



Laurie and Sharon Lockhart, 1970

Sharon Lockhart's projects usually begin with a concept, through which she then finds her subject. For example, for her 1999 film *Teatro Amazonas*, she began with the following concept: shoot a thirty-minute roll of film, from a single angle, of an audience listening to a piece of music created as a score for the film. This device led her to an historical opera house in Manaus, Brazil, which only then led her to the people who would become her subject: the 308-member audience featured in the film, each member of which she interviewed and selected personally in collaboration with a demographer to create a representative cross-section of the city's population, a portrait of Manaus. She arrived at her *Pine Flat* project somewhat differently, however: one could say its subject, or subjects, found her. Looking for a place to get away, she has said, she almost accidentally happened upon the town, a former ranching community in the Sierra Nevada foothills, now a bedroom community for families who find their work down the mountain. And given its demographics, during the day Lockhart often found herself the lone adult amidst the town's children. That fact, coupled with her contagious curiosity and ease in their company, gradually led the children to approach her. Lockhart being Lockhart, a film began to crystallize. *Pine Flat*, the place, began to metamorphose into *Pine Flat*, the project.

My first encounter with the project came in December 2003, when I saw rough cuts of several shots that Lockhart had made for the film *Pine Flat*. All summer scenes, they included segments of the completed film portraying two sisters swinging, two children playing in a creek, and a boy playing a harmonica. One might think that the startling, real-time stare that Lockhart imposed on each scene's subject, the fixed camera calm that allows the eye to take in the scope of each frame and its myriad details at the pace of activities as quiet as reading or sleeping, would have left the most conspicuous first impression. But what struck me most viscerally on that first screening was the incredible luminosity of those ten-minute-long shots: the densely concentrated color and pervasive all-over light. Qualities that should have cancelled each other out instead intensified each other, a doubling that in turn catalyzed a certain psychological urgency, underscored by the only partially audible ambient sound.

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Curiously, for me these formal environmental effects preceded any real register of the children the environment contained. But once I acclimated to the environment of each shot, the children themselves riveted my attention. Lockhart's tightly controlled compositions, coupled with her painterly treatment of the images, had focused my gaze equally on landscape and figure, though not necessarily simultaneously, by making each distinct yet interdependent, and by giving the viewer sufficient time to look. I became intrigued by her transformation of the play between figure and ground in formal terms into a meditation on what it might mean to reside in this community. Through her active involvement of the Pine Flat children in the practical realization of the film, Lockhart appeared to be transposing a minimalist aesthetic of repetition into a sociological preoccupation with habitual behavior and everyday activities while reclaiming the ethic of collaboration with one's subjects advocated by the filmmaker Jean Rouch. Even in those first rough cuts, I was impressed by the equivalence she established between a painterly figure/ground and a more ethnographic subject/field.

Like Lockhart's previous photography and film projects, *Pine Flat* is predicated on an engagement with a community—in this case, her personal experiences with the children, who in many ways stand for the town as a whole, and with a place that she felt connected to in part because it is similar to places where she grew up. In its totality, *Pine Flat* comprises three correlates for the community: a film, a series of nineteen photographic portraits of the children who live there, and a series of three photographs representing the landscape at different times of the year. The film is structured as two halves: the first half consists of six ten-minute shots, each featuring a single child absorbed in a solitary activity; the second, six ten-minute shots of pairs or groups of children interacting with one another.¹

Like Rouch, in *Pine Flat* Lockhart refuses to feign objectivity, to use the camera merely as a recording device or to suggest that it creates the reality observed. The camera that she used to shoot the film—the first film she shot herself, without a film crew—was crucial in this respect. For this project, she purchased and used an Aaton camera—a 16mm camera invented by the engineer Jean-Pierre Beauviala in 1967 and first used widely in the political filmmaking

that emerged out of the events of May 1968 in France.² This camera provided filmmakers with a single reference to both film and audio takes by clearly indicating on the film stock, as well as on the magnetic tape, the precise time that it recorded the images and the sounds. While until then conventional filmmaking had to resort to artifice to show the existence of two different but coterminous realities, the Aaton enabled filmmakers to reconstitute the simultaneity of events after the fact. It consequently revolutionized filmmaking for a generation of politicized filmmakers, ranging from documentarians such as the Maysles Brothers, to directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Louis Malle. It permitted Lockhart to examine the camera as an extension of the director's way of seeing, to bring art and life closer together, and to open up new, more personal yet more analytic possibilities for an artist seeking to create a portrait of a community.

