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## Rudzienko

### Sharon Lockhart

2016, color, 53 min., Polish. **Producer** Wojtek Markowski, Ola Knychalska, Sharon Lockhart. **Production companies** Muddy Hill Productions (Łódź, Poland), Ola Knychalska (Łódź, Poland), Sharon Lockhart (Los Angeles, USA). **Title design** Purtill Family Business. **Director of photography** Yori Fabian, Colin Trenbeath. **Sound** Zofia Moruś, Ola Pniak. **Editor** May Rigler. **With** Julia Barbarewicz, Weronika Buła, Aleksandra Ciechomska, Katarzyna Drozd, Małgorzata Jańczyk, Natalia Kruk, Dżesika Łazinka, Klaudia Matyja, Vanessa Mazur, Weronika Mechlińska, Agnieszka Miller, Selena Mroczek, Marta Olszewska, Nadia Ozga, Patrycja Pietrucianis, Natalia Rutkowska, Anna Rutz, Marcelina Skiba, Milena Słowińska, Weronika Szałapska, Wiktoria Szcześniak, Andżelika Szczepańska, Klaudia Tomczak, Anita Wyka.

**Workshops** Małgorzata Wiśniewska (Movement Therapy), Bartosz Przybył Ołowski (Philosophy), Tomasz Węgorzewski (Theater), Joanna Pawluśkiewicz (Improvisation), Kasia Makowiecka (Mindfulness), Ewa Tatar (Dream Awareness), Ewa Piotrowska (Farming), Marcin Masecki (Piano), Jerzy Regiewicz (Percussion), Ola Markowska (Vocals), Gunia Nowik (Costume), Elizabeth Webb, Zindzi Zwietering (Arts).

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Sharon Lockhart's film *Rudzienko* was shot over three years in collaboration with the residents of the Youth Center for Sociotherapy in Rudzienko, Poland. Building on a relationship she established in 2009 with a young girl, Milena, who later moved to the center, Lockhart conceived of a series of workshops to empower the young women to find their voice. The group worked together to develop dialog and movements out of their collective activities. The resulting film depicts a mix of conversations, from the philosophical to everyday teenage concerns, and actions both theatrical and mundane voicing the girls' rich humanity. The Polish language film proposes an innovative approach to the relationship of image to language by offsetting the conversations with their textual translations into English, creating a space of quiet reflection.

## Email conversation between Sharon Lockhart and curator and critic Linda Norden

**Linda Norden:** Can you talk a little about your original invitation to do a project in Poland – that is, what brought you to Poland, initially? And then, can you say whether, in your conversations leading up to that initial project *Podwórka*, you knew you wanted to focus on kids/adolescents, or did you come to that when in Łódź?

**Sharon Lockhart:** The initial invitation to work in Poland was from Adam Budak, curator of the Łódź Festival of Cultures, with whom I had previously worked at the Kunsthau Graz. He invited me to come to Łódź to see if something piqued my interest. I had just finished *Lunch Break* so had moved away from the young people I worked with in Pine Flat. I had no plans when I came to Łódź. It was quite by accident that I noticed kids playing in courtyards and came up with that idea. It was really the quickest I had come to and carried out a project.

Can you give a rough chronology of your time in Poland and how it led to the current project?

All of my work in Poland started with *Podwórka* in 2009. I met a young girl named Milena Slowinska during the shoot and befriended her. She was nine at the time. The following few years I kept in touch with her, as did the Polish producers of *Podwórka*, Ola Knychalska and Wojtek Markowski. When I was invited back in 2012 to do a show at the Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, I decided it would be great to work with Milena. By that time, Milena and her brother were separated and they each were living in a different institution. I wanted to give Milena an opportunity to spend some time with her brother in the countryside. She told me she wanted to write a book about her life and I liked the idea of playing a part in giving her voice a platform. She had something to say, although I'm not sure she had yet to say it directly. Ola, Wojtek, and I rented a house near her grandmother's town and I tried to learn about her life and help her write her book. Although her brother was unable to join us, we had a lot of fun doing the kinds of things you do on a family vacation. Milena and I shared a room and would stay up all night looking through pictures on my phone. We had a great rapport but neither of us understood the other's language. After that summer, I kept in touch with Milena and we planned more adventures together. She still felt she wanted to tell her story but she didn't really know how. When I was invited to do a work for the Liverpool Biennial in 2014, I decided I wanted to do something with Milena and the girls of the home she lived in, the Youth Center for Socioterapy, Rudzienko. Nobody ever asked any of them about their opinions. They were told what to do every moment of their lives. We tried to present a different kind of education for them. We developed workshops to give them a voice, to bring out that part of them the system had tried to repress. It was a continuation of the process we began with Milena to tell her story but it was expanded to them as a group.

