

Title, Lucy + Jorge Orta

Monograph, Collective Space

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Nigel Prince and Jayne Bradley:

In considering your use of the street as a location – for food events, dinner party projects, water projects, the vehicles, nexus projects, and the earlier ‘survival’ and ‘refuge’ suits - within this there seems to be attempts to deal with notions of re-establishing connectivity through tackling issues of displacement, and through engaging with people/ things that are on the periphery or marginalised in some way.

‘The street’ becomes a place where the establishment of some form of ritualised networking/ community activity takes place. Can we discuss how your practice engages with this?

LO: Marginalisation occurs when sectors of the population are separated from or not integrated into a normal mould, rendered powerless, ‘swept under the carpet’, ‘out of sight out of mind’. The artworks we create (interventions, events relational objects...), serve as mediators between the diverse separations; art connoisseurs versus non-art educated, socially excluded versus lawful citizens,... The projects we stage employ visual metaphors, tactility and participation, that allow a huge diversity of people the opportunity to engage and express themselves, thus giving voice to, or offering a chance for ‘silent’ voices to be heard.

I began challenging social disappearance and anonymity in 1993, utilizing the street as a location for bridging extremes between the ‘high’ art world and that of social exclusion, deprivation. The first occasion was Cité La Noue, situated in the Montreuil suburb East of Paris. By invitation of the community arts coordinator, I was asked to reflect on and create an artwork that could ‘dialogue’ with local residents, perhaps forge links and dissipate various tensions that had been mounting between inhabitants. I had just exhibited the ‘Refuge Wear’ in the Parisian gallery Anne de Villepoix, and it had immediately been singled out for critical scrutiny. (N. Bourriaud, N. Ergino, Documents No 2, pp 24-26, Paris, Feb. 1993). The encounters with La Noue residents allowed for a non-art audience to engage. The opinions were intuitive, (free from historical precedents or intellectual conformism). In this context, the sense of ‘purpose’ of the artwork evident both aesthetic/poetic potential and practical, there was no conflict. What struck me was that this plural gaze was as important to the analytic process as the intellectual rigorous analysis of the object, as a mirror for society and democratic opinions. The third exposure of this same work was in the Musée d’art Moderne Paris 1994. Here I met Paul Virilio and it was around this time that a huge public debate arose about the mounting homeless situation and the political negation to the phenomena.

The combination of the highly poetic potential of artwork combined with the apparent functional acted as powerful trigger for pushing this debate into the public agenda. This double objectives, has become one of the parameters for my creative process/methodology. At the same time ‘confronting’ the artwork with different publics.

During the ‘Nexus Architecture Interventions’, passers-by were invited to become physically involved in the construction of the scenario, no longer spectators of the ‘Refuge Wear’ investigative process. The artwork became inscribed with an added social relevance through the intervention of the public, connecting people regardless of their differences, ‘zipping’ them into a simple inter-connective structure, creating an unusual closeness, questioning interdependence by being part of it, physical and visceral. The umbilical metaphor of the ‘nexus’ (social link) attached to each of the overalls at the belly becomes more potent as the

garment is 'inhabited' by different people. The same suit has been worn by migrant labourers in Johannesburg, children and teenagers from shelters in France and Australia, a hiking group in Bolivia, protestors, architects in Berlin and Venice, complete with odours and personal traces from the previous wearers in a huge diversity of locations across the globe.

The intervention of the people themselves, and the connectivity to different groups does set precedence for the dinner parties. The social link has been replaced by the tablecloth and the dinner plates, synonymous to the '70 x 7 The Meal' series of artworks.

The ritual activity is another research strand, and stems from a nostalgic longing to re-create community gatherings that have been replaced a stark sense of individualism, 'every man to himself', and to restore the sense of community through festive and 'binding' activities. After experimenting with several ideas (Village Fete, 'In the Midst of Things', Bournville 1999, ...), food became the most pleasurable reciprocal tool (artist gives and receives back), the sense of fun/humour a powerful constructive bond.

NP: Your first project with food, All in One Basket – Les Halles (1997) hints at a potential in the work, which you have subsequently explored in further events and 'dinner parties'. What was the reaction from the market vendors? What were the issues you identified to take further in the 70 x 7 projects?