Indeed, what we perceive in *Pine Flat* is a certain affection between director and actor that resembles parenting at its best: Lockhart appears to enable the children to play themselves. As a result, the performances they offer up feel neither acted, nor surreptitiously observed. Almost without exception, there is an absence of both self-consciousness and posing. In fact, her efforts to work collaboratively with the children to select and reconstruct activities that feel familiar and routine, but not obligatory—to structure play as work—is integral to her direction. Hanging out with the children leveled the playing field, allowing her to communicate outside the proscribed role of “adult” and to initiate this collaborative process. Together, she and the children crafted a series of activities that simultaneously seem natural while calling attention to all that is artificial in the filming. For example, even in an activity as near-static as that of the girl reading on the grass, the trailing of eyes along lines of text and the allotment of time before a page is turned, the action of turning a page comes off convincingly: the reader seems to be genuinely absorbed in her book, yet we can also feel Lockhart behind the camera, equally absorbed, waiting to be surprised. This is not to say, however, that there are not moments that feel a bit like working at play, as when we are made to squirm along with the boy playing the harmonica as he finds himself flicking bugs off his skin.

Amidst this familiarity, Lockhart persists in establishing distance

from the children. First, as in her previous films, she imposes a seemingly objective structuralist logic—namely, the decision to divide the film into twelve ten-minute-long continuous shots. Second, she is at pains to reinforce a sense of intense remove from commercial culture, hemming her shots with stands of trees or horizon-less fields and pools, introducing the external world only via the children’s contemporary clothing, sometimes emblazoned with logos, or the sounds of cars, trucks, buses, planes, or gunshots. And third, the children’s activities, however carefully culled from conversations with and observations of the children themselves, are formalized and limited to small movements or repeated sounds—the sleeper’s twitching feet as he sleeps wedged between a few rounded rocks on a mossy knoll, the reader’s turning pages as she reads on the grass, the hunter’s flicked sticks and slowly scanning gaze as he waits for prey in the forest, the hands-in-pocket-rocking-steps of a boy standing alone in the landscape, waiting for his school bus to ascend the foothills spread below him.

As these brief descriptions suggest, Lockhart insists on locating each of these children in a landscape, which she posits as a containing structure, and on giving them roles to play. Within this containing structure, and within the roles she contrives, their personalities spill out through the little leakages that occur as a result of the unplanned accident, the things that defy her control. The heightened perception she makes possible in this way allows every blip, laugh, shout, or lifting of a gun to register. Lockhart reinforces this attention to isolated gestures by repeating certain isolated formal effects in otherwise different scenes.

I am not the first to observe, for example, that Lockhart begins and ends her film with frontal shots of figured landscapes veiled in neutral precipitation. Snow steadily falls in the first shot, as a girl searching for her friend cries, “Ethan, where are you?” A gnarly, fog-enrouded oak tree occupies the full frame in the last shot. And the second half of the film begins with a snowy scene in the forest shot from above and on a clear day, foregrounding a meander of dark tree branches and the upward zigzag path of a group of children who enter the frame from the bottom, ascend the hill, and then exit the frame from the top. The cumulative effect of these three shots is both

to envelop the rest of the film in a kind of insulating whiteness and to thread the two halves of the work together. Lockhart uses flashes of red similarly throughout the film, primarily on the children’s clothing, to create another more subliminal weave, or counterpoint, to the mostly modulated and tonal landscapes within which she sites the children. This intensification through repetition is one of the many ways she builds complexity, moves the film forward, and allows abstract formal effect to register psychologically without resorting to narrative.

For pure painterly complexity, the shot of the boy and girl playing in the creek is incomparable. Positioning the girl, wearing a pale pink shirt, and the boy, shirtless and with pale white skin, like a nucleus in the center of the concentrically rippled creek, she surrounds these two figures with a flattened reflective field of dappled color—blues and pinks and yellows and oranges. The effect is more Claude Monet than Monet himself, as if Lockhart had captured the source of his interest in refracting light as color. More to the point, though, is how Lockhart neutralizes this aggressively beautiful scene by recording the children’s running chatter as another kind of abstract dapple, only occasionally broken by one of them breaking the surface to dive for a fish.

