ENGAGING ARTISTS: *NEW WORKS IN PRACTICE*

ARTISTS TEXTS
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Workers' Art Coalition,

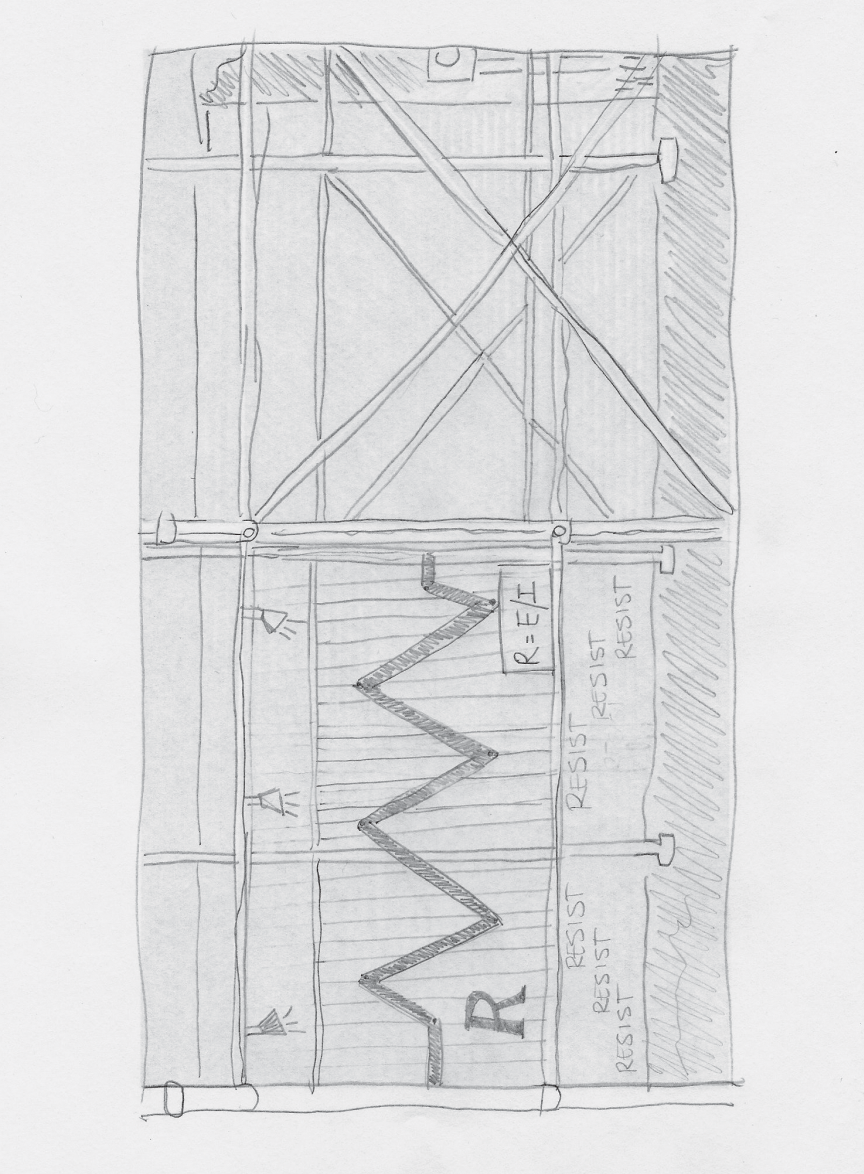
Work Featured: ***Outside the Box*, wooden crate, ceramic tiles, tool case, LEDs, zines, 2019. This installation marks the Workers' Art Coalition launch of the zine, *Blue Collar.***

