

SEEING STARS: Visiting Al Neil in 1974, a gathering of Titans

*THE ROOM*

*You are ↓ doing  
what  
you  
↓  
have always  
— done —  
↓  
You must do  
what  
↓  
you never have  
↓  
done*

taped to a bathroom mirror by Al Neil

“We’ve been reading too much science fiction,” says Art Rat, also known as Gary Lee-Nova. Rat has been reading a lot of Burroughs. He quotes a passage word for word.

At the end of a work day, Rat lounges in a worn arm chair in the screening room of Al Razutis’ Visual Alchemy experimental media complex next door to his painting and sculpture studio, under the Granville bridge, in an industrial wasteland that will be developed into the Granville Island mall and Emily Carr College of Art. In 1974 it is rubble, trash, run down warehouses and shabby low rent commercial space, ideal for art studios. Nearby is the shop of the skilled woodworker, Allan Miller who teams up with Rat and Raz to build sculpture and holography lab fixtures.

Visual Alchemy is a sprawling eleven rooms, with just one fisheye porthole to see who is at the door. Artists, curators, writers, computer scientists and creative technologists drop by to engage in lively conversations in the 16 mm film screening room easy chairs. There is an office, a studio equipped for video and audio synthesis, a darkroom featuring Raz’s home made optical printer, a workshop for repairs, tinkering and alignment of laser mirrors, a holography lab, and an unsettling room where the former tenant succumbed to acetylene fumes, because, well, no windows.

I’m twenty two years old, with an interest in experimental media driven by philosophical musings about representation and the nature of reality, drawn to the holographic paradigm because its system of construction is unlike that of other image rendering mechanisms. I am working at Visual Alchemy as a lab grunt, because a hologram I made by stealthing into a university physics lab with a student I met at a party, had been my ticket to make my way to California to learn cottage industry techniques that are more flexible and less costly, and that Raz wishes to employ in his studio.

We are on the first bottle of rum with diet Pepsi. Something has to be done about the state of mind. Al Razutis reads aloud from Shakespeare’s *Complete Works*. There is agreement that whomever it was was everything anyone ever claimed he was. “I’d like to translate this guy into colloquialisms because he is

not being read,” Razutis says, donning his wolf skin. They set out for Rat’s dope dealer who turns out not to be home.

At the White Spot a spotty young lad takes their order of coffees, a club sandwich, apple pie and ice cream. Rat has to get nourishment, his blood sugar up. Raz says he doesn’t want anything, no, then changes his mind in his seventies noir nighttime sunglasses lopes over to order a hamburger.

In the next car at first there seem to be four ladies necking, then apparently a boy and a girl in the front seat, likewise in back. “You know, find yourself and all that,” remarks Rat. The kids all pay for their orders separately. A full figured boy gobbles his food fast. The thin fellow does take-apart-and-sniff-the-meat, grimaces, and offers half to his girlfriend who is munching contentedly on hers and sipping a soft drink.

Thus launches the second bottle of rum, with a plan to visit Art Rat’s friend Al Neil, pianist and collage artist. Al Razutis says they never have talked even after ten or twelve encounters.

Al Neil is a touchstone on the West Coast, especially on those occasions when after American movies on Granville you’re bored with the culture, bored with everything, wondering what you did to be born into this, thinking that even death would be easier than living out another twenty years of *this*. It is easy to say, “It’s a civilization in decline, degenerate times, Kaliyuga” and such, and it’s something else to live it out. Yeah, go see Al Neil. Make a pilgrimage to somebody who’s been at it for half a century, who has seen it all, without compromise or surrender.

The way to Al Neil entails thrashing through underbrush traversing down a steep slope to the houseboat on the tideline, the no rent mudflat squat settlement where Malcolm Lowry wrote *Under the Volcano*.

“Let’s let our eyes (pant) get (pant) accustomed (pant) to the dark (pant).” They take a break for a few minutes that expanded to twenty later in the telling.

Al’s boat is dark and silent. He rouses from sleep to greet the visitors, an old friend and new, Razoo. Al and Rat greet warmly, long time buddies.

“Hey Al, remember when I used to come over to your place on tenth, that terrible place where you were living that finally burnt down – ”

“Burnt down?”

“Or whatever happened to it, and that guy from across the street would come with this incredibly heavy grass, and we’d go out to English Bay and smoke up and then go to the movies – ”

“You have a movie of my house burning down?”

