



Barthélemy Togo, *Transit*, 1996–1999. Collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem

Barthélemy Togo

By Christine Y. Kim

Translated from French by Nico Wheadon

Christine Y. Kim Each of the eight prints in the *Transit* series tells the story of a “performance” from your travels throughout Europe. The image of you wearing a workman’s suit is about refusing to leave a first-class train for which you had an appropriate ticket, resulting in other passengers leaving the car. The image of the carved-wood suitcases is about airport security and customs—when the officials asked you to open them and it was clearly impossible, they broke the sculptures. Are these images recreations, documents or something else entirely?

Barthélemy Togo *Transit* is a brazen survey of clichés and appropriation. It is not forcefully a work about “the black man,” as this work goes very far beyond that. I was fed up and decided to give the customs officers and border police the opportunity to exert their faculties of control, and thus *Transit* began. It should be understood that we are all permanently in transit. This concept is universal for the twentieth-century man, and whether he is white, black or yellow is of little importance. His existence is one of eventual exile brought on by the machine of society, which simultaneously colors his voyage and makes him an outcast. We leave room for others by various means, while carrying our own culture, which goes into the meeting of this other. Of course this introduction can be both beautiful and difficult at the same time and the voyage is enriched by the unrestrained rhythm of actual society. One is constantly in motion. Thus, more often than not, this concept of “transit” is actual, as its multiple facets evolve alongside society. *Transit* questions, with a humor retaining a certain amount of provocation, the conditions of crossing borders.

CYK You are opening an art space in your native country of Cameroon. What is the program and how can it be part of a larger, international conversation on art and art making?

BT It is a personal project that emerged following my acknowledgment of numerous failed cultural projects concerning the African continent. In regard to the lack of democracy and freedom in Africa, Africans must understand that they should not surrender. It is important that they imagine solutions in every realm: agricultural, medical, economic, social and cultural. This project will allow for the assembly of international visual artists, writers, sociologists, actors, filmmakers, ethnologists—the whole world—in Bandjoun to develop projects that adequately represent this place, its environment and its people. I’ve already composed an assembly with international artists so that we may avoid another African ghetto.

CYK You work in all media—drawing, painting, video, sculpture, performance and photography. How would you describe your art practice?

BT Beyond drawing, it starts with the attentive observation of the mod operandi of contemporary society. To that effect, information becomes paramount for me. I am connected to the radio all day, I like to read the headlines of the newspapers and compare them to political trends, and I like to watch television. It is crucial to know what is going on in the entire world. However, it is also necessary to maintain distance from the press and to differentiate between information and intoxication, even though I do believe “intox” is also a formidable source of inspiration! This step allows me to develop my work by using photography, sculpture, performance and video. However, “LIFE,” and its manifestations, remains my primary preoccupation because it serves as an obligatory inspiration for an artist.