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Labour-Intensive Filmmaking: An Interview with Su Friedrich

Sibley Labandeira

Abstract: *In this interview, filmmaker Su Friedrich comments on a wide variety of projects, as well as her labour-intensive work process, the crucial role of feedback from friends and fellow filmmakers, and the importance of being specific. She also describes her experience researching unusual archives, her views on the current media landscape, and the satisfaction of creating Edited By, a website dedicated to honouring the many women who revolutionised film editing, playing a key role in cinema history that has yet to be fully recognised.*

Su Friedrich (b. 1954 New Haven, Connecticut) is one of the most innovative and original filmmakers of the last forty years, and one of the hardest to classify. Her work, which includes over twenty films and videos, exists in a liminal space between documentary, experimental, and queer cinema, taking from all arenas but conforming to none. Throughout her career, which spans over four decades, she has worked with different formats, from silent 16mm film in beautiful black and white to crisp digital video, as well as a plethora of topics. Her films usually start with something personal, but their scope goes beyond the merely autobiographical, offering keen insight into larger social and cultural structures. While each of her films is unique, her mastery of language—verbal and visual—and her relentless curiosity for the world around her are a constant in her body of work. She has the rare ability to make films that are simultaneously subjective and analytical, gentle and sardonic, never shying away from difficult subject matter.

This interview took place in Madrid on 16 March 2024, on the occasion of the retrospective *Su Friedrich. Lazos que unen* [Su Friedrich: The Ties that Bind] held at Cineteca-Madrid, organised in collaboration with Punto de Vista (the International Documentary Film Festival of Navarra), Filmoteca de Catalunya, Filmoteca de Galicia and IVAC-La Filmoteca de Valencia.

LABANDEIRA: One of the things I really admire about your work is that each film seems like its own world, and I have read that you work on one project at a time. Is it still the case? Why do you choose to work like this?

FRIEDRICH: I don't think my brain can handle doing more than one thing at a time except that, just in this most recent time, it took six years to make *Today* (2023) and, right around the time I started doing it, I started putting together a book about a five month trip I made alone when I was twenty-one through many countries in North and West Africa, which I've constructed from my travel journals and the black & white photographs I took. So, over the last six years, I was sometimes working on the film, then I was sometimes working on the book, and then I was also working on the women editors website, and also on the William Greaves website. Plus, I was teaching.

I think, in this case, it kind of made sense because I really didn't know what the film was going to be. I was collecting a lot of material and wondering why I was doing what I was doing. And I wouldn't say I got lost, but maybe I reached a point where I didn't know how to go forward exactly and then I would turn to the book, I would work on that for a while, then I would teach, then I would go back again. But I hope I wouldn't do that again, because to me it really makes sense just to be focused on one thing.

LABANDEIRA: Is that how you usually start working, gathering material first and then deciding where it takes you?

FRIEDRICH: Well, it's hard to say because I've made so many films. I think a lot of times there was a very clear initial idea, you know, like it's going to be about my mother during the war, it's going to be about my father and my relationship with him, it's going to be about my medical problems, it's going to be about what's happening in Williamsburg. That's the point of it, but then how to collect all the material and say all that I want to say is just a very long process. I usually start by shooting the obvious things, writing the obvious things, and then it just develops over time into what it ends up being.

LABANDEIRA: I guess that's why each one of your films is a world of their own, because you let them kind of appear to you.

FRIEDRICH: Kind of, yeah. Actually, one that I really didn't know what I was doing was *Seeing Red* (2005). In that case, I just started it in a very frustrated moment. I was working on this film about coffee (*From the Ground Up*, 2008) and, now that I think about it, I did in this case work on two things at once, because I was working on the film about coffee and I was getting really annoyed with it, and Cathy (Nan Quinlan) said "Why are you doing this? You seem so bored". I got really mad at her and I went in my room, and I started talking to the camera, but I didn't think "I'm going to go make *Seeing Red*". I just said what I thought and then, probably a week or two later, I thought I'd say some more, but that wasn't at all such a clear thing as "It's about my father", "It's about my mother" or "It's about gentrification". So then, I did finish the coffee film; I didn't want to just abandon it, I had put a lot of work into it already, but I wasn't very happy with it, whereas I really liked *Seeing Red*.

LABANDEIRA: Even though your films are very different, there are still some elements that make them unmistakably Su Friedrich films. What would you say are important things for you to have in every film?

