

A.E. Benenson

At the Farm

Beginning in 2014, Sharon Lockhart invited a group of teenage girls from the Youth Centre for Socio-Therapy in Rudzienko, Poland for three weeks of summer workshops. Five years earlier in Łódź, Lockhart had befriended a girl from the centre, Milena, and she developed the workshops as a way to encourage Milena and her peers to explore their autonomy and self-expression through play. They always called their retreat “the Farm,” though technically it had been at least four different places—the first summer, a farm south-east of Warsaw, in Lasomin, and then the next two, a different farm 10 km east in Dzielnik. In the following years, the workshops stretched from the urban museums and cultural spaces of Warsaw to the island of Gotland, Sweden.

But the name never referred to a single place or set form; instead it was something they would all build together in an open-ended, often improvised way, anew with every workshop. Lockhart hosted philosophers, artists, theatre directors, writers, and others to come and share their knowledge and passion with the girls. “The Farm” came to name all that they made out of talking, reading, sewing, writing, playing, and dreaming, out of the old stone bridges, the crack of bonfires, the thickets of tall, dark pine, the seashores, the concert halls, the dance floors, and the libraries.

In total, there have now been more than one-hundred workshops. Any single one is only a brief chapter in a larger story, and yet, like the meaning of “the Farm” for Lockhart and the girls, each still carries the significance of the ineffable whole.

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The girls split into groups of two for a trust walk: one wore a blindfold and the other looked out ahead. Holding hands, they made their way through the summer grass. *Chodź, tędy.* Here, this way. *Uważaj!* Watch out! They followed by sound, touch, and friendship—all coming now into a new kind of high relief. The air was filled with birds calling their own partners, the cool grass pawing at ankles with each step. Senses have their way of adapting, building new confidences in times of need. The same goes for people, too: the girls all took turns blindfolded, each discovering in their own way what it was like to cast their trust outwards into the uncertain dark and then feel it settle safely in the care of another.

Lockhart had made their blindfolds in her Los Angeles studio from different pieces of fabric she had collected over the years: fragments of dotted, floral, and patterned cottons. After the walk, the girls stuffed the masks with their own combinations of scented fillings like chamomile, mint, lavender, and buckwheat. Each as different as its pattern. Later, they found a clearing to lay down with the masks over their eyes, breathing deeply.

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*Notice your breath now
and the nice, gentle ease
of your inhale
and your exhale.*

The bus that took the girls back to the centre in Rudzienko each evening would be there soon. In the late light, they all walked a little way up the hill from the farm and spread out on the grass. Lockhart had brought a mindfulness script that she had begun listening to earlier that summer and she wanted to share it with the girls. It focused your attention on the refrain of your breath—in and out, your body becoming like a bellows for the mind, emptying it of anxiety, fears, and the grip of the past. Gunia Nowik, who worked with Lockhart and the girls throughout the project, read the translated script aloud in Polish as she walked amongst them.

*Continue with your breathing.
Just breathing in
and out
at a nice pace
that's right for you.
In and out.
In and out.*

It wasn't like the other workshops: no talking, no moving, no laughing or playing. What exactly were you supposed to be doing? Lockhart roamed around the group, giving gentle cues. There's less to distract you when you lie down. Place your hands lightly on your stomach so you can feel it. Accept each breath. She placed small stones in their hands, the weight shifting their attention: feel your hand, exactly in this place, in this moment. As the script went on, it asked them to gather up difficult memories of the past, weighing them like the stones. *These past feelings, experiences and ideas have taught me life lessons*, the script reminded them. Then it told them to watch the past float away. *I am older and wiser now. I no longer need to feel all of these feelings to keep myself safe in the world*. Despite the silence, there was still a kind of conversation to be had; despite the stillness, a walk to be taken. *Imagine that past version of yourself*, the script said. *This younger version of you did not have the knowledge that you have now and could really benefit from what you have learned. Now gently and easily take the hand of the younger you and imagine a path in front of you*. It was like when the girls had taken turns being blindfolded and leading one another. They took their younger, unseeing self by the hand and led them to safety.

