

**Looking Through a Two-Way Lens:
A reflection on “Vancouver’s” lively underground cine-culture, 1960–present**

written by Sidney Gordon

It was in my early university days that I first heard of Al’s films. Not once did I think I would end up in his eclectic studio on the isolated Saturna Island, rained in, smoking joints, giggling in a haze, while we walked between divided rooms with each of our films spread between his two monitors.

Incredible!

He said, pacing back and forth. He gestured towards my film looping on the screen.

40 years later, you put these side by side and you would never know that they were a different artist.

Honored, somewhat in agreement, but also disbelief, I smiled.

We spent the rest of the day comparing our lives, talking about our shared passions and experiences as artists and programmers in Vancouver’s avant-garde community. I listened to him speak in various tones about the run-ins he had with administrative bodies, his political stances, moments of defeat, and many highlights from his youth – all of which gave me a humble understanding of him, as well as the people and organizations that I knew or once inspired me.

Amongst the creation of innovative films and sculptural works, Al was a pivotal figure in the formation of Vancouver’s underground film scene. In 1968, he began hosting weekly curated programs at the well-loved Intermedia: a four-story warehouse studio on Beatty Street that ran from 1967 to 1971.¹ It was a no-barrier space where artists, technologists, and educators of all disciplines were encouraged to come together and create without the usual bureaucracies of other established arts organizations. Al ran his screenings every Saturday and Sunday on the second floor for a one-dollar admission price. Using the supplies he had around him, he made a cinema out of white paper attached to a hanging rug, no seats, and a couple of 16mm projectors. The screenings were an immediate success, with a full house every weekend.² One could say it built an experimental film community the city had much longed for.



TV Installation work by David Rimmer, Tom Shandel, Bill Fix - Vancouver Art Gallery 1969, Intermedia Show.

¹ Wikipedia. 2023. “Intermedia (artists’ association).” Wikimedia Foundation.

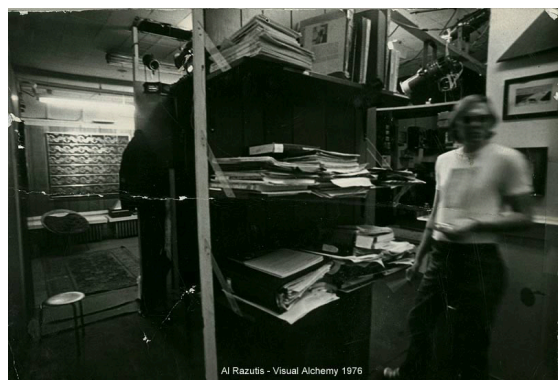
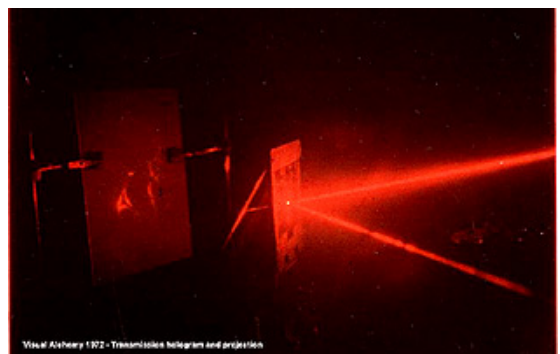
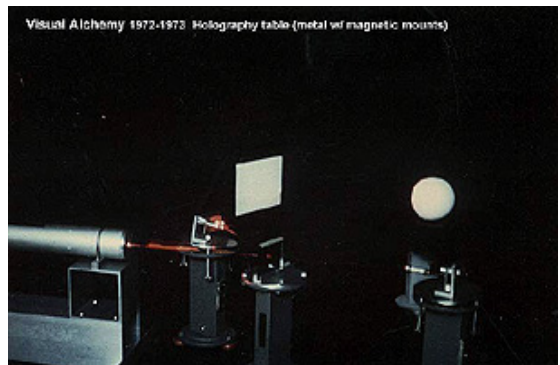
² Mike Hoolbloom, “Al Razutis,” Mike Hoolbloom, 1995, <https://mikehoolboom.com/?p=46>.

With a strong focus on local media makers and film adjacents, this collaboration slowly shaped into the creation of Intermedia Film Co-op, a distribution center that held primarily the work of Vancouver-based artists, taking whatever 8mm and 16mm works people offered. This only lasted a couple of years but led to the formulation of many new film organizations including Cineworks Film Co-op, CFMDC-W (Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center West), and The Cinematheque (Pacific Cinémathèque Pacifique), all of which AI played some role in kick-starting.



Excerpts from the Intermedia Film Co-op catalog, printed by Al Razutis and Ed Varney, 1969.

