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BAMPFA Mounts First Comprehensive Retrospective of Alison Knowles

On View July 20 through December 18, 2022

Exhibition Highlights Six-Decade Career of Celebrated American Artist and Co-Founder of Fluxus



(Berkeley, CA) April 25, 2022—This summer, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) will mount a major retrospective of Alison Knowles, the first time that this influential artist's six-decade career has been comprehensively explored in a museum context. Best known as a founding member of the interdisciplinary art collective Fluxus, Knowles has been an important figure in the avant-garde community for more than half a century, collaborating with George Brecht, John Cage, Nam June Paik, Robert Watts, Emmett Williams, and many others. The BAMPFA exhibition *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960-2022)* includes more than two hundred objects that illustrate the monumental scope of Knowles's still-active practice, which began in 1960 and has spanned multiple disciplines ranging from painting and printmaking to sculpture, installation, sound art, live performance, poetry, book art, and more. The retrospective is organized by independent curator Karen Moss, who is also the editor of a fully illustrated catalog that BAMPFA will publish in conjunction with the exhibition—the most significant scholarly treatment of Knowles's work to date.

The first half of *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960-2022)* is organized chronologically, with a focus on the work Knowles produced during her association with Fluxus—which she helped establish in



1962 and remained involved with through the late 1970s. Knowles's output during this period typified Fluxus's process-oriented approach to radical avant-garde creative production, most notably with her "intermedia" works that combine elements of visual art, written texts or musical scores, and live performance. Many of the live components of these works are represented in the retrospective with historical photographs or other ephemera, including materials from three of Knowles's most notable intermedia projects: *The Big Book* (1966), which expanded an artist-made publication into a monumental installation; *The House of Dust* (1969); a poetry project that produced one of the earliest computer-generated poems and was later translated into a public sculpture; and *The Identical Lunch* (1967), a performance piece that consisted of Knowles eating the same lunch at the same time for two years, often with colleagues or spectators invited to share the experience. The opening section will also highlight Knowles's early series of silkscreen-on-canvas paintings, which predate the use of similar production methods by Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg.

A second, nonchronological section of the retrospective presents Knowles's output from the 1970s to the present, when she continues to produce new work at the age of eighty-nine. This section of the exhibition

highlights Knowles's experiments with an eclectic range of media and materials, including her innovative silkscreen paintings; sound installations; book art and other text-based works; and sculptures and musical instruments constructed from unusual materials like beans or flax paper. Specific subsections document Knowles's collaborations with other artists on live events over the past twenty years, during which she has traveled internationally to revisit and reactivate many of her early projects—including what is perhaps her best-known piece, *Proposition #2: Make a Salad*, one of the earliest food-based works of performance art. First performed at London's Festival of Misfits in 1962 and regularly revived thereafter, this iconic work consists of Knowles preparing a massive vegetable salad to the beat of a live musical score and then serving it to the assembled audience.

By positioning these early works within the extended trajectory of Knowles's creative practice, *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960-2022)* will highlight the recursive and iterative strands that have defined Knowles's work for decades, during which she has repeatedly returned to previous images and ideas and resurfaced them in new works many years later. Alongside Knowles's artwork and ephemera, the retrospective will display a new illustrated timeline titled "Art/Life/Events", which will introduce visitors to important milestones in Knowles's biography and artistic career. Compiled by the independent curator and scholar Lucia Fabio, this timeline represents the first attempt to construct a detailed narrative of Knowles's life and work, from her first performance with Fluxus at the age of twenty-nine to the artist's most recent project: a revival of her early work *House of Dust* consisting of a massive, habitable structure produced using 3D printing technology and installed in Wiesbaden, Germany, where the initial Fluxus Festival took place in 1962.

In conjunction with *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960-2022)*, BAMPFA is publishing the first major catalog on the artist, which includes groundbreaking new scholarship and previous writings by

historians, artists, and curators focused on Knowles and Fluxus. Copublished with D.A.P., the fully illustrated catalog begins with an introductory essay by Karen Moss that provides an overarching framework for engaging with Knowles's body of work and why her contemporary avant-garde practice has influenced younger generations of artists. The catalog also includes essays by Nicole Woods, author of a forthcoming monograph on Knowles; Hannah B Higgins, a distinguished Fluxus scholar and one of Knowles's twin daughters; and several other distinguished scholars and curators. Also included are reprints of past scholarly essays on Knowles that have had only limited circulation, along with an illustrated chronology of the artist's education, exhibitions, performances, residencies, collaborations, and commemorations.



