

Quintín Rivera Toro Interviews Carlos Jesus Martinez Dominguez / FEEGZ

QTR: Can you identify a lineage of graffiti art(ists) that you are a part of? What about them is it that you identify with?

CJMD: I was that tagger known in my school and neighborhood, not at all someone who would be considered “all city” by any means. I was also known as a “Black Book Bomber” which wasn’t necessarily a compliment. In terms of fame, I think it would be fair to have called me a “toy”. I actively wrote from roughly 1986-1997. I am actively involved in a project documenting Dominican Americans in the Graff movement with the Dominican Studies Institute at CUNY. Puerto Ricans obviously are widely recognized as pioneers in Graff history. Although you don’t necessarily need a cultural connection to love graffiti, that link has played a big part. So I identify with Graff Culture, but especially as that “Toy,” “Black Book Bomber”, “Tagger” or even “Hispanic” Graff writer”

QTR: Do you run with a crew or solo? Why?

CJMD: I work with many artists and educators; most notably a young filmmaker named Marie Jimenez and printer Pepe Coronado. Dister Rondon is also someone who has been instrumental in my evolution as an artist. Collaboration is essential to some of my more ambitious projects and working with others who enrich me with knowledge just makes s#*t better.

QTR: Would you consider making an art practice outside of NYC? Why?

CJMD: I have thought of practicing in the Zona Colonial in the DR and recently Santurce, PR (which has supplied another fantasy). Two other locales I have ties to are Austin, TX and Atlanta, GA, although I feel like I never want to be disconnected from Washington Heights, NYC on a permanent basis. I’m not the type of person who could live or work without a link to family and my cultures.

QTR: How do you relate (existentially) to the political status of the Island of Puerto Rico?

CJMD: To visit my direct Puerto Rican family I travel not to Borinquen but to Killeen, TX. This is due to coming from a largely military based family on my Puerto Rican side. So my romanticizing of the Independence movement was not popular to say the least. I have always been told that I shouldn’t speak on the issue, that I do not understand and am not a real Puerto Rican (which I’m always told by Dominicans also). I have always found the issue a bit ironic. My

mother who grew up in PR for a bit was the romantic “revolutionary” and would tell me stories of interviewing “independentistas” for her school newspaper. My dad, on the other hand, would tell me stories about people like Generals Pedro del Valle, Salvador E. Felices, Governor Luis Muñoz Marín and Boxers. I tend to take after my mom in that regard. My heroes include Bentances, Lebrón, Albizu Campos, and Big Pun. I would love to see a sovereign Puerto Rico, however it doesn't seem most Boricuas do according to the evidence or my personal experience.

QTR: How has the role of protestation evolved for you over the years, as you get older?

CJMD: I've never been much of a protester in the traditional sense. I have probably been to less than 5 protests in my life. I consider myself more of an activist than protester. I protest through my art mostly, by volunteer work in my communities and outside of my communities with organizations such as Grito de los Excluidos, Comité Pro Niñez Dominico Haitiana and past work with I Love my Hood. Lately what has been peaking my interest as an activist is my concern with the state of the arts in Washington Heights. My area's arts organization, Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance, has failed to meet the demands of the community when it comes to inclusion, except if you're into theatre. We have a couple of websites that claim they are the "voice of uptown" but seem to think the only artists we have up here are rappers, and the other site almost exclusively covers stuff going on outside the hood. It's a sad state when a bookstore has more visual arts than the only gallery space we have in the area, Shout out to Word Up Books!!!! If it wasn't for them and Rio Penthouse Gallery there would be no space to show art up here. Yes we have local bars, restaurants and commercial spaces that try and fill the void but it shouldn't come to that when we already have an institution collecting public funds in our name.

QTR: Is there a dilemma between the wall or the canvas for your art production?

CJMD: Not at all. Unless you're illegally bombing or burning, there's always room for some purest to say you ain't doing it right. A lot of the burners we see are legal, which kinda makes them murals in a Graff style. Back then they would almost all be illegal and you would think to yourself how did the artist/vandal/athlete/daredevil do that with a spray can, in the cold, with the danger of being beaten or locked up. At first I only used street signs to try to create a compromise or to make a comment on the conversation of what constitutes true graffiti but I really don't give a f#@k about that anymore.

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

Nicolás Dumit Estévez Interviews Javier Hinojosa

NDE: Javier, your photographs of Melquiades Herrera with which you are participating in *Playing with Fire: Political Interventions, Dissident Acts and Mischievous Actions* always put a smile on my face. These photographs are installed right by the entrance of the galley and so, every time I visit the space I am in a good humor. Can you talk about the histories behind the production of these images?