Workers Art Coalition (WAC) is a collective of blue collar workers and artists who are working collaboratively to create public art that amplifies the voice of social justice movements through the vision of labor. Contemporary mainstream depictions of blue collar work often associate it with a particular kind of person and body, while invisibilizing the level of skill and creativity it involves. Building trades workers and other manual laborers are not widely represented in the creative imagination in nuanced ways, despite the diversity in the blue collar workforce and how this manual work, essential to making modern life possible, is highly skilled and often dangerous. Through this group exhibition, WAC is launching their Blue Collar zine as a compilation of complex and varied personal perspectives of blue collar worker, including those beyond the more visible white, cis, heteronormative male worker experience. These firsthand accounts publicly share how individuals' identities and life experiences have been complicated by their participation in this professional field of work, the community and support they've been able to find within it, and blue collar participation in advocating for labor, housing and civil rights. Inspired by WAC's ongoing work with collecting blue collar worker oral histories and materials for their project with the Library of Congress archive, *Blue Collar* also uses the collaborative format of the zine as an entry point and way to make participation in their collective accessible and democratic to anyone with an interest in realizing or participating in an artistic vision of representing worker narratives. WAC hopes that through the process of working together with newer members who collaborate through this zine, trust and commitment will be built with them to toward future creative collaboration.

Outside the Box is one of WAC's most recent public artworks developed from the collaboration of the collective's core

group, who saw the theme of being "boxed in" emerge through *Blue Collar's* narratives of workers' diverse identities being stereotyped within and outside their profession. As a group of artists who are also professionals with construction, WAC intuitively wanted to build a form that could distribute the zines in a way that also reflected the skills and complex experience of the community it represents. As a result, WAC fabricated an installation around the symbolic, sculptural form of the crate—a commonplace object in blue collar work—that serves not only as a stand for the zines, but also brings up other visual associations. Outside the Box serves as a site for workers to gather to organize, speak up, and celebrate through readings and other public programming that WAC will present through this group exhibition.

In the six years that WAC has been active, organizing has been a significant, key part of their collaborative artistic process, which demonstrates their commitment to a socially engaged artistic practice. The work of being an artist collective is challenging and often short lived because of time and emotional effort it requires through the constant negotiation and navigation of group differences and power dynamics, which parallels the process of labor unions and movement organizing work. Individual members of WAC, many of whom belong to union locals as blue collar professionals, have found that their work collaborating as an artist collective to create public work is intrinsic in the way they approach building, relationships, negotiation, and improving the culture within their own unions and worksites.



Workers' Art Coalition, *Resistor Sketch*, 2017

People-Pueblo Party Logo

Álvaro Franco and People-Pueblo Party

Works Featured: ***What Does A Better World Mean To You*, video of performance, 1/24/19; *Questions You're Afraid to Ask About Socialism*, Alvaro in collaboration with People-Pueblo Party**

Álvaro has collaboratively organized, with the People-Pueblo Party, *What Does A Better World Mean To You*, a participatory work through the format of an open mic that invites participants to connect the dots around systemic issues and share and learn from others around what they feel is necessary to envision a better world. Rather than focus on political campaigns, individual politicians, and the labels they come with, People-Pueblo Party wants to approach the process of building a political platform through open conversation in the hopes of making local and national progressive politics accessible to everyone. Through *What Does A Better World Mean To You*, members of the People-Pueblo Party will engage in performance while sharing political perspectives from anonymized historical figures to help participants contribute to a collective conversation, using the creative process of the open mic as a grassroots approach to building political consensus. Through the recent development of his socially engaged practice and ongoing involvement as a member of the Party, Alvaro has been working over the past year with other party members to develop an interactive performance that can be experienced in person for the first time through this exhibition. In order to ensure that the diverse voice of the Party's membership base, who consist of NYCHA residents to Green Party members and students, are represented and heard, Alvaro has been deliberate in collaborating with other party members and letting them lead as the designers, facilitators, and performers in this work.

Alvaro relationship with the People-Pueblo Party started when he connected with People Power Movement (PPM)—a grassroots group agitating for fundamental change around urgent social issues—through his student activism around the CUNY tuition hikes of 2011, and at the time, the majority of PPM consisted of undergraduate students. A smaller group within the Movement

ended up forming the People Pueblo Party with an intention to focus more specifically on electoral politics and reaching a more intergenerational and socioeconomically diverse range of working class people who might not consider themselves part of progressive left or academically articulate socialist theory, but still share a desire for progressive political outcomes such as affordable housing. People Pueblo Party eventually amicably split from the People Power Movement to become an autonomous political party in order to focus on reaching a wider community who might be interested in supporting the party's progressive platform and its entry into local NYC electoral politics.

