

# Brooklyn Museum

## Teacher Resource Packet

*Question Bridge: Black Males*

January 13–June 3, 2012



# Question Bridge: Black Males

## About This Teacher Resource Packet

This packet highlights the special exhibition *Question Bridge: Black Males* and artworks from the Brooklyn Museum's collection that also explore themes of identity and social issues. It is intended as a tool to help you look at art with your students. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussion by reviewing the description and background information provided. Then use the Questions for Viewing to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together. Visit one or more of the artworks suggested in the Further Investigations section to compare with this installation. A ten-module high-school curriculum designed for classroom use is available at <http://educator.questionbridge.com>. You can also join the conversation through Twitter (@QuestionBridge), Facebook (*Question Bridge: Black Males*), and the *Question Bridge* interactive website (<http://questionbridge.com>).

**Please note:** The installation *Question Bridge: Black Males* is presented in an intimate gallery space with low lighting, video display, and high sound volume. We recommend that group discussions take place in adjacent galleries or the Museum Lobby.

## Description of the Artwork

*Question Bridge: Black Males* is installed in a rectangular room with low light levels. As visitors enter the exhibition, they walk past distorted images of Black males projected on hanging panels. Five video monitors on large vertical columns stand in an arc at the center of the room. All five monitors screen video clips of Black men speaking to the camera. Though the footage was recorded at different locations and time periods, it has been edited to create simulated conversations between these individuals. Each man listens to a question that has been posed by another participant, and then responds. The questions all concern Black male identity, and the answers are diverse.

## About the Artwork

The *Question Bridge: Black Males* video installation is part of an innovative transmedia art project created by the artists Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas, in collaboration with Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair. In 1996 Johnson created a video artwork that featured men and women from San Diego's Black community presenting questions and answers about issues relevant to African Americans. Years later, casual conversations about their own individual and shared experiences as African American men motivated Johnson, Willis Thomas, and Ross Smith to orchestrate a national dialogue among Black males to address specific issues of concern.

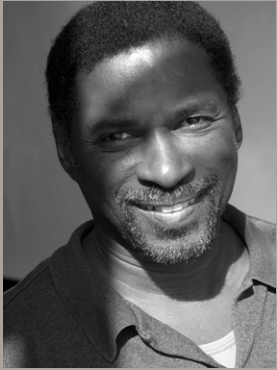
Over the past four years, the four collaborators traveled to twelve American cities, including New York, Oakland, Chicago, Birmingham, Miami, and New Orleans, to collect a video catalogue of more than 1,500 questions and answers from more than 150 Black men representing a range of geographic, generational, economic, and educational backgrounds. The participants' questions, along with their separately filmed answers to questions generated by other participants, were then interwoven to simulate a stream-of-consciousness dialogue that raises important themes and issues, including family, love, interracial relationships, community, education, violence, and the past, present, and future of Black men in American society.

*Question Bridge: Black Males* offers new opportunities for understanding and healing by bringing forward a multifaceted and self-determined representation of what it means to be Black and male in America. The installation includes three hours of footage presented in a loop. Museum visitors become witnesses to the conversations between these diverse men. The artists chose to juxtapose the video footage with distorted images of Black men on the hanging panels so that visitors encounter multiple perspectives of Black male identity. The artists hope that visitors will dismiss their assumptions as they look more deeply at the population of Black males in America. Visitors are also invited to view the user-generated *Question Bridge* website, accessible on iPads throughout the gallery.





## About the Artists



Chris Johnson (American, born 1948) is a photographer and video artist, writer, curator, and arts administrator. Johnson studied photography with Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Wynn Bullock, and his artwork has been exhibited at the Oakland Museum of California and at the Mills College Art Museum. In 1994 he coproduced a large performance work in Oakland titled *The Roof Is on Fire*, which brought together inner-city high school students and adults to address stereotyping of teens by the media. In 1996

he produced *Question Bridge*, an innovative one-hour video piece that investigates class divisions within the Black community. In 1999 Oakland mayor Jerry Brown appointed Johnson chair of the Oakland Cultural Affairs Commission. Johnson is currently Professor of Photography at the California College of the Arts, San Francisco.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976) describes himself as a “photo conceptual artist” and works primarily with themes related to identity, history, and popular culture. Thomas's process often involves editing existing photographs and presenting them in a new format. Many of his works examine the commodification of Black identity in advertising and popular culture and encourage the viewer to think critically about representations in media and beyond. Willis Thomas received his B.F.A. from New York

