

Minia Biabiany

*J'ai tué le papillon dans mon oreille*

*I killed the butterfly in my ear*

19 Jun–8 Aug 2021

Minia Biabiany (b. 1988, Guadeloupe) arranges materials, sounds, videos and images to form spacial narratives. These deal with the conflictual and violent histories that have been inscribed into the archipelago of Guadeloupe and into the bodies of its inhabitants. They tell of the ongoing ecological and political ramifications of the plantation economy and slavery during French colonial rule, as well as the continuing contamination of the ecosystem through the use of the pesticide Kepone from the 1970s on. Under persistent conditions of colonial depletion, exploitation and destruction, how can a connection to the land be established?

The exhibition title *I killed the butterfly in my ear* recalls a former video work of the artist, *Toli Toli* (2018), where it's saying: "butterflies provoke blindness when they blow in your ear." In this context, blindness is not understood as restricting or posing a barrier to perception. Rather, the loss of optical perception allows for the sharpening of other senses. In place of an object perception that classifies and represents, there emerges a sensitivity and sensuality that is more permeable and remains ambiguous—a sensory capacity that eludes the hegemony of the visual and enables a different, more encompassing way of experiencing and occupying space. The title tells of a transformative moment, a synaesthetic experience that offers the possibility of seeing the room with one's ears.

On entering the hall, acoustic sensation is addressed immediately as a staccato sound penetrates the room. What is heard is a song by the Martiniquan music group Watabwi, who perform on conch shell wind instruments, known in Creole as “kòn a lanbi” (French: *conque de l'ambi*). In the colonial period, it served the residents as an instrument to communicate exceptional occurrences such as deaths, uprisings, and catastrophes or more commonly to announce the daily tides and currents before fishing. These resonated messages had two functions: by means of coded tones and melodies, these sounds would communicate information and warn others of danger, as utilised by slaves who fled from plantations and the resistance fighters known as Maroons. They were also used to call people together. Watabwi continues to play music today, “pour faire parler nos silences”; to make our silence speak.

Due to its metamorphosis from caterpillar, to chrysalis, to butterfly, the butterfly stands for transition and changeability—processes that are of fundamental importance for Biabiany's exhibition. In the tension between the visible and the invisible, the open and the concealed, Biabiany sketches a landscape of her homeland in the Kunstverein, compiled polyphonically from a variety of arrangements and structures. Biabiany's practice is characterised by a particular attention to the materiality of more-than-human entities, to their ways of being and working. Elements and motifs are repeated and varied in physical space as well as on auditory and digital-visual levels, so that new inter-linkages are constantly forming.

Lines of heaped soil lead into the exhibition space. The patterns they form recall a traditional weaving technique, used to make fish traps from bamboo in the Caribbean, among other places. Due to their genuine qualities of entanglement, linkage and connection, practices of weaving and braiding, as found in the wicker baskets and standing panels in the exhibition space, stand metaphorically for storytelling (Latin: *textere*, to weave, to intertwine). Biabiany interweaves forgotten tales in her work and traces

a network of geographical, social and ecological forces, dependencies and relationships that comprise her living environment in Guadeloupe.

Just as soil stands for the basis of life and habitat, in Guadeloupe it also stands for poisoning and destruction. The use of the pesticide Kepone, which consists of the toxic molecule Chlordecone, contaminated the Guadeloupean ecosystems. The chemical was used on the banana plantations of Guadeloupe and Martinique to control a beetle (the banana root borer) that afflicted the banana plants. The Guadeloupe archipelago has been an overseas department of France since 1946, making it one of the “EU's outermost regions”. The controversial pesticide, which was approved for use about 7,000 kilometres away in Paris, was also permitted in Guadeloupe from 1972. In the USA, where the pesticide was produced since 1958, it was banned from the mid-1970s and in France only after 1990. For many more years it was used illegally on the banana plantations of Guadeloupe.

