Object/Poems: Alison Knowles's Feminist Archite(x)ture

Nicole L. Woods
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You see you have to get right into it, as you do with any good book, and you must become involved and experience it yourself. Then you will know something and feel something. Let us say that it provides a milieu for your experience but what you bring to it is the biggest ingredient, far more important than what is there.

—Alison Knowles

The world of objects is a kind of book, in which each thing speaks metaphorically of all others...and is read with the whole body, in and through the movements and displacements which define the space of objects as much as they are defined by it.

—Pierre Bourdieu

In 1967, American artist Alison Knowles was invited several times to Marcel Duchamp’s New York apartment to collaborate on a project entitled Cœurs Volants with the famed provocateur and the experimental poet Emmett Williams. A photograph from one of their meetings shows the artists in a state of mutual concentration. While Duchamp studiously looks on, Knowles is seen leaning just over his shoulder, casually holding a lit cigarette in her right hand and carefully flipping through colored paper samples of the flying hearts image she recreated for the cover of Williams’s book of poems, Sweethearts.

Decades later, Knowles would vividly recall their exchange, making a point to note the arbitrary, even comical, nature of the final selection process:

Some visits later I arrived at his door with eleven color swatches...[Duchamp] chose one and set it aside on the buffet. After lunch, his wife Teeny picked up the swatch and said, “Oh Marcel, when did you do this?” He smiled, took a pencil and signed the swatch. The following year Marcel died. Arturo Schwarz wrote me suggesting I had the last readymade. Teeny and Richard Hamilton assured me that I did not, but that I had a piece of interesting memorabilia.

This brief experience with one of the most prolific and influential artists of the twentieth century was but one of many chance encounters that would characterize Knowles’s artistic practice for more than four decades. The experience of seeing the readymade process up close served to reaffirm her sense of the exquisite possibilities of unintentional choices, artistic and otherwise. Indeed, Knowles’s chance-derived practice throughout the 1960s and 1970s consistently sought to frame a collection of sensorial data in various manifestations: from language-based notational scores and performances to objet trouvé experiments within her lived spaces, computer-generated poems, and large-scale installation works.

For Knowles, the formation of her multimedia practice was a fortuitous and unlikely outcome of her artistic training. Having spent several years studying abstract painting with Adolf Gottlieb at Pratt Institute, trying to perfect her own trademark of expressionism, Knowles would eventually reject the Abstract Expressionist ethos of existential suffering and embrace a way of approaching art (influenced by John Cage and Duchamp) that found enormous aesthetic potential in the everyday world. This trajectory of chance-based work formally commenced in 1962, five years prior to meeting Duchamp, when Knowles was actively engaged in the founding of Fluxus, one of the most significant and innovative groups of visual artists, poets, composers, and musicians to emerge from the ashes of post-WWII Western Europe and North America. As an original Fluxus


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member, and the only female among its early ranks, Knowles was pivotal in developing a notion of artistic labor that relied on unconventional materials and uncommon strategies in fusing the bridge between art and life. Like their contemporaries in Neo-Dada, Assemblage, and Pop art, the contributions by Fluxus artists to the history of cultural production are unquestionable. Even among an impressive roster of avant-gardists, Knowles has always been a unique, if underappreciated, voice precisely for the ways in which she expanded the field of chance procedures beyond even experimental borders.

Within this context, I would like to reconsider two large-scale projects Knowles developed in the late 1960s/early 1970s—The Big Book and the House of Dust—that independently merged the forms of installation with performance, technology, and poetry into a large-scale investigation of the spacio-temporal conditions of reading and living. One of my aims is to consider how the works modeled a new form of spectatorship using spaces/metaphors of the home to foreground certain political questions arising out of the nascent feminist art movement. Here, the critical terms of Knowles’s Fluxus practice—indeterminacy, the event-score, and performance—were extended to include a consideration of the physical and metaphorical use of the built environment and the ways in which ideas and experiences about the home in the postwar era were tacitly gendered and critiqued.

The Big Book

“It’s the book we’ve all been waiting for.” So declared critic Howard Junker on the pages of Newsweek magazine in spring 1968 of Alison Knowles’s large-scale installation, The Big Book (1967). Tracing a chain of book-inspired art projects from Marcel Duchamp’s Boîte-en-Valise (1935–41) to the avant-garde publishing activities of Fluxus and Aspen magazine, Howard approvingly compared Knowles’s work to the experimental efforts of literary modernism: “[Her] radical reshaping of the book format is only the latest effort in an iconoclastic tradition dating back to the century-old suggestion by French symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé that a book-in-a-box could have parts as well as lines.”