“No. We’d go to the movies and I’d get really paranoid and start freaking out and hallucinating on that incredible grass that the guy from across the street would bring over, and then he would lean over and say, ‘None of it ever happens.’”

“What’s this? My house burnt down and you have a movie of it?”

“No, just that we’d go to the movies and I’d be freaking out and that guy would lean over and say, about all the paranoia and hallucinating and everything, ‘None of it ever happens’.”

Rat then points out that Al Neil was bang on with his sculpture of Nixon, the mask in the wheelchair, “Prophesy. Pure prophesy. Prophetical art.”

Al muses, “I never really considered it like that.”

Al Neil’s house is spotlessly clean with a newly painted floor. A chair is broken and he has recently recovered from bruised ribs. “I couldn’t sleep for two weeks, nor drink.” He is strong, firm, tanned, on the wagon. At first Al has trouble hearing, then he realizes he is not wearing his glasses. He was reading about Hitler before falling asleep. He has been reading about Stonehenge, and is working on a piano piece of it.

Al drinks the rum and gets lemonade for it and everyone smokes cigarettes. He is glad to see Rat and pleased to meet Ak Razutis whom he has encountered many times, pointing out that Raz never has spoken with him. He says of the Western Front, “These are my friends and I treat them as friends but I do not deal with their art and I find it hard to understand why all the Duchamp and faggot business.”

Ian Davidson would say, “It’s been done.” Al continues, “Dr Brute is afraid to get out of his spots because, like, after you’ve built that up, where can you go?” Al is less heated about West Coast art than Rat and Razutis who when they get onto it talk about killing people. Rat describes the art he feels has degenerated into tricks when measured against the early work.

Raz asks Al Neil, “For you, where is the magic?”

“Well, when I play the piano.”

Rat expresses some confusion with himself these days, “except with my immediate family, closest friends sometimes. In any general way, forget it.” There is agreement that in order to just survive, get by, it has to be in some general or cultural way.

Al Neil says that not a lot of people come to visit and he has been playing the piano. He reads aloud a letter from Madja which makes him angry because she opened with a bummer, about the Art Gallery not giving her a gig after Al had set it all up, and ended with a bummer, about having heard that he wasn’t well, so must be drinking heavily. Al says, “Madja hears from people here who don’t drink, so ...”

Then Al Neil plays his vintage, out-of-tune piano, which he and Gary brought down in 1969. “I like numbers,” says Gary. Al says some people like his music best on this piano with missing keys. Al’s left hand does its part, holds it all together with those particular Al Neil left hand cluster orbits, while the right hand moves up and down, back and forth, superficially erratic definition of pattern, that brings to mind the way that the hologram’s developed film appears chaotic, yet when illuminated generates a high definition three dimensional representation. This “holographic blurring” is a key defining characteristic, as expressed by Karl Pribram, a thinker in the field. “A random distribution is based on holographic principles and is therefore determined. The uncertainty of occurrence of events is only superficial and is the result of holographic ‘blurring’ which reflects underlying symmetries and not just haphazard occurrences.” (Shaw, Robert and John Bransford, editors. 1977. *Perceiving, Acting and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*. Hillsdale, N.J. : Erlbaum.).

While he plays, Al's face is very close to the sheet music. When I step behind to see what he is reading intently, it turns out to be a diagram of Stonehenge. Harmonics. Centres. Tantric piano.

Rat yelps. Al Razutis takes off his glasses and looks down at the floor. Al Neil stops playing. Rat says, "Yeah! Yeah, man!" Al Razutis is silent until asked what he thought. Razutis is Taurus, Al Neil Aries, Razutis played classical piano and the organ in church.

"No. No. I listened and it just ... wasn't ... real? ... No. It ... just ... wasn't ... good."

AN HONEST CRITIC! What a find! Al Neil rolls cigarettes, finds a big glass of rum and lemonade, "Yippeee!" and settles down to dig, dig, draw out of Razutis, scrutinizing and mining for treasure, the way he plays a diagram of Stonehenge, to hear from Razutis exactly what he heard, what he wants to hear and what he means by "good".

Al Neil explains the piano, draws analogies with film, plays examples, giggles with delight at an honest person in the room who is willing to critique his playing. Al Neil can be serious without being solemn.

"I want to learn! I want to learn! You have something to teach me. I want to know what you mean by what you said. Speak up!"

"I mumble a lot."

