On *Ul*

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The Aztec world full of voices, shadows, ghosts.

A book, a space of convergence for these shadows, ghosts.

> *Homer, Celan, Halo,*
>
> *Morton, Miron, Lister,*
>
> *Land, Stein, Vallejo, Gizzi,*
>
> *Jodorowsky are all around me.*
>
> *I study them. I devour them with fury.*
>
> *Wrote Joan at twenty.*

A meeting place. A neutral space. "A symbol of an unattainable reality" writes Richard Huelsenbeck (37). He is referring to simultaneity in Dadaist collage, the process of turning "the sequence a=b=c=d into an a—b—c—d" (Huelsenbeck 35). I understand this shift relative to one of collage art's popular sources: the magazine. Commercial magazines are arranged sequentially and intentionally: ads, content page, editor's note, letters to the editor, ads, product or personality spotlight, ads, article, ads, feature, etc. This template aims for seamless linearity, a thematic and stylistic fluidity, with the ultimate goal of profit: buying what is advertised in the magazine or buying the magazine again and again.

Dadaist collage (Figures 1 and 2) interferes with this ordering by metaphorically condensing the sequential magazine to one simultaneous page. A two-fold fragmentation occurs. Each element, the
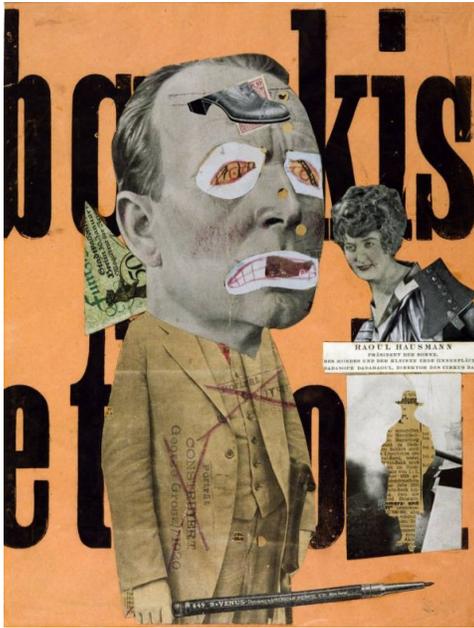
Figure 1: Raoul Hausmann. *Der Kunstkritiker* (The Art Critic). 1919-1920.

Figure 2: Hannah Höch. *DaDandy.* 1919.

advertisement, for example, is cut out of its crucial position in the template, is de*context*ualized, and is then cut up, is de*content*ualized. Unlike the magazine, it is unclear how the collaged canvas is meant to be spatially and temporally read, or even where the piece begins and ends as there are many possible entry and exit points. But since each collage is not made up of material from a single magazine but rather a mixture of magazines, newspapers, photographs, catalogues, books, and other printed matter, each element becomes further abstracted. The condensation is not one of a single template-language but the Language of Print Media as a whole.

Experiencing these pieces, it is clear that Hausmann and Höch are not collecting and arranging elements on the canvas to formally mimic this Language, they are not trying to 'speak' the accepted language of the time to discuss or critique the time. Rather, they reconfigure the language to create another language, that of post-WWI consciousness. A language of mutilated cities and civilians, cyborgs, massified technologies, confused gender, socio-economic, and political dynamics, speed, and

shock.

Hausmann and Höch's canvases seem never-ending, as if the current arrangement is temporary and at any moment the elements can unfreeze and reshuffle. The collage-language mutates. Even after I have absorbed and processed all of the colours and textures, detected patterns, forms, and themes, each element or group of elements (bodies, textures, scraps of language) and the way that these are juxtaposed makes it so that any kind of totality or end point escapes me. My eyes move in circles, generating more and more connections and meanings. The pieces regenerate as I observe them, thus meaning regenerates. Meaning is not a goal, it is embedded in the movement of the pieces.

