

BOMB



Still from *Gut Renovation*, 2012. 81 minutes.

Outcast Films, 2012

For the first time in more than a hundred years, the morning sun streams straight through the huge windows of a North 11th Street loft in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The night before, on May 3, 2008, the last brick walls of the building across the street had been demolished behind a black veil. For a brief raw moment, there is a large swath of open sky (later to be obliterated by a new ugly glass-and-steel facade). In her film *Gut Renovation*, Su Friedrich, who had moved into the grand cast iron 19th-century building with her partner Cathy Quinlan and other artists in 1989, bears witness to the transformation (just a few years after the city's 2005 rezoning) of the former outpost Williamsburg into Condo-burg. With a sense of urgency spurred by the frantic destruction and construction all around her, Friedrich, known for her personal and poetic films, prowled through her disowned neighborhood, talked to her butcher, her car mechanic, and her artist friends, documenting their melancholic exodus. "It's the evolutionary process," one evicted painter in *Gut Renovation* resignedly calls her departure from "the coolest zip code" with "the coolest dress code"—as the slogan for a new building (called The Edge) claims.

The victorious march of red-blooded developers, headed by the Toll Brothers—famous for transforming farms and natural landscapes into sprawling subdivisions nicknamed "boomburbs" and now lustily revamping an exciting urban habitat—is trailed by a parade of designer dogs: all are subjected to Friedrich's sarcastic gaze. Her frustrated rage against this hostile takeover of her neighborhood—deemed "sick" by the mayor's office in order to "justify" its erasure—is counterbalanced by a wicked sense of humor and constant second-guessing. When the filmmaker angrily stalks a young couple carrying fancy shopping bags, she backs off once they confront her

as rude, admitting, “They have a point.” When she extends her personal explorations by infiltrating chic housewarming parties thrown by the real estate companies, she confesses (to the viewer’s delight) to having stolen a bottle of wine on her way out. And we happily share Friedrich’s glee when a huge boulder at the construction site across the street refuses to budge, delaying for weeks the rise of yet another architectural atrocity. We find ourselves breathlessly counting along with her when she adds yet another batch of new buildings with “unreal amenities and real neighbors” to her chart. We see her count and count, passing 100 and marking down building number 173 on her painstakingly researched map of the new Williamsburg, when she finally retreats from what she calls “a war zone.” Next, she is pointing to a bold graffiti on a blue construction fence, ARTISTS USED TO LIVE HERE— tagged, as she admits in her typical deadpan manner, by none other than Su Friedrich herself. The filmmaker leaves the last words to her favorite response to the graffiti, posted on the online real estate site Curbed.com: “The last ‘artist’ we had was Picasso. The rest of them should eat shit and move on.”

— Claudia Steinberg is a German-born, New York-based writer and the cocurator of the 2013 Festival Neue Literatur in New York. She lived in Williamsburg from 1990 to 1992.

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FILM

Su Friedrich

by [Claudia Steinberg](#) Apr 02, 2013



Still from *Gut Renovation*, 2012, 81 minutes. All images courtesy Su Friedrich and Outcast Films.

All through the 1970s and '80s, the sole inhabitants of a grand loft space in an old beautiful, industrial building on North 11th Street in Williamsburg had been pigeons fluttering undisturbed under the splendid cathedral-like ceiling. In 1990, filmmaker Su Friedrich and painters Cathy Quinlan and Martina Siebert transformed a full floor of this rusty palace into a communal place where they lived and worked for many years while the neighborhood changed around them. When the coexistence of artists and light industries came to a sudden end with the 2005 rezoning laws, which allowed the notorious Toll Brothers and other developers to build one brash, shiny apartment tower after another, Su Friedrich began counting—and filming. *Gut Renovation* is a systematic yet highly personal response from this cinematographic auteur to a particularly rapid and ruthless version of urban renewal.

Claudia Steinberg Your film starts with a bang. You push open the door and there's a gasp of disbelief. What happened? There's this sense of shock: the pigeons have moved back in. Almost 20 years of your life have been obliterated—gone, gone, gone.

Su Friedrich Well, I found that really traumatic. It made me understand what it means for people whose houses are destroyed by fire or bombed in a war. Here was this architecturally exquisite cast-iron building from the 1890's and we had tried everything we could to maintain its quality. It's one thing to see the walls you put up taken out, but the vaulted ceilings had those bands with finely carved, detailed floral motifs—

CS —which you had cleaned with almost surgical precision, with dental tools, investing countless hours...

