

Alison Knowles's "Bean Rolls": The influence of mycological and aesthetic discussions with John Cage on early women's Fluxus aesthetics

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Alison Knowles is regarded as one of the first female artists in Fluxus. She is well known for her books and hand-made paper objects. But to her, dried beans were also an important artistic material, which she used for many years, because of their sound effect, haptic quality, and socio-cultural connotations. Alison Knowles's first multiple "Bean rolls" is used as a representative example from which to elaborate on the special role of Fluxus aesthetics in her work. The influence of John Cage on Fluxus in general is well known. But it has not yet been researched specifically in relation to Knowles, her work with beans, and the sound aspects for these artworks. Knowles's choice of beans as an art material will be also analysed from the perspective of image science with comparisons to other works from Baroque to Pop art. Special emphasis will be placed on the emancipatory attitude behind Knowles's art.

Alison Knowles. Fluxus. Sound Art. Beans. John Cage. Marcel Duchamp. Percussion. Feminism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Alison Knowles is regarded as one of the first female artists in Fluxus and even called the "Fluxus princess" (Dumett, 2017, p. 273, p. 278; Richter, 2012, p. 99).¹ She participated in the first Fluxus festivals 1962-3 in Europe (Richter 2012, p. 360).² At first, she was active only as a performer, but soon her event scores were also performed. Her score "Make a salad" became very popular and Knowles was often called upon to repeat it.³ Her works soon gained recognition among fellow artists and collectors because in her art the pivotal Fluxus principles—intermedia, interactivity, and indeterminacy—found a convincing artistic expression. Thus, Maciunas invited Knowles to contribute the multiple "Bean Rolls" to the collective art project "Fluxkit" (fig. 1, 2).⁴

Many of Alison Knowles's works include visual aspects, poetry, and sound. Because of the important role of sound in Fluxus, Douglas Kahn characterised it as "the most musical of the avant-garde [...] art movements of this century" (Kahn,



Figure 1: Alison Knowles, *Bean Rolls*, ca. 1964, Molvena (IT), Fondazione Bonotto

1990, p. 102). For emphasising this aspect, Philip Corner even coined recently the word "FluZusic" for the special sound projects by Fluxus artists.⁵ Together with James Tenney, Alison Knowles used a Siemens system 4004 to create the computer-generated poem "The House of Dust" in 1967

(Higgins 2012). But apart from this, she used very little technology in her works. She employed it only to amplify or record sound. She also often subverts traditional concepts of womanhood in a subtle manner instead of being radical or provocative (Dumett, 2017, p. 266 ff.).



Figure 2: Various Artists, *Fluxkit*, 1965–66, MoMA, New York

Alison Knowles is well known for her books and hand-made paper objects. But to her, dried beans were also an important artistic material, which she used for many years, because of their sound effect, haptic quality, and socio-cultural connotations (Higgins, 2010, p. 9).⁶ Knowles would put beans in all sorts of containers: from tea tins, to big pipes used as rain sticks, to larger containers almost like a sandbox where you even can lay down among the beans. She even used beans in an artist books with handmade paper as a so-called "bean page instrument." The sound of beans also inspired her to write poetry as well as to thematise the legumes in radio plays.⁷

Especially in the 1960s, it was widely held that art should be part of real life and an auratisation of the works of art should be prevented with the special aesthetics. The Fluxus "anti-art" should prevent a bourgeois art comprehension and a heroisation such as one of abstract expressionism and their mostly male painters such as Jackson Pollock. But today, the artworks of Fluxus are often imprisoned in museums, showcases, or depots, which leads them to be unused, and to a silent life.⁸ Alison Knowles is represented by an ambitious gallerist and has performed at prestigious institutions such as the Tate, Art Basel in Miami or the Los Angeles Philharmonic in the last years. But parallel to Knowles's recognition by the art world there was more research interest from art historians such as Julia Robinson (2004), Nicole Woods (2017), Emily Elizabeth Goodman (2016), Mari Dumett (2017), Dorothee Richter (2012) and of course her daughter Hannah Higgins (2010; 2012) who is a Fluxus specialist.

