

Suzanne Hudson

To My Future Readers

When Sharon Lockhart was in Łódź, Poland, scouting locations for what became 2009's *Podwórka* ("Courtyard"), she met a nine-year-old girl, Milena Słowińska, who ended up helping her direct the other neighbourhood kids who appear in the film. In it, they find choreographed diversion in makeshift playgrounds—the gridded composition of parking lots, storage units, and cement courtyards tagged with graffiti that extend beneath low, mirroring grey skies—which likewise organise the six fixed apertures that comprise Lockhart's portrait of childhood's lost hours. Milena would become the subject of many works thereafter, pieces that similarly reveal possibilities of escape, or, maybe more accurately, small and deliciously meant freedoms, even within the pervasive structures that seem to inhibit them. It was also because of her emerging friendship with Milena that Lockhart returned to Poland over the years that followed, taking Milena and her brother Sebastian on adventures to Kraków and all around Łódź, where they celebrated holidays and Milena's birthday. From 2014 to 2016, Lockhart organised summer retreats and workshops for Milena and the girls with whom she was by then living at the Youth Centre for Socio-Therapy, a state-operated residence for "troubled" girls in the small town of Rudzienko, outside of Warsaw. When later asked why she started this more formalised programme, Lockhart answered: "I developed workshops for [Milena] and her friends at the centre because she told me she wanted to write a book about her life."¹

Rudzienko (2016), co-produced by Liverpool Biennial and Kadist Art Foundation, debuted in the same year at the Arts Club of Chicago, where one could not have missed the connections to reformist pedagogy and creative education in the settlement houses and laboratory schools that are that city's bequest. Filmed over three years, the tableau-like work focuses on Milena and the other residents of the Rudzienko Youth Centre, where Lockhart had been conducting the workshops out of which they developed dialogue and precise somatic expressions for the camera. In the 53-minute cinematic iteration, silently scrolling texts of the conversations punctuate long-duration shots. Within enveloping backdrops of buildings falling into disrepair and surrounding woodland and farm fields, each exchange is populated with a new cast. In an empty gymnasium with paint peeling from the walls, two girls gracefully slow-dance, sympathetically sinking into one another. Two others confront—and perform—their individuation as one runs without hesitation across a broken bridge; the other cannot manage to traverse it and, stopped by fear, she remains on one side where she starts to laugh, at first nervously and then fully, rapturously.

The first text comes before its corresponding scene and the other two texts follow theirs. This shift activates and heightens the viewer's processing of language—spoken and written, bodily and gestural—as it slips from register to register, especially as there exists, too, a non-equivalence between the words spoken and the dialogic excerpts Lockhart uses for the English-language interludes. These two- or three-way conversations likewise serve as a basis for translations from the Polish that materialise separately from voices of the girls' that resound fully in the scenes

1. See: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-sharon-lockhart-revives-nazi-era-childrens-newspaper-venice-biennale/>.

where they appear. (These in-scene utterances are layered atop ambient noises of bugs and birds and the ever-present wind, all captured on location.) This eruption of presence is terrifically acute at the very end of *Rudzienko*, when a panoramic shot across a meadow is suddenly interrupted by the wild shrieks of girls, cutting the stillness as they jump up from behind a screen of tall grass and then disperse, departing from view.

The girls' voices are the work's content but, even more importantly, its subject; the girls' offer of them, expectant, soliciting reception and response, suggests something of its ethics. Arriving at a position from where each could offer her voice was the basis for the workshops with Lockhart prior to filming. She conceived and facilitated them not simply for the expedient of generating a draft—although they did accomplish this—but rather to instantiate a setting in which each participant might come to be heard. These assemblies became catalysts for setting free personal stories and for sharing them in instances of hard-won trust. Thus, Lockhart effected a context in which the insights gleaned absent of rehearsals or scripts would, self-consciously and in a kind of sublimatory mode, transition from workshop to artwork, as in this meditation on having a voice:

You behave like you don't have your own voice.

*Everyone has a say now. I don't know what I'd do if
I lost my voice. I guess I'd prefer to be blind.*

*But not seeing anything would be like dreaming through
the whole day.*

Yeah, exactly.

*Having a dream would keep me from having to listen to all
that yapping.*

*If I see that someone's lips are moving, but I can't
hear it ... if someone wanted to tell you they love you,
what then?*

I think it's best to hear someone say it to you directly.

There are many ways to do that.

