

## A conversation between Nicolás Dumit Estévez and Alicia Grullón

**NDE:** Alicia, I would like to start this conversation by asking you to elaborate on *PERCENT FOR GREEN* and to tell us how this endeavor relates to the work that you are developing as part of *Back in Five Minutes*, the residency program at El Museo del Barrio?

**AG:** My project *PERCENT FOR GREEN* deals with looking at climate change in the Bronx and how art can serve community. The goal is to pass a bill allotting funds from city-funded construction projects to sustainable green initiatives overseen by small grassroots organizations in Environmental Justice (EJ) communities. Modeled after a Percent for Art, the bill would allot 5% of the budget for eligible City-funded construction projects to be spent on expanding green space and sustainable initiatives in EJ communities in New York City.

*PERCENT FOR GREEN* has consisted of roundtables, workshops, and my planning with Bronx-based grassroots organizations for the People's Climate March. As a result, these organizations and I have created the Bronx Climate Justice Platform, a proposal of legislations addressing concerns in EJ communities. I launched the project this summer at the Longwood Art Gallery at Hostos Community College, with its legacy of strong activism which led to the college's founding. I proposed the launch to be at Longwood and Hostos due to the college's history. The bill was created through exchanges and contributions from the people who visited the gallery, conversations with Bronx residents, and organizations.

The work I am creating at El Museo is responding to the history of the museum and the current work on display. That this museum exists marks how art history and culture has been recorded. It's *other's* gigantic intervention. The work of Marisol and the artists in *Playing with Fire* and the museum are part of my artistic legacy. These are examples of moving the dialogue forward. It might even invite the question: has the conversation moved forward? If I were to change the dates of the work produced they would still be contextually relevant today. Is their strength, especially in the case of Marisol and women in art, still a persistent problem of women being placed on the back burner in the history of art?

**NDE:** We coincided at the September People's Climate March in New York City. While your investment in environmental issues is clear, I was wondering how this translates into the artwork you do? For example, how is your involvement with South Bronx organizations like Mothers

on the Move and the North West Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition reshaping your art practice?

**AG:** The nature of my work is to experiment and explore through process and exchange. I see that participating in community allows me to go further into how this is a site where issues of race, class, gender, and activism open up. My ideas come from asking if it's possible for art to transform how community and history are experienced. I want to find out if my position as an artist and the things produced from making art can impact history. These activists, like Wanda Salaman, Nova Strachan, and Taliegh Smith, to name a few, impact history every day through their work with residents, government, schools, etc. As an artist I am part of the community and benefit from the work of the activists. So then, how can I put my skills to use beyond the practice of producing an object or what we consider "art"?

**NDE:** You are making art and engaging in activism in the context of the South Bronx. What are the most pressing concerns in this borough and how is your work responding to them?

**AG:** The City has become very stratified. The inequality is desperately un-New York. The Bronx has rebuilt itself but stills struggles with history largely due to the highway infrastructure implemented in the 1950s and redlining, discouraging investment from people of color. The quality of air is bad; public schools need care; real estate development is running rampant displacing people; there is a lack of green space and community gardens; the irony of poor quality fresh food although the Hunts Point Market distributes the freshest produce throughout the City; and massive food pantry lines. There's a church off of Jackson Avenue, Iglesia Evagélica Española del Bronx, where I will be working with on *PERCENT FOR GREEN*. This endeavor will be done in collaboration with Mothers on the Move and Radio Diáspora, whose pantry provides over 2 million tons of food per week to South Bronx residents, and that is still not enough. The lines go around the corner twice sometimes. In my work I want to invigorate the activist in us all. The people power that we have in even the smallest action. Supporting the work of the activists and reminding people we are a community is how I am responding.

**NDE:** I am curious as to how you see your role as an artist and activist in the midst of so much "socially engaged" art that only scratches the surface of a given situation.

**AG:** Art like politics questions how one establishes one's presence in the world. How people engage together, exchange information, and take

action are the starting points for directly re-structuring society. As an artist these ideas bring up many questions especially in regards to how useful art can be. Everything trying to make a true change only scratches the surface. The world needs a complete re-assessment after 600 years of the same economic values (see, take, & sell). But, if we all scratched at the surface hard enough we'd be able to gauge open and uncover a potential that would un-nerve us all and that's our own amazing potential for working at justice, caring, and balance.

**NDE:** Can you use words to give us one of the images that your art has generated? I am asking this while thinking of the great potential artists and other visual image-makers can have on activism.

**AG:** Endurance.

**NDE:** I would like to return to the subject of the South Bronx, a place I call home, and one that New York City uses as its dumping ground. What are some ways in which artists in the borough can advocate social justice?

**AG:** That's a hard question only because you have to want to be involved. Volunteer first. Then, see what needs to be done and how you can help get it done.

**NDE:** One last question! What is your vision for a green museum and a green art world?

**AG:** I never thought of that before. Well, an easy answer would be look out the window, see the green spaces around you and protect them. Protect the green spaces far away from you because they all are the same, they serve the same function. These spaces and the encounters they generate can give us an inkling at what a green museum and art world might look like. There is balance, function, and diversity there. A harder answer would be let the people build it.