

Prize for Migration Project That Weaves Art and Politics

Maria Thereza Alves, an artist who helped found Brazil's Green Party and whose floating-garden pieces explore human migration through the idea of seeds distributed inadvertently around the world in the holds of cargo ships, has won the Vera List Center Prize for Art and Politics. The prize is given every two years to an artist or group whose work furthers social justice.

The center, based at the New School in Manhattan, said that Ms. Alves's ongoing project, known as "Seeds of Change," "weaves together the fields of art and politics in the most exemplary ways."

"The history of human migration has never been more relevant," David E. Van Zandt, the New School's president, said in a statement. "Through creative and scientific expression, Alves has made our past come to life through visual and oral art forms and, at the same time, highlights the importance of migration in the history of society."

Ms. Alves, who lives and works in Berlin, developed the seed project beginning in 2002 to explore the social, political and cultural history over centuries of "ballast seeds" — dormant seeds that ride along in the dense material used to stabilize ships. As a metaphor for human movement around the globe, the project, versions of which have been realized in various European port cities, touches on commerce, colonialism, ecology, migration and belonging.

Finalists for the prize included Gulf Labor, a coalition of artists working to ensure that migrant workers are protected during the construction of museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, and MadeYouLook, a South African collective that produces tongue-in-cheek works intended to disrupt urban routines and encourage the questioning of political norms.

The prize, first awarded in 2012 to the Chicago artist and activist Theaster Gates and in 2014 to the Syrian film collective Abounaddara, includes a long-term commitment by the school to aid the winner's projects through academic study or other means. It was established on the 20th anniversary of the List Center, named in honor of the philanthropist and collector Vera List, who died in 2002. List devoted her money and time to art and educational institutions, with a focus on programs that promoted social justice.