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# Art ConText: In Providence: Wendy Ewald

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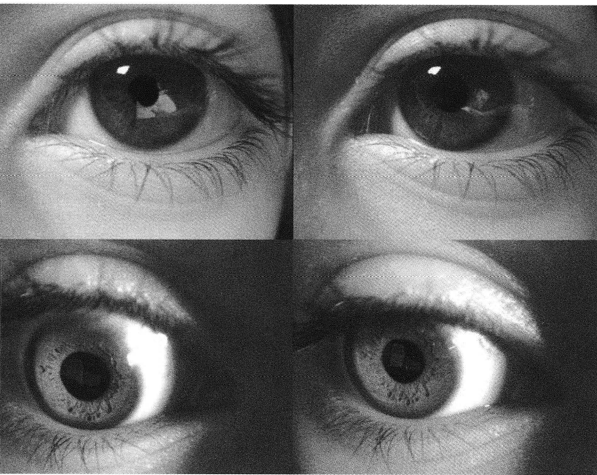
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The RISD Museum

Exhibition Notes, Number 19, Summer 2002



Wendy Ewald, *Francis reading* (top); *John-Michael reading* (bottom), 2002. Images courtesy of the Artist. On view in *In Providence*.

## *In Providence* Wendy Ewald

June 29 – October 20, 2002

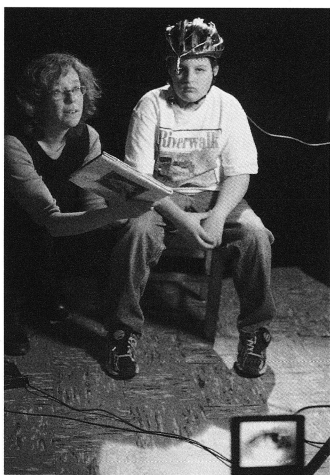
### The Artist as Educator – The Educator as Artist

Beginning in late February and continuing throughout the remainder of the semester, Wendy Ewald visited Michelle Silvia's classroom of special-education students at the Carl G. Lauro Memorial Elementary School in Providence. The photographs and videos of the children learning to read and the patterns used in classroom lessons are the result of a three-way collaboration—teacher, students, and artist. The following questions were posed to Wendy Ewald and Michelle Silvia by David Henry, Head of Education at The RISD Museum, in early May.

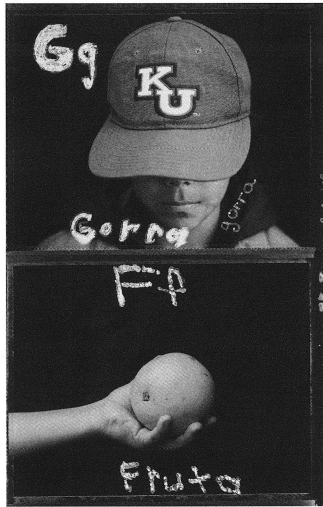
*Wendy, you have received a great deal of acclaim for the ways in which you collaborate with non-art communities. Does all your work involve collaboration, and why is it important to you in your art practice?*

Historically, photographers have had to go out into the world and interact with their subjects. At the very least, they've had to be in the presence of their subjects. Who is it who actually makes a picture, the subject or the photographer? Very early in my work—when I was still a student—I became excited about the visual possibilities of taking this question one step further and sharing cameras with my subjects. The results were very compelling, but I had to learn to pay attention to how my collaborators were seeing. Often it took me a long time to understand their vision.

I was also photographing on my own. I saw these streams as separate. About twelve years ago, I started a program at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University that used photography to teach writing in the Durham Public Schools. I decided to try merging my processes as artist and teacher. I felt that my role as a teacher was just as artistic as my role as an artist, and vice-versa. I also felt it was important to make the collaborations I was undertaking more transparent: even when my students were taking their own photographs without me, I was still present in their work. In many ways a classroom in a mid-size American city is representative of our society and its systems of belief. I thought, why not use education as my subject matter?



