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As told to Annie Bielski, 2404 words.

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# On putting thoughts into action

**Poet, publisher, and politician Rebecca Wolff on the complications of running a literary journal, standing up in your community, and how to actually get involved in politics.**

**You're a poet, a recently elected alderperson in Hudson, New York, and the creator, editor, and publisher of *Fence*. How do these roles shape each other?**

I was remembering when I first started thinking that I needed to eventually run for office. The idea emerged back around the same time that I started *Fence*, which was 1998. About a year after that, there was this attack on *Fence* that had to do with the publication's ideological stance, which is about publishing writing coming from lots of different perspectives and different ideological positions. That's what we've always been doing, and we had made a big stink about why we were doing that and what our goals and intentions were, but we were attacked by this Marxist literary critic for basically being a tool of neoliberalism, because what we were essentially doing was denaturing writing that had actual ideological positionality and we were packaging it, according to this critic, and basically making it palatable for consumption.

That was a pretty heavy critique. My response to it at the time was basically like, "Okay, I can see why what you're saying is a problem." Although, actually I'm not even sure I really said that—I probably was more like, "Fuck you." But what I eventually formulated as my response to that was, "I see what you're saying, however, unfortunately art doesn't really make enough difference in the world for you to critique my small non-profit literary journal whose intention is to basically publish in a democratic way. And if it did make a big difference in the world, then I would take your critique and I would change what I'm thinking and doing."

That was pretty much what I was thinking at the time. I was sort of like, if art had enough political efficacy, then I would think that what you're saying makes sense. Where I went from there was, "What does have enough political efficacy? What actually does really change things?" And then I was like, "Oh, it's people being involved with the government, essentially." I can be pretty literal, and I've been musing on this lately as I'm observing the trajectory of what's happened since that time and how art has kind of coagulated as this entirely separate world unto itself. I guess it created a goal somewhere in my mind that was like, at some point I will become *literally* involved in politics.

**There are politics in poetry, but is there any poetry in politics?**

If poetry is considered a way of understanding things that go beyond linearity and beyond a rationalist approach, or that appeal to parts of the mind that are more about intuitiveness, then yes. I mean, so much of this might not be what you mean by "politics," but so much of what I'm experiencing about politics is relational and has to do with being able to carry the weight of people's confusion and their hope for change. Not to get all heavy right away, but that's where we're at. Basically I think people are completely desperate—and maybe they always have been—but it seems like what being a politician really is about has to do with the ability to carry the difficulty of getting nothing done with the hope for getting something done at the same time, which is what poetry is supposed to be all about.

***Fence* has been in continuous publication since 1998. What are the most challenging and most joyful parts of running it?**

The challenges definitely have been around navigating the world of philanthropy and learning about the problems and dangers of art patronage and sustainability models in literary publishing, which is a time-

honored way that small publications have always sustained themselves, especially pre-internet with print. *Fence* has remained in print, which has been an ongoing choice that I make over and over.

Certainly when we were just starting out the question of how to raise the funds was more fun. At the time it was fun to have a party and charge money for beer and invite wonderful writers that we felt were really interesting as representatives of *Fence*. This was in the late 90s, early 2000s. We raised money just by having readings and parties and it seemed very innocent and fun. And then sometime in the mid to late 2000s it just started to become like a job, and then there were people who had the job title of "event planner" and you're like, "I don't want to do this anymore." It became about directly approaching donors and that whole mess.

The ongoing joy is always the chance to engage with some writing that I feel is really just relying on itself in a certain way, that knows how to be itself. It's a little bit of a solipistic, convoluted way of looking at things, but that sort of describes me. As an editor, I'm looking for a reading experience that feels like what I'm encountering is something that has, for whatever reasons, been able to just manifest itself in this kind of escapist way—especially now where writers are exposed to so many different models of how you can be and what's marketable. I almost don't even want to touch the whole concept of branding and such.

#### **From your standpoint—both as an artist and politician—what is community for?**

My experience living in Hudson has been the first time that I actually felt that I could understand what community means, not because I feel that I'm experiencing some kind of incredible warm bath of being held in community, but because I wanted to basically be able to lift up people who were *not* being served by the community. That's really what *Fence* is about, and that's kind of what I was trying to describe earlier. I'm always looking for writers and artists who are not plugged in and who are not enjoying the benefits of whatever—it's been so strange because that whole "whatever" has changed so much since I first started doing it—or has it? I mean, I guess that's the big question, has it really changed? The whole model of *Fence*, even in its editorial construction, is unusual—the editors of *Fence* don't even really know each other. We have all been working together for years, but we're all geographically really dispersed. Not because we all sort of met in one place and then dispersed, but because the intention was to keep it from having a kind of coterie/community basis. I always insist that we're not just publishing our friends. That was such a simple statement to make back in the day. And now it feels really different.

I do wonder about alienation because it's been widely publicized that, despite the connectivity we have online, everybody's feeling more and more alone. I'm no different. Part of being a writer is that feeling that one must explain what things feel like to oneself because there isn't a shared sense that we all are in this together and we know what it feels like. It's just a really basic instigator—the need to speak. We need to speak because we are trying to express something that is not already evident, which goes beyond questions about individual voice or even individual experience. It's more about impressions, or sharing impressions.

