

In Dialogue with Louis Armand

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Abstract:

This essay engages with Armand's texts as well as paintings, portraying their author as a composer, a composer, a compiler, and a collagist capable of drawing multiple creative impulses and contexts into his dense vortex. Reading Armand's poetry as well as painting, for D.J. Huppatz the fundamental question remains, "What happens when we mash two materials—or media—together?" This intermedial dialogue is found opposed to a confessional tendency in contemporary literature marked by a coherent author-subject who recalls significant events, people, places, in a clear, communicative language.

Keywords: Louis Armand; writing; painting; intermedia; genre-mashing.

Melbourne, Australia. Mid-1990s. One day, out of the blue, I got an email from someone called Louis Armand. You did not get many emails in those days. I knew few people with a home modem. Email was exciting. Really. The World Wide Web promised new possibilities of communication and collaboration. Hypertext. Remixes. Rhizomes spread around the globe. But who was this Louis Armand? A writer and artist whose work and interests paralleled mine: modernism, postmodernism, all things avant-garde and experimental. I was part of an artist-run gallery, 1st Floor, and a small-press collective, Textbase. I asked around. Did anyone know this guy? No. Originally from Sydney was all I got. But Louis Armand sounded a French surrealist. Living in Prague.

Prague. Cosmopolitan centre of Central Europe. In the mid-1990s, my only reference point was Kafka. Only later I would read some of the great (underrated) Czech writers: Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval, Josef Čapek, Ludvík Vaculík, and Bohumil Hrabal. Despite a strong creative legacy running through the 20th century, Prague's literary reputation remained marginal compared to Paris, Vienna or Berlin. Aside from its history, in the 1990s, Prague was an unusual place. With the demise of Soviet-backed institutions, the city was in an intense period of rebuilding and reimagining. The Czech Republic's new leader, Václav Havel, was a playwright and dissident essayist before he became president. Such were those heady days when a creative intellectual could become a president. When artists and writers could simply start something. An artist-run gallery, a literary journal, a publishing house.

Séances, Armand's first volume of poetry, published by Twisted Spoon Press in 1998, emerged from this context. The Prague-based press still publishes an excellent catalogue of Central European authors in English translations. Yet geographical location is not a useful frame for considering Armand's work. While some poems in *Séances* contain references to Prague, there are also poems that reference other European cities, as well as places in Australia and the United States. Perhaps an alternative starting point is what these poems are not. We are a long way from the MFA workshops of middle America, confessional poetry or the notion of an artist as a unique representative of a specific culture or nation-state.

It is worth contemplating the title: *Séances*. Dialogues with the dead. Pablo Neruda, Virginia Woolf, Patrick White, Antonin Artaud, Rainer Maria Rilke, Samuel Beckett. All speak via epigraphs, or they are addressed directly via dedications. Are Armand's sparse, spiky verses—among other things—a dialogue with dead writers? Yes, but a dialogue in which the author functions as both a respondent and a conduit:

or that i am the séance myself—
you who are who were & who
will have been—
 waiting at the arrival:
 of the ghost nothing remains—
a name
at the bottom of the page
which belongs to no-one (Armand 1998, 73)

The poem's title, "Zéro de Conduite," refers to a 1933 French film. "Conduite" is almost conduit. Another dialogue. Cross-linguistic. "Conduite" means "conduct" in English. The film, set in a repressive institution, portrays anarchic schoolboys using anarchic film-making techniques. It was banned after its first showing and not seen again for another twelve years. For the reader, the many references in *Séances* to writers, artists, filmmakers and composers might serve to resurrect their work. Intersect with them. Deliver on the promise of hypertext.

Years later, I met Louis Armand in person. A few times in Melbourne. A couple of times in New York in the mid-2000s. Did he look like a French surrealist who lives in Prague? I cannot recall. At some point, we did a reading together at Collected Works, the legendary Melbourne bookstore run by Kris and Rietta Hemmensley. It was an Armand kind of place: a central meeting point for the city's literary culture whose generous hosts held regular readings, launches and events, as well as offering a wide-ranging collection of books from around the world for sale. It was a place of chance discoveries. Self-published pamphlets and limited-edition chapbooks sat next to Penguin Modern Classics.

