

INTERVIEW WITH SHARON LOCKHART

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You have visited Poland almost 20 times. How did it happen that you came here?

In 2009 I was invited by Adam Budak to take part in the Lodz Four Cultures Festival. I wasn't planning to be involved with Poland for such a long time, but I met various exceptional people: the producers of my film *Podwórka*, its main characters – Milena and her brother Sebastian, and a few years later, the girls of the Youth Center for Socio-Therapy in Rudzienko. It was Milena who contributed mainly to my unique and long-lasting relationship with Poland; everything began when I met her.

***Podwórka*, *Rudzienko* and *Mały Przegląd*, which you are going to present in Venice constitute a logical whole. From the beginning you have planned it to be a series.**

Podwórka was essentially about childhood and the ties that are created during this period. The main subject of *Rudzienko* is the process of growing up; it is an attempt to capture a moment when a child is becoming an adult. *Mały Przegląd* is about something else – it is a voice of young women, but it can be actually considered as the third chapter of this story. I myself started to perceive these three projects as a whole, kind of a trilogy but I did not plan it; I had no idea that Poland would turn out to be so addicting, that it would entirely change my life.

Last year you participated in the residency program at the POLIN Museum in Warsaw. Was it the time when you first came across the works of Janusz Korczak?

No, I learned about Korczak earlier, in 2013, when I was preparing for my exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw. At that time, I did some research on youth educational centers and I discovered that many of them were named after Janusz Korczak. I was trying to find out who he was; I was asking the adults, I was asking the kids from the educational centers, but I was not able to get comprehensive information. Yet, the more information I gathered, the more curious I became. People knew of him but they didn't really know how radical his pedagogical model was. In 2013 I tried to borrow the original issues from the National Library of *Mały Przegląd* – founded by Korczak, it was a supplement

to *Nasz Przegląd*, a popular pre-war newspaper. Published every Friday, *Mały Przegląd* featured sections on politics, travel, sports and culture, written and edited by children. I wanted to make a reprint of the first issue of *Mały Przegląd* for my exhibition in CSW but finally I did not manage to complete this part of the project. The idea of publishing a newspaper by and for children but without speaking down to them is so unusual. Korczak and his activities are such an interesting historical phenomena that has somehow been lost. There has been an interruption in history and my interest is in mining history and retrieving the relevant elements. This year, the girls from Rudzienko worked with all 676 issues of *Mały Przegląd* in the archives of the National Library, and they chose the issues??? that were the most important in their opinion. The issues have been translated to English and reprinted in a special edition, printed on the occasion of the Venice Biennale. In June we are trying to organize something in Venice with the participation of the girls from Rudzienko, as now they are all experts on Korczak. We are also trying to organize a conference on Korczak in Warsaw for the fall to bring all of this back home.

You compare contemporary educational methods with those of a hundred years ago.

Korczak's ideas seem to be very modern.

Janusz Korczak was the true and outstanding pedagogue, a precursor of the fight for children's rights. His theories were very progressive, especially for his time. I have the impression that today, in many areas, instead of taking a step forward, we are stepping backwards at least a few decades and the past has so much to teach us.

Only few teenagers understand what art really is and even fewer of them are involved in its creation. How did you explain to the girls from Rudzienko what you are going to create together with them?

It's rather difficult to explain something, which is not determined from the beginning to the end. We were discovering everything together, we learned from each other and from people who joined the project. I worked with outstanding choreographers, therapists, theatre directors, philosophers, writers and chefs. We introduced the girls to the world of almost unlimited possibilities and we exposed them to the maximum number of stimuli. It has been my experience that everyone assumes art is so difficult to understand but that, in fact, it

comes very naturally. The girls picked right up on what I was doing and really relished in what art provided.

You managed to do something that seems impossible. You established partner relationship with teenagers.

Yes, with wonderful young women, intelligent, witty, clever and creative. I want to bring some of my students from California to Venice, and I am planning for the girls with show them around the exhibition and tell them how something like that is created and how much effort they put into it. Because of Venice, I am able to work with the entire center – all 47 girls at once. This is special. All together, over the years, I think we have worked with about 150 girls.

Some of the girls have returned to their families, others have been relocated to other centers, most of them have reached the age of 18, but still we manage to keep in touch with each other. Of course it doesn't mean that we are a family, but in some sense we are. Our relationships have never been one-sided; the girls also had an impact on the adults taking part in the project. They teach me so much. Thanks to the formation of these relationships, the girls are not alone –they have friends, both elders and peers, and we are trying to build a long lasting support. We have been working to build this community around them so they always feel they are part of something.

You speak highly of these girls, even though they have been in the centers for the at-risk youth.

One of the unavoidable experiences connected with the period of adolescence is the clash with the system. Some of us were able to get away unharmed, others were slightly affected, and others are getting into trouble. I am not sure why some people can deal with it without problems and others cannot. Anyway, I would never call the girls from Rudzienko the “at-risk youth”. For me they have always been exceptional and wonderful.