Born and raised in NYC to immigrant parents and currently based in the Bronx, Alvaro has worked in manual labor and other working class and community organizing jobs as a means to survive and support himself while he participate in activism and pursues work as an artist and filmmaker on the side. He considers himself the only film director who has operated a pallet jack for 8 hours and organized tenants in Inwood against landlord abuse. His life experiences and close relationship to the working class have informed his artistic practice and political ideology and inspired his interest in combining a multidisciplinary and experimental artistic practice with filmmaking. He examines ways of understanding profound issues and systemic injustices through humanist realist stories that believe in all viewers' capacities to understand the complexities of conflicts.

Vanessa Teran Collantes

Work Featured: ***Runa llaktapi, llakta illaskkuna. human land, no states*; from the project *Runa Ñawi . Runa Eye*, video, 2017-2019**

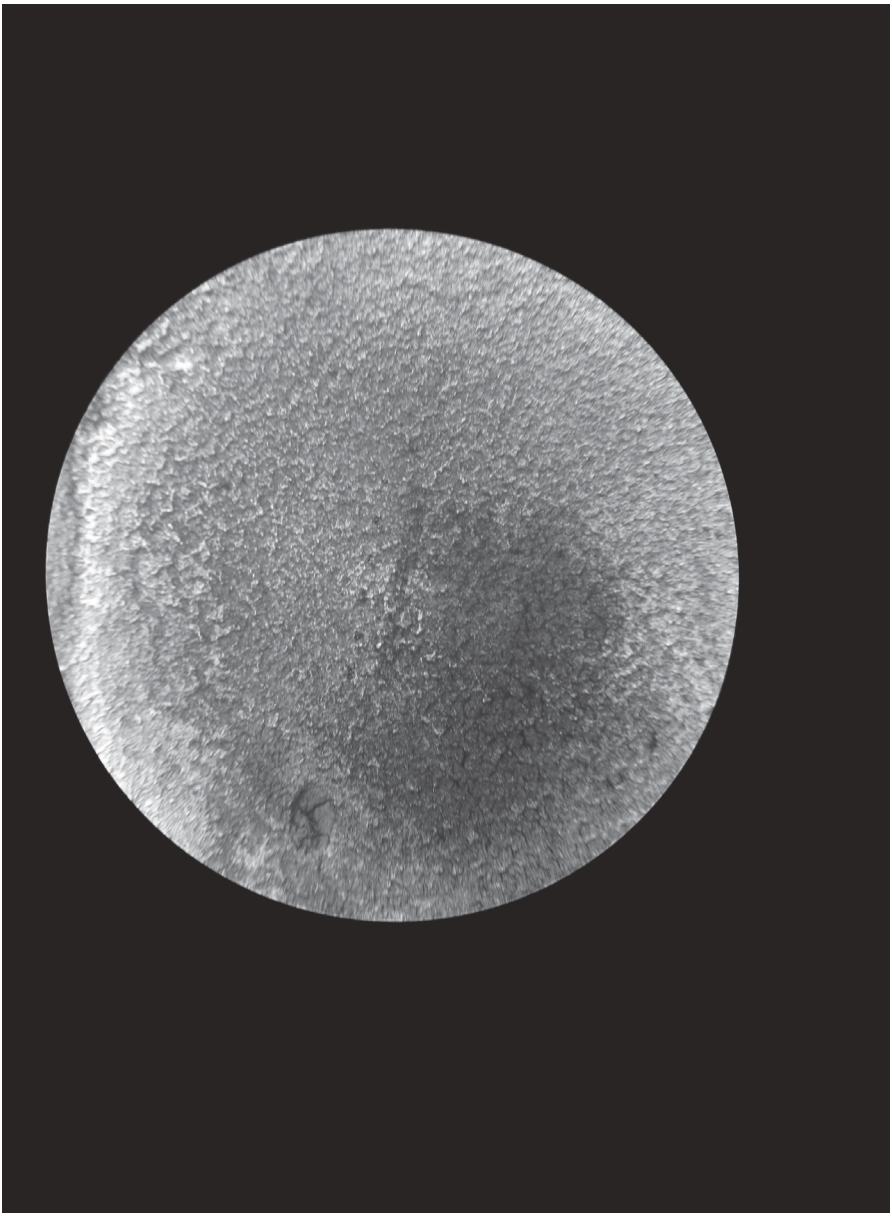
Runa llaktapi, llakta illaskkuna (translation from Kichwa to English meaning "human land, no states provides") is an intimate view into the culture and diasporic community of Kichwa-speaking Andean indigenous people, who are widespread yet often unseen, unacknowledged, and segregated within Ecuador and the larger South American diaspora. While the Kichwa language is one of the identifying features of the indigenous Andean community to outsiders—with Kichwa speakers referred to as *runas*—Andean indigenous culture is multifaceted through its traditions and views toward spirituality, identity, gender, territory, and how it has been influenced by diasporic migration and a history of conflict with European colonialism. Self-identified as an Ecuadorian of mixed indigenous and European heritage, Vanessa became personally connected to the Andean diasporic community after moving the US for her artistic education. Through collaborating with the Kichwa Hatari collective—a Bronx-based Kichwa radio station—and taking Kichwa classes, Vanessa started to build relationships in the Andean indigenous and mix-raced immigrant community around NYC and contribute as an artist by documenting local community events such as Raymis—celebrations central, to Andean spirituality.

