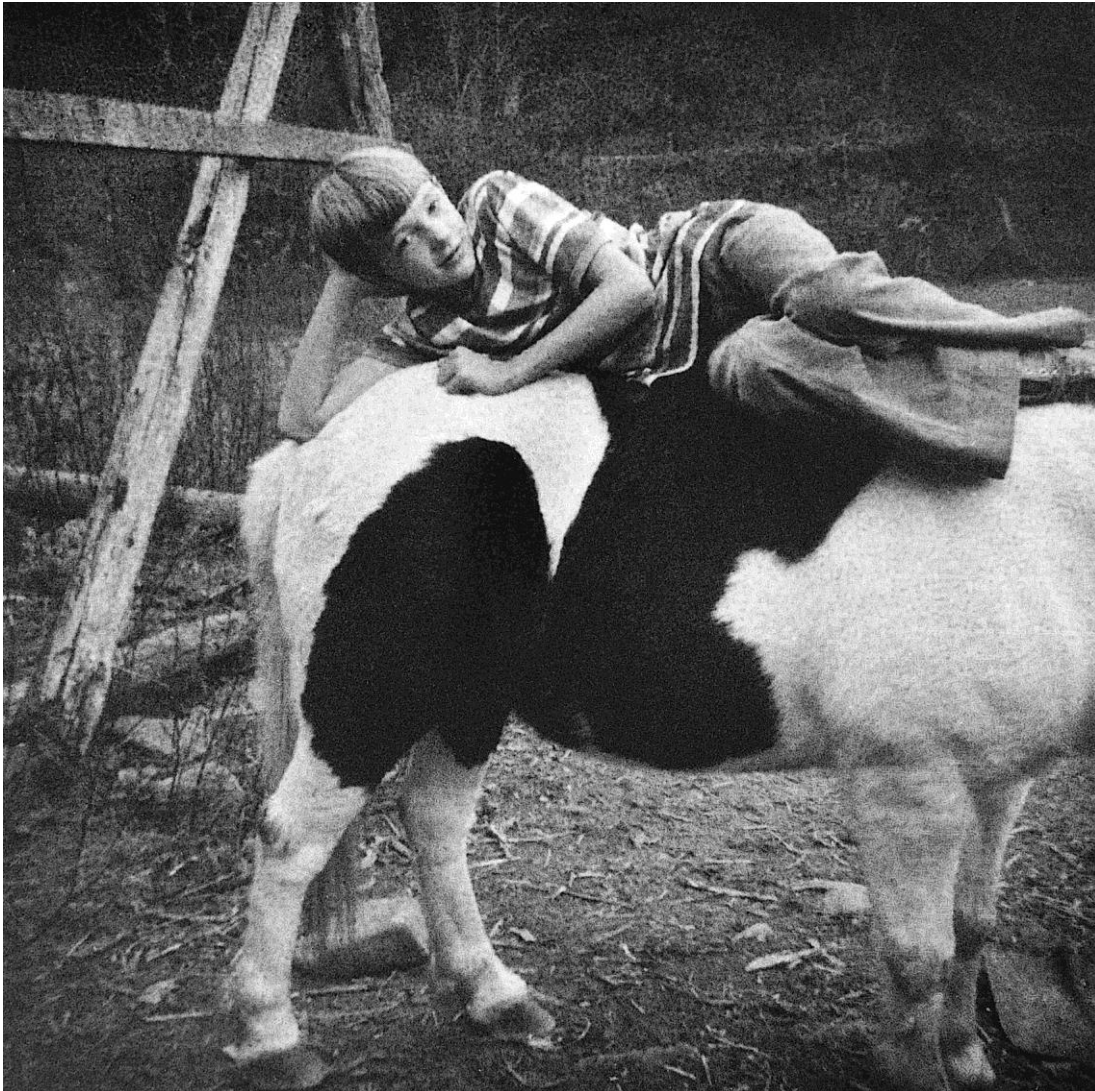


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WENDY EWALD: PIONEER OF COLLABORATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

By Holly Stuart Hughes, May 10, 2018



As the photo community wrestles with questions about who has the right to tell someone's story, many photojournalists are choosing to put their subjects in control—by giving them cameras or asking them to contribute to the process of making and choosing images. Wendy Ewald has been doing that for almost 50 years. Since 1969, she has taught children and women in communities around the world to photograph their lives, their families, their dreams and fantasies. Her groundbreaking work in collaborative photography has been supported by numerous grants from the National

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Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Open Society Foundations and other arts organizations. But her influence on other photographers is often overlooked.