Wendy Ewald and Carl Lauro student Dean Games. Image by Stephen Oliver.



Wendy Ewald, from the *American Alphabets* series, in progress. Images courtesy of the Artist.

*What is the relationship between the art you end up with and the interactions with the participants in your residencies? Can you be successful as an educator and not successful as an artist? Is one more important to you than the other?*

My task as an artist is to create a work that in form and content illuminates the subject. I take the journey to that illumination along with the subject. I must know how to create a structure or plan for the project, and when to let go of it. If I hold on to it too tightly or too long, I lose my collaborator. I really don't think one can be successful exclusively as an educator or an artist. I was trained as an artist, and although I thought about studying education, I never did. I think I have a natural gift for teaching, but I also use my artistic practice as a model for teaching.

My work is about posing questions. Choosing the right questions to ask is essential. If an artwork is unsuccessful, I haven't asked the right question. I hope by asking the question, my collaborators and I will go through an educational process that will not only benefit us, but others as well.

*You have been involved in residencies now for over thirty years. How do you decide which projects to undertake?*

I try to take on only those projects that give me an opportunity to work as an artist and possibly to create new pedagogical approaches. I've come to see my work as model-making. For example, I am continuing to work on a series of alphabet projects called "American Alphabets." I will create a curriculum for teachers, community workers, and artists who are interested in carrying out similar projects with their students.

In the Providence project, I am modeling my practice for a group of RISD students. They have undertaken their own collaborative projects with the Carl Lauro students or students at the Fox Point branch of the Providence Public Library. Each week we discuss our progress, which has given us additional insight into the young people.

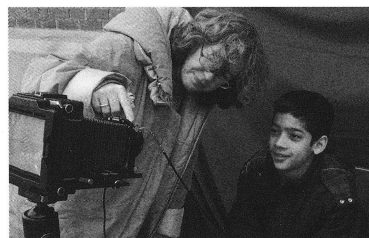
*What made you want to work with special-education students here in Providence?*

I have a son who is just learning to read. Like any parent, I am fascinated by his development. At what point would those marks on a book page turn into a readable pattern? What if that didn't happen so easily? What would that mean? What would we do? I began talking to some teachers I know well and started educating myself by reading about the subject. I realized how little we know about how we learn.

When I visited the Fox Point public library to discuss working at that branch, the librarian told me about a project that had been going on there. Learning-disabled



Carl Lauro student Sabina Pereira. Image by Stephen Oliver.



Wendy Ewald and Carl Lauro student Francis Peña. Images by Stephen Oliver.

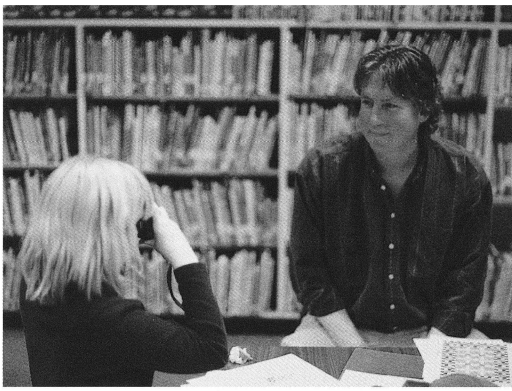


students were working with college students who had similar problems. I thought, what better for a library project than to tackle the learning of writing and reading? I was excited when Michelle Silvia allowed me to become a member of her classroom at Carl Lauro elementary school.

I hung out in her classroom and also Maureen Kenner's classroom at the Vartan Gregorian Elementary School across the street from the Fox Point library in order to understand how learning took place there. I designed my project on the basis of those observational visits.

I decided to make reading a central part of the project. I asked each student to read for me in a makeshift studio in the literacy coach's office. I was interested in seeing the students' physical reactions as they tackled a new book. We rigged my son's bicycle helmet with a tiny lipstick video camera, so that the camera was pointed at the students' eyes as they read.

