

## Media Arts Salutes American Art

### AFA Launches Tour of the 1991 Whitney Biennial Film/Video Exhibition

#### An Interview with Filmmaker Su Friedrich

Since 1979, the AFA's international tours of the Whitney Biennial Film/Video Exhibition have brought these cutting edge media works to audiences across the United States and around the world. AFA's tour of the 1991 Whitney Biennial Film/Video Exhibition, which includes seven films and twenty-one video works selected by Whitney curator John G. Hanhardt, began in September and is expected to travel to more than thirty-five museums and media centers over the next two years.

*Sink or Swim*, part of the 1991 exhibition, is a 48-minute film that describes a girl's difficult relationship with her father. Through a structure of twenty-six short stories, which correspond to the letters of the alphabet, a dual portrait slowly evolves: that of a father who was more concerned with achievement and discipline than with creating a secure home life, and of a daughter who was deeply affected by his behavior. The stories are read in voice-over by a young girl, while black and white images depict the ordinary and extraordinary events of daily life. The resonance of the images and forcefulness of the text are united through fluid and elegant editing to create a complex and emotionally charged film.

The following interview with filmmaker Su Friedrich was conducted by Sam McElfresh, director of the AFA's Media Arts Department.

**Sam McElfresh:** I've noticed a continuing concern in your work with telling very personal stories about your life and finding the appropriate formal structure in which to tell them.



Su Friedrich. Photo: James Hamilton.

**Su Friedrich:** Right, but I don't think my choices are that pre-ordained. It's not that I start by saying it's important to work with family or autobiography—ideas just come to me and have an urgency, and I respond to them. My earlier autobiographical film, *The Ties That Bind*, really has more to do with my mother's life and the effect the Second World War had on her. It doesn't focus that much on my relationship with her. *Damned If*

*You Don't* [toured by the AFA in the 1989 Whitney Biennial Film Exhibition] is autobiographical, but only in the way that most fiction is: most people call on their own experiences even if they choose to speak through a fictional character. But the experience of making those two films allowed me to be more direct in *Sink or Swim*. Even though the form is somewhat disguised—I speak about my experiences and my father's experiences in the third-person—it's clear to anyone who sees it that the film is about us.

**SM:** Why did you decide to work with a third-person narrator?

**SF:** It was too difficult to write *Sink or Swim* in the first person. I drafted all the film's stories in the first person, but there was something too overwhelming . . . I didn't like the sound of it, and I didn't think it would be accessible to people. I thought it would make them too aware of me, and that the more neutral third-person narration would allow them instead to think about themselves, about their families.

**SM:** Had you thought at any point of using your own voice on the soundtrack rather than the girl's?

**SF:** I did, but I don't particularly like the sound of my voice, and I didn't want to hear it constantly through five months of editing. It was actually a friend's suggestion to use a child's voice—I had been thinking of simply using another woman's voice. I thought it was a brilliant idea—it's exactly what the film needs. I think that happens a lot—certain crucial ideas are not necessarily one's own, but are suggested by others.

**SM:** But you do use your own voice in the “Alphabet Song” that ends the film when you sing “Tell me what you think of me.”

**SF:** Right. There is a bit of irony in having that song end the film because the last story is about deciding not to do something risky that I associate with my father—swimming across the lake—but going back instead, to be with my friends. In effect, the text is “I'll do what's good for me and not what pleases him.” But then in singing that song, I say “Now I've said my ABCs”—in other words, I've told you everything—“tell me what you think of me.” So I do ask for his approval. It was done with a sense of humor, but also with a sincere realization that in some ways you spend the rest of your life trying to overcome bad childhood experiences.

**SM:** Was it a difficult film emotionally to make?

**SF:** Extremely.

**SM:** Because you were dredging things up?

**SF:** Exactly. I felt like I was both betraying my father and exposing my feelings to the world, which



Su Friedrich. From *Sink or Swim*, 1990. 16mm film, black and white, sound, 48 minutes. Courtesy the filmmaker.



From Sink or Swim.

is a risk you often take as an artist. Of course, there is a certain gratification in that, in being able to express your feelings, since a lot of people can never say what they feel and therefore can't get any response. For me, making this film and getting such a positive response to it has been very confirming. It led me to understand that I was not alone. We tend to think of our problems as only our own, but that just isn't the case. I show the film to a roomful of people and half of them come up to you afterwards and say, "My God, that was so much like my childhood."

**SM:** One of the things that's so deeply affecting about the film is that it is so evenhanded. It doesn't come across as a strident denunciation of your father and the pain he inflicted on you, so much as a series of tales in which both of you are wounded because of the family structure. Was that your original plan or did the balance come as you made it?

**SF:** It was something that happened over time. When I started the film, I was extremely angry and imagined it as a kind of revenge against my father for all the things he had done. But I worked on this film for a long time—it took three months to write the text, and two years to complete production—and the more I looked at it, the more I realized how important it was to bring in another side of the story, to bring in some details about his younger life that would explain some of his behavior as an adult. Just as there were things that happened in my childhood that make me behave as I do now, the same thing is true for him and his parents. So it was important to acknowledge that chain reaction, not necessarily to forgive him but to give him . . .

