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This Place

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WENDY EWALD | THIS IS WHERE I LIVE

By Charlotte Cotton, August 5, 2015



'With time I've learned to back off from the world', writes Wendy Ewald, 'and let it reveal itself to me by giving cameras to my subjects to photograph'. For this project, she began by collaborating with students, teachers and families in five schools, including elementary schools in Nazareth and several military academies. Working with digital cameras for the first time made it possible for Ewald to extend her project to include fourteen communities and propose a collective portrait of life in Israel and the West Bank. She worked with shopkeepers in the Jerusalem market, Gypsy children in the Old City, elderly Palestinian women in East Jerusalem, high-tech workers in Tel Aviv, as well as additional schools. These

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communities eventually produced tens of thousands of images, along with writings and local exhibitions. Her book, *This Is Where I Live*, combines photographs made by the projects' participants, their testimonies and Ewald's portraits and extensive research.

Wendy Ewald in conversation with Charlotte Cotton

CC: When did you first go to Israel to explore the idea of joining *This Place*?

WE: I was part of the first group exploratory trip in 2008. We went straight to Eilat, in the south of Israel, and that's where we all met each other. Being together and processing what we were going through together was great. We went to Nazareth and I felt comfortable there, but I left Israel not knowing if I would come back. I guess that it was on the strength of this initial feeling in Nazareth that I decided to take part in the project and it was the first place I went to work.

CC: What would you say was particular to that experience?

WE: I think it was because we were in a Palestinian city that wasn't under siege. Also I liked the way it looked. For instance, I was very interested in the way photographs were used in the signage. There were photographs all around town, like the photographs of pieces of meat to represent the butcher. I thought that this was something I could work with; it seemed there was a visual world to be explored there.

I also went to Silwan, a Palestinian city just outside of Jerusalem and met with a group of women who were in a Hebrew and English language class and wanted me to work with them. Some of the women in Silwan didn't have the right identification papers and couldn't leave their homes. I thought about how we could make large format pictures of scenes these women imagined.

CC: Is this the way that conversations start with the community or the constituency you're going to work with?

WE: Yes, but it doesn't mean that it's going to determine the final project. Sometimes I start with an idea but most of the time I don't, or I'll find several ideas and then try to pull them together in some way. Once I formally joined the project, two years had passed and I knew that I would have to go back for another exploratory trip on my own. I had the idea of looking at Israeli education and how education plays a part in creating the State.

As soon as I went back on my own, two years after the first exploratory trip, I visited military academies – I knew I wanted to work with students at those institutions.

I was working with a great researcher – Ronit Porat – and she knew educators to talk with so I developed a fascination with the decentralised system of Israeli education. Schools are started all the time for different purposes and political ideas so I thought about developing a portrait of the country by focusing on its education. But after my initial interest, I realised that I was much more excited by how the people I was working with in Nazareth were using the camera: what they were photographing and what it was possible to do with digital cameras. I was scared that other projects I might take on coming after the work in Nazareth weren't going to be as interesting, but they were – and more so in relation to each other.

CC: Can you describe what your working process was in Nazareth?

WE: I worked in a village outside of Nazareth and in an outer borough of Nazareth in an urban school. Both projects involved sixth graders. The village school's young principal was very keen for us to work in her school. The urban school in Nazareth was introduced to me by the sister of the principal, who was in charge of social work for East Jerusalem. On the first trip I worked in both of the schools for three weeks. I stayed in Nazareth and went to the schools every day or every other day.

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CC: How do you start a project like this?

WE: The children and I talked, sometimes with the help of a translator, about what they thought about photography, how pictures get made, what they had taken pictures of, what people in their family took pictures of and what they would like to take pictures of. It was a while before they actually took hold of a camera.

CC: Did many of the families have a camera?