I will use Knowles's first multiple "Bean rolls" as a representative example from which to elaborate on

the special role of Fluxus aesthetics in her work. The influence of John Cage on Fluxus in general is well known. But it has not yet been researched specifically in relation to Knowles, her work with beans, and the sound aspects for these artworks. Knowles's choice of beans as an art material will be also analysed from the perspective of image science with comparisons to other works from Baroque to Pop art. Special emphasis will be placed on the emancipatory attitude behind Knowles's art.

2. KNOWLES'S "BEAN ROLLS"

Thi Knowles chose the title "Bean rolls" for her first Fluxus multiple. From a contemporary perspective, the term "bean rolls" is most commonly used in the context of cooking, and preparing beans by mashing them into a dough. And from a historical perspective, the term "bean rolls" could have been used for a similar product such as "Dilly Beans", which were famous pickled beans in the 1960s (Ickeringill, 1960). But in Knowles's multiple "Bean Rolls," the simple black and white labels designed by George Maciunas, as well as the tea tins that are unusual for processed beans, suggest how it is not a normal commercial product, but an artwork.

"Bean Rolls" takes the form of tea tin in which there are dried beans of different sorts, colours, and sizes. In addition, each tin includes 13 small paper scrolls with a collage of texts and images about beans from botanical cookbooks and textbooks that have been made with offset printing.⁹ Further, the tins included proverbs that her artist friends liked to use as well as cut-outs from mail-order catalogues of a firm called bean.¹⁰ Knowles had researched these materials at the New York Public Library. Thus, instead of canned legumes, she offers a "canned book". The use of scrolls allows to combine texts and images on the continuous sheet of paper without page breaks. The multiple was also used for an event score performed at the Cafe Gogo in New York. A group of 6-7 performers read aloud texts from the scrolls at the same time as one performer went around and cut out elements from the scrolls that had been read (Knowles, 1965).

Knowles produced the multiple "Bean Rolls" with the help of her mother (Woods, 2017). The idea was that a simple execution would support mass production. Although, this was unfortunately not realized. Now, the rare examples of the work that still exist can only be seen in museum showcases during special exhibitions. If you want to 'get to the bottom of the work', and explore its aesthetics, you have to make an unauthorized copy. The intermedial qualities such as sound and interactive potential, typical in Fluxus, then unfold during touching and opening the multiples. Because of these participatory aesthetics, Knowles sees the

artwork as a tool of communication (Knowles, 2000, n. p.).

3. FLUXUS IDEAL OF INDETERMINACY

With the use of the small scrolls that can be opened in an unspecified order, Knowles fulfils the Fluxus ideal of indeterminacy (Robinson, 2004). The aspect of chance is enhanced very cleverly of the used form because the small scrolls remind of tombola tickets that are also randomly chosen.¹¹ The indeterminacy of art was important to John Cage. In his works, he supported the participation of performing musicians and left space open for chance [Cage, (1958) 1961]. This was influential for Fluxus artists who attended Cage's class on "Experimental Composition" from 1958 to 1959 at the New School for Social Research in New York (Ouzounian, 2011, p. 201). George Brecht (1966, p. 14), for instance, acknowledges chance as a method through which an artist is allowed to escape "the biases engrained in our personality by our culture and personal past history [...]" Duchamp, Cage's friend and chess partner, was also a source of inspiration for the Fluxus artists. He highlighted the importance of the viewer and their viewer participation in the creative process. In Duchamp's early readymade "box with hidden noise", the sounds can be only be activated by the recipient (Woods, 2017, p. 271).