Your work has certain through-lines: for instance, adolescence and the activities, states of mind, and awkwardness specific to that transitional age – both universally and as informed by very local circumstances and traditions – are interests of yours that are conspicuously evident in the projects and people you've pursued in Poland. But, I'm also interested in the way you develop very

intimate, or at least close, relationships with the people who then feature in your films and photography. Can you speak to the ways some of those relationships develop?

The relationships I have with my subjects are almost always continued after filming. I like spending time with the people in them, getting to know them and seeing them grow. In many ways, it is the most enjoyable part of a project. Each of those relationships is unique, as any friendship is, and they develop in their own way. When Milena ended up at the Youth Centre for Socioterapy, Rudzienko, I decided to do the first set of workshops for her and her friends not knowing how much I would love those kids and identify with them; how they would have a hold on my heart.

Do most of your projects begin with an invitation, or are they prompted by a subject, location or place, or an activity with which you identify a place (such as Goshogaoka or Nō, or the *Ikebana* project; or Teatro Amazonas; *Lunch Break*; *Double Tide*)?

It is different each time. *Podwórka* started with an invitation. *Lunch Break* started with an idea or subject matter and Maine became the place because of circumstance. The Milena projects were developed through my relationship with her and her friends.

A question about the order of things: in the move from your personal relationship to the film, did you, Milena, and her friends discuss the various activities you ended up using in the film – the kite flying, the dancing – as planned actions? Or were they generated from the sites you were drawn to for a particular shot?

Things really developed organically in that film. We were discussing subject matter and sites all the time. Sometimes I think subject matter led to site and sometimes the site generated a subject.

To go back to where I left off, I'm really interested in the order of things, and especially, where a film begins – *Rudzienko*, in particular, but also generally. I'm also interested in the increasingly complex intermingling of theatrical set-ups – or *mise-en-scènes* – that you stage, with your committed relationships to the lives of the people in your films, which lie behind them and become an outgrowth of them.

*Rudzienko* has really been a different kind of project for me. The idea of the workshops and generating something for the girls, aside from my filmic project, has always been out in front of producing a product, both in chronology and importance for me. The first year of workshops was an experiment and a surprise. I wasn't completely prepared for how personal it would get and how quickly we would develop friendships. The girls themselves generated this. They were very open to me and the people I brought to them. Everyone who has participated in this project has been amazed by these girls. The set-ups and *mise-en-scène* staging is something I've been doing ever since the 1990s and it has always really depended upon the things my subjects bring to the project. None of them would have worked without that personal element that brings something unique and unexpected. It is important that they are real people, given the space to bring their own personality to the project.

That's so deeply evident in the work, a kind of insistent reminder or pulse against the often unnervingly beautiful landscapes in

which those relationships get framed. But your fields and frames are equally crucial, and so subtly differentiated that it takes acutely attentive looking to track the differences. I love the way you build surprise into the landscapes, the way you reveal all they hide and hold with seemingly silly gestures, as in the scene where the girls emerge from the tree, or pop up from the fields. I love the way that plays against the more natural hanging out, as when the three girls are sitting on the stone wall, talking.

Your work has any number of complex, interwoven constants that work as a counterpoint to the very specific circumstances of the girls in *Rudzienko* or the kids in Pine Flat. For example, the ethnographic underpinnings, which you invariably reconceive around those very intense relationships to your subjects, or your penchant for a certain pastoral, cinematically composed field. That is, I'm trying to get at the way you mess with the distancing usually imposed on unfamiliar or remote subjects by working closely enough to them to enable them to perform in your films, rather than to be filmed as if by a documenting camera.

Can we talk a little about the art/life implications, here? How do you get to know your subjects; how do you script and direct them?

