

# ALISON KNOWLES

**Selected Press**

# When Making a Salad Felt Radical

Ahead of her retrospective in Berkeley, Calif., the artist Alison Knowles talks about her Fluxus roots, the appeal of beans and the power of interactive artworks.



Since performing in early Fluxus concerts in the '60s, Alison Knowles has made decades of inviting artwork. "I don't want people looking passively at my work but actively participating by touching, eating" and more, she said from her SoHo studio. Lila Barth for The New York Times

**By Jori Finkel**

July 18, 2022



Visitors to the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive will soon be seeing red. To mark the opening of “[By Alison Knowles: A Retrospective](#) (1960–2022),” the artist is taping a large grid on the museum floor and inviting visitors on July 23 to place one red object in each square. It’s a reprisal of a work she conceived in 1962 called “Celebration Red” (later titled “Homage to Each Red Thing” for Hans Ulrich Obrist’s [influential show of artists’ instructions “Do It.”](#)) It’s also one of Knowles’s most famous — and vivid — participatory artworks in a long history of making them.

Best known as a member of Fluxus, a loose group of avant-garde artists who embraced the use of chance and “intermedia” or interdisciplinary forms in the 1960s, Knowles, 89, has continued over the last five decades to make interactive, inviting and category-defying artworks. They range in scale from tiny hand-held sculptures to eight-foot-tall, walk-in installations that look like giant books. Speaking recently from her longtime SoHo studio in Manhattan, where she lives, the artist discussed some of her signature themes and materials. Here are edited excerpts.



For “Celebration Red (Homage to Each Red Thing),” 1962/1994, Knowles asks museum visitors to contribute a red object of their choice to a grid on the floor. Here is a 2016 version done at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. via Carnegie Museum of Art

**A lot of your work is participatory to the point of being generous:  
Art is something you give to people.**

I like that very much. I want my work to expand the terms of engagement. I don’t want people looking passively at my work but actively participating by touching, eating, following an instruction about listening, physically making or taking something, or joining in an activity.

**Beans are a favorite material in your work over the years. You’ve used them in so many ways, whether embedding them in handmade paper or placing them in paper sleeves to create sound-makers called Bean Turners. What’s so appealing about beans?**

Well, they’re affordable and available everywhere, and there are many different kinds you can cook and work with. Everyone knows the different names of beans in their own culture. And when beans are dry, they make a great sound. My study of music was minimal — a little work on the piano and I loved singing but I never had a lot of formal study. Beans became instruments for me to make sound in performances. They gave me an action to punctuate the text. Beans are acoustic and capable of projecting sound, which is important.





Beans are a favorite material for Knowles, who performed with Giant Bean Turner, a bean-filled sound-maker, at the Guggenheim Museum in 2009 for the exhibition “The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989.” via Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

**Other women were associated with Fluxus later on, like Charlotte Moorman and Yoko Ono, but I understand you were the first woman to do Fluxus performances in the '60s?**

I was the only woman included in the Fluxus performance group of 1962, on a stage with public performance dates in Europe as Fluxus went from being an idea, project or name to being the group of performers taking on new music and intermedia. I was very glad to be on tour doing work. I was honored [to be the only woman] and tried to use the opportunity well.

**I read that you were hit in the face with a rotten tomato in Wiesbaden during one of those concerts.**

There was a lot of aggression about what we did onstage but frankly I don't remember the rotten tomato. I remember people would stand up and leave — and often did. But I had work to do, I performed the work no matter what.

**Some of your early works like “Proposition #2: Make a Salad” (1962) — which consisted of preparing a salad onstage and serving it to museumgoers — must have seemed radical at the time. Later you revisited that work for venues like the Tate and the [High Line](#). Do you find that your audience or its sense of outrage has changed over time?**

Performance art now allows for so much human activity that was never available when I started out on a concert stage. The concept of performance now includes food, children, the weather, you name it, everything — I like that.

