

Wendy Ewald, *Q and T* from *An African American Alphabet*, 2000



Chromogenic prints, each 30 x 37 5/8 in.  
Gift of Richard E. Brock, 2015.32.5

*The people I work with already have a voice. Often we don't listen.*

—Wendy Ewald <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wendy Ewald and Sondra Farganis, "A Political Alphabet: Arabic Alphabet," in Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 235

### **Artist Biography**

Artist Wendy Ewald (American, b. 1951) was born in Detroit, Michigan. Her father ran a Chevrolet dealership, and her grandfather, Henry T. Ewald, was the co-founder of the advertising agency Campbell Ewald, which oversaw the General Motors account. Henry Ewald was one of the ad-men credited with incorporating images into advertising. Since an early age, Ewald was aware of the presence and impact of images. She often interacted with well-known photographers, sometimes the subject of their images. Her family was also on the cutting-edge of commercial technology, adopting color television early on, and upgrading to the newest photographic technologies—such as Polaroid’s instant cameras—as they were released. She did not aspire to become a photographer, however—photographers were glamorous personalities, while she was incredibly shy. During high school at Phillips Academy, however, while working in the dark room and with a photography instructor who was in the process of creating a photobook for publication herself, Ewald realized she never wanted to do anything else.

During her senior year in 1969, she applied for a grant from the Polaroid Foundation for film and cameras to bring to a Native American reservation in Abrado, Canada and teach photography to children at a summer camp. What the students photographed dealt head-on with issues of alcoholism, dwindling game, and housing in a way she had never seen done before. She attended Antioch college from 1969 until 1974, during a turbulent time during which the college was closed down multiple times due to strikes. This was, however, a reflection of what she witnessed growing up in Detroit with the race riots of the 1960s. Politically, she grew up pretty quickly. Through college, she continued to work with young people on two Native American reservations.

While Ewald never formally studied education, she began incorporating it into her work naturally. Initially, sharing her camera with others was a way to overcome her shyness and develop a relationship with her subjects. Over time, however, she became more conscious of this sharing and its results. She began her career working with students in Appalachia in Kentucky, followed by North Carolina between 1994 and 1997. In addition, Ewald has traveled the world as a photographer working with different communities. International locations where she has worked include Colombia (1982-85), India (1989-91), South Africa (1992), Morocco (1995), Netherlands (1996), Saudi Arabia (1997), and Israel and the West Bank (2009-2012).

Ewald was the founding director of the Literacy Through Photography program at Duke University, a program “established to promote and support the use of photography for language acquisition in the public schools in Durham, NC” and has since become a national resource.

### Location

*Q* and *T* from *An African American Alphabet* are currently installed in the Chazen Lobby. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

### Visual Description

*Letter Q*, from the series *An African American Alphabet* is a photograph created by American artist Wendy Ewald. The photograph is horizontal and large, measuring thirty inches by thirty-seven and five eighths inches. It depicts a portrait of an African American child standing in three quarter view, or from the waist up. The child stands in the middle of the image and looks at us head on as if trying to make eye contact. Their face is expressionless except for a slightly open mouth. Their right hand is raised and their index finger rests upon their mouth to create a shushing gesture. They wear a ring on their right ring finger and a sweater with a fair isle pattern that alternates stripes of different shades of blue and snowflake-like shapes. The child stands against a white backdrop that appears to be made from a soft material such as cloth or paper as evidenced by wrinkle lines on its white surface. Positioned to the upper left of the child's head are two large letters – an uppercase letter “Q” and a lowercase letter “q”. To the right of the child's head is the word quiet, also written rather large. The text is dark brown and appears to be handwritten as evidenced by the jagged edges of the letters.

*Letter T*, from the series *An African American Alphabet* is a photograph created by American artist Wendy Ewald. The photograph is horizontal in orientation and large, measuring thirty inches by thirty-seven and five eighths inches. The photograph is black and white and depicts an African American boy in profile from the shoulders up. The boy stands against a non-descript black background. He faces left and stands with his eyes closed and his mouth open. In bright white letters, the word “talk” spills from his mouth. Written in lowercase, the word is outlined by a circular bubble-like shape that perfectly aligns with the boy's lips. The word appears to be handwritten as evidenced by the irregularities of the letters. In the upper corners of the photograph, a capital letter “T” appears in the same bright white handwritten text. In the lower corners of the photograph, a lowercase letter “t” sits in matching white text.



