



MYRIAM MIHINDOU

INTOXICATION

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Intoxication

By Julie Crenn

In linguistics, etymology consists in researching and understanding the roots of a word, but also in revealing the relationship between the sound (enunciation) and the word (signifier). Myriam Mihindou has long experienced this association as a trauma. For several years, the artist has immersed herself in an etymological research that aims to 'bring to the surface my *fleur de sel*' and to be able to identify things, to overcome boundaries and create images and representations. Since her childhood, she has been fascinated with dictionaries and encyclopedias. Above all, she devoured the medical books collected by her mother when she was a hospital director. By reading and studying anatomical charts, she discovered the human body in all its glory while learning about diseases and germs. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that her new series of sculptures is entitled *Amygdales* (Tonsils). Made of wood and copper, they take their cue from a dowsing rod, which is here developed into vegetal and organic forms. The series results from an examination of the common medical practice that consists in surgically removing the adenoids. Yet, as the artist explains, tonsils are an essential part of the body, 'an element of survival that helps us identify, gauge and manage fear'. This would make removing them an authoritarian and violent practice that generates fear and perpetuates confusion. These works, then, are part of a wider reflection that takes a critical look at tools of domination such as medicine and language – the very tools that take part in the colonisation of bodies and modes of thought..

The exhibition was prepared in Meisenthal, a small French town near the German border. At the heart of this territory of boundaries the artist created a series of new works. Myriam Mihindou tracks the hybridisation of languages, the incongruities and the “disenchantments”. The German language interacts with the French language, the two cultures forming an alliance by way of words. She brings to the fore what she calls ‘the schizophrenia of language’, in which one word can hide another, a binarism that lets meanings overlap and contradict each other. In her effort to undermine the paralysing dualism on which Western societies are founded, Mihindou works with the plasticity of words, both literally and physically. She hybridises opposites by marrying glass and copper – ‘incompatible materials’ that she puts in a *relation*. We must therefore listen to and read the words to grasp the Creole essence: ‘languages that are visual and restorative’

Myriam Mihindou aims to 'heal the body by way of the word'. Since 2006, she has been developing a series of collages and embroideries titled *Les Langues Secouées* (The Shaken Tongues), in which she cuts up words and puts them in relation to each other in order to question them and open them up. At Galerie Maia Muller, the artist presents a performative work that is also based on dictionaries. She has written and drawn straight onto the wall, overcoming the limited format of the page so as to add a physical dimension to her research. 'The body works to unearth the work and reveal the language. It took time, but now I see.' She sees and hears 'the words sing'. The relationship between words and sounds is active, as it creates an 'overflow', or 'awakening', of intense sensations. 'All of a sudden, I hear, I see, I can identify things, so in that sense it's a form of intoxication'. A form of intoxication that gives her the energy and strength to explore the depths of a system built on exclusion and violence. On one of the walls, she is showing *ANALPHABÊTE* (Illiterate), a word she sees as a 'nerve centre'. This imposing three-metre-large work makes visible a wound that had been concealed. The artist chose to make it from copper wire, a conductive material, a means of transmission. It's a material the Dogon in Mali associate with water: 'water is speech, speech is fertile'.²

Copper resonates with speech, 'the reactivation of sleeping neurons'. Orality is a tradition, a means of transmitting stories, a skill, or knowledge that is shared without the support of writing. Mihindou translates the violence of the word *illiterate* with the effect of 'an atomic bomb'. It stands for a practice of discrediting, for a system in which the dominant literati discriminate against those who are not, in their eyes, in 'an animal state to wield power'. A way of thinking that ignores a whole wealth of knowledge not transmitted in writing, but by the body, through speech, through materials. It is therefore the artist's task to take care of the words, of the meaning given to them and the history they convey. By doing so, she participates in a political movement that aims to decolonise language, more specifically the French language. On this issue, Achille Mbembe and Alain Mabanckou have written: 'We are campaigning for a world-language, a planetary language, a language of what we have in common, a vehicle for dissemination at the intersection of the forces of life and the forces of openness; a language humanity as a whole could use in order to share new and committed words that question our destiny in terms of its commonalities and singularities.'³

¹ All quotes by the artist are excerpts from a conversation with the author on 13 August 2018.

² GRIAULE, Marcel. *Dieu d'eau – Entretiens avec Ogotemelli*. Paris : Fayard, 1966.

³ Achille Mbembe and Alain Mabanckou, 'Plaidoyer pour une langue-monde. Abolir les frontières du français', *Revue du Crieur* 10 (June 2018): 67.

Myriam Mihindou was born in 1964 in Libreville, Gabon. She lives and works in Paris and elsewhere.

Exhibitions – 2018 *Aucun de ses os ne sera brisé*, curator: Alicia Knock, Galerie Saint Séverin, Paris / *Transmission*, curators: Anne Dopffer & Johanne Lindskog, Musée national Pablo Picasso, Vallauris – *Poétique du geste*, curators: Sonia Recasens & Maud Cosson, La Graineterie, Houilles, France – **2017** *D'un monde à l'autre*, Fondation Salomon, Annecy / Venice Biennale, performance, Pavillon Arts & Globalization, Venice, Italy / *Afriques Capitales*, curator: Simon Njami, La Villette, Paris / *Les ailes de mon père*, performance, curators: Pascale Obolo & Kader Attia, La Colonie, Paris

Works in collections in France and abroad:

Fondation Claudine et Jean-Marc Salomon, Collection Abbaye d'Auberive, Collection Sindika Dokolo, Collection Eric Touchaleaume, Musée Léon Dierx, FRAC Alsace, FRAC Réunion, FRAC Poitou-Charentes

