

Philip Hammial was born and raised in and around Detroit, the D, Motown, the Motor City. With money from a newspaper route he bought his first car, a '41 Ford Coupe, when he was fourteen. His family lived in a Detroit suburb and he had his father's permission to drive it around the countryside but not in town. What his father didn't know was that his son was syphoning petrol from his company car into the Ford. The mechanics at the motor pool thought his father was doing a lot of driving.

By the time he turned 21 Hammial had five more cars, all future classics: a '40 Ford 2-door sedan, a '49 Ford 2-door sedan, a '50 Oldsmobile Rocket 88 2-door sedan, a Model A Ford truck and a '38 Ford 2-door sedan. These were the days of drag racing and petting in lovers' lanes—of icy winter nights when the car refused to start, Hammial fiddling under the bonnet, an imperfect end to a perfect night.

For eleven years Hammial travelled in eighty-two countries. He kept count. Many of them were places which today are considered rather risky: Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Zaire, the Central African Republic, Nigeria. In those days he always travelled hard class, mostly hitchhiking, sometimes by local buses or in third class train carriages and always staying in one star hotels or pensions. Taking his cue from an essay by Albert Camus, Hammial's perfect travel situation might be described thus: dropped off by a truck in the middle of the night in a strange city in the Third World, not knowing the language or where to spend the night or where to find something to eat, all senses on red alert, anything can happen, perfect for poetry, situations where one might encounter all kinds of weird and wonderful creatures, some benign, some not.

Past adventures hitchhiking in India, China and central Africa have given Hammial enough material for a thick book or a dozen art exhibitions. Some have left permanent scars.

In 1991, on the way to a spiritual conference in the far west of West Bengal, Hammial and his wife Anne alighted from a train at the wrong station and were immediately attacked by seventeen young men who thought that the couple were there to steal a baby. The intent was murder but with the fortuitous intervention of a station master and a sadhu they survived. Very badly beaten by lathis (hard wood sticks) and slashed by a hatchet Hammial was in plaster for a year. In 1993 he mounted an exhibition of paintings and sculpture depicting his would-be murderers. The exhibition worked as an exorcism.

Art Brut

Since the late 1950s Outsider Art or Art Brut has held a fascination for Hammial. He first became aware of Art Brut when he read Andre Breton's Surrealist Manifestos, where Breton speaks of the art of the mad. Then in 1966 he worked as an orderly at Athens State Hospital in Athens, Ohio, a sinister-looking asylum built in 1874 where the patients were still subjected to ECT and occasionally even beaten by staff. In the afternoons when he had finished his work schedule Hammial found time for conversations with the patients and soon had a working knowledge of the language of schizophrenia.

In 1985, after a four-year trip around the world, Hammial returned to Australia where he now lives. He had visited the Prinzhorn Collection of Art Brut in Heidelberg, the Wolfli Archives in Bern, Switzerland and the Collection of Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland. Hammial and Australian Outsider Artist Anthony Mannix then founded the Australian Collection of Outsider Art. To date they have curated and assisted in the organization of twenty-eight exhibitions of Australian Outsider Art in five countries, the high point a 175 piece, twenty-two artist, six month exhibition at the Halle St. Pierre in Paris in 2006/07.

Opposite:
Top: Lamborghini, 120 x 140 cm
Below: MF-108, 20 x 30 cm
This page:
Mr. Toyota, 45 x 45 cm



PORTRAIT OF A POET*

** and sculptor, Art Brut collector, inveterate traveller, motor head...*

PHILIP HAMMIAL





The language of Outsider Art has infiltrated his psyche and the creatures he constructs with found objects are clearly close cousins

Hammial is a self-taught artist and sculptor and insists that he's not an Outsider, but the language of Outsider Art has infiltrated his psyche and the creatures he constructs with found objects are clearly close cousins. He is shortly to publish an illustrated book of his sculptures, a number of which were exhibited in his recent solo exhibition at Orange Regional Art Gallery.