Knowles became well-acquainted with the ideas that Cage circulated in his composition class because her boyfriend at the time and later husband Dick Higgins also visited the class and they discussed these ideas together. Knowles also joined Higgins on Cage's mushroom walks, an activity which led to Cage co-founding the New York Mycological Society. Cage had acquired a great deal of knowledge about mushrooms. According to him, hunting for mushrooms was an example of an indeterminate action (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015, p. 46). And for Cage and Knowles, "mushroom hunting" together would be the beginning of a longlasting friendship.¹² Knowles detailed knowledge of beans was comparable to Cage's expertise with mushrooms (Pfeifer, 2011, p. 39). Knowles also became acquainted with Duchamp's ideas and created with him a reprint of "Coeurs Volants" (1936) in 1968 (published by Something Else Press).

4. 'HUMBLE' BEANS IN CULTURE AND ART

At first sight, beans seem to be a material that has absolutely no connection to the art sphere.¹³ Thus, legumes seem to fulfil the Fluxus idea that art should be related to life – as Maciunas has expressed in his Fluxus manifesto in 1963. Knowles decided to use a very humble food that

was one of the best bargains in the supermarket (Albala, 2007, p. 2).¹⁴ Because of their cheapness, maybe they can also be seen as a typical artist food – Picasso ate them in Paris often in his first years (McCully, 1981, p. 41). They were also the main ingredient of popular dishes in the U.S. in the 1960s such as Boston baked beans or bean soup. But there are also many prejudices against beans partly because of their difficult digestibility (Albala, 2007, p. x).¹⁵ Beans are a common staple that goes back to the beginnings of human culture and society. They are one of the first domesticated vegetables in the world (Albala 2007, p. 11f.). Because of this, beans have been thematised in applied art as well as high art numerous times across history.

Their representation in paintings of the 16th and 17th century make their connotation as a cheap peasant food in these centuries very clear. Annibale Carracci's "Bean Eater" ("Il Mangiafagioli") in 1583/1585 is a popular example.¹⁶ Art historians recently interpreted this painting as a disguised caricature of the Italian poet Giulio Cesare Croce. According to Sybille Ebert-Schifferer (2011), Croce is depicted eating beans, which was regarded as a peasant food in the 16th century, because he wrote people-oriented literature. Often, beans were also integrated into still lifes with vegetables that illustrated the botanical diversity and richness in the 17th and 18th centuries. The still lifes by female Italian painter Giovanni Garzoni represent an exception in this genre (Casale, 1996).¹⁷ Garzoni concentrates mostly on one legume in an image and emphasizes its botanical characteristics. Such a scientific interest in beans and other simple food is unusual for a woman at that time (and a female artist in particular). It can be seen as a predecessor to Alison Knowles's art-based research on beans some 300 years later.

In order to transfer art into everyday life, the Futurists and Surrealists already dealt with food. Food was also important in Pop Art, for instance in Claes Oldenburg's "Green Beans."¹⁸ This sculptural piece was created the same year as Knowles's "Bean Rolls," but it differs a lot. Oldenburg's "Green Beans" represents fresh beans in an exaggerated way with the use of vinyl and latex on cast plaster. Critic and musician Michel Delville (2008, p. 73) pointed out that Oldenburg's artwork "echo and sabotage the equally fake and unreal glossiness of advertising images." Regarding food in art, even more famous is Andy Warhol's "Campbell Soup" series, which also included bean soup.¹⁹ Warhol's works also point to the popularity of canned food in the 1960s. It was regarded better than homemade food because it required less preparation, was faster to make, and therefore seemed more modern and more belonging to the 'space age' (Lovegren, 2007, p. 203; cf. Woods 2017, p. 276 f.).

By using real dried beans, Knowles raises awareness for natural, unprocessed beans and their haptic qualities. Beans, given their rounded form and colouring, have also been used as adornments on clothing and in jewellery. A few years after Knowles's "Bean Rolls," Italian designer Elsa Peretti also began to use beans (Nemy, 1975). Although Peretti was more interested in their sensual, organic forms than in their socio-cultural meaning, or in the materiality and sound of beans like Knowles. Peretti's bean necklaces have been a lucrative bestseller at Tiffany's for many years and are still available. In the Fluxus group, food was used as a material before Knowles used it in her first works. Perhaps Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri with his "Eat Art" was a general inspiration for Knowles's first use of food.²⁰ Korean American artist Nam June Paik also threw beans into the public in 1961 (Dumett 2017, p. 224). And American artist George Brecht used beans or peas falling on a piano, and glued on piano keys, in his event score "Incidental music" (Dumett 2017, p. 137). But their sounds were very quiet.

