

BROOKLYN RAIL March 2013

**INCONVERSATION**

# IT'S ALRIGHT, WILLIAMSBURG (I'M ONLY BLEEDING) SU FRIEDRICH with Cynthia Lugo

by Cynthia Lugo

*GUT RENOVATION* OPENS MARCH 6 AT FILM FORUM.

The filmmaker Su Friedrich used to live in a loft on 118 North 11th Street. It's one of the more trafficked sidewalks in Williamsburg. Brooklyn Brewery is across the street, and the clothes reseller Beacon's Closet is half a block away. Just around the corner is the newly opened Wythe Hotel, where one can rent a loft-style room for \$495 dollars per night.



*Gut*

*Renovation*. Courtesy of Su Friedrich/Outcast Films.

Walking around the neighborhood with Friedrich as we discuss her film *Gut Renovation*, she points out the many new luxury condos with the alacrity of a real-estate agent. She has been

inside several of them, posing as a prospective homeowner to see exactly what is being sold, a lifestyle altogether different from her modest life as an artist. Needless to say, she isn't buying.

*Gut Renovation* chronicles the rapid transformation of Williamsburg as well as Friedrich's memories of a place she can no longer call home. It is a diary as well as an indictment of the collusion of corporate greed and government that has destroyed the character of the neighborhood. Though grim, the film is punctuated by moments of gallows humor. At one point, Friedrich spray paints the wall of a construction site with the slogan, "Artists Used to Live Here." It's both a jab at new residents and a gravestone for the community that has moved on.

**Cynthia Lugo (Rail):** Your film is very successful at charting the destruction and redevelopment of Williamsburg, as well as your personal struggle to stay in your own house. How did you balance these two angles throughout the film?

**Su Friedrich:** I have been known to make very personal work. But I've also been known to deal a lot with form, and I've always felt like I owe it to my audience to speak honestly about my emotional situation. Also, I love film, and I love what film can do when it's being unconventional. In the case of this film, I recognized that I was going to be telling something personal, but I also was going to be talking about a very large political and economic story. I was trying to keep the two things in view, and one was trying to balance this personal or more general story, and telling it clearly the way a documentary might, but allowing it to be more playful, or unpredictable in structure than a regular documentary. But I'm also very out there with my emotions, and in this film I got to indulge or take advantage of both sides of myself. On the emotional side I was very angry about what was happening. I was also really sad, and those are two different emotions. When my partner, Cathy Quinlan, started looking at the film she brought a lot of humor into it, which was crucial.

**Rail:** Your outrage is palpable throughout the film. You share that your "crazy anger" started when one of your favorite buildings was demolished. Do you think the film harnessed your anger in a productive way?

**Friedrich:** Anger was a large motivating factor in making this film, as well as my memory of what happened in the East Village back in the '80s. I lived there and then it started changing; I thought I would remember what had been there, and then I forgot. And I was really shocked that within a year or two I didn't remember whether that place was the old butcher shop or the old bakery. When this started happening, I thought, "My god, it is so easy for us to forget."

Anger can be a great motivator, but you can't continue feeding off of anger—more things have to enter into it. In trying to construct the film there were other emotions in play. It was really amazing to me that three years later, when I was looking at the footage of the building across the street being torn down, I started crying again. That sense of loss takes a long time to go away, if it ever goes away. And so I would say that in the course of editing I recognized my sadness more and more. But I had to keep making this film; I couldn't just dissolve into grief.

**Rail:** This film is the culmination of many years of footage—at what point in the process did you know you were making a film?

**Friedrich:** I started documenting in late 2005, early 2006. The rezoning took place May 2005. Towards the end of 2006 I knew it was a story I wanted to tell.

**Rail:** In 2005, when industrial Williamsburg was rezoned for residential use, you started recording every demolition and development west of the B.Q.E. I'm curious about what this ritual was like for you on a day-to-day basis.

**Friedrich:** I had lived in the neighborhood for 15 years and I knew every street like the back of my hand. I felt a little bit like a journalist doing research, and it was daunting—I had to tell myself that I had to be thorough. As the scale of it increased I realized I was up against a mammoth project.

**Rail:** For me, your film is very effective at debunking two myths, the first one being that gentrification is a slow, gradual, and inevitable process of change; and the second, that artists catalyze the gentrification process.

