



MAKING INJUSTICES VISIBLE

THE ARTISTS' BLOC

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The Artists' Bloc

Organization

The Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) (Montreal)

January– December 2014

In 2014 the Artists' Bloc of the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) continued its arts activist community-based practice for a second year. In 2013 the group had self-identified as an autonomous collective within the IWC, and its actions sought to make visible the experiences of immigrant workers facing injustices such as the precarisation of employment, dangerous working conditions, and the lack of regulations for workers' rights and social benefits (see the ROUAGE publication: *Art communautaire militant – projets 2012-2013*, p. 60-79).

In this second year of the project, the Bloc continued its arts activist interventions while responding to multiple invitations from groups defending immigrants' rights. The Bloc continued to support IWC campaigns, of which there are many! Over the

course of 2014, the organisation chose to prioritise the initiatives of two associations it oversees: the Temporary Agency Workers Association (TAWA), created to confront the exploitation of workers placed in hotels, greenhouses, factories, distribution centres and the health sector; and the Temporary Foreign Workers Association (TFWA), dedicated to the defence of a very precarious agricultural work force (despite their contributions in taxes, these workers are excluded from numerous social programs and sent back to their countries if they are injured, or the enterprise no longer needs them). Many of these stories of injustices in the workplace and in the immigration system are detailed in the Migrant voices newspaper published by the IWC.

In 2014, certain members from the first year took on more responsibilities while others left the Bloc, often for personal reasons. Some new people joined the group. But the primary change to the project's organisation came from the departure of Mostafa Henaway, who had acted as co-coordinator on the project. An Artists' Bloc member, Noé Arteaga Santos, took on the role of liaison with the IWC, who no longer had any staff members involved in the project. Koby Rogers Hall, the affiliated artist with the project, continued alongside the collective.

A MULTI-FACETED STRUGGLE

Following a period of hiatus over the holidays, the first months served to mobilise the group and determine its direction. In order to take into account the availabilities of participants, who are workers as well as activists, parents, etc., the group elected to stick with meetings every two weeks. But as early as March 2014, the rhythm picked up, and the Artists' Bloc was making interventions almost every month.

Encuentro: an opportunity to enrich one's practices

In June the *Encuentro IX* festival and conference took place over one week in Montreal, presented by the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, a network of artists, activists and academics convening from across the Americas. Taking place every two years, each time in a new city, Encuentro gathered over 700 participants in Montreal, interested in the arts and activism across a program of conferences, public interventions, exchange, exhibitions and hands-on creation workshops. This was the first time that the event took place in a Canadian city and only the second time it took place in the Northern hemisphere.





Photo: Koby Rogers Hall

Inti Barrios Hernández represented the collective throughout discussions and workshops, offering her unique perspective as an immigrant, former temporary agency worker, and as a Mexican woman of Indigenous descent, a theatre artist and activist with the Artists' Bloc of the IWC. The *Encuentro* also allowed for the collective to meet with members of La Pocha Nostra, a transdisciplinary group who had inspired their work in the first year of the project. Originating in Mexico and in California, its members are dedicated to erasing the borders between arts and politics, artistic practice and theory, the artist and the public, seeking out collaborations across the borders of nations, race, gender and generations. This encounter took place thanks to an invitation to participate in *Zapatista Negra*, an installation on the artistic and political junctures between the respective struggles of the Zapatistas and the Black Panther Party, co-created by Emory Douglas, Eve Mia Rollow, Saul Kak and EDELO.

Following a series of creation workshops offered by La Pocha, members of the Artists' Bloc participated in a public intervention on the theme of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, in collaboration with women from the Idle No More indigenous resistance

movement: in drawing on the visual arts, installation, poetry and performance, thirty or so people created an anti-manifesto that began with a ritual round-dance and circle in Viger Square involving four women from North America and four from the South.

Beyond the sharing of artistic strategies, this encounter with La Pocha Nostra helped members of the Artists' Bloc to position their practice within the Pan-American tradition of political art, while enabling the transnational practice of La Pocha Nostra to connect with local struggles, notably that of immigrant workers. Members of the Bloc remain in communication with La Pocha Nostra, connecting them with migrant justice initiatives across the Americas, and in turn, find themselves participating in this Pan-American network of arts activists.

