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BOMB

WENDY EWALD

By Esther Allen, March 15, 2016



On my living room wall hangs a small black-and-white photo of a girl-child in a platinum blonde wig and satiny white garment. She's vamping for the camera, gazing over a bare, raised shoulder, her lips in the exaggerated pout that would come to be known as "duck face," captured in a hundred million selfies long after this picture was made. A black snake twists up out of the girl's left hand and disappears around the back of her neck.

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The photo was taken in the early 1980s in Letcher County, Kentucky. It was staged by the girl it depicts, Denise Dixon, who titled it: "I am the girl with the snake around her neck." The shot was snapped by Dixon's mother. I first saw it at the Whitney Museum in 1997, and never forgot it, or the other images it was shown with in that year's Biennial, all made by children across the globe who were challenged by artist Wendy Ewald to take photographs of their dreams.

A few years later I was introduced to Wendy by our mutual friend, journalist Alma Guillermoprieto. Over the dreamlike passage of time, our families have become fast friends; Wendy gave us the photograph as a gift one Christmas. She also remained in touch with Denise Dixon, who grew up to become a wedding and maternity photographer in Kentucky. In 2014, when the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit invited Wendy to curate an exhibit for the People's Biennial, whose curators were Jens Hoffmann and Harrell Fletcher, she put together a show of Dixon's work.

One of Wendy's recent projects, an assemblage of photographs taken by groups of children and adults across Israel from 2009 to 2012, has been published as a book titled *This Is Where I Live* (Mack, 2015). The project is also featured in the museum show *This Place*, which juxtaposes the vantage points of twelve internationally renowned photographers on Israel and the West Bank and opened at the Brooklyn Museum in February of 2016. I sat down with Wendy recently at her house in Upper Red Hook, New York, to talk about the evolution of her collaborative approach to art-making and the new form it has taken in the quietly devastating images that emerged from her work in Israel.

Esther Allen Let's go back to the beginning. How did your particular approach to photography develop?

Wendy Ewald In Detroit, at the turn of the twentieth century, my grandfather H.T. Ewald was a teenager working for a shipping company on the Detroit River. He came up with the idea that one could use images as well as words to advertise their services. At that time, there was no such thing as advertising as we know it; there were handbills with words and maybe some little pictures. My grandfather's ideas about advertising matured along with the new and booming American auto industry. He invented roadside billboards. By the 1930s his ad agency, Campbell-Ewald, was the largest in the world.

There were photographs all over our house. They were taken by professionals who worked for my grandfather. Whenever a new photo technology appeared, we got it. From the time I was born until I graduated from high school in 1969, my mother was taking photographs with a stereo camera. Taking photographs was something we liked to do but nobody was delving into what any of it might mean, apart from its sentimental value.

EA When you started working with banners and public installations, was there a conscious connection to your grandfather's advertising agency?

WE I never gave it much thought. My father was a car dealer. When I was in high school, he used a portrait of my mother, who was very pretty, on one of his billboards. The caption was "My favorite car dealer is Ted Ewald." She was wearing a green velvet coat, as I remember. When you get close to a billboard, do you know what it looks like? It's completely different, it dissolves. Here was my mother dissolving into patches of color. When the billboard went up, my mother's friends hated it; they said it didn't look like her. So, after a while, my father had it taken down. Later on, after seeing billboards in Paris, I designed a couple for my father's car dealership. He said he liked them, but not enough, I guess, to get them made.

EA People were putting fancy photographic equipment in your hands even when you were very young?

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WE Oh no. Only adults could use the equipment. My grandmother did give me a Brownie when I was eleven and I started taking pictures, but nothing elaborate.

Just before that, when I was ten, my younger brother Teddy was hit by a car. He was in a coma and lost the ability to speak. I devised a game—this is a lot like what happens when I'm working as an artist: I see a situation and think, Okay, what can I do to change this for the better?

We were in the library and the nurse was wheeling Teddy around and around in a wheelchair. I made a little stoplight out of construction paper and told him that if he said "Stop" when I held up the red stoplight, the nurse would stop.

It was a way to get him to connect with something visual and then be able to say the word. I kept putting up the stoplight and eventually he'd say "Stop" when I did.

Of course, I'm more conscious now of what I was doing then—using something visual as a path to communication. Teddy eventually recovered. He has some brain damage, doesn't connect the same way other people do, but he's fine. He has a full life.

