

Question Bridge: Black Males
Socially Engaged Art and the Politics of Dialogue

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Abstract: *Question Bridge: Black Males* is a ‘trans-media’ art project created by Hank Willis Thomas and Chris Johnson in collaboration with Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair. The artists travelled throughout the United States for four years to engage more than 150 Black men in an intercultural dialogue about identity and representation. These exchanges are part of socially engaged art practices that Grant H. Kester calls “dialogical aesthetics” in which artists adopt a collaborative, process-based approach to facilitate a dialogue within communities. As an artwork that is based on conversation, collaboration and community engagement, *Question Bridge* offers an opportunity to explore the potential for creative expression to engage social issues and stimulate change. This article uses Kester’s “dialogical aesthetics” to examine the relationship between dialogue and identity formation. Drawing on postcolonial theorists Frantz Fanon and bell hooks, as well as Jürgen Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, I argue that *Question Bridge* creates an opportunity for transformational dialogues that challenge and ultimately deconstruct dominant stereotypes and popular media narratives.

Key Terms: *Question Bridge: Black Males*, trans-media art, socially engaged art, dialogical aesthetics, dialogue, identity, postcolonial theory, self-determination, Habermas, public sphere, communicative action.

Introduction

Question Bridge: Black Males is an art project created by Hank Willis Thomas and Chris Johnson in collaboration with Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair. The collaborators traveled to twelve cities to interview more than 150 Black men, who span generational, economic and educational backgrounds, in order to create a video archive of their collective 1,500 questions and answers (Hendrick, 2012). However, the artists did not interview the participants in the traditional sense; in fact, they did

not prompt any of the questions. Rather, they asked the participants to think of the questions they have always wanted to ask other black men. All of the question and answer exchanges were filmed separately. The filmed questions were then shown to other participants who generated answers (Johnson, personal communication, April 13, 2012). This footage was subsequently edited together to create a three-hour group conversation about Black male identity/ies.



Figure 1. Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, with Kamal Sinclair and Bayeté Ross Smith. Stills from *Question Bridge: Black Males*, 2012. Multichannel video installation. This image is used courtesy of Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas.

The installation was exhibited at five venues across the United States,¹ including the Brooklyn Museum. Visitors entered a dimly lit room to find hanging panels that displayed the blurred faces of Black men (Figure 1). Beyond the panels, five video monitors were installed on large black vertical columns, arranged in an arc in the

¹ *Question Bridge: Black Males* was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum (January 13 - July 15), the Oakland Museum of California (January 21 - July 8), the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art (January 20 to May 19) and the City Gallery at Chastain Atlanta (January 27 - March 10). It was also screened at Sundance Film Festival (January 17 - 27).

centre of the room. The video monitors projected clips of Black men speaking directly to the camera. On one screen, a man's face came into view to pose a question. On the four adjacent screens, the faces of four men appeared, who were filmed listening to the question and then providing four different answers (Figure 2). Taken together, the men engaged in a collective dialogue about love, family, sexuality, interracial relationships, community, class, and violence, as well as race and racial identity in America. The gallery room filled with visitors who stood in the semi-circular space 'bearing witness' to the dialogue. The artists described the visitors as "privileged witnesses" to emphasize that they were not passive but active listeners (Hendrick, 2012). Nor were they silent; they continued the conversation at the end of the video to further activate the installation.



Figure 2. Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, with Kamal Sinclair and Bayeté Ross Smith. Stills from *Question Bridge: Black Males*, 2012. Multichannel video installation. This image is used courtesy of Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas.

Question Bridge is not confined to the installation. It continues through the development of an interactive website and other social media platforms, special

community events and roundtable discussions that have taken place across America, as well as the development of a high-school curriculum, which is currently being implemented at public schools in Brooklyn and Oakland (Johnson, Willis Thomas, Ross Smith & Sinclair, Education, 2012). Thus, the artists describe *Question Bridge* as a ‘trans-media’ project, as opposed to a ‘multi-media’ one, to capture the way in which it enacts discussion at multiple sites through the use of media. Participants and witnesses at all of these sites are encouraged to address overarching questions about negotiating identities within intercultural and cross-cultural communities.