Artistic intervention at Saint Joseph's Oratory

In July, the next opportunity for a new intervention presented itself: the proposal of Bill 8 (a law modifying the Labour Code for certain salaried employees in agricultural production), which affected immigrant workers in particular. This proposed bill would allow this labour force its right of association, however withhold their right to strike, and in doing so, any means for applying pressure. As a former temporary agricultural worker fired by his employer for wanting to assist a sick colleague, Noé felt particularly called by this issue. He was also extremely aware of the limits to organising associations in the agricultural sector in Quebec (we can read his story in *Art communautaire militant – projets 2012-2013*, p. 76-77). Manuel Salamanca Cardona, another member of the Bloc selected as a spokesperson for this action, also denounced the fact that such an important bill, that risked enabling a form of indentured slavery, would be brought forward just before the holidays. Interviewed by *Le Devoir*, he affirmed “we must bring public and media attention to this law and to what is happening on farms” (Arnaud Stopa, “Des ouvriers agricoles pourfendent un projet de loi libéral”, July 21st 2014).

Each year, a service is offered to migrant agricultural workers at Saint Joseph's Oratory. For Noé, this provided a strategic opportunity for holding an outside press conference in order to denounce this anti-union law. Two years prior, during this service, to which the public was invited to share in their migration experiences, Noé had begun speaking of the exploitation he had experienced when he was abruptly interrupted by the organisers of the event, and detained by their private security services. “The Church authorities were trying to have me arrested for ‘disturbing the peace’, suggesting that I had spoken



Photo: Koby Rogers Hall



without permission and in a private space”, explained Noé in a press release with the IWC. “They also told me that they disapproved of the fact that I was ‘politicising’ their event.” He was then released without any charges brought against him, but considers it “frustrating and unacceptable that such an incident should happen during an event which is supposedly organised to support migrant workers. I believe this demonstrates well to what extent migrant workers are the targets for repression when they try to speak of the exploitation they experience in the context of their work.”

In July 2014 Noé asked for the Artists’ Bloc support in bringing visibility to the event. In one evening, five members of the Artists’ Bloc prepared an artistic intervention: participants held up a piece of paper on which was written (in French) “Quebec feeds off of our work” or “No somos esclavos” [We are not slaves]. Red adhesive tape with the writing “Bill 8” (in reference to the proposed bill) was taped across their mouths. One member of the Bloc spoke to passersby and distributed pamphlets with further information. This intervention disrupted the service and forced the Oratory to call the police, whose intervention proved discriminatory and targeted Noé. Their intervention can be viewed at: youtube.com/watch?v=Oplb-4oKcto.

With such little time and with few resources, the group considers they received a good amount of media coverage and that they attracted the attention of agricultural workers on-site to the proposed Bill 8 and the importance of public protest. Looking back, the collective acknowledges it would have been preferable for the handouts, written in French, to be trilingual (French, English and Spanish).

The group however also learned from this experience. They realised they had not taken the time to consider the risks of detention or deportation certain participants were incurring, nor did they think ahead to a police intervention. But this also confirmed for the Artists' Bloc the importance of public intervention in reaching those communities most affected by the issues that concerned them.

A first retreat

The Artists' Bloc then offered themselves in September a two-day retreat outside of Montreal. This time of rest allowed for the group to reaffirm its collective process and to envision next steps for the project. This collective reflection was interspersed with diverse workshops (movement, voice, media, group organisation, etc.).

Intervention at the Mexican Consulate

Each year on the 1st of November, the Mexican Consulate in Montreal organises a celebration for the Día de los Muertos [Day of the Dead], but from the Artists' Bloc viewpoint, in a very docile manner. For example, the life of the radical author Octavio Paz was to be celebrated without mentioning that he had denounced the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968; furthermore, there would be no mention of the Canadian policies of detention and deportation of Mexicans facing death threats in their country, given the violence confronted there daily.

The IWC Artists' Bloc decided to make this celebration a veritable tribute to the dead we would rather forget, in particular the 43 students from the state of Guerrero disappeared since September 2014 while they were preparing their own commemoration of the killings in Tlatelolco – their disappearances to this day remain unexplained! The Bloc's intervention took place concurrent with an international campaign denouncing violence and injustices in Mexico. It was also in support of the collective Mexicans United for Regularization (MUR), who fight for the right to remain in Canada without discrimination based on the country of origin or nationality, and for the regularization of all Mexican asylum seekers.