The enormous pesticide pollution caused grave and irreversible ecological damage. The chlorine compound can be detected in the soil, in the lakes and rivers, the drinking water as well as in the blood and even breast milk of the inhabitants. Large parts of the arable land are contaminated yet beyond the banana plantations. The cultivation of root vegetables such as sweet potatoes, cabbage or yams—the inhabitants traditional food supply—is no longer possible in many areas. The many rivers in Guadeloupe are also heavily contaminated, which severely restricts local coastal and inland fishing—once an essential industry. The relationship between humans and nature changed fundamentally, for how can one relate to nature knowing that it makes them sick? Chlordecone negatively affects the cognitive and motor development of infants and increases the risk of miscarriage and prostate cancer. Martinique and Guadeloupe have the highest rates of prostate cancer in the world. The chlorine compound is hardly biodegradable—if at all—meaning that the molecule will still be detectable in the soil for up to 700 years.

In his book *Decolonial Ecology*,<sup>1</sup> the Martinique-born political and cultural scientist Malcolm Ferdinand argues for looking at the massive environmental pollution and destruction in the context of persistent colonial structures. He writes: “Contrary to a technocratic approach that tends to disconnect environmental issues from their historical, social and political contexts, I suggest that environmental pollutions such as that of Guadeloupe and Martinique need to be understood in relation to the social and political issues associated with life in post-colonial and post-slavery societies.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the abolition of slavery in 1848 and integration into the French state, the colonial order established in the 17th century, and its economic ramifications, remain intact. Local products such as bananas on monoculture plantations owned by a few, predominantly white families, are largely exported to France. Food needed by the archipelago has to be imported. “The colonial image of these lands depicts them as mere gardens for the mainland,” states Ferdinand.<sup>3</sup>

The element of water plays an important role in archipelago culture. In her videos and installations, Biabiany repeatedly returns to motifs such as oceans, rivers, waterfalls and rain. The shimmering surface of the two pools placed in the exhibition space can be seen from the very entrance. The deep black water reflects; the bottom cannot be seen.

The post-colonial theorist Édouard Glissant (1928–2011), who was born in Martinique, attaches a positive meaning to the impenetrable, unpredictable and incomprehensible in his thinking on new relationship forms and a new understanding of identity towards the “right to opacity” (French: *le droit à l'opacité*).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Glissant opposes the “western wrath of understanding” with the right to remain un-understood. His criticism takes aim at the will to understand as a prerequisite for coexisting with different cultures, since the desire for classification and standardisation would result in a juxtaposition of a self and an Other. Instead, the focus must be on the textures of the weave, in which opaque elements not only coexist, but run through

each other. Biabiany’s works also refuse to be named and obvious. They are much more readily located within a manner of search-oriented “trace thinking” than control-driven “system thinking”, to use Glissant’s terminology. Objects in the exhibition space remain partially hidden, areas of the earth pattern are not accessible, sounds and languages resist understanding. Trace thinking is characterised by the recognition of breaks and ambiguities, by emphasis on sensitivity and intuition.

Biabiany uses vertical structures to contrast the horizontal pattern on the floor. Delicate, wax bead chains of different colours hang from charred pieces of wood. These are presented to the wind as votive offerings, said to hold powers of healing and resistance. A piece of wood hangs in the centre, with recognizable handle, blade and cutting edge, resembling a machete. This was used during French colonial rule to reap sugar cane grown on plantations. To this day, the machete is an important tool for gardening and agricultural work that is widely used in everyday life in Guadeloupe. The machete, directed towards the exhibition space, returns in the video shown opposite, *Pawòl sé van* (2020). The sharpening of the machete creates a rhythmic sound that usually leads into the use of the tool.

Due to its malleability and melting properties, wax can stand for volatility and change. At the same time, it has the ability to freeze a certain (material) state and its inscribed meaning and memories. In addition to hanging wax chains, Biabiany places cones cast in wax, which enclose banana leaves, as well as circular cross-sections of the banana tree covered with wax, on high wooden tables.

In the context of the colonial history of the French Antilles, the two boat-hull-like wicker baskets are reminiscent of the violent crimes of the transatlantic slave trade. Africans abducted from Sub-Saharan Africa arrived on the Caribbean islands for the first time at the beginning of the 16th century, where they were made to work as slaves on the plantations under the most inhumane conditions.

