A salon evening with

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Gregor Weichbrodt

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at Room & Board

October 29, 2015

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BY JULIA PELTA FELDMAN

Gregor Weichbrodt recently visited a friend's apartment in Berlin, the city where he lives (a short train ride from Potsdam, where he was born). He knew that this friend often hosts international guests, but Gregor, finding the apartment's contents labeled with their own names, was nonetheless struck by a feeling of disorientation. *Der Kühlschrank* on the refrigerator; *die Wand* on the wall: of course, these words were there to help visitors learn German, but for Gregor, a native speaker, the experience had a surreal quality: the redundant explanations served to estrange him from these familiar, domestic things.

I had not properly appreciated Gregor's feeling of discombobulation at finding himself here in New York until he proposed applying the same treatment to Room & Board. He has learned a few new English words in the process, but the primary goal is not to orient him, but rather to disorient everyone else: to communicate his experience of estrangement in the face of gratuitous obviousness. In doing so, he both allows native English speakers to feel like strangers on our own soil and reminds us of his own constant awareness that he does not belong here. (Gregor has a habit, when I correct some minor error in his

English, of saying "Sorry." That he is both genuinely abashed and aware that he needn't be is suggested by the fact that he has lately escalated this practice to pre-emptive atonement, apologetically explaining, "I'm German – no offense.")

The verbal redundancy of the labels makes the perfect cognitive hors d'oeuvre for Gregor's work, which often makes too much sense and too little all at once. As in his encounter with the labeled apartment, it's not in language's foreignness but in its familiarity that we find the bizarre. That is precisely where Apollinaire's sense of *une sorte de surréalisme* originates, not to mention most jokes.

Still, it surprised me that Gregor sought to share a personal experience. Even in his native tongue, he is not given to foregrounding his own subjectivity. In fact, in his work – much of which takes the form of an insistent first-person perspective – he avoids it entirely. This is especially true of his English texts, for whose qualities he is only partly responsible.

My first interaction with Gregor was online. For his book *I Don't Know*, released early this year, Gregor needed the assistance of native English speakers to suggest a variety of expressions of ignorance with which to populate his text. Gregor had written a script in the programming language Python that would weave through Wikipedia from any given starting point, assembling a list of article titles that resembles the kind of internet clickhole down which each of us occasionally plummets (or perhaps an inter-

net browser's stream-of-consciousness). But the project of *I Don't Know* was to deny any knowledge along this path: "I'm not well-versed in Literature. Sensibility – what is that? What in God's name is An Afterword? I haven't the faintest idea. And concerning Book design, I am fully ignorant. What is 'A Slipcase' supposed to mean again, and what the heck is Boriswood?" (1).

Gregor's collaborator in 0x0a, the two-person literary collective from which *I Don't Know* emerged, is my husband Hannes Bajohr, who asked if I could help by contributing phrases. Finding this an extraordinarily fun task, I provided a long list. What in the world, who the hell, where the fuck … ? I haven't the foggiest idea. The result of my enthusiasm is that, for better or worse, the text occasionally sounds a bit like me ("I've never heard of People from Berlin. Is Heinz Schweizer famous or something? Who the shit is Alfred Dürr?" (229).) I feel a little guilty about having left my fingerprints on Gregor's piece, but he doesn't seem to mind at all. His ego doesn't trouble the work's course; mine couldn't, either.

In *I Don't Know*, the narrator's relentless claim to ignorance skews from the absurd – "I don't know what people mean by 'A Building'" (6) – to the sneeringly dismissive – "Do people even go to London?" (5) – to the perfectly reasonable: "Vinca alkaloids are unfamiliar to me. And I'm sorry, did you say 'Vinpocetine'?" (282). Often, the text undermines itself: "I'm completely ignorant of Art Deco architecture in Arkansas. Can you tell me how to get to The Drew County Courthouse, Dual State Monument,

Rison Texaco Service Station or Chicot County Court-house?" (212). I don't know about you, but the narrator of *I Don't Know* knows a hell of a lot more about Arkansas's architectural history than I do.[1]

And yet computers, as they constantly remind us through their shocking stupidity, actually know next to nothing. The Python program that generated *I Don't Know* makes no distinction between common sense and obscure data. There is a similar mechanism of bafflement at work in *Holiday*, which Gregor is presenting at the salon tonight. *Holiday* begins from the post-Internet premise that docu-mentation is more important than experience: what is a vacation if not photographs and pithy captions to explain them? This is exactly what *Holiday* provides: photographs from Google Maps of randomly-chosen locations iden-tified as landmarks, and text derived from the applica-tion of nascent image-recognition software from Imagga (*http://imagga.com*) to those photographs.