Through the development of a more socially engaged practice beyond her previous work in documentary-driven photography and film, Vanessa started *Runa Ñawi* (Runa Eye) as an ongoing collaborative project as a way to strengthen the sharing of Indigenous Andean culture culture and the Kichwa language, which UNESCO has designated as endangered. In collaboration with the Kichwa Hatari collective and other culture keepers, teachers, and Taytas (community elders), Vanessa initiated a shared learning space she refers to as a "collective laboratory" or creative *Minka*—a tradition based on reciprocity and community. Runa community members would come together to use photography and other forms of expression to explore themes of Andean indigenous cosmology and the Kichwa language, while

telling stories about the life of indigenous Andeans living in the US toward the larger goals of language justice, cultural resistance, and decolonization.

Vanessa has collected photos and video from a series of eight workshops that took place as part of *Runa Ñawi*, and other creative visual imagery made in collaboration with the community. After moving back to Ecuador at the conclusion of her artistic studies in the US, what was created and captured through collective documentation and shared moments through *Runa Ñawi* are now being exchanged between the communities in the US and Ecuador, creating a newfound significance and closeness between those who have stayed and those who have migrated. *Runa Ñawi* has taken on a new meaning with an opportunity for Vanessa and other artists, activist, and communicators to use art and shared visual expression to build bridges across the indigenous Andean community in Ecuador and its diaspora across the world, reminiscent of Chaskis from the Inca Empire, who were messengers that conveyed news and messaged between communities. *Runa Ñawi* continues to be an ongoing project for Vanessa in a new context as she stays connected to the community in the US from Ecuador to continue an exchange of Kichwa language, indigenous Andean culture, and the contemporary experience of its diaspora. Vanessa's continuation of her socially engaged practice as an artist has been driven by the development of her own connection to the indigenous culture of Ecuador and the relationship of culture and identity to political resistance, which has challenged her own approach as an artist doing documentary work.

Vanessa Teran Collantes, from the project *Runa Ñawi* . *Runa Eye*, 2017-2019



Floor Grootenhuis, *What is the color of your blood? Cellfie_Woman_NewYork_RubyRed*, archival inkjet print on cotton rag and transparency, 24x36, 2017

Floor Grootenhuis

Works Featured: ***What is the color of your blood? Cellfie_Woman_NewYork_RubyRed*, archival inkjet print on cotton rag and transparency, 24x36, 2017; *Cellfie Studio Lab continued archive*, ongoing, microscopic 'cellfie' slides, 2017**