5. THE SOUND OF BEANS

In general, beans are most clearly audible on stage when they are used in percussion instruments, for instance as rattles in Latin American music.²¹ Dried beans are also an essential element in the musical instruments of Native Americans, such as with container rattles and the "rainstick" used in traditional "rain dances" and functioned as an inspiration in popular music in the 1960s. Knowles favoured beans also because of this sound aspect. In "Bean Rolls", the beans in a tea tin function as a metal tin rattle. The movements of the different sorts of beans and of the heavier scrolls have various rattling sound effects that are dependent on the type of movement and the speed. They produce an interesting multilayered mixture of delicate deeper and higher sounds with a metallic character. The loudness and intensity is variable.

Knowles's consciousness of sound, especially of sound produced by percussion instruments, was influenced by John Cage. It is well known, that in Cage's opinion each and every sound can be considered music (even the absence of sound). He postulated that sound and rhythm should emancipate themselves. According to Cage, attentive listening to individual sounds is necessary for modern music, a view that opposes a more analytical comprehension of the musical form, such as in traditional music. Cage hopes that in the future electrical instruments will make all sorts of sounds audible. In an article by Cage and Henry Cowell [(1939) 1961, p. 87], they stated:

"Percussion music is revolution. Sound and rhythm have too long been submissive to the

restrictions of nineteenth-century music. Today we are fighting for their emancipation. Tomorrow, with electronic music in our ears, we will hear freedom."

In the late 1930s and 1940s, Cage used many percussion instruments in his compositions and collected many of them. In his much-discussed composition "Constructions," he even integrated maracas, which are normally filled with beans, as well as cans and other unusual instruments. Since the 1940s, Cage concentrated again more on piano compositions, integrating only a few percussion instruments (Silverman, 2010, pp. 26-50). But the earlier opinions that Cage expressed were influential among the Fluxus artists, for instance for Knowles.

6. GENDER ASPECTS

Knowles got the idea to use beans in "Bean Rolls" for the first time because she was often preparing food with dried beans for the people working at the "Something Else Press" that her husband Dick Higgins edited (Goodman, 2016, pp. 149f.). With her cooking, Knowles fulfilled a traditional female role, one in which cooking and caretaking are considered appropriate for a woman in society (Goodman 2016, p. 251). Thus, the use of beans as a material for art, given their ideological connotations as a home cooking ingredient in connection with traditional women's work, seemed meaningful to Knowles in her pursuits as a female artist.

But Knowles also subverted this connotation, by using beans in a manner unusual for women, in that she researched them extensively, and became an expert in beans. Normally only professional and very good cooks do such deep research. And even today, these top chefs are mostly male – such as the best Austrian cook Heinz Reitbauer who has a research library in his restaurant (Burghardt, 2013).²² Commonly, women's cooking has been viewed as more intuitive and amateurish (Dumett, 2017, p. 283). And in the 1960s, when Knowles was making her bean art, women frequently only mixed processed canned food together instead of cooking dried beans and other ingredients. By using beans as art, Knowles undermined and overthrew not only the establishment for beans, but for women.

With her use of food in her multiples, and the symbolism of these works in terms of what it means to be a woman in society, Knowles subverted the traditional gender norms for women. Women's roles were beginning to be questioned more and more in the 1960s. For instance, US President John F. Kennedy commissioned a report published in 1963 which pointed out that

"[...] one of the most pervasive limitations is the social climate in which women choose what they prepare themselves to do. Too many plans recommended to young women reaching maturity are only partially suited to the second half of the 20th century. [...] We have identified a number of outmoded and prejudicial attitudes and practices." (American Women, p. 4, see also Goodman 2016, pp. 40-44.)