Before a workshop commenced, Lockhart and her team would scout a location for it, going so far as to place a camera and draw out the frame with improvised materials like string or flour. The workshop itself unfolded within these bounds. The crew reviewed the footage each night, translating it as they went to get down patterns and pacing, but also because a translator was not present during the workshops. When the scenes were shot for *Rudzienko* on the same footprints, the girls were revisiting the place and origin of what they were to recall and also model on cue. Thus do we bear witness to passages that reveal histories of abandonment in divorce, or a parent's suicide, together with the disclosure of anxiety, cutting, and other kinds of self-harm begotten of personal and social traumas that persist amidst the more mundane topics of the day-to-day:

When's your birthday?

The 28th of March. It's the worst date. I also don't like the 5th, the 5th of July ... that's when my dad left us.

That's the worst, when someone close to you, a relative or a family member leaves.

Yeah, but the worst is, when someone leaves, in the sense that they die.

What's your favorite kind of food?

Spaghetti.

We also behold tendencies and habits, questions of whether to stay or to go, and of what they are leaving behind. These animating tensions are redoubled in the motifs of flight that play against the emphatic duration of each fixed frame: girls alighting from the base of a tree at the beginning and exiting a meadow at the end. Related works of Lockhart's, including the photographic series, *When You're Free, You Run in the Dark* (2016), appropriated by her from a comment made by Małgorzata Jańczyk, capture in an otherworldly electric luminescence—of precisely calibrated strobes that can imply the shrill, not totally benevolent light of headlights in the deep night—girls turning away from the camera on their respective passages into the dark wood. These are pictures about flight if not actually of it. Here is the exchange, which recasts vulnerability as something potentially liberatory, yet equivocally riddled with terror:

I'm not afraid of the darkness, that's when you're free.

Once when my sister was walking through the woods, this pervert attacked her. And so she bit him, and there was blood on her entire cheek. But she ran away. She had this pretty dress on. It was violet, in this floral ...

Well, you know, if you're free you run away, right?

Perhaps it is worth noting the philosophical reflection on the girls' life experiences that Lockhart undertook in a seminar with Polish educator Bartek Przybył-Ołowski in June 2014. She initiated this forum for abstract discussion alongside more directly practical sessions on farming and cooking aimed at the acquisition of skills for life beyond and, ultimately, after the centre, and still others exploring mindfulness and journaling as well as photography, painting, drawing, and flower arranging. Subsequent years included classes in feminism and women's histories; movement therapy; theatre, dance, yoga, and improvisation; voice, piano, and percussion; sound recording and interviewing; a zine workshop; textiles and aromatherapy; dream awareness; field trips to a flea market and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw; and so on. In what became a touchstone for all involved, that first summer also saw Lockhart introduce ideas about the right of child to be shown respect, through the writings of Janusz Korczak. This was the pen name of Henryk Goldszmit, a revolutionary paediatrician, writer, and pedagogue who

established and for a time co-ran—with Stefania Wilczyńska—a progressive orphanage that served both Jewish and Polish children in Warsaw, until they and the children they cared for with such extraordinary solidarity were exterminated at Treblinka during the 1942 *Grossaktion* in the Warsaw Ghetto.

What is in effect the prologue for *Rudzienko* is “The Poet,” written by Andżelika Szczepańska. Reinforcing its importance to the rest of her work, Lockhart has separated it out in the cinema version of the film and set it on a wholly other screen when presented as a gallery installation. Szczepańska establishes a mood of privation that in turn begets recognition and, finally, a guarded yet concretised, spoken wish for agency—and thus for the recognition of the child’s rights that Korczak asserts. For Szczepańska though, its attainment remains elusive:

*Lost, alone
she stands on the sidelines of life, looking
looking
At heartless and ruthless people
Who have forgotten what love is
And can only hurt others
But I, a thousand thoughts per second
My heart beating like crazy—
My love
Was buried alive
And only the tears streaming down my cheeks
Remind me of you
Most people avoid me
Why? I don't know myself
But I still dream of
Love, happiness
And of someone noticing that I am
Worthy of being loved.*

Worthiness understood not as a superficial consolation to be bestowed but instead as a basic human right to be demanded and accepted cuts to the core of Lockhart’s project. The film, therefore, marks a temporality of becoming that it both follows and necessarily anticipates.

