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## Bringing back the future: an interview with Alicia Grullón

By Jehan Roberson

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I sat down to talk with artist Alicia Grullón unsure of where we might go, but certain we'd address where we have been. Having met through my job and her artist residency at the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, I knew Alicia's work to be fiercely powerful and firmly rooted in the histories, voices, discussions, and love for people of color. It is this love, this unwavering dedication to communities of color, to our artistry, our histories, our beauty and our trauma that is the heartbeat of her work. She spans disciplines, geographies, and temporalities. What I appreciate most about her work is that it requires something of you. Through her acts of reckoning and of recuperation, she embodies adrienne maree brown's concept of imaginative power, affirming that "it is our right and responsibility to write ourselves into the future."<sup>1</sup>

Jehan Roberson: *As I was re-reading your bio, I was thinking about where you say your performance art interrogates the "politics of presence." Your activism, too, lines up with politics of space, which led me to wonder about site-specific work, and the places where art is supposed to be made, celebrated, housed, interrogated ... Is that what you meant by "politics of presence?"*

Alicia Grullón: I think that place has so much to do with land, and has so much to do with how we've come to be on this particular land, how land has since been cultivated and developed and geared, that I think to ignore our presence in space is to ignore the history of land. So even down to our identities, our identities are largely affected by whether we have been forcefully displaced from a specific land, or forcefully placed in a specific land. Or both, depending on the person and their background. Coming into a space not invited, but claiming it as your own. Those things are so unresolved that when we talk about these particular politics, it seems as if the conversation is either refused or ... these ideas of land percolate, but aren't central as a starting point in even talking about art. Because art, also, has so much to do with presence in a place. And whether that presence in a place is through an artifact that was stolen and placed in there, or a collection of artifacts that became these curiosos in

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someone's cabinet that led to the founding of a museum, and the land that museum is on. Or, even our understanding of art is coming from a Western European perspective. So that means most of our knowledge about art is centered on a Western definition of how it's supposed to function, what its purpose is supposed to be, how it's supposed to be made, what media are used, where it's supposed to be shown ... I'm just raising questions about how we can rethink this. Because it's not fitting into my lived experience, or the lived experiences of many other artists who are black or indigenous, or of color, or queer. One approach is to be specific about place. For me, when I go into a project, or when I'm invited somewhere, I look into the history of that particular area, that particular place, highlights and not, to inform me in my work and to inform me on what the project will become.

JR: *So there's a lot of research, then. Would you say your practice is largely interrogative, with a constant reflection on what it means to build off of these questions?*

AG: Completely. There's a lot of research, a lot of thinking. It's a lot of reading and a lot of digesting, and a lot of inquiry. I've been asking myself if it's possible to separate our identity from place or where we're from. How do we get to a more human understanding of people? Which is difficult, because being human has been claimed, particularly, by white men. So that becomes a challenging question because I am human. I know other humans who are not white and male. Or white females. And yet, for us to get down to that essential need to take care of other issues, often based on the illness of being human, I'm wondering how to interrogate our belonging to a place and not belonging to a place. Because [my art] is so based on that. And then excavating how other people identify with a location, and not have it be a colonized idea of how one identifies with a location? How do we relate to a location? How does that happen? Through family? Through what we do in a place?

JR: *It's difficult to even find language to discuss our relationship to land outside of ownership. How do we think of our relationship to land outside of laying claim to it? And how does performance become the vehicle for that interrogation?*

AG: Performance, for me, is so central on my body. With all performance, it is. It's our instrument, our medium. How are we using this medium? It goes back to this place: How is my presence, my being very aware that I'm a woman of color, how is my presence a vehicle for interrogating belonging to land? I think it becomes very exciting, in a sense, because I go from that semiotic condition of my being – what I look like, my history, where I'm from – and all those things become a way of pushing questions, pushing this interrogation to finally get to a more liberating conversation.

JR: *Which leads me to think about the historical reenactments that you do, your participation in *The Battle of Brooklyn* at BRIC for example.<sup>2</sup> Would you say more about reenactment and your body as its placed in this situation that initially did not center you?*

AG: For me, it's interesting that we're almost allowed to time travel through performance. In that particular instance, it was the idea of how do I participate in this Revolutionary War

reenactment and bring the future to this past? I think that played a huge role in my decision to have the Ferguson protestor's letter in one shoe and having the Red Nation's nine-point manifesto in the other. What happens if I bring these particular events, as best I can, to this particular reenactment? Does it change the way we look at this past history that's taught onto us, and that's reenacted every year? I mean, the reenactors see the power of performing those scenes over and over again. I think the power is in reliving a moment in history that validates the United States' becoming, although the militia men lost that one particular Battle of Brooklyn. But still, there's a huge enthusiasm in recreating war, and recreating things that aren't touched upon. The recreating of how land was taken, of how slaves were brought to this particular area, is not talked about. It's not even mentioned. It's not part of that landscape. It's just this war scene and everything else becomes blurry and cloudy. So, for me, I wanted to play with "what if I brought these two incidents back to the past?"

