



Alienamex: Hispanic Culture Made in Mexico, 1992, mixed media installation.

We, the Colonized Ones Kukuli Speaks

edited by Ivor Miller

We, the Colonized Ones is a series of clay sculptures by Kukuli Verlade Barrionuevo, made in New York from 1990 to 1992. Each of the pieces either symbolizes or represents the emotional consequences of European colonization among Native Americans, Africans and their descendants. Some of the works relate specifically to Kukuli's experience in her native Peru. Their goal is to show the point of view of the defeated; those who saw their cultures and societies disrupted by the imposition of another culture. The sculptures embody a communication between the American past and the American present, and the western and non-western cultures that co-habit on this continent. These sculptures are used by Kukuli in performances along with song, dance and candle light to evoke the spirits of colonized ancestors, the spirits of the unborn (whose parents were killed), and the spirit of affirmation and resistance among the living. The following text is based on taped interviews with Kukuli, conducted in Central Park and the South Bronx in New York City.¹

I am a westernized individual. I do not say I am a western individual, because I did not create this culture — I am a product of colonization, and in this moment I am trying to define things as accurately and clearly for myself as I can. If I say that I am western, I could imply that this world that developed in Europe, and now in the Americas, belongs to me as it does to you. And I do not think that this is true. If there were no discrimination, maybe this relationship to western culture would be much more successful, and I could consider myself 'western'. But I come from what 'they' call a 'Third World', and I think that we are 'third world' because we are colonized. We have to face that reality. To face it is to acknowledge my mixed race, to acknowledge that I am not Indian, and that I am not white. That does not mean I have an ambiguity, but that I have a new identity: the identity of a colonized individual. I feel hurt when I see what colonization has made of the people I come from — the mixed race. I am not an Indian person, I have both heritages.

My images come from indigenous aesthetics. I don't say they are 'pre-Columbian' icons, because what is called 'pre-Columbian' still exists everywhere in the Americas. So-called 'pre-Columbian' is still a part of society that exists and survives. Everybody is westernized in some way. Colonization has been so

¹ Interviews conducted in June of 1992 by Ivor Miller. The author thanks Jill Cutler for her help in editing.

successful that what we call Indian communities are people who are westernized in some degree. When the Spaniards came, they forbade the Indian population to wear their own clothes; they had to wear Spanish clothes. At that time, 400-500 years ago, the fashion was very different from now. So the Indians, in many towns in Peru, took the forms, and put in their own colors, changing the Spanish clothes to fit Indian aesthetics. If you go to small towns in Peru, you can find clothing styles that were used in certain regions of Spain 300-400 years ago: the hats, and the big skirts with several layers of underskirts — the difference is mainly in the colors. The colors are strong and bright, with flowers and birds, a wonderful mixture usually with a black background. And the style changes from town to town. The dresses of that time continue to survive, so I would not say that they are totally 'Indian'.

My mother, who is a journalist/anthropologist, often took me on her trips inside Peru. Twice a month, or whenever she can, she goes to small towns very far away from the cities, the places where no other city people go. She sees the festivals, the customs, and hears the legends. She is a hard worker. I liked Peruvian music; but to go with my mother to ask how these artists made this mask, or that sculpture — I was not into that at all! I just wanted to enjoy the landscape, or eat an ice cream in the town's park. Yet I think that I gained a lot from those trips. Now I regret that I couldn't enjoy them more, when I had an opportunity to see things that probably no longer exist. Now I am reevaluating my memories. My mother forced me to learn things that now are helping me a lot.

I consider myself and my family mixed race. I do not speak Quechua: my father never taught it to us. I grew up in a middle class urban setting in Lima; but there was always something floating. My mother, instead of telling us tales like Snow White, told Indian legends from different places in Peru. My family has always been very proud of our Indian ancestors. I thank them very much for this.

I was born in Cuzco, and my father's father is from another state called Tacna, and my mother's mother is from Ancash, another state. We come from different parts of Peru. In Peru people always belonged to one clan or nation or confederation, but we have been mixing now for 500 years.

