

# AMERICAN BOOK REVIEW V.16, N.6

## MARCH - MAY '95

### Let It Bean

p-3

#### Spoken Text

Alison Knowles  
Left Hand Books, Station Hill Road, Barrytown, NY  
12507; 160 pages; paper, \$18.00; cloth, \$40.00

#### Karl Young

Alison Knowles has produced some magnificent book art, including *Gem Duck*, a printed edition whose visual base is offset facsimile of what photocopy connoisseurs used to call "wet" xerography, and *The Book Of Bean*, a book so large that you can walk through it, sit on a chair mounted on page 9, eat bean soup in it, and use it as a performance space. Although *Spoken Texts* draws on her previous work in book art and performance, the main emphasis of the book is on text. These texts are from scores for six radio plays (and a translation/adaptation of one of them into French), originally drafted for West German Radio and later reworked for live performance.

"Bean Sequences" opens the book. Throughout her opus, Knowles has concentrated on ordinary things and the way people have used them. Beans occupy the center of this exploration. As a basic food, nothing could be more appropriate. As humble as a food can be, beans can provide the center of a nutritious diet, as they did for Native Americans for countless centuries before the coming of Europeans, as they still do for many people throughout the world. Beans can be a source of pride for those who grow them and a source of humor for anyone. On the simplest level, many languages include such expressions as "he's full of beans," and jokes about farting are universal, as basic to joking as beans are to eating. Puns on beans and "being" seem an appropriate response to existentialism for someone coming out of the first phase of Fluxus: a phrase like "Bean and No thinness" in the context of Fluxus could match Samuel Johnson's kicking a stone and saying "thus I refute Berkeley."

On the first 18 pages of "Bean Sequences," the names of different types of beans in different languages are set in various type faces, sometimes horizontally, sometimes going down the page. The poetry in these names is hard to miss: "small white" probably takes its origin in simple description; "belcher" may derive from jokes; "Haricot Abundance" may come from a sense of prosperity—or hopes for it; "McCaslan" may be named after a farmer or botanist; "fagiolo di luna" could come from humor, or description, or a sense of poetry; "Haricot A La Reine" could come from a desire for prestige—it just might include a bit of subversion; "seventy five day mammoth melting sugar" probably comes from a combination of the above. Whatever the beans, the names reflect the lives of the people who lived by them. The names give us a glimpse into the hopes, fears, desires, aspirations, and accomplishments of generations of people, and the first function of this sequence is simply to let the names of the beans speak for themselves in small, discrete poems.

Handwritten text runs around the bean names. Beginning in the mechanics of evolution, this free association text includes the nutritional value of beans, the symbiosis of beans with other plants, fights for beans in Brazil, beans in religion, the symbolism of beans in dreams, beans as omens and as part of such folklore as banshees, and, of course, a story about a child who put a bean in his nose where it later sprouted. The generous and casual progression of this text around the fixed names of beans strikes a pleasant balance, and presents an unpretentious view of life and history.

The last five pages of "Bean Sequences" typifies much of the writing in the rest of the book. As elsewhere, Knowles edits the writing of naturalists into poetry. In his introduction to the book, Charles Doria points out Knowles' affinities with Homer and Hesiod. Here is a sample:

Wild bean and Florida velvet yield to oats and  
beggarweed.

Nothing in the pod when you grow your own.  
Blue lake and Tendrette, a little extra room in the row.

The beans lead everywhere, as Knowles suggests in her notes on "Fishes of the Philippine Seas": "With some time to spare in any library I open the card catalogue to the word 'Bean.' Using this system at Northwestern University I discovered the researches of a scientist named Barton Appeler Bean who kept journals and did drawings from the steamships Blake and Albatross in the early 1900s in the Philippine Seas." Knowles opens this section of the book with descriptions of fish living at great depth and brought up to Bean's ship. This segues into descriptions of the whale shark Rhinodon, and finally into the beaching of one of these giants after it had pulled the small boats that hooked it for some distance. This is a poem of mysteries brought up and

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gnomic wisdom that has run through  
the [Fluxus] movement all along.*

made plain, a precise paradigm of Knowles' writing style. Of course, sometimes the search for clarity can result in being pulled out of control by the thing you're trying to comprehend. Knowles has no objection to this, and welcomes it when it comes. An earthquake began when Knowles was performing this piece at San Francisco State University in 1979. She writes "We all ran outside, leaving the recording equipment running. Since this was the only recording of the earthquake, it was played on a local radio station."