Today Hammial the poet travels in a little more comfort. He receives regular invitations to participate in poetry events around the world and invariably manages to include detours to visit Art Brut museums and exhibitions. Here is his schedule described for friends after returning this year from a series of poetry festivals in Europe:

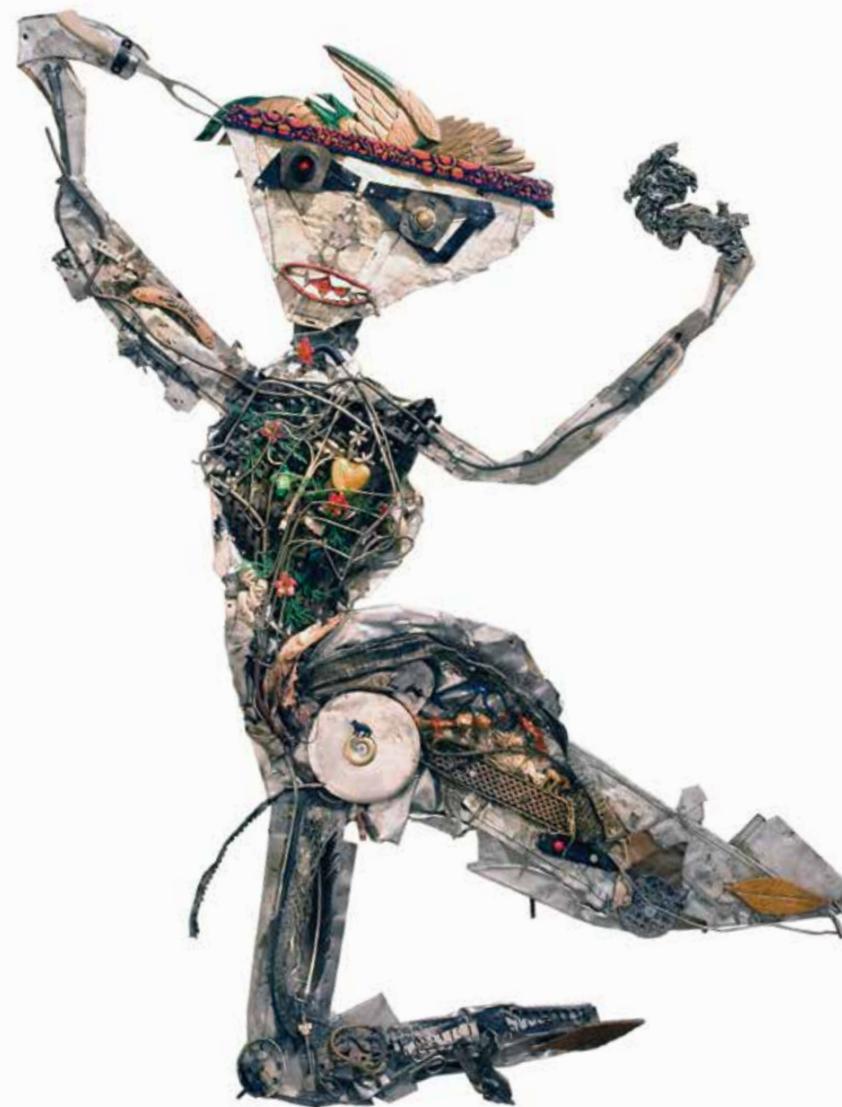
Arrived back from six weeks in Paris—three poetry festivals, the Microfestival in Prague, the Val-de-Marne and the Franco-Anglais in Paris, all three excellent. Went to an Art Brut exhibition in Prague— 300pieces from Bruno Decharme's abcd collection, my favourite Hans-Jorg Georgi's flopping cardboard aircraft with multi-levelled galleon-like cockpits.