Everything made sense to me when I came to the US and first started working in clay. I have been painting all my life, and technically I am a good painter, but my painting did not have a connection to my soul. I was not able to make a connection with my spirit, my interests, my frustrations, my passions and my work. The native music from Peru, Ecuador or the US that my family played at home was not reflected in my work. Nor were the legends my mother told me, which have been my spiritual support in trying to understand a world that was denied to me. I was pretty much lost until I entered the ceramic studio while doing my BFA at Hunter College. There, I remembered the red clay that I had seen everywhere in Peru, in Mexico, or even in photos. So I thought, why not work in red clay? I like the color, it brings physical and optical memories to me. I got the red clay and I began working; it was like magic, it was amazing! I felt like a mute who suddenly found their voice! While tossing the clay I remembered a Chankay doll (Chankay is one of the several cultures in Peru). They did not use red clay, but clear, white clay, but I remember the form of the head, and I began building a doll. This was my first piece that was a loyal translation of my thoughts and ideas. I painted it with engobe (earth colors); and from then on I decided to use engobes because they are the coloring that native peoples from the Americas used and still use. I decided not to use any glaze, because glaze was a creation brought by the conquistadors. That was the first contact I had with clay and my way of thinking.

On the sculpture is written a piece by Eduardo Galeano.² It says,

The no ones. The sons of no one. The owners of nothing. The no ones. The no ones. These treated as if they were not one. *Corriendo la liebre* — dying a life. Fucked, refucked. Those who are not even if they are. Those who do not speak languages, but dialects. Those who do not have religions, but superstitions. Those who do not do art, but handcrafts. Those who do not practice culture, but folklore. Those who are not human beings, but human resources. The no ones. Those who cost less than the bullet that kills them.³

When I finished this first piece, I had it standing in front of me, and I still felt that there was no connection between it and me until I decided to nail it. After I had put in a few nails, a friend who was working next to me said "That's enough!" But I thought, "No, it's not enough", and I put in more nails. Once I had finished I felt I was saying exactly what I wanted to say. It was not the form, the color, or the angle: it was the nails that had the final meaning. I was thinking about this, and I immediately did the next one, the one with the snakes. That one came by itself.

In the belly of the sculpture is the white man that lives in every colonized person. I try to make it clear that I do not have anything against 'white people', because one thing is white people outside of my body, and another thing is the white man who is inside my body, who is telling me that he is superior to me. The white man that I am against is the one that lives inside us. He is the one who is always repeating that we are white inside, even though we look black and Indian inside. He is the one who does not let us be what we are, because he is eating our self esteem, and always tries to come up when we fight to hold on to our own reality.

The snake goes from the mouth of the colonizer to the mouth of the colonized. It is like those parasites that people have in their stomachs. The white man is our spiritual parasite, and the snake represents the lies that he says through his mouth. We do not have our own voice, because things that come out of our own mouth are often times his, what he thinks, and what he wants us to believe we are. We carry our own colonization inside of us. On the back, I wrote:

'I am not black', he says, as if he were warding off a curse. His right hand waves nervously in front of his face, scaring away the ghost of some inopportune ancestor. Drums and castanets undertake a funeral song. Racial pride and cultural roots have been killed for the sake of assimilation. We the colonized ones have a tiny armed conqueror stabbing melanin like crazy. There amidst our dignity in our inner selves. We masters and slaves, black and white Indians, all at once, we are a paradox.

Someone told me that my sculptures are an exorcism, are trying to expel demons, and they were right. These two pieces in particular are like tumors that I took out of me. But I don't know if I took them from me or the people I came from, because in some way we are the same.

Every piece from this series is like a scream. It is emotional work. In the same way that I can talk to you about the issue, they are talking to you. They are talking to you about their pain. That pain is in us. Maybe many of us don't want to see it, and don't want to face it, but it's our reality. It is horrendous to think how our cultural context has been disturbed by what colonization brought to us, by what we are, but don't want to be.

The series entitled 'We, the Colonized Ones' is all sculpture. After seeing them

² The Uruguayan author who wrote *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, English translation by Monthly Review Press, 1973.