Taking careful note of the imaginative nature of The Big Book’s concept and construction, he concluded that the “permissiveness” inherent in the discursive space it opened up was potentially “just what Marshall McLuhan’s post-literate man needs to revive his interest in printed matter. Freed from the linearity of type and the one-at-a-time strictures of pages bound together, the book is again a contemporary medium.”

Taken collectively, the bookworks reoriented the domain of publishing and the very concepts of narrative, time, and experience. Yet what was so inherently radical or permissive about Knowles’s piece? Devoting more critical space in his summary to The Big Book than to the work of any other artist, Junker’s jaunty description provided a hint:

8 feet tall, weight about a ton, equipped with telephone, toilet, hot plate, art gallery, graffiti wall and—for the utmost in reading pleasure—a 4-foot sleeping tunnel lined with artificial grass. Blinking lights, a tape collage and a film complete with the visual impact of this eight-page volume… The Big Book is, of course, not really a book. It is something else, literally a book-world.

In Junker’s view, the multimedia environment Knowles created was not a “subversive” redesign of the traditional book format, but rather a “book-world,” and one, in fact, that would meet an urgent need.

In 1967, Alison Knowles was pictured on the first floor of her Chelsea brownstone, standing on a ladder with her arms outstretched and carefully moving one of those oversized rectangular “pages” of The Big Book. The methodical and monumental work consumed her for almost a year; she conceived of it as a continuation and in many ways a synthesis of her performance pieces and objects of the early to mid-1960s. The Big Book was a veritable text-world and mixed media project that incorporated original silkscreen prints, papers, various found images, and mirrors,
which were framed in wood and mounted on casters around a steel spine. A stepladder affixed to the outside of the structure supplied the viewer/reader with a tool for climbing in and out of windows. The multi-paneled environment was wired for sound with an electronic tape system that provided ambient music and “empathetic tones.” The construction also included actual items and spaces for living: a working kitchen, a telephone and electrical system with small colored and flashing lights, a library with books and a typewriter, a gallery with commissioned artworks by Higgins, Philip Corner, and others, and an artificial grass tunnel that could double as a garden and a bed.

The Big Book contained a chemical toilet but no formalized waste system or disposal system—a slightly anarchic gesture that hinted at the relative impracticality and ultimately utopian possibilities of actually dwelling in the space.

To access The Big Book, the viewer/reader was directed through signs and arrows toward specific zones for entering and exiting. Despite the moving vertical frames that acted as both doors and windows, the book cover, or portal for admission, was a hole surrounded by lights located at the bottom of the first page. Activating and engaging The Big Book required a certain flexibility and dexterity; one had to crawl through the circular void to get to the second page. This sense of physical motility was magnified as the viewer/reader continued to navigate through the book environment, as each successive page consisted of tall and wide doors roughly eight-feet high by four-feet wide. They were not, as one might reasonably expect of a book, made of paper but rather of two kinds of bonded sheeting, transparent and opaque, which hinted at what would be revealed on either side. Some of the framed sheets were subsequently covered with paint and penciled murals, collaged bits and scraps of paper, and most intriguingly, a series of Eadweard Muybridge chronophotographs from his human motion studies (1887), which Knowles had silkscreened as negative and positive images directly onto the wooden supports. The appropriated Muybridge images showed male athletes captured in various states of isolated movement (bending, twisting, standing, and jumping). With the inclusion of these images, The Big Book recalled the motion studies and photographic technologies that helped visualize and reorganize notions of time and duration in the nineteenth century. Following Knowles’s penchant for design, the photographs were scattered non-sequentially and pasted, almost decoratively, over the door/walled surfaces.

One early viewer/reader of The Big Book noted the “ever-present naked gentlemen whose changing gestures ape one’s own” as one crawled, bent, stooped, or stood in and around the pages.

Knowles published The Big Book with Higgins under their collaborative publishing house Something Else Press, and it was exhibited for a time in the Something Else Gallery, located on the first floor of their New York home. In 1968, Knowles was invited to exhibit The Big Book in Europe for the Frankfurt Buchmesse, with subsequent stops in New York, Chicago, and Toronto. Negotiating the tricky elevations where Knowles placed the ladder, tunnel, and windows, independent writer and critic Bill Wilson noted, in his review of the work in Art in America, how difficult it was to actually inhabit the space and implied that a key feature of the work’s achievement is the projection of an imaginative dwelling.

