

Title, Lucy Orta

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Lucy Orta studied fashion and textiles at the Nottingham Polytechnic before moving to France in 1989 where her knowledge of textile design was tailored to a social critique of the vagaries of modern living. Confronted with the growing crisis of homelessness in our contemporary society, her work incorporates elements gleaned from the fashion industry which, when combined, create a « symbolic » clothing that turns the power of the image back upon itself through a series of personal interventions and performances.

Starting with a series of early collaborations with the Salvation Army in Paris and New York in the early 1990's, Orta organised a series of catwalk shows which displayed a collection of clothes made out of old and discarded garments – a metaphor for our throwaway society and the fashion industry. By 1994 this work evolved into the formation of the « Collective & Refuge Wear Series », or Nexus Architecture, possibly her most emblematic designs to date. From an innocent tent transformed into a fully functional urban suit with attachable arms and « survival gear » entwined, to the creation of interchangeable garments and people linked together by detachable « umbilical » cords, these outlandish outfits signal the collective body as architecture, society and clothing.

In recent years Nexus Architecture has come to the attention of French cultural theorist Paul Virilio, who has championed Lucy Orta as one of the few contemporary artists confronting the disintegration of the social in today's urban environment. Her construction of collective, multi-faceted, multi-functional garments sporting text and images take on a life of their own, transforming the concept of clothing from that of a mere second skin to a refined form of visual and verbal packaging and social propaganda.

From the comfort of the living room and the remote control, we stand witness to the gradual erosion of the individual and our ability to function effectively as a collective unit; the phantom of difference transcending the spectre of the social just as the notion of private space becomes subsumed within the public arena. Within the site-specific location of the street, Orta's designs stand halfway between architecture and dress, a private and public form of refuge.

Forming a dislocated body reflected by the individual bodies contained within them they sometimes total upwards of 30 participants at any one time and have become the object of numerous performances all over the world, including South Africa. Made with the help of disadvantaged groups such as the homeless or deprived children from the inner cities, their construction forges links between those who work together on a project while simultaneously challenging or personal and cultural identity and the way that we communicate and interact in the modern world.

In an age where collectivity has become a dirty word, Orta's work is unashamedly collaborative. In the future she plans to create a Collective Suite that can be worn by hundreds of people at the same time, a type of urban armour for a modern age which points to the strength of collectivity as visibility. If fashion is a statement of style over content, image over substance, then Lucy Orta's clothing can be seen as its visual antithesis; clothing as social commentary and collective action.

Mark Saunders