In 1972, after the dissolution of Intermedia, a failed storefront film theatre, and a slew of resigned teaching jobs, Al received a grant to establish Visual Alchemy. Visual Alchemy was a collectively used, windowless media space that later hosted a studio fully equipped for all things analog film, video, and audio-related. It held gear for video and audio synthesis, a self-made optical printer, a workshop for repairs, tinkering and alignment of laser mirrors, a holography lab, an office, and an unsettling room where the former tenant was repeatedly exposed to acetylene fumes. The eleven-room atelier was located under the Granville Bridge in what could be referred to as an “industrial wasteland,”³ and came to an abrupt end when Razutis decided to depart to Samoa, leaving everything behind, including large amounts of equipment and artwork that lived there, and the key for whoever wanted access during his absence. After many months of overdue rent, the city claimed the building as abandoned and demolished it with the remaining gear still inside. Funny enough, the site was later developed into the Granville Island Mall and Emily Carr College of Art and Design, the same school where I later studied film, which could arguably be traced to me meeting Al, ending up in Visual Alchemy 2.0, and ultimately getting involved in the making and programming of experimental films.



³ MacTavish, Catharine. SEEING STARS: Visiting Al Neil in 1974, a gathering of Titans”. Toronto, Ontario: Catharine MacTavish, 2023.



View from 2nd Ave facing Granville St. bridge and False Creek, taken after the demolition of Visual Alchemy, Vancouver, 1978.

In 2022, I was put in contact with Kirk Tougas, another well-known 70's Vancouver avant-gardist, who assisted in the founding of The Cinematheque, where AI was famously banned at the 1986 celebratory conference due to him scrawling "The Avant-garde spits in the face of institutional art" on their new screen and 'ruining it for good'.⁴ I was linked up with Kirk through my good friend, past professor, and mentor Lindsay McIntyre. Kirk reached out to Lindsay after a conversation he had with VIFF Centre Programmer, Tom Charity about the lively history of Vancouver's experimental film, noting many of the centers and co-ops described above; and comparatively, the absence of like-minded spaces in today's local cinema scene. VIFF Centre had recently renovated its space to include a 41-seat microcinema to host small events and overflow from sold-out shows. With the unpredictability of Vancouver's attendance, especially for an avant-garde event, they decided that the Studio Theatre would be a perfect fit for this type of event.

After this conversation, Kirk reached out to several experimental filmmakers in the city, including Alex Mackenzie, Laura Marks, Lindsay McIntyre, and more, asking if they knew anyone who would be interested in running such a program. At this time, my best friend Celina de Leon and I were finishing up our last year in the Film + Screen Arts program at Emily Carr University of Art + Design and had recently done some curatorial work in Lindsay's Analogue class. With our growing involvement in experimental cinema and DIY organizing, Lindsay came to us asking if we would be interested. Excited by the potential of it, we agreed to meet with Kirk.

⁴ Mike Hoolbloom, "AI Razutis," Mike Hoolboom, 1995, <https://mikehoolboom.com/?p=46>.

A few weeks later, Celina and I met at Continental Coffee House on the Drive and were greeted by an older man sitting by the door wearing a fedora on his head and a grin on his face. We sat down and he pitched us the idea, stating he wanted it to happen but didn't want much to do with it, and he was just waiting for the right people to come along to get things going. With a bit of hesitancy, due to the mountain of operational work an unfunded screening series takes, we accepted and began building up the series that is now known as XINEMA. On October 23rd, 2022, we put on XINEMA's inaugural screening, which featured the works of six local experimental filmmakers including Brittney Appleby, Sammy Chien, Lindsay McIntyre, Luis Serrano, Sydney Southam, and Al's friend and fellow filmmaker of his time, Richard Martin. It was a successful show that generated a lot of encouraging feedback from the community — much like Al's at Intermedia. Our next three screenings continued to sell out days in advance, with long standby lines of supporters trying to get a seat. Since then, we have continued to hold (mostly) monthly curated programs, and the occasional workshop or open screening at various locations, primarily supporting the works of Vancouver-based and connected experimental filmmakers. Soon Al is to be one of these filmmakers.



Filmmakers and audience members gathered in the lobby of VIFF Centre after the XINEMA One Year Cine-Celebration Open-Screening event. Pictured left to right: Barry Doupè, Patricia Gruben, Dennis Ha, Lindsay McIntyre, Mena El Shazley, Shervin Zarkalam, Sidney Gordon, Niloufar Samadi, Illeana Pietrobruno.

I didn't meet Al until my third visit to Saturna Island. During previous trips, I had been visiting to do a cameraless photo project with my friend Madeleine Keen, and the rocks at *TEKTEKSEN* (East Point), which I learned are coincidentally the same rocks Al's wife Anne Popperwell moved there to paint. Every day that I have spent on Saturna, I have felt as if I was in some sort of lucid dream, but this day seemed especially chimerical. When I opened his rickety studio door to leave that evening, I was welcomed by the smell of petrichor and the sight of the sun peeking out from behind the clouds, glistening on the grass in front of his property. Left with only the images and videos in my phone I had taken of his many illusive archives, I wondered how I would relay the feeling they gave me to my peers when I returned. I often think about the apparitional space that's created when certain elements

align – like the small vertical exposures that make up a hologram, the individual silver halides that react to produce an image or the paths that align to create connections like these. Though many of the centers, co-ops, and works Al created have changed or expired, their impressions on Vancouver, and the greater film community remain. Despite the loss of authentic charm, these traditions will sequentially continue, between the cracks of urban inflation and the depths of their obscurities, and flourish in moments like these.