. Because a performer from the audience that is wearing a hat, or has some shoes that are interesting.

Leaving Pratt Institute I had various jobs, usually printing. But what do you print on? So if you make a

silkscreen and it's to go into a restaurant and it says please eat here, there is all kinds of physical...Like what is the paper you are printing on? What is the quality of the ink? How about the squeegee you pull across it? So I would do the whole production of stretching the screen onto the frame, taking it into the camera room, taking the negative, going to positive, and exposing the silkscreen. Then, when I made the sign of course, they just throw it away. Well, I take it home and I can use fragments of those letters in my own artwork and for instance, with Adolph Gottlieb, I could print fragments of numbers and letters that had been part of a large sign. Cloth, I could print on cloth, but I was no longer having a brush and paint. I was printing with inks and I was kind of obsessed with the act of printing because you don't have to pull the squeegee all the way, you can do it with two colors, partially...Smear I mean it's kind of, I treated printing almost like a painting. So mostly on paper, some on cloth and some on canvas. Then I begin to perform and, we'll say, a piece like, well "draw a straight line and follow it" or that's from La Monte Young, or "shoes of your choice", just something where I'm talking. I could have the bean turner quietly moving while I'm talking. So, anything to confuse people or make them wonder what I'm doing up there." I thought she was gonna do a theatre piece for us? Let's get out of here, I don't know what's going on". I like to puzzle. I like the puzzling of the audience because then I can I ask them, will they like to come up and speak about their shoes. If people are puzzled, there is always a few people who want to be aggressive about a question and those people are very useful and they go on to do something because they are questioning their environment or their situation. If I see someone in the third row and I see that they have got a bright face and I say, "you there in the third row could you please come up?", and I can pick them out, the ones who are going to be responsive. They become human material to be in the piece which I prefer to just being a solo performer, because it pulls the audience right in.

## MEDIUM

I would say performance art has been the medium where I am most invited to perform...to appear, and that's ok with me. As my own artist, at home, I like to go to Dieu Donier or go to some printing house and create a print, but then that's expensive. It's usually, a residency of three days costs five grand and unless they pay for it. I don't do it. So there is that... but then I come home with six or seven prints I can sell. So it's a trade off, but I'm kind of looking forward to going to a print shop and doing an edition again. I don't have anything in my cabinets. I have all these drawers but there is nothing much in them anymore, because I give them away or I sell them. Of course Hannah, my daughter she has to have one of everything and Jessica asks, too. Jessica is a performer, so she likes to be on the stage. I'm grateful that I have all these different outlets for my energy that have been given.

## PROCESS

Well, it depends on the piece for instance. "Make a salad", it could be wrapped up very quickly if the ingredients are all washed and ready, but they usually aren't, they usually have to be torn apart and chopped and sounded and so it's very hard to, particularly for "Make a salad," to say ok, to the organizer, its gonna be 10 minutes. You just don't know, it could be half an hour, it could be more... or there aren't enough plates for the audience, things like that, haha (laughing). "Make a Salad" is different every time. Even somewhere like the Tate, where they are ready with all of the ingredients and everything else. To get the salad out of the tarp, this huge tarp, into the little bowl, individual bowls... that was time consuming. But it's ok, people do their best. People getting up and leaving, and being annoyed that they have to wait... sit there and wait while the salad is being made. They thought its gonna be theatre or, I have had people stand up in the audience and ask me "What is going on here?" and then people behind are saying, "please sit down or go out", so you get the audience very involved.

In the early Fluxus performance years, people were not ready for this kind of activity at all. They would want to go home, or they would want to call up and get their kids to come. It puts the audience really on the spot, because they've all made a salad at home but... there have been some amazing performances I want to mention, called "Child art piece." That's where you get some brave

mother to stand up there with her 4 year old and put him up on... in front of the audience and comfort him, and say that he's gonna be up there for a couple of minutes alone, and some can do it, and some can't. So, the audience has a chance to kind of study a tiny person. Is he gonna stand up there in front of the audience for a couple of minutes or run for his mother? It's like an interesting piece.