JH: I am glad that they make you smile. Melquiades was an irreverent person and, as a matter of fact, his characterizations were packed with his sense of humor. These were fun work sessions in which he always surprised me with new characters. The series *Las faces de Melquiades*, *The Phases of Melquiades*, were the photographs with which I participated in the biennial of photography in Mexico in 1986, and I still remember the commentaries made by the public about the humor in the work amidst the preponderant solemnity that existed then in the photographic circles.

Melquis and I met at the Escuela de Diseño, where both of us were starting to teach. We became close friends. I still remember how our work on the portraits in the exhibition at El Museo started. I approached Melquiades about taking them for an art portfolio that was meant to showcase artists who will become well known in the future. He accepted my invitation and we walked through the center of Mexico City together with Maris Bustamante and Rubén Valencia, all of these members of the No Grupo. Melquiades pulled out a sugar skull on the spot that he was carrying in a market shopping bag that he always traveled with, which was full of tchotchkes. For him all of these were precious objects that nurtured his collections. This is when I made the first of several studies. These photographs were not published in the portfolio because Melquiades asked me to make a portrait depicting a mask made out of combs. I selected this image for the portfolio, it has become an iconic representation of Melquiades's creativity and spirit. I decided to title this image *El señor de los peines*, *The Lord of the Combs*.

NDE: How did the complicity between Melquiades and you emerge at the moment of creating the characters or personas in photographs such as *Melquis es amor y arte*, *Melquis is Love and Art*?

The idea emerged as a result of a graffiti that appeared in one of the classrooms of our school: *Melquiades es amor y arte,*" *Melquiades is*

Love and Art. I thought this graffiti would make the ideal stage for another series of portraits, and so I proposed this to Melquis. We planned the shots in advance and agreed upon a date to meet. In this case, I sought to introduce different elements, including a flying stool. We had fun!

NDE: Before you produced your photographs of Melquiades, did you work with other artists focused on performance art or what the Melquiades and the No Gurpo called “montajes de momentos plásticos,” to refer to their actions?

JH: Before this I had generated some portraits of people connected to the cultural world in Mexico, but the series that I made with Melquiades were the first ones of this kind. I must add that some these portraits embody a powerfully synthetic action enacted by Melquiades. Others portraits were characterizations of less specific actions which I considered as thematic units. Although the initial intention was to make the portraits I described at the beginning of this conversation, the work can be understood today as photo/performances. Simultaneously, with this series of Melquiades, I made some portraits of Maris Bustamante and Rubén Valencia.

NDE: Your contribution to the exhibition at El Museo del Barrio goes far beyond the document of a performance, at the same time it suggests a relationship with the archive of the ephemeral. What can you say about this?

JH: That the photographs were conceived as portraits implies an understanding of the artwork in itself that obviously transcends the documentary (this was never our intention) and that responds to the times. When one looks at the images today, one can confer on them a documentary character because they are the only registry of the actions of a performance artist. From this perspective the images acquire a character that makes them part, precisely, of what we call archive of the ephemeral. But I repeat that the intention of Melquiades, as well as mine was that of creating some portraits.

NDE: What project are you working on at the moment?

JH: Since 2001 I have been working on my project *Estaciones*, a photographic registry of protected natural areas in Latin America. *Estaciones* consists of the almost 300,000 kilometers that I have traveled through natural areas of Mexico, Guatemala, Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Perú, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador and Brazil. Along this journey I have also incorporated into photography elements such as

video art, assemblages, and prints on non-traditional materials – metal and glass -as well as a series of artist books on the same subject.

NDE: I may not be able to join you in one of the amazing natural areas that you describe, but when I go back to the Mexican capital, I was wondering if we can do an iteration of the walk you undertook with Melquiades around the *Centro Histórico*, the Historic Center, when you initiated your portraits of him.

JH: I'd like to do that.

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Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga Interviews Jessica Kairé

RMZ: I understand that Guatemala has a long history of violence due to CIA interventions in the 1950s to guerrilla warfare in the 1970s and 80s, and from the genocide committed by Efraín Ríos Montt and current-day street gang warfare. Was there a particular event or moment of violence that inspired *CONFORT* Series?

