

On Distance and Language

Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes | *In Your Words*

A whole world was opened up to me when I heard about bird migrations, that mighty net which is spun around the earth as a result of some inexplicable call, for which life itself is wagered.

– Karen Blixen

Baroness Karen Blixen left her home in Denmark for the African highlands, where she spent seventeen years, and then returned. From 1913 to 1931 she lived and worked on a coffee farm in the Ngong Hills, not far from Nairobi, Kenya. The untouched landscape of the region enraptured her, and the people she met were a source of admiration and mentorship. As a Nordic emigrant, she experienced both the isolation and the freedom of living in a faraway place, sentiments she elucidated in her memoirs, *Out of Africa*.

Written after her return to Denmark in 1931, the memoirs were a meditation on her beloved coffee farm, the divergences between African and European life, and her affection for the flora and fauna of the region. Blixen's writings reveal an enchantment with migratory birds who, in an instinctual search for sustenance, travel invariably from one locale to another. To the author, the remarkable clockwork of their long-distance migrations reflects the intricacies of the cycle of seasons, and evokes a graceful

interconnectedness between distant places—a “mighty net spun around the earth”. In 1991, nearly thirty years after her death, Blixen's home in Copenhagen, referred to as Rungstedlund, was converted into a public museum and bird sanctuary. Amongst the birds who frequent Rungstedlund are those whose migration patterns circle between Denmark and Kenya. They include the common swift, willow warbler, house martin and lesser whitethroat, to name a few.

The migratory life and acclaimed writing of Karen Blixen serve as a jumping-off point for artists Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes in their collaborative project, *In Your Words*. Originally presented at the Karen Blixen Museet at Rungstedlund in 2011, the multifaceted exhibition hinges on *Out of Africa* to explore notions of distance and language. The exhibition combines film, video animations, text, sculpture and installation works that offer a poignant response to the Baroness' legacy and shed light on the artists' respective nomadic existences.

ON DISTANCE

In their personal and professional lives, both Buhl and Fernandes have travelled extensively and lived in diverse countries. Buhl was born in Denmark and has resided in Amsterdam, Paris and



6. The image is a photograph of a person sitting at a table. The person is wearing a white shirt and dark pants. The background is a plain wall. The image is framed by a white border.

7. The image is a photograph of a person sitting at a table. The person is wearing a white shirt and dark pants. The background is a plain wall. The image is framed by a white border.

8. The image is a photograph of a person sitting at a table. The person is wearing a white shirt and dark pants. The background is a plain wall. The image is framed by a white border.

IN YOUR WORDS

On Distance and Language

Brooklyn. Fernandes is of Indian descent. Born in Nairobi and raised in Newmarket, Ontario he is currently based in both Toronto and Brooklyn. Reflecting on their own itinerant narratives, the artists mine Blixen's oeuvre to address the challenges catalyzed by distance, displacement, foreignness, language acquisition and long-distance travel.

Anchoring the exhibition is a ten-minute black-and-white video, from which the project takes its title. Buhl and Fernandes channel Blixen's fascination with migration through a textual inventory of birds that visit Rungstedlund as part of their seasonal passage. The voices of Buhl, Fernandes and Irungu Mutu, a Kenyan actor, recite the names of the species in Danish, English and Swahili, the three languages shared by Blixen, Buhl and Fernandes. Like falling leaves, the species' names float down the screen—a dreamlike backdrop for their layered voices. As the film continues, biographical anecdotes, animations and a fleeting flock of birds intercept selected passages from Blixen's writings.

