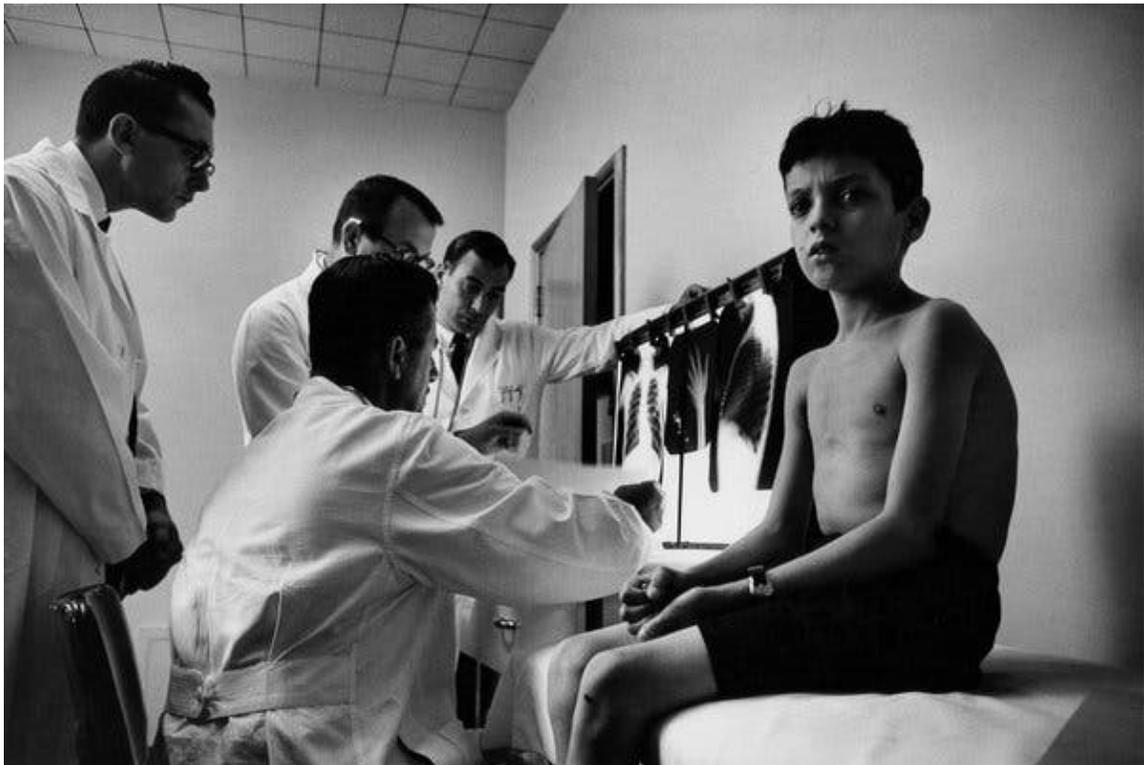


Art to Systems and Back Again: A Picture of Practice*

One afternoon about six months into the time of COVID, a museum educator named Corinne Zimmerman decided to try using an ArtC activity online. She was curious to experiment with the thinking arc, *Art to Systems and Back Again*, which uses art as an entryway into exploring civic systems. As participants, she chose a small group of colleagues with whom she had been meeting regularly on Zoom throughout the pandemic. The group's meetings were partly social, and partly a means to share ideas about teaching online, and Corinne knew the group would be game. Here's how the experience went.

LOOK CLOSELY

To introduce the activity, Corinne explained that for the next 30 minutes or so, the group would be exploring connections between a photograph and civically related systems. "I'll say more about what civically-related systems means in a moment," she assured them, "but first let's just take a look at the work."



Corinne pulled up the image onscreen and began by sharing a bit of information. "This is a photograph taken by the American photographer Gordon Parks", she said. "It is one of several

images in a photo essay that *Life Magazine* commissioned him to do in 1961. The image shows a young boy named Flavio who was from Rio de Janeiro and who suffered from asthma.”**

She gave the group a moment to look quietly, then asked, “What do you notice?” Everyone jumped right in. “The boy’s gaze is so striking,” one person said, “He seems to be looking right at us, while all the men are looking at what appear to be X-rays.”

“Yes,” someone else rejoined, “his brow is furrowed. He seems to be alarmed or worried.”

“And he’s naked from the waist up,” another person added, “while the four men clustered together—doctors, presumably—are fully dressed and in white coats.” Using the boy’s name for the first time, someone else observed: “Flavio is wearing something on his wrist, and he seems to have a skinned knee.”

The observations continued to flow. People commented on the position of Flavio’s hands, the images in the X-rays, the architecture of the room, the men’s crisply ironed white coats, and more. One person commented on who *isn’t* shown in the picture. “The photographer is in the room, of course,” he observed, “but what about a family member? Is a parent in the room with the boy?” The group discussed this for a moment, then continued to make more observations.

What do you notice?

The boy’s gaze; alarmed?
2 groups: one with four men; one just the boy.
The four men seem to be doctors.
White coats, crisply ironed
Boy seated, partially naked,
A slightly open door.
Scabbed knee
Who’s NOT in the picture but in the room?
X-ray of a hand
other X-rays--maybe lungs?
Boy’s torso.
The boy’s hands—one fist seems to be holding the other hand.