Ul (Polish for 'beehive') consists of three main elements, or modes: translations of the Polish poet Miron Białoszewski, drawings, and other poems. Formally, *Ul* is me answering a question I asked myself almost two years ago: how are you going to put together all of your distinct formal interests into a cohesive book? Each of these modes could be its own book or a section of a book, so why fold them together? Is partitioning not its own kind of collage? A series of sustained pulses that when compiled also exhibit simultaneity, like this Höch piece:
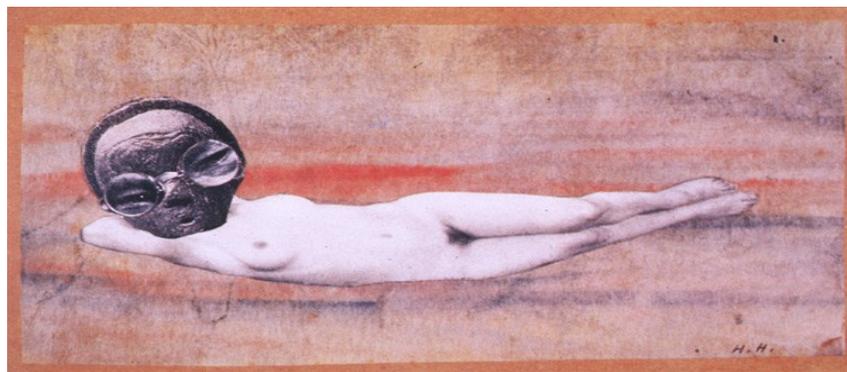

Figure 3: Hannah Höch. *Fremde Schönheit* (Strange Beauty). 1929.

Yes. But compared to *Der Kunstkritiker* and *DaDandy*, here the eye only reads three distinct elements. Each element has aesthetic and cultural depth, but they are not rearrangeable, they are static, frozen in

place and meaning.

Ul is more of a cacophonous than a minimalist collage project, formally and conceptually closer to *DaDandy* than *Der Kunstkritiker* or *Fremde Schönheit*. In *Der Kunstkritiker* and *Fremde Schönheit*, meaning and narrative emerge from element-to-element reading: this head now belongs to this body or that eye to that head. The pieces of the whole are integral to understanding the whole. This narrative process is similar to poem-to-poem narrative generation where the poems' particular arrangement and linear progression creates narrative by eliciting certain moods or tones and/or by creating a narrative arc across the book. In other words, narrative is shown instead of stated. In *Ul*, this narrative approach exists on one distinct plane, but instead of only relying on this kind of narration, having the book's beginning and end be the only frame, narrative is approached simultaneously by creating a second plot-based plane. These planes are at once independent and interrelated; they both move the book along but through different routes.

The plot: one day, a group of modes, characters, spontaneously set out on a voyage. As they voyage, the group is joined by more and more characters, until they reach their destination, Illness, formatted as a long poem. After Illness, one character, Homer, who is presented in multiple poems (pages 5 and 87) and drawings (pages 32 and 46), becomes ill. The group ceases voyaging and begins to wander. Then Homer proclaims that he must go to Ul, and so they begin to voyage there. Eventually, they reach Ul.

Der Kunstkritiker and *Fremde Schönheit* are examples of element-to-element narrative: a disjunct but still readable body is made out of fragments of bodies. But in *DaDandy* fragments of bodies and textures are arranged to indicate a smooth form, body-like, but vaguer than Hausmann's suited man or Höch's Venus. This body-form is offset by the more angular, stacked, textures. Because of the narrative

approach in *Der Kunstkritiker* and *Fremde Schönheit,* the foreground and background remain distinct

with the body foregrounded against a more unadorned background, but in *DaDandy* this distinction

between foreground and background is drastically confused. At first the body-form is almost

indiscernible amongst the jumble of textures, but eventually, its contours emerge into the foreground.

