SU FRIEDRICH
Interviewed by Katy Martin
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In the 1980s, Su Friedrich first emerged as a powerful voice in independent filmmaking. Her seminal film, *Gently Down the Stream*, garnered widespread attention for its dreamlike imagery and poetic text which she scratched directly into the film emulsion. Since then, she has created a body of work that makes extensive use of dreams, memory and personal subject matter that is, at times, emotionally raw. Inward-looking and subjective, yet politically aware, Friedrich's art re-examines personal experience while also commenting on broad social issues.

Since 1978, Friedrich has produced and directed many acclaimed films and videos including *From the Ground Up* (2007), *Seeing Red* (2005), *The Odds of Recovery* (2002), *Hide and Seek* (1996), *Rules of the Road* (1993), *Sink or Swim* (1990), *The Ties That Bind* (1984) and *Gently Down the Stream* (1981). In the following interview, she discusses two important works—*Sink or Swim* and *Seeing Red*—both of which will be presented at MoCA Shanghai in October.

Su Friedrich's film/video art has been exhibited throughout the world in museums and leading film festivals. It has also been broadcast on television across the US and Canada. She has been honored with retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Rotterdam International Film Festival; the National Film Theater in London; and the Cinema Shiadu in Guangzhou, China, among others. In addition, her work has been written about in such major publications as *The New York Times, Artforum, Premiere, The Nation, Film Quarterly* and *Flash Art*. Friedrich currently teaches film/video production at Princeton University.

KATY MARTIN: What first attracted you to film?

SU FRIEDRICH: When I was in fourth grade, I bought my first photo camera, a Brownie, at the local drugstore; I still remember how excited I was when I got it, and I still have it. I then studied black and white photography in college (they didn't offer any film classes) and realized how serious my interest was in working with images, but at that time I had no idea about being a filmmaker—that seemed far too big and remote. After college, I moved to New York, which gave me the chance to be exposed to great film culture. I started seeing work by filmmakers like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Margareta vonTrotta, Chantal Akerman, Luis Bunuel and Akira Kurosawa, and this gave me a deep interest in the possibilities for telling stories through film.

I started getting frustrated with photography but I still couldn't imagine that I could make movies; I still only knew about "big movies." Also, back then, there were very few

women filmmakers, so that made it seem even more remote. On the other hand, it was the time when women were really fighting to make and show work, so I feel lucky that I started out then instead of ten or more years earlier.

One day a friend asked me to go with her to a super-8 filmmaking class at the Millennium Film Workshop, in the East Village. I went and, as they say, I never looked back. It was clear to me after that first evening that it was what I needed and wanted to do. Within a short time I sold my darkroom equipment and started shooting film. The Millennium also put me in contact with the experimental film community, which I hadn't been aware of, and I started seeing films that were very different from the "big movies." These were films I could imagine making myself. It gave me a lot of energy and courage to see that individuals, with very little money, were making films all by themselves.

KM: Let's talk about *Sink or Swim* (1990), one of your best known works. It's a film about your father, and some of your memories are highly charged. Can you talk about the use of explicit, personal material in your art?

SF: At the time, I had already made a few other films that used personal material, including *The Ties That Bind* (1984) about my mother living in Germany during World War Two. So it was a direction I was already going in, and I think there are several reasons for that.

The first would be that I had a difficult time growing up. I had a mother who had been very traumatized by the war and then by her move to a new country; I had a father who was remote when he was living with us and who then left us, who left my mother to raise three children without any support; and I went to Catholic school and very soon realized that I had strong disagreements with the beliefs and practices of the church. So there were many issues I wanted to address when I finally started thinking about telling stories/telling history.

The other big reason is the influence of the Women's Movement, which opened up a huge and complicated discussion about how we were formed by society, what the damage was from that influence, and how we could change that to something better.

And last of all, I felt that I would be most honest, or would be most challenged, if I made myself look at the experiences that were closest to me. I love to read fiction, and I admire people who can turn life into a story, but I don't think that's something I know how to do, so I decided that I should try instead to speak more directly about my own life and the lives of people I knew.

It's a tricky thing to work with personal material because one has to try very hard to get some distance from something one is very, very close to. Each time I've made a film like that, I've depended a great deal on the perspective of friends. I ask them many times to read the texts, watch the edit, and tell me when I'm not being honest or correct or when I'm just being stupid and sentimental. The films would be very different, and I think very bad, if I didn't always have the criticism and advice of these viewers.

KM: Can you talk about how the film is organized, and the simple device of using the letters of the alphabet as chapter titles?

