

Turn of Phrase: Language and Translation in Global Contemporary Art
Bowdoin College Museum of Art | Brunswick, Maine
December 15, 2022–June 4, 2023
Exhibition Labels

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How do different artists interpret, disrupt, and reimagine language? How might language’s meaning become lost, destabilized, or reinvented through art? Artists use language to embody narratives, contest definitions, and raise questions about the self and the world. *Turn of Phrase* seeks to reframe language beyond the written word and situate individual artists’ approach to language in relation to their distinct linguistic backgrounds, cultural references, and personal ruminations.

This exhibition features works of global artists created during the last forty years to reflect the increasing urgency to express and communicate. While artists often use language as a subversive strategy, they equally challenge language’s limitations through the process of translation. Questions of context, readership, power, and access are essential for examining works of art across cultures and geographies.

The diverse artistic practices evident in this exhibition can be seen as distinct “turns of phrase”—interventions rooted in idiosyncratic expressions, manners of speech, modes of address that are both uniquely personal and broadly resonant. They offer nuanced interpretations for navigating limits of legibility, systems of representations, and personal dialects that resist essentializing readings. Recognizing the power of the “untranslatable,” *Turn of Phrase* is dedicated to the in-between space that allows for pluralization and disruption.

This exhibition was curated by Sabrina Lin ’21 and was made possible by the Stevens L. Frost Endowment Fund and the Sylvia E. Ross Fund for the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.



XU BING

Born Chongqing, Sichuan, China

Chinese, born 1955

Quotation from Chairman Mao, 2001

Chinese ink calligraphy on paper

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Museum Purchase, with a

grant from the Freeman Foundation Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative
2006.10.1

Xu Bing began the *Square Word Calligraphy* series after moving to New York in 1990. In Xu’s linguistic intervention, the Latin alphabet is transformed into strokes that resemble Chinese characters. English-speaking viewers, upon close inspection, will gradually realize that they are able to parse out the hybrid texts, which spell out a quotation from Mao Zedong’s 1964 letter to students at China’s Central Conservatory of Music calling for the appropriation of the past to serve the present and using foreign cultures to serve the Chinese. The quote mirrors Xu’s strategy behind the series, transforming a historic writing tradition for contemporary art, and translating “foreign” things into a new international context. However, Xu’s characters are inaccessible to native Chinese speakers without reading knowledge of English. While the series

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promises an optimistic vision for cross-cultural communication, it nonetheless raises important questions about readership and relative access to language for different audiences

MARTA MARÍA PÉREZ BRAVO

Born Havana, Cuba

Cuban, born 1959

Oddun Para, 1997

photolithograph on paper

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Anonymous Gift and Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund

1998.18

Born in Havana and based in Mexico, Pérez Bravo uses black-and-white photography to juxtapose parts of her body with elements of Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería and Palo Monte, which originated in West and Central Africa and were brought to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade. This image shows the artist's upturned palms displaying two objects: a sunflower that represents the goddess *Oshun* and a lightning bolt for the god *Shangó*. Pérez Bravo frames the photograph like a private altar, superimposed with handwritten texts that offer votive prayers to the two *Orishas* (deities). Evoking both the physical and esoteric vocabulary of the body, Pérez Bravo uses spirituality to speak to women's lived experiences and interior life. Staging a ritualistic event, the work's combination of text and image generates a syncretic parallel between bodily language, sacred symbols, written texts, and the spoken word.

GRISHA BRUSKIN

Born Moscow, Russia

Russian, born 1945

Lexika (Anghel, Ptizza, Glaza, Strela, Litza), 1992

color etching on paper

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Anonymous Gift and Museum Purchase, Art Collections Purchase Fund

1993.23.1.–5

This portfolio of prints translates the iconography of Bruskin's monumental paintings and sculptures into an intimate, mystical *lexika* (lexicon). These five images depict chimeras of bird and man, or bodies fused with crosses and arrows. Overlaying a lined background reminiscent of school notebooks, these images correspond to Bruskin's interests in myths connected to his Jewish background and Soviet upbringing. Bruskin has made the inscription purposefully illegible to evoke only the essence of language as "a sign of the basic knowledge of the world" or "a facsimile of note-taking." Bruskin suggests how images can take on textual functions and vice-versa, and playfully incorporates signs, symbols, and mythologies into his personal lexicon. Printed in Vinalhaven, Maine, the series also reveals this state's role in bringing together international artists within larger currents of global contemporary art.