But because the body-form and background have the same amount of detail, what might be perceived

as the background, only because there is no piece of a human in it (since if a human appears in a canvas

we have been taught to read it as foregrounded), the stacked textures slide into the foreground and

overwhelm the figure. It was only after all of this shifting and sliding that I perceived a second contour

in the body-form: a bust of a large-nosed, slightly hunched-over figure in profile facing right. A body

within a body made out of bodies. Am I even seeing it? Am I seeing, reading, or imagining?

I am working towards something similar to *DaDandy*'s spatial confusion with *Ul*'s simultaneous

approach to narrativity. Rather than foreground poem-to-poem narrative, the plot line introduces

another narrative process, but neither is intended to be foregrounded or backgrounded. They slide, and

as they slide, I am hoping that something else, a third thing, a third plane, something real or imagined,

emerges.

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Ul engages with a constellation of works and poets that I am calling verbo-visual i.e. works that

integrate poetry and visual art[1]. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is a well known

example of verbo-visuality. Blake was working towards the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* an artwork or artistic

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[1] Verbo-visual is taken from Michael Kasper and Chamati Viswanathan's afterword to their translation of Gabriel Pomerand's *Saint Ghetto des Prêts*, *Saint Ghetto of the Loans* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006).

practice that integrates many or all artistic forms, and so attempts to harmonize image and text. Painting and poetry coexist on the page to illustrate that page's theme, for example, Infant Joy (Figure 4).
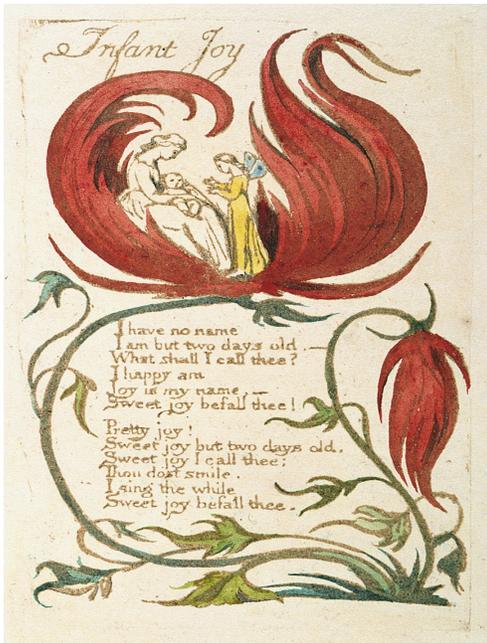

Figure 4: William Blake. *Infant Joy.* 1789.

Figure 5: Isidore Isou. *Les Nombres XXXII.* 1952.

Image and text are not meant to be read separately but as symbols of each other: the image signifies the text and the text signifies the image to create a narrative feedback loop, a similar experience to *Fremde Schönheit*. Some of these formal elements are also found in Lettrism, a 20th century French avant-garde group. These poets, including Isidore Isou and Gabriel Pomerand, also created original hand-drawn visual sources and the verbo-visual gesture occurs on the same page (Figure 5). However, the Lettrist's use of visuality is predominantly linguistic. The group believed that words made from letters of the alphabet were archaic, rigid forms that enhanced social hierarchies and could never fully capture what they were meant to signify. For the Lettrists, all speech is an act of translation, and as Isidore Isou states in his "Manifesto of Lettrist Poetry": "the translated word does not express". Lettrist poetics is based around the idea that "letters have a destination other than words" (Isou, "Manifesto"), that letters

must be understood as a complete unit of meaning, and through the group's emphasis on handwriting, the concept of the letter often morphs into a fantastical visual code, similar to a rebus. This interaction between text and image is called hypergraphics or metagraphics. When recognizable letters and words do appear, as in Figure 5, the interaction between text and image is not read as harmonious, but as a completely dissonant gesture, emphasizing the signifying void between word-language and the Lettrist's letter-based language. The media are not intended to meld as in Blake's work, they are utilized to communicate different aesthetic, poetic, and political dimensions.

