



**Portraits:**  
Dawoud Bey  
Wendy Ewald

July 20 - Sept. 7, 1997

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

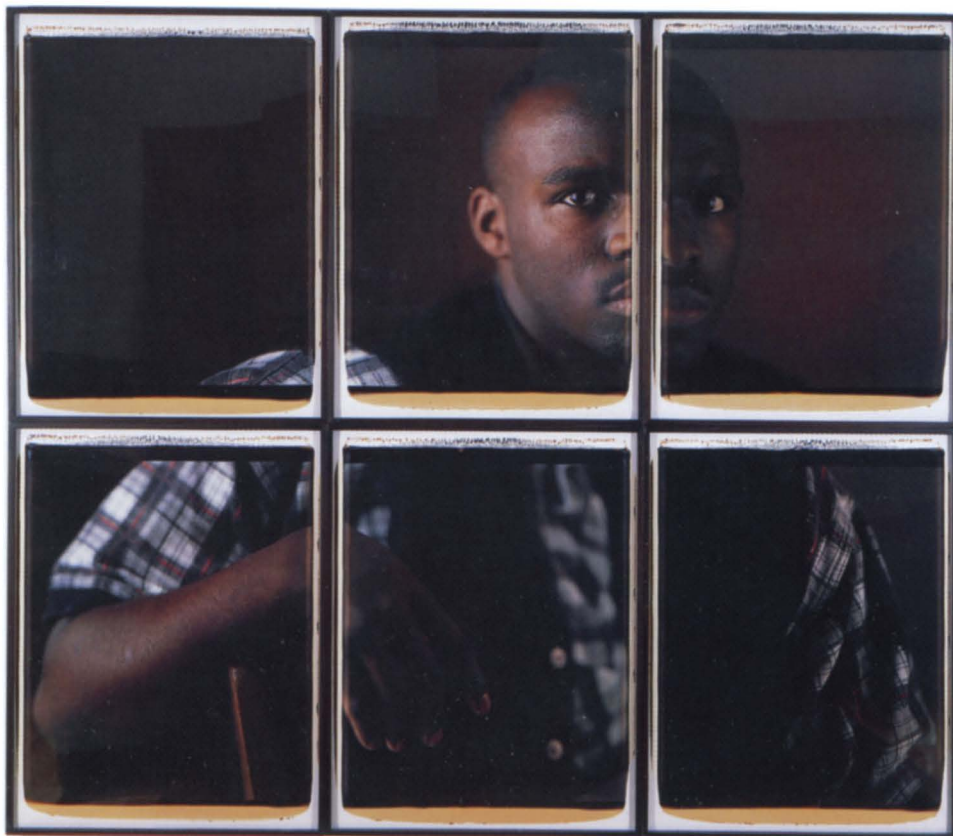
Revelations and Disclosures:  
The Photographic Projects of  
Dawoud Bey and Wendy Ewald

The two distinctive and remarkable projects brought together in this exhibit – Dawoud Bey's 20" x 24" Polaroid studio portraits and the black-and-white works by Wendy Ewald and her young students – differ enormously in their styles, their methodologies and their formal properties. Yet, in terms of their content, they have much in common – and, to a considerable extent, spring from related motives and a shared set of ideas and beliefs.

We have today in photography a vital, ongoing debate concerning the authenticity, value and politics of representation that emerges from within a particular community or culture versus representation that's generated – and, too often, authorized and imposed – from without. Though I believe its origins can be traced directly to discussions that began in the late 1960s concerning photography by and of African-Americans, this debate is nowadays not restricted to that specific issue, nor even to imagery more broadly involving people of color. It is, appropriately, a challenge to the fundamental misconception that photography itself can be considered a value-free, transparent medium, and that its presumed neutrality somehow transfers itself to those who employ some combination of the tools, materials and processes that comprise this technology.