WE: Yes, in the Nazareth school, but not in the village. In Nazareth, somebody in the family or an uncle would have a camera but they didn't have cell phone cameras. To have a camera was a special thing. The first time they took the cameras to shoot was during one of the holidays; it gave them a lot of visual material to work with – for example, eating around big tables of beautiful food. I was there at the time so we were hanging out with the kids, and they would come and show us the pictures they were taking. It was a lot of fun. We downloaded the pictures at their school and looked at them together.

I set up different assignments – one was to photograph their families. Then they photographed the community, whatever they thought that was. In preparation, we made a list of things that they liked and didn't like about where they lived, and we talked about it. I'd help them select the aspects on the list they wanted to depict, which helped them to think about how to photograph their ideas. That was probably the most difficult assignment. They had to learn to think symbolically. We talked about how they couldn't just photograph something literally; they had to figure out what it meant and how they could show that. To practice that kind of shooting we took a walk around the community together.

The shopkeepers loved it, and we went to the mosque. The Imam welcomed us to take pictures and even enacted prayers for the students to photograph. It wasn't exactly what I expected.

After those first three weeks, they continued to photograph and I came back three months later. Ronit would try to go back at least once in between my trips and collect photographs. We worked with those students for over a year. It was the perfect amount of time and there were some outstanding photographers. We mounted exhibitions in both schools and made a book of their photographs. I left the schools cameras, a printer and CDs of the photographs; hopefully they're still using them.

CC: There are fourteen projects in total. When did you start to realise that it needed to include so many groups?

WE: The work with the students in Nazareth, and with girls in a military academy, happened easily and quickly and felt well resolved. I wasn't sure where to go from there. I showed the work to Miki [Kratzman, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem] and the first thing he said was, 'this is finished, where can you go from here?' I could have tried to elaborate a story of one village but Miki was the person who challenged me to think in a more expansive way. I liked the idea but it really wasn't until people started asking me to get involved with their communities or suggested places I could work that I decided to make an overview of the country. I could have delved into one village – I love working that way too. But I chose a different way of telling a story that's perhaps more subtle and involves looking at a place from different points of view. I was also looking at how people in the fourteen places use the camera differently – to understand the way they saw things rather than constructing a single or double narrative.

CC: What sort of exercises would you do? Did you use the same techniques with all the groups?

WE: Yes, each project had a similar beginning. The first thing we did was to look at a photograph by the American photographer Helen Levitt. I asked the participants to look at it for a long time and then write a list of words of all the things that they could see in the photograph. I did this with the adults as well as the kids. We'd go around the group and

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everybody gave one word. Then out of those words they constructed the meaning of the photograph. This was to help everyone understand that photography is a language made up of details. It's fun to hear what they have to say. After I did the exercise with the merchants in the Mahane Yehuda Market, they said, 'She's a real professor... we get it now'. All the groups were asked to photograph a range of things, except for the market traders – I asked them to photograph the market. It was harder for them to spend time with their families photographing. As the project developed, it also became less about people representing their interior lives and more about the visual spaces of their everyday lives. I was knocked out by the way their houses were organised and how they composed still lives, they were just brilliant.

CC: You just reminded me of the first time I went through the selection from all the pictures that were taken, it felt like a series of gifts.

WE: That's the way I think about it. The photographs are exciting in a very natural way and there's a lot of humor too.

CC: Do you think it's an emotional journey for participants in these projects? Are they releasing thoughts or connecting things for the first time? I suppose I'm asking what's happening psychologically to participants.

WE: Well, yes I think that does happen. Obviously, it's different for the children than for the adults – often they're more playful, but I think all the people I worked with had the possibility of taking some control over their environment with the camera. They can feel successful and they can show their families the pictures they took of them. With the East Jerusalem women you could see much more easily the effect of the project. They were the ones in their families who don't handle the cameras, so they were tentative in the beginning. They were also concerned about what was going on in their communities politically.