JK: Years ago I was partying with a couple of friends and at some point we got in the car to drive back home. We were pretty wasted and suddenly found ourselves in El Gallito, a barricaded neighborhood in Guatemala City that's controlled by drug traffickers. Next thing you know, two armed men drove up besides us and tried to block our way. I'm not sure what they were carrying but it looked like M14 rifles. Long story short, we became involved in this random car chase and shooting until we finally, and fortunately, lost them. I'm telling you this story because it reveals how fragile life can be in a place like Guatemala.

When I made the first set of *CONFORT* sculptures, it was really in direct response to these kinds of encounters that we can experience on a daily basis and how we are so used to it. But with some distance, I've also realized that it was through this work that I began to unpack and articulate a set of personal experiences that are directly connected to those larger historical events, like the kidnapping of people who were close to me and others leaving the country in the early 80s, and the stress that came along with it.

RMZ: The color of one of the grenades reminds me of tropical fruits - bright, yellow, orange, violet, green, whereas other weapons are in pastel colors... How did you choose the color palette for the various sculptures and do the colors carry symbolic meanings?

JK: Playfulness and humor are elements I often like to use because I see them as good entry points to more dense subject-matter, so switching the weapon's typical black, brown and deep green palette for bright colors made sense. The Tropical Grenade's colors (yellow, orange, green and pink), which you mention, came out of a chat with El Museo's curators in which I remember Elvis Fuentes proposing that the grenade resemble a mango and I liked that idea because it suggested a kind of violence gluttony.

RMZ: Are viewers sometimes able to hold the *CONFORT* Weapons when on display?

JK: Usually, the work is displayed behind glass and isn't interactive but it really depends. I once displayed a dozen grenades without glass and at least 3 of them got stolen. On another occasion, for an exhibition titled *Horror Vacui / The Disappeared*, I created a series of eight soft bodies that visitors could wear as they travelled throughout the space, an extension of the *CONFORT* series. The eventual wear and tear of the pieces was valuable to me. It gave the work its own history and also offered a more visceral experience for the visitors.

RMZ: The egg-like shape and architecture of El Nuevo Museo de Arte Contemporáneo – NuMu in Guatemala reminds of the *CONFORT* Series. Is there an aesthetic link between these projects?

JK: To some extent, I'd say this is purely coincidental. But I do think that there's an underlying link between the two, given that they were both created within the same context and respond to larger issues of underdevelopment and precariousness. NuMu's oval-shaped architecture was built and tailored to house an egg-selling business, but I think its aesthetics are common in our country and probably result precisely from the lack of resources. And this same shortage ranges from employment to educational resources, which in turn brings forth organized crime and violence.

RMZ: Can you describe the development of NuMu... How you went about acquiring the space and gathering the funds to build the museum? Were there difficulties or barriers in establishing the museum?

JK: For several years, Stefan Benchoam and I talked about the need to create a museum that would support, exhibit and document contemporary art within the country, but we couldn't quite resolve it. Then in 2012, Stefan called me up saying that he'd found a space for rent. Turns out it was this iconic 2 x 2.5 meter high oval-shaped structure that we'd both known about since we were kids – we rented it out the next day. By July, we had developed a yearly program that resembled that of other leading museums and organized a fundraiser. We inaugurated the space with a pictorial intervention by Costa Rican artist Federico Herrero and since then, NuMu has presented projects by diverse artists and curators, which have brought about cultural exchange, the opportunity for artists to realize unique projects and a growing relationship between NuMu and its neighboring community.

It's almost perverse to think that the same limitations due to which no contemporary art museum has existed in the country prior to NuMu

(and under which a modern art museum barely survives) are the same that have created a unique situation for us to question and re-define what a contemporary art museum can be in the 21st century. Artists have little to no institutional support in Guatemala and every four years a new government sets in which interrupts any cultural advances being made. So we basically have to build things from scratch. Within NuMu, our challenges have mostly gravitated around funding and time constraints. We've invested from our own pockets and the exhibition production is usually split between Stefan supporting artists on-site while I outsource digital and printed materials from New York. But at the same time, we've been very fortunate to receive the ongoing financial and emotional support from Friends of NuMu, a group of people who recognize the need for the Museum, and who genuinely supports its mission.

RMZ: In much of your work, there is a desire for the work to interact directly with the viewer. Is there an underlying mission in your practice to have the work effected by the viewer?

JK: There are exceptions, but in general there is that intention in my practice. I'm always very interested in sculpture and this medium easily lends itself to interaction, given that much of our experiences as human beings become evident through our relationship with objects. On a more personal note, I would say that this intention comes from my personal background of being raised in a traditional Jewish home which often meant sitting around the table to share a meal with my family and in contrast experiencing hostility in the Guatemalan urban landscape. Having had this kind of twofold experience has increasingly gotten me interested in creating platforms where food and dialogue can meet.