Many other poets including Robin Crozier, Johanna Drucker, and Kenneth Patchen have explored the verbo-visual on the single page, but other works, such as Betsy Halick's *A Fable for Beginners or Only the Buttons Are Real . . .*, a self-published story/poem/graphic novel that gave me the idea of how to arrange *Ul*, as well as some docupoetry, Christian Hawkey's *Ventrakl* and Jena Osman's *The Network* for example, have expanded the verbo-visual across pages, placing the text on one page and the image on another page, while integrating different text genres, such as expository prose and interviews, into a poetry book. *Ul*'s trans-modal movement across pages, jumping from translation to drawing to poem, has more in common with these expanded verbo-visual works than the single-page examples, however, with spreads like poems like "Faust" (pages 29-31), "Illness" (pages 37-43), and "Pythagoras" (page 62), I want to show that both of these conceptions of the verbo-visual figure into my trans-media practice, that this practice is not, as the Lettrists voiced, a constant progression towards newness, but an investigation of verbo-visual possibilities. Generally however, I am interested in moving away from the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* or making the poem be a visual. I do not want language as image or image as poem but a recognition of difference and an attempt to incorporate these differences, not just between image and text but among texts. One of *Ul*'s challenges, for me as a writer and for a reader, is not just the challenge of reading images alongside text, but also the challenge of reading these in conjunction with

the book's *translated* texts.

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In the second semester of my sophomore year, on the suggestion of a fellow student, I took Christian Hawkey's translation course. My ancestors are Polish and all of my extended family still lives in Poland, so I knew that I wanted to translate from Polish, though I was not, and am still not, fluent in the language. I had read some of the big names in Polish poetry, such as Czesław Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska, but they had been heavily translated and Christian encouraged the class to work with more obscure, under-translated poets. I went online, was led to a Wikipedia list of Polish poets, and found Białoszewski. Very few of his poems are online in faithful translation, but this is the one I remember reading:

A Ballad of Going Down to the Store

First I went down to the street
by means of the stairs,
just imagine it,
by means of the stairs.

Then people known to people unknown
passed me by and I passed them by.
Regret
that you did not see
how people walk,
regret!

I entered a complete store:
lamps of glass were glowing.
I saw someone – he sat down –
and what did I hear? what did I hear?
rustling of bags and human talk.

And indeed,
indeed,
I returned.

What captures one about a poem? In this case, I was engaging in the strange activity of searching for a poet to translate, but why this poem and this poet? On a surface level reading, there is humor, there is an inconclusive intent, a kind of circling back on itself, a return. But to what? A return to the store. There is complexity in perceived simplicity and perhaps this is what was initially enrapturing. But as reader has led to the role of translator, I ask myself, why am I continually enraptured, what is it I keep returning to, working with or for, what about this poet's work, as Walter Benjamin posits in "The Task of the Translator", demands translation?

> *Always, when I went looking for him, he was there*
>
> *—Christian Hawkey,* Ventrakl

Białoszewski was born in 1922 in Warsaw, Poland. Interwar Poland. His father worked for the postal administration and his mother was a seamstress. Born in peace time, he soon experienced the destruction of his country, and in 1944 participated in The Warsaw Uprising against the Nazi forces controlling the city. After the Nazis crushed the Uprising, he was sent to a labour camp in Siberia where he stayed until the war's end. When released, he returned to Warsaw where he lived until his death in 1983. He published his first collection *Obroty rzeczy* (The Revolution of Things) in 1956, and in the subsequent nine years wrote three more books of poetry. After 1965, he focused on prose, plays, memoir, and his experimental theatre, Teatr Osobny. The translations in *Ul* are from his fourth and final book of poems, *Było i było* (It Was and It Was) published in 1965 by Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

