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PRESS RELEASE

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Sonja Feldmeier's "Kalka Shimla" Diaries in Bergün's new railway museum

The Albula Railway Museum in Bergün opens on 2 June 2012. Alongside the permanent exhibition, dedicated to the story of the Albula and Bernina railways, the Swiss artist Sonja Feldmeier presents a video installation, specially created for Bergün, in which she explores the historical Indian narrow-gauge railway between Kalka and Shimla.

Wrapped in a red woollen blanket, a coolie lies sleeping with his head on the railway track. It is early morning in Shimla, an Indian city 2100 metres above sea level, in the foothills of the Himalayas. Shimla once served as the summer capital for the British colonial government, which, towards the end of the 19th century, arranged for a narrow-gauge railway to be built, leading up from Kalka to this summer retreat. The railway line, around one hundred kilometres long, was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008. It has an elevation gain of 1420 metres, crosses 864 bridges, passes through 102 tunnels, goes around 919 curves and stops at 18 stations.

In 2011, the Basel-based Swiss artist Sonja Feldmeier (*1965), together with photographer Mark Niedermann (*1974), filmed between Kalka and Shimla, capturing not only the man sleeping on the track, but also many other moments, still lifes and glimpses: a family of monkeys crossing the railway platform while delousing each other and seeking food, an old balloon salesman with his colourful goods, a railway employee labelling bulging gunnysacks with a paintbrush, a violet piece of aluminium foil being blown across the platform by the wind, passengers waiting individually or in groups, sleepy children fleetingly shaking hands with each other and waiting for the train to arrive.

While Sonja Feldmeier's dramaturgy is not hectic, it does contain a poetic densification of what is happening. Each day, a maximum of seven trains ride to the valley and to the mountain. This leaves a lot of time, waiting time, which can be killed in various ways. The sleeping man becomes a key image. He is not suicidal, just tired. The next train will wake him in good time. The artist captures this slowly flowing, unhurried time accurately, like a botanist. Her camera work is static. She films journeys and can wait to see if anything happens. This is where Sonja Feldmeier's visual and narrative strength resides. Since the year 2000, on endless expeditions around the globe, she has gathered visual material from everyday situations and fragments. She has learnt to have faith in the moment, while developing a very acute sensorium. Later, she interweaves the gathered visual material to form stories or, in her own words, "mounted realities". Accordingly, for the railway museum in Bergün, she cuts various episodes, video sequences, out of the "Kalka Shimla" film material and arranges them like moving pieces of a puzzle.



Each of her film excerpts yields a new mini-story. A bird circles in the sky. The old instruments in the station office are shown, where at least five generations of telephones are amassed, ranging from the heavy cast-iron equipment of the early twentieth century to the cheap IT plastic of the present day. Everything seems intact

and functional. Amid the crowd of equipment, the votive picture of Ganesha ensures that nothing happens.

Cows stand at the crossing, just outside the city, staring at the empty railway line. A few cars pass on the parallel road. Here, suddenly, finally, the blue-and-white diesel engine, with its six carriages, storms onto the scene, passing the observer in a long curve to the left. The cows look up. Like everywhere else around the world, they do their "train spotting" – the pastime born of out of a lot of preceding time and a lack of stimuli. Sonja Feldmeier puts us in precisely this situation. We are willing to take things in; as if we had the time for it. Another cut. We are in a train, right up the front by the driver. With the camera, we pass through the compartments, accompanying the passengers in the semi-conscious state of travel. The rhythmic rattling takes on a life of its own. Outside, the signalman switches the mechanical points in the darkness of the night. The train disappears in a tunnel. And the train driver becomes the guardian of the travellers' sleep.

Text by Juri Steiner
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About the Albula Railway Museum

The Albula Railway Museum represents the unique cultural and historical merits of what is probably Europe's most spectacular Alpine railway. The combination of nature, culture, architecture and the museum itself has enormous potential, which we want to tap into, in a meaningful way with public appeal – directly incorporating the Albula/Bernina landscape (which can be experienced every day and is part of the Rhaetian Railway, a UNESCO World Heritage site) as well as the industrious population and the active tourism. The museum lends another aspect to the Rhaetian Railway as a UNESCO World Heritage site: it tells, and elaborates on, stories and facts which are addressed on the Rhaetian Railway UNESCO World Heritage site's long-distance hike, with presentations of content and local info points, thus creating an additional attraction. The presented hiking trail between Filisur and Preda virtually constitutes the museum's exterior: topics conveyed in the museum can be experienced at first hand. The educational railway trail and the Rhaetian Railway UNESCO World Heritage site's long-distance hike lead to this place for railway enthusiasts and jointly invite travellers to visit the museum. The Albula Railway Museum opened on 2 June 2012. More information can be found at www.bahnmuseum-albula.ch.

If you have questions, please contact:

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