The partially broken and burned wicker baskets contain green plastic bags. Banana bunches are wrapped in plastic before harvest to protect them from damage, i.e. from themselves. The hard leaves of the banana plant could cause scratches, which would not comply with the European regulation on the import of bananas. Due to their delicate and graceful nature, as well as the partially broken and burned willow rods, the wicker baskets refer to fragility, vulnerability and defenselessness—conditions that can be traced in a multitude of materials and images in the exhibition.

Two video works expand the network of relationships that Biabiany drafts across the exhibition hall, including recordings of the familiar surroundings of her home. Changing and repeating camera angles condense into a rhythmic, non-linear narrative: The first video in the space shows scenes of a *Strelitzia* (bird of paradise flower), a plant originally native to South Africa, lying on a barrow in the rain, tree tops swaying in the wind and the gushing water of a river. Biabiany plays with different temporalities: in addition to the leaps between daylight and night, the sequence of the recordings also undermines any causality. For example, a hand holds a soft, translucent cross-section of the banana plant into the camera. Only afterwards is its actual slicing by machete shown.

The dormant, seemingly untouched landscape does not hint at the fact that much of it is contaminated by an invisible pesticide that causes irreversible damage. The European idea of a paradisiac island in the Caribbean Sea collides with knowledge of ecocide and colonial continuity.

“Pawòl sé van” is a Creole idiom and means “words are wind”, which originally refers to the ephemeral, volatile and random nature of the spoken word. Biabiany reverses this statement by bestowing the wind the ability to communicate. “Open eyes believe they see” (French: *les yeux ouverts croient voir*), but “open eyes do not see” (French: *les yeux ouverts ne voient pas*), so a voice narrates, accompanying the video in French from the start. In visually poetic and

metaphorical language, it reports on the banana plantations, the poisoning of the soil and the ongoing destruction of the environment. The wind and the shells’ sounding breath act as resistant forces, which, in spite of colonial assimilation, expropriation and ecocide, refuse to fall silent.

Individual Creole phrases appear simultaneously as text in the video. The Creole language emerged in the 17th century in the overseas territories colonised by European settlers. It emerged from the abduction of hundreds of thousands of people from Africa to the Caribbean, “from the clash, the consumption, the mutual mingling of linguistic elements”.<sup>5</sup> For a long time, Creole was a spoken language, characterised by repetitions, shifts in what is spoken and decisions made instinctively. Oral communication is tied to the moment and requires a counterpart who listens and reacts.

While the installation in the hall traces relationships to the environment and the land, in the third video on the upper floor, Biabiany turns her attention to the perception and representation of time and history. *Blue spelling, a change of perspective is a change of temporality* (2016) shows a blackboard with chalk markings. Yellow strings are stretched across it, fixed with adhesive tape, arranged and reangled following irregular rhythms. Biabiany places a person in this complex, constantly changing web. Different perspectives are taken in and experienced. In the context of intergenerational trauma, the artist negotiates self-reflection and self-experience within a non-linear story, that is told differently at various points, or altogether eluded. As Glissant argues, “the French Caribbean is the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade.”<sup>6</sup> The infrastructures that emerged from four hundred years of colonial oppression and exploitation are still present today, in their demographic, socio-political ramifications and resulting economic dependence on France, shaping the realities of life for the Guadeloupian people. However, they often remain invisible and unquestioned.

Biabiany attaches decisive importance to movement and intuitive exploration as well as to the sensual and corporeal experience of space, to set what lies there visible and invisible in relation through “corporeal thinking”. Biabiany’s installation is an act of choreography, interweaving perspectives and levels of meaning through the structuring and rhythmising of the hall.

With and in her extensive installation, Biabiany further develops Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (French: *Poétique de la Relation*) in so far as she attempts to remove the dichotomies of ,nature’ and ,culture’, ,subject’ and ,object’ and gives voice to more-than-human entities. At the same time, Biabiany’s exhibition shows that the exploitation and destruction of living beings and ecosystems cannot be viewed in isolation from ongoing colonial structures. The ecological cannot be separated from the social. Instead of thinking in the singular, i.e. thinking in units, Biabiany focuses on moments of permeation and exchange. Glissant writes: “I can change in exchange with the other without losing or falsifying myself. Hammering home these repetitions means to openly advocate for the revival of the borders, as they are now places of mutual understanding and exchange.”<sup>7</sup>

Biabiany’s exhibition *I killed the butterfly in my ear* at Kunstverein Freiburg is her first institutional solo exhibition in Germany and has been developed from an earlier show at Le MAGASIN des horizons in Grenoble, 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand, M. (2019) *Une écologie décoloniale: Penser l’écologie depuis le monde caribéen*. Paris: Seuil.