The near-perfect equilibrium in this scene between children and creek creates a sense of something close to harmony, of a calm that the next scene, in which two boys and a girl use Airsoft pellet guns to intensify the emotional anxiety of a teenage triangle, disturbingly disrupts. Lockhart has said that for the film, the more natural a subject is with regard to his or her surroundings, the greater the appearance of artificiality, and these scenes seem to make us conscious of her point. The creek scene, in which the innocence and absorption of the children in their conversation and play enable us to relax enough to enjoy the scenery, as it were, as parents do when their children seem safely occupied, makes us conscious of the exaggerated painterly effects Lockhart contrives. In the pellet gun scene, the awkwardness of children of that age, and the effort that this awkwardness imposes on even the most spontaneous gestures of affection or aggression, make us equally conscious of things like rain and the calculated contrast of red clothes against verdant green woods. This

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scene has more spontaneous action, more swearing, more erotic charge, than any of the others; and Lockhart’s selective amplification of the conversation and the sound of the rain only intensify the sense of anxiety it interjects. Again, the full effect owes to the equivalence she establishes between the darkly dense stand of trees that cut through the middle ground and the almost stereotyped adolescent segue from flirt to taunt. This is one of the few scenes in which the children move *behind* a barrier of sorts, into a space that could be less protected. But overall, the painterly composition again contains the action.

More abstractly, the almost obvious formal/psychological equivalences I am trying to sketch—between innocence and light or adolescence and shadow and between the more over-arching containment of activities that seem just short of absorbing, restless and latent with an anticipation of change—extend Lockhart’s long-standing interest in ethnographic photography and filmmaking, her desire to give herself permission to look at people who interest her, to stare as we stare at figures in a painting. Timothy Martin has written about some of the ways that Lockhart “defers the individual” or distances herself from her subject by formalizing and abstracting her presentations, something he wants to call camouflage—for example, Khalil’s makeup in *Khalil, Shaun, A Woman Under the Influence*, the aggressively choreographed exercises of the girls’ basketball team in *Goshogaoka*, and the conspicuously conventionalized presentations of the families of the island of Apeú-Salvador in her Amazon River Basin project.³ He sees her imposition of obvious artificiality as a way to evade being co-opted into critique. What she seems to posit instead is a type of rhythmic repetition that we register as meaningful, but cannot interpret, as in the complementary pairings that take place first in the creek segment, then in the swing segment, and then in the segment featuring two young couples, where the two centralized pairs of the earlier scenes seem to be centrifugally pushed to the edges of the frame. Cumulatively, the succession of carefully crafted records begins to suggest something more psychologically complex, a kind of antispectacular weaving of figure and ground, or subject and field, that approaches both the integration and the anxiety of Jackson Pollock at his most abstract.

About ten years ago, Rosalind Krauss made some observations about figure and ground and resistance to spectacle that seem relevant here.⁴ Her remarks were reactive, an effort to pin down some of her misgivings about a tendency she ascribed to the practice of cultural studies and its visual culture offspring—specifically, what she read as a postmodern tendency to collapse the material signifiers of an image into a more psychoanalytic Imaginary, or hallucinatory projection—and to link this interpretive practice to an earlier formulation of art historian Michael Fried’s, in which he proposed an “optical” reading of “the relation between figure and field,” in lieu of Clement Greenberg’s spatial one, in Pollock’s late 1940s, all-over painting.⁵ More broadly, Krauss was grappling with a tendency to generalize the condition Fried called “absorption.” At the risk of entirely flattening her argument, her particular concern had to do with the similar operations entailed in what Fried called Pollock’s “cutouts”—figures isolated from their background that the viewer registers as blind spots and that Fried saw as something “registering an absence,” “not experienced as actually occurring within the space of the painting,” and “utterly resistant to signification,” and what Lacan referred to throughout his mirror-stage essay as “recognition-in-imitation.” Krauss’s argument hinges on her detailed reading of a process of projection onto, and interpretation of, forms read not as figures per se, but as these “cutouts” or “blind spots” or mirrors. The problem for Krauss is that a coalescence of form, a form that distinguishes itself from the field without becoming fully a figure, is not understood as dynamic tension *within* the field, but as something that “drops out,” becoming a surface onto which we project an identity.

