

EXPERIMENTS IN DOCUMENTARY

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## FILM JOURNAL



## ■ EXPERIMENTAL DOCUMENTARY QUESTIONNAIRE

Below is the original questionnaire that we sent to numerous film and video artists whose work crosses between experimental and documentary modes. The questionnaire was sent to a broad swath of media artists, including influential experimental filmmakers and documentarians, single-channel video artists and artists better known for their gallery installations, and various specific folks whose work we admired. As editors, we found it often productive when respondents abandoned the Q&A format altogether and expressed their ideas with their own structures—in the process, making this a dynamic interaction with varied formats. The responses that follow may not directly answer the questions and, in most cases, have been revised from their original versions.

- Lucas Hilderbrand and Lynne Sachs

THIS ISSUE OF MILLENNIUM FILM JOURNAL IS ABOUT A BROAD CATEGORY OF WORK THAT WE ARE CALLING "EXPERIMENTAL DOCUMENTARY": ESSAYISTIC, FORMAL, RESEARCHED, STRUCTURAL, EPISODIC, SELF-REFLEXIVE, IMPRESSIONISTIC, AND/OR PERSONAL FILMS AND VIDEOS THAT EXPLORE SOCIAL ISSUES. AS PART OF THIS ISSUE, WE INVITE YOUR RESPONSES (TO ANY OR ALL) QUESTIONS—AND ENCOURAGE YOU TO REPLY CREATIVELY.

- I. DO YOU AGREE THAT "EXPERIMENTAL DOCUMENTARY" IS A VALID CATEGORY? HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT? WHAT ARE ITS AIMS AND/OR SUBJECTS?
- II. HOW DO ARTISTS WHO DO THE WORK OF DOCUMENTARY—AND YET ARE NOT PRIMARILY CONSIDERED DOCUMENTARIANS—CHALLENGE OUR CONCEPTIONS OF NON-FICTION CINEMA? WHAT DO YOU SEE AS YOUR RELATION TO DOCUMENTARY?
- III. WHERE DOES DOCUMENTARY MEET THE AVANT-GARDE?
- IV. WHAT ROLE DOES POLITICAL CRITIQUE OR ACTIVISM PLAY IN YOUR WORK? HOW ARE YOUR POLITICS COMMUNICATED? HOW DO POLITICS AND AESTHETICS INFORM EACH OTHER?
- V. WHAT RECENT WORKS OR ARTISTS HAVE INSPIRED NEW WAYS OF SEEING THE WORLD? HAVE INSPIRED NEW WAYS OF THINKING? HAVE INSPIRED CHANGE?

one of the most famous paintings in the world and the quirky, rural town that inspired it and a departure in that it, like Varda's *Daguerrotypes*, is preoccupied with questions of observation and staging, self-presentation, and representation in photography, history, and the documentary impulse itself. *This American Gothic* follows a handful of Eldon, IA (population 998) locals as they work toward their dream of building the American Gothic House Center to attract tourists and save their fading rural community. The film explores the irony of a rural America abandoned to economic hardship for decades (the town collectively laments the closing of the Rock Island Railroad in 1980) now trying to rebuild itself through tourism that glorifies a happier, but largely imaginary, country past. *This American Gothic* is a film about a painting in which we never see the original, only the translations, parodies, and permutations it inspires; it is a cinematic portrait of a painted portrait that periodically looks back at the viewer (camera) in a manner that echoes the direct gaze of the painting itself. Yet the film is also a portrait, unwittingly when I first began shooting, of four earnest, church-going, working-class women of the type who are rarely seen in films or television, except in parodic form. These women would never self-identify as feminists, yet I believe they are a living legacy of the activist feminism of the 1970s—a feminism that also shaped Gaitskill's, Varda's, Godmilow's and countless other women film artists' consciousnesses, and that continues to inspire me to tell stories from the margins of female culture and experience.

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#### SU FRIEDRICH

To the extent that I've always disliked (and tried to disavow) the term "experimental film," I feel the same way these days about the term "experimental documentary film." This is to say that I always thought the field of—what to call it? avant-garde?—cinema was ill-served by the term "experimental," and I think what everyone does these days that has a relationship to documentary is ill-served by this new moniker.