As much as the bird is a leitmotif in Blixen's memoirs, it is also a central figure in *In Your Words*, threading together the exhibition's six distinct elements. In *At Sea*, a three-minute silent film based on an excerpt from *Out of Africa*, 150 flamingos are shipped by boat from Kenya to a zoo in France. Fragments of text in a bright pink serif font describe the poor conditions in which the flamingos were kept during their long journey. The text is set against black-and-white footage of the ocean, taken by the artists



On Distance and Language

at Rungstedlund. “At each wave I heard in the dark the flamingos shriek”, Blixen narrates. “Each morning, I saw the keeper taking out one or two dead birds and throwing them overboard”. Harnessing Blixen’s personal account, Buhl and Fernandes expose not only the hardships of long-distance travel, but the distressing and sometimes disastrous effects of forced migration.

Another piece that alludes to the negative effects of migration is *Farah’s Letter*, a pulsating neon sculpture in the image of a parrot drawn by Fernandes. (The same parrot appears as an animation in the *In Your Words* video.) Accompanying the neon is an audio excerpt of Farah Aden, Blixen’s servant, explaining that he brought a French-speaking parrot from the French Congo to Kenya as a gift for Blixen. In a thick Somali accent, Aden recounts that once it adjusts to life in Kenya, the parrot will forget French and acquire both English and Swahili.

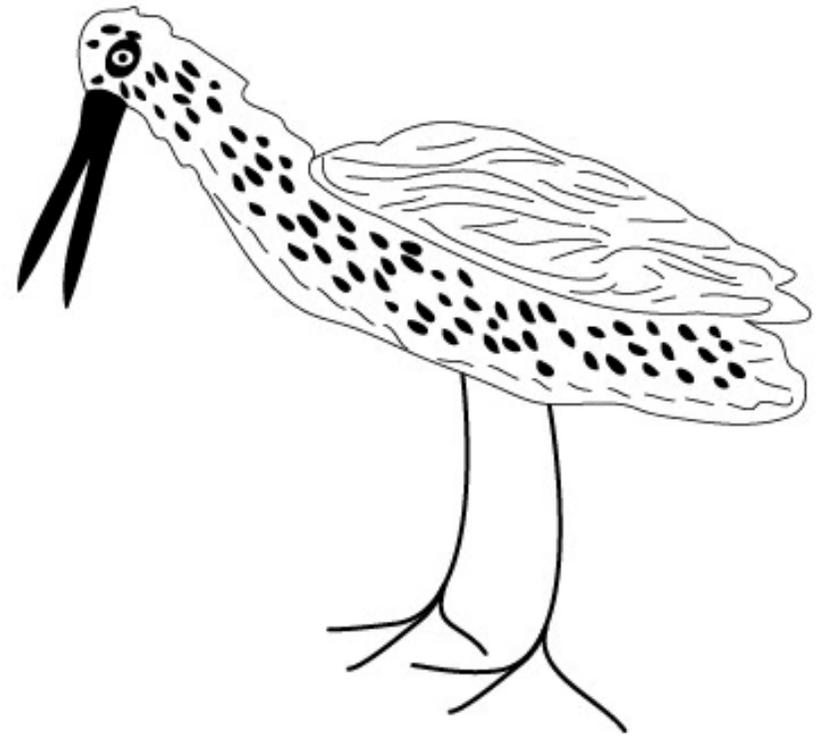
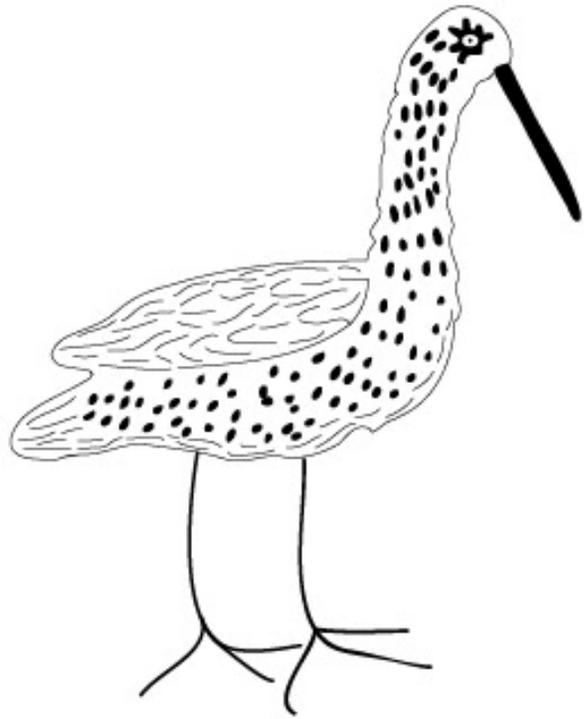
Parrots, in contrast to migratory birds, are often held captive, coveted for their magnificent colouring and ability to imitate human speech. There is a marked parallel between a parrot, who mimics the sounds that envelop her, and an individual who learns a new language through immersion. The neon parrot also serves as a reminder that language is related to ethnic identity and power relations. As Aden’s story of the parrot’s unnatural migration unfolds, the work conjures the effects of colonialism, such as forced acculturation and the suppression of language through involuntary geographic relocation.

