

# Brooklyn Museum

## Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

*Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*

April 29–September 18, 2016





## ***Disguise: Masks and Global African Art***

### **About this Teaching Resource**

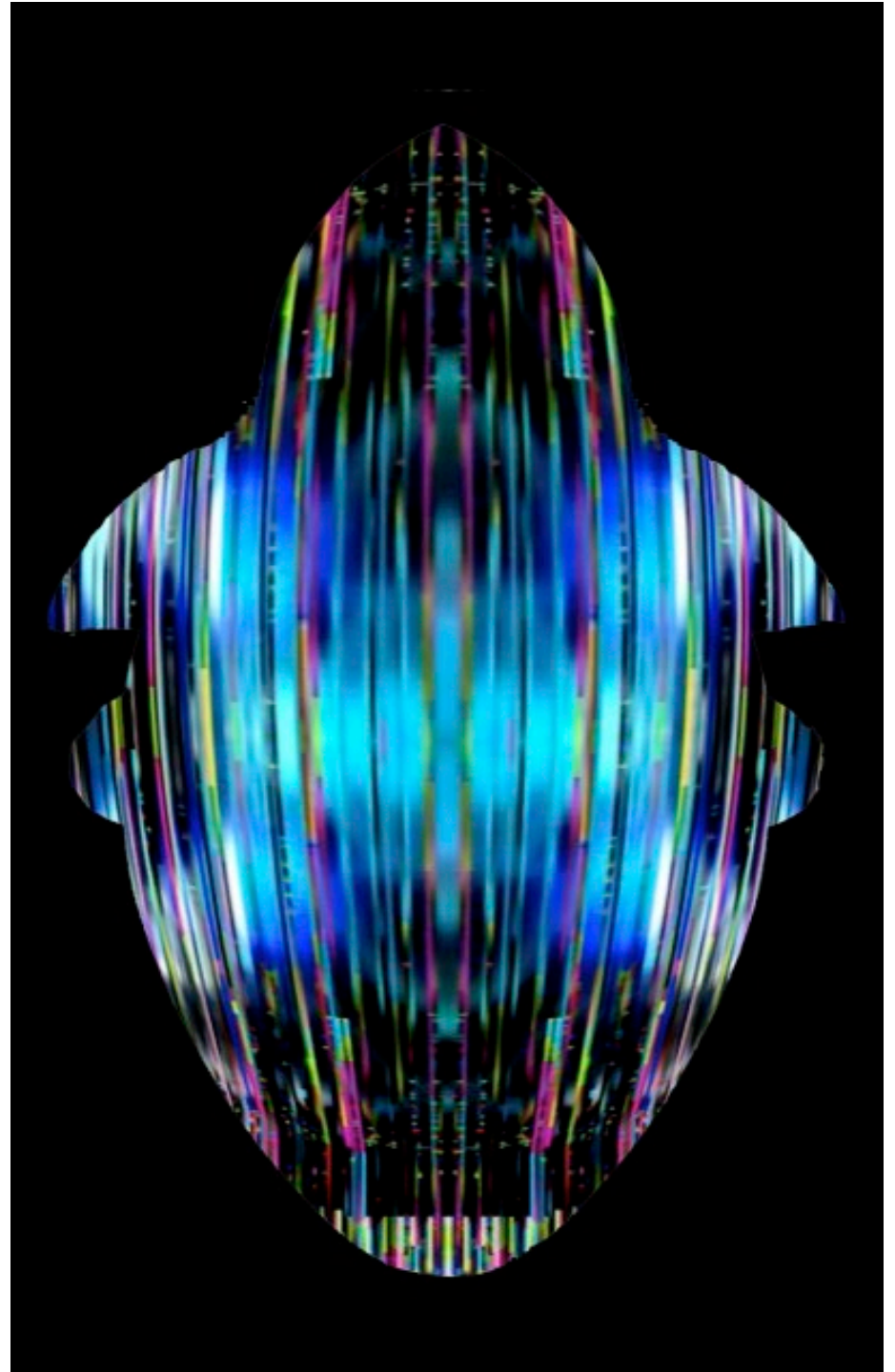
This packet features two artworks from the special exhibition *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*. It is intended as a tool to help teachers look at art with fifth- to twelfth- grade students. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussion by reviewing the descriptions and background information provided. Then use the section “Questions for Viewing” to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together. Extend your investigations with one or more of the suggested activity ideas. In general, questions for younger audiences are listed first followed by progressively more complex ideas. Feel free to adapt the suggested activities according to the age group you are working with. Share your teaching stories with us! If you use these materials, let us know: [school.programs@brooklynmuseum.org](mailto:school.programs@brooklynmuseum.org).