RMZ: To me the general concepts of “relational aesthetics” - of creating a situation of shared experience functions perfectly and is elemental to Latin American culture. I am wondering if you feel similarly or have observations or thoughts regarding relational aesthetics embedded in Guatemalan culture and way of life?

JK: Culturally speaking, I think that there are connecting points between the different Latin American countries, but each is also very peculiar. Within the context I grew up in Guatemala City, the need for privacy and intimacy prevailed. Of course, this is coming from very personal circumstances but there's definitely a lack of conviviality among the culturally diverse communities in the country. So there's a huge need to generate spaces for shared experience and to respectfully celebrate this diversity, I think this is where art can become less of a commodity and more of a mediating resource. And I'd say nowadays there are more

efforts being made amongst the local arts community to promote collaboration, but things don't happen over night.

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Carlos Jesus Martinez Dominguez / FEEGZ Interviews Manuel Acevedo

CMD: As I was going through your work and interviews I noticed there's little info about you as a Graff writer, can you give us a quick intro to that chapter? What did you do, bomb or burn? What were your tags if any besides Prince/ Prins? Inspirations?

MA: I'll try to make a long story short. I began my artistic practice as an illustrator, graphic artist and seriously interested student of photography at Arts High School in Newark, NJ. During my junior year, an art teacher who was a great inspiration, Mr. K, introduced me to the world of wide-angle photography using the 20mm lens with a field of vision in 90 degrees. The following year (1982), with camera in hand at all times, I signed up as a member of the Guardian Angels (Newark Chapter) where I had to travel from Newark to NYC to train and occasionally patrol the city subways. That was my first exposure to the Graff writers' scene. The urban landscape was second nature to me, and I felt a strong connection to the expression of subversive language in grand scale and volume. Back in Newark I found off brand spray at my local hardware store and started one color outlines and fill-ins on freestanding cinder block walls around the neighborhood. I officially became known as PRINCE in the West Ward (Vailsburg section) of Newark. I changed the spelling to PRINS and then NAM a year into it, with the intention of forming a crew called No Apparent Motive.

CMD: What do you think of being paired with the other "Graffiti artist" in this project? Is it something that annoys you or has it in the past? Or is it something you embrace and find pride in?

MA: I embrace it. I embrace all of the disciplines that make me the artist I am. First of all, I have never been one to limit my work and artistic pursuits based on commercial appeal or a marketplace that demands stringent definitions. I work in multiple disciplines and I have resisted being categorized as a single-issue, single-genre artist. Fortunately, there is now an appreciation for artists who have multidisciplinary practices. In the past, I have been criticized for changing the direction of my work--particularly after receiving accolades in photography--however I embrace change and am constantly seeking challenges. If it's true that we are constantly evolving we must embrace change, otherwise we limit personal growth.

Long before I could be considered an "indie artist" I embraced

underground or alternative art forms like comic book art, customized car culture, day-glow art of the 70s and sign painters. In fact, underground artists and crafts people in my youth were very inspiring and provided insight into popular, social and political realities of the day. In my hometown of Newark, there was JStarr, Pez and Flare from North Newark. Jstarr was considered a Graff guru and mentor to many up and coming writers, and also was knowledgeable about the Hip Hop scene across the river in NYC. Jerry Gant aka Nasty Nas was the first person to bring temporary street installations and stencil works into the derelict properties of Newark. He recycled old broken TV tubes with other elements (debris) and sprayed up objects with gestural raw encrypted marks. You could spot them from the 31 Bus, which ran across South Orange Avenue (West to East Side).

While in East Orange, I'd meet up with Merge (who became an art director for the Source magazine), Glenie Glen, Jay Burn, Mello Max and Abigail Adams the owner of Movin' Records (a label and record shop of house music). She connected the northern Jersey writers to the Roxy's in NYC, as well. Remember, we were in our early to late teens. It was a hotbed of activity, Jersey writers connected to New York and vice versa.

One day in 1984 I met Doc, Beam and Staf27 at the Sidney Janis Gallery on 57th Street. They were responsible for my introduction to the Graff scene in Brooklyn and I painted my first train on the 3 Line. I joined TC5- -a group of talented self-taught artists though they painted all the time and developed unique style inspired by Dondi and other writers. I feel very fortunate to have experienced such a broad range of audio and visual expressions in the company of these talented artists and am honored to be amongst them.

CMD: Do you think there is still a need for museums dedicated to "Latinos"?

