

‘Hard to say where / this occurs’: Domestic and Social Space and the Space of Writing in Rae Armantrout’s Work
by Rob Stanton

Rae Armantrout opens *True*, her 1998 memoir of growing up in San Diego, with a characteristic paradox:

Many people must see their lives as somehow exemplary.¹

Many people may, but surely if everyone is ‘exemplary’ it waters down, or at least alters, our sense of what this word means. In order to be ‘exemplary’ – instructive – an individual must be, we assume, unique, distinct, exceptional. A crowd of exemplars is oxymoronic, and it may be that Armantrout’s qualifications – ‘many’, ‘must’, ‘somehow’ – highlight the delusional quality of this mass belief. However, the very existence of this memoir shows that if she has doubts, she doesn’t exempt herself:

I tend to see my early life as an example of the pathology of “Middle-America” at mid-century. (13)

This is a bit more specific without actually being specific – setting up for the reader a certain set of possible class, cultural and historical expectations. From this point, Armantrout embarks on her narrative. And yet doubts have already been sown: independent selfhood has already been presented as both ‘special’ (‘exemplary’) and as ‘test case’ (‘pathological’).

Although the form of *True* is not typical – Armantrout’s poetry is never usually so explicitly autobiographical and/or ‘confessional’ – there are in these opening sentences gestures which I hope to show are characteristic of her work in general. Particularly, there is the oblique emphasis on location – Armantrout seeks to demonstrate in *True* how her attitudes and perhaps her temperament have been shaped by a set of social and cultural assumptions and ideals linked implicitly to a specific time and place. However, it is worth noting that in introducing this subject matter she

¹ Rae Armantrout, *True* (Berkeley: Atelos, 1998), p.13.

has already recorded a certain forensic distance from her own experience, the better to get a purchase on it: she describes her own development as an example of a ‘pathology’. Even in naming these spatial and cultural confines a value judgement, and possible moral evaluation, has been made. Such implicit judgements – as well as doubts and confusions – are as typical of Armantrout’s work as constant, if elliptical, references to location – and all these qualities are to some degree inseparable.

I want to focus initially on two poems from Armantrout’s 1985 collection *Precedence*. The first, ‘Development is History’, has a particularly loaded title (to which I shall return), but its location seems specific enough:

A short sidewalk
meanders
 between boulevard and
 parking –

 some shrub
 tucked
 in every bend.²

This description at first appears so straightforward as to be uninteresting: why describe a sidewalk? But then – as the poem itself admits – abstractions start kicking in:

Saw-toothed
 foliage feints toward
 an abstraction of grazing? (28)

This is a deliberately strange idea – presented as a question – in which the regular placing of the shrubs suggests – ‘feints toward’ – the regular, paced rhythm of animals grazing. The shrubs are there as though ready for ordered consumption, their ‘[s]aw-toothed’ leaves themselves ordered and regular. These lines might seem a relatively ‘normal’ visual correlative, the sort of odd connection that might ‘pop’ into one’s head as one passes by, but the military overtones of ‘feint’ and the sharpness of those ‘[s]aw-toothed’ edges already hints as a possible underlying violence – a predatory alternative to ‘grazing’ – an anxiety developed in the following stanzas:

² Rae Armantrout, ‘Development is History’, *Precedence* (Providence: Burning Deck, 1985), p.28.

Does it matter what's fallen
at the perfect intervals –

so long as
we're on top of it,
I mean? (28)

Further abstraction: the shrubs are now 'what' – undifferentiated – has 'fallen' – with all the connotations that *that* word brings to bear – at the 'perfect intervals'. These specifics don't seem to matter 'so long as / we're on top of it' – either mentally on top of grasping the situation or perhaps literally still on top of the sidewalk, walking along confidently. Suddenly we have pronouns: a collective 'we' that presumably includes us, as readers, and an 'I' that can 'mean' the question asked and the scene portrayed and speak, presumably, on our behalf. But why the anxiety that has spurred this question? Why the apparent need to dominate – be 'on top of' – an innocuous-seeming environment? Such questions call for a re-examination of what has already passed us by.