In distilling the point of travel from the activity of it, the narrator of Gregor's *Holiday* calls to mind a literary precedent: Jean des Esseintes, the attenuated aristocrat of Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *À rebours*, translat-ed into English as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*.[2] Des Esseintes, the dead-end of a long, inbred lineage, is so consumed with *ennui* that even decadence bores him. He

1 Here, it is even more imperative than usual that we not conflate the author with the narrator. I assure you that it is not Gregor. He hasn't even read the book.
2 I would like to thank my mother, Dr. Maureen Pelta, for suggesting the reference.

cloisters himself with prints by Moreau and Redon and luxuriously-bound editions of Mallarmé, and instead of leaving home, he simulates travel with evocative trinkets, pictures, and books: "Movement, after all, seemed futile to him. He felt that imagination could easily be substituted for the vulgar realities of things."[3]

But for Des Esseintes's armchair excursions, exertions of the imagination are still required. Who has the time, or the energy? Gregor's *Holiday* improves upon Des Esseintes's model by removing this last toil: the programming script takes on the work of imagination that itself replaced actual experience. (If the delectation of reality is refined by being purged of its messy and unnecessary aspects, then Gregor – having rendered the delectation, too, obsolete – is the ultimate connoisseur.) "Travel" is the most vital embodiment of what we call experience. But its pleasure, as Huysmans remarks, "only exists as a matter of fact in retrospect and seldom in the present, at the instant when it is being experienced."[4] Therefore, Gregor has achieved a victory over experience itself.

Holiday also demonstrates that what is gratuitously obvious to me – the names of kitchen appliances, for example – may be a matter of some difficulty for someone without my knowledge and experiences. If you have been a stranger in a strange land, you know the feeling. But imagine how a computer must feel: it knows only what it is told, lacking Des Esseintes's power of imaginative syn-

3 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, trans. John Howard (New York: Lieber & Lewis, 1922), 45.
4 Ibid.

thesis. Thus, in *Holiday,* the narrator's observations veer from the superfluous to the spurious: whether the algorithm detects something that is obviously there, or apparently invents something that is not, it has missed the point of the photograph.

Holiday's shifts from image to text certainly foreground the failure of translation: the work would be less interesting if this tender technology were more successful. This failure provides the germ of much of 0x0a's output.[5] But then, it's a commonplace that translation's inadequacy is also its strength: it produces a new work. It seems highly appropriate, then, that Gregor and Hannes's latest work, a collaboration, takes on translation directly. If any translation is imperfect, ever an interpretation, than surely more of them leads to a richer understanding of the original work. In this spirit of generosity, 0x0a has determined to double the number of English translations of *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis), Franz Kafka's indispensable novella, which was first published one hundred years ago. This project, whose initial results we are privileged to hear tonight – Gregor will read the opening lines of all seven of these new texts – is of course called *The Translation*. It is called that because "translation" is

5 See, as another example, Hannes's Maschinensprache works, in which a poem read aloud by a computer voice is recorded by a speech-recognition program set to a different language. Tristan Tzara's *Pour faire un poème dadaïste* then becomes *Profound brand at least* (their first lines, respectively: "Prenez un journal / Prenez des ciseaux"; "financial night / we need to see Sue").
(http://hannesbajohr.de/profound-brand-at-least-pour-faire-un-poeme-dadaiste/)

a synonym of "metamorphosis." From there, you have a pretty good picture of where the rest comes from. In these new interpretations, the celebrated Gregor Samsa (no relation) awakens to finds himself transformed into an "atrocious varmint," a "monstrous pest," a "verminous glitch," a "lurid parasite," an "immoral louse," a "horrific vermin," and a "mammoth worm." As many of 0x0a's projects suggest, it is actually easier to create a new work than to communicate the meaning of an extant one. (Digital literature is doing its part to dethrone the tyrant of creativity.)

