EVIDENCE

Director Lee Anne Schmitt

USA | 2025
76 min. | English

Screenplay Lee Anne Schmitt. **Cinematography** Lee Anne Schmitt. **Editing** Lee Anne Schmitt. **Music** Jeff Parker. **Sound Design** Sara Suarez. **Sound** Lee Anne Schmitt. **Producer** Lee Anne Schmitt. **Executive Producer** Lee Anne Schmitt. **Production company** Lee Anne Schmitt (Altadena, CA, USA).

World sales Lee Anne Schmitt

Synopsis

Poisoned water, damaged earth, and elevated cancer rates: environmental clean-up sites are one of the legacies left behind by the American chemical and munitions manufacturer "Olin Corporation". Its other legacy was the John M. Olin Foundation, which donated millions to pushing a conservative agenda from the 1970s to the early 2000s. As a by-product or direct effort, the Olin Corporation and other conservative think tanks have had a deep and unsettling impact on American politics, family values, and women's health. Working again the field of the 16mm New Left essay film, Lee Anne Schmitt connects an array of topics, books, and objects to reflect on the rise of the new conservative movement and the effects of dark money on American politics and culture. In easily her most personal film to date – as her father worked for Olin – she considers these values and their implications after becoming a mother. In the face of appalling attacks on women's biological rights and the current dominance of the Republican party, **EVIDENCE** is a sobering primer on the state of America today. (Ted Fendt)

Lee Anne Schmitt is an essay filmmaker. Her projects have addressed American exceptionalism, the logic of utility and labor, gestures of kindness and refusal, and the history of racial violence in the United States. Her films have screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Viennale, Rotterdam International Film Festival, Cinéma du Réel, FICUNAM, FIDMarseilles, DocLisboa and many more. She is a recipient of a Guggenheim, Creative Capital, Graham Foundation Grant, and multiple MacDowell Residencies.

Films: 2008: California Company Town. 2012: The Last Buffalo Hunt. 2018: Purge This Land. 2019: Farnsworth Scores (short film). 2024: Cry Love (short film). 2025: Evidence.

Director's Statement

The Personal Is Political

Understanding one's own story within a capitalist mythology

EVIDENCE is both an analysis of corporate spending and the impact of dark money on U.S. politics and ideology and a personal meditation on ideas of family and care.

The film is a meditation on the intersection of American politics, ideas of family, and the right wing's intentional assault on bodily autonomy.

This is my fourth feature: each an examination of ideology and its construction in the United States. This film is by far my most personal work and attempts to understand how my own family (of birth and of choice) was sculpted within a mythology of capitalism.

My father worked for thirty years for a petrochemical company. In 1969, two years before I was born, the son of the company's founder formed a foundation which, over thirty-five years, spent more than 350 million dollars in support of the creation of the new conservative movement. Using an archive of funded materials, landscapes of the company's manufacturing sites (many of which are now environmental clean-up sites) and personal, domestic imagery the film meditates on the impact of corporate money on our ideas of care and family, as well as the link between the right wing's assault on bodily autonomy and the crisis of the environment.

The film also looks at the link between humans and the natural world; the Olin Corporation has one of the most egregious environmental histories in the United States. **EVIDENCE** looks at the primacy of place and the body, and the varied meanings of survival.

The music in the film is, like that of my last film, composed by my partner, Jazz Composer and guitarist Jeff Parker.

Lee Anne Schmitt

Interview

Questioning Ideology

Ted Fendt and Christiane Büchner in conversation with Lee Anne Schmitt on dealing with political/personal history on film

Ted Fendt: In the film, you look at myths of the family that conservative organizations promoted in the 1960s and onwards. The flow of the film is very striking. I'm curious about your process of bringing the different topics and thoughts together.

Lee Anne Schmitt: I work through films and they evolve as I research and experience. Finding the structure is always the hardest part. It's not not pre-planned, but what I mostly

start with is what I'm interested in and the layers. Then I find the shape of how to go through those once I have a lot of the material. This film was a little bit different because my other films were more landscape-based. So I would go and film, and then I had an archive, a self-created archive. Here it was somewhat similar, except that after I did the filming of the manufacturing sites, Covid happened, and I was in this very domestic realm. And that really altered what the film was. I work visually first and then I have an outline of the ideas and the information. And I just keep trying to find alignments. I really wanted to find a way to focus on the personal without it being a personal film where the personal eats up the political. So when I'm in the more informational or historical time, the images are very personal, often they're very domestic. I wanted it to touch lightly on my specific experience, but have that as a reference point for the value of the domestic. It takes me probably two, three solid years to edit a film and really find both the material edit and the information. It's always a question of how much do I need to say and where can I say less.