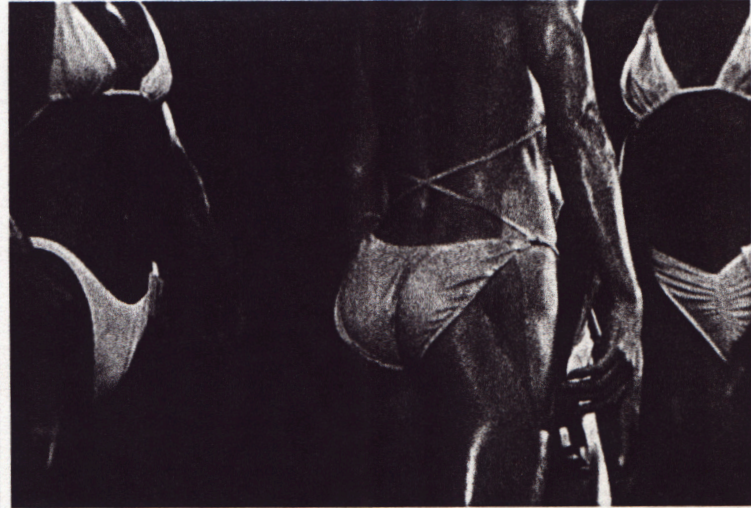
**SM:** Some sort of human stature, as opposed to simply being a monster?

**SF:** Yes. So I allowed a little more room for my father's past, and I wasn't as cruel as I might have been, but my intentions stayed pretty much the same: I wanted to describe very clearly certain incidents in my life, or in our life together, because I felt the father/daughter relationship in our culture was underexamined, and still is a somewhat taboo subject. Most of the people I know have had troubled childhoods, and there has to be more understanding, particularly in the case of divorce, in order to break the cycle of dysfunctional families.

**SM:** How did you come to use the alphabet as your central structural element? And did your decision to link one story to each of the twenty-six letters limit you or free you in making the film?

**SF:** I got the alphabet idea at the very beginning. My father is a linguist, and of course language is made up of the alphabet. And because the film is about storytelling and speech, I wanted to keep the alphabet in the forefront during the whole film. It's also a very vivid experience of childhood to acquire

the alphabet, and then to acquire the use of words. Traditionally, the primer is meant to teach you the alphabet, but at the same time it teaches you a certain kind of morality. So there's some irony in that. If you are doing something scary, I think it's important to have a clear structure that your feelings can fit into. I believe that having a certain amount of discipline gives you a greater freedom: that's an old-fashioned way of seeing things, but it really works for me.



From Sink or Swim. Courtesy the filmmaker.

**SM:** It must have been difficult to edit this film, given the disparate visual material. How did you approach it?

**SF:** I built it in small blocks. I would take one story at a time, with what I thought was the perfect plan, and then as I edited I realized that certain footage did or didn't work with that story. Since I needed to begin from a manageable place and build from there, I started with the stories in which my ideas of the image seemed to fit perfectly with the text or with the ones that weren't as emotionally difficult. I played back and forth between images that were more symbolic and those that were more literal in order to help ground the viewer. It took a lot of juggling to get the individual sections to work, and then to have them work from one to the next. I gave myself more to work with in editing this film than in *Ties That Bind*, for instance—I went out and

shot places and events even when I wasn't sure the material would work in the film, to have it if I needed it. For example, I had footage of women bodybuilders which worked perfectly with the story of the Greek myth, even though I didn't have that in mind when I shot it.

**SM:** Did you involve your immediate family at all in the planning of the film?

**SF:** I talked to my sister, who is a year older than I am, and my brother, who is six years younger.

**SM:** So it was a "reality check" to talk with your siblings?

**SF:** Definitely. Since my sister and I are close in age, we shared a lot of experiences, and she gave me details that I hadn't remembered. . . .

**SM:** How did your family respond when they saw the film?

**SF:** My sister and brother both liked it a lot, and found it valuable. Just as it puts certain fears of mine to rest, and clarifies certain conflicts I had with my father, it was also helpful for them. My mother and father haven't seen the film: my mother really wants to, but she hasn't managed to yet, and my father doesn't want to know anything about it. I think that a lot of people who work with autobiography—particularly with material about troubled families—imagine that by making a film, they'll find a new

way of relating to their parents which will somehow heal the breach. And I guess I imagined that would happen. But when it was finished, I understood it wasn't going to. I may have made it possible for people who see the film to talk with their parents, but that didn't work for me.

**SM:** Who was your intended audience?

**SF:** Because I am a woman and I was always thinking of a young girl while I was writing the stories, I had in mind young girls as my audience. But I've really been gratified that a lot of men have responded very well to it. Some react to it out of their memory of childhood, while others have said, "I'm the father of two teenage girls and I really appreciate this, because it makes me think more about my behavior." It amazes me that I've been able to reach those viewers.