In 2001, Textbase published Armand's poetry book, *Land Partition*. It is a book about frames, contexts and divisions. Much of its poetry is dense and difficult, as in "Erosion Mimics a Frame" that begins (after a quote from Jacques Derrida)

X marks literalisation of distance, sites—archaeo-
logical? emerging in the ~~present~~ tense
as equipmental photoselfportraiture "speaks"
the abolition of every possible remoteness... (Armand 2001a, 70)

There is a lot to unpack in four short lines. Framing. Erasure. That which falls outside of official histories or institutions. A disintegration. Of what? Meaning? Language?

With a relentless energy, Armand's uncompromising compositions continued over the next two decades. A steady production of single-authored books, theoretical essays and edited collections. They accumulated on my shelf. Creative and critical books that spread across a wide spectrum of forms and ideas. But not only text-based material. Armand also produced paintings, collages, photographs, and films. A visual practice continued in parallel to, and in combination with, text-based practice. It is impossible to summarise or overview such a large oeuvre that spills over into so many realms in a short piece such as this. So how to proceed?

My method in what follows is somewhat like Armand's. Above all, he has maintained a commitment to anti-institutional impulses. Small presses, independent galleries, self-publishing, alternative means of distribution. Not to mention genre-busting books at the intersection of poetry, fiction and philosophy. It seemed wrong to write a formal, academic essay. At the same time, Armand's tendency to avoid the autobiographical and confessional modes made a personal recollection or reflection also seem wrong. Perhaps I should erase the memoirs? Or at least put them under erasure? After all, I have a poor memory. Let me begin again.

Using the Armand books on my bookshelf, I will extract and examine a few threads from what has become a vast tapestry. Who has experienced it all? And if you have, did you catch all the references? The subtle allusions? They are too numerous. Armand has absorbed an impressive swathe of the avant-garde and experimental traditions of 20th- and 21st-century literature, visual art, cinema, photography, and theory. More than a singular writer or artist, Armand is a compositor, a composer, a compiler. A collagist capable of drawing multiple creative impulses and contexts into his dense vortex. Let us start with something simple. Something concrete.

A Painting

I only know one Louis Armand painting (fig.1). I have seen others online, and, like you, I have seen his paintings and collages on his book covers. But this one painting I know well. It has lived in my living room for twenty years. Too personal? OK. It is a landscape-format canvas, roughly 1.5 by 1 metres. A striking field of bright red. The paint is layered and thick. Recognisable fragments emerge from the red field: pieces of newspaper headlines, black and white photographs, scraps of the newsprint era. The composition seems not quite random, yet there is no discernible pattern or underlying grid. Disconnected, leftover fragments pulse from the red. This is not an art of figures and lines or a window to an alternate world but a frameless piece of a boundless field. It reminds me of compositions by John Cage.



Fig.1: A painting by Louis Armand

There are no complete words, only linguistic bits. “PICTUR,” for example, “TH,” “AL” and “IN.” And painted letters: “X,” “Y,” the number “3” and a “\$.” So, it is more than just paint on canvas. It is a composition that combines original brushstrokes and found text, a collage of visual and text-based practices. Up close, the textual and symbolic fragments appear to exist within an enveloping visual field. As if this is simply a piece of a vast universe of such bits and pieces. Partial images. Phonic units. Joyce’s atomistic interrogation of language in *Finnegans Wake*. Sub-lexical. Sub-symbolic.

If you look even more closely, you can see paint drips above and below the fragments. And colours below the surface. A painting worked and reworked. The accretion of layers attests to labour expended. Time spent. Yet this is not the labour of a pop artist or minimalist who agonises over precise lines, exacting geometric forms or flat colours, but a spontaneous process of applying layers of paint and found materials on canvas. Roughly. Leaving traces. Improvisation. Chance discoveries. Jean-Michel Basquiat’s collage of word fragments, serial imagery and raw paint. As always with Armand, this work evokes fundamental questions: what is painting in our mediated age? And what happens when we mash two materials— or media— together?

