Introduction to the Special Issue "A Tribute to Louis Armand"*

David Vichnar and Matt Hall

> *A poem exists solely to create a situation of* poiesis, *of bringing into being, of becoming.*[*]

Louis Armand is a cousin of British artist Charles Gosford, who chaired the London Artists' Union from 1976-1980. His great-aunt, Annie Acheson, and his aunt, Rhonda, were also artists, as was his maternal grandmother Clarice Farr. The publisher of the *Forbes Gazette*, Samuel Sidney Smith, was his great-grandfather while his great-grandmother, Antonia Cosulich, belonged to the Fratelli Cosulich shipping family in Trieste. By marriage (to the theatre scholar Clare Wallace) he is related to the 18th-century literary critic William Hazlitt.

Armand studied painting from a young age, attending night classes at a technical college while still a school student. He began exhibiting in local shows at 14 and had his first one-man show in Prague in 1999, followed by four more and a number of group showings, including the Prague Art Fair. His mother's musical influence led him to study flute and piano, before later taking up guitar and violin. He began writing songs at the age of ten, which later gave rise to an interest in poetry. In 1988 a choral piece that he co-authored with Matthew Moore became the official bicentennial anthem of the NSW Department of Education and was performed by school choirs across the state. He was a member of the band KLASS, recording an album in 1989 entitled *Rhapsody in a Modern Life*.

In 1990 he confounded expectations by attending university on a physics and maths scholarship. While a student he maintained a studio and continued painting, while editing the university newspaper and later becoming president of the SRC. After switching to a degree in English literature and critical theory, he graduated with a first-class honours degree and gained a travelling scholarship that allowed him to pursue doctoral studies in Prague in 1994 (a controversial decision at the time; he had also turned down a British Commonwealth Scholarship in favour of having the freedom to pursue a life in art in the post-communist city).

His first publication in a literary journal was from a sequence called *Empire of the Crow*, which appeared in 1990 in *Poetry Australia*: the journal's editor, John Millett, would remain a correspondent for many years and a significant influence on Armand's education in recent and contemporary Australian poetry, introducing him to the work of John Tranter and Jennifer Maiden, and many of the so-called "Generation of '68."

On arriving in Prague he met a number of Czech writers, including Ivan ("Magor") Jirous, Lukáš Tomin, Ewald Murrer, Bohumil Hrabal, Ivan Klíma and Miroslav Holub. Holub became a supporter and wrote favourably about his first collection of poetry, published by Twisted Spoon Press in 1997. In 1996 he was included in a "Pacific Rim" issue of *Sulfur* magazine, edited by Marjorie Perloff and also included work by D.J. Huppatz and John Kinsella, two poets

---

[*] This, together with all other section mottos in this introduction, is a quote from the editors' private correspondence with the author, Louis Armand.

with whom he subsequently entered into correspondence—in the case of Kinsella, this correspondence extended to two collaborative volumes of poetry, *Synopticon* (2012) and *Monument* (2020).

Armand met Kinsella in Cambridge in 1997 and again in 2000 when attending the CCCP (Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetics), where he exhibited a series of collage works ("Indirect Objects") alongside pieces by Brian Catling. In Cambridge he also met Jerome Rothenberg, Keston Sutherland and Véronique Vassiliou (whose work he had previously translated in the *Prague Revue*).

In 1995 he spent a month in NYC, frequenting the International Center of Photography and the Poetry Project. On subsequent visits he met Steve Dalachinsky, Bruce Andrews, Pierre Joris, Marjorie Welish, Charles Bernstein and many others, including Edmund Berrigan, with whom he would co-edit *VLAK* magazine from 2010-2016. In 2001 he edited a special issue of *Litteraria Pragensia* on Contemporary Poetics, which was expanded into a book for Northwest University Press and brought together many of the writers Armand had formed a relationship with in the US, UK and Australia, presenting an "internationalist" vision of contemporary anglophone poetics.