### **About the Exhibition**

*Disguise: Masks and Global African Art* connects the work of twenty-five contemporary artists with historical African masquerade, using play and provocation to invite viewers to think critically about their world and their place within it. By putting on a mask and becoming someone else, these artists reveal hidden realities about society, including ones having to do with power, class, and gender, in order to suggest possibilities for the future.

Masks have long been used by African artists to define relationships—whether involving individuals, communities, the environment, or the cosmos—and, sometimes, to challenge the status quo. However, once masks were removed from their original performance context, they were transformed into museum objects, and their larger messages were often lost.

The exhibition presents contemporary work in dialogue with historical objects from the collections of the Seattle Art Museum and the Brooklyn Museum within an immersive and lively installation of video, digital, sound, and installation art, as well as photography and sculpture.





Yoruba  
"Egungun" Dance Costume,  
mid-20th century

Wood, cotton and wool textiles,  
aluminum, 55 x 6 x 63 in.  
(139.7 x 15.2 x 160 cm).  
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Sam Hilu,  
1998.125. Creative Commons-BY

## Description of the Artwork

This costume ensemble appears as a large horizontal rectangle supported at the top by a long horizontal frame that would be balanced on the masker's head. Wide vertical panels of fabric, composed of different materials and colors (especially maroons and yellows), are draped over this frame and hang side by side across four tiers, completely covering the masker from head to toe. The first tier is comprised of short panels that create a border at the very top of the structure. A second tier, immediately below, is composed of medium-sized panels. This tier features a centrally placed panel made from a netting material positioned directly in front of where the masker's face would be. The third tier appears only in the front of the costume and is composed of shorter panels that cut across the middle of the figure. The bottom tier features the longest panels that flow easily with movement. Comparatively newer, factory-made cloths appear on the outer layer of textile panels, while significantly older, indigo-white strip cloth panels are underneath. The textile panels are decorated with perforated aluminum geometric objects sewed onto the surface.

## About the Artwork

*Egungun* is a masquerade tradition practiced by the Yoruba of West Africa and their descendants throughout the African Diaspora. As a group, *egungun* appear as masked figures covered from head to toe in an elaborately decorated costume. They are visible manifestations of deceased ancestors who periodically return to the community for remembrance, celebration, and blessings.<sup>1</sup> They also provide stability to Yoruba society by sharing their divine knowledge with their living descendants during times of trouble, and by punishing those who are not following the teachings and moral standards of past generations.<sup>2</sup>

*Egungun* are invoked through precise drumming rhythms and dance rituals during annual festivals. While the robed figures act as a temporary bridge between the living and the dead, under no circumstance may the *egungun* be touched, approached, or spoken to by living humans. When they appear in public, the *egungun* are shepherded by attendants who walk alongside them with sticks and help to protect the physical space around them.<sup>3</sup>

Fabric plays an important role in Yoruba society.<sup>4</sup> The *egungun* costume is composed of multiple layers of embroidered cloth lappets made from expensive textiles denoting the status and wealth of the family of the manifested ancestor. In addition, the costume connotes spiritual power, since its very structure and design allow the realm of spirits to manifest in the realm of the living.

The organizers of the 1993 exhibition *Transformation through Cloth: An Ancestral Devotion through the Egungun Costume of the Yoruba* at the University of Wisconsin-Madison describe how these costumes work to facilitate the masker's transformation into the ancestor's spirit:

The composition of an *egungun* ensemble has several distinctive features. The layer worn closest to the masker's skin, the undersack, must be made of *aso-oke*, the indigo and white strip cloth. It closely resembles the shroud in which the dead are wrapped. This sack, along with the netting for the face and hands, must completely seal the masker's body. The netting effectively disguises facial and hand features that might disclose his identity. On top of this base are placed the layers of lappets. As the masker whirls, the lappets are sent flying, creating a "breeze of blessing." The design of the costume is therefore closely related to the choreography of the performance. . . . To make the costume beautiful, and thus powerful, the lappets are decorated with patchwork patterns, braids, sequins, tassels, and amulets. The amulets hold medicinal preparations which have performative power (*ase*), providing protection against enemies at a time when the transformed person is vulnerable. The main protective amulets, however, are on the inside of the costume, not the outside.<sup>5</sup>

