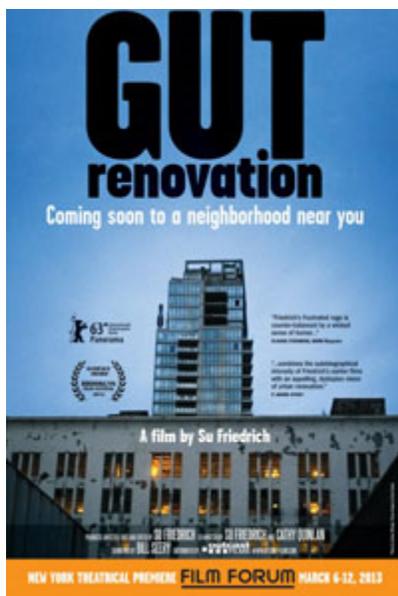


## POP MATTERS



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## 'Gut Renovation': Jackhammers in Brooklyn

By [Cynthia Fuchs](#) 12 March 2013

PopMatters Film and TV Editor

## *I Was Loving This Rock*

“For the entire summer of 2006, men tore down the bus garage with jackhammers.” So begins the story of *Gut Renovation*, a story of demolition and loss and outrage too. For years, through 2012, the tearing down continues, and for years, Su Friedrich documents and describes what’s happening outside her window in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. She describes the men at work with jackhammers, the tenants losing their businesses and homes, the condo buildings erected in their place, and also the new condo owners, who come equipped with “a parade of designer dogs.”

Friedrich takes a particular interest in the dogs, filming them on the sidewalk and from above, tiny and coated and leashed. Walking with faceless people, the dogs become emblems of the “destruction of the neighborhood,” which is to say, an incursion, such that quaint, jaggedy blocks once occupied by artists of various sorts are now owned by a new class of neighbors, blithely rich and entitled.

To chart this change, *Gut Renovation*—winner of the 2012 Brooklyn Film Festival Audience Award and screening at [Film Forum](#)—marks passing time (each year is denoted by a brief glimpse of a Christmas ornament on a tree, under a snippet of “Auld Lang Syne,” including versions by Guy Lombardo, Lou Rawls, and Girlschool), as well as shrinking space, in shots of a map where Friedrich colors in red the Williamsburg properties bought up and torn down, counting off the numbers, from one and two at the start to 173 at the end, an arbitrary stopping point chosen because, well, the “whole fucking neighborhood” is close to gone.

Such repetitions represent the incursion from Friedrich’s perspective, her feelings of betrayal by a landlord whose original lease wasn’t quite above board, allowing tenants to live for years in commercial spaces, as well as her sense of invasion by outsiders: “The wheels turned,” she narrates, “Developers saw how much money there was to be made and the Bloomberg administration came in with its focus on high-end residential development and the area was rezoned.” These turning wheels lead to material adjustments, in particular, long months and then years of noise and disruption, brick walls collapsing, bulldozers banging, and residents lamenting.

Some bits of destruction or construction appear in time-lapse imagery, some transitions are indicated by moving out parties and others by real estate open house parties. On occasion, Friedrich directs her indignation specifically (at one point, she tells you, her girlfriend suggests that “I should call this film ‘I Hate Rich People’”). The film includes as well efforts to frame the changes, signage meaning to define the experience, for anyone who might read it. Some of these efforts are local, as when Friedrich points out her own handiwork, a scrawled notice on a blue tarp, “Artists used to live here,” under which, she says in voiceover, tourists pose themselves for pictures. Other efforts are slickly professional: a developer’s pitch for the coming “amenities” includes buzzy words like “tasty” and “perks” and “shop,” as well as the promise of “a real neighborhood.”

This is, of course, a sticking point, as the difference between what's real and what's not becomes a matter of... perspective or access or again, entitlement. Who gets to say what's real? The baker, auto mechanic, or zipper manufacturer who can no longer pay rent has a version, as does the neon-vested construction worker or the developer in a dark suit (Friedrich films a pack of them from her window, yelling after them that they're "ruining the neighborhood!"). When, one day in 2008, workers in a lot just across the street come upon a rock that is too large to move and, for a time, seemingly impervious to drills and jackhammers and some sort of explosive "goo," Friedrich films it, day by day, huge and still as men clamber atop it and poke and penetrate it. She asks the men when they might defeat the rock, and they scratch their heads and have no good answer. And for a few days, in scenes montaged under Vivaldi's "Concerto in C Major F. VII No. 6," the rock prevails.

As charming as her identification with the rock may be, Friedrich understands it is fleeting, as are attempts by tenants to stay the invasion, holding community meetings, writing letters of protest, organizing. At times, even the film is turned into an effort of its own, a documentation that will hold meaning, or maybe allow it. Friedrich films the dogs, she films the signs, she films the buildings. She also, sometimes, films people too. Some she knows (toasting as they part ways or complaining as they make their way along a now treacherous sidewalk) and some she doesn't.

At least one of these wonders what she's up to. "What are you filming?" asks a young woman who spots the camera. She wears huge sunglasses, she smiles, and she and her male companion carry shopping bags from A.I. Friedman and B&J Fabrics. "Rich new people who are moving into the neighborhood," says Friedrich from off-screen, her hand swishing across the frame. "You don't know anything about me," the woman protests, as the camera tilts down to look at her feet and the curb. "It's just rude," she says, "to put your camera on me and follow me, that's all." As the scene cuts to yet another view of a new building, against a sunny blue sky, a title card notes, "And she had a point. I also hate to be filmed."

The moment, awkward and incomplete and not exactly apologetic, is typical of *Gut Renovation*. The woman is right: Friedrich can't know what's in the bag from Friedman's (an artists' supply store) and she can't assess the new neighbors' surface any more than they might judge hers. And yet, such righteousness shapes all views here, from those who think time and nostalgia have worth to those who think, as their culture insists, that money holds sway.

Even as the film keeps track of lots bought and residents moved (or evicted), local manufacturers shuttered and shiny new corporate offices opened, it notes limits as well, of power and time and understanding, of art and also, of money. As such, the film is of a piece with Friedrich's previous films, simultaneously personal essays and deeply, if unexpectedly, sociopolitical critiques, films that also tell stories of loss and frustration, yearning and upset, public spaces and personal experiences. For as *Gut Renovation* observes and decries the neighborhood's changes, it also offers a broader analysis, of the eroding value of art as such, the escalating costs of commercial existence. On one hand, the movie mourns the loss of a community. On the other, however, it asks how this or any community is defined, who makes and misses it, and how it might be remembered.

Rating: 

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