FRIEDRICH: I don't know. I don't really think that way. I know what kinds of things I like to work with. I like to work with language in various ways, I obviously like to work with music, and then I like to have text that's interesting. It's not like my film *has to* have such and such, it just has to end up making sense and being interesting for somebody to watch.

LABANDEIRA: I think what I meant was if you saw something common to all your films. Maybe language is a key element, because you combine different languages in your films, it's never just about visual language or just about the narrative. In fact, it seems like meaning comes out of all the layers of those different languages. Nothing is quite explicit, but it's making sense in a very beautiful way in the addition of every language you are using.

FRIEDRICH: I'm very happy to hear that because I think you can't just say things so directly, you know. You can hint at something, or you can kind of foreshadow something by an image

or a comment and then later the viewer might think “Oh, right! That’s why that’s there!” And, actually, somebody recently—this is so odd!—I can’t remember where it was, but they had seen *Sink or Swim* (1990) and they were talking about the use of the Schubert song, and I said it was the first time I used music, and we were talking about that in combination with the letter about the song that you see later in the film. And they said “I wonder what it would have been like if the song would have come afterwards, so that you read the letter and understand the meaning of the song”—because, of course, it is in German. I was like “That would have been a terrible decision!”

LABANDEIRA: It changes everything!

FRIEDRICH: It would change everything! It makes no sense. So, yes, when you put things together you think “Well, I’m not going to give away this thing right away”. You want to tantalise people, what’s that song about? Maybe get the feeling from the song but not the actual story of the song until later. There’s a lot of that kind of play going on in my films.

LABANDEIRA: One impression I get from watching your films is that everything is thoroughly thought through. They seem like very labour-intensive films.

FRIEDRICH: They are, they really are! I don’t think I’m bragging when I say that. They are really labour-intensive and because one of my guiding principles, my main guiding principle, is to get feedback from other people, particularly from my partner Cathy. She’s a painter, but she is very good with language and storytelling. And also other people, friends, filmmakers like Peggy Ahwesh...That’s partly why they’re so labour-intensive, because I do what I think is working, and then they come in and say “Well, it’s not really working yet”, and I have to figure out how to make it work. So, there is a lot of redoing.

LABANDEIRA: That must stretch out the process a lot, the fact that while you are working you are also asking for opinions.

FRIEDRICH: Yeah. I mean, I don’t think it’s ever happened that I’ve said “Oh, could you come over and look at my film? I think it’s done”, and whoever it is comes over and says “Well, it looks done to me!”. It always takes a bunch of people to say it’s not done yet. And then there is a moment when I think, “Well, it has to be done. I’ve run out of ideas, and they have nothing else to say”.

LABANDEIRA: It also sounds like it’s a very humbling process, opening yourself up to commentary with things that aren’t finished, it seems like it can be a very vulnerable moment.

FRIEDRICH: Totally! And I learned later in life that the person doing that, giving that feedback, is giving me a huge gift. In the early days I would just think “I need help! I need help! Come help me!”, and they would say something critical, or even question it, and I would get really upset. Then, more recently, I thought “My God! What about when I have to do that for somebody else?”. If a friend asks me to look at their work and I have problems with it, I can see how hard it is for me to say “Well, I think that part doesn’t really work” or “It’s too slow” because they’re going to be upset with me. I really appreciate when people do that for me; it takes a lot of courage.

LABANDEIRA: I imagine there has to be a lot of trust.

FRIEDRICH: Yeah.

LABANDEIRA: One thing that stood out from the book (*Su Friedrich Interviews* edited by Sonia Misra and Rox Samer) was the first piece, which consists of two letters, one written by you to Leslie Thornton and the other is her response to you. Now you have just mentioned Peggy Ahwesh, and in other instances in the book it seems that you are in contact with a lot of other filmmakers. Is there a sense of community or was there a sense of community at some point?

FRIEDRICH: Well, when I started working at the Millennium—I mean, I took this three-night workshop and that's how I learned how to make films—a lot of filmmakers were hanging around there and working there. So, way back, I'd say in the 1980s, I wouldn't say big groups of us would always get together socially, but we would always be at the screenings, so there was a lot of chatter. But then there were a few people like Peggy and Leslie, and Alan Berliner a little later, who I talked with fairly often. At this point, I don't know, things have changed so much because everybody is streaming, and everybody is online and on their phones. And when I teach, particularly if I have students who are serious about wanting to go to New York or LA or something to be filmmakers when they graduate, I say "Find some people and get in a room with them. Do not just send your work out in an email to somebody because they might never watch it, or they might just write back a quick email about it being cool or interesting". I think you really need that direct relationship with people in the real world. And we did have that for a very long time. I feel really lucky that I started making films then and not now.

