

## Belladonna\* and Aesthetic Relevance in Poetic Community

Rachel Levitsky

Jane Sprague's Question:

“Communities tend to coalesce for a variety of reasons; how might we describe the communities that editors, publishers, distributors, poets and readers of independent presses are in the process of participating in &/or inventing?”

Rachel Levitsky's Answer<sup>1</sup>:

1. I am attached to Feminism's critical notion that the personal is political. Being an avant-gardist in poetry, I have the impulse to add that the personal, which is political, is aesthetic. And not just for poets—but for any who have a personal, which is political. But how does one exactly define a personality or a particular aesthetic tendency, which is bound to be idiosyncratic and impossible.

2. Walter Benjamin addresses this in “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Reproduced art is freed from its ritual beginnings. This doesn't simplify art; it complicates it; it makes its use variable or nil. Nil because its center, the 'aura' which is irreducible, is annihilated in the reproduction. So, I am thinking about complication, multiple usage, annihilation.

3. Speaking of annihilation, I write this sitting visiting my parents in a retirement community in the South Mojave desert—near Palm Springs. Repetitive houses sit along golf courses and every one, golfer or not, rides from home to recreation center in their golf cart. There are lots of rules and there is a gate. Things are designed so nothing will seem sudden, jolting, out of place. I find it hard here to find and hold a thought. Several have come and gone in the moments it has taken me to write this. If my thought has no marker, how do I trace it in order to organize it into distinct vision?

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<sup>1</sup> In the writing of this piece, I digressed from my intention to squarely answer Jane Sprague's question, though perhaps I do so tangentially, in that asserting aesthetic and political strokes is a force toward community formation.

4. In a piece I wrote for Fence Magazine in a 2003 early Iraq wartime forum<sup>2</sup>, I griped about the American resistance to Position or Stance, i.e. picking a side (not so much on issues on which we are polled to the heavens, but on political positioning—i.e. Communist)

5. But herein too lies the danger of false unification that such a stance might seem to provide. Like the spongy tangled water hyacinth in canals of Lagos, Nigeria which grow deadly in the toxic and untreated waste waters, and (not that) look so much like a unified surface that the children running from the January 28, 2002 incendiary fires (started when munitions explosions from a military base sent fireballs into nearby neighborhoods) jumped into the Oke Afe canal possibly believing the vines would hold them up (possibly being stampeded)—the thick growth there in the poisonous waters may have looked like a watery cushion of refuge.

6. Is it impolitic to use this image? It occurred to me; they occur to me again and again—these slimy watery traps that look like refuge from the heat of the menacing blaze. Not unlike a glib political platform, or religion.

7. It is tricky to compare a great human tragedy to a political stance. Presenting a blithe unity is not what we who make Belladonna\* (this group is mutable and/or smaller or larger depending on how it's defined—people dip in and out of involvement—there's a certain porosity in the relationship between organizers and audience) intend, though to those who react against our stance of feminist/experimental/hybrid, this may seem so.

Yet, it's impossible to separate an intention, or an ideal, from the action that fumbles forth. The fact that we are feminist is not separate from the fact that we aim to be non-competitive, and the fact that we aim to be non-competitive and avant-garde and bent on demographic parity, and interested in Immediacy, in fast and cheap and not so very institutionalized and hybrid and narrative and

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<sup>2</sup> Crumpacker, Caroline and Francis Richard, eds. "Oldthinkers unbelly feel Newspeak': Reclaiming Rhetoric and What Artists Can Do Now." Fence Magazine. 6.1. Spring/Summer 2003.

interrupted and kind and multi-lingual, these are all intertwined by the personal, political, aesthetic hyacinth we present. And though we love the internet, we have not mastered it, damned to still have a blog not a web-site because the people who love us and would do this for us are involved in a million other under-the-radar-of-capitalism cultural and political projects, and the fact is that we, like the DJ's who held onto vinyl for the rest of us, are attached to textual objects and imbue into them the possibility of that special combination of magic and traceability (if not 'aura' despite their being reproduced). There are no accidents, beyond the accidental, and good manners makes up for some of the gaps—low pay and limited venue slots. We try to restrict our gossip (in Hebrew called *L'Hashon Ha Rah* —“bad tongue”) to tabloid celebs and save our best for the poets.