
New York after Rent part III

“Gentrification: it's like looking in a mirror and thinking it's a window.”
—Sarah Schulman

“Riding the subway, urbanity teaches us that others are different, and that knowledge is crucial for creating new ideas for the future.”
—Sarah Schulman

Introduction

1. There are several philosophical themes to draw out of this episode. First, there's a strong sense, held by Benjamin and his guests, that the *context* in which we find ourselves (our time in history, our neighbourhoods) really shape the kinds of erotic and artistic experiences that we are able to have. Second, there's a strong sense that art itself is directly related to sex, pleasure and other kinds of expressions. When art is threatened, in other words, our capacities for pleasure are also threatened. And third, there's an existential challenge, posted by Benjamin and his guests, to us as listeners: have we lost a sense of the real nature of art and critique? Do we mistake commercials for true conceptual work? Do we look in mirrors and, instead of confronting ourselves, presume that the entire world looks just like us?

Discussion questions

1. In her interview with Benjamin, why do you think Sarah Schulman is so convinced that the quality of art reflects the quality of love, desire, and pleasure going on in a particular neighbourhood? Do you agree that one's space (one's community, one's context and historical moment) shape one's capacities for desire? (It might be helpful to know that Schulman herself is a writer who has lived in NYC for a long time; she was active in AIDS activism in the 1980s and has written a book about gentrification called *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*).
2. Sarah Schulman dramatizes how she thinks someone who is participating in the gentrification of a neighbourhood seems to see the world itself: “it's like looking in a mirror and thinking it's a window.” What do you think she means by this? How does this way of looking (looking into a mirror but assuming it's a window) make a gentrified space feel so much safer to the newcomer—but so much more dangerous to those who are already there? Can you think of any examples in your own experiences of city life that would exemplify this “gentrified” perspective?
3. Why does Sarah Schulman seem to think that learning and knowledge are so much more likely to take place in an urban context? What's the threat that she is so

worried about, in terms of suburban kids moving to the city? It's interesting, I think, to listen to these reflections on New York City from your own context. Are there any connections that you might draw between Schulman's disgust at what's happening in NYC and what is happening in your own city?

4. Schulman makes a really strong assertion at the end of the episode when she contrasts the "true" creations of artists with the "fake" banality of corporate-sponsored art. If we understand this statement existentially, what do you think the "true" refers to here? And how does banality threaten this kind of truth? What do you think truth means here? Another way to put this is: why is it so dangerous when "true" art isn't being created?

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