

Gravity Wins, Entropy Rules

Al loosened the piece of wood holding the mattress upright against the wall as I braced to help him lower it to the ground. The frantic chatter which had occupied us all evening slowed as Al said goodnight. He returned to his house on the adjoining property, leaving me alone to experience the deafening quiet for the first time. Despite the pleasantly remote feeling of this island, the severity of silence unsettled me. The room where the bed stands is lightly furnished with three low bookcases and a cheap IKEA floor lamp. Two of the four walls are covered by black felt on top of which hang five illuminated fixtures with holographic film taped to their curved plexiglass fronts. A promotional hologram for Prince's 13th studio album *Diamond and Pearls* is the closest of these to the bed. Each hologram contains a figure stuck in pose, embracing another, grinning or winking. As I walk over to the sink to unpack my toiletries I notice from my peripheral vision that the holographic figures are moving in perfect synchronicity with me. Each stride causes a subtle shift in their expression. Bed ready, I switch off the overhead lights, unplug the floor lamp, lay onto the bed and — admittedly a bit stoned from a joint we'd shared after dinner — stare at the holographic figures which waver ever so slightly with every breath.

Aptly named Visual Alchemy, Al Razutis' studio is distinctly incongruous with its surroundings on Saturna Island: a not-so-easy to get to mountainous island of about 400 people located in the Southern Gulf Islands. In the Summer months, there is one ferry a day that brings cars over from the mainland. Other than the annual (slightly satanic looking) lamb roast, there is little tourism here. The studio and neighbouring single bedroom house where Al lives with artist and wife Anne Popperwell is on a ridge overlooking a wetland. As is necessary on these islands, both buildings are enclosed by 7' tall fencing to prevent the deer from eating their way through the yard. The single-story house is surrounded on one side by a vegetable garden which Anne tends to daily. It provides them with a portion of their food and a healthy supply of cannabis. The studio which houses Visual Alchemy and Al's hologram collection is a converted fisherman's cabin. From the outside it appears vacant: its cedar shingles are sun bleached and all windows are covered up to prevent anyone from looking in.

Inside the discrete building is one of the largest private collections of holograms in the world. It includes not only Razutis' fifty year engagement with experimental film, virtual reality, and holography, but also, the estates of two of America's most prominent holographers: Sharon McCormack and Lloyd Cross. Sharon and Lloyd were instrumental to the development of holography from both a technical and pedagogical standpoint. Lloyd & Jerry Pethick (an artist now celebrated for his sculptural assemblages and fresnel arrays) opened the first School of Holography in San Francisco in 1971 to which Sharon would later become integral. Only a few years later, Al held classes of his own on holography in his studio under Granville Street Bridge. How such a significant portion of holographic history ends-up in a small cedar shingle building

on Saturna Island continues to surprise Al who met Sharon McCormack only one time in Mexico. Some years later, Sharon contacted Al to say that she would leave her estate and the estate of Lloyd Cross (her late collaborator and ex-partner) with him as she believed Al to be the only person serious enough about holography to ensure that the history wouldn't be forgotten. She died unexpectedly a few weeks later in 2016. Sharon put her trust in Al because of the unwavering criticality he presents on his website alchemists.com and Facebook. As a self-described 'truth teller', he has written dozens of essays and hundreds of Facebook posts outlining and challenging the history of experimental film, art in Vancouver and holography. Sometimes even coming up with insulting nicknames for artists and writers with whom he disagrees. This is a side of him which I avoid arousing but cannot ignore.

Catharine MacTavish, an artist and friend of Al who worked closely with him in the late 1970s, put it best: "...no doubt you have figured out that the trick is to get him down off his rant soap box with a pointed question, at which point he spews breathtaking genius." I do my best to steer Al away from decades' old beefs at which point, yes, I am often left flabbergasted. This requires some patience and understanding. Al was born in 1946 to Lithuanian refugees in war-torn Germany. After landing and migrating across the United States, his family settled in Los Angeles. In the 1960s he attends California Western University on a basketball scholarship and while on track to receive his PhD in Mathematical Physics, sees students protesting the Vietnam war getting beat up by police and, citing a refusal to work for the U.S. military, drops out. Shortly after in 1968 he dodged the draft and jumped the border to Vancouver. Here he got involved with Intermedia, built an optical printer from salvaged hospital machinery, made dozens of experimental films and eventually established Visual Alchemy: Canada's first holography studio. The studio stayed afloat by offering holography workshops. By the time he'd turned 30, Al locked the door to Visual Alchemy and moved to Samoa to write two prose-poem novels, one of which will be published in the U.K. this year. The city of Vancouver assumed his studio was abandoned so they demolished it with artworks and equipment still inside. A friend mailed a photo of the parking lot which took its place. Al doesn't seem to have been distressed about this. An invitation to teach film at Simon Fraser University pulled him and his family back to Vancouver a year later. Al resigned from his tenured position at SFU in 1987 as he believed the "department had become a virtual autocracy."¹ From there he moved to Los Angeles, then Mexico, then returned to Canada, Saturna Island in 1995 where he writes without pause. Al is a dropout whose life is a complex of innovation and subsequent conflict. Discussing holography in particular, MacTavish continues, "Al's battles in the holographic arts arena are in part because of the enormous cost of archiving and maintaining the medium, which in all its iterations is fragile and fugitive... There is desperation for the pieces to be collected by an institution that can afford the conservation expenses, so the various artistic camps feverishly pitch claims, such as 'originality', or 'the first', to justify museum acquisition."