SF It's a 19th-century technique that people don't use anymore—unless they're the King of Saudi Arabia. The space had been the design and showroom for Hecla Ironworks, which created the marquees for Carnegie Hall, Saks 5th Avenue and the Stock Exchange and all the beautiful elaborate cast-iron railings that you see in the old buildings of New York. We felt part of this long history of the city. But the new owners used a spray gun to blast the ceiling with white stucco paint destroying all that work. Then they went into the staircase, which had been preserved in its original form for over a hundred years, and covered its beautiful and extremely detailed sunflower pattern railing with battleship-grey enamel paint.

CS So you catapult the viewer into this void—the erasure of your own history in this building, as well as the destruction of a precious place. But throughout the film you contrast your emotions with a very analytical approach—these two elements bounce off each other.

SF I don't necessarily have a completely clear plan about how I'm going to construct something, but I have two primary responses to life: One is to be very emotional and the other is to be very systematic. I wanted to be a math major. I love systems. I love numbers. I love ordering things. I love making spreadsheets. So when I recognized that I should bear witness to what was happening, it was very clear to me that I had to take the act of recording really seriously. When I went out and saw an imperiled building on North 10th Street, I had to know its exact address, who had owned it, what it was being turned into. I ended up with a record of 173 spaces. To approach it that way—record, record, record—I had to dot every “i” and cross every “t” in this neighborhood. And then there was the emotional part. I was extremely angry and extremely sad at the same time as I watched this unfold.

CS What was the moment that made you decide to document what was happening?

SF We knew that things were getting really strange. Then, on May 11, 2005, the newspaper carried a banner headline—the kind they reserve for a war or an election—about the re-zoning. In that instant I thought, I knew for a while that something was about to happen and now it just happened. 48 hours later I heard the first jackhammer. Within a month, I would find a plywood fence around an empty lot. One could see very quickly that the action was starting up. In the film I talk about one of the first buildings to be worked on, which happened to be around the corner from us, 55 Berry. They were also tearing down the bus depot. We heard jackhammers all summer. I thought, Ah, this is going to be our reality for years to come.

CS Strange how it all happened so fast. Once SoHo was the precedent and it provided the “rags to riches” saga, literally, but then this type of urban renewal accelerated. SoHo has even become

a model for Las Vegas. Last year I heard about plans for a SoHo there. An architecture firm is inventing an industrial past for Las Vegas which then allegedly “became an artistic center,” but is now a shopping and gambling hub.

When was the first time you understood that Williamsburg would not always be your home?

SF In my film I talk about Isabelle Hill who was a member of the team that surveyed the waterfront for the City Planning Office between 1987 and 1992. They were supposed to determine whether manufacturing was vital and thriving. They determined that it was and the City said, We don’t want to know about this. They already knew that they wanted to transform the waterfront. So I think a lot of what was happening during the ’90s—manufacturers getting pushed out, spaces becoming defunct or available to other kinds of people—took place because they had decided on the transformation. I don’t think many people were aware of the plan that was being fomented by the City Planning Office and by the Mayor’s Office. One community group knew what was happening and proposed a plan that allowed for the coexistence of manufacturing and residents. Williamsburg has a long history of people working in manufacturing and living in walking distance and they wanted to maintain that ecology but the city completely disregarded their suggestions. None of us were aware. But around 1990 *New York Magazine*’s cover story was “The New Bohemia,” and we knew, that’s it, we’re screwed—Williamsburg has become a commodity, it has been branded and somebody is going to come in to make money off of that. And that was 15 years before the rezoning happened!



Still from Gut Renovation, 2012, 81 minutes.

CS So already the first artists who came with a strong sense of creating a new community in Williamsburg, while leaving Manhattan to the rich, were inadvertently laying the groundwork for the City Planning Office. You were among them when you moved across the river in 1990.