Some of them were sad and angry. But in conversations about what they could or wanted to take pictures of, one of the women, Nadia, said she wanted to take pictures of weekly political protests against settlements in Sheikh Jarrah, but she said her son was arrested every week during those protests in Sheikh Jarrah. Although she wanted to, she said she couldn't go and photograph that. I said, 'well you don't have to. You can make a picture that's metaphoric or find some symbol of it, we can work on that'. But she ended up by photographing the situation very directly. According to the social worker, she had been very sad and passive. Photographing gave her a new role in the community – she became the one who was documenting some of the abuses by settlers and the army.

The women themselves wanted to start another photography class for another group of women, so I think it was quite important psychologically and politically for them. It was helpful to be active and have control. That's the beautiful thing about photography – it can give you control over your environment.

CC: Who are you working with to keep the momentum of these projects going?

WE: I was invited to work with the women by the director of social work for East Jerusalem, Ahlam Hijazi. She's the sister of the principal in Nazareth and her husband is an educator, Yahya Hijazi; he's writing his PhD thesis about violence, imagery and child development. There are some brilliant people who are doing wonderful work in Jerusalem and they were my main contacts.

CC: Do you always work with pre-existing groups?

WE: For this project, yes, and that was important. The high tech workers were all part of a company called Blink, which is a communications company in Tel Aviv. It's a Jewish group but the group is made up of people who come from different places to Tel Aviv to work in the tech industry. Some of them are orthodox and some of them aren't at all religious, but they share a passion for technology.

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CC: How did you get access to the Bedouin?

WE: It was through Miki [Kratzman] and a friend of his. They took me to a Bedouin school that I had heard about. It's a school for a growing population in an area where there are a lot of industries. It's dangerous and polluted but the Bedouins don't want to move to a state-designated town. The population has increased so much and they aren't allowed to have a school of more than 1,000 pupils. So what they have done is build a wall between two small campuses so they would have two schools. It's a beautiful school both indoors and outdoors. The surprising thing about working with them, at least in the beginning, is that when I would ask them, 'how is it being a Bedouin? What do you know about your history?' They had very little to say. I think part of it is a kind of shyness and maybe part of it is not wanting to share. They were more private than the other kids and they talked a lot about the importance of their traditions and loyalty. Then it became necessary for me to find someone who could tell me the story. I ended up recording the Sheikh who is their community leader. He talked about his personal history of being removed to the spot they live in now, Wadi al-Na'am, which is unrecognised by the Israeli State, and thus an illegal village.

CC: What does that mean in terms of daily living?

WE: It means they have no services and they can be relocated at any time. In some villages the army has come in at night, pulled down the structures and in some cases uprooted the olive trees. They tell the people they have to leave. Then, slowly, some people come back and try to set things up again. There are three Bedouin cities which are legal but they're filled with apartment buildings – where can they put their sheep?

CC: How did you find the Druze that you worked with?

WE: I was interested in the Druze from the beginning. Ronit found out that there was a Druze military academy. The Druze are the only Arabs in the Israeli Defense Forces, but the school was eventually closed for financial reasons. Instead the principal of the Julis village school put together a group of young people that we would meet with. We started that project right before the olive harvest. They learned how to use the camera and then they were off for two weeks with the olive harvest with time to photograph. It's an interesting culture because it's changed rapidly over one generation, especially in regards to girls and women. People my age wear very traditional clothing with white headpieces and long dresses and the men wear very wide pants and big white hats but the kids live very different lives. The village is prosperous with big houses and education is very important. They believe in reincarnation and have a system of beliefs that are kept secret. The students were very good at taking pictures, they were organised and dedicated to it. The final part of the process came after we downloaded the pictures. I'd print out contact sheets of the images for the students to add titles to.

CC: Did you use digital cameras? You're downloading digital files?

WE: Yes, downloading the images and making a folder for each participant's work. At some point in the process I'll print out the folder contents to give the participant a copy and I'll keep a copy. I have notebooks for what I call the 'contact sheets' and their titles, plus all the writing. The notebooks also contain other materials that I collect from the place or about the place. I would start editing as soon as I got back home. I'd have to spend long enough so that I could get into their way of seeing, as much as I could. It was just fascinating, it was wonderful, I loved it. They were letting me see what they were seeing.