Having travelled through Morocco in 1994, Armand's novel drawing on his experiences there, entitled *The Garden*, was published in the UK in 2000 as the inaugural title in the Salt Modern Fiction series. In 2000 he was included in a landmark "generational" anthology of 30 Australian poets born after 1968, *Calyx*, edited by Pete Minter and Mike Brennan, and published by Robert Adamson's Paper Bark Press. His work would subsequently be included in a number of anthologies, including the *Penguin Anthology*, edited by John Kinsella, and significant anthologies from the University of Queensland Press and Puncher and Wattmann.

I

> *The only creative pathway that ever appeared in any way viable for me was one where artistic activity existed in an open field, not one bounded by obligations to some arbitrary authority, of tradition, marketplace, medium or genre.*

Ever since his move into the city in 1994, in both his fiction, essays, and work as editor and publisher, Armand has worked tirelessly to spread awareness of the riches of the Prague Anglophone scene. To illustrate how complexly productive his Prague inspirations have been, below is a brief walkthrough Armand's three recent Prague-explicit works of fiction.

His novella, *Breakfast at Midnight* (2012), is set in "Kafkaville," the "other" Prague that is not to be found on tourist postcards: mostly Žižkov and Libeň, with a few excursions into the nightlife of Holešovice and Trója. The genre is "acid noir," as the "reality" of so much of the narrative is drug- and/or insomnia- or hallucination-induced, its plot construed of the many vision/memory assemblages, montages of leitmotifs recurring in feverish flashbacks of an unnamed narrator trying to put to rest the many ghosts of his traumatic past. The modernist aesthetics of fragmentation is employed together with another staple modernist device—a mythological intertext functioning as a grid by which to structure the narrative. This is evident in its segmentation into 24 chapters (after *Ilias* and *Odyssey*) and the fact that its last chapter is set in the eponymous Prague quarter of "Trója" (Czech for "Troy"), as well as in minor motifs: the barge on the Vltava temporarily inhabited by the protagonist is called GORA, an acronym for the fabulous ARGO. Franz Kafka is also thematically present in *Breakfast at Midnight* via

a shared narrative concern with paternity and parricide (the chief intertext being Kafka's "Letter to Father"). However, there is also a more playfully textual, translingual connection established via the motif of the *jackdaw*, "the shadow of a great oppressive black bird, eclipsing everything" (*Breakfast at Midnight*, 72), which in another scene is "speaking to me, but I can't make out what it's saying" (*Breakfast at Midnight*, 120). This inability to "make out what it's saying," this misunderstanding, stages the translingual content of the jackdaw motif: famously, the Czech for jackdaw is *kavka*, the etymological origin of Kafka's surname, itself a misspelling of the Czech ornithological appellation. The jackdaw's emissions remain, unlike the refrain of Poe's Raven, not of human language, but "gurgling craw-sounds, words lost in transmission" (*Breakfast at Midnight*, 121). Thus, what drives its many explorations of words and meanings lost-and-found in transmission is *Breakfast at Midnight*'s self-conscious positioning *between* languages and traditions.

Armand's 100-chapter novel *Cairo* (2014) features Prague in tandem with the cityscapes of New York (post 9/11), London (post-post-blitz), the titular Cairo (post-apocalyptic), and Armand's "native" Australian outback. An exploration of Armand's pet "acid noir" neo-genre, this time from a decidedly sci-fi perspective: The narrative's central peg on which all the five storylines hang, is the premise of an asteroid (or a satellite from the future?) hitting New York's Ground Zero. A one-in-a-billion chance, verging on the impossible, and yet taken as a "real" starting point. The opener, "Everything about it seems fake and yet too-real" (*Cairo*, 1) is a clue to the entire book in that most if not all of its tone, imagery, characters, motifs are "fake": not necessarily in the sense of "simulated" (although that plays an important role, of course), and even much less "derivative," but "parodic."