MA: In short, yes. In 1984, I studied photography with Geno Rodríguez at SVA. He was one of the co-founders of the Alternative Museum as well as the first Boricua instructor I had in an educational setting. I learned about cultural representation and photography within a conceptual framework. It challenged my notions of identity and helped me translate between local and global perspectives. My time at SVA shed light on the underrepresentation of people of color, including "Latinos", in the art world.

In the late 80s I discovered El Museo del Barrio. I must admit it represented something special. I experienced a museum that tried to meet the needs of the local community of East Harlem through its

mission to educate the community about Caribbean culture in particular, the island of Borinquen. I didn't know much about the history of Boricuas in New York until I learned the history of East Harlem.

El Museo has informed my understanding of the history of the Caribbean and the Americas through art exhibitions, programming and contextual literature. I feel my education as a young man and over the 25 years as an informed artist and educator wouldn't exist without the foundation for social justice and cultural representation that the museum was built on. Maybe, it should be renamed to The House Raphael Montañez Ortíz Built.

CMD: Do you think all "Latino" cultures and nationalities are represented equally in Institutions dedicated to such subjects?

MA: I'm careful not to play into the further stratification of Latinos by Latinos--when we compare ourselves amongst ourselves, however I think it is our responsibility to consider whose narratives and histories are collected, preserved, exhibited and interpreted by institutions. If it's true that collections of art and artifacts are ways of maintaining and protecting cultures and affirming a sense of identity or identities, then we have a lot more work to do.

CMD: If you could be lead visual propagandist for any government or revolutionary movement in history, which would it be and why?

MA: Prior to La Massacre de Ponce on March 21, 1937 (Palm Sunday) I'll set the stage: some very attractive folks would give out cold glasses of water laced with a minded altering drug like LSD to all the police officers 45 minutes before heading out of the station house to the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party March. As they experience a change of heart and mind, they are provided with Free Pedro Albizu Campos under garments (shirts). Then, their guns would be exchanged for tricycles, which they would ride over to the prime location. Once there, U.S. appointed governor of P.R., Blanton Winship is seated before a punching apparatus. As officers arrive to the scene they get off their trikes and line up. One by one each officer pulls the lever striking blows to his face and body with a leather glove filled with feathers and lead as to not break the skin. Film the event and send a film to Franklin D. Roosevelt. End the motion picture with line...This Is How We Remove U.S. Appointed Gringos. There would be no Ponce massacre. I know it's an absurd act. What act of war isn't absurd?

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Nicolás Dumit Estévez Interviews Maris Bustamante

NDE: Thank you Maris for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your work is of great relevance to artists from the new generation.

My first curiosity is about the degree of freedom to create that one could sense in the Mexican capital of the 80s. This is a period that precedes the hyper-commercialization of art and the artistic that is prevalent today.

MB: Within humanity there are always limits to thinking and making freely, and additionally Mexico is a very conservative country. In post-colonial Mexico, structures are organized so as not to give permission, because people will then liberate themselves. In the 70s and 80s, making and talking about experimentation and especially about change used to provoke scorn and dismissal from almost all of one's colleagues and institutions.

NDE: In an interview with Sol Henaro, in part of her publication, you discuss how you and *No Grupo* remained aware of artistic terms and impositions coming from outside. My understanding is that you, meaning you and *No Grupo*, used to reflect on your art practices as artists working within a very specific context and realities. What can you add to this, particularly in reference to the globalization of artistic practice?

MB: Our political frame of action was the legacy of 1968 within a Latin American context, and to artistically negotiate the enormous baggage of the traditional, logical, object-oriented culture with its continuous, historical experience over at least seven hundred years, with the exception of a very few ruptures.

We worked from our own geographic location to recuperate popular urban culture itself. But we did not want to fall prey to mannerisms or hollow superficialities. We were interested in recognizing ourselves as belonging to the left, but not in an orthodox or pamphleteering way, and our work clearly reflected this awareness. We were not at all interested in falling into the trap of making sensational work with a tabloid-like content. We accepted the challenge to produce a contemporary body of work attuned to its time.

Economic globalization has been a disaster at a hemispheric level because of the free flow of products. This globalization does not include

the possibility of a wide and free circulation of people and ideas. Those who profited from economic treaties were Others, both here and there.

On the other hand, the exponential growth of technology has supported us, allowing us to interrelate in an instantaneous and efficient way. This has allowed for disruptions of the absolute influence that traditional spokespersons for the System used to exercise. Thank to this we can see with clarity that schools and universities have become lazy. Those who become artists do so in spite of the systems.