Theoretical Framework

This article explores *Question Bridge: Black Males* through Grant H. Kester’s concept of ‘dialogical aesthetics.’ Kester (2004) defines dialogical aesthetics as socially engaged art that is “concerned with the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange” (p. 8). Although artists have had a long tradition of creating work to provoke dialogue among viewers, such dialogue takes place in response to a finished work and is usually predicated on a model of one-way communication—from the artist, curator or critic to the viewer (Finkelpearl, 2000, 278). In contrast, *Question Bridge* is based on a collaborative model, in which the artists’ role is to provide “context” for the conversation, rather than the “content” (Dunn, 2001, cited in Kester, 1). Further, as a ‘dialogical’ artwork, *Question Bridge* facilitates a dialogue that continues to unfold beyond the gallery walls. As such, the ‘meaning’ or significance of the work is not based on a finished product, but through a reading of the project’s process.

Question Bridge, like other socially engaged art practices, has its roots in social, cultural and political activism. As Kester (2004) explains in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, it is difficult to contextualize dialogue-based art within mainstream art theory and criticism because it is usually dismissed for its lack of aesthetic value (p. 10). Thus, this article further explores *Question Bridge* through the lens of post colonial theory and Habermas’ concept of the public sphere in order to demonstrate the significance of dialogue-based art and to situate this practice within a larger social and political context. The first section of this paper examines the project from the perspective of postcolonial theory and resistance. I apply Frantz Fanon’s conception of ‘self-determination’ as well as bell hooks’ contemporary interpretations to explain the role of ‘story-telling’ in the social conditioning of racial identities that these theorists have observed. Storytelling has historically been used by the colonial power to shape the identities of colonized peoples, but it can also be used as a strategy for resistance (Jefferess, 2008). The second section builds on the idea that dialogue, a form of storytelling, is

a potent political force by examining Jürgen Habermas' theory of the 'public sphere' and 'communicative action'. Habermas offers a theoretical framework to explain the relationship between public discourse, identity formation and political action. Thus, this article demonstrates the potential for socially engaged art to facilitate transformational dialogues that deconstruct dominant stereotypes and media narratives.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial studies emerged as a critique of English literature and the "politics of representation," (Jefferess, 2008, 4) recognizing how stories, put forth by the colonial power, can legitimize colonial domination by constructing the identity of the colonized through visual, textual and spoken representations. Thus, Frantz Fanon, among others, explains that 'liberation' not only requires dismantling political structures of domination, but also 'transforming' the narratives that legitimize them (Jefferess, 1). The *Question Bridge* project uses media to create a platform for self-determination by re-invigorating the capacity to imagine, see and describe oneself beyond the colonial framework. Consider these fragments from the installation:

Tony Snow: "Do you really feel free?"

Malik Yoba: "I find it interesting as I get older how many people allow their internal monologue to dictate their path toward negative results. So people often talk about what they can't do because they're Black, or they're poor; because they don't come from the right family or they don't live in the right place. I think that life is a miracle...I experience miracles on a regular basis and the older I get the more than I can attribute it to the freedom that starts [in my mind]. No one's going to give me freedom. Even if the world is saying something different, particularly if you live in America...We have no excuse but to *own* a sense of freedom, to *own* a sense of possibility, to *own* our future and it's not easy."

Malik Seneferu: "Being free has a lot to do with the ability to understand who you are...Especially for me as a Black man, as a child a lot of my existence was designed by the world around me and as I became older I was able to understand that this self that was developed or sculpted or painted into place was not me and I had to

redevelop and come to an understanding of who exactly I am from a historical reference and who I need to be to my family and community. So for that, no I am not free.” (Johnson et al., Explore Project, 2012)