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LUIS CAMNITZER

Born Lübeck, Germany
Uruguayan, born 1937

This is a poetic statement. Identify the elements that construct the poem. From the series “The Assignment Books,” 2011

brass plaque with mixed media

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Museum Purchase, Greenacres
Acquisition Fund
2022.21

Luis Camnitzer, the German-born Uruguayan artist, curator, writer, and educator, has long employed language to interrogate structures of power, pedagogical frameworks, and the intersections between art and social justice. This work belongs to his 2011 series *The Assignment Books*, originally created for an installation at The New School in New York. Juxtaposing object and text, Camnitzer presents a prompt (“the assignment”) for the audience and encourages viewers to write directly on museum walls in response.* Interested in activating language as intellectual puzzles that carry no fixed interpretations, Camnitzer attempts to bridge the distance between artist and viewer and initiate a process of collective problem-solving. His intentionally ambiguous, provocative, and open-ended use of language thus creatively subverts the ways in which meaning is generated in the museum space. “In this I abandon the traditional declarative stance of the artist/teacher,” Camnitzer said. “I become an unprotected artist/learner.”



ALEJANDRO CESARCO

Born Montevideo, Uruguay
Uruguayan, born 1975

Learning the Language (Present Continuous I), 2018
video, color, sound; 18:25 minutes

Learning The Language (Present Continuous II), 2018
4k video, color, sound; 5:25 minutes

Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles

Learning the Language references the creation of personal lexicons by drawing on existing vocabularies. In both works, Cesarco pays homage to female leaders in Latin American art and culture, whose voices address the artist’s own recurrent concerns of memory, regret, and repetition. Considered a form of ventriloquism by the artist, Cesarco “learns” the language of multiple speakers, sources, and texts in this interpretative collage. In the first video, Cesarco casts as his narrator the Argentinean pianist Margarita Fernández, whose eloquent musings on learning music are interspersed with close-ups of her eyes, ears, and hands, gently reminding the viewer how memory becomes absorbed into our bodies. The second video follows a conversation between the Brazilian psychoanalyst and critic Suely Rolnik and her assistant. Here, Cesarco re-stages an iconic scene from Jean-Luc Godard’s movie *La Chinoise* (1967) as Rolnik discusses how Godard’s film shaped her relationship to past traumas. Cesarco’s allusion to film, music, and

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literature is also conditioned by the inclusion of subtitles, offering a complex viewing experience necessitated by layers of translation.



SONG DONG

Born Beijing, China

Chinese, born 1966

Stamping the Water (Yin shui), 1996

set of 36 digital color photographs

Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon; Gift of the Jack and Susy Wadsworth Collection of Contemporary Chinese Photographs

These thirty-six photographs document an hourlong performance by Song Dong, during which he sat in the Lhasa River in Tibet and repeatedly stamped the water using a wooden block carved with the Chinese character *shui* 水 (water). In his sustained engagement with water, Song taps into water's many esoteric meanings: from Daoist beliefs on material impermanence, the pictographic origins of Chinese script, or its elemental powers documented through ancient texts like the *Dao De Jing* (Tao Te Ching). While the work demonstrates the fleetingness of inscribed text, it also concerns language's metaphorical and philosophical paradoxes. Rather than strictly critiquing language, Song's performance shows how bodily process, nature, and time collectively inform a personal cosmology of meaning. Meditating on presence and absence, being and nothingness, Song's large-scale photographs offer an immersive experience for the viewer to "read" language for all its potentials and contrariness.



JEFFREY GIBSON

Born Colorado Springs, Colorado

Choctaw and Cherokee, born 1972

The Anthropophagic Effect, Garment no.3, 2019

mixed media with cotton, brass grommets, nylon thread, artificial sinew, dried pear gourds, glass and plastic beads, nylon ribbon on canvas

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund
2021.63

Gibson's garment synthesizes diverse cultural references to formulate his idiosyncratic vocabulary, including the Paiute Ghost Dance, historic and contemporary craft techniques, images from the 2016 Standing Rock Protests, and the camp aesthetics of Queer culture. The tunic recalls nineteenth century ceremonial garments worn by Indigenous people for protection against colonizers' bullets. At the same time, Gibson brings together voices and narratives that concern contemporary issues and hybridized influences. Drawing on Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagic Manifesto* (1928), which argued that Native cultures can "cannibalize" colonizers' cultures to their own ends, Gibson proposes a new language that speaks to the intersections of identities— "a language that would counter didactic perspectives

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and grow in richness because of its inclusiveness.” His bold evocation of the lyric “Don’t Make Me Over,” a 1962 song by Dionne Warwick, functions as a resounding statement of self-love, solidarity, and artistic agency.



