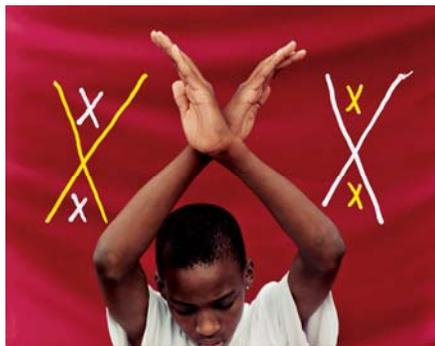


Wendy Ewald: American Alphabets

September 29 – December 31, 2006



Wendy Ewald (b.1951), *X, An African American Alphabet*, 2000, chromogenic print, courtesy of the artist.



Wendy Ewald (b.1951), *U, A Spanish Alphabet*, 1998, chromogenic print, courtesy of the artist.



Wendy Ewald (b.1951), *I, A White Girls Alphabet*, 2002, chromogenic print, courtesy of the artist.

A TEACHER'S GUIDE

*to the exhibition, alphabet projects,
& the Addison Photography & Writing Program*

CONTENTS

- Arranging a Museum Visit
- About the Exhibition & the Artist
- What are the *American Alphabets*?
- Designing a Project with Your Students
- Related Activities & Resources
- Addison Photography & Writing Program

ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

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FREE GROUP TOURS for up to 55 students are available on a first-come, first-served basis: TUESDAY-FRIDAY, 8AM-4PM

PUBLIC MUSEUM HOURS: TUESDAY-SATURDAY 10AM-5PM & SUNDAY 1-5PM

Admission to the museum is free!

Arranging a Museum Visit

This Curriculum Packet is designed to help you connect the Addison Gallery's exhibitions with your classroom curricula and the **Massachusetts Department of Education's Curriculum Frameworks**. Museum visits and related activities developed for this packet address numerous subject areas that are often cross-disciplinary and therefore can combine two or more frameworks.

The Addison Education Department is glad to assist you in matching exhibition content with the frameworks listed below or others you may wish to use. We can also help you organize your museum visit and pre- or post-visit activities to correspond with your grade level and current classroom topics in **English & language arts, sciences, history & social studies, politics, foreign languages, and the visual & performing arts**.

How to Arrange a Class Visit

- Decide which exhibition(s) is/are most relevant for your class or group to see based on this packet, viewing the exhibitions, and/or talking with education department staff.
- Select several possible dates and times to bring your class to the gallery. (Tuesdays through Fridays, 8 AM - 4 PM). Visits, ranging from 45 -90 minutes, may be accompanied by an art making or creative writing activity. Up to 55 students can be accommodated in the museum at one time.
- At least two weeks in advance and preferably more, contact **Rebecca Spolarich** at **(978) 749-4037** or **rspolarich@andover.edu** to schedule the visit and discuss ideas for guided tours and related activities that are particularly suited to your group.

How to prepare your class for a visit to the Addison

- Discuss the visit with your class before you come. This packet and a pre-visit to the museum can help you inform students about what they will see and do on their trip.
- Additional information about the artists and exhibitions is always available on request.
- In-class visits (usually including slide presentation and discussion) can sometimes be arranged.
- Mention that students will need to keep in mind: stay with the group, raise hands to ask or answer questions, no touching the artwork or the walls, no running, no food or gum.

What to expect when you are at the museum

- When you come in the front door of the gallery, we will greet you and direct students where to hang their coats and gather.
- After a brief introduction in the lobby, we will bring your students through the exhibition(s) of your choice. Students will be asked to discuss, interact with, and raise questions about the artwork that they see. We strongly encourage teachers to engage in the discussion to strengthen the connection between classroom and museum learning.
- If arranged in advance, the visit can conclude with an art making or writing activity.

Making the most of your visit

- Pre- and post-visit activities are the best way to get the most out of your museum visit.
- Project and discussion ideas provided in the **Art & Writing Activities** section of this packet will help you determine the best approach for the age level and subject of your class. (If this packet does not include information relevant to your class, we can help you make connections.)
- We are pleased to assist you in developing and executing extended projects that connect the classroom and the museum.

