



FOR DECENT WORKING CONDITIONS

THE ARTISTS' BLOC

Adriana Pozos
Arianna Garcia-Fialdini
Carmelo Monge Rosas
Inti Naxhiellii Barrios Hernández
Koby Rogers Hall (artist and
co-coordinator)
Manuel Salamanca Cardona
(co-coordinator and link with the
organization)
Mireya Bayancela Ordonez
Mohamed Ali Ben Dellej
Mohamed Jridi
Noé Arteaga Santos
Patrick Landry

artistsbloc.ca
facebook.com/blocartistesCTI

The Artists' Bloc

Organization

The Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) (Montreal)

January– December 2015

In 2015, the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) continued its arts activist community project for a third year. For an analysis of its first two years, please see the texts “Reclaiming status and voice” in ROUAGE’s first book: *Art communautaire militant – projets 2012-2013*, p. 60-79, and “Making injustices visible” in the second book: *Art communautaire militant – projets 2013-2014*, p. 102-115.

Since its beginning this project is led by a collective that has self-identified as the Artists’ Bloc of the IWC. Comprised of workers of diverse origins who live different immigration realities as well as artists, activists and allies, this collective supports the organisation’s campaigns in addition to creating its own artistic interventions.



The IWC, which defends the rights of immigrant workers in their places of work, collaborates in organising a coalition against precarious labour that gathers both groups it has initiated as well as allied organisations. One of the groups overseen by the IWC is the Temporary Agency Workers Association (TAWA) with whom the Artists' Bloc once more collaborated with several times over the course of 2015. This association was created to fight the exploitation of temporary workers placed in hotels, greenhouses, and warehouses, distribution centres and in the health sector.

In Quebec, immigrants must confront several barriers to employment, such as the language, the lack of recognition of diploma equivalencies, the absence of a social network, discrimination, racism and persecution by the Canada Border Services Agency. Many turn then to temporary placement agencies in order to find work, oftentimes at minimum wage or even below minimum wage. Businesses seeking low-wage labour rely more and more on these agencies' services to fill their positions so that they may save money, avoid taking on the responsibilities related to permanent hires and in effect avoid labour regulations. As a matter of fact, these almost 1200 agencies (that in Quebec constitute a rapidly burgeoning industry, of an estimated value of one billion dollars) often operate without a licence or permit. Many immigrants working placements with these agencies unfortunately work in dire conditions. Beyond the fact that they are treated differently than other workers, immigrant workers do not always declare infractions of labour norms, given that sometimes they do not know their rights or they are worried about impacts on their immigration status.

The Artists' Bloc arts activist community project in 2015 pursued the same objectives as in past years: use art to make immigrant struggles visible, inform workers of their rights, support actions aimed at improving the conditions of people in precarious work situations and sensitise the population to these realities. These public interventions called upon physical theatre, performance and visual installations.

Koby Rogers Hall, the artist involved in this project since the beginning, continued to ensure its co-ordination with a member of the group. As in the transition from the first to the second year, the Bloc entrusted this role to a person who had not yet taken it on: Manuel Salamanca Cardona, who had coordinated certain projects in



2014 and expressed an interest in logistical support. Already very involved in the IWC, in particular with TAWA, he would be well placed to ensure a closer follow-up with the organisation. Furthermore, Manuel was writing his PhD thesis on the production of knowledge, learning processes, action and human rights struggles within social movements related to immigration, all topics quite relevant to the collective.

The Bloc recruited some new members during the year, while others who had participated since its beginning took a bit of distance, remaining however in orbit of the project, never very far and always welcome.

PROCESS AND CREATIONS OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR

In order to accomplish its diverse activities, the Artists' Bloc held meetings every two weeks. As the group was able to call upon its creations from the previous year it was possible for them to quickly respond to invitations. As such, as early as January 2015, the Bloc took part in the third annual Migrant Canada congress (in which the organisation PINAY also participated with its project supported by ROUAGE, see p. 29), where two of its members presented a piece involving video, theatrical intervention and poetry.