LABANDEIRA: Also, social media makes things very different. Your work usually starts from something very personal and your films, at least to an extent, are autobiographical. But now we are living in a time where social media has a lot of people posting personal and autobiographical content, maybe it's not even autobiographical because sometimes it seems that they are portraying themselves as an image. Does this affect the work that you want to do now, this social media environment?

FRIEDRICH: I think it mostly makes me feel like why bother to make films anymore.

LABANDEIRA: Really?

FRIEDRICH: Because there is so much media out there. But the problem is using the term media to refer to everything from some really inane TikTok—and there are good things on TikTok—to a Bresson film. It's all media but, wow, what a difference! So, there are times that I think that everyone is so over-saturated with images that why would anybody watch anything by me when they can watch seven billion other things. But then I think there is a difference between something that is carefully crafted over time and something that's thrown together in a day. But it is really strange now.

LABANDEIRA: I would say that films like yours are more important than ever because of that huge difference between something that is thought through critically, analysed rigorously, and put together very carefully and artistically vs. a lot of content that people kind of just spit out there without much contemplation.

FRIEDRICH: I think there is also an interesting thing now with money, because you also have things like Netflix funding, with them putting a ton of money into things that are made, which often seem to be mostly concerned with the production value. They're really not very good but

they look really good. And so, there's a lot of expectation now for things that are "independent" to have that kind of gloss, and I think that is a killer. It's really, really bad.

LABANDEIRA: It's true that there seems to be an obsession with gloss and perfectly polished images, and so many things can get lost if that is your main focus.

FRIEDRICH: They also have these tremendous deadlines. There's a really great piece in *New York Magazine* ("Reality Check" by Reeves Wiedman), and somebody I teach with was one of the secret sources of information for it. And it was so damning because it was about documentary filmmakers that had been toiling for years in the trenches and, suddenly, they get two million from Netflix, or however much they get, and then they are given this production schedule that's completely idiotic. Like you are a documentary maker, you're trying to document something that happens over time, like the growing and harvesting of something, or a strike that goes on for six months, or whatever it is, and suddenly the situation is you have three weeks to shoot and ten weeks to edit, period. And they sort of sign on the dotted line without realising that they are going to be under those constraints, and it just blows my mind.

LABANDEIRA: Seems like an impossible task, and an undesirable task.

FRIEDRICH: Yes, definitely.

LABANDEIRA: Another thing that I really admire about your films is that you bring together things that would seem opposite or unmatchable. Sometimes it happens on the formal level, sometimes it's with the content, and sometimes it's both form and content. Is that something you look for, to incorporate contradiction?

FRIEDRICH: Could you give me an example?

LABANDEIRA: For example, on the level of content, in *Sink or Swim* you deal with your relationship with your father, and it seems like a very troubled relationship and there is trauma, but there is also a lot of love. We see people who are not perfect, but who cannot be reduced to being a villain either. In your films relationships are very complex, and I don't see that complexity portrayed that often.

FRIEDRICH: Thank you. Feature films have to have a happy ending and there are so many constraints. In traditional documentaries people usually set out to show who is the good guy and, in my case, I get to say whatever I want. And, actually, it's interesting in relation to *Sink or Swim* because when I was working on the text, I hadn't quite finalised what all the stories would be, and I showed it to my sister and my brother to say "Does this ring a bell? Does this ring true?". And it was my sister who said "You know, Dad was so profoundly affected when his sister drowned and it's weird that you don't have that story in there", and I thought "Aha." I didn't consciously think of it and decide not to include it, I kind of just skipped over that. Maybe, in a way, because it wasn't so directly about my relationship with him. But when she said it, I thought "I have to have it in". But I struggled with it a little bit because I thought "Damn it! It's going to make people sympathetic to him, it's going to sort of explain his bad behaviour and I don't want it to be excused". And I think it does give some feeling that here is a person who was so traumatised and who is just—as we know about abusers—turning around and doing it to the next person. There are other cases when things like that have happened, where I've been walking a kind of narrow road, and somebody has said "I think you've left this

out”. Again, because other people can see where I might be shying away from something that would be complicated to deal with.

LABANDEIRA: Well, it does make things more complex. In any case, it seems that you rarely shy away from things that might be difficult.