I also noticed that visual patterns were used to teach math. It seemed to be an area in which these students excelled. I made portraits of the students themselves,



Michael Ensslin (RISD MA Ed. 2002) at the Fox Point library branch.  
Image by Stephen Oliver.

photographs of their favorite toys, and pictures of pages from their notebooks. I also asked each student to choose a favorite color to use as a background. Later, I gave the students five copies each of their portrait, a page from their notebook, their toy, and their color. We then used these photos to work on ideas of repeating and random patterns. Each pattern is slightly different, and the way they went about making their patterns gave another clue to the child's identity.

*What do you hope your presence provides to young students and their teachers?*

I always hope that the community person or teacher I am working with will get new ideas for the program and that the students will reflect on their own lives through the artwork that we create.

*Is this exclusive to photography? Art? Or are these tools for making self-reflection a part of the school day for each student?*

The visual arts—particularly photography—can be powerful tools for self-reflection. Photography is arguably the most democratic medium. Photographs are what many people keep in their homes to remind them of the persons and events they consider important. Photography is democratic, too, because students can easily learn how to employ the medium. When students photograph in their homes and bring their photographs into the classroom, they are able to share their own particular experiences, not just the experiences and values of the dominant culture.



Teacher Michelle Silvia and Carl Lauro student Sabina Pereira.  
Image by Stephen Oliver.

*Michelle, would you describe what your classroom is like? Who are your students, and why are they in a special-education class?*

My class is made up of ten children, seven boys and three girls ranging in age between ten and twelve years. They are considered fourth- and fifth-graders, although their academic levels are very widely spread. Some function at a first-grade level, some at second-, third-, and fifth-grade levels. My students have all been identified as learning disabled. Most of their needs are in the areas of reading and writing: many struggle with phonemic awareness. They know the sounds of individual letters, but blending them together to make a word is very difficult for them, so I have to teach them strategies that will help. Some of my students have delays in their speech and language development, which are addressed by the speech-and-language pathologist. I also have students with emotional concerns, so I work with psychologists and counselors, too. Each child is a totally different picture. No two are the same. As an educator, I attend to both their needs and strengths to enable them all to learn.

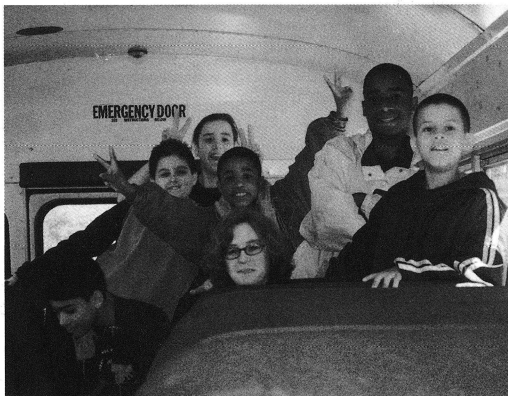
*What were your hopes and anxieties when you were first approached about an artist coming into your classroom?*

Thankfully, I had many more hopes than anxieties. The only thing I truly worried about was how this project would fit into my day-to-day teaching. Would my students miss the lessons they need daily? I was also worried about the structure of our day. My class is very much used to a specific routine. Usually, when something new is going on and I have to change our schedule, the students are affected. That is when behavioral issues arise and students don't work as well.

As soon as I heard about the project, I was very excited. I felt that my class had been presented with a wonderful opportunity to learn something new. This project has also given my students self-confidence. They are able to see that their difficulties in reading and writing do not make up their entire selves. I was very interested to find out how they would work with someone else. Each of my children has something different to offer, and I was happy to have a chance for others to see how truly special they are.