In "Paper Weather" Knowles uses shorter lines and phrases. Faster shifts in subject suggest a quicker tempo. Notes on aquatic life run through the sequence, joined by observation of weather conditions, place names, bits of weather lore from several cultures. Names of scientists enter the sequence more frequently as it progresses, peaking with part of a dictionary entry for Joseph Priestly, giving an account of his parents' religious beliefs. Some riffs in this sequence create dramatic tensions in their elliptical isolation ("Wake to pace a roaring tunnel through each room of the house"), and such simple lines as the last in the sequence—"seven blocks in St. Louis say four or five o'clock in the afternoon"—imply tense enigmas.

"North Water Song" was composed as a tribute to John Cage on his seventy fifth birthday. Part of the text comes from Thoreau's *Journal* and performance instructions include readings notes from an *I Ching* hexagram. The sequence opens in winter, and the first major point of reference is the statement, "QUALIFYING WORDS DISTINGUISH WATER// BY ITS ORIGIN IN ICE." The second major reference point is a caption from a Chinese scroll depicting water control through dams and other structures. Other water management statements follow, leading to observations on mud and shallow water, which in turn open into plant and animal life in the shallows. Names of plants appear throughout, and the sequence ends in a list of names—accepted or newly invented—with water in them. The sequence could be read as a song for early spring, when cold fresh water is unlocked and activates plant and animal life and cooperative human action. The *I Ching* hexagram for the sequence is "The Family," and this poem celebrates families of all sorts.

"Setsubun II" also celebrates spring, based on the Japanese Setsubun, a New Year's bean throwing ritual. In this ritual, soy beans are thrown about the house (particularly in closets and other small spaces) to chase away evil spirits and invite good fortune. Much of the piece is based in texts by Basho, and in commentary on linked verse, ritual, and Chinese and Japanese mythic history. The lines move between poems and gnomic utterances and stately pronouncements. The main body of text is set in type, but additional longhand passages recounting Knowles' attendance at a more formal bean ceremony appear between blocks of type.

"Frijoles Canyon" includes information from fellow hikers in this valley of beans, as well as material from books on the area, and lore from indigenous peoples. Appropriately for a hiker's poem, observation of trees predominates, though lichen, heather, and other plant and animal life appear as the sequence progresses. The walk leads to notes on entering Anasazi caves, and the history and beliefs of the Pueblo Indians. Early in the poem, Knowles writes "The cultural other and the natural order are widely spread apart." The poem ends with "these they are Brothers of Light to balance." The following lines come in mid text: "With naming comes identity and comfort."

A performance of "Frijoles Canyon" is available on CD and cassette tape. I had some difficulty getting a copy: I was unable to reach Knowles, had some odd phone conversations, promises of copies that didn't arrive, and phone numbers that yielded recorded voices telling me that the number was no longer in service—wild bean hunt. It may be best ordered through Paul Oliveros's Deep Listening Catalogue—a good catalogue for performance art and new music. The recording includes several pieces not in the book in addition to "Frijoles Canyon." The pieces emphasize Knowles' interest in found music and music produced with sin instruments. The beans play their part even in this in "Paper Weather" and "North Water Song," for instance, performers are instructed to shake beans on tambourine. Instructions in the book emphasize a slow pace and lack of rhythm. As in much of the music of last forty years, exploration of acoustics and contemplation of the nature of the instrument take the place of stimulants. Knowles' clear and steady delivery of text confirms the clear and steady nature of the text. Although there is some tense drama in such pieces as "Paper Weather," the main orientation of the work is toward serenity, toward balance, toward self knowledge.

Although Knowles has worked in many genres, she is probably best known for her performance art, particularly in the context of Fluxus. Although the emphasis of this book is on text, the book nonetheless underscores the serenity of her previous work in other areas. Perhaps also underscores the serene, gnomic wisdom that has run through the movement all along. This is not to deny the importance of more outrageous work, such as the big adventures of George Maciunas. But it is to affirm that with many other traditions, Knowles' use of the *I Ching* and Thoreau's *Journals* in "North Water Music," for instance, is an appropriate memorial to John Cage, as both were essential to him. But the ease with which Knowles works with both sources shows how compatible her approach to art and life is with 19th Century American quietism and ancient Chinese nature mysticism. Knowles' use of other sources works in much the same way. If one premise of Fluxus is individuality and invention, another is respect for the efforts of others, contemporary or from the past or even the distant past. Does this make Fluxus sound like other movements of the arts? It should be so considered.