Introduction

Like most everyone I know, I first encountered written language in children's alphabet primers. 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. A picture of a shiny new car illustrated the letter C. My father ran a Chevrolet dealership in Detroit, so I thought this example had been dreamed up with me in mind. I assumed that the congruence between written expression and one's experience of the world held true for all children.

- Wendy Ewald (*American Alphabets*, 2005)

Does the language we speak shape the nature of who we are? How does our language reflect our culture? Parents and teachers introduce the written language to us as toddlers through ABC books and blocks and classroom alphabet borders. And just as words and sounds carry meaning, so do images. Examples like "A is for apple" seem arbitrary, but ultimately, the images we learn to associate with letters are markers of our larger culture and potentially the expectations that culture holds for us. Wendy Ewald related personally to "C is for car," but would it be as appropriate for a child whose family relied on public transportation or could not afford its own vehicle? As the American population becomes increasingly diverse, multilingual communities expand, and new forms of mass media such as the internet affect the way we communicate, how will alphabet primers adapt to reflect these changes in our American vernaculars?

In her photographic series *American Alphabets*, which includes *A Spanish*, *An African American*, and *A White Girls Alphabet*, artist and educator Wendy Ewald explores issues of language, education, and identity as they relate to youth in the United States. Collaborating closely with children, she asks them to define both their language and *themselves* through photography and writing, using the familiar – and potentially provocative – format of the ABC book or chart.

Teachers and students can use this exhibition to:

- learn more about young people with different language backgrounds
- discuss the importance of language and what it means to individuals, families, communities, and the world
- consider what language has to do with one's race, gender, ethnicity, and age
- inspire creative photography and writing projects of one's own that address language and identity
- prompt reflective and creative responses to imagery through written and verbal expression

About the Artist

Born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1951, Wendy Ewald has been committed to both photography and education since her high school years at Phillips Academy, from where she graduated in 1969. For over thirty years, Ewald has been teaching photography to children as a means of education and self- and community expression across the United States and in North and Central America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. As she teaches her students, she too learns about their communities, which she often photographs with her own camera.

In addition to being invited to develop photography projects with schools, communities, and museums around the world, Wendy Ewald is the director of the Literacy Through Photography (LTP) program at Duke University. While this program was established to promote and support the use of photography for language acquisition in the public schools in Durham, North Carolina, LTP has also become a national resource for teachers and schools with similar objectives.



Wendy Ewald with Carver Elementary School students, Richmond, VA.
Photograph by Regula Franz.

What are the *American Alphabets*?

It was my hope that a series of self-styled alphabets could allow us to see ourselves, and the issues of race and culture in a fresh light.

-Wendy Ewald (*American Alphabets*, 2005)



Wendy Ewald (b.1951), *M, A Spanish Alphabet*, 1998, courtesy of the artist.

A Spanish Alphabet

Wendy Ewald developed the initial spark for the *American Alphabets* project in 1997 when she learned of the unsettling mistreatment of second-language learners in some public schools. Setting out to use photography to teach language and explore its cultural implications, she began working with Central American immigrants at an elementary school in Durham, North Carolina, to create their own alphabet. The students discussed the significance of language and selected a word to represent each of the 30 letters in the Spanish alphabet. Next, they wrote definitions for the words and modeled them with objects and their bodies while Ewald photographed them. Ewald described the students' words, images, and definitions as "a kind of cultural self-portrait" which allowed others to understand them and their language heritage in a new way through a sharing of the project within the school.



Wendy Ewald (b. 1951), *A, An African American Alphabet*, 2000, courtesy of the artist.

An African American Alphabet

An African American Alphabet was created in 2002 by middle school students from Cleveland, Ohio, after spending time reading aloud writers like Toni Morrison who incorporate African American vernacular in their novels. Many conversations about race and class ensued as the students developed an alphabet including some words that are common in standard English but have additional meanings in African American usage, such as "Oreo" and "ill."