**What were the ingredients in the original “Make a Salad” piece?**

The salad had to be made with ingredients selected during a trip to the local market. Salads are more available nowadays, at least in this country, but the idea in 1962 of having green food available for a performance was extremely odd. It was also difficult for people organizing the concert who usually worry about sound to suddenly worry about getting good, green food for people to eat.





Knowles reprised one of her best known performances, the 1962 “Make a Salad,” in 2018 for the Aspen Museum of Art. It culminates in museumgoers eating the salad. Seth Beckton, via Aspen Art Museum

**How would you explain the idea of a Fluxus “event score?”**

[George Brecht](#), artist and founding member of Fluxus, came up with the “Event Score” format, and we used it for a proposed action performed like music on a concert program. It was our own way of scoring our actions or performances in a manner as serious as a score by Satie. A sentence like “Make a salad,” that’s the event score.

**You collaborated on books and performances with John Cage. What he was like to work with?**



It was a great friendship. We enjoyed working together, cooking together, eating together, hunting for mushrooms together. We would find mushrooms, and if we didn't, we would find greens. The important thing was working together in the open air on the trails.

He was a little bit fussy, he didn't get along with everybody. He honored my work and that meant a lot to me, and I found his work very basic to what I was trying to do: using chance operations, using an available instead of a chosen audience.

**I heard you inadvertently gave your husband, the writer Dick Higgins, the name for his publishing house, [Something Else Press](#)?**

Yes, Dick told me he wanted to call it Shirt Sleeves Press. I didn't like that idea, so I said, "Call it something else."

**Along with designing books, you've made sculptures inspired by books: walk-in installations where the walls look like pages of a book, and props for a performance where the [spine of a performer's body evokes the spine of a book](#). What about the book form resonates with you?**

I'm interested in transforming hand-held objects into full-scale architecture, and the book has been an accessible tool to explore that. The person or performer engaging with the work can step into the object and activate it. Hand-held objects can become models. With Something Else Press, I did editorial and graphic design on some of the books Dick was publishing. I eventually designed a walk-through, live-in book to be published by the press as a single copy and called it [The Big Book](#). I continued designing books as environments.



“I’m interested in transforming hand-held objects into full-scale architecture,” said Knowles about her walk-in installations modeled on books, like *The Big Book*, 1966, shown at Something Else Gallery in New York.

Northwestern University

**For the Berkeley show you’re doing a new version of “Celebration Red” (1962). Could you imagine celebrating another color, like blue or green?**

I'm very drawn to the color red, and I associate it with courage. But it's not really about the color — it's a chance to access the relationships that the color offers. Your shirt, your hat, your beans can all be red, it's a very common color in food and clothing, so it gives me a chance to activate a network of people, objects, actions.

**The museum said you are hoping to fly out to Berkeley for the opening weekend. Will you add a red object of your own to the grid?**

I definitely want to be there, and I would be happy to add something. I just might add a tomato.



# Art in America



## Alison Knowles

at James Fuentes,  
through Sept. 9  
55 Delancey Street

What could be more appropriate for an August exhibition than a nautical theme? One almost expects to smell the sea when walking into "The Boat Book," octogenarian Fluxus artist Alison Knowles's second exhibition at James Fuentes. The titular work in the exhibition, which debuted at Art Basel Miami Beach last year, is an eight-foot-tall construction with movable "pages" displaying large silkscreened prints of maritime imagery, photo collages, an audio recording of seafaring literature and items such as fishing nets, an anchor and a teapot. Visitors are encouraged to traverse the installation between portholes and a nylon tunnel. Its precedent is Knowles's *Big Book*, a 1966 multimedia installation-as-living-space equipped with a kitchen, toilet, artwork and other amenities, which debuted at Something Else Gallery—owned by the artist's late husband Dick Higgins—and traveled the world.

Pictured: Alison Knowles: *The Boat Book*, 2014-15, mixed media, installation dimensions variable (approximately 8 by 8¾ feet). Courtesy James Fuentes, New York.