My understanding of his biography, as my understanding of Polish, is constantly being added to. Rather than applying a masterful knowledge to the translations, I am approaching Miron, his work, and even

the Polish language as an amateur. I grow with and through these things as the project and my knowledge collaboratively grow. I am acquiring this knowledge through an assemblage of disparate and traditionally un-pedagogical parts: through his poems; the names of his books; a brief Wikipedia page; some online images; a secret diary written in Polish; some websites that when put through online translation engines produce surreal-sensical prose that reveal tiny, perhaps mistranslated, details:

> I waited on the doorknob. The smell of cigarette smoke had a concentration of incense. The walls were blackened by the candles. He lay on the couch in the bay, which was once the scene of his theater. He was so embedded in the interior of the thief, who once got in there. Above the couch hung Orthodox a blue bulb fitted, giving the night, the light rail. With one hand he could reach into the adapter into the wall and the other for milk bottles, filled with water, which put out the butts. Drafts and pens were lying on the bed. I went music, Palestrina, Mozart, Bach. Mironie Białoszewskim. It's kind of very personal memories not only of the poet, but also the entire environment that is shaped around it. When a monk dies, is said to be "left to God." Miron, "went to the literature," which is alive, as a portrait of Dorian Gray. Devoted himself to literature, to the extent that the study of his "life" regardless of "creativity" seems pointless. You have to deal with this Miron, who is, not that that is not.

Through my parents, who, when I ask for help over email, reply with comments like:

> skosem skweem ...means ...on the angle through park...it is like when you are walking in the park and the path is leading you straight...you decide to go on the angle through the grass...could be like a shortcut... JESUS!!! THIS IS NOT REAL POLISH!

My understanding is never the product of applied knowledge, nor is it totally immediate, it is always mediated—through technology, through books, through the voices of bilingual speakers and translators that may or may not be giving me faithful information. I am building a collage of a person, a poetics, a language, a process that formally mirrors *Ul*.

Translating Białoszewski has acted as a filter for the rest of the book. My roles as poet, artist, and translator have begun to bleed together, encouraging a greater interaction among the modes. This interaction can also be called translation. The Polish translations are catalysts for this idea and also act as symbols. On a page with a Polish translation, the two languages are interacting like the single verbo-visual page, but across the book, as the pages jump from Polish translation to drawing to poem this trans-media movement is also able to be read as translation. The character of Homer in the book is an example. As previously mentioned, he exists in multiple poems and drawings, and in the second plot-based plane. This character weaves through the book, occupying many different platforms, embodying different media, and, like Miron's 'original' and my 'translation', all of his identities, lives, and instances contribute to his continuing life. I would like a similar reading to be possible for all elements in the book, whether they are the same character or not. Not only can Homer be a translation of Homer, but any drawing can translate any poem or any poem any translation, on the same page, across any two pages, any number of pages. The book is an ongoing translation of itself.

This translation act, like the narrative, is also multi-planal. It happens on book- and mode-based planes, but also on word and sound planes through repetition. In my writing practice, repetition allows for sonic, rhythmic, and structural texture. Repetition is play, it is music, and it is joy. But why do I repeat? Another plaguing question I ask myself. My repetition is undoubtedly imitation, residue from reading and rereading Paul Celan, Gertrude Stein, and Cesar Vallejo, but it is also a conception of language