A White Girls Alphabet

In 2001-02, Wendy Ewald worked with female high school students from her alma mater, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, to create *A White Girls Alphabet*. Curious to explore changes in girls' language over time, Ewald and the participants discussed the ways women's lives – and consequently their language – had evolved since the early days of the school in the 1800s to her time at the school in the late 1960s to the present. Considering email, popular film, television, and adolescent lingo, the girls devised a list of words which revealed a poignant view of their individual and group identities characterized by their sexuality, relationships, emotions, and status in relation to boys.



Wendy Ewald (b.1951), *N, A White Girls Alphabet*, 2002, courtesy of the artist.

- How do the alphabets reflect differences/similarities between the groups of students?
- In what ways do the words and images demonstrate that the students are conscious of the characteristics which set them apart from others?
- What alphabets would you add to complete the *American Alphabets* series? Which one(s) would you be a part of and why?

Your Alphabet

Exhibited together, the *American Alphabets* create a dialogue about race, culture, gender, and age. The conversation further expands when your class considers what alphabet(s) they might create.

- How do your students regard themselves in relation to the rest of their school, community, country, or world?
- If your students were to design their own alphabet, what would be the theme and what would it look like?

Designing an Alphabet Project with Your Students

Developing an alphabet project can be as eye-opening for you as it is for the students, and you do not have to be a photographer in order to make it successful. Projects can be tailored to suit all grade levels.

Before you get started, think about the following on your own and with your students:

- **What is the goal of the project?** The process of making and writing about their own photographs will reinforce your students' ability to express themselves in art and writing, but what will they learn about themselves, their language, and others? How will you connect this project to your curriculum?
- **What kind of alphabet?** Depending on your curriculum and interests, the alphabet your students create may be based on age/grade, school, city/town, state, country, gender, ethnic/religious/cultural background, or other ways in which the students identify themselves.
- **What form will it take?** Your alphabet does not necessarily have to look like the photographic series Wendy Ewald produced. By using alternative materials such as magazine cut-outs, paint, poetry, or computer graphics, your alphabet can take on a variety of formats including drawings, posters, books, collages, CDs, websites, and more.



Wendy Ewald (b.1951), *T, An African American Alphabet*, 2000, courtesy of the artist.

Basic Steps to Getting Started

Before you hand students cameras or crayons, we recommend following the outline below to get prepared. Because every class is unique, no two projects will be alike. Be open to modifying your original plan should new ideas or challenges develop along the way. The following is a rough outline (adaptable for all ages) of how to organize an alphabet project:

1. Students learn to interpret images How can you “read” an image? Tune your students' visual, critical thinking skills by talking about art work or photographs in class. If you plan to use cameras, find out what your students think a photograph may represent. Practice observing, reacting to, and interpreting photographs. Also, consider a visit to the Addison or other art museum where museum educators can enhance students' visual literacy.



Example: Ask students to compare photographs seen in family albums, newspapers, and advertisements. Bring images to class and try these questions: What different purposes can photos serve? What messages do they send? How does the photographer's relationship with the subject affect the image produced? Compare two pictures of the same subject, i.e. a school portrait and a family photo of the same person. You can guide them through an extended looking exercise with 4-5 images for up to thirty minutes.

← Addison Director of Education Julie Bernson introduces photography to Lawrence fourth graders in a photography and writing project developed with teacher Mary Guerrero, 2005.

2. Students reflect on the meaning of language Get your students thinking about their identity as part of a group and as individuals, and about the ways language and identity relate to one another. Discuss the alphabet by looking at alphabet books, classroom borders, toys, etc. and discussing how each of the letters are illustrated. Who decides how the letters are illustrated and what do the illustrations imply about the people who speak and teach the language?

Example: Email and instant messaging have introduced new jargon with which young people are familiar but some adults are not. Discuss language's link to group identity. Ask students to list the words that may be common to them, but not understood by those without such technology. OR: Look at various alphabet books (some are listed on page 8) to discuss the differences between those produced for different audiences and at different times in history.

