

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa is a photographer and writer. His work advances a theory of contemporary images, via both a documentary photography practice and written criticism. He works with original and appropriated texts and images, in order, as he says below, to explore “a set of histories and genealogies by way of which contemporary conditions...become normal and, in some sense, invisible.”

I met Wolukau-Wanambwa in summer of 2017, while teaching in the Image Text MFA program at Ithaca College, and our friendship has continued to evolve in and around various arts spaces in New York City. He has photographed me (at my request), so I know a little about how it feels to be the subject of one of his portraits. It's a revealing experience and also one that's impossible to prepare for; I'm still thinking through what took place during those fractions of a second.

In fall of 2018, Roma Publications will publish Wolukau-Wanambwa's debut photobook, *One Wall a Web*. The book is composed of landscape photographs and portraits he made of near-strangers up and down the east coast of the United States, along with a selection of archival images from the late 1940s and '50s documenting American popular culture, two text collages and an original essay. His photographs evince the challenging work of establishing a relationship of trust with someone one does not know, in order to capture a time and a place, a point of view and an experience. These documentary portraits exist in ambivalent dialogue with the archival images, which, while often aggressively cheerful or seductive, portray acts of violence and white supremacy. The archival images affect the viewer's reading of Wolukau-Wanambwa's contemporary work, inspiring questions around the meaning of the photograph as a gesture or act, particularly in light of the way in which this technology of spectacle and memory has, historically, been deployed in the US.

Our conversation was conducted over Skype in mid-July of 2018, and then transcribed and edited by me, with notes from Wolukau-Wanambwa.

—Lucy Ives

It's Not the Economy: An Interview With Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa *by Lucy Ives*



Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, *Moore Avenue*, 2015, photograph, 31.74 cm x 25.4 cm
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Lucy Ives: In a piece of criticism you wrote, there's a quotation from Susan Buck-Morss. She talks about the artwork in modernity as having "the power to interpret reality itself as an illusion." In my own peculiar reading of the present, we've dispensed with reality. But I still see art as a form of critique. You often write about a "logic" associated with photographs; I wonder if you could say something about that, as well as how you understand photographs' relationship to reality, so-called.

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa: I think the photograph has become an almost zero-level instrument of communication with which to reshape the real, with a rate of acceleration and diffusion that's really hard to wrap one's mind around. This has happened somewhat independently of society's collective work of developing widespread visual literacy, so pictures are always acting on us in ways we're not attuned to or willing to consider. "Logic" has been a term for me to clarify that there's a calculus at play. By making a series of photographs for a book, I'm also trying to valorize and interrogate a certain logic, or way of approaching reality.

LI: I'm curious about the significance of the book as a vehicle for photographs. I think of Stéphane Mallarmé's utopian idea that "everything in the world exists in order to end up in a book."

s^w-w: A photographic book is as close to the actual thing the photographer wants you to hold in your hands as they can get. A photobook affords a photographer more narrative control than an exhibition affords an artist. It's also as close as we can get to giving people democratic access to a photographic experience, with the understanding that most people cannot go to the places where our work is shown. This is why I love writing about photobooks, because they represent what the photographer wanted to put into my hands, from first image to last, from the cover to the end papers. I fell in love with photography in book form long before I went to go see it in museums or galleries.

LI: I want to move beyond the material nature of publishing to the interpersonal. How do you interact with someone, in the course of making a portrait?

s^w-w: I make photographs with a 4×5 view camera, which is a modestly transformed version of a 19th-century camera. Its design is almost as old as the earliest cameras we now think of as producing photographs. It sits on a tripod. The one I use is made of beautiful dark wood. A dark cloth snaps on the back, and I put my head underneath. It's an odd spectacle to see me out on the streets making photographs, as there aren't a lot of people who are both able and crazy enough to spend the kind of money it costs to make pictures this way, and who do it on a regular basis. I'm always aware that my decision to make an image out in public turns me into an image for others.

When I ask people if I can make their portrait, the question or approach is always the same. I say, "Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you," and then explain that I'm working on a portrait project. I'll say, "Would you have some time for me to photograph you?" Those are basically the only elements of the request. The whole thing is over in 10 seconds. I'll walk directly toward the person I want to photograph. I don't dawdle and flit around. I want to be straightforward. I also want to leave myself as few options to chicken out as possible.