³ Eduardo Galeano, *El libro de los abrazos* 'The Book of Embraces', Siglo Veintiuno, Spain, 1993.

a friend of mine told me that I had finally got my voice, and I like that. The way I think, the way I feel, are reproduced with fidelity in this work. I feel that they are alive, because I put a lot of life into them. They represent millions of people, and if it is true that the spirits exist, some of those millions of people might inhabit these sculptures. They are like a summoning of those ancestors I don't know, whose languages I don't speak.

All my work is related to these issues, and to the fact that I am a woman, and living here in New York. I am working on another series that has to do with the right for my life, as a woman. It deals with abortion. I have made a ceramic belly with a newborn child, but only the belly is framed, and the child is already out. Its head is the head of a baby and the head of a dog. The dog is biting the womb. It deals with the rights of the fetus over the rights of the womb, and how much some in this society are crying for the unborn children, when they have people living like animals on the streets, and won't give a dime for them. This society is very much in love with ideals, but not with realities. It prefers the ideal of an unborn baby that is a promise for the future rather than the responsibility towards what they already have. Because, after all, a child that is not yet born, is not a responsibility of yours, it is a responsibility of the womb. This is a very unfair society for women who want to do something in their lives other than pay forever the punishment of having an unwanted child.

There are three categories in the 'We, the Colonized Ones' series: installations, ceramic pieces and performances. The three are related because the installations include ceramic pieces and the performances include my babies.

I have different performances of two to three minutes each. I always have a baby which I carry with me. In one performance I cover the baby with Peruvian fabric, and then put flowers on it. I come out humming, and walk zig-zag through a line of yellow candles, yellow for Oshún (you always have to be respectful of everybody else).⁴ I have a ceramic cross placed in the middle of the candles, and I sing a song that talks about how people are dying because of the war between the army and the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso). The song says that "the people's blood has a beautiful aroma, it smells like violets, geraniums, roses and sunflowers, it smells like dynamite and gunpowder, carajo!" I first heard it at home in Peru. I like the poetic combination of first blood, then flowers, gunpowder and dynamite. Then I approach the cross with my baby, and I'm praying, very low at first, and then louder and louder, until I try with my voice to cover the song, but I can never do it. I stop at the moment of the line with flowers and blood, then I sing it with the cassette. And I put my baby as an offering to the cross. And that's it. I am performing as myself, myself not only as an individual, but as a product of culture and history.

Some artists worry about giving themselves to their work; they keep a little detached. But I think that the work and you are the same thing. That is why I don't think of myself as a political artist: I would not be able to talk about the problems people are having in Africa, even though I know about it and it's terrible. It is the same difference when you hear that a woman was killed two blocks from your house, and when you hear that your own mother was killed. I am talking about my own forefathers being killed, not somebody else's. I think that both issues are equally important, and equally deserve to be talked about, but I have the mission to talk about what I saw, what I felt, and what I'm going through, because colonization has not ended. I cannot talk about landscapes that I don't know, faces I have never seen. Yet I can talk to you with passion about Victoria, the maid in my house, who is almost like a mother to me, and who has never been allowed to sit on our sofa.

⁴ Oshún is a Yoruba deity of love, associated with sweetness and pregnancy.

When I do my pieces, nothing else is important but the personal conversation between me and my work, although I know that probably other people are not going to like it. For example, I am now creating a cross that will be shown in a window near Columbus Circle. Definitely I am thinking about what the audience is going to say, because the audience are going to be those who gather this October (1992) for celebrating the discovery of the ignorance of the Europeans. I call it many things — the invasion, the beginning of colonization. Many of the pieces were created when thinking about the 5th centennial, and they are going to say what colonization is for us, or what it is for them.⁵

This one is the Indian giver, who gave everything for nothing. I use the phrase 'Indian giver' because I know the connotation that it has in this society, of an Indian who gives something and then wants it back. So he is talking to the 'white taker', because if he is the 'Indian giver', you are the 'white taker'. I don't mean to say 'he', because all my pieces have two sexes, they are neither male nor female, they are not just one — they are a society, a group of people. On it, I wrote:

I gave you the gold and silver from my rivers and my mountains. The humble potato which saved many from starvation. The tomato, my corn, even the popcorn, I gave you that batata, the yam, the passion fruit, the mango, the guayaba; I gave much more. Everything my life produced. The buffalo, the wikuña, where are they? I gave you my moral values, my laws, so you could create yours, I finally gave you my land, my freedom, my hands. Me the Indian giver, you the white taker. I gave the tools for you to develop, you took my life.