In another article, published by sometimes Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell, Wilson described his physical encounter with The Big Book:

After wiggling through the tunnel, one enters the apartment, an illusionless reality, a world without artifice, the unpretentious Manhattan living-loft of the 1950’s and 60’s. This underworld, such as an epic hero usually enters, presents the processes of life nonchalantly, without varnish, for acceptance. The acceptance leads (led me) through the window of the apartment and up a short ladder, which I read to mean that when the apartment was felt to be sufficient, it ceased to be an underworld and became a means toward elevation. Others who read the Big Book, who take this journey through...
According to Wilson, Knowles played on several visual and environmental registers at once: text and texture; function and space; epic literary fantasies and mundane lived realities; and indeterminate experiences. “Different quest[s]” meant to “arrive at different goals” for each viewer/reader. In this way, Knowles amplified the process of reading as a perceptual and physical event.

**Gender Readings**

More important are the ways in which Knowles expanded the material possibilities of indeterminacy toward a critique of gender as it is experienced spatially. Her project, like the feminist liberation movement emerging in the late 1960s, materialized from a discursive rupture with preexisting orders of representation—spatial, textual, aesthetic—that sought to reconsider notions of gendered subjectivity and the social forces (including domestic space) that aided in the process of self-actualization. The Cagean notion of indeterminacy was accorded a new framework in which to take sounds as they are heard in real time and space, and quotidian experience as it is inhabited in the flesh and enforced by the division of labor and production of gender. The collapsing of public and private realms evident in The Big Book points to a radical displacement of reading (artistic and literary) and architecture (postwar nuclear home) in a reconsideration of the structures of interiority. The viewer/reader is invited to experience an artist making plain the female body and the domestication of labor as a text and performance to be enacted by anyone.

In 1963, six years prior to the construction of The Big Book, Betty Friedan and other second-wave feminists challenged the institutionalization of patriarchal authority, and its “family romance,” as the site in which the home acted as a unified familial order. What is unique about The Big Book is Knowles’s use of the expanded book form (tactile, literary, literal object) to dramatize the act of reading daily life as a social text and an enigmatic space of self-reflection. Less of an homage to a woman’s assumed role as steward or protector of the home, Knowles’s piece is more akin to that metaphorical “room of one’s own” trope as evocatively described by the writer Virginia Woolf. Here, the objects Knowles assembled spoke to a deeply personal and specific way of living (her books, her tools) that would enable one to ostensibly survive in the makeshift home without the support of a man or the structure of a family. Moreover, architectural historian Beatriz Colomina has argued that new images of domesticity that arose in the postwar period had an explicitly nationalist bent that “turned out to be a powerful weapon” of democracy that featured “expertly designed images of domestic bliss [that] were launched to the entire world as part of a carefully orchestrated propaganda campaign.”

The interchangeable elements of The Big Book environment seemed to insinuate the need for isolation, self-sufficiency, and an abundance of basic supplies for living in a moment of personal and political crisis. The Big Book symbolized Knowles’s shift from small, handheld objects in her early Fluxus works to large-scale environments that required more active participation and awareness of domestic, national, and global anxieties surrounding the home and enacted these realities in an elaborate performance of the book as world.

As an act of architectural displacement, Knowles’s The Big Book actualized the reformatting and unfolding of lived domestic space into an exteriorized view. The interior was turned inside out and its daily, private operations were publicized revealed. The environment was mobile and adaptable (the pages/walls could be moved and removed), thus offering a new sense of the architecture of the home as book, perhaps, even an advertisement of a person’s life to be read and consumed openly by others. By transforming the ideologically defined domestic space into a destabilized book-world, Knowles undermined the spatial integrity of the nuclear home and effectively collapsed the complex social rituals that are inhabited and reaffirmed in its various regions—kitchens, bedrooms, etc. In exposing the house itself as an object and experience to be read, then, Knowles’s The Big Book is feminist in a concrete sense: she affords attention and value to the domestic sphere and the intimate rituals of reading/living in the delicate threshold of the everyday by revealing its affects.

Knowles’s deliberate excavation of the space of the home (her home) monumentalized the act of reading for its material and aesthetic potential. The readymade environment was called on to destabilize the traditional boundaries of domesticity by providing not only a real space to be lived in, but also the mobilization of a “different kind of space”—a space of discourse and interaction between the reader and the house. The sounds of labor recorded by Knowles while constructing the piece (sawing, cutting, nailing of wood, sounds of her daughters crying, husband inquiring, etc.) were replayed in an audio loop during each exhibition, thus giving a sonic substance to the experience of moving, dwelling, constructing. As such, Knowles explored a private economy of means: first, in the remaking of architectural space with the zones of indeterminacy toward a critique of gender—of public and private—revealing not only the blandly familiar but the utterly strange in reconsideration of the reading experience. This work invites us to act—to perform our potentiality, to re-read our abilities, our bodies, our spaces, and our narratives.

