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<http://alnel.vancouverartinthesixties.com/writing-about-neil>

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On Al

Al Neil is dead. According to his press kit, his last show was in 1992, and he has not had a review since 1994¹. By today's standards, if an artist goes that long without a show or a review, he is dead.

Al Neil is dead and living in Dollarton. But where is Dollarton? Scrolling down a list of Canadian towns, there is no Dollarton. Though I know where Dollarton is, and what it might mean to the Burrard First Nations, Modern Literature, and a Vancouver avant-garde², I can no longer find it. But that's where Neil lives. In Dollarton.

A dead man living in a place that no longer exists. Seems appropriate that an artist whose practice has for almost sixty years been at odds with public institutions, the market, and the market's tendency to promote and profit from distinctions made between mediums should end up in a place that no longer exists. The only thing called Dollarton now is the highway that takes you there – wherever 'there' is.

I have known of Al Neil for almost twenty-five years, yet my introduction to his work came later, in 1993, while programming readings at the Railway Club. The series was called Reading Railroad, and the idea was to present literary writers, followed by a songwriter whose work has some... 'literariness'. It was while assembling a list of 'literary' musicians that I ran into Jamie Reid, who urged me to 'look into' Neil. It took some looking but eventually I was able to hear a copy of *Kenneth Patchen Reads Poetry In Canada with the Al Neil Quartet* (Folkways, 1959), after which I was impressed enough to ask Neil if he would participate in Reading Railroad.

But getting in touch with Neil proved difficult. Not because I didn't know where Dollarton was, but because the people I called for his number – the people I was told would know him – scoffed. They said that Neil no longer 'had it', that booze and pills had melted his fingers; that inviting him to perform would be disrespectful, exploitive, because "the man's off his rocker, you know" – "whacko" – "in name only," etc. So I dropped it. A few years later, while at Scott Watson's house, I saw a collage Neil had made from a letter found in his medical records – one doctor telling another how astounded he was that a man who had devoted so much of his life to drugs and alcohol (Neil) was not only alive, but in full possession of his faculties.³

I tell this story not to mythologize Neil but to rescue him from those who know him – who choose to remember him – as one thing: jazz pianist. Not that one has to work very hard. As some Vancouverites will tell you, Neil (like the late Roy Kiyooka) is one of our city's greatest artists at large, someone who, like Duchamp, arrived in one medium, only to impress in another – and what that looks like, to do both, to be post-medium.⁴

As I said, Neil's career spans almost sixty years, from his return to Vancouver after the Second World War, to today, where he has for the past few months been contributing to meetings in advance of the Fourth Vancouver Performance Biennial, a festival that hopes to present him as the kind of artist performance attracts. It is during the biennial that we will get an overview of the artist's life and work: a conservatory-trained musician who, in 1952, opened a jazz club because there was nowhere else to play⁵; his travels in 'hardbop', jamming with the likes of Carl Fontana, Art Pepper, and Sonny Redd; his collaboration and recording with poet Kenneth Patchen (before Ginsberg and Kerouac attempted similar projects); and then, in the early-1960s, his reckoning, his dissatisfaction with modal music and the road jazz was taking, his decision to quit playing changes and...

In a 1970 Coda interview, Neil talks about this reckoning, figuratively exploding at the beginning of the sixth paragraph. Suddenly he's running down the Halls of History, shouting names – *Charles Ives and Henry Cowell; Duchamp and Stravinsky; Satie, Virgil Thompson, John Cage; Wagner and Webern*. He is seeing parallels between writing and painting; decrying technology and the erasure of the fingerprint; lamenting stasis in the avant-garde. Yet these are not the ravings of a mad man but someone who has been thinking, reading, researching, questioning the things jazz music could only tap a cane at, like a blind man searching for a park bench.

But what strikes me, what resonates, is not the proper names or the broad reference range – Artaud, the Dadaists, Beckett; nor an artist exploring convergence where others seek fences. Nor quitting music to re-educate himself (as Sonny Rollins did, when he stopped recording and touring to wander Brooklyn Bridge at night, blowing his horn until he'd re-learned it) – none of that. What strikes me – what resonates! – is the sentence from the sixth paragraph of the Coda interview. You can almost see the veins in it.

But if you could conceive of a music that could not be written down (that may seem like a truism of a cliché) it seems to be a gigantic mental leap to think of the fact you could play configurations and patterns, let alone get into anything else in any kind of state of being where you might be able to express beyond that.⁶

I have read this sentence twenty times now, and each time I read it something new happens. Although the subject is music, it carries no note (a tune, yes, but no notes or sound to speak of). Because it was transcribed it is closer to thought – awkward, overlapping – than writing. But as writing it is visual, and there are things to look at. Like I said, veins – but veins feeding driftwood, scrapmetal, rags. There are corners, but as I have yet to see their ends, I cannot say if they are a part of a frame. If I were to recreate it, without words or sound, it would be like assemblage, collage.

In the three years prior to the Coda interview, Neil, performing with bassist/producer Richard Anstey and drummer Gregg Simpson as the Al Neil Trio, had begun a series of improvisational sessions, the most successful of these being "Horse Opera" (1967), a mix

of ‘live’ playing, Neil’s spontaneous narration, with samplings from a turntable, operated by Simpson.