EA Your work often takes the form of long-term projects that involve entire communities. How did that tendency develop?

WE That started in Detroit after the 1967 riots. My family lived in Grosse Pointe, which was very suburban. One summer during high school I drove downtown each day to volunteer in a settlement house. Betty Shabazz was around and there were lots of musicians. It was exciting and disturbing to see the differences between the cultures. I worked with classroom teachers, both black and white, to teach black history. My job was to make visual aids. The work helped me understand what was going on in the world. At the same time, my father was managing African American prizefighters who became family friends.

When I graduated from high school, I connected with the Grenfell Mission and went to Labrador. I worked with Innu kids in northern Canada. Even though they had a school, their education was limited, so young volunteers were sent up to develop activities with them. Most of the fishing communities in Labrador were white, but since I'd worked in Detroit, it was assumed I could handle working in a First Nations community, as Canadians call Native Americans.

EA The Labrador project still continues. When you went back decades later, the earlier work had itself become part of the story.

WE I first arrived in Labrador in '69, just when the Innu community had been "settled," or moved into villages. There were still some nomadic people among them. It was a trying period. They knew how to survive as nomadic hunters—not comfortably, but they did survive. Now, in the villages, separated from the caribou, it was a different story.

We established a day camp for the kids. What was distinctive about my contribution was that the kids and I took photographs together. I was using a large-format camera and they were using Polaroid cameras given to me by the Polaroid Foundation. We walked around the "reserve" and photographed. I gave them assignments. One was to photograph and write about things they would like changed. I was very close to some of the kids, and very close in age, too. One boy, Benedict Michel, photographed the things that made him sad. He wanted the community to have more food, not to have to carry water long distances from wells, and so on.

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It came to me that the kids were taking more powerful and more intimate pictures than I could. They knew their surroundings and had uninhibited access to private family situations, and that showed, even in the way they composed their pictures.

In the time between my visits in 1969 and 2010, Benedict—or Penote, to use his Innu name—became a First Nations leader in that part of Canada. He led protests against NATO, which established an air force base nearby. The booming of the NATO test flights ruined the Innu’s game runs and destroyed the community’s way of life. I was overjoyed to learn that Penote had become an influential guy. Then he had a heart attack and died a few months before I went back; I never got the chance to renew the conversation with him.

The Innu had been basically the last nomadic people in the Western Hemisphere. What happened to them in the forty years between my visits is devastating. When I first knew them they were called the Naskapi Montagnais, which is now considered a derogatory term. The name of the place they lived in changed too; everything reverted to the native names. The Quebec-Labrador Foundation asked me to bring back the pictures the kids and I had taken (though I had left copies of those pictures with the Innu) because things had gotten so bad. The Innu had the highest suicide rate in the world. Drug sniffing, terrible unemployment, nobody in school. The idea was that it’d be helpful—I was very hesitant about this—if they saw the pictures from 1969, which they considered a happier time. They would gain some perspective from them. One of the responses from a powerful woman elder was: “The pictures woke the people up.”

EA That’s a hugely ambitious and nakedly political achievement: to wake up an entire community. It can be a rather risky goal to aim for, no?

WE In 2005, I was commissioned by Artangel to work in Margate, England. Margate is a down-at-the-heels resort town on the English Channel. With the advent of cheap flights to the Mediterranean, the old wooden hotels went bankrupt and were converted into housing for asylum seekers.

I worked with refugee children from Africa, the Middle East, and Ireland there, making portraits with a large-format camera—really just a big box with an adjustable opening in the front, which makes it easy to show the kids exactly how the camera works. I could take it apart and they could look through the bellows. I also shot Polaroids so they could see right away how the image turned out. Then the children wrote on the negatives, and the inscribed portraits were printed on giant vinyl banners.

We hung the banners on the retaining walls of the cliffs a week after the bus and subway bombings in London. Each banner was a triptych: one image looking out to the sea, another—of the same kid—looking back at the community, and a third showing a treasured object that the refugee kid had brought from their homeland.

The opening was lovely. It was a time of fear and discouragement for the country, in the wake of the recent terrorism. But people came anyway from all over to have a picnic on the beach, walk, and be with the children in the pictures.

One of the triptychs portrayed a girl from South Africa; the photo of her belongings showed her flip-flops and two copies of the Principles of Islam. A few days later, that image was petrol bombed. Then members of the National Front wrote graffiti around the burnt triptych, and my name was linked online to the National Front.