¹ https://alchemists.com/visual_alchemy/sfu-orgs/SFUresignation.html

Despite Al's continued efforts, there is very little public awareness of holography. Aside from the thumbnail sized holographic dove on the back of some credit cards, people today no longer come into contact with holograms. Tupac at Coachella was not — as it is often referred to — a hologram, but instead, an example of Pepper's Ghost: a 16th century illusionist's trick. A hologram is a real physical thing that you can hold in your hand or put into your pocket. It is a truly three dimensional image suspended in a photographic emulsion. The effect of three dimensionality occurs because of interfering wave patterns in the emulsion produced by a split coherent laser beam. MacTavish recalls that other artists referred to her work in holography as 'tricknology'. I'll admit that some holograms (particularly ones which are made for purely commercial purposes) can appear like a gimmick. Al fights vehemently against these detractors while I believe this misperception to be worthy of embrace by practitioners. As cultural theorist, literary critic, and feminist scholar Sianne Ngai has it in *Theory of the Gimmick*², "When we say a work of art is gimmicky, we mean we see through it — that there is an uninvited transparency about how it is producing what we take to be its intended effect." (83) With holography, however, there is no uninvited transparency. Understanding *how* requires a high level of science comprehension and years of experience with optical imaging technologies. Ngai believes that "Experience unfolds all the more richly the more deeply consciousness penetrates the artwork's technical complexion. Understanding grows along with an understanding of the technical treatment of the work. That consciousness kills is a nursery tale; only false consciousness is fatal." (86) After fifty years of engagement, I notice that many early practitioners of holography retain an unwavering fascination with the theoretical and technical complexion of holograms. That above all else, the practice of holography has irrevocably changed the way that they understand the nature of perception.

As Gregory Moynahan notes retrospectively in *Holography and the Aesthetics of the Hyperreal*³, "Although once proclaimed to be the medium of the future, with predictions that the technology would be as important an invention as the printing press and replace such traditional means as painting and sculpture, holography never fulfilled those expectations. It remains a marginalized medium, one equally entangled with esoteric technology and with lowbrow kitsch." Moynahan shares my view that the story of holography is one of disappointment. In a period of fifty years, the unlimited potential for commercial products, media and art afforded by holography turned out to be oversold, not accepted, or too complicated a process for general use⁴. In this present context, holograms appear to me as simultaneously futuristic and passé.

² Ngai Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick : Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2020.

³ "Holography and the Aesthetics of the "Hyperreal," Catalog Essay for the Exhibition, "Pictures from the Moon: Artists' Holograms 1969–2008," New Museum, New York, July-September 2012

⁴ <https://spie.org/news/photonics-focus/novdec-2021/what-happened-to-the-hologram?SSO=1>

Made mostly in the late 70s and early 80s, Al's holographic artworks still feel novel. This is precisely why I like them. Critics of the time in which these works were made, however, disagreed. Moynahan writes that:

"Most critics found neither the choice of content nor the form of the work of high quality; many were perplexed by the nature of 'images [that] were disturbingly there and not there.' There are, of course, some aesthetic grounds for these complaints. Holograms suffer from what might be termed the 'stereoscope effect' where, precisely in their timeless realism and infinite depth of field, animate beings in particular often appear hauntingly unreal, as if revealed through a new type of taxidermy. Due to the relative complexity of the holographic process, it is also difficult to match medium and content reflexively, and thus to comment on the form of representation in the manner of visual art traditions such as those ranging from Dutch Realism [sic] to Abstract Expressionism. Underlying these aesthetic issues is perhaps a more fundamental theme that has haunted the aesthetics of holography: the relation of art and reality itself. "

For this reason, holograms have never quite been accepted by the art world. There are a few, yet very well known, examples of artists who have worked with holography: Salvador Dali, Simone Forti, Bruce Nauman, Louise Bourgeois, Ed Ruscha and a handful of others. These experiments — which were conducted in specialized facilities housed within private institutions — were one-offs and brought no real prolonged interest to the field of holography. Institutions for preserving, exhibiting and educating the public about holography essentially don't exist. These responsibilities are left up to artists such as Al who use what little resources they have (Facebook pages and infrequent exhibitions) to make the story of holography and its many contributors known. Artists dedicated to the practice of holography have never had a choice but to work entirely independent of the larger art world. Without access to specialized institutions, artists working with holography were left alone to develop their own tools and techniques for making holograms on a shoestring budget. Jerry Pethick's 1971 booklet *On Holography and A Way to Make Holograms*, for example, proved an enormous contribution to the accessibility of holography by providing instruction on how to make holograms at home with a sand table. These efforts by artists to democratize the practice of holography reflect the spirit of idealism inherent to the development of holography as the image of tomorrow.