From its inception and ever since, photography has been used by the members of all cultures into which its practice has been introduced as a medium for cultural self-description. Yet, until the 1970s, the imagery of the world's many cultures that predominated in the mass media of the "first world" (which, of course, permeates the entire globe) was made, almost invariably, by Caucasian photographers of European descent, rather than by members of the communities under scrutiny. However marvelous the resulting imagery, and however well-intended towards, knowledgeable about and sympathetic to its subjects their makers may have become, these observations lacked the insight and attunement to cultural specifics and nuances that only full membership brings. They also emblemized an unhealthy and largely unexamined concentration of power over the depiction of others.

Fortunately, by the 1960s we already had several important examples of long-term attention to cultures from within (the lifetime project of Roy DeCarava stands as only one notable instance). Those efforts – in their obvious value, as well as in their comparative infrequency – served to spark in a younger cohort both the debate referred to above and a sudden, dramatic increase in experiments intended to rectify some of the entrenched imbalances between subject and



Dawoud Bey, *Earl*, 1996, Polacolor ER photographs, 60" x 69", courtesy David Beitzel Gallery, New York

photographer. Consequently, we have by now several decades' worth of active investigation of these possibilities, exemplified by the two projects whose results are surveyed here.

Consider, in this light, the color portraiture of Dawoud Bey. Bey has chosen in recent years to work with Polaroid materials and tools that add significant elements to the traditional genre of transactional studio portraiture. After exposure and the usual minute's wait, Polaroid 20" x 24" film – like its much smaller older sibling, the more familiar SX-70 – provides a negativeless, direct-positive one-of-a-kind print, analogous to a Daguerreotype. Unlike standard film, this process permits both photographer and subject to view and evaluate the results immediately, and in dialogue. Says Bey, "It makes for a more balanced relationship."

No other photographic system is capable of such minute description of such a wealth of detail. Their color adds yet another layer of important data to these pictures' function. And their size achieves just the opposite of the jewel-like Daguerreotype's effect: rather than miniaturizing their subjects, it monumentalizes them – especially when, in many cases, Bey maximizes the scale of these works by combining two or more 20" x 24" prints to describe his subjects. The dimensions of the consequent pieces, and the density of description embedded in them, make them equivalent to the Renaissance

court portraits of European royalty.

As images, these portraits are necessarily made in the studio; this camera is not transportable and is almost impossible to operate out-of-doors. Hence all environmental data is eliminated. Rather than replacing that with props or elaborate settings, as do so many who've used this camera system, Bey restricts himself to his subjects and whatever they reveal and disclose through body language, facial expression, clothing and personal ornament. A rich but altogether unpedantic sociology results from this method of inquiry, which creates a self-presentational context that's the photographic version of what the late Erving Goffman called "the theatrical frame."

This methodology premises itself on trust; it requires the photographer's willingness to share the power of representation, so that his interpretation of the subjects finds a counterbalance in the subjects' vision of themselves. There is nothing casual about these pictures, and nothing surreptitious; those who have chosen to accept Bey's scrutiny, and ours, compose themselves willingly for these portraits, presenting themselves self-consciously to the light and the lens, returning the gaze. The portrayals here emerge as much from their deliberate choice as from Bey's perceptiveness.

"I am mindful that portraiture has been a way for a select group of people – the gentrified class – to perpetuate their [own] images," Bey wrote awhile back. "Museums



all over the world are filled with portraits that moneyed people were able to commission of themselves ... I like to bring the same attention to ordinary people ... and I particularly like to give this attention to black people, as a people whose images have been stereotyped and ridiculed extensively in this country ... My photographs allow the subjects to direct their unflinching gaze at the viewer, if only in facsimile." Needless to say, they also permit Bey to direct his own unflinching gaze at them.

To fill the walls of a quasi-sacral space such as a gallery or museum with such collaborative representations of those the dominant culture spends such effort to marginalize and "disappear," revealing them life-size or larger to the viewer for careful scrutiny, allowing them (even "if only in facsimile") to initiate and return that prolonged gaze, is a form of understated empowerment of the subjects and – in the deepest sense of the word – an encouragement of the viewer. It proposes that such an encounter has mutually beneficial consequences, and that the logical next step – engaging with each other face to face, in the flesh – contains nothing to fear on either side so long as those involved are willing to see each other as fully human and take each other seriously.