### Content and Context

For over fifty years, artist Wendy Ewald has engaged in what is now commonly called “social practice,” or the act of making art collaboratively as one’s method of art production. Ewald travels the world and engages with different communities (often children), teaching them the techniques of photography and encouraging them to create images informed by their cultural background, sense of self, and personal vision. As opposed to drawing or painting, hand-eye coordination is not as necessary for photography, nor does it require a long period of training. The resulting photographs probe identity and cultural difference. She finds that in the different communities with which she works, compositions are different, the way the children use the camera is different, and what they choose as their subjects are different. The learning process is mutual or reciprocal, in that Ewald learns from every interaction how different people see things in the world and make compositions. Her work “[challenges] the concept of who actually makes the image – who is the photographer, who is the subject, who is the observer and who is the observed.”<sup>2</sup>

The artist sees photography as a way for children particularly to process complex issues, as well as an empowering device. Through the act of photographing, they realize that there are aspects of their life that are important, worthy of being looked at, and not evident to others. This is likewise true of the adults in the community: upon seeing the resulting images, they often regard the children with new respect. When typically working with children, Ewald will first have them look at and discuss pictures together. Then she will teach them the techniques of photography (much easier now in the era of digital photography) and when they are comfortable, she starts to give them assignments: first, to photograph their family, then their community, then representations of their dreams and fantasies. Given the nature of the communities she typically works with—extremely rural or economically depressed—she understands that economic and social conditions will prevent them from seriously considering photography as a profession. She hopes, however, that through absorbing the creative process, they can build confidence and problem-solving skills that will aid them throughout their life. She also hopes that her work undermines categories that society imposes about who is considered a photographer and who is not; about who can and cannot speak for a community. “My work, she writes, “questions the conventional definition of individual authorship and casts into doubt an artist’s intentions, power and identity.”<sup>3</sup>

Once she determines a location that she is interested in investigating further, Ewald finds an organization with similar goals with which to partner. Through the organization, she introduces her work to a community, informs parents of how she intends to work with their children, and puts a call out for interested participants. When Ewald sells the resulting work, she takes money out of the sale to compensate for production costs; the remainder is split three ways: between the artist, the organization she worked with to create the images, and the gallery through which it is sold. This is agreed upon with the participants before the project begins. She also acknowledges the children who participated in the creation of works: When a child makes a photograph, the title they have chosen accompanies the image.

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy Ewald, “About,” *Wendy Ewald* (<https://wendyewald.com/about/>), accessed 8/16/2020.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Ewald, “About,” *Wendy Ewald* (<https://wendyewald.com/about/>), accessed 8/16/2020.



“If it’s something we make together, if I take the picture and they write on it, their name will appear with the work.” Ewald considers herself, however, the author of the overall project.

*An African American Alphabet* is one of a number of series that Ewald created in collaboration with groups of children that explore the changing identity of the United States. These include a *Spanish Alphabet*, an *Arabic Alphabet*, a *White Girl’s Alphabet*, and *An Immigrant Alphabet*. “I first encountered written language in children’s alphabet primers.” Ewald explains. “Looking back, I now see that the words and visual examples used to represent letters reinforced the world view of the middle-class white girl I happened to be... *American Alphabets* is an attempt to remake the building blocks of our language to reflect our differing cultures.”<sup>4</sup> After hearing “disturbing” stories from English-as-a-Second Language teachers in North Carolina about the poor treatment of their students by other teachers who assumed because they couldn’t speak English well, they were “stupid,” Ewald began to think about using photography to teach language. “While the United States has become increasingly diverse, the culture of our schools has remained much the same as in my childhood: white middle-class. And the language sanctioned in the classroom is, as it was in the fifties, an extension of a white middle-class ideal.”<sup>5</sup> She has written about these alphabets, “I wanted not just to mend an educational system, but to see our language(s) and our children as they actually are in the world.”

While Ewald created the parameters for these collaborations, the content was generated by the students themselves—in this case, objects or words representing each of the twenty-eight letters of the alphabet. For each series, the artist asked the children to come up with a word for each letter. A selected student then determined how they might visually represent the word. Ewald worked with the students to arrange the composition. After the image was made, the students added text to the image by either scratching the emulsion of the negative or writing with a marker on the negative or, in the case of more recent projects, adding handwriting digitally.

*An African American Alphabet* was created with students in Cleveland, Ohio at the Central Intermediate School. Ewald relates that the students began their work on their alphabet by reading excerpts by prominent black writers John Edgar Wideman and Toni Morrison, who include black vernacular in their texts, aloud and discussing how they spoke with family and friends in a different manner than how they spoke with teachers and fellow students at school. Many of the words included in the alphabet are in the standard English lexicon but have developed alternative meanings within black usage. Teachers, Ewald writes, “were amazed by the versatility, precision, and subtlety of this parallel language.” Ewald’s alphabets act not as a teaching device for the students, but rather for adults: To awaken them to the complexity and vision possessed by those often written-off. To make the images, each child chose a color for their backdrop cloth and enacted their selected words. After photographing the image, the students wrote the corresponding definitions, along with sentences demonstrating the context in which the word was used. The children who collaborated with Ewald on this project were: Azuree Barkley, Sierra Brown, Monique Cowan, Jesse Fink, Cordarro Griffin, Ebony Harris, Lachelle Hill, Cornell Holly, William Houston, Keith Johnson, Willie Jones, Tierra Lofton, Arturo Norris, Unique Pannell, Erica Ransom, Alyssa Riggins, Dannie Smith, Mark Stoves, Dafawn Taylor, Samantha Vene, Jacinta Warren,

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Ewald, “Afterward,” *American Alphabets*.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Ewald, “Afterward,” *American Alphabets*.