CONNECT TO CIVICALLY RELATED SYSTEMS

Eventually, Corinne asked the group to consider another question. “What civically-related systems does this work invite you to think about?” she asked. “By civically-related I mean systems that affect people’s lives as members of a community.”

Civically related systems

Healthcare system
Medical education system
System of representing human body in medicine
Family system
Childhood as a system
Economic system
Documentary photography as a system (especially the system of deciding what’s worth documenting)

“Well, an obvious one is healthcare systems,” someone said. “It’s not clear the boy is feeling cared *for*, but he is certainly involved in—you could even say entrapped in—a system of health care.”

“Another system is medical education,” someone else added. “The doctors seem to be part of a learning group, studying the X-rays. Yes, medical education is part of the health care system, but you can also think of it as its own system.”

The group went on to explore a number of ideas. One person commented that the way the human body is represented in medicine is a kind of system, pointing to both the X-rays and the boy’s partially naked body as parts of that system.

Someone else suggested that childhood itself can be thought of as a system because it involves interacting procedures and beliefs about childrens' role in society and about their capabilities and rights.

EXPLORE PARTS OF A SYSTEM

Eventually, Corinne asked the group to select one system they'd be interested in thinking about further. "We'll explore it by brainstorming its various parts," she said. The group pondered for a moment, then someone spoke up. "I'd be curious to explore the system of how bodies are represented in medicine," she said. "The photograph is interestingly complex in this regard: the X-ray images show one way human bodies are represented in medicine, and Gordon Parks' photograph—which shows a group of human bodies in a medical scenario—is another way." The group liked this choice, so Corinne pulled up a blank comment onscreen and wrote at the top: **System: How human bodies are represented in medicine.**

"What are the different parts of this system— all the different elements that are involved in it?" Corinne asked the group. "I'll write down your ideas. And don't worry if the parts we list overlap or seem to be different kinds of parts," she continued. "Our goal is just to brainstorm lots of ideas so we get a better picture of the complexity of the system.

Peoples' ideas came fast. The group mentioned tangible parts, like X-rays and medical imaging machines and brochures depicting medical procedures. They also talked about the people involved in the system, such as patients, doctors, nurses, and technicians. And they spent quite a bit of time discussing less tangible but equally important parts of the system, such as emotions, issues of privacy, and power dynamics. Indeed, the group seemed especially interested in these intangible elements, talking at length about who has decision-making power in representing bodies in medicine, and who is made vulnerable by it. Throughout the conversation, people frequently commented on how much the parts were interconnected.

Eventually, Corinne asked the group to identify the two or three parts that felt especially important or central. "If you wanted to understand this system even more deeply—maybe even try to change the system—what parts might you focus on?"

System: How human bodies are represented in medicine

PARTS

Medical equipment/paraphernalia
Privacy and intrusion
Physical space
Choreography of bodies--arrangement of bodies
Written texts
Who gets to judge/die--medical decision-making
Staging versus "truthful"
Patients, doctors, nurses, technicians
Emotions
Families
Representations of who is allowed to look (groups of doctors observing)
POWER--who has it, who doesn't, etc.
Values--what's priority?
CONNECTION/EMPATHY
Intention in representation--what's purpose of the representation

The group discussed for a moment, and quickly came to consensus. They identified power as an important component, along with a few other related components. Corinne highlighted their choices onscreen and invited the group to talk a bit more about why they made the choices they did. An animated discussion ensued.

LOOK AGAIN

Corinne let the conversation flow for a few minutes, but the meeting was due to end soon, and she still had one more thing to do: Corinne wanted to close the experience by having the group look back at the image with fresh eyes. Participants had been staring at their screens for a while now, so she invited people to stand up, move away from their computers, and take a big stretch and a couple of deep breaths. Which everyone did with audible gusto. After a moment she called them back. “Take a look at the image again,” she said, “and see it with fresh eyes. Maybe you’re thinking about the system we discussed; but maybe not. What stands out to you?”

Interestingly, everyone’s attention went immediately to the boy, and the mood was strongly empathic. One person noticed the curl of Flavio’s hair sticking up; two other participants returned to the positioning of his hands. Someone else was drawn to the curve of Flavio’s back, and another to the scab on his knee, wondering aloud how it got there. And then, the time was up. Corinne drew the experience to a close, thanking the group and acknowledged the deep looking and thinking everyone had done. Later that day, she emailed everyone a link to the image, along with a link to a [recent article](#) about Gordon Parks’ 1961 photo-essay, in case anyone was interested in learning more.

*Special thanks to Corinne Zimmerman, Francesca Bewer, Siobhan McCusker, Ruth Slavin, Ronald Stark, and Ray Williams

A few days after this conversation, one of the group members made an interesting discovery: The photograph, which is owned by the Gordon Parks Foundation and appeared as part of an exhibit called *Gordon Parks: The Flavio Story*, was actually taken by photographer **Carl Iwasaki, who photographed Flávio for *Life* Magazine after Flavio had been flown to Denver, USA, for treatment at the Children’s Asthma Research Institute and Hospital. Here is an excerpt from a [Washington Post](#) article that tells the story; here is an exhibit at the [Ryerson Image Center](#) in Toronto, Canada, that has the correct attribution (see figure 3).