SF: It was extremely difficult to write the text. I started in the first person ("I was" and "my father") but then understood that I couldn't continue, it was too emotional for me, so I changed it to the third person ("the girl" and "her father"). That gave me some mental distance, because I could imagine some other girl, not myself. But I also needed to create a framework, so that I could generate more stories. The fear of speaking was strong, and I was having a hard time continuing to write. Since my father was a linguist, and language was the cornerstone of his work, I decided to use the alphabet as a structural device. This of course meant that I had to generate 26 stories, which was more than I had imagined doing, but at least it gave me an end point, a finite sum of work.

KM: How do you use the process of writing in your approach to making films?

SF: Writing has often played a major role in my films, and maybe most markedly in *Sink or Swim*. With the exception of *Hide and Seek* (1996), which included a more or less conventional fiction script that I co-wrote with Cathy Quinlan, my films have usually depended on texts I write or find, so I don't think of myself as a screenwriter. Also, since I do all my own cinematography (again with the exception of *Hide and Seek,* which was shot by Jim Denault), I tend to be thinking already about shooting, or be in the process of shooting, while I'm writing or finding texts.

I say that writing was most marked in *Sink or Swim* because it was the first time I had written such a lengthy text for a film, and it was such a hard one to write, and I see that the film depends very heavily on the text. The images are expressive up to a point, but the film really wouldn't make much sense if it didn't have the voiceover.

The only other film that I wrote so much text for is *Rules of the Road* (1993). In most of the others I worked more with a collage approach, mixing things I'd written with interviews, found texts, etc. In recent years, with video, I've also been talking more directly, using the camera to record unwritten/extemporaneous speech.

KM: You reference diary, memoir, and letter writing in *Sink or Swim*. There is even a story of you writing something in your diary that your mother actually erased. Can you talk about art and saying what can't be said?

SF: There are many ways and reasons to make art, and I can only talk about what I do and what I believe in doing. This means, very importantly, that I don't think other approaches or reasons are lesser or wrong; they're only different. I don't think it's better (or worse) to speak explicitly and directly about one's personal life, it just happens to be what I do. So in my case, I would say that it was necessary for me to use art as a way to say what "shouldn't" be said.

When I started making *Sink or Swim,* I looked for literature about children's experiences during divorce. I found almost nothing, so I felt I should tell that story and should speak for, and from, the position of the child. I also found very little about "The Father"—or at least very little that saw fathers from a critical perspective. What I was doing seemed quite taboo (at the time) and I felt strongly that it was something I had to address. In a similar fashion, I started making *The Ties That Bind* because I felt that the story of the ordinary, non-Nazi (and non-Jewish) German hadn't been told and I wanted to tell that story.

I think making art like this can be very useful—not just for the person who makes it and thereby has a chance to put their private thoughts and feelings into the public arena, but also for the viewer who might have had a similar experience and can finally see and hear their story being told.

KM: The stories you tell about your father are horrifying. That could not have been easy. How did come to make this film, and how did you find your way?

SF: It's very hard to say, because I think there were so many factors at play. I started making *Sink or Swim* in 1988, when I was 34. I had started therapy a couple of years before that. The decision to go into therapy wasn't easy, but at least by the time I started making *Sink or Swim*, I was beginning to understand what you had to do in order to unravel certain issues from your childhood. So I had a few skills, and I had somehow accepted that I had to do this, but I was still very early in the process. A critical moment came when I read the book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child* by Alice Miller. The one thing I took from it was the idea that children don't have a voice, that their stories aren't told, or aren't believed or respected when they're told. When she articulated that as clearly as she did, I recognized the truth of it from my own experience. All my life I've been full or rage and unhappiness about how my father behaved in our family, and I never felt that my experience was being heard.

KM: Politically the notion of invisibility and voice is very strong. In the Women's Movement, it's huge—if we're invisible, we have no voice.

SF: You know, I credit Alice Miller's book, but as I said before, I also very much credit the Women's Movement, in a broader way, for making me able to think that it was not only necessary but important to articulate those things. Because that's what women had been saying for years. I started making this film long after the modern women's movement got going, so there were years and years of women saying, I will now talk about my abusive husband, I will now talk about my experience being raped—all that— and not feel that I'm the one in the wrong. Otherwise, that's the way they keep people silent. Once you say, no, that's not the way I should be treated, things start to change.

KM: And I'm a witness to that.

SF: Yes, that's crucial to me.

KM: What's important about *Sink or Swim* is the tension it creates, so that we as the audience share the pathos and the whole terrible feeling of invisibility you had vis-à-vis your father.

