

## Time Samples

Alison Knowles' work is motivated by a commitment to the present moment of realization, the art act that automatically integrates with life as it is lived. This resonates with the concerns of Fluxus with which she has been associated for decades, from its inception, particularly its intentional, often conceptual, confusions of art and life. And like the other Fluxus artists who lived their art to high levels of articulation, her work is clearly distinct from the others and immediately recognizable on its own terms. Yet, unlike the artists in some ways associated with Fluxus who hardly need to be distinguished from it—John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, for instance—it still seems important to consider her work outside that context. This is not because the Fluxus connection is a detriment in any real way, but that the historical concept “Fluxus”—with its internal diversity and even vexed complexities (e.g., those who accept Maciunas' claim to be the center and those who think such a notion violates the nature of Fluxus)—blankets her work in a way that scarcely serves its subtleties. Her work now, such as the present exhibit and book, *Time Samples*, while not entirely removed from her more familiar Fluxus work, foregrounds certain values and works into a highly nuanced sense-based experience that invites a whole new engagement. I'm not sure that that engagement would be well-served by a full-scale analysis at this point of what she has made, but it may be served by some refocusing.

With this in mind I recently made both video and audio recordings of sessions with the artist, first in March in her NYC Spring Street loft, looking at and discussing the actual objects (the “found” objects amassed on a table, and the garments and paper pieces suspended on the wall) more or less one by one; then in her Barrytown studio in April, I filmed the recent “rake” works, and right after that I recorded our conversation at my house further down Station Hill Road. After playing the tapes I decided that a transcription of portions of the conversation, further below, was the best offering in celebration of this new work gathered under the name *Time Samples*, which is also the name of her artist's book published in conjunction with the Venice show. I will begin with a few thoughts that have been on my mind since seeing this work, as a preface to our conversation.

### The Book

Alison Knowles describes the extraordinary limited edition book *Time Samples*, which I had the good fortune to glimpse when Granary Books publisher Steve Clay brought by the first copy to show us at the artist's Spring Street loft:

The book is in an edition of 45. signed and numbered in a leparello style with 17 pages each. The book can be exhibited on the wall and read, or put into the box on a shelf with a spine that identifies it as *Time Samples*. All the leavings from the artist's studio are cut and assembled into six inch squares that make up the prints, posters, and art detritus of many years. Each page in each book is unique, but in a specific series. In other words, if a photo positive is shown, or a fragment of a silkscreen printing plate, it is different in each book. The only identical page is the green silk sunshade that is the first page of each book. Each page

has a text called “Writing Red” that runs throughout the pages just above the hinge. This text describes finding the color red for one week in New York City and noting down its exact location and circumstance.

## Making History

Alison Knowles’ work offers a garden of complications to art history. Perhaps any truly interesting work does so in the sense that the comparative/categorical/diachronic approach to it sacrifices singularity and actual identity to mental convenience. Still, her work *specifically* complicates historical category. As a descendant of Duchamp, with whom she actually collaborated—*Coeurs Volants (Flying Hearts)* (1967)—many of her pieces fall into a rough category of Readymades, most explicitly the *DESERT READYMADE*, apparently a corroded old-fashioned surface-mountable round light switch, which looks the part of having been found abandoned in a desert. This object, like all of the objects collected as *Time Samples*, is compelling in and of itself; it strikes the eye as first of all itself, decisively *before* it strikes the mind, aided by the nametag, as a funny transposition, an object self-severed from context and then wittily restored to an absurd (art) context, a “time sample” à la Duchamp, *même*. It *reads* definingly as itself, *sui generis*, even as it, an instant later, asks to be read historically or, rather, as a parody of historical reading. It romances Duchamp, lovingly, while resisting the austerity of naming a store-bought shovel “art object,” or, perhaps more precisely, an ordinary object in the place of art. That famous shovel has no intrinsic interest, and so is provocative to art viewing and becomes an intellectual object, retrospectively (arguably the first “conceptual” art work); *DESERT READYMADE*, by contrast, is interesting all by itself. It invites an active, only slightly perplexed gaze.

The Knowles found object, however, makes no claims as a contribution to artistic skill or taste, and in that way too relates to Duchamp and Cage. It’s interesting, in part, because it’s *found* interesting. It has the Knowles touch, just as a Cage chance-generated drawing is clearly Cagemade. It has artist-identity invisibly stamped into its very nature—somewhat mysteriously. It’s as though the object and artist attracted each other to the spot where you see the thing, and in that sense is an event underway. To see it sympathetically is to collaborate. It’s not quite what it is by force of the Duchamp “it’s art if I say it is” (as Arman put it), but it’s a near neighbor of that view. It’s art if I *know* it is; it’s art if I can’t resist seeing it that way; it’s art because I the artist am attached to it in the art way.

