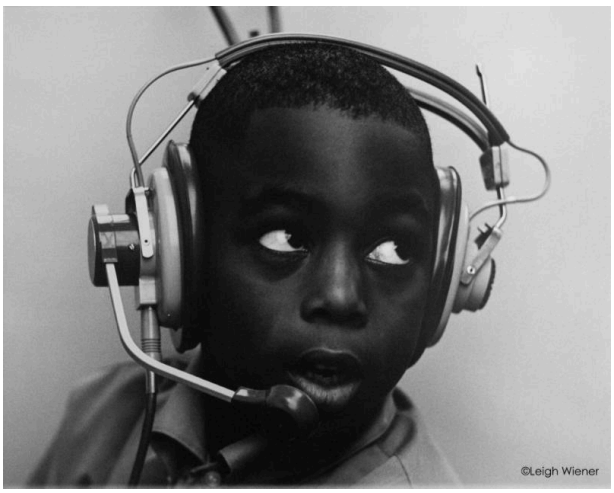
Basic Detail Report



Frankie

Date

December 1966

Medium

Gelatin silver print on ektalure paper

Description

This photograph taken by Leigh A. Wiener depicts Frankie, a boy from the slums participating in a computer education experiment conducted by IBM, Stanford, and the US government. The test conducted was about computer assisted education. Wiener recalls the day the photo was taken: "He didn't look like the kind of kid who could teach anybody anything about market research, but as Albert Einstein once said while sipping a cup of hot chocolate in a Swiss cafe, 'You can't always tell for certain about things and people.' I have always believed that if researchers were more curious than analytical, their results might be more accurate. Unfortunately, large institutions find the exercise of curiosity almost impossible. Analysis seems more their style. One August afternoon this simple truth led to a big misunderstanding shared by three of this country's finest institutions and a lone black lad of nine. His name was Frankie and he lived in as terrible a ghetto as America had to offer, East Palo Alto, California. But his luck was about to change. He had been selected as one of the 'chosen forty.' The United States government and IBM (a computer company almost as large as the United States government) and Stanford University were pooling their resources in an effort to research computer assisted education. There would be about forty guinea pigs. All under twelve and all black. Frankie would be among them. The test tube was the gym of a run-down school in East Palo Alto. Forty small booths were along the inside walls, each containing a television screen, a light pen, and a set of earphones. The student to be tested would sit in a chair facing the TV screen, wearing the earphones, and holding the light pen at the ready in his hand. Instructions were given to the student through the earphones. It was a multiple choice type of test. A picture would flash on the screen and next to it would be three possible answers. As soon as the student thought he knew the correct answer he was to touch the spot of the TV screen with his light pen that indicated his choice. Accuracy and speed were paramount, and to measure the student's reaction time a young female teaching assistant stood next to each youngster with her stop watch primed. Using a Nikon with a 400mm lens I was focusing on a boy about thirty feet away. On the TV screen flashed a picture of an automobile. Next to it were three possible answers: something to eat; something to wear; something to ride in. The boy seemed to stare at the screen. Suddenly he spun around to his left on the swivel chair. Making a complete 360 turn, he stopped and stared again at the screen. The girl's stop watch was moving, but the boy made no move with his light pen. Instead, he spun around again, only this time to his right. Still no effort to give an answer. Completing his turn, he paused just long enough to readjust his feet and took another spin on the chair. But this was a little different. It was a slow, deliberate spin, and

upon finishing it, he took his light pen and touched the spot on the screen that read, 'Something to ride in.' The relative silence was shattered by the blast of a whistle. It was break time. My subject hopped off his chair and ran outside to claim his milk and cookies and probably share his experiences with the other kids. His teaching assistant headed to an office to go over her notes and timings with the man in charge of the adventure, a Doctor of Education from Stanford. I decided to follow her. 'I believe, Doctor, that Frankie has a psycho-motor learning problem,' she said as she handed him her notes. 'Hmm,' uttered the professor as he shuffled through her papers, 'I believe you're right.' The doctor 'hmm'ed again. 'Interesting,' he finally said, 'it took him 63 seconds to answer the car question, yet he answered it correctly.' 'Well,' said the teaching assistant, 'if you ask me...' Since I hadn't asked her, I decided not to wait for her comment, but instead headed out to the playground. As soon as he saw me, Frankie approached. Pointing to my camera with the 400mm lens, he said, 'Hey man, did you really take my picture with that?' 'I did,' I answered. He started to gently touch the barrel of the lens with the three middle fingers of his right hand. With his eyes on the camera, he said in a somewhat bashful manner, 'When I get big, I'm going to take pictures...would you let me look through this camera?' As he finished the question he looked up at me with an expression that seemed to say he was sorry he asked the question. Without replying, I took the camera strap off my shoulder and held the camera so he could look through it. By now, about ten or twelve other kids had gathered around us. Frankie sensed the feeling of importance the camera was giving him. Pretending to be unaware of the others, he took his eye away from the view-finder, looked up at me, and in a voice somewhat louder than before said, 'Man, you really took my picture with this? Man!' 'I did,' I answered. 'Now you tell me something.' The crowd around us had taken away any shyness Frankie may have displayed several minutes before. 'What's that, man? What do you want to know?' asked Frankie. 'Tell me,' I said, 'didn't you really know that a car was something to ride in?' The boy's face broke into a big grin. 'Sheet, man, sheet. I knew that. I knew it. I been in a car.' 'But it took your over a minute to figure out the right answer,' I said. The grin left Frankie's face. His eyes became very large and I can't recall ever seeing a more sincere expression on anyone's face. 'Man,' he said slowly, 'man... I got three swivels out of that.'"

Dimensions

16 × 20 in. (40.6 × 50.8 cm)