Knowles also distanced herself from the more typical female role models in her life. She accompanied her husband to the early Fluxus festivals in Europe not as a wife but as a performer. She convinced male artists to perform her works and thereby the ideas within them. And she subverted typical female behaviours with event scores such as "Make a salad." Recently, art historian Mari Dumett (2017, p. 269-307) provided an enlightening analysis of this score in her book "Corporate Imaginations. Fluxus Strategies for Living."

Perhaps, in the fight for women's rights movement and gender equality, Knowles's works were less provocative than, for instance, Shigeko Kubota's famous Fluxus performance "Vagina Painting" in 1965.²³ With a paintbrush between her legs, Kubota put red paint on white paper that was lying on the stage. This paint refers to menstrual blood. It feminized the masculine "action painting" of Jackson Pollock, among others. And, retrospectively, historians regard Kubota as having taken a protofeminist stance (Wark, 2009, pp. 46-48). Because Knowles's works appear less radical than Kubota's performance, Knowles is difficult to analyse within a feminist art history or using feminist discourse analysis (Robinson 2004, p. 115 with footnote 45).²⁴

7. SUMMARY

Today, beans continue to be a rare art material in the arts. Although, they are sometimes used in contemporary sound art, such as the installation "SeedShaker: in anticipation of a favourable environment and suitable time" by sound artist Sergey Filatov in 2018. Here, a build-in motor causes balls with beans and other seeds to vibrate, thereby raising the awareness of their different sound qualities.²⁵ In contrast to this artwork, it becomes even more clear that the aesthetics of Alison Knowles are very 'low key.' She uses only a little material, but her art is intense and multidimensional. Some time ago, Knowles pointed out that

"[i]t is important to remember that we are free to make art and poetry out of anything: a loaf of bread, some beans, a hasty jotting on the train." (Knowles 2000, n. p.)

Since the 1960s, Alison Knowles's works have expressed Fluxus aesthetics in their relation to everyday life and the importance of indeterminacy. Her use of beans, and their sonic qualities, may have been especially influenced by John Cage, but it also has a feminist connotation and subversive potential. Finally, it is important to consider the humorous aspect in Knowles's use of the 'humble' beans. According to Maciunas, Fluxus art should be amusing (Maciunas 1965).²⁶ And Knowles's multiple "Bean Rolls" of course has a humorous effect by bringing together different disparate areas such as art and cheap legumes.

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1 Other female avant-garde artists in New York were – among others – Yoko Ono, Takako Saito, Carolee Schneemann, Shigeo Kubota.

2 The first venues of the international Fluxus tour in 1962 and 1963 in Europe (organized by George Maciunas) were designated as concerts in the realm of contemporary music (see Stegmann and Burkard 2012).

3 Alison Knowles, *Make a Salad*, 1962, performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1962, and repeated for instance during Tate Long Weekend, London 2008.

4 The multiple "Bean rolls" was commissioned by Maciunas in 1963 and the first edition was available in 1964. The multiple could be bought separately for \$5 or as part of the whole "Fluxkit". The latter one consists of an attaché case with different multiples, Fluxus newspapers and performance score cards. "Fluxkit" encompasses several sound aspects. For instance, the case has a built in noisemaker by Joe Jones. George Brecht provided the collection "Water Yam" (1963) with event scores such as "Incident music". Mieko Shiomi contributed "Water Music" (1965) which offers the possibility to listen to the sound of water filled from one container to another. The compilation and number of works in the "Fluxkit" have differed over the years. The collective concept is influenced by Surrealist joint projects such as the card game "Jeu de Marseille" organized and planned by André Breton in 1941 (Rühse