University's Tisch School of the Arts and his M.F.A. in photography, along with an M.A. in visual criticism from California College of the Arts, San Francisco. His work is in numerous public collections, including that of the Brooklyn Museum, and his collaborative projects have been installed publicly in California and featured at the Sundance Film Festival. Willis Thomas is currently a fellow at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University.



Bayeté Ross Smith (born 1976) is an artist, photographer, and arts educator living in New York City. He began his career as a photojournalist for the Knight Ridder Newspaper Corporation and has exhibited at the Oakland Museum of California, MoMA P.S.1, and the New Museum. His collaborative film with the Cause Collective (a team of artists, including Willis Thomas, who explore public space by creating conversations between issues, sites, and audiences) was screened at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. He has also been

involved in public arts projects with organizations including the International Center of Photography, Alternate Roots, and the Laundromat Project. Most recently Ross Smith appeared on the Bravo television series *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*.



Kamal Sinclair (American, born 1976) is a professional artist, teaching artist, and producer of live and transmedia art. Sinclair obtained a B.F.A. from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and an M.B.A. from Georgia State University's Robinson College of Business. Her professional career began as a cast member of *STOMP*. The founding artistic director of Universal Arts and creative director for many festivals and awards shows, Sinclair has served on the boards of the Children's Theater Company and Fractured

Atlas, and on the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre Ambassador's Council. She is also a periodic contributor to the theater publication *Black Masks*.

## Q&A with Artist Chris Johnson

### What inspired you to develop *Question Bridge: Black Males*?

From the outside it may appear to some that African Americans make up one large community. After all, aren't we all "Black people"?

In fact, Blacks whose lives are focused on life within predominantly Black neighborhoods often have very different perspectives and values from African Americans who live most of their lives in the mainstream white world. I created the original *Question Bridge* project because I was looking for a creative way to help African Americans, whose lives have been segmented in this way, to better understand each other. My hope was that if I could encourage them to ask and answer questions of each other, the resulting "conversation" would help them better identify and empathize with each other, and perhaps find ways to work together to resolve some of the many issues the community as a whole struggles with.

But that was what motivated the first version of this project back in 1996. Hank Willis Thomas inspired me to use Black men as the subject for this current version, because he thought it would help to heal some of the divisions that exist within this community and help facilitate the sharing of knowledge around a shared experience. He was also interested in using the model to explore the diversity of thought that exists among Black men as a way to deconstruct monolithic notions of Black male identity.

### Why is this artwork personally important to you?

Right from the start, wherever we went, it was clear that Black men immediately understood and found value in participating—by offering us honest and very meaningful questions, and providing us with remarkably insightful and wise answers. It has also been true that non-Black people and women have found that this project helps them better understand Black men, who have historically been positioned in popular culture as opaque and threatening. Our hope is that *Question Bridge* will have the effect of humanizing a group of people in this culture who have often been dehumanized in media and popular narratives.

### Why do you believe it is important to have a conversation about Black male identity?

Currently, most people get the ideas they have about who Black men are from media sources with a narrow set of images and narratives—which perpetuates stereotypes and limiting assumptions that impact the way Black men are accepted or not accepted by our social structure. If *Question Bridge: Black Males* can help people see and understand the humanity of Black men, then there's hope that the same process could build bridges between other groups who are divided from each other.

### Why did you choose video as a medium for this artwork?

I wanted people to be really open and honest when they asked and answered their questions. I hoped that people would feel more comfortable and safer when speaking into a video camera than they would if they were forced to confront the people they were questioning or answering.