Wura-Natasha Ogunji  
(American, born 1970)  
*Costumes Used in the Video  
"An Ancestor Takes a  
Photograph,"* 2014

Tyvek, cloth, thread, ink, canvas on  
polypropylene, safety goggles, gloves,  
bubble wrap, electrical tape. Overall:  
75 x 28 x 15 in. (190.5 x 71.1 x 38.1  
cm). Seattle Art Museum,  
Commission, 2015



## Description of the Artwork

Two mannequins stand side by side, one slightly in front of the other. Both are placed in front of a projected video, which is shown to either side of them. Their arms and feet are positioned so as to give the impression of movement. They are covered from head to toe by matching white costumes made from Tyvek or Hazmat (hazardous materials) suits. The hood of the costume almost completely encloses the mannequin's head, except for a plastic-covered opening over the eyes. Each costume also features an additional layer of translucent material over which are stitched long rectangular strips of orange and green fabric. There are additional geometric shapes in orange, aqua-blue, green, red, black, and silver, patch-worked over the hood. The mannequins wear fluorescent orange-and-black work-style gloves, and safety-style square-toed shoes made from silver material.

## About the Artist

Wura-Natasha Ogunji is a Nigerian-American performance and visual artist born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1970. Her work encompasses a variety of media, including video, thread, ink, and paper. Ogunji received a BA in Anthropology from Stanford University in 1992 and an MFA in Photography from San Jose State University in 1998. She was a recipient of a 2012 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and has been awarded numerous grants by institutions such as the Dallas Museum of Art, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and the Idea Fund. Her work has been exhibited at several venues, including the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos, Nigeria, Exit Art in New York, Arthouse at the Jones Center in Austin, Texas, MASS Gallery in Austin, and the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn. She currently divides her time between Austin and Lagos.<sup>6</sup>

## About the Artwork

These costumes were used in *An Ancestor Takes a Photograph* (2014), a video-performance art project displayed behind the two figures. The video shows two masked female performers walking through a busy Lagos commercial district carrying "selfie sticks." Ogunji has said that the design for the patchwork embroidered over the suits is modeled after a street map overlay of the city of Lagos. Ogunji sees these costumes as both a continuation and a critique of the *egungun* masquerade tradition, still prevalent in Nigeria today:

*An Ancestor Takes a Photograph* reconfigures the *egungun* ceremony as a performance for two women to move through the megacity of Lagos and document their experience of this street masquerade. This work builds upon the practices of "street *egungun*" who cleverly expand the traditional Yoruba ritual for economic reasons. While the street *egungun* are more tricksters than ancestors (they tease and annoy and ask for money), they also inspire a sense of awe, fear, and attraction similar to that instilled by the proper *egungun*. *An Ancestor Takes a Photograph* is both an interruption to the gender prohibitions around who can dance *egungun*—as women are not allowed to be part of the secret society—and a way to examine and embody the power of masquerade. . . . During the performance our costumes are outfitted with cameras so that as we move through the city we are recording this expanded sense of power and spatial freedom.<sup>7</sup>



## Questions for Viewing *Egungun* Dance Costume and Costumes Used in the Video “An Ancestor Takes a Photograph”

Take a moment to look closely at these two costumes. What elements do you see that are similar? How are they different from each other?

Imagine that you were walking down a busy street in your city and came across figures covered in the *egungun* costume. How would you feel? What about this costume would make you feel this way?

Now imagine that you came across figures wearing the costumes displayed alongside *An Ancestor Takes a Photograph*. What would you think? How would you feel? What about these costumes gives you this impression?

How do you think it would feel to be inside the *egungun* costume? How would it be different to be inside the costumes used in the video?

Ogunji says, “Masks and masquerades create alternative and transcendent spaces. The mask is a portal. It tells both audience and performer, ‘You’re about to enter a totally new world.’”<sup>8</sup> Based on what you see in each of these costumes, what “worlds” might they have come from? What specific details from each costume give you this impression?