Photo: Patrick Landry

Artistic residency

During five weeks, from January 25th to February 28th 2015, the Artists' Bloc was in artistic residency at the Plaza Côte-des-Neiges shopping mall. This collaboration emerged from research done by the group in order to respond to one of the criteria required at that time by ROUAGE for project renewal, which asked that 25% of project funding come from another source. The theatre company Projet Mû accepted one of these proposals. This company, in preparation for a site-specific production that would be presented in the shopping mall for the Festival TransAmériques, wanted to better understand human interactions within the Côte-des-

Neiges neighbourhood, and to do so with other artists. As such Projet Mû invited different artistic collectives, one of them the Artists' Bloc, to work in a space within the shopping mall. The conversations that arose with passersby as well as workshops for creation, information and education offered by artists in residence acclimatised those often frequenting the location to its having an artistic presence. Projet Mû's experience ended in May 2015 with PLAZA, a promenade through the shopping mall in which 80 people from the neighbourhood participated, among them two members of the Artists' Bloc.



It was meaningful for the Artists' Bloc to set up residence in this location, a gathering place for the communities of Côte-des-Neiges, the most multiethnic district in Montreal. The ambitious and intensive project of this residency allowed the Artists' Bloc to challenge its organisational capacities and to initiate new creations. The residency space dedicated to the Bloc became a sort of headquarters favouring dialogue and co-creation with a larger public, in a context unaccustomed to this type of work.

Since the collective had been preparing this residency since the Fall, members were ready to share early tasks and responsibilities as soon as the project officially began. The Artists' Bloc maintained a presence at the Plaza Côte-des-Neiges several days a week, several hours at a time. During the week, the collective met people who frequented the shopping mall, organising facilitation activities in addition to showcasing works, banners and videos they had previously created. Every weekend, the collective offered public presentations followed by a discussion. The following is an overview:

- "Stories and migration": this puppet show on the process of immigration told the story of two farmers, one of which urges the other to leave because a large corporation wishes to exploit their land; attacked by a monster, they escape to Canada to request asylum from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, but it is the same monster that opens the door to them! The play ended on a call for workers to unite against this systemic exploitation that profits from their vulnerability, and invited the exchange of stories and experiences around reasons for immigrating;
- "We make the road by walking": a theatrical performance on the realities of temporary work and placement agencies in Quebec;
- "Art in resistance: for Ayotzinapa from Montreal": this event, presented in collaboration with the Haitian artist Rebert D'Amour and members of Mexicans United for Regularisation (MUR), with whom the Artists' Bloc had begun to collaborate with the previous year, focused on the detentions and deportations from Montreal of immigrants particularly from Mexico and Haiti. The public could express themselves by collectively painting on doors, which in turn nourished the conversation.



Photos: Koby Rogers Hall





Photos: Patrick Landry



There was a projection of a filmed performance by Inti Barrios Hernández (Artists' Bloc member) about the events in Ayotzinapa (the disappearance of 43 Mexican students in September 2014). Along with the public, the event ended with a silent procession through the Plaza shopping mall with the creations of that day;

- The last presentation was conceived as an open installation in which the public could circulate, meet the artists and in doing so discover the research and creation work produced by the Artists' Bloc over the previous weeks. Mireya Bayancela Ordonez, Artists' Bloc member, also presented a fable in which a bird is bitten by a snake; the sun teaches the bird how to heal itself with herbs and to fly wherever it desires. Mireya's message surrounded identity, the connection to roots and to nature, and to the need to know one's origins.

On weekends, 20 to 40 people of different origins, immigrant and non-immigrant, directly participated in each presentation. During the week and the installation work, between 100 and 150 people would visit the space, sometimes by coincidence, sometimes not; all were informed of the upcoming activities of the Artists' Bloc in residency as well as those of the IWC. The Artists' Bloc distributed several flyers prepared for the occasion and copies of the *Migrant Voices* newspaper published by the IWC.