This is the zero point of art. The point where explanation is too heavy to be of much use. And any effort on the part of the artist to justify it risks dogma and privilege in a quite unpalatable sense. Better to acknowledge that zero point disappears in the spotlight.

A Knowles object stands first of all in its self-identity. It has a certain entitative claim on being, with a haptic leaning. The urge to touch her objects is almost irresistible, and it’s what she invites. Clearly the handmade papers, especially the sounding papers, want touch. Some are almost incomplete when not in the hand, or not yet quite present. They reach for you.

“History” is “made” primarily in the minds of experts—professional historians and commentators who tell us what has happened to us, or, in art, what we have seen or can still see. Scare quotes for a scary reality—being told what *was* as indicator of what *is*. Of course that is only *conceptually* the history we live in *fact*. It’s *after* the fact. The poet Charles Olson, who for many years had a life in Roosevelt era politics, ended up with what he called, in lectures at Black Mountain College, the “special view of history” (1956), which is the view that, rather than a passive record through retrospective account, history is the “function” of actual people—“that we use history, not that we be used by it”—and that is the life story as actions performed in the realization of one’s work. History in this sense is the critical intensifier that releases actual energy and allows a moment of being to take its own shape.

Alison Knowles titles one object in a way that says how time is “sampled”:

### **Objects out of context make histories of their own**

Corollary: people who decontextualize themselves as free acts of mind live their history as their own, and they find/make objects as historical acts. Such acts function as intimate liberators of history. One is living history into an open space in which entities retain and further their self-identity, and this engages and respects other actual entities in their own possibility.

## Conceptual and Principled

Alison Knowles, like most Fluxus artists, is often discussed in terms of Conceptual Art, although apologists for the latter may tend to soft-pedal giving Fluxus a key place in that history. This tendency may be more justified in the case of her work than that of many Fluxus colleagues. Obviously she often frames work conceptually, but it may be more of a convenient cover, or a way out of formal and categorical dilemmas, than is characteristic of the variety of approaches usually called Conceptual. Her early computer-generated text *House of Dust* (1969) has been discussed in relation to conceptualism, in part due to its similarity to the approach of Lawrence Wiener at that time; yet Jackson Mac Low was making work on similar principles at the same time, and in the range of procedures that he (or Cage) employed, it hardly seems a gain in historical understanding to insist on a conceptualist context. (I’m reminded of Cocteau’s remark that to call Picasso a Cubist is something like calling Shakespeare a Shakespearean.) The question, it seems to me, is what do we *lose* in responding to a given work when we approach it with such a label. It reminds me of a mind-numbing response to Mac Low’s performance, “We’ve had all this before in Dada.” [*Grave Ball-breaking and Schwittering heard from afar*]

I’m inclined to apply a variant notion of *principle*-based art, to make a distinction. To oversimplify in the interest of making a point: the conceptual approach often seeks the definitive statement of the concept in the form of a perfectly realized work, at times on

the mathematical model of a proof. An ideal might be: one concept, one work. By contrast, a principle work can never be the definitive expression of the principle, because the principle is a starting point in the manifestation of a possible truth; there is no definitive expression. The more powerful the principle, the more generative it is of new work, with a potential for life-like endlessness of new instances. One principle, unlimited instantiations.

How useful this distinction is historically, as a way of reexamining actual works, remains to be seen (my hunch is we could see a lot of work in a different light). In the case of Alison Knowles, it saves a significant part of the day. Her work is far more *experience-based* and *textural* than conceptual; it wants to be an enhanced way of living intensively. Even *text* is first of all *texture*. Its poetics is haptic, as well as vocative, even invocational in a naturalist sort of way. The words want to be touched, felt, with a range from caress to palpation. The ordinary things she finds and then titles, or drags across paper to mark, or frictively engages for the sound—these become agents of an *event*, opportunities to *say* the thing itself. Subjectivity of the object, or perhaps intersubjectivity of self and object. Respect for, love of, engagement with Earth life through its ignored traces. The little tags she attaches to discovered objects are, from one angle, single frame cartoons with a speech balloon. The light switch says, “DESERT READYMADE.” An extended rusty old-fashioned wing nut says, “TO REMOVE A GOVERNMENT FROM POWER.” A flat stick with two wicker-like sticks separately bound across it horizontally with carefully knotted string says, “3 TICKET MARIONNETTE.” The poetics of how the titles (speech acts) get onto the objects is *by any means necessary*. Events of the name, happening in the clear space of the liberated object.

You have to bend over or pick the object up to gain access to syntax, to name, to meaning by way of the verbal. Hand to eye vocality. Touching is believing, then the disjuncture that lets you listen in; that is, what the words say does not express the object but clears the way for the object to be itself. It interferes with cognitive predilection just enough to free the thing. Success can consist in the fact that categorical thinking fears to tread. Laughter helps, and the non-jointure of word and thing is often funny, yet tenderly connected to the object. There is no prevailing attitude.

