

emergency room

IN THE BEGINNING
THERE WAS NOTHING
THEN IT BECAME
A BRITISH PROTECTORATE

Massa Lemu

Passages for the Undocumented

November 1–November 29, 2012

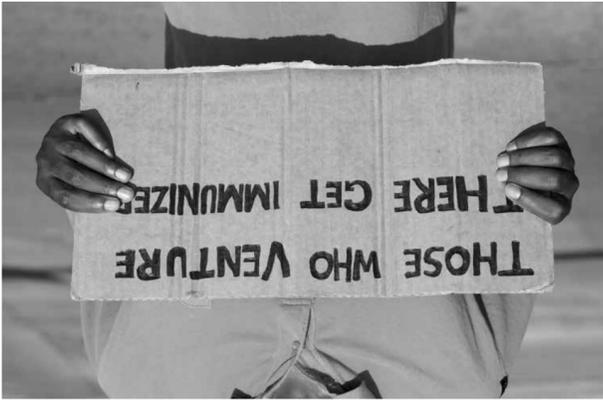
Sewall Hall, #402
Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts
Rice University
6100 Main Street
Houston, Texas 77005

Massa Lemu is a visual artist and critic. As an artist, his multi-disciplinary practice takes the form of painting, drawing, performance and text-based installations that are mainly concerned with the contradictions of globalization and the precarious condition of the Third World Migrant, the Asylum Seeker, and the Exile. Lemu's selected solo exhibitions include *This Scourge is also a Mask* (French Cultural Center, Bligny, 2006), *Primal Forces* (Capital Hotel, Lilongwe, 2006), and *Multiple Suns* (French Cultural Center, Bligny, 2008). His selected group exhibitions include *Of Other Spaces* (Dallas, 2012), *Dallas Art Biennial* (Dallas, 2012), *Material Traces: Selections from Core 2011* (Dallas 2011), *An Evening Measured Space* (Savannah, 2009) and *104/112: conceptual works by artists from Atlanta and Savannah* (Atlanta, 2008). Lemu's critical and scholarly interests lie in post-colonialism, globalization, and new media in contemporary African art. His essays have been published by artandeducation.net, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, and Might & Education (Fine Arts) from University of Malawi and a Master of Arts (Painting) from Savannah College of Art and Design (USA). He was a Critical Studies Fellow at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston from the year 2010 to 2012.

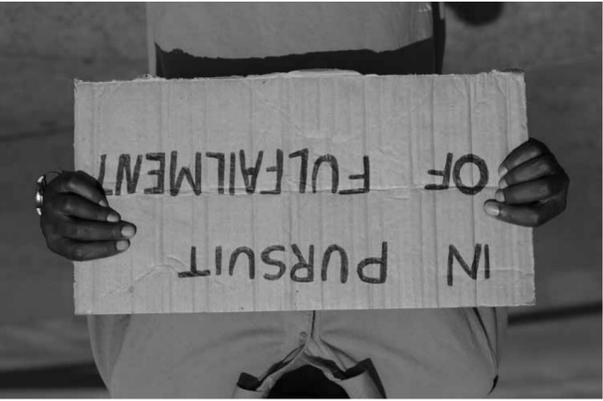


Genesis: A Concise History of Malawi
2012 Performance with Cardboard and Ink

Opposite: Portrait of the Artist as a Dung Beetle
2012 Performance with Cardboard and Ink