NDE: What is your relationship to performance art, an artistic form that is in vogue, and that is not exempted from having a connection to colonialism and imperialism within the arts? The “history” of performance art traces its roots to Europe and the United States.

MB: For us, performance art was a platform that we invented and that we ended up locating conceptually to substantially change the artistic system in Mexico. Performance art helped us change how we thought and made art, and to critique many things that were in a deplorable state. There was a great need for drastic changes. We foresaw those changes that today have become commonplace. We foretold them.

From this we developed ideas and concepts through artwork, texts, and essays both through the academy as well as through artistic praxis to defend performance art from Western cultural hegemonies. First Western European, and then Anglo American thought not only appropriated it but also expropriated its platform to claim it as part of their own historical development.

What we did in performance art, installation and *ambientaciones* (which we call non-objectualisms) was to develop them from a Mesoamerican duality, from a very different cosmology. Once this approach became recognized and eventually fashionable, it stopped interesting me because once things become officialized they go down a road of no-return, one of repetition and laziness.

NDE: I am intrigued by the attention that your work in general gives to the autochthonous, to the quotidian in Mexico, at the same time that it formulates ideas and images at a sophisticated conceptual level. How do you achieve this dialogue?

MB: Our economic situation was always quite precarious, however we decided to work with our own traditional baggage in order to overcome this. When one does this with integrity, the results are clear and potent. We were very poor because we would go from one economic crisis to

the other, because capitalism was already foretelling what it would do with all of us. But we did not allow this to deter us. We were very ambitious, conceptually speaking.

Our decision was to value cultural elements that were in harmony with our intentions. Just like Picasso valued Black art and, during their time, the muralists recognized the value of Pre-Cuauhtémoc art, we decided to work with our immediate heritage: this mega-city that has become more and more complex due to anonymous popular contributions. We decided to recognize this urban popular culture as a way to voluntarily set ourselves apart from the elite bodies that develop and coopt the arts for themselves.

NDE: How did you come up with the idea of patenting the taco? You have inspired me to do the same with *el mangú*, a Dominican dish that is made from mashing green plantains into a puree-like consistency.

MB: My main idea was that of creating a social performance, and that of offering to the people the possibility of circulating in performatic situations; to pull it out of the galleries and museum, widening the perception of the public. All of this required identifying an element with enough power, content and cultural force. When I found this element, everything else started to unfold. The patent, as with kidnapping, was a resource that conceptualists were already hinting at, and so I thought this was the ideal strategy to get attention and to catch the eye of the non-professional, which is what a proposal of this kind called for.

NDE: Do you have any suggestions to share with artists from the younger generations? I am greatly inspired by the space that you, Melquiades and the *No Grupo* opened up to experimentation. This is something that takes effort to replicate in a time where international biennials and art fairs, and amidst the homogenization of the artistic “profession.”

MB: All of this paraphernalia is seeking to shed a light on artistic proposals as well as the individuals that produce them. They become class enclosures that attempt to distance the individuals and their proposals from the relevant political “mission” that art has had in the production of knowledge and ideas. I always understood, at least for me, that to be an artist is to do something that has not been done before and that makes a contribution to humanity. If I make art because “I like it” it only indicates a shallowness that has nothing to do with art. All the rest is “televising” art that is, it makes room for it in informal and lazy way, as entertainment. To me, the alternatives in art are to make art or to make pure *manualidades*, handicrafts.

NDE: I hope that our next conversation can take place in Mexico City, my favorite megalopolis. Would you be up for getting together for some tacos?

MB: We will do so!

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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 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.

Nicolás Dumit Estévez Interviews Quintín Rivera Toro

NDE: How did *Gíbaro* come about, and what does this action mean to you at personal level?

QRT: This is the story of two men, both named Manuel, who have influenced me deeply at an intellectual, as well as at an emotional level. First, I was fortunate enough to study history at the University of Puerto Rico with Professor Manuel Alvarado Morales before he passed away in January of 2010. It wasn't until I reached the university that I had access to a non-superficial, non-"sanitized" version of my country's history. Under Alvarado Morales I had the opportunity to learn an abundance of facts and information, and it was through this exposure that I learned about the second Manuel; the journalist and poet, who was also a medical doctor, Dr. Manuel A. Alonso, who published in 1845 his book of verses entitled *Gíbaro* (spelled with a "g" as in old *castellano*). In this book Alonso depicted the customs and traditions of the Puerto Rican countryside, as well as of its working class folklore. The term *Jíbaro*, approximately translates as "hillbilly," and is commonly used pejoratively.