However, a problematic situation arose that once more highlighted the lack of understanding that immigrants are often faced with. As part of this residency at Plaza Côte-des-Neiges, Projet Mû had received a grant from the Programme montréalais d'action culturelle so that a person not involved in the project could take care of "cultural mediation". This expression designates the implementation of strategies allowing for artists and the public to meet, "to help translate a project so that the



public can understand it”, as explained in the policy of the City of Montreal, which since 2005 has adopted cultural mediation as a priority action.

This approach in cultural mediation created much tension over the course of the Artists’ Bloc five-week residency. For the group, it was important to work on its own strategies for transmitting its message. The Artists’ Bloc considered that the cultural roots and communities of its members deserved to be taken into consideration when it came to approaching residents of the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood. The cultural mediation team appeared to want to do it in their stead, creating a barrier to the Artists’ Bloc direct communications with people.

This approach to cultural mediation eclipsed the power dynamics at hand. Pascale Brunet, an activist and artist who participated in the activities offered by the Artists’ Bloc on several occasions during the residency, summarised her impressions with the following:

I felt uncomfortable with the first contact by “cultural mediation”. There was something not very natural in it or superficial since, by the very nature of the Artists’ Bloc, the people that are involved with it already have an excellent way to communicate and to share their art with “non-artists” (if such a thing exists...).

I asked myself if Projet Mû had thought about what it meant, politically speaking, to choose a white person to mediate between the Artists’ Bloc of the IWC (a collective made up of a majority of people who are immigrants and/or racialised) and the people who frequent the Plaza Côte-des-Neiges (people that in majority are immigrants and/or racialised). I see in this a reiteration of the power relations that permeate our society.



In this sense, I highly encourage Projet Mû to continue its reflection on privileges and systemic oppression, racism, white supremacy, colonisation, the violence of our immigration system, etc. I myself am a white person who learns and unlearns things about these topics every day. These conversations and reflections, though sometimes difficult and destabilising, are oh so necessary.

In the submitted evaluation of its residency, the Artists' Bloc took great depth in calling into question the relevancy of accompanying its artistic and social practice by way of cultural mediation, a topic which then became the basis for two conferences and two articles the Bloc prepared over the course of the year (see below), fulfilling its objectives for knowledge production and knowledge sharing.

That being said, this artistic residency brought the Artists' Bloc to conceive of two projects presented in further detail in the following section.

The Network of Immigration

During this artistic residency, the Artists' Bloc launched one of its main projects in 2015: The Network of Immigration, a reconfiguration of the Montreal metro map from an immigrant perspective. The previous year, Manuel had the idea to transpose the conditions for global migrations and existing labour conditions on to the scale of the city

of Montreal by tracing the stories of movement of immigrant workers throughout the city. The Artists' Bloc took inspiration from the experiences of discrimination told by people that gravitate around the IWC and from several interviews conducted by Manuel for his thesis research. Indeed many IWC members work precariously in Montreal and in the agricultural, food and hospitality sectors, as well as in warehouses. A large part of the products bought in grocery stores and consumed in restaurants are harvested, packed and served by immigrant workers. The goal of this project was to bring awareness to this invisibilised reality and to the movements, free or restricted, of racialised and immigrant people living in Montreal.



Photo: Patrick Landry

The group created a reproduction of the Montreal metro map spread across several meters, re-naming the various stations in order to signify their particular meaning for immigrant workers. Over the course of its residency, the Artists' Bloc facilitated a



Photos: Patrick Landry

series of games and workshops around this human-scale map spread across the floor-sized carpet in the residency space. Easily recognisable, this provided an excellent tool for engaging passersby in a discussion as they could project their own experiences on the map and rename stations based on their lived experiences. People were invited to choose a particular station and to explain why it held significance for them. With their agreement, the Artists' Bloc recorded their stories through audio. At the end of the residency, various listening stations in this space within the shopping mall allowed the public to discover 37 different stories gathered over the previous weeks.

In March 2015, in order to edit these audio recordings, Artists' Bloc members received training in Audacity (a free digital platform for processing and audio editing) in collaboration with Concordia University's Mobile Media Lab and The/Le Sensorium, an artistic collaborative project founded in 2011 by Natalie Doonan. Always looking for artists who critically engage and play around themes of food and consumerism, she was interested in the Artists' Bloc due to the invisibilisation of immigrant workers in these fields of activities.