More generally speaking the art-in-everyday-life stance of Fluxus is much more a principled approach than conceptual; it stands as a way of accessing something true only as experienced newly and therefore perplexing in its constant need to be *happening*, both within and in spite of the saying. It’s restless within its own formulation, because it is always in danger of betraying itself by solidifying its position. All of this is true of Alison Knowles, yet the grounding for her occurs within matter—actual material, stuff—which for her is the source of ideas. She seems to discover, by laying hands on, the conceptual resource within a given material thing *as entity*. The openness and endlessness of the process keep it moving along an excited yet precarious edge of discovery, kept self-true by an unaccountable freshness.

## Conversation

GQ: Do you think of an optimal relationship with these objects?

AK: I want the pieces to be studied, as if you had found this thing on the street and cleaned it up. Seeing them in an art context might involve an effort to see things as if thrown away. Discards are huge artifacts in our civilization, which tell us so much, and I find them for some reason worth looking at over and over again.

GQ: Do you think of the historical or social connection or do you think of the object in itself?

AK: That's a hard question because for me it's kind of all wrapped up in the object. You wouldn't find an abandoned shoe heel in the Versailles Palace; you find it in a particular space. Hannah [Higgins] once said that my work is political. She said it has a definite place socially; it's outside what we think of as art world politics; and the fact that it's outside makes it political.

GQ: It's worth thinking that thought. In a related sense, there's the view that all art is political one way or another.

AK: I've always thought of myself as apolitical as artist.

GQ: You're apolitical in the sense that you mean it, but political in the sense that she seems to mean it—our lives are political by the stand we take, by what we do and don't do. It's political to make art, not war; to not hurt people; to not vote for war-makers. But that's rather *passive* political. My *art* is political more actively in the sense that it clears the mind so that people can live more intelligently, to know better than to make war. It can sharpen *human knowing*. It makes bad language inconvenient; it might help people resist being suckers for political rhetoric. And there's the possibility that it will wake people up to responsible choice.

AK: I feel that way, maybe wishfully, that if someone loved one of these objects they're less likely to support the war.

GQ: They'd probably not throw that object *at* someone. You've succeeded in making at least one object unlikely to be thrown at another human being. People might be too absorbed in the beauty and merit of the object, in the fact of its being intrinsically interesting, as finally all things might be. If there's natural and spontaneous compassion, it might come from knowing the real value of each being or thing. Of course people don't think that way, but instead in categories, with winners and losers, and someone on top. Your art is an instance of *right life*—that's a texture of experience, a state of attention, which is easy to caricature or reduce to “sentimentality” by unsympathetic, hard-edged

political thinking; unfortunately the latter is coercive, as your art is not—I call that political. It’s difficult to stand up against that kind of self-righteous insensitivity, which Blake showed us is part of what it claims to most oppose; but art of your kind stands up by itself, in its sheer openness. It embodies a contrary to human destruction and, well, hegemony. It’s political as *rescue*.

+

AK: I am working now on a series of rake prints consisting of crude marks from a garden rake with beautifully twisted tines. I have raked through various pulps, some with sand, some with colors, to make the marks. The closest association I come up with is *cave* drawings like those in Altimira, where the stick is put in the fire to give a charcoal tip to draw with. Apparently the necessity there was, before the bison hunt, to make an image on the wall of the cave—magic in the service of necessity.

I want the rake to give me an unanticipated mark and a chance window onto the wall or colored mounting. The rake series is nothing one could have predicted, but a sense of necessity is there, the pull is fierce.

The rake, that gnarly thing, I find it quite beautiful, and at the same time it has a hard violent sharpness, in that “pencil” of mine. It appeals to me first of all because it’s not something you can buy in a store, not even in an antique store. Only as a thrown-out item. Its torqueness, its sharpness is a natural form of its aging, of its abandonment. That makes it beautiful; it has existed outside of anybody’s use of it.

GQ: Our friend Irwin Kremen says that the found papers he uses in his great collages are “experienced papers.”

AK: Wonderful. You know what they said about this book [*Time Samples*]? “It’s totally cured.” That’s how long it took working through those processes.

GQ: I sometimes think of the stones that are becoming my “axial stones” as *used stones*. I lamented to Gary Hill that you can’t find used cars anymore, only pre-owned vehicles, and I proposed a business, following Kremen, called *experienced cars*.

AK: It’s also that there are all those things that I’m supposed to buy like to vacuum my rug, things in plastic that I find so ugly—their use or their process hasn’t turned them into something beautiful. And when I walk into a museum and see a vacuum cleaner as a supposed object of beauty—I don’t share that view. I know it’s efficient as machine and design, but not interesting to me in the context of beautiful things..