SF: For me, a critical moment came when I wrote the story about being with my father and his younger daughter from a different family. When I heard him say to her, "Oh, that's not interesting," I recognized myself in her. So when I wrote that story, everything came together in that moment—emotionally, because, in the process of making the film, I was really struggling to understand what my experience had been; and artistically, because I was trying to figure out how to make a film that was both personal and formal. That moment seemed to answer both those demands. The circle closed, and I felt very grateful that happened. It was all about the invisibility/visibility issue, which so many stories had touched on. But then suddenly, it was as if I were speaking for her, but also about myself, on film and off!

KM: You saw yourself. You were finally seen. You took that power.

SF: Yes. And I could finally be the one to tell the story.

KM: This issue of invisibility is a force in so many people's lives, which maybe comes back around to the father, and what a father is supposed to do. What you hope a parent will do is provide certain kinds of nonreciprocal attention.

SF: Yes, exactly. (laughs)

KM: *Sink or Swim* is about the father as absent.

SF: Yes, it's about the absent father. That was the other thing that was invisible. I don't mean to minimize what feminists had done, but the majority of the discourse at the time focused on mothers, daughters and wives in relation to men. The man was spoken about, but not so directly. He was still invisible. So that's the other side of invisibility, that you have the oppressed person feeling themselves as invisible, but you also have the oppressor being invisible in their role. They're present—I mean, fathers are present, political leaders all have a public face—but what they *really* are is not what's being seen. Their more benevolent public role is what's being seen, but who they really are is not being seen. Part of making *Sink or Swim* was saying, here, I want to make this girl visible, but I also want to make the <u>father</u> visible for who he really is.

KM: Which comes back to the desire to witness. How does that relate to making art?

SF: There is a big difference between, let's say, going to therapy or talking to friends, and making art. There are connections, but it's not the same. If I'm sitting at a therapist's or talking with friends about my father, I may be ranting and raving, I may even be crying. But if I'm sitting in a room, editing or writing, there has to be a lot of control at work. I can rant and rave on a piece of paper, but by the time it's in a film, it

has been reworked so many times that it has become a very controlled thing. I think that's a really important distinction to make.

A lot of times people watching films about personal issues see them as a form of therapy (for the filmmaker). It may start out as therapeutic, but it doesn't end up as a therapeutic experience because there's so much craft involved. In making *Sink or Swim,* there was so much rewriting, so much re-editing. Worrying about how to cut together two shots has nothing to do with my father—it's about composition and rhythm! And then there's the problem of how somebody delivers their lines. I recorded many, many takes of Jessica Lynn, the girl who did the voiceover, and I had to decide which ones to use. So when she says, "When he held my head under the bathwater"—well, that may be a traumatic phrase, and when I wrote it, it may have made me throw myself on the bed and start crying, but when I was editing, I was just concerned about whether she read it articulately or whether it hit the right frame. It's an odd thing to start out making something that's so emotionally devastating, and then find yourself, a year and a half later, in the editing room, worrying about things like the frame.

KM: Right. Because then there's the art. Art creates a safe space for the viewers, to think about things that may otherwise be taboo. Maybe one way it does that is precisely what you're talking about, the craft and the aesthetics.

SF: If I think about my experience watching other people's work about traumatic experiences—the Holocaust or rape or you name it—there is always that odd combination of sensations. On the one hand, you're being brought very close to something which is almost unthinkably painful and on the other, you find yourself thinking, wow, that's a great shot, or that's beautifully edited, or they found such a brilliant way to convey their experience. In other words, you can admire the film as a constructed object that's very separate from, or something in addition to, the real, lived experience being described. I don't think there's anything to say about that except that it's a fact of life. That's what art is. Art takes the real world and crafts it into something that's small and coherent. That's just the definition of it.

KM: *Sink or Swim* is beautifully crafted and as a whole, it is very poetic. The text itself sets up layers of meaning, and the relationships of word and image are oblique. Maybe it is those oblique relationships that give me a sense of space. They give me room to reflect.

SF: That was the intention, and I'm really glad that you experience it that way. Other people have said that, and that really was what I wanted to do. I asked a lot of the viewers in the sense that I really left them on their own to make up whatever they thought was going on. There are some places in the film where the relationship between the text and the image is quite literal, and there are some places where it's really disconnected. To me, one of the riskiest moments is when I'm telling the story about my father leaving, and I describe my mother putting us on the windowsill and saying, "What if we all jumped out the window!" and what you're seeing at the same time are images in a hospital. There is no direct connection. The story has nothing to do with medical issues.