Now George Maciunas, was very much the impresario, the leader of the group, the Fluxus group and he would have things not in disarray, he would have it very exactly done. So, sometimes the simpler pieces by Brecht, or some of my one liner pieces, were more to his liking, where someone would come up on stage and simply speak about their shoes and he could..."thank you very much." I probably had one or two pieces on a program. Someone who was very active on the group was Ben Vautier from France. I mentioned George Brecht, but George Brecht didn't like to be on the stage, he wanted to give pieces but he didn't want to be seen. People always had theirs.... And Dick Higgins, he was fine with performing but he had to run a press in New York or wherever. So I was the one to be traveling.

## PRESENTATION

Of course it depends on where it is, if it's a museum or maybe it's just a little concert hall, or maybe it's a high school stage, or...I'm very flexible with all that, and I leave it to whoever has invited me to be sure I have a microphone because my voice is too soft to carry. So, I've had the clip on type like this or a standing mike, I prefer. Whoever has invited me usually has some ideas what the audience would like, what they would like to see. But I'd say I have the last word about what I'm gonna do up there, of course. I noticed that, you know, I have these boxes of black clothing that I'm supposed to wear, I guess, to perform in. But I usually wear a white shirt and black pants. Well, I listen to everyone and certain situations seem to ask for certain works. I don't know, it's hard to answer that. Or sometimes I ask the audience what they'd like to see. Again this is not theatre, these are actions and the difference is, I think very eloquent, that theatre is supposed to go a certain way and actions you have an endpoint. There is gonna be a salad, there is gonna be shoes talked about, but beyond that it's very flexible.

## INTENTION

A work like "Shoes of your choice", or "Make a salad" or "Child art," there is no goal they are simply to have the event happen. So whatever happens with someone speaking about their shoes or the child on the stage...There've been horrible salad, hardly edible, like, they didn't get the stuff together right. Yes, all that is up for grabs, it's flexible, I have no goals or endpoints. Except that if it's food, I like it to be edible and good, I like to give people more if they like. And without that invitation it's very doubtful that person has ever thought about speaking about their shoes. They bought them ten years ago and they are wearing out but they have never had to recount the way they would have to recount about their childhood, their mother, their father, they are recounting about something they are wearing, and so it's pretty spontaneous, there's been some pretty amazing remarks that have come out of there. Then of course they show their shoes and so, one shoe is worn through at the sole, and the other one, so you see that person walks on their right foot more. And so, it asks quite a bit of the performer I think. The variety is tremendous. I've had to ask people to please stop, because you know, they've been talking for five minutes and it's fine, thank you, or the person who just gives it a minute then gets off the stage. It defines the person a little bit, too, if they are comfortable. I think there is so much that we do between our body and ourselves and our person that never gets voiced because we think it's too personal. How do you feel about your shirt, which I like by the way, or the fact that you are wearing your hat indoors? I mean these little things I noticed, they are very you, and it's very interesting. And I remark on those things, and I think most people don't. And try to have it revealed. Spoken to a group, how you feel about your shirt, because maybe you never even thought about how you feel about your shirt since you bought it, but now I have to speak about this blue shirt, you know? So it's personal and interesting and descriptive of you...

Well it's an intention. Right. I wouldn't call it goal. I'd say it makes it reasonable to work with people, to bring something out of them. Yes, I have a book of instructions. They are called event scores. It's a

little pamphlet from years ago and it's my first tour of Europe and it mentions these pieces that I or others would do which were directed toward, if you like, a goal, or to have people turn on themselves and take a good look.