At the Microfestival I was the grandfather among a dozen cutting-edge multimedia youngsters from London, Amsterdam, Berlin and Prague, all fluent English speakers. In Paris, as always, I was the flaneur, walking 8 to 10 hours every day (eventually having to go to a podiatrist to get my ancient feet repaired). Four times to the Halle St. Pierre

to see, on the ground floor, an exhibition of drawings by visionary artists, not all Art Brut. Especially interesting were pieces by Victor Hugo and Bruno Schultz. I didn't much care for the show upstairs, too mainstream. Then took a train to Lille to visit the new Art Brut extension to the LAM, the Lille Museum of Modern Art with some of the great classics including several pieces by Ratier, the blind sculptor.

When I was in Paris in 2009 I got acquainted with Jephon de Villiers who was having a show at Beatrice Solier's. He was at Beatrice's again, some of his pieces selling for 3000 Euro. Great Henry Darger exhibition downstairs at the Museum of Modern Art and upstairs an exhibition of marvellous works by Markus Lupertz, a German neo-expressionist.

The opening readings for the Val-de-Marne poetry festival took place at the Antonin Artaud Auditorium in Ivry. I was much taken with the poetry of Hwang Ji-U, one of the top Korean poets. Two old guys, we became great mates. There was some talk about inviting me to Seoul for some readings; maybe just talk. At the Val-de-Marne we were three Australians, four Koreans, two Canadians (indigenous, Innue), six Chinese and five French poets. The Chinese came later in the week. One, from Beijing via Chengdu, Ouyang Jianghe, is considered to be one of the leading Chinese poets (a translation of his work, Doubled Shadows, has just arrived from the Book Depository) and Yu Chian from Kunming is the second



Opposite:
Jumping for Joy, 90 x 140 cm
This page
Above: Leaping Dancer, 170 x 100 cm
Right: Murtha, 160 x 80 cm

BITING

The men were biting my arms.
The horse was blindfolded.
No one would extinguish the fire in the next room.
"It will burn forever & you with it,"
said the old woman, the mother of the men.
She took off her clothes, put them into a box
& gave it to me.
"Put them on," she said, "& give me yours."
I did as I was told, & became a mother of seven men
for eight hours.
When I told my sons to bite the old woman's arms
they refused.
Then we exchanged clothes again.
This went on for seven months.
On the first day of the eighth month the horse was taken
to the burning room.
After we ate the horse the old woman told her sons
to bite my arms.