An interesting platform for provoking a better understanding of movement and migration at the scale of the city, this metro map was reprised by the Bloc on several occasions throughout the year. A long-term goal was to create a digital map that would be available online, accompanied by the recorded audio stories. This project would come to be known by a larger audience, as Manuel and Koby submitted an article to the British journal *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, and it was accepted. In 2017 this article will appear on *The Network of Immigration* as well as on the themes of precarity and resiliency within the Artists' Bloc, notably addressing how group members manage to stay united and to develop their knowledge and practices within the context of the systemic conditions of vulnerability that they experience.



Photo: Natalie Doonan



Photo : Patrick Landry

Boots for safety at work

A second project was born during the Bloc's artistic residency, in support of the IWC and of TAWA who demand safer working conditions for temporary workers. More specifically, it consisted in supporting the campaign designed to force businesses that deal with temporary placement agencies to provide free safety equipment necessary to fulfilling required tasks. It is the employer's responsibility to do this, but this is far from always being the case. Most workers pay for their equipment out of pocket, in particular for safety boots.



The Artists' Bloc worked from this evocative example. In collaboration with TAWA members, they created two large boots out of papier mâché. Publicly exhibited in the Plaza Côte-des-Neiges, they attracted attention and thus informed the public about the illegal practices of businesses that rely on the services of temporary placement agencies. The boots were even paraded throughout the shopping centre, and many curious people joined in on this symbolic procession once having been informed of what it represented.

In the context of this campaign, the Artists' Bloc also collaborated with TAWA in writing informative texts as well as complaints that, accompanied by one of the large-scale boots, were deposited in February 2015 at

the offices of then Labour minister Sam Hamad. The minister was unfortunately absent for this visit, a visit that had however been previously announced. As the outdoor rally that supported this submission drew attention thanks to one of the giant boots, the IWC campaign and its allies still gathered rather interesting visibility, in the media and on the street.

The second boot was shown during press conferences and demonstrations organised by TAWA to inform workers of their rights, and to raise public awareness of this denounced discrimination. The Artists' Bloc considers that these large-scale boots, by bringing a visual component to the campaign, increased its impact, as well as gathering people in a collective creation process and during symbolic actions.

The Summer Picnics

Still in collaboration with TAWA, the Artists' Bloc made the most of the 2015 summer season by holding the *Summer Picnics* in different Montreal parks, an event series that, much like the residency, aimed to reach out to people and to make the realities of immigrants known. The collective distributed handouts here presenting their objectives and upcoming activities for the year.



Photos: Natalie Doonan



The *Picnics* started the 27th of June at Mount Royal Park with an event on human rights in Mexico, organised in collaboration with the MUR collective. This event continued to raise public awareness of the 43 disappeared Ayotzinapa students and was aligned with the campaign launched in 2014 by several groups, among them MUR, to denounce Canadian mining interests in Mexico and to demand that Mexico be removed from the Canadian list of “safe countries”. This label in fact serves as a pretext to refuse refugee status to many Mexicans seeking refuge from violence and persecution in their home country; they are instead detained in Canada in prisons and detention centres before



being deported. This situation affected particular Artists' Bloc members of Mexican origin, living in fear of detention and deportation. At this first picnic, the metro map *Network of Immigration*, this time taped to a large-scale plastic tarp, once more served as a platform for facilitated participation inviting the public to share their experiences or to become aware of those stories already gathered.



In July, the group participated in a McGill University conference gathering activists, artists and graduate students around the theme of *Improvisation, Collective Action and the Arts of Activism*. The Artists' Bloc offered a participatory workshop entitled *The Return of the Aztecs*, proposing improvisational tools within the frame of Canada's colonial positioning in its relationship with Mexico and denouncing more specifically the limits on stays imposed by its Temporary Foreign Worker program. This workshop began in the Sala Rossa, in the Plateau Mont-Royal, and continued in the Parc Lahaie just nearby.