LO: All in One Basket (1997) is where we experiment with food for the first time. The subject of investigation: waste food and the terrible contradictions of our consumer society and the geopolitical absurdities that allow tons of perfectly rip fruit and vegetable go to waste everyday, when so many go hungry everyday. Our first experiment was a very localised analysis of the fresh produce thrown away in the weekly markets, in different districts in Paris. Over several months we collected surplus produce from the street that had been rejected by market vendors and meticulously transformed it jams and pickles. Throughout the process, I interviewed the different populations dependant on this life-cycle: market vendors, gleaners, shoppers. It was an anthropological survey as well as a ritualistic, particularly the jam making. We exhibited the preserves, objects and audio recordings in the Galerie Saint Eustache, which is adjacent to the Les Halles forum, and for the opening we served up 400kg of delicious recycled fruit, prepared and cooked by a celebrity chef (Stoher).

The Kunstraum Innsbruck (2000) became the venue for the third stage of our food experiments, and took the form of a more intimate sit-down dinner 70x7 The Meal act III. In this 'composed' setting we could be selective with guests using the poetic formula 70 x 7: seven people, invite seven, ad-infinity... We could begin to network influential people, policy makers with food producers, media,... and possibly gauge more easily the outcomes of the conversations, and encourage the debates to continue.

The second stage of this project Hortirecycling Enterprise, Weiner Secession (1999), was based on the discussions with vendors, gleaners and shoppers in Paris. It took the form of a small collective-citizen enterprise for recycling, immediate processing of, and ways to distribute the over-ripe food. The vendors were willing to cooperate in the recycling process, if it was without too much effort as their livelihood depends on the rapidity of a sale. Most of the gleaners were not interested in the over-rip produce because it was too difficult to preserve "you have to be rich to collect that stuff, you need a fridge!" The shoppers were surprised at the lack of public legislation, and aghast at the actual quantity of perfectly edible produce that is left to waste, but perfectly happy to eat the transformed version of the rotten apple. The public attitude sums up a general lack of interest and complacency to the phenomenon of waste. The positive outcome was the distribution of food uniting together all different kinds of people drawing awareness to the problem. The lively process proposed a simple method of citizen participation, the convivial aspect of the open-air buffet broke down social barriers and allowed many different people to engage in conversation and reflect on the issue. The jam became the comestible relational object and the metaphor.

The Kunstraum Innsbruck (2000) was the venue for the first sit-down dinner and occasion to bring people together in a more 'strategic' setting '70x7 The Meal act III'. The sit-down dinner

allowed us the possibility to be selective with guests, set a thematic for discussion and gauge more easily the outcomes of the conversations. Using the formula and symbol 70 x 7 we could network influential people: policy makers with food producers and the media. We began with 7, then 49... very quickly the exponentiation happened and conversations took off on their own track.

NP: The early Survival Kit or Refuge Wear collections provided blueprints for activity that could be transferred from one site to another. As a strategy the fugitive nature of how these materialised is something that provides an interesting context for later projects. Can you describe the development of your concerns and how they grew to become involved with actions such as the 'Global March against Child Labour' in 1998?

LO: The compact-ability of the Refuge Wear and Kits, their practical innovations, their multi function, do provide blueprint for transportable and modular deployment. Intervening is the act of locating ones-self between two things. In the street and in the gallery. Between poetics and action, between public and private, static and transitory. This has become a 'formulae' for a thought process, trying each time to find the equilibrium.

The interventions during the big Parisian marches: Anti-nuclear 91, Anti-pollution, 96; World Earth day, 98; as well as collaborations with environmental organisations and associative groups at the Global March against Child Labour 98, (collaboration with foster-children) are a personal political statement, as well as the necessity to connect art to the political arena and be part of the transformation of our society. I am fully aware that I have not been sufficiently active and would have been to Seattle, Kosovo, Rwanda and back several times, if it were possible.

Working together with an environmental organisation, we printed a statement on the 'Citizen Platform' 1997 (a ballot for recycling facilities in the 19th district Paris, conducted in La Villette Park): '1+1=Millions'. If each and every one can contribute in a minute way, it is worth a million.