FRIEDRICH: Once somebody points out something like that, I’m interested. I mean I grapple with it, but I’m interested. I think “I can’t not do this” and “What is the effect going to be?” So, I want to make things that are more complex, as you say, and that make people think, maybe see both sides. I think I didn’t do that enough in *Rules of the Road* (1993); although, when people saw it, they said it was such a love letter to Cathy. But I felt like I could have put in a little bit more about the good stuff, but I was really out for blood.

LABANDEIRA: Another film that I find interesting in its contrasts is *Hide and Seek*, the combination of the fictional story of Lou, the interviews with real women, plus this other level with all those educational movies that are telling children how they are supposed to behave. It’s fascinating how all those visual and aural levels work together. I think it’s really hard to make such disparate things work together so beautifully as you do.

FRIEDRICH: Thank you. That was a hell of a thing to do! Because I did the interviews first, and there was great stuff in the interviews, and then it was only because I got the money from public television that I was able to film the fiction part. So, when Cathy and I were writing the script, the fictional part, I knew all the interview material. So, there were ways that I was thinking we have a scene that would connect to that, but for the most part we sort of set up all these scenes that would show various experiences, or various thoughts, or whatever; and then, when I was editing, I had to make parts of the interviews weave in with one scene or another. One thing that helped was that Jim Denault, the DP, shot it in a way that visually it wouldn’t clash with the educational films. But, yes, it was very hard to make everything work.

LABANDEIRA: It is beautifully woven together. The archive material in the film is really striking, where is it from?

FRIEDRICH: It’s from crazy places. This is before the internet and there is a place in New York called Prelinger Archives, run by Rick Prelinger, and now he gave everything to archive.org and it’s online. But, back then, it was a huge loft space with thousands of films, and one of the women who was in the Lesbian Avengers—which was one of the inspirations for the film—worked there. When people would order a reel, she would have to make copies, so she was always watching things and she started making what she called the “dyke reel”. She’d see a clip from some random film and think “That looks like lesbian content to me” and she would put it on the reel. So, she gave me this “dyke reel” and, for example, when the girls are in the treehouse, and they lie down, and then you see two little girls in an orchard kissing and then it says “Eighteen years later” and they’re standing by the tree smelling the blossoms, that was from a film about scurvy and they were in a lemon orchard. It was about how sailors have to eat lemons so they don’t get scurvy, but what she noticed was the little kids kissing. And never in a million years would I have found that!

LABANDEIRA: How do you even know to search for that?

FRIEDRICH: You don’t! Exactly. And I got a bunch of other things from him. One of the other places was weird. It’s the Archives of the History of American Psychology, based in Akron,

Ohio. It's mainly a paper library but I called them up and they said "Yes, we also have some films". I flew in from New York and they took me to the basement, and there was literally a pile of 16mm films in cans just lying around on the floor, and a projector and they said "We don't know what we have". So, I projected them and then they let me take the films—the only prints that existed—back to New York, so I could copy them and then send them back. And that's where I got things like the story about pain, and also the chimpanzee, because it was from some psychiatrist who had brought a baby chimp to live with his young child and then filmed it.

And the other one that was interesting goes back to what I found at the Prelinger Archives. I made a point of interviewing some Black women for the film, and I also cast some Black girls in the fiction scenes. And one of the great bits of interview was with Edna, when she talks about sliding down the banister, and I realised I had all this archival footage of white girls, because that's all people had been doing, and I didn't want to intercut that with Edna's interview. But at the Prelinger Archives I found out about *Palmour Street*, which was a film that George Stoney—who taught at NYU for many years and was a really great documentary filmmaker—made with this other guy (Bill Clifford) about a Black community in Georgia. It had great footage of these Black girls out in the playground, so that was my one source for images of Black girls for that interview and a few other places in the film.

LABANDEIRA: It is a beautiful moment in the film.

FRIEDRICH: Yeah.

LABANDEIRA: Another beautiful moment in the film is the song.

FRIEDRICH: When they sing "Stop in the Name of Love"? Yeah.

LABANDEIRA: It's great because it stops you and it totally captivates you.

FRIEDRICH: It does kind of stop. I was watching it recently, I hadn't seen it in a long time, and they come running out of the school and I think "OK, here we go", and halfway through the song I thought "Aren't I going to get out of here? Oh, I played it all the way through. OK".

LABANDEIRA: I think it was a wonderful decision.