The *Summer Picnics* series then went to the Côte-des-Neiges Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighbourhood, in the Mackenzie King Park in July and in Park Kent in August, alongside TAWA members. The following activity, held in August in Molson Park in the Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie neighbourhood, was a publication launch with *The/Le Sensorium*, in which two articles (the first by its artistic director Natalie and the other, by Koby and Noé Arteaga Santos, of the Artists' Bloc) presented the metro map project; Noé also spoke of his experiences in Quebec. Each time the collective facilitated the *Network of Immigration* and sometimes installed iPod .mp3 players so that the public could listen to the audio recordings connected with each station. The last picnic took place in Jarry Park, in the Parc-Extension neighbourhood. The Artists' Bloc returned to its popular education activities around the metro map, offering a creative workshop to the public on the links between migrant justice and food production in Quebec and Canada.

In Inti's words, this summer tour of Montreal parks offered the Artists' Bloc an *escuelita*, or "little school", in politics; members learned there together and together built new practices. Even if all members could not be present, the Picnics offered the occasion to regroup, to re-evaluate group objectives and collective actions, and to think through the group's creative and activist strategies.



The campaign for a \$15 minimum wage

Beginning in the fall of 2015, the Artists' Bloc took on a longer-term project by joining the larger Quebecois coalition calling for, in the midst of a North American movement, raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour. In several American cities, massive campaigns organised by workers in Walmart stores and fast food chain restaurants had recently won the adoption of \$15 minimum wages. Closer to home, a 2015 study by the Institut de recherche et d'informations socio-économiques (IRIS) confirmed that a significant increase to the minimum wage was necessary in order to attain a decent quality of living in Quebec, but the Quebec government was only proposing an increase of 20 cents starting in May 2016, bringing the minimum wage to \$10.75. At this rate, even by working full-time, it is impossible to get out of poverty. The Quebecois campaign, in which the IWC, TAWA, and organisations behind the Coalition against precarious work were actively participating, proved relevant for the Artists' Bloc since it spoke to the defence of workers' rights to decent working conditions and to a decent wage for all, including immigrant workers. It was important for the collective to participate by bringing visual and interactive elements.



The campaign was launched on October 7 2015, a Global day for Decent Work, with a forum organised at Jarry Park by the organisation Au bas de l'échelle. In the middle of this day of panels, the IWC positioned itself by organising a rally calling for the \$15 minimum wage. In November 2015, during a press conference held in front of the prime minister's offices in Montreal, the Artists' Bloc produced a banner in collaboration with artist Arianna Garcia-Fialdini, an ally to the Bloc whose work touches on femicide in Mexico. Highlighting a large number 15, the banner was designed to allow protestors to contribute to it. One by one, those gathered as well as passersby added an outline of their hand to this collective image. Spontaneously, several participants began writing the number 15 on the palms of their hands, and a series of photographs captured this motif repeated as a symbol of solidarity. For the Bloc, even though this action did not attract that large numbers, it was important to participate there in order to better sense the reactions of people and to prepare the next interventions in order to bring greater visibility to the campaign.

LES DROITS AU
TRAVAIL SONT
AFFAIRE DE TOUS ET
TOUTES.

“Artists' Bloc members share a collective vision for creation that is not elitist. This speaks to me.”

– Patrick Landry

Other interventions

Very active in 2015, the Artists' Bloc did not stop at the creations that have just been named! In May, collective members facilitated Forum Theatre workshops with women working for temporary placement agencies (within a TAWA project aimed at informing them of their rights in the workplace and to develop leadership skills). During these activities in physical theatre and vocal work inspired by techniques from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, these women explored how they could act in different situations of abuse they were facing in their workplace, situations related to their intersectional experience as racialised and immigrant women.