Of course, I run into problems naming what I do when I do something that relates to documentary, so I (sometimes) use the term begrudgingly. I don't know whether anyone could ever coin a term that would be large enough to embrace the huge range of work made under this current name, but I still have to say I dislike and disavow it.

I never thought we were doing "experiments" when we were making non-narrative/



Su Friedrich, *From the Ground Up* (2008)  
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

non-documentary films, and I don't think we're doing "experiments" now if we use our cameras and language to record events in the real world. We're just making films that document something in a way that isn't prescribed by the tenets of conventional documentary practice.

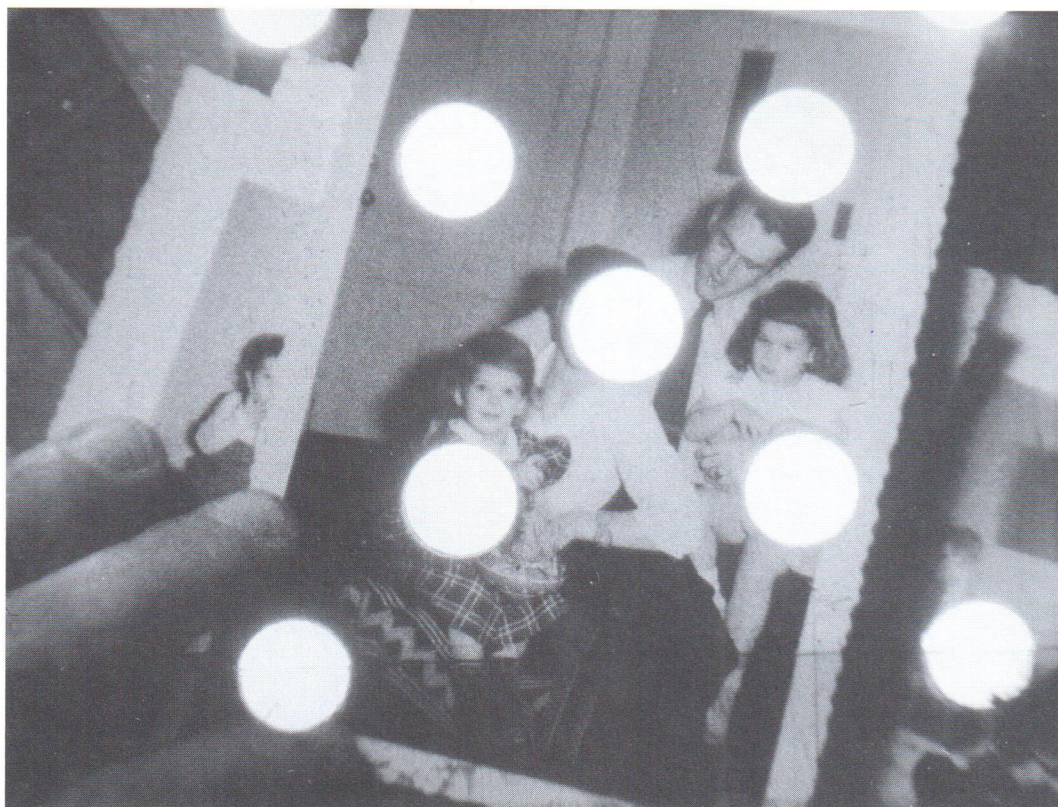
Perhaps I should draw on a few examples from my own work. In the case of *The Ties That Bind* (1984), I documented my mother's experience in Germany during World War II. Rather than use talking heads interviews with her, I scratched text into the film to distinguish my own voice and questions,