The novel engages in a colossal parody/pastiche of the genres, milieus, tropes, and motifs it reworks. The fake/real dichotomy stands at the opening of the London storyline, whose opening features "a Messerschmitt 109, Battle of Britain vintage" flying across the city with an advertisement campaign billboard slogan: "We're back! With more direct flights between London and Berlin than ever before!" (*Cairo*, 11) another fake-taken-for-real motif that is absurd, outrageous, and politically incorrect. In the Australian plotline, we follow Lawson, a half-Aboriginal astronomer, with her meditations on the white man's burden and the colonialist / racist project that was and is Australia: "She was what they used to call a half-cast, before the whitefella dreamt up subtler words for the same thing. The half used to bother her as a kid. She'd never thought of herself as half-anything … White man's language taught her an existence by ratios. Half-truths. The other half. The lost half" (*Cairo*, 30). In the "Cairo" futurist segment, there is Shinwah, the female robot assassin, whom we first meet at "the Millennium Plaza Hotel. *Praha-haha*. Prague. The plughole of Europe" (*Cairo*, 20), and who provides the sci-fi philosophical framework behind *Cairo*: humanity's project of outdoing itself through robotics. Why plughole? In a futurist Prague, "a series of major floods had earned Prague its moniker as the Venice of Inland Europe. The whole north-side … had been rezoned into a network of canals and waterways" (*Cairo*, 53).

Finally, Armand's monumental novel, *The Combinations* (2016), billed by Equus as "the 'European anti-novel' in all its unrepentant glory … , following in the tradition of Sterne, Rabelais, Cervantes, Joyce, Perec. Kafka's *The Trial* meets Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*," has been hailed as the "ultimate 90s Prague novel" ("the combinations"). It comes in 64 chapters and on 888 pages, on which Armand puts to use his translocal background in order to animate the 20th-century history of so-called *Mitteleuropa* and "Golem City" in its heart of hearts, while applying delightful postmodern trickery to blur fact and fiction.

This electrifying novel zooms readers off to the crazy, ominous place that was Prague, capital of "Cheskoslovnikia," across the 20th century—an oftentimes miserable and dangerous place ruled in turn by conmen, lunatics, warmongers, and war mongrels. As well as before / beyond: there are entire sections on Rudolphine Prague (esp. John Dee and Edward Kelley), on Jan Mydlář, the Thirty-Year War, the 19th-century national revival, TGM, the Čapeks, and the avant-garde, the Heydrich assassination, the Jan Masaryk "defenestration," the February 1948 putsch, the Slánský show trials, an entire chapter of dramatic monologue by "Klem" Gottwald, etc. Or as a footnote detailing the Heydrich episode has it,

> Oh, indeed, it would've been the ultimate, irrefutable, unarguable, supreme monument-of-monuments to the Eternal Greatness of the Nouveau Reich — and of Heydrich, first among them, of course. (Well, who needed a town like Golem City anyway, with its thousand spires-in-yer-eye and brokendown alembics and bald monkeys on yer back?) (*The Combinations*, 447)

In this city of a thousand contradictions there now lives (in the novel's present of the mid-1990s) a certain lost soul, Němec ("the German" / "the dummy")—forcibly separated from his dissident/émigré parents, brought up and "normalised" by the institutions of the regime in the uncaring 1980. Now, set adrift in the 1990s experiment with capitalism with an inhuman face, Němec becomes the unwitting participant in a murder/suicide-pact mystery, and sets out on a hunt after the mysterious Voynich manuscript which may or may not hold the missing clues to Prague's thousand-and-one secrets, past and present:

> 17 November 1989, the Velvet Revolution: a handy-dandy upheaval of the heavenly spheres that brought Golem City from the Cold War to Capitalism's Promised Land. Makes you wanna cry, don't it? (*The Combinations*, 138)

The thrust of the novel's plot is chiefly set in the mid-1990s—i.e. pre-computer and pre-web, but very freshly post-1989—and its playful yet serious provocation is that behind all of the chief 20th-century political ideologies (fascist, communist, capitalist) is the impulse to own truth, to master reality through a certain type of enforced "normality."