In August, the Artists' Bloc answered the call for support from Noé, a member of the Bloc since its beginnings, who wanted to offer an opposing viewpoint during the annual event organised by the municipality of Saint-Rémi that underlines the positive contributions of the Temporary Foreign Worker program to the Canadian economy, which is used by several farms in the area to supply their farm hands. A former temporary agricultural worker, Noé experienced conflict with his former employer, Savoura, for wrongful dismissal; he had just won his case in court after five years – but the company declared bankruptcy in the meantime, thus evading its responsibilities to pay for damages incurred. Members of the Artists' Bloc took part in a caravan of activists that went to Saint-Rémi to denounce the racist exploitation on which the Temporary Foreign Worker program depends.



In October, the Artists' Bloc reprised a nurturing experience from the previous year by holding a group retreat, this time for one day in the city. This gathering allowed for reinforcing links between members, who are often tested by their living and working conditions, to debrief on past creations and to share visioning for future ambitions. The afternoon was open to all people interested in collaborating with the collective.

The following month, Artists' Bloc members were invited by the Neighbourhood Arts Network (which brings together socially-engaged artists and community organisations in Toronto) to present at the *Emergence Symposium on Equity in the Arts*. Koby, Manuel and Carmelo Monge Rosas facilitated a workshop on precarity and resiliency, two themes often engaged with in the collective's work.



The Artists' Bloc has always been mindful of keeping traces of its actions and to disseminate them, much as the group had set this objective at the end of the previous year. Patrick Landry, who joined the collective as a videographer and photographer, extensively documented the group's actions throughout the year, generating documentation that was archived rather consistently. The goal of disseminating it through a website required reflection on what type of content to choose (and why). In December 2015, Koby began the creation of the site in collaboration with Patrick, keeping in mind their shared goals of accessibility and adaptability of this content to several different formats. The launch of this website was planned for the May 1st 2016, a symbolic date for workers of the world.

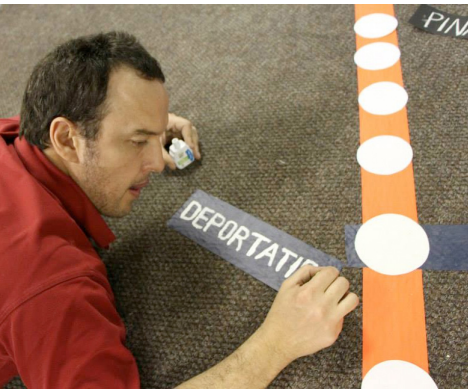


Photo: Patrick Landry

“It is difficult to evaluate the clarity of our message because the problematic of immigration is very complex, carries many ramifications, much like the IWC and its diverse associations. It was important for us to build a tool (the metro map) for presenting this complexity that includes racism, immigration Policy, the lack of regulations for placement agencies and many other factors.”

– Manuel Salamanca Cardona

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

During this third year, the Artists' Bloc continued experimenting with an organisational model encouraging the distribution of leadership and of responsibilities. Each person could play a role as they wished based on their skill-sets, whether they be in art, facilitation, mobilisation, organisation or documentation. This helped to maintain a sense of continuity and empathy when a person would temporarily need to step away for reasons of crisis related to their precarious status or personal difficulties. In this way the group created a space both in solidarity with members who could receive support for their personal situations and mobilised so as to act together to reclaim their

common struggles. The two individuals tasked with co-ordination in 2015 worked complementarily. In addition to his links with the organisation, Manuel contributed to the project through a strong research ethic related to his university thesis. Koby, on the other hand, continued to favour the emergent vision and leadership from group members, contributing to further defining various project roles as well as facilitating various workshops. Her artistic direction ensured consistency between Artists' Bloc activities.

It is with its own members first that the sensitization process the Artists' Bloc takes on felt the greatest impacts. Manuel considers himself more conscious of the situation of immigrant workers and the way in which colonialist attitudes are maintained, and this gave him further motivation, along with group members, to continue to develop his own thinking around activism, art, the problematics of immigration and social justice. A similar observation is shared by Patrick, who earlier in his involvement with the Bloc considered himself more of an accomplice than a group member: "I am more aware of the reality for racialised people and of certain problematics that they face, of the systemic racism that our society imposes on anything that is not white, Francophone or Anglophone." Inti, for her part, considers that she deepened her reflections on the political, social and cultural implications of the work of the Artists' Bloc, all while "getting out of her head" in order to play more.

