Juliette Klinke about EVERYTHING IS TEMPORARY

"I didn't exactly go unnoticed"

The pictures that Juliette Klinke was shooting in Myanmar, were not supposed to end up in a documentary. They were meant as a report about her trip (with surreal images from her lockdown shelter), or a testimony of her friendship with 17-year-old girl Zu Zu, whose roadside food stall becomes Juliette's second home from where she observes daily life. But that life takes a drastic turn when, on 1 February 2021, a coup d'état takes place, and Juliette Klinke decides to continue capturing the events around her in images. Always shining in focus remains Zu Zu, a girl bursting with a zest for life who has as many as 1,000 different faces to express her emotions.

When we first see Zu Zu in the film, her face is like a canvas for pure joy and joie de vivre.
Juliette Klinke: When we first met, Zu Zu didn't speak English very well. We mainly improvised with non-verbal language and gestures that no one but us could understand. We somehow developed a way to communicate, and throughout the film her English improves a lot. But all the time, this was exactly the impression that I wanted to share. For me, Zu Zu is like a ray of sunshine.

Can you describe the daily life in her town, the life that you observed from Zu Zu's roadside restaurant?
Klinke: It was a peaceful and nice way of living, surrounded by women and children, all the time talking and eating together.

Then strong signals of impending doom come looming. You felt like you were witnessing the end of something; the images turn dark and foggy.
Klinke : People told me that "something could happen just after the elections", but the following months were quiet. Myanmar had been a closed country for so long, but since around 10-15 years it was becoming more and more open to the outside world and on the way to a political democracy. The coup came as a shock.

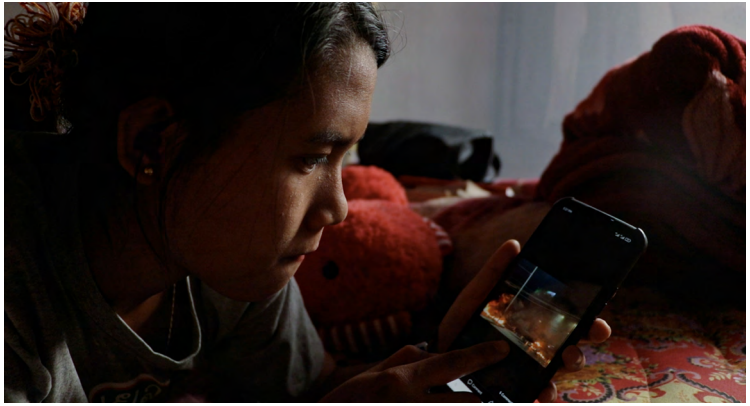
To set the context: Aung San Suu Kyi, the former head of state, is described by Zu Zu as 'our hero'.
Klinke: Aung San Suu Kyi is the leader of the NLD party (National League for Democracy) that strives for more democracy. But regardless of the party that is in power, the military will anyway retain a large chunk of its power. They never took a step back. After her victory in the elections, Aung San Suu Kyi was grounded again by the military. She had already been under house arrest for 20 years, and now it's happening again.

From that moment on, things are changing, and Zu Zu doesn't smile as often anymore as she used to.
Klinke: Sometimes she smiles when addressing tough topics as a way to protect herself - which is something I can recognise in myself. She is trying to go on with her life, wondering how this will influence her future. It was always her dream to become a police woman, protecting the country and the people. Now that dream is shat-

tered, because working for the police now equals working for the military junta.

What initially started as a portrait of a young girl suddenly turns into a socio- political report. To what extent did you still make it Zu Zu's story?
Klinke: At first I didn't realise that I was making a film. I was filming Zu Zu - and at some point interviewing her - to get a better understanding of the country, and how it was to be a young woman in Myanmar. When the coup happened, I couldn't suddenly stop filming her, because she was the one whom I was concerned about. I wanted to be by her side. Only then I realised: maybe there is a film in what we're doing. But I didn't want to bring Zu Zu in danger - everybody in the neighbourhood had seen me filming her. I got more careful. In the first scenes I'm all the time filming her outside, but after the coup we stayed indoors and I filmed Zu Zu in the kitchen. Zu Zu used to say that "life is a challenge"; nowadays life has gotten even harder for her, but she has to keep on living it, earning money and building her future.