SF I had lived in really tiny places—a storefront in the East Village, a tenement in Chinatown—and I had to work outside my home, at places like the Millennium Film Workshop. In Williamsburg I could live not only with my partner but with roommates too—potentially with other artists and filmmakers—and I could also have a huge studio. People I knew had already moved to Hoboken or other places where they lived in industrial buildings. I always envied them but I never had the money or the wherewithal to do that. Artists who moved into commercial spaces in Williamsburg with unprotected leases lived with the risk of rents being tripled overnight. Like many others, we as tenants did all the work and spent all the money—about \$80,000 in materials alone—and the three of us renovated every day for eight months. We also paid all the expenses of the building and were living adjacent to manufacturing. There was a furniture-making place across our courtyard so all day long we heard buzz saws. It was very loud. But for us, it meant: Somebody is working, they have a job, and I get to have this place where *I* can work! The kind of people who live in Williamsburg now do not want to live with the sound of a saw all day long.

CS And the cleaning trucks with the noisy brushes—every morning at 6 am there was this elephant herd streaming out into the city. But there was also peace.

SF Back then you could walk for an hour along Kent Avenue on a weekend and not see a single person. This was such a treasure for me having grown up in Chicago where I could go to the lakefront and not see a soul, and also after living in Manhattan, which is always so loud and crowded. Our loft was a block and a half from the river, so even in terms of my development as an artist, to have that privacy and sense of peace in a modest environment was really great.

CS What did that do for you as an artist?

SF It gave me some time away from all of the pressures of living in the city—just to go somewhere and sit for hours and stare at the water and think my own thoughts. Also, we were right up against all of the industries along the river. Our own building contained small industries and we were mostly surrounded by those kinds of buildings, not the little row houses like in the rest of Williamsburg. It meant that every day I was seeing people at work. Not like in the city where people are going into office buildings or into shops, but people making cardboard boxes or labels. Over time I developed such a respect and a real attachment to it. I could go out and see people producing things that we need on a daily basis—it was something that became very much part of my feeling: this is a necessary and important thing and I'm glad to be around it.

CS Especially as a countercurrent to the increasing abstraction of work that is taking place in Manhattan where everyone seems to reside in a numerical and intangible sphere that becomes less and less comprehensible.

SF That has been true for the last 10 years but during the '90s outsourcing to China really increased and all those basic items for daily life were being made elsewhere. And now everyone

is doing virtual work. I'm a very hands-on, DIY kind of person and to see somebody make a cardboard box is actually exciting to me. I made a film called *From the Ground Up*, which I finished in 2007 and which is about coffee. It originated with seeing the coffee carts arriving and leaving from a place just around the corner from us—I thought, Oh, we have a part of the production chain right in our neighborhood.

CS In many parts of Manhattan one is mostly surrounded by banks and the Halal stands are among the few signs of production in otherwise increasingly sterile neighborhoods.

SF It's also evidence of the labor of the immigrant population in New York. The vast majority of the people who work in the manufacturing spaces still in existence in Williamsburg, who run the coffee carts and who run the Halal stands, are recent immigrants. Our neighborhood had also been a vital center for art production and showing art and having performances and screenings for a long time. And then that all fell apart.

CS You and your partner Cathy Quinlan were part of that production and you lived with your roommates in your own art community that attracted other artists.

SF We lived in this beautiful space which soon became a gathering place, and more officially so in 2004 when my partner, Cathy Quinlan, started the Temporary Museum. We'd have a show, an event, or a discussion with an artist and lots of people would come and passersby would stop in from the street—it really was a salon environment and people loved it. Cathy has been a painter all her life so when she started her museum she said, "This is for painting and drawing." Period, end of story. And she proceeded to mount really good shows of only painting and drawing month after month. People would say, "Thank God I have come to a space where I can just look at paintings and drawings and not have some monitor over in the corner yammering at me." There were people who had that kind of seriousness of purpose and focus in Williamsburg.



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CS I think it's interesting that art now is employed as a cure for social ills—the NEA puts a little art center into the slum of Atlanta so the neighborhood will blossom! It has become almost like a social strategy.