NP: Your work is often considered in terms of its potential – creating participants rather than 'passive' spectators. How do you combat what could be seen from the outside as a naïve assertion that art institutions can affect real change or that art has capacity to socially transform? What precedents inform your practice?

LO: Affect real change in what manner? Is it their role to?

I would think that the role of museums as an institution would be to develop new publics and inform people to new practices in contemporary art. A change of perception from an audience point of view could happen if work is curated and exhibited in innovative manners.

A museum generally allows artist's ideas to manifestations and can build the links to audiences, facilitate projects, and allow seemingly crazy ideas to be produced and realised. Ultimately it's up to the artwork to be participative or not?

I think the institution is just one of the channels that can allow accessibility, but this needs to be combined with many methods of presentation and representation

Beuys stands out as being an interesting example, where the museum, the educational and the public bodies are combined.

'But is it Art, the spirit of activism' (Bay Press, Nina Felshin) was a huge inspiration early on in my career in particular, reflecting on the activist practices of the American artists and collectives such as Group Material, Gran Fury, Guerilla Girls. Another exciting read was Culture in Action (Bay Press, Mary Jane Jacob).

When I began working with Jorge back in the early 90's on the large-scale light projections, we were heavily influenced by the dichotomy facing the land artists and the public encounter. On the one hand the monumental modification of the landscape, often isolated or ephemeral experiments visible in publications or the rare expedition, and on the other the necessity to connect this to a human experience for the viewer. The first experiment we made was a series of light paintings in front of 200,000 Indians in Cuzco Peru. The public were totally engulfed by a visual spectacle. Cert they were not participants, yet it was obvious by the emotions released that they felt part of something magical/mystical. This project set

precedence for the encounter with the public, mobilising people around an event that can trigger emotions and as rewarding for the audience as it is for the artist. However, not everything we do has to mobilise hundreds or thousands of people. The intimate experience and the change that takes place in an individual involved in the process of developing and artwork is as equally important. Allowing that individual to feel an active part of something, inscribing an empowering experience in an individual's life no matter how small.

NP: Your practice could be seen to provide or rather proposes the antidote to larger global forces or to this displacement and disenfranchisement and attempts to tackle issues to create a sense of a cohesive society. How do your projects aim to affect and create real change? Are there any tensions or conflicts that lie within this? Can you move beyond potential to actual deploying methodologies that revolutionise the status quo?

LO: We stress that the visual manifestations of artworks are triggers or a catalysts - emotive - ideas generating - they do not provide solutions as such.

Our process of uniting different people together around a subject that can be compartmentalised into acts or series (water, food, identity, survival, gift, mobility,...) provide a long-term collective forum for discussion and actions. The networks created as a result can effect change in thinking and go beyond revolutionising the SQ, if projects are adopted by the different members of the network.

(We do not see ourselves as an artist lone figure, like Beuys, more of agitators of groups.)

We are currently working on three projects, that aim to fuse the visual manifestation, the process and the agitator network to effect real change: Life Nexus, OrtaWater and HortaRecycling. The only tensions we have are that people expect results immediately when in fact we would hope to see them in 10-20 years time.

Jorge has been managing Life Nexus and as a result of an action conducted with 35,000 high school students in the region of Meurthe and Mosel has created the Manifesto for the Gift, which has been adopted as a charter for organ donation in France.

NP: I'm interested in the relationship to the body you establish through projects, and in particular the way you make tangible the invisible in the environment they occupy. Can you discuss the effectiveness in challenging this and so creating a political visibility by your propositions to re-imagine the organisation of public space and the social relationships within this?

LO: I have given working titles to the ephemeral interventions that I have been staging since the early 90's. Vulnerable Body; Collective Body; Portable Politics.

Vulnerable Body consolidates the interventions urban locations such as squats, railway stations and housing estates conducted throughout the 1990's recession (1993-1998) In these interventions 'Refuge Wear' and 'Body Architecture' are worn by both performers and marginalized individuals act as a warning or alarm bell to signal the distressful reality of the economic crisis, bringing to light new situations of social inequality such as homelessness or refugee crisis. The intervention in Montparnasse Station, Paris (1993), portrays figures shrouded in bivouacs, in vibrant colours that render the shadowed wearer extremely visible and vulnerable to the public eye, yet the ignorance of the passers-by captured in the photographic image painfully reminds us of the social isolation. The same work in an urban squat merged into the environment, retreating into total invisibility. Oscillating between these different backdrops challenges the notions of social disappearance and anonymity.