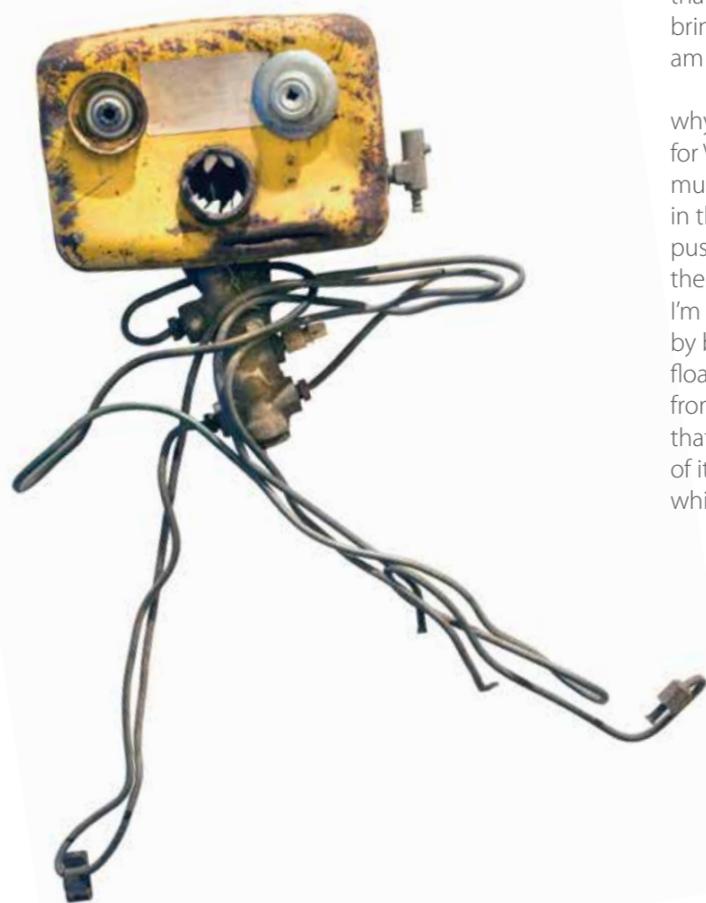
NURSE

She's blowing
into my pyjamas. Into my pyjamas
she's blowing & blowing, & a doctor
is hammering. He's
hammering & hammering. My pyjamas
full of nails. On which wall
should I hallucinate a ladder, a nurse
climbing that ladder? Desperate
to escape. From me? The doctor? Not me: tethered
to this bed by a chain, a heavy chain
that Nurse attached to my collar (the collar
that identifies me as a Category Three patient). Which
brings me to the question: Why
am I here?

I know
why I'm here. I'm here
for Vigilance, a Simple who, for his own safety,
must be constantly monitored. Who left that window
in that basket? They did, the padres, the
pushers of glass with knives to cut
the Mexican square from which, again, as always
I'm excluded, left to fend for myself, set upon
by bandidos, a bullet smashing my jaw. It's
floating, my daughter's violin, set free, moving away
from the room where the game-bags are kept. Who left
that dog chained to a post? Who's sewing it, what's left
of it, into my skin? – my skin of glass (for vigilance) into
which a nurse is blowing, & a doctor is hammering.

Philip Hammial has published twenty-seven books of poetry and held thirty-one solo and participated in seventy group exhibitions. An illustrated volume of his sculptures will be published next year.

Petrolhead, 45 x 30 cm



best-selling poet in China. We traded books. Both highly recommended if you're curious about contemporary Chinese poetry.

The director, Francis Combes, took us all out to dinner every night at posh restaurants. Judith Bishop, Jan Owen and I read at Shakespeare & Co, out on the footpath to about 50 people, Notre Dame in the background. Later, at the Franco-Anglais Festival, we read at the Café Flore, one of Sartre's hangouts. As always the Franco-Anglais Festival took place during the Marché de la Poesie, the huge poetry market in the square in front of the St. Suplice church: 350 tents, many of them shared, devoted to poetry publishers and magazines from France, Belgium and the Zaire. By my calculation France alone has 400 poetry book publishers. Per capita, if Australia had the same number we'd have 130. We have about 10. At the Franco-Anglais we were four Australians, one Japanese, two French Canadians, one Slovenian, one Rumanian and one Belgian.

Some highlights: After a concert in the 20th we had a rooftop party and then went to a huge street party with live bands, hundreds of Africans and Arabs. At my café on rue Cler I had coffee most mornings with Antoine Jockey, a poetry, novel and film critic/book reviewer/translator from the Arabic and assistant director of the Voix Vives Poetry Festival in Sete in the south of France. Had coffee twice with an old Dutch painter friend, Frans, who lives on a barge near the Eiffel Tower.

I had three poems each in two festival anthologies and three plus two images in Louis Armand's huge 664 page journal, VLAK. Also have poems coming in a French language online anthology of Australian poetry and possibly in an anthology of world poetry. So I'm back in Oz fully charged, chock-a-block with poetry and sculpture.



BELL

I went down where the bell was.
At a long table there were monks bent over bowls.
They were slurping soup.
Disgusting. When, I asked,
will you stop to ring?
And one, the eldest, wiping his mouth on the sleeve
of his cassock, replied: The sound that will carry
your mother home, how big must it be?
It was a good question, & one to which
I had no answer.
They offered soup, which I reluctantly accepted,
a bowl, apparently, without a bottom.
When you've finished, said the old monk, I'll make
the sound that carries your mother home.