

# The New York Times

---

Art & Design

---

## An Artist Explores the Lives of Girls Labeled Difficult



The artist Sharon Lockhart.  
EMILY BERL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By HILARIE M. SHEETS  
MAY 20, 2016

On a 2009 visit to Lodz, Poland, to gather ideas for a film, Sharon Lockhart was drawn into a gritty urban courtyard by the sound of children playing. That was where she first saw a 9-year-old girl named Milena Slowinska.

“You should have seen her, up on the roof, ruling the court,” said Ms. Lockhart, a Los Angeles filmmaker and photographer known for her intimate studies of overlooked communities, often centered on childhood. “She’s a very powerful girl.”

Inspired by the inventiveness of the children's unsupervised play, in which buildings became jungle gyms, Ms. Lockhart spent three months shooting their street games for a short film called "Podworka" ("courtyard" in Polish) that looked spontaneous but was actually staged.

Since then, Ms. Lockhart has returned to Poland more than 15 times to see Milena, now 16, who has come to assume a prominent role in the artist's life and work. Ms. Lockhart's friendship with the teenager has extended to her peers at the Youth Center for Socio-Therapy in Rudzienko, a home for troubled girls where Milena lived for several years. In a new 40-minute film, "Rudzienko," currently at the Arts Club of Chicago, Ms. Lockhart explores the emotions and self-expression of girls labeled difficult or unmanageable.

"I pay attention to children," said Ms. Lockhart, who is 51, but whose open manner seems nearly as youthful as her subjects'. In interviews, the teenagers said they were shocked to learn that she was older than 30.



An image from Ms. Lockhart's "Rudzienko."  
SHARON LOCKHART / GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS; NEUGERRIEMSCHEIDER, BERLIN

She has forged an ethnographic approach to photography and filmmaking that combines documentary and re-enactments. She spent months studying the drill

practices of a Japanese middle school's girls' basketball team for "Goshogaoka" (1997), screened at film festivals and institutions including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. She visited a small town in the Sierra Nevada foothills over four years, for the film "Pine Flat" (2005), shown at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and she integrated herself in the world of manual laborers in Bath, Me., her own hometown, for "Lunch Break" (2008), a slow-motion meditation on the customs of industrial workers during their downtime.

"She is thinking about how everyday people can be both subjects and performers," said Stuart Comer, chief curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art, which acquired "Goshogaoka" this year. Her early commitment to the fixed-frame camera, in the first decade of the Internet, when the speed of images was changing so frantically, was a "radical move," Mr. Comer said, based on her dedication to "what happens if you really scrutinize an image in all of its detail over a long period of time."

Ms. Lockhart cites the work of the French filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch, who pioneered the style of ethnofiction, as inspirational, as well as the durational films of Andy Warhol.

Ms. Lockhart described her background as working class and said she did not consider college until the age of 21, when a family friend mentioned the New England School of Photography in Boston. In Ms. Lockhart's second year there, a teacher opened her eyes to Conceptual art through the work of Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and James Welling. "I feel very fortunate to have found a passion," said Ms. Lockhart, who moved west to get her B.F.A. at the San Francisco Art Institute. Intent on studying with the artists Mike Kelley and Stephen Prina, she went on to the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. She credits her teachers for recognizing something in her that she didn't know how to define herself and hopes to do the same thing for the girls of Rudzienko, with whom she identifies.

"Just listening to them and telling them that they're special goes a long way," said Ms. Lockhart, whose work often explores subtleties about class. "I think it's something that they'll take with them and spread to others."



Klaudia Matyja, left, and Natalia Rutkowska in Ms. Lockhart's new film, "Rudzienko."  
SHARON LOCKHART / GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS; NEUGERRIEMSCHEIDER, BERLIN

She and Milena discovered an easy rapport when Ms. Lockhart, without a translator, was scouting locations for "Podworka." She used a digital camera and body language to act out what she wanted from the children, and Milena became her de facto assistant director. As Milena explained by phone from Poland: "We met when I was still a punk. I was a little kid that all the other children listened to, so I would shout instructions at them."

Ms. Lockhart showed glimpses of this little girl's transition into adolescence in her exhibition "[Milena, Milena](#)" this winter at the Gladstone Gallery in New York. It included a photographic triptych of her at 13, concealing and then bashfully revealing her face through her hands. "She's like the Mona Lisa," Ms. Lockhart said. In a film installation, a dramatically older-looking Milena, then 15, performs the final scene of François Truffaut's 1959 film "The 400 Blows," in which she portrays the misunderstood youth, Antoine, who escapes from reform school.