ABR

# E X I L E

R e v i e w s • E s s a y s • I n f o r m a t i o n

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Free

**Frog Peak Anthology; edited by Carter Scholz**  
Frog Peak Music (Box A-36, Hanover, NH, 03755) 1992; 164 pp.; \$25

**Frijoles Canyon; Alison Knowles**  
Nonsequitur Foundation (PO Box 2638, Santa Fe, NM, 87504); 1992; 69 min.; \$13.50 CD, \$9.50 Cassette (postpaid)

My primary concern with the phenomenal environment of language, more so than (because it is a combination of) reading or writing or speaking or hearing, draws me immediately to two new documentations of speech-events: *Frog Peak Anthology* and *Frijoles Canyon*—the former, a book in its most open and far-ranging form; the latter, a recording.

*Frog Peak Anthology* collects works by composers currently distributed by Frog Peak Music: A Composer's Collective. Like the seminal gatherings of diverse works so prevalent in the 1970s (such as Charles Doria's *Origins*, Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* and Ronald Gross and George Quasha's *Open Poetry: Four Anthologies of Expanded Poems*, this anthology contains performance scores, cartoons, political diatribes, found poems ... For example, Larry Polansky's "Name Dropping" advises the potential performer as follows:

*Very softly, try to find the melody of your own name. Sing it, quietly and slowly, as if to yourself. Listen Carefully. Gradually, get louder, but as you do, listen to everyone else's nametunes. After a while,*

*find one that you particularly like, and sing it. When everybody's name is being sung by someone else, the song is over.*

*Frog Peak Anthology* is not so much a book of readings, of writings, etc., as it is a book engaging the one in whose hands it sits into the act of *doing*, into the energy and activity in which people once again take part in, are participants in, the creation not of a work of art, but of their own living.

*Frog Peak Anthology* also contains a segment of Alison Knowles' computer poem "A House of Dust" (the complete text contains several miles of computer printout). The poem uses four lists (material, place, lighting, inhabitants) programmed by composer James Tenney (who also has a marvelous new CD just out from Frog Peak, *Selected Works*). The list is randomly mixed as the poem progresses, & the resultant text is haunting:

A HOUSE OF ROOTS  
IN A DESERTED CHURCH  
USING CANDLES  
INHABITED BY AMERICAN INDIANS

A HOUSE OF BROKEN DISHES  
IN A DESERTED FACTORY  
USING NATURAL LIGHT  
INHABITED BY CHILDREN AND  
OLD PEOPLE

Knowles' CD release documents a series of speech acts captured in their natural environments. The resultant texts deal with objects present at her field recordings in New Mexican & Canadian sound scapes (ponderosa pine, juniper, sandals, etc.). Knowles speaks and questions in an act of discovering and/or re-discovering her present place, the phenomenal world in which she locates herself, as Charles Olson suggested, the artist placing themselves in the center of the field of activity, making themselves part of the process, seeing themselves as actors rather than viewers, players rather than fans. Both of these releases gloriously achieve & surpass this objective.

[Currently unavailable in the Twin Cities, both *Frog Peak Anthology* and *Frijoles Canyon* can be ordered direct from the publishers. Refer to addresses above.]

—Mark Nowak

# GASJOB

## **ALISON KNOWLES**

### **Frijoles Canyon**

Interesting capturing of sound oriented happenings backing the verse of Allison Knowles, ranging from the flowing descriptiveness of "California Sandals" (the subject matter on this CD seemed to bounce occasionally back to various footwear), to the straightforward capture of a sound experience on "Mechanical Saw" (which spooked all the animals in this house when the whirring buzz began). The questions, "Do the stars on a clear night enhance hearing a train whistle through the Canadian Rockies?" and "Does anything sound the same in daylight as in the night?" are examples of the inspiration included in this release. Suggested listening for students of performance art. [¿What Next?, PO Box 2638, Santa Fe, NM 87504, USA] -*Bob Bunce*

N D 17 | Spring 1993

**Knowles, Allison "Frijoles Canyon" [Nonsequitur/What Next?] (CD 69 min.)** An exploration of literal text set to varying field and found recordings. Longtime composer Knowles' voice is at the forefront, but does not dominate what ultimately becomes a warm blanket of a recording. Unpretentious and simple, the text becomes secondary to the calm and assured execution of the voice. Recommended, and my idea of recorded poetry. (R.F.)

