

Bodies, Disability & Identity in Art: Project Overview

This lesson explores how artists use depictions of the body to share identity, beliefs, and power-dynamics surrounding disability. This lesson sets an art-historical background for exploration of contemporary art that engages disability and identity. Students are driven to artmaking with a prompt that focuses on agency, autonomy, and the body.

Guiding Questions

- How have artists used the body to represent disability in art?
- How do bodies show thoughts, beliefs, and power?
- How do bodies represent/mis-represent some one's identity?
- Who has been and how have people been denied, and reclaim, autonomy over their bodies?

Sequence

1. Contexting: Where are we with disability and identity?
2. History of the body & disability in art & looking at examples
3. Stretch: Artmaking
4. Movie: Crip Camp
5. Stretch: Letter to Judy Heumann
6. Responding: Reclaiming identity with the body

Procedure

Part 1: Contexting

In this section, students will learn the goals for the unit. Students will start becoming aware of their own pre-existing knowledge and biases. We will define the body, identity, and may explore intersectionality.

- Overview of project and sharing goals of project. Explanation of artmaking goals.

- Group definition of identity. Explore group understandings of disability, space for volunteering of personal experiences with disability.
- Establish working definition of power, using guiding questions:
- Introduce vocabulary: disability, identity, agency, bodies

Part 2.1: History of the Body & Disability in Art

In this section, students will get a brief overview of how bodies have been used and represented in art history from prehistory to late modernism/postmodernism. Students are guided to find visual clues of agency, power, and narrative. These questions are influenced by the Critical DEI Analysis frameworks adapted from Botelho and Rudman (2009). Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children’s Literature, especially the critical questions on focalization and social processes among characters.

Part 2.2: Looking at Examples (Contemporary Art)

As the disability rights movement won significant battles, the mainstream western art world took an interest in (among many things) diversity and the world around the art. Disability and disabled artists were brought into conversations around art from which they were either previously excluded or only partly present and heard. To explore disability and identity in art today, students will engage in dialogue with artworks created between 1975–present.

If this artwork is presented in a whole-class discussion, it should be very conversational; a fishbowl, socratic seminar, philosophical chairs (role of agency, disability, the body...), or snowball discussion could work well ([link](#)). Small-groups and jigsaw discussions would also be beneficial for students

Stretch: Artmaking

Students should create a drawing that reflects on what they have seen and learned so far. It should be abundantly clear to students this is a quick exercise; it may develop into a final project, but this in itself is not the final project.

Part 3: Crip Camp ([link](#))

The purpose of this viewing is to explore the disability rights movement, with a focus on agency. Bodies and representation in art orbit around conversations of agency and power. *Crip Camp* is a powerful complement to this. This viewing is condensed for timing.

Part 1: 4:10 - 20:00

In this first part, *Crip Camp* introduces Camp Jened, as well as some of the people they will follow. This first segment landscapes the state of disability and access in the mid-century, and identifies specific obstacles and larger themes.

Discussion questions:

- Whose stories are we hearing?
- What themes or stories are you hearing repeatedly throughout this section?
- “We realized the problem didn’t exist in people with disabilities, it existed in people without disabilities.” What does this mean to you?
- Films are artworks too! How does the editing, music, and cinematography (anything but the words) tell the story?
- Pay attention to Judy Heumann. How can we describe her? When someone asked her “are you sick,” what do you think he wanted to know?
- How can we describe the differences between life at Jened and life at home?

Part 2: 36:30 - 50:00

This segment transitions us from Camp Jened to the worlds the campers came from. The scope zooms out further to consider the national political landscape, introducing the Rehabilitation Bill of 1972 and political support/opposition for disability justice. It also discusses Willowbrook, which students should be made aware of beforehand, and also informed the footage may be disturbing. Remind students: this was in New York City.

Discussion Questions:

- Revisit the quote, “the problem didn’t exist in people with disabilities, it existed in people without disabilities.” How does this clip speak to that quote?
- When Nixon vetoed the Rehabilitation Act in 1972, who benefitted from this?
- How could things have played out differently if he hadn’t vetoed the bill?

Part 3: 1:01:00 – 1:11:00

- What kept the protests going for as long as they did? Think about practical things too (food, communication, bathrooms, hygiene, sleep...)
- Intersectionality is when different identities come together and meet in some way. What were some examples of intersectionality at the 504 Protests? Think about how disability intersects with race, sexuality, religion...

Stretch: Dear Judy

Students should create a drawing or a letter to Judith Heumann that reflects on what they have seen and learned so far. It should be abundantly clear to students this is a quick exercise; it may develop into a final project, but this in itself is not the final project.

Part 4: Responding: Reclaiming identity with the body (Armaking)

For this portion, students will have an open-ended artmaking prompt:

Create something that shows what agency means to you. Your artwork should in some way connect to a body, taking inspiration from any of the artists we've studied.

Post-Project Reflection

Reflection Questions

To help with group processing, the following discussion questions are offered.

- What surprised you?
- A lot of disability identity, culture, and life is about lived experiences. Legislation and laws help improve lived experiences. How does legislation impact our everyday lives? Whose lives are more impacted by different laws, and whose are less?
- How did your artmaking process go? When did you feel more or less capable of expressing yourself with your art? How did the materials you chose help or hinder your expression?

Resources

- 10 Principles of Disability Justice ([link](#) with shorter descriptions, [link](#) with longer descriptions)
- Crip Camp Curriculum ([link](#))
 - Lesson 2: Power and Disability Justice ([link](#))
 - Lesson 5: Strategic Use of Power ([link](#))
- Minnesota Department of Administration, Parallels in Time: A History of Developmental Disabilities ([link](#))