

Lesson 5

CONTENT:

Signs and Symbols



Materials Needed: Works listed below, computer, digital projector, digital cameras, workbooks, colorful poster board to use as backdrops.

Masterwork: Bruce Davidson, *Gang. On a bus, USA, New York City, 1959*; Olivia Bee, *Kids in Love* (Aperture, 2016); Nan Goldin, *Suzanne with Mona Lisa, Mexico City, 1981*; Robert Frank, *Fourth of July, Jay, New York, 1954*; James Mollison, *Where Children Sleep* (2010); and Neil Winokur, *New York City, 2000*

Teacher Preparation: The week or day before Lesson 5, ask students to bring in an object (small to medium size) that they would use to describe themselves. This object will be used for the photo exercise.

Students will:

- **Know:** Symbols are things that stand in for something else or “point” to something else.
- **Understand:** Photographic content (what the picture is of) can function like a symbol, representing things not seen or not physically in the picture.
- **Do:** Students will be able to identify symbols and look for meaning in pictures that may not be visualized.

Lesson Plan: (1 hr, 15 min)

- **Warm-up:** Review pictures in slide show from last week’s exercise. Ask students to explain their processes and choices. (5)
- Begin a conversation with the class about the meaning of the words *sign* and *symbol*. It is important to guide the conversation toward a visual definition of these terms rather than a literary one. Explore the symbols on the slide focusing on the universal visual language of signs, corporate identity symbols, and national symbols. How immediately identifiable are these symbols with the things they stand for? If you are working with older students, you can probably skip the first slide and jump to the question about how photographs work as symbols.
 - 1) Stop Sign
 - 2) Dollar Sign
 - 3) Apple Corporate Symbol
 - 4) Air Jordan “Jumpman” Symbol
 - 5) Broken Heart Emoji
 - 6) American Eagle Symbol
- Can photographs function as signs and symbols? (5)
- Robert Frank, *Fourth of July, Jay, New York, 1954*: Ask your students: “What is being celebrated and how do you know that? What evidence is there in the picture that tells you that?”
- Show students James Mollison’s book *Where Children Sleep* and ask the students: “What do you see? Do the photographs of the ‘bedrooms’ tell you anything about the children? About their cultures? Social status? Age? Would your understanding of the story be different if the portraits were not included? If so, how?” (15)
- Show them Neil Winokur’s images (do NOT tell them the titles of the works). Ask again: “What do you see? What do the individual objects represent?” Show them the entire grouping and ask: “What do they symbolize when grouped together?” (15)
- **Photo exercise:** Backpack still life. Have each student choose an object from their book bag or pocket. Work with them to photograph it against a curved colored poster board backdrop to create a still life “self-portrait” in the style of the Winokur images. (20)

Staff Follow-Up: Download backpack portraits for sharing in the next class.