

Speech for the opening of *Death by Drowning*

Usha Seejarim

October 2026

It is a profound honour to stand here in Bremen for the unveiling of the public artwork *Death by Drowning* and the opening of the exhibition *Life Force* at the Gerhard Marcks Haus.

I want to begin by acknowledging Laye-Alama Condé's family, particularly his brother Bangaly, who has travelled from Guinea to be here with us.

There are moments when an artist has to recognise that the work being made is not really hers. While it has passed through my hands, the story belongs to many others.

Death by Drowning belongs first to Laye-Alama Condé, to his family, and to the many people who endured forced emetic treatment while in state custody.

Laye was a young man from Sierra Leone seeking asylum in Germany. In December 2004, while in police custody here in Bremen, he was subjected to the forced administration of emetics. On 7 January 2005, he died as a result.

His death was not simply a medical accident. It took place within a structure of authority and control, and it happened to a Black man in state custody. That history matters.

A memorial is not only a place to remember the dead. It is also a place to ask what made the death possible—and what, since then, has changed.

When I encountered Laye's story, I was struck by the violence of the procedure and by what it revealed about power over the body: the body forced, controlled, made to produce evidence—and eventually drowned.

This is where the word **FORCE** became central to the work.

The letters of *Death by Drowning* spell the word FORCE, carrying the violence of the state, the pressure exerted on a body, and the coercion of authority.

But force can also mean resistance: the persistence of a family seeking justice, activists refusing to let Laye's death disappear, and a city willing to confront a difficult history.

That is another kind of force: the force of refusing silence.

I did not want to make a conventional monument. I wanted the memorial to enter the physical experience of the city.

The letters invite us to occupy them, but they are not entirely comfortable. You cannot encounter this memorial only from a distance. You walk around it, sit on it, move through it; your own body becomes part of the work.

This matters because the history remembered here is a history of the body: subjected to authority, unprotected, and treated as something to be controlled. The memorial asks us to consider our own position in relation to that history.

I come to this work from South Africa, a country whose history is inseparable from racial classification, forced movement and the unequal distribution of power.

We know what happens when human beings are divided into categories, when some bodies are deemed more deserving of protection than others.

And yet South Africa continues to struggle with the question of who belongs.

Xenophobic attacks and anti-migrant violence, continuing today, painfully remind us that racism and exclusion do not belong to the past.

Migrants from other African countries have been targeted, intimidated, displaced and killed—Africans made into outsiders in Africa.

The language is familiar: *foreigner, outsider, threat, illegal*. Once a person becomes a category, it becomes easier to stop seeing the person.

We see this across different contexts, even when the circumstances are not the same: the reduction of a human life to a nationality, a race, a legal status or a perceived threat.

I do not equate Laye's death with xenophobic violence in South Africa. The histories differ. But both compel us to ask:

Whose life do we consider worthy of protection?

That question does not belong only to Germany or South Africa. It belongs to all of us.

This is why memorials matter: they interrupt forgetting.

Laye-Alama Condé had a name, a family, a life and a future. This memorial cannot restore that future, but it can ensure that his death is not absorbed into anonymity—and it can ask something of us.

Not simply, *How could this have happened?* But: *What are we allowing to happen now?*

A memorial should not always make us comfortable. Sometimes its responsibility is to disturb us—to make us pause long enough to look again.

This is also why I am grateful that *Death by Drowning* stands beside *Life Force* at the Gerhard Marcks Haus.

For me, their proximity makes the questions raised by the memorial more urgent. *Death by Drowning* confronts a specific history of violence against the body—of state power, coercion and a life that should have been protected.

Life Force reinforces those concerns by reminding us that control and exclusion are not confined to the past. They continue today wherever some lives are treated as less worthy of protection or dignity.

To remember a life that was taken is also to look clearly at the conditions that still endanger life now.

This memorial exists because people refused to let Laye's story disappear: the Initiative in Memory of Laye-Alama Condé, his family and many citizens of Bremen persisted in demanding a permanent place of remembrance.

My proposal was selected in 2023, but the work began long before I arrived—with people who remembered, organised and insisted that public memory is a form of responsibility. I am deeply grateful to them.

I want to thank the City of Bremen, the Senator for Culture, the Gerhard Marcks Haus, the selection committee, Simone Ewald, Mr Seekamp and everyone who has worked to bring this memorial into being.

And especially, I thank the Initiative in Memory of Laye-Alama Condé for trusting me with this story.

And to Laye's family: no artwork can repair the loss of a brother, a son, a loved one. But I hope this place can hold his memory with dignity, and that his name will remain present in the life of this city.

At a time when migrants are increasingly portrayed as threats, borders harden, and racism and xenophobia find new expressions, we need to resist the language that turns people into categories.

Laye-Alama Condé was not a category. He was a person. He had a life. And that life mattered.

Let this memorial be more than a marker of what happened: a demand that we look at how power is exercised over vulnerable bodies; a reminder that dignity cannot depend on nationality, race or legal status; and a call to understand remembrance as responsibility.

May this place remain a site of reflection, resistance and dialogue, and may the life that continues around it keep that memory alive.

Thank you.