The Combinations might be impossible to summarise precisely because it purposefully resists the kinds of "normalised" summarisations that any and every political ideology places on both the individual and the collective. It certainly resists the culture of enforced conformity by making Němec into an anti-hero, a passive plaything of an obscene authoritarianism that masquerades, after the fall of communism, as democracy and the free market. In doing so, Armand's monumental anti-novel raises important issues about the world at large and about the role of literature in it, taking Prague's history as a lesson in personal responsibility to venture beyond one's own immediate comfort zone and not to take anything on faith: "In its dreams, they call Golem City, not the *beloved*, but the *belated*" (*The Combinations*, 698).

II

> *I consider the basis of all of my work to be improvisation and in a very literal sense each of my pieces can be considered improvisations, in different spatiotemporalities, different evolutions, differing degrees of complexity and diffuseness; more or less generic or indeterminate, more of less alienated, more or less "free."*

Armand's writing has always been one to steadfastly defy categorisation. It should be argued that there is an integral attention to and defiance of boundaries—nationalist, identitarian, political, and literary—that implies a coherent and indefatigable response to constraints that animates the shape and affect of Armand's writing. The theoretical, poetic, and theatrical impulses of his work are determinate of its "difficult" status, in that the experience of reading and rereading of Armand's writing has always demanded attention, defied expectation, and pushed the reader into a liminal space outside of their expectations of the text. It has been a shared feeling among many that the project of his literary experimentation was to escape the very idea of literature itself as a transcribed object, with expected alignments, conditions and discourses. Armand's poetry, for instance, always took, most devastatingly, to the notion of confinement with the aim to break free. In critical attempts to situate his writing's concerns and theoretic engagements with antipodean constructs, Armand's work was always displaced: forcefully, self-correctingly. Only gradually, a reading of Armand emerged, which grasped at moments, was informed and guided by mentors in the Australian writing community, but ultimately shed its influences, its preoccupations and—at times tacitly and overtly—its circumscribed locality to align itself with more challenging questions.

Take, for instance, Armand's 'fig. I choisir d'une masse incompréhensible un seul détail speculatif…' a Malevichian Black Square, appearing in a longer sequence title 'Gravity's Aspect' in the book *Inexorable Weather.* This image of a solid black rectangle irradiates the whole body of the poem's space and hangs like lead, anchoring the book in redaction, in resistance; a lucid excision of that which needs to be expressed. The alignment of his interests with the odds and opportunities of the Suprematist movement, with Malevich's Manifesto, with the eschewal of feelings, of representation, was determinedly more interested in a fiery critique of the expression of the self. Armand's structuralist tendencies, his proprioception and investigative attention to and experimentation with language came to the fore in *Inexorable Weather* and *Land Partition*. The integration of and cadenced patterning of poems on artworks—whether of national obscurity or international renown—was a rewriting of an inexorable narrative. Fighting an inevitability, like distancing oneself from one's place of origin, is about building a new narrative, but also about defying expectations. Disabling the intermediary authority that ekphrastic poems rely upon, Armand irrupts and interrogates an aligned obligation to an anterior story, a defiance of the artwork itself.

Transposing an argument from Marc Augé, it could be proposed that from his very early period Armand has been defiantly marked as arriving at an alternate ending to a foregone narrative conclusion. Moving from the representative focus on the land that defines so much of Australian writing, Armand's linguistic experimentation denies the existence of a future literary allegiance reliant on bound modes of expression. In this case, these early books signify the growing gulf between him and the group of Australian writers who would be his contemporaries, and with each successive reinvention Armand seems to have increased his distance. One sees this detachment build from *Erosions* through to prose experiments in *Abacus* and later *The Garden,* where Armand consciously sets aside "anything to do with beauty of expression or aesthetic

feeling," and focuses instead on "the rare opportunity to combine memory and expectation" (Augé, 55), even when his attention is Australian history.