Superheroes are often depicted wearing suits that give them special powers. Similarly, both the *egungun* costume and the suits worn in *An Ancestor Takes a Photograph* give maskers the power to move between realms while at the same time protecting them from the outside world. What do you see in each of these costumes that might help the masker to travel across different dimensions? How does each of these costumes protect the person inside? What elements or details in each of these designs (*egungun* costume and the suits worn in *An Ancestor Takes a Photograph*) show evidence of this?

*Egungun* costumes are traditionally worn only by men. When they appear in public they are revered and feared by those who encounter them. In her masquerades, Ogunji chooses to have only women participate. One of the participants has described how she felt as she walked down the streets of Lagos in costume: “Oh my God, it’s amazing! People moved out of my way. I could stand there and nobody was going to do anything to me or ask me for anything. I could move freely through space.”<sup>9</sup> What does her response tell us about gender roles in that society? How does this compare to gender roles here? If this performance were carried out in Brooklyn or another neighborhood in the U.S., how might gender, race, and class affect the experience of the masker?

If you could wear a costume that gave you complete freedom and total security, where would you go? What would you do?



## Activities

### English Language Arts and Visual Art

Look at three to five excerpts from films, novels, and short stories featuring protagonists who have travelled across different dimensions in the time-space continuum. Examples might include Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) or her collection of short stories, *Bloodchild* (1995). For films, you might consider *Somewhere in Time* (1980), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), or *Safety Not Guaranteed* (2012). How is the protagonist's physical body affected by time-space travel? What physical considerations might be considered to guarantee the traveler's safety? Now imagine that you were about to embark on such a journey. Using fabric, wood, wood glue, recycled plastic, and other found materials, create a costume or "suit" designed to guarantee your safe passage. Write a manual explaining its main features and how it should be worn. Be sure to incorporate descriptions of both physical and symbolic elements that speak to the idea of "protection" in your design.

### English Language Arts

Ogunji's work is inspired by the philosophy of Afro-futurism, which "combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, and magic realism . . . to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color, but also to revise, interrogate, and reexamine the historical events of the past."<sup>10</sup> Examples of artists whose work is often described as Afro-futuristic include novelist Octavia Butler, visual artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, and John Sayle's 1984 film, *The Brother from Another Planet*. What are some of the problems facing people of color and/or young people today? What are some of the historical reasons for these problems? Write a science fiction short story where you explore some of these problems in an alternate world inhabited by beings that may be both very different and very similar to humans.

### Performance Art/Theatre

Are there issues in your school or community that are important but that no one seems to notice or talk much about? Think of an "intervention" or "scene" that you might create to get people talking and thinking about this issue. Working with two or three partners, think about how you might grab people's attention in a way that makes them curious and engaged, as opposed to just shocked. As Ogunji says: "This requires a kind of respect and consideration for the public which I don't at all associate with spectacles. When I think about a spectacle it brings to mind a particular image or event that is intended to shock. And things that shock us don't necessarily create opportunities for conversations or transformation."<sup>11</sup> How can you use costumes, interesting objects, and your own body to bring attention to this issue in a way that creates an opportunity for change?





## Resources for Teachers

**Pamela McClusky, et. al. *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art.***

Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2015.

Catalogue for the exhibition as it appeared in the Seattle Art Museum.

**Margy Burns Knight, Mark Melnicove, and Anne Sibley O'Brien. *Africa Is Not a Country.*** Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press, 2000.

Illustrated book that demonstrates the diversity of the African continent by describing daily life in some of its fifty-three nations.

**Ytasha Womack. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture.*** Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013.

"This book introduces readers to the burgeoning artists creating Afro-futurist works, the history of innovators in the past, and the wide range of subjects they explore."<sup>12</sup>

**Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown, eds. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements.*** Oakland: AK Press, 2015.

"Whenever we envision a world without war, prisons, or capitalism, we are producing speculative fiction. Organizers and activists envision, and try to create, such worlds all the time. Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown have brought twenty of them together in the first anthology of short stories to explore the connections between radical speculative fiction and movements for social change."<sup>13</sup>

**Augusto Boal, trans. by Adrian Jackson. *Games for Actors and Non Actors.*** London and New York: Routledge, 1992. Available online at [https://geraldkeaney.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/augusto\\_boal\\_games\\_for\\_actors\\_and\\_non-actorsbookfi-org.pdf](https://geraldkeaney.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/augusto_boal_games_for_actors_and_non-actorsbookfi-org.pdf).

