tioning which is part of your creative process and has an open-ended quality to it, is not seen as questioning, but is seen as definition. I think that is a troublesome aspect of teaching for an artist. I suppose it’s a difficulty for a lot of artists who also teach. I don’t want to hear myself saying a lot of what I have to say in class, but that’s what I have to offer, these insights are part of what I have to say and what I trust. But to speak them makes a limitation of these very ideas and puts me on the side of authority. And I strive to stay so far from a position of identification of authority or legitimation in my work. So, it’s troublesome for me to figure out what happens when I teach.

B: In the process of teaching, the construction of authority has a lot to do with attitudes the students bring into the class. I found that my students always rejected my attempts to re-organize the construction of a hierarchical teacher-student relationship.

T: I really don’t think you can re-work it. So the trick in surviving would seem to be to find a job which can either be very neutral, in relation to one’s own film work, or that can feed it creatively. Teaching can feed your work sometimes, but it is never neutral. Maybe graphic arts would be neutral. And that’s a fine way to get by, sometimes I think I’d be happier doing that. Working in commercial film would be very much a drain for me.

Su Friedrich writes film criticism, teaches filmmaking workshops and was co-editor of the film/video issue of Heresies.

B: How did you get started making films?

FRIEDRICH: I don’t think I would be a filmmaker if it wasn’t for Millenium Film Workshop, because when I began making films in 1978, I was doing paste-up work to earn a living, but not earning very much. Since the Millenium fees were so low, I managed it so that I didn’t have to work at a job that much, but still get a lot done on my films. I was making short films, between 6 and 15 minutes long, I was working in black and white, and doing all the technical work myself. I would shoot and edit in Super 8mm and blow-up to 16mm the sections I wanted. That made it affordable. I was spending only a couple hundred dollars on each film. I spent over one thousand making Gently Down the Stream.

B: About grants? You recently received a DAAD to live in Germany.

F: I think psychologically, it’s not good to depend on grants. Because it’s important for me that if a grant does not come through then I can still work, otherwise it makes me feel desperate and helpless. Also, writing grant applications can be frustrating. I’ve written six this year, which is the most I’ve ever done. It just makes me feel really angry that I’m writing out these descriptions and trying to second guess what they might want to hear. And I can assume that one place is fairly open to experimental film or feminist film but another place is really conservative and so I have to tailor my description for them. And it gets me so confused because I end up not knowing what my film is about. But I can earn the money doing graphic arts work, and put it into filmmaking. My standard of living hasn’t changed in the last couple of years. I would like to receive grants to make films, however. I work hard enough, and most artists I know work hard enough that we deserve to get grants. Filmmaking is a tremendous amount of labor. I don’t know what it is about experimental filmmakers, that we are all willing to work so hard and assume that we shouldn’t get paid for the work—our work! And that was something I had encountered a lot in the feminist community. That we did an enormous amount of work for free, just for the cause. And I feel like I worked for free for years in feminist organizations. And I finally said I’m not doing this anymore, I have to have time to earn money to spend the remainder of my time being a filmmaker.

B: About exhibitions and tours? Do you depend on that for money?

F: I have been able to do so only this year. Before 1981, I had done a lot of work putting on group shows, because I wanted to show my films, but I also wanted to show other people’s films and to feel that I was working with other filmmakers in some way. And so I did a lot of shows around the city in churches, galleries, at the Women’s Center. I think that made me appreciate programmers and the trouble they go through. But it was a good experience because it gave me a feeling of independence from the Millenium and the Collective for Living Cinema. I felt that there were other places I could show and didn’t have to think of those as the only showcases for experimental film. But now today, if somebody asks me if I want to work with them organizing an event in a gallery, I get cold feet, because it’s too much work. I have too much work to do just to get my films distributed, you know how much work it can be. Anyway, Gently Down the Stream rented a lot, and then when I finished The Ties that Bind in 1984, I had a show at Millenium and then at the San Francisco Cinematheque. Then I went to Germany for six months, and I felt like I dropped off the face of the earth. The film was with the New York Filmmakers Cooperative by then, and Women Make Movies had decided to take it, but I wasn’t around to do any promotion for it, but I did have a lot of shows in Germany. I did nine shows in Germany and five in London. While in Europe, it seemed like suddenly it was possible to get more one-person shows, and also when I got back to the states, because I had this longer film. So I did a huge mailing when I got back, probably wrote to one hundred places, sending out reviews and personal letters, and I did arrange a few shows for the spring at a couple of universities. It seems like it’s taken people about six months for them to register that the film is available and that they can rent it. From March of 1985 until March of 1986 I probably earned about three thousand dollars, with shows where I might get paid between $200.00 to $500.00, less travel, and also from rentals. And this is more than I would have expected.

B: Travel expenses can take up a lot of the fees earned.

F: I really covered a lot of my travel, some places paid that in addition to the rental. But I know what you mean because Leslie Thornton and I did a joint tour in California in 1982, we showed at 5 places, and we each lost $700.00 in travel and expenses. Some places paid us $125.00 which we split between us. But it was a learning experience for both of us. It was fun, because each time we presented the films, we would order them differently. We saw our films in every possible context. But that particular tour was a financial disaster. After that thought, well, that’s what touring is all about. But now I
know it can actually be worthwhile, but it is really exhausting work.

B: You were in Germany in 1985?

F: Yes, 1984 to March 1985. And then I spent the fall of 1985 doing five shows outside of New York City. And the only other good money was getting The Ties that Bind shown on WNYC, for which I got $1,100. Then I was asked to be on Channel 13 (PBS) and found out that I couldn't because the broadcast premiere had already been on WNYC so it couldn't be on Channel 13, and I would have made 3 times as much money.

B: How do you feel about the avant-garde film in general? Some people think not many good films are being made today and this means that "the avant-garde is dead."

F: I think it's really funny for anyone to say that. I think a filmmaker who says that presumes that they've made a good film. I don't think it's ever been any different. I think that if it was 1973 or 1963, some filmmakers would feel that no good films are being made. My introduction to experimental filmmaking was reading Mekas' articles in the Voice, and feeling like there was no end to the excitement that had been generated during the 1960s.

B: Right - but let's talk about the last five years. What is the state of things today in 1986?

F: Yeah, but I think that's partly just the way things seem when you read about it in a book. Reading about a movement in a book makes it seem more cohesive and I think that if somebody in 1990 were to write a book about independent filmmaking in the 1980s it would be an exhilarating thing to read, because it would seem like there was so much going on. So sometimes, when I get the feeling "there's nothing going on." I think, well, it must be because I'm not editing right now, and so it seems like life isn't very interesting when I'm not editing. But I don't know, I think that video did make a difference. I just suspect that but it seems like it started happening in the early '80s when people were switching over to video. I'm still too new as a filmmaker to really know what effect that would have on the larger world of filmmaking. All I knew was that I just wasn't going to start making video.

B: And today, how do you feel about working in video?

F: I still don't want to work in video. I hate the light, I hate the way it looks. So, video has affected the avant-garde, and also the "New Narrative." I think there are a number of experimental filmmakers who decided to do something more narrative...I have no problems with somebody wanting to do a crossover film or to mix film styles...I mean I think that is what it's all about...But I think if you are going to be directing actors, you should know how to direct. I think most people who are experimental filmmakers who decided to do narrative can't direct, and they also don't find people who can act and that's really a problem because it just makes the film boring...and those films don't have to be boring...But I do think it's also giving "avant-garde" a bad name...Like there are a lot of people in the larger world who kept away from experimental film and have now become more interested in it because there is something more narrative about the films with actors or whatever. But I don't think that brought the audience any closer to real experimental films.