

Fake Music Re-Anticipations

Alison Knowles - Gentle Surprises for the Ear

FMR -012

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[We are pleased to welcome FMR's third guest contributor, Lauren Fulton, a writer and curator who lives in Chicago, IL. The following words are hers. -Eds.]

In 1975, artist Alison Knowles collaborated with Philip Corner and Bill Fontana on a project called *Gentle Surprises for the Ear*. The installation was composed of eighty found objects laid out on tables, floor, and suspended on strings from the ceiling at various heights around a darkened room. "Ticketed" using Manila tags with miscellaneous phrases and undefined directions for activation (tags like "Please touch this remnant of a tree," "Shark egg case," "Fear of flying"), Knowles encouraged visitors to sound her assortment of artifacts. She invited guests to pick each one up and play a tone.

Though Knowles is not a composer, her repurposing of what appeared to be ordinary things—detritus, a rusty rake, worn shoe heels, and beans of all shapes and sizes—afforded the things a deep resonance in a new event context. Plucked from the street or gifted by loved ones, each singular object, imbued with sound, held potential. Her selection, close study, and care resulted in an assemblage, a silent cacophony; that is, until participants orchestrated a situation with greater harmonious potential: given time and commitment to Knowles' open work, participants could know each object and its unique texture. Collectively, what was perceived as silent was indeed amplified.

Decades later, in an unpublished artist statement, Knowles reflected, "my orchestra consists of beans, toys, papers and words. (...) each instrument comes out of silence makes its performance and returns to silence."

The success of *Gentle Surprises for the Ear* depended on visitors as an essential part of the installation—to touch, sense the magnetic energy, and listen closely in the present. In keeping with the nature of their initial gathering, the objects have since been dispersed, either distributed to friends, or used for other artistic endeavors. As such, with remnants scattered (continuously vibrating with energy and continuously made part of other collections), Fake Music can in no way recoup or approximate the energetic arrangement of the room in 1975 New York, where this work took place. Given that this energetic interaction forms the basis for the work, its inaccessibility to us limits our ability to reissue it in any form today.

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