FEATURE

## Make A Salad

BY JULIA SHERMAN JUNE 8, 2015



**Julia Sherman:** When I first contacted you and asked you to perform “Make a Salad” in the Salad Garden at MoMA PS1, you said you were out of town, but you invited me to enact the score myself. Have you ever had other people do the piece in your absence? I feel like I have been enacting the score inadvertently, insomuch as I was inviting people to come and make a salad with me in a ritualistic way all summer long.



**Alison Knowles:** As far as I know, you are the only one I have ever invited to do it. I had a feeling you could carry it off because you have the garden. "Make a Salad" has the most important element of performance art to me: it is never the same from one time to the next.

**J:** The original score just says, "Make a salad," but judging by the notes from the last few performances at the Tate Modern and the Walker Art Center, it appears the performance has become pretty complicated.

**A:** Oh, well, the curators made those decisions. I never said, "I must have organic vegetables." It is up to the curator to set me up, then I come in and work with what they have given me. Think about how many kinds of salad you can have. Infinite. But it wasn't always just the salad. During a Fluxus performance there might be Eric Andersen standing up beating a drum, or Dick Higgins bellowing. People would do other things, and when it was my turn, I would make a salad.

**J:** For you, is the original score still the score? When I was setting up, I was really worried that I might forget something, but now I realize that doesn't really matter.

**A:** Well, what is a salad anyway? It can be anything. You can make a salad out of just fish and capers or something, depending on the circumstances.

**J:** Do you have feelings about whether this works best on a large or a small scale? You have hit both ends of that spectrum.

**A:** Well, once I like a piece and I want to do the piece, the context is up to somebody else, and I just accept what it is going to be. My least favorite way to present is to a small class of art students. They have expectations of what it is going to be like to be an artist. I am such a wayward, offbeat artist, I shouldn't guide people in that way.

I have done painting, performance, Fluxus works—you name it. I have no straight line of any kind to follow. What I like about artists is that they make their own way. I have done some teaching but I cannot say that it is my *métier*. Can you imagine how far away this is from traditional theater performance, where the actors have to live up to something very specific, where the lines have to be said exactly right and have to be in a certain form each time?

**J:** So is there a way to do the performance wrong?

**A:** I think if it wasn't edible maybe?

**J:** Do you think there is something particularly exciting for the audience to have the opportunity to consume the artwork they see at the museum?

**A:** Absolutely, that's why I love the food pieces "Make a Soup" and "Make a Salad." When I was first doing these, nobody else was working with food. You had wonderful pieces like [La Monte Young's] "Draw a Straight Line and Follow It," or Carolee [Schneemann] taking off her clothes, but there wasn't any food. Food was kept mostly at home with the women. It has all changed. I know a lot of men now who love to cook. I don't know what it is. But my father cooked a lot. I just assumed it was a unisex activity.





**J:** Was this about bringing food out of the feminine sphere?

**A:** I have never come at art that way. Even though I applaud my sisters and their work, I don't have much of a sexual element in my work. Cooking can be anyone's work, usually women's work, but not necessarily anymore. I don't make work that is specifically located in femininity.

**J:** You are not elevating the procedure of making a salad, you are just making a salad.

**A:** I am glad that performance art has made it part of the theory and history, but I don't know how to do things like that, how to place things historically. My daughter is a historian, but not me. Feminism wasn't an issue for me, I never felt kept out of anything that I wanted to be a part of. Simple as that, I just walked in.

**J:** When somebody becomes famous for making a salad, does it affect the way you make a salad when you are home alone?

**A:** That is the point of it, right there. That someone could go home from the performance and say, “Hey, I am going to make a salad tonight, I just saw that done as performance art. Hey, Henry, I am going to make a salad!” They take a certain power to the act, instead of wishing they could go to the movies.