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When the pianist Marcin Masecki came to meet the girls at the POLIN Museum in Warsaw he had his piano in tow. Though it was an upright, the piano's highest point didn't even reach Marcin's waist. He had also removed its front panels. Below, its exposed cast-iron frame was fanned with wires like a fossilised bird's wing and above rose the keyboard's hammers, long stalks with grey felt tips like pollen-dusted stamen. It didn't look anything like a normal piano, which was part of the point. When Marcin sat down and began playing for the girls, he also didn't look anything like a normal pianist. His whole body sprung into crazy motion. He dangled his left hand over the bass and danced it like a marionette, his right foot working the pedals and then suddenly bursting out sideways to chase a spree of high notes. The notion of *playing* the piano suddenly made a new, literal kind of sense. It was a thing you did with your body as much as with your mind, something physical and spontaneous. When Marcin finished he invited all of the girls to try it for themselves.

There was no sheet music, no lessons on scales or talk of proper hand positions. It was as if Marcin hadn't just pulled off the case of his piano, but all its normal layers of rules and know-how that usually kept the uninitiated at a distance. It wasn't even really a piano at this point, only an instrument in the broadest possible sense of the word—a thing for expressing yourself. Some girls didn't even touch the piano's keys. You could rake its insides with fingers, rap on its outsides with knuckles, or just stand there motionless and let the silence speak like a riddle.

Later, Lockhart found a grand piano in the museum's auditorium. She led the girls blindfolded onto the stage and had them lie on the floor while another pianist played. This close, the whole body listened, resounding with the vibrations coming through the stage floor. Like during Marcin's session, there was a sudden physicality to the instrument that produced an almost automatic, reflexive familiarity; its sounds now so close and palpable that they could have been extensions of the body's own senses. Each of the girls again took turns at the piano, playing the instrument with a directness we assume belongs only to technical mastery. Not so. Each girl's turn rang out with clarity, songs of intuition and honesty. All that was really needed was the grace of openness—a chance to be heard and someone willing to listen.

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The first summer, Lockhart put on an excerpt of the documentary *D'Amore si vive* ("One lives by love") for everyone at the farm to watch. Silvano Agosti, the filmmaker, wanted to understand the role of love and tenderness in our lives. But more than that he wanted to listen to the people society had disqualified from answering: an abused Catholic, a sex worker, a transgender person. He talked with a nine-year-old boy, Franck, frustrated by a world that wouldn't take him seriously on any account. Franck said adults treated children like idiots, refusing to listen to their thoughts and feelings on anything, even their own inner lives. Franck, looking directly into the camera, wanted to tell them something: *children are human beings like everyone else.*

At the farm, listening was complicated by the fact that Lockhart only spoke English, the girls only Polish. Besides there was so much that was hard to say out loud even when there was a common language. Writing turned out to be a powerful alternative. No one could interrupt. A thought could take as long as it needed. In the privacy of pen and paper, shyness could be taken off like an overcoat. Lockhart always gave each of the girls notebooks and they used them to start an ongoing correspondence with her that lasted throughout the summer and then stretched on into the months and years that followed. They filled the pages with verse and prose, questions that needed answers, and questions that had none. *What do you see when you look in the mirror? Why do we live if we will die anyway?*

Together at the farm, they read manifestos and philosophy while they wrote, including the work of the Polish pedagogue Janusz Korczak. Writing from Warsaw a century before, Korczak had drafted a bill of rights for young people: *The child has the right to love. The child has the right to live in the present. The child has the right to have secrets.* The list went on and on, acknowledging not just the hopes we have for a life well-lived but also its inevitable tribulations: *the child has the right to fail;* and its harsh, present realities: *The child has the right to respect for his grief. The child has the right to die prematurely.* Korczak understood that to respect young people was to recognise their lives bristled with all the complexities of an adult life.