3. Students choose an alphabet theme and make a list of words Through a series of group discussions, activities, or games which prompt the students to reflect on their individual and group identities, determine what kind of alphabet(s) they will create. Assign letters to students and have them brainstorm words beginning with each letter. Look together at the words they selected and resolve which you will use. Students plan how they will illustrate their words.

Example: Students in *A White Girls Alphabet* spent a day deciding on words that illustrated their group identity. For P, they debated among "powerful," "preppy," "prissy," "porn," and "psyched" before settling on "PMS." Your students can choose words in groups or individually.

Example: A fourth-grade teacher led her class on a walk around town to help them gather ideas for their city alphabet. Students explore their city/town and make photographs along the way. Back in the classroom, they reviewed each other's photographs and discussed their different perspectives of their town.



Installation view of works from Wendy Ewald's *An African American Alphabet*.

4. Students learn to use a camera If you plan to use photography, be sure to spend some time instructing the students in how the camera operates and thinking about how to use the camera to create "a picture that tells a thousand words." With the camera(s) that the students will be using, practice "framing" a picture by having each student hold the camera up to their eye and using the viewfinder to set up their picture. Discuss the difference between quickly making a casual snapshot and a creating a photograph slowly and carefully to convey an idea or story. Remind the students to pay as much attention to the background of the picture as the foreground.

Example: Select a classroom object as an example of a subject to photograph. Ask the students to isolate it and determine how they would photograph it. Discuss what they see and how they would place it in the frame. For example, a close-up of an object/person on a simple background will focus the viewer's attention on the object/person, whereas a picture taken from further away will show the object/person in the context of what is around it.

5. Making photographs and sharing cameras Students decide how they will illustrate their word(s) by using their bodies or props or both. Set up an area in the classroom for taking pictures, walk around your school or city/town, or send cameras home with the students. Use a calendar to schedule dates for each student to photograph or be photographed. Coordinate when students will take cameras home and return them.

Example: For her 24 elementary students, a teacher collected funds to purchase six disposable cameras which the students took turns bringing home for two days at a time. She developed the pictures after the students had made three pictures each so that they could review them and look for things to change in the second series.

6. Writing definitions and putting together the alphabet After all of the photographs have been made, students can work individually or in groups to write definitions for each of the words pictured. You may have more than one word per letter and more than one definition per picture. Decide how to compile and present your alphabet. Once the alphabet is in its final form, set aside time for the class to discuss the alphabet and what they learned from the process of making it.

Example: Decide whether you are going to put all the pictures and definitions together as a book, exhibition, poster, website, CD, etc. Based on your format, you will then want to determine whether to type or hand-write the letters, words, and definitions and if you want them on a separate page or directly on the photograph.

7. Display the alphabet and create discussion beyond the classroom If possible, find a way to share your alphabet with the rest of the school, the students' families, and/or the greater community – and hopefully create further dialogue.

Example: Locate a space in your school, town library, town hall or local organization to exhibit student work. Invite classmates, friends, family, the public, and the press to see the alphabet and comment on it. Option: If other teachers you know have organized alphabet(s), exhibit the classes' work together to inspire interesting discussions.

Related Activities

If planning an alphabet project does not fit your schedule or budget, consider these other activities:

1. Students may design an acrostic with their names, illustrating each letter with an image that defines their personality, family background, culture, etc. Option: Individuals can each design their own alphabet primer as a self-portrait and share it with the class.
2. What words define a generation? Students select terms and phrases that are characteristic to their age group and demonstrate these through performances, poetry, music, photographs, drawings, or an illustrated dictionary. Share these with adults and possibly develop a new alphabet to teach them the new "language."
3. How does the language you speak shape your identity? Write a poem, narrative, or essay describing your language and the ways both it and others have impacted your life.
4. ABC poem: Instead of creating images, students create poems for each letter of a themed alphabet, choosing a word which represents both a letter and an idea about their identity.
5. After viewing *Wendy Ewald: American Alphabets* at the Addison Gallery, reflect on the groups represented and decide which alphabets should be added to make a complete series of American alphabets. Explain your point of view and then describe which group(s) you would be a part of and why.