On further examination, this 'short sidewalk' does indeed seem to be standing metonymically for a larger subject. Where is it situated? It is 'between boulevard and / parking' – facts which tells us a lot. '[P]arking' obviously implies the presence of cars in sizable numbers, but also something nearby with enough pulling power to require a separate area for parking – shops, restaurants, leisure facilities: attractions. An urban or suburban space. A 'boulevard' might just provide such attractions, and the word-choice here is no accident: 'boulevard' is, of course, an import, carrying with it just a hint of affectation, a desire to imply if not provide a bustling street-life like that (theoretically) of Paris or other 'Old World' cities. The choice of word to describe the sidewalk – '*meanders*' – is no accident either, isolated in its own line and italicised to emphasis its oddness. Can one actually describe a sidewalk as 'meandering'? Perhaps, but it is a word more usually associated with organic movement, with streams or brooks. It suggests a purposelessness at odds with the functionality of a sidewalk. If this carefully chosen and positioned word is itself jarring, it is because it brings the natural into an *un*-natural, man-made setting; implying furthermore that – if this sidewalk is *intentionally* meandering – that such suggestions of the natural are themselves artificial in this context.

The question of intention is raised again in the second stanza – ‘some shrub / tucked / in every bend’ – where some unspecified agency, almost maternal-seeming, is apparently responsible for the shrubs and their placement. The uneasiness that follows derives from the possibility that these shrubs are themselves unconvincing representations of nature: if the sidewalk ‘meanders’, this ‘foliage’ is too neatly and regularly ordered. This itself leads to further abstraction: ‘[d]oes it matter what’s fallen / at the perfect intervals’. The regular placement of the shrubs may as well be ‘perfect’ for all its relation to organic ‘wildness’, with ‘intervals’ suggesting the even more abstracted rhythm of music, rather than that of neat landscape gardening: perhaps this ‘foliage’ really is ‘fallen’ in its disjunction with its urban surroundings. *Does it matter what these plants are?* I think it is important to note that we are never told their genus – they are simply ‘some shrub’, perhaps a selection. They are devoid of identity: ‘we’ don’t see them. Perhaps then it is ‘we’ – newly introduced at this point of the poem – who are ‘fallen’ in our ability to assimilate – get ‘on top of’ – such bizarre anomalies without seeing, figuratively speaking, the trees for the wood. Or perhaps it is the unnamed agent who is responsible for the sidewalk and the shrubs that is ‘fallen’, having created such an unnerving environment for us to exist in. If the poem’s response seems neurotic it is arguably because the environment is neurotic to begin with.

However, I don’t think this poem is simply an attack on urban landscape designers. The final stanza hints at wider resonance:

“Will the owner
of the red Datsun
in the Motor Home section
of the B lot . . .” (28)

Assuming that this tannoy announcement exists in the same context as the rest of the poem, it tells us a lot. Firstly, that ‘boulevard’ really *was* a town-planning affectation: this particular ‘parking’ is clearly part of a mall complex or retail park with numerous convoluted sub-sections. Secondly, that ‘grazing’ – like many of Armantrout’s uses of metaphorical language – initially appears an example of the wilder extremes of mental juxtaposition, but now comes to seem increasingly apposite. ‘[W]e’ are ourselves ‘grazers’, consumers, with the intimation that this repeated consumption has made us

docile and animalistic. '[W]e' are also 'owners', possessors of items such as cars that can transport us between places of consumption, cars sporting unnatural colour schemes and recognisable, defining brand-names. In a lovely touch, the 'owner' of the 'red Datsun' seems to be shopping for a 'Motor Home', another form of transportation but one that also doubles as a domestic space.

The poem tails off before we hear the point of the announcement – the information that will tell us whether or not the car has been broken into or is blocking a point of access. Armantrout seems more interested in the address itself, the interpellation – in Althusserian terms – of the 'owner' as 'owner'.³ It is as much an interruption here, in the poem – which until now has been dominated by a single 'voice' – as it would be in real life. In the context of the poem, its waylaying of that line of rhetoric leaves us uneasy: hadn't we been on the verge of getting 'on top of' our weird appropriation of nature and our artificial environment, elevating ourselves above it? This new voice, parody God-like or Big Brother-ish, brings us back down into the system again as potential addressees, shorn of our individual identities – from this perspective – just as the shrubs were of theirs.