'Nexus Architecture' (1994-2001) best exemplifies the issue of collective identity Collective Body, inextricably linked through our clothes and the symbolic umbilical-like connection. The over-all uniforms the wearers, uniting them into a interconnected chain as it travels across the globe, at a second glance the backdrop changes and the inscriptions, fabrics and faces reveal the uniqueness of each individual.

Portable Politics (1994, 1998, 2004) depict the atmosphere at the height of the nuclear dispute, environmental protestations and peace making efforts, notably the intervention at the Victoria and Albert Museum galleries five days before the hand-over of sovereignty to Iraq (25th June 2004). Here, performers clad in gold leafed combat suits silently meditate the future fate of Iraq and its citizens, amongst the medieval tombs, sepulchres and war trophies from ancient battles and historical combats.

NP: Can we explore notions of nostalgia, romance and mythology within the projects and structures you develop? Is this something you acknowledge or recognise?

LO: The most nostalgic project is 'Nexus Village Fete' ('In the Midst of Things', Bournville 1999), stemming partly from fond memories of the traditional festive village gatherings, and the re-discovery of childhood through raising children. Many of the 'Nexus' (generic term) projects attempt to restore the sense of community through and 'binding' activities, to contest the stark sense of individualism that is sadly so omnipresent: 'Every man to himself'. Although not as intentional, the meal projects could be interpreted as nostalgic, reminiscent of the British Jubilee events or the 14th July 'fete guinguette' in villages across France, open-air picnics and balls that temporarily break down the social barriers.

Since we begin creating the relational culinary projects, All in One Basket and Hortirecycling, followed by 70x7 The Meal, the encounters that we have staged through food have been the most pleasurable reciprocal artworks (artist gives and receives back), the sense of fun, combined with anticipation of encountering the unknown guest, combined with the degustive discovery, all create the recipes for the most powerful constructive bonds.

NP: With projects such as the dinner parties or food events, the action creates a new community, even if for only a brief moment. By making the constituencies visible to each other, in real terms perhaps for the first time, how might this contribute as a reminder to us of our responsibilities as citizens?

JO: The table for these dinners enlarges over time; the tablecloth is silkscreen printed with the theme of the meal and for each occasion, a 'precious' Royal Limoges porcelain plate is created. 7, 49, 210, 449, 2.000 guests are invited, each one forming part of a network which continues to grow, into infinity.

The table setting often burgeons form a cultural institution and travels throughout the town; thus creating a bridge between art and people who may frequent a museum but not usual talk to each other. The artwork takes the form of a daily object and ritual, it infiltrates the public domain, moving from the museum to the street and to the intimacy of the household. The artwork is not hanging from the wall, it is somewhere on the table, in the interrelations and relationships formed between people eating from that space.

The artwork attempts to become invisible, taking the form of the most cherished of our rituals, it mimics the essential human needs, to eat and to unite. Only small signals, like the cloth or the plate, leave the trace that something unusual has brought these guests together. But these clues should remain discreet so as not to incite the 'fear of art', and allow the catalyst encounters blossom naturally. Nobody can change the world with a meal, but each meal changes the world.

For several years we have been looking for formats for our work which allow the possibility to interact and react to the difficulties and needs of local communities, breaking down boundaries, together with the community in as many poetical manners possible. The meal ritual is the natural logic to our research process, from the food, collecting and recycling, to the fabrication of the culinary objects and artefacts.

Setting a 70x7 table in an urban space is a return to the need for spontaneous general assemblies around specific subjects, bringing people to concert, to reconcile, to reflect together, with the potentiality of an artwork that is active in the heart of a community. The invisibility of the art renders this tool more efficient, erasing the fear of 'not-belonging' to.

However, to find the 'Other', we have to accept the other, acknowledge his or her difference, and by reconciling with this Other. It is not sufficient to share with whom we know, but to look

for those we don't, those we have ignored or maybe even offended. It is this spirit of openness to others that 70x7 gathers its renewable energy.

