

Ngozi Ajah Schommers »I'm sorry, I can't help you.«
Winner of the 2024 »HAP Grieshaber Preis der VG Bild-Kunst«,
awarded by Stiftung Kunstfonds

Laudation

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Guten Abend Berlin. Good evening to everyone!

Dear members of the jury of the HAP Grieshaber Prize, the artists and members of the VG Bild-Kunst, the Stiftung Kunstfonds and the Deutscher Künstlerbund, thank you for inviting me to give the 'laudatio' today and for allowing me to deliver my speech in English, which interrupts the tradition of presenting this 'laudatio' in German. Although, I have been assured that most of the audience understands English, and live translation is not necessary, I would like to thank you for this exception.

Also, special greetings and hearty congratulations to you Ngozi Ajah Schommers. It is an honour to present the laudatory speech on this occasion of your HAP Grieshaber Prize exhibition.

According to the jury that awarded the 2024 HAP Grieshaber Prize, you were selected for your outstanding artistic practice. There is no doubt in my mind that your art is outstanding, but it is the journey to this point that I find even more remarkable. Your tenacity, commitment, purposeful slowness and point of view inspire me as a friend, sister and ally.

Ngozi Ajah Schommers began her artistic practice over fifteen years ago and was already well advanced when Jude Anogwih (an artist-curator and friend) introduced us at the end of 2015. At the time Ngozi Ajah Schommers was preparing her first solo exhibition in Lagos, Nigeria, titled "We Are Not Welcome here". He had invited me to study her work and write a text that could be included in the exhibition catalogue. At the same time, he hinted that we could become friends and was surprised our paths had not crossed in the Lagos art scene. Since that introduction and my first visit to the artist's studio in Lagos, we have become close friends and share a lot in common. But, beyond friendship and sisterhood, Ngozi Ajah Schommers and I have continued working together and have seen each other grow in our respective paths in the art field.

In the following presentation, I divide my examination of Ngozi Ajah Schommers' artistic practice into two sections:

1. Positionality, intersectionality and re-interpretation (...seeing, thinking and making as a woman and an African)

My admiration for Ngozi Ajah Schommers began with paying close attention to the painstaking but deliberate material choices and technical processes of her earlier works, before her focus shifted to

more nuanced and relatable narratives. Over the past nine years, I have witnessed the growth and expansion in her practice as a whole: from the application of conceptual forms and new methods to working with cut-out installations, textiles and objects, as well as performances that deepen and transform her art and the associated narratives into a three-dimensional experience.

In general, Ngozi Ajah Schommers' work addresses a range of topics: from her exploration of the experiences of immigrants, particularly how they relate to African and Black people, to the complex subject of identity, and the relationship between memory and colonialism.

Her artistic and personal worldview begins with the intersectional experience of being a woman and an African. She acknowledges the influence of the cultural specificity of being an Igbo woman born and raised in Enugu and the broader experience of being a woman from Nigeria and Africa and navigating the world as an African and Black woman. In addition, she turns to the experiences of other women to show the different but intersecting formations of womanhood – as well as the broader collective and historical perspectives. However, regardless of the socio-cultural constructions the artist presents, emphasising her position and location to the subject at hand are crucial.

Ngozi Ajah Schommers' art is also political.

How do we appear? How are we perceived? What shapes our relationship with others? How does society impose on us how to be or relate?

As we know, this prize honours artists whose work addresses the political in varied dimensions, which corresponds with the artistic activities of HAP Grieshaber, a pacifist and political activist, and the symbolic figure of this prize.

Although I would be careful to call Ngozi Ajah Schommers a 'political activist', her work carries strong political resonances best captured in the phrase "the personal is political".

The subjects and issues embedded in her work slowly lead us to issues of inequality and power imbalances, which are often hidden behind circumstances that are unassuming and ordinary but demand deep reflections and debates. Political references can also be found in the asymmetrical forms and empty spaces in her work which she attributes to "the way that Black people and women occupy space in society, which is unbalanced when compared to other races and gender."