ALISON KNOWLES' "THE CALIFORNIA SANDALS" appears on *Frijoles Canyon* in an audio realization made with composer/producer Joshua Selman. The text heard on that recording is itself a textual realization of an event score, "Proposition VII," which reads: "Study an object thoroughly; one with which you are already familiar. Present your observations as a performance." Both the score and its textual realization were published in Knowles' 1976 *Something Else* chapbook *More*. So the recording of "The California Sandals" documents an audio realization of a textual realization of an indeterminate event score; in this commitment to a twenty-year process, notions of the artist as proprietor or the work as unique object have been "given away" from the start. The length of time over which these works develop, and the multiple interventions possible in the process of development, dissolve notions of origin and originality. What was your realization of "Proposition VII"? That is probably the first question to be asked; the reviews and the rest of the critical apparatus can come later, if at all.

The Fluxus "group," with which Knowles was associated, had these sorts of commitments in common. But in Knowles' work, I detect a particular trace of the feminine. There is something distinct about it, but not because of something it has — her work is distinct because of something that wasn't there, or perhaps had been given away from the start.

But there is also something of overcoming in her work of giving away. One of her earliest pieces, not included in the collections reviewed here, was published under the name of Philip Corner, with whom she had shared a studio in New York. It is called "The Identical Lunch," and the score for it is: "a tuna fish sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo, and a glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup." In her introduction to the book "The Identical Lunch," Knowles explained that she always ate "the same lunch at the same time at the same place each day." When Philip Corner "caught her at it," "the experience was elevated into a formal score." This book is the diary Corner kept while

eating Knowles' lunch at her favorite lunch counter; later, other friends joined in and an expanded version was created.

What interests me in this is the genesis of the score: a man catches a woman doing something she does every day, and his catching her at it makes what she does into a score, which is then circulated under his name. We are all trained, now, to write and talk for a long time about the implications of all of this; but again what interests me are not the theoretical frames through which this scene might be reviewed. Instead, what I believe important is that Knowles gave all of this away, at once, as if this was the precondition for her work, or its situation. What did you do the first time a man caught you doing something you do every day, and elevated what you did into something very important, and called it his? But you yourself began as a realization of someone else's performance of "Proposition VII."

Many people see Knowles' work in the context of ritual, as explorations of the material sacred and its processes. That is certainly one of its contexts. But the sacred is material, as materia, matrix and flux, and the approach to it is what is in question. To immerse oneself in process or use compulsion, sorcery, science? Wrest the secrets from Nature or live under her rule? As speaking materia, talking matrix, a woman now asks another version of that last, very personal, very desperate question. What is Nature before humans catch her in the act of doing what she does every day? Before they name what she does, and make it into something very important, and call it theirs? "Proposition VII" can also be realized as a scientific lecture, or a taxonomy, or perhaps, even, "The Origin of Species." What happens, then, when a woman enunciates it?

Most women choose silence under the exigencies of the questions I have raised, but a few reinvent what it is to speak, speaking out of language in process, repetitious, unserious, layered with quotations and fragments of half-forgotten other languages, once, before they came undone, the controlled, well-shaped texts of others, probably men. This is done under desperate circumstances, and it may be with personal risk. Yet Knowles, in her work, operates with ephemeral gesture, open-ended process, serenity, and wit.

A commitment, like Knowles', to the anonymous and multiple, or ephemeral and non-repeatable event will of course produce a difficult state of affairs with respect to documentation. Can an indeterminate work be represented by documentation which records only one of its indeterminately many realizations? Won't the book or video or CD, as unique, collectible item, at once attain the sort of commodity fetish status that process-oriented work is supposed to subvert? Then isn't a recording of a performance done under conditions of indeterminacy a mere reification of

process, which violates everything conditions of indeterminacy try to do? Much-argued questions.