The interchangeable elements of The Big Book’s construction (again, mobile, compilable, adjustable) contained a central paradox: because the entire structure was so heavy, the pages could not be collapsed or closed easily. Unlike Marcel Duchamp’s Boîte-en-Valise editions of traveling artworks made in miniature, the object experience presented by Knowles needed to be stationary in some sense—either experienced privately at home (metaphorically, again, in a room of one’s own), or as a playground with the artist’s young daughters moving through it, or in a gallery space, boat fair, or other public exhibition site that required an expenditure of time and leisure. I want to suggest that this play between contemporary adjustable pages with structural fixity (a container of experience) might be understood as an implicit critique of domestic space that implies more than the material conditions of living. The Big Book also implies that the intimate, everyday rituals of domesticity, in their repetitive ordinariness, offer a novel way to read and understand how one comes to know the social body. Knowles proposes such a reading in her explanation of the environment:

I don’t want to drag the reader through the book simply on my own terms. I want [everyone] to see and hear enough of the pages and their background to know what it’s really all about. Maybe having done The Big Book is better than going through it, but offering it to others as a performance piece is the best I can do.

Indeed, we can read The Big Book as an example of a proto-feminist intervention where subjectivity, as constructed by space, disrupts the boundaries of inside/outside and is thus a threat to orders of patriarchal authority in both the public and private sphere. The large, methodically constructed, assisted readymade
undermined the categorical nature of art (and by extension “woman’s art”) by including a variety of sources crossing medium and aesthetic boundaries in an atypical ensemble that expanded architectural and perceptual space. Knowles’s readymade was not rendered dysfunctional by a deliberate obfuscation of use-value and exchange, but differenced by the procedures in which we conceive of the work as a bridge between art and life. It did not, then, as Helen Molesworth has argued of Duchamp’s readymades, resist its “intended, mandated, standardized use” or “resist the working subject,” but rather offered an extended experience of the working body in the physical exertion it took to interact with the installation—squatting, contorting, standing, climbing, and turning the pages of the book in multiple arrangements depending on purpose, participant, and need.

Here Knowles reinterpreted her being-in-the-world through the lived experience of the everyday and called our attention to the way in which the domestic sphere is implicitly dramatized. In 1967, after viewing the work alongside Allan Kaprow’s installation Words (1962) at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, the critic Harold Rosenberg observed that Knowles effectively offered the viewer/reader “a physical metaphor that literally contains everything. It is the story of the artist’s life presented through copious examples of her domestic and cultural surroundings; it is both individual and collective.” Indeed, in The Big Book Knowles opened up the site of domesticity to all viewers/readers by emphasizing labor in which each performer, entrant, and viewer experiences a highly individuated and personal encounter with the text.

House of Dust

The most important thing to emphasize is the changing nature of the poem.... [It] is about dwellings, types of people and situations that sometimes do and sometimes don’t get together.

—Alison Knowles

In 1967, while assembling objects for The Big Book, Knowles was also participating in an informal workshop on digitized language systems and computer mainframes organized by the composer James Tenney, who was a mutual friend of Knowles and John Cage. Over the course of several Thursday evenings in the living room of Knowles’s Chelsea home, Tenney introduced a group of artists and musicians, including Knowles, Cage, Higgins, Nam June Paik, and Steve Reich, to the rich potential of blurring the boundaries between visuality, poetry, musical notation, engineering, and computer programming. A resident at Bell Laboratories in New Jersey and an expert on the IBM compiling system known as FORTRAN, Tenney conceived of the workshop as a simple demonstration of the methods in which computers could be used as a tool of artistic practice. Demystifying the complexity of technocratic language and application, Tenney’s goal was rather modest: to show the artists that their previous experimentations with indeterminacy in fact “often resembled the way one programmed information.” Stimulated by this creative environment, Knowles began to conceive of a basic poetic structure in which random bits of information fed into a machine could streamline her experiments with chance-derived imagery. The result was “The House of Dust”—a digital poem composed of four separate categories prepared by Knowles in advance and programmed in FORTRAN-IV by Tenney, which was then processed by a mainframe computer at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute (BPI). The refrain of the poem followed the formulation “A house of...” with each category indicating the materials, locations, lighting, and inhabitants of a house in a series of repeatable quatrains (four-line verse). The four lists created by Knowles were then subjected to chance and random mixing by the computer’s internal logic. The results were often fascinatingly absurd, humorous, and evocative. For example, one set of permutations read:

A House of Dust
In Michigan
Using Natural Light
Inhabited by Vegetarians

A House of Roots
By a River
Using Natural Light
Inhabited by People Who Sleep
Very Little

A House of Sand
Among Other Houses
Using Electricity
Inhabited by People Who Love to Read

A House of Leaves
In a Metropolis
Using All Available Lighting
Inhabited by All Races of Men
Represented Wearing Predominantly Red Clothing

When Tenney first ran it at BPI, he reported back to Knowles that almost a thousand quatrains were generated before a single quatrain of verse repeated. The total poem apparently runs for a quarter mile of computer printout, producing “a perpetually shifting set of mutual and modular relationships” among the material and “poetic choices” of the artist’s many lists. Unlike Knowles’s paintings in the late 1950s that used the I-Ching for color placement, the chance-derived structure of “The House of Dust” was not predicated or produced by a throw of dice but rather through the construction provided by a technological apparatus. The use of FORTRAN-IV as the interface between visual and poetic content was thus an important and innovative choice, since this particular computer language was known for its flexibility and modularity in providing for compilations favored in the organization of libraries, indices, and other assemblage systems of information.

In 1968, Alison Knowles won a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship to transform one quatrain of the original “The House of Dust” computer poem into a large outdoor sculpture: A House of Plastic / In a Metropolis / Using Natural Light / Inhabited by People from all Walks of Life. It was remarkable that Knowles would choose spatial, domestic architectural, elemental, and environmental (even climatic) materials for her poem composition, given that the computer program used to construct the original poem, classical FORTRAN, had been crucial for handling computationally intensive areas, such as numerical weather prediction, finite element analysis, and fluid dynamics. In the application materials for the prize, Knowles proposed a public works project to be situated in the Chelsea district near her home. A friend of Knowles, William N. Berger, an architect and teacher of aesthetics at Pratt Institute, spent eight months assisting her in the development stages and successfully managed to see the blueprints through the New York City Building Department. Securing a permit for an acre of land between 28th Street and 8th Avenue, it was decided that the precise location for Knowles’s “home for the houses” would be the Penn South Housing Co-op, funded by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. The director of ILGWU, Henry Marguiles, approved the design and convinced the board members of the co-op to place two huge fiberglass domes on its lawn. The smaller dome, which was the first quatrain of the poem and weighed a total of two tons, was fabricated from plans Knowles designed at the George Krier foundry in Philadelphia. That same year, Knowles began to work on its façade, collecting and adhering objects she had found in the surrounding streets to its rough limestone exterior shell. The computerized printout of the poem was programmed to aid in the further evolution by taking elements from the poetic text (home, materials, lighting) and determining its structural coordinates. When the location was fixed, Knowles then commissioned Max Neuhaus to add ambient sound and light to the environment. He chose thermal circuits sensitive to sunlight.

While working outdoors at the co-op, Knowles encountered growing resistance and resentment from the tenants, whose apartment windows had a clear view of the House of Dust structure.
Many were unmove by its status as public art and instead took it as an affront to their privacy and considered it a “disturbance of the peace.”

Knowles met with the director and co-op members to discuss participation with the object by “children and artists” living in the building, but disgruntled tenants organized protests and walking petitions. Part of the polemical nature of their resistance had to do with the fact that House of Dust had no recognizable taxonomy or designation; they simply did not know what to call it or how to interact with it. Indeed, as Knowles recalled: “There’s quite a difference between a sculptor doing outdoor pieces for a decade or more and a visual artist doing performance and intermedia looking for a place for her three-ton poem!”

The frustration reached a boiling point when, in the early morning of October 23, 1969, the gardener of the ILGWU was bribed to drench the house with kerosene and throw a torch, effectively destroying the work. A few days later, Knowles received a color photograph of the blaze in the mail. The perpetrator was never discovered or convicted of arson. In shock and disappointment, and fearing the work was irretrievably damaged, Knowles set a fire in her institute’s workshop to destroy the work. The following month, the director received another photograph of the blaze in the mail. The perpetrator was never discovered or convicted of arson. In shock and disappointment, and fearing the work was irretrievably damaged, Knowles set the project aside.