He has always had the linguistic instincts of Maurice Blanchot, or Pierre Joris, perhaps; an alignment which one reads in the evolutions and transpositions of his œuvre and in the distances his writing conveys. So, what claim remains on Louis Armand still being considered an "Australian" writer? As Ali Alizadeh has argued in "Louis Armand and the Limits of Australian Poetry" (Alizadeh, 191), there is little social, cultural or financial merit in being a poet in Australia. Amongst the autolytic cycle of self-consuming recriminations, gossip and ego of a small poetry scene, Armand's reputation has always been one of generosity and leadership. Few Australian writers venture outwards and test themselves amongst the best in the world. Few venture, as Armand has done, to shape the poetic imagination of the country he came from through effort, outreach and dedication. Armand has sought and continues to seek an alternate path.

Many writers have returned from Prague with a suitcase of books, their mailboxes have been visited bi-annually with new titles from Litteraria Pragensia Books, or Equus Press, or *Alienist* magazine*,* and have been given opportunities to write on an international stage, when Armand was editing *Contemporary Poetics*, *VLAK*, or any of his other many publishing ventures. An invitation from Louis has always been a commitment to something larger than oneself; a way to substantiate a belief in poetics as a whole, to grasp the literary world as a lifeline, and perhaps as a way to mark one's experience in dissecting one's knowledge of the world. That so much of Armand's writing and edited works focused on "difficult," experimental, theoretic and ground-breaking works, also meant coming into one's own as a critic whose ethics of attention paid dividends. The invitation carried with it a sustained belief in rigorous academic labour, whose outcomes enlivened the experience of those who engaged with it. That so many of those invitations arrived at the doorsteps of Australian writers, artists, and thinkers, was one way Armand has truly shaped the Australian poetic imagination, even from afar.

Where Armand gets less attention and recognition that he well deserves, certainly from Australian critics, is in relation to his experimental fiction. From *The Garden*, to *Menudo*, through to *Abacus*, *Cairo* and *Glitchhead,* each experimental novel reads as multi-generic composition, interspersing dreams with lyrical utterance, violent byplay with the comedy of contradiction. Each corpus explores and often explodes genre, opens a fractal vision onto a dense webbing of narration and corruptible text cohesion. The integral disorder here is a growing transitivity of agency and a narrative-self suffering image-saturation, grappling with their own synoptic struggle. The unique and identifiable pressures Armand has placed on each prose work play among the registers of vantage, bringing structure, constraint and expression into life. Armand has been writing a compelling vision of an artistic life under the conditions of capital and technology. In what may account for a synopsis of a recent Armand book, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi writes:

> And this mutation of the psychic and linguistic interaction may also be at the root of the contemporary precariousness of life. Precariousness is not only the condition of labour in the age of global deterritorialization, but it is also the fragmentation of the social body, the fracturing of self-perception and of the perception of time. Time no longer belongs to the individual … people are erased, and time is turned into a vortex of depersonalized, fragmentary substance that can be acquired by capital and recombined by the network-machine (Berardi, 49-50).

And so, the question must be asked, given its devotion to experimentation in poetry, in prose, and art that fits no clearly aligned status, no determinable category, how does one begin to consider Armand's œuvre? This question stands as a centralising question in this issue, leading to multiple and paradoxical responses from each contributor. The orientation of an Armand work is always towards a 'you'; whose pathways through any given text are always multiple, whose material, political or nationalistic reading of a text is never singular, and stems from an origin where all directions are possible. The assemblage of text, occupations, pathways, from ambiguity through to deep analysis, is defined by attention. But this path is resistant to easy answers, the immanent effect is a readerly excitement to engage with language experienced as art. It is this condition which defines Armand's attention. The conditions and locality of one's birth are simplistic circumscriptions, whereas language, language has always sought a version of itself outside of imposed boundaries. "It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself" (Barthes, 88). And it is in this voluptuous pleasure of language where one finds Armand alive, boundaryless.

