

**Elena Siemens**

### **Babel Radio: Multilingual Art and Writing from Mayakovsky to Meireles**

Cildo Meireles has described his sculpture *Babel* (2001) as a "tower of incomprehension." Taking Meireles's work as its starting point, this presentation addresses the pros and cons of multilingual art and writing. My case studies include Vladimir Mayakovsky's forceful Futurist mixing of Russian and English in his 1925 compilation of poems *Amerika* (America), Joseph Brodsky's less extravagant *mélange* of Russian and Spanish in his *Мексиканский Романсеро* (Mexican Romanserо) from 1975, and today's flamboyant practice of code – switching as represented in the 2009 publication *Фотосинтез* (Photosynthesis) by poet Vera Polozkova and photographer Olga Pavolga. In contrast to the earlier tradition, *Фотосинтез* uses foreign words and phrases without either transcribing them into Cyrillic or providing their translation into Russian. Similarly, Pavolga's photography refrains from providing any direct visual reference to Polozkova's poems. The presentation further considers the intense debates surrounding Google Translate with some commentators seeing as it as travesty, while others hailing it as an antidote to that very incomprehension between nations pointed out by Meireles. Illustrated with analogue and digital photography by the author, the presentation cites, among others, Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roman Jakobson, Max Kozloff, and Vladimir Nabokov.