"This Al Razutis is getting very close to telling me something. I want to learn. In this age of Duchampian and John Cage leftovers, of somebody with glitter on a suit from New York, *somebody* has to explore, and so this isolation, this place in the woods. I can live here on \$40 a month, if I have to \$30. But I am half a century old, not sure where it goes from here. Where is the next notch? After Duchamp? After Burroughs? After Cage, where do you go?"

Al Razutis describes that in Al Neil's playing there is passion; however that passion is himself, and sometimes does not connect with the instrument, the piano.

Ah, might this be what obscures the next notch? This is the Arien, constantly aspiring to it, uncertain what it might be. Perhaps it's teachable, and so the honest critic, few and far between, gets pinned up against the wall, so to speak, and pressed for more, more feedback.

"Tell me more," says the Arien aspirant who will realize that attempts at self effacement are like erasure with Santa's lump of coal, that efforts to remove the self from the picture draw it square in the centre, because what never was there cannot be ejected nor suffer rejection. Al Neil sits comfortably, yoga posture perfect. With a gasp he describes tremendous energy he releases through his spine, as he neither masturbates nor fucks, not that he has anything against either; there simply has not been opportunity. He reminisces about Marguerite, his wife. When she was there, she baked bread in the stove which is now burnt out, which came to mind when Al Razutis went to sit on the electric heater. "It's getting cold. That little heater is good until it gets to be about thirty five, then it's blankets and clothes."

Later Gary relates, "Al's work, his best work always depended upon inspiration from a woman, and since Marguerite his wife there has been none. I feel the same way, in the same position."

Al Neil plays again. He ends suddenly with, "NOW YOU'VE GOT ME ALL MIXED UP!" which sets off laughter. Again he sits down on the floor before Razutis. With a twinkle in his eye, he quips, "I have to get down to your level." He demands more feedback.

Gary becomes uneasy about a the possibility of heated argument, and in vain tries to change the subject. "Hey Al, you get three guesses. Name my son's middle name."

"Douglas."

"No, that's my middle name." Rat hints with a date and an address.

"It's either Claude or Breeze." Claude is the name, rousing jubilation at the correct response, and discussion of this good and noble name, not Rainbow or anything like that.

The Arien keeps returning to this matter of a critic who would honestly say that to his ears the music is not good. He leaps back up to the piano and plays a ditty. The Taurus will not be mollified. "No, I was listening and now you are playing games on the keys."

Rat jumps up, "Hey, now listen you guys. I know you both, man, and I know this guy (meaning Razutis) has trouble with your kind (Al Neil)," referring to their sun signs. "Sometimes he has a hard time."

There was no hard time. Al Neil leans over, kisses Al Razutis and says, "Did I tell you I am a faggot?" The peck is merely affectionate.

Rat encourages Raz to read Al's palm. "This guy knows his stuff and he won't use it against you. Raz, you don't have to say anything. I just thought you might like to look." Later Raz will say he is glad he did not have to say what he saw.

"Do you like my nun's dress?" asks Al Neil. "It has a cross on the back which means I am a Christian."

"Or that you are not," says Rat.