*

In the discursive universe around Lockhart’s work there remains an overwhelming scholarly interest in her use of media and its technologies, conventions, and institutions. Thus do we find typically art-historical writing that interprets her prints and moving images through genealogies of photography or film, and that does so responsibly—even as it categorically remains obligated to artistic labour as apotheosised in a recognisably determined product. As Susan Snodgrass describes *Rudzienko*: “In the opening scene, a man rides his bike down a country road; the viewer is suspended within a sunlit vista—as evening falls, two girls hidden within the branches of a tree suddenly emerge and run away. In another vignette, two figures walking along a distant horizon silhouetted by lush trees recalls the haunting landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich. These types of referents to art-historical

painting (Courbet, Millet) and landscape photography are intentional.”² In this, she continues what Mark Godfrey maintains has been a “dialogue with painting”³ throughout Lockhart’s work (this is exemplified, for him, in the formalism of *Nō* (2003), a film in which a couple move through horizontal fields of colour, raking the ground with hay in anticipation of the winter frost as though they were methodically covering a canvas).

Other texts about this and earlier works situate Lockhart’s long-term commitment to people and the contexts in which their lives assume representational legibility somewhat differently, in relation to conceptual art or its latter-day ethnographic cognates that favour objectification and in doing so naturalise the privilege of rendering another. And yet, as Diedrich Diederichsen has avowed, such conceptualist strategies play an important role for Lockhart, in that she seeks not only to understand each research project vis-à-vis “symbolic frameworks, ontological statuses, medial conditions, the arbitrary character of decisions, etc.,” but also to do so in terms of how such structures might become “visible and thematic”, as essential, if finally demystified (and admittedly personal), qualities of an artistic field.⁴

To be sure, Lockhart has made the intimacy of her involvement with her protagonists a general procedural narrative. It has always been predicated upon contingency and manifest through rapport, albeit expressed differently in each instance. In 2000, for example, she alighted upon a small town in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains north of Los Angeles and ended up working there for four years. This resulted in a 16mm film, *Pine Flat* (2005), and in a related series of large-format portraits of local children posing themselves with attributes of their own self-fashioning, both projects re-presenting what exists off-frame. In *Pine Flat*, the protagonists read in a field or roam the forest, attentively on the hunt. These images confound documentation and staging, what one finds and comes to know with what one already remembers. Discussing a cache of family snapshots that Lockhart’s mother took during her childhood in Maine, and from which certain compositions in *Pine Flat* derive, George Baker names “attunement”—which he describes as a kind of rhyming that brings forms close—as her “overriding artistic concern.”⁵ Baker understands it as a kind of longing, an impossible attempt at the reconciliation of opposites—ultimately, in his formulation, the past and the present—under the sign of a critical nostalgia.

Rudzienko, I think, forces us to a consideration of a more direct form of advocacy. Lockhart has been forthright on the record about her identification with the girls, and her responsibility towards them is in any case evident in the work.⁶ Another way to put this is that *Rudzienko* insinuates itself into our presence, and awaits response. It addresses itself to an audience that may never receive it. Yet this uncertainty does not obviate its promise; rather, it grounds it, and holds us accountable. Writing of Ad Reinhardt’s late, black paintings, Yve-Alain Bois asks what there is to see in a work that is so ostensibly and imposingly blank: “At first nothing, then almost

2. See Susan Snodgrass, “Sharon Lockhart: *Rudzienko*,” *The Seen*, 3 (2016), <http://theseenjournal.org/art-seen-international/sharon-lockhart-rudzienko/>.

3. Mark Godfrey, “The Flatness of Pine Flat,” *Pine Flat, Sharon Lockhart* (Frankfurt: Revolver Books; Bilbao, Spain: Sala Rekalde, 2006), 112.

4. Diedrich Diederichsen, “Socially Singular,” in *Sharon Lockhart: Das komplette Werkverzeichnis*, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: DuMont, 2009).

5. George Baker, “Lateness and Longing,” in *50 Moons of Saturn*, ed. Daniel Birnbaum, (Milan: Skira editore, 2008), 83.

6. Hilarie Sheets, “An Artist Explores the Lives of Girls Labeled Difficult,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2016.

nothing. The temporal interval between the nothing and the almost nothing is ... still very brief.... This interval is nevertheless essential ...; the viewer experiences this interval as a 'narrativisation' of his own vision."⁷ The "almost nothing" in this account is a phantom of colour, the tinge of violet or green that divides the surface into a pattern of superimposed geometries. My point in citing Bois here is not to invite comparison of *Rudzienko* with a painting of Reinhardt's specifically, or even with modernist painting generically, nor is it to equate the heuristics of perception of chroma with the affirmation of visibility of others; it is to posit that by favouring Lockhart's narrative, we have been, as it were, blind to the demands made on us by this work.

