

Activism through Art: Grades 9-12



Letter Q and Letter T, from the series An African American Alphabet, Wendy Ewald

Key Idea

Artists can engage in activism by amplifying the voices of marginalized people through representation.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Closely examine *Q* and *T* from *An African American Alphabet* by Wendy Ewald
2. Consider how Ewald's practice connects to representation and activism.
3. Explore the theme of activism by working individually and in groups on select learning activities.

Lesson

1. Choose a close-looking prompt (from the introduction page) to encourage students to study the artwork. You may also ask suggested questions under "Look" in the section below.
2. Provide the class with some background information using the "About the Artist" and "About the Artwork" sections below.
3. Engage the class in conversation using the suggested discussion questions.
4. Follow up the class discussion with a recommended activity in the "Connect Ideas" section below.



Wendy Ewald, *Letter Q and Letter T* from the series *An African American Alphabet*, 2000, Chromogenic prints, each 30 x 37 5/8 in. Gift of Richard E. Brock, 2015.32.5 (bottom); 2015.32.6 (top)

LOOK

1. Compare and contrast the two photographs side by side. How are they different? How are they alike?
2. Look at the expressions of the children in the photograph. What do you think they are feeling? What do you see that makes you say that?

LEARN

About the Artist

For over fifty years, artist Wendy Ewald has engaged in what is now commonly called "social practice," or the act of making art collaboratively. Ewald travels the world and often engages with children in rural or economically depressed areas. She teaches them photography techniques and encourages them to

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create images informed by their cultural background, sense of self, and personal vision. She developed a passion for photography in high school while attending a private boarding school. During that time, Ewald witnessed the 1967 Detroit race riot, a multi-day clash between Black residents of Detroit and police that resulted in the death of 43 and injury of over 1,000 people. (See resources section below for more information about the 1967 Detroit race riot.) This inspired Ewald to take action and she began volunteering daily in a settlement house (inner-city community center) teaching Black history to local youth by creating visual aids. This work allowed her to better understand her surroundings and examine cultural differences from a new lens that relied heavily on images. Her educational experiences were drastically different from the students at the settlement house, which empowered her to think about how she could work more inclusively with diverse communities.

About the Artwork

An African American Alphabet is one of a number of photographic series that Ewald created in collaboration with schoolchildren. These particular images were created with elementary school students at the Central Intermediate School in Cleveland, Ohio. For each series, the artist asked the children to come up with a word for each letter of the alphabet that connected with their identity. Ewald relates that the students began their work on the alphabet by reading excerpts from prominent Black writers John Edgar Wideman and Toni Morrison aloud, after which they discussed the differences between the language they used with their family and friends compared to the way they spoke with teachers and fellow students. The student then selected their word, determined how they might visually represent the word and worked with Ewald to arrange the composition. 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.

DISCUSS

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. If you were to create a personal alphabet, what words would you use for “T” and “Q?” Why? How would you represent your chosen words in a photograph?
4. In what ways are these photographs considered “activist?”

CONNECT IDEAS

Timeline of Local Activism—To help connect activism to their community, ask students to create a timeline of events that they consider “activist” that happened in their community. Follow up this project with reflection questions on how activism has changed or stayed the same over a specific period of time. For additional information on local activism, reference the resources listed in the “Introduction.”

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Visual Alphabet—To examine visual literacy, ask students to create an alphabet primer in the style of Wendy Ewald’s alphabets. Students should select vocabulary words that resonate with their identity and can use either photographs or drawn images to illustrate the alphabet.

GO FURTHER

Resource about Wendy Ewald:

“Conversations with History: Innocent Eye with Wendy Ewald,” *Conversations with History*, University of California Television, San Diego, CA, 1998: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaxwRS-XFoE>

Resources related to 1967 Detroit race riot that influenced Ewald's practice:

Allie Gross, “Detroit in ’67: 1966 Student Walkout at Northern a sign of things to come,” *Detroit Free Press*, (July 2017), <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2017/07/17/detroit-67-1966-student-walkout-northern-sign-things-come/483019001/>

“Uprising of 1967,” *Detroit Historical Society*, <https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/uprising-1967>

STANDARDS

Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts

L.11-12.1 Demonstrate an understanding of how language functions in different cultures, contexts, and disciplines; apply this knowledge to comprehend more fully when reading and listening, and make effective choices when composing, creating, and speaking.

Wisconsin Standards for Social Studies

SS.Hist4.d.h Analyze how the POV of the author can influence the content and intent of a primary or secondary source and identify whose voices may be left out.

Wisconsin Standards for Art and Design

A.A.R.18.h: Interpret: Explain the intent, meanings, and impacts of different medial works of art and design, considering complex factors of context and perspective.