Here is the text from the opening minute of “Horse Opera”:

Okay it’s Saturday night and this is Big Sam Finestein the Third and we’re down there on President Johnson’s ranch and we’re gonna get together the greatest epic western that’s ever been done before and President Johnson has allowed us the run of the Pedernales River that runs alongside the ranch there. Right now Bela Legosi’s having a swim and Rin Tin Tin is flicking his tail at Roy Roger’s great horse Pegasus. What we gotta do is think us some new scenes and we gotta get them looser and we gotta arrest everybody that doesn’t get the possible sequence together before it starts.⁷

“Horse Opera” is an important and prescient work, not only for its use of turntables as a source instrument, its Pee-Wee’s Playhouse-style environment, or its pursuit of the contextual riff-scape (later popularized by such proto post-rock bands as The Mothers of Invention), but as a sonic cousin to the visual collages, assemblages, slide and video works Neil exhibited as part of his first solo show, *West Coast Lokas*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1972.

Although he had been working with visual artists leading up to *Lokas*⁸, the show marked the arrival of Neil as an artist at large. Indeed, while jazz music was importing new cultures and fusing with rock, Neil was speaking visually, performing not as a buttoned-down sophisticate or an image-indifferent jazz snoot, but as a football-helmeted shaman, a bushman living in the footprint of Dollarton’s other Mod-squatter, Malcolm Lowry.

Neil’s production continued through the Seventies and Eighties, but the world was quickly changing. ‘Free market’ economies were expanding, and with this expansion came the decline of political borders. However, the decline of these borders brought new borders – and this was certainly the case in the arts, where lines that had once kept media distinct – lines dispensed with during the Sixties – were being redrawn. Nowhere was this more apparent than at the Vancouver Art Gallery, where, in the mid-Seventies, incoming director Luke Rombout announced that the gallery would no longer be a site of experimentation – be-ins, happenings, performance – but a place for visual art.

By the end of the Seventies, galleries and collectors had grown tired of the cool, deadpan strategies of minimal and conceptual art. In its place, neo-expressionism and figurative painting rose. Looking at Neil’s collage work from the mid-1980s we see the market’s effect. Suddenly the artist is using higher quality paper, and the collages that once intrigued critics were beginning to look less like “pages of a biography” and more like artists his work had been compared to – Motherwell and Rauschenberg⁹. This, I think, had less to do with Neil than the times.

In the early Eighties, Vancouver was remaking itself for Expo ’86, a world’s fair conjured up by our provincial government to facilitate the shift from a resource-based

economy to one built on service. Like Trudeau's 1970s invocation of the War Measures Act, Expo '86 provided a rationale for all sorts of social engineering (kicking pensioners out of their homes, massive cuts to health and education, increased spending of federal transfer payments on infrastructure). Expo was an ideological smoke screen – just as the upcoming 2010 Olympics will provide a similar rationale.

Last week I saw a picture in the newspaper of one of Neil's contemporaries, the architect Arthur Erickson. Erickson – who, like Neil, was born in Vancouver in 1924 – was standing beside a maquette of a building he and his partners had recently presented to City Hall. The building, a magnificent twisting tower, had just been approved, and Erickson seemed pleased that it would be ready for the new Olympic-era Vancouver. This was a very different Arthur Erickson than the one who spoke so bitterly at the memorial for former Vancouver Art gallery curator Doris Shadbolt the year before. Bitter not because he despised Doris Shadbolt, but because the institution that once employed her had postponed his retrospective two years, on account of a designer whose show required more resources than thought necessary.

The Vancouver Art Gallery has not offered Al Neil a retrospective. But these are different times. Nowadays buildings speak louder than sounds, pictures or words, and Neil's practice is not big and clean and vertical, but small, horizontal and messy – like the artist himself. Yet Neil is not disappointed. To be disappointed is to have expectations, and the only expectations Neil ever had were between him and the work.¹⁰

If this year's performance biennial is successful, it will do more than celebrate the life and art of Al Neil - it will make an argument for the kind of artist we once saw (and heard) more of, someone who explored the potential for convergence between mediums, someone for whom the object of being an artist is not what to make but how to make it. An artist at large, not some dead guy from nowhere who once played jazz piano.

¹ The press kit I am referring to was given to me by Glenn Alteen, which was given to him by Carole Itter, last year.

² Dollarton (or Dollar's Town, after it's founder, the logger Robert Dollar) lies just east of the Second Narrows Bridge, on the north side, in an area laid claim to by the Burrard Inlet Band. It is also where Malcolm Lowry wrote much of *Under the Volcano*. In the Sixties, the Dollarton mudflats was the site of a showdown between the municipality of North Vancouver and a group of young squatters living in shacks. One of those shacks appears in Ian Wallace's seminal photo triptych "Melancholie de la Rue",

³ The collage is called "Doctor Bogoch's Conclusion" (1982).

⁴ I use the term "artist at large" after De Duve's use of it, in his essay "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint", from *Kant after Duchamp*, MIT: Cambridge, Mass., 1996.

⁵ The Cellar Jazz Club, where Neil led the house band.

⁶ — "Sacred and Profane", interview with Bill Smith, *Coda Magazine*, February, 1970.

⁷ "Horse Opera", from *Retrospective: 1965-1968, Al Neil Trio*, Blue Minor Records, 2001.

⁸ Neil mentions Sam Perry, Gary Lee Nova, and Dallas Selman, along with Intermedia, as artists he worked with.

⁹ Watson, Scott. "Three Masks for Al Neil", *Origins*, Vancouver: Western Front, 1989.

¹⁰ From a documentary interview, shot at the artist's home, July 17, 2005.