Resources

More about Wendy Ewald

Ewald, Wendy and Alexandra Lightfoot. *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.) The educator's perfect guide to organizing a photography and writing project with students of all ages. Ewald explains her teaching strategy of literacy through photography and describes every aspect of the projects step-by-step and with illustrated examples.

Ewald, Wendy. *American Alphabets*. (Zurich: Scalo, 2005.) A catalogue of the current Addison exhibition with an essay by the artist. Also features *An Arabic American Alphabet*, a photographic series made with students in Queens, NY that is not included in the Addison exhibition.

Ewald, Wendy. *In Peace and Harmony: Carver Portraits*. (Virginia: Hand Workshop Art Center, 2005.) Documents Ewald's recent photographic portraits and outdoor banner exhibition featuring students from the George Washington Carver Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia.

Ewald, Wendy. *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*. (Zurich: Scalo; Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art; et al, 2000.) The catalogue for Ewald's retrospective exhibition of her photographic projects with children from around the world including Colombia, South Africa, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, and India.

Ewald, Wendy. *The Best Part of Me*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002.) "Children talk about their bodies in pictures and words," is the subtitle to this wonderful text which will inspire children to express themselves through photography and writing and to embrace their bodies and unique identities.

Literacy Through Photography <<http://cds.aas.duke.edu/ltp/spanishalphabet.html>> The home-site for Ewald's educational program at Duke University. Includes links to Ewald's work and provides a sample outline of her approach to organizing alphabet projects.

More about Photography & Writing Projects

Kodak: "Adding Snap to Language Arts"

<<http://www.kodak.com/global/en/consumer/education/lessonPlans/lessonPlan045.shtml>>

A first-grade teacher shares her lesson plan for incorporating photography into her language arts curriculum.

Related Fiction & Film

Alvarez, Julia. *How Tia Lola Came to Stay* (various editions in English and Spanish, 2001 and reprinted). Grades 5-8

Alvarez's heartwarming story about a ten-year-old boy at once embarrassed and comforted by his Dominican aunt's not-so-perfect English and flamboyant ways as he strives to fit into his new community in Vermont. The challenges and charms of learning English – and speaking “Spanglish” – are humorously yet poignantly revealed.

Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1991). Grades 9-12

In her partly autobiographical novel, Julia Alvarez describes four girls' transitional experience of moving from the Dominican Republic to the United States during adolescence. Intimate and eye-opening, the novel offers a personal perspective of immigration and cultural assimilation.

Do You Speak American? <<http://www.pbs.org/speak/>> Grades 9-12+

Educator materials from a PBS show that address the varied words, dialects, and accents that make up the ways Americans speak English, including lists of slang words by categories, discussions about “standard” and “official” English, and a game to challenge you to identify the accents of areas across the US.

Fleischman, Paul. *Seedfolks*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1997). Grades 5-8

Fleischman tells a story of a “blighted neighborhood transformed when a young girl plants a few lima beans in an abandoned lot. Slowly, Hispanics, Haitians, Koreans, young, and old begin to turn the littered lot into a garden for the whole community.”

Tan, Amy. “Mother Tongue” (in *Best American Essays*, Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. Ticknor and Fields, 1991. or online

<<http://www.people.virginia.edu/~pmc4b/spring98/readings/Mother.html>>.) Grades 9-12

Tan describes her experience growing up as an English speaker with a Chinese mother. A lesson plan for using the essay is available online: <http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=910>.

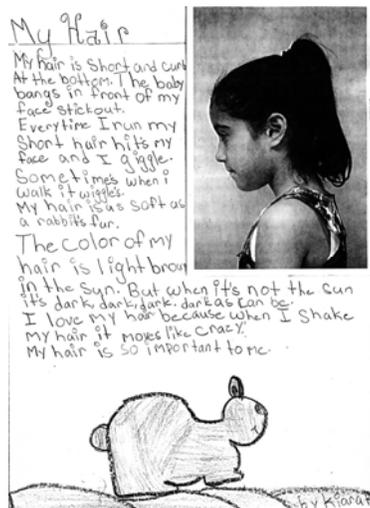
Alphabet Books – While geared toward early language learners, ABC books are valuable for exploring and discussing the cultural implications of language and gathering ideas for creating a class alphabet. The books suggested below and many others are available new and used through local libraries and stores or on-line book sources.