At its core, his declaration said the same thing as Franck: *children are human beings like everyone else*. As a teacher and the director of an orphanage, Korczak dedicated himself to the young, but really his life's work was trying educate the adult world on that fundamental point.

Korczak had also printed a newspaper, the *Little Review*, filled entirely with the writings of young people, and it ran weekly for thirteen years. It came inside a normal newspaper for grown-ups, *Our Review*, like a warm heart glowing with wit and pathos. Lockhart took some of the girls to read from its archives at the Polish National Library. It was different than any newspaper anyone had ever seen. In January 1938, for example, the third issue ran a front-page story titled *LONG NIGHTS AND BIZARRE DREAMS*. In an issue from May of 1929, *MY IMPORTANT MOMENTS* took up nearly all of the first page's five columns. Eighty-five years later, it was still a revelation to see how the paper's pages pushed the wider world aside for a singular dream or the welling up of a private memory. But this was more than just a picture of how it felt to be young. It was a picture of how it felt to be a human being, like everyone else.

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The girls wrote down fragments of what they could remember from dreams on scraps of paper and dropped them one by one into a hat. Good dreams, nightmares, dreams they had had so many times they knew them by heart, uncertain dreams that came and went like strangers. Tomasz Węgorzewski, a visiting theatre director, and Ewa Tatar, a writer and friend, used the girls' anonymous dreams as prompts for plays to be improvised together. It wasn't exactly make-believe because in important ways dreams are even more real than our waking life. Unlike the randomness of the daytime, dreams come from our truest inner-lives, fragments of what the private mind gripped the tightest. Tomasz and Ewa picked a few girls at a time to be the actors, while everyone else gathered around to watch. The productions were a way of talking-without-talking about what they normally held within. Especially when the dreams were painful, giving them over to the group, to collaboration, offered to relieve some of the loneliness of the suffering. Their stage was a clearing hewed from a stand of tall Scots pines, and the sheltered green pocket gave the plays the quality of a protected ritual: here, anything that could be summoned could also be put to rest.

Freud believed that jokes were the closest thing waking life had to the power of dreams, and as the day progressed it was surprising to see just how much of the heavy lifting could be done by laughter. One of everyone's favourite comedy routines was a Babushka skit they came up with where two girls would pile on oversized flea-market clothes and hobble around the hollow kvetching about themselves in the third person. *Kids these days ...* It was a way to skewer the older generations for their inability to understand the girls' lives but it was also a way for the girls to express how they thought they appeared to others. During the writing workshops they had penned a manifesto that borrowed a similar perspective: *For sure, we are not like other people want to see us. We hear: "Pathology," "Perverted brat," "Outsider." We hear we will not go very far, we lead people astray, we don't respect anyone.* Like the dream plays, the Babushkas had a way of clarifying self-truth by removing it from one's own point of view. It was a counterintuitive truth of art and also community—your sense of self could become that much more vivid when it was refigured by something or someone else.

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Therapy was part of the programme at Rudzienko where the girls lived and went to school. It was even in the centre's official name, *Młodzieżowy Ośrodek Socjoterapii*, ("Youth Centre for Socio-Therapy"). But, for the most part, everything at *MOS* was always going to feel like some extension of school—of discipline, of rules. The farm was a place apart. The rural idyll, the openness of everything, and all its other sharp contrasts from *MOS* made it possible to re-approach even things like therapy. The sylvan theatre with Tomasz and Ewa had been, after all, a kind of talk therapy. Similarly, Lockhart invited Małgorzata Wiśniewska, a movement therapist trained in Dance Movement Psychotherapy from Warsaw, to collaborate with them for the summer.