And then, as a child of immigrants, I have no place to go 'back' to. My parents might be from the Dominican Republic, and that was my culture at home, but it's not like I can go back there. New York City, because of my parents' choice, has become where I'm from. So if this is the place that I'm supposed to be from, how do I fit into this history? How do I physically fit into this history?

JR: *Was having the two texts in your shoes an internal dialogue or grounding? Or was that made public later on?*

AG: It was more of a grounding mechanism for me. No one would know unless I told them. [But] at the exhibition at BRIC, at *Reenactment*, they were there.

JR: *This is really interesting, because the ways in which people of color inhabit spaces has always required a necessary level of stealing away: of scurrying, stealing away yourself or certain talismans, grounding objects, that have always had to be kept under the radar to subvert, in a very The Undercommons sort of way. So it's also about how we inhabit and are present in space across time. It's an attunement to how history is at play in the present moment, and informing what is to come.*

AG: I think so. I do. When we look back at the importance of performance ... often I tell my students that the history of art as we know it is a Western history. So it's based on who could pay enough to paint. Historically they were kings, queens, dukes, etc., or the Roman Catholic Church. So, you needed to paint these extraordinary portraits of those in power in order to maintain power. They were usually housed in churches or at the palace. So, these paintings were made in the context of where they would be housed. If you go further into history, that tradition has largely been maintained. It's become more of a commodity now, changing art's function. But what if we go to non-Western European forms: why did people create art? Performance is a great way to start talking about that, because a lot of it was based on not just oral history and oral storytelling of a community but – depending on what community in the world you're talking about – it was usually part of some sort of tradition, some sort of ceremony. The community was involved in it. [These performances] were done

usually in very special times, at special moments. It would be worth looking into, because everyone was a part of it, but everything that was done, that was made, was for a higher understanding of our purpose here. It's a very different way of using what came to be art. It was more of what made us a community.

*JR: What would you say is the role of art in addressing the types of social ills you've mentioned? Under the best of circumstances, when resources are present and available, I suppose we might all imagine what art might be capable of doing. But within social practice, what role does art play within the community settings in which its based?*

AG: I don't support the commodification of social practice art and how it's being used, particularly by many foundations and governments, to replace much needed social services and public programming. An artist can't solve these problems. We're not social workers. We're not trained counselors. In many cases, putting an artist in a situation like that is problematic. Unless an artist has specific training in dealing with PTSD, in dealing with serious depression and anxiety, unless they have that background you should probably not put an artist in that situation. Because, even if they're well intended, they're coming in and then leaving. The community is still left with, maybe the beginning of some type of help, some type of communication. But because of long-trenched scarring, it's such a quick iodine fix for something that needs much more investment in order to have human recovery.

*JR: Earlier I wrote intimacy down as an idea that performance can seek to foster. Would you say the kind of performance that you're talking about is necessarily about intimacy?*

AG: Intimacy to do what with ourselves? [I think] it's the intimacy of that time to be silent with ourselves. That time not to be busy thinking about what are we going to do next. Shutting down the chatter in our minds. We're rarely ever in the present moment, just breathing in. I think that's the power of any religious – non Judeo-Christian, non monotheistic – ceremony that we ever partake in, that we're so immersed in that moment. We stop thinking about bills, we stop thinking about everything, and it becomes spiritual. I think that's the intimacy that is the point of it.

*JR: To what you were saying about types of performance that require audience or communal engagement, it can often breed a kind of intimacy and sharing that is antithetical to an increasingly individualist way of approaching the world. I guess I'm thinking about the necessary communal aspect of existence and how that's always been a condition of our survival. I'm wondering if you think of performance as working in and outside of those types of intimacies.*

AG: I'm trying to answer in regards to what my intention was, for example, with the Battle of Brooklyn intervention and bringing back that future. Is it possible to change history by bringing the future back to this moment that's being reenacted, which in itself is a performance? In itself, [the reenactment] is some sort of ritual these reenactors do every single year. There's power in that, which is why they keep doing it,

regardless of whether they stop thinking about their lives, because the majority of them are Vietnam War veterans. So it's like, you're reliving this thing but you're also so immersed in this 'now' that everything else fades away. So there's pleasure coming out of that.

JR: *I didn't realize the majority of them are veterans. So if they were in fact fighting in the infantry, what must these reenactments do for them in regards to their lived experiences?*

AG: I don't know. How is that used as some sort of coping mechanism? When there are so few social services available to veterans to help them cope with their trauma. So this is one of the many things some of them do that's not killing them.

I'm thinking of other work, for example *Illegal Death*, where I was in Van Cortlandt Park and I reenacted the discovery of an undocumented Honduran worker found frozen to death in the woods of Long Island in February 2007.<sup>3</sup> I reenacted that in the woods near my house. I laid in an area where it looked like shelter, in the snow, for a few hours. Then I did it again at the Bronx Museum of the Arts a few years later on their balcony. Again, under the premise of finding shelter on that balcony. And I performed it again at Socrates Park. Each time I think it got gorier, because there was no snow so I couldn't be frozen to death. I started adding elements, just a trace here of fake blood, so that a story with the viewer could be reflected on. Everyone knew [that] there was a description of what was occurring. That intimacy, really spending time with the crisis, just that time devoted to someone we're reliant upon to do our work, but because of the systems that hunt them down, people are in the position of their lives being threatened by the whim of a winter storm. We don't spend time with it.