Over the course of the past year, I've traveled periodically to Saturna to work with Al. The focus of my last visit was to document his sculptural works in preparation for a solo exhibition at UNIT/PITT. The seven assemblages I've selected for the exhibition *Gravity Wins, Entropy Rules* combine various found materials such as furniture, children's toys and stray electrical bits together with holograms. These 'real', physical, sculptural components play off of the 'false', virtual, images in the holograms. The combination of outmoded second-hand objects against the strange futurism of the images reflects the tension inherent to the history of holography: once proclaimed to be the medium of the future, it is today relegated to obscurity.

There is an underlying sense of urgency that compels me to document Al's work and put it together into an exhibition. The peak of development in the holographic arts belongs to a generation of artists born in the 40s and early 50s. As these artists and innovators fade, so does their artwork. This is in-part why MacTavish refers to holography as a fugitive medium. Many of Al's white light reflection holograms made during this time use a dichromate emulsion which is unstable and susceptible to decay due to humidity and other environmental factors. A decay which could be slowed if it were not for the general disinterest towards holography by art institutions and archives capable of preserving them. Unseen for over a decade, the artworks in this exhibition show traces of this decay. Razutis has told me that the images embedded in these assemblages may disappear completely in the years following his death. He considers this a reminder of the inevitability of entropy, and as such, believes highlighting the degradation of these works is a way to tell the story of holography.

Holographic art is distinct to the West Coast. The epicenters of artistic practice in holographic arts are dotted along the coast from Vancouver to Los Angeles. In the 80s and 90s, Al travelled up and down the coast documenting artists working with holography. The resulting two-part feature length documentary film *West Coast Artists in Light* (1997) features 6 women and 6 men working with holography. Despite holography being a complex technical process, these artists don't hesitate to share their hard-learned techniques. It seems to me a feature of the holographic community to discourage gatekeeping or other forms of protective measures artists in other arenas often take to protect themselves from one another. Al certainly hasn't held anything back from me. Maybe this openness is the result of holography's marginal status in the art world. These artists necessarily rely upon one another.

Prior to working with holography, Al made experimental films using a homemade optical printer built out of spare parts from Saint Paul's Hospital in Vancouver. He claims it to be the first optical printer in Canada. The optical printer, and Al's studio, were first situated in his home in Crescent Beach, BC, then at Visual Alchemy his studio under the Vancouver Granville St. bridge beginning in 1972. From 1968 to 1972 Razutis was a member of the artist group 'Intermedia' in Vancouver. Writing on Intermedia, artist Michael de Courcy recalls, "The idea of creating a society and a public workshop dedicated to the collaborative exploration of new technologies by artists had been the brainchild of a local alliance of artists, poets, musicians, dancers and academics. This group originally assembled to discuss Marshall McLuhan's theories on how electronic media, particularly television, was transforming our world into a 'global village'. There was the strong feeling that artists should be at the vanguard of this radical reshaping of society."⁵ Through this lens it is easy to see how the holography factors into this thinking. In discussing local, provincial, and national artistic traditions it is already widely understood that media such as video, photography, mail art, and magazines connected 60s and 70s era artists in

⁵ <http://intermedia.vancouverartinthesixties.com/introduction/default>

the geographically isolated city of Vancouver to the rest of Canada and the world. In my view, holography also belongs to this range of media, and in some ways, even explodes the technologies described in McLuhan's theory of the global village meant to eliminate the effects of time and space towards an interconnected world.

When I've arrived home from Saturna it often takes me several days to decompress. This is because when Al and I are together we talk uninterrupted about history and movies and art from morning until night. He shares a lot of knowledge with me and I do my best to reciprocate. In an email initially inviting me to visit him on Saturna he said "I'm interested in what your generation and you think about this stuff sitting among the trees and mushrooms on an island." My first encounter with 'this stuff' was electrifying. In part because of the context of the island and the beauty of the surrounding nature. Although I can't transplant all of those factors, my hope is that the exhibition gives visitors some fraction of the excitement that it produces in me. And like Al, I'm curious to know how my peers will react to an obscure art that — although they might not know it yet — belongs to our local tradition.

Felix Rapp, 2024

Curator, 'Gravity wins, Entropy rules' exhibition.

Vancouver, Canada