*The other day you were talking about how your students look forward to Wendy's visits. You have mentioned your worries about how her visits, as well as those of the RISD students, might create disruptions in the normal order. How have you incorporated this project into your regular curriculum?*

Fortunately, I feel the RISD students have really tried to develop projects that fit in with what I am teaching. The project with Wendy has helped my class and myself take a step back and reflect on what we have accomplished this year. Toward the end of the school calendar, I feel that it is great for them to be able to put their year into perspective. Many times, this is hard for children to do, but Wendy's work is really making them see how far they have come. The photography of themselves and their favorite objects has been incorporated into their



Wendy Ewald with Carl Lauro students on field trip to The RISD Museum. Image by Denise Cavanaugh.

writing. It has also given me a great idea for our last class project this year. I plan on having each child write an autobiography. They will be asked to take pictures of things that tell who they are and then write about each thing. They can use some of the ideas from Wendy's visits and maybe even some of the pictures taken earlier to include in their own books.

*Has this been an education in art or in literacy for the students, or a mixture of both?*

It has definitely been both for my students. I am incorporating the literacy component into my class time, and Wendy is educating them in art. She takes the time to speak with each child, explaining what she is doing and why she is doing it beforehand. She shows them how the cameras work and gives them chances to do it themselves. This kind of "hands-on" approach is the best way for many of my students to learn about something new.

*What advice might you give to other teachers thinking of having an artist come into the classroom?*

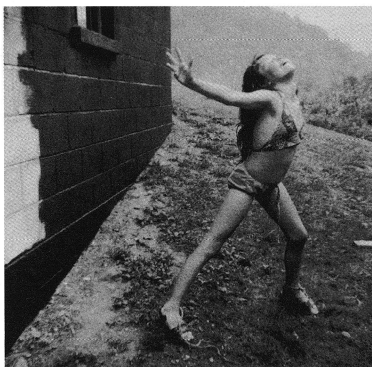
I would encourage any teacher to jump at the opportunity. My students are so excited every Thursday and Friday when Wendy comes. It gives our children the chance to learn about what else is in this world. They need exposure to the arts. They have received a whole new education that under normal circumstances I would not be able to give them.

*I wonder if you might each say what you think has been accomplished here?*

MS: My class has had the chance to see that their strengths and struggles, likes and dislikes make them who they are and that they should celebrate this every day. I thank everyone involved for giving my class this great opportunity.

WE: When I started this project I wanted to show what it was like for these kids to negotiate a system not set up for them. By working with them in developing patterns, I hope they have gained a bit of control over how they see and how they are seen. In thinking about the patterns we've made, I've also reflected on how the patterns of these kids' lives are boxed in by our "neuro-typical" society.

Wendy Ewald is an artist who has participated in residencies all over the world, including India, Colombia, Saudi Arabia, and Mexico, as well as numerous sites in North America. Among her books are *Magic Eyes: Scenes from an Andean Girlhood* (Bay Press: 1992); *I Dreamed I Had a Girl in My Pocket* (W. W. Norton: 1996); the catalogue for her mid-career retrospective, *Secret Games: Wendy Ewald, Collaborative Works with Children 1969-99* (Scalo: 2000); a guide for educators, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children* (Beacon Press: 2001); and a children's book, *The Best Part of Me* (Little, Brown, and Company: 2002). A few of the numerous honors and awards Ewald has received are a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Fulbright fellowship, and a MacArthur fellowship.



Denise Dixon, *Self-portrait reaching for the Red Star sky, Kentucky, 1975-82*. Image courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover. On view in *Secret Games: Wendy Ewald*.

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Providence, Rhode Island

The RISD Museum

Art ConText

*In Providence* is the eleventh Art ConText project. Art ConText, a partnership between the Providence Public Library and The RISD Museum, is designed to introduce new audiences to contemporary art; to bring art and reading programs to library branches throughout Providence; and to provide opportunities for RISD students to apply their talents. Funding for Art ConText is provided by Pew Charitable Trusts and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more information about Art ConText, visit the web site at [www.risd.edu/artcontext](http://www.risd.edu/artcontext).