ANN HAMILTON
Born Lima, Ohio
American, born 1956
Untitled, 1992

mixed media paper book altered with polished pebbles on
lacquered birch and glass case

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Archival Collection of Marion
Boulton Stroud and Acadia Summer Arts Program, Mt. Desert
Island, Maine. Gift from the Marion Boulton “Kippy” Stroud
Foundation
2018.10.139

Remaking old books to explore legibility and erasure, Hamilton lays out eight pages with texts covered by tiny pebbles that obscure individual letters. The stones seem to absorb the words, but rather than blankly redacting information, their slightest variations in shapes, colors, and transparencies appear silently expressive, imbuing them with language-like characteristics. Occasionally, fragments of letters show up from beneath the pebbles, conjuring the mind’s ability for linguistic associations and the human impulse to decipher meanings in natural shapes. As Hamilton says, “the text was obscured, but if you were really determined, you probably could read it.” Hamilton is not concerned about the text’s original subject, but instead wishes to evoke the intimacy and discovery found in sustained reading experiences.

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE
Born Johannesburg, South Africa
South African, born 1955
Spectromètre, 2002
Iris print with hand coloring
Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Museum Purchase, James Phinney Baxter Fund, in memory of
Professor Henry Johnson
2003.3

Best known for his drawing-based practice, Kentridge frequently repurposes antique maps, dictionaries, and encyclopedias to represent physical repositories of knowledge, where now-obsolete sources can inform new associations and abstract ideas. In *Spectromètre*, two figures are set against a page from an old *Larousse Encyclopedia* that features an illustration for the nineteenth century theatrical device used to create the illusion (“spectre”) of figures or objects onstage. Playing with different notions of illusion and disillusion, Kentridge sees this as a metaphor for the disconnect in interpersonal relationships. The conical shape of the original device, for example, is translated into “empty vessels” accompanying the figures. Diagrams for

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perfume bottles, shells, and speculums reference the female body, whereas a flower forms a spiky mess of chest hair on the male torso. Weaving a narrative out of seemingly randomized components, Kentridge reimagines them as elements of a new-found visual language.

BARBARA KRUGER

Born Newark, New Jersey

American, born 1945

Untitled (We will no longer be seen and not heard), 1985

photo-offset lithograph and screenprint

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund

1986.14.1.–9

During the 1980s, Kruger and other feminist artists began using the language of advertising, graphic design, and critical theory to comment on issues of power and representation. Here, Kruger repurposes images found in mass media to create nine picture-texts that reveal how information can be intentionally framed and selectively fashioned. Importantly, Kruger activates multiple layers of language beyond the visual. Her evocation of the aphorism “children should be seen and not heard” emphasizes discourses of control and establishes a particular readership who understands familiar idioms, which are culturally specific. Likewise, the figures’ provocative gestures suggest a correlation between the written word and body language, yet they do not correspond to the accurate sign language for the given phrase. In bringing together vernacular references and different linguistic modes, Kruger highlights how language can not only communicate but also, depending on context and audience, fail to express.

GLENN LIGON

Born Bronx, New York

American, born 1960

Untitled (Crowd/The Fire Next Time), 2000

mixed media screenprint with coal dust on white wove paper

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Bequest of David P. Becker, Class of 1970

2011.69.262

In this print, Ligon superimposes a line from James Baldwin’s essay collection *The Fire Next Time* (1963) over a grainy photograph of the Million Man March, the 1995 demonstration for African American civil rights in Washington, D.C. The quotation reads, “something in me wondered ‘What will happen to all that beauty?’” The letters are spelled out in coal crystals to simultaneously enhance language’s physicality and illegibility. Coal also engenders contradictory readings: the byproduct of environmental extraction, the coded meaning of color, the beguiling beauty of its presence. As dust particles bleed down the page, text and image obscure one another, and the meaning of the quotation, too, becomes unfixed. Juxtaposing Baldwin’s words of resilience and community with images from the March, Ligon’s intentional play on illegibility and invisibility points to the absence of Black women and LGBTQ individuals in the event.