But since I've had a lot of medical problems, I thought, well, maybe there's a way in which growing up in an environment like that could really contribute to being unhealthy, physically as well as mentally, and maybe I ended up in the hospital with all these weird things because I hadn't grown up right.

KM: You had all these injuries.

SF: Yes. But that's a pretty oblique connection between sound and picture. When I was doing it, I thought people are going to be just completely lost during this. But I decided to go with it anyway. That's the kind of thing you do. You have to play around and hope that people figure something out.

KM: Your recent video, *Seeing Red* (2005) is quite funny. But it's also about anger and explicit, personal material. Your approach here, using humor and the color red, is quite different than in *Sink or Swim*. Can you comment please?

SF: I think part of the difference between *Sink or Swim* and *Seeing Red* is that fifteen years had passed. Thankfully, as you get older (if you do the work), things get a little clearer, a little better. Although in *Seeing Red,* I do complain about doing the same things, being stuck with the same reflexes—but I must say, on a lesser level. I'm not still railing about my father! I'm so glad that I'm no longer subject to those rages, that sort of irrational violence. That's part of why *Seeing Red* has a note of humor in it, because even though I'm still stuck in certain ways, I now can laugh about it some of the time. And I can see that that's how we are as humans. We just are always somehow stuck.

Otherwise, I attribute the main difference to the fact that, the year before, I had begun to work in video, which is cheaper and easier to shoot than film. I started *Seeing Red* because my partner said that I seemed to be suffering from something. When she said that, I simply walked into my studio, set up the camera and started talking to it about how I was feeling at that moment. This was something I would never have done in film.

After that first shoot, I didn't have a plan, but I set up a simple structure by deciding that I would shoot myself talking whenever I had something I wanted to say, and I would go around collecting any image I could find with red in it. At some point along the way I came up with the idea of using J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* as sound. I only shot for a short while, perhaps two months, and had very little footage to work with (maybe six tapes). Then I sat down and started to figure out how to put the piece together.

This was very unlike my working method in film, where I had written texts and devised elaborate plans for the editing structure in advance. In some sense, I needed that structure with film so I could afford to shoot what I needed, and also because editing in film is so much more difficult. Now, with video, I find myself accepting a looser approach in gathering material, but the editing is still a very long and rigorous process. Technically, it's easier to edit on the computer, but figuring out the rhythms and the narrative flow is still as hard as it is in film.

KM: We should explain what the expression, *seeing red,* means in English. Maybe there's an equivalent in Chinese—I don't know—but may I ask, what do <u>you</u> mean by *Seeing Red*? Where did the idea for this video come from?

SF: In English, when we say that someone is *seeing red,* we mean that they're very angry. However, red is also the color of passion (in the good sense, not just anger) and I wanted to refer to that feeling as well.

All my titles play with some known expression or adage or part of a song. I try to escape that, but every time that I struggle with the title for a new piece, I find myself falling back on that pattern. So in this case, I decided that *Seeing Red* worked well because of the three part association: 1) seeing red as a reference to anger; 2) seeing the color red and asking the viewer to think about what we mean when we refer to a color, and how we tend to think of it as a simple, single thing when in fact it's a complex thing with many variations or shades; and 3) seeing the world passionately.

KM: The images themselves are pleasurable and funny—you've collected the results of "seeing red" everywhere you look. Can you talk about the camera work in relation to pleasure?

SF: I'm not sure how to answer that question. I don't think there was more (or less) pleasure in shooting material for this piece than in any other piece I've done. It was fun to ride around on my bike looking for red things. And it was interesting to experience how we don't see things until we're looking for them and then, once we're looking for them, that seems to be *all* we see. This was similar to my experience shooting the station wagons for *Rules of the Road*; it wasn't until I started shooting that I realized how many there were.

In general, for me, shooting is a fantastic experience, probably because I'm not usually confined by the demands of narrative, dialogue, actors, etc. When I've shot scripted scenes (like for *Damned If You Don't)*, I enjoyed the challenge, but I do prefer to be out and free and using the camera to respond to something unpredictable.

I also have a very intense relationship to the (imaginary) viewer when I shoot. This is hard to describe, but as I'm framing and moving the camera, I have a silent dialogue with a viewer—it's like I'm thinking how the shot will translate, or read, when someone watches it. Or maybe I can say that by imagining someone watching it, I understand what I want the image to convey, so that leads me in the way I shoot it.

KM: How about the Bach music on the soundtrack? In this context, it seems rather funny. Are the *Goldberg Variations* just a touch obsessive, or is neurosis "well tempered" when it is turned into art?

