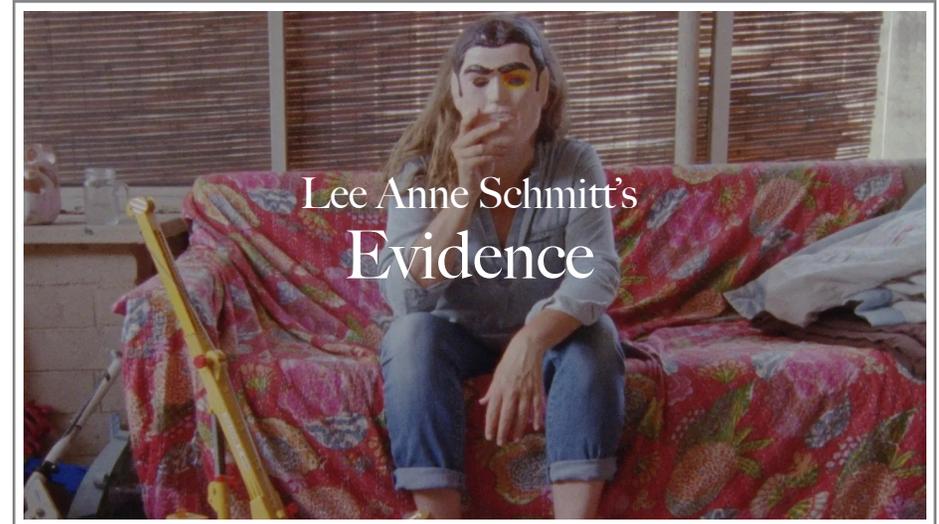


unscrupulous social media capitalists in the vein of (the now deceased) Olin.

Schmitt brings all of this together in something that holds the middle between a documentary, an essay, and investigative journalism. The film is exhausting in its evidence, and in this case that is not a bad thing. Schmitt's 'narrative' is a straightforward and coherent exposition of the conservative right's long march to absolute power, easy to understand and hopefully get angry about. Thanks to the personal touch of Schmitt not only introducing the dolls her father gave her, but also appearing in several scenes either alone (and masked) or with her young son Esra, *Evidence* manages to feel engaging despite being a massive info dump – also because Schmitt's narrative tone is calm and almost soothing. There is nothing soothing about *Evidence's* subject matter though, an urgent and necessary film that may have sadly come too late, and an enraging exposition of the corrosive nature of capitalism and religion, especially when brought together. ♦

Acropolis Cinema presents:



February 24, 2026 – 2220 Arts + Archives

ABOUT THE FILM

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. (Berlinale)

TRT: 71

In person: Lee Anne Schmitt and Athina Rachel Tsangari

Evidence by Marc van de Klashorst

The following article was originally published by International Cinephile Society, March 22, 2025

On the surface the rise of authoritarianism in the West, and specifically in the US, seems like a phenomenon that was only set in motion in the late ’90s as a reaction to the Bill Clinton presidency, but the neo-conservative push is a project that has been six decades in the making. As ‘useful idiot’ Donald Trump draws attention away with his antics around annexing Greenland, imposing tariffs left and right, and trying to ‘solve’ the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the infamous, religion-infused Project 2025 gets implemented with the help of his new best pal Elon Musk, the gutting of crucial government agencies being part of a larger plan that has been brewing since the late ’60s, and which is finally paying off in front of our eyes. In her fourth feature-length film *Evidence*, Lee Anne Schmitt adds a personal note to an essayistic documentary that meticulously lays out the rise of a religion-based conservatism out of the deep pockets of an American billionaire class whose influence on the political debate and the angle from which this debate is approached cannot be denied, certainly not after watching this well-researched and argued work. How capitalism took over politics, and added religion to a dangerous cocktail that we now seemingly have to drink to the last poisonous drop. And these are people who know poison.

Schmitt’s father worked for the Olin Corporation, an American firm that started out as an ammunition manufacturer before being forced to diversify. Olin acquired the Mathieson Chemical Corporation and later further expanded into pharmaceuticals, plastics, and other chemical fields. Their plants especially gained a toxic reputation because of several hazardous waste scandals, scandals that disproportionately affected minorities (it is estimated that 3 out of 5 black or Latino citizens live in a community housing toxic waste). Oblivious to all of this, a young Lee Anne happily accepted the gifts, usually touristy

dolls, that her father brought home from his many travels abroad. Now, decades later, she sets out to unearth the influence her dad’s employer has had on the American political landscape through the John M. Olin Foundation, named after the company’s most important post-war president.

The Olin Foundation began to rear its political head as a reaction to the formation of the EPA, an unwelcome development for a chemical company that wasn’t too keen on oversight of their toxic waste dumping, paving roads with hazardous waste, and the company having to buy water for the town of Wilmington, Massachusetts for over 30 years after yet another waste scandal. Schmitt shows how this first taste of political influence led to a larger plan to create a system in which the rules of economics dictate the structures of society, with capitalist alpha males like Olin obviously profiting most. The foundation thus architected the so-called Law and Economics movement, which holds that the law should be determined based upon economic rules; Schmitt presents evidence that the foundation was also among the earliest funders of the Federalist Society, a now highly influential conservative legal organization that advocates an originalist interpretation of the law, and without which the conservative right could not have accomplished the slow-motion judicial coup it has been planning for over half a century. The Olin Foundation established conservative colleges, and funded the education of young conservatives like Dinesh D’Souza, who further propagated the ideas of law and economics. The Federalist Society oversaw the appointments of conservative judges during Republican presidencies, and the three Supreme Court justices appointed by Donald Trump during his first term all come from the Federalist Society (not to mention Antonin Scalia being the keynote speaker at the Society’s first event). Five out of the current nine judges in the US’ highest court have their roots in this ultra-conservative organization. Schmitt connects the dots in an easy to understand and well-sourced argument, using book excerpts and newspaper quotes, revealing the web spun by the poisonous capitalist spider in its center.

She then pivots to the foundation’s influence on conservative thinking when it comes to sex and marriage, and by extension the rights of women and members of the LGBTQ community. ‘Family values’ is an oft-cited cornerstone of American society in these circles, but Schmitt posits that this is a myth: only 18% of Americans are married, 30% live alone, and most households don’t have kids. In other words, the traditional ‘family’ that Christian conservatives like to tout doesn’t exist. Yet the Olin Foundation pushed figures like Richard Epstein and James Dobson to the forefront, with their rigid and rather creepy ideas of how to raise children; and they struck gold with the promotion of Phyllis Schlafly, who fiercely attacked women’s rights and almost singlehandedly forged an alliance between the Republican Party and the evangelical movement. Schmitt shows the connections between these figures and organizations like Focus on the Family and the Alliance Defending Freedom that grew out of it, one of the world’s largest Christian legal organizations with an annual budget that runs into nine figures. They in turn support fundamentalist attacks on gender-affirming care and trans rights, as well as right-wing think tanks that promote a free market approach to environmentalism, in which Earth is a resource to be used, not a place we live in.

Schmitt thus niftily lets her argument come full circle, from pollution to climate change denial and wasteful resource extraction, all finding their roots in the John M. Olin Foundation spreading its message like an oil spill spreads its toxicity, exacerbated by the Citizens United ruling of a Supreme Court that was heavily influenced by the ideology of the foundation, allowing it to spend hundreds of millions to realize the dream of its founder. Even though the foundation is now defunct, its long-term plan is nearing completion with the help of