



THE ARTS PAPER

Building the House of Memory

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“Don’t fall in love with buildings—they only break your heart,” declares a piece of graffiti in Su Friedrich’s *Gut Renovation* (2012), playing at the New Haven Documentary Film Festival on Sunday, June 10. The all-day mini-retrospective of Friedrich’s work brings the director, born in New Haven, back to town with a selection of her works on buildings, memory, family, and how we struggle against the loss of the spaces which made us who we are.

Friedrich’s work fits broadly into a style called “avant-garde” or “experimental” documentary, labels with which she doesn’t necessarily identify—except that filmmakers working under those labels don’t have to follow the rules.

“People who go to film school learn the rules,” she has said of her work. “I never learned the rules.”

Sunday’s retrospective starts with two short films, *Sink or Swim* and *Seeing Red*, which are closer to “avant garde”, followed by three more traditional documentaries which still follow this “no-rules” sensibility: *Gut Renovation*, *The Ties That Bind* (1985), and *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel* (2016). These films combine documentary footage with Friedrich’s own personal narration as she explores her reactions, her fears and desires, as deeply as she explores the world around her.

The images reflect the subjects’ (and Friedrich’s) thoughts in these films. In *The Ties That Bind*, Friedrich interviews her mother, Lore, about life growing up in Germany during World War II. As Lore narrates, the film returns again and again to an image of hands cutting shapes from a pattern. These shapes soon merge into a small model of a house. When Friedrich visits her mother’s former home in Ulm, Germany, we see it clearly: the model is her childhood home, reassembled from a pattern of memory. As the story continues, the model house returns to be broken apart as a casualty of the war. By telling the story, the building lives and dies again.

Friedrich’s mother and her taste in homes returns in *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*, which tells the story of Friedrich and her siblings trying to move her mother from her apartment in Chicago, where she’s lived for fifty-two years, to an assisted living facility in upstate New York. Throughout, memory and identity are tied to the spaces we live in.

In one sequence, they talk about trying to fit Lore's furniture in to the new apartment. She seems to have one couch too many, and they worry that losing a couch will cause a crisis in her day-to-day life.

"That's how it fits, according to my crazy mathematics," says Friedrich's brother as he lays out his floor plan. But no matter how they calculate, they can't quite get Lore to fit in the new space.

Friedrich has said that whenever she approaches a new subject, she feels afraid. Not just the usual fear of failure, which we all have, but a fear of exposing herself and the people she loves, of not doing justice to the stories of her subjects, of showing things so close to her to the world. In *I Cannot Tell You How I Feel*, that exposure leads her to reflect on her fear of dying, of living too long, as her mother goes through the same struggle.

The loss of well-loved buildings is even more dramatically central to *Gut Renovation* (2012) which depicts the demolition of industrial Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NY where Friedrich and her partner lived from 1989 to 2009, in the wake of its rezoning for residential use.

As factories, warehouses, and local businesses are destroyed and replaced with cookie-cutter overpriced condominiums, Friedrich expresses the anger of her group of artists (who first made Williamsburg "cool" in the late 80s-early 90s) and the anger of the local small business owners, the butchers and mechanics, who were being priced out of their homes.

Plot-wise, she does this through her own attempts to document and investigate the changes in the neighborhood. On a map, she counts down each new demolition and marks it in red. She poses as someone looking to buy one of the new condos and tours their model apartments: all trendy, all decked out with the latest amenities, all the same—and all priced upwards of \$500,000. And that was in 2008—the same apartments in 2018 go for \$1 million for 700 square feet of space.

Visually, Friedrich shows us how the buildings themselves speak, especially through signs, graffiti, and advertising. A music-video-like sequence shows the signs of the many businesses being driven out of the neighborhood. Advertising for the condos offers surreal welcomes as the model apartments shout: "PICTURE YOURSELF HERE! WE'RE READY FOR YOU!" to the new type of desired resident.

But the best moments are when graffiti attacks the state of the neighborhood, renaming Williamsburg "Condosburg" and declaring the condos "for hedge fund managers!" Friedrich contributes one of the best herself, writing "ARTISTS USED TO LIVE HERE" on the wall around her neighboring construction site.

In one extended sequence in *Gut Renovation*, the construction crew across from Friedrich's apartment struggles for two weeks to destroy a massive rock. The rock becomes an unlikely symbol of the resistance Friedrich and the viewer both desire: if we can just be unwieldy enough, maybe those with the power and the money won't be able to cart us away. We root for the rock against the jackhammer. Eventually, though, the rock splits. She moves. (To, it turns out, Bed-Stuy, another neighborhood in Brooklyn which is now transforming in similar ways—and her anger remains vibrant.)

What Friedrich shows us in these films is everyday resistance against the erosion of our spaces and identities. Though ultimately the buildings are lost—the war happens and we grow old—the

act of filming the struggle to save the spaces in our memories serves as one way of preserving them. As we look around at our own community, at the everyday losses of space and personhood in New Haven, how can we struggle to save them? How can we, at least, expose these losses and injustices to the world?

The event will be held at the Whitney Humanities Center, 53 Wall St., on Sunday June 10. Sink or Swim (1990) and Seeing Red (2005), two short films, will be screened at 11:00 a.m., followed by a Q&A. Gut Renovation will be screened at 1:30 p.m. Friedrich will speak in conversation with NHDocs organizer Charles Musser and other filmmakers on “What Constitutes a Documentary” at 3:00 p.m. The event will close with The Ties That Bind (1985) and I Cannot Tell You How I Feel (2016) starting at 4:15. For more information, visit the NHDocs website.

<https://www.artspaper.org/articles/2018/6/8/building-the-house-of-memory?rq=su%20friedrich>