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Arjun Von Caemmerer, *Vice Versa*
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All poetry has unknown quality. The word is essentially an experiment. Each textual construct has multiple realities only restrained by imaginative possibility. In *Vice Versa*, a significant work of poetic exploration, Arjun Von Caemmerer asks us to journey beyond language convention and form. Any illusion of singular meaning becomes a playful quality on the page, instigating a textual re-think, and ultimately, unconditional reading. His multi-dimensional work negotiates letter, word and syntax in a ludic interrogation of concrete reality and abstract ideas. Along with an active spatial quality, the work deconstructs meaning, and in this dialogue, openly disrupts the orthodox of traditional poetry. Von Caemmerer offers an epigraph of Emily Dickinson; "I dwell in Possibility.../More Numerous of Windows", almost as if in open invitation.

Vice Versa has ambitious range, with 340 pages, roughly chronological of new and selected poems. The book unfolds into 26 sections, corresponding with a letter of the alphabet. Each section has an implicit co-operation, but also divergence, working with, and against, itself. The early work, from *Two's Kisses* (1992), floats the word/letter on the page as if suspended in a gravity void. Some works disperse while others centrally align or rotate around a central core. There is a gentle literal touch, exploring the word in space by utilising minimalist layouts that reconnoiter both signifier and absent space. The section is completed with a selected arrangement of the 'index of first lines' from *The Collected Poems* of Michael Dransfield, employed on the page in small allotments.

Many of Von Caemmerer's works might be categorised as 'concrete poetry' where typographical form is re-configured in word, construct and explication. *Vice Versa* is full with such examples, notably the central axis; *Lingua Franka*, *Sutra Poems* and *Au Pair*. The poem becomes a functional object, openly displaying textual difference and irregular compositional structure. Von Caemmerer is confident using language and visual disruption in equal measure. While in this there is an underlying poetics, for me this is occasionally impeded by print quality and design. My critique here is personal, a calling for further elucidation of a visual aesthetic in concrete poetry form. In Von Caemmerer's work, the visual narrative – including typographic contortion – is not always fully realised in application. Although textual interplay may be integral to poetic intent, or in fact, the intent itself, my feeling is that often concrete poetry publications

can lack a critical visual overview. I am not soliciting a design homogeneity, or experimental constraint, but a subtle recalibration to book as art/TEXT object.

Vice Versa explores poetry of signifying possibility, with many works re-imagining material edicts of language and reconstructed typographic form. Both word use and poetic structure are opened up as modes of mutual investigation. The authority of poet and role of incumbent reader relocate in active exchange; the writing is meaning in activity, always moving. We are entering a textual discourse of Von Caemmerer's life journey manifest on the page as if in subtle discordance of narrative self. His yoga practice is a constant muse (or musing!) along with musical reverie, including (as the blurb promotes) the "first full blown print release of LINGUA FRANKA, his unruly homage to the late, great Frank Zappa." Von Caemmerer notes his own collaborative performance works with composer/pianist Michael Kieran Harvey and, in this, I imagine a reticulated fusion. A musicality breathes in many works.



In *Vice Versa*, Von Caemmerer utilises word excerpts, his own and others, to make poetic form. Along with Dransfield, snippets of Matsuo Basho and Dickinson are appropriated, again using a selected arrangement of indexed first lines. The Basho section, *Tripples* (2009), cleverly lays out the words in a landscape format, allowing the poetry to gently roll down the page, aligned in three columns. The words can be read both across and down, or at random interval. Other works re-lay yogic instruction or utilise yoga mantras in re-configured form, obviously influenced by Von Caemmerer's yoga practice and teaching. In *Momentos* (2009), he blends 'asana' descriptors with observational dialogue and inner thought, for example: " / *śīrsāna*: I examine my imprint" (p 120), "*sūrya namaskar*: exhalations cloud the windows/" (p 124). For me, this section, along with *Vyāsa Versa* and visual works of *Sūtra Poems* (1996-2012) are the apotheosis of the collection, insightfully blended and observational. The visual poems of *Sūtra Poems* have symmetry, a centrality the writer explains in the poem *centrāsana*, noting "the midpoint of the 196 sūtras of Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtra*" (p 193). Responding to deliberate visual cues, I find myself thoughtfully navigating Von Caemmerer's world, finding both order and spontaneous inquiry. My reading has these poems rotating from, along, or spiralling through this central point, almost in perceptual relation to its yogic core.



Some works, notably *A Bunch of Fives* (2009), *Geographical Tongue* (2010), *Omar's Amor* (2005-15), have a lyrical humour, occasionally bawdy, including the cheeky pun. These poems often use amused wordplay, rhyming couplets and juxtaposition. I am uncertain about such humour, finding it somewhat adolescent. Maybe I miss the absurdity! I suppose one person's witticism is not always another's. Von Caemmerer might argue personal taste, or Zappa-like playfulness, but for me there can be too much going on. Along with certain layout congestion, this imposes an over-sorting for the reader. Given Von Caemmerer's eclectic range, clearer sectioning of works would assist in such navigation and also elevate the collection as a book-object. My thinking is that the experiment needs space to find itself, even within the constraints of a book.

In reviewing *Vice Versa*, given such range of poetic form and visual experiment, my own limitation is time. The more I contemplate the work the more I find. Von Caemmerer asks us to digest his life work, along with a radical rethink of poetic forms, most notably through visual syntax. The poem itself is opened up, into new spaces and non-linear readings. Such an exploration requires thoughtfulness and time, with writer and reader convergent in a cooperative textual interplay. I enjoy this. On another temporal plane there is Von Caemmerer's time, the collection being a twenty-five year journey. *Vice Versa* is language in constant flux, exploring potentiality rather than constraint. The poetic undertaking is considerable.

Nothing is concrete!