The positionality and specificity that she brings to her subjects allow us to deconstruct generalisations. They allow inclusiveness and accountability. They show nuances and point to differences and hierarchies that are present even among people of similar backgrounds. They provide a basis for new meanings and solidarities that can lead to a better understanding of the 'other'.

This way of working is closely related to the feminist ideology of objectivity, which emphasises positionality and situated knowledge, especially as an antidote to grand, closed, and male-dominated narratives and the male gaze.

To quote and slightly rephrase the feminist scholar Donna Haraway, Ngozi Ajah Schommers does not seek for subjectivity for its own sake: "but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings that situated knowledges make possible."

Haraway also argued that "the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular," which in the artist's case is to work from a specific position to enrich "a collective subject position." Her work challenges us to look more intimately at situations that have either become accepted or generalised.

In her recent work focused on hair, responding to a predominantly African-American perspective on Black people's hair, the artist turns to a pre-colonial history of African hair through artifacts, and examines the archive of her community and family. It was important for her to show what hair represented from an African viewpoint and how hair relates to the environment it comes from before colonial intrusion erased the people's care practices and rituals. It was also her way of questioning how African and Black people's narratives and representation are hinged on and often begin with colonial times as if they had no history before this violent interlude. As Joseph L. Underwood wrote in "The Hair Carries the Story: Ngozi Schommers and the Thread of Memory": the artist invokes hair's ability to carry a lineage between generations and fosters communal care, support, and positivity.

Another example of her preoccupation with representation is the work *Unframed Narratives* in the exhibition "The Blind Spot. Bremen and Art in the Colonial Era", at the Kunsthalle Bremen in 2017. To emphasise the gaps and distortions in the representation of Africans in historical records, she showed new portraits of various women from formerly colonised countries such as Nigeria, Namibia, and Ghana, whom she had met in Germany and other places. These portraits were then juxtaposed with the idealised images of Africans on hanging objects with a colonial history. The empty spots in the installation point to the absence of the real people who had been denied representation in colonial times and those who refused to be represented in her portrait series – showing that their refusal to be represented is also a form of presence and a choice to be respected.

When the artist works with historical narratives, she often approaches a subject not through literal representation, but through deconstruction and re-interpretation, which allows her to integrate her own perspective and position in the narrative without obliterating the agency of the main subjects.

As I wrote in the introduction of the book *tracings of time and place*: "Schommers does not necessarily reach back into the far past to debunk or produce a linear account, but to extract knowledge and details she can transpose onto the present and the future by deconstructing,

reuniting and abstracting them. Our attention is drawn to the lost architecture, fashion and style, rhythm and musicality of the past while witnessing the birth of new forms and history."

2. Being immigrant in Germany and Europe in general...

Contemporary art cannot afford to look away from subjects of prejudice and intolerance as they continue to be a problem in our society. In this regard, Ngozi Ajah Schommers' practice has been very dedicated to examining the problems of relating better in our world and the path to this exhibition has been filled with statements excavated from various scenarios of intolerance and inequality: from immigrants' experiences in Germany to the power imbalances in the art world and in familial circles.

"We are not welcome here."

"We have been kind and considerate."

"After all I have done for you!"

"Work hard! Just work hard... No, keep working hard!"

And tonight, we encounter: "I'm sorry, I can't help you."

When I first heard "We are not welcome here", I did not fully understand it. I could empathise with people in this situation, but it was not my lived experience. I had only visited Europe twice, and on each occasion, I did not stay more than a few weeks. However, since living here, it made more sense.

In fact, it began to make sense during my first 'Inburgeren' courses and at those times when the state authorities would ask numerous evidences for simple applications or when I needed third party testimonies to ascertain that my marriage was not a sham; at Schiphol Airport during the security check; when someone would ask me loudly "Where are you from?" while waiting to take my seat on the airplane; and when the same question would come my way while peacefully shopping at Coop. One could often sense these are provocative reminders from how the questions come at you. Sometimes, you can sense an awful scenario even before it happens. For example, the feeling I had just before someone spits at me on the tram in Berlin on the way to a professional event. Sometimes, you do not see it coming, such as when I was pulled aside for a drug check in Poland because of the colour of my skin and because I carry a Nigerian passport.

