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Steffanie Ling, "In the Field: Sharon Lockhart, James Benning, and People," *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 4, 2018



FILM

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In the Field: Sharon Lockhart, James Benning, and People



Rudzienko.

In a conversation between filmmakers James Benning and Sharon Lockhart after a screening of their films *L. Cohen* (2017) and *Rudzienko* (2014), Benning starts things off with a little joke. He sets it up. Two planets. The first planet says, "I have people," and the second responds, "Don't worry, that will pass." The joke is over. The audience laughs. We can derive humor from the idea (the fact?) that the human race is a blight

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on any environment unfortunate enough to appear bountiful before us, but I suspect that Sharon Lockhart actually kind of likes people.

Cohen is a single 48-minute shot of an Oregon farm field on a clear day. Benning captures the subtle quivers of life: the view of forest through a window in *Two Cabins*, the twenty smokers in *Twenty Cigarettes* (both 2011). His unflinching lens magnifies subtle activity that elicits broader considerations of experience. At the event, I can identify a young filmmaker seated in the front row touching his mouth as the audience waits for the subtle event, which could really be anything, but on this occasion, what Benning presented that evening was not so quotidian. *L. Cohen* depicts the solar eclipse plunging this pastoral scene into darkness, save for the silhouette of a mountain peak. The screen never goes completely dark, no transcendence to some abstracted phenomenological state. We don't leave the planet. Shortly after, the distant and green patches of land, wisps of blue and white, and yellow gasoline canister become visible again, untouched in the aftermath of the plunge. The film brings Benning's captive audience in, and out, and back in, to light, and I can see that the filmmaker has stopped touching his mouth but his head is now tilted at an intellectualizing angle. The usual mood of durational experimental documentary works is embodied by the filmmaker's posturing (maybe, maybe not)—but then "Love Itself" by Leonard Cohen hits, and *L. Cohen* is now rather distinct from a mere structural exercise. Benning draws attention to more than just the movement of time and light, but invokes the movement of love too:

All busy in the sunlight
The flecks did float and dance,

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And I was tumbled up with them
In formless circumstance.
I'll try to say a little more
Love went on and on
Until it reached an open door—
Then Love itself,
Love itself was gone.
Love itself was gone.

I realized Benning is being very sincere, sweet even. The comedic value of his joke about planets and people lands because it locates humanity like a rash on the geological time scale, but I'm wary of laughing all the way to the fringes of moral relativity. Benning goes micro or macro, and both are a retreat. Yet, the boldly saccharine deployment of "Love Itself" strikes me as his admission that there is a people-factor that's worthy of prolonged engagement. It's worth talking about, touching mouths, tilting heads, and watering eyes over, but it is as rare, phenomenal, and fleeting as the sudden darkness of that eclipse.

Rudzienko also opens with a placid wide shot of a field. After a period of peoplelessness, two girls descend from a tree and run out of the frame. The film cuts to a rolling transcription that suggests it is the conversation in the tree—"At least we can be here to listen to these sounds and talk in peace. A stop to this endless routine." We see two girls lying on a patch of grass, one with her head resting near the abdomen of the other. Just talking. For those of us in the audience who aren't fluent in Polish, we are not privy to their discussion, and so are resigned to receive it as an image of female

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companionship—not quite cryptic, but just enough. The linguistic inaccessibility frames real life, but Lockhart cordons it off from any preemptive aims to comprehend what appears before us in cinema. The moment feels protected from analysis, from overthinking. One of them dons fluorescent green and red shoelaces, visually pronounced against the dry grass, calling my attention to it as a universal indication of a burgeoning sense of personal style, or agency. Then we return to a wide angle on another field, this time the image is sectioned off by fences that are traversed by two girls who are attempting to fly a kite. It's fleetingly airborne followed by the surprisingly sharp thud of the kite landing on the ground, again and again. One of them becomes more legible and her figure enlarges each time she runs further out of the depths of the frame to initiate another flight, but the naturalism of these false starts surpassed any aspiration to see the kite flown. These are just a few of several affecting vignettes portraying girls from a socio-therapy center outside of Warsaw.

Rudzienko is Lockhart's second film in Poland after *Pódworka* (2009), wherein she portrayed various courtyards, an architectural idiosyncrasy in the city of Łódź that are occupied by children as their unofficial playgrounds. At one of these sites, Lockhart met a young girl named Milena. Lockhart reflects on her first encounter with Milena painting her as a natural leader, exuberant and assertive, climbing atop makeshift structures and commanding the other children with confidence and jest. She has become a muse of sorts for Lockhart, and their sustained friendship has been a pivotal subject for other photographic and filmic works. Lockhart leased farmland near the Youth Centre for Socio-Therapy in Rudzienko where she organized and hosted a retreat for Milena and her peers who lived together at the Youth

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Centre just outside Warsaw. Each day they took a bus from the center to socialize and play in nature, and participate in workshops for philosophy, theatre, improv, mindfulness, dream awareness, vocals, and costume. Together, Lockhart and the girls conceptualized the conversations, staging, and direction for each strand of the film to build up their confidence and stimulate creativity. Lockhart has said, “Those young girls are telling us something very important.” A statement that distills much of the philosophy of Janusz Korczak, an early twentieth-century Polish educator who advocated for the affirmation and respect of the emotional life and intellectual affirmation of children. Many of these educational methodologies informed the workshops and exercises Lockhart employed.

Recent projects such as *Pine Flat* (2005) and *Lunch Break* (2008) also involved becoming a part of a small section of society, a community essentially. A word that has lost much of its meaning in the amplification of social practices. However, this term is rarely ever applied to the presentation or discussion of Lockhart’s work. Lockhart’s work has completely avoided that quaint stamp, which rather confirms the superfluidity and compensatory nature of its application. For all the time spent with the girls in the youth center in Rudzienko, Lockhart’s work—speaking on a not-quite-geological scale, but one that expands beyond the circulation and legitimization of cinema and contemporary art—takes on a role that remains completely subsidiary to the profound results and impact on the lives of the people she involves in the process of producing film and art. In the post-screening discussion, Lockhart spoke briefly about contending with the girls inevitable growing up and of returning to Warsaw to aid in establishing collective living models in the city. Several who have aged out of the youth center have since

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become mothers, and the system in place may have them return to compromised family lives or enter an exploitative labor economy. In thinking about the profound access *Rudzienko* provides into the social interiority of Milena and her friends, it depicts evidence of a model at work. The film reveals what can take place when trust is built and space carved away from the branch of people-ness that Benning's planets can't wait to be rid of.

Sharon Lockhart likes people, and people like her too. It's apparent and a lot. And it's working. It's almost too simplistic to state, but I refuse to complicate it in order to convey something more challenging or potentially deeply philosophical. The difficulty isn't representing its complexity. The greatest challenge with Lockhart's work is trying to think about it simply, so we can present it as evidence of a stunning and feasible possibility, a graspable future where we do not have to force people to be happy or good, productive or stable, but again, simply require outlets and forums to derive the value of being truly looked at and listened to. At a much more niche scale, Benning has succeeded in creating this circumstance for his films—which we, his audience, are tremendously conditioned to see and hear.

Nearing the end of her conversation, the almost familial rapport between the two artists is evident. Lockhart prods at Benning for insights on the music he uses in his films (he replies that he “doesn't use music in his films”) and teases him for excluding women from his periodical homages. He recedes, knowingly.