I came into art being told that theater, painting, and sculpture were art. I went to art school and I was lucky to have [Adolph] Gottlieb at Pratt. I told him I was studying actions at the time, and he thought it was good for me to consider my paintings actions—he didn’t mean to denigrate the paintings. I think my enjoyment of other people and my engagement with them was very important growing up, rather than being in the studio alone.

That’s led to me finding out that my own actions, anyone’s actions, the things they thought were so private, could be exploited. I don’t go into female sexuality, as others do, but I think the effort there, too, is to take what we do privately and look at it as being interesting to other people. The idea is that our daily activities, our relationships, and what we do alone—in the kitchen, the hallway, alone at the computer, in the bedroom—should be considered as part of our expression. **LP**



This feature comes from *"Lucky Peach #15: The Plant Kingdom Issue,"* which is now on newsstands! Pick up a copy [here](#).

Julia Sherman is an artist, the salad-maker-in-chief of MoMA PS1's rooftop Salad Garden, and author of the blog *Salad for President*. Last summer, she invited Alison Knowles, one of the original Fluxus artists, to enact her performance-art piece "Make a Salad" on the roof of the museum. "Make a Salad" was first performed at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1962, where Knowles managed to transform an everyday task—making a salad—into a ritual worth contemplation. Via a microphone, the audience listened to the sounds of her chopping block as Knowles cut vegetables and threw them into a pile, tossed them with oil and vinegar, and seasoned them with salt. In the end, the rather mundane green salad was served to the audience. Art historian and Fluxus scholar Nicole Woods-Beckton described the multi-sensory experience as "highlighting the understated and often disregarded ritual of preparing and sharing food."



# ARTFORUM

## Alison Knowles

03.27.11

*Author: Lauren O'Neill-Butler*

02.23.11-04.03.11

James Fuentes LLC

Alison Knowles has alchemized found objects into art for nearly five decades, but she's always paid particular attention to beans and shoes. Why? In a recent (and excellent) essay published in *Art Journal*, the art historian Hannah B. Higgins drew this response from Knowles (Higgins's mother): "A pair of shoes is very important for everyone." The Fluxus doyenne was discussing one of her task-based and mutable event scores, *Shoes of Your Choice*, 1963, in which audience members are invited to approach a microphone to talk intimately about their footwear. In Knowles's latest solo exhibition, an astute ode to strolling, shoes seem to speak for themselves—and just as simply.

In the front gallery, six collages on raw cotton in tea-stained maple frames feature items—an eggbeater, shoe molds, deconstructed soles—amid raw flax and lentils. Hand-pressed stamps spell out some of the works' titles, as in *TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE* and *IF THE SHOE FITS PUT IT ON*, both 2011. In four adjacent selections from the 2006 series "Event Threads," a more comprehensive view of Knowles as longtime Downtown New York bricoleur emerges. These gorgeous talismans loop over a single nail apiece and elegantly snake down the wall like precious Minimalist driftwood mobiles, except with a rotten orange or a clothespin instead of washed-up wood, and a telephone cord or a baseball dangling at the end.

MoMA is currently presenting Knowles's series of screenprints based on her well-known late-1960s event score *The Identical Lunch* in an exhibition of contemporary art from the museum's collection, and earlier this year she enacted six afternoon performances of that piece in the museum café. Many tuna fish sandwiches later, this compact selection picks up where MoMA left off: It's the crucial after-meal walk.

# A1-1Review:

Contemporary artists & photography | Online Art Magazine | ArtReview

## Alison Knowles: Clear Skies All Week

By Joshua Mack

Alison Knowles, a founding member of Fluxus and a New Yorker since she attended Pratt Institute in the 1950s, has been getting attention recently for *Identical Lunch* (1969), her work featured in Kathy Halbreich and Christophe Cherix's rehang of the Contemporary Galleries on MoMA's second floor.