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HUNG LIU

Born Changchun, Jilin, China
Chinese American, 1948–2021

Western Pass, 1990

oil with silverleaf on wood, ceramics on canvas

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Museum Purchase, Lloyd O.
and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund
2021.53

Created in response to events of Tiananmen in 1989, Hung Liu offers a complex interpretation rooted in layers of history, politics, and language. The image derives from a photograph taken by a British botanist in 1900, depicting two Chinese prisoners awaiting execution during the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901). Liu’s linseed-oil washes dissolve the realism of the image, while a Tang-dynasty poem by Wang Wei (699–761) humanizes the subjects and inserts them into a literati tradition, in which poets bid farewell to those setting out on a journey: “Wait till we empty one more cup [of wine] – West of Yang Gate there’ll be no old friends.” The porcelain bowls, offered like a commemorative gesture, further evoke a linguistic homophone—*linxing* as “awaiting execution” and “on the eve of departure.” As mundane objects likely purchased by Liu in San Francisco’s Chinatown, the bowls subtly reference the artist’s own diasporic background and compel us to consider the work’s many implications.

ANGELA LORENZ

Born Boston, Massachusetts

American, born 1965

Su Shi boat to the Red Cliffs: part I, part II of Chibi Fu, 1082, 2011

artist’s book

George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives

Display copy lent by the artist

Bologna-based artist Angela Lorenz finds inspiration in *Chibi Fu* (“Ode to the Red Cliffs”), a Song-dynasty poem written by Su Shi (1036–1101). Intrigued by the poem’s wide dissemination across East Asia, Lorenz playfully reimagines this iconic Chinese prose in the form of the homophonous Japanese food, sushi. The two rolls, containing Lorenz’s commentary on the poem and the poet’s exile, evoke classical scrolls through which Su’s writings journeyed across oceans and through time. By drawing a comparison between literature and food, Lorenz suggests about how language can likewise be translated, digested, and absorbed.

MELEKO MOKGOSI

Born Francistown, Botswana

Motswana, born 1981

Modern Art: The Root of African Savages, 2013

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inkjet printing and charcoal on linen, six panels

Colby College Museum of Art; Gift of the Acorn Foundation, Barbara and Theodore Alford in honor of Sharon Corwin

Defiantly scribbling over, crossing out, and picking apart text sourced from museum labels, Mokgosi's commentary ranges from sharply analytical to poignantly personal, calling into the question the often-neutralizing effects of museum display. Appropriating labels for works by Picasso, Matisse, Stieglitz, and historical objects by "unidentified" African artists, Mokgosi exposes the very didactics used by art institutions to perpetuate racial hegemony and colonial narratives. By targeting museum texts as a particular mode of superimposing and cementing meaning, Mokgosi makes apparent the ways in which institutional language functions as a system of representation and exclusion. The artist also challenges the tendency to "always have human history in the form of the linguistic wall label, thoroughly taken over the art object." Rather than offering easy solutions, Mokgosi inserts his individual voice to remind viewers that language has long been at the heart of power dynamics and ideological construction.

ABELARDO MORELL '71

Born Havana, Cuba

American, born 1948

1841 Book of Proverbs for the Blind #1, 1995

gelatin silver print

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund

1996.23

Books have long fascinated Morell, whose series *A Book of Books* reframes the printed page as not a static carrier of meaning, but rather something that can be transformed and made ambiguous under changing conditions. In this photograph, a beam of light streams across embossed letters in a book developed for blind readers, casting valleys of shadows on the page like an undulating landscape. The depicted page features text from the Book of Proverbs (8:21–8:26) using Boston Line Type, a raised alphabet system that was later replaced by Braille. Morell showcases how the ability to 'read' can be translated into the non-optical, instead centering language as something that can originate in and be understood through the bodily, the sensory, or even the experiential. Nevertheless, as a photographic representation of a tactile language, the source's linguistic functionality becomes reduced, its intended purpose for unsighted readers provocatively lost in translation.

IRMARI NACHT

Born New York City

American, born 1939

Books 42 Italian, 2010

altered bookwork

George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives

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In Irmari Nacht's work, the artist comments on the transfer of languages by slicing apart and remolding a copy of the classic textbook *Galpin's Beginning Readings in Italian* (1966). Nacht uses recycled books to probe how new meanings emerge when the physical text is no longer legible, extending beyond its two-dimensional surface. As the textbook is transformed into a tree-like structure, Nacht also makes visible how language acquisition, while originating from written text, blossoms and grows organically.