GQ: *That’s* social art in a common sense, seen as what it is for its interplay with social context and not for its intrinsic beauty, although I’m sure some people view it as beautiful, possibly in a sense related to mathematical elegance. It’s mainly the framing that makes it considerable as art. It’s related to Duchamp’s shovel in the place of art, although he’s making no claim that the shovel is beautiful or even art. There may be good reasons for the vacuum cleaner, but your response to it is as object and its presumption as

art. In any case that's not what you do in your work, and I don't feel the force of context, for instance, in the case of a shoe heel. It doesn't forcefully *refer*. Its presence doesn't commit that kind of social or political act. Perhaps it does something in some way even more powerful, considering each object *as it is*. Your choice of object isn't by a *collector's* standard, as a member of a known category (a certain designer's heel, etc.), but for the direct impact of the object on the viewer (you, first of all). I'm interested in the way you focus on a found object on the basis of how it has arrived at a certain moment in *its* history, a way that's compelling. For strange reasons, mysterious reasons.

AK: Strange reasons. Hard to even put that into words. I never change the object. I will put maybe different papers on them, maybe string them together. I have two sticks that are tied together—I don't know why—sometimes I put a couple of things together, not very often; maybe they need some kind of support.

GQ: Coupling, they couple.

AK: They had just been on the table for a while and I was titling them and they came together .... Like your stones.

GQ: The axial stones are like that, yes, and I wait for them to declare their attraction to each other ... making eyes, through my mind, using my mind. You feel the attraction between things and to the things that are attracting.

AK: And like your stones, the things have been sitting there next to each other for months and months, while people have walked by that table.

GQ: And they're very shy, it takes the time it takes.

AK: There really isn't any answer to the social question, as to why the found thing became that object we now see, what it is telling me—on my own I'm not going into those things. Yet people try to give me things for my table; I can't accept things for the table.

GQ: They don't go there.

AK: They don't go there.

GQ: Well, they maybe *could*.

AK: I have two things that I've accepted from others.

GQ: People have given me stones, but they're people who really *get* it, like Barbara Leon or Jenny Fox, who have brought me fantastic stones. Susan [Quasha], of course, and Chie [Hasegawa], and recently Sherry Williams who designed my new book [*Axial Stones: An Art of Precarious Balance*] has been out with us finding stones. I'd say they internalized

what it is, and they're not doing it only from *their* point of view, but also from mine and that of the stones themselves, viewed in this special way for potential relationship.

AK: Well, from the point of view of a mystery that is *your* discovery, linking into the stone through *you*.

GQ: It just proves that communication exists. It's been known to happen.

AK: Yes. I don't feel that when people look at these things they have to *say* anything. Many people feel they have to make a remark about everything they're looking at, as if I'm waiting for them to say something nice or pleasant.

GQ: We're overeducated, and people think they have to say something intelligent about everything they see, and that's why it's good. (Robert Duncan once said, at root our taboo is against the unintelligible.)

AK: You see, I'm not even asking if it's good. I'm not even asking if it's art. I'm asking that, whatever it is, they pick it up and consider it, that we can all find something in that. That's useful to all of us.

GQ: That *speaks* to us.

AK: That speaks to us. And that means cutting out millions of media contacts and stuff that we are taught speak to us, *should* speak to us, like a good movie, and it may be that it doesn't speak to me.

GQ: There are so many registers of communication, like between intimate friends or unknown people, the known knowns and the known unknowns. Then there are these strange registers that get drowned out by the media, the loudness and crassness and self-importance. A work of art is expected to have a certain importance, a certain explanation, which tends to put the artist on the defensive, so that one feels one has to explain the work. We'd like to be able to communicate with people, but sometimes they ask misleading or irrelevant questions.

AK: I do know where every single item comes from, but it's not as if that's what it's about.

GQ: It's a *fact* about it.

AK: What's interesting is that all of these objects feel in the same *tone*. It goes from dark brown or black up through the range of the flax, which is a manila color, the strings; there are some beans; there are some pale orange things, but nothing that's the color of a bright plastic soap product, which I guess I've screened out as what would be interesting to me in something that I picked up.



GQ: Your colors would be hard to name, and hard to describe. They're name-eluding colors. That's why you can apply other names to the objects, because the objects can't be named in themselves.

AK: Exactly, and nicely said, because I had a terrible time with the titling, thinking first that I should do it, and finally I did most of it—well, I haven't said who titled what—I don't think that's necessary—I titled more than half of them, I see now, and I've also edited bad titles that I had invited. So, that was a hard place to go through, and yet, I'm glad I did it, and I want people to read those titles and ...—maybe as Susan [Quasha] said, it helps, like a little more information about what we're looking at, and it's good to know that maybe you *didn't* do this or that title. I've had people say, *no*, you can't have just *anybody* titling the pieces, but I've gotten how to remove the title not only from myself but from the piece itself. Why *not* have other people walk up and....

GQ: Well, I have this to say: that the object's having created a level of attractive specificity and utter individuality, adequate to the prevention of direct naming, creates a space in which naming can become free.