There are several pejorative expressions in Polish to describe young people, as if we didn't like them. Maybe it is easier to approach young people when you speak a foreign language?

There are many assumptions that being an outsider allows you to go beyond. I prefer not to work with an interpreter; I prefer to butcher the Polish language because in this way I

encourage the girls to speak English without being afraid of making mistakes, without having a complex of not speaking well enough. In *Podwórka*, the language divide did not help, but it did not disturb either. You can communicate with children without words. Yet in *Rudzienko*, voice plays a main role; the girls discover that it is an important tool, they want to communicate what they think and feel, their words are important and they matter. Yesterday I asked the girls whether they prefer to communicate with words or with images. They thought it over carefully and the majority chose words, because in their opinion the words are more precise.

You use the camera in a way that does not reveal your emotions, you watch people almost as if you were an anthropologist, and you do your best to be an objective witness.

I can tell you a long story about my work with the girls, what we have achieved together, what we say and write to each other, but a spectator does not need to know it. The intimacy between us is obvious, the picture shows confidence and mutual understanding. If the project were lacking these features, nothing would come out of it. Yet emotions are not a main subject of *Mały Przegląd*. We are not dealing with problem solving, we focused instead on the girls finding their own voices. All my works also assume the active participation of the audience; I do not present them images in which everything is clear and unequivocal. *Mały Przegląd* is not a documentary film about socio-therapy; it has to be filtered through the personal emotions of a spectator.

The Venice Biennale ends in November, but your project does not.

When I was shooting the film *Rudzienko* I imagined that we would organize a premiere in Warsaw, followed by a debate about education, about the concept of our workshops and that the model we have developed would spread around the world and I expected it to further develop. I am not a politician, I am not a decision maker, I am an artist and probably that is why it is easier for me to carry out such ideas. So far I had to manage everything myself, I had to be on the spot, look for people who would conduct the workshops and now I have a real partner - the Zachęta National Gallery of Art. Together with the Gallery and other non-profit institutions, we want *Mały Przegląd* not to end after the Biennale and we have prepared an eight-month educational project. It wasn't difficult to create this project, the real problem is securing the funds that we need for implementation.

Would your project make sense if instead of young women the boys took part in it?

From the beginning I worked in Poland only with girls, not by choice, just by happenstance. Yet it has worked out in an interesting way. There is something feminist in the project that I identify with. I do not feel the need to try something else, I am really happy with the results. Our girls can speak their minds, they say what they think, they cooperate with each other, they create a team, they are ready to speak in public and they are aware of their competencies. Even if at the beginning they felt lonely and alienated, they have learned that together they are strong and in a group they possess great power, the basis of which is mutual trust and confidence.

The way we treat young people is often a kind of revenge for our own childhood. Your childhood must have been idyllic.

No, it wasn't. It was quite ordinary. I come from a working-class family and we are talking about America in the 70's, which was rather different. I had many cousins and I spent a lot of time with them.

You decided to study when you turned 21 years old. Why so late?

I went through a similar path, like the girls from Rudzienko. School wasn't really my thing as a teenager. Only a few of them are studying, most of them choose vocational schools, which teach a specific profession. After graduation from high school I worked as a waitress, I had no idea what to do next. Someone told me that there was a school for photography as a profession and I applied and was accepted. Soon after I learned that a picture could be more than I thought it to be, that there are artists - photographers - and that what Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine was doing is called art. This discovery led me to study, first at the San Francisco Art Institute, then at the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena. I really was lucky that I was able to find my way and this is what our project is about. This may seem naïve but I believe that our method is really effective. So far I can see no reasons to lose faith.

Your earlier works are very picturesque; in the images from *Goshogaoka* there is something, which reminds me of social realism and the girls reading Braille could have been as well portrayed by Michaël Borremans, but with paint and a paintbrush.

Goshogaoka explains how an outsider perceives a foreign culture. The film lasts 63 minutes, you have to see it in the cinema, then the impression will be completely different, far from socialist realism, it is a postmodern work. In contrast, the photos of blind people, taken in the public library in Los Angeles were inspired by the photos of August Sander from the 30's. You see the texture of the materials, the light, the color, the multitude of details, but above all you see the blind people and you enter into their world, which functions next to your world. The picture is still but at the same time it causes a "flight of ideas" in a brain of a spectator.

In 2014, the Guardian asked you to share your life's most valuable advice with readers.

You said: "Find your friends, live well and do not work too hard."

Did I really say that? Too bad that I can't be 100% successful in living up to that statement.

Starting a new project I always say: great, it will be fun. And it is fun, but only as a bonus.

Everyone tells me I work too hard. Never in my life have I worked so hard and so intensely as

I have in Poland. But I've had a lot of satisfaction with this work, and I have a lot of new

friends, so it seems I didn't stray too much from that statement.