I have another piece of the man impaled on the cross. The cross was an instrument of colonization. Some people who see this cross make the sign of the cross in front of them; they seem to feel that it is offensive. This being has three mouths that are screaming, because his own mouth cannot scream, because he has the cross going through. On its back is a quote from Fray Valverde, who came with Francisco Pizarro, and delivered it to the Inca Atahualpa (the king). It reads:

If you refuse, know that you will be constrained with fire, and the sword, and all your idols shall be overthrown and we shall oblige you by the sword to abandon your false religion and to receive willy-nilly our Catholic faith and pay tribute to our emperor and deliver him your kingdom. If you seek...to resist, you may rest assured that God will suffer that you and all your Indians shall be destroyed by our arms.⁶

You know where the word *mulato* comes from? A mule. So this sculpture is saying 'don't call me *mulato*, I am not a human mule'. Many people don't realize that definitions must be reviewed and erased if necessary. I don't think that it is nice to be called a mule. Because the white man thinks of himself as a horse, and a black woman as a donkey — whatever she gets from that union must be a *mulato*. The main implication of the comparison with animals is that one is noble and beautiful, and the other just a resource, a beast. It is a very negative way to call people. The sculpture has the mask of a mule, and it is trying to pull it off. It is the mask imposed on him. I don't know what he wants to call himself, but I know that it would be patronizing to tell him what he should be called. The checkers on his back represent the black and white that's in him, but this mixture doesn't blend. It is as if he were separate pieces put together.

The babies that I make are for my performances. This is the first baby that I made.

⁵ This installation was banned by the New York Institute of Technology the day before its opening at Columbus Circle in Manhattan. The administration told Kukuli her work was "too political". See 'College in Chriss-Cross: Dean bans art with genocide theme', by Sonia Reyes, *Daily News* (Urban Gazette), Thursday, October 8, 1992; and Robert Atkins, 'Omission Quinto Centenario', *Village Voice*, Art Section, November 3, 1992.

⁶ Fray Vicente de Valverde. Excerpted from 'The Royal Commentaries of the Incas', by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega in *The Conquest of Peru*, trans. Harold V Livermore, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1966, pp 679-681.

It says on his head: "I was not born, I was not even conceived. My parents never could meet at all. My father died in a mine, working from day to day with no rest. My mother was raped by one of them, then killed herself." You might find this writing melodramatic, but it was many times, in fact, reality. On its belly it says: "I am a spirit with no body, I am a soul with no embraces, I am a life never lived, I am an illusion never dreamed. I ask you: Why?"

This sculpture says: "I am a benefit of western culture". Some birds, when they cannot fit all the baby birds in the nest, let one die. So that chick, as the others, is always waiting for its food with its beak open, but food never comes. It eats air, and it dies with air in its belly. It says here: "Chosen by you not to survive. Don't say my death was worth your civilization. If so I would have to say my new survival is worth your death. Your pollution, and corruption, and TV are not worth my life." And here it says, "I'm scared".

All my babies are dead. They were never born. They represent babies that never had the opportunity to come to life because of history.

Baby III, 1992, ceramic.



Dream, because reality is just the container of your dreams, too awful to face, too overwhelming to challenge. ESCAPE.