Photo: Émilie Noël

Reprising a performance style learnt with La Pocha Nostra, the Bloc presented a silent intervention. Their eyes circled in black makeup, collective members alongside additional participants mobilized for the occasion brandished signs with a photo of Octavio Paz and a reminder of his denunciation: “I cannot continue to serve a regime of assassins.” The group also attached images to a clothing line, among them portraits of the disappeared students, and carried a coffin covered in the banner “Justicia para los 43 estudiantes desaparecidos” [Justice for the 43 disappeared students] alongside numerous slogans. Others had planned a similar action of political critique elsewhere in Montreal that night; when they heard of the Bloc’s intervention, they arrived at the consulate with their creation in tow, inspired by the traditional miniature Mexican alcoves housing skeletons. The Bloc successfully disrupted activities planned for that evening. Furthermore, the police had been called to remove the group, but finally the consulate decided not to bring further attention to events.

This action in Montreal brought local preoccupations to the international campaign underway, drawing attention to Canada's complicity in situations of violence in Mexico: in fact, its mining interests are protected by armed interventions and its Temporary Foreign Workers program leads to the numerous detentions and deportations of Mexican citizens. In many cases, people are seeking asylum away from the violence and persecution that they face in Mexico, but Canadian policy, placing this country on a 'safe list', refuses to consider their applications.

The visibility of the IWC Artists' Bloc strategies made themselves known among communities of Mexican refugees and immigrant workers particularly in Montreal. These actions further solidified their partnership with MUR, an association with whom future collaborations are to be expected.

And diverse interventions

At the same time, the Artists' Bloc pursued other activities throughout the year. In March 2014, during a fundraising event for the IWC at the Sala Rossa, the Artists' Bloc performed its *Phantom agency* scene, originally staged the previous year for the *Mayworks Festival*, an annual event hosted by the organization (to read more *Art communautaire militant – projets 2012-2013*, p. 68). This was also the occasion to celebrate the birthday of Freda Guttman, an artist and human rights activist based in Montreal.



Photo: Thien V

« I am always happy to work with the Artists' Bloc because we reinforce our ties through trust and mutual support. I see that when we have an idea, all we have to do is share it and to find ways to make it happen. »

– Mireya Bayancela





Photo: Thien V

The Bloc continued to develop links with a broader activist network by participating, in April, in the *Art + Activism* festival organised by Howl!. This collective is part of a larger anticapitalist artistic movement and each of its events seeks to celebrate local tactics for resistance. The Bloc offered a theatrical performance and facilitated a round-table discussion on its arts activist practice.

In May, the group participated for a second time in the IWC's *Mayworks* event by presenting a short play on corruption in Mexico, a phenomenon linked to the displacement of peasants dispossessed of their lands. The group wished to draw parallels between the conditions of temporary agricultural workers in Quebec, who also experience inequality in their labour conditions, exploited by corporations as a discounted work force.

Also in May 2014, the Bloc shared its experiences during the ROUAGE training program. It collaborated on IWC campaigns throughout the year, notably in preparing a banner for the International Day for Decent Work taking place in October, where the Bloc presented a performance inviting the public to get involved.

« I am most satisfied that we are able to provide critical information on the effects of immigration policy in Canada. It is necessary to understand the gravity of this problematic and to demystify the idea of this country as a paradise for immigrants » – Manuel Salamanca Cardona

DIFFERENCES FOR THIS SECOND YEAR

During this second year, one could observe a greater level of involvement and of leadership from each group member regarding the overall direction of the project, proposals for actions and in taking on specific tasks. Over the course of the project, members gained the confidence to speak in public, supported by feelings of pride and of solidarity. One could see a greater consideration for the efficacy of chosen strategies, for specific actions as well as the collective management of conflicts. Within the group as much as outside of it, participants further affirmed the need for their arts activist practice.