It may seem paranoiac to have conjured up so much from a sidewalk, some shrubs and a tannoy announcement, but Armantrout has stated (in an interview with Lyn Hejinian), 'I tend to focus on the interventions of capitalism into consciousness'.⁴ The title here supports – or perhaps mocks – such sweeping intentions. 'Development' is, again, a specific word-choice, suggesting not so much the forward, linear movement that 'progress' might have done, but rather an unfurling of an already present potential. Like 'intervals', it also evokes music – the modulation and variations of a theme over time – altogether *not* the too-regular placing of shrubs 'at every bend'. All this seems very positive, constructivist and slogan-like, until one realises that 'Development *is* History' can read in a far more colloquial fashion, consigning

³ See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), especially pp.170-77. Althusser's sense of the apparent 'obviousness' of subjectivity as 'the elementary ideological effect' is relevant to Armantrout's work in general, the anxiety so many of her poems express that 'the self' is dictated not by individual agency, but by inherited language and norms; the fear of 'precedence', as one book-title has it.

⁴ Lyn Hejinian, 'An Interview with Rae Armantrout', *A Wild Salience: The Writing of Rae Armantrout*, ed. by Tom Beckett (Cleveland: Burning Press, 1999), p.26.

‘Development’ irrevocably to the dustbin of the past. ‘[W]e’ are left instead in the repetitious ever-present of capitalism, in which we ‘meander / between’ interchangeable sites of ‘grazing’. The incomplete tannoy message leaves us in this unhappy state of anxiety.

The other poem I want to look at from *Precedence*, ‘Double’, also seem anxious, although this time in a (theoretically) more comfy context:

So these are the hills of home. Hazy tiers
nearly subliminal. To see them is to see
double, hear bad puns delivered with a wink.
An untoward familiarity.

Rising from my sleep, the road is more
and less the road. Around that bend are pale
houses, pairs of junipers. Then to *look*
reveals no more.⁵

The first stanza introduces us to something like a dream landscape – ‘nearly subliminal’ – in which the ‘hills of home’ are seen, personified, to possess an ‘untoward familiarity’. What is initially ‘[h]azy’ becomes visually bifurcated: ‘[t]o see them is to see / double’. This leads to a sensory confusion in which ‘to see’ is also ‘to hear’ – ‘bad puns delivered with a wink’. Armantrout seems fascinated by ‘bad puns’ and sees them outside language as well as within: the ‘shrubs’ in ‘Development is History’ are, for example, a ‘bad pun’, doubling for a nature that they can’t quite evoke. The double nature of the pun is akin to the double nature of all figurative language, and Armantrout’s work demonstrates a healthy and productive distrust for metaphors of all kinds. As she tells Hejinian, ‘[m]etaphor is like one thing swallowing another: the bulge of the antelope in the boa’s midriff. Metaphor should make us suspicious, but we can’t do with it.’

The second stanza of ‘Double’ confirms (perhaps) the dream-like qualities of the first: ‘[r]ising from my sleep, the road is more / and less the road’. A fascinating slip of language, augmented by its being split over the line-break. ‘More *or* less’ would suggest a grudging acceptance that the ‘road’ is a ‘road’ whatever its condition or implications, perhaps *the* road that needs to be taken. As it is – ‘more / *and* less’ – the

⁵ Rae Armantrout, ‘Double’, *Precedence*, p.11.

road has become inescapably ‘double’, both improved and diminished from its former state before – or during – the ‘sleep’ mentioned. Hovering somewhere behind this part of the poem is Robert Frost’s famous meditation on ‘The Road Not Taken’, a poem that with its grand conclusive rhetoric –

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.⁶

– hoodwinks the reader into believing he or she has just witnessed a profound epistemological choice. In fact, the narrator admits earlier that, as far as he could see, each path was worn ‘really about the same’ – that any difference resulting from his choice was always already down to his own perspective and temperament and nothing to do the space in which he found himself. Armantrout’s poem ends on a similar note of ‘unvision’ – foregrounded (perhaps) more honestly here:

Around that bend are pale
houses, pairs of junipers. Then to *look*
reveals no more.

That second sentence is really – like Frost’s concluding flourish – a *non sequitur* in the context of the first: how can the speaker physically ‘look’ ‘[a]round that bend’? She must have previous inductive knowledge or the clairvoyance of dreams – in either case it is not first-hand sensory experience – ‘looking’ – that is being described. That said, this blunt final sentence does indeed put an end to all the poem’s envisionings, mental or otherwise. A veil has been drawn.