EA They linked to your Wikipedia entry? As someone they were targeting?

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WE Afterward, the usual vague letters accusing no one and expressing little were sent out by the organization I was working with. The important thing wasn't how I reacted, actually, but how the girl's family reacted. Her father was a prominent member of the mosque in Margate. The family decided they didn't want the banners with their daughter's pictures replaced right away, for fear that it would fuel more attacks. They wanted to wait until things calmed down. When the banners went back up six months later, they got hit again. At that point, the family said, "Just put them back up whenever is a good time, but we won't tell our daughter." And the third time, the banners stayed and weren't harmed.

EA What incredible courage! The image of their daughter has been publicly attacked twice, and their daughter is a person walking around in that community, yet they are willing to risk putting the banners up a third time.

WE Any decision I made would pale in comparison.

EA You've mentioned Detroit, which continues to be a large part of your work. You've talked about Labrador and also Margate. What other places do you have projects going on in?

WE You're talking about interventions in various communities, but I am also very focused on, if not most focused on, interventions in photography: how to make images that communicate with layering and depth. That was my primary objective when I started working in Kentucky.

EA Your work has always sought, in all of these different contexts, to deepen, enrich, and problematize photography's documentary aspect.

WE My work is socially engaged. Socially engaged art and documentary work, in comparison to high art, is often perceived as "explaining" or "defining" too much—it's seen as journalistic. But I find the images themselves poetic, and stirring in the way that serious art is stirring.

After Kentucky, I was in Colombia for a couple of years, and then in a village in India. I also started working with schools in North Carolina, on collaborative projects like American Alphabets, Black Self/White Self, and The Best Part of Me that combined children's images and text with my own on the same piece of film. Later I went to Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Chiapas, the Netherlands ...

EA You're leaving out Tanzania, where you've been going each year for the past eight years.

WE That's another entirely different kind of investigation. Tanzania's schools are so under-resourced they have very few books and pencils. I'm working with teachers to develop visual curricula.

EA None of your interventions ever really ends, or so it seems. You document something at a certain moment, and it remains present in people's minds, it becomes a milestone, as with the early work in Labrador, and then you're invited back.

WE Photographers tend to tell a story within a package, and then the story is over. But the thing is: the story is never over. The more you follow it, the more interesting it is.

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I don't go back because I want to take care of people. I mean, I do want to take care of people and intervene in a way that is helpful. But also, and most importantly, I want to tell the story. Most of the stories that get told are truncated. Now I'm working on a book about my family and the fighters my father managed during the '60s.

EA You produce a large number of books. Each of them embodies the narrative of a given experience that, in large measure, you caused to happen in a certain place to a group of people, one of whom is you. How did you become a photographer who writes books out of images?

WE The times shaped me, to a certain extent. When I saw what Danny Lyon did in *The Bike Riders* in 1968, and then in 1971 in *Conversations with the Dead*, which included prisoners' drawings and their mug shots ...When I saw that, I thought, Oh damn, this is what photographs need. I was always bothered by emotionally simplistic photographs. For example, the romantic images of Native Americans I'd grown up with, of chiefs in feathered headdresses or children in their traditional garb.

EA As in Edward Curtis's attitude of "I, the Western photo-grapher, representing you the Native Other, through the lens of my artistic vision."

WE That didn't match the reality of where I was! There was much more interesting material to be had and many other ways of using the images.

EA Your approach moves away from conventional ideas of the author. Who is the author in your work?

WE The author's role is to pull together whatever bits and pieces there are to create the story. I listen to and watch whatever is going on and ask questions and then use what I've gathered to draw out images.

EA You could be describing Frederick Wiseman or any number of other documentary filmmakers. But your work goes one step farther: you don't hold the camera. You give it to the documentary's subject.

WE What's interesting is that I can work with anyone, and they can show me what they're seeing. You have to know how to tell them to show you; it is not simply that they take the camera out and shoot something—they have to learn how to make decisions about where to position the camera so that they understand what it means to frame something.

EA A documentary filmmaker like Joshua Oppenheimer is an heir to what you've been doing for so many years. Oppenheimer also gives his subjects the camera.

WE I first thought about doing that in Kentucky. I was watching kids play and thinking about how their ideas in play mirrored the culture. They were actually acting like animals; one was going to slaughter the other. They lived on a farm and saw these things. Since they could actually bring that out in their play, I thought, Why don't I try to create this in photographs? Asking them about their dreams was a shortcut to the idea of fantasy. I want the people I collaborate with to understand that they can move away from the realities they've been placed into, that they can create a reality.