III

> *Writing shld never be embarrassed about being intelligent, it shld be embarrassed about being idiotic.*

The seven essays and two creative responses collected in this issue of *JEASA* are manifold in both their scope—some extensively panoramic, surveying vast portions of the Armand canon (Wolf, Bessière, Brown, Huppatz), some intensively single-text focused (Marshall, Delville, de Highden)—and tenor, ranging from theoretical engagements (Bessière, Delville, de Highden) to meditations and provocations (Wolf, Marshall) to critical dialogues (Brown, Huppatz) to creative responses (Alizadeh, Cohen). Each piece is unique, cogent, and valuable in its own right, as contributors explore different aspects of Armand's creative output, in a shared fascination with its intergeneric "diversity" and multimedial "hybridity," and its programmatic "alienism," marked by the conviction that, if anywhere, "art belongs to the thresholds."

Karl Wolff's essay, "How to Detonate the Novel: A Rough Guide to the Later Fiction of Louis Armand," contends that in his later fiction, Armand has worked towards detonating the novel. In a parody of the oft-quoted phrase, "Form follows function," to Wolf's mind, Armand's "Form follows destruction." In a panoramic overview of the Armand canon ("a history in fragments," his borrowing from Tony Judt), Wolff canvasses several novels via critical vignettes on *Breakfast at Midnight* ("Acid Noir"), *Cairo* ("Conspiracy, Crime, and Paranoia"), *The Combinations* ("The Magnum Opus and/or The *Ulysses* Manqué"), *GlassHouse* ("Mystery, Mayhem, and Mob Violence"), *Death Mask Sutra* ("Plague, Prague, and Papa Walt"), *The Garden* ("Pastiche as Style"), *Vampyr: A Chronicle of Revenge* ("The Pandemic Bite"), and *Glitchhead* ("Chaos and Its Aftereffects"). Wolff's main three points are that Armand's œuvre "does not seek refuge in a single type of fiction (literary / popular), genre (mystery, thriller, epic), or scale (doorstopper, novella)," that it searches for "means of subversion and parody" in the "use of popular genres," and that it "increasingly explodes the novel-form," a tendency that culminates in *Glitchhead*, "a multitudinous, fragmentary textual-and-visual narrative artefact."

Jean Bessière's "'Writing,' Reading, and the 'Equality of Probability' in Louis Armand's Poetry and Fiction" studies various ambits of meaning, writing, and reading in Armand's novels (e.g., *GlassHouse*), poetry (e.g., *Indirect Objects*), and theory (e.g., *Literate Technologies*), in order to tackle the uneasy task of qualifying Armand's corpus. An endeavour that remains

uncertain as, to Bessière's mind, "the manifest calculations which characterise these works' developments do not expose constant rules or constraints, and leave Armand's calculation of their details to the 'equality of probability' … , explicitly thematised in many fictions." For Bessière, this limitation imposed on reading has to do with the "essence" of the "literary," which "begins where metalanguage ceases," and with the paradoxical nature of literary texts which, for Armand, are "at once, kinds of autarchic verbal constructions and multiple series of words which authorize many connections." In that, literature points to its etymological precursor and ally, literacy, which in Bessière's reading of Armand has two components:

> Firstly, the linguistic environments of writing's performances, transferences and readings, and the past and geography which 'writing' implies. Consequently, 'writing' is within literacy, according to its relations to linguistic practices and their past and present backgrounds and their technologies. Secondly, according to Armand, literacy allies the obvious literary construction of poems and fictions with the possibility of an experience.

Ultimately, Bessière suggests that Armand reliably, aggressively challenges conventional literature by imploding the roles of writer and reader; meaning erupts from their interchangeability in tandem with social inertia.

This "aggressive challenge to convention" in literature (at least in the Western understanding of the term) is taken up in Richard Marshall's "Louis Armand's Black Lodge Alienism" in the context of Armand's alienism as "nothing literature," a writing with/of absences, and connected to many a mystical lore of the past. Apart from speculating whether Armand is a Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist, Plenist, kenophiliac, etc., Marshall does paint a convincing picture of Armand as a continuer of the subversive tradition in which it is absence rather than presence that generates meaning and engenders particular effects (and affects) in Armand's writing:

> Armand deliberately finds the empty spaces. He blurs the line between nature and supernature in writings that efface the distinction between somethings and non-things. What are his books and what is culture? Absence conjures magical thinking and feelings of awe. An abyss is an absence that seems to draw you down. Absences can be effects.