"*Games for Actors and Non-Actors* is the classic and best-selling book by the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal. It sets out the principles and practice of Boal's revolutionary Method, showing how theatre can be used to transform and liberate everyone—actors and nonactors alike!"<sup>14</sup>

**Herbert M. Cole. *I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade.*** Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1985.

"A collection of essays from various authors about African masks. Includes a section on Yoruba masks by Debbie Randolph and a section on Pende masks by Karin Klieman. Also has many black-and-white photographs of African masks and a few color photographs in the front of the book."<sup>15</sup>

**Z. S. Strother. "Invention and Reinvention in the Traditional Arts."**

*African Arts*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 24–33, 90.

This article explores the relationship between what is termed "traditional art" and urban popular culture. The author traces the emergence of the *Gidongo (Gi) Tshi?* [Which Generation?] mask genre from the central Pende of Zaire to show how innovative masquerade traditions emerge as vibrant, collaborative processes that defy dominant conceptions of artistic authorship.

**Z. S. Strother. "Gabama a Gingungu and the Secret History of Twentieth-Century Art."**

*African Arts*, vol. 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 18–31, 92–93.

The author begins by asking "What is the difference between writing 'The Pende people make *Fumu* (chief's) masks' and 'The Pende sculptor Gabama a Gingungu made a *Fumu* mask ca. 1930?'" She then provides a comprehensive view of Pende sculptor Gabama a Gingungu and of the ways in which his profession and art have adapted and changed over the course of the twentieth century.

**Elisabeth L. Cameron. "Women=Masks: Initiation Arts in North-Western Province, Zambia."**

*African Arts*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 50–61, 93.

This article debunks the cliché that only men wear masks in African masquerades by pointing to women's initiation traditions in North-Western Province, Zambia. The author recounts how women in this region refer to themselves as *makishi* (masks), which prompts her to reconsider dominant European definitions of African masks and masquerading.

*Disguise: Masks and Global African Art* was originally organized by the Seattle Art Museum.

The Brooklyn presentation is organized by Keven Dumouchelle, Associate Curator, Arts of Africa and the Pacific Islands, Brooklyn Museum.

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## JPMORGAN CHASE & CO.

This packet was written by Adjoa Jones de Almeida, Senior Museum Educator/Intern Coordinator, with assistance from Monica Marino, School Programs Manager; Radiah Harper, Vice Director for Education and Program Development; and Kevin Dumouchelle, Associate Curator, Arts of Africa and the Pacific Islands.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/resonance/44.html>

<sup>2</sup> Laura Strong, "Egungun: The Masked Ancestors of the Yoruba": <http://www.mythicarts.com/writing/Egungun.html>

<sup>3</sup> Mary Ann Fitzgerald, Henry J. Drewal, and Moyo Okediji, "Transformation through Cloth: An Egungun Costume of the Yoruba." *African Arts*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Spring 1995), p. 57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3337226>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncsu.edu/aern/TAS10.2/TAS10.2Yemisi.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Fitzgerald, Drewal, and Okediji, pp. 56–57.

<sup>6</sup> <http://daily.serving.com/2015/08/disguise-masks-global-african-art-at-seattle-art-museum/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nataal.com/disguise/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/dec/30/africa-masks-art-disguise-los-angeles>

<sup>10</sup> "Calls for Papers: Afro-Futurism," *Callaloo*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Summer 2003)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.okayafrika.com/photos/nigeria-art-wura-natasha-ogunji-visual-performance/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://books.google.com/books?id=HTvVAAAAQBAJ&hl=en>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B001111111/ref=pd\\_lpo\\_sbs\\_dp\\_ss\\_2?pf\\_rd\\_p=1944687542&pf\\_rd\\_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf\\_rd\\_t=201&pf\\_rd\\_i=1498510507&pf\\_rd\\_m=ATVPDKIKX-0DER&pf\\_rd\\_r=096W4NFD7ER23E3JTZDB](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B001111111/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_dp_ss_2?pf_rd_p=1944687542&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1498510507&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX-0DER&pf_rd_r=096W4NFD7ER23E3JTZDB)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Games-Actors-Non-Actors-2nd-Edition/dp/0415267080>

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth L. Cameron, "Women=Masks: Initiation Arts in North-Western Province, Zambia," *African Arts*, vol. 31, no. 2, (Spring 1998), pp. 50–61, 93.









Small text label on the red platform, likely providing information about the costumes.