

The Political Art of Alicia Grullón



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Percent for Green (all images courtesy the artist)

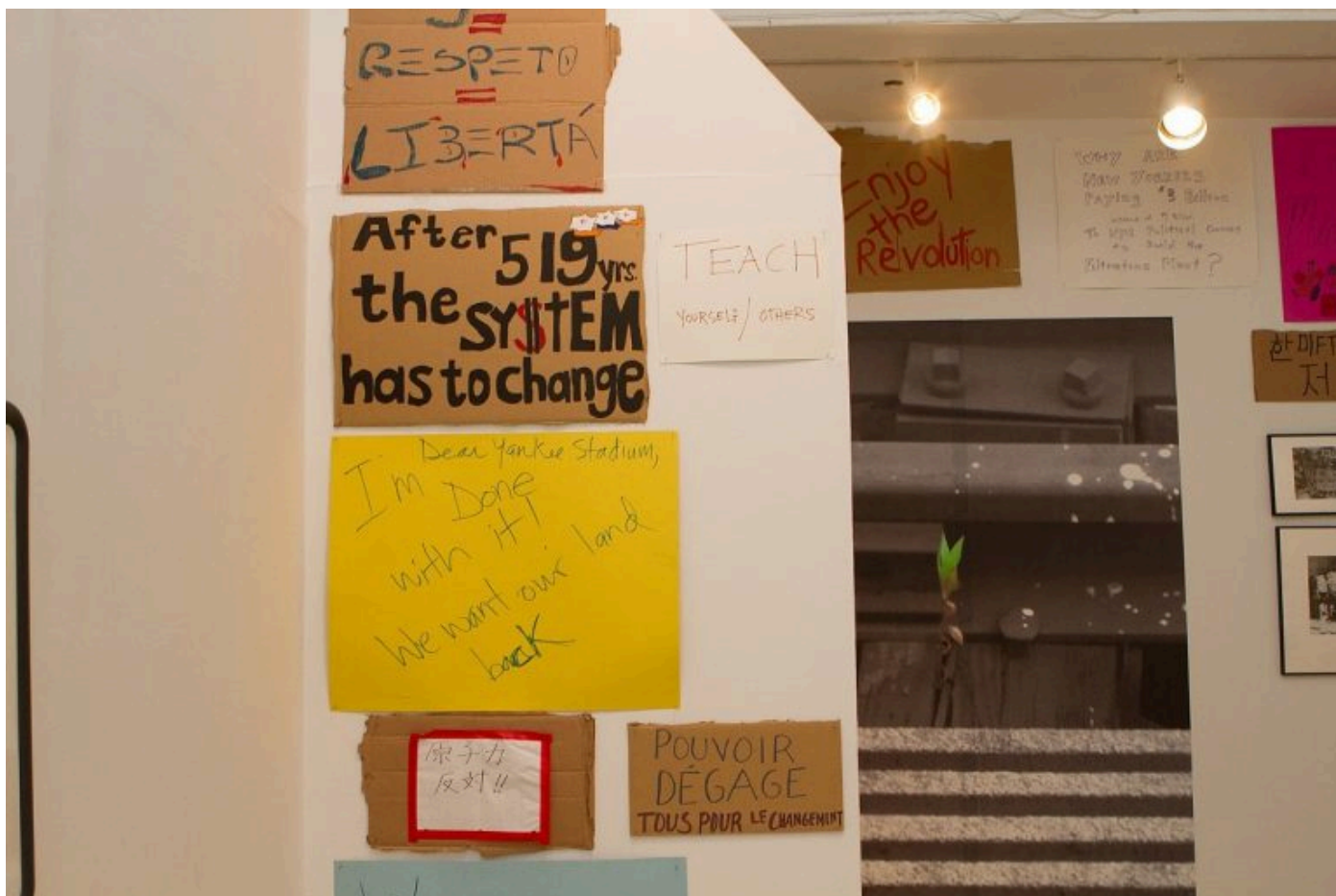
Like the food on our supermarket shelves, public artworks appear to us with their history of labor relations mostly obscured. We perhaps stop to snap a photograph of the work, or to render judgment on the site it occupies, but that artworks should populate those sites, and how and why those artworks came to arrive there, can be as easy to take for granted as the hidden provenance of the packaged foodstuffs we toss into our grocery carts.

Much public art in the United States has been funded by [Percent for Art programs](#), which stipulate that a certain small percentage (typically between 0.5%–2%) of eligible government-funded construction costs must be spent on public art. The first such program was implemented in Philadelphia in 1959. Twenty-eight states, and many more cities, currently have Percent for Art

legislation on the books. New York City’s program, signed into law by Mayor Ed Koch in 1982, has commissioned nearly 300 projects since its inception.