FRIEDRICH: It is fun.

LABANDEIRA: Another thing I want to know more about is your website *Edited By*. It's fantastic! It is fascinating how important women have been to film editing from the beginning of cinema, and not just in the US, if you dig in you find it happened in Russia, in France... But you have to dig in, it's not information that's just going to pop up.

FRIEDRICH: Yeah! I started doing it after I got a lot of names from a chapter about editing in a production handbook. They didn't mention the editors, so I looked them up, and there were a lot of women. Then I started looking online for information about them. And, OK, you look for Thelma Schoonmaker—Martin Scorsese's editor—and you get pages and pages of links, but then you search for Ulla Ryghe—who did eight films with Bergman—and there's nothing! There's like one line in some French film archive website, and that was usually the case with many of these women who had done such profound work. I should have known by now that

that would be the case, because women are so ignored, but it still horrified me. And now I'm so proud of the fact that if you type in Ulla Ryghe on Google, the link to *Edited By* is on the first page, and that's true for virtually everybody in my website: they show up on the first page on Google because finally there's some information about them. But it was strange how hard it was to get information about some of them who are incredibly important.

LABANDEIRA: I'm thinking of the film *Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), how everybody talks about how amazing the editing is and they go on and on about Dziga Vertov, but it was edited by Elizaveta Svilova.

FRIEDRICH: Yes! I have a quote from him on the website where he's being really ferocious in defending her to be recognised at the time—for all the good it did! Because people just talk about Vertov. It's unbelievable! And same thing with Godard, like "Oh, Godard! He invented everything that anybody has ever done ever since then about editing". No, it was actually three women (Cécile Decugis, Agnès Guillemot and Françoise Collin). I mean, he was more engaged with the editor than other directors, some directors would be like "Just show me it in a couple of weeks" kind of thing and women were making a lot of the major decisions. And I think with Godard, to be fair with him, he was more back-and-forth, but still those women were, you know...

LABANDEIRA: It is quite impressive that you have managed to make so many films with all the work you do besides movie making, like the website and teaching at Princeton.

FRIEDRICH: I've retired this past spring.

LABANDEIRA: Does that mean more movies?

FRIEDRICH: We'll see. It's just great to be retired, I have to say. I've been working like a dog.

LABANDEIRA: Is there any project in mind, even if it's still early stages?

FRIEDRICH: I submitted my manuscript to the publisher in January, but now I have to do some menial labour for it, which is getting the rights to something like a hundred and fifty images that aren't mine. And I just made an eight-minute-long film, *Jeruselema: From Austria to Zimbabwe*, sort of for the fun of it, which I just showed at Punto de Vista (International Documentary Film Festival of Navarra). Anyway, I'll have to see. It's always really hard to think of the next project, it really takes some time.

LABANDEIRA: Something that I always enjoy in your films is how you connect something that is very personal to social structures that are a lot larger and that impact a lot of people's lives. I think it also helps people identify in a very interesting way with your films. At least it happens to me, I might be seeing the film and identifying with something, not because it's my experience but because it goes back to a larger context that I also have to navigate in the best way I can. I think it is a very rare ability. Is it something that you consciously do, to have these larger social structures in mind?

FRIEDRICH: No. I think it's because one of my first experiences showing a film was when I made *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), which is my fourth film, a short film, it was a totally weird film. I mean, the aesthetic of it wasn't weird in the context where I showed it, because it was an experimental film, but the content was really weird. And after the first screening of it, a guy came over and said "Hi, I'm from Scotland, I'm straight, and I have the same dreams that were in this

film”. I walked away thinking, if that’s the case, then I probably shouldn’t worry anymore because either we all share so many experiences, or we can identify with the story or ideas because we can “translate” them to something in our own lives. To me it meant that I should be super specific about what I do and not try to generalise, not to think “This dream is really weird so I should rewrite it to be more accessible”, because then it becomes kind of neutered.

I have been following that principle all the time and it seems to have usually succeeded. Every time I finish a film and I’m going around showing it... Let’s say it’s about my father, people will come up to me afterwards with “Oh, my father this and my father that”. And then I make one about medical problems, people come and say “Oh, I had this problem, I had this surgery”. So, people are watching it and they are thinking about themselves, which is good. I don’t want them to think about me, I’ve already thought about me. So, if they are wrestling with whatever it is and it helps them wrestle, that’s sort of the point, and that does make it a bigger story, because that is something that a lot of us experience.

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