These answers powerfully explore the legacy of internalized racism described by post-colonial critics: “I can attribute it to the freedom that starts [in my mind]. No one’s going to give me freedom.” Post-colonial scholars argue that dominant powers formally headed by the state are also spread throughout most of the power centers of our society. Recognition of these cascading effects has precipitated what Frantz Fanon calls “psycho-affective” attachment of the colonized to the colonizer in which colonized peoples come to *identify* themselves in these oppressive relationships (2005, 148). Fanon and other postcolonial critics explain that economic and political control is maintained in ‘knowing’ peoples—establishing relationships defined by, and in the interest of, the dominant culture and persuading the ‘Other’ to know themselves in this context, namely, as subordinate. Structural domination relies on the ‘internalization’ of these forms of oppression and thus, cannot be combated with affirmative action alone (Coulthard, 2007). *Question Bridge* takes up Fanon’s conception of self-determination, which requires that it be promoted on multiple levels. If the form of resistance does not challenge the background structures of colonial power, then the result is “white liberty and justice” (Fanon, 1967, 221). In other words, it is freedom that is ‘bestowed’ by the master to the slave that does not question or undermine the dominant power. In the result, Fanon encourages a path of self-determination which is fought through individual and collective ‘self-affirmation.’ He argues that the colonized must reassert their own narratives outside of the dominant colonial discourse (Fanon, 1967, as cited in Coulthard, 2007). In this view, Johnson (2012) described how *Question Bridge* is a remedy to the distorted and self-perpetuating stereotypes that Black males have inherited: “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 the media and popular narratives” (Johnson, cited in Hendrick, 2012).

Accordingly, postcolonial scholars view culture as a powerful political space in which its production and its consumption work to maintain the power of one group over another. For example, hooks (1992) explains that while African Americans have made considerable progress in education and employment, television acts as a constant reminder of the supremacy of white over black: white voices, values and beliefs are channeled into the private homes of Black viewers (p. 2). This works to undermine the “capacity to resist white supremacy by cultivating

oppositional worldviews” (hooks, 1995, 110). Although African American viewers may not readily identify their own experiences with the lives projected on their screens, television deftly crosses these boundaries simply by sitting in the living room. Today, the presence of Black characters on television is meant to suggest that there is no longer any need for resistance because ‘racism no longer exists’ (hooks, 1995, 111). However, the Black characters that inhabit popular television and movies are usually created by white cultural producers who rarely challenge underlying discrimination; instead, they present viewers—black and white—with racial stereotypes that pervade our dominant white culture (Shome, 2000, 368). These stereotypes are constantly internalized by both the dominant culture and the racial minority (hooks, 1995, 112). For *Question Bridge*’s Malik Seneferu: “[M]y existence was designed by the world around me and as I became older I was able to understand that this self that was developed or sculpted or painted into place was not me and I had to redevelop and come to an understanding of who exactly I am.” Seneferu’s response demonstrates that the struggle for control in the arena of representation is still a live issue that must be confronted by individual and collective self-affirmation.

Habermas and the ‘public sphere’

Defining the ‘public sphere’

Another useful lens through which *Question Bridge* can be analyzed is Jürgen Habermas’ conception of the public sphere. *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) illuminates the powerful political potential of the discussions central to the *Question Bridge* project. For Habermas, discussion and debate, or ‘communicative action’ is a necessary form of social integration, political organization and citizen participation outside of formal political and economic institutions (as cited in Calhoun, 1992, p.6). However, the ability for critical discourse is often hindered by the opportunity and entitlement for speech. Thus, his seminal text examines the ingredients necessary for civil society to thrive and offers a lens to frame the *Question Bridge* project as a dynamic social movement based on collaborative dialogue.

In this view, *Question Bridge* not only challenges dominant narratives, it activates what Habermas calls the “public sphere” by facilitating discussion and debate, which Habermas views as a form of political action (Calhoun, 1992, 9). For Habermas, the public sphere is the space where “private persons” come together to discuss issues of ‘common concern’ (Habermas, 1962, 36). Thus, the public sphere functions as an important site of ‘societal integration’ (Calhoun, 6). As a ‘truth-speaking’ project, *Question Bridge* reinvigorates the ‘public sphere’ and the

collective capacity of black culture to act as a powerful socializing force outside of dominant institutions. Within the public sphere, interaction is not constrained by status differences: all participants have equal opportunity to participate—to assert, question or defend any claim (Held, 1980, 396). However, Habermas recognized that there are a variety of factors that have the potential to inhibit free and open discourse, ranging from the influence of cultural traditions and values to the effects of mass media.