Poetry

In the next room, two poetry books sit side-by-side on my bookshelf. *Letters from Ausland* (2011) and *Indirect Objects* (2014) both contain—for Armand—relatively conventional poems. Many are written in recognisable forms. Stanzas, couplets, consistent rhythms, even the occasional rhyme. Some refer to places in Australia, Europe, the United States or Mexico. So, as with *Séances*, there is no point adopting national or place-based analysis (as in “Australian poetry,” for example). The intertextual references continue. Now Armand includes contemporary as well as past poets. Dedicated to or “i.m.” Armand continued the dialogue with writers and painters, as well as the occasional philosopher or musician.

But beyond specific places and people, Armand’s poetry consistently approaches something more essential. Existential. In the title poem of *Letters from Ausland*, he asks, “what’s the true substance of our presence?” The title of the poem (and collection) indicates a dialogue a distance. “Ausland” is the German word for “abroad”. Cross-linguistic again. The title poem is a long sequence, comprising ten sonnets, oscillating between abstractions—distance, departure, exile—and concrete details such as:

Jurassic birds
screech in the concrete foliage of towerblocks
smashed from their foundations – the skyline
blackened out under a hulked massif, thick
bituminous smoke: it’s always the places you think of
not people. (Armand 2011, 55)

Armand’s landscapes are rarely picturesque. He seems drawn to remaindered places, industrial wastelands ruined by humans who have long since moved on. Which begs another central Armand question raised in this work: “What is a poet for in a destitute time?” (Armand 2011, 55).

There is the risk of scepticism in this work. As Blanchot put it in *The Writing of the Disaster*, “To write is to be absolutely distrustful of writing, while entrusting oneself to it entirely” (110). This double imperative seems to operate throughout Armand’s work, in the continual disruptions, the erasures and the stepping above or below the imagined scenes on the page. A

slippage between layers of abstraction (beyond the initial abstraction of words themselves) without reaching a conclusion. This can be construed as a negative scepticism. What is the point? Yet there is an affirmation in all this activity. A response to a demand. A reply to the many who wrote in the past and write today.

Doubt about poetry's power or purpose recurs in *Indirect Objects*: "Perhaps we don't know what art is / or does, but the point's to go on as if we will?" (Armand 2014, 57). In a particularly New York referential network, the title refers to Charles Reznikoff, a poet associated with Objectivism in the 1930s, whose sparse sketches of New York street life focused on the disenfranchised, minorities and immigrants. The poem is dedicated to contemporary New York poet and critic Charles Bernstein, associated with LANGUAGE writing and a practice that blurs the boundaries between poetry and criticism, mixes linguistic registers and delights in puns and word play. "It begins in the relation" starts Armand, before launching into a rumination of a walk from the Bronx through Manhattan.

Psychogeography? Situationists and Ian Sinclair come to mind. But this is New York. Frank O'Hara? Allen Ginsberg? I remember a slim volume that Armand sent me, *East Broadway Rundown* (2015). It is a collage text that follows a walk suggested by a Sonny Rollins album of 1966. Poetry, photography, jazz. Sonny's retreat after *The Bridge*. A retreat into sound. Under the Williamsburg Bridge. Black and white photographs of Canal Street signage, zigzag of fire-stairs, a lone fire hydrant, trash. Improvisation along a chain link fence. I have a confession. I am writing this in the Reading Room of the New York Public Library (fig. 2).