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- 2015). The use of a case is inspired amongst others by by Marcel Duchamp's "La Boîte-en-valise" in 1935-41 (Galliano, 2019, p. 67).
- 5 Philip Corner provided "FluZusic" as a title for an exhibition at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers in 2017.
 - 6 Because of the importance of beans in Knowles's work, Takako Saito dedicated a drawer filled with lentil beans to Alison Knowles in her installation "Fluxus Scoops" (2003).
 - 7 Important works from Knowles's oeuvre that thematize beans are—among others—Bean Rolls, multiple, ca. 1964, Sea Bean, 1978, Edition Hundertmark, Berlin, the radio work "Bean Sequences" (West German Broadcasting Cologne (WDR) 1982), the artist books "A Bean Concordance", Printed Editions: New York 1983, Plah Plah Pli Plah [artist book with a "bean page instrument," Chicago, IL: Sara Ranchouse Publishing 2009 and Giant Bean Turner, 2000, Coll. Emily Harvey, Venice (Knowles has created these "Giant Bean Turners" since the mid1990s.
 - 8 Because the multiple "Bean Rolls" is rare and fragile, it is difficult to study them even for research purposes (Woods 2017).
 - 9 The number of scrolls differs in the multiples, for instance, the copy in the MoMA contains 16 scrolls, the one in the Collezione Bonotto 13 scrolls.
 - 10 Knowles even refers to words from different languages that sound similar such as "bin" in the German song "Kinostar."
 - 11 Inspired by Japanese Emaki, scrolls have been used more often in the art of the 1950s and 1960s. One famous example is Rauschenberg's tire track drawing (Terranova, 2014, pp. 51-56). They were used for Fluxus publications such as "Kalenderrolle 61" (No. 1) and "Kalenderrolle" (No. 2) [Wuppertal: Verlag Kalender (Hansjoachim Dietrich & Bernd Ebeling) and Emmett Williams' "Alphabet Poem" in 1963 (published by Fluxus Editions).
 - 12 In 1969, Cage and Knowles published "Notations", a collection of graphic music scores.
 - 13 Knowles underlined in an interview: "I like to use [beans] because they're not really an art-connected element." (Knowles, 1995) – Only coffee beans are included in Monika Wagner's literature database for materials used in art [Available from <https://materialarchiv.rrz.uni-hamburg.de/Materialdatenbank/index.htm> (20 August 2019)].
 - 14 Unfortunately, Albala does not mention Knowles works and artist books in his monograph.
 - 15 Due to the growing trends of veganism in the last decades, beans have gained even more importance as a protein-rich alternative to meat. For instance, they are the staple behind Tofu. Cage also grew fond of beans because of his macrobiotic diet in the 1970s.
 - 16 Annibale Carracci, Bean Eater, 1583-85, oil on canvas, 57 cm x 68 cm, Galleria Colonna, Rome.
 - 17 Giovanna Garzoni, A Bowl of Broad Beans, 1661-1662, gouache on parchment, Galleria Palatina, Florence.
 - 18 Claes Oldenburg, Green Beans, 1964, vinyl, and latex on cast plaster, 18 parts, each 5.1 x 29.8 x 12.7 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.
 - 19 Andy Warhol, Campbell's Soup Cans, 1962, MoMA, New York.
 - 20 See for instance Daniel Spoerri, Kichka's Breakfast I, 1960, MoMA, New York.
 - 21 For example, Cabaças and bigger Maracas used in orchestras are filled with beans.
 - 22 The few exceptions in the male dominance of chefs include American cook Julia Child (Spitz 2012).
 - 23 Shigeko Kubota, Vagina Painting, performed during Perpetual Fluxfest, Cinematheque, New York, July 4, 1965.
 - 24 Alison Knowles also kept her distance from the feminist artists at CAL Arts Institute – Richter, 2012, p. 333.
 - 25 For more information on "SeedShaker: in anticipation of a favorable environment and suitable time", see Sergey

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- Filatov's website www.sergeyfilatov.com (21 August 2019).
- 26 The aspect of humour has been important for Maciunas and Fluxus artists even before 1965.