The effects of mass media and the role of culture in the public sphere

Inspired by Marxism, Habermas identified the diluting effect of mass culture on the power of civil society, where public debate and shared critical activity was replaced by “a more passive culture of consumption” (Calhoun, 23). One can read this critique against bell hooks’ dissatisfaction with popular culture as a driving force of white supremacy through passive consumption. hooks (1995) describes the evaporation of the spirit of resistance that characterized black cultural politics in the 1960s.² hooks links this change to the assimilation of black culture into the dominant white culture (p. 110). As she argues, what was originally seen as African Americans’ long overdue social advancement—obtaining and consuming some of the material goods produced by the dominant culture—in fact, merely extended white values and culture into black imaginations. This partial material assimilation was mirrored in popular television, movies and advertising: as hooks (1995) explains, “When black Americans were denied easy access to white movies, black cinema thrived... Once the images of whiteness were available to everyone there was no black movie-going audience starving for black images” (p. 111). While hooks recognizes that African American viewers do not fully identify with the representations and values seen on mainstream television and film, the expansion of access to African American audiences has had the effect of undermining *active* participation and production in this public arena.

If we see culture as a political space, then the initiated engagement of Black individuals and artists to create their own cinema can be seen as political action. Likewise, *Question Bridge* expands the boundaries of political participation and struggle from the mainstream to the margins. The conversations that surround the project—the filmed interviews, the exchanges at the gallery, online sharing and discussions at home and at school—locate African American concerns in arenas

² For more information see: California Futures Forum: *Question Bridge: Black Males Blueprint Roundtable* <http://museumca.org/calendar/california-futures-forum-question-bridge-black-male-blueprint-roundtable>.

beyond formally recognized political organizations. As such, we are compelled to redefine what we understand to be ‘authentically political’ resistance strategies to understand the way in which political struggle is enacted and negotiated in everyday activities (Kelly, 1994).

An expansive view of political action is directly related to Habermas’ conception of the ‘public sphere’, which is dependent upon direct participation and access to production. *Question Bridge* exemplifies this objective: the public sphere spans across America, initiated by the conversations that happen between everyday Black men. The sphere is enlarged through online web applications and social media platforms that rely on participation through comments and sharing to activate its political potential. In other words, *Question Bridge* can be seen as a radical art practice that defies the commoditization and consumerization that typically overwhelm art and culture.

Moreover, as radical culture, the project transcends the traditional notions of artist and viewer, producer and consumer. The artists are not ‘artists’ in the traditional sense; in fact, they are not even featured in the documentary. Nor is the project about an authoritative object that projects the views of an individual or group of individuals onto an audience. The creators do not prescribe what questions will be asked; instead, they provide an opportunity for issues of ‘common concern’ to emerge organically from the discussion. In line with Habermas, the project requires dialogical involvement to be activated. In this form, social integration is dependent upon collaborative critical discourse, not domination.

Question Bridge and subaltern groups: reclaiming the public sphere

However, as a public sphere that is predicated on the inclusive participation of populations that have historically been marginalized, one must look towards Habermas’ postmodern critics. For these critics, Habermas’ public sphere is idealized: made up of predominantly white, bourgeois males and largely dependent upon the exclusions that delineate political and economic institutions (Fraser, 1992, p.120). Indeed, Habermas overlooked more diverse, non-bourgeois, or ‘competing’ public spheres. Problematically, his conception is based on ‘bracketing’ status differentials, such that outside of state institutions, citizens are equal, regardless of their status. Feminist theorists point out, however, that there were also counter-publics—“subaltern publics”—that existed both outside of the state and outside of dominant society (p.123). Within these counter publics, members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, and people of color—were able to ‘find their voices and express their thoughts’ against modes of domination, rather than get grouped into the “false ‘we’ that reflects the more powerful” (p. 123). These

“subaltern publics” were necessary for oppositional groups to reflect on and interpret their identities, issues and needs. This view suggests that the public sphere is not only an arena for public discourse but also for the development and performance of social identities (p. 125).