Cupid represents what alienation is for us: a tool of colonization. In Mexico all the governmental offices end in the suffix 'Mex'. Petroleum companies are called 'Petromex'. Mexican popular literature includes comic books that deal with love, sex and the mafia. In the installation room where Cupid will hang, there will be a love ballad playing, those that Mexico exports to Latin America and Spain. There will be two TV monitors running soap operas from Mexico. Comics, ballads, and TV: those are the three most important instruments of alienation, or colonization, which is the same. They make people think about things that are not important: they give people a reality that doesn't exist. They keep people from understanding their own realities. Today's media shares with religion the task of taming human beings and taking from them any possible desire to question or demand. This Cupid is a dead Cupid. I wrote on it:

I don't worry about my misery, my discrimination, or poverty. A *guapo y rico*, a handsome and rich man, will take me out someday as in the soap operas. Someday, someday, I will be rich, I will be beautiful, I will be white. We the colonized ones. We blonde, blue eyes, tall, and wealthy. We TV dreamers, trained to be content to be what we are not, what we will never be.

Only when we acknowledge how deeply colonization has been internalized in our communities, and how much the media reinforces this situation, will we be able to take control of our destiny. In the meantime, in its hands our blindness rests.

This virgin is about syncretism. About the many deities living in the same form. The Spaniards imposed the Virgin, but the Virgin for many people was the mother earth. That is why her belly is ceramic. I wrote on her: "You are not virgin, neither Mary, you are the fertile land, the ocean, our beginning and our end." Because she was many things. For the peoples I come from, she was the mother earth. In the big procession for Semana Santa (in Corpus Cristi, Cuzco State), when the people carry one figure after the other, what they really carry are their old gods and goddesses. My mother met a man who was preparing one of the virgins to leave the church. She asked him which virgin this was, and he told her, "It is the Virgin de la Candelaria, but it is not really the Virgin de la Candelaria, it is our female deity for potatoes". He told her that the people of that area see her as the indigenous deity, and no one knows this but them. My mother then wanted to know about the other figures, and he said, "You should be happy knowing that, but I am not going to tell you anything else". When the figure left the church, there were potatoes underneath her, and you can see them in the photographs. They were the offerings that people left to their deity, not to the Virgin.

She has no name. I created her for a performance that deals with the maids in Latin American houses who sit on the floor while the landlords sit on the sofa to watch TV. In the performance I dress like her, but then I put on a wig, and I cover my shirt with a black sweater, and I have high heels. While the music goes I start to take all the western clothes off until my braids come out to resemble the sculpture. Around her face it reads:



Self-portrait, 1992, ceramic, height: 61 cm.

We the colonized ones. I'm afraid about my life. What did you give me, Europe?
In 1992 let's celebrate our genocide.

She does not look exactly like me, but she has similar features, as if she were a sister.

This is my self portrait. It says

If I do not criticize, if I do not burn a flag, if I do not have an abortion, I can consider myself a free individual. If I do reply with a nice smile when I'm called 'sweetie' by a stranger, if I deny where I come from, which language I speak, if I do not look at a beggar in the street, at the blacks segregated in the restaurants, at my people assimilated, alienated, if I play the game, woman and Latina here in New York, nice and quiet, harmless and obedient, subordinated and ignorant, I can consider myself a free individual.

THIRD TEXT

THIRD WORLD PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY ART & CULTURE

32 AUTUMN 1995

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Editorial

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London NW6 3PQ.
Tel/Fax: 0171 372 0826

Subscription

Carfax Publishing Co
P.O. Box 25, Abingdon
Oxfordshire OX14 3UE, UK
(for detail see page 112)

Distribution

Central Books
99 Wallis Road
London E9 5LN

Bernhard DeBoer, Inc.,
113 East Centre Street
Nutley, N.J. 07110
USA

Speedimpex Canada Inc.
155 Deerhide Cr. - Unit 1
Weston, Ontario
Canada M9M 2Z2

Manic Ex-Poseur
PO BOX 8
North Carlton
Melbourne, VIC 3054
Australia

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ISSN 0952-8822

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Cover: Ruben Trejo, *Columbus Survivor* (detail)

Third Text is published by Kala Press,
typeset by Emset, London
and printed by Whitstable Litho, Kent.

We acknowledge the financial assistance of
the Arts Council of England.