Christiane Büchner: You dedicated the film to your father. Did you discuss it with him too while going along?

LAS: No. We've discussed politics much in our lives. I guess in some ways I could dedicate my whole body of work to my father. I think the struggle between these foundational relationships and these politics is a big motivation for me to try to understand thought processes. He's a figure that I love dearly and I struggle with why these logics make sense. I did a film way back, CALIFORNIA COMPANY TOWN (2008), that really began with him in some ways, too, this concept of progress and use and land use. I did another film on buffalo hunters (THE LAST BUFFALO HUNT, 2011), which wouldn't seem to be about him at all, except it was in some ways about masculinity and how that manifests itself. So, no, I haven't discussed it with him. We've done a lot of discussion of politics, but he's quite ill now. So the conversations have been a little bit different as well.

TF: There's a very powerful on-screen text in the middle of the film about how your mother was stopped from working by your father. Were conservative family ideologies present in your house when you were growing up?

LAS: It's always where priorities are and how priorities are laid. I was not raised evangelical. That was something that I wanted to be really clear about. I wasn't raised with corporal punishment. But I was raised in a very gendered household. We all were in some ways. It's very hard to step outside the way gender and family constructs shape us in the US and elsewhere. I think it was interesting to me as an adult to realizse that I thought I had, because my parents had moved and they were much more progressive than their parents in terms of roles. But I found these family tapes and I listened, I was like, 'No, gender was actually very strict in terms of just assumptions.' We used the objects from childhood and just how it shows up there: whose work is prioritized and whose work is lessened and who gives up the work in order to do care, and issues like that. I also live in relationship to these constructs. I have a child, I have a partner, I have a stepdaughter. It's very hard to live perfectly in imperfect systems, which is what I really am interested in the film: How do you proceed in systems that are sort of meant to destroy us? And how do you do so with joy and care and love. So I'm critical, but I also want to acknowledge the compromises I make and the compromises we all make day-to-day.

My mom worked so hard in her life to go back to school. She hadn't finished. She went to nursing school, she didn't go to university. It was such a priority when I was a kid for her to go back to school and in a very intellectual way. Then when she tried to implement that in the world, probably around my age, between 45 and 55, it was really hard, both because of the structures of her family and just the structures of the world. It's hard to enter a workforce. Then priorities just take over in the day-to-day needs of people. I admire both my parents in certain ways and I have watched them make choices that are hard to align with those. It's hard for me to align certain choices I've made with my more utopian beliefs.

CB: I thought the arc of argumentation you have in your film is really amazing because we get into all these books and we think, 'Okay, right. Think tanks. Heard it before', but: new names, I didn't know them. How much of of the argument did you develop through reading and collecting and discussing, and to what degree did you already know before that this would come together?

LAS: I was definitely in discussion and reading and contemplation over, maybe, five years. But it was a culmination of discomforts I've had for a long time. My discomfort with capitalism, I guess. I think I've worked over the years to understand how people come to embrace a system that devalues them so deeply. The foundation was an excuse to go deeply and have a frame, draw a bubble around something that's so extensive, so endless. It was like, 'Okay, we can draw the boundaries here, not even with the largest foundation, just one of many moments of this, and see how this has been such an intentional shift.' I made a lot of discoveries along the way.

The way I write is I take notes, but then I do a picture edit and I talk to it, then I transcribe and edit that. This is why it takes so long. I just have this cheap microphone going the whole time where I talk over the images and work it out, both to figure out for myself, but also: How do I make these connections? It's always a little bit surprising. I show it to people I really trust and get feedback and burrow into it for a couple of years. I always want to create density. As I'm talking, unlike in a linear essay where you're progressing, I want to spiral around ideas so that they echo throughout. The film ends in this very uncertain place of: We have to move on. We move forward, whether we want to or not in life. It was always very important to me to come back to the connection between the domestic and the political system and to break into this very American idea of free will and individualism and keep coming back to how we are so thoroughly within these systems. And so the choices we make are always in that context, even if it's the choice to refuse and defy.

TF: There's a moment when you talk about the Federalist Society and how such movements encroach more and more on family life. Meanwhile, you show domestic interiors. There's space for the viewer to think rather than this being illustrative.