Gíbaro, the first acknowledged literary accomplishment of the history of our culture, instantly became a point of personal pride. The thirst for such information impelled me to celebrate it, by inscribing the title of the book on my head for the public to witness. As was part of my intention, people asked me about the design on my head, and I had a chance to explain the facts. Using the word *Gíbaro* as a proclamation, my head turned into a billboard. The term became a form of empowerment by subverting its traditional meaning, and by simultaneously promoting this piece of beautiful literature.

NDE: *Jíbaro* has been used as a stereotype to refer to people who come from the countryside or those who reside there. What are the implications behind calling oneself *jíbaro* as opposed to using the term to refer to someone else?

QRT: In our age of academic and socio-political correctness, I feel that this is a way to re-examine the term and to re-signify a fact that people in my culture often try to ignore: that us Puerto Ricans come from a very mixed heritage. "*¿Y tu abuela dónde está?*, Where is your grandmother? *Con el negro detrás de la oreja*, With black behind the ear. Both of these popular sayings refer to the fact that our genetics are not predominant in any one ethnicity, certainly not White European. I have stopped using the term *jíbaro* (although I grew up with it being very normal) to refer to a third person. I actively curb myself. Likewise with many other terms that might be culturally

common, but really just propagate problems of inequity such as racism, classism and sexism.

NDE: Why did you decide to document *Gíbaro* in photograph, and is the photograph the actual artwork or the documentation of an action?

QRT: To be honest, this photograph exists thanks to a snapshot. The photo depicts me right before stepping out of my car for an opening in the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico back in 2006.

Gíbaro was originally meant to be an action/performance. Interactions with passersby and the consequent questions and conversation is where the art making really was for me. The action gave me the chance to express my passion for Alonso's book of verses, and for the historic fact that this was the first acknowledged piece of literature in our culture. My haircut grew out very quickly, therefore making *Gíbaro* an ephemeral artwork. I am very glad that this photo was taken, because I get to continue to talk about it. Many of my works, like this one, exist now only as stories, yet they are still interesting experiences. They represent lessons that I learned from the conceptual era in art history.

NDE: What is your connection to Puerto Rico, besides the fact that you were born on the island and that your family lives there? I am asking because we met in Berlin, Germany, then you moved to Rhode Island to pursue a graduate degree, and after graduating decided to relocate to your homeland.

QRT: I also lived in NYC for 7 very intense (!) years where I spent the best of my youth. Perhaps an interesting prefix and semantic layer for the word *connections* could be *inter-connections*. As an islander, and like any islander, we have no roads to interconnect us to other lands. We are not interlocked with other states as is in the U.S.A., Canada and Mexico; or other countries. Or as is in Asia, Europe and South America. It is not so simple for us Puerto Ricans to travel. We can't jump in a car and go cross-country. We therefore must travel abroad, relocate abroad, experience newness abroad. The "diásporas" between Puerto Ricans and the U.S.A. are recurring and cyclical due to our American citizenship status (see the Jones Shafroth Act of 1917, for an incredibly complex set of decisions based on the subject of national identity). That being said, we do enjoy an incredible advantage over the rest of Latin America, due to the fact that we are not illegal immigrants once in the U.S.A.

I conceptually work with locality and identity as a subject matter. The origin of my identity, which I actively choose to be a Puerto Rican identity, and further more a *cagüeño identity* (proud to be born in the municipality of Caguas, Puerto Rico), is a constant source of inspiration. There is work to be done, and

here is where I am most useful. I also use Puerto Rico as an intellectual reference point for me to experience the rest of the world. I do so as a critical thinker, as a maker of art statements, objects, and experiences.

I could also say I relocated back to Puerto Rico due the emotional and intellectual need to bring my daughter back to our cultural roots. I was well aware of the fact that the economic crisis has affected the quality of life in the island. The benefit of family and belonging is unequivocally more important than better asphalted roads, more diversity in culinary options or access to the latest trends. We'll have our chances to consume "better" culture elsewhere again. This is what us islanders do.

NDE: I am curious as to the connections that you and artists from your generation, living in Puerto Rico, are forging with their counterparts in the Caribbean and in the Caribbean abroad? I am asking because the migratory borders that situate Puerto Rico out of reach for most "Third World" peoples.

