

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

What's Happening to NYC?

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, January 31st, 2018

I have to admit, my perception of New York City is painted by what I learned in college poetry classes, and some of my favorite bands come from NYC. The Velvet Underground, Sonic Youth, Blonde Redhead, and Interpol all give me the sense that NYC is a place where great music thrives. The New York School poets, including Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, Amiri Baraka, Ted Berrigan, and Alice Notley give me the sense that NYC breeds accessible, experimental, and unique poetry. And Patti Smith, with her incredible memoir *Just Kids*, gives me a picture of a gritty, scrappy, and charming NYC where artists go to catch the spirit of their idols, where artists go to find each other.



Blonde Redhead/[Flickr](#)

But recently, I had the chance to talk to Alice Notley when she came to give a reading in my hometown. She's not in New York City anymore—she's in Paris. It's incredibly hard for artists to live in NYC now. This is important because plenty of America's great art, music and poetry has come from a city that used to hum with diversity, color, and grit. Is it drying up and succumbing to gentrification? Or is it undergoing a metamorphosis?

Look no further than the millennial experience for an answer. A city's young people are a sure sign of where a city is going with art. How many are moving there? What are their lifestyles like? What type of influence do they have?



Highline Park, Chelsea, NYC/[Flickr](#)

I was surprised to find the Manhattan borough is “[one of the best cities for young professionals](#).” Over three percent of newcomers are millennials, and 22.1 percent of the people are between 25 and 34. So what's life like for them?

Apparently [every millennial in New York can relate to](#):

- High prices for everything; it's important to “check Amazon before making a purchase”
- Again, high prices — a Metrocard costs \$120 a month, which is about half a week's paycheck
- The drinks are between \$6-10, so cash-strapped millennials take advantage of happy hour
- Waiting for “a day and a time when a museum is free”
- Only doing laundry once a month because there's no time or money to do more (I guess millennials in Manhattan smell like Manhattan)

- Having absolutely no time to party but doing it anyhow

The \$6-10 for a drink doesn't sound that abnormal and really, none of this sounds that out of whack when it comes to the general millennial experience. Prices in major cities are skyrocketing. Most young people need to have more than one job. In between work, partying, and Netflix, they somehow find time to do art.

New York is one of the best cities for young professionals, but is it one of the best for professional artists? Turns out gentrification in the city has a direct tie to artists.

“You have to be wealthier to live in places like New York these days, so artists in gentrifying cities create art that sells for more money, which creates an art market less concerned with the social value of art and more concerned with aesthetics that appeal to the wealthy, which feeds into an MFA system that creates more market-oriented artists, who then move to cities and produce aesthetically pleasing but conceptually vacuous art.”

Does that make sense? In an [Artsy article](#), Peter Moskowitz talks about how artists aren't responsible for gentrification, but they contribute to it. In the East Village during the 80s, for example, the government gave grants and tax breaks to artists who wanted to develop property and make it better. This drove the value of homes up. The rest of New York followed suit or was already in the process of gentrification. As a result, rent prices went up by 44 percent in 20 years.

Now, if millennials, artists, and millennial artists want to move to New York City, they have to be well off to begin with. Once they're there, they must cater their work to people who will buy it instead of indulging in obscurity or experimentation. If an older poet like Alice Notley, who was born in 1945, wants to remain in NYC, she has to live in a rent-controlled space or find a separate stream of income. Notley has always refrained from doing anything besides poetry — she's a professional poet in the true sense of the word. Since poetry books don't sell very well, it's tough for her to get by in the Big Apple.



World famous CBGB/[Flickr](#)

I have to confess my only experience with NYC came after I graduated from college in 2006. I went there to see the last show at the famous music venue CBGB. Patti Smith was the headlining act. I learned the venue was closing because, as you'd expect, the landlord wanted to raise the rent and the owner couldn't afford it. [CBGB transformed into a boutique](#) that sells shearling jackets for \$3,000.

Now there's a new venue in NYC called Elsewhere operating out of what used to be a furniture warehouse. The owners are show promoters who run the place out of the basement. They book underground bands and critical darlings. It's symbolic of the metamorphosis, the renewal that's possible when gentrification takes hold. No matter what money does to the artistic scenes in our cities, there will be people who manage to adapt.

Featured/Theater District, NYC/[Joe Yates on Unsplash](#)

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