SF Yeah. But there's also blurring of lines between what it means to be an artist and what it means to work in the commercial realm employing certain art practices without being an artist. This is what we started hearing back in the early 2000s when people would say about Williamsburg, "Oh, it's just filled with creatives!" And we'd be like, What the fuck is *a creative*? I had been *a creative* if you consider that early in my life in New York I worked in advertising and magazine and book production, so I was around people who were trying to sell a product, and I was helping them because they paid me and then I'd go home and make art. But what's happening now is that somebody who works at the Gap designing their website is thinking of themselves in the same realm as me or a friend of mine who's a painter or a poet. And I'm not making a value judgment, but I'm saying there really is a difference between being paid to design a website and sitting in your room not being paid to write a poem or paint a painting. I think if they just called themselves advertising executives like the people who used to do that kind of work did, I'd be fine with that. Because then we would have understood the difference between Allen Ginsberg and somebody who worked on Madison Avenue.

CS An artist like Warhol promoted something like this himself by mixing the high and low, the trivial and the noble. However, if the artists themselves play with the commodification of art, that's one thing, but if whole industries commodify art for their own purposes, that's still another. You can probably market the poison in the Gowanus Canal in the name of authenticity as a bohemian asset.

SF In the late '80s when people like David Byrne were in Gap ads in the subway, we were like, No way! but that was one of the first incursions of getting artists to basically market themselves. I remember so well how we all talked about that: If the Gap asked you to do that would you do it? It was one of those terrible moral questions that people hated to be asked. Now it's just absolutely ordinary.

CS I've always admired the work of the photographer Camilo José Vergara who has specialized in showing the opposite process, starting with a slightly endangered neighborhood and documenting what happened to it all the way down to the very ruin of the buildings and then in the end the fortification of a neighborhood with all the fences and concertina wire. And, like in your case, the systematic process in connection with an aesthetic concept gives a more powerful understanding than just reading a book about it. Did you know what a long breath your project would take?

SF No, at first I thought, Wow, the building at the corner, I'll go watch them jack-hammering it. And then, Oh, the one on North 10th and Oh, the one down on South 3rd. And suddenly it became so huge. I would get on my bike with my camera and ride around and check up on the construction sites that I knew already and then find new ones. Over the first two years I was just periodically continuing this record. Eventually I started logging just to get an idea of how much material I had and what I might need to follow up on. Then the *Icon* on McCarren Park was having its big fancy party so I went to see what these buildings were like inside. It was a process of recognizing additional layers. And, of course, I talked to various small industry people in the neighborhood who I knew, like the guys across the street with the forklift company. Then I talked with other artists—Amy Jenkins threw a party when she was finally thrown out of her loft along with many of the original Williamsburg artists I've known for years. We were witnessing virtually every building around us being either transformed or torn down.



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CS In spite of the tragedy all around you there is also a lot of humor in your film.

SF One critical evolution of the film came when I had constructed a two-and-a-half hour rough cut. At that point it was mostly my voice. Then Cathy Quinlan entered the picture and she was the one who brought in a lot of humor even though she was as upset as I was about losing our space. She said, This is an important story to tell but you won't win people over, or you won't even get them to listen, if all you are is angry or sad. There needs to be humor because there is a tragicomic side to the way these developers behave toward the people who are moving in. The whole situation is just preposterous. And so she did some extensive rewriting and co-writing with me. That made all the difference.

CS In the film you quote Cathy suggesting you should just call it *I Hate Rich People*. There is certainly a great deal of absurdity in these pseudo-glamorous buildings and the way they are marketed.

SF It's always a really bad idea to tell people what they're seeing but if you say that the sales agents love to brag about their subway tiles and 20 minutes later we see a developer talking to a client and he says something about the subway tiles, there's always laughter in the audience. People remember.

CS And then there is the piece de resistance, the stoic, irremovable boulder, which for a gleeful little while becomes your ally.

SF One summer they had torn down the building across the street, which I found absolutely heartbreaking and then this huge rock was unearthed. I just put my camera on a tripod by the

window in the kitchen so I could record their efforts over many hours—it turned out to be many days—as they tried to get rid of this poor rock. And so that became very emblematic to me of what was going on, the losing battle we were fighting against these people.

CS If the architecture was not as offensively hideous as it is, if this had been done with more sensibility, would you have felt at all differently about it?

