

WRITING ABOUT AL NEIL: SCOTT WATSON
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1.

In writing about Al Neil for the occasion of this exhibition I want to set into motion more than one level of inquiry and activate multiple voices. This would be more interesting than attempting to serve as a medium for the work, explaining it, rationalizing it, inserting it in this history or that, aestheticizing it, advocating, normalizing, getting it right or wrong in the process. Neil isn't a famous artist. A situation which disappoints me more than him. Just why an artist who has had the influence Neil has had is not a part of the canon is a potentially bitter subject – certainly his anti-authoritarianism has something to do with it. If he were more well-known, validated, legitimated, whatever, there would be an institutional frame and a history of that legitimization: at acceptance and reception would be "history". But this hasn't happened. Neil's career is a pile of debris with much of the work lost and undocumented. Although Neil is emblematic of a stance and a point of resistance for Vancouver artists, another affirmation of the value of that stance would be also quixotic, doomed by actuality, the non-effect of the resistance: it would encircle everything in the declaration of yet another arrival, another recuperation, another fake reconciliation, another slackening of attention, another enthusiasm.

Al is sort of a cult figure in Vancouver, so the work does

have a mode of reception. In our limited context AI is seen as a voyant–shaman, the heroic actor in a drama of avant–garde dissolution, a deviant whose deviance puts him in touch with spirit worlds and the well–spring of myth. In the art world we like to think that such figures appear in response to the demands of art itself. That is, AI becomes the representative of the truth value of art and the possibility of the authentic expression of an authentic self as resistance. However, this kind of figuration is, if one thinks about it, but one term in what Walter Benjamin would have called a dialectical image. The other is that figure in the dominant culture who corresponds to the voyant–shaman of the avant–garde – the entrepreneur. There is a parallel between the anarchic individualism of the entrepreneur, the “magical”, dare–to–be–great attempt to construct identity not from ethical standards or a relationship to one’s fellows, but from inner resources alone, and the projection of the figure of the artist as a figure of isolation working against the norm.

Thus one can, if one wishes to be unsparingly reductive, dissolve the figure of Neil in a critique that will describe him as a reflection of what is dynamic and determining in the economy at large. There are, after all, many points of interchangeability between the entrepreneur and the voyant avant–garde artist, while at the same time one is also the obverse of the other. If both are fascinated with psychic technologies, ancient and modern, the uses to which these technologies are put constitute a real polarity. The entrepreneur builds a megalomania, a narcissistic and infinitely greedy ego in pursuit of power and material wealth. He stands at the very centre of capitalism today, The voyant sets out to destabilize the ego, and derange the self in order to assume a pathetic powerlessness. “I am

another,” declared Rimbaud. The voyant artist allies himself with the outcast. The entrepreneur manipulates the system and the voyant refuses it.

But Rimbaud, the archetypal voyant, who is a model of sorts for Neil, is highly problematic in just this area. He is both voyant and entrepreneur, poet and gun-runner, alchemist and slave-trader. The spiritual exploration of the unknown that Rimbaud announced as a poet became the literal exploration of Africa as an agent of European imperialism. Thus the two figures are found conflated in one life at the site of origin of the theory of the voyant.

The figure of the shaman, which also attaches itself to Neil, is equally problematic. A host of questions are raised when avant-garde practice becomes identified with shamanism, and certainly the case of Neil is not unique. It involves the identification of the artist with a cultural “other”. This identification ought to be seen against the background of reality; that is, actual relationships between the dominant culture of Canada and its native peoples. This polarity is larger than the one between avant-garde artists and mainstream culture; the real situation of native people in Canada is hidden by the appropriation of cultural practices, such as shamanism, into the lexicon of the avant-garde. On the surface of it, shamanism and native cosmologies are brought forward as correctives to the empirical/imperial outlook of western culture. But beneath the surface, along with the long and shameful history of Canada’s treatment of its native people, lies the use of ‘culture’ to ignore social reality. Thus, the use of this figure to describe someone like Neil is contaminated with an unwitting imperialism. Neil operates within and without these figurations: voyant, shaman and entrepreneur, as well as many others (soldier, junkie, patient, be-bop

pianist, come to mind). The collages which Neil has been working on for the past seven years are a series of disguises, “masks”, as Neil calls them. The masks, if they relate to the typologies I bring to them, are not worn in order to be animated, but to be erased. Nonetheless, these figurations have guided the work and determined its development. There is an early (1982) collage on the wall in my study. It is a portrait of Proust, called *Proust (fake)*. It is this gesture of cancellation which dominates Neil’s work.

2.