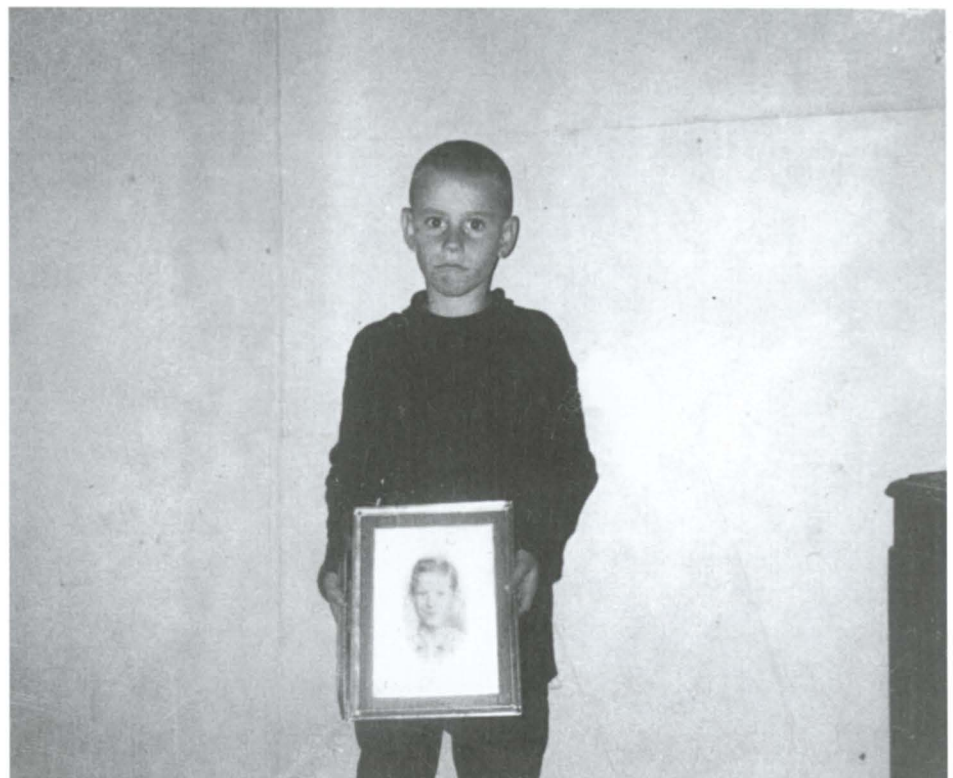
That such equalizing introductions still need to be made may be reason for sorrow; but that someone like Bey is both eager and able to effect them, and that Bey's collaborators remain willing to risk taking the initiative, is surely cause for hope.

For more than a century now, cameras and many of the photographic processes have been available to children. For at least the past three decades, assorted photographers and educators have actively explored what children could accomplish in this medium and what we could learn – about children, about the worlds they inhabit, about photography itself – from their efforts. Wendy Ewald's exemplary efforts over the past two decades need to be understood in that context; but they also demand to be acknowledged as one of the earliest commenced of these teaching ventures, and by now probably the longest-running of them all.

Technically speaking, this is bare-bones photography, made with cheap Instamatic cameras coupled with black-and-white film. Yet the results resonate in a space rich with intimacy and ripe with dreams, somewhere between the quotidian revelations of the family album and the more deliberated, imaginative works of such contemporary figures as Emmet Gowin, Nancy Rexroth, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Duane Michals: photographers who have combined the consistent address to issues of personal and even private life with an economy of means



Janet Stallard, *I took a picture of myself with the statue in the backyard*, Kentucky, 1977, silver gelatin print, 8" x 10", courtesy James Danziger Gallery, New York



Freddy Childers, *Self-portrait with the picture of my biggest brother, Everett, who killed himself when he came back from Vietnam*, Kentucky, 1976, silver gelatin print, 9½" x 11¾", courtesy James Danziger Gallery, New York





Dawoud Bey, *Nikki & Manting*, 1992, Polacolor ER photographs, 30" x 46", courtesy David Beitzel Gallery, New York

partners in these experiments continue their involvement in the medium as their lives evolve, their relation to the world of lens-based visual communication has been altered drastically by their encounter with the basic tool on which all the visual mass media are predicated. And they, in turn, have subtly but inexorably shifted the ways in which they and their cultures are to be understood.