I think it's more pertinent now in the 21st century when we're so distracted that we're not able to be intimate with social issues around us. We're not able to be intimate with museums and why they're here. What is their function? Why is this particular person on the board? We're not able to be intimate with this 11-hour filibuster – I reenacted Sen. Wendy Davis' 11-hour filibuster (<https://aliciagrullon.com/section/437353-filibuster-1-wendy-davis.html>). I wanted to really spend time with what she was saying, how she was defending a woman's right to healthcare. To spend time with the accounts she was reading. And at the same time I'm spending time with the ways we talk about reproductive health when we're not talking about the forced sterilization that happened to Black and Brown women in this country. It adds even more importance to saving these clinics. Spending time with what Davis was saying, what was happening, the asshole remarks by the senators who were trying to derail her. For me, as the performer, reading through this filibuster and, in a way acting it out, it was an intimate moment for me because I actually got to spend time with the words and with our legal system, not just in that moment.

I'm not that person, nor am I trying to be that person. There are elements of the moment that I might take for us to spend time with reliving them, like being in the Texas senate house. But I'm not Wendy Davis. I'm not a white woman. I think the reenactment is a [revisiting]

of that period in time but changing elements in order for us to see important layers that are pertinent.

JR: *And how the same thing said by a different person –*

AG: – might trigger something else. It might trigger a different understanding of abortion, of the need for women's health clinics.

JR: *Do you identify as a social practice artist?*

AG: I'm interdisciplinary, I say as I grin and laugh. There are aspects of social practice I use. They've always been very specific to climate change and environmental concerns in an urban setting.

JR: *I had an earlier question in mind about the dichotomy often made between art and activism, but do you see those as being two separate fields or as being necessarily separated? Or are both positionalities tied up with how you understand yourself as an artist?*

AG: I think it's just what's needed at this time. We might not always need to use activism as a medium. Right now, there are people, collectives using activism – there's Chinatown Art Brigade and I guess The People's Cultural Plan – as an art form. We didn't intend that [with The People's Cultural Plan] but it can be seen as art. Right now, in this moment, we need to use art to change the space or the place where art is appearing.

JR: *Would you understand the artist as a politically positioned figure?*

AG: Of course. We've always been taught to keep art and activism separate. We see it right now with many artists not talking about certain situations that are happening, not just at the Whitney, but at El Museo del Barrio. It goes back to this training where politics are separate, and your funding will rely on [that separation].

JR: *So when you're talking about presence as it relates to making art, how would you define it?*

AG: A couple of things are coming to mind because sometimes the artist is not present in their work. But, for me, it is having your politics present and open. Consistently, it also has to do with representation and, still, the lack of representation of Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, Muslim, queer people. Their presence in art institutions ... and it's not to say that just having them is enough. It's doing the work of requiring them to be intimate with all of these issues having to do with why we're here, how we got here, and who is being hurt in the making of this art or in the making of this institution. Why are we being asked to artwash crimes against humanity? I think that's how I see presence in art.

Alicia Grullón moves between performance, video, and photography. She channels her interdisciplinary approach toward critiques of the politics of presence – an argument for

the inclusion of disenfranchised communities in political and social spheres. Grullón's works have been shown in numerous group exhibitions including Franklin Furnace Archives, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, BRIC Arts | Media House, School of Visual Arts, El Museo del Barrio, Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery, and Performa 11. She has received grants from several institutions including the Puffin Foundation, Bronx Council on the Arts, and the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York. Reviews and essays regarding Alicia's work can be found in *The New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Hyperallergic*, *Creative Time Reports*, *Art Fag City*, and *ArtNet News*. Grullón has participated in residencies in the United States, South Korea, and Germany, and has presented workshops as part of the 2017 Whitney Biennial with Occupy Museums, Creative Time Summit '15, and The Royal College of Art, among others. She holds a BFA from NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and an MFA from the State University of New York at New Paltz, and has completed advanced graduate level coursework in art and philosophy of education at the Teacher's College at Columbia University.

### Note

1. adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 34.
2. See <https://www.bricartsmedia.org/eventsperformances/opening-reception-reenactment>),
3. See <https://aliciagrullon.com/section/418926-illegal-death.html>

### Notes on contributor

**Jehan Roberson** is a writer, educator, and artist whose work explores text as a site of liberation, place making, and historical intervention for Black peoples in the Americas. She currently serves as the Collections Specialist for the Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library where she works with artists, activists, and scholars to historically and digitally preserve their works. Her writing appears in *Apogee*, *Public Books*, *MadameNoire*, *VICE*, *emisférica*, and *Kalyani Magazine*, among others. Jehan is an editor of *Teachers & Writers Magazine* and *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*. She is a 2017 and 2018 Public Performance Art fellow with Betty's Daughter Arts Collaborative.

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