QRT: This is a constantly perplexing reality in my mind. We do not have a significant exchange with the rest of our Caribbean counterparts, a ridiculous fact in my opinion. Nevertheless, this is no accident. We have become insulated from the rest of the Caribbean in so many ways because of our relationship to the U.S.A. I sometimes have this image in my head that we are mapped alone in the Caribbean Sea, as if someone had whited out the rest of the islands around us, when really it is us who have been whited out from the Caribbean map. A very telling example is the famous saying: *Cuba y Puerto Rico, de un pájaro las dos alas*, Cuba and Puerto Rico, two wings of one bird. We share the same design in our flags for Christ's sake! But nothing could be further from that truth today. Socio-political events such as Castro's revolution and the U.S. military presence in Puerto Rican territory have made us become a separate phenomenon. Likewise with the rest of what you have called "Third World" peoples. We still are the Third World! I see it in our collective behavior. It is very palpable in our governmental corruption, underground economies, but mostly in our social approach to co-existing. We have been under the influence of a "First World" system for roughly 3/4 of a century, yet our access to it has been through the unsustainable economic possibilities provided by a "democratic" capitalist system.

We are not in any way self-sufficient. We import an abnormal amount of what we consume. We have no real fishing industry in spite of having water all around us. The examples and contradictions are endless. I hope that we become more aware of these underused advantages and of our proximity to other Caribbean nations, and use art as a bridge to help us overcome the not-so-evident political, military and economic barriers dividing us from the rest of the Antilles. Anyone up for an artistic *Confederación Antillana*? Anyone? Anyone?

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Nicolás Dumit Estévez Interviews Ricardo Miranda Zúñiga

NDE: Can you talk about the use of firearms in *On Transmitting Ideology*?

RMZ: Through the amplification of mass media, ideological rhetoric is a powerful cultural weapon. I wanted to make as transparent as possible the power of ideological speech and its transmission through the media; mounting the radios onto the forms of AK47s and Uzis immediately triggers this link - the transmission of ideological speech is a political weapon.

NDE: I had the opportunity to see images of the performance of *On Transmitting Ideology* in Berlin, Germany. What were some of the reactions from passersby? My understanding is that people in the streets encountered you, as well as a small cadre of performers carrying wooden AK47s? How did you go about recruiting participants for your piece?

RMZ: The march was one act of a 24 hour sound performance titled *Moving Forest* that was commissioned for *transmediale.08: CONSPIRE...*, an annual art and digital culture festival in Berlin. The performance and call for participants was circulated during the festival, so it was festival participants that volunteered to be part of the performance. The march of 20 participants was from Haus der Kulturen der Welt to the public park Siegestsäule with a stop by the mayor's home. My constant fear was that of authorities stopping us, but police merely looked at us with disinterest. Also most pedestrians merely paused to watch us. Some asked what we were doing and, when English speaking, we had them listen to the audio montage. People who did so generally understood the work and were only surprised by the extremism spoken in the historically famous speeches.

NDE: There is a great deal of debate among those who advocate for guns and those who want to ban them. I am wondering how *On Transmitting Ideology* may or may not position itself in the context of this push and pull.

RMZ: The representation of the gun is to reflect the violent nature of ideology and if one listens to the audio montage, it captures extremism. I consider both violence and extremism as negative characteristics of society. The reading of the work that is most in line with my goal in creating it is that we, as a society, need to move away from both

weapons and ideological extremisms - political and religious.

NDE: What are your thoughts about the politicization of aesthetics. It has come to my attention that while it is fashionable to make “political” work, politics are not a hip subject in the art world

RMZ: I have little interest in the art world. I’m much more interested in art that exists outside of the art world; art that engages people who are not seeking art and may function outside the gallery or museum. I’m interested in art that attempts to weave itself into the fiber of everyday culture while investigating, questioning and perhaps critiquing normative culture to stir self-reflection. Much of the exchange in the art world is to decorate the homes of the wealthy or perhaps to serve as an investment for the wealthy. Perhaps for the art collector investing in work that portrays current day politics is a bad long-term investment choice, and not the best home decoration. If the artwork is political, it needs to be sufficiently abstracted or undefined to function as a commodity object, so that any political potential has been muted.

NDE: Making political art work entails a big responsibility and a challenge as well. How can art that is politically-conscious live beyond the art world and effect change in society at large? And is this the role of the artist?

RMZ: This is a tough question because I don’t know how one would measure the effect of politically charged work upon others whom it may inspire to act. I believe that as long as the drive to create political art is sincere - that the artist is compelled to make political art due to first-hand experience of injustice, inequality, the misuse of power, it is not the role of the artist to effect change. The role of the artist is to capture and convey.

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