LAS: I was trying to move from the very material impact to this other a material impact, but we don't think of it necessarily in that way, these more structural things. The film flipped around. At one point, we went through the personal first. There's this film by William E. Jones I really like, MASSILLON (1991). It's a bifurcated film. One half is very personal and one half is the legislative history of Ohio. I always aim to make a film that's that clear and structural, and then I end up making much more essayistic work. Because I'm interested in indeterminacy, putting the audience in these spaces where they're like, 'I don't exactly know how I got here.'

CB: I thought the duet of your voice and the music is very special because it has both a gravity and a lightness.

LAS: The music is by my partner Jeff Parker, who is a jazz guitarist and composer. At first, I was using songs of his as temp tracks to help draw these things together and give them a little momentum. What was interesting is that, over time, I wanted things more and more fractured, so he just gave me these improvised tracks he'd done broken into instrumentations, and let me play with them. I think he managed to find just a really good tone.

The last thing we did with the film is cut one last song from the very beginning and replace it with some of those tracks. Over the books. The books had been really tight and driving, and I was like, 'No, I actually want some space there' and to add these moving around, domestic sounds there, too, because throughout the film there is this idea of just me and a couple of people who help me moving, turning books and picking things up and putting them down. The sound when you live in a house with people, you're always hearing them moving around, picking things up and putting things down and taking showers. It's comforting to live among people that way.

TF: A lot of the objects have tags on them, addresses and names.

LAS: That's my mom. She used to have mailing labels because she used to use mail that often. You would print them with your address, and she just stuck mailing labels on them. That collection lived in a box and she sent it to me when I was 40. I knew I wanted to do something with these objects that had come back. That's where I was like, 'I'm just going to use these.' What do you keep and what do you send on? Because if I was to talk about my childhood, not all the objects I would think of are there, but it's weird how much is there in these random boxes and things she sent me over the years.

TF: It adds to the film's archaeological quality, which you also have with the books.

LAS: It's interesting with the books because they have a more academic feel at the beginning, and then they abandon that for this more mass market font. That was really interesting to me, just how these were put together and the languages that were used on the title pages and things. My son, actually, he labels his rocks. There are labels throughout. There's a push towards naming things.

TF: The various signs at the beginning of the film: Don't go into this site. Olin Foundation was here, which is also related to property and who owns what. The film is now coming out with the US election right behind us.

LAS: My first film, CALIFORNIA COMPANY TOWN, came out right after the real estate collapse in 2008. It was a lot about land use and land property. People were like, 'Oh, how did you know?' And I was like, 'Well, that's the system.' There's a logical extension. While I've been doing the sound mix and the final things on the film, it's all in the context of, first, the vote authorisation and then the inauguration and then whatever you would call this first week of Trump's election, this shock thing he's doing. I mean, you could never imagine this, but of course, all of it traces very logically to what they said they would do. It's exactly what they planned on doing. It's in the books, it's in documents from Pat Buchanan in Reagan's time.

This is such a planned momentum, but I don't know if the plan... Once something starts to flow, it's hard to control. The film has been worked on from 2019 to now, so there are many times where I was like, 'What will this film be?' Will it release into Biden's administration or what administration comes after if something had happened differently? And will people still be able to see that this is the system? No matter which president we have, this is the underlying system.

CB: What discussion are you expecting showing your film in this time, in these first few weeks of the Trump administration?

LAS: In some ways, I think the organizsing of how the different issues fit against each other is useful. I think documentary or film itself just as a document, whether it's fiction or documentary, does have this function to document times, but also to be there for other people to help feel less lost. I think of films I watched over time where I was like, 'Yeah, that helps me understand what I'm feeling or what I'm thinking.' I think for other people, it'll be challenging because there are things that we embrace just by living.

CB: I wonder whether these analytical thoughts can empower us to do something now.

LAS: I think that I try and have some space for that in the film, but it's a hard question because what do you do day-to-day? My father always likes to talk about these pendulums and the health of the system. I think it's not that simple, because it's more like rivers meeting and there are these different currents happening in different concentrations and different strengths. It's not as linear as a back and forth.

I've been asked, 'Why don't you just write this down? Why is this film?' I was like, 'The time of it.' The collective watching, the collective experiencing of it is something valuable, especially in this political sense. I have often been critiqued by a couple of filmmakers I came up with, who were essentially like, 'You should be bolder.' There's a lot of boldness, and I'm not sure boldness is the attribute we most need. I think making space for people is important in the work. That's what I aim to do. It's hard to sit with ideas. It's hard to sit still. Especially when it seems like if you take an hour and a half to do something, when you come out of there, there's going to be something on your phone that's going to be horrible. I have a friend, Coleen, who said, 'What we have control of is our own attention. What we have control of is our own time.'