SHIRIN NESHAT

Born Qazvin, Iran

Iranian American, born 1957

"Sayed" and "Ghada" from "Our House is on Fire" series, 2013

digital pigment prints on paper

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Gift of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

2016.2.1.–2

Neshat traveled to Cairo in 2012, following the Arab Spring, to speak with and photograph members of the Egyptian community. Here, barely visible lines of calligraphy are inscribed over the two figures' faces. Written in Farsi, Neshat's text draws from poems from the Iranian Revolution, as well as Persian translations of Arabic poetry. The figures' piercing gaze haunts the images with the emotional weight of lived experiences, conjuring up the words of Mehdi Akhavan Sales (1928–1990), whose poem "A Cry" gives name to the series: "My house is on fire, soul burning, ablaze in every direction." The choice to overlay Persian texts over Arabic-speaking individuals complicates reading of these photographs, perhaps as a mode of inserting the artist's own voice of living in exile. At the same time, the text's ghostly presence speaks to the invisible yet indelible traumas of individual loss under political tumult.

LORNA SIMPSON

Born Brooklyn, New York

American, born 1960

H.S., 1992

two dye diffusion color Polaroid prints, engraved on Plexiglas

Collection of Alvin Hall '74

In her conceptual practice, Lorna Simpson uses multi-panel photographs with inscriptions to question the relationship between text and image, likeness and representation. Intentionally cropping out figures' faces or turning their backs against the camera, Simpson offers complex views on gender and race while resisting essentializing or autobiographical readings. In *H.S.*, the anonymous female figure holds up a yearbook superimposed with the repeated words "subjugation" and "indoctrination," like echoes of a silent mantra. Is Simpson making a commentary on the limitations of the education system, or the homogenizing power of institutional language at large? Simpson's construction of the figure using two vertically stacked Polaroids, meanwhile, presents the Black female body as both laden with meaning but also physically fragmented and constrained. Combined with its textual ambiguity, the work leaves the viewer to contemplate how language shapes, obscures, or even negates individual voices.

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WANG TIANDE

Born Shanghai, China

Chinese, born 1960

Digital Series No. 03–A05, 2003

Chinese ink calligraphy on paper with cigarette burns

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Museum Purchase, with a grant from the Freeman Foundation
Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative

2006.10.3

Trained in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, Wang Tiande poetically reimagines the process of inscribing words onto paper. In his *Digital Series*, the artist layers two sheets of writing: the bottom features inscriptions of Chinese characters in ink, overlaid with a second layer of translucent *xuan* (rice) paper burned with cigarette tips to form words. The title calls to mind the process of “burning” information onto digital drives, where text becomes translated into micro-units of indecipherable data. Wang’s subtle reference to the “digital” as pertaining to fingers (digits) calls attention to the manual, physical labor of calligraphy. Through veiling one layer of text with another, the work’s overall illegibility speaks to the tensions of reading between the past and present. The most compelling aspect of Wang’s work, perhaps, is not the artist’s mastery of calligraphic techniques but rather the delicate, elusive gaps glimpsed between the lines.



YANAGI YUKINORI

Born Fukuoka, Japan

Japanese, born 1959

Loves Me, Loves Me Not, 1997

wool carpet and brass “petals” on jute backing

Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Archival Collection of Marion Boulton Stroud and Acadia Summer Arts Program, Mt. Desert Island, Maine. Gift from the Marion Boulton “Kippy” Stroud Foundation

2018.10.430

Fifteen petals scatter across the surface of Yanagi Yukinori’s carpet, dispersed from the chrysanthemum medallion at its center. While one petal remains on the central disk, the others float freely, each accompanied by text that reads either “s/he loves me” or “s/he loves me not.” The inscriptions correspond to languages spoken in Japan’s former colonies and by Indigenous populations in Japan. Juxtaposing the imperial crest with the rich red color evocative of Japan’s national flag, the carpet surfaces the voices of subjugated individuals under the imperial regime. By drawing on the visual and textual language of the empire, Yanagi participates in political debates regarding Japanese national identity in the decades following World War II. Additionally, the carpet prompts viewers to connect the disjointed phrases by inviting speakers of the given languages to say them aloud. Yanagi’s use of different languages requires a collective reading, the text’s full meaning activated in situ.