<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand, M. (2017) *Living in Contaminated Land: The Struggle for a Decolonial Environmental Justice in Contemporary Martinique and Guadeloupe*, in: *Heritage and Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. by M. Castillo and A. Strecker. Leiden: Leiden UP, 95–107, here 97.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures.” Glissant, É. (1997) *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by W. Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 190.

<sup>5</sup> Glissant, É. (2005) *Kultur und Identität. Ansätze zu einer Poetik der Vielheit*. Translated by B. Thill. Heidelberg: Wunderhorn, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Glissant, É. (1989) *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Translated by J. M. Dash. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Glissant, É. (2006) *Eloge des différents et de la différence / Lob der Unterschiedlichkeiten und der Differenz*. Translated by B. Thill. Available at: <https://www.literaturfestival.com/medien-en/texte-en/opening-speeches/eroffnungsrede-edouard-glissant-2006> (Accessed: 08.06.2021).

Minia Biabiany (b. 1988, GP) lives and works in Saint-Claude, GP.

Selected solo exhibitions:

*Musa Nuit*, La Verrière, Brussels, BE, 2020; *J'ai tué le papillon dans mon oreille*, Magasin des horizons, Grenoble, FR, 2020; *Spelling*, SIGNAL art center, Malmö, SE, 2016; *The unity is submarine*, Galerie G, La Garde, FR, 2015; *(sex)intaxis*, Cráter invertido, Mexico City, MX, 2015; *Envolvernos en la lluvia*, Contemporary Art Center TEOR/ética, San Jose, CR, 2014.

Selected group exhibitions:

Manifesta 13, Marseille, FR, 2020; *One month after being known in that island*, Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger, Basel, CH, 2020; *Paroles de lieux*, Les Tanneries, Amilly, FR, 2020; *Echo-Natures: Cannibal Desire*, Tout-Monde Festival, LHCC, Miami, US, 2019; *Le jour des esprits est notre nuit*, CRAC Alsace, Altkirch, FR, 2019; *Diaspora Art From the Creole City*, Corcoran School of the Arts and Design, Washington DC, US, 2019; *We don't need another Hero*, 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Berlin, DE, 2018; *The share of opulence; doubled; fractional*; Galerie Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna, AT, 2018; *In the Belly of the Whale*, Witte de With, Rotterdam, NL, 2016.

1

*J'ai tué le papillon dans mon oreille,*  
2020/21

Banana plants and leaves, beads,  
black ink, burnt pieces of wood,  
conches, light bulb, loud speakers,  
plastic bags, soil, strings, wax, water,  
wooden tables, wicker baskets,  
wire ropes

Installation

Dimensions variable

2

*Untitled, 2020*

HD video

2:47 Min.