You couldn't go out on the streets to film tanks and soldiers, even if they were there. But you could film the people's nightly protests. It's not exactly a silent protest!
Klinke: As one of the few foreigners, I didn't exactly go unnoticed. I had to be careful. Right after the coup, Aung San Suu Kyi asked the people not to start any riots, but then they came out at night, banging pots and pans. You could hear people using this method to politically express themselves. It has been done like this before in numerous revolutions around the world, but in Myanmar it has always been a way to scare away evil spirits.



They also expressed themselves through social media.
Klinke: Social media played a big role in this revolution as for connecting all the people in Myanmar. From inside her kitchen, Zu Zu knew what was going on out there. I used a lot of social media clips as a way to show the bigger picture of the violence that we experienced, always from Zu Zu's point of view.

There is a striking image of a young boy, holding a protest board that says: You are fucking with the wrong generation!
Klinke: Zu Zu's generation is the first to be born in a somehow peaceful Myanmar, growing up with a perspective on democracy and a chance to pick up - through social media - a glimpse of the outside world. These youngsters are getting many more options than the generations before them. This boy tells us: our generation is united and ready to fight back.

Gradually, we get to see more images of the uproar, the street protests and the military junta's attacks. Violence is coming scaringly close.
Klinke: It was a challenge to make the audience understand what was going on. The news was controlled by the junta, but also on social media you had to select which news was real and which was fake. The Internet arrived in Myanmar at the same moment as Facebook - when Zu Zu tells me that "she will research a topic online", she actually means she will check it on Facebook. She never had a media education to make her aware that not everything on Facebook has the same news value.

In the film a parallel war is being fought: Covid-19 is all the time somewhere in the background of the story.
Klinke: When I arrived, the Covid-19 epidemic was everywhere in the world… but not yet in Myanmar. But precautions had been taken, which is why I got stuck in that small village where I met Zu Zu. After the coup, the country gave up on restrictions, and

that's when Covid hit, and at some point it was hitting hard. I couldn't go to see Zu Zu anymore, which felt bad because she was the one keeping me connected with everyday life.

I was moved by Zu Zu's mother telling about her childhood dream to be educated.
Klinke: Born into a farming family with 12 children, she wants her daughters to have a better life. If they can go to school and to university, they will have access to better jobs. Now that Zu Zu has improved so much in English, this is a way for her daughter to earn a living.

Zu Zu calls you 'big sister'.
Klinke: There's a cultural aspect to it. In Myanmar, when meeting a woman older than yourself, you call her 'big sister'. And I will address her as 'little sister'. But Zu Zu and her family became my surrogate family in Myanmar, and they still are. She considers me a sister in her life, and from my side, it is exactly the same.

Which made the unavoidable farewell extra bitter.
Klinke: We have lived this story together, but there is a distance that keeps us from meeting again. I want the audience to feel that pain. I came back to a peaceful country, while Zu Zu had to flee her home, due to bomb raids. She keeps on telling me that "everything is temporary" but things simply don't feel fair.

The cameras of the Western media are seldom pointed at Myanmar. The conflict remains under the radar.
Klinke: The coup made it to the news, but few people know what is exactly going on. Which I understand - there are so many conflicts going on in the world. But Myanmar is still at war, and the situation for civilians is not getting any better. I hope that this film can raise some interest.

Did Zu Zu see the film?
Klinke: She did! Now that we're travelling to festivals, it didn't feel right to do it without her approval. Zu Zu and her parents saw the film, and in her voice messages she was telling me: It's so beautiful, I cried a lot, I want everyone in the world to see this film. So yes, we have her blessing.

–
Gert Hermans

EVERYTHING IS TEMPORARY was the opening film of this year's DOXS RUHR festival. The full version of the interview can be listened to as a podcast on Spotify.

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