



Apologies (1983-90)

Fact and Fantasy: Artist's Self-Portraits

Films by Anne Robertson and Su Friedrich

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APOLOGIES (1983-90), by Anne Robertson, Super-8mm, color, sound, 17 minutes; *SINK OR SWIM* (1990), by Su Friedrich, 16mm, b&w, sound, 48 minutes.

What has been termed the “diary” film has long been the province of male filmmakers of the American avant-garde such as Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas, who with many others — and we can add here the heavily mythologized home-movie maker, whom it goes without saying was almost exclusively the father of the house — created heartfelt documents of the families, friends and events big and small that made up their lives.

By hiding behind a hand-held, handcrafted sensibility which privileged the humble aspirations of the amateur (both in name *and*



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style), these diarists were able to corner the market on both truth and subjectivity. Casualness signified not only that the subjects of these films (the families, friends, et al.) were complicit in their making, but that the man with the movie camera was implicated as well. But what these films, and those critics that triumphed their existence, seemed to ignore was the implicit dominance of the filmmaker over his subject matter. The subjectivity of the image-making was taken at face value as truth, rather than as the making of subjects constructed in his image. The personal was political without him ever knowing it.

Anne Robertson's *Apologies* and Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* are both self-portraits with links to the diaristic strain of American avant-garde filmmaking. Yet both films are also attempts to break away from the phallogentric grip of that tradition, to critique its assumptions about whose eye beholds truth and objectivity. While it is dangerous to generalize (and gender-ize) the differences between (as well as among) a past generation of filmmakers and those of today, it is not insignificant that these two films are made by women. Historically the mute object of male filmmakers' desires and not a speaking subject, women — along with other marginalized groups — have had the most to gain by blurring the distinctions between concepts such as documentary and fiction and by dislodging the master's voice.

Both of these films deal with subjects of extreme personal significance to each maker, but do so in ways which open out, allowing the viewer to enter into the experience. There is a vulnerability implied in the filmmaking which doesn't slip into solipsism nor simply become grist for the liberal quilt mill which will only consume it and then churn it out, to be forgotten.

On first glance, Robertson could be seen to fall in line with the Romanticism that informs many filmmakers of the past (and not a few today) with her grandiose claims for film as a life-saving force. Robertson: "Sometimes the act of taking a picture everyday has kept me sane. I believe in it. I have to take a picture every day." A manic-depressive, Robertson has obsessively recorded her life on film since the early 80s. (Her *Diary* is now over 40 hours long.) Filming when not under hospitalization or excess medication, her *Diary* is a catalogue of her everyday life, environment and obsessions. Eating disorders, suicidal impulses, guilt complexes,

the effects of various drugs — all are explored by Robertson openly in the *Diary*.

Apologies, which is both a separate film and part of the larger *Diary*, presents Robertson at several different points and moods within its 17 minutes. Consistent throughout the work, however, is a confrontational stance, manifested most explicitly in her direct address of the viewer by looking and talking into the camera. Within this strategy Robertson occupies several different positions or modes of address, ranging from a series of short scenes of Robertson against a green backdrop to more (seemingly) casual set-ups such as Robertson on her porch or driving a car.

For the most part, we hear Robertson in synchronous relationship to the image. Her voiceover maintains this level of directness even when Robertson is not speaking into the camera, as when she films herself against a mirror or sits in profile several feet away from the camera. Because her microphone also serves as the mechanism by which she turns the camera on and off, the usual distance between the act of recording and editing are collapsed, just as the film collapses the larger distinction between creator and subject.

Robertson's obsessive explorations of her self confront acceptable limits of self-revelation at the same time as they confront the viewer. Instead of remaining on the outside looking in, like a human at a zoo, the viewer is drawn into Robertson's life. One is made a part of the construction(s) Robertson is weaving. That Robertson's different set-ups are all staged and overdetermined is in part where their power ultimately resides — they are all fictions struggling to reconcile themselves into truth(s).

In contrast to Robertson's frontal, aggressive self-portrait, Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* is a measured, distant reflection of her relationship with her father. Though the stories on which the film is based are autobiographical, Friedrich chose to have them read in the third person by a 13-year old girl. She also organized the stories into a structure based on a backwards reading of the alphabet (Z-A).

Friedrich's use of a formal structuring element and third person narration affords her not only the distance needed to tackle the complexities to a diverse range of people who might otherwise feel unable to identify with Friedrich's personal experience.



Sink or Swim (1990)

In earlier works such as *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), *But No One* (1982) and especially *The Ties That Bind* (1984), a film about her mother, Friedrich used direct scratching of words onto the film surface to re-position her first-person voice. This aural to visual transliteration engendered a mode of reading on the part of the viewer which brought he/she in closer “sync” with Friedrich. This is especially true of the scratched-on questions to her mother in *The Ties That Bind*, where their childlike appearance and naive tone positioned Friedrich as the child wanting to know at the same time that it reinforced our identification with Friedrich/that child.

While Friedrich has abandoned the scratched-on text in *Sink or Swim*, her use of a young girl to narrate her stories functions on a similar level. It relocates the authoritarian, omniscient voice within someone usually denied any voice at all, let alone one that may know the score. Implicit in all this is a critique of the self-perpetuating way children are treated by society as unwitting innocents vulnerable to being molded by parents in their image. A poignant example of this within the film is the citing of a poem by Friedrich's father where he writes about his newborn child (Su Friedrich) and how her “quiet face” has replaced his sister who had drowned in their youth. Here memory inscribes itself into the present.

The stories that are read throughout the film are not simply reenacted in the accompanying imagery. Indeed, there is very little



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in the way of a one-to-one correlation between sound and image. Instead what one hears and sees often appears quite distinct from one another, related only by slim metaphorical associations or symbolic connections. Yet the ability of the images to inform the stories, to open up multiple channels of meaning (and truths, if you will) between the two, is where the strength of *Sink or Swim* lies. It is also here that Friedrich breaks down the traditional mode of documentary film practice whereby either sound or image toes the line of the other in the name of objectivity.

Just as Friedrich attempts to work with, around and against formal conventions, so too does *Sink or Swim* grapple with the larger, systemic and gendered questions that lead to/arise from such conventions. In trying to find some answers, Friedrich doesn't opt for a one-dimensional accusatory pointing of the finger, but rather for an open-ended airing out of the questions. Her home-movie is not an inventory list of her problems, an us versus them catalogue. It is an attempt to meet her father halfway, trying to balance her very personal and subjective feelings with some objective understanding.