- Aboff, Maria. *Guatemala ABCs: A Book About the People And Places of Guatemala* (one in a series of geographically-based books on the cultures of different countries, including the US, Mexico, China, India, France, and more)
- Ada, Alma Flor. *Gathering the Sun: An Alphabet in Spanish and English*
- Aylesworth, Jim. *The Folks in the Valley: A Pennsylvania Dutch ABC*
- DK Publishing. *My First ABC Board Book*
- Greenaway, Kate. *A Treasury of Kate Greenaway* containing the “Apple Pie” ABCs
- Jay, Alison. *A Child's First Alphabet Book*
- Hausman, Gerald & Kelvin Rodrigues. *African-American Alphabet: A Celebration of African-American and West Indian Culture, Custom, Myth, and Symbol*
- Lee, Cynthia Chin. *A is for Asia*
- Kwas, Susan Estelle. *ABC Block Books*
- Mockford, Caroline. *Cleo's Alphabet Book*
- Schnur, Steven. *Summer: An Alphabet Acrostic*

The Addison Photography & Writing Program

In addition to guiding museum visits for students, the Addison coordinates long-term, collaborative photography and writing projects with educators, schools and organizations. Addison education staff, teachers, program leaders, curriculum

specialists, and Addison artists-in-residence developed the program which includes professional development, museum visits, classroom work, artist residencies, student picture-making and writing, and the presentation of student work through publications and public exhibitions. The program responds to the mandates of the Massachusetts Department of Education and can be adapted to any school, city, or state curriculum standards. While naturally lending itself to complementing language arts, the interdisciplinary nature of photography and writing projects offers creative and exciting ways to match curriculum frameworks in other areas such as art, math, social studies, local history, science, and literature.



An example of a fourth-grader's photographic portrait and poem produced during a project developed through the Addison's Photography & Writing Program.

Usually designed around themes in current exhibitions but not limited to these, the projects the Addison develops with teachers each take on their own character as they are tailored to meet the curriculum needs and specific interests of educators and students. Inspired by Wendy Ewald's work and using it as a model, the Photography & Writing Program emphasizes the use of students' own photographs to inspire autobiographical, descriptive, expository, and community-based writing, as well as to enhance written expression and visual literacy.

Alphabet Projects In-Progress

For ten years, teachers in local schools and beyond have taken advantage of the Photography & Writing Program. This fall, the Addison is involved with international collaborations among a group of teachers using Wendy Ewald's *American Alphabets* as a springboard for photography and writing projects focusing on regional/cultural identity. Elementary students in Lawrence, Massachusetts, New Orleans, Louisiana, Mumbai, India and Karachi, Pakistan will all create alphabets of their respective cities and exchange their images, writing, and ideas through email. Each school will also create a book of their project and there will hopefully be an exhibition to bring together the work of all of the students from the various cities.

Other Photography & Writing Projects

- A fourth grade class at the South Lawrence East School in Lawrence, MA created an exhibition for the school after a several months-long exploration of identity, portraiture, and photography. Visits to the Addison to see the exhibitions, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* and *In Focus: Collecting 150 of American Photography* raised an acute awareness of the potential for images to create and reinforce stereotypes. These visits were complemented by classroom discussions and photography and writing sessions in which the students created portraits of themselves and their peers.
- An English teacher at Lawrence High School has used photography and writing to enhance his teaching of realism and romanticism in nineteenth century literature. After reading the work of varied writers, the students use cameras to explore their own neighborhoods, looking for scenes they find to be either "romantic" or "realistic." Visualizing and then putting into words the distinction between these two literary forms helps to reinforce this aspect of the eleventh grade curriculum.

Collaborate with us! Contact the Education Department at any time to learn more about the Addison's Photography & Writing Program and the resources available to you to start a photography project of your own.