Jermaine Whiteside, Calvin Williams, Cierra Williams, Marcus Williams, and Justine Woody. Partial proceeds from the sale of artwork in this alphabet went back to the school toward the purchase of art supplies and fixing the ceiling of the art room, which had collapsed during the project.

“At certain times I feel I’m an activist,” Ewald has stated, “in the sense of giving people the tools to look at what’s happening, to confront these things and to think about solutions or changes.”<sup>6</sup> Not only does Ewald give children and the disenfranchised tools with which to build resilience, but by empowering those without power, she uses her position as a way of amplifying diverse voices. Her work questions who has the authority to make images and who can be considered an artist. She has found that her work, especially with rural communities, has come as a shock to the more privileged museum-going publics. Through her practice, she raises awareness to the complexities that exist within a society. “Change,” she says, “begins with acknowledging what exists.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Luvera, “Tools for Sharing: Wendy Ewald in Conversation with Anthony Luvera,” *Photoworks Annual* issue 20: *Family Politics* (November 2013), 53

<sup>7</sup> Wendy Ewald and Sondra Farganis, “A Political Alphabet: Arabic Alphabet,” in Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 232



**Discussion Questions to Consider**

1. When you think about the alphabet, what images come to mind? How does your version of the alphabet compare or contrast with Ewald's?
2. Words, like photographs, have many layers of meaning. In looking at the composition of these photographs and the students' poses, what additional meanings might the words "quiet" and "talk" have? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. Who is the author of this work—the "artist" or the subject?
4. If you were to create a personal alphabet, what words would you use for the letters "T" and "Q". Why?

**Collection Connections for Further Engagement:** *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

1. Deborah Roberts (American, b. 1962). [Face to Face](#), 2018. Mixed media collage on paper, 44 x 32 in. Joen Greenwood Endowment Fund Purchase, 2019.7.

Deborah Roberts's use of collage speaks to the challenges encountered by young black children as they strive to build identity in the face of societal challenges and preconceived notions. By combining a range of different facial features, skin tones, hairstyles and clothes, she hopes to create a more expansive and inclusive view of black cultural experience.

2. Glenn Ligon (American, b. 1960). [Boy on Tire](#), 2004. Color screenprint, 34 x 25 ½ in. Gift of Richard E. Brock, 2016.26.5.

During a 1999 residency at the Walker Art Center, Glenn Ligon invited children from the Minneapolis community to color the pages of Afrocentric coloring books from the 1970s. The following year, he created screenprinted work on canvas based on these drawings as part of a large body of material entitled "Coloring." In 2004, he created a portfolio of prints based on the original sheets as well.

3. Mathilda Schwalbach (American, b.). [Faces of the Decade Facing the World](#), 1969. Fabric (screen print, weaving), 35 ¾ x 22 3/8 in. **Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection**, P.R.US.1631.

Schwalbach was a textile professor at UW—Madison's School of Human Ecology from 1945 to 1973. According to Bobette Heller, a student of Schwalbach's, this piece was likely used as a teaching object to demonstrate the transfer of photographs to textiles. This test cloth depicts women who appear to be feminist activists, and certainly were in the news for some kind of action. Overlaid are symbols that represent the flag on one half and a ball of yarn on the other. This seems to represent women's work as it has traditionally been seen (as textile work), while subverting and recognizing women's work within feminist activism and activism more broadly.



Chazen Museum of Art

Fall 2020 Faculty Curriculum: Activism through Art

Not only a teaching device, this material incorporates portraiture into a more widely commercial medium.



**Additional Resources**

Wendy Ewald and Sondra Farganis, "A Political Alphabet: Arabic Alphabet," in Tom Finkelppearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Wendy Ewald, *American Alphabets* (Zurich: Scale; London: Thames & Hudson, 2005) [Kohler Library: Cage (no loan) TR647 E935 A5 2005 (Available for in-library use only)] [pdf of text portion available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Wendy Ewald, *I wanna take me a picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children* (Boston: Center for Documentary Studies, in association with Beacon Press, 2001) [Merit Library, PreK-12 Stacks, TR161 E 93 2001]

Holly Stuart Hughes, "Interview: Wendy Ewald, Pioneer of Collaborative Photography," photo district news (June 1, 2018), <https://pdnonline.com/features/photographer-interviews/interview-wendy-ewald-pioneer-of-collaborative-photography/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Katherine Hyde, "Portraits and Collaborations: A Reflection on the Work of Wendy Ewald," *Visual Studies* vol. 20, no. 2 (October 2005) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Anthony Luvera, "Tools for Sharing: Wendy Ewald in Conversation with Anthony Luvera," *Photoworks Annual* issue 20: *Family Politics* (November 2013) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

University of California Television (UCTV), *Conversations with History: Innocent Eye with Wendy Ewald* (April 2, 1998), 50 minutes, <https://youtu.be/vaxwRS-XFoE>