As far as the receptivity of the IWC, who had expressed some reticence at the end of the first year, the Bloc was able to perceive a change. The organisation was more eager to collaborate, while respecting the autonomy and the Bloc's ways of working. Eric Shragge, a member of the IWC volunteer staff (where he is a co-founder and president of the Board), says that education is a priority for the Centre, which wishes to reach the larger public as well as immigrant workers. The fact that people transmit their own stories is, in his view, a good tool for raising awareness. The Bloc can support IWC campaigns, as it has tools, for example, to interact with people in the street. It was able to participate in many events while needing less preparation time than before. For Eric, this reflected the growing capacity of members to call upon competencies developed through the project. One of the most important long-term impacts of the project is the assertion of leadership by several Bloc members who play an active role in the campaigns and daily activities of the Centre.

«The personnel, the board, volunteers and members of the IWC have come to understand the important role that art plays in the campaigns that we organise. We now expect that each action organised by the Centre be accompanied by some kind of artistic participation.»

– Eric Schragge

During this second year, the Artists' Bloc was recognised as a radical activist collective creating artistic interventions primarily by and for immigrant workers. This recognition comes both from the campaigns to which it is associated as from the network of allies who call on it more and more for collaborations or consultation on ways for developing such a project. Bloc members shared a greater sense of trust, which is a precious thing, however also recognised that this cohesion made difficult the recruitment of new people. The collective knows that in order to continue, the project must develop beyond its closed circle.





Photos: Thien V

« Personally I have realized the wealth of learning, of having been a part of such a diverse group of artists and activists. Also, my perception of art has extended. The Artists' Bloc is a space where I feel free .» – Inti Barrios Hernández

As for Koby Rogers Hall, she received more support from the group as artistic facilitator for the project. She was able to improve her capacities to express when something does not go well – something she finds hard to do in many other work environments. When problems or conflicts arose or when a certain aspect of the organisation was problematic for her, the entire group shared the responsibility for resolving the situation.

The group also brought greater attention to the documentation of its work. As such, the intervention at the Mexican Consulate was the occasion for the first (and not the last) collaboration with videographer Patrick Landry, who documented the whole event, including preparations – video can be seen at: youtube.com/watch?v=lgjoHNkPHKE&feature=youtu.be. The Bloc also benefitted from the support of photographer Émilie Noël. One of the photographs from the action at the consulate was used in the global campaign denouncing the disappearance of Mexican students (animalpolitico.com/blogueros-la-maquina-de-hacer-pajaros/2014/11/03/ayotzinapa-el-mundo-esta-contigo/).

The experience of the IWC Artists' Bloc prompted ROUAGE to change one aspect of its program. In the perspective that projects become progressively independent, ROUAGE asked collectives seeking funding for a second year to obtain 25% of their funding from other sources. This created much stress for the Artists' Bloc, which functioned in 2014 without identifying this amount, funds it then was able to locate for 2015 – and not guaranteed of being able to repeat this! After observing the pressure that this financial need created for groups and community organisations already lacking resources, ROUAGE dropped this obligation. From this moment on, full financial support was offered to all groups who desired to continue their experiences.

CAN ONE MEASURE THE IMPACTS FROM ACTIONS TAKEN?

The Bloc resisted focusing on one single demand. The aims of actions taken over the course of this year were large in scope: dignity and justice for immigrant workers, the right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples in the Americas, denouncing the Quebec bill modifying the labour laws for certain workers in agricultural production, and the disappearance of 43 students in Mexico, alongside a critique of the immigration policies in Canada and the request for removal of Mexico from the Canadian list for countries considered to be “safe”!

These demands were legitimately related to members’ preoccupations, often urgently needed in their own situations, but what can one hope to achieve through one single action? As such, in evaluating their project, many members expressed their dissatisfaction and disappointment in observing that their actions did not bring about change. This is why ROUAGE encourages groups to keep hammering away at one single issue, even if choosing one demand requires setting aside other problems that are just as vital. In the case of the Bloc, it must be mentioned that no organizer from the IWC was involved in the process and that members held strong to their autonomy as distinct from ROUAGE.

It’s on a local level that their interventions had the most impact by offering a critical perspective on the realities for immigrants. For example, during the appearance of the Bloc at the festival organized by Howl!, which took place in a café in the Mile End mostly frequented by white people, members of the Bloc did not feel at ease – even the price of a coffee was exorbitant for some. During the discussions that followed the collective’s presentation, members of the public brought up the question of artistic professionalism. In response to this, members of the Bloc, primarily of Latin American origin, brought up the categorisation of their activist art practice (professional or not, community or not) by a middle class audience, primarily white, as inherent to a cultural colonial legacy. The dynamics were somewhat tense...