Knowles herself is expected to visit Berkeley during the exhibition's opening week, when she will mount a revival of her event piece *Celebration Red*. First executed in 1962, this conceptual installation invites visitors to participate by donating small red objects to add to the installation, which will be displayed in BAMPFA's Crane Forum during the opening weekend. BAMPFA will also mount a range of public programs in conjunction with the exhibition, including a curator's talk with Karen Moss on the exhibition's opening day; a performance by UC Berkeley students of Knowles's work *Event Scores* on Saturday, October 9 at 7 p.m.; and an academic symposium on Knowles's work on Saturday, October 15 at 1 p.m. More information about public programs will be announced in the coming weeks; visit bampfa.org for the latest updates.

Considered a forerunner of conceptual art, and inspired by Dada artists (especially Marcel Duchamp) and composer John Cage, Fluxus was an international collective of the 1960s and 1970s that included artists, poets, composers, and designers. In conjunction with *by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960-2022)*, BAMPFA will mount a focused survey in an adjacent gallery of art from Knowles' Fluxus colleagues; this complementary exhibition is curated by BAMPFA adjunct curator Constance Lewallen and will be on view concurrently with the Knowles retrospective. *Fluxus Reverb: Events, Scores, Boxes & More* highlights several important works by Fluxus artists from the BAMPFA collection, including Joseph Beuys, Cage, Alice Hutchins, Alison Knowles, Shigeko Kubota, Nam Jun Paik, Ben Patterson, Yoko Ono, Mieko Shiomi, Ben Vautier, and others.

"Since she first rose to prominence as the sole female co-founder of Fluxus, Alison Knowles has had an astonishingly expansive and productive artistic career at the forefront of the avant-garde movement. Yet, as for many women of her generation, the extent of her practice has been too long underexamined relative to her male peers," said Moss. "While no single exhibition or publication can do full justice to an artist who has worked so prolifically and in so many different modes for more than half a century, this retrospective aspires to amplify Alison's presence in art historical and critical discourse, and to bring into sharper relief her prescient contributions to contemporary art."

"It's an honor to present this retrospective of Alison Knowles, a pathbreaking artist whose remarkable six-decade career exemplifies the spirit of conceptual art practices and community engagement that are deeply ingrained in BAMPFA's own identity," said BAMPFA Director Julie Rodrigues Widholm. "In the recent past, we've had the privilege of working with multiple women artists from Alison's generation—including Sylvia Fein, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, and Luchita Hurtado, among others—whose work merits much overdue attention. In that respect, we're especially pleased to mount the first comprehensive retrospective and accompanying publication of Alison's long and distinguished career, which will illuminate her underappreciated influence not just on Fluxus but on avant-garde art writ large."

Sponsorship

by Alison Knowles: A Retrospective (1960-2022) is organized by guest curator Dr. Karen Moss with on-site curatorial oversight by Christina Yang, chief curator, and Stephanie Cannizzo, associate curator. The exhibition is made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Image credits

1. Alison Knowles: *Iliad Oddities (Greene Street)*, 2010; found objects and cyanotype on cloth; 24 x 108 in.; Alison Knowles Studio, New York.
2. Alison Knowles in her studio, 2012. Photograph: Jessica Higgins.
3. Installation view, Alison Knowles: *Celebration Red (Homage to Each Red Thing)*, 1994/2016, at Alison Knowles, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Courtesy the Carnegie Museum of Art.

Visitor Information

Subject to change based on COVID-19 protocols: visit bampfa.org/visit/plan-your-visit for current information.

Hours

Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Tickets

\$14 general admission

\$12 non-UC Berkeley students, disabled, 65+

FREE BAMPFA members; UC Berkeley students, faculty, staff; 18 and under; one adult per child 13 and under; and artists in the BAMPFA collection/MATRIX

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About BAMPFA

An internationally recognized arts institution with deep roots in the Bay Area, the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) is a forum for cultural experiences that transform individuals and advance the local, national, and global discourse on art and film. BAMPFA is UC Berkeley's premier visual arts venue, presenting more than 450 film screenings, scores of public programs, and more than fifteen exhibitions annually. With its vibrant and eclectic programming, BAMPFA inspires the imagination and ignites critical dialogue through art, film, and other forms of creative expression.

The institution's collection of more than 28,000 works of art encompasses pieces dating from 3000 BCE to the present day and includes important holdings of Ming and Qing Dynasty Chinese painting, Japanese paintings and woodblock prints of the Edo period, Indian miniatures, Old Master works on

paper, Italian Baroque painting, early American painting, Abstract Expressionist painting, contemporary photography, and conceptual art. BAMPFA's collection also includes more than 18,000 films and videos, including the largest collection of Japanese cinema outside of Japan, impressive holdings of Soviet cinema, West Coast avant-garde film, and seminal video art, as well as hundreds of thousands of articles, reviews, posters, and other ephemera related to the history of film.