But why only seven new translations? Why not make the project infinite, unending, like the permutations of language itself? The execution may be impossible, but the question is legitimate. In nearly all of his projects, Gregor struggles not only with a surfeit of material, but also against the impossibility of a true ending: *Holiday* and *I Don't Know* could go on forever, or nearly. This quality particularly propels *Chicken Infinite*, a compilation of thousands of recipes culled from the Internet into an epic compendium of ingredients and instructions (*Chicken Infinite* is currently on display in the kitchen).

Building on these implications, Gregor has made a special project for Room & Board during his residency: *BÆBEL*. Another work which both gestures towards and demands infinity, *BÆBEL* comprises an awesome aggregation and reshuffling of all the IKEA furniture-assembly instructions available online.[6] The result has a surprising

6 I also see *BÆBEL* as a nod to domesticity, Gregor's take on the homelike

formal beauty that is only underlined by its incoherence. *BÆBEL*'s name suggests both staggering ambition – and if you followed its instructions, could assemble all IKEA furniture into a single fixture, what could that be but a tower to god? – and its promise of universal comprehension: IKEA's power is predicated on communicating across languages, which is why its manuals eschew words entirely for these severe and elegant images. For tonight's salon, we printed the full text of *BÆBEL* into a run of zine-sized booklets. Each is therefore unique, and available for $1.

Ultimately, of course, the experiment fails: *BÆBEL* doesn't resolve into a comprehensible whole; its excess of explanation once again causes estrangement. After all, language alone isn't to blame for our failures in communication. Gregor knows this already; that's why he wrote "dishwasher" on the dishwasher.

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side of Room & Board that has, one way or another, inspired each of our residents so far. (Perhaps Gregor has been influenced by the vibes emanating from Daniel Fishkin's *Bed Piece: Pelta Feldman Variation*, a musical bed in which he has slept all month.)

List of works

THE TRANSLATIONS

This project, a collaboration with Hannes Bajohr, uses a python script that searches for synonyms for each Verb, Noun or Adjective in a text. The process is applied seven times to translations of Kafka's *Metamorphosis,* which in sum generates seven new translations of it. Gregor Samsa thus awakens to find himself transformed into an "atrocious varmint," a "monstrous pest," a "verminous glitch," a "lurid parasite," an "immoral louse," a "horrific vermin," and a "mammoth worm."

HOLIDAY

There is a website called *GoogleSightseeing.com* that features Google Street View tours of popular places around the world – all you need is an Internet connection. The slogan of the website is a question: "Why bother seeing the world for real?"
Now that image recognition software is getting better and better, we can push this idea to its logical conclusion by automating our perception of the world analog with the travel. One may ask now: "Why bother seeing the world at all?"

I DON'T KNOW

An algorithm combs through the universe of online encyclopedia Wikipedia and collects its entries. A text is generated in which a narrator denies knowing anything about any of these entries.

This is a Frohmann Verlag and 0x0a project, released on Jan 10, 2015.

ON THE ROAD

The exact and approximate spots Kerouac traveled and described are taken from the book and parsed by Google Direction Service API. The result is a huge direction instruction of 55 pages. The chapters match those of the original book. All in all, as Google shows, the journey takes 272.26 hours (for 17,527 miles).

This book is part of the exhibitions "Poetry Will Be Made By All!" (Zürich, January 30 – March 30, 2014) and Print Error at Jeu de Paume (online exhibition). It's also a stage performance by Michael Durkin and 14th Street (March 2015).

CHICKEN INFINITE

Cooking recipes from the web have been collected and mixed randomly together.
The result: Chicken Infinite – A cooking recipe for 532 pages.

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

Who am I? Where do I come from? What is my purpose in Life and what happens when I die?
For centuries people have tried to come up with answers regarding the fundamental questions of life. Then the internet was invented and these questions have finally been answered – by users.

The book The Fundamental Questions captures them in an inspiring record of epic proportions where every individual verse becomes a mantra of a mind-expanding collective thought. It reminds us, that one single answer is never the answer.

A Collaboration with Vicki Bennett aka People Like Us – www.peoplelikeus.org

Thousands of online dating profiles from the web were parsed, matched according to four questions and sorted in an alphabetical order.

BABEL

BÆBEL comprises an aggregation and reshuffling of all the IKEA furniture-assembly instructions available online. The result is an enormous manual of about 800 pages.

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R o o m   &   B o a r d is an artist's residency and salon that takes place at my apartment here in Williamsburg. Gregor Weichbrodt has been artist-in-residence for October 2015.

Director: Julia Pelta Feldman
President: Deborah Peña

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