EA How does that quest to see what someone else is seeing continue to evolve through your most recent project in Israel? You've always worked where there was poverty, harsh inequality, and even violence, but had you worked in a place as deeply in conflict as this before?

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WE I worked in South Africa in the early '90s. People make parallels between South Africa and Israel. I never wanted to go to South Africa for the same reason that I didn't want to go to Israel, because it's so defined. It's a dichotomy, a standoff. And what can I do? Especially in Israel, where there are all these great photographers such as Miki Kratsman. I didn't think there was any reason for me to go there. It was really because of you that I went, you know.

EA I had no idea!

WE You put me in touch with Peter Cole, the poet who lives in Israel. We talked and he started telling me stories; that's when I could first envision doing something there that made sense to me. Even so, when I went to Israel on an initial exploratory mission, I was on the fence until I actually started working.

I was seeing something I'd never seen before. I started off in two Arab-Israeli communities, one in a village, and one in Nazareth. I felt very comfortable there. I could see right off that there was something special in the visual environment from the pictures the children made. They made colorful, complex still lives which were sometimes humorous. For me, the hook is the pictures. At the same time, I knew I was going to have to include other perspectives that I might not feel as comfortable with.

EA How many communities did you end up working with?

WE Fourteen, all pretty distinct. I included seven Arab or Muslim communities and seven Jewish communities. Among the Arabs, there are Druze, Bedouins, Christians, and the Arab Israelis. I got to see how diverse the place is, that it isn't just a matter of one side against another. The Gypsies, for example, are not accepted by the Arabs. And a Jewish group was helping the Druze community that I worked with. The Druze are considered Arabs, but are much more aligned with the Jews than they are with Arabs. I decided to work with adults as well as children.

EA When you were working in Kentucky in the '70s or '80s, to give a young child from a disadvantaged or marginal community a camera was to introduce that child to something new, unfamiliar. But now, in a place like Israel, it must be the norm throughout many communities, and even for very young children, to be taking photographs on smart phones all the time.

WE I don't think so. We have that impression. The kids who lived on the kibbutz where I worked, they could do that, but not the Druze kids, not the Bedouin kids, and certainly not the Gypsy kids.

EA Certainly for most adults it's become a routine part of daily life: the photographic recording of everything. Does offering them cameras become less rewarding under these new circumstances, or more rewarding?

WE It's an adjustment for me. Every time I start on a project, whether it was ten years ago or now, I am dealing with whatever is happening in that moment. It was very hard for me to switch to digital, though. I went through a brief period when I didn't really do anything.

EA When did you switch to digital?

WE For Israel.

EA How do you feel about it now, looking back?

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WE Great. I never could have done what I did with film.

EA The vastness and complexity of *This Is Where I Live*, the sheer number of images.

WE As an artist, I have to figure out the best way to use this new language. I take my time so that when I give a camera to someone and teach them how to use it, I can do it in a way that gives them control.

EA Did you have to teach the adult groups how to use digital cameras?

WE I taught everyone. It's not that they didn't know how to use a digital camera, but there was a way I wanted them to use it. For example, I told them not to zoom. It changes the look of the photograph and is much harder to keep steady and sharp. Very simple things like that, which gave them a different relationship to the camera than they'd had with their cell phones. They were all using the same camera—the model that had the most number of pixels in my price range. I ended up buying almost two hundred of them. This camera was easy to use, so people made fewer mistakes. They learned how close they could get, how far away. Within a pretty short time, they were making very successful pictures.

EA Did you give them an assignment?

WE In Hebron, for instance, the kids had grown up in the shadow of the settlements, and they had been trained to photograph the conflict. I didn't want them to do that, which was confusing for them at the beginning. Then later, when they did photograph the conflict, they did it with much more control. There are some beautiful pictures of settlers on their cell phones, taken through a fence, or of settlers coming over the mountains. The images evoke more than photographs taken as evidence do. Of course I also wanted them to photograph their own community and their own families. They're not just victims of a conflict, they're human beings.

EA All fourteen communities were given the same instructions?

WE Pretty much. If there was something particular going on, I would follow that. I asked the merchants to photograph the market because that's where they were all the time. I told all the participants, "Look, here's your chance to say what you want to say." So for instance, after the brutal murder of a settler family, the boys in the premilitary school complained of being maligned in the press. They wanted to make pictures to show themselves as "human beings, not demons."