SF Of course one wants things to be more pleasant and more interesting to look at, but it wouldn't take away from the fact that the buildings drove out other people. The one couldn't happen without the other. And not just people in the industrial buildings but all the people who lived in the small 2-story and 3-story houses in the neighborhood. Those mostly were not rent controlled or rent stabilized and so the rents skyrocketed. The owners of the corner deli on Driggs and 9th Street tried so hard to stay. Now their rent is \$30,000 a month—for a deli! Only those who own the buildings can remain, everyone else has been driven out. So, yeah, the buildings for the most part are crap. I couldn't believe what I was seeing when I went to those showrooms. Karl Fischer is famously horrible. He was the architect of a good number of buildings in the neighborhood and there's a lot of stuff online about just what devastation he's wrought, architecturally, visually, esthetically. We used to joke about how 15 years from now Williamsburg is going to be like a scene from ??Blade Runner??—all these buildings will be falling apart. All the rich people will have moved out. People are going to start squatting them. I kind of hope that happens.

CS Moving to Bed-Stuy, you have embarked on another chapter in your life, another interesting, complex situation. To me, that would be another film—the irony of having been kicked out of one neighborhood and then being seen as the gentrifier in another, eyed with suspicion. It just seems like a never-ending New York story.

SF I insisted that we buy something because I'm in my later fifties and I just couldn't imagine going through this again. We had very little money. We looked and looked, and eventually got a place in Bed-Stuy. I was very aware that we would enter into a neighborhood that had been largely a black neighborhood for about 40 years. Before that, it was different—it had been German and Jewish. Knowing what had happened in Harlem, I was sensitive to what it might mean to move to Bed-Stuy. I tested the waters a bit before we had found this place and decided to buy it. I was met with varying responses. Some people were saying, Don't do it, or, We don't want your kind in this neighborhood. And other people were saying, Do it. We need stability. If it's a home that isn't occupied we need people to be living in these homes and maintaining them and keeping up the block because we want a safe, friendly, good neighborhood. And so some recognized us as people who might possibly do that. The day after we closed, we went over to start working on the house and a van drove up with three women in it who jumped out and said, Hello, we're the block association of this block and we'd like to welcome you to the block and please come to the meeting next week. We went to the meeting and have since been incredibly involved with our block. We've done tons of work with our neighbors. I read *Bed-Stuy Patch* everyday and there's lots of talk about what all this means. It's debated a lot on the Internet. I feel like it's a thorny thing. Just like living in Williamsburg, living in Bed-Stuy to me means eating at the local restaurants, shopping at the local grocery store, and joining my neighbors, who have lived here for 10 or 30 or even 40 years, doing things that they think are necessary to make

it a nice neighborhood to live in. I did that when I lived in Chinatown. I renovated my crappy old apartment so it was a nicer apartment and I ate at the local restaurants. So I think we can be a part of a neighborhood without destroying it. The people who live in Williamsburg now would never have wanted to live in the old Williamsburg. They wanted their Williamsburg. I don't move into a neighborhood in order to turn it into my vision of some glittery place full of palaces and flashy restaurants.

CS One last question: how you see this film in the context of your other work?

SF I've been making films since 1978 and I'm known as somebody who makes work that is seen as quite personal or as something that originates with the personal. A film about my father, *Sink or Swim*, or the one about my mother, *The Ties That Bind*, or *Hide and Seek* about lesbian children—I'm a lesbian so, yes, it's sort of about me. I have always wanted my work to originate in the personal but extend out from there in all kinds of ways. And sometimes that happens because of a formal device that I use or sometimes it happens because I introduce other characters, but I don't want it to just be about me. Judging from people's responses, my approach does speak to them. So I would say this film is in keeping with my other work. Back in 2002 I made a film called *The Odds of Recovery*, which was about medical issues and it was seen as more of a documentary with a capital "D" compared to my earlier work. When I made *From the Ground Up* about coffee I wondered, Am I turning into a documentary filmmaker? I love documentaries but I didn't ever quite see myself as a documentary filmmaker before. *Sink or Swim* is a document about my relationship to my father but aesthetically it is very far apart from documentary. *Hide and Seek* uses interviews with women about their childhoods but there's also fiction mixed in with it. I think of *Gut Renovation* more as an essay film, more in keeping with what Agnes Varda might do in *The Gleaners and I* or what Chris Marker might do in some of his films. It's trying to step back a bit from the immediate and allow people to think of it as a conversation about something that applies to many other situations. If you watch a documentary about steelworkers in Mongolia you might think, Oh, this is like what steelworkers in Pittsburgh experience. *Gut Renovation* is very much about Williamsburg but at the same time reaches beyond that.

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