Floor's movement across different borders, cultures, and nation states, none of which have been her family's place of origin, has complicated her concept of identity and home. Floor has lived and worked in several places across the world—which include Kenya, Afghanistan, Spain, and Indonesia, and now NYC where she is currently based. Her upbringing, professional work in the global field of humanitarian assistance has influenced her development and education as an artist. Her journey as a socially-engaged artist has become a way for her to creatively call out and challenge power dynamics while determining what identity means through a conscious and continuous process of considering privilege and position as an artist and as a humanitarian advisor. As a woman born in Kenya of Dutch/European origins, Floor refers to herself as transnational and transcultural yet acknowledges the privilege and complexity of her positionality in the places she's inhabited and her field of work.

Socially engaged art has become an essential approach for Floor to learn more intimately about her own experience and those of others. *What is the Color of Your Blood (WICOB)* comes partly from Floor's relationship to her father, whose work as a field biologist inspired her to bring the scientific process of the lab, commonly used in biology, into a participatory artwork. For Floor, the lab has become a space for her to connect with strangers to collectively consider the complex and sometimes uncomfortable tension between how identity is defined by oneself and perceived by others—often based on what one looks like at the surface—which Floor has experienced from living in the varied context of different places beyond the borders of her origins. Through *WICOB*, participants are invited to explore beyond the border of one's skin quite literally, by looking at one's own blood through the microscope and documenting it through a a microscopic

blood portrait she refers to as 'cellfies.' The act of drawing one's own blood and examining its qualities closely through the use of lab equipment is often inaccessible in everyday life beyond the professional and educational scientific community. In giving participants an opportunity to examine one's internal cells on their own terms, Floor encourages them to interpret and respond to identity in relationship to the biological concept of blood on their own terms, at odds with the now common ancestry results from DNA testing kits--a problematic and continued history of scientists using biological studies and evidence to develop theories and conclusions that further the agendas of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression based on difference. While the color and other qualities of outer physiological features vary between humans, our blood is consistently the same, red color. Biologically humans are all much more similar with the difference in genetic makeup between individuals at 0.1%, yet small differences have consequently determined the privilege and oppression we are dealt through our lived experience.

Floor's artistic practice experiments combines movement and visual expression through different disciplines, with an end goal of facilitating shared experiences with participants that addresses relationships and social understanding. In her recent artistic work, Floor is driven by a desire to connect and change small yet intimate moments of exchange that give voice to what is often unspoken and can be misunderstood between strangers. Through gesture, play, collaborative performance, and in the case of this exhibition, the participatory form of a scientific lab, Floor has a desire to listen, learn, and intimately connect with others through open and experimental platform she creates around themes that are global, urgent, and of personal significance. She also sees this work as creating artistic rituals through which she is performing acts of apology to mend historic trauma.

Floor's socially engaged artistic practice has been a transformative journey in awakening her conscious of the positionality and privilege that comes with her Dutch/European origins while born and growing up in Kenya. With these realizations around identity, Floor intends to continue to disrupt and challenge problematic Western hierarchies that have consequently led to causing many issues and human conflict in the places where she's lived, around which her professional work in humanitarian assistance exists.

Bryan Rodriguez

Work Featured: ***Mike and Ingrid Wait in the Waiting Room*, 2 channel video, 2019**