Her movement exercises demonstrated that there was a certain freedom of expression that could only be coaxed out in the absence of talking. That for a body brimming with feelings, language can be dead weight with reason and logic hardening around it like stiff clothes. That's not to say her exercises were silent: there was the time when Magoshka, as they called her, got everyone on the ground imitating different animals, making a zoo's chorus together. Or when they all joined hands and made a giant snake that whipped with peals of laughter through the field. Everything actually got louder without language; when they weren't being prodded to talk, the girls could be at their most vocal and expressive. Even in total silence, Magoshka showed them that the body had so many ways of communicating. Like when she had everyone run like crazy and then stop and put their hands above someone else's heart. Your pulse throbbed in your own ears while you felt your partner's beat in your hand—a wordless conversation about what had just happened.

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After two summers in the countryside, Lockhart invited the girls to the POLIN Museum for three weeks of workshops and excursions in Warsaw. It was mid-March but really still winter, with afternoons blowing sleet and the pale sun finished before the workday. It was also the first time the project had financial backing from a Polish institution, and the support let Lockhart invite back old collaborators like Gunia, Patrick, Ola, Magoshka, and Ewa along with a number of new ones. They toured the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art and heard a concert at the towering Palace of Culture, a Soviet-era high-rise that was still the tallest building in Poland. Before then, they had hardly even spent any time indoors with Lockhart, let alone in museums and palaces. Because this was all technically part of the museum's artist-in-residence programme, POLIN had also scheduled a public presentation and artist's talk for the last day. That was different, too. The only audience Lockhart and the girls had had up until that point had been one another and when visitors came to the farm, they invariably got pulled into the day's adventures. No one had been a spectator. Lockhart had also never had to address the meaning of the project to the girls using the formal terms of art before. In each other's company, the importance of their time together had gone un-theorised, even largely unspoken.

By the time that the day of the public programme arrived, the idea of doing any formal kind of performance had been nixed. There wasn't any one thing they could do or say that could sum up the last years together. Besides, the workshops hadn't been dress rehearsals, their play hadn't been a warm-up or preamble to anything. It had been the point itself. So in the end, they decided to give the public a window onto that freedom.

The natural choice was something from the comedy improv exercises that they had been working on with a visiting screenwriter and improvisation artist, Joanna Pawluśkiewicz. There was one called “The Machine”, where they imagined different fantastical devices—a *machine for killing hatred*, a *love machine*—and then set to piecing together its parts from an improvised palette of sounds and movements with each person fashioning themselves into an eccentric cog of their own making—bleating, whirring, twisting. In another, they staged a mock radio talk show with the girls playing the hosts, guests, and call-in listeners. They interviewed each other and took questions. In one session they called Lockhart up as their special guest, except they introduced her as a famous Polish singer. Then they wheedled her to sing a song for their listeners. Lockhart only knew a few words that could pass for lyrics in Polish, all of them swears. Everyone had lost it with laughter.

So on the final day, when the public filtered into the museum’s hall, Lockhart and the girls continued doing what they had been doing for the last three weeks, and for the last two years before that. They moved with abandon. They laughed. They made faces. They played.

Then, when it was time for the artist’s talk, everyone was ushered into an adjoining room with proper seating and a table set with bottled water and a microphone. The girls sat in the front rows and they were all given earpieces that piped-in simultaneous translations. Lockhart was asked by the moderator, Szymon Maliborski, to explain the project to the audience. The girls had never heard her speak about their time together so directly—what their experiences together had meant to her and what she hoped they might be able to offer them now and in their future lives. And so even though the wider audience was listening, Lockhart found herself talking *to* the girls as much as about them. This wasn’t just the last day of the residency, it was also the last day they would all be together until who knew when. Some of the girls would turn eighteen in the coming months and graduate out of the centre, so even if there was another summer to look forward to there was no telling who might still be able to come. Tears started to fill the spaces between words. And when it finally became too difficult for Lockhart to go on talking, one of the girls got up and made her way onto the stage. She took the microphone in her hand and spoke for herself.