In 1970, when she was invited by Allan Kaprow and Paul Brach to join the fine arts faculty at a new experimental arts campus, the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Knowles negotiated to have full reign over an acre of ground where she could have the ruins of the New York House of Dust moved. On a patch of green meadow near the tennis courts, above the Golden State 5 Freeway, Knowles used the remaining funds secured from her Guggenheim grant to commission two new “object/poems,” this time inspired by the quatrain: “A House of Dust / On Open Ground / Using Natural Light / Inhabited by Friends and Enemies.” Both were larger than the original work; one cave-like building (the “large house”) measured twenty-three feet long by twelve feet high, and a similarly shaped structure (the “small house”) was twelve feet long by four feet high. Each was fabricated from wood blocks and fiberglass sprayed with gray sand. Knowles again commissioned Neuhaus to add sound to the smaller of the two houses. Neuhaus chose thermal circuits that were sensitive to thermal and solar changes and thus “would pick up the path of the sun moving over the HOUSE each day and would change that heat into sound for the people sitting inside.” In a letter dated from 1977, Knowles recalled how the small house with “electric eyes” was the perfect spot to host film screenings with her students.

This sense of participation was a key difference in the House of Dust iteration at the CalArts campus. Often lacking office space at her new post, Knowles conceived of the poem houses as “active” sites for meaningful exchanges with students and colleagues. The sculptures also functioned as alternative spaces for poetry, music, meditations, performances, and happenings in the art and music schools. One of the more notable events was the “Poetry Drop Event,” organized at the site by her student, Norman Kaplan. The postcard announcing the performance read: “Computer Poem Drop: An Event by Norman Kaplan. Over the House of Dust: Sculpture by Alison Knowles. 1000 feet of poem dropped from the skies 2 P.M. May 20, 1971.” For this event, another student of Knowles’s, Jeff Raskin, contacted a friend at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at California Institute of Technology (Caltech) and asked him to print out a second computerized printout of the original poem. The long printout of the computerized House of Dust poem was dropped from a helicopter over the physical structure, with Knowles directing the timing by radio. A staff reporter from the Los Angeles Times who covered the performance took note of the multifaceted nature of the coterminous activities: “As the paper fell on the campus, students acted out, symbolically, lines of verse.” Like many events and happenings at the House of Dust, the poem drop captured a pause in the routines of daily life and created a space in which new ideas and experiences were offered and new platforms, sensations, perceptions, and moods were shared. This sensibility was evident in another performance event by Knowles, known as 99 Red North (circa 1971–72). Here, the surrounding...
This page and opposite
relationships among outside, entrance, and occlusions a woman’s preoccupations with the (FAP) at CalArts—Lippard noted that “living space is an extension of the body, and biological as well as social experience influence the tenuousness and tediousness of life as it is lived. By encouraging such an open approach to propositions, performances, objects, and spaces, Knowles consistently allowed for the easy slippage of any one of us into her place.

In the context of working at CalArts in the early 1970s, when the feminist art movement was just emerging, Knowles created and participated in artistic and environmental projects that presented new territories to be explored. The art critic and curator Lucy Lippard described both iterations of Knowles’s House of Dust as distinctive for their ability to make “stories become true occupants of the space.” Describing a narrative component seen in the “fictionalized” and “transformative” space of Womanhouse (1972)—a month-long installation piece created by the students in Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro’s Feminist Art Program (FAP) at CalArts—Lippard noted that “living space is an extension of the body, and biological as well as social experience influences a woman’s preoccupations with the relationships among outside, entrance, and inside.” Indeed, both House of Dust and Womanhouse were important domains of activity for artistic, feminist, and student-generated happenings and performances in Los Angeles. Since Chicago and Schapiro famously favored a women-only admissions policy in the FAP, and Knowles opened her classes to all students, many of whom were male, frictions existed between the artists, and Knowles was refused a request to participate in Womanhouse. Despite feeling a deep sense of alienation from her female peers, in an interview with her former student, Aviva Rahmani, Knowles recalled the stimulating environment at CalArts:

I had been working alone, as most women artists did then. It was new and exciting to work visually along with others. I hadn’t had access to women of that stature. All the artists I had worked with were men...[but at CalArts] I found women working everywhere. It forced me to take a harder look at myself and what my own history had been.

It is important to point out, as Carolee Schneemann did in 1991, that there appeared to exist no theoretical framework or interpretive or institutional structure to ground what Knowles and other women and performance artists were doing prior to 1970, “no feminist analysis to readdress masculinity,” and certainly “no semiotic or anthropological scan of archetypes that could link [women’s] visual images.” Given Knowles’s aesthetic of minimally produced events/environments premised on the notion of openness where performers/viewers carry out simple tasks, perhaps the struggle between Knowles and the FAP was less a sense of what was or was not permissible for a woman artist to do, but rather, a matter of taste and preference.

