

Wendy Ewald I

"God raises his hand and sends dreams to us. This morning in my dream I was wondering about when we die—where we'll go. Is it America? My dreams come at midnight. I think I'll keep the camera with me and when the dream comes, I'll take the picture."
—Jayanti, eleven-year-old boy, Vichya, India

ALONG WITH the simplest of tools—Instamatic or Polaroid cameras, rudimentary darkroom equipment, black and white film—photographer Wendy Ewald has, for over twenty-five years, brought to the world's least heeded population an unheard-of invitation: that these youngest members of working-class and poor communities photograph their everyday lives. Ranging in age from six to sixteen, Ewald's photography students depict themselves, their families, their animals, and their neighborhoods, and then, when they have mastered the basics, they capture on film their inchoate, irrepressible, and sometimes bewildering dreams and imaginings.

Born in Detroit in 1951, Wendy Ewald came early to photography and teaching. After graduating from high school, where she learned to shoot and print pictures, she left for Canada, to photograph and to teach photography to Naskapi and MicMac Indian children. In the first of many grant applications she would compose to obtain photography's raw materials for her students, the seventeen-year-old photographer appealed, successfully, to the Polaroid Foundation for cameras and film. During summers in college at Antioch, she returned to Canada to teach.

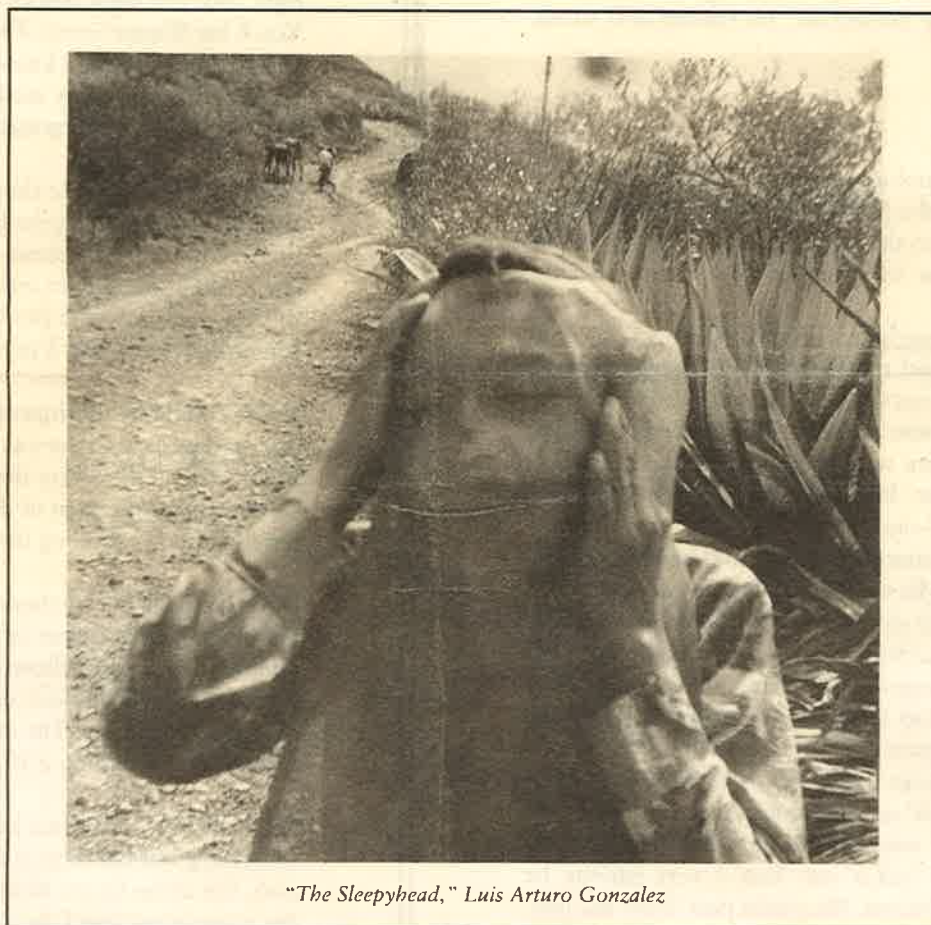
In 1975, she moved to an isolated and wildly beautiful corner of southeastern Kentucky, hoping to document coal-mining communities still governed by tradition and the rhythms of nature. "But the camera," she noted later, just "seemed to get in the way." Eager to know her neighbors and to be useful, Ewald offered to teach photography to students in Letcher County's elementary schools, including one of the last one-room schoolhouses in the state. "I wanted them to pay attention to their environment and to give them a sense of pride in who they are," she recalls. She believed photography was "ideal" for her young pupils, as it could be learned in a matter of weeks, "without frustration."