Those Who Venture There
2012 Performance with Cardboard and Ink



In Pursuit of Fulfillment
2012 Performance with Cardboard and Ink

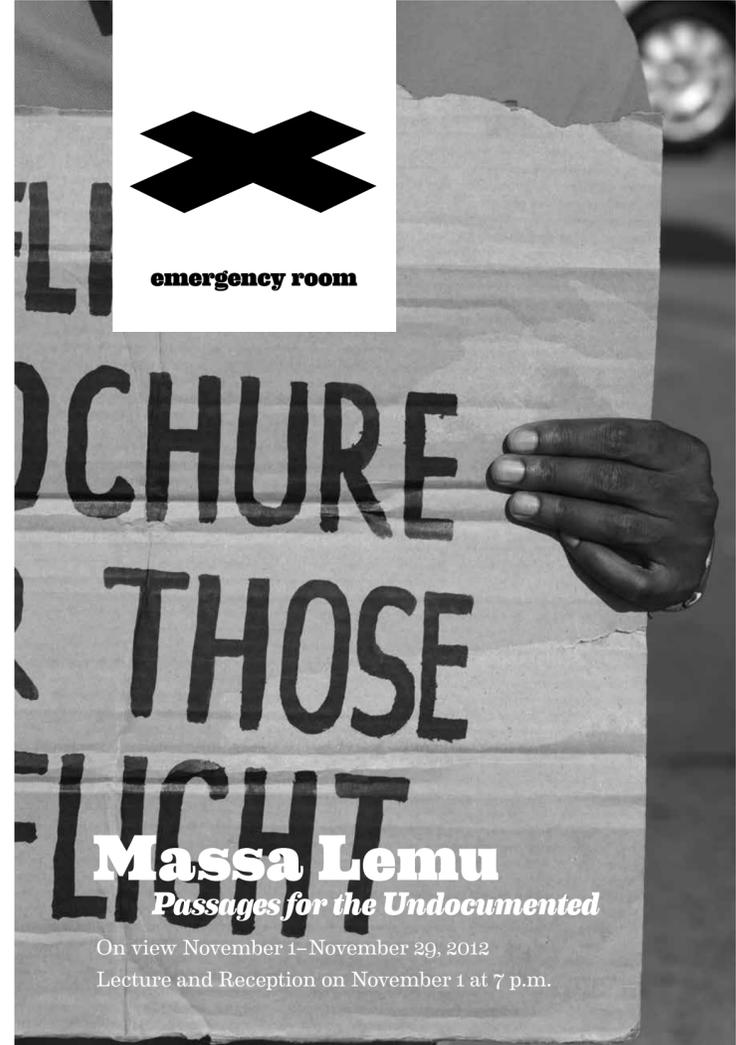


The Emergency Room is the latest venture by the Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts. This new exhibition space is aimed at better serving the Houston arts community and the arts on the Rice University campus. Visiting emerging artists will develop new exhibitions, give public lectures, and interact with Rice studio arts students. Emerging artists are an underserved population within the Houston region, and the Emergency Room is an attempt to correct this by presenting the highest quality exhibitions within the context of a serious academic program. *Gallery hours are Thursday, 5-9 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m. - 3 p.m., and by appointment. Closed on university holidays.*

Massa Lemu

Passages for the Undocumented

On view November 1–November 29, 2012
Lecture and Reception on November 1 at 7 p.m.



IMAGINE A TYPICAL DAY. You are driving down a major road. As you approach an intersection, you see a common sight: a panhandler stands in the median holding a hand-written sign. You might feel any number of emotions: sadness for the panhandler's poverty; discomfort at their public display of destitution; compassion for their physical discomfort standing all day under the hot, Texas sun; cynicism about the underlying cause of their reduced state.

And then there is the sign, normally on cardboard and with its own message of illiteracy and lifelong hardship. Sometimes it's written in marker and capital letters to attract our attention, but other times the words are so faint that its maker either doesn't care anymore or realizes that words are unnecessary. The sign that we never read, because we already know what it says. Because the saddest thing about panhandlers is the self-abasement of their occupation. In our culture of commodity fetishism, where the luxury car and designer label define a person's social value, panhandlers display their failure for all to see. Pitied, ignored, or scorned, they are the spectacularized Other that secures our superior place in society.

To be sure, Massa Lemu's project *Passages for the Undocumented* is not a commentary on the marginalization of the poor embodied in the abject image of the panhandler. According to the artist, it began more than a year ago in response to a practical problem many artists face: Lemu had nowhere to show his art. Inspired by the panhandlers he encountered, Lemu started to imitate their method, writing his own slogans on cardboard signs and standing on street corners around Houston. The slogans concentrate Lemu's experience as a third-world migrant artist into pithy statements that combine conceptual art practice with transcultural displacement.

Consider the source of one of the slogans: "In-flight brochure for those in flight." Lemu was on a flight from Africa to the U.S. His fellow

passengers included political asylum seekers—people literally and figuratively "in flight"—many of whom weren't even sure whether they would be admitted through customs once they arrived. Lemu describes an atmosphere of hope and desperation. To pass the time, they could read the complimentary in-flight magazine whose pages marketed luxury vacations to the ultra-rich. The disparity between the actual passengers and the magazine's intended audience was absurd. Pitied, ignored, or scorned, these impoverished would-be immigrants are the invisible counterparts of the well-heeled jet-setters of the airline industry's imagination. Lemu's slogan asks: What if there were a magazine for these passengers?

Like the "people in flight," Lemu experienced a certain invisibility during his performance of *Passages for the Undocumented*. Hardly anyone acknowledged him when he stood on street corners with his signs, and those who did sometimes tried to give him money. What can we learn from this parody of the absorptive model of art appreciation? Perhaps the panhandler is an apt metaphor for the artist after all. Not because of the cliché that no one appreciates art anymore: as much as the artist's material conditions might resemble those of the panhandler, their relative value to society differs dramatically. Instead, the panhandler offers a metaphor for the performativity of selfhood *Passages for the Undocumented* explores, for Lemu's slogans are just as personal as the sad life stories on the panhandler's sign. But whereas the panhandler's sign is calculated to spur donations, Lemu's communicates his personal experiences as a Malawian migrant to a wider public. Cryptic and poetic, his slogans are dispatches from the dark side of globalization.

Melissa Venator
Melissa Venator is a graduate student in the Department of Art History at Rice University.