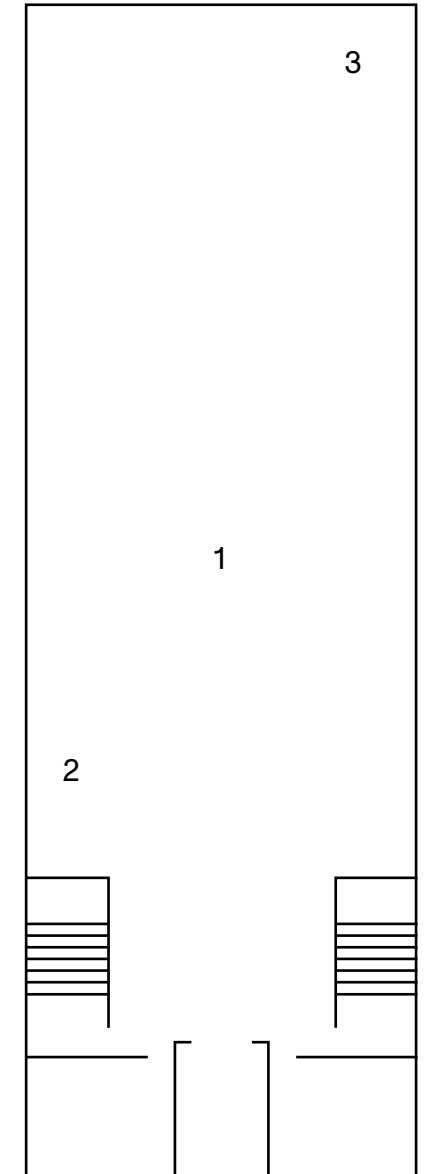
3

*Pawòl sé van, 2020*

HD video, sound

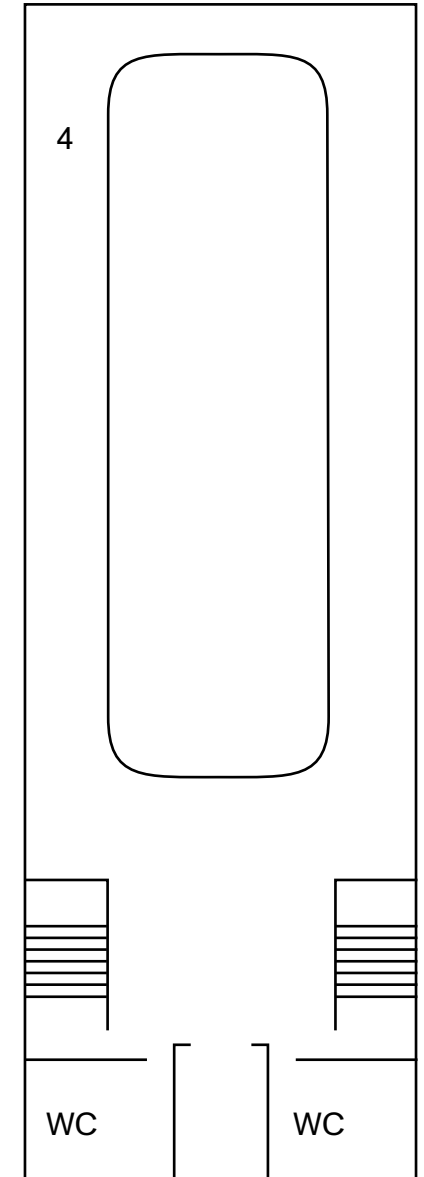
13 Min.

Hall



4  
*Blue spelling, a change of perspective is a change of temporality, 2016*  
HD video  
2:22 Min.

Gallery





## Programme

Opening of the exhibition

Fri, 18 Jun 2021, 6–10 pm

Sat, 19 Jun 2021, 3 pm

Artist Talk with Minia Biabiany  
(in English)

Tue, 6 Jul 2021, 7 pm

Lecture by and Conversation with  
Malcolm Ferdinand  
(online, in English)

Tue, 13 Jul 2021, 7 pm

*Freiburg and the German colonial  
history*

Lecture by and Conversation with  
Dr. Heiko Wegmann  
from [freiburg-postkolonial.de](http://freiburg-postkolonial.de)

Tue, 20 Jul 2021, 7 pm

Members invite

*Martinique, a landscape of the world*  
An evening about Édouard Glissant  
with Beate Thill

The artist would like to thank the  
Laboratoire d'Archivage de l'Oralité in  
Fort-de-France, Martinique.

In cooperation with Le MAGASIN  
des horizons:



Thu, 22 Jul 2021, 7 pm

Curator's Tour with Heinrich Dietz

Thu, 5 Aug 2021, 7 pm

Guided Tour with Theresa Rößler

## Opening hours

Tue–Sun, 12 am–6 pm

Thu, 12 am–8 pm

Mon closed

Entrance: 2 € / 1.50 €

Thursdays free

Members free

## Visit

The current Corona Ordinance of  
Baden-Württemberg applies  
to the visit of the exhibition and the  
participation in events on-site.

Please register for events by  
email at  
[anmeldung@kunstvereinfreiburg.de](mailto:anmeldung@kunstvereinfreiburg.de).

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