Most rationales for public art programs emphasize civic-minded virtue. On this view, public art — fiber in the salty diet of the polis — is considered an inherent good for the citizenry, believed to promote a robust sense of community and place. While it may well be the case that, like vitamins or Muesli, public art is inherently good for the body politic, it is worth keeping in mind that Percent for Art programs actually originate out of Depression-era New Deal legislation designed, first and foremost, to give unemployed artists work. The initial health goal was not civic renewal but job creation.

As both a work of art and a proposed environmental ordinance, Alicia Grullón’s *Percent for Green* project throws into relief some of the wherefores and whys behind Percent for Art legislation and public art more generally. For the ongoing project, which she refers to as a work of “social sculpture,” Grullón has conducted environmental justice workshops at museums (The Bronx Museum of the Arts), galleries (Longwood Art Gallery) and community centers (NYCHA Betances Community Center) throughout New York City, sometimes publishing one-off broadsides featuring participants’ written and artistic responses. The workshops, oriented toward the environmental health concerns of communities of color, have provided the basis for a proposed piece of eponymous environmental legislation.



Percent for Green

Modeled after the New York City law to which its title alludes, the *Percent for Green* bill proposes to earmark 1% of City-funded construction costs to support green initiatives in underserved neighborhoods. At first blush, such policy ambitions, however urgent, seem quixotic in the face of strapped municipal budgets and bleak political realities. But legislative art has achieved policy successes before, if slow and hard-fought ones, such as Laurie Jo Reynolds's *Tamms Year Ten* project, which resulted in the 2013 closing of the Tamms Correctional Center, a former supermax prison in southern Illinois. And even during the time when the legislative outcome remains undetermined, the project itself can raise awareness around an issue. In the past year, for example, [Aviva Rahmani](#)'s "Blued Trees" has garnered mainstream attention for its attempt to halt the expansion of a gas pipeline in Peekskill, New York through the clever use of artistic copyright law.

Whether or not Grullón's proposed bill eventually passes into law, its structural parallels to the city's Percent for Art law are telling. In both cases, the one-percent figure, while better than nothing, makes the program seem a token form of patronage, one of those sops business occasionally throws culture to maintain appearances. In an artistic context, especially that of public art, this level of subsidy, while perhaps a bit patronizing, nonetheless makes a certain intuitive sense. We want art around, for a variety of reasons, but we don't imagine it serves as essential a civic function as the sites and buildings it has been commissioned to adorn.

In an ecological context, however — and here lies Grullón's essential provocation — that one-percent, a loaded figure post-Occupy, appears downright scandalous in its paltriness. The scientific consensus around climate change suggests that the scale of Grullón's proposed subsidy remains wholly inadequate to the scale and urgency of the problem. Much more needs to happen, much sooner, in our local communities and beyond. Both Percent bills seek to improve citizens' well-being, but in *Percent for Green* the civic health at stake is not merely metaphorical. The Bronx, for example, has the worst air quality and highest asthma rates among New York City's boroughs.



Percent for Green Community workshop, vermiculture composting

The problem isn't that *Percent for Green* asks for too little. It's that the little it asks for still feels like an enormous ask. In modeling her proposed bill after a modest, commonly adopted form of arts legislation, Grullón dares lawmakers and art world onlookers to discredit the proposal as unrealistic and overambitious. Almost unwittingly, the project functions as a Rorschach test measuring the extent of its audience's cynicism. Dismissing its legislative ambitions as hopelessly quixotic contributes to the problems the project seeks to redress.

Elsewhere in her artistic practice, Grullón performs re-enactments of politically charged historical events, most recently her April 13 re-enactment, at BRIC House in Brooklyn, of Texas Senator Wendy Davis's eleven-hour-long 2013 filibuster against a restrictive abortion bill. Such performances are of a piece with the gesture of proposing legislation as a work of art. Both types of work operate through a distinctive form of mimesis. Under the aegis of art, they stage scenarios, all too realistic, that make visible the quiet cruelties of the political process. But rather than stop there, self-satisfied with holding a mirror up to nature, *Percent for Green* strives to effect concrete, positive change in the world.

As such, *Percent for Green* puts the lie to the idea that artists interested in politics would be better served directing their energies toward politics proper than art-making. Not only are the two activities co-extensive for Grullón but proposing the bill as art affords her otherwise unavailable angles of political approach. Literary critic Rob Nixon has coined the term "slow violence" to

describe the largely invisible, long-term environmental depredations visited upon disadvantaged communities and cultures as a result of climate change. In the face of this predicament, art such as Grullón's provides a way to make visible what might otherwise remain invisible. As proposed legislation, the bill would likely be a footnote in the minutes of a community board meeting or in local newspaper. Framed as art, it not only has a better chance to become visible but even, maybe, enacted.

Correction: *A previous version of this article stated Alicia Grullón worked at The Laundromat Project. This is incorrect; she works at NYCHA Betances Community Center. This has been amended.*