NP: How do you reconcile the possible differential between the sculptural works presented in gallery space and those projects involving social process realised public space?

LO: There is always a residue from a social process, but not always an artwork. What we show in a gallery/museum is usually an artwork which itself is exploration of the residues. In some cases the process (workshops, actions, interventions..) and residues are combined into an exhibition format and this has been exciting. (Stroom Centre for the Visual Arts, The Hague; Casa de Francia Mexico City)

Drawing and photography play an important part in the visualisation of the social process often these are combined in wall collages. The website www.fluidarchitecture.net is the most comprehensive archival artwork comprised of video clips, audio recordings, photography, drawing scans, text, interactive activities, discussion platform, participant commentaries, etc. The hyper-link format of the website allows for a multiplicity of information to be stored and accessed to the general public, it is often large-screen projected in exhibitions and always available for consultation on line.

Some of the 3D sculptural artworks themselves incorporate residues in the form of images, drawings, and models i.e. 'Data Drawers' contain the original drawings and models of the numerous participants involved in the Collective Dwelling project; 'Process Tables' used during the 'Identity + Refuge' and 'Nexus' workshops reveal photographs of the work in progress and the people involved; 'HortaRecycling - Conservation Units' or 'Commune Communicate - 19 Doors Dialogue Unit', diffuse the audio recordings of the discussions with different populations during the elaboration of the final artworks.

Thanks to the development of accessible editing technology, video montages of the process can now be integrated into the sculptural artworks (Barbican Art Gallery), or in some cases become artworks themselves such as the triple large screen projection of the '70x7 The Meal' series (exhibited at Z33, Hasselt 2005-2006).

For '70x7 The Meal', the plates serve as both artworks and residues of the project. Each plate a reminder of the previous meal, relating back to the encounters with local in the context for which it was original created.

NP: How does your design training influence your practice? – I'm thinking off function versus symbol here. The idea here is to discuss your work moving away (in part) from the pragmatic to the symbolic and hence how it addresses pointed political viewpoints and readings, especially in relation to the legislation of the city and how contemporary urban space is managed and negotiated.

LO: I have an extremely pragmatic design training, where design methodology is 'multi-tracked' to create and reflect simultaneously on the price, consumer trends, innovative use of materials, at the same time corresponding to an aesthetic ideology defined by brand image.

The Refuge Wear sculptures synergise the intellectual foundation/idea, to the aesthetic, to the symbolic transformation of high-tech textiles, to the eventual practical form that defines a body's morphology. Whether in fact they function as practical designs is somewhat irrelevant. The potentiality of the project through the multiplicity of the symbolic components is more 'powerful' for a trigger to new ideas, than the actual functionality of one design.

The multiple languages/readings that are created as a result of applying this methodology allow multiple points of accessibility.

NP: Other concerns I'd like to introduce into the conversation are notions of the regeneration of urban space and how this results in 'the overlooked' or 'unwanted'; the development of city centre management teams providing a superficial gloss to spaces while ignoring any real

need, desire and creating rather than tackling problems. Can you articulate how your practice addresses these many concerns or do you just draw attention to these areas?

LO: (We have a tendency to expect city politicians to address these issues, which, in fact they cannot, nor will they in the future. In the French cultural sector, as in the UK there has been for the most part a successful decentralisation of power to the regions, which has naturally taken time to become active. This power is now being shared with local agencies and cultural organisations that have the real experience on the terrain, however the shared funding does not always come. More often than not the agencies not only have to find capable artists and manage the projects, but also look for extra cash for them to be realised, this demands a heck of a lot of competences. It is hardly surprising that projects are somewhat superficial. Fortunately the more experience the partners' gain, the better the projects are becoming, and more the needs of the people are becoming incorporated into the briefs.)

