

## Jessica Kairé Interviews Papo Colo

**JK:** In 1977, you performed the seminal endurance piece *Superman 51* – a performance in which you ran down the West Side Highway in New York City, dragging behind you 51 wooden sticks attached to your body until collapsing on the pavement. Once the action was completed, did you feel a sense of defeat or triumph?

**PC:** THIS KNIFE HAS A DOUBLE EDGE, BUT IT IS ABOUT THE KNIFE NOT THE EDGE.

DOUBT IS THE REASON TO HAVE IT BOTH WAYS sometimes a triumph is a defeat and vice-versa. Duality is the dynamic of life, its Yin and Yang. The number of this piece is interesting and one of my favorites. 51 is the number of democracy, half plus one is the majority. Running is liberation, but come with a price. Obstacles will try to slow you down but you don't give up until your life is gone.

I will include some words about this work by my lover and a friend:

Jeanette Ingberman has written of El Colo's art that: "It is an idealistic search for triumph constructed by a predetermined act of defeat. Herein lies the dialectic necessary to all I art..." - *Lucy Lippard on Papo Colo*

**JK:** In both of your action-based works *Superman 51* and *Aro Head*, there is a merging of artist and athlete. What are the political implications in this suggestion?

**PC:** I WAS BORN INTO A FAMILY OF athletes, and grew up among artists, priests and politicians. For me all art is political. Even with the spiritual drawings and paintings that I am doing, the political implications are obvious: the P.R. status, etc. But my work has other intellectual and spiritual implications also, like muscle intelligent, body endurance, Sado-Masochist religious penitence or the simple exhibition of the power of the body in art. You can see actions and objects in different ways.

**JK:** The struggle to define Puerto Rican history and identity due to its commonwealth status is a recurring concern within your practice. How differently do you think younger generations of Puerto Rican artists are addressing similar issues?

**PC:** a colony has its advantages. Puerto Rico is a theater of tricksters; every generation has its own monsters. In my opinion, at the end, we have a good deal without honor. But who has honor these days? Our major city is New York. The center stage is here in NYC. The younger generations of Puerto Rican artists just have to appropriate it like I do. We can go back and forth between the Island and New York like in a flying bus. All we need is a driver's license. We are Latin Americans with an imperial seal; kind of free slaves, but again we cannot be deported, because we are part of the U.S. This contradiction is a wonderful situation to produce art. I use it in my own way; they in theirs.

To me this tension produced by ambiguity is an ideal space in which to operate Art - business - spirituality. This space is beyond good and evil. This is a space to be dealt with by a trickster: an island with no natural resources, a small 100x 39 miles island, the smallest of the greater Antilles, and overpopulated. More than half of Puerto Rico's population lives in the USA and other countries. We are a diaspora. Maybe the definition is no definition. Once defined, you know who you are, but ..... do we really know who we are? Civilization is hardly 5 thousand years old, a baby with a100 years using electricity. Look where we are. Do you imagine where we will be in a 100 thousand years?

I have to add that other "countries" laugh or put down our political status with the USA empire. I personally believe that any territory should be independent, but that is a utopia. There is no independence any more. Everybody is INTERDEPENDENT, so we Boricuas, AS TRICKSTERS, look for the best deal out there and make conceptual art out of a political status. Countries are businesses as an art form, and duality is their diplomatic language. I say this to quote one of my colonizers: "to be or not to be, that is the question."

**JK:** Coincidentally, I am visiting Puerto Rico at the moment and it is interesting how this struggle manifests itself in San Juan's urban and natural landscapes. Could you expand on this notion and in what ways it has, if so, become evident in your work?

Art is telling of what and who you are.....or who you want to be. If my work cannot explain itself then I am not doing a good job. The real struggle is to produce THE EXTRAORDINARY. This sounds 1 %, but if you look back in history to Zoroaster, the Greeks, the Romans, Buddha, Islam and the Judeo-Christian traditions you know that the 1% represents the thoughts of this world and the one after. The struggle is to create something transcendental, and that will cost your life and every love you have. You have to give everything without expecting anything back.

**JK:** I am curious to learn more about what the cultural landscape was like in Puerto Rico at the time you relocated to New York. What made you leave the country and how do you think it influenced the development of your work differently than if you had stayed in P.R.?

**PC:** Staying in P.R. was not in my plan since I was 10 years old. Since I was very young I wanted my existence to be an adventure. P.R. was the point of departure for me. After having a dream-like childhood and adolescence (growing up among extraordinary people in a creative environment), I left the island at 18, and as merchant marine lived in various countries. I even did the Don Juan peyote trip in Mexico with the Huicholes and the Cora. Art is a gift. Life is an adventure. Death is the afterlife, the unknown supernatural. I can't tell you until I get there. Art is how you express your life, your development, your predilections, love, ideas, places and persons. It is what guides one's work, and the work of a person, whether an artist or not, is the testament that she/he has once existed.

**JK:** I understand that you began working on a new initiative in 2012 – the School of the Americas – at El Yunque rainforest in Puerto Rico. Would you share with me some of the motivations behind it and if it is now up and running?

**PC:** This project was aborted with the passing of my partner's wife. I then decided to establish an art republic. Right now I am enjoying the pleasure of reading, drawing, writing poetry, bodybuilding and love. Life is an art form ...well.... that makes me Dionysian and Epicurean, BUT I AM puertorriqueño or Boricua or Nuyorican and a CULTURAL hybrid MULATO. What do you expect? You can go to [pangeaartrepublic.com](http://pangeaartrepublic.com) and find out.

**JK:** What is tropicality to you?

**PC:** Everything that I like, because I am a tropical person born in the middle of the planet and the climate this entails.....and I swim in my favorite beach at Xmas. Climate is an acquired taste, a predilection of the skin; it is sweat, boats, bikinis and barracudas. I can see also the other side of underdevelopment: hunger, the chains of all-inclusive hotels, casinos and prostitution, drugs and money laundering, pollution... The list of good and bad is unending, like any other place. But the body and its relation to this weather and how I love it, defines what tropicality is to me.

This interview is part of *Crossfire*, a project conceived and edited by Nicolás Dumit Estévez for El Museo del Barrio.