**Su Friedrich, *First Comes Love* (1991)**  
FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

optically printed various images to highlight them, and did a range of other things that made it formally quite different than the standard doc. But, for me, this made it no less of a documentary; it told the story of a real person through her own words (in voiceover) and provided images and text to give her a context. A more tricky case, *First Comes Love* (1991) departs most radically (among my films) from the standard documentary but still, in its own way, documents the marriage rituals for heterosexual couples in New York City alongside the lack of access to such rituals for homosexual couples. Granted, all the film shows are images of four couples getting married, followed by a three-minute crawl that ticks off all the countries of the world that don't allow gay marriage; nevertheless, even without hearing talking heads discussing how the one ritual plays out and why the other isn't allowed or hearing a narrator describe the stages of a wedding, the viewer learns a lot about both those elements or experiences. Lastly, there's *From the Ground Up* (2008), in which I trace each stage in the process by which coffee goes from being a seedling in Guatemala to a hot drink in New York City without the use of interviews, narration, or facts and figures. It thoroughly documents the world of coffee but in a way that allows the viewer to experience it more directly and assess it in a subjective way, rather than being led to a predetermined assessment by the filmmaker, as so often happens with a more traditional format.

It would be far better if we called our work documentaries and let the traditionalists squirm in their seats (or coffins) at having something so "experimental" assert itself as, simply, a documentary. Why should they be the ones to dictate how one goes about documenting the world? Why are their works "documentaries" and ours "experimental documentaries"? That just serves to limit the field and to make people think in a limited or simplistic way about a huge body of films—as if some are "true" (proper, authentic) and others are efforts to undermine

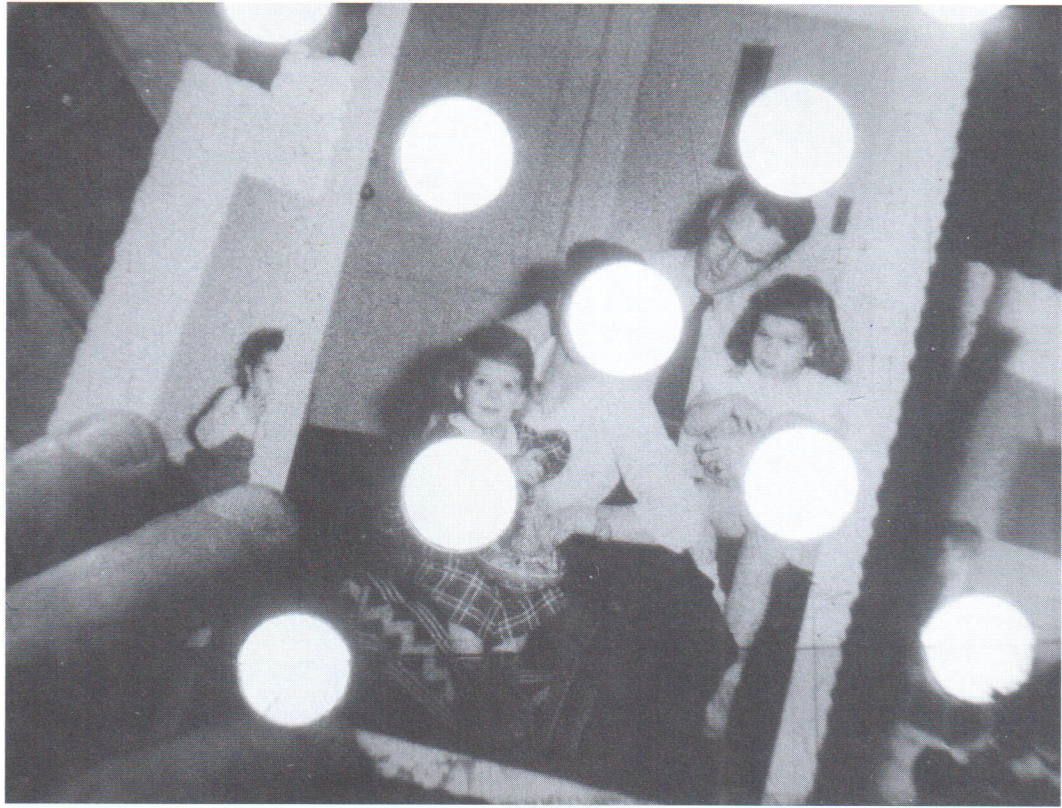


**Su Friedrich, *The Ties That Bind* (1984)**  
FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

(or correct) the traditional ones—when, in fact, there are so many complicated ways to group, categorize and analyze the field.