Indeed, the compelling nature of the address made by *Rudzienko* is formalised in another interconnected project. For *Little Review* at the Polish Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, Lockhart translated and printed issues of a newspaper that Korczak issued from his orphanage. Korczak famously operated according to a model of humanistic democracy that was to become a paradigm of education and child custody, wherein the children had their own parliament and court and were consulted on all major decisions. When the orphans outgrew the residence, Korczak found work for many of them by entreating his associates. In 1926, he let the children found—then edit and write—their own youth-focused newspaper, the *Mały Przegląd* ("Little Review"), which ran as a weekly attachment to the Polish-Jewish daily newspaper *Nasz Przegląd* ("Our Review"). In the pages of this publication, which would witness the rise of fascism and run until 1939, the young authors covered politics, culture, sports, jokes, aspects of everyday life, and offered diaristic ruminations on how they came to be parentless.

The first issue of *Mały Przegląd*, dated October 7, 1926, was stamped with an oversized headline: "To My Future Readers!" In it, Korczak lays out a programme for the incipient publication, while soliciting readers who might yet become contributors: "This is only a project, a plan, an outline. It has to be filled in, altered, and fully worked out. We'll be grateful if our readers help us."⁸ Frank in his appeal, Korczak used the platform to express the care with which its offerings would be handled, as in this remarkable statement of intent:

The newsroom will be located on the first floor. There will be a waiting room, or maybe two—one for the grown-ups, one for the kids. Because grown-ups will come to our newsroom with various matters, too. The paper will consider all of the matters concerning students and schools. And it will be edited in such a way that it will defend children. The paper will make sure that everything happens FAIRLY. There will be three editors. One old (bald, wearing glasses), to make sure everything stays in order. A young editor for the boys, and a girl—an editor for the girls. So that nobody's ashamed and everyone speaks honestly and clearly what they need, what's hurting them, what are their worries and cares. Whoever wants to can say whatever they want to, they can come in and write it down, right there in the newsroom ...

7. Yve-Alain Bois, "What Is There to See? On a Painting by Ad Reinhardt," trans. Christopher Lyon, *MoMA*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art) 8 (1991): 3.

8. Janusz Korczak, "To My Future Readers!," *Mały Przegląd (Little Review)*, October 7, 1926, trans. Paulina Bożek (Warsaw: Zachęta National Gallery of Art, 2016). Published in connection with the 57th Biennale di Venezia, 2017.

*If someone is embarrassed that they write messily or make mistakes, the editor will tell them:
“Don’t worry. We’ll fix it in editing.”
Or if they don’t want to write at all, the editor will call the stenographer and tell them, “Go on.”
They’ll go into a separate room and dictate
Just so that everyone’s comfortable, so they’re not embarrassed that someone will laugh at them.
There are many grown-ups who write only because they’re not embarrassed. There are many children who have so many good ideas, observations, and comments, but they don’t write, because they don’t have the courage or because they don’t want to.
Our paper will encourage young people to write.
It will encourage and embolden them.⁹*

Lockhart brought the girls with her to consult the archives of *Mały Przegląd* in Warsaw and together they chose twenty-eight issues out of the total 677 to be translated into English for free distribution in the Polish Pavilion, then writing a twenty-ninth themselves. The broadsheets, including the one from which the above manifesto of Korczak was taken, were exhibited in Venice in 2017 alongside photographs and a film. Four monumental photos show girls reading original copies of the paper, as in Agnieszka, “*MANIFESTO OF THE MILKY NIGHT*,” *Little Review* no.131 (4568), May 10, 1935, National Library of Poland, Warsaw, February 2, 2017 (2017). The film shown alongside moves through three acts: in the first, the girls act out gestures and repeat words (love, hate, hope, and trust) selected from letters that they had written to Lockhart; in the second, girls play the piano; and, in the third act, they dance. There is a dignity in all of this that is rarer than it should be. It obtains most fundamentally in the allowance for voice and in the coeval assumption, finally, that someone may hear—which is also to say: see, read, or regard—it. It is to imagine, after all, a future in which one might have mattered to someone else.

9. *ibid.*