In a meditation arriving at propositions reminiscent of Bessière's, Marshall posits that the Armand corpus is one in which "all the parts resist being a whole," "complexity falls apart," and "there are no abstracts." Insofar as his writing does "nothing more than rais[e] possibilities," it is "not asserting anything" but rather "setting us up to think about what might be the case, and filling in some implications." Which is another formula for the adventure of any responsible reading.

In a most Prague-focused piece of those collected here, "Shadows of the Future: Louis Armand's Megaphones of Prague," Michel Delville hails Armand as "the Michael Moorcock of the neo-avant-garde" in that his œuvre has

> become a centrifugal creative force to be reckoned with and which resists generic categorization, as attested not only by his work as a painter and a video artist but also by the verbivocovisual hybridities of his fictional and poetic output, which

often mixes cut-and-collage techniques with edgy, surreal visual elements, found material and complex typographical interventions.

Delville's focus is on the "post-lyric" collection *VITUS*, performing close-readings alongside word/image collages from the poetry book which stems from a 1996 experimental project called "The Megaphones of Prague" and enacts a "psychogeography of Prague." Again, Armand's fusion of poetry, photography, documentary, "guerrilla installation," and other forms of artistry and criticism departs from "traditional, linear notions of the aesthetics and politics of historical representation and commemoration, … dramatizing the spectrality of politics as such in a context of the increasing globalization and virtualization of human activity." In doing so, Armand's multimedia project raises questions to do with the social value of poetry, which to Delville's mind stems from two primary intentions: one, "its refusal to embrace a continuous, self-present notion of the social whole" and two, "its capacity to mobilize meanings and configure strategies that highlight the rhetorical construction of the subject." In interrogating the city's intricate cultural palimpsest in space and time, Armand develops an entire "phenomenology of the city" in which the Derridean "hauntology" becomes not just a working method for social analysis but also "a compositional technique in its own right, one which develops a wide methodology for understanding temporal and spatial stresses, cultural displacements, and experiential shifts."

Delville's Pragocentric essay is balanced by Pam Brown's "Ausland"-centred "Retro Record," a compilation of notes and revised extracts from her reviews, in which Brown takes on Armand's poetry and mixed-media productions, which she contends "are incisive, sardonic, and serious." Brown opens with the provocative question, "What might an Australian writer who has lived in Prague for over a quarter of a century make of Australian culture?" In its light, Brown goes on to read collections like *Letters from Ausland,* whose title puns on, literally in German, "a foreign land" and an abbreviation often used for Australia, "aus," and whose poems "take an assiduously cognitive and imaginative turn that Armand often applies socio-politically," and *Indirect Objects*, which as she shows "is loaded with attempts to transform or restore a destroyed world (where we live) and shares with the reader the proposition that renewal is possible." But not without regard for the past, as "like all Australians, Armand knows the sorrowful history of Australia's settlement as a penal colony and its subsequent development on supposedly unoccupied land." In her overall judgment,

> There is an energetic and curious intellect driving the imaginary in these poems. Armand's analytical and motile thinking upsets conventional expectations. He arranges a kind of sur- or hyperreality and fashions fresh concepts as images and metaphors tumble over each other and extensive transcultural classical and popular cultures combine to make poems that are often reminiscent of large colourful, layered, goopy oil paintings or stacked banks of video screens simultaneously playing different images.