AK: Write that down, it's right on, and relieves me of a whole burden.... Kenny Goldsmith walked in and took up a piece, and I said, Kenny, the whole show's going to be waist high, rib high, above the hip, so people can take it off the table and hold it—tables going all around the room like the wonderful Gabriel Orozco show, where the level of the table was right against the wall, a shelf, hip-level, as if you're eating something, that *close*. And I'm going to have a table right below the head, at the arm, level. And Kenny said, yes, do that, and he titled the piece, "Above hip level."

GQ: Once that space becomes free, it becomes an interactive language zone. So that if other people participate, that's not really the point anymore—where did the language come from—Dostoevsky, me, or Joe Blow. The right language excites you when it comes into the space and you say *yes*. And you don't have to know why.

AK: I don't even have to explain to myself.

+

AK: There's the question of how you house these things. I like the way that you have Chie's things just lying about the house. I want the touchability to be there. At the same time it's a little bit slight to say to someone buying a piece, just set it out on your shelf. Once people have this, the piece that they consider to be a work of art, in a way it's a responsibility to have it well kept, indeed *honored* ....

GQ: Unfortunately we own too much for the available space, and I like having them out there, for people to see, so I can pick them up and put them in people's hands....

AK: Are those my papers there?

GQ: Yes, I show them to people often. But it's a bit messy here.

AK: Space is something of a problem.

GQ: Because we're not museums. We have our own work, as well as other people's work, so these days we're *rotating* things more often. But we'll never have enough space for everything we like. And the main point is that we organize our space around *making* work, not showing it—our orientation is *doing work in living*.

AK: Better.

GQ: How does the space problem affect your work?

AK: Not much really. It just means that when I have these things on the table in the loft in NY I can't also show my books and catalogues and things people send me; so I just have them piled up on top of the dresser. But of course ultimately the idea is that people find these things for themselves. And no one's collection would look like mine. The collecting is open to anyone; it's not like one person has a lock on a certain style or whatever. This stuff is everywhere. Yet I don't pick things up *often*.

+

AK: I think of the difficulty of giving works up, either giving them away or selling them.

GQ: It's about our attachment to things with special qualities and how we manage those connections. We manage them *amorously* to start with...

AK: Amorously.

GQ: And then we, as in all relationships, get possessive. And have to deal with that.

AK: Oh, I consider that I have many arrogances and vanities to deal with. For instance, I easily say, *I* never buy clothes, I've been wearing these jeans for years, since at least a decade ago when I got them in France. But then when it comes to things on the table, I don't easily part with them. I *would* and I *will* of course, because I know the world is full of them. It's the quality of the choice that's distinct, and it's that that you want people to love. It goes into being a small work of art—from *nothing* that was recognized.

Now, there are those things like the African bean—I've had that for many, many years, since it was sent to me, but the context was never right; because I didn't have this signature show that I'm putting up now. Suddenly, many things seem right for this show that I didn't use before, because the show was about *paper sound*, or it was about *cyanotypes on cloth*. Here I'm not showing anything that isn't related to the newly

focused concept. I'm just showing the *rake prints* (very recent works), the *things on the table*, and the pieces in the loft: the *Emily Harvey overalls* (with cyanotypes on them), and so on.

There are two shirts with poems and pages in/on them which I've been trying to stop working upon. One is a tee shirt with the poems of Robert Filliou and Jackson Mac Low attached to the shirt and dipped in flax giving a kind of landscape quality to the tee shirt. Strings hang down to connect to the world around and give it age. The shirt titled *Book Jacket* was once a white shirt and has two books embedded. In this case my own books: *Time Samples* and *Footnotes*. Again the now published pages have been dipped in flax and placed on the fabric of the shirt. The recycling into art of pages that have served to make a book is an old story with me—how many old shoes and sox have found their way into artworks. My brother is fond of saying to me, "Don't forget, we lived through the war years." As for my use of flax paper, it seems to be a sympathetic support for everything I do.

In this last group I have to work with *books*; these are book ideas for me. And the cyanotypes are sun prints which, developed, become bright blue. And these are a kind of performance too, since I never know what they'll be like, and I abandon half of them, as I abandon many things that I pick up. It seems that the effort to *interest myself* is inside the process; I must be interested in wrapping this thing or tying it or presenting it in some way; in other words I don't just find it and that's the end of it. I *find* it and then it gets *processed*.

As I find the thing and it passes through my consciousness and onto the table, something is added—I don't know what it is, something of this mystery of *selection* and *quality* and ... *acts*, almost like nourishing. Another person might look at it and find out something they didn't know about or hadn't felt.

GQ: It's also a whole class of object that humans are not only indifferent to but are often disdainful of ...

AK: Oh, indeed.

GQ: "Get *rid* of that crap." The majority of human beings in our society have no tolerance for such objects, let alone interest in them.