If this abrupt conclusion seems suspicious of the ‘authenticity’ of ‘looking’ then it is entirely in keeping with Armantrout’s attitude elsewhere. Her descriptions are often particularly hard to visualize, sticking stubbornly to their textual dimension. A poem entitled ‘Visibility’, for example, offers no such clarity:

It’s strange to see traffic backed up at this checkpoint – people
scattering – heading for the hills or darting across the freeway toward

⁶ Robert Frost, ‘The Road Not Taken’, *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), p.103.

the beach. There are words connected with this scene. “Aliens” is one. If I can avoid these words, what remains should be my experience.⁷

Visual perception is ‘strange’ because people and things are odd and unpredictable and – in order to reach any authentic expression of experience – the obvious word-associations in any given situation must be avoided. Seeing, describing anything as ‘Alien’ in a knee-jerk fashion is not useful.

All these varieties of doubt, hesitation and ambivalence are carried over to the next passage I want to focus on, from a more recent poem, ‘Up to Speed’:

Covered or cupboard
breast? Real

housekeeping’s
kinesthesiac. Cans

held high
to counterbalance “won’t,”⁸

After the unnerving public space of ‘Development is History’ and the ‘untoward familiarity’ of ‘Double’, the location of this passage seems more domestic. ‘Up to Speed’, as a whole, appears to be a reconfiguration of the Oedipus myth – Oedipus being one who limped his way ‘up to speed’ and ended up blind and stumbling as a result – and this passage relates to the context of that narrative ‘arc’. Indeed, the initial question conjures up, to my mind, a host of references, as though investigating such a fundamental narrative has opened the poem to other textual presences too. The idea of a ‘[c]overed [...] breast’, for example, evokes perhaps Valéry’s poem ‘Le Sylphe’, in which elusive Symbolist meaning is figured in the image of a breast glimpsed fleetingly between the halves of a robe.⁹ ‘[C]upboard / breast’, on the other hand, suggests perhaps some of Salvador Dalí’s images from the 1930s, in which people’s anatomies start to develop drawers.¹⁰ This motif, borrowed from Freud, gives a rather obvious visual form to the idea of secret interiority. (Freud, of course, someone who

⁷ Rae Armantrout, ‘Visibility’, *Made To Seem* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1995), p.45.

⁸ Rae Armantrout, ‘Up to Speed’, *Up to Speed* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p.1.

⁹ Paul Valéry, ‘Le Sylphe’, *Selected Writings of Paul Valéry* (New York: New Directions, 1950), p.72.

¹⁰ See in particular *The Anthropomorphic Cabinet* (1936), *Venus de Milo with Drawers* (1936) and *The Burning Giraffe* (1936-37).

made his own particular use of the Oedipus myth.) ‘[C]upboard’ also suggests domestic space – a kitchen perhaps – and this seems to be where the second sentence takes us: ‘[r]eal // housekeeping’s / kinesthesiac’. ‘[K]inesthesiac’ appears to be a neologism, taken from ‘kinesthesia’ – ‘the sense of muscular effort that accompanies a voluntary motion of the body’ (according to the *OED*). ‘Real // housekeeping’s / kinesthesiac’ is, I would venture, that which motivates the effort that goes into ‘[r]eal’ housekeeping, or perhaps that which makes one aware of the effort that has gone into such work.

So, is it the preceding question that is this motivating/revealing agent, the acoustic confusion of ‘[c]overed’ and ‘cupboard’, or even Valéry or Dalí’s high art eroticising of meaning and furniture? The third sentence offers only elliptical commentary: ‘Cans // held high / to counterbalance “won’t.”’ Again, in another typical Armantrout gesture, this can be read simultaneously as both utterly literal and bizarrely abstract. Literal, in that ‘won’t’ could easily be the voice of a recalcitrant child refusing to comply, and the ‘[c]ans’ literal cans (perhaps taken from a ‘cupboard’) ‘held high’ out of the child’s reach: a little vignette, perhaps, of ‘[r]eal // housekeeping’. Alternately, ‘[c]ans’ refers to the part of speech, the positive verb auxiliary, that literally ‘counterbalance[s]’ the negative likes of ‘won’t’, and the sentence becomes an odd visualization of language usage. Neither of these readings is privileged, I would argue, and each can be shown to be relevant to the overarching Oedipal subject matter. Firstly, Oedipus is a great example of ‘can’ – the driving desire to obtain knowledge and ‘truth’ at any cost – against more restrained and (in hindsight) more sensible voices. Oedipus’s efforts can even be regarded as a form of ‘housekeeping’, initially at least, in that he wants to justify his claim to the throne of Thebes and keep his family together. However, the meaning he seeks quickly reorientates the domestic, the family and the self as the site of his – and Thebes’ – troubles. These superimpositions are the erotic troubles that Freud and Dalí later found buried in the familiar and domestic and it may be that Armantrout is mocking all these figures – and Valéry as well – for their eroticising, and gendering, of the quest for meaning. It could be that all these male questers, from Oedipus on, are not being celebrated for their ‘can-do’ spirit, but ridiculed for their single-minded pursuit of a misbegotten ‘truth’ – their responses more like the unreasonable ‘won’t’ of the child – I won’t shift *my* course – than the attitude of a responsible, ‘housekeeping’ adult. Whichever way –