SF: I don't know much about Bach, but I do know that Gould, the pianist, was famously obsessive and I think one can hear it in the precision of this recording. I had loved it for years so I thought it was the obvious one to use, but then thought I should listen to at least

five other performances and see whether there was one that would work better. It was striking how different they were, and how fast his performance was compared to the others.

But I don't think writing (or recording, or using) a variation is obsessive. Structure is a foundation of any work of art, and doing what seems to be an exercise in writing numerous versions of a basic structure is not only a great way to learn what works and what doesn't, but it can often yield a valuable work in itself, not just something that comes across as an exercise. The *Goldberg Variations* are a prime example of that—there's so much musical pleasure in listening to them.

But, having said that, I agree that using them as I do (in the context of a film in which I worry over many things) inevitably leads to a feeling that the music expresses a kind of neurotic, obsessive mood that compliments what I'm saying on camera. Perhaps that isn't fair to Bach and Gould, but perhaps they would also be amused by it.

Actually, in *Seeing Red*, the idea of variations is really important. You have the idea of artistic variations, embodied by the *Goldberg Variations,* which presents a musical theme and then reworks it in complex and playful ways; and you have the theme of a person talking on camera with variations occurring in clothing, space, and what's being said; and then you have this color, *red*, and many, many objects somehow using this color. But then you also have the underlying idea of life itself being a very variable and varied thing. So maybe the film is simply asking us to contemplate the fact that life is unpredictable and full of variation. Almost any real life situation can play out in so many ways, either in your imagination or when it actually happens. *Seeing Red* is like the shorter version of that.

KM: Can you talk about the scene at the end? You have on all these clothes, and you take them off, layer by layer. Was that taking away some of the possibilities?

SF: It's kind of going in two directions at the same time, because I'm taking the clothes off but I'm piling up the sound. The sound mix is sampling from the different parts of the spoken segments, and adding more and more layers. But then, at the very end, the one phrase that emerges is, "And part of the problem…part of what is so fucked up is that I feel like most of life is about performing for people!"

So it gets denser and denser, and then this one line comes out. Meanwhile, I've got on all the red clothes that I wore in the film and in the end I'm in nothing but my bra. So it's not exactly two opposite trajectories but it comes close to that. I just thought, okay, well, I was wearing all this stuff, so let me just take it all off; and I said a lot but the core of what I said was that we're always performing.

As for my remark about performing: I was surprised when I recorded the scene where I was pacing around saying, "Be a good teacher, be a good girlfriend, be a good this, be a good that." I was a little bit scandalized afterwards because I thought, of all the things that I say in the film, and maybe of all the things I've said in everything I've done—and

I've never said this before—but of all the things I've said in all my films, that was the most damning and revealing. And embarrassing! It made me worried, because one shouldn't feel that one is always performing. One should feel that there are places in life where one can be true to oneself.

What was scary was that I looked at that footage and thought, can this be true? Is it true that even with my partner of 25 years, I am somehow fundamentally performing, I'm never just pure "Su" (whatever or whoever that is)? It's easy for me to accept and admit that I'm performing when I'm teaching or when I'm at a film festival showing my work… but at home or with friends? I found that shocking!

KM: When that happens, do you know you're onto something?

SF: In the moment of shooting, I don't know… but later, yes! When I saw that, I thought, "I've probably been thinking this and feeling this for years." I'd probably been saying it to myself for years but had never expressed it as simply as I did at that moment, and that shocked me. So I definitely had to keep that in, even though it might be tempting to hide it!

KM: So then, that moment of revealing, baring your chest at the end?

SF: That was nothing compared to that!

KM: What's the relationship of rage and humor—rage and making art? That's a big one, but can you muse a bit?

SF: In the one film workshop I took (my only training in film was those three nights at the Millennium), which was taught by David Lee, he made us write a list of the ten things that were most important to us. The last item on my list was "fear." I was surprised by, and interested in, the fact that I'd put that on the list. I later found that to be a most useful and necessary realization, and I think a lot of my work stems from doing that list. In other words, a lot of my work has been an effort to speak about my fears. But in conjunction, a lot of it has been about articulating my anger at certain things, so I would say that fear and anger usually live together, and they can be a great spur to making art. Moreover, talking openly about one's fears and anger can be a way to rid oneself of those feelings.

I also have a partner who not only has a brilliant sense of humor but who is also much more of a stoic than I am. She believes that one can often make a point better through humor than through anger, and she has often encouraged and shown me how to foreground the humor rather than the anger, fear or pain. I am very grateful for that. The nicest thing about using humor in film is that, if you're successful, you can actually know what the audience is experiencing. Hearing the audience laugh during a screening is a very pleasurable thing.