AK: They're not manufactured, or at least not to be *this* way.

GQ: This relates to the part of art that is reclamation—of lost values, things that have gone unnoticed, things that are like the underclass of society, driven under to the point of taking on the status of less than human, and so we have a holocaust of objects too. Dispensed with, without examination or reflection.

AK: Dispensed with, yes, which makes it easier for us to be focused on the value of the latest thing, the best equipment.

GQ: And as we upgrade, the previous objects become part of the unconscious. And we depend on art to wake us back up to what is lost to narrowing focus. The rejected sounds

of vinyl records are once again attracting attention, for instance. Nostalgia plays a role, but there is also a nostalgia for what we no longer know we've lost—fragments of a home forgotten. Your table feels like an array of cherished parts found on a trail to the lost land.

AK: One of the titles is taken from Yeats: "In dreams begins responsibility." I like that because I think there is some unconscious or dream element in the selection of objects.

GQ: Clearly. One of the things that art does, and that your art does especially well, is to reinvest power in specific aspects of the unconscious; I'm thinking in particular of the kind that is unconscious by neglect more than by repression, although that distinction is not always clear. Or by *suppression*, which is related to the underclasses of society that are inconvenient to the middle class and up; we forget and neglect them because to do otherwise challenges our selectivity. Some artists take on the task of reclaiming them out of awakened sympathy.

AK: Or because they have special cultures that they are guarding better than we do ours.

GQ: And they're part of Earth ecology, which we have lost sight of like the languages and species that are disappearing every day, or even by the hour. We can only be aware of them selectively; we have limited ability to remain at that edge.

AK: I appreciate so much that you've caught that in your axial stones, the precariousness of bearing weight and keeping balance—that is, being in constant jeopardy. I think about the stones and I speak *for* those stones to people, who sometimes feel that the stones are outside the world of fine art—"That's not fine art!" [*laughs*]

I guess for me the beginning of this performance is Fluxus tradition, which you pointed out so well isn't really my work, but it always wanted me in a way, and I did well with it, kind of like someone giving you a hat.... So, I can get visibility for what I'm really doing here and take this show to various other places simply by being the female artist of Fluxus; in other words it has served me well. And yet the work that I've done here isn't known at all; you can talk with a dozen art critics and curators who do know my work and yet don't know this work. And nevertheless there are overlaps between that early work and this work—in finding and working with ordinary objects.

GQ: I don't think this intimacy with objects and matter was ever missing from your work, as I know it. Art movements can give one an aperture through which to direct one's own specific life/art force, whatever that is for one as individual. Working in the Fluxus context you used the art languages that were making themselves available, the opportunities that shape the form of a statement. What's behind it, the actual *essence*, to use a vexed word, is basically not different from what is *shaping* in another way in this work. The thing that is pre-Fluxus is primordial to you, the artist you are, and yours to reveal. There's a liminality in this mix of the primordial and the individual. It doesn't come out only as a signature style, recognizable by the outer presentation cherished by the lazy marketplace mind, but something more like a DNA make-up, something both at the core and in every cell that is free to manifest in surprising ways, yet enjoys a more

translucent sameness. Of course you see it *in* the work and nowhere else, and I think I'd probably recognize your found objects on sight, although I'm not really sure how. I think of this sense of signature recognition as close to the physical voice, which can be developed in many ways but has a large component of the *given*. And it's basically unknown, like the DNA "code," of which we're largely ignorant, despite the hype of the Genome Project.

AK: I have to bring Fluxus in here. I have an old tape of five principal Fluxus artists on a stage ....

GQ: And how utterly individual they are ....

AK: Completely individual. If I'm doing a Dick Higgins or George Brecht piece, as I did in Cologne, when I shuffle in on my own up the aisle it's *me* doing it, which is different from *you* doing it, and it's all so valuable, because we individuate that score, we shuffle differently, speak differently; and that's one of the ways that Fluxus is great—it doesn't tell you how to *be*, or the right way to use body or voice; it holds *direction* to the conceptual frame. So everything else can pour out to everyone.

GQ: And it liberates what is truest in the actual artist showing up in the actual *event*.

AK: That's why it isn't theater. Or, if theater, a highly specified form of theater.

GQ: Maybe it reclaims something that is lost in theater, hidden away inside theater for which the art still longs (as Artaud, Grotowski, Rick Zank [Iowa Theater Lab], and others seem to have felt), something powerful in the actual voice, which comes from settling into what is most itself as the basis for any formulated or formalized release into action. The event that shows us how things speak their truth.

AK: How things speak their truth—I like that for the objects too.

GQ: Yes, indeed, you *hear* them. Other people can't hear them. From your objects I learn to see what you hear, maybe in time to hear them too. I hear stones. That is, *certain* stones, not stones in general, because I'm no great stone-hearer overall.

AK: One of the few though.