In the long run, the effects of this complex dialogue cannot help but benefit all concerned. And the immediate results – the perceptive, emotional, frank and unself-conscious disclosures and revelations contained in these image-text works, the intricate pleasures they offer to the eye and heart at once – constitute an invaluable gift to the present and the future.

Without the extended and often lifetime commitment of several generations of devoted photographers of all races, ethnic origins and persuasions who believed in the possibilities of empowerment through photography, the argument over how the diverse experiences and cultural realities of any identifiable group of people are to be represented in photographs – and who gets to do the representing – would be strictly moot.

The sheer force and durability of the best of the work these photographers have produced themselves and encouraged in others – as exemplified by the projects of Dawoud Bey and Wendy Ewald – has helped to provoke a crucial, long-overdue discussion that reaches far beyond the boundaries of art discourse, into all the observational disciplines and methods of cultural inquiry: sociology, anthropology, historical research and more. In challenging the very concept of photographic seeing as “objective,” they’ve contributed to a significant opening of our eyes. Through their efforts to disseminate the power of photographic representation, they’ve helped maintain the democratic basis of a medium always threatened by an encroaching elitism. And by insisting on the imperative of revelations and disclosures on both sides of the lens, they’ve succeeded in keeping themselves as honest as their collaborators. These pictures demand nothing less of us, constituting a collective statement of belief that only in learning to see others clearly can we come to know ourselves – and that by opening ourselves to close examination we can begin at last to confront those things we have in common with all others and embrace our differences.

– A. D. Coleman

*photography critic, New York Observer*

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Cover: Dawoud Bey, *Laneisha*, 1996, Polacolor ER photographs, 88½" x 44", courtesy David Beitzel Gallery, New York

and quietly eloquent styles.

I would like to believe that the attention and recognition that Ewald’s projects have attracted of late not only pay tribute to her dedication and the substance of her endeavors but also represent an expanding awareness of the visual intelligence of children, their individual and collective genius. For the cumulative evidence leads inexorably to the conclusion that clear-sightedness and its creative expression are capacities inherent in most if not all of us at an early age, regardless of nationality, race or class. Indeed, it suggests that these potentialities are commonplace birthrights, whose comparatively infrequent manifestation among adults may be more the result of long-term societal neglect than statistical rarity.

Ewald’s choice of pupils and collaborators – the youngest generations of poor and working-class people in economically depressed areas around the world – is radical in its politics. Her approach to photography education, as synopsized here, is radical in its simplicity. The children with whom she’s been working since the early 1970s – whether from the Chilean Andes; South Africa; rural India; Houston, Texas; or (as sampled in this exhibition) Appalachia, Kentucky; Chiapas, Mexico; and Colombia – are taught the basics of the medium by Ewald and turned loose in their own contexts. They are encouraged to photograph their neighborhoods, their friends and family, their pets, their homes, the things they love – and their dreams and imaginings. Then they write about their pictures, or speak about them in taped interviews that are subsequently transcribed. The resulting images and texts, amplified with Ewald’s own pictures and commentaries, are eventually edited, with the children’s active involvement,

into the forms of books and exhibitions. (A selection was included in the 1997 Biennial of the Whitney Museum of American Art.)

What pulses through consistently in the products of this process is the exuberant spontaneity of young people given their first opportunity for the visual interpretation of their own lives. What Ewald and her students achieve is a turning of the tables, whereby children seize image-making power and become autonomous. As Ewald herself says, “It’s one of the few situations in a child’s life when they can control what’s around them, particularly adults.”

This exemplifies, in my opinion, what Marshall McLuhan meant when he defined the only proper function of present-day education as “civil defense against media fallout.” Whether or not Ewald’s young



Sebastián Gómez Hernández, *The devil is spying on the girls*, Chamula, Mexico, 1991, silver gelatin print, 8" x 10", courtesy James Danziger Gallery, New York