Despite her direct “access to feminism for the first time,” Knowles’s practice was never explicitly ideologically motivated, nor was it engaged with the more radicalized movements sweeping the United States in the postwar era. But a close reexamination of Knowles’s work reveals how much it did in fact respond in feminist ways to many political and social crises. In other words, while Knowles was not a part of the overtly feminist educational program at CalArts, she was nevertheless actively engaged in its nascent political consciousness. Knowles took great pleasure and satisfaction in the 1970s from her work with women art students. In a letter to her then-ex-husband Dick Higgins, dated August 11, 1974, she wrote:

One of the things in my life that is rewarding for me now is my relationships (influence one might say) with young women students I had at CalArts—[Barbara Bloom and Lisa Mikulchik—to see how they live and what they are doing, and that my work and image is very meaningful to them.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that Knowles expanded the material possibilities of indeterminacy toward a critique of gender as it is experienced spatially. Her projects, like the feminist liberation movement emerging in the late 1960s, materialized from a discursive rupture with preexisting orders of representation—spatial, textual, aesthetic—that sought to reconsider notions of gendered subjectivity and the social forces (including domestic space) that aided in the process of self-actualization. The collapsing of public and private realms evident in The Big Book and House of Dust points to a radical displacement of reading (artistic and literary) and architecture (postwar nuclear home) in a reconsideration of the structures of interiority. The viewer/reader is invited to experience an artist making plain the female body and the domestication of labor as a text and performance to be enacted by anyone.

Rather than instigating a radical break (or rupture) with her previous work in Fluxus, in these multimedia projects, Knowles expanded the tropes intrinsic to time-based art practice—movement, memory, duration, information-experience, participation, and perception—and productively joined them in polemics surrounding new ideas about space and subjectivity in the late 1960s. In each instance, the work of artistic practice is characterized by a set of shifting terms and dialectical procedures: immediate and measured, public and private, literal and metaphorical, practical and imaginative, modest and confident, intelligent and humorous. The scale, sensation, texture, and affect of her installations demonstrated how objects perceive and are perceived in that delicate residue of human experience that seeks to make life meaningful.

Nicole L. Woods is a visiting lecturer of modern and contemporary art at the University of California, Irvine. She is currently working on a book entitled Alison Knowles, Fluxus, and the Enigmatic Work of Postwar Art, and a second project on food in contemporary art practice. This essay is dedicated to the memory of James Woods.
The Big Book

The American photographer Peter Moore took the photographs I have been describing. The photograph by Robert R. McElroy, white photograph by Robert R. McElroy (1969–71). In 1972, Atchley was an artist-in-residence at the Page of the Arts in Oakland, California, where he proposed relocating the sculptures and installations in the living room to a “kitchen-in-progress” for events, installations, and happenings. For more on Knowles’s early paintings, see Kristine Stiles and Hannah Higgins, “The Obscene Womanhouse,” Art Journal 31.3 (1972), 56–47. For more on the antimonies of public art, see Kristine Stiles and Hannah Higgins, “The Obscene Womanhouse,” Art Journal 31.3 (1972), 56–47.

This reaction to public art is, of course, not unique to Knowles. For more on the antimonies of public art, see Kristine Stiles and Hannah Higgins, “The Obscene Womanhouse,” Art Journal 31.3 (1972), 56–47.

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The Logic of Practice


6. Ibid., 18. The House of Dust sculptures were also mentioned in a short Rolling Stone article, dated April 1972, on multimedia artist Dana Ackley, the author/editor of Space-Atlas, Noobook One (1969–71). In 1972, Ackley was an artist-in-residence at the Page of the Arts in Oakland, California, where he proposed relocating the sculptures and installations from the living room to a “kitchen-in-progress” for events, installations, and happenings. For more on Knowles’s early paintings, see Kristine Stiles and Hannah Higgins, “The Obscene Womanhouse,” Art Journal 31.3 (1972), 56–47.

7. Knowles has been invited to recite the poem many times. Most recently, in May 2011, she performed “House of Dust” and other works at A Celebra tion of American Poetry, hosted by the White House (http://www.youtube. com/watch?v=4z87B8zFYt).

8. A second set of images was of a goat called by the independent writer Henry Marguiles, had died a week earlier, thereby setting off a reaction in the press and “reading” the book as well. A later filmed version shows her then-young daughter, Jessica Higgins, experiencing and “reading” the book as well. Viewings of the film has been crucial to my understanding of the work and its meaning. A copy of the film is located in the Alison Knowles Studio Archive, New York City.

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10. Alison Knowles, e-mail exchange with the author, April 9, 2010.