Again, I think this most recent project is a bit different than previous ones in how personal it has gotten. I am in touch with a number of the girls on social media every single day. As I said, I was surprised by how open the girls were with me, but I did work to create a space for that. When we first went to the Centre to recruit girls for the project, they showed us their bedrooms. When they first came to the farm we rented for the project, the first thing we did was show them our rooms. Then we sat down and ate something together before Polish educator and philosopher Bartek Przybył Ołowski conducted a workshop in which I and my collaborators participated. I've worked very hard in this project to keep the girls as equal participants, guiding the direction of the scripts and locations and taking cues from things they are into and pulling something out of that.<sup>1</sup>

And then, to get back to the distancing you do all sorts of things to open a space between the viewer and your subjects: reinstating, in a way, a more documentary distance, but structurally. For instance, through your use of timed shots, fixed camera, and via the *mise-en-scènes* or clearly staged reenactments of what would have/could have been a found activity.

That is an interesting point. The production side of my projects is so different from the reception side. I think this is really because media (film and photography) has such a peculiar dynamic. I think you have to recognize the distance you have from the subject of a film in order to create the space for viewers to participate through their own thought processes. Media itself is so manipulative and viewers are so used to acquiescing to that manipulation that it becomes necessary to pull back from the image.

Can you say a little more about the relationship to your subjects that you're trying to achieve for the viewer? That is, how much do you want us to think we "know" the subjects in your film, and what would you like us to know about them? Is this something that's as important to you as your structuring of the film or relationship to those in it?

I don't know if I want viewers to feel they "know" the subjects at all in the conventional sense. I want them to think about their own lives. I want them to have a relationship with

the subjects of the film and that almost always comes by being aware of yourself and, at the same time, being interested in the other person.

There's another sort of play you establish, between the intimate and the formal: intimacy with and amongst your subjects and your highly formalized, exquisite set-ups. Aside from the obvious joy you take in the formal beauty of your shots and in the sound, are some of the formalizing devices meant to protect your subjects?

I know I am very protective of my subjects, and I take it personally if audiences don't "get" them. I wouldn't say that the formal elements are meant to protect them. I recently screened *Rudzienko* to a non-art audience at a center for wayward teens in Sweden. Someone offered the comment that they really appreciated the awareness of the frame that the static camera created because it suggested that there is always something outside the frame guiding what goes on within it. He felt that created an empathy that called for a wider view of behavior and the circumstances that generate it.

That's a great observation. This might be a good place to say a little more about the particulars of how you worked with the girls in *Rudzienko*: your research, the workshops, and the theatricalized set-ups you constructed for shots...

When we started *Rudzienko* I didn't know exactly what it would be as a film. I knew I wanted to do the workshops and that they would generate something discursive. What it generated was a conversation or set of conversations. As I said earlier, we wanted to give them something different as an educational model, to ask their opinions and develop those ideas. Each day we chose a different location and based our programming on some aspect of the site. In this way, each conversation is linked to its setting.

I think *Rudzienko*, and your other projects with Milena – also *Lunch Break* and *Double Tide*, but not *Podwórka* or *Pine Flat* – seem more sociological than ethnographic. That is, the subjects seem less exoticized and at once more clearly "known" by you and more developed as characters, rather than as exemplars of what they do. Does that seem like an accurate perception?

I would include *Pine Flat* in the more sociological group. *Pine Flat* was really the first time I worked for years with a group of people before filming them. In general, I would say that a time commitment will generate a different project than something done quickly. I hope that my subjects are not exoticized and I am always working to move away from that.

Can you talk about translation in *Rudzienko*? More specifically, can you elaborate on how you gained understanding of what the Polish girls were saying, what you wanted to capture from their dialogue, and what you wanted to protect? Following this, can you explain your reconstruction of sound in the film, and how you decided to show the translation?

Translation has been a huge issue from the start with this project. I've always had Polish speakers working with me and some of the girls were even fluent in English, but I never had professional translation so was always working hard to communicate. I think the amount of effort we had to expend on communicating became a bond we shared. In the initial workshops, Bartek was quite helpful in communicating his ideas to me and bringing my ideas to the girls.

The texts the girls generated were a product of his workshops. The crew, Bartek, and I discussed the content every night and talked with the girls the next day about what they might want to say on camera, but often they came up with their dialogue improvisationally on the spot. I had a general idea of what they were saying but the specifics weren't fleshed out until I had a translator go through the footage and translate the texts word for word when I was back in Los Angeles. Later on, I had another translator go through the texts and found out there were subtleties that the first one had not noticed. For the most part, I did not see my role as protecting them from their own words. They were told that this was their opportunity to say something to the world so I took them seriously, and assumed that their speech was intentional.