Group members' motivation tended to fluctuate. With the artistic residency, the Artists' Bloc began the year with an intense deployment of energy, which then dissipated, notably because in 2015 the IWC no longer held its annual cultural event *Mayworks* to which the Artists' Bloc had participated in the two previous years. A smaller number of members were available for the *Summer Picnics* series, but the group still decided to move ahead with it. Manuel found it difficult to keep people motivated in preparing activities and improving upon strategies; as they had little time, they wanted to move directly towards action. He recognises this group dynamic as being related to the precarious situations of their members, but still he found this to be exhausting at times. Inti also came up against the challenges of co-ordination tasks, taking on this role particularly in the summer of 2015. "How can we concentrate on this project? She asked. How can we find the energy to continue?" But she also recognises that "the

Photo : Koby Rogers Hall



Photos : Patrick Landry

“The contribution of the Artists’ Bloc is very important: everything that we do at the IWC now is a little more animated, a little more fun.”

– Eric Schragge

situation of vulnerability related to immigration makes it so that certain people cannot always be there.”

This reality however did not stop the Artists’ Bloc from being more active in 2015 than in the previous year, following one intervention and collaboration with the next. The group gained more and more visibility on the Montreal scene and they have started to become known in a wider field of networks, including university settings. Their activities generated further exchanges with other artists, such as *Projet Mû* and *The/Le Sensorium*, and with other organisations, such as *MUR*, *Solidarity Across Borders* and the *Coalition for a \$15 minimum wage*. The trying social context made evident the importance of supporting one another’s campaigns. The Artists’ Bloc was also invited several times to share their knowledge with others. As Inti observed: “I know that we have inspired other people. Now, around us, a lot of people engage in creative processes in order to make their demands known.”



In addition to its own endeavours, the Artists’ Bloc also further collaborated with the IWC by responding to calls for support. As the group had more experience, it became easier for them to organise quickly in preparing certain interventions. The liaison maintained by Manuel contributed to harmonising the Bloc’s activities with the campaigns carried out by the organisation, particularly those of *TAWA*. For Eric Schragge, a volunteer member of the IWC (of which he is a co-founder and president of the board), the Artists’ Bloc interventions in 2015 campaigns were better prepared and more visible. The collective has become an important vehicle for popular education and its activities have allowed for reaching more people than the IWC would have alone. For Eric, the greatest contribution by the Artists’ Bloc is having raised awareness with the people the organisation is trying to reach and to have encouraged them to participate in an inviting way thanks to this artistic component. The residency at the *Plaza Côte-des-Neiges* for him is a good example of effective dissemination towards a larger public thanks to an artistic project. The symbolic gesture of posing one’s hand on a banner, during one of the rallies to raise the minimum wage to \$15, was another powerful moment for him in rallying the organisation and its allies.

By dedicating itself at times to activities to raise awareness, at times to strategies for targeted struggles, the Artists’ Bloc brought visibility

Photos: Patrick Landry

to certain issues overlooked in our society that thinks of itself as immune to systemic racism. Reaching beyond borders, the problematic around migrant justice is very complex, related to the systemic exploitation of workers around the world and with repercussions here. This is why the Artists' Bloc held true to maintaining pressure on multiple fronts. And one can observe strategic gains, notably for the campaign demanding the removal of Mexico from the list of "safe countries": in July 2015, the Federal Court of Canada ruled that this list was discriminatory and unconstitutional, a decision that represents a step in the right direction.

