

**May I say a few words?
A Curatorial Notebook
By Anthony Romero
For Vox Populi AUX Curatorial Fellowship January – March 2015**



1. *"There were very few women in those days who dared to "speak in meeting"; and the august teachers of the people were seemingly getting the better of us, while the boys in the galleries, and the sneers among the pews, were hugely enjoying the discomfiture as they supposed, of the "strong-minded." Some of the tender-skinned friends were on the point of losing dignity, and the atmosphere betokened a storm. When, slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had scarcely lifted her head. "Don't let her speak!" gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced, "Sojourner Truth," and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments.*

The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eyes piercing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows."

- as recalled by France Dana Gage in *History of Woman Suffrage*, 2nd ed. Vol.1. Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1889., edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWuPLxMBjM8>

2. [Siobahn Burke](#), in writing about the dance criticism of John Martin, notes that "Martin believed that the process of retrieving "meaning" from dance required two people, that is, two material bodies, each with a unique emotional past: the performer and the spectator. To interpret a choreographed work was not a process of mental, intellectual rigor but one of naturally-occurring kinetic transfer, the transmission of "movement sense" from body to body. As he wrote in *Introduction to the Dance*, "not only does the dancer employ movement to express his ideas, but, strange as it may seem, the spectator must also employ movement in order to respond to the dancer's intention and understand what [they] are trying to convey." Martin theorized that the viewer of dance engaged in an "inner mimicry" of the movement onstage, essentially internalizing the dance into [Their] own neuromuscular system. The initial act of perception took place through the external senses, a passive absorption of spectacle and sound through the eyes and ears; this evolved, however, into a feeling deep within the spectator's own body, through what Martin called the "sixth sense" of "muscular sympathy." and I would add that it evolves yet again into speech as the spectator attempts to recount the performance to their peers. This for me is the relationship between talking and dancing. It moves beyond Dunn's formal concerns. Why don't they speak in the ballet? Why can't a poem be a dance?, Hinging instead on the transition from the emotional to the intellectual. It is through dancing that the unspeakable becomes spoken and vice versa - after all what are poems if not dances in reverse.

3. *May I say a few words?* takes its name from the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron Ohio where Sojourner Truth delivered the speech commonly referred to as "Ain't I a Woman". Truth's speech was never written down by Truth but instead lives on through the transcripts of white abolitionists and women's rights advocates who were at the conference. While Truth's voice and words remain her own at the moment of articulation, she does not dictate the terms of their circulation nor the subsequent images that are conjured of her from them. The potential of the voice to serve as an instrument of liberation, communication, performance, and the body, together with the many slippages that may occur when it is dislocated from the speaker, as in the case of Truth, is at the heart of this series of programs. *May I say a few words?* asks artists to consider these potentialities as they intersect with their own writing, moving, speaking, and performance practices. While the series for me is grounded in social and political histories of speaking, especially as they relate to excluded communities, not all of the artists involved are so explicitly political. The aim of this program is to express points of intersection through a diverse group of artists, backgrounds, and mediums.

4. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in, [*The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*](#), write, "When I think about the way we use the term 'study', I think we are committed to the idea that study is what we do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice...The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversibly intellectuality of these activities is already present. These activities aren't ennobled by the fact that we now say, "oh, if you did these things in a certain way, you could be said to have been studying." To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What's important is to recognize that that has been the case - because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought."

I kept returning to this passage while researching and coordinating this series of events at Vox for a number of reasons. The first is in describing intellectual activity as a social endeavor. That one is not an intellectual in a vacuum but rather that one is an intellectual through a mutual theorization across common lived experiences. Members of a band or co-workers in a factory, to use their examples, are intellectual in so far as they are theorizing about their experiences together. This discourages an academic view of intellectualism and allows for a more inclusive definition of what an intellectual can be - so that it may include domestic laborers, farmers, craftsman and so on and in doing so, as Moten and Harney acknowledge, we open ourselves up to an alternative history of thought that includes a broader social world than the arts or university alone. The second reason is the broadening of what Moten and Harney refer to as 'study' - what I will call 'a practice' in order to give both the act of studying and the subject under investigation a duration and discipline. Practice implies both (duration and discipline) as it is most often used to describe activities which are regularly attended to: playing music, meditating, medicine, spirituality, art-making, dancing or talking.

May I say a few words? is a way of making practices public. It is an invitation to artists and an interruption into their practice. It is, in other words, a form of study.

5: Imagine this: You are couched in the noisy black of the pre-show. Small tremors of anticipation spread across the crowded rows like ripples in a disturbed pond. You overhear your neighbor whisper something about the performance you are about to see and you remember something you heard about the relationship between performers and spectators. The hushed chatter quickly turns to silence on its own - the way some audiences do when they collectively agree upon the start of the show. The silence beckons your gaze as you watch the swinging curtain for signs of life.

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