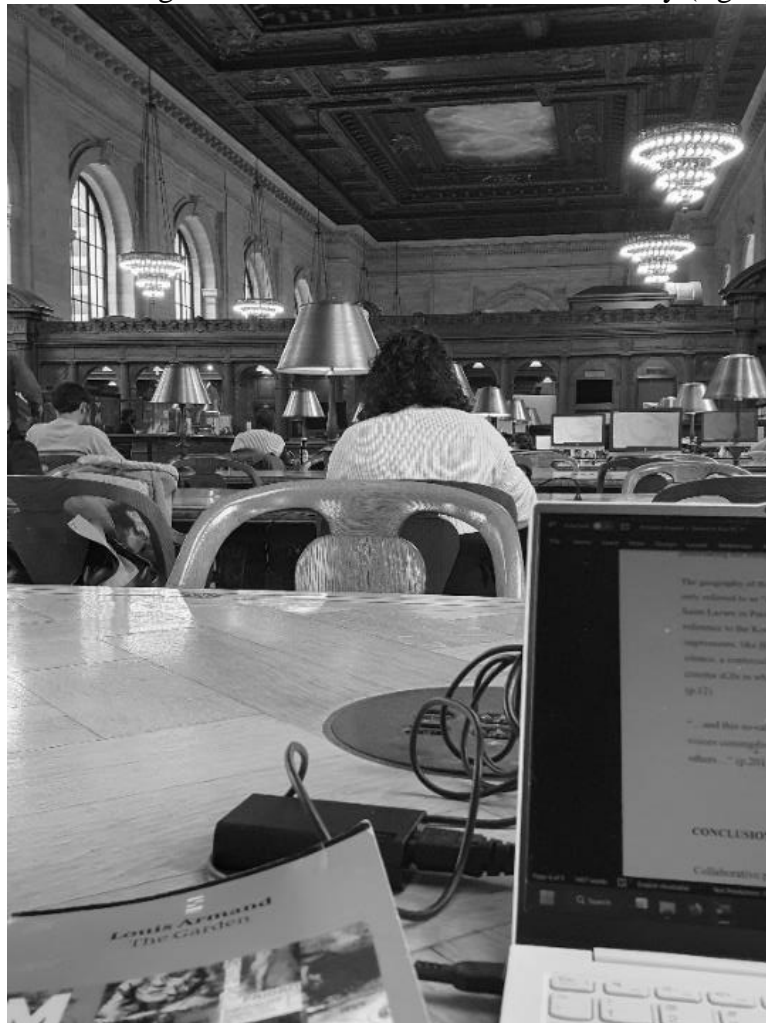


Fig.2: In dialogue with Louis Armand, New York Public Library, February 2023

A vague memory of walking in New York with Louis comes into my mind. We caught up with some friends for lunch in the East Village, but before that, or after that, we walked by Union Square where Louis pointed out the building that housed Andy Warhol's Factory. This connection was sparked by the introduction of another character in "From the Reznikoff Variations," Nat Finkelstein, the photographer responsible for producing numerous iconic images of the Factory's actors. Then Armand introduces Spinoza and Karl Marx, who appear in an unlikely trio with Menudo (see below). The poem goes beyond Reznikoff's poetry of transcribing the visible, instead, combining visual impressions with ruminations at the intersection of numerous artists who have also walked these streets.

Intertwined existential and aesthetic questions, on the poet and on poetry, are central pillars of these two poetry collections. And the other notable feature in both *Letters to Ausland* and *Indirect Objects* is the stream of references to not only other poets and poems, but to painters and paintings, historical and mythological figures, philosophers and composers. Rather than reiterate a litany of names, what is important 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. In this way, Armand's work continues working the seams opened up by certain English-language experimental traditions, specifically, North American LANGUAGE and post-LANGUAGE writing and the "New Australian Poetry" (or "Generation of 68") and its aftermath.

Instead of an authorial subject, Armand engages in both intertextual collaboration with texts of the past (as in a séance) and with living writers. As well as those noted above, a number of collaborative works with poet John Kinsella extend our notion of what a poet might be. Despite many precedents, collaborative works of poetry attract very little attention. Is the poet condemned forever to be a tortured, lonely individual working alone in a Parisian garret? As editor of *VLAK* and *Alienist* magazines, numerous theoretical anthologies, and organiser of various events in Prague, Armand has been anything but a lone poet. Perhaps this is 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.