Strong from its experiences in the previous years, the group also demonstrated interest for longer-term actions. As Inti observed: "One has to do less things, as inspiring as they are. One has to choose one creation and to develop it, invest more time to make it beautiful and to ensure that it's related to our objective. We should concentrate the energy." The Artists' Bloc also tried to reach other communities in addition to immigrant workers, be they during the artistic residency at Plaza Côte-des-Neiges, by taking its metro map project through different neighbourhoods in Montreal or by participating in the coalition with the \$15 minimum wage campaign. These experiences allowed the group to consider the effects of both a longer-term creative action and of gathering diverse struggles around one common issue. The messages carried by the Artists' Bloc were clear, but Manuel estimates that their interventions did not reach a large enough number of people. For him, future efforts will need to be put toward dissemination and mobilisation. The same observation can be made for recruitment to join the collective: "We were few members, observes Noé, while it had been planned that the project grow and involve more people."

Artists' Bloc members hold a particular vision of the aesthetic aspect to their interventions: "Our efficiency is not attached to the presentation of a spectacle, explains Carmelo, but rather to the fact of transmitting a message that is understood by our public. This comes from the fact that we are ourselves immigrants



Photos : Patrick Landry

"Our strategy is not to make artistic presentations of spectacle; our efficiency comes from the fact that we are ourselves immigrants and we know the problematics very well. It is this experience that we transmit."

– Carmelo Monge Rosas

"Interaction – generating dialogue with people – is a fundamental element to our actions."

– Mireya Bayancela Ordonez



“Activist art can provoke dialogue between people, it’s a step for reflecting on the situation in which we find ourselves and to try to find solutions against this unjust system.”

– Noé Arteaga Santos

and we know the problematics very well. It is this experience that we transmit. Our aesthetic is not limited to presenting a beautiful thing, but to present a clear message that the public can grasp easily.” Mireya also considers that interaction and dialogue with people are fundamental elements to the actions of the Artists’ Bloc.

The creative aspect however remains important. “Activism without art is empty, underlines Carmelo, it is nothing but shouts. Music, visual art, etc., they create a sea of creativity, it is more alive. We move forward in joy, and not in destruction.” But Mireya reminds us that it is difficult to have the time to meet for rehearsing and creating more theatrical actions: “Theatre takes time.” As the majority of members were involved as activists or volunteers and that the deadlines for preparing an action were often very short, it was not easy to improve on the aesthetic quality of the work, for lack of being able to rehearse more. For Manuel, this reality did not allow for taking on both the aesthetic aspects and the political efficiency of their work: “Due to a lack of time, of resources or of expertise, we must renounce a little bit of one in order to have a little bit more of the other.” “We wanted both the activism and the art, concludes Inti, and to not fall into urgency. The balance is difficult.”

TO FOLLOW...

The project will continue for a fourth year. At the request of ROUAGE to prioritise one precise local struggle, the Artists’ Bloc chose to concentrate on the campaign for a \$15 minimum wage, a struggle that we speak about more and more in the media. The potential repercussions from this campaign that is gaining momentum are one of the reasons why the IWC and the Artists’ Bloc chose to continue their engagement together in 2016.

A new coordination team, this time composed of four people (including Koby), will share the responsibilities connected to administrative management, artistic vision, logistics, documentation and group mobilisation. This model for organising is specific



“My passion and my engagement in this project and the possibilities it presents come from the exceptional learning I have been privileged to have here as an artist, and from the practices being put in place within this group. I sense that we are building knowledge together. This is a radical project that leaves no one unchanged, and that is extremely significant for me.”

– Koby Rogers Hall

to the Artists’ Bloc, a collective for whom categories are interlaced and roles combine (artists, members, coordinators), and this change in ways of operating reflect the evolution of people’s capacities and the recognition of their interests expressed by those who would like to get more involved. As Koby says: “The Artists’ Bloc is made up of its member-participants; each of them make up the heart, the blood and the vision that ensure that this work continues to evolve.” Inti continues to think that this is a unique project that allows for developing a common language through the singular contributions of each person. It will be interesting to follow the development of this collective.



“We are not a homogenous group, with everyone in the same situation. This is also our richness. We respect the fact that our process is much like a labyrinth, non-linear. I know that with the Bloc, I can say what I think, express myself, create and trust others. We are not aiming to make something complex artistically, rather we live a personal and collective process – human.”

– Inti Naxhielii Barrios Hernández

Photos : Patrick Landry