There were no photographs by other children to show her students. They found inspiration in album-cover portraits of country-western singers (whose characters they sometimes assumed in self-portraits) and in landscape photos illustrating seed catalogs. But they also took to heart Ewald's call to photograph what they knew firsthand. Denise Collins' picture of her dolls propped up alongside her kid sister documents that interval when any child smaller than yourself is a baby. And, more profoundly, it shows the animistic beliefs of our earliest years, in which all things—but especially our dolls and toys—are filled with life.

In their photography projects and the writings that accompanied them, the

children told of being the first generation of Appalachians to have leisure, free for the moment from the grim requirements of the mines, of subsistence living. And though they naturally mimicked the working world of adults, they are also seen relishing the sweetness of hard-won play.

During her seven years in Appalachia, Ewald developed the basic assignments she now uses wherever she goes—though in each situation she observes and listens attentively, and makes adjustments as she learns from her students how and what they see. When she was awarded a Fulbright fellowship in 1982 to photograph and to teach pho-



"The Sleepyhead," Luis Arturo Gonzalez

tography in the small village of Raquira, Colombia, Ewald found her students could not, at first, frame intended subjects within their cameras' viewfinders. Their mountain huts, she saw, had no windows. The very idea of looking at the world *through* a frame "was utterly foreign to them." She asked her students "to carry a piece of paper with a hole in it and look through it at everything they came upon," and soon the framing problem was solved.

Ewald knew the children had seen cameras before. In Raquira—which literally means "town of potters"—many children begin at age five to make pots, often in front of camera-wielding tourists. With access to cameras and their own darkroom, the children of Raquira began to know picture-taking as other than a form of historical subjugation, and to see it as a way to gain a measure of control—especially of their

own image. "I'm proud to know how to pick up the camera and take pictures," one student told Ewald near the close of her eighteen months in Colombia. "The gringo tourists always come to take pictures of us when we're making pots. When I was small I was excited by it. Now I'm ashamed to think I might look funny or distracted in pictures that might end up in a newspaper or a movie." Years later, when she went to work in Chiapas, Mexico, Ewald found in the Mayan descendants' aversion to being photographed a similar resistance to cultural theft.

Ewald has seen, again and again, how child-workers, lacking time to play, will deny imagining, or recollection of their dreams. Luis Arturo Gonzalez, a Raquira fifth-grader who would leave school the following year to become a shepherd, said he was taught to think only of his job. He described rising each morning before dawn to work, then walking two hours to the village to sell milk. School attendance—after all his morning tasks—allowed him to imagine something else, for a little while. "In what might be called the last year of [his] childhood," notes Ewald, Luis used his camera to produce a dream picture he called "The Sleepyhead."

often, when the deceased was female, by murder, carried out by husbands, or in-laws who had not received the huge dowries they demanded.

Violence and fear mark many of the stories and images produced by the children Ewald meets, reflecting the lack of autonomy they experience as children, as well as the dangers they face with other community members. In 1992, when she was working in Soweto and the Afrikaner community of Glenesk, Ewald's students told her they would only be able to photograph inside their homes or directly outside of them. "They talked about putting a camera up to your eye and you've lost your peripheral vision," she recalls. They feared "something violent might happen" and they would be caught unprepared. Yet the children found, through play, ways to depict what they knew without putting themselves in physical danger. They reached for metaphor. One girl in Soweto compared the rewinding of her film to the recollection of memories.

At the end of each project, the students exhibit their pictures: first, in the local school, and then—in ever widening circles of recognition—in the neighborhood bank, at a nearby university, and finally at a city art gallery, often with newspaper and television coverage. Ewald makes provisions for the photography work to continue, leaving equipment, training people, and making agreements for maintenance of community darkrooms.

When she comes home to rural Dutchess County, New York, to the one-hundred-year-old house she shares with her husband, cinematographer Tom McDonough (and now their infant son, Michael), Ewald brings her photographs, along with the children's images, into another world. Her work with each group of children is process-oriented, like a one-time performance, in a particular time and place. When she brings the images back, she becomes a translator, but—like the anthropologist who described a "typical" Eskimo family as one with mother, father, children, and an anthropologist—she is a translator who acknowledges her part in making the story.

Three books of pictures and stories produced by Ewald stem from her work as a teacher: in 1985, *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories of Children of the Appalachians*, with her pictures and preface introducing the children's work; *Magic Eyes: Scenes from an Andean Girlhood* in 1992, with a text derived from stories told by Alicia and Maria Vasquez, and a combination of Ewald's photographs and photographs by Raquira's children; and a just-released collaborative book, *I Dreamed I Had A Girl In My Pocket*, including stories and photographs by the children of Vichya.

Ewald was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1992, allowing her to spend less time writing grants and more with children. Newly emboldened by their cameras, her students realize they can stop time, direct action, even picture their elders as imperfect. Working alongside them, their photographer-teacher says she has often felt "we were like accomplices in a secret game. We knew as photographers that sometimes we had to trick the adults into letting us take the pictures we wanted."

—Holly Metz