GQ: Well, I have intense relationships with certain stones. And that's determined *for* me by what I experience as the stones calling my attention to them; I look at the stone and I know that stone is going to go with me. It may be a soloist, as opposed to axial; if axial, over time it'll find one or more stones to consort with, and the axial stones work will emerge. In this way I feel a kinship with your practice of only taking home a small number of objects that speak to you. It may take a long time for the conversation to advance further, as if, having lain around for a long time (maybe millions of years!), it takes a lot to get them turned on and ready to become something unexpected. It can take years.

AK: Years! I have this table and some of the stuff is there for years.

GQ: It's about how we dialogue with reality, the whole texture of reality. And you have a register, a range that you are picking up stuff in.

AK: Do you think that goes for the book *Time Samples* too?

GQ: All those different materials, things upon things upon things—we have these *layers* of our integration with material reality.

AK: But isn't it important too that all of those materials were first used in some other process, just as the objects had their own history?

GQ: Well, these are *your* castoff, now unconscious *things*, and your going back to them, reclaiming them in this art process; these are the things that didn't make it to the first use, and so were just there in your studio among the rejectamenta; but you remained attached to them for their intrinsic richness and elemental beauty and never gave them up. And now you've found a way to hear them again, and they assert something new. And the brilliant thing about this amazing book is that it turns these outcast materials into a flowing accordion fold-out intensive panorama, like a Pandora's hope chest on LSD, a palette of transformable materials. It makes you feel that nothing need be lost or wasted, as if the artist's role is to redeem exiled things on behalf of Gaia, to call them back into Noah's Space Ark to reconfigure evolutionary possibility. All for the sake of galactic health. It's an optical, haptic hymnal.

AK: And in this context they're far more beautiful than they ever were, they've *arrived*, in a way that they never could have back there in something that didn't work out; they've stepped up to the plate, if you will.

GQ: I keep seeing how art creates thresholds of awareness, sometimes in a simple question like “what makes these objects art?”—something you find in the street, then in some degree process without changing the object itself, whose magical claim to the state of art is somehow connected to the fact that you hold it in your hand.

AK: Maybe it's just so to *me*. The reason that I present it as art is so I can engage you in my discovery, maybe even get you to join me in its art nature.

GQ: Of course, and that's one of the things art does, saying look at this thing you weren't looking at, and it so ups the ante of attention, releasing a certain intensity that, like the object, seems to have been dormant or unavailable in this way. Somehow there's a renewal of the senses, as in Cage's statement, when asked for a manifesto on music, to the effect that nothing is accomplished in the process and it's unpredictable: “our ears are now in excellent condition.”

AK: Yes.

GQ: This sense of art that I find in your objects is an *event* in which a thing deputizes us to speak on its behalf, yet through the thing itself, and that shows *its* power as art.

AK: We've been elected, or selected.

GQ: What, you mean I've been selected by a knob?

And selection in this sense is really a two-way process. We're selected by things all the time, perhaps mostly unrecognized, that is, there's an interactive process of attractions that's a dynamic of the eco-field, in which we're instrumental, but not the sole cause. There's an ecology of reality recognition. Your objects become defining points of attention in that field, and they instruct. After I saw Chie's one instance of balanced stones about nine years ago, which turned me on, it took me a year of balancing tiny stones on the dining room table before I saw what it was and crossed the threshold into bigger stones. It never entered my mind that this might be about art until I crossed that threshold. The process woke up the thinking, and the context changed. It's as if a particular reality had woken up, and I was a part of that waking. I feel that way about your table too; it's like discovering a new neighborhood or a world of things which we've been desensitized to, now a place to go to again and again, and, between visits, to notice the impact it has on what one finds and keeps.

AK: We get resensitized to this world of things, because we *need* it. You go into a level of necessity in which the object speaks to you to the point of its own ... separate magnificence.

GQ: Where it can be *heard* and also *hear itself*. I think there's something to learn about the need for nature to hear itself. *There's* where *we* figure in the picture. William Blake made the mysterious statement, which I've been intermittently meditating for decades: "Where man is not nature is barren." My view of what he meant—admittedly there are a number of other possibilities—is that (non-human) nature is trapped in its own cyclicity, whereas human nature is capable of self-reflection and conscious transformation, although, to put it mildly, this capacity is neurotically underexercised and capable of great destruction of nature. Yet this capacity is essentially visionary, which means capable of envisioning oneself beyond the present state (how you appear) and of experimentally projecting oneself beyond limitations. This means that when a conscious human enters the matrix of nature, one can inseminate nature with this visionary possibility. To translate this little allegory of human evolution to the axial stones: the stones don't know they can fly—lift up on the edge, levitate—until we get together; and I don't fully know the implications of my species' having realized this way of being until I discover how to transmit it. Reconfiguring a stone's possibility teaches me a lot about myself. Non-human nature and human nature need each other, which is what you were saying.