Deciding what entered the film and what did not was difficult. The conversations that didn't work were the ones that were confusing and aimless. I wanted to put everything in but I had to limit the content so it worked as a totality. I had a really hard time coming up with a way of presenting the text since I think subtitles are problematic. If you are always reading, you are unable to look at the image and really listen to the sounds of the Polish voices and the ambience. Subtitles make everything textual and rob you of your senses. I felt that their "voice" was more than what they were saying. It was also the sound of their voice. I tried every way I could to present the translation and ended up with the 3 scrolls. I like the way it gives a solemnity to the text and gives you space to sit with it and also sit with the picture.

As for the sound, we did a lot of work on bringing out the texture of the places we filmed. I wanted people to hear the conversations, and if they were native Polish speakers, be able to understand them, but I wanted the feeling of the landscape to be ever-present. [...]

*I wanted to ask about your thinking around Janusz Korczak and his book, How to Love a Child (1919). That title alone speaks volumes and is something you're so hyper-attuned to. I think for me what's so astonishing in your films is the way you reinforce the importance of a quality of attention – to people and landscape and work and craft and things in our everyday lives – and the ways in which small gestures and hard words and just a lack of attention can so quickly hurt and do damage. But more specifically, the way you consistently get at those overlooked, tiny exchanges and recognitions through the intensifications and reenactments that cinema and painting and photography (images and encounters intensified by aesthetic adjustments) allow. I think this question is both about quality of attention and about scale and magnitude. That is, I think your precisely calibrated formal intensifications – the slowed looking and long still shots; exaggerated (manipulated) sound; acutely observed, staged, filmed and framed mise-en-scènes; and perhaps above all, the real relationships you establish with real people in real lived situations, and your collaborative direction of same – draws your viewers into an order of attention that comes close to yours, and an order of experience that comprehends that of your subjects, even as you protect your subjects from any false assumption on our part.*

It is interesting that your question starts with Korczak and goes on to encompass almost everything I do. I think it is insightful to frame it that way because it is really about giving everyone (the subjects of the film, viewers, and all the

participants in the projects) a certain amount of respect. That is what drew me to Korczak in the first place: the fact that he respected children enough to cede them a level of autonomy that adults often reject as dangerous. He encouraged the children in his orphanage to form their own parliament, their own court system and made possible their own newspaper, The Little Review. He was one of the initial authors of legal rights for children. I've always been interested in this topic, both the question of rights in general and rights for children in particular. One inspiration for *Lunch Break* was the research I did for Pine Flat and the Lewis Hine photographs lobbying for child labor laws. Korczak thought it was important that children be given the opportunity to fail. For me, that is such an interesting and important stance. In a sense, it is how I like to think of audiences. My films are more about giving people an opportunity to approach the work in their own way than an attempt to force them into a certain kind of spectatorship.

<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the group worked with Polish educator Bartek Przybył Ołowski to create exercises designed to empower the girls' individual voices as they articulated their perspectives about the world. In 2015, they worked with curator Ewa Tatar, theater director Tomasz Węgorzewski, and dance movement therapist Małgorzata Wiśniewska to explore the psychological derivations of movement. Then, as a group they read Edgar Allan Poe's gothic story *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which was used as a framework to engage with the girls' own dreams.

*The interview by Linda Norden with Sharon Lockhart was first published in the framework of Sharon Lockhart's solo exhibition "Rudzienko" at the Gallery TPW, Toronto, 8 September – 29 October 2016*

Sharon Lockhart, born in 1964 in Norwood, USA, lives and works in Los Angeles. Over the past twenty-five years she has created an extensive body of work in film and photography. Many of her projects involve years of in-depth research and collaboration with particular communities. Lockhart's work has been the subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions at museums worldwide. She has been participating at *Forum* and *Forum Expanded* since 2006 with numerous films.

#### Films

1994: *Khalil, Shaun, a Woman under the Influence* (16 min.). 1997: *Goshogaoka* (63 min.). 1999: *Teatro Amazonas* (40 min.). 2003: *Nō* (32 min., Forum 2010). 2005: *Pine Flat* (137 min., Forum Expanded 2006). 2008: *Lunch Break* (83 min., Forum Expanded 2009), *Exit* (41 min.). 2009: *Podwórka* (32 min., Forum Expanded 2010), *Double Tide* (99 min., Forum 2010). 2016: *Rudzienko*.