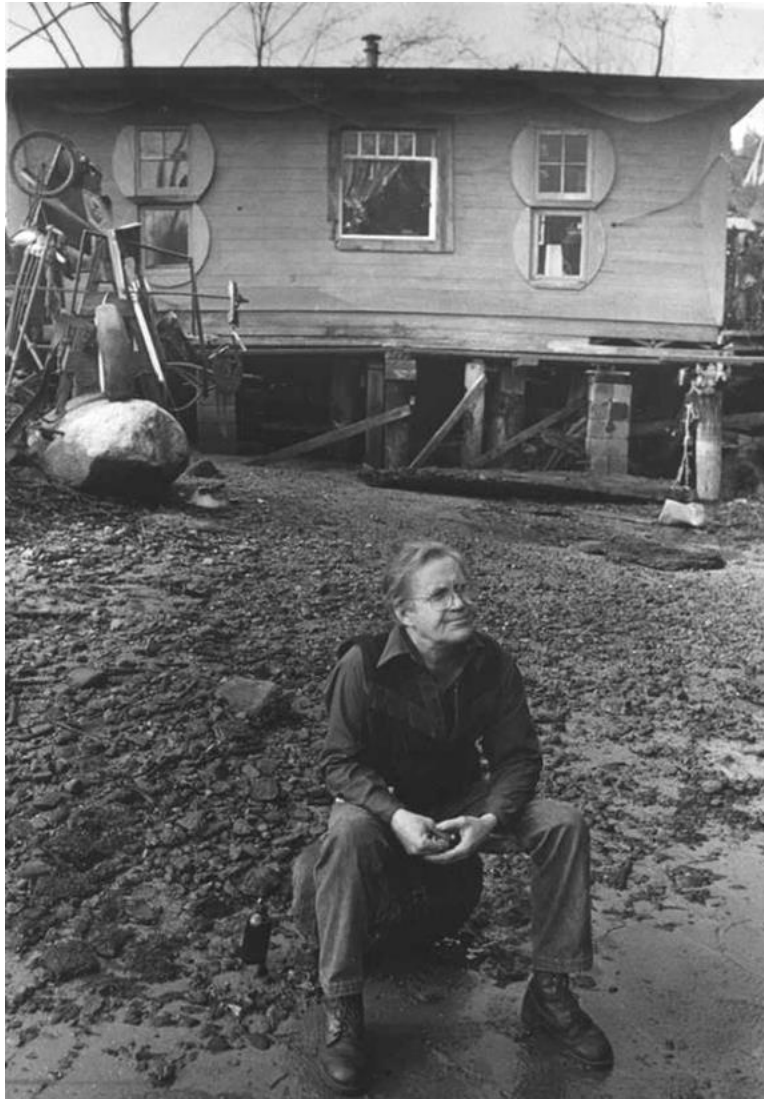
Al returns to the piano to play again. This time, the miraculous. The stubborn Taurean melts, keeping on his glasses. Al Neil stops suddenly, "IT'S NO GOOD! NONE OF IT! IT'S ALL BAD!" More mirth, except for the bull, who doesn't laugh, just,

"Yes. There was magic." Al Razutis is a hard nut to crack. Al Neil's been there.

This is by no means all. There is more about the *Georgia Strait* losing his article, about not being allowed on planes because of his "condition", about this Razutis being close to telling Al something, about how Rat really wanted drugs and Al Neil is clean these days so he has to bear the afterimages and hangover of the American movie on Granville.

It is a long climb back to the road, prickles in the hands.

Out there by Deep Cove, you can see the stars.



Essay by Al Neil enclosed in record album *boot + fog* (*Music Gallery Editions*), as he typed it.

#### THE MUSIC OF STONEHENGE

I haven't made an overt political statement at any of my performances since the late 60s. At that time we had one war to consume us. We all, of course, spoke as best we could against that. Now there are many wars raging, perhaps the same one in many fields. In the 60's I used to think that if the music had enough charge, energy, life-

force, and if there were enough of us working toward getting that energy out, it might somehow link up with all the similar life energies around the planet and in some simple-minded psychic dream I thought we artists could counter the global death wish. And this was by no means an original idea of mine. All around the globe, people I was aware of thought this way. Nevertheless the war goes on. And what can we think when even the slayers of those persons seemingly innocent confound the rational and they themselves speak in terms of mystical innocence.

For instance, when the Japanese Red Army terrorists committed their appalling massacre at Lod airport in 1972, only one of them survived, Kozo Okamoto, Here is Okamoto's summation at his subsequent trial:

"The Arab world lacks spiritual fervour, so we felt that through this attempt we could stir up the Arab world. We three soldiers, after we die, want to become three stars of Orion. When we were young we were told that if we died we may become stars in the sky. The revolution will go on and there will be many more stars. But if we recognize that we got to Heaven, we can have peace."

Well, these days, in this art racket some of us sometime appear to be in, I don't believe it possible to make any political statement which doesn't resound with absurdity, when we are faced with the workings of the minds of men like Kozo Okamoto. But in music we too can at least attempt to see and be the stars, without the slaughter.

And that I take it is what the ancient race which constructed the gates of Stonehenge was doing. They were erecting a solar observatory to plot the solstices, the eclipses, precise points of the sun's dawning; and who knows what else -- beyond the stars -- came under their gaze?

But, what noises were they making at Stonehenge? What singing? Here at last we come to the point of this preamble.

Whatever sound there was at Stonehenge, unlike the very real ruins of the actual ring of stone is gone forever. Now we can either say how unfortunate it is we'll never hear it, or we can make it to our advantage and unleash our own Stonehenge response to the terror of being alive, absurd as the thought may be; even if the response seems as bizarre and incomprehensible as the last statement of Kozo Okamoto.

*(hand printed)* AL NEIL