A new exhibition, "Wendy Ewald: Works, Projects, Collaborations 1975-1996," on view at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York City through June 2, highlights 70 images from several of her early projects. The exhibition looks at her first extended collaboration in Kentucky (1975) and work made by her and her collaborators during subsequent projects in Mexico, India, South Africa, the Netherlands and elsewhere. Ewald is also a co-creator of the exhibition "Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography," shown at the Ryerson Centre in Toronto earlier this year.

In addition to teaching photography, she has also worked with groups of kids to draw and write on photographs she has made, producing works that explore race and identity. Her books include *I Dream I Had a Girl in My Pocket* (1996), *Secret Games* (2001) and *American Alphabets* (2006). Her 2015 book, *This is Where I Live*, is the result of her work with students, teachers and families in 14 communities in Israel and the West Bank; a selection of their images are included in the touring exhibition "This Place."

In a recent interview with PDN, Ewald discussed her teaching methods, her inspiration, and what she hopes audiences see in her collaborative projects that they might not see in "outsider" representations of those same communities.

PDN: Let's start with your most recent project, the "Immigrant Alphabet" installation. How did it come about and what was your method for working with the kids?

W.E.: I was commissioned by Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture, an organization promoting cultural understanding through the arts, that had been working with Northeast High School students in Philadelphia, working especially with refugees and immigrants. I met the kids and discussed my work with them and asked them to describe their experiences. From that conversation I came up with the idea of making an immigrant alphabet, based on who each student was and the stories they had to tell. I've made other alphabets in the past, as a way of looking at a changing U.S.

Before starting on a project I do a certain amount of research and meet with people in the community, trying to understand a bit about the issues and experience of the people I'm going to be working with. Then I come up with an idea.

Since we were going to be putting together a very public exhibition, the images needed to be made with a high-definition camera so we could blow them up to 10 x 12 feet. They needed to be this big because we were going to wrap 26 of the photographs around the municipal building in the center of Philadelphia, which is where people go to pay their water and electricity bills. The building faces City Hall and looks out on a square where the biggest public protests happen.

We made a studio in the school with a backdrop, and the students chose what I would photograph. Some were still lifes and some were portraits, each represented by a letter and a word beginning with that letter. Then the students looked at the ground glass and commented on what was working and what wasn't. Then I'd choose a few of their selections to work with.

In earlier projects, in the days of analogue photography, I used to ask the students to scratch and draw on the negative. Now, with the digital prints, they put Mylar over the images and draw on it. Then we sandwich those with the images.

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PDN: In some projects, you asked kids to photograph something about themselves, like their dreams. With "Immigrant Alphabet" and other projects, you've had kids alter your images and address weighty topics like "the immigrant experience" or "race." Is the editing process different when the topic is more pointed?

W.E.: Well, when you have an alphabet, it's pretty focused. You'll end up with 26 letters and 26 words related to immigration. We voted on which of the words or images that they liked the best and then we looked at the entire list and said: "OK, this is what we've chosen. Does this say what you want to say?" Then I'd look at the images for technical and esthetic issues and offer some remarks to the kids. I shot more than one image for each letter. We kept having work sessions together, which deepened the meaning of the alphabet, and was really fun.

PDN: Are you thinking about what the audience will get from the images, as well as what your collaborators will get out of the experience of working on them?

W.E.: Yes, definitely. We're creating an artwork. The alphabet is childlike and playful until you start reading some of the things the kids have said and look at the images. Then it slowly reveals the pain and the difficulties the kids have experienced.

We also had conversations about: What happens if there's a bad reaction to this exhibition? How are we going to handle that? In my experience over the years, if I can include kids (or whoever my collaborators are) in the process all the way through, not only in what we're doing but the effect of what we're doing, the final work is more powerful. The students have really grown through this process. Quite a few of them have taken on the mantle of being spokespeople for refugees and immigrants.

Little, Brown is publishing a young adult photo book in the Fall that includes interviews I did with the students during the "Immigrant Alphabet" project. I've shared with them the design and process of making the book, and they've worked with me on their interviews.

Part of the money from the book sales will go to the organization Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture to pay for more projects at Northeast High school. That's part of the process, too.

PDN: You've been doing this a while.

W.E.: Almost 50 years.

PDN: What first inspired you to work collaboratively?

W.E.: In my senior year of high school, I started taking photos. I wrote a grant to the Polaroid Foundation for film and cameras to bring to a Native American reservation in Labrador, Canada. All through college I worked with young people on two Native American reservations in the summers.

That was the first project. It was clear that the pictures taken by the kids were really something. Theirs was not a romantic view of the situation on the reservation. People hadn't seen photographs like that before. Then I just kept doing it.