### How did you select the participants featured in the artwork?

The questioners were chosen almost at random. There were some people we knew who would provide good and important questions, but in general we simply went to different cities and gathered men to ask questions wherever we happened to be. Sometimes this meant asking men we were sitting next to on airplanes. Other times we would stop men on the street and ask them to pose questions for us. After doing this for a while we realized that we also needed to get as wide a range of questioners as possible—meaning men of various ages and backgrounds. At that point we sought out men who would fill out our list.

Once we had lots of important questions, it was necessary for us to find men who were appropriate to answer those questions. For example, if the question related to men who were elders, or in jail, or involved in the music industry, etc., we made an effort to contact and invite men who fit those requirements.

We recognize that the more than 150 men we solicited to participate in the project—although diverse—is not a comprehensive sampling of the diversity of Black men in America. Therefore, we conceived of the interactive website in order to provide a platform for an even more diverse community of Black men to represent and redefine their own identities, which will all be synthesized into an "Identity Map," a data visualization of the words Black men use to define themselves.





**How were the questions developed? How were they introduced to the participants?**

The questions were never developed. All we ever did was simply ask the participant if he had a question that he had always wanted to ask another Black man who was very different from him. All of the questions came from the men themselves, never from us.

**What would you like viewers to take away from *Question Bridge: Black Males*?**

We hope that viewers who are not Black males come away from seeing this project with a deeper and more accurate sense of how Black men think and feel about all of the issues raised by the project. But we also hope that viewers see that Black men themselves have answers to these questions and wisdom they want to share with each other through this project. We hope that Black men who see this project recognize the value of honestly expressing their feelings about issues they feel passionate about and perhaps find meaningful answers to questions they have always wondered about.

**How can viewers continue the conversation?**

We have created *questionbridge.com* to make this possible, but we also hope that people feel inspired to create Question Bridge–like projects of their own.

## Questions for Viewing

Use these questions to guide your students' exploration of the installation. Questions can be addressed in small groups, in pairs, or independently. You may choose to divide your class into three groups in order to address each focus area in more depth:

### *Focus on Form*

- Enter the gallery and carefully explore the entire space. What do you notice?
- The installation has three components: (1) entrances/exits on either end of the gallery; (2) video presentation; and (3) visitor interactive. Look carefully at the video presentation and the surrounding space. What do you notice about the design? How does it help to simulate a conversation?
- This installation is part of a transmedia art project that tells stories across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies. In what ways does *Question Bridge: Black Males* use this technique?

### *Focus on Process*

- What steps do you think were involved in preparing the video footage used in the installation?
- Why do you think the artists used video as the primary medium?
- What other materials might the artists have chosen?
- The artists chose to film each individual's questions and responses separately from those of other participants. Why do you think the artists made this decision? How is this arrangement different from a one-on-one or group discussion?

### *Focus on Content*

- Move to the center of the installation and stand in front of the video panels. Describe the mood.
- What role do you play in the conversation taking place in the video?
- The artists refer to museum visitors who experience the installation as witnesses. A witness is someone who can provide a firsthand account of something he or she has seen, heard, or experienced. What are you witnessing here? What is surprising to you?
- The artists traveled to twelve cities throughout the United States over the course of four years to interview more than 150 Black men. In what ways are these men similar? How do they differ? How do their similarities and differences shape the conversation?

### *Questions for Reflection*

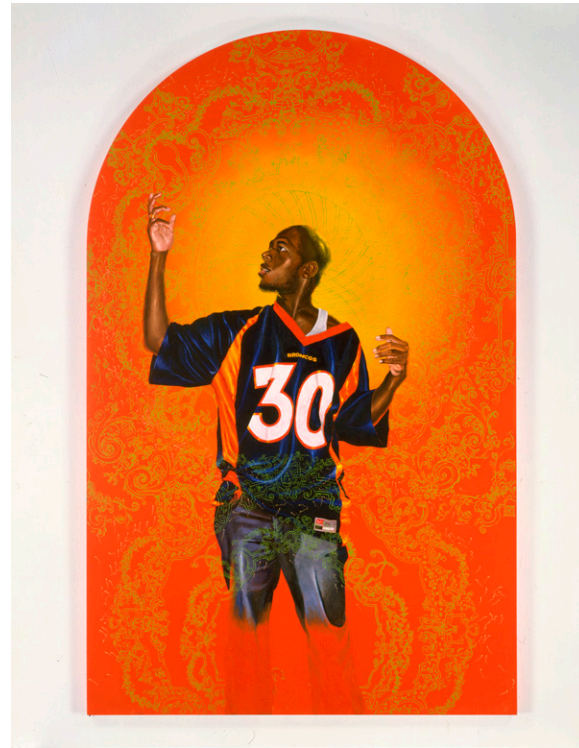
Move to an adjacent gallery to reflect on the installation with your students. Ask for a report on two or three interesting findings. Use the following questions to build on these observations:

- Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, and Bayeté Ross Smith are Black American male artists. Why do you think they wanted to create an opportunity for you to witness conversations about Black male identity among Black males?
- Where do our assumptions about other people come from? How does the installation challenge assumptions about Black men?

## Further Investigation

Use the following questions to compare *Question Bridge: Black Males* with other artworks on view that also address issues related to identity and society. To continue the discussion, use the additional questions about artworks by Kehinde Wiley, Judy Chicago, and mounir fatmi on pages 8–9.

- Johnson, Willis Thomas, and Ross Smith are among a number of contemporary artists who address social issues through their work. Some of these works focus on issues and experiences of a single demographic, while others consider social themes that affect multiple groups of people. What do you notice about this artwork? How is it similar to *Question Bridge: Black Males*? How is it different?
- *Question Bridge: Black Males* addresses social and political issues specific to Black males in the United States. Does this artwork address issues related to a single demographic or multiple groups? Who might be represented here? What issue(s) might the artist be responding to?
- What assumptions does this artwork challenge? What do you see to support your answer?
- What might the artist be suggesting to viewers through this artwork?



Kehinde Wiley, *Passing/Posing (Female Prophet Anne, Who Observes the Presentation of Jesus on the Temple)*, 2003

Location: Contemporary Galleries, 4th Floor

- Describe the figure's pose, facial expression, and clothing. What might they tell us about this person? Kehinde Wiley adopts and alters painting techniques and styles from Renaissance and Baroque Europe. What do you see that reflects the present day? What do you see that references the past?
- The *Question Bridge* collaborators sometimes invited men they were sitting next to on airplanes or men they saw on the street to provide questions. Wiley sometimes invited men walking down 125th Street in Harlem, New York, to select paintings from art-history textbooks and then replicate the pose of a figure in the work. Is this selection of participants an important element of the artwork? Why or why not?
- By applying the visual vocabulary and conventions of art history to urban subject matter, Wiley encourages viewers to reflect on how images and identities are constructed. Does Wiley challenge ideas about Black male identity in this painting? How so?





Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79

Location: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 4th Floor

- Describe *The Dinner Party*. How is this table different from a kitchen or dining table?
- The artist includes place settings for thirty-nine different women. What objects does Judy Chicago include at every place setting? Are they all the same or different?
- Why did Judy Chicago title this artwork *The Dinner Party*? What do you see to support your answer?
- Why do you think Judy Chicago “invited” these individuals to her party? What would you overhear them discussing if the party took place?
- Look closely at one place setting. Describe the different colors, shapes, lines, and textures. What materials do you see? Do you notice any symbols?
- Continue to look closely at this place setting. Whose setting is illustrated here? Judy Chicago wanted to celebrate this woman’s accomplishments. Why do you think this woman was included in *The Dinner Party*?



mounir fatmi, *Maximum Sensation*, 2010

Location: Contemporary Art, 4th Floor

- mounir fatmi uses everyday materials in his artwork. What materials do you see? How are they used in everyday life? How have they been transformed?
- The artist bought and tailored prayer rugs for each of the fifty-two skateboards included in the installation. What assumptions might exist about Islamic culture? About skateboard culture? Is there a relationship between these two cultures?
- The artist is interested in creating work that encourages viewers to look at the world from a different perspective. Does the combination of Islamic prayer rugs and skateboards challenge our assumptions? How so?
- This artwork is called *Maximum Sensation*. Why do you think the artist may have chosen this title? What questions does the work and its title raise about identity?

