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’.

Alison Knowles, Green Street, 2003, found objects, cyanotype on unbleached muslin panel, 64 x 279 cm. Courtesy James Fuentes, LLC, New York
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](image)

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 affixed to captions 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*