**Friedrich:** I think gentrification is a very complex and very thorny issue. And depending on what neighborhood you're talking about there are differences. People compare Williamsburg to SoHo because SoHo was the classic example, and SoHo didn't get transformed by an edict from the city; it was more organic and more gradual in some ways, but of course it has become what Williamsburg has become: a place for the very rich with very expensive stores and very few art galleries. But what took 25 years in Soho took Williamsburg 5 years.

But I really question this idea that artists ruin a neighborhood. What it implies is that the artists want that transformation to happen. It suggests that artists are "willing" to move into a less desirable neighborhood, but then they want it to be really comfortable and full of amenities, and I don't think that's the case. What I see happen in Williamsburg (and also in Chinatown and Lower East Side) is this:

You have a city like New York, that's filled with artists. They need a place to work as well as to live. Usually artists need bigger places—they can't work in a tiny apartment. I've lived in a tiny storefront on North 9th street when I started making films, but I was able to go to the Millennium Film Workshop to edit. We find places to work, often in industrial spaces. In the case of Williamsburg, a lot of those industrial spaces were not being used. The reason for that is because the city was already making it unaffordable for industries to be in those properties. You have an ignorant population—the artists—seeing those empty spaces available, and also knowing that they're not supposed to legally live there, but having all these landlords let them live there. They are, for the most part, living around the existing industries. That was certainly the case for us. We lived near a woodshop that ran industrial table saws all day long, and we put up with it, because we needed a place to live and work.

But then marketing people and developers and people like Bloomberg who are only out to make money turn it into something to sell to other people. And that is not the fault of the artists, or the other families who have been living in the neighborhoods and maintaining the basic amenities. All these people with money and political power turn it into something to sell. It's really weird to

me that the artists get blamed.

But there's a way in which marketing people can use artists as a groovy selling point. So artists are being totally used by the people with money, and then they're being thrown out. The thinking is that it's inevitable. And it's not.

And that's why I included all those comments at the end of the film of people saying "Fuck Artists." I can't help thinking that every artist I know moved to New York because this city was the art capital of the world. If you do not have a city that supports artists living here, artists will not live here anymore. Young people are moving to Philly, to Portland, to Chicago, to Atlanta, to Berlin—they are not moving to New York.

To anyone who says gentrification is the fault of artists, I say, "Fuck you." Artists have been living and struggling in this city as long as I've been here, which is 36 years.

**Rail:** Throughout the film you seem resigned towards the process of citizen action; there's a "we're screwed" mentality that pervades the film. On the one hand, I thought it was honest, because it's an accurate reflection of how few rights tenants actually have. On the other, the film offers almost no alternatives on how to challenge the system.

**Friedrich:** For starters, I would say that I am not a social activist as a filmmaker. I very much admire films that try to mobilize people about an issue. Take something like Kelly Anderson's *My Brooklyn*, that really tries to educate people about what happened in Downtown Brooklyn, and how one might think about it in the future. And then you have a film like *Battle for Brooklyn*, which is astonishing in its portrayal of the efforts made by all of these tenants to combat Atlantic Yards. They're both really fantastic films, but that's not the kind of film I was making. I think I recognize my limitations; my concerns as a filmmaker are different than my concerns as a citizen. Though I have been involved in a lot of different activist groups, I never feel like my films are part of that process. They are of course informed by the part of me that's a political being, but I don't think of them as *tools*. In this case, I wanted to paint a portrait of a time and an experience, and let people make of it what they will.

I think you're right in saying that there's a general sentiment of "we're screwed" because by the time I started making it, I knew we *were* screwed. I didn't think there was a damn thing that anybody could do. There could be individual efforts on behalf of one building, but to fight the entire rezoning just wasn't going to happen.

I don't want to depress you, but I feel like the forces of money and power are so profound in this city, that the battle is elsewhere. I don't even know what the battle is. Certainly in the case of Williamsburg, the battle is over.

**Rail:** You never mention the word "hipster" throughout the film—was that a deliberate omission? At one point you joke that an alternate title for the film could have been "I Hate Rich People."

**Friedrich:** You know, that's an interesting question. I never made a conscious decision to exclude the word "hipster." Now that you ask it, I think, there were ways that I found to point to the new demographic. So in one case, I refer to the fancy dogs. And so when I show the fancy dogs, you do see some people that would probably be called hipsters, like the guy with all the tattoos. But I guess to me the term became so contested, and so tiresome, that even to throw it out as a term of derision would have been passé. And I think it's more to the point to talk about money. Money is not confusing to me, especially when someone has \$800,000 to spend on a studio apartment.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/03/film/its-alright-williamsburg-im-only-bleeding>