The piece is deceptively simple and quintessentially New York. In the 1960s, Knowles's friend and fellow artist Philip Corner noticed that she was eating the same lunch every day: tuna on toasted wheat with either soup or buttermilk, ordered at the Riss Diner (now a noodle shop), around the corner from her home in Chelsea (not the gallery zone, but the by-now-almost-defunct-manufacturing-distribution-and-modest-rent neighbourhood to its east).

The piece consisted of turning this once unremarked habit into a script or score. Knowles began inviting others to share her meal. Five photo screenprints of the lunch, dated 1969 and from a set of 11, are displayed in the museum. In late January and early February, visitors could join the artist in the museum cafeteria for lunch.

Knowles's evident interest in duration and experience, repetition and improvisation strongly relates to John Cage, with whom she was friendly. And like Cage, although in a more intuitive way and based more on the local and quotidian, she has a keen awareness that repetition and ritual give meaning to existence. Truth doesn't lie in a tuna sandwich, but in the awareness of eating it. Commenting on *Identical Lunch*, she said, 'It was about having an excuse to get to talk to people, to notice everything that happened, to pay attention'.



As each lunch was and is a moment of community, cumulatively they reveal how individual acts and habits provide continuity to individual lives in circumstances over which people have little control. The piece turns out, too, to be an elegy to a city that's changed, redolent of the old coffee shops and the foods that have gone out of fashion. And it's a prayer for the future vested in the individual acts of faith contained in sitting down to lunch as part of life in the city of which its inhabitants and workers are a part. It's very William Blake, a push 'to see a world in a grain of sand', and to measure it by oneself and others.

Knowles seems to be after something similar in her show at James Fuentes. She peppers the works there with poetry and idioms. *Thunder Bay*, 2003, a long crinkled, almost felted fall of handmade black-and-white cotton paper, bears a line the artist attributes to Basho: 'Mountains and creeks and springs and water-holes are the living handiwork of an age-old family tree'. Expressions such as 'If the shoe fits, put it on' are printed on assemblages of objects she has picked up, things that startled her or caught her attention as she ran to whatever was pressing in her day: old shoes, a discarded glue bottle, a rusted egg beater.



Alison Knowles, *Cave Wall*, 2003, pure oat flax, lentils, 173 x 102 cm. Courtesy James Fuentes LLC, New York

This trash is the remnant of daily life and actions, the handiwork of the urban family tree. Knowles's serendipitous discovery of these things, and her later meditation on them, are her recognition of the continuity Basho points to. In a similarly poetic way, her scrunched, mottled handmade paper is the outcome of a living handiwork, an interaction between the material pulp, which has certain inherent characteristics and a fluid form, and Knowles's attempts to form it.

Using the quote from Basho, however, seems obvious; the run of its printed text old-fashioned and decorative. The shoe pieces are heavy-handed; little meaning opens between word and object. Instead the pieces seem instructional, illustrations offered to sections in a textbook.

True poetry emerges in the four vertical loops of string, telephone cord, fabric shreds, scraps of metal and dried lemons, all dipped briefly in white flax paper pulp, which hang along one wall of the gallery. These are things which are beautiful precisely because they are common and worn and because Knowles has combined them in formally sensitive ways. They do not, incidentally, need the little printed tags she affixed to them, which read, for example, 'Why not sneeze', and 'Runaway train'.



Alison Knowles, *If the Shoe Fits*, 2011, found objects, acrylic, hand stamps, raw cotton, hardwood maple, tea-stained frame 72 x 83 x 17 cm. Courtesy James Fuentes LLC, New York

What really transforms these works from talismanic, and beautiful, collections of detritus, however, is the way a thin, fibrous crust of paper clings to the elements. These wisps are like remnants caught on a fence and in the process of slowly blowing away. In the way of John Cage, it's best to consider these pieces as scores. The paper crust is the result of improvisation and intention, the fibres which clung as Knowles drew these objects through a vat of paper pulp.

