

Nicole L. Woods, *PERFORMING CHANCE: The Art of Alison Knowles In/Out of Fluxus*

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Nicole L. Woods, *PERFORMING CHANCE: The Art of Alison Knowles In/Out of Fluxus* (University of Chicago Press, 2026).

As this book appears coincidentally a few months after Alison Knowles passed away at age 92, it serves as a fitting memorial to her work and legacy in an expanded field of art and, in Nicole Woods' reading of that legacy, as a "protofeminist dialectic of chance ... in the formal economy of her work: the task-based structure of her propositional scores and their live iterations, which observed an acute awareness of the domestic sphere in both its public and private operations." The book serves to correct how Knowles "has remained a mystery, a minor character in the his-tory of art whose accomplishments are generally noted but woefully under-studied," in part because as "a founding member of Fluxus, Knowles stands out among its mostly male cadre" with "until now, no monographic study." The mostly ephemeral and conceptual work has further made the work difficult to include prominently in the history of the arts, let alone in an expanded conception of poetics and the history of reading.

Woods discusses in detail the influences on Knowles's work, including a discussion of Edwin B. Knowles, the artist's father and a professor specializing in *Don Quixote* (especially in translation) at the important art and design college, Pratt Institute. I mention it here because what Woods describes as "Anti-spectacular, language-centered, and coded to the terrain and objects of daily existence" has a Quixotic literary aspect of reinventing the everyday as what I have called sociopoetic, and which Woods illuminates as "performing chance." For her father "she crafted, almost daily, small, hand-drawn books casting Walt Disney characters in invented stories" and his research on *Don Quixote* further inspired her "interest in the enchantment of episodic novels, narrative invention, and stylizations of language."

Woods begins this eloquent elegy to Knowles by describing what one might see as dialectic relationships between the mundane and literary, art and literature, chance and composition, and the Quixotic and the everyday. An Associated Press wirephoto, taken at a preview for Pictures to Be Read/Poetry to Be Seen—the inaugural exhibition at Chicago's newly founded Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)—records the first museum presentation of Knowles's large-scale installation *The Big Book* in which "she appears wresting her lower body through a tight portal. A hot plate and kettle sit atop a shelf on one side; on the other, cooking utensils hang below an electric fan. A rotary telephone is mounted just above her head. Close inspection reveals more eclectic items, including letterpress blocks—oversize letters and numbers—which, given Knowles's training as a painter and printmaker, suggest a habitat of both work and sustenance."

In expanding reading into an art, Knowles challenges the silly silos of arbitrary boundaries between disciplines, especially literature and visual arts, and also between the inside of books and learning and the outside of a still (everyday) life. “Measuring over eight feet high and comprising individual ‘pages’ that pivoted on a steel spine, *The Big Book* provided an entryway with a grass tunnel, the makeshift kitchen, a small library with a typewriter, and an art gallery showing commissioned prints by artist friends and intimates, including George Brecht, Dick Higgins, and Carolee Schneemann ... Its immersive scale and evocation of functional spaces of everyday life exemplify Knowles’s determination that art be composed to be lived in, not just looked at, and more importantly situates reading books and the everyday as a “dialectic is best expressed not in any direct involvement in the politics of the era per se—Knowles never participated in women’s marches for equality, for example—but in the formal economy of her work: the task-based structure of her propositional scores and their live iterations, which observed an acute awareness of the domestic sphere in both its public and private operations. Antispectacular, language-centered, and coded to the terrain and objects of daily existence...”

Although I found Alison Knowles through poetry or through her inclusion of poets like Emmett Williams or Jerome Rothenberg, not knowing as Woods explains that those poet-editors-publishers were “among the first to hail her heterogeneous approach to social performance and the thicket of language in the domestic everyday,” and that inclusion afforded, a “critical space to Knowles’s notational scores, performances, and book installations, [that would] situate her verbal-visual constructions firmly within the literary avant-garde.” Reading these lines in Woods book seemed to justify my entire so-called career in which I have never found a comfortable home in literature, media, or certainly not art or CAA. Instead, Woods argues throughout the book that Knowles not only “referred to herself as a ‘visual poet’ or ‘performance poet’ — hybrid designations that again reject any rigidly medium-specific working method,” and “collaborated closely with another early affiliate of Fluxus, composer and experimental poet Jackson Mac Low,” but also, and more importantly that “Knowles’s practice in and beyond Fluxus— as a prolific author (in various media), bookmaker (at all scales), and printmaker (of every technical process)— evinces, as this book aims to demonstrate, a thoroughgoing aesthetic commitment to questions of translation in form: propositional recipes for physical action; word collages to be read out of sequence in fragmented, staccato cadences; book-objects and installations to be activated by reader-viewers; and computational poetry and paper sculptures that presage new genres.”

Considering that this short and modest review appears in a scholarly journal that seeks to explore “emerging knowledge” and especially by the guiding avant-garde editorial feminist practices, Alison Knowles could serve as a fitting reading of an emerging knowledge that Nicole Woods has finally, after six decades, begun to open that big book on an expanded knowledge and reading, and although my slightly more than one thousand words review just offers a peek inside, one could see using *Performing Chance* as the workbook in a class on visual-, performance-, and socio-poetics if such a transdisciplinary course were allowed to be offered. Although Knowles grew-up around universities and must have been influenced by her father teaching at Pratt, outside of John Cage and a few others there was little room even at art schools to explore the type of emerging knowledge Knowles was pioneering. One hopes that has now changed with Woods’ taking and *Performing Chance*.

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