I’m looking at a letter I received from Al about 15 years ago (we first met in 1957 – I don’t recall the meeting). The text is scrawl, evidence of some extreme distress, delirium or ecstasy, some awful and terrible recognition. The text on one page, written over a network of vaporous and ghostly scribbles, reads, “We are here we are here we are where????? where?” A diagram is superimposed over this script of chattering voices, arrows point this way and that, three cancellation crosses over the words “where”, “we”, “are”, are stacked, spine-like in the middle of the page. The letter was admonitory. I had published a review of Ed Sander’s book on Charles Manson, *The Family* (because Sanders was a member of The Fugs, a poet in the Olson circle, etc.), and Al took exception. I can’t find the review, and it doesn’t really matter; what was irritating about it to Al can be seen in his response. “There is no proof,” he wrote, “in your few brilliant paragraphs as to any ‘ultimate evidence against drugs’. You know this without me calling up Poe, Baudelaire, de Quincey, Rimbaud, Artaud, St. Aquinas, etc.” Then in faint pencil and parentheses, his own name is added to this list. The list is a list of writers. Al has always been more at ease seeing himself as a

musician first, secondarily as a writer, and only as an artist if you say so. (The three artistic roles – writer, musician, artist – correspond to the metaphorical constellation that is used to mythologize them; voyant, shaman, entrepreneur.)

The writers are all voyant. As Rimbaud described it, “To arrive at the unknown through the disordering of all the senses, that’s the point.” (letter to Izambard, May 13, 1871.) The point being to dismantle the bourgeois construction of self and identity and to explore unproductive being. (I have already noted that the entrepreneur is, in turn, constructed out of the voyant). This “systemized disorganization”, as Yves Bonnefoy calls it, is the quest, the motive energy for AI the collager of indexes, sacred maps, old and discredited cosmologies, and the broken categories of the Enlightenment.

This disorder is in dialectical relationship with an invisible order that is called into appearance and then swiftly cancelled out again. One thinks of two opposing volumes in the large library that informs AI’s work. The surrealist Kurt Seligmann’s book on the occult is one source for the heaps of ruination in AI’s collages. The dislocated aping of kabbalist signs, maps of the cosmos fragmented and inverted, are ‘systematic’ challenges to the void, to the absence of the sacred. This absence is voiced in Samuel Beckett’s plays and novels which register modern consciousness as emptiness. (I remember AI gleefully brandishing a letter from Beckett’s agent denying him permission to perform *Krapp’s Last Tape*, which, of course, he had already performed.)

As theoreticians of disorder, nihilism, and the aesthetic of dissonance as a new consciousness, Dada has been important to AI since he read Robert Motherwell’s

anthology in the early 1950s. (Al comes to this material at about the same time as his contemporaries, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly.) Although his name does not appear in Motherwell's book, through German Dada Al would have met the ideas of Freud dissident Otto Gross, an early critic of gender roles and self-declared enemy of patriarchy. It was Gross who so impressed Raoul Hausman with his sociopschoanalysis before the senior Herr Gross, a criminologist and also friend of Freud's, had him committed to an asylum. (Jung signed the commitment papers, but this is another story.) Gross disputed Freud's construction of the self-contained individual whose psyche was determined in infancy by inner libidinal hydraulics that responded to familial stimuli. He thought, more modernly, that moderns were made out of each other and contemporary history – that we are dynamic centres absorbing and rejecting, constructing and dismantling provisional selves from the information overload that washes over us every day. We are socially constructed and therefore can only reconstruct ourselves through social change and resistance to norms rather than by adjustment to them. This heretic psychoanalysis was adopted by the artists and writers who became German Dada. It informs the way they collage and montage, dismembering and reassembling the human figure with newspaper headlines and mass produced consumer products. This is part of what Al's imploding, exploding heads are all about, although superimposed over them are dense images from heavenly maps and an attempt at cultural biography.

Elsewhere in this catalogue Al writes about the importance of René Dumal, another surrealist voyant-visionary, and about his relationship with Kenneth Patchen and the jazz greats of the fifties and sixties. Suffice it to

say that jazz and collage are interchangeable for Al. He refers to “collaging at the piano”, and to both music and collage he brings the same inclusive but disordering strategies to produce dissonant “fields”, (a term Al uses and which calls to mind Cage and Black Mountain), to record “what’s going on”.

Besides the global influences of Dada and Surrealism that circulated even so far as this coast in the fifties, the local figures, Malcolm Lowry and Emily Carr, count for a great deal in Al’s own arrangement of a personal tradition. There are obvious interests in alcohol as a consciousness expanding drug and in the Kabbala which tie him to Lowry. Since 1966 Al has lived in a boathouse beached on Dollarton’s intertidal flats, choosing to reside in Lowry territory, as it were. The intertidal zone is the location from which Al views nature. (It is there, more than anywhere, that one is reminded of the gravitational pull of the moon and the origins of life.) Carr serves as Al’s anima, a complementary and interiorized feminine other whose pagan pantheism (which she, in turn, derived from Whitman) is the paradigm for an idealized, but culturally stripped, rapport with nature.