In a poetic sense, that process parallels the way in which an individual interacts with objects. We leave our mental lint and the oil of our hands on them, and our use of them is scripted as much by our intentions as by their inherent qualities. Our experiences are shaped by the objects and circumstances we run into. Our days are a mix of intention and chance. These hanging works are an invitation to accept the serendipitous beauty that may result. They are a nudge towards the place of a poetry which lies where our individuality edges off into the world around us.

Alison Knowles: *Clear Skies All Week* is on view at [James Fuentes LLC](#), New York, through 3 April



THE NEW YORKER

[ART](#) GALLERIES — UPTOWN

## **“The House of Dust by Alison Knowles”**

Through Oct. 29.

In 1967, Knowles, a Fluxus artist, composed one of the first computerized poems, written in Fortran code, with randomly assembled verses. (An example: “A house of steel / Among high mountains / Using candles / Inhabited by people who sleep almost all the time.”) This significant, jam-packed exhibition revives Knowles’s poem on an old-school dot-matrix printer, and includes related ephemera, including a film by Allan Kaprow. The show also highlights forebears of Knowles’s aleatory composition, with a never-completed book by Mallarmé whose pages could be reordered at will, as well as Marcel Broodthaer’s 1969 homage to it. There are also successors: Nicholas Knight’s intricate paintings of overlapping colored curves were generated by an algorithm, and Katarzyna Krakowiak’s audio piece remixes Knowles’s original poem into skittering musique concrète.

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

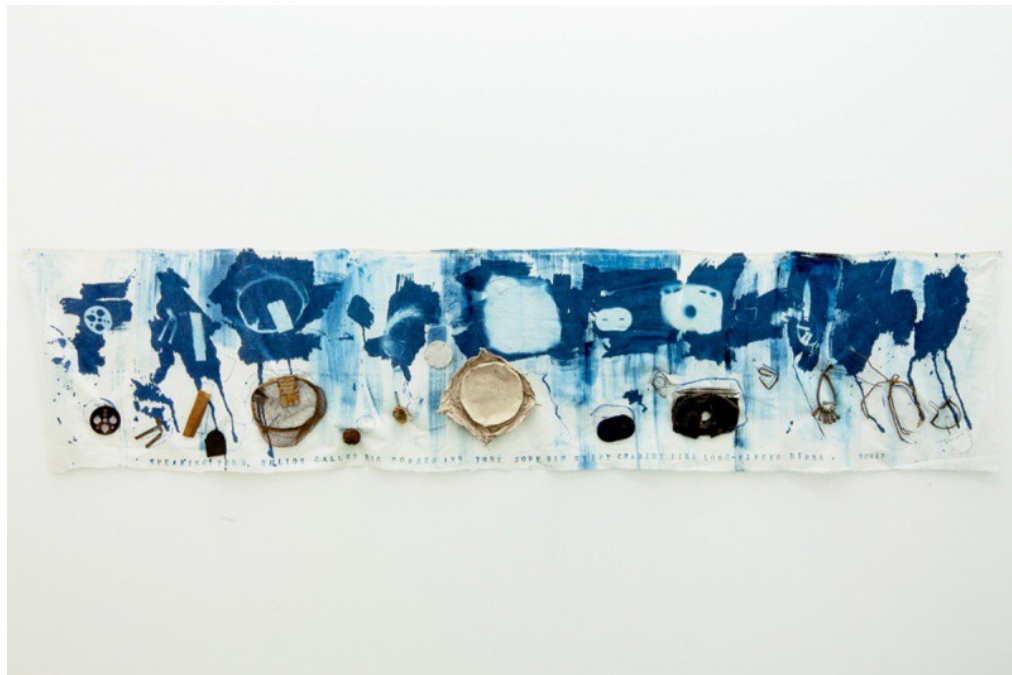
## Alison Knowles

7/19/11

James Fuentes

By Amanda Parmer

New York



At first glance, Alison Knowles's exhibition "Clear Skies All Week" looked to be historical, and in many ways it was. Although all the works date from 2003 to 2010, they incorporate used and found materials that the artist has collected from her life in SoHo over the past 40 years, fusing her early experience as a founding member of Fluxus with moments in her contemporary everyday. It is this mixing together of the past and the present that was most significant as one engaged the show.