Once someone says yes, I'm interested in everything that prevents them from becoming overly invested in the

outcome. I don't share cellphone pictures of the frame. I don't carry Polaroid film. I try to dissuade anyone who might want to come gather around. I try to create a bubble in which there's just myself, the person or people I'm photographing and the camera. One of the main ways I do that is by being quiet, and letting silence grow. I concentrate on how people move, and I think about light. I jealously defend the moment, but I don't say what I want, because the truth is that I'm not sure. I'll ask whomever I'm photographing to do things that seem like a variant of what I've seen them do before. Like, I would ask, how would you sit if you're waiting for a friend to pick you up — or, if you're leaning against this wall, what's the most comfortable way for you to lean, is it on this side of your body or that. But I don't say, "Sit here, move your leg, now think about your dead grandmother!" I worry that that would signal something that constructs an anticipation of the image.

Unless you know the weird optics of the view camera, which you can morph in profound ways by adjusting the relationship between the lens and film plane, you don't really know what I'm seeing. And I don't want you to obsess about it. When a person turns their gaze on the camera lens, a lot of these little inflections can change, but I'm still drawn to something that seems to belong to people before I even utter the question of whether I might photograph them. There's a kind of accident that can happen, and it might be a fleeting half-expression utterly unrelated to the moment we're experiencing together, but nevertheless resonant and compelling. I'm most invested in getting close to that. In a weird way, a person's anticipatory sense of the image we're making together gets in the way of me making images, at least in the way I'm trying to.

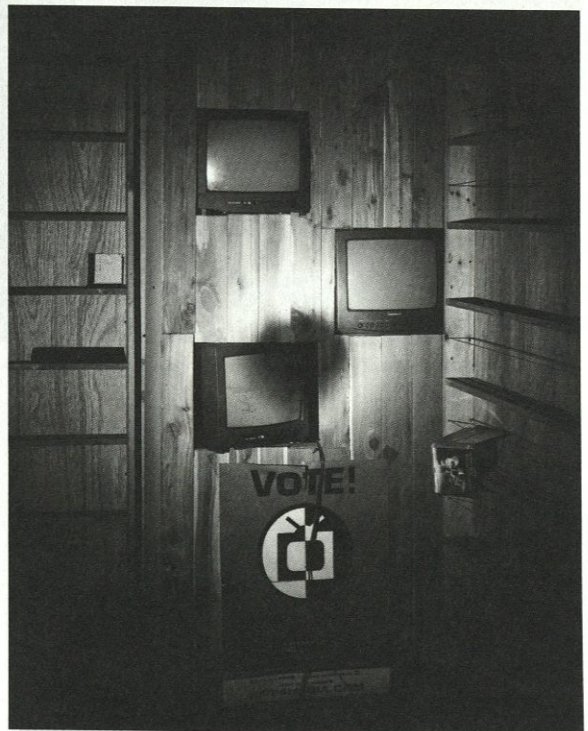
LI: If, as you say, images get in the way, how did that play into your decision to include archival photographs in *One Wall a Web*?

s^w-w: The appropriated archival photographs turned up by accident. It began when I encountered photographs owned by a man who had lived in Richmond, Virginia, in the special collections at the Virginia Commonwealth University library. He was a member of the FBI who ended up being murdered with an axe in his own house. He had collected these mugshots of people who had been arrested. And there were candid portraits mixed in. It was apparent that these were photographs of people who were bound up in the criminal justice system in some way. I made enlargements of the portraits and mugshots and put them up in my studio. Then a friend urged me to look for found photographs on eBay, and I started looking for 4×5 negatives. I knew I didn't want prints. That was one of the first things I determined, that I wanted to buy archival negatives that were materially equivalent to my contemporary ones.

But when I'm talking about images getting in the way of me making images, I'm thinking narrowly about not wanting people I'm making portraits of to respond to a pre-existing expectation; that's the sense in which I try to keep images out. What I would say about the archival images is that as it became clearer to me what kind of work I was making, I understood that my own words or pictures were never going to cover all the terrain I was interested in. Other voices would be needed. The archival negatives immediately gave me a clear sense of a set of histories and genealogies by way of which contemporary conditions in which I was living and working had become normal and, in some sense, invisible. Maybe, in contradistinction to what I said earlier, this means other images also freed me to make images differently.



Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, *Armed woman shot by police, Chicago, 1957*, 2015,
 photograph, 25.4 cm x 31.74 cm
 PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, *Near Duke Drive*, 2015,
 photograph, 31.74 cm x 25.4 cm
 PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, *Hancock Street*, 2015, photograph, 31.74 cm x 25.4 cm
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, *Shirley Temple in Dimples* (1936), 2016,
 photograph, 31.74 cm x 25.4 cm
 PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

L: How?

s^w-w: I got more and more interested in describing the world in attenuated ways. The photographs became more oblique. Where I stood and how I made a picture shifted. And the way I made landscape photographs changed a lot. I have to add a caveat to this and say that I am an unreliable critic of my own work. However, I think the landscape photograph became a way for me to get at the pathological investment in violence that I understand to be central to American history and culture.

L: I think about one archival photograph you include, of a white woman who has a neck wound, being treated in a hospital.

s^w-w: The caption for that photograph is *Armed Woman Shot by Police, Chicago, 1957*. The woman is white, being attended to by an all-black staff. She's framed centrally, looking out directly at the camera, on her back. Her face is plaintive, and wracked with pain. She's surrounded by these black hands. They're not exactly forceful, but what they're helping to make happen is painful.

I think – to clarify what this image is doing in my book – that the kind of social encounter I'm interested in by way of photography approximates one that precedes or can precipitate violence. I'm interested in the fact that people believe they know things about a person on the basis of the body that person is carrying around and are often impelled to act on the basis of that "knowledge." I think the bulk of what informs such violent acts is broader and deeper than individual bias. The kind of power we're reckoning with here can't be ratcheted down to the manageable abstraction of an individual. Anti-black violence is much bigger than that.

We've gone through this period in America where people were trying to say, "It's the economy, stupid." But it's not the economy. It's racism, which not only buttresses the capital economy but has its own economies of desire. These things are important in relation to portraiture because how we look at one another has enormous bearing on how we act.

So, if people travel to the image index in the back of my book and see the titles of the photographs there, they might discover *Armed Woman Shot by Police, Chicago, 1957*, and they might intuitively think they know what kind of guilty perpetrator will appear in that photograph. But it's *that* particular elegant yet pained white woman. She's being made to suffer by black excellence, being cared for by people who are structurally subordinate to her. What might those black nurses and doctors have been thinking about what would happen if they were doing the same thing as their patient, bearing firearms in front of the police? You have to work to understand what is going on in that room, which is about much more than just one person's pain.

L: Your inclusion of the archival photographs activates them as records of the society that produced them. I'm wondering how you see documentary photography's relationship to the work of deploying images in an evidentiary way, and how you understand the term "documentary," more generally.

s^w-w: Documentary, at least etymologically, has to do with pedagogy. In the American history of photography, the Farm Security Administration photographs from the '30s play a pivotal role. Documentary photography was used to re-adhere the public to the state, as a scaffold

within which national recovery should occur. The images were meant to be transparent, their meanings stable. Of course, they aren't and never were, as *Armed Woman Shot by Police, Chicago, 1957* also shows.

When we get to the '50s, '60s and '70s, there's this crop of new documentary photographers including Robert Frank, and in 1967 there's this seminal exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *New Documents*, that features Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand and Diane Arbus: a generation of photographers whose "aim has not been to reform life, but to know it, not to persuade but to understand," as John Szarkowski said at the time.

Szarkowski's commentary effects a clear ethical and artistic division between documentary practice in the '30s and in 1967. At that point, individual creative genius was to be valorized over and against the public sphere or the national body. I have just as much criticism for that notion as I do the statist model. It's an evasion to claim that rhetorical objects like photographs do not seek to persuade their viewers.