As a kind of regulating force for all these influences, and in the quest for truth through a disorganization of the senses, there are the Tantric practices which have guided Al for close to thirty years. Sometime in the early sixties he read, “under the influence of speed”, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and, in his words, came “in a flash of misunderstanding” to the science of Kundalini management. The correct alignment of the charkas which join the body and soul to the world in Tantric somocosmology, became the basic, if broken, order of composition in practically every collage and assemblage Al

has made. The proper management of Kundalini energy, which has its seat in the genitals and can be used to heal the mutual denial of the body and spirit or be dispersed in acts of lust, power and/or evil, has come to be his image of order against which the disorder of the world is measured. It is an order superimposed on Dada modernism as a trace or vestige of a redeeming anti-enlightenment body of knowledge which exists only as ruin, debris and fragment, and which can only be had through “misunderstanding”. Thus the view of “history” in Al’s collages is battle between good and evil, demons and angels; at least that is the metaphorical cast implied by the image.

3.

The current collage activity began in 1982. (A previous period of activity resulted in the body of work, now largely lost, destroyed, transformed, that he showed at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1972.) I remember seeing the new works at Carole Itter’s house and how excited I was by them. They registered something rare. They reminded me of Michaux, Wols and Artaud – desperate recordings of an “other” language. At the time I was having a long conversation about Bataille with Roy Arden and he was also excited by Al’s work; we both saw it in the context of Wols war-wounds and Bataillan excess. Roy went on to write an article (Vanguard, April 1985). Al seemed, at the time, to be uncomfortable with my, our, willingness to locate what he was doing in a “ready-made” sensibility of disorder and excess which was, for him, contained by art historical description. He showed me his mocking satiric drawings, hopelessly inept (Klee, Kandinsky, etcetera) pastiches which he presented as “fakes”. Al was also nervous about the collages being considered as “art”.

Whenever he talked about “art” it was as an entrepreneur who stood outside a game that was already “fixed”. He understands the amorality and gangsterism of the art world and sees himself as a poor player. He realized that it would be through some sort of “construction” that related him to whoever – Rauschenberg, Wols, Bataille – that a context would be provided for the legitimization of the collages. The point was, was it worth it? When does mastery of the game turn into mastery of the player by the game? The works relied on a delicate mastery of energies. The look of them reflected this tension between a refined modulation of delicate distinctions and forces of wreckage, ruin and struggle. Another way to put it is that they relied on a balance between the real and the fake. The “context” of art history was “fake”, the autobiography “real”; Aesthetic manipulation of the materials for effect was “fake”; registration of acceptance and resistance to “what’s going on” was “real”.

New collages were shown at the Western Front in 1983. He sold all the work there and then began showing annually at Bill Jeffries’ Coburg Gallery. The early collages (1982–83) contain material from personal archives and are mounted on crummy, at-hand papers. Sometime after the Western Front show Al began to use large sheets of Fabriani paper as the ground for the collages. And, to be frank, he began a process of aestheticization that has, on the one hand, allowed his collages to snuggle up beside Robert Motherwell’s (which they do in one local private collection) without making the Motherwell’s look “fake”, which they are. On the other hand, their claim to “authenticity” is diminished as they incorporate more marketing-style decision-making processes, like xeroxes of archival material (which allows duplication of the

reference to meet market demand). Imagery is now hunted down for a priori themes; self-citation appears more and more as parody. It is a development that doesn't make the work look less interesting or important. Rather, it is impossible to imagine how this could not have happened. But the voyant is becoming the entrepreneur. As time goes on and the number of existing collages increases (300 is a rough guess), the weight of the existing work bears down on present production. Whatever they add up to threatens to appear. (I haven't asked, but I imagine death itself will close the project.) "I think of them as pages of a book," Al says now. They always were manuscripts, pages of a biography. Thus, for the better part of a decade Al's been engaged in a project with a single summary trajectory - to gather together the strands of his life and knowledge. They weave together a long history in Vancouver, his experience as an enlisted man in the last war, his life as a musician, his comic interchanges with the administration of the world as it diagnoses his body, his preparations for death, origins, indexes and lists that contain the potentiality of the name and the demolition of enlightenment reason, and all framed by the bloodbath of modern history and the incantation of useless tantric spells which save the man but do not dispel the terror.