and I think Armantrout wants us to read it in as many ways as possible – serious issues have been raised and domestic space has been reconfigured as the site for thoroughly ‘uncanny’ events.

I meditated on several ways of best approaching this paper. Initially I thought of extracting from Armantrout poems those passages in which seen spaces are framed and described, extrapolating from them a model of ‘Armantrout’s America’. If I select some of those passages here (the first few are on the handout) –

On the other side of
siding
cars go by.

String of fat
commas
as far as
we’re concerned¹¹

from ‘Sense’. From ‘Police Business’:

Harmless as the hose is turquoise
where it snakes
around the primroses –
those pink
satellite dishes,
scanning the columns.¹²

From ‘Engines’:

Dressing to match vinyl booths, the young waitress hums absently.¹³

And, finally, from ‘Necromance’:

Couples lounge
in slim, fenced yards
beside the roar
of a freeway. Huge pine
a quarter-mile off

¹¹ Rae Armantrout, ‘Sense’, *Necromance* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1991), p.25.

¹² Rae Armantrout ‘Police Business’, *The Pretext* (København & Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2001), p.12.

¹³ Rae Armantrout and Ron Silliman, ‘Engines’, *Veil: New and Selected Poems* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p.45.

floats. Hard to say where
this occurs.¹⁴

– it is only to demonstrate the futility of such a project. This is not to say that I think a sort of socio-geographical model could not be constructed from these poems. It would reveal a Southern Californian landscape strangely bland and banal, beyond parody, a place of crass yet soothing advertisements and a regulated existence occluding much latent aggression and groundless nostalgia. Armantrout can be honest about the attraction of such backward looking:

Of course I understand! The missed vibrancy. Electric green of the
frontyards at twilight. San Diego, navy housing, families sitting in
lawn-chairs. Thru-out my childhood objects gleamed with the intensity
of fetish. Are all children fetishists?¹⁵

But she can also be fiercely satiric:

Fetish objects
now occur
as previous centuries.

Miniature log cabins
beside the jelly cabinet.

These are just what we've needed
to fortify our love.¹⁶

The extrapolated model based on such passages would not simply be that of a simulacrum, however, but representative of a place in which people actually have to live their lives and make some sense out of their environment.

Constructing such a model, apt though it might be, would do violence to the intentions of the poems. As the examples I have just quoted show, description of space in Armantrout's work can never be divorced from the method of their expression, the general comment they are being asked to make metonymically, the placement of language. Armantrout saves the precision that many another poet would exploit on argumentative clarity or visual mimesis for honing her paradoxes and her ambiguities.

¹⁴ Rae Armantrout, 'Necromance', *Necromance*, p.8.

¹⁵ Rae Armantrout, 'from Journal Entries: Youth', *Extremities* (Berkeley: The Figures, 1978), p.16.

¹⁶ Rae Armantrout, 'Interior Design', *Up to Speed*, p.30.

Everything is open to question, and such questioning occurs at the specific level of language, the difference between ‘[c]overed’ and ‘cupboard’ or ‘more or less’ and ‘more / and less’. Thus each poem insists on its own existence as a discrete and inimitable linguistic construction, a new test, perhaps at odds even with those that have come before. I have concentrated closely here on poems dealing with public, familiar and then domestic space not just because I have my own fetish for close reading, but because that is what the poems require, need, for that space to be illuminated and described. The reader’s task is to find the space – mental, imaginative – from which to observe the ‘matter’ of each poem from all the shifting angles it will demand, bearing in mind that Armantrout often questions – even parodies – her own technique from time to time:

The rote quality of the late work was part of its genius: a glimpse into the dollhouse of the soul, right? My schtick was omniscience, which always makes a room look small.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Rae Armantrout, ‘Performers’, *The Pretext*, p.16.