## Resources

<http://questionbridge.com>

The official website for *Question Bridge* provides a comprehensive overview of the project, including a virtual tour of the installation *Question Bridge: Black Males*, samples of dialogue exchanges, and an explanation of each of the project components: website, community programming, and curriculum.

<http://educator.questionbridge.com>

The *Question Bridge* website includes this educators' portal to a ten-module curriculum for grades 9 through 12 that explores complex identity frameworks, conflict-resolution communication models, and the process of inclusion.

<http://chrisjohnsonphotographer.com>

Chris Johnson's website contains portfolios of his artwork; his curriculum vitae; a trailer for the *Question Bridge* project; and an excerpt from the 1996 original video *Question Bridge*, whose participants included Black women as well as Black men.

<http://hankwillisthomas.com>

The artist Hank Willis Thomas's website features a biography and selected artworks.

<http://bayeterosssmith.com/home.html>

Bayeté Ross Smith's website contains his biography, information about upcoming projects and exhibitions, selected artworks, and his artist blog.

<http://morethan28days.com>

This website focuses on *Black Male Identity*, a project by the nonprofit organization Art on Purpose, which uses art to further a national More Than 28 Days Campaign to build, celebrate, and accentuate new images of what it means to be a Black male. The site serves as a forum for sharing community-generated content; anyone may set up an account and contribute art and ideas to the conversation.

This packet was written by Keonna Hendrick, Senior Museum Educator, with assistance from Alexa Fairchild, School Programs Manager, Tricia Laughlin Bloom, Project Curator, and Radiah Harper, Vice Director for Education and Program Development.

*Question Bridge: Black Males* was created by Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas, in collaboration with Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair. The Executive Producers are Delroy Lindo, Deborah Willis, and Jesse Williams. Will Sylvester is the Post-Production Producer, and Rosa White is the Supervising Story Producer. The Transmedia Producers are Antonio Kaplan and Elise Baugh of Innovent.

The Brooklyn Museum presentation is co-organized by Patrick Amsellem, former Associate Curator of Photography, and Tricia Laughlin Bloom, Project Curator, Brooklyn Museum.

*Question Bridge: Black Males* is a fiscally sponsored project of the Bay Area Video Coalition, supported in part by a grant from the Open Society Foundations Campaign for Black Male Achievement, the Tribeca Film Institute, Sundance Film Institute's New Frontier Story Lab, the LEF Foundation, the Center for Cultural Innovation, and the California College of the Arts. Additional support was provided by the Jack Shainman Gallery.

The *Question Bridge* curriculum was designed by Kamal Sinclair in collaboration with Bayeté Ross Smith and Chris Johnson, in consultation with Jinan O'Connor, Dr. Joy Angela DeGruy, and Dr. Deborah Willis. The *Question Bridge* website concept was conceived by Kamal Sinclair.

Cover and pages 2, 3, 6: Chris Johnson (American, b. 1948) and Hank Willis Thomas (American, b. 1976), with Kamal Sinclair (American, b. 1976) and Bayeté Ross Smith (American, b. 1976). Stills from *Question Bridge: Black Males*, 2012. Multichannel video installation. Courtesy of the artists and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Pages 8, 11: Kehinde Wiley (American, born 1977). *Passing/Posing (Female Prophet Anne, Who Observes the Presentation of Jesus on the Temple)*, 2003. Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 96 x 60 x 1 1/2 in. (243.8 x 152.4 x 3.8 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Mary Smith Dorward Fund and Healy Purchase Fund B, 2003.90.2. © Kehinde Wiley, courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

Pages 9, 12: Judy Chicago (American, born 1939). *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 x 576 in. (1,463 x 1,463 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of The Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10. © Judy Chicago

Pages 9 (detail), 13: mounir fatmi (Moroccan, born 1970). *Maximum Sensation*, 2010. Plastic, metal, textile, dimensions variable. Brooklyn Museum, Purchase gift of Stephanie and Tim Ingrassia and John and Barbara Vogelstein, 2010.67. © mounir fatmi

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