

LESBIAN

ONE CATASTROPHE An interview with Sarah

Sarah Schulman writes novels about the Lower East Side and lesbian sub-culture in New York City. Like a good punk band (*Fugazi, the Mekons, Poison Girls*) every book she releases is quite different. How you think about her depends on which novel you just finished reading. Cities change and they don't change. There are always homeless people in her New York, contemporary political events such as American wars, low-paid women's jobs, and there's always sex. Over the last ten years she has written five novels, including *Girls, Visions and Things, People in Trouble*, and most recently, *Empathy*. In *After Delores*, the main character drops by CBGB's, a punk palace, and comments that the petrified hardcore kids need to get hip to something new. But then she still reads punk poet Patti Smith aloud to her friends.

If you want to talk to Sarah Schulman about New York and Toronto, and about her new non-fiction book on lesbian and gay life, you phone her New York number between eleven and noon. It's the only way she gets any writing done. On the telephone, she's friendly and practical. Sure, she'll do a taped interview. "Let's do it right now, you just keep firing questions at me." In the summer of 1993, Alan O'Connor asked the questions.

AO: *Is there any single theme in your book on lesbian and gay politics during the 1980s?*

SS: Well, it was just one catastrophe after another, wasn't it? I don't think anyone ever could have imagined what was coming next. So the book is an analysis of strategies and tactics we used in the 80s, and which ones worked and which ones didn't. And I think that it is pretty obvious that single-issue organizing does not work; that trying to use the language of the right wing, words like pro-family and things like that, does not work; and that trying to make changes behind the scenes, working inside political parties does not

work. The thing that has worked the best has been when we have been very authentic about who we are and as radical as we really are and used direct action. That seems to have been the most effective actually, when you analyse the period from 1981 to 1992, the Reagan-Bush years here in the United States.

AO: *What do you mean by single-issue politics?*

SS: In the early 80s in the United States there was a very strong anti-abortion movement. That was a very wide coalition of everything from the Catholic left to the completely insane religious right. And they united on one issue, which was to make abortion illegal. So we tried to build huge coalitions on single-issue politics. We spent the whole 80s imitating the tactics of the right. But that doesn't work if your vision is freedom. You can't make these tactical decisions to eliminate half of your worldview in hopes of having coalitions. So, for example, the women's movement tried to have a single issue campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment in which they excluded all mention of abortion rights and lesbian issues, and failed miserably because you end up not really standing for anything.

AO: *Can you point to a coalition that is an example of what we should be trying to do?*

SS: I think ACT UP is a very good example. It was always a coalition. It had and still has every kind of person. There's people who want revolution tomorrow and there's people who just want to work inside the Democratic Party. There's the whole spectrum. And yet, the way it has operated when it has been most successful, is that people are allowed to be where they are at. There is no forced consensus. So if you want to participate in a particular type of action you can, and if you oppose that action you don't have to be a part of it. But that doesn't mean that you have to leave the group. There is a certain ideological flexibility which allows a lot of very different people to work together.

AO: *How has the relationship between men and women worked in ACT UP and similar groups?*

AFTER ANOTHER Schulman in New York

SS: ACT UP has always been primarily men. Though I would have to say that of all the different AIDS organizations, whether it is issues of the pharmaceutical industry, the government, social services, or community-based groups, ACT UP is really one of the organizations that has been in the forefront of advocating for people who are not necessarily represented in the group, or who are represented in a minority way. We had prison projects, we had needle exchange, we had school condom distribution, we had an incredible amount of activism on behalf of women with AIDS, pediatrics, tax-reform, every issue of access has been addressed by ACT UP. So I feel that it has been a very good relationship. There was faction-fighting in ACT UP, as in any other organization, but I don't think it ever was around gender. Nor was it about positive or negative HIV status. It was always ideologically divided.

AO: *There is a new generation of activists who define themselves as queer rather than as lesbian or gay. Does this represent a shift in politics?*

SS: I don't want to be too simplistic but "queer" represents people who have been able to have a place both in the gay world and in the world of popular culture. Pre-liberation gay life took place underground. The more we have achieved, the more we are able to have a place in the world as well as within our world. That is what queer represents. It is happening and it is an inevitable change. It is not for everybody but that is an actual evolution of the movement.

All of these questions: are we queer, are we gay, do we need lesbian separatism, do we need gay and lesbian separatism, bisexual separatism, there is not one answer to this. The point is to create an environment where the largest number of people can participate in political rebellion. And that means providing the greatest range of options for people to participate. So if there are lesbians who want to be in lesbian-only organizations there is a need for them to be there. If there are lesbians and gay men who want to work together those organizations need to be there. And bisexuals, if they want their own organizations... What I'm saying is that we need to have the widest range possible. Not to have a closed, dogmatic definition of what it means to be politically active.

AO: *Can you say something about Lesbian Avengers? A new organization you're involved with...*

SS: Okay, I'm also still active with ACT UP, by the way. Lesbian Avengers was started a year ago by six women, lesbians, all of whom had a huge amount of political experience. At this point I think we have ten to fifteen chapters in the US and in Europe. The New York chapter has over two hundred people in it. And we just had our greatest moment. We organized the dyke march, the night before the march on Washington, in which 20,000 lesbians marched to the White House, and we believe this is the largest lesbian event in the history of the world. From six people to 20,000 in one year is pretty good. It is on a Queer Nation or ACT UP model, a lesbian direct-action movement. It is not separatism. It is a post ACT UP lesbian movement. Lots of people in the group are in other organizations, in mixed groups, in non-gay groups, whatever. There is not an ideology of separatism. But lesbians have been in the forefront of every movement for social change on the face of the earth but not as lesbians and not on our own behalf. And that is what this is about. So we only do direct action. It is not a theory group, it is not a therapy group. It is a direct action group and our actions have been very clearly focused on the right wing. We don't go after other movement groups or other liberal organizations. New York City's religious right has battled the multicultural curriculum in the high school system. And we have been involved in contesting their moves. We were very much involved with the Irish lesbian and gay organization when they took on the Catholic Church and tried to march in the St. Patrick's Day parade. We zapped the mayor of Denver after Colorado passed Proposition 2. And we were in Tampa Florida when a lesbian with AIDS had her trailer burned and the city of Tampa refused to classify it as a bias-crime. So 31 Lesbian Avengers from Atlanta, New Jersey and New York went to Tampa and did all these actions, had a motorcade and demonstrations and got the mayor to come out and speak on her behalf. So that's what we're doing. We're national and we're willing to go on location. It's really very exciting.

Sarah Schulman's book, My American History, will be published by Routledge in June 1994 for the 25th anniversary of Stonewall. This interview with Alan O'Connor was first broadcast on CKLN 88.1 FM.