AK: Yes. I'm sure you've read the haiku by Basho where the silence in the stone is echoed in the cicada.

GQ: Two stones have two silences, and when individual silences come together in this special way they engender a further silence that *I* can hear. It's an excited silence.

AK: Well, look what you've done for them, taken them out of their sleep....

GQ: I think we've given each other something. I'm gravity too, and part of me wants to lie down and stay there, stone-like; let others do the work. That's a non-axial state, or perhaps a *pre*-axial state. Your objects may not want to be found, or not realize that they do, until you get into an instantaneous conversation with them and call them out. You excite each other. That's how they end up in the artist's hands, and how hands become artist's.

That's how I look at it, and it seems that you do too. It makes me feel more alive to think this way, and more attentive to the world and its possible further nature. But none of these ways of thinking are meant to be definitive; they're provisional, prospective, excitatory. Instead of the explanation that is defensive, which we mentioned earlier, we have the explanation that is excitatory, toward further engagement, toward connection.

AK: It goes back to your remark about nature as a *mutual* resource. I like to say that I work with nature, but then nature works with me too.

GQ: Nature likes to say it works with *you*.

—

## *Time Samples* Titles

Sea Bat Wing

The window of my hut is curtained with a white cloud

The sound from a distance is the same

The lion roars by day and the ostrich by night

tomborellison

Early Picabia

Imitate Nature in her manner of her operations

desert readymade

skull artifact (capuchin)

Harvest of the Mojave

Arizona

"o" is for fagiolo..."o" is for bohnen

Notes from the Underground

Broken things are powerful but things about to break are stronger still. The last shot from the brittle bow is the truest

Once in a while St. Therese Once in a while

Fear of Flying

Each of us sits in the best seat

Hangnets where the Nile meets the Nibia



A Monk's necessity a fishing line  
Carrot from the garden next door  
After the fact  
The people have the right to remove a government from power  
It seems like a game with dinosaurs playing in the mud  
Memory  
Objects out of context make histories of their own  
please touch this remnant of a tree  
A room of one's own  
The heart is a lonely hunter  
Iowa farmer Numchuck  
Gamelan Son of Lion  
Good day Sunshine Good day Sunshine  
Just a whist of pity a cloud in peace and silence  
The art critic has a special interest in the condition of spectatorship  
Hip level  
Persuasion  
Howl  
Azuki Bean Turner  
After the fact  
Frogs in the morning tell of sultry nights to come  
Shark Egg Case  
A(r)mour shedding/emerging changing/making  
War is good for business invest your son  
Chinese Woman's Shoe

## Authors of Titles

Allen Ginsberg	Dick Higgins
Josh Selman	Dostoyevsky
Charlie Morrow	Yeats
Betsy Damon	Henry David Thoreau
Jessica Higgins	Kenny Goldsmith
Alison Knowles	Jane Austin
Phil Corner	The Beatles
John Latham	Bill Stone
James Joyce	John Cage
Yuan Hung-tao	Larry Miller
Julia Robinson	Gertrude Stein
Encyclopedia Britannica 11th edition	Phoebe Neville
The Animal Kingdom Illustrated	Virginia Wolff
Hannah Higgins	Carson McCuller
Gustave Corbet	WBAI radio (Amy Goodman)
Taketo Shimada	Steve Clay
Betsy Damon	Henry Martin

---

Artist and poet **George Quasha** works across mediums to explore principles in common within language, sculpture, drawing, video, sound, installation, and performance. His **axial stones** and **axial drawings** have been exhibited at the Baumgartner Gallery in Chelsea (New York City), Zone Chelsea Center for the Arts, Cotuit Center for the Arts, and elsewhere.

For **art is: Speaking Portraits (in the performative indicative)**, he has filmed over 450 artists, poets, and composers (in 7 countries and 17 languages) saying “what art is.” His video works (including *Pulp Friction*, *Axial Objects*, *Verbal Objects*) have appeared internationally in museums, galleries, schools, and biennials. A 25 year performance collaboration (video/language/sound) continues with Gary Hill and Charles Stein.

This year he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in video art.

His most recent book is *Axial Stones: An Art of Precarious Balance* (Foreword by Carter Ratcliff), due out in July. His other 14 books include poetry (*Somapoetics*, *Giving the Lily Back Her Hands*, *Ainu Dreams* [with Chie Hasegawa], *Preverbs*); anthologies (*America a Prophecy* [with Jerome Rothenberg], *Open Poetry* [with Ronald Gross], *An Active Anthology* [with Susan Quasha], *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*); and writing on art (*Gary Hill: Language Willing*; with Charles Stein: *Tall Ships*, *Hand Heard/liminal objects*, *Viewer*).

Awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in poetry. He has taught at Stony Brook (SUNY), Bard College, the New School, and Naropa University. With Susan Quasha he is founder/publisher of Barrytown/Station Hill Press in Barrytown, New York.