11. A second set of images was of a goat print found in the New York Public Li brary. Knowles sent copies of the print to a dozen artist friends, who then “collaged it, cut it up, bottled it, etc., and sent it back to make up the goat gallery.” This detail was recorded by Alison Knowles in conversation with Charlie Morrow in “A Dialogue: The House of Dust.” New Wilderness Newsletter 17 (May 1980), 22.

12. Emmett Williams, “The Big Book of Alison Knowles.” 10. Emmett Williams Correspondence File, Jean Brown Papers, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Williams also noted that “cooksies in the shape of the ever-present naked gentleman” were found in the kitchen next to coffee, headache remedies, and cigarettes.

13. Touring sites included: Kunsthalle, Cologne; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and The Jewish Museum, New York. It eventually made a stop in San Diego before falling apart from the ravages of travel and poor packaging by various exhibiting venues.


15. Wilson, “Alison Knowles: The Big Book.”


19. Around the time of its construction, Knowles also created a short film of The Big Book in her studio. Providing a variety of perspectives, from extreme close-up to wide-angle, both Knowles and her then-husband Dick Higgins are shown walking in and working through the environment. A later filmed version shows her then-young daughter, Jessica Higgins, experiencing and “reading” the book as well. Viewings of the film has been crucial to my understanding of the work and its meaning. A copy of the film is located in the Alison Knowles Studio Archive, New York City.

20. Interestingly, Knowles resisted specific signs of motherhood within the book-world she created. The Big Book did not include objects that related or identified her explicitly as a mother— even if her young twin daughters were invited to interact with the structure in an elaborate pop-up book environment of learning.


23. Rudi Fuchs, “The House of Dust: A Chronic,” New Wilderness Newsletter 17–24. Knowles is careful to note that the “champion” of the project, direc tor Henry Marguiles, had died a week after its arrival, thereby setting off a chain of destructive actions.


25. The name FORTRAN is an acronym for FORmula TRANslating System— a computer program invented at IBM (International Business Machines) in 1957 that quickly became a vital structure for the early evolution of compiling high-level programming languages (now seen in C + and Java software).


27. Knowles has been invited to recite the poem many times. Most recently, in May 2011, she performed “House of Dust” and other works at A Celebra tion of American Poetry, hosted by the White House (http://www.youtube. com/watch?v=4z87B8zFYt).

28. A small edition of twenty-one pages of the computer printout, run off by the Siemens 4044 in 1963, was passed in plastic sheeting with a silkscreen label and published in Cologne by Kaspar König. Now a collector’s item, one edition is located at The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.


30. For more on Knowles’s early paintings, see the first chapter of my dissertation, Performing Chance: Alison Knowles, Fluxus, and the Enigmatic Work of Art, University of California, Irvine, 2010.


33. For detailed information about the House of Dust sculptures, I have relied on archival materials, photographs, a short film, and multiple interviews with the artist.

34. Alison Knowles, “The House of Dust: A Chronic,” New Wilderness Newsletter 17–24. Knowles is careful to note that the “champion” of the project, direc tor Henry Marguiles, had died a week after its arrival, thereby setting off a chain of destructive actions.

35. This reaction to public art is, of course, not unique to Knowles. For more on the antimonies of public art, see Kristine Stiles and Hannah Higgins, “The Obscene Womanhouse,” Art Journal 31.3 (1972), 56–47.

According to Knowles, she felt alienated from the FAP, Chicago, and Schapiro, as the first woman to establish a faculty position in general, because she was known for “working with men.” Interview Stanford University, November 2009.

48. Aviva Rahmani, “Alison Knowles: An Interview,” ME/A/N/ING: An Atlas Toward Artists’ Writings, Theory, and Criticism, ed. Susan Bee and Mira Schor (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 364. In the course of the interview, Rahmani tells Knowles of the important mentor ship she provided, calling her “the most supportive” of all her teachers at CalArts.


50. In chapter two of my dissertation, I discuss this distinction further by detailing how Knowles changed certain performance features of a score written for her by another Fluxus artist, Nam June Paik, in Sera nee for Alison (1962–63) by refusing the score’s instruction to undress. Similarly, as Kristine Stiles has noted, Knowles did not participate in another work dedicated to her by Nan June Paik, entitled Chronicle of a Beautiful Princess (1962), which called for “a woman to stain the flags of selected world nations ‘with her own menstrual blood’ and...expose herself...in a beautiful gallery.” Knowles shared with George Maciunas certain mystical and poetic nature of Paik’s pieces and, thus, her objections were on aesthetic grounds, not because it was not a female faculty member of Acts,” and the Spirit of Fluxus, ed. Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfus (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1993), 62–99.