The Garden

The words of *The Garden* flow in a long thin column down the page, without capital letters, without punctuation, like "...a voice by itself spilling out of nowhere..." (Armand 2001b, 1) Is this another mash-up—a poetic fiction, a prose poem—or is it a kind of "third text" beyond genres? I begin in doubt. Confused. Then a narrative emerges. A "he" and a "she" surface and submerge. They slip between third- and first-persons, as the language slips between descriptions, events, inner thoughts and reflections on the writing process, "...in unexpected directions spreading & overflowing punctuating her thoughts confusing them one instant opening to another..." (Armand 2001b, 3).

The characters sweat. A geography unfolds. Somewhere hot and humid. Memories interject. An incident at the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris. A few phrases in French. Then the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakesh. Is this a love story set in a Moroccan garden? No. *The Garden* contains no flowers, shrubs or vegetables. The action occurs in a hotel room, a hospital and other temporary, anonymous places. Shadowy places. Cigarette smoke lingers in the air, a typewriter, a washbasin. At times, the prose is reminiscent of William Burroughs', "...a masked figure is standing beside a woman stroking his penis but fails to achieve an erection the woman has just

removed a hypodermic needle from her left inner thigh & is now vomiting on the floor...” (Armand 2001b, 44).

The Garden reads like a symphony of images and impressions. The sense of a séance recurs:

...and this so-called interior speech was like the noise of a soukh in m that amassing of voices coming from outside i myself was a public square & through me passed the words of others... (Armand 2001b, 20)

A twilight opera composed of memories, dreams or half-remembered visions. Nightmares. Rather than a botanical garden, the title more likely refers to Derek Jarman’s 1990 film, *The Garden*, an assemblage of images with little dialogue. A poetic contemplation of mortality. In the era of the AIDS crisis. Armand’s garden is similarly filmic and elegiac: “a series of half-formed images like cinema stills in which the subject is constantly moving beyond the edge of the frame...” (Armand 2001b, 12).

A central trauma permeates the book. Like dark matter surfacing. That will not dissipate. It takes a while for the reader to realise that “m”—the “she” character—committed suicide. If *The Garden* is a symphony of images and impressions, the atmosphere it evokes is one of emotional torment and emptiness. Of profound loss: “the realisation that i have indeed been driven entirely by resentment of m the world in general her death everything seems inextricably linked to my sense of loss...” (Armand 2001b, 73).

Despite the lack of places to pause (punctuation marks or paragraph breaks), the cascade of words flowing down each page, you do. Pause, that is. Impressions return, or words recall a scene you have read previously. Words do this too. Corps (“body” in French) slips into corpse. The character “he” is haunted by a recurring image of m’s corpse. And for him—for Armand, for us—her death is not only a tragic existential death but also a literary death: “...his own consciousness seems to flow out exhausting itself in a stream of words a literal death sentence & what if it goes on write until you can’t stand it anymore...” (Armand 2001b, 47).

French writer and theorist Maurice Blanchot described language as inherited, borrowed, essentially powerless. Its meaning is constantly withdrawing. He wrote of “literature’s space” and the risk inherent in creating it:

[L]anguage is not to be heard. Hence the risk of the poetic function. The poet is he who hears a language which makes nothing heard. It speaks, but without any beginning. It states, but does not refer back to something which is to be stated, something silent, like the meaning behind an expression. (Blanchot 1982, 51)

Armand takes on this risk. One possible critique—consistent with the French characters—is a latent Orientalism, in which Marrakesh appears as dark, melancholy background for the French characters: “in the corner an old moroccan was eating a bowl of couscous it was late outside the prostitutes were standing around looking bored the street almost empty i’ve tried to write my way out of this impasse to approach a realisation...” (Armand 2001b, 55) What is it to be French without colonies? Without Morocco? Without Marrakesh? How to write without “m”?