It also seems to undermine or ignore history; an analogy would be if Germany before WWII was called “Germany” and after the war would be called “Experimental Germany” because it no longer operates under the same rules as it once did. The history of a country, people, art practice, business, etc. is always subject to change, redefinition, refinement, progress (or regression), major and minor tweakings. It goes without saying that time (history) yields change, but in other areas we don’t constantly rename the original entity because we accept that evolution occurs. So why can’t we think this way about documentary? Why do we need “experimental documentary” when what people are doing is simply revising, enlivening, challenging, having a dialogue with, and *therefore carrying on or contributing to* the evolution of those genres?

One significant experience for me has been attending the Flaherty Film Seminar, off and on, over the years. What I have witnessed there was a fierce battle between the group that held onto the traditions of documentary and those who wanted to open up the field. Sometimes it seemed like a tempest in a teapot, but what a tempest it was! And I found myself dragged into it, defending myself and my films against charges that I hadn’t done things “the right way.” (Not to exaggerate: I was also warmly received by others.) It’s important to note that I’m not talking about legitimate criticism applied to the problems inherent in the film (e.g. it’s too slow, vague, badly shot, superficial); any film can and should be criticized if it falls short of its intentions, whether on technical or aesthetic grounds. What I’m talking



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about is looking at a film as if it should have been made according to the rules of the genre and then deeming it a failure if it didn't follow those rules. This I do not accept.

Traditionally, a documentary would have been filmed over a sufficient amount of time to follow the subject thoroughly, would be shot in sharp focus with good sound, would be edited for maximum clarity, and would in the broadest sense be seen as a truthful and comprehensive portrait of a people or place made from as neutral advantage point as possible. Obviously there have been massive attacks/revisions made to these rules over the last 40-50 years (most notably the avoidance of the written and narrated voiceover in favor of the story being told by the subjects in on-camera scenes, even preferably without the interview format being used). Many great films have been made during this time, so in a sense we're already working in a much more liberated atmosphere than what prevailed before the 1960s. But the strictures are still in place if we still have to say that what we're doing is experimental. We still must feel that Those Guys make documentaries—albeit somewhat different than the most traditional ones—and consequently we don't see ourselves as part of the history, part of the community, but instead as outsiders busy with our experiments rather than in a dialogue with our peers.

It's much too late in the history of cinema to have these categories and/or divisions prevail. Viewers today are totally familiar with every "experimental" kind of shooting, sound, and editing. I think that continuing to call a documentary—something that records and analyzes events in the real world—"experimental" is to consign us to the dustbin, the back room, the orphanage. I don't think that's where we belong.

One of the lessons I learned many years ago as a young lesbian was that, if I spoke about myself as Other, I would be treated as such, whereas if I spoke of myself as just another human being, I would be treated that way. I think we should see ourselves as documentary filmmakers when we document the real world. The fact that we might be a one-person crew, install ourselves in the story, use nontraditional camerawork, and edit for multiple readings instead of a linear narrative doesn't mean we aren't making documentaries. Let others sweat if that makes them uncomfortable, but we shouldn't put ourselves outside of the history of documentary cinema because we are very much a part of it..

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#### **RICHARD FUNG**

On the subject of categories, I always ask myself what is at stake and for whom. Film/video genres are of greater import for funders, distributors, programmers, and scholars than for makers, except to the extent that funding, distribution, exhibition, and criticism limit or expand the possibilities of a work or a career. For most artists I know, the creative process does not involve trying to fit into the conventions of an established form for the sake of fitting in. But clearly there are real stakes for makers on how our work is categorized.

The concept of "experimental documentary" tries to function as a passport that eases movement between the established territories of experimental, documentary, and fiction modes. It doesn't necessarily challenge those categories in which there is a great deal invested by way of jobs and institutions. However, as the notion and the works themselves circulate more widely, it brings to the fore practices that are in fact longstanding: is Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) a "real" documentary or a "real" drama according to today's popular understandings of those categories?