

CINESPECT

Q&A with Filmmaker Su Friedrich



Published on March 6th, 2013 | *by Carlos J. Segura*

Now showing at Film Forum, Su Friedrich's documentary "Gut Renovation" looks at Williamsburg, Brooklyn's transformation from working-class neighborhood to "Condoburg." Employing an intensely personal style while looking at the big picture, this film is of interest not just to any New Yorker who has ever had a conversation about gentrification (read: every New Yorker) but to people in big cities everywhere.

Cinespect sat down with Friedrich to talk about the making of "Gut Renovation."

What kind of camera did you use for the documentary?

Panasonic standard-def video camera.

Were your choices of digital video and graphics mostly to due to cost and ease of use, or were they based more on a pre-planned aesthetic choice?

Well, I basically shot film as long as I could afford it. So in 2002, I made a film called "The Odds of Recovery," which was a mixture of 16mm and video. And the video was so I could film

secretly in doctor's offices. But then things were such that I couldn't afford to shoot 16mm anymore. So I shot video. It was mostly practical.

I got the impression from a lot of the footage that you didn't intend to make a documentary to begin with. Was the documentary something that came about more as an afterthought, something you came up with as you shot the footage?

What happened is after the rezoning and after we understood what was going to happen and we started hearing the jackhammers, I thought, "I gotta go out and record this." It started as an act of witnessing. I just thought, "I want to remember what was everywhere." But I became very involved very quickly so then I... I didn't have a plan. I guess some more conventional documentary filmmakers say, "Ok, we're going to shoot on X day and we're going to have this crew." I certainly didn't approach it like that. I just went out on my bike with my camera, found a building that was in progress, filmed it, went to another. So it was a bit of catch-as-catch-can. And then, of course, I took my camera along to the sales parties because I wanted to get what they were doing but in an unofficial way. I didn't get permission exactly. I went in and I pretended I was filming so I could show the space to my partner because we were interested in buying. It was a little bit of guerilla filmmaking.

How many hours did you have to work with?

About 45 hours.

Is there anything you left on the cutting room floor that really hurt to leave behind?

That's a good question, but I don't think so. And there are things I'm really glad I cut out. Since it was partly a story of the neighborhood and partly a personal story, I had gotten very involved in cutting parts about when we had to move and buy our new place and getting a mortgage and all that because I thought the struggle of relocation should be a part of this. And then people who were looking at it said, "That's so boring, people know how to buy a mortgage. Leave it out." But I don't think there was any storyline that I developed and then took out.

Once editing was underway, was there an intent to cause a particular effect, or was it more about expressing frustration and anger?

Well, a lot of my previous work has been based in personal experiences. So I do approach projects from my own experience. But I really felt in this case that this was a huge story, not just my story. I knew so many people in the neighborhood who were being affected in the way we were. And so in thinking about how to put it together I actually paid more attention to the big story than to our own story at first. Also, since it wasn't a conventional documentary, one of the real challenges was representing the space. In a way it's a film about losing a home and the politics of the city and all of that. But it's also just about space and materials and buildings and what buildings do to us and for us. To show this huge thing that was going in a film was very difficult.

When it came to focusing on the big story, what kind of materials did you find yourself turning to in terms of journalism or other film and video, literary sources, etc? What kind of formal research did you do?

I would say I was reading blogs, news stories about what was going on. Something like “The Gleaners and I” by Agnès Varda was in my mind while I was working on this. I didn’t look at it again to see what she did. But I think the way that she approached this activity—gleaning—through lots of different avenues, and inserted herself personally I found very interesting. Very intelligent. It wasn’t a conventional documentary, although she did have a lot of information in it. But there was this personal component. So films like that were in my mind. But I didn’t look at films about housing while I was working on it. While working on a film I might see some things, but I don’t work that directly with what’s come before. I kind of understand I have to figure out my own language.

Now that it’s making its way out there in the world, what has the reception been like?

It’s sort of the beginning of it I would say. It premiered at the Brooklyn Film Festival and I took it up to the Flaherty Film Seminar and I’ve just been in Berlin with it. It was interesting in Berlin because I thought, “I don’t know if this story will translate.” And immediately people said that exactly the same thing was happening in Berlin. So I think, sadly, that this experience is shared by a lot of people in a lot of places.

I would say that one of things that people pointed to is the anger that I express very directly in the film. Cathy Quinlan, who shares co-writer credit, started working with me about six months before I was finished editing. She put in some of the humor because she felt you can’t convince people with anger. You have to have something else. And that was an interesting process for me because I did have a lot of anger while I was filming and also residual anger when I was editing. But then when she started bringing in the humor, I thought, “Yes, you have to look at this from many different sides.” So I think that’s been good in terms of the audience.

Complete this sentence: Based on what you know now, within five to ten years gentrification turns New York City into...

Well, the statistics are that it’s becoming more and more white. Which I find horrifying. And more and more housing is for the wealthy. There are way fewer rental apartments. I read a long piece in the New York Times this weekend about the fight for available land and how there are these huge bidding wars and how the land becomes so expensive that when the developers finally start building the only thing they can afford to build is luxury housing. They all say they’re going to put affordable housing in part of the building but they usually don’t. So it does seem that it’s getting very skewed towards Bloomberg’s friends, let’s say.

About the Author

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