ON LANGUAGE

It is curious that Blixen, whose native language is Danish, composed her memoirs in English. Writing in a language other than one’s mother tongue is a challenge both in terms of orthography and self-identification. If a first language is inextricably connected to one’s identity, then a second language becomes a second way of life, replete with new idioms and lexical items that colour one’s understanding of the world. That Blixen authored her memoirs in her second language demonstrates not only her linguistic prowess, but the very hybridity of her being.

Composite identities are also palpable in the artwork of Buhl and Fernandes. Buhl, for example, is a polyglot who speaks Danish, English, French and Dutch. In the video *In Your Words*, Fernandes confesses to Buhl: “When we were in Denmark, I found it interesting to hear you speak in your mother tongue. It was almost like you were another person. Not a different person, but *another* person.” Buhl replies: “When I’m in Denmark I tend to forget English phrases and words. I realize that I sometimes spoke to you in Danish when you were here. I didn’t always notice it, but then I would see the confused look in your eyes. Returning home, my words get lost. I mix up languages and lose the connections between faraway places.”

The idea of translation is carried further in the video when Mutu states that in Swahili, *what is your name?* translates literally to *who are you?* The nuance in this translation illustrates a deformation



On Distance and Language

of meaning as it crosses cultural borders. Translation, in this sense, can become a microcosm for interactions between cultures, and can illustrate the extent to which place, identity and language are interconnected.

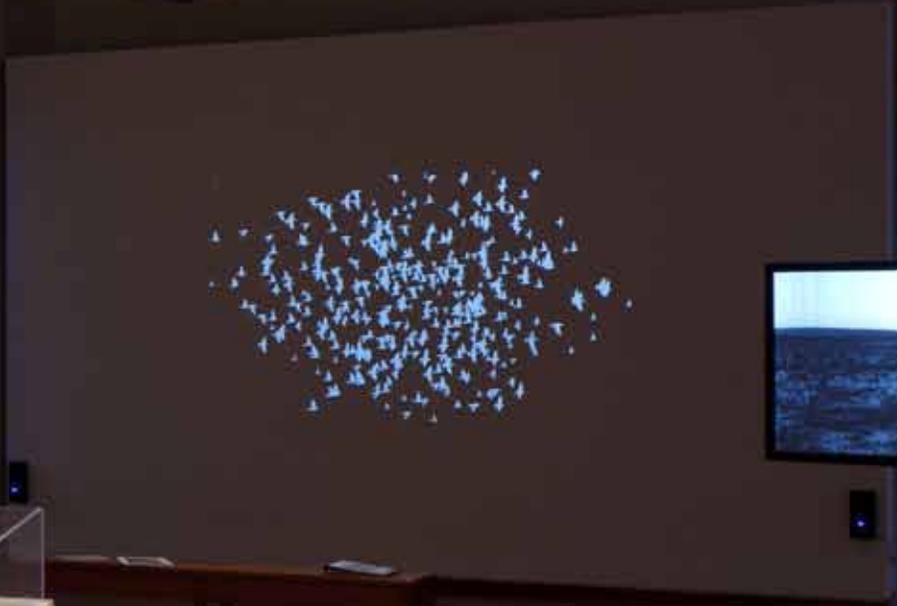
Another work that engages themes of translation and multilingualism is *13 INDEX CARDS*, a text-based installation of fragments from thirteen index cards handwritten in different coloured inks and languages, scribed by the artists in collaboration with Danish poet Mette Moestrup. The text, which interweaves personal experiences with reflections on language and translation, functions as a legend or glossary for the exhibition. The playful medley of languages presented in an unbroken structure creates a whimsical, polyphonic experience for the reader. The thirteen terms include “bird”, “journey”, “mother tongue”, “snow” and “stranger”, concepts that all resurface at other moments in the exhibition. Here, for example, is their collective rendering of the term “bird”:

ndege is the word for a bird as well as an airplane & the pink flamingo on the table has no feathers & I noticed a yellow canary in the flock & the starling in the black sun is no natteravn & I prefer the nightingale & fuglen kan dø

The idea of a fragmented glossary or lexicon is also addressed into the short film *To flee / To fly*, which portrays dictionary entries for the English verbs “fly” and “flee” alongside 16 mm footage



EXIT



On Distance and Language

of a 1918 airplane attempting flight. The work's title refers to the Danish terms *et fly* and *at fly*, which translate into *an airplane* and *to flee* respectively. Playing on the shared English etymological roots of these terms, the film also depicts a flock of birds hovering in an empty space, which echoes the flock in the *In Your Words* video. *To flee / To fly* presents a deft use of layering and a nimble back-and-forth of text and image that characterize the collaborative practice of Buhl and Fernandes.

In Your Words evinces that distance—both physical and psychological—can be a source of personal reflection and artistic energy. As the exhibition queries the effects of migration on language and identity, it also asks us to consider notions of home and belonging. After a long time spent away, home can become surreal; as Buhl remarks, “returning home, my words get lost”. Similarly, Blixen experienced home as an illusory place, confessing that having more than one existence made the other feel dreamlike and unreal. These parallel experiences beg the question: can a human being, like a migratory bird, belong to several worlds?