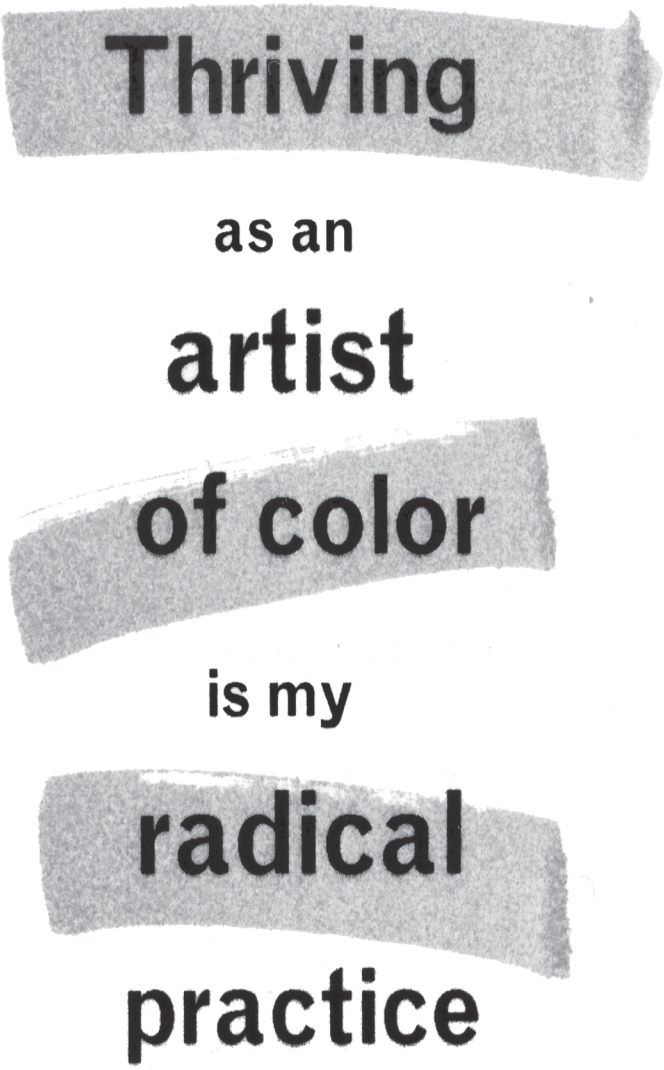
Having immigrated to the US from Callao, Peru, Bryan is interested in exploring the consequential meaning of their lived experiences in an Afro-indigenous, queer, immigrant body, and their mother's experience as a Black femme from Peru. Through using performance, video, and other multidisciplinary forms that involve bodily expression and interaction, Bryan uses a socially engaged artistic practice to challenge themself and others in understanding a more complicated relationship between violence, love, and abuse, and how interpersonal manifestations of these behaviors and emotions come from historical paths and cycles of trauma that are internalized through bodies and minds. *Mike and Ingrid Wait in the Waiting Room* juxtaposes Mike Tyson and Bryan's mother, Ingrid, to provide viewers a visceral experience of being between a gestural conversation involving two seemingly different individuals who share violent histories. Bryan has had a longtime fascination for Mike Tyson, because of his striking similarity to their mother in the way both of them often express emotion physically through their bodies first, rather than verbally, which can take form through violence or manipulative confrontation, despite their ability as people to love, feel guilt, and want redemption.

On June 28, 1997, Bryan visited his mother, who at the time had immigrated to the US and was living in New Jersey. They fatefully saw the moment Mike Tyson bit the ear of Evander Holyfield on a TV at a local bodega. Research through YouTube and the internet, particularly around how popular culture portrays black and brown bodies, has been a part of Bryan's artistic process, which led them over the years to watch countless hours of footage of Mike Tyson, with a small portion having been edited into this piece. For Bryan, this 2 channel video becomes a study of the psychological effects and characteristics of people who act impulsively based on their emotional instincts. In showing both individuals through this gestural conversation that reveals their tenderness and humanity, Bryan attempts to present contradictory dynamics of each person

beyond the projected assumptions that society would typically have of them based on identity related to their bodies and their relationship to violence. Bryan interrogates violence beyond a value judgment of primitive instinct, irrational behavior, and lack of intellect, treating it as the product of a complex pathology of socialization in the context of each individual that does not negate other human characteristics. Both Mike and Ingrid attempt to love, but not always in ways that fit western expectations of what love means.

Most recently, Bryan has been working on an ongoing project with youth awaiting trial at Rikers to use the creative process as liberatory practice of learning to love beyond the limiting and dehumanizing effects of incarceration and how individuals are perceived because of it. For Bryan, both *Mike and Ingrid Wait in the Waiting Room* and their recent collaboration with incarcerated youth at Rikers are ultimately about healing and processing together beyond a black and white assumptions of polarizing issues like violence and abuse, as a bold attempt at the complicated practice of loving oneself in face of the failures of human intentions.