A lot of people in contemporary practice have rejected the term "documentary photographer." I don't have any problem with it. I'm willing to speak candidly about the ways in which my photographs are constructed fictions. I can speak to that person who's invested in a statist model, who would look at a photograph and say, "This person = good, this circumstance = bad," as though the photograph always only confirms its caption or my best intent. And I'm willing to have an argument with another person who claims that *all* my book contains is my own creative expression. It plainly does not. Both positions tend toward an anti-social absolutism – one by closing down interpretive responsibility, one by ignoring the politics of the material world.

What I'm trying to "document" isn't reducible to the individual people who loaned their time to me so I could make their picture, nor is it reducible to the places where I made landscapes. It's not reducible to singular images. I'm trying to photograph a non-figurable operation of power. I'm trying to photograph the literal fact of something evanescent: the violent operations of white power in a process of normalization and legitimation, which is experienced radically differently, depending on one's race, class, gender or sexual identity.

Plainly, while the term documentary stays stable, what defines it as a practice varies over time. Sometimes a historically normative form of artistic expression is useful as a way to communicate, in part *because* of the limitations of its values and rules, as in *Armed Woman Shot by Police, Chicago, 1957* for instance. I happen to agree with many critiques of humanist documentary photography, and I am also equally committed to describing what's happening in the world because it's fucked and we need to do something about it. I'm trying to work out a way as an artist of holding to both of these positions simultaneously, because they're not contradictory. How we see and how we act have a history. The images I make or appropriate, and the texts I write or appropriate, are also working in relation to those histories, sometimes in sympathy, often by way of subversion. This is the material I have to work with and this is the best way I know how. I'm simultaneously marveling at the world, and being quite frank about terror.

L: Do you think the people you photograph are aware of these goals? Can they be?

s^w-w: It's a lot to saddle somebody with. And this comes back to my concern about pre-empting an incident in which something else might occur. I know what I believe,

but I don't know what's going to happen when I photograph. That not knowing is vitally important, because I can be right about a person and categorically wrong about the portrait that might ensue. If someone asks me what I'm doing, I'll say I'm interested in how people are living in this particular moment. I'm interested in what it feels like and what it looks like. I'm interested in what it means. I'll always be interested in that because I make portraits. I'm interested in complex moments of shared relation. I don't outline my politics, because the risk is that then you're not only asking that people collaborate, but also endorse your views. And they may not! In sharing my beliefs, I might also imply that the portrait we make will necessarily confirm my views, and that in that sense they will be willing accomplices to my politics. I've photographed people with whom I disagree profoundly. Whether that disagreement has anything to do with how they look in a given place and time is rarely, rarely relevant.

L: How can it be that that's not relevant?

s^w: I made portraits of this young guy for a period of about a year when I was in Richmond. He harboured some deeply anti-Semitic beliefs and conspiracy theories about world governance. At certain points I was trying to find a way to photograph those beliefs, but they weren't visible. Other things were visible – scorn, disdain, a kind of aloofness and insecurity – but, those might add up to something different in an image. So, what's my responsibility? If this person isn't covered in swastikas, how do I photograph his anti-Semitism? Is it enough to define him? I could use a caption. I could quote him. But then what am I asking you to bring to this photographic encounter except an excommunicative judgment? And what work does the portrait do to reckon with the complex structures of feeling from which views like this grow? Since the photographic portrait approximates and at the same time creates a certain social encounter, it's important to deal with the uncertainty inherent in our relations with the unknown and to question how we think and act in that suspended potentiality.

Lucy Ives is the author of the novels *Impossible Views of the World* and the forthcoming *Loudermilk, or the Real Poet, or the Origin of the World*. Her writing has appeared in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *The Baffler*, *Granta*, *Vogue*, and at newyorker.com. She teaches in the Image Text interdisciplinary MFA program at Ithaca College, as well as at NYU's Center for Experimental Humanities, and is editing a collection of writings by the artist Madeline Gins.

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa is a photographer, writer and former editor of the contemporary photography website *The Great Leap Sideways* (2011–2017). He has contributed essays to catalogues and monographs by Vanessa Winship, George Georgiou, Rosalind Fox Solomon, Marton Perlaki and Paul Graham, been an artist-in-residence at Light Work, guest edited the *Aperture Photobook Review*, and written for *Aperture*, *FOAM*, Rutgers University Press, the Barbican Centre and The Photographer's Gallery. He has lectured at Yale, Cornell, New York University and The New School.