The works were arranged into three discrete groups: hanging, vertical amalgamations of found objects; large, roughly rectangular forms of hand-molded paper pulp; and framed collections of personal items. For the four vertical "Event Threads," telephone cords, brightly colored rope, branches, baseballs and small plastic tags inscribed with text are bound together by string and flax. Each piece effectively transcends its individual elements to create a new form.

The four molded paper pieces combine shapes and materials evocative of a particular place or personal memory. The long, horizontal *Greene Street* (2003), for example, is an assemblage of objects unearthed by Knowles on SoHo's Greene Street as it was being repaved in the '90s. They are affixed in a row on the paper and, above each object, its image is reproduced using a cyanotype photogram process, leaving blue stains and markings around the negative shape. Redolent of nonlinear time and non-hierarchical

representations, the work particularly demonstrates the Fluxus agenda, which was to collapse boundaries between the art object and the framing device that marks it as such.

In turn, this Fluxus resolve sheds light on Knowles's use of personal artifacts. Well-worn slippers, shoe heels, scattered beans and sentimental proverbs were arranged into small groupings in six handmade frames hung along one wall of the gallery. The use of slippers and parts of shoes recalls her early Fluxus performance *Shoes of your choice* (1963), in which she asked audience members to come to the stage and describe a pair of shoes, the ones they were wearing or another of their choice. According to the artist, the beans scattered on the pages among the shoes, spilling into the words, pay homage to the many communal meals of lentils she shared with friends in New York over the years. Each of the proverbs reflects on relationships, such as "a rolling stone gathers no moss," "takes one to know one" and "alike as two peas in a pod." These framed works, reminiscent of Fluxus boxes, or Fluxkits, insist upon dismantling the way in which the "artwork" is set apart from the everyday language of life by drawing an equivalence between the finished piece and its signifier as a reified object: the frame.

*Photo: Alison Knowles: Greene Street, 2003, found objects and cyanotype on muslin, 25 by 110 inches; at James Fuentes*

**The New York Times**

June 27, 2008

## **Art in Review**

ALISON KNOWLES

Sequence: One Work, One Week

Miguel Abreu Gallery

36 Orchard Street, Lower East Side

Through Sunday

The summer plan at the Miguel Abreu Gallery was to involve 10 artists, each invited to show a single work for one week; then the work would be re-installed in the gallery's lower level as part of an expanding group show. But in the fourth week the poet and veteran Fluxus artist Alison Knowles arrived and hung nearly 20 ethereal recent efforts made from small found objects and natural materials. Several consisting of double layers of handmade paper tinted with indigo, flax or oat are titled "A Rake's Progress" in honor of the rusted claw of a garden rake (also present) used to scrape their surfaces, exposing the contrasting tones of paper. Other works, all titled "Event Thread," are flax-dipped cords strung with rusted screen-door hooks and faded bits of detritus; they are butterfly rebuses.

One standout assemblage features a stiffened T-shirt cut open, flecked with pink lentils and decorated with what seem to be frilly clumps of wrung-out paper pulp at the neck. It looks like a relic of another time, whether Elizabethan or Egyptian. Ophelia might have worn it.

Fittingly, two cyanotype-silkscreen works simply offer the ghostly imprints of things: kitchen utensils, beans and pick-up-stick batches of raw pasta. Leaning in a corner, one of the pieces Ms. Knowles titles "Bean Turner" represents her more audible, performance-based work: as the checklist puts it, it consists of a drum made of "flax-paper surface in barley and beans containing azuki beans" and may be shaken. How this will play out downstairs is anyone's guess, but for the moment, this is an exceptionally knowing and beautiful show.

ROBERTA SMITH