It is therefore important to situate the *Question Bridge* project within this re-interpretation of Habermas. In a conversation with the artist, Chris Johnson, we discussed the inherent problems of presenting at a gallery. Habermas would likely see an art gallery or museum as an ideal location for public discussion and debate. Surrounded by cultural artifacts that initiate critical reflection and discussion, visitors engage in conversations related to larger issues of social, economic and political concern. In contrast, postcolonial critics see mainstream galleries and museums as institutions of the dominant culture, having the potential to exclude the very publics that *Question Bridge* seeks to engage.



Figure 3. Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, with Kamal Sinclair and Bayeté Ross Smith. Stills from *Question Bridge: Black Males*, 2012. Multichannel video installation. This image is used courtesy of Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas.

Johnson and his collaborators addressed this issue and the fundamental importance of providing a safe space for the participants to speak openly and honestly, unmediated by potential obstacles to candour during the initial interviews (Figure 3). As Johnson explained it, the artists made the decision to *only* have Black males in the interview rooms to dismantle the potential barriers to conversation (personal communication, April 13, 2012). In order to expand these conversations beyond the Black male demographic, the artists developed social media platforms in

order to make the conversations more widely accessible and provide an opportunity for the broader public to reflect on and discuss issues of race and racial identity in America.

Similarly, the installation at the Brooklyn Museum responded to the problems described above by reclaiming the public space. The viewing room was contained in an arc that created a circular opening to make the viewer conscious that they were entering into a public domain, rather than happening upon the installation incidentally. The screens were mounted on six-foot tall black pillars to stress the identities of the participants (Figure 4). In this space, visitors were also conscious of their identity—in effect emphasizing that identity is an important marker of participation in this public sphere.



Figure 4. Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, with Kamal Sinclair and Bayeté Ross Smith. Stills from *Question Bridge: Black Males*, 2012. Multichannel video installation. This image is used courtesy of Chris Johnson and Hank Willis Thomas.

Transformational Dialogues and Education

Question Bridge further enacted widespread public discussion through the development of an educational curriculum designed to connect with younger participants. As an emancipatory project, which based the potential for self-determination on dialogical activity, the implementation of a public and high-school curriculum evolved organically from the initial filmed interviews that are the

backbone of the project. (Johnson, personal communication April 13, 2012). Recognizing the vulnerability of youth to the charged issues of race and identity, the collaborators identified the importance of involving young people in a parallel practice of self-reflection, dialogue and transformation. The *Question Bridge* curriculum asks students to interview people from their community and discuss race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class with their peers. The students are also encouraged to analyze contemporary modes of communication and popular media to increase their media literacy skills (Johnson et al., Education , 2012). As such, the curriculum provides an opportunity for students to question dominant narratives in order to cultivate self-determined identities and relationships. Students learn to articulate their views in a respectful and sensitive manner and become more aware of themselves and others. This increases their ability to see their views, values and identities as conditional and subject to transformation (Giroux, 1993).

Conclusion

Modern art has a long tradition of challenging dominant modes of representation: abstraction defied realism and acted as a catalyst for discussion, debate and change. The discussions that are central to the *Question Bridge* project recognize this potential for art to challenge dominant discourse and representation by creating a new frame of reference and by asking different questions. The project animates this idea by empowering non-artists to ask the questions and to answer them and by encouraging members of the public to explore the larger political and social impact of these questions and answers. The project can be used as a model for marginalized groups to engage in collaborative dialogue that allows participants to imagine and describe themselves beyond the boundaries of conventional discourse. It highlights the potential for dialogue to challenge the notion of fixed identities. Thus, *Question Bridge* did not generate a single or final answer; the process was deliberately iterative, the answers sometimes contradictory and the public roundtables, online forums and classroom discussions were intended to make the work forever unfinished. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of *Question Bridge* coaxes participants and viewers towards insight and reconciliation across division. In other words, the project exemplifies the importance of bridges—from personal struggle to collective movement; from individual differences to common concern.

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