EA How long of a process was this?

WE It took about two and a half years. I probably made ten trips over that period. I had a wonderful assistant, Ronit Porat, who would meet with the communities when I wasn't there and download their pictures.

EA Your approach could be read as a strong reaction to the larger initiative your project was part of, which was to have a point of view on Israel from twelve artists from outside the region. Your project responds to that in a somewhat subversive way by foregrounding multiple perspectives of people living within Israel, perspectives grounded in local realities.

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It also invites the viewer to piece narratives together out of these fourteen different perspectives. You've obviously curated the images, but in your text and the way you frame the images, you refrain from imposing any connections. You leave that to the eye of the viewer.

Haaretz quoted Shoshana Kano, a fourteen-year-old participant from a school in Lod, a mixed city, who said that seeing all the pictures together made her feel that everyone who participated belonged to the same place. Do you think being involved in the project affected the participants' perspectives?

WE Coming to see the other pictures may have. The participants hadn't seen the other groups' pictures while we were working.

If people couldn't come to the opening, I went to them, and brought them the book *This Is Where I Live*, another result of the collaboration. So they were looking at all the pictures, even those by people they didn't know much about at all. The Druze were very happy with the exhibit. They came and brought wonderful food and ate on the floor of the museum lobby. For them to be included was really important, it was also important for them to see the museum. None of the Arab groups had ever been to a museum before. And this is a state museum. You realize at that moment how divided things are. How can it possibly be so odd for these people to be there in a museum?

EA It's an interesting opportunity to contrast the book-centered aspect of your work with your installations in communities and galleries and museums.

WE Well, one thing about the book is that, in it, these perspectives are all presented together—this was obviously conscious. It's different from being on a wall in a museum where you can stroll from one group's installation to another. To have all these people together in a book is shocking.

EA So in the museum, as you pass through, you're moving from one space to another very different space, which is very much like Israel itself.

WE Right, it's geographical. What I really wanted to do with *This Is Where I Live* was make the book as neutral as possible, make it a resource. I had one response, a beautiful letter from a psychologist, not a participant in the project, who said she hadn't really understood what I was doing in Israel until she saw the book.

EA It's interesting that this response came from a psychologist. Do social scientists tend to use your work as a touchstone?

WE Yes, especially sociologists.

EA Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and educators cite your work and write about it far more often than art historians do. Yet you're a fine art photographer.

WE It's very difficult for people in the art world to figure out how to collect my work. You see, I put the participants' names on the work. If I just put my own name, it would be easier.

EA Your collaborators have a voice and that voice is acknowledged.

WE It means more to the image, to know, for example, that Denise Dixon took it.

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EA After working with you in Kentucky as a child, Denise Dixon grew up to become a photographer. But having her name on the piece would have been important even if that hadn't happened.

WE That's one of the reasons I ask the kids, or anybody, to put titles on the work. It's a way of defining the relationship of the photographer to the image so that the audience has another way of reading it.

EA This comes up for translators, too. Having more than one name associated with a given work sometimes means that someone has to become invisible: there's only room for a single author.

WE I'm an artist because I feel like being an artist is the most inclusive way to work.

EA When I met Svetlana Alexievich—at a PEN World Voices panel in 2005—her method seemed remarkably like yours: A choreography of voices that aims to represent not a unique authorial overview so much as the very interior, individual perspectives of a number of people in a situation. These perspectives are so deeply acknowledged that all the words on the page are ascribed to Alexievich's interlocutors. I don't think any of us could possibly have imagined then that this kind of radical yielding of the page to another's voice could one day be honored with the Nobel Prize. How did you feel when Alexievich got the Nobel?

WE I was excited, and hopeful. Here was an acknowledgement that working with other people's voices is valuable, that you could weave these voices into a narrative, which is considered—at least in photography—so problematic. You know: Is this actually the real thing, or not? So the idea that you can create a masterful work of literature by doing that is extremely compelling, especially when I read about her process: the way she works over long periods of time, and her deep commitment to political change.

EA Her work is a deliberate intervention in political situations. Are people suspicious of your work as an active intervention?

WE Yes. Is it mine, is it theirs? Am I speaking for my collaborators? My detractors sometimes say that the more transparent I am, the less transparent the work is, or something like that. And my reaction to that is, Oh well, at least I have detractors!