heavily influenced by technology. Speed as I spoke of it in terms of Dada has become a hyper-mechanized super-speed. Society is communicating (writing, reading, talking, chatting, exchanging news, making decisions, buying) faster, but because time and space have become so condensed, the need to be 'linked in' results in a neurotic compulsion to check one's email multiple times a day, visit the same websites, obsessively update and be updated so that one can stay up to date. High-speed habitualism. Repetition. These ideas are reflected in the contemporary collage art that I find to be most engaging. The element-to-element narrative approach where disparate fragments are pooled to create mash-up narratives is still a very prominent collage practice, but artist Lola Dupré, for example, instead repeats fragments of a single image to create Photoshop-like effects using a scissors-and-glue technique (Figures 6 and 7). The Dadaist's did not have Xerox machines, hand-held cameras, or personal printers; they could not drag an image file off of the internet onto their desktop, and then drop this file into a word document, like I did with these images. At once liberated and limited by their available technologies, the Dadaists were only able to engage with the proliferation of printed matter in society. Dupré's work, however, furthers this engagement by speaking to the ease of reproducibility. Dupré's piece is especially curious because of its fake-Photoshop effect. She manages to elicit the virtual through the physical, or rather, the virtual (the Photoshop morph) through the virtual-analog (scanning

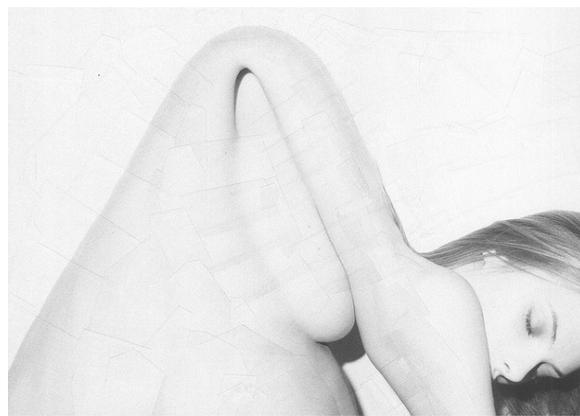Figure 6: Jonathan Waiter. *Dioni Tabbers at Supreme NY.* 2011.

Figure 7: Lola Dupré. *Manipulation of a Photograph by Jonathon Waiter #1.* 2011.

and copying the image file and then cutting it up) through the physical (scissors and glue). The piece is aesthetically and conceptually filtered and re-filtered, and thus seems to float among the traditional, the virtual, the beautiful, the ugly, the two- and three-dimensional, the lived, and the dreamed.

I, like Białoszewski, often write and repeat my own hyper-lived: house, room, window, door, hand, rat, mouse. But unlike him I am able to enter virtual space. I would not know him without the virtual. For a few dollars a month, I am able to absorb far gone, far reaching worlds, persons, and ideas. Perhaps this is why the book is full of the dead. Ultimately, I want all worlds, the lived and the ghosted, the virtual and the non-virtual, to occupy a space in my poetics, thus inanimate objects repeat, animals repeat, and code repeats. Repeating words and sounds, similarly to the poetry of Gertrude Stein, are not to be read as clones, like almost everything else in the book they are translations. In each repetitive instance, the word or sound cycles around to another platform of meaning. Like the modes, these platforms flow among each other and can exchange meanings. Similarly, across pages, when words are repeated, they become more revealed in their similarity and their dissimilarity, and it is almost as if the pages are talking to and even about each other, introducing yet another narrative process.

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Levine writes that Białoszewski is "interested in being; never in becoming" (115). However, it is through the translations that Białoszewski becomes. His poems have "reached the stage of their continuing life" (Benjamin 3). For Benjamin, the goal of this continuation is pure language, a stage of complete linguistic development where all languages are unified. But I am more interested in translation as a way to develop the role of translated works in the English speaking landscape, in and out of academic institutions. As yet, I do not feel that the English speaking poetry world, especially

students of poetry, know how to read or talk about translation outside of discussions of faithful translation. Translation, as exhibited at Pratt, is an adjunct or specialized area of study relying on a bilingualism that few posses. What I hope to communicate, through my amateur approach to translation and the book's trans-media translative movements, is that developing the vocabulary and concepts to discuss translation as comfortably as untranslated works, and translating, whether this is language-to-language, within one language, or between and among mediums, is one way of approaching a larger discussion of a heavily mediated society. These discussions coexist, like the book's characters, in an as yet un-tangible reality. The book is a space for this reality. It is not an answer, it is an offering.

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