

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Alison Reilly, "In a New Collaborative Film, Sharon Lockhart Puts Teenage Girls in Charge of Their Own Image," *Artslant*, July 21, 2016

ARTSLANT

In a New Collaborative Film, Sharon Lockhart Puts Teenage Girls in Charge of Their Own Image



Through close collaboration with a group of teenage girls living at the Youth Center for Socio-Therapy in Rudzienko, Poland, Sharon Lockhart creates a striking portrait of the complexities of adolescence. The centerpiece of the artist's latest exhibition, currently on view at The Arts Club of Chicago, is the 2016 work *Rudzienko*, a two-channel film installation featuring short scenes choreographed and performed by the young women from the Center. As both facilitator and documenter, Lockhart fosters a safe environment for her subjects to express themselves and empowers them to take ownership of their voices and representation.

In one clip, the film's only indoor scene, two girls slow dance with each other, holding a profoundly tender embrace for the duration of the shot. Tattered, mustard-green wallpaper

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serves as their backdrop as they seem to simultaneously grip and heal one another. The slowness and stillness of the portrait undermines traditional portrayals of teenagers as angst-filled, disengaged youth. In its staged yet candid portrayals, *Rudzienko* provides a powerful answer to the question: how can teenagers be accurately and responsibly represented on screen?



Sharon Lockhart, Still from *Rudzienko*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York/Brussels and neugerriemschneider, Berlin

The other eight vignettes—interspersed with text from dialogues performed by the young women—unfold in outdoor spaces near Rudzienko, which is on the outskirts of Warsaw. Lockhart situates the girls in close conversation with the rural landscape; they are embedded within the trees, brushes, and grasses of the Polish countryside. In one shot, three large trees, backlit on a cloudy horizon, dwarf the figures of two girls who slowly come into view. In the dark, the bright image reflects onto the cool, stone floor of the Arts Club gallery.

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Sharon Lockhart, *Milena, Radawa*, 2016, Chromogenic print, 32 1/2 x 40 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and The Arts Club of Chicago

In 2009, while working on the film *Pódwórka* (“Courtyard”), Lockhart befriended a girl named Milena, who makes a brief appearance in one of the *Rudzienko* vignettes. Milena is Lockhart’s muse; since their first meeting, when Milena was nine years old, the two have developed a close relationship. Over the past seven years, Lockhart, who is based in Los Angeles, has returned to Poland more than a dozen times and documented Milena through several films and photographs, which were recently on display at Gladstone Gallery in New York.

While images of Milena are largely absent from the Arts Club exhibition, she serves as the crucial tie between the girls from the Youth Center and Lockhart. *Rudzienko* is a product of workshops that the artist organized for Milena and the other girls living at the Center that focused on the development of personal narratives through performance, writing, and dance. Together they choreographed scenes for the film and staged conversations as a means of building self-confidence and trust. These exercises were based on the practices of early twentieth century Polish educator Janusz Korczak, the author of *How to Love a Child* (1919), who advocated for the respect of the emotional intelligence of children.

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Sharon Lockhart, Installation view of *Rudzienko* at The Arts Club of Chicago, 2016. Photo: Michael Tropea. Courtesy of The Arts Club of Chicago

Throughout *Rudzienko* Lockhart maintains the fixed camera position typical of her films. The absence of jump cuts within a vignette provokes a kind of deep looking often absent from contemporary culture. Lockhart does not manipulate narratives through montage, splicing, and other heavy editing techniques, but rather lets the girls perform their own stories before a non-judgmental lens.

The fixed-frame camera's stillness also allows for moments of pure joy to unfold through surprises in movement. An entrancing scene of a lush meadow is interrupted as a group of girls emerge from the beneath the tall grass and yell in unison. In another scene the focal point is a full-grown leafy tree, majestic in the daylight as clouds pass overhead. A few minutes into the footage, a girl hidden from view casually drops down from its enormous branches and walks off screen.

Lockhart's still shots also provide opportunity to listen more keenly to the ambient audio. The girls in the film speak to each other in Polish but the sound of their voices fades into a soundtrack of humming bugs and chattering birds. At times during the 40-minute film it's striking how loud the countryside can be. Echoing in the background of the gallery is the second channel of *Rudzienko*, installed in the opposing alcove. A Polish voice-over reads an unnamed poem by Andżelika Szczepańska, one of the girls from the Center, as an English

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translation appears on screen. Szczepańska's poem reiterates the themes of acceptance, abandonment, and fear expressed in the text passages in the first channel.



Sharon Lockhart, Installation view of *Rudzienko* at The Arts Club of Chicago, 2016. Photo: Michael Tropea. Courtesy of The Arts Club of Chicago

In transcribing the conversations between the girls, Lockhart pays respect to how adolescent dialogue can swing from deeply profound to incredibly mundane, and back again. This respect, coupled with her sustained engagement, fosters a critical lack of self-consciousness revealed in the teenagers' spoken words and performed gestures alike.

“When you're on the run, you walk in the dark. It's so nice to walk through the dark woods. And then, if there's a sunset too, before the darkness, it looks so cool.”

“When's your birthday?”

“The 20th of March. It's the worst date. I also don't like the 5th, the 5th of July...that's when my dad left us.”

In the main gallery of The Arts Club are three photographs of girls from the Center—Klaudia, Selena, and Bula—caught in the bright flash of Lockhart's camera as they race by her into the woods.

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Sharon Lockhart, Installation view of *When You're Free You Run in the Dark* at The Arts Club of Chicago, 2016. Photo: Michael Tropea. Courtesy of The Arts Club of Chicago