Even among ROUAGE’s network, the group observed in certain people their ignorance of the conditions of social exclusion created by immigration policies and lived by participants, as well as the unconscious bias of the expectation of cultural assimilation. This destabilising attitude confirmed for the Artists’ Bloc the importance of their project even within groups of artists and engaged communities. Furthermore, Koby noted that other artistic facilitators from projects supported by ROUAGE spoke of their participants as having no artistic practice before beginning their process – in one particular case, this was a white person speaking about racialised participants. These

« We began to speak more of the group’s autonomy in our activities and to take decisions collectively. This gives us confidence. We have also improved communication in the group. »

– Carmelo Monge Rosas

« I have acquired greater emotional maturity in my relationships with group members and equally with members in other collectives and organisations. »

– Noé Arteaga Santos

remarks stood out for her as denoting a vision that completely erased the richness already existing within communities. All this made evident the value of the Artists' Bloc approach, one that concentrates on the cultural practices and knowledge already existing within its group.

ON AESTHETICS AND THEIR EFFICACY

The question of aesthetic quality, which was unequal from one creation to the other in this project, is worth bringing up. Often, due to the urgency of an intervention (for example the one at Saint Joseph's Oratory), the short turn-around made so that the artistic qualities were lacking. For *Mayworks*, as Koby also took on a role in the production of the event, the group did not have enough rehearsal time, which could be felt in the quality of the theatre presentation. The action at the Mexican consulate had many elements to it and a profusion of words, which interfered with the clarity of the message. If ROUAGE insists on the aesthetic quality of arts activist community creations, it is in order to favour their efficacy in transmitting a message that can reach a larger audience and inspire their involvement.

As an artist, Koby places importance on relational aesthetics – dialogue as artform –, inspired by ideas in Grant Kester's book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. This approach considers artistic interventions to include those that transform participants' ways of being in relationship with one another.

But the artist recognises that the group often acted very quickly. Wanting to stand in solidarity with other collectives, the Bloc participated in events each month, but then had to question their own capacity to maintain this rhythm, due to the notable risk of exhaustion in its members. The time and resources invested in their numerous interventions were then not available for artistic training and the development of members' competencies.

Koby thinks that the social context is often be prioritised over the creative process, creativity often perceived of secondary importance in activist environments. In her view, the Artists' Bloc challenge is in continuing to push back this dominant organising culture and to make more space for creative training and skills development necessary to creating effective tactical works. During the retreat that took place in October 2014, the group concluded that planning for free time was an inherent factor to healthy group dynamics, and that the continual



Photos: Thien V

trainings played an important role in the creative process. For Koby, the strategy that had worked best was to systematically dedicate half of each two-hour meeting to group training.

Koby continues however to question her place as an artist in such a project. Always seeking to support equitable leadership amongst the group, she asks herself when is it necessary and welcome to offer trainings based in her skill sets and professional experiences. Collective members wish to share their own skill sets (in theatre, facilitation, directing, etc.) while also receiving diverse trainings in order to continue to develop. How can one make space for the interest and capacities of everyone? Koby hesitates to put her own artistic qualities forward and asks if it is due to her consciousness of the concentration of power that the status of artist can bring, as well as the privileges she benefits from as a white woman, worker and Canadian citizen who is not living the same realities as project members.

TO BE CONTINUED...

The Artists' Bloc will continue for a third year in 2015, motivated to pursue its consciousness raising work around immigrant workers' struggles. Much like in the end of the first year, the Artists' Bloc held a public meeting in December 2014 to both look back over its activities and to envision the way forward, also allowing new people to take an interest in the project.

Already for early 2015 they were looking forward to an artistic residency at Plaza Côtedes-Neiges, for which the Bloc had begun preparing themselves as early as October. Several other projects were planned for this third year: revisit the Montreal metro map from an immigrant perspective, continue to collaborate on the IWC's campaigns and to document the Artists' Bloc story, recruit new people interested in the Bloc's work and put in place an efficient system in order for people to reach them who share a similar commitment to migrant justice.

«I am convinced that our project is unique: decolonising artistic practices and notions of leadership among a diverse group of members from those communities most affected by the issues we address, defying hierarchies of power both in dominant artistic circles as well as dominant activist cultures.»

– Koby Rogers Hall