Bryan Rodriguez, *Mike and Ingrid Wait in the Waiting Room*, 2 channel video, 2019



Noé Gaytán and Michelada Think Tank, *Thriving As An Artist of Color is My Radical Practice*, Inkjet on paper, 24x36, 2019

Noé Gaytán

Works Featured: ***Thriving As An Artist of Color is My Radical Practice*, Inkjet on paper, 24x36, 2019; *Michelada Think Tank's Guide to Getting Paid*, 2019. Inkjet on paper, 24x36, 2019; *Thrive/Guide*, Photocopy on paper, 11x17, 2019; *Work*, Highlighter and ink on found book, 2019**

Thriving As An Artist of Color is My Radical Practice and *Thrive/Guide* developed out of Noé and Michelada Think Tank's (MTT) collaboration on a critical and creative analysis of artistic production and support, or lack of, through a racial lens that amplifies the greater challenges that artists of color face. MTT was founded in 2014 by a group of artists of color after a collective realization of and frustration with the lack of diversity in representation and inclusion in social practice art, contradictory to its purpose in using art to address social inequality. As the result of an interrogation into the systemic absence of artists of color in social practice and greater field of visual arts, MTT has put together workshops, participatory artworks, and other collaborative public art projects that articulate the conditions of survival that artists of color face in participating in the field as supported professionals, while pushing for radical interventions in changing the system of arts production so that all artists can thrive.

Noé is interested in consciously placing the practices, processes, products, and structures of administrative work in the arts within contemporary art theory. *Work* is an installation that shares a glimpse into the research, theory, writings, and conversations with other art workers that have informed Noé's ongoing reflection of the relationship of the artist to artmaking through a labor analysis of the production and consumption of art and the systems in which it exists. In the US, these systems have been formed through a capitalist context that can be understood as an industrial complex of institutions, organizations, and those who administer within and between them. Noé's socially-engaged art practice treats administrative work as part of the artistic process, though this labor is often not visible to viewers who experience the end result of its process. Through *Work*, Noé bridges the gap

between the creative and administrative aspects of artistic work that have become separated due to the compartmentalization of labor within art organizations and institutions.

Within museums like the Brooklyn Museum, where Noé currently works as an arts educator, it is common to see individual roles and departments siloed into the areas such as community engagement, education, fundraising, marketing, collections management, etc.—all of which are essential to an institutional system of supporting art—yet paid roles or designated departments for artistic production do not exist despite artists being the frontline role of creative production for this system. Being an artist often implies precariously paid work or unsteady employment, which today has resulted in many artists who support artmaking through making a living from day jobs, side hustles. Like many others, Noé ended up working as an arts educator to support himself after years spent training as an artists through a BFA and MFA education, which has left him to wonder what it means to be professionalized as an artist after the costly requirement of investing in training, when more often than not, one doesn't end up getting paid to do the work of making art. As a way to reconcile this question, Noé seeks to merge the activities that define him as an artist and a cultural worker which has led him to successfully negotiate with his employer for paid time on the job as a museum educator to pursue projects like those seen in this exhibition.

Artists working to inspire and imagine the possibilities of social change often engage in processes often unseen by the public. *Engaging Artists: New Works in Practice* uses the format of a group exhibition and programming as an entry point into the practices of six emerging artists who participated in More Art's 2017-18 Engaging Artists Fellowship. Many of the artists in this show enter their work not from the studio, but through other disciplines and occupations: skilled trades and labor, science, arts administration and community organizing—demonstrating the expanded role of artistic inquiry and creation in everyday contexts, and the permeable and symbiotic membrane between art and life.

More Art fosters collaborations between artists and communities to create thought-provoking public art and educational programs that inspire broad discourse regarding social and cultural issues.

Engaging Artists is More Art's fellowship program for NYC-based artists seeking to both develop and sustain their socially-engaged public art practice in collaboration with advocacy organizations, schools, coalitions, unions, groups of neighbors, and the public at large. The Fellowship is designed to support a cohort working on developing works from the research phase to public presentation.

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