



Mario Savio speaks  
to assembled  
students at the  
University of  
California, Berkeley,  
1964. Photo:  
AP Images/  
Robert W. Klein

# Up Front

## BODIES ON THE GEARS

*Tom Sellar*

Climbing atop a police car in Sproul Plaza at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964, the student activist Mario Savio eloquently pleaded with the protestors gathered around him to make a heightened commitment to opposing an unjust state. “There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part,” said Savio, his voice rising in pitch as defiance turned into history. “You can’t even passively take part! And you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop. And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it—that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!”

For Savio, a leader of the Free Speech Movement, the body was an actual instrument of political resistance—not merely a metaphor for the human in conflict with the military-industrial war machine. With enough bodies in enough vulnerable places, strategic disruptions could halt business as usual, stopping the mechanisms of a morally corrupt, even lethal enterprise from turning forward.

Savio’s words come to mind again and again in this troubled era as artists find themselves as critical agitators in the current movements for social, economic, and political justice—from Occupy to Tahrir Square, the Women’s March, Black Lives Matter, and beyond. Their creative interventions have shifted public perceptions of conflicts at pipelines, national borders, and more locally, at museums and cultural institutions.

The centerpiece of this issue of *Theater* consists of five original “lecture-performances” which we commissioned, presented, and now publish in partnership with the 2019 American Realness festival. We titled the series “Bodies on the Gears” in homage to Savio’s police car appeal, a milestone of the Free Speech Movement that has served as a foundation for so many subsequent social justice movements. Savio, like the brave artists and writers today who stand against nationalism, colonialism, racism, and economic exploitation, put his body on the line to make his speech. And the speech



Audience discussion at American Realness: Bodies on the Gears, Gibney Theater, New York, 2019. Photo: Ian Douglas

marked a pivot point in national consciousness, as surely as the work of artists today keeps alternative avenues of thought open.

For this series—originally offered as live presentations for New York audiences at American Realness in January 2019—we invited five writers and artists to reflect on relationships between creative practice and political agency, especially when it comes to live forms. Bodies are vulnerable subjects under siege today: Black and brown bodies. Women’s bodies. Queer bodies. Migratory and indigenous bodies. Disabled bodies. Muslim bodies. Bodies make movements when they form a protest; bodies also make movements in dance or theater or other stage forms. We asked them: Do these actions converge? Do they overlap?

How can choreographies, theater, and visual culture shape and carry—not just augment—ideas of protest? Can performance and other spaces for live encounters awaken and catalyze and renew—or are our institutions aesthetic tombs, permanently dead to the possibility? Could live arts hold special potential as public assemblies, as rigorously imagined convenings of micro-utopias? What can expressive projections of past and future contribute to the movements of the present? Fresh vocabularies, imagery, or other elements? What examples should we keep in mind?

These five live essays take strikingly different approaches to the protesting body—from memoir to liberatory dance gestures to symbolic pies thrown in the face of the powerful. Bodies might not even be human vessels, as indigenous authors remind us: the earth and the celestial realms beyond also act, also speak and cry out.

The issue opens with another solo turn of dizzying dimensions. Although not part of “Bodies on the Gears,” Australian performer Nicola Gunn defines the territory available to “the first-person artist” (as Daniel Sack puts it in his essay on her work). Gunn’s *In Spite of Myself* plays with our unstable understandings of where a creator’s identity and agency lies. The theater becomes a mirror, a heterotopia, a place where connections unravel and also where they form. Sack calls Gunn “a performance essayist” in the tradition of transitory thought arising from individual expression. It’s a category of performance that makes sense only through encounters with these creative texts, perhaps only completed in liveness. The power and versatility of these individual voices would have made Savio proud.