What I am trying to suggest here is that Lockhart’s careful calibration of everything from the tonal mix of the seemingly casual apparel that the Pine Flat children wear in the film, to the capture and manipulation of light and sound effects that weave the children inextricably into the landscape, to the precisely deflected gazes that make it impossible to make eye contact and the subtly disjunctive interruptions that shift focus or direction and snap us to attention, effect something entirely anti-spectacular and make it impossible either to project an identity or to formulate a conventional character or ethno-

graphic “type.” In the film, one could argue, the equivalence Lockhart establishes between figure and ground allows her subjects to assert their individuality *within their environment*, precisely because she so carefully controls the containers she constructs for them.

Something different becomes apparent in the photographic portraits that comprise *Pine Flat Portrait Studio*. In the tradition of a late-nineteenth or early-twentieth-century portrait photographer, Lockhart opened this studio in a barn in the center of town. The children could come to the studio whenever they wanted and have their portraits taken as they were, and Lockhart has said she particularly relished the ways in which this open studio setup recapitulated her initial encounter with the children, as a result of their approaching her. So that they could see the results of each shoot almost immediately, Lockhart used a large-format camera with the capacity to make Polaroids, which she would show to the children, as well as 4 x 5 negatives of the same frame. In these photographic portraits, in contrast to the filmed ones, the “container” is not the landscape, but a black muslin backdrop. This backdrop acts as a foil that intensifies the details of the children’s gestures or clothing by throwing them into high relief—a very different effect from the film, one that is amplified by the children’s direct gazes, which contrast with the assiduously deflected gazes of the children in the film. At the same time, Lockhart increases the children’s potential for individuality by allowing them to wear outfits of their own choice as they pose in front of the black field. Although she must have had a fair amount of say in their poses and expressions, as a group these portraits are affectionately defiant and assertive. Lockhart seems to have transmitted the pleasure of performance. Perhaps as a result, the children in these photographs enter our space.

Pine Flat is not Lockhart’s first project focused on children. *Auditions*, her early series of photographs of children restaging a sequence from François Truffaut’s 1976 film *Small Change*; *Khalil*, *Shaun*, *A Woman Under the Influence*; and *Goshogoaka* each enlist a certain combination of adolescent guilelessness and blankness to explore the formation of character through habit. But Lockhart’s focus on recreation and play—on something elected and not obligatory—may be the most significant shift that the *Pine Flat* project

introduced into her long-term investigation of habit and work. Ignoring, for a moment, his more deceiving manipulations, Lockhart seems to have played something of the role Tom Sawyer made infamous when he cajoled his friends into painting Aunt Polly’s fence. Or rather, she seems to be asking the same question that he asked those friends: “What do you call work?” Four hours from home, with a group of children she invited into her creative space, she also seems to have arrived at the answer Twain gave to his character’s question: “play.” “Work,” said Twain, “consists of what a body is obliged to do; play consists of what a body is not obliged to do.” By allowing the kids she came to know to perform themselves in the studio, Lockhart allowed them to make play of their work, and work of their play.

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Notes

1. For the first time, Lockhart has devised distinct film presentations for the theater and the gallery. For the theater, the film is screened as a 138-minute-long feature, with the two halves separated by an intermission. Ten minutes in length, the intermission is a black screen printed in white with the word “intermission”; the soundtrack features Balam Garcia, one of the children who worked with Lockhart, covering a pop ballad by Blink 182, with the refrain “So here’s my holiday.” For the gallery, each day, one consecutive segment from the first half of the film and one consecutive segment from the second are respectively shown on continuous loops in two discrete but linked screening rooms. A separate room includes a turntable and an LP record featuring Garcia’s covers of pop songs that he likes and a large photograph of him recording the LP in an interior space.
2. Information about the Aaton camera in this paragraph is drawn in part from Jean-Michel Frodon, “The Modern Age of the French Cinema From the New Wave to the Present,” Aaton (2006), available at <http://www.aaton.com/about/history.php>.
3. See Timothy Martin, “Documentary Theater,” in *Sharon Lockhart: Teatro Amazonas*, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and NAI Publishers, 1999), 12–30.
4. See Rosalind Krauss, “Welcome to the Cultural Revolution,” *October*, no. 77 (Summer 1996): 83–96.
5. See Michael Fried, *Three American Painters*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, 1965).

Linda Norden is Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Harvard University Art Museums. She recently served as Commissioner for the U.S. Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale, where she curated, with Donna De Salvo, Ed Ruscha’s *Course of Empire*.