

Title, Introduction: Lucy Orta's *Nexus Architecture*

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The first time I met Lucy Orta was in June of 1995, when she was my tour guide for *On Board*, a group exhibition designed by Jerome Sans that was installed on a boat for the Venice Biennale. Orta's contribution was *Survival Kits*, a set of wetsuit-like pieces of clothing and bags that held items such as whistles, rope, flotation devices and food, which bore functionally descriptive, pithy expressions appearing in large letters, such as "SURVIVAL KIT" and "LIFE LINE." Over the next few years we met at various international shows and I introduced her to the independent, Tampa-based curator Jade Dellinger. Dellinger included her in projects he was working on in New York and Mexico City, and in 1997 we began to plan an exhibition that was to travel within the United States. An invitation was extended to her to create an "advertisement" (or "intervention") for a year-long project that the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum was organizing; designed for The Tampa Tribune, the *Art in the News* series featured works by Orta, as well as Matthew Barney, Allan McCollum, Lorna Simpson and William Wegman, among others.

In early 2000, Orta began a new commissioned work, for Pitti Imagine in Florence, Italy. She proposed a long-term project—a *Connector Mobile Village*—which would be composed of personalized living units that could attach to an expanding architectural structure of modules and nodes: an architecture of people as well as materials. These sculptures were to be conceived in workshops conducted with a variety of participants in various parts of the world, such as Florida, Brussels, Tokyo and Edinburgh. Sketches and prototypes from the workshops were manipulated and further developed in her Paris studio as rhizome structures that could be zipped off and on to form models for new communities, pieces that could be removed from one artwork—or community—and become an integral, functional part of another: *disconnection* for the sake of *reconnection*.

In June 2000, Orta was invited back to Tampa by the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum to work on her fourth mobile community, *Connector Sector IV*. Jade Dellinger set up workshops with homeless children, which were supported by a local family care center and the Metropolitan Ministries, and in which local art students and architects participated. This project became the basis of Orta's first survey exhibition to travel in the United States, *Lucy Orta: Nexus Architecture + Connector IV*, cocurated by Jade Dellinger and supported by grants from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, New York, and the Florida Department of State—Division of Cultural Affairs. The exhibition opened at the USF Contemporary Art Museum in October of 2001 and is scheduled to travel through 2004, to the Florida Atlantic University Galleries, Boca Raton, Florida; the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; the Bellevue Art Museum, Seattle, Washington; and the Lothringer13, Munich, Germany.

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Fundamental to Lucy Orta's creative practice is her commitment to the democratization of art and dedication to directing the participants'/viewers' attention to new kinds of relationships and prototypical structures that address the challenges of contemporary urban existence. This exhibition includes works that she has titled *Refuge Wear*, *Body Architecture*, *Modular Architecture* and *Nexus Architecture*. The structures and garments can be performed, worn or lived in; consistent with her *Survival Kits*, they are mobile and connective, and their bright colors and aggressive design lend them a demanding immediacy and urgency. Color, structure, space and time are fused into practical objects that can be read as playful, decorative structures designed for camping, survival in the harsh elements or some form of ritual in which a group of

individuals is connected.¹ The invitation for direct corporeal participation of the spectator activates the expressive manifestation of the work.

A disturbing facet of this urgency is the action of contrasts in Orta's *Nexus Architecture*. Her exhibition in Tampa opened shortly after September 11, 2001, and during the height of the anthrax scare, and her bodysuits bore an eerie resemblance to the protective uniforms worn to prevent contamination from germ warfare or other biochemical weapons. With fresh images of the ruins of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in their minds, and the fear of death through the mailbox, viewers' readings of her *Body Architecture* and *Refuge Wear* seemed to shift from colorful camping/survival gear or costumes for performances (such as synchronized dance) to body bags and protective gear—and, importantly, gear limited not just to military or emergency waste removal use.

Situating Orta's work within, or relating it to, the contemporary discourse on the meaning and function of art is not simple. Links are apparent in the experimental work of such artists as Nam June Paik and the Fluxus group, whose public "concerts" established new relationships between literature, music, visual art, performance and pedestrian life. The work of Joseph Beuys—which he called "actions"—and his evolving ideas about how art could play a wider role in society, as well as the public interventions and street art of the *Nouveaux Réalistes* working in Paris and later New York, likewise provide meaningful contexts in which to examine Orta's work.

Her marriage to the South American artist Jorge Orta may account for some conceptual connections to the Brazilian avant-garde of the 1960s, the most pertinent precedent being the postwar period in Latin America led by Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. "I am against any insinuation of a 'linear process'; as I see it, the processes are global,"² Oiticica has stated; and in the global yet inclusive scope (but also detachable, rearrangeable and adaptable quality) of Orta's work, an interesting progression can be observed. Consider the colorful, wearable performance art clothing of Oiticica or the therapeutic practices of Clark and their considerations of political, social and ethical problems, along with an interest in collective propositions—experiments fused by political turmoil. Orta and her generation of fellow artists—Atelier van Lieshout, Rotterdam; Tobias Rehberger, Berlin; Andrea Zittel, Los Angeles and New York; Jorge Pardo, Los Angeles; and Lee Mingwei, San Francisco and New York—all promote and utilize art as a means of creating solutions to socially challenging issues (i.e., the homeless) and personal healing in a nonpersonal (or nonalone), group situation. Assemblies of people are engaged in collective, creative transformations.

Lygia Clark (whose art asked "Why can't the body, and more so the *social* body, free itself from pain?") proposed the liberty and elasticity of the body through devices that in the same instance bind and constrain it. At the end of the 1960s she suggested modes of healing and communication through sensory deprivation and stimulation by creating clothing that could connect people; Orta's designs, some tight and smooth, others large, unwieldy and cone-like, have been performed in by modern dancers (*Borderline*) and are less about individual transformation than about the intersection of fashion, art and humanity. She has directed her skills, learned in the fashion industry, more at the service of ethics than consumerism.³

A comparison with the work of the German-born artist Mathias Goeritz lends unique insight into that of Lucy Orta. Goeritz's complex web-like constructions and "emotional architecture"—architecture intended to incite emotions in the observer—can be likened to Orta's *Body Architecture* (especially her *OPERA.tion Life Nexus*). When on display in a museum or

¹ This level of participation ranges from five or six people in her *Body Architecture* "tents," to a virtually unlimited number in her *Nexus Architecture—OPERA.tion Life Nexus* connected bodysuits.

² Hélio Oiticica, "Brazil Diarrhea" (1973), in *Hélio Oiticica*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie National du Jeu de Paume; Rio de Janeiro: Projeto Hélio Oiticica; Rotterdam: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art; Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1992), p. 17.

³ Her *Refuge Wear* pieces, for instance, are not commercially available; the homeless would not be able to purchase them if they were, and they would likely become items exclusively for exhibitions and collectors' walls.

gallery and not part of a participative exhibition, or intervention, the bodysuits hang ghost-like, suspended from the ceiling and “floating” only inches above the floor, just enough space for a human foot. Without a person to fill them, the suits (whether suspended in the air or lying flat on the ground) are limp, emaciated, almost palpably empty—the forgotten and ignored are present by their absence, as Goeritz’s webs are notable for their negative, vacant space. The response elicited by these empty, spectral suits is a visceral one.

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Orta draws our attention to social exclusion, isolation and dislocation, and promotes a theory—quite literally—of inclusion, community and relocation; she collaborates with at-risk teens and the homeless to consider their needs and their ideas and then devises and packages pragmatic and reproducible (rather than mystical or metaphysical) theories to alleviate, if not end, social problems, which can, in turn, provoke additional action.