In Knowles' work, however, I find that the initial opposition between work as reified process and work as flux has already been given away from the beginning. The terms of her work are such that it has no origin, only realizations. One version might work better at the moment than another; but none of them is closer to the source, or more "authoritative." Then each realization in performance, recording, or text becomes the possible starting point for a new performance, recording, text: there is no longer any such thing as the "origin," but there are thousands and thousands of seeds.

The names, often the no-names, of some of these seeds spill across the pages of *Ancestor Dragon Buddha Bean*, crumpled, layered, grainily photocopied, lists gathered from the Seed Saver's Exchange and its voluminous registers of disappearing varieties, "heirloom, non-hybrid beans." One of the reasons hybrids dominate today's gardens is that they can be patented—all rights reserved—by the corporate entity that develops them. Ownership of the natural world, segregation of kinds, replacement of the varietal flux with the registered, owned, corporately legitimated hybrids, and just a few of them, too. But is this collaborative evoking of the non-hybrid varieties an "oppositional" work? It seems rather to be an intervention, which restores a condition of flux by operating on the material of its representations.

A score, a "work of art" begins when someone else catches you (out) at doing something that you do every day. It is already in the gaze, the construction, the operations of the other and so cannot ever be re-possessed for oneself, one's own-ness. Proposition VII. In Knowles' work, I find the danger and risk of the feminine situation; but out of this an affirmation of the matrix is being made, with its many seeds and many paths, its long process and its flux. Each Knowles piece is no more—and no less—than the starting point for another piece, which may be hers, or someone else's, or a collaboration perhaps. Knowles' work encourages us to learn something of her habitual surefootedness in ascending and descending these paths.

—Charlotte Pressler

# UMBRELLA, Vol. 16 #1

Another CD, entirely different in texture and approach is Alison Knowles: *Frijoles Canyon*, a *What Next?* Recording, accompanied by a 12-page color booklet. Knowles recognized internationally as an intermedia artist and one of the founding members of the Fluxus group in the 1960s, has gone on to doing work in books, installations, performances, and audio works. Recurring themes that run throughout her body of work include beans, shoes, paper, found objects, and observations of nature.

*Frijoles Canyon* uses sounds recorded in the environment of New Mexico and Canada: rocks, trees, cactus, pine cones, windmills, distant trains, etc. (many of the natural sounds were recorded using contact microphones). These sounds are woven together with both new and older texts written and read by the artist. Although these texts are somewhat non-linear, her voice is calm and soothing, giving the piece the effect of a rather abstract bedtime story. The field recordings act sometimes as counterpoint to the texts, and at other times lead lives of their own, overlapping to create unforeseen associations and textures.

Although Knowles has made short works from time to time on anthology recordings, this is the first widely-available release devoted entirely to her own audio art. If you have ever attended one of her performances, if you close your eyes, you can even hear her breath as she performs these works. It is a meditative, soothing performance, one that will calm your anguished spirits in these hard times, one that will let you know who Alison Knowles is and can do. Close your eyes and listen carefully, and listen again. The booklet also has various "voices" intersecting, asking the performer to do certain things, asking certain questions, making commentaries. It is as if you were in the natural setting, or the studio, with Alison Knowles. The CD is made in collaboration with producer and composer Joshua Selman.

*What Next?* Recordings is the record label of the Nonsequitur Foundation, which also publishes a journal called *The Aerial*, which is a sound journal. By all means, order this important CD, available for \$12.00 plus \$1.50 postage and handling for North America, or \$4.50 for Overseas, from Nonsequitur Foundation, P.O. Box 2638, Santa Fe, NM 87504.

Or get it at Printed Matter for \$9.00 for the cassette and \$13.00 for the CD.

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# VITAL

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1 NOV. '92 NO COPYRIGHT ISSUE 26

ALISON KNOWLES - FRIJOLES CANYON (CD by *What Next Recordings*).

To art history lovers Knowles made known for her work with the Fluxus movement, of which she was one of the founders. In later years she started to make "ear plays", a kind of radio plays. This particular work was recorded in New Mexico and Canada. It uses sounds from those environments (from stones, trees, cactus etc.) as well as the voice of Knowles, who speaks texts of her own. The voice is most in the foreground, which I found a pity. It makes one harder to listen to this as a pure music piece, as one is always forged to listen to the text. That will make it that I will carefully select this when I want to hear, but if I do, I sit and listen with care. (FdW)