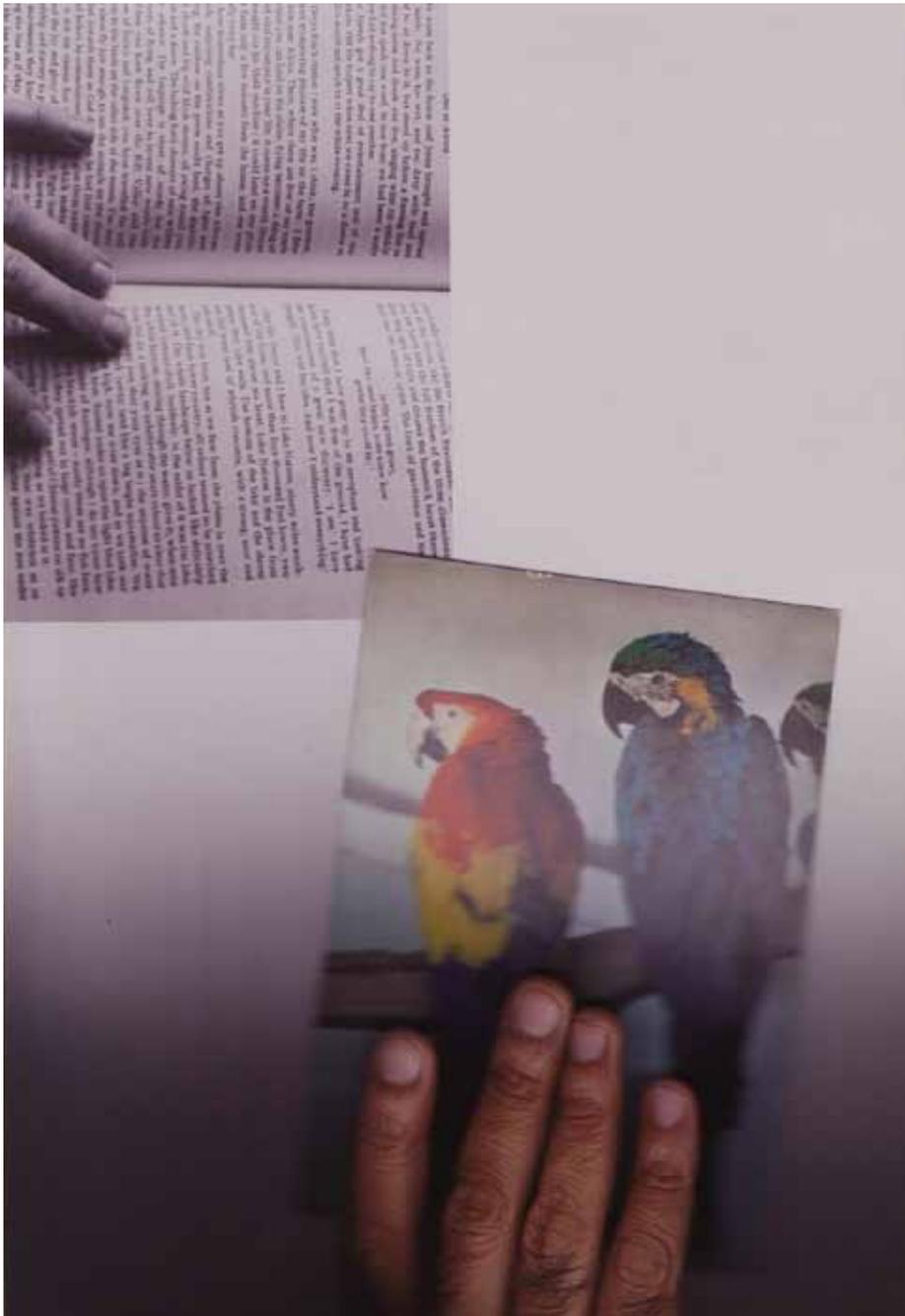
Through the ambling narratives of Blixen and the artists, *In Your Words* encourages us to reflect on our own trajectories and glossaries, and how these shape our identity. In the context of a globalized world, cultural terrain becomes mutable and the question *who am I?* (or *what is my story?*) gains poignancy. Through representations of personal experiences, *In Your*

Words explores the multifarious and transitory nature of identity in contemporary society, asking us to consider who we become as we speak in borrowed languages and live in foreign places.

by RENÉE VAN DER AVOIRD

NANNA DEBOIS BUHL (MFA, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 2006) is a Danish visual artist based in New York and Copenhagen. She has exhibited her work internationally in the United States, Sweden, Italy and Denmark and has work in the collections of the National Museum of Photography, Copenhagen and the Museum for Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark.

BRENDAN FERNANDES (MFA, University of Western Ontario, 2005) is a Canadian visual artist based between Toronto and New York. He has exhibited his work widely across North America and at the Third Guangzhou Triennial, China. His work has been collected by numerous institutions including the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and the National Gallery of Canada.



Acknowledgements

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Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes, *Dinesen, Baroness, Lioness, Memsahib* (detail), 2014, fourteen digital prints (Cover, page 9)

Installation view of *In Your Words: Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes*, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario (Page 2, 6, 7)

Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes, *Farah's Letter*, 2011, neon sign and audio, 0:55 minutes (Page 3)

Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes, *In Your Words* (video still), 2011, high-definition video, 10:27 minutes (Page 5)

Photography: Pages 2, 6, 7, André Beneteau; Cover, pages 3, 5, 9, Courtesy the artists

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37 Mulcaster Street
Barrie, ON L4M 3M2
www.maclarenart.com