

TIME OUT NEW YORK

## TONY Q&A: Gut Renovation's Su Friedrich

**The experimental filmmaker big ups a disappearing Brooklyn in her latest personal documentary.**

By David Fear Tue Mar 5 2013



Gut Renovation's director Su Friedrich

By her own admission, Su Friedrich has never had a problem adding autobiographical elements to her often challenging, always rewarding work; her relationships with her father (*Hide and Seek*), her mother (*The Ties That Bind*) and her own ailing body (*The Odds of Recovery*) have all served as starting points for larger examinations a bigger-picture issue. So it's no surprise that she's turned the camera on herself once more, this time tackling a subject that's close to home—literally. *Gut Renovation* is Friedrich's *cri de coeur* that charts the dissolution of her Williamsburg neighborhood, as fat-cat developers put up luxury condos, push out local industrial businesses and give the high-hat to the Brooklyn hot spot's artistic community. The 58-year-old experimental filmmaker talked to *TONY* at Film Forum's downtown offices.

***Time Out New York:* It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize why someone would make a movie about their neighborhood being razed, but what was it that finally moved you to pick up a camera and think, There's a film in this?**

**Su Friedrich:** I'd lived in the East Village during the late '70s and early '80s, when that neighborhood was in the midst of gentrification, and at the time, I thought, Oh, I'll remember what everything was like. Then I'd go back a few months later, and I'd find myself saying, "Wait, was that where the butcher was located, or where that bakery we liked so much was?"

With Williamsburg, they announced the rezoning and the next morning you heard loud construction work right down the block. I knew I needed to go out and record stuff right away, just for my own interests. But the more I started documenting what was going on, the more I felt that I needed to get deeper into it. I started to get serious very soon after I went out into the streets those first few times. I didn't have any idea that I'd be filming for five years or what the eventual shape of the film would end up taking, but yeah. It didn't take long.

***Time Out New York:* Coloring in places on the map where buildings used to be—did that notion occur early on as well?**

**Su Friedrich:** Yeah. I needed to keep track of the footage—so I xeroxed a map, numbered the buildings and marked things up with a red pencil. Once I started editing, I realized that people needed to have a sense of where they were—I knew where this store or that apartment was, but most viewers wouldn't. Even when I showed a rough cut to someone I knew who lived near me, they'd ask, "Why is that building No. 37? Why is this one No. 83?" I realized, Oh God, I'm failing here! Then I remembered the map: Why can't I just animate this? It helped denote the encroaching sense of change, so that when I'm showing you a sales party on Seventh Ave, you get the sense that developers have moved on to this part after they've zigzagged through the northern areas. It solved a lot of problems immediately.

***Time Out New York:* Someone in the film talks about how this whole process is "evolutionary"...as if to suggest that gentrification is simply the natural order of urban living. Do you believe that? Are most big-city neighborhoods simply destined to become these enclaves of the rich?**

**Su Friedrich:** If we think of evolution as being the survival of the fittest, what she was saying was that all these people with loads of money—from developers to government officials—were bound to win. Personally, I couldn't tell you what the future of big cities, much less New York City, is destined to be. But if you look at the way income disparity in this country has evolved in the last 15, 20 years or so, there needs to be a correction or else yeah, that seems to be where we're heading. There was an article in *The New York Times* recently that talked about how developers have pushed bids for land up to \$45 million, so the only thing they can afford to build is luxury housing. I mean, we're told that 20 percent of that will be affordable housing, but then somehow that manages to be conveniently forgotten once everything is said and done. [Laughs] And then what you're left with is a city full of nothing but luxury housing. Once you change the scale of a neighborhood like Williamsburg, how do you undo that?

***Time Out New York:* It's ironic that many people move into a place like Williamsburg because they want to vicariously be part of some funky, boho scene. And then the first people to get priced out of the neighborhood...**

**Su Friedrich:** ...are the artists. But it's not just "Oh, boo-hoo, these poor artists!" It's also the working-class folks whose livelihoods are there, it's about the industrial base, it's about the people who produce our sugar at the Domino factory and fix forklifts for other manufacturing plants. It's a varied community and a vital culture that's been fostered over many years that is being displaced. It was my intent to show that it wasn't just painters and filmmakers suffering here; the phenomenon was widespread. [Pause] Though when you've got people coming to take pictures of graffiti that reads "Artists used to live here," as if it was a tourist attraction, it's easy to see why someone would focus on that.

**Time Out New York: Talk about adding insult to injury!**

Su Friedrich: You can't make shit like that up. It's just too absurd. [Laughs]

**Time Out New York: The word hipster is never uttered once throughout the film, is it?**

Su Friedrich: It isn't, you're right.

**Time Out New York: I know you're primarily going after the rich here, but did you make a conscious decision to not follow the usual route of scapegoating this demographic?**

Su Friedrich: Maybe not consciously, but yeah. I mean, I've seen all the same online links of people in outrageous clothing and giant beards that everyone else has, and yeah, I think they're funny as much as the next person. But this issue is a lot bigger than a bunch of kids with beards "ruining" a neighborhood. They are not the problem. Besides, who am I to tell someone not to make artisanal pickles? [Laughs] It's such a poorly defined term anyway.

**Time Out New York: You have a knack for intertwining personal stories into big-picture takes on issues, e.g., *The Odds of Recovery* (2002), which both details a series of maladies you suffered and looks at how the medical industry works. Is this something you're thinking about as you're shooting or simply once you've gone into the editing room to shape it?**

Su Friedrich: I never have a clear picture when I begin on a project like this; I'll have an instinct about connecting two things, but honestly, it's all trial and error. You know, I was obsessed with math when I was kid, which helped me develop this incredible, analytical love of systems and numbers. And I've always been very emotional and forthright in my movies. But even more than, say, *The Odds of Recovery*, this was one of the only things I've done that's really allowed me to use both of those sides of myself. That, and give me an outlet to air my deep-seated hatred of the rich. [Laughs]

I mean, look, I'm glad that Mr. Guggenheim had enough money to give me a fellowship [in 1989]; I'm not so naive that I am unaware of how we all depend on wealth in one way or another. And if I assumed that I had some God-given right to just get pissed off and self-righteous about all this... I don't want to be like that. I know there's another side to what's going on. It's just that the gross disparity of income is so blatantly unfair and so rigged, and that's contributing to a place I love being destroyed. Someone needed to speak out. So I spoke out.

**Time Out New York: Did making the film help you grieve or give you some sense of catharsis?**

Su Friedrich: When we started reading the writing on the walls, I immediately went into angry,

I'm-going-to-go-film mode. I'd come back to our place and start telling my partner, Cathy [Nan Quinlan], "I talked to another business owner today," and her response was, "I don't want to hear it, I'm going to go paint." She was already going through a quiet, very profound grieving process about losing our new place. Then we eventually moved, we're settled in to our new place in Bed-Stuy, and I'm working on the movie. I'm sitting in the editing bay, and the footage I shot of the building across the street from us being torn down comes on—and I suddenly find myself sobbing uncontrollably. It all just hit me at once. So in a way, yeah, it did help. I hadn't set out to make it for that reason, but it did help me come to grips with things. It told me: Yes, these buildings were once here. Yes, this happened.

*Gut Renovation* opens Wednesday, Mar 6, at Film Forum.

<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/film/tony-q-a-gut-renovations-su-friedrich>