D.J. Huppatz's "In Dialogue with Louis Armand" paints a picture (almost literally—Huppatz also engages with Armand's paintings) of its subject as "a compositor, a composer, a compiler … , a collagist capable of drawing multiple creative impulses and contexts into his dense vortex." Armand's writing, in an elegant formulaic expression, is described as "Scepticism on speed. Radical destabilisation. Work that affirms nothing definitive." Reading Armand's early poetry, Huppatz finds his compositions "not quite random, yet there is no discernible pattern or underlying grid" but rather "disconnected, leftover fragments pulse from the red." In texts as

well as paintings, the fundamental question remains, "What happens when we mash two materials—or media—together?" And in spite of the sceptical or negative outcomes of much of Armand's investigations, Huppatz finds "an affirmation in all this activity. A respond to a demand. A reply to the many who wrote in the past and write today" since what is of import is "the ongoing dialogue. A dialogue opposed to the contemporary confessional tendency marked by a coherent author-subject who recalls significant personal events, people, places, in a clear, 'communicative' language." It might be, Huppatz suggests in a concluding rumination, that Armand's multiple activities and inter-connectedness might be the reason "why he is not famous? In an era where so much potentially available, creative work is conceived, channelled and corralled into ever-narrowing market slices, keeping the singular authorial subject alive has never been more important."

Finally, Jack de Highden's "Armand and Alienism: Generic Détournement, Translocality, and Hyperrealism in Louis Armand's *Cairo*" focuses on the shift in Armand's œuvre, from consisting primarily of poetry and shorter prose, to longer forms of experimental fiction. These longer-forms often mediate through a novelistic, noir genre frame, whilst consistently engaging with such themes as surveillance, the limits of realism, and the phenomenology of place. Highden's article confronts Armandian alienism in detail and demonstrates a scholarly command as he centres on the anti-novel *Cairo*.

IV

> *The Sphinx's riddle can also be understood thus: what navigates time on four feet, two feet, three feet, is poetry. The entire Oedipus "complex" marks the resistance of, or to, a generalised poetics—being the situation of the "subject" in language.*[1]

Marcel Duchamp, having long abandoned art himself, in his final devotion to chess once remarked, "I don't believe in art. I believe in artists." From amongst the poets of the twenty-first century, amongst the self-promotional rants, the in-fighting, and gatekeeping, one is wont to make the opposite claim: "I no longer believe in poets. I believe in poems." What better can be said? That one's devotions, one's memories of place, moment of significance or remembrances, are all marked in the communion of reading, connected to others through acts of the creative imagination. An imagination defined before the advent of AI, before the flourishing of mimetic expression, endlessly replicable across nations and decades, for the same pitiless acknowledgement. A writer like Louis Armand is a *rara avis*, one whose creativity, intellectualism, encouragement and effort continues to shape literary life on multiple continents. It is to this inestimable force that this journal issue is dedicated. To our colleague, our friend, to someone—in the maelstrom of contemporary life—who has the capacity to make one believe in the possibility of poets.

---

[1] From private correspondence with the author

References

"The Combinations." *Equus Press*. https://equuspress.wordpress.com/the-combinations/.

Alizadeh, Ali. "Against Representation: Louis Armand and the Limits of New Australian Poetry." *Antipodes*, 25.2, 2011, p. 191.

Armand, Louis. *Breakfast at Midnight.* London/Prague: Equus Press, 2012.

Armand, Louis. *Cairo*. London/Prague: Equus Press, 2014.

Armand, Louis. *The Combinations*. London/Prague: Equus Press, 2016.

Augé, Marc. *The Future*. Translated by John Howe. London, New York: Verso, 2014.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Vintage Classics, 1993.

Berardi, Franco. *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide.* London and New York: Verso, 2015.

David Vichnar works as senior lecturer at Charles University Prague, an editor, publisher and translator. His latest publication is *The Avant-Postman: Experiment in Anglophone and Francophone Fiction in the Wake of James Joyce* (Karolinum, 2023). His translations from/into English include important works of the French, German and Anglophone avantgardes. He directs Prague Microfestival and manages Litteraria Pragensia Books and Equus Press. His articles on contemporary experimental writers as well as translations of contemporary poetry and fiction—Czech, German, French and Anglophone—have appeared in numerous journals and magazines.

Email: david.vichnar@gmail.com

Matt Hall holds a PhD from the University of Western Australia. He has written extensively on late-modern poetry and poetics.

Email: maffro@hotmail.com