

B-N-L

Disclosures
Solveig Qu Suess

April 13 - May 25, 2024

When the artist began shooting a film recounting her mother's career as an optical engineer, the story is complicated by a non-disclosure agreement signed with the Chinese state in 1987. Constructing a personal narrative must navigate a promise of confidentiality to a powerful actor. With an absence of accounts and records as premise, the exhibited work asks how to narrate such an event that cannot be narrated, yet has registered its presence across time and distance, including within the artist's personal history.

As a result, the work traces around this absence of information, exploring the personal and gendered experience within structures of power that shroud optical technology and its global spread. The exhibition attempts to situate images from various sources onto a single timeline: Kodachrome slides from personal family archives that capture landscapes of a system under transition in 80's and 90's China as well as scenes of her mother's first years in Switzerland with the artist as a child. Both intimate and staged images bring a palpable tension between memory and its images, belonging and statecraft, lenscrafting and transposition.

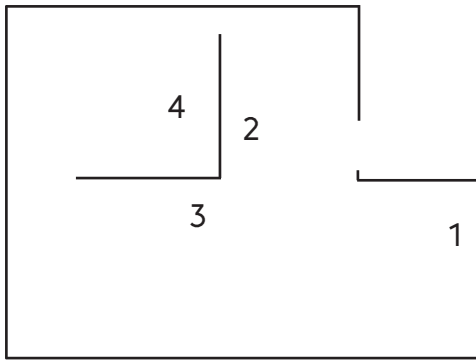
Solveig Qu Suess works within the fields of documentary film and artistic research. She is currently a researcher at the Critical Media Lab, Basel and a PhD candidate in Urban Studies at the University of Basel. Her research sits on the intersections of visual ethnography, environmental humanities, and feminist STS. Since 2022, she has been working on two films concurrently; "Holding Rivers, Becoming Mountains", set along the Mekong River and within the downstream politics of hydroelectric development; and "Little Grass" a film on memory, belonging with the history of geopolitical division between China and the West through the lens of her mother's career as an optical engineer, expelled by the Chinese state in 1987 for marrying a Western colleague.

Curated by Lucie Kolb

B-N-L
Auf dem Wolf 11
4052 Basel
www.brand-new-life.org

Mondays, 4-8 pm
Saturdays, noon-6 pm

Upcoming:
May 25, 4-6 pm
Notes on Autoethnographic Filmmaking with Solveig Qu Suess
Hosted by Futuress



1

18 Kodachrome slides photographed between 1966–76 during the Cultural Revolution, courtesy of Xin Li.

1966	China - Beijing; Start of the Cultural revolution, with grandparents.
1968	China - Beijing; In front of Military museum, with sister.
1971	China - Beijing; Middleschool, as red guards.
1972	China - Beijing; Summer palace park, with brother and sister. Military camp, Middleschool. In front of Tiananmen, with uncle and aunt.
1974	Family portrait. Beijing Jiaoqu mountain village, Highschool Military camp.
1976	China - Changping; Reeducation camp, with tractor, Korean folk dance.
1978	China - Changchun; Optical Instrument Design College. Harbin; In front of flood control monument, Stalin park, Jinhong bridge.
1980	China - Beijing; College friends' visit, in front of Military museum.

2

240 Kodachrome slides, photographed between 1986–87 during the first classified business trip made by Optics Balzers AG into China following the Cultural Revolution and the country's political closure, courtesy of Peter Suess. His photos are interjected by photographs taken from the Zeiss Archives, documenting optical manufacturing, advertisements and technology fairs.

1953	Germany - Delegation from People's China led by the Chinese Minister for Heavy Machinery Construction visits the Zeiss plant.
1964	Germany - Jena; "In Service of Progress", Image-Film Zeiss. PRECISION a million times over, Image-Film, dir. Otto Bauer.
1980	Germany - Jena; "Facts", Image-Film Zeiss.
1985	China - Beijing; Asia-Pacific International Trade Fair '85, exhibition area for geodetic instruments.
1986	Optics Balzers AG First business trip to China - Beijing; Great Wall, Optical Manufacturers. Jiaozuo; Wuxi; Shanghai; Hong Kong; Luoyang; Longmen, Generals Temple, Factory Market, Landscapes, Shaolin Temple.

3

12 Kodachrome slides photographed in 1987 during the limbo period following Xin Li's decision to marry a Swiss colleague from the classified project and being banned from her workplace because of it. Courtesy of Peter Suess.

1987	China - Beijing; Family Li's home, Bei's home, Soniang.
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4

Excerpt from "Little Grass", in-progress, dir. Solveig Qu Suess, HD, 7:34min. Sound design by Flora Yin Wong, Featuring Xin Li.

ATTEMPTS IN UNDERSTANDING MY MOTHER,
OR,
THE POLITICS OF OPTICAL INSTRUMENTS
AND THEIR PRODUCTION

Following its decade of political closure during the Cultural Revolution, the then new prime minister Deng Xiaoping rerouted scientific and technological ambitions away from defense and toward the economy under the ambition of integrating China into the global market. Optical technology, specifically, was framed as a crucial way for China to “catch up” with the West.

During the early 1980s, my mother was placed on one of the first international projects where Western designs of optical instruments were purchased by the Chinese state. A confidential project, staff from different countries were secretly flown in to install and train personnel to use and maintain the new machines. The project remained classified as these new ways of seeing were only made possible by collaborating with countries that were not ideologically aligned with the Chinese state. Still labeled as Western imperialists, the Chinese state publicly disavowed their presence and referred to them as occupying forces.

As a young optical engineer, my mother had contributed to the production of instruments for seeing at a distance and at night, implementing the designs of instruments that had been defined as critical technology for development by the government. Desires by her company and state to hide this state-of-exception project had eclipsed the desires of my mother as she fell in love with a Western colleague on the project. After signing a non-disclosure agreement, my mother was expelled from China to Switzerland in 1987, following her decision to marry the Swiss colleague had led to threats of state-directed disappearance, marked her as a traitor, and banned her from her workplace.

The film process of “Little Grass” has focused largely on how difficult it is to represent memory through film, which in this case includes the absence of any accounting of the main project that my mother worked on. Family footage shot after her arrival in Switzerland, as well as our present dreams, have become the archival knowledge for the production of images. Since the film escapes materiality in many ways, I spoke to my mother and we narrated around the classified project, about a variety of topics big and small. We spoke about love and her feelings when she met my father, a Swiss engineer, who was flown in to install the optical coating machines. We spoke about feelings of displacement, of pressures to assimilate, and our different relationships to home.

In “Little Grass”, the politics of the nondisclosure agreement, which had served the desires of the Chinese military-industrial infrastructure,

show up as forms of alienation, as protective coping mechanisms, as a constant negotiation of identities and knee-jerk reactions whose meanings we are only just collectively piecing together. The nondisclosure my mother signed, scales between the personal, to the nation-state and ideological, where following the threads of the personal, had started to reveal the other side of the scale and filled each other in.

— Solveig Qu Sues