

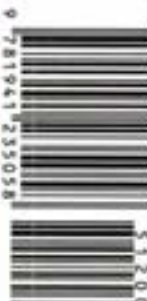


SUMMER 2015

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# MAKE A SALAD

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
ALISON KNOWLES  
BY JULIA SHERMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON BERGMAN

**Julia Sherman** is an artist, the salad-maker-in-chief of MoMA PS1's rooftop Salad Garden, and author of the blog *Salad for President*. Last summer, she invited **Alison Knowles**, one of the original Fluxus<sup>1</sup> artists, to enact her performance-art piece *Make a Salad* on the roof of the museum. *Make a Salad* was first performed at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1962, where Knowles managed to transform an everyday task (making a salad) into a ritual worth contemplation. The audience listened to the mic'd sounds of her chopping block as Knowles cut vegetables and threw them into a pile, tossed them with oil and vinegar, and seasoned them with salt. In the end, the rather mundane green salad was served to the audience. Art historian and Fluxus scholar Nicole Woods-Beckton described the multi-sensory experience as "highlighting the understated and often disregarded ritual of preparing and sharing food."

1. Fluxus was an interdisciplinary artistic movement in the 1960s and '70s that challenged the boundaries of the plastic arts and counted people like Yoko Ono and John Cage as contributors and coconspirators. The artists associated with the movement wanted a more fluid definition of artistic practice, incorporating everyday and ephemeral happenings into their work and dialogue.



**JULIA SHERMAN:** When I first contacted you and asked you to perform *Make a Salad* in the Salad Garden at MoMA PS1, you said you were out of town, but you invited me to enact the score myself. Have you ever had other people do the piece in your absence? I feel like I have been enacting the score inadvertently, inasmuch as I was inviting people to come and make a salad with me in a ritualistic way all summer long.

**ALISON KNOWLES:** As far as I know, you are the only one I

have ever invited to do it. I had a feeling you could carry it off because you have the garden. *Make a Salad* has the most important element of performance art to me: it is never the same from one time to the next.

**J:** The original score just says, "Make a salad," but judging by the notes from the last few performances at the Tate Modern and the Walker Art Center, it appears the performance has become pretty complicated.

**A:** Oh, well, the curators made those decisions. I never said, "I must have organic vegetables." It is up to the curator to set me up, then I come in and work with what they have given me. Think about how many kinds of salad you can have. Infinite. But it wasn't always just the salad. During a Fluxus performance there might be Eric Andersen standing up beating a drum, or Dick Higgins bellowing. People would do other things, and when it was my turn, I would make a salad.

**J:** For you, is the original score still the score? When I was setting up, I was really worried that I might forget something, but now I realize that doesn't really matter.

**A:** Well, what is a salad anyway? It can be anything. You can make a salad out of just fish and capers or something, depending on the circumstances.

**J:** Do you have feelings about whether this works best on a large or a small scale? You have hit both ends of that spectrum.



A: Well, once I like a piece and I want to do the piece, the context is up to somebody else, and I just accept what it is going to be. My least favorite way to present is to a small class of art students. They have expectations of what it is going to be like to be an artist. I am such a wayward, offbeat artist. I shouldn't guide people in that way. I have done painting, performance, Fluxus works, you name it. I have no straight line of any kind to follow. What I like about artists is that they

make their own way. I have done some teaching but I cannot say that it is my *métier*. Can you imagine how far away this is from traditional theater performance, where the actors have to live up to something very specific, where the lines have to be said exactly right and have to be in a certain form each time?

J: So is there a way to do the performance wrong?

A: I think if it wasn't edible maybe?

J: Do you think there is something particularly exciting for the audience to have the opportunity to consume the artwork they see at the museum?

A: Absolutely, that's why I love the food pieces *Make a Soup* and *Make a Salad*. When I was first doing these, nobody else was working with food. You had wonderful pieces like [La Monte Young's] *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It*, or Carolee [Schneemann] taking off her clothes, but there wasn't any food. Food

was kept mostly at home with the women. It has all changed. I know a lot of men now who love to cook. I don't know what it is. But my father cooked a lot. I just assumed it was a unisex activity.

J: Was this about bringing food out of the feminine sphere?

A: I have never come at art that way. Even though I applaud my sisters and their work, I don't have much of a sexual element in my work. Cooking can be anyone's



work, usually women's work, but not necessarily anymore. I don't make work that is specifically located in femininity.

**J:** You are not elevating the procedure of making a salad, you are just making a salad.

**A:** I am glad that performance art has made it part of the theory and history, but I don't know how to do things like that, how to place things historically. My daughter is a historian, but not me. Feminism wasn't an issue for me, I never felt kept out of

anything that I wanted to be a part of. Simple as that, I just walked in.

**J:** When somebody becomes famous for making a salad, does it affect the way you make a salad when you are home alone?

**A:** That is the point of it, right there. That someone could go home from the performance and say, "Hey, I am going to make a salad tonight, I just saw that done as performance art. Hey, Henry, I am going to make a salad!" They take a certain power to the act, instead of

wishing they could go to the movies.

I came into art being told that theater, painting, and sculpture were art. I went to art school and I was lucky to have [Adolph] Gottlieb at Pratt. I told him I was studying actions at the time, and he thought it was good for me to consider my paintings actions—he didn't mean to denigrate the paintings. I think my enjoyment of other people and my engagement with them was very important growing up rather than being in the studio alone.

That's led to me finding out that my own actions, anyone's actions, the things they thought were so private, could be exploited. I don't go into female sexuality, as others do, but I think the effort there, too, is to take what we do privately and look at it as being interesting to other people. The idea is that our daily activities, our relationships, and what we do alone—in the kitchen, the hallway, alone at the computer, in the bedroom—should be considered as part of our expression. **12**