PDN: How did you figure out how to teach kids to photograph their lives or their dreams?

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W.E.: I just taught myself. I'd give them assignments about what to shoot. Some were based on shape or other visual cues. Eventually I got the very simple idea of asking them to photograph their families, their community and their dreams and fantasies. But that came later, when I was working in Kentucky.

PDN: So you came at it as a teacher, or a fellow student, more than as a photographer?

W.E.: I was interested mainly in the photographs but I was a natural teacher, and could pick apart the medium in a way that helped us make these photos. At the same time, I was opening up to different ways of seeing with the camera. I was photographing with a 4x5 Crown Graphic—a very controlled, somewhat static way of shooting. But when the kids had cameras, they were shooting from all different angles, very freely. And what they were photographing was very different from what I was choosing to photograph.

PDN: In the communities you were working in at first, how much familiarity did they have with photography? They didn't have Instagram, but did they see images in magazines?

W.E.: In most of the communities I worked in, they had none of that. It wasn't part of their world. In Kentucky, they had family photos. There were traveling photographers at that time who would go from house to house, asking if somebody wanted a photo of something or someone. When the photographer came through, people always wanted photos of a dead person in a coffin. One time a neighbor showed me one of those photos and asked me if it was possible to copy the photograph and make the dead person sit up. People had such magical notions about photography, even before Photoshop.

PDN: Are kids now more likely to have an idea of what a photograph "should" look like?

W.E.: I kind of think it's my job to get them to move past that. And it's also my job to see what's the emotional and esthetic power of what they're photographing. When I started working in Durham, North Carolina, in the 1990s, the houses were very bare inside, and there weren't many opportunities to go outside. For a while I was discouraged by the images they were making. Finally I could see how they were using the barren space in interesting ways.

Most of the time, when I'm working on a book or exhibition, my collaborators are also writing captions for their pictures. That adds another layer of meaning, and it makes an image more interesting than if I'd simply shot it.

PDN: Some photographers choose to give cameras to their subjects because they're uneasy in the role of the outsider photographing a community that's not theirs, or they're critical of the relationship of the outside photographer to the subject. What do you think of that as a motivation for collaboration?

W.E.: I don't think it's great, actually. I'm genuinely fascinated by what I do and what I get to see. I'm sorry if people have used my work to say outsiders shouldn't come in. Because I don't believe that, either, but I believe as an artist I can get something through collaboration that I couldn't get any other way. And I'm always looking for fresh ways of seeing. If collaboration comes out of a defensive impulse, I don't think it does justice to the people you're working with.

Which leads to another collaborative project I'm working on with Ariella Azoulay, Susan Meiselas, Leigh Raiford and Laura Wexler. We've put together a work-in-progress called "Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography." It's an exhibition that just finished at Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto and will move to the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia.

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The exhibition is made of over 100 collaborative projects that look at the act of making and sharing images with an audience. It's more complicated than one person taking a photo of another person or a landscape.

If you look back in history for example, there's Julia Margaret Cameron making literary tableaux using her friends and servants as models. How much did those people help or put their imprint on those images? Then you research and read an interview with Nobuyoshi Araki's wife. When he's photographing these pictures of her, what was she doing? There's much more going on than we thought.

I called my instructional book I Wanna Take Me a Picture. In different countries, when people wanted me to take a picture of them, they'd say it in the active way— "I want to take a picture," when what they meant was, "I want you to take a picture of me."

I think I can get something different by saying, "OK, how do you want to pose? Where do you want to go?" If there are backgrounds, "What color background do you want to choose?" All those things have meaning.

PDN: Do you think the switch from analogue to digital changed your collaborative projects?

W.E.: It was a big deal. I think the analogue process gave the kids a real focus and it slowed them down—and me too. There were discreet steps—developing film and making prints, which gave them an opportunity to understand how the medium worked.

The first time I worked digitally was in Israel for the project "This Place." I spent a lot of time looking for cameras to use, and trying them out to see what were the best, the easiest to handle, so my collaborators would be successful. I guess I'm always trying to simplify the experience so that they can just look through the viewfinder, rather than having to fuss with the equipment.

I think a lot of people think that you can just give cameras to kids or whomever and they'll come out with an innocent vision. I'm much more interested in them controlling and understanding what things will look like in the photos.

Some of the young people in Mexico were so small they couldn't make the stretch between the thumb and the forefinger to click the button. They had to figure out another way to press the shutter. They carried around buckets of sodium sulfite because we were using Polaroid positive/negative film. And they made fantastic pictures.

You want to give the kids control, and they can gain that control. It doesn't matter if it's complicated. They learned, and I learned how to teach them to do it. It was amazing.