"I'm sorry, I can't help you" is also a sentence I can relate to very well. It is a phrase that most immigrants in this room and in most parts of Europe can relate to. The all too familiar rejection that ends your inquiry before it has even started. In my case specifically, it is the "Nee. Ik kan je niet helpen" that arrive with Dutch directness and seriousness, often followed by "This is how the system works."

When I reached the artist to ask for the title of this exhibition, the response that appeared on my locked screen when she answered was "I'm sorry, I can't help you". I was triggered and immediately put my phone away before I realised that I had misunderstood her answer to my question. Of course, it's not these words that traumatise me or anyone who has heard them. But it

is the weight of the recurring rejections and refusals that arrive with them. It also represents the disregard for one's opinion or feelings in interactions with the customer service, one's GP, at an appointment, at the daycare, and even at a restaurant. Over time, the negative energy in the phrase and its other manifestations seeps into the nervous system, and one becomes repeatedly triggered by continuous encounters with these words.

So, I asked the artist: Why would you use such a trauma-inducing title?

Her response: So that we can take power from it. By saying the words and using them repeatedly ourselves, they will lose meaning and power.

This reasoning follows the cathartic exercise in her text-based durational performance *We have been kind and considerate*, and *After all I have done for you*, which refer to hurtful statements that simultaneously reveal motives and hostility. The repetitive actions of writing, erasing and saying the words out loud have a surgical dimension to them and are undoubtedly outlets to release the negative energy.

To return to "I'm sorry, I can't help you": How should we interpret this? What does it mean? Could it be that the speaker certainly cannot help? Is the speaker also under pressure from the system and truly cannot accommodate more problems? We will never know for sure in the absence of discussion, which is crucial for coexistence and relationships.

But, before these other responses emerge, here are some of the ways we receive and perceive the statement:

I can't help you (because I have more important things to take care of...you are not worth my time) / I can't help you (because the system has made no provision for you and I can't resolve that problem...the system is round but you are square) / I can't help you (because I don't understand you and can't be bothered to try) / I can't help you (why are you even here? Go back to your country!)

These verbal and non-verbal pushbacks are walls and barriers from individuals that join together to form a collective wall to keep people out. They create distrust and phobia and drive migrants to isolation or to form a community on the margins of that society.

Nonetheless, I know from a recent surprising experience that it is possible to relate otherwise. While expressing my frustrations to the senior curator of a museum who invited me to work on a project, my perception of her position in the situation changed when she stated: "I'm sorry, but how can I be helpful? Will it help if you proceed to do XYZ instead of what is causing problems now?"

She knows how the system works but also recognises that a rigid system makes it difficult to work together. Importantly, I felt heard, and though we did not resolve the matter immediately, the way we approached and resolved things changed.

In closing, I would like to turn to what Rupa Marya and Raj Patel called "epistemological humility" in their book *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*. Epistemological humility shows a willingness to listen and believe the 'other'. Believing the 'other' requires listening and acknowledging their knowledge and their ability to convey that knowledge. Marya and Patel wrote, "Philosopher Miranda Fricker contends that good listening is done by someone whose testimonial sensibility has been suitably reconditioned by sufficient corrective experiences."

Also, like a disease, discrimination consumes everyone concerned and though momentary wielding of power may feel good, it does not signify genuine liberation. Therefore, if our lives and freedom are connected, why can't we treat each other differently? To re-quote cultural theorist and poet, Fred Moten, from the book mentioned above, "...maybe this is not a call for help. Maybe, we just need you to recognise that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly."

Thank you all for listening.

Thank you once again to the jury of the HAP Grieshaber Prize, the brilliant people behind the VG Bild-Kunst, the Stiftung Kunstfonds and the Deutscher Künstlerbund.

I invite you all to take a closer look at these works for the rest of this beautiful evening, even as we continue to celebrate a phenomenal artistic career still unfolding.

Bukola Oyebode-Westerhuis
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