My impression of visual art culture, music, and maybe even literature is that there is more of a sense of a collective and there are literally collectives that are always forming. I'm aware of so much surging towards that model. We've exhausted the individual to some extent. I mean, politically we have. What happened in my generation is that people completely forgot that there was a need to act collectively, politically speaking. And everybody was like, "Yay me." I've read articles that make me cringe and laugh that describe the people that are all of my generation as just being essentially totally dispensable, because our experience was so laughably limited in terms of what we understood as the obligations of being a citizen or a responsible person.

I've witnessed this the whole time I've been doing *Fence*—there's a funny balance between the need to express individualness and the need to have something that's really related to the world that you're actually talking about. This is not a new issue, the individual in society, it's been going on forever. We're just experiencing this new desperation around it, I think. Because we all just keep finding ourselves, but now we're finding ourselves in the middle of this complete mess.

Back in the day when MFA culture was starting to steamroll and there were starting to be more and more MFA programs, I would always be invited to talk at panels about whether it was important to have an MFA as a writer. I was always like, "No, it's not important. You should go be a social worker." You could debate if it's a useful intervention at all, it's probably useful at a metaphorical level more than literally. Just think about who you are in the social world. For example, the social world of Hudson is that Hudson has a population of lower income people of color who are being forced out of their neighborhoods and their communities, which are longtime communities, because of the g-word and the rising real estate values of Hudson, which are, in part, rising because of the art scene. That's where I started to get so super concrete about these things. I'm just like, "Artists should not allow themselves to be tools in this."

If artists are really interested in community activism, or being a community member, then what that would really mean is doing whatever they have to do to *not* be used that way. As an artist and as a person who has dreamed of magic and exceptionalism my whole life, as I find myself going to more and more and more town meetings, I've experienced this sinking feeling of dread. Like, "Oh shit, what am I doing? What have I done to myself?" But then at the same time I've also experienced amazing things that I never could have dreamed of in terms of just learning more about the actual world.

#### **What is an accessible way for anyone to get involved in local government?**

I really think that everybody should just pencil it into their calendar and go to some meetings. That's the most basic and real way to do something that is also sustainable and ongoing. Those meetings don't ever stop happening. And there's always something happening at them that directly affects the lives of either you or your neighbors. Obviously this upcoming election season is going to be nuts and everyone who is alive and breathing should basically choose a candidate and support that candidate with their teeth and their nails. It's all about door knocking. That's really what it's about.

My job is to represent my constituency in those common council meetings. So part of what I'm going to be doing is proposing things that I feel are important, either specifically for the first ward, although my conviction is that Hudson is a small enough place that, what affects the first ward affects [other wards]. The first ward, for example, has the whole site of development around the waterfront. There's tons of money being poured into it, or that will be poured into developing it further. How can I say this in a non-contentious way? I mean, that's my real job as a politician—to learn how to say things in a way that doesn't immediately make anybody completely angry. But, there's a lot of development that could potentially happen. So I will be voting on some of those issues and can propose things. It's really fascinating, the list of different kinds of policy that could be proposed. It's really just a world that I actually never have imagined being part of—lawmaking. In fact, I have always tried to stay super far away from laws. As I think we all do, really. When I say "we" I mean typically people who make art. I mean, we're interested in the forms and how to work with them, and I guess that would be the comparable thing here. But personally as a writer, I had never actually explicitly investigated forms. I've always been totally free verse, basically.

As an artist and whatever else I am, I have always had kind of a burr under my saddle. One thing about being involved in politics, even at this very local level, is that you become aware of the incredibly low levels of participation in the political system from regular people, citizens, whatever—insanely low levels. The reason I'm like, "Hey everybody, go to a meeting," is because nobody goes to meetings—*nobody*. In Hudson there are like five citizens who regularly go to the meetings at which massive decisions are being made and the corollary to that is that if people *did* go, they actually would influence what those decisions are. Public opinion is persuasive.

This is my conspiracy theory in a nutshell. I believe that the whole arts professionalization thing that's happened, where artist types have been massaged into a state of total complacency with themselves, means that they can feel like what they did, some art project, is actually an intervention when it's just nothing.

#### **What do you feel hopeful about?**

I do not fail to choke up with tears of, I don't know, hope?—which is a weird configuration—when I am listening to Greta Thunberg and her ilk. If you look at history [before my generation], young people have always been doing incredible things. I just heard on the radio yesterday about Fred Hampton, a young Black man who was killed in Chicago in 1969 during the riots. He was a member of the Black Panthers, he was 21 years old, and he was out in public being a voice of resistance. It gives me hope listening to younger people who are really awake. I'm sorry, that's such a freaking social justice cliché, but it's just really true.

#### Rebecca Wolff Recommends:

"Happy Marina Abramovic Day Parade" by Rebecca Wolff

"So Long, Suckers" by Rebecca Wolff

What Is Democratic Socialism?

Hariissa (Tunisian Chili Paste) recipe

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Rebecca Wolff

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