...by an emergence of meaning which is perhaps a mere surface effect concealing the abyss of the seduction of language a récit of the wave’s journey as it draws ever

over to the shoreline the hollow fury of self-annihilation repeated ad infinitum...
(Armand 2001b, 90)

Anguish of Artaud. A painting by Francis Bacon. The impossibility of writing with which so many French writers—Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida—struggled. The rupture caused by the death of God, “Western civilisation,” the author. The suicide of “m.” The impossibility of trying to make sense of it all in writing.

Menudo

I had to Google it. A Mexican soup composed of cow’s stomach and chili. *Menudo* is set in “a row of half-lit cubicles at the back of a cantina” (Armand 2006, 12). Short, terse sentences create a momentum, a rhythm that carries the reader through a noir Mexican city. A roving cinematic eye “unconsciously drawing together all the impressions. instances. moments of awareness. to reconstruct the order of things” (Armand 2006, 9). The lowercase text flattens hierarchies. The present tense reinforces the unstoppable flow of time, the “riverrun” of Joyce’s *Wake*, relentlessly without paragraph breaks. It begins in “the silence after the killing” (Armand 2006, 1).

An atmospheric city. Naked, exposed backstreets and shadowy characters half-glimpsed in lethargy. Flickering fluorescent lights, rusty washbasins. And bodily fluids. Spit, urine, excrement, vomit. The abject. The location of *Menudo* adds to the atmospheric affect. Temple pyramids and echoes of ancient rituals. Violence. And the constant struggle to maintain a stable conscious state due to intoxication, exhaustion or torture: “ankles tied with duct tape to chair legs. mouths smashed in. the smell of cooking oil. latex gloves” (Armand 2006, 66).

Just as *The Garden*, *Menudo* constantly exposes language’s failure to adequately express. To convey, to communicate. The sentence fragments and details create an atmosphere something like the painting I described above. Insistent, words keep emerging. Details appear and fade again. In the manner of Surrealism as described by Andre Breton in the *First Manifesto*:

The fact still remains that punctuation no doubt resists the absolute continuity of the flow with which we are concerned, although it may seem as necessary as the arrangement of knots in a vibrating cord. Go on as long as you like. Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur (Breton, 30).

This trust in “the inexhaustible nature of the murmur” surfaces again and again in *Menudo*. It disrupts the mimetic principle. Background noise drowns out a coherent narrative voice. For Armand, “what matters is that something goes on. Resisting” (Armand 2006, 141).

Although similar, *Menudo* differs from *The Garden* in that it is an intertext concerned with film as well as writing. It is reminiscent of a late Godard film where “frames run into one another. overlap” (Armand 2006, 20). Not surprisingly, Armand writes (in a critical essay) of Jean-Luc Godard and James Joyce in a way that also describes his practice in *Menudo*: “A wholeness that articulates new possibilities of experience. A wholeness constellated out of fragments, atoms of existence: ‘cities, billboards and brand names... a girl’s hair’” (Armand 2013, 18). Modern inventors of the vernacular. Details, details.

Armand ends *Menudo* with a meditative exercise. An attempt to still the murmur:

lie down. eyes closed. breathing deeply. i count the seconds between inhaling & exhaling. then stop. counting nothing. i am struggling to make the mind as empty & blank as possible (Armand 2006, 141).

What is it to embark on a project that seems destined to fail? Writing into a space beyond the author's control, a space where meaning constantly slips from our grasp? For Roland Barthes in "Death of the Author,"

writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (142)

We are immersed in systems of writing that give us the reassuring illusion of understanding. Communication. Control. Writing that seems complete, coherent, stable. There are always minor slippages, of course. That is what makes literature vital. But there are minor slippages, then there is the writing of Louis Armand. Scepticism on speed. Radical destabilisation. Work that affirms nothing definitive. I have certainly experienced something—moving, intense, unforgettable—yet I cannot communicate to you a simple takeaway message. I too struggle to still my mind. Especially here. The ceiling in the Reading Room of the New York Public Library sparks fond memories. I have been here before, joyfully lost in those clouds above. Trying to write. In dialogue with those who have been here before me. Those who are here now. And those to come.

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