We have played an active part in two regeneration schemes in Birmingham Attwood Green and Turin Mirafiori where the partners are closely linked to neighbourhoods and in the case of Turin the commissioners are a representative group of inhabitants, defined as the 'New Patrons' on a model initiated by the Fondation de France and put into practice in Italy by the Olivetti Foundation. In this program of redevelopment 'Urban' promoted by the European Commission (General Management of Regional Policies) and the Ministry of Public Works, sustain urban re-qualification projects which, through participatory planning, work both on planning for the territory and promotion of social policies. Mirafiori Nord is a neighbourhood with about 25,000 inhabitants, housing mainly workers from the Fiat factory. An exemplary case of a post-industrial European suburb, Mirafiori's predicament is connected to unemployment among the youth, the ageing population and a lack of social cohesion. Within the ambit of Urban, New Patrons was adopted as a priority cultural action inserted into the axis of the project "Social integration and the struggle against exclusion," with the goal of promoting the re-appropriation of urban spaces by residents and the reinforcement of these places' identity.

Our practice fits perfectly with this model, transforming the inhabitants from "recipients" into "patrons". Developing the concept of "free zone," that the young people defined as the object of their commission: a modular and transformable meeting place that can function as a gathering and reference point for meeting with friends, hanging out, chatting, reading and studying and finding "shelter;" a part of the park that conserves its characteristics and functions, but distinguishes itself by a new conformation. Conceived as a two-level "structure" that would create an area sheltered from rain and sun but still open, the place was defined by the Patrons as an "atoll," to underline its characteristic of island-platform that rises up from the ground, manifesting its presence in a distinctive way. A sort of organism articulated by the integration of nature, architecture and functional furnishing. Working with the local mediators in Turin, and meeting the young people over a period of a year, the artwork gradually takes form as a synthesis our collective ideas.

In Birmingham the Optima Community Association is engaged in an ambitious program of projects with contemporary artists. Commencing with a series of discrete residency programs in the Attwood Green community, followed by an evaluation of the impact of these projects, which in turn led to the implementation of a more strategic long-term and sustainable series of commissions for art in the public realm. From 2004-2005, three artists were invited to interact with the local community, leading to the presentation of a artist strategy for permanent artworks that interact directly with the needs of the community. This collective which became know as LOG (Light Observation Group) worked with resident groups, local inhabitants, developers, schools, etc. setting up a series of workshops, ephemeral actions and collecting residues of their activities analysing and transforming these encounters, questions and wishes into potential artworks that would be actively inscribed in the fabric of the community. Several of the ideas leading from the LOG strategy are being realised thanks to the diversity and success of the interactions.

One of the most successful 70 x 7 projects to date is act IV, Dieuze in the North East of France. Here the rural contemporary art centre (Synagogue de Delme) approached us with a demand from the MJC youth organisation in the local agricultural town of 2,500 inhabitants. Some tensions has been arising as a result of unemployment since the closure of the salt

mine, job loss, immigrant populations arriving in the town, general dissatisfaction. The MGC's reflection was to create a temporary festive gathering that could help the residents 're-appropriate' the town and 'reinforce' a local identity and 'restore' a sense of community. The 500metre red tablecloth stretching from the salt mine to the town hall, the successful turnout of 1,500 locals on the day, and the sale of over 750 Royal Limoges plates proved the pride and enthusiasm of the people.

NP: A broader expansion of this could be seen to be national governments desire to maintain boundaries. Your nomadism seems to challenge this – the idea that space is static and insular. Could you expand on this idea?

LO: For the Modular Architecture intervention at the Cartier Foundation for contemporary art (1996) the floor was covered with bold vinyl inscriptions. The tents and sleeping bags were deployed across the space, interconnected by borrowed phrases from French philosophers: 'Habiter un espace c'est le prendre pour corps'. Translates as: 'To inhabit a space is to belong'. In French however, it implies filling the space with your body. The Refuge Wear mobile habitats propose an alternative. The habitat fits snugly to the human body and the living space is an extension of the body. Community is an extension of all the bodies, so why doesn't the community map all our contours, why don't we feel snug at home? There is a growing tendency to gloss, package and market urban space as a commodity, no longer belonging to the people but a commercial zone for exploitation. Here the city has a role in protecting urban space from becoming anonymous, not belonging to the people in the civic sense and involving more of the agencies, and creating more interdisciplinary team work that cross boundaries from the home to the public space, and elsewhere.

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Published by ixia & Article Press Collective Space explores the concept of neighbourhoods and reflects on the artists' interest in the street as an environment where social exchange takes place. For this publication Lucy + Jorge Orta stage an imaginary public dinner party to explore community participation.