Milena stares down the camera with a blend of toughness and vulnerability. "I feel like this is the first time you're really seeing Milena," Ms. Lockhart said. "The idea of re-enacting Antoine allowed her to perform herself."

The new film, “Rudzienko,” at the [Arts Club of Chicago](#) through Aug. 13, was shot during rural retreats Ms. Lockhart organized the past two summers for Milena and her peers, who went to a farm each day from the youth center. Inspired by the theories of Janusz Korczak, a Polish educator who understood children’s need for freedom of expression, Ms. Lockhart brought in a movement therapist, a theater director, a philosopher and a curator, among others, to hold creative workshops to help the girls develop their voices. Ms. Lockhart filmed them speaking intimately about topics she knew they valued.

The film, to be included in Ms. Lockhart’s show in September at the [Artist’s Institute](#) in New York, opens on a frame of a country landscape, a tree animated only by sounds of nature and voices. Slowly, girls emerge from the camouflage of its branches, and the screen then cuts to a written conversation including this interchange:

“Sometimes I feel like God controls everything. ...”

“I just don’t buy it. I think everyone controls their own life. ... You walk down your own path. Even if somebody stands in your way. ...”



An image from Ms. Lockhart's "Untitled Study (Rephotographed Snapshot)" project.  
SHARON LOCKHART / GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS; NEUGERRIEMSCHNEIDER, BERLIN

“Except that sometimes along the way you can make lots of mistakes. ...”

“Mistakes reveal things.”

The landscape tableaus — which alternate with text passages — read almost like still photographs to Janine Mileaf, executive director of the Arts Club of Chicago. “But something happens over the course of that slowness,” she said, noting in particular the final scene of a gradually darkening field of grass, from which the girls erupt in a joyous stampede. “It rewards that waiting, that watching, that carefulness. It’s that same slowness that Sharon’s willing to invest in these girls over years.”

Ms. Lockhart said, “I’m just an artist, not a politician.” But the social activism in the back story of her films has taken on greater dimensions in this project.

Logistically, it was a challenge, said Karol Thiel, director of the youth center in Rudzienko, to take a group of 15 girls out of their highly monitored daily structure. He was won over by Ms. Lockhart’s vision and dedication to the girls “who don’t know what they deserve in life,” Mr. Thiel said. “She isn’t like an American aunt who buys kids ice cream and then leaves. Sharon showed them that there is a completely different world out there and that it is possible for them to become a part of it.”

The teenagers, interviewed in Polish recently at the youth center, said they felt like “normal girls” with the artist, whom they called “Sharonka.” It’s hard to overstate the affection and even love they expressed for her. Paulina Mroczek, 16, explained, “We could say just about anything to her.”



Milena Slowinska playing Antoine from Truffaut's "400 Blows."

SHARON LOCKHART AND COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS AND NEUGERRIEMSCHNEIDER, BERLIN

Natalia Skorocho, 15, found that the theater workshops helped her overcome shyness. Reading Poe, they re-enacted daydreams and nightmares in a clearing in

the woods. The Arts Club exhibition includes three photographs of girls caught in exaggerated motion in a theatrically lit forest. Collectively, they are titled “When You’re Free, You Run in the Dark,” a comment made by Malgorzata Janczyk, who is 16.

“It’s about escape,” said Ms. Lockhart, who encouraged the girls to pay attention to their own words.

“When she wanted us to talk, Sharonka would just throw out a subject, like friendship, God or family, and then leave us alone while they were filming it,” said Klaudia Matyja, 16, who has discovered that she likes to perform.

Milena said the workshops have helped her develop patience. “I used to be quite aggressive,” she said. And last year, she moved out of the youth center to live with her grandmother.

Ms. Lockhart, who is married to Alex Slade, a photographer, also holds a dialogue with her own childhood in the Arts Club exhibition by including family snapshots originally taken by her mother outdoors in Maine. The artist began reshooting these pictures in 1994, appropriating them for a project she calls “Untitled Study (Rephotographed Snapshot).”

She admires her mother’s aesthetic instinct for photographing people from behind, which informs how Ms. Lockhart composes her own work. On a visit last year to Maine, she was surprised to unearth a photograph of her mother in the woods, dressed in costume for one of the plays that the artist, her sister and cousins used to stage. “I thought, ‘Oh my god, it’s exactly what we’re doing in Poland,’” Ms. Lockhart said.

She continues to communicate with Milena and the other girls and plans to get the group back together this summer for another extended workshop.

“It’s like running a camp in another country where you don’t speak the language,” Ms. Lockhart said. “And it’s all because of this kid you met that you really like.”

Joanna Berendt contributed reporting from Rudzienko, Poland.