## METHOD

Well, there's so many different kinds of art that I do. It often depends on the person who wants something. The institution or the curator says I'm having a print show, do you have any new prints? Or, I'm having a show of fluxus actions, or, what do you know about Allan Kaprow, could you do a piece? Tell us about...Well, it just depends on what you want. I'm truly the most ordinary person and I've had a lot of wonderful situations come up for me but, I don't find that I'm in the least extraordinary as a human being. I'd say my ordinariness is maybe my strong point (laughs). When I was cooking with John Cage, he would inform me what food I could bring. Usually what kind of beans, and it's like his diet, the people he saw, and his method of working was very disciplined. As opposed to my own which was very free fall and experimental.

## ART

Well if I designate someone, or they designate themselves as an artist, then their production is art. And art has to change around those concepts. I mean, I've seen outrageous performances on the street for instance, by Paik or... But they are conceived as artworks. I've been very happy to see artwork leave the museums and leave the studio and come on to the street and into the hallways and bedrooms and living rooms of human beings and kitchens please (laughs). Well, I had no huge overview about what art should be, I want more people doing art and I grew up and worked with my father who promoted everything I did, every mark I made on a piece of paper and put it up on the wall, and than Fluxus had a view of art that was substantially very revolutionary and allowed us to do what we wanted on a stage. So, you have to understand that we were up against formal theatre, we go into someone had just seen Rigoletto or something and then you are faced with these people standing up on stage, all singing a different song together. So, this was a lot of fun, this was extraordinary... the positions we were put into, in Europe... in Germany and France and Asia, but particularly Germany, I remember people shouting and leaving and shaking their fist. And it's like, what is culture anyway? Is it something we expect to be repeated or can we stomach something really new? So you put the audience in the position were someone stands up and shakes their fist and the person behind them says: sit down, I can't hear, get the hell down in your seat! I mean, it puts the audience into thinking what they think about it. So I like that very much. Of course we often did things in the aisle, not just on the stage. I guess LaMonte Young's "draw a straight line and follow it" is a remarkable piece, where with a chalk, I could draw a line down the centre of the aisle and then I, or someone, would follow along on hands and knees and than the whole people on the stage...it was a way out, it was a way to exit without standing and bowing and clapping or booing. We have to have someone who has an idea for a piece of art. Whether you call it art, or an action or a happening, or a gesture, I don't care. But something I want to show you, and call it art. It makes me an artist, it makes you a receiver. I think we are in a sort of quite time in terms of action and performance right now, but that's ok.

## BIO \*

\*1933, New York City. BFA from Middlebury College, Vermont; MFA Pratt Institute, Honorary Doctorate, MICA. Guggenheim Fellowship 1967; Documenta Professor in Kassel, Germany and NYSCA Grant recipient in the 1990's. Professor at California Institute of the Arts, 1970-72. Collaboration with John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Dick Higgins, George Maciunas, and a Founding Member of Fluxus. Participant Fluxus Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden, Germany, 1962 and 2012. Fluxus performance activity provided access to major artists in the sixties and seventies, in many countries, whose ideas and connections were sources for further thinking in works including action, installation and book arts up to the present. Knowles designed and edited John Cage's Notations book of experimental composition and Marcel Duchamp's last print, Coeurs Volants, in 1967. Both were

published in partnership with Knowles's spouse, Dick Higgins, whose Something Else Press published early work by Knowles and other members of Fluxus, Happenings, concrete and experimental poetry and the historic avant-garde. Since 1964, Knowles has made large and small experimental books: *The Bean Rolls* (1964) was a hand held, canned book of small scrolls of bean lore and information which has appeared in important artists' books surveys alongside titles such as *By Alison Knowles and More by Alison Knowles* (1965/1979), *Spoken Text* (1993), *Bread and Water* and *Indigo Island* (both 1995). Passenger Books recently published a new collection of essays, transcribed interviews and articles and reviews related to *The Big Book* (1967), a walk-in book construction with 8-ft. tall pages, moving around a center spine. Knowles has continued her examination of books at various scales, from *The Book of Bean* (1983) to *The Finger Book of Ancient Language*, a table top book in Braille and other tactile languages (1987). *The Boat Book* (2014), commissioned by James Fuentes Gallery, appeared at Art Basel, Miami Beach.

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